



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Cadex Herrera,
2020 August 11

This interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool,
administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Cadex Herrera on August 11, 2020. The interview took place in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, and was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right. Hello, Cadex. Thank you for joining me for this interview. Um, this is Fernanda Espinosa, and I'm interviewing artist Cadex Herrera for the Archives of American Art for the , um, Pandemic Project. And today is August 11 of 2020. And Cadex is joining me virtually from his home in , um, White Bear Lake in Minnesota. Hello, Cadex. How are you doing?

CADEX HERRERA: Hello, Fernanda. Thank you for having me and creating the space for this interview.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Of course. Um, we're excited to have you. Um, so as I mentioned before, we only have about 20 minutes, so they're pretty brief interviews. But , um, I'm interested in starting with just general sense of how you've been doing over these past few months that so much has happened?

CADEX HERRERA: Um, it's been a very interesting experience as a—I'm educator and as a father and as a family member, just dealing with uncertainty of living through a pandemic. You know, every day you go outside, you go to the store, you go anywhere. You have to be conscious about , um, wearing a mask and being safe and keeping social distances. So there has been—as far as an artist, a lot of our work centers around community and bringing people together and being out in the community. Um, it has really put a halt to our work. Um, however, um, I do—you know, I'm thankful that we have social media platforms where I will usually post my work. However, as an artist, I do feel the need to communicate and be—you know, be around people and around the community and fellow artists and so we can be able to discuss and look at art in person. So it's straining times. It's a—it's a very unusual. Never in my life have I ever experienced anything like this. And, you know, knowing that there is an invisible disease out there that can affect anyone, it's very disconcerting to say the least. However, you know, as an artist, I really try to take all of that. Those feelings, that information, and sort of put it and focus it on my work that I do.

[00:02:47]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, can you tell me a little bit more about the different kinds of work that you do? You mentioned you're also an educator. So if you can just talk a little bit about that and also how the pandemic has impacted the different communities that you intersect with.

CADEX HERRERA: Yes. So I am a media arts instructor. And just last week, I finished a series of photography camps. I taught photography to teenagers. And this has been—I've been teaching photography for many years. I do some summer camps, and I've also taught art and media arts at high school level. And—but my experience with doing remote learning, you know, is very different. It takes a little bit to get used to. But , um, my—the organization I work with is called FilmNorth, they really provided good resources and training so that, that could be—so that the technology wasn't an issue. But as far as communicating and staying—and keeping your students focused, you know, that's a whole different world now, because they're not there with you. And as a photography teacher and as an art teacher, that was a little interesting to work around. However, you know, we figured it out. And the students went out there and they did great work.

[00:04:17]

But, yeah, it—just the idea of, you know, getting used to or starting a new methodology of education, I think really—as a society, we really have to look at the infrastructure that we have and that we will provide for students with low means, for students with no access. Because, you

know, this is our new reality now, is that we have to start thinking about—so we have to educate our youth, our children. And I believe that's—we have to put those resources in place, so that learning can occur. And also, I'm seeing that there is going to be a drastic change in the educational models, you know, from what we have in the past or from our traditional educational structures. Now, we have more options and I think that this pandemic has made us see that clearly and also has opened up the doors for—you know, for the different educational organizations to approach learning in a different way.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mmh-hmm [affirmative]. And have you seen any—or have you felt all the impact also on your personal work as an artist, and how have you seen those shift?

CADEX HERRERA: Absolutely. Um, I started some years ago doing summer art sales. Um In Minnesota, we have a short but beautiful summer. And we take opportunity to do, you know, art crawls and go out and uh do different art sales at different places. And it's part of the way I, you know, keep some income coming in, aside from my regular job. And all of that has had been, you know, cancelled. Um, So it has affected me economically, financially. However, you know, I do get some occasional sales via my, um, platforms. Um, however, I don't have that access to new clients and new people and new visitors to my work. And so that has been very difficult; and the pandemic is, you know, largely—is—it's what's causing that, right. So everything has been canceled. No general groupings of people, so we really can't have art shows and go to galleries and have art sales and and sort of do the traditional sort of art sale things that we used to do even last year.

[00:07:02]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. Um, so before we started the interview, you were telling me a little bit about your family in Belize. Um, I'm interested in hearing a little bit more about what the impact has been for artists like you who have families and loved ones in other places. And also, how it has impacted your closer network, your family and your loved ones?

CADEX HERRERA: Sure. I use a lot of the money that I've made during my—you know, because I have a regular job, I have a family and, you know, typical family, like, bills. But a lot of the funds that I made through my art sales, I would share that with my family in Belize, my little brothers and sisters. Beautiful country; however, we really have issue with, you know, unemployment and opportunities. So I do send a lot of funds down to Belize. And especially now during the pandemic, um, I've had to increase those funds just because they can't work, and they can't go outside because they're under the same limitations as we are here. So that has definitely affected, um, a lot financially and how, you know, I helped them and just trying to keep them, you know, abreast of the news and asking them to, you know, please be safe and just having those typical worries for your family, you know.

[00:08:33]

Um, and it has also affected my art collaborations with other artists here in the Twin Cities. Um, I work with an organization called CLUES, Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio, which is a service organization, nonprofit, that helps up communities as well as artists. And just last year, they opened a new gallery. And there was an opportunity for me to have a solo show. and I was super excited. And it was going to be in August, this month. But however, that all had to get pushed to next year, hopefully. And also, I am part of a mural group and—the Muralistas. We can't get together; again, because of the same concerns with COVID and, you know, social distancing and just following the protocols that are set by the governor, the governor here in Minnesota.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. So you worked on a on a mural with an image that has traveled around the country with other collaborators. You just mentioned, you're—I'm not sure if this is part of the same mural group, but can you talk a little bit more about that mural and your practice as artists in the public space?

CADEX HERRERA: Thank you. Um, so like I uh, uh said, I'm a media artist. And many years ago, I decided to change my focus as an artist rather than—and I still do, you know, rather than, you know, painting landscapes and beautiful pictures, I decided to start focusing on social justice in my work. And so I transformed what I do to more of a social justice leaning art, , um, speaking on issues of, you know, police brutality, immigration, issues that affect Native American women disappearing and not being accounted for, and the people in charge not really looking at that. So

also, you know, just create work to bring awareness to the environment as well and all of these social issues that are important to me.

[00:10:50]

And, um, and I, I have been a big supporter of Black Lives Matter, and I've been doing work to support Black Lives Matter and to echo and amplify, you know, their message. And, um, on May 25, George Floyd was murdered by the—some police officers here in Minneapolis. And, you know, I saw the footage and—I believe it was Tuesday morning. And I was so—I can't—I can't put into words all the emotions that went into me because I could see myself. You know, he was in his 40s as am I. And I could see any one of my, you know, my brothers and sisters, my neighbors, people I know, being George Floyd and it was devastating. And I needed to say something. You know, I needed to stand up and say, hey, this can't happen anymore.

[00:11:52]

Some years past or prior to that, Philando Castile, who was also—he was a St. Paul—who was from the city of St. Paul. And he was also murdered by police. And I remember creating some artwork on my platform to honor Philando Castile. And, um, I didn't—personally, I didn't feel like it was enough, like, I didn't—you know, it was just for my limited audience that I have on my platforms. And so I went out there and I protested on Tuesday night. And then I went out there on Wednesday night as well. And when I came home Wednesday night, Xena Goldman, who was one of the partners that painted the mural, she and I are in the same muralist program at CLUES. And she called me, and she says, "Cadex, I have an idea? I have this portrait of George Floyd. Um, Would you—you know, would you want to paint a mural with me?" And I said, Yeah. She's like, can you come up with an idea on how we can make this work? And so, um, I said, okay. So you know, it took me very little time to come up with a concept. I sent it to her. She said, "Oh, this is—you know, this, this is speaking to what it is that we're trying to say." And then I told her, "Just give me some more time and—an hour or so, and I'll send you a more sort of precise work, a precise concept." And an hour later or so, I sent her the idea, the concept that you see up on the 38th and Chicago of the George Floyd mural.

Um, and it was a work of—that came out of, you know, anger and sympathy and solidarity. And also, in an effort to speak louder, to say, you know, "This this person was a human being. He was valued by his community and his family. It could be any of us. Police brutality needs to stop." And, um, I wanted to focus on, you know, his humanity. I wanted to focus on him as a as a person in his community. So it was a very sort of intense, um, uh, situation and time for me to just dealing with all the emotions and—you know, and participating in something that I never would have thought in—you know, that it would become as big or the response would be so positive from, like I said, you know, from around the world. So it was just an incredibly surreal experience. Also, healing and reflective, you know, for me just to see the people from the community that came and that were there watching us create this mural while we were painting it and lending a hand, you know, bringing, bringing us water and food and asking us if we needed anything, just the support from the community. You know, there was two or three guys who came and said, "Hey, you know, I want to make sure that you guys feel safe. We're going to stand here until you guys are done with this mural. No one's going to touch you. No one's going to hurt you."

[00:15:19]

So just, um,—and—oh, and then also while we were painting right across the corner from the store where—where George Floyd actually was murdered, the Reverend Jesse Jackson came to speak and Al Sharpton. And it was just such a moving experience for me. It's one of the things that stands out the most to me, because I was—you know, we're painting and painting this mural and trying to figure out, you know, the lines and getting—just the technical parts of painting a mural, and I could hear Jesse Jackson's voice in the background, and he's doing the call and response, you know, with the crowd. And it was just so moving and motivating. And it was—yeah, so it was just a tremendous humbling, as well, experience that I went through. And, you know, I'm grateful and that I had the opportunity to do that. I'm happy with my choice of standing up and saying, "Yes, I'm going to go and do this with other artists and, you know, create this piece." You know, and whatever happens, happens. And, um, and so—yeah, so the—the response from the community, the world has just been, you know—was overwhelming and incredibly positive and supportive. So it was—it was an experience.

[00:16:48]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, when you were putting together the sign for the mural, what was going through you? Um, what were you trying to communicate?

CADEX HERRERA: As a—as a rule, I've—any of the social art that I do, especially when it comes to politics and, you know, social issues, I always focus on the victim, and never on the on the criminal, you know. So I wanted to make sure that I, um, portrayed George Floyd in a—in a positive light and not bring—because I've seen some other work done where, you know, there's the brutality of it, which I believe also has to be shown as well, as well as the faces of the police officers. And, you know, every artist should and have their own path and their own decision making. I personally thought, you know, I want to create a place and a space for people to reflect. I was going through—you know, I felt hurt. I felt personally hurt by this—by this crime. And it wasn't only that specific situation, but it was just the whole accumulation of all of these in justices being done. Just about three weeks prior to George Floyd being murdered, there was a young man who was shot by two white men when he was running and—you know, just jogging in the neighborhood and they're on their pick-up trucks and they didn't like that he was there. And, and, uh, uh, Sandra Bland and so many others that had been just terribly murdered. So all of this, all of this just became this ball of anger and and and just—you know, like I said, it's hard for me to find a word to express all of these different emotions.

[00:18:53]

Um, but when I was creating the piece and thinking about—thinking about what was I going to say on this public space, you know, I had to really think about how George Floyd will be portrayed, the history of police brutality in this country, and also the response of the community. And and that's sort of the three major elements in the mural is George Floyd as a human being. The names inside the sunflower, all those names are seeds that never meant to—you know, will never grow into flowers themselves. The petals of the sunflower coming out, that shining light out in the world because these people were people of light as well. His name in large yellow letters with the blue protestors inside or his community inside. Yellow is as a Black Lives Matter, sort of one of their trademark colors that they use, these black and yellow. And I wanted to incorporate that and I, you know, incorporated that in—excuse me, my computer just went to sleep. [Laughs.]

[00:20:18]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Oh, okay.

CADEX HERRERA: I wanted to—yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I still hear you.

CADEX HERRERA: I wanted to go—yes. I wanted to incorporate those Black Lives Matter colors into the piece. Um, and so his community is inside his name, and they're all sort of abstract. They don't have any sort of facial features, but they're just representative of shapes. Because—I then—I wanted to say that everyone, you know, is fighting for this cause. And then you have the—sort of the blue background, which represents freedom and openness. And the flower also represents loyalty and longevity. So loyalty for George Floyd and loyalty for the cause. And longevity, you know, that we should always remember the names of these people who have been killed by police.

Um, so, you know, artistically, I was trying to put all of these elements together and trying to create a piece that was, again, a reflective part. You know, a thing where you can go and see and say, "Okay, I can see what is being said here. I can relate to it. It's not only George Floyd but all of these names that have been taken away unnecessarily by police violence." And so but through all of that process, you know, it started with anger. And then slowly once, you know, that—the day we finished the mural and ended up with just the sense of relief and thankfulness and just this spiritual awakening in a way, you know, of how a community can come together and create something that lets us come together.

[00:22:00]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Great. Well, um,, on that hopeful note, um, I'm going to just finally ask you to tell us a little bit more about anything that you've been working on, on your art over these past few months or right now. Um, And also, if there's anything else that you'd like to say that I didn't ask you about today.

CADEX HERRERA: Sure. Um, so right now, I'm currently working on a series called Children Don't Belong in Cages. And it is a simple black and white pen drawings of silhouettes of children, and their silhouettes are taken over by the cages they're in. They're just this—you know, we have COVID, we have Black Lives Matter, we have tons of different issues right now happening in the world. And, um, there's so much that we can be—you know, if you're a social justice fighter, artist that you can be fighting for. And I, I, I commend, and I respect all artists, especially those who are using their talents to, to speak out against all of these injustices. And however, you know, one artist cannot do everything, so I—usually, what I do is, each month, I do a different theme or a different cause. And so this—well, crossed over to this month, I started doing the series of Children Don't Belong in Cages because of what's happening right now at the border with immigrant families, and children just inhumanely being kept in cages, and nothing seems to be—being done about it. They're human beings. As an immigrant myself, you know, I see my—I, I see my kin, I see family, you know, I see my neighbors inside those cages and it's disheartening. It's inhumane. And regardless of where you're from, you know, you should not be treated like an animal. You should not be kept in cages without proper care, you know, and where your humanity is stripped away from you. And these are the kind of experiences that will mark those children for the rest of their lives. And that's a terrible, terrible atrocity that we are creating, that this administration is creating. And I hope that those kids grow up to be, you know, great functioning human beings. And, um, I hope that this experience doesn't scar them for life, you know, where it will really affect them and their generations to come.

[00:25:24]

Um, so that's—right now, my—the cause I'm working on as far as art is concerned. However, I'm always thinking about, you know, all the different issues and things that are happening. So, um, that is my current work. And, yeah, I just like to say to all those folks who are artists and regardless what type of art to practice, you know, use your talents, your skills to bring change about the world in a positive way.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much, Cadex. It's been great talking to you. Um, I will—I hope we see you soon, and I'll be sending you some more follow-up information.

CADEX HERRERA: Sounds good. Gracias, Fernanda. Y un placer hablar contigo.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Muchas gracias.

CADEX HERRERA: Okay. Thank you. Que tenga un buen dia.

[END OF TRACK herrer20_1of1_digvid_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]