



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ester
Hernández, 2021 November 1517

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ester Hernández on 2021 November 15 and 17. The interview took place virtually over Zoom at Hernández's home in San Francisco, CA, and was conducted by Melissa San Miguel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Ester Hernández and Melissa San Miguel have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. 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

[00:00:10.36]

Hello, this is Melissa San Miguel interviewing Ester Hernández virtually over Zoom on November 15, 2021, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Thank you, Ester, for making the time to share your story with us through this oral history.

[00:00:28.72]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Thank you too, Melissa. I'm very, very honored to be a part of this Smithsonian Oral History Program—project, I should say. And I thank you too for all of the time and energy that you put into this, uh—putting in the answers, getting all the answers together, and just helping me pull it all together. So, gracias.

[00:00:49.21]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Well, I'm excited for our conversation over the next few days. And I think we'll start off with the first set of questions, from the beginning, right, the beginning of your story, which also relates to your family as well. And so I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about when and where you were born, you know, how many siblings you have, and share a little bit more about your family and yourself.

[00:01:14.38]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Um, I was born in 1944 in a small, sleepy little farming town—as it referred to itself—called Dinuba, here in California, in the Central San Joaquin Valley. And, uh, let's see, what else? My parents—okay my mother was from Mexico. She came during the time of the revolution, when she was one year old. And my father is of, uh, Yaqui, uh, ancestry, and he was born and raised around the border of, uh, Mexico, the US-Mexican border.

[00:01:53.03]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: What were their names?

[00:01:54.66]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: My mother's name was Luz Medina Hernández. And my father was Simón Hernández. And they both, uh, were—migrated. Eventually their families found their way into the San Joaquin Valley, which at that time was very, very difficult. There was very little work.

[00:02:14.72]

And there was just so much going on, so much chaos going on all over because of the revolution. And to be honest, they were—they had to keep moving, because nobody would, uh, give them housing or allow them to buy property during those times. So that's how they landed up going—landed up in the San Joaquin Valley, where the water systems were being developed for the agriculture that were, uh, you know, all the industry that would be coming. So that's how they ended up there in that area where, um, uh, they raised their families.

[00:02:49.61]

They met at a baseball game

[00:02:52.05]

[They laugh.]

[00:02:53.37]

And—

[00:02:55.43]

—they both loved to dance, so that always helped—

[00:02:58.61]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —aww—

[00:02:59.93]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —it helped. So I had three older sisters and two younger brothers.

[00:03:06.23]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Got it. And so when your parents, um, came—so this is the Mexican Revolution, correct, in the early 1900s?

[00:03:13.85]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, correct, mm-hmm.

[00:03:15.20]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: When did they make it over to the San Joaquin Valley area?

[00:03:19.26]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It would have been probably in the—maybe the mid '20s—

[00:03:23.63]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —hmm, okay—

[00:03:23.81]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —or that era. The Yaqui community was being pushed out of Mexico. The Mexican government as such was trying to take—was taking—away the land and the water. So people were being massacred. So there was a lot of movement going on.

[00:03:37.20]

So in the one sense, when my mother's part of the family—they had lost land and it was just—just everything was falling apart. So my grandmother and my grandfather, they came—they left Mexico along with the millions of other people that left. My father's side of the family, they stayed, in the border, and they had buck boards and they actually ran guns into the revolution. So it's like I come from all this really totally interesting background in that regard.

[00:04:05.60]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, that's quite a—that's quite a history, a family history.

[00:04:09.29]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes.

[00:04:10.89]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And so in terms of the folks that raised you, were your grandparents living with you? Who were some of those that you call like the family members that, um, you know, were really close to you and that cared for you? It seems like there were many people.

[00:04:28.16]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, my, uh, my uncles—I had many uncles and aunts. And my grandparents were around, mostly in the town of Dinuba. My paternal grandparents and my aunts, uh, lived there. So I had lots and lots of relatives.

[00:04:45.11]

My maternal grandmother lived in a town called Selma, which was maybe 10 miles away. So we spent a lot of time going back and forth. And there was a lot of movement within, um, my family and the community. So it was very active—very, very active—in that regard. I received a lot of love and support, which I'm grateful for to this day, mm-hmm.

[00:05:07.40]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, and what was—did they have any expectations for you growing up? And if so, what were they?

[00:05:14.83]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, my mother went up to junior high, which was pretty unusual for a woman in those days. Like so many other—being the oldest—like so many other families in these small farm working communities, she had to, uh, quit school to go and help support her family.

[00:05:35.30]

My father had an education up to the fourth grade. But he continued to educate himself. So they had a real strong, uh, interest and they valued the importance of a good education—even if you were a woman—because my mother really had high expectations. But she wasn't able to realize those.

[00:05:55.15]

So she instilled in all of her children and supported us in terms of getting as much education as we could to learn some skills, so that no matter what happened in life, especially if you were a woman, that you would be able to take care of yourself and your family, if you had one. So—and just to learn and grow and to learn other things, to get out of the, uh, the hard life of being a farm worker.

[00:06:20.59]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, it seems that they instilled so many meaningful values into you.

[00:06:26.18]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: On that level, education, even, but even then, um, sort of a love—the community, the Mexican culture, like so many other cultures, we come from thousands of years of our traditions. So in between all the hard work and what have you, there was always time for self-expression. And it took so many different forms.

[00:06:49.10]

So I was totally surrounded by the arts. It sort of gave meaning to our lives. And my grandmother did this, like, embroidery that had like thousands of years of tradition, uh, wonderful gardening. And she was a magnificent dancer of folk music—Mexican folk—and she could also do the jitterbug or whatever.

[00:07:11.03]

[They laugh.]

[00:07:12.64]

My grandfather—maternal side—he was a master carpenter in Mexico. So when he came here, he built many houses as well as other structures. But also in his spare time, he created sculptures, religious and otherwise.

[00:07:27.28]

So, um, my father's side, um—the Yaqui side—, uh, they were musicians and dancers also. So—and my father was into photography. So—but there was always time for a dance. Even if we worked 10 hours in the field or whatever, we'd come home and get dressed and—and go dance.

[00:07:48.61]

And even when we were in the fields, we were singing—and trying to make the best of very hard moments—singing and somebody maybe reciting a poem—or a passage from the Bible. There was all kinds of things—jokes, storytelling, and the magnificent storytelling, especially by the elders who had come from Mexico, talking about the revolution and what they experienced and their feelings about being here in the United States. So it's a very, very rich, uh, environment for a young—child—with a very—big imagination.

[00:08:25.36]

[They laugh.]

[00:08:27.04]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, it sounds like you were surrounded by art, you know—in ways large and small—by everyone in the community.

[00:08:33.88]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Absolutely, it was highly valued.

[00:08:37.81]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Was there any experience you had with art either that you witnessed or maybe that you participated in that made a strong impression on you, too?

[00:08:47.71]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It's always funny to say this, but it's the truth. It was my brother's—because I was—I had my three older sisters and then my younger brothers. So when my first younger brother was born—well, we always had parties anyway. But they had a big—like I think it was a baptism party—and so there was music going on.

[00:09:07.24]

It was a tiny little house and really, really hot.

[00:09:09.80]

So all the children were running around outside. And I was kind of dressed up in a fancy little dress, which was pretty unusual—uh, you know because being in the farms out there. Anyway—uh, we were running—I was running outside with my friends. And I landed up falling—and I landed up falling into the mud.

[00:09:31.53]

And I was—maybe—three or so—maybe—my brother was just born, so I must have been around two or three. But I just remember falling in the mud and just being so overwhelmed with the plasticity of it that I just sort of began to draw and create forms. And then—sort of then—I came to this realization: Uh-oh, I fell in the mud in this fancy little dress, and what's going to happen, and all that.

[00:10:05.46]

So I let go—I moved out of that space.

[00:10:07.45]

But I was still very much shaken and moved. But even more so—after I dealt with my parents, it was all fine and all of that—but I went back. And my image and my drawings in the mud were still there. And that just really changed my relationship with the world around me, that one moment.

[00:10:32.89]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[00:10:34.67]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So that is very—it's still very vivid in my mind.

[00:10:39.87]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm.

[00:10:40.16]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So in that point, I think it really, like I said—I know—it became a diff—I was forming my mind to like, uh, I guess, the arts, the visual arts—

[00:10:49.04]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —mm-hmm—

[00:10:49.19]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —yeah, the plasticity of the world—the nature.

[00:10:55.44]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, it sounds like such a powerful experience and one that you had, like, as a toddler.

[00:11:01.34]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, and, you know, just to go into it a little deeper—the reality of being a farm worker child and all of that, too, and living in a small little crowded house, and it's super hot and it's foggy and all of these things that you have to deal with—I also learned—I mean, I continued to create things around me, even in the grape fields, and my grandmother's house had this magnificent mud—so I was always making things. I was always—charcoal from the little fires around—I was always drawing. I was always involved.

[00:11:33.47]

But I also found—that, in the process of making art—that it was meditative. It allowed me to escape—whatever, and especially the hard times—it gave me a respite. And plus, it gave me so much joy, so it was like I—it was like a gift that I had the fortune of recognizing at a very young age.

[00:12:02.78]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, so it was like a kind of a dream space you could go into and make what you wanted.

[00:12:08.75]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes. It's—even to this day—it's still the only thing in my life that has been consistent and can do that for me.

[00:12:17.74]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, wow, and so I was wondering, how did your family react? Like I'm sure—like, you were using everything around you right to make art. What did they have to say about that?

[00:12:29.39]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: They—they really loved it. I mean, they were, like I said, they were themselves involved in the arts. And there was a real appreciation in general for self-expression.

[00:12:38.03]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Hmm.

[00:12:38.33]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And even for my friends, I mean, I received a lot of recognition in the school—not from everybody, but—but from the art teachers. We had marvelous art teachers who were from the city, and they were kind of a little unusual for the country school.

[00:12:55.98]

But anyway, but my classmates were also very supportive of me, especially the Chicanos, because I could draw portraiture. I was fascinated with portraiture. So at a very young age I was already doing business. I was already selling portraits. [Laughs.]

[00:13:11.07]

I could do some cool—all these fancy do's, honey—or I could do, like, María Felix, Elizabeth Taylor eyebrows, whatever you wanted. So I was already at a very young age trading my art skills for food. So—yes. So in that respect I kind of learned that it was valued in different ways and that it had some value to other people.

[00:13:39.60]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm. And very entrepreneurial, too. [Laughs.]

[00:13:43.53]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Survival.

[00:13:43.81]

[They laugh.]

[00:13:46.14]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: What drew you to portraiture? Like, that's something unique to start working on as a kid. And so what was it about it that really drew you to drawing people—or painting people?

[00:13:57.78]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I guess I've always been curious and fascinated with people. And I've always been—well, it's like they said, if there was one person—or two people—standing together, I had to go see what was up, kind of snoop and curious. But more than anything, I always had this really—appreciation maybe it was from learning from my family, for people, for the beauty of our people, the dignity that was a lot of times denied us in the general, the bigger picture.

[00:14:33.25]

But they were my models. Who else was going to sit for me? But—so it was my mother or my sisters, my friends who were my first models. They would actually sit for me—

[00:14:43.65]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —wow—

[00:14:43.83]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —and I would draw them. And I would try to capture their essence.

[00:14:48.13]

And so that was kind of my window into portraiture and to working with other people—to collaborate. Yeah, and I was always—I would even have little exhibitions, ongoing exhibitions, in our little house.

[00:15:08.07]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: No way, tell me more. What were some of your works and themes? [Laughs.]

[00:15:13.89]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, okay. My first exhibit outside of school—still was connected with school—this was at our little library. That's the first time that I had an exhibit outside of the classroom. And that was the first grade. I'd won a prize. And my work was exhibited along with some of the other children.

[00:15:33.78]

So that was kind of a real turning point also in my life in terms of my work being recognized. And again, it was portraiture and it was of people. It was of the classroom, the school photographer taking the picture of the class. But from his—from behind his—it was like a really unusual perspective.

[00:15:55.77]

So anyway, so people have always been fascinating to me. And later on—my mother kept a lot of my artwork, so—I saw that a lot of the drawings that I was doing that were real, like, just line and gesture, like when I was maybe—fifth grade, sixth grade—they were of the workers. They were of workers—

[00:16:17.63]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —wow—

[00:16:17.87]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —because I like the sense of movement of their bodies and all of that. They were people either working on the street or my imagination of us working in the field. So my—I've always been fascinated with people, especially women, the role of women, what they do, what they look like, and—yes.

[00:16:38.30]

So—and I've always felt too sometimes that I've always been drawing especially images of women, in particular to honor them—kind of a feminist approach, actually, but, um—now, I mean, there's a word now: feminist—but also because I moved around in my life. And to me it gave me great comfort to be surrounded by these wonderful multi-generational *mujeres*.

[00:17:07.91]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah.

[00:17:09.08]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: They accompanied me in my life.

[00:17:12.54]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: It seems like you're such an observant child, like really taking in the whole world around you—you know, your family, the other workers—just so present, right, with what was around.

[00:17:27.21]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Right. Yeah, well that was in contrast again to the very difficult conditions of being a farm worker child and the hard labor that we endured and the days of,

just, fog—being fogged in—of the oppressive heat and all of that. It was like a contrast. And fortunately the visual arts gave me that respite.

[00:17:52.89]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Were you also working as a child, as well?

[00:17:56.89]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: As a farm worker?

[00:17:58.00]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah.

[00:17:59.02]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Oh, absolutely. Back in those days, especially at those small little farming towns, there weren't any childcare centers. So pretty much after I was born—like the rest of my siblings—pretty much after I was born, after my mother was able to sort of get back to the fields, I was with her. They would, uh, take us in whatever—bassinets, bask—whatever—and—or leave us in the car in the shade or—yeah, I grew up in the fields.

[00:18:28.51]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[00:18:29.59]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: There was nothing else. There were no places else, unless you had, like, a family or somebody. But most of us were working. But, um—so—you would get older and you would, uh, you would watch the water, get it out of the sun. Or the food, you would move things around. You sort of were given different chores the older you got.

[00:18:51.70]

But—and then when you were much older, then you were sort of started actually picking grapes or picking cotton or picking tomatoes—different things, whatever was in season—so then the work got progressively more difficult and challenging and—but you were still a child.

[00:19:10.36]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[00:19:11.23]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So—so—but—but you did it bec—because you wanted to help your family. And of course, they never allowed you to do anything that was going to totally injure you. But back in those days, there were no laws against child labor.

[00:19:25.30]

And of course, that was before the Farm Workers Union. And you had to take your water—the bathrooms, that was a whole other problem. And so it was very difficult. But we did it. And again, like I said, we sang, we did—whatever we had to do to get through the day.

[00:19:41.98]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. Well, very powerful story, right, of the strength and the community and strength of each person.

[00:19:48.66]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Correct. Yeah, and it wasn't just like Mexican Americans that were out there, too. There were African American families. There were Native American families. And in this particular little town called Dinuba—the truth of the matter is: I was born in Chinatown, Dinuba, and as in many, like, of the towns in the West Coast in particular, there

were many Chinatowns—you've got LA—but in small little towns, too—so I was born in Chinatown *barrio*.

[00:20:22.03]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[00:20:23.15]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: They were still—I still remember the elderly Chinese—but also because it was so segregated at that point, that all the people of color had to live in the *barrio*. So we had Filipinos. We had Koreans. We had, uh, like I said, African American. And there were Native people that sort of would come and go—and they still lived up in the mountains—and then, of course, the Mexican Americans.

[00:20:48.28]

And then—and interestingly enough—after World War II, the Japanese, after they were led out of the internment camps, they could only live in the *barrios*. So they landed up bringing their Buddhist church and their ceremonies and all of that into our *barrio*. So that really changed my life. And it enriched my life, too—as well as some of the other cultures.

[00:21:17.57]

But the Japanese were just so different and so public with their lives. And they had a little store, so I was exposed to a lot of food and sweets. And my friend would share, like—uh, scrolls—so I saw calligraphy. I saw washi, the beautiful handmade papers. I saw a lot of different things that she shared with me. So again, that was a transformative sort of experience in the small little rural town that all formed me.

[00:21:50.63]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right, and there's such a diversity of nationalities and people in the small town.

[00:21:57.53]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And of course, we also—just as a footnote, there were also Okies, the poor whites. They were also part of our community. And they weren't wanted in other parts of the town, too.

[00:22:11.48]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: It seems like what was bringing people together was that they were working class and trying to do their best.

[00:22:19.01]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, absolutely: working class and people of color. There was a lot of race and class divisions, mm-hmm.

[00:22:28.31]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: I see. And so then, like, you were describing, too, kind of the progression in the sense of the work that you were doing as a kid in the fields. And as you become older and as a teenager, you get more responsibilities. So what was that like as a teenager? And you're also an artist, too, and you'd been exhibiting your work at that point for years with the neighborhood and with everybody. What were some of the things that you were thinking about at that point, in terms of wanting to do with your life?

[00:23:02.64]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, my guide was so much involved with the arts. And in school, elementary and high school, I won a lot of prizes—awards of sorts.

[00:23:12.14]

But, okay, when I was graduating from high school—this is something I'll never forget, also—the school counselor was talking to everybody about their expectations over and beyond—. And actually, the expectations of us were pretty much very low. They expected us, people of color, the working class, to either be secretaries or beauticians. That's what's kind of—because there are no other jobs. They wouldn't give us any other jobs until all that changed later. But up until that point those were the only options you had. But I had this conversation with the school counselor. And I told her that I wanted to be an artist. And she started laughing.

[00:23:56.00]

She said, There's no need or call for artists in small little farming communities. And she looked at me and she said, But maybe you can get a job working for the police, they're always looking for people and you draw faces so well, maybe you can do, like, a facial composite—I think it's called—and help them find people. And that really just—shook, shocked me. And I told my parents. They were horrified. They were totally horrified.

[00:24:25.27]

But anyway, so, but—it was—so that kind of always stayed with me. I sort of felt at that point that I was going to have to move to an urban area. I was going to have to move out of that, because the opportunities were extremely limited—especially then—even now—but more so then. But this was also the time when the United Farm Workers were forming and taking shape and becoming highly visible.

[00:24:56.91]

And this was about the time I had left school. And I was doing a little bit of junior college in the area. And I was studying, like, business, because that's what we were forced to do, and art at the same time. And I have to say, the business skills really helped me [laughs] later on when I had to learn the business of art.

[00:25:15.39]

But anyway, so I was in school. And the farm workers were really becoming visible and becoming controversial. My father was one of the first people in our little barrio to join the union. And so—but there was a lot of, um, fear among some people: communism, anti-Christ, the whole bit. But in general, most of us were supportive of it, union.

[00:25:41.73]

And so again, a very transformative time in that period of my life was the farm workers when they were making their famous pilgrimage to Sacramento where they were marching from Delano. And they marched to Sacramento, I think, to be there on Easter Sunday. It was something like that—so long ago.

[00:26:02.49]

But they came through my little hometown. They marched. And we—there was all kinds of—the newspapers, the TV, everything, the radio was pretty much telling us to stay away, because they were just a bunch of outside agitator—troublemakers, right? But that didn't stop us.

[00:26:25.99]

But the streets, the highways that—it was—they were marching to the little country roads. And they were coming down those little highways. And they were leading into our little town. And the streets were lined with Highway Patrol, marshals, FBI, state police, city police, everything. And they even had dogs, okay?

[00:26:49.05]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Oh my goodness.

[00:26:50.08]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Okay? We went anyway. We went anyway. And we welcomed them.

And then we had this great big sort of celebration at a little park in my hometown. And there were speeches and all of that.

[00:27:06.62]

But to me, that the one thing being the artist was—that seeing the Teatro Campesino. It was the first time in my life that I had ever seen artwork being used for social justice. They had—they were singing. They were dancing. They were doing theater. They were doing poetry.

[00:27:30.32]

And more for me, they had, like, all of these port—what I would call portable murals and banners. And they were always changing them around and this and that. It was a backdrop and all of that. So for me, I had never seen anything like that in my life. None of us had.

[00:27:45.74]

So that really stayed with me in terms of, uh—probably giving me some sense of where I might fit in that world and in the civil rights, the Chicano civil rights movement, that was later to become, like, so much a part of my life.

[00:28:02.96]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm. And I want to go back to that moment you were talking about with the high school counselor who, you know, was just—didn't see that vision—right?—or for you, that you saw of yourself. How did you stay true to what you wanted and keep going after what she had to say to you?

[00:28:27.08]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: [Coughs.] Excuse me. Well, for one, it wasn't surprising, because the thing about my little hometown and, like many other little towns out there, it's a real Bible belt. And also, most of our teachers were Mennonites. And they're, like, one step behind being Amish.

[00:28:46.46]

So they were very, very strict. They didn't smoke. They didn't drink. They didn't cut their hair. They wore long dresses, everything kind of opposite that we wanted to do—not that we didn't smoke or we didn't drink: we were too young and all of that—but they didn't go to movies. They didn't dat—listen to music, I mean, all of these things that we'd kind of—were so much a part of our life in one form or another.

[00:29:07.77]

So—but we always had these, um—for some reason, these art teachers came in from the cities. And they always had a different perspective and edge. And they always would tell us, especially the Mexican American kids, they were always telling, [imitating art teachers], "You come from a long line of artists and the roots are there and magnificent work and keep it up." And they were always giving us positive energy and feedback and openness.

[00:29:33.17]

And there was even this one guy—he was a Chicano guy. I think he was from LA. But he was our art teacher. And he was like, uh, like a wannabe beatnik—

[00:29:43.58]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:29:43.79]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —which was really cool—you know, dressed in black and—. So we had these—another perspective aside from the Mennonite who were very, like, uh—oh, very—what should I say—I don't know what the word would be—just very different.

[00:30:01.10]

So when this counselor who was a Mennonite woman—she meant well. And I think she was being honest with me. If I would have stayed there, my options would have been very small. So I wasn't surprised necessarily when she told me that. If anything, it probably—I needed like a reality check in terms of, like, like okay, so what's next? So in some ways that allowed me to start that dialogue with my parents that one day I was going to have to leave.

[00:30:27.73]

And they did—they were—it made them sad. But they also kind of understood that for what I wanted to do my options there were pretty limited. It was totally, uh, agriculture related. And that's all seasonal, so it's really hard to make a living. And at that point, like I say, any other jobs in the town were not allowed to us yet. Mm-mm.

[00:30:52.45]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: So your parents were—like you were laying that groundwork to let them know this is who you want to be and what you want to do.

[00:30:58.57]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, mm-hmm.

[00:30:59.80]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And they, it seems like, were receptive.

[00:31:03.37]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, I think as long as I sort of got an education and just sort of—stayed, you know, straight in terms of being a good person and working and—yeah—it was okay with them. Getting an education was critical. It was so important for them. So as long as I stayed on that path they would support me. And they did, they always did.

[00:31:32.64]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And so when the Farm Workers Union came through, like, your city, that was a time for everyone in the community, like your family included, right, to participate and to see the Teatro Campesino. What were the discussions then about seeing these artists kind of come through and participate, too?

[00:31:53.09]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, I don't know if there was a lot of discussion in particular about that, that aspect, because the whole experience was just completely like nothing we had ever experienced. It was such a unifying thing with connecting up with all the other towns and the valleys and seeing us as like a whole that we had never seen before.

[00:32:14.49]

So the arts were only one part of it. So I don't remember specifically any one dialogue just talking about the arts. But it was kind of seen and respected as being a part of the whole. Uh, but I don't consciously remember ever talking to anybody specifically about the arts.

[00:32:30.44]

But because I was obsessed with arts and giving visual form to my ideas and feelings, I felt that deeply, even though I didn't really have the words to express what I had experienced, because I was still very young and I had not experienced like art history or—even been to a museum, an art museum or anything along that line.

[00:32:56.72]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, and it seems like with the Teatro Campesino and just the family and community you grew up with, you were exposed to so many different types of art forms, like music and dance and—yes!—literature and poetry. How did you—what drew you to the visual arts specifically, too?

[00:33:16.22]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, I do love to dance. But I can't follow—uh, what should I say—the steps and all of that.

[00:33:24.05]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Oh. [Laughs.]

[00:33:25.37]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I did my own thing. [Inaudible.] It was just sort of something that really flowed. It's just always been very natural for me to work in a visual—to give visual form. Yeah, it's just natural for me to go in that direction rather than singing or doing anything along that line or playing an instrument. Those things are always too mathematical for me.

[00:33:52.28]

And also, there was a thing about weaving and embroidery—because those things are still going on—and I could never do that. My embroideries or my sewing, they would look like bird nests.

[00:34:05.41]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:34:06.32]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And I loved it. But it wasn't what people expected. So I tried. My family taught and exposed me and took me to these traditional masters who were there in our barrio to learn these different skills. But it would just never resonate with me like the visual arts.

[00:34:22.85]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, wow, so like for you, like kind of the drawing and the beginning parts of the visual like really stuck with you.

[00:34:30.83]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, yes. Right, and not even sculpture, not even sculpture. Even to this day, I can't make anything stand up—

[00:34:36.62]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:34:39.14]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —or—I don't know—not that that matters, but [laughs].

[00:34:43.54]

[They laugh.]

[00:34:43.67]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And so it's—so, like, after having this really powerful experience, both within yourself and within the community with the Teatro coming through and the broader Farm Workers Union and the movement that they were making to Sacramento, when did you decide to leave the valley? And how old were you when you left as well?

[00:35:10.34]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Oh, I was probably, maybe 23, which is already pretty mature. Um—I met somebody who was an outside agitator who had dropped out of the schools and was kind of into the hippie movement. So I thought that was all kind of cool. So I landed up sort of becoming a hippie, Chicana hippie.

[00:35:32.82]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:35:33.13]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I was not the only one. Sort of getting married and going off to the mountains, the Sierra Nevada, just going off to the mountains for several years. And I learned a lot. I learned a lot. But—and I had a child. I had—I have a son.

[00:35:47.06]

And—but after a while, I kind of—just didn't like the isolation so much. And I missed community. And I wanted to go back to school. So then that's when I landed up moving into the Bay Area. By then I had met some people who were living near. And so I just kind of made my move to the Bay Area and connected up with some other, uh, people of color, students who sort of helped me find my way back into the school system and back into the community.

[00:36:25.81]

And at that time, it was like Third World concept. And then also at that point I reconnected with the Chicano Civil Rights movement and also back with the Farm Workers Union who were, like, organizing and doing a lot of activity here in the Bay Area. So I got involved with all of that.

[00:36:45.52]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow—

[00:36:46.69]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —with great joy. It was fabulous.

[00:36:48.70]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

I'm sure there are many stories—

[00:36:50.56]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —oh, yes! [Laughs.]—

[00:36:50.86]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —about those days, too. What drew you specifically to the Bay over LA or other parts of California?

[00:37:01.31]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I've always liked the Bay Area. There were some instances where my older sister—who would become a schoolteacher, the first school teacher actually in my little town—when she got married, her and her husband would now and then bring me to San Francisco.

[00:37:17.08]

So the first time we drove into San Francisco over the bridge it was nighttime. And it was just gorgeous. And I said to myself, and I told them, I said, one day I'm going to live here. So to me it was filled with magic, the bridge, the water, the topography of it. It was just so beautiful. And it really touched me.

[00:37:36.97]

And even back then it had like a different edge. It had an edge to it. There was a beatnik thing where the—all of that. I kind of liked that. And they sort of took me around that.

[00:37:47.39]

So yeah, so I experienced—they were interested in what they were calling fine art movies. So they took me to these really radical, uh, movie houses. And being a *campesina*, I was just like, oh, my God. Oh, my goodness [inaudible].

[00:38:04.03]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:38:04.66]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I was able to experience some—a little bit of that. I saw the ocean probably for the first time maybe when I was about 13—and so things like that. So that's kind of where—I always had an interest in San Francisco and—LA, not so much. It just seems so humongous and overwhelming.

[00:38:26.92]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And it seemed like San Francisco made such a strong impression on you.

[00:38:30.77]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Oh yes, it did. And I had—there had been some other families in our *barrio* there in Chinatown who had also their children who were like a little older, maybe older, like an age of my sister. They would get an education, like at Fresno State or whatever. And then again, they found that they had to move on. And a lot of them were moving into the Bay Area more so than LA.

[00:38:55.46]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: For the opportunities that they would have in the Bay Area.

[00:38:58.64]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes.

[00:38:59.78]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And so when you decided to—close the chapter on your hippie Chicana life and go back to the Bay, did you decide—like, what was that process like in terms of what you wanted to do next and what you were hoping to work on in the Bay Area, whether it's your artwork or other things that were going through your mind?

[00:39:22.72]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, I was fortunate that the first people that I met sort of connected me up right away with a college that was sort of super radical called Grove Street. It was very short lived. It no longer exists.

[00:39:38.02]

But it was a school that was filled with, uh, a lot of social activism. And kind of the heart and soul of it were, uh, murals and printmaking. So I had this, this sort of natural—flow and connection into that community. Mm-hmm. I kind of found my place. Let's put it that way.

[00:40:03.10]

It kind of gave me my visual voice when I met up with muralism and being told at that point from people like Malaquías Montoya and other people that the murals and screen prints were very powerful, because then even as in now, we had no control of the media. We had no foot in the media. And so with murals, aside from our own personal work, we could create work that was public and talk about all kinds of issues or just to beautify our communities.

[00:40:46.81]

—And with a screen printing, it was another way to disseminate, uh, like, visual imagery and

to share knowledge, uh, announce events of sorts, and again, to beautify our community. So that works like another medium, uh—yeah—to share with a bigger community that didn't need a lot of money, that didn't need a lot of, uh, fancy equipment. Mm-hmm. So that's kind of what happened in terms of how—and then from there I just moved on to other colleges and universities eventually.

[00:41:25.85]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Got it. And so who were some of your art teachers in the Bay Area that had, like, a big impact on you?

[00:41:33.05]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, certainly Malaquías Montoya, meeting him—because he also came from a farm worker background. So we had like a connection. And also meeting Rupert García, who was also from a farm worker background and came from this San Joaquin Valley like I did. They were more from—well, no—I guess it was, like, near from where I was from.

[00:41:54.56]

But, yeah, and then I ended up meeting eventually around that same era the people, the Mujeres Muralistas, some of the Mujeres Muralistas who were also in school at that time. And I had put together an exhibit at this junior college called Laney College. And I had some great teachers there, one person named Frank Rowe, who had been, I think, part of the Lincoln Brigade. He had gone to fight in Spain. And he was, like, a super radical art teacher. And so he was extremely supportive of what we were doing in terms of the murals and the whole Movimiento Artístico.

[00:42:42.28]

So he and—so that was a real impetus in my life, too. So—and then again, meeting the women from the Mujeres Muralistas, and—and they were, like I said, in college. So—it was a time for us to really share and teach each other a lot—uh, sharing, uh, resources, information, knowledge, materials—money, housing, you name it. So, um—so they were my teachers, too—a really important turning point in terms of sort of giving me a feminist, sort of, angle, the *mujeres latinas* perspective.

[00:43:24.23]

But there was also one very important woman—teacher—named Fran Valesco. She was, uh—from New York—a Jewish woman. And she was also kind of that—the—okay, she was—I met her when I became a student at UC Berkeley.

[00:43:43.21]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Okay.

[00:43:44.09]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Okay, that was a little later on. And that was like a major turning point.

[00:43:47.93]

And I was really blessed to have encountered her, because she was kind of more radical. She was, like, one of the first wave of women teachers. So she wasn't—any a more welcome than we were—because we were like the first wave of people of color, we were women, we were radicals, we were all these—and the—and the tenured staff, these old white men were, like, freaked out.

[00:44:09.05]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:44:09.26]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Anyway. They weren't very happy with her either.

[00:44:11.84]

So she kind of had a real political perspective—you know, marches—she knew all about that. She had been a part of that: activism. So—she was my printmaking teacher. And it was with her that I created my image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos*.

[00:44:32.09]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[00:44:32.78]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And also *Libertad*, which were later to become, like—you know, whatever—my flags [makes gesture of waving a flag]. But it was through her—her support, her allowing me to create whatever I want and giving me positive feedback—but also teaching me, you know, the steps, setting a foundation for printmaking and for art. I learned so much from her. And she's still my friend.

[00:44:58.49]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[00:44:59.48]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: We still meet up with her. So those were kind of the teachers that I had that sort of carried me down the road to make me who I am now, for better or worse.

[00:45:09.86]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm. Wow, that's amazing to hear, like, those two prints are such iconic prints, and that they were made in, you know—this class where the instructor, or friend, had such an impact—

[00:45:22.32]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —yes, yes, mm-hmm—

[00:45:25.69]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —you know, on you.

[00:45:25.84]

—And where did you—so you mentioned that you exhibited work at Laney College. Was that your first exhibit? Or where was the first one?

[00:45:34.09]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It might have been—it might have been—it might have been at Grove Street. But these were very informal, very informal at that point. We were kind of anti this and anti that.

[00:45:47.27]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:45:47.90]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I mean, if you put—stapled something on the wall and tore it down later or somebody stole it or loved it and you gave it to them—it was kind of more like that. It was more the process rather than the product so much at that point.

[00:46:02.51]

—What was your question again? I'm sorry.

[00:46:03.98]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Oh, just, what was then your first exhibit? Like it seems like these that you're describing were a way of showing, like, this is what you wanted to say about, you know, whatever, through your art.

[00:46:15.35]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I would say it was probably at Laney. So they had a—they had, like, a small little gallery. So then they would show some of the work of the students, the students' work. But then—so there were some teachers there. I can't remember their names, except for Mr. Rowe. Um—but they were also very open minded.

[00:46:34.40]

But there was one point. For some reason, I decided to set up an exhibit myself.

[00:46:40.22]

—So I—that's where I brought in—it was just—Chicanos, Chicanas—

[00:46:47.55]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —wow—

[00:46:49.08]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —I decided, I wanted. And they gave me a space—it was nothing big, nothing formal—but that was the first time, I guess, where I had my work formally—kind of maybe a little bit—maybe a map on it.

[00:47:02.08]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm.

[00:47:02.37]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: But other people also exhibited.

[00:47:04.68]

And anyway, it was during that time—I guess word got around, because this was in Oakland. And that's where Irene Pérez, Patricia Rodríguez, they heard about that show. I don't know if they saw it. But that's where they invited me to participate at an exhibit, Galería de La Raza. And this was in 1974. That was kind of my connection: that little exhibit at Laney College—to Galería de La Raza.

[00:47:34.43]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, wow, and so what were they working on that they wanted to connect with you about?

[00:47:41.09]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, they were still students. But they were also involved in the formation of Galería de La Raza. And—they were part of a group of women—who—sort of came up with the idea of having an all women's exhibit.

[00:47:59.45]

And what I heard from [laughs] was that the director at that time said, No way, nobody's going to come. But they insisted. They insisted. And they went on out of their way to go out and connect with people like myself and invite us to participate.

[00:48:20.45]

So they helped put together the show. And it was a huge success.

[00:48:26.58]

And so—but that also connected me up with Galería—I met other artists and sort of bonded with the *mujeres*, who would later become part of the Mujeres Muralistas.

[00:48:35.06]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right. Well, and—

[00:48:37.01]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —I just wanted to say one thing, though—Okay, then I went to UC Berkeley. I got recruited to UC Berkeley. And I told you about the prints and Fran Valesco and all of that.

[00:48:46.72]

But Berkeley was extremely important to me, because those prints that I created, the *Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo* and *Libertad*, there was a group of Chicana women who were putting together an anthology of Chicana writings. They needed—they were friends of mine—and they needed a cover for this book—this pamphlet, maybe—booklet that they were putting together. And so they wanted to use my artwork.

[00:49:16.86]

So I allowed them to use the *Virgen de Guadalupe* and *Libertad*. Well, they use it, and then all hell broke loose. And I had no idea. I didn't know what was going to happen. It was just a student project. I had no idea the impact that it was going to make.

[00:49:34.14]

But anyway—so that was kind of—that little publication, apparently it was sent to all the UC Berkeley systems. And it just made the rounds and sort of put my name out there. It was like my first, uh, publication, so another one of those turning points.

[00:49:50.88]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, what happened specifically? And how did you feel as you learned, right, that your art is going everywhere across the state now?

[00:50:00.03]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, it was kind of exciting. But just—but some of the feedback was pretty negative, to say the least.

[00:50:05.95]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: What did they say?

[00:50:07.63]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, it was like—I guess—first of all, I just did it to, sort of, honor my grandmother initially, because when she passed away, as is typical of a lot of the families at the church—although my grandmother is not that religious, like I am. But they gave a little memorial card, and it had the *Virgen de Guadalupe* on it.

[00:50:30.34]

And when I saw it, I thought, that's not my grandmother. My grandma was strong, sassy, and full of life. So it's always stayed in the back of my mind that I'm going to create an image that's going to honor her, okay?

[00:50:46.12]

So this kind of jelled with that times where we were, in particular the *Mujeres*, we were sort of creating this, uh, our space for Chicana, Latinx feminism, okay? So that might—thinking about my grandmother and my learning and growing about feminism and the place of women within the Chicano movement, and we were also strengthening our bodies and our mind. And so at UC Berkeley I was also taking a karate class.

[00:51:18.24]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:51:20.63]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Okay? I was worthless at karate. And I didn't like getting smacked around either, because none of us knew what we were doing. But I loved the outfits.

[00:51:29.86]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:51:31.54]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Okay? And I thought our outfits are totally cool. So, anyway—so all of that sort of came together. And I kind of always thought of it as an image of a—because of what we were involved with, a sort of—a sort of—calling women to become active, to sort of rise up and to become active. That's kind of how I came to see it later on.

[00:51:54.77]

But when I first did it, I didn't have words. I mean, it was just—a print. It was just a—school exercise. Of course I had thought about it. It had roots and all of that.

[00:52:04.42]

But I didn't have any words to defend myself against people were saying I was anti-Christ, I was anti-church, I was anti-men, I was—I mean, it was like a whole litany of things. It was mostly from the men—or—or from, uh, *mujeres* who were very fundamentalist—like, Christian—especially those who were devoted to the Virgen de Guadalupe—which I was, too. But I kind of liberated her, to say the least.

[00:52:33.20]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right, well, so it—there was a strong reaction or a strong feeling towards it as well.

[00:52:39.01]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Drama—

[00:52:39.96]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:52:40.44]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —total drama. And I wasn't ready for it. But fortunately a lot of my friends who are word people, they sort of helped me. They started writing about it or talking about it. So that sort of helped me really figure out what it was I was trying to say—what, what impact was it making?—what?—I didn't have any clue. And for the long—maybe about five or—to eight years, it didn't have a title.

[00:53:09.79]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Hmm. What made you decide to give it a title?

[00:53:12.64]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, I just thought it sort of made more sense just to talk about the Virgen de Guadalupe just sort of defending our rights and just kind of leave it at that and leave it open to people to interpret it as a—as a—you know, whatever—wherever they were coming from. I didn't feel like I had to totally—define it.

[00:53:29.89]

And even then I'm still trying to figure out, what—what was I doing, what was it about, why

did it shake people up so much, or why did it affect them so much? Even now, that's still happening now.

[00:53:43.31]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Has someone said anything recently?

[00:53:45.98]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, that's always been going on. But one thing that really happened that just kind of blew my mind was just a couple of weeks ago. I received a letter from the Getty Museum in Los Angeles about an exhibit that they were putting together—that they are putting together called something, "Mary, Mother of God," or something along that line.

[00:54:10.63]

And they wanted to invite me to contribute—to loan them my *Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo*. And I thought, What does that have to do with anything religious and this and that? Because they were talking about medieval imagery and this and that.

[00:54:25.50]

Okay. So the woman, this PhD—very charming woman—we did a Zoom conference, because I wasn't sure. I said, well, I don't—I'm not religious, I'm not into the Catholic Church so much, I grew up with it and all of that, I'm more into Guadalupe and Tonantzin and all that.

[00:54:40.60]

So she did this Zoom conference. And she started off by showing me these medieval hand-painted manuscripts that were like 1,000 years old of Mother Mary interceding and the most outrageous thing that still resonate now—you know, men running around with women and women asking the medium to do away with that woman, things along that line—that still resonate to this day. But she showed me all of these manuscripts.

[00:55:04.35]

And then at the end she told me that the reason that they wanted me to be a part of the exhibit—because, um—is that my *Virgen de Guadalupe* is recognized in art history—now, which is shocking to me—to have been the first one to sort of, uh—sort of, liberate her after 500 years and that my artwork has created this magnificent outburst of new imagery of the Virgen. And that that's why they felt that it was important that I had given her a new life.

[00:55:42.44]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Hmm. Mm-hmm.

[00:55:42.62]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: That blew my mind! I mean, it just totally blew my mind to think of that humble little print that I did as a student that is being looked at in this way, so then that Chicana art, our activism has sort of being recognized as part of the story, as this story, too.

[00:56:06.59]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And really visionary, too, like, you know, ahead of its time [laughs]. What was the—you know, since it—you know, you were making that amidst a community at UC Berkeley. What did the professors have to say? And were they aware of, kind of, all the conversation going on about it?

[00:56:26.79]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: [Laughs.]

I still laugh about that. Again, this—we're talking about this mid '70s. And so the teachers that were there were mostly elderly men who are all tenured. And frankly, they were still crying about the Renaissance, okay?

[00:56:47.87]

And their only I think openness to anything contemporary that was turning them on—especially a couple of them—was what they were calling automatic drawing, where you would just do these continuous lines. Anyway, it was things like that they were kind of more supportive and comfortable with. And they claim not to know anything at all about Chicanos, about the Panthers, about anything like that—the the aim—about gay—they completely were not—they just lived in their own world, okay?

[00:57:24.39]

And so when we came around, this whole wave of activists and people of color or what have you, um, they were scared to death and shocked and horrified—initially. I think they thought we were going to slit their throat or something. [Laughs.]

[00:57:41.60]

So anyway, so it took a while for them to kind of just to settle down and to see that we were there to learn and we had something to say, that we were funny, that we were goofy, that we made mistakes, and we were trying to learn, and we were open minded, and all of that. And also, that we weren't going anywhere. Okay? We were not going anywhere.

[00:58:07.23]

So—but I think toward the end—I mean, I got excellent grades and all of that. And so we were—I think we all were able to bring them in to some degree into the new age. Uh—and we learned a lot. We learned a lot—from them, too, I have to admit.

[00:58:27.98]

So—but it was initially—it was difficult. It was like, uh, like feeling rejected—right from the—right right from the get. And, um, of course we've grown up with that. So that was nothing new.

[00:58:43.10]

But again, we are determined. And thanks to our community and this sort of grassroots—like roots build up and knowledge that had been shared—we felt empowered. So we had connections with the community, had connections with Galería de La Raza. I knew other artists who had gone through, were going through similar things. So we found spaces to sort of encourage each other and support each other as well as other people going through the same situation in the schools, the universities. We found ourselves, thanks to some of the staff that was there, too.

[00:59:21.05]

So anyway, so it was very difficult. I remember one teacher when he used to call me "chiquita," like banana.

[00:59:29.93]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Oh, my goodness.

[00:59:31.72]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It was like that. So they didn't know how to deal with us, except for the stereotypes. But again, things changed. They changed. And they saw that we were talented, that we were interested and all of that.

[00:59:45.71]

So it was a two-way learning situation, I have to say. And I would like to hope that we opened the doors to them being much more kind and open hearted to the ones that came after us. But even then, I know that it's not necessarily that way right now.

[01:00:00.08]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah. Were there other students of color in your art program there, too? Or—

[01:00:05.39]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Absolutely, there were, mm-hmm—not many; but we were there.

[01:00:09.20]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And it seems like you were able to find each other in the different spaces, whether it was San Francisco or through Galería.

[01:00:16.25]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, absolutely. Galería was a very important space for that.

[01:00:20.93]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: I was going to ask you, like, what does Galería—what did Galería mean to you at that point in time of your life?

[01:00:28.82]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, it was like—it was like home. It was like a creative space, a nurturing space for artists of all mediums. It was like a place where we could speak freely and share ideas, um—a place where we could exhibit, where we could, um—we had an audience. Our audiences were created from both within the community and from without. Uh—yeah, it was just all of that and more.

[01:01:05.90]

I'm still connected with the Galería de La Raza. 47 years later, we're getting a brand new—two new spaces, permanent spaces that belong to us. So I'm still connected.—I'm a *madrina* more now at this point, whereas before I was on the board and I was an artist—participating artist from—yeah, all that time—47 years.

[01:01:28.31]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, that's a long—many generations of artists and people.

[01:01:34.34]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And it's a space now where I really enjoy going over there to participate in all the different activities. And of course, a lot of things are in Zoom right now because of the pandemic.

[01:01:44.12]

But it's important for me, because right now it's—and it wasn't so much before when we were first getting started—it was—It's much more intergenerational now, and I really value that. I love that so much. It gives me life. It keeps my spirit going.

[01:02:01.43]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Well, I want to do a time check. We're at about an hour in. I'm going to press pause real quick.

[01:02:10.29]

Okay, I wanted to pick up Ester on one of the pieces that you mentioned in terms of the significance of Galería de La Raza, on you as an artist, and how you've been involved for 47 years. And so I wanted to learn like what has kept you involved? And what was it about that first experience, right, that made that impression on you as a space that you wanted to be a part of?

[01:02:38.47]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well first of all, I'd never experienced any space like that ever—

especially coming again from the smaller farming towns. There was, uh—Okay, the general population, again—aside from the *barrio*, Chinatown *barrio*—there was really no interest or support of the arts as such, maybe just in the church, singing or whatever. That was their focus. Whereas the rest of us in Chinatown, we were always partying. It was one thing after another.

[01:03:09.43]

And so—but the Galería was to me was like familia—with all the good, all the bad, it was all there. But it was a place to sort of share our lives, our hopes, our fears, our aspirations, and all of that by giving form—the various art forms that were there. Most of it was visual, of course. So for me it was like—finding home. Because one of the things my mother told me when I left home, she said, *Mija*, wherever you go, make community, find community. Okay? And that's something that I've always done.

[01:03:47.32]

So for me when I first moved to the Bay Area, I gradually started finding and building my community. And Galería was like a home. It was a space for that community. And it continues to be that to this day.

[01:04:07.21]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And you were describing too the exhibit that Irene Pérez and others invited you to participate in. What was that like being a part of the women show there?

[01:04:17.71]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: [Laughs.]

It was totally magnificent. Again, I've never experienced anything like that in my life. And it was just such a joy to meet other women. And what was really interesting to me, it was like meeting women that were just not Mexican American.

[01:04:33.61]

There were women from Peru. There were women from the Caribe. There were women from South America and Venezuela. And there were people from urban areas, because I wasn't even used to that, I mean, LA, Texas. There were people from all over the place—Salvador—

[01:04:53.71]

It was—just, to me—magic. It was just wonderful, not only to meet these women, but also to see what they were talking about, the different mediums that they were using, and what they were having to say. What were the things that concerned them? What things they were, uh—thinking about and all that? To me it was, just—wonderful, just such a magnificent—another major turning point in my life.

[01:05:23.12]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Meeting the women at Galería.

[01:05:25.67]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Absolutely.

[01:05:28.16]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Who are some of the other women that were part of that show or that you consider close friends from that era, too?

[01:05:34.64]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, it's still part of the Mujeres Muralistas. It would be Irene Pérez, Patricia Rodríguez, and Consuelo Méndez who ended up going back to Venezuela. But we still stay in touch through Facebook.

[01:05:46.49]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:05:48.26]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So I would say those are the main people. Uh—Uh, you mean from that first show? Probably Amalia Mesa-Bains

[01:05:55.01]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm.

[01:05:56.15]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Uh, who else can I think about?—Yeah, that probably—those are the ones that are still—Yolanda Lopez, who—

[01:06:02.15]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —yeah—

[01:06:02.48]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —sadly we just lost. So, yeah, it was—it was a pretty powerful group of women. A lot of the women didn't continue in the arts. But some of us did.

[01:06:13.01]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm. What did—how did the—or how would you describe the role that these artists play in your own development—of yourself as a person and as an artist?

[01:06:23.02]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, it was very empowering to say the least to see other women—some of them who were in school,—learning and growing. That was really—to me it gave me a real impetus to continue my education with their support and—and sort of, learning from them—how to survive, how to survive in a world that basically at that point didn't really value what we had to say, um, how to find our place—even within the—as women, as feminist women—within the bigger community. How do we claim that space?

[01:07:12.14]

How do we deal with our families? A lot of times—not mine—but some of their families didn't want them to be artists, because there was no money, blah, blah, blah. So—there were a lot of things that we shared as women that, uh, would not have happened with the bigger community, because we were all set on being artists, professional artists,—whatever that meant—all wanting to be of service to the community and all wanting still to be a part of this bigger—change.

[01:07:43.19]

So—so—yeah. It was very powerful. And they were all Latinas. Mostly—all of us were Latinas and mixes in between.

[01:07:51.38]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, and how did you see art at this point in your life and your career connected to the Chicano Civil Rights movement and the farm workers movement? Because at that point, it was like a couple of years and still growing. What was it like in terms of you and what you saw that you wanted to contribute or be a part of?

[01:08:10.85]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I've always sort of felt that my perspective—[clears throat]

excuse me—my perspective—my contribution—was—my farm worker background. I kind of learned right away that that was kind of unique. Farm worker woman, artists was very

unique. And so a lot of things that I had to say, or that I was creating, sort of came from that perspective.

[01:08:43.55]

And also growing up on the Western slope—the base of the Western slope of the Sierra Nevadas, the magnificent mountain range that runs through all of California—nature sort of very much also a part of my journey—that real introspection, that real connection, that real —what—all encompassing beauty, colors and all of that. I had a lot of that in me that I surprisingly left out that people were interested in my sharing or they wanted to know about that, because they were depicting farmworkers.

[01:09:25.48]

But they didn't know what a tomato plant looked like, what a grape plant, how people really dressed or anything like that. Or if they were painting the mountains, it was like real typical things. They never considered the fact that it has layers—you know, layers: what's growing on this layer, the higher you go up—things along that line.

[01:09:45.07]

Or who are the people up there in those mountains? They're not just empty. There are people up there. And they're my friends, the Native people.

[01:09:50.74]

So anyways—so, it was really interesting. So I was really pleased that people were interested—the *mujeres*, the community was interested. Again, because I came with—I came sort of, um, sort of alongside the Farm Workers Union, which is also—uh, was a—had a—was very much a part of the Movimiento in those years, even here in the city. So I was kind of a part of that, too. So I really felt at home and welcome and valued.

[01:10:23.83]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: I'm so glad that was like, you know—that others at that time also recognized your contribution and what it could be and what it could mean. I was wondering too, like, you know, this is the earlier part of your career. And so—and you were still a student and doing so many different things as an artist. You're also a mother as well. How did you earn money at this time and balance your responsibilities as well, as a mother?

[01:10:58.26]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well fortunately, my son's father—even though we got a divorce—he was—he stayed with us. He was always around. Wherever I was, he would be nearby. So we shared that. And fortunately, I was blessed in that regard. He's a good father.

[01:11:12.63]

But also in the community that—where my son would go to school—I was a student. Some of us had children—I think most did not. But at the school I also connected up with a community, made community there, too. So a lot of us were young mothers.

[01:11:30.94]

So we shared a lot of resour—we shared housing. We shared food. We shared money sometimes. We shared daycare, childcare. Okay? We helped each other in so many ways.

[01:11:48.11]

So I did work study. I got grants. My work study were always fun. And they were art related, so I loved that. So—but it was a real effort. It was very difficult actually.

[01:12:01.36]

But it would not have happened—I probably—I don't know what would happen to me if it wasn't for this community that I was a part of. Not only in school,—my son's school, and Galería—those are, like, three networks that I had that in some ways all came together on

some level. But they were what sustained me.

[01:12:20.71]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, wow.

[01:12:22.99]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Communal sharing.

[01:12:27.82]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: That seems like your—just your experience speaks so much to that power of having a community in different places.

[01:12:35.48]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It's really important.

[01:12:37.90]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And what role at this time—like, with your family that was still back in the valley—what role did they have in terms of your artwork? You mentioned, too, like, your print, that you saw your—re-envisioning your grandmother a different way. Were they kind of coming through your artwork in other ways, too, or in other pieces?

[01:13:01.99]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ:—My older sister was probably my biggest fan since I was a child. And since she had become a teacher,—the first teacher in her *barrio*, in Chinatown—she had a little bit of money. So she was probably maybe one of the first people to start buying my artwork—okay—and actually, even goes so far as to frame it. So to me—I—I'm forever grateful for her—for that. And she was probably the one that I had the most dialogue with about my artwork.

[01:13:39.48]

The other ones were—they were curious, but, um—they were interested—but not so much in the visuals—artwork. And, um, Movimiento, they understood, to some degree.

[01:13:55.49]

But it—they—it's my moth—my mother—always supported me. Maybe she didn't completely understand where I was coming from. But she always supported whatever I did. She always backed me as best she could.

[01:14:10.88]

Other members of my family were probably a little bit more conservative, in terms—especially when it came to the Virgen de Guadalupe. And, if anything, out of respect for me, rather than engage me or put me down, I think they preferred silence. So—because I know that some of them were not comfortable with it.

[01:14:38.35]

And others, I know my younger cousins and all of that, they thought it was cool.

[01:14:42.75]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:14:44.34]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: They really loved it. They really loved it. They related to it. And they were kind of maybe in the university or colleges themselves. So they knew what was going on, the changes that were going on: the role of women, Chicana power, and all of that kind of stuff, so yeah.

[01:15:00.24]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Did your sister or your mom, did they inspire any pieces specifically for you that you can think of, or—? Wondering—just curious.

[01:15:10.86]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, I have to say that my *Sun Mad* was inspired by my mother. In 1979, I went to go visit my mom. And it was—in the San Joaquin valley in the summertime, it's like 110 degrees, et cetera. It's just brutal.

[01:15:29.96]

And I went—in the little house that my mother lived in, the little house I was raised in—made by my grandparents and my uncles and my father—in Chinatown—um, she was boiling water. And I couldn't think about boiling water. I've never seen her do that.

[01:15:46.74]

Well, it turned out, as she explained, that the water table in the little—in the *barrio*—had been contaminated. And it turned out from some research that had been done with some students from UC Berkeley that it had been contaminated with all of the chemicals that had been used, like, for, just—generations or, just—a long time—all the chemicals in the farming—the agribusiness around us—it had seeped into the water table.

[01:16:14.12]

As a result, the water table was shut down. So there was no water available at that point. You had to either buy it or boil it or—filter it in some way or another. And at that point, most people—what, filtering?—or bottled water was not even common, then, so much. So she was boiling water.

[01:16:36.17]

So she told me that story. And needless to say, I was horrified, because one of the reasons I seemed to be going back and forth so much was—was, uh, relatives who—who were suffering from cancer or dying from cancer.

[01:16:50.21]

So anyway, needless to say I mentally—I made this connection with the contamination of the water table and our being farm workers, all our lives—and that we were drinking it, we are bathing in it, we're—our life—we were totally enveloped in it—from the field: there was no way we were getting away from it.

[01:17:11.01]

So anyway, so I had these talks with my mother about that and all of that. And I still didn't know—I was really bothered. I didn't know what to do with it, what I was going to do. Like what most people were doing in that area, including the city governments and the state government is just to ignore it. We're just going to lower the standard and turn the water back on. That's what happened,—even to this day, I think.

[01:17:38.85]

Anyway, so—but I continued my dialogue with my mother. And—another time I was going to visit her again. And when I was driving down the little country roads—because it's surrounded by great fields, that whole area—most of the work we did was related to the raisin industry, picking the grapes, laying them out in the middle of the fields to dry—so, anyway—so driving down that road and I saw the, uh, Sun Maid—like, uh—it's like a post—it was on a post—it was like a poster of the Sun Maid. Because it's really a cooperative of farmers who—they raise the grapes, and then they turn into raisins, and they send them to this cooperative where they're processed.

[01:18:25.22]

When I saw the Sun Maid—because in my back of my mind was still the water, the

contamination of the land—I saw the Sun Maid. And I thought, there it is. There it is, okay?

[01:18:39.69]

And one of the things that I had always learned about my mom and my dad was kind of the dualities of nature—the dualities—not only the passing of time, the transitory nature, but—the duality. And I think those are very Mexican. They're a very Indigenous lot.

[01:19:01.37]

So anyway, so my mind started thinking about, What is the other side of—what is her other side? What is the other side of this story? And so that's kind of how I started sort of, uh—in my mind—transforming her to tell the story about what was going on with her.

[01:19:20.55]

And I had numerous dialogues with my mother about this. And all the way through it she was supportive of me and really thought that I should tell the story, even though—even though, even to this day—my *Sun Mad*, which has been shown all over the world, published a million times in the Smithsonian, blah, blah, blah, has never been shown in that part of the San Joaquin Valley where I'm from. It's always been censored—when any—any time anybody's tried to put it in a little exhibit in some little town out that way or bigger city, it's always been censored.

[01:19:56.36]

But anyway, they stood behind me even though it's extremely controversial over there—even among the farm workers, because it shakes the ground of their well-being, of their lives. They're dependent on that type of work. So having that image around is just way too controversial.

[01:20:18.64]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:20:19.54]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So—so, my—my mother—for *Sun Mad*, is the one that helped me give life to it, the good form to it—my mother's words, her love, her—her support.

[01:20:38.11]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Thank you. Thank you for sharing that. It's such a powerful story and to know that the lineage, right, of that print—since, like you said, it's been everywhere. And so it's really powerful to know that it comes from that conversation, and set of conversations, with your mother, too.

[01:20:59.41]

And I was wondering, your father was Yaqui as well. And was there ways or did you find ways to incorporate your Indigenous heritage into any of your artwork as well?

[01:21:13.02]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, it's in a lot of different ways. Visually I did a lot of, like, uh, portraits of the Yaqui community: dancers, different things along that line. I no longer have them, because this was way, way, way back.

[01:21:26.34]

But I think the—the, uh—what I think I learned from the Indigenous part of my father was, uh—for one, storytelling—valuing storytelling—and also this immense love of nature and seeing that we are connected—we are part of nature—and also kind of a real value of humor. And that kind of allowed me to sort of venture into dark humor, as well, which I would consider *Sun Mad*. But there was this value for humor. We would get together, my father and family, all we do is laugh, whatever we're talking about.

[01:22:15.55]

And the love of music, and also a love of the arts, and a love of dancing—because when he was a young boy he still was—he experienced the Native traditions. The Yaquis had been run out of Mexico. Some were sent into slavery. Others were massacred. And a lot of them came in to the border areas and El Paso.

[01:22:36.07]

When my father was in El Paso, his family, my ancestors, were Matachines—was kind of a Native dance society devoted to the Virgen de Guadalupe. So my father as a boy was able to experience those dances. So every now and then he would dance around the house. And I would follow him around.

[01:22:56.71]

And he would say these Yaqui words. And I would—I was totally—I didn't know what that meant, all of that—I didn't quite understand. Because as Amalia Mesa-Bains told me one time when I told her, You know, I don't know so much about my—my Yaqui history—and I don't know why.

[01:23:12.95]

And she said, Because it was dangerous to be a Native on both sides of the border, so, a lot of times, people sort of pushed it to the background to survive—they intermarried and this and that with Mexicans and all of that. So anyway—so the things that I learned from my father were more on that level: a way of being, a way of connecting with the world around you—through the arts, a real value for the arts—

[01:23:44.73]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —yeah—

[01:23:45.09]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —real value for the arts—and community, and familia.

[01:23:51.81]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: I noticed that line of humor is present in so many of your artworks throughout the years. [Laughs.]

[01:23:59.89]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Oh yes, I love humor, yeah. Of course, not everybody gets it or appreciates it—But so what?

[01:24:03.74]

[They laugh.]

[01:24:04.73]

Their problem.

[01:24:09.66]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: You mentioned Amalia Mesa-Bains. And I was wondering, like, who are some other artists that inspired you—like, whether they're in history or your contemporaries, right—you know, at that time or now—that you still find are sources of inspiration for you?

[01:24:29.09]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Hmm, Carmen Lomas Garza is another person who I've always admired greatly. And her storytelling—the complexity of her work, even though it looks like little *monitos*—little images, little doll-like figures—there's always an edge to it. There's always—I mean, they're beautiful stories about family and community. But if you look closely and you

really take time to read it, there's always something subversive, always something there that's questioning the bigger picture. They're very subtle.

[01:25:01.97]

But I've always appreciated, not only her—creativity—her great technical skill—but also Carmen—I learned a lot also from Carmen about the business of art—the business of art, which was sort of taboo. And it was something we were not taught in colleges and universities, which I think is a real shame. I learned, through people like Carmen and studying and taking workshops and books, reading books, and all that, to teach myself to learn and to share that knowledge, even to this day. That and the toxic nature of art materials. So that's another thing I think I learned from Carmen.

[01:25:46.42]

I still really love and appreciate Malaquías Montoya—and Rupert. I still—they are still creating some magnificent work that's very, uh, contemporary, with the contemporary issues of our times. But a lot of the issues that we're dealing with are the same that we were dealing with back in the '70s—sadly.

[01:26:12.61]

So a lot of—and the younger generation, I would say there's a lot of them that—Jess Sabogal, though, who is a young muralist—from Colombia, raised here in California—she's one of my favorite artists. She—her work is just, like, breathtaking. It's so bold and graphic and, just—really amazing skill and talent and this—way of just—composing these images that are just—magnificent, breathtaking. Yeah, she's one of my favorites.

[01:26:46.75]

I don't know. There are just so many. There are so many young people that really, uh, that I love their work. And I—and if I can, try to support them by buying their work. They're just talking about so many different things that weren't being talked about before now. Yeah, it's —

[01:27:05.68]

Yeah, Galería is the place for that. I wish I had their names written down here. I had somewhere—but yeah, Jess comes to mind.

[01:27:14.08]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Got it. So, you know just, uh, you're finding inspiration in so many artists that are from your generation and also the new ones that are coming up, too.

[01:27:23.81]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, Gina—Gina, what is her—Mart—Martínez? I think she's in the valley. She's doing prints. They're really absolutely hilarious—dealing with gender and sexuality and all of that. "Be a bad girl." I love it.

[01:27:39.64]

[They laugh.]

[01:27:42.97]

Yeah, I wish they would have taken the time to get their names. Yeah, there's a lot of young talent out there. A lot of them are now using the computer to create their images. So that's like a whole other world.

[01:27:56.72]

So also—what's their name?—Digni—Dignidad Rebelde—Melanie and Jesus, those are a—yeah they're like a—a—a couple that I really appreciate—their work. And I'm still connected with people like Judy Baca in LA, Patssi Valdez, Judith Hernández, Alma Lopez. There's a whole generation. So there are just so many wonderful people out there who are sort of still

carrying on the—what should I say?—the energy and spirit of the social justice movement.

[01:28:32.77]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right, right.

[01:28:34.66]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: As well as doing whatever they want—the *locura*—it should be open. I don't think we all have to just stay—uh, you know, everything has to be super political. I don't. I think we have to have—take the time to have fun, also, and just celebrate life.

[01:28:48.58]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, well, it's like your artwork has definitely done all—

[01:28:52.82]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —It's important, you know, for your mental health! it's so important. Enjoy life.

[01:28:57.04]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Well, I wanted to ask you about one artist in particular. And I remember that you described the artist and singer like Lydia Mendoza as being your mentor in life. And you've created several portraits as well about Ms. Mendoza. So how did you two meet and develop this connection and this friendship?

[01:29:20.04]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I'd heard about her from my family. She was a legend. My grandparents—she was a legend. Her and her family—I'm talking about the turn of the century—actually, I think her and her family were—she was a child—were among the very first Mexican-American recording artists. They were a line of musicians, they came out of vaudeville, okay, the Mexican vaudeville. It was part of all of that tradition.

[01:29:41.94]

She was the only one of her family who kept a tradition of singing and playing the ten string guitar for, like, over 50 years. She had brothers and sisters. The sisters dropped out because their husbands didn't want them to be out there in clubs and bars—all of that. So anyway—

[01:30:04.23]

But she—she, uh, continued her career of over 50 years. And—I was listening to one of my favorite radio stations, KPFA, which still is an alternative radio station. And there was a program by this man called Chris Strachwitz.

[01:30:23.61]

And he had a radio station—he was, like, a—playing music.

[01:30:28.02]

And he also published what was called ethnic music. He had a recording studio. So he collected and put together and recorded all these different singers. And he had recorded several—at that point there were LPs and CD—45s and all that—of Lydia Mendoza and had compiled some of her early family recordings.

[01:30:51.63]

Anyway, he announced on his radio program he would play her music, of course—which I loved—he announced that she was doing a residency at Fresno State, which is nearby my hometown. It's in Fresno County. I'm from Tulare County. So and he said that they were looking for different venues for her to perform there in the San Joaquin Valley.

[01:31:17.69]

So I contacted him and got her contact in Fresno. So since my family was nearby and one of my uncles was passing at that time—so I was going back and forth—so I made a point to go and visit Lydia. And I showed up with a bunch of *tamales* and *chile* and *tortillas*—

[01:31:34.66]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:31:35.53]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —*carnitas*, and all this kind of stuff. You know, I know how to work it—

[01:31:38.72]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:31:40.44]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —and music. So—and she was so happy just with that alone, because they had her like in this dormitory filled with all these kids who could care less who she was. She was pretty much isolated.

[01:31:53.06]

Anyway, so one thing led to another. We became tight friends. And I became—eventually I became her Northern California agent, because she was still touring. She was still touring part of these *caravanas* of *músicos* that come out of Texas.

[01:32:10.61]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:32:11.45]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And there was this whole—Esteban Jordán, Flaco Jiménez—she was part of all these groups that would come and they would play like in the big cities but also on the ranchos, the small towns, the Veteran's Hall or whatever. They were—so they were still performing.

[01:32:27.84]

So I met her—so when she would come into the Bay Area I would arrange her, uh, her engagements. I remember—I did a Cinco de Mayo at UC Berkeley I think a couple of times. And then I had her perform at many, many different senior centers. And we performed the Galería—she performed at Galería de La Raza and then also at Teatro Campesino.

[01:32:48.47]

So I would—she would stay with me. And she would sing for me and I would just swoon and dance and carry on and faint. And just, be crazy. And she just loved it. So we became good friends.

[01:33:01.94]

But during all of these times, there were times when I would ask her questions. How did she—how was she able to survive? How did she—she couldn't read English. She couldn't write. She knew very minimal things.

[01:33:15.23]

So—but she still—she had, like, toured the country for over 50 years—a woman, a Mexican American woman. So she told me a lot of different things. And one of the most important things that she taught me—because at that point I was having issues in my relationship, my partner at that time didn't—wanted me to get a real job—not in the arts, right? So I was struggling with that, because I didn't have a lot of money. And there was no future that looked like I would have any sort of stability economically.

[01:33:46.74]

And one of the things that she told me that stayed with me, and it's something that I still pass on, is the importance of finding a partner who respects and supports your artwork, whatever you do. And so things like that. I mean, she told me all different kinds of things, you know, taking care of yourself, keep learning the craft, uh, I mean, just lots of different things, even, like I said, like, rituals about before you perform.

[01:34:19.54]

She would tell me things, like, being an artist or having these gifts—they're gifts from God—I say "gods," for me, that's how I think—and that they are meant to be shared. But she would also tell me magnificent things like that I still love, that a decent woman doesn't start drinking till noontime.

[01:34:40.73]

[They laugh.]

[01:34:45.23]

Or never marry—in her words—never marry a man that doesn't dance. All this, it was so—some serious thing, but some just absolutely, wonderfully crazy outrageous things. But those were the things—I mean, a lot of those things that she taught me really sort of, uh—and she would also say things like, if you don't believe in yourself and what you have, that you have something to say, nobody's going to believe you. So—things like that.

[01:35:14.69]

She really just gave me so much strength. I'd never met anybody in my life who had been an artist, of any form, of that lane—being a woman from this whole other era. It was just—mind blowing—another big mentor in my life that sort of just kept me on the road.

[01:35:37.46]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And it seemed like a guide as well as you're going through life and making different choices. What did—

[01:35:46.22]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —and into plan—storytelling to the max.

[01:35:48.59]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

And so what inspired you to make art about her as well? What were you hoping to, uh, create or capture or represent through them?

[01:35:59.80]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: "Capture" is the right word. That sounds—I thought about that off and on. Well, for one I wanted to honor her. I wanted to honor her—while she was still alive. And I thought she was just, really—a fascinating person, because—I had—because I—she would stay at my house.

[01:36:18.14]

I had the honor of seeing her transform from this sort of grandmother figure—because I met her when she was already 65, with her little—nightgown—and her little *chanclitas* and her hair, just, whatever—no makeup and all of that.

[01:36:36.74]

I had the pleasure of watching her transform—putting on wigs, putting on these beautiful handmade dresses with petticoats and ruffles and sequins and then this guitar and this and that—and makeup, that she learned from some queer boys in Hollywood—in—in Los Angeles—and stuff like that, magnificent story—just make this complete transformation. So to me, that was just—mind blowing and magical.

[01:37:10.79]

So anyway, so, all these different parts of her life I found quite fascinating. And again, it's like, sometimes I thought about—because I've always chosen to depict people who I admire, for one reason or another—their own power, the way that they've transformed themselves to, like, live out their life the way on their terms—that they have some sort of a power.

[01:37:39.14]

And sometimes when I'm working on creating images, especially with my drawings, my pastels, it's like lots of little lines. And sometimes I felt like—I'm sort of capturing their spirit—and that in some ways maybe that will give me some strength to continue.

[01:38:01.03]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:38:03.93]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And Lydia was one of those people, for me. And at that point it turned out I was the only one making any artwork of her—about her.

[01:38:14.92]

Now I sold—well, yeah, the Smithsonian acquired this really large piece that I did of her. And they, down the road, are planning on doing some sort of a traveling exhibition honoring her. So I'm really pleased to do that.

[01:38:30.37]

And my friends in Texas, especially in San Antonio, have always been really supportive also of the images that I created of Lydia, *también*. So a lot of my early prints of Lydia, a lot of them are housed over there, because they knew of her, because she lived there among them. And her story is part of their history, whereas here in California not so much, except for the older generation and for others who had the honor of experiencing her magnificent voice and guitar playing.

[01:39:04.61]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. So her story gets to continue as well through the future.

[01:39:08.95]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes.

[01:39:11.36]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Well, now, uh, I wanted to bring it back to the town and community that you're from and talk specifically about the impact that, um, the Japanese culture and Japanese community has created in your life. And you mentioned that there was—after the Japanese-Americans were released from the, um, internment camps, that they came back into the community. And so you've also mentioned too that you've traveled many times to Japan, the country itself. So, for you, what created that connection to the Japanese community and its culture?

[01:39:49.73]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, even before the war there was a connection there, because some of the Japanese—they had tiny little farms—tiny—I mean, like, in their backyard or whatever—and my father used to work with a lot of them, right alongside of them. And my father learned to speak Japanese.

[01:40:08.12]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. [Laughs.]

[01:40:10.07]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: You know, nothing real complex, but he could. And he had a little booklet, also. So he was always teaching us different words.

[01:40:18.24]

So—and so—when the Japanese were taken to the camps, it was really heartbreaking. And it was like really a very sad and traumatic time for our family and for other communities when they were taken away. And that family that my father worked with, they gave us some of the furnishings, because they knew—their personal furnishings—because they knew all of it was going to be stolen. It was going to be stolen the minute they walked out the door. People were just robbing everything they could.

[01:40:44.49]

Anyway. So, after, they were let out of the camps and some of them returned back and had to rebuild their life. But there was this one family who stayed, who went right into Chinatown. And there were other Japanese family that also came right back into Chinatown, too.

[01:41:03.79]

And one of my friends, Kimiko Nakashima, her and her family, they had a little store. And so they specialized in Japanese products. And her and I were in the same grade. So she was always sneaking things out of her house that belonged—the Japanese things—scrolls, again, album covers, ceramic pieces—

[01:41:28.77]

But the thing that I think that really just—a couple of things—that really most impressed me was the calligraphy—just the power—that resonated, just stayed with me, then—the power of line—

[01:41:41.63]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —hmm—

[01:41:42.03]

—beautiful power of line. I was just taken by it. And again, maybe it went back to when I was a child. That drawing, that line—that stayed there.

[01:41:52.38]

And also when I was a child working in the grape fields—that the fields—in the middle of the grape fields are flattened out. And it's all sand. And during my free time when I was really little, I would do these immense like drawings with my fingers, making these patterns all over. So, somehow, the connection with the calligraphy—connected with me—I think, on that level. So, aside from being beautiful, you know, the paper—and then the washi—oh, my god—the beautiful papers—okay.

[01:42:27.27]

And then my uncle—one of my uncle—okay, so, also, my friend, Kay, she was always sharing things with me. And then the Buddhist church, also, had to be in Chinatown. And they were always having Obon festival, where they would be out there with their beautiful yukata, their summer kimonos.

[01:42:46.29]

And they would be dancing. And there would be music. And there would be lanterns. It was just magnificent. And it was right there at the little store—in the street—there in the *barrio*. So we were always being in awe watching this dancing and this music. And it was just, real—and this summer nights, and—it's pure magic, pure magic.

[01:43:08.55]

So—and my sister also developed a real interest in Japanese culture, like I did. I was getting

it from my friend, my personal friend. She was getting it, also, from her other older, older Japanese—. And it turned out—I found that 50 years later that my friend had been born in the camp. And she never told me—ever. I found out 50 years later at her reunion that she had been born in the internment camp, okay?

[01:43:38.10]

So, anyway. So that was kind of my initial introduction—with the store, I saw candies, I saw what you can now call flip-flops and they call zori and, I mean, all kinds of products that were coming from Japan. So, that, in terms—my family and community—all of that really impressed me.

[01:43:58.59]

When I moved to San Francisco, they had—there was the Japan Council. I started going there regularly to the movies. I was taking my son. We would go to eat. We'd walk around and buy things and all of that. So, I kind of pass that on to my son, that interest in Japan and in the manga. He was fascinated with manga and all those robots and all of that. So we loved all of that.

[01:44:25.08]

So, then, when he finished college and university, he decided to go to Japan to teach English. So, then, when he moved over there, that's when I started to go to visit him. And that's when I had a chance to travel around Japan and sort of get in deeper into the art and the culture. It's just so rich and magnificent and ancient and modern and contemporary. It's all of that and more. So it just, sort of, fed the flames to my interest and passion for Japanese culture. An interest that continues to grow.

[01:45:13.92]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah. Well, like you said, the Japanese culture has so many long histories in ceramics and calligraphy and also with printmaking, right?

[01:45:24.11]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Oh, exactly. That has infused my work—definitely. That has definitely been something I've studied. The Mexican printmaking—particularly Posada—those two different cultures or print—commun—prints—com—artists communities—the Japanese prints, which I can see my calendar in the back—and I've studied a lot of the prints from Japan.

[01:45:52.46]

Woodblocks is most of them. But I still study them in general. And the Mexican Taller de—what is it?

[01:45:59.39]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Gráfica Popular?

[01:46:00.62]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Sí. I think of those—Popular and Posada—those are my main—I would say, when I'm ready to start like a print or whatever, a lot of times I go and I just go through those images and just sort of absorb whatever I think might work and find a place in my art. They continue to inspire me.

[01:46:22.67]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. Are there any pieces that like for you have that strong connection to the Japanese printmaking?

[01:46:31.50]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Oh, I can ever remember the name. Hokusai is one of them. Yeah, I can't—I can never—never sticks. But there are a lot of them that chose to depict women, the

courtesans. And this whole Ukiyo-e—something like that—

[01:46:50.06]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —yeah—

[01:46:50.63]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —there's a whole body of portraiture—and most of them are of the courtesan prostitutes—that are just magnificent. And as a matter of fact, my image of *La Ofrenda*, a woman with a tattoo, is directly influenced by that.

[01:47:07.25]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:47:07.95]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: There is one Japanese print where the woman has—not the Virgen de Guadalupe, of course—but she has—I think she's just, like, look—has her back. You're looking at her back. We're back with her. You've got the kimono draped around her body. So that was like a real boom—transformative.

[01:47:29.72]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. I always wondered that, too, because they had that very—like the shapes reminded me of the Japanese prints, too.

[01:47:41.12]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Flatness, flatness.

[01:47:45.56]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:47:46.49]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It works to some degree, mm-hmm.

[01:47:49.11]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And, so, you mentioned that you—like once your son moved to Japan, you've started visiting regularly. What—in addition to your family there, like, what keeps bringing you back to Japan as well?

[01:48:03.43]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, my family—my family in Japan—they know that I'm an artist. And they're very fascinated with that. And every time I go over there they love taking me out to different parts of—to different, what should I say—like, they took me out to a real rural area to a village that's known for ceramics, where they had, like, a kiln, a wood burn kiln that ran up a mountainside.

[01:48:36.73]

It reminded me of the paper wasp from nature, from growing up in the valley. I was always looking at nature, the paper wasp. Yeah, all of that; I really looked at things seriously. I concentrated. And so me that was like, oh my God, it's like a paper wasp—the home that they build—and here was this magnificent mud created structure that ran up a hill, wood burning fire and flames and smoke and whoo, drama.

[01:49:14.35]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:49:16.01]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: But also to see paper being made, the washi being made. And they took me to a village that was famous for making paper sculptures. And they were having a celebration. And all the streets were lined with these incredible structures of—they were made, like, probably rattan or bamboo and covered with handmade papers. And they were just all these sizes and shapes. And at nighttime they were lit, so things like that.

[01:49:44.80]

So they enjoyed going with me. And just I guess they enjoyed me being a drama queen and seeing all of that art.

[01:49:51.91]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:49:53.24]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Oh, my God, and smelling things and—wanting to touch things and touch things—things, I guess, that they normally would not do, even though they would appreciate things in another way. But—because, to me—just, to see things in the realm, to see them in life like that is really, just, amazing. And it just made me appreciate the technical knowledge and information that went into creating them but also their beauty, their magnificent beauty for just what they were. So—

[01:50:28.12]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, it seems like you've had a chance to see up close, right, these processes for all these different types of art forms and art objects.

[01:50:37.12]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, and I had a chance to go to a lot of museums over there, too. They would take me to a lot of museums. So that's where I heard about Yuk—uh, I can't even sa—Kusama—Yuyo—Yayoi—

[01:50:47.83]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —Mm-hmm, yeah.—

[01:50:49.00]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —Kusama—so I was—I saw her work a long time ago.

[01:50:56.32]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. [Laughs.]

[01:50:59.89]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: In Kyoto and Tokyo. So that was amazing to see her now, so—popular, now, here in the US—all over the world, I should say.

[01:51:08.05]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right, right, so you've been exposed and deeply involved with so many of the Japanese different art forms and Japanese artists that are making over there.

[01:51:19.64]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, to some degree it's—they're like Mexico. They're a community of artists. And the arts are embedded in everything. If not that, you're a supporter of the arts, okay?

[01:51:34.90]

So they're just—it's just on every layer. So, I don't even think I've scratched the surface. I've been—there's just so much. So I'm always anxious to go back, to take another layer off of that magnificent country and just sort of see it close hand, experience it.

[01:51:55.90]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: When are you hoping to go back?

[01:51:58.80]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, normally I would go at least once or twice a year. But now since we're coming out of COVID, the pandemic, it's been a couple of years since I've been there. And I was in Japan when—and coming back I soon heard about the pandemic in January, from my son, because my daughter-in-law works for a mult—uh, international company. And there are a lot of Chinese doctors part of the team. And they were starting to talk about the pandemic.

[01:52:37.68]

So I learned about the pandemic before it was even really popular or known so much here in the United States, that people even took it serious.

[01:52:47.69]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:52:48.65]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So anyway, I came right at the tail end. When I was in Japan, it was just millions of Chinese people visiting, tourists.

[01:52:59.05]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Got it, so yeah, so you learned about what was happening and what would soon become our lives, right at the beginning of it.

[01:53:07.90]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I hope to go, maybe, hopefully next year, 2023. I hope to start traveling again.

[01:53:15.31]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah. Wow, well I just want to thank you for this first session in covering so many different aspects of your life up to this point. I'm going to stop the recording. So just give me a second.

[01:53:33.43]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Okay.

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[00:00:03.26]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Got it.

[00:00:06.56]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wonderful. So, hello. This is Melissa San Miguel interviewing Ester Hernández virtually over Zoom on November 17, 2021, for the Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution. Thank you again, Ester, for making the time for part two of our interview, and it was wonderful to hear all of your story in our first day. And I'm looking forward to the conversation to come this afternoon as well.

[00:00:38.94]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Thank you. I'm honored to be a part of it.

[00:00:42.59]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: I wanted to pick up on the questions today really looking at your art

process and understanding your method as an artist, looking at specific artworks, and as well as your different art exhibits that you've been a part of and the significance of them. And you touched upon this—I want to also start at the beginning of your art making process once you moved to the Bay Area, too. And so we touched upon it a little bit earlier, and some of your earliest works are the murals that you made with the Mujeres Muralistas in San Francisco. And so I wanted to just ask you what drew you to the process of making murals, of *muralismo* in general. And why did you want to participate in that medium?

[00:01:29.39]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, like I mentioned earlier, the printmaking and muralism were part of the Chicano Civil Rights art movement because that gave us access to the community because we had no control of the media in general. Not like now where there is social media, with Facebook and what have you. Back then there was none of that.

[00:01:53.13]

And so it was a way of engaging with the community. And it came to me; I didn't necessarily go look into it, but I was invited to participate in the murals. And I thought it was a magnificent idea, not only because it was a journey with the Mujeres Muralistas or my chance to work with them and sort of exchange all kinds of ideas and information, but it was a wonderful and rare opportunity. I mean, it was my first opportunity really to engage with the public on that level.

[00:02:25.25]

Up until then, I think most of us, the only murals that we had seen were like in public spaces or in churches. So this was a chance for us to really sort of honor and talk about different issues, uh, in a fresh, new way that was—there was no history. There were a few people who were creating murals, some of the guys, and they were making wonderful murals. But for the most part, they were, uh, copying—or interpreting, I should say—the Mexican masters.

[00:03:01.10]

And so I think what was really fresh about the Mujeres Muralistas—I think it was because of our diversity and because we were working as a collective, that all of our ideas came together with a feminist approach. And also because of the great diversity within the Mujeres—Caribbean women, South American, Chicanas, urban Latina, we all had a different—something different to say or a different—yeah, a different message, we should say.

[00:03:34.06]

And so that was very fertile and crazy and wild and fun. [They laugh.]

As you can imagine. But in a lot of ways it felt like I was just sort of dealing with family, with my sisters. We worked with different issues and problems, and you know at the end want to do something positive or come out with something that engages a community. So aside from all of the dialogue and back and forth and what have you, we kind of all knew that we wanted to do something positive for the community so that we'd still work together to come up with a mural idea that in some way would inspire and, uh, maybe educate the community.

[00:04:14.62]

In particular, I think we are really interested in diversity and intergenerational—making presence the fact that—that the Latino presence, especially in the mission, was just not—it was not monocultural. It was—there were South Americans. There were, uh, Afro-Americans. There were—acknowledging our native blood, our urban existence, our farm-worker backgrounds, all of that. And that was really fresh, and I think that was, uh, what really was exciting for the community—and for us, too. We sort of created a new dialogue, I should say.

[00:04:53.57]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right, so working with these diverse group of women artists gave you that opportunity to engage in different ways now with the community. And so what did working with these women artists, how did they impact your own art practice?

[00:05:10.10]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, again, it opened up a whole new world to me, especially the, Latin—Latino world. Coming from a rural background was pretty much just Chicanos in terms of, uh, the Latinos that were there. So when I came into the city, and then I had an opportunity to work directly with all of these Latinas of different places, it allowed me also to learn about their history and their culture—some of their dances and their foods and all of that. So it totally enriched my life.

[00:05:45.26]

Aside from that, everybody had, like, diverse—I want to say what? Artistic knowledge and information and political consciousness and all of that. So that all came together there with these incredible dialogues about getting to know each other. It was—to me, it was—it just changed my life. It was, again, one of those moments in my life that was transformative, and I'm just really grateful that I was able to experience that, even short lived as it was. It was because economics and—more than anything—but also the fact that we were all young, and we were, like, in a stage in our life where we were—going back to school, or—some people were going into relationships and moving—.

[00:06:34.82]

So there was a lot of things at that point in my life that—sort of had us move on in our paths. But we did continue to do a few murals, but the group was always changing. But in fact, that made it interesting also. Because it gi—

[00:06:49.36]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —right—

[00:06:49.70]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —somebody would come in with a new perspective, a new way of thinking, new artistic knowledge and background to share. So, yeah, that kept me engaged.

[00:07:01.94]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: So it sounds like a really kind of dynamic collective, right, of different ideas and approaches to art making.

[00:07:07.49]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Very much so, yes.

[00:07:09.61]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Thank you. And we discussed a little bit earlier some of your prints from the 1970s, which are iconic pieces of artwork in American art. *Libertad*, from 1975, and *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de Los Xicanos*, from 1976, and I appreciate you sharing the origin of that print. And so I wanted to get a better sense of what drew you to the printmaking medium in particular because you've established such a long career as a printmaker and different types of printmaking methods as well. So what did printmaking provide for you as an artist, as a process, or as a medium, that perhaps painting or drawing didn't, or that was especially unique for you, and how you felt that as a tool of expression?

[00:08:00.66]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, again, it was, again, part of the, um—what was going on within the Chicano art movement—again, this is muralism and printmaking. So initially, I was introduced to screen printing, which I thought was fabulous—creating editions, creating these marvelous prints with these bold areas of color—very sensual. Uh, right—easy set up and all of that.

[00:08:26.29]

—At some time down the road, though—I can't remember; I was taking these different art

history classes—and—I ran into the work of Francisco Goya, the Spanish printmaker. And it was—he was doing etching—it was his etching series on the disasters of war. And that very much resonated with me because, again, it was like a social activist—so social justice, or just—it was, like, political. And so aside from being political and all of that—that part really resonated with me—but the prints were so unusual. They were, like grainy; there was this texture—and I wasn't even seeing the real thing, but these beautiful prints in like art history books, or whatever—and that really turned me on. I just was amazed with the lithographs and etchings and aquatints.

[00:09:25.68]

So fortunately, what was really, uh, like, meant to be, maybe—when I went to UC Berkeley—they were offering etching and classic etching. So I'm just totally happy and—to have that opportunity to explore that medium. And that's where I created *Libertad* and also *La Virgen Defendiendo*. And I had the opportunity to work again with a marvelous printmaker, teacher, Fran Valesco.

[00:10:00.35]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And do you have a preferred printmaking method, whether it's litho or etching? Which one calls you more?

[00:10:08.25]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I think I still kind of enjoy screen printing because there are just so many ways to approach it. You can approach it from making paper stencils and just making one print; or doing mono-printing, screen printing where you just paint on the screen and print it, and there's only one and maybe a ghost image. It has a lot of flexibility, and you don't need a lot of fancy equipment to do that.

[00:10:35.15]

Of course, now most of the younger artists are working with computers and creating images like on photo—what is it called?

[00:10:44.09]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Photoshop.

[00:10:44.87]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Photoshop—and all that—I know nothing about that, and I don't even care. I'm old school. I love it. It works for me. So anyway—what was I getting at?

[00:10:55.34]

So—so screen printing still appeals to me because if something comes up in my mind that I really want to print, I have pretty much all the materials here. I don't need a big, fancy studio. I don't need nitric acid. I don't need fancy ventilators or what have you. And I don't need—I've had etching presses; I've had studios set up, my own studio, to have etching presses and all of that. But I let all that go. It was just too cumbersome. And to me, screen printing is just a lot—easier medium for me to work with—especially at this age.

[00:11:38.84]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right, so, like, that ease and accessibility of just the medium and also—less toxicity, some of the other—

[00:11:46.76]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —it's beautiful. It's a beautiful medium. My God, it can create things that look like paintings, still, and really solid, bold areas of color that are just wonderful to look at, sensually.

[00:11:56.99]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, and I think that color is interesting because with lino you won't

necessarily get that same intensity—or with litho, with a different—right, a different approach. So—was—does color play a role as well, like, for you in your selection of the palette or of how you want to express an idea? Or are you drawn more to line?

[00:12:24.21]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I've always—am drawn to line. And in some way, that's—what kind of I—this—what is really interesting in making that move from bold areas of color that are screen printing, for the most part, to drawing with pastels or what have you—even when I paint, which is not my favorite medium, I'll use a brush that probably has two hairs; so basically I'm drawing—

[00:12:57.13]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:13:02.47]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —so—yeah. What was the question again? I'm sorry.

[00:13:04.60]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Oh, just the what's drawing you—like line, color—and it seems like that the line, the movement of the line is significant.

[00:13:14.61]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, even in my screen prints, I still do a lot of line. And I was able to—I did a lot of—all of my screen printing before. So I knew how to prepare the inks. But I've had a chance to work with some "master" printers. And it's been really a challenge for them to, like, uh, print my lines, my fine lines, and small text—because I use a lot of text in my screen prints. So—but we get it done.

[00:13:47.80]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, and what makes you decide to use text in certain screen prints? Like, what is the text's significance for you?

[00:13:56.78]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, it just sort of adds to the story. I've always enjoyed using words just to tell my story.—I guess, in general, my work is narrative in nature, a lot of it is, anyway. So that adding words to it is just part of the story.

[00:14:17.24]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Got it.

[00:14:17.72]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And sometimes that's a challenge because—deciding what words to add—because it could either—take away—you know, it has to sort of work with the visuals. So sometimes that can be quite challenging. I've had a million sleepless nights trying to figure all that out.

[00:14:34.25]

[They laugh.]

[00:14:35.69]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: I can imagine. And getting to the *Libertad* print, which is one that we didn't get to talk about last time, I was wondering if you could share a little bit more of the origin of that print and what you had hoped to, kind of, convey through it and what it was responding to at that point in time as well.

[00:14:57.86]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, I was a student at UC Berkeley, and I was taking an etching class. And it was 1976, which was the American Bicentennial. And, again, I love humor. And I love to celebrate things, so I'm thought, perfect, I'm going to have fun with this; I'm going to come up with some sort of an image.

[00:15:21.24]

But again, my—some of my prints—I would say that one falls in line with that—it's kind of like dark humor, a little bit. It's humorous, but if you look at it closely, it's talking about—what?—the displacement of the native people and the reclamation of the land—type of a thing—that the presence of the native people is still here, still creative, and still contributing.

[00:15:51.49]

So, needless to say—again, I'm grateful that I had Fran as my teacher because she loved it, and she has an amazing sense of humor, twisted like mine.

[00:16:03.96]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:16:04.42]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Some of the other students and maybe some of the other staff, were a little uncomfortable, and they didn't understand it. They felt it was, like, making fun of the—of the celebration—and the—yeah, that I was being disrespectful to some degree.

[00:16:21.37]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[00:16:21.91]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: The Chicano community, my fellow students and community, they loved it; they got it; [snaps fingers] boom, they got it. Mm-hmm. So that's kind of were *Libertad* was coming from—my comment on the Bicentennial.

[00:16:36.48]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right. I'm sure there was so much happening across the country and in the Bay Area at that point in time, too.

[00:16:42.01]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Absolutely. But the Native peoples in the Americas were not a part of that dialogue.

[00:16:50.42]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And you've mentioned the humor quite a bit and also where it comes from for you and your dad's humor. And so, I was wondering, like, what does humor allow you to say?—Or how do you use it? Like, what is that impact for you, and what can it let you express—you know, that, if you didn't use it, might not come out or feel as natural?

[00:17:15.84]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Again,—when I come up with an idea, I try to see it from a lot of different perspectives. It's dual nature, or it's multiple perspectives. I really try to study an idea, a feeling—in so many different ways. So—sometimes—when I really do the opposite of my idea, like use irony or dark humor, I find—from what people tell me—the feedback that I receive—is that, initially, they may be shocked. But it makes them laugh, and it makes them feel more comfortable in terms of not feeling threatened, necessarily—not just hitting them straight with the information but in a roundabout way. So it's easier for them to digest it, and they're more willing to sit with it and think about it.

[00:18:16.84]

That's what I've been told about my humor, in particular, *Sun Mad*. I've been told by people, like, in—all over the world—that the people that are most drawn to it like immediately—and they laugh and they just wonder what's going on—is children. They're drawn to it, *¿Qué le pasó a la mujer de las pasas?* What happened to the raisin woman? And it engages—it throws everything off.—They laugh and, What happened? And so it starts a dialogue, and that's what—a lot of my work is about—a dialogue, creating a dialogue. So getting back to the humor like that, I found it to be like a valuable tool and something that I enjoy anyway. I'm a clown.

[00:19:05.65]

[They laugh.]

[00:19:09.83]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.—And thank you; thank you for sharing, just, the ways, right, that humor can allow people to access information and to start that conversation. And so, uh, I know *Sun Mad*—and other prints that you've made, such as *Tejido*—have—responding to really significant moments in history and what's happened to people. And so I wanted to hear from you and in your words, like, for you, what is the role of the artist in the world?

[00:19:42.83]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, I can only speak for myself.—Everybody has their different path—and my journey has been—again, like I told you, these different markers in my life that have sort of kept me going. And—I've always sort of kept a balance, though, I have to admit; I haven't always done work that's sociopolitical. I've balanced that for my own mental health, for my own joy, uh, with narrative—I mean, portraiture, in particular—of women, okay, of other things, of other things in life, the celebration of our cultures or a celebration of life in general, a celebration of the Earth.

[00:20:37.48]

So I've always kept that balance, and I think that's what's kept me going. I can never totally carry the total burden of just doing sociopolitical work. It's just way too much. And so that's been my path, just to sort of—like this balance, balancing act.

[00:20:59.02]

—And I would like to think—I would like more artists—I think it would be fabulous—and it's something I was planning on talking about toward the end—I think we're all realizing now that we are all connected. I think the COVID taught us a real lesson about how we're all on this Earth, and we're all connected one way or another. And I would like to think that the artist community will become a part of that dialogue, because the arts are such a valuable—I mean, it's something that's just so much a part of our lives from the beginning of time.

[00:21:36.28]

And it's just completely—we're immersed in it, whether it's commercials that are bombarding us with things that we don't really need or personal art for self-expression to keep ourselves healthy and sane and happy or whatever, and then the political work which, so, really connects us with other people. It makes us know that we're not alone, that we share a lot of issues, problems, and that with the arts or whatever, if everybody was to contribute a little bit, we could change—we can make a lot of change in the world and for a better world.

[00:22:12.18]

I think we have that responsibility. But again, I don't necessarily think people have to make art and contribute in that way. They can find other ways to participate, find whatever that resonates with them, whatever issues resonate with them. But I do believe that everybody has a responsibility to contribute on some level.

[00:22:34.89]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right. And for you, that happened to be as an artist and through some of your work—because your work is diverse in terms of subjects and themes that you

deal with.

[00:22:45.72]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Right.

[00:22:47.70]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And I wanted to ask about your portraiture as well and one in particular, too, as we pull out to a larger discussion. So one of your most written about prints is *La Ofrenda*, which is a print from, like, 1988 to 1989, and its connection to LGBT art. And so who is this an image of, and what is it referring to? And is there—and what would you like to say, if anything, about your own sexuality and how it connects to your art?

[00:23:20.52]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, the image is of Renee Moreno, who was my partner at that time. And it was sort of—well, okay, first of all, I would say—let me make it really clear. My artwork, I would sort of more define it as feminism in general; but in that regard, I've always said it covers everything from goddesses, trannies, truck-driving women, to people like Dolores Huerta, who has 10 children. I'm interested in that whole beautiful—people who we are with all of the depth and complexities.

[00:24:02.70]

So personally, I lived through a time when it was against the law to be gay to now where people are allowed to define themselves in so many diverse and healthy ways. I'm not a real purist about anything, especially about sexuality. I'm totally open and always have been. And I think, for my part, and from what I've seen in my friends and my community, that's the healthiest way to be—is just to be who you are. And—but also to know that we change and to stay open and stay positive and stay healthy. And I hope one day that we don't even have to talk about these things—that it's just part of being human.

[00:25:00.60]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Definitely. And thank you for sharing that. I can only imagine what it was like at that point in time to try to be oneself, however that was.

[00:25:11.28]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It didn't stop us, let's put it that way.

[00:25:14.57]

[They laugh.]

[00:25:17.89]

All of those words were there, now. I mean, we hear it from the younger generation, Thank you for just standing up, for being who you are, for—keep going on, for your growth, development, your changes, all of these things that make us human, that give us, uh, the visibility of being who we are with all of these complexities. All this diversity that exists within human sexuality and all of its beauty.

[00:25:44.10]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Absolutely. And that's where—in your work—where portraiture of women across generations, across occupations has played such a central role as well. And I'm thinking of some of your drawings of Astrid Hadad in San Francisco, your other one of recyclers that's also done in the medium of drawing, too. And so, you've spoken, too, that you've—even when you've tried to create other things, you always kind of come back to the line.

[00:26:14.55]

And when you decided to make these prints, or excuse me, these drawings of these working women, of strong women, or working people in general, what made you leap to the choice in

using a drawing like pastels as your tool for expression? Is there something specific about wanting to connect the medium to your subject, at least in regard to some of these portraits?

[00:26:42.18]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Definitely. It's something that I've been doing since I was a child. The only materials that I had that were accessible to me in a small, little farming town were, well, initially, things found in nature, whether it was a piece of—a little rock that I could draw on some paper that I found—because there were no art supplies; there were no art stores; there weren't museums. There was nothing like that.

[00:27:12.89]

So it was up to me to explore nature—and also my family; they dabbled in things, too. So we had pencils. We had things along that line. But—and again, drawing in the sands of the grape fields, things like that; I had that natural impulse for drawing and drawing. I remember that I would draw lines in the sand, and then I would watch during the course of the day how the shadow would change, how the light would hit it from a different angle.

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So it was constantly changing.

[00:27:49.10]

So anyway, my obsession with line was always there. I've always been doing portraiture. Again, when I was a child, my first models were, for the most part, the *mujeres*: my family, my sisters, my *primas*, my neighbors. So that drawing and portraiture has been part of my artistic life.

[00:28:11.69]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Do you like the tactility of working with pastels? It's like a different process than screen printing.

[00:28:18.39]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Absolutely. It's fresh. It's direct. It has energy. It inspires me. It turns me on. I turn up the music, and I just let it flow.

[00:28:28.07]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:28:29.37]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Again, there were those moments, where, before I actually touch the paper, there's a lot of anxiety and fear and just not knowing how to approach it.—The colors—I go through all of this process of, what colors am I going to do? What type of energy am I going to put into it? How is it going to fit in the bigger picture? How do I apply it? How much pressure?

[00:28:55.59]

So once I get beyond that point, then [snaps fingers] I go for it and then let it flow; and it transforms me; it takes me to another world. It's very meditative for me. It's a very peaceful place for me to be. It always has been. Like I said, there were—like, all of us, we go through hard moments in our life. And as a child, I kind of learned that for me that was an escape—a beautiful tool that I found as a child as a way to sort of take myself out of my reality.

[00:29:32.72]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, it sounds like a really powerful art making process itself. Like once you've kind of figured out all the different things you wanted to do, and to just do it.

[00:29:42.86]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Mm-hmm, do it.

[00:29:43.82]

[They laugh.]

[00:29:46.54]

Let it flow.

[00:29:47.90]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And with portraiture being such a core part of your practice, as well, what is it—what does it mean to you? Like what do you think of portraiture like today, and what is its significance in the world and in the works that you made and that you will make as well?

[00:30:07.46]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, like I said, it's always been part of my life. I've always been fascinated with people, faces in particular. I'm just drawn to people's faces, their bone structure, their eyes. Eyes are probably the hardest part because that's where their spirit lies. So anyway—so—reading people on that level.

[00:30:27.16]

So—I've always done that. But it wasn't until much later that I learned—when you start taking art history and what have you—that common people were rarely portrayed in portraiture. Just like the murals, it was, like, famous people or Saints or politicians or whatever, what have you. It was not—rarely—rarely—I mean, Van Gogh is one person who in some of his paintings he portrayed just—you know, there were a handful—Käthe Kollwitz—who portrayed just everyday people.

[00:31:01.20]

But in general, it was not necessarily a medium that was respected. I found, like when I went to study art like in higher education, it's not necessarily considered, like, what was going on; but I didn't care. I didn't care. I wanted to honor, portray the strength and dignity of these women that I was meeting who inspired me in so many different ways. I wanted to give them life.

[00:31:33.08]

I wanted to be able to share them—the beauty. And also—okay, I'll just back it up a tiny bit here. At one point in my life, too, I had a chance to spend time with Dolores Huerta, okay, who was a great supporter of the arts. She is a closet poet. Anyway, she loves jazz, and she's always been supportive of the arts.

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And I remember one time having a dialogue with her, but we were talking something about art and the role of Chicana artists and all of that. And she—because she knew that I love portraiture—and she said it was really important for me to stay on that path because people need to know the diversity and complexity and the multidimensional sort of *mujeres* that we are. We're not just this one monolith. We're—because in general, she said, the only time that we would see Latinas—on the media, whatever—newspapers, whatever—

[00:32:37.53]

we were either to be feared or pitied.

[00:32:41.28]

So we never really had an opportunity to see women who are dancers, who are *curanderas*, who are truck drivers, who are—what have you. So that kind of added to me and sort of gave me a sense of purpose, and it sort of inspired me to continue on my path no matter what, no matter—with whatever—with the general art history, which I could have cared less; it didn't

matter. It's not part—

[00:33:13.44]

It is changing now thanks to people like yourself. It's changing now in the museums, the Smithsonian, all of that. The face is changing; and there's more inclusiveness; there's more interest in a lot of the younger generation, uh, of, uh, curators and what have you. It's changing, and I'm very grateful to that—Our allies—I mean, it's opening up.

[00:33:35.88]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right.

[00:33:36.51]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: We have something to say—

[00:33:37.50]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —mm-hmm—

[00:33:37.80]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —mm-hmm—that resonates with a lot of people that I never would have thought.

[00:33:44.43]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Well, I'm glad that despite what the academy and the higher ed folks were saying about portraiture that you continue to stay true to who you are and who you wanted to represent as well. And you've also created, too, I think—what I think is really pretty amazing about your practice is that you've created works in so many different mediums, not just two dimensional; as well, you've got installation works that you've made.

[00:34:15.24]

And so—I'm thinking of the immigrant woman's dress—and so I wanted to learn a bit more about, kind of, this 3-D, like, in person, type of practice. And how did you decide on this different medium for this particular idea?

[00:34:31.11]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I've always kind of let my ideas sort of guide me in terms of what materials to use. And so I think in some ways a lot of times, curators always so, especially way back, had a hard time with that—because they want everybody to do prints; they want everybody to do the same medium—and I never have worked that way ever—never, never—and I will not. So this dress, kind of again, is part of, like, a long narrative—a very long narrative—stemming initially from the story about my grandmother.

[00:35:07.54]

When my grandmother died—oh, well, before my grandmother died—she told everybody that she had hidden money. And of course, she didn't tell anybody where she hid it.

[00:35:17.98]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:35:19.17]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And after she was gone, my uncles, my aunts, my cousins, everybody just tore everything up, turned everything upside down, and they didn't find—not even a penny. And one day they were sitting in her house, in her home, and they started remembering that she was always sewing.

[00:35:39.95]

—A treadle machine—she was always working on something.

[00:35:43.55]

So one thing led to another, and they decided to start looking at all of the things she had made—quilts, curtains, aprons, you name it, just on and on and on. And they found—they started finding all this money. They found, actually, \$16,000 worth of coins that she had been hiding for 60, 70 years.

[00:36:10.55]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[00:36:11.54]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And the story behind that, too, though, the reason I chose to do that dress is because she also talked about—. Oh, another part of that story was, she also would mention—that—when—she was leaving, when they were leaving Mexico during the chaos of the Mexican Revolution along with the millions of other people that made it up north, that the women—because there was just vandalism, bandits; everything was just chaos on both sides of the border—that they had precious items in their clothing, in the hems, in the folds, what have you.

[00:36:50.69]

They hid it.

[00:36:51.41]

So that story—that is kind of the, uh, let's say, the genesis of that dress. I wanted to honor my grandmother's story. So that's how I chose that medium. And I based it on a family photo of my grandmother and my mother, who was a year old, probably, just shortly—taken shortly before they left Mexico. So it's kind of this colonial kind of dress. So I don't know how to sew. And earlier, my weavings looked like bird nests—very pretty—.

[00:37:28.73]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:37:30.59]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I designed it; I can design; I can draw; I love to draw. So I designed a dress sort of based on my grandmother's dress from that era. And then I worked with it, uh—I screen-printed the *Virgen de Guadalupe* and the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui onto the silk organza. So it was, like, clear, translucent—translucent, I would say. And then I screen-printed the coins that were sort of on the different parts of the dress, and I had to cut those out. It was a major undertaking.

[00:38:05.93]

And then I worked with this young woman who made costumes, and she just loved the project. So we worked together, and she was the one that actually sewed it and put it together—under my guidance, of course. But that's how the dress came to be. So it's a long story. It has long roots.

[00:38:25.82]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yes.

[00:38:26.87]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So—but it was the only medium that I felt that I could really tell the story. And I always enjoy working with different mediums. It makes me grow; it pushes me; it drives me crazy.

[00:38:37.61]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:38:37.97]

It pushes me to learn and grow. So I would just get stuck with, like, just repeating the same—working with the same material. That's too easy, to fall in that trap. But that's what a lot of the museums like or the galleries like—but that doesn't matter to me. So I'm constantly pushing myself to learn and grow. And that has to do with exploring different ideas as well as materials.

[00:39:04.91]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah. How is it like, printing on silk organza? [Laughs.]

[00:39:10.94]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It's crazy; particularly totally insane. [Laughs.]

[00:39:14.87]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: It must have kept moving.

[00:39:16.31]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It goes right through the fabric; it doesn't stay; and then you have to lift it up, and it wants to transfer; it wants to stick. It was totally a challenge—totally a challenge. But that's what making art is. I mean, it's like, somebody told me, Oh, making art is so much fun, and I said, no—well, it has its moments, but you're just constantly problem solving.

[00:39:37.72]

Again, if you challenge yourself—if you just stay with paper and pastel or painting and canvas and you never do anything else, well, of course, you're challenged in different ways, but not the same as trying different materials, to explore in different materials, to express your idea in a different way. Everybody's different; I'm not saying anything's wrong with doing it—staying with certain materials and all that. There's nothing wrong with it; but it's not me.

[00:40:07.68]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Thank you for sharing, kind of, how you approach your own growth as an artist and different ways that you challenge yourself to keep developing and keep imagining new ideas and new ways of making it happen.

[00:40:20.55]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It keeps it interesting. It keeps the medium—because there's endless ways of telling your story. And, you know, just, yeah, it's always changing around me. I'm learning, again, by meeting especially the younger artists and see the materials their exploring, the computers, and all of that. So, yeah, it's just a wonderful, endless—endless possibilities.

[00:40:44.64]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right. And it seems like, with this installation piece, that it was a bit connected to the figure and not, at the same time, and starting to get a little bit more abstract and conceptual. And, so, I was wondering like what are your thoughts on abstraction and other maybe non-representational ways of creating art and if you have any others that you've enjoyed making, as well.

[00:41:13.99]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Some of my first—aside from portraiture and all of that—I was always, I would say, dabbling in abstract art—always, since I was a child. And, I would say—even to go as far as—even my drawings in the sand were just, uh, non-representational in any way; it was just an exploration of line and movement. And I would also—from the campfires—a lot of times we would make little fires to warm up our lunch in the fields, in the grape fields.

[00:41:48.15]

And there would be little bits of charcoal that would be left there, and then I learned by people showing me that it could be a drawing tool. And so that was actually probably one of my mediums. I think that's what that needed, charcoal, pastels. So—a lot of my first drawings as a child were very abstract. And they were, I would say, inspired. And I kept doing abstract work all the time; it was just—it flowed for me quite easily.

[00:42:23.27]

It was really natural. It's there; how could it not be? But I just remember being inspired by nature—that I was so surrounded by. And especially when the winds would blow and things would sort of move and the colors and the colors changing through the day—I mean, there was just so much to inspire me—but also by the night sky. This was before the night skies were really polluted. Now you can't even see anything. But before, it was this immense—immense canopy of stars—and the moon, almost frightening. You felt like—you knew you were part of the universe.

[00:43:06.43]

So those things would inspire me, and a lot of times I remember trying to capture that energy and feeling and the mountains—the mountains—we were right there at the foot of the Sierra Nevada. That was always changing, and the mud—and the sun would rise, and all that. There was all this change and drama, color, in all of that. And I remember one painting that I did; it was called, like—okay—Springtime in the Sierras.—Things like that.—And it was completely abstract.

[00:43:39.51]

And I think it was a painting but, again, probably with two hairs on the brush; so it was really a drawing—it was a drawing.

[00:43:48.08]

But I did a lot of very abstract work with charcoal, and then later I had—my family and my uncles and all that, they knew I was into art, so they were always bringing me little materials from Fresno or what have you. Yeah, I was always being gifted different art materials eventually.

[00:44:08.84]

But I did a lot of extra work—even when I was at UC Berkeley. I did; I did. But—within the Chicano Civil Rights movement, there was really not a place for that. So the early curators and galleries and all of that, in general, they weren't interested. Although there were some artists on the sides who were doing that work, they were not necessarily included in a lot of the early exhibitions. So I guess, in some way, I pushed abstract sort of to the background.

[00:44:53.56]

But I have to say that I still feel it when I'm drawing and developing like, pastels or whatever. I still feel that intensity and that passion for line—in general, not—I can disconnect myself from portraiture and just be involved in a given area: with line and giving shape and giving form to that; and that is really very abstract.

[00:45:19.71]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. Were there—and I'm aware that at the beginning of the Chicano Civil Rights movement—just with the push for social justice—the challenges, right—with artists who were interested in abstraction or who that was their main mode of expression—were there any other artists that, kind of like you, had that kind of abstract form of expression or practice? And did you find any other Chicano or Chicana artists kind of similarly trying to figure out how to navigate making art at that point in time?

[00:45:53.16]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I can't think of anybody offhand. I do remember that there were some artists, in particular from Mexico, who were not—I guess they didn't consider themselves

necessarily part of the Chicano art movement. Like, in Mexico and, like, a lot of Latin America, they still mostly looked to Europe. There is, of course, there always has been that element of social activism within the arts; but in the bigger picture they were doing a lot of abstract—a lot of those artists who were from Mexico. And they were beautiful artwork—beautiful.

[00:46:26.85]

And they were very inspiring. And then there were also the people like Peter Rodríguez, the founder of the Mexican museum. Who was doing, I would say, abstract work. And then there was—what was his name? Lerma—José Lerma came from a generation before us. And they never really embraced the Chicano movement as such. They still had—they were still uncomfortable with the politics in art. They didn't think it worked. So they continued to do their work, and I always enjoyed it and appreciated and valued what they were doing.

[00:47:05.94]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And today, do you also continue to make some abstract works?

[00:47:11.34]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I would say it's still very much alive, again, like I was saying, with my pastels. I can isolate a different area there and just go back to being a child and just having fun and just developing it. And then maybe pulling back and looking at the bigger picture in terms of what I'm trying to develop and then go from there to, like, integrate it. But in general a lot of the areas, they're not going to kill somebody; they're like in weavings.—Uh-oh, no, I'm not a weaver.

[00:47:38.66]

[They laugh.]

[00:47:40.88]

But you have line coming together to give form, let's put it that way. And so it's very, very abstract in that way. I mean, if you look at my pastels and you isolate lines in a given area, you'll see it has its own life. Every area has its own life, and I work hard to integrate it all. But in general, it's just a lot of little abstract works of art—yeah, lines, movement.

[00:48:07.50]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, I like that, weaving of lines.

[00:48:10.17]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It is. It's true. Maybe that's my—inability to be a weaver that I—sort of worked it into that medium.

[00:48:16.98]

[They laugh.]

[00:48:18.73]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: You found another way.

[00:48:20.46]

[They laugh.]

[00:48:23.70]

Well, I think you're—I'm always amazed just by how many different modes of expression you have. And I wanted to bring up a recent one as well, your collaboration with Ms. Sandra Cisneros on the 2014 book, *Have You Seen Marie?*, where you were the illustrator for the book. And so was hoping that you could share a little bit of how the collaboration came about and how long you've known Ms. Cisneros.

[00:48:52.49]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I met Sandra probably in the mid '80s in Austin, Texas. It was at a place called La Peña. It's a cultural center there. They were having like a poetry reading, and I believe they also had some artwork. I probably had some artwork up there, too. So that was the first time that we met, and I really loved her work, and she was just absolutely hilarious and very fun to be around.

[00:49:17.07]

So we really became good friends.

[00:49:19.08]

And at that point, she was just kind of a struggling poet trying to find her place in the world. But with time she really became very, very well-known and successful, and she started collecting my artwork which she still does to this day. And I'm very grateful and honored to have my work be a part of her life.

[00:49:38.61]

So, anyway, she started buying my work, and we continued our friendship over the years. And I would go to San Antonio, where she was living, and I always made a point of spending time with her. And we just had a marvelous time telling the most outrageous and scandalous stories we could dream up. So—at one point, she contacted me about collaborating with her on this book. And I've never done any sort of a collaboration or had any interest in being a part of a book like that—illustrate a book.

[00:50:16.62]

So I told her, No. And then she said, No, it's an opportunity; we have a lot of line; you have to only do so much work; you can come and see me; I'll give you the idea—. And I said No, I've never done anything like that. I said no. So I told her no at least 10 times, and she wouldn't let me go.

[00:50:36.30]

Then she said, Your work would really tell the story, and—our mothers had just passed around the same time—that I would understand it. And then I said, Well, let me think about it and this and that, because that did resonate with me. Because—but I didn't want to be a part of it because, first of all, I don't like schedules; I don't do commissions; I don't like to—my work is—I don't like to please people. I please myself.

[00:51:05.76]

I don't do, like, work like—commissions—like that—somebody hires me to do a job and they say whether they like it or not—. I don't work that way. I didn't like the ideas of publishers or agents and all this whole group of people who would be sort of watching me and giving me timelines and pressure to do the whole project.

[00:51:31.03]

So I kept telling her no—and then, eventually, you can't say no to Sandra, okay?

[00:51:34.95]

[They laugh.]

[00:51:37.92]

Yeah. So I think the fact that she sent me this manuscript—and it did touch my heart and soul because it was ultimately about the loss of our mothers and the fact that they will always be with us, with that story. And, so, finally I agreed to do it, and it was, um, quite a challenge. I learned a lot. I'll never do it again.

[00:52:02.10]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[00:52:04.18]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: But it was a magnificent opportunity to work with Sandra, to go and spend time with her just days and weeks. We just really worked really closely, and that was a rare opportunity and, again, a life changer for me, too, a turning point in my life. And I'm pleased with the way the book came out and the feedback that it received and the way that we honored the community there and the way that we honored our mothers. So again, it was a different medium and an opportunity—once she talked me into it, I took the—I dove into it, and I did my best.

[00:52:45.57]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, well, it sounds like quite a process. Like, what made it challenging as a medium or as a new form of working?

[00:52:54.78]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: The main thing I would say is telling—giving visual—what?—giving visual form to the work. I'd never really done anything like that. Words intimidate me in some ways, from spoken word or writing speeches or writing poems and all of that. I have ideas, but to give form to them is a whole other matter.

[00:53:24.45]

On my terms, I can do it. It may take me two or three years like *Sun Mad*. But to give form to somebody's story where I'm expected to illustrate, like, maybe 20 images, to create 20 images telling the story step-by-step, that was really challenging. But again, Sandra was gracious enough to invite me to go stay at her house—because the story takes place there, in San Antonio, in her neighborhood, with a lot of different characters that are part of the stories live there. They still get live there, although she's moved to Mexico.

[00:54:02.91]

So she took the time to take me around to sort of see where the story took place, to meet the characters, to walk in the river, to see the sacred trees, and all of that. So, like in a lot of my artwork, I use my own photography. So a lot of the portraits that I do are—they're from my photos. That's always been one of my tools. Well, long time, not always.

[00:54:35.16]

So that was very helpful, and that kind of made it much more easier for me to a lot of times run a photo by her to see, Is this the feeling? Is this the place? Or—and a lot of times I would just develop them anyway and just run it by her. So a lot—for the most part, it was just up to her—up to me, pretty much, to decide what I wanted to depict. And fortunately the publishing company and the agents and all of those people, they pretty much let us do whatever we wanted. So I'm very grateful to them for that, too. They trusted us to tell the story.

[00:55:14.97]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. And what was the best part of working with Ms. Cisneros?

[00:55:20.79]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Hanging out with her. All we did was laugh. All we did was laugh. She's just a joy to be with. Just to see her beautiful home, to meet her friends, to meet her 1,001 pets, her world, to be in her world and all of that, it's just—it was just a real honor and privilege for me to share time with her, to share our stories about our life, what inspires us, what moves us, and all of that.

[00:55:54.07]

So, yeah, it was just—spending time with her was, like I said, just a total honor and something that I still honor and feel wonderful about to this day. We're still going back and forth. I'm sending her all these Japanese gifts, and she sends me things from Mexico. So we

have this thing going back and forth.

[00:56:14.33]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: It sounds very beautiful, like a very amazing friendship to have.

[00:56:18.24]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It is; totally.

[00:56:20.40]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. Well, we'll take a quick break. So I will pause the recording.

[00:56:27.66]

Okay, it started recording again. So we're back from our break, and I wanted to pick up on the last pieces of discussing some of the artworks specifically and wanted to ask you about—and you've talked a bit about it—but I would love to hear your thoughts in addressing this question of what inspires you to create art about working class people in these different mediums that you've explored?

[00:56:59.15]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, again, it's something that I pretty much have been doing all of my life, even before I knew the word working class. But also my parents, in particular my mother—especially, like, those small little farming towns, there was, like, a lot of prejudice toward us and all of that, and especially looking down at farm worker people—that she used to always inspire and encourage us to be proud of who we are. And one of the main things that still resonates with me is all work is honorable and should be respected.

[00:57:48.01]

So that's kind of the roots, kind of what has made me continue to honor and celebrate a lot of working class women. I really had an interest, also, in people who come from other countries—

[00:58:07.42]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —hmm—

[00:58:08.44]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —*mujeres*, who—who knows, their stories are just really intense stories—and yet they came to make a better life for their families, and they recreated themselves in some way. So I always find inspiration in those women, and that's why I choose to honor them and give dignity to their work.

[00:58:37.81]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And, to that process, too, of immigrating and all that goes into remaking yourself.

[00:58:44.14]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Their story is my story, too, though.

[00:58:46.00]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm. And, uh, you've made so many different artworks, and I can imagine they're each like your own children in different ways. As we reflect upon just your very vast array of works, are there any particular works that you've done that, you know, still speak to you or that you think are more important than others or that still have that resonance for you today?

[00:59:14.85]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: *Sun Mad*, definitely. That was, like, from a very personal story, and that

really connects me deeply with my family and my community. And yet it never ceases to amaze me that it's—well, sadly, it's still relevant, the story about the pollution of our water and all of that—but it never ceases to amaze me, the audiences that it's reached and it continues to reach, and the museums that are collecting it, that people are still interested in publishing it, and—yeah—showing it at exhibits, exhibiting it and all of that—that it's still alive.

[00:59:56.98]

I printed that in the kitchen—in my home, in the kitchen—with my son; my 10-year-old son was my assistant. I didn't have any money, and I had pretty much not that long ago finished school. I was struggling to pay the loan just to get by. It took me a long time, two years, actually—after finding out about the water table and being able to buy materials and paints and all of that—to create that image. So that one is very close to me. It's like a family story that became bigger than that. Social justice, environmental justice, all of that did not exist. Those words did not exist at that time. It was very, very at the beginning of the environmental movement.

[01:00:42.35]

And the other one would be *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de Los Xicanos*. That's another one that surprised me in terms of the impact that it would later make in the art world and our culture in general. That still never ceases to amaze me in the feedback that I'm getting now—the good and the bad, but in general, good—and the audiences that it's reaching are really quite different than when I first created it. And, yeah, just that—those two pieces really are like my—are close to my heart and soul.

[01:01:22.66]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow, and, you know, with *Sun Mad*, it has like your son's hand in it, too, as your assistant.

[01:01:28.45]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Absolutely.

[01:01:29.99]

[They laugh.]

[01:01:33.67]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And—

[01:01:34.06]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —he still tells the stories.

[01:01:36.73]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Excuse me?

[01:01:37.84]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: He still tells those stories.

[01:01:40.24]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Ahh—was he an assistant on any of your other—

[01:01:43.33]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —yes, but still, we just connected, big time, yes.

[01:01:47.17]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, was he an assistant on any of your other prints as well?

[01:01:52.52]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: He had no choice.

[01:01:54.08]

[They laugh.]

[01:01:58.69]

He's always been my little partner in crime—always, always there—even to this day, even though he's now in Singapore, recently. But, uh, we still hook up in Japan to see the in-laws—my daughter-in-law, my granddaughter—well, of course, my granddaughter is with him, but, yeah, she's not Japanese; so, yeah. But he's always—he's there for me, definitely, encouraging me to continue doing my work, proud of me, and, yeah. He's always been there for me.

[01:02:27.76]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: That's very powerful. And with your artwork, as you mentioned, so many of them still resonate today. Unfortunately, right, because the issues that they're speaking to are still impacting us in terms of environmentally and all of that.

[01:02:43.27]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes.

[01:02:43.54]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And your work was recently also included in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's 2020 exhibit, *Printing the Revolution, the Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now*. And in my research, I found that one of your earliest exhibits was the 1979 show *Souls and Spirits* at the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco. And so I wanted to learn, like, what was your experience like as an artist going through this process with the museum and your impression of it in 1979 as compared to recently, in 2020 and 2021?

[01:03:23.22]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, to be honest with you, I don't think we had a lot of contact with the staff, necessarily. Maybe it was a—the curator, I can't remember who the curator was. It might have been René Yañez from Galería de La Raza. So in some of those early shows, there weren't, like, artist talks, and there weren't a lot of things.

[01:03:46.61]

Yeah, they would let us—they would open the door for a moment and then close it pretty much after. It was kind of—they did their people of color thing, and then the doors would close. Sadly, it is still—that attitude is still kind of there. So my contact with them was pretty minimal. Whereas, now, it's really different. They want to know the back story.

[01:04:12.54]

There's much more interest, and again, that has to do with the younger generation, I think: the new people that are part of the museums and galleries and whate—publications—whatever, now—it's different—; and people like yourself who are getting educated and are going back there and doing the work and bringing our histories back—giving life to them, bringing them to light. So that's, I think, the big difference between the shows back then, where it was very minimal, very distant, almost.

[01:04:51.80]

Although, it was—what should I say?—well, it was very, very empowering for us to be able to exhibit in those spaces. We never would have dreamed that. It's like somebody told me about me and my work, said, "From the grape fields to the Smithsonian—wonderful, congrats!"

[01:05:12.37]

[They laugh.]

[01:05:16.28]

So—but it did—again, like I said, it empowered us, and I think it made us dream bigger, of possibilities. Again, one of my goals has always been to reach new audiences. So there was—people came. People came, our community, our families, our friends, and then people who were part of the museum community. So there was an exchange which was, I think, important. And it always has been, to that, that dialogue between communities. So, yeah—compared to the Smithsonian, which is a monster show—

[01:05:53.60]

Unfortunately, it opened up right at the beginning of COVID-19, so that pretty much shut down, um, opening. We did a Zoom conference, and I was invited to speak, but there was no reception in person. There was no talk, no *plática*, in person. I didn't get a chance to go. I don't think hardly any of the artists except maybe the ones that were in the East Coast, Midwest, were the ones who actually went.

[01:06:30.23]

So that was very heartbreaking. It was very difficult to not be able to travel, which is probably one of the biggest exhibits in my life and my career.

[01:06:41.00]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, and it's such a significant show in just telling the story of American Art and the role that Chicano artists played.

[01:06:50.33]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Right. Yeah, so: *la vida*.

[01:06:55.52]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, well, I'm—I hope that the world continues to manage through COVID-19 and stay healthy in the years to come.

[01:07:07.46]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, absolutely.

[01:07:10.07]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And coming to—your work has been exhibited all over the world, And I was amazed to learn just all the different places, right, that you've had a chance to share your work with the communities there and wanted to learn, like, what was the reception like to your work in Mexico and in Japan, in particular?

[01:07:33.16]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: [Laughs.]

It's interesting. Like anywhere, it depends where you exhibit, who puts the exhibit together and what their intentions are. I've been in some shows in Mexico that were put together by community artists, activist-art artists, in galleries and all of that. And I've also had a chance, or almost had a chance, to exhibit in bigger spaces. The bigger spaces, the more traditional museums, the bigger names and all of that, were extremely uncomfortable with my artwork, especially *Sun Mad*. And so there were a few instances where they censored it, basically.

[01:08:19.14]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:08:20.73]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So I experienced that kind of feedback from Mexico quite a bit. And in general, in going to Mexico and, uh, for conferences—we had several conferences with Chicana and Mexican writers—again, most of the artists, the women artists, that I met were—I'm just talking about it because it was a women's art conference—they mostly looked toward Europe in terms of their art inspiration and their audience and their money, and they made that really clear.

[01:08:54.82]

So the whole thing about politics was, like, a no-no. It was like something they weren't interested—it was dangerous; it was dangerous to be political; there was no money in it; and yeah—. So they had focused—they came—a lot of the Mexican artists women from those more established places also were middle and upper class. So we were the scrappy Chicana working class with an attitude being very political and wild, right, according to them—*indias*.

[01:09:39.40]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: They said that?

[01:09:40.99]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: There was some of that, yeah. So—

[01:09:42.64]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:09:43.30]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: In one conference that we went to with the women's conference—it was amazing; it was Mexican and Chicana artists—so in general, we got sort of—the Chicanas—we got sort of dismissed by the elite Mexican women artists. Although, all of them—those women—wanted to migrate to the US, right? Okay.

[01:10:06.64]

But the ones that understood us and connected with us and took us under their wing were the Native women.

[01:10:17.53]

They were political; they had a consciousness; they understood about migration; they understood about prejudice; they understood us, the women from Oaxaca—Native women from Oaxaca. With time, the other women—once we sort of got a chance to know each other and see each other's work—there was much more understanding and respect for each other. But initially, the fact that we didn't speak Spanish was like, boom, right away.

[01:10:49.21]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:10:50.53]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: But yeah, so it's very complex to show in other countries. Even, like, in Japan, I've had a show—I mean, again, a lot of it has to do with who's sponsoring the exhibit, where it is, who their audience is, who their base is.

[01:11:08.98]

And the pieces that they were interested or thought they were interested were like *Sun Mad*. But when I showed in Japan—at one time I showed in Yokohama, Tokyo, area, and it was very well-received, but again, it was because they were more like a cultural community center. And that's where the actors were.

[01:11:30.68]

And the other time I showed was in Chiba in a big fancy museum in Chiba. And I never heard

anything back, just in general, because I know that at that point, just like here, it was very early in the environmental movement.

[01:11:44.62]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: I see.

[01:11:46.09]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: There—yeah, so there was this part of me—I wasn't there to sort of explain where it was coming from and all of that. And I think, again, because of cultural differences and what have you—although, the Sun Maid raisins are all over the world at the checkout—. So anyway—so my response has been very complicated, for various reasons—cultural, political, you name it.

[01:12:14.55]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right, class-wise as well, and navigating the different structures in other countries.

[01:12:19.59]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Absolutely.

[01:12:22.77]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Have any of these international exhibits really stuck out in your mind in a positive—or, you know, not so positive—way that just really made an impact on you somehow?

[01:12:34.99]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, this exhibit that I'm talking about, this—it was like a—it was a conference that a friend of mine put together. She's from Mexico.

[01:12:43.82]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And this is the Chicana Mexican woman artist conference?

[01:12:47.27]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It was a Symposium and an art exhibit. I think that was really a—that really made a really big impression on me, just in terms of really getting to know and understand a lot more about Mexico and the art communities—and the museums and—yeah, what it is that people have to deal with in their countries—the dangers, the economic realities—yeah, there's just a lot—not having the resources to make art—and the time.

[01:13:23.00]

So—so it was really interesting to sort of—because I have Mexican blood to sort of go back and to learn about the realities of women artists over there. That was the first time I really have had a chance, like, to, uh, have that encounter in depth.

[01:13:42.09]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. Well, we've had a chance to discuss like your art practice and process and works and exhibits. And so to conclude this part, I'll bring it back to the beginning as I'm curious to also learn like what rituals do you have to get started in the studio?

[01:14:04.18]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well,—there's a lot of problem solving that happens, like, before I even get to the studio—a lot—before I approach the—. That's what—I'm not really super prolific. There's a lot of thought before I touch anything. And when—I guess one of my rituals is doing a lot of walking in nature, just to sort of clear the air and sort of envelop myself in color and light, all of that. That to me is, like, what I do all the time, whether it's going up to

Bernal Hill or going to the ocean or going to Mount Tam or going to the Bay, whatever.

[01:14:53.14]

And I think that comes from—well, I know a lot of people do that—but I think it comes from my rural background. That's the space for me to go to sort of cleanse my mind or whatever. But the nighttime for me can be really difficult when I'm working on a project because I'm just sort of—I'm tossing and turning and thinking about things and ideas and colors and this and that. And morning—in the morning, early, early morning—is a lot of times when my ideas gel. They come together after a treacherous night or whatever—

[01:15:26.52]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.] —figuring it out:

[01:15:29.11]

What am I going to do? What am I going to say? What color? And then, usually, when I'm ready to approach the paper or what have you—this is something I learned from Lydia Mendoza, my mentor. Before she went out to perform, well, first of all she readied herself; she took care of herself; she slept well; she ate well; she didn't start drinking until twelve—

[01:15:59.05]

[They laugh.]

[01:16:00.59]

—I'm just kidding—but that was part of the ritual taking care of yourself, of knowing that you're going to approach this project, and you want to put your heart and soul into it. So you start preparing. You're always preparing for it. So—but when I'm really ready to approach it, usually, like Lydia, I start up with prayer. In particular, me, I pray to my ancestors to help me, to sort of, um—to move through my project, to guide me, to give me strength, to give me vision, to give me humor, whatever.

[01:16:38.08]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah.

[01:16:39.40]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Okay? I do that. I start that. And sometimes when it feels like the air is very heavy and my thoughts aren't very clear, I will burn Japanese sandalwood incense. That kind of takes the place of fire—fireplaces, campfire, smokes, the fires, the farm worker field fires. It kind of does that. It clears the air for me.

[01:17:04.98]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:17:06.33]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And then, once I really start to approach the work, I'm a Latina, honey. We have to have music.

[01:17:12.32]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:17:13.27]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Okay?

[01:17:13.74]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: What do you listen to?

[01:17:14.84]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I listen to—it depends on my mood. If I'm ready to roll—if I'm ready to roll—it's there; the color's selected; I've worked out the rhythm—then I'll put it—I could put everything from a merengue—whatever—salsa—African music—Brazilian music—you name it, anything with energy—Arabic music—Ethiopian—whatever, whatever—Japanese—*genki*—high spirited music—anything.

[01:17:47.31]

So—or if I'm still kind of working my way through something, the music may be more subdued, maybe, like, something like jazz.

[01:17:56.55]

Or it could be ranchera—listening to Buika—or it could be huayno, from Peru—melancholy, kind of, uh—bluesy, like inward. So I'm kind of still in this sort of mood, not really ready to approach it; I sort of put myself in that space, kind of almost depressive—

[01:18:25.32]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:18:27.12]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —bring myself out of it—to sort of work myself out of it—and the music accompanies me on that journey. So when I'm really popping, the music is popping, too. And then between things, I'll sort of go with the flow of the music and the rhythm of the artwork, and I'll dance around and just, you know, shake it down and sort of do my little stretches and then go back. And then, pretty much, when I'm finished for the day, I back up and—certainly going to have things to take care of here in my home—but, again, the things that I really do to really sort of let go and move on and clear my mind is a walk in nature.

[01:19:14.85]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: It seems like you engage all your senses, right?

[01:19:18.72]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes, I do.

[01:19:19.41]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Hearing, smelling, seeing.

[01:19:23.37]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Right. And conversation with my friends.—Conversation with my friends—a lot of times who accompany me on walks. We're admiring the flowers and then a good meal, yeah, enjoying life.

[01:19:41.74]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow.

[01:19:42.25]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Sometimes when I'm really, really involved, I can't even do that. I'll go for a walk by myself.

[01:19:49.18]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

Stay focused.

[01:19:50.36]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I stay focused. Yeah, that's right.

[01:19:55.39]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Well, and you've had a chance to work with many different artists over the years, and I wanted to touch on a particular space that I think is really important in San Francisco as well. And you worked at Creativity Explored which is a nonprofit that creates an artistic studio space for artists with developmental disabilities, and you worked there for nearly 30 years as an arts educator.

[01:20:20.11]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Yes.

[01:20:20.41]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And what inspired you to work in this artistic space?

[01:20:26.38]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, I had a chance to work part time. Well, I had many grants from the California Art Council that sort of had me working in the schools and senior centers, different things along that line, and also eventually started working in colleges and universities part time—pretty much part time—because my main focus is my art. And I had worked at, I think it was Mills College or whatever. But anyway it didn't matter.

[01:20:53.24]

It was a college, and I just did—

[01:20:56.02]

I wasn't comfortable. I wasn't prepared, and I wasn't comfortable for the competitive nature of it and all of the paperwork that was part of it. I loved the students and all of that; but it was just taking too much time and energy and sort of breaking my spirit. And everything has always been about my work. Whatever job I have is to pay and nurture to keep me going in my art world.

[01:21:21.01]

And this was requiring too much energy for me, because I was not prepared to be an art teacher, period.

[01:21:28.01]

So then this opportunity came up to work part time at Creativity Explored, which I thought would be really quite fascinating to work with that population because they have such a different way of looking at art. And at that point, the Center was really small, and most of the student artists that we had come out of different mental institutions and had pretty much been abandoned by their families.

[01:22:00.49]

So in that regard, they were really free and fresh to create. And we just were there kind of to sort of just move them along whatever direction they wanted to—or if they weren't in the mood, they didn't have to—we were just there for them. So that was wonderful. It was really refreshing to me because when I walked out of there, it felt good.

[01:22:24.11]

It felt like I had done—some, what?—I felt part of the community, to be honest with you. People would go in there, and they didn't know who the staff was and who the artists were. And we loved it. We would just sort of hide away sometimes. And anyway—but it was just a fun place to work. I loved my coworkers, and I loved the clients—artists, they call them artists, okay?

[01:22:48.07]

And—but more than anything, to me, I think it was really inspirational because it was

something that I've always sort of felt was really important for me.

[01:22:58.65]

It's—the process—is more important than the product.—That's, for me—when I started making art and then it was like, Oh, you're supposed to sell it; you're supposed to exhibit it. I'm like, what?

[01:23:13.11]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:23:14.43]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So difficult was the art business—the business of art—kind of is, like, well, nobody taught us anything. So eventually I taught myself with other people, too, not just me. But, uh—so anyway—so for me it was always refreshing to be in this environment where we're more involved with the process. And there was really no pressure or concern to go beyond that. Even in time it changed, just like the artists, the young artists. They had all sort of been mainstreamed into the schools. Their families were—their expectations—were a lot different, and the state was putting a lot of pressure on the program to become like a work program.

[01:23:52.14]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Oh, okay.

[01:23:54.21]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: So then eventually, with time—and I was already getting ready to retire, and the younger generation of teachers were coming in, and the young art artists were coming in, and their families were coming, again, with all these different expectations. So with time, slowly it was moving more, because of all these pressures, more into, uh—the product was becoming much more important, which is understandable. They wanted these young people to have a purpose, to be able to make money, to feel good about themselves, to contribute, and all of that.

[01:24:24.19]

So that was about the time when I was like easing my way out, which was perfect, to allow these—the new generation to sort of take over. And so that's how I made my exit. But yeah, it was a wonderful, wonderful experience; completely wonderful to be in that environment for so many years—30 plus years.

[01:24:45.81]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Right. That's the generation of artists that you worked with. And so what was it about the artists that were there or the space or maybe the magic that was happening that kept you there connected and a part of the community for so long?

[01:25:05.07]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, again, it was a sense of freedom, a sense of openness. The possibilities were endless. I mean, there were some people—I mean, anything could happen in a given day. And all we did was laugh anyway. And music was just present all the time. And we had all levels. We had all levels of—what do they call it?—abilities. And sometimes we had people who were really like—they would stay on a paper—they would stay within the confines of the other paper—but sometimes we would tend—sometimes we would turn around, and one of the artists had painted a table or their lunch or something.

[01:25:49.37]

It was just—it was like really fresh in that regard because anything could happen in terms of creativity. There were no boundaries or lines—without hurting each other or anything like that—but in terms of what surfaces or materials and how you work with them and how you handle them and how you—what you visualize—or didn't, because not everybody was an art—was an artist as such.

[01:26:17.99]

Some people were there because they had no other place to be, but they also added in their own way. They also contributed, whether it was being an audience or whatever—helping or whatever. So it was really quite a fascinating space compared to being at a college and university where everything is already kind of pre-prescribed—for the most part—the expectations are already drawn out. Here, there were—it was wide open.

[01:26:47.03]

And that I found really quite fascinating and that kept me around. And there was no homework. I didn't have to go home—I didn't have to go to all these meetings. I didn't have to do grades. There were no grades because we had no graduates. Yeah.

[01:27:02.60]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: So everyone stayed a part of the community.

[01:27:04.94]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, they didn't have a choice. It was like really like a day program.

[01:27:08.97]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Hmm, I see.

[01:27:10.48]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Initially, that's how it was set up, but fortunately, there was this art program that was created. But there were lots of other day programs where they would go on outings, and they would do other things, but not art, as such—fine art, not just arts-and-craftsy.

[01:27:26.36]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-hmm. And how did working with these artists that had developmental disabilities impact your own artwork? Do you see different ways that it kind of came through as well?

[01:27:36.59]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, yes and no.—I would say—maybe in some ways, that's what sort of allowed me the freedom to feel comfortable trying different materials and ways of working; that if I would have stayed in an environment, let's say, where I had to teach painting or drawing, I probably would have stayed within those parameters—maybe, just in my own art practice—because that was happening or whatever.

[01:28:05.73]

But in this environment, within one huge space, one huge studio, we had teachers, art teachers of different mediums. So there was everything going on from weaving to printmaking to painting to ceramics. There was just a whole range of materials being explored in the given space—again, with everybody, with so many people breaking all the rules. They were doing things they shouldn't be doing with such materials, or whatever.

[01:28:37.98]

So that was very exciting and inspiring to me. And the fact also that because a lot of the artists there had, like, mental health issues—[phone rings]. Sorry about that. Should I stop?

[01:28:59.33]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: I think we're good.

[01:29:01.68]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Had mental—so many of the artists there had—they had to deal with, like, schizophrenia, depression, anxiety—different things like that—would sort of come and

go. And yet, they found peace or would eventually to come back. They struggled with all of that, and yet they came back to continue to create despite all those challenges. And to me, that was always very inspirational.

[01:29:33.23]

So no matter what was going on—the drama within my own life, which we all have to experience when we're in the loss of parents, your own health issues, breaking up or whatever—that they always inspired me that yet, they found the strength to continue. That they found, like I did, too, comfort in creativity. Yes.

[01:29:59.17]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: That it was, like—the art was a kind of a similar way of interacting or coping with the world.

[01:30:06.82]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Therapeutic. Without being called therapeutic there for our program.

[01:30:12.03]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, wow. Well, thank you for sharing what that experience was like. It seems like a very special place.

[01:30:19.41]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: It was. It's still very much in my heart.

[01:30:24.08]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Well, now I wanted to move on to hearing your reflections over—you had a career in the arts for over 50 years as an artist, which is amazing, and just inspired so many people and artists as well. And I wanted to know that if you had to pick five adjectives to describe yourself as an artist or your artwork, what would they be? [Laughs.]

[01:30:52.62]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, I just want to clarify one point.

[01:30:54.95]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Sure.

[01:30:55.52]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Oh, I see it. My career as an artist is more like 75 years, okay, because I really started as a child. I really did, on the road. And 50 years maybe as a professional artist, okay, where I started trying to make a living off of my artwork on a serious level and learning the business of art, et cetera. But I would say 75 years, definitely. Let me take a little moment here. Can I take a little bit?

[01:31:30.19]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Of course.

[01:31:30.91]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I had adjectives written here somewhere. Oh, here it is. We can X all that out, right?

[01:31:39.57]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: I think so.

[01:31:41.81]

[They laugh.]

[01:31:43.05]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Okay. Here you go: adventurous, curious, persistent, resilient, and funny. That's it.

[01:31:56.43]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, and we've covered all of those in the conversations, too.

[01:32:03.12]

[They laugh.]

[01:32:07.20]

Well, I appreciate being corrected because I think, yeah, you describe such powerful experiences, right, as a child making art and how that was such an integral part in you then deciding to pursue it professionally, too. And so it is a 75-year career, and I think it's exciting to get to learn from and hear from someone who's dedicated their entire life—you know, pretty much—to exploring and being true to themselves as an artist.

[01:32:41.04]

And so what do you want people in the future to know about you and your artwork? What would you like the future to think about and reflect on?

[01:32:51.36]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, it's hard to say. I mean, because we all have different paths, so I don't know. I don't really know what I expect people—because it just depends where they're coming from. But in general, I would like for them to think that I was somebody who, in my own way, tried to make it a better world through my art.

[01:33:20.87]

—That's all I can say.

[01:33:22.40]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah. And for you, like, how do you think of, or what do you think are your greatest contributions as an artist and a person?

[01:33:34.36]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: What—the contributions—say that again?

[01:33:37.30]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: What do you think are your greatest contributions as an artist?

[01:33:42.25]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: My greatest contribution?

[01:33:43.69]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Mm-mm.

[01:33:46.06]

—I would imagine is in some ways to create a dialogue between people, being a bridge—particularly like *Sun Mad* representing the farm worker community, that reality—to the bigger world. Yeah.

[01:34:07.47]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: And with a lifetime of making art and in a society where it's challenging to make a career in the arts and to choose to be an artist, what sustained you to

keep going?

[01:34:25.19]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: I guess my love for family and community and my love of Mother Earth. My concern, my hopes, my dreams, my aspirations for a better world, for all of us. And I made a little contribution to that.—Yes, I think in general, those have always kind of kept me going—and the pleasure that creating art gives me. Making art—it gives me so much joy and pleasure when I finish something. The process might have been a bit tortuous, but—

[01:35:01.43]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:35:02.32]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —seriously, to really complete something and get this immense rush through my body, it's almost like a drug, I have to admit. This really—this rush, like a hormonal rush, that flows through my body, and it's nothing like—there's nothing else that can do that for me. It's like a—I don't know how to describe it, but it's just this wonderful feeling of accomplishment, of giving life to something. And you walk away, and it has a life of its own. But nevertheless, you created something, and you step back, and there it is. Sometimes knowing when to stop is a whole other issue, but yeah.

[01:35:44.70]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Wow. And my last question for you is as an oral history for the Smithsonian, your story will be here for generations to come. So what message do you have, or do you want to share, with the younger and the future generations, that we don't know yet, of artists and cultural workers? What would you like to say to them?

[01:36:11.23]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Well, this has been probably the hardest part for me to think about because the rest, I've lived it, and I can sort of give it life because it's already lived. In terms of thinking of the future, this part really gave me a lot of sleepless nights.

[01:36:30.95]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: [Laughs.]

[01:36:32.71]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: And what it boils down to—and I try to make it as simple as I can—I'm not a purist about anything. And I know that everybody, we're all coming from different paths, and we all recognize the importance and the power of art, historically. I mean, we see—we've experienced recently in this day and age the power of art, how it sustained us the COVID-19. You hear about it left and right.

[01:37:09.56]

So we know that the arts has a lot of power, okay, to do so many different things. Commercially, we're bombarded with advertising trying to sell us things, most things that are not even good for our body or for the Earth. And then on a personal level, there's so much satisfaction from self-expression, the power of that, and that's wonderful. But then there's also the social aspect of creating art that I think really is very important.

[01:37:45.62]

It's a connector. In many ways it reminds us that we're all in this together. We're all in this Earth, this Mother Earth, this fragile, beautiful Mother Earth together. And I feel that it would be so wonderful if artists use some of their talents and energy to find a niche, whatever it is, within the issues that are pressing upon us. Whatever it is—climate justice, all the way to immigration, you name it—whales, ocean—I mean there's so much—that people find a niche and be a part of that discussion on whatever level they can.

[01:38:34.90]

Be a part of that dialogue because nothing is going to change unless we speak up. And so my message to them is that—is, um, we only have one Earth, at least right now. One Mother Earth, and we are a part of it. And really, in the Native spirit, the Native vision, in the Native thought is—and it's true—that we humans are made of the same materials as the stars, moon, and the sun. And I think our time here on Earth is very short, and we should look toward the future, the future generations to come. And, again, like I say, help and be a part of that dialogue, that discussion, so that there will be, hopefully, a more just, sustainable, future.

[01:39:38.68]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yeah, wow, well, those are powerful words to end us with.

[01:39:44.35]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Also, life is short; sing, dance, cry, whatever, read poetry, enjoy life! Enjoy life.

[01:39:56.99]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Thank you. Thank you for reminding us of all these different parts that make up a life and for sharing your story with us to give us a sense of how to do that. And so I'm deeply appreciative of you for sharing your story with me, with us in the future. And so I want to thank you, Ester, for all your time.

[01:40:18.62]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Thank you, too, Melissa, and like I said earlier, I'm totally honored and delighted to be a part of this Smithsonian Oral History Project—art history project I guess it is. So—

[01:40:30.86]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: —thank you—

[01:40:31.46]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: —thank you very much, and *viva la vida*.

[01:40:35.15]

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Yes. So I'm going to stop the recording now.

[01:40:38.94]

ESTER HERNÁNDEZ: Okay.

[END OF TRACK AAA_hernan21_2of2_digvid_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]