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Oral history interview with Mel Casas,  
1996 August 14 and 16

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## **Transcript**

### **Preface**

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Mel Casas on August 14 & 16, 1996. The interview took place in San Antonio, Texas, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. With special guest Jacinto Quirarte. Portions of the tapes were inaudible, therefore there are breaks in the transcript.

### **Interview**

Session 1, Tape 1, Side A (30-minute tape sides)

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with artist Mel Casas at his casa in San Antonio, Texas. The date is August 14, 1996. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom, and this is the first tape, tape one, side A. Okay, now we're doing it, we're really doing it.

MEL CASAS: Whatever it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Whatever it is we're doing it. I want to start out by thanking you for allowing me to come over this afternoon, against your better judgment, and to participate in this project. This-just for the purpose of identification on the tape as well as anything else-is part of the current Archives Latino Art Documentation Project, and San Antonio is one of the places where we'll be doing some work. As I mentioned to you earlier, these kinds of interviews for the Archives tend to be pretty heavily biographical, and what I hope to do in the time available to us is learn something about your story: family background, experiences, especially those that, of course, relate to your art because we're the Archives of American Art and you're an artist and that's really what we're focusing on.

But before we go into that I can't help but start with . . . well, take us back just a few moments, really, when we were looking at some slides of your recent work and then some of the works themselves. We're sitting in your living room and a number of them are lined up against the wall, really on a series of chests-display cabinets, I guess you'd say. We saw some upstairs and they look like tiles actually. They look like tile work, painted. In fact, you say-and you ought to know-that you're working with acrylic paint but working with it very thickly and building it up so that it actually has a bit of relief.

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They're very simple images, very striking. I'm not going to describe them beyond that but there seem to be several themes that you return to. Anyway, you've been working on this series-some of which have been shown, I guess-for how long?

MEL CASAS: This particular series?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MEL CASAS: Oh, I guess four or five years at least.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, could you tell me a little bit about what appealed to you about the method, about the way of working with the materials? You mentioned earlier that you had become less interested in working in a conventional way with the brush-paints and brushes-and that this represented a new departure for you, one that has been satisfying for certain reasons.

MEL CASAS: I guess the way I should approach it is it's not a thought-out process. It's just an inner dissatisfaction. I had a very strong academic education-classic drawing, classic painting-and I could handle the pastels, charcoal, conti, and oil paint, and then later acrylic with a brush very proficiently simply because I got very good training. But with time you find that this kind of facility sometimes tends to lead nowhere-at least for me, and I can only speak for myself. So I began to play more with paint directly, and I began to pour paint and move it around with a brush. And I liked the initial pour, but then when I distributed the paint with a brush I was back to square one. I was thinning the paint out. I was instantaneously blending with a brush again, so the only difference was instead of picking up the paint with a brush, I had poured it on the surface. I began to realize that what I had to do was not paint with a brush. So I began to make a quick outline-in case I was painting a figure-of the figure and then pour the paint around it, and then I got a stick with a point on it and began to move the paint around. The paint kept the kind of quality and surface that I liked. It had no identity at all with brushwork, with brushstrokes, with directional factors of that paint. The paint itself became the image-not in terms of like a painting that would show the individuality of the artist through the brushwork but rather the reality of the paint itself. Let's say the pull of gravity of the paint itself responded as you moved it around. I began to get excited about it, so I continued to do it.

Then I began to paint color on color while still wet. I found out that because of the quality of the paint-they're made out of different materials-so therefore some colors are heavier than others, so some sink and create valleys. Others stay on the surface. Sometimes when you mix two colors they create a halo, a mixture of both colors. But not necessarily like mixing blue and green. It creates another fine line of color other than that. And it's because of the chemistry of the paint.

But all those were unknowns to me. They became apparent as I began to work and concentrate on it. The finished product now, in a sense, looks. . . . I think people have said that it looks very much like ceramic. And I think that's fine. The good thing about it is they're not breakable. The paint is very, very elastic, and it stays quasi-soft for a while. You can make impressions on it if I want to-which I have done; did great textural patterns with it-and then they stay there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You can make impressions you say?

MEL CASAS: Uh huh, and they stay there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like this, you mean, pull. . . .

MEL CASAS: If you look at the one over there, which all this work-we can talk about that really-but the one in black, if you look at the holes they have impressions on them. It's a pattern. It's not just black. It has other. . . . So you begin to find out that if you handle the paint at particular times you can make impressions, while if it's too wet the impressions will disappear.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

MEL CASAS: So those are things you begin to find out and you get excited about it-at least I do-working this way and it has its own reality. And, I guess, in an egotistical sort of way you feel, well, other people are not doing this, and I enjoy what I'm doing, so I'm going to continue exploring it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: From your description it sounds as if in many respects the materials and this process and the way the materials behave becomes the subject of the series as much as anything else. And that reminds me a bit of earlier Abstract Expressionists' ideas where there's this direct use of material that then is expressive in a certain way but it's an

acknowledgment-as certain modernist art was supposed to be-of the integrity, the character of material, of support, and all that-all this Clement Greenberg stuff-and I don't know if that. . . . Well, I could ask you: Do you feel any kinship to that?

MEL CASAS: Well, no. You brought up a good point. The Expressionists were action painters, and by being action painters they wanted to keep paint as a subject matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

MEL CASAS: Uh. . . . As a matter of fact it happened to some of them. Sometimes not being careful they painted quasi-landscapes, and they would get upset about it because it was recognizable, so therefore it will render the paint into an object and destroy its own reality, and they wanted the reality of the paint. What has happened to me is that. . . . You made a good point, because I enjoy the reality of the paint. When you look at these paintings, you're very much aware of surface. So much so, even though there is subject matter, there's a balance between the tuning in to the surface in relation to the subject matter. So you look at it and you see a [subject matter], you see how it's done, or you look at the paint and then you look at the subject matter. So it's a balance between the two realities. I don't know if I make myself clear on this, but it wasn't intentional, but the whole idea is to have the paint become the object without being the object. And that's a difficulty that we all have. That's the reason that we [sort of] relish the idea of realism, in which the paint becomes something other than itself. It's no longer blue paint; it's a vase. And it's a vase with roundness and what have you. In my case, I try to avoid all the ideas of shading or chiaroscuro. I just want to keep, in a sense, a surface paint quality. It does have dimensional effect just because of overlapping, but basically you're very much aware of just the surfaces, of the [(sounds like "vasticity")]] of the paint itself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we've acknowledged that this is representational so-called realist art, that figures are involved. Many of them are female nudes. They're provocative in many ways. They're also, though, carousel horses and Visconti chairs. There are other subjects as well. But I wonder if you haven't made it even more difficult in a sense by choosing subjects that have their own evocative power and that tend to possibly dominate. And, as you say, you set up a situation where you want the surface to speak, that the material and the surface becomes very much what these works are about. And yet you've, perhaps, made the problem even more difficult by having strong subjects, commanding subjects.

MEL CASAS: Well, it wasn't intentional. I do have basically a strong liking for painting female nudes, and I understand, for instance, when we talk about the idea of the quality of the paint, is that, if you notice, I don't violate the flesh. It stays, in a sense, almost in its pure state-an idealistically pure state. But when I do that the question arises is: "Well, how can I do this and avoid having an airbrushed female nude painting and still keep a sense of sensuality even and avoid the idea of shading?" I have overlays, I have lines or outlining, but basically it's a series of overlays that created sensations of form, and, again, the paint helps me because it's so heavy that it creates its own borders. And it picks up light and defines areas, and this is because I use high-gloss paint-you know, medium, high-gloss-so that I have a linear element, not only in the painting itself but produced by actual light. I think a good example would be that one over there. You can see when it catches the light.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which one?

MEL CASAS: The nude over here. See how it catches the arm? The highlight?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Uh huh.

MEL CASAS: And I find that very enjoyable for myself. And this happens in all the paintings according to how the light hits. As a matter of fact, when I have a raking light I enjoy that, because all the textures come out. A straight light flattens everything out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know what's interesting. Upstairs we were looking at one of the shoe. You have a whole series then of shoe paintings, almost fetishistic one would say-one of them down here at least. And you pointed out that, on the example upstairs, there's straps and how the straps-I think they're black, if I remember correctly-tend to recede, actually are. . . . Well, the flesh in between is in relief, and so what you said-and what interested me so much-was that there was this physicality that came from this, almost-I don't know if it was a matter of feeling or an analogue to a physical feeling-where the strap is tight, it's binding . . .

MEL CASAS: It's binding, um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . the foot and the flesh. This, then, becomes almost palpable. This is a whole different level of experience.

MEL CASAS: That's part of the nicety of using the paint that way. It gives a dimensionality, so that you can, in a sense, almost feel the flesh, which I guess you can do illusionistically with a brush and shading. This happens almost in a relief form, which means then that you have to think about how light is going to hit the paintings to render that more dramatically. So when the light hits, those forms cast their own shadows.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think it's clear. . . . One of the reasons I wanted to start with the present and then, of course, we'll have to jump back in this interview, was that I'm not as familiar with your work as I would like to be sitting here interviewing you. On the other hand, as you've pointed out, you've-for certain periods-avoided exhibiting, and perhaps your work isn't, as a result, as well known. So I don't know the range of your work. But what I see here is work that strikes me as being superficially simple, in a way. Very direct. These images are very direct, almost to the point of an abstraction or a stylization. It's about style, it seems, to a great extent. But then as you really look at them and as you consider especially your interest in the materials, they become actually very complex statements, complex problems, and I guess this . . . I'm not saying I'm surprised, but this struck me right off the bat. Let me ask you just a couple more things about this series before we move back. I'm struck also by all these shoes. I have to say, I think that that's rather marvelous. You even have a shoe in a frame up there and I call that "Artist and Model". Or "This is the artist's model." [chuckles]

MEL CASAS: You know, actually, the high heeled shoes are not shoes. They're pedestals for women. And they look beautiful in them. And some women complain that they hurt. Yeah, but they look so good. So they should suffer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles] You've done quite a few of the shoes.

MEL CASAS: And I'm not done yet. I've still got some more ideas to do but, as I was telling you earlier, I get involved with a theme and I carry it only so far then I get bored, so I begin to do other things. I'm doing the carousel horses now, and I'll probably do one or two more and then stop.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you choose that? Because they're so colorful?

MEL CASAS: You know, it's hard to explain this, but outside in the little patio out there I have a little horse that I have in there and I bought it because I like the decor in it. And I say, "I'm going to use this later in paintings." Well, I had it for two years and finally I started doing it and I haven't used that horse at all. But the ideas stay. And then I do my research on the subject matter. But the hobby horse, the carousel horse, are [fantasies]. They're the earlier train to the west-you know, where you disappear into the horizon. And we still fantasize. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Off into the sunset.

MEL CASAS: Correct.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Gottcha.

MEL CASAS: And also I think the carousel horses, because they're so decorative, they give me a freedom to do spotted horses, ruddy color horses. You know, basically they're all the same. When you analyze a carousel horse, basically they were designed in such a way that it could be taken off and stacked.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

MEL CASAS: So therefore they have particular forms that they follow, and by themselves they can be very static, but if you cut them out and put them in a format, they become very dynamic. And so I play with the forms, and anyway I'm enjoying doing them. And, again, I start working with them and I don't know what's going to happen, how they're going to come out. But I enjoy the new form because it allows me new aesthetic dangers to play with, and I don't know what's going to happen until I start doing it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You'll remember that a little earlier I was telling you about an artist friend of mine. In fact I think when we were first talking about these works right here before us. This artist friend of mine-Peter Alexander, whom I just interviewed in Los Angeles-and he has embarked upon this . . . he has his own current series, or recent series-not quite as long as you've been working on these-but they're these erotic nudes. They're images based on pornography, which-and that's not to say what these are, what your works are; it's obviously what the viewer brings to it-but what fascinated me about his account of these works, that are actually pastels, two parts that interested me and interested me in terms of connections I thought might be there with what you're doing, one of them being that it's always seeing how far you can take something and still have control, to keep it within the realm of art. Whatever that may be. But what maybe you yourself think is appropriate in terms of imagery and presentation. To not lose control, but to go right up as close to the edge of the cliff as you can without jumping off. This is the way he talked about some of the directions that he's followed, that he's explored. You said "exploration"; that's what he feels he's doing. The second part was perhaps even more obvious, and that had to do with the way he works in the sense of possession of his subject, in this case the female nude, through the way he created these. There's a voyeurism and an obsession. But what was interesting is that he works these-this is not about him, it's about you-but that he works the surface with his pastels with his fingers, not using a brush or even pastel or pen or anything like that.

MEL CASAS: He molds them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He does. And he described it very directly as physically then touching his subject-or having this kind of connection that for him is very real. Now I wonder if any of that resonates for you? Do you feel any. . . .

MEL CASAS: No, of course. You know, the mere fact that I'm painting nudes, which I enjoy painting, and when I'm problem-solving I enjoy solving the problem. We're talking here composition. We're talking the distribution of paint. But then at the end as things begin to fall into place, I enjoy very much the eroticism of the paintings. I am not really into pornography. I think pornography to me is personal. I can be very pornographic in my own time. The paintings, I would say, are erotic. And in all my paintings, if you look at them, I'm very much involved with composition. They have to be composed well. And that's the grammar of art. And I'm a stickler on that. Just to paint a nude or to paint a religious picture and say, "Well, this is a religious picture, therefore it should not be criticized." No. If it's not composed well, yes, it should be criticized. If you paint an erotic picture or a pornographic picture, the same thing. What is the composition about? And that calls for the totality of the paint-the way the paint is handled, the way it's arranged-and the subject matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does the same idea apply to some of your earlier works-like I guess these are works of the seventies-the movie theater or the big screen and then the audience?

MEL CASAS: Very much. If you look at all my paintings they're all very, very structured. Everything seems to fall into place. At least, I think so. I'm sure there might be somebody who'd disagree. But I'm very grammatically correct when it comes to putting the image on the canvas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But with the earlier works-and I've only seen a few examples and I like them a lot-we should point out that they tend to be much larger in scale.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, [there, they] were six- by eight-footers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They were big.

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Those are big puppies. These are little for the most part. But, in seeing those. . . . Now, one of those is actually reproduced in our mutual friend Jacinto Quirarte's pioneering book on Chicano art of 1974, I think [\_\_\_\_\_-Ed.]. One of those is reproduced. And it struck me right away that there's a postmodern sort of confessional quality in these images. Whatever you may say about grappling with problems of composition and fixing images in relationships and all that, still, you chose a subject that would seem to have messages, that the content has more of message to it than simply a formalist. . . .

MEL CASAS: Correct. You know, all painting-I wish we could just stick to painting-has messages. Whether it's an abstract painting, a typical eighteenth-century realistic painting,

or end-of-twentieth-century painting now, the question is, what kind of reality are we talking about? When I painted those six- by eight-footers, again it wasn't that I decided, "Oh, I'm going to paint six- by eight-footers." What happened was that I was imbued with the power of the outdoor theater-the movie theater-and the big screen. And in a sense I'm consciously I was mimicking that. Now, why six by eight? Six by eight because nothing else would fit in the door. Otherwise I would have done them bigger. And then I began to realize that it had its own problems. If you want to paint a hand in a big scale like that, each finger would be like painting a gigantic sausage.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

MEL CASAS: I mean, the scale totally changed. At that time, I was painting basically very academically with thin paint and using brushes and some chiaroscuro. But I guess the question is, "Was the subject matter more important?" And my answer would be, "No. It was just the subject of the time." It was current and I felt a need to express something about what was going on. At that time I wouldn't have called it Latino art. As a matter of fact, I still don't. It would be Chicano art and the problems Chicano artists were having. And so I began to wrestle with the problem of aesthetics. Why is it that some of these people were turned down in having shows? Why was it that some of these people were not being considered serious artists? What was the criteria that was used to establish this? So I began to think back in time and space. You know, I remember being an undergraduate that there was basically no Latin American art. It was sort of skipped over. When mention was made of Mexican art, which had a tremendous impact in Europe- mural painters-it was pooh-poohed, and one of the reasons that was given to me, directly by one of my professors, was that it was Communist art and there was reference to Diego Rivera and Siqueiros, David Siqueiros. So then I said, "Well, how about Orozco, José Clemente Orozco?" I said, "He's not a Communist." And I said, "If anything, he's an Expressionist. And, more so, he's an Existentialist." I said, "Rivera is more classical. He's safe." Anyway, we had a nice talk-over wine, as a matter of fact . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Always the best.

MEL CASAS: . . . and this instructor and I became the best of friends. And he began to understand that he was avoiding an issue that he hadn't thought about.

Session 1, Tape 1, Side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, here we are, continuing the interview with Mel Casas. This is tape one, side B and, Mel, where were we?

MEL CASAS: I forgot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were at a good point. We were talking about content in art. We were talking about those paintings at the drive-in theaters in large scale and then I asked you about the whole issue of form and means versus content, and you acknowledged that, obviously, the content of the moment is important. And you then introduced the idea or the importance at that time of Chicano art interests-along those lines-and you were talking with some professor, I believe.

MEL CASAS: Yes, when I was an undergraduate.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was at . . .

MEL CASAS: Texas Western.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . Texas Western, now called UTEP [University of Texas, El Paso -Ed.].

MEL CASAS: UTEP. I was taking art history courses and. . . Wasn't that recorded before?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, not much. You just said that he was criticizing, saying this crazy business of Communist art. . . .

MEL CASAS: Well, actually, no. It wasn't his doing. I questioned how come we left out Latin American art and, in this case also, Chinese art. And I said, "Those are ancient cultures and they had a wonderful art." And you have to realize that I used to be a very avid reader, so I used to read all this stuff. And all of a sudden we go through art history and it's only,

basically, European history. And I got very-to me-dissatisfying answers as to the exclusion of Latin American art because, in this case, Mexican artists were Communist. Well, it turns out as I began to analyze and play with it is that we're talking hegemony. We're talking who is in power. We're talking who makes aesthetic decisions. So he and I began to talk about things like that and, as I said before, we became the best of friends.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's his-or what was or is his name?

MEL CASAS: He's dead now. He's Dr. Robert Massey.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And he was the art historian there?

MEL CASAS: Uh huh. M-a-s-s-e-y. He was a very, very intelligent man. And he had never thought about it in those terms. And I said to him, "The reason you haven't thought about it in those terms is because you're thinking a monolithic country with one culture." And he was a Texan. And I said, "You're ignoring the other face of us. You forget that when the landing at Plymouth Rock, Mexico already had a university. And when the Anglo population moved west, the English [meant Mexicans -Ed.] were already bilingual. So with those gaps in time. . . . So what happens to all of us, history begins with us. And now we have to be careful that we're open-minded." I have always been in love with the Tang period of Chinese art. It was unbelievable. So when that was left out . . . because I wanted to get more information and I couldn't get it, it was because it was just Oriental art. As a matter of fact, I think Japanese art has more push than Chinese art, but it all comes from China, moving that way. Anyway, so later on he changed. He was giving lectures on Tang art and Mexican art. But the beauty of it is that I brought forth something that he had not thought about. And what I'm trying to get to is, as I talked with him, I realized that we had a bicultural problem. Meaning some of us were from a "Hispanic origin." Accidentally that's the way it happens. Some were from "Anglo." Both of them in quotation marks, whatever that means. And even though we all are Americans I found out I was less an American, and the reason I found out I was less an American is because I really spoke with an accent. Secondly, I was bilingual, and in Americana to be bilingual is to be suspect. We like to have all Americans speak only English. And I wish we would change that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But don't you think that's changing?

MEL CASAS: I hope so!

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now I'll tell you a little story here. My wife and I made sure. . . . Our daughter went to a private school in San Francisco because, well, we just thought this was the right thing to do given the situation with the public schools in San Francisco at that time, although both my wife and I were products of public schools in El Paso, Texas, and in Burbank, California.

MEL CASAS: Well, you've been burned. Maybe that's why.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, no. It was good. It was good. Those were better days. But, at any rate, the point is that we felt that our daughter needed . . . we wanted for her to have this experience. We thought it was important for her education. And what we did was choose to send her to a bilingual school. In this case, it was French, the French-American International School. That represents a value system, an acknowledgment that, in fact, we wished for ourselves, that we were truly bilingual. Although we studied languages, of course, and my wife is actually pretty good, I feel that this is not something to be proud of in America. It's not to be ashamed of, but to recognize that this is not ideal and that we're enriched by languages. So from my perspective, although, of course, I'm coming from a-quotes-"educated situation," having gone to college and university and all that, nonetheless, I think it's shifting and I can't say that because this was our experience and what we did for our daughter, I can't say that this represents a shift in America. But don't you really think that that's changing a little bit?

MEL CASAS: No, I think it is changing. As a matter of fact, I read somewhere where statistically there are basically two languages in the world-English and Spanish.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know, we were stupid. We should have sent our daughter to a Spanish. . . .

MEL CASAS: Well, no, but the reality why. They were the two world powers at one time.



PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MEL CASAS: So when I was in Far East I got invited to different places, many places, simply because I spoke Spanish. The Filipinos think that if you speak Spanish you're a better class Filipino. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, you're an aristocrat.

MEL CASAS: That's correct. You don't speak Tagalog. You don't have to. You speak Spanish. But it's all, well, what are we talking about? We're talking about domination by the Spaniards. [laughs] I don't know if we want to brag about it or not. But, no, if I had it my way, every area of the country would specialize in some languages, depending on where they're [located -Ed.]-you know, the French word, the Russians' word, the Spaniards' word-and it would be a wonderful country. One of the powers that Israel has is that it brought in Jews from all over the world, so they can send people out to all over the world, speaking like natives to just about every town.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's hard for Americans even to get a good spy force together because they have not had. . . .

MEL CASAS: Well, as a matter of fact, well, you're highly suspect really if you speak more than one language in the States. We're really rooted.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you really do-I mean, this was the point that you brought up and I sort of introduced my own little story-but you really do, then, feel-certainly at that time; you were talking back when you were in college-well, that you were viewed as suspect because you were bilingual.

MEL CASAS: Well, you know, I've always been ambitious. At one time I thought I was working for the State Department. When I applied, first-generation Americans were not accepted. Now we accept even foreign-born to become citizens, but at that time we didn't. I always thought way back I would go into cultural attaché. Heavens forbid what I would do to the world, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

MEL CASAS: But I guess the reason I was inquisitive about things like that is that I was brought up with my parents, and my Dad was very demanding in making us know that we had a strong Hispanic culture. And so I was very well-versed in that history. So when it was totally left out, I felt as though I was left hanging; it was not part of the whole picture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you felt that you were-at least on the evidence of what you could read in the art history book-that you were less of an American or less a participant in culture and civilization?

MEL CASAS: Precisely. For instance, to be an American-basically-I had to paint English paintings. People wouldn't care if I painted eighteenth-century paintings as long as they were English-looking. We're not talking quality now. We're just talking the image. But it's interesting how culturally we developed. For instance, America embraced Impressionism, so we have a whole school of American Impressionists. So what we're saying really is that American artists mastered French through the brush, which we cannot do vocally.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh!

MEL CASAS: See what I'm trying to get to? So therefore by saying that then I'm saying then we understood French grammar visually. But the Impressionists had one tremendous advantage, and that is the use of their subject matter. They went *plein aire*-so they painted landscapes, they painted railroad stations. They were romantics, and they painted women in beautiful clothing and what have you. But they were not aristocrats. That was their breaking point. There was a separation from the idea of the aristocratic versus the common people. Now the artists were painting everyday things and people were enjoying them so it became a common language. But the subject matter was the one that opened the doors. It was just beautiful, pretty, noncontroversial. If it was controversial it was because it was new in the way paint was handled. But that was it. And America just took it in. But by taking it in, we've also set a standard by saying, "We are able to set aesthetic standards, and the reason we're able to do it is because we had the money and we had the people at the right place to buy it

when nobody else would buy it." It's the same thing happened to Cubism. We have here in San Antonio the [McNeigh, McNay] Museum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a wonderful collection.

MEL CASAS: Wonderful collection. Mrs. McNeigh went out there and she bought this stuff and she just had it in crates sent to the States. She was really an arbiter of taste. And she had the money to do it. And when she bought those paintings they were not that expensive. I understand that. . . . My God, was it Guggenheim? No, no. Who am I thinking of? She has a museum in Venice now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Guggenheim.

MEL CASAS: Guggenheim?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Peggy Guggenheim.

MEL CASAS: She got \$40,000 from her parents. \$40,000. It was a lot a money at that time. But she invested a lot of that money in painters-contemporary painters. By doing so, she again set the standards, the criteria for aesthetics, that the rest of Europe was refusing. So the artists went to her, not only because she bought their paintings, but because she belonged to a circle of people that were intellectuals, cognoscentes, whatever, and they identified with that group. But she was able to set that standard. So what I'm saying to you is that aesthetics is a reflection of money and power. And with time we all learn to like it and enjoy it. Very few people now don't like Cubist paintings. They tolerate them now. Before it was that entirely different tongue. The foreign language and alien language. And now we take it and understand it. And that was Picasso's and Braque's greatest gift. They cleaned the language of. . . . Impressionism got so bad, so syrupy, that something had to be done and they're the ones that did it. And they used African influences in their paintings, but they cleaned the palette. And they said, "Okay, let's start anew. Let's see what kind of grammar we can invent." And they did a wonderful job.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You felt that, I guess, that you didn't see yourself or your background-a part of yourself-in these art history courses. What about. . . . You acknowledge a certain Hispanic background, a connection to Spain, right?

MEL CASAS: Well, I couldn't deny it. My Dad would turn over in his grave. I was born, raised. . . . I was the oldest of a big family. Being the oldest I had a tradition to behold [meant uphold? -Ed.], to retain, to push on to everybody else. That's the Hispanic tradition. Whether I liked it or not, I was burdened with it. No-how do I say this to you?-it wasn't that I felt left out. It's just that it was a matter of hegemony again. It's a matter of importance. It was not considered serious. And I didn't like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's see. Certainly you were pleased to see Velázquez and Goya and people like this in your art history book because they were the biggies . . .

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and they're Spanish. El Greco, he's problematic, but nonetheless he worked in Spain. So the European-the Hispanic-the European connection there is certainly validated. I gather what you're saying is that you felt a closer and, literally, geographically much closer, and your immediate background in Mexico, and that this was not acknowledged, not denied. Beyond that any of Latin America was not acknowledged in these texts, so this was the part that was of concern. You say, "Wait a minute. Where is all this and why isn't it there?"

MEL CASAS: Well, it didn't make sense to me. But it's because of my peculiar . . . the way I was educated at home. I learned to read and write in Spanish before I ever knew English. So consequently I was versed on a lot of things that other people that were in the same classes with me were not. And I was a lot older when I started college. That's another advantage.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So how old were you?

MEL CASAS: God! You're asking embarrassing questions. Let's see, I had just come back from Korea and I went under the G.I. Bill. It was 1950 or 1951, I think. No, '53. '53.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You enrolled at Texas Western in El Paso.

MEL CASAS: Uh huh. So by that time I was a young adult in my twenties. But the difference between me and some of the other people, I was very well read. And I continued to read a lot. So I had a lot of curious questions to ask. And when I found things that were wanting, I would challenge, and so, of course, sometimes it gets you in trouble.

But going back to the idea of art, I found out that the art that happened where I grew up was not "serious art." To give you an example: Not too many years ago I was in San Antonio. Six, seven years ago? I'm getting so old that I lose track of time. Anyway, I was invited to go to a panel discussion of chairmen of the art department at the San Antonio Museum of Modern Art. So they had all the chairmen from the different departments and I was one of them. I represented San Antonio College. And they talked about. . . I don't know why I accepted. Don't ask me. It's one of those things. They talked about their impressions and what motivated them into art. And, believe it or not, there was an audience. I didn't expect to see anybody there. Obviously people had nothing to do. Anyway, what turned out again was the tremendous differences that we have in our culture. Some of the people there talked about spending the summers in England and doing this and doing that. Others were out at the farm and they're watching the animals and being influenced by all this. And sooner or later I've got to say something. Well, when it comes to me, I didn't have any of those experiences. I grew up in the inner city, in the ghetto. The [South] El Paso Street. That's where I grew up. That's where I lived. And I said, "The only experiences I had was the calendar art-the Mexican calendar art. I think his name was Jesus [Algera], this \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_. You know, the classical Indian and the maiden, the volcanoes, and all this kind of stuff?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. What does that . . . remind me what their names are, represents the mountains.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, [Popocatépetl] and [Separo]. It's, ah, I forgot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, right.

MEL CASAS: And so I looked forward every year to the new calendar of all this ridiculous stuff. But that was my source for art-other than just looking at books of art from history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so, what does that means, though? You expected that calendar artist to be represented in your art history courses? [chuckles]

MEL CASAS: No! What I'm saying is that this panel, we were talking about impressions and influences . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MEL CASAS: . . . and I'm saying that's what I had. And that was my only point of reference. Yes, I had read about Michelangelo and da Vinci and what have you. But, basically, the live art was those calendars. So I made those statements to these people in there and they're sort of taken aback. It doesn't make it good; it doesn't make it bad. It just tells you a set up, basic experiences. And that's what makes the difference. Secondly, we were talking about very, very different economic circumstances. Where I grew up was hard-core ghetto, the other side of the tracks. And now people brag about stuff like that, but at that time we just sort of mumbled where we came from, you know? And so here we sit. All of us, basically all educated, with an unbelievable disarray of experiences in Americana. So we are not speaking the same language, because we're not speaking the same experiences.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even if it's in English it's not the same.

MEL CASAS: Precisely. It's not the same.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about-we're sort of dancing around this a little bit; we're getting close to it-but what about your early years or, beyond that, your family background. You were born in El Paso in . . .

MEL CASAS: 1929.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '29?

MEL CASAS: The Depression, yeah. I'm a Depression baby that had nothing else to do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I'm glad to see you overcame your depression, but what about your family? Quickly, tell me about your ancestors.

MEL CASAS: Okay. I'm a first-generation American. Both my parents were from Mexico. My Dad was from a little town in the state of Chihuahua called [Villa Lopez]. I guess, in a sense, it was a community of Spaniards, that's what they were. My Mom was a true Mexican. She was a mestiza-Indian, French, and Spanish. And she was from Chihuahua City. Anyway, when my parents came to the States. . . . Oh, by the way, my Dad wouldn't say he would come to the States. He'd just come to northern Mexico. I think he was talking about history. So he was always very pointed about that. At that time, people didn't need passports. They just went back and forth. I don't know about that, but that's the way it was.

So, anyway, I was born in 1929 during the hard-core Depression, but my Dad was a very good provider. I didn't go hungry. As a matter of fact, there's a picture somewhere of me that's unbelievable. It's this, I would call it a bag of fat, with eyes that look as though they're popping out in this bonnet with three loops on it. I mean, it's unbelievable. Why they would do that-it's like a cartoon. But, anyway, that was me. Anyway, I grew up there and I went to elementary school at Franklin Elementary, which no longer exists, I understand. It got torn down. And, you know, I got a very good basic education. I had very dedicated teachers. They were all Anglo. Some of them-I found out later-only had high school diplomas, but that's all they needed at the time. Times changed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Those were different days, huh?

MEL CASAS: Uh huh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They probably were better educated than some of our college graduates.

MEL CASAS: But, you know, I think more than that I was lucky. We had people that care. I was mischievous, always probing, plotting, and doing things. But they helped me a lot. I questioned a lot and I got answers. So I got a very nice sound elementary education. Then I went to junior high. That was quite a trip, because it was the first time they'd done this. Where was it? My God. It was in Sunset Heights. I think it was called [Violas, Villais], I'm not even sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know Sunset Heights.

MEL CASAS: Okay, I went to junior high school there. I can't think of the name of the school [\_\_\_\_\_-Ed.]. It'll probably come to me. But when I found out an essential difference, is I finished there and I was ready for high school. I was a very good student. I just always was hungry for information. Let me tell you a little. . . to give you an idea how hungry I was. We didn't have a phone for a long time. Finally we got a phone. So I didn't know the mechanics of the telephone, but I knew information. So I was ready for my parents to go out. So they left. I got on that phone, and I had a list of questions and I punched information. So I got the operator and I had all these questions that I needed answers for. Now it sounds weird, sounds dumb really, but we're talking another time. And I think the operator humored me, and she helped me with some answers and then she told me that I should go to the library, that what they did was really give information about telephone numbers, you know? [laughs] I thought they gave any. . . . Which is now what you have in computers. That's what I wanted.

Anyway, when it came time to go to high school, tremendous change happened. I wanted to go to a particular high school at that time, and that was El Paso High School. The reason I wanted to go there, I felt that I would get a better education. I wasn't wrong. The other option was Bowie, and Bowie's reputation was awful. I didn't even count on one thing-I did manage to go there-was that I was out of pocket. So I was shunned away from. I was a pariah-or something different. And I spoke with a heavy accent. So. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was more of an Anglo school.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: El Paso High was more Anglo.

MEL CASAS: At that time, uh huh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And Bowie was more of Mexican American.

MEL CASAS: It was strictly the Mexican, okay. But there were a lot of people of Mexican descent there at the school. What happened was that they were becoming acculturated. I was not. I was raw material. And so I really didn't even have any friends, because they stuck to themselves. Realizing that, I stayed away from everybody basically, and I just fumbled through high school. And I graduated with gentleman's C's because I didn't drop out. In some ways I did, because I could have been a straight-A student. But the environment was not there for me. It was just not true of elementary school and junior high.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, was this outright hostility?

MEL CASAS: Hmmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No?

MEL CASAS: Subtle things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were made to feel unwelcome?

MEL CASAS: Um hmm, precisely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you said, "Wait a minute. What's going on here?" Was this your first encounter with this kind of discrimination?

MEL CASAS: Yeah, uh huh. And that was at high school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm, interesting. So you were able to get through to that point. Although, presumably, you were going to the public schools and there were mixed groups, communities, Anglos, whatever, but you didn't get any of this then?

MEL CASAS: Hm-mm. Anyway, that's important because, see, that in a sense affects how you react, and I reacted negatively up to a point. Meaning, "No, I will not drop-out. . . ."

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MEL CASAS: . . . too raw in that quality. And, then basically I guess, my bilingualism was more a menace because I spoke with a heavy accent, and so it interfered with my education. It shouldn't have. But it did. I was able to override it by just canceling people out. I knew what I had to do, except that I didn't do it with the earnest that I would have done it another time. The instructors were fine, but sometimes instructors were oblivious. They don't know what's going on. And so I graduated-or was graduated-January 1948. I worked for a while for the railroad, then I got inducted into the Korean conflict in 1950-'51.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You worked for the railroad, did you say?

MEL CASAS: Yeah, Pacific Fruit Express. That's what a high school diploma got me. I made very good money, by the way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you do for the railroad?

MEL CASAS: I was an iceman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: An iceman?

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Huh. The iceman. That means you kept the fruit. . . .

MEL CASAS: I was cool, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were cool. [laughs]

MEL CASAS: That was before. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was a way cool dude. I knew it, I knew it.

MEL CASAS: That's before they had those refrigerated cars. They used to ice them. All the

fruit coming in from California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then you worked at that job for a short time and on to the service?

MEL CASAS: No, actually I had worked there on and off. Because of the war I had worked there as a young man-as a young boy really. They didn't ask your age when they needed somebody. So I worked for the railroad for a while. Then I got drafted. When I got called in, my Dad was very, very. . . . It's interesting. My Dad was very Mexican, and he still claimed all the Southwest as part of Mexico. But when I got called into the military, he said it was my duty. So he even drove me to the bus stop where I was supposed to go and what have you. And then [I] ended up in Korea and I got hurt. Boy, my Dad felt so guilty. It was awful. Every time he looked at me he just. . . . See the scars?

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's what those on your face are? War scars?

MEL CASAS: Uh huh. And then. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I thought they were dueling scars from Heidelberg or somewhere.

MEL CASAS: Well, yeah. [chuckles] It entices the ladies with them. Anyway, I got quite a few of those. But my Dad never quite got over it. Felt guilty. I was going to say something else about that. I forgot it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you were talking about-on the one hand-he had this identity with Mexico but. . . .

MEL CASAS: Oh yeah, but then he had his own business. He always-I don't know if this should be on record or not. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Of course].

MEL CASAS: . . . he made me doctor his books so he would pay taxes because he felt an obligation. It was his duty to pay taxes. So he had a gigantic family, he didn't do badly but didn't make a great amount of money. And I kept his books and I had to do it in such a way that he would have to pay taxes. It was his obligation, his duty.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, this is really interesting. Now, what did he do? What was his business?

MEL CASAS: He had a Swedish massage business. I guess that's where I became erotic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you get to watch?

MEL CASAS: Oh, I got to practice, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughing] I'm not sure I want to hear this.

MEL CASAS: I worked in. . . . I was the oldest.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We'll talk about this at dinner. I'm sure that it was a therapeutic-what do they call it?-straight massage or something?

MEL CASAS: Of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

MEL CASAS: No, he had a lot of referrals.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There are children around, be careful.

MEL CASAS: He had a lot of referrals from doctors to give people. . . . Yeah, it was a therapy. It was physical therapy. That's what he was doing way. . . . See, my Dad was self-educated. He had, you name it, all the diplomas \_\_\_\_\_, including fingerprint expert, radio expert. When the Second World War happened, the FBI was interested in my Dad because of his expertise, but then he was not an American citizen. So he had a lot of curiosity about a lot of things. But he was very, very well versed in a lot of things. He spoke seven languages.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Seven languages?

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did that happen?

MEL CASAS: He was facility with it. And then, right across from where we lived were Syrians, and Jews, Mexicans, Chinese, second-hand stores. I mean, it was unbelievable.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was this? What part of El Paso? Downtown, presumably, near downtown?

MEL CASAS: Downtown, South El Paso Street. I lived at 405 1/2 South El Paso. It doesn't exist any more.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's near the border?

MEL CASAS: No, no. It's more central.

PAUL KARLSTROM: More central?

MEL CASAS: I mean, that's where all the activity was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Near the square?

MEL CASAS: No, you're thinking about the Alligator?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, the Alligator, exactly. I actually saw that.

MEL CASAS: No, it's further south than that. You remember where Tony Lama used to be?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MEL CASAS: Near.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, yeah. It's a little west then.

MEL CASAS: Yeah. But anyway, In all that people had the second-hand stores and they all had music playing to draw in customers. Can you imagine, Mexican music and Syrian music and Jewish music?

PAUL KARLSTROM: God, that's great. The melting pot.

MEL CASAS: And I worked in a grocery store owned by Italians, and so I learned to handle all this other stuff, you know? It was really interesting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He needed to change his income a bit to show that he needed to pay taxes, am I understanding this then?

MEL CASAS: Um hmm, um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is so opposite to the way the rest of the world operates-or the American. . . .

MEL CASAS: Yeah, that's correct. That's correct. But, you see, he felt a strong obligation to the country. But, at the same time, don't mention the Southwest, because that was Mexico.

PAUL KARLSTROM: See, this is so important-right now-because there are these perceptions that immigrants-especially from south of the border-don't pay taxes, don't want to pay taxes. Want to take, take, take the benefits of our taxes-you know, proper citizens. And what I'm hearing is that-admittedly this is one case, this was one individual-but it suggests-I bet you that was not unique-and that there was, then, this kind of identification with, what should I say, a sense of participating in the government, in the country [enterprises].

MEL CASAS: Yep. Well, that's not all of it. He used to show up at home with whole families-I was a little kid-to eat breakfast. They were Anglo families that were on their way to California. I was little, a little boy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, Grapes of Wrath. Yeah, in the dust bowl era.

MEL CASAS: See, they stopped, and El Paso was a gateway. And they would be stopped and no money. And so [(sounds like Hama Dero)] would run into them, take them home, feed them. He used to send money to Israel before it was Israel, too. I don't know what that means [either].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

MEL CASAS: Yeah. They'd send him holy sand from Jerusalem, send him books and stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They've got a lot of sand there. [laughs] It doesn't cost that much.

MEL CASAS: [laughing] Didn't cost much. But they did send him some books. He knew Hebrew, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is an extraordinary man. I wish I were interviewing him. [laughs]

MEL CASAS: Yeah? If you do, I'm not going to be around.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is he still alive?

MEL CASAS: Oh, no, no. He's been dead for thirty years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Thirty years, yeah.

MEL CASAS: See, my mother just died two years ago. I think at one time my Dad's family used to have a lot of money, and they lost it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In Mexico?

MEL CASAS: In Mexico. They had haciendas, and they lost it through family shenanigans, and that's the reason they landed up in Juarez and El Paso, [with the first] \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So some of your family. . . . Was this a family where it was split that way? I mean, Juarez/El Paso is just a huge metropolitan area that happens to have a border in the midst of it, and now, in some ways, well, I don't want to say it's hard to tell which side of the border you're on but in terms of listening to languages. . . .

MEL CASAS: I was there this summer and I would say all of it is Juarez now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. All of it?

MEL CASAS: [All of it].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, okay, that's another matter. I wouldn't say that, but I guess what I'm asking is, did some of your family . . . did you have relatives across the border in Juarez while you were growing up in El Paso?

MEL CASAS: Yeah, but I didn't really know. There was a split in my family. It was like when people change their names, you know?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MEL CASAS: Same thing. It was a total split. It had to do with my Dad's family and some shenanigans with haciendas. They lost out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it sounds to me-although I don't want to generalize and simplify too much-that your experience, generally speaking, was a positive one growing up in El Paso until you came to high school.

MEL CASAS: Well, you know, even there I think because of the way I was brought up. . . . My father used to take me by the hand and we went to the printing presses and to the little businesses where they used to print revolutionary stuff [on, for, from] Mexico, across the border. And so I got to meet some of these people that were actual living history-some of the people that had done this. And I got to meet them. Since I was the oldest, I would go with my Daddy and I would sit around with all these bullshitters-they were old guys-and then I got involved with their conversations and they included me in it, so I was never really a boy. I was always a young man going through \_\_\_\_ and getting older, but I had a very strong



identity and I think that's what carried me through when I had my fiasco in high school. I understood what I wanted and where I was going, and I couldn't let anything else interfere with that. And I think that kind of . . . the way I was brought up helped me because a lot of people would drop out. I never thought about dropping out. I just proceeded with the process. I knew there was a problem, but I wasn't going to let the problem do me in. You know? Anyway. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What. . . . Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

MEL CASAS: No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting. We haven't really talked about-except in the very beginning we talked about your recent work- but, going back to the past, I've somehow missed asking the critical question. Other than that calendar artist-you were talking about early exposure to art and influences-was there anything beyond that? Because here you are. Somehow you became an artist.

MEL CASAS: Well, yeah, my Dad used to draw a lot, and so because my Dad used to draw I started drawing. Somebody asked me some years back when I became an artist, and I said, "When I was five years old." I knew I was an artist. I was in the back porch of the house and I was standing there and for some reason I had already decided I was going to be an artist. Now I guess you have to define artist. But I already knew. And then I learned. . . . You see, when I went to college I was going to study, [go into] psychology, because I liked psychology. I went back to art. That's what I should have done from the start. And I still read psychology but, no, I was to be an artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you imagine it meant, to be an artist? What did you envision this would have you doing in a few years, after you went through your course at the college?

MEL CASAS: At college? Well, once I decided to go from psychology to art. . . . See, I went under the G.I. Bill, so I had to make a change and have it approved, but my grades were very, very good so I didn't have any problem getting the change. But I also was practical. I mean, I'm foolish. I did throw money away but, I mean, up to a point I'm practical. I realized that making a living as an artist would be very difficult so I went into teaching-which I liked a lot. And I couldn't believe how lucky I was that I was in teaching and getting paid for it, because I really enjoyed [it]. Right at the beginning, I never had thought about teaching.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you mean, when you were in college-in undergraduate school-you had that realization that you needed to create a career beyond just being an artist, and so how did that work? Did you take special courses? Did you get like, to start with, a credential?

MEL CASAS: Oh, yeah. Well, at that time I had to take a lot of education courses, quite a few. And then we had to have the certification. We had to have practice teaching and all that kind of stuff \_\_\_\_.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now was this for secondary school? Through high school? Or was this preparation for college?

MEL CASAS: Okay, my preparation was to teach art, and I got an all-level certificate. And I was lucky. I got one of those things for life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does that mean you can teach college as well?

MEL CASAS: No, that doesn't affect us. No, that certificate was to teach in public schools.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

MEL CASAS: I said, for life. Which means I didn't have to go through all that crap again. Some of it was very useful, but a lot of it wasn't. For college, even now you don't need to have any certification. All you need is degrees. Which is unfortunate, I think, because I think some of us need a little pedagogical guidance, and we don't get it. And the degrees doesn't give you the skills to teach.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

MEL CASAS: Knowing the stuff doesn't mean that you can impart it to other people. But, anyway, I taught in public schools for three years, and then I got a job offer in San Antonio

and I came here, and I started teaching at San Antonio College, and I was there for thirty years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you have to get, though, like an M.A. or anything for that?

MEL CASAS: You had to have a Masters of Fine Arts, uh huh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did you do that?

MEL CASAS: In Mexico.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh yeah?

MEL CASAS: University of the Americas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

MEL CASAS: As a matter of fact, I found out later that [Jacinto -Ed.] Quirarte had been there, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. But you weren't there at the same time?

MEL CASAS: No, I'm older than he is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, by one year.

MEL CASAS: Well, it's a hell of a difference.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs] Well, whatever. So you then got your M.A. in art in Mexico-Mexico City-and then. . . . But you had already been asked to teach at San Antonio. No? Already you had your M.A. You were teaching. . . . Let me get this straight.

MEL CASAS: No, I had to have my Masters to teach in a college, so I didn't start teaching here until 1961. That's when I got the offer here. I was teaching in El Paso in the high school. I was chairman of the art department for the high school there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which one?

MEL CASAS: Jefferson High School.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that was one that. . . . That must have been a new one, is that right?

MEL CASAS: No, that's an old high school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you mentioned there were two alternatives when you had gone to high school.

MEL CASAS: Oh, no, no. The alternatives were based as to what area you were in, but there were several other high schools. But I wanted to go to that particular high school at that time. The other one that would be an all-Anglo school at that time was Austin High School.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MEL CASAS: But El Paso High was more prestigious. And so that's the reason for that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And was Burgess High there yet?

MEL CASAS: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: See, that's where my wife went. That's why I had to ask.

MEL CASAS: That was new, that was new. That was in northwest of somewhere? I've forgotten where it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So anyway you ended up then . . . you taught a few years in El Paso.

MEL CASAS: Three years, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I suppose the question there would be, did you have an opportunity

to set up a studio? At what point did you. . . . You were teaching, but at some point, clearly, you must have gotten an idea of how you conduct yourself if you're a real artist.

MEL CASAS: Well, I don't know what a real artist is . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

MEL CASAS: . . . but what I did. . . . I never had a studio. I just found a space to work, you know? I was talking to wife not too long ago, and I say, "If I had a lot of money now to have the romanticism to build a studio I don't think I would anymore. I just can work. . . ."

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean you never had a studio separate from your places in your home?

MEL CASAS: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How could you be a real artist if you didn't have a studio?

MEL CASAS: Precisely. See, so I want to deal with that because I might find out tomorrow that I'm not a real artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

MEL CASAS: But the romanticism of a studio . . . it is a romanticism. You've got to make do with what you have, if you have the determination to do it. For a while, I used to teach day and night courses, so I never went anywhere. Came weekends and vacations, that was my time for me to work more, intensify my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What kind of paintings did you do at that time? I presume you were doing mostly paintings?

MEL CASAS: Yeah. Most of the paintings I'd. . . . Well, are you talking about when I was here in 1961?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I'm thinking back before that. Even those few years in El Paso.

MEL CASAS: I dabbled a little bit of everything including abstraction. But I have always worked. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Abstraction, huh?

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was early fifties, would you say?

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were aware of Abstract Expressionism?

MEL CASAS: Yep.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And did that. . . . Well, tell me how you learned about that and what you felt about it. Because here was big excitement, big press, big \_\_\_\_.

MEL CASAS: How do I got from calendar art to Abstract Expressionist?

PAUL KARLSTROM: To A.E., right, \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.

MEL CASAS: Well, yeah. Well, very easily. I did like a lot of Americans do. I faced East and bowed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

MEL CASAS: It was Mecca and Mecca said . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Specifically Manhattan, right?

MEL CASAS: Yeah. . . . Abstract Expressionism is it. So I began to dabble with it, and I found

out. . . . I did quite a few. But let me tell you what happened to me. I had a show and I looked at the work, and it was so pretty that I couldn't stand it myself. You know, there were flawless brush strokes that looked artificial. And I was correct. Now I understand what I felt without being able to verbalize it. It was a synthetic thing. All the problem-solving had been done in New York. I was using the same language and I was being cutesy. And once I realized that with that. . . . Actually, you would have heard more had I been able to analyze it that brutally at that time. I decided, "No, this is not what I want to do. This is not what I need to do." So I began to play again with imagery. And that's what I've been with ever since. But it changed quite a bit [over, at that] time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what imagery, pray tell, appeared when you made that important decision that you needed to move beyond \_\_\_\_\_?

MEL CASAS: Well, as a matter of fact, because I was involved in a search, the early paintings were basically black, yellow ocher, and white. I was devoiding them of color, because I was involved in a form search, not knowing what I was going to be doing. So I did a series of paintings that way, and little by little imagery began to appear the way I wanted, and then I began to get more into color.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was it like landscape, that kind of thing?

MEL CASAS: No, no, they were imagery. Image paintings. I'll get you. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean by that exactly?

MEL CASAS: You know, figures, skeletons, things. Recognizable images. We're talking. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Any figure that has. . . . Not nature, not landscape?

MEL CASAS: No, no. We're talking going from Abstract Expressionism to figure painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

MEL CASAS: And I didn't decide to do figure painting; it just so happened. Maybe because my training was so academic that it comes back.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were there any nudes? You said skeletons. . . .

MEL CASAS: Nudes, fetuses.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

MEL CASAS: Little fetuses hanging in. . . . I've got some slides of them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Little fetuses!?

MEL CASAS: Yeah, hanging on a cord like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, ho!

MEL CASAS: I was searching, beginning life again.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Boy! Well, that sounds-let's pursue this minute-that sounds interesting that these things-the fetus-should emerge in your quest to find the next thing.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, and it wasn't planned on. That's what I'm talking about. None of these things are planned; they just sort of [happen, happened].

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's got to mean something.

MEL CASAS: No, I'm sure it probably means something. I'm saying, but it wasn't preplanned.

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right. Well, what do you think it means? I mean, one would say it's slightly unusual.

MEL CASAS: Oh, I don't think so. I think it's just an emergence of ideas, giving birth to new ideas. And then I came up on the idea of using the concept of the screen shortly after that, and things began to lock into place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean the drive-in movie?

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so those early ones were done in the sixties?

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Must have been. Probably starting in San Antonio when you were already teaching here.

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you have studio at the college?

MEL CASAS: No. They didn't supply me with a studio. Not at San Antonio College. The Trinity University does, and I don't know whether UTSA [University of Texas at San Antonio -Ed.] does or not. But no, not us. We were a community college. At the time when I started teaching at San Antonio College there was no UTSA, so basically everybody in San Antonio went to San Antonio College. So I got a very good cross-section of the city in my classes and that was very, very nice. Very, very nice. I think that got all these people to react and interact together, and I got some wonderful students. It was really a pleasure teaching.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You only retired from there a from there a few years ago . . .

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and made, what, a total of thirty years?

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You must have liked it or at least. . . .

MEL CASAS: Oh, I liked it. Well, see, you've got to think economics. To retire you have to have certain basic criteria. I think the magical number now is eighty five. Your age plus years of teaching should equal eighty five for retirement. But I had a very demanding job. I was the chairperson of the department and I was very ambitious and trying to do things for the department, so I was on call all the time, day and night ,and it was very stressful. But I enjoyed teaching, because I still taught besides my administrative duties. And I found out that I really liked teaching. I liked dealing with minds and playing with them, especially when I put up charts and start working with words and playing with them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, we have to talk about that at some point, but anyway. . . .

MEL CASAS: But I retired in 1990, and what happened was our oldest daughter was here. She was teaching at. . . . No, she wasn't teaching. She was the psychologist for the Department of Defense in England and she came to visit and she told my wife, "Well, why don't you apply to teach overseas?" And she did and she got a job offer. So ready to go. I qualified for retirement, so I put in for retirement and retired in 1990. So we were gone four years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is to Italy?

MEL CASAS: To Italy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where were you?

MEL CASAS: We were in [Brandisi] for two years and in Sicily for two years. But the good part about it all was that I think my retirement gave me a few extra years. I got away from all that kind of pressure that I had, and I feel it. I feel better. Well, I was surprised about this. I've always been a very nervous type of person and I fell into retirement as though I was made for it. I enjoy it and I paint a lot. But I have an agenda. I always have. So the only difference is my agenda now is my own instead of just working for schools and other duties. I'm very disciplined, so I work so I'm occupied. I don't have to worry about what I'm going to do with my time. So I paint a lot. As a matter of fact, it's getting to a point I don't think I can afford my own paintings. Buying supplies, you know, is just for the birds.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I want to return at some point to this tracing of your career and your work-you know, how it changed and your experiences in the art world, but. . . . Oh, I see this little red light is blinking so this would be a good moment to turn the tape over.

Session 1, Tape 2, Side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing the interview with Mel Casas, this is tape two, side B. Mel, you were starting to talk about our friend Jacinto [Quirarte -Ed.], and I guess you were going to talk a little bit about the role that he played in the, what shall we say, recognition or beginning to get information on the whole Chicano movement. Is that right?

MEL CASAS: If you say so. No, anyway, what I was trying to say was that one thing that Quirarte did-and this is endemic to his profession; he's a scholar-he traveled a lot. I mean, I'm sure that some of it was merciless, the way he traveled all over to interview people and begin to bring all this information together. And what he actually did, he gave a reality-a documented reality-to the idea-or concept-of Chicano art. Previous to this, with a few exceptions, that word wasn't even used. In talking, when dealing with these people, he was able to umbrella the concept. Because he went back in history to some of the people that were originally from Mexico, that were of Mexican descent and from Mexico. They were artists in Texas-for instance, Medallín-and he was not a part of the Chicano movement, if you want to call it that. And in a sense they were participants in it, even though they were not aware of it, because it was basically on a cultural, racial concept. And what happened to Jacinto's work with it [is -Ed.] that he gave a reality to the existence of these people which-this sounds ridiculous-did not exist before-until they were documented. And this is the power that the word has . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Power of the word.

MEL CASAS: . . . and museums have. They can document and actualize, and we forget how powerful that element is. And, in that sense, all of us should be very thankful that he took on the burden of doing it. He did a brilliant job with that book.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, now that we're here at this point, why don't we talk about this. What was the situation? Using the sort of arbitrary appearance of Jacinto Quirarte on the scene to bring a scholarly look and a documentary effort. He went around taping many artists, those that he could discover. I suppose he networked or something like that, saying, "Who should I see?" and then he traveled around with his little tape recorder, which then ended up in a book. Well, what was the situation when he appeared on the scene? I mean, how would you describe it? If you had to be the historian of all of this, how would you describe the development of what became a movement-became self-consciously so-and in different parts of the country? What had happened?

MEL CASAS: Part of it is serendipity. He was here at the heat of the moment, and he was able to grab onto it and understand the potential of it. Previous to this, I got involved with a group that we organized and I called [the, a] [Con Safo] group.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Con Safo, that's right.

MEL CASAS: And that's how he got in contact with me, because of that element. And the way that came about, I was asked from former students that they wanted to organize a group and they wanted me to help them organize it. So I thought about it. I guess I'm just not as scholarly. [I know] because I used to lecture to students about different things. You know, when you have a captive audience they gotta listen. So I was approached, and so I decided I'll go ahead and do it, and came up with the name and began to write a lot about concepts, and I guess I-like everybody else-when I get hot on a subject I start multiplying. Through my [painting again] and ideas multiply. So I began to do a lot of writing, and we had meetings. The good thing about it, it got to the point that we were able to get monies for exhibitions. Unheard of!

PAUL KARLSTROM: From?

MEL CASAS: The people that wanted the group's shows.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the source for the money was from institutions? No.

MEL CASAS: Institutions and whoever wanted, they had to pay a fee.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was a hot thing already, then?

MEL CASAS: And they paid it. It was unbelievable. They paid it. And then we had politicians that wanted some of our artwork as backdrops to make them democratic. They paid. That was for the organization. So I understood. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's sort of cynical, but I suppose it's true.

MEL CASAS: Yeah. It's true! But I understood there that there was a sense of power in what we were doing and it was being acknowledged. So the next question in my mind was the question of aesthetics. Because you can get into a very sensitive situation. You have here-in quotes-"Chicano artists," "Chicano group," so therefore they paint "Chicano art." Well, what is Chicano art? Is it Chicano art because it's an ethnicity thing? Or is it a subject thing? Those are the kind of questions I had that people didn't want to deal with. They just wanted. . . . See, you have to understand-I make it as my statement-but you have to understand that we all have needs, so when you get a group of people together not all of you are on the same plane. You're all together, but we all have different interests. So we had people here that wanted recognition, wanted shows, wanted sales, and they didn't merit any. There were some that did. But in a group identity, they wanted that kind of relationship. So how do you deal with this and try to give an aesthetic word to a concept? It's difficult. Consequently, at the end I got very tired of it, so basically I just sort of dropped out of the group. And then the group continued on for a while and then they died out.

But I had key questions. Great art is not great art just because a power says it is. It is because it has merit. And so if there's no merit, then it should be redone. And the problem I ran into was that if you were of an ethnic group then you were a Chicano artist and you should show. And when you saw what they were painting, you just wondered what they were doing. And that, unfortunately, brings up questions of offense, or "You're not with me so you're not really one of me. You are a college professor. That's the reason you're acting that way." I said, "No, it has nothing to do with that. It has to do with training and education." And so those are touchy points. I'm sure that I told you before that Quirarte ran into problems with some people that were left out-I think unintentionally-but they were furious because they were left out of his "Bible." You know, the Mexican American Artists. But he couldn't cover everybody, but they were not receptive to that. They were not in the limelight.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They saw him, perhaps, as just one more example of discrimination, of being excluded.

MEL CASAS: Um hmm. Very well put. But not, "Why?" Part of it could be just ignorance, not knowing. The other part is not qualified. And no one wants to face that issue.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What does it mean, "Con Safo"?

MEL CASAS: "Con safo" is an old term of barrio talk, which meant, in a sense, to have a way out, to excuse oneself, to not be responsible for the actions. So consequently, when you found people desecrating walls, and they write C.S.-Con Safo-it means "I'm not responsible for this action even though I did it." The literal translation is to have a way to squeeze out, [separza], to slip out, not get caught. In a sense, it's a cultural term of rebellion, really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Now it got picked up elsewhere, is that right? I mean, I think I read in something Jacinto wrote about the Coronado Bridge-you know, the Chicano park in San Diego-that Con Safo, C.S., appeared on some of the murals that they did there. Did it become a broader thing, not just local?

MEL CASAS: Well, it actually is regional. It was not just San Antonio. As a matter of fact, where I came from it was "Con Safo," which is what I wrote for the group here, but here and in California they say "Con Safos," plural. And the interesting point is, why the plural, why the singular? And I thought about that a lot, and to me, maybe because I am from El Paso, it makes more sense to be "Con Safo." "Con Safo" means omnipotence. "Con Safos" means having more and more excuses. You don't have to worry about that many excuses if you have the power.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is it possible also that there's a distinction between a notion of self, of individuality-which, of course, is a modernist concept-and then a competing claim of group and responsibility to a community? Plural, singular.

MEL CASAS: That can be taken into account that way, yeah. [Definitely].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how do you feel about that? Because this is the plight that many artists face, and it seems to me especially artists who have-let's say, black artists, African-American, or Asian-Americans-where there are the very real demands and concerns of the group, of the community, and then the very natural draw for an artist of really dealing as an individual with problems, with subjects. It's kind of a lonely activity. How do you feel about that-these-perhaps competing-demands upon an artist? Responsibility to community and also the demands of responsibility to self as being an artist?

MEL CASAS: Well, first of all, I think when you respond to community needs-and there are many types of community needs-you're not really responding to artistic needs. Artistic needs are individual. Now you can tie those things to social needs or community needs, but first you have to have the voice, you have to have a language to deal with the community needs. I guess, to give you an example of what I was trying to do, when I expressed strong social commentary, I was involved with community needs. But yet I was still involved with paintings that they were paintings but they had a strong message, political message. Interestingly enough, I never really got involved with religious painting. Meaning, for instance, in Mexico not too long ago and here in San Antonio, people [have, had] gotten a lot of publicity because they do paintings desecrating the Guadalupe image. To me, that's easy. It doesn't have any great amount of power to do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, wait a minute. These artists desecrate the Guadalupe?

MEL CASAS: Well, what they do-or what they have done, one of them painted the face of Marilyn Monroe on the Guadalupe image. That was in Mexico. Here in San Antonio somebody did the Guadalupe in Cubistic form. To me, it doesn't mean anything. Even the bishop here-what's his name? Flores? Bishop Flores?-was in the news, giving this whole thing more importance than it deserved. So, consequently, the mural was whitewashed. But those are easy things to do. I stay away from it not because I'm afraid of it. It's so easy. It is so easy to hurt people that way and to have that certain kind of belief. To me, it doesn't matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it seems strange, because the Guadalupe image has been used or appropriated, chosen by Chicano artists-a lot of them the women, it seems to me-for very specific reasons and it's to establish this connection to . . .

MEL CASAS: . . . to the Virgin. Good luck. How many virgins are there?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Two.

MEL CASAS: [laughs] That's right. But they did not change the image, see? These people were changing the sacred image. In other words, as long as you keep the image intact you're okay. But once you start playing with it, you get into trouble.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I guess what I'm asking-you have to help me on this-is that, in the past the use of this image has been pretty reverential and it's a cultural thing more than anything else, it's to establish a connection with something from Mexico-[from] Colonial Mexico, really.

MEL CASAS: It's more than that. It's an awareness of a mestizo race.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

MEL CASAS: Because she was no longer a Spanish Virgin.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, yeah. Well, why the desecration, then? How did they get to this point? What does that mean? Is this like deconstructing? Is this a post-modernist thing?

MEL CASAS: I don't think so. I think what it means is you've got to find easy ways to get attention, and that's one of the easiest ways to get attention. So I don't even think that it is. . . In that sense, it's not even artistically valid. It's just a way to get attention.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's commercially valid.

MEL CASAS: Oh, yes!

PAUL KARLSTROM: So wouldn't this be attached to the whole notion of the mainstreaming of Chicano art or artists? Which some people have observed as maybe an inevitable, you know, natural progression.



MEL CASAS: It has to happen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Which is. . . . You know, it's like Carlos Almaraz-of course, he's gone now-but these members of Los Four-well, certainly, Frank Romero and then other Chicano artists in California, presumably elsewhere-it seems, after the seventies, really-maybe in the early eighties at some point-put that aside-basically, the political involvement or this kind of deep cultural involvement with these sorts of images and all that-and began like most of the rest of us to seek their fame and fortune in the gallery system, the mainstreaming of American art. And I just wonder-a long way to ask a question-but if this desecration of the Guadalupe isn't very much about finding ways, as you say, to call attention to oneself to get that show. You say, "Oh, here's an interesting new, courageous artist whose taking these risks and taking chances." Is that fair?

MEL CASAS: No, I think that's a very valid point. And I think it is done that way. I guess what I'm trying to say is, to me it's a very cheap way to do it. There's a strong tradition of aesthetics in Chicano art now that you don't have to do that. You mentioned Almaraz. He painted very, very beautiful paintings at the end.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Absolutely.

MEL CASAS: Gorgeous. And I wouldn't call them Chicano paintings per se. Why wouldn't I call them Chicano paintings? Because they don't have any tacos in them?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know.

MEL CASAS: Okay, I'm talking aesthetics. They're put together so well that it transcends that element. And, secondly, he used contemporary imagery. He used cars. And cars, in a sense, are ephemeral. They're new today, old tomorrow. Basically, all those are the criterias for keeping an aesthetic. When I painted the [Visconti], it's an old aesthetic and it's a new aesthetic. Is it Chicano art? Well, I guess it was painted by a Chicano, but if you have an American Impressionist is he French? So you begin to wrestle with those elements again and again. The question is, what is the criteria for the national aesthetic?

PAUL KARLSTROM: What is?

MEL CASAS: At this point, it still continues to be an Anglo aesthetic. And it's changing, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What is that Anglo aesthetic? Don't you feel there have been major changes in all of that from the sixties?

MEL CASAS: There sure have.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, certainly high modernism has pretty well collapsed. That's viewed as, well, totally passé. And then you have this pluralistic art world where, my God, almost everything seems to be able to get in there and compete for attention.

MEL CASAS: But we still have, for instance, when you see shows you can have native shows. Well, how can you have a native show if you have a national aesthetic?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I don't know.

MEL CASAS: But we do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean Native American show or something?

MEL CASAS: Yeah, we have Native Blacks, Native this. Okay. Native Eskimos.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Native Chicano.

MEL CASAS: Native Chicano. So either we have a national aesthetic or we don't. And the beauty of our country is so complex, so diversified, and it's one of the biggest experiments in the world, one of the greatest experiments in the world.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

MEL CASAS: And I think it's going to work. But it takes time. But up to now it's. . . . For

instance, these paintings-not by choice, but just because I paint that way-basically, would go into any gallery. They would not be Chicano paintings. Why not?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know. Why not? Do I have to answer this? I'm the interviewer. You have to answer.

MEL CASAS: Oh, oh, okay. I'll rear back and kiss you. [laughter] The subject matter and the way of painting is more in the universal American concept. A carousel horse, a female bottom, you know? Even the Visconti is not outstanding in terms of being foreign or alien in that sense. Now if I were to paint a monkey-which I thought about doing-it becomes a little exotic. Why? Because, basically, we don't have monkeys in this country. Now you can find them in. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No monos.

MEL CASAS: No monos. You can find them in Brazil, you can find them in part of Japan, even Africa, but not here unless if you go to the zoo. So you will be in sort of an artificial element. I had been doing a series of food things to see . . .because I play with myself. I did a painting of [Corsair] clams-I mean, sorry, mussels-and I called it, [Cause I Like 'Em, Corsair Like 'Em]. [Corsair] for Italian, 'cause I like 'em, you know. [There's wordplay here that we are missing not knowing the language; sorry. -Ed.]. And I've done some vegetables and what have you. My point being is, as I work with these things, they become regionalized, or they transcend their element. And I found out that they can transcend their element-easily.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think this is an important area to discuss. Because we're talking about art, and then we're also continuing to refer to the Chicano movement which is . . . can become an art movement. But that's, as you said earlier, basically not what it is about. First and foremost it's about community in a struggle, if you will, and identity-all these issues. And so what do you have to find in art, what are the qualifications, what would make a work of art a Chicano work? What would be required to qualify as such?

MEL CASAS: Well, very easy. Mexican painting. I mean, otherwise we're going to biases. We're talking quality. The issue really is not that. . . . The issue is that Chicano artists felt that they were slighted out of the museums and they were not included in art history. I agree with them. It is true. But once you become a competent artist and you get accepted in this case the Chicano element as we know it would disappear because they would be acculturated into the Americana, which is what we claim we want to do. The reason we have a differential is because this has not happened totally. In San Antonio I don't even participate. They get involved in these heavy discussions as to how many Latino artists they have, which, to me, I don't understand the term. They say they're Hispanic or-in this area, regionally-Chicano. And Latino is a very nebulous term. It's more nebulous than Anglo. I don't know what Anglo means. But we have an idea. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anglo-Saxon, is what that's from.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, I know. No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's actually specific [people].

MEL CASAS: Yeah, I know. But I'm playing with the term because am I talking the Teutonic? or German? It doesn't make any difference, because he or she is included in the same circle and under the same umbrella. So we have certain basic characteristics that we accrue to a group of people. So then we go into racial types and all this kind of stuff that gets involved. I'm not concerned with it. I'm concerned with the idea of art getting acceptance. Now, my idea is that once artists get a fair chance at exhibiting they become part of Americana. And some people even now feel that that hasn't happened. To the point that when you find, for instance, the museum saying, "We're going to have more Mexican-American artists," they get a new director.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What?

MEL CASAS: They get a new director for a museum. "We're going to have more Mexican-American artists, we're going to have more Chicano artists," whatever. What does that mean? It means that it is still an issue that has not been clarified.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

MEL CASAS: Otherwise it wouldn't come up. What is very fascinating here is that we keep getting new directors-especially the San Antonio Museum of Modern Art-we keep getting new directors and all of them have the same thing to say. But it's not their fault. They want to keep a job. Meanwhile, they're not the ones that are responsible. It's the board. The board chooses the directors, so if I'm on the board of directors and I choose somebody from the east coast, they're going to come here with an east coast aesthetic. Why should I expect anything different? So when we're dissatisfied with a director we shouldn't be dissatisfied with the director. We should be dissatisfied with the board. But then the board is the one that has all the money, and those are the ones who run the city, and you don't want to get them angry because then you got problems. Ask me about it, I can tell you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah?

MEL CASAS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, I will. [laughter] Well, I'm still struggling with the various concepts in here when we talk about Chicano art and what that really means and when it's necessary and when it's not. But you have to answer my question on one more tape, because the red light's going.

Session 1, Tape 3, Side A

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing an interview with Mel Casas, this is session one, tape three, side A. And, Mel, I was trying to pin you down, trying to get you to say, What is Chicano art? What is it? What does it have to be? What does a work have to be-besides good? And I questioned that answer, as a matter of fact, because I understood you to say the quality. You know, it has to have quality. I think that's what makes it the art. But the Chicano part has to be somewhat separate, having to do with concerns and issues. Is that right?

MEL CASAS: Well, I don't know if that's correct or not. But the main issue is when we're talking about Chicano art we're talking about an ethnic group. And so therefore we're saying this ethnic group is posturing-heavens forbid the idea-that they're being discriminated aesthetically, that their art is not being taken seriously. Now, using that posture, we're also saying, on the same vein, that these people are saying they're discriminated upon racially and culturally. And that becomes an issue, that these people are saying that their being of Hispanic origin is keeping them from being mainstream or being in the museums or being taken artistically serious. Ah. Part of the problem, I guess, I [find] here is that we've got a lot of velvet paintings in the border that you can go buy-you know, with ladies with big boobs and nice background and sunsets and what have you-so consequently we relate that to the idea of Chicano art also. And indirectly it's tied to that. But what these people are saying is, "We are Americans and we want the same privileges." Forgetting quality right now; that's really what the issue is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

MEL CASAS: Now, in bigger terms, what we need is cultural atheists in the museum world. Meaning, if you have a cultural atheist, you have a believer that just believes. In other words, an atheist believes that he doesn't believe, therefore he believes. [When -Ed.] you have a cultural atheist you have one that is not comfortable with the aesthetic already in form. So he or she is willing to experiment without a concept. This is the vitality of creativity. But to have that, you have to feel very secure. You have to have people that are saying, "Let's try this other avenue, see what it produces." Very few people want to do that. Now, the negative side to that is that there are some people that will do anything to appear democratic, to appear nonconformist, to appear willing to experiment. But it has nothing to do with art. It has to do with personal needs. And so it's not that simple. But what we are talking about is that these people feel slighted, basically, on an ethnic basis. True or not, that seems to be the issue.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you feel that you can look at a work of art, a picture-we won't even call it necessarily . . . we won't get into definitions of art-but a work, and determine by qualities inherent to it that it is or is not Chicano or any other ethnic-based one? In some cases, maybe?

MEL CASAS: Yeah. In a lot of cases you can. It's like being able to tell Mexican art and Argentinean art from New York art. Now, it's more difficult when you get to international art, which a lot of the Argentineans do, which means rigid grid systems, colors, and what have

you. But basically the coloration is what gives us all away. And the Mexicans or Argentineans-and I'm not picking on them-and the Brazilians have a way of painting that you can identify. So it becomes a national school, if you may-whether intentional or not is another story-but there is that. Our country is so huge and such a blend of so many people that that is where the problem lies-that we have imposed a particular aesthetic over the whole country and it doesn't quite function. And that's where we run into problems. But, yes, you can tell. I guess if you look at my work, I don't paint Catholic paintings. Maybe I should correct myself. They're catholic because they're universal. You know, they're that subject matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

MEL CASAS: But religiously, no, they're not. They're not Thomistic or Augustinian in philosophy or yet. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Early Augustine.

MEL CASAS: Early, huh? Yeah, very early. Before the . . . there was a lost city, what was it? [tongue in cheek -Ed.] Anyway. But when you see Mexican art you can tell, just by the use of the subject matter and the way they handle it, that it comes from Mexico. And now we're not talking the mural paintings, we're just talking Mexican regular easel paintings. So, yes, you can tell. So, saying that, this part of the country has some of that in them and it bleeds through. The question is. . . . It's not that much. And it's different. And it should be. It's different from the east coast where you find a lot of fishing boats and sailboats and what have you. You find here desert and cacti and what have you. And those are realities of life. So geography in a sense dictates also the art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I certainly agree with that. But that's one issue. And the other issue is this ethnicity. And what I'm struggling with, respectfully, is to come to more of an understanding of this. So you said earlier that Carlos Almaraz finally is not a Chicano artist in one sense, because there are these transcendentally. . . . You seem to admire his ability as a painter. But that is truly "other." You know, he's operating as Carlos at his work. How important or what difference does the Chicano part make? He was the founder of Los Four. You know, they exhibited together. Part of that was opportunism, as I understand.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, precisely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And yet you've got Carmen . . .

MEL CASAS: Garza.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . Lomas Garza, and her imagery clearly signals the whole sort of Mexican-American domestic experience. She grew up somewhere in Texas.

MEL CASAS: Um hmm. [Mesas] is her last name, Carmen, sí? Carmen. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Garza.

MEL CASAS: . . . Garza Mesa? No, Garza Mesa \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anyway, Carmen, I think it's Lomas Garza.

MEL CASAS: Lomas, uh huh. Lomas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She had a big show at the Hirshhorn, and one would have to say she's mainstream in big time. She's out of the country a lot of the time with commissions. Most artists would kill for this. Yet her imagery identifies her with her community, her background. And it's not a polemic, exactly, it's an aesthetic that she's adopted. Maybe one would say women do this more than men. I wouldn't ever say that, but, you know, possible. Almaraz not so much.

MEL CASAS: Yet, see, Almaraz doesn't fall into the criteria of folk art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, that's right.

MEL CASAS: She does. And she plays with it very well. Now, the essential difference is danger. She-because of her folksy quality-is very safe. It's somebody that you can. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's comfortable, that's true.

MEL CASAS: Comfortable. You can buy and feel elated about [it]. The other ones. . . . Almaraz is dealing with the essence of art at an entirely different level, and he took the challenge and he did well with it. This is not involving a put-down. It's involving, what is it that we want, that we admire? For instance, it's very easy to get from Mexico-even now-a show of pre-Columbian art. But to get revolutionary art, you don't find that many takers. One is safe. It's like liking Native American art. Meanwhile, we've got Native Americans in reservations. But it's safe. Not only that, "See! I don't discriminate. I'm having a show of Native Americans." But I don't look in what condition I have left them: drunkards, unable to support themselves.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, it seems that's the social responsibility. And this is what I'm trying to get at, that there are two things at work. And that is a recognition that you as an artist are part of a community with certain problems, that there are challenges. Part of it is that the art tradition isn't being recognized, that, you know, "I'm having difficulty getting attention, getting a show." That's a careerism issue.

MEL CASAS: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what you're saying-and saying very well-is that there are bigger issues and it has to do with "What circumstances are my people in?"

MEL CASAS: Well, either you have art for art's sake or art for humans' sake. And that's what you have to decide personally. Nobody can decide that for you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does it restrict you, though? Or does it restrict one? I'm not just talking about you. Isn't that, perhaps, a difficult choice to make. And are these two demands, competing demands \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.

MEL CASAS: It depends on what you want. Some years back I did several paintings that were very anti-Vietnam, anti-Nixon, and no one would give me a show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

MEL CASAS: Now people want to show those paintings. Why? Because they're safe. And I don't want to show them-because they're safe. Why didn't they take the chance when they had more verve? But, see, what I'm saying is these people are saying, "See how open-minded I am? I'm giving you the show of this thing." Not now, they're not open-minded. They're very, very safe. But in their mind they're daring. And so then comes the question, "Well, do I want that show? How badly do I want that show?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: That depends on how good the show is. Is it important? How much of a careerist you are, which raises another question.

MEL CASAS: Well at this point, Paul, I'm 66. I think I paint very superb paintings. That's my evaluation.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I agree.

MEL CASAS: And I like to be commercial and sell them. I want to spend the money with my family. It's just that simple. That's all I want to do. I don't want fame. I don't want anything else. And it's not easy. Not here in this town. And I have my reasons for [not] having a hard time here, but that's another story. And you don't have time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about that award? Artist of the Year?

MEL CASAS: Oh, God!

PAUL KARLSTROM: You've got to tell me that story again. I saw it on the video.

MEL CASAS: Who told you that?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Jacinto. And besides \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_. [laughs]

MEL CASAS: Hah! I've got to talk Jacinto! Well, many years ago-I've forgotten the year, to tell you truth; it doesn't really matter-but I got elected artist of the year. Which is an honor in

San Antonio and I appreciated it. And I was asked to give a little talk. So I gave a talk about the Barbie-doll culture, and I undressed a little doll for them, too, that one of my students loaned me. You know, to show the boobs and the [curves on it]. The ladies were so offended. . . . Well, before I go into that, what I was doing, I was trying to tell you that as long as we didn't. . . . Oh, no, I was trying to show them how males had an identity. You know, there were farmers, warriors, and what have you, and that [male? -Ed.] dolls work appropriately. Barbie dolls are basically sex machines and baby machines, and that was the ultimate, and if you were lucky and you were blonde and blue-eyed, you were even more in, so you were guaranteed for life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Full employment, right?

MEL CASAS: It hit home. It hit home like I never thought it would. Anyway, the ladies got together again and they found out that they had taken the vote on the wrong day. So they informed me that they had reconvened and because of the problem they had to have another vote and they had voted again and I just didn't make it the second time. So I was artist of the year for, I guess, hours or days and that was it. And it was no big deal. But it's a local honor, and I didn't get it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, this group, what is it called?

MEL CASAS: The San Antonio Art League. And you've got to realize that we're talking wealthy women.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some of them may be collectors.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, none of mine were. But, see, that's the other side to the story I was telling you that my work doesn't sell here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why is that? Why do you suppose that is?

MEL CASAS: Well, I think I have offended enough of the money people to make it a deterrent. I have made some sales but not that many. You know, you've got to learn to play the game, Paul, and I am very poor at it or I don't care about it. I just care about the art, so that's what I do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, in a perfect world that's supposed to be the way it is. And that's the way you conduct your life, but nobody is naive enough, fool enough, anymore to think that that's how it works in the art world. It's unfortunate but true.

MEL CASAS: Anyway, I never pay much attention to that anymore. But it seems that some of ladies are still around and still remember me, which is very complimentary.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's good. They should come over and see your recent work and buy some.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, they'll love it more.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, they'll love it more. But I guess it's important to distinguish. . . . I mean, we were talking about a number of different things. One is what's appropriate in terms of sexuality and those issues. And that seems to be what offended this group. And maybe the implications which are true-that they had to identify with the Barbie-but also there's the other issue, that you're a Mexican-American, and they knew that already. So, when Jacinto first told me that story, I thought that for some crazy reason they didn't know what they getting. Well, I guess they didn't really know what they were getting when they elected you. But it certainly wasn't a race or ethnicity thing, though.

MEL CASAS: I don't think so. I think when I first came to San Antonio I sort of shocked the local world here. When I came here I got invited to different places, money-spending places, and I just did not play the game. And when I began to speak my mind, people weren't ready for it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what did you say? This then would get into the area of your politics and so forth, right? Identity politics.

MEL CASAS: But it wasn't politics. It was a matter of understanding aesthetics. I questioned aesthetics. I didn't question ethnicity; I questioned aesthetics and what people were buying

here. We're talking 1961, so. . . . Okay, going back to what I had said before to you, when I started teaching at SAC, San Antonio College was the school for everybody, so everybody came there-wealthy, poor, whatever. And mostly it was an Anglo school, okay? So when I started speaking my mind about ideas, about concepts, this had nothing to do with ethnicity. It had to do with art. Some of this stuff I think traveled home, and some of the people were not happy with what they were hearing. I was upsetting the apple cart, and they weren't ready for it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: About ideas of what art is?

MEL CASAS: About what art is and the values of art and things like this. Their reasons for choices. I've got the book. I'll show you some charts that I used to put up for the students.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, tell about those charts.

MEL CASAS: Well, we used to do it in class. To keep the class alive, I would start out with an idea, a concept, and put up the word, and then begin to make correlations and associations, and we'd have class participation. Then we arrived at different elements and different connections, and then we would arrive at a conclusion as to what all this would mean. And they were very exciting classes. Students liked them and I liked them, but I think some people didn't like them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how did they demonstrate this dislike?

MEL CASAS: Well, no, my students didn't. My students were excellent, \_\_\_\_\_. But I had had in class people that used to. . . . I've forgotten the name of the group that used to sit in your class and see that you were doing all the proper things. There's an organization.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MEL CASAS: Anyway, I had those people. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: An accreditation committee or something?

MEL CASAS: No, no, no. This is a political . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Peer review?

MEL CASAS: No, no. This is nothing to do with the school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, political!

MEL CASAS: Yeah. And I had a lady come and identify herself to me, and then she said, "You do a wonderful job connecting all those things together once you listen through the whole thing. But I've forgotten their names. They're still in existence. They would go to classes and sit and listen to what you have to say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They're like watchdogs.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, but they're political.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Community \_\_\_\_\_.

MEL CASAS: Political people. You've got them in California, too. It's a national thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, no.

MEL CASAS: It's a national thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, we don't allow those.

MEL CASAS: Yeah, sure you don't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles] So what happened?

MEL CASAS: Oh, the lady was [all right]. She came and identified herself to me and she said that she liked what I was doing, that she told what I did and she said it was fine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that's good.

MEL CASAS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you suggested there was some negative results from. . . .

MEL CASAS: Oh, yeah. No, no, that was something else. I began to find out that people didn't like what I was saying in classes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what wouldn't they like?

MEL CASAS: I guess I questioned things. I questioned how much is a painting worth? So I said to my students, "You and you. We just bought a [\_\_\_\_\_-Ed.] [Pearlstein]. Go find out how much. . . ."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Pearlstein?

MEL CASAS: Yeah. "Go and find out how much we paid for it." And then I said to other students, "Manet's Asparagus sold again. Trace that down." And so then we'd sit together. . . . Well, first of all, one of my students came back [saying -Ed.] that they could not tell him how much was paid for the Pearlstein. That was privileged information. I said, "That's not correct. It's the city, the museum. They used city money. You go back and tell them that I said they better give you that information." It's those kind of things that. . . . Anyway, then we made a comparison between the history of the Asparagus of Manet-how they traveled and how much they were worth-versus the Pearlstein. "Who decides what . . . who sets the criteria. What is the value line? Are we talking money? Are we talking aesthetics?" And, you know, the final decision thing. Those are the things that keep things very much alive, but also can create a lot of problems because they're very current. The easiest thing to deal with is history. But I guess when you deal with data instead of knowledge it's different-data is raw; knowledge is already processed-and it makes difficulty. But that's how come I love teaching so much. I used to experiment a lot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think, though, that your somewhat outspokenness, I guess, in class and elsewhere then interfered with your career here locally?

MEL CASAS: No, I think some people just don't like my paintings. [laughs] It's just that simple.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's a different thing.

MEL CASAS: Yeah. It's a reality, though, you know? Why should everybody like my paintings? No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the implication-or at least as I understood it-was that there were things you did or things you said. . . .

MEL CASAS: Whatever I did offended some people. For instance, let me tell you something that. . . . I wish it weren't on this tape but I'll go ahead and say it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is history.

MEL CASAS: My youngest daughter was very sick. I didn't know she was sick. She developed a lump on her side, and it had grown bigger and I had not noticed until she came and told me, and [it had gotten] quite a bit. I've forgotten if she was seventeen, eighteen. I've forgotten. Anyway, I said, "Better go to the doctor and have it checked," that it didn't hurt. Well, good grief. It turned out to be Hodgkin's disease. And she was already in the second or third stage-I've forgotten-and moving. And then, you know, they die! So I decided, "Idealism has to go out the window. I'd better contact somebody and try to sell some paintings in case I need to." Because it looked pretty bad. So I contacted a local gallery. The lady left. Where did she go? Washington? Where'd she go? Washington state or Washington D.C.? Anyway, she said, "Yes, I'll handle your work." I'm lucky, I'm unknown, so she said she would. She called me back and said, "No, I can't sell your work." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "The people with money here don't want to touch your work." I said, "Okay, thank you." So that was my first real attempt at going commercial to make some money in case I needed to. And so some people still carry a grudge or whatever-the people with money-and the thing of it is my daughter did okay and she's doing fine. But that made me face reality. There's a



nice romanticism to do what you want to do-since I was making my living teaching instead painting-but there comes a time when you need more money and you have to realize those things. And I was abruptly let know that, you know, no. And so you have to handle those things. I said, "Okay." So now I had to try to do something else, somewhere else, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Have you tried elsewhere?

MEL CASAS: No, [not really]. No, I did have a show in New Mexico. Nothing came out of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you haven't systematically tried, as some artists do, to, even through an agent, through a representative, identify possibilities. . . .

MEL CASAS: I'll tell you what got into my agent. My agent's gallery closed down.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, right, you told about that. And then you took that as a sign.

MEL CASAS: No, no. I said to you, "What does it mean?" And, no, she still said she wanted to represent me as my consultant. I don't think she's done anything, to tell you the truth. And I think she's comfortable enough that she hasn't had to worry about anybody.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we'll think about that.

MEL CASAS: And, you know, I'll tell you one thing. It's a matter of who and what you are. I'm very poor at going to galleries with my batch of slides. "Want to look at my work and see if you want to show it?" I'm very poor at that. Some people are very good at doing it. I'm very poor at it. And you have to accept those realities. And I'm not good at catering for whatever reason. It's been expensive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you need somebody to represent you.

MEL CASAS: It's been very expensive. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. This is a conversation that we can have at dinner, but there are two things at work. There's you, and there's your work. And if for whatever reason you're not the best one to be the one to [represent you -Ed.] . . .

MEL CASAS: Oh yeah, no, I know that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . then get somebody else who is, because the work really . . . that's where it becomes separate. You know, it goes out into the world, and I would think. . . . I mean, I like what I see. And I've seen a lot of artwork. It can't be that all of San Antonio just is resistant.

MEL CASAS: \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_. No, I don't think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But, anyway, we don't need to talk about this on tape. This is almost running out. But, just briefly, it seems to me that you have pursued a career that is in many ways very independent. I mean, you were certainly connected to the Chicano movement and probably described yourself as a Chicano artist in a very important way. But in talking to you, it's something that you seem to have very much in perspective. And that isn't finally, what you are or. . . . That's a part of it. And that you continue your work independently, one on one. And the work. You're an American artist doing what you do. Is that a fair. . . ?

MEL CASAS: I think so. The Chicano movement, which I tried to help, is just a phase of my life. You know, that same way that I was very anti-Nixon, very anti-Vietnam. That's another phase of my life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you're not just a \_\_\_\_\_.

[Break in tape. Session 1, Tape 3, Side B is marked blank.]

Session 2, Tape 1, Side A

[The audio quality of this tape is significantly lower than that of the previous tapes; some words, particularly names, are unintelligible -Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A second session with Mel Casas at his home in San Antonio. Also present is Jacinto Quirarte, with whom we just

finished a long interview. The two know one another well from the old days and are back in touch, happily, once again. And the subject-one of the subjects, anyway-has been the Chicano art movement and it occurred to me that to sort of wrap up Mel's interview we could introduce a conversation between Mel and Jacinto, perhaps reflecting on certain issues and experiences that relate to this subject. And so this is Paul Karlstrom-ostensibly the interviewer. The date is August 16, 1996, and without further ado I'd like to kind of turn it over to you.

You were already discussing something of considerable interest. A colleague, somebody else involved importantly-Shifra Goldman-in the movement-or, rather, the writing about it-the understanding of the movement. So, Jacinto.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: What has always interested me are the interrelationships among artists and the people who wrote about Chicano art, and some of the comments that Mel was making about Shifra Goldman were very interesting to me because I had an experience with her that colored the way I saw her. And I always saw her as, certainly, a person with integrity. An art historian whose major interest, initially, was Mexican art. And we touched base off and on over the years, being together at exhibitions where we were both invited to give talks or participant in round tables and so forth.

But I'm much more interested in Mel's involvement with the movement. I only know it superficially through the first interviews that I did with him in San Antonio along with some other artists present and then including part of our interview in chapter eight of my Mexican American Artists book that has since become the key part of it, actually. You can ignore all of what comes in the first seven chapters and you just read that one chapter eight with Mel's interview and then the one with Esteban Villa where there's a comparison and contrast, and you come away getting a sense of what was going on at that time. And then the next time that we really delved into this was the 1990 hour-long video interview that was put together by Charlie Jarrell, a former PBS employee.

I've always been curious about Mel's relationship with all of these younger artists, and my perception was-and this is where he can elaborate-that he always had to play the reluctant bride, that the young artists had to coax him into playing a leading role for which he was undoubtedly terrifically qualified, given his experience in Mexico and then being a teacher at San Antonio College and so forth. And, all down the line, I think that Mel-being primarily involved with his work-always had to be drawn into some of the political aspects of it. The organization of Con Safo, interviews like this [chuckles], and things like that. Anyway, those are some of my perceptions, and I would really love to hear some of Mel's reflections on these last twenty-five years. On all aspects of them.

MEL CASAS: Wow, twenty-five years! No, but you're correct there. There's a basic reluctance in me to get involved with groups. It's not that I can't, I'm not capable. I'd just rather do my own work. But sometimes the times call for it. Going back to Con Safo, the reason I got involved in organizing it is that I got approached by one of the students-as a matter of fact, [Fanita] Reyes. They had had a group before this. I think it was called Pintores de Aztlán, and they had gotten a grant to get supplies and what have you and there was discord. What happened I do not know because I was not with the group. Anyway, he approached me one day and I told him that, reluctantly, "Let me think about it a little bit and I'll get back with you." And I thought about it a couple of days. Maybe my life would change. I was divorced. My timeframe was different, and I was teaching night and day courses to keep my household going. But I decided I would take a crack at it. So once I started, I met with the young men, and I listened to them and I began to realize they really needed to organize. So I wrote a manifesto and . . .

JACINTO QUIRARTE: The famous "Brown Paper"?

MEL CASAS: Uh huh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Could you tell us a little about that? Because we didn't touch on that in our earlier interview.

MEL CASAS: Well, you know, I'd forgotten. But I wrote it because I had to give these guys a reason for what we were doing. You have to understand this: There's two reasons for ideals. One is, "I want what everybody else has and I haven't gotten it." [microphone is moved, obscuring MC's words temporarily, but then improving the audio quality -Ed.] And the other one is, "I have something to offer, and it has been negated or not acknowledged, what have you." Now those two things sound contradictory, but they're not. One has, if not racial, it has cultural overtones, cultural conflicts. And you have to realize that to me culture is nothing

else than ready-made solutions. So when you're born into a culture, the solution's already there; you just conform with those solutions. When you have two cultures meet, there's obviously a clash, because the solutions do not quite jive the same way. And most important, when you think about it, culture has another element to it, and it's an incestuous expression. It says, "We all reproduce our own ideas together." The ideas being human, therefore being sexual, being mores, being education, and this unit that we've created through our incestuous relationship will give us a nation, will give us an identity. And so when you think that closely, that's so interwoven, it's very difficult to let anybody else come in. That's the reason I mentioned the other day that you need cultural atheists to give somebody else a break. You need someone that nature just forces a mutation to open up and create another avenue.

But going back to Con Safo, I had a whole bunch of firebrands in my hand. And I was the teacher; I was a painter-teacher. And I knew that we needed academic discipline, so that's the reason I started doing this. The question of Con Safo versus Con Safos, that was my doing, because where I grew up it was Con Safo. In California and here, it was Con Safors, with plural. And I was going to write up on that, too, because the one from El Paso is more arrogant. You don't need any other excuse but this one. The other one gives you multiple choices so it's more lenient. But then I grew up in the clash of the border back there.

And so I began to do that, and then we organized shows, and, believe it or not, it was propitious for the times, also. We even had sets of slides and we had a fee for showing. We actually charged for our exhibitions, and, guess what, we got money for the exhibitions. Unheard of! And then local politicians wanted to use us as a backdrop for their liberalism-or would-be-liberalism. And so in that sense it was very enjoyable. We had quite a few meetings, and then the egos began to come out-the individual egos, the individual needs. Because we began to sacrifice the unison concept of Con Safo into the individual needs. People feeling that they wanted more attention, rightly or wrongly I do not know. That. . . .

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I'm sorry for interrupting, but that seems to me to be the microcosm of what happened on a regional and national level of the individual personality and these needs, that they just seem to keep popping up all the time, and you're trying to hold something together so that people don't lose sight of the direction that you think the group is going in.

MEL CASAS: Precisely. See, what happens to all of us, we have a group of people-even if it's a group of students-and we start talking with them and-I'm talking like the father image now [everyone chuckles]-and we start talking with them and we forget that we are not at the same level. And I'm not talking intelligence, I'm just talking experiences. So therefore the reception of what information is being filtered is landing at different levels with multiple interpretations. And among them, the personal need: what is in there for me? And obviously that should be there, too, because no one is that totally altruistic. Let me tell you something comical about it. At that time also, before we totally started to disintegrate, [ETSA] [E\_\_\_\_ T\_\_\_\_ S\_\_\_\_ A\_\_\_\_ (or is this someone's name?) -Ed.] had settled down and started experimenting with \_\_\_\_\_ for a while. He taught courses at SAC and then somewhere else. I don't remember.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: The Craft Center?

MEL CASAS: The \_\_\_\_\_ Center is where they had their offices. They were somewhere in there, somewhere. Anyway . . .

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh, the [Kroeger] Center.

MEL CASAS: The Kroeger Center. Anyway, some of the students were in the graduate programs, so they were given assignments to do research and in this case they picked Con Safo, and I don't know whether Quirarte had anything to do with it or not. But we've had some of the ladies, and I happened to know some of the ladies because they were ex-wives of fellow artists that I know. And these fellow-artists that I know were Anglo. And I have to say that because it goes with the story.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that Bob [Teiman, Thieman] and Ruth [Theiman, Thieman]?

MEL CASAS: Uh huh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

MEL CASAS: And I got called-not just from her but from others that came with her-and so you're in line up, saying that they wanted to meet with the group and take notes and what have you. And they wanted to write a history of the Con Safo. That's all a polemic. But the thing that was so fascinating was that one of the ladies told me that she was very concerned about showing up with artists. She didn't say, "All these hot-blooded Mexicans, I'm easy pickings," you know? [laughter] I said, "No, we're all very tired really." I said, "Just come on and. . . ." And so we had that kind of a thing but what happens is, when you get two groups of people to meet, sometimes invariably the sexual element becomes emphatic without being there. It's like an alien attraction. So anyway, it was fascinating.

PAUL KARLSTROM: \_\_\_\_ fantasies.

MEL CASAS: Um hmm. We all have them.

[About here, additional difficulties with the recording begin showing up (tape has the hiccups), obscuring even more words -Trans.]

MEL CASAS: Anyway, but I think that did it for me with Con Safo, and we were very organized. We had a whole bunch of stuff that we were doing. And it was exciting. But I tried to get a national grant for us. Those times were propitious for that at that time. Anyway, I decided, too, that we needed some money for the ambitious projects that we had in mind-or the ones I had in mind, shall I say? So I got information to get some money through a national grant. And I looked at this stuff and I said, "There's no way I can do this. I need help." And you've got to remember I was teaching day and night courses and then painting on my own, so I had no time to do something like this. So what I did, with one of the fellow Con Safo members, we stayed up late a couple of nights and divided everything into sections and put it in envelopes and then, being the president, I assigned certain jobs to everyone. All the major work was [done]. It's just so they could feed me this information I could tie together, and then we could do that. Well, I guess. . . . Now, in retrospect, I would say that obviously there was already a lot of dissatisfaction and nobody had the guts to tell me. There was a [verbal] rebellion that night at the meeting.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: What was behind it?

MEL CASAS: Well, I was trying to get a grant, so I assigned to all of them a package. And I remember-I think I was \_\_\_\_-because he looked at it-\_\_\_\_-he looks at it and he throws it down on the ground, the floor, and he says, "I don't do this. I'm an artist." [laughter] And I said, "Listen, we need money and we're going to send off for information. We need sets of slides and what have you." I said, "And I don't have it." Jesse. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Trevino?]

MEL CASAS: No, not Trevino. My God.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ . Jesse? Did you say Jesse?

MEL CASAS: Yeah, I said Jesse. He was one of the. . . . He lost a hand.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh, Treviño.

MEL CASAS: Treviño. Jesus.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Jesse Treviño.

MEL CASAS: Jesse Treviño. He was getting one hundred percent disability. I know because I also have a disability, and I. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's from your war experience, Korean war?

MEL CASAS: Korean, uh huh. Anyway, I said, "We need to get you some money. Actually, I got this backwards, I did that part first and it led into trying to get a grant." Jesse said, "Well, you work." And I said, "Treviño, you're driving the Corvette." And he had 100 percent disability. " asked you to contribute something that I can't." He said, "No." I said, "Okay." So then I went that route trying to get a grant. And that's when I presented this stuff and \_\_\_\_ got upset with him, threw them down, and said, "I'm an artist, I don't need this kind of stuff." And then some of the others got into it.

But what I gather. . . . I didn't have time to congregate with people outside the meetings. I

was busy all the time. But they got together a lot, so obviously there was a fermentation of a new revolution coming out of this. And so they decided they didn't want to do it. So I said, "Let me let you know by the next meeting whether I'll participate or not." I said, "Because I can't do all this on my own." And that's part of the goals that we had. We had sets of goals. I wrote those out. We were not meeting some of those goals. And so I gave up being president and Treviño became president.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right, Rudy Treviño.

MEL CASAS: Rudy Treviño became president. But the thing was just beginning to disintegrate. And then was it [was it] César Martínez, Amado Peña dropped out and joined a group called Los Quemales, the Burned Ones. JC? Oh, and Carmen Lomas Garza?

MEL CASAS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, is that right?

MEL CASAS: But she was really never. . . .

JACINTO QUIRARTE: She participated in the exhibition but was not in Con Safo. She was off in Austin somewhere.

MEL CASAS: And \_\_\_\_\_ somewhere. Now, Amado Peña also was a member. As a matter of fact, he sent her some slides that they started doing. The Familia, the Family. He started with Con Safo; he started doing work with Con Safo. But so they went their separate ways and they didn't last at all. Shortly after that I understand they just sort of disappeared into the air. And everyone seeking, I guess, glory, and no one gets it.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You know, as an aside, just before and after I left for London this last time to participate in Arts Semester in London \_\_\_\_\_ at the University of Texas at San Antonio, I got wind of something that is indirectly related to what you're saying because some of the same people are involved, and that is an effort to start a Chicano art museum down town. I heard that Jesse Treviño is involved. I guess, César is in on it.

MEL CASAS: Amado is.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Yes. And they're being sponsored or at least encouraged by [\_\_\_\_\_-Ed.] Cortez who owns that whole complex of the Mercado-tierra is located and some of the others. And I don't take a local paper so I don't follow these things. Occasionally I see an article when I buy the Sunday paper. And the only artist that I've really seen is César but particularly Adam Hernandez, who is younger and was being interviewed when we did the 1990 interview. And he called me to tell me about this, but only to indicate that. . . . He wanted to know whether he could put my name forward as director of this new museum. And I said, "No, I don't think that that would work. I would be more than happy to be a consultant or help them in anyway I can, given the experience I've had on the national and state level in putting things together. But it's the wrong kind of thing for me in my time of life and also I'm an academic, blah, blah, blah." The next thing I knew from César and Adam [Alfalaron] whether-before leaving for London or right after-that is 1995-was that my name had been put forward by Adam, and that there was this violent reaction to it by Jesse Treviño, whom I really don't know other than he was one of our NFA students. I never had him in my classes of art history. He was getting his degree when I was teaching at the college. I'm sure that César Martínez did not react negatively to me-or certainly I've never gotten a sense from César that that would be the case. So that that indicated to me that my comments to Adan were the correct ones, that the last thing I needed, given the many debacles that I've been involved with, like \_\_\_\_\_ Task Force and the Mexican Museum in San Francisco with Peter Rodriguez, the Mexican Museum in Chicago with Carlos . . . whatever his last name is; I can't remember [Carlos \_\_\_\_\_-Ed.]-that's the last thing I would need to do. I was even interviewed for the Latino Museum position in Los Angeles, which I backed out of as soon as I had the interview when I realized, again, it was the wrong time in my life, career-wise. I [hadn't] the kind of energy that someone would need because they need someone in their forties, at least. Someone who's full of fire in the belly and that wants to make a difference.

And I think that that illustrates what I was telling Paul earlier, that you're always going to have personal agendas that many of which I'm sure I was not aware of \_\_\_\_\_ I've not been [aware of]. And so when Adan mentioned that, I found it a curiosity, because I was not aware of any of that. And so we all had a presence and people have a perception of us, and

they have a perception \_\_\_\_\_ now because of our role in the whole definition of what Chicano art was and this group that he. . . . I mean, you needed that like you need a hole in the head . . .

MEL CASAS: That's right.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: . . . with all your commitments as an artist and also as a teacher. And with this hassle it illustrates what I told Paul on the way down, that I didn't put on the tape before, and I think it's perhaps spoken and everyone's familiar with it-the identification, the nationality of a bucket of lobsters. How do you know they're Mexican? Well, the way you know that they're Mexican lobsters is that when one of them tries to get out they all pull him back in. [laughter?] And \_\_\_\_\_ the obvious counterpart of that [is if] it's full of Jewish lobsters, they're all going to all make a little pyramid and one of them is going to get out. [laughter] And that's what's involved here.

MEL CASAS: Of course, going back to the museum situation, I did get invited to a meeting at \_\_\_\_\_ Sosa's.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh, so you have more direct knowledge. I have none.

MEL CASAS: Well, that's the only one. I got invited to this meeting and I went and it was a very nice spread and a lot of important people were there, and \_\_\_\_\_ spiel, and I just said \_\_\_\_\_ . They wanted me to say something. I said, "Oh, God." So what I said to them is that once you decide to have a museum-in this case, a Chicano museum, you are deciding to have an institution. And if you want an institution to have enough validity it's going to have to have [credentials], it's going to have to have criteria of what is accepted and what isn't-aesthetically, morally, whatever." And I said, "Are you people willing to do this? Or are you going to show in that museum just because you happen to be Chicano?" There was a long silence. They had another meeting afterwards, a very \_\_\_\_\_. I was not invited to that. So since \_\_\_\_\_ have second [thoughts]. Let me say something that I was going to say there, and I \_\_\_\_\_ out in public: The worst thing we can do-\_\_\_\_\_ position-is for me to be a novice in trying to open a museum that \_\_\_\_\_ the implication is that some of my work would be there.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Exactly.

MEL CASAS: Okay, now I said to [other] people, "The people you have here are all artists." They said, "What?" Which \_\_\_\_\_. That was my mistake. [George Cortez] he's an artist. He does gigantic big heads and I like them. I never knew he painted. Now, after they've been mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. [Kathleen Rich].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who is?

MEL CASAS: \_\_\_\_\_ Margarita \_\_\_\_\_.

PAUL KARLSTROM: \_\_\_\_\_.

MEL CASAS: [Yeah].

JACINTO QUIRARTE: \_\_\_\_\_ everything but one parcel.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh!

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And they are central to the [development] of that whole section of guerilla theater, right?

MEL CASAS: Yeah. But see the problem is when you're trying to do something like that, you might be the finest person in the world, but you're highly suspect. And the first thing you've got to do is remove yourself from the position if you want any chance at succeeding. And I don't know where they are now.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now who are the artists involved in this?

MEL CASAS: For sure it's Treviño, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Jesse.

MEL CASAS: \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: For sure, huh? I'm not in on this. Who continues to mention my name. He's a big fan of mine, but I keep telling him that it's not the kind of thing that I'm interested in. I'm at the tail end of my career. I continue to write things in \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ eventually think the writing \_\_\_\_ what really happened \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ beyond the personalities [or in spite of them]. But for the moment I have a lot of books that I need to finish. So that's the last thing I want. But I'm quite curious because when \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ wanted \_\_\_\_ shows . . .

MEL CASAS: [All right. OR: Oh, right.]

JACINTO QUIRARTE: . . . with regard to what you're trying to do and what you saw given your experience was needed, and we call this a lack of professionalism. It continues to plague. . . .

MEL CASAS: See, I have problems with the idea or the concept of Chicanism \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ . . .  
[Stopped transcribing here, even though there is at least five minutes more of conversation, as it is unintelligible. -Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is the end of this brief session with Mel Casas, Paul Karlstrom, and Jacinto Quirarte in attendance, so those three voices are heard on this tape. We also encountered an inexplicable speed-control problem, with a shifting of speed that gets very severe towards the end. That's the problem; I'm really not quite sure what it is, but an attempt should be made to salvage the final part of the interview because it is good information. At any rate, this marks the end of the interview with Mel Casas, in San Antonio, Texas.

[End of interview.]