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Oral history interview with César Martínez, 1997 Aug. 21-28

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Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Interview

CM: CéSAR AUGUSTO MARTÍNEZ
JQ: JACINTO QUIRARTE

JQ: This is for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with César Martínez on 21 August at his studio at ArtPace on North Main in downtown San Antonio. The interviewer is Jacinto Quirarte. Well, César, this is really a wonderful opportunity to get down on tape many of the things that we've talked about over the many, many years that we've known each other. I remember you were sitting in with Felipe Reyes when I interviewed him and many others at Trinity University. I think you were there, back in 1970, '71?

CM: Yeah, I was. [Interruption in taping]

JQ: You said that it was probably 1971 when that interview took place?

CM: I'm pretty sure, yeah, because I remember that you were doing a lot of work on your book, Mexican American Artists, and I remember sitting in. I didn't say much, because I didn't know much at the time. [laughs]

JQ: Now, the thing that I think will be very, very important for anyone who wants to consult these tapes is to learn as much about your background as possible, and all the things that were determinants in how you became to be the kind of painter that you are, the artist that you are.

CM: Okay.

JQ: So tell me a little bit about where you were born and when, and about your growing up.

CM: Well, I grew up in Laredo, Texas, which is where I was born. I was born on June 4, 1944, and I spent all of my childhood there, and so, as you know, Laredo is on the border with Mexico, and so I had a lot of visits from my family in Mexico, and Spanish was my first language. I also spent a lot of time at the family ranch in northern Mexico in my formative years, and so all of that influenced me a lot, and I would say that in recent times a lot of the imagery is coming from those early childhood experiences, getting more biographical.

JQ: Now did you have anyone in your family who inspired you to become an artist? Or how did you begin to make images?

CM: I'm not sure. The only person that I can identify in my family as having some kind of artistic talent as far as visual arts are concerned [is-Ed.] my cousin Armando from Mexico, from northern Mexico-he's the Mexican side of the family. Nationality-wise we're all Mexican. [chuckles]

JQ: Right. On both sides of the border, yeah.

CM: Yeah, I remember that he used to do a lot of very nice drawings. But I remember also that a family friend also-he was an artist, actually-and so I would rifle through their drawers and stuff, and then look at drawings they had there and stuff, whenever we visited in Monterey. And so I think that all those little things stirred something in me. There was something about drawing and painting that was very interesting to me. And my family always. . . . Being an only child, I think I was indulged, and if I showed any interest in anything, my mother and my aunt would buy me colors and stuff like that, so I think that that's pretty much how it developed in the early years.

JQ: What about images in your house when you were growing up? What are the first pictures you remember?

CM: Yeah, no, I don't really remember too many . . . or anything. I'm pretty sure there were. Probably commercial prints that came with a frame, something like that. I do remember a little bit about the old calendars and stuff like that, and I think those have been _____ _____.

JQ: What about religious images? Did your family include home altars or anything like that?

CM: Yeah, there was a. . . . My grandmother. . . . I mean, I was raised. . . . My father died when I was less than a year old, and so I never even knew him. And so I was raised in a house full of women, and my uncle also lived there, but then he got married and left, so for the most part I was raised in a household of women: my two aunts, my mother, and my grandmother. And my grandmother had a little altar, and it was there very noticeable. I don't think I ever really showed any . . . took any real interest in it, other than that I took it for granted. It was always there. My grandmother was very religious. And I never really took to religion, but I did have to put up, of course, with all of the rituals and comuniones and all of those things. [chuckles]

JQ: Oh, yeah, of course. One of the things I remember going to my grandmother's house, since she had come to this country in 1910 and I never once heard her speak English, but she had a photograph of Porfiro Diaz. I had no idea that that's who that was. It was an old man with the mustaches, and she had a print of El Santo Nino de atocha (Holy Child of Atocha).

CM: Yeah.

JQ: And that made a real impression on me. I didn't know what that was, and. . . .

CM: Those were the visuals.

JQ: Yeah

CM: Well, you know, speaking of pictures, I remember that. . . . I always. . . . One of my aunts-my aunt Lidia-was a very avid picture-taker-you know, just snapshots-and she had this old box camera-you know, Brownies and stuff like that . . .

JQ: Oh, sure.

CM: . . . and very early on she bought me one, and so I would take a lot of pictures, and I also took a lot of interest in the family album that was always there, just bulging with family photographs, and there's some very old stuff in there, and I was always fascinated by that. I still am, and I intend to go back to that one of these days and maybe do something with it, with those images. But so anyway, all of the richness of the images always caught my eye, because I guess I had an eye for it to start with. But like I said earlier, I'm the only one in the family who ever developed it, and the only one other known person who actually. . . .

JQ: Oh, really? I'm going to pause. [Interruption in taping]

JQ: This is after the pause, just to check the level of the recording. We continue now with the interview with Cesar Martinez. I had asked you about the images that you saw as a child. What interests me is what kind of images you saw when you first started to school. Were you in school in Laredo or Nuevo Laredo?

CM: Yeah, Nuevo Laredo. Yeah, I went to American schools. I don't really remember.

JQ: They didn't have any kindergarten finger painting?

CM: Well. . . . No, no, not that organized. It was mostly the. . . .

JQ: That's from the thirties, when I was growing up. We did the finger painting.

CM: [chuckles] The [well]. . . . No, I don't recall of ever having any activities involving the visual arts. I'm pretty sure we did, but apparently they were not important enough, because I don't remember those.

JQ: I see.

CM: I think it was not until like the fifth, sixth grade that I remember some things. I remember that. . . . Well, apparently I had shown some kind of talent in school, because I was one of those kids who was always getting pulled out of class to work on a set for a play or stuff like that, so I guess we did something and somebody saw it, because it was identified in me. But personally I don't think it made that much of an impression, because I can't remember the specific images. [laughter] I remember that I liked wildlife, and I remember one time I did some drawings for some drawing contest, and I did some animals-copied them actually. It was a copy of another drawing. [laughs] I don't think I really had any idea, but I think that the mechanics of it fascinated me: being able to draw. At that time I think that was pretty much my interest: being able to draw something, make it look like art.

JQ: Oh, sure. Now, did Laredo have an art museum when you were growing up?

CM: No, it did not, and it still doesn't really have one.

JQ: No?

CM: No, I don't think it has one.

JQ: So did the art teachers in high school show you any. . . . I guess they showed you reproductions.

CM: Yeah, well, books. I think that the first actual art class that I took was when I was in junior high school. It must have been the ninth grade. Yeah, I'm pretty sure it was the ninth grade. And it was Mrs. Quiroz, and she

was very good.

JQ: How do you spell her name?

CM: Quiroz? Q-u-i-r-o-z.

JQ: O?

CM: o-z.

JQ: o-z. Oh, Quiroz.

CM: Quiroz.

JQ: Okay.

CM: And she was pretty good-a pretty good teacher-and she was very talented herself. She was always working on something. And I remember the big achievement of the year for us that-again-I got pulled out of class to work on a parade float for the annual parade in Laredo, very big thing over there, and as it turns out we won, I think in all categories, first place. Well, no, I don't want to overstate this. But I think it was something like that.

JQ: Oh, really?

CM: First place for something or other, but maybe for something else also. And so it was a pretty good original float. I remember we had a bullfighter on it. One of my friends was dressed as a bullfighter. And I think that that's where that . . . another thing that piqued my interest in those years. [laughing]

JQ: So the nearest big town was San Antonio . . .

CM: San Antonio, yeah

JQ: . . . because Laredo is . . .

CM: Yeah, it's pretty much a small town.

JQ: . . . surrounded by even smaller communities.

CM: Oh, yeah, definitely. So anyway, I think it was junior high when, well, like I said, I did take my first actual art class, and then I did very well, and then I enjoyed it. But that was the last. Through high school, I didn't take any art classes because I got very realistic, and I was thinking, well, you can't make a living as an artist, and I took business courses.

JQ: Oh, really?

CM: These were electives, you know, things that you could . . . you had a choice.

JQ: Sure.

CM: And I did not take any art classes when I was in high school, and, let's see, it wasn't until my third year in college; I spent two years in Laredo Junior College, going to business administration [classes-Ed.], which I hated.

JQ: Oh, my goodness.

CM: But I was very naïve. I thought, "You study this and then you're qualified."

JQ: Sure,

CM: I thought that everything comes automatically, like you don't even have to look for a job. [laughs]

JQ: When you get your diploma, yeah.

CM: You get a diploma and that's it-you start working, automatically. I was very naïve. And from Laredo Junior College I went to Texas A & I University in Kingsville. It is now Texas A & M, but it used to be Texas College of Arts and Industries.

JQ: Right.

CM: Texas A & I. And I think that the first semester went so badly in business administration that that's when I

decided that it's not going to work. I just had no interest-zero interest and terrible grades-and so anyway I went into what they called the all-level art program there, and that was the only way that you would take a lot of art courses. And also I wasn't a very good student, had no interest in school really, and in those days it was affordable and my family was paying for it.

JQ: So this was, what, the early sixties?

CM: Yeah. I arrived at A & I in 1964-September of 1964. And so anyway I wasn't really college material, but I went. It was being paid for. [laughter] It was affordable then. And so I went into the all-level art program, because that was the easiest also, but it was a teaching program. I mean, it was like you were going to be an art teacher. But that was the only program where you take the most art courses, so it was perfect for me, and I avoided all those other harder courses for a B.A. program, and. . . . It was a B.S., [whatever], B.S. in Art Education. Bachelor of Science, not a bullshit. [laughs] And so anyway as soon as I went into the art program then I started doing all right. My college career stabilized and I got a degree, in that all-level art. . . .

JQ: What kind of teachers did you have? Were there any that inspired you, or you were just getting through the program? Is there anyone in particular?

CM: It was a very interesting time, and the teachers there are. . . . They are now like family. We're very good friends and, to tell you the truth, at the time I didn't appreciate them as much as I do now. But these were times when things were changing politically, and I was very naïve politically-in every way, really. And so at A & I there were two people who became very important to the Chicano movement in Texas, and that was José Angel Gutierrez and Carlos Guerra.

JQ: Oh, of course.

CM: And José Angel was already on his way out when I got there-he's older than me-but Carlos was a year younger than me-or in school, anyway.

JQ: So that was José Angel Gutierrez and. . . .

CM: And Carlos Guerra . . .

JQ: Carlos Guerra.

CM: . . . who is now a columnist here in San Antonio.

JQ: What is he here?

CM: A columnist. He's writing a column for the paper.

JQ: Oh, that. Oh, it's that Carlos. Oh, okay.

CM: Yeah, that Carlos. And so anyway those two people were very important. Well, actually Carlos Guerra was, because we became very good friends, and we're . . . the closest I had to a brother. He says the same thing about me. But, anyway, it was basically through Carlos that I became very conscious of the political things that were happening. And the art professors were very liberal-all of them, even Mr. Bailey who was a very old man, an old military man, and he was the head of the art department.

JQ: Bakey?

CM: Mr. Bailey. Ben B. Bailey. He was an institution there in the art department. But he was a very nice person, and so, anyway, like I said, all of them were really very liberal people. And I think that they sensed that something was going on and they kind of left us alone. And they were also producing artists, and each of them had a studio there, and so I was very interested in what they were doing professionally. In the classes, well, I took an _____. I was interested, of course, and I did very well in art classes but what fascinated me more was the idea of being an artist. And it wasn't like you get a degree and then you teach art. I wasn't interested in that. My thinking was, "How are you just an artist?" you know. But there was no road map for that at that time. There is none yet, but I think you just have to go with it. [If] that's what you want, you have to figure out a way. But anyway, this was college and I was naïve. But, like I said, the political events, you know, of the time, they were very conscious of that and very supportive also, and so they kind of left us alone because they knew that there was a cultural thing going on where their own teaching might not even be adequate. They taught all the mechanical. As far as subjects and all of that, they pretty much left that to us. And so I was able to explore a lot of things, and as far as art history's concerned, these were the years when. . . . I guess it was the tail end of the Abstract Expressionist movement, and where abstract art is concerned, we had color-field painting. And Jules Olitski and Mark Rothko and Kenneth Noland. All of those. Those were the big artists-the major artists in that sort of thing-and that's basically what I liked. Pop Art was coming onto its own, and that interested me a little bit,

although not as much as just the pure act of painting. So basically I was starting to become an abstract painter. [laughs] And I was very. . . . Considering that A & I was not really an art school or famous for that. It was just basically a teaching college.

JQ: How many faculty did they have?

CM: I think that there were about five or six in the art department.

JQ: That's pretty good.

CM: So, anyway, my intention when I finished college was that I wanted to go to New York and be a New York artist. That was what I read in the art magazines, and I was buying all of it. [laughs]

JQ: Of course, of course.

CM: [I] didn't know better, you know, and I figured that the only way to be a real artist-you go to New York. And that never happened. Eventually, I got drafted. These were the Vietnam years, and eventually. . . .

JQ: What year were you drafted?

CM: I got drafted the year after I graduated from college. I graduated in 1968 with a degree-Bachelor of Science in all-level art education-and the following year. . . . And I had been fighting the draft all this time trying not to be. . . . You know, dodging, dodging. But they got me eventually in August of 1969. And fortunately, instead of Vietnam I wound up in Korea, and I was in the army for only eighteen months because Korea was considered a hardship tour, even though it was not like that in fact, but it was considered that because there is a demilitarized zone and hostilities every now and then.

JQ: Oh, sure.

CM: There used to be anyway in those times. So, anyway, the deal was that, if after serving your tour of duty in Korea you had five months or less left in your two year commitment (because I was a draftee), they would send you home. So to qualify for that I extended my time in Korea. I think I spent like fourteen months over there to qualify for that, and so I came home directly from Korea.

JQ: So you came to San Antonio or. . . .

CM: I came to San Antonio because my friends from college, Carlos Guerra and Beto Peñ a and some other people who were very close to me, were here and they were already becoming activists in the Chicano movement. They already had something going, in fact, and so I just fell in with them. And the rest is pretty much. . . .

JQ: Now when did you meet some of these Chicano artists? Or when did you begin to hear about Chicano art?

CM: I think that almost immediately I was introduced to some artists who were already organized here. I remember meeting Chista and Rudy Diamond-Rudy García, "El Diamond"-and. . . .

JQ: Was Rudy García "El Diamond?"

CM: Rudy García, "El Diamond."

JQ: [laughing] Why did they call him that?

CM: I don't know why. I have no idea. [laughter]

JQ: Chista was of course Cantú, wasn't he?

CM: Yeah Chista Cantú, Jesús María Cantú. And somewhere along there then I met Felipe Reyes and Mel Casas and Jesús Esquivel and Jesse Almazan and all of those, and they already had a group going. I don't remember exactly what the name was because it went through several incarnations.

JQ: I remember they said there was Tlacuilo.

CM: Yeah, the Tlacuilo group, and there was also Pintores de la Nueva Raza. It may have been something else at some other point and then it became Con Safos, which was the most visible of the groups.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: And it was basically the same people, you know.

JQ: Now did you belong to Con Safos, or you were just on the periphery?

CM: Not initially, but I was drawn in eventually. Basically, the recruiter there, the soldier there, the gung-ho guy was Felipe Reyes. Even though Mel Casas was pretty much identified as the figurehead there, it was actually Felipe who was doing most of the work itself. And it was through Felipe that I got in and I stuck to Consafo for a couple of years. I don't remember how long; it must have been a couple of years.

JQ: Well, when did that. . . . Well, better still, what prompted you and Carmen Lomas Garza and others to form that Los [Quemados]?

CM: The thing about it is that basically. . . . What I think happens here in San Antonio is that the artists here were very much into San Antonio. And their ways were their ways. They were very identified as San Antonio, and I think that there was basically kind of like a distrust there. Not a distrust, but it's like "it's us and everybody else who's not from here is them." And even though we were very good friends and we remained very good friends, I kind of felt like an outsider.

JQ: Being from outside of San Antonio?

CM: Yeah, and something that may have had something to do with it was also that I had a real political connection in that I was working with the Texas Institute for Educational Development. Carlos Guerra was the head of that, and we had a whole political thing going. And these other guys were like, even though they were perfectly in tune with the events of the time-the Chicano movement and everything-they were basically in it as artists, and I was coming on differently here. It was like I'm actually doing stuff here in the communities surrounding San Antonio-not in San Antonio _____.

JQ: So you were doing photography at that time?

CM: And also photography, yes, and I was very involved with that. But basically what we did at the Texas Institute for Educational Development is that we would work with local activists in small towns in South Texas like Cotulla and Robstown especially. We would have meetings and stuff and then discuss all kinds of things and strategies for organizing and then things like that. And since I was an artist we figured a cultural thing to it, which was my part, and I would give a little talk and show slides of what artists were doing and with what little materials I had. And so, anyway, that's what we were doing.

JQ: Where did you get the funding for that?

CM: Eventually, I got funding from the. . . . God, I forget the. . . .

JQ: Was it a foundation?

CM: Irwin. . . . I remember now. It was the Irwin Sweeney Miller Foundation.

JQ: Irwin?

CM: Sweeney . . ..

JQ: Oh, Sweeney.

CM: . . . Miller Foundation. And they gave me a grant. I applied for one and I got a grant through the fund-raising effort basically of Carlos Guerra, who was a very effective fund-raiser. And I got grants to travel throughout the Southwest and photograph the work of Chicanos who were into the movement thing. And not being much of an academic, I did my best and I think I did all right, but a lot of. . . . I never pretended that it was all-inclusive, but I did my best. And then I think I came up with a pretty good collection of slides that we eventually sold to libraries.

JQ: Yeah, I saw them. Because a lot of those murals disappeared right after that.

CM: Yeah. Oh, yeah, a lot of the stuff disappeared, and I think that all things considered it may have been the first effort to gather information and put it out.

JQ: What year was that?

CM: That must have been like '73, '74, something like that.

JQ: Because I remember going out to San Diego and Los Angeles and talking to a young man named Bright, who was a photographer, and he was photographing the murals in L.A. And I think he had photographed a few things in San Diego.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: But there wasn't anyone who was doing, say, New Mexico, California. And you did most of that.

CM: Yeah, because I met most of the. . . . Basically what I covered was Texas, New Mexico, and California. That was it. I skipped Arizona completely, didn't have any contact there.

JQ: Well, there wasn't much there, I don't think-at the beginning anyway.

CM: And probably the only other place that had something going was Colorado, but that I missed completely. I never even visited Colorado. But, anyway, I did put together a very fine collection that probably became seminal for Chicano art studies. [laughs]

JQ: What happened to that collection?

CM: I don't know. It got lost. I'm pretty sure that I passed it over to Pedro Rodriguez, because Pedro was. . . . We were involved in a project that was sort of like using Texas Institute for Educational Development-TIED from now on. . . . We knew it as TIED. Probably easier to say TIED. TIED was the umbrella group, but we started the Instituto Chicano de Artes y Artesanías, and behind that were myself and Pedro Rodriguez and Amado Peñ a.

JQ: Give me that again.

CM: Instituto Chicano de Artes y Artesanías.

JQ: And Pedro was involved in that?

CM: Pedro, Amado Pena, and myself. We incorporated, and we were using TIED as an umbrella group.

JQ: So that's the Chicano Institute for Arts and Crafts.

CM: Yeah, basically that's what we were saying, and then we were going to explore all those things and then we were going to create an institute. That was our idea. [laughs]. Probably the Guadalupe is what we had in mind. [laughs]

JQ: Well, then Pedro _____ has those things in his private collection or maybe part of the _____ _____.

CM: Well anyway, my contention is that, somewhere along the line after the project was long done and dead and buried, Pedro borrowed the slides from me. I had them in very nice metal cases and everything arranged. My recollection is that Pedro borrowed them and he never returned them. Then he asked me about them and I said, "Well, you have them." And he said, "No, I don't have them." And that's where we are. [laughs]

JQ: Oh, my goodness!

CM: [laughing] So it's gone and the magical collection is gone. [laughter]

JQ: Oh, that's the story of. . . .

CM: I know I don't have it and I've looked for it very hard, and I know I don't have it.

JQ: That's the story of so much of that [era], in the seventies. Because he went on to Washington, didn't he?

CM: He moved around. He was at A & I when I got out of the army. I had met Pedro a couple of years earlier, when he was teaching at . . . when he was going to college. _____ _____.

JQ: He's a little older than you isn't he?

CM: Huh?

JQ: He's older than you?

CM: Yeah.

JQ: Much older, I would say.

CM: Probably about ten years older than I am.

JQ: Is he from South Texas also?

CM: He's from San Antonio.

JQ: Oh, he's from here?

CM: Yeah, he's from here right now. But he's been all over, teaching _____ _____.

JQ: Because I first met him when I was teaching at Austin, and we had a huge national conference on Mexican-American . . . something or other, and they had asked me to do something on Chicano, because there was this guy named Felipe Reyes coming up from Texas A & I, I think. And that's when I first met him, I think, it was '70 or '71, and. . . .

CM: No. Felipe Reyes? No Felipe wasn't at A & I.

JQ: No? And of all people, this guy who used to have Marío's, he had either just gotten out of jail for having marijuana or pot.

CM: Yeah, Marío' Cantú. Yeah, he had been in prison for some drug-related offense. But he became a major activist here in San Antonio.

JQ: Yeah, because he invited me to come down after that, and I came to see him at Marío's for some kind of project.

CM: Yeah. Yeah, he had all kinds of stuff going.

JQ: And so I knew that Pedro was also very much involved. He said he was teaching a class on Chicano art . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . in Kingsville.

CM: Yeah, and that's where I ran into Pedro after getting out of the army, and later on Pedro moved around. Next thing we knew he was in Las Vegas, New Mexico . . .

JQ: That's right.

CM: . . . then Pullman, Washington, and who knows where else.

JQ: And then finally came here for the Guadalupe.

CM: Finally came back here for the job at the Guadalupe. He was all over.

JQ: So, coming back to your painting, when you were involved with the Texas Institute for Educational Development and then later the Instituto Chicano de Artes y Artesanías, you were still doing your work. You were doing prints and paintings.

CM: Yeah, the only work that I managed to do was some. . . . Well, I was painting, but basically. . . . When I got to San Antonio. . . . Actually, I started painting immediately after I got to San Antonio. But I was doing like hard-edge things, abstract stuff-again, exploring my interests in college, which were color-field painting basically.

JQ: So you were interested in. . . .

CM: And I was doing some pretty good work, I think, and I exhibited those things . . .

JQ: I've never seen those.

CM: . . . in those early shows, but basically I was getting a lot of carrilla from. . . .

JQ: We'll have to spell that one because. . . . Carrilla.

CM: Carilla. They were on my case, so to speak.

JQ: C-a-r-r-l-a.

CM: L-l. It's got an l-l somewhere.

JQ: So it's carrilla.

CM: Yeah. It's a term that means they were harassing me about it.

JQ: Harassing you. Giving you a bad time.

CM: Yeah, that it was very bourgeois, and all that rap.

JQ: Because you weren't doing politically charged things?

CM: No, I was not doing any of that. But anyway, basically I was ignoring it, and so the insight that I got from that is that figurative work is harder to do than abstract work. [laughs] It's not necessarily like that at the top levels. But at the level I was it was easier to do abstract stuff than actually have to draw. [laughs]

JQ: Sure.

CM: I didn't have the technique or anything. So I was struggling. But I came up with some pretty good works that got into the early shows. And basically what happened is that when I went to California with the project that I did-the slide project-I met a lot of artists, but of the artists that I met probably the ones who had the biggest impact on me were José Montoya and. . . . I forgot his name. His name is Hernandez. He was in Oakland at the time. What is his name? Very important to me and I don't remember his name. His last name was Hernandez. It'll come. . . .

JQ: I have that somewhere.

CM: Well, anyway, and El Queso -Salvador Torres-El Queso-in San Diego. I thought those were. . . . They were doing some very original stuff, and they influenced me where subject matter is concerned. And where style is concerned, I would say that Hernandez was doing some wonderful woodcuts, and I had always liked the medium. And so it was pretty much. . . .

JQ: Was he at Arts and Crafts with Montoya ? Or you met them in Oakland?

CM: I met him. . . . He was living in Oakland at the time, if I'm not mistaken. And so was José's brother Malaquias . Malaquias was also very important to me there. And Rupert Garcia, for that matter. They were all [voiceover]

JQ: Rupert does a lot of very hard-edge things-even now.

CM: Yeah. At that time he was doing posters and he was very helpful to me, so these people have become very, very good friends. And so, anyway, it was basically Hernandez who influenced me on those woodcuts. I came back after that trip wanting to do woodcuts, and I did some. And those were the first works that were showed in the Chicano context.

JQ: Because they included some of those in the Ancient Roots and New Visions.

CM: Yeah, that gave them a lot of visibility, and then one of those got reproduced everywhere, just about. My first . . . one of my "greatest hits." [laughter]

JQ: One of your big hits!

CM: And so anyway. . . .

JQ: Oh, wait a minute. Oh, it's all right. I'm sorry, I thought we were done, but go ahead.

CM: Still tape in there?

JQ: Yeah.

CM: Okay, I'm kind of lost. Where were we?

JQ: Well, you mentioned the people who had an impact on you in California when you were doing the Texas Institute for Educational Development. And Rupert. . . .

CM: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I remember what the question was now. You were asking me was I painting. Yeah, and I was doing all this stuff. We went into that little tangent there. But basically, you know, I was starting to move into figurative work because I felt that. . . . The idea that all of this was generating in me needed to be expressed figuratively, and I did not have the technique that I needed for that. So I just decided it's either that or. . . . I mean, that's it.

JQ: Just go ahead.

CM: And so it took a good few years for me to get my bearings and that eventually led to the Pachuco series in the late seventies. Right before that I had done the very hard-edge Serape series, which was sort of a

transitional period there.

JQ: What series was that?

CM: The Serape series.

JQ: Oh, the Serape, yeah.

CM: And that was kind of like transitional, and from then I went into the Pachuco series, and that eventually got a lot of play in exhibitions, and curators were really gravitating toward that series. Since then I have added other things, but you know the. . . .

JQ: Now you have told me on other occasions that you began to then recall some of the people you knew when you were growing up, and in some cases you used photographs and in other cases you _____ _____.

CM: Yeah. Well, let me tell you how all of that gelled. Because influences are very important, and I remember. . . . You know, I mentioned El Queso earlier, and when I visited with El Queso in California, he had some sketchbooks, and I went through them and I saw some of the most stunning images of Chicano that I had ever seen. An artist had actually done this, a subject that I'd never even. . . . I mean, who would think of painting some pachuco? And Queso was doing that. Not in a stylized way, but like José Montoya. Even though José Montoyas were also wonderful I felt, "Queso's got a different thing." They were like just regular excellent drawings in charcoal and pencil and stuff, but of real people, pachucos.

JQ: Not caricatures.

CM: Not necessarily just pachucos, but people in general, of [kids] around in the barrio and everything, and I thought that this was the most. . . . I mean, I felt like a tiny little being when I saw that-work like that. And I said, "I want to do stuff like that. Stuff that moves me." Stuff that would move people like that moved me. So I think that all of that was in my mind. Being into photography at the time, I was looking a lot of the work of Richard Avedon-all of those very frontal, very poker-faced portraits that he was doing.

JQ: Right.

CM: And then Fritz Scholder, the Indian artist, was doing a lot of very frontal stuff with Indian imagery, and so all of these were working on my mind, and I was forming an idea there of what I wanted to do with these portraits. And I think it was also kind of like I was sort of tipping my hat to color field painting with those, what eventually developed in those stark backgrounds in my work.

JQ: Oh, yeah.

CM: So I think I owe that to Avedon and to some extent, Fritz Scholder.

JQ: What's the name of the Indian artist?

CM: Fritz Scholder.

JQ: Chris?

CM: Fritz. F, like the German Fritz.

JQ: Oh, Fritz.

CM: Fritz Scholder, S-c-h-o-l-d-e-r.

JQ: Yeah. I guess my problem is I'm beginning to be hard of hearing. [laughs]

CM: Yo tambien. [laughter] No, I'm also . . . have to go, "Eh? What, what?" So, anyway, the thing. . . . But that's not all of it, of course. I mean, Picasso, about the turn of the century did a lot of very wonderful portraits of the [ambiento] that he was in, and Toulouse-Lautrec had done a lot of stuff with people and the times. And Degas and Gauguin and van Gogh, all of those artists, *tambien* [also], and many others throughout history.

JQ: Sure.

CM: So, anyway, it was through all of those influences, and many others that I can't even think, because there's so many influences that it's just impossible to trace everything.

JQ: But the Mexicans didn't affect you at all?

CM: Ideologically. Ideologically.

JQ: But not in terms of images?

CM: I never was that drawn to that. I felt that. . . .

JQ: Because you were never interested in the murals the way those guys out in California were.

CM: No, I never was interested in it in that way.

JQ: [In fact, It's like] none of the artists here were. Not really.

CM: Yeah. No. I think that the artists here generally, we all work individually, whereas in California it's a very collective thing, and I think that's one distinguishing thing from the Texas tribe and the California tribe.

JQ: That's right.

CM: But, anyway, all of these things that I mentioned were going around through my head, and I think that is basically how the Pachuco series eventually emerged. It is not really a style in which they are done. I've always said that I found the format for these characters that I wanted to put across, and that is how the idea formed. Sources? Well, one of my very first sources was the high school yearbook.

JQ: Oh, is that right?

CM: Yeah. [laughs] Eventually I put together a. . . . I would clip from magazines, pictures that struck my eye that had something to them. And I collected, in fact, that one right there. I have it right here as a reference. My sourcebook. And so that's where I get my images. But a lot of them are basically also from recollection. Probably the most effective images that I have come up with have been from recollections that I have reconstructed not exactly as I saw them, because it wouldn't work, but I would kind of like merge characters, make composites. Sort of like a writer comes up with a character that is based on real people,only this was a visual thing. And that is how it developed. Very few of the work from that series is actually real likenesses of real people, but it's the essence of real people. And I was also very consciously working with physiological types that you would recognize-that you could say, "Yeah, I know that guy!" I think we all fall into types.

JQ: The barrio type.

CM: Yeah. Well, not. . . . Well, yeah, specifically the barrio, but physiologically there are certain people that look a certain way, and certain people that look. . . . You know, some look very Moorish, some very European, some very Indian. I was working with all of those physiological types there, and trying to come up with characters that were very specific but at the same time also very universal to the Chicano experience. And I think I pretty much succeeded at that. That's basically what that series is all about.

JQ: So whenever you started a particular direction you never really abandoned other [concepts].

CM: No, I have never abandoned anything.

JQ: Because when did you start the South Texas series or whatever you call it?

CM: The South Texas series had been sort of like there in my mind for, ooh, way. . . . Forever, I would say. [laughs] But like I said earlier about the Pachuco series, I needed to find a format for that, or a way of. . . . And in this case it wasn't. . . . . In the South Texas series it wasn't exactly a format, but more of a way of painting, and I think that I went into a type of painting that was expressionistic. I mean, all of these things I do are very objective. You hear a lot of mystification about artists suffering, and, well, no, my mind was working and I was coming up with this stuff, and "How do I do it effectively?" I actually tried doing some landscapes-some early South Texas series landscapes, what I call the Rio Grande series-which were very simple-just land and the river going through it and sky. Basically what we have in the Pachuco series-you know, a horizon line and stuff like that-but it didn't work. It wasn't effective. I did some very nice stuff, but I felt, "That's not it." And I also. . . . Here's where I started. . . .

JQ: It didn't have enough possibilities?

CM: Yeah. Here's where I became conscious of the fact that what worked for a particular subject doesn't work for something else. And here's where I started forming ideas about style and all, and I came to the conclusion that style can be a very. . . . Not necessarily true in all artists, but in my case it would have been something superficial. I was just trying to do something in the style of the Batos, the Pachuco series. But it didn't work for that series, so I said, "I need something else." And eventually it became a mixed media thing, and also very expressionistic where. . . . Session 1 (Tape 1, Side B)

CM: . . . the painting end of it was concerned. And so eventually I found my format for the South Texas series. But it had been in my mind forever.

JQ: So even though you have all of these found things like wood and metal, wire and so forth. [Interruption in taping]

JQ: Repeating the question that I asked at the end of Side A related to the South Texas series that was, in turn, related to the Rio Grande series that really didn't have enough possibilities for you even though you thought it might work stylistically . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . because it has been fine for the Pachuco series, and then you began to use mixed media.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: But my question was that even though you use wood, metal, wire, and other found materials, you treat them as you would paint.

CM: Yeah, basically these are wall pieces.

JQ: It's a two-dimensional. . . .

CM: They're sort of like painting and they actually have some painting in them most of the time-or imagery, either incised or whatever. Also a little bit of a sculptural element entered into this, in that I did some snakes out of barbed wire that were three-dimensional and stuff and they were attached to the wall pieces. But basically, yeah, the idea basically is of a painting. The way that I approach them when I do them, visually speaking, you know, I'm not shooting for a sculptural element. I just include it but it's not really thought out as sculpture.

JQ: It projects from the surface, but it's still within the range when you see it from the front.

CM: Yeah, it's just a flat surface and I haven't really given it much thought as far as a sculpture. So I wouldn't claim that it was sculpture.

JQ: But in that series you also have a lot of remembrances or reminiscences of your growing up in South Texas.

CM: Yes, because I was pretty much into the outdoors-fishing, and hunting, and coming from a ranching family I spent a lot of time on the ranch in northern Mexico, the family ranch-and so the outdoors were very important to me, and, whenever we would go hunting or be out in the woods, things would stick in my mind, and so eventually all of these become subjects, when I started thinking in terms of subjects. And I think I came up with some interesting stuff. Like, for example, probably one of the most effective pieces on the South Texas series is a mixed media piece that I called Cono's Christmas Buck.

JQ: Oh yeah, Cono.

CM: I remember that one. El Cono was a friend of mine from Laredo who passed away a long time ago, in the early seventies. But when we were in college in the sixties, he was very much into hunting, and he was very expressive in the way he would recount his hunting adventures-and very funny also. But he was a hunter. I mean, hunting was all he thought about. And I remember that after I had. . . . That year that I was floating around dodging the draft I would go back to Kingsville and stay with my friends, and they all lived in this house together, El Cono and Beto Peñ a and other friends of mine-people that I hung out with. So I would stay there, and there was a spare bed in Cono's room, so I would sleep in Cono's room. And so we would be there shooting the breeze at night, in the evening, and I'd be talking about art or something and Cono would get exasperated with me.

JQ: [laughs]

CM: He would say, "Platicame de carabinas." Talk to me about hunting. [laughter] It was very funny. And so. . . . But, anyway, when the South Texas series gelled, Cono came to my mind, and I said, "Now who would think of using Cono, except me, as a subject?" [laughs] So I worked out this piece, and basically it's graffiti but not urban graffiti. This is ranch graffiti that some hunter might inscribe on the wall of a shack where he's staying or something like that.

JQ: Now where does Cono come from? It's a cone, but. . . .

CM: I don't know why they called him El Cono. [laughs] I have no idea.

JQ: What was his actual name?

CM: I have no way. . . . His name was. . . . Ah, I can't remember his name. I'm bad about names. He comes from a family that has a history in Laredo . . . the Sanchez. . . . Rodolfo Sanchez was his name, one of the historical Sanchez family in Laredo. I can't remember exactly what they did, but they were historical. [chuckles]

JQ: But El Cono was his nickname.

CM: Yeah. I think there was a Tomás Sanchez in Laredo, Tomas Sanchez that is historical for some reason or other. I think he was from that family. But, anyway, he was from Laredo, and I think he was a year ahead of me in high school.

JQ: So he died very young then.

CM: Died very young. It turns out that he had an aneurysm or something like that . . . .

JQ: Oooh.

CM: . . . and started going berserk. He was a teacher eventually, and people started noticing mood swings and, you know, "What's going on here?" It turns out that he [had-Ed.] something in his brain, and he died of it. But anyway, Cono was the subject of one of the most. . . .

JQ: So that was an inspiration for that whole _____.

CM: Yeah, one of the most effective pieces in the South Texas series. It was basically a story told through graffiti about . . .

JQ: About his buck.

CM: . . . about a buck that he killed for the Christmas tamales, because it's a tradition in Laredo. Something to coincide with Christmas and tamale time. Tamales time. And so tamales de venado are a big thing in Laredo.

JQ: Tamales de venado. The venison tamales. Well, what about the exhibitions that became very important in the late seventies? You were in that major international show, the Ancient Visions. . . . Or what is it, Ancient. . . .

CM: Ancient Roots/New Visions. Yeah, that was one of the very first major museum-caliber exhibitions that went around that was so. . . .

JQ: You were also in MIRA-M-I-R-A-shows, which was the whiskey, Canadian Club.

CM: Canadian Club Hispanic Art tour. Later there was kind of like a carbon copy of that, the Coors thing, which I did not participate on, because I had a political problem with Coors. A lot of artists did.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: We didn't want to be involved with Coors because it's a right-wing . . .

JQ: Exactly.

CM: . . . right-wing founder.

JQ: Racist.

CM: Yeah. So anyway. But, notwithstanding, some very good artists participated in that who were probably. . . .

JQ: Yeah, in fact they asked me to do the catalog for one of them. I forget, MIRA 2 or 3, I forget which one. In the early eighties, it must have been.

CM: Yeah. But, no, those early exhibitions-the survey exhibitions and Chicano exhibitions and stuff like [that-Ed.]-it wasn't until relatively recent times that I started being left out of major shows. [laughs]

JQ: Oh, is that right?

CM: Because, I mean, they become more special and competitive and new artists. So anyway. And I'm getting old, you know? [laughter] So _____. . . .

JQ: Yeah, but you were in CARA.

CM: Yeah, but I was in all the early ones; I was in all of the major ones.

JQ: Well, I think that what happened is that they became more and more fragmented, like Tomás Ybarra Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Baines began to do things in San Francisco and other places, and if it didn't fit their notion of Chicano art then you were not [part].

CM: Yeah. Well, every area had their own thing going, and also the fragmentation. . . . It wasn't really fragmentation so much as these early shows were very national in scope, and then people started to organize major shows in their own locations, like there were some major shows in California. Here in Texas we had Dale Gas in Houston in 1977.

JQ: Right.

CM: And in California prior to these. . . . I think the first Chicano museum show was probably Los Four in Los Angeles.

JQ: That was in '74.

CM: Yeah, that Jane Livingston put together.

JQ: L.A. County.

CM: Yeah. That was probably the first museum show, but shortly after that we had both Dale Gas and Ancient Roots/New Visions. So, anyway, the trend was shows national in scope, and then probably everybody went into their own thing locally [and what not]. I wouldn't fit in in California. [laughs]

JQ: Well, of course, there haven't been any really major Chicano shows in the last . . . not since CARA.

CM: No, probably the last major one was probably Hispanic Art in the United States. It wasn't a Chicano show, but that was the last of the major surveys.

JQ: But it was before. That was '87, wasn't it?

CM: Yeah, I think it started in '87.

JQ: Jane Livingston and Beardsley.

CM: And John Beardsley, yeah. They did. . . .

JQ: For the Corcoran and Houston.

CM: Yeah. Well, it traveled all over.

JQ: Oh yeah, but they opened there.

CM: Yeah, it opened in Houston and. . . .

JQ: I remember going in April of '87.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: So, God, that was ten years ago.

CM: Yeah, yeah, that was it. I think that was it, when it opened in Houston for the first time.

JQ: But your Pachuco series was already very well known by then.

CM: Yeah. In fact, that was what was shown in that show, and after that I've been in many museum shows. Actually, you know, it's kind of interesting that artists would kill to be in museum shows, and I started to . . . I became conscious of, "Well, what's this thing about museum shows?" And it turns out that most of the shows that I had in my resume at the time were museum shows. I didn't have any gallery shows. [laughs]

JQ: _____ museum shows. . . .

CM: So it wasn't until recent times that I started actually showing in galleries and selling a painting or two. [laughs] But I was in major shows-major museum shows-and nothing as far as galleries.

JQ: So who handles your work? Do you have a gallery or do you just. . . .

CM: Over the years I've had some galleries handle my work. Lyn Good in Houston and John Caciola in New York, Galería Sin Fronteras in Austin. Here, locally, I went through several: Jansen-Perez, Milagros, and now Parchman Stremmel. I think that's it. I think those are the galleries that handled my work _____. [Interruption in taping]

JQ: This is to backtrack a little bit on something that we left out relating to Cesar's work in the mid 1970s when he was loosely affiliated. . . . I'm not sure if that's the right word. But you were not really that involved with Con Safos, although you did become involved with Los Quemados (or The Burnt Ones) . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . as a reaction to what Con Safos was doing. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

CM: I was involved with Con Safos; I became a member. But because I had. . . . You know, as I mentioned earlier when we were talking about this, the San Antonio artists are a very tight group, and if you're not from San Antonio it's like . . . you're not from San Antonio.

JQ: Oh, that's right. You had mentioned that.

CM: Not that there's any problems, but you're not from San Antonio. But with my political ties and the things that I was doing, I knew a lot of people throughout the Southwest, and here in Texas I was very good friends with Amado Peñ a and Carmen Lomas Garza, who were some of the major artists of the time. And there were a lot of other artists who were also active doing a lot of work, artists like José Treviñ o and Vicente Rodriguez and, let's see. . . . Well, there were others, but I can't. . . . Santa Barraza.

JQ: Was Carmen Lomas Garza in. . . . You mentioned her name?

CM: Carmen Lomas Garza? Yes, of course. She was one of the principle artists of that time. And these were all my friends, and so when I went into Con Safos a lot of them came with me. And after we had been in Con Safos for a while, we started noticing a pattern in the meetings. We talked about very formal things, expectations and stuff like that that weren't really applicable at the time. I remember that Con Safos wanted to . . . anybody who wanted slides of the group, they wanted to charge money for the slides and, where exhibitions were concerned, they were insisting on insurance and stuff like that. At the time that wasn't heard of. Significant places that wanted to show your work could not afford things like that. This was like for museums and stuff like that, and of course it was an excellent ambition but among ourselves, especially between myself and Carmen Lomas Garza and Amado Peñ o, we would look at each other and say [comments] like, "We keep talking about these things, and we're not showing." We were dying to show, and there were many places. . . . You know, at the time it wasn't like a gallery scene or a museum thing. At that time it was more like wherever you can, but it wasn't. . . . There was also another dimension to that wherever it's needed, and there was a need. People wanted. . . . They knew we were artists and they said, "Great. We're having a conference here or there. Why don't you show your work?" And sure, you know, we wanted to do that at the time, and. . . . But don't do that any more. [laughter] But we wanted to do that at the time because it was necessary.

JQ: Sure.

CM: And the Con Safos group was not very receptive to that. They wanted to show in museums and stuff like that, but at the time, like I said, the realistic thing about that. . . . Well, being realistic about the times rather. That was still a few years in the future. And so we decided to leave Con Safos for that reason. We felt, "We're artists. We need to show our work, and we're people-oriented, politically-active and stuff like that-political orientation-and so we need to exhibit." And so we left Con Safos, and I remember that I wrote a very diplomatic letter why we were leaving, and we left the group and we formed Los Quemados, and Los Quemados was basically. . . . I came up with the name, if I remember correctly. But Los Quemados was basically Amado Peñ a and Carmen Lomas Garza and myself.

JQ: Now, was Santa involved with this?

CM: Yes, she was, but she was a younger artist at the time. We were the more active ones then, and basically it was more or less our leadership. But then everybody from Austin. . . . This was a very Austin group that I was dealing with here, and I went back and forth so. . . . And not being from San Antonio, so I was kind of floating around. I was a free agent, so to speak. So we formed a group that was convenient to our idea. But, ironically, after that time. . . . I think we exhibited as Los Quemados once at least, certainly.

JQ: I remember that.

CM: But I'm kind of vague about any other. . . . I'm pretty sure we exhibited at least another time, but then we also kind of like dissipated, you know.

JQ: Well, you went your own ways.

CM: [laughing] Went our own ways.

JQ: Amado Peñ a went, of course, _____.

CM: Yeah, we all got into our work and developed what we were doing, and Amado developed his [monito] thing, you know, that everybody hated eventually. And Carmen developed her thing and then _____ _____ fine.

JQ: And then she left for California.

CM: And she left for California and has been there every since. And I just kept on. . . . Like I said, I had been struggling technically with my work, and with me it was just a matter of just doing work-working, working, working at it and struggling with it until I came up with what I wanted, and I did. In other words, we were developing individually . . . kind of went our own ways. And then we all emerged in some of the major shows that started coming up like Roots and Visions and all of those. Con Safos. . . .

JQ: Now, Con Safos more or less . . . .

CM: I mean, not Con Safos. Dale Gas.

JQ: Dale Gas. But Con Safos by then was really not operating any more, was it?

CM: It became very ambivalent, I think. That was my viewpoint. There was an ambivalence there. Too concerned about form and not enough about realities and the substance of the times. I felt it required more activism, exhibition-wise, and I felt it wasn't there. And Con Safos kind of like also dissipated after that. Everybody kind of went their own ways. Like for example, from San Antonio, artists from that group, Jesse Trevino was there and he kind of like went his own way and then developed what he became. And Mel Casas. Well, Mel Casas was already a very formed, very mature artist at the time.

JQ: Mature?

CM: Older also, than all of us. So he was already made, so to speak. So he kept on being Mel Casas, and Felipe Reyes went through something there. You want to hear some gossip? [laughs] Felipe Reyes left for Ann Arbor, the college over there.

JQ: I guess that was the undoing. I don't know what they did to him up there.

CM: Well, Felipe changed. He started repudiating what he had been doing and went into some things that he felt were very important to him.

JQ: Is he from here?

CM: Yeah, he's from here. And eventually he emerged again in San Antonio and sort of came back to where he started, but for a while there he was estranged from the whole Chicano thing.

JQ: And then he taught briefly at UTSA.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: And Jesse Treviñ o got an MFA out there. But I really didn't have any contact with him.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: But he was never really politically involved, was he?

CM: Who?

JQ: Jesse Treviñ o.

CM: No, he. . . . No, not really. He was a very shrewd person, and I think all along he knew, well, had a good idea where he wanted to go with what he could do, and I think pretty much went there.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: You know, someone that we haven't mentioned at all who was very important to all of us was Santos Martinez.

JQ: Oh, yeah.

CM: He was also one of the artists who was very much involved, and he went on to become the curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, under the directorship of Jim Harithas, who was also a very important character here-to Texas art in general and. . . .

JQ: Harithas?

CM: James Harithas.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: And for Chicanos in particular, very important, because it was through his effort-and Santos'-that Dale Gas came about.

JQ: Right.

CM: And Santos had been an artist, but basically. . . . Santos Martinez is an excellent artist. Technically he's an excellent artist-I mean, very skilled draftsman and everything. But he always was drawn more to the academic end of it and curating, and so he ended up in. . . . I think he was in Ann Arbor also, and then he went to Minneapolis after that. I know that he was in Ann Arbor when Felipe was there.

JQ: Yeah, he got an MFA up there, I think.

CM: Yeah, he got a degree there, and he wound up in Minneapolis.

JQ: Well, he came back here for a while, didn't he?

CM: I don't remember.

JQ: But he's not here any more. Or is he?

CM: No, he's still over there in Minneapolis, always saying that he wants to come back, but hasn't actually done that. But he was very important to that period.

JQ: Well, he could conceptualize certain things-you know, put that exhibition together.

CM: Yeah, he could. And he was a doer-a very by-the-book kind of guy, and he was very committed.

JQ: But then the head honcho with Con Safos ended up being Rudy Treviñ o . . .

CM: Rudy Treviñ o, yeah.

JQ: . . . who went on to become the lead person for the [Tejano] Music Awards.

CM: Yeah, he's the impresario there. He has done very well with that.

JQ: But he gave up his art, didn't he?

CM: Well, you know, the interesting thing about Rudy is that he was an excellent teacher. His students were always getting awards and stuff when he was. . . . I don't remember where he was; probably. . . . I think it was [at] Edgewood or _____ . . .

JQ: [Lanier]?

CM: . . . Lanier, one of those. I don't know. One of those. But he was an excellent instructor-and an excellent artist also-but he was very business-like and I think that that led to his going into the Tejano music thing, and stopped being an artist somewhere along the line.

JQ: Now by the time you met all these people, you essentially were going in your own direction.

CM: I think I always was going in my own direction.

JQ: They didn't really have an impact on you other than. . . .

CM: No. Well, no, I would say they did. Like, for example. . . . Maybe I should talk a little bit about the artists here who I . . . the ones that really did something to me-their art did something to me. I don't think I have mentioned Roberto Ríos at all . . .

JQ: Oh, right.

CM: . . . but Roberto Ríos was a formidable illustrator and commercial artist. And I think most of us. . . . Well, that's something that can be said about most of the Westside artists of the time-Chista and Felipe Reyes (well, no, not Felipe Reyes)-Chista, Jesse Almazán, Roberto Ríos, José Esquivel-they were commercial artists-and they could do virtually anything. But Roberto Ríos was a very effective illustrator, and his work just blew me away. I mean. . . .

JQ: Wasn't he in the Air Force or the. . . .

CM: Yeah. Like for example, he was working as an illustrator with the Air Force, I think at Kelly or one of those-Randolf, whatever-and Jesse Almazán was at Fort Sam, I believe, with the army-also an illustrator.

JQ: What about Esquivel?

CM: And José Esquivel was with the CPS. No, no. What is it? CPS? City Public Service, yeah.

JQ: The City Public Service?

CM: Yes. He was a commercial artist there, and so these guys were very accomplished working artists-you know, professional illustrators and commercial artists. But, anyway, Roberto Ríos was one hell of a paint handler, and his work just blew me away. Like El Queso had done. . . . Like what I saw in El Queso really moved me. Well, Roberto Ríos' work moved me in a different way, in a technical way. Well, actually his work was also moving otherwise. But for me, I was just dazzled by the technique, the paint handling there. Another one is José Esquivel. José Esquivel was. . . . His work was very down home, I would say, in a very real way. He could convey ideas about the barrio. Simple stuff like a quilt hanging on a clothesline, but done in a way that is just effective. [laughs] And I thought he was also a really excellent artist. The artist whose work really moved me, I think. Felipe was more cerebral. His work was also excellent . . .

JQ: Yeah.

CM: . . . but in a different way. But I would say that the ones whose work moved more was Roberto Ríos and is José Esquivel-from that period

JQ: But not the people with Con Safos? Well, they were part of that, too, weren't they?

CM: No, actually, yeah. They were or went with Con Safos at some point, but there were many fallings out and people going in and out again.

JQ: I guess it was just such a huge group that. . . . Even Kathy Vargas was in that.

CM: Kathy Vargas came in after I was there, I think. I don't recall having been in Con Safos when Kathy Vargas was there, but she was there. I think maybe Rolando Briceñ o may have been in the last group there that went through Con Safos.

JQ: What about-this is not directly related to what we're talking about, but in a way it is indirectly, in reference to the barrio, or what constitutes that part of San Antonio's cultural life, historical-this thing that came out this weekend or has been brewing for a couple of weeks over at that Cisneros woman's house in King William, where she's trying to establish purple as a. . . .

CM: Oh, yeah, she's doing an end run there, but she does have a valid issue because I think that. . . .

JQ: Well, first of all, let me ask: Is she from here?

CM: She's from Chicago.

JQ: Oh, okay. She's not originally from here?

CM: She's from Chicago. I met her when I was on the board of the Guadalupe and we ended up hiring her [as-Ed,] the director of the literature program.

JQ: Oh, okay.

CM: On and off she's been here since then. She's permanently here now. But, anyway, yeah, that was an interesting thing, with the purple house. She's kind of sidestepping the issue, but it is a valid issue because for the reason I think that the historical commission sends out very mixed signals. And it seems to. . . . Even though they say that their guidelines are very tight. On the other hand they also, they also say, "But just look around.

There's a lot of color in the King William district." And there sure is. You know, very green houses-like that painting-with yellow trim and stuff like that.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: So, ultimately, it seems that it is a matter of the taste of the historical committee, their review committee, and it seems capricious to me. Like if they were to say "only colors from that period are permitted," then they would have a chart, and [if] you wanted to paint your house they would say, "Here it is. Choose, and do it." So the question that I have there is, If that color was unacceptable, why didn't they allow her to paint the back of her house so they could check it out and see if it was acceptable to start with? I mean, if they already knew the guidelines were so tight. . . . So to me that's very ambivalent. And when they say. . . . And to start with, this business about colors that didn't even exist at the time, to me that's a very flimsy argument. If they had existed, they would have been used.

JQ: That purple wasn't _____ did they say that. . . .

CM: They say that it wasn't in use at the time, but so what? I mean, my view is that it would have been used if had existed. You know, that's why colors were developed. There was a constant. . . .

JQ: Yeah.

CM: They were coming in. And I don't think that those houses were built to be a certain color. They were built, those houses, and they were painted with what was available. So I think it's a very flimsy argument. But, like I said, if they wanted to go by that, then what's the problem then? They should have allowed part of the house to be painted so they could check it out. They should have said, "No! That's it." [laughs] You know. So it seems capricious to me. And there is, of course, and her contention about Chicanos and all of that. . . . I mean, it comes down to taste. You know, they are ignoring the history there and so I think it's just the taste of a little group of people.

JQ: Yeah, I read the articles that appeared in last Sunday's paper, and neither one was convincing.

CM: To me, the most convincing one was the one that the man wrote. Sandra just did an end run around the whole thing.

JQ: Yeah, it didn't make any sense.

CM: To me, frankly, it was rambling and didn't make sense. The other guy, for the most part, I think, was very tight, except for that ambiguity. On the one hand he says that.. . .

JQ: He likes it, personaly.

CM: Yeah, he liked it, and so I said, "Well, what is this decision really based on?" It's like only colors from the period of the times are supposed to be used, but then, on the other hand, "If we like it. . . ." It's sort of like, "If we like it." So I don't know, it's very ambivalent.

JQ: Well, it's a little bit like the missions. When they began to be restored in the 1920s, they were restored by people who had no relation to the people who built them . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . so their taste was totally different, so what they would. . . .

CM: Yeah, like _____ _____ the famous Rose Window. [laughing] _____ _____ _____, and it's become the focal point here.

JQ: Exactly. But they went in and whitewashed everything, and I have found comments in the historical documents before San José Mission was restored that there was a Mexican lady there who had very lovingly put together some quilts of her own manufacture . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . up on the walls in the santuario-the sanctuary, chapel-and she had placed the original images of the santos-or the sacred images. . . . That everything came down because it didn't correspond to the Anglo American's taste, which is exactly what you're dealing with here.

CM: Yeah, yeah. A different sensibility.

JQ: Exactly. Now how does that translate into the people who have bought your paintings? Like they like the Bato series or the Pachuco series, they can relate to that but they don't have to have known anything about it. They'll accept it in a painting. . . .

CM: That's a very interesting question, because I don't necessarily have a handle on it, because the acceptance of those series has been so widespread. For example, several Jewish people have been really taken aback by this work and bought it, some major pieces. Jewish people who were very conscious of their Jewishness-you know, culturally speaking. You know, like I'm a Catholic, but not really. But these are Jewish and they're Jewish. [chuckling]

JQ: But they're Jewish.

CM: And they could identify with this stuff, and so. . . .

JQ: And so it's a universal thing.

CM: So I think it's crossing into very universal territory there, and I keep wondering, is it the way they're painted, or is it that they're very effective. Is their realness there? I know all of those elements are there to some degree or other in the work. It should be there-in the good ones anyway. I've done a lot of bad work. So apparently it has crossed across cultures. And things being what they are, it could be that some of the best work has been collected by non-Chicanos, non-Latinos-collectors who collect all kinds of work and then Tejanos. . . .

JQ: Who really just relate to the work?

CM: Who relate to it as art. And I think that, well, the work is, of course, very Chicano-consciously.

JQ: Sure.

CM: I mean, I've always [worked at it]. This is about culture and identifiable. But I think that our own people tend to look at work like this as a cultural artifact, as opposed to art.

JQ: I was going to ask you about that.

CM: They couldn't care less about the background. They go if the character is important as a whole.

JQ: The character.

CM: It's just the character. Oh, great, you know. And they couldn't care less. In the CARA show-it's a very good illustration of what I'm talking about-in both of the pieces that were in that show, they cut off the top horizontal band there that I. . . .

JQ: Really!

CM: They cropped these in the catalog.

JQ: Oh, my God. To focus on the. . . .

CM: Yeah, yeah, too arty. I don't know what. [laughing]

JQ: That is so strange. And of course that's a very crucial part of the painting.

CM: Yeah, because, well. . . . Yeah, certainly. Because I deliberately make my images proportionate to the canvas. They're very small in there, because I want all of this space around them. And what influenced that-we're going to another very important influence in that series-is the work of Giacometti-not the painting but the sculpture. I always felt that those little figures of his were not little, but thin _____ _____.

JQ: Sure.

CM: It's like they carried around them like an ambiente around them, an atmosphere. It was like there was an atmospheric thing around them, and they looked tiny, so in my mind that is one reason that I have all this space around my figures-most of the work; not all of it, but most of it-it's because I wanted to create this space there that is somehow related in some way. It's hard for me to explain this because it's one of those things that are intuitive and some of the hardest things in doing this series is the backgrounds. You might think that painting the figure is difficult. Well, it is, but the background is a thing in itself, and it has to work.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: It has to work, and you have no idea . . . I mean, some paintings have layers and layers of color that was

put on there and they didn't work and they didn't work, and then finally. . . . [laughs] So they certainly are important. Even though I can't explain it, there's something going on here in that format that I use for the series that is also an important part of the painting, and it has to be done just right. And to those to whom these are cultural artifacts that's irrelevant. . . .

JQ: Yeah, _____ _____. Well, they recognize. . . .

CM: [They say], "He didn't put anything in there, so I guess it's not relevant." For them it's not a color field, a live color field.

JQ: Now did you ever try putting the band of color on the sides? Or it was always on top?

CM: The reason. . . .

JQ: It's like a horizon?

CM: The reason why. . . . There is a reason. Most of the work that I have done in this series is like torso, or from the chest up, and sometimes they're placed so low down there's almost only the neck, the very top of the shoulders. So it's always with that horizontal line there-that horizon reference line that I call it-low down, and everything [would be] down here, so I need to put it up there. But I have done-that I can think of-only two pieces where I have a full figure, and on those the horizon line is down here, because then the figure is the [subject].

JQ: Of course, of course.

CM: It becomes. . . . Pictorially it's a different reference. It's still the same thing, but it works down here, not up here.

JQ: So essentially, then, you were never interested in doing the full figure anyway. It was always the. . . .

CM: No, I was, but it's just that I've been drawn more to the. . . . Some are in the works. Remember when I told you that technically I had my limitations, and it's only in recent years that I have gotten to do actual drawing, and now I could do a full figure. At the time it had to do with that. I mean, it was hard enough putting together just the torso and making it work. [laughing]

JQ: It's interesting that when Picasso and Braque began to do their experiments in what later became analytical Cubism and then synthetic Cubism that they initially made the full figure when they were essentially decomposing the various parts and creating all these facets, but they evidently found that doing the full figure was too distracting, so essentially they started doing just the bust and the head . . .

CM: Yeah. They were probably looking for effectiveness, and essentially the. . . .

JQ: . . . and they found that what they wanted to do within that rectangular frame was resolved. So a lot of times, when you look at these early works, you know that part of the guitar is in a certain place, and the head is there, and then the arm maybe.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: And then [in] the background it might be altered as well. So it's interesting. But the legs and the arms-most of the arms-got in the way of what they were trying to do.

CM: Yeah. Yeah, sometimes artists. . . . People think that we do this stuff easily. I mean, I know I don't. I know some artists that are very excellent draftsmen, and I get the impression they do it very easily, but maybe that's not true. [laughs]

JQ: Or they may have no ideas.

CM: Yeah, you know. I mean, like I've seen Luis Jimenez work and he's an excellent draftsman, but he works in a way that he's constantly correcting himself. It's not like he gets it right the first time . . .

JQ: Oh, sure.

CM: . . . but it becomes part of the whole. And I think Picasso did that to a large extent. He would do all kinds of stuff, then he would erase, but he wouldn't erase completely. You could still see what he had erased, and he would leave it like that, but it became part of the thing. In a different sense Luis works that way, but his is just redoing it, but in a way that it. . . . The more assertive stuff is the corrected version, but all the other stuff is under there and you can see it end. It's a mechanical thing, and it's a wonderful thing. And especially-going back to Picasso-he did a lot of excellent pencil line drawings, like that of Igor Stravinsky or _____ _____, something like

one of those. But he also did some of ballerinas.

JQ: That's right.

CM: Now you look at the feet and they're klutzy. [laughs]

JQ: That's right, yes.

CM: Bad feet. He couldn't do feet.

JQ: He didn't do feet, yeah.

CM: Excellent hands but bad feet. [laughing] They look awkward with the ballerinas-what do you call them?-sandals, whatever, slippers, and they look awkward. And the rest of them are just so fine. So anyway, I think we. . . . I know I do. I cut away the hard parts-because they're not essential.

JQ: Now did you focus on the torso-or the bust-at the very beginning? _____ _____ _____.

CM: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Because, like I said, these essentially came from. . . . The idea of a very frontal and very emotion[less]-not emotionless, but almost expressionless-faces just staring at you, that came from Richard Avedon's work.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: And so it was essentially a photographic thing . . . format.

JQ: Yeah, essentially they're neutral. [I tried to]. . . . I mean, they're _____. . . .

CM: They are very neutral. _____ _____, but the trick is to do something with that. And then Richard Avedon could do that through those pictures, so I [thought] and I said, "There's a challenge there." And every now and then there's a hint of a smile and stuff like that, but basically they're very straightforward.

JQ: Now, when you do a series like this, that you're doing now, you've got five paintings [in all] that I guess you're working on simultaneously . . .

CM: Yeah. Yeah, because you need to refresh yourself. I mean, you get too much into something, it gets. . . . Like this painting here got very tight-but very tight-and I'm repainting it now. I got it to the point where it was done, and then I said, "But that's not what I wanted." So I'm going to repaint it until I get it right. But, yeah, painting can get very tight on you and you just start trying to get every brush stroke just right.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: Now it can be just right, but it should also be . . . it should look effortless. Nothing is really effortless-not for me anyway. And I think that. . . . I mean, I know how the Abstract Expressionists work, and somebody who doesn't know about art would say, "Well, he was just throwing the paint around."

JQ: Oh, yeah.

CM: My three-year-old. . . .

[INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

JQ: This is the second day of our interview, and I would like to reiterate what I mentioned at the very end of yesterday's tape, since there were just a few words there that were indicated as a summary of what we touched upon. We did the biographical data relating to his birth and upbringing in Laredo, Texas, and we dealt in very general terms with his work, and although one might think that the inclusion of other artists and their work at this early stage might not be appropriate, we did that anyway. So we will probably concentrate primarily on his work today. And we will proceed then. This is August 22, 1997. As indicated, Cesar, I think we could talk in general terms or perhaps to summarize some of the major approaches that you use in your work and then we can talk about some very specific works that we can relate to, and always taking care to provide the person listening the necessary information relating to the works-title, date, and so forth.

CM: Maybe I should begin by saying that there has been a progression from when I first started producing work as a professional in the early seventies to the present, and I have continually added themes-general themes, ideas, series of works, which have names, and stuff like that. So I think that, as we mentioned before, the very first pieces that I ever exhibited in major exhibitions were those early woodcuts. I would have to say that those pieces were very individual pieces, even though they were united by the fact that they were woodcuts. I think

that they were very individual ideas that I went to great pains to express-and to express effectively. But then later on, as my ideas began to gel and I started thinking in terms of series of works. . . . And I think that probably. . . . Well, you know, I think that just about everything has always been there in my mind gestating, I guess, and sometimes it takes years for an idea to become cohesive enough, and for me to find a format for it, a way of expressing it. It takes a while to actually do something from the beginning. There's a big gap there between when I get an idea and then when I actually start doing it. I think that South Texas took probably over ten years to actually get going.

JQ: Well, let me ask you about your approach. We didn't really delve into some of these things. Do you think in terms of images or concepts? Do you scribble things down-"I'm going to do this"? Or do you carry a sketchbook around with you?

CM: Well, usually the themes suggest themselves. You know, I'm dealing with something or other, and then I say, "Well, there's a theme that I could deal with in my work." If I feel there's a visual possibility in a theme then I start thinking about it and it's always in my mind.

JQ: Now what is the trigger? When you go down there to visit. . . . Let's say you talk about the South Texas series.

CM: I would say, well, it varies. Sometimes it's the other. . . . Sometimes like, for example. . . . Because art history is very important to me and I have a very good working knowledge of art history as it pertains to me, as I see it, of course. And sometimes I have an idea, and then at some point I'll be going through some of my art books or what have you and I'll see some work of art by some other artist and that might trigger an idea of how to approach a subject. Art history for me is like a Sears & Roebuck catalog, you know. [laughs]

JQ: Yeah, like a real sourcebook, yeah.

CM: And so things were suggested that way. Sometimes the very subject itself suggests a way. Sometimes I think that, technically, some things are best expressed through. . . . I think that in some series drawing becomes very important. In other series painting becomes more important. In other series mixed media becomes more important. In some things I've done, the printmaking medium has been very effective-like those early woodcuts that I mentioned. So it varies, but . . . and any number of things can trigger or substantiate an idea that I have, validate an idea. "Oh, see, somebody else did something similar, yeah." And I just run with it.

JQ: So when you get these ideas or a concept, you do sketches?

CM: Yes. . . . I've never been a good sketcher, or organized sketcher. Probably the best ideas originate as doodles. [laughs] But then the sketches become more formal, and then I start zeroing in, but sometimes I'll just be doodling and I might, almost accidentally, do something that, "Now wait a minute. There's something here."

JQ: Now, you don't work like a mural painter where you make a sketch and then you do a grid and then you enlarge it?

CM: Well, I do work like that in the final stages, especially. . . . Well, to give you example of how that has evolved in the Pachuco series, originally my idea was to just start painting on the canvas and let the thing emerge. I would do a very rough drawing and then refine and refine it until it was done. But as the series evolved then I started paying more attention to drawing. It is one thing to draw with drawing media-pencil or charcoal or whatever. My own favorite drawing media is charcoal on newsprint, which everybody says, "No! Those things are going to deteriorate. The paper is no good." But, I'm sorry, it's my favorite paper. [laughs]

JQ: And it's the right size, too, I guess.

CM: Yeah, and it's got just the right texture for charcoal as far as I'm concerned. And so basically I work on newsprint when I do charcoal drawings. But, anyway, that particular series-the Pachuco series-gelled. You know, everything becomes more formalized as you work. Everything becomes more systematic-and I think better, although there are those that would say that the first work, the very raw stuff, is better. No, I don't think so. [laughs] I'm not shy about going back to a work that is already done and reworking it. I don't care about the. . . .

JQ: Like the Mona Lupe you did, although that's not part of the series.

CM: Well, no. Yeah, no, that one evolved over years. I mean, the first version I did was in 1975, and the last one-the biggest version-was, I think, in the early nineties, I guess. So all of that takes a while. But, anyway, to answer your question-do I work like a muralist and all that-well, I don't actually do a grid, because I think that's an antiquated way of transferring an image. It's a very manual . . . it's sort of like the manual way of doing it. What I do is I photograph. . . . I take a slide of the drawing on paper, regardless of the size. I just compose it on the film, on the camera, and then I project it onto the canvas, and then I can compose photographically. That, in

its turn, goes back to when I was doing a lot of photography. I think that the enlarger is the perfect composing tool.

JQ: Yeah, you can do it right away.

CM: Yeah. Some artists would do it manually. I know I saw a documentary on Wayne Thiebaud-or maybe a book, whatever it was-where he's doing a figure and he does this wonderful drawing on the canvas, and then he decides that it's off so he draws the whole thing again, just a little bit further on, like maybe an inch further.

JQ: And who was the artist you mentioned?

CM: Wayne Thiebaud.

JQ: Oh, yeah. Thiebaud, yeah.

CM: Thiebaud, the California artist. So, anyway, to me that's too much. [laughs]

JQ: Yeah, but you may know that Siqueiros did that in his murals.

CM: Projected images?

JQ: Yes, he. . . .

CM: Yeah, he was very _____

JQ: Among the things that he thought was the thing to do, since he was in the twentieth century and the last thing that he wanted to do was to use the antiquated methods of fresco, which would take forever to prepare, and, of course, he probably didn't have the patience to do that anyway. . . .

CM: Yeah, I never would have myself. No, I don't blame him.

JQ: But he worked on cement, and he started using airbrushes and he was the first one to use plastic paints.

CM: He was very innovative.

JQ: So he projected _____.

CM: He was also the one that started developing acrylic paints. He was one of a group who started developing acrylic paints.

JQ: Exactly.

CM: Yeah, he was very innovative. And I think that some work is just tedious work, really. It might be traditional, it might be a classic way of approaching work, but, basically, times change. Technology starts becoming important. It worked for me. [chuckles] It worked for me.

JQ: Oh, well, this is very interesting for me. Even though I've known you all these years we've never really touched upon how you transferred the sketch onto the larger surface.

CM: Yeah. And I might add that sometimes I position those images on the canvas in what seems to the viewer in an awkward position-very low, or maybe awkward. But that's all intentional, because I usually have. . . . I mean, you don't err with a projector. Now if you were doing it by hand, just cold, _____, you might wind up with an image that is off. But with the projector doing it you don't err, so those were intentional. [laughs] [Interruption in taping]

JQ: We had to stop the tape to check the speed, so we are continuing with the interview of Cesar. What I had asked earlier was whether you dreamed anything that might be used as a source for images, and the intent here is to see where your inspiration comes from.

CM: Yeah. Well, like I said, no, not from dreams. I told you about that dream about the opera-that I had composed an opera and it seemed very original in the dream-but I have no musical talent whatsoever so I don't know where that came from. But, no, to answer your question, I don't recall anything ever coming from dreams.

JQ: The reason I asked that is that you occasionally hear people saying that, particularly if you have a problem when you're writing something and you go to bed worrying about it and then maybe in the morning you wake up. Of course, it's not so much that you dream about it, but that your mind is clear. And I started thinking about that because my wife has been painting a tree in the kitchen-a wall-and she's gone over across several walls and over a doorway, and yesterday she got up and said that she had dreamed that she had put a swing on her

tree. [laughter] And so there's a mixing of reality with the image. Anyway, that cracked me up, so I told her the next time she needs to paint a tree over a doorway; then she can hang a swing.

CM: Yeah. I think where dreams are concerned in my work, I think that I may have had dreams where I have a show coming up and I'm not ready and I'm worried about that. [laughs]

JQ: Yeah, I think that would be the _____. So essentially what we're finding here, then, is that-as I've indicated before-is that your approach is primarily cerebral, or you get your sources or inspiration-or whatever word you might want to use-from solutions that artists have come up with that you might see. "Oh, my God, he did this. This'll work for what I'm doing. It fits with what I want to do."

CM: Yeah. The work has its origins in something that interests me, and then a theme that interests me, an idea, or whatever. And it stays in my mind until it gels, and certain things. . . . I've been very lucky in that sometimes a lot of things happen by accident. Just something. Some artist emerges that is doing something like what I like, and I say, "Hey, that's sort of like what I had in mind."

JQ: Sure.

CM: And it becomes like a jumping-off point. That might trigger it, or it might be something from art history, or I might just come up with it.

JQ: Now, do you like to go to exhibitions to look at other people's work? Or have you stayed away from that?

CM: Well, it's an interesting question. I am losing interest in exhibitions now. Contemporary art doesn't do much for me anymore. I'm more into art history. But, yes, I used to go to a lot of exhibitions. Anything that interested me, I went to great pains. In regards to what is useful to one as an artist, you'd be surprised at the things that I look at. Sometimes it's the most banal, commercial work, but I see some possibility there. I think ultimately the substance is in the ideas and not in the technique.

JQ: Also, when you talked about Roberto Rios yesterday . . .

CM: Yeah, he was an illustrator.

JQ: . . . you were really impressed with his technique.

CM: Yes. He was a fabulous paint handler, even though he was basically an illustrator. But using his abilities to illustrate, he comes up with incredible work, and very moving work. To give you an idea about the kinds of exhibits that I have gravitated to, one of the most memorable ones was a Norman Rockwell exhibit here at the MacNay. [laughs]

JQ: Oh, really?

CM: I remember that I went with Chista, and we were really. . . . Well, Chista being a commercial artist, of course, he was also very interested in Norman Rockwell's technique.

JQ: And when was that?

CM: That must have been in the early seventies. I think it happened right close to the time when I first got to San Antonio in 1971.

JQ: I remember that there was a national show of his works _____ _____ _____.

CM: Yeah, it was touring. In fact, there were long lines, so we went to great pains to see that show, and thoroughly enjoyed it, and I realized that Norman Rockwell, even though he was sort of like soft-core you might say, he was very political and was always deflating pomposity and things like that.

JQ: Yes, yes.

CM: So I thought that was wonderful. And also the technique and everything. Well, of course, I've never painted like Rockwell, but there was stuff to apply there. [laughs] Stuff to see, things to learn. So, anyway, one's sources, like I said, can come from. . . . I'm not saying that Norman Rockwell was banal. I didn't mean to. . . . I said that, but I didn't mean to apply it to Rockwell. I meant more like Leroy Niemann, whose work I like to look at. [laughs] [But, Well], I think it is banal.

JQ: This is Neerman?

CM: Niemann. No, what's his name? Leroy Niemann. Leroy Niemann, the guy who was probably the house artist

for Playboy magazine.

JQ: Oh. I'm not familiar with him. [laughs]

CM: He illustrated a lot of articles, and he's a very commercial artist and yet, for some reason or other-you tell me why-he _____ _____ _____.

JQ: How do you spell his last name?

CM: Niemann. N-i-e-m-a-n, I think.

JQ: Okay.

CM: Something like that. It might have two n's; I'm not sure. But anyway what one can apply comes from the most surprising of sources sometimes. And, of course, there's of course artists whose work that I thoroughly like and respect, that also, of course. . . . Like, for example, I've seen a couple of Goya shows over the years. It was an experience [laughs] to see those things, the effectiveness of the work.

JQ: What I'd like to do is continue in that vein. We've dealt with sources, and that gives me a very good idea of where some of these things come from. We haven't talked about it in specific terms, which we will when we look at some of the works. But in line with that, I'd like to go back to what I had myself indicated and then I strayed: focusing on the formal aspects. First the composition or the structure and then we can talk about the color, line, or any other of the visual elements, and what they mean in the work of art. And then, most importantly of course, the content . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . where you use pre-Columbian sources, you use sources from your growing up in Laredo-the usual references to the barrio or barrio-types, or however we may wish to refer to them. So why don't we talk a little bit about the structure of the works, starting first with the woodcuts and then we'll. . . . Well, actually, we could go back to the very earliest, the color-field paintings, then you did the Serape series . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . and then the first Pachuco series, and then this last . . . well, the New Spain or Spain/Mexico. . . .

CM: Yeah, the Mestizo series.

JQ: . . . the Mestizo series, and then the Southwest Texas series.

CM: Okay. Well, yeah, I think that composition-wise I have a tendency to gravitate toward the center of my canvas, and I think there's a lot of symmetry in the work that I do-conscious symmetry-and centralization of the subjects. I think I have done a few. . . . Over the years I have done a few canvasses that are unique in that they go away from being presentations of a subject and they go into more into a narrative kind of thing. But those are very rare, but there are a few of those. A very few of those, I might add, but there are some canvasses that have more complex compositions. By saying "more complex" I'm not implying that maybe there's something lacking there. I don't think complexity is necessarily better. It's just that because of the thought process that is involved in what I deal with, I pare down my ideas. My initial impulse usually is to throw everything in, and then once I start working I start throwing out a lot of things, because I realize that they do nothing for conveying the idea. I realize I just threw it in for reasons that weren't good enough to persist [with it]. I'm excessive sometimes. But then the thought process emerges, and then it gets rid of those things.

JQ: Well, in a sense, that will touch upon the relationship between the structural or formal properties and the content, because there does seem to be a pretty clear relationship there.

CM: Oh definitely, yes.

JQ: Where with the Bato series, of course, the simpler the better the symmetry, and the. . . .

CM: Yeah, the operative word has always been effectiveness. I'm interested in effectiveness, and maybe this is an exaggeration, maybe I'm being facetious, but sometimes people have made these wonderful comments about how stunning the work is, and I said, "I planned it that way." [laughter] If it dazzles you, it's because I made it dazzle. [laughter]

JQ: Very direct, very direct [statement].

CM: I'm not sure if it's true, but I like to say that. I hope it's true, that I'm that effective.

JQ: But then when you get into the. . . . I know we've skipped over the color field and Serape paintings, but I guess the same thing could apply there.

CM: Those early works-the hard-edge, abstract, color-field paintings-they varied. Some were very painterly color-field. Some were hard-edge. I think I basically had a Rothko idea. I think you could classify them into a Rothkoesque genre. What struck me about color-field painting, especially in the work of Jules Olitski. . . . And, again, we go back to the choices artists make or why one is attracted to certain things. I don't think Jules Olitski was the best of the color-field painters, but I always felt that there was something very dramatic in the way he would do a canvas of virtually one color-very light color to be sure-but then here on the edges there would be little dabs of another color, and I always thought there was a drama. To me, I read it as very dramatic, a very dramatic use of color. A very dramatic, a very graphic way of presenting just color. And so all those things linger, and I think that's basically what eventually I applied to the backgrounds in the Pachuco series, which are just very stark. But the color is very alive. They're not flat colors. I tried flat colors originally, and they looked flat. [laughs] I didn't like it. I said, "There's more to this." And eventually it becomes a matter of color choices and other little colors peeking out here and there. That's what makes it effective.

JQ: But the boundaries between each of the areas is very clear.

CM: Yes. It's really two things. I think it's two things. Almost like two separate little paintings.

JQ: Well, that's certainly very clear in the color-field Serape and the Pachuco series, but then-still dealing with structure-you move away from the symmetry in your South Texas series. Although I guess in the Mestizo series you still have the symmetry with. . . .

CM: Yeah. Well, yeah. There's maybe a couple of pieces in the Mestizo series that are not symmetrical. But generally I think that that tendency holds true, I think throughout, and for some reason I don't fight it. I've discussed this with other artists, saying, "Well, how come you never do other compositions?" I haven't. To me it's a matter of need also. If I need it I'll do it, and I have done it, but there's no need. . . .

JQ: But in the South Texas series where you introduce barbed wire and _____ wire and tin roofs, I guess, and _____ _____.

CM: Yeah, I think yesterday we mentioned Cono's Christmas Buck, that particular painting. That piece is made up of several components that are not symmetrical. They're very asymmetrical.

JQ: Right.

CM: There's another version of that that is pretty much the same also. There's two versions of Cono's Christmas Buck, and both of them are very asymmetrical. And then there are some other pieces that I think. . . . Yeah, there are some others.

JQ: Why do think in the South Texas series, when there's so much going on visually with the various materials, that you're more apt to deal with structural problems or compositions where you have the asymmetry?

CM: Probably because I'm dealing with. . . . There's many sub-themes going on. First of all, there's the biographical, in the sense that this is about where I grew up, and experiences that inspired this painting. And then there's also undercurrents of ecological themes, I think, about the land itself, the ecology of the land and also the problem with the ecology, how it's been disturbed. Like for example, in the South Texas series, I did some work that deals with what in other places would be called deforestation. Here it's called brush-clearing. [laughs]

JQ: It's called what?

CM: Brush-clearing.

JQ: Oh, brush-clearing. Yeah.

CM: In South Texas. In other places. . . . Because it's brush, it's almost not considered anything. But [when-Ed.] you chain-saw a forest, that is deforestation. Well, to me it's the same thing.

JQ: What little _____.

CM: So I sort of deal with that.

JQ: So they go in and clear what little stuff grows there.

CM: Yeah. But the interesting thing is that here the brush renews itself even faster and comes on stronger after

you eradicate it. It doesn't last forever. [laughs] So I think that those are ironies that I like to deal with. I think it's funny how people struggle with the environment, a very harsh environment, and they control it for a while and then it gets out of control again. They have to go through the whole process. I think South Texas is a very tough land. The climate is tough, very hot, very dry, and I think it's very harsh, and I think that somewhere in there is a larger metaphor-for survival, I think, in general. How people and animals and plants adapt to a certain area and survive one way or another.

JQ: Well that brings to mind something that I had wanted to ask you that we can deal with in more detail when we focus on specific works. With one work in particular where you use the title of Time Erased Everything. Something like that. I've forgotten what the. . . .

CM: Yeah, that's an ongoing theme. I'm working on two major pieces, the ones that are there on the sawhorses. ArtPace. Those are going to be. . . . I already have a very nice landscape there and a big sun and a pyramid. Well, those are going to wiped out when I finish by a big [remolino], and it doesn't matter. Those are very metaphorical. It's about how time erodes everything-you know, the winds and everything physically erodes. . . .

JQ: But the land remains.

CM: Yeah. But also in a sense the reason I use the pyramid in there is because it's sort of contradictory. Time erases everything, but in the case of pyramids time covered it up.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: And it became a little hill. I've seen pictures of the pyramids before they've been excavated and restored. They look like little hills. You wouldn't know that. . . . You know, covered with brush and everything.

JQ: Exactly.

CM: But then there's a pyramid that has been under there. So in a way there's this also contradictory thing going on that it also preserves. And Picasso himself hated the-I read this somewhere-that Picasso hated his studios to be swept, because he felt that the dust that settled on everything preserved it.

JQ: Oh, is that right? [laughter]

CM: It may not be totally true that it actually preserves it. I know it messes up some things. But Picasso liked to say that.

JQ: Well, you know, when you focus on the various series that we've talked about, another thing comes to mind (and, before we deal with the content in the traditional sense): the space that you define, beyond the fact that you have an image and you have a background, but the background may be just as much in the frontal plane as the image.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: How do you deal with that?

CM: There was something very interesting. You know how opinions about art vary from. . . . You know, every now and then somebody steps back and makes an assessment of what has been going on and says, "Well, this is all b.s." This is just art jargon and art talk. You know, like Tom Wolfe did a wonderful book called The Painted Word . . .

JQ: Oh, yeah.

CM: . . . in which he went at length about the thing with the Abstract Expressionism, the flatness of the canvas and being true to the flatness of the canvas and then the fact that it's only a single plane and therefore the color should be on a single plane. So, to me, it was very humorous, but at the same time it was also very true, how some artists get so formal about what they do that they make this very, very fine distinction . . .

JQ: Because there's nothing else? [said with a smile in his voice-Ed.]

CM: . . . and in the end the conclusion that they draw is that the truest form of painting is abstract because it deals with the plane of the canvas in its truest sense. Well, when a figurative artist does something illusionistic, where there's a sense of depth and all of that, he's also dealing . . . and also he's being very creative because he is, in fact, putting it on a flat plane. It's not sculptural.

JQ: That's right.

CM: So he's also dealing with [it].

JQ: It's all _____ _____. . . . Yeah.

CM: . . . so this is all just double-talk, you know. But artists get like that and some wonderful work emerges from all that, anyway, on both sides. But the thing is I think there is some irony there and some humor and everything, and so in my work there is a constant push and pull. Sometimes I try for depth, but mostly the kind of depth that I try for is different planes. But they're shallow, they're not deep. Almost like a bas relief, in that it doesn't go that deep, but you get an illusion of what's in front and what's in back. But it's a very functional thing, and I leave it at that. And I think that there I'm paying my respects to that humorous controversy. [laughs] Because I think it's all true, but at the same time it can be taken to excesses, academic excesses.

JQ: Oh, yeah. I had wanted to touch on it to see if there was a way that you dealt with space in the Pachuco series, for instance, or the way you dealt with it in the South Texas series.

CM: It's been dealt differently. I think I mentioned yesterday that, among the major influences that that series has, the sculpture of Giacometti was very important to that, because I felt that those tiny little figures-what those skinny figures, rather, sometimes not so tiny-it's like they carry an atmosphere about them, so I decided that I wanted to isolate those figures within a canvas, but proportionately small to the size of the canvas, to where the figure would look small in relation to the canvas. And I felt there was also a formal problem there to be solved, and one easy solution was the horizontal line that I usually put on top, which is basically a natural horizon line. But at some point it ceased to be an easy solution and it became a thing onto itself, and now it is one of the most difficult parts of the canvas to actually paint because it has to be just right for it to work. And it requires a lot of repainting sometimes-refining the colors and all of that. And I've never really. . . . I might actually be very truthful in saying that color for me is not that important even though I use a lot of color.

JQ: You don't invest it with meaning _____ _____ _____. . . .

CM: No. I'm very casual about it. It's not until I start finishing the canvas, the painting, that color becomes critical, and usually the last part that I finish is the background. In fact, you might say that it always is the last thing I finish, but with maybe some exceptions here and there. And so that's probably what contributes to the difficulty of painting the background. It has to be just right. You have to do justice to the subject, the idea, the figure-everything that's already there. And it is essentially something else and you have to relate it. [laughs] So it's an interesting problem.

JQ: In line with that, I've always been curious about the illusion of volume. Even though you will use the usual techniques of defining the planes of the face-in the Pachuco series, for instance-even thought they're frontal we do think of them in terms of some mass, but because it's such a clear silhouette they tend to be flattened out. But they're not really flattened out.

CM: Yeah. Because those are the contradictions that I think contribute to the final effect. Something _____ _____ it almost seems like a decal, like the figure is a decal that has been placed on the canvas, like it's a little skin of paint that is put on there. But these are all the things that I deal with. These are all very conscious, things that I consider and reject. And sometimes they don't work. That's all a part of doing what I do. Sometimes they don't work, and you have to figure out another way of solving the problem.

JQ: Well, let me concentrate on the content and how you deal with that. Well, if we start with the color-field paintings and the related Serape series, I remember you telling me once that the serapes were like precursors of the stripes that some of the late sixties, early seventies artists were using.

CM: Well, not a precursor but a result of that, based specifically on the work of the painter who was known as the Stripe Painter, Gene Davis, an artist from Washington, D.C.

JQ: Right.

CM: When I saw those. . . . I first came across those when I was in college in art books and magazines of the time. And I saw them for what they were, but I also . . . my cultural mind was reading them as serapes. And I think you might even say that that's one of the first times that I started thinking culturally.

JQ: In cultural terms.

CM: Where culture influences how you see something. And I read them as serapes and they stayed in my mind: "One of these days I'm going to do something like that." And eventually I did a whole series of those in the . . . it must have been in the mid to late-seventies. I think that was kind of like a transitional series. I went from that on to the Pachuco series, _____ _____.

JQ: Now did you do woodcuts right after that or about the same time?

CM: No, that was before. The woodcuts were the very first things that I did after I got out of the army and came to San Antonio.

JQ: And those, you did use cultural references or pre-Columbian.

CM: Oh yeah, there was a lot of pre-Columbian stuff in there mostly. And I remember now the name of the artist that was very influential. Manuel Hernandez . . .

JQ: Oh, Manuel.

CM: . . . from California, a California artist. Manuel Hernandez did some wonderful work where you could see the gouge cuts on the wood and everything. He incorporated all of that. And I already had that in mind and I saw the work and, like I said, that triggered it. "See, it's wonderful [to do] that," it said to me. And I did my own version, very different from Manuel's but basically it was sort of like a little homage to his work which had so impressed me.

JQ: So from the very beginning you were already thinking in cultural terms or your own experience of what you had seen.

CM: I think that emerged very naturally in me. I don't think . . . I never had an identity crisis, a cultural identity crisis so much.

JQ: Because from Laredo you're not in the minority, huh?

CM: Yeah. Even though I was naïve about it, not even conscious of it, I became conscious of it in a very natural way. "Well, yeah, I am this. What's the problem?" you know. Whereas you have Chicanos-Mexican Americans-from more anglicized areas of the country who don't even speak Spanish. To me that was like unheard of. But as I started moving away from home I started realizing these things exist . . .

JQ: Especially in the Midwest.

CM: . . . and then "racism!" Oh, wow! I didn't even know. [laughs]

JQ: So you didn't have that in Laredo?

CM: No. Well, it was more the economic kind of segregation.

JQ: Yeah, you lived in one part of town. . . .

CM: Yeah. Well, [no, no, no, no].

JQ: Not even that?

CM: I mean, I never was dirt poor. I came from a. . . . I came from a poor but working family and never really lacked anything. Very working class and poor, but there was always food on the table. And enough to indulge my. . . . Because I was the only one, the only kid. I'm very thankful for that situation.

JQ: When you started thinking of the pre-Columbian things, what sources did you use for that? Was there anything in particular?

CM: The first work that used pre-Columbian imagery that really impressed me was Manuel Hernandez, because he was doing a takeoff on pre-Columbian work but he was doing some very original things with it, I felt. Amado Peñ a also was doing a lot of it at that time, and that has to have impressed me because I was very close with Amado at that time. We had some projects going and things like that. We used to exchange a lot of work also.

JQ: What part of the pre-Columbian material attracted you? What is it that they were doing? They were like stamps?

CM: Yeah, those stamps. And you might say it was secondhand, because it wasn't even the actual thing. It was that book that everybody used, that little paperback.

JQ: By a man named Enciso.

CM: Enciso. Yeah, Enciso. The Enciso book was sort of like my little catalog there, and also for many others.

JQ: Yeah, he did the . . . they were actually designs taken from mainly Central Mexico and. . . .

CM: I think they were cylindrical things that you could impress them on something.

JQ: Exactly. They were like the equivalent of a woodcut but made out of clay.

CM: Yeah. And circular in that you would roll it and the image would repeat itself as you rolled it.

JQ: Exactly. They were stamps.

CM: Yeah, they were stamps essentially.

JQ: Yeah, that's what it was. When did you start focusing on your own experience in growing up in Laredo and later San Antonio?

CM: I think that emerged with the Pachuco series itself. Although, of course, I was thinking of it all along but the thing that as far as manifestations of it in my work that has to have been the Pachuco series. Because, as I mentioned yesterday, seeing the work of José Montoya and El Queso, especially, it triggered the possibility that there is something in my culture that has not been dealt with. These guys were doing it, of course, but I felt that there was another way, and besides I really wanted to that and I had to figure a way of doing it in a way that I wouldn't be. . . . Well, the artistic ego emerges here. I don't want to repeat what they're doing. [laughs]

JQ: Exactly, exactly.

CM: And I did wish I had their talent, because, like I said, I think those guys are naturals. [laughing]

JQ: _____ _____ _____ _____.

CM: I'm not a natural, I had to learn everything.

JQ: Yeah, because Montoya was around during the Pachuco. . . .

CM: Yeah, he actually was around. He is older, a full. . . .

JQ: Because he would have been around eighteen back in 1950, I would say.

CM: Yeah. And my experience-actual experience-is basically in the sixties.

JQ: Yeah, the pachucos were already middle-aged by then.

CM: Yeah. There was another type of pachuco, but that is precisely the one that emerged mostly in my work. Sure I've done my share of Zootsuiters, because there have been some very compelling pictures that I have seen and I have based them on that, but. . . . Well, and they are part of a general theme. But basically I think that the best work that I've done has come out of my own experience.

JQ: Now that brings me into something that is very interesting about the South Texas experience and that is the curandero, especially Don Pedrito Jaramillo.

CM: Yeah. There's a story to that, and it involves the work of Carmen Lomas Garza, because her work triggered in me an interest in Don Pedrito Jaramillo. But it wasn't like the first step, you know. There was something in my family that it related to. Carmen did this wonderful little triptych-type etching of Don Pedrito Jaramillo very early on that I was really struck with because all of a sudden, "Hey, there's Don Pedrito Jaramillo" as a subject of a work of art. And so immediately I said, "Well, my grandmother used to grow. . . ." She had a little garden at home and she would grow medicinal herbs, and she would use some of them for her own and some she would dry and she would take to this packing house that would package them under the Don Pedrito Jaramillo trademark. And she would get very little-make twenty-five cents, ten cents, whatever-but in those times twenty-five cents was a lot more. You could buy a hamburger with it. [laughs]

JQ: Yeah, right. [laughter]

CM: Two, actually-or three in some places. But so, anyway, my grandmother picked up a little money with that, and so there was this very direct connection that I felt, so it was a natural for me to then just run with it and do my own number with it. But it was Carmen Lomas Garza who . . . that triggered that subject.

JQ: That's interesting. Well, what about the other things that you've used-and, of course, we can focus on those in particular cases-like the protective fences around the graves and that kind of thing?

CM: Yes. That is a fairly recent thing, and it has to do more with. . . . It's very biographical, really, in a way, because some of my family is buried in what is now considered to be the old part of the cem[etery] [in Laredo]. .

. . Session 2 (Tape 2, Side B)

CM: It was a very modest part of the cemetery. You know, there's a part where the rich families bury their own. Some of them even actually have marble statuary. And I don't mean cast; I mean, this is real marble.

JQ: My goodness!

CM: Carved marble. But this other area was more humble, and the graves have a more folksy feel to them. [Interruption in taping]

JQ: We have been talking about the various series in terms of the content. The only thing that we haven't touched upon, at least in this very general way, is the Mestizo Series, where you have references to Spain and Mexico.

CM: Um-hmm.

JQ: And the Mexican part is usually referred to with a jaguar and Spain with a bull. Could you talk a little bit about that?

CM: Can I digress a little bit and return to the previous . . .

JQ: Sure, anything.

CM: . . . because I was going to say something else about those graves. Anyway, I had said that-at the break-that it was a more humble, more folksy part of the cemetery, and anyway infants used to be buried with those little fences around them, to answer your question. And those always struck me as very interesting for some reason-and moving, also, in their own way. To me it was sort of like a . . . it was very sad that an infant died-well, you know, if an infant dies-and it was kind of like a very loving, a very moving tribute to them. But there was also this metaphor about the loss of innocence, I felt. You would think that a child would not die. So it's sort of a like a very innocent thought. But they do die.

JQ: Yes.

CM: So, in a sense, there was loss of innocence in that an innocent child was dying, innocence also in the sense that one thinks that. . . . Well, I think it's very innocent to think that a child would not die.

JQ: Exactly.

CM: So anyway, there was a metaphorical thing going on there. And that is how that theme emerged, and I've used it in fairly recent times. There was also an area of the cemetery where I used to play a lot with my cousins.

JQ: So you lived nearby?

CM: Well, no.

JQ: But you walked everywhere, yes.

CM: The thing about it is that during funerals, you know, somebody in the family would die and the kids, we were kids, you know, and so we didn't care about. . . . [laughs]

JQ: Right. You just ran off.

CM: We just played there. There was a tubular iron fence there that is now gone, and we used to hang from it and do somersaults and there was a mesquite tree that I have now come to call the burying mesquite tree, and it's still there.

JQ: Oh, really?

CM: And it's sort of like. . . . I like to go there sometimes and look at it for some reason, that it triggers memories of things. It's a nostalgia thing with it and my own thinking is that if I die well-prepared I will have made a provision that I be cremated and my ashes be strewn at the base of that tree. [laughs] But, anyway, that's pretty much what I wanted to say about that subject.

JQ: And I'm sure we can return to that when we look at some of the works that you have-or that you may wish to talk about.

CM: Okay, you had asked about the. . . . Do you want to ask the question again, or I remember the. . . .

JQ: Yeah, the Mestizo series.

CM: Yeah, the Mestizo series, I think it emerged in the mid-eighties, and it was basically a response to something that had always bothered me about the work that we were doing-Chicano art, in general-in that there was a tendency-and these were very political times; I understand perfectly why-but there was a tendency to deprecate the European side of us and side with the so-called oppressed without really. . . . But I felt that that was a very uninformed reaction, I felt. Because I felt that, "Who are we dealing [with-Ed.] here?" The Europeans who were technological and were smart in many ways, in many war-like ways. And here we also had the Aztecs, who were supposedly oppressed, but they weren't exactly like benevolent rulers themselves. So to me it was all the same thing. [laughs] So I couldn't really identify with either, you know, from that period. I identify with both culturally. Yeah, certainly, that's what makes up a mestizo. That's why we are mestizos. So, anyway, it was a response to what I felt was that failure to deal with something very real about something as important as our own culture. I mean, culture is what. . . . Culture was always to me very political, because at the time it was sort of suppressed here. It wasn't developed. We didn't really know who we were. Mexicans, on the one hand, were saying we were cultureless, and yet we were their own people, but they felt that we were pochos and all of that. And then from this side there was the racism from the Americans.

JQ: So we got it from both sides.

CM: So we got it from both sides, and then so what I considered to be sort of like the Chicano renaissance was a cultural thing. That we started thinking, well. . . . It was like realizing that not only do we go back to pre-Columbian times, we also go back to Europe, and we have two great histories with us-the good and the bad of both of those histories. And when you consider that not only the pyramids in Egypt but the pyramids in the Americas were these huge structures-they were the biggest things in existence and they probably still are.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: Bigger than most any building made by Western-minded man. And in Europe the people. . . . I mean, people in the Middle Ages wearing furs and fighting with each other and over here we had civilizations that were already dead or dying . . .

JQ: Yeah, exactly.

CM: . . . who had built these fabulous structures. So I felt, "This has to be dealt with."

JQ: How did people react to that when you. . . .

CM: They still don't react very favorably.

JQ: No.

CM: It's the least understood, the least admired, period, that I have ever dealt with.

JQ: Why do you suppose that is?

CM: For the same reasons as. . . . I think that my generation has never gone beyond. . . . Welll, some individuals have become like the old guard, and they're still the Chicano movement and with the oppressed thing going, you know, which is fine, but you have to apply it in a truthful way. You have to see things the way they really are.

JQ: They don't distinguish between what the Spaniards were and what the Aztecs were, let's say?

CM: No, they see it as history. They see an invader. An invader when actually he was lost. The man was lost. He thought he was in India. [laughs] It became an. . . . Yeah, let's be truthful. Let's also. . . . Yeah, it became at some point a calculated thing. They realized they were not in India, they were somewhere else. "We can take over this." Then it became calculated. But we need to get a perspective on all of that, a true perspective. It wasn't just an outright invasion. They didn't decide, "We're going to invade the Americas." They didn't even know it existed to start with. [laughter]

JQ: Exactly.

CM: And then in 1992 there was whole reaction, where Europe got it with both barrels. [laughs]

JQ: Oh, that's right, that's right.

CM: Which I thought was. . . . Again, you have to acknowledge the truth. And, yes, some of it is justified. So some of it was done very intelligently, but some of it was knee-jerk reaction.

JQ: Oh, yeah.

CM: So, anyway, in the Mestizo series I was dealing with it in my own personal way, and I think that here also a . . . the reason that I have been sympathetic to Spanish culture is because of that other little footnote in my biography, that my first ambition was to be a bullfighter. [laughs]

JQ: Oh, of course.

CM: That was for real. Some people don't really believe it, but I was very serious and I'm still obsessed with it. And, as I have said, being an artist because I wanted to be one but I wasn't really a natural artist I had to learn everything. And I can flatly state-and I have said this-that if I could go back in history . . .

JQ: Start over.

CM: . . . I would trade all of these nice things . . .

JQ: _____ _____.

CM: . . . that I have accomplished [to have been a bullfighter]. [laughing]

JQ: Well, when did you see your first bullfight?

CM: The first one that I saw I was scared stiff. I thought that the horses were going to get killed. They actually do sometimes, at least by accident. They're well padded, well protected. But I was horrified.

JQ: And that was right next door in _____, in Nuevo Laredo?

CM: When I was a kid my uncle from San Antonio-from here in San Antonio-. He would go visit us in summer, and then we would go to Nuevo Laredo and sometimes we would go to the bullfights. And it wasn't until I was in my early teens that I started. . . . I was just drawn to it, for some reason. It was the arena, and the family would go to bullfights every now and then, and then it became a thing with me. And I saw a book on Manolete, and from that moment that was all I thought about. So anyway, I had this affinity, and with bull-fighting it's also a culture onto itself and has its own music and its own way of talking, and even its own way of walking sometimes. And so I was really into this and I was experiencing it for real in that I was training with a novillero in Nuevo Laredo. Professional training. And we would actually go to bull-breeding ranches and practice with real fighting animals-not bulls, but young females because that is the way it's done, but that is how professionals practice.

JQ: Yeah, they don't want to mess up. . . .

CM: They cannot mess around with the actual bulls.

JQ: Yeah, and they can't mess up the bulls anyway. They learn.

CM: Yeah, they learn and they kill somebody-and have done so when somebody has messed with them clandestinely. So, anyway, that little biographical detail made me conscious of another culture-and also, in a sense, later on I figured the politics of it, that there was. . . . I mean, even there there's discrimination. The Mexican bullfighters have always suffered, historically, when they go to Spain, because opportunities get blocked and things like that. And in Spain, the toreros there, there were stylistic differences. Like it was more cerebral, more functional, whereas it was more inspired with the Mexican toreros. It was more moving, what they were doing. The only equivalent that they had over there to the Mexican toreros was the gypsy toreros, who were also kind of like outcasts.

JQ: Oh, ah!

CM: So all of these things were playing on my mind, and I said, "Well, wait a minute. There's all of these things going on that people don't really know, and I know this, and there's no way I can convey this because bullfighting is out of bounds here." And even I don't approve of it anymore, even though I'm into it. But, anyway, that made me conscious of all this. And so all of a sudden the Chicano movement was saying, "Spain and Europe is bad. Spain invaded the Americas and conquered it."

JQ: Well, they must have felt the same way about bullfighters from Central America or South America.

CM: Yeah, yeah, generally from the Americas. Some of them have been able to transcend all of that with their incredible talent.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: And only now is the greatest, the most awesome torero that ever lived. . . . It is only now that it is grudgingly . . . the honor is accorded to Armillita, a Mexican torero. And he was. . . .

JQ: Finally.

CM: . . . the most awesome torero that ever lived. Do anything.

JQ: Wow. So that was one thing that the other Chicano artists could not relate to.

CM: Could not. No way of getting a handle on that.

JQ: Now yesterday you mentioned the differences between the-in many ways-the Chicanos from California and the ones from Texas.

CM: Yeah. I think of us as different tribes. [laughs]

JQ: Yeah, exactly.

CM: Different tribes and different approaches, and those all have to do with circumstances, I think. There was a lot more activity, volume-wise, in California, and so it was natural that they would start working together. Whereas here there were fewer of us.

JQ: But you know it's interesting to note that some of the best known people in California were not really from there. Like Queso was actually from El Paso. I don't know exactly when he went and Montoya was from New Mexico, I believe.

CM: Yeah. Well, here in San Antonio also. Yeah, there's always been migrations like that. It's interesting, the details like that. Here in San Antonio we have Mel Casas and myself-from the border, you know, who moved to San Antonio.

JQ: Yeah, like Mel's from El Paso.

CM: For reasons of our own we moved here and then became part of the landscape here, the Chicano art landscape. But I think that you adapt to the place where you live and in our own way, and I think that. . . . In fact, I said, you know, there was not a . . . it wasn't a collective thing. Yet we were like-minded and we even had groups that we were affiliated with, but as far as our own work we weren't working together.

JQ: And they had a lot of trouble with. . . .

CM: We were working in concert certainly.

JQ: Yeah, but even when they tried to work in the collectives, they. . . . They did it initially, but then they all went their own way as artists.

CM: Yeah, I think that we were very individualistic, I think. And I think that that kind of irked some hard-core activists who were following the Communist line of thinking that individualism is not good. [laughs] Collective. Never mind that we have different abilities. [laughs]

JQ: _____ [argument]: And it's art for the people.

CM: Yeah. You know, the sentiments are very noble, but in applying them that's where there's a problem, and I think that we were doing art for people, but it came about in a different way-different from what the ideologists thought. [laughs]

JQ: Exactly, exactly. Well, let me pause here, and then we can decide what way we're going to deal with the next part, unless there are some general statements you want to. . . .

CM: No, I think that we covered the Mestizo series rather thoroughly-well, as far as its origins. I don't think we've discussed actual works of art. I can go into that or we can do individual discussions of works.

JQ: Yeah, if we could just pause, and then we can discuss how we're going to do it . . .

CM: Okay.

JQ: . . . so that we won't be stopping all the time if you want to get a work of art out and that sort of thing. [Interruption in taping]

JQ: We continue now with our discussion of the series I enumerated earlier, and we're going to take them in

sequence and Cesar will talk about key works in each of these, and then, as we go along, I'll give the necessary information on the title of the work, the date, and, if necessary, other information. Then we'll talk about themes that cut across series, such as Our Lady of Guadalupe. Well, let's start then with the earliest of your works in woodcuts.

CM: Yeah, I think that one of the most striking images that emerged from the woodcuts-and I think I mentioned earlier yesterday that my greatest hits came from that period. It was a piece called Dando Vida, and it was a woodcut where basically I had seen a picture of a semi-mummified, semi-skeletal human remains in a sort of fetal position or maybe like with the knees drawn up from a burial from some Indians in South America. Maybe we should say indigenous peoples of South America, to be more correct. And it had always struck me as interesting, and I figured out a way to incorporate that image in this piece that I had in mind. Basically, what the image is-it is from the mid-seventies-it's an image of a skeleton, then above it. . . . It's sort of like underground, buried with the knees drawn up, and obviously some kind of indigenous burial. And growing on top of it is. . . . It is right in the roots of a maguey plant that is growing above ground, and then there's the sun above that. It's very graphically effective, I think. And I think that it encapsulated, I think, many different. . . . I think it touched many bases-cultural bases, ecological bases. Basically that was my statement, was an ecological statement, but I gave it a cultural context. It was basically about how you die, and if you are buried in your natural state without chemicals or anything, you decompose and become nutrients for the earth itself and the plants. Sort of my version of pushing up the daisies. [laughs]

JQ: Let me backtrack and translate for those who will listen to this tape. Dando Vida, if I heard you correctly, is. . . .

CM: "Giving life." "Dando vida" means "giving life."

JQ: Yes. The thing that comes to mind-and I remember seeing it for the first time-as far as the cultural references are concerned the breakup into three different levels of the sky, the earth, and the underworld . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . is certainly pre-Columbian, and you see it also in the very popular ex-voto-or votive-paintings.

CM: I might say that I was not conscious of that in pre-Columbian art, but I think that some things either you have it in you or you see it and it just registers with you subconsciously.

JQ: Well, I think you also echoed without realizing a lot of the pre-Columbian beliefs-that they thought of the human remains in exactly the same way, and that's why they. . . .

CM: But that way was not. . . . I don't remember being conscious of it at the time. I think at some point I did become conscious of it. I think it was particularly. . . .

JQ: Because there's the myth of Quetzelcoatl, who brings life from the skeletal remains in the underworld.

CM: Yeah, I think I had conversations like that with Chista. Chista was very much into pre-Columbian thought, and so we used to have many conversations.

JQ: They also . . . so the bones were like something that gives life like the bone of the avocado.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: A great big seed. It's the seed from which life springs.

CM: Yeah, I think I touched on all the bases, whether subconsciously or consciously, but the bottom line is that it was a very effective image, and it was one of the first images of mine that was widely published in magazines and reviews of that particular show, Ancient Roots, New Visions.

JQ: Exactly. Yeah, that was prominently reproduced everywhere.

CM: And it was also in those early woodcuts where the Don Pedrito figure first emerged. It will reemerge in the South Texas series, but I remember doing a couple of woodcuts of the image of Don Pedrito.

JQ: Can you talk a little bit about your experience with Don Pedrito? Obviously you'd heard of him when you were growing up, but the people who are not involved with this culture would not know anything about that.

CM: I know generally the history of Don Pedrito. Don Pedrito was a man, if I remember correctly, from Jalisco or Guadalajara, something like that, that area of Mexico. And one time he was riding on his horse-he was a [campesino] and he was riding on his horse going somewhere, and by accident he got hit right on the face-on

the nose, to be specific-by a low-hanging branch, and he fell off, unconscious, from the horse and when he woke up he had this terrible gash on his nose. Deformed his nose really. Right on the bridge of his nose. And I believe the story goes is that there was a small pond, and he rubbed some mud on the wound, and he got well, and maybe he had some kind of religious experience there, and he felt like he had some power to cure or something. And, eventually, he migrated to South Texas. Ended up in what is now Falfurrias, a little place called Los Olmos, a little ranch house there. And he became known; he became a local legend. People from far, far away-both Mexicans and Anglo-would come to him for remedies or to cure some ill.

JQ: And this is at the turn of the century?

CM: Right at the turn of the century. The initial impression that one gets-you know, that people get-is that he existed just a few years ago, but actually he died I think in 1906 or something like that. Or 1911. Something like that. And, anyway, this man became. . . . He was a cult figure, sort of very benevolent in attitude, and people would go to him for cures and he would devise all kinds of very creative cures. We all know the importance of psychology sometimes in healing, and I think that he was an early practitioner there, a very effective practitioner, and he became part of the folklore of South Texas. There are some books that have been. . . . I think J. Frank Dobie wrote about him-among others. And in recent times he has been the focus of many studies and things like that.

JQ: There must have been other healers in South Texas, but he was the one that stands out.

CM: Oh, yeah, certainly. Another one-although I think he came much later; I'm not sure of the chronology there, but I definitely do think it was much later-was-and he was not from Texas; actually he was Mexican, but he had a lot of influence here, a lot of followers-it was El niñ o Fidencio.

JQ: Right.

CM: But there were also others that were not famous, many other curanderos.

JQ: So that's very much a part of the Mexican culture.

CM: Yeah, oh certainly, yeah. Probably because of . . . it has to do with belief and also with the economical situation. It was what was affordable, and it worked to some extent for them. It worked for them, period.

JQ: Now, you probably saw the very well-known photograph of him with the long white beard, and you used that as a point of reference.

CM: There's something there about that picture that has been misinterpreted here and there even in the way it's used now commercially. You have him with a pointed beard, and it was not a pointed beard. It was a beard that flared out from the middle. What they interpreted as the point of the beard is actually. . . . He was wearing a vest, and so it created a point and since the photograph is vague they thought it was a pointed beard, but it's not a pointed beard.

JQ: I didn't know that. I've never looked at it carefully.

CM: So he didn't have a pointed beard like he is pictured in the trademark, the medicinal line of stuff, plants. But there is another, even more. . . . The best photograph of Don Pedrito, as far as I'm concerned-that I know of-is in the collection of the Institute of Texas Culture, and very few people know about it, but I investigated it and I have a copy of it. A perfectly clear photograph taken by a San Antonio photographer. I mean, perfectly clear. Do you want to pause a little bit? Can you pause? [Interruption in taping]

JQ: We return now to the taping and our discussion of the key works in various media that Cesar has used. We were talking about Don Pedrito and how one of the photos has been misinterpreted, and he has shown me that it really was a vest, so he just had a . . . I guess we could call it a rounded beard; it wasn't pointed.

CM: It wasn't. It was a very regular beard.

JQ: Just an old man's beard.

CM: Scraggly.

JQ: Was there anything else you wanted to say about the woodcuts?

CM: I think that there was maybe a few other very effective images that came off of it, but I think that second to Dando Vida there was another one called Liberación.

JQ: Liberation?

CM: Yeah, "Liberation," which was basically a. . . . Again, you had a horizon line and a sky, little mountains in the distance, and a sun, and flying almost like across the sun is this bird figure which is actually a [paisano] or a chaparral cock, and it was in part. . . . It was made more realistic, but it was based on one of those images in the Enciso book that I reworked. It was actually of the same bird. And that's where it came from. I think that particular woodcut has all of the characteristics of the basic landscape that I used in the South Texas series, which is a foreground, then in the distance little mountains, and then the sky and a big sun. And I might add that the little mountains that you see on the horizon line, the origin of that is that when I was a kid in Laredo I would go to the family ranch for periods of time during summer and almost immediately after you leave Nuevo Laredo, you start seeing way out in the distance the mountains. And so that always symbolized for me sort of like going to the ranch . . .

JQ: [If you go north there are no] mountains.

CM: . . . but it also symbolized going away from home, because you don't see any mountains from Laredo. So anyway, it was just that little bit of biographical, personal symbolism there in the little mountains that you see all the time.

JQ: Now had you used serapes in any of the works before? That just happened. . . .

CM: I think I did. Yes, I had. When I was. . . . Like I said, I was going from abstract painting into figurative painting, and I did some still lifes, some very traditional. . . . Some of them are a little bit abstract, sort of Picassoesque, but some of them were very traditional still lifes, where I had a skull, a serape, bowl of fruit, Mexican chair.

JQ: You mean a corn-husk chair or a leather chair? You said a Mexican chair?

CM: Yeah, as a matter of fact it was. . . . I guess that's what it is-a corn-husk chair, that braided. . . . Yeah, those that have painted flowers. Well, I did some very traditional still lifes with those, and the serape was there for drapery. You know, very standard still lifes, very academic still lifes, but again with a cultural intent. And that is where the serapes emerged. But they were very difficult to do, in trying to get the illusion of folds and depth and everything. Depth and all of that. They were very difficult to do as a still life, as a representation of a real thing. So, anyway, from that experience emerged the actual Serape series, which are more abstract, because they're laid out starkly across the canvas or paper, and they have been very carefully figured out as far as the spaces of the lines, the number of lines, and the progressions of the colors. So you might say that I did what real artists aren't supposed to do. I worked out formulas. I had formulas for different configurations, and I worked with those. And in the Serape series I don't think there is any single serape that stands out, because they're all pretty much . . . all different but essentially the same thing.

JQ: Now did you use the traditional colors in the serapes or did you. . . .

CM: In some and in some I deviated. I used just combinations. I always felt that these were sort of like the experiments that Josef Albers was doing-had done. Color progressions or color relationships.

JQ: What is the genesis of the Batos? We have been calling them Pachuco series, which is "Zoot Suiter," and Bato is. . . .

CM: Yeah, I think I started calling it the Pachuco series at first, but then I felt that Bato was more appropriate because that was the term that we used a lot, Los Batos.

JQ: Do you have any idea where Bato comes from?

CM: No, I have no idea.

JQ: I'll have to look it up, because I don't either but I remember hearing it.

CM: I'm sure it has a history, but I don't know it. It just was a term that we used at home among us. I think I mentioned yesterday about the origins of it. Well, I'll repeat that.

JQ: Sure.

CM: It's the result of many influences and many ideas that were running through my mind. Foremost, of course, the possibility of even doing that was awakened in me by seeing the work of José Montoya and El Queso, especially, in California, and I felt that I wanted to do the same thing because I had in my mind some very memorable characters that I knew I could eventually lay down on canvas, or whatever, and express. And so an idea was planted in my head, but I had no idea how I was going to do this, and I didn't even have the technique then because I was into abstract painting. Couldn't paint a figure. [laughs]

JQ: Ah. What was the very first one you did? What was it like?

CM: I'm not sure. I think I have it. The very first one, I think I have it. I'm not sure if it's the first one, because I wasn't dating things then. I wouldn't put a date on them; I would just do them. But I think it is, and it's very different. . . . Well, it has some of the markings, some of the characteristics of the later stuff. It's kind of stark, but it's not as formalized, and it's more stylized also. A little bit more caricaturish, I would say. But it's a very good image I think. And. . . . [Interruption in taping]

JQ: For some inexplicable reason, we lost a good fifteen minutes of tape, and I'm checking to see if it is recording again, and I may not have let out one of the buttons or something, and just checking to see where we are.

[Interruption in taping- CM & JQ can be heard continuing to speak, but their remarks are not audible enough to be transcribed-Trans.]

JQ: You mentioned two key works, and one is Bato con Sunglasses, or Bato with Sunglasses.

CM: Yeah, I think we lost all of that.

JQ: Yeah, you painted that in 1978, and you think it's thirty by thirty-six inches and you've done about six to ten versions.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: And the second one was A Faithful Portrait of Baltazar Lopez. Then you talked about a third one, among others.

CM: Oh, yeah, I talked about Javier Herrera [Portrait of Javier H.-Ed.], yes.

JQ: Javier spelt with a J instead of an X. And then we were beginning to talk about the mature work, among them El Hombre que le gustan las mujeres-The Man Who Loves Women. So let's just backtrack a little bit and talk about the two key works of the Bato series.

CM: Okay. One of those early key works was a piece called . . . one of what became-unfortunately for me-a signature work. I caught myself on that and tapered off. But, anyway, it was called Bato con Sunglasses,and I eventually did a lot of versions of that.

JQ: You even did a print of that.

CM: A couple of prints, I think. [laughs] So anyway, talk about overdoing a subject. But it was good material. So I couldn't help myself. And I intend to do it again.

JQ: It really came together for you.

CM: And I'm going to do it again. But, anyway, it was in that piece where I think everything gelled, and it was very early on, but it was still. . . . My thinking on it was still scattered, but somehow all the things that I wanted for that series gelled in that particular piece. The horizon reference line was on the top of the canvas, and the placement of the figure became very typical of that series because it was very effective. There was some distortion in the figure itself, which made me conscious of scale and how some things would work in one size, but you go to a bigger or smaller size, it's not going to work, you know, one of those things. It was also a learning experience. It was a very dark, mysterious portrait of a guy with sunglasses.

JQ: It seemed to typify the piece. . . .

CM: It typified. It was. . . . The sunglasses themselves were like. . . . I affected them. I personally affected sunglasses because it was kind of cool to wear sunglasses. [laughs]

JQ: Right.

CM: So anyway, that piece was a very effective piece and it was one of those where I said to myself, "That is what I want to . . . pivotal," you might say. Another piece that is also pivotal in that series, that had quality that I was looking for, was a piece that was a fairly faithful portrait of another friend who went through school with me-elementary and high school. His name was Baltazar López. And I don't remember if in this particular piece I actually drew it or if I. . . .

JQ: You mentioned you were having difficulty with the drawings _____ _____ aside. . . .

CM: Yes, at that time. . . . Like I have said, I have had to learn many things because I'm not a natural, and drawing was not my strong suit at that time, and I would just start painting and edit everything on the canvas itself-no preparative drawings. In this particular piece, I don't recall. . . . To tell you the truth, I don't recall if I drew it or if I took a picture of the picture from the high school annual and then projected it on the canvas. I don't remember. But, anyway, pictorially it was pivotal because it was . . . especially in color relationships. I used some combinations of colors there that I thought were odd for where my own thinking about color was concerned, and I felt that it worked. The horizon line was not present. Instead of a horizon line. . . . It was there-that band of color-but it was brushy. It wasn't a straight line, in other words. It was atypical in that sense. The colors were. . . . You know, the figure itself had blue and turquoise and colors like that. The shirt was painted very flat, whereas there was some modeling on the face. The shirt itself was very, very flat. Here's where I started varying the . . . playing with those things.

JQ: Yes.

CM: But we discussed earlier how much depth do I give a picture. And I think that that's pretty much it as far as what I have to say about. . . .

JQ: Now is that the one that had collectors complaining because you'd done so many versions? Or was that another one?

CM: No, that was. . . . Yeah, well okay, yeah. That was the other one-the last one that we discussed, I think, in full.

JQ: Well, let's take it in sequence then. And then the second key work was the Faithful Portrait of Baltazar Lopez.

CM: Yeah. That's the one that we're talking about and, like I said, it had qualities that was just, you know, very different from the other, from the Bato with Sunglasses, but, again, this was all a pivotal piece. It just added more possibilities to what I was doing. I could see firsthand right there, this is going somewhere.

JQ: Yes. And that's the one that . . . one of the few times that someone actually saw the work?

CM: No, that was. . . . Okay, the portrait that actually was seen by the subject was the one that I'm going to discuss now, and that is Javier Herrera, another friend who went to. . . .

JQ: Okay. So I got them all jumbled up. Sorry about that.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: It's because of the notes that I had here. So let me reiterate then. What you talked about was the Bato con Sunglasses done in 1978 and the. . . .

CM: Yeah, and then I talked about Baltazar Lopez.

JQ: Right. And then the one you need to talk about now is Javier H.-or Herrera.

CM: Yeah. The title was Javier H., but it was meant to be Javier Herrera.

JQ: Javier with a J?

CM: Yeah. Javier with a J, not an X. In that particular piece. . . . I think I said something to the effect that. . . . Well, I'm going to go over it. I shouldn't repeat myself so much. In this one I was trying to make a faithful drawing of the picture in the high school annual of Javier Herrera . . .

JQ: Oh, that's right.

CM: . . . and I was having so much difficulty with drawing it that I just gave up. I had an urgency to do this, and I said to myself, "Forget it. Forget the drawing." I took a picture of the picture then projected the slide on the canvas and traced it. So it's a traced image and that's why it's so faithful to the subject.

JQ: Ah-ha.

CM: But where painting is concerned, it was painted in such a way that it also became a pivotal work. It was very effective. The face was a very dark blue with a purple . . . sort of purplish shirt. It was kind of like a serape, bands going, something like that. It was a very effective picture and I really liked it. Unfortunately, at the time. . . . Okay, this one, the background was red. It was kind of like a dark red background, and the only thing that ever disturbed me about this picture is at the time I was signing my full name and on this one my name came out so large . . .

JQ: [laughs]

CM: . . . that, quite frankly, it ruined the picture as far as I was concerned. [laughter] A perfectly good picture ruined by the artist's signature. And so it was kind of kept under wraps. I think I showed it maybe a couple of times, but I never got rid of it. I never sold it or anything. I never changed it. But then in recent times-I think maybe a couple of years ago-I finally reworked it to get rid of the excessively large signature. So I had to repaint the background, and on this background. . . . The original background did not have the horizon reference line. On the new background I did paint one on. The red that I used was a little brighter, because I felt that at this time I wanted that. It was a revision and also in color. The figure was not touched. I think I touched it up here and there, but it was only touching up like scrapes that had happened over the years, because keep in mind that was done in 1978. So, anyway, I had to do a little bit of repair work-very minor, though. It didn't change the character at all. But the background was repainted a little bit differently, and the signature was hardly seen. [laughs] On this I wasn't taking chances. And it was a painting that is now in the collection. . . . It was bought recently by the Mexican Fine Art Center Museum in Chicago.

JQ: That's right. That's the Javier H.?

CM: The Javier H., yeah.

JQ: Okay.

CM: And I showed you yesterday at my studio at Art Pace the second version of Javier H.

JQ: The one that's against the wall _____.

CM: It is relatively faithful to the actual person, but here, where the original was an actual tracing from a photograph projected on a canvas, the new version is actually a drawing. And it emerged from two drawings. The first drawing that I did that I was satisfied of Javier H. . . . Remember, we're in the present and I can draw now. I know how to draw. [laughter] The first drawing that I tried of Javier Herrera came out very faithful to the photograph, to where I can say it's a portrait. And I realized that Javier Herrera was-the actual . . . the picture and then the person-was very benevolent . . .

JQ: Yes.

CM: . . . had a very benevolent. . . . And I wanted something actually with a harder edge, and so I did another drawing where. . . . I think I thinned the figure out a little bit-you know, it became a thinner man-and something in the expression changed. It still looked like Javier, but it's not really Javier anymore, but it's still based on that person. The title remains. And as I have said, in this series it's not the idea of doing actual likenesses, but actually getting the essence of a type of person, and these guys happened to be types-very identifiable, to where you can say, "Well, I've seen a guy just like that." And you have. And so, anyway, the recent version of Javier H. is a painting that I like very much, and I just did it.

JQ: What about the mature works? When you say "mature works," these are from what years?

CM: Probably . . . I would say that the mature works start emerging from the mid-eighties on, I think.

JQ: And then you mentioned The Man Who Liked Women.

CM: Yeah, El Hombre que le gustan las mujeres was the actual title, and the translation was, of course, The Man Who liked Women. And this is in the purest sense the essence of what I've been trying to do, because it did not come from an actual photograph. This is from memory. And here's how I go about composing these characters, because it is in this painting that I can give you, essentially, the process-how I blend more than one person-or elements-and create a character that is almost like literary. There was a mechanic that lived a couple of houses . . . on the block, almost in front of my house-next to my house, in front of my house-and he was a mechanic, a big man. His name was Chale-Carlos, but we called him Chale. And he worked there in his yard. He had a hoist there where he would take out motors and work on them and stuff like that. So just a big man. And his looks lingered in my mind as possible subject matter, but somehow something was missing, and then at some point I said, "Well, a big man-a man with a big torso, big arms, big chest-there's a lot of room for tattoos." [laughter] And so I decided, "I have to put tattoos on this portrait. So the next thing was "What tattoos?" And originally I had intended to put a crucifix on his chest, and that was it. And the reason I was going to do that, because the man who lived next door to him-directly in front of my house-was an older man. Never worked. He was always at home and he would get up early in the mornings-actually, at all times of the day-and start watering the plants there. And almost invariably he was shirtless, and he had this fabulous big tattoo of a crucifix on his chest, and that is why.

JQ: [laughs]

CM: So I was blending characters here, you know. I was going to put that tattoo on the other guy-on the mechanic. But as I fleshed out from memory the character, I just drew him from scratch, from memory, and it wasn't meant to. . . . Again, I was [generally]. I realized that I can put a tatoo on his chest and also on his arms, and so what am I going to do there? And then, "Well, how about girls, you know, women?" They were very common among the pachucos in Laredo and all that. Even though this is not really a pachuco that we're dealing with here, he came from that element. I wanted to, again, [get] the whole idea, relating everything that I wanted for that theme. And so then I said, "Well, I'm going to put women on each arm." And then the question was, "What kind of women?" And then that's when a light bulb lit up in my head, and I figured I could do a theme kind of, a theme that was about attitudes toward women, which were the attitudes of the time-you know, very macho attitudes, so instead of a crucifix I put a Virgen de Guadalupe on his chest, and that's a woman-a type of woman. And then on one arm I put what is essentially a nude woman-you know, kind of lewd, kind of prostitute-y, like prostitute-like-and on the other arm what I felt was a personification of a very nice girl, very nice Mexican girl.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: And I think I added a little heart on the side [with] that. That was the good girl, the bad girl, and the [virgin]. So there's a range there. [laughter] This guy had range. And it became a statement about macho attitudes toward women. I actually knew a guy who had those attitudes, and the funny thing is that this guy lived with his mother all his life until she died-a guy my age, a person my age-and didn't go out much with girls, but when he did he'd do it with this thing in his mind that like, if you want sex you go to el otro lado -Mexico, Boy's Town-and the girlfriend-the nice girl that you go out with-you're going to marry her so you don't mess with her. He had that mentality. [laughs] So, anyway, this is real stuff here. And so that all figures in my thinking and into that painting, and it became one of those images that was reproduced right and left, and has been shown a few times. There were two versions of that, actually-a small version, and then I did another version.

JQ: So the Lady of Guadalupe on his chest came in as you were working the bad and the good girls?

CM: Yeah, I said, "Well, I mean, why a crucifix? You can put-following the women theme-you can put a Guadalupe on there." [laughing] So, anyway, that is the essence of how I did this-that painting-and it's also the essence of what I do with a series-combine characters into different people, and also the idea that I have in mind-and then it becomes a character that seems very real and very recognizable and very universal to the Chicano experience, and that was one very successful picture that I did.

JQ: Now did you use a character with tattoos in other Bato series? Or was that it?

CM: I think I did although, frankly, to my view, less effectively because. . . . I mean, you can only do one El Hombre que le gustan las mujeres. [laughs]

JQ: Yeah, that's right.

CM: I wish I could capitalize, but the only thing you can do there is repeat yourself, do another version of it. And, actually, I did another version. Because, as time goes by, what happens is that I do something, and then as time goes by I look at it again and all of a sudden something catches my eye about it that I'm not satisfied with. Even though it works in the painting itself, I think, "I could improve on something." And, in this case I felt the tattoos could be improved. There was some distortion in the naked girl that was there on one arm, and the Virgen de Guadalupe had some details that I wanted to work out that I felt I could express with a more cultural intent there. The good girl stayed the same. That one worked from the beginning and, interestingly, I don't know if I tapped into something here that somebody has actually said something about it or what and I heard it and it subconsciously registered, or if I actually came up with it originally, but when that painting was in Hispanic Art in the United States, and when it was in Los Angeles-at the Los Angeles County Museum, I believe-they did an audio tour of the show, and they asked the personalities from Los Angeles to talk about specific pieces in the show, and it so happened that Luis Valdes, who did Zoot Suit, was assigned to talk about El Hombre que le gustan las mujeres, and he said something. . . . He did a hell of a job. I mean, he understood exactly. I never talked to him about it. Just going by what was there, he was very accurate in his interpretation, and he said, very specifically about the tatoo, the nice girl, he said, very authoritatively, he said, "Interestingly. . . ." Well, these are not really exactly . . . I'm paraphrasing, of course. But something to the effect that, "Interestingly, in this tattoo, this is the nice girl, and typical of nice girls are these Mexican braids and blouse of this type and stuff like that." Everything I had on there he was agreeing with it like it was common knowledge that . . . as if folklore. . . .

JQ: Yeah, right. _____ _____ _____.

CM: . . . folklore, and maybe it is, for all I know. I don't know it is _____, and maybe it isn't, but the thing is I didn't do it knowing those things. [laughter]

JQ: Oh, that's great. Well, I'm wondering if this would be a good time to talk about Our Lady of Guadalupe since we touched upon that.

CM: Yeah, we can see into that. Yeah. . . .

JQ: It's still going under the Mestizo.

CM: Yeah. In fact, after I did that Virgen de Guadalupe on the chest, the image lingered in my mind, and I wanted to do something with the actual Virgen de Guadalupe. But, first of all, let's trace the origins of what became the Mona Lupe, one of the versions of the Virgen de Guadalupe that I have done. In the mid-seventies it was very common in the Chicano art shows of the period and in Chicano murals that there had to be a Virgen de Guadalupe, and there-among other things, among other things-there was the image of the mestizo that came from a-or expression of the mestizo-that came from the Eppens Mural at the Ciudad Universitaria, where you have the profile of the indigenous Mexican and the profile of the Spaniard and then the mestizo face facing you, you know. All of those things were used by Chicano artists at the time.

JQ: The Tri-Face.

CM: In most cases it wasn't even an interpretation; it was just a copy. It was thrown in sort of like an ingredient of a Chicano artwork. And at that time I vowed, took a vow, made a vow that, "I will never do a mestizo painting. I will never do pyramids. I will never do a Virgen of Guadalupe." [laughter] Because everybody was doing it. But no sooner had I said that when an idea struck me. And it was meant to be critical of that excessive use of particular images. And I came up with a painting that I titled Mona Lupe, The Epitome of Chicano Art, and it was basically Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa (La Giaconda) dressed in Virgen de Guadalupe drag. Very faithfully painted but dressed like the Virgen de Guadalupe-faithfully to the best of my ability. But, again, I really labored over that one. I never could finish it, although what I had was pretty good. As I have repeatedly said, my drawing abilities. . . . If I was inspired, I could draw , but I had to be inspired. It wasn't a natural ability that I had. And I struggled with it, and at some point I left it alone. "I can't do anything." I just gave up on it, plain gave up. "I cannot finish it. Too hard." And it wasn't actually the drawing that was giving me trouble; it was the painting itself. The painting I was having trouble with, so I couldn't think how to make this effective and I gave up on it. And then at that time I did actually do a drawing on paper, a colored pencil drawing, that was pretty good.

JQ: That's the one I saw? The one in colored pencil?

CM: Yeah, I think you saw that one. And that paper piece, Sandra Cisneros has that now. I think I gave it to her at some point. But, anyway, this is the mid-seventies when these pieces were conceived. Then we jumped to the . . . must have been . . . we'll have to check the dates later. I don't remember the dates, but either late eighties or early nineties, when I decided to move on this, and I finally finished the original Mona Lupe that I had started in 1975, thereabouts. And it turned out to be a very good image, and I exhibited it a couple of times, and that was eventually sold to Sandra Cisneros's brother [_____-Ed.]. . .

JQ: Oh!

CM: . . . who's an art collector. So the Cisneros are well stocked with Mona Lupe. So then after that I decided to do a third version. The reason was that I wanted to add some other things that had become considerations in my work, and the original Mona Lupe is. . . . I figured out the actual size of the actual Mona Lupe, and I painted it in more or less those dimensions and proportions. And I wanted to keep that, but I wanted to do that in a larger canvas. So what I did is I worked out a middle portion of the canvas where the actual Virgen de Guadalupe is in, and that is the size of the original, but it's within a larger canvas, and to which I added a lot, elaborated on it considerably. If you want to refer it, I happened to notice that one was around here, so since it's handy we can refer to that. But this actually. . . . Well, actually, we have both versions here, and you can see here.

JQ: Yes.

CM: And in the latest version I added . . . I perched the Virgen on top of a cactus, a stylized Aztec-design cactus, and then all of that is on top of a burning, smoldering pyramid. So here the elements of the Mestizo series crept in-the idea of the conquest and all that, and dealing with all of that. And that is the last version that I did of the [Virgin of] Guadalupe. And I did some things that I _____. . . .

JQ: You even put in a triptych here.

CM: Yeah, in a religious triptych form, which I had first encountered in that Don Pedrito image that Carmen Lomas did. I had that in mind from way back that I wanted to do something with that, too.

JQ: So you've thrown in the pre-Columbian, the colonial, the religious.

CM: Yes. So here a lot of things gelled.

JQ: And this one is in. . . . Has anyone bought this?

CM: Yeah, that version. . . .

JQ: That's the one that the Mexican Museum bought? No, they bought the other one, the Bato.

CM: No, this one . . .

JQ: Sandra Cisneros' brother. . . .

CM: The first painted version is Sandra Cisneros' brother. The drawing is Sandra Cisneros'. And this one is at the Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi.

JQ: Oh, so they bought it?

CM: Yeah, they bought it.

JQ: Okay. What about the other images with Our Lady of Guadalupe? These are the primary ones, actually.

CM: The Mona Lupe is the primary one, the one that started it all. But then I did other versions, where it was basically as part of. . . . Well, here's where the series become kind of like they blend into each other. I did it as part of the South Texas series, but really the theme is very much [a] Mestizo series theme, because I was blending elements from Native, pre-Columbian, Americas imagery, and I was blending European imagery. You know, like even the local Rose Window here, which was not part of the original . . . things you know about. Not actually part of the original mission, San José Mission. So I was blending all of those considerations here and coming up with a version of the Guadalupe that paid its respects to everything that led to its invention.

JQ: Well, that can lead us directly into the Mestizo series, then.

CM: Yeah. Can we discuss a little bit about the Virgen de Guadalupe . . .

JQ: Of course.

CM: . . . the original that's in the Basilica? Because there's a bearing on that, and I think that there is something . . . considerations that can be considered into what we're talking about, interestingly. I think. . . . You know, it is said to be a divine image. And the church, on the other hand, doesn't allow any investigations, but then all of a sudden I think it actually allowed some investigations and analysis, and supposedly they couldn't identify the pigments or anything so there was still a question, "Is this a divine image?" And so much is said about the divinity and the divine origin of this image, and yet what nobody talks about is that the Virgen of Guadalupe has been repainted, things added to it. The original did not have any of the things that have made it so recognizable to us. Basically, it was a woman dressed. . . . Originally, it was a picture of a woman dressed in the clothes of a . . . pretty much a peasant, probably the people of that area-Middle East, I think. No adornment whatsoever. Just very plain. Then the rays of light and the clouds and all of the other designs on the clothes. . . . The colonial element crept in and it was repainted. It was allowed to be repainted. So, to me, that's all of part of the controversy and irony. It's a sacred image, and yet the church allowed it to be repainted to make it more credible. [laughs]

JQ: Yes. Well, there was always such a controversy, because there were a lot of apparitions, but this one happened to become the cult figure and attracted a following. But the church itself doubted that this had actually happened. And everyone knows that it was supposed to have first appeared on December 12 to Juan Diego _____.

CM: I have my own theory about how this whole thing evolved. Like you said, there was a series of alleged appearances, and it was brought to the attention of the church and all of that. But interestingly. . . . Well, I'm not a scholar on this. I'm just going by bits and pieces that I have read, but actual histories of what happened were not written immediately.

JQ: No.

CM: The accounts were not written until maybe abut fifty or sixty years later.

JQ: Well, the first inquiries were, oh, about twenty-five years later.

CM: Well, okay. But considerably removed from the actual original date of the appearance. And what I think happened is that it happened to an Indian so you're not going to believe him-for all those reasons, you know.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: But apparently a cult developed, where the Indians really were worshipping there. But then again, it had

been an original place of worship for them to start with because . . .

JQ: Exactly.

CM: . . . [Tonantzin] or what is it?

JQ: Yeah, Tonantzin, the earth goddess.

CM: The earth goddess was there at one time. But apparently the Church and the powers that be of the time started getting comfortable with the idea. "Well, this is drawing the Indians . . . this is becoming a . . . we're drawing them to Catholicism." They had found their Catholicism.

JQ: Yeah. And then the Criollos also began to identify with it.

CM: And so I think as the years passed they got comfortable with the idea, and then, next thing you know, it becomes an official icon. [laughter]

JQ: Yes, she became the patron saint of Mexico City in 1731, I think.

CM: I mean, it became that accepted. But it fit so well and it sort of pacified everybody, satisfied everybody.

JQ: Yes, in fact, even the Spaniards who came up here to San Antonio in the early eighteenth century brought many images, and there's a very famous encounter between the Spaniards and one of the earliest friars or missionaries meeting the east Texas Indians, and they had two banners painted-one of Our Lady of Guadalupe and one of the crucified Christ-and they did a whole religious ceremony before they sat down with the Indians. And they had their own banners. And it was all very formal and this was, I believe, around 1715. Anyway, she was already such an important icon for the Spaniards as well as the Mexicans, let us say.

CM: Yeah. I mean, I think it bears saying that there is a Spanish version of Guadalupe.

JQ: Exactly. Yeah.

CM: I guess you were referring to that, right? Or was after. . . .

JQ: This was the one in the Basilica.

CM: Yeah. There was a Spanish [version].

JQ: Yeah, when they were fighting against the Moors, she appeared, I guess, a couple of hundred years before they came over here.

CM: So anyway, [we've digressed enough, we're digressing now]. [laughs]

JQ: Yeah. There's been a lot written on her, and there have been some Chicana artists that have used Our Lady of Guadalupe.

CM: I've read some of that stuff, yes.

JQ: And so there's been that identification. She's not only a religious symbol but a political one, and Mexicans identify with Our Lady Guadalupe.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: Because she is the brown virgin.

CM: Yeah. It fit perfectly for everybody. The Indians were reconciled to it, and the Spaniards were saying, "Well. . . ." Catholic _____.

JQ: And until recently every family always had a Lupe in the family.

CM: Oh, yes.

JQ: Whether it was a boy or a girl.

CM: Yeah, in my family there's a male cousin named Guadalupe, and we call him Lupano.

JQ: And every church from here to Kansas to Chicago, in a Mexican community, their Catholic church is dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, so she's a super-important icon.

CM: Yeah, it became representative, emblematic. So, anyway.

JQ: So how does she fit into the Mestizo series? Or actually. . . .

CM: Well, like I said, the other versions that I did were meant to be part of the South Texas series, because there's a religiosity that I had to come to terms with about the area. South Texas is mostly Mexican American, and Mexican Americans-my people-are very religious, let's face it. I'm not. Have no belief whatsoever. I was born a Catholic, and for years I kind of like was hostile to the idea of religion, but I've become reconciled to it-as a cultural thing. I realized that it's a cultural thing also. And culture is important to me, so I reconciled myself to the fact that religion is there whether I believe or not. So I decided to do works that were faithful to that idea and not disrespectful, but again correcting what I felt were-well, adding perceptions, let's say, about the Virgen de Guadalupe, introducing elements that had not been used before-as far as I know. And so I started doing them, I believe in the form. . . . Yeah, it was in the form of crucifixes, but in the middle I had the typical configuration of the Virgen de Guadalupe, and also surrounded in the middle of the crucifix by the Coatlicue figure that had been cut up and reassembled to fit. And all of this fit around the Rose Window that is at one of the local missions here and which is really a very colonial element. It was not part of the original. But again, I was going into the Mestizo thing where all of the . . . from pre-Columbian to more current things, more current elements, and the European, religious, and all of that. So it became everything. A crucifix, a Coatlicue, a Virgen de Guadalupe, a Rose Window-_____ it all gelled into one image, a reinvention of the Virgen de Guadalupe.

JQ: And which are the key works in that series?

CM: There are several. I can't. . . . I would have to refer to my slides to figure out how many versions I did. I did maybe three, four. No, maybe more than that, come to think of it.

JQ: Well, what we can do is talk just a few minutes more and then wrap it up on another tape. We can do what's left of this tape, and then the other side, which would give us just, I think, the opportunity to pick up on some of the stuff that we've [referred to].

CM: Yeah, okay. Yeah, I think we can wrap up the Virgen de Guadalupe by saying that in some of the versions that I did I actually did it with . . . not the canvas but I did them on Masonite. And I configured the Masonite in the form of a cross, an actual cross, and the images were painted on that. And it involved mixed media, because some parts are photographic that have been transferred or collaged onto those grounds, and some painted element, very expressionistic, very explosive, I think in some cases. And also, usually the base of these crosses is usually a burning [pyramid], which makes reference to the conquest.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: And I think that's pretty much it for the Virgen.

JQ: Well, thank you very much. This has been a really productive session. I think that maybe early next week we can do a wrap-up on what remains, particularly talking about others in the South Texas series and certainly the Mestizo series, and then if there's anything else that we need to do.

[Interruption in taping-Note: This portion of the tape has a burbling sound-Trans.]

JQ: This is the third session, taking place on August 28 in Cesar Martinez's studio. We left off with a discussion of his work, particularly the South Texas series and the Mestizo series. We have just a little bit on this tape so we'll just continue to discuss, in very general terms, what we left off with.

CM: Okay.

JQ: Have you thought anything about some of the things that we talked about that you'd like to comment on before we go on in more specific terms?

CM: No, offhand I can't think of anything. I think we pretty well covered the subjects although, undoubtedly, if we go on I might think of something. Maybe I can just interject.

JQ: Well, one of the things that always occurs to me whenever dealing with these kinds of things is the thoughts that you yourself have on occasion about the philosophical underpinnings, or what you think of your work beyond the fact that it focuses on this or that experience or that person or this person. Say, do you think of it in broader terms of what it might mean in relation to. . . .

CM: Yeah, because I think that even though my work is very specific-very specifically Latino, Chicano, South Texan, Mexican-and it involves a lot of what you could probably term cultural ideologies, because I think-I've always said, and I think I've said it in this tape for this interview-that for me culture and politics always. . . . Even though I've never claimed to be a political artist, to me culture has always. . . . Cultures are our underpinnings,

what unite us. Regardless of whether we have different political ideologies, culture unites us. So to me that was a very interesting tool to get into, to use in political terms, which is pretty much my upbringing, you might say, artistically, because it was what I have been doing professionally since I have been a professional artist has had to do with those things that resulted from the political Chicano movement, and art was certainly a supportive branch of that movement. So anyway everything is linked in that sense. However, I do think that a lot of the subject that I have touched upon in a different series I think that there is much metaphorical material there that goes beyond the specific, which is the Chicano, and I think it pretty much puts it on a universal plane, because I think that our experiences basically are parallel. Regardless what culture you're from, there's usually some parallel in another. . . .

JQ: _____ _____ [religion, direction].

CM: Yeah. And I think the testimony to this is. . . . I think we've covered it briefly, but I think that I said, as far as the people who collect my work, I think I cited very specifically some Jewish collectors who were very much identified as Jewish, and yet somehow my work crossed those cultural boundaries there. And also a lot of Anglos have collected my work and [mainstream, Mexican] museums, and, of course, what is more natural to what I do, but I would think it's pretty much across the board, so obviously I'm touching on some universal nerve there, or perhaps commonality. I think nerve is more of a [reactional] thing. But I think it will be understood, and it is certainly on my mind when I do it, because I'm not just thinking, "I'm not just doing this for me. I'm not just doing it for my culture." I think that one can get very. . . . I think one's thinking. . . . One does things for oneself or just for a very specific targeted audience. I think that eventually the painting becomes very convoluted and it doesn't re. . . . [Interruption in taping]

JQ: This is the final side of the conversation we've been having on Cesar Martinez' work, and I was focusing on his. . . . [Interruption in taping]

JQ: You mentioned those of different cultural backgrounds, different ethnic backgrounds, that are able to appreciate the very specific cultural references that you have, that somehow these transcend the sources that you use. What I was going to ask was whether Latinos, Hispanos, or Chicanos react in any way differently to your work. Do they react in a negative way, or in a recognizable way? You mentioned Luis Valdes, and how he was able to relate immediately without you even talking to him . . .

CM: Yes.

JQ: . . . about El Hombre que le gustan las mujeres, and so there is a kind of experience that we all share, whether we're from California, Arizona, New Mexico, or Texas . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . that these things seem to cut across.

CM: Yeah, I think that for me a response doesn't to have to be positive to tell me-to indicate to me-that the work is coming through, or that it's successful, that, for example, the example that I gave when you just mentioned Luis Valdes when he interpreted my work-keeping in mind that Luis Valdes is very close to my generation. He's essentially my generation so he understood very well. Now older people, maybe a generation or two removed from me, and especially early on, when I started the Pachuco series, I remember that one of the very first times that I had a showing of that work as a group was in. . . . In fact it was only the second time. The first time was at Texas A & I University. Session 3 (Tape 3, Side B)

JQ: The second time was at Estudios Rio, which later became Xochil in Mission, Texas. And some older people-not quite old enough to be my parents but certainly older than myself-they came and they saw the show and they related to it very well, but they told me in very concerned tones that they felt that this wasn't really very proper subject matter, because these characters were, after all. . . . The hoodlum thing.

JQ: Exactly.

CM: And so they were concerned about that, whether this was projecting our culture in a positive way. Well, positive-to me that's an old cliché, about presenting the positive side. Well, real is what's there, and we have to deal with it, which has been more my approach, more confrontational thing, and that goes back to the formal aspects of my work as it has developed. The things that . . . the format that has become formalized as I've gone along, which is very confrontational. No distracting background to interfere with a character that is presented very frontally, very centrally on the canvas. And so anyway I think that over the years my instincts were right on in trying to pare down the idea to say, "What do you want? Why do you want to present these characters in this way?" And I think that essentially even when there is a negative response like that, I think that in its own way I think that's transcendent. And I think that the beauty of figurative art, as opposed to more esoteric art forms, especially art world art forms-and I do make a distinction there, very consciously-is that I think that figurative is,

of course, varied because it is representational and it's of course very universal. People can relate to it as people. On the other hand, you have the more theoretical art forms, especially in more contemporary times I would say Minimalism. Let us cite one example-Minimalism. I think that those are what I consider to be art world art forms. They're unto itself, _____ _____. . . .

JQ: You have to be very conversant with the ideas.

CM: Yes. Self-referential, and unless somebody guides you through it if you're not. . . . Personally, I am rather well-versed. I understand it, but I can't say that I even like it. I think that the idea is liberating, certainly.

JQ: Yeah.

CM: But it doesn't go anywhere really as far as I'm concerned. I think that it negates art's ability to transcend. I think art can transcend, but I think that certain art world art forms can negate that possibility. It stays. . . . Remember what I was saying about when you start targeting an audience and then the thinking becomes very convoluted? You know, I think I cited earlier The Painted Word, by Tom Wolfe-how certain ideas certainly become the whole focus of certain things. Well, all of this is connected with the philosophy that I have developed over the years. And so, anyway, yes, certainly I think that art transcends. At its best art transcends.

JQ: Well, then maybe we can put it this way, that with regard to your audience you've had no problem with the collectors whether they're Hispanic or Jewish or, say, Anglo-as we say in Texas-for non-Hispanic or all "other."

CM: Yes.

JQ: And then within the community, from which you get your own experience and from which you come, that there have been conflicts depending upon not only class but also age.

JQ: Yes.

CM: I found very similar things when I first started the research on the Mexican American Artists book, that the older the people were, who had had to contend with prejudice and had aspired to middle-class status or beyond in the thirties and forties and fifties, that anyone coming along making a lot of noise would be suspect, and they often would say, "Well, I wish people . . . I wish that they wouldn't point out the most negative aspects of our culture like the pachucos or the Zoot Suiters." And I actually found the very same thing in the 1960s when I organized a Pop Art show where a lot of Americans thought that Pop artists were dealing with the most negative aspects of American culture. So it's the same thing across the cultures.

CM: Yes, I remember the. . . . Yes, I was in college at the time and I was more or less keeping up through the media and magazines what was going on with Pop Art, and I remember the reactions to it. But I think that interestingly the art world itself-artists-are by nature very reactionary. And when you have a movement like this, all of a sudden another movement comes along that is in reaction to that, and there is no possible way that we could possibly do what is being done already, and so they go into extremes. I think that somewhere in there, after Pop Art, I think Minimalism came into prominence, and Minimalism is a very interesting art movement and certainly very liberating to understand the principles, but it really is a very small point that it is making, and it becomes academic. Almost as soon as you lay it down, it becomes academic. [laughs]

JQ: Or like Conceptual Art, as well.

CM: Because it is essentially an academic art form. And so, anyway, I think that these are excellent exercises in, I don't know, in art philosophy, what have you. But I don't think that they really go anywhere. I mean, talk about underwhelming.

JQ: Yeah, exactly.

CM: I mean, like you're going to set the world on fire with Minimalism. [laughs] It's a contradiction in terms.

JQ: Yes. Well, that brings to mind something that happened. . . .

CM: I always say that the effect of Minimalism is also minimal. [laughter]

JQ: Exactly. Now that brings to mind something that happened here-oh, six or nine months ago-when one of our faculty members at the University of Texas at San Antonio named Frances Colpitt put together an exhibition of The New Latino Art, and, presumably, these were Latinos who were also Conceptual and Minimalist artists, and Kathy Vargas and a number of other Chicano artists in San Antonio reacted violently because they had a notion that Chicano art was about certain things and it didn't include Minimalism or Conceptual Art. And I wonder if you have a comment about that?

CM: No, I do have a comment on that and I was dying . . . when you brought it up I was dying to say something, because I got drawn into this argument. Ultimately I didn't go along with it. I didn't sign a certain letter that was circulated for reasons that I will explain. The reason that I got interested is because in Kathy Vargas's exchanges with Frances Colpitt when this was happening, when the show was in the planning stages and Kathy Vargas got wind of it. . . . Kathy was incensed that somebody who she felt was not qualified to do it was doing this show, and personally to me those are curators' squabbles and I stay out of it. I'm an artist and don't like conflict of interest to start with. Many conflicts of interest there in relation to the other artists involved in it and curators and such. Suffice it to say that where I don't fit there is another place where my work fits, so it's not that opportunities are lacking. But anyway, I got drawn into it because in one of Kathy's exchanges with Frances Colpitt apparently Frances Colpitt was saying, "Well, these artists are different. They don't do like, for example, what Cesar Martinez does." And I'm sure that was not meant exactly to be complimentary, but they . . . But anyway, my point was that I can't . . . obviously Frances Colpitt knows the difference, and I'm happy because there is a big difference between what she promotes and what I do. But that's not a problem. I just mentioned some things about Minimalism. Well, come to think of it, a lot of those artists that were in that show have a very Minimalist bent, and I think that they are very frustrated because they haven't gotten anywhere. Well, like I said, Minimalism is underwhelming. Our work [attacks] you. It's calculated. I mean, let's face it, what my generation did was calculated to have an effect-push all the right buttons-and it had to be recognizable and so on and so forth, because it went with a more populist tendencies, I think. So anyway, the show happened regardless, and in the end I think that Frances Colpitt really did make an effort to work around the controversy. After the show was done, a little brochure was printed. I read it very carefully and I didn't really see anything that was. . . . It was clearly a particular group of artists. That show was not intended to be like a general thing where . . . inclusive. No, it was a particular group of artists who worked together, and I think about ninety-nine percent of them also happened to be gay, so it had that aspect. And so it was very specifically laid out, and so I really didn't have a problem with it. I mean, these [artists] wanted to pursue this, but that's fine. There was kind of like an attempt on the part of those artists to be in two different places. Like on the one hand, we're Latinos. On the other hand, we want to be mainstream. We want to be part of the trends and all of that. But that's nothing new either. Remember what I said? I wanted to be that at one time. I wanted to be an abstract painter like a New York artist-you know naively, of course. [laughing]

JQ: Well, I remember many Chicano artists saying, "Well, I really want to be considered an artist who happens to be Chicano or Latino or Spanish."

CM: We're still saying that, but ultimately that's a matter of perception, and it also has to do with the knowledge and the sophistication of the person viewing this art. To some people my art is universal and it is art, of course-just art. My own stance has always been that for it to be any kind of art-Chicano art or whatever, whatever label we want-it has to be first. It has to be art, period. And then it goes into the specific. It follows, because art is. . . .

JQ: Well, tell me about. . . . Since you've been a professional artist for at least a generation, say in twenty, twenty-some-odd years. . . .

CM: Yeah, I would say that it's in the twenties. Twenty-some years.

JQ: Yeah. So you have had very specific ideas about what Chicano art was and what it wasn't. You even wrote about it in two articles that you'd written [which-Ed.] I included in a book of selected readings that was titled Chicano Art History, published in 1984. What are your thoughts on Chicano art and how that relates to this controversy concerning these gay, Hispanic, or Latino artists?

CM: I think it relates, because I think one thing I mentioned in those articles-one thing, or in one of them, anyway-was something about validation, and that if the art world or the academic art world does not want to validate what we're doing maybe we don't need that validation. And I think that essentially what we wound up doing [is-Ed.] we went around it. We just persisted until they had to come around. And the coup-de-grace to all of this was the CARA show. It finally made it as a _____ thing on its own terms, and it went into mainstream museums everywhere. And so there it was and then. . . . I like to think that that was the end of that. I mean, yeah, the whole thing is sealed and delivered and now dead and nicely dead and buried. It's all academic now, and we can go on with the rest of our lives.

JQ: Yeah, that was a movement that inspired a lot of people in the [seventies].

CM: That's not to say that the idea. . . . I think I'm doing essentially the same thing. I probably always will. All artists do essentially the same thing, in my view.

JQ: I think artists just went their own way and stopped thinking in terms of. . . .

CM: Yeah, they started. . . . Because it was no longer a self-conscious thing. You know, we were there. . . .

JQ: More groups of artists.

CM: But we're not necessarily doing anything different now. It's just that there's less self-consciousness. And I always say. . . . I think that there is an obsession in the art world to come up with something new. But I think that that has to do more with the immediacy of the media and art forms that have come up. It has taken on the aspects of the fashion world and, just like fashion goes out of fashion, art is getting to be that way.

JQ: Exactly.

CM: And I think that all of us perceive that at some point or other. I mean, that's not us. That's not what I want. My work, I want it to endure. Now you have artists now arguing that art can also be disposed of. Well, I don't disagree with that, but the thing is I want my art to endure because . . . _____ it becomes something that's worth keeping. That's my assumption; I don't presume that I succeed every time-certainly not-but, I mean, I'm shooting high, in other words.

JQ: Well, I think that that's a very admirable goal, and I certainly have always been a partisan, so I've always thought your work is-from the very beginning-very important. That brings to mind something else, and I think we need to zero in on this. Because a lot of people looking in from the outside react to all the labels, and I think one of the things that Kathy Vargas reacted to was the use of Latino interchangeably for Chicano.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: But it was the tone of the . . . even the title. It was A New Latino Art. In other words, as if what had existed before was not art.

CM: It dared to call itself new, but to me . . . but that establishes pretty much, I think, a link with the art world and a desire on the part of those artists to be part of the art world. And I don't begrudge them anything because I always like to think that. . . . I mean, as matter of principle, I'm never opposed to any art form as a matter of principle. To me, I always. . . . Because somewhere in there somebody comes along who really uses it in a way that engages you and you say, "Wow! I didn't think it was possible." Well, I do think it's possible. It's just that nobody has really come around and really. . . . We have a lot of Latinos and Chicanos who are creating art in the contemporary art form, like video and performance and all of that.

JQ: There's Celia Muñ oz.

CM: Celia Muñ oz. Celia I think is probably one of the best practitioners, and she has been successful in creating that fusion between a very contemporary art form and also a culture.

JQ: And Daniel Martinez?

CM: Daniel Martinez. I'm not that familiar with his work, but what little I've seen seems to be pretty much. . . .

JQ: It's a multi-media approach, Conceptual Art

CM: Yeah. It seems to me pretty much . . . very tight. I think for David Avalos also. I think that he's another one. And these artists are being able to do that. But one problem that arises with all of these new art forms is that, typical of the art world, I think that there is a mystification there, and it becomes like something that is really far out or like really daring, which is not really the case. I'm saying this because I'm very conscious of this because this project that I'm doing, the residency at the ArtPace which is very known for pushing these new art forms, experimental art. . . . Well, what is experimental art? First of all, I have concluded that experimentation figures in there no more and no less than in any other art form, because it is inherent in making a work of art that you experiment with it until you have what works and then that's it. So, you know, experimentation figures into it no more and no less than in any other art form. What it really is referred to as experimental art as a genre where artists are using materials that are not considered traditional materials. They might be using video or installation or industrial materials or what have you. Again, that is linked, I think, pretty much to the art world thinking of something new. So, anyway, I think that going back in history-Dada, let us say, or. . . .

JQ: Oh, Dada.

CM: Dada, yeah. Where Marcel Duchamp made the point that if you take a urinal out of the bathroom and put it in a gallery it becomes art because you say it is art. And that was a very important point, a very minor point just like the point that Minimalism makes, but it is a very liberating point. But it was made, and he moved on.

JQ: Then you have to move on.

CM: Yeah, and he moved on. [laughing]

JQ: Then he made the ready-mades.

CM: Yeah, so what is really experimental? I mean, it started way back then. So experimental is not necessarily new. It's been around for years, even in the contemporary sense. So I think it's time to demystify that. Experimental art is just another genre. Either you're a sculptor or a painter or an experimental artist, but what goes on there is essentially the same process. And even considering that a lot of the so-called experimental art uses especially methods of reproduction, whether it be print material or sounds or images, as is the case in video, they're more mechanical than ever, so it really cuts off a lot of [process]. In other words, you become subject to the medium that you're using. I think that there's certain limits. All media has its limits, and I have always certainly recognized the limits of painting. So, anyway, getting back to what I was saying, I think that there's a lot of mystification around, and I think it blows up something into something, makes it look bigger than it really is.

JQ: Now what about the differences between the various labels that have been used for artists of Mexican American descent, or Hispanic or Spanish American? From the late-sixties on, Chicano was the one designation that was extremely important, and alongside that at the beginning was the hyphenated name, of those artists who were a little uncomfortable-particularly the older artists that I talked to who were born, oh, 1901, 1905, and so they were in their sixties and they said, "Well no, we're Americans of Mexican descent." So they were Mexican Americans.

CM: Yeah.

JQ: And in the last ten years we've heard a great deal about Latino artists, and now that's all we seem to hear about. What's the difference between Chicano, Latino, and Hispanic, let's say?

CM: Well, it has changed over the years. When I became active as an artist professionally-and it was within the Chicano movement-we made a distinction between Chicano and Mexican American, but that was a political distinction. Because at that time people felt uncomfortable with the word "Chicano" and some people still do, actually. But, anyway, we took it to the point where "Chicano" became a very common term, no longer derogative as some people wanted to make it out to be. And so I think that with time and with success-and because we succeeded in implementing our own terminology, our own vernacular there. . . .

JQ: We defined ourselves.

CM: Yeah, we defined ourselves on our own terms politically, and so now I think if somebody refers to me as a Mexican American, I mean, I am that, too. And I'm Latino also, and I'm very specifically Chicano-as far as I'm concerned.

JQ: So I think that Hispanic is a term that was imposed on all Spanish-speaking Americans by Washington [D.C.-Ed.], because they didn't know exactly how to put everybody in in one rubric . . .

CM: Yes.

JQ: . . . and then Latino seems to be very popular in Los Angeles where there's so many groups other than Mexican Americans.

CM: I think that generally where there is a more political, more leftist ideology that referring to us as Latinos is very prevalent and very much accepted and certainly very politically correct. But the flaw that I see in this is that I think basically it's a very reactionary thing again. If Washington says we're Hispanic, well, it's not good enough for us. But the fact of the matter is that Latino. . . . I mean, we don't speak Latin. [laughing]

JQ: And that goes all the way back to when. . . .

CM: Who started calling us Latin anyway?

JQ: Yeah, Washington wanted to bring everybody into. . . . South of the border was Latin America.

CM: Yeah. Pan-American, some thing like that. What is that, anyway? So Hispanic really is a very appropriate term, I think, because it touches on our commonality, which is the language. Spanish, specifically.

JQ: Exactly.

CM: And also I think it came from the fact that many of us have roots in Spain. I don't know that I actually have roots in Spain, but I'm presuming this. For all I know I might be Jewish or Irish. [laughter] I don't know. Who knows? So many people emigrated to Mexico, so one can't be too specific. Nor can one be too specific about what Indian tribe's blood one has in one's blood. It could be Aztec, it could Chichimecas, or whatever. [laughs]

JQ: Exactly, it could be anything.

CM: It can be anything. So, anyway, to me it's a source of humor there because. . . . I think it's very humorous because people are always searching for the most avant garde thing they can think of, the most cutting edge-to use a more contemporary term there.

JQ: Yes, yes.

CM: And to me those things are meaningless. The cutting edge is where something touches a nerve. And it may or may not be one of these art forms, it may or may not be a word that is in common usage or in acceptance or in dis-acceptance. I mean if it touches a nerve, it touches a nerve, then it's cutting edge. [laughs]

JQ: Well, that actually. . . .

CM: Some artists actually specialize. They sit down and they think about the cutting edge art that they're going do.

JQ: [laughs]

CM: To me, that is absurd.

JQ: Of course, of course. You know, that brings me to the Mestizo series. We did talk a little bit about that in our second session, but there's certainly some more that could be said about that. You had mentioned that some of the Chicano artists used the Tri-Face that had been first used by a Mexican muralist in the national university that was built way back in 1952, I believe, where they focused on pre-Columbian themes, Mexican Revolution themes, and then the Tri-Face was presumably intended to focus on the combination of the Mestizo theme, Indian, and Spanish.

CM: Yeah, the creation of the mestizo.

JQ: Or Indian and European.

CM: The creation of the mestizo. The genetic marriage of the people of the Americas and the people of Europe. Yes, and I think. . . . I keep saying things about how reactionary the art world is, and I'm no stranger to that either. I'm guilty of some of it myself. During the early Chicano period when I was seeing the Virgen de Guadalupe and the configuration of the mestizo and the César Chavezes and the Che Guevaras in murals, to me they became ingredients and I said, "Ah, pyramids, you know, Aztec and stuff like that." I said to myself, "I am never going to do any of those." And now I'm contradicting myself. [laughs] Because later on I figured an angle that had never really. . . . Basically what I think that what I was rebelling against there was not the imagery itself because to me-now, in retrospect-it seems like the classic that you go to and you try to do something with.

JQ: Well, I remember some of your self-portraits that, unlike the generic Tri-Face that some of the muralists used in California, you actually personalized it because you put yourself in the center like it was a self-portrait, and then you had the pre-Colombian reference as a . . . not an Indian but a symbol or a . . . the jaguar . . . . And then the bull instead of the Spaniard.

CM: Yeah, I figured out a configuration of the mestizo image that was more . . . that I could relate to. But again. . . .

JQ: It was more culture-based rather than racial.

CM: Yeah, but again I always. . . . Usually, a lot of times, I make. . . . This usually comes about through a thinking process and also investigations that one makes into things that interest one. In that book that came out a few years ago, of Picasso's sketchbook, I ran across a very beautiful, very simple, charcoal I think it is-or maybe it's pencil-a very dark drawing of a bull's head. But the actual face of the bull seems to be human. And I said, "I just wish I could do something that was as simple as this. And as effective." Well, what I did eventually wasn't that simple, but essentially that was the idea. I wanted to do a bull. All of a sudden I wanted to do a bull, and for the reason that I've already stated-you know, bulls have always been on my mind, still are. Still obsessed with all of that.

JQ: So [here's] that autobiographical _____.

CM: Yeah, so I had that in mind, and then so when I saw that face. . . . Actually, Picasso did many minotaurs, also. So that was all in my mind. But it was that little simple drawing that was less illustrative that really sparked an interest. I said to myself, "It'd be nice to do a bull but with a human head." But how to do it in a way that . . . because Picasso already did it. But then the thinking process goes on and on and then at some point, divorced from this bull-thing, I thought of a jaguar-a man with jaguar features, and then the light bulb lit up somewhere in there, I said, "Oh, well, there it is!"

JQ: Now had you seen the jaguar in relation to Mexico?

CM: Yes, because the jaguar's an American animal, and bulls, cattle, are European animals. There were no cattle here except for the bisons which are not cattle at all.

JQ: Right.

CM: And so all of a sudden there it was, the symbols-symbols that I could convert into an emblem, something as emblematic as the more traditional mestizo configuration, where instead of being human heads these were animal heads, but animals that have a cultural connotation that I felt amounted to the same thing. And I like animals, and so I thought it would be interesting. And then I needed a human face in there. I've been asked whether these are self-portraits. Well, only in the sense that it is my face in there, but my face was handy. And the actual drawing that I used of my face was one that I had done when I was in college and it was a very simple line drawing that was in one of my sketchbooks.

JQ: And then you put a little goatee in there.

CM: Yeah, I think I had that at that time. And so I used that basic drawing and then combined it with a bull's head, with the drawing of a jaguar, and made the transformation there.

JQ: What was interesting is that, because you focused on these symbols-or the personifications of the new world and the old-that you had no need to put them in profile.

CM: No, no.

JQ: You had them in frontal view also.

CM: No, no. Yeah, again, that changed it, and then it was all frontal. But that's been my tendency all along-a tendency-everything is very frontal . . .

JQ: All the frontality.

CM: . . . and very centralized. And then so that became my own version of the mestizo, and apparently it has become emblematic enough that it's been widely published in textbooks.

JQ: Wasn't that one included in the book by . . .

CM: Oh, yeah, by Lucy Lippard.

JQ: . . . Lucy Lippard, yeah .

CM: I think that's where everybody. . . . I think everybody who's looking for culturally oriented material looks at that book and then they call me and say, "Well, we want to use it in our textbook."

JQ: Right.

CM: And so who knows how many textbooks it has been used [in]. Countless requests have come in which I have honored. And so it's out there now. I think it is now one of those works of art that help to explain what we are, define us along our own terms.

JQ: Now I guess one of the final things we need to talk about before we run out of time is the South Texas series, which is very rich in not only the materials that you used to create these very complex works of art that go beyond the narrative . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . because sometimes you see something represented, but a lot of times it's suggestive of something . . .

CM: Yeah.

JQ: . . . and some of them are based on personal experiences like, what was it, Cono's Buck, or Cono's Christmas Buck?

CM: Yeah, Cono's Christmas Buck, and I think it was one of the most successful. But I think that, in general, the South Texas series is probably the most metaphorical that I've done so far. I think that the Pachuco series was very specific. I think that the Mestizo series was very emblematic and symbolic. And I think that the South Texas series is the most metaphorical-and also, in its own ways, more conventional, because it is basically landscape-oriented, and where I have all of these things . . . laid out all these tableaus where things are happening,

whether dealing with the land itself, or sometimes there's some. . . . There's always, of course, undercurrents of the cultural connotations that I give the work.

JQ:: Are there any specific works that you want to talk about? Like you talked a little bit about the more culturally specific works that included the Aztec earth goddess, the Rose Window at San José Mission, the cross, and. . . . I'm trying to think; was there a pyramid in that, too? Well, you've done several.

CM: At some point, yeah. Yeah, some of them don't have, but at some point I threw in a pyramid also as the base for the cross because that gives it the historical linkage, as they say these days. "Linkage." [laughter] Interestingly, I think that that particular image. . . .

JQ: What was that series called?

CM: Well, those were essentially the. . . . Remember that at some point we decided, well, maybe the Virgen de Guadalupe thing became a thing in itself?

JQ: Right. I guess the reason I thought of it is that they were large like the South Texas series is.

CM: Yeah. But the thing about it is that I started them as part of the South Texas series simply because I had to address the religiosity of the area. South Texas is almost all Mexican American, Chicano, whatever you want to call it, and along with that the Catholic church is very prominent and so even though I have no belief I was born a Catholic and I felt that it would be dishonest of me to negate all of this and so I had to deal with it. So then I started reinventing-reinventing in a way that I could relate to it. Not in terms of religion, but in terms of visual, and make it something that is culturally relevant and also again, then, that historical linkage. [both chuckle] So I related it both to the area, to the land, to history, to the known icons, to all of that. And I think in some cases I did the same thing with Don Pedrito. I sort of Virgen de Guadalupe-ized Don Pedrito and linked it more to contemporary cultural thinking where Chicanos are concerned. But these all were essentially started as part of the South Texas series. Sometimes certain individual pieces take a life on of their own and they become almost like a little mini-series. But those particular pieces were rooted in South Texas and in the South Texas series which became a thing on itself. Don Pedrito, of course, is pretty much identified with South Texas, so that is certain. But I have also linked that with the Virgen de Guadalupe and also religion in a more general sense and also probably in a. . . . It even gave probably some kind of historical context. It might be interesting to note here that things that sometimes seem very serious to you, sometimes they have a humorous intent or just like a panacea. I was just working with my printer in Austin. Last week we were doing some monotypes, and when we're working I have a very good rapport with Peter Webb who is with Strike Editions in Austin, and we work very well together, and we joke around a lot and we drink a lot of beer when we're working.

JQ: What's the name of that . . . the print shop?

CM: Strike Editions.

JQ: Oh, Strike Editions.

CM: So we joke around a lot, and a sort of private joke between myself and some artist friends of mine is that if I do something and then it doesn't work out , I'll put a pyramid right in the middle of it, and then if the pyramid doesn't work then I'll wipe out the pyramid with a remolino, and that has to work. [laughter] It sounds funny, and it is meant to be funny. But when you look at the pieces they really do look very transcendental and very serious. [laughter] And then there's a lot of metaphor there about time eroding and all of this, when essentially we were wiping out what I figured was a bad painting.

JQ: Well, actually, you've reached a point of maturity as an artist for some time now. . . .

CM: I feel comfortable with failure, and how you can fix anything and it becomes. . . . So that in itself is another metaphor right there. A work of art becomes a living experience, as opposed to just a work of art that you do detachedly. You get so involved with it that you've got to finish it or you've got to make it succeed,that you try anything. "Well, here comes the pyramid." When we're doing monotypes one of the panaceas that we use as a last resort is if a monotype is not working out well, I'll make an impression of my hand on it. That usually fixes it. You need something there, you put your hand on there. [laughter] And we did that on some things, but you look at the picture itself and it worked. The humor is not really there. The humor is how it comes out; you see it and somehow it's related. [laughs]

JQ: That's wonderful. Well, I think that we have really had a good opportunity to do a wrap-up of sorts, and before we run out of tape I just want to thank you for the terrific experience that this has been. It's given me a chance to talk about these things in this more formal manner, although our meetings have certainly been very, very informal.

CM: Yeah, well, I don't want to. . . .

JQ: The formal part would be the recording.

CM: I don't know if it's possible for me to be too formal. But, no, as far as I'm concerned I think we covered a lot of territory, and it is certainly a pleasure and a privilege for me to say these things for the record, because I don't think you'll find any of this comprehensively anywhere.

JQ: At least not in published form, certainly.

CM: You might find it in bits and pieces. My work has been dealt with very sparingly-certainly respectfully, but there's a paucity of detail. [laughs]

JQ: I've never had a chance to really write a long study of it, which I certainly hope I can do sometime.

CM: So I'll be glad to amend this if later on you feel there's a gap.

JQ: Okay, what I'm going to do is go through the three tapes and I think we got the length that the Smithsonian wanted, except for that one little portion that for some reason we couldn't record that second time, the back of tape number one, I believe.

CM: Yeah. Maybe we can even doctor the tapes. If I said somewhere something in there that's inconsistent, maybe we can create our own . . . throw in a pyramid to cover it up somehow. [laughter]

JQ: Well listen, thank you very much. This is a session that we had that lasted about 45 minutes.

CM: Time goes by fast.

JQ: Yeah. So if there's anything that you want to add at this point. I think we have just a couple of minutes.

CM: No, not really. Again, at this particular moment I can't think of anything, but there's always all kinds of [things-Ed.] that one can go into, but maybe we can save that for another occasion.

JQ: Very briefly, you mentioned this New Latino show in Laguna Gloria.

CM: Yes, I think that the Frances Colpitt controversy-The New Latino Art thing-I think that it went a step further in a show that was curated by three curators . . .

JQ: Oh, that's right.

CM: . . . at Laguna Gloria in Austin. And one part was created by Kathy Vargas, another by Benito Huerta, and another by Victor Zamurio Taylor. Victor Zamurio Taylor is championing basically the same set of artists that Frances Colpitt was championing in her New Latino show, and the result was there was a forum there and panel discussion and it got heated, where [there were-Ed.] exchanges about how some artists . . . "I'm a Latino/I'm not a Latino."

JQ: Oh, I see.

CM: That sort of thing. There just seems to be some of that going on.

JQ: Did they _____ _____ or did they. . . .

CM: I don't know. I hope so, because I felt that it was important, but there's also . . . I think there's some intellectual dishonesty going on, because something was said about the work of artists of my generation-that they had created a stereotype in the eyes of museums, a stereotype that is desirable to them, and now they're collecting it-as if that was at the expense of other artists, but the fact of the matter is. . . . I mean, it's not like all of a sudden I'm inundated with requests for my work [by museums] . . . .

JQ: Yeah, _____ _____.

CM: . . . but it is certainly good that it is being collected now, because now that it has been verified and validated and all that by that same system. Okay, all of a sudden. But, anyway, essentially the fallacy in that argument is this. I mean, somebody like Victor Zamurio Taylor who has worked in the art world and [using it], he should know why it is being collected now. Because there's a backlog. It will never be. . . .

JQ: Exactly.

CM: It was ignored for years and years. All of a sudden they got to fill in . . . .

JQ: Catch up. CM; . . . this historical gap, and so they're collecting works that they should have collected ten years ago, and I think these other younger artists were feeling left out of this . . .

JQ: Which is what always happens.

CM: . . . alleged binge in collecting by museums. Here's where they learn their Latino lesson, that they really are Latinos, in that, even though their work makes a horrendous effort, a huge effort to be mainstream, the mainstream is not going to take them into account because they're Latinos, and they have to somehow validate themselves some way or other, and then ten years after the fact, and then what makes it sadder is that essentially this work is more linked with current trends, so it's going to go out of style real quickly and blah-blah, so it's not until it becomes part of a more general history that it will say, "Hey, well, these guys were doing this. Let's collect it." They will be collected, too. They have to wait like we did.

JQ: Exactly. It's a generational thing.

CM: Yeah, the only contemporary art that is collected is that which comes out of the power centers-you know, New York and all of that. The power gathers [in, an] interest, and that goes into museums immediately because, hey, it's American mainstream and it doesn't need too much validation. [laughs]

[End of interview]