



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Frank Romero,
1997 January 17-March 2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Frank Romero on January 17, 24 & 29, March 2, 1997. The interview took place in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Jeffrey Rangel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

JANUARY 17, 1997

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

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is an interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

FRANK ROMERO: Really! I wonder if I've ever done. . . . Have I done any?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Not that I know of.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, okay. Because one time we had engaged Margarita Nieto to do this, and she never came through. Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That means, let's see, we're here with Frank Romero on January 17, 1997, at the artist's studio, 1625 Blake, in Los Angeles. The interviewer is Jeff Rangel, and let's get going.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, all right. So you want to ask a question? [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure, well, I guess I should just let you know kind of the format that we normally use. The interviews are pretty much biographical in nature, and so we like to start out first talking about yourself, your childhood, your family, family experiences, where you're from, education, how you first got interested in art, things of that nature.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, that's kind of easy because I did this yesterday. [laughs] I don't know, is that machine hearing me? Are we doing okay?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, looks like we are.

FRANK ROMERO: I've done that story so many times . . . Actually, we tried to do a little concise version yesterday. But, you know, mine is a very typical American story-you know, with Latino/Chicano/Mexican-American overtones, right? [laughs] Whichever one is politically correct at the moment. I always start off with that, that especially in "Hispanic Art in the United States," which was criticized for its title, in Octavio Paz's essay, where he deals with whenever you get three Latinos together, they're always dealing with identity-who the hell we are. And because it is a diaspora. . . . And maybe there's something about that. There is racism in Latino society, but, I don't know, somehow you miscegenate it out of the dialogue. For some reason. . . . There were black slaves in Mexico, but they sort of all inter-married and most people don't realize that they have. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Have African background.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . African background. That's very interesting because I have a friend who's a photographer. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Tony Gleaton?

FRANK ROMERO: . . . Tony Gleaton, yeah, who exploits that idea-you know, goes out and finds black Mexicans.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. He's done shows.

FRANK ROMERO: All over, right, yeah. And I said, "You're knocking a dead horse around, Tony." He was here yesterday, actually, and I was a little hard on him, he says. Because he's going out to the University of Michigan to give a lecture. [laughs] I said, "Tony, not another lecture on black Mexicans." So now he's into black Central Americans, so he's got a new. . . . [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: It actually raises a lot of eyebrows.

FRANK ROMERO: I know. It's still controversial in American society, because we don't have that history or that

we don't talk about the fact that we intermarry in American society.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That mestizaje.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. But everyone does. I think that's what so interesting about living and growing up in California, which I did, is that the Latinos are probably going to become the majority population by the turn of the century, but we're closely followed by Asians and every other group. And all these peoples-the few hold-outs of the racist white society not withstanding-are getting on with life anyway. And I think it's the first time in history where we have this kind of just polyglot culture. My kids tend to be probably German-Dutch-Jewish-Latino. . . . Anyway.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: And that's just true of every family. You talk about any Hispanic guy, you go back down and you find that one of your ancestors was German or Italian.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure.

FRANK ROMERO: And it's fascinating.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And so, does that mean when you were growing up. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: I grew up in a polyglot culture. I was born in . . . it was actually, in those days, called Whittier Township, which is East L.A., right near Sister Karen's Self-Help Graphics. It was a little hospital called Santa Marta. And it's very interesting because I was given an award like ten years ago for being born there. [laughter]

JEFFREY RANGEL: We know what that means. [laughter]

FRANK ROMERO: A distinguished alumni. . . .

RICHARD ____: It means he knew he was coming before, prior.

FRANK ROMERO: Anyway.

[A brief conversation ensues, in which Robert appears to be departing.-Ed.]

FRANK ROMERO: Anyway, so I was born in East L.A.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And what year was that?

FRANK ROMERO: 1941. Not that. . . . I guess you know I don't remember the Second World War or the death of Roosevelt, but I do remember jet airplanes and Truman-yeah, sort of my first president. In those days, not that one understood much about the world, but it was very beautiful here. We live in a little basin surrounded by snow-capped mountains, and I think anyone like my children who were born in the sixties and seventies and eighties have never seen those mountains. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Well, only after it rains.

FRANK ROMERO: Only after it rains, and they say, "What are those funny things?" And in the early fifties and late forties, we had three days a year of smog. Three days a year and it was very devastating. It hurt your eyes, made you cry, and it was like a heat wave. And it actually usually came with a heat wave. [FRANK ROMERO's dog arrives on the scene-Ed.] And I always say that, too, mine is the artist's story. I never did anything else. I was always an artist. I think my mother sort of had this idea. . . . I've done some reading about that, where you have a very dominant mother that wants you to be an artist. I don't think she knew what that meant, because I know it got me in a lot of trouble later when I became one. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did she encourage that?

FRANK ROMERO: That's a good question. Obviously, I was just inclined that way from the very start. I have some old books-I think that my daughter has them now-Modern Library children's classics. And there are scratches in those things that I did when I was four or five. And I know because when I started kindergarten I remember probably an assistant to the teacher, who was a very lovely woman, who encouraged me in making projects that dealt with. . . . You know, art is a mental and physical process. And I think I just always enjoyed just making things-and drawings, combining those qualities.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Making those two. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, thinking about something and making it. I probably have a very uncanny ability to visualize something and then go and do it. And it comes out exactly like I visualized it. I understand that most people don't do this or can't do this, but it seems to me odd that they can't. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: People consider that a gift, yeah, definitely. So that's something that you've always. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: I've always done it. And then I think that's true of eighty or ninety percent of the artists. Some people get thwarted in those endeavors. I was very, very lucky. Growing up in East L.A., I went to the First Street School in kindergarten and then over to Euclid Avenue. Oh, my fourth-grade teacher was a Sunday painter, Mrs. Martin, and I think I remember Carlos [Science] and I were the best artists in the class, and we were very much encouraged. There was a mural we did at one time, and I think we did it in pastels on the back wall and it was a Christmas scene. And then, after Christmas, it didn't quite make sense. The Three Wise Men on camels. And I very cleverly took the hump of the camel and made it into a ladies' dress and we turned it into a Spanish hacienda scene-you know, after Christmas.

JEFFREY RANGEL: This was in the fourth grade?

FRANK ROMERO: Fourth grade. The last grade of grammar school is eighth or ninth? Eight?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, it depends. Sometimes they go up to sixth grade and then junior high goes with high school or. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, junior high is six, seven, and eight. No, seven, eight, and nine-ten, eleven, twelve-yeah. So, the sixth-grade teacher was actually an Englishwoman who was very much involved. . . . She was about to retire, at least go to England for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, and so there was actually maybe some inklings of the world beyond Boyle Heights, in those days, because she spent a year telling us about England and the coronation. It was a very big event, and I think when she went over she sent us stamps with the queen's profile and stuff like that. It was a very exciting thing. I was very lucky also. I went to Stevenson Junior High, which was sort of an old-fashioned kind of Ivy League school, in that it was brick and mortar. All of those schools were eventually torn down in Los Angeles because they're not earthquake [proof-Ed.]. There's two left. There's one here, actually, in this little barrio that I live in now, Frogtown. And there's a Marshall High, I guess. There's a little high school over here. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I saw it, actually, driving in.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . that they use for a lot of filming, because there's only two schools in Los Angeles that are still brick. But Stevenson Junior High was a very nice . . . very interesting school. This is in the mid-fifties. And, again, I had some very good art teachers. That's unusual.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It is unusual.

FRANK ROMERO: And, the thing is that Stevenson Junior High was a training school for people out of Cal State L.A. that were into art education. And for some reason, I studied with Ronald Silverman, who now teaches art education at Cal State L.A., and Jerry Uribe, who. . . . You know, they were both student teachers at that time. And it's very interesting because I had them as instructors at school and then later on when I went to university met them again. So there was sort of a continuity in my life that was very interesting. Jerry Uribe just understood that I was. . . . You know, by that time-fourteen, fifteen, sixteen-I was a fairly accomplished artist. And he sent me to Otis on a P.T.A. scholarship, which was something that used to happen in those days.

JEFFREY RANGEL: P.T.A. scholarship?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. And I think two people from each school of the city of Los Angeles was sent to Otis Art Institute-just for the summer, for a six-week course. And that was the P.T.A. scholarship. And Joe Mugnani who was actually "moo-ni-ni," M-u-g-n-a-i-n-i. . . . [The first "i" was a slip of the tongue-Ed.]. If you talk to most people that grew up in L.A., they all studied with Joe. Carlos [Almaraz-Ed.], Judithe [Hernandez-Ed.]-we were all talking about studying with Joe Mugnani, who taught Introduction to Life Drawing at Otis Art Institute in those days. And that was a very interesting time at Otis which-you know, in retrospect-here I am, a sixteen-year-old kid just graduating from junior high and going to Otis in the summer, studying life-drawing with a live nude model and all of that kind of stuff, and just smelling the turpentine in the hallways was very heady, sort of made you dizzy. It smelled. . . . You know, the part of art that people don't understand is that it's very tactile-you know, this feeling about it-and it involves all the senses. An art school for someone like me was like. . . . In fact, it sort of destroyed the rest of my high school life, because after Otis, which is a university kind of situation, I wasn't very much interested in high school. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were you able to take drawing classes and art classes in high school as well?

FRANK ROMERO: For some reason in those days. . . . You know, there's a prejudice in our society. Most people don't understand what artists do or what they're about or that it even has validity. Most people in our society are very much uneducated. The Republican agenda, one of the things is destroying funding for the arts. And I don't know quite why that is so. I'm going to fight back. I'm going to curate a show, Republican Art. But I think it's an oxymoron. I can't find any Republican artists.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs] Right.

FRANK ROMERO: But, nevertheless, in '56 Otis was run by a very well known artist and designer named Millard Sheets, and he was a very progressive individual and had instituted a ceramic program at Otis and built a beautiful lab, which was run by Peter Voulkos. And at that time, that was the ceramic revolution in painting-I mean, in plastic sculpture, right? And so I went to Otis for the next three summers, on Saturdays and after school. So I saw the master shows of Henry Takamoto and John Mason and Kenneth Price, people like that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So you were steeped in this. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, I was very much. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . high art culture from early on.

FRANK ROMERO: And, for some reason, Sam Maloof gave a lecture on working in wood. He's a friend of the family's now, and I know him very, very well. This is what? What are we, forty-five years later? Forty years later? But he was just starting out in the world then. It's very interesting, the people I met and saw at Otis in those periods. And it really was over a three-year period. During my high school years I was going to Otis also. And I did it sort of secretly and surreptitiously and sometimes paid for it. Sometimes I was just allowed to come into classes. I studied with Herbert Jepson, who's another idol. You know, the art influences on the West coast were people like Rico Le Brun and Jepson and Joe Mugnani, who were much involved in drawing and a humanist sort of a tradition, which is a West coast tradition. And really by the time I was sort of done with high school-and I did take all the art classes, basically, one art class a semester. We only had two or two and half art teachers at Roosevelt. I went to Roosevelt High in East L.A. Very interesting. I was sort of done with university on one very real level by the time I graduated from high school.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, that's amazing.

FRANK ROMERO: And, just to go back a little, going to Roosevelt and Stevenson in Boyle Heights and East L.A. it's very much of a polyglot culture then, which is what L.A. has become, which is very interesting. So what I experienced in the fifties is what L.A. is now doing in the nineties, so I'm very comfortable with this kind of society. I don't like homogenous societies, as a matter of fact.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: I live downtown for a very real reason, so I can go have Japanese food or Chinese food or Mexican food every other day. I like that. I enjoy that. My first encounters with prejudice were not so much the fact that, oh, maybe a high school counselor expected me to go into shop rather than an academic major just because I had a name like Romero. But the truth is that all the kids of Sansei, Nisei-Japanese descent-who I grew up with were born in camps during the war.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: That was fascinating to me, and it was just like a little conversation I had with Diane Morishida and a couple of other people one time at lunch about the fact that they had perfect teeth, but they had brown spots on them. I said, "How come you guys have perfect teeth? You know, what is it about Japanese kids that. . . ?" She said, "Well, we were actually born in a camp in Arizona that had fluoride in the water." They had figured that out, which made their teeth-you know, brown specked-but also strengthened them.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Really strong, right.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, so it's fascinating. And that's the first time I learned about the kind of things that our society does to people. Even President Roosevelt. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. So, maybe we can back up a second and you can tell me about your parents, a little bit.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were they born in L.A.?

FRANK ROMERO: They both grew up in L.A. My dad was actually born in New Mexico. I'm not quite sure. . . . The

legends as to how he got here are very strange, but obviously there was a kind of breakup of the family; he ended up in L.A. My mother was born here, so I'm second generation. Her father is from Texas. The legend there-that's the Jurado side of the family-is that my grandfather ran off with this young sweetheart who was only fourteen, and even in Texas, which is a very liberal place in a sense, that was too young. So he stole her and they eloped and ran off to Arizona to get married, and ended up in California. They ended up with fourteen children, so my mother's one of fourteen. And my father, although he has siblings in New Mexico-two brothers-was a sort of a single kid growing up in L.A.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And their names, just for the record. Mother and father?

FRANK ROMERO: Delia. Her name was Jurado-Delia Jurado-from that side. And my father is Eduardo-Edward-Romero. Also because of . . . we don't know exactly. . . . At one time, I noticed that his . . . I found a birth certificate and he was named, at one time, Martinez. So that just very interesting, because I've done a lot of research on New Mexican traditions and genealogy, and Martinez and Luján and Romero and Mondragon and Archuleta-most people that you meet with these surnames have come from New Mexico.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Montoya is another one.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. I have family in Santa Fe that we know go back at least five generations in Agua Fria, in one little village right outside. . . . Well, it's actually part of Santa Fe now, but right outside the center of town, in Agua Fria. So that's a very interesting side. I spend my summers in New Mexico, so I learned a lot. But they basically grew up in Boyle Heights, and the truth is they were both bilingual, and I'm saying that because of my mother's very large family. She always spoke to two of her sisters every day for an hour on the phone, and it was always done in caló, in sort of a mixture of Spanish and English, which I can't do anymore. I don't know if I ever could. We grew up speaking English, period. And I do speak a very rudimentary Spanish, and it's something I learned when I was very, very young from my grandmother, who didn't really speak English. So two generations back everyone spoke Spanish. My grandfather spoke Spanish.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was that a conscious decision on your parents' part. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: No, it was just. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . not to teach you Spanish? Or it just kind of happened by being here?

FRANK ROMERO: They spoke English, actually. Rather than this being a trauma. . . . Everyone always talks about these things as being traumatic. I come from an English-speaking tradition. And I don't know, that's maybe indicative of a lot of middle class Latinos . . . Chicanos. [laughs] You have to go [through] the litany. But a number of people. . . . Because the truth is I don't know of anyone that, you know, immigrated across the border. They've always been here. Gilbert Luján was saying the same thing. He traces his family on this side of the border to the sixteenth century, and I think I could, too.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

FRANK ROMERO: In that, New Mexico was only part of Mexico for about thirty four years, and it's been part of the United States for a hundred now, and part of Spain for two hundred before that. So it is a different tradition. The Hispanos in Nuevo Mexico are different . . . the Norteños are different than people that grew up in Oaxaca, or something like that. We have a common language and traditions and foods with local variations-which are fascinating. I grew up, which is unusual for California, eating sopapillas. But, you know, my mother made tortillas every day-but they were flour, which is a Texas tradition. Those are the kind of things that I find interesting-you know, that, yeah, she made tortillas till the sixties when everyone stopped. [laughter] You know, they discovered you can buy them in the store. But she made tortillas when we were young, but they were flour.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What about brothers and sisters?

FRANK ROMERO: I have two brothers. That's it. My mother was sort of very much involved in community affairs, and she was a caterer, so she was very much involved, and she very much believed in planned parenthood and went around talking to women about not having so many babies.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So you had two brothers. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: I think we have to go move our cars. Let's stop for one minute.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, let's hold on there.

[Interruption in taping]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, we're back with Frank Romero, and this is an interview for Archives of American Art.

Okay, we were still on some of the family. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, you asked me. . . . So, anyway, I'm the oldest of three brothers, and we're all about a year apart. And even though it's traditional in Chicano families to . . . you're always told when you're young how poor you are. But I never remember being hungry. [laughs]

MARGARET GARCIA: And you didn't look it, either.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. And I never remember being without anything I wanted, because we were all spoiled rotten, to some extent-or to a great extent. Maybe our needs are not the needs of a typical westside kid at that time. In those days you didn't have thirty dollar haircuts and cellular phones and all that stuff. But whatever the equipment was. . . . I think just growing up in that environment, maybe you didn't even know you needed more. Nevertheless, the Moores [a neighboring family?-Ed.] had a three-inch TV set a few years before but we were the first one with a big screen-Admiral, ten inch. So that's sort of one of my childhood memories is having everyone in the neighborhood over to watch TV in like probably 1951. I have the Admiral here. I actually have that TV set.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow. What were you guys watching?

FRANK ROMERO: Oh, I mean, that goes on, but. . . . Oh, when I was very young, actually, I think that's very important that we sort of grew up in the rehash of, you know, not so much in a sense a movie culture, but an old movie culture, because the only really viable TV station in the very early days was Channel 5, which was local, and I don't know if it was owned by Gene Autry then. . . . I believe it was. I'll have to. . . . It doesn't matter. The idea being, though, that what they showed were old Republic westerns. Which was a very moral, upright kind of story they told-of good triumphs over evil and all of that. And Tim McCoy, Buffalo. . . . What was his name? There was a cowboy on TV. Buffalo Bill?

MARGARET GARCIA: Oh, Buffalo Bill Cody.

FRANK ROMERO: Buffalo Bill Cody? No, no. Yeah, that was one. But Tim McCoy. . . . But "Cowboy Bob" or "Cowboy Slim"? Very early. Time for Beanie, "Cecil the Seasick Sea Serpent."

MARGARET GARCIA: Howdy Doody.

FRANK ROMERO: Stan Frieberg. Howdy Doody. But that was actually the network. That was a little later. That was network TV on Channel 4. But the ones on Channel 5 were Space Patrol, a precursor of . . . a little set there, with rocket ships and something that we didn't have in those days but they were in the model-freeways. Very much the future of California, you know, in those early, early shows.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So you saw the future sort of come to life.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, in a sense, yeah. But it's so interesting that all those movies that made such an impression on me as a young man were movies that were actually made in the thirties in Hollywood. So it's interesting that we grew up in the fifties watching cowboy movies from the thirties, because were rehashed. That was the first recycling of a culture, I think, in our society. Because that's what TV does, in a sense-or did, you know?

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did they influence you?

FRANK ROMERO: Oh, I've always been a straight-shooter, right? [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Ohh.

FRANK ROMERO: But Margaret García, who's with us at the moment, grew up ten years later and she's always very upset with the fact that I like to listen to Tex Ritter recordings and Roy Rogers and Gene Autry.

MARGARET GARCIA: Same neighborhood, ten years later.

FRANK ROMERO: Ten years later. [laughs]

MARGARET GARCIA: Same art teachers. We both took violin. We were both in a Jewish neighborhood.

FRANK ROMERO: Music Settlement.

MARGARET GARCIA: Neighborhood Music Settlement. And both went to the same stuff but he had. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: So you played violin, huh?

FRANK ROMERO: Oh, six months probably. I never practiced.

JEFFREY RANGEL: In conjunto style?

MARGARET GARCIA: No.

FRANK ROMERO: Never practiced.

Session 1, Tape 1, Side B

FRANK ROMERO: . . . Street, actually but. . . .

MARGARET GARCIA: Near Jackson. Right near the Bad Boys [Inn].

FRANK ROMERO: Euclid. Well, Jackson is actually next to Roosevelt.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, we're back with Frank Romero on January 17, at the artist's studio. This is Jeff Rangel and we're doing an interview for the Archives of American Art. And we're joined by Margaret Garcia.

MARGARET GARCIA: Um hmm.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay. I'm curious, though-back to the westerns. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I remember it just. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . how that imagery, maybe, or the culture of that experience?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. Well, the imagery. It was very much. . . . And, actually, Los Angeles, which was much more different. It was actually much more of a, still. . . . Especially when you start to get outside of the city limits and East L.A. was right on the fringe. Everything beyond us-Gilbert Luján lived a little further out for his high school years-and there was all farms and cows. And Sears Roebuck, which. . . . The main store was actually in East L.A. It was on the corner of Soto and Olympic. And down in the basement, which was-I would imagine five thousand square feet-all devoted to tack, saddle tack, and stuff like that. It was a wonderland to go in there in those days to the old Sears and look at all the cowboy stuff. There was a boot store on Main Street at about Third and Main, where my grandfather took me-my godfather, actually-took me to buy a pair of boots and they cost thirty dollars. I mean, that was quite a bit of money, and they were beautiful. But it was just part of western culture and cowboy regalia and stuff like that, which is very much part of the culture still. People still had horses-not that I saw them, but that was my imagination. And you could buy all that stuff. And we're not talking about going to Nudie's in Hollywood, I'm just talking about going down to Main Street and buying a pair of boots. You know, people wore them.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Was there a sense that it was more of a U.S. western style, or was there a bit of the sort of Spanish Californio thing.

FRANK ROMERO: No, that was cowboy stuff. I mean, we're talking about as very young children we all wore. . . . My name is Romero, and my brother's Richard, so he could actually wear Roy Rogers regalia and have his initials on it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

FRANK ROMERO: And I was very upset because mine were FRANK ROMERO. [everybody laughs] But yeah, we all wore cowboy clothes. I remember for Christmas my mother made us these beautiful wool cowboy shirts. They were light blue with purple piping, and they were all embroidered with flowers and stuff and I think she actually had those made up for us.

MARGARET GARCIA: Did you see the Cisco Kid . . . was it the Cisco Kid back then?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, with Duncan Rinaldo. That was late fifties.

MARGARET GARCIA: That was late fifties?

FRANK ROMERO: Probably.

MARGARET GARCIA: But you didn't identify with any of, like, Mexican stuff at all? Like Zorro or anything like that? For you it was all [American] cowboy.

FRANK ROMERO: Zorro was always sort of a Californio. I had one side of my family who lived in Ventura who were Alcala, and who were basically Californios, although now I'm finding out that even their grandfather came

from Texas, so it's always mixed up. It's amazing how many people came from Texas. I think a lot of California was populated by groups coming during the Great Depression, who all came here during the Great Depression or during the war looking for work in the air industries. And a lot of our . . . this is exactly part of our history, you know. Otherwise I would have been born in Santa Fe.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Talking about Los Angeles being more rural than it is obviously now, one of the things that I want to come back to is maybe the way that that figures in your landscape painting now or the images that you sort of put out there of the city.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, it's interesting that you mention that. We'll get back to this, but I always do a lot of paintings looking towards downtown, but I take out all the new buildings; I never put them in. And now I'm starting to do paintings that look east from my house. And I face downtown Los Angeles, and I'm starting to put in some of the more significant new buildings. But I also remember all the buildings they tore down, because I go back fifty years. And I remember the beautiful showboat, Victorian gothic houses on Sunset Boulevard.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: My friend Virgil [_____-Ed.]-you know, they were still around in the late fifties, early sixties-photographed them all. So a sense of history. I used to work in downtown for the County of Los Angeles, and Bunker Hill was still intact. All the old Victorian houses were there, and I watched them being torn down and removed. I have some of the old doors from some of those buildings still in my possession. But so the sense of history-everyone says it's my sign-but I'm very much involved in trying to preserve the past. And I live in a Victorian neighborhood.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What do you mean, it's your sign?

FRANK ROMERO: I'm a Cancer. [everyone laughs] I'm a Cancer.

MARGARET GARCIA: You remember when they had a law against building any higher than the city hall?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, thirteen stories.

MARGARET GARCIA: Yeah, you couldn't build higher than that so the landscape. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Was flat.

MARGARET GARCIA: . . . except for City Hall was flat.

FRANK ROMERO: It was flat. It was kind of wonderful. You could see the mountains because there was nothing impeding your. . . . [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: The smog wasn't there. It was probably clearer then, right?

FRANK ROMERO: Anyway, maybe that's enough about my cowboy past. I will mention though, seriously. . . . Are we on? [referring to the tape recorder-Ed.]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: It stopped there. Yeah. And the movie culture. I went to the movies on Main Street . . . I mean, on Broadway in downtown, which was the old Los Angeles and the Warner's and the Orpheum. I knew about the Million Dollar and the State. But they were just beautiful movie palaces. And that's what I thought going to movies was about. There was a little show. . . . I think it was called. . . . There was a little Mexican, Spanish-language show on. . . .

MARGARET GARCIA: On Soto and Whittier.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . Whittier Boulevard, yeah.

MARGARET GARCIA: On Soto and Whittier. El Rey.

FRANK ROMERO: The El Rey. I saw South of the Border, which was a Disney cartoon, in Spanish there. But the truth is there was a cowboy theater on Whittier Boulevard in East L.A. that only showed westerns, and just recently I realized that I saw a double bill there called River of No Return, and I fell in love with that woman-I didn't realize it was Marilyn Monroe, because I was so young-and with the real famous Red River. And it was a movie theater that had all the marquee and all the signs, like that said popcorn, were done in coiled ropes. They only showed western movies. And that was on Whittier Boulevard. So westerns were very much part of the culture, I think, in the late forties and early fifties. It all changed. By the time I went to junior high we weren't

talking about rock and roll so much as something called rhythm and blues. And even earlier than that, something called race records. And the Chicano culture. . . . I always have to talk to Sancho. Sancho . . . what's his last name?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I don't know his last name, I just know him by Sancho, The Sancho Show.

FRANK ROMERO: Sancho, right. The Sancho Show. Because he plays all this stuff he calls Chicano music, and I say, "Sancho, none of that happened." Chicano culture . . . Chicano music when I was a kid was black music, and we were into rhythm and blues and all of those people. The ones that are still around are Ike and Tina Turner. They were around then, you know, and all that kind of stuff. But some of the records-"Sh-boom," which was like the first really rock. . . .

MARGARET GARCIA: How about Lalo?

FRANK ROMERO: Lalo. . . .

MARGARET GARCIA: Lalo was always [there].

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, but Lalo Guerrero-and it's a name I knew, it's true, but not really-but he was actually the forties-thirties and forties.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So would you go see these people perform?

FRANK ROMERO: No, I wasn't interested.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It must have been on the radio.

FRANK ROMERO: Not so much that I wasn't interested; I didn't know. See, a very quiet, naive East L.A. kid, but I didn't know you went to concerts. I'm just saying, this is what my cousin Arlene [Jurado?-Ed.]. . . . There's a whole part of the story I forgot. The Jurado side of my family, there are 165 first cousins, and they all grew up within five miles of each other in Boyle Heights. So a very, very close extended family.

JEFFREY RANGEL: 165 of them!?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, because my cousin Laura [Alcala-Ed.] had ten, and my cousin Annie [Duran-Ed.] had ten-and that's Alcala and Duran-and just right there-those are my closest cousins-and that's ten and ten and three, so that's like twenty-three of us right there-that saw each other all the time. And that's a very interesting aspect of my family; it's very, very close because there were so many of us and we have so many common experiences. We all had Thanksgiving at . . . the grandfather's house was the meeting house.

MARGARET GARCIA: Where was that?

FRANK ROMERO: He was on State right behind [Petroly's] ballroom, which is now [El Leon de Oro]. But it was Pentrolly's, which is a very, very famous dance hall-basically during the war in the thirties and forties. Part of that liking history is I've done a painting called The Ghost of Evergreen Cemetery, and it's really about my father being chased by a ghost. It's an eyewitness account. He said that he was standing in the old streetcar platform, which used to be in the middle of the street. He'd wait for a streetcar in this little zone and hope that no one hits you. But he was standing there one evening and this ghost . . . this mist rises off the old Evergreen Cemetery. A ghost came towards him and was just about to grab him when the streetcar came along and he ran in and was saved. I mean, this was my father telling this story, and I was so impressed with it I did a painting about it. Which is interesting is that later I keep finding these stories in written anthologies by other people, and I'm very much interested in the idea of urban myths. And this story I just told you I related to a group just last year down in South Central and this woman, Senora Lechuga, says, "I know exactly what you mean!" And [he, she] said, "Well, what do you mean by that?" and she said, "Well, my brother was down at Petroly's ballroom during the war. There was this beautiful woman that everybody was fighting, lining up to dance with, and I got to dance with her one time. But I could never get to her again. But I fell in love with her and I felt, you know, the brother had to marry her. But she said this other guy took her home. And she was freezing or something, and he lent her a coat and dropped her off right there on Evergreen at the corner house. And this man goes back the next day and goes up to the woman and knocks at the door and says, "I need to talk to your daughter. I'm in love in with her and I need to marry her. She was the most beautiful woman that anyone had ever seen, and when everyone danced with her she almost floated on the dance floor." And the woman, the mother, said, "No, no, there's no way." She says, "My daughter's been dead for a year." And he says, "No, it's your other daughter." She says, "No, no, I don't have another daughter." And he says, "No, well, there's some mistake." [She] said, "I'll show you." And so, because they lived on Evergreen, and she walked across the street to the cemetery, and they found her grave and there was his coat on the grave. [group makes sounds indicating creepiness-Ed.] And this is Mrs. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: There are a lot of these Evergreen Cemetery stories.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. This is Mrs. Lechuga saying that this was her brother who had this experience, and yet you will find that story in an anthology. And I haven't done "The Ghost of Petrolly's Barroom" yet, but that's one of my next . . . one of my paintings I will do this year. I'm very fascinated with these stories that come out of the barrio experience. And, again, my grandfather lived right behind Petrolly's ballroom, and we would meet there for Thanksgiving. He was born on the Fourth of July, my grandfather, so it was sort of like. . . . His name is Joseph [Romero-Ed.], and somehow St. Joseph's feast day is around that time, so that was another big time we all met. We all met at Christmas to exchange gifts. There was no way that 165 cousins could exchange gifts, so we drew, a hat. . . . You would just draw one family and buy presents for that one family. For Thanksgiving we started at one o'clock. There were usually around three or four turkeys and two hams, and I have this memory-I can't believe it's true-that my mother one year made a hundred pumpkin and apple pies. And that wasn't all the people that were making food.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You must have had to eat in shifts or something like that.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. We started at one o'clock and ate about fifteen per table all day long. And it was wonderful, because it was an old wonderful, a duplex, Victorian house, and the kids running in and out of the front porch all day long. My memory is every year somehow I just couldn't wait, so I was always out on the porch eating a drumstick. [laughs] Or all the pies.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you still have a lot of family around here now?

FRANK ROMERO: Lot of family. You know, they've dispersed all over the world. Everyone became middle class. We all grew up in Boyle Heights, and they all lived. . . . They didn't move to the Westside, they moved to Diamond Bar-my brother lives in Diamond Bar-San Gabriel, and now they're all the way up to Moro Valley. . . . Moreno Valley, yeah. [laughs]

MARGARET GARCIA: Your other brother lives in Silver Lake.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

MARGARET GARCIA: So that balances it out.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, that's one brother. I'm just saying. . . .

MARGARET GARCIA: You only have two. [laughs]

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, but I'm just saying. . . . Yeah, but I'm talking about an enormous family.

JEFFREY RANGEL: 165 cousins.

FRANK ROMERO: And they've all moved east.

MARGARET GARCIA: They moved east.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. And I imagine there's got to be some great family stories-from having so many people around, I mean.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, I'm fascinated with that idea. I keep doing. . . . I've got a little teeny tape recorder but I'm actually going to go and. . . . I like these, especially the urban myths. I want to hear about the family ghosts and the family. . . .

MARGARET GARCIA: I don't see how your family and my family didn't cross somewhere because my great-grandmother had twenty-four, children and they all lived in East L.A. so. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I'm sure they. . . . I don't know, you have to ask about all the Alcalas, the Durans. . . . In fact, the Alcalas lived right near you. They lived on Savannah between Fourth and [Lanfranco]. I lived on Lanfranco all my life and we actually moved once from Lanfranco to Lanfranco. And the house that I know. . . .

MARGARET GARCIA: Flores. Were there any Flores there?

FRANK ROMERO: No. But, anyway, I actually grew up in the White Fence territory. . . .

MARGARET GARCIA: Yeah, so did I.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . which was the gang area. Gangs weren't what they are today. It was just sort of a myth

more than anything else. My parents wouldn't let me run with those kind of people. [laughs]

MARGARET GARCIA: Neither would mine.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And so it was never an issue.

FRANK ROMERO: It was never an issue. It was never an issue.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And you never got any hassle for them or from them or anything?

FRANK ROMERO: The horror stories in those days and like the places you avoid, and I think maybe there's an element of roughness to the culture. But in the fifties that wasn't the problem because you avoided those situations. I didn't want to get killed or die an early death. And I think what you did in those days to get in trouble is you went to. . . . Lourdes Cathedral was notorious for fights-knife fights-on Saturday nights. I never went to a dance at Lourdes.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You just knew not go there, huh?

FRANK ROMERO: I just never went to a dance at Lourdes. Maybe I was lucky in the sense that. . . .

MARGARET GARCIA: You were a strange kid, weren't you?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. No, after going to Otis as a freshman just before I started high school, I really didn't. . . . And I actually sort of had a kind of a very regular junior high school existence. But after high school I was interested in art and no one else was.

MARGARET GARCIA: But weren't you kind of like a very different . . . kind of an oddball in school?

FRANK ROMERO: Oh, well, I was smart. And actually there wasn't much room for smart people.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So what kind of stuff did you do in high school? Were you going out for clubs and sports.

FRANK ROMERO: I also went out for athletics, so the truth is that took care of all my free time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: Because you worked out from, oh, three to five every day, and then went home. You were exhausted. So maybe that kept me out of trouble. I didn't have a car. We weren't wealthy. I didn't have a car till I went to university. And I was interested in art and nobody else was.

MARGARET GARCIA: Well, you might say you were kind of odd. I didn't mean. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. I didn't hang out with the guys.

MARGARET GARCIA: In the sense that you [end up] being different from everybody else. You didn't always feel like you fit in, so you were kind of a loner.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, I was very comfortable being alone.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What kind of art were you doing then, in the high school years? What really had your attention?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, as I say, I was actually working with the model and doing oil paintings at Otis-you know, very much involved in a. . . . Well, you know Otis was actually a. . . . You started on your. . . . In real life there, you started in your third year of university and went for four years. So it was like, you had to go to college. . . . You had to go to college for two years and Otis for four years, so it's a six-year Master's program. And just the fact that I spent so much time there over a three-year period, I was, as I say, done, really, with my art education by the time I started college. But nevertheless I went to college.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Where did you go to school?

FRANK ROMERO: Cal State L.A. I was a member of the first freshman class, which was the class of '63. So it was a brand-new university. It had just opened up, and they really didn't even have an art building, but they took a classroom building and converted it to an art building, which was sort of makeshift. I only mention this because this is sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety-thirty-five years later they still have the same building. [laughs] And actually even less of an art program today than they had then.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is that right?

FRANK ROMERO: The County of L.A. has some kind of deal with the university, and they use it as the high school for the arts now. Which is very interesting because my daughter goes to the High School of the Arts, and she's. . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow. Yeah, I saw that. Got the big Luckman complex over there now.

FRANK ROMERO: Luckman [Art Center-Ed.] is new and quite different because it's actually a performing and gallery. In fact, I'm negotiating a show there for next year.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, great.

FRANK ROMERO: And just because I want to. It's where I started off. I actually met Almaraz-Carlos Almaraz-as a freshman. We were both eighteen.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So you were both part of the first freshman class there?

FRANK ROMERO: Um hmm. That's where I met Carlos. So our friendship goes back over thirty years. And we met there. He was from Garfield, I'm from Roosevelt, so we were rivals. And a few other people-Verna Hall from Roosevelt. I used to drive her to school, or vice versa. By that time I finally got a car. Because even then the only way you could get to Cal State was to drive there. It's always been a commuter campus. But it was interesting because we were the first freshman class, and so for me. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Half of Los Four was there.

FRANK ROMERO: Half of Los Four was there. And this is basically how it happened. He was a very good talker. He was very charming. People loved to hear him talk because he told wonderful stories, Carlos did. And I was very much the arrogant bastard I've become today already, but I had gone to Otis, you know, so I was very impressive to people like Carlos, who had not.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Who ended up going there eventually.

FRANK ROMERO: At that time, he kept saying he wanted to go work for Walt Disney. And I said, "No, you want to be a painter." And basically I told him he wanted to be a painter, and he accepted that, and from those little germs a relationship ensued that went on for thirty years. Carlos and I are basically a school. I think he and I exchanged ideas so frequently that. . . . And people can't distinguish us sometimes. Because we dealt a lot with ideas that grew out of our discussions over our sense of identity.

MARGARET GARCIA: Didn't you like to argue a lot about politics in terms of. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: No. I was not at all interested in politics.

MARGARET GARCIA: Yeah, but he was. He was really into it at the time, wasn't he?

JEFFREY RANGEL?: In '63?

MARGARET GARCIA: Or did that come after [the other]?

FRANK ROMERO: No. Not in '63. No, he was very much interested in art in those days.

MARGARET GARCIA: [Nothing] after Gilbert.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What kind of conversations around art would you be having at that time?

FRANK ROMERO: He was very much involved in reading. And, of course, in those days one read French poets and. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Kind of avant-garde, beat?

FRANK ROMERO: . . . Colette and. . . . Yeah, John Rechy. Carlos read everything. He was very much read, and the truth is, not that I. . . . People like that for me are very interesting. I've always had friends like Carlos, but the idea that. . . . You know, he would discuss what was current in literature and arts and I would read it because he thought it was interesting, and we would discuss it. But not that I went out and got it. He got it and I read it. And, oh, he heard this one girl. He thought it was a very interesting voice, and we went out to Claremont to hear this woman sing. Her name was Joan Baez. She was twenty-one years old. And I wasn't very impressed with her. But, like, a year or two later we were all playing her records. Because Carlos' dad was kind of an erudite. . . . He was a laborer, but he was a very interesting man, very much involved in film culture, and I think that was imparted to Carlos with his conversations with his father. I think they were very interesting. And that's the kind of

conversations we. . . . He really taught me a lot about film culture, just in our discussions. And his best friend up to that point had been. . . . He grew up with Danny Guerrero, which is Lalo's son. And so there were the three of us who. . . . I was very sophisticated when it came to being an artist, but I had never been across the L.A. River. [laughs] So the first time I went to Hollywood I was like twenty or twenty-one. Twenty. Twenty. Nineteen! And I went with Carlos and Danny. And they kept saying, "Did you see that one!?" and I said, "What the hell are they . . . see what?" And they were talking about homosexuals on the street, because they were very sophisticated and they could tell. [laughs] I couldn't. A year later I could. I said, "Oh, did you see that one?" you know. I mean, life changed. But I never had been out of East L.A.-I mean, other than to go to Otis. I went to Otis on the RICHARD _____-car, which was on Whittier Boulevard, which became Seventh Street, so it cost ten cents to go to Otis in those days.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And so he was really impressed by the fact that you had gone there and had training?

FRANK ROMERO: That I was a painter and I was doing paintings and I was actually doing very much heavy Christ, very much influenced by Rico Le Brun at that time in my life. And drawing. I was very much in. . . . In fact, a lot of my paintings were in browns and sepias and stuff like that, which is interesting because I'm known as a colorist.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: But my background is really heavily steeped in the California humanist tradition of those kind of drawings.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And that's something that you picked up from Otis?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. It's my education at Otis, very much so. And I mean it's true, Carlos eventually went to Otis and it's because I told him to. At some point he said, "What should I do?" and I said, "You should go back and get your degree." But I didn't want to. Because I had really done that. Later on. . . . We shared many studios and houses together over the years. I think. . . . He went off to New York after three or four years of university.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was it '65? Maybe around there?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, about . . . exactly. And by that point I had a girl friend that I actually lived with, which was a huge . . . you know, a family split and all that. I think that's why I left home. I was still living at home with my. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: You shouldn't be living with a woman if you weren't married?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. Well, God, that was. . . . I was twenty, I believe, at that point. And she was a very interesting woman. I still know her and her daughter. She was an artist and fascinating.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Where did you guys live?

FRANK ROMERO: She was very much interested in all kinds of stuff, and liberal ideas. Carlos was very much involved in liberal ideas, and we all listened to Pacifica Radio [KPFK-Ed.] in those days. But it's not the Pacifica that it is today. It was actually much more relevant to a lot of things and lots of programs that were of. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: In what respect?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, just like. . . . I mean, it's so interesting that the Republicans won and have destroyed public radio. They've absolutely destroyed it. I'm just sort of like very upset. This year there's just absolutely nothing left on any-any-public radio anywhere in the world, because they've gone over to commercials and it's just awful. But. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: They would be talking about more relevant local issues?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, exactly. And, you know, injustice and. . . . Because we're coming out . . . we're in the sixties and it's before. . . . When did Eisenhower send the troops down to Little [Rock-Ed.]? You know, all that stuff was happening. So it was a heady time. And it's sort of interesting, because lot's of the things that, as a child, you know, "If only the world were this way it would be better," and we started to see changes at least in that direction in those days. I mean, there was hope for the world, I think, and we all had. . . . It's just like, we grew up and we had these ideas and it looked like some of them . . . things would get better in some respects. As I say, my first bout with racism was really learning about the internment of the Japanese, and by the time you're in university you realize that one of the reasons you're at Cal State L.A. is because you're Chicano, you know. And it was a terrible university-or college, in those days. It was just not a first-class education. And it's still

the same way. I mean, those things don't change. I substituted. . . . I taught one year at Cal State L.A., and basically you always tell your students to get out of here and go to a real school and get a real education. [laughs] But education has changed in this country, and I have no idea what to tell people anymore. I don't think you can get a good education anywhere, unless you go to Harvard or Yale. And then we're not talking about art. So. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: And we're talking about a lot of money to get there, to do that kind of stuff.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, it doesn't matter since they all cost that much anyway.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So in '65 when Carlos went to New York, did you ever consider going there?

[End of session one]

JANUARY 24, 1997

Session 2, Tape 1, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is an interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, with Frank Romero, on January 24, 1997 in the artist's studio in Los Angeles, affectionately known as Frogtown, and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. And let's see, last time, like I was saying, we left off . . . you had just finished high school and you were talking about how you started at Cal State L.A. and met Carlos Almaraz and began your relationship with him at that stage. So maybe that would be a good place for us to pick up again.

FRANK ROMERO: Okay, sounds good. Anyway, just in talking to Carlos, who everyone in class-and I don't know which class we're talking about, maybe Mr. Little's design class. . . . It was sort of a young group of kids out of high school [notwithstanding]. But during the conversations in class or outside of class we discussed what we wanted to do when we grew up, and Carlos was mentioning that he. . . . He says, "I don't know. I want to do something in art. I've always been interested in art." He had studied with a teacher at Garfield High named [_____-Ed.] Ramirez, who was an incredible drafting instructor . . . drawing instructor. And I don't know if he's still around or what, but Carlos' figurative drawings that he brought, his portfolio, was incredible. And I said, "You know. . . ." My feelings were, "My god, this guy could go to art school and be a painter." And that's what I said to him, because he thought maybe he would have a career at Walt Disney. When he was a lot younger he did a lot of drawings based on TV visualizations of Walt Disney cartoons. He had a whole series of flowers and dancing elephants, stuff like that that he had done. You know, the beautiful little. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Kind of Fantasia-esque?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, the things. . . . Yeah. I think Fantasia was very much of an influence on his life. It was a very interesting film. I mentioned earlier that his father was very much of a film buff, anyway, so on many levels Fantasia was quite an influence in Carlos's life. Anyway, I sort of felt that, "God, you draw so well. You should consider a career as an artist, instead of just maybe working as a commercial artist as such." I said, "You're too good." And maybe that worked out in some sense. There was a whole period in there. . . . We were getting to know each other. I mentioned that he and his friend, Danny. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Guerrero?

FRANK ROMERO: Guerrero, right. Actually, in those days it was Eddie. [laughs] That was because he took a stage name of Danny, which was very interesting. You know, they actually-the first time-they took me to Hollywood. I'd never even been in Hollywood, just to go see the sights along the Boulevard. We're talking about-where are we?-in 1960-'59, '60. And I think we were both nineteen, and Danny was a year older.

Anyway, he was going to East L.A. College, and Carlos and I were actually the first freshman class of Cal State L.A. We became very close friends because the discussions were very intense. They were about being an artist, what that meant, going to art school, all that. I thought, "Wow!" And so the relationship grew and matured and changed. But I think very quickly, within two years, Carlos decided to go to New York. I had known him at least two or three years, something like that. He was kind of getting bored and restless and all of that and did go to New York. But only for a short while, maybe a year. My chronology is totally screwed up here. Because he came back, and I think at that time I was living with a girl, Diane-the first Diane-Leibovits, in those days, who was also a very interesting artist. But we were together for at least three years, so during that time there was correspondence with New York. There's some of it still in my possession. So maybe Carlos was back there almost two and half years, three years. And he came back about the time that I was breaking up with my girlfriend.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you recall the nature of the correspondence?

FRANK ROMERO: Oh. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Just kind of keeping in touch?

FRANK ROMERO: He wrote letters about New York and the art scene and people he had met and people he wanted me to meet and that I should come out.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you ever have a desire to go out to New York?

FRANK ROMERO: I assumed that I eventually would get there. But at the time I wasn't out there. I would write back very short letters that were essentially what I'm still doing in these notebooks, short lists-or long lists-of just things that I'd done. I did this today, I did this yesterday, intend to do this tomorrow. Some of them do exist. There's one little box left in the world of that correspondence. But he came back to L.A. It wasn't quite the time to spend a lot of time in New York. I think Danny stayed on because he sort of wanted a career in. . . . He was still. . . . It was 1960, and the world was starting to change. He wanted a career in musical comedy, and, of course, at that time in the world musical comedy was coming to an end. But Danny stayed on in New York for. . . . Who knows how long he was there. Fifteen years?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Musical comedy? Like. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. Oklahoma. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oklahoma, okay. So like Broadway and stage show musicals.

FRANK ROMERO: Broadway. Yeah, but the musical comedies were really, except for the big blockbusters that sort of were the end of it all, like The Fantastics. . . . Eddie was always talking about The Fantastics.

RICHARD ____?: Or Chorus Line.

FRANK ROMERO: And for some reason, Carlos was back after that short period of two years, and we took up residence together. That was the first time. That was a little teeny dump on Centuse or off of Centuse. It was actually like Bixel or Eighth Street off Olympic, way down there in that end of the world. And I'm not going to go into all those adventures of that first. . . . You know, that's almost like a sub-category.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What was the nature of those adventures? If you don't want to talk about them [it's okay].

FRANK ROMERO: No, not that I. . . . It's just like where do you start and where do you end? We were there for a period of time-a couple of years, three years. We grew up. . . . I was working still and going to school. I was at school seven years, and I never quite got my degree. I was working for the County of Los Angeles, for the chief administrative office, and I was a student professional in the field of art. At one time I was drafted, so that was, what? Just before Vietnam got real hot and right after Kennedy's assassination. So I was drafted. During the Kennedy administration, I think. Anyway, for some reason-which is a very, very long story-I didn't go.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did you manage to get out of it?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, that was actually a wonderful story. I mean, this should be on tape. This means I can't run for political office. I was drafted but-fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know how you characterize all that-I was in the. . . . It was notorious. You know, not that I especially understood how the world worked. I was a young kid going to school and all that and really kind of naive. But Vietnam was happening, but it wasn't hot yet. So this is under Kennedy. Sort of like no one quite understands. I think I'm the only person that's ever sort of mentioned that Kennedy got us into Vietnam. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: And LBJ had to clean up the mess?

FRANK ROMERO: Not LBJ. Yeah. Well, and he didn't. He made it worse.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right, right.

FRANK ROMERO: And Nixon made it worse. [laughs] But it wasn't serious, and it was just a few people-you know, a few hundred thousand people. And I went to the draft board in downtown Los Angeles that basically served East L.A., and I think that was sort of famous for cannon fodder, because young Chicano kids were drafted there all the time and they were all high school dropouts.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [Drafted and killed-Ed.] disproportionately?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, disproportionate-and incredibly disproportionate. Chicanos and blacks from that station that just went and died in the war. I think later on-this is after my situation, that people from the westside would register at that draft board because they knew they had a better chance of getting out because they had so many people going.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: And so anybody with a student deferment got out there. I wasn't eligible for a student deferment, I think because I was a part time student. But anyway, I was drafted and I had heard the stories. There's a room you go in. I forget, the notorious W-20's-I can't remember that far back-you know, the psychiatric room. You know, how one gets out of the draft and all that. And the truth is, I wasn't trying to get out. I was called and I was willing to serve so, you know, I am a patriotic citizen. This is not because I'm running for president. They had a going-away party for me at the County of L.A., where I worked, and I actually recommended Carlos for my job, and he actually took it at that time. And I went off to war, in a sense. And I was kicked out. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: What happened?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, what happened was very curious. You could say I'm lucky. Or you could say I'm special.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is it something you tried to do?

FRANK ROMERO: Nothing I tried to do at all. I mean, I ended up in that psychiatric room and I saw all these people faking craziness, and I wasn't crazy and I didn't say I was. But what did happen is providence, luck. I had had a little motorcycle accident between my physical and my actual induction, which is about a three-month period. Somebody there said, "If anybody has a medical problem," to raise their hand. And I said my knee was bothering me and I said, "I'd like to have my knee looked at because I was in a motorcycle accident since my physical." And that's the part you don't know. Why did this guy do this to me? He looked at me-and he was a sergeant-in a very curious manner and said to himself, "Why is this guy asking to see a doctor?" So he asked not that-which would make some sense-he asked me what I did for a living, or what I was? And a lightbulb went in my head because I could have said, "I'm a student," or I could have said, "I'm a graphic designer in the field of art," or I could have said, "I'm a photographer." All things which I thought I would do as a military person. I knew that's what I would do, because I had skills.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. You had skills, right.

FRANK ROMERO: But a lightbulb went on my head, "Okay." So I said. . . . What works in the military . . . one thing the military can't deal with is honesty. Which is a very interesting point.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, that is.

FRANK ROMERO: So I didn't lie. I said I was an artist. [laughs] And all kinds of things went on in his head, because he didn't send me to see the doctor, which he should have done, because I asked to see a doctor. He sent me to see a shrink.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's phenomenal.

FRANK ROMERO: So I'm there sitting there with all these guys faking mental illness. A couple of them faked it so well that they actually were nuts. And I was very calm. And I knew where I was because I had heard about room. . . . I think it's room 10. This is all coming back to me. I'm not sure. I said, "This is not a doctor's office; this is a psychiatric office." But I sat there about 45 minutes because the shrink was late, and when he got there he was in a very foul mood. Which is, again, you know, my luck? I don't know. Because I sat down with him and he started attacking me. He didn't say, "How are you, kid? Why are you here? Do you think you have any psychiatric problems?" No, he attacked me. He said. . . . (You know, I am a genius, so I have total recall. So you have to excuse me.) "Have you ever dated girls?" But in a very hostile manner, very angry. "You ever date girls?" I said, "Well, that's a good question." And the truth is, again, truth being what it is, people can't deal with the truth. I had never dated girls. I met one girl and lived with her for three years. [laughs] So I said, "No. I lived with a girl for a three years, and it was the first girl I ever met. [laughs] And he wrote down, "Never dated girls. First girl I ever met."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Artist, never dated girls. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Artist, never dated girls. Okay. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's two strikes.

FRANK ROMERO: "Are you queer?" I said, "No, I'm not. But my best friend is." "Knows homosexuals." Wrote it down. "Have you ever broken anything in anger?" And I said, "Well, I just broke up with my girlfriend and I broke every dish in the house." "Shows violent disposition, has broken all these dishes." Now this is what this guy's writing, and these are the questions he's asking me. He says, "Do you think you would do well in the military?" I said, "Well, I always do well. Wherever I am I get along with people. And I have a good IQ. I have seven years of

college." He writes, "Arrogant." "What do you think of the. . . ." He says, "Well, you took the military test and it doesn't show that you'll do well." I said, "In what way? I've taken Psychology 1 and everyone knows that the military psychiatric test that you give people is basically of no value and shows nothing." He says, "Are you questioning me as an authority?" I said, "Well, if you think that you know more about me than I do, I guess I am."

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

FRANK ROMERO: He wrote down, "Questions authority figures."

JEFFREY RANGEL: God! This guy was doing you a big favor.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. I said, "No, I've gone to college. Everyone knows about that military test. It's totally worthless. I mean, this is what I was told." "Questions authority." And then he threw me out. So I sat. . . . Oh, he gave me my file, and threw me out. So basically I had all these strikes against me-basically that I question authority. And he really took it per[sonally]. He said, "Are you saying that I'm incompetent?" I said, "Well, if you're telling me you know something about me that I don't. . . . I know my IQ, I know my education," I said, "I'm going to do well in the military. I don't have problems with people." And he was just writing down this shit. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: God, I wonder what he wanted to hear.

FRANK ROMERO: So I didn't. . . . Absolutely honest answers. And I sat down and read it, and this is why I know what he put down. I just read everything he said. And then there was a series of steps, but basically I walk and give it somebody, they give it to another guy, and there's a little desk sergeant-who was really five feet tall, which is sad, smoking the biggest cigar you ever saw. You know, obviously a kind of phallic-you know, kind of inadequate thing-because he just had a real ball saying, "You've been found. . . ." I'm five nine and this guy's five feet tall. He says, "You've been found unfit for military service. Get out." [laughs] He was screaming at me. I almost punched him because he was such a. . . . But then you almost punch him, but you look at this little guy and you start laughing. So I left. And I was out. And I didn't understand why I was out. I mean, that whole thing took four hours. I was in the military four hours. And honestly I still think the first guy that sent me to see the shrink somehow didn't even take offense that I'd asked to see a doctor but just said, "I'm going to let this guy out." I don't know what happened to me. I mean, really, the whole thing is Kafka-esque.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: You know, it doesn't make any sense. What makes sense is that Vietnam wasn't hot yet and they had so many other people that I was never recalled. Because six months later Johnson was in and I'd read that they were going to recall everyone. And I wasn't 4-F or anything, by the way. I was 1-Y, which meant I could be recalled at any time. During a real emergency, right? I was just let go for a while. But I think because I was in East L.A., at that district, I just was never recalled.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were you disappointed that you weren't able to serve?

FRANK ROMERO: [laughs uproariously]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you consider that a mixed blessing?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I was hysterically happy about an hour later. I walked home. I didn't have any money. You don't go. . . . I think you go in without money or something. I walked home and didn't have a key because I had said goodbye, left the keys. I climbed back in the house and started calling everyone I know. I said, "I'm not in. Yahoo." I mean, I didn't lie, I didn't steal, I didn't run away to Canada-any of those things that you had to do and all of my friends did. I didn't do any of that. Well, I was just lucky.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So there were a lot of people trying to get out of the draft?

FRANK ROMERO: Not then. But a year later, yes.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: Or two years later. Because it was just, as I said, Kennedy was still around.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Starting to heat up.

FRANK ROMERO: It was actually Johnson that, you know, Gulf of Tonkin, which was under Johnson that it got hot. And my brother, who's a year younger, ended up in [Plukow] [a location in Vietnam-Ed.]. So, again, I was just incredibly lucky. [laughter] And also the military. . . . I mean, I hate to say this: our government is full of fools. I

mean, why else would you wind up the military? [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Why else would there be war?

FRANK ROMERO: Why else would there be war? But it's all those things. We have an American tradition of fuck-ups and everything else, and where do you go, you know? In those days, the judge says, "Either you join the Marines or you spend one year in detention."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. So did you get your job back when you came back?

FRANK ROMERO: No, Carlos had my job and I didn't care, but as it turns out our boss sort of said, "Well, I'll keep you both." But after that, a year or two later, that all changed but, yeah, I got my job back. A couple of guys who were ex-army guys who had really given me a great send-off were kind of sad because they were living vicariously through my military experiences. But they knew exactly what I'd been through. This is a military exercise in absurdity. It was silly. And unbelievable, the chain of events that somehow four hours later I was out.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It really is unbelievable. So at the same time, I guess, the Civil Rights movement is starting to stir about.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, and we lived through that-Carlos and I-because we were working at the same job. . . . I mean, everyone always remembers where you were when Kennedy was shot. And actually, it was sort of interesting because I was working for government, and we'd get these calls from the Board of Supervisors-specifically Kenny Hahn, who had us look up every picture he ever took with President Kennedy on some trips through L.A. where he'd met the Board of Supervisors. And we were busily printing up those kinds of pictures for statements from his center spread.

JEFFREY RANGEL: His releases?

FRANK ROMERO: You know, one always wants to do something and you're apprehensive, you don't know what's happening, and all you get is self-serving politicians writing statements about the fact that they knew Kennedy or they shook his hand. It was pretty disheartening, actually.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I can imagine.

FRANK ROMERO: That's all I could do in terms of government. In other times. . . . The funnest part of that job was actually the time when they, again Hahn, actually a couple of others-not Hahn as much as others on the Board of Supervisors-censored the show at the L.A. County Museum with Backseat Dodge, Edward [Kienholz-Ed.]. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is it Wallace Berman or George Herms?

FRANK ROMERO: No, no. I always, when it comes to names, black out.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I know, you were telling me about it.

FRANK ROMERO: Anyway, Backseat Dodge. It'll come to me in a minute. His wife is. . . . He just died. Redden-Nancy-is his wife. He was buried in his Mercedes. There's a big show, a retrospective, here at MOCA last year, this year. Anyway, it was a big scandal, and I actually have the. . . . Because I worked in the photo department at night. . . . I learned all about photography at that job. I actually worked in photography for almost twenty years. A big headline, "L.A. Art Scandal," or something. I mean, I just loved it, because that's the only time that art made the front page of the L.A. Times is when they censored the Backseat Dodge piece. And, again, working for the L.A. County, the photographic crew that I assisted shot all these pictures of the Dodge and all that stuff so we were always sort of dealing with these very interesting phenomena in the world. But I was sort of from the wrong side. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you have opportunity to express your opinion otherwise, from the other side?

FRANK ROMERO: I was fortunate in that my employer there wanted a full-time kid and I needed to work full-time and yet go to school, so that's why I was at school so many years. At the end of that I finally moved on and actually. . . . But I had a very good education because I was with a well-funded agency. It was part of the chief administrative office, and what we did was sort of the supervisor's supervising. Basically we wrote scrolls for the county and took pictures of the supervisors shaking President Kennedy's hand and all that kind of. . . . So basically a PR arm, and also we did a lot of stuff for brochures, and, oh, like for the [Dobson] Agency. Actually, some things were worthwhile. The county does a lot of human services that are essential. The state gives them that responsibility. The county general hospital and all that stuff. So we did related graphic material for all of these agencies. So, in a sense, other than serving the supervisors, which was self-serving and a waste of taxpayer's money quite frankly, we did a lot of things that were very useful in terms of county services, human

services.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see. The photography and the graphic arts, did you feel like you were developing your skills as well?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, yeah. At the end of that period. . . . And I don't know if I actually had that job. . . . I would say five years. . . . I worked for the L.A. Times cleaning out air-conditioning ducts for a year before that. It was interesting. So I had a good, well-rounded . . . in observing the power structure when I was very young. How it worked, you know. Maybe that changed me in some ways and made me much more aware of various people. After that I actually got a job with Lou Danziger, who was a very well-respected graphic designer in Los Angeles, out of the Bauhaus movement and all of that. And he knew everyone. He couldn't take me; I worked too fast. He was shocked. He gave me a project and he. . . . Because he didn't know what to do with me. He says to me I was sitting around doing nothing all day. And he gave me a project that he knew would keep me busy for at least three or four days doing darkroom work. Because he hired me because I was a designer and a photographer. And getting a job with Lou Danziger was a very prestigious accomplishment. At that time I'm what? I'm twenty-four or so. Anyway. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: So that would be along about what year?

FRANK ROMERO: I'd say we're into. . . . Where are we? Aaah!

JEFFREY RANGEL: Twenty-four, about '65?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. We can check some of this on my resume.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's all right. I just want to get kind of an idea where we're at.

FRANK ROMERO: But anyway, '65, '63, '64. No, actually, so I'm actually only into. . . . Yeah, '63, '64, somewhere in there, '64, '65, yeah. So we're in there. Anyway, he gave me a job to keep me busy, because actually we were doing. . . . It was actually a little earlier, because now I realize we did. . . . Lou Danziger used to do all the publications for the L.A. County Museum of Art, and we did Sculpture of the Sixties. Actually, the truth is, I designed that cover, which was like my first really big exciting job. And Maurice Tuckman was the curator, who I met at that time, and so I was working for Lou in 1960. And that's okay because I only lasted with him for four weeks. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow!

FRANK ROMERO: Because he gave me this job to keep me busy for three days because he didn't know why I was sitting there doing nothing because everything he'd give me I'd finish in an hour. So he gave me a three-day job and went off for a couple of hours, and I finished the whole thing in three hours.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Jeez. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: And he just didn't know what to do with me.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So he let you go?

FRANK ROMERO: No, he sent me over to Charles Eames. It was sort of like to punish me or to reward me. So he called up Charles Eames and said, "You've got to hire this guy. I can't take him." [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Hang on, let me switch the tape side.

Session 2, Tape 1, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, we're back. This is tape one, side B, interview with Frank Romero on January 24th in his studio. And as you said, it was about 1965 when we left off and I was asking you if Carlos, at this time, had made two trips to New York and if this was about the time of his second trip and what you were doing around that time.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, and I said, "Yes, that's absolutely true," because I was thinking these things I mentioned about working for Lou and he sending me to work for Charles Eames, who's the premier designer in the world at that time—even though it was towards the end of his career. But this was like, yeah, we're still in 1960, '61, somewhere in there. Because I was sort of thinking. . . . Carlos and I sort of lived together for maybe a year, year and a half, downtown in a little second-story Victorian building with a little troll that lived in the corner—which is . . . I'll leave it at that—that we only heard through the walls, you know, and we always wondered who was there. But I think he decided that he liked New York and didn't like being in L.A., didn't like driving. He always had a lot of trouble driving, and that sort of manifested itself. . . . I think he had somewhere between seven and twelve

tickets in the year that he was back in L.A., and so he decided rather than pay them he was going back to New York. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's one way to deal with it.

FRANK ROMERO: And by that time we had found a little abandoned warehouse in downtown Los Angeles, and there were four of us that were involved in renting it, because it was enormous to us. It was probably, in real life, only, oh, 1500 square feet, but it was enormous to us. It had a very high ceiling, thirty-foot ceilings. And we rented it, and we all decided we could afford ten dollars a month each, so we rented it for forty dollars. That was on the corner of 11th and [Centuse], which actually was torn down for the convention center. So we were actually one of the very first art studios in downtown Los Angeles. Anyway, instead of moving into that studio from the apartment, Carlos went back to New York. [pauses, thinking] I see where my chronology is off, because I am around. . . . Carlos going back to New York about '61, because the Sculptures of Sixties probably came out in '63 or '64. Or maybe towards the end of the sixties. So my chronology is off here.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's okay.

FRANK ROMERO: I'm going to have to check dates.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, we'll [figure it] out.

FRANK ROMERO: All right, that's not important. The stories are interesting anyway. [laughs] So Carlos wasn't. . . . That was the first time we lived together, and it was a small apartment, and we did painting sessions in that. We had a sort of living room/parlor situation with the kitchen in the back and then a bedroom off to the side and all that. We did a few painting sessions with people like Ben [Abril], who worked with us at the County of Los Angeles, and he's actually rather well known in local circles. He was sort of a [plain air, plenary] painter, and he died recently. And the other guy who eventually became the art director of the graphic arts section was Frank Ackerman, who was also sort of well known in water color circles in California. But we always, Carlos and I. . . . Because they were very conservative artists and they actually saw us as way out and avant garde-even though the truth is, all things considered, we're at least narrative or figurative painters. I think that's sort of the California school we came out of. Anyway, Carlos went back to New York and I stayed on with the County of Los Angeles. I finally went with Lou Danziger and then with Charles Eames. Because the most interesting. . . . You always tried to please Charles Eames-he was always sort of there with sort of a scowl on his face-wondering if you were going to measure up. It was a very curious place to work. In retrospect I can't never make it. . . . It was the most exciting and dynamic place to work in one respect, and in another kind of weird, because, like, he never once took an interest in me as a human being.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What kind of work did he have you doing? What were you doing?

FRANK ROMERO: I basically did some photography. Because he was always into. . . . He thought he was a photographer. He prided himself on his photography. So he liked the fact that I took pictures. But I was basically a graphic designer for Charles Eames. And I really set type. And actually, it turned out. . . . He always had you make things. He was very much of a hands-on kind of institution where you made things with your hands. And it turned out I was very good at that. But those are skills I learned there. You know, you can go to school that prepares you for life in a sense. Then, if you're clever, that might prepare you to work for Charles Eames. It's such a dichotomy there. I was very good at what I did there. And I was hired and worked for many years there on different projects. He never hired you as a full-time employee. He would hire you for projects and when he ran out of money he'd dump you. But then I was persistent and I would call back two or three years later, do another job for him. You know, the people I met there were Rob Staples and Glen Fleck and Debra Sussman-people [I] actually worked for later after Charles Eames died. They all sort of started their own businesses. It's sort of the diaspora of all the ex-Eames employees. Even though I was very late in his career. Charles lived. . . . I think he died about 1970?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm not sure.

FRANK ROMERO: I'm not sure either. And then, I think, his wife in 1980. So it's been a little while. I may be five years off there. But it was the most wonderful place to work-the most fascinating and also the most uptight. There was very much the fact that maybe he had so many corporate clients like IBM, there was sort of an uptightness there that was very strange. Sort of out of place for such a playful place, too, because Charles Eames was a big baby. He collected toys. He had them all over the office. Just bunches of them. And the best toys you ever saw in the world. He had the best collection. I guess, he gave it to Santa Fe. Which is too bad. No one in L.A. took any of the Eames stuff. The only thing, U.C.L.A. owns the house. And the building was sold and it's just part of the Venice culture in these days. It's all gone. But it was an interesting place to work and I spent ten years there, doing various different-you know, at different times.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Coming back?

FRANK ROMERO: Coming back and forth. Maybe, literally, only worked for him maybe three or four years.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So how's your painting developing at this time?

FRANK ROMERO: I'm always painting. I went through this whole situation. I was actually living with another girlfriend-Sally-at that time which maybe lasted three years also. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sally's last name is?

FRANK ROMERO: In those days?

JEFFREY RANGEL: You may not want to go there.

FRANK ROMERO: Oh, no. Sally Parks.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sally Parks.

FRANK ROMERO: She's interesting because. . . . I still know her; I still know all these people. But she was very much interested. . . . Her mother was sort of interested in collecting stuff, so she was a collector of antiques and things like that. And in those days, it was just sort of the beginning of the counterculture and the swap meets. And the swap meets in those days were places where you could go and buy treasures for fifty cents. Literally, everyone at swap meets were people cleaning out their garage. There weren't dealers there like there are now. Now it's institutionalized at the Rose Bowl and things like that. But in those days it was Paramount swap meet, and it was really. . . . It was a quarter or free to get in and you'd literally spend maybe five or ten bucks there and get just fabulous, fabulous stuff. And I didn't know too much about that, but I think Sally sort of introduced me to another aspect of the world in terms of collecting this kind of stuff. And the truth is I had another friend who was a photographer who had gone to work for Charles Eames a couple of years before I did. He [_____-Ed.] was sort of livid when I got a job there, because he never recommended me and I got a job anyway. Of course, I always knew . . . there was a time there, at least five years, where I wanted to meet Charles Eames, and it's so funny that I ended up working there. But Charles, one of the things he did, especially his wife, [Rae, Ray] [Eames?-Ed.], they collected antiques. You learn so much of the world through the things that people make. I mean, that's. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: How so?

FRANK ROMERO: That's what the Smithsonian is all about in a sense. It's full of all the stuff that people made. You know, baskets and, well, you name it. Whirligigs.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So what kind of things were you doing?

FRANK ROMERO: I don't know. It's like, in a sense, I go home at night and I paint, right? You know, like everyone, like young artists do. You work for a living, and I'm working in this very, very interesting career. I'm a graphic designer and I literally spent twenty-five years at it. You know, sort of like you finally come to the point where you know exactly what you give up by working for other people, doing art jobs for other people, which is basically giving up your soul. And not to say that your contributions aren't worthwhile. They're wonderful. But it really is like. . . . You know, when I hit my fortieth birthday and I'm going all the way around, I sort of realized, "Wow! I always meant to paint." And I had been famous by then almost ten years, and I was still working doing graphics or doing design, and it just no longer appealed to me. I stopped. I just stopped doing it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I was going to say, it seems like a pretty common route for artists to go, you know, to have a day job.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, you know, like Andy Warhol. [laughs] That's exactly what he did, but the thing is he took it literally. What he did as a graphic designer became his art. And I always thought that what I did as a graphic designer was boring and that putting paint on canvas was much more exciting. So it's a different route. But I don't know that. . . . My contention is that people who work as graphic designers tend to have sticks up their butt. They're very formal and they're very much afraid of things. And also the truth is I ended up in New York with Carlos years later, and maybe hit bottom in terms of financial considerations, and so I knew what it was like to be totally broke.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were you working in the graphic-design scene, or are you trying to do the painting full time?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, because I had worked for Charles Eames and I had entree, basically, to the top people in New York. I worked for a guy named George Klauber for a while, but I ended up working for Ian Ballantine, which was a publisher, Ballantine Books. And I was there. But I only ended up . . . I was only in New York for about a year. So now we're now way back up, we're up and around. . . . I jumped there, but that's okay because that's sort of like. . . . You know, I had lived with Sally, I had dealt with collecting junk, I decided to go to New York

finally. You know, there was a time there where I was no longer with anyone, and it seemed like a good time. Carlos kept saying, "I want you to meet this girlfriend of mine," and all that kind of stuff. Who I later married. [laughter] So in '69, '68, I went to New York.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: Finally made it to New York. What happened is I probably had finished a job with Charles Eames, which was The History of the Computer for IBM, and I was just in between, and rather than going out and finding a job I went to New York. And that was fun.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What was New York like that year? In terms of the art world?

FRANK ROMERO: The blizzard of '68 or '69. We're still in hard edge. We're still in nonobjective. We're still doctrinaire. What was interesting to me about New York, which. . . . You know, "wild New York, all this stuff going on, the art scene is really happening, Andy Warhol," and you go there, and the truth is everybody's doing the same thing. Because there's no freedom in New York. You do what's fashionable or you're out. And that's a very curious idea for a Californian, who does anything he wants even though he's [not-Ed.] recognized for it. [laughs] You just do it anyway. That's just what you do here. So George Klauber actually was. . . . It turns out the guy I worked for, who was actually an instructor at Pratt and also a graphic designer, but, literally, he was very emotional. I never had worked with anyone like that. Like within five days he kept screaming at me and he pushed all the buttons until I started screaming back and I quit. And then like a month later I went. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: He was just trying to get under your California skin.

FRANK ROMERO: No, no. It's just amazing. And then you know the thing is in the end we became good friends but we couldn't work for one another. [laughs] And as I say, I went on to something else like Ballantine Books. But so there was that curious aspect about New York. I would have met Andy-George would have introduced me-and he got shot. And so I didn't meet Andy and all of that. So I didn't meet Andy, I didn't meet Rauschenberg, I didn't meet anyone. And I sort of got bored with New York. I just said, "I'm not used to. . . . I can't deal without a car!" You know, I can't get in a car and go anywhere. What happened is that in the summer Diane [Romero-Ed.]-this is my second wife-ran away to Paris rather than marry me or something. And then she was toying with the idea of going crazy. And this is all sort of part of. . . . I think so was Carlos at that point. Everyone was toying with that idea, because we had met a fellow who had told them all how you could go to Bellevue in New York for one month and then spend a year in out-patient and the state would pay for it. So there was actually some way to . . . there was actually a physical way to do it. And all my friends, in the end, took advantage of that situation, which I found very curious. So I was always committing them. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: The year that the state would pay for included what? Paid for what? Their living expenses while they were out?

FRANK ROMERO: No, no, they would pay for your medical.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: So the state would literally pay for three months of therapy, so what they literally did was they'd keep you in the hospital for a month and then give you out-patient for a year. So there was a physical way of dealing with psychiatric problems in the world in. . . . We're talking about '68, '69. This is before we stopped cutting out all that shit. Anyway, Carlos and I went to Mexico. I had a car in L.A., so we flew to L.A. and drove all the way down to Mexico City with a friend of his, William Fitch Mann, that was actually a graduate of Columbia University and interesting in another way. But I think Carlos and I both realized at that point for the first time in our lives-I think it was sort of a turning point-in that we weren't Mexican. You know, because everyone called. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yeah, all's you got to do is go down there.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, everyone called you Mexican-American, and so you go down there and they called us gringos, they called us-what's that word?-pochos.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Pochos, yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: I had a mustache or a full beard-I had a mustache at that point-and they always thought that was, you know, "You look like Pancho Villa." Of course, they were all clean-shaven in '68, '69. But we drove into the student demonstrations on the campus of Mexican University, and the day we drove into Mexico City the whole town was deserted. So we're driving down the street empty, and we didn't know what was going on. It was very frightening.

JEFFREY RANGEL: After the disturbances on Tlatelolco?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, I think four students were killed.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: Anyway, that was very interesting just in passing, because, again, sort of like "I'm there and this is a little bit of history."

JEFFREY RANGEL: What was the idea of going down there? You just wanted to see Mexico?

FRANK ROMERO: Never had been there. He was born there. He had never been there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's right.

FRANK ROMERO: He was just literally born there. His father went down-hypocrite that he was-to marry a virgin and left his Jewish girlfriend in Chicago. That's the story, you know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

FRANK ROMERO: So he married the virgin and had a child and simply went back to Chicago. So it's all very sweet that Carlos was born in Mexico City, but totally. . . . It doesn't speak to his true heritage, which was a guy from Chicago. Although his mother was Mexican.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. So how long was the trip in Mexico? What did you guys do down there?

FRANK ROMERO: Four weeks, four weeks.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were you going to museums?

FRANK ROMERO: We drove back. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, you just got down there and headed back up?

FRANK ROMERO: No, we saw everything. We went to the palace. We saw a woman-I mean, I knew of her, but no one knew who she was-named Frieda Kahlo. We saw a lot of her work, and I said, "This woman is a better painter than her husband and will be very well known." And I was right. But in 1968 that wasn't the case. Nobody knew who Frieda Kahlo was-or her work. So now that we're in the cult of Frieda I can't stand her anymore just because she's so famous. But she wasn't then. So that was an education. Oh, to really see the murals of Siquieros and Orozco and Rivera. We saw all. . . . Yeah, of course, that's what we went for. And that's what we saw. And I think that changed our lives-to some extent, maybe-two or three years later when we're doing murals in East L.A.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So it was a conscious act to try and sort of imitate their style and their imagery and stuff?

FRANK ROMERO: Not then. Not then. But we saw it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: But a few years later.

FRANK ROMERO: Oh, yeah, yeah. So anyway we drove back through the Sonora Desert and through the South. And it's so funny because we lost a couple of tires along the way, and we literally had ten dollars to get back to New York. We were somewhere in South Carolina, and I saw a tire store and it was Sunday. And I drove around and there was a whole pile of junk tires just lying outside. And I said, "I know what we're going to do." I went through them and I had a. . . . I had one of the very first. . . . It wasn't Nissan then, it was. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Datsun?

FRANK ROMERO: . . . Datsun station wagons. And I actually found the right size tire, and it looked okay. I looked at it, and I took it a gas station and he put it on a rim for us and it got us home-for free. And so we literally ended up crossing the Brooklyn Bridge-or, whatever, the George Washington Bridge-from Virginia to New York and all that with ten dollars. So, you know, it was four days.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Just made it, huh? [laughs]

FRANK ROMERO: Four days and we made it. When I got back Diane was back from her excursion in Paris and we got together and got married. That was a wild, wild time for all of us. Carlos was. . . . I guess the only. . . . We got married at City Hall. It was like three months later. I don't know, as I say, but in the interim she went crazy and was at Bellevue and then came back and it was really chaotic. It was very tumultuous. Carlos was actually

having a relationship with William Fitch and it was not healthy. He drank-he was Irish and drank-and Carlos started drinking. And so it was a very, very strange time in our lives. And literally we went to City Hall. A friend of ours who was a designer and an artist made the most beautiful quilted wedding certificate, because we didn't know what to do with the piece of paper so she quilted it for us. And Carlos and I were sharing a studio and I don't know why [but-Ed.] William Fitch and Carlos-it's the part of life you don't understand-they were very upset with our wedding. I mean, emotionally, it was draining and frightening, and they both got drunk and started crying, and by the time we got to the restaurant I think Bill was totally drunk and Carlos couldn't take his being drunk and left. Anyway, somehow my wife and I ended up back at the studio alone. In those days, there was one large room and the only place you could sleep was in the elevator shaft, which was made into a little room. So we slept in there with these drafts. And Carlos had a sleeping loft, and I think Bill or someone came in stinking drunk, and we just heard these noises [imitates sound-Ed.], and he passed out. Carlos comes in three hours later and they start having a fight. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: God, on your wedding night.

FRANK ROMERO: So, you know, dishes being broken and I think William Fitch ended up with a cut on his arm and going to the hospital with stitches. It was just a tumultuous night. [laughs] And we're cowering in the elevator shaft, afraid to go out.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And you'd just gotten married!

FRANK ROMERO: And we'd just got married.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Unbelievable!

FRANK ROMERO; In the meantime, all of this happens, my wife is pregnant, and I keep saying, "I can't. . . ." And I'd only been in New York a year and a half or something, and I said, "I can't take this." I decided, like in the eighth month of her pregnancy, that we should just go back to L.A. And in the meantime we had met this wonderful, wonderful lady-and she was probably a New York character-she was an expert on bricks. She could tell just by the brickwork when a building was built, and she had examples of all the different kinds of brick in New York underneath her stairs. And she owned a building downtown, and it was beautiful. It was like an enormous, enormous buil[ding]. I mean, she rented it. She could actually rent it to us for like a hundred and twenty five, hundred and fifty, a month. And it was probably 5,000 square feet. One floor of this building. And it was this whole area around where the World Trade Center ended up or New York University. Anyway, down there, West Broadway, Chambers-basically in SoHo. But she had a friend who had first dibs and she said he wasn't sure he was going to take it, and ultimately it turned out he did take it, and so in our eighth month of pregnancy I just said, "Fuck it," and we came back to California. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was that a good decision on your part?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, it was a very interesting decision. What is happening in the meantime, I mean, so we'd gone through civil rights and now there were things happening in L.A. like the Chicano . . . whatever the thing they did at Garfield with the Blow Outs.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Blow Outs?

FRANK ROMERO: The Blow Outs. And the truth is we didn't hear about them in New York. They didn't write about the Blow Outs. New Yorkers, especially at that time, just don't know what a Chicano is. They don't relate to it at all. There are Puerto Ricans or Hispanos or Latinos in New York, but not really Chicanos. So that is sort of happening when I get back. Or this word "Chicano."

JEFFREY RANGEL: There must have been a lot of Nuyorican activism at the time that sort of caught your attention in the late sixties?

FRANK ROMERO: I don't think so, no. No, that's a couple of years later. Or maybe we just didn't know about it. We were enmeshed in the art world. We actually hung out at Max's Kansas City and all of that stuff. That's what we did, you know. And then, the truth is, we both had day jobs. Carlos worked in the rag, you know, design world, design trade. My wife did. She was an illustrator. They both worked for this guy that would give them money to do drawings and sketches and paintings that he would use in display. He was in the display industry. I worked for Ian Ballantine. I was the straight guy then, you know. They were doing wild things and living an artist's life and being totally broke. You know, that's part of it, of course. As I say, I've never been afraid of being broke. I hit bottom when I was twenty-eight. [laughs] Anyway, it's almost time to stop or something. Because we come back from New York, I have the kid, and literally eight months later Carlos is back in New York, which we never expected.

JEFFREY RANGEL: In L.A., you mean?

FRANK ROMERO: In L.A., I'm sorry. In L.A. And he had been in New York then for eight years-eight or nine years. And so he comes back, we hear about the blow-outs, we meet, Carlos meets and introduces me to Gilbert Luján, he introduces me to Roberto de la Rocha, I'm back with Charles Eames for a little while, Carlos calls me up at the Eames office and says we're having a show at the L.A. County Art Museum, and I tell Ray Eames, "I'm going to be famous." And that's actually. . . . That is chapter one.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's the way it works.

FRANK ROMERO: That's chapter one.

JEFFREY RANGEL: All right, let's take a break here then.

[End of session two]

JANUARY 29, 1997

Session 3, Tape 1, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is an interview with Frank Romero for the Archives of American Art. Today is January 29th and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. And, like we said the last time we spoke, we talked about your adventures in New York and living with Carlos there. This time we wanted to begin by talking about the way that Los Four kind of came together and maybe about the show at LACMA in '74 and all the details around that.

[FRANK ROMERO conducts a brief side conversation with a worker in his studio]

FRANK ROMERO: Okay, so. . . . It's true. I came out to L.A. in May of-I keep saying eighties, but it was actually 1969-and found a house to rent-to buy, actually. We found a house to rent, and we met this very interesting realty man who actually sold us a house for two thousand dollars down and seven hundred a month?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Two hundred dollars down to buy a house?

FRANK ROMERO: It wasn't. . . . It was a hundred and twenty-five a month, I believe.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And this is in Echo Park?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. So it was twenty-one thousand dollars. Thirty-year mortgage. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: And you had just gotten married recently.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, I'm married and by the time we got to L.A. my wife [Diane Romero-Ed.] was eight months pregnant, and so the last month was spent here at UCLA and our daughter, Coco [Romero-Ed.], was born in May of '69 at UCLA. Anyway, the funny part of all that-and I hopefully mentioned some those stories about committing all my friends because of this special program that New York state had, including my then wife for a short time. But anyway, ended up in L.A., bought a house, had a baby, all that stuff, and, literally, the funny part is within the year Carlos followed.

JEFFREY RANGEL: He was back.

FRANK ROMERO: He was back. Which was totally unexpected. I thought he was a career New Yorker. I never cottoned to the place. I'd never understood it. You know, New York is a strange way of life. To my view it's a nineteenth-century way of life, or maybe L.A. is twentieth-century, and I don't know what the twenty-first century will be-Mexico City or something.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. When Carlos came back he was in pretty bad shape?

FRANK ROMERO: He was. He was running away from all kinds of strange relationships. He had a friend who came with him, actually, and who drank. He was an Irishman who drank, and Carlos had begun drinking. And part of it was to. . . . Now the chain of events is very curious. Stop, for one second.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure, just a second.

[Interruption in taping]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, we had a brief pause there but we're back now.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, a brief pause. Anyway, the chain of events is that he was running away from a curious relationship, and he managed to do that by drinking himself into a stupor. He was drinking Red Mountain; he was drinking a gallon a day. That's a funny. . . . I think it was three dollars a gallon. It was the cheapest wine on the

market and it was actually not bad. But I guess what we might call "rot-gut" today.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: Somewhere-and I don't know the chronology here, but I think this was before Los Four-he did end up at County USC with a liver and a pancreatitis-cirrhosis of the liver that stopped functioning. I think the fact he was relatively young-we were both twenty nine or maybe thirty by that time. . . . But, anyway, he spontaneously recovered. They were. . . .

Third voice: [asks another question]

FRANK ROMERO [sotto voce to JEFFREY RANGEL:] "It's a bad day." Anyway, he spontaneously recovered after having been given last rites at least three times. So everyone thought he was going to die. I was very angry at him for dying, at that time. But he survived that one. [laughs] And over the next three years, I don't know, it all worked out. When my daughter was about three years, Diane-the first wife-ran away and I ended up, actually, with a kid. And I don't know if Carlos. . . . You know, I bought this house that had ostensibly four bedrooms. It was an enormous house, so it sort of functioned as sort of a meeting place in that it had a very large kitchen and living room. I tore out a lot of walls so there was even bigger rooms. It was a sort of. . . . Because I owned it, which was a very curious idea-you know, people our age and social position. They all thought I was rich, and I wasn't, I just bought this house for nothing. Which is actually. . . . You know, maybe houses on the West Side in those days only cost thirty thousand. But anyway, I bought a house for twenty-one thousand.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Geez. What a concept.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, what a concept. Yeah. No one understands it anymore but we're only talking twenty-seven years ago.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: So, whatever. All these things sort of together. Carlos got better. I don't remember, but he was there most of the time. He lived with us-in one of the rooms downstairs, I believe. And when Diane ran away, he stayed on. So he actually had a great deal to do with raising Coco-at least for a few years. When she was three. Carlos, I think, was the first one who had heard-I hadn't, because I was raising a kid and working for a living-but he heard about what had been happening in L.A. in terms of being Chicano and was interested in it. I think we all were. And somehow he met Gilbert Luján, who was at that time working in-in some capacity; not exactly publishing but, you know, publishing with a group of guys-Con Safos magazine. And he was very politicized-that was his agenda-and so we ended up talking about being Chicano, which was a term I'd never heard before.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What was your initial response to it? And a lot of the political activity that was taking place at the time? When Carlos would be bringing this into your house and generating discussion about it.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. I don't know about politically. All of that stuff in peoples lives is. . . . I mean, it gets you killed every now and then or changes your view of yourself and all of these things. Politics-what's the term?-I guess, ultimately do matter. [laughs] But people are toying with ideas most of the time, especially artists. They like the idea. They're curious about why so much of the world maybe at that time called themselves Communist or people in this country thought it was a good idea, you know? And also the fact that it was anti-establishment. I don't know if. . . . You know, people hold very passionate beliefs and I can't figure out why. I'm interested in ideas. And for a while there Carlos really. . . . He embraced, he heard about it, he liked it, he embraced the movement. Gilbert was very much involved in proselytizing things. Jane Fonda was very much a liberal in those days. Now she's a. . . . Is she Republican, you know? These people that are interested in all of this stuff don't seem to take it very seriously in that they. . . . You know, ten years later Carlos was a howling capitalist. I take all these things very seriously, and so I didn't join the movement for ten years. [laughs] And yet, now historically or in retrospect, I actually call myself a Chicano, even though it's sort of like it's been "out" for at least ten years. And the curious thing is, I guess, sort of with the younger generation it's sort of "in" again.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: Because it was politically incorrect. And, you know, the things that people come up to replace it with. There was an art critic who was into "Latin American Gothic art." I don't know what it meant. I don't have it quite right, but, I mean, they're far-fetched ideas, and to explain a political movement-or really an ethnic one-Chicano fits. It's a very interesting idea.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So during the time of the movement you were somewhat reserved about embracing these politics.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, I didn't know what they were talking about. I never heard [of] this word.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And yet Los Four is strongly identified as coming out of the context of that.

FRANK ROMERO: But Gilbert says that he knew that word as a child, as a young man. It came out of nowhere. Nobody can tell you what. . . . You know, everyone has his theory about where it came from. No one can tell you that, you know, Henry [Cisneros] in Santa Fe came up with this term in 1969. Not that I know of. No one's ever told me where it came from.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You know, there's a whole history about the etymology of that term.

FRANK ROMERO: Anyway, and what I'm saying is, we met Gilbert and he brought in Beto [Robert de la Rocha-Ed.]. And it was very true. We actually sat around my kitchen table and discussed politics and art. And they were heated. And we would scream at each other, and I think that's what made it a unique experience, in that all four of us had a very large circle of friends and together we knew everybody. The four of us, you know, that we were quite a force. And it only became manifest or we only started to understand that when we had an exhibition.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: Carlos was very much involved in, at that same time, working with Cesar Chávez. He was actually driving up once a month to work on the newspaper, El Malcriado, and Gilbert was, again, publishing Con Safos with a group of people-and I don't have the names in front of me; we'll have to get those-and Beto was actually a well-respected painting and print instructor at Long Beach State.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I didn't know he taught there. Did he run into [John-Ed.] Valadez there at that time? I mean, do you know if Valadez was in Long Beach at that time?

FRANK ROMERO: I don't exactly know. Un momento. Valadez was very much on the periphery. I have to look at the film, because you always want to. . . . You know, I mention all these names and there are vignettes of everyone in the Los Four film. You see them all at the opening of the Los Four exhibition. But so John Valadez was very much involved in, especially. . . . He was a very good friend of Carlos's. For a couple of years they just hung out. And that was shortly after '74. So he was around. He was, again, a lot younger-sort of like ten years at least difference.

So Los Four happened. It was actually on the kitchen table. Gilbert suggested to Hal Glicksman that he curate a show of some Chicano artists, because Gilbert really believed in Chicano art as a form of expression that existed in the Southwest, in that mythical realm called Aztlán somewhere north of Mexico City. [laughs] And all those things I couldn't argue with, you know? I had an art instructor, George May, in high school that really felt that Chicano kids-Mexican-Americans at that time-came with a special knowledge of visual communication, visual arts. He said he saw it year after year, these kids with all this raw, rich, rich talent. And they got out of high school and the family and the social pressures to get a job were so great that they never painted again. The fact that he said that to me maybe burned a hole in my head, because I said, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to be an artist." So I'm glad he said that. I mentioned Carlos having come out of a really rich experience with a drawing instructor named [_____-Ed.] [Ramirez]. Luján, you know. . . . We all had the same story to one extent or another. Carlos and I had been trained, spent at that time some time at Otis, and we were really trained as professional artists.

You know, society says that basically artists are loners. So the idea of collectivity was very new to us and very foreign and kind of scary and something we argued about, but ultimately when we started asking for things as a collective and we got them and we never got them as individuals, we saw that it gave us power. So all the stuff is jelling at this time. And, as I said, Gilbert bringing in all the people from maybe the San Gabriel Valley. And me, I worked in county government as a student professional in the field of art, so I brought in media people from county government who did the Los Four film [_____-Ed.]. Hal Glicksman was sort of an up-and-coming young curator in those days, so people were very much interested in anything that he had something to do with. You know, he did the first show at UC Irvine. You know, the politics are so strange. Ernest [Debbs, Debs] of the third district, which was Latino, was a little put out because they had done a Black show, I believe, at the LA County Museum the year before us, and he sort of said, "How come you haven't ever done a Latino show?"-you know, because his district was overwhelmingly Latino.

And so there was a social need, a cry, to do a Chicano show. And Jane Livingston was working for Maurice Tuckman. She had been very much involved at the old Pasadena Art Museum with Hopps, I guess-Walter Hopps, and we had met her there. Carlos had met her there and introduced me. So five years later she's at the county museum and she's actually given an assignment to go find a Chicano show, do a Chicano show. And she heard about the show at UC Irvine through Carlos and through Hal Glicksman and went to see it and liked it and picked it up. And that's. . . . So, you know, there's the politicians and. . . . You know, every level of the society is involved in these things.

JEFFREY RANGEL: In terms of the actual chemistry of the group, were there particular expertise or areas of interest that you individually brought? Or did that work as a collective?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, that's a funny thing is that, you know, a big machine-especially the county museum-has a lot of problems in terms of PR and gathering stuff and putting it together, so every time we went to them with a small request like, "Well, we'd like to hang this. . . . You know, you can't do the show unless you do the banner that Carlos has done for Cesar Chávez." And the banner was thirty feet so they had to find a thirty-foot wall. And Los Four had been assigned two rooms that were really basically a thousand square feet, and very early on in the planning of the exhibition they realized it wouldn't fit. [laughs] Gilbert wanted to enlarge the altar. Carlos wanted to do a special painting, because some farmworkers had been killed and he wanted to do an homage to the death of the farmworkers. And Gilbert Luján always wanted to bring in a low-rider into the show, that we couldn't do at UC Irvine, and the truth is that ultimately we couldn't do it at the county museum because we had to go up an elevator, but they could bring in the front end of a car, so that's what they did. But, anyway, these funny requests-just small requests-by each one of us made the show grow exponentially by four. And all of a sudden they decided to give us the half the Anderson wing. And then we decided, "Well, we can't just have a show of Latino art without color and all the walls are white," so we painted all those.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did you paint them?

FRANK ROMERO: We actually chose colors-purple, turquoise, a lot of them based on the Mayan Codexes, stuff like that very magic colors, and the walls were painted. But then. . . . Now Gilbert says that they actually got bent out of shape, which I don't quite understand because, anyway, we started doing graffiti on them. [laughs] But they rather liked it. He said, to make it palatable to the museum, he did La Virgen de Guadalupe, por vida y rifa, you know, and all that kind of stuff. Anyway, it was all like that. It was fun. We were there for a whole solid week installing that show, and a lot of that. . . . We all brought, you know. . . . I brought the county museum. I worked for the graphic-art section of the county. [phone rings]

[Interruption in taping]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, we're back. It's a busy day in the studio.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, even at four o'clock. Actually, let's stop.

[Another Interruption in taping]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Here we go.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, one of my old girlfriends, Sally [_____-Ed.], was a seamstress and I remember she made shirts for us. As I say, I knew people from the media. Actually, the L.A. County in those days had a film section, and they somehow just on their own managed to get a small little grant from Ernie Debbs, from the third district-I think ten thousand dollars and a lot of in-kind donations-to do a film. So they actually-which is very, very funny-they actually came around and followed us for a whole week. And just from that. . . . And then they did voiceover interviews, and then they put a very nice film together. Which really. . . . I always mentioned that. I don't know where the script is, but the dialogue on that is incredible. It was all voice-over and it was all very snipped and cut and put together.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. So were you guys aware at the time of the sort of historical importance of that exhibit? Or was there just. . . .]

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I think there were a lot. . . . In the intervening five years there were a lot of four-Chicano-artist shows, and they were mostly males, and I think we were very aware of the fact that females were being overlooked. I mentioned that Judithe Hernandez is in the Los Four film. She wasn't in the first two exhibitions, but she was already around. She cut her hair [laughs], and that's in the film-Judithe Hernandez cutting her hair. Sally Lopez making us dresses, and on and on and on and on. The film crew that I knew-because I worked for the county-doing this film, which really has nothing to do with the county museum. It just happened to be that I worked for the county. Gilbert with his friends in the media. There were a lot of people working for KCET at that time that were Chicano, and they were there in their affirmative action-honestly. And that's Jesus Treviño and [Montezuma] [Esparza]. I forget the head curator, guy used to have a show. . . . Ed Moreno, who was actually high up in those days. They were all thrown out a couple of years later with the end of affirmative action and KCET. It's funny, because you always think that there are these windows of opportunity for some people to get through, and then the doors close again. That happened with us.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So is that what you thought about the Los Four exhibit?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, that's what happened with Los Four. I mean, there were a whole number of people for various reasons. . . . The ASCO group were notorious for having graffiti. They were so angry that we got the first show there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, if I'm not mistaken, they tagged the building a couple of years before.

FRANK ROMERO: They tagged the building. Well, see that's probably reality, but in people's minds they put the two events together, and they say that Gronk and Willie [Herrón-Ed.] tagged the Los Four show. And I always heard that! I don't know if it's true. We have to ask them, have to ask Gronk. But the fact that they said they did made them famous. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, I understand they made quite an appearance at the opening as well.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, there's a beautiful. . . [As-Ed.] I say everybody that I'm talking about is in that film. Willie Herrón, there's just this one shot of him. See, and he came in blue-face. Anyway, so the media, we did at least three or four shows on KCET during that month. We did Ralph Storey later on in the year, which went. . . . We did Time magazine, which was eventually dropped. The story was dropped, but we actually did the interviews and everything. So it was a very heady time. [phone rings] She didn't put the [answering-Ed.] machine on, and so I'm sorry. Drive me crazy.

And, no, no one knew. It actually caught the. . . . You know, you catch the eye of the press, and as I say their limitations and their prejudices. . . . The truth is, Time magazine didn't run it nationally. They wanted to, and then they said that by the time they heard about it-because a show only runs for four weeks, six weeks-that show was over. And it's interesting because the week it should have ran they ran nothing. They ran a story about a dead man-you know, an artist named Giacometti. [laughs]

But, anyway, it never ran, and we never made it nationally, but local-California and all of that-was incredible. That show was picked up and it went to Oakland, and actually our biggest installation was in Oakland. We probably had ten thousand square feet. It was an enormous space. We did a pyramid that was thirty feet high. You know, stuff like that. There were a lot of small shows over the next five years. And, yes, the impact was incredible, because there were a lot of Chicano art shows that didn't have that impact. But the fact is that we were the first. The idea of being first is sort of a rather silly one to some extent, because you can always, if you look hard enough, find something you're first at. As it turns out we were the first ones in a major art museum. But to characterize L.A. County in 1974 as major is maybe stretching it a bit. [laughs] So it's only in retrospect that we're major.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: But nevertheless it was important.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So maybe you could give us an idea of maybe some of the aesthetic ideas that you guys were tossing around amongst one another and how that fit into or was expressed in your work.

FRANK ROMERO: I heard that Christopher Knight just mentioned something about Gronk being-in spirit, at least-very much involved with German Expressionism. And I think Chicano art in general is. And-of all, people-Gronk is maybe the least expressionistic. But nevertheless he is. And so am I and so is Carlos. It just happens to be an aspect of our work. We are talking about our stories, a humanist tradition in art-which is very much a part of growing up in California-and they're telling stories-a narrative content-and, basically, art that is figurative and not abstract.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What sorts of stories were paramount for you to be telling?

FRANK ROMERO: I think when we got together. . . . You know, maybe I always told stories but they weren't especially Chicano stories, and I think after sitting and arguing with Gilbert the stories started to be about where I grew up-where we all grew up-which was on the East Side. So they were East Side stories, but really in a larger context, they were California stories. It was quite an impact in all the art world, because we brought back a. . . . It was okay again to do emotional, you know, to talk about emotions. Emotionalism. It was okay to talk about bright, vibrant color. Everything was very cool in those days. We were totally out of left field. We angered and confused the establishment. You know, the William Wilson article. He said, "I'm sure they're perfectly wonderful painters, but they're not really Chicano artists because they went to college."

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did you guys react to that?

FRANK ROMERO: [laughs] Well, we did. It didn't seem absurd to me to be educated and smart. [laughs] I've always taken it for granted.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. With some sort of outsider authenticity. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, yeah. I think if you're Chicano you're supposed to be uneducated and clean floors. I mean, the white establishment has-has-a lot of trouble dealing with all that. But it's a reality in California. There's an enormous Chicano middle class, and that have been here for generations.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Let me take a break here and we'll switch the tape sides, okay?

FRANK ROMERO: Okay.

Session 3, Tape 1, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . interview with Frank Romero on January 29th. It's an interview for the Archives of American Art, and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel.

What I wanted to do at this point was ask you about some of the cultural institutions that were springing up around Los Angeles around this time. And maybe you can talk about some of the work that you did with them or your reflections on them-or didn't do with them-[and] some of the sort of community infrastructure in that, as well.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I think part of these discussions, before they coalesced into an exhibition-Los Four-was we were interested in what people were talking about: being Chicano and all of that. There were a lot of people starting funny little centros and art groups. There was Mechicano, down on Whittier Boulevard, and the Goetz Gallery, which was another group of people. Self Help Graphics, with Sister Karen [Boccalero-Ed.]. And what we found at that time is that they were sort of like . . . kind of boys' clubs. A group of artists that had got together and started an organization of some sort that had to do with being Chicano. And the truth is somehow they were. . . . In a sense, even though they'd only been established a year, they were established, and entree for us as outsiders who had just come in from New York was maybe difficult. [chuckles]

JEFFREY RANGEL: What sort of. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: And that's one of the reasons that Los Four happened is that we weren't accepted in the other clubs. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: But I think that's the way it is. I mean, that's life in general.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did they have some sort of criteria?

FRANK ROMERO: I don't know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did it mean you had to be politicized as a Chicano?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, and. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Or you had to be invested working in street settings or anything like that?

FRANK ROMERO: All of that, but it was all so young, and the truth is it just sort of turned out that we were another boys' club. Ultimately it just sort of happened. Everything happened too fast. I mean, we all wanted to be involved in this movement, and I'm sure. . . . Like I think Goetz sort of sponsored at least some of the mural programs at Estrada Courts, and then we all ended up doing murals maybe under their sponsorship. I know that both Carlos [Almaraz-Ed.] and I had exhibitions of our work at Mechicano, either before or after Los Four. I can look some of that up. And actually Los Four had an exhibition at the original Self Help Graphics location. Right there at what actually used to be Whittier Boulevard, near Brooklyn and Soto. So we were all involved in all of these institutions, but at that time as sort of entities unto ourselves. It just happened that way.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So between those three centros and. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: You know, Gilbert was very much involved with some of the people up north, like the Royal Chicano Air Force and stuff like that, because of his contacts through Con Safos, and he actually spent some time in some of these other centros. So all of us together sort of had contacts with everybody in California. I don't know. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was there a sense that what was going on up north or maybe in central California was different than what you guys were doing in Los Angeles?

FRANK ROMERO: I think it was all, in some ways, a concerted effort. It's funny it all happened at once. We all started doing murals. Like who did the first one no one knows but it was in 1970 or '69, and by '71 we were all doing murals. It's funny how these things. . . . We were all looking back for inspiration to Mexico. You know, even though the murals hadn't been done in Mexico in thirty years, we started doing murals. It fit L.A. And a lot of that stuff is much more important than, say, one exhibition, is that we all were doing murals in the streets and communicating. . . . Because, you know, we didn't have access to galleries.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: And all of that. Los Four was only part of all of this stuff going on all over the state. And I know there was stuff going on in Texas and New Mexico. Not that I personally was involved in any outside of state. Gilbert will give you a different answer. I think he traveled. Gilbert and Carlos traveled more than, say, Beto and I who were really more studio painters. And what we brought to the movement is actually professionalism in terms of imagery, whereas a lot of the Chicano art is very primitive in nature, because people were putting out ideas and they really never learned how to draw. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see. So you feel like you were kind of responsible for generating, say, a more refined iconography?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, I think so.

JEFFREY RANGEL: More expertise in that area?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, we were good painters, yeah. Before we were Chicanos, you know, we had studied European art, history.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was there any sense that it was difficult to bridge that kind of art school education that you got with doing work in the streets and maybe working with youth or working collaboratively.

FRANK ROMERO: It's interesting when people put books together; you know, no one makes a distinction. I made that distinction with the exhibition Murals of Aztlán, where actually I chose eight or nine of the best Chicano painters, that actually did much more sophisticated imagery. I mean, the other group was, say, Judy Baca's group out on the West Side-you know, SPARC, Social and Public Art Resource Center. I think actually we even did some. . . . You know, we've all done work under that umbrella also. And very political work. I question the validity of doing it in a wash. I mean, Tajunga wash. You know, it's her life's work and all of that, but it's done by a lot of kids and it's very primitive, and it's put somewhere where the establishment doesn't have to confront it every day. So they sort of very quietly just sort of. . . . You know, some very blunt political stuff being said, but it's sort of done in a run-off basin where it doesn't disturb people too much. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: There's also two distinct parts to that mural. The first half seems to be executed much more by youth, and there's much less expertise evident . . .

FRANK ROMERO: So even there there's a . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . and then the second half it's much more professionally done.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. And it's true, because, you know, I haven't seen it. I don't know if I've ever really seen it. I've seen bits of it, but I don't know if I've ever gone out and looked at it. So even at that level, yeah, there is a . . . Because a lot of people say, "See? The mural movement is dead." Because there was a period there for a good-the seventies-where everyone was doing murals-sophisticated and unsophisticated. And now all of that has been culled, in a sense. But I still do murals, and John [Valadez-Ed.] still does murals. But we're doing enormous pieces for hundred-thousand-dollar budgets, three-hundred-thousand dollar budgets.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. Where did the funding come from then?

FRANK ROMERO: But everyone says that's not the same. And it isn't.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is that because of funding?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. But, just as Diego Rivera was funded by the Mexican government . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: By the state, yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . by the state, and all the stuff we did on the streets we did for three hundred bucks-the murals we did on Whittier Boulevard under a little program. They had ten thousand dollars. Rather than giving it to one artist they gave it to twelve. So I don't know, it's just that kind of thing. So we all got three hundred dollars each. That still doesn't make ten thousand dollars. It makes three thousand dollars? The rest is always gobbled up by something called "administration." I don't care who you are-SPARC, any program that gets involved with government-it's all gobbled up by people who push paper. And that's the way it is. That's life.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Where were you going to for funding to execute your murals?

FRANK ROMERO: We didn't. I mean, we every so often got lucky and somebody gave us three hundred dollars, but we were doing murals anyway.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So people would seek you out if they had money and you would kind of do it that way? Or just

do it on your own.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. The network was-because of all of these-the network was established. Everyone knew who was doing murals. How many Chicanos really did murals in all of this time? A hundred? Fifty? [If-Ed.] we start writing names, starting with Roberto Chávez, who was really maybe before the Chicano movement and all of that, and there's not very many people.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well maybe along the same lines of a kind of developing mural movement or Chicano art movement, you referred to yourself and Carlos as kind of a school of painters. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. Hold that for one second.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay.

[Interruption in taping]

FRANK ROMERO: Iconography? [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, we're back. Guess we should mention that you're preparing to go to New York in a couple days, so there's a lot of activity around the studio.

FRANK ROMERO: [laughs] Well, other reasons, too. I'm actually curating, [though it]. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: And you're hanging tonight, right?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, we're hanging a show tonight. And it's funny, because we just put a mural away and we're putting another away, and I just noticed there's a third up there and I don't even know what it is.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs] Maybe after the session we can pull it out.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, there's probably ten thousand dollars worth, a hundred thousand dollars worth of stuff up there. So it's scary.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, it is. Anyway, I wanted to ask you about. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Totally uninsured.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh-oh, I'd better be careful then. Anyways, I wanted to ask you about something that you had mentioned earlier, in terms of you and Carlos sort of considering yourselves a school of painting.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I think I only say that in retrospect just to sort of put together. . . . You know, before there was a Chicano Movement and all of that-our story is not unique but nevertheless it is our story-he went to Garfield and I went to Roosevelt. We were rival high schools and all that. Both very much interested in art and for some reason, like a new university opening up on the East Side, which enabled us to go to school for twenty-five dollars a semester, the fact that there was a rising middle class-even in the barrio-and that we actually were allowed to go to school. You know, the prejudice is always "out of high school to get a job."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: There isn't a history of encouraging kids to go on to university. It's just, "Pay your own way." It's hard for people who. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: And so how does that shape the development of a painting school, per se?

FRANK ROMERO: All I'm saying is that for some reason, unlike a lot of those kids that George May talked about, Carlos and I continued.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: And you could say, "Well, they were geniuses and they would have continued anyway." But I always see social reasons. Like you're allowed to go on. Yeah, and maybe I would have fought harder and all of that. And maybe I did fight harder and all of that. But I continued to paint. I had something to say. And maybe in a sense. . . . Obviously, in retrospect, the Chicano movement in a sense gave me a voice. It was very strong, because you know, now, in nineteen . . . where am I? [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: In '97.

FRANK ROMERO: In '97, I'm doing political work about the history of the movement.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that sort of timeframe.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, it always takes me ten years. So the idea that. . . . Carlos and I had dialogue that was really about art. And the ensuing dialogues that included the outside world were about being Chicano. But the dialogue. . . . And maybe he had the same thing. When he met his wife, Elsa Flores, they painted together. And my wife, Nancy Romero, paints, and she brought in another element because she had spent a lot of her time in the Southwest and living in Mexico. Carlos and I had never seen Mexico. So she was a Mexican expert, especially in the Zapotecs and Oaxaca, and stuff like that. So there's another dimension to our work, and where we're discussing those ideas or living in that kind of rural life. And what Nancy and I discovered together in the last fifteen years is we're going back to New Mexico, which is a different kind of life-as a Hispano existence.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. So does the New Mexican and Los Angeles influence. . . .]

FRANK ROMERO: I think it's the Southwest. I think the genius of the Chicano movement was the term Aztlán. Because we go all the way back to our indigena past-and found a mythological land that exists somewhere north of Mexico City. Well, obviously, it's Los Angeles. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Unless. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Unless you live in El Paso. [laughter]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Unless you live in Albuquerque or in El Paso, right.

FRANK ROMERO: But it all fits. I mean, it's kind of wonderful when a legend . . . when a prophecy becomes fact. It lends credence and a romantic. . . . You know, I believe in romanticism. That's what Chicano art is about. It's about romanticism. It's about emotionalism. It's not cold; it's not hard edges. Not East Coast. We're totally. . . . You know, we're not at all East Coast. And that's why the East Coast resists so strongly. I mean, there are no. . . . There were no Chicanos, obviously. Even when I lived there with Carlos there were no Mexican restaurants in New York. You know, there were fake ones, two fake ones. The closest we could get to Mexican food was a little dive in the East Village that served Spanish, but they served paella. But Mexican food was The Four Seasons, which was, you know, because I worked for Charles Eames, and it was designed by his best friend-his name [_____-Ed.] escapes me at the moment-but it was a white Mexican restaurant, you know. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Now there have taquerias all over.

FRANK ROMERO: Do they?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: But are they. . . . Nowadays, they always tend to be Latin American, Central American or something. I mean, Latino is. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: They do sort of have that flavor. But there's a large Mexican population in New York.

FRANK ROMERO: In New York now.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: There was not one single real Mexican restaurant in New York in 1969.
Third voice: Plastico?

FRANK ROMERO: Aqui. Hay uno.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So how long were you working with Los Four and what led to it?

FRANK ROMERO: Los Four, again, at one time was really a group of people getting together to discuss the Chicano art movement. And that's a historical fact. Now also the fact is that we were all friends for various lengths of time. Obviously by the time Los Four happened-which was '73, actually-Carlos and I had met in '59, so we had already known each other-what's my math here?-fourteen years. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: There we go.

FRANK ROMERO: So in a sense that's what I say-Carlos and I, because we go way beyond the Chicano Movement, fourteen years, to a simpler time, the early fifties growing up in California. You know, post-war, all of that stuff. And all of us actually come out of that. Our parents were laborers. Carlos's dad worked for the

railroad. My dad worked for Lockheed. We were in aerospace and transportation-but laborers. And their kids went to college, and they became artists. So it's the American dream. Nothing wrong with all of that; it's just. . . . But also very typical. [laughs]

Nostalgia for that era or a lot of the ideas is still very much a part of my work, which is stream-of-association, stream-of-consciousness. Lot of my work deals with that. And that's all happened because we all sat around the kitchen table and did drawings, and sort of every so often switched pieces of paper and worked on each other's drawings, in a collective spirit. I always enjoyed that, and to this day, where I sort of work more or less alone in my studio, I still do those kind of paintings. They're still very much a part of what I am. The political awareness was, I think, that you didn't have to go paint romantic images of starving people in India. You can go paint romantic people [meant to say "pictures"-Ed.] of starving people in East L.A. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: That doesn't seem too romantic.

FRANK ROMERO: But what I'm saying, it was all right to paint the imagery around you. I think the fact that we discussed. . . . Maybe I would have anyway, I don't know. Margaret García is a very close friend, and she went to Roosevelt High ten years after I did. We're always still talking about going back to Boyle Heights. Maybe Boyle Heights has now become a figment of the imagination. It was very much. . . . you know, Brooklyn Heights in New York at the turn of the century. Boyle Heights like that was in the thirties and forties and fifties when we grew up there when it was a melting pot. It was a polyglot culture. It was Jewish, it was Chicano, it was Japanese-American-Nisei-and also Russian. A very interesting place to live at that time. And I've always sort of enjoyed cultures that were very much mixed. The West Side doesn't have that. It's too homogenous. The food's not as interesting. [laughs] It always comes back. . . . Gilbert Luján talks about the Tortilla Clan or the Tortilla Culture. And he's right. He did a series of paintings on small tortillas for the Los Four show.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: I mean, when you talk about all the things we did, the ideas that were prevalent in Chicano art. . . . Just recently, another associate here in the studio. . . . Because in a sense my studio has become a centro in the nineties. Alfredo de Batuck just did a tortilla dress for a fashion show. I mean, those ideas are still prevalent and they're still fun to play with. But in ninety [the nineties-Ed.] that's almost accepted. Everybody eats tortillas. I always say that. In the fifties you got tacos in East L.A. Now they're everywhere. I mean, it's Taco Bell now, for God's sake. Or pollo loco, which is actually a little more relevant to reality. Everyone knows what a tortilla is in the United States. That wasn't true twenty years ago.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see. So you think your work has. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: We've become mainstream.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, I'm thinking along the lines of what you were doing throughout the seventies and, say, early eighties was really sort of gaining more expertise and ____.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. Yeah, and we were dealing with visual puns, we were dealing with prejudice, we were dealing with prevailing attitudes towards Latinos-Chicanos-that all we did was do floors or whatever or fix cars. I had an old girlfriend who writes about me publicly every now and then, and it's so interesting. When she writes about her ex-husband she uses a pseudonym, but when she writes about me she uses my real name. So I'm always being written about. But even her, she shows so much prejudice because she always talks about standing around and looking in a car engine, you know. And to think of Carlos and I, who have the softest hands and don't know what labor is, working on a car is kind of a joke, because I don't know what the inside of a car looks like. [laughs] I mean, we're talking about racial stereotypes, and they're not true. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

FRANK ROMERO: Gilbert Luján likes to work on cars. Very much. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, and we can sort of see that.

FRANK ROMERO: The idea of all four of us sitting around looking at car engines and trying to figure out why they're not working is just absurd. You know, we're artists; all we know about are paintbrushes.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you feel like you're being written about that way now, still? You know, she's still writing about that? Or that critics in general are?

FRANK ROMERO: There's a very interesting article in the New Yorker this week about ebonics, the fact that you come out of the barrio and you. . . . In East L.A. you sort of spoke caló-you spoke in English and Spanish at the same time and sort of this polyglot language, which was kind of wonderful. Yeah, and they do have a cadence and stuff like that. I used to listen to my mother do it all the time with her sisters on the phone. But I really never

did it, and when I try to do it now-because, you know, "How are you, man ese?" All that shit, it's forced on me because I really didn't grow up that way. I really did grow up in an English-speaking household, even though my . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's affected.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. So when I do *caló*, it's affected. [laughs] I actually speak in English. It makes communicating to the rest of the world maybe easier for me . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

RICHARD ____: . . . and for those Blacks that speak "regular English," right?-and not ebonics. What's the point? Well, the point is that I still eat tamales and menudo, but I do it in English, [laughs (transcriber, too!)]

JEFFREY RANGEL: So could you say the same thing about your artwork?

FRANK ROMERO: Um hmm. I'm very much interested. . . . John Sedler is a very well-known and respected cook internationally, and he invented something called "Southwest Cuisine," and it's the future of California, and the world in a sense. He was trained as a French chef. He's half Hispano, grew up in [Abique] in New Mexico. You know, Anglo name. He's Sedler. He's half French and English. But he liked the idea. . . . The thing is he doesn't speak Spanish-or speaks as well as I do, which is very poorly. But he still eats tamales. But because of where we grew up and all of that, he can honestly come up with a new idea and make a Jewish tamale. And that's very much what California's about, what Aztlán is about.

JEFFREY RANGEL: About sort of mixing things that normally wouldn't be perceived as going together?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, it's just the reality. My children are English, German, Dutch, Spanish-Mexican, you know? So am I. My great-grandfather was German. We all are. None of us are these pure little Indios that-I hate to pick on William Wilson-that William Wilson is looking for.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [chuckles] Right.

FRANK ROMERO: That just happens to be the history of the United States-and the world, for that matter. You start understanding history, we've all come. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [Miscegenation], right.

FRANK ROMERO: Everyone was murdered and raped and pillaged, and the issue of all of that murder and rape and pillage was a mixed race.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right, *mestizaje*.

FRANK ROMERO: *Mestizaje*, exactly.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So maybe we can close this session by talking a little bit about the Murals of Aztlán exhibit. You just unrolled them, or the mural you did there.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, that was kind of lovely. [shouts to helper:] [What am I. . . .] These people just, I don't know, they just. . . . I have no answers _____. I can't. . . . It's Daddy Frank. You have to excuse me; it's another. . . . But anyway, the Murals of Aztlán was almost ten years after Los Four and basically was maybe a summing up of the Chicano mural movement, especially up to that time. Maybe I can just mention who was in it. It was John Valadez, who was doing photorealism, Gronk and Willie Herron, who were sort of there as representatives of ASCO-and their two distinct styles at that point-Carlos Almaraz, myself-Frank Romero-the East Los Streetscapers, which at that point-they're always changing-but it's always Ray Healy and David Botello and at that point George Yepes and Judithe Hernandez. I think that was it. I don't know how many names I just reeled off-about nine, seven or nine. Anyway, I chose those people. And I curated the exhibition. Everyone always forgets to mention that in all the books. No one ever quite. . . . Because there was some criticism leveled at it, that basically it wasn't true because it was on the West Side. Now if you consider Wilshire Boulevard, it's not exactly the West Side. But it was at least Midtown, and I felt that was important, to actually take this kind of work Midtown, so that both sides of the L.A. community-which is the west and east side-could at least see what was happening, basically on the East Side. [people enter, including a child, breaking the train of thought.-Ed.] Let's finish this statement, man.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay. So you felt that criticism was unfounded?

FRANK ROMERO: What criticism are we on here?

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Murals of Aztlán exhibit.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, anyway, yeah, we still weren't pure enough because we-or we weren't real. In this case it was Shifra Goldman saying we weren't real because we left the barrio. And, of course, my idea was to take the barrio to the West Side, because the West Side was certainly not going to come to us. Although, nowadays, we do bus tours. [laughter] And we actually do bus them in to see the murals. But the murals in L.A. are essentially an ephemeral movement, and they all fade in ten years. If they last ten or twenty years that's a wonderful life of a mural in the streets, because the sun will bleach anything. And the murals-unlike state-sponsored murals by Orozco and Rivera and Siquieros, who were done in shady courtyards and not exposed to the sun, and done with very good materials; frescos, for the most part-we used house paint and junk, and Carlos says that they were the barrio newspaper. And there are a lot of murals-or a number of them-that Carlos painted that were wonderful, and he put the wrong sealer on them and it peeled it off, so it was only up for six months. A lot of stuff, but. . . .

[End of session three]

MARCH 2, 1997

Session 4, Tape 1, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is an interview for the Archives of American Art on February 29 [sic], 1997, with Frank Romero. We're in the artist's studio. The interviewer is Jeff Rangel, and this tape one, side A. Okay. Welcome back.

FRANK ROMERO: Thank you. Anyway, we were just sort of discussing the polyglot culture and how we all sort of dealt with this term "Chicanismo." And I was thinking about it, because we all brought our whole backgrounds. I think Carlos, the fact that he was born in Mexico City and for the first almost eight or nine years of his life was in Chicago, and his dad was sort of a union activist, or at least very much involved, you know, he was in the railroad. Carlos was very much interested in Communism and communal living. When Gilbert Luján started talking about being Chicano, he sort of thought we should do things communally.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you know where he sort of became politicized? Or how?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, basically, it's the people we knew-in a sense. Maybe to some extent the liberal Jew in Boyle Heights who loved art. I find, at least in California, the people that know and appreciate art as a cultural thing are Jews. There's always been this fascination between Latinos and Jews, at least and especially in Boyle Heights, you know, because we grew up together. And the truth is a peasant from Mexico is not at all politicized. Maybe an urban Latino from Mexico City is a different kind of animal, but the immigrants from Mexico in this country, as a rule, were not politicized. So, again, calling yourself Chicano was the beginning of a political kind of act for lots of Chicanos.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see. Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: Anyway, so that was on the table. Both Carlos and I grew up in Boyle Heights which, again, was this polyglot culture. So I didn't especially encounter too much prejudice about me being Mexican-American, maybe because I'm lucky, I'm light-skinned. But I understood it from my neighbors. You know, the fact that all the Japanese kids I grew up with were born in concentration camps. So I think in a lot of ways, and especially coming of age in the sixties with the various civil rights movements and the hippies and the folk. . . . You know, we were both very much interested in folk music and a lot of those ideas that came out of the songs of Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston and all that kind of stuff. Leadbelly. That was part of the political climate, was the music, which was very political. Very politicized in the sixties.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. I'm interested in what you said about the Jewish community having a sense, an appreciation for art. Did you feel like you had to develop a Latino or a Chicano audience for yourself to push your work?

FRANK ROMERO: No, it's not that. It's just various cultures have areas where you're allowed to shine for one reason or another. Blacks have always had a difficult time-maybe because of the financial situation-dealing with things like painting, because I guess it requires an investment in a physical plant-studios and stuff like that-whereas maybe being a musician-a blues musician-only cost fifty dollars for that first guitar. I don't know. The Latin culture. . . . Because the truth is we're rooted in the Southwest and we've been here for three hundred years. It's a visual culture. It just is. Samella Lewis and some of these people that talk about Black culture, they always say that there wasn't a distinct Black style.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Um hmm, there's a performative quality to the. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: They were actually taught. . . . Black artists were basically taught in the European tradition. That's now being changed by people like Bettye Saar and daughters [Alison-Ed.], who are developing a Black idiom. Some of these. And Romare Bearden, people like that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Charles White.

FRANK ROMERO: Charles White. But Charles White was, again, classically trained, academic draughtsman. He's the first to say it. He painted Black subject matter but in a Eurocentric tradition.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: These are all people I know. So. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Noah Purifoy?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. But what I'm finding is that we're all shaped by our times. I can't help it. Basically, what I do is Eurocentric and acknowledges Picasso and acknowledges a lot of East Coast painters. But the thing is now we're starting to see, finally. . . . In fact, right now this year I mentioned. . . . I'm ahead of the time but there's actually starting to be a Jewish idiom, an art form, that's developing on the West Coast. Because we're talking about ethnic identity to a great deal. There is a Black . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sensibility.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . art movement, there's a Chicano art movement. And the truth is we're borrowing from each other, we're stealing from each other like mad, because it's a polyglot culture. L.A.'s a polyglot culture.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Can you tell me how that shows up in your work? Or how those discussions take place?

FRANK ROMERO: I always talk about John Sedler, because I like the fact that. . . . He has an Anglo name, but he's actually a Martinez from [Abique, Abbaque]-which is very much my story in some sense-but he recently came up with a Jewish tamale, and I did a painting of it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yeah. You were mentioning that.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. [laughs]. So the fact that I'm painting Jewish tamales, with a menorah and Mogen David in the background, is some indication of what we're doing. And I think what we're doing, though, is we're much better educated, we're learning where we came from. I'm probably Jewish. The diaspora of the Jews leaving. . . . The same year Columbus discovered America all the Jews were exiled from Spain. So when Romero comes up in the list of the inquisition in Mexico City, you sort of wonder where my ancestors came from. I was raised Catholic, as was Carlos. I always mention that because the churches are always a fount of visual knowledge. It's the only place you see paintings and murals and statuary and stuff. Early churches, before Pope John XXII, were quite embellished, and now they've become very plain and Protestant-looking and rather boring. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: So the fact that you say you're borrowing from all these different traditions, how do you respond to the notion of rasquache? And do you feel like that is an accurate means of describing your work or a Chicano sensibility?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, rasquache, which to me was sort of explained as the idea of putting something together with the materials at hand-wires and sticks and things that you find on the street-to make an elaborate automobile, almost, a car made out of junk, or that kind of sensibility, of course, is very much in the tradition of Western art. In one sense you can look at it that way . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: In assemblage kind of thing?

FRANK ROMERO: . . . or you can see the fact that ASCO-you know, Gronk and Harry [Gamboa, Jr.-Ed.] and Patssi [Valdez-Ed.]-went around and did No-Movie movies because they couldn't afford the film in a sense, to me, is an extension of that idea-rasquache. I'm very careful about my materials-you know, I was taught to be a craftsman-and yet every so often I have to. . . . I'm always picking up junk. I collect junk from everything. It's just part of . . . it colors my work in a certain way. But, again, we're talking about Duchamp and Man Ray coloring. . . . Those ideas are not especially Latino or Chicano but they are. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: They've been shaped by the fact that. . . . I always go back to Boyle Heights. I think if you grew up there, especially in the thirties or forties or fifties, there was a sense of community there and a sense of place that was incredible. I mean, I talk to Anthony Quinn, Cheech [Marin], some of the younger Latino comics, they grew up in that area-and Lalo [Guerrero]. There was a sense of community that is very much a part of who I am.

And I never will forget it, and to some extent I look back, I go back there. I still go back there for inspiration, I still like working at Self Help Graphics just because I can spend some time in East L.A., walk the streets. It's a very interesting . . . its' an incredible area.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you feel like Boyle Heights, then, still holds that polyglot nature for you?

FRANK ROMERO: I don't think that sense of community is there anymore. But L.A. changed; everything changed. And maybe that's what a man my age, at 55, sort of sees: that all the good restaurants I used to go to and all the places I understood, they're all gone. In fifty years they've all closed and changed. But a different culture survives-or exists. I'm very much involved in the new culture. [laughs] And it's not the fact that. . . . Because I'm already sick of looking forward to the twenty-first century.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Millennium?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, the Millennium. I've already been booked in two shows that look forward to the twenty-first century-or the end of this century. So we're going to die of. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, what do you have to say about that?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I'm going to die of boredom if I ever make the twenty-first century.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, wow! You don't have long to go.

FRANK ROMERO: I'm tired of it already. Especially our president talking about. . . . It's so cute. I mean, I think why people use that as sort of, whatever, as a metaphor of something, [is-Ed.] because you need to have a slogan and it's a way to raise money for various things you want to do. [laughs] I mean, the fact that there is a Chinese calendar that's three thousand years old and a Jewish calendar that's almost two thousand-what is it?-and an Aztec calendar that's obviously. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: God knows how old.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. Obviously these things are. . . . You know, when we're starting to find out that maybe people have been in. . . . They've now pushed back people in Peru, in the Americas, down to thirty thousand years? They found some footprints, and they had sandals on. And now human beings they've pushed back to three million years in Africa. So obviously we've been around a lot longer than the Millennium suggests. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: It's a rather arbitrary. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, I guess maybe then to get back to the chronology . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . we had left off at a point where I think Los Four had. . . . You had talked about the show at LACMA, and I wasn't really clear about what happened in terms of the group after that, the kind of works that you did together.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I think there was a period there when we were very active. And, as I say, part of the fact is that Los Four sort of was an accident of naming an exhibition, and it got more media attention than we ever imagined, and we were all very lucky in that respect. I think, if you see my resume, I think Los Four had fifteen or twenty shows in the ensuing five years. We tried to incorporate. We didn't know what it meant or why. Since there was no money being generated it was rather an exercise in. . . . You know, an exercise. Period. We had meetings and we argued. And I think there are other people pulling other people, wanted this to be part of the movement, this and that. I think it ended up maybe five years after Los Four or even earlier-I don't have my dates-but three to five years later we were on Figueroa [Street-Ed.], and we were calling ourselves the Concilio de Arte Popular.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: And that had like twelve people involved, who were involved at one point or another. Ricardo Duardo, who became a silkscreen printer; Leo Limón, who was back from the army and starting to work on his own.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Concilio was a statewide organization, was it not?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, we were. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: It had chapters around?

FRANK ROMERO: No, no. There were all kinds of Concilios, of course, in those days. And there were. . . . Gilbert, I think, was much more involved in traveling and talking to some of those people up north. No, the one in Highland Park was . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, the Centro de Arte Popular?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, yeah. Centro or Concilio, I don't know. Whatever. Whatever we called ourself. At some point we all. . . . I was raising a kid and there were disagreements, and I sort of left that group, to some extent. I think I was. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: What were the disagreements about, do you remember?

FRANK ROMERO: Oh, I don't know. What we were about.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Anything and everything?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. Money, what we were about, what the center wanted to do. I don't remember anymore. We were always. . . . I have a wonderful letter where-which I kept in my files, which maybe I'll give to the Archives later-where Gilbert Luján sends me a very formal letter, but on the outside it says, "I formally quit Los Four." And then by then we were already the Centro, and maybe I'm not even going to meetings, and Carlos is, I think, working for Cesar Chávez and spending a lot of time with El Malcriado. And then he gets involved with another guy and they start publishing. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Chisme Arte?

FRANK ROMERO: Chisme Arte, with. . . . I can't think of his name.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Guillermo?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, Guillermo. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Bejerano?

FRANK ROMERO: Bejerano, yeah. I've seen him recently. He's still around and he's doing work with magazines and computer graphics now. But Chisme Arte was funded by the state, and that way became sort of. . . . But it's so interesting that. . . . So at that time Carlos is working intensely for a couple of years with Guillermo. And for some time there John Valadez is very much involved with Carlos in some of these activities. So it's interesting that, you know, I'm mentioning a lot of names of people that actually have made careers for themselves that were involved with the extensions of Los Four and stuff like that. Wayne Healey was an engineer when we met him. Carlos met him somewhere, because he wanted to do art. Healey is Irish, of course, but he's Alaniz, and of course he became Los Dos-or the East Los Streetscapers . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . which is really, basically, Wayne and. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Botello?

FRANK ROMERO: David. David Botello.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: Then there's the brother now.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Then there's Paul, yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: Paul. And various other members of that group have come and gone. But Wayne wasn't painting when we first met him. He wanted to paint. And I think he was sort of involved in the Concilio to some extent, came to. . . . You know, people come to meetings. We're all trying to make a living. None of these things ever made money. Los Four published a comic book, and we actually got. . . . We wanted to publish three of them, and we got a little teeny bit of money from the Liberty Hill Foundation. And we only published one. We wanted to publish three, and we didn't even have money for distribution. So I don't know where those comic books are.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What was it called? Do you remember?

FRANK ROMERO: Los Four.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Los Four.

FRANK ROMERO: I have some here.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What's the subject matter about?

FRANK ROMERO: It's wonderful. I mean, it's basic. It's very politicized, and it's just basically about Anglo teachers giving you sort of a U.S. view of Manifest Destiny, and stuff like that that Carlos wrote. Very political. And sort of young Chicanos speaking up for their rights or the fact that they felt they were stolen from them, and all that kind of. . . . I have some here. Did I ever give one to the. . . . Probably, because they're so rare and so valuable, I have to be written all kinds of formal letters and begged from the Gallery of American Art [meant Archives of American Art-Ed.] to get one now, before I lose them all. It's very important.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, that's a good idea. Actually, when I was looking through the papers that Elsa [Flores-Ed.] and Carlos [Almaraz-Ed.] donated, I saw a book of comics in there-or maybe some sketches of comics-that Beto [[de la Rocha-Ed.] had done, and I don't know if they were. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: This one was actually published, and I have a box full-which I don't understand, because I don't know if we even printed a thousand. Maybe we did. It was the minimum run, because we got so little money. I just found out that. . . . I just in the last few months have met some people who actually fund Liberty Hill, and so I'm still thinking that we should do the rest of those-the other two comics.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, great.

FRANK ROMERO: But the fact that this one was published and the cover says "Los Four and Friends," and it exists. I may have thirty of them.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Let's go find them. [chuckles]

FRANK ROMERO: I don't know. . . . See, that's why I always wondered because I know they were not distributed or sold or anything because we just didn't have enough. Gilbert took them. My feeling is Gilbert took them and has them in a box and lost them.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh-oh.

FRANK ROMERO: But I have thirty. I keep thinking that. . . . We should ask Elsa. We should ask the various members of Los Four if any of them have those comic books. I'm going to sell some at the Chicano bookstore here.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Arroyo?

FRANK ROMERO: Arroyo Bookstore, yeah. I'm going to sell them for about thirty-five bucks-or maybe even more, because I really have to count them.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, those are collectors' items.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, they are. It's art.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You know, just listening to you talk about the different activities that Los Four did in terms of murals and painting and collective work and comic books and stuff, I was wondering if you could comment on maybe just kind of the range, the scope of styles, the scope of work that you guys did collectively.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, what you mention is exactly what we did. For some reason, because we had so much media attention-and we had friends in the media that were Chicanos that for the first time were getting access at least to even editorial,

KCET. . . . You know, the name always goes, but the guy that did our first Los Four interview. . . . Older man. Which will come to me in two hours. And I always mention, I think we met Moctezuma Esparza there and Jesus Treviño there, who went on the win Oscars and do documentaries. In fact, they're [the, The] Latino Consortium now. You know, Treviño. They haven't done a. . . . It's so interesting; to their discredit, they never did anything on the Chicano art movement, though they say they're going to.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Still waiting for that one, aren't we?

FRANK ROMERO: They say they're going to. But what they should have done is woven some of that material into

the pieces they did do.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: You know, there is a separation. Chicanos just, when it comes to art, are illiterate. It's just not part of the culture. You get a job, you work, maybe you're politicized, but you. . . . Art is the poor stepchild.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's why I was asking you before if you felt like you had to generate your own audience for that.

FRANK ROMERO: The audience. . . . You know, people that love art are the people you meet and understand, and it's only like in the last five or ten years that I'm starting to. . . . And, of course, you know, that have discretionary income. You're starting to meet middle class Latinos who can afford to buy art. And we've tried everything to make it accessible. I mean, it's half price to poor people, or people who can't afford-or give it away, if I have to. That's not the point, but you only do that when you reach a certain level of sophistication. I just mentioned Jewish culture, because there's an injunction there that you support things you love, just for the love of them, because it's beautiful. And so even. . . . It has nothing to do with money.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's about the love and the passion that you have for it to begin with.

FRANK ROMERO: The love and the passion. Or the ideas inherent in the material. And a lot of the art that has been done that's called Chicano is politicized. It's about injustice. And the models that we all went after-looked to, in those days-were the Mexican muralists. You know, Los Tres [Rivera, Siqueros, Rivera-Ed.]. And Ben Shahn, a Jewish activist in the thirties painting in New York City. Rico LeBrun here on the West Coast-very much art about injustice. Especially the series he did on Dachau and stuff like that. So, you know, we go back to Goya-The Disasters of War.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Exactly.

FRANK ROMERO: And Picasso: Güernica. And maybe I'm talking on a more personal level, but a lot of the work that we did-or tried to do-was about social injustice. Still is. The important paintings I do. Just got it back, by the way.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I saw it over there.

FRANK ROMERO: The Arrest of the Paleteros [ice cream vendors-Ed.]. It's true, though. But we tried comic books, because, I mean, it's obvious in one sense. Maybe I've never verbalized it, but I think Gilbert especially; me, because I come from a graphic arts background; and Carlos was actually very well read. And everyone in Los Four is a teacher. And we deal with comics because we want to get a young audience interested in art. And, of course, for middle America, art is comic books. [laughs] Graffiti on the streets was something that some kids understood, you know, the fact that you could put art on the streets instead or as part of the graffiti was an interesting idea to us. The fact that we had no access to galleries on the West Side. So, of course, if we had, maybe we would have never done art on the streets. But we understood that. I mean, it was an abstract idea, not that I'd ever seen a mural by Siqueros or Rivera, but we understood that they did murals and put them on the sides of buildings, so we went and did murals and put them on sides of buildings. We used housepaint, and it was for three hundred dollars. And you start to read about Siqueros and Rivera that they worked for the government and did beautiful murals inside of government buildings, right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: It wasn't quite the same thing. [laughs] It was rasquache.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah a little bit, huh?

FRANK ROMERO: But it worked for us. I mean, the fact that it worked for us, that we were sincere in our efforts, even though Mexico City at that time sort of laughed at us that we were so old-fashioned, in a sense. But we were talking about. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: It was an important go through it.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, we were talking about an injustice here.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: And it was one way of communicating that wrong.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Speaking about putting murals up, there was a point in time when L.A. witnessed tremendous-

especially the East Side-where there was a tremendous growth in murals. I wonder if you can talk about the discussions or the exchanges that were taking place among artists at that time? Doing murals.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, because there are Chicanos on the West Side, too: Judy Baca.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: Although, you know. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: She was doing a lot of painting. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: On the East Side. I mean, evidently she was one of the very first ones that did a mural. . . . You know, bandstand?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, in Hollenbeck Park.

FRANK ROMERO: Hollenbeck Park? I never quite knew where. And do you know the year?

JEFFREY RANGEL: In the band shell. I think it was '69, maybe?

FRANK ROMERO: So we're way. . . . You know, everyone else said Judy Baca was first. Except that nobody knew about it except Judy Baca and her friends, right? But that's the way it was. So we're actually. . . . That's very interesting, because my daughter was born here in L.A. in 1969. So Carlos and I are back in L.A. in '69 and talking to Gilbert, and we're doing murals in '71.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You can't quote me on that; '69 is [approximate].

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, yeah. No, that's all right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's right around there, though.

FRANK ROMERO: We're doing murals in '71. Actually got a little inner-city mural program, which Carlos actually worked as a coordinator on. The government gave us a grant of ten thousand dollars and rather than giving to one or two muralists they gave it to ten. [laughs]

Session 4, Tape 1, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, this is tape one, side B. Interview with Frank Romero on February 29.

FRANK ROMERO: So the Inner City Mural Program, which Carlos coordinated, and I did a mural, Gilbert Luján did a mural. Carlos did or did not? Those were all done around Whittier and Lorena, sort of that area in East L.A. That mural might have lasted twenty years. Most of them got hit kind of early. In those days, kids were hitting murals. But I've always been very lucky. Mine on the Hollywood Freeway was just finally hit, and it's been there thirteen years.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. That's kind of a hard one to hit, though. I mean you've got to go down there on the freeway and. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: I just crawled down there, walked down at night.

JEFFREY RANGEL: But there was a sense that there was really something kind of in the street happening?

FRANK ROMERO: I would say. . . . Yeah, the Inner City Mural Program, Self Help Graphics . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Parks and Recreation. Mechicano.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . Mechicano . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Goez.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . Goez, were sort of the Centros that developed in East L.A.-and along Whittier Boulevard and along Brooklyn Avenue, sort of like the major thoroughfares in Boyle Heights that were doing this kind of stuff. Then you get the Estrada Court murals, which was out of Goez, actually. I think they actually got a grant. There was always a grant involved. In those days, government actually funded. You know, we're talking about ten thousand dollars here, not a hundred thousand. But there was some funding. It's always seed money. We always buy Standard Brands paints, which used to be the cheap paint store in L.A. It wasn't at all artist quality. And so between '69 and '71, everybody's doing murals, sort of independently of one another, but these ideas are in the air. And all of a sudden, you know, you start doing Estrada Courts and you have a hundred and six

ends of buildings to paint. You do one, you do the next, next one. And we all did murals for all these groups. I think, one time that would be a good list to do. The members of Los Four, including Judithe Hernandez, just the five of us, maybe were responsible for thirty, forty murals. They're all gone.

JEFFREY RANGEL: All of them are?

FRANK ROMERO: Judithe Hernandez has the Virgen de Guadalupe, which is in very good shape, right there on. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Which one?

FRANK ROMERO: I don't know if you know it. It's on, I don't know, Spring Street or something, Hope Street.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Downtown?

FRANK ROMERO: Downtown. Right near the freeway on a county building or a city building. It's on the corner, and it's right off the over ramp of one of the freeways. So I don't know if that's Spring or Hope or Flower. It's in a strange location, but because of that it seems to have survived. John Valadez and Carlos did the one in Highland Park with the flying tortillas, and I understand that Leo Limón restored it a couple of years ago and it's in pretty bad shape but it actually exists. I mean, a remnant of it exists. Carlos did one for a union hall in the San Gabriel Valley, and I'm the only one that has a slide of it. But I suspect that it might exist, because it was indoors or at least in an inner courtyard. No one's sure. [laughs] That's a good question for Elsa.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. I'll ask her about that.

FRANK ROMERO: Because if an Almaraz exists. . . . And that he did for his uncle's railroad union hall mural. And, of course, we're always looking for the Cesar Chávez murals, and they seem to be gone-although I swear the ones. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: The ones you did on canvas, you mean?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, the one on canvas is lost. I have a slide of that myself. I have all this stuff somewhere, but you'd have to sit with me for a whole week and go through all of my slides to find them. I may have the only examples of these things [left]. That's right, so I do have a slide of that. What is that? The farmworker mural. And then he did one, sort of an homage to Cesar Chávez which isn't in the. . . . In the hallway on the way to some of the offices. I can't believe they would paint that one out. But again there's that insensitivity.

JEFFREY RANGEL: At the UFW [United Farm Workers-Ed.], you mean?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. There is that insensitivity on the part of the peasants! [laughs] They might have done it. But it was actually a wonderful picture of Cesar Chávez holding his hands out, kneeling, and talking to some children. It's a beautiful piece. And he did that up there . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: I haven't seen any.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . in the offices. And you've been up there in the last few years?

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, I haven't seen any sign of it circulating visually anywhere right now.

FRANK ROMERO: I might have. . . . So he did two pieces. I know the banner-I mean, from what I've heard-has disappeared in the world.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I heard it molded out.

FRANK ROMERO: This is probably true.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, because it was all rolled up.

FRANK ROMERO: And then, of course, probably ten years later, I curated the show called The Murals of Aztlán . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . and all those murals, which included Almaraz, Luján-this was done at the Craft and Folk Art Museum about '80 . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: '81, I think it was.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . '81. Valadez, Gronk, Willie, Judithe Hernandez, myself, and East Los Streetscapers.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: And I have the Almaraz mural right here. Elsa says she's going to. . . . So that one exists. Actually, I'm talking to the Getty [Museum-Ed.] about a mural show, and so some of these things may surface.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That would be great.

FRANK ROMERO: They're actually sort of interested in doing a mural show. And this fact, of course, the idea that. You see, we were very experimental. The fact that I suggested that we do portable murals, which is an idea that. . . . You know, I thought I heard something about Judy Baca discussing that recently. But the idea that I suggested it and actually did it, and that the murals are, you know, they're in storage most of their life-which preserves them, by the way. And they're done on acrylic, so they actually seem to be holding up very well. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, that's good. What do you think about the fact that. . . . I guess, I'm interested in how people now are interpreting the work that you guys were doing in the seventies and what the murals were. Something like a show on murals in the Getty, you know? It seems like in 1970 it would have been unheard of. And even in 1980 to have a show like you did in the Folk and Craft Museum was pretty unique.

FRANK ROMERO: It was pretty unique, and actually it's interesting that. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: And there was a lot of criticism about that.

FRANK ROMERO: A lot of criticism.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. The trouble is that when anyone puts anything in print it gets. . . . We're talking about Shifra Goldman making an off-hand comment that really didn't mean too much. Because we were there every day, and I designed the show so that it was open to the public. It was everything that, in a way, we as Chicanos and as artists wanted. I mean, we actually had a public that came and watched us paint and discussed ideas, and it actually helped shape our ideas. I was very much open. I was doing a free-association piece. I just painted what came to mind. The only sketch I had was something I did on a napkin. And the fact that the painting took six weeks-or eight weeks, I think. We were there for two months painting. And then we cleaned up the place a little bit, painted the floor black again, and had a formal opening. And then it was up for another six weeks.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It traveled, right?

FRANK ROMERO: It really didn't travel. It was scheduled to travel, and it eventually went to Bakersfield, University of . . . whatever. University in Bakersfield, UC campus. But it didn't travel, no. That was sort of the irony of it. Again, because we got some funding, but it was so little it was like we either had to do a catalog or a film, and in those days we were interested in experimental media so we did a film.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, the James Tartan film.

FRANK ROMERO: And the film has served us well. I still use it in my teaching . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Great.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . and it's on video now and that kind of stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What's your sense now about how people are talking about what was going on.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, because the mural movement sort of had a beginning and an end, in terms. . . . We're talking maybe '69 and it maybe ended in '89, maybe with the murals for the Olympics in '83. Which is just sort of defining moment, because that was sort of the end of the rasquache side to murals, which are still fun. It's funny because you're seeing a cycle now. You're seeing David. . . . The other Botello . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Paul.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . Paul going back and starting all over again and doing murals on the streets. It still goes on, and the truth is, I'm doing murals all the time but they're funded now. So they're indoors, and they cost \$150,000. But I think what happens, in a sense, what happens to all movements. . . . I see life with a grain of salt. You become establishment and you're absorbed and then nobody talks about you anymore because you're just the establishment. Maybe you don't even look at the murals. In my case, at least, they're more politically explosive than ever, but I do it with a lot of humor and tongue-in-cheek. I have one I did for the, what is it, Columbus's . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: The quincentennial?

FRANK ROMERO: . . . quincentennial, where he's having all the Indians on Hispaniola killed. But it's very pretty, and people go up and say, "What a pretty picture," and then they see what it's about and maybe walk away, because it is very disturbing. And he did. He was an awful, awful man. Why anyone celebrates this man is. . . . [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, it's very offensive.

FRANK ROMERO: I guess he had an ignoble end for very real reasons.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Let me ask you something about the way that Los Four kind of dissolved.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. But, again, I'm a Cancer, whatever that means. I mean, I've read it before. The Blue Rider in Germany-or the Fauves-the four artists. Or Picasso and Braque. People get together for various reasons and explore ideas, and they're visual. And sometimes these groups have a life. But I think our society tells you that artists are individuals.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: And eventually it had to happen that we sort of carved . . . or we were asked to show as an individual. And in a sense there was a lot of talk about Carlos selling out, deciding to make money. But the fact is, maybe after ten years of being part of Los Four and not having sold a painting, even though we were very well known, I think the truth is-you always sell something-but I sold a painting for a hundred and fifty bucks in those ten years. Carlos sold one for three hundred to a lady I still know. And stuff like that. But, I mean, we didn't sell art. We still had no access to galleries, and eventually ARCO [Corporation-Ed.] gave Carlos a show, which made a lot of. . . . Because I heard a lot of talk and by then he's not living with me especially. I think by that time he's married? But very close to the time that he's married. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: He was married in '81, I think.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, that makes sense, because. . . . Yeah, so he's already married to Elsa. Or just recently married. And I think part of that is, you get married, all of a sudden he has to worry about the baby! [laughs] Or this and that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Doesn't that coincide, though, with a whole decline in state and federal funding for more community-based art projects that [people were doing]?

FRANK ROMERO: It may be, like something we never even understood. No, but I think everyone gives you very noble ideas. You know, Carlos worked for three years as a social worker. He did give up painting. He thought it would be more exciting. And he worked with Mexican gangs in the old Jewish Community Center in East L.A. which was by then the Eastside Community Center. But he worked with Mexican gangs, which [are, were] sort of the bottom rung. They're sort of picked on by the police and the Chicano gangs. And he said in those three years that he'd worked as a social worker-I think something like eight, thirteen kids were shot, killed, or ended up in jail. One of them, he felt was his success story because he ended up on the board of the East Side Community Center. But after three years, he. . . . Carlos was very much interested in social causes, but it always somewhat perplexed me because I knew this guy had to paint, and after three years he said, "I have to paint." And it was a very simple choice on his part, and maybe the fact that he was actively pursuing what he did best led to a show at ARCO. ARCO was a place for "young emerging artists," quote-unquote, even though by that time we're. . . . [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: You're well-established.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . forty years old. No, but we hadn't sold. And didn't have galleries.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's the kind of ironic thing, though.

FRANK ROMERO: Didn't have galleries.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I mean, at that point your reputation had been solidified to some extent, but you weren't getting the play in the galleries.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, but no one. . . . Yeah, okay, so you say, "Wow! This is. . . ." But I understand the same is true of people like Ed Ruscha, a very-well-known Pop artist in the sixties. You know, really didn't any money till maybe ten, twenty years ago.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How was that transition for you?

FRANK ROMERO: Well. . . . So Carlos was at least somewhat criticized for the fact that he was a vendido, right? [laughs] The poor kid's trying to feed his family. And had a show at ARCO and did very, very well. Got a lot of wonderful press, broke attendance records, sold a lot of stuff, because it's sort of in the financial district in downtown Los Angeles, and it's where people buy art. You know, not down on Spring Street, because people are afraid for their lives to walk over the sleeping bodies or the dead bodies that they find there every morning. He did very well financially, and I think at that time he went with Saxon. . . . Was it Saxon?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Jan Turner?

FRANK ROMERO: Oh, it was the [Janus] Gallery.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Janus Gallery, right.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, which was Jan Turner and Dan Saxon.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: And had shows annually or every so often, and it was very successful. But also newly married and deciding that he wanted a little more out of life, he bought a house in a Hawaii and that kind of stuff, you know? Became more traveled. And then he was successful. Okay, so everybody else was pissed off at him, and I sort of. . . . I think Carlos and I both remarried about the same time, within a year of each other or so, year or two. I have a show at ARCO a year later. [chuckles]
The same thing happened to me. Broke attendance records, sold everything out of the show, got gallery representation. It's so funny. As soon as you had a show at ARCO. . . . Which is funny: here's a corporate giant despoiling all of Central America, killing people-indigenous peoples-destroying their habitats, and all of that, and, somehow, the art establishment in L.A.-to their discredit, I must say-just because you have a show at ARCO, you're legit. You're mainstream, almost. I was very lucky in that I was offered a slot because another artist, [_____-Ed.] [Terrell], who worked in plastic, was sort of destroying his body. I can't think of his name. He's a good friend of ours. It'll come to me later. You have to fill these gaps in. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's fine.

FRANK ROMERO: Anyway, the director of the gallery said, "You can have a show in three months or a year from now." And I smelled a rat or I smelled something. I am intuitive and I took three months, and I put an incredible show together in three months. And it changed my life. I started to sell art and had access to galleries and people knew who I was. And I got a wonderful, and I got [the cover. . . . And actually my favorite write-up [was-Ed.] by Suzanne Muchnic. It was a good show, and it showed everything I did rather than one aspect. I did a giant mural for the show and, as I say, I had three months, and I did it in seven weeks. I actually had Elsa Flores help me on it, so there's very much her hand in it, especially the sky. You can see that in the sky. Cheech [Marin] owns that piece now.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What mural was that?

FRANK ROMERO: It's called Mejico Mexico, spelled with a J and an X.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, okay.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, Mejico with a J, and Mexico, which is the Spanish. . . . To me, it was, again, a cross-cultural thing. It was Spanish and Mexican.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Done by a Chicano, raised in that [polyglot culture-Ed.].

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, done by a Chicano.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. What year was that show at ARCO? Was that '85?

FRANK ROMERO: ARCO. Well, no, it was. . . . The Olympics is '83?

JEFFREY RANGEL: '84.

FRANK ROMERO: '84. So it might have been right around. . . . It might have been '83 or '84. Or '85. [laughs] I have to look. I have to think here.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Just curious what general timeframe it is.

FRANK ROMERO: During the time of the Olympics. And, actually, whenever ARCO. . . . It was one year after Carlos's show.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Have you found that since you were able to make that transition that the content of your art has changed at all?

FRANK ROMERO: No.

JEFFREY RANGEL: No? You're still painting. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: I always did everything. Except maybe. . . . What happens is that-in my case, because I work all the time and I paint all the time and, you know, the fact that I had a show and learned how to sell art. . . . I mean, Carlos and I have a gift of gab in that sense that we're gregarious and like to talk to people, and the way you sell art in the real world-if you're not too frightened-is to talk to people. And if you talk to people enough they say, "Well, yeah, I like this guy and I'll take a little piece of him home," and they buy something. I rather like it. I don't see it. . . . I'm not cynical about it, because it's human nature. And some people talk to you longer and they're very interested in your ideas and your political positions and they buy it because they're fervently committed to your ideals.

So there are all these reasons that people buy art. In fact, one of them is because art is such an elitist, an alien idea to most people. I was just discussing that with you earlier. So if they don't know real artists they'll go to the eighty-nine percent of these other people who make art and they call themselves artists, because they have access to them. It's all access. People-you know, the fact that they know me and they know that I'm an artist-they want to have an artist in their house. It's a real need. Visual ideas are not discussed in our society. They're very alien. They have nothing to do with the bottom line. [laughs] You know, art is not an investment. I read this somewhere, but I'll make it up anyway. Ninety-eight percent of all the art ever made never goes up in value. You know, has no value. It's an idea. Art is an idea. It's free. And you give something to an artist to take home an idea, but you're paying for the idea-or just to help the artist feed his family. You can't buy the idea. The idea's free.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right, right.

FRANK ROMERO: We were discussing that. There are some commodities in the world. Art which is a real object, a physical object, but that embodies an idea. And that's the human part of art that I don't ever want to lose that idea that when you make a sale it's a human one-to-one situation. And it's hard. That's why it's hard for me to deal with galleries. [laughs] I like talking to people. I'm much better at doing that than they are.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How do you feel about introducing young people, kids, youth, to that idea as well?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, as I say, if you mention that, all of us were teachers. I actually worked at the junior art center for almost twenty years-you know, part time, two or three days a week. That's what I did. I'm back. I'm at Santa Monica College of Art, Design, and Architecture, which is a sort of off-campus school. It's part of the Santa Monica College system. We've always taught. We lecture. Gilbert lectures all the time. It's just part of what we are. I'm sort of playing with the idea, because I have a large facility that's used for a lot of things now. This is my studio. And it's just like. . . . Because there is no other. In a sense I am successful in that I have a 5,000-foot studio, and very few of my friends do. So I use it a lot for public access. People have meetings here, we have art auctions here, we have classes here. In a sense, maybe I'm becoming a centro, even though I'm for profit. [laughs] Let's turn it off a minute, just to go to the bathroom.

[Interruption in taping]

JEFFREY RANGEL: We're back.

FRANK ROMERO: I was talking about individual careers. So in a sense with the ARCO shows. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did Beto or Gilbert have a show at ARCO?

FRANK ROMERO: No.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Never? No.

FRANK ROMERO: What happened is that those few venues for emerging artists, like ARCO-and I mentioned Josine Ianco's Magical Mystery Tour Christmas show . . . Magical Tour Christmas show she had every year-were all for emerging artists that didn't have access to. . . . See, that's part of the idea of. . . . Because I think Los Four was always addressing the issue of access for minority artists, for non-mainstream people, and in a sense, even though ARCO was this curious institution, the administrations there-this was under [_____-Ed.] Anderson, you know-had a very-at least in L.A.-a very progressive policy towards funding the arts. They were actually very active . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I read about that.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . and they regressed. Yeah, they regressed under the new president. They've gone back to being the selfish corporate . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Multinational corporation.

FRANK ROMERO: . . . multinational corporation they used to be. You know, when they fund the arts in California where they're located-in Los Angeles-for a few million dollars, we're talking about nothing. This is a billion-dollar corporation. And they were basically down in the basement-the ARCO Center for the Visual Arts-but it was a player. I think, quite frankly, it did them ten times what they invested in it in PR.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm sure, yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: It's just they don't have a very forward-looking hierarchy at the moment. They're just out for corporate. . . . You know, it's the nineties. We're back to corporate greed and selfishness.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Downsizing.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, not ARCO. [laughs] ARCO's. . . . Well, they fire people and stuff like that, but they're making more money than ever. I don't know, who knows how long the oil reserves are going to last in the world?

JEFFREY RANGEL: So we were talking a little bit about the transition you made after the ARCO show, and maybe you can kind of give us an update about where your interests lie now. Or how they've developed from that time.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, I think so. I think after ARCO I had some access to galleries, but I didn't go with a gallery that especially worked with me. I think Carlos was very lucky in terms of the Janus Gallery he was with, in that he seemed to be doing very well in terms of sales and access to important collections and stuff like that. Eventually, I ended up with Robert Berman, who was really like the only guy in town who was championing Chicano art at that time. I eventually did very well. I've tried many galleries, unlike Carlos who actually stuck with one and he was lucky to stick with them. But eventually they went out of business, in Carlos's case--and Robert Berman, in my case--is sort of pursuing other interests, I think, now. But in the meantime I learned to play the game and became part of the art establishment. I teach with a school that only has professional artists there. I've now either outlived or have met all the dealers in L.A. I never got out of town very much, and actually I'm just sort of like starting all over, you go to New York. I just had some experiences with New York. . . .

Session 4, Tape 2, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . two, side A, an interview with Frank Romero on February 29, 1997. Okay.

FRANK ROMERO: We'll say that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Twenty-ninth?

FRANK ROMERO: Or tomorrow. . . . No, today's the first.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is today the first? Oh, well.

FRANK ROMERO: Tell us about it. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: We're in that . . .

FRANK ROMERO: In that area.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . in that gray zone today. It's all good.

FRANK ROMERO: Where's yesterday? Today's the second!

JEFFREY RANGEL: So you were saying about actually branching out to different places and showing in New York, and I wanted to ask you about the work that you're doing on New Mexico now, as well-or from New Mexico, I should say.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, as I say, because I have room-I've never had access-I can do fairly large. . . . This is not the world's biggest studio, but I can do, oh, a twelve-foot painting. Because I have sixteen-foot walls I can go sixteen feet. I can go maybe fifty feet before I start coming to barriers and things. And I actively pursue public arts projects. I'm still very much involved in public art, and it's still a struggle. Some of the things that artists won in the last couple of decades, like 1% for Art, has given artists a place in society that they haven't had since

maybe the WPA days where at least you got a salary to do public art. It's interesting. The scandals about public art is that, of course, most of the money goes for administration, where it was originally intended to put artists' creations in public spaces, and now it's going more and more to designers and architects and, basically, administrators who just sort of gobble up all the money. But nevertheless it has created a little niche there that artists didn't have twenty years ago to do public art and actually make some money-pay their overhead and their salaries and stuff like that. They're difficult to get-public arts projects-and they're not the most fun, because, again, in this very hostile climate that's anti-art in the federal government at the moment, there's so many restrictions put on. It's no longer free. It's censored.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How does the censorship work out? When you present them a sketch or an idea then they modify it?

FRANK ROMERO: No, it's in the prospectus: No nudity. No political themes. No. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: They say that straight up? No political themes. So you try and work it in underhandedly? [chuckles]

FRANK ROMERO: Sometimes, to some extent. I do work that's blatantly political and I do it because I want to do it and it's not done at public expense. I think maybe, "Gee, Republicans might even buy that idea, subscribe to that idea." [laughs] I don't have to do protest pieces especially in a public arts project, but nevertheless. . . . Like I have one now that I'm actually a finalist. I'm one of five finalists in Denver, and I've been trying to get some information from Denver or from the architects, and it's sort of skewed to the fact that they deal with it by not returning my calls. So I'm finding it very difficult even to respond, and they give you so little money. I'm a finalist and they're giving me a thousand dollars, which doesn't even allow me to do any research or even fly there. So I may just say no to the project, even though it's \$94,000.

And these things are designed that way. You know, there's always nepotism. They probably have a favorite that lives in Denver that they want the job to go to. I never know. The politics of all these things is already so skewed twenty years after the introduction of these 1% programs that. . . . Sometimes I think it's big brother. It's these strange things where you come up with themes that are sort of safe rather than daring or exciting. But, then again, sometimes doing a sweet government piece that doesn't offend anyone maybe allows you to carry on your own work, but, eh, you know. That's a big debate, right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: These decisions that you have to make.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, in life. Just sell out to the devil [laughs].

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Wow, who would want to go there?

FRANK ROMERO: [still laughing] Compromise.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, I guess that leads me to my next question then, about maybe how you see the role of an artist, generally, to comment on things that you see in your life. Do you see that as a responsibility? Do you not? Is it something that. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I think that's. . . . I have to admit: I worked for thirty years, basically as a graphic designer. And I worked for some very prestigious people and learned the business. But what I understand about design and these kind of applied arts is that you do compromise. You know, you work for a client and you do their bidding. And they're always making. . . . everyone is always vying for their point of view, and I think designers, if they're clever, again, sneak it in. Maybe not over the objections of the client, but they have to win the client over. And it's a very difficult thing, and maybe this is why I'm starting to have reservations about a great deal of public art, is that you're in that situation again of making compromises. And when I hit forty, I decided to stop working for people and paint, because that's what I intended to do when I was very young, and I didn't want to lose that opportunity. So I think [for-Ed.] an artist-like a pure scientist-some things are about truth and some things are about your own ideals. And this is why I'm an artist and not a designer or a commercial paint artist. And I fear that a great deal of public art is becoming a compromise. So these large public projects that I used to go after won't happen. I'd rather paint and deal with ideas that are relevant to my concerns. I can only talk about pieces that are done in the past. The Olympics were not about nudity, and they weren't about. . . . We were told not to do political themes. And how does that color your work? I defied them, and I painted two Greek wrestlers wrestling in the nude.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

FRANK ROMERO: And I'm shocked! In fact, I'm rather hurt that no one complained. [laughs] So I got away with it, and yet Willie Herrón did two wrestlers-[luchaderos]-in masks and he was asked to change the masks or remove the masks because they felt that they looked like terrorists.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: So in a sense I wasn't censored and I thought I would be.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, but you're dealing with classical themes.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, that's right, that's right. The artist always got away doing naked people by making them classic. But Willie got censored. And there was some concern about Baca's piece. I'm not sure. I'm not quite sure.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The mural?

FRANK ROMERO: Judy Baca did. Well, I'm not sure. So that's a reservation. But anyway there were very few objections made, but there were some made. I just completed a piece for the MTA [Metropolitan Transit Authority-Ed.], and, quite frankly, I chose a very safe piece-although it was a celebration of our multiculturalism in Los Angeles.

JEFFREY RANGEL: This isn't the same piece for the Blue Line, is it?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, the MTA piece. But it's not blatantly political, except I have Chicanos in there. I mean, I say a lot of stuff. It is subtle. [laughs] It is subtle. But it wasn't about violence on the streets of L.A. or stuff like that. And I really didn't feel it was relevant or important to make that kind of statement in a subway station, quite frankly. But still, I always wonder. Maybe I would have preferred to do a totally abstract piece or. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: You know, when you said there was a point where you made a decision not to pursue public projects and really sort of paint for yourself. Was that when you were able to address the themes like closing the Whittier Boulevard [and] the death of Rubén Salazar?

FRANK ROMERO: They were done for myself, yeah. And it's basically. . . . In my studio I have to deal with my own devils, and I wrestle with my own concerns and dreams and fears. That's what I do and the truth is the fact that ten years after I do such a piece I actually find someone who's willing to support me or buy it. It's gratifying to some extent, but I don't know if. . . . I'd do them anyway, and I do.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's a necessity.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. And, you know, that's what being an artist is about. So I'm sort of backing away from at least public funding because of the. . . . Maybe if I got the government to give me some money, I might end up doing a "Piss Jessie Helms," which I think would be much more relevant. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'd love to see it!

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, that was my take-or my comment-on the censorship of the arts, that Congress is a. . . . Or just the total lack of funding.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. So let me ask you this. How do you. . . . What's the word I'm looking for? Maybe some comments or reflections about where you see Chicano art heading.

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I'm kind of gratified that there are another generation going back to the streets. [laughs] Because you go through this huge struggle and you assess it ten years later, and, you know, really a few people were let in, and you can sit here and name them. For some reason Gronk and Luján and Romero and Almaraz were sort of let in the door, but there's twenty years after that of people that have come up and down, but they're not in. It's just as hard, so the whole thing is to do that again. Or try to consolidate. Like, if I do have access to things, it's try to get some other people in the door, find some way. ARCO closed; Josine was fired. There aren't those venues that were just there a few years ago, but then finally maybe Self Help Graphics is starting to really get some belated recognition, and they have a little gallery that showcases young Chicano artists. It's on the wrong end of town so you don't get the press out there. Whatever. The struggle goes on. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: This has been good. I want to give you a chance now just to, if you have any closing comments or anything like that that you might want to. . . .

FRANK ROMERO: Closing comments are difficult because art is. . . . It's kind of fun to watch a cycle. I've never. . . . And, again, I'm always talking about a sense of history, because I understand that art has up-and-down cycles and they're very closely tied to the economy.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure.

FRANK ROMERO: And right now all artists, even established ones, are struggling to make a living. And yet we're sort of poised for maybe a recovery in terms of that area. There may be another up-cycle coming because we've been in a down-cycle for the last five years-sort of with the ascent of the Republican Congress and hostility towards all the arts including painting and dance. So it's a new struggle to redefine how that is all going to . . . and in the meantime just trying to get some Latinos in. And yet I'm sort of almost sort of almost part of the establishment. I do a Christmas show every year, and I showcase twelve to fifteen artists, a great deal of them minority people. And maybe in a sense to some extent I'm doing what Josine used to do. And in a sense I guess we're trying to do that ourselves.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: Whatever I learned. . . . And I had to do it myself, you know. I think even Andy Warhol and some of these people-[Jean Michel-Ed.] Basquiat-that came up in the eighties in a sense learned how to manage their own careers. It used to be something that a dealer did for you and that, for whatever reasons, they can't do that anymore. But so an artist has to be savvy in a lot of other areas. Or at least align themselves with people who can help them. And we all [do it]. This is what we're into at the moment.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, it's nice to hear the idea of reciprocity.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Like trying to open spaces that you have access to to others who may not at any given time.

FRANK ROMERO: Anyway, maybe that's enough for today. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: All right.

[End of interview]

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