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Transcript

Interview

Interview with Carlos Almaraz
Conducted by Margarita Nieto
At the Archives of American Art Southern California Research Center in Los Angeles, CA
February 6, 13, & 20 and July 31, 1986; and January 29, 1987

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Carlos Almaraz on February 6, 13, & 20 and July 31, 1986; and January 29, 1987. The interview took place in Los Angeles, and was conducted by Margarita Nieto for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

MARGARITA NIETO: All right, Carlos, let's talk a little bit about where you were born and your childhood.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm. Well, I was born in Mexico City.

MARGARITA NIETO: Date?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And that was October 5, 1941. And I was told I was born in the center of the city in what is now-what has been for centuries-the Zocolo. Not in a hospital, per se; it was a maternity ward-a maternity hospital, where only women are allowed and this is where they delivered their children. From there, with my parents, we stayed in Mexico for only six months.

MARGARITA NIETO: Was your mother fairly young when you were born?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think she was around 22, 23, and my father was in his late twenties. My father was there. . . He says, specifically to meet a bride, a woman, a Mexican woman, because he felt that he owed it to his mother or to himself to marry back into the culture. So they were there living and working part time in a grocery store, and my father says that my mother used to come into the store every day-and she was very pretty; I have pictures of her-and he was just taken by her, and slowly began to know her and get to know her and then I think they started going out, at which point, her mother, being my grandmother, was very upset because she was going out with what she'd call Americano, even though he was totally [Mexican-CARLOS ALMARAZ], you know, he's almost Indian, he's so Mexican. Anyway, they met, they were married...and they lived there for a year till I was born and then, after six months of that, they decided to go back to Chicago, to where the rest of the family was living, in the United States.

MARGARITA NIETO: One question about your father. He went to Mexico to seek a bride. Was he from Mexico City?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: [No CARLOS ALMARAZ], he was born in Aguascalientes. He was adopted. He was really of an Indian father and a mestizo mother. And I believed his mother remarried and his second father adopted him. So that's where the name Almaraz comes from. It's a little bit hard to know. My father mentions that it was given to him. So my original name may not be Almaraz [but Hernandez]. And I'm still investigating that, because it doesn't quite make sense.

MARGARITA NIETO: A very good Arabic name.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, right, and we try to look into the name and find out more about it, but it's kind of a mystery to Mexicans, what the name means. An Arab, however, has told me that it's an Arabic name, it's actually two words, not one: Alma and Raz it's another word and that it's very, the elements in it are very common. Well, to go back to my father, he was born in Aguascalientes and had a very, all I could call it is a Ramona upbringing, meaning the play, "Ramona."

MARGARITA NIETO: Um, right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Being half Indian, he was treated like an Indian boy, and many of the family did not accept and didn't want him, but he said that because my dad's very smart he was accepted finally because of his smartness and his ability to deal with language. He started to learn to speak English, I guess, fairly young, because he speaks it like an American, and his Spanish is like a Mexican. And, again, I have. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: So he's completely bilingual.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: He's totally bilingual. If you put him in Mexico City and you put him in a dining room, he'll have a wonderful time, and if you put him in New York City on Times Square at a local hot dog stand, he'll have a very fine time. And there's no division in his feelings for both cultures. And from that, I've learned the same kind of appreciation for the American culture, within me, in the American culture I mean, the Mexican culture within me. They're two extremes that, you know, can and do live in the same person. So he evidently traveled to Mexico and to Chicago a great deal throughout his life. And I think this accounts for his very good English and Spanish. Finally, when he met my mother, he continued to travel, but not as much. I was raised most of my early, early childhood, from one to five, in Chicago. We had a restaurant there, and then later my father began to work for one of the big steel mills, Inland Steel in Gary or I don't know what the names of the mills are. But we started then to stay in the Chicago area until I was about nine.

MARGARITA NIETO: One question about those early years. Then you went to Chicago at the age of one.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: And did you have any preschooling there? Were you bilingual at that time?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it's very fuzzy. My English has always been very good, and I don't remember ever being traumatized by having to speak English. But I know for a fact that I spoke only Spanish at home with my mother, because my mother did not and to this day hardly speaks any English. So I was in a very isolated kind of situation, but at home I spoke Spanish. My brother spoke Spanish, and to this day we both speak Spanish. It's just part of being at home. With my father, I spoke both languages. Today, at home, I will always speak to him in English. And I will turn to my mother and speak to her in Spanish.

MARGARITA NIETO: Interesting.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, it's always been that way, and my father only speaks to me in Spanish when he wants my mother to hear, or it's an emphatic father order or some understanding that, you know, everyone should be listening to him. Otherwise, it's mostly English between he and I.

MARGARITA NIETO: And going back to that early childhood, do you have any memories. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, very vivid memories, in one respect. And one of the first memories that I've had of seeing art, or looking at paintings, was in the old Zocalo Church, the big Guadalupe Church there, because it's an old haunting church. It's like something out of Paris. It's like Notre Dame. It's an old, old. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Cathedral, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .late Baroque building cathedral, with many facets within it. I remember praying there, being on my knees, and looking up at what must have been a portrait of John the Baptist. Did I tell you this story?

MARGARITA NIETO: No!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, after a while, I used to hate to go to church, and I'd start crying, and my mother would say, "What's wrong? Why don't you want to go to church?" And I'd say, "Because of the gorilla." And she'd say, "What gorilla?" I said, "There's a gorilla at church, and I don't want to see it." And she says, "There's no gorilla at church. There absolutely is no gorilla at church." So once again, she'd drag me, crying, to church. So we'd get there, I'd get on my knees, the mass would start, and I'd peek over the pew and look up to the far, far left and there was the portrait of John the Baptist draped in furs, with a long furry beard, long hair, bushy eyebrows, and so covered in hair. Well, to a child of I must have been, I'm like four or five now, and this would have been one of our return trips because to a child of that age, it could very easy look like a gorilla. And one of the reasons I mention this story is that, for me, my first impression of art was both horrifying and absolutely magical, because I really believed that was a gorilla, and it scared me. I, otherwise, I've never had any fear toward going to church; it was for me an experience to share with parents and especially with my mother. But that to me was the first painting because it was a painting; I've gone back to see it and, yes, it's a painting of John the Baptist that confirmed my sense that art can be something almost alive. And that happened very young, you know, at a very young age. Later on, my exposures were different.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, let's go back to grammar school then. You went to kindergarten in. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I remember going to, I think it was called Lincoln School. I remember that because I remember drawing it, and as a school project, I guess what must have been kindergarten. Because I drew it from the sky looking down at the building. Most kids would draw the windows. No. It was shaped like an upper-case "I." And I remember taking a bird's-eye view looking down at the school and shaping it on my paper and then drawing my classroom and students in the classroom. This was, again, five or six years old, it was Chicago, and I

remember very distinctly that it was a very multinational, multicultural environment. I remember white children and black children and children of Hispanic origin, which could have been from Cuba, from Puerto Rico, from Mexico. Many of them were from Mexico, because the railroad used to end there. Chicago was one of those fulcrums where everything went to Chicago.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I think this is why my father migrated back and forth so easily and readily, because of the activity between Mexico City and Chicago.

MARGARITA NIETO: I had never thought about that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh yes, yes. All the railroads, because of the livestock, all ended up at Chicago.

MARGARITA NIETO: Sure.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So much of the cultural aspects of the world would go to these distant places, Chicago being one, New York being another.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you have many friends? Were you a sociable child?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, let me see. I do remember being very close to mother, because I remember her giving me, maybe, early art lessons. And me correcting her drawings. She laughs to this day and she says, "Oh, I could never do a drawing that you liked. You always corrected my drawings." She says, "Of course I only draw stick people." But I do remember her showing me how to draw a woman or a girl, and seeing her very stick people, and remember being irritated that skirts didn't look like triangles they actually had a little shape, or something. I do remember that, and drawing on a piece of paper with her. My brother came to us two years after my birth and there was a great deal of activity between my brother, my mother, and myself, the three of us. That's pretty indelible. [I saw less of] my father later on, especially when he started working for the steel mill longer hours we saw less of him, and the relationship between my mother and my brother and myself became even tighter. [We were together] a great deal of time.

MARGARITA NIETO: There was, you only had one other brother then.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Up until that point. I later had another brother, much later in my own life. He was born when we came to California.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: He's deceased now. He died at a very young age, 22. And it was probably the hardest thing my parents went through. He had a very difficult life for that age. He had a lot of problems with drugs and he had problems living and growing up in the barrio. I didn't grow up in the barrio per se; I grew up in Chicago, which is a pretty big city. Although we lived in a Mexican area, nothing in Chicago is purely of any one culture. It's like New York. In your block there'll be people of all nationalities. So my exposure was different. My brother had the similar exposure second brother so his battle with the barrio and drugs and things like that was not as difficult. But my younger brother, no, he just, it was too much; it was overwhelming. And this I think happened to many, many people of that period, maybe of course, still today; it still goes on.

MARGARITA NIETO: So you had your early education in Chicago, pretty. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I'll say up until nine years old which I believe to be the most formative years I had the imprint of the Chicago cosmopolitan, metropolis, urban environment to form me and my ideas about people.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you went back and forth between Chicago and Mexico during that period?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, I remember going back and forth simply because things that have occurred to me would not have things that I recall could not have happened in Chicago. When we were in Mexico on one trip, I recall having to go by, which must have been in a, a mental hospital, because we hear screaming and we go and run and tell our mother and say, "What is the screaming?" She says, "Oh, those are where the crazy people live. I don't want you near that building." And I remember having to come home from somewhere with another little boy, maybe my brother, and running around the block or across the street to avoid this strange, frightening place that was supposed to be a madhouse. Which is only important as my own personal life developed, going back to that first impression. But I do remember madness at the end of the street, and a dark building surrounded with a large iron gate and a fence. I remember trying to avoid that house. I remember being in Mexico when things were very open, not expensive; poverty was not as great. It seemed, of course to a child then, it seemed to be a very wonderful, different place to be. I remember rivers, and people washing clothes at a river, at the side of the river on rocks. Now, you don't see that in downtown Mexico City anymore, but you do see

it in the outskirts. But I remember that in the city itself, somewhere in the city.

MARGARITA NIETO: Another thing, what kind of books did you read, what were you. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I don't recall. Up until then, my literary interests didn't come up till much later. I remember mostly film being an important influence, and I don't mean American films Mexican films. Because up until much later, I didn't see American films. There was no television at this time; there was only radio. And if I was taken to the movies, my mother [would take me] to see Mexican films. So my first recollections of literature was really through the stories that I saw on the screen.

MARGARITA NIETO: So you had visual narrative rather than. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Now the stories that I knew as a child were mostly folk stories. Very early I was exposed to the story of La Llorona [weeping women]. I was exposed to stories about metamorphoses of people. For instance, my grandmother once told us that when she was a little girl, she remembered that they caught a witch, they actually caught a witch in her village. And they brought her to the center of town and she had no eyes, only eye sockets, and instead of arms, she had wings. And they tried her as a witch and she was burned at the stake.

MARGARITA NIETO: In this town.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: This is in, this is somewhere in Mexico. When my grandmother, who was from San Luis Potosi, was a little girl. These are the stories that she grew up with. My grandmother is now 95 and is almost a century old, but she hasn't forgotten.

MARGARITA NIETO: And she's still alive.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Totally. And totally aware of everything that happened to her up to [this] day. She has a vivid memory of all the development of her life, down to what she was wearing the day of the revolution.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you have much to do with her as a child?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Much later. At first it was mostly through letters. I knew of a grandmother somewhere. And then when we visited her in Mexico I would see her. But I don't recall much memory connected to those visits. Later, she came to live with us much later and much of what I learned about Mexican culture was first through her, derived through her. And then I would reaffirm it and reassert it through literature and reading history. But, no, the first five years, up to I mean, the first five up to nine years old, the influences on me were not literature or even storybooks I guess at school, yes. Having a Chicago schooling, I was exposed to the standard, sort of occidental stories about fairy tales and about magic and the things that every child sees and [understands] at school.

MARGARITA NIETO: Sort of the Grimm Brothers versions.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. It wasn't till much later that I went on to discover other things. But my first, again, influences were mostly the Catholic church, my own mother and strange that I put that in that order; [if anything, you would think] I would reverse it. Probably was first my mother, then the Catholic church, and then my father and my father was a dim figure; I don't recall him too well until much later in my life and my aunts. I had, on my father's side, three or four aunts. And that was a strong understanding of extended family. And my aunts were always very affectionate. They were very caressing and would fuss over me and my brother.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you remember them much more than you do your uncles, of course.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I don't remember my uncles at all. [spoken sotto voce]

MARGARITA NIETO: That's interesting.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I almost even to this day, I don't remember my uncles. The aunts were very important, my father being the only male of his family. He raised five girls. So you can see that the emphasis was on the aunts. And Father, I guess he just got pushed aside in that he was the provider of the material things we needed but not of the emotional and family ties. The aunts have always done that job.

MARGARITA NIETO: Another thing, you mentioned drawing this picture of your school when you were very little.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you always draw? Were you attracted toward that? Or did that come up later?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I have asked my mother about that, and she said, "Yes," I used to like to draw and that I used to make fun of her drawings and correct the drawings. Which sounds to me that I had drawing material, although I don't recall drawing or painting until later in secondary school or at least primary. Well, I would say up until about the third grade I remember. But I always remember as art being my favorite class and not having enough of it. We only got it on Fridays, you know, or when it rained. So to me it was always a treat, it was always a dessert, it was always something that I had to look forward to. But actually doing drawings around the house, no, I don't recall that. I was talking to my friend a while ago and recalling I had a tremendous imagination as a child, and by I think either through luck or through early exposure I became aware of sexuality. And I don't know, you know, I know several ways I could have, but I became very curious about things like that at a very early age and trying to understand it, to a small child became an insatiable curiosity.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Now, the Church later on only made my curiosity worse [than ever].

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Because rather than giving me answers they gave me more questions.

MARGARITA NIETO: The evasiveness.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it wasn't till I read Freud that I started really answering some of the questions, and later Jung, and later some of the areas of science and psychology that start to answer why we're here and what we're doing.

MARGARITA NIETO: But were you, did you. . . I have a writer friend who tells horrendous stories about his childhood and sexuality. Were you an explorer, a voyeur, at that age?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think so, because I remember we were always told, when we lived in the [countryside, where CARLOS ALMARAZ] we lived off and on, the little kids always ended up in the barn with their pants down, the boys and girls. And I remember going to visit relatives or friends and knowing that in five minutes we're all going to be in the, all the little kids, in the barn with our pants down, and I remember our parents saying, "Okay, now, you kids go out and play. The grownups are going to talk."

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That's it. [snaps fingers] And I think when I became a Catholic and in a sense aware of myself as a mortal being, at least for a period of my life where I really believed all those things, I began to then question and also to feel that this interest, this curiosity was somehow connected with sin, which became a very detrimental way of entering into the intellectual life. Connecting knowledge with sin was a strange combination but, yeah, it's there; maybe it's so fundamental, really, that it's obvious that, you know, that there is a double thing about knowledge that ultimately leads to sin or is sin if you want to be [real literal] about it.

MARGARITA NIETO: Interesting. You begin as pure beings, and we end up being impure.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I see that in my daughter now. She's very, very open; she's a pure little soul. And I understand she's going to school, there are certain awarenesses and restrictions that she begins to understand, like, "Don't go beyond that fence." "This play yard is for what they call toddlers." "And this other one is for three to five," and et cetera. You begin to see that life becomes a series of fencing you in to certain directions.

MARGARITA NIETO: Hmm. Well, after Chicago, what happened? And how did you come to California?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, let's see now. I think that by nine years old that brings us almost to 1950, '49 or '50 we came to Los Angeles. This was after a long trip we had in Mexico, when after. . . Which my father tells me now, it was during a separation that he and my mother had, and she decided to go back to stay with her mom and the kids, and he was going to think about his life, his marriage, and also about whether we wanted to stay in Chicago. Things were going [bad CARLOS ALMARAZ], we were having a rough time of it, and he decided that the trouble was Chicago. So while we were in Mexico City, in '49 '48, '49 he came out to California, and he toured the San Joaquin area, up to I guess San Francisco, which is again interesting, because later I did exactly the same thing. Even looked for his hotel. He told me he'd stayed at the California Hotel, and like it's no longer in Fresno. And I wanted to stay there; I wanted to do that.
So we came back from Mexico City and found that our house had been sold from under us by my father. And I remember as a child, my parents arguing about this: "How could he have done this to us?" And he says, "We're all going to California." And my mother didn't really know much about California, except what he had told her. He had been there, he loved it, and he thought she would like it. At that time, she was having trouble with rheumatism because of the cold, and the doctor had advised him to take her to a warm climate. So that's why he

had chosen Los Angeles. Besides knowing what he had read about it, seen in movies, he promised a warmer climate. So sure enough. . . We cried; I remember crying and very, being real tragic about losing our house. And we packed up. And the difficult thing was that my father did not come with us. He sent my mother and the two boys, me and my brother, to Los Angeles alone. My father had to stay and work until he had enough money to close up the house, then follow us. Well, this was my first real exposure to becoming an adult. From Chicago on, I had for the next almost month or so, I had to translate for my mother.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And arriving in Los Angeles not knowing a bit about Los Angeles, not driving a car, having only one phone number to call, was a very, very. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Traumatic.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .frightening experience for a little boy of nine.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She either lost the number or in the confusion had not taken the number of the only, the only woman we knew in Los Angeles, who was going to take us in until my father arrived. She broke down crying at it wasn't Grand Central station; it was actually where the [R-Car] used to meet down on Main and Fifth and someone coming up to us I recall a Mexican woman coming up to us and remember my mother didn't speak any English and the woman coming up and asking us what's wrong. At which point I explained that we were lost, that we had no where to go a real tragic story and she took us in, and took us with her, home. And we remember going to Wilmington, when Wilmington was just a series of vacant lots and orange groves and agriculture and big trucks going by the highway. And we lived in a little house or a trailer in Wilmington until my father arrived.

MARGARITA NIETO: Gosh, and you never knew where you were supposed to have gone?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No. If it hadn't been for this woman and my mother and I talk about it today we don't know what we would have done.

MARGARITA NIETO: My heavens!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was very frightening. And yet it taught me about taking on the responsibility for my mother and my brother and my family, in a sense. Because since I was a small child I've been able to do that. We then lived in Wilmington for a while. Even today, as I was out at Santa Monica, I had flashbacks to Wilmington in 1950, because the air was always very clean and we were near the ocean and there was a sense of something rural about Los Angeles in those days. We moved on. . . When we first arrived in Los Angeles, there was no freeway, there was no smog, there was no highrise. There was just small one-of-a-kind houses. Tract developments were still unheard-of. The war had ended; the big war had ended and we were in the Korean conflict. So it wasn't till after the Korean conflict that L.A. began to grow as much as it has today. But those days were clear and sharp, and to this day I have dreams of arriving in New York [means Los Angeles-Ed.] in 1949, getting off the train, and looking at that beautiful horizon near Pasadena, the mountain being sharp and clear.

MARGARITA NIETO: In L.A.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And Hollywood being a very simple, small town. It isn't what it is today at all.

MARGARITA NIETO: Gee.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Touring that area, which we used to do, we took the red car [same as the R-Car-Ed.] out to Santa Monica, was going by the Hollywood Hotel, where all the old movie stars ended up, and seeing [Grauman's] Chinese and the few theaters that were down there. Now it's, you know, much, much more complicated.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah. Another question about that then. How long were you without your father?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think we were only without him for two months. It was a short period.

MARGARITA NIETO: And this must have been during the summer, so you weren't in school?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I wasn't in school until much later. When my father did arrive, we moved to the country because we did have someone out there. Oh, wait now; I take that back. We moved, of all places. . . One of the places we lived when we first came here was near Doheny Drive.

MARGARITA NIETO: Really!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, and Santa Monica Boulevard. In an all-white neighborhood. We were a little Mexican

colony that was worked for UPS, United Parcel, United Railroad, no, Union Pacific Railroad, at Union Pacific. And we lived there for a while. I remember going to school in that area, and seeing movie stars Hopalong Cassidy at the market and understanding this phenomenon of celebrity. Again, I was young but I still could understand that. We lived near Doheny Drive for a while, maybe six months. Then we moved to the country. Or it might have been in reverse. We might have moved to the country first. Now the country at that time was Chatsworth. It was not what it is today, suburban enclave. It was then very rural: horses, cattle, and ranches. Again, my father got temporary work, working for Union Pacific, which was always Mexican labor. It had once been Chinese, but now through, you know, one century, it became Mexican labor. And we lived in a very, what I call pure Mexican environment, in that we lived in a small railroad village. Most of the help in fact, all of the help were Mexicans. We shared one communal house. We each had an apartment within the house, but it was a communal house. The kids all played together, and the adults cooked on wood-burning fireplaces.

MARGARITA NIETO: Hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think the whole place was $12 a month for our rent.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's amazing now, that you're such an urban artist and you've had so many connections at the same time with the rural, haven't you?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, right. Yeah, and I running up and down grape vineyards, picking grapes, playing in the rivers, playing with frogs. In the evenings, the men would have their beer outside, the women would cook, everyone would eat, and after dinner all the kids it was like a village they'd all play together and the men would all talk and maybe sing songs, and the women would be indoors, gossiping or talking or laundering, or. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: It sounds like Mexico, and like Mexican rural life.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it was. . . Right, right. And it was a very comforting environment because if anything went wrong, you could ask your neighbor to help you. If you needed a ride or if you needed something. Los Angeles at that time was very innocent; it didn't have, you know, the vices and all the problems it has today. So those years were very reassuring of this idea of an extended family.

MARGARITA NIETO: Some time ago, when we were talking, you mentioned and right now the business about songs brought it back you mentioned music as being an integral part of your influences during this time. Do you remember anything about that?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sure. Again, music for me were what I saw at the movies and I saw Pedro Almendares and. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Maria Felix.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .Maria Felix, and Pedro Infante, es de Toria de Magrete, Pedro Infante. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Pedro Infante.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And early, all the Mexican music that is still very popular. Traditional Mexican music, [their, very] folk music perhaps, and it was still part of or which is still today part of Mexican culture. But from here, I think, I learned about music. I was exposed to it and about lyrics and indirectly about poetry.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh, you got a feel for language and lyricism through song.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Again it was all. . . Well also, now that you're bring up music, to me, the American counter [meaning counterpart-Ed.] to that was music of the big bands, and even more than my period of music, which is the fifties, the forties still contains the greatest amount of nostalgia and a sense of American culture that I can think of.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, it's funny, because I remember the first time I saw, out at the beginning of the Echo Park series. .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh yes?

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .I remember humming "Sleepy Lagoon" and you looked at me very strangely.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, right. Right, I know. That song is a memorable thing to me. So is "Peg O' My Heart," which is I think the first American song I actually remember by title. And that brings us to 1945, '46. So that was, again, the American culture, and I'm sure along with it came American movies although I don't remember American movies until I was at least eleven or twelve.

MARGARITA NIETO: Were you a Saturday-at-the-movies kid?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, especially when we moved to California. Now once we came from the country and moved back to Los Angeles I think then we lived at Doheny Drive and then we had, they closed down that railroad thing, village, courtyard it was a court and my father started to work for the steel company. And we then moved to East L.A., which we hated, we could not stand it. We cried. Not because we lost Doheny Drive, which was wonderful, but they had all these wonderful programs for young kids, especially poor kids, which we were. They had movies for us, they took us to the beach, they took us to the Shrine Auditorium. They bussed us everywhere. When we moved to East L.A., we were really on our own.

MARGARITA NIETO: But you didn't have a sense of poverty, did you, really?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Not. . . No, because my father was a good provider. He bought our home right away. In fact, one of the reasons we moved to East L.A. was we bought our house. This is 1951, '52. I think he paid $12,000 for the house.

MARGARITA NIETO: Wow!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So we had our own house right away. We had already had a home in Chicago, and for us it was really fine that we had a permanent place to establish ourselves as a family, and then I remember finally being enrolled in full-time school. Up until then, I migrated, which again led me probably later on to getting involved with the migrant workers, because I migrated with them when I was a child. We moved from one place to another to another, and I grew up with migrant children.

MARGARITA NIETO: So you had a sense of mobility, you might say.
[Interruption in taping to answer knock at the door]

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, you were talking about migration in the. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Migrant children.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .fact that you have this sense of mobility that you could share with the migrant children that you later worked with.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm, because. . . I'll just skip a little bit forward for one second. Because later when I met the Teatro Campesino group, there was a tremendous sense of familiarity. And they'd tell me the same thing, as if we already knew each other.

MARGARITA NIETO: Wow.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And it had to go back to my early exposure to country life and migrant life and migrant children, and understanding, or having a sympathy with this, because we weren't migrant children. We were, right at that time, we were kind of like living that life, but my father knew exactly where he wanted us to be.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So later when we moved to our own home in what is now East L.A. [and it has many negative connotations today but] at that time it was simply a community. It was lots of vacant lots, lot of space, little smog. The problems with drugs when I was a child were not much at all. This is in the fifties. The big thing in the fifties was getting drunk, as a teenager, but there was [nothing beyond] that yet.

MARGARITA NIETO: Cruising.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. It later became much more complicated. But once we bought our home we were settled, and ready in a sense to launch our lives or to establish ourselves here in Los Angeles.

MARGARITA NIETO: What school did you go to?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, let's see. Permanent schools, the little ones that I'd gone to as a migrant I don't recall, but I went to Humphrey's Avenue School, out in the eastside. I went to Griffiths, a junior high school, and did three years there, and then I finished my school at Garfield High School. I graduated in summer of 1959 and then went from there to Loyola University, which I would have graduated from, but they had no art department at that time.

MARGARITA NIETO: I didn't even know you had studied at Loyola, isn't that funny?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh yeah, my early exposure to the Church and its influence was very strong and I'll go into that a bit but later on, I turned against it all, for various reasons. But my early schooling was not great; it wasn't exceptional. I learned to read and write pretty well, pretty soon. I had trouble reading though. I remember now

being in class and having to almost memorize the paragraph I was about to read because I'd get very frightened. I was a slow reader, and to this day I'm a slow reader. I recently found out that I have this problem where you flip a word [dyslexia-Ed.].

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I'd flip the second word over, and it's been difficult for me to read, and yet I've read volumes of stuff.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you're a voracious reader, yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But I remember being a young kid and dreading having to read out loud. But I still, at the same time, I remember reading "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer in front of the entire student body. In the morning we'd have a presentation, and students would volunteer to read something, and I remember having the poem in front of me and reading to all the school "Trees!"

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And these are mostly Mexican chicano kids. Half of them didn't know what I was talking about, and the other half wondered why I was reading this. But I had an interest in reading. It was a challenge, I suppose, and it always became a challenge. I think that I compensated by doing a lot of reading.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you have art classes at these schools?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, we had arts on Fridays, or if it rained. (laughter) And I remember doing a project with Francisco Cordova, a partner. We did our first mural. I was in the third grade and we painted what must have been either a weasel or a mink, and a beaver. It was a fur mural. (laughter)

MARGARITA NIETO: Fur mural. Back to John the Baptist, right? (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That's right! I never connected it. It was a fur mural. It was nature, a forest, a waterfall, and this beaver and a badger and several fur creatures. And we spent months, it seemed, on this, and at the end of the mural, the teacher was disturbed as to who was going to get the mural, when it was done, because it was two of us. And it was cut in two. (laughter) Now, I mean, the paper was cut in two sides, so I would just say, "Well, Francis would get the upper part and I'll get the lower part." She said, "No, that would be a pity to divide it, so what I'd like to do is give it to Francisco." And I said well, I felt robbed! But she said an important thing. She says, "Carlos, you're very talented" but my name then was Charles; I'll have to go over that with you.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: "Charles, you're a very talented artist, and you could always do another one, but" get this "but Francisco couldn't without your help, so we're going to give it to Francisco." (laughter)

MARGARITA NIETO: She was very perceptive.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Now, you know, to this day I remember that vividly and saying, "Well, poor Francisco, he got the mural but he also got the boot in a way."

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, Francisco Cordova, where are you?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And we lost our friendship shortly after that. I remember being his very close friend for a while and then something happened and that was it, but I think it had to do with the fact that he got the mural and I didn't, which it should have been in reverse. But I did want to mention, when I started public school, my father started using my English name, Charles. He didn't want me categorized as a wetback or an alien or an illegal. There weren't any illegals at that time. But he wanted me to, he said, "You're an American, so use your American name." So I used Charles. I used Charles up until graduation from high school; everyone knows me as Charles. And when I first met Teatro Campesino, they still called me Charles. After meeting Campesino, becoming involved in the politics, I changed my name back to what is on my birth certificate, which is Carlos. So my real name at birth was Carlos; it's on my old certificate. When I was naturalized in 18 as an American citizen, I took the name Charles. Now it's haunted me because I've wanted to go back and get rid of that name. But now in order to do it I'd have to go to court, and they have to rechange the paperwork on that. So I've just never bothered. It's been confusing because my legal name is Charles and people don't understand, they don't believe it.

MARGARITA NIETO: And of course they think that you just simply picked up the Carlos out of. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, right. And they think, "Oh, he just. . ." No, I had it, and it's on the birth certificate, and

there it is.

MARGARITA NIETO: Of course; you were born in Mexico City.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, they didn't call me Char-less.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's amazing. You went to Garfield High. Did you do any art there?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, let's see. The two. . . I went through junior high school. I had a wonderful time in art. I always got A's, you know. Rarely did I get even a B. I did well. I liked color; I liked to play with paint. In high school, however, I finally met my mentor. He was David Ramirez, who taught life drawing in high school for kids who started in the ninth grade.

MARGARITA NIETO: Wow. My gosh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Which was unheard-of. And he had incredible kids. I even kept drawings of some of the kids, who are long-since gone, because they were so outstanding then, and they still are. I've looked at those drawings and they're still outstanding. I started with him in the second year of high school, and I did very poorly. He was very strict about his classes. He expected us only to get one pass out of the class. And I don't know if you remember that art classes were the easiest classes to get out of, when you wanted to work on another project or the school dance or just go to a meeting, or just get out of class, you could always get out of art. His, you were only allowed once. If you asked for two, he would drop you.

MARGARITA NIETO: Wow.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So that was the first time I had met a man so disciplined. And he had these kids, everyone from a cholo to some bright, middle class Chicanos, alert and at their desks when the bell rang, not getting to your desk. He believed in the combination of discipline and reward. The rewards were there. You know, he had ways of rewarding us. I had never met someone so challenging in art and so serious about art. And up until then, art was still a goof-off session. I couldn't draw the human figure. It was very difficult. All of my figures were elongated; they looked like El Greco. Finally, I began to get the swing of proportion and understand; by seeing the more excelled students draw and paint mostly draw I began to learn. Well, I followed that man for the next three years. I got him in eleventh grade, twelfth grade. I took summer school at Roosevelt between the eleventh and twelfth. Then I followed him after graduation to L.A.C.C. [Los Angeles Community College-Ed.], where he was teaching an extended class there. And he's probably one of the reasons I did not go to Loyola. Otherwise, if I had never been exposed to David Ramirez I would have gone on to another school, and maybe not stayed in the arts. But Loyola at that time was very excelled in political science, ROTC, and philosophy. Very little in the arts. [Attended Summer School only at Loyola-Ed.]

MARGARITA NIETO: I see. What about external influences? Were you already beginning to look at painters?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Let's see, now, we'll go back. . . No, my first exposure to art was real tacky.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I would spend a lot of time on Whittier Boulevard as a little teenage kid with my best friend. On the way home we'd often go by the boulevard and, you know, buy something to [notch, nach] on, and then go home. And I saw, I would say between the ages of twelve and seventeen, furniture art.

MARGARITA NIETO: Ah hah!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Couch paintings that looked like Dali's, you know, simplified to the nothing degree.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Paintings of city scenes and Brooklyn Bridges or Golden Gate Bridges over, elongated, which is interesting because later, and to this day, I do that shape of canvas. And going from store to store looking, and often going inside and seeing further paintings of leopards at the brook and women on top of leopards and very, very, you know, it was totally tacky kind of art.

MARGARITA NIETO: Terrific.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But it was still kind of fun because it was so simple. It was done piecemeal. Everyone did a section of it. It was the simplicity and the fact that I was exposed to something outside of my realm. Art did not become visually important till David's class. Then I became interested in line drawing, and the line work. But previous to this, especially in grammar school, my first exposure to classical music became an incredible preoccupation, which meant that, whenever I could go to the concerts with the school, I'd give them my dime

they went every Saturday and get on my bus and get to the Shrine Auditorium or the Philharmonic and listen to music. And I remember early exposure to Rimsky-Korsakov, early exposure to the Nutcracker, early exposure to some of the basics of classical music.

MARGARITA NIETO: I remember one time talking to you about Stravinksy being a discovery for you at a very early age, something like twelve, or something like that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Well, you know, I have recently received a book on Fantasia, and as a child was a great fan of Fantasia, not only the final film, but more, what it took to put that film together. And the interesting input that each artist had, as well as Walt Disney the man, who had done this, who saw that film could be a form of art if it's carried to its final, you know, development. Again, it left an indelible memory. I finally, eventually, did meet Walt Disney.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you really?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, I did. But at the beginning I knew him only through his films, you know, all the films that we seem to have indelible imprints of but it wasn't till Fantasia that I really started understanding that there was such a thing as art, that had nothing to do with animated films. That there was something that when I heard Stravinksy for the first time, when I heard The Dance of the Hours and the Pastoral and all the pieces that composed that and studied them. Because I didn't have a musical background, my way of studying was to listen to it over and over, read up on the artist, try to connect why someone created something like the Rite of Spring. I could not, at that time I was so young I could only hear excerpts from the production; I couldn't really understand the rest of the sound. But to this day now, I know pretty well most of the work of Stravinsky. Whatever records I have, much of it is Stravinsky. And I understand his formative years so much better now, as an adult having done this research. But that film turned, changed my life. And for a while I thought and this was I'd say age 12, 13, 14 that I was going to go into animated film or into filmmaking. Because I thought it was pure magic what Disney could do.

MARGARITA NIETO: And actually you had a period in your life of which you worked in that area, right?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I think that was again influenced by the fact that at age 14, 15, we had gone to the Disney studios, and we had asked to see Disney, but they said, "Oh, Disney's a busy man. I'm sorry, he can't see you." We were there on tour with Lalla Guererro, who was working on a film or something with him. And on our way out of the studio, I pushed the button for the elevator and the elevator door opens, and who should be standing there: Walt Disney himself. I remember shaking his hand and being awed of him. You know, "There he is, the man himself."

MARGARITA NIETO: Gosh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And of course he was busy. He said, "Hello." He greeted us and went on his way. But yes, you know, I shook his hand and I had touched one of the, you know, one of the most important influences of my young life then. Was this man who I felt was a genius in many ways.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's an interesting correlation between the visual aspect of the animation and music, and one feeding the other.

MARGARITA NIETO: Do you still have the same adoration for Disney as far as animation?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I do in more [of, have] distance now, more intellectually, and I'll tell you why. I think Disney personifies some of the American ideals in art and in culture in total, because what he was trying to do and specifically with Fantasia. And it was the spirit of the thirties, I believe; it was the post-Depression period, where people were trying to think popular art, art that was consumable by the masses high art that could be put in a tin or another form, a package. You can say that even the L.P., the record business became aware of this. Get it into a form that everyone can afford, that everybody could pay a dollar or five dollars and take home and play and understand and appreciate. This, for its time, was very revolutionary. Up until the thirties, you still had the division between the high arts and popular culture, being jazz and popular movies. You didn't have them come together, I believe until such films as Fantasia and some of the other productions that came out of either Hollywood or Broadway. Porgy and Bess was an example of this of trying to amalgamate these two sometimes opposing extremes, which are very, very, which is, the effort is very, very American to get rid of the uppercase "H" in High Art and really deal with art on a more democratic level. I think he did it. I think he was a pioneer. I think I can find many relations between Disney and Andy Warhol, because of using the popular image to convey something more fundamental about mankind or civilization. I think the very idea of packaging such a huge collection of masterpieces in one two- or three-hour film. . . I think originally Disney's Fantasia was supposed to be a program for three to five hours. They cut it down because of popular consumption, no one could sit through it.

MARGARITA NIETO: But you're also talking about a very important issue which is iconography and the definition of a truly American iconography emanating or originating from this whole concept.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. And I think, again, perhaps other cultures got their iconography from high art or, say, the lifestyles of the monarch. I'm thinking about ballet. But when you're talking about American culture, we still look toward Porgy and Bess as one of the sources of meaning and form.

MARGARITA NIETO: One of the issues that I've been trying to confront recently has been the question of what is American iconography, because, as you know, one of the problems with acceptance of Latino art has been a misunderstanding or misreading of the narrative tenets used by Latinos. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .because they speak to a bicultural tradition.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I think that's something we should discuss later because that's very interesting.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, because in the visual arts you don't have that same problem, at times handicap, because you're not dealing with words; you're dealing with language only indirectly, so you can circumvent that.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I think that's, in my case, the advantage, rather that it would be to a writer of plays or poetry a disadvantage, having to deal with both languages.

MARGARITA NIETO: But later on, for example, there's this great acceptance of, say, Ruscha or Oldenburg or Jasper Johns, but there isn't, say, of a John Valadez, you see.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: But that we'll get into later.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: What I'd like to go back to right now is Loyola.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And where did you go from there?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, let me explain a little bit about Loyola because, again, that was a small turning point for me in that I had gone there for a summer program in which if I had worked it out I would have been able to have my schooling paid for by the university by doing part-time work. But I found myself at that point changing my ideas toward religion and the answers that it gave us. I was looking for more scientific fundamental answers as to why mankind was here and what was he doing on earth. Loyola gave us religion. And religion, for me, it started to answer less and less questions. It started to impose restrictions on my thinking. For instance, Loyola and the Catholic church was very much pro the interest at that time of world war, especially in Viet Nam and in dealing with Communist countries. They were very militant. If you went to Loyola, you had to take R.O.T.C. There was the, you were indoctrinated into the whole idea that we are the chosen people to guide the poor, blind Communists out of their sinful ways. Well, even as a child in my exposure again, I don't exactly know where I got the exposure to Diego Rivera as a Communist, because I knew he was a Communist, and to Cantinflas as an early Communist. My ideas toward Communism were really, that it had nothing to do with sin or the devil; it really had something to do with another way of doing things, another political structure. I couldn't confirm it because at the eleventh grade I had done very little reading in Socialist ideas. After Loyola, I said, "I do not want to be a member of this kind of team that's fighting for, that's fighting in the name of Christ to kill all Communism in the world." I couldn't go for that. And even though they were offering me a scholarship, I just could not see myself getting involved with it totally. My very best friend became a navigator in the at that time, my very best friend a navigator in the air force. He bombed Viet Nam many times. He said for him it was a job. He left in the morning, he got on the jet plane, he flew to Viet Nam, dropped the bombs on a target, not on people, flew back home and had dinner with his wife and his two kids.

MARGARITA NIETO: God.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: This is all he saw of the war, he said, "You can't blame me. That's all I saw of the war. I had no more to do with it than you did." So, but yet he had physically participated. Perhaps in another war, I would

have supported that, but in this war it seemed wrong. It just did not seem right. And the whole [metch, mess, that's when] that I started to read about the influence of the church in Latin America. There was a very close friend of mine who had been a missionary in Peru, and he went to Peru totally optimistic and naive and in total faith of the church. When he was in Peru, he finally, five, six years [later-Ed.], he cracked up. They found him on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. He went to psychiatrists and they started to put him into therapy, then sent him back to Peru, because. . . Well, he said, "What I have discovered and the reason I really just lost all sense and reason is that I discovered that I was not here spreading the word of God or the Lord, but I was fighting Communism, that I was being used. My confessionals were being used to get information from the natives in that area as to who was organizing, in what villages, and then they were being systematically napalmed, without anyone knowing." The Peruvian government, the United States government had agreed that this was how they were going to deal with the Communist burgeoning in that area, and no one else was to know anything about it or to speak, including the priest, as to how this problem was being dealt with. "When I discovered those things," he said, "I couldn't stand it or believe it, and just started flipping out." And finally, this led to my friend's he was a priest, ordained priest to a slow withdrawal and finally, a few years later, he renounced his priesthood. Now that was after tremendous torture that he had personally suffered, in trying to deal with his beliefs in God and Christ and all that he believed in, and trying to see the Church as a political machine. So I had, I think, very young, understood that the Church, maybe through his exposure and other exposure, was a political machine, was a political entity, and the facade of being so involved with your soul had other ramifications, some of which, many of which I could not support. So my pulling out of the Church and of being a Catholic was a very conscious, conscientious effort to not support that kind of structure. And all this led up to the political arena of the sixties. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .where many of us were pulling out of things that we had supported and believed in, simply out of habit. We were questioning fundamentals of the American system, because we were at a turning point.

MARGARITA NIETO: So it was a politicization as well as a coming to terms with maturity. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and with a conflict with ones own ideas.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think it started out with the personal change, and then later I started to see the other political and. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Collective.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .collective ramifications of my choices and decisions. So I left Loyola and. . . I had already a room and, you know, I had been working for the school already, but I packed up and came back to Los Angeles. I was at Westchester then. Now, it had another very important influence on me. Up until high school, at that point, I had not gotten out of the eastside, outside of going downtown and maybe Hollywood. And lived in a white neighborhood and seen how much better life was in Westchester County than it was in East L.A. [Loyola is in Westchester-Ed.] So I came back to East L.A. knowing that I was going to give up that living by the beach and, you know, living in nice neighborhoods and feeling that there was another, there was more, there was something else going on besides what was going on in East Los Angeles. I returned to East Los Angeles for two and a half years and did two and a half years of schooling at Cal State L.A. I became very discouraged there with the art department and the structure of an academic school, of the art structure of an academic school, because there was no place for an artist.

MARGARITA NIETO: And by this time you had already decided you wanted to go into art?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think I knew that since I was five. I never wanted anything else in my life.

MARGARITA NIETO: So you really did want to be. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, never, ever did it enter my mind. I think at one time I thought about theater because it was fun, it was make believe, it was art but never seriously.

MARGARITA NIETO: Between those years as in this mobile life of going from community to community that you talk about..

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .you still kept on drawing and you still kept on. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Never stopped. At Loyola I think that summer was the only summer I didn't do any art, but I

think right after that I enrolled in my general studies at school, I took [at-Ed.] L.A.C.C. with David Ramirez again. And I started studying at night at Otis/Parsons, while I was going to Cal State. By the two and a half years at Cal State I decided that was a terrible school and transferred over to Otis/Parsons. I received a full scholarship, four years there. And I didn't have to pay a cent. But it came too soon in my life. The scholarship was so easy for me to get that I somehow really didn't think much of it. I spent a year and a half at Otis and then withdrew. I withdrew the first time. . . Well, let's see, I withdrew at that time, transferred to UCLA, because I really wanted my general studies or by that time I had passed general studies my academics to be more demanding. I really wanted to know more. I just didn't want to be a dumb artist doing, you know, pretty pictures. I needed a background that was much more fundamental. So I studied at UCLA and after a series of problems with moving I mean, physically getting from the east side to UCLA I decided then that school was not the best place to form your art ideas and to be an artist, that I had to go and do it in a real place where art is made, and at that time it was New York. So after another year of UCLA, I finished there, or quit, and moved back to New York City. Now, I had visited New York City the first time. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Let's backtrack a moment. You were talking about going to Otis/Parsons and receiving a full scholarship, which obviously they're not handed out every day to everybody.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No.

MARGARITA NIETO: Who did you study with? Who saw your work?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I was understand. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And what was your style of the time?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it was very figurative. I was studying with Joe Mugnaini, who was the man behind me at that time. I went from David's arms and hands to Joe, who again was a strong disciplinarian, who was a tremendous teacher as far as teaching the figure, drawing the human figure. And he was an Italian in all the sensibilities. His politics were Italian. His thinking was Italian. He was not American in the sense of the all-American; he was really American-European. It was that kind of bicultural, I think, background that I gravitated to. He demanded a lot of his students. All of our drawings were three by four feet, four by four feet, six feet, full size. The bigger the better. He felt that, you know, one should really explore on those kinds of scales. We were not, I never felt the need to paint a painting that was 14 by 16 inches. For me it was a waste of time. Scale had been introduced to me through Joe's classes, and I did quite well in his classes. He was the one that finally introduced my portfolio to the school, who gave me the scholarship. So I was from, I went from David to Joe, and I probably would have finished had I not become terribly interested in New York.
Now, I wanted to say that I had gone to New York the first time between Cal State and Otis. I went with my very good friend Danny Guerrero and went to New York City to try my luck at it. At that time I wanted to be an illustrator. I was only 20 19, 20. We went to New York, we got an apartment, and we lived there for six months. I got to understand how the city functioned, how it worked, where the museums were, and basically what the layout was like. I left after six months because I did receive the scholarship to Otis and I decided to come back and take advantage of it. After a year and a half there, I went to UCLA, and then I went back to New York City. And that brings us to 1965. I lived in New York City from 1965 to 1970, '71. Between '70 and '71 I was starting to come back to L.A. more. I started feeling the ties back to the city.

MARGARITA NIETO: But the New York experience was very important, from what you've told me before.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think it made me into a serious artist in that I was willing, and saw that other people, other artists, were willing to give up everything to be an artist in the full sense of the word. Not just to make images, but to sell them, to be in the galleries, to be criticized, to deal with the whole enviroment of the arts. In Los Angeles in 1960 there wasn't much going on in the arts. Your images and your ideas all came from New York or Paris. It really all stemmed from the sources, and the sources at that time were the big cities.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So even though the first six months there for me were mostly working for an ad agency, not even doing illustration; I typed, I did office work considering going into illustration. While I, in New York, there, I was able to attend some classes at the Art Students League, which again connected me to the old school of New York, the pre-Abstract Expressionist school, the Tin Can school of New York. It started there at the Art Students League. I became then aware of the American tradition, in history, of people like John Sloan, Walter Kuhn, some of the artists who had made New York in the thirties the city it is today, in the arts specifically.
So I did my six months and then returned to Los Angeles, only to find again the same problems I mentioned: that this was not the place for serious study, that I had to go back. So I did by '65. And I had, for all intended purposes, I never thought I would return to Los Angeles. I had really at that time decided that my life was going to be on the east coast. But I had. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And you had no problems cutting off from friends and family and that kind of thing?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, I was of the age that, you know, you normally do cut off friends and families. You're going to college.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But I hadn't discovered culture then, really. Culture, let's say, my culture, Mexican culture, within me yet. I hadn't really discovered it. So it wasn't until I left the west coast that I became, I discovered. . . It's kind of when you leave your town you decide, you realize what your town's all about. While you're there, you take it for granted. So that was my last, that was it. In '65 I became a New Yorker for the next five or six years.

MARGARITA NIETO: And were you then painting constantly?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You mean, up until, from New York on, or before New York? Well. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: I mean when you got to New York in '65 you were already. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, not immediately. I first had an apartment, which I shared with a roommate, who was a German. He was a chef. I learned a lot about German culture through him popular. He was not a literary person, had no real education in literature outside of what he learned. But he had grown up as a small child in war-torn Germany and had become an international chef. And I started to read then, and for a while he paid the bills because I told him, "I've got to get some background in the arts."

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And he owns much of my work because of that. In fact, I spoke to him years ago, and he still has the work. And I said, "One day it might be worth something; hold on to it." But what happened at that time is that I had to start reading. I had to start really, like never before. . . I mean I had gone to school and learned all the basics, but now I had to focus in on the arts, and what modern art was all about, and how did it come about. So that led me into the readings of the literature of Paris and the turn of the century. Apollinaire and some of the other literary people, Mallarme, who then led me to the contemporary Cubist time and we got to Gertrude Stein and, again. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Duchamp.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. Then that led me into the pain of the period, which then finally kind of cleared up where our modern art started, and then I could add on to that the knowledge that I gained from seeing the art exhibits in New York City and seeing where the American influence became a part of the history with the advent of Abstract Expressionism, and even some of the other moves before that that were popular and they were sort of American-European movements. And then that plus seeing all the art in the museums and understanding that finally started to give me a clear indication as to what modern art was about and what came after modern art. I was in New York when Pop Art was on the decline and Conceptual Art and the very, very severe hard-edge school of painting was on the rise. For a painter that was the worst time to be in New York. Because no more did you see drippy paintings; now you saw crisp hard edges, a lot of writing, a lot of intellectual investigation, less of the atmosphere of Kline and Pollock and some of the other artists who were the characters of that turning point for American art, and more of the literary structure of what art was about. It was to read and not a time to paint, as I saw it.

MARGARITA NIETO: And today would you still view that as the very sterile period?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I'd have to say yes. I'm not against any school of painting, but I'm not in support of art that depends so much on literary content.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I really found it to be overbearing and exhausting, so much that I really became very depressed. By the time I returned to Los Angeles, I was a mess.

MARGARITA NIETO: By the way, when you lived in New York, where did you live?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I first had an apartment on West 72nd, which is near the Ansonia [Hotel-CARLOSALMARAZ], which has been traditionally a classical and Broadway-musical neighborhood. Many, many musicians. You hear people reciting for opera, you hear piano practices going on in that whole [Canyon] area. A lot of musicians living in the Ansonia and then very quick and direct access to Lincoln Center, to Carnegie Hall. So that I was spending a lot of time getting myself exposed to some of the best art in the world, being the American Ballet Theater. The Joffrey Ballet had not formed yet, but I was seeing the Metropolitan and I was

seeing most of the main theater of repertoire groups of that time.

MARGARITA NIETO: What about your friends? Did you have painter friends, people that you still. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Not all at once. Most of my friends were still. . . My best friend being Danny Guerrero who was in musical comedy, and I was exposed to his friends who were all musicians and dancers which I loved. But again, I was still hungry to meet my own people. Now, I finally decided, after two years of having an apartment, to look for a loft down in what is SoHo today. When I was down there, it was simply a semi-industrial environment with a lot of, some of the Wall Street business sort of spilling over. It was a place that closed down at five o'clock. You couldn't get a match, you couldn't get a cigarette, you couldn't get a beer, you couldn't get a glass of milk or coffee. Everything closed at five. I looked in the Village Voice for some time before I found a possible loft that I could afford. I went up to the door. You had to wait. . . At that time well, I'm sure you still do you have to wait the night before [1967-Ed.] the Village Voice comes out and grab it and then make your phone calls real quick and set up your appointment and get down there with the money before anyone gets down there. Well, I had the good fortune of seeing an apartment rented by a Richard Serra.

MARGARITA NIETO: Really.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Now Richard Serra today has become one of the major artists of New York and more of a certain kind of thinking of that period. Well, I didn't know him. I didn't know Richard. I went down to the apartment. I knocked on the door. And a very rude man in a huge overcoat said, "Come back tomorrow." Mumbled it and walked out. I didn't know who he was, but all I heard is "Come back tomorrow." So I did. Went back the next. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .the next day. [This was the studio of Richard Serra and Nancy Graves-CARLOS ALMARAZ.] At this time they were not famous people; they were just like you and I. Artists functioning, working, trying to survive in New York City. I walked into a modest-sized studio with about ten- or maybe eleven-foot ceilings. The place was a mess in that there had been a lot of activity. And in the rear end of the studio they had constructed what looked like an inside of a boat. There was a little loft of top of the living area, there was a dining area underneath the loft, there was a bed, a closet, a kitchen area, and then in the most strangest contraptions to get into the shower imaginable. Because the shower was raised four feet off the ground so that the drain could drain into our sink because everything had to built like that and the only way into the shower was up these little boxes into a small cubbyhole, and then you connect the hoses and shower! Now this was the struggle for artists who wanted to live in a loft, because the lofts were really industrial spaces; they weren't made for living.
So I walked in, introduced myself, met Serra, met Nancy Graves. At that time they were [married or-CARLOS ALMARAZ] living as lovers together in this space. And they were, from what I understood, they were moving to larger quarters. We talked about the rent and I thought it was a little high. They apologized because it had just gone up. They were paying $92.50, and it had just gone up to $120, and both of us, we all bemoaned the fact that, how rents were going up in New York City.

MARGARITA NIETO: My God.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I took the loft, I signed the lease, I paid them $600 for the fixtures that's for the interior and that was it. We talked a little bit about art because Richard asked me if he could keep his work in the closet. There was an elevator chute that was used as a closet. And I said, "Sure, for a while," I said, because we're not settled in the new space. And then I looked around. As I was looking at the loft, I noticed a lot of fur everywhere. Pieces of, chunks of fur. And I turned to Nancy, I said, "What is all this fur?" She says, "Oh, those are for my camels." And I said, "You're the girl who showed at the Whitney those large camels, like a taxidermist." She said, "That's it." I said, "They were wonderful!" They were the talk of New York for a while, because they were working with ideas that had to do with using things as they are rather than as an illusion. So she made a camel with hair and everything.

MARGARITA NIETO: Back to gorillas. (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And Richard I didn't know about. What?

MARGARITA NIETO: Back to gorillas. (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, back to gorillas. So I said. . . I didn't know much about Richard. Now I think shortly after I left that loft we had agreed upon the rent and all, and they had said if I have any trouble with the heater to please call them which I did several times later, because the place got incredibly cold. There was only one heater and that was the kitchen stove, and if that didn't work, you got no heat. And one time we were at six below and the stove didn't work, except for the burners, and we were dying in there. Anyway, I left the loft, signed the paper, felt very happy that now I was really going to do the art thing. I was going to have a studio. Richard Serra soon] hit the cover of Art Forum and he became an internationally known artist from then on, with his lead, poured lead pieces that he done at the Whitney [or Guggenheim-CARLOS ALMARAZ]. And I saw him

only a few times after that, when they came to my studio to help me out with this or that. Nancy continued, and to this day has done extremely well as a sculptress working in metal. At that time, as I say, they were just two people that I had met. They. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, and you know, it's, you know, it's a SoHo story. Then I took the studio and lived there between 1965 and 1970. No, I'm sorry. 1967 and 1970, '71. The place was very adequate for what I wanted to do, but then my life, personal life, started really falling apart at that point. I started letting many people live at the studio with me best friends. Frank came to live with me and. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Frank Romero?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .yeah his girlfriend came to live with me and then my friend Bill Cameto came to live with me.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's when he was with Diane?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Diane Humphrey Romero. Now she's Zapeda; she remarried. But I had a lot of problems in establishing myself and my space, as an artist, and then I kept inviting people to really basically take over.

MARGARITA NIETO: When did you meet Frank Romero?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Romero I met in 1959 at Cal State, L.A. He was a student there, who excelled in the arts, very much, had gotten a very young exposure to fine arts, so that he was a very good draftsman, fine sense of form, and his drawing ability was amazing, and. . .
[Something crashed; interruption in taping]

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, and. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: He was a fine draftsman and a very, very excellent ceramist. He had studied with Peter Voulkos, and had gotten a lot of education out of the way very early, so by the time he got to college he was already ahead of most of us. We had a very good relationship in that he was a hard critic and gave me a lot of pointers on the difference between fine arts and advertising illustration, which is what I really thought I'd be getting into. So by the time we got to New York, I was trying to establish. . . The missing element was the discipline it takes to do your art. Kind of like the bohemian life sort of fell over into personal, or say my professional work, and I couldn't get my professional work off the ground. Plus, getting into a gallery is very hard in New York, and I was trying too hard rather than. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: So you were on that precipice between living off your art on a commercial level and really becoming an artist.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. During the day I worked in commercial art doing illustrations, working for a small company and doing visual work. And in the evening I worked on my own painting. But it became increasingly more and more difficult for me to do it. Plus I had the bombardment of what was going on in New York at the time was not a painterly attitude toward art, but rather very severe, restrained attitude, and it was very unlike my nature, my cultural background, to become that obsessed with exactness, as I saw it.
To make a long story very short and we'll return to this in 1970, I decided to return to Los Angeles. After a visit here I thought that it would be easier for me to make art here than there. But more important, I suffered tremendous depression during '69 and '70. I started to see my problems as getting in the way of my profession. I started to have doubts about myself, not as an artist, but kind of as a person. It was more fundamental than the arts. I got into therapy, because I was really torn between running home and staying in New York. I thought that a trip to Europe would help. So I saved my money and took a Communist freighter from New York harbor to North Africa. I went from North Africa to Valencia, Valencia to Madrid, Madrid to Paris, Paris to Amsterdam, Amsterdam to London. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: God! What a weird way to get to Europe!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I know. (chuckles) I've always done things in reverse. And then from London back to New York. I thought that would cure me of my melancholy, and this is why. I noticed your pin up here. [aside to MARGARITA NIETO-Ed.]

MARGARITA NIETO: Ahh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it didn't. I got back to New York knowing for the first time that it didn't matter where you made art, that the important thing was to make art. With that in mind, I decided, "Why am I living in New York? Why don't I just go home and make art." L.A. was still home to me. Plus at that time, you could live easier

in Los Angeles than in New York. You could rent a studio space in Los Angeles easily for like $75, which today would probably be equivalent to New York, but maybe, but at that time it wasn't. It was easier. So I, after a lot of therapy, and a near nervous breakdown, I decided to come back to Los Angeles. But I didn't. . . I really came back, I felt that I came back as a failure. I had not gone to New York to do what I intended to do, to make it as an artist. [He meant to say: I had not done in New York what I intended to do. . ."-Ed.] I had returned to Los Angeles because I couldn't deal with the New York scene. It became overpowering. So there was a lot of depression. The depression did not. . . And I mean lingering depression, where every day seemed to linger. My answer to the immediate problem of the depression was my medication and drinking. I battled with that for quite a while. Until finally I succumbed to pancreatitis in 1971. I was hospitalized here in Los Angeles at the General Hospital for 42 days, 32 days of which I never drank water or ate anything.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh my Gosh!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was a total fast because my insides could not stand any food at all. I would immediately, you know, vomit. So here I was at the General Hospital with fevers of 105o, having hallucinations, deep, complicated hallucinations they called it confusion and hallucinations. I saw my chart. It was like eight things that I had: fevers of 105o, I went blind at one point I could not see for about four or five days because the blood vessels. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: You were in a life and death situation.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. . . .the blood vessels in my eyes had burst.

MARGARITA NIETO: Ohh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, one day my parents arrived and friends, and my eyes were totally red, all the blood vessels had burst. So I was in deep pain at the beginning pancreatitis is a very painful internal problem and then the pain was replaced by the medication. I was on heavy Demerol, which becomes very addictive. But so I went through all that and nearly died. I woke up one night, very weakly woke up, to find that my feet were being annointed with oil, and I was receiving last rites.

MARGARITA NIETO: God.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I had barely enough strength to ask them, "Am I dying?" And I was not given a direct answer. But it was obvious that I was at that threshold. So I somehow got through the next few days and recovered slowly and then, after a certain point, very quickly. But the period before that was probably one of the hardest and lowest points of life, because here I was. . . I was let's see, how old was I? Oh, I was just in my thirties, and I had got to New York and returned basically, I felt, as a failure because I had not done what I wanted to do there. It was naive of me to think, "Yes, I can go to New York in five years," but the feelings were there. I had brought back everything, and I was back home, even in my parents' house, which to me was again a sign of failure. I had not, you know, returned to, I don't know. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: To your independent, independence.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .my own apartment or my own life, my independent life. And my personal life was a mess at that time, really. So I decided to pull out of the arts, really, and think more about the issue of life and death. Because I had gotten so close to death that I really felt that I had been reborn. I had a new chance to do something with my life. And I became very aware at that point that I was so involved with my problem, my life, my talent, my art, that there was no end to it, that unless I started to look at the world and myself in it, my surroundings and my involvement, that I wasn't going to get out of this. And there were several dramatic things that happened. One of them was six months after my recovery my brother died. And it was as if we had traded one life for another, because he had been at the prime of his life. He was 22 years old, in good condition. Yes, he had had problems with drugs, but he had kicked it. He had really fought it off. And here I was at the other extreme, dying in the hospital, and he was coming to see me. Six months later the whole thing changed. He died. I lived.

MARGARITA NIETO: My gosh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So I'm sure there was. . . There was a lot of guilt there. Because what I did afterwards was to in a sense to punish myself in a positive way, which sounds real Catholic, but by giving up my involvement with the art world and the art galleries and making myself a living off of art, I decided to become involved with social issues and using the vehicle of the mural as the means by which I could. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Ahh!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .I could try to redeem my brother's life and try to reconstruct my reality through my work

in murals.

MARGARITA NIETO: Fascinating.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It finally led to my involvement with young kids to help me on the murals.

MARGARITA NIETO: Ahh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And to create a sense of collectivity. It was from there that I started to get involved with the children of Plaza de la Raza, and help Margo Albert in establishing some of that at the beginning when we were still working on benches in the park. And to be aware of the world around me, rather than just me in the world.

MARGARITA NIETO: So in a sense it was from that self-isolation toward a, out of growth, toward a world, toward a social order. But through this whole introspective search.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think I had done [enough-Ed.] reading also to realize that you do find yourself through other people. And that even though I had had it very rough I had done it all to myself. I couldn't really blame anyone for doing this to me. So that when I looked at people who had a more difficult time with their reality, what made an impression on me was that they were victims of their situation. I was not a victim. I had done everything I had done with knowledge. When you're working with poverty people, things are quite different. There's a lot of things wrong and they have no idea how they got to that point. So after recovering, I started working as a volunteer on a mural project for the farmworkers, which led me out of the city a great deal, and being up north.

MARGARITA NIETO: How did your contacts come about with the community? Here you had been away from Los Angeles for six years and you had been in New York and. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, that brings up to what happened today. Today I had lunch with Gilbert Lujan, and in 1971, '72, he was working on a magazine called Con Safos.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was a very community-oriented magazine dealing with Chicano culture. And they wanted volunteers to do some of the artwork and different pages for the magazine. Well, this seemed a good thing for me to do. It was volunteer, it was no pressure, I could, you know, do basically as I pleased, more or less or I thought. And so I got to know him, and I did some volunteer work for Con Safos. He was very involved with the Chicano movement, at that time, and we started dialogue, which has been now 14, 15 years of dialogue, as to what is a Chicano. Because I never saw myself as a Chicano. I was a Mexicano living in the United States with Americanos. We did not use the word Chicano in our homes to describe ourselves. We were Mexicanos. We started the dialogue as to what is a Chicano and what is the Chicano movement, because at that time I had gone from New York we had no movement, we had no specific cultural awareness then. We were just basically New Yorkers. With that dialogue I started to change a lot of things about myself, and becoming more aware of my role and participation in community work and, more important, not just community work, just und erstanding how I could participate in the social environment in which I was in by becoming more active, more aware, and learning a little bit about organizing people, which was something totally foreign to my nature. Later I discovered it was not my nature to do that. But I gave it eight years, of trying to organize community people, then artists, and then trying to get on a state level of this kind of activity. But after eight years I decided it was not really in my nature, that I was doing something that was not what I had intended to do back in '70, '71. I don't regret it, because I learned a lot, and I learned to paint. I learned to paint what I wanted to paint. Sometimes not even what I wanted to paint. But I learned to use paint a little more freely. It wasn't a precious gift that had been given, but rather it was something I [learned to-CARLOS ALMARAZ] do.

MARGARITA NIETO: And this of course necessitated an evolution in your style.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, I went through. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Because your work in New York had been hard-edged. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Hard-edged, minimal, severe, six- by six-foot canvases with just a few lines going through and a few dots. A little bit of vibrating color. But it was based on restraint, and holding back, and not on letting go, gushing forward.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you feel that that was representational of your point of view at the time? That is to say, was it art.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Let's see. I think that if we go back to New York in 1970, I had returned from my trip to Europe. I had seen a lot of art, including the Picassos and the Spanish work, which intrigued me because it was

unlike the rest of Europe.

MARGARITA NIETO: You mentioned Bosch at one time.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, his paintings Bosch had had tremendous influence, because these people were dealing with a very subconscious, emotional imagery. They weren't involved with the decoration, say of the Rococco or the French school. There was something very psychological about their work. Even some of the more primitive Spanish paintings that I saw were macabre, they were gothic, they were really dealing with dark elements of our psychology. They weren't as clear as the Impressionists. They weren't as bourgeois as the Impressionists. There was something very peasant about some of the others, some of the Spanish painters. When I returned to New York after my trip, basically hard-edge went out the window. I started painting on top of those paintings in loose, watery, acrylic paint, six- by six-foot paintings, with lots of gushing not gushing color gushing paint, in that you could see the drips, you could see that. . . They were dark, somber paintings, because I wasn't happy. I was really confused. I was going from a very bright palette of hard-edge to a very dark palette of grays, dark blues. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Ahh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .even silver paint metallic, industrial kinds of colors. Something that I would never do in Los Angeles. New York still represents to me a gray color palette. The work became very emotional. I wanted to paint when I was feeling unhappy, depressed, because I was going through these depressions. I started to draw more and more with pastel. Up until then I had seen and studied the work of Degas at the Metropolitan and read on how he did them and why he did what he did. At this time, at this point I started to buy pastels, large pieces of paper, and really loosen up and smudge this paper, and feel that I was violating something, instead of feeling that I was restraining myself and trying to maintain control. Because I think that led to my near nervous breakdown, in trying to maintain. When I started [to-Ed.] break down is when I started to really get it together.

MARGARITA NIETO: At one point, you had told me, you said a while ago, that your change from Charles to Carlos came at high school. At another time you said it came really at about this time.
CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I have to say, it came, my name went from Carlos to Charles at age eighteen, officially when I was naturalized. Everyone called me Charles, even in grade school. When I returned from New York to Los Angeles and started working with the farmworkers, when people asked me in Spanish, "Como te llamas?", I would never respond with Charles. (both chuckle) I started to use my Mexican name. But I also started to identify with the Mexican in me, and then people who knew me as Charles had to start calling me Carlos because I was not going to respond to Charles. So it was a realize. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So what's in a name? There's a great deal.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes. I mean, that is a tremendous. . . It's a tremendous knowledge to know what is in your name, what are the elements that compose your name. So when I started to leave that hard-edges school, I was looking for something more expressive, more emotional. I wanted to tap my emotion. Because I was having such problems dealing with it the rage in me, the anger. When my brother died I felt tremendous rage and anger. My answer was to join the farmworkers, like you would join the Foreign Legion although I didn't officially join anything. I started to go up there and spend more time. And I started to paint murals that were definitely political or at least didactic. They had a message. It said, "Boycott Gallo. . ." My first mural was Boycott Gallo Wine. There was nothing more unartistic than trying to do something like this, but the work itself was artistic. I had, I was the first professional, schooled artist to come back to the eastside to do murals. Up until that point it had been a handful of folk artists painting murals that were not, you know, in perspective, were distorted, had all the problems of primitive painting, naive painting. So when I came back, I understood how to put up a grid, how to make the proportions work right, how to do your whole arm and brushstroke so the painting looked like a painting and had your feeling. And I had learned this by seeing the work of Siqueiros and seeing Orozco and seeing Rivera, because by 1969 I had already taken my first big Mexican tour as an adult. So we had seen all the major museums, we had visited some of the pyramids, and seen the big three and seen most of their work. So when I got back to the murals of _____. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And you had really of course at that point begun to understand the techniques of muralism.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right, right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: In the Mexican school.

MARGARITA NIETO: So by that time I had already, I knew what I was doing. The recognition by my peers was pretty immediate, in that I had returned from New York, which hardly any Chicanos had ever done. . . We should probably stop here and let me call again, because it's going to be four-thirty, and we may have to wrap it up. And then continue again. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Okay. All right.

MARGARITA NIETO: We had been talking last time about your experience, your friendship with Gilbert Lujan, and how that developed.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: [Whispers:] It's not plugged in.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's on batteries.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, I see. We were going to. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Just a moment. This is session two of Archives of American Art for the Smithsonian Institution, Carlos Almaraz being interviewed by Margarita Nieto, February 13, 1986.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Now you were saying about. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: We were talking about Gilbert Lujan.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Were we?

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah. Because you had said that you essentially started getting involved with collective art. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, I see. Well, after my brother's death, in about '71, I felt very bitter and confused about being a Mexican American, or Chicano, here at this time and place, questioning my. . . In a sense questioning my allegiance to the United States and the principles of capitalism and asking questions about that. When the Chicano movement came around to me it came in the form of Gilbert Lujan. He came to my mother's home and I was working in the garage on the series of what I call my "Mad" series. These were drawings that I did on, first series I did in pastels, oh, say, the second series that I did in pastels. And at that time I was drinking a great deal, I was basically home to Los Angeles for, because I had not succeeded in New York. I was feeling pretty bad and then my brother's death made things worse. I was looking for a reason to get involved with something besides myself. I was then doing these drawings that I just mentioned, which were very crazy, very subconscious, a lot of Jungian kind of psychological symbolism. And I was doing a bunch of them, many of them. Strangely enough, now I only have about six left of that whole series and I must have had maybe fifty. I later sold them out of my portfolio to make, you know, ends meet.

MARGARITA NIETO: Was this when you were doing the "Pingos"?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, this was after that. The "Pingos" were. . . No, actually it was before the "Pingos." The "Pingos" I did later when I returned to school to finish my master's degree. But what I was saying was that I met Gilbert Lujan in my mother's garage. He came around because he'd heard that I was doing some work. I had spoke with him on the phone about his magazine Con Safos. And although I didn't agree in principle with some of the ideas of the magazine it tended to be very local, it tended to be very macho-oriented, it tended to be, rather than literary, it kind of tended to be more like a comic book. At that time I was not into comic-book philosophy. I later became more interested in comic-book philosophy, down the road. But we started to discuss, we began our dialogue on what is a Chicano, and what is the Chicano movement, and why should I, Carlos Almaraz or I was then Charles Almaraz why should I get involved? Well, Gilbert is a very good spokesman for the movement because he believed in it totally. I've always been a cynic. I really feel that nothing will really change the situation, but I, at that time because of my brother's death, was willing to try to better the situation for myself and for Chicanos and for basically Third World people ultimately. But principally at the beginning it was mainly for my own sense of answering the "whys." I got involved with Con Safos only in a few illustrations that I offered them, and then I started to do a lot of reading and Chicano history and Mexican history, and to then get involved in some of the basic principles of the Mexican psychology, which was pre-Columbian thought, the conquest, the struggle between mestizo and the European culture, and started to really know more about myself as a Mexican. It finally led to my getting involved with murals, street murals, my first murals being the ones I did for Cesar Chavez. And I think I mentioned before that I was one of the first professional artists who had returned to the eastside to do murals, for free. I mean, there was no money at that time. There were no grants. It was simply what you could salvage, not salvage, but gather from donations around you, to do a mural.

MARGARITA NIETO: How did you meet Chavez? Was it through Gilbert?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No. Gilbert in a sense was the kicking-off point. I started to realize that this movement, so-called movement, had a start, had started somewhere. That Gilbert in a sense was a prophet of a philosophy that had already had its beginning long before I returned to Los Angeles. As it turned out, its beginning, one of the beginning points was the Cesar Chavez movement in 1965, when he started to lead and to guide the farmworkers out of the fields and get them to demand better standards of living for themselves, and to raise the

standard of living for people of that caliber. So this was back in '65. And from Gilbert, I decided to go to the San Joaquin Valley. At that time I did not intend to meet Cesar Chavez, but I intended to get closer to the source of the philosophy. Now this led me to, before Cesar, it led me to Luis Valdez. I happened to be in the San Joaquin Valley in San Juan Bautista by accident, and a family took me over to the theater to see one of the productions of Luis Valdez. And he was doing a, at that time he was doing two obras, two pieces of work. One was the beginning of the Carpas of the Rasquachies [The Lowly-Ed.] and then the other was a play concerning pre-Columbian music, philosophy, and some of the mysticism, concerning pre-Columbian life, which intrigued me, because he had done, Luis Valdez had done his homework, knew what he was talking about, more than anyone I had met at that time, concerning pre-Columbian ideas. And he had put it into an art form that was, for his limitations concerning money and space, he had done a superb job on this little play that I had seen. After the play, I was able to meet Luis and found him to be totally unique. I had never met a person like this [before]. I had met one other person like him, but totally unique in that he was his own person. He was a very complete individual who knew exactly what he was all about and seemed to know and be able to lead other people to some of his dreams. I was very taken by him, very, very in awed by this man, who was maybe, you know, he's five-two or five-one, a tiny man. Brilliant mind. Tremendous vastness in his intelligence. I later found out he originally was a math major. He was really a mathematician.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, really. I didn't know that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That was his first love. And then he was also a gymnast. He used to do all that stuff. (chuckles) And this I found out only recently. And then I started to get to know him well enough to read some of his old plays, one of his first plays being The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa, which was interesting. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: But did you approach him after the production?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I did talk to him a little bit and all he could say to me at that time, and. . . I remember saying that I wanted to join the movement and he said, "What movement?" And I thought, "Here's the man who started some of the movement and he's asking me 'what movement'." But he really meant that, because he understood that everybody has their own movement, and his movement was theater. Everybody else's movement was what everybody else wanted to say their movement was. So I had to define what I meant movement. And we had a small but important talk. It was for me an important talk. And it was shortly after that meeting that I started to use my original name, Carlos, instead of Charles. So I returned back to L.A. very enamored with the theater, with the whole life, and with something very personal. I had grown up among rural people when I was a child. At least two years of my life was spent out in the country. Meeting Luis, and later meeting his family, was incredibly familiar. I felt very much at home, and I had a feeling that I knew them all before. So I later met his brother Danny, his sister Socoro, and many of the other members of the theater group. And I felt very, very much at home and wanted to join them. I returned later to meet Luis again and to show him my work and to discuss more of the ideas that I had already opened up and had been opening up through my first dialogues with Gilbert Lujan. And I found that. . . I ended up living at his house for about ten days. He actually, Luis took me right in and I slept on his couch, and I was able to get close to the source of much of the ideas of the sixties and seventies and even today. I was able to, you know, to really get close to the man himself.

MARGARITA NIETO: And how was it that you were, started doing murals for Cesar Chavez?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, from that dialogue with Luis, he said, "Who you should meet" and he said it most casually "is Cesar Chavez." And I said, "Oh really. How do you meet him?" He says, "Well, you have to go to. . " what at that time was forty acres in Delano, which was their original land. Well, when I got to Delano, they had left; the farmworkers no longer used that as their headquarters. They had moved to La Paz, which was this little tiny town I guess a berg outside of Bakersfield.

MARGARITA NIETO: So, in a sense, it was happenstance. You saw this theater group, you meet Valdez, and Valdez suggests that you meet Cesar Chavez.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Casually suggested I should meet Cesar Chavez. So I said, "Well, that's good. I'll do that." Within 24 hours I was in front of Cesar Chavez. He's a hard man to know, hard man to get to meet. But I was astounded at myself for realizing that if you want something you have to go out and get it. You must. . . You do it. Or you don't. So within 24 hours. . . And the way that was managed is that I left San Juan Battista, I drove down to La Paz, first to Delano. He was no longer there. They told me where he would be, I made a phone call, was introduced to the editor of [El Malcriado], which was Venustiano Orgin. I said I want to do volunteer work for the farmworkers, and since I had done work in journalism before, I would like to do it for the union. I understood they had a newspaper. He said, "Fine, come on down. We'll meet you." I did, I went down, he met me, he liked me, and he said, "We're having a meeting with Cesar right now concerning the 1972 convention that we're all going to be working on. Why don't you join us?" So I did. He led me into the big hall at the administration building in La Paz, and, as I say, within 24 hours I was in front of the man himself. And when it was time to speak on so-called decorations, they turned to me and I gave my announcement of what I had suggested to do, which

is to paint a big banner, a la Diego Rivera, you know, some of the other Mexican painters, muralists. Well, Cesar loved the idea. And he said, "However, we're not going to be ready to talk about decorations till later." So I was a little insulted because he referred to my mural as decorations. So we left the meeting early. And I left it rather abruptly, because as we were walking down the path someone yelled out to me to, "Come back, come back." And I said, "Why?" He says, "Cesar wants to talk to you. He wants to talk now about the decorations." (laughs) So we went back and sure enough, he said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Well, I want to do a big banner, very political, very like a big political cartoon, blown up, so that people can see. . ." We're talking about farmworkers who don't read, you know, they do read some Spanish but not a lot. I said, "Let's get a picture across to them of their own struggle." So Cesar loved that, and he said, "Great. What do you need." And I told him what I needed. He says, "Well, we don't have any money, so I don't know if we can do it." So he left it at that. Then about, I stayed with the farmworkers, worked on El Macriado for the next week or so, then Cesar came back to the office one day, and said, "Well, how much do you really need to do this banner?" And I told him I needed about $300 and some paint. So he got me some of the money for the banner, and then I went out myself and got a volunteer donation for the paint. And then we started, with the help of Mark Brian, we painted an enormous 64- by 32-foot banner, political cartoon, on this big piece of canvas. They rolled it up and for the convention they rolled it out and hung it up on the wall, and it looked great, you know.

MARGARITA NIETO: Is it still in existence?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I don't know. I assume it is, but it's probably in real bad condition, because it was done with acrylic paint, and acrylic paint becomes moldy, and canvas rolled up, even anywhere, can become pretty moldy. It was later shown, and it's astounding to me, because I had never done that piece for any kind of museum recognition or any of the so-called high-art recognition. But it was shown two years later at the Los Angeles Museum of Art, Wilshire Boulevard, at one of my shows.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, at the first Los Four show.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. And now, which will lead us into that in a minute. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, because we still have a lot of territory to cover.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, so I got to know. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Were you the only artist working for them?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, there had been a few, but after I left, and after doing numerous projects for Cesar and ideas, and some of which never came about, other artists joined, and even. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Who were some of the other. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I did the first two convention murals. On the second mural, I had Judithe Hernandez help, Judy Baca helped. I think Barbara Carrasco, I'm not positive. Billy Shaffner. I had a crew of maybe twelve artists helping on the second banner.

MARGARITA NIETO: I had been under the impression that Barbara Carrasco only started working with you on the Zootsuit mural.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, maybe you're right. It's fuzzy because at that time there was groups of people going up there. It seemed to be. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you have anything to do with the RCAF at that time?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, no. I never really did. We did the second banner in '74. That was a larger banner. It entailed, as I said, more people, people some of them which I never really got to know too well, because they came up with the Judy Baca's group. We did that in a good fast three days, four days. Acrylic on canvas. And that was hung and shown. It was twice as big as the first one. Now the third year I didn't do any more banners. It turned out that Gilbert Lujan did the third year's convention. He did the largest of all. His banner was immense. It was three stories high and something like a half a football field no, maybe not that big but it was the entire length of the convention center, which was gigantic. It weighed well over five hundred pounds and it took a good twenty people to roll it up and carry it into the convention center. It was like a huge burrito. It was just immense. And it was wonderful. I do have one or two photographs of the piece.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh really.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Because Gilbert worked on it over three or four weeks, with a crew of maybe twenty people, and they put such detail like you would not believe. You know. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: How long did it take you to do your first one?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: The first one took us a week.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you worked on it alone?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, myself and Mark Brian, just the two of us. The second one took three or four days. But we had a larger crew, maybe twelve people.

MARGARITA NIETO: And this is the one that Judithe Hernandez worked on.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: How did you meet Judithe?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Judithe and I met originally at school. She was in the graduating group that I was at Otis/Parsons, and this was in 1974.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, this was when you had already gone back?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, this is when I returned in '72 and finished. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: That was a question I wanted to pick up on again, yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, I see. Yes, I returned back to Otis to get my master's degree in '72, because I wanted to teach. And the only thing in my way was the fact that I didn't have a degree so I went back and got the master's in '74, so basically I graduated in '74. And Cesar Chavez was supposed to come to my graduation, and I suspected that he wouldn't, and he didn't, and it disappointed me immensely because I had told a lot of people that he was going. . . He had said, "When is your graduation?" And I said, "In June." He said, "Well, I'll be there."

MARGARITA NIETO: But basically then, during this time you were traveling between Los Angeles and _____. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I was commuting between Los Angeles and Tehachapi.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, Tehachapi, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I would go there once a month to work on the newspaper and what other projects I had. I hadseveral projects going. One of them was a painting in the administration building, which still is there. And all the decorations around the doors and things that they wanted. You know, they wanted the office to look a little bit better.

MARGARITA NIETO: You mentioned the relationship between your work and the Mexicans, the big three, Los Tres.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I was wondering if. . . Well, one of the tenets of Chicano muralism has always been the correlation between the muralist movement in Mexico, supposedly, and the muralist movement in California or the Southwest.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: And other people have challenged that. They say that that doesn't really exist, that that's a supposition that art historians and art critics have created.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: But in talking to you it seems obvious that that was a premise.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, right. Remember I was born in Mexico, so to me, you talk about muralism, you have to go back to the big three. And I literally went back to Mexico City to look at all of their work. I looked through scads of books, looking at details of their work. I read much research on their life, their lifestyle, and their politics and their philosophy and their ideas. So, no, I very consciously went back to pick up ideas from them, and ways of conveying complicated ideas to a in [this sense] a non-literal group of people, being farmworkers, and trying to get the ideas across.

MARGARITA NIETO: In other words, using the didactic objectives. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Definitely.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .of muralism, which are based on the didactic objectives of Medieval art in the cathedral art.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Exactly.

MARGARITA NIETO: And Quattrocento and all of that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, right. And I knew that, like, Diego Rivera had gone back to Italy to study the murals of Italy and the early, early work done in Italy, [so that] he could do what he wanted to do. And I wanted to have some learning so that I could continue my work. I certainly could not turn to New York and Abstract Expressionism to learn these things. And it had to be back to the source that I knew best. Other Chicanos, I don't think they were as affected by Mexican mural painting, but I kind of see that as kind of the weakness of much of their work, because it had lacked the heritage that I thought, I believed, that I had put into my work. I had researched it and it looked. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: You were conscious.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .very scholarly, you know. People said, "Oh, I can see a lot of Siqueiros in your work," or, "I can see Rivera's, right."

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you actually incorporate technique? Was it iconography? What were the. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Technique in the sense of Siqueiros. . . Siqueiros has said one thing, that you use all your arm in painting a mural; it's unlike an easel painting, because an easel painting, it doesn't take the physical effort as much as when you're doing a wall, or you're doing a huge banner. I kept that in mind when I executed the large pieces, in that the motions were simple, they were complete, and I used the full extent of my arm in making lines, which means that the work begins to flow. It's not a piecemeal puzzle that's put together or just a little photo that's enlarged. You start really incorporating body movement into the motion of the mural, which gives it its life and its substance, and people say, "Your paintings look like their, like the paint's moving. They're animated." And this is what I was trying to get across. Not a still rendition of something, but a sense of movement, which is what the movement was all about. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And which is what the [Quinto Sol], the philosophy of the [Quinto Sol], was all about, the sense of movement, going back to Cesar Chavez, going to Luis Valdez, and trying to interpret what they meant by movement. And so this was one of the things that I had incorporated into the early murals.

MARGARITA NIETO: What about the iconography of the pieces? Were they, did they incorporate words and image with. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Some of them were right out of the Diego Rivera textbooks, in that he used obvious symbols for Capitalism and Socialism, hammer and sickle, and a guy with a top hat and monocle and a cigarette holder. I used some of those ideas, but what I did is what he did, is to make cartoons into pictures. And so if you want a picture of, you want the idea of someone stealing the cheese, you paint a rat. And if this happens to be strikebreakers, great. You maybe even put a label on them, you know, you call them by name.

MARGARITA NIETO: So you used that Riveran iconography that also goes back to [Jose Guadalupe Posada], to a great deal.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, right. Exactly. And I did tremendous research in Posada. I mean, I was looking at his woodcuts. I was looking at the best books I could find in reproduction and buying things, to look at that iconography. I found that you cannot just simply draw or sketch a peon and put him in the context of the Chicano environment because people says, "Oh, that's Mexico." A guy wearing white clothes with little huaraches and a sombrero is not a Chicano image. It's not a Chicano symbol. That's Mexican. Here the dress is different. The elements are the same, though. A humble-looking individual, struggling against this enormous Capitalistic monster, being the agricultural business industry. You still want to convey that feeling. Well, I had to learn to interpolate, to take ideas from Rivera and put them into the context of California in 1972, and not of Mexico in 1924. I had to do that kind of interpolation.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's interesting. By the way, with your painting at Otis during this time, you were studying and getting your master's. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .[relation]ship was there between the work that you were doing with Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworker's Union and the work you were doing at Otis/Parsons and working toward your master's degree.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, there was a tremendous clash there. And if it hadn't been for the sympathy and understanding of one teacher, Joe Mugnaini, who understood my politics and what I had to go through to come up with something new and different, I don't think I would have made it through the school. I presented the political banner that I did for the farmworkers as one of my presentations. You do a presentation every few months. I hung it on the outside of one of the buildings, and there it was, the neo-social-realistic painting of the farmworker's struggle. During a period of cerebral contemplation of art that was known as minimal art, or conceptual art. This is what all the students were doing. Well, it was totally offensive to the sensibility of the school, I heard through the grapevine. However, upfront, I received my degree and things went on. But the thing with me during that period is that although I was leaving the school and working for the farmworkers and had photos and work to show that I was working, I was far out- and I knew it distanced most of my colleagues at school. I was a little older than they were. I had more experience. I'd already lived in New York, I had returned, and my work there was tons of it. I was, and am still, tremendously prolific. So not only had I produced a 64-foot banner, I had done lots of, oh, paper on gouache, enormous murals on paper, I had portfolios of pastel drawings, I had, you know, an abundance of work. So no way could they really criticize me for not sticking to the rules. I had gone beyond the rules. I felt pretty confident in that.

MARGARITA NIETO: Nonetheless, I think the trends, the prevailing aesthetic, say, of an arts school such as Otis/Parsons, would have to have been in conflict with. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, but there was. . . Oh, I know what did it is that. . . One interesting thing kind of proved the point. The last year at school, I had been with the farmworkers so much that I didn't have any money to pay for my tuition. So I turned to the school, and I said, "Could I possibly apply for a scholarship to pay for my last chunk of money?" And they turned to me and they said, "I'm sorry. We can't do that." You know. And I saw it as a political affront in that because of my left-wing politics they were not going to allow me to, they were not going to give me money to help me through the school. I saw it that way. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I did feel that they were not supporting what I was doing. So I simply turned to Cesar Chavez and I said, "I'm getting kicked out of school, and unless somebody helps me I'm going to lose my degree." So he said, "Fine, we'll send them a check." And they did.

MARGARITA NIETO: My gosh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Cesar paid for my last payment at school, which was only $400, but it was a lot to the farmworkers. .

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh my heavens!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .in order for me to finish my last semester at school.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's remarkable.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Now, when I told people from the farmworkers that, they all said, "Well, Cesar's trying to recruit you. This is why he's taken such interest in you." And that put me in an awkward position, because I did not want to be recruited as a farmworker volunteer. I was an artist. I was a painter. I wanted to be recruited as that, and not as someone giving up his career to join the farmworkers. I had met too many people in volunteer work, both at the farmworkers and at other levels, who had done that already. And what you had were a lot of unhappy people, who wanted to return to finish their engineering degree, or wanted to become nuns, or whatever they were doing. I didn't want to join those ranks. So although it disappointed Cesar that I did not join the farmworkers after graduation, I felt that what I gave them those first two years was enough to pay him back for the $400 loan that he had given me. But yes, it was incredibly. . . For me, it was very uplifting to have, to him, for him to help me get through my last semester at school.

MARGARITA NIETO: You also seem to have fostered a group of artists who became involved with the Farmworker Union. You mentioned Judithe Hernandez. From what I have, from the little I have talked to her unfortunately I have never been able to talk to her a great deal about this she was at Otis/Parsons and she again a person who had always been an artist, from the time she was a child.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: She knew she wanted to be an artist. She was very gifted and very talented. Yet I don't think her social consciousness had been developed until she met you as I remember.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm. Well, I think what happened in school is that I started to polemicize? What's the

word for. ..

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I started to bring that, the polemics.

MARGARITA NIETO: _____ _____ polemics.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: We had started to develop these polemics in our classroom and in the school, in that my position was always leftist, even though it wasn't totally genuine. A lot of that was really play-acting, you know. You're an actor in a sense when you're an artist. You have to play the role. And it was a way to make that school come alive, for me. I otherwise found it very, very dull.

MARGARITA NIETO: Is it true that you had group discussions on Marxist dialectics _____. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: We had heated, we had heated debates on the role of art. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .study sessions?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .to society. How does art relate to workers? How does it relate to the poor? And is it really a democratic idea to have a museum and to have high art? These were the kind of things that I think brought Judithe closer to me philosophically, because she started to support me and started to really take on the whole class. And up until that point I was. I wasn't ostracized, because I felt very strong in what I believed, but I certainly felt that I was not like the other students. My art was different, my ideas were different, and I could give a hang about what they were doing.

MARGARITA NIETO: Who were some of the other people you went to school with?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, now, let's see, there are about two or three who are still working actively. I can't remember the names, except Kiki. Kiki Samarcelli, I think. It's an Italian name. She's still working, and she was a, she's very avant garde, and very good at what she does. Judithe Hernandez, of course, who's now in Chicago and not doing much art.

MARGARITA NIETO: Hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, in fact, they went to visit her and she hasn't done anything since she left Los Angeles.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, _____ _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: There were a few other minor people who are not in the arts anymore. I can't say that I was with the most, you know, outstanding graduate of Otis. Life has gone on and, you know, most people have given it up. It's just simply too hard to try to make a living. For me, Otis was never an important part of my life. I simply had to get through school to get that master's degree. Once I finished school and looked back, it was something I had to do; it was a hurdle. Then I was allowed to teach with my degree and I started getting minor jobs throughout Los Angeles. But for me, to give you the attitude that the school had toward me, every student was supposed to, was almost ordered to donate one piece of work to the student body. I did not want to do that. Plus they never asked me. And I had work that was already. . . I had by graduation by graduation, I had already had a show at the L.A. County Museum, which at that time was the only place to show. Now most of the students had not gotten close to that. By graduation, I had already shown in most of the major, not only the L.A. County Museum, but some of the major university galleries.

MARGARITA NIETO: Irvine and _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So for me graduation which was graduation, we had a one-man, we had a graduation exhibit[correcting himself-Ed.] was a minor thing.

MARGARITA NIETO: And by that time you'd had the Cal State show and you'd had Irvine and you'd had the LACMA show, right?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, right.

MARGARITA NIETO: One thing, too, about that whole era. You had continued your friendship with Frank Romero, right?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, out of the friendship with Frank Romero and Gilbert Lujan and later Beto de la Rocha we formed the Los Four group.

MARGARITA NIETO: And, let's see, Frank you had known since. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Since we were seventeen. I met him at Cal State, first year of school there. This was at college.

MARGARITA NIETO: And he was into illustration at the time?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, he was actually pretty well educated, young man, who had gone to Otis part time, and was pretty advanced. I can say. . . For a young man, he was the most advanced there at school.

MARGARITA NIETO: And from that group, Frank, Judithe, and you all went to Otis.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Eventually. Well, not at the same [time].

MARGARITA NIETO: But you were all. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Judithe and I at the same time. Frank went much earlier. And we began. . . I can go back now and say that out of the dialogue between Gilbert and myself and Frank and Beto, we formed the first Chicano collective, called Los Four, The Four. And from that we started to exhibit as a group and started to actually make group art. We first did one spray-can mural, that was like 30 feet long, eight feet high, and done in one afternoon at U.C. Irvine, among the four of us, trying to get away from the individualist attitude toward art. It was a spray-can piece where we were, which we were allowed to go over anybody else's images. And it was difficult.

MARGARITA NIETO: I can imagine.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was a very fine. . . Exercise, I thought and I felt, that it was based on the surrealist exercise called the "exquisite corpse," where you take a piece of paper and you fold it so many ways, and each artist does a section, and when you unravel it, you have this monstrous creature that is a collective piece of work. Well, this was the idea behind that large banner that we did, which was later exhibited at the L.A. County Museum. It was, I thought it was a grand piece of work.

MARGARITA NIETO: But it's interesting that it's a collective piece; you mentioned your, say, didactic objective in doing it as a collective piece, but you also mentioned surrealism.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, yes. It was. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: So that, in a sense, was an important sort of futurism, more than. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I would say it's surrealist in that it was really based on letting go, tackling the unconscious, and coming up with a collective piece that kind of conveys those subconscious ideas that we all shared.

MARGARITA NIETO: What about. . . Did you discuss or were you aware of the problem of ego?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, yes. Beto de la Rocha had the most problems with ego.

MARGARITA NIETO: Really.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was very hard for him to let go of an area and have one of the other members come over and spray over it. But we were using the ideas of the barrio, where a kid'll spray his initials and somebody else will spray his on top. We tried to come. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: So you were experimenting with that whole idea of graffiti?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, and we also realized that we were four Chicanos and what we shared was our culture, so that we felt that the piece would hold together, culturally speaking, because it was done by one culture. Had we used an Anglo person or a Black person, which we tried later it would not have worked as well. The symbols, the imagery, even the final appearance, looked strange. In a sense it was more challenging, but we wanted to see what the culture came up with. So we took ourselves as guinea pigs and we said, "Let's do a collective piece and see what we come up with." I found it to be very genuine, very rewarding, and I liked the finished piece a great deal because it had, we had taken something out of the streets and put it into a gallery of a museum, using very primitive ideas, and even primitive materials. A spray can, you know. And I found it to be genuine. It was real. It wasn't a pseudo act of something. It wasn't directly political. It had no feelings or trying to convey a political idea. It was something more fundamental to that. So out of the Los Four we ended up showing at all the major college or university museums as well as some of the major museums here on the west coast.

MARGARITA NIETO: By the way, how did you meet Beto de la Rocha?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, he was introduced to the group by Gilbert Lujan. And Gilbert was kind of the prophet.

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: He went around looking for interesting artists who were Chicanos who were trying to find a direction. We lost Beto out of. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Tell me a little bit about him.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, Beto was. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Was he from L.A.?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: He was from Los Angeles. He had an interesting background. He claimed to be a Hassidic Jew from Spain. He said his family was originally from Spain. And you kind of believed it, that he was a very unusual kind of person, very delicate and very bright, very sensitive, and a wonderful artist. He originally worked for Gemini and pulled some of the prints for Rauschenberg, Stella, and some of the big major-league people, and had that kind of reputation, was very respected.

MARGARITA NIETO: Very good printmaker.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, he had taught at Long Beach, he had taught at Northridge, and then he wanted. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Where had he done his work? Where did he get his education?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: His education I think was originally in Long Beach, and maybe Chouinard. I'm not quite sure about that. But he had a pretty good background in the arts, and he had traveled around the world. He actually took a long trip with his wife and family around the world. And had, with pretty sophisticated outlook on life, and very, very much of an introvert, individualist.

MARGARITA NIETO: He was older than you, then?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, he was older than most of us, probably two or three years. Now, when he came to the group, he had problems with the group in that he was not used to working with a group. He had always been an individual. But he liked the idea. It was new, it was refreshing. I even took him to the Farmworker's with me, but he did not like that environment. The environment was very political, very dedicated, with lots of sacrificing being done. He did, however, take to Los Four. As I said, we showed at several galleries throughout town, and finally he left the group under very, very terrible circumstances. He ended up going on 40-day fast and ended up at the psychiatric ward at the L.A. County Hospital, and came down with various illnesses dealing with the fast, and never really recovered. The last I had heard was that he was burning his work and basically denouncing art as being an act of the devil and not an act of God. And he's come out of that, though. I saw him recently, and he's becoming. . . He's never physically recovered from the fasting, and even mentally he still has a lot of confusion concerninghis role in society. But when he left the group, we had then, we had to fill the gap.

MARGARITA NIETO: And of course he was in the group that. . . Tell me a little about how you managed to attract the attention of curators to hold the exhibitions and Cal State, at Irvine, at Oakland.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it started with Hal Glicksman, who was brave enough to, first of all, become interested in the group and, secondly, to arrange for an exhibit and actually finance the paintings and the materials for us to paint with for the U.C. Irvine gallery. We had the first exhibit there and it was well received. The critics gave us interesting reviews, and then we brought the show with amplification to the L.A. County Museum.

MARGARITA NIETO: I was going to ask you about the show at Irvine. According to Frank Romero, at some point, he said that you were trying to find a name for the group.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh yeah. Yes.

MARGARITA NIETO: Because all of a sudden you were a group.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you came up with the idea of Los Four, basing yourself on Los Tres.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Is that true?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. I had worked with volunteer on Los Tres, which is an east L.A. group trying to. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, Free Los Tres.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .yeah, Free Los Tres, and we thought, "Well, let's change to Los Four," and it seemed to work and it read well, and it. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: But it also had to do with Los Tres Grandes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, not really. That was only kind of an accidental thing, but it did. . . Other people have asked us that and we said, "No, actually we were basing it on Los Tres here." But Los Tres here might have been based on the Los Tres painters in Mexico.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Because the people who organized that group were aware of, you know, the big three.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So after our exhibit at the, in Oakland we had a wonderful place there to show we lost Gilbert Lujan. And he became very, he questioned our politics, the group's politics, in that we were jumping into an exhibit that had been offered to the local artists up there. And for various reasons they had taken it, or were not given the main hall. So they basically boycotted the museum, and we stepped into that boycott. I thought, I still believe that it was an important step, and I did not really, at that time I didn't really care who was boycotting. I wanted to show at the Oakland Museum simply because the hall was wonderful. It was the grand hall.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, out of that disagreement, we lost Gilbert. He really bowed out of Los Four. So now we had Los Tres and we had to find a fourth member and we asked Judithe Hernandez to join us. So she exhibited there, so it was Judithe, Beto, Frank, and myself. Then later we lost Beto, so this was, when we returned to L.A., we had to find a fourth, another member. And strangely enough, ironically Gilbert [who had] brought John Valadez to us.

MARGARITA NIETO: Really.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes.

MARGARITA NIETO: I had always thought that John had been your friend first.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, no. He was Gilbert's. He met him at Long Beach and we. . . John showed with us only at the end, which is by '76 we had sort of started to show, we started to get in, people became interested in the individuals in the group, and we wanted to break away. We were getting, we were feeling stagnant. But we did show several places, with John Valadez being the fourth member.

MARGARITA NIETO: But tell me, who was at LACMA when you went from Irvine to LACMA, because as we all know that was the first show by Latinos. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .by L.A. Latinos, in the history of L.A. community of art.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Now how did that come about? Because it's still difficult.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it came about through the help of Jane Livingston, who had approached me, and I don't know if the other members know this but she had approached me to show as an individual at the L.A. County, and I said, "Jane, I have a better idea. I'm working with this group that I think is terrific. They're not polished in the sense that they have finished paintings to show. Because we are forming, we're starting with new ideas, and we're all relatively young. But I want you to see their work." I introduced her to each member, she looked through their portfolio, and she loved it. She says, "I love the idea; I like the whole thing." So she was the one that basically brought the show from U.C. Irvine to L.A. County, paid for it, and paid for the publicity, and was able to give us a terrific opening.

MARGARITA NIETO: Really.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: From what I hear, it was one of the biggest openings they had, because as you mentioned, yes, it was the first Latino exhibit ever to be held at a major museum, and we did everything possible to bring about publicity to that show, including the film that we came out of it. We had two films out of it, one from KCET [L.A. public television station-Ed.] and one from an independent source, and we were able to use that as publicity, plus we did a lot of plugs all over the media, with the help of the museum, to publicize the show and to get Chicanos and Latinos down there to see their museum. And to see people who had come out of the same community they had and who had in a sense made it.

MARGARITA NIETO: One thing too about that, the posters that were pulled from show are collector's items today.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Each member was asked to do one poster. And the entire, you know, we, the entire portfolio was four signed posters of each, all the images were different, and they were done on different kinds of paper. So that it really showed the individual as a complete artist, rather than as collective. We did one, we did do one poster collectively. In which each of us contributed to a piece of the work.

MARGARITA NIETO: Really.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, the Los Four logo was done by a combination of Frank's spray can, Gilbert's spray can, based on Beto's initial Los Four, and then I did some of the bottom work on that.

MARGARITA NIETO: I see.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So that was the only piece that was, I could say was collective. The rest was done by the individuals. I think Frank bowed out. He didn't do an individual poster.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's fascinating.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: And then from the. . . Then the Cal State _____ show was after that?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: After that. And by that time the temperament of the group had changed. And the we were in to inviting other people to join us, so even though the Los Four show we presented the work of I think it was Smiley Casares, Ismael Casares, who didn't get along with the group at all. Then later on, we showed in Long Beach with the group that is now called ASCO. At that time it was really two members, Willy Herron and Gronk.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh. Harry Gamboa and Patssi Valdez came later?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, but they didn't join that exhibit. They were not into plastic art; they were really into other ideas. The only people that had paintings or drawings were Gronk and Willy Herron, who have now done extremely well on their own, and they did very well as ASCO. And Gronk I think will continue to. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you have anything to do with any other collectives throughout California, or with any other artists?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, we did work, we tried to collaborate with ASCO. At that time they weren't ASCO; they were just four artists. We did do a couple of exhibits, the Long Beach exhibit, and we tried things, but it didn't work. I later met the RCAF [Royal Chicano Air Force-Ed.] but, no, I didn't do anything with the RCAF.

MARGARITA NIETO: Or with Montoya.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, no, the man who did things with him was Gilbert Lujan. I think it was the temperament. He was of the same temperament that they were. There was a more traditional Chicano. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: _____ _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, attitude. My ideas have always been Mexican. I was brought up in a household that did not utter the word Chicano. You were a Mexicano, and you were living in America. You were not a Chicano. My cousin who was born here was a Chicana. She called herself a Chicana. At our home we did not say that word. So it was. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: I see. What about Rupert Garcia, or any of those. . . I only met Rupert. I know Rupert through my help with the Concilio de ArtePopular. No, I should mention that.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: By '76, the Los Four idea had gone on to the idea of forming collectives. People were joining

collectives. There was the RCAF, there was ASCO, there was Los Four, Teatro Campesino.

MARGARITA NIETO: But yours was actually the first _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it was one of the first. I don't know when RCAF got together. Los Four got together formally, on paper, in 1973. Although we met in '71, '72, and I had known Frank since, long before that. Suddenly, throughout the state, Chicanos were forming collectives. We. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and Judith and the Concilio de Arte Popular?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. I think it was about 1976 that, between all the other projects we had, we had dreamed up, with the help of, I think it was Luis Valdez, the idea of incorporating or joining all of the resources, the Chicano art resources, into one collective group that could kind of administrate information, grants, that kind of work, in order to bring the group together. So, out of this came a meeting in San Juan Bautista of all the art groups that existed: Los Four, Royal Chicano Air Force, the theater groups, and we formed a umbrella organization that represented all fields of discipline of art, and we called it the Concilio de Arte Popular. Now, I'm. . . I was the one that named it. That was my contribution. And they had several titles they were going to call it, but they did choose the "Concilio," so we called it CAP for short. And out of that came my contribution in that I wanted to ask for a grant of money in order to put together a publication that would focus on the different factors of the California groups. So we formed, we got a grant of money from the California Arts Council to do a magazine called Chismearte. I did not name it. (chuckles) I would not have chosen that dreadful name. But the group, it was I think Montoya, from RCAF who brought up that name, and the group loved it. They laughed at it and they thought it was funny enough, because it didn't seem artsy-fartsy; it seemed to have a rural kind of sensibility. Anyway, for better or for worse, the name was Chismearte.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's a wonderful name, though.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I was the treasurer, art director, all-around handyperson, and Guillermo Bejerano became the editor. And then we proceeded for the next two years, mostly Guillermo and myself, to start putting together the magazine. We came out with the it was supposed to be a quarterly, and we tried to stick to that schedule and produce a magazine that reflected the theater groups as well as the art groups as well as individuals within that whole thing.
MARGARITA NIETO: So the Concilio was actually a state-wide organization.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, yes. And we met at different cities at different times, so that. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Who were the founding members again?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I remember the, in a sense, the veterans of the group, and the spiritual leadership, was Luis Valdez, who was at the first meeting, possibly the second. But the first was the most important. He kind of, everyone turned to Luis and said, "What can we do? How can we do this?" And Luis and I had become fairly close to discuss ideas that I already had. I said, "Let's form a concilio, a group that encompasses all this." So we did, and then we had the RCAF, the theater groups from Santa Barbara, San Jose, the theater groups from San Francisco. The Galleria 24 or it was called then Galleria de La Raza, Rene Yanez. We had the people from San Diego, the members from the Teatro de Spiritu, and I forget all the names of the groups. We had basically around twenty groups of people.

MARGARITA NIETO: And what about painters or artists, individual artists?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, individuals, we had, mostly. . . Most of the individuals, with few exceptions, were members of the groups I've just mentioned. There] were individuals also, though [few-CARLOS ALMARAZ], because a lot of people did not believe in joining groups. And we met for the next two or three years. My part was basically, from '76 to '78 in which I gave it all I had. And that meant running around the state, picking up stories, translating, taking photos, laying out the magazine.

MARGARITA NIETO: Because at the time I met you, you used to drive up to Oakland or something overnight or something.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, yeah. Over the weekend, just to pick up stories or deliver the magazines. Well, we had a lot of problems in distribution, collecting the money, and all the things that, you know, artists are not trained to do. And after two years, I had a very important discussion with Valdez who asked me, "Why am I doing this?" And I said, "Well, Luis, I told you, you know, I want to do my share and do my part of, you know, so-called "the movement." He said to me and it really changed my life he said, "You're very talented, and you're really doing too much. You really should do more of your own work, and in that way you will give people guidance." And I said, "I can't believe you're saying this to me, you who have done so much for so many people besides your own work, you're telling me that basically I should drop out and do my work." (chuckles) He says, "Yeah, but you

should." And I think what he was saying is that. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, during that whole time you weren't painting, right?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No. No, in fact, it got back to me. . . I was going to be invited to a show by, given here in Los Angeles, and the curator said, "Oh, we can't invite Carlos because he doesn't paint anymore. He does magazines." And I wasn't invited to the show. I felt. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: So that hiatus. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Between '76 and '7[8?]. . . You can tell in the work. There's a lot of, there's a gap there in my work.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: By the time I heard these kinds of comments, I realized that I have to make a decision whether I was going to continue working for the Concilio and for the magazine Chismearte or get back to my work. With Luis behind me. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And that was the summer. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .saying, you know, "You should get back to your work, and Josine Starrels saying, "Well, he's no longer an artist; he's a layout artist."

MARGARITA NIETO: Ahh. She's the one who said it, right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. But it was a gift, to me. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, of course.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .because she was that important later on, you know. . . Coming from her, I had to listen.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She says, "No, we can't include him in the show because he no longer makes art; he does magazines."

MARGARITA NIETO: I remember. I think I met you at that time.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I remember when I first saw your work, I was appalled that you weren't painting.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. So that's what Luis saw too, because he had seen me. . . When I first met him, I was painting a lot, and then by the time I got involved with Concilio, my painting had come down to a minimum.

MARGARITA NIETO: By the way, though, going back to this whole era, what about the relationship between the artist and the actual Chicano political movement? I mean, you talked about the Farmworkers, yes, but what about the universities and all of that act, and all that relationship?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, they were. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Was there anything there?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, the artist, he did recruit other artists to join the Concilio and to become politicized to the extent that they realized where they were from and what they were doing in this greater society, and it gave them a sort of a place to go to. Chicanos on university campuses get kind of lost. You're talking about, you know, mainstream in its totality, and Chicanos needed a place to feel that it was their own, where they could speak their own language or, you know, have their own customs. This gave them that. However, it did also give them false promises. There were a lot of things that the Concilio could not do. It could not get you a grant. It could not help you to become a better artist. It could not get you a job. It tried, however. Most of us, being well intentioned, tried to get people together. Sometimes we did; often we didn't. So by the time that I had realized that I had, really basically had given my all, we came down to 1978. With '78, we had. . . Zootsuit came to town. Through my relationship, mostly with the Mark Taper, the remaining group. . . By that time we had a little group here in Los Angeles, which was not Los Four anymore. It was a group called Public Arts Center, which was composed of younger blood, and a few of the oldtimers who had come over from the seventies, early seventies.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, by the way, before we get into that period, there was the collective studio on 56th and

Figoroa. How did that come about?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it came about partly through my work with the Chismearte. We needed a home base that we could support ourselves. Not necessarily through the Concilio. And so Guillermo and I found a very fine 5,000-foot studio space that we rented, and then formed as a collective in order to pay our rent. We joined up, we recruited four, five other artists, to help us, which really were Leo Limon, and Frank Romero, Ricardo Duardo, George Yeppes, John Valadez, myself, and Guillermo Bejerano. And it's interesting. Most of those people have gone on.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Leo Limon is doing extremely well, I hear.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: George Yeppes later joined a group called the Streetscapers and formed a small threesome. Frank Romero has continued to exhibit. Duardo later formed Aztlan Multiples, and he's been making prints now for years, and he's been very successful, well received. I have continued to do my work of course. And the only one that's kind of dropped out is Guillermo Bejerano. But most of the other members have, were in that original group, have still, are still doing strongly what they were doing then.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, I remember that collective, Judithe Hernandez was working there.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She was working there, and. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: John Valadez.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That was the first place Barbara Carrasco ever had gotten involved with.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Valadez has continued, of course.

MARGARITA NIETO: And Delgado.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Tito Delgado. Now we thought that he was really going to be cocktail artist, because he was from, originally from Palm Springs, and wore Bermuda shorts, and really did not, would not take on any bohemian attire, and, ironically enough, he has become extremely bohemian. He later left the group, went to Mexico, and has been living there off and on for the last five or years?

MARGARITA NIETO: Doing those murals.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And going through a lot of struggle, because I hear he has rheumatism or arthritis in his fingers.

MARGARITA NIETO: Really?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes.

MARGARITA NIETO: He's a very talented painter.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And he cannot really use his hands well; it's very difficult and painful. And yet he has done, and has not stopped painting since that early time.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes. He had a very interesting exhibition with Leo Limon at the B-1 Gallery in L.A.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, that's what I hear. That's what I hear.

MARGARITA NIETO: With Duardo as well.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. So it's, the struggle is still on in that, you know, the artists are still doing what they were doing then. That group went on until about 1980 '79 or '80. The turning point for that was my trip to New York, along with John Valadez.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh yes, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: When we returned from New York, he and I really felt that we needed to get into a more directly urban environment, in order to reflect an urban consciousness. So finding our collective studio out of the

mainstream - physically; it was in the suburbs he and I decided to pull up stakes and go downtown.

MARGARITA NIETO: Okay, now, we're talking. . . Backtracking again, you did a number of murals at Estiade Court? [Actually, it was Romona Gardens-CARLOS ALMARAZ.]

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I did one mural called Adelita, which was a large female, revolutionary female, holding a gun and leading all these men on horses. My thing was to become, is to kind of bring feminine consciousness to the Chicano population, which was very anti feminism. I wanted to bring it in a very indigenous way by showcasing and highlighting the contribution to the Mexican revolution of the Adelita, the female revolutionary.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you were also helping John with some mural portraits?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, I helped John, and. . . It was a true collective in that when one member needed help, we'd kind of all join in and start to do, or at least help them with their project, be it a mural or a poster.

MARGARITA NIETO: The summer of '79, you were doing, he was doing a mural with students on Figueroa.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: On Figueroa, which is still there damaged but it's still there.

MARGARITA NIETO: And did you also help Judith with her mural projects at that time?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, and this was at Ramona Gardens. We helped Lujan with his project.

MARGARITA NIETO: But that was up north?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That was, no, here at Ramona Gardens. And about '78, '79, we did several murals at Ramona Gardens, and they were done on grants.

MARGARITA NIETO: What were the specific names of those murals?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Gosh, I couldn't remember. I'd just have to go over the slides.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you were the originator of the windshield tour, right?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: The windshield tour?

MARGARITA NIETO: Of the East L.A. murals.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think everyone did it. I was one of the people that gave people tours on that, you know, but I think everybody. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: I know there's a Goez map.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, there's a Goez map, which was important because it stated that there were over 300 murals painted in five or six years. Now no one ever knew that. We did mural after mural after mural.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And many of them we lost along the way. Somewhere it was actually painted over older murals. And there was, you know, heritage in that we had painting over painting over painting.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: We all took it in stride. Even some of the members painted over some of the member's. . . Which, interesting because that was, what we tried to discover in the Los Four project of spray-can painting is to deal with letting the ego, put the ego aside, to get the message across. And later it became real. Painters painted over other painter's murals!

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, there's a fabulous example of that, and that is on First and Soto.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: That wonderful Valadez mural.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It's Brooklyn and Soto.

MARGARITA NIETO: Brooklyn and Soto, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Valadez painted over a mural done by Frank Romero.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, really!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, he had done spray-can. It cost $150 to do that mural, and then Valadez came over and painted over that, and now. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh, he did that wonderful street scene.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And now the Streetscapers a year ago painted over Valadez with another mural. And who knows, after them, maybe there'll be another group of people painting over the Streetscapers.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, in that context it takes on an interesting dimension. As an art critic, as an historian, one tends to see it as, regard it with horror, you know, and it's. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh really. Well. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And that's interesting, _____. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: To the artist, you know, it's regarded as a passing of time, a sense of like giving your all to the collective, rather than trying to, you know, strive for the one individual statement. But going back to. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Have you gone through and documented the murals that Los Four actually did together, or the group [before them]?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, because they were done under very strange circumstances, in that it was rarely. . . Outside of the mural done for, the spray-can mural done for U.C. Irvine and the L.A. County Museum, the murals were not, none of the other murals were done by Los Four. They were often done by two members of Los Four, three members of Los Four. Often we gave time to one member to finish his mural, but it was not a collective mural. Everyone really did their own piece of work. And it kind of showed the way in which we were going to go. Most of us went back to the individual statement, back to the individual piece, and left the collective. But we felt that the collective was an important part of our development. So now we have. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: So the last mural you really did was the Zootsuit mural, at the Aquarius?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. And that was with the help of John Valadez and Barbara Carrasco. And. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: That was the first mural that Carrascoz worked on.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. That was the first. And that was a three-story-high mural. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: I remember her being a little kid so to speak, a little kid and you were training her.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sure. She was an apprentice. And she learned a great deal from that, because it was a big project. Like I said, it was three stories high, one section was 64 feet wide, and another section was about 14 feet wide. The Pachuco was 14 feet by three stories, and the rest of it was more of a square shape. With that mural, I basically bowed out of the mural movement. We had near accidents in that mural.

MARGARITA NIETO: I remember.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Which really made me think that this is dangerous work and it should be done by trained people. We were not trained. We were not trained to deal with scaffolds-three story, eight-tiered scaffolding. Some of the other scaffolding that we used and some of the materials which were toxic and, you know, somewhat lethal. After doing a three-story-high mural, I really had had it. I needed to return to the studio to do very personal work that was more or less the other side, my other aspect, my more introverted aspect, and to develop ideas that were nonpolitical, that were totally my ideas.

MARGARITA NIETO: I'd like to talk next about, or as we continue, about your work, because you had already done the Echo Park series and you were beginning to do the car crashes, when you finished the murals.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: In fact that summer you had had that show at Otis/Parsons.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. L.A. Parks and Wrecks.

MARGARITA NIETO: L.A. Parks and Wrecks, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, L.A. Parks and Wrecks, that was it.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I'd like to talk about that later and talk about the influence that muralism had on your urbanization and your urban view in your paintings.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Okay.

MARGARITA NIETO: Okay?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Very good.

MARGARITA NIETO: You are going to make some prints of Los Angeles?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I'm thinking of doing a small portfolio, first of drawings probably just black and white, maybe pen drawings or charcoal then some pastel drawings, and then probably finally some etchings. I was very inspired by seeing what Thiebaud had done with San Francisco, and I thought about it, [it] brought to mind people like [John-Ed.] Sloan, people like [Edward-Ed.] Hopper, some of the Ashcan School painted in New York City, who besides being maybe dramatic painters were also. . . They made a chronology of their time, through their sketchbooks. I'm thinking also of Reginald Marsh, who was sort of very well captivated the feeling of the thirties, the New Deal democracy, in his sketches of people at Coney Island.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I'm hoping to include lots of people in these sketches, because I don't want them to be architectural renderings of the city, but to capture some of the feeling of today, this time. I think of Daumier and his capturing the time of Paris in his period. That kind of interest. And to leave it as a small kind of museum sake, a portfolio of Los Angeles, circa 1986.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, in a sense and this is departing a bit from what we were going to talk about, but I think it's important when you start the Echo series you have this influence to me it's separately clear of Monet and the Impressionist school, an aspect that few people realized until I think that show in 1984, the big Impressionist show, the Olympic here, at the same time that you had the solo show in Barnsdall.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: And the relationship of Impressionism to the city, to the urban landscape as well as to the rural, which is what we usually associate with Impressionism. And right now, you were just looking at this photograph of a painting by Monet, and it brought to mind that influence, which I think is very strong in you, isn't it?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think that dealing with the urban environment, we have to certainly. . . Maybe it started with Impressionism. Because at that time, you had artists looking at cityscapes, at factories, at drawbridges, at scenes that were no longer rural, bucolic. They were not romantic in the old sense of going back to Greek landscapes. They were not pretty much can be said in the sense that up to that time, Paris started to become an industrial city and London an industrial city, and the artist of this period again conveyed that very well, with a certain softness, because it was not what it is today. I kind of see that here in Los Angeles. We have a metropolis, but it's not, hasn't been developed to the extreme that New York has, or Chicago. It still has elements of nature creeping through it, giving us a landscape sometimes very reminiscent of French Impressionism, of those lovely cityscapes or streetscapes of Paris with the horse-drawn carriages. I sound, I'm probably very romantic in my thought of this, but I still think Los Angeles presently is a romantic environment. It may not be in 50 years.

MARGARITA NIETO: And that's what you wanted to catch?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think so. And leave that behind so people can look at. . . I did one painting of Looking South on North Broadway, it was called.

MARGARITA NIETO: I didn't know that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: From the top of the Elysian Park. And already that scene has changed. They've added more buildings, and Chinatown has taken a distinct different look. In the painting I did there's a, you know, Chinatown as it was five years ago. So already time has stood still, in that painting, and I think that's one thing painting does. It makes time stand still. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Catches the instant.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .or blurs time in a way that say Francis Bacon blurs time, to make you aware of motion.

But then there's that other very wonderful aspect of painting, is it absolutely renders something still, so you can study it for all it's worth.

MARGARITA NIETO: Let's go back a moment and regress a bit to the conversation we were having last week about muralism and your discovery, your entry into this field, which was coupled with a personal and collective need. We talked about iconography and technique, and you talked. . . And I'm wondering at this point, you had been doing these very spiritual flat canvases of abstraction. And you plunged from one type of painting into another. Am I right in saying this?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think so. Yes. I was plunged and I was driven to find something more emotional and tangible. There was a dead-end in my art aesthetically about the time I came down with pancreatitis. My personal life had become a mess, and I got to the point of simply recording my hand painting a piece of paper, not painting, but drawing it black with graphite. Now if you think about this. You have before [you] a piece of paper that's maybe 30 by 40 inches and you take a large graphite chunk it comes in pieces and you start rubbing the paper over and over until you go from a white piece of paper to as close as you can to black. Well, that takes hours. And the other interesting thing about it maybe not interesting so much, but dramatic is why would anyone want to turn a white piece of paper black? If not just for the sake of. . .. .he's _____ that he's trying, that he's trying to say something. I'm inspired sometimes by seeing graffiti, the most terrible graffiti in some restroom somewhere that's been abandoned to time, to see that same struggle, that same graphic line that blurs sections and says foul things or it says phone numbers. For me it's a recording of people in desperate situations trying to reach out somehow. Trying to connect. In these drawings that I did during this period, I was at a dead-end with my life and I had no reason, in a sense, to even draw. But out of some need which I consider to be the very essence of me, I continued, even after I had absolutely nothing to draw, except just marking that paper until I finally darkened it. Well, I did maybe thirty drawings like this, and you have to see them in connection with the time that it took to do that and the, sort of the endless purposelessness of such an act, that you cannot explain rationally, but the drawings are in a portfolio. They were done and they were tucked away like. . . Maybe I thought after that there was no more art for me to make.

MARGARITA NIETO: And then all of a sudden you plunge into making the banner for the [United Farmers]?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I plunged into being sick for a long time, and then coming out of that, I was lucky enough to get involved with children. I started working with kids, children's school out in east Los Angeles in Lincoln Park. I was working with the Plaza de la Raza kids before the buildings had been erected and reconstructed and redeveloped and all that. We were out in the open. That gave me a new sense of living. Doing something for nothing, and simply not even for me. When you work with children, you work to help them find some expression in artmaking. You don't really end up with a product. And then I really started thinking more and more about art without a product, art that was more of a process, more something that you had to do, existential rather than something that you had to sell and show and carry about. This was. . . Indirectly I had been influenced by some of the conceptual ideas of modern or post-modern art, in that the process is perhaps what is most important today in artmaking. I didn't do it rationally, this thinking out; it sort of fell into its place by time. But from that experience of working with children and doing it for free I even worked up here in Santa Monica for a long time.

MARGARITA NIETO: Regis House, wasn't it?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, right [with Jennifer Goldwyn-CARLOS ALMARAZ]. I started to enjoy the innocence of children's artmaking, the experience of them the first experience sometimes of them discovering color, form, and being able to compose a face with the most simple elements. That plus the needs that there are in lower income environments, communities, to bring some hope, some ray of hope to their lives, which otherwise doesn't change. A life of poverty changes very, very slowly. From recovering from my own bout with liquor and trying to face my problems, I started to get, become lost in other people's lives, in a very positive way. When I returned, I decided to do something for other people for a while besides just worrying about my life. That's when I plunged into let's join the Farmworker's, let's do some murals, let's forget about art with a capital A, and let's get into, you know, what is art on another level, on a more humane level.

MARGARITA NIETO: Speaking of the murals, was there a conscious effort to muralize? I mean, what was the consensus, what was the construct behind muralism, as a form say, instead of making posters or. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, right. Well, I think they came together. Out of the sixties and seventies, there was an inspiration to return to a more simple art form that was not high art. We had people like the Beatles, who brought poetry down to the level of working-class people. Then the Viet Nam War brought about a leftist consciousness that was sort of socialist inspired. Again, there was an emphasis on art that was not in museums [and, but] rather art of the people in the streets. This is where people were singing; a lot of the poetry had the same feeling.

MARGARITA NIETO: And the hippie movement in a sense; anyone can make art.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, that was part of the popular culture that was, softened the bureau-state, the bureaucratic state. Now, there was a real movement of muralism coming out of Chicago and out of New York. It was like a wave. It started out there and then started sweeping west.

MARGARITA NIETO: What do you mean by that? Could you explain?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, there was a movement led by community artists in Chicago, and they had a name. I forget their names at this time. And then there were several groups in New York, who were doing murals, everything from an abstract mural to a very, very representational piece of political propaganda, mostly on the lower East Side, and then the abstract pieces were being done around 42nd Street, and they were being done around what is now SoHo. These were very conceptual in origin, simple colors, but gigantic. They were three or four stories high, some as many as six stories high on the top of a building. Now this happened during the [late sixties and-CARLOS ALMARAZ] seventies in New York. This is between two decades that were a little bit more volatile. They were in a quiet period. This mural movement started to be picked up by the media as well as postcards; they were being mailed around. And if you picked up magazines of this period, there was always an article on a new mural being done. When I came back from New York in '71, I was aware of a mural movement going on. There were grants being offered for murals, through the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts-Ed.] and the CAC [California Arts Council-Ed.], and more people were applying for more murals and asking for larger sums of money. This I think finally evolved into the big murals that were done for the Olympics, which were, I think, the peak of the wave. Finally artists were getting paid. I could say that the first murals in Los Angeles in 1971, which I took part in, were paid, the artists were paid $149.50 per mural to do a piece, sharing because I was the one that had to buy the supplies sharing one gallon of red [paint-CARLOS ALMARAZ] among all of them, which were twenty different groups, because this is the, this was the, we asked for $10,000 and we got $10,000 for a group of twenty. So this was terribly unfair to the artist. It was Rumpelstiltskin, you know, you had to do something out of nothing.

MARGARITA NIETO: But that also belies another theory that's current among historians right now, and that is that the muralist in Los Angeles was a street artists' movement.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, yes it was, I think. It was not a muralist movement of the twenties and thirties in Mexico where you had the state actually supporting the murals.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You did not have the institutions say of New York in the teens or in the thirties the WPA, who were also paying for murals. No, this was being originally sponsored by community groups, community organizations. My part was through the United Farmworkers, who sponsored some of this, not doing really much, giving me perhaps some money or some paint or some material. But mostly going out right to the community itself and asking for donations to do a piece of work. The first murals, there was no real salary. You got a tiny stipend, but there was no real salary. My first mural was totally free, in that I didn't get a penny, not even the Farmworkers gave me money for their first mural in the street. They didn't have it; they couldn't afford it. But the idea picked up that the struggle. . . To do a mural [as a popular statement means that] you need a cause. So there were several bandwagons you could get on: Farmworkers, the feminist cause, the cause to liberate certain groups of people, et cetera. Or the cause just to be an individual, to make that statement. So you kind of can break down the murals into these categories.

MARGARITA NIETO: But you needed a collective force behind it.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Plus at times you needed the collective money that a force like that could give you, to get your mural done. But I think ultimately most of the murals were paid through community money that had been used to redevelop a certain area, but this was only after 1975. Prior to that it was willy-nilly; wherever you can get some money for the mural, do it. And the artists were doing some crazy things to get some money to do a mural. Because that was the name of the game. Everybody especially on the east side everybody wanted to paint a mural. Now that movement has really subsided. There are still a few murals being done, but not the way it was being done in the seventies. That was a heyday for it, and it, as I say, it was the tail end of a national movement that started way back in the late sixties.

MARGARITA NIETO: You know that there is that prevailing theory that the muralists were street artists.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sure.

MARGARITA NIETO: And that they were shall we say unschooled. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think especially at the beginning. We, up until '75, or up until I got in, and then a few

other people who followed, I was, you know, one of the first to return back to the community, after going to art school, to do a mural. Then a few other people started to follow. Frank Romero did a mural; he's an art-school graduate. Gilbert Lujan did a mural; he's an art-school graduate. But what's interesting that we all imitated. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: What about Herron and Gronk?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: They have completed some schooling at the junior-college level. I don't think they've gone beyond that.

MARGARITA NIETO: Cal State L.A. or something like that?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .also, but I don't, I do not believe they have a degree.

MARGARITA NIETO: In art.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: In art.

MARGARITA NIETO: But they've studied painting.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: They've studied, yes. I think Los Four were the first graduate artists.

MARGARITA NIETO: Judith was from Otis/Parsons.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And John was from Long Beach.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: John was from Long Beach. Beto la Rocha was from Long Beach, with a full MFA [Master of FineArts-Ed.]. Frank Romero was a little bit short of an MFA. Gilbert Lujan had an MFA in art history from U.C. Irvine. This was a very important reassertion of, that it was, it wasn't just a, you know, the crude primitive people in the streets who were painting murals, but suddenly we had a real intelligentsia going back to the community and adding to it in many not only in the murals but in the ideology behind the pieces.

MARGARITA NIETO: Could you talk a little bit about some of the people who were. . . The name Manual Cruz comes to mind.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, Manual Cruz is probably one of the first community street artists to kind of persist into the seventies, finally maybe even into the eighties. He is in no way a gallery-establishment person; he really is a folk artist, using the materials that were around him, that were relevant to his life, and the kind of images that were part of Chicano history: the pachuco, the. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Brown fist.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, the brown fist, the cholo, the ruca. Colloquial characters out of a pantheon of cholo and Chicano imagery. He probably inspired and has inspired many artists to pursue those kind of primitive needs that we all have to render something that's now, part of our colloquial experience. It's interesting to think of someone like Jose Montoya who has taken that further, that simple idea, and refined it to a very, to a poetic form. Cruz is more of the beginning. He's the first step toward that.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's interesting that right now you're talking about an iconography or a language of symbols that speaks to a particular collectivity. We the pachuco and the ruca and the cholo. There's a whole series of symbols there that I think made it at first difficult for some of these artists to break to mainstream the pierced heart, for example, the low rider, et cetera. Could you talk a little bit about that, because I'd like to follow up on this a bit.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, let's see. I can say that the people that are breaking through are people like Frank Romero and Gilbert Lujan who have used very colloquial imagery to convey something about Chicano culture, and also something ultimately about west coast art that it's not like east coast art, in that the influence is definitely Mexican or Japanese or folk. It is not as self-consciously museum art as say east coast art and artists are. Living in both cities, I have a feeling for what New Yorkers are looking for in art, and also what Californians are looking for. We still are looking for something sort of innocent, something new, something fresh, and something that has often little to do with museums. It's part of the nature of the Californian to emphasize the outdoors and things that go outdoors. Murals fall into that category. But so do low riders; so do ceramics. They are in a sense one step removed from the high arts. They're an applied art that is in the area of crafts. And I think we still live, in Los Angeles we are very conscious, we are conscious of craftsmanship. We have that environment in which craftsmanship is still part of our nature.

MARGARITA NIETO: The reason I ask this, too, is because, back in the sixties I guess it was, when. . . Is it Kienholz who does the car assemblage?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: At LACMA. And it created such a furor, which is funny today.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, sure.

MARGARITA NIETO: They wanted to close his show, and it was decadent and immoral, et cetera, and the city council was invoking the wrath of God upon the artist. And I remember thinking at the time that, for one thing, it wasn't that shocking; secondly, that it did speak to a kind of American iconography. Yet there is a piece by John Valadez that I'm very fond of: Cookie Dreams.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: And he uses nopal, and he uses the family altar inside of a Latino home. He uses images of this sort. And I've found that as an art historian or as an art critic, I have to explicate his iconography to a majority of viewers, that there isn't an ability to bridge over those barriers, so to speak. And I've been wondering about this for quite a while. How do you view that? How do you see that? Say, speaking still in the language of one's reality, or what is one's reality?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it can be a hindrance when you want to speak to a larger group that doesn't share one culture. It's like showing someone Chinese vases of a certain period that are so specific to that period that it's hard to understand them if you're not from that period. Now I think that someone like Luis Valdez has dealt with the same problem. How do you talk about an issue of a minority group, a national minority, without limiting yourself to simply that one minority? It's a difficult bridge to cross because it means tremendous editing. You have to understand the elements that will affect the larger group of people and bring them to rally around whatever your issue is, if it's that literal. If it's simply one of composition and color, well, a serape will do. It'll convey all those feelings. But if you want to go more into more literal expression, you have to start looking at the material and saying, "Well, all right, what of the, what are the cultural elements in this piece, this composition, that perhaps should be altered somewhat, should be broadened, should perhaps even be dropped, in order to get my message across?" You do want to. . . For instance, you don't want to speak in Spanish to people who don't speak Spanish. You've got to find a middle ground. And I think this is the challenge for artists to plan to cross over, to the larger audience. Now all artists can do that. And this should be very clearly understood by young students, that not all artists want to do that. Some people want to stay and speak to a smaller group of people. Some who want to cross over do have to go through an assimilation process that can be torturous, can be very difficult. In my own present work I'm going through that now, in trying to edit my work so that it doesn't just read to a regional audience. I don't want to be typed as a regional artist; I want to be typed as an international artist. I have to go through a lot of changes and growth myself to do that. How we each do it depends on how large an audience you want to reach. It's the difference between say Picasso and Posada. Posada speaks to a Latin American audience. Picasso speaks to a larger audience, but he's not trying to say the same thing Posada is trying to say.

MARGARITA NIETO: Would you. . . There was a thought that came through my mind just then, in terms of universals or like you say, crossing over. It would be the same bridge, however, that a very elitist artist. . . For example, how many people admire Frank Stella, and get very of course, you're not supposed to get emotional about it but how many people really care about the painting of Frank Stella? Other than those who find it important, consider him important because, et cetera, et cetera, you know.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: Would it be somewhat equivalent to that? For example, if Stella were to speak a different language?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, in a sense he did with his arch- and triangular-shaped canvases. If I recall correctly, his initial idea came from living in the Mid East.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And the idea came from the modular designs of city walls and city structures and that environment in the Mid East which tends to be that way: angular and rather severe.

MARGARITA NIETO: Spare.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Now, perhaps to a. . . But again, he simplified his image so much that I'm sure it and it does

it reads to a, I don't know if you can say an elite. . . Art on a real valuable high level tends to be elitist by its very nature, because it's valuable. And sometimes takes, tends to eliminate those who cannot either keep up with the content or deal with the quality itself. You have that now with people who support someone like Christo and those who are against Christo. Those who support Christo would say he's an elitist. Those who. . . I mean, those who support him would say he's very democratic because he uses tons of people to construct his work and everyone can see it. Those who are anti-Christo would say, "Well, yes, but the initial idea is so esoteric that it's only really offered to the most elite intellectuals of the society." Well, that's an old argument.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Ultimately, you know, the Venus de Milo ended up in a museum where everyone can see her. Ultimately the Mona Lisa ended up there. Perhaps Christo will too, perhaps some of the artists will too.

MARGARITA NIETO: But you just said something interesting, I think. You said, "Ending up in a museum, where everyone can see it." And you, last time we were talking about the last murals you did, so to speak, the apogee of the movement and then its climax and then nothing, and we were talking about the Aquarius mural, the mural at the Aquarius Theater on Zootsuit, which I think was destroyed, wasn't it?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it was painted over.

MARGARITA NIETO: And it was a marvelous mural that you and John and Barbara worked as an apprentice; Barbara Carrasco was an apprentice on that. And I remember, I guess what really was the final hurrah was that show mural for Aztlan.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Right, I think. Well, it hasn't ended, because, as I was saying, with the Olympics here in '84, suddenly you had some real money and artists being paid good sums of money to do these gigantic murals on our freeways. No, I don't think the mural movement has totally ended. I think it's not as, it's not a popular movement anymore; it's a more professional movement. And I think Murals of Aztlan was that changeover.

MARGARITA NIETO: The bridge, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Because if you noticed, before that show, none of those artists were represented by galleries. Now almost all of them have galleries.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's true.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So now those same artists who I really supported and felt that they were going to make it, whether or not we did that show or not, we the artists who were eventually going to grow into a professional field totally. And they have done exactly that, with few exceptions.

MARGARITA NIETO: By the way, there was a great deal of criticism coming from some quarters on that exhibition because it was inside a museum. This was held at the Craft and Folk Museum in 1980?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was '80, yeah, just before. . . I think it was '80, I believe.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, and it was in the spring, right?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was in the spring.

MARGARITA NIETO: And the idea was that the show itself was going to be the execution of the murals by. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Eight murals?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Eight no, nine.

MARGARITA NIETO: Nine. They were, let's see, you and Frank Romero, John Valadez, Judith Baca, Gronk. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, Judy Hernandez. Judy Baca was the woman who lived. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Pardon me. Of course. Judithe Hernandez. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Gronk.

MARGARITA NIETO: Gronk, Herron, and. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Let's see, who have we missed.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, Wayne, and the Streetscapers.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, the Streetscapers. Now, the Streetscapers have gone on into the seventies. . . And after the Olympics they did a gigantic eight-story mural. Romero went on and did another gigantic street mural on Broadway.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Valadez has continued to work on. . . He doesn't work on murals anymore. He works on large-scale work, very scholarly and very well researched, but he doesn't do murals per se anymore. He just felt that he too wanted to become more specific in his interests.

MARGARITA NIETO: He didn't do. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Back to the criticism on this murals inside the walls.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Which flared up at this Murals of Aztlan Show. Could you talk a bit about that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, the principal criticism was that we were now doing murals that were not on the east side, they were not outdoors. They were being commissioned by the idle rich for their amusement, and we were working for them down in the building of the Crafts and Folk Art Museum while they ate their lunch. And here we were, you know, the peasants. But I think that's a very melodramatic way to look at something like this, especially from the outside. The point of doing the murals to begin with at the Crafts and Folk Art was to, in a sense, institutionalize the murals, say, yes, they were folk phenomenon which has now reached the general masses. And now they're being done by professionals real artists, not just people with paint who wanted to make pictures. The other purpose was to demystify that whole process, because murals, like most art, it's not meant for just one locale. We had agreed to do them for the museum, with the understanding that they would be on tour, which they were; that we would be paid for the work, which we were; that a film would come out of it, which was, which shows interviews of each artist explaining his background and how he got into murals. There was supposed to be a documentation in a catalogue form; there wasn't, as it turned out.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, I know all about. . . (laughter)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But up to point, a few of those points, we were able to accomplish some of the things we wanted to accomplish. All of those murals toured Texas, Northern California, and other points of the Southwest. They were done on movable canvas so they could be taken off the walls. They were done indoors because naturally we really couldn't work outdoors; it would have been physically impossible. We had to use the facilities for which we were insured. In fact we had one accident. Frank Romero fell off of a big ladder there, and luckily did not hurt himself, but he was almost unconscious at one point. Now doing that outdoors on someone else's property, it could have proven, you know, very, very bad. So those things had to be met. What it appeared to be for a critic who walks in from the outside and doesn't interview the artist, doesn't talk to the director, doesn't ask anyone for the objectives of an exhibit like that, such judgment was totally out of line with what the purpose and intent of the mural was. [Shifra Goldman, Artweek, June 20, 1981-Ed.] The other thing that that kind of criticism did is that it tended to barrio-ize the artist. In other words, "What are you guys doing here on the west side painting murals for westsiders? You belong on the east side, on those dirty, dingy walls, not over here on the west side." This is the. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: The mentality?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, this is the mentality of that kind of thinking, that the city is divided in a few pieces and the Mexicans go on one side and the white people go on the other and the Black people go on the other. No, this is a big, big city, where we are all going to mix one day, especially after the subway, and start exchanging many of our viewpoints and, ultimately, our images, whether they be music or they be murals or they be whatever. That was the point of that exhibit, was to bring east side over to the west side. That's why we called it "Murals of Aztlan." You know, there is, Aztlan is a fictitious [mythical] place. But we're saying it exists everywhere. You can just drive to Venice and you'll see murals as much as you'll see on the east side. So, to me, that was a very uncalled-for way of looking at the murals. The review for that show also never once criticized or analyzed the murals. It was mostly the social phenomenon of having eastside kids and eastside young people over in the west side in some restaurant. There happens to be a restaurant in the museum, yes. There's also one at the Museum of Modern Art and one at the Metropolitan.

MARGARITA NIETO: LACMA.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That's just the way, you know, museums go.

MARGARITA NIETO: There's another point to that, though. When you talk about institutionalization of the mural movement, it's interesting that this same critical perspective doesn't see that with regard to the Mexican muralist movement, which was very institutionalized and had a great deal of, [as] you've mentioned, patronage from the government. In fact, it was completely funded by the government. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .whereas the Chicano muralist was not. And secondly, that the deterioration that everyone's yelling about now with the murals in East L.A. is directly related to the fact that they are outdoors, and that they are [on, in] unprotected spaces, unlike say the Mexican murals, which are at least in enclosed patios or on inner walls so that they're better protected.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And in getting back to my original point, these murals that were executed for this particular show are still in excellent condition. They're being preserved now.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I know mine is. They have taken very fine care of it, and it was unrolled and shown a year ago, less than a year ago, and now it's, from the Murals of Aztlan to now it's been almost six years. The painting looked new! Brilliant color. It still had the original varnish that I put on it. It's in A-1 condition.

MARGARITA NIETO: So institutionalization per se, but it's also preservation of a particular moment. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .by a particular group of muralists that may never work the medium again, right?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. They have gone on to continue to do large-scale work not all of them murals, but large-scale work. And I think by institutionalizing the murals, we institutionalized also the artist in saying that they are professional in every respect and that they deserve to be saved, their murals deserve to be preserved, well taken care of, done on good paper I mean, good material. Remember all these murals were done with the best material that the museum could afford. They paid for the material, which was A-1 canvas, gessoed canvas, and oil paint, and anything we wanted to do the murals with. They bent over backwards to give us what we wanted on executing our individual pieces.

MARGARITA NIETO: So it was unique.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was a unique experience, and it was really the. . . It was more than just painting murals on museum walls. It was really bringing together the eastside and the westside in a very real sense. Frank Romero married into the Wyle family, via Nancy Romero, and their marriage brought about kind of this old feeling of eastside/westside coming together. Through their marriage we were able to start to really move around much easier on the westside knowing people, extensions of an, of a family.

MARGARITA NIETO: Of friends, acquaintances.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .and of Frank's family and acquaintances. In a very real sense, it was the marriage of the two extremes. I think if the reporter who wrote that story had known the background better, there was a very beautiful story there, that no doubt could be interpreted in many ways, but the truth was quite, quite contrary to what was rendered in that critique.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm. Hmm, interesting. Was that the last mural you did?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That was probably, I think. Yes, it came after the Murals of, it came after the Zootsuit.

MARGARITA NIETO: Zootsuit mural.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So that was the last mural I did. But, I mean, that's like Frank Sinatra retiring. I don't know. (both chuckle) There might be a mural down the road that I might do.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, you've also been doing these large pieces. For example, I remember at the [Arco] show you had the wonderful. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: The Echo Park Lake.

MARGARITA NIETO: The triptych? No, that. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was four. I don't know what you call a fourtych. Qua. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Quad.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Quartet.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, whatever. (laughter) Of Echo Park.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That was mural scale. That was 28 feet long, six feet high, and one continuous running image of Echo Park Lake. That was one of the biggest paintings that I've seen around, here on the west coast.

MARGARITA NIETO: And right now looking at the Shin'enkan catalogue [Masterpieces of the Shin'enkan Collection: Japanese Painting of the Edo Period, LACMA, 1986-Ed.], you were talking about the possibility of doing panels, painted screens.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I want to do some screens. I really want to recognize the influence of the Japanese school of art to my own way of looking at society and nature and the urban environment. I think for west coast artists you can't go without being influenced by either the Mexican influence or the Japanese influence, because they were, they [have, had] been working in this area longer than most of us. And they have been dealing with a very similar kind of feeling.

MARGARITA NIETO: I remember in the catalogue yesterday that I did for that Arco show, I talked about the feeling of a Chinese screen of that piece.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. One is reminded with the Echo Park Lake, the larger lake, of a [Chinese-Japanese; OR Chinese, Japanese] screen, which is something that's been, for me, very dear to me, because I had seen a great deal of that here in Los Angeles, whether it's at the museum or at, it's [at, a] Little Tokyo.

MARGARITA NIETO: Another thing, getting back to that period of transition between. . . Well, you did Mural for Aztlan after you did the Echo Park series. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .[that first] group of pastels. And after you began doing the car crashes. But that was a period of evolution in 1979, and you talked about, well, after finishing the Zootsuit mural, I think that was the point which you began moving back to studio work. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and to pieces that could be shown in a gallery.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: But I think I'm wrong about that. You were already doing the Echo Park when you were doing. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, you know, history tends to run sometimes concurrently; we kind of break it up and want to put it in little neat categories. Yes, I had already started to do studio work during that Zootsuit piece. The business about the Zootsuit mural was that once it was done, once this three-story-high mural was finished, and once it was painted over, I think you can understand why you start feeling that maybe murals are not such a permanent piece of work. Maybe all the work going into it means no more than just and in this case advertising the play, Zootsuit. There was a feeling of futility, especially when you consider that we had a couple of very bad accidents on that project, I almost losing my thumb. A few other people also getting, you know, near falling. You start realizing, "Well, is this worth it? If it isn't, then something else must be much more worth it." I [felt, thought] that returning to my own personal statements and developing car crashes or landscapes or whatever I wanted to do was, I think, a little bit more worthwhile, than continuing to pursue this dream of the biggest mural lasting the longest time and being seen by all of mankind. That became in illusion.

MARGARITA NIETO: Now actually I think that you began the Echo Park series in the fall of '79, if I'm not mistaken.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: The show was in '82. I was in Echo Park between '79, '80.

MARGARITA NIETO: It says '78.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: '78, Park, fall of '78.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I'd have to look up to see when Zootsuit opened to figure out exactly when that piece was done. But it was painted over, and it hurt, you know. We all felt, you know, that we thought the piece would be up as long as the play was up, but politics prevailed and the piece was taken down and another one put in its place.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh. You had not painted for two years, you said, when working with the Concilio de Arte Popular and with Chismearte, and then you had this sense of self-examination. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and you began painting again.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you were involved after that of course still with the barrio movement. I remember you doing a piece with John Valadez I think we mentioned that on Figueroa. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and doing some work on your own. But during this whole time you were evolving the series of pastels, which we alluded to at the beginning of today's session. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .with the Monet influence of urban environment and Impressionist and yet Expressionist motives.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: Could you talk a little bit about the Echo Park series? How you got interested. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I used to live in the area. I lived right across the street from the lake. And I moved there at a time, for me it was a turning point. I was just arriving at 40, and I started to become very aware of time in my own, the limits of my own life.

MARGARITA NIETO: Fertility?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. So the lake, as someone, Ken Brecher called it, he said it looked like a deep, deep, deep, profound emptiness at times. At other times it seemed to be more, you know, influenced by the, by a very romantic, you know, color sense. Whichever you might choose, yes, I think the lake had both those feelings. But I think for me doing the lake was dealing with my immediate environment, and I did so many variations on that Echo Park, on the Echo Park scenery there, that to me now they all blur. The large painting, the 28-foot painting, probably brought together most of the ideas into one composition. Yes, it was very consciously reminiscent of Monet, but there was a certain brutalness. His coloring is much more delicate.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes. Very intense sense of color.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Mine was almost out of the can. I was adding the fauvist colors that I had been stimulated by since I started painting. And it was. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: You said fauvist?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's funny, I always assumed that your sense of color came from the school of Mexico, for some reason.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think people do believe that, but actually it's not true. The sense of the color initially came from Mexico, but it's re, recognized, re-recognized in paintings. In other words, I probably reacted as a child to a serape before I ever saw a painting. But then when I saw the fauvists and I saw their paint, I said, "Oh, this reminds me of something familiar." On until maybe some of the modern artists also having that kind of, conveying that kind of feeling to me. The influences are many. The fauvists are one, in the purity of color that they have. That piece was color that was almost out of the can, although it never really was. People assume that to be literal. No. I'm saying that I rendered the color, I changed it very little. I try to keep up with the brilliancy of the color and actually work with that brilliancy the way a Indian might make a beautiful blanket out of brilliant-colored yarn. It's the combination of colors that give him a sense of tonality, not so much that he's mixing his own colors. And this is what I was trying to do in the early color paintings that I was working with. Later on,

especially now, they're altered. There may be a little more gray, there may be a little bit more sophistication in my application of color. I recently did a painting that was done in [thalo] green and burnt orange, which are very, very distant from my early paintings with hot pinks and blacks. I'm getting now into a more sophisticated color idea.

MARGARITA NIETO: When you talked about trying to portray the feeling of painting on velvet to give the scene. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: I remember that was a very, very, that was upmost in your aesthetic [concept].

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Now this had, and this had nothing to do with Julian Schnabel, who paints on velvet.

MARGARITA NIETO: No.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I could care less. I haven't even. . . I've seen a couple of his, but before I saw Julian Schnabel I saw the paintings down in TJ [Tijuana-Ed.]. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .on velvet, which, for all their tackiness, there's something captivating about them, in seeing that luscious velvety black against the brilliant tones of color and in highlights. That's something which I have rendered in my pastels, those that are done on black paper specifically. There the influence, I can say, it has more to do with south of the border than it does with New York City.

MARGARITA NIETO: But here you've gone from monumental size of what you were talking about before, the dynamic paintings with the entire arm and the whole body. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and this commitment to social and public art of the community and all of this. And all of a sudden, you became very introspective again.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think I've. . . You know, I've analyzed that in myself. And I think periodically I've done that. I think I can, you know, that every seven to ten years, I go the other extreme, and I'm sure I'm going to go the other extreme down the road. Right now I'm into rediscovering myself; even going through this interview has to do with rediscovering yourself, and trying to find out exactly why you do what you do. When you pull in that tight, you start to become involved with the tiny things that make up reality, and then later you pull out again. And maybe you, it's like writing a symphony down the road, but right now I'm working on small quartets and small piano pieces that I'm rendering that are small in nature. They're more personal. Hopefully the scope will larger, the appeal will be more international. But the pieces that I'm doing now are smaller in scale only. I don't think, I think the scope goes beyond that. Some paintings I do are five inches by seven. Some of the most successful paintings that I've done are that size, and people like them. They respond to them.

MARGARITA NIETO: Those tiny precious pieces that you were doing.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: You were doing car crashes and the Echo Park pieces at the same time, weren't you?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. Partly it was, partly because of my reaction to that environment. In Echo Park you have this very serene lake facing you, a sense of something totally fictional. And then to the left of you, you've got the Hollywood freeway, which literally has crashes going on every few hours, there's a crash there. And I used to wake up to the sound of metal crunching. And it was only after a few weeks of living there that I realized that I was hearing cars crashing. And the contrast between the two had a lot to do with my own life. The tranquility of that almost dead lake, and yet the violence of what was going on just south of it. There was that reality to accept as an urban creature. And I chose to live in that reality, because I felt at home, it felt familiar.

MARGARITA NIETO: The other thing about that is that you still would make some very indirect references and not really indirect but often your car crashes involved a police car and a lowrider.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: There was one important piece for the L.A. Parks and Wrecks show that was a shootout it was called The Shootout and one version was in pastel and it was a police car shooting it out with lowrider car, little red car. Yes, now in that piece, it was not simply a social message. It was really a message of rebellion. You could see lowriders, you could just see kids, and you could see a blur. It depended on where you were coming from to see that piece. I wanted to leave it open so that people who were not Chicanos could also say, "Wow!

What's going on here? It's a shootout." Something that was very real to everybody. If you were from the eastside and saw that little car, you'd say, "Oh, they're from the east side; they're Chicanos. They're shooting it out with the police," which again is a reality that's true to non-Chicanos as well as Chicanos. It's playing with line that for me becomes exciting. I redid the painting, down the road. I redid it as a painting. The same situation: a little car, kind of lowrider shooting it out with the police. It was changed only enough to make it look as if they're all in motion, rather than one car standing still. I think it had the same feeling, but it had gone one step further, in that there was less emphasis on the ethnic background of the guys shooting out and more on the fact that there was, this was a street scene going on a street drama, if you will going on that was true to our time. So things do evolve, and they're less directly socio-political statements and more directly artistic expressions of certain fears, say. I think the car crash conveyed that very, almost angst-provoking preoccupation with death in our society that every day you get into an automobile and you could die, yet you get through, you somehow get to your destination. But I make. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Death is lurking at every corner, so to speak.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, and I make a picture of sometimes. . . People say, "Well, why do you paint such terrible things?" I said, "I don't just paint that. I paint other things, too, but I've been given this power to make images and I have to make images of something, sometimes some things that are frightening. I can't just paint pretty pictures, because I have fears everyone else does, and sometimes I have to make a picture of these fears. I know that children understand that very well. If they show cars crashing or airplanes crashing, it's because they're frightened. They have to get into a plane with mommy and daddy and they don't understand. . . They do understand that this thing could fall! They've seen it on television. So in school they sit down and they draw that anxiety and make a rendering out of it, and somehow it's less frightening when you see it there in front of you, than it is inside your heart and inside your head.

MARGARITA NIETO: Hmm. Getting back to the idea there was something flickering in my mind about car crashes. Oh, about personal statements, about the urban environment, about the monumental versus the small. What point was it that I wanted to make, with regard to Echo Park? Well. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I'd say that they both exist at the same time. It's a matter of living with them both. I have sometimes needs to do very personal small-scale work, and at the very same time I want to do something enormous. I have to choose, for that moment, which one to do. Given all possibilities, I would like to do both. Now sometimes, it's physically possible to do both, in that I have enough material to work on small-scale work and I have a couple of enormous canvases. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: [How did the L.A. murals start?-Ed.]. . .a few minutes ago about how it originated.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Okay, this is important because there are very few people who remember or have been able to document this. I can probably give names later, but right now I can say that in 1971, I was approached by Lukman Glasgow of L.A. Parks and Recreation [Recreation and Parks] to help organize twenty murals for the east side. They had received a $10,000 grant from either CAC [California Arts Council-Ed.] or NEA [National Endowment for the Arts-Ed.]. They could not give each part, each group much money, but they would promise them paint and a small stipend. This is when I mentioned they got $149.50 and they each got, I think about eight or ten gallons of paint plus they had to share one gallon of red paint among all of them.

MARGARITA NIETO: A gallon of red paint. (laughters)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Which is the breaking point. That was the point that finally did it. And I'll tell you later what happened. So I started getting involved by going out looking for artists to do murals. I interviewed many artists who were either. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: How come he approached you?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Because I had been. . . Well, I had been visible, partly because of Plaza de la Raza, and partly because I had been showing at the Municipal Art Gallery. And I was on the, I was living in the eastside, or around there, and I was also going to Cal State L.A. Somehow it all tied together.

MARGARITA NIETO: When were you showing at the Municipal Art Gallery?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, I started showing there when I was a post-teenager, when I started Otis, which was back in sixties. I was in their annual outdoor show and sold my work and people began to know me as an artist. And I can probably refer to. . . I don't exactly remember how Lukman got ahold of me, but he did, and he would often come over to Frank Romero's house in Echo Park, and we would discuss doing murals and getting muralists. Anyway, I finally got hired, went ahead and started looking for artists. I rounded up twenty. And I can only remember a few: Roberto Chavez, Robert. . . Gilbert Lujan. . . They wanted me to do a mural, they asked me about Frank Romero, they asked me about Francisco Hernandez. I was looking for Gronk, and I don't know if he

finally did do some murals with us. And Guillermo Bejerano. I went to Mechicano to look for artists. There was an organization on Whittier and Gage that had already been doing murals now for some time at Ramona Gardens, and a few at Estrada Courts. I finally rounded up the artists that I could. We were given the grant, and then we found out about the can of paint. Plus, the equipment to do the murals was terrible. It consisted of two ladders and a plank.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And we had to rotate that around so that each group could use it. It became impossible to get the murals done through the help of Parks and Recreation. It was easier to do it on your own. So we finally called a strike when we found out about the one can of paint, and all the artists met at my apartment in Highland Park, and we signed a manifesto saying that we would not continue with this mural project until all the artists got a red can of paint and that we had more to hold us up on the walls besides two ladders and a plank.

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckling) Do you think it was political that you only had one can of red paint?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, at that time it was pure economy. Pure economy. So all the artists signed that manifesto. We mailed it to Parks and Recreation saying that we would work or show up on any of the sites until these things were met, plus we wanted more money. So we squeezed them. I dropped out. I was on the payroll there and dropped out totally, living on, I don't know what for the next month and a half. Finally the month and a half passed and we had a showdown at Mechicano Art Center, and which time they came down and spoke to us. And, yes, they would give us more paint. Yes, they would raise our salaries from $150 to $200. Yes, they would give us no, they couldn't do anything about the two ladders and a plank. That's all the equipment they had. But they would try to get some more scaffolding, which is what we were after. Most of the artists agreed to do the mural. I could not. Somehow I felt that it was still not enough and I refused to sign my part of the agreement, and I never did do a mural for them. Gilbert Lujan did a mural that is still there, on Whittier and Indiana. It's in terrible condition. But he did get it up. There are a few murals still clinging to the walls. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you work with Robert Chavez?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: His wall is on Floral Drive and Fourth Street. Between Fourth and one of the others, Gage, something like that. It was on a Tortilla store or factory.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, that one, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, it was done in three or four colors. He used his limited color cans very well. He used a very limited palette. So he only used, I think about four or five colors. There was no real bright colors in it. The other artists, half of them did continue with the work; the other half dropped out and I was principally the leader of the group that dropped out. I just felt that it still was not enough. Why I had considered it to begin with, I'll never know. It seemed to be going in the right direction. But I think what happened is that originally we were going to have only ten artists working on a $10,000 mural, which gave every artist $1,000. But instead, they changed it to twenty, which really rendered the whole thing ineffectual. So out of that, some of the work started. I later went on to get my own money or something funded to do the work, through the All Nations Neighborhood Center. They paid for the paint and later hired me to work with the kids in that neighborhood. The principal groups at that time were the Judy Baca group on the west side of town Venice area and the Mechicano group on the east side of town. The struggle between that was very feminist [worth] versus the machismo. All the guys at Mechicano I mean all the people in Mechnicano, with one exception, were men. And Judy Baca's group. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Who was the exception?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think it was Judithe Hernandez. She was the only woman that was accepted as an equal among the guys. The Judy Baca group was much more diversified. They had both men and women young people working for them. And they were vying for the same $32,000 grant, which would have changed the character of the murals considerably. Well, Judy Baca got it and Mechicano didn't, and there was a sad day at Mechicano which I walked in on, and they were all with heads bent because they had just missed out on the $32,000 grant, at which point I said, "Well, that's what you guys get for not having any women around here."

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And they looked at me like, "Well, who is that guy," you know. Who does he think he is. And that was kind of the politics in the city at that time. Judy moved very well. She was very political and she went, started with a $32,000 scholarship on up the ladder, and was able to get the money she needed to do the murals, especially the ones in The Wash for the next six or seven or eight years.

MARGARITA NIETO: She's been very committed, also, to the idea of feminism.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sure.

MARGARITA NIETO: I think her first mural had to do with her grandmother and her. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and her [own personal]. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. And she worked in the same territory as Mechicano. She would come all the way to the east side to work in Lincoln Park. And Hollenbeck Park. She was not a well-liked person, by any of the members, even to the point of it [being] dangerous for her to be around them. They hated her. Partly because they didn't know her, partly because she did win the grant and she did it with all, you know, the savvy of a political person, but there was still a lot of anger, resentment. Mechicano. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: But then she's another product of an art department, too, isn't she?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Northridge.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Mechicano eventually went under, for all those problems I think that started showing up then. It was male-dominated. It tended to be one clique. I remember the ASCO group were thrown out rather quickly after one important show; they were kicked out because they were just too way out for them.

MARGARITA NIETO: _____ _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: The Mechicano group was fairly traditional in their idea of what art was about.

MARGARITA NIETO: Who was the director of the gallery?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, there was Leonard Castellanos, who was a colleague of mine. We went to the same high school; we studied with the same person, David Ramirez. And as a young person he was an incredible draftsman, just unbelievable. Later on, I don't think he continued studying or painting, even. He kind of dropped out of the picture. I remember that he started to resent the pressure added to his own personal life when he started to represent groups of people. He wanted to be considered individual an individual artist, not necessarily the leader of Mechicano. It bothered him so much that he finally moved out of the city and disappeared for a long time. I don't think he's even now known, no one knows where he is. He either did it deliberately or, you know, he basically just stepped out. So Mechicano struggled on until about '75, I think, and then they finally well, they made an effort of opening up under a new director, at Highland Park then they finally folded up while the Judy Baca group has continued to pursue the art and has grown and has really developed into a very complicated community arts center.

MARGARITA NIETO: Who else was involved in Mechicano besides. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, as I said, Gronk and Herron had arrived later, and they had had one show and then they were, they came to odds, I mean, [friendly] odds with the organization. They dropped out. I couldn't remember everybody right now. Many of these people are no longer making art.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, really?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Really. I mean, it's only a handful who have continued.

MARGARITA NIETO: None of the Self-Help group.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, the Self-Help group is the second generation, so I could say that with the exception of one artist, no. They have. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: What about from Self-Help Graphics?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, there was an artist named Frank Hernandez who's still around, but he didn't fit into Self-Help and he didn't fit in Mechicano; he was a loner. He has still continued. I don't know if he's still making art to this day. Leo Limon, I believe, started out with Self-Help. He went to our group and then he finally has returned to Self-Help. But I don't know which of the artists have continued to do their work. The artists that started with Mechicano, most of them as I say.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, speaking about origins, one thing we didn't talk about was the relationship of the painters to the beginnings of the Celebration of the Day of the Dead [All Saints Day, November 2-Ed.] in East L.A.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, well that's an interesting story. Los Four had one member, Beto de la Rocha, who was very aware of the customs in Mexico since he had been visiting Mexico for many years. And he remembered the Day of the Dead being November 2, so he and Gronk, I believe, were the first, with a few of their friends, were the first group to celebrate the Day of the Dead, starting at Evergreen Cemetary, and then they formed a small procession going up First Street. It was only after that. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And they were dressed as skeletons or something, weren't they?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, they were dressed in very simple costumes, and it was no more than a few weird artists doing this weird thing, and everyone looked at them with great curiosity.

MARGARITA NIETO: Like a street happening, or something.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. But very small scale. It was only after this, and I think we did it two years meaning we, Los Four, but I had really little to do with it.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you do banners and things like that?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, it was mostly mask and face makeup, and we took some photos, perhaps, but only Gronk would have them. Anyway they did do a procession and it was only after that that Sister Karen applied for a grant of money to continue the Day of the Dead. And it was by I think the third Day of the Dead that she actually participated with the funds that she had available.

MARGARITA NIETO: Building the ceremony.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: To really building it up and making it a very big procession. But it was Beto de la Rocha who started it. And it was totally again a street thing; it was not a recognized ceremony. You know, it was his idea from his scholarly investigation into Mexican history and customs. But that was way back I think in '74.

MARGARITA NIETO: So you said Self-Help was the second generation?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, yeah. Mechicano seemed to be the first generation of eastside muralists to come together under one banner. Some participated very little, some only peripherally. Some, in the case of Baca and her group was the opposition, or seen as the opposition. The rest of us sort of meandered in and out. They were kind enough to allow me to store and help bring my farmworker newspaper down and piled it up there, and I would sometimes sleep there. And there was a place to kind of hang your hat and have meetings and meet with the other artists concerning issues of the streets and doing further murals. For a while it looked pretty healthy. But then the artists were also running the organization it became overbearing, trying to do administrative work.

MARGARITA NIETO: Like in every case.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Everybody in that organization wanted to be on the streets painting murals. They did not want to be inside answering the phone. So when it finally folded it was sad but, you know, it just had gotten to the point that the individuals now were doing better than the organization.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm. What about Goez Gallery.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, that was first generation in that that came out of the walkouts. Everyone talks about the walkouts. Much of the walkouts became the push, the ignition, for social consciousness in trying to alter things, and out of that came Mechicano and Goez and a few other organizations Telacu, who started to form alternate ways of doing things. Goez was to be a private gallery selling art to private investors, and it still does that I believe. It sells to restaurants. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Does it still exist?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I'm not sure. They got into a scandal, so I'm not sure. The last time I saw them they had a gallery space in Overa Street.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh really?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. And their gallery is closed, the one on Brooklyn, so maybe they've gone under. But for a while it seemed to be doing well. It became the only art gallery on the eastside. I'm sorry that the art was not of the caliber that, you know, I consider to be of high quality or even more intellectual. It was simply restaurant art, and it wasn't meant to go necessarily beyond that. But they got into some scandal with funding and I don't know what else. There was a lawsuit involved. Mechicano was the first generation of I would say the most sincere and real artist in that their intentions to do wonderful street murals and to render a homeless society and, you know, but a lot of utopian aspirations. Then there was all the other smaller groups that wanted to fund

art, do mural programs and all that.

MARGARITA NIETO: Another question about that. Was there any artistic participation in the Chicano moratorium?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I was not in the moratorium. The only participation I know were the people who sang, the musicians who participated in that. And many artists who made banners and posters.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's what I was wondering.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That again, since the moratorium and all the problems that ensued started one block away from Mechicano I would not be surprised if many of the artists who worked on the moratorium were the same ones working for Mechicano. Many of us had dual jobs, or dual voluntary work that we did. So I think there probably was some thin connections there.

MARGARITA NIETO: That would be an interesting thing to try to document.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, well, the only artists, the artists who know of that period, most of them as I say have retired from the arts scene and, with them, the history of what happened. However, the members of Mechicano are still around. If you ever want to pursue it I can give you names and you could talk to them. They can give you. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: That would be very interesting, because really the two, the manifestation of posters and banners goes hand in hand with the muralist movement at the time.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sure, sure. And as I said, most of us did exactly that.

MARGARITA NIETO: And interestingly enough, when we were talking about iconography before, I think we didn't get into this but when I think of what is considered to be the Pop Art and the iconoclasm of the American art of the sixties and seventies Oldenburg and Johns and Rauschenberg, Kienholz, et cetera they used assemblages so much and I think it was because they had luxury of being able to have an interior space and making an assemblage of assemblage [changing pronunciation-Ed.], if we wanted to be correct (laughs) of a particular, of objects that are important as statements. But the Chicano artist didn't have that largesse.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think the only one who had it consciously was Gronk, and his group ASCO. They used a lot of what you call objects and transfered them into ritual objects in their processions. They did one procession which went down Whittier Boulevard, and I forget what it commemorated, but they did the most incredible costumes for that, and they still have photographs that have been published. They were very much into the school of kind of like a neo-Dada surrealist kind of involvement with objects. Gronk specifically with little dresses or little strange objects that had a very feminine tragic look to them. He liked to play with that. And I know Harry Gamboa played with some found objects. There was some of that there. The other artists, especially the ones from Mechicano were as far as I know, they were all interested in paint.

MARGARITA NIETO: In two-dimensional.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: In two-dimensional illusions, and altering that. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: I think that's very important to have occurred there.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I know that they were all conscious everywhere you saw posters of Mechicano of the Siqueiros murals, the Orozco murals, the Diego Rivera. They were everywhere. And there was even talk of asking one of the artists of that period to come up and speak to the group. The problem is that the group was a very disorganized bunch of artists. I forget. It wasn't Judy Baca who was the first [making correction-Ed.] I mean Judy Hernandez who was the first member of Mechicano; it was another girl, and she's totally dropped out.

MARGARITA NIETO: Wasn't she the one who did the Virgin of Guadalupe mural, or one of the. . . Not Virgin of Guadalupe. There's a mural of hers at Estrada Courts or Ramona Gardens, wasn't there?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I can't remember, but I'm sure that I can find out somehow. But there was only one girl.

MARGARITA NIETO: Josephina? No.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Cassada? Josephina Cassada? No. That was again a second-generation. The first generation, as I say, were mostly men. Josephina came
later. And Judy Hernandez also came later, although she was of the generation of the Mechicano group. That actually came much later.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, in reviewing, is there anything you think we've missed for today?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, up until now, I think the only thing I could mention is that, since then, I have gone ahead and continued to do my work, I did one of the posters for the Olympics.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh! Yeah, of course.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: For the Olympics, out of. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, you did the Bicentennial poster first.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Did the Bicentennial poster and that was well received and I was given a second commision for the Olympic. And I was offered a choice between the Olympic poster and doing an Olympic mural. And although the Olympic mural paid more, I chose to do the poster because I liked the idea that it went all over the world. I continued to do my one-man shows, as well as to show both here at the Jan Turner Gallery and at the Fuller Goldeen in San Francisco, and then more recently now at the, with Ruth Siegel [Gallery-Ed.] in New York. I hope that develops into something. With each of these galleries, a new relationship takes form and I have to start considering my audience 3,000 miles away.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, but let's get back to, a moment, on the iconography of your pieces, if you have time. Or would you like to take a small break and then come back?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: We can continue, and then we'll take a break.

MARGARITA NIETO: Okay. A recurring theme in your paintings is the idea of chairs, and sometimes stages.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: I was wondering about the relationship between that and your early involvement with the Teatro and with the idea of the emptiness of a stage waiting for action. That is to say, when you were speaking earlier I've never talked to you about this but when you were speaking earlier about the active quality of the movement when you became involved in it. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and the idea that the dynamism of your painting had to correlate to the political activism, political and social activism, at the moment.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And there's a state of expectancy often in your work, which of course is neo-Expressionistic, one can say, and we can speak about Paul Klee and we can speak about an enormous amount of influence of Klee in your work a lot of people have seen that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: But drawn into an interpretation of our time and your reality, would you say that there's any correlation between those two aspects: the activism and the fulfillment of that particular time, and then the expectancy and a search that's going on now? [dog barking]

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I mentioned it briefly in that most of my pieces deal with either time in motion and time standing still. The chairs and those inanimate objects which seem to be there forever are dealing with time standing still, between motion. There's that stillness. This is what I'm going through now, discovering. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Like absence and presence, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, discovering oneself and trying to know which step to take next. Then there are the pieces that render motion. People say, "Your pieces look like they're moving. They're blurred, there's a sense of tremendous action and energy." Yeah, that's the other extreme. When I am at a full force trying to convey that and make the paint look like it's alive. So, yes, I think I do try to play with both extremes. I'm aware of my life as a psychological being so that I can understand what or at least try to render some of the preconscious thought.

MARGARITA NIETO: Now, what we wanted to talk about today was the people that you've met during the course of your career, people from the world of literature, people from the world of art. And I think we wanted to go back to New York to the days that you were in the SoHo, when you mentioned meeting Richard Serra and Nancy Graves. And at that time, you also had a friendship with Kate Millett, didn't you?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, we were all in the what is now SoHo area. And Richard and Nancy I met because I was looking for a studio apartment to rent, and I happened, just by chance, to come across their name in the paper.

So I went down to West Broadway, 136 West Broadway, and a very gruff man covered with a big thick overcoat bounces out of the building and basically tells me to come back tomorrow mumbles something like that. I did, I came back the next day, and I met them both. At that time they were married and people have been surprised because they've told me, "Oh, I didn't know that they were married." They were married for a short time, as I recall. But they were, I remember, to me, introduced as "This is my wife." And I think they were married no more than two years. But they rented me their space, and I remember walking around the studio and seeing fur everywhere, and finally turning to Nancy and saying, asking her if she she said she was a sculptor, and I said, "What do you work in?" And she says, "Well, I do camels." And I remembered seeing her camels at the Whitney Museum, only a year before that visitation. And I immediately, you know, recognized her as the person who had made these wonderful camels. Richard became famous shortly thereafter. Within that period, he was on the cover of Art Forum for one of his poured lead pieces, and which was sensational in the whole introduction of conceptual art in New York City. He has still been a strong cornerstone of the conceptual art movement the American conceptual art movement to this day.

MARGARITA NIETO: And Kate. You had a friendship with her?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, Kate was living at that time with Fumio Yashimura who was a sculptor on The Bowery. And you literally had to walk over a wino or a drunk or two to get up the stairs to get into their building. They owned an old building which had been turned into an historical landmark, and in that building she wrote much of the book of the, much of the basic research for Sexual Politics. At that time, I met her as a sculptor. She was introduced as a sculptress, and writing was a side-issue, in a sense.

MARGARITA NIETO: How interesting as far as her. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, her original paperwork was going to be on Jane Austin. And then at the last moment she took a very radical path and got into developing the Sexual Politics. She and Fumio were married and lived together almost on a platonic basis, I hear, partly because of his immigration standing, and partly because of his. . . Well, in a sense, the artists' allegiance to each other is often greater than their politics or their personal desires. So they were very faithful, I guess in their own way.

MARGARITA NIETO: What about their art? She was a sculptress, you said?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. I always felt her art. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: She would hate to my saying that. She was a sculptor?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: A sculptor. She was. . . But more than that, she was really an intellectual of just the highest caliber, in that, in many times, it's hard to understand her. She's extremely well read, and dealt with very subtle kind of intellectual nuances that she found in both American literature and international literature. As a sculptor, she was weak, partly because she was too literal in her expression of imagery, and also because she did not you could see that the time was. . . And the presentation was somewhat clumsy. One of the first shows I saw of her was in her own building. They arranged the basement to turn into a sort of a temporary gallery, and she had a show there. And then, as I said, then she dropped sculpture, and two years later her book Sexual Politics was published. Fumio. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: [So, Because] she found her metier, so to speak.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, right. Fumio, her husband, was the sculptor in the family. He was a very sensitive man who originally made kites in Japan, then came here with the same craft, and then started developing into a more sculptural, final form. So he. . . He still shows in New York, and pretty well known within the area. You knew from talking to Fumio that he was always, and always had been, a craftsman and an artist in his own right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm. Another person whom you've read, and who you mentioned in conversations before, was James Agee, is that right? [MARGARITA NIETO pronounced Agee with emphasis on the second syllable, and is asking for clarification of pronounciation-Ed.]

CARLOS ALMARAZ: James Agee.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: James Agee I really read as a young man, in trying to get out of my very strict Catholic thinking. Up until. . . I almost ended up going to Catholic college, which I'm so glad I didn't, because I think that my intellectual interest is much broader now because of that. But James Agee, I recognized as sort of a fellow artist, who was struggling with his own life. He died very young. And in his life he wrote only a very few amount of books, which I had read. And one volume of letters, which I read religiously. I spent a year going over the letters, and really enjoying and relishing many of the awarenesses that he was going through that I think I

shared with him.

MARGARITA NIETO: Was there any influence on [sic, probably meant of-Ed.] that on your diaries?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think so, because my diaries started to become a form of letter-writing, and I had included in the diaries even letters themselves that I either saved or salvaged or I got back in some way or another and pasted in the book. But yes, I think I always. . . I always had an imaginary person to write to, so that when I met his James Agee's real pen pal if I can call him that Father Fly, it was as if it was destiny for me to meet the man.

MARGARITA NIETO: Where did you meet him?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, Saint Luke's Church in West Village. And most people didn't know who he was, except the person who introduced, of course, was a literary individual, and he says, "You probably have read James Agee's Letters to Father Fly." I said, "I certainly have." He said, "Well, this is the real Father Fly. And I said, "You have to be kidding."

MARGARITA NIETO: My gosh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: The man was almost. . . He was ninety.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh my Heavens.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And we immediately were attracted to each other like, you know, it was a natural destiny thing. And I think that's when I first started to realize that my life, much of it, was already becoming the bohemian and literary life that I had sought in these books that I had read as a young person. Because when I met and talked to Father Fly, I recognized, in a sense, his literary involvement indirectly in shaping much of American writing and thinking for people my age. This was late. . . This was the early sixties. We had a wonderful conversation that lasted maybe two, three hours.

MARGARITA NIETO: Gosh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And we were glued to each other till finally Father Fly ran into the church, just out of nowhere this is a man of ninety turns around, almost hysterically, and runs into the church. Everyone turned to us they were on the side listening to us speak and said, "What happened? What did you say to him?" I said, "Nothing." I said, "He's going to go get his camera." (chuckles) And ran inside, disappeared for a few minutes, and then ran out with his camera, and then started snapping pictures of me.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs) Amazing.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And he says, "You know what?" And I said, "What?" And I said, "It's coming. Here it comes." He says, "You remind me of James Agee." I said, "That's the greatest compliment I could ever receive." He says, "I know his mind from his letters and his books." He said, "You certainly do. I have the same feeling toward you as I have toward him. I've only met you for, you know, a few hours." So we parted then with the understanding that he was going to write to me and send me photographs which I did receive, and until this day I have them and then I was going to correspond with him. I never did. And I think that's interesting because I did not want. . . I was not James Agee; I was Carlos Almaraz. I did not want to. . . I could not compete in that arena.

MARGARITA NIETO: Sort of adopting the persona of. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, that was artificial. No, that was it. I closed the door and realized that I had in a sense taken part in history through that association, through that meeting. And later on, other people who fell into that also made sense to me such as Kenneth Rexroth. Again, a man who I. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh yeah, I was going to mention that. What kind of. . . How did you meet Rexroth?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it was through you. We had gone up and I had mentioned to you that I had always admired his writing, especially his poems on, Japanese poems. And you had mentioned that you knew him and would be glad to introduce me to him. I was both scared and excited, because, here again, I was meeting historical figures. Rexroth I thought lived somewhere in Japan on top of a mountain. And here you told me he lives right in Santa Barbara. So it was a very delightful kind of an experience to go right up the hundred miles and meet this great figure, who I had read. I had read both his own personal poetry, much of his writing, and his translations, and I admired greatly.

MARGARITA NIETO: What was your impression of him?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think what I found most reassuring is that Rexroth. . . Rexroth was the first man artist that I had met who was up-front about his own sexuality and his sexual drive and the connection between that

and his art. I sensed it within the first few minutes that we met him. There was a tremendous sexual urge and energy for life, that it took on sexual form, as well as a very avarice [sic] and tremendously vast interest in intellectual ideas.

MARGARITA NIETO: So it was really a lust for life that you. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Exactly. I think in the most extreme sense. And for me it was reassuring because up until now or up until that time I had met literary figures only through reading and only through the university campus, which always filters out the more personal aspects of an individual and the real passions and drives that make him what he is. They have to, by the nature of, I think, of just any kind of intellectual research. You have to deal first with ideas, and then you start looking for these real people, which life offers you. But I think Rexroth was that cornerstone again, crossroads where I said, "You know, it's true. What I felt about the drive in his literature, I could see totally in the man as I'm speaking to him." And that was a very exciting moment.

MARGARITA NIETO: What about his house? People were always surprised when they. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I found it to be almost what I. . . It was a small dusty house filled with books, and everywhere you looked there was, I'm sure, a story would have connected with an ashtray or a little Japanese pot. But it was as if time had stood still in that house somewhere in the sixties, and had remained so, up until his death, because there was something very still about the house. And. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: My, that's an interesting comment.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. I still remember the smell, the musky smell of damp books. [said musky, perhaps meant musty-Ed.]

MARGARITA NIETO: And I thought, too, that there was a painting of his, because Rexroth was a painter.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Oh yes! Of course. It's coming back. Yes!

MARGARITA NIETO: That had a certain correlation with your first period in your. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Very much so. In fact, didn't I give him a piece? Yes. He had very Impressionistic paintings.

MARGARITA NIETO: Nonobjective, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Nonobjective. Which were very similar to some of my first involvements with gouache and transparency of color. And there was a great affinity, and I gave him one piece of work.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I still have in a sense the sister to that piece. There were two; one I kept, and one I gave to him. Because of that [affinity-Ed.]. I'd forgotten that I gave him something. I did do a sketch of him. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .and I have them somewhere. I know I found them once, and I've lost them again. I have a history of doing that.

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I remember the print that you gave me, by who?

MARGARITA NIETO: Ah, [Alberto-Ed.] Giacometti.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Giacometti, the long, skinny. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: The etching.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Etching.

MARGARITA NIETO: Which by the way I have now misplaced again, anyway. (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I lost, I found, then I lost again. And this is a matter, this was over a period of three or four years. And I finally found it and I gave it back to you, now. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And I don't know where it is.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Now you don't know where it is. Well, I'm sure it's in good hands, or between some pages.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs) It's somewhere, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: A chapter of some good book. But, yes, so that kind of was my impression of Rexroth.

MARGARITA NIETO: Turning to another aspect of California, going from the dean of California letters to another area, what about people in the film industry? You did actually work on a film?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. I worked on two films. The first film I was only 20, 21. I was introduced to the family of the Lloyd. Norman Lloyd worked with Orson Welles many years ago, in the Mercury Theater. I met his wife Peggy at school, and we became good friends, so much so that I gave her a drawing that I did in figure drawing [class-Ed.]. And she showed that drawing to Sam Goldwyn, Junior, who was looking for an artist to work on his new film with a new star at that time named Peter Fonda.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And this was to be Peter Fonda's debut. It was his first film ever. So I was hired along with another artist to work on the real sketches, since the story entailed an artist who had fallen in love with a woman and did drawings [and paintings-CARLOS ALMARAZ] of her, and it was in apartment of their home of their life. I was doing the actual drawings. So it was exciting because it was my first real introduction to big Hollywood names like Sam Goldwyn, Junior. And at that time Peter Fonda was unknown. But other stars: Billy Wilder and film photographer Bert Stern were all people working on the set. This was, I think, the first real west coast [said "coast, but meant to say "side"-Ed.] thing that ever happened to me that was something for me extraordinary, in that I was brought up on the east side of Los Angeles, which was basically Mexican, and to come to the west side to work among all this glamour was for me, you know. . . I think it gave me a sense that life is magical; there's things that go on that are really exciting.

MARGARITA NIETO: And that you could be part of.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And that I could definitely be part of. So the interesting. . . Peter was a very fine person, a very serious young man. Since it was his first film there was a certain nervousness to him. We were not allowed to ask him to sit and pose for us because they were always rehearsing, or speaking to the director, but we were allowed to hover around him like bees, constantly, trying to get a view of his face so that we could sketch it. So we were outside of lunch and our coffeebreak always with him, or within ten to twenty feet of him and the leading lady, trying to sketch them and try and develop some working sketches.

MARGARITA NIETO: Who was his opposite?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sharon Hugeney, who never made another film. The name of the film was The Young Lovers. She had a lot of problems on the film, and she at one point, I think, broke down and was gone for eight days of filming. It cost the studio a fortune.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh. Boy. Really.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But Peter, one day removed his shirt because there was a dance scene in which he had to work in, and he had this enormous gash in the front of his chest that was also apparent in the back. And we asked him, "What is the scar?" The huge scar. He says, "It was from a shotgun wound." And at that point he had to tell us the details because we were at the edge of our seats. He said, "When I was eleven years old, I put a gun to my belly and shot it."

MARGARITA NIETO: Ohh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And he says, "I lived. . ."

MARGARITA NIETO: Suicide attempt.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. "I lived," he says, "and they sewed me up, and it's a miracle I'm here." But you could see this enormous. . . Yeah, you could see that it went right through him. And that was the only revealing episode that occurred on the set. Other than that, he was extremely serious, seemed like a very introverted person. I later met his sister, Jane, who in many ways was just the opposite. Where he was, seemed more passive, she seemed very aggressive. Where he seemed introverted, she seemed very extroverted. Where he seemed to lack confidence, she seemed to be overexuberant [with, in] confidence and fiery. She came to see me when she was trying to develop a campaign for her husband, Jerry. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Tom Hayden?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Tom Hayden. She came to east L.A. and I was working for a[n all nations-CARLOS ALMARAZ] neighborhood center, and she evidently heard that I was active politically in the neighborhood, and within the Los Angeles area. So she came to the center, and we had a good two-hour conversation down in my office, which was the. . . It was the. . . It was like the hell-hole of Calcutta. We had this terrible building that was falling apart, with kids that had all kinds of problems. Everybody under nineteen, with no money for budgets for programs, for basketballs, for anything. And we had a very good conversation about Hayden's ideas, and her involvement, and what did this have to do. . . My question to her was, "Do you just want us to help you now with husband's campaign, then are you going to disappear? Or are [sic] you going to stick around and help us solve some of these problems?" Well, as life turned out, the answer was evident. You know, she was just looking for someone to help her with her husband's campaign.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She had no interest in remaining and trying to solve the problems. I had that feeling about her and so I declined from getting involved.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did she ever buy or support your work as an artist?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She claimed she did. I asked her once to help us out. We were doing a Chicano show at the Craft and Folk Art Museum, the muralist show.

MARGARITA NIETO: The first muralist show, right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And we were looking for not only, but we were looking or contributions we were looking for help. We wanted to throw a smashing first-night party so that we could get people interested in preserving the murals.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, she sent me a little note saying, "I can't at this time help you. I'm sorry that my life is, you know, has taken me in other directions. Please understand." And signed, "Jane." I was so upset I tore up the letter. And I regret it. Because I wanted to save it. I wanted to say to myself, you know, "You gotta do it on your own. You really can't ask westsiders to help you with these problems; it's really your job to do." But I threw it away. My mother says, "Oh, you should have saved it. It would have been nice to keep." But it was a lie.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's also an interesting reminder.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, I think so.

MARGARITA NIETO: What other film people have you met? Well, you must have known Margo Albert because. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, Margo was really. . . She had two sides. There was the arrogant Margo who everybody kind of liked; you know, she was like the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland. And then there was the other side, who was terribly sentimental, who we found out later was suffering, you know, daily, with her battle with cancer.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And who finally succumbed to it after a tremendously long struggle. And who, in the process, did a tremendous amount of promotion and good work for her baby, Plaza de la Raza [an art center in Los Angeles-CARLOS ALMARAZ].

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And carried a torch after Frank Lopez passed away also cancer. So Margo was exciting to me again, they were people who I had known as legends and who I'd seen in old movies. And when I saw them, I saw them in a movie house, which always added to the sense of legend.

MARGARITA NIETO: Actually, we met. . . You introduced me to Margo and we actually ended up meeting because of Margo I mean, meeting in person, though we had talked over the phone.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, really?

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, when we worked on the advisory committee for the Treasures of Mexico exhibition.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Exactly, right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And she headed that committee, and we put together that effort to bring people out to that exhibition.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. I just, the other day, just bumped in to Lozano. And we were talking about Margo.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You know, she was a personality, and a very dynamic one, and one of the best. . . She had one of the best memories I know of for names and positions.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes. A very accurate mind.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She was unbelievably accurate on that. I could never remember the people.

MARGARITA NIETO: And tireless about working for that particular endeavor.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, right. And she did do a lot for Plaza. I think things got muddled because, when you get the westside into the eastside, the eastside starts to resent it, by nature, you know. Meaning that the leadership still should be in the hands of eastside people if it's going to be an eastside center of culture.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But in the long run, I think they got a tremendous amount done I mean, more than I could have done. I mean, Lincoln Park and Plaza needed her kind of personality.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you know Eddie Albert at all?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, I only met him several times through her. I heard though that he was very dependent on her, and was rarely seen on the set without her being there. I don't know if that was a rumor, but while I was working in Hollywood. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: No, I think that's probably accurate.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .several people told me that, that she was really his whole strength.

MARGARITA NIETO: She was a very complex person, a very interesting person, probably a biography at some point would be appropriate.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Hasn't there been an effort?

MARGARITA NIETO: I don't think there has been.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, I think it'd be wonderful.

MARGARITA NIETO: A lot of complexities, and her errors and whatever, but she was a. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, also because of the blackballing she suffered the McCarthy period. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: 1950s, right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: .and how she really lost. . . She told me she was up for a film, and up for a weekly program on television, and within a weekend, she was dropped totally.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, and apparently it was a very painful for her. I think the weight gain and probably the incipient cancer developed during the time. I have a feeling that it did.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Isn't that something.

MARGARITA NIETO: From what she's told me. From what she told me. Anyway, to get on to other people whom [we've, you've] known, what other people from the film or political spectrum in California?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, we're trying to think of people that I have not mentioned before in the biography. I think, you know, one of them was when we did the Los Four exhibit, we had Jerry Brown come to our house, and we had an evening of very nice celebration of the Los Four exhibit.

MARGARITA NIETO: That had something to do with Aimee Price.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She's good friends. Her husband went to school with Jerry, and she invited him over to meet

my studio mate, who was a woman very lovely woman, who looked Polynesian, and who was actually Chinese and Jamaican black. And you swear she was when I met her, because of her beauty and her hair, she looked like someone off the set of Mutiny on the Bounty.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, really.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And her name was Charmaine Moo. And we, Aimee called she thought Jerry would be very fascinated by Charmaine. Charmaine was originally a pre-med student at Harvard, who dropped out and ended up reading Tarot cards on Sunset Boulevard.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, God. (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And then enrolled at Otis/Parsons, and that's where I met her, as a major in sculpture.

MARGARITA NIETO: And Aimee Brown Price taught at Otis.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She taught at Otis, and I met her there, as my art history teacher. We became good friends, and to this day we are good friends. And she was always fascinated by Charmaine.

MARGARITA NIETO: And she was fascinated by your work, as well.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, definitely. She owns several of my very, very early pieces. And she called Jerry and he came over looking very spiffy. He had just been elected, so he was not in office yet, and he came in wearing a very lovely light tan suit three piece suit and was very cordial, very warm, and I think he stayed at the party a couple of hours and told us that he had lived in the area, in Echo Park, so he knew the area well. And then he and Charmaine disappeared about midnight. And it wasn't until a few days later, after I saw her at school, that I said, "Well, what happened between you and Jerry Brown?" She said, "We had a wonderful time." She says, "You know, it wasn't as romantic as I thought it would be, but it was certainly wonderful." And she said that she met many of his friends during that period, and many of them were artists, and he had a real understanding of the art community.

MARGARITA NIETO: Hmm!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So they became friends. I don't know how intimate of friends.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But they became friends.

MARGARITA NIETO: How interesting. Is it true that Jerry Weintraub owns some of your pieces?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, Jerry is an old collector. He collected me before anybody, even the galleries, were interested, mainly through my good friend Carol Finkelstein, and up until the first. . . We were in communication up until the first filming of The Karate Kid. He asked me to do the poster.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, really?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. His office called me, and I went to see him, and I. . . That's when I first really met him. Even though he had purchased my work, he had always done it through proxy. But he came in looking very much like a very successful Hollywood producer. But his real success, for I think most people, came with The Karate Kid. He asked me if I would be interested in developing the poster for The Karate Kid, and I declined, saying, "Jerry, I'm not an illustrator. You're looking for an illustrator." And he said, "Why? Why do you say that?" I said, "Well, you're talking about expressions and trying to capture the mood, the feeling of the film in the expressions of the child. I say you need an illustrator. I'm an artist that paints like" I pointed to a piece by Jasper Johns; I said "paints like that" meaning messy and drippy and painterly "and what you're looking for is someone like this" and I pointed to a poster of The Zootsuit, by Ignacio Gomez. And I gave him the number, and I said, you know, "This is the man you're really looking for." But I was very flattered that he had thought of me. He wanted me to work, get involved with the film, not only on the poster, but get involved in some other way which was just not the right time for me. If that offer came up now, I would jump on it, but at that the Olympics were just around the corner. I had been asked to do one of the Olympic posters, and I knew that there were a couple exhibits coming along with that, so I maintained my horses and stayed on the fine-art track.

MARGARITA NIETO: Which is probably the best thing to do as a painter. (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: What about. . . Another topic we didn't touch at all on and this is really jumping from The

Karate Kid to suggestion but I don't think we ever talked about your trip to China, and I was very interested in reading your diary and in knowing that you had taken that trip. But was it '74?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: '75, I think.

MARGARITA NIETO: Which must have been when people were just beginning to go, and from what I understand twelve, thirteen years later, China has changed dramatically from when you went.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm! Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Could you tell a little bit about how you went, and impressions.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It's interesting, because recently I had dinner with David Hockney, and David was in China almost ten years after I was there. And we were discussing the changes and how dramatic. . . For instance, we arrived at the Beijing airport, which was then called the Peking airport. We'd looked around, after arriving and deplaning, and was in the lobby waiting for our bus chauffeurs to come and pick us up. We looked around and I noticed that everything in the airport was handmade. Nothing was machine-made.

MARGARITA NIETO: God.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And we realized we were dealing with a totally other society, another way of doing things. The magazines in the lobby were free. They were all Socialist magazines, but they were free. And free tea was available. And there was a sense of arriving at someone's home, rather than arriving in an airport. In other words, if you arrive in someone's home, obviously they're not going to price the tea, and then price the chair. There was just a real nice sense of being in a different world in a different time. Once we left the airport and got in coaches and then drove through the countryside, I was convinced that we were in the nineteenth century; we were not in the twentieth century that was another world out there. And from that point on, we had 28 days of an incredible adventure that, at that time, was very pure or very cleansed of Western influences. There was no Coke. The clothing was still Chinese in the old Cultural Revolution sense.

MARGARITA NIETO: Quilted jackets, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, the greens and that. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And the unisex look.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, and then the little blue uniforms. But I thought what was interesting as we got deeper into China was that things had not changed so much under the new Communistic government for most of China, because most of China seemed to be very collective anyway, especially when you get into the country. One family did not harvest their rice; all families participated.

MARGARITA NIETO: _____ _____, right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: There was a sharing of materials and things like that even the uniforms. We saw some of the old-timers who had not changed over to the new uniforms. Their old Mandarin uniforms were also that blue. So it was still part of their culture to be uniformly dressed.

MARGARITA NIETO: What about. . . Did you sketch while you were there?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. There's a notebook that was included in my donation to the Smithsonian, with some of the sketches of China. Some of them I also kept because I plan to put them together at some point.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I did take a tremendous amount of photographs of China of that period.

MARGARITA NIETO: Have you ever exhibited them?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, I hope to. I'm going to be seeing the Cityscape Photo Gallery this evening about one day showing China, you know, as I saw it in 1975.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, that would be fantastic.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think so. Time has made it more interesting, too. I was able, especially at that time, to go out in the streets, pretty well left alone for about three hours to photograph just about anything I wanted. So I had a good chance of seeing China's lifestyle without being an overseer too much.

MARGARITA NIETO: What about the people that you traveled with? Who did you go with?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: We went with a group community workers and educators. And they were from all parts of the country. They had a difficult. . . We all had a difficult time with each other, in that by the end of the trip most of the American group were pretty sick of each other. I mean, literally. There was some terrible fights and scenes. The Chinese found it very amusing. Because at our meetings, it was like an encounter group. People accusing other people of being petit bourgeois or being uncollective.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, my God.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Whereas the Chinese meetings were. . . You could hardly hear them.

MARGARITA NIETO: How amazing.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And they used to sit around, especially the villagers. . . Often we met, the whole group would meet outdoors, near, you know, in the open area where we ate, so that the people working in the restaurant or even the villagers could come by and watch us even though they couldn't understand English. They knew what we were doing: We were having a meeting and having a lot of disagreement. We were very disorderly. Very disorderly.

MARGARITA NIETO: How interesting. And you found that a point of contrast?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And as this trip continued, we got more disorderly. Finally, one night, several of the people in our group got very drunk and abusive with the Chinese. And I thought it was terribly embarrassing, and I stepped in, which made me a target. But it was interesting to see how disorganized Americans were under stress and under the sense of being in a foreign country, than to see that the Chinese were the same group was with us throughout the whole trip, and we never saw them come apart.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you felt that your personal relationships suffered as a result of being thrust into such an unfamiliar situation?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You mean, at that time, my personal relationships?

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Definitely. Definitely. Partly because of having to remain individuals rather than couples. In other words, you signed up as individuals. You were not supposed to team up during the tour, which caused tremendous, you know, petty dramas within the total trip.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But, you know, it was difficult to be confined with so many people. My second trip to a Socialist country was when I went to Cuba.

MARGARITA NIETO: I think we talked about that. [No-CARLOS ALMARAZ.]

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And that equally difficult for the same reason. I was never a Boy Scout oh yes, I was! but I was never successful at it. And trying to get along with 28 people for 28 days became a task.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, I can imagine.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Not just for me. Because I didn't have the conflicts that. . . Others got in physical fights; I did not have that. But there were several on the trip. There were several, you know; among the men and among women, there was some abusive language and name-calling as the trip got closer and closer to its end. The China trip was, in total, one of the best trips I've ever had, in that we saw much of China. That's the only place I would really want to take my wife [Elsa Flores-CARLOS ALMARAZ] to and show her what I saw.

MARGARITA NIETO: As a landscape artist (chuckles). . . As an urban landscape painter, what are your impressions of China from that standpoint?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, the urban part is not too interesting. I mean, the city life of China is very drab. Beijing was the most traditional Chinese city we saw. Shanghai had already had tremendous influence from the English architect, so it was not Chinese. Beijing was. It was, and also it had the same, it had the problem of being very old, very dusty, and basically drab there was no real color. The most colorful thing in Beijing were the babies. They were dressed in silks and satins. But everything else was very drab. It wasn't until we got to the countryside that we saw some beautiful, beautiful landscapes. Again, I was with a group of people so I couldn't stop and work on, say, an oil or a watercolor which is what I would like to do next time.

MARGARITA NIETO: I can imagine. Ah, let's see. What else have we missed.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, we talked about Cuba.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So I, that. . . I was going to say, comparing Cuba, the landscape in Cuba was, I think, probably some of the most beautiful landscape I've ever seen. Some of it outpasses even China.

MARGARITA NIETO: I've heard that the color of the sky is incredible.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Well, Cuba is an island, so the sky is very clear, colors are very intense, and it's so luscious. China, you only find that lusciousness when you go south into the tropical area just above Burma. But much of, yeah, the rest of China can be very dry. Some of it can be incredibly dry and rocky. But the lower part was beautiful. But Cuba is one of those. . . If it wasn't a Socialist country, it's one of those places I'd like to live, because it is so beautiful.

MARGARITA NIETO: By the way, speaking of China again, what about the. . . Did you have a chance to see anything in terms of visual art there?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: We were taken to universities, but no. This is some of disappointments of visiting Socialist countries, that, culturally, especially during that time, it was stripped. We did not see, outside of the old Ming tombs, we did not see much visual art, except the artifacts.

MARGARITA NIETO: This was right after Cultural Revolution.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, so it was not a time to be in China looking for art. What we saw was very academic or very folk art. There was a tremendous interest in folk art at that time. The best seemed to be on people's tapestries and their clothing. We did not see great painting, even the sumi and sushi I mean, not sushi sumi painting, because it just simply was not there. The museums we saw seemed empty. But so did the libraries, and I was shocked!

MARGARITA NIETO: _____ sure.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: To go to the University of Peking and to see shelves empty. Shelf after shelf of all the empty [boxes of] Western books. The same thing we saw. . . The same thing happened in Cuba, that we saw. . . Again, when you go to the library, you don't see Aristotle, you don't see the classics. You see empty bookshelves, and you see the last thirty to forty years of literature only, and only Socialist literature. Well, if you're only brought up on that, it's fine, but if you're not, you starve for intellectual ideas. So, you know, I mean these. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: What a sad commentary. But what a sad commentary that in this country where we have it available, people don't avail themselves of it, that's _____ _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. Well, that's true, but this country is, you know, it's such a different experience totally. We went from. . . Always coming back from a Socialist country to the United States, you feel you rediscover your country, because what you take for granted is impossible in other countries. And there's a certain comedy about returning to America, because it is, America is everything plus more. Your choices here are infinitely greater and thus you can make a choice.

MARGARITA NIETO: Especially in California.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. Right. True.

MARGARITA NIETO: Especially here.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Dial your weather.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes. (laughs) Dial your food.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. You want snow, go to Idlewild. You want to beach, go to, you know. And you want ethnic food, go downtown, or. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Anywhere.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. It's pretty amazing.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, is there anything that we've missed.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think we've covered most of the material that I have to say at this time. So unless there's some questions you want to ask, I don't think so.

MARGARITA NIETO: Mnn, let's see. No, I think that we've pretty much covered it all.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I'll just say at this point that I've just finished a new exhibit of paintings, which will be shown at the Jan Turner [Gallery-Ed.].

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh. This will be opening. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And it'll be opening tomorrow.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh, August 1 through September 5.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And the new work yeah I think it's farther, I think it's closer to the painterliness that I want to get on canvas.

MARGARITA NIETO: Ah, good.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think that'll. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And you're working oil on canvas in this show?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, and that's becoming stronger and stronger.

MARGARITA NIETO: And a larger dimension to your pieces?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think so. Although I've done larger, what this show has started to do is to put it all on one canvas, rather than in triptychs or diptychs. So it's a little more abstract, I think, than the rest of my work.

MARGARITA NIETO: How interesting. And I should mention also that the paper that I read in Paris on "Carlos Almaraz, Genesis of a Latino Painter," is going to be published in the proceedings of that meeting, and I sent it off, edited and what have you, so we'll see that appearing.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Based on the interviews here, as you know.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Wonderful.

MARGARITA NIETO: So, there we are! Onward and upwards. Well, thank you very much.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You're very welcome.

MARGARITA NIETO: We haven't talked for a long time, and a lot has happened. You had your show in August, that was very successful, at the Janus Gallery, Jan Turner Gallery [correcting from Janus to Turner-Ed.]. You've been to Hawaii since then, and you've begun working on a new series of works. So today what we'd like to talk about is that, your perception of what's happened in Los Angeles with the opening of the new museums the end of this year, and Art Expo, and the fact that we are now one of the cities in the world in terms of visual arts. We didn't talk about your family and the influence of your family on your work. We want to touch upon friendships, people that you've met since we last spoke or that we didn't mention in the last interviews. Why don't we start with your August show.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Okay. Well, I had a one-man show at the Jan Turner Gallery in August of '86, and what I tried to do in that show was to bring together my own styles, my own personages, and my own narrative images to some kind of focus, trying to draw more on the past, and in a sense trying to work with very traditional ideas in painting, in that I was making illusions and I was trying to manipulate the paint so that you really sense the paint in making these illusions.

MARGARITA NIETO: I think everyone was struck by that, about the fact that you had matured so much in terms of your painting technique.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Technique. Well, I think the new challenge. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: The application of the paint was so rich and. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think the new challenge and mood of the city now is that we are becoming a focal point for much of international artmaking. We're not the market yet, but we are a focal point for artmaking. And I, like

many other artists, want to stand out as an international artist rather than as a regional, you know, artist alone. I think that's very limiting. So my going back to some of the, in the paint, in the collection of work presented in August, there was a great emphasis on sort of neo-religious characters: The Return of the Bishop, The Eternal City. There is also an emphasis on city itself. The idea that I am part of a, or a member of urban, very, dense urban society. And I am reflecting on that now more than ever. I have been searching to answer the question, "How do I get out of the regional labeling? How do I make the paintings more important, more exquisite than just being Echo Park for the sake of Echo Park?" Now, I find one answer is to work more with the material itself, make you more aware of the material, and, secondly, to work the idea of city: What is city life? What is it now? What was it in Rome? What was it in Pompei? What was it in ancient Tenochitlan [Mexico City?-CARLOS ALMARAZ]? It's all the same thing: density of mankind.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, what's interesting, too, is that you maintained that same line, or connection, with the urban landscapes of the Impressionists. I think there was one painting that was very much stylized after Monet, wasn't it? And _____ _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, exactly. It was called The Artist as Monet.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I thought if I. . . I'm a great admirer of Monet, but I also thought of Monet as being. . . He was a member of his society; for a long time in his life, I'm sure he lived in Paris, itself, and his country estate was outside of the city limits.

MARGARITA NIETO: _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But if anyone lived a full life and was fully capable up to his end, as a painter, it was Monet. And if I could pick someone that I would like to be like at that age, would be Monet. So for me it was a visualization of a dream, of a wish. And it, I know that the critic. . . I'm drawing a blank right now. My good friend and. . . What's her name? At L.A. Times?

MARGARITA NIETO: Suzanne Muchnic?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, Suzanne Muchnic said that that painting of all was the most. . . She found it "corny," she found it overdone, or something.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, I remember that comment.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it's only because it is, it's sort of a child-like fantasy, made into a picture with no excuses, you know. Yes, it's a little awkward and, yeah, you are being a little bit. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Self-conscious.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. But I was going to do it anyway, because I had planned to do exactly that!

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles) Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So. . . Many times what you have to do in putting together a show is to turn off all that inner dialogue as Carlos Castaneda says, and proceed, you know; otherwise you won't get anywhere. And so now, as I say, the work is becoming more aware of itself, in an urban city.

MARGARITA NIETO: I have to ask you something. There was a change in your palette in this show.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Definitely.

MARGARITA NIETO: There was. . . You were black a great deal more not that you hadn't before. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .but there was black oil, which you had not used before. Would you talk a little bit about that?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I was. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: It cast a different light.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Again, I'm trying to deal with the fact that Suzanne and, even my own dealer, still sees me as a Southwest artist, and they're constantly, critics are constantly referring to my "hot Latin colors." Well, this

is a convenient cliche, but it doesn't hold up really. I just saw this young Irishman today [Patrick Morrison-Ed.], and last night I saw his paintings, and they're brilliantly hot colors. But no one would ever refer to him as hot Latin colors.

MARGARITA NIETO: To go to another extreme, Peter Max would never have been talked about in terms of hot Latin. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, hot Latin colors. So, to break away from, again, that sort of cliche, I started to move into another range of colors, into the purples, into the more subtle hues, lots of creamy colors, lots of whitish colors, and then, last of all, consciously went back to the use of black. Now I had kept away from black for many years, because originally my background was in black-and-white drawing and in graphic art. So I [had-Ed.] a good background in just linear construction, and tonal construction. So I became. . . For a while, what I was doing at the beginning of my painting career was drawing my paintings, and to rid myself of that I started to get away from black, and create black by the mixture of other colors or keep away from it totally. Again, looking at Impressionist paintings, you rarely see black.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I followed that kind of logic. But now I've returned to it consciously to perhaps exaggerate the tableau itself, and often to use black as a silhouette.

MARGARITA NIETO: And it's very interesting because it is very neo-Expressionist.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. Right. And it adds to the drama of the situation and. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And to the application of the paint, because if you're doing this heavy texture. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .this heavy overlay of paint.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: You're very conscious of texture.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And the only thing that can work over that is black, with some nice crisp edges. And, also again, we're talking about city scenes, and you can't get away from the fact that there's a blackishness to the urban enviroment, whether it's psychological or real. And by reintroducing black as a color, I can do that.

MARGARITA NIETO: Getting back to that topic then now. . . Since we last spoke, we've last month witnessed articles in all the major publications in the United States, and probably in Europe as well, about our emergence as an important art center. I'm speaking of Los Angeles.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, of course.

MARGARITA NIETO: How do you perceive that? Of course we both saw it coming a long time ago. We've talked about this for a long time. But how do you perceive this, and how do you view the new museums and the museum addition at LACMA?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think on one hand it is a very fine forward movement. On the other hand it tends to be a little bit what is it? self-congratulatory? a little bit of patting ourselves on the back and saying, "Oh, aren't we bad. Aren't we. . .," you know. [using "bad" in the colloquial reverse sense-Ed.]

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You know. I've talked to dealers because I think they have a good sense of the realistic aspect of L.A. as an art center. Is it really happening, or is it just an illusion? Is it ourselves telling ourselves that now that we have two museums we're somebody? Well, on one hand it is happening. Talking to dealers tells you that sales have been like never before. The amount of galleries in L.A. are extremely broad; they cover a large range of work. I hear that several at least one big San Francisco gallery is moving down to Los Angeles, opening a branch here. I don't think they'd do that if it is wasn't that, from what I hear, San Francisco has done quite poorly in sales of art in the last few years.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, I think they've been behind the times.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, now that's interesting, because at one time they were who we looked up to and followed.

MARGARITA NIETO: But I know. . .
CARLOS ALMARAZ: Thirty years now has passed and it's turned around.
MARGARITA NIETO: On my last trips they were not only disappointing but horrifying.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Really?

MARGARITA NIETO: I was just amazed at what didn't happen in San Francisco as compared to Los Angeles.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, really. Well also, you know, the kind of. . . In showing in San Francisco I have found that large work has been discouraged. Very few people buy and even show large work. San Francisco's sense seems to be. . . Caters to a smaller format because of the size of the city and the fact that people live in apartments, maybe. For whatever reasons, this is what they seem to be more interested in.

MARGARITA NIETO: But probably has to do with another factor, too. We have a lot of money here in this city.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: True, and we have more space. Again, I for a while here painting those bigger than four by four feet, you could not, it was hard to sell in Los Angeles, and now there seems to be no limit to size.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's. . . But I think that might be a reflection of the type architecture that's going up in the city.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Exactly.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I'm not talking about value here I mean, value judgment in terms of the aesthetic quality of architecture. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .but when you think of living space in Los Angeles, the kind of home that you have, or the space that you live in, people opt for places that have a lot of space.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sure.

MARGARITA NIETO: And that probably reflects itself in the type of work that's in demand.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I think a lot of young couples who are becoming collectors tend to live in open spaces. I'm thinking right now of lofts.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: There's a lot of people moving to the downtown and around the area into loft spaces. Because that gives them the kind of lifestyle I think that they admire, mostly from New York, and ideas coming from a metropolis city like that. Now, but getting back to the question of whether L.A. is an art center, I think from talking to dealers it is becoming an art center market-making place. Not a market. It's still not, you know, the. . . New York is still the market for the arts. Also, we in Los Angeles now, our range tends to be around the contemporary art scene. In New York you have beyond that. You know, you can buy a French Impressionist painting or you can buy something from the Renaissance.

MARGARITA NIETO: Van Gogh _____ portraits, uh huh, _____ _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Here in Los Angeles still it would be very hard to find something that's at that caliber.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So in that sense, no. It's really another drop in the bucket, but it's not in any way turning the city around or changing. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Do you think that might have to do with our lack of sense of history?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, I don't think so. I think it has to do with geographical placement. The exchange, the international market is still, is approached through the east coast, specifically New York and that area. I mean, not only do you buy and sell paintings from Europe there like crazy, but you also buy and sell furniture, architectural ideas, architecture, et cetera. They seem still to accumulate there. Now in Los Angeles we're having a lot of interest but not really phenomenal buying. When you talk about selling a Jasper Johns, you're going to go to New York with it. You're not going to sell it in Los Angeles.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You won't get the top dollar. Until that changes, and that may be 50 years from now really you still have New York as being the mecca. I think that, you know, we've all had to sort of like face that. But meanwhile we have a city that's grown immensely in the arts. It's got two new museums.

MARGARITA NIETO: Would you like to comment on the architecture and the space at MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art-Ed.]?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think that let's say the MOCA space I was very disappointed. I want to say for the record that I was not invited to the MOCA opening which I took as a personal insult because I had been a member. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you know that David Hockney wasn't?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Perhaps.

MARGARITA NIETO: No, I was scrounging around for an invitation.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You're kidding.

MARGARITA NIETO: It was in the press.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You're kidding me. I can't believe that.

MARGARITA NIETO: I meant to mention it.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, a lot of people were very upset because. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: I mean that doesn't mitigate the fact that you weren't invited either. I mean. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I mean, I think that mailing list of, you know, I wasn't invited to the LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art-Ed.] opening, and I thought it was a more sensitive mailing list, more realistic. All of the major artists of Los Angeles were there. From Ed Ruscha to everybody else. Rauschenberg was there. You could see them freely. And we were invited to a separate opening where it was mostly just the artists. It wasn't a lot of public and we didn't have to wear tuxedos.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was more to our lifestyle. I think most artists, you know, are not tuxedo-wearing types.

MARGARITA NIETO: No. (laughing)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It doesn't mean that they don't wear a tuxedo, but they're not tuxedo-wearing people. But I think it was also the informal aspect of LACMA that made me feel at home and it made me feel like this was really our museum. MOCA now I see with a certain amount of suspicion, in that somebody even I think Koshalek Richard Koshalek described that he did not want to be a museum of modern art colonial outpost. But this is exactly what he is becoming. To show there at the museum young people that I spoke to were very disappointed. They called it the worst of the sixties.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I left thinking, "You know, you're right!" The new building I find tremendously disappointing. Tremendously. And I realize you almost have to snicker, because L.A.'s tooting its horn so loudly, and all you have to do is look at the Guggenheim, look at the Whitney, look at the Modern [Museum of Modern Art-Ed.], and look at some of the great museums, the Pompidou of the world. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, yes, yes, the whole world, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .to see this as being the museum on the top of the hill. It's simply a real, I think it's a real failure. Even the placement of the new museum is an incredible failure to the city of Los Angeles.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, you think of Beaubourg, which is probably one of the best statements, which was highly criticized when it was erected in Paris, but what has developed its own center. . . I forgot that since we were last together I've been to Paris, _____ _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh really.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's right. Maybe we haven't seen each other since then.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That's right.

MARGARITA NIETO: In fact I read that paper on your work in Paris.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, of course.

MARGARITA NIETO: But. . . And we have to talk about that a little bit. I want to comment on it. But it has, it was erected in an area of Paris which had not been an art center, and it's actually pulled a crowd away from the Left Bank, the Left Bank which had been. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sure.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .the gallery area, or the gallery _____ _____, for example, and, you know, [where-Ed.] all the important dealers are, has become less important because people are now circling this area, which is the Beaubourg, right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I really can't see this happening around MOCA. I may be wrong, but I was on La Cienega just the other day, and Ovsey, which had been one of the last galleries to stay downtown has moved on to La Brea.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, downtown galleries. Oh, it has?

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, the museum is not. . . The placement of where it is, as I say, on top of Bunker Hill, was I think wrong. There are more accessible places in the city. There is no ambience created by the placement of that museum there. It's just simply dropped there, and nothing around it that gives you a sense of. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: "Star Trek V"? [for future historians: A movie-Ed.] (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah! Right. And so, and also the size of the museum and the placement of the main galleries downstairs, with no facility for the handicapped or people. . . We happened to go with our child who fell asleep in a crib, and it was a nightmare to have to carry her down the stairs.

MARGARITA NIETO: My God, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Because there was no elevator to get you down to the second level. On the first level, the administration building offices, and they were all closed. And I thought, "This is just terrible!" Then we finally saw the show and, just as you're getting into the show, it's over with. You get to the end of the building. And there's a sense of, "Well, that's it." You know, "We got our twenty paintings and they're all basically kind of mediocre paintings from the sixties, with the exception of Cy Twombly. And out we went. And that was the, all the year of preparation and years of preparation, tons of talk for that.

MARGARITA NIETO: And what's unfortunate is that the Temporary Contemporary was completely different.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I know. I found that to be much more successful, exciting to go through, a sense of something closer to the environment in which art is made.

MARGARITA NIETO: And a sense of urbanity.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. Right. Because the building is never complete. It has a sense of unfinishedness. And things can be moved, and walls can be moved. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .and holes can be made.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's not a sacred cow.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Exactly. Exactly, really. And seeing MOCA for me was a very terrible experience, and the whole week I thought was pompous and. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, which brings us back to LACMA. I think the new wing is gorgeous, but what we're left with at LACMA is a mishmash architecturally.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh yeah. I know, but you see I've gotten used to that, after what they were doing, what they

did to the Whitney, and then what they're going to do I don't know if it's done yet-is this whole new design for the Whitney that consists of.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .I think five additional floors, and each floor will be designed architecturally totally different. So it's sort of like Byzantine on top of Babylonian on top of Art Deco a really strange collage of architecture.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, which makes me think. . . I was in Paris before the Musee D'Orsay opened, but that space must be incredible.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, really.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's, you know, the museum they opened of nineteenth- and twentieth- century art.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, my goodness.

MARGARITA NIETO: And they took over an old railroad station.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, I see.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right on the edge of the Seine, around the Quay D'Orsay.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: And it's a beautiful building, and I understand they've made use of natural light and artificial light, which of course the French are very good at doing. I think that's one of the beauties of the Orangerie des Tuileries.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Exactly.

MARGARITA NIETO: The fact that you have that marvelous combination of real light and artificial light.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I know. Yeah. That's very true.

MARGARITA NIETO: And, anyway, I'm dying to see that museum.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I know. There's a new museum also in Cologne that everyone's been talking about.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: The collection, they say, is superb. The other thing about MOCA was that for their first show, the Europeans, I hear, were very insulted. They were totally ignored. It's supposed to be American contemporary art, as far as I know, but it was so emphatic that it was just like saying that Europe has not contributed anything in the last thirty years.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, my God.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Which we know the last decade alone, they've come back, you know, and really overwhelmed the market.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But anyway, these are all the subtle problems that come about in trying to create a museum. But I don't think it's wholly successful at what they've done, and I'm sorry that, you know, it could not have been a little bit closer to an ideal museum.

MARGARITA NIETO: I'd like to get back to something else that occurred just about the time that we were doing the interviews or after we did the interviews. You were at a party at Bob Fitzpatrick's? [President of Cal Arts-CARLOS ALMARAZ.]

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: That was held in honor of Octavio Paz.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, right. Yes, of course.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you were one of two Los Angeles artists who were invited to this party to meet him.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: The other one being David Hockney. Could you talk a little bit about your reaction, your appraisal of both Paz and Hockney, Bob Fitzpatrick.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I thought it was one of the most interesting dinners I have been invited to in a long time. Because it was an important dinner. It was an important dinner because of the guests there. Specifically Octavio Paz and David Hockey. It gave me a chance to compare my own culture with the English culture and, using Paz as my, you know, superego. But I was able to talk to David and sit next to David throughout the dinner, so we were able to chat and exchange information, and I was able to ask him questions that I've always wanted to ask him. For instance, why did he choose Los Angeles as a homesite for his artmaking? And he said, "One thing is that he didn't like New York. Specific. . . I mean, he didn't like New York enough to live there. And (b), he found that [in-Ed.] Los Angeles, the lighting and the environment itself was very compatible to his own sense of light. He's not an extravagent man. He's a real hardworking individual, and he enjoyed, evidently, the color here, the environment.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did it have anything. . . Was he a friend of [Christopher-Ed.] Isherwood's?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, he was a very close friend of Isherwood's and he had met Isherwood years ago. I had spoken to Isherwood maybe fifteen years ago. We had a long conversation at an opening, and then later on the telephone for about an hour. And I liked his work very much and was fond of his philosophy. He was a very passive man in many ways. And David's. . . I said, you know, "His passing must have been a great shock to you and a disappointment." He says it one of the hardest, you know, farewells that I've ever had to make. He said, "But I had great feelings for Isherwood because of his own teaching." For instance, he told David that the best way to approach life is to seek pleasure and not pain. And to live for the good side of life and not necessarily for the bad side. Now I think this becomes very important and revealing when you're talking about the gay world, the homosexual world, where much of it is dealt with in pain, and you tend to look at the darker aspect.

MARGARITA NIETO: And duplicity and the fear of. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. Right, of not only. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Ridicule.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Ridicule and discovery and et cetera.

MARGARITA NIETO: I know.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But rather, to have that philosophy and to live it. You can see it in David's work, that his work is pleasure-oriented. That it deals with the good side of man and it deals with the pleasure of living, rather than the dramatics of the pain.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And Christopher Isherwood living with Don Bachardy all these years has been an inspiration I think to many gay people, that there is a positive way out, and a positive way of leading your life, rather than just the dramatics and the dark side of John Ritchie, say. I think that talking to David that evening, for me, was a greater understanding of being an independent artist creating art anywhere, but specifically in Los Angeles. He made it sound very positive. Everybody else I talk to says, "Why aren't you in New York? Why aren't your here, or there?" et cetera. Or "When are you going to show in New York?" et cetera. Well, there's no great hurry for that. I think that comes about on its own. I asked David, "Haven't you felt that pressure?" He says, "Yes, but I just, doesn't faze me." And I said, "What about your own subject matter in your work? Haven't you felt the pressure of the New York School." He says, "Never. I've never felt I had to worry about my images in comparison to the New York School in any. . ." You know, I'm using it in a real broad sense New York School, that he's never felt that need to cater to what was going on in the market in order for him to be, you know, to make a living. He felt and I could sense that strong enough to be totally his own person. Now, I think that this ties us into Los Angeles, because for me Los Angeles offered the artist that opportunity, of being your own person, of not being out there in the sense of Andy Warhol, at the right parties at the right time, being part of the New York decadent set. You don't need that.

MARGARITA NIETO: Having the trappings and the right apartment.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, I mean, you don't need that, you know. I lived there long enough to know that that's just one style of living. There are other styles.

MARGARITA NIETO: Speaking of that, then, you had mentioned in private conversation, rather than the interview, a feeling that you had gotten at Richard Serra's apartment when you leased it from him. You talked about apocalypse and hallucination.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, let me tell you. When I was in New York, and that was in '68, '69, when I first met Serra, it was a brief meeting, we talked, and I met his I think I mentioned this is the other interviews. But a year later I was living in the loft in the loft apartment studio that I had rented from him and I was engaged in a very intense conversation with a friend of mine over philosophy, over afterlife, over Christianity, over spirituality in general, and over reality versus illusion. Now, one evening it was a summer night. It was very hot in New York. We were probably drinking and talking. There was a couple in the place. Frank, in fact, was in the place with me, farther lost in the loft. There was little rooms [in it]. And my friend, Bill, and I started to talk about that subject. At one point I started to become extremely cold, just as if someone had opened the refrigerator door, and was beginning to get really, really chilly, and I told him, "I'm feeling really strange." He says, "Are you ill?" I don't know, but something's happening." At that point. . . At the back of Serra's studio, there used to be a shower that you had to mount through the bathroom and into the, adjacent from that, the living loft, a sleeping loft where there was a bed and a little terrace where you climbed into. Well, at the end, back of the studio there, I could see forming over the shower a large cocoon shape with hair. It was like a large furry cocoon, and it appeared absolutely crystal clear. And I was describing it as it was appearing to my friend who had had a similar experience years ago, and said, "You're having a vision. You're having a hallucination." "A vision," he called it. He says, "People have had them for centuries. It happens." And here he's telling me this as I'm describing what I'm seeing. So the image dissolves, and I start shivering, my teeth start chattering, he covers me with now here it is like 92 degrees covers me with a blanket, and then I sense coming back.

MARGARITA NIETO: Ahh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And this time it comes back very strong, very clear, and I can remember seeing it form its own shadow. It was that kind of intense illusion. Because this time the cocoon opens, and out of the inside comes this head that was the head of Christ when Mary Magdalen wiped his face.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh yes, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: There's an impression left on the towel. It was very haunting.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And the Shroud of Turin has that same haunting, almost looks like an x-ray.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well anyway, this is what appeared coming out of the cocoon.

MARGARITA NIETO: Ooh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And now the whole thing starts to move across, from the shower to the sleeping loft, back to the shower. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: God! And you're wide awake!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I'm totally awake. I can look away, and look back at it, and see it there. I could rub my eyes. It wasn't as if it was like something hazy. No. It was absolutely crystal clear. And there it goes: from the shower to the sleeping loft, back to the shower, back to the sleeping loft, moving and swaying back and forth. This time it lasted like almost three minutes. It finally slowly starts to dissolve very slowly. I could sense it getting weaker. Finally it dissolves totally. I again begin to chatter, my teeth begin to chatter. I was shivering. I calmed down, and it's never returned since. And I talked to a psychiatrist about. He's said, "Yeah, that's called a schizoid episode.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, in psychiatric terms.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, in psychiatric terms. But I thought it's interesting because in the old days it's called a vision. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: In creative terms. . . Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .a hallucination, you know, et cetera. But here it was, now it's buried under. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: The guise of trying to find normalcy. (both chuckle)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, so. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, the normal, well-adjusted individual.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But I thought, "Isn't that interesting now historically in context to the fact that Richard Serra is a conceptualist with a very strong emphasis on material as artmaking. He doesn't deal at all with illusions. There's no illusion in his art. Here I'm having a legitimate illusion, vision, in the back of his loft while, you know, he's giving birth to minimal art, I'm giving birth to these illusions (laughter) of something that is definitely very deep within my own psyche, and within my collective unconscious, within the tradition of the Mexican culture as well as the Spanish culture.

MARGARITA NIETO: Or, following Castaneda, "pushing your point of alignment."

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, right. Here is, you know, a delination occurring in the same space. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: "Separate reality." (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: In a separate reality. And I almost with I could see Richard again, to tell him what happened to me in his studio. But, you know. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: You've never had visions like that in Los Angeles.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, no. I've never had anything like that again.

MARGARITA NIETO: I was thinking of. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .when I was very ill in the hospital in '71. I had hallucinations. They were legitimate hallucinations induced by high fevers, that I went through, in which I traveled the universe. I met the designer of the universe. I was shown a place where people wait between lives. I had an experience that was very like a classical dying experience, as well as one of leaving your body and all that.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That's a separate kind of thing, I think, than what happened to me in New York. And they're both, I think, legitimate in that they're bringing the subconscious up to the surface really hard. And you have to face your own existence. But the second experience that I just mentioned now was awesome in the amount of information that came out of me that I was unaware of, and the kind of dialogue I carried with these people who were basically taxiing me around the universe until my life, which was on a pendulum, was going one way or the other.

MARGARITA NIETO: I remember! You drew me one time. . . We were in Canters Restaurant I remember this specifically.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Very late. And you drew me a sketch of how they looked.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. They were, these creatures who took me around the universe, while my body was between life and death, they claimed that they were, they existed in the same space but at different times than us, so that we were going very slow in comparison to them. And they were designed so that their vital organs were encased in sort of a shell construction, so that they could outlive their bodies. In other words, their vital, their eye, everything else existed in this casing. And they could then go living on for centuries. Now, they had designed their bodies so that it fit their apparatuses, be it a spaceship or a motor vehicle, so that when they became one with it you couldn't see them. It's as if we designed couches so that we buried ourselves in it, you could not see me. I was not separate from the couch.

MARGARITA NIETO: Hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Now their whole society was this way, from the chairs they sat on and the ships they drove to the cars they drove. They became one with the machinery which they created. And their. . . I remember seeing the machinery was this fine jewel-like constructions, beyond the refinements that we would know today. And I remember seeing it very clearly. And these creatures were aware of their function in society and they told me when they were in a certain point in their development they thought that they were the most advanced creation existing. Then they got to a certain level at which they discovered that they were just on another step of development, and that the staircase was infinite. So. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: What a wonderful concept.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Isn't it? And that directly from my dream, from these hallucinations.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh! I like that one.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And so I said, "What is the infinite mode? I mean, what happens [if, at]. . ." They said, "We still don't know."

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, wonderful.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And they were so advanced, and they still had that sense of saying, "We haven't gotten that close."

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, my God.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And they took me to the edge of this universe, and then we started to approach what seemed to be another solar system around us, encasing us, in which the stars, rather than being randomly laid out, were equidistantly laid out, and as the ship approached the edge of our space and into this, it could not penetrate. I said, "We're not moving." They go, "That's right." They go, "For us to go into that space, which was equal distant stars forming a sort of a rigid, very rigid blocks of force, we would have to go to tremendous speed, and we would dissolve, as s shooting star dissolves into the atmosphere of the earth, and we would exist for one second."

MARGARITA NIETO: Ohh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Isn't that incredible? And that's exactly what happens in the relationship of shooting stars to the atmosphere of the earth. One existence ceases while the other one is viewing it. So there was kind of information and knowledge that I personally don't even necessarily believe in. It was information that came from the body itself and the mind.

MARGARITA NIETO: How wonderful.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So all this I slowly will eventually put together in some form, because. . . Some of it has slipped away; others I've jotted down, other things. They also told me that I was going to be involved with a universal language, and there was a six-character format. Six characters to form all languages throughout the universe, to communicate with all species of man. And it's made up of only these little six characters, being a cross, an "x," a circle, a square, a dot, a vertical line, and a horizontal line. And he says, "It's so simple that if you learn to manipulate these, you can communicate with just about anything. And on and on, you know, these strange, esoteric kinds of information that I was given to. And they told me that the, this universe was designed or based on a Mozart theme.

MARGARITA NIETO: I like that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah. Remember that?

MARGARITA NIETO: I remember you telling me that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And someone was telling me that in the Middle Ages they used to refer to the universe as the celestial sphere. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .and the music of the celestial spheres.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, it's always been _____.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So there's something medieval. Which brings us back to the content of my last show. Much of it was Medieval.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm, yes. There was a strong sense of that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: The idea of the Return of the Bishop.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh, the rise of the city, and. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: He was returning to a burning tower, on a little, it would seem to be a gondola.

MARGARITA NIETO: Have you read Fernand Braudel?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No.

MARGARITA NIETO: Or have I asked you that. I should lend you The Structures of Everyday Life, he wrote.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, really?

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh! Yeah. But anyway. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Jot it down so that I can do it.

MARGARITA NIETO: We talked about Hockney. We didn't talk about Paz that much.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think. . . Paz, to me. . . I had met him before, and I have always been a great admirer of his poetry. I find that he's probably one of the most important poets of our time. So it wasn't a surprise to meet Paz, because after all the dinner was for Octavio Paz. It was a surprise to meet David, so this is why I think I talked a little more about David. But Paz, being a writer and a poet, puts him in a different, in a sense, in a different circle. I think that the two of them together gave me a chance to compare the two cultures one being the Angle-Saxon culture or Anglo culture of the English, and the other being the Mexican culture of Octavio Pas. I think that their exchanges and remarks about poetry. . . For instance, we immediately plunged into the subject of Cubism and the poets of the Cubist period, which specifically I mentioned [Guillaume-Ed.] Apollinaire as being one of the most important poets of his time because he combined both literary line and visual visual experience in poetry.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And up until then it had not been really considered. I think this led the way to much of what later became concrete poetry. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .and it was kicked off by Apollinaire, you know.

MARGARITA NIETO: Apollinaire, yeah. So I think this started the conversation in that direction. And in much of the evening we were talking about Cubism, poetry in Cubism, as well as Picasso and the artists of that time. And that sort of gave the format to the evening.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Paz is going to be doing the essay for the Corcoran show [catalogue-Ed.], right?

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, he is. We're really, I'm really delighted that. . . It gives us, again, that international appeal or sense of ourselves, rather than seeing ourselves as merely a Southwest phenomenon.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You know, it's interesting. He's recently been writing a series of articles on art. He has a book which is due out, The Privileges of Vision, on, that is to say, the privileges of having vision, of being able to see and perceive, to the eye, huh?

MARGARITA NIETO: Right. Los Privilegos de la Vista is the title in Spanish. But he's begun to reassess two areas that he had not talked about at all. One, the muralists, the Mexican muralists, and pre-Columbian art. He has an essay, a very recent essay, on Mayan art. And a very interesting essay on Orozco. And self-diaglogue: he interviews himself.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: (laughs) What a great idea.

MARGARITA NIETO: I guess. I guess when you're Octavio Paz no one can interview you, you know.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: I don't know what the situation is. At any rate, a self-interview on Mexican muralism. And I find that very interesting and extraordinary because it's something that he didn't bother with for so long. He was much more interested in individual expression.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And in the idea of studio art. And, in fact, the only muralists that he had any real contact with were the Rufino Tamayo, who of course is Rufino Tamayo. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, yes.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and was never part of the School of Mexico anyway. But now he has a [Sessionaros]

school, and he's been talking about the history of muralism in Mexico.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um, umm. [untranscribable indication of interest-Ed.]

MARGARITA NIETO: I find that interesting.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm. Well, I think it's great that he's coming back to that.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, I think so too.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I'll look forward to reading that, what he has to say. I, you know, that's why. . . I mean, that adds to the flattery of he writing the essay for the Hispanic show for the Corcoran.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It gives us that. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, I pause to wonder. . . And as you know, I've had occasion to speak with him about a great many things for a great long time.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: I pause to wonder if the fact that he has traveled in California has not influenced him into reassessing this whole area.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, I'm sure it has. I'm sure it has.

MARGARITA NIETO: The fact that it's, you know. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I'm sure meeting artists like David Hockney has made him. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And like yourself.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. And I still. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And being in a city like Los Angeles.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. Until he sees my work in the context of my studio, I still don't think he knows me.

MARGARITA NIETO: No. No, I would agree.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So I still feel that, you know, I know him, and I know his work very well, but for him meeting David, I think was important on a cultural level. Because it is like one country meeting another. In a sense I was, I'm the witness, and I'm sort of a combination of the two. So I think that was sort of my role at that dinner. I was really trying to be somewhat of a devil's advocate and trying to contrast these two men and their definite formation. They're such individualists, you know. Hockney is definitely his own person. Paz is his own person. And it was fun just to see them [chide] a little for center stage and yet be very polite, you know, [about] the whole evening.

MARGARITA NIETO: Interesting.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That was a very unique evening. I hope that one day I can see them both again, and in a more informal environment, where they could become a little bit more expressive of their own personal ideas.

MARGARITA NIETO: I was thinking as we were speaking right now about the Octavio Paz and his rejection of the School of Mexico and his return now toward a more objective assessment of muralism. In previous interviews we had talked about your own commitment to the muralist movement. It was explained why you left muralism and gave a very succinct reason why you did.
And by the way, in Europe, when I read my paper [at the Sorbonne in Paris-Ed. and showed my sixty slides of your work, people were absolutely bowled over. They had never seen Latino art of this caliber, of this type. There was a woman from Germany who was almost weeping.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I should get a hold of her.

MARGARITA NIETO: She wanted copies of the work, and of course I didn't have copies of slides anyway.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I didn't know. You'll have to give me her name.

MARGARITA NIETO: But the paper's being published in the proceedings.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I see.

MARGARITA NIETO: Jose Montoya, by the way, from the RCAF [Royal Chicano Air Force-Ed.], was present.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: He was very upset, because his group has stayed where they were in 196[8].

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Didn't we talk about this?

MARGARITA NIETO: We didn't talk about it on the tape.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, I see. Okay, go ahead.

MARGARITA NIETO: We talked about it in person.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And it's interesting, too, that at this point in time public art and muralism is all of a sudden becoming, certainly not. . . It's not a mode of expression.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: But the general public is worried about the preservation of what's there.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And those artists who have not moved forward are beginning to find themselves in a bind. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and that whole point that there are no more walls to paint. And the movement is passe as a whole.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, it is.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I think this is what Montoya expressed. His presentation did not talk about what he was doing. It talked about what he had once done, and it was based on a nostalgic presentation of what had been.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: And it was sad in that respect.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I know.

MARGARITA NIETO: There are other artists like Judy Baca, for example, who are beginning to try to return to the studio.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, really.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes. Because of the need for self-expression.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sure.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I was just wondering if you would like to. . . And then there's a case right now in Los Angeles and that brings us up to this melange of topics the idea of mural preservation. There's a very [large] mural done by Kent [Twitchell] which was whitewashed. The Old Lady.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, of course. Well, yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: And the problems therein of public art and preservation. Do you have any views on this.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think since public art was never recognized as an official movement, people were left to paint on whichever walls they could get, which would, with whatever materials they could buy or steal or get.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you went into that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And naturally, my own murals have suffered. They're gone. They've peeled off. They rolled away. They were painted over. It was a period this was the seventies, early seventies where at that time there was a lot of public, state, federal money circulating for, not specifically mural-making, but for helping the youth in our streets. I think that time will come again. It's happening now again with the whole resurgence of anti-drugs, you know. We gotta do something with those kids this summer, so we're going to go back to the murals. I think there's always been a current interest in public art in one way or another, and then it fades away. Now, for many Chicanos it was the time to be. And that time has now faded. If you didn't adapt to no state funding, no federal funding, and start going out peddling your wares, you went under. And most, many of the artists of that period do not have other jobs, lead normal lives, and they can't afford to make art. Those of us who adapted. . . In my case, I went back to my first gear, and I said, "Well, I'm going to get back into the art scene, and to the gallery scene, so I can make a living, because there's no more money in outdoor murals.

MARGARITA NIETO: What do you think about this movement, or this, all of a sudden, this horror of the fact that the murals are being destroyed. What do you think about that sentiment?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: The murals are always being destroyed. And now and then the media focuses on one mural. Now, Twitchell's mural was cut in half, then it was cut in quarters, then the only remaining part of that one poor mural was the woman's face, and then recently that got wash-washed [meant to say whitewashed-Ed.]. Then the media picked it up, and they were starting to uncover the face. Well, it's all great, except that even if they uncover the whole face, the rest of the mural's got a building on top of it. It's too late. People have to get involved with preservation of murals before they're constructed, not after they're destroyed.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And it becomes a media thing, you know, they knock it around for a while till they get bored. I suffered because of that kind of coverage. Every now and then they'd cover one of my murals being covered over, and there'd be some interest, and then they'd drop you. We've discussed the preservation of the Siqueiros mural for years, and it still sits there, you know, in a state of. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Disintegration.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Total. And now it's covered over. You can't even see the decaying paint, because it's been covered over with plywood in order to preserve it. It's ironic: In order to preserve it, they've covered it over. So we're back to. . . Not even back to step one. At step one, you could at least see the mural coming apart. Now, you can't see the mural at all.

MARGARITA NIETO: Which reminds me of John Valadez's premise early premise; I'm sure he doesn't do anymore of doing those drawings on butcher paper because they were not going to last anyway.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. He does not do that anymore.

MARGARITA NIETO: No, I can imagine. (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: All rag. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: I remember being absolutely horrified. (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Me, too. And he laughs now, and it's great to see him [and] talk to him about it, because he was younger. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: We were younger.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .and he didn't really care then. Now, he cares, and he laughs at himself for saying, "Yeah, all that stuff on butcher paper."

MARGARITA NIETO: That first $100 I put forth to have that marvelous print done by Richard Duardo, the [Chore-low]?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh yeah?

MARGARITA NIETO: And my whole reason being, "John, you've gotta do it on good paper!" (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, you know, talking about the RCAF and the nostalgia: yeah, there is a lot of nostalgia in the community for the past, but I lived some of that past, and it wasn't all that great. There were lean, lean days, when we were painting murals.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, they were.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I don't want to go back to that. I don't think the RCAF wants to go back. I don't think most Chicanos want to go back.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, I don't think they do either. It's just that it made them look wonder. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it gave us focus. People began to look at Chicanos as artmakers, as a tradition, it's. . . You know, the tradition in Mexico has passed on to us, and we were doing it on the streets. I thought that was just great.

MARGARITA NIETO: But you have to realize that in Europe it's much easier to view a Chicano as someone downtrodden that they can patronize. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: Than it is to see a Chicano as someone who is viable and upwardly mobile, and what have we.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right, right.
[Interruption in taping]

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, to go away from public art to something very private. We didn't really talk about Elsa, your wife Elsa Flores, the painter the way you work together or the way you don't work together your child your daughter Maya what changes that wrought in your work. You've been married now how many years?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think we're on five years, or we're on five going on six. We lived together for a while before we got married, so I always get it confused whether it's five or six.

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Elsa and I re-met in that same studio building that I now have my studio in. I had known her before; in fact I knew her when she was eighteen. Our ages being. . . I'm thirteen years older than she is, so I always felt that I was much older; plus, at the time that we first met, I was living with another woman. We became good friends because we were in the arts, and I knew her mostly as a musician.

MARGARITA NIETO: She played with Los Lobos, didn't she?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. I did not know that (a) she was a photographer and (b) she had studied painting. When I met her again in my building she had the studio above me that's when I discovered that she was painting and drawing. We became good friends; we started going out, having coffee, dinner, and then finally dating and then. . . Then we decided that we were going to live together. And at the beginning I couldn't share my studio with her. It was very difficult. I had never shared my studio with a person, [the-CARLOS ALMARAZ] woman I lived with. It was a whole new kind of way of doing it. So the first year or so, there was some tension in our relationship because it was my studio. Later, I gave into it and, partly because I started looking at it and meeting couples who had both been artists who had worked together. And started thinking of people like [Jackson] Pollock and [Lee] Krasner, and real couples, living couples that we had met who were both in the same field and were able to share their studio space, and that part of their lives. So we gave it a try, and it hasn't been difficult, really. Obviously, we [continually] have problems [with] space. It's not that big a space, but, you know, we work around that. We were able to construct a home environment so that developing a studio environment has worked out well for both of us.

MARGARITA NIETO: Is there any influence of your work on hers or is it the reverse?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think it goes both ways. The first thing I realized is that besides being husband and wife, we were artists first. When we start working, we sort of turn each other off, put on some music, and start working.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you work separate days, don't you?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes, we try to work separate days. Mine Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday I help with Maya, and then she comes in on Thursday and Friday. And then those days I do things like today's interview and things like that, so she has the space to herself. But again, we are able to become art students, and it works for us, because we turn off the ego. I'm not necessarily trying to teach her anything. Whatever influence rubs off, rubs off. It's not a conscious process of, you know, student-teacher.

MARGARITA NIETO: What about Maya? Does she influence your work at all?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Not yet. But we just discovered that she has some real ability. She did her first drawing of a human figure the other day, totally spontaneous. She had gone from drawing little squares and circles to

suddenly an entire figure. What she did is she put her hands on a piece of paper, and traced them.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And then she added torso, a head, hair, eyes, mouth, nose, and then she painted it all over, much of it, with red lipstick.

MARGARITA NIETO: How fantastic!

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And this was a figure that was maybe, it's a legal sheet of paper. And it's incredibly well thought out. It's a whole person. And we were wondering. . . Recently she lost her Nana [grandmother, Maria Flores-Ed.]. Nana passed away this Christmas. And it just seemed that right after that she did this figure.

MARGARITA NIETO: Strange.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And as if she replaced her Nana with a drawing of her Nana, and her Nana had died of cancer, so we had taken her to the hospital to understand that her Nana was sick. And, to me, that red lipstick smeared all over the body was very much like some strange illness. I've painted that out in my drawings. But both Elsa and I were astounded because at this age, they don't do people. They do little stick people for a long time.

MARGARITA NIETO: She's how old? Four?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She's not four. She's three and three quarters.

MARGARITA NIETO: God.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I've seen her with other children, and she has an advanced. . . People say it, says, "Where'd she learn those big words?" She learns. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Isn't it funny: I think of her as being much older.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Definitely. She and I talk about things that are much older. Her little girlfriend came over to play with her, and the little girl is a three-and-a-half-year-old girl. She acts and. . . She's a little baby in a sense. And Maya is much older. She tends to act much more in control and knows what's going on, and has to be patient with her little friend. So part of it is, I think, that Elsa and I are able to spend more time with her. Elsa and I got married in Cancun, and we were married after a long planning. . . We eloped. We just went off to Mexico, got married. The first town they wouldn't marry us we were going to get married in Oaxaca because my passport expired, and I think they thought she was trying to smuggle me out of the country. So the man said, "No, estos jovenes se quieren casar." [These young ones want to get married-CARLOS ALMARAZ].

MARGARITA NIETO: (giggles)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Real sarcastic, looking at me like I was trying to get away with something. So we came back to Los Angeles, hid our rings away and we didn't want to tell anyone. A few months later we were able to go to Cancun. We did it, took off, got to the city hall, and asked them if we could get married, and they gave us a piece of paper, and they said we'd be married in an hour. So Elsa took photos of the whole process, being a photographer. Me looking, she said, "Nervous and insecure." And we got married, and we got in the cab, and went back to the hotel, totally. . . I was totally shocked.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It was so fast and so, in a sense, unceremonious, that suddenly we were married. Well, anyway, I got used to the fact. We had a wonderful honeymoon in Cancun, and we went to Isle Mujeres, and that's where we started discovering some of the ancient roots of all that area. And we kind of made a little pact that we'd come back there a year from then and perhaps conceive our child, which we in fact did, a year later. And this is why Maya was named Maya. We were on vacation and when we came back, Elsa was pregnant.

MARGARITA NIETO: I didn't know it was the Indian Maya, or, you know, the Hindu Maya, or. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, right. I know. Well, we chose the name because it has those two.

MARGARITA NIETO: Connotations.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She was the mother of Buddha, and her name was Maya.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And the Picasso Maya.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: He spells it Mai the i with the little dots a again. [Maia-Ed.]. Or no, we took the Maya from the ancient Mayans, and we spelled Maya's name, Maya. And now, it's interesting that you bring up that point, because we are about to leave, next month, for that ancient land, to take Maya to the Mayans, so she could see where she was conceived.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's nice.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: We're going right back to Isle Mujeres with Maya.

MARGARITA NIETO: You're going next month?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yes. She's now going to be four in March, and I've. . . We've waited this long. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: She was born what day?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: March 9th. We've waited this long so that she was old enough to enjoy the trip and she wouldn't be a burden on us. And now she's going to be four, she's quite capable, and she's fearless in the water, so it's time to take her back to her homeland. And also, we want her to listen to Spanish. We want her to understand there's a whole bunch of people that speak Spanish. She has, like many children, fear of the language. Even though her grandparents speak to her only in Spanish, she won't repeat the words. Only with, if I'm with her and I'm in a teaching situation, then she will, she wants to learn to speak Spanish.

MARGARITA NIETO: And she's at the age where the language could really infiltrate her mind.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. So we're thinking this will be the first of many trips now. And this is the way I was reintroduced into my culture, by being taken to Mexico.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So we're going for about ten days.

MARGARITA NIETO: What shows are you planning this year, Carlos?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I have very little plans for this year outside of reestablishing my relationship with my gallery and my dealer. Also in thinking in terms of spending more time on each [country] painting.

MARGARITA NIETO: Slowing down a bit.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: A lot. Really. Trying to. . . I'm doing more reading now than ever before, and really beginning to stack up those books, and discover what it is about the images that I think I find intriquing. I'm thinking a lot about Europe. I'm meeting a lot of French people and trying to find out about, you know, showing work in Europe. We will probably be taking one trip to Europe this year.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm, good.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: We're also going to be traveling to Houston and Washington for the other, the Hispanic show, the. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: When does that open?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: May, in Houston. Then it goes from there to the Corcoran.

MARGARITA NIETO: I'd like to go to that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think you should. It's going to be an important opening. And then, I hope Octavio Paz will be there. I'm really looking forward to, you know, thanking him in person. Then we're hoping to go to New York to visit the [Ruth] Siegel Gallery, who likes both of our works, and just meet her. I have shown there before and I think that I have to spend more time with the dealer to find out what is the taste of the gallery? What's going on in New York City. It's been three years since I've been in New York. Look around and see what the possibilities. . . My goal is to show outside of Los Angeles and, if possible, to show out of the country.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I really want to start getting labeled as an international artist rather than a Los Angeles

artist.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: You have to kind of please both markets sometime. Because I am an Angelino; this is where I live. At the same time I think, like Richard Diebenkorn, you have to get away from the West Coast label and be looked upon as an international artist representing the American spectrum. I'm going to make a more conscious effort to do that, and I need the kind of backing and support that'll help me to promote the paintings in that way. So these will be the plans for this year.
But let me backtrack now to my wife, because I want to say that we have worked our lives out so that it is a creative environment for both of us. We share the burdens of child rearing as much as possible. We've created an atmosphere in our studio, which is not unlike our home. We have a nice home and it's pretty [informal], and it's got the environment that we feel good in. It's artistic, and it's a creative open environment. The studio has that same kind of quality. We're able to share the space, physically and emotionally, so that there's room for Elsa's ego and her success as well as my own. I don't see that I'm going to be producing at the rate I'm producing now forever. There will be a peak, and then there's a subtle slow gradation where you produce less work and maybe, hopefully, of a higher quality. I see that happening. And I see that she's going to be reaching her apogee maybe ten years from now, as she starts to rise and becomes noted as a. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: She's been very well reviewed, um hmm. She's a very strong. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Plus she's an extra. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .strong painter.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .strong painter. People walk in and often say, "This looks like the work of a man."

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She paints with a broom.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: She paints with expressivist splattering all over the place. And she builds up the surface so there's sometimes a half an inch thick of paint.

MARGARITA NIETO: And she has a wondeful technique, in that mixing of the sand and texturings.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right. And now she's working with these large triptychs and diptychs, which really give you the sense of the paint, the action of the paint. So I think if she's. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .saying that. . . So we have a, I think a tension in the area of the arts that is both positive and negative, like any other creative couple. You know, you're rubbing off each other ideas and art styles as well as trying to be loving, intimate, and close, and, in this sense, also trying to be good parents.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It is not necessarily hard if you give yourself totally to it. I've found that it has helped me as an artist and as a person to mature, and realize that at some point you start giving rather than just taking. You know, you eventually reach that point as an artist that you now want to give to your audience. You don't necessarily want to take from them. You know what I'm saying?

MARGARITA NIETO: [nods affirmative-Ed.]

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And I think it helps you to mature, to really become less fearful about artmaking. It's just part of your. . . I always go back to Cervantes because he used to write in the environment of his family, which I remember he had a balcony someone said to me he'd go on the balcony and write and there was all this noise in the kitchen, and here he wrote the most important book of all time, in his wife's or somebody's kitchen! And if he can do that. . . Paul Klee did it.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: He worked in the kitchen, his kitchen, and he. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And Paul Klee took care of his baby.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .he babysat little Felix, you know, for many years at the beginning of little Felix's life. So it

can be done. You can have a family and a relationship and create important art. You do have to keep at it.

MARGARITA NIETO: You mean you're not living the orgiastic life of the great artist?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Not any more.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think that marrying late, for me meant giving all that up, and realizing that there's something more to life. And I don't feel it as a sacrifice, because I gave it up late in life, late enough in life, to feel that I did it. Now it's nice to me, it feels good to be domestic and to get involved into the house, and to look at my studio as a place of making my living, like someone who makes sandals. That's where I make my sandals. So I think in that way it's worked out very well for us.

MARGARITA NIETO: Thank you. Now is there any topic you think that. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think we've covered it all.
MARGARITA NIETO: All right. Well, again, I want to thank you. This has been one of the most exhilarating experiences. . . And I've wanted to know about you. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it's good to put it all together in a capsulized form because it makes me understand myself.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's been wonderful to look at the transcript.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Yeah, isn't it?

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh, to see everything that came out.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It's even better there. It's so exact. Every word we say is there.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So we'll see how this turns out.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, and I really hope that within the next year I'll begin working on some of this material and can begin putting together a book on your work. I would be very interested in doing that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I wanted to say that's probably, even more than going to Europe, it's sending a full printed color catalogue. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Actually a book.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .to Europe really speaks for itself.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And that's, I've kept a good, I have compiled my photographs of all my work now for five years, so I have a pretty complete portfolio. The next step is to take that and to figure out how to print a book.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, I think it would be interesting to look at a publication, to look at a publisher, to try to find a publisher.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And do a very complete book. Doing the paper, which was entitled, as you know, "Carlos Almaraz: Genesis of a Latino Painter," based on the biographical material of this [interview-Ed.]. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and on sixty slides that were representative of your work, I realized how important it was to do that kind of critique or that kind of writing. . .

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . .and how challenging it was at the same time.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Sure. Sure, it must be, to give it form and, you know, bring it together in any. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And it was very exciting. I'm hoping to continue with interviews, and I hope that we continue catching up on your career, ___eptions.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I think after the Corcoran, that tour show. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: We should do this again?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I think it'll happen again, because that's going to change my life, and. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And I'm going to be interviewing Rufino Tamayo, probably before then.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, you are? Oh, that's great! Well, that show from the Corcoran will arrive in California two years from now. By that time it'll have collected a lot of history. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .and I think it'll be a very exciting time to, I think even to present there was talk now of presenting some Mexican artists up here, bring them up here, and having to put together an exhibit, comparison, between the Latino artists here and the Mexican artists.

MARGARITA NIETO: Now you're beginning to shake my mind a little bit. I was talking to Francisco Toledo in Paris.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Oh, were you?

MARGARITA NIETO: And I talked to him about your work, and he knew your work.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Did he?

MARGARITA NIETO: And of course that's even more amazing because Francisco Toledo doesn't talk to anyone. (laughs) I don't know if you know that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: But you know how [does] he know my work? Probably through Robert Gil de Montes. Because they know each other.

MARGARITA NIETO: No, they don't.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Really?

MARGARITA NIETO: No.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I do want to tell you. I have many more catalogues, and I would like them, whenever you need some. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes. Yes, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Please, let me give you some. You can mail them out.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Because they don't do me any good tucked away in drawers. They were printed in nineteen-eighty. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Four.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: . . .four.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, I do need some.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It's now 1987.

MARGARITA NIETO: I do need some.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So, okay, next time I see you. Also I wanted to give you a calendar, and I didn't bring a new one. The artists' calendar that I spoke of?

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh, yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: So you'll have that. And, you know, whatever. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: What about the artists's calendar? Tell us a little bit about it.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, it's I think more than fourteen L.A. artists represented in a calendar put out by the California Arts Foundation. I think that's the title. It's. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Lynn Kienholz [F]oundation.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Lynn Kienholz's. And, she was kind enough to arrange a dinner at Sophie's Restaurant here in Los Angeles, at which most of the artists came. With the exception of I think Don Bachardy and David Hockney, everybody else was there. And it was one of the first times, maybe the second time that I have been with a lot, with the main group of L.A. artists, the other time being the LACMA opening.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: It felt good. It felt like Paris in the twenties. It seems as if, you know, it's still obscure enough so that we're left alone. It's not a media. . . There was not one camera there that evening.

MARGARITA NIETO: How wonderful.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And yet we had a sense of community, in that we've all had the same kind of history, you know, in making art in Los Angeles. So that's happening more and more. It's important, I think, for Hispanics to know of that. You can get involved in Mainstream, but you've gotta be willing to do it.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And it's demanding and you've gotta sometimes play a role, but you've gotta do it in order to break out of the old barrio mentality.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Pattsi Valdez was there, looking very dashing. Frank Romero was there. I was there. My wife, Elsa Flores, was there. And we were there among our peers. So it felt good.

MARGARITA NIETO: I can imagine. Yes, in that sense we have grown up as a city, I think a great deal.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: And there's still a lot more growing to do.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes. Well, again, thank you very much.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Great, thank you.

[End of interview]

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