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Oral history interview with Jesse Treviño,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jesse Treviño on July 20, 2020. The interview took place in San Antonio, Texas, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie 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

JESSE TREVIÑO: —the pandemic has taken over everything that I do, you know?

BEN GILLESPIE: So, this is Ben Gillespie interviewing Jesse Treviño at his home in San Antonio, Texas. It's July 20th, 2020. This is for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Jesse, would you tell me a little bit about how your life has changed during the pandemic?

JESSE TREVIÑO: Well, first of all, you know, I had cancer about six years ago, but I'm in remission and, fortunately, I'm a lot better. But I have a lot of a nerve damage on my arms and my whole body, so I experience a lot of pain. Of course, I work through it in my art.

But, you know, I've been fortunate that, you know, I was in a very important exhibit at the Smithsonian about the Vietnam War, the artists' responses. It was a beautiful exhibit of art from 1965 to 1975, art in America of the Vietnam War. So, being an artist and being in that exhibit meant so much to me: that I've come so far.

But, my whole life has been dealing with the pain that I—and, you know, I've taken medications. I've done different things. So, on top of all of that, of course, my son lives with me. So, you know, he's sort of my partner and helps me with a lot of things. But, I'm afraid, you know. I'm scared, at this point, because, you know, my art is so important, you know, I want to continue my art until my last breath, you know.

And that's what the pandemic has to do with: your respiratory system and how it attacks all of that. So, I have a lot of fear. After everything I've gone through, and I am very grateful for everything that I've had and I've done given that, I want to keep rolling. I want to keep working. But, you know—and I had an operation in January on my neck. Anyway, there are so many things that are happening to me, so the pandemic—you know, I go outside for a little bit, you know, and my son does the shopping. So, it's interrupted, not just my life, but everybody's life. I could doodle, sketch, and do a few little things here, but I need to connect with people in a way where—I like being outside and doing different, you know, interacting with different people, and this is prohibiting me from doing anything like that; so, for me, like, creating.

I've always had projects, projects, projects. And everybody has to put a hold on all their—and to me it's sort of like a business, you know. I'm retired on disability, but I'm self-employed, you know. I create these projects that are million-dollar projects here for the city of San Antonio, outside public art, and things that I do in ceramic and mosaics. Like, outdoor pieces, you know, that have pretty much come to a halt, you know? So, that's not happening.

But, you know, so it's like a day by day, you know—I sort of make my own meals and, you know, I watch a lot of movies. I, I love cinema. My son is a cinematographer. He loves that because we see so many movies. And I've learned so much from movies, you know? I love that art, you know. I'm a visual artist. You know, the few friends that call me—and my family, my brothers and my sisters call me and see how I'm doing, and I do the same thing.

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But, it's so disconnected not being able to be real close to each other sort of, you know. Here in San Antonio, it's gotten bad, I know. They've been sort of 'who's your donor' and, you know, we know who our president is, who our governor is, and our local leaders that make decisions of what other people do. Because what other people do—I know what I need to do, but not everybody thinks the same way, you know? I see people walking down the street here without a

mask, and here we're supposed to be wearing mask. But, I see people without a mask, people doing things that they shouldn't be doing, you know, because it affects everybody, you know. What I do is just protect myself, so they got to protect themselves too. And I try to look at the numbers and the things that, you know, I've heard. But, it broke out in Seattle in Washington, you know, at the nursing home where a few people—and then how the different countries were reacting to all of this, and, you know, little-by-little, the numbers went from very few to, you know, millions almost, you know, [laughs] of casualties that we have here.

So, I'm very fearful of what's going to happen. You know, I've always had faith in vaccines and all these things, but this is, like—and, you know, it's funny that this is the greatest wake-up call for all of us, for people that haven't experienced anything like this, of how important all these things that protect ourselves from the different pandemics, you know, that are out there, you know. I've seen many movies, you know, even way before this, and how there was an outbreak of this, an outbreak of that, and, you know, it's just a movie. We have a bunch of movies, but this is reality, you know. We're experiencing this now.

And, you know, I exercise a little bit because I had both of my knees, total replacements in my knees. I have to, sort of, you know, keep them active a little bit and mobile a little bit. I try to keep my head straight, you know, the way I'm thinking. You know, I'm always thinking about art, but, sometimes, it is more frustrating—you know, about 50 years ago, I spent two years in the hospital, and I know what it's like to be confined to a bed. You know, I couldn't walk for a whole year, and I couldn't draw, I couldn't paint, I couldn't do anything because I've always been right-handed. I couldn't do anything with my left hand. So, you know, you can't imagine, it's so frustrating. I'll never be able to do that. The worst thing I could do now is think, "This thing will never get better." Then, I'm still 74 years old, and I feel like gradually my body is shutting down. You know, as the older I get, but I don't want my mind to shut down, and be able to work with my hands and my prosthesis. So, I've got to try to keep everything, you know, active, you know, to a certain extent. But that's the most frustrating thing for me to do. Like, my son helps me with certain things. I've always been independent. I've always been able to do, not just stuff for myself but for other people, and trying to do stuff like that. So, it's been very difficult for me. I guess it's almost frustrating for me because it is.

But, fortunately, I have my home and my son, and we do the things that we should do, that were supposed to do, you know? But things that are happening outside, you know—like, we're talking about Black Lives Matter here, how important all of that is, you know. It's out there, you know. And those are some of the promises that I'd never forget, you know. I think about myself, but I think in terms of what, you know, they go through, you know: how horrible it is.

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BEN GILLESPIE: Well, I know a lot of your murals—you've talked about how you want to make the world safer, and they appear on hospitals, and I was wondering: has your work changed as you're doodling and thinking about what you can do after the pandemic?

JESSE TREVIÑO: Yeah, well, because there's several projects there that are sort of on a hold right now. So, you know, I go from one to another and think, "Well, what would I do here? What would I do here?" So, I've got enough projects to think about, you know, what I want to do. But, you know, it's always been about that.

You're exactly right, you know, that the one that really stands out here in San Antonio is the one at the hospital. You know a little bit about that mural. You would understand the direction that I, you know, even more than ever, wanted my work to cry. And it's powerful. Art is so powerful, and that's a good example.

That mural could be seen just passing through San Antonio. You don't even have to stop. If you just pass through it, you can't miss it. You know, the main corridor, I-35: you pass through there, upper level—and it's called *The Spirit of Healing*, okay? It's a hospital, a children's hospital now: one of the best children's hospitals in the world. And that mural has been there over 20 years: 23 years or 25 years. It's a mosaic, and it's an outdoor mural, and it was built so that it would last 500 years, you know, because, you know, I want people to remember me in 500 years when they see it, that, "Oh, Jesse Treviño did that."

And, originally, people were telling me, "Hey, what are you going to do with that?" It was a wall that is a 100-foot high wall. Well, I can do a historical image of what the hospital represents—it has a lot of history to it—or whatever I wanted to do. But, when it came down to it,—you know,

this was in 1994 when I began that mural—it changed, what I thought about what I wanted to do. Because I always leave it—you know, it's not like I know right away, "This is what I'm going to do." No, I just let my mind and my heart take me where it's going to end up. Once that happens, it's really incredible the process I go through.

So, I thought like—it's sort of like the Black Lives Matter—it's like what matters right now here in San Antonio? And what mattered was that our youth were involved in gangs and drugs. And that was a children's hospital. I mean, it still is a children's hospital. I thought, well, that's very important, you know?

That was one thing, and then I was doing a portrait of my son. He was eight years old. And I was doing some research in a cemetery here in San Antonio for the tombstones. Some were angels and some were—I had pictures of my son on one side, and I had pictures of some of the tombstones, and the images, sort of, converged together, and I realized it was the very images you see: the guardian angel image that has been done by many different cultures. And I thought you know, this thing about our youth, what's important here—when I grew up as a little kid, my older sister saw that I could draw. And I was just a little kid about five or six years old. She got me my first little drawing tablet, little tempera paints, and a couple of drawing pencils. And I thought, wow, that's the most incredible gift I've ever had because she thought I had potential as being an artist, okay?

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So, that was very important. I thought that's what kids lacked was direction, right? The young kids—someone that could direct them and guide them, you know, as they grow up. To do the right things as a kid, you need such an adult that can guide you. It could be anyone, but, in this case, it was my sister and my mother. She was single parent. My father died very young. And both of them—this image that you see in the background is the spirit of healing. And it has my son, and my son is holding a dove. The dove is very symbolic of many things: the spirit, freedom, and all the kind of things that—when you're child, you're fragile. You're moldable, you know. So, when I did the portrait, he was holding a hedgehog. He loved cats, and he loved animals, you know. But, the way a child holds something like a pet or something like that—the innocence of that child caring for it, protecting it, and all of that: that's the difference between a child and an older person, you see. A child does that. So, it captured that.

And it captured the angel. There are actually nuns and nurses there are at the Santa Rosa Hospital that came originally from France, and there was an order that created an orphanage, and it eventually became a hospital. That angel represents them also. But it represents my sister, that person like my mother, and the person—it could be an older brother or someone that takes that responsibility of making sure that that child at least doesn't get in trouble and doesn't get, you know, involved in all of these—and that message was so important to prevail. And I had an opportunity in this mural to do that. I mean, I'm telling you, the way it came together, that was the thing. It didn't matter what other people thought. For me, from an artist's point of view, it's what I wanted to accomplish. It's something that would be there for years to come, and it would still be relevant to what's going on now, you know what I'm saying?

And it was about youth, you know: what was important there. And it came down to the parents, the father, the mother, the older sister, or whoever would do that. Because, can you imagine, if you don't have that, how—I mean, those are the kids that get in trouble, that, you know, get out of school. They go hang around with the wrong group or the wrong friends, you know, so things like that. You know, there are other projects set up here in San Antonio that have a similar message.

You know, the community where I grew up was a very poor community. It's sort of like Black Lives Matter: that section of town is still, you know—people discriminate if you're from that part of town. It's like the bad part of town. I've been real successful in downtown areas and different parts of the city, but nothing in that particular town because projects are expensive. And I went to this certain area and I wanted to do a sculpture, a mural sort of sculpture, and they didn't have any money.

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So, I had to actually raise money because a lot of people that have left that part of town and are professional doctors or lawyers or teachers are friends of mine. And I went to them one-by-one. So they would donate \$500 or \$1,000 each, you know? Nobody turned me down. Everybody

wanted to be part of this project that I wanted to create.

People would have to, in that neighborhood, lock their houses and doors and everything. When I grew up in that neighborhood, doors weren't locked and, you know, people could come in and out and whatever because you knew your neighbors. Well, now, people would be all locked up. And it was about people getting killed and mugged and all sorts of terrible things in a community that wasn't safe.

So I created the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the virgin of Guadalupe, in the form of a candle, like the candles you see in the glass jar, with that image in tile. And it was about a half-a-million dollar project that I helped raise money to create. Because that candle, in the homes there when I was a little kid growing up, is called the Guadalupe community. There was a green space there where I wanted to create this sculpture because I felt that that image was very powerful, and the symbolism of that candle sort of could light up the whole community. Not just one house. And, so, if people could start coming out to see that image, talk to each other, and, you know, be able to interact, and tell stories of how, for many, many years, it was a big community, you know, 100 years ago, and how different it was. So, I wanted that to happen again. We needed to, instead of, you know, everybody getting locked up in their houses, they would come out and interact.

You know, there's people from all over the world that go to that candle because there's nothing like it in the whole world. That candle, the size of it, and the way it's created—it's made out of concrete and glass block and ceramic tile, mosaic tile. You know, it takes about three or four years to create those murals, you know? So, you know, those are the kind of projects I want to last hundreds of years, and sometimes it takes other people that will help me to actually create it.

I like students that, they don't have to be artists, but there are people that—I learned many years ago from a friend of mine from Chicago that was involved in the arts that said, "You know, we get young kids that perhaps had problems at home and whatever and got them involved in a project," in a theatre project or, in my case, doing the murals. Can you imagine the difference that it makes to a kid that has a broken-up family and has all that to get involved? They're saying, "Look, see that mural that's there? I was part of that. I helped create that." They live that. And, believe me, I've had people that helped me, kids and other older people, great people. They're all right. I mean, they've made artists, architects, and engineers, and different people that thank me all the time, you know? When I used to go to the supermarket, people would stop me and say, "I don't want to bother you, but I want to just thank you for that mural you did at the Santa Rosa Hospital. I wanted to thank you for doing that."

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Because they tell me some incredible stories of how it's changed their lives and, you know, they saw it for the first time and, like, wow, you know, it's overwhelmingly. I guess, you know, it's like when people go to Europe and they see some of the things that were done, you know, hundreds of years ago, and they're just overwhelmed by that. That's the way I want my work when people see that.

You know, in the Vietnam show, there were artists there that had art from all over the country. And I was thinking, you know, when I won that first contest as a little kid. I was about six years old. I remember that that was the beginning of my whole career, because I saw how important a museum was and all that. So here I was at the Smithsonian in a Vietnam show where Vietnam has been a big part of my life. I mean, you know, what I experienced, I have to live with forever.

I had a mural that I did inside my home where I lived. I sold the house, and the person that bought the house took the mural out because, otherwise, the mural would just be in the house. They took the actual wall, and that's what's in the exhibit there in Washington at the Smithsonian and at the MIA in Minneapolis. And I tell you one thing, because I've experienced it before: I've been to an exhibit like that, and that one piece was obviously the heart of the show. It stood out, you know, because of the size of it and then the contents of it. And it was in the bedroom. When I came back from Vietnam, it was all pitch black, I mean, it was dark. And I put a couple of spotlights and I painted the wall black. And I painted on that black wall: "mi vida," my life, right? So, you know, it touched so many people, and it was such an important piece. And we could even see the beautiful book, that catalog that Melissa Ho did. They're from the Smithsonian. It came out in the *Wall Street Journal* in color, the whole page, the mural. It's unbelievable. From a wall that I did when I came back from Vietnam because I thought I couldn't paint anymore [laughs]. I mean, that's what it proved: when you see that, and you see it in that

exhibit, those are the kind of things that I've done in my lifetime. They're incredible statements of the things that I've experienced, you know?

BEN GILLESPIE: Right, and that's—

JESSE TREVIÑO: You know, here in San Antonio, one of the things that I've really wanted to do but, of course, it's been very difficult—African American, Black people sit on the east side of town, right? And I've always wanted to do something like—, I really feel like Martin Luther King heads, it's very sincere, that he really deserved by someone like myself. So, I've had different ideas. If I could create something that, you know, sort of like a cityscape. I mean, the pieces that I do become part of the whole city, you know? So if I could create something, an image that would be monumental, you know, that would rival the one there in Washington that Martin Luther King—or the murals that are done all over the country and stuff like that. I have ideas that are much bigger than that, that, if one day I have the opportunity to do that, then I'll do it. Because, I've, sort of, in my mind I've been sketching it. I want to do something like that here.

But there is an old theater here in San Antonio downtown that is very important. It's sort of like what the Apollo is in New York to the African Americans. We have a theater here. We have many theaters, but this one theater is a theater that's been closed for many, many years. And I got the community together, and we saved the theater. But they've put somewhere in the millions of dollars to restoring the whole theater. But there's a wall outside the theater that's next to our beautiful San Pedro Creek that they've done sort of like a river walk. I want to do a mural there—a huge mosaic mural there one day, too. And that was before this pandemic was very close. And it's still alive, and hopefully that will happen, you know? But—

BEN GILLESPIE: That's a wonderful point for me to thank you for this. We're at the time limit, so thank you, Jesse—

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