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ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

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# MARGARET GARCIA

INTERVIEWED BY KAREN MARY DAVALOS

ON AUGUST 27 AND

SEPTEMBER 10, 12, 19, AND 24, 2008

Margaret Garcia's work has been exhibited in group shows throughout Southern California and in Texas and Mexico, and she has produced a number of murals in the Los Angeles area. The recipient of a California Arts Council grant, Garcia also teaches and lectures throughout the region on art in different cultures. She is a graduate of California State University, Northridge, and the University of Southern California, where she received a master of fine arts. Garcia is a resident of Los Angeles.

Karen Mary Davalos is chair and professor of Chicana/o studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Her research interests encompass representational practices, including art exhibition and collection; vernacular performance; spirituality; feminist scholarship and epistemologies; and oral history. Among her publications are *Yolanda M. López* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2008); "The Mexican Museum of San Francisco: A Brief History with an Interpretive Analysis," in *The Mexican Museum of San Francisco Papers, 1971–2006* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2010); and *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

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## THE CSRC ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

The CSRC Oral Histories Series publishes the life narratives of prominent Chicano and Latino figures. The life narratives have been recorded and transcribed, and the interviewer and interviewee have reviewed and corrected the transcriptions prior to publication. These oral histories are often undertaken as part of a larger research project and in tandem with archival collections and library holdings.

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## CSRC ORAL HISTORY SERIES PROJECTS

**L.A. Xicano** documents the history of Chicana/o art in Los Angeles with a focus on artists, collectives, and art organizations. The project resulted in new museum and library exhibitions, public programs, archival collections, and scholarly publications. These efforts were part of the Getty Foundation initiative Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945–1980. The project received support from Getty Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and California Community Foundation. Related support includes funding from Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, AltaMed Health Services Corporation, Entravision Communications Corporation, Walt Disney Company, and individual donors.

**A Ver: Revisioning Art History** stems from the conviction that individual artists and their coherent bodies of work are the foundation for a meaningful and diverse art history. This book series explores the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other U.S. Latino artists. The A Ver project is made possible through the generous support of Getty Foundation, Ford Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Joan Mitchell Foundation, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation.

**The LGBT and Mujeres Initiative** seeks to increase archival and oral history holdings that document the Chicano/Latino presence in LGBT and women’s histories, the role of women and LGBT people in Chicano/Latino histories, and the importance of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in “mainstream” scholarly research and archival institutions. The project receives generous support from the Ford Foundation and individual donors.

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## ARTISTS INTERVIEWED FOR THE L.A. XICANO PROJECT

Judy Baca  
Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez  
David Botello  
Barbara Carrasco  
Leonard Castellanos  
Roberto “Tito” Delgado  
Richard Duardo  
Margaret Garcia  
Johnny Gonzalez  
Judithe Hernández  
Leo Limón  
Gilbert “Magu” Luján  
Monica Palacios  
John Valadez  
Linda Vallejo

# INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET GARCIA

AUGUST 27, 2008 . . . . .	1
SEPTEMBER 10, 2008. . . . .	27
SEPTEMBER 12, 2008. . . . .	58
SEPTEMBER 19, 2008. . . . .	89
SEPTEMBER 24, 2008. . . . .	121

## AUGUST 27, 2008

**Karen Davalos:** Here we go. This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia on August 27, 2008, and this is for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. And we are here in Highland Park at Margaret’s studio. I’ll just start with your grandmother.

**Margaret Garcia:** Right.

**KD:** Because I know she is important to you. So why don’t you tell me about your grandmother?

**MG:** My grandmother was born May 26—no, 25, in 1906, and she was born in El Paso, Texas, and she was the eldest of twenty-four children. My great-grandmother had had five sets of twins. [My grandmother] went to a private school over there until they moved here. My great-grandfather was a cobbler, and at the age of thirteen she was raped and molested by my grandfather, who was a Yaqui Indian. My grandmother was [of] Tarahumara descent, and he was thirty and she was thirteen. And because he had taken her virginity back then, you know, people were very Catholic. “You’ve taken her, you’ve used her, she no longer has value because she is not marriage material, she is not a virgin anymore so you have to marry her.” And they forced her to marry him. And she had—she had three boys from him. And she had a fourth pregnancy over here in Lincoln Park, because they were living in Los Angeles by that time. And my—my dad was a baby, he was a toddler, he was learning how to walk, and she was afraid he was going to fall into the lake chasing the ducks. And she said to my grandfather, “Agara, Fernando, se va a caller.” Go get him. He’s going to fall in the water. “Ah, tu agarralo.” And so she jumped up, and when she jumped up she fell on her belly. She was eight months pregnant and she lost the baby. I have the death certificate somewhere, and it happened here in Lincoln Park. And I guess they had a fight over it. I don’t know what happened, but I know that my grandfather took off for, like, six months and left her with no means of support. So she found a widower who had nine children who took her in.

And [my grandfather returned]. After six months he showed up and says, “I want my wife and kids back.” And my great-grandmother was, “Well, he’s your husband, and you are married by the church,” and all this other stuff. So my great-grandmother was trying to convince my grandmother to return to her husband, and my grandmother was, like, “I don’t want to be with that man. He’s cruel and he’s mean and he forces himself on me when I don’t want to have sex with him. And I don’t want him and I don’t want to be with him.” And she [my great-grandmother] says, “Well, look you guys are fighting. Why don’t you just leave the kids here and you guys can sort it out. And then you can get the kids tomorrow.” Well, when she went back to get the kids, she [my great-grandmother] had turned the kids over to my—to my grandfather. My father and his two brothers. And my grandfather said, “If you want to see your kids again, then you’ll come back and live with me.” And she said, “No, I refuse to do it.” So he took the kids to Mexico.

And he went to Mexico, and my Uncle Gregory died in Tijuana. There was a flooding in Tijuana. Tijuana was flooded back then. There were big floods that year that he left, and there was also this sort of movement to repatriate Mexicans to Mexico. And my grandfather kind of hopped on board that, and he took off. My grandmother did not see my father again. He was in diapers when he left, and she didn’t see him

until he was fifteen. And what she did was, she put an ad in the newspaper and they found him. And my father came back.

And my—my grandfather was a very, very harsh man. He was Yaqui and Apache Indian, and they lived in [Sonora, near Obregón]. I think it's the Vamparo, Sonora. And he would leave the boys—my father and his brother—alone to fend for themselves. They would shine shoes and beg for change on the streets. And he forced this living on his sons rather than return them to their mother. And so my father was always—grew up being told that his mother didn't love him, that she was a whore and a tramp and all this other stuff. So my grandmother found him when he was like fifteen, and there was a whole transition that happened because she was still with the man that she, you know, the widower that she took up with. And so my uncle, his brother, stayed in Mexicali, and my father came here. And at one point they both came across the [border].

But my grandmother wanted to know who I was, and so she felt—I think she felt robbed. She had two other children. She had Sylvia and she had Charlie, and she even had a daughter that she adopted. She adopted a girl. And she died of tuberculosis here at the county general [hospital] in the communicable diseases ward, and her name is on my birth certificate, which is another story. But grandma felt very connected to me. My grandmother was a midwife. She delivered a lot of babies and she knew how to get birth certificates for people. She would say she was the midwife, she delivered the baby, and she'd help them get their birth certificates so that she could cross people over and help them get their papers. That was one of the things that she did. She was a *coyote*. And she met my mother and my mother met my father through my grandmother, and my grandmother would tell my mother, "No te casas a Fernando. He's no good. He drinks too much. He's bad for you, you know. He's my son but he's just bad for you." And my grandmother would always say—she says, you know, "You have never heard me say anything bad about your mother." I said no, I have never heard anything bad.

But when she—when my mother crossed the border and came here, my grandmother gave her—her adopted daughter's birth certificates and papers so that she could get work and do stuff. So when I was born here at the county general, she was still using those papers. So the name on the birth certificate is my father's stepsister, who was dead before I was born, as my mother. And then they had that changed. So now I have a two-page birth certificate and—

**KD:** When did they have it changed? Much later or . . .

**MG:** They had it changed when I was little, so her name is now on it. But, you know, there were differences. And they got it changed because she is my mother. I realize, you know, my mother was an undocumented worker, and I was born—I was conceived out of wedlock. So my whole existence is a criminal act, you know. And because of that I think that I don't look at the establishment or the law or anything like that. I think that we are all kind of criminals to some degree or another. I mean, we have all been criminalized in one way or another.

**KD:** When were you born? And it was in Los Angeles, then?

**MG:** I was born September 20, 1951.

**KD:** So it's coming up?

**MG:** [*laughter*] Yup, it's always coming up.

**KD:** Were you born here in LA?

**MG:** I was born here at the county general. My grandmother was there. She had become a nurse and worked in the county general hospital as a midwife and as a trauma nurse. She told me stories of how, you know, doctors would come in the room and the nurses would have to stand at attention. And there were these doctors, these obstetricians that would . . . The county general deals with people who have been injured if you are in jail or something like that. So the county jail there is a whole floor, which is the county jail, which is where my grandmother ended up working.

So she was a deputy sheriff up at the county general hospital. She is only four feet, ten inches. And she would tell me stories of the drug addicts that would come in and the heroin addicts. And how some

of the doctors were really cruel, and some young girl, some virgin, would come in and they would pop her cherry just to be able to say that they did it. Just, you know, in the examination room. They did all sorts of cruel things up there, and she saw a lot of it. I know that there were a lot of women who were, you know, they are in a lot of pain. They are giving birth, and they are being asked in English whether they want to be sterilized.

KD: Right.

MG: There was a lot of stuff that went on there at the hospital. And my grandmother was always very guarded. She always saw her position as a person who had to take care of her patients and, you know, guard them all the way up into—I think into the late '60s. You know, when some of my friends were protesting over at Century City, they were protesting LBJ there, they were protesting the war. I remember Mr. Mount got beaten over the head. The cops went into the crowds and beat people up and they ended up at the county general. And I remember Mr. Mount, who was the father of one of my friends at school, got put in jail. And he was afraid. He thought they were going to kill him. They were going to inject him with something and they were going to kill him. My grandmother went up to him and said, “You can be okay now. I am taking care of you and nothing is going to happen to you.” And he actually sent her a thank-you through me for taking care of him, because he said he thought they were going to kill him. And Grandma was very forward thinking. She cut her hair short, she wore pantsuits, she had a lot of art books—

KD: Really?

MG: And she took care of me. Oh, yeah. She would go to the school and tell them that I had an appointment with the doctor, and she would take off with me and we would go to the track and bet on the horses. You know? I meant something to her and I felt it, and I was the closest one to her because all of her other grandkids weren't close.

KD: You're telling a wonderful family story. I mean, it's tragic, but you have a very clear sense of that story. Was that important to her to tell that story? You learned it from her?

MG: I learned it from her. There's a lot of things that . . . I mean, I have a cousin whose name is Albert. They're Mormons, you know, on that side of the family. They had become Mormons. And I laugh. I'm sorry, but I just find that whole thing kind of ridiculous. But, you know, they are into family history, which I can appreciate.

KD: Yeah, right.

MG: There are some things I don't care for, but that is one thing I do appreciate. And they have always—you know, they call me up and they ask me questions because they collect the family histories. And I would tell them stuff about my uncles, because she told me all the stories. She talked to me about how my Uncle Henry was the biggest kid she had. She had three boys, and he weighed like fourteen pounds when he was born. He was just a big baby. And she said that he got really big, and he would go in the kitchen and ask my great-grandmother for a tortilla with butter on it and run up to her and want [to nurse].

KD: Suckle at the same time.

MG: And want a suckle at the same time. *[laughter]* He just had a big appetite, and I recognize now that it was all the diabetes. That is why he was born so big.

KD: Yeah.

MG: You know, back then we didn't know what was going on. Grandma was diabetic. She was very smart woman. As a child she won a spelling bee in her school against another school. Caused a minor riot because I guess she won some kind of badminton set and a pen and quill. And one of the girls from—they were Mexican—and a Mexican all-girl private school—

KD: Really?

MG: And the girls from the other school were white. And one of the girls tried to take her prize away from her or something, and grandma stabbed her with the quill. And there was a big fight that broke out between the girls and one school against the other. The Mexicans against the white girls. But she was the smallest

kid in the school and had won this—this spelling bee. And it was a big honor to them. So they really . . . But that was before that whole thing with my grandfather.

**KD:** Did you grow up knowing these stories?

**MG:** I learned them. You know what happened was that my father had been so poisoned against his mother [that] it took a long time to mend that relationship, and my grandmother decided that I was—I was the prize to her. I felt like the center of the universe with her. She gave me an incredible sense of confidence. She made me feel intelligent and beautiful and capable and everything else. I mean, she wanted to give me what she wanted for herself as a young girl, and she made a very conscious decision about that. I remember sitting in her kitchen—I think I was six or seven—and she was telling me, “Well, a man has a penis and a woman has a vagina and when they love each other they have sex and men’s penis enters.” And I said, “Do I really have to listen to this?”

**KD:** [laughter]

**MG:** And she says, “Yes! Because you are a female and you will have a menstrual cycle and you need to know all about that stuff. And I’m a nurse and I am going to make sure that you know the right things.” I was a little kid, and I was, like, “I really don’t want to hear this right now.” But I knew it, and I filed it in the back, and, “Okay, I’ve learned that. That’s fine. But I don’t have to focus on that.”

**KD:** She was making you a strong feminist, woman-centered person.

**MG:** Yeah, she had—she had that in her mind. I mean, to me, I was just a little kid. What did I know? I have a lot more fun with Grandma than I did with Mom because Mom ignored me. I didn’t get that. My mother kind of resented me. I think that even to this day there is always this sort of competitive thing between her and me that, “If I had had an education like you, I would have done something with myself, and what have you done with yourself? You’re an artist.” She doesn’t get it. I don’t invite her to things too often.

**KD:** Tell me about growing up. How many brothers and sisters, and were you in this part of town still?

**MG:** I grew up here in Boyle Heights. My mother and father owned a house over here. When I was born we lived on skid row. My parents lived in the Gladys Hotel over on Gladys [Avenue in] downtown LA. You know where that is? That was right in the center of what was skid row.

**KD:** Yeah.

**MG:** Back then. My sister is—my half-sister, she is biologically my half-sister—my mother had her in Mexico and then came here and crossed over. And my father adopted my sister. And the judge asked my sister, “You want this man to be your father?” And she said, “He is.” “No, do you want this man to be your daddy?” She said, “No, he is my daddy.” So there was never any question about that. My father loved my sister wholly and totally and completely. I mean, she was his. Not *as if* she was his. She was his.

**KD:** Exactly.

**MG:** And I grew up knowing that she was my sister. I never doubted that she wasn’t. It wasn’t until I was about fourteen that I learned that she was my half-sister. But according to my mother, which I didn’t know until I was, like, thirty-seven, she said that on her first date with my father they had sex or he forced himself on her. She got pregnant, [and] she didn’t know what to do. So then she felt obligated to marry him because she was pregnant with me. And so she sort of blamed me for having to marry my father, who, she said, made her life miserable and was an abusive drunk. I know my father drank a lot. He did. And he was abusive at times. He really was. But my mother was no piece of cake, you know. She had some very tough things. She was very cold. She wasn’t just cold with my father. She was cold with me. She was, you know, “No seas encimosa, quitate de aquí.” [She was] very distant. And I used to think that—I used to think that it was my imagination. “That can’t be. My mother must love me.” Because for a child it was very . . . You know, given all these gifts by my grandmother and doted on by my grandmother. And I knew my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and my great-great-grandmother, so I knew them. And so it was like a matriarchy because it had become that. And my mother just was very not very warm toward me.

**KD:** But it’s the matriarchy from your father’s side. So you’re the inheritor of the matriarchy, not your mother.

- MG: Yes. Not my mother. Not my mother. My grandmother on that side died. I never met her. She died when my mother was fifteen, so I never got to meet her. And my mother's father, I understand he was an alcoholic. And at his funeral the priest said that my grandfather was condemned to hell and he would burn in hell. At the funeral. My mother was beside herself. She swore she would never go back to the Catholic Church, but she is still very Catholic. *[laughter]*
- KD: I wouldn't go back to a Catholic Church that said that.
- MG: About your father. No, no.
- KD: Yeah.
- MG: But there were other things that she wasn't telling me at the time. But apparently the church had condemned him and he had, the story goes—and I don't know how true any of this is—but my understanding is that he killed a man who supposedly raped my mother. And I say supposedly because I am not sure she—I can't get a straight answer from her on any of that. And supposedly her pregnancy of my sister was the result of another rape. So there were all these things that were sort of unspoken. And I don't know if my mother's embarrassment over being pregnant out of wedlock is the issue or whether or not she was raped. I'm not sure and I can't say one or the other. I think it could be—
- KD: Was she young when she had you, or . . .
- MG: She was, I think, nineteen when she had my sister. And I think she was twenty-five when she had me. Which is interesting because I was twenty-five when I had my daughter, and my daughter was twenty-five when she had her daughter. We have all twenty-five, twenty-five. So, yeah.
- KD: So when you were growing up, was there a closeness between you and your sister and you and—just you and grandma?
- MG: I loved my sister. You know, I remember having these dreams about how much I loved my sister, but I don't think that I had a lot to do with her. I felt very disconnected. My sister suffered from malnutrition. She—you may say they dropped her on her head, they dropped her on her head. I mean, she had some major fall. She is not—she is barely learning how to read now. I mean, she is older than me. She hardly knows how to read. She's not an intellectual, you know, so she's lacking. I think she has, like, a learning disability. I am not sure exactly what it is or how it is. She is very self-conscious about it, so if she would hear me talking about it she probably would be really—she would feel badly. And I never want to make her feel bad about that. She is my sister, and she does the best with what she has. But for me, I can't be too close to her because it's like putting, you know, it's like putting energy into a black hole. It sucks me up, and then I can't get myself out of it. I can't—I can't be a close part of her world.
- KD: When you were growing up, the age difference I would imagine, you know, you would . . . Your stage of life that you were in was different than hers.
- MG: I think that is part of it and I—I just think that there was a whole lot that we didn't have similar interests at all.
- KD: So what kinds of things were you doing as a young child, as a young girl growing up, for fun?
- MG: Well, you know, my parents owned their own home, which was I think—now I realize, among Chicanos it was probably a little unusual. My father had his own business.
- KD: But you said you started in skid row?
- MG: We started in skid row but my father had a business called Baba Louie's—a bar and grill called Baba Louie, which is exactly where the Vernon police station is today in Vernon. On Santa Fe Avenue. And he had a bar and grill. And he made food, he served beer, and he had a partner. And they had a big riff and a fight when my mother was pregnant with my brother and I was ten years old. And he lost that business and he opened up another bar. I went to Sheridan Elementary School, and I played the violin in the orchestra and had piano lessons. And my mom got a nanny to come up and take care of us, especially me, you know.
- KD: That sounds extremely established and—
- MG: Well, I didn't think so at the time. I mean, I never grew up thinking that we were well off. And if I think about it now, I still don't see us as being extremely wealthy in any way. I mean, I had my own room, I had

an upright piano, I had a yard. A front yard and a back yard, and the yard was my world. We had fruit trees. And I was an outside person. I wasn't an inside person. My sister was older than me, and my cousin who is sixteen came to live with us when I was a young girl. So I had an older cousin. And my mother . . . And then eventually another cousin came to stay with us. So there were five, six women in that house, and I was the youngest. So I wasn't too much into doing chores. The whole idea of, "It's your turn to wash the dishes" was out of the way. I mean, I would run in the bathroom and lock the door until the dishes were done. "I'm not doing those dishes." Or I would climb the tree. I was into climbing, and I was a bit of a tomboy.

KD: Really?

MG: Oh, yeah. I did gardening. I liked gardening. I would water the trees. We had orange, tangerine, lemon, peach, avocado. We had this huge fig tree that gave the biggest, most beautiful purple figs that you could ever find, and my job was to pick the figs because they would drop to the ground and attract flies. So I would pick them and put them into bowls and hand them out to the neighbors. And our neighbors were Jewish back then, and they would make these little Danishes with fig filling in them, and I would . . . My job was to give the figs away. Because nobody would eat them.

KD: Really?

MG: "Go pick the figs and give them to the neighbors." And I would get these bowls, these big bowls, and fill them up with figs and go to the neighbor and give them away. We were kind of a loud family, you know. We played rock and roll too loud, and we were loud kids, and we were obnoxious. But then we would come over and we would give them some figs, so it was okay.

KD: So you must have been growing up in Boyle Heights during the time when it was going through a transition from a—

MG: We were almost the first Mexicans on the block.

KD: Really?

MG: Yeah. And across the street, when I was a little kid, César Chávez lived across the street. And his aunt or his sister and his niece still live there.

KD: Still live there, right.

MG: Right there on Folsom. He was on the corner of Folsom and Fickett. They lived across the street, and his kids used to laugh at me [*laughter*] because I couldn't skate. I wasn't too—uncoordinated. I tried to skate, I would fall down, and they would sit there and they would laugh.

KD: So you were allowed as a young girl to go up and down the street. Seemed to be a lot of freedom or—

MG: I took more freedom than I was given, you know. And when my mother—my mother and father used to fight all the time. It was a constant battle. It was always about food and the fact that he stayed out late and he drank too much, and so there was always this sort of fight. You know, during—when I was a little kid we always had dinner together. He would come home for dinner [*and*] we would all sit together and eat.

KD: Really?

MG: I remember that. But it was always, you know, sitting at the dinner table with my mother and father fighting, and I never wanted to be there. I would rather be outside playing handball or whatever. You know, I didn't want to be there. It was a little kitchen. We would sit in the kitchen and heaven forbid we should ever sit in the dining room.

KD: Oh, really?

MG: [*laughter*] Yeah, you know, you had a dining room and you had all these beautiful dishes and everything, but you didn't use them unless it was Thanksgiving.

KD: Did your mother cook, or . . .

MG: My mother cooked every day. She made flour tortillas for my father on a regular basis, every day. We did not have any canned food in the pantry. We had a little pantry, and the only canned food allowed in our pantry was tuna and tomato sauce. No canned beans. Everything had to be fresh. My father was a chef. He was a cook. He studied to be a chef, and he did not allow canned food. Everything had to, you know, be



fresh for him when he came home. And my mother would get up at four in the morning to go to work, and then she would come home in time to make dinner for him. And then, you know, so he—

KD: Did he ever cook at home?

MG: On Sunday mornings he made Sunday morning breakfasts. Yes, yes. I used to have a photograph of him with his little chef hat. He used to work at the Union Station.

KD: Really?

MG: Yeah.

KD: At the restaurant there?

MG: Yeah, there were dining cars. He was responsible for making the gravies and the sauces that went on the dining cars because back then they had dining cars that were very elegant and they used to [serve food]. So that was his one of his first jobs.

KD: So when you said you were younger, the family would have dinner together. Is that your elementary school years or . . .

MG: From childhood up until I was ten or eleven. We used to have dinner together as a family except on those occasions when my father didn't come home because he was out drinking, which did happen. And occasionally my mother would want to embarrass him, so she would walk me over to the bar where he was drinking—because it was like two and a half blocks away—and she would say go in there and [say to me], "Tell your father he has to come home." And she would send me in to get him, to embarrass him. She didn't use my sister. And I didn't recognize it, I didn't realize it, she didn't ask my sister because my sister is my half-sister and, you know, to my father it wouldn't have mattered. But it mattered to my mother. My mother made an issue of it. My mother did not allow my father to hit my sister. "She is not yours. You can't hit her." But he could hit me. So if my sister did something, like tear something up or break something, she would blame it on me and I would get the beating. She never got hit. So there was a bit of resentment.

KD: That would cause a—

MG: It caused a rift between us, and my mother sort of fed into it. I don't know that she meant to, but she did it, you know. And my sister was also the *güera* and I was the *morena*. She was the *güerita* and I was the dark one. And she would say things to me like, "Oh, you are getting too dark," you know. In the summertime I would go out and I would play with the water hose and put the sprinkler on and then lay on the ground and get as dark as I could, just to piss her off. "I am going to turn black," you know, that kind of thing. And my mother was just beside herself. "Ay, no andas muy prieta. No andas en el sol tanto." You know?

KD: That sounds like my family. [laughter]

MG: And, you know, I was never going to be as white as my sister, so I might as well embrace my darkness. And that's the way I felt as a kid.

KD: Did anybody else reinforce that in the family?

MG: Well, you know, I had, you know, we had a lot of cousins and a lot of uncles. There were some good ones and there were some bad ones. I had this one uncle, we used to call him Uncle Pirate. Great-grandmother had had twenty-four children. She had had four husbands. So he was from the Cruz part of the family—whereas my grandmother was from the Marmolejo part of the family—and his brother was a prizefighter. He was a [boxer. He] was a lightweight [boxing] champion. He got drafted and was killed three days before the end of the war. I don't know if it was the Philippines, but it was in the Pacific. He got killed by a sniper and . . . But Uncle Pirate was really dark, really, really dark, and he used to call me *prieta*. Used to call me "nigger" and "Zambo"—and "Sambo"—or the "Santa Fe Indian." I got called the "Santa Fe Indian," "Sambo," and "nigger" by my family.

KD: And at the time was it a playful term or was it a—

MG: It used to piss me off!

KD: And they knew that?

MG: Well, he knew that, but they also knew I had a bit of a temper, so I was a little tough to deal with. I was not an easy child. You know, I was not that kind of kid that was easy and mellow and sweet and smiled at everybody. I just wasn't that kind of child. No, I was devious.

KD: Did you get in trouble at school?

MG: No, no, but I was argumentative. I was argumentative, I think, from the time I was born. I had a very sharp tongue.

KD: So far it sounds like you have been talking about [your] elementary school years. And you were at Sheridan, you said?

MG: Yeah.

KD: Did you—did you like school during that time? Was there a memory of school, or . . .

MG: [*laughter*] My first day of kindergarten I wanted to go to school because my sister was going to school and they talked about it. And I remember going to kindergarten. And I had Mrs. [Ricksheim], and Mrs. Ricksheim made everybody line up and march into the bungalow. And I didn't like that, so I took off. So when I came home my father said, "So, how did you like your first day of school?" I said, "Oh, I didn't like it so I decided to leave." [*laughter*] He goes, "You can't leave!" I go, "I can't?" And my sister started laughing. She said, "No, you've got seven years of elementary school and three years of junior high." And then I was like, "Oh my God, you mean now I'm stuck there? I have to go to school. Oh no. What have I gotten myself into?" But that was the [first day of] kindergarten. And I had some teachers I didn't like. Mrs. Tanaka didn't like me. I remember that. And Mrs. Williams. But my favorite teacher in elementary school had to be Mr. Sharplin.

KD: Mister?

MG: Sharplin. He was the first male teacher I ever had, and he was the first person that really sort of, you know, made me feel good about my schoolwork. I took an interest. He allowed me to be myself. Before that I don't think I had teachers that were as [supportive]. I had a lot of black teachers, you know.

KD: Really?

MG: Yeah, I had black teachers. Mrs. Williams and Mrs. McWilliams. And who else did I have . . .

KD: When you say that Mr. Sharplin allowed you to be yourself, what does that mean? Did he—

MG: Well, I had a Japanese teacher named Mrs. Tanaka who—I think she hated me. [*laughter*] She just hated me. And I remember at one point this kid was stealing my homework, and I was trying to get my homework back from him because he grabbed it, and I was trying to get it back, and he stabbed me with a pencil. And I remember that she turned to me, and she says, "Well, you deserved that." And the next day she was absent and the substitute teacher found out about it and was horrified. He sent me to the nurse's—to the nurse's office to be examined. She said, "That's lead. That's lead poisoning. I mean, you—even if you don't like it, you have to treat it or do something." She just hated me, you know, she was just didn't like me.

My father had, you know, my father . . . They would send me home with homework. For instance, they sent me with a list, a spelling list that I had to learn how to spell, because they were going to test us the next day. My father said, "Where's your homework?" I'd say, "Well, it's this spelling list." And he says, "Okay, spell." So I'd spell everything. I was good at spelling. He says, "Okay, now spell them backwards." I said, "Backwards!" He says, "Yes, I am going to give you the word and you have to spell it backwards." I said, "Oh, no." So he got me to do this whole thing, and he says, "It's good for your memory. It's good for your mind. You have to learn how to spell backwards." Why do I have to learn how to spell backwards? So when I got to the classroom and they did the spelling, I did the same thing on the spelling test.

KD: Wrote it backwards.

MG: I wrote it forward and then I wrote it backwards. I wrote it both ways. And the teacher said, "You get an F for doing that. You are not supposed to do that." [*laughter*] Got me into all this trouble. The teacher didn't want me doing that. But she hated me, so she would look for anything, anyway. So it didn't matter. And there wasn't, you know, my mother didn't have any confidence about her English language skills, so it wasn't like she would go and fight for me or talk to the teacher. "Well, you do what the teacher tells you to

do,” you know. And I think a lot of Mexican families are like that. So I didn’t have anybody to come to my defense, and my grandmother was too old and my father wasn’t there.

**KD:** Were you exploring? You know, drawing and crayons and paint?

**MG:** Yeah, I came home with a drawing—I think I must have been five or six—and my father said, “Oh, it’s wonderful. You are going to be an artist.”

**KD:** Really?

**MG:** Yeah. And I said, “Oh, I am going to be an artist. Okay.” And I accepted it from that moment on and that was—that’s the way I saw myself. I was the artist.

**KD:** Do you remember what you had created?

**MG:** I was in Mrs. McWilliams [class]. We were doing washes with, you know, crayons and washes.

**KD:** Wow. So when you got to middle school?

**MG:** My family was already divorced. And I was playing violin, I was in orchestra. I couldn’t take art because you only had so many electives, so I had to take the violin. And I wasn’t great at it. I wasn’t very good at it, but my mother and father wanted me to take violin, and I think it had more to do with what they wanted. It wasn’t something [enjoyable]. I didn’t care for the music. It was the wrong instrument and the wrong music.

**KD:** Well, you are doing classical European music, right?

**MG:** Yes, it was *Pomp and Circumstance*, you know. It wasn’t very interesting, and I had never gone to a live concert or experienced anything like that, so it was completely out of context. If you want a child to care about music, you have to also let them see concerts, and go to concerts, entertain them in that way. And for my mother, you know, entertainment was the movies on a Sunday. You know, “Go to the movies. Here’s your twenty-five cents and a dime for Coke.”

**KD:** Did you go? Did you go to the movies a lot?

**MG:** I went every Sunday. My mother—this kind of explains my mother. My mother—my mother would give me twenty-five cents and a dime to go to the movies after church because we had to go to church first. We went to a Catholic church. We went to Assumption. One day my father and my mother had company, so this had to be when I was about eight or nine, and the guests decided to give me a quarter out of nowhere. “Here, here’s a quarter.” And I thought, “Oh, great. Today I get a hotdog at the movies.” Because we would sit through two movies. They used to show two movies back then, and at the end of them I was famished, you know. And my mother saw that he gave me a quarter and she said to me, “Well, he’s already given you your quarter. Here’s the dime.” I was so pissed off. I said, “But I’m hungry and I want to buy a hotdog.” She says, “Oh, well, get something here and carry it in.” Because, you know, they wouldn’t have let us do anything. She was very, very frugal. So this whole idea of us being a family that was well-off was, like, off context. I didn’t see ourselves as wealthy.

**KD:** Right, I’m also thinking your playing instruments at school, which is a normal part of school, but very normal. I grew up post-Prop 13, so we had no arts, we had no music, right? So the instruments are coming from the school? You’re not renting them?

**MG:** Well, you rented from the school. We played three dollars back then to rent an instrument for the semester. Yeah. So you had to pay the school a rental fee. But that was very slight.

**KD:** And the piano? Did the family purchase that or was that a—

**MG:** Yeah, they purchased that. We had a piano.

**KD:** Whose idea was it that you had to have that kind of music?

**MG:** My father. We used to watch Lawrence Welk on Sundays as a family. Yeah. My father wanted me to play an instrument. And I would have been happy with the piano, but they didn’t teach piano at the school.

**KD:** No.

**MG:** So they decided that I had to play the violin. And my parents chose the violin because they didn’t teach guitar and they didn’t teach piano because . . . I think they would have been happy if I had been able to play guitar, and I think guitar would have been a much better instrument for me. But they couldn’t—they

wouldn't allow me to play any of—like flute, or clarinet, or anything like that because, “Oh, my God, she's a young girl and she's going to be putting something in her mouth and nasty,” and, you know, “Only boys can play bugles and saxophones and things like that.” So I wasn't allowed a wind or brass instrument. It had to be a stringed instrument. And it couldn't be the cello because, “Heaven forbid, she would have to open up her legs and put an instrument between your legs in public.”

I mean, that's not ladylike and, you know, this sort of . . . I mean, you know, they came from this idea that, you know, you are not supposed to sit on the floor, you are not supposed to wear shorts. If I had gone to Mexico to visit my uncle, for instance, I could only wear a dress. I wasn't allowed to wear pants. And, you know, it was very divided that way. I remember one summer this one lady came to take care of us and I was taught how to crochet and how to embroider and all those, you know, house domestic skills.

**KD:** Domestic skills, right.

**MG:** Yes, I was taught domestic skills, embroidery and that kind of stuff. [*dog barking*] Izzy, come here. Come here.

[*break in audio*]

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos on August 27 with Margaret Garcia, and Margaret was telling me about her family life. I was going to ask the question about the religious experience. The way you talked about it, was your family deeply religious or church-going Catholics?

**MG:** My—I was baptized at Santa Vibiana's. Well, the birth certificate—the baptismal certificate I have is from Santa Vibiana's [in] downtown LA, but I think I was baptized in Placita on Olvera Street. My parents were Catholic, but as soon as my sister, myself, and my cousin were old enough to walk to the church on our own without having to be accompanied, then we went to church without them. My parents didn't go. They just sent us and a handful of change to put into the basket and that was it. And I went to Assumption Church, which is the parish where I made my first communion, but the church wasn't built so we had to go [to another church]. I had to make my communion at the Santa Lupita's, and then the church was built immediately after that. We were there before they built the church.

**KD:** Wow. So there was a sense that you had to get—the girls should get their sacraments.

**MG:** On a personal level—I mean, my mother was not a religious person, my father was not a religious person. As a child, though, I was very devout.

**KD:** Really?

**MG:** Yes. I wanted to be a nun.

**KD:** You wanted to be a nun?

**MG:** I wanted to be a nun. I loved the church. I loved the statues and, you know, the ritual and I loved the church.

**KD:** Was it a quiet space?

**MG:** I took it very seriously. I just really believed in God and was very, very devout in that respect. And, you know, I don't—I don't see myself as Catholic, which is . . . I came from that love of God, and church, and the priests, and the ceremony, and I believed everything they told me. And I loved it, you know. And I loved that sense of order and that sense of [discipline]. The thing is that my family—my mother, my father—did not provide any sense of discipline or boundaries that made me comfortable, but the church provided that in terms of being able to say “this is the world.” And I enjoyed the structure because I had no structure.

**KD:** Were they attending to your spiritual life in other ways, or . . .

**MG:** I was just a kid. There wasn't like, you know. When you talk about, you know, spirituality for me doesn't exist within a vacuum. It isn't like your sense of right and wrong is tested through experience. Like either something is right or something is wrong, and it wasn't like I was making major decisions as a child. But I saw the world in terms of this is good and this is good: “This is good for me to do not because I enjoy it, but because I want to do it.” And I know that by the time I got to junior high I had friends who I was very close to, but there was always this sense of wanting to be kind of wild and crazy. And yet I was always the

person in the group that said, you know, “You are going to get in trouble, don’t do it.” You know, that kind of thing. But I had my own sense of purpose, you know, my own sense of—

KD: Do you think you got that from your grandmother then?

MG: Yes. It was [her].

KD: She was attending to your spiritual life?

MG: Definitely my grandmother. It was definitely my grandmother. I turned out to be allergic to milk, but I used to get sick on a regular basis. And my grandmother was a nurse, so they would always take me over there, and there were things that I didn’t understand. And I can look back and I can kind of think about what happened. My grandmother was raped by my grandfather when she was thirteen and he was thirty, and there was always this fear in her that somebody was going to abuse me. And she was always watching over to make sure that wasn’t some kind of legacy that got passed down through my father. And she would tell him—and I didn’t understand then what she was telling him, but I understand it now. I mean I can’t tell you the words, but she would basically say, “I’ll know if you do anything to this child.” And my father never did. I mean, my father never abused me, he never did anything. But there was always this sense of her watching over me.

And I remember being feverish and just sick and laying in her bed, and her examining me and her taking care of me. And I remember one time where she was [standing over me], she was hypnotizing me. She said, “Look at my hand.” I would be looking at her hand and I would have a fever and I know that she said things to me or she would . . . But I don’t know what they were. She never completely explained to me.

KD: Wow.

MG: Right.

KD: Was she also interested in Catholicism or was she—her spirituality—

MG: My grandmother got into Edgar Cayce.

KD: Really?

MG: And Lobsang Rampa. Yes. She, in fact, I sort of inherited her interest in that. She liked Edgar Cayce.

KD: I might be wrong. I associate that name with Hindu—

MG: Lobsang Rampa.

KD: Yeah.

MG: Yeah.

KD: Hindu philosophy.

MG: Yeah.

KD: And religion.

MG: Yeah, and I know that my mother used to get material from the Rosicrucians on a regular basis too.

KD: Really?

MG: Yeah.

KD: Fascinating. So you were maybe in a family that was willing to explore—

MG: Oh, yeah.

KD: Other spiritualities and religions.

MG: Yeah. We were allowed to go to other churches, you know. I remember the girls across the street, they were [Protestant]. They were from Oklahoma. They were white and they were Okies and they were Protestants. And they were going to some kind of Sunday school or some kind of Bible class, and they invited us to go with them. And my mother said, “Oh, yes, it’s good for you. Go! Go!” “Okay, I’ll go,” you know. And I remember going and the lady was preaching that smoking and drinking were a sin. I said, “Smoking and drinking is a sin! My father smokes and drinks. Oh, my God, he’s a sinner!” But, you know, there was this sort of very condemnation that kind of went with it.

KD: Yeah.

MG: But we went, you know. We were [open to the experience]. It was okay. It was okay to experience other cultures, other religions. We weren’t closed off from any of that. I think that that was kind of a healthy

thing. And I remember Kennedy running for office and the girls across the street saying, “Oh, you know, if Kennedy becomes the president we’re all going to have to be forced into Catholic schools.” I go, “Really? That’s terrible. That sounds terrible.” And I told my mom and she said, “That’s absurd. Nobody has to go to Catholic school just because he’s Catholic.” But those were, you know, when you were little kids those were kind of the arguments that would be batted around.

**KD:** Did your mother work outside the home? You said she got up at four?

**MG:** She worked for Coronet Foods, chopping onions. She worked in an onion factory. And I only made one visit to that onion factory, and I remember going in and just walking into the room. The smell from the onions—my eyes wouldn’t stop crying. And I would look at my mother, and my mother wasn’t crying. And I remember she would cut onions at home and never cry. I realized why. There were no tears left. Her eyes just didn’t respond to that anymore. But it took a long time for her to get accustomed to that.

She had a couple of accidents in there. Boxes fell on her. Her hand got caught in the machine and her fingers were mangled a bit. But I also know, you know, she worked—if she talked—if she told you her story, she would tell you she worked because she had to. She had no money and no . . . Some of that is true to a degree, but I also know that my father didn’t want her to work. She chose to work. It was a choice that she made because . . . in my mother’s frugality. And I understand this about her: there is never enough money. “Well, what choice did I have? We didn’t have enough money.” And in my mother’s life, even to this very day, there is never enough money. And so, you know, we have an aunt or somebody that they would find in Mexico. And they would come up, and they would take care of me because the school would send notes that I wasn’t eating breakfast, that I was getting headaches and I was getting sick, stuff like that. I had a sickly disposition.

**KD:** Because of the—probably the allergy to milk.

**MG:** The allergy to milk. And then, you know, I would refuse to eat in the morning, and just stuff like that.

**KD:** You have talked about the religious and spiritual background of your family, especially of your grandmother. Did you hear a lot about your parents’ political perspectives or affiliations? You know, I mean, you did grow up in a time when Kennedy was elected.

**MG:** My mother was an immigrant, and she studied to become an American citizen and my sister did too, because they were both [immigrants]. Both my mother and my sister had to become American citizens. And so, you know, when she was having to learn all the presidents and all that stuff like that, I participated, and we all had to do that. We all had to learn, you know, who was the first president, who was the second president, you know, the whole thing we went through that. If you ask me now I couldn’t tell you, but I remembered doing all that with my mother and [sister].

When I got to sixth grade, well, my sister got to junior high. She was going to Hollenbeck. We both went to Hollenbeck, but when she went to Hollenbeck from Sheridan . . . Sheridan was a school which was predominately Jewish when we started and became more Mexican, and there were some blacks there, but not many. I don’t think there was more than a handful in the whole school. I don’t think there was more than five total. I doubt even if there was that much. But when we got to Hollenbeck the percentages of black students was up, and one day my sister came home with her school annual. You know, the photographs of her and her class. And we were sitting at the kitchen table with my father, and my father said to my sister, “Oh, you’re the prettiest girl on the page.” And I said, “Oh, yeah? Prettier than her? Prettier than her?” You know little kids. And I pointed to a black girl, and my father said, “Why are you picking on her?” “I don’t know.” He says, “You know . . .” and it was like he made an issue of it. He says, “She’s black, she’s like every other person deserves dignity and rights and everything like that.” And I was sort of stunned for the talk, because I kind of felt like I wasn’t asking for it. But on the other hand I’m grateful for it now, even though, you know, it was like he took the opportunity to tell me what his perspective was and how we have to deal with other people and give them respect and dignity like anybody else. Yeah. And that’s what he said. And my mother poo-pooed—you know, my mother was not on the same page of that. But my

father was. And my grandmother worked at the general hospital and there were a lot of nurses there who were black. So she had that experience, and she had learned to get along.

And my parents divorced when I was eleven, and by the time I was fourteen my mother was going through this finding-herself phase. She was bringing different people home, and I wasn't very happy. And I would wake up and find some man sleeping on the couch, and my mother was gone to work and the house full of women and I [resented it]. She eventually took up with this Puerto Rican guy, Victor, Vincent—I don't even remember what his name is [anymore]—and married him. And the guy was like offering me money to have sex with him. He was just really obnoxious, and I couldn't exist there anymore. So I left and went to live with my grandmother.

KD: At what age?

MG: I was fourteen.

KD: Wow.

MG: And when I did that, there was a rift between my mother and I.

KD: I would imagine.

MG: But I lived with Grandma, and Grandma had married an old bootlegger, who was this Navaho Indian who had spent most of his time, I think, in different penitentiaries, including Alcatraz. He knew Baby Face Nelson. He was just an old bootlegger and an asshole. He was just a total jerk. And at first we were friends, but then as I got into junior high school and [when] he recognized that I had a lot of black friends, he would harass me. He came out of an institution, you know, a penitentiary where blacks were over here and the Mexicans were over here.

KD: Yeah, very segregated.

MG: It's a very segregated system under which he had lived for years. He had grown up on the reservation. He was just a very, very, harsh, harsh person. And he would follow me to school and call me a whore, a bitch, and a nigger-lover. And he would trade out my lunch and put dog food in it. He just made my life very difficult, and his name was Andy. My cousin, who had been [also living with us]—wait, I have to go back a little bit here. Grandma had me here in the states. but my Uncle Henry had had an affair with a waitress in Mexicali and she got, she had a little girl. She had three children, but she had a little girl. My uncle told my grandmother, "You have another grandchild in Mexicali. It's my kid. I had it there." And she says, "Well, if it's my grandchild, I want to know where it is and where it's at." So she crossed the border and went to Mexicali and saw [the mother of my cousin and] met my cousin, Cuquita. She was named after her, and Cuquita and her mother and her two other siblings—a boy I think and another girl—lived above the bar where the mother was working. And when my cousin met my grandmother, she literally threw herself down on her feet at my grandmother's feet and said, "Don't leave me here. Take me with you."

KD: Wow.

MG: And my grandmother was so startled by the whole thing. She wasn't expecting that. She just was startled, and she said, "I can't take you with me right now. I will return in two weeks and I will come back for you, and you will come back with me." And she did. She returned for her. She picked her up, she crossed her across the border with no papers or anything, brought her here. And my cousin had—Cuquita, she was sick. She was covered in fleas and lice and—we didn't realize it—she had tuberculosis. So she was sick. We didn't know she had tuberculosis. My grandmother took care of her, but my grandmother was the kind of person that liked to be out on the street. They used to say, "Era una callejera, una libertina." That's the way they referred to my grandmother. And so Cookie didn't adjust very well because all she wanted to do was stay at home and rest. She didn't want to go anywhere and decided that she wanted to go live with another aunt, Aunt Josephine, who is also the sister of my prize-fighting uncle, you know. She had got herself into a big mess there, and that's a different story. But the thing is that when she turned sixteen—when we both turned fifteen, sixteen, I convinced her to come run away and go live with Grandma. So the two of us were living with Grandma at the same time. So even though Andy was there—he was a horrible

person, he was terribly obnoxious—Cookie and I lived there with my grandmother. And Cookie was beautiful, and she won the President’s Fitness Award.

But the same time she won the President’s Fitness Award, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was sent away to a sanitarium to live for a year and a half. And we were in high school at the time, and I wept. I just cried. We had to take her [to the hospital]. It was her birthday. It was April 21 and it was her sixteenth birthday. She was just turned sixteen, and we had to drive her all the way to Olive View Hospital. My uncle sat on this side, Cookie sat on this side, looking out the window, and I sat in the middle. My uncle was in the front seat with her father and my grandmother, and we drove up there. And I wept. They were taking my cousin from me. I felt so possessive of her. I just loved her so, so much, and Charlie looked over at Cookie. And I was wearing this little white empire dress, and someone had given Cookie a bouquet of baby roses as a present for her, as a birthday present. It was her birthday that day. And Cookie turned and said, “Would you hold these for me?” And I was holding her flowers in my hand, and Uncle Charlie looked at Cookie and said, “Oh, doesn’t she look like she’s just been jilted at the altar?” And we just burst out in laughter. And I couldn’t stop crying and I couldn’t stop laughing. I was so hysterical. It was such a strong emotion. And I had to leave her there at the sanitarium, and I had to say good-bye. And she, you know, she was trying not to cry. And she says to me now when we talk about it, she says it meant so much to her “that you loved me that much, that I mattered to you. I never felt that I mattered to anybody like I, you know, that you loved me so much.” And she was, she was like my sister. I was very, very close to her.

And then, you know, I was left alone with Andy, my racist pig step-grandfather—whenever he was. And my grandma would say, “Ignore him!” You know, he’s old. We don’t know what to do with him. I ended up having to leave there. Things get very complicated from that point on because I was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in San Diego. My godmother for a while, at least, for the summertime. And then there was all sorts of shit that hit the fan down there. It didn’t work out. I had to go back, and I ended up living with my father and my stepmother. And I guess there is stuff there I am not interested in talking about. I am not too comfortable even now.

[break in audio]

**KD:** We’re back from lunch. And over lunch, Margaret, you were telling me about your grandmother and taking the bus and the trolley.

**MG:** Yes, when I [about four or five], when I was young, I still recall having to stand in the middle of the street to take the trolley here in Los Angeles, which didn’t exist very much longer after that. But taking public transportation with my grandmother, because my grandmother didn’t drive, she never drove anywhere.

And I recall going to the track because, like I said before, she used to take me to the track, to tell them I had a doctor’s appointment, and we would end up betting. And one day it was raining or drizzling, it was very foggy and raining, and we had gone to the track and were coming back. It was late at night. And we were sitting in the back of the bus and some white man was going off about how he hated blacks or he hated niggers, he hated Mexicans. And my grandmother went off on him. She is only four feet, ten inches, and she said, “I’m a Mexican and I’m from Texas and if you don’t shut up I’m going to put my umbrella through you.” And the whole bus applauded because nobody wanted to hear him. The bus broke out in applause and I [was proud]. It makes me smile now, but I thought back then, “Oh, she has got a lot of guts.” You know, “She’s . . .” And I thought she was so brave.

**KD:** When he was saying these terrible things, how were you feeling? Because you’re a dark-skinned woman. Do you remember?

**MG:** You know, it’s hard for me to not look at that and just think that that was just evil, you know, that he was being—that he was being evil.

**KD:** Did you have a sense of shame though, or . . .

**MG:** No, I didn’t. I don’t remember feeling shame. I was like—like, “What are we going to do? This guy is like—this is awful.” It was ugly. It was ugly. It was just so ugly, and I had never experienced that before,



you know, as a little girl. I remember, you know, white people or other people asking me if I was Spanish, because nobody wanted to say the word *Mexican*. *Mexican* was a dirty word back then. Nobody wanted to say the word *Mexican*. “Are you Mexican?” Because that was a put-down in and of itself. You know, it wasn’t until the whole Chicano Movement, where people acknowledged the whole idea that being Mexican was something to be proud of. But there was a lot of shame in being Mexican, so people would ask if you were Spanish. You know, “Are you Spanish?” And that’s the way it came down.

**KD:** How did you reply to those questions as a young child?

**MG:** I’d say, “No, I’m Mexican.” “Oh, okay.” You know? Because I don’t—[I didn’t have a problem with it]. I don’t recall feeling a shame about it, but I recognized that they were having a hard time saying it.

**KD:** That there was shame.

**MG:** That there was shame in it that they were trying to like, you know, I don’t want to call you a nigger if you are not one, you know. And it was that kind of thing that saying Mexican was just that, derogatory just that dirty.

**KD:** Did you frequently then take the bus and the trolley downtown to see movies or shopping?

**MG:** A lot. Yeah, we used to go downtown a lot. Grandma loved to shop. I would go anywhere with her. There was always this little talk she gave me. “We are going to go shopping and you better use the bathroom now because I don’t want to have to stop every fifteen minutes.” And, you know, and I used to get bored. I didn’t want to stay at home. So Grandma liked to be in the street and, you know, she always bought me something. She would buy me a coat or a pair of shoes or something. And we would end up [having dinner], we used to go to a cafeteria called the Forum. [Forum Cafeteria was at 620 S. Broadway—ed.] They had, like, Spanish tiles there, and it’s like Clifton’s.

**KD:** Okay. Right.

**MG:** You go up, and you pick out, “Okay, I want chicken and I want this.” And they had little dishes, and you would pile them up on your tray, and you would sit down. And every time Grandma went to the track, every time we went together, she used to say to me, “I’ve always won at least a hundred dollars every time I’ve taken you. You’re my good luck charm.” So we’d go and we’d celebrate by eating at the Forum. And it was always too much food. She says, “You put it on that tray, you are going to have to eat it.” I’m like, “Oh, too much food.” You know? She always fed me like I was a football player or something. Piles of food.

**KD:** So that’s how she made her extra cash, was betting at the racetracks?

**MG:** She bet at the tracks, she used to do bookie work. She used to be a bookie, she was a midwife, she was a *coyote* . . . I don’t know. Mostly, I guess she used to help people with their papers. Because having been a midwife, she had the ability to say that she [had delivered the baby and forgot to file the papers].

**KD:** Right.

**MG:** “I brought that person into the world and they did it in a house and . . .” You know, that kind of thing. She helped with a lot of that.

**KD:** So she obviously had gone to school to get the nursing degree.

**MG:** Yeah, she did. She had [five children of her own and] she had nine stepchildren with the widower that she took up with. And some of them were older than her, so he was an older man. And they actually owned a house over on Beaudry, near the Temple-Beaudry area. My grandmother, my great-grandmother lived in the Chávez Ravine area and the entrance to the Pasadena freeway on Alpine, off of Figueroa. Right there where the entrance is, is where her house was. They knocked it down to put the entrance in.

**KD:** Wow. So she was one of the families that was displaced?

**MG:** Yes, she had been displaced. But she was displaced before the Chávez Ravine thing, but it was within the same area. She was living in that area.

**KD:** Now I know your mother and father eventually split, but you talked a little bit about Thanksgiving, and I wonder if you could talk a bit more about other holidays. If there was a change before and after, you know. So, before and after the divorce, what did your family do for Christmas, for example?

- MG: I had an Uncle Jesus, Tío Jesus, who used to come over and they used to make this *natividad*, you know, up against the wall. And it would have lights and it would have camels and zebras, and it had a little manger in it. And it had palm trees and snow, and it had everything on it. They would, like—it would take up the whole wall. And he would build it, and you could see it from the street. And it was all full of glitter and snow and every kind of figurines that they could find was on it. It was bright and it had Christmas lights all over it.
- KD: So a traditional crèche with all these other—
- MG: Uh-huh. And he made it at Christmas time. They did it—they did it for several years. And then we, you know, we had a Christmas tree as well.
- KD: Did your family do—what’s the holiday in January? The Three King’s Day celebration?
- MG: No.
- KD: No.
- MG: My cousins did though. And occasionally they would come to visit around that time. and then they would go back. And they would tell me about the three kings, but I was always into Christmas. I was very American, you know, that kind of thing.
- KD: So Thanksgiving was a traditional American cuisine?
- MG: Yeah, turkey. Well, my father, you know, worked as a chef. I mean, he understands American cooking. And we had a turkey, and the stuffing was always wonderful, you know. He had his own recipe, which I’ve kind of kept to a certain degree. I mean, I like putting in the same things. There was, you know . . . I like Italian sausage, and water chestnuts, and, you know, all the other stuff. And I love stuffing.
- KD: Sounds like a Portuguese or—at least some of my family is Portuguese and they make a stuffing that way. It is not a stuffing that is good old American, you know, bread, and the apple, and the, what? Bread, apple, celery, raisins, or whatever. But adding the meat I think is another—
- MG: Well, he would take the giblets, and he would make the gravy out of it. He was always into making sauces. But the interesting thing about all our meals—and it was something that was pointed out later—is that every meal, even Thanksgiving or Christmas, every meal I ever had had beans.
- KD: Really?
- MG: Every meal. You could have mashed potatoes. You could have, you know, rice. Mashed potatoes, macaroni, spaghetti—you could have anything, but you had to have beans. If you didn’t have beans, you didn’t have a meal.
- KD: Wow.
- MG: You always had to have beans no matter what. I grew up on beans and I still eat beans. Still. I still love beans. I eat my beans.
- KD: That’s fantastic. A lot of folks I have spoken with talk about two things. One thing is that the children bring home the cuisine. You know, they are taught at school, this is what you do for Thanksgiving.
- MG: Oh.
- KD: That doesn’t sound like your experience at all. And the other is, families trying so hard to create that American cuisine and just not getting it right. But obviously your father was an excellent cook, so—
- MG: Yes.
- KD: And your mother was doing this American cuisine as well?
- MG: During the week we had beans, and flour tortillas, and rice every day. We had a salad, which was made up of lettuce and, unfortunately, too much mayonnaise. And we ate fried chicken, steak, *fideo*. We had chicken soup. We had fish on Fridays. Every Friday we had fish. Even after they said we could eat meat on Fridays, we still had fish. We always had fish. We had chicken usually on Sundays. Fried chicken. I loved fried chicken. Menudo.
- KD: Your mother was making menudo?
- MG: Oh, yeah, we had menudo. I hated *pozole*. You couldn’t get me to touch *pozole*. I didn’t like anything with pork. I didn’t like pig. I wouldn’t eat bacon. Like if somebody was cooking pork, I would leave the house.

I hated the smell of pork, and I have grown to love it now. I like it. But even now my father loved pork and my mother loved lamb. And my mother would make a side dish of lamb for herself, and I would say, “What is that?” You know, and she would say, “It’s lamb.” And she would give me a piece, and I loved it. I loved the lamb. I hated the pork and it wasn’t my taste. I didn’t have a taste for it. But the thing about my mother is that her cooking was extremely bland. She boiled anything [to death], make a soup out of it, and it was boiled and that’s the way she served it. Everything was like boiled chicken, or boiled beef, or boiled this and no vegetables. It was just a broth and some piece of meat and it was boiled. And so there were always these arguments, you know, “You put no seasoning in your food!” These arguments at the table were all about food. It was very passionate arguments about food. “Where’s the garlic? Where’s the celery? You need a little more salt in the tortilla.” I mean, it was . . . you know.

**KD:** Yeah, you had mentioned that, and I assumed it was about you didn’t have enough, or a critique of—

**MG:** Oh, we had plenty of food.

**KD:** It wasn’t Mexican cuisine, or . . . So it was his—their different interpretations of how a recipe should be handled. And then when you had birthdays, was that a special occasion in your—as a child?

**MG:** Birthdays were tough on me. They always seemed to go wrong. I remember being really little and having the birthday party. Something about you have to—you have to either blow out the candles or you have to break the piñata or these people are going to go home. And I said, “Good. I don’t like any of these people anyway.” [laughter] You know, because they weren’t my friends. They were all my sister’s friends and they were all older, and I was little and nobody was playing with me, and I said, “That’s okay.” I didn’t care. And then when I got older, I remember a horrible birthday party where all these people came over to have birthday cake and my father had fallen on the porch drunk. And I just didn’t feel that we could have a party with him crashed on the front porch, so it ended. So it was sort of like, you know, “I would rather not.”

**KD:** Did your grandmother make a special way for you at your birthday?

**MG:** No, no. So I don’t remember really celebrating my birthday, because they were always a source of embarrassment to have all these people come over and my father get drunk. Because my father drank a lot.

**KD:** So was it—birthday was not a special time for anybody in the family?

**MG:** Oh, you would look forward to it because you hope somebody gives you a present, but maybe, you know, if your mom—my mother used to make some really good cakes. She would make a really nice cake. And I liked her cooking, [her] baking, back then. There was some kind of meeting of the minds between my father and my mother. But my mother is not a person who likes a lot of seasoning, and I’m a person who likes seasoning. I’m more like my father in that way, except for the fact that, you know, I like the lamb like she did. We had vegetables, you know, things like that. I mean, fresh food.

**KD:** Do you remember if there was leisure time for the family? You know, like—

**MG:** Lots of TV everyday. My father [didn’t take us out]. My mother was always [complaining about it. It] was always a thing of complaints, you know. It was sort of like, “He doesn’t take us anywhere, we don’t go anywhere.” I mean, we went to the beach a couple of times, or we would go to the park. I remember going to the park and, like, at Hollenbeck Park, you know, as little kids, we laid down on the hill and then rolled down the hill. And we would roll down the hill or we would play in the sand. We didn’t have a whole lot of experience outside of East LA. We kind of stayed in East LA. But every now and then we would take a trip to the beach, and we would go to Santa Monica.

**KD:** For the day?

**MG:** Yup, for the day. And I think, you know, my father’s oldest brother drowned in a flood in Tijuana, so he was extremely fearful of my drowning, and I was fearless. I would just go out and I would just keep going out. And by eleven I had pretty much taught myself how to swim. I had gone to the [inaudible] Boys Club, and I had gotten my junior swimming patch at the age of eleven. Junior lifeguard. Even though I wasn’t old enough, I had passed all the tests. [I had to wait till I was twelve before they gave me the patch, even though I passed the tests.]

**KD:** Really?

**MG:** When I would go to the beach I would hop up and down and spend the whole day in the water. And I remember coming back and laying on the bed and closing my eyes and feeling the waves over my body. Even though I was laying on the bed I could feel the waves. I loved the ocean and I loved the water.

**KD:** Did you collect things from the beach?

**MG:** Shells, yeah. Every kid collects shells or pebbles and pretty little stones that are smooth from the water.

**KD:** Do you have a memory of your parents taking trips? I don't know, you said TV was one thing, but reading books, going to the library, taking you to the library?

**MG:** They didn't, but we had a neighbor, Mr. Silverman, who gave me his whole set of *National Geographic*. And they had them in a bookshelf in the garage, and I would sit in the garage, and I went through every single *National Geographic* I had. It made a huge difference. I remember going through everything and finally reading everything in the house and just saying there is nothing to read here, you know. There's only one book or . . . you know. She hated for me to leave and go to the library or walk anywhere unless it was church. But she allowed it. They allowed that. They didn't [encourage me that way. My mother didn't like me to cross the street]. By the time I got to junior high she didn't want me in any clubs, she didn't want me hanging out after school. I couldn't go anywhere. And I was having to put up with that horrible stepfather, so when I got to live with my grandmother, my grandmother was a lot more open. And I had been fourteen, fifteen, I was going on sixteen. I ended up at Roosevelt. I had gone through, and by the time I got to Roosevelt, I could go with . . . My cousin and I were together, so my grandmother would say, "Okay." So we would go and we would play volleyball at night. And I got into gymnastics. I competed. I took first and third in the municipal games and second in the all-city. So I competed in gymnastics and I was good at it. I enjoyed it.

**KD:** You must have been very dedicated?

**MG:** Oh, I loved it. I enjoyed the physicality of it. But I—I can tell you right now, no one in my family ever came to see me perform or compete ever in any of my meets. So it wasn't something that I shared with the rest of my family. It was something that I got into.

**KD:** Well, was it—was it an improper sport for a girl or was it—

**MG:** I think that I had recused myself and just became very private. And by the time Cookie left, then there was, you know, I wasn't sharing anymore. She came back over a summer when she had gone away because of the sanitarium. By the time she came back I had been living with my father. And here I was in high school, and I was living with my father, and I had some good friends and my cousin had come to visit. She was like on a—on a leave from the hospital to come and visit. They allowed her to come and visit. And we were in my room. My step-mother was in the kitchen—I don't know where she was—but my cousin, myself, and another friend of mine, Evie, who at the time . . . You know, right now I can tell you she's a dyke—she's lesbian and she looked kind of butch back then, but I was a very non-sexual person back then. I was not sexually active. I was just Margaret, being Margaret with a teenage cousin in the bedroom, listening to rock and roll, combing our hair, and doing our nails or whatever it was that we were doing. We weren't kissing, we weren't holding hands, we weren't even talking about boys. We were just, like, playing around, and my father came home and he saw my girlfriend there, who looked kind of butch. And he knew her mother and was like, "Yo no quiero esa mal flora aqui." And so we got into this fight. They ran off. He grabbed me by the neck, and I was so flexible back then because I had been in gymnastics, and I was wearing these big chunky shoes, that when he went to attack me I kicked him in his sternum on his chest and knocked him to the ground. I said, "Whoa."

**KD:** Wow!

**MG:** And he was on the floor. And he jumped up and he grabbed me again, and he started pounding my head into the floor. And I had—like he was choking me—and I had these big bruises around my neck where he was choking me. And my cousin and her nephew came in the room, and they pulled him off of me. And the next day, Saturday—that was a Friday night—and the next day was Saturday. So Saturday I was sort of, like, not allowed to leave the house. But on Sunday, Sunday was church, and he couldn't keep me from

going to church because it was a sin. “How could I not let my daughter go to church?” So I got dressed and I went to church and I called my English teacher in high school, Linnea Hunt. And Linnea Hunt was my English teacher, and she took me in. And from that point on I went to live with my English teacher. And we went to [the authorities]. I remember we had gone to the sheriff’s department. She called the police. You know where the Chicano Resource Center is over here on Third?

KD: Yeah.

MG: That is where [the sheriff’s department was]. It is over there somewhere. We met and they said, “Well, we could have you put in juvenile hall.” And Linnea asked for custody of me.

KD: Wow.

MG: And I was allowed to go live with her. So I lived with my English teacher.

KD: She got custody of you, or did she just [take you in]?

MG: She got custody of me.

KD: My goodness.

MG: So Linnea Hunt was my custodian, and he paid her child support, and she was no longer teaching at Roosevelt [High School]. She had been teaching at Roosevelt—

[*break in audio*]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia on August 27, 2008, for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. And we’re on tape 2, and Margaret was telling me about her moving in with Linnea Hunt.

MG: Well Linnea Hunt was my English teacher in tenth grade, and Veralynn Marshall, who was the history teacher at Roosevelt, lived across the street from her. And I went to live with her. And I guess it was just before summer. Linnea had a swimming pool, and we lived in Monterrey Park, and Veralynn lived across the street. And it was interesting, because during that summer, Evie, the girl that was my friend, that was my dyke friend, went to live with Veralynn because . . . [When] she came home—she was in the UCLA Upward Bound program—and when she came home from UCLA her mother had been put in prison and she had nowhere to go. So Veralynn took her in. And so Evie ended up living across the street from me with Linnea. And then they got to talking about it, and we decided to combine our households. So I ended up living with Evie as my roommate, who was the very person my father didn’t want me to associate with.

KD: Mm-hmm. Did—I mean you obviously must have had a relationship or some kind of trust with her to have the foresight or the sense that you’re going to call her when you leave the house on Sunday.

MG: I had her personal phone number. She was very involved with her students. When she became my teacher, I think she was only twenty-one. So she was young.

KD: She just graduated.

MG: She was a young teacher. We were her first job and I—I can see now she was trying to help me. I got a lot from Linnea.

KD: I mean, you hadn’t talked much about school. You know, before, it sounded like school was not . . . So you obviously have some . . . You know, you blossomed enough to be part of the gymnastics team and—

MG: I loved history. And I could sit up front, I always sat up front. I sat up front in the classroom because I wanted to hear what the teacher said. To a degree I was probably and possibly more involved than other students, but I was not good at doing homework. “Don’t ask me to do homework because once I leave here, I’m going to go do my gymnastics. I’m going to go play volleyball. I’m going to do anything else, but I’m not going to do homework.” So you could test me until the cows come home and I will score very high, but I just [don’t like homework and] I just don’t do homework. And that was the way I was, I mean, that was the way. . . you know, I was very difficult—

KD: You were smart, obviously.

MG: I was smart enough. I could pass all of the tests, you know. They would test me in history especially, you know. You give me all those facts and figures about what’s going on in China and India and you know, the most populous country on the face of the Earth or the largest island land mass which is Australia, or any of

those things and I loved it. And I loved it—I still love it. And I would retain that, and so testing was never a problem for me. But doing homework—I just really didn't care, at all. And that was one of the things I had to kind of get over, especially in the last few semesters of high school, because I had to get into a college, right?

But they used to divide us up into rapid, medium, slow, English as a second language, and LI, which was low intelligence, or MR, which was mentally retarded. So they had all these classifications. And I remember one time I was waiting outside the history, outside the classroom for my history class, and there was this obnoxious student there. Her name was Irma Pardave, and Irma was making fun of all the immigrants, all of the non-English-speaking students, and she was like, "And what is your code? And what is your code?" And the class was just beginning, so we had to walk into class. And the teacher sat at the front of the room and called your name, and you were supposed to read off the code, so they could mark it on your thing, so that you knew where you were. So everybody got to know what you were. It was really kind of gross.

**KD:** Oh, terrible!

**MG:** So she would be, like, making fun of all the immigrant students that were coming in. And she was like, "Oh, you don't speak English," and you know. And she came up to me and she said, "Well, what are you?" I said, "Oh, I'm an S," which is "slow." And so we get up into the classroom, and the teacher's calling out everybody's name, and he gets to my name and he says what I am, you know, I'm an R. I was a "rapid." And she was like, "Oh, yeah." Sort of like putting her in her place. And the immigrant students in that classroom caught on, and they caught on to what I was doing with her, and they befriended me, you know. I was their friend, I never made fun of them.

And, you know, my cousins who were immigrants and ended up living in Los Angeles and going to Hollenbeck, they would tell you to this day, I never made fun of them. I never called them names, didn't need to say "wetback," or do any of that. Because during that session when my father sat down and talked to me about, "She's black and you have to give her the same kind of respect that you give . . ." It was during that same talk that my father said, "And I never want to hear you call anybody a beaner or wetback or taco vendor or whatever. Just because when you're calling somebody that, you're calling me that, and I'm your father. And you're the same blood that I am. We are no different." So he went through this whole little speech about doing that, and I remember that very distinctly, because it was that same little lecture. Kids do listen.

I mean, my father was an alcoholic, my father was abusive, my father was oppressive, my father did things that would embarrass me today. But when it came down to acknowledging human rights or humanity in another person, he did. He acknowledged that all the way down to before he died, you know. When the killings were going on Rwanda, I remember coming home and my father—he's sitting in front of the TV, weeping for the children of Rwanda because it came on the TV. Everything affected him so, so much. And I realized, I get that from him. Whereas my mother is not very connected in any of that. She's just, "Oh, it's another, it's another war, it's another killing, it's another so and so." My father could never just say, "It's just another." He was always so affected by those things, especially when it came to children.

**KD:** Right. Do you think . . . Your parents get a divorce, you said you were about ten?

**MG:** I was eleven.

**KD:** Eleven? The relationship with your father, does it change at a certain point? Or is that later?

**MG:** I was angry with my father for a very, very long time. I knew that he loved me dearly, he really did love me, love me, love me. But I resented him. I blamed him. I did not blame my mother for divorcing him at all. I thought, you know, he's abusive to you, he drinks too much, he comes home late, he yells at you, he bosses you around, and I don't think anybody should have to put up with that shit. And I believed it, and I believe that because that's what my grandmother told me. So I completely supported her divorcing my father. But I blamed him for the fact that he didn't want to clean up his act. I did not blame my mother. I don't blame her for wanting to leave.

But when our family broke up and she [started going out], you know, decided that she wanted to date and go out and see other men and do all that stuff, it isn't so much that she [dated]. I was happy for her

to go out, go dancing, go have a nice time, do that kind of thing. What I didn't like was when she brought it home. And I didn't like the company that she was keeping at all. And it was at this point—and see this is the kind of thing that becomes difficult for me to talk about. I went to live with Linnea and Marshall.

It was interesting. During the civil rights march by Martin Luther King, going downtown Los Angeles, it was interesting because on that very same day was the day that I decided to take the bus and go downtown and go to the movies by myself for the first time in life. And while I was downtown, some deviant male child-molesting man decided that he was going to either pinch my booty or rub up against me and start bothering me when I was downtown. And what I did was join the march, was going down, what street is that? Third Street [and Broadway]?

KD: Mm-hmm.

MG: And Broadway. Right around where the Crest used to be. And what I did was, I wove into the march to get rid of the guy. And it was Martin Luther King's march, and there were all these black people marching in the street. And I was just sort of weaving in and out to get rid of this guy that was mashing, you know, bugging me. And I got rid of him, and I went off and I went to the movies, and then I came home. And that was my day that day. I guess it was in August. It was in August, yeah. I don't know, but he had marched down there.

And I remember that because later, Verallynn Marshall had housed some of the students from Mississippi. She was a history teacher and she was black. Linnea was white. And we were Mexican. So one of the things that happened in Monterrey Park is, on one particular occasion we found voodoo dolls on our doorstep. People leaving nasty little messages and stuff like that. And that was some time later, though. But Verallynn Marshall and Linnea—they were important to me because they, you know, like, at that time I felt like I was growing up and Linnea was an atheist and I was going to be an atheist too. You know, and I was just—I had disconnected from that sort of, like, I had been very religious, you know, and now I questioned everything.

KD: Everything, yeah.

MG: Everything and everybody at that point.

KD: I want to ask you a little more about high school because you know, you're—

MG: Skipping.

KD: Well, no, it's okay if you can skip, but there's these other things that are happening in Los Angeles. And I'm wondering if you were a part of some of those.

MG: The Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was obviously going on. I was in junior high when that started and at the time I remember being very pro-American. In junior high my best friend Maria Elena Braddock [Johnni] had an Aunt Sara that was communist, and we spent our afternoons debating the Vietnam War at her house over strawberry soda and crackers. Very pro-American, anti-communist, you know. Sort of like, you know, the monks were setting themselves on fire. I remember reading about the war and that kind of thing. And by the time I got to high school I was very anti-war, very [much of protesting] the war. And I think Verallynn and Linnea were as well. And I would—I had Mr. Yonan in history class, and I would debate the Vietnam War single-handedly against the entire classroom.

And it was right after that period that I think the walkouts were there. I was there during the [East Los Angeles] walkouts. And I spoke [before the board of education], when we went . . . They had a big meeting with the board of education over here in Lincoln Heights. And I got up and I spoke, you know, about how, you know, 50 percent of the students are dropping out and the literacy programs failed my sister who can't read, and I appreciate the gym building because I'm in gymnastics but, you know, we really need to be able to have students that graduate and have reading ability. So many of the students back then were being sort of corralled into, you know, manual arts and home economics, and you could be somebody's maid and that kind of thing. They didn't do that to me because I was in the rapid class. Most of the kids in the rapid class were Japanese. And there was a big rift between the Chicanos and the Japanese.

KD: Really?

MG: Yeah. There was a Japanese school nearby. There was a Buddhist temple down the street. And I lived with my grandmother—I lived over on Pennsylvania between Fickett and Martin. At the end of the block there was a big Buddhist temple and there were a number of Japanese that lived in the area.

KD: On the campus, at school, how did that rift between students play itself out?

MG: Well you know, there was some animosity that came from it, but I remember Mr. Fellardo, who was teaching algebra, he made an issue of it by . . . And one of the things he did is he failed all the Japanese students and gave all the *cholos* A's. Just flat out did it. And there was a big problem. He quit the school, and that was his last act. It was sort of in defiance, but I think that was, kind of, I thought that was kind of cruel. I didn't take his class, so it didn't happen to me. But I heard about it later, you know. I heard that that was one of the things that had happened on the campus.

There were—I remember the principal getting drunk and speaking at graduation commencement and getting up and saying all sorts of horrid things. I think the year after I left somebody burned the library down, and not just the library, the records buildings. So there were a lot of records that were lost. People's graduation records and their grades and all that sort of thing. But I really, you know, my grades weren't that bad and I—I did get accepted to Cal State Northridge. But my understanding was that I could have been accepted in any number of different colleges and universities. I had gotten an excellent letter of recommendation from Mr. Yoman to go to, oh God, what's the name of the schools out there? I can't even remember. Out in West Covina, the—

KD: Oh, the Claremont Colleges?

MG: Yes, Claremont. [Scripps.] I had gotten one of the best letters, and he is the head of the department and he said he had never had a student like me. Mostly it was because of my debating skills. I would take the class on and argue politics. I loved to argue.

KD: So you weren't known for your artistic abilities or you weren't developing that at that time, in high school?

MG: I had three art teachers in high school. I had Mrs. Neutra, who was the daughter-in-law to the very famous architect Neutra, and I had Mrs. Ferrante, and I had Mr. Henry May, who is probably dead now and who was also Frank Romero's teacher. I also had Mr. Mace, who was the ceramics teacher. And Roberto Gil de Montes and I used to hang out with him at lunch time. Those were the four teachers I remember. And I learned silk screening and embossing, and Mrs. Ferrante gave me a little bit of drawing skills.

But it was during this period of time that I was living with Linnea in Monterrey Park, and I lived across the street from East LA College. And during high school there was Roberto Chavez, who was teaching at ELAC, and he invited me to come in and audit his classes on Tuesday nights. So on Tuesday nights I'd walk across the street and go over to ELAC and sit there and take his life drawing class. This is in my senior year of high school. So I took, you know, I took drawing at ELAC there. But I wasn't graded for it. I just dropped in and audited the class.

KD: Now, if he made you the offer to come on over, how did you meet someone at a community college?

MG: He was at Roosevelt where he did this, sort of, movable wall or movable mural that he did on the stage of the auditorium. And we would walk in and out and watch him do this mural.

KD: You had mentioned that you were a witness at one of the meetings that resulted from the walkouts. Did you have a leadership role on campus?

MG: No.

KD: Or where you—

MG: No, I didn't. I was very independent about that. But—

KD: But did the students pursue you because they knew that you could speak and because your oratorical skills?

MG: You know, I didn't speak about the walkouts as much. There was a guy named Roberto Chavez, or not Chavez . . . Sanchez, I believe. And he was dating a woman, a young woman named Candy—what's her . . . Something, [Tanamachi] Mots. I don't remember her last name right now. She was a big girl. She was not a dainty little flower of a Japanese girl. She was this rather robust, large, Japanese woman. I say woman—young woman. And he was this very svelte, slight, handsome, good-looking Chicano, who was



like revolutionary in passing out fliers and talking about—and very pro-walkout. I remember him stopping me and talking to me about it. I understand that a number of years later he committed suicide. I could have that wrong but I—I remember that that had happened. And, you know, he was the kind of good-looking guy that could've had any number of young Chicano women, and there he was with this rather robust Japanese woman who was the sweetest person. And he seemed to be the kind of young man that was looking for issues and looking to look beyond the surface of any kind of issue. I mean, I didn't know him very well, but I kind of wish I had, because he was very, very interesting from the standpoint of challenging the establishment and taking on issues at the time.

**KD:** So if I am getting this correct, you graduate in 1969?

**MG:** I graduated in 1969.

**KD:** So you're there for the walkouts. Did you walk out? Do you remember—

**MG:** I was there at the gate. I didn't walk out but I did go to the board of education to speak out in favor of the walkouts and to speak out in agreement with what they were protesting. So I went to support them. I didn't walk out, but I did agree with them, and I did state that. And I know I was—I don't know if I was on TV or not but I did—I remember getting up and talking about how, you know, my sister can't read. You know.

**KD:** Is that what motivated you? Because you said—you had—you weren't in the leadership. Were you part of any of the local, you know, groups, or . . .

**MG:** I think after that I joined MEChA, and I joined afterwards. But . . . And that carried over into, you know, like when I got accepted into Cal State Northridge. At Cal State Northridge is really when I became much more politicized. And I got involved with the farm workers strike, and I was protesting, and I met Carlos Arce, who was an instructor there. I don't think he was a professor. And I met all the other people in the Chicano studies department. And that is when I became much more involved in that issue. I was never really a leader in any of the movements in the high school. I had a tendency to be too disagreeable to become a leader. I was much more interested in, sort of, challenging other students. I don't, you know . . .

When I got to Cal State Northridge there was a meeting. We had an orientation, and Richard Calderon, who was the city council person, was there to give us our orientation because he was part of what was going on there. And I remember going to the orientation and there was all these Chicanos in a room. And they had taken all the African Americans to another room where they would—we were having separate orientations, right? And so there I was at the orientation, and I raised my hand and I said, "Why are we living separately from the African American students?" He said, "We're not living separately, they live across the hall." Because all the Chicanos had been put together in their own dorm rooms and all the blacks had been put together in their dorm rooms. And I said, "This doesn't seem right." It seems like we should really be, you know, mixing. And I had met a young woman named Sheila Kennedy who was black, and she and I decided that we wanted to mix it up and we were going to be roommates. And I had already been assigned my roommate, and so he says, "No, no. They live across the hall." And I raised my hand and said, "Well, I want a black roommate." I mean, here you are, you've left high school, you're going off with all the same people you went to high school with, you're in college now and it's the same old shit again and we haven't met anybody new.

Now, I know that the African American students basically took over the administration building at Cal State Northridge and had a sit-in. And there was one student there who was missing an eye because they had gotten into an altercation with the authorities there—that he had lost an eye in what had gone on there. Because there was one Chicano, one, who took part in that taking over the administration, they also agreed that there needed to be Chicano students there. So, excuse me. "Hey! Don't you think we ought to be working together on these issues? Don't you think that we have something in common? And that if we support one another we can get a hell of a lot more done than if we go off into these individual things." "No, no, they live across the hall, you know, get over it. All right, you can have your black roommate." So they put me off.

There was a committee formed, it was called the Committee of Social Change, or something like that. But the name of the committee was really the "kick ass" committee. Because they were going to kick your

ass if you didn't do what they wanted you to do. I remember that the—I think Frank Lechuga was involved in that committee. And I was the one that took on the chore of disagreeing with everybody and refusing to go along with the program. And I was fraternizing and socializing with all the blacks, which is just not—not what they wanted. But, you know, going to college at that time, I mean, it was interesting. But I didn't change. I still didn't want to do homework. I still didn't want to, you know, do anything. I just . . . I was okay with learning, I just didn't want to learn in that way. And I didn't want to be there anymore. And part of it was because, you know, I went to take art classes and they told me that the only way that they would allow me to take these art classes is if I was an art major. So I went to the Chicano studies department and said, "I need to change my major so that I can take art classes." And they said, "Oh no, you can't do that. If you do that we'll cut your funding." I said, "Well, what am I going to school here for? I can't take art classes and I want to be an artist." "No, you have to take Chicano studies classes because that's the way we get our funding and if you're getting money from us then it's because you're a Chicano studies major."

**KD:** Who had helped you do the application for college?

**MG:** They had. I remember her name was Evangelina, but I don't remember her last name, and her boyfriend. They went out on recruitment days to Roosevelt, and they—we met in the library at Roosevelt and we filled out all those applications. They helped me get in.

**KD:** Because you weren't going to—I'm imagining you didn't get that kind of encouragement or support from him?

**MG:** Well I was living with Linnea. And Linnea was an educated person who came from a background that said education is very important. And Veralynn was saying the same thing. Evie got into a university in New Mexico and I got into Cal State Northridge. We were all expected to go on to college. They expected that from us.

**KD:** So it was from *that* household you got it from?

**MG:** From living with Linnea and living with Veralynn. It was expected of us. You need to get an education. You expect to work in a factory or something? You know, and I was somewhat rebellious with that too but I felt that it was the best thing to do at the time.

**KD:** So you get into Cal State Northridge and you said you were becoming more politicized, but the questions you were asking didn't match their notion of Chicano nationalism.

**MG:** Not at all. My English was very good. They didn't expect me to speak the way I spoke. But I think what threw them off is that, even within that crowd, my Spanish was also very good.

**KD:** Right. You had—you didn't—I'm assuming that your family spoke—that your mother, grandma, they're speaking Spanish. That's where you pick that up?

**MG:** My mother's first language was Spanish. My grandmother spoke to me in English. She corrected my English and she corrected my Spanish and I grew up with both languages exactly at the same time. I did not go to a class where all I got to do was speak Spanish or. . . As a matter of fact, back then, you know, if you spoke Spanish they, they punished you. I recall a young kid named Frené, her name is Frené, and she came to our class, she was from Mexico. They asked if anybody in the classroom spoke Spanish, and I raised my hand, and she says, "Okay, you get to walk her around and be her friend so that you can introduce her to, you know, how to get along on campus kind of thing." And I remember sitting down and making a little book for her. You know, *libro*, book, and I did this very primary kind of thing. And it was my first attempt to try to put together my English and my Spanish. I mean I spoke Spanglish to begin with. You know, I would say, "Where's my sock-e-tines?" You know, my socks and my *calzettes* were somehow garbled.

**KD:** Right. That was a great one.

**MG:** Yeah, you know. So I did get a lot of that confusion. But there were people, my family, would help me sort it out. Even my uncles, you know, they helped with that.

**KD:** So this bilingual family upbringing . . . You get to Cal State Northridge, and it's not what's anticipated, and you're saying things about building coalitions. I'm not sure if you used that language, but you had noticed that when African Americans worked together with Chicanos—that there's a benefit.

- MG: Well, I even got to the point where I asked African American students that were going—that were there at Cal State Northridge, were being housed at Monterey Hall. I asked them, I said, “We picket at Safeway, we could picket against the farm workers, why don’t you join us?” And I got three different students to come out and join the picket line to represent the African American students on the picket line for Safeway.
- KD: You showed me a picture of the picket line at Safeway market.
- MG: Yeah, it says 1970, but I know it was 1969 because I was already gone. Because in 1969 during the whole summer I was there at Cal State Northridge and I was there through the winter semester. But by spring of 1970 I had already left. And I had gone off to—I got a job at the Bank of California. I left because I wasn’t allowed to take the classes I wanted to. You know, it’s like, if you’re going to make me stay here and take classes I’m not interested in or something I don’t want to participate in, and especially if it requires all of this homework and all this other stuff, I mean, that’s not who I am. I mean, I love the information, I love knowledge. I did then, I do now. And, you know, the poetry of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the history of Mexico and how it—you know, all that stuff. I loved it and I enjoyed it and I was interested, but I didn’t want to do homework about it. What I wanted to do was make art.
- KD: So help me figure that out, because so far you haven’t really talked about your artistic or aesthetic development.
- MG: Well, you know, what was available to me back then, you know. When I went to high school, I knew Harry Gamboa. He went to our school. I knew John Ortiz, who hung out with Harry, and they were like buddy buddies back then. And John Ortiz was helping them, you know, put grants together and everything. According to John—this is according to John, because . . . This is not according to Gronk or even according to Margaret, but I don’t doubt it, because John was pretty bright. [He was nominated for an Emmy on the moratorium.] He got Harry and Gronk, and he got them together in that whole thing about writing grants and getting money to fund this whole perspective that John was part of it—John Ortiz. And John Ortiz was the guy I was dating when I went to Cal State Northridge.
- KD: Oh, okay.
- MG: And, you know, our relationship was kind of fracas. And Carlos Arce used to hold these meetings at his house, and I think it was Canoga Park. And one night I remember they had Arturo Flores, who was the editor for *Con Safos*. And Arturo Flores came out, and he was arguing the Chicano issues, and he says, “The problem with the Chicana woman is that she has been Anglicized. She belongs in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant.” And I was drunk on my ass. I was sitting in the classroom, in the living room of this instructor Carlos Arce, and I raised my hand. “What is it?” And I said, “Man, why don’t you buy yourself a cow, that way you can fuck it and it’ll follow you with blind obedience.” And the teacher says, “Get her out of here! Get her out of here right now!” And [Arturo said], “No, bring her back, she’s the only one that knows how to argue!” And I was drunk. And so finally they got me out of the class. And John Ortiz comes out and he’s talking to me, and he says, “Oh man, I’m really stoned.” He’d been dropping acid or something and he was, like, “You know, my life is shit and this feels bad,” and this and that. I said, “You know, man, get your shit together. I don’t know why you’re crying on my shoulders. You know, you fuck everything that doesn’t get out of your way fast enough, and now you’re coming to me to cry on my shoulders because you think I want to be your girlfriend or something like that. You know, get your shit together. It stinks.” And that was the end, we broke up.
- KD: Your grandmother definitely prepared you for that.
- MG: She did! She did, she prepared me for that. And Arturo Flores, I didn’t meet him until years later, but he used to be the editor of *Con Safos* and he would tell you, you know, I told him to go fuck a cow.
- KD: [laughter] Well, I’m glad you did. [laughter] So, you were part of some of these early—I don’t want to call them debates, but you know, the salon before there was the salon. The Chicano—
- MG: Well we didn’t call it that—
- KD: No, of course not.
- MG: Because so many of us—

- KD:** But these moments where people would sit down, and drinking is going on, and it's a festive scene, but talking about what are we to do and what is the issue and how is it to be formed and who is going to—
- MG:** I mean, in high school, we had to wear dresses up until 1968 or 1969, you had to wear a dress or skirt. You were not allowed to wear pants on campus. And I remember making a big issue out of it, you know, because they just didn't wanted us to wear uniforms, you know.
- KD:** Right.
- MG:** They were, like, you had to wear a skirt, you had to wear a dress. Girls were not allowed to wear pants on campus. And I was like, "Well a lady is a lady no matter what she wears or what she doesn't wear." Why does she have to wear a skirt? We were the class that changed that. We were able to get that changed, we can wear pants! This is back in the '60s. You know, if people think that, you know, this thing is mind boggling, you know, and you end up in college and everybody is drinking and fornicating and dropping drugs and smoking dope and, you know, the *Harrad Experiment* [by Robert Rimmer] was out and about, and we were all reading that and . . . I mean, you know, Carl Jung was supposed to be revolutionary, but this whole thing with birth control and having control over your own body and being able to selectively choose who you wanted to have sex with it, and it wasn't because you were going to get married. I mean, all of this stuff was happening right then. And I am a product of that. Wholly, totally, and completely. And was I promiscuous? Definitely, I was. I had a lot of lovers and I had a lot of friends and I enjoyed that and I enjoyed that time.
- KD:** It also sounds like you were a shaper, not just a product of. If you're talking about women aren't going to stand—women in the Chicano movement aren't going to stand around to be the servant of these male leaders—and that's a shaper. That's not a—
- MG:** Well, I wasn't a—
- KD:** Just a product.
- MG:** It is, but there was no real organization for that. It was just people individually speaking up and speaking out. And, you know, refusing to lay down and say, "Here," you know, "drive your tractor over me." But the thing about going to Cal State Northridge, more so than the walkouts, was this—this epiphany that I am a Chicana. I am not a Mexican, I am not an American. Or I am an American, but as a Chicana. It makes sense to me, it completed the sense of who I was to the point where, you know, you know, my cousins are calling me "*pocha*" because I wasn't born in Mexico and they were all making fun of me. And I'm not allowed to sling the mud back, even though they're calling me names and saying stuff about me and to my family I'm too dark. And I'm, you know, *la morenita linda*, if anything. or the Santa Fe Indian. Can't talk back, but at this point I solidified the sense of being, you know, I am a Chicana. And I was very strong in that and I was very solid in that. And that came to some degree before my understanding of myself as an artist.
- KD:** Oh.
- MG:** Okay, so for a lot of people, the thing about being a Chicano and being an artist or being, you know, kind of came first. I'm an accomplished artist and now I'm a Chicano so I'm going to adopt that and I'm going to be a Chicano artist. And the sense of being a Chicano was important enough to me to understand that, you know, "Fuck you and your iconography." I can be whoever the hell I am. I am this. I was born as a woman, and I come from Mexican parents, but nobody's going to tell me that I'm not a Chicano artist. If I'm an artist, I know I'm a Chicano, you know. If you're looking for some barcode you better go somewhere else, because whatever it is I do, I breathe, I sense, I feel—the way I perceive the world is as a Chicano. I don't have to have any particular iconography, I don't have to paint the Virgen of Guadalupe and the farm workers and fists up in the air. I don't have to do any of that. I just have to be who I am and be an artist. And anybody else wants to disagree with it, that's their problem, because I know who I am.
- KD:** That's a good place to stop for today. Thank you.

## SEPTEMBER 10, 2008

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia. Today is September 10, 2008, and this is our second session for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. Margaret, I think last time when we ended, we were talking about your high school experience, and finishing up high school.

**MG:** Yeah. In high school, it was, you know, I was there during the walkouts. I went to Lincoln High and spoke to the board of education during the walkouts. I was living with a high school teacher, Verallynn Marshall, and a former high school teacher of mine, Linnea Hunt, who was at that point a social worker, and Arlene Ruiz, who was my roommate. I used to call her Evie.

And we had a visiting artist come to Roosevelt, and [he] did, like, this big performance piece. His name was Roberto Chavez, and he taught at East LA College. And I was living across the street from East LA College, so he invited me to audit his class. And I would cross the street on Tuesday nights and go over there and do life drawing. And so that was really nice. It became a nice little discipline. It was a regular thing, like on Tuesday nights, and it was something that I enjoyed doing. Other people in the class were older than me, I was the youngest in that class.

**KD:** Right.

**MG:** So when you're the youngest in a situation, I think that sometimes you try harder and you push harder, because you have this feeling that you need to keep up with everybody else. And most of the people taking that class were just taking it for like an art experience. It wasn't like they wanted to be artists. But I was very, you know, wanted to learn how to draw. It wasn't that I wanted to be an artist, but I wanted to learn how to draw. I wanted to have that under my belt.

**KD:** I'm curious about, then, how did you decide, and when you decided to be an artist.

**MG:** You know, I came upon it kind of casually, because after high school—I graduated high school, I went to Cal State Northridge. And the focus out there was Chicanismo, you know. I didn't call myself a Chicana until after I went to Cal State Northridge and I became a little more—I became more involved in what was going on.

There was a lot of controversy going on. Before I had gotten there, the African American students, and one Chicano student, had taken over the administration building and had a sit-in. I think one of the African American students actually lost an eye during the scuffle at that administration building. And what was demanded of the administration building, of the administration of CSUN, was that they institute a program for African American students, and because there was a Chicano there, they also asked for a hundred fifty Chicanos. So it was a hundred fifty African Americans and a hundred fifty Chicanos who were brought to CSUN under a program, it was called the EOP program. And even though I had applied at Claremont, and Mr. Yonan, who's the chair of the history department at Roosevelt, had given me—he told me, he said—the most glowing letter of recommendation to go to Claremont, and I thought I wanted to go there, it wasn't quite as political over there. But it turned out that I went to CSUN.

I was not—when I went there, I have to say that personally, I wasn't a very focused person. I attempted to change my major to the arts, but they informed me that if I did that, they would cut my funding, and I wouldn't have money to go to school. So basically I was told I couldn't do it. And the art department said unless I was an art major, I wasn't allowed to take art classes. So I said, what am I doing here? I don't want to be—I really didn't want to become a teacher at that point. I didn't have a sense of that. The only thing I knew was that I wanted to do art. And what I was doing, as much as I loved it, wasn't anything to do with what I wanted to do.

**KD:** Was it a Chicano studies department, or . . .

**MG:** Yes, there was Chicano studies department. I went there. Carlos Arce was there, Rudy Acuña was there, Everto ["Veto"] Ruiz was there. Everto Ruiz, I think, is just leaving now, he's retiring. Rudy has retired. And I still know them all. In fact, there's that photograph that I showed you, it was a photograph of me picketing with Veto—because we picketed for the farm workers, we were in front of Safeway, I went to

Delano—who was wonderful. I mean, all that stuff is, you know, you're in the middle of a time of change. The idea of identifying as a Chicana was important to me, and I identified with it.

I wasn't part of the Chicano art movement. I was a Chicana, and was aware of it, but there was not really an art movement at CSUN. Harry Gamboa came through there, he was there, and he had—his best friend at the time was John Ortiz, who I was dating, you could say. So we were sort of dating at the time. According to John, and this is like the *chisme*, right—you know, Harry and John were really tight, and he kind of directed him into writing grants. And he knew Gronk, and it was that whole thing. But apparently, you know, it was a free love kind of atmosphere, people were smoking dope, dropping acid, and, according to John, if you excuse the language, he would fuck anything that didn't move out of the way quick enough. If it had a skirt, he was after it. And that was John. Well, Harry [was basically doing the same thing]. And at some point after I left, because I wasn't involved, I had nothing to do with any of that at that point . . . So [a] split happened between Harry and him. I know I'm a little off the track here, but because of that, John and Harry don't speak anymore. But it was a big riff back then, and John wasn't a visual artist. [John was nominated for an Emmy, for his work on a documentary about the Moratorium.] I know he wrote music, and they were all friends back then, and everybody was a part of it.

**KD:** Were you influenced by their style? Or did you admire their style?

**MG:** No, I didn't know anything about their style. I was totally in the dark about that. I think that I—I think that if I'd had the opportunity to be involved with them, I probably would have taken it. But I didn't know Patssi [Valdez], I didn't know Gronk, I didn't know any of these people. I didn't know what Harry was up to. I liked Harry. I knew Harry from high school, because we actually went to high school together. But I can't say that I really knew what he was up to, or what Diane Gamboa was up to, because I didn't know her at that time either.

**KD:** So you decide to become an artist during this—

**MG:** No, I didn't decide to do any of it. I decided that . . . You know, I was listening to Carlos Arce. I was influenced by him, which was a mistake. But it was sort of like, you know, you're either part of the movement, or you're not part of the movement, or you're part of the—you know, sort of like you can embrace the—you know, what are your choices? You can have a military revolution and it will fail. You can become a part of the establishment, and then you're doing the status quo. You can go against it, but you'll—you know. And the best thing to do is drop out and go against the establishment. That was what was going on back then. I said, I'm dropping out. Well, back then, I was totally unfocused. If I had been able to get into the arts, I think that I could have maintained a focus. But because I was being told that I needed to do Chicano studies, and I had to be a teacher, and I didn't feel it. It wasn't—you know, I'm the kind of person that's really driven by a passion.

**KD:** Well, I would hope teachers are driven to be teachers, and not just there, right?

**MG:** Right, and I didn't have that. It just had no sense of my wanting to go into a classroom and do a nine to five, and I wanted—I think I just wanted to find myself. I just wanted to live my life, and I . . . You know, the most commonsense thing to do is stick it out, do your four years, and be able to come out making a decent living. But that didn't happen. That wasn't, you know. . . I think if I had been able to be a cowgirl, I probably would have done it. Anything, just—you know—

**KD:** So you said it was a mistake to follow him.

**MG:** Well, I think it was a mistake to listen to him. I think that—I don't think that he was giving me advice that was beneficial to me, or to anybody else there. I think that it was all about him or the movement or being anti-establishment or. . . I don't think he was really concerned with the welfare of what . . . You know, like if you're really thinking about the student, you help them put a game plan together. You help them establish goals for themselves so that they can figure out their life. So I was just sort of drifting out there aimlessly. I left CSUN, and my first job was working for the Bank of California, and I became a file clerk. Woo, woo, file clerk. I mean, that's a lot of fun. That's not fun! You know, I should have stayed where there was a lot of tension going on, because that's the kind of person I am.

**KD:** So how did you get yourself—how long did that—

**MG:** I got that job, and I found a place to live in—I found several places, but I ended up in a boarding home, boarding house. And I actually decided to walk from downtown, on Sixth Street and Flower, over to where I was living, over on, what was it, Eighty and Berendo, over . . . I would walk home. It was a long walk. And through that walk, I wanted to sort of check the shops out. And there was—I ran into a framer. There was a frame shop there run by John Fox, had a frame shop, you know. I passed McArthur Park, there was Otis-Parsons, and there was this one artist-illustrator whose name was Hugh Baker. And I walked into the frame shop. John liked me, walked me over to Hugh Baker’s studio, and Hugh Baker’s studio was in this courtyard where the original Chouinard art school used to be, over on . . . I want to say Rampart, but it’s not Rampart. Carondelet. And there’s this lovely little village of art studios that used to exist there. And I also met a few other people. There were a number of different artists that were there. I used to pass McManus and Morgan.

So I just kind of saw what was going on in the neighborhood, and I wanted to walk home to see what was there. That’s the kind of nutsy person I was. Just explore. And Hugh Baker said, “I’ll give you drawing lessons if you model for us, and on top of that, you can take whatever favorite drawing you like of the bunch.” So I would . . . He gave me, like, hand-eye, these contour drawing lessons—gave me the basics—and said, “This is no trickery. This is the real thing. This is the lesson. Just do this lesson, and do it, and you could stay in a room for five years and do the same lesson, and you will come out and you will know how to draw.” He used to do illustrations for NBC. They would send him into the courtroom. He says, “You can go in, and you learn this hand-eye coordination, and you could nail somebody in a short amount of time, and it will sharpen your drawing lessons. You carry a sketchpad and a pencil or a pen, and you draw. And that’s all you have to do. And this is the lesson and that’s it.” There were no composition lessons, no this, no that. It was straight up just draw, carry a pad with you. And I did that. And I thought, “Okay, fine.” And I didn’t have the idea that I was going to be an artist. I was just having the idea that I was going to learn how to draw. It was about the skill. It wasn’t about the other part of it. The other part of it is something that I think should come later.

**KD:** Can you tell me more about Fox and Hugh Baker?

**MG:** Fox had a frame shop over on the corner of Rampart and . . . was it Eighth, or Seventh Street? Eighth Street? Let’s see.

**KD:** But he was actually an artist?

**MG:** Yeah, they were all artists. And they had their little studios down there, and . . . I think Hugh Baker still lives up here in Mount Washington. And I did that for a period of time, and I began modeling in exchange for drawing lessons. And I did nude modeling, life modeling. And then I met Vern Wilson, who was teaching at CalArts, and he asked me to be his model. [Vern Wilson taught at the Art Center College of Design—ed.] And so I started modeling for him, and I met another guy named Don Ward. Don Ward had a group that met every Tuesday, and then every Wednesday, and he invited me to become a part of that group. They were all students at the Art Center. They studied under a man named [Lorser] Feitelson. And it’s interesting, because Feitelson actually established a trust fund that gives out an award. Many years later, I was to get that award. I never met the man. I was never his student. I only heard talk of him. I actually went to the Art Center, and I asked to see if I could apply, and they said, “Oh, yes, definitely, we will accept you, you have a nice portfolio.” But there were no scholarships.

[*break in audio*]

**MG:** I never met the man, ever. But I painted with the group of his students, and we all just got together on Tuesday night, took turns modeling for each other. I think Linda Jacobi was part of that group. There was another artist, his name was James Moore. And James Moore did seven paintings for his master’s exhibit. Five of them were paintings of me. You know. . . so I would just get together with them and paint. They wouldn’t give me any lessons. Don Ward said, “If you’re coming here for lessons, don’t expect any. We’re

not going to give you any. But you have the time to sit around and paint.” And they would talk, they would talk about this and that, whatever.

**KD:** Were you influenced by their styles? I mean, this is the center of Los Angeles—

**MG:** I had to be influenced by their styles. I’m influenced by anybody who comes into my space, good or bad. I mean, whether they’re a good artist or they’re not a good artist, I can still be influenced. And I accept all of it. I’m like a sponge. I don’t say, you know—but I make it my own, because I have so many other influences that it all just gets thrown in the mix.

**KD:** Did you talk in the group? Did they talk about composition, or was it just local politics, whatever was on people’s minds? It was—did you talk about color?

**MG:** Don Ward was such a chauvinist, he was a real, real chauvinist, and he’d say, “Women don’t know how to compose. Look at [Mary] Cassatt.” They were opinionated about certain things. I didn’t agree or disagree. I just kind of listened to the whole thing. I did think about that. That wasn’t where—my focus was just trying to do a painting in three hours. That was it. You know, you got three hours, you can do a painting, that’s it. Sit down and paint. And that’s the way I learned to paint. He didn’t tell me anything about even how to wash your brushes, or where to put anything. It was like, “You have an opportunity.”

And his reasoning for actually having me become a part of the group wasn’t that I was a great artist. His point of view was, “Well, you know, it’s a woman, and she’s not afraid of taking off her clothes. She’s a model, so she can model for us.” And that was his reason for allowing me into the group. It wasn’t because he thought I was such a great talent. And then I met—one of the guys that joined the group, his name was John Flynn. John Flynn had left home at the age of fourteen and began to study under a master, a master who restored paintings. So he learned formulas, and he learned the Eurocentric method of, like, the palette with the umbers and everything. And he taught me that, and it was wonderful. But I didn’t meet him until, mmm, ’75, I believe. But it really helped me a lot, because I kind of understood the tone and how it was laid out. I understood about the turpentine, and washing your brushes, things like—little things that Don Ward just didn’t hand out.

**KD:** How long were you part of the group with Don Ward?

**MG:** Let’s see. I started in ’72. And I was there through ’75, ’76, but it was sort of crucial. Oh, and I forgot to mention, I got married in there. [*laughter*] I didn’t think about that part. Yeah, I did get married. I got married in ’71. I met someone at the boardinghouse where I was living, and I married him. We were going to travel, we were going to do all of this stuff. And I was working for the bank, I had saved enough money to go to Mexico, and that’s all I wanted to do. And he kind of—well, he took the money, and we went to Las Vegas. He spent all my money at the slot machines or the blackjack table, and pissed me off. And I said, “Well, you’ve spent all my money, you’re going to support me, because now I can’t do what I want to do.” And he said, “Fine.” I said, “Okay.” And I went back to school, I went back to CSUN. I thought, “Okay, I’ll go back.” But it didn’t take. I just wasn’t happy there. I didn’t stay.

**KD:** Did you try the art classes then, or did you—

**MG:** No, they wouldn’t let me into the art classes, because I wasn’t an art major.

**KD:** So it’s still the same major.

**MG:** It was still the same thing. It was still the same old same old at that point. And that was in ’71, and I only stayed for like a semester or two. I hung out with the art students, but it didn’t happen. So later that year, in ’71, was when I met Vernon Wilson and Don Ward and all of these other students, all of these other artists. And I heard of Jan Saether, who was from Finland. [Saether was Norwegian—ed.] He had a very classical approach. So, you know, like, my influences were possibly a little more formal. But my—the kind of artist that I really fell in love with was from the Impressionists on to the twentieth century. I wasn’t interested in painting like Rembrandt or Vermeer. I mean, I appreciate that work completely. I understand what makes them great paintings, and I love them. But I’m not a classical painter. Linda Vallejo will sometimes tell—she says, “You’re a very formal artist. You’re a formalist.” Really? I think of that, but like, I don’t have any of the umbers that are normal in the Eurocentric palette. I don’t have black, burnt umber, raw



umber, raw sienna, burnt sienna, yellow ochre. I don't have any of those colors in my palette. They happen, if I need them, it's so easy to mix them, I don't understand why anybody has to buy them. Mix them.

**KD:** You mix your—

**MG:** Well, with your own, you know, the little bit of purple and your yellow, and you start getting more of an ochre-ish color. You mix your opposites, and you can tone them down. You don't have to buy raw sienna. These shoes I'm wearing are kind of a sienna color. I don't have that. But I decided I wanted to touch them up. I went over to my oil paints, and I mixed it, and I'm okay. You don't need those colors. You can mix your own. If you have all of the high key colors, it's easier to get the browns. Browns are easy to get. So I don't have any need to buy the—

**KD:** Was that something you think you learned sitting around three hours twice a week?

**MG:** No, no, no. I went to Chicago at some point—this was after I was married, and, I mean, there's a lot of other stuff that happened. I had a baby, and my husband and I were fighting because he didn't want me to paint. And I said, "I just need to paint one night a week, that's all I'm asking." "No." We actually got into physical altercations over it. He just didn't want me to paint. He was jealous of the people I was with. So we ended up with a very, very ugly divorce. I actually kidnapped my daughter and went to Chicago. And I lived there three years underground, under an assumed name with other papers, and did all sorts of things.

But one of the jobs that I took in Chicago was working for a guy that did restoration work on hard objects, like ceramics and brass and things like that. [K. Matsumoto Art Repair, founded by Kankuro Matsumoto—ed.] And there was a woman who was working with him. Her name was Diane Wheat, and she did all of the finishes. You know, it's one thing to restore the piece. They did a lot of work with antique companies, antique shops. They also did work for Chicago Art Institute for some of their collections. And it was Matsumoto and Wheat, and she taught me how to achieve the patinas, like on the porcelains, and the minute changes of color, even when you have like a white porcelain cup or a white ceramic. Most of the stuff—most of the restoration work, we used to call it poodle shit. They were, like, Lladrós and Hummels and Royal Daltons and Wedgewoods, and all those little tchotchke ceramic kind of figurines, you know. Even that stuff that Jeff Koons is doing, that little crappy ceramic stuff that clutters up the borders of your house and looks cruddy. But every now and then, we would get something that was exquisite, that was like 500 B.C. China, or something Aztec, or, you know. And I learned from doing the ceramics that the sophistication of work from the so-called Third World was so much more sophisticated than those little poodle things that were coming out of Europe. You had this wonderful sculpture from Africa that was carved, and this giant bird that sits on top of a tortoise, or a woman kneeling. And the expressiveness of it, the use of functional work, and the sense of color.

And one of the things that I did before I went to Chicago is, I saw an exhibit over here at Pasadena at the Norton Simon. And it was the Blue Four, and it was [Alexei] Jawlensky, who just set me on fire. I saw that work, and I just—it haunted me. It haunted me. And when I went to Chicago, I kept looking for it, and I couldn't find it, because it didn't exist there. You got the—of course there's the Chicago Art Institute. And I was there with my boyfriend, he was going to the Chicago Art Institute, so I was there often. And I would walk through the walls and I would see the Seurats, and I would see all of the Impressionists, which I totally loved. But you couldn't find the German Expressionists there. You couldn't find the Fauves. And I kept, you know, wanting to find it.

And one of the things about doing restoration work is that I became a little more aware of what the Expressionists work was doing. I learned that Gauguin was raised in Peru, and it made sense to me. Yes, he was French. Culturally speaking, his heritage or his culture was really Latino. And that sense—hot, vivid, expressive color. Yes, you can get a piece of Bolognese work that has these intense colors, and through age, the patina has warmed, and people have touched it and held it, and there's a little bit of grease and a little bit of sweat, and the work has this sense of—it's almost like love. It's this loving that happens to the work. And, yes, it has its own life. The environment imposes that upon the piece. And I have an

appreciation for that, as pieces age. I love the way they get older. So during my absence, or my absence from Los Angeles—and I need to back up here a little bit.

KD: Yeah.

MG: Before I went to Chicago, I did a mural on the corner of Beethoven and Venice in Mar Vista, and it's the *Two Blue Whales*. I did that with Randy Gerald. And after I left my husband, Randy and I ended up in Chicago. We were together. I seem to be skipping all the relationships, because I don't think about them right now.

KD: It's up to you.

MG: [laughter] And he's still out there. He's still over there. His parents paid for his education, and he went to the Chicago Art Institute while he was there.

KD: And that was the reason why it was Chicago, not Philadelphia, not—

MG: Yes, because his parents were there, and they could help us out a little bit. And, you know, he got to go to school, and he studied at Chicago Art Institute, and I guess he got a degree. And he is—I'm not sure exactly what he's doing. I think he's doing architectural photography. And while I was there, I was doing the restoration work, and I got a job teaching mask making, because I had become very familiar with all of the materials in restoration work. I knew how to restore hard objects, and I could take mother-of-pearl and make masks, or do different kinds of mask making—taped face, bolds—and do different things. So I had a class where I actually taught a little bit of mask making with different material, because we . . .

You know, we did all of that restoration work, and there was a whole number of different kind of elements that came into it. That was made out of, you know, abalone, stone or pewter, or brass or ceramic, or any of that stuff. It would come through, and there would be a way to restore it. Now, some restorers don't try to make it look like it was never broken. And in many cases, they're not concerned with trying to make it look like it wasn't broken. They're just trying to preserve the integrity of the piece to that extent. But depending on who the client is, because if you get a client who has an antique shop, and the piece is broken, it's absolutely worthless. And what they do is they try to bring it to a certain degree where, you know, maybe the leg was broken on a statue that was made out of Parian marble, and you have to replace, like, say the toes or something like that. And you're not trying to make it look like new. You're just trying to make it look like it isn't broken.

KD: Right.

MG: So there was always that balancing act, and Wheat was the one that was in charge of all that. She was the one that would say how far to go or whatever. But I learned a lot about that from her.

KD: You were in Chicago from 1979 until about '82?

MG: I came back in January of '83. And at that point, I was—well, the police came and got me, took me away, took my daughter. I ended up here. I had a satchel of belongings and that was it, and I was kind of homeless for a while. I met—I came back and ran into Glenna Avila, who was the person that commissioned me to do the mural over on Beethoven and Venice. And I met Eloy Torrez, and they introduced me to Self Help Graphics. And I met Yreina Cervantez, and I saw the work of [Gilbert] Magu [Luján], and I met Magu, and I met Diane Gamboa, and I met all these people. It was Glenna, Glenna that offered me sort of a job. They gave me a sentencing. I went to my trial, the judge expunged everything from my record. He met my husband. My husband showed up at the sentencing, and the judge turned to me, and he said, "How did this man get custody of your daughter?" I said, "I don't know. I don't understand it either." It was a big deal. And it was a custody thing, and the judge just wanted—I think he wanted to sentence my husband instead of me. But what he did was he expunged everything from my record. But I had to do some time, like—not, what do you call it—

KD: Community work.

MG: I had to do some community work, so Glenna sent me up to do a mural out at Coldwater Canyon Elementary School. So I did a mural out there with all the little kids, and I'm trying to think of the teacher. Her name was Faith, Faith Flam. And the woman who did Catwoman. I don't remember the actress right now,

she used to do the Catwoman [Julie Neumar]. She was real tall. She came out for the kids, and we did an underwater thing. And I left that and ended up working at the Photo Center. [William Reagh Los Angeles Photography Center—ed.]

**KD:** But I need to back up a second. Glenna is with—

**MG:** Glenna Avila used to be Glenna Boltuch back then, that was before she was married. And she is now at CalArts.

**KD:** She's at CalArts. But before, she was with—

**MG:** The Photo Center.

**KD:** The Photo Center.

**MG:** And before that, she was with Citywide Murals. [Citywide Mural Project—ed.]

**KD:** That's what I thought.

**MG:** She was the director of Citywide Murals during the time. She's the one that hooked me up to do the mural. Judy Baca wasn't anywhere around. I know that SPARC has taken over that whole thing under the whatever, but back then it was Citywide Murals, it was Glenna Avila, or Glenna Boltuch. And her boyfriend at the time was Carlos Gallegos, and Carlos and I went to elementary school together. That's how I met her. I brought in my portfolio, she saw my portfolio, and she gave me a mural.

**KD:** So does that mean in Chicago, while you were working at a restoration shop, were you also producing your own paintings?

**MG:** You know, I was holding down two and three jobs just to pay the rent. Occasionally, you know, because Randy wasn't working. He went to school.

**KD:** Full-time student.

**MG:** That's right. He was a full-time student, and we had my daughter back then, and I had her in a daycare. And occasionally I'd come home, and he would lay out the watercolors and paper and stuff like that, so I could come in and, "Just sit down," he says, "you do this." But that wasn't a regular thing. I did do some painting. There is paintings over there that I've left behind in Chicago somewhere. There are paintings there. But it was really tough. Most of my artistic energy was channeled into the mask making and the restoration work. But it was a good thing to learn, because it forced me to understand how color works. And so, yes, I don't bother with those umbers. If I was doing restoration work, I probably would buy them, because they're more of a shortcut. But thank God I don't have to do it. It was a very tedious job. It can be very, very tedious.

**KD:** So you're doing the mask making with one of the cultural centers, or the Chicago cultural center?

**MG:** There was a little shop down on the Gold Coast over there in Chicago. I don't remember the name of it. But she had this sort of arts and crafts shop where people could go and get art lessons, and they hired me to do mask making there. I took any kind of job where I could get paid in cash or where, you know, I didn't have to do the income tax thing, do all that. But I did have a falsified Social Security number. I had all of that paperwork. So somebody collected—got more money on their Social Security, because it got fed into their number.

**KD:** And you were living in what part of town in Chicago? Because I know Chicago.

**MG:** At first I was living in Ravenswood.

**KD:** Oh, okay.

**MG:** Well, actually, I landed in Park Ridge, and then I started—I moved into Ravenswood, and I ended up living in the Pilsen area.

**KD:** Oh, you did end up in Pilsen.

**MG:** Yeah, I ended up in the Pilsen area.

**KD:** Because you're there before the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum really takes off and starts to do programs, because they do programming in '82, that building. But the other arts organizations were supposedly starting.

MG: There was another organization there that Reyes, Marco Reyes, is a part of. And I visited that place, and I checked it out. But I didn't see anything that was pertinent to me at the time. I mean, there wasn't anything that I could get involved in. I was busy being a mom and trying to take care of my kid. There was a Hispanic [Coalition for Jobs]. The Hispanic Resource Center, run by Mary [Gonzalez] Koenig, who is a Chicana or Latina. But—and I went there and I studied to be a word processor, they gave me a job there.

KD: Oh, you mean the Spanish Coalition for Jobs. No?

MG: They changed their name. Yes.

KD: Right. That's where I started my research. *[laughter]*

MG: I worked for them. And I—God, I worked for them, and I learned how to become a word processor.

KD: That's the class I took.

MG: You and I went through the same programming?

KD: She wasn't the director anymore by the time I came on board. She worked for the city. But I did that to get to know young women, my—

MG: She was my landlady, too, because she rented a location to me over on—was it Eighteenth Street? Right down the street from the—

KD: From the museum.

MG: From the museum. There was a big board, and it had a three-bedroom house with a storefront attached. I think it was a hundred thirty-five dollars rent with utilities.

KD: She was very generous.

MG: Yes. And we did a really nice job fixing that place up, too. We repainted the floors and everything, the walls. We put up beautiful bamboo wallpaper and changed the curtains. I mean, we made it really nice. We lived there . . . I probably could have stayed there, in a way. But I didn't like being with Randy anymore. I felt like I was doing all the work, and—

KD: He was the full-time student.

MG: He was the full-time student, and I was sort of the . . . I just didn't like where it was at. When I got brought back to [Los Angeles]—when I was extradited and brought back to Los Angeles, I didn't have a home. My grandmother died within the first week or so that I was here. Within the first two weeks, my grandmother was dead. And I was at the hospital by her side, so the gift was that I was able to be with her for her last moments. My mother got put in jail, so she wasn't around. I still wasn't talking to my father. It had been over three or four years since I had talked to him. I had been sort of estranged from my father. And it was just a very, very tough time.

And then I had to go to the sentencing, and my husband showed up. It all kind of was okay, in terms of the court and everything. But he was buzzing around me like this little fruit fly at the end of the sentencing, and it was sort of like, here's the man who has custody of my child. I can't see her. I have no rights. I don't know what's going down. So I'm trying to just keep my cool and mind my manners, because my goal is to try and see what I can do to establish a relationship with my daughter. Well, he wasn't telling me everything that he was doing, but he was driving to Florida, he said. He didn't tell me why or what for or anything like that. He says to me, "Well, if you had sex with me, then I know I could trust you with my daughter." And I'm like—I'm sitting there in the truck with this man, and I'm trying to be cool and not go off on him. And I just said, "With your luck and my luck, I'd probably end up pregnant, and we'd just go through this all over again. I don't see the point of it." But what he wasn't saying was that he was in that truck, and he was getting ready to drive to Florida, where he had taken my daughter, and I wasn't going to see her for—I didn't know how long at that point. And it wasn't until after he left that I found out that they had all moved to Florida. So they weren't even here anyway.

And so there it was. He was gone, I was here, I didn't know where my child was. And then I tried to call the number to see how she was. I would send her little packages or a letter here and there. And one day I called, and the phone was disconnected, and they had moved on. And I didn't know how to get ahold of him. I didn't know, you know.

KD: Wow.

MG: So eventually, he moved back to California and he contacted my father. And then my father was able . . . After about a year or so I went to court, and I tried to reestablish a relationship, so I could just see her, you know. Supervised visitations, whatever it took. And I would drive down to San Diego to see her, and then my ex-husband would, like, “You want to have sex with me?” And I’d say, “No,” and he says, “Well, you can’t see your daughter.” So it was like he would hold this thing over my head. And it was rather exasperating. But slowly, I was able to go back to court, and get weekend visitations, which I reestablished. And the weekend visitations, you know, I’d show up, and, you know, I’m driving from LA to San Diego, and it’s just a distance, and things were getting kind of strange. I was able to—I went to court, and I guess we ended up in like family therapy or something like that. He and I would go, and I started trying to keep track of her. And I found out that the school had reported him for child abuse.

KD: Whoa.

MG: And so, you know, Cheyenne began telling me things. He had put her head through a wall, he had bruised her pretty badly. And then I had to have a mural over here at City Hall with—God, what was the name?—the American Soviet Socialists, something or other. It was an organization that was doing sort of bridging the gap between the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia—

KD: The Hungarian Youth Exchange? That one?

MG: Yeah, it was the Soviet—yes. It was not Hungarian. It was the Soviet Union. And I was doing a mural—

KD: Yeah. Nineteen eighty-eight, *Let There Always Be Sky*, at the Los Angeles City Hall, East Mall, [painted with a crew of Soviets, Hungarians, and Americans].

MG: Yes. Yes, yes. So I was doing a mural with them, and at the end of that program one of the things that was supposed to happen was that everybody was supposed to go to Disneyland. So I had tickets to go to Disneyland. I had already asked, and my husband was kind of hot and cold, you know, “Yes, you can do it” and then “No, you can’t.” So he said that I could take her to Disneyland. Well, you know, those things are—you’re with a whole group of people, you’re waiting for the tickets. We finally get in, and we’re staying in touch, we call him to let him know we’re at Disney, he says, “Well, you have to come home now.” I go, “We just got here. She’s only gotten on one ride.” “Well, she has to . . .”

Well, she was crying, and I was in the car, and I was trying to figure out . . . You know, I had no control, I had no [control whatsoever]. It was at his mercy, so there was nothing I could do. I was going to take her back. And I’m sitting in the car with her, and I say something about, “He’s acting like a jealous lover. I don’t understand why he’s doing that.” And I looked at her, and I said, “Is he, in any way, touching you inappropriately or something?” And her face went red, and she looked down, and she just said, “Yes.” Apparently her stepmother had already left and was having an affair with the soccer coach of the kids and was living in a tent somewhere up in the hills above San Diego. And he was alone with her, and he was going into her bedroom at night to ask for little favors, apparently. I found this out, and I said, “Don’t tell me anymore. We’re going to deal with this.” And I came back to LA. I called—

[break in audio]

MG: I have the police on one line, I have the child abuse hotline on the other. I had to call social services. I did all this. They gave me seventy-two hours to return her. I had seventy-two hours to keep her. So during that time, I frantically ran around trying to raise money for a lawyer. And I called Child Protective Services, and I said, “Look, every summer he’s been saying that she’ll be able to spend the summer with me, and he hasn’t gone by it. Why don’t you just, instead of saying that he can’t have her, why can’t you just ask him if he’s willing to let me have her for the summer?” And they called him up, and they asked him, and he says, “Oh, of course,” because he was trying to show Child Protective Services that he was being generous. So during the summer, I was able to—during that whole time, I took her to a therapist, I took her to a doctor, I was able to show that what was going on was going on. And when I went into family court and had to go through the reconciliation portion of it, it all came out. And the doctor and psychiatrist had recommended

that he not even be given phone privileges. So I ended up with total, complete custody of her. He was not even granted the ability to call us up, because he refused supervised visitation. We offered that. “You can visit with her, but only under supervised visitation.” And he refused. So he wasn’t able to see her during that period. So she was eleven at this point, and—but it’s all kind of nutsy.

There’s a book by James Baldwin, “Things Not Spoken,” and it’s all about incest. [Baldwin is the author of *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* and *Just Above My Head*; incest is a theme in the latter—ed.] I read that book and I began to understand the dynamic in the family where there’s an incestuous father. And it has a lot to do with disenfranchising the mother. And because I refused to accept that role during the time that I was married to him, and in a family unit with him, there was always this undercurrent of, like, “Your mother’s crazy.” It has to do with disempowering the mother, and the mother’s absent. And I refused to be absent, and I refused to accept that role. And that was what we fought about. And I knew something was wrong. I could feel it, and I could sense it. But it wasn’t anything that I was able to articulate at that point. And that was why I ran off with her. I did what I had to do to protect my kid. I knew she was in danger. I just couldn’t articulate it, and nobody would believe me.

KD: Smart move.

MG: Well, you know, when I got to the point of taking off with her, and child-snatching my kid, I was down on my knees. I was praying, and I was saying, “Look, God, let me just keep her until she’s seven, because her personality will have formed, and at least she’ll be safe. She’ll have the ability to be able to cope with it.” Because if you mess with a kid before they’re seven, they don’t ever come out of it. And sure enough, she turned seven in December of ’82, and in ’83, they found me. So, you know, I think that I kind of got that, but I think I probably would have changed it to keep her for, you know—I think there’s all sorts of things that have happened to her head, even now, that I have a hard time with.

KD: You’re still painting during this period. Where did you find—

MG: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

KD: The energy, and—

MG: When I came back—

KD: Resources, and sense of artistic expression?

MG: That’s all I had was my painting. I think that my painting was the one thing that centered me, that gave me a sense of [purpose]. You know, they always say when you’re a young, pretty girl, “beauty fades.” There’s this sense that I developed a skill that I took the time to develop that skill, and develop something in me that I felt good about, that I said, at least I can paint. At least I can draw. I can do this.

Even during that very short two-week period when I was in Chicago and in prison, because they put me in jail over there when they extradited me, I would sit there . . . It was like a little—over there, it was kind of like a dorm. And we’d sit around the card table, and I would draw the different women in jail, and they’d give me cups of cocoa or they’d make, you know, there was a bartering system in there. I don’t smoke, so I didn’t want cigarettes. They’d say, “I’ll give you a cigarette for it.” I said, “I don’t smoke.” So they’d have to figure out something else that I wanted. “Oh, do a drawing of me so I can send it to my kid.” So there’s always that kind of bartering system in there. That was okay. I didn’t mind. I didn’t even mind being in jail there, because there was so much tension surrounding my living situation—you’re always looking over your shoulder. It was almost like a vacation. It was just, “Oh, God, I don’t have to pay rent. I don’t have to worry about the gas and utilities.” I didn’t care about my stuff. I still feel that way sometimes. I think about that, and I was like, you know, hey. [laughter] You’re going to pay my rent, feed me, and take care of my medical bills? Excuse me, am I supposed to feel bad about it? No, I don’t.

KD: So, yeah, I guess you said you came home with just a satchel and that was it. So everything you had in Chicago was gone or left?

MG: Yeah. I left it behind, and Randy still wanted to be together. But when I got here, I was so grateful. I missed the mountains, I missed the palm trees, I missed California. And when I came into Self Help Graphics and I met Eloy Torrez and Glenna and all of these artists, it was like I had come home to a home-cooked meal.

The color made sense to me, the iconography made sense to me. And I felt at home. I felt I was back when I needed to be. This is my home. I love LA. I love LA. This is where I was born. This is where my father was born. And we have a lot of history here, and I love it. I mean, I love Mexico, too. I think that I could possibly live there as well. I could feel that I could live there, it makes sense to me. But those cold winters in Chicago, I . . . You know, the people in Chicago are wonderful. I have to say that I met wonderful people. I learned a lot, I learned a lot about friendship and camaraderie. The people there are solid. But the weather is just terrible.

**KD:** So you come back. Can you tell me a little bit about the Self Help experience, when you were at Self Help Graphics, and what kind of work you did?

**MG:** Oh, Sister Karen. I met Sister Karen. I started working at the LA Photo Center, and Glenna connected me with all of Self Help, and I was in charge of doing the Day of the Dead for Self Help Graphics at the Photo Center. So I was the hostess, and the first thing in '83 that we did was just a celebration. And we sold Gronk posters that were done at Self Help Graphics for fifty cents.

**KD:** You're kidding. *[laughter]*

**MG:** No, I'm not. We sold them for fifty cents.

**KD:** Wow.

**MG:** Yeah. That's startling, isn't it?

**KD:** That's not even covering the paper.

**MG:** That doesn't even cover the paper. But you had a whole stack of these prints that Gronk had done, and they were done on newsprint. They weren't like—they were just newsprint prints that were done, that Gronk had done, and we were selling them I think for fifty cents and seventy-five cents. It was just a little celebration.

**KD:** Do you remember the reason for—you just wanted them to move? Or was it a fundraiser, or . . .

**MG:** It wasn't me. It was . . . You'd have to ask Sister Karen about that one, because I don't know why she did it that way. But the following year we decided to do a full-out celebration, and do Day of the Dead. And Monica Almeida, who was a photographer over at the *LA Times*—her and [Aurelio] José Barrera, José Galvez, and a number of other photographers had already gotten a Pulitzer for the series that they had done on Chicanismo. [The Pulitzer was awarded in 1984 to a team of *Los Angeles Times* reporters and photographers—ed.] And Monica and I were the ones that hung and did the whole Day of the Dead thing. She's one of the few Chicanos that got the Pulitzer at that time. She now works, I think, for the *New York Times*.

**KD:** So, I'm confused. The—

**MG:** And Glenna. Glenna was a big part of it too, because she hooked me up with all the artists. But Monica and I are the ones that kind of stayed up and hung the show and put that all together.

**KD:** So at the Los Angeles Photography Center, you're doing—

**MG:** I started out as a volunteer. And then I got a job as a gallery attendant, and they would only give me twenty hours a week. They gave me twenty hours a week. And I moved in with my father, who was living out in Huntington Park. And I would go from . . . Well, I had, at this time I had a boyfriend whose name was Tom Meyer. He worked for Cultural Affairs [Department of Los Angeles], and he helped me get a car. So on the weekends I would stay with him, and during the week I would stay with my dad, because the distance was pretty long from the LA Photo Center to Huntington Park. I would stay there. We closed the Photo Center. By the time we did all the cleanup and everything it was like ten o'clock at night. And after I closed the Center, I would go into the darkroom and just develop photographs. I had my camera, and so I got into photography. And I became the curator for the members' exhibits. And I became the photo tech. I laid out the chemicals, I learned about the drum and how to mix the chemicals, and how to hand out the equipment and collect it, and do all of that.

And there was, you know, Fred Croton was the general manager for Cultural Affairs, and it was like there were different camps. He and Glenna weren't exactly the best of friends. She didn't really like him a

whole lot. She was my—I guess, my mentor back then. That’s the only word for it. She kind of kept me in the loop of stuff. So whatever she was into, I was into. And they were against the Day of the Dead. They didn’t want the Day of the Dead there, because it wasn’t a photography-based event.

**KD:** That’s what I was trying to figure out. How did you get the Day of the Dead, which I associate with installation, or sculpture, or something—you know, visual. Not photography. So how did that—

**MG:** We did include photographers. There was photography. For instance, in the first Day of the Dead I included Willie Middlebrook, who was black. And the photographs were photographs of his brother at the side of his father, his father’s coffin with his father in it. I extended it to include other people that weren’t Chicano. And I got a lot of flak for it. “Oh, it’s not the Westside.” I had Chinese artists, I had Cuban artists, I had other artists. And I said, “Well, death is not exclusive to our own experience.” And I’m more concerned with the idea that it is—that it pulls us together. Death is something that unites all of humanity. Nobody gets out of your life. And I wanted to look at it that way. Yes, it is something that is practiced in Mexico. But we’re all human. It’s about our humanity, at its essence. It isn’t just a practice that’s done in Mexico, but it’s a practice that’s done through out Latin America. And if anything, it has to be extended.

**KD:** To the Americas.

**MG:** To the Americas, but globally.

**KD:** Well, the Asians have ancestor worship, it’s just not done in the way that we do it.

**MG:** It’s not done the way we do it, but if you can extend yourself, then you can understand. I mean, I remember a photographer named Delarosa. I think she’s Italian American. Her husband is a member of the Communist Party. He ran for presidency. But she had photographed the Chicano moratorium back in the ’60s. And her husband had passed away, and she had come to one of the Day of the Dead [events] there at the LA Photo Center. And one of the things that we do is we put up a community altar. And I said, “There’s little pieces of paper so that you can write your husband’s name and the dedication and put it on the altar.”

And she stood in front of the altar, and all of the sudden, she truly understood in that moment the purpose of the Day of the Dead. The Day of the Dead is not a celebration of death. It’s a celebration of life. It is a celebration of the life of the person who has died. It’s a remembrance of that, and that we all grieve together. When your significant other or your father or your mother or your brother or your sister or anybody dies in your family, you have a funeral service, and you grieve for that person. And it’s specific to that person. But when you do it as a community, and everybody acknowledges the death of those people, you do it as a community, and you understand that you’re not alone, that you do it as a family, that you do it as a community, and that yes, your father has died, but this woman has also lost her husband. And even though you may or may not have known each other, you do that collectively, and it brings you together, and I think that’s what is significant and important.

So, you know, I had artists like Matthew Thomas, who was an African American. Turns out his grandfather was Mexican. I said, “Well, this is part of your heritage too.” He goes, “I know, but people don’t think of me as Mexican.” I said, “It doesn’t matter. It’s your heritage to embrace, and you can take what you want from it, and practice it the way you please.” So I had other people, I brought Ann Chamberlin from Texas, who had some lovely work. That’s how Ann Chamberlin started showing with us. She came here, and I introduced her into Frank Romero. Joseph Maruska came to me, he’s a Czechoslovakian. But his mother was, I guess, Chicana, and his grandparents raised him. So even though he had a Czechoslovakian name, he was from the community. There’s a lot of people, you know, they’re part of the community, but they always feel like they have to explain themselves. My daughter is half Irish, and she’s very fair. She has freckles and red hair, or had red hair when she was born. And so there’s this identity issue. It becomes an issue for some people. But there are people who are raised in the midst of the culture. It’s not about your biology, it’s about what you’ve shared.

**KD:** So the exhibitions for Day of the Dead at the Photography Center would include photography, and then this community altar, and it was the people that you would invite, or just literally—



- MG:** It was a combination. See, the thing about . . . I think one of the mistakes at Self Help, when other people were in charge of it—made, is, they put out a call, and it's like whoever answers, and that's the way we deal with it. Well, I know who the artists were that had names, and if you put out a call like that, they're going to ignore you. So I went out and asked, and I asked Frank Romero, and I asked Carlos Almaraz, and I asked Gilbert Luján, and I asked John Valadez. I even asked Betye Saar, who also participated. I had Betye Saar there. If I knew the artist, and it was a good artist, I asked. And I talked to them about the Day of the Dead, and I talked to them about what it meant, and what our focus was. And I had some people who . . . On one occasion, I remember an artist brought me a piece, and you know, it was about death, but it was about this demonic stuff. And I said, you know, "That's not Day of the Dead. I'm sorry. That's lunatic stuff. It has nothing to do with the Day of the Dead." And I remember, "No, I can't have that. That's not part of it." You know, people show up with axes in their head and stuff like that. But it had nothing to do with that. It was about a remembrance of someone they had lost. And that's what the work needed to be about, and that's where I tried to keep the focus.
- KD:** So you curated.
- MG:** Yeah. And Glenna helped me with that. She introduced me to all those artists to begin with, but then I'm the one that went out and got all those names and did that.
- KD:** Why did you go to Frank Romero or Carlos Almaraz? Why did you invite them?
- MG:** Oh, well, they were Los Four. Everybody knew they had the biggest names. I invited them, I invited Eloy Torrez. I invited Alfredo de Batuc, I remember he was in it. I even had—I'm trying to remember—I think . . . I don't know if I met José Lozano after. And Salomon Huerta. But I got involved. I was, like, on the board with CARECEN [Central American Resource Center] in helping to put the auctions together when they started raising money and doing those art auctions. But, you know, a lot of auctions. This is one of my biggest gripes with auctions, is that they ask the artist for 100 percent, and the artist cannot afford it.
- KD:** Right. We talked about that last time. And I didn't realize until I got your résumé that that's where most of your . . . Or at least what you have on the résumé, I have it as the "CARENCEN." You've done several of those through the Daniel Saxon Gallery. So the work is exhibited, but auctioned at the gallery? Or Daniel Saxon handled the paperwork for the—
- MG:** I guess they handled the paperwork. I know that Daniel Saxon has sold some of my work, but never from me. He's bought it through other people, and then sold it. But he's never dealt with me directly.
- KD:** Are you seeing your legally entitled percentage?
- MG:** No. No one's ever contacted me. Maybe he's selling at a loss. I don't understand or don't know. Because they're not telling me anything.
- KD:** So you had . . . In the '80s, it's quite prolific. I mean—and that's when you start the Día de los Muertos, the first one. I see the seventh. Quite prolific artistic expression and gallery work. You also must have been doing a lot of community . . . I mean, only a few murals were listed here. But most of them, it looked like, were through Glenna.
- MG:** Well, yeah. Because I started doing murals with her. There's some murals that I don't list because I don't really feel that they're mine. They belong to the kids. You know, you do it with a group of kids, and then, you know, you're taking their drawings, and you're helping them put it up, and it's important for them to have ownership of their own work without me sitting around taking credit for what they did. I facilitate. And so, yeah, I mean, there's a lot more murals under my belt, but it's not always necessarily my work. It's the work of the kids. And I coordinate it, and without me, it probably—it wouldn't happen. I know that. But that's not my purpose in doing that. I don't need to take credit for their work.
- KD:** I think maybe we'll talk more about that kind of experience, like it was a teaching experience for you, when you'd get on to teaching. Because I'm curious about this professional development, of this network you're creating. I wouldn't say it was already fully formed. The people that you're mentioning bringing into the Photo Center in the '80s. That's when—

- MG:** Well, you know, I started working for—I got a grant to work at Self Help Graphics, and I introduced mono-printing over there. Now they do monoprinting on the screen. And my very first print was with Steven Grace. And I tried to get Steven Grace to let me monoprint on the screens, and, “No, it’s a waste of ink, it’s too much ink.” But he let me do a brushstroke on the first screen, when I did the wild dog on the first piece that I ever did. So before he pulled the screen, I’d grab a brush and paint a little on it, so it would create texture. And that piece has [been] collected the—at LACMA, in their graphic department. And I was named artist of the year through the *LA Weekly* [by Michael Anderson]. You know, each critic got to select two artists that they felt were artists of the year, so I was selected for artist of the year in the *LA Weekly*. And shortly after that, I had the grant through the California Arts Council to teach monoprinting over there, and I met with Wayne Healy. Wayne Healy was—he was also in those Day of the Deads. He had some big, beautiful paintings, murals, that he installed for Day of the Dead. Daniel Martinez.
- KD:** At the photo shop?
- MG:** Yeah, at the Photo Center. Him and David Botello. I remember—I believe we had something like sixty-seven artists. I can’t even name them all. Leo Limón. And that was done—I’ll tell you the way it was done. We had gone to Self Help Graphics, Self Help Graphics, yes, let’s do it in conjunction with the Photo Center. And I was the one that took charge of it. Now, back then, see, I didn’t totally understand at the time I was getting into it, that the way Self Help Graphics works is, an artist steps up to the plate and says, “I want to do a show” or “I want to teach kids” or “I want to do a printmaking workshop” or “I want to do this.” And then the artist takes control of that, and they become in charge of that, and that’s how you are a part of Self Help Graphics.
- KD:** Right.
- MG:** So I guess I was the one that was doing that. So then I was—Self Help Graphics would then turn around and reply to the NEA or whoever for their grant money, and say, “We did the Day of the Dead at the Photo Center, and the person that took charge of it was Margaret Garcia.” And then they would get their money from the NEA.
- KD:** [laughter]
- MG:** You see how that works?
- KD:** Yeah, because that’s the way I saw your name. [laughter]
- MG:** That’s how you saw my name, right. Because that’s how they got their funding, was the fact that they had somebody in charge of it, and I was then considered part of Self Help Graphics. That’s how I was a part of Self Help Graphics. And then, you know, I would do a mural, and the newspaper would come out, and I said, “Oh, yeah, I work with Self Help Graphics,” and they would say, “Self Help Graphics.” But I was out doing—I mean, what was Self Help Graphics doing? I was Self Help Graphics at that point, I mean, for that. And that’s the way Self Help works. I mean, it works through a coalition. And I thank God for that, because in many ways, Self Help doing that is what really helped me. It helped me that Self Help took credit for it. But, you know . . . And then I applied for the CAC [California Arts Council]. I was doing a print with Oscar Duardo, who was the master printer at that time, because Steven was gone, and I was working on the *Romance* print, which is the chili peppers and the high heels. I don’t know if you’re familiar with that print.
- KD:** Right.
- MG:** And, you know, we had had—I think this was my third print at this point, and I had painted directly on the screen. Oscar and I were kind of fighting, you know. Master printers are control freaks. They control everything. It was just really very, very controlled at that point. And he was busy talking, and in the middle of talking, he started printing the image upside down over a layer. He lost ten sheets of paper. And we got into this little argument, and he said, “You’re not getting your artist proofs.” I says, “If I’m not getting my artist proofs, then you’re not getting your printer’s proofs.” And so he had to call Sister Karen. Sister Karen came down and finally agreed that, you know, first of all, it wasn’t my fault. He stood at the table and started knocking them off upside down, because he flipped the paper wrong. He wasn’t paying attention to what he was doing. And then Sister Karen said to me, “Well, it’s because of your process, because

you're confusing him," or something like that. And I said, you know, I just felt like she was taking his side on it. And I got kind of uppity about it, and I said, you know, "I'm moving my grant."

So the following year, instead of applying to Self Help Graphics to have my grant there, because—God, I'm trying to remember—oh, what was the name? Susan Hill was in charge of it. They wanted me to work out at the prison. And, see, the thing about working at Self Help Graphics, I started working at Norco, California Rehabilitation Center at Norco.

KD: Right.

MG: And I was working with women, and then I started working with [men], and I taught painting out there. But the thing about Norco, and they were very easygoing about it. The thing about working with Self Help Graphics is Self Help Graphics never had the amount of money that they said they had. And so instead of paying me the amount of money that they needed to pay, because the state gives you eight hundred dollars and then Self-Help Graphics was supposed to supplement four hundred dollars. This is back [in 1987]. That's what the prices were back then.

KD: This is the artist-in-residence for the visual arts—California Arts Council awards, and you had them from '87 through '90.

MG: Well, I had them—I had '87—

KD: Eighty-seven to '88, '88 through '89, '89 through '90.

MG: Mm-hmm. And then what happened was that, instead of paying me the money, they gave me a studio. So my studio, you know, if you go over there, there's the master printer's studio—the room that he uses to store a lot of the work and stuff like that—that room was my studio. And I had met Patssi Valdez by doing the Day of the Dead over at the Photo Center. And I was already—I had gotten her to apply for a grant. Frances España was working there, she was teaching video. And she and I were friends at the time. And Yreina Cervantez had had the grant before me. In fact, when I applied for my grant Yreina helped me out by showing me her grant, so I could see how it was put together and understand what it took to apply for that grant. Because that grant is thirteen pages long. It is a huge grant. It is so difficult to get that grant, and there's thousands of people. So when you get that grant, you can consider yourself some of the elite of the art—of culture in California. And their conferences were amazing.

And the work that they did in California . . . I mean, you talk about some of the work that they did in hospitals, with people in prison, I mean, it was such a salve on our communities. That grant was huge, is huge, in terms of helping people establish careers, and the work that they did in all the different institutions and schools and everything was amazing. And I know the program is dead now, but you've really got to give it to that grant. So, you know, I got that grant, and I ended up at Norco, because—it was just a split between me and Karen. There was all sorts of other stuff going on.

KD: So which one is that? The second one you get?

MG: The first grant, I was with Self Help.

KD: Right.

MG: And then I moved it to Norco.

KD: Oh, during that same tenure?

MG: After the first year. The second year, I took it at Norco.

KD: Okay.

MG: And I was working with Ernest Dillahay, who now is in Cultural Affairs. And Mildred Howard. And Sister Karen and I got into a big argument, because it was during that grant that I was then able to get custody of my daughter, and I had to deal with social workers and all this stuff. And Sister Karen said, "Well, we're taking your studio back, and you need to move your stuff out. I want the keys." And I said, "Bullshit. You have a contract with me, and if you want to move me out, then you'd better call Mildred Howard from Sacramento and get her down here, so that you can renegotiate this contract." She says, "Well, ever since you've been teaching here, we've been broken into," because Eduardo Oropeza was doing the outside of the building, he was up on scaffolding, and he would put the scaffolding up against the building, and none

of the windows had locks on them. So, you know, people were breaking into the building, and they broke into Leo Limón's studio and stole his stereo and stole books and stole all stuff.

Well, you know, she said, "Well, ever since you've been here, we've been ripped off. I'm closing the place down. I'm locking things up." And I said, "Well, why don't you blame me for the drought, while you're at it?" [laughter] I said, "You're not getting me out of there until my turn is done. You have a contract with me, and I can't afford to move all that stuff out, because I would have to move it into my living situation, and I have social workers coming over to see about my getting custody of my daughter. And you're not dumping that shit on me right now. I am not in the position to deal with it." And I refused. I had my priorities set straight, because I had to deal with the law and the lawyers and—

**KD:** But it was in-kind contribution that they were giving to you was the studio, in exchange for the money that they owed you, so—

**MG:** Yeah. And she thought she was going to be able to just turn around and just yank it. And I said no. And so—

**KD:** So did you have an awareness at the time of why there was probably all these break-ins? Like you're talking about the scaffolding?

**MG:** Well, yeah. I said, "Well, you know, maybe you should lock the windows and pull the scaffolding away from the building." You know, of course I knew. Everybody knew. She wanted to act like I didn't know. She pretended, you know, or she'd call a meeting and have all the guys there, all the male artists, and she wouldn't invite me to the meeting. I said, "Well, I'm the only female in the group, and I'm the one that's being omitted." She'd say, "Well, you know, we want to talk about suggestions for how to improve Self Help." I said, "Well, I have one minor suggestion. Why don't you put a sign on the door that gives the hours of the gallery?" She says, "That's just it, Margaret. Why didn't you do that to begin with?" I said, "Well, I don't know what the hours are." I mean, give me a break. So—

**KD:** So you were doing—you had a studio there for your artist-in-residence.

**MG:** No. The studio was part of the artist-in-residence deal, so I got to teach monoprinting. And I had, like, Wayne Healy in my class, and I showed him how to do monoprints and stuff like that. And that's when he started using the ketchup bottle. And I said, "You guys, I'm going to show you how to do this, and then you're going to turn around and start showing me stuff." Because it has—it's that thing with monoprinting does that. We were working with Plexiglass—

**KD:** What do you mean, "You have to teach me something"?

**MG:** Well, because, you know, you teach somebody how to do that, and everybody finds new techniques. There's always something new on how to do something like that. And I had actually learned monoprinting from Vern Wilson, from when I was modeling. I learned that, and it was really nice, because you could take a drawing that you did, and take your Plexiglass or your glass, and paint directly over it, and then just get a brayer and rub it. And then over that, you could do pastels, like Degas did, because that's what Degas did. He's the father of color lithography. He would take a wet monoprint and place it on a litho stone, and then rub it down and create a series of that monoprint, and all of his pastels were done that way. That's the way he did his pastel work.

And I said, "Well, let's bump it up here." I wanted to do it on the screen, and when Steven Grace was there, it was "No, it's a waste of ink," and Oscar was saying the same thing. And then Anna Christensen from San Pedro showed up and showed us her portfolio. She was doing monoprint on screen. I said, "Fantastic, that's what we need to be doing here." Granted, you don't get as much out of [the ink], you don't get as many, but each one is unique. And the whole thing about Self Help and the thing there, was to say, this is an experimental process. And if Self Help is truly experimental, then we need to be able to push the medium. Dolores Guerrero-Cruz was there at the time, and so when Anna did her demonstration, we were there. In fact, I have in my archives the piece that both Dolores and I did jointly when we did it at that first meeting there for monoprinting on the screen. Now all of the Chicanos are doing monoprint on the screen, but that was pioneered by my efforts. Yolanda Gonzalez was one of my students.

- KD:** That's amazing that there's—I hadn't actually thought about the tension between budget and artistic expression. *[laughter]*
- MG:** Oh, well—
- KD:** I mean, when it's in your own studio, you get to make your own choices. But I hadn't heard about those kind of constraints. So you were teaching this monoprint class. That's one of the things you proposed in your grant.
- MG:** Yes.
- KD:** You had mentioned that Yreina Cervantez had helped you with writing the grant, or at least showing you hers. Did other women do that in your experience?
- MG:** Well, Yreina—I met Yreina through Glenna. We were hired to do a mural over at Echo Park. That mural for me was a nightmare, working with Yreina. She has a wonderful aesthetic, and I learned so much from her, but the process of working on the mural with her was, oh, an ordeal.
- KD:** You have different approaches?
- MG:** Oh, my God, yes.
- KD:** I keep losing the page that starts with the murals. There it is, you said in Echo Park.
- MG:** Yes. And we've never worked together since. At one point, it was proposed that I do a mural, and I was being given a big budget, and she asked if I would hire her to work on the mural. And she's my good friend. I mean, she comes here sometimes—she literally spends the night here. We've been roommates. We were neighbors. She lived downstairs from me. She had a key to my front doors so that she could just come and go as she pleased. And she borrows from my library here. But I'll tell you right now: I don't want to work with her. Because it's just too painful.
- KD:** Well, I think it's normal that artists have different techniques and styles and approaches, so. *[laughter]* But I guess what you're describing is you actually are very good friends, so that's probably the shock to the two of you, is that, how can we get along in one area, but not in others?
- MG:** Well, we don't paint together. We're very, very different. Her process is just painstaking and slow, and my work tends to be very spontaneous and combustible, and sometimes it doesn't work.
- KD:** Well, you were saying you learned to paint something in three hours.
- MG:** Yes. All of my sessions were three hours. You do a painting in three hours, you have three hours, do a painting, and that's it.
- KD:** And did the other folks in the group also have that?
- MG:** Yes.
- KD:** That was the goal of the group, everybody's going to sit down—
- MG:** You're going to do a painting . . . Occasionally, he'd say, "Oh, this painting is so close, can she come back," something like that, and you might make arrangements. But it was usually three hours.
- KD:** Give me the location of this one that you did? I'm not seeing it—maybe it's just not on there.
- MG:** What?
- KD:** With Yreina.
- MG:** It was done at Echo Park.
- KD:** I see, at Echo Park. Do you have a year?
- MG:** Was it '83 or '84?
- KD:** Oh, it's one of the earlier ones.
- MG:** They painted over it. It doesn't exist anymore.
- KD:** Wow. How does that feel?
- MG:** Okay with me. I'm fine. I think that Yreina's pieces on it were really nice, but, you know, they hired, like, I don't know how many kids to work with us. We were supposed to keep them busy and do all of that stuff. And Yreina was working with three, and I was working with the other seventeen. And it was like—oh, man. There was just too many people. I ended up doing all of the babysitting. I didn't like that.

**KD:** So you're saying it's okay that it's gone because you didn't like the product, the outcome, the process? Or—

**MG:** Yeah. I wasn't happy with that mural. I was very unhappy with the way it turned out, because it didn't feel solid.

**KD:** You have other murals that I'm imagining you are happy with.

**MG:** Yeah. The *Two Blue Whales*, I'm happy with. I'm happy with the one at City Hall East, the one with the Soviet Union, you know.

**KD:** If those were—had been destroyed, what would that feel like?

**MG:** Oh, I'd be sad. I'd be sad. But then again, I'd do another one.

**KD:** Yeah. Some artists talk about, "Oh, it's the process [that is important]."

**MG:** Yeah, you know, you've got to let it go. You don't know what's going to stay. I mean, I know that I do have things that are going to be around a long time. If those are lost, it's sad. Especially—I think that the two blue whales is the oldest one on the east side now—I mean, on the west side of town. It is now one of the oldest murals there.

**KD:** And it's been restored at least once, right?

**MG:** Yes. It has been.

**KD:** And the ones that you did with Glenna through these elementary—coordinated with, or collaborated with, is the words you have here on your résumé, with Glenna [Boltuch] Avila in the schools, in the elementary schools. Those, I imagine, because they're in elementary schools, are probably going to be around for a while.

**MG:** I think so.

**KD:** But I'm surprised to hear artists talk about . . . So I was wondering if you have the same kind of sense that murals are ephemeral. Like, I think of painting on walls as a little bit more permanent than that, a little bit more permanent.

**MG:** I think, you know, it's like, last Monday I did that painting right there, and I don't like it. And I'll probably paint over it. It doesn't matter. I like painting over painting, so it is kind of ephemeral. It's good until it's great, and when it's great, then you're okay. So if you do a painting . . . For me, it's like riding a roller-coaster. It's sort of like you're really taking a risk. If you are not taking a risk, you know for a fact it's going to come out perfect. But if you're taking a risk, that by definition means that you are taking a risk, that it's not going to be good, too. You're challenging yourself to push beyond where you were before. And if you nailed it each and every single time, that means you're not risking anything anymore. To take a risk means that you're going to have some failure. Otherwise, there's no risk. It's a sure thing, which I've never done.

**KD:** So you're waiting for the learning curve to catch up? The eye-hand coordination?

**MG:** Well, I take a risk, and then sometimes the risk pays off, and I go, "Oh, wow! I got that, I got that! It worked!" But if you're nailing it each and every single time, "Oh, I got a process now. I've got the subject. I've got the process. I've got whatever I've got." But the truth is that for me, there's an element of risk involved. And sometimes I get nervous about it, when I'm getting ready to do something new, and I'm excited, and I'm excited about the possibilities and the potential. And, you know, I'm good enough now where I can sit—

[break in audio]

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia. Today is the tenth of September. We're on our second tape for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series], and Margaret, you were talking about taking risks.

**MG:** Yeah, you know, I think that what makes it exciting is the fact that you take a risk and you challenge yourself and you're able to meet the challenge, but that does mean that there's a risk. And I wanted to go back to one other thing. The thing with Don Ward that I forgot to mention is that I met Don Ward, and he had me become a part of his group, and he was a bit of a chauvinist. But one of the things that Don Ward was doing at the time is that he was painting album covers for Peaches Records and Tower Records. They

used to paint them on these sheets of, I think they were Masonite, and they were four-foot by four-foot squares. And they would take an album cover and paint it, and I thought, "Okay, that's a job I can do." So I studied under him to do that, where you take an opaque projector, you take an image, you blow it on a panel, you draw it out, and you paint it. And back in '72, '73, you know, he was doing two a day!

KD: Wow.

MG: And it was like three hundred sixty dollars each, which was a nice chunk of change! And I said, "Oh, I could make a good living with that!" And just as I got to the place where I felt I was good enough to do it, the market fell out of the music industry, you know, vinyl was out, and Peaches collapsed, Peaches and Tower Records, you know. So there was no longer any money to do these big album covers, and there were all these other artists who had been doing it who were good and, you know, how could I compete against that? The market was saturated. That was when I got the mural gig with Glenna.

KD: Did you meet Richard Duardo that way?

MG: No.

KD: No?

MG: I met Richard Duardo—wait, yeah, I met—

KD: 'Cause I know he was with Peaches, if I'm remembering the stories right.

MG: No!

KD: No.

MG: No, I didn't know—

KD: Somebody else was, then.

MG: No, no, no. I met Richard through the connection with the Day of the Dead and the people that were . . . 'Cause, you know, once I started doing Day of the Dead I got to meet everybody.

KD: Exactly! And can we go back to those exhibitions at the Photography Center?

MG: Sure.

KD: What kind of crowd would you get? What kind of audience?

MG: Oh, we had a great crowd, and I think that . . . You know, there was music, there was food, we had vendors, it was all outside. There was enough space to do the thing. We had a stage. We had installations. We always had at least two or three altars. We had more than one altar, because we had an altar as an art piece, as an installation, and then we had an altar for the community to participate in.

KD: And so the ones that were by the artists were those ones you said you would invite.

MG: Well, we would invite an artist to do like a community altar, but it would be stated, 'cause some were like not to be touched and then some were, you know. And Matthew Thomas, Matthew Thomas did this beautiful, ethereal altar, and it was this pigmented sand, and the wall was colored, but there were no labels or candles. I mean, I think there might have been some candles, but there were no, like, images. It was a very sort of ethereal piece. It had no real imagery on it.

KD: So if I'm getting my dates right, you start that in the '80s, probably '83, right?

MG: [Eighty-four.] Right.

KD: So what I'm remember of Self Help Graphics and their Day of the Dead—

MG: We were their Day of the Dead. Sister Karen had initiated the Day of the Dead with Carlos Bueno over in East LA near Evergreen Cemetery, and it was a big to-do, but her intent at the time was for the merchants in East LA to take over and to fund and support the Day of the Dead as an event that helped the commerce in the area, and they didn't do it. They turned her down, they refused! And she was upset about it! She said, "I'm going to drop the Day of the Dead! I'm not doing the Day of the Dead anymore!" And that's when I said, "Let's do it at the Photo Center." So she said we [Photo Center] were their Day of the Dead. They didn't have it in '83, '84, you know. During that period of time, we were Self Help's Day of the Dead. It was done on the west side of town near MacArthur Park, but Self Help didn't have it at that time. We were their Day of the Dead. That's how they got . . . 'Cause when they asked for funding and did all that, that came through that.

KD: So by the time they take it up in the late '80s—

MG: Or they go back to it, yes, in the '80s.

KD: That's when you start to see this artistic, contemporary interpretation of the altar as an installation. And so what I'm trying to get at is that happened through the *altares* work that you were doing.

MG: Yes. Matthew Thomas did a beautiful—and it was this colored pigment. I remember he used cobalt, and he used this raw, red sienna. And it was up against the wall, and it was a piece of the colored wall. It was just this gorgeous, gorgeous piece.

KD: I mean, because there's the—I don't want to call them traditional altars, because from what I understand, and this is just preliminary research, a little bit based on the interviews that I've been doing. But basically, [what] Chicanos—I'll be really generic—in California pick up is the Day of the Dead aesthetic style in Oaxaca. Okay, that's preliminary, but there's, you know, so that altar has a certain form, right?

MG: It's different, yes. It's different, because I don't think Matthew Thomas has that connection to Oaxaca, but—

KD: Exactly. Well, from what I can gather there was literally—that's where people went to do the research, that's where there was a video made by the guy who does chair . . . I'm not going to get this right.

MG: Peter? Peter?

KD: I want to say Eames?

MG: Oh, oh, oh. Charles Eames.

KD: Yeah. Did a video on Day of the Dead and it circulated in Northern California. I haven't found out if it circulated here. So you have this—

MG: Well, Frank Romero worked for Charles Eames at one point.

KD: Well, there you go! [*laughter*]

MG: Yeah, he worked for Charles Eames, and I have—this is his track lighting! This track lighting you see here belonged to Charles Eames. It used to travel with his shows, because he would do installations, and Frank bought it off of Charles, and I got it from [Frank], and I still have the crate in the back from Eames. But—

KD: So they were doing, there was the early work at Self Help and other places in California. The altar was, I'll say traditional in that that's the way they understood it.

MG: We had a group of artists that visited us. It was Juan Alcázar, Justina Fuentes, and Jorge [López García] from Oaxaca came and did a sand installation at the Photo Center. I think it was in the '90s, I'm not sure. I had met them and had invited them to come and do the Frank Romero Christmas sale, and they came up. And they have a *taller* down there, and Juan was the director of the Tamayo institute, and he was *compadres* with Francisco Toledo, who is now up here in Santa Monica, and they had a *taller* down there. And I went down there and I know we had purchased a couple of prints— [*phone ringing*] Hold on.

[*break in audio*]

KD: You were just talking about the *taller* from Oaxaca that had come up.

MG: Yeah, they came up, but they came up I think—was it '90 or '92, or something like that? They didn't come up until later. I could check on that. But they came up, and then I went down. I have been to Michoacan, and—

KD: Well, there was a couple of exhibitions that you had in the '90s in Mexico.

MG: Yeah.

KD: Is it before or after, because that part of that relationship, that network you had developed, or . . .

MG: The Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum [in Chicago] had a traveling exhibit that went to the museum of Santa Domingo, and I believe it was before . . . Well, I had been to Oaxaca in '72. The first time I went to Oaxaca was in '72, and it was before it was all built up. I remember like around three o'clock or four o'clock in the day the electricity would run out in town and everything would be, like, shut off! [*laughter*] It would be hot, and we'd go to the *mercado*. Went up to Monte Albán and Mitla and all that.



I had already traveled in Mexico. I'd gone with my stepmother. What I found out was that . . . You know, my stepmother was from Mexico City, and her daughter was a doctor there, and my stepmother had worked here as a seamstress to help her daughter become a doctor in Mexico. But, you know, every year she had this habit of gathering together things like blenders and jeans and articles of American clothing and things like that, and then going down to Mexico City and either selling it or doing whatever she did with it down there. And because she was a Mexican citizen, every time she went back to Mexico they would rifle through everything she did and at every stop, because she would take the train. They would stick her with *la mordida*, you know. The *aduanas* would come out—oh, you know, the tariff and the taxes. And so they'd get her at every stop, and she'd have to pay all this money. And so one time, and I think it was in '72, she invited me to go with her. And what she did was she put most of the luggage in my name, and since I was an American they didn't bother with me! They only bothered with her! So I carried all the big items, you know, any kind of electronic equipment or anything like that.

**KD:** You would just say it was a gift for someone that you were going to see, right.

**MG:** Well, I'm going to use it while I'm down there. I'm not giving anything away! I just, like, to say that, and so it made her passage. She figured it was cheaper for me to go down than it was to pay for *la mordida*. There isn't a train there anymore. I've taken the train down at least three times to Mexico City and to Jalisco. There's no longer a passenger train that does that anymore. Was it Cardenas that did away with the train? And I remember going from Mexicali—oh, 'cause you take it from Mexicali. It was beautiful! I loved taking the train! It was wonderful! I loved it.

**KD:** Did you paint while you were in Mexico?

**MG:** No, but I drew. I did a lot of drawings. I didn't do any paintings there 'cause I didn't carry any paint with me. And back then, in '71, '72, I didn't—I hadn't started painting. I didn't start painting until I was twenty-one, which was in '72, later that year. And I would have to say it was like September, October of that year when I started painting. Right after my birthday. And before that I had gone with—it was earlier that year, it was '72—I had gone with Salud, my stepmother, to Mexico City.

And she's from a little village in Michoacan, where I had even gone to spend Easter there. It's beautiful there, it's so beautiful there! Love it! There's this old sugar mill, and I went around Easter time, and they had the passion play with the donkey that went around. And they take the *calavasa*, the big pumpkin up to the sugar mill, and they make candy out of it for the whole village. And her daughter became the secretary of public health for all of Mexico, and her job was to place, like, interns doing their residencies into these different little villages so that each village could get medical assistance. And I got sick when I was down there, and she said, "Well, you can go to this clinic over at such and such place," and I said, "Well, I'm not a Mexican citizen!" She said, "We don't ask for your citizenship papers! We have socialized medicine here! They'll take care of you there!" I was shocked! I had no idea. So yeah, so they took care of me. She's passed away since. She had a brain tumor, she had cancer, and she died. But my stepmother was a very lovely person. [I] went down there and I had a great time and a great relationship with her.

**KD:** So the sketching, was that part of the instruction you had gotten from the group, 'cause I'm not sure if it's exactly the same time, but in the '70s—

**MG:** Yeah, I just carried a sketchpad with me. Like Hugh Baker says, just draw, draw, draw, draw, draw. When I came back and I was twenty-one—I'm going back a little bit—but when I was twenty-one I got custody of my brother, who was eleven at the time. I was twenty-one and he was eleven. So he came to live with me. And during that period of time he lived with me, and he was starting to get into trouble at school, and I was having problems with him, you know. He wanted to smoke dope and hang out with his friends, and he was a very, very intelligent little child. He was gifted. He had taken criminal law in college at the age of ten, so he was very bright, and so he was a handful because he's not the kind of kid that wouldn't . . . You know, he's always questioning authority, always pushing his limits, and the teachers really needed to challenge him. And they weren't quite challenging him there.

And I said the best thing for him to do is for me to send him with my aunt and uncle in Mexico and let him live on a farm for a period of time. That's much better because obviously he's intelligent, he's not going to lose anything by backing off. So he ended up in Magdalena Jalisco, where he stayed for like three years, you know. So he was down there, and he came back up just before I divorced my husband and came to live with me, and I still had custody of him then. I took him over to the high school, and I decided against the high school. I said, "I don't want him in high school. I want him to take his GED and go to college because all he does in high school is mess around." And the counselor was angry with me. She says, "He's going to miss the prom! He's not going to . . ." [laughter] I said, "He doesn't need the prom! He doesn't need the prom! He needs to study! He doesn't need to be in that part of, you know . . . That's not what he needs, that's not what he wants."

KD: And he was just starting high school at that point?

MG: He was about sixteen.

KD: Okay, so one year—

MG: Yeah, I said, he needs to take his GED and go straight to college, because he should've been in college all this time. He's been just messing around. I mean, when he was living with my uncle in the village in Mexico, you know, he worked like any other farmers, you know. They had to—they installed some plumbing so they had an indoor toilet, but before that it was like everything was outdoors and, you know, he had to feed the chickens and the ducks and pigs and everything else, and he was out there working. He said that there were times when all they had were beans to eat and that's what they ate. And I said good! I think it's good because he got an appreciation for what he had here. He didn't get it, he didn't understand it, and he was so bright and so smart. And I said, "He doesn't need this other high school stuff!" And he ended up—

KD: Can I just interrupt the story for just a question?

MG: Yeah.

KD: When I was in Chicago I heard this as the strategy, how parents make sure their kids don't become gang-bangers: they send them to Mexico for the high school years or the years before high school. So were your other friends or colleagues or people aware of doing that, or were you one of the first ones to invent that system? Had you heard it from others, or . . .

MG: No, I did it. I thought, 'cause I had already visited my aunt and uncle, and they lived in this old adobe house that had been there from my great-grandparents' time. And I knew that it would be a very different experience and that he would have an appreciation for where he was and what he was getting, because he was bright enough to deal with it.

So when he came back, he actually was working with my husband who was a contractor, and it was a very odd comparison, 'cause my brother had come back from Mexico and my husband had a cousin who had been raised on a farm in Walsh, Colorado, who was coming from a rural agricultural background. But over there in Walsh, Colorado, he was, like, riding bikes and motorcycles, and he was into all this other stuff, whereas here comes my brother who was like two years younger than him. And they put him on a crew to do this construction work, and my brother is just out doing him [inaudible]. My brother's working hard, and the other guy's sort of like, oh, kind of maybe, and he's fighting with my husband, and my brother and my ex-husband actually got along really well because my brother was a hard worker. You know, the Mexicanos, they come here, they don't come here to go on welfare, they come here to work! That's the work ethic, this Mexican work ethic! So my brother had that, and I said, "I don't want him in high school. I want him to take his GED, I want him to go to college." The counselor was pissed with me. He did what I told him to do. He took the GED. He ended up at East LA College.

KD: So he passes the GED at sixteen.

MG: Yeah, and then he goes to East LA, and then he goes to Harvard. Then he comes back, he goes to Berkeley, and then he goes to Stanford. And he graduated from Stanford. He is now a trauma surgeon in Fort Worth, Texas.

KD: [laughter] Congratulations!

**MG:** Thank you! So I'm proud of what I put into that. You know, one of the things I did with him when he was eleven is, I took all my books and I made bookshelves in his bedroom, and I put all the books—the library was in his room. And he'll tell you, I had Marxist books in there and all the literature books in there, and we created a library in his room.

**KD:** I'm curious where your intellectual development came from, 'cause you didn't do the college route, you were obviously frustrated—I mean, that's the part of the story I hear, so. . .

**MG:** You have to find, you know, you have to find your bliss. You have to find what you want. I knew that that wasn't it. I knew that I wanted to be an artist maybe, or do something that excited me. None of that stuff really excited me. My grandmother had given me this curiosity. My best friend in junior high school was Maria Elena Braddock, and we used to call her Johnni. And her aunt—she had an Aunt Sarah who lived half a block from me. We would walk over there and drink coffee or strawberry soda and [eat] crackers and argue politics, and it was exciting and interesting, and that's the kind of thing I loved. I like a certain amount of tension. You know, I do foolish things sometimes, I admit. I can look back and think, oh God! What did I do? What did I say? How stupid was that? But you know, you don't hear sound on a string unless there's tension. There has to be some kind of tension. There's a reason why we're here. I mean, life is kind of boring if you're doing nothing, you know?

**KD:** So were you picking up these books on your own and then sharing them with your brother, or. . .

**MG:** Yeah. Yeah, I did that. I also have to admit that I probably smoked a lot of dope back then. You know, I smoked a lot of dope, and I had my first experience—I dropped acid. It's not my thing. It's not the kind of thing I would recommend on a regular basis for anybody, [*laughter*] but it was an interesting experience because it seemed to be very eye-opening at the time, and I'm not sorry I did it. It was fine for me, you know, it worked for me. I think that I can't recommend it to anybody for anything, only because, you know, it's like recommending cigarettes or cupcakes or beer or something like that to somebody else. You can't recommend those things. That's a personal journey. But I got into, you know.

My grandmother was into Lobsang Rampa and Edgar Cayce, and so was my mom, so I kind of got into that. And then I got into *The Seth Material* with Jane Roberts, and I've always been interested in that, and [*A Course on*] *Miracles*, and I've been interested in all that sort of esoteric kind of stuff. You know, like Oprah right now is sort of into Eckhart Tolle, and I actually agree with that. I've read some of it and I really . . . You can tell when there's truth being spoken. You can hear it, you can feel it. It makes sense to you. I trust my instincts, and that's the same thing about painting is I've gotten to the point where I can draw and paint like I can breathe in the same way. You sing it, you dance it, and it's instinctual with me. I trust myself enough, and I know when I've misstepped. "Oh, I didn't quite do it right, let me try that again." That's good.

**KD:** What was the block before?

**MG:** What block?

**KD:** Well, you said now it's instinct. What was. . .

**MG:** Well, I had to learn my skill and my craft to the point where it became second nature to me. It isn't that I was so much blocked, but I just had to get to the point where I was in sync, in synchronicity with my sensibility.

**KD:** When did you get that sense that it happened?

**MG:** You know, it happens to degrees. I don't think it happens completely. I think that it happens in degrees, and the more into it you are then the more second nature it is to be able to see something and be able to like mimic it. I don't mean like duplicate another image so much as to be able to respond. You know, I like work that has brushstrokes that you can see the pulse of the hand, because that pulse is your heartbeat. It shows the way you feel about something, and it's inherent. What you see and how you feel about it is completely conveyed when you take up that brush or that pen or that drawing, and you're impacted by the environment and the light and the way you feel at the moment, whether you're sweating or whether you're sitting there in a cool shade of tree, or whether it's this intense moment between you and the

person that's sitting there and the way the light hits them. You respond with your feelings. You don't think about it, and if you're in a state of grace you don't think at all, it's just instinct. It's not contrived, whereas like conceptual work is work that is born of the mind. I don't intellectualize it, you know? I just sort of respond. I sit with people and I, you know, sometimes they're self-conscious or they're uptight or they're whatever they are and all that stuff comes out in work.

**KD:** But you—if I can reflect on your current project, you think of a path. I mean, there's the intellectual moment where you said, "I'm going to paint young girls in original costume, original dress."

**MG:** Well, she presented herself, and I had never had that opportunity. It was something new, you know. I hadn't been painting people in their costumes. I mean, I did a couple of pieces because I liked the dance. I like the music of Veracruz. I love the *jarocho*. So it just so happened that she . . . And I thought, "Oh, how beautiful! Something so beautiful, I should paint it," you know. I just responded that way. But I didn't originally set out to do that whole thing, except that here's this little girl who has like all these different costumes, and I don't have a car right now so I can't do plein air painting anyway.

So okay, she shows up, I have a class, we sit, we paint, and we're good, and I think that something else is coming from it, and some of that has to do with my relationship to my daughter and my relationship to my granddaughter and how I feel and what happened and all that other stuff. I think it sort of bubbles up to the surface sometimes, and sometimes I'm not completely happy with it, but I think it's there. I don't think you can keep that stuff out. I think that if whatever it is that's in you, whatever journey you have had to take for whatever reason, it always surfaces when you're in that sort of state of grace. It doesn't even matter if it's a teacup that you're painting. You know, that state of mind, it's a practice, like singing. When you sing about love or when you sing about grief or you sing about that state of mind and you've experienced something, all of the other stuff feeds into it, and it's the same with painting.

**KD:** Because you're open, when you're open.

**MG:** Yeah, I think it's natural. You know, whether I leave a body of work that will be remembered enough by a lot of people, I don't know, but I know that I go through the process of creating it, of living a life that, you know, produces something that, you know, sort of within the moment, you know, and my work is completely reflective of me at this time and me in this community at this time.

**KD:** Let me take a pause.

[break in audio]

**KD:** Okay, we're back.

**MG:** In '78, I think, I met Judy Baca, and I don't think she liked my work. She said it was easel painting, 'cause all I did was—I did a lot of portraits. And it's true, I did do a lot of easel painting. It's not politically relevant kind of thing, that was her response. And when I started making art as an artist and as a human being, I wasn't really interested in trying to be political with my work, or even socially relevant, for that matter. I was just interested in drawing and painting and having something that was personal, because you—for whatever reason it is that I paint portraits, I paint portraits. I like painting portraits. And I realize it's because I care about people, and I'm more . . . What concerns me in life is that one-on-one relationship. It's about relationships, and those are the most meaning-filled things that you can have and do in your existence, for me. You know, everybody has a different *onda*. But she said, "Well, you know, you're doing easel painting, and it's not socially relevant, and it's not important."

And I have many portraits of many people that I have done. And at a certain point in my life I recognized that I was documenting my community, but instead of trying to make an overall statement I was sort of doing it one at a time, and sometimes it's Chicano and sometimes it's not. Sometimes the person is something else, and it's about that assimilation. And I don't have to overtly go out and try to make a political statement if I'm not—if I don't want to. That doesn't mean it's not art, it's just me. And it doesn't mean it's not Chicano art, because it's Chicano art because I'm producing it and I'm Chicana, and I don't have a barcode on my ass, you know. I don't, and I don't need one. I can do whatever I want. It's called the artistic

prerogative, you know? And on some of it I agree with her. That's true, it's not! So what? You know, I'll do what I want to do! But to be a Chicano artist, I didn't feel that I had to make political statements.

**KD:** Or the way that politics was defined at the time.

**MG:** Yeah, and it isn't that I don't agree with them. I actually kind of agree with a lot of it, and sometimes I am motivated to make a political statement every now and then, but the main body of my work isn't really political. So you know, like when they did the CARA [*Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*] exhibit, I wasn't part of it because the people that were selecting that were just basically looking for very political work and were looking for things that were politically based. That doesn't mean that there isn't Chicano work that is outside of that realm. There is, and if the way they define Chicano art is it's got to have the Virgin of Guadalupe, the farm worker flag or, you know, the Mexican flag, or it's got to have antiwar thing, or it has . . . You know, for me, that's not Chicano art. It is Chicano art, but it isn't the only thing that's Chicano art. There are other Chicanos who are interested in other things. But the focus of . . .

You know, there's such a drive to label name and identify what is Chicano. There's such a drive to do that because all of a sudden it's this new thing in the last, what, thirty years or forty years, or whatever amount of time that it is, and everybody wants to be on top of the dog pile. Everybody wants to be, you know, king of the hill. And I was here first, and I was the first one to make Chicano art, and you know what? There were Chicanos here doing art before we knew what Chicano was, and nobody has a copyright on that label! You know, it's like saying, "You know, if you protest the war you're not American because you're not American enough." Well, we each have the right to define what that is within us. You know, I have a right to define what it is to be a Chicano through my own experience and through my own process and through producing work. I don't have to fit someone else's label of it and live my life according to how they think I'm supposed to live my life.

**KD:** Did you meet any of the folks who'd been producing work who were Mexican or Chicano before we started to identify? Did you meet any of those?

**MG:** I've met people who were not included in the Chicano art history documentation, like Roberto Chavez. He's one of those people. There was another gentleman who was producing abstract art. His name is Roberto [Quijada]. I don't have his last name but I can get it for you. And he has huge art in lots of bank collections. That was way before the Chicano Movement. But he's a Chicano, and he was never included in that, in that, in what is considered Chicano art, because he wasn't producing political work.

**KD:** Now, for the CARA exhibition, did folks come around to your studio, look at your work, or you just were never . . .

**MG:** I think we submitted some slides. And definitely, you know, Chicano art is fueled and driven by a lot of political work, and by a social awareness of the '60s that may or may not be present with other groups and other people, because of the farm worker movement and because of the efforts to organize and unionize and educate so many people on the issues of what it was to become a Chicano and that sort of self-awareness, so . . . And I'm affected by it. Honestly, I can't say that it's not in my work. But to say that it is the main driving principle of what my work is about was not always there. I mean, it came from a personal . . . Now that I've become more aware of what my work has to say, I can broaden that label and sort of encompass more of that and know that I am making a political statement, because my existence is political.

**KD:** Right. I was wondering if you were aware at the time—I mean, it was by '78, at least—the feminist movement in the United States was saying—

**MG:** Oh, the feminist movement, for sure! You know, [*laughter*] I mean, I remember . . . You know, in Chicago I answered an ad to go out and do what they called a pictorial on the side of a building. And I went out, answered the call because I needed the money, and it was a little gig. And I thought I could go out and just kick off this little mural, and I went up there. . . The scaffolding was hanging from the side of the building, and they had this lean-to ladder, and he says, "Okay, it's up there." And I said "Okay," and I started climbing the ladder. And this guy was like right behind me, right on my ass, and he was following me so closely he made me uncomfortable. And I said, "Why are you doing this?" And he said apparently his girlfriend

had gotten the gig, went up to do the mural, freaked out and couldn't come down and was screaming for an hour before they could get her down off the scaffolding, and he was afraid because I was a chick I was going to do the same thing.

KD: [laughter] Poor guy! Poor thing!

MG: So he had me do—you know, it literally took me an hour to do all the work that they wanted to, because all the other stuff was graphic lettering that they were taking care of, and I just had to do the pictorial. And then they didn't pay me because I did it so quickly. And it was winter. The mural over there had to be done with an oil-based paint, it had to be done with enamel because the snow, it was starting to fall, and so had to do that. But it wasn't just that, it was just that and a lot of situations where they wouldn't hire me because they didn't think that I could do the work or I couldn't carry anything heavy or I couldn't work fast enough or . . . You know, guys would come up to me, and they'd say to me, you know, "You have to paint every day and you have to practice every day." And they'd give me this advice, and I'd go, "Yes, I know, I know."

At one time I think there was a group over here in Venice that met over in Centinela [Avenue]. There was a [man], his name was Tony, and he invited me to come and apply for a job he had. And then I showed up, and it turned out he didn't have a job and they wanted me to model with my clothes on. But, "Oh, we have a drawing class. Why don't you model for us and we'll pay you for modeling?" So I said, "Okay, I'll take that," you know, and they said, "Well, you know, we know you don't have any money right now, so we'll give you a scholarship so you can come and join us and draw with us." I said, "Oh, that's great! It's a three-hour session! Do you mind if I paint?" They'd say, "Okay, but you don't have enough time to do a painting here, and Bob here, he comes and he paints, and he'll help you out a little bit." And I said, "Okay, that's fine." And I showed up with my little paint set and my little Masonite, and I sat down. And [in] one hour I knocked out a painting and I was ready to knock out the other two 'cause, I have two more hours. And I was sitting at my little sketch bench—I had sketch boards—and they said [gasps]. And there was another woman who was part of the group, and she says, "I want to do what you do," and stopped drawing. And everybody started painting, because before that everybody was drawing. I said, "Well, you've got three hours, you can do a painting!"

KD: Was this in the '90s?

MG: This was in '83.

KD: Oh, when you had just come back.

MG: When I had just come back and I joined his little sessions. I think he still has a few little paintings that I had done from there.

KD: I'm curious about this ability to jump into the right place and people say "yes" to you, or . . . I mean, you somehow are in the right place at the right time and—I mean, it's amazing. It's because you bring your portfolio, you're enthusiastic and they can't say no, you're assertive—

MG: Well, I can do it. You know, it's that very Mexican, you know, sort of like, I've never seen one of those before but I can do it. Whatever it is, I can do it. I think that that's a very Mexican cultural trait! [laughter] You tell them you can do it and you figure it out as you go along!

KD: You meet somebody at a frame shop, you get into a group—or a couple of groups, actually, it sounded like there—and then you come back from. . . You're brought back to Los Angeles from Chicago, and you right away are getting gigs. That's amazing!

MG: Well, you know, I think Glenna, Glenna took care of me.

KD: You said that, and that was my—that's how we started this.

MG: She took care of me, you know. She thought that—I think when I came back from Chicago . . . I mean, I didn't say this, but I think that it would have been very easy for me to have a nervous breakdown and fall apart. Before that, you know . . . When I had gotten custody of my brother at the period of time I had been separated from my husband, so it was just me and my brother at the time, but I was going to—I did go to LACC [Los Angeles Community College] at the time, and I became the editor of the *Citadel*.

I was working with Sam Eisenstein. I took a creative writing class there, and what I learned in the creative writing class—I know I’m jumping around a little bit—is I learned a lot about discipline. He said—it was really interesting, the way he graded—he said, “You either get an A or you get an F. You either do the work—I don’t disagree with your style, we can talk about it, but you’re given a list of things that you have to meet up to, and it’s either pass or fail. That’s the best you can get. And basically you have to submit your writing to—three different articles to magazines or books or something like that. And it isn’t that you have to be accepted. You can be rejected, but you have to have that letter of rejection. You have to read in class at least once, you have to read your work aloud. You have to write so many thousand words per week. You have . . .” I mean, so he gives you a whole list, and you just meet that criteria and you get an A. You don’t do it and you get an F. That’s as simple as it was.

But what it instilled in me, that little process from this writing class, was that—just do the work. Just do the work. And it was about getting us—just sit there and write, write, and write. I’m not going to judge it on how good it is. I don’t give a shit about the grammar. Just do the work. And it was the same thing with the painting. You know, I was painting on Tuesdays and Wednesday nights. I showed up and I painted, and I showed up and I painted. I carried a sketchpad and I just did it, and you just do it, and you just do it, and it’s practice and it’s discipline, and it’s a self-discipline. I don’t know where it’s going to take me! I had no idea if I’m going to be an artist or not be an artist, but that discipline helped me to create a rhythm and to feel comfortable with it.

I mean, you know, sometimes—you know, like there was a period of time I was taking class with Vern Wilson, and I would get there at Saturday morning and I was like, “Oh, I don’t know if I can draw. It’s kind of cold. I want some coffee. Where’s the art?” You know. And you’d sit and you’d start and you feel kind of rusty, but after you’re into it for an hour you’re in it! And you just have to go there. You have to let yourself go there and be there, and you have to make the time for it. You have to say, “I paint, I draw at this hour of this day at this time of week” and do it on a regular basis and make a commitment to do it and just do it. And don’t worry about how good you are or how great you are or whether or not it’s going to hang in a museum. Just go there and put yourself through the process, and given enough time at a certain point you will turn a corner and you will say, “Oh my god, look what I’ve learned!” You know, you have to give yourself the time to grow that little seed that you planted in your heart.

**KD:** Did any of the folks that you were working in these groups with ever give you encouragement, or was that necessary?

**MG:** It was all about, you want to be a painter then you have to come paint. That’s it!

**KD:** So no one did critique of others’ works, or even . . .

**MG:** No, we didn’t do that. We didn’t do that much. I just saw what I saw and reacted and responded to it, and I didn’t know if it was any good. I didn’t worry about it being good or great or anything like that. I just did it, you know. I wasn’t trying to be the Chicano artist. I wasn’t even trying to be the artist. I was just trying to take a practice on. I was trying to learn how to paint, I guess the same way somebody would be trying to learn how to play the piano or play the violin or do anything like that. But I made a commitment of time. I gave it a space in my life because it was important enough for me to learn it. If it’s important enough for you to say you want to be an artist, then you know, make a schedule for it. Schedule it in.

**KD:** What about the technique that’s . . . I mean, you talked just briefly about—

[break in audio]

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia on the tenth of September, and this is our second tape, second side. I was asking her about, you know, doing murals early on. Do you know how to prep a wall, or did you . . .

**MG:** Well, you know, when I got the first mural with Glenna—then Boltuch, now Avila—I asked her. I said, “So what do we have to do?” And she said, “Well, you have to prep the wall,” and it was me and Randy. That mural that we did, the *Two Blue Whales* on the corner of Beethoven and Venice, we took a hot . . . Well,

first we wanted to prep the wall. We wanted the wall to be as stable as possible. We chose an east-facing wall because we knew that it would get less [sun], it would not be so harsh. We chose blue colors because they knew that they could stand up to the weather and the color, and if we chose red that it would be faded, because red burns out right away. So we chose a theme that was mutually, you know, that we felt had social relevance that we could both agree on. And that was the whales, 'cause we both agreed with that, and they were in the blue range, which meant that it would last a long time. It was east-facing.

We hosed off the wall. We clawed it, because we wanted to make sure the surface . . . I mean, my ex-husband was then working as a contractor, so he knew that the wall had to be prepped, and we didn't want it to crumble or anything like that. So we took a high-powered nozzle to it, we took a claw, we sanded it, we scraped it, we chipped it, we gessoed it, and, you know, we gave it a lot of paint and made sure that the paint was nice and thick. And that particular mural, in part because of the prep, has lasted a very long time, and the restoration on it has been minimal. No one has touched it, even.

**KD:** The other thing that was striking to me is this: as you map your early part of your career, it seems to me you're quite successful at negotiating the art world, the art . . . You haven't talked about market yet, but at least getting in, becoming part of a group or establishing . . . I mean, I'm really fascinated by [the fact that] it's under the curatorial direction that Chicano, at least Chicano Day of the Dead altars take on a different form, 'cause I don't think I've heard . . . Or at least what goes from the Photography Center and then back to Self Help. Self Help wasn't doing that in its early Day of the Dead [events].

**MG:** I wasn't—I didn't concern myself with what Self Help had been doing. I mean, I don't think any curator does. They look for what is relevant to the day, you know, sort of like—

**KD:** Well, if we go back to my question about the memories of early critical response, was there a critical response to—

**MG:** I don't remember ever getting a write-up. But you know, you're right in the middle, you know, like, honestly, I was sitting there in the middle of all this creative talent and all these people that I had become aware of. And when I looked to curate I wasn't looking to try to fit a genre, I was trying to fit the meaning and the sentiment, my understanding of what the Day of the Dead was. And you know, I'm not Mexican, I'm Chicana, so my interpretation is going to be Chicana, and, you know, you always bring your own stuff. My studies in spirituality, in, you know, Edgar Cayce and the *Seth Material* and all that other stuff that has a more universal basis—

[break in audio]

**MG:** I was talking about universal idea of spirituality. Well, you know, Day of the Dead is one of those things that was put together by the Catholic [church], you know, on All Souls' Day, and also the Aztec ideology of it. But I'm not, I don't see myself as Catholic anymore, and I think that because I don't see myself as Catholic anymore I also don't see myself as having to limit myself to the sort of Catholic religion or Catholics in general, so not just about not being Mexican or being Chicano. But I think that because dying is the universal experience—being born, dying, you know, is part of that—I think that you want to look at this grieving process in the way it affects people regardless of religion, because it's not about religion. It's about our experiences as souls, as people, how we impact one another and how we move on and what kind of an imprint that leaves on you.

**KD:** You know, you were talking about commentary that must have come from folks that, you know, you were doing the photography on the west side, not the east side, so do you recall any commentary about, you know, "What are they doing with the altar form and how dare they?"

**MG:** [laughter] No!

**KD:** I mean, artists that we identify as Chicano artists are the ones, some of the people you invited. I mean, those are the names you gave me, so—

**MG:** Yeah, but there were other people that I invited. I think that there was this. . . There is a criticism by some that, "This is ours, it belongs to us. We have struggled with not having an identity. We have struggled with



creating something that it culturally and uniquely ours and only ours, and you're giving it away, and, you know, you're inviting these white people to show and be a part of this, and it's not fair because so many of us had to fight just to be able to show, and they are cultural vultures that are appropriating our imagery." So there's that feeling of getting ripped off by some people, and I think that that's part of it.

The other thing was that [at] the Photo Center, there was an old established photography clique community that existed there. Mostly it was men with these big photo lenses that took all these cheesecake shots, you know, stuff like Bettie Page, that kind of thing. And it was a kind of a dicey situation for the Photo Center because, you know, they would go on these excursions where they had models show up at the beach, and they'd be taking their photos, and they'd have all these photo shoots. And sometimes the guys would get along with the girls and there would be all this other little stuff going on, and . . . You know, like we don't know who these photographers were or are! I mean, we have the photography equipment. We had lights and we had backdrops that they could rent at three dollars an hour! You know, we had a photography situation where you joined as a member of the Photography Center. And they had a backdrop in the backyard that—I think one of the sets was [from] *Meet Me in St. Louis* with Judy Garland. They had some of the old sets from Hollywood that were donated to the Photo Center, so they had some of these things there. But they also had these photographers who were more interested in taking these sort of boudoir type of imagery. And there was a resentment that I had brought the Day of the Dead there.

And my understanding, and what I've heard is that one of [Mayor Richard] Riordan's biggest supporters and patrons had found out about that, and he supported Riordan on the whole idea that he would privatize the cultural centers that we had. You know, the Department of Cultural Affairs is one of the smallest departments in the city of Los Angeles, and Clarence Inman, who was the director before Glenna, had done a lot of fundraising and had raised a lot of money to upgrade the Photo Center. But his mistake was that in his fundraising, instead of establishing a 501(c)(3) and a foundation, one of the things that he did was he put it back into the city coffers. And when the Olympics came to LA they went into those coffers, took the money, and established a polo field out in Griffith Park for the Olympic Games. So they lost all that money, and that money, which . . . Actually, the Photo Center should have become a multimedia center, and that would have been the best thing for LA, but instead, you know, the Photo Center was kind of down.

And one of the reasons for doing [the Day of the Dead at] the Photo Center was to bring awareness to the Photo Center—that it existed—because it had become this very private old-man white club. I mean, there were some people of color there, but not much. And when the Photo Center did the Day of the Dead, all of a sudden you had these photographers. You had the black photographers of Southern California. You had the photographers who had gotten the Pulitzer at the *LA Times*. I established the focus on photojournalism. That I hosted—where I had photographers from the *Times*, from the *Herald* back then, White House press photographers, to talk about photojournalism as a group. And then I met Lester Sloan, who was with *Newsweek*, and this is a funny story. He calls me up and he says, "They're going to shoot *48 Hours in America*," that book that they shot, "and they have, they're sending a photographer here from Mexico, and we want to set her up someplace where she can spend forty-eight hours, and do you have a place?" I said, "Sure. I have a situation that, you know, my niece is deaf and she belongs to a gang. I think that would be a really interesting photo essay for her." And he calls me back the next day, says, "No, no, they're going to use another resource. We'll get back to you." And I'm working over at the LA Photo Center. So then I get another call from Sister Karen saying, "We've got a photographer coming in to do the shoot. Do you have a place?" I go, "Sure, I do!" And so then they get, "No, they're going to get back to me." I don't know if it was—which one it was first. It was Glenna or Sister Karen. All three of them, all roads led to Margaret. They all came back to me. And finally I met her and I said, "Yes, I have a place," so I took her over to my niece, who's deaf—

KD: You mean Graciela—

MG: Graciela Iturbide. And that's how I met Graciela, and that's how I hooked her up with my niece, who is a part of the White Fence gang in East LA and she's deaf. I said, "Well, that would be something interesting to see, to look at."

KD: So did you go with her the whole time, or did you . . .

MG: No, I took her there, I dropped her off, and I left. You don't do that. You let them do their work, you don't interfere. You know, a photographer needs whatever they need to shoot to do whatever they need to do. I was still working at the Photo Center at that time.

KD: Did you think about . . . I mean, tell me more about why you thought this group would be right for this project? I mean, you said it to three different sources, you know—

MG: Well, they all picked me up because they knew I knew East LA and that I've lived there and that I'm from East LA, and that, you know . . . If they send you to an art center they send you to an art center, but you're looking for material that is of human concern. You're looking for something that has not been thought about, considered. You're looking for the human condition under different situations, and I know that the deaf community and the deaf kids in East LA in these gangs are basically invisible.

And even though she did—I mean, it hasn't been until recently that people have become aware of the fact that these people are deaf. They knew that they were in gangs and they're doing all this *placas*, and there's a bit of, you know, kind of putting them down. But one of the reasons for all the hand signs is the fact that they sign. They do sign language because they're deaf, and that's the way they express themselves. So even though it's a lot of throwing gang signs and stuff like that, they're deaf, and it's an aspect of what . . . I mean, you know, people get offended by that stuff, but there's a reason behind it. Los Angeles has the largest deaf community in the world, and one of the reasons we have one of the largest deaf communities is because there was an epidemic of rubella that came through because a lot of people were not inoculated against the measles. And my sister was one of those people who got rubella, and her daughter was deaf because she got it when she was pregnant. So I mean, I was aware of that.

I think that any time you bring awareness to a condition, a situation that people are living and existing under, if you're doing it with compassion, I think it's favorable. I think I would probably be a lot more cautious about opening that door and letting anybody in, because I've dealt with the media sometimes, like the newspapers, and they tend to be rather . . . Their method of photojournalism is sort of the rape and pillage method! [*laughter*] They shoot from their car, sort of like a drive-by! Whereas the thing about this particular situation was, she was to be there and stay there and to understand the situation and the condition, which, because I was working with photojournalistic photographers, I knew that that was the best kind of situation for a photographer to be in. You don't want them to just make an introduction and have a one-hour photo shoot. You want them to sit there and get a feel for who these people are and have an understanding of what their lifestyle is about, to see them as human beings, not just as models or subjects. And that was what they were asking for, and that's what I wanted to make sure was provided wasn't just a drive-by. I had been exposed to lovely photography exhibits that had been portraying, say, Echo Park. And in this one case [I] was looking at this photograph of this guy with a shotgun sitting on a porch, and we said, "Well, where did you shoot that?" He said, "Well, it wasn't Echo Park, but it made me feel like Echo Park." And I thought that that was kind of a cheap shot for Echo Park because, you know, there was something kind of dirty about it. There was something kind of gritty about it, and you know, it was like—

KD: It wasn't genuine.

MG: It's not genuine, no. And so you get this feeling that it's more about the way he sees the Mexican community because he's not from the Mexican community. He's a white guy who's sort of traveling through and thought it would be really edgy to do a documentary about these gang-bangers in this, you know, ghetto. And so you don't see the human side of it. You don't see the guy who's carrying his baby and pushing the stroller, or the woman who's helping her mother across the street, or . . . You don't see that. It goes by you. You focus on what you're afraid of. And if you come into the community and you're afraid, that's what you focus on. And photojournalism, as much as any other art form, is one of those things where it helps

define who we are. It says “this is who we are” in a very graphic way, and empowerment means having that within your control and being able to define who you are. That’s why it’s important for Chicano photographers to have the ability to be able to make that statement about who we are instead of having white people come into our community and shoot us, and shoot us with their fears and their—

**KD:** But what made you feel comfortable with a Mexicana coming?

**MG:** Well, because my feeling was that she had a compassionate eye at the time. And I have to say that Willie Middlebrook was a big influence on me at this point. He had gotten the NEA [grant], and he was one of the first black photographers to ever get the NEA. And I had walked with him in skid row and took my camera down there and was able to shoot with him. He took me on a shoot with him down at night in skid row, and I remember we talked . . . It wasn’t just him, it was Donald Bernard, it was the black photographers who talked about being able to define your community from within. And the Chicanos needed to have that as much as the black photographers.

**KD:** I’m curious about the forty-eight-hour project. How did you ask your niece? How did you introduce the project to her?

**MG:** I called my sister, who talked with my other niece, and my niece, who is a hearing person, she was there at the time. And I asked her, and she enjoyed it. She enjoyed that. I mean, she’s on the Internet and she has her picture up with her and the other girls, and she loves it. She loves the fact—she says, “I’m famous!” It’s a big deal for her. It’s meaningful for her. She enjoys it. That’s fine.

**KD:** Did you like the results of the work?

**MG:** Yeah. I don’t think it’s finished. I feel that there’s more to come, and I don’t think Graciela feels it’s finished, either. I’m glad it was done.

**KD:** Let’s take a break for today!

## SEPTEMBER 12, 2008

**KD:** All right, let me cue up.

**MG:** We hadn't gotten to that, yeah.

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia, and today is September 12, 2008. And this is our third session for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. And I wanted to start, Margaret, with . . . Last time we were talking about some of the important opportunities you had, but I know we haven't covered all of them. And the Metro commission seems to me like a really important—

**MG:** Well, the Metro commission, I think, started in—was it '92? I'm not exactly sure of the year that I applied. I applied . . . Jon Moynes was working up there, and he helped me write a letter of interest to—I guess it was Maya Emsden up there. And I wanted the Metro station at Universal, because it was the Campo de Cahuenga and I loved the fact that it was a historic site. That it was related to, I felt, my Chicano history. My knowledge of the Mexican American experience.

It's the beginning, because this is the location where the Campo—the treaty of the Campo de Cahuenga was—the capitulation was signed between [John C.] Frémont and Andrés Pico, ending the Mexican American War in California. This is before the end and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. And Doña Bernarda Ruiz, who was from Santa Barbara, very smart, sharp, intelligent woman, who . . . It's sort of a long, involved story, but she basically convinces Frémont that it's in his best interest, politically speaking, to have the Californios. And I would love to talk a little bit about the Californios. But the thing is, she convinced him that it was in his best political interest to have them surrender to him and to sign a treaty, because he ends the war. You've got [Robert] Stockton, and you've got all these—you've got [Stephen W.] Kearney, who lost a leg. They're battling and they're being—basically they're being assholes. They had been stationed off of Monterey, if you go back to 1842—this is before the war breaks out. The war breaks out in 1846, supposedly between a battle on the Nueces River in Texas. But the truth is that there was a telegram from Waddy Thompson—who was the ambassador to Mexico to President Polk—basically stating, as far as Texas is concerned, "They can keep Texas. I want California."

And their reasoning for wanting California was the Bay of St. Francisco, as they called it. They wanted to—the Bay of St. Francisco, because it provided a large harbor to, in his words, "harbor all the ships of all the world." And with the oak in Northern California they can build all the ships of all the world, because the trees are abundant and there's so much lumber. And the reason for wanting this maritime location is because it provides access to China. It is from sea to shining sea, and with it, the commerce that China provides. It is after this period that you get into the Boxer Rebellion in China. But the money from that particular exchange funded the Industrial Revolution and the railroad that goes across the United States. They didn't want commerce with the Gulf of Mexico via Texas.

The exchange in Texas was a ruse, in order to start a fight with Mexico, because California was under Mexican authority. Mexico was not providing a lot of soldiers to guard or protect Mexico. In 1842, you've got—you've got the commander, I can't remember his name, I can give it to you later. [Thomas ap Catesby Jones—ed.] But he basically captures Monterey, thinking that the United States is at war with Mexico, and we're not. And so he has to apologize, and he gives them ammunition and uniforms and things like that, he says, "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought we were at war" and has to leave. And it leaves the people here thinking the United States wants California. Of course they want California. This is before they even discovered gold. They really wanted—they wanted Northern California. They were okay with not getting Southern California, and they were okay with not getting Baja California, because Baja California at one point is offered up.

**KD:** Oh, really? I didn't know that.

**MG:** Yeah. And so there's a priest, Macnamara. There's a priest from Ireland named [Eugene] Macnamara, comes here and negotiates a treaty with Mexico, and is going to bring ten thousand starving Irish from the potato famine to California to establish the Macnamara colony. And on the day that that agreement

is signed is the day that war breaks out with Mexico and the United States, because the United States had spies out there, and they find out, and they're afraid that if the Irish are here, the British will come in too, and they will take control of the Bay of San Francisco. The Bay of San Francisco is key to commerce with China. And that's why they want it.

**KD:** Now, you did this research prior to the application? Or . . .

**MG:** No, no, no. *[laughter]* I didn't know all of this, but I knew that the founding of Los Angeles, and the history pre-pioneers, European pioneers, was key to the Chicano history and the Mexican history here in California. And I knew it, but I hadn't gotten all the information yet. What I did was, I started putting this information together. I had some of it, I knew some of it. And we made a presentation to the people of—the Native Sons and *[Native]* Daughters of the Golden West, and they hated it. They hated my presentation. And I knew that what they wanted was, they wanted me to focus on the American, Eurocentric American influences, and their ancestors who came here sixty years after the signing of the capitulation. And I knew that that's what they wanted me to focus on, because they had taken control—they have control of the Campo de Cahuenga—and they wanted to be able to present their ancestors kind of like the people who came over on the Mayflower. And they wanted that, the Campo de Cahuenga, to be all about their settling of this untamed West. And I knew that the history that existed here would just be totally ignored.

So what I did was I hired, as part of my proposal, I hired Bill Mason, who had thirty years with the Museum of Natural History and had *[researched]* the census of—what was it, 1798, something like that. I don't know what the census was, what year. But his—I couldn't give you the exact date on that. But he provided me with all the history. I sat at his feet and I took it down. And then I compiled the history that I was preserving—to put on. . . If you go to the platform, it is all of this history of all of these people. And there's a lot of written history that goes along with the portraits and things that I carved in clay that's there on the platform. And I did it in English and I did it in Spanish, because the capitulation was written in both languages. And so, you know, Frémont, who signed the capitulation with Andrés Pico, gets court-martialed for signing it.

**KD:** I didn't know that one. Wow.

**MG:** Yeah. He was court-martialed. He also was the first Republican president to run for—I mean, nominee, to run for presidency—on an antislavery platform. And you have to remember that the people that were here, the Mexicans that were here, half of them were black. So, you know, there was a concern about this lynching that was going on, that later became an issue when the forty-niners came in. Because they were lynching a lot of Mexicans. But it wasn't just because they were Mexican. It was because they were Mexican and they were black. You have *[Pío de Jesús]* Pico, who was the last Mexican governor of California, he goes up to San Francisco to testify at a trial, and when he gets there, they prohibit him from testifying because he's black. And Andrés Pico is his brother.

**KD:** When you tried to take historical narrative, I'm curious about the artistic process then. How do you work—

**MG:** Well, you know, I love history. I think—I felt fortunate to get selected for this project. Kate Diamond sat on the panel that helped select me. She was an architect, and she noticed in looking at my portraits and my paintings that I was scribbling writing on the paintings, and that I wasn't afraid of language, that I enjoyed language, that I enjoyed the story of it, that if there was something that—a little quote or something that was said during a sitting, I might consider scribbling it into the painting itself. And that I like language. I like the story behind it. Sometimes there's nothing I can say, and then sometimes the painting says it all, and then sometimes a word changes that. If my dogs are getting too loud, I'll stop.

**KD:** I don't think so. Well, maybe. *[laughter]*

**MG:** Hey! Cut it out. So, anyway, she noticed that. And because of that, and she knew that it was a historic site, that this type of project required some writing, that somehow the history of what took place at this location was important enough to be written about, and needed to be written about. And most artists

just wanted to do art and not really pay attention to what came down. But I think that locations are very important. The history of a location is very important.

And one of the instances that I recall is, there was an artist that was commissioned to do a project down in Little Tokyo. And she was an American artist who didn't know anything about the Japanese history in Little Tokyo. And her project was—turned out to be something like a large American flag on the side of a building with something else on it. And the people in Little Tokyo were somewhat—I don't want to say offended, I can't say they were offended, but they didn't really like this project. And one of the reasons that they didn't like this project is because this artist was unaware that during World War II, all of the Japanese Americans were forced to take oaths of patriotism. And without knowing that, and doing that particular project, not being sensitive to what had happened to these people . . . You can be very offended. But—because you need to sort of embrace the history of what did happen there.

And what happened at the Campo de Cahuenga was that Frémont was convinced to sign this capitulation that kept the Mexican laws intact while the . . . And so the Mexicans were able to keep their property, at least for the moment. But one of the things that Andrés Pico did, was that he went out into the valley and lit campfires throughout the valley, so when Frémont looked out into the valley, he saw all of these campfires. And he thought, "Oh, he's got hundreds and thousands of men, and it's going to be a big battle, and we can prevent that by . . ." You know. So that was one of the things that he did to get Frémont to sign this.

Now, some of the history that I'm giving you is not all of the history that's there, because I was limited in time and limited in terms of Maya Emsden. Maya Emsden was the biggest pain in the ass in the history of—my history of art making that I've ever had to deal with. The Metro people were just horrible. If you go to the Metro station, you will see that it is very labor-intensive. The city of Los Angeles and the state of California have gotten their money's worth out of me in the installation that's there. And I gave it my all, because I recognize and I know for a fact that that station is going to stand for at least a hundred years, if not two. It's going to be there a long time. And that history needed to be accurate, and it needed to be as truthful as possible. And the problems that I had with the Metro was that they wouldn't approve certain [things] because they were trying really hard to save money. They didn't want to pay me for a fabrication. They did it this way—they had the most convoluted method of invoicing that I've ever seen ever by anybody, and I used to help my husband when he did contracting, you know. They wanted . . .

You know, normal contract—you get a contract, it's a certain amount of money, you get a percentage up front, you pay for your materials. Half here when you get half of it done, and then half when you're finished. No, are they paying you for design or are they paying you for fabrication. The pay rates are different, they don't pay you the same way for different things. And you have to justify every single thing and account for every minute that you worked on everything. And then they make it so convoluted that you just about have to hire a bookkeeper to be able to invoice, but they don't want to put the money in the budget to hire the bookkeeper. It's sort of like they make it almost impossible for any normal human being to even invoice them. And they would kick it back and they would kick it back. And finally I just said, "You know, I've given you my last invoice." "Well, we don't agree with it." Well, they don't agree with it? What does that mean? And I think forty-five days passed, they hadn't paid me. And I said, "Okay, you're breaking the contract, because my contract says you have to pay me within thirty days." "Oh, no. Well, you know, I'm not going to be there, and so-and-so's not going to be there." And I said, "Well, you know what, I have the acetates for the silk screening that goes on the tunnel of the wall." Because I also was involved in some of the finishes. It's not just the art on the platform, it's the finishes, it's the handrails, it's the other stuff that goes on at the station. And I received an award in architectural design as a member of that team, because of all the other work that I did on that stuff.

**KD:** Because you were doing design. [*laughter*] You were doing architectural design.

**MG:** Yeah. Yeah. So, you know—

**KD:** So were they—their censorship was based on cost, is what you've said so far.

- MG:** Not completely. Maya didn't like—there was a couple of paragraphs that were censored, because Maya . . . I think there was one sentence that made a reference to the fact that the forces here were trying to do a Texas-style takeover, where the pioneers basically moved in, and there were so many people there that they basically took over. But in California, that they weren't able to do that because they didn't have enough of a population, whereas the Mexican population that was here was bigger. They had a greater population. This whole misunderstanding over the fact that the *Méxicanos* here called themselves Californios. Well, you know, the people in Texas today will call themselves Texans. That doesn't mean that they don't think of themselves as Americans. And it's the same kind of thought, because they knew that they were Mexican, but they were a certain type of Mexican, and that Mexican was a frontiersperson that was on the frontier of what was Mexico, and it was California.
- KD:** Right. Regional identity.
- MG:** It was a regional identity that they were very proud of. The black, the Afro-mestizaje from Sinaloa that moved here, who were descendants of slaves of what was then Mexico. And you know, Mexico had let go of the slaves. They had freed the slaves.
- KD:** That's right.
- MG:** And so the thing with Texas was that one of its reasons for not wanting to be a part of Mexico was that it didn't want to free the slaves that it had, which was very obvious.
- KD:** So don't tell me she was trying to censor the fact that—
- MG:** She did. She did censor some of it, because she didn't like . . . She says, "Well, we're not trying to pick a fight with Texas." But one of the things that I did—
- KD:** But that's just history, that's, you know—
- MG:** Yeah, that's just history. But, you know, one of the things that I did in order to protect myself from as much censorship as possible was I would take direct quotes from Frémont or Doña Bernarda or Waddy Thompson, and she couldn't touch it, because that is a direct quote. So that's what I did.
- KD:** Very smart.
- MG:** Yeah. And I just tried to provide the framework for it.
- KD:** Wow. What about aesthetic control? Did you, did they—
- MG:** No. They didn't really do anything. But they wanted sketches for everything. And you know, they were ridiculous because, you know, I don't draw. I don't draw the way I carve clay, and it's not that kind of thing. And I'm not an illustrator. "You want me to tell you there's broken pieces here and there's broken pieces there." You know. They gave me such a headache over that crap. But that's not the kind of . . . You know, I wasn't putting any nudes out there. There was no vulgarity, there was no profanity, there was . . . You know, it was about—
- KD:** Did they talk about structural integrity? Because I know some artists that have—
- MG:** I took care of all of that by hiring—by making sure that my budget included the installation by a professional company that was already hired to do other portions of the station. And Kate Diamond was a dream about that, because what she tried to do was, when she made a bid for certain parts of the station, she worked hand-in-hand with me, so that she made sure that when the tile company that did the job to put all the tile for all of the station, that it included the tile for the artwork. So that I didn't have to pay for it out of my budget, but that it was included in the budget of the station.
- KD:** Wow.
- MG:** So she was just sharp, and we worked . . . I swear, that station was like a marriage. I mean, it was an all-women team, the other thing. It was a complete women's team. It was a dream working with her. She and I were on the same page. We'd come to the table and she'd say, "I like this, I don't like this," and we'd put it all out. And there were a few disagreements. I felt that the color and the pattern of what was going on in the tunnel, because it's enamel on steel, needed to be stronger, a little more punchy, with a more vibrant color and not so much white. And she was worried that it would make the tunnel dark, and that there had to be so many—I forget the measurements for light that were in there. The other thing was, we put

a whole wall of—a timeline wall on the outside, that was interesting. And I really didn't want to put a lot of energy into that, but she made me stop, and I had to provide a timeline in English and Spanish, again. And then the engineers of the station decided that she couldn't put the light sconces on the sides of the building as you go down into the—

**KD:** Down to the platform?

**MG:** Down the escalator. Because as you come down the escalator, the walls should be in front of you. But what happened was, they wouldn't allow her to put the sconces, the light sconces, on the side. And they made her hang this giant chandelier to match the other chandelier. So as you go down, the wall is in front of you, but it's behind the chandelier, you can't easily read it. You can see it from the elevator, and you can see that the timeline wall is there. So there is a timeline, you know, when the Native Americans first came, when Gaspar de Portolà arrived, you know, when Father Junípero [Serra] established the first mission, all that stuff is there. And it's there on the wall, but you can't see it very easily.

**KD:** That's a nice history lesson. *[laughter]*

**MG:** I know. We're talking all about the history, but—and I feel my whole body and my energy level just rise, and I start almost shouting, because I'm very passionate about that history. It's a history—it's really the Chicano history to a certain extent, and it's not provided in our public schools. And the thing about this particular station is that the kids can go there, they can see the station. They can go to the platform, and they can touch it, and it's got carvings, and it's colorful, and it's got a lot of language, and they can read about it. And people who take that train on a regular basis, they get on it, they get off it, they get on it, they wait for trains, they stand there, and they may not read the whole thing in one trip, but eventually they will read it. But eventually, they will read it, and they'll read little bits about it, it might intrigue them, it might intrigue them enough to go back and read a little more. And that's what I want.

**KD:** Talk about the clay carvings that you did. I didn't actually realize that all of that was yours. I've only seen—I haven't been to the station, but I've seen the images, electronic.

**MG:** I hired Wayne Perry, to work with him, because he was a ceramicist, and I didn't have enough experience in clay to be able to do that. I do now, I feel like I could do it now, without a ceramicist. But I also needed somebody who was strong and can pull those racks out of the kiln. Frank Romero actually helped me with some of it, because there were a few pieces that were done out of his studio. And I worked out of his kiln for awhile. You know, basically, Wayne would make slabs, or I would make slabs. My daughter helped me out, she made slabs. That coffee table right there that you see? I worked on that table. It was in my living room over on Bernice. I had a normal house, I had an outside area, and we would roll slabs.

And you had to let them sit for a while so that they became kind of leathery. Not dry-dry, but kind of leathery, because if you roll a slab, it's too soft to carve right away. You have to let it sit long enough to dry out a little bit. And we would—we had these little ruler-like things, and you roll out a slab, and then you cut it and you carve it. And we were working on a grid. One of the things that Kate said, and I agreed, was that she didn't like the tiling with all of these straight lines, because it looked like a bathroom. And I liked having different tiles of different shapes. So it was sort of grid, sort of mosaic. So it has a lot of movement to it. And Wayne Perry carved some of the leaves, because I wanted leaves off the top part of it. And so we created these leaf patterns—or he did, actually—that fit, so that he could sort of place them together. But when I was putting them down, after doing the first tree, I put them down very orderly. And then when I got to the other ones, I started spinning them around, because the first one was the order, the way in which things were before the Europeans arrived.

And I wanted to show, you know, the Gabrielinos were here, there was a particular—they were very laid-back. They actually were—they smoked a lot of marijuana back then. *[laughter]* They were kind of relaxed about their lifestyle. It was the women, the indigenous women, that became members of the church probably more so than the men, because they had a certain stability, they wanted a regular—I guess, commitment. I don't know if that would be it. But the church was kind of funky, because the people here were accustomed to doing a religious ceremonial bathing on a regular basis. They bathed in



the morning, and gave thanks to . . . I don't know what the religious practice was exactly, but I do know that ceremonial bathing was part of it. And when the church moved everybody into these little crowded little rooms, they didn't permit them to bathe. And the infant mortality rate just skyrocketed, and a lot of people just died. And once you became a member of the mission, then you weren't allowed to leave, because then they'd hunt you down and maybe even kill you. So, you know—

**KD:** You know, I'm really struck. You'd get an A in my "Intro to Chicano Studies" class [*laughter*] where we teach that history.

**MG:** So you've learned—you've already read this history.

**KD:** No, I don't know all of that, no. Are you kidding? You have it even more clear in your mind than I would ever have. I'm just really impressed that—you're right, not all of that story gets to be told in the Metro station.

**MG:** No.

**KD:** Did you—

**MG:** Some of the things that I couldn't say, like, for instance on the first column, I have a carving of the mission. And under the mission, I've put little skeletons all underneath it, because I wasn't allowed to say that, and I knew they wouldn't allow me to say that, so I depicted it. So there's a lot of little things in there that take awhile to know that I put it there. But it's there. It's there. In my own way, I put it there.

**KD:** So have you found yourself doing other projects like that, with this incredible—it doesn't have to be historical research, but this kind of investigative process?

**MG:** Not like that. I mean, you know, there's things that I care about, and things that I'm concerned about, and they seep up like sweat. They come out of me like—and I'm not trying. It's just that it's there. And it isn't something that I'm always conscious of. Because, you know, if you're making a work of art, and you achieve that sort of state of grace where you're connected to your skill and you're responding to what you love and what you see in front of you, after a period of time it has its own little journey. And you can go back, like a diary, and say, "Oh, that's what I was doing then, that's what I was saying, that's what I cared about and that's what I was concerned with."

The portraits that I did, the Nuevo Mestizaje [series of] portraits, I think, are a very prime example of that. Where I've always been intrigued with this thing of racial identity, that, you know, here you have somebody who comes from Lebanon, and is half Jewish, and yet they're calling themselves Mexican. Elias Nahmias, who was a filmmaker, is Lebanese and Jewish, and he knew Gabriel García Márquez and his son. And he met with him, and they were talking about that. And one of the things that Gabriel García Márquez said to him is, "The seeds of destruction are within you." I thought, "Oh, wow. That's great." And that's the kind of thing I liked to write onto the portrait. And so I did his portrait. It's part of [my] Nuevo Mestizaje [series]. But also people who, you know . . . Like, I met this black woman and I did her portrait. And as I was painting her, I said to her, "You know, you look like you could be part Asian." And she just lit up, she lit up, and she said, "Oh, my mother was Vietnamese! And nobody ever knows that. They know I'm black, but they don't know that I'm Vietnamese." And it meant so much to her that I could see it. And the thing is that we are so many things, and the thing about *Méxicanos*, this idea that . . . It's almost *la raza cósmica*, you know, that we're all of this, and there's so many aspects of that. I'm not straight-up Indian.

**KD:** Well, we're not pure anything.

**MG:** We're not pure anything, and it is this sort of hybridization of different people that make it so beautiful. And you look and somebody and you go, "Oh, you know, they look like they have a little bit of black in them." No, look at the coloring, it looks kind of golden. These things that. . . And yet we are all human. We are all—we all have some contribution, something to give. And the thing about the Metro station that I want to say to young people is, your culture, your people, have made a contribution. You have this period of time when Rodney King or, what's his name, and there's all these riots and all this stuff, and people are out burning and destroying property and buildings and things like that. The reason why I think that happens is because there is no sense of ownership. There's no sense that your culture or your people or

anything like that has made any kind of contribution to this establishment, and there's no loss to them in losing it or burning it down. But when you understand what your people have gone through and done to be able to be here, to be a part of that, to contribute what they've contributed, then you protect it. Then you guard it, you protect it, you nurture it, you do what you can. You have to take care of this place. And that's what hopefully this does, that it honors the history.

**KD:** Now, I could just imagine you sitting with Bill Mason, and he's delighted that he's got such a wonderful student. So what were the—were those conversations? Did he hand you books, did he—

**MG:** I have books. I would buy books, I'd read them. I'd ask him about it, and we would talk about it. And at the end, he told me, you know, you could teach this now.

**KD:** Well, that's what I'm telling you. *[laughter]*

**MG:** Yeah, he would say that, he says, "You're ready to teach this." And I needed to have that much of it and that much understanding of it in order to be able to put it on the wall, because I knew I would get attacked. And I was, I was attacked by the Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West, who felt that the project was too Mexican. Well, this was Mexico! Give me a break. What do you want? Of course it's Mexican!

**KD:** And how did you win that battle then?

**MG:** I shut up. You know, they wanted interviews, or they wanted to do something in the press, or they wanted to talk about it, and I refused to talk about it until it was all said and done. It was approved, and once it got its approval, I disappeared and just did the project. Because if I started talking about it, I would have gotten attacked again, and then it would never get installed. You see what happened over here at Hollenbeck.

**KD:** Yes.

**MG:** So, you know—

**KD:** Actually, I should let you do that for the tape, what happened at Hollenbeck. *[laughter]*

**MG:** *[laughter]* What happened to Hollenbeck. The Hollenbeck police station. People were really offended by what was put on the wall. And I know Sandow Birk's work, in fact I sat on a panel in Long Beach that selected his work. And I think his work is really great. *[phone ringing]* You want to hold that line?

**KD:** Go ahead.

**MG:** So I sat on the panel that selected his work for Long Beach. So, you know, obviously I have respect for his work. If the same work had been done by someone who lived in the neighborhood [Boyle Heights], and I lived in the neighborhood—I came from that neighborhood, I went to the library right down the street, I lived in the community, all that stuff—I think that probably there wouldn't have been a problem with it. But I think it's because it's an outside artist looking in. And if I go back to my ideas regarding photojournalism, and how people from the outside are coming in and portraying us the way they see us, instead of the way we see ourselves, I respect the way the community feels about that. I feel that the community is right in being able to say to the powers that be, "This is our community, and nothing's going up here unless we want it here." And I think that every community should have that right. On the other hand, you know, I think that if it had been a Chicano that had done that work, I think that it possibly could have been approved without so much anger.

But I think that as a member of the community, it's easy to question the intent of what it is that's being portrayed. Because when I portray something, my intent is one thing, and somebody from the outside, their intent is another. And I think that intention is relative. So, no one wants to say it, but I think that the best way to have avoided that situation was by making sure that you had an artist who was from the community who understood the needs and understands the need of the community to put their best foot forward and give their young people something positive to see themselves in. And I'm not saying that . . .

I mean, I think that a Chicano artist would probably be able to get away with more. But on the other hand, I also think that, you know, if you get somebody like the East Los Streetscapers, or George Yepes, or Eloy Torrez, or myself, or something like that, we're trying to find the missing space, or the element that makes people feel really good about themselves. It isn't just about an inaccuracy. And it's because that's what the community really wants. They want to see themselves different from the way that the media

has been portraying them. And whether it's true or not, I don't think that that really matters. You know, you watch TV, and you see how actors act, and you go, "Oh, that's the way I'm supposed to act when that happens." As a society, whether it's white, black, brown, or whatever, if you don't have an idea of what that looks like or how you see yourself act, then it doesn't happen. So art is a cultural outlet that provides something different than what the media has been providing.

**KD:** Right. A new possibility.

**MG:** A new possibility. It's not a work that provides a lot of hope. It's not that—for me, it's not because it's that negative. I don't really see it as being that negative. I think more for me, it's about the fact that it's not giving people this sense of positive and hope.

**KD:** What about the kind of collaborative, dialogic process that people like East Los Streetscapers use? I mean, that could have worked with any artist—

**MG:** Well, yeah.

**KD:** Where they go and talk to, get to know the community, and hear and use images, use people from the community as their models, right?

**MG:** Well, I think he did do some of that, but maybe he focused on people, for instance. . . You know, if somebody comes down the street here, and we've got our winos out at the street, and you're focused on the fact that there's a wino on the street instead of a guy who's taking care of his kids, and he's got his daughter by the arm and he's taking her to the park and they're going to go play ball. And that exists, too. But instead of focusing on that, they're focusing on the homeless guy who's sleeping in front of the recycling center. It has to do with focus, because if you go into a community that you don't belong to, you're going to focus on the things that you're afraid of. And if you're from the community, you know what's valuable, and the things that are valuable are the things that you want to preserve. Those are the things that you want to see reflected, and that's the way the community feels.

Now, I'm on the other side of that situation, where I was installing this thing at the Campo de Cahuenga, in a community that was predominantly white and that had been taken over by the Sons and Daughters of the Golden West. Yet even though I'm not from that community, just like Sandow Birk wasn't from that community, I provided a history. But I did do my homework, and I wasn't reflecting negatively. I never said anything negative about the white pioneers that came in and settled over and took the property or stole the land from, or did any of that. I didn't go there. I didn't reflect on that. What I was concerned with—because there's so much to write about, that the history, the positive history that had happened—an understanding of that was going to be put on that. and I didn't want to jeopardize that by getting on a bandwagon and attacking people for no reason. And I don't see the benefit of it, to sit there and talk about, you know, those white forty-niners came in, and they killed Indians, and they lynched people and people were persecuted. There's a lot of that. There's a lot of it. It happened. It happens. So—

**KD:** You mentioned, while you've been talking about the Metro station installation and design, the Nuevo Mestizaje series. And I was wondering if you can reflect on . . . I know this is not what we had planned for today, but, I don't know if you want to call it the catalyst or the impetus or the goal you have. How and why did you get started on that?

**MG:** I remember doing my first portrait at the age of ten. It was a pencil portrait of the woman that took care of me, and she sat in front of me, and I sat there and drew her face as tightly as I could. And I got a really nice likeness. I don't know what ever happened to that portrait. It was a pencil drawing. But I loved doing it. And it always became, like, whenever I painted, it was always a human being that I always painted. I never did landscapes. I didn't do still lifes. I never did still lifes. I didn't paint animals. I just painted people, and it was portraits. And like I think I reiterated—

[*break in audio*]

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos and Margaret Garcia, we're on the second side, for September 12, 2008, in our third session. Go ahead, Margaret. And you were telling me about—

**MG:** Yeah. Judy Baca said that my work wasn't really politically or socially relevant, that all I was doing was easel painting. And I said, well, maybe. I'm not trying to be political. Like I said before, you know, my existence is political. My conception was a criminal act, you know, illegitimate and by an undocumented worker. My very existence here was—I see it as a criminal act. So if politics are devoid of human beings, then I don't understand the reason behind that. I painted people because that's why I enjoyed doing. I just enjoyed doing that. What surfaces for me, as I mature and as my work gets stronger, is this idea that I am concerned with the human condition, and I am documenting my community, one person at a time.

**KD:** But did you look for these folks who are mixed? Or did you—

**MG:** I'm not looking for it. They exist around me. You don't have to—

**KD:** Did it start as a series?

**MG:** I didn't start it as a series, but as I started to look at it, I became aware that that was what was there. I was examining us and looking at our condition, and it became apparent that that's what we are. That's what we were. And I started to reflect about that and think about that. And the difference between the way I see us and the way, say, the media sees us, is that, you know I'm talking to filmmakers and teachers and opera singers and artists and writers and musicians and choreographers and photographers and . . . I mean, these are the people that I am. And they all have these jobs, and they all do these things, and they all care about this stuff. And I look at what the media shows me about what our community is, and they're all gang-bangers, drug dealers, prostitutes, mothers on welfare. I mean, like you say, it's just that—it's so different from what I'm looking at. It's just different, and I'm realizing what it is that I see. And people see it, but they don't see it. They don't understand it, they don't relate to it.

And then I'm also seeing someone who's half Japanese and half Italian, half Mexican, half Filipino, half this, half that, a third this, a fourth that. They're Japanese, they speak Spanish. They're Chinese, they're Thai, they're Cambodian, they're a lot of stuff. And yet we're all functioning as a community, because my community isn't, like, "Okay, all of the Chicanos are over here." I mean, if you come here to Highland Park, you know, there's . . . I walk out there every morning, and there's a whole crowd of Chinese people who go for their walk every day. You go over to the Arroyo Seco Park, and for the first time, one of the things that I've noticed with the outdoor exercise equipment over here, is that you've got Latino families and Chinese interacting, because they're all getting on the same equipment, which is wonderful. I think it's absolutely wonderful. I mean, because there's one thing: your kids go to school, they interact, they learn together, they do that. But the adults—you know, you've got Chinese immigrants, and you've got Mexican immigrants, or Salvadorian immigrants, or people who are black, or whatever—are all coming to the same location to go through the equipment and exercise, and they have to wait for each other, and "Excuse me, is it your turn?" And it's that small little thing, and we look at each other as human beings, and we're being—we're able to interact. And I think that we need more opportunities like that.

**KD:** So when you were doing this series, or when it becomes a series, do you say to yourself, "Okay, I need sixteen"?

**MG:** No. I just do them. Whenever somebody's there that I have the opportunity to do a portrait, I do it. And—

**KD:** So is the series complete? Or is it ongoing?

**MG:** It'll never be complete until I stop painting them. I'm making new panels right now so that I can do more. It's something that is ongoing. It's everybody—everybody is an able target for me. You are, as well as anybody. You know, I had a—I actually gave a lecture in Judy Baca's class. And her students were there and I remember one young woman who was, like, really pissed off that I was doing Chicano art, and, how dare I call myself Chicano, because I was painting these people, and who are these people, are they Chicano, are they brown enough? Are they, like, oh, I'm not allowed to paint anybody but Chicanos. I mean, you know, give me a break. And how should I be able to say that they're part of the Chicano community or they're part of our community? Like they haven't gotten the approval of the brown committee or the Chicano committee. They haven't gotten their tattooed barcode. It's absolutely absurd that we would think of people in that fashion.

The thing that I love about my family, the part of my family that I really love, is this willingness to accept people in their humanity. The thing that my father said was, you know, sort of, like, everybody's entitled to respect. We all have something to say. Nobody is dismissed. Nobody is discounted. If I listen to the lecture that Father [Gregory] Boyle was giving up in Oxnard when I caught him talking up there—and he was talking about Homeboy Industries, and he was talking about the gang members, and he was talking about what his work was about. And what it was about was an acknowledgement that we're not all that different. The thing that other people are always trying to do, well, you know, they do this and we do that. They do this and they—you know, some of us do that and some of us don't.

**KD:** You know, when I saw the sixteen images for *Nuevo Mestizaje* in Chicago, I had actually assumed that they were all mixed, of Mexican and something else. But that doesn't sound like the case, and I guess that was that young girl's complaint.

**MG:** It depends on the ones you saw, because there were two shows in Chicago, and the first lot of portraits was picked by the National [Museum of Mexican Art], and then the next lot was picked by the Cheech [Marin] show. [*Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge*; the traveling exhibition opened in 2002 and completed its tour in 2007—ed.] And in the Cheech show they didn't give me enough time, because you know, I do these portraits and I sell them. I make my livelihood by selling these portraits. I'm not sitting on anything. And sometimes people don't want to lend them. They get very attached. "Oh, I can't live without that painting right now. How long is it going to be gone?" And that Cheech show was pretty—they said, "Oh, no, that's too much time!"

**KD:** Yeah, it's going to travel forever.

**MG:** It's going to travel forever. I'll never see that portrait again. So some people don't want to lend that stuff, and I have to be given enough time to be able to produce more. So, you know, right now I have about fifty.

**KD:** What?

**MG:** Yeah. I have them in here, and I have them in the other room. I have—

**KD:** Portraits of—

**MG:** Different people.

**KD:** That are mixed, that are mestizo.

**MG:** No. It's part of the *Mestizaje* series, because sometimes . . . For instance, I have a portrait of Kay Rico [?] Torres. And she married a *México*, and they have a daughter, Gabrielle. Now, she's not Mexican, but she married Mexican. And I have people who have a relationship to the Mexican community who are—you know, they become *familia* once you're married, sort of like. I accept whatever it is that they—whatever they accept what the relationship is. You know, Gauguin was French, but culturally speaking, he was from Peru, because that's where he was raised. So I acknowledge your cultural environment as being part of it. Kathy Gallegos is part Cuban and part Puerto Rican, but if you talk to her, she'll tell you she considers herself Chicano, because that's what she grew up in. Well, what am I to—who am I to say you're not? You have no right, no claim. What does that do?

And the thing about—what I like [about] what Father Boyle was saying is that there is this desire among some people to make more of the differences, between "oh, they're very different from us." To sort of expand on those differences and not really understand the humanity within us, to look at, you know, that homeboy that wants a job, that wants to feed his family, that wants to get along, that wants to do all that? We need to be able to support that, and not just support this idea of the differences. We need to be able to see our humanity.

**KD:** So, let me ask you this way. It sounds like you kind of just . . . There was a process where you discovered you had a series of portraits of mixed people.

**MG:** Well, the majority is mixed. Or are mixing.

**KD:** And you—so the decision, the decision to do that, comes from—

**MG:** It wasn't a decision. It was just me painting the people that were around me. The majority of people around me tend to be Chicano, *México*, Latino artists in the community, and I just take what's in front

of me. I don't have to ask anybody's permission to paint a white person, to paint a black person, to paint a Samoan or an Ethiopian or anybody else like that. I'm a citizen of the world. And it's viewed through my little Chicano eyeglasses— [phone ringing]

[break in audio]

**KD:** We took a quick break to get the phone. And I wanted to, I'm really curious about . . . You mentioned, I don't know if they consider themselves collectors, but they certainly are folks who own your work who don't want to part with it. I find that really fascinating.

**MG:** Well, you know, if it travels on a—

**KD:** I'm imagining you have that most of the time, since you paint portraiture.

**MG:** Yeah, because they feel it's personal. I've had people feel that. . . You know, I did a portrait of a couple one time, and I asked them to lend it for an exhibit, and they were, "Oh, you know, it's kind of personal." It's a very personal thing.

**KD:** Yeah. I would imagine other artists who don't do portraiture are not going to have that challenge necessarily. I mean, people might not want to lend something so long. So this is a common. . . Is what I'm trying to get at, is it—you hear that frequently?

**MG:** Yeah, I hear it. I hear it. I remember asking Cheech to lend his portrait of Willie Middlebrook to the National Mexican Fine Arts Museum when it had that tour going to—it went to New York, it went to Oaxaca, it went to Mexico City—

**KD:** Oh, the African presence one. No? No.

**MG:** No. It was another one. And he—he wouldn't lend it. He said, "No, it's gone too long, and I'm used to it, and I don't want to see it gone." And Cheech—

**KD:** Even a Cheech Marin, yeah.

**MG:** And then we had to turn around and ask other people for portraits to lend.

**KD:** For the *Art of the Other Mexico* show [in 1992]?

**MG:** Yes.

**KD:** Okay.

**MG:** The one that Patssi did the cactus queen on. I hated the way they reproduced that catalog. I hated the—because the thing is that the portraits. You know, when you see it on a page in a book, you think that there's these little—

**KD:** Little.

**MG:** These little portraits. But then when you see them, you realize that their faces are two feet by two feet. And they're actually large. But what happens when you shrink them, the way they shrink them in that particular book, is that the color becomes oversaturated and it becomes—you know, you can't see the purple. It looks black.

**KD:** It's dark.

**MG:** So it's not a good reproduction. The reproductions are terrible. But the reproductions in Cheech's book are better reproductions. But I have to say that some of the portraits that I was able to get for the *Other Mexico* were some of my favorites. Like the portrait of Bill Roper, I thought, is really an excellent portrait, and that's where—he's a black person, has green eyes, and it's just a really lovely, lovely piece that I think was very successful. And some of those pieces, we weren't able to get for the Cheech thing, and I was disappointed because of the way they put that together for me. They didn't—they wanted to do—they were just going to do like two portraits or three portraits. I said, "What's the point? You're missing the whole point. Why even bother?" And it was René Yáñez, who's like from San Francisco, he doesn't—I don't think he got me. So, you know, I fought for it. I said, "Listen, if you're going to do the portraits, you have to do sixteen, or don't do it at all."

**KD:** Good for you.

- MG:** Yeah, I got it. But I didn't get all the—I didn't really get to do the portraits I wanted to do. There were a few I really did. Willie's portrait was in that collection. So I was happy with some of them, and then I thought others could have been stronger. But, you know, it's about trying to show the variety of our human experience. And there's a tendency on the part of the person that puts the show together, when I talk about *Nuevo Mestizaje*, to always make sure that it's Mexicans that are in there. And the thing that I'm trying to say—because we're assimilating faster than any other group, than any other community. My cousins, some of my cousins are married to blacks, to Scots, to Japanese. We're all mixed up, and they're still my family.
- KD:** Supposedly 5 percent of the California population from the last census is mixed, and it's the fastest growing segment of the population in California. So I wouldn't be surprised that you were making these observations early on, and—
- MG:** Oh, yeah.
- KD:** So they wanted it to be just our mixedness, and not all these other—
- MG:** Yeah. And, but the thing is, that we are the dominant thread through it. So, you know, I don't understand. Well, I do understand, because there's this need to label and categorize and put people in their little boxes and not, you know, shift from one thing to another. But it's just like when you watch TV, and you see that . . . There used to be that program called *In Living Color*, and *In Living Color* is a program that was predominantly Afro-American, but it wasn't exclusive. And people can recognize the fact—they understand it. They're not stupid. We don't give our audience enough credit. The thing that upset me about putting that group of portraits together, because honestly, it wasn't because of the quality. I thought the quality of the individual portraits were good. But what I wasn't happy with, was the fact that in that particular grouping it tended to be more heavily Asian than some of the more Latino . . . You know, so it looked like I was focusing . . . But I was working in Chinatown at the time.
- KD:** Oh, really?
- MG:** Yeah, I was working in Chinatown, so I had Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, and it became sort of a central theme. But, you know, if you look at the entire body of all of those portraits, and I don't think that I'll ever have all of those portraits together, it is predominantly Latino.
- KD:** So you're just—you're describing the grouping that got put together for the Cheech Marin—
- MG:** Yeah, there were more Asians than usual.
- KD:** You've transitioned into one of my other topics, which is to talk about some experiences you've had with galleries and museums. I don't know if you want to start with the more positive experiences or with the challenges. Like what are some of the challenges? Curators—you've just described how a curator has a certain particular . . . And it doesn't match your original vision. So does that happen often?
- MG:** You know, I remember asking Betye Saar once, when she puts a body of work together. And she talks about putting the body of work together and that there has to be a continuity, a thread, that puts things together. A lot of times in the Chicano community show, there's a tendency on, like, these different galleries to do these giant group shows that are related to Frida Kahlo, Day of the Dead, saints and sinners, the border, blah, blah, blah, blah. And as individual artists, you sit in your studio and you do what you do, whether it relates to any of that or not. And somebody calls you up and says, "Do you know we're doing a show to protest the war in Iraq?" Or, "We're doing a show to whatever." And then you go, "Oh, well, let's see. I either have something or I can give you something. I can make something for that." And through the course of the year, you find that aside from what you do do—which is, you know, in my case it's been portraits—is that everything else tends to be a little disjointed. Like there's no big connection between Frida and the war in Iraq, or there's no big connection between the Day of the Dead and a *mujeres* show, whatever. So you have all this stuff that's disjointed, and everybody's doing all this disjointed stuff, and so the continuity tends to get lost.

And if you're working on a body of work, like I'm working on a series right now. I've been doing the *jarochas*, the little girls in their costumes, stuff like that. People don't want to see it. They don't want to

show it. You know, it's like I have this opportunity to paint this painting of these two women embracing in front of me, they're two gay women, and they were just basically embracing. It was about infatuation and affection and love. But to somebody else, because they're new, it looks like erotic. Like it's . . . And it wasn't intended really to be erotic. I don't think of it as erotic. I think of it as sensual. And you can't show that in an academic setting, or easily at the municipal art gallery. Because when I did the show up there, they didn't show it, because they said, "Oh, we have too many kids coming through." LACMA didn't say that to me. They said, "There's no problem with that." They didn't have a problem with it. But most places do, and so they don't want to show it. And then if you try to put a solo show together with all of this disjointed stuff, it doesn't work. You have to be able to put together a body of work that is basically cohesive, that there's, like, a continuity of thought, or the show can lack power. It doesn't have the impact.

KD: I'm sorry to interrupt, but the show you're discussing at LACMA, where they didn't censor it . . .

MG: They didn't, actually. Howard [Fox] and Rita [Gonzalez] came here, and they looked at what I had, and they decided that they weren't going to show *Nuevo Mestizaje*. But they wanted to put something else in instead of that. And I was good with that. That was fine with me. I was happy to be able to provide something that was more current, and since—

KD: Oh, this is the *Los Angelenos* show. [*Los Angelenos/Chicano Painters of LA: Selections from the Cheech Marin Collection*, 2008—ed.]

MG: Yes.

KD: Okay.

MG: So, you know, I was really happy. And Howard called me up, and they had selected the painting that's over there against the window, the one on Evergreen Cemetery. I said, "Oh, really? I really would have preferred to put in *Shock and Awe*." And he said, "Which is *Shock and Awe*?" And I told him, and he says, "Okay, we'll do that one instead then."

KD: [laughter] That sounded easy.

MG: He was easy about it. But I got the feeling that—

KD: Is it normally that easy?

MG: I have no idea. I just know my experience.

KD: I know. But for you, is it usually that simple? The curator or the gallery owner says, "Oh, yeah, I'll do what you say. That's fine."

MG: No, not always. But he was good with that. I know that this painting causes a lot of grief with some people, and, you know, my work isn't about that kind of controversy. I mean, I'm not usually trying to find that. I want my painting to be where my painting wants to be. I like the painting. I think it's an excellent painting. And I wanted *Shock and Awe*, not because it was political. I wanted *Shock and Awe* in that, [*Los Angelenos*], because I just felt that it was the strongest painting. And I know my work, and I know which pieces are the strongest. You take—look, if you're a painter and you take risks, that means—risk means I'm taking a chance that it's not going to be successful. That's what a risk is. And if you are always nailing it, so called nailing it, and it's right on all the time, that means you're not taking any risks. Because to take a risk means that you've got to fall down sometimes.

KD: So that sounds like a really good story. What about the solo exhibition you had at the B-1 [Gallery in Santa Monica]? I mean, almost all of the artists that I've interviewed were associated with the B-1 at that—1980s.

MG: Kristina Van Kirk. I think Kristina had a very strong idea of what she liked. She liked my work, and she gave me an opportunity. I had some pastel work . . . you know, I only remember two of the pieces in that show right now. It's hard for me to even remember what I showed. It was that long ago.

KD: Really? So it sold.

MG: I guess some of it sold, yeah. He—I know that Robert Berman bought from me a monoprint that I had done of a coyote that I ended up doing a silk screen of at Self Help Graphics. And it was my first silk screen, and he bought that piece, and it was sold to LACMA. I doubt very seriously that I got the full value of it.



- KD: Was it a helpful opportunity at the time? Having a solo at the B-1? I mean, people say that's the Westside, it's—
- MG: Yeah, it was good. I mean, it was fine. I don't—
- KD: Is that when the relationship with collectors started? Or was it—
- MG: You know, I didn't get that many. I had one show there. I know that Diane Gamboa was in there. But I didn't sell a lot of work there.
- KD: Was there a particular gallery relationship that really did spark the collectors?
- MG: No. I'll tell you where I was able to establish relationships with patrons was through Frank Romero Christmas sale.
- KD: Really?
- MG: Yeah. At the Christmas—
- KD: Out at his studio.
- MG: Yeah. Right out of the studio. Because all of those people who knew who he was came and collected, and you were able to develop direct contact. And when you're selling something, you call them up directly, you don't go to the gallery. But what hurt me, I think, or what has hurt me— [*siren*]
- KD: Go ahead, say that again. What has hurt you?
- MG: What I think has hurt me on some level is that, because I wasn't showing with a regular gallery, that I wasn't able to establish the kind of patronage that would allow me to really raise my prices as much as—like Patssi did. Because Patssi really, you know—her prices are up there. And I think I would have liked that more. But it forced me to be more productive. Then it becomes more about producing a larger body of work, so that you have more inventory. Because, you know, once you've sold it, it's gone. Now you've got to go sell something else. And when you're raising the rent as often as I was, and at a certain point. . . You know, I'm a single mother, and supporting me and my daughter, you know, that takes a lot of money. I think that people are shocked, you know, [that] I'm here paying fifteen hundred dollars a month.
- KD: Wow.
- MG: Right.
- KD: Jeez. I didn't think Highland Park was that expensive.
- MG: But look how big my space is.
- KD: That's true.
- MG: I have a very large space.
- KD: Do you have the square footage, so I can say it on tape? Or—
- MG: I don't know if—I really don't know.
- KD: Well, that's definitely more than—
- MG: It's thirty feet by forty feet. I've got very high ceilings, eleven and a half feet, I have nice ceilings, I have—
- KD: Oh, it's almost twelve feet. No wonder it feels so huge, too.
- MG: Yeah. It's because the ceilings are so high more than anything. Yeah, I have a large space, and I definitely have done a good job at filling it up.
- KD: [*laughter*] I don't think you're talking about the art. That's what I would talk about.
- MG: Well, I have a lot of art here too.
- KD: You do have a lot of art here.
- MG: Yeah.
- KD: So what about the relationship with collectors? I mean, I hadn't actually thought about the benefit to joining with a gallery allows you to establish a market rate.
- MG: I think it does. I think it's much better, if you're in with a gallery that—galleries also do other things. There's certain things that you don't do as an individual artist. I have produced a lot of work where I do the work, the painting is still wet, I call up a collector, and I say, "This is your baby. You've got to come and see it." And I sell it for a lot less than I would if I had been in a gallery that's doing my work on a regular basis. But oftentimes it goes out the door and it's still wet. You know, the painting of *Janine* [*at 39, Mother of*

*Twins*] that Cheech has, that was still wet when he bought it. Because I—you know, I don't have the luxury of being able to put together a body of work to do a solo show. And if you look at my résumé, I don't have a lot of solo shows.

**KD:** No, you don't.

**MG:** You know, I'm not being given the opportunity to do those solo shows, and so therefore—

**KD:** But you've had a relationship with a number of galleries that are very good galleries, at least in the—I'm not going to say their booking and their strategy with working with artists, but those are the names that people would associate with some kind of success.

**MG:** I really have to say that, you know, there was the B-1. I thought Kristina Van Kirk was very supportive. She was no longer there at a certain point. I think the focus of Robert Berman was the men. I don't think he necessarily had an appreciation for me. I thought that the Williams-Lamb Gallery [in Long Beach] was okay, you know. They were all right. But, you know, look at what they ended up doing to all of these artists. And they did sell my work, they did give me some—you know, I did show with them. But then there's the Julie Rico [of the Julie Rico Gallery in Los Angeles], who was interested in herself, and following the crowd. There's a tendency to want to be with people who have established themselves, like, financially, and have a way to go with that. And I understand that.

But, you know, like Patricia Correia. I thought that, you know, Patricia Correia wasn't really, truly interested in me as an artist. She was interested in being able to say that she has all the major Chicano artists. And she's the one, and that's where you have to go. But I sold two pieces in two years out of that gallery. And that's nothing. I'm not going to support myself and eat off of that. But she wanted to be able to say that, regardless of whether she was doing anything to cultivate the work one way or another.

**KD:** Right. The relationships you've had with galleries, is it always a fifty-fifty split? Or is there a range?

**MG:** No. The galleries on the Westside, all of them are fifty-fifty. The galleries on the Eastside tend to be a little more towards the artist. You know, it could be anywhere from twenty-five to forty. But it's not fifty. But see, if you have a gallery that's taking fifty-fifty . . . You know, if I had a gallery that was taking 50 percent but they were publishing brochures, they were doing invitations, they were putting out PR, and they were earning their 50 percent, then you can't complain, because what happens in a gallery that's doing that and taking 50 percent. And they're doing their work, and they're giving you a solo. What they're doing in one way or another is, they're finding a way to raise your prices, to raise the value of those prices. And they have a relationship with the LA County Museum, and they're in the [museum's] President's Circle. And they're trying to get shows that are relative to the kind of work that you're making, so that you can be included in some of these more academic settings, even if it's at a university, or if it's in another place like that.

And that's what the gallery should be doing, because they're trying to put together shows that travel and have some kind of permanence. Because if you're representing a show or an artist that can say, "This artist was the first artist to introduce this new genre of art making, and has influenced x amount of artists, and has done this and done that." And people are writing about it, and they want to come and interview you, and they want to do books. And they want to do that, then the value of the work goes up. That becomes automatic. But you have to do your homework with it. And the truth is that some of these places don't understand that and don't understand the value in that. You know, Patricia Correia, for instance, was saying at one point that she had her Chicano Movement artists, and she was talking about Patssi Valdez.

**KD:** No. It was a critique of the other art content, or the form.

**MG:** Yeah. Right. Right. And they were saying they were, you know, modern, hip, metropolitan, urban people that didn't have—

**KD:** Right. And the other people were backward. [*laughter*]

**MG:** And that the other people were backward, and that they used Mexican iconography, because they couldn't differentiate between what was Mexican and what was Chicano. And that was the point of view that Asco was taking.

- KD:** Right.
- MG:** And I'm not saying that things haven't changed for her, and that she hasn't developed, and she's come to a different place, because, you know. . . And she does represent for many what is the Chicana artist. And I'm not anybody to say that she's not a Chicana. I don't think that anybody has the authority to say what she is or isn't. She has the right to define who she is.
- KD:** You're talking about that period, earlier period, with Patricia Correia, where one of the first Chicano artists that she gets is Patssi. Because then she later gets other folks, who—their content is much easier, I think, to describe as Chicano.
- MG:** Yeah, I don't think she knew what she had. She just knew that she was making money on it. And she had a Chicana artist, and that's the way she saw it. And she does have a Chicana artist, but Chicano Movement artist? I wouldn't say that.
- KD:** Well, at least not that kind of work, right?
- MG:** No. And not ever that work—
- KD:** I mean, the collage, maybe, the collage work.
- MG:** The collage work, the early collage work. She was making commentary on the social conditions and situations related to Chicanos, whether she recognized that or not. Doesn't matter. There was a commentary that was running through that, I believe, with her work. And I think that Patssi had something strong to say about that. But I don't see it as being Chicano Movement kind of commentary. Nor was mine back then, either.
- KD:** Weren't you, though, selected to be in the *Pintores de Aztlán*, the [exhibition] that goes to Spain? You're not in that one? It came out of mostly Patricia Correia's [gallery].
- MG:** No. And I get excluded by a whole bunch of things at that point. [laughter] Because I don't have a good relationship with Patricia. I never did.
- KD:** How do you cultivate . . . You as an artist, how do you cultivate a relationship with a gallery?
- MG:** I mean, I would like to know that. [laughter] I'd like to know how I cultivate that, because I haven't successfully done that, to be honest. I—
- KD:** Well, you had to have . . . How did you get connections with Robert Berman, for example?
- MG:** Through Kristina Van Kirk. She was the one that brought me in. And I got a show, and I think that it was because of her. I don't think—if she hadn't been there, I don't think I'd probably be there. But I don't have a lot of relationships, good relationships, with galleries. Right now, I'm showing out of a little artsy-craftsy little shop out in Whittier. I'm at LACMA, and Cheech is featuring me with Patssi over at Archer School in Brentwood. And I've done shows in Oxnard. I've had shows in different places. I showed at the Contemporary Museum of Art in the show that traveled from Chicago.
- KD:** From Chicago, right.
- MG:** And I've had major shows on an academic setting. But when it comes to a more commercial venue, I haven't been given a lot of opportunities to do that, though they'll do a *mujeres* show, and they'll put in one piece.
- KD:** [laughter] Right, because it's a group show.
- MG:** Because it's a group show. And so that's the way they do it. But there have been people that . . . You know, like the two pieces that Patricia Correia sold as mine were [to] people who were looking for my work and saw me listed with her in the *ArtScene* magazine, and then went and bought the work. But I have not been featured in any of those galleries, in any way, shape, or form.
- KD:** You mentioned that sometimes you'd call up a patron, and the work is still fresh, it's still wet. And you'd say, "This one's for you."
- MG:** "This is it."
- KD:** Is it because you know their collecting style, and you know that that piece? I mean, what makes you call that particular person?

- MG: Look, if this is, like, let's say I have to pay the rent. My daughter's got to eat. I'm not on welfare. There's no child support check coming in. This is me. I've got to pay the rent, I've got to come up with money, put food on the table, and I've got to make it. I hunker down and I say to myself, "What image can I create that just becomes so compelling and so seductive that that patron who liked that other one is just going to come back?" It has to be. And I will consider the process and the image and what it is that I have to do to just bring it in. And that's what I do.
- KD: You sound like you have a lot of very supportive patrons.
- MG: I don't have—
- KD: Who can't turn you down—
- MG: I have people that are just—they just love the work, you know. "I just—I can't believe you painted that." That's the kind of response I have to get.
- KD: Can you tell me a few of the folks who have, like, you know, two or more of your works in their collection?
- MG: Nancy Thomas, who is the deputy director at LACMA, has a number of my works, including a very large painting that she bought at Self Help Graphics. Dan Dworsky, who is an architect, has this one major piece of mine. My cousin Willie. Juan Rodriguez at KGB [Studios]. Rick Serrata, who I'm currently trying to help with his collection, because he has such a huge collection.
- KD: Mostly—
- MG: And a lot of the individual artists themselves, who want to acquire one of my pieces.
- KD: Do you trade? Or you—
- MG: Sometimes I trade. Sometimes I sell it. Oftentimes I trade. I do try to collect a little bit myself.
- KD: I didn't know that.
- MG: I have José Lozano and Frank Romero and Patssi Valdez. I even have a little Gronk, Harry Gamboa, Linda Vallejo. Obviously, I have Graciela Iturbide. I have photographers. I have Donald Bernard.
- KD: Now, you say "Obviously."
- MG: Gilbert Luján.
- KD: How is it obvious? Because of the relationship when—
- MG: Because I had relationships with them, so I have those pieces. I have, you know, Alfredo de Batuc, David Flury.
- KD: Wow. That's nice.
- MG: Yeah. Yreina Cervantez.
- KD: Do you—do you find that you actually prefer that studio visit to the gallery? I mean, you talked about the financial, the benefit of going to the gallery. But I'm just wondering in terms of that—
- MG: I would love to have a gallery that took care of me, so to speak, that concerned itself with my PR and moved my work. But it isn't that, you know, I want a relationship with a gallery where the person who is moving my work comes to my studio and talks to me, and we talk about the work, and we talk about the content and what they see, and the development of that work, and whether or not they feel they even have patrons that they feel would take an interest in that particular type of work. I don't feel like working—you know, I'm a pragmatic person. Most of my patrons are not people who collect a lot of conceptual work, though not to say that they don't. I mean, you know, I know Rick will collect some conceptual pieces. And not to say that they don't care about that, that there isn't some kind of crossing somewhere in there, and there are influences. But I know that there's certain things that probably wouldn't have an audience in my regular patronage. And I'm not interested in beating a dead horse. I have to make a livelihood. I have to make a living. I have to pay the rent and put food on the table, for—
- KD: Do you ever find that it's just impossible to build a patronage outside of like a local. . . I mean, the folks you're mentioning here, obviously I asked you for a particular kind of list, but they're local—

[break in audio]

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos [with Margaret Garcia] and we're on tape 2 for September 12, 2008, on our third session for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. And I had asked Margaret—I was asking you about building relationships with collectors, and my observation is the people you've mentioned are local, so that it really does kind of depend on a kind of—

**MG:** Local economy.

**KD:** You want to call it a local economy! [laughter] That's—

**MG:** Well, you know, I've had people come. . . I think I've had a few collectors come from Georgia.

**KD:** Wow.

**MG:** I've had, you know, from as far away as Georgia, yeah, that come and knock on my door and ask me about my work, which I think is pretty interesting. But I don't—

**KD:** Do you know how they learned about your work? You don't have a lot of Internet presence.

**MG:** No, I don't. I'm trying to change that. I'm trying to change that. I do have a Myspace page now with work up, which I didn't have before. And I have had a show in Tucson, where I went when José Galvez, who was a photographer at the *LA Times*—he's one of the guys that got the Pulitzer—he opened up a little gallery in Tucson and invited me to go out there and stay. And I did show there. And I've gone to Austin, and I've shown there, and I mean outside of the Cheech Marin traveling exhibit [*Chicano Visions*]. I went to Washington when the Smithsonian showed the collection, and I felt that if I could stick around I could really get a few things going over there. But, you know, I don't have the resources. Right now, the young, the woman that I've been mentoring, she comes from Detroit and her sister lives in New York, and they're talking about trying to get us a few shows in New York. But that I know of, there isn't a whole lot of Chicanos in New York or have shown or have any representation. I know none of them, those four—I mean, Carlos Almaraz never had a gallery in New York.

**KD:** It sounds like to get beyond the local economy you need a dealer that's—

**MG:** You need a dealer that knows what they're doing. You need somebody who has the ability to put together not just the vision but a plan that'd be able to, you know. . . Look, you have a situation over at Self Help Graphics right now where, you know, Armando Durón was in there, which was cool for me because he was the first guy that, when I came up with the proposal and suggested something, said yes! [laughter] He said, "Yes, oh my God! Let's do this." Right? And now we've got a new director over there, Stephen Saiz.

And I think one of the things that I found a little disturbing or upsetting for me is that, you know, they would put on a Roberto Gutiérrez show, and I was working with Armando to do that, and I actually went to Roberto and I shot all of the work. I put it together in a PowerPoint presentation and started laying out a little catalog for Roberto. And I put that together. And at least we wanted to get, like, a brochure. We want to get something going, because if twenty years down the line we say we had a Roberto Gutiérrez exhibit and there isn't any kind of publishing material or anything on it, then it's almost like it didn't happen. And you need to start publishing! You have to get a hard copy! You have to get it on paper! You have to have the image reproduced! And a lot of the galleries are kind of cheap, or they put it together in such a way that it isn't feasible.

**KD:** Well, I was actually surprised on that particular show. If you're not going to make a splash with the opening reception, you'd better have a long enough run to then start your media press releases and things like that.

**MG:** The mailing wasn't done, all the invitations were still sitting out there, so I was concerned about that.

**KD:** But the show was a really short run, so it wouldn't matter if it was going to be up for three months and the mailing goes out late, right? So . . .

**MG:** Yeah, you know, like, I mean, I feel that if a gallery is serious, they have to start publishing catalogs. They have to publish material that can go to another city and have some of these exhibits start to travel. That's why, you know, you got to love Cheech for all the effort that he made, because that show's amazing that he was able to do that.

- KD:** My understanding is that the public galleries might do that, but the private galleries are not going to be . . . I mean, maybe I just don't know that they don't travel with work because they understand their local economy. Museums and university institutions, galleries or museums will travel and make catalogs and document.
- MG:** But if you were a gallery in New York, let's say, you could expect that there's going to be a catalog, and there's going to be an invitation with an image or something that is a little more substantial than just . . . And I have to say, I hated, hated, hated, hated the invitation for the *Los Angelenos* show at LACMA. I thought it was completely inappropriate. It isn't because I hate Chaz Bojórquez's work, 'cause I don't hate it. I just felt that that type of graffiti . . . And he was the only graffiti artist in there, and that's the work that they pick for the invitation, which, regardless of whether you like it or not, is completely illegible. It's crooked! You can't see what it says! It looks cheap. And this graffiti, this font that's being used, says to many people "gang-banger," and this show is not about gang-bangers. It just felt really, really inappropriate.
- KD:** Well, I suspect that was because that show is put together as a response, right?
- MG:** To the *Phantom Sightings*.
- KD:** No, that they're not going to do Cheech Marin's traveling exhibition, "American Painting on the Verge." [*Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge*—ed.] They—
- MG:** They fought it! They fought it, they fought it, they fought with him. There was all this political wrangling. I talked to Howard [Fox] about it and Howard says that he personally selected that font for the invitation. And I told Howard, "It sucks!" He knows I hate it! I have no . . . I'm very transparent. You know, I tell people exactly what I feel, which is one of the reasons I probably have had a hard time getting into particular galleries and in places where other people have gotten in and have made it, you know.
- KD:** Yeah, women aren't supposed to be opinionated! [*laughter*]
- MG:** I am opinionated, and sometimes, you know, I offend people. I know I offend—
- KD:** But I'm just curious . . . But your piece, though, *Shock and Awe*, breaks the rule the best.
- MG:** What rule?
- KD:** That's not Cheech's piece.
- MG:** No, it's not. It belongs to me. That's right, it does.
- KD:** I mean, I remember seeing it, not at the opening but at another day, which I call "Chicano Day at the Museum." When—it was an event at LACMA to promote the two shows. And I thought, "Wow, Cheech Marin bought this? This doesn't look like something he'd . . ." You know, the content. Not the painterly style, because the painterly style is certainly yours, which he loves. But I didn't think that was his content, that his eye would like that. So I was delighted that they actually curated, they actually went and curated—
- MG:** Howard did that. Howard let me put that in. I mean, I asked him. I said, "That's the piece that I want in," and he said "Okay." He said, "I have to see it, but I think that would be fine." 'Cause what they did is, they came in and they selected four pieces as possibilities for the show. This was one, the *Evergreen Cemetery* was one. *Shock and Awe* was one, and then I think the . . . They talked about having that piece, but it was really different when they saw it. That—
- KD:** Does it have a name? This is part of the series, the—
- MG:** This is from the little girls, where I just made this transition. So you know, they talked about those four pieces. And when I said, "Oh, I'm disappointed that you didn't pick *Shock and Awe*," he said, "Which one is that?" I said, "It's one of the four that you considered." And he was okay with any of the four. Now, if I had brought in the name of something that they hadn't seen, maybe it would have been "No." But I was talking about something that they'd already viewed, so that really wasn't an issue, and I was kind of working within their parameters. It's a large painting. It's one of my larger paintings, but it's very free, it's very loose. I've had other people say, "Well, we don't feel that that's the direction you're going in," or "that's the way you ought to be," but I actually am going in that direction. It's much more expressive. It's loose,

it's not as tight, and it's very strong. It's very . . . It's bold, and I feel like it's in control, you know. I feel like I'm in the driver's seat with that painting, and I'm having fun, and that really is what I want.

**KD:** I'm fascinated, the way you talk about it, just more loose and . . . I don't think of your work as—

**MG:** Tight? *[laughter]*

**KD:** Whatever the other side would be! It's always been very lyrical. So are you referring to literally how you hold the brush, or are you referring to the process, or how do those words . . .

**MG:** Oh, I'm referring to the freedom with which I sling the paint. Where I'm using my instinct, and I'm not trying so hard to be so representational. That I'm allowing the paint to really be the paint and, you know, play with the texture and express myself wholly and freely and totally. Just be in the groove, yeah. I love the color and way it moves and, you know . . . Yeah.

**KD:** I wonder if we can change gears for a minute, because you've mentioned it, I think, twice now: photography. Have you ever shown your photographic work or—

**MG:** Yes.

**KD:** Really?

**MG:** At the Photo Center I was able to have some shows. Josine Ianco-Starrels, who was the curator at the Municipal Art Gallery [in Los Angeles], came, and there was two shows. There was my show, which was . . . And then there was somebody else was being featured. And she just loved my work. I felt really happy. The other person had like a four by five format, and here I am with my little 35mm camera. I had a photograph of Eloy Torrez, he was in it. I had a number of other pieces that I thought were—they were good works, you know.

**KD:** So when you work in photography, or when you worked—I'm not sure if you're still doing that—was it human portraiture, as well?

**MG:** Mostly, yes. Still, it's people.

**KD:** Black and white or color?

**MG:** Black and white. Black and white.

**KD:** Did you have the opportunity to develop your own work? Because you talked before—

**MG:** I developed my own work. I printed my own work. I spent a lot of time in the dark room. I loved it. I loved working in the dark room. I loved learning and I loved . . . Willie Middlebrook mentored me. A lot of the photographers who came through there. Donald Bernard mentored me. I became aware of Roy DeCarava's work, who I just adore. I love Roy DeCarava's work. I talked with Lester Sloan, who worked with *Newsweek*. All of the Chicanos who were working out of the *LA Times*. You know, I had the best, the best teachers. I had the absolute best. And then Graciela Iturbide, oh my God! Yes! I still love to shoot, and every now and then I come up with a really special image. I have one that I recently shot—I should show you—that I really love, but . . . Do you want to see that?

**KD:** Oh, please!

**MG:** Oh, okay. Let me—

**KD:** Let me pause this so you can look.

*[break in audio]*

**KD:** Go ahead.

**MG:** Let me see if I can blow it up, zoom in. *[referring to computer]* See, I did this because—

**KD:** Margaret, wow! So it says "Recycling at the dog park"?

**MG:** Yeah, at the dog park. This guy was like looking for aluminum cans in the trashcan, and he pulled up, and there was this light on him, and if you can see, I've manipulated the images. But my intent was to create an image to do, to work on silk screen, and you can see the—because I wanted to do photo silk screen. One of the things that I've recently been involved in—and this was something that I actually started when Sister Karen was around, and that was that I was trying—because I was working at the Photo Center and I had done the Day of the Dead, and I had been working on silk screen—I wanted to get together an *atelier*

of photographers, Chicano photographers, to do a photographic silk-screen project. And she always said no. The master printer always said no. “The process is too difficult, we can’t pay for the separations, they’re too expensive.” Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, you know. It was all no, no, no, no, no.

Well, when Armando Durón came in—and he saw me at the Getty, because Graciela Iturbide was talking about me being the *madrina* of that particular collection—I said to, I proposed to Armando, “I would like to invite Graciela to come and do a photographic project at Self Help Graphics, but I would like to do it as part of a photographic atelier.” He said yes, so we started putting that together, but Graciela hasn’t been able to show up or do it. But we went ahead with the photographic process, and so we had Willie Middlebrook and we had a number of other photographers lined up. And it was during that period, I said, “Oh, I want to do a photograph,” but you know, they won’t include me. They won’t include me because I’m not, you know, known as a photographer, I’m a painter. But as you can see, I am thinking in that direction, and I’m very happy with the image. But he’s not happy with the image, you know, so it’s sort of like it has to be curated. Armando said no, so I didn’t get to do it. But I wanted to do this to try to push myself and see if I could do some photographic imagery. And I just think that this would be lovely as a print, you know—

**KD:** Yeah, it’s fascinating how you can see your skill with paint.

**MG:** And you see the shadow, the lovely shadow, and the light is the golden hour and it’s very—and it has a little bit of this sort of mezzotint quality to it, and I love it. And here’s this homeless person, you know, picking aluminum cans out of the trashcan. What a perfect thing to reflect on in this day and age, with global warming and homeless people, and this is my community. It’s a spontaneous image, and it’s like . . . So yeah, I’m happy with that.

But you know, they want something that is perhaps a little more didactic, a little more, you know. And so, you know, again, I’m not on the boat. I missed the boat again. But that’s where I’m going with it, if you see what I’m saying. And yet, you know, I’ve been able to get Graciela to say yes, and it isn’t all about me. It isn’t about whether they accept me or they don’t accept me, because I could’ve gone to Armando, say, “If you put me in this project I’ll get her for you and she’s going to say yes,” because Graciela would have backed me that way. I don’t propose projects that way. That isn’t the kind of person that I am. And maybe that’s what I ought to be and that’s the way I ought to do it in order to be able to nail it. It’s the same thing—

**KD:** Or the other strategy could be two workshops: one is for the folks who are known for their photography, and the second one is for people who are known for one other genre or other genres or other media and want to expand, because I see your painting in this. I mean, how could you leave that aside, right? You can’t just leave what you know in the back of your brain! [*laughter*] It’s just incredible, the way you’ve moved the color.

**MG:** And you bring it—and you bring it together. I think this is a wonderful image, and I think it’s an exceptional image. But I don’t have control over that, because he has a vision about what he wants for that photographic atelier, and it’s this sort of focus on photojournalistic kind of thing where it’s, you know, Chicanos who are in that media and are dedicated to that media. They don’t want people who are playing with the media, and see, I play with everything. You know, I play with everything.

And I am a photographer, but he’s not going to acknowledge me as that because he’s busy thinking about my painting. So I’m more interested in being able to bring Graciela into Self Help Graphics and to open that door and create another venue for all of us. Again, that’s what I’m thinking of. I’m not so political as I ought to be. I ought to be a little more like, well, you want Graciela, you better take me, and I’m not doing that, and—

**KD:** Do you have another one you want to show me?

**MG:** There’s another one. There were two, I took two from that thing. I have others, but these are the ones that . . . [*referring to computer*] Not my path. He’s just looking at the can. This is before he drops the . . . But you



can see the light. This is a tunnel, this is the light in the tunnel. And actually, what I was attracted to when I decided to take this picture, was this light on the wall.

**KD:** Yeah, I can tell.

**MG:** And then he kind of got in the way as I was doing the light on the wall, and I said, “Oh, great,” and then I got his shadow and his silhouette in there—

**KD:** Oh, right, he’s still on the bike there.

**MG:** Yes. So, yes.

**KD:** Those are wonderful.

**MG:** They’re at Herman Park, and I think they are wonderful, you know. I’m totally happy with this. And since Self Help won’t reproduce this for me and I can’t do it, I’m actually thinking of just taking this image as a photograph, blowing it up on a canvas, and painting it the way it is. If I can’t get it their way, I’ll do it my way.

You know, you don’t give up. The door opens or the door doesn’t open, you just keep doing it, because this is obvious to me. I have a vision and this is talent, and I’m good. I mean, this is really good, and I can recognize how good I am. A long time ago I didn’t know. I was very insecure about that, but I can see that this is a tremendous image. And it’s one of my better images, and I know that it has to be reproduced. So I have to blow it up because I don’t have any options anymore. They’re not giving me any options. So instead of just feeling cornered—’cause you get cornered every now and then. Every now and then you feel like there are people who are saying no. They have an expectation of your work and they want your work to stay a certain way, and you can’t do it the way you want to do it. Well, this is the direction I want to go in after I finish this stuff with Archer, and this is where I’m going to go.

**KD:** Tell me about the color palette on this, on the interrelated photographs.

**MG:** There is a lot of color, but there’s a lot of layering of color, which is what I want and is what I’m interested in doing. I’ve always layered the color. I use high key color and I do create some of the more muted tones by that layering of color, but that color still vibrates underneath because little pieces of it sort of seep through. And when you have opposites they create a stronger vibration, and that’s what I’ve always liked to do with my color. I mean, I use extreme color. And yet there are some people, though I use the extreme color, don’t find it to be as brash as it is with other people who are using the same palate, but they don’t know how to layer it in the same way. and it has to do with the amount of layering that gets done.

**KD:** Thank you. You want to sit back down?

*[break in audio]*

**KD:** Did we talk enough about photography? You didn’t talk about your earliest endeavors with photographs. This is a recent—

**MG:** Well, you know, when I came back and I had the Photo Center and I had the darkroom, you know, when I arrived in LA I was homeless. It’s kind of hard to start painting and trying to put together paintings, because, where are you going to keep them? Where are you going to put them? And the thing about photography is that it’s portable, relatively speaking.

**KD:** Yeah, I’ve actually heard about feminist . . . I’ve heard, I’ve read other feminist art historians describing that photography was an immediate form that female photographers that had children picked up because of that. It’s not just because of a child or space, but just there are certain media that allow you to keep being flexible.

**MG:** Well, you know, when I paint, I mean, you see what I have there. You make a big mess and then, you know, you need to get back to it, and you can’t put it away! You have to leave it out because you’ll never get back to the same palate, and it’s hard to set up, it’s a lot of work. When I was married I used to keep everything in a closet. Nothing was out. I didn’t have a studio outdoors, and I would pack everything up and I would put it in a little toolbox, and there was my canvas. And all the canvases were in the closet, too, ’cause I never hung anything out because my husband didn’t appreciate any of it.

But it didn't matter because I wasn't doing it for him! I don't know who I was doing it for back then but myself, and it wasn't about showing it, it was about just developing my skill. I was just trying to get good at it, and I just dedicated a certain amount of time every week, you know. Every week I have to paint, at least one day or two days a week, and it's a constant. You schedule it in. It's about schedule. It's always about schedule. You know, I don't care if it's one hour. You have one hour, then you take advantage of that hour and you don't let anybody take that hour from you, because that hour isn't for anybody but you, you know. It's for you, it's all for you, and you're entitled! You deserve it! You know, people will take . . . "Oh, I have a birthday! You have to come to my birthday!" "Oh, my kid's getting christened and I'm getting married!" You know, I don't care, that's my hour!

KD: Good for you!

MG: My two hours, my three hours, whatever. But I always tried to make sure that that was at a time when people usually didn't get married, at a time when people usually didn't have birthday parties. You know, "I'd love to come, but if it's the weekend I'll come, but if it's, you know, Tuesday, Wednesday night, you know, I'm busy." And usually, you know, if you schedule it at a time of week or day that, you know, it's like a meeting, a twelve-step meeting. Whatever it is, you dedicate it to yourself because that's what you need in order to *desarrollar*. And I love that word, *desarrollar*, because it's this unrolling, it's this opening up. It's being able to unveil your hidden talents and whatever else you have. And if you don't have a talent for that, and you just enjoy developing it, I'm sure that in the next lifetime it will be there for you. There is never a point at which it is a waste of time. This idea that you have to be talented in order to take on an endeavor, to become an artist or to become something is absurd. It's absolutely absurd.

KD: Well, I've heard this at least fourteen times and I'll still have to disagree! *[laughter]*

MG: No, because if you don't have a taste for that practice, you probably will never become an artist. But if you don't have a lot of talent but you enjoy doing it, do it, because there's something else that you're learning from it, and it's something that you're compelled to do because it makes you feel good. You know, I've heard say that if you want to know what you ought to be doing, God lets you know what it is that you want to do because he makes you happy when you're doing it. It isn't about the final product. The final product can be important. I've gotten to the point where, yeah, I can drive it there.

But it's about the process. That when you're in that moment and you're in . . . It's achieving that state of grace, like meditation, like prayer, like jogging, like swimming laps. It's the practice of it. It isn't that you're going to win the marathon. It isn't about that. It isn't about being the top Chicana artist, as if there were such a thing. Everybody has a voice, a vision, a contribution to make. It may be in the arts, and it may be somewhere else. It may be something totally else, but it is about the practice of it, about the living of it. I don't blackmail people most of the time into saying, "Hey, you've got to include me in this or I won't be in a show with you or I won't connect you or I won't do that." I don't do that. I don't play that game, and I don't enjoy it when people play that game with me. And they do it all the time because they know I have access. I don't like that, because I don't like the person I become to do that. I am Margaret, and Margaret doesn't like to play that game.

Because you know what? I think of the artists that benefit, the twenty to thirty artists that go through a gallery, even if they're assholes, who are able to derive an income and who are able to do something with that and support their families and do what they have to do. I think of the young artist that wants to develop a career and just have an opportunity to show their work, to be in the company of these other *veteranos* and be able to open that up. That's what I think about. I think of the Day of the Dead. It's my contribution to make, and I don't hold it hostage. It's not for me to do that. I just don't—I don't like doing that. I have on occasion said, "Okay, well, am I included or what?" You know. But it's oftentimes the way that it's viewed, and they're into, "Well, I'm going to go after the big stars." And that's what they do, and that's what's done. But I've helped them, too.

KD: I'm curious with this strong sense of direction that you had. When you were using photography, did you feel that centered or grounded, or . . .

MG: We are so underrepresented in so many ways, and there would be so much, so much would get done if people didn't always care about who got the credit or whether or not they were going to benefit from it, and they're . . . You know, I have to make a living like everybody else, so I am practical to a certain extent, and there are times when I have to say, "Hey, you know, I need to get paid for my work." You know, recently 'cause I was telling Rick I could help him put this cataloging together and facilitate, I said, "But you gotta pay me because it's gas, it's time, it's money, it takes away from my work."

KD: From painting, yeah, and photography.

MG: And he agreed, and we're okay with that, you know. But it's difficult for me to sometimes do that.

KD: Well, photography didn't look. . .

MG: I didn't make any money on that. I had . . . I had the equipment, the paper was relatively cheap. I set up the chemicals.

KD: You had skill, yeah! Nobody develops! *[laughter]*

MG: And I had access to the darkroom almost 24/7, because I had the keys to the facility, and I could be there at whatever time of day or night, but I lived there, I almost lived there!

*[break in audio]*

KD: I was trying to get a sense of your—

MG: Well, I had access 24/7, and I had lost my home. I had lost custody of my daughter. I only saw my boyfriend on the weekends, and at a certain point I started living with my father so I had a room. And I made very, very little money. But I think at that time I was in a lot of pain. I was. . . And I had to deal with that pain by distracting myself and devoting myself to a higher cause. So for me, the higher cause was that little artists' group—the photographers, the Chicano artists—and this idea of self-identity, and that's where I directed my energy. It was for myself, not so much in terms of making money, 'cause I really didn't make a lot of money at it. I only got paid twenty hours a week, and if I did any overtime they'd tell me not to work the next week so they could put it in there, 'cause they did . . .

You know, the city doesn't want to pay for benefits. It isn't that the city couldn't afford it. The city doesn't allocate for that, they just don't care. And the gallery attendants are the ones that just, without the gallery attendants none of the cultural centers would have continued to exist. When Riordan came in, he just killed them all. He didn't understand the value in it, you know. And there were a lot of, like, white photographers and people who were not from these small communities that didn't get the reason for it or its value. Now you have students that are rioting at high schools because they have no cultural standing, they don't understand their historic and cultural connection, and they see everybody else as an other. This is this other thing about . . .

You know, I talk about people. You have to. You know, there's a Joan Osborne song, "What If God Were One of Us?" It fits in with the Nuevo Mestizaje thing, that if you look at another individual and you can see God through somebody else's eyes, you see the humanity in what another human being is and gives you. And art provides that venue. You begin to educate the young people, so that, you know . . . Respect for others comes from a sense of self-respect. You can't respect others if you don't respect yourself, and the arts helps provide that, that sense of self, for me. I know it isn't for everybody, but that's the way I use art.

KD: You have done the kind of work where you're actually engaging with other folks to help them get some sense of their dignity. Can you talk about the work you did in the prisons?

MG: The work I did in the prisons was a lot of, you know, drawing, painting and, you know, hand-eye coordination, using oil paint. I did monoprinting in there. We did like some carving on linoleum and little printing with brayers and stuff like that. And it was a very limited class in terms of what I was able to bring in, because of tools, because of time.

But I'll say that, you know, working with the Santa Monica Museum [of Art], when I was working with pregnant teens over there, it was one of the most, for me, enlightening, and it's the one I like to reflect on the most. Because I would bring in films like *Once Were Warriors* and *Fearless* with Jeff Bridges and

Rosie Perez, and we would talk about dysfunction in the family and we'd talk about death and dying and vices, and what is traditions you want to keep versus dysfunctional things that your . . . You know, your great-grandfather used to drink and beat up your great-grandmother, so your grandfather did it, too, and your father, and those are not things that you want to pass on. And how do you create a new tradition, a new family identity through being able to pass on customs and things that are positive and that give your children a future, that give them something to reflect upon?

I worked on that, on creating ceremony, on making life masks that reflected the journey that some of these young women had gone through, who had experienced, you know, death of their babies or death of their brother, their mother, their, you know, somebody who died in their family. And surprisingly, when I entered that classroom I asked, "Has anybody here ever lost anyone?" And seven people raised their hand. I was shocked, because I think that when I was in high school, you know, a lot of people hadn't even seen death or experienced death.

**KD:** Right, it's usually a little bit later, in your twenties.

**MG:** But because we were dealing with the Day of the Death, the Dead, and it was something that came up. And we had screened the movie *Fearless* with Jeff Bridges and Rosie Perez, and it was the first time a Latina had been nominated for an Oscar since Rita Moreno in *West Side Story*. And she wasn't Chicana or Mexicana, but it was the first Latina, so it was something to celebrate. It was one of the reasons I wanted to screen the movie. But also, you know, I wanted them to reflect on the issues of legacy and heritage and what you want to leave behind that's positive and creating that kind of energy. It was right after this, you know, I married Danny de la Paz? I don't know if you know that. He was in the movie *Whittier Boulevard*, and he was in *American Me* with . . . So I became aware of some of the stuff that was going on with the movies. And Nancy De Los Santos did the *Bronze Screen*, and she came and talked to my girls at one point and talked about the movie industry and how we're portrayed, and people that have made headway in that industry, and stuff like that.

**KD:** Can you talk about the students? They were young girls who were . . . How many?

**MG:** [Twenty to thirty students.] I tell you, I was raising my teenage daughter, and here's these young women, they're getting pregnant, and they're having babies, and some of them were in that classroom not because they had children but because as teenagers they were supporting their parents, they were the sole support of their parents. These are Mexicanos, Chicanos who were here as children of immigrants and their immigrant parents were no longer able to support them, and they were actually going to school, coming out of school, going to a job, holding that job down, and going home and supporting their family.

And then there were young women who had had babies, and I thought, "Oh, this is terrible," you know. We don't want our young daughters getting pregnant in high school and, you know, blah, blah, blah. But I'll tell you that I saw incredible strength in there. I saw this one woman who had a baby. Her parents were helping her with the child, and she, she was an A student. She was getting really good grades, was going to become a doctor. That she was going to go out to become a doctor, and her parents were going to help her with her kid, and she was being encouraged to go out to get her, you know, to go after a medical degree and become a doctor. That's what she wanted. She didn't see her having the baby as being the obstacle that was going to stop her from doing that. And I have to say that in part it was because her parents decided that they were going to support her through this period of time, even if it meant taking care of their grandchild, and they supported her completely. And I was shocked at the maturity.

And the other thing that I found completely engaging with them was the fact that they were willing to be so open to learn and value what I was giving them, in part because they were bringing a new life into this world and they wanted to feel that they had something to give it. And the other thing is, the women who took part in this particular program over at Santa Monica, and it was run by a woman named Marilyn McGrath, that the recidivism in terms of the women getting pregnant a second time wasn't happening in this class, whereas other young women who were getting pregnant and not going through this process and still going through high school were getting pregnant again and bringing in a second child. Whereas

these women would stop with one, and they would really use . . . They were continuing to go on with their education so that they weren't just going on welfare and doing that. I mean, we need to invest in these young women. I just was really impressed with them. I enjoyed them completely.

**KD:** Do you remember when you taught that or how long?

**MG:** Had to be fifteen years ago.

**KD:** And the class was about what, ten students, or . . .

**MG:** No, we had . . . Oh God, did we have at least twenty, if not more. Yeah, we had a full class.

**KD:** Was it at the Santa Monica—

**MG:** High School.

**KD:** The high school.

**MG:** It was done in conjunction with the Santa Monica Museum of Art.

**KD:** Really?

**MG:** Yes.

**KD:** So that was the period of time where there was actually funding through museums and the art world for that kind of stuff.

**MG:** It was an excellent program, excellent. I also worked with the deaf. I did a mural of the greater Los Angeles council for the deaf. [Greater Los Angeles Agency on Deafness (GLAD)—ed.] I had a really good, good, good friend. A guy that I dated. You'll laugh at this. I met him hitchhiking. I was hitchhiking—this was back in '70—and his name was Leo Mouton, and we dated for a while. He turned out to be a social worker who worked with the United Way and became involved in helping to establish the Greater Los Angeles council for the deaf and worked as an advocate for the deaf community and for that organization. He worked—and I knew he knew like, what's his name, Alatorre? I forget his first name. Is it Roberto? Ricardo? I can't remember.

**KD:** Richard Alatorre?

**MG:** Richard Alatorre. He knew Richard Alatorre. And he helped to pass a bill that put a charge of two or three cents on your phone bill that helps provide services to the deaf or handicapped or other people who have problems with the phone. But also he was an advocate for the deaf and that understand that if you're deaf and you get picked up by the police and thrown in jail, you have one phone call and you can't hear it, so you know, having accessibility to the TTY and that whole movement. My friend Leo Mouton was right on the front of that. And so Leo got me involved because my niece is deaf. This is the same niece that I introduced Graciela to, and so Leo was my friend.

And when I came back from Chicago, one of the first things he did was help me to get this mural, you know, partly in terms of kind of getting on my feet and helping me with that staff. They provided me with a crew of five deaf teenagers and an interpreter, and they were paid, and we did this mural on the entrance to the Harbor Freeway on Eighth Street. I think it may have been painted over, and that poor mural has taken a lot of abuse. It was difficult to do, but . . . So that happened through Leo. And Leo has a brother named Bernard, and Bernard . . . When my father started to become really old, he—well, not old—he came down with a condition similar to ALS, the Lou Gehrig's disease, and he needed somebody to take care of him. Leo's brother Bernard stepped up and went over there and would take care of my father, and he was paid through the Department of—

[*break in audio*]

**MG:** They didn't do it for money. They did it to take care of my dad. And they loved me and I loved them. And Leo is like . . . Leo's black. He's from—I think his family is from New Orleans or something. It's a French name, Mouton, and I call him St. Leo. I did his portrait and I wrote on it St. Leo, 'cause he is very Catholic, you know.

**KD:** I actually don't think I've seen the writing on your work. Is it small?

**MG:** I scratch it in.

**KD:** You scratch it in?

**MG:** Not all of 'em. I don't always, but sometimes something happens or there's a comment that's made. I have no problem scratching it in. That's why I like working on wood. It's easier to scratch on wood. Canvas is like yuck, can't scratch well. But I met Leo when I was eighteen, and it's gone on that long, and Bernard is wonderful. Bernard—I remember my father just loved them so much. He'd say, "Oh, that Bernard," you know.

**KD:** Do you have other teaching experiences that were that wonderful?

**MG:** I worked with Faith Flam at Coldwater Canyon Elementary School, and I did two murals out there. I worked at Hazard Park, over here at Hazard—Murchison Elementary School. And I did a mural there. I don't take credit for those murals because I always say that they belong to the kids, you know. It's about ownership, so I let them—

**KD:** What about other kinds of teaching? I know you do studio lessons.

**MG:** I'm here, I'm open Monday night. I charge fifteen dollars a lesson, and it starts at seven o'clock, and people sometimes leave at eleven o'clock. April shows up for, like, an hour. She models for us. If we were paying a model it would be twenty dollars an hour. And sometimes I have twelve people and sometimes I only have one. Whoever comes, comes. I don't make a big deal out of it. I'm not getting rich out of it, that's for sure! Sometimes people can't pay for the class. And, like, that phone call that we just got a moment ago was Alex, and he, you know, he's on scholarship, let's say, and he'll work, he'll clean the studio, or he'll, you know, he's mopped or he does this or he does that in exchange for his lessons. I'll barter for what I need. You know, there's some things I just can't get done myself. I don't have the physical stamina to do all of it. I'd like to totally rearrange the office, re-hang the bars in there, rearrange the office and do all that stuff, and I get halfway done and then I run out of steam. But you know, some of these younger people, they have the energy and they can do it, and I'll just make them pay me in labor.

**KD:** Talk about some of the students you've had. You mentioned once before that you've had students go on to be quite successful.

**MG:** You know, there's Yolanda Gonzalez and Suzanne Urquiza and Fernando Barragan and Heriberto Luna, and David Flury, and . . . It was really interesting, I was doing a mural at Coldwater Canyon Elementary School, and there was a little Korean girl there who was one of my students. Her name was Jaime, and back in—what is it? In [the] '90s . . . I forget what year it was. I had the California Arts Council grant to teach in Chinatown, and I was teaching there in Chinatown, and the coordinator for the arts program was Jamie, and she was making puppets and teaching puppet making and things like that, and she was actually one of my students who worked with me at Coldwater Canyon Elementary School in '83.

**KD:** Wow.

**MG:** And it had come full circle. She was such a lovely young woman, and I remember her going to . . . There was an exhibit at SPARC on the women of Juárez and some of the stuff that had happened there, and she went. And she came out of the room and her face was wet, and tears were rolling off her face. And she was talking about the immigrant conditions that affected not only the women of Juárez but the women of Asia and China, and how they worked in sweatshops and they were separated from their families, and they did all that. And it hit a note with me. I realized, you know, we talk about these things that are very central to the conditions and what's happening in the Latino world and what have you, but the immigrant experience is not just Mexico and the United States. It's those factories in China that are producing those little transistors and computer parts and things like that that are going all over the world. It's about the Turkish that go to Switzerland. It's about the, you know . . . It's a global situation. And because we've sort of compartmentalized all this stuff, the condition of the immigrant and the immigrant woman who is put under a situation where she may be asked to extend favors to support her family or do something like that. These are situations that are global, and we haven't completely become aware of it. It's one of the things . . .

I just applied to the [Andy] Warhol Foundation [for the Visual Arts] through Self Help Graphics. I was, have been interested for a number of years in trying to put together a atelier of women from . . . I would

like women from Ethiopia, Iraq, Afghanistan, East LA, Central America to put together a global atelier that can teach the economy of the atelier and the Self Help process, because there is an economy that has helped a number of people create an income for themselves to support themselves. That's how I've supported myself. A lot of it has to do with the prints that I sell at the sale at the Frank Romero Christmas sale. It's through that. It's through understanding the dynamic of how Self Help can support itself and artists can support themselves, because that process needs to be shared so that women in other developing countries, where they perhaps need an income . . .

You know, there's a movie called *Flip Flotsam* in there where . . . You know, if you go to Africa everybody wears flip-flops, these little plastic flip-flops, and they wash out to the ocean. And they tend to land on this little island, where there's large quantities of these discarded flip-flop shoes that are mismatched and aged. And they land on the beach, and the women go there with baskets and they collect them, and then they take them home and with scissors and knives and glue they re-create and create toys and puzzles and all sorts of things. And they started by doing this as entertainment for their own children, and then realized there was an economy for it, and they take it to trade shows and they sell them in trade shows. And they create barracudas and animals and penguins and all sorts of little things that they create with these found flip-flops.

And the thing is that there is your sense of aesthetic, your sense of, you know, the utilitarian aspect of it, and it opens the doors for a lot of women in other countries who need to support their families, and it empowers them. It empowers them because if you have the money the you have the ability . . . If you hold the purse strings you have more say in what happens with your family, and the arts is definitely one way, crafts and arts, you know. And I think we have to recognize that. We have to acknowledge all that. I know I'm going off onto a tangent, I always do.

**KD:** No, you're not! No, you're not! I was going to actually ask you a question! So this is like exporting the model of Self Help Graphics to other places.

**MG:** Yeah, it needs to be done. It has to be done. We have to open that door, and right now a lot of doors are closing.

**KD:** But wouldn't Sister Karen prefer that the organization actually have a way to make a buck off of it?

**MG:** You know, the most successful aspect of what Self Help does is the part that sticks to the philosophy of sharing with the artist. I've said this before, I'll say it again. You know, they do these fundraisers where they ask the artist to come in and donate 100 percent and everybody goes and looks for their little tchotchke art, their little fifty dollar, hundred dollar pieces. That are this sort of throwaway stuff. And Self Help has had the ability to bring in the National Mexican Center Fine Art Museum [Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago], the Plaza de la Raza up in San Jose, the MALDEF, the politicians, all these people. And they're coming in and buying, you know, hundred dollar pieces. And excuse me, but the National Center Fine Art Museum, the Mexican museum there—

**KD:** Yeah, changed its name, that's why we're stumbling. Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum was the original name. Now I think it's the National Museum of Mexican Art. There we go.

**MG:** The National—

**KD:** No?

**MG:** The National Mexican Fine Arts Museum—

**KD:** Okay.

**MG:** Has the ability to come in and buy a piece for ten thousand dollars! Why are we doing this Mickey Mouse stuff! Give me a break! And the thing is I, as an artist, am not able to put my ten thousand dollars forward to support Self Help because unless I'm given a portion of it, I can't afford to give it away!

**KD:** But why would they . . . That's how they're—

**MG:** That's the way they ran that one with Christina Ochoa. Now, when they support the artist and they share with the artist, the artist says, "Oh, man, the Mexican—the museum is going to be there! MALDEF is going to be there! Plaza de la Raza is going to be there! The big collectors are going to be there! I am going to

put the most strongest piece that they cannot, they can't pass it up! I'm giving them my best and I will give them my best, and yes, you have to pay five thousand dollars or ten thousand dollars or whatever, but you're going to get the best work on there." And it develops the reputation of having the finest work there. All this shit that they put together with these little tchotchke things, you know, they're going to go and spend . . .

You know, they're spending a hundred dollars a table to be there, they're there to support you. They're there, and we have to be there to seduce them. We have to up the ante. We have to put our best foot forward, and Self Help needs to take 50 percent and give the artists 50 percent. It's fair! It's what they get at galleries, and we're able to give them our best work! It's what the museum needs! They have to collect it! It's what the academia wants. It's valuable! If Self Help doesn't value it and doesn't feel it's worth anything, why should anybody else?

**KD:** But they . . . Is that a model that was used recently, or . . . Because I don't remember fundraisers being so—

**MG:** You know, the print program, which is the most successful part of Self Help Graphics, is based on the model that it shares with the artist. Self Help gets a percentage, the artist gets a percentage.

**KD:** Yeah, and they split them like every other—

**MG:** They split them, and that's why it's successful. That's why it's successful.

**KD:** And there's a deal on how much you sell for, so at least, you know—

**MG:** It's a successful model, it works because the artist is getting something out of it. They can make a living.

**KD:** Well, how many prints have you done there?

**MG:** I don't know. I've done a number of ateliers that were monoprint, and I've done a number of . . . I did—the first time I printed I did two, because I did two on a sheet. And then I did *Anna Comiendo Salsa*, and I did *My Ego Is My Devil*. I did *Emilio F. and Family*. I did *New Generation*. That's at least six. And then I did a number of . . . Well, I did *Romance*. I've done seven. I've done at least seven pieces. Plus I've done a number of monoprints.

**KD:** Is that—

**MG:** But they don't have . . . Right now if you go to Self Help Graphics, they only have one of my prints available. Everything else is sold out.

**KD:** That's what I was just going to ask you.

**MG:** Yeah, they pretty much sold out. The *Romance* print—

**KD:** Did you sell out yours, too, your half of the run? I'm assuming it was half of the run.

**MG:** On a number of them I have. I have . . . Oh yeah, and I did *The Memory of a Haunting*. That's eight. I've done eight prints. *The Memory of a Haunting* was the last print I did, just before Sister Karen died. I've always had fights with the master printer. Right now, Oscar Duardo, who used to be the master printer, came by and asked me if I would do a big print with him, and would I be willing to work with him to do a new print. And I said, "Of course! Of course I would!" He and I have developed a new respect for one another.

But in the process of trying to do the printmaking I've worked with Steven Grace and I've worked with Oscar Duardo, and I've worked with, I think it was Rolo. I've worked with Joe Alpuche, and I've had—honestly, I had a lot of problems with Joe. He's a control freak. All the master printers are control freaks. And the problem with him is that, you know, you do a monoprint, you pull one layer, and I would say to him, "I need to pull another layer." When the weather is really, really hot, the ink dries on the screen and it gets all clotted and you're not able to get a nice product. So you need to be able to work really fast and know that you could come back to fill in all the little imperfections. And it gives it another layer, which gives you a little more control. And every time I would ask, [he'd say] "No, you can't do it! That's not the way it's done! You need to do one layer and that's it!" And I said, "Why? Who said so?" I said, "Isn't this experimental?" "No, I'm not giving you another run." And so he would always say no.



And I did this one print called *Memory of a Haunting*. It was a gorgeous monoprint that I got, and Sister Karen was there, and I took up the ones where I was able to do another layer on it. I think I had a total of three or four of the twenty-one pieces that he allowed me to do a second run on it, and I took them up to Karen. And I showed her and she says, “Oh my God, you need to be able to do another run.” I said, “I know that, but he won’t let me!” “Well, you tell him that I said you need to do another run.” So she agreed, and it was shortly after that that she passed away. And we always had fights. You know, I would say, you know, “How come I can’t print more often? You’re not letting me print!” He’d say, “Well . . .” I said, “You let Yolanda Gonzalez print a lot.” And he goes, “Yeah, but she’s one of the pioneers in monoprinting!” I said, “Joe, she was my student! What is this?” And he just is difficult with me! I think we’ve kind of come to terms with it, and the reason I’m saying this is, honestly, I don’t think he ever will hear this. I honestly don’t think he’ll hear it. That’s how come I’m saying it and I’m putting it on the record, ‘cause I’ve already complained about it before.

**KD:** But is he concerned about, like, it’s not a monoprint if it’s, if you pull it more than once?

**MG:** It’s a monoprint if it’s only one of a kind.

**KD:** That’s what I thought.

**MG:** You know—and you know, I’m the one that fought to get this process on the screen, and he’s there doing that process because I’m the one that fought with Sister Karen to get it on the screen. And in my point of view he’s being a jerk, but what am I going to do about it? You know, it’s like all this other stuff. People are lame, you know, and you just go, okay. For those people who aren’t lame, who want to work with me, who understand my work ethic, that person will appear and I will end up working with him. Now, there’s another printer that I work with, not at Self Help Graphics, and his name is Ramon . . . God, what’s his last name? He was the master printer for Ignacio Gomez’s *Zoot Suit* print, the print.

**KD:** Oh, right.

**MG:** I don’t remember Ramon’s last name right now, but I love working with Ramon [de la Rosa]. And the reason I love working with Ramon, is Ramon . . . We did a print, we did silk screen over Giclée, and then I painted over that. It was multimedia. And he saw me working, he saw me working like a demon, and he said, “I can’t . . .” He says, “I am so impressed with how hard you work.” ‘Cause when I work I’m, like, there until two o’clock in the morning. I’m, you know, I’m slinging paint, I’m working, I’m doing like ten a night. I’m just painting, and I’m like a crazy person. And he saw how fast and how hard I worked at doing these images, and he says, “I want to work with you!” And right now he’s trying to get me to do another print with him. And that I love. And see, eventually you find the right person and it happens. You fight with people like that.

I mean, I fight with Joe, and I used to fight with Oscar. But Oscar and I are friends now. And, actually, me and Joe are kind of friends now, because when we just did this big sale to AltaMed with Armando, and they sold, like, over two hundred, three hundred prints to—somewhere in that neighborhood—to AltaMed, as well as original pieces to AltaMed. They have different facilities—Chinatown, Pico Rivera, Downey, Montebello—and each one of these facilities gets a collection of these prints. And they’re all put on the wall, and there’s some original pieces. And in doing that particular project, because Chinatown required some of the artists to be Chinese, they wanted some representation of the Chinese culture for Chinatown, ‘cause it was the one facility that was heavily Chinese. I helped Armando get the Chinese artists for that project. And I was able to talk about the process, and I got them in with Joe, and I talked about doing a second run. And I said, “They need to be able to do that because they’ve only got two days to print, and it has to be work that’s going to be able to go to AltaMed, because AltaMed is buying the pieces that they want, and they need to have enough control ‘cause they’re new to the process.” And Joe said, “Okay, they get whatever they want.” And he didn’t fight me on it! [*laughter*]

So when I went to print recently—‘cause I just printed again recently—he let me have what I wanted because he didn’t fight me on it. But you know, it’s always—you know, you’re always fighting with these people. They, like, want artistic control over your process, and the master printer is, you know, famous for

that. Oscar, you know, he wants to try other processes, and I was able . . . I did the one print called *Anna Comiendo Salsa*. I painted directly on the screen with ink. Now, when you do monoprints you paint directly on the screen with the color that you're working on, but the ink that I worked on with *Anna Comiendo Salsa* was the blocking agent that let the other ink through. We burned the ink onto the screen, and then pulled the colors, so we were able to make an exact edition of the same ink that's being pulled. And the first time [Richard] Duardo saw that print he didn't even recognize it as a print. He said, "What is that? Is that a painting?" I said, "No, that's a silk screen." He goes, "Whoa!" 'Cause you could see the brushstrokes of the paint directly on the screen.

We haven't been able to reproduce that since because Oscar switched media. We weren't able to get that stuff back again, and then nobody else wanted to do it anymore. And every time you go in to do a silk screen they require separations, so it's all done on acetate. Whereas before I painted directly on the screen, they burned it in, and then we went from there.

**KD:** That's fascinating that the development of the innovations of the technique get lost.

**MG:** Yeah. I love, I love innovating. I love working with different materials, and I understand photography so I understand how it gets burned and, you know, I understand the process of it, because I'm interested, you know. I'm interested in all the little things you can play with and stuff.

**KD:** We've done a lot for today. Let's take a break. Thank you.

**MG:** Good!

## SEPTEMBER 19, 2008

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia, on September 19, 2008. And this is our fourth session for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. And we're here in Highland Park, on a Friday afternoon. And Margaret, I know you wanted to start talking about a project that you and Armando Durón were beginning to discuss, and it seems like it's very close to one of my own questions about the similarities and differences between your earlier work and the work that you're doing now.

**MG:** He asked if I were interested in . . . Well, I asked him if he wanted to curate a show, help me put a show together, because I haven't really done something like that. He said there were two ways of going about it, and he was sort of recommending that I do what Barbara Carrasco did over at East LA College. And that was basically do a show that reflected my history in the arts. And—

**KD:** Her mid-career survey.

**MG:** Yeah. Something like that. So I haven't done it, and I know that the problem in trying to do something like that is that a lot of the work is already sold, and in other hands, and if you haven't kept track of it, it's really difficult to find or to establish. One of the ideas I've had about reconnecting with patrons who have maybe purchased art and moved away or done different things is—one of the ideas I had for Self Help Graphics is to establish a registry of artists that were willing to provide certificates of authenticity, so that patrons would say, "Oh, this artist belonged to Self Help Graphics," and go over and there and say, "They sold me this piece back in such-and-such year, and I want to get a certificate of authenticity."

And with that, the piece would be established at Self Help Graphics as being part of that artist's record or document. You'd be able to provide a certificate with an image of the certificate, an image of the artist, and create a registry of an archive, as well as being able to deal with some of the artists that have gone through Self Help Graphics, because even though it is a print program, there are many artists that do other media and other paintings. So you'd have the registry for the artist, and you'd have the registry or an archive for the certificates of authenticity, and they would work hand in hand, because you already have an arts organization that had almost every major artist go through the doors of Self Help Graphics. And it doesn't have to be part of—excuse me—UCLA or Santa Barbara, even though I think that they could work hand in hand to help do that.

And the board agreed with that. I had presented this before the board at Self Help Graphics. And Armando was stepping down, has since stepped down, and I knew Stephen Saiz is now the director, the acting director. But the problem is that now Self Help is having to cope with the issue of moving. So, because of that, I don't know where we're at, at this point. But I know that I'm intending to pursue this idea, with that, so that . . . The other thing is that artists are then able to reconnect, because they go there to, say, get a certificate of authenticity on, say, Leo Limón, and they find, "Oh, I also have a Margaret Garcia." So you're able to establish all of those things.

**KD:** When did you begin to document your work?

**MG:** I'm terrible at documenting my work. *[laughter]* But the thing about—this was advice I was giving one of the people I mentor last night, because she was on a trip to Berlin today, she's flying right now as we speak. And she brought me some printouts that she had done of her work, and I said, there was maybe one or two that I thought were decent printouts. The other printouts were kind of murky, kind of muddy. They were dull, they weren't very clear, they didn't have strong resolution. And I said, "If you're going to give somebody an image, you have to have top quality, because you may have only one opportunity to make that first impression. And once they shut the door, they have an idea of what your work is about, and they never open the door again. So if you're going to make that first impression make sure that you have with you the best quality imagery. It isn't that your paintings aren't beautiful, because they're gorgeous." It's gorgeous work. She's doing absolutely fantastic work.

**KD:** She was bringing, like, a digital portfolio, or printouts from the—

**MG:** She was taking some printouts from her camera, but the resolution was really poor because she shot them in a dim situation. You have to have really good lighting, so that you can open up that camera, so that you can really get a nice, tight resolution and clarity. And they weren't professionally shot. They were just kind of muddy. And the first time I applied for a grant with the CAC, you know, I had photographs that weren't top quality, and I didn't get the grant. And I can look back now and know for a fact that it was the quality of the slides. Because after that, I said, "No, I'm really going for this," and I had a professional photographer shoot it, and the slides were gorgeous. I met Rick Meyer at the *LA Times*, from the . . . And he cut a deal with me, and he literally came in with his camera, and everything I had, he shot. I don't know where—I can't tell you where I have all of those slides right now, but he literally went through everything I had. He said, "Just bring it out," and he shot it and shot it and shot. We spent days just shooting hundreds of images.

**KD:** What year was that, about?

**MG:** Let's see. I was living over on Bonnie Brae, because that's where we did it. I would have to say it was in the late '80s to '90s. It was before I got to USC, because I used those slides to get into USC. I took over there literally bagfuls. And I say bags—I had like shopping bags of slides, I had so many slides. I don't think I have that many slides anymore, so I don't know what I've done with all of them, but I do have quite a bit. I do have some. I've probably done better at documenting my work than other people. But the thing with me is that I'm fairly productive, and sometimes I don't have time to have those professional slides taken. But I do know that when I have, like, a cornerstone piece, I try really hard to make sure that it is documented, so that it doesn't leave without having some record of it. Because when I applied—if I applied for a grant, or if I apply for a public art commission, they're going on your slides. And, you know, if you're going to play hardball with the big boys, it's time for you to take up the big guns. You don't ever turn in a shitty slide. You just can't. You can't afford it. If you're not interested, and if it's just a so-so thing, and you don't care, then why bother?

**KD:** So do you collect any other materials that are associated with your artistic production?

**MG:** I try to keep, like, invitations, and people send me stuff from the museum, or publishing, like, obviously, the newsletter from LACMA. They used my image [*Janine at 39, Mother of Twins*]. I have it on there. Any kind of memorabilia, especially if it has any work of mine in it. If I'm listed, I try to keep it. If there's an article, I try to keep it. But a lot of that stuff is overwhelming. I mean, I have books that have been published, and now I have work in the different—you know, the Cheech [Marin] work. My work was used for the cover of the *Encyclopedia Latina* from Collier, so the grid of portraits that were used for that. [*Encyclopedia Latina: History, Culture, and Society in the United States*, 2005—ed.]

**KD:** That's right. I'm going to move this a little bit closer. What about you—I don't remember if we talked about a sketchbook or anything.

**MG:** I have sketchbooks. I don't use too many sketchbooks these days. It takes me as much time to paint as it does to sketch, so, it just seems like if it's time to produce art, just sit down and do it. And I don't—you know, a sketch—

**KD:** Well, that would make sense with that early training you had, of, okay, three hours on a painting. [*laughter*]

**MG:** Well, yeah. You know, April comes in—you see these paintings of April—and April comes in, and I'm lucky to get her to sit still for an hour and a half. That's about the most that child has to give me. And I just did this painting of her, and I'm totally happy and blown away by the fact that she, you know, she's just lovely.

Now, the painting before it, the week before—I think you saw it—it was here. I hated it, and I painted over it. So I put this painting over the bad paintings. So I destroyed the other painting. And I thought about that, because, you know, when I do a painting and it's not successful, it just falls short of what it is I want—I get up in the morning and I'm surrounded by all this stuff, because it's right here—and I go, "Oh," you know. The painting talks to me. It says, "You thought you were good, huh? Well, that was just a fluke." And

I said, “Oh, yeah?” So we have this dialogue, and if the painting doesn’t cooperate, and I can’t get it to the point where I feel that it’s something that I love, then I destroy the painting, and I’ll paint over it.

But I build on it. And I love the surface that has all of this paint, this pigment. And you can often see the old paintings right through the new paintings. And I like to scratch into them. And I like this viscous, this thick—it’s almost like carving, there’s a texture to it. I had a show at the Watts Towers called *La Textura Brava [of Margaret Garcia]*, and that’s what I love. That’s one of the things that I really love to do. So unsuccessful paintings tend to get painted over. And I don’t do a drawing because I can’t . . . You know, if April comes in and I sit here and start drawing, I’m losing time, because this kid’s only going to give me an hour and a half.

**KD:** So the earlier work, where you were instructed to take the sketchbook everywhere, did you keep those sketchbooks?

**MG:** I have sketchbooks because there was a period of time between, I’d say, ’71, 1971, to about ’75. In ’71, I had already left Northridge. I was working at the bank. And I decided to walk home, because I was living past Vermont, and I worked in downtown LA. And I wanted to see what LA was about, so I walked home through MacArthur Park. I walked by McManus & Morgan, I walked by Otis-Parsons, I walked by—there’s a little area where the old Chouinard art school used to be. It’s like a little village of buildings that was there. And there was a frame shop called John Fox Frammer.

**KD:** Right. And this is a story you have told me, so—

**MG:** And he took me over to Hugh Baker, and Hugh Baker gave me drawing lessons. And I thought about those lessons this morning, because he said . . . John was playing with watercolor, and he was doing all of these little fancy tricks, and Hugh said to me, “Ignore that shit. It’s just tricks. Those are just tricks. What I want you to learn is skill.” And he said, “I go into a courtroom, and I sit down, and I do a portrait. I draw the situation. Sometimes I just sit there and I observe and I watch. But it’s all about nailing the guy.” And he used to do these courtroom drawings for NBC. He was the artist. And he said, “This is what I want. I want you to learn skill, and I’m going to give you a lesson.” So he did the contour drawing lesson. And he says, “You can do this lesson over and over and over again. It doesn’t matter if you’re six or you’re seventy or what. This is hand-eye coordination. It’s simple, straightforward. Just do this over and over.”

And I did it. And I did it for five years, until I met Vernon Wilson, when I started a little more about the anatomy so that I could nail my subject a little quicker. It was all about understanding the structure of the human body quickly enough so that I could place my body in a particular way, and have the fun of drawing it, instead of trying to measure, oh, is that shoulder too high, are the eyes too low, the mouth too much to this way or that. And if you do something like that, it’s because you’re trying to get an effect, and just simply because you don’t know what anatomy looks like. And if your hands look like bananas, you’re in trouble, because the face and the hands have to look like face and hands. You can mess around with other parts of the body, but you can’t mess around with the face and the hands. So, you know, I said . . . And that was a very traditional way of thinking about how to draw and how to paint.

**KD:** So have you always had this attention to sculpting the portrait? Or is that more recent?

**MG:** I think it developed more so, because in the beginning it was all about creating a likeness, a very traditional way. When I started painting, I would do . . . In the very beginning, I used, like, burnt sienna and raw sienna, and did these sort of brownish undertones that I would paint over, because that was the way Rembrandt learned. That was very old-fashioned. John Flynn, who had been working as—he used to do restoration work, and he had done restoration in Rubens and other important paintings like that—he taught me the European palette, he showed me how the colors are laid out on the palette. You have your black, your burnt umber, your raw umber, your burnt sienna, your raw sienna, your yellow ochre, and then you go into your yellows, down into your cool colors. And he gave me this very distinct palette.

And it wasn’t until, I think, ’78 that I went to the Norton Simon and I saw an exhibit of the Blue Four, and I saw this vivid color, and it really resonated with me. It resonated with my sensibilities. And from ’78, you know, when I ended up in Chicago, I couldn’t get Jawlensky pieces out of my head. I was in love with

Jawlensky, and I couldn't find anything there. I mean, I loved the Chicago Art Institute, and I used to go through its collection, and I got to see a lot of the paintings. And my boyfriend was going to the school there, he went to the Chicago Art Institute. So I spent enough time going through its collection, and was able to visit it a lot. So, you know, I really got to look at its paintings, but I wanted more. I demanded a different vision, and they didn't have it. I said, how rare is it? How odd is this that they don't have Jawlensky? They'd have a Matisse, or they'd have a few other pieces, but they didn't have these—what I felt were significant works, that how could they overlook them?

And then during the restoration work that I did, when Diane Wheat—who I worked with, and for doing restoration on china and sculpting and things like that. She started to get me to pay more attention to some of the works that were coming from other than European countries, whether it was Javanese or China or Africa or Latin America. And she started talking about the sophistication of the sculptures that we were getting. The European sculptures were these, you know, Lladrós and Hummels and Royal Daltons and Wedgewoods, and we were repairing all of this poodle shit. And that's what it looked like. It was very frilly and very dainty, and it looked like tchotchke, and it was all this stuff. And then you go to a country where the aesthetic of the popular art was so much more sophisticated. I mean, popular art in Mexico—we're talking about [José Guadalupe] Posada, we're talking about even some of the pre-Columbian work that was there—the sophistication of the aesthetic was so much more in keeping with what I prefer and what I enjoy.

And when I had left LA, to go back there, I had already done the whales. And I don't think that I had a complete appreciation for some of the street art that was being done. It wasn't until I came into contact with some of these more expressive works, and was living in Chicago, and understood how much they were an integral part of my being, of my aesthetic, of my home. I miss the mountains. I miss the palm trees. And I missed the imagery. So when I came back and I saw the work that was being done at Self Help Graphics, and I reconnected with Glenna Avila. And Glenna Avila had a nice collection of Gilbert Luján. She had a lot of Magu's [work] there. And I met Eloy Torrez, and I met Diane Gamboa, and Yreina Cervantez, and Wayne Healy. And eventually, you know, all the Chicanos that I ended up doing the Day of the Dead with, when I met them and I saw the work that was coming out of here, it was like coming to a home-cooked meal. I had arrived home, I had come home, and I was totally happy about it. I was totally immersed in it.

**KD:** How did those images that you were seeing in the late '70s influence your own work then?

**MG:** Well, Yreina and I both got hired to do a mural over in Echo Park. I don't find it—I didn't find it to be the most successful work. Part of that was the dynamics of how that mural was put together. I ended up doing all of the supervising. I was the one that got hired, and it was my imagery that got selected. And Yreina just wanted to do her own thing, and had a few people—she was supervising five people and I was supervising twenty-two. And it gets real sloppy that way, because the wall was huge. It was this gigantic, gigantic wall. And she was doing three panels and I was doing all of the others, and I didn't like the dynamics of how that was set up. I have a little more control now. I have a little more experience dealing with stuff like that, and I don't think that I would ever be put in that situation again. And it's not all Yreina's fault. Yreina was trying to be a good artist. I was trying to be a good artist. But the dynamic between us, it didn't work, on that particular project.

**KD:** So did you find that there was any influence on either content, approach, technique?

**MG:** Well, Yreina and I had a lot of arguments.

**KD:** Really?

**MG:** Oh, yeah. On a regular basis. She was living in Long Beach, and I found this little place to live, I was living above Echo Park. And in order for her to do the work, she asked me if she could come and stay in my apartment. So I allowed her to stay there, and then I was staying with my boyfriend, so most of the time I wasn't even there. And we were just walking distance to the mural, because she didn't have a car. We were loading up the paint into a shopping cart and rolling it down to Echo Park. But we had a lot of

arguments, because, you know, I at that time was not in . . . You know, I told her when I was doing the mural, I said, “There isn’t going to be a Virgin of Guadalupe, a fist in the air, or the farm worker flag. This mural is not going to have any of those things, so I’m telling you right now.” And I think she felt like I was insulting her. Like, “It’s got to be more than that.”

I mean, I like the expressiveness of it, and I don’t really have a problem using those images, but I just didn’t want to see them used gratuitously. And I wanted it to be about Echo Park. I wanted it to be about where we were at, and the community that we were there, and not just have clichés. And so there was a lot of discussion about, you know . . . And my memory is probably more skewed about all of this, because it’s kind of hard for me to even remember that I felt the things that I felt, because I think that I’ve changed my idea. And Yreina had a big to-do with that, because she . . . I didn’t like using iconic imagery, like the Virgin of Guadalupe or the farm worker flag or all these things on a regular basis, because it just felt like we were making Chicanos out to be cliché. That it was just a cliché of who we were. It wasn’t—

KD: Or repeating a symbol wasn’t giving it new meaning?

MG: Yeah. It wasn’t giving it new meaning. It wasn’t giving it any insight. It wasn’t being real. I wanted something that . . . You know, I sit here and I look at you, or I look at anybody, and I see their humanity. And as a Chicana, that’s just part of it. We’re so much more complex than that. We have so much more than that. And that was my argument, that we could reflect on a daily issue, we could reflect on the issues of our lives as individuals and personal journeys and still be Chicanos. And she felt that our symbolism was part of our aesthetic, and there was this whole thing of universality versus this cultural identity. I kind of feel that they don’t conflict anymore. In me, they don’t.

So, you know, I’ve often said, and I’ve said since ’86, since ’85, I’ve always said that I define Chicano art by producing it. And I have that right. I help create what that is, and I’m entitled to do it the way I want to do it, because that’s called artistic freedom. So I’m not conflicted about that. I think that it’s very difficult to go back to a period of time when you were feeling conflicted about that, and you’re still trying to sort it out, and still trying to discover what that cultural symbolism is for you as an individual.

KD: How is it that you’re able to recall that specific year? Was there something that happen in ’86?

MG: In ’83. Well, it started in ’83, when Yreina and I started having it, because we did the mural. Eighty-three, ’84. Eighty-four. We had to have done it in ’84. It was a fast year for me. I had come back from Chicago . . . No, it might have been ’83. And Yreina and I got hired to do this mural in Echo Park, and it was sort of a lifesaver, because I didn’t have a job before that. And I had done my community service at Coldwater Canyon Elementary School just before the summer broke out. And by the time summer came along, I did this mural at Echo Park with Yreina. We got hired to do that through Centro de Arte Público. It was just like, you know—

KD: Yeah, you don’t have it on here, I don’t think. You have ’84, *Silent Prison*.

MG: Eighty-four was *Silent Prison*. That was done for the greater Los Angeles council for the deaf.

KD: Right. And then *Tribute to Hokusai*.

MG: *Hokusai*. Yeah, that’s been painted over. That was a giant mural of the—the waves below Mount Fuji.

KD: Yeah. It says ’87.

MG: That was done for a Dodge van commercial.

KD: Really?

MG: Uh-huh. They came and they wanted to sell this truck to artists to lug their stuff, and they wanted a mural in the background. Just as a mural, it didn’t have to have anything with the Dodge or anything. And they asked me if I could do this wave. And it turned out to be right behind the Japanese mortuary, it was this giant wall. And the mortuary told them that they could put up a mural there, and that after they had done their shooting and used the wall for the mural, that they were requesting that they take it down. They didn’t know what we were going to put on there.

KD: Right.

MG: And then I did the—it was over the Fourth of July. I had three days. I was given one helper.

KD: For seventeen by thirty feet?

MG: The wall was prepped before I got there, all of the supplies were there, and I had three days to do the mural. I did it in three days, it was like 102-degree heat. I put a brush on a pole, and I painted, and I got it done.

KD: Oh, my God, you put a brush on a pole. *[laughter]*

MG: Uh-huh. And the helper, like, rolled me from this direction to that. But I figured it out in a very graphic manner. It's a very graphic image, so I broke it down into colors, and did a very graphic thing. And, yes—

KD: So did you work from a sketch that they had approved, that Dodge had approved?

MG: Well, it's the image of Hokusai. That's why it was a *Tribute to Hokusai*. And that's what I called it. It's a *Tribute to Hokusai*. Left it at that. So the funeral home saw it, and requested that they leave it. And so it was there for years. They loved it. The only reason that they ended up painting over it is because it started to peel, because the prep underneath it—

KD: Wasn't that—

MG: Wasn't as good, because it wasn't intended to be there forever. So the preparation. . . You know, when I did the blue whales, when I did the *Two Blue Whales* we scraped that wall. We took a high-powered nozzle and scratched it and scraped it and prepped it and gessoed it and sanded it. This wall for *Hokusai* was done with the intent of being painted over after it was finished. So, you know, ten years later when it's peeling, they had—they eventually took it out. But it was there.

KD: Now, did they have to get your approval to cover it?

MG: No. They didn't. It was on their property.

KD: No, but I mean, by then—

MG: Because when it was painted, it was painted with the idea that—

KD: Oh, you had already agreed.

MG: I had already agreed. I had agreed to that when I painted it, that it could be painted over immediately. And the other thing, by the time I even was aware of the fact that it was painted over, it was already gone, so there wasn't anything for me to say about it. And you wouldn't be able to—the prep on that wall was so poor. It isn't like a Siqueiros mural, you know, what's beneath the paint, next to—on the wall, what's between that. And if you've done your prep work, there's a good chance you'd be able to keep it. Like Siqueiros, I'm sure, did his prep work, and even though they painted over it, what's underneath is well established. In the case of this particular piece, it wasn't. So that's why it ended up going.

KD: So we were getting a timeline for when you did the one at Echo Park.

MG: Echo Park was '83. It was the summer of '83. I was hired, and I was supervising all these students, because that's where they were getting some of the money to pay us. So we had to supervise these teenagers.

KD: Was it like a SYEP?

MG: Yeah, something like a SYEP. Summer Youth Employment Program. And so the way that they paid the artist for doing their work is that they got paid as supervisors, and they had to have, like, all of these . . . They got one supervisor for ten. And then the Summer Youth Employment Program paid the artist for supervising them. So they weren't being paid to do the mural work. They were being paid to keep these kids busy.

KD: Yeah. So then you've said you had this—there was a moment where you made a change, and that's what I was trying to figure out. It sounded like it was a specific year where you start to—

MG: Well, it was kind of a growth—it was a growth issue, you know. Some of those things came—in part probably because I got involved with the Día de los Muertos and ended up putting that together, and I became aware of the issues of the community in a very different way. I was highly influenced, of course, by the Photography Center by that point. And Glenna worked at—she was the director at the Photography Center, and she was the one that had helped me get the mural. So I always had a relationship with her. And she was pretty much into the Chicano art movement, in terms of supporting it and what have you. She's the one that hired people like John Valadez, and the [East Los] Streetscapers, and Leo Limón, and was collecting Magu. So she was part of the scene back then. And she always included me, and I was always kind of . . .



She was the first person to call me an artist. Before that, I just called myself a painter. I'm a painter. I paint. That's my work. There are artists that bake. There are artists that make clothes. There are artists that decorate. There are artists that cut hair. I'm a painter, and I paint, and that's my art. But she acknowledged my level of skill and achievement by calling me an artist. And so she was the first person to say I was an artist, and when she started calling me an artist, I said, "Yeah, I'm an artist. I am." Because before that, I was more focused on just being a good painter.

I'm so glad that my work is not conceptual and that I don't have to work with bricks and barbed wire and plastic bags and things like that, because it takes a different mindset. I don't have that kind of mindset. I mean, I think that, you know, painting, the act of painting is like a discipline for me, like swimming laps, or playing the piano, or shooting baskets. Whatever that is, it's a discipline. And I get up in the morning and I look at my paints and I look at my painting, and, "Okay, what do you have to do today? How does that painting need to change? Where are you going with it? Is it any good?" And it's something that I practice and I practice, like singing, like anything else. But when you're doing conceptual art, it seems to me that you're trying to, you're thinking about . . . It's born in the mind, it's not born through a skill, but it's born through . . . Because, you know, it might be hammering something, it might be gluing something, it might be sawing something in half or stacking things or lining something up or hanging things from the ceiling. It's not that kind of a physical discipline, as painting is a discipline. It isn't like I design something and I give it to somebody else and they paint it for me. I'm not that kind of painter either. I am the kind of person that makes things with their hands, makes their own. And it's about the process, so it's the process of that discipline. And I need that for my stability, for my inner being, for my expression, for my comfort.

**KD:** You've talked about a couple of things that are some of the questions we're trying to get at with the [CSRC Oral Histories Series], and one of them is the commercial products, projects. I didn't know you had had others that were—

**MG:** Commercial, you mean?

**KD:** Well, the Dodge one. I don't know if you want to call that commercial, but—

**MG:** Well, you know, they were looking for a mural artist that did murals, and they weren't looking for somebody who did commercial art. And the reason they hired me was because my work isn't really considered commercial, any more than—you know, my lines are graphic in that respect.

**KD:** Right. But commissioned pieces, other commissioned pieces.

**MG:** I think that any time you start getting into the area of producing public art, you're going to find that you're getting into the area of commissioned work. Unless you have a patron that's backing you up solely, you're going to find that in order to supply a lot of those pieces, you're going to end up doing commercial, so-called commercial work. And commercial only means that it's being funded. And, you know, whether you're being funded by Dodge, or you're being funded by vodka, or Miller Light, or any of those things, I think it becomes a question of whether or not you have, you know, their logo as part of your composition.

**KD:** Right.

**MG:** And in that particular case of Dodge, there was nothing on there that said Dodge. There was no logo—

**KD:** So you do think . . . I mean, you have it in your résumé as a mural, and not as a set design, or . . . Yeah, set design is another—

**MG:** Yeah, because it wasn't—yeah, I didn't do any set . . . Well, actually, I have done a piece with the Latino Theatre Company. But I, you know, there's no logo on the painting, there is nothing—I didn't take into consideration anything.

**KD:** So to you, that's a commissioned public work.

**MG:** Yeah, because I didn't even concern myself with where they were going to park the truck, I didn't concern—

**KD:** Right, so it's not even set design.

**MG:** Not even that. I mean, I didn't concern myself with any of that.

**KD:** Well, tell me about the set design you did for the theater group.

- MG: It was for the Day of the Dead, and we . . . José Luis [Valenzuela] had a visiting artist—I don't know if he was from [*inaudible*]. I can't remember the city that this particular artist was from. But he had asked him if he could help create a piece for the theater, and the guy was going to be here shortly. And what this guy did is he created these gigantic masks, and they were masks that were sometimes used as like body pieces, and people would walk on stilts. And José Luis wanted one of these pieces for the set of the theater company, and we put this veil over her. And so what we did, he said he would show an artist how to create this work, and the artist would take it over so he could leave, because he wasn't going to be around for the painting of it or the creation of it or anything like that. So in order to create this giant, ten-foot mask, we dug a pit or a mold into the backyard of José Luis's house. And there was this giant mud mold, and we took a sheet, like, sheets, and laid it on top with Elmer's glue, and then layered layers of paper and cloth to create this ten-foot mask. But we carved it out of the ground.
- KD: Exactly. And a negative indentation of the—
- MG: A positive.
- KD: Positive, sorry.
- MG: A positive indentation. And then laid it over this giant thing. And we talked about what we were going to produce. So I created this giant mask that stood on the stage of the theater. And then they brought . . . I got lace, and I attached it, and I created—in fact, I created, I would say, they had to be like two-and-a-half-foot roses made out of this paper that. . . I made these papier-mâché roses as a crown across the top, and I hung this lace over it and I painted it. And then the people would appear from behind the mask on the stage.
- KD: Right. I think I've seen them use that since then.
- MG: They have?
- KD: In other pieces, yeah.
- MG: Have they?
- KD: Because it's a way to allow the actors to come on and off the stage, it functions like the wings.
- MG: Yes, right. Because the gauze came out.
- KD: And so they use that for their entrance, they come from behind it.
- MG: Yeah, exactly. So I worked with them doing that. And I mean, it's fun, but I haven't ever really—
- KD: You didn't work with Peter Sellars?
- MG: No. I think Patssi does. She did these things for HBO, she has done them.
- KD: Yeah. A couple of people have worked with Peter Sellars.
- MG: I haven't had that opportunity. I know Yreina did. She went to France with a piece that traveled there. I haven't really had that kind of opportunity. And, you know, people don't really look at me as a set designer, because I tend to be more focused on the individual paintings. But, you know, I'm pretty impressed with what Patssi does. I think she does these really—I think her sets are really beautiful. I like her sets. And I think that's one of her strengths.
- KD: Do you think that—do you think that working in the theater, making this large mask, gave you a sense of another direction you want to pursue? Or . . .
- MG: Well, you know, back in, oh, '73 I worked for Tony Urbano and Company. And that was a puppet company, where I made puppets. And it isn't a huge leap from the puppets and the masks, it's kind of the same kind of category in my mind. And I've worked there, I could work there if I had to work there, in a pinch, I would do it. But I don't have enough time. I don't have enough time to—I mean, I have an interest in it, I like it. But it's a whole other setup.

What I have here for myself in my studio is, I have paint. And I had a master printer show up. I worked with him on the Santana piece, and he's—he brought me a little gift. He brought me some acetates and said, "Whenever you feel like that, I will produce this print for you. It's a gift. It's free. It's for you to sell." And I said, "Wow. That's really, really nice." So I said to him, "Instead of giving it to me, why don't we just produce this print and share in it, so that we can get some money and buy some good paper and keep doing it?" And

he said, “Okay.” I sort of stick to what I learned about these little opportunities from Self Help Graphics. That given the opportunity, I like to turn it into a financial or economic resource, so that it benefits both him and me. Because I don’t want to just do one print. I want to do twenty or thirty. And he agreed. He said, “Okay.”

And then actually followed up with a call, again saying that he was producing something akin to the *Pennysaver* bilingually, that goes to all the different restaurants that he works with, and would I consider doing a little article for it? It’s only a one-page thing with images, and he would produce it, and he’s putting out ten thousand [copies]. “Would you like to do that?” And I said, “Oh, okay.” So there’s all of these little opportunities. Now, he is offering to pay me for that. However, I’m sure that the amount of money that comes from it isn’t enough to sustain me. However, it’s the ability for me to promote who I am as an artist. So I’ll probably take it on.

**KD:** So is that how you see some of these commissions? That they’re just interesting relationships, but that’s not the way you’re going to keep—

[break in audio]

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia, and we’re on tape 2. Go ahead, Margaret. You were talking about how you think about commissioned work.

**MG:** If you’re presented with an opportunity to do something, you have to see how it fits in to what you’re already doing.

**KD:** Right. So this is the priority, the painting.

**MG:** Yeah. It’s always a priority. I keep coming back to it. I always come back to it. I may take a break. I may go volunteer at Self Help. I may go work on a mural. I may do another show. I may do some ceramics. I may go help Fernando Barragan work on his mural. I may do any number of other things, but I always come back to painting, because the painting is something that’s easy for me to sustain. Making puppets . . . I have a hobby of making earrings. I do that too. But, you know, the thing is, you can’t sustain all of that. I cannot come in and do pastels every day, oil every day, printmaking every day, writing every day, swimming every day, or doing any of those things every day. But the one thing I can do every day is I can do a little painting, because it’s so easy for me. It’s such an easy form of expression for me. You know, it’s like other people draw. I paint. It isn’t any different than that.

**KD:** We started this conversation with questions about your earlier work compared to your work now. And I was wondering if you could reflect more. You’ve answered part of that question, but I was wondering if you could—

**MG:** Well, I’ve made a journey into things that have a stronger sense of cultural identity. I’ve embraced this reflection of who I am as a Chicana and a Latina. And in there I’ve kind of found myself. Because, you know, when you’re a kid, and you’re growing up, and you read *Dick and Jane*. And you see all of these American magazines with all of these white teenagers on them, and you don’t see yourself on the TV, you don’t see any characters. And you don’t know anything in the media that reflects your experiences. It’s hard to see who you are. And I think that understanding my history is part of it, and understanding the aesthetic of my community is part of it, and sort of looking for my own personal journey in there and reflecting upon it. I’ve embraced all of it, and I don’t feel I have a barcode on my ass. I don’t feel that I have to meet up to anybody’s standards. And if I choose to sit here and, say, do paintings that don’t have any figures in them whatsoever and do something that is completely expressive and abstract, then I can do whatever the hell I please, because I have artistic freedom. And if it’s within me to do that, and I feel compelled to do it, I’m going to do it, because there isn’t anything stopping me. I can have whatever I want. I can have my cake and eat it, too, because there’s no point in having cake unless you can eat it. And I hope that other people can feel the same way, that they have that freedom.

You know, Shifra Goldman was criticizing me for painting, doing paintings of my granddaughter. “Oh, this isn’t really serious art. This is just, you know, this mushy familial kind of thing,” or whatever. And I thought about that this morning, and I realized, you know, hey, I’m a woman, and my work reflects that

I am a woman. And as a woman, what are my concerns? My concern is my family, is my womanhood, is my children, my grandchildren. Is my reflection of myself as a mother to be any less than the reflection of what a man sees as a woman—as a sexual object? [Is that] more important than how I see myself? And my stuff as cute, or it's pretty, or it's endearing, because it's babies sleeping, or any of that. I don't see any problem with it.

KD: Hasn't that criticism been leveled at women artists for centuries? *[laughter]*

MG: Yes. "Oh, well, you know, those are babies sleeping, how could it not be cute?" And, yes, it's cute, but it isn't just about being cute, too. It's me reflecting on those things that I love. And if I'm not painting about the things that I love, why the hell am I painting anyway?

KD: Right. It's just [not] genuine.

MG: Yeah. It's not genuine. And, you know, I had—I remember I was thinking about this one painting I had done of my granddaughter. She was asleep and she was hanging off the couch, and it actually looked like it was falling off the couch. And it was just her sleeping with her just sort of falling out of it.

KD: Like a cat, just so unaware of things, like lounging at the edge of the . . . yeah.

MG: Yeah. Completely. And I paint about my life and I paint about those things that are in my life, and sometimes they are kind of mushy.

KD: But if we look at this large painting *[referring to image]*—and this is one that you've said you've been working on—does this have a name? I think it's on the back.

MG: Yeah, it says "Niña de Colores," but I was thinking of changing it, because I have this idea of putting these clouds in there. And I was going to say *[inaudible]*, or "Between the Cactus and the Clouds." And it's my granddaughter again, and I feel like it's a stronger piece now, because before, it was—I just didn't have it right. But there's something kind of thorny around her. She's sitting around these thorny plants. Not thorny, but spiky. And these clouds, like, I'm going to put these kind of clouds with these sort of silver lining, but they're dark clouds. And I—I think that I'm not just doing pretty little pictures of babies and kids. I mean, there's also this other thing that's going on about their innocence and their beauty, and—

KD: Yeah, you could do the portrait without the background. You don't need a background to do portraiture.

MG: No, I don't.

KD: But you seem to be compelled in this one, and there's a couple of others who just. . . It doesn't compete with it, but it tells another story.

MG: Yeah. And I don't—I think one of the observations that Kikki [Eder] was making about my work is that I never paint what I—the background that's there.

KD: No. *[laughter]*

MG: I have a tendency to sort of put them into different situations, like the rose petals and the clouds and the cactus. And sometimes it's roses and sometimes it's thorny things and stuff like that. Yeah, I know. Because I just want to put what I enjoy, and I just want to put what I like and what I find to be beautiful. And it's sort of halfway between what I see, what I envision, what I want, what I, you know, sort of fear, maybe. I don't know. And, you know, I'm so focused on the figures sometimes when I first start the painting. It's always first—that's the first element. That's the first thing. Because I really want to capture the feeling of what the person is like in that sense, because they're always, for me, the most important element to begin with. And then somewhere along the journey of that painting, I sometimes even risk losing that. You know, like with the rose petals, falling like confetti. If you notice, some of those rose petals are in front of her face and her arms. So I did all that painting and then I took this risk of maybe losing all that work underneath it.

KD: What's the name of that piece?

MG: I don't really have a title for it. But I think that at the end of this journey with all of these little girl pieces, I'm probably going to start with titles, because I'm getting a stronger sense of where I'm driving with them.

KD: So this is a part of that same series, but it's one of the earlier ones.

MG: Yes, it's one of the earlier ones. In fact, this is actually one of the earliest, and I've totally changed it.

KD: Of your granddaughter.

MG: Yes. And I told you that the rose petals for me were like kisses falling, and it was my way of telling her how much I loved her. And it was just a statement about that.

KD: You've used a phrase a couple of times, "the aesthetic of my community." I wonder if you could tell me—

MG: I don't know, you know. I define that as an individual, but I think different people define it in different—

KD: So what is it—so how, what are the elements or the examples?

MG: Predominantly . . . You know, obviously there are people who break rules. There's always someone who breaks a rule, you make a rule, and that's why it's meant to be broken. So, you know, obviously I like high key color. I like things that are expressive. I like things that are passionate. I like things that move. And for me, I like—I enjoy texture.

But I've seen—you know, I've seen things out of even prisons, when I worked in prisons, like those pencil drawings that are very *cholo*, and I'm fascinated by that. I don't do that, that's not me. But I know that that's a strong element in the community as well. But it's not what I do. I like to be able to—I find that to be a little anal. [laughter] You know? It's just a little too tight for me. I want a freedom to be able to produce work the way I breathe, in the manner that it feels organic, that it feels natural, that it's not contrived, that it isn't over-intellectualized. And you're not, you know, sitting there trying to figure out how it has to be, but that it has its own sort of sense of life, and that it has the ability to move people, to touch them and give them an emotion, connect with it from personal experience or a personal emotion that they feel connected to the work. And they don't have to sit there and figure out, "Oh, this little girl was deported." It isn't about that or like that. It's about the value of that individual, period. And all of that other stuff is just background noise, and sometimes background story. But what's on the forefront is what I value: beauty and love and human connection.

KD: When you talk about high key color and community aesthetics, I start thinking of some of the things you would see every day, like the graffiti art.

MG: I have a strong appreciation for graffiti art. I really like it. I mean, I like it on the walls. I wish that there were places where people had. . . You know, one of the things that is kind of like—I mean, I'm offended by things that people are not offended by. Or should I say, not so much offended . . . I think that may even be the wrong word. But I'm, like, I go out and I see mushroom-colored buildings, beige buildings, grey buildings, brown trim, just dull tan-looking buildings every single day. I went out to visit my cousin, and she says, "Oh, you know, you can find my house, because my house is yellow." It's the only yellow house, it's this pastel yellow. And she's like, "You don't think it's too bright? My neighbors might complain." It's like she's trying to sublimate her *mexicanada* or something like that. My boyfriend painted his house orange with cobalt trim, and my mother arrived at the house and she said, "El crea que es Mexicano?"

The aesthetic here is so dirt-colored, and I don't—and it looks sooty. The streets look sooty and grey and smoggy, and when you find a place that has bright, vivid color, this expressiveness, I just love it. That's kind of . . . You know, why do you want—why do people want to create environments that are so institutionalized? It's like the whole city has the aesthetic of—I mean, not this whole city, but all cities. There's this aesthetic of prisons, of institutions, of the very dull. I love flying over like Mexico, and you see turquoise-colored houses and pink houses, you know, violet-colored houses. It's crazy. And I love that. I embrace that. I like strong, strong color. The architecture of Francisco Barragan.

You know, if you look at some of the interiors on some of those houses, they are so incredibly rich. And they're not garish, by any means. They are rich and elegant and well stated, and there is this sense of the ethereal and the spiritual and the historic, almost, sensibility, and connection to indigenous culture that exists there. And I think that's part of the strong key color. The Europeans had a very brown palette, a very tan palette. It's because a lot of them came from snowy places where, you know, when they started painting, all they had were umbers and greys and things like that. So we don't have that. We have tropical . . . You know, like if you see a plant that is a fuchsia, that is so bright that you kind of think, is that real? Is that flower real, or was it painted? And you can't tell the difference because the color is so bright. And sometimes nature puts on those colors. But in other places, people don't recognize it as such, because

they think it's just being garish. But what is natural around us is that bright color. You go to a tropical place where they've got these giant butterflies that are—they're not just bright, bright blue, they're iridescent. We have that sensibility, and color looks different. I'm still drawn to it. I don't know if it's in my genetic makeup or what, but it's there. It's strongly there.

**KD:** I wonder if you could talk a bit about the technique.

**MG:** Technique?

**KD:** You talked about a couple of paintings over the last couple of sessions, but we haven't actually talked about—

**MG:** Well, there's certain things that I set myself up to do that, in the beginning, I wasn't aware of. But as I've grown, I realize how to get what I want a little more quickly. I use wooden panels, I paint on a wooden surface. I use luan. And I use . . . If you notice, my palette is a panel. I use the palette—I use it as a palette. And as I paint one painting, I use the other palette to sort of smear the paint and build up the surface of the paint. And I do that because it creates more tension with the brush, and I can control the texture and the movement on the surface of the image easier with a wooden panel than I can on canvas. With canvas, the canvas absorbs the paint. It sucks up the paint. So it's very difficult to bring the surface up on that. It takes a lot more paint. You have to use a lot more paint on canvas than you do on wood, because wood isn't quite so absorbent. So you can control it the same way you would control frosting on a cake.

**KD:** Right.

**MG:** You know? And so you can get this really nice texture in the bristles on the brush. You can almost carve the paint onto the surface, so that you're getting all of this lovely texture.

**KD:** And you have your own table saw? You—

**MG:** I'm making my own panel, yes. I had a carpenter make them, because I wasn't into making panels. So for the longest time Howard Swerdloff, who now has Howeeduzzit Gallery out in the Alhambra, and Mark Salazar, who was with Frank Romero, he—they used to make my panels for me. And I've had different people now and then make different things. But the last person that made my panels, I guess he didn't have a table saw. But he was one of my students who, you know, he couldn't pay me for his classes or his lessons, so instead of paying me, he did some work for me. And I bought the wood and he made the panels. Well, I just—I'm still working on some of those panels. I'm not as happy about his panels as I am about mine. And I felt that because they're for me, I tend to be a little neater.

**KD:** Yeah.

**MG:** Because, you know, what it is you need from the panel, you tend to be a little more thoughtful about your corners and your edges and things like that. And I know how to fix his panels to make them work for me, but I just felt that it wasn't as neat. You know, I wanted it to be kind of—I didn't want it to be so sloppy. So you can be painterly with the paint, but you can't be painterly with the wood. You have to make tight corners. And I like painting on wood panels. I like the hard surface. The other thing that I enjoy about it is that you stack them sometimes. I've had canvas, the canvas falls over onto a brush, makes a hole in the canvas. I know how to stretch that out, I know how to deal with that, but I don't like that. I mean, when you have a hard surface—

**KD:** Is that something you learned in the restoration, when you were doing restoration work?

**MG:** [*laughter*] Yeah. You learn how to deal with that. I used to—you have to shrink the canvas, you wet it and heat it and it shrinks a little bit. Pulls it tighter. You can do that with some of the new canvas, but if it gets really old, you can't do that. You can't do that with all canvases. Not if it's a given amount of years. You start having problems trying to do that.

I wanted to talk a little bit about Frank Romero, because I haven't talked about him at all, and I didn't want to pretend that he wasn't an element in my development as an artist. Frank was part of the Los Four, we all know that, and he had a house over here on Carol Street in Angelino Heights, and he had a studio behind there. And he invited me to start working, or doing the Christmas sales behind his house. Before that, I had never done anything that made money. It was always like, oh, you have a show, you hang a

painting. And so that first year that I did the Christmas sale with him, I think I sold something, I made two hundred dollars. Oh, I was so happy. Two hundred dollars was a lot of money for me. It made me happy. So the following year, I did the sale again, and I made two thousand dollars.

**KD:** Whoa. What year was that?

**MG:** I'd have to look at see. But there's the economics of artistic survival. And the thing about Frank is, that Frank was always very accessible to a lot of people back then. He isn't so much now, but back then, his doors would be open. And through that, you know, your survival is really important, in terms of being able to make it, do stuff like that. And there was always a lot of tension between me and Frank. We didn't agree about a lot of stuff. Just as there was a lot of tension between me and Glenna—not Glenna, Yreina—when we talked about Chicano imagery and iconography and stuff like that. We disagreed about a lot of stuff. And in fact it was always like a challenge, this sense of throwing down the gauntlet and having a little spat about it. But our disagreements tended to be friendly, and they were based on aesthetics and process and approach and things like that. I mean, he didn't like my portraits, he didn't like my sense of color.

**KD:** Really?

**MG:** Uh-uh. He said I kept using these garish colors. You know, he used Naples yellow, and he uses browns, and he uses tans, and he has a different palette than I do. He does use high-key color, he does use bright colors, but he's not quite as far out as I am. And so we would have these . . . I go, "Well, you're using designer colors. You're using bathroom colors. Give me a break." But it was kind of a friendly thing, and it was a certain amount of tension that was for me part of my—how should I say, *modus operandi*? It's the way that I work and it's the way that I function, and it makes me—tends to make me a little more productive, in terms of being challenged. I sort of—

**KD:** You have to refine your argument.

**MG:** I have to refine my argument, and having a place in which to place an argument is healthy for me. I need it. It's a sort of a healthy kind of thing, and I have that a little bit with Kiki now. And I sort of nurture it.

**KD:** Right. It's not about you telling the other person they're wrong. It's about that exchange that helps you build and perfect.

**MG:** Absolutely. You know, I don't need yes-people around me. What am I doing with that? I don't run a company. I need something that challenges me to become a better artist. And it isn't about going into a situation and just doing what people tell you. It isn't about going into a situation and trying to just, you know, emulate them or be another Frank Romero or be whatever. It's about having a disagreement and saying, "No, I don't agree with you, and I'll tell you why. Let me show you. Let me show you." And the argument is done with the imagery. And there's times when you agree.

**KD:** Can you give me an example of how you guys would, or what you would—

**MG:** Oh, he had a troop of people marching through his studio one day, and he says, "Well, bring a painting over so you can show them what you do, because they're coming from . . ." I don't know, they might have been coming from UCLA. You know, these little tour groups that say, "Oh, we're going to stop in on an artist's studio, and we're going to visit." And I said, "I'll bring over one of my portraits." He says, "Don't bring those things over. Bring something else over. Those portraits, you know, I don't like them." And I brought over a portrait of Bill Roper. This is a portrait that I had done for the *Nuevo Mestizaje* [series], because I've been doing these for a long time. And [Frank] got up and talked about himself, and he was getting ready to introduce me, and he was going to say something really negative about my portraits. And there was my portrait sitting there, and he goes, "Well, you know, her portraits are not my favorite kind of thing, but this one's really pretty good." [*laughter*] And then found himself turning around in the middle of the lecture, as he's talking to other people about me. And I'm standing there, I go, "Yeah? Okay. So this is our argument, and I proved it by doing something that you disagree with the idea of it, and how it's done, and yet you find this image compelling," and he says it. But there were times when . . . I think there's a *Midnight* [Special] bookstore in Santa Monica, there used to be?

**KD:** There used to be, yeah.

**MG:** There used to be this Midnight . . . and Harry Gamboa, Barbara Carrasco, and these people who were putting together the CARA exhibit were having a lecture. And they were basically—almost like they invited Frank over there so that they could kind of beat him up, I think. And they were challenging him there, and he took me with him. And I remember standing at Frank’s side and just saying, “Well, you know, ten years ago”—because I think this was ten years from—I said, “When I showed up to town, I was the new kid on the block,” and I said then, I said, “I defined Chicano art by producing it.” Because they were trying to say that Frank’s work wasn’t Chicano, that it was design or that it was for the dollar, that it was about the money, and that they were the real Chicanos. I was just like, give me a break. Why are we even saying this is a universal image versus the iconography? I mean, it was the same old argument that Yreina and I had been having. But the difference is that there isn’t a—there shouldn’t really be an argument about that. I think that we’ve dealt with that already. I think it’s old and it’s over, and it’s like, where are we going now? Why that? Why are we still arguing about this?

**KD:** Well, maybe we don’t need to argue in such definitive terms, so that somehow Frank Romero would be kicked out of the group when he was part of Los Four, which kind of put Chicano art on the map. I mean, not the first, but getting that show at LACMA, it was a pretty big deal.

**MG:** I think it is a huge deal. And I wanted to take a—

**KD:** If artists are concerned about getting in the door—

**MG:** I mean, my first show was with Gilbert Lujan, and I really knew Gilbert before I knew Frank. And I wanted to mention Frank only in that I haven’t really talked about him, and yet there have been times in my past when he was my best friend. And one of the reasons for him including me in the Christmas sale back when he first did that, was as a way of helping me out with money for the lawyer when I was trying to get custody of my kid. And I can’t overlook that. I don’t want to overlook that. I do remember that. And he has befriended me and been a major resource in many ways. So, artistically we disagree on a lot of levels, and we have that challenging argument between us. But I’m not threatened by that.

I think that there’s a tendency for women who are, like, married to other artists and they’re trying to be artists, there is a tendency to sort of sit in the shadow of that artist. And the thing is to take it as a challenge, not to just emulate them and copy them and follow down the same path, but to carve out your own creative journey that challenges their journey. And there were times when I used to piss him off, totally. So I think that you have to look at it that way, especially because he’s very famous. If you think that you’re going to . . . Like his present wife, you know, she is now Sharon Romero. She’s lost her name. She doesn’t use that, she’s taken on his name, and now she’s going to become Latina. Well, she’s not. She’s not Latina, it’s not going to change. That doesn’t mean that she can’t be influenced by him, or influenced by Chicanos that are around him, or that she can’t do work that doesn’t reflect that influence. But there’s a difference between being influenced and being derivative. And there was one show that the two of them had, over here at Plaza de la Raza, and people literally couldn’t tell the difference between what was his and what was hers. And I find that rather disturbing. You need to find your own journey in this.

**KD:** Unless they’re actually working together on the piece, right? Then it would be a success, when you can’t tell the difference.

**MG:** Well, if it’s collaborative, I guess. But they’re going to France and they’re painting these fields, and all of the paintings look the same, and they all look like Frank. I find that rather . . . He said to me, “Oh, she’s not influenced by me. She’s influenced by David Hockney.” That’s what he said to me. And I said to him, “Well, you know, Frank, it’s still derivative, whether it’s you or it’s David Hockney. It doesn’t look like she’s herself. And I find that rather disturbing.” There’s a combination of—number one, there’s that. And, you know, when my daughter was working for them and she was in the studio, Sharon had her making the pieces for her, because she comes from the CalArts school of conceptual art. And she had my daughter making these sort of lollipop balls with sticks in them, and it was just a wad of papier-mâché. And she would make these wads like lollipops in different shapes on a palette like suckers. And then Sharon would come and paint them and put glitter on them. And—



KD: So your daughter was the fabricator.

MG: Yeah, because my daughter kind of . . . When she ended up working in there. And Chloe, my granddaughter, from the time she was born [she] was in the studio. And Frank taught her to work with clay. She worked with clay with him, and he was her godfather, and she—you know, she's still, when she sees Frank now, "Hi, Frank." She loves Frank. He's her *niño*, that kind of thing.

KD: Oh. Really close relationship.

MG: So, yeah, we have a very close family, a kind of relationship we have had. And I know his daughters, and his first wife. And I think that Frank is in love with Sharon, really is in love with her, and they seem to be very happy. And she's giving him maybe some sense of peace and something that he wants. So I'm really glad that he's found that. And he's moving to France, and it sounds idyllic. It sounds like a fantasy. So I hope it's everything that he really wants. He has helped a lot of people. He taught me a lot, especially when it comes to maneuvering and figuring out a way to survive and create a career, as far as the—there are certain things that are helpful to do.

Auctions are very helpful for artists, and there's a way to do them, and there's a way that they can be more helpful to artists, and I always wanted to try to get people who did auctions to be more considerate of the artist. That was one of the things, I sat on the—I helped with the CARECEN art auctions, which was another way, you know . . . I did the Day of the Dead. But when I sat on the CARECEN art auctions, it was also very helpful because I also, again, was always meeting new artists and making new connections with stuff like that. And Frank was a part of that too. And it's a very important network to be a part of. And this is something that I said, when I talked about Self Help Graphics, is that if you ask the artist for 100 percent donation, they'll give you a little tchotchke, they'll give you a little fifty-dollar or hundred-dollar piece, and if that's where the market is, I suppose that's okay. The artist doesn't give you any part of it. But if you're really having a big auction, and you're bringing out all the high rollers, then you really need to give the artist 50 percent so that they can put in that big, expensive piece that the National Museum of Mexican Art—

KD: Is that why you ran the CARECEN, or participated in CARECEN?

MG: That's part of how I ran CARECEN. And if you notice, when the CARECEN art auctions, you go back to them, they gave the artist 50 percent. There's too many auctions. I mean, I'm receiving stuff now for Obama and receiving stuff for—

KD: Exactly.

MG: For—God, I mean, there's a whole bunch of things, auctions that I can participate in, and they all want 100 percent. I can't do that. I don't care if it's the American Heart Association, or the children with AIDS, or the homeless women who, you know. I can't do it, because I'm going to be homeless myself. But if they share with me, I can find a way to share what I have and give them a tithing, which I think is much more sustainable. Because then I can do it more and more often, and I can use my work to create some kind of revenue for all the causes that I care about.

KD: Well, it seems just like a silly model, to ask for donations from artists. I mean, maybe if you ask in Target for a donation, you know—

MG: A dentist or a doctor or somebody who has the resources and the money. But you're asking the artist to give away their livelihood to support you, because you think they can just create another, which means to me that you really don't value what they're doing anyway.

KD: Right. Or don't understand it, or don't value it.

MG: Or don't understand it. And as much as I care about all these causes, and I do, I mean, they destroy me. Sometimes I see these things and—

KD: Well, you were—you were homeless, and you were a single mom, and you had to survive a difficult domestic situation. So, yeah. [*laughter*]

MG: Yeah. And I want to see those things addressed. But I want to see them addressed more and more often, and I think that a source of revenue can be established for those things in the same way that the programs that work for Self Help, that really work for Self Help, that have always worked for Self Help, is the

question of sharing it with the artist, and sharing it with the artist means that the artist gets a percentage. You know, we have to think about the artist.

**KD:** Do you want to take a break for lunch?

**MG:** Yeah, I'm good for that.

[*break in audio*]

**MG:** If you guys get loud, I still have the water bottle, okay?

**KD:** [*laughter*] This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia, and we're back from lunch. And, Margaret, can you tell me about the first trip you made to Mexico?

**MG:** The first trip I made to Mexico was just before my nineteenth birthday. And I was talking to my good friend Leo Mouton, who I think I've mentioned before. I don't know if he's on record. But someone I met hitchhiking. [*laughter*] And I said to him . . . And Leo was a major, major influence in my life. A huge influence in my life, because when I . . . He's a social worker, and he worked with United Way, he was an advocate for the greater Los Angeles council for the deaf, which is where my connection for that mural came from. And he's just—you know, he does social work on his own, without an organization. He's that kind of guy. He rescues people. He does all sorts of things.

And he was talking to me, and I said, "I would really love to go to Mexico." And he says, "Well, what's stopping you?" I said, "Well, you know, I only get seven days off, I have two days of vacation. It's not worth it if you can't go for two weeks, you should at least be able to [*inaudible*]. I'd have to take a leave of absence, I don't know if they'd approve." And he goes, "You're making all sorts of excuses." He says, "Do you have the money?" I said, "Well, yeah, I can do it. Financially I think I can do it." And he goes, "Then go. Book your ticket and go." And I was hesitant, because I'd never, never, ever taken a trip anywhere on my own. Ever. I had gone to Northridge, where I went to college. I had taken a vacation with some relatives at one point and gone to Tijuana. But I had never traveled, really. I had never traveled outside of California, or Southern California. I had never been to Northern California. I had never been anywhere, really. No, I did go to Delano, and I did go to Palo Alto. So I have never really gone anyplace and stayed with a different, you know . . . He said, "Go."

So I bought a ticket for a bus, and I called my cousin, and I said, "I'm going to go down to see your mother. I'm just going to go for a couple of weeks." It was before the sixteenth of September, it was close to my nineteenth birthday [on September 20]. And I went, and I was nervous about the whole thing. I got sick. I got to meet my relatives. I got to see where my mother was born. I got to see where she lived. I met my uncles and my aunts and my cousins. And I arrived in jeans and tops, and before my cousins took me out to meet my uncle, they took me and bought me a dress, because young ladies did not ever wear pants. They always had to be presented in dresses. And so they actually took me out and bought me clothes, because they didn't want me to meet my uncle in pants. And we went out to the *rancho*. And they had to get a—oh, I arrived out there on horseback, because there was no roads out there. So I actually, from my aunt's house to my uncle's house, rode on a horse, and then had to change my clothes when I got there. And it was lovely. I arrived, there was a festival, the sixteenth of September was coming up. I just got to see how they lived.

**KD:** Did you have a moment of panic at all? Like, "Oh, my God, what did I get myself into?"

**MG:** Well, it was just so new to me. I was new to them too, though. I was different from what they expected. I'm the *pocha*, you know. And their houses are different. The outside—you have a house where the center of the house, the garden is in the middle of the house. And all of the open windows and everything is towards the center of the house. It's almost like the home is the central part. You don't have windows looking out into the street, and people don't look it, and all the houses look like these little blocks.

**KD:** Right.

**MG:** But when you go inside, there's a courtyard, there's a center, because you cook outside. And the tables are outside, so you sit in the patio and you eat. And my aunt has a little store, like a little—she had a little store there where they sold toothpaste and shoelaces and toilet paper and meat. They had meat and

milk and *pan dulce*, and it was like a little tiny grocery store that she had. And that was at the front of the house, and the house was behind. And then everything gets bolted at night and everything's locked up, so you don't ever see the inside. And I was sitting at the kitchen table, and it's the outside, and the house is made out of adobe, and this little tiny, teeny tiny mouse fell off the wall and dropped onto the kitchen table between me and my cousin. And I looked down at the mouse and she looked at me, and I said, "Whoa, look. It looks like a baby mouse. It doesn't look like a full-grown mouse, it just looks like this little bitty mouse." And she says, "You know, I thought because you were kind of *gringa* that it would really freak you out." [laughter] And I said, "Why would that freak me out?" I said, "It wouldn't freak me out any more than it freaks you out." Like, ah-h! Get up and scream and talk about my nails or something like that. Their idea of who I was, it was just very different.

There were rainstorms, and I saw butterflies and moths that were as big as pigeons. Everybody was friendly, everybody was helpful. You couldn't go anywhere where somebody just didn't help you and embrace you and accept you, even if you were a little different. Everybody was very kind and considerate, and, you know, *mi casa es tu casa*. I mean, literally, it really means that. I enjoyed it. I thought, oh, this was fun, it was an adventure. And then they took me to Jalisco, where I wanted to buy some crafts and some things that, you know. . . I bought a ceramic cat, and I bought some goatskins, and I had boots made. My cousin took me—my big cousin, my male cousin. It was cool. They live here now.

KD: Oh, they do?

MG: Uh-huh. My aunt has since passed away, and my cousin Eva has passed away, she died—

[break in audio]

KD: This is tape 2 for session 4 with Margaret Garcia. This is Karen Davalos on September 19, 2008. Margaret was telling me that her cousins had moved here to get treatment for cancer.

MG: Yes, two cousins come here for treatment of cancer, and I have an aunt who has since passed away over there, so, the family that was there that I knew. . . I still have a few cousins there.

KD: Did you go to see them on subsequent trips? Or was—

MG: I have gone. I think I went again with my husband when I was married. I went again—I went with my husband when I was married. I went by myself and I had custody of my brother for a period of time and he was giving me problems in school.

KD: Right. You talked about that. So you said, with him. Does that mean you took other trips to—

MG: I went down there to set it up, to ask if they could take him in. I just thought that living there would be a great experience, a healthy experience for him. So that he could connect with, you know, what was really important. Because, you know, you're up here and you have everything and you don't realize what a struggle it is for so many people to live and survive and thrive and have what they want. And being able to go into a situation where. . . You know, at my uncle's ranch, they didn't even have an outhouse. They built that. They had indoor plumbing but they didn't have that either. And my aunt is different. She had the grocery store, she had property. She had stuff. So people lived very simply, you know? It isn't like up here, just is very different kind of economy. People do things, and the work ethic is so much stronger, and it really helped my brother focus his energy when he came back. It made a huge difference in terms of. . . You know, that's why he's a doctor. You know, he does well. But he's completely bilingual and his Spanish is perfect, you know, he spent three years there. So he was fine, then he came back and took custody again for a short period of time just before he went for his GED, so. . .

KD: Did you . . . Were the trips, then, more for your kind of exploration of your heritage, or were they just to be vacations?

MG: They were everything. It was all, you know. . . On the other hand I'm a Chicana, I just come out of Northridge. I was working at the Bank of California. I talk about my heritage. You talk about your heritage and yet you haven't been in a trip to Mexico, how is that? You know, how can you do that if you haven't even left East LA?

My uncle had come up here when I was a little girl, I remember him from then. When he was getting ready to go back, I begged him, “Take me with you!” But yeah, my uncle and aunt were here. He said he lived in a ranch. I go, “Really? You have cows? You have horses? What do you have?” I mean, I was a very curious, insatiable kid, and I was insatiable to experience life outside of the little neighborhood that I lived in, you know. I was like, I wanted to see other things. I had stacks of *National Geographic* and I read about other places and looked at other things.

I think it was one of the reasons why, when I was in high school and I had become sexually active, I think in the last year, I didn’t really want to get married. All the young girls were like, “Oh, I have a boyfriend” and “We’ve done it, now I’m going to get married.” I mean I came from a generation that was like, “Hey, there’s birth control pills. And who says I have to make a commitment to this guy?” You know. And maybe there’s something else out there for me, you know. And I came from that hippy dippy generation that said, “Well, sex is sex,” you know. And when I became sexually active it was because I chose to, nobody forced me into it, and I felt like it was an act of my own volition. I was seventeen and I felt, “Okay I’m ready.” And there was a sort of in—cognitive about that, because by that time I was already living with the English teacher—the history teacher, Marshall. So they took me right away and put me on birth control pills. And I was happy about that. I didn’t get pregnant in high school. But for the grace of God go I. Because I could have possibly ended up that way.

But I was so grateful to being able to go on to college, to be able to have a few more things, to feel that I was making choices, to feel that I wasn’t just letting life happen to me but that I was actively having the right to have choice.

**KD:** I have to ask you a question. You—[this] is changing gears, but, you’re trying new choices. And you eventually make the choice to go back to school.

**MG:** Yes. [laughter]

**KD:** And I was under the impression we were talking about it once before, over lunch. But you decided to get the bachelor’s degree and you—

**MG:** Well, I went to school in 1969 or 1970. Early January 1970 I left Northridge. I just didn’t feel I was going to get what I wanted, so I left. I went to the Bank of California. I worked, I got married, I applied for a scholarship. I went back to Northridge for another semester or so, [met] a few new [people, made a few new] friends. But I didn’t get involved in the Chicano studies thing, I just did my own thing. But it really wasn’t . . . what? I wasn’t focused. I had no focus, I still was not connected. I was married, I was struggling with the thing of being married. I think, it wasn’t working. I met a few artists there, I did a few things, and I left. So, I don’t think I even completed a full year, not even, yeah, not even a year.

And I left when I went back to my husband. I was married when I went the second time. We were having horrible fights. He was becoming addicted to barbiturates and I was smoking a lot of dope. I was. But while he was out there, like, you know, speeding, I was taking something that was making me kind of like, “Yeah, whatever.” You know, just totally didn’t care. And when that marriage kind of started collapsing at that point, and I decided to take a hiatus. And so I left him and ended up—I enrolled at LACC. And the best thing that happened to me in LACC was my creative writing class, and that’s when I started painting.

**KD:** Right. You talked about that.

**MG:** But I didn’t paint in an art class. Because I didn’t take art at LACC. But the creative writing class taught me discipline and I learned discipline. It’s about discipline. It’s about discipline, discipline, discipline, whether it was gymnastics or creative writing, it finally sunk in. I had an epiphany, and it was like, “All I have to do is just keep practicing this, and practicing this, and do it and do it and do it and eventually it’ll do something.” And I started painting in the evenings with Don Ward over here with the group from Arts Center. Am I skipping? I don’t know if I’ve answered your question. I don’t know if—

**KD:** Yes, USC. Yeah, you’ve covered this. You haven’t talked about how you got yourself back into school.

**MG:** Oh, well, after, you know, I was at LACC, I became the editor for the *Citadel*. When I finally got pregnant and got back together with my husband, because I was trying to provide my daughter with a father and a

stable family and do that whole thing. Because I had gone on welfare, I'd done that for almost a year, or maybe a year, I don't know how long. And then he—we went back into the fighting thing. Ended up divorcing him, ended up in Chicago. I did the three years in Chicago. I came back, I worked for Glenna, I did the Photo Center. I got the two grants at the California Arts Council.

And by, I think it was 1992 . . . Was it 1992 or 1990? Something like that. I was doing—I did the portrait of Bill Roper. And I know I walked over to USC with my portfolio and I said, "I want to come here, but I don't want to do your undergraduate work. I want to do graduate work." And I put my stuff on the table and I said, "This is it." And I interviewed with all the faculty, and they said, "Well you're the person we're competing against in the art market. It seems to us that we should let you in." They didn't have any—I think they had one person, Mr. [Bob] Alderette, I forget what his first name was, who was Latino. I don't know about being Chicano. Maybe he's Chicano too, but he didn't really connect to that part of his culture. However, he was there, and there wasn't another Latino in the whole department. Not in the undergraduate program, except for him on the faculty and in the graduate program. So I was there little token, I guess. But I have to say that the faculty was extremely supportive of what I did there and tried to connect with me. There was Margit Omar and Ruth Weisberg and Ann Page. I worked with Ann Page, I team-taught with her in the classes and did drawing.

**KD:** So, you got into a studio arts program without a bachelor's degree?

**MG:** Right.

**KD:** And it's the MFA program you get into?

**MG:** Mm-hmm.

**KD:** That's pretty amazing, Margaret.

**MG:** Well, but I had the portfolio to back it up, you know. One of the things I realized when I applied for the California Arts Council grant is there's thousands of people that applied for that, throughout the state of California. This is the cream of the crop. If you get accepted there, I don't care if you've got an MFA or an undergraduate [degree] or anything like that, you don't get those grants unless you're the best in the state. Once I had that, I had the confidence to go after anything. And I believed in me. I believed in myself, and I believe in myself now. I mean, I went to USC and I said, "Look, I've passed all this stuff. I don't need academic drawing. I know how to draw, I know how to paint. I'm in the art market, you know? I'm competing in these big . . . You know, you need to let me into your graduate program." They agreed. The unanimously voted to let me into their program. So, I did that. Well, kind of it had to do with Yreina, because Yreina [Cervantez] was going to UCLA, and I said, "Well, I would like to do that." She says, "Well, why don't you go to USC?" So I decided to pursue it there. So I did it. And at the time I was dating Tony Gleaton, he was a photographer. Crazy guy, oh my God. Anyway, so I introduced him to Robbert [Flick].

Anyway, I convinced Tony that he needed to do the same thing I did. I said, "You have got to do what I did." I said, "You need your degree. You need to get a job teaching or doing something. But don't do it at USC because I've already done it. And you don't want to overload them. You want to go to someplace else and do the same thing. That's the way to do it." And he did. And he caught me up some years back, maybe four years ago, and said, "I want to call you and thank you for sending me in this direction. Because of that I was able to get a professorship and I have tenure track [position] and that means I have health insurance," because he's a diabetic. And he says, "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have this health insurance. And you put me into the position where I could do this, so I want to thank you for that." And it was out of the blue. I was like "Whoa, Tony, you're welcome." [laughter] And then I talked to Wayne Healy and Wayne Healy did the same thing. He went over to [Cal State Northridge] and got his degree over there. So, yeah.

You know what I learned? And it goes back to what I did with my brother when I said, "Forget high school, take your GED and go straight to college." If you can skip a step, skip a step. There isn't any reason. You've passed this stuff, we don't need to go through it anymore because it's just boring. If you put somebody at a level where they've already passed that stuff, all you're going to do is bore them. They're not making any—are we sending them to high school to socialize? Or are we sending them to learn? Because if

they've learned at a level where they can go to college, I don't see any problem with them doing that. We're not setting them up so they can just go there and go to prom. It's not about going to prom. It's about setting yourself up so that you can go out and earn a livelihood and have a career and be able to do the things that you love. And doing the things you love means you have to do the things that you have to do.

KD: So how many classes did you take at USC?

MG: I just did the—you have independent studio and you had to work with another . . . My thing at USC, especially the first year, is that your tuition is paid for—

KD: Right.

MG: By being a teacher's assistant to a staff member. So that I didn't pay any tuition the first year, and I made enough money as an artist to support myself. So I supported myself with that. And the money from the work from the teaching paid for the tuition. So the first year I didn't take anything out. I had to take some—I had to borrow money the second year. But, the only thing is, I didn't write a thesis. So, the strange thing about USC is if you don't write the thesis and you want to come back and write the thesis and get your diploma, you have to pay for the tuition for every semester that you've been gone. And the tuition there is really high.

KD: What?

MG: Yeah. So that's why I haven't gone back to finish the—

KD: There isn't even any sense.

MG: No, it doesn't. And it's not something I can do.

KD: No, who would? *[laughter]*

MG: So, I didn't go down that road.

KD: How—did it help you work some things, through?

MG: Yes. It helped me recognize how far down that journey I've gone. How much development I've made, where other people paid for their education, maybe they had someone who could pay it, a rich mommy or daddy or maybe they worked, who knows? But they were able to get into a school and get that degree and do those things. Because I didn't have that, I had access to learning through other people that did that. So if I met somebody that did something I liked or enjoyed, I said, "I'd like to learn that. Can I?" For instance, when I was working at Otis-Parsons and I was a photo tech, I went to Tony Zepeda, who was the master printer there in the etching studio. And I said, "Oh, I'd love to learn lithography." And he says, "Well, if you want to be my tech you can come in and clean up behind me, and I'll teach you." And they let me audit. And I said, "Fine." I went to the Photo Center and I worked there. I learned how to mix the chemicals and I learned how to print. And Willie Middlebrook came in and, I mean, he's the best! Tony Zepeda, he is the best. Anybody who had something. Because you don't know where you're going to get your education. I can't always pay for it, I don't have a teaching situation and I'll go in for whatever I could learn and get what I could get and then it's about practicing it, you know. Go there and practice it.

KD: Did you ever look around at the other students and go, "Oh my goodness. What do universities create?"

MG: No, I guess I don't. I mean, you know, I like the road that I've traveled because it gives me a unique perspective. I have never really said that I was self-taught. I think that's a really difficult thing to claim. I mean, if people say that, I always give it a chuckle. Because if I look at a piece of pottery or a painting or an etching, I'm looking and I'm learning. They don't have to sit there and give you a speech about it. If you're a visual person, and you're a visual artist and you speak that language then it's all about learning from the work. And what you have to learn isn't all technical stuff. Technical is part of it. And you could learn how to roll a slab of clay and how to carve in it.

But what it is that you have to say or how it is you put it together or your process is part of the *ambiente* that you live in, what it is that you have to say to another person. Part of your aesthetic, you know. And you can have a dialogue about techniques. Techniques are easy to learn. You can go to a library, you can take a crafts class or do this or do that. The thing that is the hardest to teach and the hardest to learn, and the hardest thing to give someone that you're mentoring or somebody that you're teaching, is the

way in which they can find their own individual process and still have some kind of structure on which to stand. Because, you know, there's a lot of people that say, "Oh you kind of do whatever you want, you float around, whatever." I don't know about that. I know that, you know, there's hand-eye coordination, there's drawing, there's dark, there's light, there's contrast, there's painting techniques, there's definitely techniques in photography, and all these are the things.

But it's, once you've grasped on to some of that, it's about being able to reveal yourself through your work. And if you do it as a personal journey . . . And when you're talking about personal issues—if you're using your work to express your solitude, your loneliness, your anger, your happiness, your joy, your awe, your political standpoint, whatever it is that you're using to express that—it never stops being you as a member of a community or you as a member of a race or a gender or anything. It still is that expression. And it's that expression as you, as a member of that, whether or not you're seeing they're consciously trying to do that. You know, I am not going to wake up tomorrow and be Chinese.

**KD:** That's right.

**MG:** I'm not going to wake up tomorrow and be black. Or wake up and be a WASP. I am exactly who I am and what I am. And when I do those things, I do those things as a member of that community and I don't have to consciously say, "Okay! Today I'm doing Chicano art." Well, I'm always doing Chicano art, you know. And I don't have to wake up and say, "Okay, today I'm walking." You get up and you walk! You get up and you walk and you get up and go to the tap and you drink a glass of water and you do what you do. And you don't consciously say that to yourself, because its become second nature to you. And if you have to consciously say that, "I'm a Chicano, I'm a Chicano, I'm a woman, I'm a woman, I'm middle-aged, I'm middle aged . . ." You know, I am those things, I'm all those things, and I don't have to sit there and remind myself and remind everybody else of it. I don't want that to be the only focus on what it is that I'm doing. I want to be able to express myself freely in the same way a singer gets up and sings this song and takes a breathe and just seduces you and loves you with the beauty of their work. That's it, you know? It has my pulse and my beat and that's where I go.

**KD:** Thank you. That was really wonderful. You've gone in a different direction, so—

**MG:** Let me—

**KD:** No, it was wonderful. I wanted to ask you, though, as you're formulating in the 1990s, focus for a bit on the MFA.

**MG:** Ah! Did you—the reason I didn't do the thesis is because when I came to the end of that semester and they were saying, "Okay, you can turn it in, it's only five pages," da da da, I got the Metro commission. And because I got the Metro commission I set that as my priority instead of the thesis, because you don't get a Metro commission everyday. The Metro commission is one of those commissions where you haven't—that work is going to be there very possibly for the next two hundred years. If not longer. And I don't want to lose the opportunity to leave something that is that well sustained. Because if I've left that and only that, then I've left something very important. And that would do more than say, you know, a professorship, where I could, you know, get my degree and go teach at anywhere. Wherever that is. I mean, I like teaching and I do it on an individual basis, but I also know that if I was at a university, I'd be going to meetings and I would have to do this and there's this committee and that committee, and now we have to do this and now we have to do that.

**KD:** And every once in a while you have to teach something you're not really that excited about, too.

**MG:** Mm-hmm. So I didn't want to be in the position where I wanted to do that. I wanted my experience at USC in the MFA program to be something where . . . I was there because I wanted to do something else. I wanted to learn something else. I hadn't had the academic experience that my other colleagues had had as artists, where they went and got their BA and got to Otis and were able to learn ceramics and do this process and do that process. And I always felt like I was behind the ball. But as I entered into those situations and I got to facilitate other professors teaching there, I realized, I'm sitting there teaching people how to develop film and how to load their camera or how to set up the chemicals for printing or to talk

about silk screen or talk about painting, or facilitate with this, facilitate with that. And I realized, “You really do know a lot.” And that was one of the reasons I felt that I could even do that. Why I could go to USC and say, “Hey, let me in your program.” Because I had the fundamentals of a lot of those processes.

At first I was very insecure about it. Especially when I started working with Ann Page, who was a really good teacher there at USC, because I was really nervous the first time I team-taught with her. And she made it an incredible experience. We really got into the drawing process, and I really honed how I teach drawing and how I draw. And I used lessons where I brought in music and we creating lines of sound and things with movement. I loved it, and I loved what they were able to create from it.

One time I subbed [for] Ruth Weisberg’s classes, and most of the students there were pretty good. And there was this one who was just trying to get her bearings. She was having problems with her drawing and nobody else paid attention to me but her. And her drawings were a little wimpy. They were kind of very soft and she pecked at the paper very tentative about different strokes that she made. And I talked her through it. And I said, “Look, put the line down like you mean it. Don’t be afraid of making a mistake. It’s just paper and pencil and nobody cares. You don’t have to be perfect.” It’s about finding the coordination and, you know, I gave her this lesson. And the next day Ruth showed up, and everybody else had pretty much ignored me. They did what they did. She says, “I see everybody’s on track and everybody’s doing their thing. But that one student,” she said. I said, “Yeah, I worked with her.” And she says, “You really changed the way she draws. She draws very differently now.” And I go, “Good, I’m happy about that.” I’m not afraid of influencing people, I’m not afraid of having an opinion. And I’m also not afraid of having someone disagree with me. You know, “Go ahead disagree, it’s okay.”

KD: Did you find any joy in the projects you had to do during the class time there?

MG: Yeah!

KD: I mean, you never talk about which works were created during that time. Or did you sell all those, too?

KD: Well I did a lot of portraits. You know, I’ve done portraits. I haven’t changed my MO. I’ve always done portraits, I continue to do portraits. I did do—I take these excursions here and there, I do different things. I had this one, what do you call them? Advisors? Whatever. He was really obnoxious. It’s Jud Fine. Jud Fine came into my studio and he was very like, “Why are you using the same colors? All the colors are the same colors, you use the same blue.” I said, “Which blue?” I said, “Which blue are you talking about? Ultramarine, pthalo, manganese— which blue are you talking about?” He says, “I don’t know, it’s all the same blue!” And then he said to me, “All your paintings look the same.” He said that twice and the second time he said it, I says, “Well, you may feel that they all look the same,” I said, “but that’s what white people used to say about black people until they got to know them a little better.” And he just [*clap*] shut up. He just said like—he didn’t say it again. He stopped saying that.

And I just said, “Yeah?” And he says, “Well, you use the same blue.” And I said, “Which blue are you talking about?” You know, manganese, halo, turquoise, ultra—he says, “Well, it’s all strong color. It looks like it came straight out of the tube.” I said, “It did come out of the tube, you got a problem with that? No, they’re not muddy.” I said, “I mean, is there something . . . You want muddy color, is that what you’re telling me?” “No, I don’t know . . .” And then I distinctly [remember] Ruth Weisberg turning to him, because we were having this—they were going through our studio, and she says, “Jud, shut up!” [*laughter*] I said, “Thank you.” [*laughter*] The thing about grad school is that most grad students are like in their twenties, maybe. Twenties, thirties, maybe.

KD: Yeah.

MG: And, you know, I entered grad school as a *señora*. I already have an opinion. You know, I’m not going to hold my tongue and say, “Hey, I’ll make up my mind later. I’m going to be open to the world. I haven’t seen the world.” I have an opinion and I’m not afraid of my opinion. They brought Catherine Lord in . . . I remember one time [Karen Finley] had this video.

KD: Yeah.



MG: Karen Finley was, like, sticking yams up her ass. And you know, she does this video and she's like on this diatribe with hatred. It's just this vile thing. And I slam my stuff down on the desk and said, "I don't have to watch this shit." And got up and walked out of the classroom. And the next day the whole class, they sort of like, they attacked me. They were, like . . . And I said, "Listen." And I slammed my fist down on the desk really loud, and I said, "Fuck, fuck, fuck, bitch, cunt, shit!" And they said—and I said, "Listen, I had to listen to that crap from my ex husband and I'm not taking it from another single soul and I don't have to listen to that profanity ever again! And if you don't like my perspective, tough shit! If you don't believe in censorship then you have to believe that I have the right to walk out when I'm offended. And if you don't like it, too bad." And they said, [*gasp*] "Okay." And that was it.

The senior advisor in that classroom came to me, we made friends, he gave me a little book on . . . I think, by Berger. And we talked about that, and I said, "I don't have to accept that. And I don't have to accept that as part of my loan, it's just not acceptable to me." I'm pretty sure it was Berger. But the thing that caught them off guard is the fact that I had the audacity to slam my fist down on the desk and curse at them and give them their own profanity and say, "I don't have to listen to this. Where do you guys come out from, trying to force me to do something I don't like? Since when has art been at the question of no choice? Don't I have a choice?" I think they were a little shocked, but I enjoyed that. [*laughter*]

KD: Tell me about some of the excursions away from portraiture, like the installation in San Diego.

MG: Ah, when I came out of USC I had met Sheila Dollente. She was coordinating stuff down there, university of San Diego [at] Calexico. [San Diego State University, Imperial Valley Campus—ed.] I told her I wanted to do this installation. Well, first I said, "Well, if you don't have it." And she said "Well, I'll get you a thousand dollars." And it was a thousand dollars and I had put . . . You want me to talk about how I came up with the idea?

KD: Yeah.

MG: I was meeting with a group of artists from El Salvador and they were all guys. There wasn't one single woman in the group. And I said, "What's wrong with you guys? You need a woman here. There's no woman artists in El Salvador?" And they said, "Well, we want to do this thing with games and toys. An exhibition that uses art almost like toys and stuff like that." And I said, "Oh, that's interesting." I said, "But what you really need to do is you need to create a giant game board like Monopoly and play it like, you know, like how to cross the border and get your papers." And they were all kind of suddenly like, "Oh, that's a great idea. But no, we don't have the money to do that because that's labor intensive and everybody would have to cooperate, and . . ." You know. So they mixed it and they did their own show.

But when I walked away from it, I realized that this was really a great idea. And she, Sheila Dollente, had heard about it from the university, and so she invited me to come down and install it. And because it was labor intensive I asked Roland Silva, who was a friend from high school. He still lives [in the hood]. We're still in touch. Who's working with the city. And I ask him if he would help me put this thing on. So, he did a lot of . . . We actually had a neon sign that said "Border Game." And we had these square pieces of plywood, and each square was a different space. You start at the beginning and, you know, there are, you know, the *coyote* and where you land. There's the Garland District, there's the sleazy motel, there's the freeway underpass. There's, you know, there's the fields that you might pick for food. There's hiring jobs at this construction [site], there's a house, there's a neighborhood. There's, you know, a lawyer's office, there's a school, there's a clinic because you have to get medical clearance. You have all these different things that can happen to you. Anything from you get infected with AIDS, you can't pass the tests anymore. This is back in 1993 I believe. So, you know, it's been longer . . . I don't know, it's been twelve, thirteen years since I did it.

I can't remember the year, but we did this big installation. We even videotaped it. I called José Luis Valenzuela from the Latino Theatre Company, and he saw Lopez, and some of the other actresses from the theater came down. And what I had done is, I also collected stories from different people and what they went through to cross the border. And then I gave those stories to the different actors and they were

able to read different parts of those stories on how they got across the border. You know, how they were brought across, whether it was in the water or they hid in the trunk, or they did these different things. And we installed a little prison, a little detention center, you know? “Do not pass go, you are deported.” We had raids on the border. There were people sitting around the courtyard watching the different—the game and watching different things that happened. And when people would escape, you know, people would force their way out of it. We had actually INS officers who played the game, And they gave us uniforms so that we could use them, and we created these raids on the board because Sheila kept a fairly good relationship with some of the INS officers and invited them particularly for this project.

KD: Wow.

MG: And I thought it was really successful. They had to go before the judge, and there was a whole litany of things. They asked them all sorts of questions, “Have you ever prostituted?” “Are you a drug addict?” “Do you have AIDS?” You know, now it would be, “Are you a terrorist?” But back then we hadn’t gotten to terrorism, at least not that. So, you know . . .

KD: How long was that installed?

MG: We did it that weekend, and then they took the board pieces and hung them in the gallery. And they did it that way. We had dice, you had to roll the dice and depending on wherever the dice landed, you had these different things that you ended up with.

KD: So you created the concept for the installation?

MG: And the different things that were on it.

KD: Okay.

MG: And then Roland helped me install it. Like, he created the prison, which was the most labor-intensive part of it because he had to drive some poles into the ground and put chain link fence around it. And then there was a corner so people could escape, and then we had people struggling to get out and things like that.

KD: So you had very performance—I mean, this sounds very like, like a performance?

MG: Yeah, it had those elements.

KD: So, what happened to these border crossing narratives that you collected?

MG: I don’t know. I guess they . . . I went to CARECEN. I had gone and spoken to some of their immigrants and most of them were Central Americans. I used their stories because it was the most organized that I could find. As opposed to walking to people on the street and saying, “Hey, can you tell me how you got here?”  
[laughter]

KD: It is not going to happen.

MG: It isn’t. So, and I had wanted to talk with an organization that dealt with immigrants on a regular basis and I wanted to install it again, but . . . It’s just never been able to get the funding again. I have a group of students now that I’m teaching here in my studio that are interested in doing it again. And I’ve brought it back up and I have it in the computer in terms of how it’s played. But we want to update it because there’s things that have happened since the 9/11 situation and, you know, it would be important. It could have been in 1992 or 1993 that I did this project. I have to find the newspaper, because we were actually on the cover of the newspaper. Right on the front pages. It was really cool. I enjoyed it. I had a lot of fun. I had a lot of fun after it was installed, but I was a real wreck before it because there was so many elements to control and make sure there was a way to get from here to there. You’re basically sending people from one square to another. and they don’t know where that square is and where do they find it. So I had to label each square, then I had to put the list of different things and my vision was to get, you know, ten squares or fifteen squares, something like that, and get an artist to do each individual square so each square would be different. And I wanted to bring in people like Lalo from the Cucaracha—

KD: Lalo Alcaraz?

MG: Lalo Alcaraz. And I wanted to bring in . . . There were a number of artists that I thought would really be good for this project. Artemio Rodriguez, Lalo, as well as Judy Baca, as well as you know, Frank and Magu.

But it's been several years since I last did it that. I think I'd put together a different lineup, because everyone had agreed to do it. And I wanted to do it again, but I just never got funding for it.

**KD:** One thousand dollars isn't even going to cover your expenses.

**MG:** Oh my God, no. It didn't cover very much [of] anything.

**KD:** Well, gas, if you were going back and forth.

**MG:** Well, materials. Materials. No, no. It didn't. It didn't cover very much at all. And I've talked to José Luis, and he said he would be interested in reviving it. I would be interested in reviving it. I also think it fits in a little bit with what Culture Clash is doing.

**KD:** Yeah, you know, it kind of fits—

**MG:** Their thing. I think it could be worked with them. But, you know, I mean, it's an interesting concept. But, you know, coming up with these concepts . . . And the bottom line as an artist, you have these concepts, you want to install it, you want to do it and then you also have to figure out how am I going to make a living doing this?

**KD:** Right, because it's not a—

**MG:** Yeah, so it becomes this production that gets way out of hand, and you have to be able to control the copyright. And the copyright is relevant and important to me because I can't pay my rent any other way. And I want to do it from a higher artistic standpoint and not be commercial about it and get, you know, Budweiser sponsors or something like that, but I have to be able to fund these projects. And the only way you can do it is by finding a philanthropist or finding someone who is willing to do that.

Because I had another project at the same time that I was trying to get done, and I actually got a write-up in the paper about it. It was called "I Feel Like an Envelope, Brown and Unaddressed." And the idea would be to be a book where we send out a letter to different people, like choreographers, writers, artists, filmmakers, musicians and different people from the Chicano community. And the idea would be that you would label the envelope. Back in 1969, I said, "I feel like an envelope, brown and unaddressed" because I was trying to find my identity. I was trying to say, "Who am I? Where am I?" And the idea would be for these different people to identify "this is who I am" and create an art installation from the mailings of that letter. And have artists respond to it with actual artworks that could label the envelope and what do you put inside it as a letter to the generation that follows to say, "This is who we are, this is how we defined ourselves." And do it from an individual basis and not just say, well, collectively, you know, "I worked for the farm workers, I worked for the farm workers, yes I did." "Did I teach? Did I do whatever I did?" I mean, defining the community, being able to define the community from inside is the most inspiring thing that a community has, and that has to stay in the hands of the individuals that bar that community.

That was the most important thing I learned from Willie Middlebrook and the photographers at the Photo Center, was the sense of "this is empowerment, is defining ourselves." And people telling me portraiture is not politically relevant. Well, maybe it's not, but it's what I have to do. And then to come to find out that in some ways, it's one of the most important records that we can leave in terms of who we are as a people is to say, "These are members of our community." And yes, there were teachers, and yes there were filmmakers. And it wasn't just the gang bangers and the prostitutes, the housekeepers and the gardeners. There is so much more that's there. How are you going to do it any other way? And that's what . . . I tried to balance this issue of the individual versus things that are iconic.

**KD:** You mean—

**MG:** Like doing work that has the farmworker flag and the Virgen de Guadalupe and all the other iconography that we use on a regular basis. And I don't have a problem using a lot of it, but the individual still has to be there for me. I still have to look it.

**KD:** Now I don't think you could call it an excursion, but tell me about the project you did with . . . It's called *Sacred Journey*.

**MG:** Ah yes, yes. Well actually, the person I mentored, Fernando Barragan, he's the one that had the mural. I've known Ernie, the guy who did the documentary, since he was a teenager, but Fernando is from the

neighborhood here and he had done these small murals over here on Griffin. Beautiful little murals. I used to say—I used to drive by them and say, “Who did those? They’re really nice.” They’re beautiful pieces and in some ways very romantic, and they’re lovely. And he lived across the street from Ernie. And Ernie’s brother—

[break in audio]

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos. We’re on side B for this second tape on the nineteenth of September for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series] with Margaret Garcia. And Margaret you were telling me about Juan and Ernie [Quintero].

**MG:** So, Juan is his brother, who came down with this disease, and his son who also has a very fatal disease. And Ernie, I think, recognized more than anybody that his time here is, is probably shorter than somebody else’s. And he wanted to make sure that Juan had something that he felt good about leaving behind. And so they came up with a mural that Fernando would paint for him because Fernando is his friend, his neighbor, his—you know. And they decided to do this, and they pitched it to Sacred Heart here, the church, the father there and the sister, I don’t know. The sister was a big supporter of the work. And they did research. They found out about the history related to the neighborhood, and they knew that if they left it on the school property itself there was nothing that the city could do to whitewash it or get rid of it. It would always be there. And they wanted something very permanent and—

**KD:** What do you mean, they’re worried about—

**MG:** Well there’s a very strong anti-mural movement coming out of Rocky Delgadillo’s office right now with the city. You have to get permits to do any kind of murals now.

**KD:** On your own private property?

**MG:** Yeah, if it’s—if it’s facing public space. Yeah, they’re forcing people to have to get permits to do these things. So you can’t even paint in your own wall anymore. It’s become absurd. And then people come out and they tag and, you know. When I did my mural on Beethoven and Venice, we used to say that the mural would last if the people like the mural. And if it’s a good mural, it’s going to stay. And it would stay as long as it could, but then, you know, whether or not the people supported it and liked it and protected it. And in my case, that’s what happened. That’s what I got. I mean, the *Two Blue Whales* is just—what do you call it?—they came and took care of some chipping and they took care of that. The [Mural] Conservancy.

**KD:** Yeah, the Conservancy did some restoration.

**MG:** They did some restoration, yeah. And they asked me about that, and they actually sent me a little stipend and asked me for information related to the materials, colors. And that was great.

**KD:** So, under Rocky Delgadillo, people can’t paint on their own walls?

**MG:** My understanding is you have to get a permit to do a mural. And they don’t—they approve or disapprove according to what they want and don’t want. So there is a bit of city censorship going on there.

**KD:** And then on top of that I guess there is the concern with graffiti abatement, because they might brown out a mural if it gets graffiti on it.

**MG:** Yes, if there’s graffiti on it, it’s very possible that they would. That’s why you have all these beige walls now.

**KD:** So, because it was interior to the school—

**MG:** Yeah, on the inside. There’s nothing—they didn’t have the right to do that. So it wasn’t, you know. Plus, I think they’re putting . . . I think Nathan Zakheim, who is sort of the conservator for murals and understands—I don’t know if he agrees or disagrees it’s a start, but I know he always advocated putting a wax coating on the mural so if they got hit or tagged, then all you had to do was melt off the wax and the paint came off. And that was one way of them handling . . . I don’t know if it has the wax here. And it just happened in the summer, so they did that. The whole community came together, they put it up. The kids go to school at the same school. Ernie and Juan Quintero, brothers, all the kids from that family went to Sacred Heart. Their kids are going to Sacred Heart. And so now the kids were involved in that. The community really came to support this family. The family has been, you know, all the brothers and sisters have

come together to raise money for their medical treatments because the little boy needs, I think, blood transfusion almost weekly. It's—it's really expensive, and they wanted this mural up to have something for the family. When the mural was over, they had aired the documentary, they did the unveiling, they did this thing. [Mural and documentary are titled *A Sacred Journey*—ed.]

I had suggested that one of the things that was missing . . . And there was this nice space on the wall where I thought it would look good. I remembered the caves in France that they discovered where they had these handprints and these bison, and it was one way of these tribal people to remember that they were there, that they hunted, that they existed, that they were there. And I said, "That's what you need to with the mural. You need to put Juan, his wife, and the two kids." So those four people have their handprints also painted on the wall. So we took their hand and did an outline and painted around it and had each of them put their hand up and their name so that they would remember that they were there as a family. And they spent that day there and that . . .

And his wife didn't understand what we were doing when we first went out there because we hadn't explained it. They were trying to get it on film, and she was kind of like, "Ah, what are we doing? It's another day of all this stressful stuff." Because sometimes she gets up and she speaks for [the] legislature. She talks about medical insurance and she does all these things. And I stood there and I talked to her about it, and I said, "Our intent is so that when Juan is now gone and this mural is here, and you look at that wall and it's a very public, permanent kind of place where all of you were together to do something really positive. And that it leaves a very positive feeling, that you left something good for your family and for your community." And it was really hard, because we were all crying. It was just very, very emotional, and we were trying to get through that. We're trying to get through the filming and trying to put the hands up and—

**KD:** How did you get involved in that project?

**MG:** Well, you know, Fernando asked me to mentor him, to help him. He knew how to do little murals, you know, if it was like five to six feet, but these walls are pretty high. So I showed him how to project it onto butcher paper, how to perforate it and how to pounce it and get it onto the wall. Because back when I was learning with Don Ward how to paint, one of the things that he taught me was how to project with an opaque projector because he was doing the album covers for Peaches and Tower Records. So I learned how to transfer an image onto a wall. And so I showed him how to do it. We did it here in the studio, and that's what the documentary shows. And I showed Fernando how to do that. And every time he hit a . . .

You know, he had limited time. He's holding down a job, he's working the night shift and he's taking—he's going out there during the day and he's painting this wall and it's not going as fast as he wants it to do. And he needs to really, really cut loose and get it together, because he's not making money. He didn't make any money on this. This was not about money, this was about him leaving something that was relatively stable and that has an opportunity to leave something that will endure. And so he'd say, "Margaret, come out. Come out and work on it." "Oh, I don't know if I have time, Fernando." He says, "I'll pick you up, I'll pay you a hundred bucks, all you have to do is come out." I said, "I can only give you, because I don't care, two hours is good enough." And I'd go out there and I'd kick loose and I said, "I don't climb up and down." So they'd set me up on the scaffolding and they'd hand me the paint and they'd say, "Okay, go to work." And I would. And he also went in and kind of personalized some of the, you know, nature that it had his hand and that it looked like his imagery. And I'd—I'd kid him, and I'd say, "Okay, boss! Is this look like the way you want it?" He'd say, "Oh I want the . . ." And he's say, "Don't call me boss. You know I'm not the boss." [laughter] And I'd say, "You are."

**KD:** Does that mean you were painting in somebody else's style to make it look coherent?

**MG:** I was—

**KD:** Or you were allowing your style to perform like that?

**MG:** Well, it's his cartoon, it's his design, it's his. And sometimes, you know, if a hand looks like a banana it's just not going to work. He had the cartoon there and I . . . He can still learn a few things from me, but basically I was following his lead. Because it doesn't matter how technically correct you are. It isn't about just

anatomy and technical stuff. It's about aesthetic and what you're trying to get out of the image. And yes, I do paint a lot faster than most people.

**KD:** Well, hey, you've laid down a line in drawing. It's line drawing. So is there going to be shading, and what kind of coloration?

**MG:** Sure.

**KD:** Did he have that planned out? Or it was—

**MG:** He did. He had a cartoon. Now, you know, like, the way I learned to do billboards . . . Because I learned that—was, you can take a photograph like, you know, some of those album covers were photographs.

**KD:** Right.

**MG:** You take a photograph, you project it onto a dark image. And in some of these big billboard companies they have a metal wall and they have a gun. And the gun shoots a spark onto the butcher paper and you're drawing with this spark gun that creates little itsy bitsy holes in the paper. So you're following the darks, the lights, the shading. It's pink here, it's white here, it's peach here. And the more detailed . . . It's the same way that—to some extent it's what Kent Twitchell does with his, only it's a little more extreme. So it depends to what degree you go, the less detail you have, the more you have to be able to make up. The more you have to make up, the more experience you have to have in terms of being able to do—

**KD:** To do it on the wall—

**MG:** The shading to do it on the wall. And his drawings were relatively simple because he had not done a full color representation of what he was going to put on the wall. What he did was, "It's going to look kind of like this, and it's a cartoon." And that's why, you know, when you see the detail of, like, the prehistoric animals, on one sense it looks kind of like it's going to be these skulls and things like that. And then you look at some of it and it looks a little jazzy, a little expressive and, you know, it works for him. He gets as much as he needs, he doesn't have to redo the whole drawing.

**KD:** Right, right.

**MG:** You know, because that's a lot of work. You know, you could put as much work into painting the sketch for the wall as you could in doing the wall. And you don't want to do that. You want to save it for the wall, it seems to me. I mean I would.

**KD:** Well I—I'm thinking of—so Kent Twitchell and I guess Wayne Healy.

**MG:** No, Wayne Healy works—

**KD:** He [*inaudible*] now—

**MG:** Well, Wayne Healy still—

**KD:** Now they send it out, because they're working on those vinyl things.

**MG:** I did a little bit of work for Wayne Healy. They didn't want to hire me. I think it's because it's a boy thing. You know, they got all these guys out there, they're partying, they're having a few beers and here comes Margaret. "Margaret doesn't drink."

**KD:** Margaret doesn't drink. Yeah.

**MG:** Yeah, she sits there. And I just get to work, and I do what I want to do. And he goes well, "We have to pay you too much money." I said, "Wayne, I can do two to three times more work than anybody else. Why wouldn't you want me? You're saving money because I'm getting it done faster. The faster you get it done the more you get to keep." But—

**KD:** It's easier though for their public art projects—

**MG:** Yeah, one of the things that they do now. And it goes back to photographic techniques.

**KD:** Right, that's what I was going to get at.

**MG:** You could go back to say, Vermeer, okay? Vermeer used camera obscura, okay? He projected with a pin-hole camera onto a panel and got the imagery and then copied it and it's one of the reasons [for] the most lovely pieces that he did, the most beautiful, ethereal little gorgeous paintings that he did. They're all very small paintings, and they're small paintings because they fit inside the camera obscura that you work with. We get into the nineteenth century, and it's not camera obscura, it's opaque projector.

KD: Right.

MG: And then from opaque projector, now one of the things you can do—and it also takes me back a little bit to what Degas was doing. What did Degas do? Degas would create a monoprint and take that wet monoprint and put it on a litho stone and then from the litho stone he would create an addition of that monoprint. But he was the father of color lithography because he understood how to create that. So from that we have color lithography that's being produced. We get into the nineteenth century so we have this history with the camera obscura and the print and now—and even during the 1920s and 1930s some of the paintings used to develop some photography underneath and paint over photographs.

KD: Right.

MG: And so now we have Giclée. And you can do pastel work of beautifully tight scans. And one of the things that I think the Streetscapers have done, and they've developed this process where they have—they do a painting, a smaller painting, you know, a nice size. But it's a full, full painting of sketch of the work that they're planning to do in the mural, and they have it reproduced on this netting vinyl. And it's a soft print. It's not, you know, it's not like the painting.

KD: Right, it's their cartoon.

MG: It's their cartoon.

KD: With the color?

MG: With the color and it's already there and all you have to do and, my God, nobody could paint faster than me on this stuff because this is exactly what I think was what my training was about. It was "Yeah, okay, it's here I see it." And they give you a little cartoon so just in case you paint over something and you don't see it anymore you can go back to it and, you know, it's about making the paint nice and strong and because it's there you can become more and more expressive. So it isn't just—

KD: Right, it's not paint by number.

MG: It's not paint by number. It isn't duplication, it isn't reproduction, it's expression.

KD: It requires talent.

MG: Right. It requires a hand.

KD: Or else it's going to look like paint by numbers?

MG: Yes, or else it will look like paint by number. So they keep hiring my guys, all the guys I've trained. You know, they hired Luna and they hired Fernando and I said, "You're hiring all my students. Why don't you hire me?" And I went out there—

KD: So, you did do one project?

MG: I did and I said, "Try me out, Wayne. Try me out." And I went out there and I think I worked one hour, two hours, and I did this whole section for him, but he still, "Well, I don't know if the paint's thick enough." I said, "Trust me, the paint's thick enough, I know what I'm doing." But I think he just didn't want to have, you know, I have a strong camaraderie with his wife, you know. And she loves my work. They're great people. I think that he just didn't want a chick who wasn't—who was a nondrinking chick in the studio. I think that that was part of it. I think David was okay with it. And he said—because I, he told me how much money he was paying the guys, and I said, "Oh, you have to at least double my salary, you know you have to double me." He says, "Yeah, I know I can't get you for nothing." Because I think he was just afraid of how much he had to pay me considering how fast—how much I knew.

KD: Right, your skill level is better than your students.

MG: My skill level is—yeah, I'm not a student. And he knew that, so he just—it just felt weird to him about the—

KD: Can I take a pause for a minute?

MG: Please.

[break in audio]

KD: Okay, we took a little pause.

MG: Okay.

KD: Margaret has something for me.

MG: I want to show you this. This is the book I put together about the Campo de Cahuenga. [*referring to illustrations*] These are some of the tiles and some of the work. This is the station. This is when—they were still under construction here so some of the photos is as they were building the station and both . . . Because I was a member of this team I was able to receive an award in architectural design for my work at the station. And you could see that's the handrail.

KD: Oh, yeah.

MG: And the wainscoting, that's there. The covers, the detail. That's a long shot of the columns that sit on the different . . . And all of this, this here. Okay . . . That's the historian made a statement, and we all . . . And there's the introduction, obviously. But all of this. There's the timeline. This is on this wall. This is the timeline on this wall. And the rest of all the written material is what is written and inscribed on the tiles of the columns in English and in Spanish.

KD: So who does the lettering?

MG: I did. Yes, I inscribed on those tiles. I made tiles and I sat here and wrote all of the history as well as carved these figures for the columns.

KD: Wow.

MG: And that's the project that I want you to see mixed possibility.

KD: So you had these—you had to make slabs of clay and sculpt them?

MG: Exactly. I—

KD: Yeah, this is like one of the ones I've seen.

MG: It's—they're sixteen feet high, these columns. And they're eight feet wide.

KD: And you knew to do the . . . I mean clay is more durable than—

MG: Paint.

KD: Right.

MG: Right.

KD: Yeah, it becomes a mural technique. So where did you do all the firing?

MG: I had a ceramicist and he rented a studio and we did that. And occasionally Frank would fire a few things for me. Frank Romero.

KD: Wow.

MG: So all of this is what's on the different columns.

KD: Right.

MG: That's a lot of writing.

KD: That's a lot of writing.

MG: And it's in both languages. It's translated. I think I only gave you the English version.

KD: No, I'm looking at Spanish.

MG: Are you?

KD: Yeah.

MG: Is it all in Spanish? Okay. I gave you the Spanish version, but it's also in English.

KD: And the—what I'm fascinated by is how you put the tiles together. It's not like I'm looking at a grid of tile.

MG: No, no. Well one of the things that both Kate Diamond, who was the architect, and myself agreed to is that this particular piece—there was one little piece that my mother actually worked on. I had some—I had my daughter here, my mother here. That's a portrait of Frémont. He actually got—I think I mentioned this before—he was court martialed for signing that treaty.

KD: Yeah, I know. I think it's clever the way it's—you're not going to cut into his face.

MG: Right.

KD: So you change the—I mean that's going to be hard to lay out.



- MG:** Yeah, because it's not a grid. It's not a straightforward grid. I didn't want a grid. Neither Kate nor I wanted a grid. We wanted something that had a more of an organic feel to what was being done on the wall.
- KD:** Also what I think is fascinating is you'd—not your color palette that you paint with.
- MG:** Well it's hard to get that high-key color. I mean, it's a high-key—a color I could get for how high I was burning or how low I was burning, because the Metro had stipulated that the durability of the tiles had to be a particular strength.
- KD:** Right.
- MG:** And they had to be fired at a particular temperature in order to achieve that strength and when you're firing at those particular levels, you're not always able to get the richness of color that you can do with other ceramics. So, you know, I went as high as I was able to get in terms of getting reds. I even have gold on there. I have cobalt blue, I have other colors like that. I had the richest colors I could get, but I wasn't able—in some cases I just wasn't able to get the color I would've wanted. And the thing with working with the Metro and working with . . . Especially, you know, you get people like Maya Emsden in there, and they force you to spend all your time fighting with them instead of approving things so that you can move forward and start working on the process of it. And by the time you get to fabrication, the amount of time you spend on fabricating is given such a short amount of time, it's like, "Hurry up and wait, hurry up and wait. We won't pay you, hurry up and wait." And then, "Okay, we need it next week."
- KD:** Right.
- MG:** And you're not able to really work on the process, so they drive you nuts. They don't pay you, they force you to fight with them and argue with them and renegotiate, and do this and do that. And the big thing with Maya and the people that control the purse strings is they're spending every—the whole staff full of people expending all their energy trying to figure out how much of the budget they can yank out from under you instead of focusing on the process of how you're creating the work. You know, and once you've approved a budget and you've decided—you know, "Let me get to work. Let me do my work." I mean if you go to the station you can see that its labor intensive. And there's so many places in the station where my hand has touched and been involved in creating the finishes on that. The handrails. What we did was I—they gave me a cutout on pressed wood that was cut out the way we wanted the handrail, and then I took a brush with this goop, with brush strokes, so that I was able to create brush strokes on the metal. So that when they made a cast of it, the metal had the actual brush strokes of my hand that fall all across the wainscot and the handrail. And then on the tunnel wall we did silk-screened enamel on steel.
- KD:** Right.
- MG:** And I took this. It's called the Mayan G, and the Mayan G represents all beginnings and all endings. So it's perfect for a historic site. And I did different tints of this—I guess it was raw sienna colored with yellow ochre—and I tried to get different shades of this color so that it wouldn't look like just one pattern. And my reason behind doing that was so that if they ever had to remove one of the panels to work behind the wall and they replaced it, they didn't have to pick the perfect shade of raw sienna or ochre because it would be modeled anyway. Because as things age they have this wonderful . . . And that was the nice thing about being able to come up with that pattern for that particular wall. It wasn't as heavy handed as I would've liked because Kate was more concerned with keeping the level of visibility and light in there. So she didn't want the pattern to be too dark, because we had to get so many BTUs or light—
- KD:** Right. A measurement of how bright, how much brightness—
- MG:** Yes, there was a certain spec of what we had to follow in terms of doing that.
- KD:** Well, we'll have to take a trip out there to look at it and find a way to talk on tape and cite . . . I know you're right about all the questions I'll have once I see it, not just the digital images that I've seen either here or online.
- MG:** Right.
- KD:** Let me take a pause.

[break in audio]

MG: There was a really important book that I've read by Jane Roberts called "The World According to Cezanne." [*The World View of Paul Cezanne*—ed.] And I can't quote it at all. I don't think it matters in that respect, but I understand the sort of spiritual relevancy that a painting has for me when I enter into that state of grace and I create work and . . . You know, all these paintings I have right now, you know, on a personal level, if I walked away from all of this and the place burned down and I lost them all for this . . . heaven forbid. But, you know, it could happen. I can walk away with my skill and I know that I can still create and I can still make other art and I can still move forward. And that's kind of a blessing, because it isn't just about the paintings, it's about the process that I go through to create those paintings. It's about the insights into other people that I've had and the insights into my own purpose. And my own purpose isn't just about painting, it's about being able to mentor and to be able to understand the human condition, the human condition in terms of my own reflection and the human condition in terms of how I see other people. And that's where the painting takes me. I don't—I'm not a conceptual artist, but that doesn't mean that there isn't concept within my work or that I haven't created conceptual pieces. It's just that I know I'm definitely a painter and I enjoy the paint.

And, you know, I'm sitting here and I feel as poor as I am and as hard as it is for me to pay the rent . . . I don't have a car. I'm always worried about, you know, how do I pay this bill and how do I do that. As poor as I am on a financial level, there are times when I look around the studio and I feel like I'm living in the lap of luxury. You know, I have these nice high ceilings and they have a skylight, and I have my music, I have my work, I have my books. I can go and come as my please. Nobody dictates my time. And I create art. And I don't know how I manage it, but it happens and it comes together and I feel good about the life that I'm living. And I don't worry about the naysayers or the people that say I can't do this, or I shouldn't do that, or . . . You know. My life would've been easier if I had been a man or if I had been white or if I had been, you know, a conceptual artist. If I had a rich daddy, or whatever, you know. You can't pour your energy into any of that stuff.

What you have to do is invest yourself in you and you means making sure that the investment includes skill and discipline. At first, *discipline* sounds like a harsh word, like it's something I have to do. And . . . I don't know, I don't like it, but in the outcome you end up finding safe harbor in your discipline, in your practice, in the things that you do and that you do on a regular basis. And, you know, as you get older, as I am getting older, and you find that . . . You know, when I was young I was pretty hot, you know? I could, you know . . . There were a lot of young guys out there, and boy, you know, I had a lot of fun, I had a good time. But as I get older those things don't seem to matter to me. But what matters to me is me and the fact that I get up in the morning and I know if there's one thing I can do is I can paint. And the proof is all around me, and I can get up and I can do that. And sometimes I get up and I look at a painting and I'm like, "Oh, I'm so happy that painting is here. I did that painting last night. Oh, look at that! I don't know how I did that but I did that." And there's other times when the painting kicks my butt and says, "You know, you didn't know. You think you're so hot. Well, I'll show you I'm not." And I'm like "Okay, I'll destroy that painting and create new." And I just keep going with it.

And I know that there's other people out there that share my aesthetic and enjoy the work and have fun with it and appreciate it. And there's going to be a lot of work out there that's going to be—you know, when I'm gone, it's out there. And other people will run into it and say, "Oh I have this—this Margaret Garcia and it reminds me of whatever." It reminds [them] of their life or reminds them of something that they enjoyed. People bring their own baggage and reflect it onto the painting and it's fine with me. They appreciate it and they enjoy it and that's, well that's the most you can ask apart of my time right now it was fun. It's good.

KD: Thank you.

MG: You're welcome.

## SEPTEMBER 24, 2008

- KD:** This is Karen Davalos with Margaret Garcia for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series], and today is September 24, 2008, and this is our fifth session. We've just come back from seeing your work at the Metro station at—
- MG:** Universal City Metro.
- KD:** Universal City Metro. I was going to say the place name, the Mexican place name, Campo—
- MG:** Campo de Cahuenga.
- KD:** De Cahuenga. And as we were talking I realized that you have some prints that we haven't looked at, so—
- MG:** Right.
- KD:** What do you have for me here?
- MG:** Well, you know, we were talking about the enamel on steel that lines the tunnel walls at the Campo de Cahuenga, or the Universal Metro City Station. And that process is enamel on steel, and it's basically a silk-screen process. So when I found out that it was silk screen I said, "Oh, well hey, that's cool! I know silk screen, 'cause I learned that at Self Help Graphics." And that's part of the process that was used on the enamel on steel in the tunnel wall. So if you know silk screen—
- KD:** Right.
- MG:** And they're doing enamel on steel, that's—that's easy to get to. The design pattern on the tunnel wall of that particular station was designed in such a way that should any of the pieces need to be removed to work behind the wall or to replace something or something falls out, you don't have to match it exactly to whatever tint of color is there because they're done in varying shades. They're done, they were done in a way to sort of replicate the way something would be done if it was worn.
- KD:** Right.
- MG:** You know, like if you look at the some of the temples of the Mayan Gs, if you look at like some of the Peruvian ruins or some of the stuff from Mayan and Aztec, you find that a lot of the stuff has this age timeless quality to it.
- KD:** And then at the same time you use a Mayan glyph—
- MG:** It is symbolic of all beginnings and all endings.
- KD:** And that's repeated in the—
- MG:** In the pattern.
- KD:** You call it the wainscoting that goes up and down the stairs—
- MG:** Yes.
- KD:** But it's everywhere. It was on the floor.
- MG:** Yes.
- KD:** It's repeated—
- MG:** On the handrails, on the glass—
- KD:** Below your own installation of the tile—
- MG:** Yes.
- KD:** Murals that are on the columns.
- MG:** Well, there was a pattern of dappled light that sits below the columns, because the columns are symbolically trees. When Kate Diamond and I conceived this project we came together, and she wanted to honor the pepper trees that were being removed, because there were some really old pepper trees that were being taken down. And the thing about trees is that they have rings of life. They can stand for something that's historic. There's a timeline. And the idea was that because this location had historic value—some people have said that it's the most significant historic location west of the Mississippi, because it's where California became a territory of the United States, and this is where we become part of the United States. The history that led up to that and how it came to be is what I presented on the columns, because I felt that that was the most pertinent history in terms of California history. The Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West, who are the people that manage that property—the Campo de Cahuenga—and have

the building and the monument that's there, wanted me to honor the Western—the European pioneers that came and settled in the valley. But they came a lot later. And so the columns were dedicated in sort of time frames. The first column is dedicated to the history leading up to the founding of California.

KD: And that's the, that's the one where the leaves are—

MG: They're all coming down in a pattern.

KD: Coming down like a tree.

MG: Like a tree, yes. And then on the other columns, the leaves are going in different directions so you get this chaotic pattern that's going on, and you have what leads up to the war between Mexico and the United States. In 1842, I believe it was [Waddy] Thompson. I'm trying to think of which commodore had taken over Monterrey and had captured it. He thought we were at war because the United States Navy had been stationed off of California waiting for war to break out between the United States and Texas, because they wanted to capture California. California was their biggest interest. They wanted territory from sea to shining sea. They wanted commerce with China, and Texas's commerce with the Gulf of Mexico wasn't going to get you anywhere.

KD: Well, we had talked about the history. What I was struck about seeing today is how you have to resolve, you know, one side of the column is in Spanish, and the same historical narrative appears on the other side in English.

MG: Yes.

KD: But you don't duplicate.

MG: They're not exactly—

KD: The composition is not the same.

MG: No.

KD: I mean, you might have the portrait of Kearney—

MG: Right.

KD: But that was—each portrait is originally created, it's not a duplicate. But then the design, the layout of all the other things that are on . . . How did you make those choices?

MG: Well, the Spanish language is 25 percent longer to say the same thing, [*laughter*] and so I knew that. I mean, there were certain things I knew had to be there once the text was written, and I wrote it in English because I don't write in Spanish. That's not my mother language. I mean, I learned both at the same time, but—

KD: Your literacy is in English.

MG: Is in English. So I wrote it in English and then had it translated. And then I had to wait for that to come back. Everything had to be approved. And, you know, I kept going to, you know, the Metro, and the Metro [would say], "We don't want to piss the Texans off, and we don't want to say this." And I said . . . One of the ways I resolved some of the things that were on the columns was by using quotes. I used direct quotes whenever possible, so if it's a direct quote coming from Frémont they can't fight it. And so those were things that they couldn't change. And that's why I put them there, because the people in the Metro want to continually change things to make it read the way they want it to read, and history just isn't that way, you know. I didn't want them to play with it.

The reason I hired Bill Mason to do this project with me is because I wanted an authority on this particular history. And his specialty was the genealogy of the founders of California, and he knew how important that was. And I didn't want somebody who was going to be messing with history. We could have our disagreements. We had one where he said, you know, "Once an Indian joined the missions, if he tried to leave he could be hunted down and killed." I said, "What is this 'could be hunted down and killed?' He was hunted down and killed!" He says, "Well, you know, I guess I wouldn't say it so strongly." And I says, "But that's the reality, isn't it?" He said, "Yeah." We disagreed that—with that for a little bit, but it was okay. We got past that, because we stuck to the truth, we stuck to the facts.

KD: And you represent that visually with a tile that's like a mission.

MG: Yeah.

KD: And underneath—

MG: Skeletons.

KD: Is a skeleton that's . . . It was a complete skeleton on a tile, but you break—

MG: I broke up—

KD: You broke it up.

MG: Yeah, I broke up some tile to put under there. Now, in that particular tile, 'cause it was a skeleton that I broke, I thought it was very fitting. There were just these little fragments of *calavera* under the mission, and I put it there. The infant mortality rate at the missions was horrific. The indigenous people had the custom of ritual bathing in the morning. The Europeans felt that bathing was somehow unnecessary and were putting like twelve people into a room. They were filthy. They weren't allowed to bathe. They were living in squalor, and the infant mortality rose because of the filth in there, plus they were so susceptible to the European diseases that were brought over. That's why so many of them died, as well. So the mortality rate just rose.

KD: There's other tiles that look broken, and some of them appear deliberate when you want to shatter either historical mythology or to break up the image of this, you know, hero worship or whatever. Am I accurate in my interpretation, or did some tiles just happen to break while you were doing the installation?

MG: No, no, no, I broke them. I took a hammer and turned them upside down. Sometimes I'd put them in cloth and I'd break them, because I didn't want everything to be so clean, manufactured, and kind of bathroom tile like, you know. I wanted it to have a more organic feeling, like something that had been there a long time. I wanted it to be looked at as something that one would find. A lot of people don't know about the station. They're not aware of the work that's there. But if you work up at the City Walk, the Universal City Walk up there, there's a lot of Mexicanos, and they may come across it and read a little something and then go back. But on a daily basis they visit it, and they get to read it bit by bit by bit. And it's in English and it's in Spanish, because the capitulation was written in both languages. This was Mexico.

And, you know, I hear so many people talk about the Spanish days of California—it really makes me want to puke. The people who came here and settled and who worked the land and ranched and did all those things were from Sinaloa, they were from Mexico. The 97 to 98 percent of the people who came here and founded the state of California were Mexican. They weren't Spanish. Yes, they were ruled by Spain in the same way that, you know, England ruled Boston. [*laughter*] But . . . And there were people who called themselves Californios in the same way that today a Texan would say that they're from Texas, they're Texan. That doesn't mean they're not from the United States. And just as the people then said that they were Californios, they were very proud of that because they were the frontiers people of Mexico, and they had come up. Many were descendants from slaves in Mexico and had come here and settled.

KD: While we were in the station it was the middle of the day, so rush hour is not really happening, but there were several people—

MG: Reading.

KD: Reading. What did that feel like?

MG: Oh, I love it. It's like dripping water. I know everybody doesn't come down and everybody doesn't read it. For, like I say, for a lot of people it's just like background noise. They sort of pay attention, maybe they'll read something. But there are some people . . . The first day it opened and I was down there. And there was a woman who had taken her children down there, and there was a little girl, and her mom was reading it. She was reading it in Spanish, and all of a sudden she became aware of what it was saying, and she said [*laughter*] to the little child—she grabbed the kid and she says, "Pay attention! This is important! You have to read this!" [*laughter*] And she made her . . . And I didn't say anything about it being mine. I just wanted to observe, you know, just wanted to see her do that. And I was so honored that it meant that much to her. That I have some little bit to play in having this history preserved, and it is Chicano history.

This is where we begin, this relationship between the Mexicano and the United States. This is that important. And I couldn't have asked for a better station, couldn't. I mean, I was so—when I found out what that station was about, that's why I applied for that one, you know. It had to be that station, because, you know, this was Mexico. Everybody else would have taken that station, talked about the Spanish colonists. You know, there were no Spanish colonists. You had Father Junipero Serra, and you had Gaspar de Portolà, and everybody else was a Mexican! You know, and some people want to say, "Oh, yeah, you know, [my people] came around the cape and they . . ." You know. But, you know, Bill Mason went to Via Sinaloa and the other little towns in Sinaloa and collected the baptismal and birth records of the founders that eventually came here, and they were not Spaniards. They were Mexican, mestizo, and Afro.

KD: Right, mulatto.

MG: Mixed, mulatto. They weren't Spanish colonists, you know. They get that out of some wannabe, you know, [*gente decente* or *limpieza de sangre*]. And that usually means to be more European, but they weren't.

KD: Now, I've taken us off track. We came over to this end of your studio to look at the prints.

MG: This was the very, very, very first print that I did at Self Help Graphics. And there's a progression here I have, or different . . . This one's . . . I did two on a sheet of paper. That was a sheet of paper.

KD: Right, right.

MG: And I used both colors.

KD: Oh, I see.

MG: You can see how—

KD: It's connected, yeah.

MG: They were connected. And this is part of the *Red Bitch* that I did. And in my effort to . . . Because I was doing monoprinting on Plexiglas and glass back then, with a brayer, I wanted to explore that idea of monoprinting on screen. And Stephen Grace wouldn't let me have it, but he let me take a paintbrush and paint a little on the screen before he pulled the run on the very first run. And that was as much as he did. And it was a very thin color, 'cause—

KD: Is that what this . . . Is that—

MG: Yeah, this is—

KD: So that's why it looks like—

MG: See, this is—

KD: I see a brush. I mean, it looks like—

MG: Yeah. Yeah, well, this is done directly on screen.

KD: Okay.

MG: Most silk screens are done with acetate. You have a plastic . . . See, this is a clear acetate, and you draw on it and you burn it onto a screen, like a negative.

KD: Right.

MG: And it blocks the screen in one way or another, and . . . But let me see, I wanted to show you . . . Okay, so, like this is one. You see how one of the stages . . . So this is the same print, and that's just a different stage. We hadn't gotten to that color. And [for] this particular print I was given "Artist Pick of the Year" in the *LA Weekly*.

KD: What's the name of this print?

MG: This is a self-portrait. This is probably the only self-portrait you'll find! [*laughter*]

KD: From nineteen—

MG: I think it was '86? Yeah.

KD: Wow.

MG: It's hard getting into that, I'll tell you. And I did this one. And this is—this is also done from a monoprint. I had done a monoprint on Plexiglas, and I used this. And back then they would give us the keys to the print studio and we could stay there all night 'til we figured out what our color schemes were. We were given something like four colors. I mean, excuse me, eight colors. We have two or three a day, and we had to be

very practical about how we were going to use those colors, because if you needed green and you didn't have enough runs, I mean, you could end up doing, you know, yellow over blue to get your green, or—

KD: Right.

MG: You had to mix, so we worked in transparencies to achieve all our colors. But I was also interested in achieving this kind of textural . . . You know, so that it—

KD: Yeah, here on the self-portrait, on the cactus, right?

MG: It looks like paint.

KD: It does.

MG: And—

KD: It looks like you've used a brush on the paper.

MG: Yeah, but I brushed directly on the screen. There were no acetates. It was done—the whole thing was done directly on the screen, and then we burned the screen. And so, you know, that was my very, very first print. And I had then gotten a grant to do monoprints at Self Help Graphics, and this particular print is the print where I was still painting directly on the screen. But instead of working with Stephen Grace, on this one I was working with Oscar Duardo. And if you notice here, there is this pattern. It almost looks like, you know, the color is floating in there.

KD: Yeah. What is this piece called?

MG: It's direct, painting directly on the silk screen. You have—

KD: The name of it is . . .

MG: Oh, *Anna Comiendo Salsa*.

KD: Right.

MG: And the thing is that you have a screen . . . I had a drawing under the screen, and I basically painted it. But if I painted it once and then I went back over it, I'd lose all of this patterning. So I only had one shot to throw down that strike, that stroke from the paintbrush, if I wanted to keep the texture of the paint on the screen. And if I went over it again, self-doubt or—

KD: It just almost reminds me here, at the top, the top portion of the print where the blues and the white . . . I guess the white is from underneath, right?

MG: Right.

KD: But the blues coming together, it's almost like water and oil.

MG: Yes.

KD: Mixed, but not mixed, right, when you . . . That's just amazing.

MG: And the thing is with this—

KD: Results.

MG: Yeah, because you can't get this texture by sitting there with a pencil and blocking out ink. You can't. It has to be very spontaneous. And so it is a very, very spontaneous, very expressive method of working. And I thought this was really successful, because Richard Duardo looked at it when it was hanging on the wall. I was over at the B1 Gallery, and it was hanging there. It had come out in *Style* magazine. And he looked at that, and he said, "What is that?" I said, "That's a silk screen." He goes, "You're kidding." No, I mean, he didn't—his first impression of this was that it wasn't a print, that it was a painting.

KD: Yeah, it almost has a watercolor quality to it.

MG: Yeah.

KD: I mean, the depth of the color tells you, okay, it can't all be watercolor.

MG: Yeah.

KD: But the way that the color floats . . .

MG: Yeah. So I felt very happy about that. I've had a number of other pieces . . . But here in the drawer I also have this particular print. Now, well, here . . . I have several things in here. This one was a monoprint that I had done before I went to Self Help. Now, this is not a successful piece, but it was a work in progress where I had done this dog. But see, this is the way I worked. What I did was I painted on Plexiglas, and

then I put down a damp piece of paper and then I rubbed it down, and I got a brayer. And then from here I could do pastel work or do anything else like that. And that's part of the process that Degas pioneered when he did color lithography. And that's why a lot of his pastels, if you look at Degas's pastels you see the same image repeated over and over again, because he had lithos that he did from the wet stones that he worked from. And then, so I—

KD: We need to describe the piece to the listener. So, it's like a dog.

MG: It's a dingo, actually.

KD: Oh, it's a dingo.

MG: Yes, it is a dog, but it . . . And this was a dog that I had done—

KD: The *Red Bitch*.

MG: The *Red Bitch*, yes, and that was also done on Plexiglas. And I took the original monoprint and I put it under the screen and copied it. Painted directly over it. But I wanted to get the impression of it, 'cause the thing about the monoprinting methods is that the monoprint is very loose. You can get tight with it, but it'll dry on you. And what I liked was this sort of texture. And I used to pick [a] really gritty kind of paper. I didn't pick—

KD: Yes.

MG: Real smooth paper because I wanted the—I wanted to bring in the textures that came up off the screen, and it sort of enhanced that part of it. So by the time . . . You know, I'm at Self Help and I'd gotten the grant over there, and . . . This is a piece that both Dolores Guerrerro-Cruz and I did on the first time, is they attempted to do monoprinting at Self Help. And I think Oscar was still there. But Anna Christensen, who had been working with monoprinting on screen, and Sister Karen . . . You know, I had to fight with her over getting monoprinting onto the screen. She didn't want to do it, and I don't know if she didn't want to do it so much as maybe her master printer didn't want to do it, because it uses up a lot of ink. You lose a lot of ink, because whatever gets—

KD: Right, that's it.

MG: That's it. And whereas, like, Stephen was so cheap with the inks. You see this piece that I did on the *Red Bitch*. I wanted this to be a red, a bright red, and he gives me this thin watercolor. [laughter] And I'm going, "That's pink! That's not red!" He goes, "Well, if you want red, just run another color." Well, you lose a run every time you have to run another color. Well, I'm not getting the red, so I have to run another color, but what I liked was the fact that I ended up with all this texture, so it worked.

KD: Now go back to the one you did with Dolores. Does that have a name? That's actually a larger piece.

MG: I don't think I did . . . It was . . . Yeah, 'cause she painted on one side of the screen, and I painted on there . . . I was painting over here, and she was painting over there.

KD: So you're on the right.

MG: Yeah.

KD: That's your work—

MG: And then we sort of crossed, yeah.

KD: And they don't—

MG: We did one on block paper, too.

KD: Normally work in this dimension, do they, at Self Help?

MG: No, this was the first time. We were experimenting, and they brought out a screen and they let us paint on it and they let us print on it. And she got some and I got some. That was the very first time. That was just before I took my grant over to work at Norco with the Artsreach program through UCLA. You know, Oscar was still there. I had already printed the *Romance* print, which is the high heels and the chili peppers.

KD: Yeah.

MG: And, you know, by the time we did the high heels and the chili pepper, you know, Oscar didn't want to, you know, didn't want to accommodate me when it came down to painting on the screen anymore. "Oh, no, you need separations! We need to make sure that you get exactly what you're going to get!" And I'm



saying, “But I like the spontaneity and the brushstroke that you get by working directly on the screen.” And they wanted something that was going to be a little more concrete and a little safe, and—

KD: Right.

MG: You’re going to get an effect, and you know what the effect is. Whereas painting on the screen involves maybe some—not always getting what you want and having to go back and reburn it and do something like that. And they were afraid of that.

KD: Experimentation wasn’t in the formula. *[laughter]*

MG: Well, you know, it’s supposed to be because that’s what Self Help is known for.

KD: Right.

MG: That’s what it does. But the master printer is not a person that’s usually predisposed to doing experimentation. They like things very neat. They’re the ones that make sure the lines are crisp and the lines are clean and you know each print looks exactly like the one before, and there’s no floating, and it doesn’t do . . .

KD: Right, right, yeah, there’s no variation.

MG: Number one is just as good as one hundred and one, and one hundred and one is just as good as number two or three or what . . . They’re identical, and that’s what the master printer wants. The artist, on the other hand, is not so interested in this thing. They like uniqueness. They like imperfections and defects and things because it brings up other things. Yes, it’s just, “Oh, look, did you see how it got that? I wonder if I could reproduce that effect!” And the master printer’s not happy if that’s the case. I need to use . . .

KD: Let’s take a pause.

*[break in audio]*

KD: What I want to ask you about is the . . . While we were driving out to the Metro station you were mentioning all the folks that you shared studios, or . . .

MG: *[laughter]* Oh, yeah.

KD: So, I think those are interesting genealogies. So you’ve shared studios with, obviously, Yreina.

MG: Yreina Cervantez, Laura Aguilar. I had—

KD: And she’s a photographer, so—

MG: She is.

KD: You guys didn’t get in each other’s way because it’s a different media, or . . .

MG: Well, I worked at the LA Photo Center.

KD: Okay.

MG: And I met Monica Almeida. Monica Almeida had a studio over on the 900 East, the First Street building that they changed into lofts, and she built a darkroom in there. And it was a nice, big space, and she rented it to Laura Aguilar, who then turned around and rented it to me and my cousin, Willie. So there were three of us women in there. It was one big room. No bedrooms, just one big room and the darkroom, that we all had darkroom privileges. But Laura really was the only person. I did do a little bit of printing ‘cause I worked with the Photo Center, [but] Laura was the one that did most of the printing. She’s the photographer, for sure.

KD: Right.

MG: And before that I had shared, I had rented space from Wayne Healey when he was at the Palmetto Gallery.

KD: Oh, okay.

MG: I had an upper section of that, and I think Rudy Calderon was there. We used to have these meetings.

KD: What do you mean?

MG: Oh, I was the only chick in the studio. Everybody else—there was all guys. And I had a boyfriend at the time, Tom Meyer. He worked for Cultural Affairs. He was my boyfriend, and I went out, I had a date with somebody else. I went out somewhere, and he asked me where I was. I said something about being in the studio, and he called the studio, and I think Rudy Calderon answered the phone and says, “Oh no, she’s

not here, she's out." He started giving my itinerary out. And I said, "So when your girlfriend calls looking for you and you're out with somebody else, I'm supposed to tell her where you are and who you're with?" "Oh no, no, no, you can't!" I said, "Well, where I am, how did it become anybody else's business but my business and who I'm with and what I'm doing?" And he goes, "Oh. Uh . . ." I said, "So, you know, I'll just tell everybody where you're at, too." But it was like this whole thing where the guys felt that they had the right to just come in and like talk about my life and tell people where I was and wasn't. I said, "You know, if he wants to know where I am then he should be asking me where I am, not asking you where I am."

**KD:** Right. So in addition to these gender chastisements or, you know, "codes for women that didn't apply to me," did anybody ever talk about art?

**MG:** Well, yeah, but when it came to Wayne Healey in that space . . . I mean, Tito was always around. There was Tito Delgado and Rudy Calderon, and of course these were Streetscapers. But, you know, they used to drink, you know. A little—a little tequila, a little beer, maybe too much every now and then. I'm not that much of a drinker. I'm a bit of a teetotaler. I always was. It's not something that I'm forcing myself to be, I just don't have a great— [*phone ringing*]

**KD:** We'll pause for that.

[*break in audio*]

**KD:** The question was, did they talk about art when you were sharing—

**MG:** We talked about art. You know, I remember getting into a conversation with John Valadez one time, and he was like, "No, no! Stop talking! Stop talking! It's just too much! I can't think that hard! I can't think that hard! And this is just too intellectual for me. I won't—I don't want to discuss it." Eloy Torrez, you know, he used to like to talk a lot. He liked to, you know, ponder. The thing about Eloy is that he had this real passion about stuff, and he'd get very impassioned about his work and his reason for doing this. And he'd look at this, and he'd look at that, but I could match him on that energy. And sometimes he'd say, "Okay, that's it, that's it. No more, no more, no more." There's few people that you could just continually talk about stuff like that, because people don't like to talk too much about it.

**KD:** Well, did you talk about technique, though, when you're sharing studios with, or running into that many people? That's a lot of folks to—

**MG:** On the silk screen, on my first silk screen—I just showed you those prints—we had a get-together. I can't remember everybody that was in it, but Frank Romero was definitely part of the first atelier that I took place, and he's the one that started painting directly on the screen with the ink, the block-out ink.

**KD:** Right.

**MG:** 'Cause there's the ink that you pull through the screen, and then there's the block-out ink that you block it out and then you burn the screen, and that leaves your image. He started painting, and I thought, "Oh, I like this, this is exactly what I'm all about." So it rang true for me. It was exactly the kind of thing that I wanted to do. I wasn't interested—I'm not interested in that sort of precise cut stencil hard edge kind of characterization that you tend to get from a silk-screen image. I wanted something that wasn't quite so graphic. I wanted something that was a little painterly. I didn't want to reproduce an image, and that was what Self Help was not supposed to be about: don't bring an image that you want to reproduce, bring an image that you want to create for the screen. That image that you saw exists only as that image on the screen. It doesn't exist as a painting.

**KD:** As a painting or a drawing, or . . .

**MG:** No, and people go, "Oh, I love this image! Will you sell me the original?" I mean, I got a lot of that when I did the *Romance* print. Everybody wanted the *Romance* print. The last piece that I sold [of] the *Romance* print—it's just a print, right? But I sold it for two thousand dollars. And the thing is that people want the original. I say, "It is the original. The print is the original. It doesn't exist as a painting. I didn't reproduce a painting. I created it on the screen and for the screen."

**KD:** Right. We were talking about the folks you shared studios with. I'm not sure if we finished that.

MG: Oh, I rented space from Frank.

KD: Frank Romero?

MG: Yes. He has this big place in Frogtown [Elysian Valley]. When he moved his studio from behind his house over on Kellam [Street], then I rented some space from him for a short period of time, on and off. It was there. I would house-sit or take care of the studio. So that's how I got to know him. Plus, you know, he included me in the Christmas sale, and every year that brought in a little bit of money and a little bit of revenue, and I got to be . . . Stuff, there was always stuff happening through there. There were artists coming through, you know. José Lozano . . . I mean, all the artists came through one way or another. You know, visited.

KD: I wonder if . . . [When] we talked the last time, we did some kind of reflective questions, and I was wondering if you could give me one more reflective thought.

MG: Reflective questions about the process?

KD: About—

MG: About what is art?

KD: The challenges of getting into the market as a Chicana, as a woman.

MG: You know, a lot of times I realize I forget that I'm a woman. I'm not self-consciously sitting there going "I'm a woman, I'm a woman." I mean, I don't sit there and think about it. But I do realize that it isn't until I back up and take a better look at what it is that I'm doing, and try to compare it to what's being done out there, that, you know . . . The stuff that's making it, you know, the perspective of women by women is different from the perspective of women by men.

And the other thing is, like, either—whether you're talking to an art historian or an art critic or a curator or a museum or something like that, you know, women's art, you know, oftentimes we do do paintings of our children and our dogs and our parents and our families, because I think the focus of a woman tends to be the focus of the woman. And as a woman we are usually more concerned with the benefits and the welfare of our family and our children and our culture. I mean, I think it's almost much more, a stronger thread in terms of our identity than it is with men. Whereas men . . . You know, yeah, there's a lot of political work and there's a lot of women that want to be political and they want to do edgy work and they want to do work that's accepted in the same venues that the men are accepted in. But if I'm doing exactly what the men are doing, then why would—how is that different? How is that any different? I do paint a lot of children. I do paint mothers and pregnant bellies and dogs and kittens and . . . Well, I haven't painted kittens but, you know, you get the idea.

KD: Yeah.

MG: It's sort of like I don't want to change the character or the nature of who I am in order to fit into what is edgy, cool, and hip. I want to be honest about who I really, really am, and pay tribute and respect to those things that I care about. And oftentimes I could give a rat's ass about a still life. You know, I don't do that many still lifes. There's a few things that I care about, but I'm not interested in painting paintings about the objects and the things that I own. This is mine, this is mine, see how pretty, this is it, and this is mine, too. I'm really about my relationships to people and my relationship to humanity and what I see of value in the human spirit and in that relationship of, you know. Yes, I love children and I care about them because they're the most important thing that we have to contribute to our society. And I don't care if you're single and if you don't have children and you have no intention of having children, each generation is fostered by the previous, whether you're doing it as a parent or a teacher or someone who's just left something of value behind for the next generation to care about. We all contribute. Everybody has something to say and something to contribute, and I care about people.

Now, that isn't to say that I can't paint a landscape and that I don't enjoy that. I mean, I have and I do, and sometimes environments are very important. But I'm not so much about the objects, you know, like, you know. Painting—I don't know, I just want to say these sort of decorator kind of like, you know . . . I don't want to sound negative about it because maybe somebody else is painting the same thing that I

don't want to talk about, but it's sort of like—it's about what I own and how pretty my things are, and that kind of thing. It isn't that for me.

**KD:** Can I have you end by talking about the painting that you were working on most recently?

**MG:** Ah. *[laughter]* Okay. I did this painting—I started by painting April, and the thing about April is April sits for maybe an hour and then April leaves, and I basically get a gesture and then I have to figure the rest out myself because April has a short attention span. She's only nine. And so she left, and as I started to paint this painting it no longer looked like April. It was April's mother. And April and . . . I mean, April has some of her mother's features, but nothing like that. I mean, it looked like Janet, which is her mother. And I said, "This isn't April, this is Janet. This is Janet." And it just took on the form of a very much more adult, sensual person than April, the little girl, so that, you know, I've been working on this one in stages.

I'm interested in creating this luminous, caramel-colored skin, and sometimes it's very difficult to do because it has a tendency to get powdery, you know, it looks kind of like it's too light. You get the light, and then all the sudden you lose the color of the skin. You get the color of the skin and you lose the light. So I'm trying to find that balance where the skin has this luminosity to it, and it looks very adult and very sensual, and it looks like Janet. And I kind of felt guilty about it for a while, and I thought, "Well, this doesn't look like April anymore, this looks like Janet." So the following week after I had started that particular painting, I did a second painting. The other one over here. She's wearing a different costume, and I made sure it looked like April and that it was all April and that it looked only like her. So I go—you know, it's a push and pull, and it's tugging. And there's a sensuality about my women, and I'm not always comfortable. 'Cause, you know, some of these costumes that they were [in], the blouses are down off the shoulders—

**KD:** Yes.

**MG:** And it looks very kind of cha-cha, kind of cha-cha, little cha-cha girl.

**KD:** Right.

**MG:** But that's the way that they're worn, you know, and it isn't like me trying to impose that one them. I mean, that's the costume, that's the way it looks, and that's the way the girls wear them because they like to look very cute and sexy. It is true, it's very sexy. But it just didn't feel right for a nine year old, so that's why I think it turned into Janet.

**KD:** The mother.

**MG:** The mother, yeah. I felt more comfortable about that.

**KD:** You also made the painting since the last time I saw it . . . Oh, there was a word we were using this morning. It's not ominous, but it has a—

**MG:** Darker?

**KD:** It has a dark, yeah . . .

**MG:** There's a darker, there's a darkness to it.

**KD:** Well, there's a tension in it now.

**MG:** Yeah.

**KD:** It's not a . . . It's not a romantic painting of a young person or a mother. It's . . .

**MG:** There's, you know, something so beautiful, you know, these young girls, women that are so beautiful, and I'd like to surround them with something lush and gorgeous like they are. There is something dark about what's going on around us right now. There's so much to worry about, to protect, to defend, to . . . I sort of fear for that beauty, 'cause I see the beauty and I see the sensuality, and I'm afraid for it, sort of. I think every mother ought to be. I think every mother should be concerned about their daughter, even their son. There's a lot of craziness out there. There's a lot of pedophiles, there's a lot of weirdoes, and you have to protect the most precious part of who you are, and your children are just very vulnerable to that. And if I see that I'm sure other people see that, too.

**KD:** Thank you.





## INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET GARCIA

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