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Oral history interview with Adriana Corral,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Adriana Corral on July 24, 2020. The interview took place at Corral's home in Houston, Texas, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco 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

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Adriana Corral at her home in Houston. Right? You're in Houston?

ADRIANA CORRAL: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. In Houston, Texas, on July 24th, 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Oral History Project. Adriana, hi. Thank you for talking to me for the archives. And, yeah, we just want to start with how have you been since March?

ADRIANA CORRAL: Um, I've been, um—these are unprecedented times. And I think it's been, uh, a lot of adjustments, um, adjustments with the pandemic, uh, with, um, health, with loss, um, with social unrest, but also with life. Um, and so looking at kind of each of those things and, um, wholeheartedly and really almost spending more time with each of those things and how to be resilient through them. And, um, that was a question that was asked early on, uh, of this pandemic to me, um, by the curator, Denise Markonish. And it's something that I keep, uh, going back to, um, because when you are faced with, um, whether it is financial burden or a health issue, or, uh, a loss, um, and it's—all of this is compounded by the pandemic, you know, because we're either required to stay in lockdown or stay remotely to the confines of our home.

And so, as a person who, um, does extensive research and fieldwork and, uh, connecting with other people to, um, bring more life to the work that I create, it's taking adjustments. And, um, to be quite honest with you, what I love in this type of oral history that you're doing, I didn't—I didn't realize the huge significance of oral histories until I worked on the Bracero Program, um, or the piece that I did in reference to the Bracero Program, *Unearthed: Desenterrado*. And then seeing each of these contributions of these oral histories and listening to hundreds of them. Um, they're so vital. They give you an insight to, um, a time, a place. And it can be unpacked in so many levels.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. It's been, um, you know, this kind of collection is new for us. And, uh, it's something I'm able to do while I can't travel and visit papers because, you know, most of my job is going to people's storage units in homes and studios. So I'm glad to hear that—yeah, and we have a big oral history program, and this will be part of it. That's, um, what the value is.

So what do you mean by more time to sit with loss? And what has it meant? What have—have you learned new things about loss because of being stuck at home with it?

ADRIANA CORRAL: Um, I think when you're not able to necessarily attend a funeral in a physical way, um, how do you do that virtually?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

ADRIANA CORRAL: It's really challenging.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Has that—yeah, it seems like the more—every week that goes by, more people are missing funerals. I've missed mine too. Um—

ADRIANA CORRAL: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Thinking about your collaborators, because I know you're practicing and how much you collaborate and rely on visits with people and curators and scholars. Um, have you been able to keep those relationships up through Zoom or through the virtual technologies?

[00:04:30]

ADRIANA CORRAL: Yeah. And I—I do want to add just one note to that last question that you asked. And just by having that tremendous loss—my brother just had a baby, him and his wife. And so it's also looking at life too and how these, these two things interlace with each other, you know. Um, my three other nephews, I was able to be there, in the same room, when they were born. And also, you know, um, kind of sitting with those emotions of, you know, when you've lost somebody, but then you have this beautiful life coming into this world as well. Um, and getting updates, um, you know, from my family about, you know, the progress of the baby, or—I think it's these two things that are kind of the core things that are, you know, what drive me to make the work that I do too. It's life and death and celebrating both of them, um, but also allowing yourself to mourn, you know, for those things. Um, but yes, so and your next question was—I'm so sorry.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, just is your family—is everybody in El Paso?

ADRIANA CORRAL: No. We are scattered everywhere. Um, I do have my parents in El Paso, but, uh, the rest of my siblings are kind of—I have a brother that's, um, in Dartmouth, Mass. He's in radiology, so he's also kind of in the front lines with this pandemic. I have a cousin who's an ICU nurse there in DC, who's primarily a COVID nurse, um, an uncle who's a heart surgeon, who's also in the forefront. So it's also looking at it from their perspective and, you know, what their protocol is and, um, just trying to be supportive on that end. Um—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I forgot so much of your family's in the medical field, which is probably both, like, helpful with information, but also terrifying [laughs].

ADRIANA CORRAL: Yeah [laughs]. I mean especially with testing because, you know, there's such an emphasis on going to get tested. And then I'm being informed from, you know, everybody else that the tests are not yielding such accurate results.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

ADRIANA CORRAL: And, you know, um, and that's one thing that I'm really fortunate to have, is have parents and extended family members and that, um, take into account health so rigorously, from the food that we eat to, um, you know, these kind of viruses that do exist, um, in all forms, not just in this kind of pandemic, but how to—how to protect yourself. And to be quite honest, I would have never thought, in my time, that my studio gear would be my gear to be out in daily life, you know. I often use toxic chemicals, so I wear full-faced respirators and masks often. And so, um, that's been—it's been interesting in the fact that now these things that I wear inside to protect myself, I'm now using on the outside because of the environment.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow. Yeah. That speaks—I mean so my question was about how you're staying in touch with collaborators. But I think maybe even a bigger question, related, is are you still making art right now? Because I think you're—an artist is an always an artist, but, you know, it changes how actively you're making something. And I've figured out, through these interviews, that some people—people are having different responses. Some are really stopping that physical making, and some are, like, digging in even harder.

ADRIANA CORRAL: So when this, I guess kind of early on, you know, in March, started happening, I—it was interesting. There was a piece I did, and I was quite disappointed with it. I mean and it's a rather large piece, but I just felt such an urgency to redo it. And I thought this is a pausing moment that I should finish it as quick as possible, um, and give myself that time. And in redoing it, right at kind of midway, maybe I was about 70 percent done, is when I ended up getting sick. And but as I've started to recuperate, that was the first thing I wanted to get back to. And, um, but also give myself—just be patient with myself and honor also my healing period. And so, um, the other thing that I did in trying to understand what is happening, you know, to me physically, but also is return to just drawing. Um, and so I ordered this anatomy book—I think the original edition came out maybe in 1915 or so—a vintage, um, anatomy book. And it just has such beautiful, beautiful illustrations of the body. And so I started really acutely looking at, you know, pulmonary, the heart, and just different organs of the body, and drawing those.

[00:11:02]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

ADRIANA CORRAL: And so, um, doing these very small, intimate pieces about the body, uh, the

internal body, just—and they're a refresher also, what are the names of these very specific, uh, you know, the carotid, or the aorta, and things like that, that I also did grow up with especially going to see these surgeries with my uncle. But, um, it—I think that has really helped me to just, um, think about the body in a different way too because, you know, when I was in DC, the last time, I was looking at—it wasn't necessarily a pandemic—but there was a typhus scare. And there was also the Spanish flu. Um, and so I have—I have been looking at the external, you know, the landscape and what that has—you know, the effects on, even psychologically, to the body. And in addition to, like, social and political and public health. And so I started to see, you know, I'm seeing this research that I started to do in DC, now very differently, um, kind of with new eyes of, you know, how our landscape, how our environment, you know, really does affect our internal too.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. This is the research in the National Archives you were referring to?

ADRIANA CORRAL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah.

ADRIANA CORRAL: Yeah. Exactly.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's interesting because your work is also looking at not natural diseases but manmade—man-inflicted illness from the pesticides and people afflicting pesticides on other people.

ADRIANA CORRAL: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And, uh, you know, they all do damage to the lungs, but why they do damage is so different.

ADRIANA CORRAL: Yes. Exactly. Um, and what in our landscape, what in our environment is—how that is affecting our, even our autoimmune, our organs, um, how that is impairing certain things that—I'm really interested in also the long-term effects because if we—if we look at, um, say for example the Bracero Program, there's no—there was no research done on braceros to see what were the specific effects of being sprayed with DDT to come in, and then also steeped in it in agriculture and in, um, the railroad industry. And so most—a lot of the braceros who were participants in that have passed away. Um, and so my questions are also, you know, in our—in our time, we've evolved in the kind of fertilizers and things like that, but I, I'm starting to see these things very holistically, essentially, which is interesting because it really stems back to what I was looking at in undergrad.

It was all about disease infestation. And it focused on my aunt who's an anesthesiologist who had cancer. And it was looking at how the—what was happening on the internal. And so then it—I started to look on the environment, what happens to trauma, and violence. But a lot of these things are, you know, it's kind of like a spoke wheel, you know. They all—there's all these little connectors. And I think what I'm trying to do too is, uh, try to stay informed, and read, and, um, and rethink how I'm approaching even this new body of work that I'm really interested in delving more in-depth with in regards to these kind of delousing facilities that were established all along the U.S.-Mexico border as, you know, as a way to contain the virus of typhus, you know, keep it in Mexico. And if they were going to enter the U.S., they had to—they were subjected to a delousing procedure that involved kerosene or, uh, Zyklon B sometimes, cyanide-based chemicals. And what does that have—what does that kind of use of those chemicals have on the long-term effect, also generationally, you know?

[00:16:14]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

ADRIANA CORRAL: And so I'm asking myself a lot more questions than maybe I've ever asked, uh, which feels like sometimes you go into something and you're looking for answers, but you come out with more questions [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. All the time [laughs]. Yeah. Well, I imagine too you've already thought so much about borders, and migration, and national versus natural boundaries, and these pandemics both have changed so much, you know, what an American passport, what a U.S. passport means and gets you now is different. Um, and the same administration's overseeing that, yet the things that have led to that has oversaw what the U.S. and other people's passports

would mean, you know, in the last few years too. So it's—

ADRIANA CORRAL: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Um, I imagine just borders are part of your questions.

ADRIANA CORRAL: Oh, for sure. Um, and it's interesting because I feel like I go back to these, these kind of three things a lot lately, which is *Line as Human*, that Gego—she wrote a nice little excerpt about it, text about it. And then Carmen Herrera, *Lines of Sight*, and then also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Uh, I've just been really looking at these kind of—these articles about what does the line mean, you know, and how it defines, um, justice, how it defines, um, the landscape, how it defines division. And I think those are—yeah, again, it's like going back, reverting back to those questions of sitting with those things and also, you know, our past, whether it's from the pandemic, that this is not—the pandemic is not new. We have a—within our, I mean not within our time, but within, you know, the Spanish flu, that was a pandemic that affected people. So I think this is going to be a very defining time. And so a huge part of my practice is also documentation. So just writing about how I'm feeling or all of the things that have been compounded in this period of time, um, because I think it's these traces that, um, and the type of time capsules that we create that really allow other people, whoever does research of our time, to start to really formulate—it is really difficult. Um, especially here in Texas right now that the numbers are so high.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

ADRIANA CORRAL: I have my cousin who is the nurse in DC, she's, um, considering coming to Texas.

JOSH T. FRANCO: To work?

ADRIANA CORRAL: To come and help the hospitals. Yeah. Here in Houston. And so, uh, so it's also, you know, thinking like, I mean, to me, she's always been a hero in this in that she goes where that need is. And it's not just been here in the U.S. She's done that in other countries. And so I think—and I think it's also important that we consider that, yes, this is not just happening here in the U.S. It's so global. And it's having such an impact in so many different ways because we're still trying to understand this virus.

[00:20:35]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So in the last couple of minutes, minute-and-a-half, something I've been asking artists, speaking artist to artist, what do you think is important to tell the artist in 100 years about what it was like to be an artist in 2020?

ADRIANA CORRAL: Um, it's eye-opening. It makes you extremely thankful for the things that you do have. And with the—with the—even the smallest thing, to be so full of gratitude, and that there is the opportunity to talk about this moment, to write about this moment, and to always share your voice, whether it's just with yourself, to find that space to just write about it internally because I think, um—and for me the field notebook, the journal, the sketchbook, um, it harnesses so much of our—of our intimacy. This is, like, the most intimate that we can be, and vulnerable and fragile. And, um, and then just being there for family, and extended family, and friends. And to not stop searching for a way to do—to connect. Don't stop searching for a way to heal. Um, and I guess that goes back into this—when Denise asked about resilience, my response was, "It's going to be movement. It's going to be our movement through breath. It's going to be our movement through pain. It's going to be movement through illness. It's going to be movement through all of this."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Yeah. Sorry. It glitched a little bit, but I caught it. Movement.

ADRIANA CORRAL: Okay. Do you want me to repeat that?

JOSH T. FRANCO: No. The words actually came through. The video glitched though, so.

ADRIANA CORRAL: Oh, okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But it was perfect. And I—yeah, vulnerability is something that archives excel in providing.

ADRIANA CORRAL: Yeah. Oh. I mean I know I have some quite vulnerable moments in there. In

the kind of documents like that I found.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

ADRIANA CORRAL: [Laughs] It was like, "Oh, my God, I can't believe I found this."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Well, thank you for giving us this one.

ADRIANA CORRAL: Of course. Thank you for the opportunity to share and speak with you.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay.

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