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Oral history interview with Angel Rodriguez-
Diaz, 2004 April 23-May 7

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Angel Rodriguez-Diaz on April 20 and 23 and May 7 of 2004. The interview took place in Rodriguez-Diaz's home, and was conducted by Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

CARY CORDOVA: All right, we're recording. This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution, conducting an oral history interview of Angel Rodriguez-Diaz on April 23, 2004, at his studio. What is our address here?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: 708 Fredericksburg Road.

CARY CORDOVA: 708—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Fredericksburg.

CARY CORDOVA: Fredericksburg Road, that's right. And with that said—oh, this is our—session one and disc one. And I'm going to get started just by asking you when you were born and where?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Okay. I was born in San Juan, and to be more specific, Santurce, in 1955, December 6. And—

CARY CORDOVA: Were your parents born there in—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, mm-hmm. My father was from the east side of the island, from a town called Ceiba. Actually, where the Roosevelt Roads Base is located, and actually they're moving that this year or something like that. And then my mother was from San—Santurce.

CARY CORDOVA: And so your—your family had a lot of history in Puerto Rico?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah. I cannot trace it, you know, because I don't know who has kept record of the genealogy. From, you know, oral history I know that the family has been there for a while. On my father's side there was, you know—my great grandmother lost her husband when she was very young, and she raised all the kids by herself, which was incredible. And eventually, they managed to get one of the sons educated. He became a doctor.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And they had some, yeah, some—some of the people in that—on that side of family came from Spain. On my mother's side, as far as I know, they're—been on the island for a long time. And they were more mixed.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I don't know exactly what—and because in Puerto Rico, things are—you know, it's been going on for centuries that people have mingled and so, you know, in one family you can have the whole spectrum of colors, you know?

But, you know, that's—my—my parents met in high school. And then I—just for the record, they—my mother was a teenager mother, you know, basically. She got pregnant when she was 17 and she had me when she was 18. And then my father was 19 by that time in 55. And, you know, his side of the family, they were a little more—they became a little more middle-class. And on my mother's side of the family, they were poor. So that was the initial kind of like encounter of economic inequalities and—but anyway, they decided to stick together and, you know, that's why I'm here today. [Laughter.]

CARY CORDOVA: And they stayed together all their lives?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, until my mother passed away in 1971. She was 31 years old and she died of a very debilitating disease. They—you know, to tell you the truth, I don't know—it was such a painful thing that it's just like—it's left a very, very dark place in my—my mind. But it was something like a—a blood—a blood disease, sort of like a cancer, you know, in the bone marrows in—and so she just got sick and lasted five years and then, you know, my father was very young, too, and left with five kids. And I'm the oldest of my siblings. And so, you

know that's—you know, just created that whole atmosphere in our family that was very intense, you know, for us to live through.

But I have to say that in spite of all the adversities, my brothers and sisters, they managed to, you know, create a very nice future, or at least overcome in a positive way that experience.

CARY CORDOVA: Because that would have been almost all of your teen years that your—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right.

CARY CORDOVA: —mother was sick—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right.

CARY CORDOVA: —right?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah. I was nine years old until about 13. Yeah, I was turning 14 years old that year. See, my birthday was in December and she died in April.

CARY CORDOVA: Oh. And so did you become the caretaker for the family in some way?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, yes. Uh-huh. At first, because, you see, that's why—you know, and I was kind of joking before about the Pentecostal issue in the family. And my parents were Catholic. And—and—even though they didn't get married until my mother got sick, you know, by the church. They had been married legally, but not sanctioned by the church. And when she got sick, they decided to try to make amends and try to straighten out their life with God and all those things.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: So anyway, they tried to find refuge in the Catholic Church, but they felt at the time they were—you know, the church was very distant—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —to them. And, you know, the Charismatic Movement had not happened.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Because that's something that was—you know, happened much later. Anyway, she got—there were some Pentecostal ladies in the neighborhood and they came to visit. And they found the situation, and you know, this woman was sick with five kids and she needed help, so they came and helped. And, you know, with mental issues and, you know, things that have to be done in the house, and so eventually my mother, which was the rebellious one, she was like very—she didn't believe in, you know, being religious at all.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: She was the one who become a born-again Christian. My father couldn't believe it, you know? And then eventually my father followed suit. But, you know, and—to one point I always remember this anecdote because it was so—so colorful, you know, the—the Pentecostals will come, you know, preaching to the—you know, every house, and my father will tell them right away, "You know what, you see that light bulb over there? I don't even believe in electric light." Meaning, you know, it's like, don't even bother. [Laughter.]

But eventually when this—this thing happened, they didn't have any other support. And actually, my father—he had a small business, you know, basically he was self-employed because he had a truck, and he would haul sand and gravel—sand from the coast and gravel from the rivers to the urban developments that were in—there was a big construction boom in the 60s in Puerto Rico, and that's how he made a living.

And I remember when I was a little kid—I must have been like three years old. I would go with him on trips to get the sand and it would be like, we're going to the coast very early in the morning. Then you have the high tide every so often. And the—the ocean just, you know, over—taking over the coast and you—I would see these waves going through the—you know, it was a sand road—and it was a very impressive thing to see the—the ocean just, you know, going inside and flooding the houses. And then we'd have to wait for the water to recede a little so we could go through—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —something—that was a very impressive experience for me as a little—I was a little

kid. But eventually he went off, and I decided that I wanted to stick with my mother in the house. And so my second brother took over. Because he was always [fighting ?] and he wanted to go with my father on some of those trips.

Actually, it's funny how things happens, because now he's—he has a business of a towing truck fleet in Puerto Rico. You know, he got into this whole thing about cars and trucks, you know? I was more interested in, I guess, in what my mother have to offer and—because she was more into—she was more—I won't say that was my father not sensitive, but she was more—she was the artistic one in the family. And my father had a vein, too, because my great—or my grandfather, his father, used to make quatros, which is an instrument. It's almost like a mandolin.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: But it's like a little guitar.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And it has a—I think four double sets of strings. That's why it was called quatro: four.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And he used to play it. But my father—my great—my grandfather from my mother's side, he was very much into art and he had a business in the Bronx actually, because some of the family had migrated to New York area. I think it was in the 50s.

CARY CORDOVA: Oh.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And then he had—early 50s or late 40s or early 50s, when there was a big migration of Puerto Ricans. You know, in 1940s, late 40, 48 I think it was, and it was called Operation Bootstrap.

CARY CORDOVA: Yes.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And so that was an agreement with the government of Puerto Rico. It was actually the first time that the governor of the island was elected by the people of Puerto Rico, because the one before who was appointed by United States was Piñero. I forgot his first name right now. I can't remember. And before that, there were just administrators appointed by United States from after the Spanish-American War.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: So actually, one of those—one of the first ones was Gloria Swanson's father. And she lived in the island and she went to high school on the island. I don't know how many years she lived there, but she used to live there. I think this was before she became a movie star.

And actually, the whole government was imposition on the people because there was a—a group of citizens that were like an assembly that represented the people, but they were not considered when the government of the island was imposed by the United States anyway. So until 1948 when the—they had the first elected governor, who was Luis Muñoz Marín—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —and then he was elected several times; I think two terms, and—the party was Partido Popular Democratico. And—and then—and—[inaudible]—the point. Oh, because that's why the big migration of Puerto Ricans. It had been happening all along, and there was always a relationship with the Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and in New York. But also before the Spanish-American war, and when Puerto Rico was making attempts to get rid of the Spanish government, they were—

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: There was communication with the Americans because the Americans had their revolution against the English. So they were trying to find some kind of support from the Americans. And because the Puerto Ricans had been traveling in—at times to Mexico. That's always been, you know—

CARY CORDOVA: A lot of—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It was Latin America.

CARY CORDOVA: A lot of migration.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: A lot of migration always.

CARY CORDOVA: But—but especially right at this moment when it was becoming a commonwealth, right? That was—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. Well, from there on and—and, you know, to come into even Texas—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —to—eventually to pick the produce, you know, in Hawaii.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And there is a big Puerto Rican Hawaiian colony in—you know, in Hawaii, because they—what would happen is that they will offer, you know, like a round-trip to whatever the jobs were, but then many of the workers found themselves stranded because they—they were not given a return ticket. And it happened to Mexican-Americans, too, you know. I know friends that, you know, went all the way to Washington State and they couldn't find a way back.

And actually, I have one particular friend is a professor, Antonia Castaneda, she told me the story about her family being stranded in Washington State, and that's where she grew up. But it wasn't by choice. It was because they—they didn't have any way to come back.

So—and, you know, the Puerto Ricans—the Puerto Ricans diaspora has been going on for—forever because even the Tainos, which are the indigenous people of the Caribbean and the island, they had as part of their mythology and as part of their rules in the society that after a certain age the male had to migrate. They had to leave the family because—and it makes sense. They didn't want to have—what do you call that when people get married within the family?

CARY CORDOVA: Oh, um—incest—or—or not—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No—

CARY CORDOVA: —or—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —it's not incest.

CARY CORDOVA: Or—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It's more inbreeding.

CARY CORDOVA: Inbreeding.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And—and that was very smart, because otherwise you would have gotten all kinds of diseases, you know, and all kinds of—

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —problems in their society. So they—they were encouraged to—not encouraged—they were—it was almost like a mandate that they had to migrate. So I think that somehow survived in the— [laughter]—mentality of the Puerto Rican people because there are Puerto Ricans all over the world. You know, in Japan; everywhere. In Japan, Europe, you know—uh-huh?

CARY CORDOVA: Well, but you in particular had a special family base in the Bronx, is that—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, no. Actually, when I decided to go to New York, it was in 1978 and I was going to pursue my master's in fine arts, and I went to NYU [New York University]; studied at NYU. I finished at Hunter [The City University of New York: Hunter College, New York] because I wanted to study with a certain group of artists and professors, especially Robert Morris, and so I left NYU because the department was not—I didn't like it. It was not a very—well, I had gone through all kinds of issues already, and there it just felt like it was repeating the same thing, you know, and I had already a curriculum.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And—and had one-person shows. I'd been exhibiting with already well established artists in the island and in other parts. And so I figured, you know, like I was more interested in studying with some artists that were active in the community and—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —that I had read about. And also, Robert Morris had collaborated with a Puerto Rican artist—I'm very bad with names right now—[laughter]—but he lives in Philadelphia and they did a project in Puerto Rico and the University of Mayagüez [University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez] in the '60s.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And—his name will come up in a minute.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: But anyway, so I knew that he was—you know, there must have been some empathy about what—and he was already acquainted with Puerto Rican issues in the island, so I felt that was kind of like welcoming, because I felt—when I moved to New York I felt so isolated.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: You know. First of all, I didn't speak the language, and I was going to the graduate program. And I had studied it as a second language, but in the island at the time people—hardly anybody spoke English. And actually, I resisted, because I felt that—even from early on I felt that it was such an imposition, it was not by choice. So anyway, I'm trying to remember this—this artist's name, you know, this Puerto Rican artist—[inaudible]. It'll come to me.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Anyway, and so when I went to New York, I started speaking the language and, you know, it took me about a year to be able to put a sentence—a couple sentences together. I mean not—not quite that way, but, you know, to carry on a conversation. And anyway, but that's—I didn't go to visit my family in the Bronx, actually. And what happened was that I had never met my—my mother had always talked with me about my grandfather, her father, and how generous he was. And she studied at the conservatory of music, piano, and —

CARY CORDOVA: He—he did or she did?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: She did.

CARY CORDOVA: She—your mother studied the—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right, and he would send her money because he divorced my grandmother and she remarried. And her—my mother's stepfather was not a very good man. You know, there was a lot of domestic violence. And she was the older one in the family. And there were lots of kids. So he'd come and abuse her—her mother, and, you know, eventually she confronted him and she had—she had a fight.

She told me this thing. It was very funny because he was in the military and one day he came—you know, he was drunk and he came to—to beat up the mother and the kids, and he treated them—so she took a shovel and beat him up. So she had to leave because he would have, you know, killed her.

CARY CORDOVA: And—and that was—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: So then she went to New York.

CARY CORDOVA: That was your mother's stepfather that that happened?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No, that was her stepfather [sic].

CARY CORDOVA: Right, okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Her—her mother's second husband.

CARY CORDOVA: Right. So she had to leave.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: She had to leave. And then she went to New York and she spent about two years in New York. And she went to high school there, and she learned to speak English. And, you know, that was one of the things that when I was a little kid and I saw her one time talking to the engineer of the development—where we lived, because we were one of the first people to move into this urban development. One of the largest urban developments in the metropolitan area in Puerto Rico. It was called Santa Juanita, and eventually Levittown

became the largest. You know, Levittown is in Pennsylvania—and everywhere, you know. But it was—there is a big urban development in Puerto Rico. And this is—they're old already, you know.

So I was very impressed one time that she ran into the—the engineer had built his own house. Of course his was fancier than anybody else's. And we were just walking down the street and there he was on the entrance of his house, and he was American, so she started talking to him in—in English. I was so impressed, because my mother was talking another language that I didn't even understand what she was saying. But I—you know, I was like—I must have been like four years old or something, and I was like, wow, you know. She became this bigger-than-life image. I mean she—you know, as a mother she was already but —[laughter]—that was an additional plus. [Laughter.]

So—and she was a woman that was very much into helping the ladies in the neighborhood. She was younger, and she was—everybody would call her. It was funny because she was very streetwise. Let's put it that way. She came from a very poor neighborhood, a low-income housing, and so she was very feisty and that helped her survive. And she and my father, they tried to better their lives and—and, you know, our lives. They were doing their best. So anyway—but she was that kind of person. She was very personable and very pretty woman and very outgoing.

CARY CORDOVA: And—and artistic? I mean you—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And artistic, right. That's what I was saying. So—and my grandfather was sending money so she could go to the conservatory of music in Puerto Rico [Conservatorio de Música de Puerto Rico, San Juan]. That is still there. It is a big institution. But only, you know, as you would expect—expect, you know, only the well-to-do could afford sending their kids to, you know, study, after hours, after school, to go, and you know —

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —study music. And she's finished and—you know, with the piano. He sent her money to buy a piano. Of course, they were, you know very poor, so my grandmother used the money to build a house. So my—that was the end of my mother's career. And—and she told me the stories, you know, years later. And one time at the church that they went to they had brought in one of the—an upright piano—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —and I saw her kind of playing a few things, and it's like, oh, so she really knew how to play the piano. And I have two brothers that are musicians.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: One in Seattle that plays—he plays the clarinet, classical clarinet. He managed to get all kinds of scholarships and people—you know, befriended—wealthy people and he went to the conservatory of music. And he befriended this lady that's the daughter of the president of a bank that—one of the largest banks in Puerto Rico: Banco Popular in Puerto Rico.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And she helped him find monies to continue studying music. And he did a master in music in the University of Washington in Seattle, and then he went on to Austria. And this was on his own, you know. He was just like with little money, and he—he pushed and went to study under the first clarinet of the Vienna Philharmonic. And this is by himself, you know. He just went, interviewed—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —and, you know, a letter with his professor in Washington State University [sic]. And he managed to get him—because it's very difficult to—you know, you can imagine how many people would be interested in having, you know, this first clarinet of the Vienna Philharmonic, you know, at least give him some lessons. And he studied with him for a year. So anyway, that's one—

CARY CORDOVA: So—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —side of the story. And then my—my other brother, he's a percussionist.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And he makes his own instruments, you know, like for special effects and stuff like that, out of seeds and all kinds of organic materials. And his name is Edgar. The little one, that's—the little

brother from mother and father, his name is Edgar. And my—my third brother who is a musician is Edwin, Edwin Rodriguez-Diaz.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And the one with the towing truck company is Alberto Rodriguez. And then I have a sister, Nancy Rodriguez. And she's very talented, but she loved my father so much that she followed his steps, so she became a minister—a Pentecostal minister. And she became a missionary, and she built her own church, like my father did, too. He went to the very poor neighborhood and he built a church, you know, one of these—actually—

CARY CORDOVA: Well—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —neighborhoods where people like land grab—that they just invade the area. And at the time they could do that, and eventually got the rights, because it was government land, and they got—they got the rights of the property. So my father built a church in that neighborhood. And they helped him because—organize the neighborhood and helped him with not just, you know—because the idea is not—like what happened to him.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It's also the social issues and community issues and—

CARY CORDOVA: When—when did he do that, or how old were you?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, that was already—I had gone—in the 70s.

CARY CORDOVA: In the 70s.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah. And he—he went to a seminary and then about a year or two after he started going to seminary, I started going to seminary.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: So I went for almost three years. It was on Saturdays, and I went every Saturday to this institute. And my father eventually graduated and became a minister. And then I migrated to New York with Anita, and then I heard that he was—you know, established his own church, and my father was very devoted to the people. It was amazing.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: He died penniless. You know, he died two—two years ago. No, no, no. I'm sorry; a year ago. It almost feels like two years. And—yeah, last year. And he gave his whole life to the community, you know, really. Devoted to the people.

And that was one of my fights when I was a little kid, because I felt—even though he was working really hard to sustain the family, and it was—you know, I could see it now that it was very hard for him to be so young having all of us kids and then, you know, working that type of job. It's not like, you know, a CEO, you know. [Laughter.] So he was very devoted to the community, and I resented that because I felt that we were neglected—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —to some extent, especially emotionally, you know. And so I would be the one that—the spokesperson for the kids, you know, like fighting for, you know, the other kids, and how much attention we were getting and this, that, and the other.

Anyway, I—you know, because I was the older one, I was almost like taking the role of my mother, you know. Why? Because my mother was always telling me—it's interesting that when she was healthy that one of the things she would tell me I would dread, that I ever get sick and, you know, I die and then my kids are spread out, you know, around the family or to—given away to the family, you know, because—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —my father couldn't handle the situation or—or there would be a stepmother that would mistreat the kids. Because that's always, you know, the image of the stepmother—you know, the traditional image. [Laughter.] So I—that was oppressive, you know. It was really something in my mind, and I always reminded my father about those issues. But he was very, very thoughtful and very considerate because

when he decided to remarry and he called me and sat with me and told me, you know, "You know so-and-so, and I like her and, you know, I would have given my life for your mother, but, you know, I can't do anything about it and, you know." I said I understood. I will always respect for that moment where he considered me before making a decision. So—

CARY CORDOVA: And how old were you then?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: About fourteen years old.

CARY CORDOVA: So it wasn't very long after your mother had died—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right.

CARY CORDOVA: —actually.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Exactly. It was not even a year. But mother had been sick for five years, and it was a very deteriorating—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —disease. She became like a living skeleton, you know, like in bed, you know. She didn't move and also, the kids needed attention. And the family came and helped, you know. His sisters would come and stay with us for six months, and help with the chores of the house and taking care of the kids.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: My grandmother, his mother, came over and also helped. She stayed with us for like a year. So some—the family—and the ladies from the church would come, too, and help out. And eventually social services provided help.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: You know—*servicios sociales* [social services]—they call it in Spanish.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And—and so in the mean time I found—you know, all along through my life—school life, you know, I had been developing an interest in art. And actually, the first time I had sort of like a glimpse into how wonderful it was to create an image, was my mother. She made, out of—it was funny—on a notebook, she started drawing a little circle and then another circle on top of that, and then she made this like oval type of elongated things, and all of a sudden when she finished, it was an elephant, and I couldn't believe it. You know, it was like—all of sudden it was like magic, and that was like—just blew my mind; blew me away completely

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: You know, at that moment when I saw her right in front of me, it was like, oh my god, you can do that. [Laughter.] And that was just like a spark that initiated something in my head. And—

CARY CORDOVA: How old were you then?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I must have been like three years old. I remember because it was very striking. And actually, I was very—I think I had a very—I became very conscious of my life because I—you know, I was kind of sickly when I was born.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And then I had a hernia. I was born with it. So one year after I, you know, was with my mother, I had to go to the hospital for an operation and I spent a lot of time in the hospital. And then another year, when I was two, I was in the hospital. And I remember vividly that place and the nurses and my experience there. And that was like a wake-up call and it made me very aware of my surroundings. So I was very—sort of like very aware of everything at an early age. And—

CARY CORDOVA: Why—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —actually that hospital—it's in Santurce and now is the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico. The Museum of Art of Puerto Rico [San Juan]. It's right there and it's an old neoclassical building. And—

CARY CORDOVA: Why were you so sick? Is there any—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, because—

CARY CORDOVA: Were you—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I think—you know, my mother told me these things. I don't know. I think, you know, it was just like the whole stress of my mother being pregnant, not married. My father's family didn't want her because she was poor. And my father was his uncle—my great uncle he had become a doctor. He went to Spain to study medicine and he—when he came back, you know, he was—you know, he helped his mother, built a house for her, and blah, blah, blah. And then he wanted—he—my father was the first nephew, you know.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And he was sort of like the hope of the family. And they wanted to send him to Spain to study medicine. And my father was, you know, a good student. And then all of a sudden my mother became pregnant. So that was like a disaster for my father, because it just curtailed his future. But they wanted to ignore what happened and send him anyway to Spain and sort of like leave my mother at her own expense, and my father loved my mother and he didn't feel like doing that, so he stuck around. But that was it, you know, it was sort of like a disappointment—

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —to his family. But anyway, so my family helped my father get established, you know, I had one aunt that she had—was well off, you know, and she was a businesswoman and very outgoing.

And it's interesting, they all became—you know, he was the only doctor, and became the doctor of the family, but then everybody else worked—became business, you know, people. But this particular aunt, she helped my father because she raised him, you know. She helped, with my great grandmother. And her sister, my grandmother—I don't know, for some reason she didn't raise my father. She remarried and they had a whole set of kids. So—

CARY CORDOVA: So big family.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, it is. It is a big family. So my father—she bought the truck for him, and that's how he started his business, you know, so he could create his own livelihood. But then on my mother's side, this moment of revelation of how to draw, I pursued it and then I had a cousin—and actually they were twins, a man and a woman, and they're albino. And to me it was the most—the strangest thing, because I had never seen albinos, and I had them, you know, as cousins. They're very—he was very creative. She was very creative, too. But he went into the arts.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: He was an incredible musician and also a visual artist, but because of his sight eventually he dropped the painting and became—he played electric organ. And I think he's still playing it because I haven't seen him in many years, but I heard that he was playing clubs and making a living that way. But he was painting, and one time I had seen a mural that he painted in a house. And then I went to visit with my mother and he had all these pad—drawing pads and charcoals and kneaded erasers, and he showed me how to do some things, and he gave me all these materials. And I started like a maniac. I filled those drawing pads completely and then went back to him to look at them. And so he just gave me some hints, you know. Oh, I must have been like seven or eight years old. So that was my first coaching, you know—in art.

CARY CORDOVA: From your cousin.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Uh-huh, from my cousin—albino cousin. [Laughter.] And, you know, I was very strange for me to look at him because he had these red eyes, you know, and they would shake. And he was so sweet and he was so patient with me.

CARY CORDOVA: What—what—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: So—

CARY CORDOVA: What did he teach you, do you remember?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: How to use the charcoal. How to spread the charcoal, how to use the kneaded eraser. But it was like one-day class, you know.

CARY CORDOVA: Uh-huh.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And not even a day; maybe an hour. And—and then when we looked at the drawings I had done, you know, he was telling me, oh, you can do this and you can do these other things, so he was kind of coaching me. And eventually—

CARY CORDOVA: What—what was his name?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Aidita [sp] was her name.

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm, right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And then, you know, I can't remember right now.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah, that's fine. We can fill it in later.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Because it happened a long time—and Aidita died. I know that. And my—my—my aunt died, too, and my aunt was a spiritualist in Santeria and she would make a living from those consultations. And her husband, which was my mother's uncle, he was a projectionist in a theater. And I remember going one Sunday to see Little Red Riding Hood, but it was a Spanish production, you know. And it was the first time I went to a theater. And he was the projectionist, so we entered for free. And it was in Santurce, and the theater is still there. Anyway, but then in school—

CARY CORDOVA: What—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —the first grade then there was a sort of like project, was to paint or to draw. I don't know why the teacher had this project. There was two or three projects I remember. One of them was to draw a streetlight with a—I guess it was teaching the colors, the—you know, the red, yellow, green. So it was basically a rectangle with three circles and a little triangle on the top. And I remember. I painted with crayons. I was so careful about making my best—I remember that—[laughter]—my best possible light—streetlight—you know, what do you call it? Traffic light. And, you know, everybody else did it. And then she picked the best and she displayed them, and she gave the first prize to somebody else. And mine was like the second prize or something like that. I was so disappointed. [Laughter.]

CARY CORDOVA: And then I saw the other and I said, but mine is better, you know. I don't know what happened there. And I was like, mine is better. You know, I could see why—I think it was a boy, too—his was catchy. It was because the color was very intense. He had rubbed the crayon really hard on the surface and it looked really saturated. And now I remember my mother had given me a coloring book of Bugs Bunny actually—

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —and all those cartoons.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: But a huge, really thick coloring book, and—and tons of crayons, you know, Crayola brand and the big box with the assortment. It was like, I don't know how many, like a hundred, all color—all kinds of colors. And I—I think I—I filled the whole book. You know, I painted every single image. But my mother didn't know any better, so she teach me to paint within the line, you know. So—and I would—I colored in a very smooth way so everything would be very even, the color, but very soft and, you know, nicely painted. So all the colors will be with the same texture, but different colors. So—and I—that's what I did for this traffic light. So I didn't—I lost and I was so, I mean really, disappointed.

CARY CORDOVA: And—and you think that was because yours was sort of lighter in color?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, probably because it was so meticulous and it was softer, something. And the other was a little more expressive. I don't know why. But, you know—but mine was pretty good. I thought it was really very—but then there was another project, and it was for the English class. I just remembered this. And it was creating the—the Indian headdress with the feathers. So as a little boy I used to go grocery shopping for my mother, you know, and go to the colmado they call it in Puerto Rico—the little grocery store.

It was about a block away across the avenue, and my mother would send me with a little list. And I was a little kid, you know, like—and she taught me how to cross the street carefully, look both ways, and make sure before crossing the street. And she trained me. I'm telling you, she was really very attentive, so I would follow the exact rules, you know. And also because I—you know, from early on I would be the one helping her cleaning the house, taking care of the kids, you know. I was the example. And she was setting the example with me so the other kids would behave.

Anyway, so later on I misbehaved in my life, you know. [Laughter.] Like I broke all kinds of rules; when I went to

New York, actually.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And so I would go to the—I don't know where—where I started this.

CARY CORDOVA: There was another project—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I think there was another—oh.

CARY CORDOVA: —for English.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. So there was the poultry shop, and she would send me to buy the chicken. And she taught me how to pick the chicken. This is live poultry. So they were in cages, and she said, look for the ones that look healthy, not the ones that are kind of like sleepy. And—and I remember going with her, and she showed me, you know, this is a good one. So, I would go pick the chicken, and they would slaughter it for me, and I would bring it back home. But—so what happened was, I would go—I—I had this project. I went back and asked to—I could get some of the feathers. So I brought back the feathers—[End tape 1, Side A.]—and I painted with tempura colors. And out of the corrugated box I cut a band of the corrugated—

CARY CORDOVA: Cardboard.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —cardboard. And because it has little holes, I could insert the feathers on it. So, you know, and then I made the—the band, you know, and put the feathers on. I had all these feathers painted very brightly—bright colors. And the teacher loved it. You know, it was incredible. And you know what? It was an English class for which some was teaching us how to count in English, and it was one, two, three little Indians, four, five, six little Indians. And so, 10 little Indian boys. [Laughter.]

And then it was a line in front of the classroom with all the kids and the feathers, you know, and their heads. And then as they—we kept counting, they kept eliminating the kids, and they would have to sit until you have one little Indian boy, or whatever, girl. [Laughter.] And it was—I just remember that how we counted.

But then after that, I started ask—started asking to—because I will make presentations, you know, on the—what do you call that—poster board basically. We used to call it capelina [ph]. And for the projects, the science project—science project or social studies project, whatever, and the teachers liked it. So anyway, you know, started—they started asking me to create them for the class. And I liked it, but at the same time it kept me from studying, and so I didn't like that, you know, because then I had to catch up. Eventually they asked me to do a frieze—you know, the—of the blackboard.

CARY CORDOVA: Uh-huh.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: For the different seasons or the different events in school, you know, Halloween, Christmas, you know, the spring, and so on and so forth.

CARY CORDOVA: So you became a sort of default artist?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah. And all through my whole—until I went to—graduated from, high school and went to the university. So—

CARY CORDOVA: And—and when did you realize you wanted to be an artist?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, that's—you know, you know, after my mother taught me that, then I was doing kind of little things on my own. And one time actually out of the cardboard from a shirt, you know, that insert in the shirt that you can shape?

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I cut and I had this square, or this rectangle, it was shiny on one side so with the Crayola I start making this landscape and it had a waterfall, and the water was coming towards you. But then I was painting the water with blue and on the other side because of—and I realized this years later—the surface of the—of the cardboard had a—it's glossy, so it's—what do you call that? It's coated. It peeled in some areas, and it created a sense of three dimension and highlights, because it—it release the colors on the bottom, you know, the white. So—[inaudible]—I looked at that drawing and it was three dimensional to me because it was coming towards you know, towards the viewer, you know, 3D, and it was just something that occurred to me to paint it that way. All of a sudden it's like revelation.

And then from there on I tried to reproduce that moment of discovery, you know, because it was so, you know,

really a spark in my life. It just gave me this jolt to—you know, all of a sudden I realized something that I'd never seen before. And then I kept making drawings after my cousin gave me that and I kept doing and painting more. And I went to New York and visited a summer for two months and visit my grand—my grandmother that had—

CARY CORDOVA: How—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —moved to New York.

CARY CORDOVA: How—how old were you then?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Almost nine. Eight.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Nine. And it was the summer. And then my aunt sent me the tickets, the round-trip ticket, so I would stay some time with my grandmother, my father's mother that had moved to New York. And she lived there 25 years. And she had remarried, and she raised the—because she remarried and my grandfather, my father's father, had moved to Philadelphia, had remarried and had five kids that I just met one. There were four males and one female. I just met one, and they lived in Philadelphia, but then they moved to the Carolinas and my aunt lives in New Jersey. And I met her, you know, as an adult.

Anyway, that's the one, the grandfather that made the quattros. And he was—he became—a born-again Christian. That was way before my father had, you know, become—

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —born-again Christian. And she—you know, I went to visit. She lived in New York 25 years and never spoke a word of English, because she lived in a barrio. She didn't need to speak English. And then the kids went to schools and they spoke English, so she would have a translator wherever she would have a need to speak, you know, English or communicate in English.

So I—that was a very interesting time because even though I didn't go to any museums, you know, they were not educated. You know, I mean they probably went to high school, graduated from high school, and that was the end of it. And—but we went to Coney Island and we went to—you know, my aunt took me to—sort of like opened up my—we went to the—Queens and I saw the—you know, that globe of the world, you know, part of the hemisphere. I forgot the number, the year. But—

CARY CORDOVA: And—and where did she live exactly?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: She lived in Brooklyn.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And my grandmother lived in the Bronx.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And—and so, you know, just looking at them. You know, she took me to the Empire State Building and see the Statue of Liberty. I saw the bridges, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Manhattan Bridge, the Washington Bridge, the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. It was amazing. I mean, to me that was like unbelievable. It opened up another world to me, you know. That was incredible, an incredible experience early on in my life.

When I came back, that's when—sort of like after having such a great—you know, like about months later, that's when my mother got sick. So it was like a damper on everything. It was sort of like a disaster, because all of a sudden some big threats came over, overcame the family. It was like a dark cloud over everybody. So—but what happened was that then I—sort of I became more introspective, and I've always been kind of—you know, I've always had a lot of friends. You know, I mean I like people, but I kind of tend to be a little bit of a loner, you know. And my—my way of dealing with what was happening was to focus on art. It gave me something to do. And my—my studies. I was a straight A student, you know, all my—you know, the only time I had a B was in first grade in English, because I didn't like English. [Laughter.] But then—

CARY CORDOVA: But you've been taking English since first grade then.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah.

CARY CORDOVA: Wow, okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Because it wasn't—you know, it was like—it was a requirement.

CARY CORDOVA: It was kind of a—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: When—you know, and—and in my—you know, they had another section. And actually, when my father—when my father passed away, my little sister from the second marriage—I have two sisters, half-sisters—she sent me all this because my father kept all this documentation from first grade. I still have that. I have it at home because she sent it to me here. [inaudible]—I'm looking at these things, and say, my god, can you believe it. I said the B was in English. Everything was, you know—the good behavior. Because then they had a section for, you know, like social, how sociable the students are or how well behaved and, you know, and—you know, "excellent" or "okay," you know, "not as good." Well, I think in the first grade I had one of—that was not excellent, but thereafter I made sure that I was going to have As, I was going to be excellent. [Laughter.] So all the way through 12th grade I did. And actually, I was the only four-point graduate student from my class in 12th grade, male. There were three females and myself. And graduation was a big thing. They call my name and every—it was a standing ovation. It was incredible, you know. [Laughter.]

So—but to me it was sort of like a validation of all those years of working really hard and, you know, my mother not being there, because she had already passed away. But it was sort of like, you know, all her dreams, her expectations about what she wanted because she told me my whole life, you know, don't make the same mistake I did. Be careful. Don't have sex and, you know, and don't get anybody pregnant until you—you plan your life—you know, she was very careful, you know. As a little kid she would talk to me about these issue and told me—told me her whole life, good and bad things. You know, she was—and she told me, "Your education is the only thing you have going for yourself. Nobody can take that away from you. You always remember that." And I never forgot.

So when that happened it was sort of like, you know, to honor her. And—

CARY CORDOVA: What—what do you think of your education? I mean you got straight A's, but what do you think about that early education that you were receiving?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, you know something, the schools in Puerto Rico, I mean I don't right now, but public school—I went to public school the whole time. My parents were able to pay for private school for about till third grade for my third brother. The first two were in—we were in public school, and then my third brother, and after third grade they couldn't afford it anymore, and so it was public school again, but they were very good. The teachers were very good teachers. I always remember my third grade teacher. And one thing about her, Mrs. Gonzales, is that she was so visual. When we walk into that classroom, she had decorated the whole place with all kinds of charts about, you know, the days of the week in English. I always remember that. With flowers and cutout paper, different colors.

She was very artistic, very visual, and I loved her. You know, because she liked me. And—you know, I've always liked—I guess because of that whole relationship with my mother, I always wanted people to like me, and my teachers especially. Especially people in authority in kind of those positions. I always looked up to them.

So—but she—she was very nurturing. And she took us to the first day trip, and she brought this anthropologist into the—and it was the first time I heard of Taino Indians, because my parents, you know, they talk about Indians, but nothing specific about them. And she brought an anthropologist, and we went to one of the first sites discovered in—this is a town in the center of the island in the main chain of mountains called La Cordillera Central. And Utuado is the town, and that's a very Taino name, Utuado.

CARY CORDOVA: What—what's the town name again?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Utuado. It's U—

CARY CORDOVA: Utuado.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —T-U-A—Utuado—D-O. It's an Indian name. Taino name, like Caguey, Camaguey, Cagues, Atillo, Arecibo, Mayaguez. There are many names, for example, hamaca, hammock, you know, and that's Taino.

It's—the root is Arawak from the northern part of the Orinoco Delta where Venezuela is now. And they migrated up north. But they communicated with very—there was a lot of communication through the Caribbean with the Myans and—and—and central American indigenous people and the Caribs—Caribbean Indian—Indians. And also, the other indigenous people from Cuba, the Siboneyes.

Dominican Republic in Puerto Rico where the most populated. They were basically the Taino islands. And Jamaica has some, too.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Anyway, but when he came to talk to the class and brought some artifacts, it was—you know, I'm not an expert and so I was blown away. And then we went to the site, and there were all of these petroglyphs. I can show you pictures of the—you know, have a box with pictures of them. And it's Caguana is the—the—the name of the ceremonial site.

And in Puerto Rico it was interesting because the—the Tainos will migrate from the other islands and meet in Puerto Rico, because Puerto Rico is considered a center, a spiritual center, and particularly these areas. And then later on, you know, I was already living in New York, they found this other site that is—I haven't visited it. It's called Tibes, and so it's older than the Caguana site and it has a sundial. So these areas were visited by the Taino Indians from the other islands.

Anyway, so we went to the site. It was a day trip. It was fun. It was a day trip. It was an incredible experience. And, you know, I loved the teacher. I did another thing; it was a present kind of thing. I made this basket of—out of a cardboard box, but this one I decorated. My mother had—you know, she was very artistic. She would make flowers out of paper and—and then I would use that knowledge to create the bulletin board upper trees—you know, decorations. And I used to make carnations of different colors out of crepe paper—you know, tissue paper. And, you know, with a little wire, tape and everything, it was all finished and little leaves; you know, it was not like any—you know, I mean they were all impressed. [Laughter.] And my teachers—that's why they liked for me to decorate the rooms.

CARY CORDOVA: You're—you're meticulous.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, I know. [Laughter.] Yeah, I was. I am. I am.

So then, you know, I'm in fourth grade and the same thing and that and then my social studies class was after learning about the Tainos, he introduced me to the indigenous cultures of the Americas: the Peruvians and the Mexican. You know, the Aztecs and the Myans. And then she show you—us all these images of the—you know, the goddess of corn, the god of fire, the Aztec calendar, and then also the Peruvian gods, you know. The god of corn, too.

And she wanted me to create these curtains for the bookcases out of muslin, you know, that fabric. And what I did was I made reproductions of those images onto these curtains with crayons, and then take a—I think my third grade teacher—I saw her—some—something I learned at some—from somewhere I learned it. I—I can't remember where. But I was—every time I saw something I liked, I was just like a sponge, you know, I would just absorb it.

And what I did was paint—reproducing out of images—because my parents were—the first thing they did once they found I was interested in all this stuff, they bought a whole encyclopedia. It was called the Youth Treasure, or Tesoro de la Juventud, it was in Spanish. And to me, that was, you know, an incredible education because I would spend—there were 20 volumes. And I would go to the 20—number 20, which had the index for all the rest of them. Or go from first volume—my mother sat me with the first volume and said, well, you can start with number one and go through it. Once you finish it, you go on, blah blah blah. And I would read all the captions of the images, and I learned a lot looking at the individuals, you know, looking at the photograph or the illustration and the caption underneath.

So sometimes I'd read the whole article, but just having the—sort of like an encapsulation of the story underneath the image, you know, created a—it was like an incredible amount of information. And they also have projects, things that you can recreate you know, and cut out, you know, like a piece of paper, we draw and then cut out a piece, you know, like a—like a little windmill, you know, and that's how I learned how to make those things. Anyway, I created this images on this muslin and, you know, my mother made the loop necessary for the rug to go through and—or the string. It was a string actually.

CARY CORDOVA: A string.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And I would press it with a hot iron. Put a piece of paper over it so the iron would get the crayon—and that will melt—

CARY CORDOVA: Melt it.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —the wax and make an imprint. So you can wash them, and you never lose the image. So my teacher was in love with it. I mean, she was tough. Everybody was afraid of her, because she was really kind of mean and—she was really tough.

CARY CORDOVA: Wait, was this still—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And that—

CARY CORDOVA: —Mrs. Gonzales?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No, no. This was—I can't even remember her name.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay, that's fine.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: But she was—she—I made the—oh, she loved it. She loved me and I was her favorite student. And I wanted to have her on my side because everybody was so afraid of her because she was really tough. Mrs. Pizarro.

CARY CORDOVA: Mrs. Pizarro.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And then she told me about the cultures of the, you know, Mexico and the Latin American, and it was amazing. It was really wonderful. And that was that triggered something that later on I found that it was reliving—it was just—it came full circle because that's when I got all these grants and I went to Mexico because I wanted to study the indigenous culture. And then I met Rolando [Briseño] and I came to San Antonio. It was—I mean, you know, reliving this, what I discovered in fourth grade in the social studies class. All of a sudden it become a reality in my life that I'm, you know, eating Mexican food, for example.

And—and my partner is a Mexican-American that is totally involved in the Mexican culture, to the point that he is working on getting his Mexican, you know, passport, you know. And not just that, that he is so concerned about the empowerment of the Mexican-American community, which is something that I am, too. In New York, with the Puerto Rican community and the Latino community in New York. You know, the empowerment, the invisibility is something that has—you can see through my art about the invisibility.

And, you know, it's interesting how things develop because it's not that you develop an agenda and you—it's a recipe. It's sort of as you live your life, you realize that there's recurring things in your life that all of a sudden you become conscious that these have been issues present from early on in your life. And all of a sudden you find the opportunity to make a statement.

And, you know, all of a sudden I'm making this today, you know. I'm talking about my life today, you know, and my life in the past, you know, is overlapped by what I'm doing today and talking about, you know, this new show at the Southwest School of Arts and Craft that has this kind of working concept, wrestling, using a wrestler's mask as a metaphor of wrestling with my aesthetics, you know, within the mainstream of American art. And wrestling with being a Puerto Rican living within the Mexican-American community and what as a Puerto Rican—what is my comment within this community? What are my concerns as a—a Puerto Rican, you know, because that's my reality. And how is—how that's reflected into my work. So the metaphor of—I'm getting emotional here. [Inaudible.] [Laughter.]

CARY CORDOVA: Oh, well slow down.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: [Inaudible.]

CARY CORDOVA: Let—let's—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It's getting me—

CARY CORDOVA: There's so much there. But I want to go back a little in time maybe. And also, maybe now is a good time to stop this tape because I know it's—it's almost over.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Okay, yeah. I—[inaudible].

CARY CORDOVA: So let's—we'll take just a teeny break, and then we'll come back.

[Audio break.]

CARY CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Angel Rodriguez-Diaz. This is session one and disc two.

And Angel, we were going to start this particular tape by talking maybe about your college experience, or where you went to college and how you ended up in New York, so maybe you could just take it from there.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Okay. First I wanted to mention something leading to that, because it—I think it was like a milestone in my development as an artist. When I was in seventh grade there was a contest and actually—and for some reason I had skipped the class or school that day, but I found out, and I worked on the contest, because the deadline was the following day or something like that. And there was a painting or creating an

image about Jose de Diego. There's a day celebrated about him, and he was a very important figure in Puerto Rican history. So that day he was being celebrated, I think it was the following day.

So my aunts, since they had discovered that I loved painting, they kept giving me this paint-by-number kits with little oil paints and, you know, brushes, and so I did—first couple of gifts, you know, I painted them very nicely, but then I got sick of, you know, painting by numbers. So instead of just following, I just used a canvas to make paintings. So I used one of those canvases to make a portrait of this man and I submitted it.

I wasn't able to—I think I was sick or something. I couldn't make it to that school. But then I found out I won the prize, which is a savings account for \$25 at a bank. So that was very encouraging, and it—and then—

CARY CORDOVA: And your first portrait?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, actually. It was my first portrait, right. The first portrait acknowledged by, you know, other people. And—beside my family, you know. But I think it was my first portrait.

Then—and then in the 9th grade—no—in 12th grade, 11 or 12th grade, my English teacher had this project about going to the library and studying paintings. There was a small series of like—sort of like—they were just books that had reproductions of paintings of different artists and they—it was an individual mono—little monographies, you know. Is that what they call it?

CARY CORDOVA: Yes. Monograph?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Monographs. Thank you. Monographias. And—on different artists. And she had requested for each one of the students to go and study one of the artists and make some kind of work—artwork or whatever, a writing about what they have learned from the artist. And I decided to do a painting. And I chose Michelangelo. And I did a reproduction of a drawing of one of his studies for the—

CARY CORDOVA: The Sistine Chapel?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: In the Sistine Chapel, but the mural of the apocalypse, which is in back of the—not on the ceiling, but in the back of the altar of the Sistine Chapel. And the title of the drawing was *Head of a Lost Soul*. And it's a screaming, wild-looking head—you know, drawing. So I did an oil painting of that image, you know. So I basically colored it, and then created all this other, you know, stuff, like background to it. And I presented it as part of my—to the class, because we all have to stand in front of the class and we make a presentation. So I spoke about Michelangelo; I spoke about this image and I showed my painting, so, you know, I've got an A, of course. So—and the teacher was like, oh. And her name was Mrs. Ross. She was Puerto Rican but had an Anglo name. [Laughter.]

And that was the first time, in all these years I've been kind of like my teachers have acknowledge this, you know, creativity, that I asked my father for—you know, if he will buy me the oils. So it was the first time my father—I was—that was incredible, because he was so like—you know, my mother had passed away because she passed away when I was in seventh grade and this was in ninth grade. And my father went with me to the art supply store, and the art supplies were not, you know, cheap.

They were expensive and, you know, I couldn't believe how expensive they were. But he bought me the small tubes of oil colors, Grumbacher I remember, and a little canvas, you know. And I think the canvas might have been like 20 by—18 by 20 or 24 or something like that.

And, you know, I always remember that moment because I felt that my father was holding—you know, it was the first gesture like—beside liking, you know, my—my teachers liked that I was doing, that he went all the way and paid for it and then—you know. And then I went to high school, and from there on, you know, I—murals. I did a—the *Last Supper* in the dining room—in the dining room of the school, you know, school dining room. And my school was Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra High School. And I never finished the hands, but I did all the heads and all the garments, and I never finished the food on the table. [Laughter.]

And every so often, and actually after—years after when my brothers and sister went to the same school, the—the director of that dining room always asked about me and when I will come back and finish the mural. And it's still there and it's unfinished. [Laughter.]

So then, you know, I went to—to, you know—got accepted in the University of Puerto Rico, which was a very prestigious thing to do—to get, because even—

CARY CORDOVA: In San Juan?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: In Rio Piedras—

CARY CORDOVA: Oh.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —which is San Juan. It's part of the metropolitan area.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Rio Piedras.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And—but it was very prestigious because even the kids from private schools, they wanted to go to that. It's the premier university of Puerto Rico. And, you know, now there are other branches and other private colleges, but the University of Puerto Rico still has the prestige, you know. It was founded early in the 1900s, in the teens. I forgot exactly. And it was—the curriculum was designed more like European universities. And so it's very—it was a very good education and I got scholarships to study there.

Anyway, so in the—in the—in the first year in college I was working, because then I found that, you know, art was my thing, and—and my mother passed away, so it was sort of like a way for me to express my feelings. And I could remove myself from the rest of the family and find a place, sort of like a haven, and—and forget about everything else.

And I participated in a contest. It was sponsored by the Royal Bank of Canada. And it was—you know, I was—I had finished high school and I was accepted at the university, and somehow I met this critic by the name of Antonio Molina. He was an art critic. And I think he still writes for art in something—every so often in the paper, one of the papers in Puerto Rico. But Antonio Molina would sponsor this—this youth contest. It was called the—I can't remember the title, but it was something Youth of the Royal Bank of Canada. And I was competing with college students already—you know, that had been, you know, going to art school and art departments.

And I met them, you know, at the reception, and I won honorary mention, you know, which was incredible because, you know, I had never been to an art school or anything. You know, I had just been self-taught all along. And it was a very nice painting, a little painting, and the Royal Bank of Canada bought it, you know, for their offices. They really liked it. And I had been working on a series of painting—and actually before that—and I just remember it—in twelfth grade there was the—the Grana [ph] company that made underwear. It's like Fruit of the Looms and all that.

Well, the—the guy, the owner of that company saw one of my paintings—I forgot where I had it displayed. Oh, now I remember. Now I remember. Okay. I had a show, the first one-person show, the first year in college, because I had been working that summer before entering the college on a series of paintings, and I was—I forgot what was the title of the show, but I had, you know, my own—I had read in the paper a review of Arnaldo Roche-Rabell's show at the Carnegie Library in the old San Juan.

And I went to see it, and, you know, I liked him, because he had been to our schools, you know. He had been to the—the Luchetti Art School, which was up to grade 11—11. And my mother had talked to me about Luchetti School and—because I lived at Bayaman, which was, you know, the suburbs of San Juan or a metropolitan area, but it was, you know, how—it was a long way to travel. I never made it to Luchetti.

So there were these contests sponsored by the government during the years in high school, and they were the local. Then from local, it went to another category. And from that category it went to local and some—they were sponsored by the public schools in Puerto Rico. And then I made it to—you know, from regional to island. So people from all over the island, the best of made it to that, and I made it to—to that—to that show, and that's when I saw Arnaldo's work for the first time, and he was a student out of Luchetti Art School.

And I really liked it because, you know, I liked what I saw. And he inspired me because, you know, I saw somebody that was my age—opened up another possibility, because I never had, you know—I had an art teacher in 11th grade and 12th grade, but basically by then I—[inaudible]. So basically they would let me do whatever I wanted to do, because I was ahead of the class.

So—and I met another artist. I had been in New York and I learned—you know, had been to art—I had art teachers—private art teachers, and he showed me some things about painting a face. You know, sort of like certain formulas of how—you know, proportions of the ears and the eyes and the eyebrows and the mouth. And that was in 12th grade he showed me that. Alfie was his name.

And so anyway, then in my first year in college I had the show. I introduced to myself to the librarian and I said—you know, I told him I have these paintings I would like to show here. I saw a show by Arnaldo and I want you to see my paintings, and they gave me a show.

So Antonio Molina reviewed the show and it was, you know, a pretty—you know, a good—nice group of paintings, probably like—the room, the gallery, must have been about the size of this space but wider. I had drawings and paintings. I must have had like a dozen paintings and about a dozen drawings—different formats. And—

CARY CORDOVA: Well, what did they look like then? What—what—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, I did a self-portrait, the first self-portrait. That was bought by Martinez-Canas who has a gallery [Elite Fine Art, Coral Gables] in Coral Gables in Miami. But he used to have it—he was a big collector of Latin American art, and I sold from that show almost everything. He bought that one. Another collector bought like two or three of that series. I did a portrait of my aunt because then I would spend summers—when I was in college—went to college I would spend summers with my aunt because I have three cousins that were about my age, and my uncle loved fishing and loved underwater fishing, and they were all very athletic. And I—you know, it was sort of like an escape for me from my home, you know.

And it was great to go almost every weekend to the—you know, and they had a little catamaran, you know, boat, and—and we'll go to the open sea and there's snorkeling, and that was an incredible experience. Mainly because my father, you know, I mean, he—we didn't do anything like that in my immediate family, so that was very interesting.

Anyway, but then I spent summer there, and I continued working and I did portrait of her, and I was—I sold two. But I submitted—you know, that show was already—it was reviewed by Antonio Molina and there is—and I don't have it in my list of bibliography, but it was the first review of my shows, and it was in 1975, because I graduated from high school in 1974. This was 1975. It was that summer. And it was—because I was already in college that first semester.

And then that's—the summer was my show. And it was reviewed. And the title, the headline of the show, was really—I felt like a million, because, you know, I hardly knew that man and—and he really liked the work. And he said—what was it? In Spanish it was *ha nacido una estrella*, you know, like in other words, a star is born.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It was so cute. [Laughter.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And the review—I had the review for many years, and I lost a piece of, you know, the scrap—I mean I kept a scrapbook for a while, and then, you know, just with pictures of everything. But, you know, it can—you can find it, for that year.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: In *El Mundo*. That was the newspaper. Seventy-five—the summer of 75. And it was in the section that was the cultural section. It was called Porden Allientro [ph]. It was a supplement, a special supplement, cultural supplement.

Anyway, so then I submitted that particular painting to the student annual, because then the students of the art department—visual art department of the University of Puerto Rico, they had created, and wanted this to be on this—at the Fine Arts Museum—University Fine Arts Museum.

So every year they would have—they will get together and the students will curate a show. Trying to represent all of the students, but the best of the work, and not everything, you know, it was not just to have a work from every student, but the best. And I submitted my work because—I wasn't even in the department, but I was a university student.

Well, the students, they were jealous because I wasn't even in the department and they turned me down. And I was crushed, because even my—you know, when the professors, the teachers, saw it and said, yeah, this is a very good painting. And it had an influence of a painter that I had loved at the time, and I still like, but at the time I really fell in love because I—he was from—he does portraiture. His—his name is Francisco Rodón.

He is a very well known Puerto Rican painter. He did I think one of the earliest portraits of Latin American personalities. One of them was Juan Rulfo. Another one was Jorge Borges. He did Rosario Ferre, when she wasn't even a writer. She was the daughter of Luis Ferre, which became—

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —the governor of the islands—you know, the island. And—but she was into the newspaper business. And I could tell you a story about that later because, you know, the relationship I had with a writer, and it happened in France, and I can give you the scoop about her. [Laughter.]

Anyway, so—so they turned me down just because I was not in the department. So that was the excuse. But then they told me, oh, you know, you should have been in the show. But the following year I was in the show. I was well represented—huge painting. Everybody was like, you know, raving about it. And so—you know, it's like my—my year through college was like—it was—it was a great experience, because I learned so much, not just about art, but about everything else. It opened up my mind, you know, from a religious background, you know, very narrow-minded.

My—you know, my parents tried to do their best, but they were not college educated. And everything else I've learned was because I was curious and, you know, I could hear people talk about things, you know, here and there I would gather information. And I was—you know, I was an honors student. And my—my class was the honor class of that year. And I was competing with students from the most prestigious private schools. So at first it was—to me, it was like—you know, I was one of the few from public school in that group and I was in all kinds of special programs where you have a tutor and you didn't have to go to class. You just had to cover the material—all kinds of very innovative way of teaching. And it was very fascinating to me. I studied physics that way, which was very nice, you know.

So—and I encountered fantastic, very supportive teachers. They bought my work, you know. Rafal Gasado [ph]—I remember that teacher. He was a social studies teacher, and he was from Guatemala and he had been contracted by University of Puerto Rico because he was a scholar, a specialist in politics and I think it was Latin American history. But he was—he had a doctorate from Salamanca University in Spain. Anyway, so he was very influential in my life as a student because he bought my work, and he also paid—you see that group of books there—the *Time-Life*? He paid for them. And every month I would get a volume of those—[laughter]—as a gift. He just paid for it and every month I would get something. And that was very nice of him, you know, because, you know, it was—he—I guess he saw the potential and I guess he felt that, you know, he could help.

And maybe his background, he probably felt that there was some connection, you know. I don't—I don't know. We never spoke about that, I mean his background, but it probably—coming from a Latin American country and all the—the experiences of living in a foreign country. So—because I kept receiving those books when I was living in New York. And he will send me money, too. When I moved to New York, he sent me some—\$25 every month. So that was in college.

And then I was very much involved with—my life was art. And, you know, by the third year in college I could—[inaudible]—academic duties, but I still, you know, was a good student, you know. I got involved in some—in some philosophy classes because I was curious whether I—I took Marxism and it was like, oh my god. It was so hard for me because I had never taken any courses like that. So, you know, studying dialectics and then I got into another one with a German professor. It was aesthetics. And we were studying Kant and studying—[End of Tape 1, Side B.]—studying Engel, Heidegger—Hei—Hei—

CARY CORDOVA: Heidegger

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Heidegger, yeah. Heidegger. [Laughter.] And it was—you know, it was interesting but it was very—it was a postgraduate class and I was an undergraduate. But I saw the class and I said, "You know, aesthetics," you know, and it's like—I read everything, but it was very difficult for me to get a grip on all of that. And that was my worst grade in college. I think I got a C. I had to repeat it actually, because first of all, I was taking 21 credits. That's a semester. It was [inaudible.] I was traveling and like every—would get up at five in the morning to avoid traffic jams. And would get to the university probably by like about 6:00, 6:30, and then I'd wait for my class at seven o'clock, and I'd stay in school until about 7:00 in the evening because then I would go into the library, because I was—then I would go to the art section and I would open all these fantastic books on art, and Velasquez and my favorites were the Spanish—the Spanish painters, you know. And Rembrandt and, you know, that period of painting because it was a little mysterious, the—the aura of those paintings was so amazing, you know, and so dramatic, you know. I love the drama. [Laughter.]

I love drama. I love that, you know. And my paintings were very dramatic, you know, from the very beginning, and then I learned about high contrast then I had that teacher I mentioned to you. And then I had other teachers like Luis Hernandez Cruz and—and another teacher there.

I what's their names—I haven't thought of their names in so long. But I have the—my major in college—it was not painting because I knew how to paint already, you know, I was self-taught, like I told you. But I decided to study printmaking because that was a whole different world. And the presses and everything was there, so I studied with Susana Herrero, and so I learned how to do etching and photography, calligraphy, wood block printing, linocuts, and experimented with all mediums—all kinds of, you know, mixing things.

And I graduated, and I never used it until I produced a paint—a silkscreen of *Santos y Picador* that, you know—

CARY CORDOVA: And you never used it until then?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, because I didn't have—you need all kinds of equipment.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: So I didn't have facilities, so I just focused on painting and drawing. Then when I met Robert Morris—this is leading into New York.

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: But I'll go back, you know.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I'll tell you, you know, the transition. Then I started making installations. And I was one of the first artists presenting installations in Puerto Rico because I [inaudible] Puerto Rico. And also—

CARY CORDOVA: And that—that would have been what year?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, that was in 1980s.

CARY CORDOVA: In the—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Nineteen—

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Because I was—I moved to work in 1978, after I graduated. The summer I finished I realized I only had a few more credits to take like in the summer, and on September 5th I arrived in New York City at NYU, Washington Square Park.

CARY CORDOVA: You—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: In front of the library. And we were waiting in line to get in to register. And—and a friend of mine, he was very sweet, very—we met in the first year in college. He was from a Jesuit college—college in—in San Juan—very smart. Esteban Serrano. He eventually became—I think he was a researcher. I think he was—I don't know if he's a librarian. Very nice man.

That's—you know, it was a time when, you know, kind of discovering your sexuality and everything. And I found out when we graduated—we kind of befriended briefly after graduating, and he was making—making arrangements to go to New York. And I wanted to go to Paris, so I studied French actually for—I studied French in high school for two years, and then I studied French in college for two and a half years. So I could speak French very well and I, you know, could read it very well. So I wanted to go to Paris. But, you know, the opportunities opened up in the United States because, you know, I could get grants and I could get student loans, you know, which have been like a, you know, horrible weight in my mind because I'm not—I haven't been able to, you know, respond to that very well. Anyway—[laughter].

CARY CORDOVA: Do you—do you still have student loans?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yes. So—hopefully I'll, you know, make some big money and pay off the rest of that. So anyway—

CARY CORDOVA: But was it Esteban that was bringing you to—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yes.

CARY CORDOVA: —New York?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: What I was going to say is that I had—it was funny how I had made many things, very many things in my life through painting—through art. And my first car—and I needed a car to go to college. I started traveling by public transportation for the first year, but then I had a show. I sold paintings.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And I got a used car with the money. And then I sold another painting, because we had the annual—student annual art show. I sold a painting. So I bought another car and sold the other one, and I bought another car, and used car, and I used that car until I graduated from college. So the last annual—student annual of the department of art of the University of Puerto Rico. And I was, you know, basically I—I designed the poster for that because we don't have a commemorative poster to advertise the annuals. And I was basically

leading the annual because I had become, you know, somewhat the leading artist of the class. And I had made a big triptych and I was making these figures in—sort of like a room. A very influence—I have discovered Francis Bacon and so I'm thinking about his isolated images.

And that—this single concentrated image spoke to me—you can tell what. And—and—and—and then this portraiture, but it was a portraiture that was so influenced by the horror of war and—and life, that lived on the fringe, you know, of society. And I found myself so drawn to this image. I had—you know, I discovered Sutherland. He was an English painter that also his paintings really interested me because they're was sort of like dramatic and sort of like, you know, but sort of like macabre. It's, you know, the vegetable becomes a specter, you know.

And one other artist in that period beside—beside the—the Spanish painters—that—that was already Goya, you know—[inaudible.] That was—that was incredible. And actually, one of my first—because I kept painting, you know, all along. Before my serious first one-person show, it was—it was very professional. It was not—you know, there was a reception. And actually, I met—and this is in high school. When I was participating in these high school sponsored shows, this artist—professional artist and he was doing commissioned work for the Vatican actually—restoration work for the Vatican. And his name is Sisto Ferrus [sp]. And he's still alive. And actually he's—he has asked after me and I—he's—he—he was old when I met him, so he was ancient. He must be ancient, but he's still alive, and I didn't go to visit him. I should and pay him a visit, because he helped me. I was in—in fourth year in—in the 12th grade and they had asked him to do a mural for this restaurant. It's called La Mura China—the Chinese Wall. And it's in the—[inaudible]—in a very business—big business district at the time in—in Atorey [ph], which is part of the metropolitan area.

They say it's called the—a gold mine, La Mina, the gold mine. It's La Mina de Oro. It's where all the banks and all the big corporations are: AT&T, all of that. And it was a wall in the middle of the restaurant. The restaurant looked like a theater because it's sort of like—not really—excuse me—with all the things, but the focal point was this freestanding wall. The wall must have been about nine by 10, and it was standing at the beginning of the restaurant. You could see there, had all the spotlights, and they wanted a mural.

They had opened recently and they had a in their menu an etching portraying the Chinese wall. So they wanted a painting of a—you know, that kind of type of painting. So he had seen my work. He liked it. He went to my school looking for me, and we spoke, and he told me about the issue. And I had already—you know, I was very outgoing. You know, I had already found a person that could make my stretchers, but I also learned how to make stretchers and—

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —and he helped me find a framer. And so that was my first commission. Yeah, that was my first commission. And it was like \$200 or \$300; something like that. They loved it. And it was there for many, many years. I went back and it was there in the same place in the same spot. I haven't been back to the restaurant and I think it has been renovated, so I don't know if my painting is still there, but there's a restaurant in that same spot.

And—anyway, and then, you know, the house thing, and I had the last annual—student annual. And I made this triptych with these images of this, it was very symbolic and—[inaudible]. They didn't know that was happening at the time because it was like a pod. It was—Francis Bacon has this interior. Or actually, it's one painting. It's a head of—it's a head that's swelling and it's like a pillow underneath. And it's a very simple little painting. Let me see if I can find it. I'm feeling nervous. [Laughter.]

I've get so emotional that, you know, I just get—you know. But—you know. This is the first book I bought about Francis Bacon. I bought it myself, and it cost almost \$100.

CARY CORDOVA: Oh, yeah. That looks like a very—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And—

CARY CORDOVA: —expensive book.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —[inaudible]—this one.

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I also buy myself because I went to this book store called Bell, Book and Candle in San Juan. And it was—they had all these art books, and it was fantastic. When I saw this book it was like, oh my god, I had to buy it. And then I saw these images of men in bed and it triggered something in my imagination, because it was so erotic and I never seen paintings like that.

So when I saw this painting. This painting. This particular thing. It's a head. It's like—like moving.

CARY CORDOVA: Do you have a name?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yes, yes. It should be—it should be in there. Because you got a list.

CARY CORDOVA: Seven, head two?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Seven. Head two. Yeah. This one—

CARY CORDOVA: 1949. Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Uh-huh. It's 31 and 5/8 by 25 and 5/8, inches that is. But that—and this triptych. You see, they're isolated figures in the space, you know. And this is a three studies for figures on the base of the crucifixion. And it was so odd. I looked at that, and I looked, and at first I didn't like it because I said, they're so ugly. But then it's like so powerful, the color. The images are so harsh, the way it was painted. It's sort of unfinished, you know. There's something that really was so abrasive about them.

And then—then I started reading the book, and it was in English so it was—you know, almost like—that's how I used to read English. It was with a dictionary in one hand and then reading the book. And these paintings, too, they were very—the—this image in the garden. And then the intersection of urban—between urban and—and—and rural, and the landscape of Puerto Rico, and coming from an urban development and trying to, you know, like—I just tried to reinterpret that whole experience looking at his painting to my own experience. So this—he opened up a whole world. I love this painting, too. These early works were very, very important to me. This particular painting, this is—it's very—

CARY CORDOVA: And—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —it's at the Tate Gallery in London, and when I saw it—when I went to Europe and I saw it, it's like oh my god, it was real amazing. It's—[inaudible]—painting. That's it. It's 37 and three-fourths by 52 inches, and from 1946. And it's a displayed carcass of a—you know, the cow, you know, meat, and then the beef on this railing and the umbrella. It was so dark, very dramatic, at the same time enigmatic. The shades, you know, and all this. The references to interior space, outdoor space, and I just saw myself like this is what I'm about. This is what—you know, this is my—this is what I need to—you know, this is something that I should pay attention to. And I kept looking into it, and you see, I like all this—this, you know, references—

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —to the urban space, the kind of cold, industrial objects, and the flesh and the interior space, the motion, the human aspect of our experience, you know, that relationship.

Then I saw—[inaudible]—too. I mean that—

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: That was very dramatic. I love all of his stuff, you know, like animal-like human being on this—

CARY CORDOVA: The raw sexuality—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right, exactly. But I didn't quite understand that at that level. I just saw nudes, which I was doing, too, in my drawings. And I think I have pictures of those works I exhibited at that first show. But then when I saw this particular painting—I loved the—[inaudible]—when I saw this painting. It's like, what's this? Is that a man and a woman? What is that? And I keep really looking for a clue. Let me see. Is it two men? It can't be two men. And I kept looking at it and—and, you know. *Two Figures* is the title, 1953; 60 by 46. And I went to—it's at the Tate, I think. Yeah. It's—but I saw it somewhere and I was like—I was like so overwhelmed. To me it was like, wow, but it was something—it was breaking a taboo basically.

Not that I—because all along actually as a kid for some reason I had been kind of like—there have been certain experiences in my life where I felt there was something that I didn't understand why or how, but it was a reality. You know, this is going back a little bit, but it's about my sexuality, which is something I found out later, but—and this is sort of like hinting into it. It was sort of like glimpses into something that I had not addressed, but it was latent in my mind. Because I remember as a kid I would—you know, there was a neighbor, a particular neighbor, and it happened two or three times and, you know, like as a kid you're sort of discovering sexuality, you know, you're playing with your next-door neighbor and, you know, sexually. It's sort of like, you know, another person like you and what they're like. You know, and stuff like that. Also with my girlfriends, you know.

You know, and the first kiss I had was under the bed. We hid from her parents in her house because she wanted to give me a kiss. So we did the kiss on the lips, and it was so—so awkward because—it was so cute, too—because it was like—there were three sisters and they were about the same age as we were. There were three boys first, you know. And then—and my father had bought this humongous container, it was a—what do you call that—a crate, but it was missing one side, so he had turned it around so the kids wouldn't get hurt. So we managed to lift it, and it was pretty high, and go underneath and we—we started playing. And it was only the girls were the one who came up with the idea let's hide and get a kiss.

So I would go in and one of them would come in. There were three sisters. And would give a kiss and come out. We come out. And then the next one and then the—you know, the three—but we didn't get to do one of them because—[inaudible]—I don't know why. So—[inaudible]. [Laughter.] So they—they told me, oh, let's go to the house and under the bed. [Laughter.] So I give a kiss to the older one. She was about my age. She was probably two or three years older than me. And I remember that kiss, because it was sort of like a—it was sort of like air on my—on my face and my cheeks, you know?

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Because we didn't know how to kiss. But it was very strange. It was scary. It was—you know, because we're not supposed to do that. We were hiding. And the family was there, and just in the bedroom under the bed, you know. It's like so so what. And all along then I remember there was one guy in the neighborhood that was—his sister was beautiful. Linda was her name. And she was very pretty, and how—

CARY CORDOVA: Appropriate.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —appropriate, you know. Linda was her name. I forgot her last name. And his name was Carlitos—Carlos. But they were older than we were. He was already like a teenager. And he had—he was incredible. He was really beautiful. And for some reason I saw him, I was like, you know, just something about him that I just couldn't help it. He had this beautiful jet-black hair, very straight, and he would comb it back with lots of, I guess, you know, Brylcreem the—

CARY CORDOVA: The hair product of the day.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: The hair product at the time, yes. And—and I remember my—I think it was one time, because I would look at my mother, and she was very—and we were not—you know, we are—she always told me—my father—this is how—how she manipulated the whole thing. Because in school every year the teacher would ask to introduce ourselves and tell the rest of the class what our parents did. So, even though we were pretty much from the same area, there were some neighborhoods that were a little bit better off, you know, middle class, you know, working class, middle class, you know. Well, ours was working class, but, you know, my mother said we're—that there were upper middle class, middle class, and lower middle class, and we were in lower middle class. That's how she managed to—sort of like raise my consciousness above, you know, the totally indigent.

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Which, you know, it's—it's sort of like she came from that but she was—they were trying to better themselves, you know—you know, better the whole thing. Anyway, so she told me that when they asked me about my—my father's—what he did, "chauffer de commune," which is—it would translate "truck driver," but "chauffer" in Spanish—well, it—it sounds different, you know. It's a—it's a more appropriate term, instead of saying "truck driver."

So I always said chauffer de commune and not—not chauffer de truck—you know. I mean, and also, we were very purist about Spanish. And I was very purist about Spanish until I—I graduated from college and went to New York. And even the first, I don't know how many years, I will keep English as English and Spanish as Spanish. And after that, forget it, so, you know.

CARY CORDOVA: You've given that up? [Laughter.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah. It's like—it's like you—it's sort of like things kind of intermingle and interject into each other. And that's how your brain works and that's the reality of things, and to deny that is to deny yourself of your own identity.

So anyway, then Carlitos one day—they were playing some game, dominoes I think, you know, other—three other guys—older guys. And it was—I—I remember it, it was on this side. And I liked to look at his arms and I liked to look at his hair, but I would be very careful not to look—for him to see me looking at him. Because when I was even young, you know, I had some—that thing with my brother and my brother told my father. It was so embarrassing. I remember I was a little kid. I was so embarrassed that I promised I would never, ever, ever, ever

do anything like that.

CARY CORDOVA: What—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, playing with my brother, because I was a little—you know, like a year older, you know. And it was like—and I don't know how, you know, why—you know, I'm saying all these things because this has relevance—

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —to my life today.

CARY CORDOVA: And your sexuality.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: You know—right, my sexuality. And I want to make sure that, you know, in spite of whatever people think about homosexuality, you know, this is something that as—from my experience, it's not something I learned because nobody taught me this. It's something that was innate, and it was curiosity about—you know, I was curious about sexuality in general, you know. But then all of a sudden I found out what I was really interested in. So—

CARY CORDOVA: And kind of at that moment when you were looking at these prints—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. Right, and the thing is, Linda, his sister, she—she loved me, you know. She was very, very sweet to me, and I liked her very much because she was so pretty. He caught me looking at him. And he made a comment, and I can't remember exactly what kind of comment it was—ugly. He said, something—I mean, I felt like, you know, oh my god, and I didn't know what to do. I felt so embarrassed. And she told him, don't talk to him that way, you know. From that moment on, I never looked at him again—ever, ever, ever.

It was very—I felt so ugly, so bad. And I felt like something dirty, you know, something really bad. And I was very innocent, and, you know, I didn't know what I was doing.

CARY CORDOVA: He had shamed you?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right, exactly.

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It had happened, because—well, I was telling you my mother, and, you know, I keep going in different directions. It's that—because she was so pretty, she would spend a lot of time, you know, and—and look at herself in the mirror. You know, like at the time they put up—[inaudible]—and I would look and I would watch her, you know, because I was the older one. I was watching, and I just looked at her so much. You see, I mean—and—and she didn't tell me, you know, come here and sit with me. Something drove me to her image and what she was doing. The—something about the feminine in her that I was—appealed to me, and her beauty, and also maybe the way she was decorating herself, you know, the visuals, you know.

And—well, to the point that my father's best buddy and his almost brother—they grew up together and—and they went to school together and they had—you know, they knew each other from, you know, all her—their life. And I saw him right before my father died. He would call her Elizabeth Taylor. That's when Elizabeth Taylor was at her prime, you know?

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And—and you said comadre, you know, like a comi [ph], you know, comadre. You look like Liz Taylor. [Laughter.] You know, and—and she was so pretty because, you know, she had that type of hair how—you know, very curly on—on the side and kind of, you know, and kind of, you know, like this, and then all of a sudden around was curly. I remember that very well. And very—you know, eyebrows like Elizabeth Taylor, in the 50s, you know. And the lips, very—you know, she was very proud. You know, I'm telling you, she became a born-again Christian and everybody was like flabbergasted. It's like, what? [Laughter.] Because she was so proud of herself and she was really something.

Anyway, so one time I—I remember this actually. I was still—[inaudible]—and I would be the one in charge of the little kids because she had to go grocery shopping or something. And one time I—I snuck into her closet and I tried her shoes, high heels, you know. It's the—it's the classic, you know—

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah. [Laughter.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —and I did that. And in a dress. Bu very quickly I put everything back in place. And I

don't know if I tried some of her lipstick. I don't think so. I can't remember that because that was more difficult to conceal. But I remember doing that.

And then I remember, there was another thing that I did. Oh, putting clear nail polish on my nails. And one time we went to the doctor because she was taking me to the annual exam, and we were on a public transportation, little bus, and I waited there, and I was very, very careful to hide my nails because I knew that she wouldn't like that.

Things have happened throughout, like—like that incident with my brother. That was very early on. And I—I said —[inaudible]—things, so I was hiding, and all of a sudden she saw. And she told me, if your father saw that he will be so mad. So you know what I do? I start scraping it with my teeth and I took it all off and then I—you know. Those were instances where—so anyway, so that's why I knew that it was something that I have to be aware of, in order for me to kind of be accepted. I—early on I knew it was a matter of survival and I denied it completely. Completely. So—

CARY CORDOVA: Well, and you had no role models.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Exactly. Right. So that is what happened—[inaudible]—and blah, blah, blah. And then when I graduated I—and I met Esteban, Esteban came out too. And I knew that there was something about him was, you know—but he came out to me and he told me about his sexuality and—there was something. I was attracted to him, somewhat. But anyway, he left to New York.

CARY CORDOVA: And—and you had graduated from Rio Piedras or—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Uh-huh. The University—

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —of Puerto Rico.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And it was like the summer. I don't know. He graduated and left to New York earlier, like a couple months before, and I stayed and then I met this guy in the last months of my last year there, and he was a mime. He had been—he taught—he was a student of Marcel Marceau in Paris. And his name I forget now—it's Rafael Fuentes, Rafael Fuentes. And he's still—I don't know what he does now, but he's still, you know, around. And we started this sexual relationship. And it was the first time I had a relationship. In the meantime I had—I was going to church and I had two girlfriends; one at work, because I was working in the credit department of Sears Roebuck in Atarey [ph], and then the other one was a girl from the church. She was the pianist. And I was singing, because I—you know, I had another talent which was singing. So I studied a little—you know, I studied some music and I realized it was not my thing because of my allergies and all that stuff. And I started singing. I had singing lessons —sight singing, you know. It just—it was not my thing, so I lost interest, but in the meantime she helped me train the voice and, you know, we had a sextet. And it was very nice, you know, we recorded something, and I was a soloist. And then—so Melba—Melba was her name.

CARY CORDOVA: Melba.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And then—and—and then the other one, her name was Sonya, and her mother was a judge. And she was, you know, like a middle class—upper middle class. And then I met Rafael and we had—and then we were experimenting with drugs—with marijuana, which I never, ever, ever, ever, ever in my life imagined I was going to do. Imagine from a Pentecostal home. [Laughter.] But it was—you know, I was curious.

CARY CORDOVA: Well, once you broke one rule—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. So anyway, he dumped me because I was living in New York, because I was like really—I was so heartbroken because I—there was some empathy there about art, and I started working with a group of—a theater group, and I met this actress, a very well-known Puerto Rican actress, and I fell in love with her and I did her portrait and—[inaudible]. And then—and the company that I did some—you know, they had some productions. At the time there was this big production, it was called *Viva y Puerto Rico Fois*, which was a—a—satire of the relationship of Puerto Rico with the United States. And the colonialist issue, you know—you know, and then I am dealing with the issues of colonization in my work, too, later on.

Anyway, so then I went to New York, and then Esteban was the one who got me—who went to get me at the airport. It was so nice. And I didn't have a place to stay. And he was staying with a friend and his sisters by Washington Square on—what's the name of the street—not Sullivan, not MacDougal. It was one of those side streets, you know, parallel to West Broadway. Parallel to whatever the place. Anyway, and I stayed there for

three days.

A friend had given me the name of another woman that was studying at Pratt, and she was working on her master's. So I gave her a call and say—her name is Mary Ann—[inaudible]—Santaede [ph]. She was [from] a very well-to-do family. And, you know. And—and she—I went to visit her. I gave her a call, and she had the same birthmark and I saw her—

CARY CORDOVA: As you do?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Uh-huh.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And it was like—it was like—[inaudible]—seeing a, you know, version of myself. And then she happened—you know, she was lesbian and living with her lover, Rosa Melende [ph]. She was studying with Margaret Mead, anthropology at Columbia University. And so they welcomed me. I told her I don't have any place to stay. They—they helped me. So I stayed with them for a while, three months, until I found an apartment. I'd never been out on my own. Never rented an apartment. Didn't know all the ropes of how to do that, and they helped me. Because then I met other lesbians and they took me under their wing and then, you know, they introduce me to the landlord—the landlord, and I got my first apartment over—over the Washington—Washington Park by the Fort Tyron. You know, where the collection—where The Cloisters are.

CARY CORDOVA: Right. Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: That's called Washington Heights. On the side of Broadway. Inwood was the street. Anyway, so that was my first apartment for \$200, three bedroom, two-bedroom apartment. Huge apartment. It was incredible.

And then after that I, you know—before that, I, you know, was going to NYU, and then the guys in the mean time before starting classes, they showed me around Washington Square, the Washington—the Greenwich Village, and of course they—I knew that they were getting a kick about exposing me to their lifestyle. And the first tour was to Christopher Street. It was September 5th, around that week, you know, the 6th, 7th or 8th. And there was—[inaudible]—in the summer. It was warm. Very warm.

And, you know, they went, you know, taking me around. All of a sudden—and I didn't—I wasn't—you know, I didn't go to bars, I didn't drink, I didn't do anything, you know. The only thing I was doing was smoking a little bit. And all of a sudden I got to 7th Avenue and Wash—and—and—and Christopher Street and I see all these men without shirts, throwing—you know—throwing themselves all over these bars, talking. But, you know, you can imagine the amount of people. You know, New York City, everywhere you go there's lots of people.

CARY CORDOVA: And this was like 1976?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Eight.

CARY CORDOVA: Or eight.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Nineteen-seventy-eight.

CARY CORDOVA: Nineteen-seventy-eight.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And it's also the time of the sexual revolution—

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —you know. I mean it's amazing. I mean everything is like—blooming. And—

CARY CORDOVA: Including the gay men.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Then I—you know, at that point something click and—you know, why am I wondering? You know, this is it. And I clicked. And, you know, I—I joke—every time I tell this story I joke with my friends [inaudible]. And, from that moment on I unleashed my brain and it went all the way to the Hudson River. [Laughter.]

And so—then, you know, it was very, you know, sex in New York at the time was so out there. It was everywhere. You know, everywhere. It was—it was so public. Everyone. You know, I'm telling you, the piers, and any little nook and cranny, outdoor, Central Park. And—and to me that was another world. It was so—and what I was telling you, being bad, breaking all the taboos. Well, I decided to break all of the rules.

So that—that was in terms of my personal life. Of course it affected my art and—and—you know, and then I realized what Francis Bacon was saying, and I realized what he was—you know, who he was, in—you know—[inaudible]. So, you know, then, you know, I was very young and, you know, good looking. And I would take the subway going home. And one night, I was very daring because I learned the—also the ropes of how to connect with other gay men. In the subway I see this man. And I—he's—and at that time I was attracted more to Anglos, you know. I guess because of the different things. Light brown, brown eyes, but light brown beard, fair skin. And I was kind of more attracted—the other, you know. You know, sort of like the—that intrigued me.

And I saw this man sitting there, very proper. He seemed young. And I made a pass at him. I looked at him and he looked back. So I smiled, he smiled, and say, oh, you know. So, you know, my—I was taking from Washington Square all the way to 198th Street, the A train. And he lived on 90th Street. So I see that he's getting up. And—no. What happened was that I think he—I know. Our glances—you know, exchanged our glances. I made—I was the one who made an approach. He was kind of shy. And then I think I started talking to him or some—oh, I passed a little piece of paper with my name and number. I was that daring. [Laughter.] I told a stranger, but he looked very clean cut. He looked very safe, you know. Because, you know, you have to be.

At this—by this time I had been to the—I had been to the gay clubs, the discos, you know. I never been to those. I never danced like that, ever. And—but I learned—I learned it very quickly. [Laughter.] My encounters. And so I stood up and I told him, the little English I can put together, do you want me to go with you? And he said—he looked at me and he said, yes. So I got off with him and we went to his house. And—[inaudible]—and the rest was history, you know. And his name was John MacLaughlin. He was a Bostonian—Irish-American from Boston and he was a scholar from Fordham University in the Bronx—the campus in the Bronx. And he was a scholar or—he was a—a doctor in Latin and Greek, you know dead languages, classic literature, you know. And his dissertation was on the presence of Eros in—what's his name, the name of the—of this—Virgil.

And we stayed for a year together. And he helped me a lot, because being a professor he taught me a lot about English and vocabulary. We went to the first movie by the Plaza, the theater by the Plaza over there on—on 57th Street, 58th Street. You know, right off Tiffany's. It's *The Paris* I think it's called. And we saw this—this movie. I think it was titled *The Other Side of Midnight* [1977]. And—and it's a very fascinating movie, because also it's about this woman who's totally, you know, an outcast, you know. And I loved the movie. And the thing is, I, you know—I, you know, have been educated. I had a, you know, college degree, and I was already in the master's program, but I couldn't communicate.

It was so frustrating because I knew more than my classmates in the graduate program, and I couldn't critique. Because I had been, you know, putting together shows. I had one-person shows already. I had a curriculum, I had been published, you know, my—my publication about my work already. At least the Institute of Culture had already purchased my work, you know. So—and these people, you know, none of them had a one-person show, you know. So I felt like so out of it, you know, totally. And, you know, that's the experience of an immigrant, you know. I mean that was classic.

So anyway, and the thing is, I couldn't talk. We took the bus to his house. I remember it was a Sunday afternoon. I wanted to tell him these things—[inaudible]—very little. And he would laugh because—you know, I felt—felt so frustrated. And staying together for a year, you know, after the end of a year we communicated very well, you know. It was very good. And he was very—a very sweet man. And we went to Ireland because we went to Europe. I sold another painting.

Oh, because the painting I—I sold that triptych, that was why I started talking about Francis Bacon, because he had those interiors. And all of a sudden that became—became a pod tied with these cables, because it made a—a—sort of like a reference to industrial. But then the bottom was grassy bottom. It was sort of like a corner, you know. It was like this. It was like this image but with a corner. And a grassy background, very much like—inspired—

CARY CORDOVA: Inspired by the Bacon.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, but inspired by something like—in this particular painting that I really—you know, this kind of thing?

CARY CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: The lines—yeah—

CARY CORDOVA: More rural.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —making reference to rural. You see the grassy and then this kind of corner kind of thing. I developed, you know, in a different direction. But then that wall became the pod, because in the triptych the pod was tied up. The third one was higher, and the third one got broke away and it exploded. And my

teacher was very perceptive. He said, you know, you know what this means, you're preparing yourself for a change. This is a seed. And he says, this is a seed, [End Tape 2, Side A]—and you are getting ready to a new—a new place of—like a new moment in your life when all of this is going to open up. And he was right. So I sold that painting as a triptych and with that money, that's how I went to New York. I bought a big suitcase, I put all of my belongings there, my picture of [Rosario?], and I went to New York. I didn't even have winter clothing. [Laughter.] And I was there in September.

And my friends, my—Rosanna and Mary Ann, they taught me how to go to the thrift stores and the Army—

CARY CORDOVA: The Red Cross.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —surplus store and how to buy things and what things to buy for the winter, and that's how I managed, you know, until I got a, you know, a know-how. It was, you know, like, it was a leap of faith because I didn't have anything to hold me on the other side. You know—not even a place to stay.

CARY CORDOVA: So you had sold that painting, and then you came to New York, and then you met MacLaughlin, right?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And then in that year, and this guy that I was—had been my teacher, a—one of my music teachers outside was singing—sight singing—it must have been something that I wanted to tape, but I was a total flop, you know, it—because it—you know, it was horrible. I didn't really study and—do you have to take a break?

CARY CORDOVA: Well, we're just about to run out of tape, so maybe—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, we can leave it there. But anyway, the thing is that he commissioned me to do a painting of—he loved to collect pigeons, which I hated. [Laughter.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: But then I made this triptych of the grid because it's also Bacon background—very, very dark paintings—you know, black background. But then I put the grid with numbers. I was doing—and I can show you. I have some old drawings, I—you see what I mean, with the numbers on the top and on the bottom, and then with this grassy thing, and I made the pigeon flying three stages: starting to rise, almost in the middle, and then a target type of—you know, like a rifle when you look in the—[inaudible]—when you look at mirror—when you look at the—through the rifle you have this little thing, so—

CARY CORDOVA: Oh, the—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —it had—it's like a target thing, that it has the circle which—

CARY CORDOVA: Crosshatch, right?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: The cross-catch?

CARY CORDOVA: Crosshatch, I mean.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Crosshatch. Yeah, exactly. I mean, well, it's just so you could make, you know, the bullet close to the target. And it—the type all over the pigeon, and the pigeon was hit, because it was kind of—blood coming out of—oh, he was all upset because he was killing his pigeon. And but he bought it, and with that money, we went—I went to Europe because it was my first year—[inaudible]—graduation and I'm—you know, like any middle class kid, had a chance to go to Europe.

CARY CORDOVA: And with that, going to Europe, we're going to end this tape.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Okay.

CARY CORDOVA: Because I know it's going to end at any second, right now, okay?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Okay.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay, stop it. [Audio break.]

All right, we are recording. This is Cary Cordova interviewing Angel Rodriguez-Diaz on April 30th, 2004 for the Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution. We are at his studio, and this is session two and disc one.

And I have—I was just mentioning to you I thought maybe I would start us off with asking you a little bit about your political upbringing, especially growing up in Puerto Rico, and your trip—where your family fell out in terms of the issues of commonwealth or statehood for Puerto Rico, and how you yourself grew up.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, that's a very complex issue, but I became more politicized once I entered the University of Puerto Rico for obvious reasons. You know, people—the students are exposed to ideas and information, and they start thinking and realizing what's happening around them. And I got involved in some marches and protests for—I remember part of them—they were more local issues there, especially at the University for the rights of the workers and, you know, the university workers. And also, for protesting for the presence of the U.S. Navy in Vieques, you know, even then, which is something that was still—it's still an issue. It hasn't been resolved.

And the reason why that happened was mainly because of the human element and their exposure to all kinds of chemicals and then also that—there was an incident of many different diseases and cancers among the population, and because they were conducting practices with live ammunition, threatening the life of the people in the island, and also the lively—their livelihood because the fishermen couldn't get the fish because they would be scared with bombing. Anyway, that's the—sort of like how I got involved a little more into thinking about how the society of Puerto Rico and the politics in Puerto Rico worked.

And also, all this would be interesting history, and in my grade years—grade school years I studied the history of the United States and the history of Puerto Rico; also the history of the world. And as I have mentioned before, it was public school but they had a very good—I had a very good education there. The teachers were very involved and committed to educate—educating the schools—the students the best they could. And when I left the island to go to graduate school at NYU, it was an interesting happening, I should say, in my life, because I was pursuing a degree, a Master's in fine art, at the same time when I—the first time I got exposed to New York it was interesting that all of a sudden I was a minority. And I have never experienced that concept before because in Puerto Rico you're not a minority.

And so, all of a sudden—on top of in New York City that everybody feels a bit alienated, just to put it mildly, because it's a big city and millions of people live there, I felt that I was below something that I didn't really quite understand. I have also struggled with the language because even though I studied my whole life in school through first grade until grade 12 and at the university, it was—at the time it wasn't spoken much, and so there was no need to practice it, and once I got to New York I was—it was a culture shock to say the least. For about a year and a half it was very difficult for me to communicate.

And I was in the graduate program at NYU and I was—you know, I had been—and I think I mentioned before I had been exhibiting, a—I have had one-person shows already; I was already a professional artist—a young one, but I was selling my work and I was—I had a certain recognition, and when I was in that program at NYU it was very frustrating because I couldn't even communicate the ideas I had about—well, it was very hard. There was a struggle to communicate the ideas that I had about whatever the subject matter at the moment was during our critiques and our conversations in class. But eventually, you know, I overcame that, and I'm still here.

CARY CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And so the—but that was a presence in my life, the fact that it was very obvious that I didn't belong and that I somehow—it was a matter of survival. I realized that very early on that I felt very isolated—very—beside being away from home and my friends and family, it was a very difficult to relate to people, and once I found out that I was—I decided that I was a gay man, it was interesting that the young adult—I was turning 22—my body was a source of empowerment because as a Latino I realized that I was, you know, something hard to be in New York's gay community. And I didn't realize this until some years later because of course you're going through all of these changes—I was going through all these changes and realizing my sexuality and sort of, like, developing my personality as an adult. But I realized that that empowerment came from the issue of desire, and that made me feel part of a certain community.

Eventually, of course, I made friends among the Puerto Ricans living in New York, which at the time was a large—the largest Latino community in New York City, and then that became my family. Those people were my support system, and so that gave me a foot into how to manage in New York City as a Latino man—a Latino gay man. At the first people that welcomed me were gay men that I had met in Puerto Rico that were pursuing post-graduate studies—different areas, not necessarily art; literature, and other fields, and also lesbians that I met once I—basically I made a phone call to a friend in Puerto Rico, also an artist, and I was given the name and number of this friend of his working in Pratt on her Master's—Mary Ann Hublitz Santa Aela [ph], and her partner at the time, Rosanna Menendez [sp], who was studying at Columbia University with Margaret Mead, and she was studying social studies and anthropology. Anyway—

CARY CORDOVA: [Inaudible.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —I think I mentioned that before. Anyway, but the thing is that when I introduced myself, I called them and I went there—they were very welcoming—I didn't have a place to stay. I just went and saw paintings, just got there and I—you know, I needed some—you know, "Can you help me?" And they were very gracious to house me for three months until I found an apartment that I found through other lesbian friends. So that's how my—how I started this whole—community started building up.

And also, in my mind, the whole relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States was defined from a different perspective because, it's interesting, once you leave where—what you know, where you are, then you see it from a distance and then you see it through a different light. It's very clear what is happening in terms of Puerto Rico being a colony since 1898, and why that has been perpetuated since—ever since. And it was interesting to find out—I mean, those are issues that I hadn't—I had learned before but then sort of like a—rediscovering my history from a distance and all of those values become—you become more aware of how important they are because that's the only thing that gives you a sense of being. It was the history.

And so I realized that, you know, that we became U.S. citizens in 1917, the Foraker Act, and that's something that the Puerto Rican Council at the time, made up of Puerto Ricans, rejected, but it was imposed nonetheless because it was the First World War and they needed soldiers to fight. Later on I found out that other Latinos in the United States, like the Mexican Americans, also were enlisted for the same purpose. The Puerto Ricans migrated—the difference was the Puerto Ricans migrated for a—you know, were seeking a better opportunity. Also, a program established in 1948 by the elected governor that—in arrangement with the United States, to provide a workforce, a cheap labor for the crops—picking of crops and also the manufacturing industry in New York. And actually the women, the seamstresses in New York City, when the crash came, they kept the economy going because there were—there was a very large population of workers and, you know, low-wage work, and that's how New York continued in spite of all the unemployment and people being homeless and so—

CARY CORDOVA: During the Depression?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. So in rediscovering this history I became more conscious of what was—what was going to be my comment—you know, you see these things from a distance now and you realize what was happening in the moment. And so, at the moment they're happening you kind of have a hint into a—you know, sort of like a guessing—you're guessing maybe this is what I have to comment about through my work or maybe this is what—this is something important that I should address. And then I became more politicized, too, as I became—befriended more Puerto Ricans in New York, especially poets and writers and other artists.

Well, anyway, then I got engaged in a relationship, with my first relationship in New York—I think I mentioned it before—with—

CARY CORDOVA: John MacLaughlin?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right—an Irish American from Boston, John MacLaughlin, but that lasted a year. It was my first trip to Europe. In the meantime I sold a painting and I managed to go there, so I asked him to come with me. And we visited Ireland, which is a place I had never seen, and it was very interesting because there were so many similarities in the way the people—the culture of the Irish people and the Puerto Ricans, because of the same attitudes towards life about you're working hard but at the same time party hard, you know, enjoy life, and also very—the family nucleus was—is a very important issue.

CARY CORDOVA: You're very sensitive to colonization as well.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right, because of the relationship with England. And anyway, the Spanish-American War was basically the last attempt of the United States to catapult itself as a world power because it had conquered—already conquered the Southwest all the way to California and, you know, Texas and the rest of the Southwest. But—and this is more the continental Americas, you know, and with the Spanish-American War, it was a dwindling empire. The Spanish empire that was dying out, and it was very weak, and it was an opportunity to make a statement, to the point that William Randolph Hearst called the war "a splendid little war."

And I researched all that for the piece I did at Artpace in 1998 which was 100 years later. And I didn't choose the date; it was handed—you know, that was already scheduled. All of a sudden I realized that it was the centennial, and pretty much at the same time the Treaty of Paris was signed in Paris, which was at 20 to nine in the evening. So in that piece I decided to address this issue, and the reason I mention this is because after living in New York 16 years and then moving to San Antonio—and this is a big, big leap, but I became aware of other communities and people have been colonized and disenfranchised; their land is taken over and basically enslaved.

When I came to San Antonio, there were so many issues that I didn't understand; that's why I started asking questions and also informing myself, reading about the history of San Antonio, and I realized that, you know, they—for example, the celebration of fiesta. You know, that whole issue of fiesta I didn't understand and I asked,

what is this celebration about? And, you know, people were not really straightforward with the history and it was—you know, I was very kind of curious why it was that people couldn't tell me up front what they were celebrating. And some people would say, oh, it's a celebration of spring. And I say, well, that makes sense; it is spring. But when I started looking into the history of San Antonio, I realized it was the defeat of Mexico but also of the Mexican American. And, you know, the Mexican American that had been—you know, that the Mexican American nation that was born in 1948 after the Mexican American War all of a sudden was the culture and the people were taken hostage. And I found so many similarities between the Puerto Rican colonization and the Mexican American colonization in San Antonio, or in Texas for that matter. That's all I can speak of—in learning more about the rest of the Southwest pretty much the same thing happened everywhere else.

So there were some—that was the immediate affinity with the Mexican American people in San Antonio because it was my community now.

CARY CORDOVA: Do you have any thoughts on whether you would like Puerto Rico to be independent or a state?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, you know, that's a very complex issue—

CARY CORDOVA: I know.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —because I think—you know, do you have—I have a certain desire for what it should be. But at the same time, I think as a people that are affected by whatever happens, I think once we should decide that outcome. I'm talking about it from a distance. And, you know, my fear, for example, if we became a state, is that what we have already experienced with Hawaii will be replicated in Puerto Rico. In other words, the culture will practically disappear. Just the certain stereotypes survive, but the people, over a period of time—they, the Hawaiians, they have made incredible efforts to recapture the culture to the point that they have created schools just to bring back the Hawaiian culture to the new generations. And that was also another takeover, you know; that didn't happen by accident. There was a plebiscite, and the people were aware of the plebiscite happening, where they—industrialists or at least the people that owned the pineapple fields, you know, Dole and so on, and they were the ones that went to the polls and voted and decided for the Hawaiian people. So that was another way of colonization of people that eventually became a state.

That's my concern, because the culture is such an important issue in Puerto Rico—same thing with the landscape. And it's a small island. It's 100 miles by 45, or maybe less, miles wide. It's basically a rectangle. And because the status—political status has always been in limbo, people have taken pride in the landscape and the culture and also they have—the cultural atmosphere is so effervescent. It's amazing how much artistic production there is in the island. And it's—you know, it's been 500 years from another concession, which was the Spanish empire, but there's a large history—a big history that—a struggle of living in that place, and that also it's a—that the Puerto Rican diaspora has spread all over the world—[inaudible].

CARY CORDOVA: What are your concerns about independence?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, then—you know, it hasn't been an accident that the independence movement— independence movement in Puerto Rico has been—become a small minority, because there have been many ways of intimidation through history. Even there was a massacre of a—you know, a peaceful protest in Ponce—in Ponce, Puerto Rico. It was called La Massacre de Ponce. And it was conducted by the police, but it was, you know, in a surretiously [sic]? I don't know how you pronounce that.

CARY CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It's that underground there—the United States was behind it surretiously [sic] I think it's—

CARY CORDOVA: Oh, surreptitiously.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Surreptitiously. Thank you.

CARY CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: You know, that's something that—we've learned the language and we learned— because Spanish is so phonetic—how to spell things, but then the pronunciation is always an issue.

Anyway, so—and so on, and, you know, over the history of the—you know, the whole dependency of the economy was the United States took over the island; the agriculture changed hands. You know, the land changed hands because the Puerto Rican people that owned the land, they were indebted to the American business. Once they purchased equipment they were taxed so highly and the produce were sold at such a low price they would never have been able—would have been able to pay for the machinery. So eventually, they lost

land; the most fertile lands in the island. And up to this day, those—that land belongs to American corporations, the pharmaceuticals now, and also Dole, you know, they grow pineapple there quite a bit.

Anyway, it's very complex, and it's very difficult to decide, and I—like I say, I had my own feelings about—you know, from a distance, what I would like to see, I—but it's something that has been worked out by the Puerto Rican people, and hopefully they will find some kind of agreement that will make everybody happy. I do not see—I don't see that happening anytime soon because the United States is not interested in having another state, and especially for Puerto Rico as a state. And many states in the union have representation in Congress. That depends on the amount of population that the states hold.

So you have a small island, but with about three million people. By law, they will be entitled to a very large representation. And I don't think that many states in the union would be happy with that arrangement. So it's very complex and I don't think, you know, it's that straightforward. The whole plebiscites that we conducted on the island. Ultimately, you know, the Congress decides the future of Puerto Rico even if the Puerto Rican people decide, you know, they want it to be independent. You know, basically that's what I can I say about what's happening in Puerto Rico right now. But—

CARY CORDOVA: [Inaudible.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —I can't be anything else but Puerto Rican, you know, even in San Antonio.

CARY CORDOVA: When you were in New York, did you ever—I don't know, did you ever become involved or have any encounters with—I tell you, I think about that time as being the time when the—[inaudible]—were also strong—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right, but, you know, I missed all that because when I went to New York it was in '78, and it took me a few years, about five—you know, well, no, not five, about four—three or four years to create an awareness of what was happening around me. I was so focused on survival and going through school and, you know, basically that takes most of your energy—time and energy that I was aware of certain issues but I couldn't really get involved with any particular groups.

And also at that time in 1978 when I moved to New York, I think all this civil rights movement and all kinds of groups are advocating for the community—the Latino community and Puerto Rican community in particular—I think they were already sort of settled. So my issues became—you know, and the important issue was like I said, survival, but at the same time how to relate in terms of as a human being in my sexuality that I just discovered—how to relate to that community and how to deal with the society around me in order to get ahead.

I became involved with a Puerto Rican writer, very well known at the time, and is still well known, he passed away, Manuel Ramos Otero. He's a—was very active in terms of gay rights in New York City and also very conscientious about the political issues in the island. And we wrote about them, and also he came from a family of politicians.

So that exposed me to a certain atmosphere of dialogue and debate about the Puerto Rican issues and statehood and independence and also about creativity and the issues of the Puerto Ricans in New York.

CARY CORDOVA: When was that?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: In about 1980, until—but my relationship with him was up until about 1983 and—but I met a lot of our writers, you know, Pedro Pietri, Miguel Pinero—let's see, we were involved with—you know, as a visual artist and I created visual language for some of Manuel's readings. We had performances. The first performance in Puerto Rico conducted at the Casa Blanca, which was a—Juan Ponce de Leon's former home in the old San Juan. It was a first performance. It was titled—[inaudible]—and it was *Funeral of Fires* and it was based on a book of poems that he had put together and at the time it was—had not been published, so I created a whole set of drawings that—enlarged drawings about 14 feet high by three feet wide, about the 14 stations of the cross. And the whole issue of being the martyr—the martyrdom, and also about through the—sort of like the Messianic image of the Christ, but in this case, the homosexual and being Puerto Rican and being in New York.

So it was interesting how all the political issues and the sexuality started—it formed a part of my language—it would become part of my language as a visual artist. And then I—you know, we're living in New York, we—he wrote a couple of books and another one was *Pagina Blanco y En Staccato* in which he deals with the history of Puerto Rico in a more direct way through different characters. It was fictionalized and among other stories of our relationships, and as artists, you know, how and also about being—our sexualities and the differences in ages because he was seven years older than I was, and also, you know, being a part of a New York gay community.

You know then, you know, we separated and I moved to—back downtown because they—I—you know, living in New York it's almost like being a gypsy. Especially if you don't own property, and most people don't. But it's like

you rent for a year in one place, all of a sudden they hike your rent and then you cannot afford it, so you have to move somewhere other than that is more affordable. So, it—you'll—you have to—it's sort of like in the back of your mind that there's some point you have to move, so you have to keep yourself as light as possible because when the time comes to move it's a pain in the neck to put everything in boxes and then haul it, haul everything to a new place, and hopefully it's big enough to hold everything that you own.

So, you know, I've always felt like an ant carrying this big load—[laughter]—you know, all on my back. So that was a very interesting experience too. And it was about being a New Yorker. And so—

CARY CORDOVA: Did—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —this time, I moved downtown. I moved to the East Village, and that was a very interesting experience too.

CARY CORDOVA: Where were you living with Manuel?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Oh, right. I was living in the West Village—

CARY CORDOVA: Okay.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —initially. I first moved, first of all. My first apartment was in the Upper West Side that it was—it's now called Quisqueya Heights. But it's also—it's called Washington Heights. And that's where The Cloisters are and the medieval collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is, and it's a beautiful area. And then I moved there and lived there for two years, and then moved with Manuel. I was living by myself, I moved with Manuel downtown in the West Village, in the heart of the gay community two blocks away, three blocks away from Christopher Street on Hudson Street between Charles and Perry on the third floor of a brownstone.

CARY CORDOVA: [Laughs.] That must have been quite an experience to live up there.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It was. It was the other side, it's like—and that was another thing that I mentioned before, it was an eye opener because I have been very, very sheltered—you know, I've been very devoted to my studies, you know, I—very devoted to my art, even though it was still in an incipient period about my artistic process, but a—of development. But when I moved to New York, and especially after I met Manuel, I started experimenting with different things.

And, you know, experimenting with drugs because I thought it was an opportunity to explore the subconscious and it opened up a Pandora's box, that's for sure. It was, like, something that—it was interesting and the same time I was always conscious of not losing myself into it because—I mean, it's very easy to—it's something very easy to do, and so I always kept a—you know, a door open and an awareness that my main concern is my art. But in the meantime, you know, you could—you know, I lost track here and there of that focus and very briefly—

CARY CORDOVA: Did you ever use drugs to create art? Was that—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, not really, because it's very difficult to be very in control of, unless it's something that is part of your process, and my processes—it's more—this certain—I need some aware—consciousness to create the work. The figuration issue—that portraiture, that's always been present in my work. So I try as a—you know, I'm trying to see can I do this? And once I'd went and revisited what I had done, I wasn't too pleased with it. So I decided just to explore while the effects of the drug, whatever I was taking, lasted. And looking—you know, I'm looking at everything under the—you know, like—it's like—it's sort of like the distortion of reality and that informed—that's for sure—informed my awareness of my surroundings and another way of visualizing—

CARY CORDOVA: How did it do that for you?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, because—you know, especially with hallucinogenic drugs, it's sort of like, it distorts the—your visual experience. And, you know, as a visual artist, that's a very important issue in my creative process. So it was interesting to see that distortion.

Anyway, so also, by 1982, I started living with Manuel about—sort of like six months after—or maybe it was less than that. No, six months after we met and shortly—and about a year after that, we started hearing in the community that some people were getting sick, and nobody knew what was going on because one of Manuel's partner—it was his first partner for many years—like ten years, and they had been separated for awhile, but he became ill. And we went to see him—and we went to see him in the hospital, he had some liver disease that he was—I had met him before, he was actually the director of the creative department of Channel 13. And he created that department, because it was early on when the public television was being created in New York City. So he was one of the people—he was with people in putting that together. And his name was John Anthes.

CARY CORDOVA: John—what was the last name?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Anthes. A-N-T-H-E—no, that's Athens. No, Anthes is A-N-T-H-E-S.

And actually, he helped me, he put me in touch with Crispo Gallery out of all places because he had seen my series of the 14 stations of the cross. And he liked it, and actually I have a portfolio, I still have the whole portfolio. I had created the first one for—and this is the first one that I recreated for the performance at Casa Blanca. The banners—large banners, like, displayed along the whole space, a very large space in a beautiful colonial building, I think from the 16th century. Anyway, and then—but I created a portfolio and I showed it to him, and, you know, he liked it. He said, well, I think, you know, this dealer might be interested in this artwork. So, I went to see him over at 57th Street. He had a gallery there on the second floor of 57th and I think it was Madison.

And then, you know, years later, it—you know, what happened, it was wild that—I met him, he liked the work, it was a very interesting evening I remember, because—I don't know, there was something in the atmosphere at the other gallery—and a very beautiful gallery, and, you know, he was a very well-respected dealer—

CARY CORDOVA: Absolutely.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: —and one of the top dealers in New York City, you know, especially for contemporary art. But, you know, there was something in that, when he came out—I am not—I had a feeling [END TAPE 2, SIDE B] that something else was going on behind closed doors and that's all I can say because nothing else happened. I think I have felt that there was something beside the work that was going on with him at the time—

CARY CORDOVA: But he wasn't of looking at the work—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well he did, and he liked it, but I felt that he was also interested in getting to know me or you know. And I took it as a, sort of like a compliment, you know, very polite, very nice. Anyway, so John introduced me to this one, and he would be—[inaudible]—in few years later, almost like three years later because I met Manuel in the summer that we started to get—I think it was in the winter. And then, John just came to this dealer about almost a year later, so it's almost like towards end of 81, beginning of 82. And then he died. There was a matter of weeks. It was amazing. I mean Manuel was devastated. I barely knew him, but you know, it was such a nice person, such a sweet person, and so giving that you know, I was very touched.

Then, I had met another artist, a writer, a poet through Manuel that lived in the village too, and his name was Victor Fragoso. A Puerto Rican poet, very well-known. He had published a—there was one particular book that I had read of poetry of his. It had beautiful metaphors about being homosexual and also about being an activist. In other words, not in the closet.

CARY CORDOVA: How did you meet him?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: He was a—I think he was either—[Spanish]—which is a restaurant in—[Spanish]—between 14 and 15 street. It has been there forever. And you can ask any Latino cabdriver in New York City, and they could take you there. And it's a hole in the wall and it's a Puerto Rican restaurant. So, the Puerto Ricans in the area, the expatriates craving Puerto Rican food will end up there, so you run into all kinds of artists and writers and people, you know, and friends, Puerto Rican friends. There we all—

Anyway, I met him there or outside that restaurant, one day as we were walking by, and he told us about being sick. Shortly after, a few months later he died. And so, those two were one of the first few people because it was very early on—the first casualties of the AIDS epidemic.

CARY CORDOVA: And you hadn't heard anything about that at all.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No, no. Nobody knew. It wasn't even called AIDS. They didn't even know what was going on and because people died on some kind of cirrhosis of the liver, like John. And then, Victor, I don't know exactly what kind of disease he died of that it was AIDS related. So, we kept hearing somebody else got sick, da da daa. And it was—everybody was scared. Because sexuality in New York—it was like towards the end of the sexual revolution and the gay sexual revolution was still on a high pitch. Any of the disco live and the bar and after hours and you know that was—and then I was part of that life because I never experienced that in my life. I've never been to bars or never had drinks or anything else you know, so for me it was a whole new world, and it was like discovering myself within this world.

Anyway, then we moved. We had to leave that apartment and we moved uptown to—not far from where I used to live, but instead of 190th street, one right over. It was 173rd street on Washington Ave., by the Washington Bridge, and that area is called Sugar Hill. And it's also, it's part Cesquilla [sp] Heights. And it's called Cesquilla Heights because the Dominican population—it's very large in that section of Manhattan. And basically it was

interesting seeing this shifting of different Latino groups coming into New York. When I arrived, the Puerto Rican community in El Barrio was still very much Puerto Rican. And this is the bodegas, which are the little grocery stores. They were owned by Puerto Ricans. Eventually, the Dominicans took over the bodegas and the Koreans. And then the Puerto Ricans moved out of New York. There have been an exodus of Puerto Ricans moving to other states. I'm one of them. [Laughing]. I moved to Texas, after 16 years of living in New York. But, so that neighborhood where it's, it's also Dominican.

Anyway, we lived there for about two years, and we had made this agreement. I won't get into any details because I must really—so I moved downtown. I found an apartment in the East Village, right by Tompkins Square Park, right across the street on 7th Street and Avenue A. And it was like a—it was an unbelievable experience because it was just like very bohemian.

CARY CORDOVA: What year did you move there?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It was in 1983, 84. And then, the first year that—I don't know if you've heard of Wigstock? It was sort of like parody of Woodstock, but Wigstock—it was about wigs. And it was a festival that the gay men had together. So it wasn't in first, in Tompkins Square Park, and I forgot what period, but it was in the summer or towards the end of summer, September probably. I can't remember exactly. So everybody will wear wigs and then we'll have music. And there was a band shell there that they would have different performers and have different bands playing. It was fun, yeah it was great.

And the East Village was so bohemian. It was so low key. It was like the world going inside you. If you think of New York, it's a—that's really multi-cultural. The East Village is then a microcosm within that multiculturalism. And then you have, the people have been there, living there for many generations, old Ukrainian families and also—who else? What other big ethnic group lived there? It's all being gentrified.

CARY CORDOVA: Jewish.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Jewish, right. Jewish is a big community further south, of Houston. And that's "Houston" you know, in New York it's "Houston." [Laughing].

And Puerto Rican, the Lower East Side. [Crosstalk]. Yes, I forgot the street—3rd or 4th Street, I think it was between C and D or B and C. I can't remember the exact address. And also there were all kinds of clubs, very trendy clubs, very hip. So there was a lot of activity going on and it was very interesting to be there. It was a time in my life when I was making adjustments. I had had a very stormy relationship with Mañuel. And so, breaking up was a very difficult thing, and basically I found myself homeless.

But then a friend had connections, I found an apartment, I found a job—I had lost my job—and started working as a makeup artist for mannequins in Brooklyn, across the river, the East River, in a Polish community. Polish, come on. How could I forget the restaurants that fed me? You know, Odessa and Lechko's on Avenue A. Also on First Avenue, I forgot the names of those restaurants, but you know, it's very home cooking and very inexpensive. And that was, very good at the time.

And it's funny because Rolando lived behind where I lived at the same time. He had sold, with his partner—they had bought a building in Brooklyn, a three story building, and they separated and she wanted to buy the building. So he sold it to her, and then, with that money, he moved to 6th Street between Avenue A and B, and I was living on 7th between A and B.

CARY CORDOVA: [Laughs.] You were like a block or two blocks away—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right and we didn't know each other. And so, I remember when his building burned down, I didn't know it was his until years later that he started recounting what had happened. I said, I remember there was a fire right behind where I lived about four building down towards Avenue B and it was his building. It's interesting. Anyway, it's the connections you know? But at the time, I was—I started working with my mannequin company—

CARY CORDOVA: Have you had any experience as a makeup artist before?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No, I was trained. And it was, you know, the different techniques. Some techniques and this technique is working on the mannequin using dry makeup. And there are techniques such as wet makeup. And that I learned later because I kept working in the industry for about seven years. And they pay well because you know it's for the fashion industry, so those jobs pay very well because you know, they're more specialized.

So, I changed companies and ended up with the most prestigious mannequin company in New York, a British company, Rootstein. They started with Ziggy, no Twiggy not Ziggy—Twiggy, the model, the red, skinny—they

started in the 60's with that model because what they would do is, they would hire the trendiest model at the moment and make a sculpture of the body and the face and then they would adapt different poses, so what we would do is, from pictures of the model, we would recreate the whole things: eyeballs and then the makeup of the moment. You know, but we had to paint eyebrows with eyelashes. You know, make it look—they were very, very realistic.

And the major buyers were Saks, Bergdorf, to name a few, Gucci—then the other retailers, I can't think—Nordstrom. You name it. All of them.

CARY CORDOVA: Did this experience, this putting on makeup on a new mannequin in response to your portraiture?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I am glad you picked on that because it was interesting to be working making faces and when I had been as a child, painting portraits—that all of a sudden became my everyday job, nine to five. And it wasn't really fun because it was basically assembly line type of work, but the fact that I have to look at a face for that period of time—for a long time, about eight years—it was very—looking at retrospect, it was very interesting. So yeah, it was at times, I would just find myself like it was so surreal. And then it's a real, it's a used mannequin because when they were first produced, it was sort of like an interesting replication of the human body. But to me, it was almost nightmarish.

And the very first times, the very first company I worked for, they will discard pieces, hands, torsos, head, and I would take them home, and I would use them as—to decorate my apartment. [Laughing]. You know, I didn't have any furniture or any decorations. But then, I got rid of that because too much. Like to live on top of—being surrounded in a factory by all those blank bodies—so it was a very interesting period of my life. It was very hard because I felt—it was sort of a claustrophobic, but then there was sort of a recession, the recession in '87, '88, 1988. They had to lay off people. And they offered me a—you know, they offered the benefits of unemployment, so I say, yeah, I take it. And the benefits were extended because the economy wasn't doing too well. So I had almost a year to work on my work, and that's why I was managed to put a body of work together and have my first big show in New York.

I've had shows, group shows here and there, but not really—and then have one person show when I was a student actually at the Hunter Gallery and it was a piece dealing with Saint Sebastian. And it was very—well I was working under Rob Morris—I was a graduate student of Rob Morris. And he was a very interesting piece. Anyway, so at this point, when I was laid off—

CARY CORDOVA: What was interesting about him?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well because you know, I have never worked with installations, and I was forced because the first statement he made that first day of class was that he didn't want to see any paintings, he didn't want to see you know, anything that had to do with painting. It's funny because after I graduate, and one day I went to SoHo and Leo Castelli—has an opening in two venues, and it's Rob Morris' opening, and I go there, and they have paintings. So I'm talking to my friend at the time, and you know, this is amazing. I told him the whole idea because he put me through the mill because I was a painter.

So, but actually, when I did that piece of Saint Sebastian—out of all, the whole class—and I took another semester with him after that, that first semester, he was so complimentary about how—you know, he gave me so many accolades. How this is the best piece that I've seen this semester and this is a good takeoff from what you have been doing because I started from nothing and he put the first two projects. He just criticizes so horribly. The second one I was almost on the verge of tears because I felt so embarrassed. He was so bad. I guess he wanted to shock me because he was really, he was a miserable bastard. [Laughter].

But he achieved—I guess he caused such an impression in me that I was resorting to all kinds of memories of my childhood, and one image that came to mind was my grandmother's images on top of the doorway. And inside the house that she always had a couple ears of corn, a glass of water, sometimes a candle, and an image of Saint Sebastian and some other saint, the virgin with the dragon, I forgot her name, was one of them or San Martin de Pobres, Saint Martin de Pobres. But Saint Sebastian always caught my eye because of the arrows, that he was still alive and he had all these thing piercing him. And he had this demeanor and his face was like in some kind of ecstasy.

He was as a little child—I remember my grandmother would take care of me when my mother starting working in a lightweight manufacturing industry in Bayamón where I grew up in Puerto Rico making brassieres. She worked for about two years there, and so I would look at this image and I didn't know what to make of it, but it was intriguing. When I was scrambling to find what I needed to say for this project that was something that responded to my sensibilities, something that had to do with my culture, something that I felt strongly about, the image of Saint Sebastian came up.

I was walking down along the Hudson River in the upper Manhattan, all the way to the tip of Manhattan, beyond Fort Tryon Park. There's a channel that divides the Bronx and the island of Manhattan, and I was right by there. There's a park there. And I was like, I was so desperate for something—and all of a sudden this image came to mind as interesting in that it was a saint, interesting that it was a martyr, as interest that it was Saint Sebastian that I was even thinking about in the sense of sexuality or just thinking about gay imagery and he is associated with the gay culture.

So I created this boxing ring also which was another image that somehow came to my mind, representing a struggle, the battle, and the tree charm hanging from the ceiling all the way to the floor, covered with a very thin layer of foam. And they pull by fishhooks tied with ropes, very thin ropes, very kind of wiry ropes, you know like a made of uté—pulling to the sides of the boxing ring so you can see the fishhooks pulling from the foam. So it's like piercing and pulling, this effect like pulling your skin. And then on the wall, I interview with a director of x-ray, Department of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, which was not far from where I lived. And he—I asked him for copies of X-rays of the torso and the head, and he provided with you know, profile shots of the head and torsos, and I displayed them on the wall, into the wall. The boxing ring was in the middle and then there was a text about murder and about the victim and the victimizer. And that piece, that's the one Rob Morris liked.

Anyway, Roy Morris came home because I went to SoHo and I saw his shows in these two spaces, but when I went to the newer space, I think it was on Greene Street, there he was. It was the opening day, and I didn't even know. I just go inside, and all of a sudden, he's there. I mean, a huge installation of this skeleton hovering with this huge black net—an interesting piece. Both pieces were about that. And I asked him, Bob didn't you tell me that painting was dead and that was out of circulation and that you didn't want to see any painters in your class, this and the other? And then he just came with this lame explanation. He said, you know what? You have to adapt with the times. And I couldn't believe it. He tell me that. I was just like, ugh, I can't believe it. But you know, he was like—

CARY CORDOVA: Was he—you never stopped painting as a result of that?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. No. For me, it was a challenge to kind of put aside for in his class, put aside painting and then, explore this other median and that I succeeded in creating something meaningful and something that—it was exhibited at the Hunter Gallery. You know, it was my first one-person show in New York actually. And all my professors came, and they had very good things to say about the piece. So, that was a very good development because from nothing, from not even exposed to sculpture and installation, and to create something meaningful in terms of my own background and my own creative process, that this happened. It was a successful piece. Anyway, that was a—I don't know—divert to this. Can we take a break?

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah, let's take a break. And I want to trade out this tape from here.

[Break.]

CARY CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Angel Rodriguez-Diaz on April 30th, 2004 at his studio. This is session two and disk two and we just took a quick break, and now we're back. We were sort of leading up to talking about your first big show and you mentioned that you now had all this time to complete some work as a result of getting unemployment. [Laughs]. And then you can tell us a little bit about that work, what you were doing right at that time, and what the show looked like when you were—what you were pleased with about that particular show.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, you know, I have to correct something because—I correct myself because this show happened when I was still in a relationship with Mañuel, and I had just finished with Hunter. And then there was a friend of Mañuel. Her name is Nitsa Tofiriño, a well known Puerto Rican artist living in New York. I think she moved somewhere else. And she was involved in relationships with a woman at the time, Caroline, who was an actress and lived a block away from where we lived and lived on Hudson Street, Abingdon Square actually to be exact.

Anyway, she suggested for me to introduce my work to Nilda Parasa [ph] which was the director of Kineman [ph] on West Broadway. And I think it was located between Spring and Prince. And, or, something like that—I can't remember exactly, probably Prince and, no, Spring and the one that goes to the Holland tunnel. I forgot the name—anyway. So, I prepared portfolio and I submitted it, and they liked it and they gave me a show. And it was interesting that that was one of the galleries that gave the first opportunity to many Latino artists in New York City. It was a beautiful gallery, a huge gallery, and I got the main gallery, which was a very, very nice space. And most of the work had to do with—it was titled, "The Beholder's Biography," and there were portraits and self-portraits, I think mostly self-portraits, paintings and drawings. And it's interesting that when I had my opening right before I had my show, the Pepon Osório and Marian Soto had their show, it was a performance and I can't remember the title or anything. But that's how we met. And also, my partner, Rolando Briseño, he had had his show the previous year, which was about a few months from my show.

CARY CORDOVA: But he wasn't your partner then?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No, I didn't even know him. So it was very interesting that later on I found out about this other references and his show was well-received, and he was visited by some important people like the contemporary—the curator of the contemporary collection of the Metropolitan Museum, Lowery Sims. She was, at the time, and now she's the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. And then, she was also visiting, which was interesting at the time. It was when painting was making a comeback, because David Sally was having a show at a gallery down the street. And I don't think Mary Bloom had opened her own gallery at that time—it was some other gallery. I'm not so sure about this actually.

CARY CORDOVA: How did you even come into contact with the Cayman Gallery?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, because of Nitsa Tifiño. And she was in the board, and she introduced me to La Perasa [ph]. And then, it just so many other layers that I found out as I was approaching the gallery. So this was actually my first show in New York. What I was telling you before was that once I—a few years down the line—I became unemployed. I had not been able to produce work the way I needed to, because of my relationship with Mañuel and one of the things, although I was learning many important things from this relationship, like I mentioned before. A whole period of experimentation, and I find that it was a moment of like studying something that was important and that was going to be pivotal for the rest of my development as an individual and as an artist.

Then I started working and got laid off, and then I had another show in SoHo in a Gallery, and I forgot the street, but it's up on State Street, side street off Broadway. I'll have to go up there, I forgot the name of the street. Anyway, it was called Step Gallery [sp], it's now defunct, but Step gallery that showed Latino art too. And that was a one-person show and I was able to produce while I was unemployed. And that led to other things and exposure to Museo del Barrio, which I had been exposed to, but not after, I participated in a group show that was titled "Six by Six." I was part of that and then this is the time when Jack Agueros was the president or the director of the museum and it became—there was a big issue with the funding and that he had embezzled some money.

So the museum was about to defund. It was a period of struggle for Luis, and then Petra Barrerras del Rio became the director. She kept the museum afloat and there were some changes and eventually, Susana Torruella Leval became the curator of the museum. And she had been a curator—because, then also there was another museum—Levina Perraza [ph] closed Cayman gallery and created the Museum of Hispanic Art, the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art. We used to call it MOCHA. And then there a big show that unfortunately I was out of the loop, because it was a stormy period in my life. So it was called "Decade's Show." The Decade show was about ten years of Cayman and she had created ten years of Latino art in different venues—museums, I think the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the MOCHA. And so I wasn't part of that show but I had shown already. Actually, I have to correct myself. I was part of the show, it was called "Decade Show." But it was sort of like I just had paintings. I didn't participate in any of the events. I just felt so out of the loop at that time and then—what happened after that?

CARY CORDOVA: Were you finding that, I mean, since we're sort of talking, I guess, late '80s—early '90s—that there were increasing opportunities for you as a—specifically Latino artist?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: My experience—I didn't actually. It was—the paintings started making a comeback. Prior to that, it was more installations and they were not showing many paintings. I found a niche because, you know, there was some—you know, like Cayman, Hispanic, MOCHA, you know, Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and others showing Latino artists. And the type of work I was doing was figurative paintings. Then when painting made a comeback I was living in East Village. I was also—I had a show actually. It was at a gallery on 10th Street and 2nd Avenue—between 2nd and 1st Avenue—called Area X Gallery. And there was a boom of little galleries all over the East Village. I mean galleries that now you see big names in Chelsea. And after the East Village art scene kind of disappeared, they went back into SoHo—the area that was not developed, because basically the area that was developed as the art—the gallery district was West Broadway. And then Broadway and the other side streets became—they had lots of other galleries.

Anyway, that was my show and it was called Chieftains of the New World, or something like that. And that's when I met John Caldwell. John Caldwell was the curator of the—what do you call it—the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. And he was also the curator of two or three Carnegie International shows—"La Barino." And he lived in the neighborhood, lived in St. Marks Place, between First and Second Avenue, and he saw the show and he liked that drawing that you seen on the wall. It was part of a series that I had produced, it was also part of the Cayman show. And I had about four or five drawings in the Gallery, it was a very small gallery—storefront. And he saw this drawing and he liked and he actually purchased it. And the reason I have it is because he passed away, and he made sure that I got it back.

So he contacted me, he wrote me a letter and that's how we met. So but he invited me to go to Pittsburgh and he introduced me to all the artists that were in the biennial—I would remember their names but, you know, the German artists that were very popular at the time and they won that one—the Carnegie International of that year, of one of those years, because I have the catalogues that he gave me. And anyway—

CARY CORDOVA: Well, just speaking about drawing actually raises a question for me. And we need to talk a little bit about, I mean, one, what's going on in that drawing. You're wearing a certain mask. And two, when did you start including masks in your self-portrait or in your portraits and maybe even talking about a little of what they mean.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: This is one of the first drawings that I used masks actually or a partial mask—this of me—and it's like a bird. And it has also sexual connotation. It is part of the portfolio "Self-portraits," and it was during the period that I had moved back to 173rd Street, back uptown. And I was living with Manuel, and it was a very stormy time. And the only thing I could do were these quick portraits after coming from work, getting out of work. And then with the little spare energy I had left, I would just, you know, drive from downtown all the way to 173rd Street. You know, it was just about almost an hour one-way. So it was like driving was a task, but, you know, I decided I had to do something to keep my wits together. And I had to be, you know, creative. So I did this series of drawings, charcoal drawings on paper, colored paper, and Canson, a particular brand. And basically they were recording—it was the first time actually that I was recording in a very direct way what was happening to me in my relationship, my life and the frustrations, the fears, the issues. The other work that I had already displayed, for example, at Cayman, was also autobiographical, but they were out there—I'm sorry. I'm sorry I have to go back.

This was part of that struggle—was it part of that struggle? No, no, it was not part of the struggle. It was after it. So after the show at Cayman, I had to continue to do something because I felt so out of touch with the arts community in New York. And so I produced this series. And basically it was after coming back from work, I'd just sit in front of a mirror and sketch very quickly a drawing everyday. And one drawing, at least one drawing in 18 by 24 roughly or it was more or less 18 by 20. And so that's how the series came about. When eventually Ron moved out of town to the East Village—and that's where I show—this series at that gallery, Area X Gallery.

CARY CORDOVA: Is that why the mirror started appearing in your work as well. I mean, I was suddenly struck by imagining you drawing in front of a mirror and in the mirror is some special meaning or something.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I will have quite a few paintings from the period when I—the last mannequin company I worked for, I got a studio to work in because then I was still living in the East Village. I had moved from Avenue A and 7th Street to St. Mark's Place. He moved uptown, which is A Street, you know, between A and 1st, like not even a block away from my other place. And, you know, I was living in a very difficult condition because I was a squatter. And I had to move because I was evicted, and eventually—that goes to the next place—but you wouldn't have heat into the winter because it was all paid by the tenants. And it was very, you know, a three-story building, two apartments per floor. And we were all very poor. So we would pay enough for oil so we could turn on the furnace for one hour in the morning and one hour in the late afternoon and beginning of the evening. And the rest was either electric heaters or heavy coats inside the apartment. You could see your breath inside of the apartment. So and then it was an old building so the wind would come right through the windows on the sides of the windows, you know, the frame of the window. So I lived in that place for almost two years.

CARY CORDOVA: And what years were those? What years were those?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It was about 1984 or '85.

CARY CORDOVA: So that was your time in the East Village.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. Still. Yeah, right. That's when I moved to the East Village. That's the place I moved to, but then I met George Gillon [ph]. And George was a fashion designer. And that's how I became involved with travelers because—and then I also started working for the mannequins, you know on mannequins. It was interesting because I started working with mannequins before I had met him. Then I met him, and he turned out to be a fashion designer. And then I—you know, he had a studio in the garment district. And he was working for a boutique—Nina's [ph] Boutique on Christopher Street—my old neighborhood. And it was a very soothing relationship actually because he was a year younger than me, but he was a very giving person, very nurturing. So anyway, I moved with him to his apartment—six-story walkup on St. Mark's. It was St. Mark's Place and a tiny apartment. And eventually I would help him with his business, you know, cutting fabric, laying out fabric for a short period. And then I didn't have a studio so he let me use part of his studio on a wall so I could work. Eventually I found a studio in Brooklyn, and I changed jobs. I became an accountant, believe it or not. Accounts payable for Hawaiian Cut Flowers on 28th Street and 7th Avenue, not far from the garment district.

CARY CORDOVA: That's a switch.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, I know. But it was so desperate to get a job. And I couldn't find anything else. It was during that period when the economy wasn't doing too well.

[END TAPE 3, SIDE A]

And, you know, it was an interesting place. I worked there for a year, just a long time to—I mean, it was a very monotonous, horrible job, but I did it. And the same thing happened. The owner offered me, laid me off. So he liked me, and he knew I was an artist. And he said, you know, I know that your career is to be an artist, and if, you know, I need to reshape this department, he had to hire somebody that was experienced. And I was only doing accounts payable. So the other person was doing accounts receivable, so he wanted to consolidate. So he offered me the unemployment benefits, and I said yes, sure.

And that period, I was helping George. I was working there because I didn't have enough money to afford a studio. So, I worked for about six months there and then—with George in his studio—and then, I worked at night after he would leave—I worked at night, instead of day. Anyway, so I have a series actually. The painting in my house that is in the kitchen, that is green, like a mint green, and they have a face that is so portrayed with—and then, you can see some building dust—the window of our studio. That's what I would see across the way, the top of those buildings in the garment district.

But, when I was with George, I would go with him to the jobbers in the—and it's a world. I mean, it's a whole different world. You go up to the twentieth floor in one of those old buildings, and you find they're called jobbers—people that sell retail, especially to the people in the industry, very specialized, lot of Jewish old men and ladies. And the couples are very sweet and they wear—they had been in business for the longest time, and they have rows and rows in that huge loft, of fabric remnants and you know, yardage of all kinds of fabrics, really old fabrics.

So, what we would do—George knew everybody. He was a very personable guy, and they liked him. And he would go everywhere. It was like a jungle. You go to—[inaudible]—you could spend a whole day visiting different floors. And on those floors, there would be like ten different businesses. And then we would look at all kinds of fabrics, and it was really, you know, it was like mines of different designs and patterns. I started painting on fabric by using the fabric as a canvas. I still have some rolled up paintings. I have a lot of paintings in there that I rolled up. I don't have room to display them, so they are in there.

And then, eventually, I found the other—my last job was with the Delrusteen [ph], a British company, and I stayed there for about three or four years. And I got my first big studio on the Brooklyn side of the East River. It was right in front of the Conetizan plant and it's called Dumbo now because it's down on the Manhattan bridge overpass. Anyhow, it's now totally gentrified; it's a very nice neighborhood. Anyway, they converted the lofts and made into—[inaudible]—where artists had studios. So I had a very nice studio there, a very large studio, and you could see the Manhattan Bridge from a distance and the tugboats and the rivers. A nice space, an industrial place. And it was very large. Mine was one of the studios, there were three with—[inaudible]—which was another artist, a Puerto Rican artist. But she, I think she was born and grew up in New York. And another—an African-American sculptor, Colleen Chase. And I stayed therefore about three years. They sold the building.

CARY CORDOVA: I couldn't help but think about when you were living like near Tompkins Square—that maybe that was also around the time that there was the big Tompkins Square riot.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, actually before—way before I was in there, there were so many homeless living in that park with tents, cardboard and plastic tents in the middle of winter. It was amazing to see those people survive. And it was like a—not a few, the whole place was full of homeless people and living on benches and it was really very, very tragic sight. And for me to you know, be in the building, not far from that, what was happening right across the street in terms of—you know, not having heat or—at least I had a place. And I had sort of a cleaned up place and painted in it and made it into my studio, but just to be confronted with that reality that was so close to my own experience, it was very, a wakeup call.

But no, the riot happened when I was living on St. Mark's Place about a year and a half later or so or a year later. And I remember, George and I, we were going to have dinner and we loved the little restaurants around there. We went to dinner to a little restaurant on the corner, it was called the Pharmacy. I think it was eight, nine, ten. And actually there were some murders—the guy that was eating people down there or—

CARY CORDOVA: Was that the Galmart [ph]?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Galmart [ph]? Is that—he was the East Village wasn't he?

MS. CORDVOA: I—you might be right. I—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It was Ninth Street because it was the same block, but different street. And I

remember hearing about it, but I was just so, so surreal, that I just couldn't believe that it was happening so closely. But anyway, where to have dinner—this restaurant was nicely renovated, kind of like yuppy. It was a yuppy period in the 80's.

CARY CORDOVA: Part of the gentrification?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. Right. Because all kinds of boutiques start to appear and fixed doors, card shops, coffee houses, bars—actually, the first floor where I lived, it was boarded up for the longest time because that's the only way I was able to abandon practically. And the landlady, she had rented space just to have somebody there. The guy across the way on the same floor was a drug addict, a heroin addict. And the experience I had was, when I first moved there, I wanted to be a good neighbor, so he asked me for—if he could borrow some electricity, so I pulled my outlet. I gave him a line, you know, an extension cord. And I told him, okay, well you know, for a week until you get your light on, you know, turned on.

Well a week went by and nothing was happening, and there were lots of people going in and out. I didn't know what was going on at first. And then weeks went by, and I asked him again. When is your electricity, you know, when is it going to be turned on? And so, you know, he put me off every time I spoke to him. So eventually, it was almost three weeks later, I had enough of this. You know, I need to have back the extension cord back because I didn't want to unplug it. I just wanted to be straightforward with him. And I realized that it was just a place where people would hang out and shoot up and do whatever they needed to do. And I didn't care as long as they didn't interfere with my life. I didn't want them to interfere with you know, any of my business. Anyway, eventually they were—they moved out.

And that night, after having dinner at the Pharmacy, there were people chanting and protesting in front of Tompkins Square Park and I think the issue was the homeless.

CARY CORDOVA: You think what?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: The issue—I can't remember exactly—I think it was the homeless, and there were wealthy people from the neighborhood, the youth protesting how they were being thrown out of the park. Well, all of a sudden we saw the police on horses and there were like 20 of them. The people, on foot, near the policemen were with shields and sticks and you know, the whole gear, riot gear. At the moment—we finished dinner and it was nine o'clock. We were ready to go. Well we had to go through Avenue A, which was the entrance to the Tompkins Square Park. To A Street because our apartment was right there. We were three doors from Tompkins Square Park.

All of a sudden, we see this mob running our way because they were being chased by police on horses, horse-back-riding. And we don't know. We just move aside, to the steps of the brownstone so we'll be safe. No luck because the police were hitting everybody that was in the area. And then there were other people responding with trash cans, throwing back at them, we have to run. We run for two blocks all the way to Second Avenue because they, I mean I'm telling you, they're hard. They were right there. I was running for my life because I thought, if I don't run, I'm going to hit or run over by one of these horses. We run and then we stayed away from the area for a while. Actually no, we tried to go back to the apartment, but we went around. It was about two blocks, through First Avenue because they backed down to the Tompkins Square Park—the police—and then, we went through Saint Mark's all the way back to the apartment.

Well, when we getting over to the apartment, actually we made it to the apartment. We opened the front door, and we stayed in that little foyer. And then there was a guy with a camera because at the time, the technology was not as available to everybody like now. You have cellulars and all kinds of stuff. Hardly anybody had videos, camcorders you know?

But there was the guy on top of a traffic light, yeah, actually a walk, don't walk light. And he was recording the whole thing. Right there. We saw him do it, and eventually, that was the footage that was used in the news to—that recorded what the police were doing to peaceful protestors. And because they denied all the charges that they had been running people over, beating everybody up—and they were. I saw people being beat up like really badly. And people bleeding. It was wild because it was at home. It was like out of a movie. And then, again, the guy was on top of the—and the police pulled him down. I don't know how he managed to keep the camera. I think because the crowd surrounded him.

But then they started chasing the people again, away from the park. And then, we got into the building and you know, it was like, we better get out of the way. We stayed you know, we kind of looked and then we went back up to the apartment. But that lasted for a while. And it was pretty strange and you know, it was a shock to see all that happening in front of your house.

CARY CORDOVA: Did you have any idea that tensions were running so high in the neighborhood at that time?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: You know, I don't think the neighbors minded so much that there were homeless people there because that park was kind of rundown. It was neglected for a long time. The benches were broken. It was unkempt. Graffiti all over. The fence was broken in areas. The whole area was actually the whole area—that's why we were squatters. And Rolando was a squatter too I found out later. And they were giving the city well—Nitsa, my friend Nitsa. She managed to rent a huge beautiful building, about six stories high on the corner of Tenth Street or Eleventh Street to be precise. And Avenue B with northeast corner of the street. Beautiful building, and the entrance was on the corner, very ornate. Forty dollars from the city. You could do that as long as you would have a program for the community or—and she was fine to have like a, you know, arts and education program for children. And so, she showed me, showed us, the building and said, you know, I rented for a year, you know, a dollar for the year.

So that was the case. All the buildings in that area that were totally rundown or falling down. A lot of them were burned down and falling. And I think if they had built anything in those areas, they probably have by now. But they were old piles of bricks. Mounds of bricks all over the place. And of course, the people that managed to survive all that—they were living in the buildings that were still standing. They were very poor. And there were absentee landlords and slumlords. I had a friend, he renovated his apartment and he was renting. No actually, he had bought it for very, very little money. And he was renovating from materials that he would find around the neighborhood. It was amazing.

So that was the state of the Tompkins—just to give you an overview of that whole area. And that was why the rents were so affordable. I mean, I was paying like \$155 dollars a month for a half a floor. We had one, two, three bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, and a big dining room like it had been another bedroom. And then, you know, the people—I think it was the city that wanted to get rid of the homeless because I guess some people starting protesting especially businesses. But it was basically, a very tightly knit neighborhood.

CARY CORDOVA: Did this sort of situation of the homeless situation or your experiences as a squatter ever enter into your artwork or was that just something separate?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No, it didn't. Well actually it did, actually it did. One particular character, I don't have that painting. I might have the slides somewhere. And it was a man that worked in the first mannequin company that I worked in, and he was this old, old man. And he was very—I guess he looked older because he was so—he had decayed so much—and he worked there in the shipping department. And I think they wanted to get rid of him, and I think they probably paid him dirt. He was a very, very sweet man. He had this curly hair, white hair, and he could barely move, you know, like shuffle. But he would be hardworking.

And I made a painting of a man holding a mannequin torso and the background was the name of a Polish neighborhood in Brooklyn where that—you know, if the neighborhood where those trendy galleries are now, like Pierogi. Pierogi? It's a Polish neighborhood. That's why it's called Pierogi. And further down is the north, the end nine you know, of the street sign, north, one, two, and that used to be a Puerto Rican neighborhood. But it was very north, rundown too. And now it's very loft and renovated and rebuilt and whatever. Now we have all kinds of galleries there. But this factory was in one of the side streets not where Pierogi is located because I remember Pierogi opened this year.

And well this man—I painted that neighborhood. I took a picture of that neighborhood and sort of like, put it in the background. And it was sort of like a reinterpretation of the myth of Pygmalion, the one that became a woman alive. And what happened to the man, it was so sad because I think he was suicidal because he didn't seem to have any future. He started eating fiberglass. I saw him. He was sort of like he got a little bit demented because of fumes in there.

I left that job. I've always been kind of political—because we were working in not very healthy conditions and nobody was saying anything because everybody was afraid of losing their job. And the owner knew it. So we were working in this place. There were three or four floors. Humongous floors. I mean, 20,000 square feet or more.

CARY CORDOVA: This was the mannequins job?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: The first one. The first mannequin job. And all of them actually. I had to fight you know because the fumes of fiberglass and resins—it's like you couldn't breath. And this first job in the winter the heat was so weak that we had to wear gloves at work. And the windows were broken. We had to cover them, and so this man was working there and he died. All of a sudden, he sort of like disappeared and I found out that he died. It was very sad. That's why I did that painting because it's just like—I think, I heard that he had been homeless and that because he had been caught sleeping there, I think that's why he was fired. And when he was fired, I guess he died. It was very sad, and you know, that made me very upset. But, the parts were insulated with what do you call that? The old insulation used—now it's illegal—everywhere?

CARY CORDOVA: Asbestos.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: One time, we were just working. All of a sudden, the parts had become rusted from the condensation. So, it had created—the asbestos were wrapped in some kind of material that insulate them. But eventually, it broke. It got broke in many areas. And all of a sudden, a chunk fell right there, right in front of us. And I didn't know it was asbestos, and asbestos was not an issue then. But I saw that falling, and then the resins and the dust from—because you have to—Max had made in molds and then what you do is they harden—this is pliable so they put the resin over it and they push it so they see the shape of the mold.

And then they opened it, and when it's dry and pulled out the—that's dry, then this fills whatever holes that are filled in and they descended, so all that does is like sand all over the place. It could be sandy on the first floor and it's all over the building. This just flies. They were not appropriate exhaust fans or anything like that. Anyway, I said, I am not staying here. I'm going to get out of here. So I told him. I told my boss. I said you know, this is unhealthy. She had been working for that company for twenty-some years. She was an older lady, very nice lady. But I said, well I'm leaving and then, the owner made us work extra hours. We had to put in overtime.

And anyway, I hated him because he was a very horrible man. Italian actually. That doesn't have anything to do with it, but you know, I remember because it was the issue of most of the workers were Latinos. Probably a few African-Americans, but most of them were either Puerto Rican or Dominican. A few Italians, most of them were the bosses, the managers. And my boss—she was, she wasn't Irish, no, Polish. And then my co-workers—there were some Anglo-Americans, there were some, you know, from different ethnicities. There was a Chinese one, very—they're all very talented.

Anyway, I decided that I wasn't going to work under those conditions, and I protested. I said, you know, I went to the manager because my boss wouldn't relay the messages to him, afraid of being fired. So I left because for health reasons. And I asked a friend of mine who was a doctor. I said I had to leave because of this reason, so they went and investigated. And they found—then they contested, and we had to go—it was brought to court. And they—I needed to find witnesses so luckily the people that had worked with me—and they had, were not working there anymore, testified on my behalf, and then, we were all interviewed at different, you know, separately. And all the stories coincided because it was all about the truth. So, they—I won. And they gave me the unemployment because they confessed to my unemployment.

So I fade out for a period, you know, manage to work on my own for a while. And that's when I moved with George, and then I was doing some paintings in the studio. Then it happened again. Then I found a job of an accountant. And then I got an offer of unemployment, another brief period where I could do my work uninterrupted. And then, I had the other mannequin company job and I was laid off and that's when I got my apartment in Brooklyn on Fourth Avenue by the Brooklyn Academy of Music. And actually, in the Williamsburg bank. The only, the tallest building in Brooklyn. It's right there by Atlantic Avenue and Pacific and where all the train stations are. I lived two blocks from that on Fourth Avenue.

And this is when I had to move from my studio on Dumbo in Dumbo area. I think it was the first time I got mugged because it was at night. I'd be home from my job to work in my studio before going to my apartment on Saint Mark's place. And in the winter, it was like a—[inaudible]—you know, everybody's gone, all the workers because it was a warehouse district. And then, the train station was about four blocks from my studio in a totally desolated area. And I got mugged twice there. The only time in 16 years that I was mugged in New York. I never had that problem.

CARY CORDOVA: Were you hurt?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No. One guy almost, yeah, he was very violent and I—he was on drugs. He was on crack I'm sure because he couldn't focus his eyes. I kept talking to him in Spanish because I knew he was Latino. And I kept talking to him in Spanish, and he realized all of a sudden, that I was Puerto Rican. And then, he said to me, oh, you're Puerto Rican. Oh my god, I'm so sorry. He started being apologetic. Can you believe it? I just couldn't believe it. I said, we'll I'm glad because I was—he wanted to take my coat, he wanted to take everything, and then he confessed because then, he wanted to walk me to the train station. Well actually, he didn't—he walked me to the train station, I couldn't get rid of him. [Laughter]. He wanted to be my buddy, my friend. Oh I'm so sorry, I just came out of jail he was telling me.

CARY CORDOVA: Wait, what did he think you were? I mean—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Exactly. No but the thing is he probably didn't recognize. He just saw that I was a guy.

CARY CORDOVA: Right.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And then, I am talking to him and talking to him, at first in English and then talked to him in Spanish to see if he will react. And I see that he is totally out of his whit. So I kept talking to him, talking to him. And then all of a sudden, I see that he's reacting and that's when he sees. Are you Boricua? [Laughter]. I

say, yes. Oh, I'm Boricua, too. Oh I'm telling you, he was like my best buddy, I tell you. [Laughter]. So I say, you know what? And I was broke. I didn't have any money with me. I had like two dollars, a dollar, some change. Just enough to buy a token and get back home.

CARY CORDOVA: Did he have a weapon?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No. Actually, he was big and very violent. And he grabbed me and he pushed because what happened is I was walking on the street. It was kind of you know, very quiet. And it was kind of dark. And I see him walking from a distance, you know, on the other side of the street. And I'm about to turn the corner, right down to the station, you know, walking a bit faster. Just very cool, not, and all of a sudden when he just—[inaudible]—you know, runs across the street and grabs me and basically pulled me up the wall. He kind of choke me. And I didn't know what to do because the guy was very violent, and I'm not a violent person. I mean, anybody could be violent and like anything else, but I didn't know what to do. So, anyway, that was—I mean, experience. The second experience I had in that neighborhood with being mugged.

I gave him my money and I said—and then, he asked me, do you need that money to—go out today? And all of the sudden he's conscious. You have enough money and he was very, you know, oh forgive me. I'm so sorry. Well, I called the police from the station because he left me and he went after somebody else. So anyway, that was a stop right before you take the double L, not the L the F train into Manhattan that then stops somewhere in the East Village and then continues into Broadway and Lafayette.

Anyway, then I moved from there. They sold the building and I moved from there. I found an apartment, a whole floor, and that was another sort of slum of the economy. And I found in that apartment, there were—for the first time in many years, you will see signs on the window saying "For Rent." Because you know, the yuppie period had gentrified everywhere—all of a sudden the rents were down and it was a great time to rent.

So I found a very nice apartment, second floor, Fourth Avenue. And it was the whole floor plus the backyard which was—became my backyard because it was—they had extended the first floor all the way to the next building so I had a huge terrace. So I had parties there. And during that period, I was creating many of the pieces that—the ones that you saw in my living room, the Yemeya and the other one of the African-American man and also I did Sandra Cisneros portrait that is in the Smithsonian.

CARY CORDOVA: Now how did that happen? How did you end up doing Sandra's portrait?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well it was—I had be—come to San Antonio because then I met Hernando, my studio-partner, the one that had the lease and sublet space in that Dumbo studio. I just said her name but Candida Alvarez—she had a show in a Gallery in SoHo—and I actually prior to that, a friend of mine from Puerto Rico—he's a very well-known artist, Arnoldo Roche Rabell. He was having a show at MOCHA and Hernando had shown with him at the—[inaudible]—[crosstalk]—"Hispanic in the United States." It was a traveling show. So, Hernando was in that show, and so was Rolando. And that's how I knew about Rolando.

And when I read the biographies, I saw San Antonio, Texas. I said, I didn't know there was a San Antonio in the United States because I didn't know much about the Southwest. I knew that it existed, but I didn't know details about the Southwest. I knew it was Mexican, but I didn't know how. And then he went to the opening and I knew about the opening, so I went to see my friend and I saw him because we had been at the university at pretty much the same time.

And he was of Puerto Rico and then Rolando was there. And he came up to me because he saw me talking to Arnoldo and then after Arnoldo was taking care of—who does this, other people I'm talking to—I was by myself looking at the painting when all of a sudden, another—Rolando came up to me and said, I think he was after the money. I think he liked it. Well I don't think—I was pretty sure he didn't because he asked me if Arnoldo was gay! And you know, that just didn't sit quite right with me just because I thought it was very intrusive.

I didn't even know the guy, that just turned me off. So I told him right, flat out, then why don't you ask himself? Why don't you ask him? [Laughter]. Why are you asking me? So I just ignore him and just kept looking at the painting. [Laughter]. Well, one day Arnoldo had a brief moment and they were talking. And he called me over or something happened that him to do stuff. And that's how I met Rolando. [Laughter].

CARY CORDOVA: First, you didn't like him. [Laughs].

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: No because he was so "in your face" that I just—and the thing is, Arnoldo I think—everybody knows that he is gay but himself. He's a closet case unfortunately, and I hope that he has gone beyond that phase in his life but this is going to become recorded later—I don't think that he needs outing anyway. I think he's out there already. But a few months later—I think this was in the summer or around late summer, Candida had the show. It was December, early December. And that's when another friend, a painter—they had met before—through Cayman. I think he went to my show. We call him Bianco [ph]. He was also part of

"Hispanic Art in the United States."

Well, his name, how can I forget his name. He's a very good friend—in fact, he lives in San Diego has been living in San Diego for a long time, and he is—reintroduced us because I was talking with him and all of a sudden, Rolando shows up and he gives like, oh, you know—have you met? This is my friend Angel. This is Rolando, and I say, yeah, I think we met before, not too long ago. But you know, just very cordial and very nice. And the thing is that then, there was a party for Candida. This loft on Broadway. And we went there and Luis Stand. Luis Stand?

CARY CORDOVA: Luis Stand.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And Luis is a great person. He's a lot of fun. Anyway, so we went to the reception. I went to the reception. My brother was living—my third brother Edwin Rodriguez—he—

CARY CORDOVA: Evan? Edwin.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, my second brother Alberto, Edwin, there is Nancy—who is a minister now—and Edgar is the other musician. Edwin is a musician too although he is working for Microsoft now in Seattle. He just got a job over there. And then, Edgar is the little one from mother and father. And then there is Racquel, which is from a second—my father's second marriage to Judith—second marriage to Judith Juarez, and the little one is Lillian—[inaudible].

So, when I and my brother—the reason I mention my brother is because he offered me and Candida—he befriended Candida. Actually, because Candida—his father had a brownstone, there was a little block of brownstones in Dumbo. And the rest were projects, warehouses—the river was on the other side. And then that they have been torn down, except for one little block—beautiful little block. But they were being, were afraid of people robbing and breaking into apartments and—breaking into apartments and my brother got a rottweiler, I remember. And so, they've never had a problem. But that was building was Candida's father's property—his property. And because there were looking for an apartment when they moved from Washington state to—they wanted to try New York, so they lived there for five years. So I found them that apartment, I introduced him to Candida, Candida to my brother, and so on. And they stayed there for five—three years or so, and then found another apartment in Brooklyn eventually—nicer and safer neighborhood.

But he had this friend that was a guitar player so he offered to have him play at Candida's reception. So we were all there—his friend was playing, a wonderful guitar player. And all of a sudden the crowd starts coming in because it was packed. It got packed. At one point, you know, I'm talking to somebody and there was—all of a sudden the elevators open up—because elevators open to the lofts, whoever owned the place. And there's Rolando walking in with his entourage—[laughs]—and he was wearing this—because it was in the winter. It was still not very cold, but it was rainy and he was wearing a raincoat. And he walks in, and then the raincoat is flowing, you know. I looked in that direction. And all of a sudden because I just happened to be facing that way, I just see him walking in with his entourage. Because he had three or four friends with him, and what kind of comes to mind is—who does he think he is? [Laughter]. I just wanted to—he was like, such a character.

Anyway, so, of course, I was drawn to him. And I—we came to each other, and he recognized me and he said, oh hello. I said, how are you doing—you know, very polite and everything. His friend, a dear friend of mine, Leah. And she is part of this marriage by now with Pedro Han. They lived in New York. [Inaudible.] They lived like the Europeans lived in New York forever. They lived in on Spring Street in Manhattan—a wonderful loft. And they were very welcoming to us and any time we go to New York, we stayed with them. And that was when I first met her.

And she right out—she sees us talking and very—I didn't know her. They had been friends, because Rolando was Pedro's assistant when he was at Columbia University. Actually, and through the same program—assistantship—Claire Tankel was the director of that program through the department of cultural affairs. And I ran into her a few—a year or two ago. She is very old, but she is very bright. We both—Rolando and I ran into her. I couldn't believe it, because he participated in that program and I did too—before meeting Rolando, I was Don Olinsky's—I don't know if you know him, he was a sculptor. I was his first assistant, when he had a loft in Tribeca, on Washington Street.

Anyway, so—

CARY CORDOVA: So you're at that party—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: And Leah says—why are you like that? And we look at Ronaldo, and who is this? Just like—I was just like, in my mind—I didn't say anything, I looked at her like, who the hell does she think she is? Talking about me that way. But he—Rolando introduced us and that was it. Anyway, later on, we had a date. About a week later, he said he wanted to meet for drinks or something—have dinner. I said, well sure, why not?

And at the time, I was breaking up with George.

And what happened is that George—you know, had an—it was in that studio in Dumbo—I had an open house twice—two years in a row. And the first year, he created—it was an incredible spread. He had been a chef in a restaurant in Pennsylvania—Italian restaurant. And then, so he made pastries - -sometimes it was really wonderful. And then the second time, I had already met Rolando because he was at Candida's place. But he was there helping out. George got pneumonia and it was in our relationship—it was 1988. And that's how that painting also—and I have other paintings also from that year and it's funny have those premonitions of things and you don't understand what it means and you don't understand what's going on. Because it's not like reading a book—but there's something that tells you.

And I guess, as an artist, you develop a certain sense that you somehow foresee things—like this thing, this painting—a pre-emptive strike, you know, coming back to haunt you. For example, in this painting that I did, when that whole thing pre-emptive doctrine was being sort of like—discussed, used, but didn't know that it was going to be the disaster we find ourselves in right now. The hunting issue, about that attitude and being so bully. I had a feeling—we were kind of—that relationship was getting strained, because I was spending a lot of time in my studio. My first painting, I have it back there. It's a self-portrait—it's holding a mirror, another mirror on the side, and it's a reflection of myself in the mirror. And that was the first painting that I did at the studio in Dumbo. And then, this one too that my friend Philippina—let's see Ramon Cordero. [END TAPE 3, SIDE B] I think he passed away too.

It was that period that, you know, the AIDS epidemic was rampant and it was like hundreds already—they didn't know what was going on—they didn't know how to treat it. The only thing they knew was the symptoms, and there was one thing that was really debilitating, was horrible—pneumonia was one and diarrhea—waste we call it now—waste. And I don't know. I had a feeling—I was in my studio working. Later on I found that George was feeling left out because I was spending my only spare time in my studio trying to create a body of work because I felt so desperate; I needed to get ahead in terms of exposure. And then, I had met Rolando but then we—actually, I met him when Arnoldo's show and then—you tell me when—[inaudible].

CARY CORDOVA: Let's stop the tape because I know it's about to run out right here and we're at a point where I definitely would like to continue.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Okay, let me take a break.

[Audio break.]

CARY CORDOVA: All right, we are recording. This is Cary Cordova interviewing Angel Rodriguez-Diaz on April 30, 2004. This is session two and disk three. And we were just talking about George actually when we had broke from the other tape and you were saying that he had just come down with pneumonia and you were having some premonitions perhaps.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right and, yeah, we spent about four years together and they were very—the whole different things from the underground world that I was dealing with—left with Mañuel and, you know, the after hours. You know, like going—all night partying and then sleeping all day—[laughs]—basically and then again doing that every day and having the house always full of people because we're very sociable and having—you know—he loved to cook so all of the pretty good friends would come and flock in and down to our place but didn't leave much space for privacy. He was a very public person. He was a very—a person very self-centered. He had to control the—he would have to be the focal of attention—the focus—you know, the focal point.

And with George, it was the opposite. Like I said, he was very intimate and at the same time, he was very social but intimate at home and I think at some point he felt neglected when I was trying to focus on my art and trying to create a body of work I could display. I was trying to—I just felt that this was the ultimate opportunity having another time off of a job to produce art. And this is about in 1988—'88 and all of the sudden he got pneumonia and very scared because he was very allergic all of his life—all of his life that he had told me—but when we were living together too—and very sensitive to allergies. And all of the sudden he got this cough and he wouldn't—we couldn't get rid of it. And I became very concerned. I asked him to go to see this—a doctor and make sure that he was okay.

So he went to see the doctor and all of the sudden I get a phone call from the hospital and he all of the sudden breaks down. He tells me that he is HIV. He told me that—at the time, they didn't know the difference—it was AIDS. And he had pneumonia. So I rushed to the hospital. I was over there below—above 14th Street—it's not Saint Vincent's—it's over there on the East Side—I forgot the name of it—I'm not very good with names.

Anyway, so I got there, and he was totally distraught and I was devastated too. And he started crying, we both started crying, and you know—and so it was the moment of trying to figure out what is going to happen because nobody knew anything about it and the only was the, you know, just wait until you die; that is the end of it. So—

CARY CORDOVA: You must have also—had some concerns for yourself.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yes, and then what happened was that he had to stay in the hospital for a period of time. I think it was like two weeks—two or three weeks. And I would go with him every afternoon and, you know, we would converse and things—we kind of got—tried to get used to it. And then he asked me to go and get tested because, you know, he said, you know, you dread to know, better to be aware than not—than being totally ignorant about the situation. And did.

And actually, this is—I was still working in that last mannequin company because that is why I would go in the late afternoon to visit him. And then I went to the same doctor that he got tested at—at the time it was a very strange situation because everybody was so scared—very scared of being outcast and scared of being, you know, basically put in a concentration camp of some sort. So people would be tested—they would give a number. And that number will be confidential. So they could not trace it to you even if they went to the doctor that got—that tested you.

So I went to the doctor and they told me I was positive. So it was like—it was very upsetting. Actually, no, I went to—no, I called—that is what it was—I called from the train station on my way back home before visiting George, and I was over there in Brooklyn on the F train and 4th Avenue, and eventually—the incredible thing is that they moved to 4th Avenue later on. And I called from the train, the elevated train, waiting for the train at that point and they told me on the phone and just I—it was like my heart sank that I couldn't find myself. You know, and obviously we think—you know, I cried—

CARY CORDOVA: They told you over the phone—that is back when they could tell you over the phone as opposed to making you come in person.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah, right. Because I insisted—something happened that because it was so private—it was so—okay, there was anonymous basically. And they told me and it was like incredible. Anyway, I just found some composure and then I went to the hospital, I told George, and it was sort of like a very strange time because—and then I look at my paintings right before—it was about '88, '89 that this happened. And it was a very strange time because I have surfaced this Sunday my painting—and that painting that you see there is called *Annunciation* in the house—*The Annunciation*.

And, you know, I don't know—annunciation—I don't know why I picked the title at that point—and then all of the sudden it makes—everything makes sense—the tools, this head, the mannequin, the New York skyline, the window—you know, my back towards the window facing the interior. Then there is another painting—it's the same—it's sort of like the same size and it's all red—it's another—it's a self-portrait and it's by the door. The door is sort of like a—it's scratched into the camera—it's all red completely except for the body and the body is like red is coming out of the body—it's like that. And it's sort of like in this pose by the door. One is by the window and the other by the door. We choose—I don't know why it was in there—I just found that they were interesting contextual elements that define that space. And the door is closed—you know, locked. So and then, you know, later on I found out about this.

I didn't know what to do so I just decided to let the clock tick because I didn't know—doctor's didn't know what to do. And then they would prescribe and then George started the regiment of ACT—and the ACT was worse—because they were all—that was the only thing that they were giving him. Now, they have the cocktails and he said it was more dosage of ACT in some instances—not everybody. So the body can tolerate.

Also, the doctors—it's unfortunate—there is something that is a practice of Western medicine—it's like they treat the symptom and not what causes it. And they bombarded people with penicillin. And the penicillin—you know, because then I started reading. What little information I found—I found some information that was not mainstream. And about—sort of like a staying healthy, eating certain ways, avoiding certain foods, avoiding certain—things that can stress your body and your immune system.

So I started reading quite a bit about it. George continued with the ACT. I told him about these things and he continued in ACT and then he had that waste problem because of all of the antibiotics. And what happens is that, you know, the antibiotics kill your intestinal flora. They found out later because doctors were not even thinking because they are not trained in nutrition.

But anybody that knows nutrition and anywhere—that after you take antibiotics you should take a regimen of acidophilus to replenish the intestinal flora so that if the candida—which is a part of the intestinal flora doesn't overgrow and takes over the flora in the intestine and then produces—because it's important to have it but not in the amounts that it develops—when it totally erodes the intestine. There is no absorption of nutrients and the candida produce the alcohol, and the alcohol keeps eroding the intestine. So it keeps growing. Eventually, it attacks the lungs, and it goes all through your brain, and it causes all kind of infections—skin problems, lung problems, brain problems—dementia.

So I was reading about it and how to avoid it and, you know—or it can be the acids, which is something that is very common in women, and men too that have these types of problems like alcohol, ingestion [sic], and bad nutrition.

CARY CORDOVA: What year was this happening?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Oh, '88, '89, '90. Actually, '88 I had—not '88. I think it was already happening. We were not aware of—George was very vulnerable because his immune system was already compromised—with his allergies and then—because his pain is sort of like a landmark—it was a feeling and it was in '88 and we didn't find out until—I think it was '89—the spring of '89 or summer of '89—around then. And I ran into Rolando in 1990 again. And that was Candida's in December—Candida's show—and so anyway, we thought—I think that is why left the day before. We started—he invited me to dinner. George decided that he wanted to separate because he had met somebody at a hospital that was in pretty much the same situation he was, that was getting better with whatever therapy they were giving them and that he could relate to him at the same level, while I was healthier or healthy and that I was going my own way with art. And he understood—he was wise enough to take the initiative because I didn't want to. I was ready to take care of him I told him and, you know, wait for whatever was in the future—stored in the future.

So he made the break and it was very dramatic because I was devastated. But then Rolando came along and it opened another door. It helped me focus on the issue of being an artist and being a professional artist and how to do that because he was—he already experienced—he had been doing this for years—and how to market yourself, how to—and he's very good at it. And so he helped me with organizing my career. And we supported each other in different ways.

He wanted a relationship; I didn't want a relationship because after this—all of this stuff I was so devastated; I was just like—and then I have to move out again and I didn't know where to—and I kept working and Rolando would go on—because he lived where my job in Brooklyn on Third Avenue and Carroll Street—an Italian neighborhood. And he would pick up because he had a station wagon and he would go and pick me up after work. He would call me at work and he would say, are you ready? And he'll pick me up. He would have dinner ready for me. He was very, very sweet.

And the first time that we went to bed, I told him my—you know, because I wanted him to be aware. But I also—we—you know, I told him—we have to use condoms so we have always used condoms—and he's married. And I told him the whole thing that had happened and why I didn't want to get involved in the relationship and he was trying to—[inaudible]—public artwork for North White Plains in New York and the train station. And he was talking a lot. So it was good for me because I didn't want to get involved. And so you know, you go on in with your life with—[inaudible]—be involved—it was complicated.

So then I have to leave my studio in Dumbo—I think I told you this three times already but then I moved to a studio in Brooklyn on the second floor and it was near Rolando; it was about 10 blocks from Rolando. Rolando had another store front, very nice, but this was on the street level, the storefront. So he would come and visit or I would visit him and for a while—while I was kind of resituating myself—relocate my self from St. Mark's Place, I was spending more time with him and then eventually I would go from there to work and George—his relationship with the other guy—I forgot his name—got, you know, more intimate.

And then I—if Rolando—or the landlord wanted his space and he offered him some money for him to move out. And he decided to come back to San Antonio. Then I didn't feel like—and that is how I met, you know—because after I had met Rolando—I started coming to San Antonio. And then I met Sandra [Cisneros], you know, met all of our friends here—Franco—Franco Mondini-Ruiz, but he was not—he was trying—he was making—[inaudible]—into art. He was a lawyer at the time—a real estate lawyer for USAA but he was making some paintings and he lived in a very fancy house—beautiful house. And I met Sandra actually, Rolando introduced Franco to Sandra and all of the friends. Rolando and Sandra—I don't know exactly how they met but I can't remember right now—he told me.

So he introduced me to her, and we had hit it off nicely. We became very good friends. We have been distant now because of her own problems. Anyway—that's another issue—but then I suggested doing her portrait. She had seen some of my work and she liked it very much and she had seen the first goddess that—I'm not exactly giving you a copy of—[off mike]—did I give you a copy of it?

CARY CORDOVA: No. I would love one. [Laughs.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: You can keep those if you like. And so that was the first one—*Myth of Venus*—and she saw it and loved it because she—then she came over to my studio in New York; she was doing reading of her book—what was her book? *A Woman Hollering Creek* [Sandra Cisneros; New York Random House: 1991]. And it was one of the bookstores there. So they taxied her—you know, the limo came and brought her over, and then—to my apartment. You know, I told her what to bring and what kind of things to bring because I had seen her

dress up her. And so oh, I like this skirt, then I like the bustier, or that top that you wore, and you know, she had very cropped hair then.

And then what I did was base the portrait on one of her characters—especially one—the woman in the story of the "Eyes of Zapata"—almost como los de Zapata, which is a very intense, tender, and very woman—you know, something about womanhood in that story that is beautiful. And I—it's sort of like—we use that character to create her portrait and that is why she is standing the way she is standing and that is why, you know, the whole demeanor of it—because I wanted to paint the heroine in that story. And actually, it's one of my favorite stories because it's one of the stories where I find that she is the mature woman. And we could go on to other issues about her writing, which I read before doing the portrait so I could sort of get a feeling for her artistic inquiries or things that moved her.

And I found that her earlier book, *The House on Mango* [*The House on Mango Street*. Sandra Cisneros; Houston, Arte Publico Press: 1983], was more about her childhood. It's a voice of a little girl. And with this particular piece—there were other books in this series—I mean, other short stories in this book—*The Woman Hollering Creek*. There is also an adult woman talking but I think this one brings together the history of her ancestry—you know, her ancestry and her demeanor as a writer at that point in her life. It is not a voice recaptured from childhood.

CARY CORDOVA: You know, it's been a while since I read that story. Is there any reference to that incredibly orange sky?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, you know, what happened was that—no, not necessarily, no. And the thing is that because I found the opportunity—I've always been intrigued by the—and when I was a little kid—on TV, there was very incredible program at two o'clock in the afternoon with Lucy Pereda, and she is still on TV. She still has a program and it's about decoration some stuff like that. But she is always Miss Manners. She is—I think she is Argentinean but she lives in Puerto Rico I think and she moved to Puerto Rico and lived there, got married, and had children, and she's still there. You know, she married a Puerto Rican in her home.

So she became a personality so she would be like Miss Manners basically. But she would have—among other things, she would—on TV she will have a period of a like a break within—it was called telecine in español—no, no que en español—la telecine con Lucy Pereda—something like that. And she would bring art films from all over Latin America—Argentinean productions, Mexican productions—that was when the first time I saw Buñuel's films—*Los Olvidados*, which was devastating because I was a little kid and I would see all of these little kids in the sham towns of Mexico City—Mexico City. It was so horrible. But I saw *El Bruto* there. It was a period of Buñuel in Mexico. I guess, well, in—during Franco's dictatorship—he went to Mexico.

I saw *The Exterminating Angel*; I saw *Viridiana*. In this time I must have been about eight years old—seven, eight years old, and every afternoon I would watch that. And then not just those, but then I saw Argentinean films because they had a big industry, you know. They were competing with Hollywood—Mexican and Argentinean. And then I saw *Llegada del Marqués* in films there. Also I saw productions—a Mexican production with Toshiro Mifune. She was a very famous Japanese actor that played Mexican characters like the *El Padrino*, you know—a very interesting story. I saw that a couple of times.

And I saw the one that really touched my nerve. I can't remember who the—but it was the golden age of Mexican filmmaking. What was the name—it is a story about the guy that is very poor and then he goes out to field and then—oh, his wife gave him a guajolote—it's a turkey—because he worked so hard for the family and is still very poor and in some kind of celebration—she said take the guajolote with you and just eat it by yourself and enjoy it. So he goes to—*Macario*—*Macario* is the title of the movie. It's a fantastic film; it's so magical. Have you ever seen it?

CARY CORDOVA: No.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Oh, it's incredible; you should see it. It's beautiful. It's a very famous director. I forgot his name. And the story is like he goes into the field. All of the sudden he is about to eat the guajolote and all of the sudden this character shows up and asks him if he would share it with him. And then all of the sudden, he's transported—you don't know that he's transported but you hear the piano—you know, the notes—[makes noise]—you know. Like something is about to fade into some other space. And he is given—I think he is given a potion that could heal people by this character.

So he goes back and he gives this to people who are very ill—terminally ill and they gave—you know, they save—they heal. And tells of his story—who had given it to him. The thing is that the who movie goes on. At one point, this character shows up again. And they have some kind of pact between because they have given this potion for some reason. And he takes him to a cave where all of these candles are lit. And this person tells him that these are the souls of the world. All of the world—the souls of the world are in that cave. And all kinds of candles—long, short, you know, about-to-go-out candles—candles are very long and freshly lit. So it's a very interesting sight. Actually now that I'm recalling it's a beautiful, very poetic metaphor.

And he shows him—I think at that point he tells him that—or maybe before he had told him that he is dead and that—Death—the character was you know, Death. And Macario decides to share the guajolote with him before it discloses that he is Death. And then Death takes him to—and then you see—and the whole thing happens in Macario's dream state or something because what happens is that death shows him in that case—shows him a candle is about to go out and tells him—and he tells him, that is your candle. And Macario is looking at it like in desperation. How could that be? You know, it's like—why am I going to die? So soon?

And he tells the Macario there is nothing I can do about it; that's your destiny. And he is like—and he's looking at it or he's trying to hold it or do something about it, he wakes up. And when he wakes up, you see the shot—the next shot is half of the guajolote. It's sitting there, the other one is gone. And then I think they show Macario on the floor or I don't know if they leave it to your imagine or I think they show him that he is dead.

So all of this stuff—it was just a process of dying. I think even the story about the potion and all of this conversation with Death. It was a moment of the transition. Anyway, the whole story is because of during those afternoons, I would see all of these films and it would—you know, they were incredible because later on I would go to art films in New York—art film festivals in New York and there they were and it was amazing to me to relive those—watching those movies again. So I've be fascinated with Mexican cinema. That's where I started and finally found the path—but because of the posters, it's so dramatic.

They are so flashy and so—the colors are so—and the posture of the characters and always those close ups to the point that I—there was—I finally got hold of the—a poster book of Mexico cinemas—and in Chicago when I went to the show, "Arte Latino"—and I went to the Mexican music museum and they had it there so I had to buy it. So, you know, like if a comedy—[Mexican films]—I saw all of those and [Mexican films]—and later on if I was out of that *Tintan* and the other one [Mexican films]—the characters reflecting the Mexican American because it's the—it's the border—they show the border and that confluence of cultures and how they translate that into the character. You know, you lose—you can see their demeanor but you could also so at the way they played with both sides—you know, kind of fooling around and trying to become like wise guy, and they always get away with what they want even if it seems to be so foolish that they—everybody makes fun of them, but at the end they get the girl, they get the prize—whatever it is they ask.

So anyway, I saw that after the—not too long ago and you have to purchase it. Silvia Pinal was also one of my favorite—I was in love with her—I was love with the *La Telemarque*. And, oh, of course la dueña, la doña Maria Felez and Dolores Ario [ph] too. They were so beautiful. But also there were movies with Rombera Cubanans and I saw those too. It was like—Maria Antonio Tamponz—I will always remember that. And there was the one movie—it was a comedy. There usually in this year—one of the posters have it. And I remember the movie where she would move their hips at the sound of the congas—the light bulbs would explode—[makes blasting noises]—in the club—inside the club wherever she would perform. And also Tongolele—you can't leave her out. And you know Tongolele—she was Californiana.

CARY CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: So and I found out this later on living in San Antonio—you much later. But then I would be also—you know, was this fascination with Mexico from my grade school years to the cinema that I was exposed to then me and Rolando coming to San Antonio in traveling with him to Mexico and going to different places. And then coming here eating the food, you know, in Puerto Rico, we would never eat with chili. The food is not hot at all. There is a vereso—you know, it's like vinegar with oil that it's chili's marinated in this long—almost like a serrano—very skinny chili they marinated and then they used a liquid to season whatever—so it's kind of like spice it up but it's not part of the cuisine per se.

And so I started eating chili—no pun intended—[laughter]—since I've known Rolando. And you know, it's something that I love. It's part of my—I incorporate into my dishes—you know, whatever I cook and I added sometimes I kind of reinvent some Puerto Rican dishes and add a little bit of spicy or whatever chile—it could be ancho or polano just to add a little pizzazz to the rice or whatever it is I'm making.

CARY CORDOVA: And so does this sort of begin the period where you are taking on a lot of different Mexican iconography in terms of making it also—reworking it with the—you have sort of a Puerto Rican perspective?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah.

CARY CORDOVA: Is this where that period begins for you?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yes, exactly because even though I had been exposed to all of this, it's sort of like if things can resurface in my life. You know, there would be a fence—almost like a cycle closes and another one comes along. Then all of these other things, when I met Fernando, all of the sudden, I met other Mexican Americans in New York—not many actually because at the time, it was still a minority. But the last few years I was in New York, I saw the shopping cart—you know, real ones with, you know, Mexican guys pushing with

flowers on the sidewalk. I saw it in the upper Manhattan where, you know—by Washington Heights. I saw early on a kid with chiclets and a little around his neck with a little—like a suitcase in the subways in New York City. That was immediately cut off. You know, they—

CARY CORDOVA: [Off mike.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right, they stopped it. But the people—the flower vendors on the street—and there are also this fear I guess because after Giuliani he, you know—he got rid of the homeless, he got rid of—tried—and the street vendors—you know, which is kind of the thing that gives New York a flavor. You know, not just—not exactly the homeless because that is a sad story—that is saddening that such a rich country hasn't been able to provide for the indigent because of homeless people of all walks of life—people that are just mentally ill, that you know, could have been executives—corporations and very knowledgeable or well educated—all of the sudden find themselves in a horrible situation and they lose it all.

Anyway, that's the first time and we started to ask around to the—Rolando and I actually were curious—actually my studio apartment in Brooklyn on Fourth Avenue—my next-door neighbors on the same floor were all Mexicans. On one sides the Korean was the owner of his building—a sign business, and on the other side, on the second floor, the same size as the—the same size as my apartment, there were four Mexican families because my apartment was compartmentalized into four bedrooms, but they must have been tiny because my apartment was about almost 1,000 square-feet—about the size of this room. And they were four families there—I guess each trying to live in the bedroom and that is how they managed to pay the rent.

But then I started—we started asking around—you know, where are you from? What part of Mexico are you from? Because there were—it was unquestionable that they were immigrants from Mexico so we wanted to know specifically. And they would tell us from Puebla. And you ask in New York—now they are probably from other places, but a lot of Mexicanos—the early Mexicans were from Puebla. And what happens is that—then I went to this Puebla. Puebla is a very educated—the population there is very well educated—lots of universities and also it seems that they have kind of—once one person migrated, then there was a connection, so their family, friends, will connect through that person. And also New York, after the whole Puerto Rican basically experience and bilinguals and because the Puerto Ricans are citizens—same thing in the Southwest—the Mexican Americans because they are citizens, they have Constitutional rights. And they are entitled to the same rights as—access to education and health, and other things that other citizens are entitled to.

So that is why the bilingual education was instituted, and also all kinds of services in a—and they provided bilingual people in social services and all kinds of organizations to help people that didn't speak English. So the infrastructure was there for people that at least spoke Spanish initially. Of course, there are the Asians—all of the other people that have migrated to the country but I—you know, for the Mexicans that type of immigrant because the rich Mexicans, they have mobility. They are free to come and go as they pleased. So that wasn't an issue and also they spoke English and that was not an issue either. [END TAPE 4, SIDE A] It was only the people that were trying to better their lives.

So then I ended up coming to San Antonio, you know. And I don't know I guess we could leave at that—well, although, before that happened—the last year in New York—I got—and this was another important part of my career—the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation—it's a foundation in New York. It provides a studio to artists and I was—had been to Yaddo, which is an artist colony in Saratoga Springs in upstate New York. And Yaddo's manager belonged to this magnates—owners of steel I guess and railroads. And they loved the arts, especially the wife.

And they had—you know, they were very wealthy but they had lived through a horrible period of tragedy when I think the house burned down, the children died, and the wife and the husband survived, but anyway. You know, the wife—they donated the house and I think somebody—to start a colony for artists and writers, to spend time there without the worries about trying to make a living and just have a month or two to produce work.

So I heard about it and I applied. And, you know, I had to be exhibiting at this point—but if you can bid in New York and lots of your shows —and Soon Yong Min—she is a Korean artist—she was on the board—I think Soon Yong Min. She was on the board that year to select the artists and she had seen my work, and she saw my application, and also John Caldwell had written a letter of recommendation. And then, anyway, I got in. So I spent two months—no, a month, in Yaddo and it was great; it was really interesting because it was like you were treated like royalty. It was incredible, believe it—and had never been treated like that in my life and all of the sudden to be in this—you know, because it was very nice. I think it's the top of the artist colonies in the United States. It's like being rich—treated like royalty. The meals are prepared for you, the beautiful dining room. You know, they ring the bell and all you have to do is work. And beautiful grounds and it's very pretty town.

Anyway, then I met—there I met Robert Sward. He was there also working and I didn't know who he was actually. And I befriended anybody—the writers and there were lots of poets, and the painters, and I befriended

everybody and I had no interest. I wasn't pursuing anything because I didn't know him. And I liked to have parties so I had a party in my studio and everybody came to my studio, and I had some paintings over the walls and he came over and we had spoken briefly before after dinner. We would sit outside and people have cigarettes. Anyhow, so then he saw my work and he liked it—he liked some pieces there.

When I applied to my Lila Wallace Foundation, the deadline was a Monday. I think I applied Saturday or something. And my friend told me you should do this, you should do that; he was doing it and he said, you should do it. You don't have anything to lose—you have slides. So did. So I got in, he didn't. It was funny, you know, how things happen. He was there to tell me—and the thing is that Robert Sward was part of the board and when he saw my work, he said, I know him, and he knew my situation and he basically—when your sort of like artistic development but also need meaning a studio in New York—so I needed a studio.

And so that allowed me to move to get out of and move out of New York City—that is how the transition happened because it was the last year I was in New York and then I found—I was roommates with somebody else in Madison Square Garden on Eighth Avenue. On top, it was the last floor, it was the top of a nice—[inaudible]—and the smoke you could imagine went all the way up there. So anyway, but I stayed there—because I had planned and I had already—it was already towards the end of my residency and I met Chuck Close—I think about that already and that—[inaudible]—there were people were sort of like—were interested in my work.

So I spent some months there and then the last month, I went with my brother in—Brooklyn—and I stayed there until I went to Mexico—I had a couple of grants from the National Endowment and the Lila Wallace Grant. And with that money I had a proposal to go study indigenous culture in Mexico. And I spent six months in Mexico. I came to San Antonio—six months in Cuernavaca where I tried to—Chapultepec—to the Museum of Anthropology. And [inaudible—off mike]—so that is how I got really even further into the mythology—Mexican mythology and I read everything that I could have my hands on—and also living among the people, you know.

And for half a year—and particularly it was a very good period because I went there—I got there in October—preparations for Day of the Dead—so I visited all kinds of cemeteries, little towns—all of them in Morelos—especially in the state of Morelos, which celebrates the Day of the Dead in a very special way. And I didn't know—my plans were to go to Patzcuaro in Mexico City—also Mexico City to—by the Lake Texcoco—[inaudible]—is a place where also—and it's a very old area—one of the earlier settlements of Spanish settlements.

So the cemeteries there—so I went there and I didn't go to Patzcuaro. But it was even more interesting although I don't know exactly how Patzcuaro—I don't have any experience there. But it was very interesting because it was not touristy—they were in the people that—it was more personal. And going to these private spaces and the people fixing up the tombs and painting them, and putting flowers, and getting ready, and talking to them, and it wasn't swarmed by tourism. So it was very nice to experience that.

And then—

CARY CORDOVA: Let me pause it.

[Audio break.]

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: The dogs—you know, the dinner at that time was at six—

CARY CORDOVA: Okay, so we're back recording—[laughter]—and we have realized how long we have been talking just now and then I thought that—I would just mention that we have come to this point where you have gone to Mexico and that is probably a good breaking point for us that we can come back to for a shorter session to talk to you about your time in Mexico and your most recent time here in San Antonio.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Mm-hmm [in agreement]. That's good. Yes. [Cross talk.] I think we've lasted a long time doing this session—[laughter].

CARY CORDOVA: And with that I'm going to stop today's tape.

[Audio break.]

CARY CORDOVA: All right, we are recording. This is Cary Cordova interview Angel Rodriguez-Diaz on May 7th, 2004, at his studio. This is session three and disk one. And having mentioned—the first thing that I'd really like to ask you about is how you decided to focus so much of your work on portraiture art and what does portraiture mean to you?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, I think mentioned before that one of my first excursions into painting were portraiture. And I think that—I don't know exactly the reason it was portraiture; it's just—[inaudible]—it was in a

way challenging. I think I sometimes try to try things that I can't—difficult for me—challenging and see if I could overcome—overcome and succeed in doing that. So I think that's one of the things that was in the back of my mind when I started painting portraits, but the same time, I found that it was very interesting in trying to disclose what people are really like, and how to get into that inner self—you know, how to figure out ways to convey how I feel about the person that is sitting.

So that is one of the things. Also it is because to me—I don't know, I've always described it as like a landscape. I feel like in the eyes and in the face and it's sort of like you can get lost in the face. You know like you can—just looking at the person and in the different—[inaudible]—of the face and the curves, and all of this reminds me of like the earth. You know, sort of like—I don't know—I don't see it—I see it as an image as a whole but at the same time, I see the detail of the flesh and the different imperfections on the flesh—you know, the skin.

And I think the eyes are a very important part of the face and my cliché—it's a cliché—because everybody used the idea—the eyes are the windows to the soul—you know, windows to the soul. But to some extent I find that there is something that you can sort of like access through the eyes and perhaps it's because it's what makes—you make eye contact. And so it's a very direct relationship. You know, it's like—from eye to eye. There is no escape. It's sort of like an energy connecting. That is what has attracted me to portraiture.

And also when I study the masters—you know, the old masters and so their portraits—there was such a magical space that was created that I found it to some extent surreal and way before surrealism because it was an imaginary space. And to be able to convey that with paint and cameras or wood, it was extraordinary. So that was another thing that really triggered my curiosity—how to accomplish that kind of situation where the individual is placed within a certain space and how those two relate to each other, and how that speaks to the viewer, and especially—first of all it speaks to me but then how that would relate to the people that would look at the painting later on.

CARY CORDOVA: Are your portraits mostly commissioned or do you actually seek out people and say I would like you to be in a portrait?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah—both of them. I've had—that's one of the reasons why I came back to San Antonio. I mean, I get to San Antonio in 1995. I went to Mexico for six months and then I came back to do a family portrait, and I figured that it was better to come to San Antonio to avoid all kinds of hassles bringing a painting from Mexico. And it was a large painting too and I needed more space. So I decided to come to San Antonio and work here for a few months and that's why I rented the space of the Majestic Theater—one of the store fronts there—to do a family portrait for Alfredo Cisñeros who is a very well known doctor in Chicago—Mexican American. Actually, he is Sandra Cisñeros' brother—oldest brother.

And it was a family portrait because he had been collecting art and his love for art—I had never seen or met anybody so excited about art than Alfredo and it was so contagious and to meet somebody that was as excited about art as I am—but on the other hand, a person that would—could put his money where his mouth is. [Laughter.] And then he wanted to have a portrait of his family and at the time they were a very young family—his children were very young and that was a his other love in life. So I felt that that was a very interesting combination of having that passion for art and the passion for his family. And how I would—you know, the challenge was how to convey that feeling for this painting. So that's where the painting *La Familia* came about.

And also decided instead of revisiting—sort of like stereotypical imagery of the Mexican Americans have used to identify themselves through the South and Southwest—images of identity, Virgin de Guadalupe and so on—it's thundering—

CARY CORDOVA: It's really thundering

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: This—[laughs]—I guess this, you know—it's a nice background—to some extent—

CARY CORDOVA: And we're sorry to the transcriber.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yes, I hope that they can transcribe that.

So I wanted to represent—and then he is a doctor and his family—a middle class family. So I wanted to represent that new—Mexican American generation—that is not the Mexican American generation of pickers—la pizca.

CARY CORDOVA: Farm workers?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Farm workers and people picking up the vegetables and fruits from the field. You know the poor Mexican Americans, poor Latinos in this country, but already in well established, well-to-do Mexican Americans—in this case—a Mexican American family that to the point that he could afford having a

collection of colonial art and contemporary Latino art from the United States, and he has a wonderful collection, one of the best collections in the United States actually because he hasn't limited it to any particular Latino group. He has been more inclusive, so he has a very interesting variety of works.

So that is why I decided to incorporate—somewhat interpret the humanity of the people regardless of who they were or who they are. In this case a family you look at painting, they have no references to any kind of ethnicity in particular. You might guess about the—maybe it's some trace on the faces—you know, if that is something you could pick on. But mostly it takes place in the backyard and some symbols to the name of the family Cisneros—you know, with a swan that was an actual pet of the house and it has a little lake in the back of house.

Anyway, so but, I have found from the time I have been more in contact with the Mexican Americans in New York, and particularly Rolando, my partner. It was sort of like we would travel to Mexico and then he would invite me to go to places that he had been to and—I became fascinated about witnessing the culture of Mexico—the indigenous culture in Mexico—and it's something that had it being exposed to early on in my development as a—in my childhood.

But then all of the sudden, I was experiencing right in front of me—so it was very interesting. And the fact that it was so—it's still alive. So that was something that—it was so immediate and so powerful that I started to—that's why I went to Cuernavaca—then I decided I wanted to study the indigenous cultures and then to—I went to the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City—spent a lot of time there studying the indigenous culture of Mexico, but also of Central America, and also going back to my own indigenous background—the Taino Indians.

Of course the Taino Indians—because it was a culture of the islands, they didn't have very—any—there are some objects that have survived but most of the things that they made—they were—made out of perishable materials. So a few things have survived but not—there hasn't been, you know, like any kind of constructions besides the petroglyphs and the ceremonial parts that were defined by these rocks that were insides with different images.

So I have—I was going back to that at the same time that I was relating it to what was happening in Mexico and then also what was—for example, the Taino Indians—they have corn—the use corn. Yuca was a very important staple of their diet and eventually the Spaniards, when they came, they realized that the cassava was a very important food because they could travel with it and it would last a long time. And it was a—it became a substitute for bread. But then also we have a pastel, which is a wrap—it's a pamal, but it's made out of banana leaves. And I found a core relation between Meso-American culture—you know, Mayans and Aztec in their foods and in the Caribbean.

So that was very interesting to find out the—discovering all of those points of connection. And the fact that—there has always been a lot of communication in around that time between the artists in islands and the artists in Latin America—Mexico—a bunch in Mexico and also the northern part of South America. You can experience that when you listen to the music. So there have been a lot of migration between the two. Also their territory that—the islands are more limited. In order for artists to survive, they have to migrate to larger countries where the market would be larger as well.

So a lot of artists went to Mexico, for example, to learn graphic art in the '30s and these—you know, the '30s also was during the WPA—the American program that was influenced or was created by default from Diego Rivera's mural work in the United States. And they went and learned different printmaking techniques. They went back to the islands—Jack Delano, for example—he was the artist that got the WPA program to establish a Taller de la Comunidad in the islands. And he was a photographer and I think he was Ukrainian—I'm not quite sure. He was Ukrainian or Polish—I think he was Ukrainian. But he made Puerto Rico his home. He stayed there until he died and raised his family there.

Anyway, the Taller de la Comunidad, for example, was very instrumental in educating the community and also making prints that was a form of art more accessible to the people and the economics of the islands at the time—and also kept the artists producing because they could afford selling in prints instead of a painting.

CARY CORDOVA: So in part your work has also been representing that continuing legacy of cross-cultural connections between Mexico and Puerto Rico. But part of it is that there is this historical artistic connection between Mexico and Puerto Rico that you show in your work?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, it wasn't a conscious effort; it just, you know, like happened that once I started visiting Mexico, this triggered so many—my curiosity about how to translate my experience in this country through my work and through my personal view of what is happening.

But of course I was aware of that history and also because of the islands—you know, like I said before, is a limited territory so people migrate. Actually, in the Taino mythology, there are stories about where the children became adults, they had to migrate—especially the men have to migrate because otherwise there would overpopulation and also that way they avoided the—what do you call it—inbreeding. But then one example that

comes to my mind and it is very graphic because most people don't know this.

For example Rafael Hernandez, who was a very popular composer of boleros in Puerto Rico—who was the other one that was very famous? Flores—I forgot his first name—Pedro Flores. Rafael Hernandez lived a long time in Mexico and also they would go to Cuba because Cuba had a very big music industry, and nightclubs so they could perform there and they could live there. But Rafael Hernandez was—he was in Mexico—he was composing to and actually "Las Mañanitas"—you know, that's almost like the national anthem of the Mexican people because everybody—every time there is a birthday celebration, they sing "Las Mañanitas." Well, he was the composer—a Puerto Rican composed that song. So when I found that out—that little detail, it was kind of like interesting because there is a—I'm sure if I look further into it, I'll find other types of relationships between the island and Mexico.

So I study the indigenous culture in Mexico and I'm not saying that I'm an expert on Mexican anthropology but enough to—so I could understand a very important part of the mythology—you know, the myth of creation and why many customs the Mexican people have—where they came from. So when I came to San Antonio, you know, that's obviously—part of that history is carried on here more than anywhere else in the United States. There was a thing about coming to San Antonio having visited for almost over 13 years of 14 years, and it was that I found that most people spoke Spanish or a lot of people spoke Spanish—I won't say most. But also that they are there are points of coincidence in terms of culture, meaning that the background—you know, this used to be Mexican territory and it was—we were colonized by the same people, the Spaniards. So we have the Catholicism as a religious background and also many cultural layers stemming from that relationship with Spain.

Of course the Mexican Americans have the indigenous layer that is—because they were empires at the time of the conquest. They had permeated the—that relationship with the Spanish and indigenous—it was so powerful that a lot of that influence survived. In the islands, the indigenous people disappeared within like 50 years of the conquest. So, you know, due to diseases, enslavement, and also mass suicides. And there are some remains of that culture—like in some objects and artifacts, but there's also some voices incorporated into the language—into Spanish—you like, hammock, guiro, maraca, huracan—hurricane—and so on. Actually—barbacoa—it's a Taino word. Well, and there are some other words incorporated into the language.

So the fact that I have been surrounded or I have made the perfect match with my relationship with my partner, then it became more—a tighter relationship with the Mexican culture and then the Mexican American culture.

CARY CORDOVA: Can you separate—like your work was changed as a result of going to Mexico versus how it was changed as a result of living here in San Antonio?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: You know, it's not very—it's not very different. The only thing I found that—when I was in Mexico—I think became more baroque—a little more baroque—more crowded—the space. Here, I think with the influence of the awareness of—also of the mainstream American art and minimalism, and conceptualism—you know, the latest trends in sort of like Anglo-Protestant aesthetic—that has sort of like a created an awareness of spacing things a little more. But still where there is certainly an intensity of color and imagery, and relationship with the viewer.

I call myself a portrait painter—you know, it's very specific. You know, I'm a painter mostly although I have built things through other mediums and I have been—I have to say that—I have been successfully translating my way of—my creative process into other mediums. But painting—I find that it's such a medium that once you take your time to look at the painting, you make a pause. And look at the painting—it just keeps growing in you. It's sort of like—it's thing—it's a static medium, but then psychologically, it triggers so many reactions in your brain that it's—I found that it's more powerful than for example videos because video—you're having a succession of images that almost—you almost forget the previous image and you're constantly bombarding but a reputation of the now—of the present. While a painting makes reference to the past, to the moment that you're looking at a painting, and to the moment the painting that was created—when the painter was addressing the medium, you know.

So there are many layers and I think that psychologically creates a very different space and I think it's very—it makes a very strong lasting impression. And maybe that is why painting is not considered important at this moment because we are living in a society that is bombarding with—suddenly bombarded by the media, and the media is sort of like—you know, especially TV and video—it's not—it's responding to consumerism—so many more image they can put—package in one second or a minute, or whatever it is in a span of time, the more successful they are—that is the attitude—is how much more you get per space.

And with the painting, just the fact that you have to settle—use the in front of it—it's in a way anachronistic, but at the same time brings back your humanity because you have to take time even to eat and look at the problems we have when you relate to—you know, or—people eat a lot of fast food, which is the same side of that type of relationship with our body and with nature.

So, you know, we are dehumanized—being dehumanized by consumerism. And I think it's very—it's very strange because we think or we have thought for a long time that it was an advancement in arts in terms of the betterment of our waste of production and also a betterment of our lives—you know, making things easier, but we have become so accustomed to being so comfortable that it has made people lazy, overweight, and ill. So there is something detrimental to our lives as a species if you compare the modes of production to our lives, you know—the way we exist on this planet.

CARY CORDOVA: In listening to you, one of the questions that comes up for me is I immediately think about those wonderful portraits that you did—of very bodied women, and, I don't know, I suddenly struck by this issue of being overweight with the depictions that you give of the women—you know the portraits that I'm referring to.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: "The Goddesses."

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah. [Laughs.] And they are so actually sympathetic to them. So maybe could you just tell me a little bit about what motivated those portraits or how they came about?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, it's—you know, it wasn't planned either. I had a friend I met through Mañuel—you know, Mañuel was her professor and years later after Mañuel passed away, I met her, and her name is Australia Marte, which is the name—incredible name—you know, Australia, the continent, Marte—Mars, you know. And she got married so her name kind of changed to Australia Marte de Ramos. Her husband's name—Nicholas Ramos.

Anyway, but one day, we were at a party at Rolando's studio actually and I had started to invite those friends I had met through Manuel. And they came—everybody came and, you know, she's Dominican. You know, and then Puerto Rican friends came and we had an incredible time. Salsa, merengue, it was fantastic. But at one point, she's a very charming woman—a beautiful woman—especially facially—you know, and she came to me with another friend—Carmen Sanchez. She said to me, well, Angel, I think have some point you should paint me, won't you? And she was joking around.

And then I looked at her and said you know what, I think that is a good idea. But then she was being sort of like—being flirtatious and trying to kind of like find out what my reaction would be. And said, well, but if you do, you have to show a little bit of flesh. You have to show a little bit here and a little bit of there, pointing to her breast—[laughter]. And we laughed because it was so cute and she was charming. It was so funny.

Then I said, you know what, I'm—this is an idea. So a few days later I call her up and I say, you know that proposal about painting—I've been thinking about it. And I have this idea about creating a painting of a goddess and the goddess that I have in mind will be the opposite of the paintings—Renaissance paintings of the goddess of beauty and I would like to title it, *The Myth of Venus*. And she liked the idea.

Of course when the moment came to have the portrait done—and I worked—after a while—after having sitters—sitting for me over a period of time—you know, it was very difficult to—so I decided to take a photo session—do a photo session with this sort of concept in mind of what the portrait should look like or would look like and then I would use photos.

Anyway, so I call her and say, okay, let's make a date, and come over to my studio and do a photo session. And she was—you know, when she came over to do the station—to the studio she was a little—kind of shy and foolish. And I said, well, you know, I set aside a folding—what do you call—the screen so she would be comfortable undressing and then I put out a platform where she could stand and I could take pictures.

And you could see the demeanor in the painting. She was still a little shy about it. So it was kind of coy and I loved the way the painting came out because it was about her beauty as a human being. It was about the—recalling those myths of goddesses of antiquity, and also the sort of like the voluptuousness of the flesh. And her demeanor of being kind of like shy when you could see all of her. You could see her whole being, you know, I mean, at least physically.

So I tried to portray that moment and I think I was successful in achieving that. The thing is that we had an unveiling a few weeks later. And I had to show it to her first because I wanted to make sure that she was comfortable with it. So we—I invited a few friends, I had prepared dinner—a few friends—like a dozen friends—you know, intimate friends. And when she saw her, she couldn't believe it. And she told me, oh, yeah, I think it's so pretty. Oh, I love it—I love it.

Well, I was very—I felt very—you know, I had accomplished my goal. And then I cover it again. Well, the rest of the guests came, of course after dinner, I had my unveiling. I tried to sort of create a little momentum—I create a little drama—you know, of a—it's a painting. But then Philip Santos—you know, the writer—he was there and he said, ay, Angel, this is "Nuevo Tropicalismo"—[laughs]—because she sat against the very kind of—the sunset—you know, by the beach. You know, it was a very low horizon. And it's just an insinuation of the ocean with a

little reflection.

So that is how it started. And then two more came after that. And actually I'm going to—I haven't been able to do—I have like two more that I would like to work on but I haven't been able to work on them in recent years. But the second one was Yemaya, which is the goddess Yemaya—Y-E-M-A-Y-A. I think she is the goddess of the oceans according to the Yorubas, which were part of the African people that were brought to a place—to the Caribbean and they believed in a pantheon of gods and goddesses. And they mostly were taken to Cuba. And the extreme position between Catholicism and the Yoruba religion was what is called Santeria.

So what happened was that—the same thing happened—[END OF TAPE 4, SIDE B]—the Africans that were brought to Puerto Rico believed in the worship of ancestors. And they were—they didn't have—it wasn't the same as Santeria; it became spiritualism. And they, you know—communication with the dead and mediums, and you know, that—all that kind of practices.

Anyway, so Yemaya is the goddess of—she is the one that causes the universal flood—the—deluge—and she was upset and I can't remember now the reason, and she started dancing frantically and unleashed her seven spirits and that's where each one of the oceans—And she unleashed those—the waters and the other gods have to come together and they convinced her to let them chain her—they wouldn't have been able to do that unless she allowed—she allowed with the understanding that there had to be—a sacrifice to her every day of the year, meaning somebody had to drown in the ocean every day. And that was why she was at peace.

So this painting uses of demeanor—and it was funny—or not funny—it was interesting how come Yemaya because Yemaya was a—this woman was the first performance of *Frida*, the opera. And it started I think in Arizona. And it was brought to New York to Brooklyn Academy of Music. And we were invited, Rolando and I, to the performance. So after the performance there was a big spread across the street at another theater of Mexican food and mariachis on the stage—all across the stage. And there were tables spread throughout the theater. All of a sudden I see this woman run across the stage. She is—I saw her from a distance, and I told Rolando, "I can't believe it. Look at Yemaya." Because I'd been looking for a model. But, you know, I didn't feel confident approaching people or necessarily asking them to pose for me because of issues of prejudice that people have, you know, most people have about being overweight. And then addressing a person to be your model, and one of the issues is because they are big women, I was a little shy about approaching women to ask them to become a model.

But anyway, I saw this one, and then Rolando says, well, go and talk to her. And at first decided to go see—I was debating—because she looked regal. She was dressed in gold lamé with black caftan with a beautiful turban—the same colors, the same design—and she looked amazing. I mean, she was really like a queen. She had—her whole demeanor was a like a queen. So I decided—I saw where she was sitting at the table she was at so I decided, you know, to go there. And so I started talking to her, and I said, you know, I saw you walking across the stage and I told my friend, she looks like a queen. And I think I found my model for this painting. I told her I was a painter, and I explained the whole concept of my previous painting. And I told her about Yemaya. So then she told me, well you know what, I love painting. And I am a painter. She couldn't do more painting because, you know, she worked for a living, and she would do painting on weekends. So I asked her, will you pose for me? And she said, of course I will.

So we made a date, and she came over to the studio. And with her was totally opposite than Australia. When I had set up all the lights, I was still setting up something and she was waiting for me. And so I'm finishing up and my back is towards her. I tell her I'm about to finish. You let me know when you're ready, and we'll start the shoot. And I turn around and there she comes completely naked, walking towards the area where I was going to take the picture. And as she's walking by me, she tells me, I think people shouldn't wear any clothes. And she walks like that. And the thing is that the demeanor in the painting is also the way she is. She was very open, very comfortable with her body, very self-confident, very, you know, very confident and self-assured. And so I wanted to portray that so she became this goddess of the ocean.

And the third one, it was in an opening, an open house at the Marie Sharpe—the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation. We all had an opening towards the end of our residency there, and one of the visitors was—actually Yemaya, her name is Diana Fraser. And then I met the model of *La Primavera* after Botticelli. In *La Primavera*, she was looking at the paintings because I had displayed the other two paintings. And she was looking at them and looking at them. She was like—I asked her, "Do you like the paintings?" Oh yes, I love them. And I was looking for another model because it was towards the beginning of spring, and I wanted to do a painting about the spring. So I figured it would be interesting to do something related to spring like the Botticelli painting of spring. So after a little while that I was watching her look at the painting, I asked her, would you like to be a model for this painting? I explained, you know, the *Birth of Spring* like Botticelli's la, la, la. And she looked at me, and I could see her eyes were, you know like, glistening. So she said, well, let me think about it. She was very—also very coy. And she walked around the other studios, and like five minutes later she came back and said, I'll do it.

So she came over another day, and I had bought all these flowers because I wanted to be—I bought—Casablanca lilies. And the Casablanca lilies happened to be her favorite flower, and I didn't know, and I had bought a bunch. It was like incredible—so large that you could barely carry it. It was about this big, you know; it was like I don't know how many lilies. It was—a big abundance. And then I ended up using just one, you know, for the painting. But after the session I gave them all to her because she, you know, she was so gracious to pose for me. And it turned out to be her favorite flower. And so we had a first session, and I decided to use glasses. She had these beautiful tortoise-shell glasses on, and she was also an artist. And she is actually and then librarian. Sandra Payne was her name. Sandra Payne, P-A-Y-N-E. And she's an artist in New York, African American. And we, you know, we established—I established a very good relationship with all these women, very charming women that, you know, storytellers. And I loved them because they were so interesting.

CARY CORDOVA: And they were all women.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Mm-hmm. Right. Yeah, I hadn't had a desire to do a large man as a subject although one of my paintings is a transvestite—one of those large goddesses. The ones I—you know, I'm disclosing something. I would never paint them for that reason, but, you know, that's why this idea—when I start talking too much about the painting, I just get, like, sidetracked. But that's one of the things I wanted to do. But with these women our relationship—we would develop a nice friendship and, you know, a lot of respect. I have a lot of respect for all of them because they were brave enough to understand and allow me to see themselves in a way that they haven't disclosed themselves to anybody else. So that was a wonderful experience, you know, that sense of trust. And the thing is, with portraits you develop a certain relationship with the sitter that's very unique. And each one of the portraits, it's a whole different world. That's why I always called it a—it's like a landscape, you know I guess, portrait-scape or portrait landscape. Rolando had his, you know, table-scape, which is funny because I had talked about the face and the body being like a landscape. So maybe I should coin another term about the body or the face being like a landscape.

So each one of the paintings is a world in itself that is about that particular person. So that creates a variety in my work, and that's why I still find portraiture interesting because you're coming into—[inaudible]—their inner world. So I mean, there's like the multiplicity of personalities like your being in a garden where you have all kinds of flowers, all kinds of fragrances. It's such a wonderful experience. That's why I don't understand the mainstream American art where they circumscribe themselves to one type of aesthetic, and they only interested in showcasing one type of artistic sensibility where there are so many different ways of looking at the world and expressing it. We are missing or they are missing a lot. We're missing as part of the American culture because, you know, of course who controls the mediums of communication, they also control the visibility.

So it's very difficult for us in the world that come from traditional cultures where storytelling is an integral part of our makeup as human beings to leave aside that experience in order to participate more fully into the American mainstream—Anglo-American mainstream. I'm not saying, you know, all the Americans because there's a vast two continents of these. But, you know, especially the sensibility of the Protestant—Anglo-Protestant sensibility that is very non-representational and very repressed for that matter. There's a denial of the human body. The body is not—and it's very interesting because in one lecture I heard from this critic—of course she writes some for the reviews for *Art in America*. And she reviewed my show at ArtPace, and I'm trying to remember her name. Oh now, Eleanor Hartney. I heard her one time talk about the differing attitudes between Anglo esthetics—Anglo-American aesthetics or Anglo esthetics because the British also have that bend and it comes from that, Anglo-Americans, you know, the Puritans and all the history—and Latin Americans. And I think not just Latin Americans, but I would put it this way: more traditional cultures. And that the religion influences, of course, our view of the world. But that Anglo-Americans look at the body as a means to sin, to lost—the paradise lost, while Latin Americans look at the body—or at least Catholics—as a means to redemption, as a mean to another possibility of experiencing another something else.

And, you know, you can see it in the practices of their religion when you look at the church—the Anglican, the Protestant, there's no reference to the body. You can have a reference to the cross with some of the Christ. You just have the cross—no body. While the church, the Catholic church—and I'm not Catholic, but it's part of my culture makeup—you can't find any more ornamentation. Look at baroque. I mean, baroque is amazing, is fantastic because it's sort of like the pinnacle of the most real imagination of how far you can take your creativity and human beings can—you know, how exuberant can they express themselves? And then you know, of course, you have the pain of the crucifixion, and you have also the exuberance of the resurrection and all of the mythology around all of the passion of the Christ. The blood, the sweat, all of these things are very human. They're human. There's no denial of that reality. And that is an acknowledgement of your body—that you sweat, that you bleed, that you have body fluids, that you are a sensuous being, for that matter, that you can experience sensuality in many ways through sex, through a beautiful—you know, letting yourself go through beautiful things in nature instead of denying yourself of that experience.

CARY CORDOVA: What I'm thinking right now is that I can see all of those things in your artwork, but I'm wondering if you—about pressure here in San Antonio to somehow move more towards conceptual art given

that the galleries here like Blue Star and Art Pace are primarily—and I could be completely mistaken in this but—seem primarily driven in that direction.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. The thing is that it's funding to fashion in art. That is very popular now, and in order to be on the cutting edge, you know, on the proposed level, the academia and the curators that come out, that academia. That's the proposal because that's where the money is. That's where the investment is. That's what's being showcased everywhere. So, if you want to be on the cutting edge whatever that means, that's the thing to do. I don't believe that art is about market. I believe that art is about self-expression, and to me, that's the ultimate value of art. And everything else is just a side product of art. Of course, that's a very—sort of like a—in the climate of things today, that might be taken as an anachronistic attitude. But the honestly, that's how I see it.

When I came to San Antonio, one of the things that really drove me to move to San Antonio was the culture—that here I wasn't "Angel Rodriguez-Diaz," but I was Angel, and that made me feel very comfortable in the United States. I hadn't had, you know, New York. Even within the Latino community, and even more specifically within the Puerto Rican community, that was a reality, but it was very limited. It was very small. You know, it wasn't there. Like in San Antonio, which is almost at 60 percent or 50-some percent majority, have you read though that people, that the majority doesn't have control of the news production, doesn't have control of the media, doesn't have control of government, you know. But the fact that I was—it was a welcoming thing to hear my name the way I had heard it from my mother—you know, the way my mother called me—and my parents. Also finding that there were connections with a tradition. Now, outside of investigating the history of San Antonio because, you know, that's something I needed to understand in order to feel that I was part of this community. Then I started to understand what was happening here.

There was very—and then other points of connection to San Antonio and my own experience as a Puerto Rican with the subject of colonization. In Puerto Rico, as they call it here in the United States, it's 1898 like I, you know, talked about before. And it's still a colony, and there you have that, you know, the people don't have control—political control of the government for many different reasons. And I tried to get into a little bit of that before. But the same thing happens in San Antonio.

Then, the more I got into the art scene of San Antonio, I found out that there are basically two camps that have become very polarized by the niche of where they're coming from. One responds to the traditions. One responds to the humanity, the individuals of the land, the individuals that were here from indigenous to early Spanish colonization, which is very old. Then you have the other camp, which is the proposals of the academia that is dominated by the Anglo-Americans and their Anglo-Protestant esthetic. Of course, they came later, you know, into the territory and took over, basically colonizing the people and taking over the land. And that's, you know—I'm not saying this to antagonize anybody, but you just look into the history books, and you'll find the facts.

So that issue, that polarization, it still exists in San Antonio. And the thing is that I found out that not just—you have that polarization between academia and the people that are more interested or that have—feel compelled to tell the story in San Antonio. And there's a clash because instead of being inclusive, the academia has decided that they have the last word on what art should be, what art should look like. Anything else is discriminated against. And you don't find, for that reason, accessibility to the same places that Anglo-Americans have. Let me make a case. For example, ArtPace was founded in '95, and, you know, Linda Pace has been a very important catalyst in her vision in San Antonio because she had been able to create a certain dialogue between what's happening here in San Antonio and the rest of the country and other parts of the world. Latinos and people from San Antonio, Anglo-Americans, have had access to ArtPace, and myself included. And I am very grateful for that because it made possible—when you have a chunk of money to create a project, it makes possible things that you couldn't ordinarily do for the lack of money. And so you can explore other issues in your work.

The thing is that the academia and also the fashion trends in the art world have taken over at ArtPace. Every so often you have, and myself included, a different voice within the trend of what's presented there. And also Blue Star has been following that trend, too, and I guess because if they don't respond to that, they will feel discriminated, too or also. Well, again with ArtPace, the issue then—if we wanted to go more specifically—has been that who chose—who is the chooser? Who chooses the people that are going to participate in the program? And then who chooses the choosers? And of course, if the person choosing the jury or the guest curator has a certain tendency towards an art that reflects the fashion of the moment, that curator is going to choose people that make art that reflects that fashion. That narrows down the accessibility to the institution that originally was founded to be more democratic, you know, more accessible to all kinds of aesthetics.

That's why even the people that came last year from all kinds of magazines and artist publications throughout the United States came over to town, and one of them had a comment about ArtPace that the work that they had been seeing there is very monotonous and that also made a point to mention that San Antonio has a unique thing going for her, which is the specificity of the place—a border town, that confluence of cultures. It's a place that is so rich in history and culture that it didn't have to look after New York or L.A. or any other big city in

Europe to validate itself. And that's what's happening here. We have a reheated type of art because the students are taught by the academia to look at New York, look at the Europeans, you know, what they're doing, and look at pretty much the first world type of art that is more geared toward consumerism, reflecting on the, you know, the times where we're living. I mean, that's interesting, too. What I am objecting to is to being so exclusive. Why do you have to exclude other types of esthetics instead of allowing everything to flourish? And I think that's a problem in San Antonio. It's sort of like a certain complex that San Antonio has about itself because they don't—and it's because the Anglo-Americans haven't allowed the culture to manifest itself in all its—I hate to give you that word—manifestations.

CARY CORDOVA: So when you had your residency at ArtPace, wouldn't you maybe have considered doing something more rebellious that even just doing portraiture there, like just installing your portraiture? What was it that motivated you to do much more installation work while you were there at ArtPace?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, I did installation work. I had to incorporate painting. That's why I did one painting. There's not enough time during the residency to prepare paintings because they're more time consuming. So I had developed the concept of invisibility of Latinos in the United States, and I used this project to showcase that concern. So that's why I created a mural of lights, and then I had more—you know, because the money allowed it, I had assistants to help me produce the work. So, you know, when I do a painting, it's a very intimate experience. It's a very personal experience, and it's very hard for me to, you know, work on three or four paintings at the same time. So basically I work on a painting at a time. You know, maybe two, but that's it. I focus on one at a time actually. And actually the fact that it fell on December 10th of 1898, it was exactly the same anniversary in the centennial in the signing of the Treaty of Paris when Spain relinquished its possessions to the United States as bounty of war—Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. So that was something that I had to address. And, you know, it being in San Antonio, the issue of colonization, a centennial about this anniversary, issues of invisibility as an artist, as proposing a certain cultural statement, I thought I was a good opportunity. It was very timely.

CARY CORDOVA: It also strikes me that it must also be about the visibility of a Puerto Rican in a predominantly Mexican-American city.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. The piece is another self-portrait, you know. And it was dealing with the issue of being a Puerto Rican like you say, a minority within a minority—well, here it's a majority, but still in terms of the United States, it's a minority—and how to make a statement about that survival. So, of course, I made a huge 8500-Christmas light face, you know, a self-portrait, that blinked, saying, "Now you see me. Now you don't," meaning as a Latino, we were silencing my community, as a Puerto Rican but also in a Mexican American community, but also as a Puerto being in a Mexican American community and being a minority here, and how to portray that, how to relate that, you know, making connections to the community.

CARY CORDOVA: Why did you choose the giant Chihuahua dog as part of that installation?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, in the installation indoor, there were two, very large, forty-foot long chalk drawings on the walls, but a black background. One side of the wall—on one side of the room, I wanted it to be my cultural background as a Puerto Rican and on the other side, the Mexican American reality of San Antonio. And then in the middle was Chupacabra, the painting of another self-portrait and, well, the Puerto Rican side. It has the Maine, the ship that was sunken that initiated the Spanish-American War. Then you have symbols of the islands, you know, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Philippines, and I'm saying that order because, you know, more or less the size. Then you have an indigenous image of Atabey, it's a Taino earth mother. And then on the other side the Virgin of Carmel because my mother's name was Carmen, and she's one of the patron saints of Puerto Rico, although the Virgin de Montserrat is the patron saint of the island. But I want to make a reference to Catholicism as far as the culture, our cultural makeup.

And in the middle is Uncle Sam saying, "I want you." On the opposite end—on the opposite side, not end, was an image of Mexico before the Mexican-American War, an indigenous image of death, you know, in the Aztec god of death and the Day of the Dead, reference to that, and the syncretism of the indigenous with the Catholicism. But on the other side, you have the Virgin de Guadalupe, which is indigenous also and Catholicism, syncretism. And in the middle—and also the Alamo, you know, a little, you know, an image of what happened the moment that Texas became a republic, so making a reference to the politics of the place.

And then in the middle is a Chihuahua. At a time, there were those commercials for Taco Bell, very, very popular, saying "Yo quiero Taco Bell." So it was about desire. The piece was about desire, you know. Now you see me, now you don't. But then you have Uncle Sam saying, from one side of the wall or the room saying "yo quiero" in English. And then on the other side you have a Taco Bell Chihuahua, a corporation representative, but it's a Chihuahua, you know, very sort of like a layered symbol, representing the Mexican, a dog, you know the Latinos, saying "yo quiero" in Spanish. So you have bilingualism. You have the two cultures represented and the product of that relationship, which is my piece and who we are as individuals in this country, living in this

country.

And it's not, you know, it's not that everybody migrated because the Mexican-Americans didn't migrate. The border migrated on them, you know. And the Puerto Ricans, we migrated because of invasion and also because there were programs politically created by the governments of Puerto Rico and the United States to create cheap labor for American interests in different parts of the United States. You know, people came here to pick the produce in the South and in Texas, but also in other parts of the United States and in Hawaii. And you go to Hawaii, and there's a big colony of Puerto Rican Hawaiians that, at the time, they were offered a round-trip ticket, but when the time came, they weren't given a ticket to get back to where they came from so they got stranded. They got stuck in those places so they formed their own communities there, and they survive there today. So the piece is about that. You know, this didn't happen by accident. It happened because there was a political and historical moment that was influential enough to trigger all this movement of people.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay, and with that I'm going to stop you and switch the tapes.

[END TAPE 5, SIDE A.]

CARY CORDOVA: All right we're recording Cary Cordova interviewing Angel Rodriguez-Diaz on May 7th, 2004. This is our third session and disc period. And, I guess one of my questions to you is, you have talked a little bit about being asked specifically as a Latino artist, but I'm wondering if you've been claimed as a gay artist. Have you shown representing that particular identity? Is that even part of your work?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: I have. I have created some pieces with sort of some homoeroticism involved, but they're in the minority really. I've also been discriminated for that reason, you know, as being very difficult, not just because of male nudity, but also nudity. And we've become, kind of so prudish in this country that, you know, people are so afraid of public opinion that they don't challenge that opinion and that is the role—I find that that's part of the role of the artist, you know, is to challenge all kinds of values and all kinds of ideas because that's how we grow as people, we develop in our culture. But because there are organizations, you know, basically after Jesse Helms, the Mapplethorpe fiasco, and actually that's recorded.

At the Puerto Rican Office of—what is it called—the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in New York, I had a show, and it was censored by the secretary because he knew that I have in the house that large nude open African American man naked. But it's frontal nudity. He took it down, and we had a big protest the opening night because he took it down the night of the opening. And I called my friends all over the place and Maria Hinojosa—she has a program on NPR—and then Sandra Cisneros. And a lot of activist friends in New York, they helped me. And they voiced their opinion and their support against censorship to the point that they put back the painting, but then they removed it. You know, the arrangement was that they were going to take it down during the day while the workers were there and then put it back up in the evening. And I said this is ridiculous. You know what? Just leave it down because I don't want it to get damaged, and anybody could by handling have an accident and damage the painting.

But it was recorded. It's a group that was starting to record censorship in the United States, and I think part of the controversy had happened at the time. And it's called People for the American Way. It sounds kind of reactionary, that title, but it's very progressive people. And they recorded in the first volume all kinds of shows that had been censored, cancelled, or pieces taken out. And my show is recorded in that first volume of Censored Artworks. And I have a copy of it. I could find it right now.

CARY CORDOVA: When was that? When was that particular show?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: It was in—when was it—it was in 1991 or '92. It was shortly after—you know, it was in the early '90s. It was after the controversy with Robert Mapplethorpe's at the Corcoran.

CARY CORDOVA: And what was the inspiration for that particular painting? I've noticed it. It's stunning to look at actually.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, I wanted to have—at times in my painting during that period of the early '90s where I was working in New York, defined itself more towards portraiture of people I knew. And then I wanted to portray, you know, who I am and as a human being to try to portray different aspects of my being, among those the sexuality. So I met this guy that, you know, I thought it could have been a good subject for a painting. And I asked him if we would pose for me, and he said that he would so that's how the painting happened. I wanted to make a reference to the African American, and not just African American but also Caribbean Africans, in other words, when the slavery was instituted in this part of the world and making a reference to the past, to his past. That's why everything in the background is in flames, you know, all that tropical landscape with the palm trees. And he's standing in front of the viewer, and he's completely bare. So it's about being vulnerable. He's standing on a tile floor, but buried because behind him there's war. It almost seems like he swung from that burning landscape and landed on this tile floor. And he is held back by, you know, whatever is in front of him still today,

you know, still up to that moment.

And so it was about the reference to enslavement, about denial of presence that eventually developed into this now you see me, now you don't in terms of being Latino because when I came to San Antonio, it became more apparent that this is, you know, this is happening here in the heart of the United States. It's not like an island where I came from, you know, part of the continental U.S. And then I found out how the United States extended their territory by taking over the lands of Mexico and, you know, the whole concept of "from sea to shining sea," where that came from, you know, from the Atlantic coast all the way to the Pacific. So that was in the works in the minds of leaders of this country. It was not an accident, the wars of conquest to appropriate land to extend the size of the nation. Anyway, but that's what's happened with that painting.

So there's always some kind of a reference in a very subtle way to the body, to the male body, my body in terms of the self-portraits, and whatever I can get away with with the male body that is not mine only, which is not very often because people are very kind of prudish about their own bodies and nudity. So that's why the work hasn't—lately I haven't had more male nudity and nudity in general, period. They have told me to be specific. Well, you know, our board is very conservative and we can't show nudity. Even before I produce the work, it's a warning that they are not going to show nudes if that's what I'm going to show, which is kind of like a damper on creativity and freedom of expression.

CARY CORDOVA: And in some ways what I'm hearing conflicted with you attempting to identify with your sexuality. You want to be able to express the nudity of the male body, and yet you're being told that that's unacceptable.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Right. And the thing is that, you know, it's sort of like—well, being Puerto Rican in the United States, that's a minority. Being a gay man, that's another discrimination, layer of discrimination. And then being an artist in this time responding to the mainstream—so it's like different layers of how you somehow disappear. And, you know, you're removed, and that's something I find whenever I go to—especially in San Antonio because it's a smaller city. When you go in New York, you feel sort of like invisible in general, period. I think everybody feels that way. You go to a museum, you are so anonymous or you go to a gallery, you feel so anonymous. But because you feel that this is almost how everybody else feels, you don't feel attacked in a critical way as you feel in San Antonio.

In San Antonio, because this is a smaller city, everything gets polarized, and it's a very intense situation. And then you feel that when you go to see a show, and it's a show, and yeah, you understand what it's about. It's not—you know, I have a masters in art. I mean, I have studied art. I've read about art and criticism and the latest trends in art and the philosophy behind it and all of that, and I make the choice to make the art I make because it responds to some very intrinsic needs that I have. But when people, you know—they're trying to, first of all, deny the reality of what's happening here and the history of exclusion of part of the population, the majority of the people from the city. It hits something in you that is very depressing because one aspect of the life of the city—and I'm speaking for perhaps, you know, also for the Mexican Americans because I feel, as a Latino, very close to that experience also because of my own history of colonization—that the city is sold to the world as very colorful, very, you know, delicious food, the best food that you can find in the United States. Mexican food, of course, is a process of Mexico. That's not all of the Mexican food because that's more elaborate than that. That's another issue. That the city is sold for Mexican-ness to the point that people come, you know, tourists come here and they express—they make this exclamation of, well, it's like going to Mexico, but you can drink the water, you know, which is kind of a bit insulting in a way if you might think about it a little more.

But the fact that the city is sold for its culture, and then the people that make the culture are taken hostage. The culture is taken hostage. The people that make the culture are separated from the product. All of a sudden, this is San Antonio, and who lives in San Antonio? Oh, well, you know I guess the people that determine what San Antonio should look like because the people that created the culture of San Antonio don't have the voice to make any big statements even today. You know, everything has been fought. And the thing is, as more time goes by, and the more the industry and the corporations, which, you know, fortunately never wants to make things happen in this community and in the United States, and the Anglo-American community realizes that it's advantageous to acknowledge the people that make the culture and the culture and not shy away from these subcultures and look at the culture, even if they use it as a magnet for tourism, looking at a culture of poverty, that culture that is the reality of the place—when that happens, it will be empowering, not just the people that are deprived from participating and reaping the product of the richness that the city brings in. But the city will finally take a very prominent place like Miami.

That's what the difference is between—Miami—San Antonio and L.A. You know, San Antonio has been the majority Mexican-American Latino for a very long, long time, okay. L.A. just became majority Latino, according to the census of 1990, and Miami the same thing because the migration of the Cubans. And then what happens in Miami is that the rich Cubans were the ones who migrated because they were the ones who had more mobility and brought their money with them and the know-how. So they established themselves and created their own

businesses, and that empowered them to deal with the whole machine behind empowerment, which is dealing with politics, and how government works, and creating their own corporations, and dealing with corporations.

The Latinos in San Antonio were people that just toiled the land. There were rich Mexicans that were deprived or their land was taken over, and they were enslaved basically. Same thing happened in L.A. So when you have a showcase of the culture, then you realize that the people who are showcasing the culture are also empowered because they are the ones who produce the culture. Look at the example of Miami. It's an incredible magnet to the world. You know, everybody wants to go to Miami because it's a happening place. It's very hot, but it's hot because of the Latino. And it's being presented to the world with no excuses, the way it is. This is great. You know, it's loud, if you want to call blah blah blah. Or it's, you know, spicy. Or it's hot, or the music is this, that, and the other. You know, whatever stereotypes that you want to ascribe to the Latinos, over there it's a plus. Over here, it's a minus and in L.A., of course, until you make money out of the products and the food that that Latino group produces. Then it's okay. And then thus you have the corporations who make millions and millions of dollars out of the food of Mexican Americans—Frito-Lays and you know all kinds of salsa, you know. I mean, that's just to show the difference in attitude.

And the more the San Antonio leadership acknowledges the fact that this is a very neat place and this is showcased—we are in the junction, in the middle of two countries. And we have a very particular flavor, not just the food, but also that intersection of cultures. And it's something so rich and so interesting that I don't know why it hasn't happened, why San Antonio is not a bridge to Latin America like Miami is. Miami has typical—you know, it's the ocean. We just drive across the border, and we are in Patagonia, you know. So it's a lot easier. The thing is lack of vision from the people that have control and the prejudice that triggers that lack of vision. That's the only way I can explain. And you know, I hope that we wiser up, you know, very quickly before anybody else takes the lead. And Miami is on the cutting edge of that issue of mestizaje of multiculturalism because it's not just a title or a name, it's a reality that people economically empower. And that's what we don't have in San Antonio. You can talk about, oh yes, we are multicultural. Yeah, but economically empowered as well? I don't think so.

CARY CORDOVA: So the difference for you is that there are more Latinos with money in Miami that are able to make bureaucratic changes versus here in San Antonio, there's a continuing difference in class that has precluded Mexican Americans from making a difference in the bureaucracy, that the power structure just says the same as it is in our community?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Exactly. And same thing with Puerto Rico, you know. It's an island over there. It's like a—Latin America ignores it because it's part of the United States, and the United States ignores it because it's an island that speaks Spanish and it's more Latin American than American. I'm not saying that Miami, most of the Latinos are rich. That's not the case. But there are a lot of Latinos, I guess in terms of numbers and compared to other parts of—you know, L.A. in this case and San Antonio—that have money and that can influence politicians, the politics of the country even. You know the relationship of Cubans that are in the United States and Cubans in Cuba. And the Bible—that has been kept in place because of Cubans in Miami. You know, they have—they are instrumental, and they have been able to exert influence because they give money to the Republican Party, for example, and also to the Democratic Party, but, you know, in this case the Republican Party. And they keep whatever it is that they want in place. And that's an incredible power.

CARY CORDOVA: I'd like to switch gears a little bit but also related to the visibility issue. I'm wondering how learning that you were HIV positive changed your artwork, and also with that issue of visibility or invisibility of being HIV positive might have impacted you.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, first of all, when that happened, we didn't know what was going on. And it was very scary, and it's still scary. I'm not minimizing that fact but in terms of my own experience. And I felt that time was running out so I was very focused on work and trying to make as many pieces as I could possibly make because I was very concerned about, you know, falling sick of an opportunistic disease. That sort of like galvanized something in my work. And also, I've always been very political, but then I felt that I had to speak out because that was the only time that I was going to have to do it. And I didn't want to have regrets especially when it has to do with—when you have people under the yoke and when you have injustice. And whatever I could say, whatever I could do in why my work focuses a bit more into portraiture—it's also to give visibility, to make a statement about us, you know, as Latinos. I have painted Anglo-Americans and other etnias, but most of it has been Latinos in my work. And it has been focused because I wanted to sort of like showcase that diversity.

Of course, now, we have new developments about the cocktails, of the Ironman and the immunotherapy is a new kind of legend, I think. Informing myself and trying to keep myself healthy and watching my what I eat, my nutrition and also keeping myself informed of the latest therapies, and having other types of therapies like acupuncture and massage and so on. And it hasn't appeared in my work as more didactic form, but I think by portraying, through self-portraiture, myself in different stages of my life. It's sort of like keeping track of what's going on in my life. And it's sort of like indirect, but not so indirect because it's about the stages of my—aging

and living, what's going on with my psyche as I relate to other human beings and living in different parts of the world, at least, you know, in the United States—the different parts of the United States, and how that affects me as a Puerto Rican, as a gay man, as a—I guess—the other way around—I'm gay man, Puerto Rican. Let's just say that I feel so removed from my family in a way because I live here. I feel isolated.

And the dynamics generated by being an individual in the world. So I'm portraying that relationship because it's like—and, you know, I think it's everybody's experience. And I think some people become a little more aware of it than others. And I think I became very conscience of it once my mother died when I was very young. I realized I was on my own, and I had to survive somehow. So I find that the one thing that has been very positive about the creative process even though it's very stressful and it's very—sort of like you put your life on the line every time you start a project. It's liberating, and it's empowering. And I guess the loneliness or the feelings of rejection that I might have experienced from having HIV have been sort of like dissipated through the creative process because I find myself, every time I finish something, that it's like a stepping stone. I have found another way of relating to the world, to the people around me, to the, you know, to all the issues in my head. And it just gave me the hope to look forward to another painting.

That's how I see it basically. That's why self-portraiture and portraiture as well being so important in my work because it's sort of like a way of—it's empowering. The self-portrait is because I look at myself, and I've sort of have been keeping a diary of my process of aging, I guess, and awareness. It's sort of like a consciousness. And in portraiture, you know, the humanity in people and ways of translating that and discovering that in different people, and there is a beauty in that. You know, there is a very ugly part, aspect of human beings, of us. But then it's a beauty of the human—the humane, the compassionate human and also respect for life, respect for all kinds of life forms—a plant, you know. I think twice before killing a fly, you know, or a roach. I think about it. You know, it's not just like squashing a snail that eats up my garden or something. And I just hate doing that, but it's either I have the garden or I have snails—but, you know, I mean—just as an example because it's sort of like creatures or critters that people kind of like don't respect very much.

And then when I see somebody has been left to their own devices and they're homeless or they're being abused and children, you know. They can be fatherless in our society where some people have so much, so many opportunities and a lot of other people don't have the opportunities because they don't have access to what makes that possible, which is money. And you can see the potential of those minds, but they cannot be cultivated because they don't have access to education, and that education is another type of becoming more of another business in this country, instead of bringing a mean to access the betterment of humanity. And it's so sad. It's saddening to see that happening because it's another way of controlling the human spirit by people that have very limited vision, and they're only concerned about how much money they can make and how powerful they can become and how famous they can be and these values that are so ephemeral. Because after all how much money can you have? How many lives can you live? You know, and some people could live out probably 20, 30, 50, a hundred lifetimes with the money they have, and they still don't share it. They don't spread it, you know.

So I think that's one of the things that motivated me to paint, you know, to strive to make something different from the one I had made before, something that's challenging, something sort of like that will add something else to what I have done before, at least to my knowledge, and try to bring something that could touch somebody in some way or disclose something that they had never seen. You know, that's basically why I've been doing what I'm doing.

CARY CORDOVA: And I want to start wrapping this up because I know we've had a pretty long session together. [Laughs.]

[Cross talk.]

CARY CORDOVA: But I think so maybe I'd like to bring us into recent things that have been happening and maybe sort of looking especially—you just had this show that just closed, but maybe you could talk a little bit about the theme of the show "Los Santos y Pecadores," the saints and sinners, and where that theme came from as we're sort of looking at your work. I mean I can almost see the threads because I think you've talked about it to some extent. Maybe you can answer it more directly.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, it's a tradition of—a cultural tradition, a part of a cultural tradition in my home. And even though I became Born Again Christian at some point, but the imagery—has a maker. I think it's a very important issue in my artistic expression. I recaptured that after a stint with the Protestant religious, I found that it was a little bit too dry for my taste, although Latin Americans have always found a way to flavor it a little more. It's not as esthetic as the northern Europeans and the Anglo-Americans practice, but still it's—I wanted to make a reference to that part of my history and because of my—as a child, visiting my great-grandmother's home and my grandmother's home, they had altars of candles and saints and flowers and images and you name it. It was like incredible. It was such a first impression. It was a fall because I didn't expect to see that in my

grandmother's house or my great-grandmother's house because to me, it was kind of like intriguing but scary, ominous, you know, something there that I didn't understand that went beyond those things that was like a summoning, some kind of other energy that I didn't quite understand. But I could feel. And I liked that. It was very mystical, and I think that's why. You know, I brought it back into my creative process because of that sort of like invisible energy, you know I guess, mystical energy.

It has to do with a form of spirituality, and that's what art is about. It's about disclosing some kind of energy that we need to manifest somewhat. Basically, it's giving form to this—art is about giving form to this type of spiritual realm. It's one form of expression about that feeling that we carry with us that there is no other way of expressing. And, you know, I find interesting how mythology relies so much on imagery. And you know, you have the Catholics, but then you have Buddhists. You have all kinds of religions around the world, and there's always some kind of symbolism with, for example, in our country the Anglo-Protestants, it's very minimal and it's reflected in the art making, but it's still there. It's sort of like a very esoteric imagery almost invisible. It's sort of like a mental exercise rather than a physical experience with an object and then translated that as part of a ritual instead of the imagined aspect of the symbol being the ritual. You know, that type of extrapolation. And, like I was saying, I think there are all kinds of forms of expression when I think about it because they reflect different kinds of people around the world.

And that's the beauty of humankind—that we are all so different from one individual to the next that when you take a culture and all kinds of cultures around the world then you see that in visual, creating a mass of objects and a whole installation that's put out, the whole world. And it's very interesting, you know. It's really wonderful to explore that. We are all fascinated by it, but then at the same time we live in a place here in the United States that is living in denial not just about cultures, denial about sexuality, denial about the censes, denial about whatever it is that people do. They hide, and they do the same thing that anybody else that they point a finger at. But then they deny, and then they believe their own denial. And you're having here the politicians, you know, from the president down. You have it everywhere, all across the culture, and I think it's stemming from acts of denying the body of its own presence, of looking at yourself being part of the day. You know, it's an anthropomorphic way of representing the day. It's sort of like, instead of being a body like ourselves, it's sort of like a gas, some kind of smoke, something that is so ethereal that it's no way of grasping it. So there is no need to deal with that physicality, in other words, not relating it to our own bodies.

CARY CORDOVA: I think that there are many, many questions I could probably continue asking, but I feel like I should try to wrap this up. And so what I'd like to do is maybe to turn the tape over and to close. And you say is there anything that I haven't asked you. Is there anything that you feel we need to be sure and put on this tape for the archives or anything that you'd just like to close with to sort of include on this recording?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well, you know what, most of when I talk has been about an individual living in a mixed-race Latino gay man, living in this country, and about—most of my focus has been about accessibility. And I think that since this is something—it's an effort that Smithsonian is making and trying to record this world history about Latino artists, I think we're just beginning to address this issue. And I think that there should be more efforts made to access this population that is still invisible. There are so many things going on that most people don't know anything about culturally.

Let me tell you actually that it's an interesting thing that happened in my career. It was with Andrew Connors, which was a curator, assistant curator I think at the time. And he was with the National Museum of American Art in Washington Smithsonian Institution. And I was invited by—I forgot her name—but it was—I forgot her name. I don't remember, and I can give you this later. But they came over, and she came over as a curator in Washington. She came over with Camille Paglia to my studio, and she saw my Greek goddesses—these big women that are so proud. And she was—I didn't know what to think because she was very quiet. And I was talking to the curator who happened to be her friend, and she had brought her to visit at my studio. I didn't know who Camille Paglia was at the time. And she walked into the studio, and I was very polite like everybody. You know, I was like, "Welcome here. Here I am." And then we started talking about the show. There was a—FAT and symbol. It was something about FAT and symbol. It's in my resume. I can't remember the—

CARY CORDOVA: Yeah, it was the abbreviation FAT right? Or something like that?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: FAT, right. FAT, you know, form—

CARY CORDOVA: Form and taste.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Form and taste. And it was at the—in Washington an alternative space. And she was curating the show—different peoples' take, different artists' take on the issue of FAT and taste. So she liked my three goddesses so I was invited to show. So Camille Paglia was very quiet during the whole session, and I was kind of like curious to know what she thought about it because she kept looking at these paintings very close. And then she would walk back still looking at the paintings. And then I asked her, you know. I said, "Look, what

do you think of the paintings?" And she said, "Oh, I love them." She loved the paintings. She was very congratulatory. She was really complimentary. Well, I'm saying this and I'm telling you this story because then these paintings, I took them to D.C. And Andrew Connors went to visit the show, and he liked the paintings.

Years later—I think it was years later—like a year later or something like that. I can't remember exactly. He called me up because they had some slides, and they were after the Smithsonian got criticized for the lack of Latino representation in the collection, which they still lack. But at least they made an effort to acquire more Latinos' artwork. He called me, and he said, "You know, we are interested in acquiring one of your pieces, and it's *The Myth of Venus*. And he asked me if it was accessible. I said, "Yes, it is." Well, he called me about a week later, and he said, "Well, the selection panel got together, and they review the different paintings that we proposed. And one African American in the panel objected to your painting because she felt that it was inappropriate to have an African American woman displayed like you have in *The Myth of Venus* in the collection." And basically it was because it was a nude, because it was a large woman. And she missed the whole point. And she missed the point that it was a figure that represented empowerment in many different ways.

So but then on the phone conversation—and I had moved to San Antonio by then. That was in 1996. He asked me, "But there is another painting that we'd like, and we were wondering if it was available." And he told me it's a portrait that is titled—what is it titled—*The Protagonist of an Endless Story*. And I answered, "Oh yes, that's Sandra Cisneros's portrait." And I told well, unfortunately, that was a commissioned work. And he had asked me about commissions and all that stuff. And I have used—I also accessed or approached people who suggested if they would like a portrait done. And that was the case with Sandra. And anyway, I based that on one of her—the characters of one of her stories, "The Eyes from Zapata" or "Eyes Like Zapata" story in her book, *Woman Hollering Creek*. I think I have told you that before. And I told him, well, she owns that painting. So fortunately—I think I told you about this one. And I told her, well, she owns the painting, so, you know, fortunately, I don't have it. He said, well okay. I'll get back to you.

Right after I spoke to him, I called Sandra. And Sandra actually, "the Smithsonian is interested in your painting, and they asked me if it was accessible and if it was available, and I told him that you owned the painting." And you know, well, that's the case, and I was just calling you to let you know. And she told me that, oh, I'm hidden. Just sell it. You can always make me another painting. And so, I said well okay. So I called Andrew back and told him, you know, I spoke to Sandra and she gave me the okay to sell it to you. And then I'll substitute it with another portrait, which I did. And then she donated the second portrait to the Mexican Museum in Chicago. [Laughter.] I guess she can't live with her own image or my image of her in her own house might be a little too intimidating. I don't know why.

Anyway, so the first one, because it was—I think it was, you know, a bit too out there, and she felt a little overwhelmed by the expectations that the thing portrays. My expectations of her character were her on top of the hill—and you know the sons are behind her as a heroine. And then the second one is sort of more introspective, intimate portrait. It's more—it's an interior piece. It's titled *La Guatelopana*, and it has a Virgin de Guadalupe on the side [inaudible]. And she is more—her attitude—her portrait is more introspective. And it's a little more intense in another way. So anyway, that's my take on her donating to the Mexican Museum, which I am, you know—it's fine with me. It's another public collection and more accessible to more people.

But that's how my painting became part of the National Museum of American Art. And I think there are lots of artists in this country, very talented artists, younger generations, all kinds of people. I'm not going to say they have to be the younger generation all kinds of artists have been overlooked. That should be in the collection of the—treasure of the nation—because, you know, we are part of the makeup of this country. That's the reality of it. And I think they should be represented in that public space.

MS. CARY CORDOVA: Is there anyone you want to name?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: [Laughs.] You put me on the spot. I mean, there are many artists—

CARY CORDOVA: —you can put that as—[inaudible, laughs]—

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah. I think, if I start mentioning, I leave people out, and then later on, remember, I should have mentioned this and that. You know, I think it would be you know, I will kick myself for leaving people out, so I would rather not. But there are lots of people here in San Antonio and in New York and in Puerto Rico. And you know, they haven't even looked at Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico. And that I'm making Puerto Rico not being called on for 500 years. And even before you know, I bought these from colonial times.

And actually, I didn't mention—I don't know if I did last time, but the first—Puerto Rican painter who was born from a slave that had bought his own freedom, Jose Campeche. He was a very sophisticated painting—never traveled outside the island. He was self-taught. He got a little bit of the European influence or at least the information about the fashion of what's happening in Europe from this painter that was ostracized by the King of

Spain because he had befriended—was a very close friend of the prince and he had engaged in some practice that the king was not appreciative of. So, but he went to Puerto Rico and gave Jose Campeche information on what was happening in Europe, and Jose Campecho was a very avid learner. He incorporated that into his painting. That's when he started making this kind of rococo painting to the point that one of his paintings were longest time—were attributed to Goya. [Cross talk]. Right.

Anyways, so, and this is, you know, this is happening in the 18th century and Francisco Oller was part of the impressionist movement was also a tutor to Cezanne. He has a painting in the Louvre, and he also has a painting in the National Museum in the United States. So that's just a safe—a lacking of our—let's put in plainly. Ignorance. A lack of attention to a big settlement of the population of the United States. And I hope that, you know, there is a mandate somehow that something happens that you know, for the first time, is showcased in an appropriate manner. And it has its own space, it's not part of the, you know, American art space, because you know, that's something that's always been sort of like a—set aside, put aside. It's almost like another—it's not part of mainstream. It's always being an addendum to the mainstream, sort of the same way the African Americans have been considered part of the mainstream. I think the Latin Americans Latinos in the United States should be incorporated into that mainstream because that's where we work. That's where we, you know—our production—it's a, you know—it's a reflection of the life and living in this country.

CARY CORDOVA: Done?

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Yeah. I think that's all I have to say at this point. [Laughter.] I don't know that I can go into all that issues, but yeah, I think that's pretty much puts a period to the interview.

CARY CORDOVA: Okay. I think so too. I really appreciate it. I've enjoyed it immensely, and so I'll just say, thank you.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ: Well thank you because you know, hopefully—you know, for whatever it's worth, I—this might serve to open some kind of inquiry or at least expand people's minds about—at least my perspective as a Latino the United States of what's going on here. Try and see it.

CARY CORDOVA: I hope so too. With that, I'll stop the tape.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]