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Oral history interview with Kathy Vargas,  
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**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Kathy Vargas on August 28, 1997-November 25, 1997. The interview took place in San Antonio, Texas, and was conducted by Jacinto Quirarte for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Kathy Vargas and Jacinto Quirarte have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

[TAPE 1 SIDE A, begins with interview in progress.]

JACINTO QUIARTE: We were talking about Con Safo and Los Quemados. So this is your first experience with Chicano artists?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIARTE: Did you maintain relationships with some of these people after you stopped being a member?

KATHY VARGAS: Some of them. Not too much because in a sense they all scattered. Like I remember Santos Martinez was a part of the group, and then he went out of state and I haven't seen him in years. I still hear about him from time to time. Of course, [Mel] Casas, I've always kept in touch with. Robert Gonzalez and Rosario, especially I still see. We've talked about that, we've talked about our days with Con Safo and how we felt about it then and how we feel about it now. And Rudy [Trevino] I've kept up with a little bit, even. Of course [overlapping voices] and, we keep up with Rudy a little bit. I've kept up with him before he became the Tejano king, when he was teaching art at Lanier we did things together.

JACINTO QUIARTE: Yes. He even had mural, I think. So when did you decide to go to UTSA?

KATHY VARGAS: Well, I guess it was the next logical step after San Antonio College, and there weren't too many public places to go to school in San Antonio. So that was the main choice, really, for a B.F.A.

And so I started going to UTSA in 1977 and did not go full-time. I was going part-time the whole time that I was in the Bachelors program because I was working -- I was continuing to work part-time at the place that made the TV commercials, for Bob Maxham, who was a commercial photographer. So I was doing different photographic things.

JACINTO QUIARTE: Who were the major influences there? I assume it was in photography --

KATHY VARGAS: In photography, it was Tom Wright [at the Southwest School of Art and Craft]. That's a goody, because I always tease Neil [photography teacher at UTSA] that he didn't teach me anything. [Laughter] -- because in a sense, by the time I went to UTSA, I was pretty much formed as an artist, I think. And I did change, and I do have to give Neil credit for that. I was 27 years old and I had already had shows, I had already been in photo-shows. I had even gotten into one of the Art League shows, which was the big thing in San Antonio at the time.

So I have to give credit to Jim Newberry, who really improved my technique tremendously, and because I was doing documentary work at the time and he was an excellent documentary photographer I did learn quite a bit from him as far as technical expertise -- how to frame things, how to see more completely. He taught me the very beginnings of the 4x5 camera. And I think, when I give credit to Neil, the two things I have to give credit to Neil for are his teaching me the 4x5 more completely, which is the camera that is still my favorite camera; and my fighting with him because --

JACINTO QUIARTE: He was another Mel in that respect.

KATHY VARGAS: He was another Mel in that respect. He didn't mean to be, I don't think; and it's funny: I don't think he expected a student who would argue with him. Unfortunately, or fortunately, Mel had taught me to argue. And it was really funny, because Neil and I really did not get along for the first year that I was at UTSA. We were coming from completely different backgrounds both personally and artistically. I was doing portraits at the time and he really did not like my doing portraits.

JACINTO QUIARTE: What did he want you to do?

KATHY VARGAS: That's a good question. He didn't bother to tell me that but he didn't like portraits. He was very honest, he said, "It's my problem, I don't like portraits." And I persisted in doing portraits for quite a long time, until I really got into the 4 x 5 and the 4 x 5 really doesn't lend itself to portraiture unless you have a huge studio, because people move and you get blur. But I think he was the one who in a sense made me fight for what I wanted to do, and made me question myself as an artist. But there was a give-and-take with us, that he would challenge me and I would challenge him back, that we would push. It was literally like a tug of war -- that he would pull and I would pull back, you know -- an intellectual tug of war, of course. But that was going on.

Of course, I always credit both Chicano art classes and the pre-Colombian art classes that I took with you, and I think in that sense learning was different for me at UTSA, but I wasn't so much learning photography, because I was pretty much set in my ways in photography, but that I was learning from other departments.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Enlarging your scope of experience.

KATHY VARGAS: And I got a lot out of the pre-Columbian classes -- because what happened is that I began to remember the stories that my dad used to tell me; he always used to say that we were indigenous people, that we weren't Spaniards, and he had enough of his own family history to know that we came from Oaxaca and that there was probably some -- and he never said, Zapotec and Mixtec that's what I learned in your class, but he said we're from Oaxaca. And he always used to talk about the bat deity, he didn't call it a bat deity but he used to say there was this guy that looked like a bat. So he had some of it from his own ancestry. My mother, on the other hand, was always mildly embarrassed when my grandmother would say that side of the family was Huichol -- "No we're not, we're French, we're Spanish --" [rest obscured laughter].

JACINTO QUIRARTE: -- mention "we chose it."

KATHY VARGAS: Because they're from Zacatecas and she would talk about how the Huichol would come down from the mountain. She would say that we were descended from both Huichol and French, because we did have -- she had one wonderful family picture, I don't know who's got it now, I don't know how many great-grandmother, and here was this little short squat Indian woman and this tall, lean European-looking man with pale hair and pale face and this bigote that went out for miles and trails upward and must have had tons of moustache wax on it. And that was in it, that was where it came together, for my mom's side of the family.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: In a way this is backtracking: Since your mother, like so many Mexican-Americans, Hispanics, Chicanos, Latinos, have an uncertain sense of their own identity so that they try to grapple with it. In your mother's case, if I understand it, she wanted to emphasize the European rather than the indigenous.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: How did that affect you?

KATHY VARGAS: Well, in a sense it didn't, because my grandmother always argued in the other direction.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: She brought the thing down to earth.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. I guess the other thing is, my mother was never a Chicana, even later on, even when I called myself a Chicana she would always tell me, "Don't you call me a Chicana, I'm not a Chicana, I'm a Mexican-American." But actually she was a Mexican.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: What did your mother do? Did she work?

KATHY VARGAS: She worked. She was a salesclerk for a long time, she worked at a paint store, I remember, at Jones Paint. And then she worked at Solo Serve, a department store, for a long time, and then she started working at Kelly Air Force Base, but even at Kelly she was some kind of a clerk-type person. That's what my mom did.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Is she still alive?

KATHY VARGAS: No, she passed away a little bit over a year ago.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Sorry, I didn't know.

KATHY VARGAS: They all followed each other pretty closely. My dad passed away in '91, my grandmother in '92, and my mom in '96.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: So now you're completely alone now?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I should have asked that.

KATHY VARGAS: That's okay. I'm taking over the house, it's my studio now [she laughs].

JACINTO QUIRARTE: So Newberry had tremendous influence on you, and of course Neil, as you've also indicated.

KATHY VARGAS: As did you --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: -- courses in pre-Colombian --

KATHY VARGAS: And even Dr. Adams, and I think I only ever took one course from him. But again it was going back into that pre-Colombian -- I would sit in on courses, I had friends in the anthropology department. I would sit in on things that I found interesting. I was just curious.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: This is the very productive first session. As in other cases, I always thought it was appropriate to do a preliminary discussion, so we can then talk about what directions we need to take the interview in future sessions.

[LATER]

JACINTO QUIRARTE: This is day two, August 29, the taping of the interview with Kathy Vargas will continue today. We have focused on her early years, her early schooling, her upbringing and the people she met when she first became aware of the area in which she wanted to get involved, that is, photography; and the people she met. Okay. This is day two of our interview with Kathy Vargas.

[TAPE 1, SIDE B.]

On a more informal basis, I have posed a question two or three times, then it begins to be a problem, but I'm primarily interested in learning more about your experience in the classroom and how this had an impact on your development as an artist.

KATHY VARGAS: I think what happened -- we were talking about after my getting a Bachelor's degree and then going to graduate school around '81 -- and I think what happened is that I was having both positive and negative experiences in graduate school. And the realities were that for the positive what I was learning from my immediate instructor, Neil Maurer, was how important it was to be a committed artist and what that meant. And that meant always searching, always being open to change, having a commitment to explore and to experiment.

And I was getting that from Charles Field as well. He was the painting instructor, and what happened is that as I began taking painting, I began hand-coloring some of my images. Both Neil and Charles would visit me -- I was in a graduate studio at the time -- to see how my painting on photo-graphs was going along; and when my painting on photographs left a lot of the photograph exposed, then Neil Maurer would cheer, and when the photograph had been totally covered with paint, then Charles Field would cheer. Because one of them was a photographer and the other was a painter. And it was kind of interesting, but in a sense they were both very committed to my just exploring, to doing as many different experiments as I needed to do without having per se a finished product.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And at the graduate level you really would be doing things like that? Unlike undergraduate, I suppose, when they give you a problem and you do this, you do that. How did that affect your work with some of the other faculty that you had to work with?

KATHY VARGAS: It was really interesting, because I always had ideas, I always had a direction. I would get in trouble even with Neil for putting lace on my photographs because that was termed "women's work" and you didn't want to be doing women's work if you wanted to be a successful artist, because it was too limiting. At the same time I was hearing "Well, why do you have all those little dead things in your photographs?" I tried to explain to somebody about "The Day of the Dead" but I'd learned through going through the women's problem that you just don't want to talk to them about it because they just don't get it. And you just kind of go, "Oh, I'm very idiosyncratic, I have a weird mind." That would tend to make them go away. So in a sense a lot of my teachers tended to not talk to me.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: They just couldn't deal with culture-specific imagery, is that it?

KATHY VARGAS: They couldn't deal with culture-specific imagery, they didn't understand that that's what it was, they couldn't deal with female-specific imagery because they did understand that that's what it was -- so it was a no-win situation.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: So, you really had your own direction.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. I had my own direction. I wasn't really worried about getting their kudos or their approval.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: That's amazing! So you had a double-barreled -- you had the gender problem and --

KATHY VARGAS: The gender problem and the culture problem, yes. So it was a double whammy.

I was taught not to expect anything, and so anything that I got was wonderful and a marvel and still is to this day, I still have no expectations. But what I was taught both by Neal's example and by my own stubbornness, in a sense, was just to keep going. And to keep exploring and to keep growing as an artist and to not expect the world to fall at your feet. And so when I get great projects, it's like blessings from Heaven and thank you very much but I'm going to go ahead and do my work whether I get them or not.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And there's never been any feedback as far as the, let's say, graduate students and the faculty? Is there ever any way that they can see that they're being so dense?

KATHY VARGAS: I doubt it. The ones I feel badly for are the students, because -- I went in as an older student, and I went in as somebody who pretty much knew who I was. You know, I didn't get my Master's degree until I was 33 years old, and I was only in the undergraduate program for three years. So by the time I went into my graduate degree, I was already 30. I knew who I was culturally, I had had the experience of Con Safo. I knew who I was in myself, I knew who I was as a woman, I knew the type of work I wanted to make.

But at the same time, I wasn't going to "grow and change" to the point that I denied who I was. But I was negatively influenced by my teachers, and I was negatively influenced by their saying, "You need to be universal, if you want to be successful." And for three or four years I was influenced by that. Because, as I've always said, you expect your teachers to know more than you do, number one. And number two, you don't expect your teachers to lie to you. It's not an expectation that students have.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Distance--

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, and in a sense you do place teachers on a pedestal. In retrospect, I've come to question, at a remove, I think. Come my last semester, I began to look at things more from a distance, and I think in a sense I think Jeff Perone had a lot to do with that, he was there my last semester. And if anybody told me there was a big world out there, it was Jeff Perone. He was a critic, he was himself an artist, he was from New York, he was the person that the art department had brought in as the ultimate authority at the time that he came in, and he basically looked at their primo artists that they were promoting --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Didn't he write a negative article on the art department?

KATHY VARGAS: He wrote a very negative article on the art department --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I never read it but --

KATHY VARGAS: It was -- and he said some interesting things that were true, and one of the things he noticed was that the department seemed to be putting down the strongest component they had, which was the cultural influence of San Antonio and the Latino cultural influence on San Antonio, and that that was not felt at the school, that was not a part of their interest, and he said you're trying to recreate New York basically out in the provinces, when the strongest thing you've got is what you're denying.

And he said that, and he talked about racial slurs within the city itself, because he was browner, he wasn't totally pale, he wasn't Latino and he wasn't really Mediterranean -- he was mildly Mediterranean because he had that background but he wasn't really in a sense enmeshed in that culturally. But because he was a darker-skinned person, he was treated as a Latino in the sense that --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Really? I hadn't heard this -- I never met him.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes! He said that he would go into stores and "people would speak Spanish to me" and expect him to answer in Spanish. [Laughter] He didn't know a word of Spanish, but at the same time he saw how Chicanos and Latinos were treated in San Antonio by non-Latinos. Basically, he looked at me and said, "How do you guys put up with this?"

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Because [laughing] you were born into it.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly. Been through it all our lives! In a sense we've gotten used to it, but he wasn't used to it. And so one of the things his article mentioned was the slur of being called a "messican" [phonetic slur], you know; that it's not about being Mexican, it's not about being Mexican-American, but it's about that slur. It's not even the attempt to define or to allow self-definition or to have it pronounced correctly, whatever the title is.

JACINTO QUIARTE: So do you think that -- well, you have expressed this in writing in recent issues, we'll get to that later -- but I think it's a more universal problem across the country [she confirms], and that's the misunderstanding between the different ethnic groups, different culture groups in this country that periodically you see explosions in violence, but it's a real basic rift. And it's because minority groups regardless of the background have to be constantly being validated by the people who presumably know what the world is about and they see it in what in Texas they call an "anglo" view of the world.

I've always been astounded by that. I have lived and worked with these faculty but I have never ever been able to get through to them or the very few times that I've actually mentioned some of these things- it's incomprehensible; Because then they hide behind "Well, we have to think in terms of quality, after all." Well, who determines quality? No matter how many times I've talked to them about some of these things, it's something that they have lived with their entire lives and they can't seem to get out from under that kind of limited view.

KATHY VARGAS: It's true. I mean, in a sense it also challenges their status quo.

It's a strange notion. It's funny, because there are art historians that you'd think they'd get hip to the idea that it's the unhip that usually lasts. I mean, look at the Impressionists: they weren't the salon, you know. Almost every major movement that happened was not what was accepted at the time, it was what had to fight. It's like -- you're art historians, do you have any concept of what you're doing, you know, in your own time?

JACINTO QUIARTE: When did your world begin to change? Obviously it didn't happen right after you got your degree, because you were already exhibiting and you continued to exhibit, but when did you feel that you had turned a corner professionally -- if that happened?

KATHY VARGAS: Well --

JACINTO QUIARTE: -- if you express it that way.

KATHY VARGAS: -- yes, I was going to say I don't think I've ever turned a corner professionally, so to speak, in the sense that it's been a slow-growing process. And it's not so much as "going around a corner" as just going down a path, you know? But as far as in a sense opening my mind, so to speak. I would say it started with Jeff Perrone; it certainly began with Jeff Perrone.

JACINTO QUIARTE: He was here in '84 --

KATHY VARGAS: He was here in '84 and he was here the semester that I got my Master's degree, and he was probably the one person who told me it was okay to be myself. And who told me that it was okay to be a woman and he told me it was okay to be a Latina, Chicana, whatever, and that it was okay to be me and that it was okay to express that in my art.

And it was interesting, because things were exploding again, and began to explode again, I guess, in the mid-'80s. I talked to Malaquias Montoya about that; in a sense about the trail of my own life that in the late '60s and certainly through the mid-'70s I was much more politically active. And I think what was more interesting in my early life, even in Con Safo, I wasn't aware of art as a political instrument when I was very young but I was aware of politics, because I grew up in a very political family.

When I was ten years old I remember shaking hands with Lyndon Johnson because my uncle was in the Democratic Party, and when I was about 17 or 18 I remember a guy by the name of Tom Cahill, who was heading up a little newspaper on Frio City Road, and it was part in a sense of a Mexican-American-Chicano civil rights movement. My mother when I was younger was a part of COPS through the churches was a part of the whole COPS movement and was the person in our parish who even when I didn't know what the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center was, you know, brought the Guadalupe to our church to teach Mariachi classes [Spanish words in 2 lines above].

So I was aware in a sense of Chicaneness, of Latinness, but not the art per se. I was aware of it as political tool. Tom Cahill was very involved with the Brown Berets, which was a very political movement. So all of these were political things -- you know, COPS, and the Brown Berets and running newspapers, fighting against the Good Government League; I was very aware of that.

JACINTO QUIARTE: COPS -- I know who they are but I'm trying to remember what the acronym stands for,

KATHY VARGAS: Citizens Organized for Public Service -- something like, I can't remember what the acronym is either, but it is definitely a grassroots citizens group, and remains that; that in a sense it was individuals in communities. It might be [titled] "Communities Organized for" because it is a community focus. And the same thing was true of the Brown Berets, that the Brown Berets were trying to get people to get out to vote. They

were also in a sense policing the police and trying to in a sense to police their neighborhoods so that there wouldn't be a cause for bringing in the police.

The other thing that was happening was that the Good Government League, which was almost all white had held sway for years. And it was at a time when redistricting was happening. It was right after Hemisphere.

And it's interesting, because the old German houses, King William, survived but if you go through the remnants of, like, Dakota Street and Florida Street, you'll see what are just as elaborately huge two-story houses, one or two of them left, that were owned by the upper-echelon Chicanos and Latinos. And that's what got leveled for Hemisfair.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Because that community had no political power.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly. And the land that a lot of it sat on was owned by white developers who said okay, you're out now, and took it over through eminent domain, took it over through city politics. And so I think what happened is, shortly after that there was this huge outcry from the Latino community the Southwest voters registration project began to come into effect. Latinos all over Texas, Chicanos all over Texas found out about the power of the vote.

And so I was very much involved -- I was always protesting the war in Vietnam, so I was very politically active with both Chicano causes and mainstream causes. And one of the reasons we were protesting the war in Vietnam was because it was lower-economy Chicanos and blacks who were being called to the war, and whereas the people who had more money and power who were Anglo could buy their way out, in a sense.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: So when you entered the program at UTSA it was as if there was your life here and then the art program had nothing to do with your own life or what you believed in.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. It was totally disconnected. I went home to another world. And in that sense both my mother and my father were very politically active. My father through the actual process of the Democratic Party and my mom through grassroots church groups. So it was a different world. That's another thing that I think that students face when there is no faculty on there that they can talk to, that they can relate to.

There is a schism in a sense: if you happen to be Latino, and you happen to be in that world and you come from the west side or the east side or any side but the north side almost, there is a schism that happens, and in a sense that's an issue of what the role of UTSA is in this community.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: That's what was even more offensive about the controversies that we could get into in --

KATHY VARGAS: When I was much younger I was very politically active because there were a lot of issues we had to address.

And then we got change -- we got Henry Cisneros in as mayor, the Good Government League fell, we had good presidents for a while -- Jimmy Carter was a good president -- and we kind of sat back and took it easy and said "Oh, the battle is won." We had equal opportunity in hiring, we had things that protected women, we had things that protected minorities. We were set, you know? We said, "Okay, we're in good shape now." And through a lot of the '80s, even after the first couple or three years of Reagan, we were still in a sense sitting back and enjoying the prosperity and thinking that we'd won the battles.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I can understand now your reluctance when you were in my class, I guess in '79, Chicano art class, a seminar, that I talked about doing the home altars and you were hesitant at first, if I remember.

KATHY VARGAS: Well, I didn't know they were there. My thing with doing the home altars --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I think what it was is that you were hearing what is art --

KATHY VARGAS: Oh, totally.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And this is culture or culture-based, how could we take that seriously, they said.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. And even there was another thing that was happening too, is that that was folk art. And that's the other thing that happened. And again, going back back to the problems with trying in a sense to "sell" the pre-Colombian class now, is that that's not real art. The one was folk art and the other was it's ancient stuff and it's cultural and it's not anything that's relevant to you. And in a sense that's what I was hearing. "This is not anything that's relevant to you." And then what happened is that once I started investigating the altares the nichos -- some people call them nichos -- once I started out investigating them and found out, number one, how many of them there were, that this is like a huge expression and, number two, that I connected with the people; and that was the big thing too, that was a big eye-opener for me, that I connect with these people.

But you also have to remember, I was coming from the east side. I was coming from the east side, I had not lived on the west side. I didn't know that they were there --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You didn't know about those --

KATHY VARGAS: And really in a sense I knew that there were a lot of Latinos, I knew all the facts, I knew the population base, I knew all of that stuff, I didn't know where they were. The farthest I had gone. It was a wonderful discovery, because in a sense the furthest I had gone was Frio City Road to go hang out with the Brown Berets who were running the newspaper and trying to overthrow the Good Government League. In a sense it wasn't a socialization, it was a politicization but not a socialization, when I began to do the nichos, then I began to socialize with those people, I began to get invited to birthday parties for the kids, and the piñ ata parties and the come-to-the-wedding; and my family was not a big family, so we didn't have that experience, we didn't have the experience that most people have of the wedding --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: But you never think of Latinos having massive or network.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly. My dad came from a big family but his big family didn't have many children. So I didn't have many playmates. My mother only had a brother and he was much older and his children were all grown. So I didn't have that growing-up relationship that most Chicano kids have, I was an only child, so --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: That's very unusual!

KATHY VARGAS: It's very unusual for a Chicano family, for a Latino family. So I didn't have that social experience.

[TAPE 2, SIDE A.]

JACINTO QUIRARTE: This is a recap of the interview that I conducted with Kathy Vargas on August 28, 1997 at the annex to the Guadalupe Cultural Center. This is for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Kathy Vargas on November 7, 1997 at the annex to the Guadalupe Cultural Center in San Antonio. The interviewer is Jacinto Quirarte.

We will begin the recap with some of the notes that I kept during that first interview. Among the very first things you gave me was your birthdate of June 23, 1950 in East San Antonio. Among the people you mentioned were Agustín Lara [Mexican composer], Xavier Solís, and that you really were raised in a bicultural area with Chicano and African-American people, and that you went to -- I assume that this is the school, the Sister of the Holy Ghost and Mary Immaculate?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. I went to grade school at Our Lady of Perpetual Help which was run by those nuns, and my aunt was also one of them but they had their convent on the east side, three blocks from us.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I wrote down Rodarte and Rosie. What was that?

KATHY VARGAS: Frank Rodarte [Blues, Jazz, and Tejano saxophonist] was a wonderful blues saxophonist who grew up about three houses from my own door and his parents and my parents were old friends from way back, from when they were children. It was just interesting that we all had that African-American blues-jazz influence and that he became --he's very much a Tejano musician but he's also a blues --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: What's his first name?

KATHY VARGAS: Frank. Rosie was my best friend when I was little, before I went to grade school, ever. She and I would literally run round and play; and she was African- American.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh I see -- I didn't write that down the last time. And you attended our Lady of Perpetual Help grade school. You mentioned that you lived with your grandmother and she spoke Spanish only?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. My grandmother lived with us. My grandmother lived with my parents -- she was my mother's mother -- and she spoke Spanish only. She understood English but she really didn't want to speak it.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: She was like my grandmother!

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. She was always embarrassed of her accent. If she ever had to pick up the phone if no one was home, she'd pick up the phone and say, "No speaky english," and hang up. That was about all she would say. She made me --well, not only I had to know Spanish to speak to her, but she made me learn to read when I was about three or four years old because her eyesight was failing and she wanted somebody to read the newspaper from the church, *La Voz* [*The Voice*, a Spanish language newspaper], the Catholic newspaper, so she taught me to read Spanish way before I could even speak English well, because she wanted someone to read to



her.

JACINTO QUIARTE: And who was Sister Lionel?

KATHY VARGAS: Sister Lionel was my high school -- I went to St. Gerard High School and she was my high school art teacher. She was absolutely wonderful. She had a royal temper and she was every inch the temperamental artist. But she was also a very accomplished artist, personally a very accomplished artist, which was unusual for a nun.

She was the one -- I remember I was not a good painter, I knew I was a bad painter even then, and I was working away at something, at some muddy painting, one day and she came up behind me and I thought, oh, she's going to just tell me to give it up, and she said, "Oh, that's very good, very good," and I looked at her like she was absolutely nuts [both laughing] and I told her, "But I can't get it right, the colors aren't mixing -- " And she said, "Technique can be learned. You have ideas and that's what's important." And that always stayed with me, it's always been a guiding force. And sure enough: eventually my technique was photography.

JACINTO QUIARTE: Now, is that the Sisters of Notre Dame? Is that where I got that? [she confirms] And that was on Yucca Street?

KATHY VARGAS: No, the Sisters of the Holy Ghost were on Yucca Street, the Sisters of Notre Dame were on Iowa Street.

JACINTO QUIARTE: And this is all in East San Antonio?

KATHY VARGAS: It's all in East San Antonio, it was all within a very close walking distance of everything.

JACINTO QUIARTE: I want to interject here what I should have said at the very beginning, and that is that the reason we're recapping is that I had technical difficulties with the tape recorder I used the first time. We continue now.

I also notice that one of the earliest influences or experiences was with the Antonio Valdez Photo Studio?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. That was my uncle --

JACINTO QUIARTE: In Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. He was himself a photographer. He would occasionally come to San Antonio. He was a very unique person, but a good person. He would come to San Antonio. I remember he came once to photograph the Golden Gloves [pugilist event] but he couldn't get in, he couldn't get tickets, apparently his press pass didn't work. And so he sat in front of our TV set and photographed the Golden Gloves off the TV screen --

JACINTO QUIARTE: [Laughing] I remember that night.

KATHY VARGAS: So that was pretty crazy. But every now and then he would let me hand-color some things, he would teach me how to color, let me do lips or cheeks, or something like that. And so that really motivated my interest not only in photography but in hand-coloring.

JACINTO QUIARTE: Now, I wrote down "Periodista staff."

KATHY VARGAS: He was a photojournalist. He eventually had his own studio. He started out as a photojournalist for the newspaper. And certainly when he was doing Golden Gloves it was for the newspaper in Nuevo Laredo.

JACINTO QUIARTE: And where did the velvet paintings come in? Did we mention that?

KATHY VARGAS: That's probably because my mother loved the things. [Both laugh.]

JACINTO QUIARTE: So does my mother!

KATHY VARGAS: That was the height of art to her in the '50s and '60s [he confirms: the velvet paintings] -- yeah, the velvet paintings. And it was very strange, because we always had very different tastes in art. But for a while, I guess when I was about ten years old or so, about 1960, they were definitely a thing of beauty, this was what my mother presented to me as a thing of beauty, and I completely agreed with her. Later on and probably in the late '60s I thought, "Oh, no! those velvet paintings --" But certainly when I was about ten years old I absolutely loved them.

JACINTO QUIARTE: Now, you mentioned that in 1964-'65 you became aware of the work of Thaddeus McCall, his drawings in the downtrodden; he's an African-American artist.

KATHY VARGAS: He's an African-American artist who opened up a little gallery in La Villita and had absolutely wonderful drawings, and when I saw those drawings I thought, "That's what I want to do and that's what I want to talk about." So it was both the technique and the subject matter --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And what was Martín Ybarra [Mexican American artist] Art and Cultural Affairs Committee?

KATHY VARGAS: I don't know if he still is, he was a couple of years ago with the, on the board of the Department of Arts and Cultural Affairs here --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: This is this Martín Ibarra --

KATHY VARGAS: -- Cultural arts Board -- Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And why did you mention him?

KATHY VARGAS: He had a gallery downstairs from Thaddeus McCall, and so he was in a sense the first Latino I met who was a working artist, who was in any way associated to any kind of an art world; and looking back on it, it was a very local art world that was not the big world and it was very much a quiet shop.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And this was before the river really became a huge [she confirms] tourist area. Because a few of these little galleries were there in La Villita.

KATHY VARGAS: They were there in the mid '60s, which is why I found them around '64, '65-

JACINTO QUIRARTE; Now, you mentioned that the first experience you had was at the Hayes Studio.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Bill and Jerry Hayes, brothers, where they did commercial photography.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, you had a part-time job there?

KATHY VARGAS: I had a full-time job, then it eventually became a part-time job. What happened is I worked -- Martin started giving me a few drawing lessons, Martín Ybarra, and then I would sit the gallery for him in trade for the drawing lessons. So when I got out of high school I went to the San Antonio Art Institute for a while and I was sitting the gallery just for about a year and a half. The San Antonio Art Institute was not a particularly good experience because it was very Anglo and it wasn't anything I was interested in doing.

But it was an art school, and so I went for not very long. I didn't get a whole lot out of it, but I was still taking lessons from Martin and the trade-off was that I would sit in the gallery. And one day as I was sitting the gallery, Bill and Jerry Hayes, who knew me from hanging around, came in and they said, "Would you like to sit our gallery? We can't give you drawing lessons but we'll give you money." [Laughter] I said, "I could do that!" I was just getting out of high school at the time. I was going to St. Philips part-time, so instead of going to college full-time I got a full-time job and I sat their gallery and was their receptionist and I translated for a film they were doing on a Mexican artist named Salvador Valdez-Galindo, who was a surrealist, because they spoke no Spanish and he spoke no English.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: This is a film? [She confirms]. And he was from Mexico City --

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. They had an art gallery, the art gallery was their tax writeoff. They also had a film studio. And it was really interesting, because they had a fully going commercial film studio. They would do short films and they would do commercials, lots of TV commercials, especially for local companies. And eventually what happened is they decided to close the gallery -- I was receptionist for the business there as well -- and open an animation studio. And when they opened the animation studio, I said, "Hey, I have arts background, can I go over there?" And they said, "Yes, that's what we're going to do, we're going to transfer you over there."

So I learned to ink- and paint, and then for about a two-month period I was the art department. We had shifting art directors, so I was the animation department -- had to deal with such controversies as how to depict the little Luby's character, how to make her mouth say vegetables [she laughs] --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Luby's, of course, being the Luby's Cafeteria. [After checking sound level] We continue with the interview. I also have in my notes that Leon Russell -- was he a photographer, or a rock and roll --

KATHY VARGAS: He was a rock and roll musician.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: He played the piano?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. I was working for Bill and Jerry Hayes, I was taking painting classes with Alberto Mijangos at the Mexican Cultural Institute. What happened was that when we got the animation department, the animation department was in Hemisfair, as was the Instituto Cultural Mexicano, where Alberto Mijangos taught painting. So I was working my job and thinking about going back to college but in the meantime I was taking painting classes.

What happened is that I was on my way to check on a painting -- I didn't know a whole lot about rock and roll at the time, I knew some, I listened a little bit but I wasn't really integrated into any kind of a music scene. So what happened is I was on my way to check on the painting I wanted to enter in a contest, I was working on it in class and I had to check and see if it was going to be dry by the time I needed it, I needed it for a show. On my way there -- Fiesta used to be in Hemisfair plaza at the time, and I didn't want to have to go through Fiesta.

I thought, oh, this is going to be a horrible mess, so I thought if I go alongside the convention center, I can take a bridge there used to be a bridge, I can take the bridge and it will get me to the back door of the Mexican Cultural Institute. So I was taking this side path, and ran into this huge man with very long hair and a beautiful portfolio case, and I started staring at his portfolio case. I asked him where he'd gotten it, and he said, "Oh, I'm from San Francisco, the portfolio case is from London." And then he started asking me what was going on and I explained fiesta to him.

And then he asked me if I was going to the show that night. He named about four different bands and I knew who one of them was. But I thought, Oh it would be pleasant to hear that band. And he said, "Okay, come by the hotel and I'll give you a couple of tickets." Well, what happened is I did indeed go by the hotel, and met Leon Russell, who was a rock and roll star at the time and a very nice person, and met a lot of other great people.

They were basically the people who did two things. For one thing, I was at Hayes and I was learning darkroom, I was learning different darkroom techniques, because we did graphic animation. Aside from the animation camera I knew how to run the animation camera but I didn't know how to run a 35mm. camera; which is funny because the animation camera is much more complicated; and I'd never really done 35mm work.

So what happened is that when I started meeting these people, the other people I met were the photographers who were standing in the wings, who were the rock and roll photographers; and they were absolutely wonderful. They would let me pick up their cameras and use their cameras every now and then. They started introducing me into photography.

But the other thing that Leon Russell and the Shelter people -- that's what the group was called -- did was that they literally opened up a world for me. Because up to that time I had been pretty much a San Antonio resident -

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Exactly.

KATHY VARGAS: -- exclusively. I think I'd taken a plane ride to Dallas ever in my life, I'd taken the train to Laredo once with my parents. And that was about it, I wasn't traveled, I was about 20 years old and I was pretty much an innocent and very much a local person and an east side person who would venture downtown.

Because they were doing promotion and wanted me to help them with local promotions, I started getting around the whole city and meeting people in the music industry. Meeting disc jockeys and going to different radio stations, and handing out records to them.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: This is all in the mid-'60s?

KATHY VARGAS: No, this is all in the very early '70s -- actually '70, '71, right around there.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh that's right, we mentioned that you were born in 1950.

KATHY VARGAS: So I was about 20. And then, once I started taking photography at Southwest Craft Center and got an interest in it, around '71 I started taking photography at Southwest Craft Center, I really fell in love with it. And because I knew all of these -- music people, because I knew booking agents by now, I would get jobs to photograph the rock and roll bands. So it was relatively lucrative.

By that time I was ready to go back to college. So it was a kind of shifting-schedule thing. I was working on specific jobs for Hayes Studio, I was working -- freelance rock and roll photography, and I was going to San Antonio College. But they really did open up the world to me, let me know what was out there.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Did I hear you mention the craft center?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. I took my first photography classes at the -- Craft Center --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Before going to the Art Institute --

KATHY VARGAS: After. Well, the Art Institute didn't have photography.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh, I see.

KATHY VARGAS: The Art Institute had painting, I took painting and drawing there --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: That's where Carl Embrey --

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. And actually Carl was a very good teacher. Reggie Rowe was not [she laughs] I'm sorry, Reggie, Reggie Rowe was not.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, was Alberto Mijangos teaching at the Art Institute also, or just at the Cultural Center?

KATHY VARGAS: No, he was teaching at the Mexican Cultural Institute and at the Jewish Community Center.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh, also there --

KATHY VARGAS: That's where I took classes from him.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And where is the Jewish Community Center?

KATHY VARGAS: It's on the north side of town, it's very close to North Star Mall. I think it's on a street called Ramparts.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, you also mentioned when we were discussing this before, the Mexican artist Remedios Varo.

KATHY VARGAS: She was the influence for the artist Salvador Valdez-Galindo, the Mexican artist that Bill and Jerry were doing the film about. It was wonderful to literally be opened up to that world of Surrealistic art in Mexico, which is very different from the Surrealism in the U.S. and Europe.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And her name was -- I listed it right under Salvador Valdez-Galindo.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly. That was -- because really my influence in art is not U.S. so much as it is Mexican and German. Mexican in painting and German in photography. So, it's interesting.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, when did you become aware of Cien años or One Hundred Years of Solitude?

KATHY VARGAS: That was with Salvador Valdez-Galindo. He gave me a copy of it when it was brand new and it would have been around 1970, I guess; I don't know when exactly.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: That's about right.

KATHY VARGAS: And he gave it to me in Spanish and I was very lucky that I could read Spanish. He said, "You've got to read this." It was way before it was translated.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: That's when it's beautiful.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You also mentioned Gilberto Tarin --

KATHY VARGAS: He had a gallery. He was a Chicano artist -- oh, that's when the Chicano movement was first happening, that's what we're talking about. I was relatively unaware of them, because I was hanging out with filmmakers and rock and roll people, not artists, had nothing to do with being Latina or being Chicana; had to do with the fact that I was not specifically hanging out with artist types any more. I had been with Martín Ybarra's group but Martín -- it was too early, it was like the '60s in a sense, so in San Antonio it was too early for that movement.

But I remember saying about Gilberto: it must have been around 1972 when I was working at Hayes --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Yes, you mentioned '72, '73 when we last talked.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly. And he had just come back from Mexico, so he really didn't know what the Chicano art

movement was, either.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: He had been at San Carlos? And he had his education at San Carlos --

KATHY VARGAS: I think so.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Is he from here?

KATHY VARGAS: He's from San Antonio. He's a Chicano, he's from San Antonio, but both he and my friend Diana Rodriguez were educated in Mexico. They went to school at San Carlos, both of them, I think.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And Diana Rodriguez is from here?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. She's a Chicana artist. Now, I don't know if Gilberto ever actually. I think he finally did say he's a Chicano but it took him a long time, mainly because he missed it -- by the time he came back, it was -- I remember having that conversation with him, it must have been around '72, '73. He had a little gallery and he said, "I've just been asked to join this group of Chicano artists. I don't know what that is" [laughter].

See, now, the other thing is that I knew about a movement of Chicanos in political areas. When I was 17 I knew about the Brown Berets, I hung out with Tom Cahill, but it was direct political action. It was not about art.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And who was Tom Cahill?

KATHY VARGAS: Cahill had a little shop on Frio City Road. He was the person who helped try to tear down the Good Government League, which was the powers-that-be in San Antonio in the '50s and '60s and it was all Anglo. The city was already half-Hispanic or half-Latino, or whatever you want to call it, at the time, and it was still very much controlled by Anglo businessmen and old-money families.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, was Tom African-American or --?

KATHY VARGAS: No, he was Anglo.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You said a little shop on Rio --?

KATHY VARGAS: Frio [phon.sp.] City Road.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: A good thing I asked you.

KATHY VARGAS: He had a little newspaper -- I wish I still had a copy of it, and he had a little newspaper that was very much a political grassroots, activist newspaper, and he was finally arrested and threatened by the police department and told to leave town. That's how "dangerous" he was. But it was at the time that the Southwest Voters Registration Project was coming into being. It was a time when there was real political activity. I knew about that because my family was very political -- my mother was part of COPS when I was about 17 or 18 years old and they were just forming.

So I knew about political movements but my mother never called herself a Chicana, and I never really heard the word "Chicano" or "Chicana" very much, so I was very politicized but I wasn't familiar with the word. And I certainly wasn't familiar with the artists.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You mentioned that from 1975 you started at San Antonio College but had heard of the Chicanos before that.

KATHY VARGAS: I had heard of the Chicanos only briefly from Gilberto, who, again, told me in '72 or '73 that "I've been asked to join this group of Chicano artists."

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And that was Con Safo?

KATHY VARGAS: I don't know if it was Con Safo or Los Quemados; it might have been Los Quemados.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: No, Los Quemados came around '75 --

KATHY VARGAS: Okay, so it was Con Safo then.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: -- and then -- Los Quemados actually reacted against -- and that was Carmen Lomas Garza and Cesar [Martinez], Amado Pena and --

KATHY VARGAS: I think, Felipe Reyes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Felipe Reyes was the leader in Tlacuilo, which is the Aztec word for writer, artist, which is really the same thing in pre-Hispanic Mexico. And then since no one understood what that meant, they called themselves "the painters of the new race," or "the new people," or "Pintores de la Nueva Raza."

KATHY VARGAS: Ohhh, okay.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Then they became subsumed under the -- and then they became Con Safo, I think. And that's when Mel Casas came in.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. And that's a thing; the only time I'd heard of Chicano art is when Gilberto asked me what it was and said "I've never heard of that" and I said, "I can't help you, I don't know what it is, either." So it was interesting because it was the terminology that was the stumbling block, that we had never heard the term. At that point if someone had said to me, "Do you want to be a teacher?" because I hadn't had art history yet, I wouldn't have known what to tell them either. So it was, like, "Uh, I don't know what it is." But it was literally a term.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You also mentioned, around this time -- and I guess Tom Wright, the rock and roll photographer --

KATHY VARGAS: He was at the Southwest Craft Center. And it made it very comfortable for me to take photography from him. And he didn't teach rock and roll photography, he taught photography.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, were you still continuing to have classes at the same time that you attended San Antonio College or were these all simultaneous?

KATHY VARGAS: No, I was working and I was going to the Southwest Craft Center in '71-'74, '75. And again, about 1974, '75, I went to San Antonio College. And by that time I was part-time in Hayes. I had taken all the courses that I could take at the Southwest Craft Center, and I had been thinking about my future and I had been thinking, "I don't want to be an animator, I want to be a photographer. What am I going to do? I don't particularly want to be a commercial photographer" because I'd already been in the commercial world. I said, "Okay, maybe I could teach, okay, I need a degree." And I went to college not as a matter of course, not the way most kids do -- "Okay, I'm out of high school," and then go to college. I went to college because I determined that I needed to go to college.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, you never had any problems with school, did you, or good grades or --

KATHY VARGAS: No. As a matter of fact I had gotten scholarships when I got out of high school but -- it was funny, because I wanted to be an artist and my mother didn't want me to be an artist --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You weren't on that track, then.

KATHY VARGAS: No. Well, I wanted to be a painter and my mother felt, "Sure, you're not going to make any money being a painter, so be an English teacher." We had this great set-to and I said, "No, I'm not going to go to college until I know what I want to do and I can take the courses I want to take. And I'll get a job." And it was good, because then I had money saved up,

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And experience.

KATHY VARGAS: And experience. Life experience, yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: So, you said that you really came in at the tail end of Con Safo because it began to disband around then. But a major influence in your life was studying with Mel Casas, because --

KATHY VARGAS: Oh, definitely.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: -- he showed you to think, and he taught about logical thinking.

KATHY VARGAS: He did. He taught logical, linear thinking. I guess the thing about Casas, he's a very logical human being. He's very A to B to C type of thinking. He is, of course, a passionate man but that's not the way he thinks. He thinks with his mind, he thinks with his brain. That was a great influence -- the fact that he is himself such a disciplined artist that he knows what he wants to say, he knows how to say it, he knows what a change of style will do to a message, he knows what a message will do to his style, how to mesh the two together so that whatever he has to say, he was always the consummate artist.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: That's when you learned to challenge --

KATHY VARGAS: Oh yes, to challenge authority!

JACINTO QUIRARTE: To ask questions.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, and you mentioned that he was an incredible role model.

KATHY VARGAS: An incredible role model for generations and generations of students, not just me. I mean for Rosario Esquerria, Robert Gonzalez, there are a ton of us who are still working artists who credit Mel Casas as having gotten us not only on a Chicano path but on an art path; not only on an art path but on a Chicano path. He was an incredibly moral human being. And that's what I have to say about him: it was also his deep commitment to always telling the truth, always speaking out. That was also an incredible role model.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You also mentioned, according to my notes, Oaxaca and [two Spanish words] --

KATHY VARGAS: Oh that was my dad, my dad and my grandmother. My dad knew a little bit about his roots but not a lot. He always used to say that the family name was not really our family name that came from Spain but we were basically indigenous-type people, certainly we were a mixed race but we were the poorer people and so we worked with the hacienda de Vargas and that's how we got the name, that our roots were really indigenous. He used to remember some of the stories. He was from the Oaxaca region, his family was originally from the Oaxaca region, but he didn't remember everything. They came over in about 1830s but the -- his family was here for a long time. But they did carry some of that forward.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And where did the Zacatecas come in?

KATHY VARGAS: That was where my mother was from, and my mother always used to say that we were Spanish and French. My mother was the other side -- she wanted to be European, and my grandmother used to say, "Oh, get over it, basically we're Indian; and we're partly Huichol and we might have some of that Spanish blood, of course, but we're also" --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: My grandmother would tell my uncles, "Stop saying that, people will laugh at you."

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, that was my grandmother. My grandmother would say, "Look at how brown you are, look at your nose, where do you think you come from?"

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Evidently the next thing that comes up following your involvement with Con Safo is Ellen Clark at BBL. Is that when you went to UTSA, or how did you meet Ellen Clark?

KATHY VARGAS: No no, she was part of Con Safo. That's still Con Safo. She was the secretary for Con Safo.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh, I didn't know that.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. I guess that was important because I met her way back then, and then when I came to the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center she was on our board and I was still very much involved with her and respectful of her. But the thing is that there were community people who were involved in Con Safo who weren't artists, who just wanted to lend support.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Is that her name or did she marry someone named Clark?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, she married someone named Clark, her actual last name is Riojas; Ellen Riojas Clark.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: She doesn't use Riojas any more.

KATHY VARGAS: Oh wow, she doesn't? She used to --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Just Ellen Clark.

KATHY VARGAS: That's unusual, because I think she divorced the original Clark, and was remarried, so who knows?

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Yes. Well, I've met a lot of people like that -- they become known professionally [she confirms] and -- actually you had already mentioned Rosario Esquerria and Robert Gonzalez. Also Rudy Treviñ o's name was mentioned.

KATHY VARGAS: He was in Con Safo. As a matter of fact, he took over the presidency after Mel Casas, and that was the funny story, is that by that time I was in Casas's design class and I left Con Safo because for me it was at a time when we were, as the younger generation, we were experimenting more. And Safo -- or let's put it this way: some of the folks in Con Safo were very rigid. Mel Casas was not, but some of them were very rigid, and so

for me it was like, okay, I need to leave the group and be by myself for a while. And grow -- because I was literally a baby photographer.

I mean, I'd only been doing photography for about a year and a half. One of the things, as I said, was that it was an incredibly generous gesture for Mel Casas to even invite me to join. He invited me and he invited Rosario [Esquerra] and he invited Robert [Gonzalez] and we were all babies. So it was incredibly generous of him to do that. But eventually the babies had to grow up, and for that to happen they had to leave the nest, so to speak.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: But what I wrote under Rudy Treviño is that he wanted to run it like a very businesslike --

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, he did. There were a lot of -- it was not so much a business but it was very rigid, it was very strict. And it was at a time also when he was saying also, okay, we're going to do a show at Crystal City, who's going to pay to get the work there, we're not going to pay for it ourselves. And so I began to question him really: well, are we doing this for people or are we doing this for career? And it was much more of an art-world concern, I guess, under his leadership, and it became more about being artists.

And the other thing is I wasn't quite ready, and I knew I wasn't quite ready to be a professional artist. I wasn't ready to be in big shows, I certainly wasn't ready to start asking for fees for exhibiting. I was still a baby artist.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Essentially, almost everyone was. Even though they were older, they hadn't really exhibited except --

KATHY VARGAS: Mel Casas.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Yes, he was the only one.

KATHY VARGAS: But what happened is that Rudy took it over, and then he got involved in other things. He got involved with Tejano music, he got involved with representing performing artist talent, and he forgot to call Con Safo meetings, and so after I had left Mel Casas came to me and he said, "Has Treviño called any meetings? Do you know, if he's called any meetings, what's going on?" And I looked at him but I said, "Casas, I left, you would know before I did, I wouldn't be called for a meeting even before there was a meeting. But I haven't heard a thing." He said, "I don't think Treviño is calling meetings, I don't know what's happening with the group." And I kind of just shrugged my shoulders and said "don't look here."

JACINTO QUIRARTE: It just sort of petered out.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, it did, it died not with a bang but with a whimper. So it wasn't a big blowup, it was just Rudy forgot to call meetings.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: The only controversy that seems to have occurred was the Los Quemados, or the burnt ones. What I wrote down the four people we already mentioned -- Amado Pena, Felipe Reyes, Carmen Lomas Garza, and Cesar Martinez. I remember they had an exhibition. They felt very restricted as to what Chicano art should be, and all of these other things.

KATHY VARGAS: And that's what happened to me with Con Safo, that's exactly what happened to me. It was very rigid, it was "you must do this type of work," and I felt, well, I can't do the same type of work all my life. It would still be Chicano, it might still be about causes but the form is going to change. And that was an issue for us. And Casas was over it, but Rudy and some of the other people were not and Rudy was in charge. So I left. I probably should have joined the Quemados -- if I'd known they were there I probably would have asked to join it. [They laugh.]

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You mentioned Santos Martinez. Was he also with Con Safo?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, he was with Con Safo. And he did eventually become an ethno-musicologist, I believe.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh, is that what he did?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: He's real smart.

KATHY VARGAS: He's very smart. And he also writes about Latino art and Chicano art. He's still known as an authority on that. And I'm trying to remember, I guess he made art -- I think he did make art --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I remember seeing drawings --

KATHY VARGAS: That's right, that's what I was going to say. I believe he made drawings.



JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, you began at UTSA in 1977. That's when you met Jim Newberry [she confirms] and then after that, Neil Maurer. Now, who is the one who introduced you to the 4x5 camera?

KATHY VARGAS: Strictly speaking, it was Jim Newberry, and he was -- I'll say this for Jim, he was a very dedicated teacher. He went out of his way to provide opportunities for artists outside of the classroom. And so there were some of us who were interested in learning 4x5 camera. He called about four or five of us aside, it was before the University even had a 4x5 camera or a 4x5 program, really. I take it back: I think graduate students were allowed to use the 4x5 camera and that was it. And there were some of us who were undergraduates -- I think I was just a junior, maybe even a sophomore. And he took us aside and he said, "I think you guys are ready if you're interested."

He held a class after school hours for the four of us and we learned to use a 4x5 camera. That was a very basic introduction.

KATHY VARGAS: Jim Newberry absolutely demanded that you learn technique, that you learn the craft of photography, that you learn how to make a good negative, that you learn how to do composition, that you learn how to make a good print.

That was the old way. Now, nobody knows how to paint anymore, nobody knows how to draw anymore, and people couldn't make a decent photograph half the time, if their lives depended on it. You can get by with just about anything if you can do the "art speak" and call it "conceptual" and talk about it doing a performance or an installation. And Jim Newberry was very much about teaching the basics.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Jim Newberry didn't get tenure, and that's when Maurer came in.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, that's when Maurer came in. A completely different type of teacher -- much more modern, or post-modern, I guess; probably not post modern, it's probably modern. But very much modernist --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: But he still focuses on technical --

KATHY VARGAS: Oh yes, he still focuses on technical.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I noticed the other day he put up student work that is -- I have no idea what they're doing, but it's almost like a pinhole camera. Did you ever do --

KATHY VARGAS: We never did that, he was still relatively basic with us, and he did give a good 4x5 course that, again, let me reintroduce the camera and let me have it for long periods of time.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: The technical part is still in that part of the program --

KATHY VARGAS: The technical part is still very much a part of photography.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: The only other thing I have on this page that we discussed that day is Dr. R. [Richard] E. W. Adams, who teaches anthropology and I guess what you meant there is that you had friends in that division?

KATHY VARGAS: I had friends in that department because my friend Anne Kerr was taking classes with him and became his lab assistant when he went to Belize. So she was very much into helping to reintroduce me to pre-Columbian -- of course I had taken classes with you. I took one class with you. I took a class with Dr. Adams. I might have just sat in on it -I think I just sat in on it. But I took a couple of pre-Columbian classes with you. There was a Dr. Joel Gunn there, who was doing anthropology classes that were not so much the Latino or Hispanic but were indigenous.

So those were all influences. Especially your pre-Columbian classes, because it was basically a bringing back of what my dad's stories had been about -- of all of those strange --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: So it was a world that really wasn't that unusual in your experience --

KATHY VARGAS: No --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: That you'd heard about it.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, it wasn't at all foreign. In fact, you always wondered how I could spell all those names. It was because I'd been hearing them before that!

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And then, according to my notes, we evidently continued our conversation on August 28, and the people you met at UTSA were Neil Maurer, whose name we've mentioned, and also, Mark Power, Charles Field. Who was Mark Power?

KATHY VARGAS: Mark Power was a visiting instructor who came from the Corcoran School. He was a photographic critic and thinker and he taught a photography class; but he also; I took his photo-criticism class and he introduced me to the work of A.D. Coleman, whom I eventually went to live with for six months, but he introduced me to the work of A. D. Coleman. [Jacinto Quirarte checks spelling] He's in New York, photo-critic.

[TAPE 2, SIDE B, Dr. Quirarte refers to this as SIDE B of TAPE 1.]

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You also mentioned Judy Sobre at that time?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. Judy Sobre was one of the better instructors at UTSA and did teach a lot of different classes. I think her specialty was Iberia but at the same time she was doing very populist-type of courses, like festivals in the area, so taking a close look at the Daughters the Republic of Texas and fiesta celebration and what all of that meant, where the Alamo stood in all of that, and was a very good instructor.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Another thing that comes up is John Mahey's name. How does he fit into it?

KATHY VARGAS: I guess shortly after I finished UTSA -- I finished UTSA and got my Master's in '84; as you know, I worked for you while I was there and that, luckily for me, gave me some sorts of arts organization experience and grant-writing experience. Just the very basics but it was a start. I taught at UTSA for about a year and a half after I graduated, worked at Healy Murphy for about a year after I graduated, worked for the San Antonio Life while it was still in existence for about a year and a half after I graduated; and was working three or four different freelance jobs at the same time.

And then, after about a year and a half of being out there and kind of floating after graduate school, the job at the Guadalupe came open. In October of '85 I took the job as director of the visual arts program at here at the Guadalupe, and one of the first things I did was to curate an exhibit for the San Antonio Museum of Art, at the request of John Mahey. That was done in I believe '86; in a series of three exhibits of different artists.

And one of the things that happened that was interesting that happened at that time was that as I was curating it, I went back to look at the work of some of the Latino artists at UTSA, and one of the people whose work I looked up was Gus Garcia, and I was very taken by these huge biker portraits that he had done. I asked him for those pieces, and he said, "Oh, you really like those?" And I said, "Yes, I loved those pieces, can we get those?" And he said, "I'm very surprised because my teachers have been telling me not to do that. They have me doing still lifes with my brushes here in the studio and a few little landscape things looking out the window."

I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "I was told that Hispanic art, this was not fit subject matter for high art." And I said, "Who on earth told you that?"

I think the real problem that UTSA continues to have is with culturally-based work. It's not racial. The problem is not that you happen to be a Latino who wants to make art; if you want to be a Minimalist, that's absolutely fine; if you want to be a Conceptual artist, that's absolutely fine; if you want to do culturally-based work, they have a problem. They don't quite know how to deal with it, they don't know how to "instruct" you.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Something must be happening, because two of the Chicano artists who are working together out there put up a huge Day of the Dead altar --

KATHY VARGAS: Great.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: -- right at the entrance to the building.

KATHY VARGAS: Neil told me about that --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: -- on the far corner, and it's created a sensation. A beautiful piece.

KATHY VARGAS: That's good, that's wonderful. Neil Maurer did tell me about that recently. He said, as a matter of fact -- it's really strange, because he came to me recently and he said, "We have a man who's out there who's a painting major in the graduate program and he's doing culturally-specific work and he said they're having a hard time with him, they don't quite know what to do with him, they don't know how to teach him."

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Yes; he came in to see me and he actually said that he had gone through a very bad period in his life -- he's older --

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Forty, maybe, I'm not sure exactly, that all through the '70s and '80s he was into drugs and he didn't have his life straight. I don't know if he was in jail but he found himself and is very interested. He's going to take my Chicano class --

KATHY VARGAS: Great.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: -- in the spring. He's never been in my classes before. So, I think that's a good thing that's happened.

KATHY VARGAS: That's one of the things I said to Neil, why do you have to instruct him in that way? I said, "Teach him how to paint, teach him how to be a better painter, teach him how to do, but teach him how to do what he wants to do, don't try to make him a Minimalist, don't try to make him become a Conceptual artist." Neil was the first one to admit "we don't really have anybody out there in the studio program that he can talk to."

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I want to go by what I have here that the three jobs you had during that period were at UTSA, the San Antonio Light, you were writing Latino-Hispanic art --

KATHY VARGAS: And photography, I was kind of an arts writer critic on Latino-Hispanic art and photography.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And you were also at the Healy Murphy Learning Center?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. That was a great experience. I was in East San Antonio, again with the Holy Ghost nuns who run that facility, and I was teaching photography with Catherine Cisneros; we were sharing the position. That was wonderful because it was -- it was either folks who had been ill and had been put back because they had learning problems or it was unwed teenage moms. It was kids with drug problems. It really was reality, it was a basic reality check. And in a sense introduced me to that whole idea of community service and community involvement; that a job could very much be about community.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, you didn't start at the Guadalupe in late '84 or early '85; it was in the fall of '85 --

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, October '85.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: -- with Pedro Rodriguez --

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, you mentioned Bob Maxham.

KATHY VARGAS: One of the things I did when I was in graduate school, I couldn't do the rock-and-roll photography any more because it required travel, so I started working for Bob Maxham, who was local commercial photographer and is still a very good friend, and I learned lighting from him, I learned how to use lighting equipment and really different cameras -- 2 1/4; I learned the 4x5 on a day-to-day basis.

He was very much a commercial photographer and it was great because it was things I could never have learned at UTSA. It was the real world of photography, and it was lighting: they'd never offered a lighting course at UTSA; it's very complicated, expensive lighting equipment that he used. I could never have gotten that training anywhere else.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: We resume the interview with Kathy Vargas. We've been talking about a number of people relating to her experience at UTSA and then at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center.

There are a number of other people whose names we discussed early on. Among them was Kay Turner, the folklorist. If you can tell me a little bit about her. She was a friend or an influence --

KATHY VARGAS: She was both, actually. I met her through working with you because she was working on folklore projects and projects on Latino folklore. What happened is that she had an opportunity -- she needed a photographer to work with her on a project she was doing on folk artists of Texas. So we literally went traveling the back roads of Texas, so what became a business acquaintanceship quickly and easily turned into a friendship and we went toddling [pho. Sp.] around the back roads of Texas, photographing different folk artists and different aspects of folklore. And it was an absolutely wonderful experience.

But the main thing was that it gave me a respect for folk art and for an art that is directly linked to a community. Because the two big things about folk art -- I guess the way it's linked to Chicano art -- are the fact that it does come from a specific community that it has an essential common iconography, that it's an art history fully read and understood and has a function within a community. It's not art for art's sake, it's art --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: It's not a self-conscious thing.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly. And the other thing is that it's heavy on tradition. It's a generational thing, it's something that you learn from folks in your community who are older, who have done that. Sometimes it's handed down with families, sometimes within neighborhoods or communities. And so those two things are, in a

sense, very relevant to Chicano art.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, is this around the same time that you got that project at the Smithsonian with the folk art division?

KATHY VARGAS: No, that was much later. As a matter of fact, that was the result of a lot of the work I'd done with Kay Turner and Pat Jasper --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Which was really the beginning, and then you did "Art Among Us."

KATHY VARGAS: We did "Art Among Us" here at the museum, the first project I helped Kay with was the book she was doing on Texas folk artists, and we [Kay and Pat] did "Art Among Us," which was Hispanic folk art in the San Antonio area.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: What year was that?

KATHY VARGAS: That was '86. As a matter of fact, that was one of my transition things that I did coming into the Guadalupe. I was already working on that freelance project for them and continued it while I was at the Guadalupe.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Yes, I have you at the Guadalupe in October of 1985. You had worked with Dan Goddard at the -- he was at the Express.

KATHY VARGAS: No. As a matter of fact, we were competitors.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: How does Pat Jasper, the director of the Texas Folklife Resources, fit in?

KATHY VARGAS: She was Kay's partner, literally. They were business partners in putting together Texas Folklife Resources and eventually Kay got out of Texas Folklife Resources, and became much more freelance and much more of an author on women's subjects. But Pat Jasper is still going strong, and I still work with her on different projects, I've helped curate projects for them. And I really love the way things overlap, I really love the way there is a contact with community and the production of an art that has relevance to a community -- has relevance in everyday people's lives.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, where did "Hecho a Mano" start?

KATHY VARGAS: Let me see -- well, this is our 11th year, so it must have started around the same time, around '86-'87.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Because "Arte Entre Nosotros" or "Art Among Us" was at the San Antonio Museum.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: -- and "Hecho a Mano," or "Made by Hand" is at the Guadalupe. And is that when Miguel Cortinas started, or --?

KATHY VARGAS: Actually Miguel Cortinas got me into the Guadalupe. Miguel Cortinas was here first --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh?

KATHY VARGAS: He must have been here probably from around '84 or so, maybe even a little bit earlier. I think he got out of graduate school around '83 or so. But then he must have come to the Guadalupe as an instructor in '84, and when the job of Visual Arts program director came along, he asked me to apply. So basically I became his "boss," quote unquote. I don't consider myself his boss but technically. And so that's how I got here.

"Hecho a Mano" came about -- strangely enough, it started out being a fundraiser.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Yes, Sara, my wife, helped you...get started.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly, and she was in on the first couple of years. We had actually gotten a consultant who put together these big craft shows to help us do the first one. Her name was Honey Meir Levi. When she put together the first one it was predominantly Anglo artists [pause] -- because she was Anglo, right? And it was crafts people. I augmented it by adding a few of the Latino folk artists that we had found in my travels with Kay and Pat.

And then in the second and third year, I began to take it over -- she literally had been the consultant for putting the first one together and then I began to take it over. And boy, has the complexion of the show ever changed! --

no pun intended. [Laughter] I mean: we have a ton of Santeros now and Latina- Chicana quiltmakers and a lot of Latino artists. We've launched a lot of good careers -- Enedina, Vasquez.

I remember -- Enedina is a wonderful painter but one year she had done these little wooden cut out crosses [?] and hearts and little people, and she came up very timidly and said, [very soft voice] "I have these new little things I'm doing, these little cutouts, do you think I could put them in the craft show?" I said, "Sure, we'll give them a try, we'll see what happens." She sold out; within the first hour of opening, they were gone. She now has quit her job, her husband has quit his job, they are full-time nicho makers, and they make these little nichos --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: One of my students did a paper on their work.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly, and she started at "Hecho a Mano." It's wonderful, they keep going, they keep expanding, they keep doing these things. It's very pop, it's both folk and pop. They have a shrine, I think, it's built like a rocket ship -- [both laugh] Yeah! I mean, they have furniture now, they've gone beyond the whole nicho thing -- trunks, furniture, tables, chairs. It's great to watch that happen, to watch that develop, and to see so many. We still have Anglo crafts people and artists participating --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Like that guy who did the lamps with perforations --

KATHY VARGAS: Yeah, Isaac Maxwell. Then, he uses Mexican workers. But I would say that probably now at least 60% to 70% of the show is Latino. So it went from maybe being 5% Latino the first year, it became 60% to 70% Latino, now, which is great.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: When did you meet David [Zamora] Casas -- this new generation of Chicano artist?

KATHY VARGAS: I met David Casas in 1989 and the reason I can pinpoint it is, actually, I take that back -- 1990, my friend Ted Warmbold, who was the editor of the San Antonio Light, who had been my editor and is a great friend, a wonderful human being and totally turned the San Antonio Light topsy turvy in that he went out and looked for talented Latinos and Chicanos to write for the paper, and if they didn't have journalistic training, he sent them to University of Missouri for workshops. He trained them. He was very instrumental in giving a Hispanic/Latino/Chicano voice to the San Antonio Light.

He died of AIDS. So what happened after he died of AIDS is that I started joining some campaigns to do fundraising for AIDS. I figured well, he was so adamant about finding ways to stop racism .. that I can be incredibly adamant about fighting AIDS. And that's how I met David Casas, and that's how I met a lot of the younger generation of artists who now call themselves Chicano artists; at the time they didn't because they basically had been told that they didn't fit into the Chicano mould, and at the same time they didn't feel that they could get into the mainstream mould because they were gay. They were having a hard time being accepted by the Latino community as gay artists.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Were some of these artists in that new Latino art show or is that a different group?

KATHY VARGAS: No. Different group. And that's what's interesting. This whole young group gave -- David Zamora Casas, Michael Martinez, Ito Romo, there were several of them, Agosto Bianco Cuellar; and they were all just wonderful. And I met them --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Were they all gay?

KATHY VARGAS: No. I met some of them through the AIDS fundraising. They started hanging out at the Guadalupe because I worked here and because this became a facility -- in other words, I think we had one of our AIDS fundraiser T-shirt auctions here; we did different things here. And they started hanging out here, and they realized that they could indeed call themselves Chicano and feel comfortable with it and be accepted-

JACINTO QUIRARTE: That was about the time he called me and he was trying to get materials from us so he could learn about Chicanos.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly. It was great.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: When you first discussed them you described it as a "push and pull" generation.

KATHY VARGAS: Because they were being -- Michael says by his own admission, says "I was a good Republican before I got involved in chicaco art." They did not feel accepted by Latino culture because they were gay, and so they felt the only way they had of going was mainstream and yet they had been raised on one side, or they had been raised by Spanish-speaking parents or Spanish-speaking grandparents. So really, it was a tug of war for them as to where they were, where they could be. And who would accept them.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Where does Farias fit in?

KATHY VARGAS: Juan Farias? He's straight. He was one of our studio artists here. Now we have this studio -- I guess about 1991 when we moved into the annex I decided that the small gallery we had in the Guadalupe was not big enough.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And Sylvia Sanchez is the same?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. In a sense they're not young, they're not babies but they are unrecognized.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: But they were in your program?

KATHY VARGAS: Unrecognized and under-recognized. Again, because they're doing cultural subject matter.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And what about Alex Rubio and Olga Garza?

KATHY VARGAS: Again, they're younger generation. Alex Rubio taught at the Prison Art Program for a number of years; went to UTSA, took some classes, ran out of money, and left, and went to work for the Prison Art Program. All wonderful artists, younger generation artists. I think Olga is probably right around 30, Alex is in his 20s, David Casas is older, he's probably, say, late 30s now.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You also mentioned -- we've covered a lot of topics -- the Hopwood Amendment?

KATHY VARGAS: Oh yes. Well, the whole thing, what we were talking about earlier: people not being given that first break. And it is a reality, that if you are given that first break you have to be not as good as your competitors but you have to try as hard as you can to be better. Because everybody is going to be scrutinizing you. But the thing is, you do need that first break. Once those breaks are gone, the reality is that even if you've got people who have both parents, they're going to have brothers and sisters, they're not going to be the only child, the family is probably still not geared for saving an arm and two legs for the kid to go to college. They're going to start looking for the cheapest education they can find, which is public education. They need every break they can get, -- if nothing else, just on a financial basis.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And of course they end up misinterpreting the elitist attitude which in its true sense [?] is open to many different things. It's like the midwesterner who goes to Connecticut and becomes a real anglophile and then returns and looks down on the people that he left behind because he has acquired this patina of the New England accent and the Hah-vahd [Harvard]-- and so forth.

Then we also mentioned the NALAC, The National Association of Latino Arts and Culture. Now, Louis Leroy was a member of that.

KATHY VARGAS: He was a member of that. He was really active with TTAAC, The Texas Association of American Cultures, and he was very much one of the moving forces in that, and he is a member of NALAC. But NALAC in a sense is Pedro's baby, Pedro Rodriguez; he really was the guiding force for that he was the acting director for a long time, kept them going --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Yes, I got mailings from him.

KATHY VARGAS: And that's a very good organization. They visited -- we did some wonderful workshops with them.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: [they clarify spelling of acronym for Texas Association of American Cultures, TTAAC]

KATHY VARGAS: The national one is just TAAC, The Association of American Cultures.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: These were very eventful years for you because you also met Lucy Lippard in '86 or '87.

KATHY VARGAS: I think it was '87.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Where did you meet her?

KATHY VARGAS: There was a sculpture symposium going on, which I did not attend, and I was sitting at home watching Jaws [the movie] on Sunday morning, and minding my own business -- Sunday is my read-the-newspaper-and-watch-TV day and that's what I was doing, and the phone rings. Someone on the phone says, "this is Lucy Lippard" and I thought to myself, "Who is playing a prank on me" and I went "Uh huh." She started talking and Juan Bruce, who was on the panel she was on, had shown some of my slides and he had given her my phone number and he told her I worked for the Guadalupe and she wanted to go through the murals on the west side. So I asked her if she'd like a ride and she said, "Yes, please."

We just walked around the murals, and she saw the murals, and we talked. She told me she'd seen my work and

she liked it, she asked me to send her slides. And we just became friends, I mean, over the years. She's a wonderful person, I really enjoy her. At first it was kind of interesting to me in the sense that I thought, "am I really going to be able to get along with an art critic?" [both laugh] but she's a wonderful human being, she really is.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, you mentioned a Hispanic exhibit for SAMA [?]. Which one was that?

KATHY VARGAS: That was -- I believe it was called "Influence" and it was three different shows and it was about 10 or 12 artists per show. It got almost everybody in San Antonio in.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I remember seeing it. Actually, that gets us back to par, along with what was salvaged from the debacle, the technical glitch [earlier in this recording]. What we can do is wrap up what is left on this tape when we meet again, and then really focus in on your work; lots of questions that I have about that. That'll give us a nice chance to talk about sources and influences and what you're trying to do with your work, what you've managed to do. Thank you very much. This is the end of our late morning and early afternoon session on November 7 and we'll continue sometime next week.

[TAPE resumes.]

JACINTO QUIRARTE: On November 25, 1997, a continuation at the Guadalupe Cultural Center Annex in San Antonio, Texas, of the interview with Kathy Vargas that we left off on November 7.

One of the things that has been left out of the taping session because of technical problems is the local art scene as it relates to Latino art and the curatorship of an exhibition that caused a great deal of controversy about a year ago. Could you tell me a little bit about that.

KATHY VARGAS: Okay. First, let me start off by saying that the Latino-Chicano art scene in San Antonio is many-tiered -- I guess that's the best way to put it; and also, because of that, somewhat fragmented, you have very young emerging artists who are very, very good, a lot of these are in their teens and 20s and already exhibiting, and they're good artists. There is a 30-something generation which is, not all of them but a number of them are in a sense "in a different place" from the 20-somethings and the 40-somethings. So that makes it interesting.

Then there is the 40-something generation, the 50-something generation, and on up into the '60s. And they've all been in different places in different times and have different concerns. Someone like Mel Casas who's spent his whole life in Chicano art and doing for the community on many different levels, is now I guess in a sense taking time to be calm and quiet and is somewhere else but still very much a part of what's going on in San Antonio, just by his mere presence here.

There are folks like Pedro Rodriguez who still paints somewhat and is very actively involved in the art scene because of the Guadalupe; people like Cesar Martinez who are very well respected. But again, locally keep a relatively low profile. Their name has a big presence but for the most part they don't get embroiled in a lot of these things.

Then we get to the 30-somethings, who are -- not all of them but many of them -- do not have that experience of a Latino neighborhood or any kind of a neighborhood of color, who were basically raised in a mainstream world.

[TAPE 3, SIDE A.]

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, this is extremely important because it focuses on the artistic environment in which you have been working. It's just as important, if not more so, than the environment you worked through during your formative years in the 1970s we've talked about already with regard to the Con Safo movement, the art group and several others.

I think that now would be a very good time to talk about what your work has been like. We can do it in stages -- you can talk about some of the early influences and how you developed your body of work: when you think that it became what you are as an artist. It's pretty broad.

KATHY VARGAS: [laughing] It's still becoming, that's a problem, it's still isn't there, and I think if it was there I'd just stop doing it.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Of course, of course.

KATHY VARGAS: I think that's a thing that's always in the process of becoming. As for influences, that's a good one. Ahhh, there are a lot, and a lot fewer artistic ones or photographic ones than one would think. Really, literature: literature has been a major, major influence. Garcia Marquez, Akutagawa, a lot of the Latino writers: Isabel Allende, certainly. Some of that magic realism but even more important than the magic realism, I think, the political reality. Both Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende deal with political realities in a very artistic way that

in a sense seduces you into dealing with the politics. And I like that, I think that's what I try to do.

I know that's what I try to do: that I try to make a beautiful object that will seduce you into dealing with the difficult issue, whether it's political or personal, whether it's the pain of death from a personal loss or the pain of death from a political loss. It's the same idea. It's that idea that you can be seduced into realizing the pain if you're seduced, if it's about beauty, if it's about something touching the eye and being very gratifying visually.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, it's worlds apart, in formal terms, from someone who's quite literal; like Rupert Garcia, who very graphically focuses on almost poster-like images that impact on people. So you're not talking about anything that is that specific about Mexico or about the farmworkers or anything like that.

KATHY VARGAS: Well, actually I did one piece called "Missing" which was about the Disappeared -- in Latin America and it had text, so the text was very explicit. And it did talk about the idea that there were missing that our tax dollars might have made missing. So that was pretty explicit but, again, it's a beautiful piece, I think. It's this huge standing figure and it is personalized -- it comes from a little clipping I found in a Guatemalan newspaper about a woman whose husband was missing, the father of her child was missing and she was advertising, wanting to know if anybody had seen him.

The first figure is his cut-out, draped in lace, and carrying flowers, as if he were walking towards her but there's no one in it, it's like a ghost, a ghost image. And the second one is that same image standing at her right shoulder while she's sitting there cradling her child. It's the idea of creating a context for him, of the fact that he might have at one point brought her hearts and flowers, that he was the person who was supposed to be standing behind her for her or for her child; that was, and she was cradling this child, and all of a sudden she was a mother alone and that he had disappeared and that he was gone and the only way to create a family portrait was to outline his missingness. And then the last piece has him prone -- it's the same figure but instead of being white it's black, and it's prone and there are flowers growing over him. And it's the idea that he might be buried in some unmarked grave and that our tax dollars might have aided his missingness.

I did this around '91, '92, some were in there. Because of the text it's very explicit but the text is written around the piece, so you have to walk up to the piece, you have to see it, that is pretty much the text around the piece. So the message is explicit but you have to walk up to it and engage with it visually before you begin to read the text.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: But that's unusual for your work --

KATHY VARGAS: Not any more. I've been doing a lot of things with text, a lot of different things with text, but I do deal with them gently. In other words, I don't -- and I love Malaquias Montoya's work, I absolutely love Montoya's work, but my work is different in that it's not as aggressive as his is. And I honestly don't know whether that's because of my generation or because of the fact that I'm a female and both Rupert and Malaquias are male, you know. Because even when you look at the Latinas at the females, most of them don't have that confrontation. It's generally much more positive and in a sense almost much more ethereal.

Now Yolanda Lopez: some of her work is very confrontational. Her videos are very confrontational but her Guadalupes are very protective. Judy Baca's work in sense is more confrontational but, again, it's very visually beautiful, visually glorious, so that you really want to engage with it on a visual level, and then you get hit with the message. But the same thing happens with Malaquias -- it's very visually engaging, it's very visually rich.

It's funny because you mentioned Rupert's work: what's interesting to me is that Rupert's work is very much about color field painting, and flat, the flatness of the plane. So there are a lot of art issues going on at the same time that there are other issues going on, political or social issues going on. And I think in a sense that's what we all do. And that for me is what was a struggle, and what I think of as the transitional period, because when I was in graduate school they really wanted me to deal only with formal elements and not anything else.

Before I went into UTSA and after I got out of UTSA, I was in full realization of all of the political realities that were going on at the time. Now, the lucky thing in a sense or the unlucky thing is that while I was at UTSA it was a relatively mellow period. It was the '70s, I got out of UTSA in the early '80s, and so it was a relatively calm period. We had gained a lot, so there wasn't as much stuff to deal with. So I didn't fight my teachers as much because it didn't seem to be in a sense at that point in time a point to my fighting them. Well while things are pretty good, whom am I going to picket -- Jimmy Carter? He's pretty nice, you know!

So in a sense it was a different era. I went into UTSA in the mid-'70s. By that time Vietnam had happened, we felt we had won, the troops had come home, we hadn't prolonged the war, you know, things had changed for the better.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: It was a breathing spell.



KATHY VARGAS: Of course Watergate was happening but it was even post-Watergate. So we were in the Jimmy Carter era, we were in a grace era, so to speak. But then all of a sudden with Reagan coming in, it was like almost the minute I got out of graduate school, things began to go topsy turvy again. And there were issues again, and I found myself at the Guadalupe, which was a perfect place to deal with those issues. I think the thing for me was to find a way that I could do both form and content. And that was the big issue, I think, of my art work.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: How did you come to -- well, the first part of the question deals with how you came to the text, how did you build up into using text?

KATHY VARGAS: It was real simple. I built up into using text because sometimes people weren't getting the point, and I realized that leaving it only to the visual has a limitation; and that when you want to only hint at something, or when it's a simpler issue, simpler visually, that you don't have to deal with text.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, the second part is the text itself: do you write these? They're not quotes?

KATHY VARGAS: No, no. Well, when I started doing the miracle lives I started doing peoples' lives, and so some of those have quotes; it depends on the portrait and the person. I wrote the text for my friend Diana [Rodriguez's] piece. I asked them basically to recite the miracles of their lives to me and then I made texts out of it.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: [Confirms name Diana, used to be Cardenas, now is Rodriguez]

KATHY VARGAS: Diana's an artist friend and I photographed her and her art work. The survival of her art work through a messy divorce was her miracle. And I wrote the text because I had been present for all the process. Rosmary Catacalos is a poet friend of mine, a Greek Chicana poet, wrote her own text. I asked her what she would like as her text, if she wanted to tell me something, and she gave me the text to a poem. It's about the painful place from which her poetry comes. Again, her survival was her miracle.

My friend Juanita Lawhn who is an English teacher and a writer at San Antonio College wrote her own text. But for the most part I write the text, and some of it's very poetic; and when it's poetic text it's just meant to amplify the visual, it's like just giving it another little strata, another little pile. But when it's the simplest text it is about an issue, and it's about me feeling that people may not get the point if I don't put the text in there. If I think you need clarification, I will give you text.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And how do you put the text on the image?

KATHY VARGAS: If it's small text I write it around the image. When I did the Alamo series, there was lots of text, it was very narrative, so I actually wrote it into the photograph. When I photographed I left space for text in each image. I was looking in the camera and saying, okay, this is where the text is going to go. It's really funny, because the one thing I've remained true to even though I do totally non-straight photography, because straight photography is like no manipulation, no handwork, no double exposure, which is the Ansel Adams criteria -- his big criterion that I learned early on was that you must pre-visualize each image; and even though I manipulate like crazy and do double exposures, I do that: I still pre-visualize. But while I'm looking in the camera I say okay, I have to keep this space clean because this is where text is going to go, don't put imagery there, it's going to confuse things. So from the beginning I knew it was going to be long text, I knew where the text was going to go.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You've been doing that about five years or so.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: With regard to the technical side of your work, what cameras do you prefer to use?

KATHY VARGAS: I always say it's low-tech: I do very low-tech work. I use a view camera, which is one of the oldest cameras around, a very simple camera, I think. I use both a Calumet and a Graflex, depending on what I'm photographing. I use 35mm., I use Leicas and Nikons. When I photograph people, I photograph them with a 35 and then re-photograph the best image for the final piece. So when I'm photographing people, I use 35mm.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Do you have the studio in your house or do you have it here, or -- ?

KATHY VARGAS: Actually, it moves back and forth; right now it's in my home. If I start photographing people again, which I plan to do for a new series, I will move it back here and I may move in here for two or three months, photograph all the people I need to photograph, then I'll go back to the house and do the final composition.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: How do you compare yourself to other photographers? Or do you even think about that? Are

there other photographers moving in the same direction? Where did your inspiration come from?

KATHY VARGAS: My inspiration, strangely enough, came from Hans Bellmer. My visual inspiration came from Hans Bellmer, who was a German photographer, maybe early, probably pre-Bauhaus but definitely around during the Bauhaus. Who eventually went crazy -- knock wood, [laughing] I'd rather that not happen to me, but in addition to his own problems, one of the things that drove him over the edge was the Nazis coming into Germany. He was dealing with in a sense the psycho-social-sexual illnesses of his time in Germany, in that early Nazi Germany. It was very interesting that while most of the Bauhaus photographers managed to get out, because of his mental infirmity he never did and I think eventually died in an insane asylum.

Wonderful photographer, he hand colored, he dealt with a lot of psycho-sexual imagery didn't do double exposures that I can recall. I put all my pieces together in a sense myself, slowly, but I like that he was hand-coloring, because what I was hearing a lot of, certainly in my early photo-education, was the wonders of straight photography of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. And I had learned to hand-color from my uncle when I was seven or eight, so when I saw his hand color work I was in graduate school and beginning to hand-color again just because I was bull-headed and wanted to do it.

And, when I saw his imagery, I guess when I was about in my first year of graduate school, I got really excited. I couldn't read a word about him, still can't, because the only good books about him are in either French or German and I don't read either one.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You mean he really had not come to the attention of American audiences in English --

KATHY VARGAS: Not at all.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: How did Man Ray compare to this? Were you in the least bit interested in him?

KATHY VARGAS: Well, when I looked at Man Ray and Moholy Nagy, God help me for this one, I thought that they were a little bit too artificial for me. I mean, they were trying a little bit too hard. And I guess, it was too artsy for me. It was too much about art-making, in the sense that some drawing can be about something and some of it is about mark-making. Well, Hans Bellmer's photography was about something, you could feel the intensity, maybe, you could feel his own pain, his own anxiety coming through the images.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Through his really expressive powers --

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly. With Man Ray I thought, "Oh, he's really trying to be an artist," you know. And I guess in a sense what really turns me off still about art today is when I can see somebody trying real hard to be artsy. It's like give me the meat, I don't want fluff, I don't want the pretty coating on it; give me what it's really about.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: How did your graduate faculty teachers react to your interest in doubling [exposure]?

KATHY VARGAS: I never told them.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: What were they pushing?

KATHY VARGAS: They were pushing the American view. It's strange, because they were typically straight white males.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: [Edward] Weston, [Ansel] Adams --

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, and when they began to get into --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I guess [Alfred] Eisenstadt fits into that -- Cartier Bresson --

KATHY VARGAS: Oh yes, and -- I guess I was thinking of the filmmaker [Sergei] Eisenstein; I get the photographer and filmmaker confused; one of them, the filmmaker, was wonderful and he was totally -- see, now that's an influence. It was an Eisenstein.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, Eisenstadt popularized the Leica, I think, in the '30s.

KATHY VARGAS: Oh, okay, that was the photographer -- I'm trying to remember-

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Did a lot of work for *Life* magazine.

KATHY VARGAS: They weren't hip to any of the German photographers. It's really funny. We would have seen somebody like Yousuf Karsh [?], we might have seen Eisenstadt, but it was very quick: they never went in depth into the Bauhaus. I literally discovered the Bauhaus on my own -- the Bauhaus photographers, not the art; the

art they went into but not the photographers. I loved the Bauhaus photographers.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: It's interesting, but my being raised in San Francisco, we had two people who had actually been involved with the Bauhaus and all we got was German Expressionism. In San Francisco, John Gutman, who is still alive, he's a photographer, he's about 90 now; and an administrator named Mundt, I don't remember his first name. That's very interesting.

KATHY VARGAS: That sure is.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: So you're at the mercy of whoever is on faculty.

KATHY VARGAS: Exactly. And that's what's scary. People don't give you the huge gamut of things. And I guess in a sense I was lucky, because I got work at the place that made TV commercials. Back when I was 20, I had hung out with a lot of filmmakers and so I saw a lot of films, and I think my photographic imaging is affected more by film than it is by the specific history of photography. I can't remember what the name of the German filmmaker was: he was a German filmmaker working, it was very early film-maker so I can't remember, but I remember this one very famous scene on steps -- I believe it's about the Russian Revolution, and people screaming --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Oh sure, I remember whom you're talking about; he's Russian actually.

KATHY VARGAS: It's Eisenstein. Is it Eisenstein?

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Something like that.

KATHY VARGAS: Maybe you're right, he probably is Russian.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: I'll look it up. He was in Mexico also.

KATHY VARGAS: Oh, okay, well that makes sense. And it was that whole idea of this heavy [?] moving thing, and that was double exposure. And that made a big impact on me, this whole idea of these people overlapping, and rushing down the steps. And some of the first double exposures I made did involve people, and I didn't get what I wanted -- I mean, it was much better done in film. So I went to objects and it worked very well with objects.

And that whole era of film -- the Swedish Ingmar Bergman: I religiously saw every one of his films and some of them several times. Cries and Whispers is still favorite film on the planet, one of his first color films, if not his first. He always used to work in black-and-white, which is wonderful, and then when he did that one in color, it was absolutely amazing. Just knowing about all of the people who -- it was a whole other era. Max von Sydow, [Swedish actor] when he finally got, quote unquote, "discovered" by American audiences, it was almost too late; I mean, he was a much older man by then. He had this incredible panorama of films and expressive intensity that he accomplished.

So it's really funny, because my artistic bent, it's really not American; really drastically not American. When I look at the American, I think of it as very superficial, very superficial. It's entertainment, and America has managed to convert art into entertainment. And when I look for depth I look outside.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Well, the quintessential one, I guess, would be [Andy] Warhol and all those people. Even Jasper Johns.

KATHY VARGAS: And going back to some of the Latino art scene today, I think for me that's the problem: it isn't about the content, it isn't about what they choose to depict, it's about the fact that it is generally superficial, it has no depth, because they're not dealing with leaving something for posterity, it's not about legacy. It's about how quickly can I get rich and famous. And so the goal is superficial, you know. If you have a superficial goal, then you're going to have a superficial product.

It's like the fact that we build cars now that crunch like aluminum when something hits them because we expect you to trade it in within two or three years after buying it. So in a sense that mind set has transferred itself into our art, and that's what I can see. Not all of us but that's what I see happening for the people that I'm having trouble with. It's about that superficiality -- not of leaving something for the ages, not even of leaving -- I mean, the whole idea to Conceptual art is that it's destructible. So in a sense it's not about leaving something for the ages, it's about doing in the here and now and disposing of it and being rich and famous so that you can be -- rich and famous, you know?

I don't think that's the way Matisse worked. I don't think that's the way Gauguin worked. I mean, if Gauguin were to have worked that way, he would have stayed in Paris and figured out how to get into the Salon. That's how I see not only the Latino art world but the whole art world changing.

I had this talk with Carla Stellweg, and I told her up front, I think, that that is a real problem among dealers -- that that's the goal they set in young artists's minds.

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, she's the director of The Blue Star. I said that to Carla Stellweg because I know her. I would say that to any dealer. And quite frankly for me, I pick my dealers very carefully, and I let them know up front that I'm not going to become a photo machine, that I produce photos at a specific pace because I need the time to think, I need thinking time, not just production time. I need to think about my ideas and mull them through before I put them down on paper.

I only have one dealer, I have one and a half dealers right now, and that's at my choice. It's really funny -- I gave a talk recently at the Norton Museum because of the Hospice show that I'm in. There was a wonderful young curator there very lovely person his first name was Neil, I'm trying o remember what his last name -- Watson, Neil Watson.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And where is that now?

KATHY VARGAS: It's in Key West, Florida. It was during the one cold week that we had I went and walked on the beach -- it was 80! But he was a wonderful person, said "Oh, you need to have a New York gallery or you need to --," and I looked at him and I smiled and I said, "I appreciate it, and some day I may follow up." He gave me the names of three galleries and said, "I know these people and you need to send them slides." And I said, "You know, I hate to label slides, and I have a full-time job that I like very much. Whatever time I have left over, I use to make the work. Sometimes I get myself together and to send out a package of slides and when I do I try to be efficient about it and businesslike about it and I know it's time to do business now. When people ask me for wonderful opportunities to send their slides, I certainly do." But I told him, "I heard this in my hippie days, and I found out it is true. I don't have the time to both hassle and hustle."

[TAPE 3, SIDE B.]

"If I'm hassling with my job and I'm hassling with making art, I often don't have time to hustle the art." And that's okay with me. I think sometime back, maybe five or six years ago, I came to the realization that it was not one of my goals to become rich and famous.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Now, who has in your view written the best texts relating to your work?

KATHY VARGAS: Oh, God! [Laughing.]

JACINTO QUIRARTE: There've been a number --

KATHY VARGAS: There've been a few. Certainly Lucy Lippard. I think Lucy always does a very good job; I would say she's topnotch. [Pause, reflecting] Diana Emory Hewlett [phon.sp.] wrote a piece that has some accuracy in it --

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Diana Emerson?

[Interview resumes at later date]

JACINTO QUIRARTE: You mentioned Diana Emory Hulick, who wrote a piece on your work in Latin American Art magazine --

KATHY VARGAS: Yes, and she did a pretty good job up until she got to putting in the French poetry, which I can't read, so it might be wonderful, it might go with it, but I can't read it. So I can't testify for it, but I think she did a pretty good job.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: Have there been any male writers?

KATHY VARGAS: Yes. Two of them: Jeffrey Hoone, who wrote a short essay for -- I did a residency at Light Work in Syracuse, and they do a publication. And of course the nicest -- I'll say this -- the nicest piece of writing I ever got, ever, on my work was not about being accurate, it was about being literally a poetic response to what I had done, and that's why I absolutely love it, was Jeff Perone. It was literally a verbal equivalent of the work. I wouldn't think of it as writing about my work but maybe writing from my work.

JACINTO QUIRARTE: And that was, what, when he was here?

KATHY VARGAS: When he was here.

[END OF AVAILABLE TRANSCRIPTION.]

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