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Oral history interview with Willie HerroIn,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Willie Herron on February 5, 2000. The interview took place in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Jeffery Rangel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE A (30-minute tape sides)

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, this is an interview with Willie Herrón. Today is February 5th, the year 2000. And we're in City Terrace. The interviewer is Jeff Rangel. And let's get going. Let's start at the beginning. I know we were kind of going through the Folsom project in a moment but we'll get to that phenomenon. Why don't you give us a little background about where you were born, where your family is from, things of that nature, the basics.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, basically, I was born in East Los Angeles, there right around Floral and what's the cross street? Humphries. There was a small church there that was also a hospital. And it's still there. Santa Marta. But it has since been remodeled. But I was born originally in the small hospital that was I guess there since the forties or so.

JEFFREY RANGEL: When was that?

WILLIE HERRON: That was in 1951. And my parents resided in Pico Rivera. We had a small store there in the fifties. A little kind of a liquor store. And my grandparents actually lived on Dozier and Ford which was right there . . . . which was broken up when they built the 710 connecting to the Pomona Freeway. That whole area broke up. And so then I spent a lot of time -- My parents were divorced when I was eight years old so I spent a lot of time with my grandparents. My grandfather, originally from Chihuahua and my grandmother American Indian from northern California. So they had a great deal of influence on me growing up, for the mere reason that they were a very tight, very close knit relationship where I didn't have that. I didn't feel like I belonged with my mom. And I didn't feel like I belonged with my dad. Since they were separated, I kind of felt like I didn't belong anywhere. So my grandparents gave me that stability, gave me the feeling like I had something and I came from some place. And my brothers and sisters were also sort of spread out. But my grandparents in the fifties, there on Dozier and Ford, which was actually like two blocks down from Santa Marta, the hospital where I was born, they actually converted four of their bakery truck garages to illegal residences at that time in the fifties. And then we lived there off and on with aunts and uncles, relatives. We lived in those little garages.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see. So there's a real sense of extended family going on there.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Almost like they created like apartments for their children, my grandparents, for their children to live when they just were having problems with their families. So we lived there for awhile in the early fifties. And then when my mom kind of got on her feet, after the divorce, she started to work in downtown L.A. in a donut shop. And then we were able to afford to move into Maravilla Projects in the late fifties. So I spent maybe a good three or four years going to the elementary school there in Belvidere Park. And then, because my mom was having I guess such a hardship with supporting us, I opted to go and move with my uncle back east who was in the military. So I spent several months in different states traveling with him from station to station and going to different schools, all the way back to Georgia. So I spent about a year and a half with him and in 1962, I won my first art award. And I was in the fifth grade, I believe, when I won my first state art award and that was in Kentucky. As an artist. And that kind of really propelled me into making me feel really like I had something that I should follow through with. And I got a lot of support from people I didn't know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So where was the initial desire to start making art coming from?

WILLIE HERRON: I think it was a desire and a need to communicate but not having anyone to communicate to. So I did a lot of -- I mean, I had extensive sketch books as a kid. I was already like developing sketch books. And so when I did all that traveling for that year and a half with my Uncle George, my book was filled with landscapes, filled with animals and just drawings of things that I saw. I really experienced all the seasons which I hadn't experienced up to the age of --

JEFFREY RANGEL: So powerful.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. I mean, to walk through the snow. To be in heavy rain storms while we're driving in the night. And lightning storms. And then seeing beautiful horizons. I really became, I think, very, very sensitive to nature. And I think that really fulfilled me in a way that I really couldn't explain. I just felt that it was a natural

thing for me to pick up on that and to want to document it. And it was all about everything happening around me, wanting to document it at an early age. I just felt a need for that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I can already see some themes developing in terms of murals and documenting what's going on around you.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. And being so that nature is so huge. I mean, you can't even look one way! Everything is huge. That was my natural instinct, to create huge art, to create huge pieces. And to me, I still could create bigger works. The opportunity doesn't come along to do anything any bigger. So I've worked as big as I've had the opportunity to work, basically.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So were there any teachers in those early years, up to fifth grade, or this is all self taught?

WILLIE HERRON: No. This is all self taught. I basically went - Once I was approaching further out of the edge of the Midwest, getting closer to Georgia and Tennessee and Kentucky, I spent very little time over there but that's where I started to learn foreign languages in elementary school. And I started to become more aware of things outside of my Spanish speaking home or the way I was raised. I wasn't raised speaking English; I was raised speaking Spanish predominantly. So I had this sort of a state of confusion with education because I didn't - I wasn't picking any of that up in school. I wasn't picking up the language I was used to growing up, and I wasn't picking up any of the history that I remember growing up and my grandparents talking to me about things that happened in Mexico. Things that were happening in East L.A. My uncles were all involved in the zoot suit period. My grandparents talked to me about the whole zoot suit period.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you remember what their take was on it?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, their take was that it was basically a political take over and the pachucos got finger pointed basically as the trouble makers. They were the punks of that era and everything that went wrong, they blamed the pachucos. And they were like the scape goats to anything that was happening locally and so were all the pickers from across the border. And I mean, that's still an issue today. Just that now the pachucos dress different. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Exactly. But they're still getting the finger pointed at them.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. A lot of our artists are pachucos in their own right still because it's a lot of that same, similar mentality. We're just different but we get blamed for a lot of things that go wrong.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So, it was your parents' generation that would have been sporting the zoot suits and your grandparents would have been witnessing what was going on.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Because they were the generation above that, because it was their children -- my aunts and uncles -- that were in that zoot suit era, that whole period. So out of that, I really didn't feel like I was getting that kind of information from school. So I felt really -- I mean it contributed to not feeling like I belonged. And so with that type of foundation, I kind of felt like I had to create my own foundation. I had to create my own sense of belonging and begin to create my own history. And it came naturally. It wasn't anything that I studied at that time. Because I mean, I was in fourth, fifth grade and I was already thinking that that was necessary in order for me to feel like I was somebody and not feel like I didn't belong. Because I didn't think the feeling was right, for me to feel like I didn't belong. I wanted to feel like I fit, like I belonged, because I saw myself equal as everyone else. To the point where I would actually say that - I mean, when they would call me "William", when they would call me "Bill", my grandparents and my parents never referred to me as William or Bill. It was always Willie. All the time. It was Willie. Or my grandfather, Guillermo. All the time. So I never really associated with that English, or that other American . . . by the term Bill, by the term of William. And yet, all the schools I went to in elementary school, they always referred to me as that and I always had to tell them, "That's not my name. My name isn't Bill. My name isn't William, even though that's my birth name. Just call me Willie. Just call me Willie." And my grandparents are really the only ones that called me Guillermo. And so all of that . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: So, when you get the recognition too in fifth grade and encouraged you to continue pursuing your interest in that direction.

WILLIE HERRON: Like I felt like I was on the right path because people I didn't know recognized what I was up to. And I felt that they saw inside of me and that's how they supported me, by saying, "His is the best." Then that teacher that I had that was teaching me French, that was teaching me English, that was teaching me geography, that was teaching me math, that was teaching me everything when I was in that one school, and in Kentucky was where I saw all . . . I stood long enough to see all the seasons, I really felt like I crystalized what it was that I needed to do for the rest of my life. And that was to be an artist. Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So how did you get back to L.A.?

WILLIE HERRON: That was an interesting experience because I - my aunt went to pick me up that year, in 1962, when I received the award. She picked me up. She flew to Kentucky and then we took a train back and we came back just as lower class as possible. You know, flat cars, freight trains. We must have taken several trains to get over here and it took us a little over, almost two weeks to get back from back east. And during that time, my aunt had had her purse stolen. So basically, it was my brother and I and my aunt and we all just came to an understanding that we were on our own for food and to make friends and to get people to feed us on the way back on the train. So we basically made friends on different trains and people just bought us food. And I went on my own. My brother went on his own. And my aunt. And then we would come back and meet at the seat and we would - if we had food left over, we would just like share it with each other and talk about who we met and what and, "Well, yeah, they were really nice and they bought me a hamburger" or "They gave me some chips." And just basically free loaded in and out of all the cars while we were coming back for those two weeks.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did that shape the perspective of a fifth grader, an eleven year old or a ten year old?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, again, it kind of was a throw back because here I come from being in the newspaper and getting this award and feeling like great. And then it was almost tragic that then we're coming back with no money and then feeling like this sense of loss, or feeling like this sense of are we going to make it? Are we going to get home to L.A.? It was very traumatic. It was even traumatic for my aunt because she's - not just because she's a woman but she was - I would say she was in her . . . let's see, seventy, eighty, ninety . . . I would say she was just maybe just approaching her twenties. So she didn't have like a whole lot. And she didn't I mean like go with a boyfriend or she wasn't married. So it was like her and then two little kids. And they're her nephews. And she's sent as our guide, protector, to bring us back safely so we wouldn't ride the train alone. So she felt very weakened by that whole instance. And it was very difficult for her too. I could see her sense of stability just like gone. Just totally gone and helpless.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was there any sense that the resourcefulness that you had to develop to get back on the train like that was something that you could rely on in the future?

WILLIE HERRON: Oh, I think it made me very -- At the end I felt another level of accomplishment. I didn't see it as a negative thing because I survived. People took care of me, that I didn't know again. That whole experience, I thought was a very positive one because it allowed me at a young age to really feel like I could go and attack and approach things on my own whenever I felt like I was doing it on my own and nothing else was supporting me. But I felt really strong. I'm going to pull through.

JEFFREY RANGEL: As an artist, you have to rely on that quite a bit.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And I think that's what gave me that little bit of an edge and stuff too. Not just the fact that growing up in Maravilla Projects. I mean there was always bullets flying and hitting my wall at night.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So it was pretty hot at Maravilla at that time.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. In that time there was a lot of pachucos and a lot of gang violence and it was heavy. I remember it. The fifties were pretty rebellious, a pretty rebellious period, around that time. And it was preceding the whole zoot suit thing which I think really contributed to a lot of anxiety, to a lot of frustration, a lot of blaming. And it just like boom, it was very destructive for us as a people, that right away put us on like we had to defend ourselves on every level, every moment. We seemed like we always had to be on guard.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So were you looking up to these pachuco characters? Were you fearful of them? Were you indifferent? You're kind of centered in your creative imagination at that point? How was that working into the equation?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think since most of my uncles and some of them being even my babysitter at times, I just felt that they were very powerful men. They represented a strength and a power I think that to a certain degree I looked up to. But from another perspective, I had really no artist role models to fall under. No guidance in terms of intellect. In terms of not having to relate to a physical persona to get through. I wanted to relate, combine the physical personal, combine the machismo with intellect, with intelligence, with craftsmanship, with creating works that people would just look at and their jaws would just drop open, and "Wow! This is like incredible work!" But at the same time have the strength and the power that my uncles portrayed as men. And as being influential men in my life as well.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How about the music? The sense of style, the dress, the language? I mean, all of these aspects of pachuco culture, I think, have been referenced as real contributions, real sort of foundational aspects of what was later coined as Chicano aesthetic.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: As you're coming up, are those cadences in the language, the style in the dress, maybe the

tattoo work that's being done, whatever, registering with you as sort of a creative source as well?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. I think like the creative source is the stories my grandfather told me. The creative source, the altars I remember in my grandparents' home. The altar in the bakery, growing up as a baker, and hearing the rosary every night. That was very influential. My uncles had a tremendous sense of style that I was only exposed to that in my little circle of my family. They had a tremendous - I mean, their shoes were always spit-shined. And I had to learn how to spit-shine shoes. That was part of . . . that's part of my culture. Learning how to shine a pair of shoes to me was like if you could do, you were like you were on your way to having abilities and skills as to be able to spit-shine a pair of shoes like they're patent leather. You're a bad dude. [laughs] To spit-shine a pair of shoes. So, even to that small detail, that aided me and assisted me in becoming the artist that I am. Their sense of style, their type of ties they used. The way they wore their suits, big and huge and baggy. The way they did their haircuts with the side burns. All of that. My uncles had a great sense of style. And they were very handsome men. It wasn't like sense of style and then they weren't that great. They were complete packages. And I had that to reference. So to me, it didn't seem to me like it was anything that was negative. It seemed like, "It's cool." "That's cool." They've got girls and they've got babes hanging out with them, they're doing something right. As a man, as a boy, I mean, you relate to those kinds of things.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, pick up on them.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What about your brothers and sisters?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, my brothers probably leaned more towards following my uncles' footsteps in the sense that they were involved in big social groups of men. They were involved in what today we call gangs. You know, they were involved in those type of groups. And unfortunately, you have those that had a tendency to give the groups in the gangs a bad name because they would either get drunk, too much alcohol or whatever and then they'd start plato. Then they'd get on the revenge thing. And then somebody killed somebody. And then there's a drive-by. Well, it was so-and-so and so-and-so. They drunk. Well, let's go get them. So I grew up with all of that too. But it wasn't that far from what I had already experienced with my uncles except my uncles seem to have this level of class that came out of the forties and fifties that then my brothers, kind of being more modern in the seventies and in the early eighties, their pachugismo was different. I didn't feel that sense of classiness that I got from my uncles. And I think it was because of the attire, the dress. They weren't in suits.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Just the idea that if you carry yourself in a different way.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, it's a very proud, very -- you hold your chest out. Your posture's really . . . I mean, it's that whole attitude. It's a different attitude. And my brothers had a little bit of a different attitude in that sense because their pants, when they were slick, they were still baggy. But they had to drag a little in the bag and get shredded. Their shoes weren't -- no longer they were into the polishing. They were more rounded and not so pointed to accentuate the spit shine. They evolved into a different, more matte, more flat, no glitter, no shininess. Like that part of it was - You were going to a different fashion era. So I had a tendency to steer away from that away from that influence where

JEFFREY RANGEL: Aesthetically . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, it didn't appeal to me. Where I wanted to grasp on to that glamour, that Hollywood, that thing that to me . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Almost larger than life.

WILLIE HERRON: . . . registered like the ultimate of beauty was for you to be chiseled and to have this physical persona that was powerful and illuminating. And to me it was that more of a pachuco style, more of that forties and fifties type of dress. So I had a tendency to really concentrate more with my brothers going really concentrate more with my brothers going into the gang sort of attire and influences. I had a tendency to even become removed from that and the art and the music flourished more inside of me. But yet, I lived with my brothers and I partied with them. But I wore a top hat, a red jacket with tails with glitter on my pants and platforms! And they were -- I mean, I was a chavala. Basically that's what they used to call me, man. But I accepted it because I used to accept it, but correct them. And just say, "No, I'm not a chavala. I'm just an artist." And pretty soon, they defended me. Pretty soon they started to defend me. Whenever any home boy from wherever at any of the parties would come out and they would like start to pick on me, the big hard dudes would just stand right there and just say, "You're going to go through me if you're going to hassle with this dude."

JEFFREY RANGEL: What's that about?

WILLIE HERRON: I guess it was about just protecting me and feeling like I don't have to defend myself. I don't

have to explain myself. And that influenced me in my early years. Then I felt like I owed something to them. And so I had this need, like I really had to create art and I had to create work that represented them, that they could identify with. Not so much supporting them and being like them and backing them up, but giving them a voice, giving them a place to say what they felt was important and to do what they felt was important. So that's why I was compelled in my early works in the early seventies to incorporate graffiti, was because my experiences with my brothers and their friends defending me on all levels. And me feeling a sense of obligation to represent them.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And this was never anything spoken? You know, like, "You know, Willie, we're going to back you up in these situations but we want to see ourselves in your work."

WILLIE HERRON: Oh, no. That was my decision.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It was all just understood.

WILLIE HERRON: It was like showing a minimal on my part, very minimal level of gratitude. And that's why a lot of my early work, since it doesn't involve traditional commissions, a committee, submit a design - all of these things that later became almost threatening and choking for a muralist, in my opinion, that whole perspective of mural painting really confined our real voice. It confined us because then we had to deal with other people that had to approve what it was that we were doing. Where my earlier works, what sets them apart is that I didn't need approval and I didn't need permission from anyone because I wasn't being paid. So, to me, I was allowed the freedom, the total freedom

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . to just go for it.

WILLIE HERRON: . . . to just communicate how I wanted to communicate and my whole level of perspective was to communicate to the barrios, communicate to the gangs and communicate to the people that frequent the thoroughfares that were populated by these gangs and by this life style.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And what are you trying to communicate in that early stage?

WILLIE HERRON: I was influenced a lot by negative circumstances and negative incidences where I felt compelled and inclined - and I think a lot of it had to do with traveling with my uncle and being back east, winning the award, and fulfilling a more psychological attitude, I felt like I had to use that psychological peace of mind and combine it with the violence, with that urgent radical attitude that was out on the streets that I was experiencing with my brothers and their friends and the communities that I had to - When my brother was actually stabbed and almost killed by a rival gang, something crystalized and snapped inside of me that really allowed me, within those twelve hours that I worked on that mural - "The Wall That Cracked Open"? One of my earlier works - something crystalized inside of me to tell me that this was a time to create this work of art that would be that blend of the intellect, the blend of vision that could somehow in a physical state take those ideas and try and puzzle them together to create an image that could possibly represent those two levels.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How does the landscape sensibility, that real recognition of beauty and the vastness, the grandeur that you're experiencing as you're driving across country, how does that get worked into "The Wall That Cracked"?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, the way that I felt that it worked in was because, if you notice, the main thrust of "The Wall That Cracked Open" takes on the form of a tree. It has a wide, almost pyramidal shape from the floor, like a tree trunk, like a base of a tree. It's wide at the bottom. And then it narrows out and as it . . .

[END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

BEGIN SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE B

JEFFREY RANGEL: Let me ask that again, about how you experienced in Kentucky in terms of nature and the scale, I guess, that grandeur that you saw there was work in the mural. You mentioned something about the shape?

WILLIE HERRON: Right. The main shape over all, if you take away the symbolism and you take away the images within that shape, the basic shape of the wall is a very vertical wall. And most of the objects that I recall traveling with my uncle across all these different landscapes either seemed to come to a point, protruding from the land going towards the sky, or had to be some sort of tree like or some sort of cactus like, but something extended from the ground up. And so "The Wall That Cracked Open", the main shape of it sort of resembles the shape of a tree where it's broader at the base like a tree, tree base, and it shapes into a tree trunk that then runs branches out. And then at the top, almost umbrellas like the foliage of a tree. So with that basic shape, I decided to then try and make it feel like once it got to the top that it blended into the sky, which is what you see when you look at the mural. Is the City Terrace sky line. So at the top, the top opens up and becomes part of the

sky. The only thing that's different is the sky is like a crimson red. It's a red sky rather than a blue sky. And combining a lot of the resources also, which plays a great role in a lot of my earlier works because I was, like Harry puts it, penniless, I only used, but creatively I used, the resources available. So I had a very limited palette that night available to me without then involving reality and collecting money, going to the store, buying paints, designing colors. I mean that doesn't play a role in this mural at all, which plays a role in most other traditional approaches to mural painting.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Let's pause here for a second and actually get that real story about how that mural came to be. I feel like there's so many versions out there. I've read them, I've heard them. It'd be nice to have it saved for prosperity.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think the basic story begins with me returning close to midnight from a party over in East L.A. And I recall coming from being with Patssi and Gronk and Harry that evening. I came home and I saw - I was driving actually down the alley where "The Cracked Wall" is located. I was driving down and I passed that wall, because that wall is several feet from where I was living, where my mom still lives today, just at the end of the alley. So as I was driving, I noticed my brother Val, who's a year younger than I, walking towards me. So I stopped. I pulled over a little bit on the alley and I stopped. And he came up to the window. And I noticed that his t-shirt had blood on it. And I says, "What's up, Val? What happened?" And he just says, "Will," he says, "They got John. He's right there behind the bakery. They got John." He says, "They jumped him and he's messed up. I don't know if he's going to pull through."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Who's they?

WILLIE HERRON: Apparently it was a rival gang from across the freeway, the Big Hazard. To be specific. Which leads to another interesting approach on my part which we'll get to right now. So then, once when my brother said that, I went ahead and just put my vehicle in park right there where I was at. I just basically parked my car right there. And walked up and then I saw my brother just laying on the ground, right there at the foot of those stairs where "The Cracked Wall" is now painted. And I noticed that he had several ice pick wounds in his neck. He didn't have a t-shirt on and he had ice pick wounds on his chest. And he was just barely breathing. So my brother said that he had already called the ambulance. So my brother and I picked my younger brother, John, up and we put him in my car. I had a four door '62 Chevy. So we popped open the back door and we put him in the back of the car, because I said, "I'm not going to let him lay here in the stone cold street." It was a driveway, you know. I said, "No. If John's going to go, I want him to be comfortable. I want him to be warm." So we got him a blanket; laid him in the back of the car and waited for the ambulance to come. And I pulled the car in front of my mom's house where we all lived. So that was right there on Miller, right in front of "The Plumed Serpent". And that mural hadn't been painted yet. Oh no. In fact, I'm sorry. It had been painted. Yeah, "The Plumed Serpent" was already painted because "The Cracked Wall" I painted second. So "The Plumed Serpent" was painted but we parked like right around the turn from "The Plumed Serpent" and waited for the ambulance to come. So when the ambulance got there, I went - Since I was the oldest at that time. I was nineteen. I went and I got in the ambulance and I rode with my brother and the paramedics to the General Hospital. And on my way, I started to sketch. I had my sketch pad with me. I know it sounds corny and all that. I'm an artist and I carry a sketch pad around. But I flipped it open and just started to sketch and stuff. And I was really influenced by - all my senses were like on high gear and they were like this huge vacuum just sucking everything in. The sound of my brother breathing out loud. I would turn back and see him with the mask and still see him without the shirt and stuff. I just saw all these little holes. And there was like membrane coming out of these little holes that were like sort of - without getting real graphic - I could see in the little membranes like the little bit of blood collected in them. But he wasn't like bleeding profusely. But I could see his wounds. I could see his wounds. So when we passed the church, you know I was raised Catholic. Did my first communion, my confirmation, all of that. Went to church on Sundays a lot with my parents and all the holidays. So I did the sign of the cross like we always did when you passed the front of the church. So then that led me to like sketch some other idea passing the church. And as I traveled with the sirens and going through red lights and it's a weird experience. I don't know if you've ever been in a car driving at high speed and you just go through red lights. It's an interesting experience. So being in the ambulance, I mean, like it was all these experiences were like just tumbling through me. That I got to the hospital. I basically was the only one that could give any kind of an authority for them to treat him even though I wasn't twenty-one. I still signed what I could sign and just say, "You have to give him treatment. He's dying."

JEFFREY RANGEL: So you went to County General?

WILLIE HERRON: So I went to County General. He was there. And once I saw they were going to take care of him, then I decided to walk home. So from the County General, I walked all the way back to City Terrace. So that took me a little bit, walking. And as I was walking, I was collecting all my ideas. I started to envision, I know, essences of street performing. Like all these ideas, painting the mural, doing paintings that really - Like I said, I really crystallized everything that had been going through me prior to that incident that that was another level that propelled me into my career because of that incident and painting "The Cracked Wall," I then thought that I should sacrifice something of myself. And that evening, when I got home, I collected some cans of paint in the

garage, some black and some brown, some red, a little bit of green. And they were all oil based enamels, which I wouldn't have painted a mural in oil based enamels to begin with because I was allergic to oil based paint. And I had already had experiences trying to paint with it and I just reacted. My eye, ear, nose and throat kind of thing did a major reaction. So it wasn't anything that I was comfortable with painting but that's all I had available to me. And I said a few prayers and like Van Gogh and like other artists that do something physically to themselves to put themselves on a plateau that allows them to get to the next step, or the next level of their work, I shaved - I decided to shave my eyebrows because I didn't feel like taking something away from me that then would have to put me in the hospital, or like cut off a hand or chop off a finger or whatever. I felt that I could do something to my self that I wouldn't do to myself anyway and that was shave my eyebrows off. And I thought about the whole idea of being humiliated by being called something other than what I was. I knew I was a man. I knew it would probably make me look and come across more feminine because I remembered the cholas and a lot of the girls growing up and some of my aunts shaving their eyebrows off and penciling in their . . . And having that look of no eyebrows, not the natural eyebrows but the lined in. And so that smoothness over the eyes to me was a very feminine thing. And so that humiliation and putting myself in a humiliating way re-presenting myself to society physically was not the machismo uncles with the suits and the zoot suits. It was like a total opposite. And I felt that I would have to deal with that humiliation and deal with that explanation for months to come. So I told God, "Save my son and I'll shave my eyebrows and I'll deal with humiliation for the next eight months." I'll deal with it! That was the deal. I'll deal with humiliation but save my brother. So I did that that night and went over maybe, it was already close to two o'clock in the morning. Some of the guys were still hanging around with my brother when I got home. When I did this little ritual thing and gathered the paints, I was in my studio in the garage away from my brother and his friends talking about, "Well, I'm going to get so-and-so. And it was so-and-so from Big Hazard. And I know that vata. And vato va a machar" and all this vocabulary that was going on. And I just totally separated myself from all of that because I knew that they had to vent their frustration their way. And I wasn't going to vent that way. I wasn't going to vent with violence. I wasn't going to vent in a physical way that they vent. I wanted to vent, tap into the intellect. To a way that twenty, thirty years from now, that work of art is a documentation of that incident which was typical to barrios all over the world. To me it seemed like a very typical issue. And I had already lived through a lot of those. But it was never my own brother. It was never my own flesh and blood. That it took that to crystalize in my head to say, "You've got to paint a piece that is the epitome that symbolizes this incident which is a common incident. We have to come out of this." So I decided to do "The Wall That Cracked Open" and turned it into the idea of breaking down everything that has already been established, everything that has always been has to be broken down. It has to be bulldozed. It has to come down. And you have to rebuild something new. So I decided to make it the wall cracking open and breaking open, the negative part of the wall cracking open forming this tree that represents life, and it could be also a dead tree. I didn't know at the time whether I was creating a dead tree or a tree that was going to spring life. So with that shape, I filled in the tree like you would carve a tree because the prior mural, "The Plumed Serpent," if you noticed the left side of it has a tree again. And the tree is carved and painted like the cave paintings from ancient times, the beginning of man. I felt that that was my connection to creating something, including something that was organic that was of the earth and tree representing the life, representing off shoots of generations where we mix with each other and it becomes part of the tree. I felt that that was very symbolic, a very symbolic shape that I included in both of those murals . . . "The Plumed Serpent" and "The Wall that Cracked Open". And then including my grandmother holding on to the middle of the tree with her faith, with her sincerity of wanting things and hoping that things improve, hoping that things get better. I wanted to show that the first generation. I wanted to include my grandparents in there somewhere because of the strength and stability that they gave me growing up and that I still felt that I was receiving from them. Because I did get permission from my grandparents to paint that mural that night. My grandfather was at the bakery making bread and so was my aunt. And they were both emotionally moved by the whole incident that they said, "Si, go ahead, 'mijo, paint your mural.'" And they allowed me that time and that space to do it. So by the crack of dawn when the sun was coming out, I no longer needed a couple of the guys holding flashlights during the night and I was at the top of the ladder finishing it up, putting the final details ten, eleven hours later. I finished it. And at the top is this person that sort of comes out of the tree and he just sort of looks totally diseased and totally plagued and his tongue's hanging out and it's like he's exhausted and he's tired but it is in the form of a man. And he's diseased and plagued by everything that has produced him that he almost lacks regurgitation. He almost lacks something coming out of his mouth. It's dry. There's nothing there to come out any more. And to me, it was the best I could do in that amount of time while I had everything just flowing through me and that was my best attempt at producing this work that was inspired by all of this prior to 1972, which really put me under the microscope at that time. I think "The Cracked Wall" put me under the microscope because at that time there was throughout the community this anti-graffiti which is still common today. This whole anti-graffiti attitude was major. And the way that I felt that I was communicating to the home boys, communicating to that life style that my brothers were involved in and that influenced me in the first place to create "The Wall That Cracked Open" was that incorporating the graffiti and the graffiti becoming an integral part of the work of art like "The Plumed Serpent" also incorporated graffiti. I was being criticized by the art world. I was being criticized by other artists for the most part for incorporating graffiti rather than approaching muralism and approaching graffiti by using murals as a replacement and getting rid of the graffiti. That was the early murals from the early seventies, the late sixties where artists were dealing with graffiti and were being hired in the early seventies to



do murals was so that they could get rid of and replace the graffiti. And I did not do that with my murals. I did the total opposite. I embraced graffiti and graffiti became part of my work because I respected the voice of the community. And I added to their voice. I didn't get rid of their voice and say, "My voice is superior." Again, it's the image that my uncles portrayed, that machismo, that street savvy with the intellect wanting to fuse rather than saying, "I'm better than this" or "You're better than that. And we're separate."

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's interesting, Willie, because I think the way that -- There seems to continue to be a lot of controversy about graffiti, not only as an eyesore or a system of signification for youth and stuff like that but in terms of Chicano aesthetics, Chicano art aesthetics. And literature says that graffiti was one of the sources in which artists of your generation were drawing from and inspired their work that was incorporated into murals. And so on the one hand, there's this drive to cover it up with murals, to wipe it away. On the other hand, there is a recognition in it and evaluation of it where it's actually incorporated into the art work. In a different way that maybe it's replicated into art work rather than incorporated the way that you're talking about.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I wonder how all that's co-existing at the same time in your circle of artists.

WILLIE HERRON: The comment that comes to mind with what you just said right now is -- And I have a lot of respect for a lot of artists that were doing works before I came along and continue to do works but I don't feel that compelled when I view a work of art that's a piece of canvas that was done in an enclosed controlled environment and it incorporates that street savvy. I have a totally different perspective of it than the graffiti that is the real graffiti that was really painted by the real people it represents and most of them aren't artists in a traditional sense. They're not the type of artist that can show at MOCA, that can show at LATC or at the University or at the museums. And then in the middle seventies, you had the Los Four exhibit where they incorporated graffiti in almost every single one of their pieces. It was very difficult for me at that time to look at it and for me to accept it as the way that I accepted the existing graffiti that was already part of the landscape. Because it was created consciously for the purpose of exhibition. And that approach just made it very difficult for me that when I attended along with Gronk and Harry and Patssi and they, at that time, I feel strong that they agreed with me. They agreed with that idea which really I thank Los Four for that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How so?

WILLIE HERRON: Because they made me realize what I didn't want to do. I didn't want to end up from "The Cracked Wall," "The Plumed Serpent" and now I'm doing graffiti incorporated paintings hanging at the museum. They did what I -- it crystalized in my head that I definitely don't want to do that. I don't want to go there. I don't want my work to end up that way. That it was okay because they had degrees. They went to college, universities and they had their degrees. That's fine. There's a place for their interpretation and their reasoning for that having a purpose. But I didn't want to go there. I didn't want to be in that circle in that realm. So we costumed to the max. We painted our faces. We hung things from our bodies. And we went to that exhibit like we were going to a costume party or like we were going trick or treating. And we just went like wanting people to see some part of Chicano art that still didn't exist, that wasn't in that show that we felt had to be in that show. So we attended that exhibit, the opening, but we were moving works of art. That then Asco became integrated into the Los Four opening. We performed without even performing. It was there at the L.A. County Museum.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What was the reception of you guys?

WILLIE HERRON: Oh, people just like had the same similar reaction like they did on the streets when we did a lot of our performances. They had some funny comment to make because they thought that we were funny. It wasn't like . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: They thought of it as humor.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. Humor rather than we were seriously trying to make a statement about Chicano and Chicano art, Chicanismo and where it was headed with the exhibition of graffiti at the museum. And so it wasn't really putting down Los Four because we attended their opening in support of them, but like I said, for me, it crystalized that I'll never do a graffiti painting because Los Four -- that's what they do. So I won't do that. That's for them to do. But prior to that I had done a painting in high school, prior to "The Plumed Serpent" and "The Cracked Wall," which showed my aunts and my uncles and one of my cousins in the alley way posing in front of the back of a bakery truck and the wall behind the bakery, which I took from photographs which was on Ford and Brooklyn at the time before the freeway was built, had graffiti. And I incorporated graffiti and incorporated City Terrace graffiti into that painting in 1971. So . . . and then I thought to myself at that time that I could easily be persuaded to go into that direction. But when I went to Los Four exhibit I just said, "This is definitely not what I want to do." So in a way it helped me.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It was more bookish, it was more contrived in a sense?

WILLIE HERRON: It just seemed contrived because they -- I did not put them on the same plateau with the Batos Locos that dropped out of high school that were just hanging out and they were doing their own thing and that were plaqueandoing. And yet, you got professors and artists with degrees emulating that. And putting them on canvas. And they were for sale! So, all of those things are important but . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [There was a brief interlude there due to a power shortage.] You were talking about - I hadn't yet asked the two questions about your relationship to Almaraz.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: and the way that you guys showed together. And I think it might also be helpful to go back a step or two before that and talk about the sort of different layers of interpretation of that show and sort of what it meant for the movement at that time. What Asco was doing in terms of performance there and stuff of that nature.

WILLIE HERRON: Okay. Well, when we decided to attend the Asco -- Do you have it on like a response because I hear a vibration. Maybe it's the head phones coming through. There's a little bit of a feedback.

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, that's all right.

WILLIE HERRON: That's all right? Okay. So, the whole idea when we decided to attend the L.A. County Museum exhibit of Los Four, we decided that we would actually dress up and just go like in costume to add to the exhibition, to add ourselves to the Chicano expression. The costumes - Well, we just like put stuff on ourselves. We had all these different layers of like feathers and we painted our faces. Gronk was like wearing like leopard, like a leopard shirt. We all wore platforms. I think Gronk had a pair of satin bell bottom pants. It was just our regular flamboyant

JEFFREY RANGEL: Far out!

WILLIE HERRON: Far out. Yeah. I think I wore gloves, like glittered gloves with the finger tips cut off, pre-Michael Jackson, so to speak. But wore platforms as well. But, I think -- There's . . . I have some super eight footage of us preparing for that exhibition. And we're putting on our make up. In fact, I think there's one really good shot of Patssi's already in costume and she's painting my face blue. And I'm already dressed but I'm sitting and she's like putting the make up on my face. Like a bluish purple.

JEFFREY RANGEL: They made a film of that opening too.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. So if they --

JEFFREY RANGEL: Are you guys captured in it?

WILLIE HERRON: I've never seen it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I haven't either.

WILLIE HERRON: I've never seen it. So somebody must have a copy of it somewhere. But for me, I have an admiration for all those artists that were in that exhibition. I think the critics kind of put them negatively in a certain perspective and I think they were also very well received for the most part. It was very influential, I think, in the sense that it was a positive thing for Chicanos to be exhibited. Somehow we felt sort of accepted now by the art world because they allowed Chicanos to exhibit at this museum that everybody felt it was a major opportunity. So with that, I think their level of education really, I think, was a determining factor. Or at least it was one of the considering factors for allowing them to go in there and have this exhibition.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That reminds me of the other question that I wanted to ask. In terms of education, there's the -- well, on the one hand, they had gone to their respective art schools and achieved their degrees and stuff like that. My interviews with Gronk and with Harry, those two in particular, Patssi to a different extent, all indicate a real like an ideological perspective. One that's aware of art history, very informed by that. But in taking it in a direction not just sort of the Mexican masters or sort of devious roots of reconnecting with the Meso-American past and what not, but really drawing on futurism, or Dadaism or surrealism. And the performance sort of glamor rock thing that's happening at that time.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So it's not as if Asco's work isn't ideologically driven in some sense, but that maybe the sources are less identifiable than some of the other sort of camps at that time. It was almost like you're developing a different audience, or you have a different audience, or maybe a broader audience. I'm not sure really what the question is. But in terms of distinguishing Asco and Los Four' education, it seems like your work

is very much informed by art history.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Well, I think that . . . .

END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE A

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, this is Tape 2, Side A, continuing with Willie Herrón, February 5, 2000. Okay, go ahead.

WILLIE HERRON: Let's see. Where were we at?

JEFFREY RANGEL: About the education.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Well, I think that the opportunity for the Los Four exhibit to be at the museum really fulfilled, I think, quite a bit of time. It seemed like it fulfilled this idea that this certain type of art work was being considered possibly at that time as like being representative, let's say, of a generation, representative of . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Which is always a danger.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's a futile exercise in a lot of respects.

WILLIE HERRON: So I think with that overview, I felt that - and I'm sure that some of the Asco members felt similar at that time, that that's why it was something we were going to explore. We were going to continue to try and combat the stereotype. And not to say Los Four exhibit seemed to solidify stereotypicalism that seemed to be taking over this whole Chicano movement, but the whole idea that it seemed to be -- like we were talking earlier, it seemed to have totally, totally inflated the balloon to have no more room for air. That there didn't seem like there was any room to then have like say maybe Asco also produce an exhibit at the museum, but for it to be an Asco show. But it also to be parallel and accepted parallel in the field of art like Los Four's work was being accepted as the representation of Chicano art. Where we were exploring a different plateau and now we can say there's many plateaus in Chicano art. And we've all proved that there are many plateaus. But at that time, . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: At that time . . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Un-uh [no]. I think the everyone, the critics and everyone really felt that this was the epitome of Chicano art. And that's why I think that it was so positively influential, was because we didn't feel that it totally represented Chicano art, I mean, on all levels.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Let's go back a minute and talk about the way that you guys came together to form Asco, the sort of narrative behind that. And that'll maybe get us up to '74 when that show is taking place.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Well, I think there was like an informal gathering of how we came together. And there was probably other times that we became more, I would say, more focused as a group. We sort of off and on became involved with Harry in the early years, in the early seventies, kind of as the nucleus of getting us together with the working of the magazine Regeneración. He at one point got in touch with Gronk to do so work for the magazine. At one point got in touch with me to do some work for the magazine. And at one point got in touch with Patssi and so on and so forth. But I think that it wasn't until we actually all started to work together, get together like in my garage to work on issues as a group that then we became more formally a collective, producing works collectively, where we were then influencing each other. No longer, "Well, you've got these three pages, these five spaces, execute them and then I'll pick them up later." That was kind of in the beginning, that's sort of how it was. We weren't all together. We just didn't start off working on one issue and we were all in the same room together. We kind of, through Harry, we were indirectly coming together in an indirect way.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I've seen some of the early issues, some of the issues that you guys worked on. And the styles are amazingly similar.

WILLIE HERRON: M-hm.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And I'm not sure if you guys were working together at that point. But even some of the announcements, show announcements like the one I showed you earlier, I have a hard time distinguishing who's who.

WILLIE HERRON: Right, who's part was what.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

WILLIE HERRON: I think because primarily we worked in a similar medium to say the pen and ink and the rapidograph approach to expressing ourselves was the common thread. But the way we executed our imagery, I think, there was some similarities, where sometimes it was very easy to say, "Okay, let's do a drawing together." And for us to work on a drawing together made sense because our styles weren't so different that, like you're saying, it's hard sometimes to tell where Gronk left off and where I started off and maybe where Harry left off and Gronk started or where Patssi left off and I started. Some times it's hard to tell. But, that I think, when we started to become bored with staying separate and isolated from influencing each other, that's when we truly started to integrate our work together and truly become influenced by each other and not because, "Oh, I see, this Almaraz mural and I like this little section so in my mural, I'm going to do something that's kind of similar because I like that." But it was more like Almaraz calling me and saying, "Help me paint this section right here." And then me going and actually painting that section with him. There's really a difference between how we started off as a group and then how we evolved into actually working on the same pieces together, even though in the beginning when we were working separately, it seemed like we were influencing each other. We probably were but not the same way as when we would actually draw on the same drawing. And I think we did a lot of that. Gronk and I worked a lot together. Patssi and I worked on art works together. Harry. All of us, we all painted together. We all drew together. And it was a completely different approach and it wasn't traditional in that sense for four artists to work on one piece. And to me, that was what was made it Chicano. Was the idea that . . . like when I did the mural, the concept for the mural for the World Cup, was the way the players are from different countries, different ideas, different nationalities and different people work together to achieve one goal. We felt that we were symbolizing Chicanos working together to achieve one goal. And that's by working on the same work of art. There was a design by that .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Including performances.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. Including performance, it's like we were telling the world, Chicanos have to get together. We have to work together. We have to respect each other's differences but we have to fuse together and become this integrated puzzle that's complex. And you have all these pieces but they all create . . . Ahora los Veras, the Mexicano drawing where there's like Gronk does five faces, I do three, he does some of the arms, I do some of the fingers. But it's all of us together creating the finished piece. So to me there was that symbolism without us being totally conscious of it. [screaming child in back ground] That's good, man. [chuckles] How old is that guy? Give him a microphone! It's just like, "Oh, is that me?!"

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's really interesting that you should say that. One of the things I wanted to ask you about that came up in the interview with Harry and at one point in my interview with Harry, Gronk happened to stop by the cafe where it became a joint interview. But Harry was saying that his sense of the way that Asco has been talked about is that it seems like people had made you guys out to be more cohesive than you actually were. He said rather it being a collective or a group per se, his word was it was more of a breeder reactor. It was just like - We'd get together. There was no like formal plan of what we were going to do. It was just four people coming together. And there was a lot of spontaneity in it. There was a lot of - no sort of rules or whatever. Very spontaneous is what he really emphasized that aspect. So it seems to have a different spin on what I'm hearing from you right now

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: in terms of a real unit, so to speak.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I mean, that . . . to me, that is the concept, I think of grupos. That's why Chicano grupos were Chicano grupos. Because they fed off of each other. What Harry was saying was like, I mean, that's really obvious but the way I interpret working together, working on pieces together, was to represent our unity, like the way we feel that our race should unite and work together. That, to me, in a round about way, that's what we were doing without really talking about it. We were really doing that. And I really felt compelled by everything that was negative happening while we were all struggling individually to try and be something, we became stronger, we became more powerful by being a group and being together the time that we were together. And that propelled each one of us to sort of stand on each other and when one would get the recognition then we were all automatically included. So in a sense, we were helping each other build something and if we would have done it individually, maybe it would have happened, maybe it wouldn't have. But I know it would have taken longer.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

WILLIE HERRON: And because we were together, we did everything together, it happened faster and we all gained recognition by one getting recognition over the other, bringing the other one along. And that's why Gronk and I - When I would get some mural commissions, they would contact me, I'd call Gronk. Gronk, you're a great artist too. Help me work on this and you'll get some mileage out of it too. So on and so forth.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is that what happened with the black and white mural?

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Yeah. Felix contacted me and I called Gronk one night and just said, "Hey, they asked me go do a mural at the housing projects and I lived there in the Estrada Courts." That was one of the other housing projects. From Maravilla Projects, we moved over to Estrada Courts. And that was also in the early sixties when I had just gotten back from Kentucky. So when Felix approached me - and that was in early 1973 -- he asked me to do a mural there. And so then I called Gronk and I just said, "Gronk, why don't - They'll give us all this paint. We'll split the paint fifty-fifty and let's just do it in black and white. This way you have all the colors to work on your paintings and I'll have colors to work on my paintings and we'll only use black and white. And that's what we'll be paid." That's like paying ourselves. We keep the colors for our paintings and we'll do the mural in black and white. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, the mural is quite a statement. And being in black and white is quite a statement.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And I think we were conscious at that time that that would be unusual in the age of color televisions, in the age of color just being so powerful, super graphics and all that. We just said it would be cool to do the mural absence of all color.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And I think it adds to the sort of cinematic quality.

WILLIE HERRON: and the surrealism of it as well. Yeah. Surreal even meaning like it almost like reals from a film even. And the way we were kind of using a lot of photography as our source of reference was also interesting because at that time we weren't aware of any artist group or any muralists or any painters for that matter that were of Chicano identity doing photo-realism in black and white. That was also pretty different.

JEFFREY RANGEL: John was going to happen upon that later.

WILLIE HERRON: At that time, he wasn't . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . graphite sketching which was more photo-realism.

WILLIE HERRON: In '73. Yeah, he was doing photo-realistic stuff but not murals. Not photo realistic murals. They were in color. But in black and white, that sort of set that one apart. And also because there wasn't yet in '73 a mural that was relative to the Moratorium. That was also a good reason to do it that way and to do it in black and white, because the magazines that we were referencing . . . La Causa, La Raza . . . they didn't have that much money so they didn't print their photos in color. So why should we reinterpret the photos in color if we were copying the photos and the photos originated in black and white? So some of the images came from there. When we originally thought we would create a class photograph. Class meaning like when you've got the twenty-five students, you get this one black and white print and they're all there. And then there's the teacher and the school, right? So we would do the mural with that concept. All these little squares, and each square we'd have different people that were significant to the Chicano movement. But then it evolved into just being more just freer. We sort of got rid of that concept but we still kept the three by three frames which was part of the original concept. Which was going to be just portraits of all these people that we knew, to create an imaginary class of all these people together in one photograph. And it was going to be a photo realistic creation - not a recreation but a creation - of a school photograph the way you're all together in a classroom.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did you and Gronk get together?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, Gronk and I had always positive attitudes working together. He was very inspiring in lots of ways. He was always seemed to give me this sort of . . . probably the best way to explain it was to just have this zen sensibility to everything. Where like everything was okay no matter what it was that you did. No matter what you were painting, it was like okay. And he really, really helped me to connect with just painting without thinking almost. Because that's how I interpret his painting. But yet, it was very thoughtful what he would end up with. And to me that was a natural. That was a natural thing that I felt like sometimes I struggled with. Where I needed to think about what it was that I was going to paint and Gronk always just painted so fast and everything looked like he painted it like he thought about it. But yet, he would paint in front of you like he's not thinking. That was very challenging to me and very inspiring because I wasn't like that. I wasn't that kind of a painter. And I'm still not that kind of a painter. I still can't just see an empty canvas and just pick a paint and then just start painting.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Your styles are really different. What's interesting is that he felt that in his interview, he was saying that he had the confidence in your ability to work side by side with you and not have to worry about where you're going but that the images kind of come together at some point.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And they always seem to do that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That reciprocity.

WILLIE HERRON: It's just his . . . the way I interpret his process of creating art work was very inspiring because I saw him different, his process as different than mine. But yet, when we were both done, it just looked like it was one piece and like it was meant to be. Like we planned it that way, like it just . . . So I think it was really easy for him also. Not just -- It wasn't easy for me to include him in some of those earlier works and give him almost first right of refusal, to so speak. [chuckles] But I always felt compelled when in the early seventies when I got a project, I always felt compelled to give him first right of refusal to do it with me. And if he would say no, then I would accept him saying no. But he never did. And it wasn't like I always invited him but when I felt compelled to invite him, I would invite him.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So tell me a little more about sort of the context in which Asco is forming. What are the elements that are pulling you guys together? What makes you guys coalesce? Why do you gravitate towards a Harry or a Patssi or a Gronk versus all the other grupos or centros that are coming out at that time, that were starting then?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think that with the sort of sprinkling of influences in that early connection, working with Harry on Regeneración, I think that allowed us to consciously focus on each other where if we would have been separate individuals out there, not being drawn together by Harry and his project, I don't know if we would have gotten together as the group that we got together. So I really attribute the group, all of us becoming aware and focusing on each other, as sensitive as we did, because of Harry bringing us together . . . with the Regeneración magazine. It brought us together to become aware of each other. But once we were there, and we really started to analyze and look at each other's work and have conversations and hang out so to speak and even socialize and have fun together. It was like telling each other that we were here for each other. We were available for each other whenever we needed to just to hang out even. We didn't have to just always be working. And when we would go to places just to say to party, like if we would go to a party or something, we always had a similar way of approaching getting ready to go out. It's like that was part of being Chicano was to get dressed up. Was to do and wear something that would be a little bit different than what everybody else possibly would be going. So that's where that glamour kind of a thing came in again. And we influenced each other by wearing and doing something with what we were wearing, with our clothing, altering, sewing this on that and taking this off, and cutting the leg pants off of one pair and sewing them onto another. Those kinds of things really made us a group. It assisted in keeping us tied together because we fed off of each other on that kind of stuff. And we became works of art physically, influencing each other not so much just the painting or the discipline of creating a visual art. We were part of our experience physically in how we dressed and what we did to our clothing. So that's why it was easy then to go into, "Well, let's perform. Let's do some performance kind of thing." Because that's like our next level. That's where we take ourselves next. From our clothing to how we look, what we paint, how we see things to then creating a performance.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Two questions out of that. Just sitting here listening to you, and I've seen some of the photographs and you cats are pretty far out back in the day. It sounds like a lot of fun. It sounds like the whole getting ready was very imaginative, it's very creative in a way.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, and what was really cool too was that - just to interject really quick -- is that I remember being so fascinated by knowing that I was going to drive over to pick up Gronk or meet Patssi somewhere and just wondering what they were going to look like! That was so freaking fabulous to me then! It was inspiring. So I knew that I had to do something because I was going to be with them and I didn't want to be left out. I wanted to fit in with them. And I think they felt the same way. So picking up Gronk sometimes, he would be dressed like with his loose pants, with his two tone shoes, with a white shirt and a tie like really, really straight. But his face would be painted white. I mean, sometimes it was that little thing. And then we'd go and we'd be around cholos and like everybody dressed the other way. And it was like there we were, right in the middle of this whole other idea.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm having a hard time visualizing. Because while it seems fun, it seems like

WILLIE HERRON: It's dangerous!

JEFFREY RANGEL: You could catch hell for it. I know personally you were talking how the cholos and those vatos were kind of protecting you in a sense. But it seems like maybe the relationships are different when there's a group of you. Maybe there's more targets or something like that so that it's safer for each one in that regard. Or there's unity in numbers, strength in numbers. But I'm wondering how that spectacle plays out when you're going to parties. You know, I mean, everyday sort of thing. Were people admiring you? Are people giving you shit about it? How does that fit in?

WILLIE HERRON: It was both. We got both. And it seemed relative to everything we were experiencing. It seemed very normal. And very natural for us to do what we were doing because we weren't really doing it to

shock anybody. I felt we were doing it to expose them to art, to expose them to something, at looking at themselves and at looking at people that exist with them differently. Just to give them that little other little role that they could dream or imagine and some of those people came out of that with our influence. We influenced some of those people to look at things and recognize things from a different perspective.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is that how the collective grows?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, I think because we started to do that to each other. And then that's when

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you incorporate more members literally? Did people see what you guys were doing and see the alternative?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. I think one of the members that then became semi-integral was Humberto Sandoval. He was a really good friend of mine. I went to elementary school with him and I was already doing some things with Humberto and he was one of my best friends, prior to doing any work with Asco.

JEFFREY RANGEL: One of my favorite pieces is the Señor Tereshkova.

WILLIE HERRON: Tereshkova. And then we did "The Gores" after that and we never finished The Gores. That's when we kind of like dissolved and . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: I've seen some of the stills from that.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, and I think what he ended up doing was incorporating a segment in Señor Tereshkova. He incorporated I think some of the dream sequences may have been from The Gores because . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: The props are there.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, right. And I think we filmed most of it in my studio in City Terrace. That was my studio almost exclusively filmed Señor Tereshkova in my studio. My art studio. Right, right. That's my studio, right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And then you guys are running all over the city.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, downtown, a bunch of stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, on the one hand there's that reception that you guys are going to parties or you're about your business around town. How is that reception different than say when you guys do The Day of the Dead performance at Evergreen? That is like spectacle to the tenth degree.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How are people relating to something that's relatively sacred and I think there's re-interpretations about that event. You guys were taking that into a whole different direction where some people may feel that's sacrilegious or disrespectful. That and like when you're taking into the Centros and stuff like that, having shows and what not. What's the reception of Asco there? What's your intention and what's the reception?

WILLIE HERRON: I think a lot of people for the most part just seemed to be shocked, and like I said, I don't really feel that we were doing it for the shock treatment as much as we were doing it to try and get people to just view things from a different perspective like I had said earlier. So we constantly got mixed reactions. It was always mixed. It was never all pro and it was never all negative. It was always mixed everywhere we went. And by the mid-seventies, we were pretty used to it. In fact, there was a lot of negativity I think that then by taking that negativity and the energy of that negativity, we would turn it into something that would then become another production or another creation that then would be a positive way of reacting to it rather than gang warfare. I mean to put it that blunt and straight up, it was we either go out there and we start hunting people down the way our friends do it or we're going to react and use our intelligence and our art work to seek revenge. And in lots of times, that's what we actually called it. We were actually seeking revenge through our art work because lots of times we felt unaccepted. We felt misinterpreted. We felt like people just didn't get it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What are some of those misinterpretations?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think when for example we started to do some of the street performances, I mean, it was acceptable for us to walk down the street and for people to say negative things to us. I mean, that was acceptable. But the negative things weren't because they were reacting to us being sacrilegious, let's say for when we did "The Stations of the Cross". I think it was out of a reaction that was stereotypical in their minds and in their . . . .

END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE B

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is Tape 2, Side B, interview with Willie Herrón on February 5, 2000.

WILLIE HERRON: So lots of times, I think something as basic as that I think the fact that we incorporated make up, we incorporated this flamboyant approach to our costumes and this glamour approach always put us, I think, in a realm that allowed people to misunderstand us because of their lack of understanding of what we were doing and why we were really doing it. And that's why our work now has become more and more important because of the reasons why we were doing what we were doing because we were finally getting a chance to express ourselves as to why we did it. And we have enough time to look back and put it in a perspective that's relative to our lives and our understanding of our lives and how that fit into our lives at the time. We can best explain why it is that we did what we did. Where at that time, it may have been very, very difficult. It's like reacting to somebody violently and then looking back and then just saying, "Oh, man, why did I do that?" And then you try and analyze why it is that you reacted that way. I mean, now we're where we really, really understand and we really know why we did some of those things that at that time were spontaneous. And we did them because we felt them but it was not that easy to explain at the time. And so I think we were being definitely misunderstood a lot.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you feel like there was anybody whom you shared affinities with at that time? Who did understand you? Or who were . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Outside of Asco?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

WILLIE HERRON: Outside of Asco, there were I think a handful of educators that were out there that ended up just stumbling on us by coincidence, or by chance, on our things that were unannounced. And people that were of a higher educational and learning stature that from . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Other Chicanos?

WILLIE HERRON: No, just people in general. Not so much other Chicanos. Because I think other Chicanos were the ones that were having a hard time putting us in a place because we were creating something that at that time had no place because you had that balloon that is filled everything. To me, it's like we're in this room and the balloon is full. But we have to somehow get in there and become part of that air that's surrounding the whole Chicano movement. And that's why I think there's a lot of the murals that dominated, now even dominate as a general, Chicano murals, there's a lot of them that seem to be very normal, very -- The iconography, all the symbolism just seems very much the same.

JEFFREY RANGEL: and what kind of icons?

WILLIE HERRON: Like I'm saying, a lot of the things that we tried to avoid. The Virgen de Guadalupe, Emiliano Zapata, Che Guevara, all of these symbols that we may or may not have wanted to use at one point or another, we avoided them. And we avoided them because they just seemed too common and too stereotypical in terms of our representations. And I think we're still surrounded by stereotypical interpretations of Chicanos.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Why is that? Because these icons and these images are coming from Chicanos themselves. Is it that - How do you explain that?

WILLIE HERRON: I think it's because they're still with that carved Aztec calendar, that whole idea that they have to go back and get that and take that and re-paint it but they're not really re-creating it and they're not altering or they're not bending it and they're not including certain levels of their life that could possibly shed a new light on it, reuse it in a new way. And that's why since we were striving for that and trying to achieve that as a group, already the group representing something that was different, approaching art differently, not using those but trying to come up with new symbols. When we had the first exhibition that we agreed to call Asco was an exhibition of our worst works. At that time, we hadn't known of any artist in the world to exhibit a piece of work that they would never want anyone to ever see. So even that approach was like telling people, "I mean, it's okay to show your crap too." [laughs] It's okay to show them that side.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Where was that?

WILLIE HERRON: That was at Self Help Graphics. 1974. And that was the show we called Asco, an Exhibition of Our Worst Works. And that's where we were coined after that as the Asco group. But we weren't Asco before '74. That word had never entered our vocabulary.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So the three of you, say you and Harry and Gronk were showing



WILLIE HERRON: And Patssi.

JEFFREY RANGEL: at Mechicano.

WILLIE HERRON: Oh no. Yeah, at Mechicano.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Or really it's . . . I guess if you guys had the show at Point Gallery in '75 so you would be Asco . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, we were already coined as Asco at that time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, you did the performances before '74, didn't you?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And up to '75, we collectively worked on pieces but around '75 and '76, we started to venture in different avenues. And we, at that time, decided that we would go separate ways and start exploring our ideas that seemed to grow out of the Asco experience.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So where is that taking you? '75, '76.

WILLIE HERRON: That's taking me into more of my music, which was requiring more time of myself.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You're in bands and . . .

WILLIE HERRON: And all during that time I was already in bands. But the bands weren't as significant and weren't getting the recognition that I was getting working with the Asco group. But since the sixties, I was in bands.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What kind of music were you doing?

WILLIE HERRON: I was doing - In the seventies, I was doing a lot of cover music and the groups - Probably that's why it wasn't as significant as what I was doing with Asco, but it was all the music that was popular at the time. It was like Zeppelin, like early forms of how would you say? Progressive rock. But it was combining a Santana sensibility and it was the early stages of trying to come up with again a new sound. Which then didn't take off until '79 when I officially formed Los Illegals And in '79 was when we were almost exclusively doing all original material, writing about the breaking up of the barrios and the freeways. Writing about already having dark skin and not needing to be in California just to go to the beach to get a tan. Like adding humor, adding politics, but still having power and just being overt and political simultaneously and Los Illegals was good name for a group because I had already had two step-fathers that I had spent some time with that were both supposedly illegal, undocumented workers and experiencing their plight and also being influenced by being a decoy at a young age where my grandfather used to import/export bakers from Mexico across the border. He used to go pick them up in Tijuana and bring them across the border to work for him at the bakery. And myself and my cousins, we would be decoys in the back seat. And we'd have the baker at our feet with blankets over us and we would pretend like we were asleep. And when we would get to the border, they would like just look at us as kids and then they'd wake us up. And then we would say that we were born in the United States, speaking in English. And then my grandfather would get across the border. My grandmother and my grandfather. And that's how he'd bring workers in to work at the bakery. But they had to be bakers from Mexico because he was making Mexican bread and it was easier for him to get a baker that knew what he was doing making Mexican bread and bring him in from let's say Mexico through Tijuana than it was to try and find somebody here locally.

JEFFREY RANGEL: There's not that many Chicano or Mexican bakers in City Terrace?

WILLIE HERRON: Not in the fifties!

JEFFREY RANGEL: Huh. That's pretty surprising.

WILLIE HERRON: Not in the 1950s. There was probably maybe two or three Mexican bakeries in East L.A. in the fifties. There wasn't that many bakeries. It was Mecia's Bakery and La Espiga de Oro. They were the first two bakeries in the fifties that sold Mexican bread in the 1950s. So it was still, it was one of those things that was an influence and it was an experience to know what you were doing, be conscious of it, know why you were going and know that you were doing something that you didn't quite understand why they wouldn't allow a human being to just cross the border. It was just weird. It was a weird understanding. So Los Illegals and that whole idea and just coming out of the performance, Gronk erasing the border, and him shaving his eyebrows at that time . . . which was part of another performance piece. So all of that, taking a lot of those Asco ideas and including and allowing those ideas to be the foundation of Los Illegals seemed like a real easy transition for me. But it was a new venture for the public to view, the public to hear where then I incorporated my art work, always projecting over the front of our faces, always backdrops, my murals in the back drops all the time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I've seen some stage sets.

WILLIE HERRON: We used to use the first portable that consisted of six four by eight panels that Gronk and I worked on. Mi Vida Loca . . . "Mi Vida y Suenos Locos" was the original title of that piece. We used to use that a lot as our backdrops. Just put it back there wherever. Sometimes it was just two of the panels because the spaces were too small. And then we started to perform in the seventies, middle seventies, on flat cars on platforms in public. Almost every year we did a performance in October here in City Terrace.

JEFFREY RANGEL: At the park here?

WILLIE HERRON: No, right here across the street from the Hidalgo mural, where that new little monument is. We always had a stage right there and we always had five or six bands. And they were all Chicanos that just played their own music and played rock and roll.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you get a permit to be out there?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, we would get a permit through an individual that had the capability of getting that permission and the permits and he'd get the county to put us a platform. And then we would bring our P.A. and we started to incorporate live bands in with the art work. So that was like my thing and that's kind of where I started off shooting.

JEFFREY RANGEL: A natural progression to go there.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, to then get away from the performance of it being just a visual art, and then start including audio, sound with those ideas, to me was my next transition from the Asco group. And being so that we were able to incorporate on a couple of pieces, one in particular Pinguinos, that Harry started to write in the seventies, we then started to include music as part of the performance where I play the saxophone, Harry plays the flute, and Gronk plays the vibes in that piece, in that performance. And then we do kind of like a rock and roll sort of Johnny Be Good traditional chord progression and we sing the song Pinguinos, a song that we wrote collectively. So that really didn't get a whole lot. I think we exhibited in a couple of community colleges, but we never really did a whole lot with that. And I don't know, in your interviews with Harry if he ever talked about Pinguinos.

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, I don't think we actually . . .

WILLIE HERRON: And I have all the audio tapes. I have all the original audio tapes. All the out takes, everything, and we're laughing and cracking up. It's like really cool. Real candid, like the whole thing. But he used excerpts of that for his video. And I don't know to this day where the video is at.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm sure he has a copy of it.

WILLIE HERRON: But it's an interesting piece.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It actually might be up at Stanford with all his papers up there.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. It might be. Pinguinos might be up there. But little to no promotion, no publicity. But that's probably one of the last pieces we did where we started to incorporate my influence and my dabbling with the music. Because I remembered recording it at Self Help Graphics and Los Illegals was already formed. So that was in '79, 1980 was when we recorded Pinguinos. You're going to '80, '81, that's a very important segue into our separating. The branching out and my influence starting to bring in more and more audio, more sound.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you feel like that was more of a sort of your personal initiative, your desire to grow in different ways as an artist, were moving you say more towards music or incorporating music in performance and visual art at the same time? Or were there more sort of socio-economic or cultural contexts around you, like the shape of the movement people's consciousness at that time changing and moving into different directions. How did those two things meld? Or do they not?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, I think there was some of that played a part in me making that decision and going more in the direction of spending more time concentrating on how to make a Chicano music be our own music, be our own sound. I think that was missing. And the last thing that I could say that was very powerful nationwide, even the world, was Santana. And I felt, "Well, what ever happened to . . . Where's all the musicians after Santana?" So to me it was like there was this huge gap. There was something there that needed to be filled, that there was not this epitome of Chicanismo, this band that is world renowned, there wasn't a group other than like the groups that were coming out of the sixties like El Chicano, Tierra, like those. But they seemed to be more rhythm and blues motivated where to me there was no rock, hard rock, progressive rock, punk rock motivated band. There was a void there. That rock and roll was part of our history too, not so much Motown rhythm and blues

and Black influence. But what about the influence of a lot of groups that I thought were like great bands and they weren't even from the United States, that were great but they were an influence on American music. But Chicanos weren't able to fuse into their culture. And so I thought rock and roll was a huge void and nobody was doing it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And then, at some point, you had some peers - I mean, there was a whole sort of renaissance on the east side in terms of music with lots of bands in the late seventies coming together. Sort of linking into the whole punk scene in L.A.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What's your feel about the way that Chicano music sort of found its niche in there; it didn't find a niche in that whole.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think that it didn't really find a niche in that whole. And I feel that it has to be included because it was a known fact that there were Chicanos out there redefining a genre that at that time didn't have our Chicano interpretation of a particular style of music, but I feel . . . I still don't feel that there was enough like say the mural movement. That was a national movement, that became a national movement, there was not enough musicians that wanted to realm in the rock world. They were more jazz, Latin, Cuban influence that it was more intellectual. It seemed more advanced, more complicated kind of music they were creating. Where I felt the need for the three chords rock and roll garage, boom, scream your guts out, and then we're saying it the way and we're coming from the streets and we're pissed. But we have things that we have to say. But to me there wasn't no - that sensibility never seemed to catch on. Never seemed to influence musicians that were able to - There was a handful of bands that we're all familiar with with there's been enough publication on us. But I still don't feel that we've never really created a niche. We were again grouped and put into a genre of music that sort of watered us down.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How so?

WILLIE HERRON: Because we were grouped with a whole bunch of people. Rather than keeping us segregated because we were trying to create a separate kind of a thing, we got thrown into the punk scene. So then we had to deal with the Johnny Rottens and we've got to deal with the Sex Pistols and we've got to deal with all this original notion of where punk rock originated rather than we're cholos that have our own style of hair. We combine mariachi sensibility but we're punk rockers and we're rock and rollers. Okay, no. There's no such thing. It didn't originate from you. You didn't come up with it. These people did. You were influenced by the Europeaners so that's why it's not an original idea. And we totally disagreed. We were inspired by our politics, inspired by being called illegals, being connected with being not welcomed or not accepted here, not accepted over there. We had all these issues that we were dealing with in our music and it wasn't driven from . . . it wasn't driven from the king and the queen in England. It just wasn't driven by that. We were driven by other issues and we were cholos but not dressed like cholos, playing rock and roll. And rock and roll was American and we were American. And that was our stand. So I think that like Asco, we kind of shocked people but at the same time there wasn't a wave of musicians, a wave of bands. There was a handful but not enough to say Chicano rock and roll has its place. Chicano rock and roll is a genre all on its own. Because there wasn't enough of us doing it. But I feel that Los Illegals had and were the early seeds of Roc en Espanol basically. And I think that no one can ever take that away from us because we sung bilingually and we were doing what Roc en Espanol is doing now but we were doing it in '79.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That would be gratifying to see.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, it is. It really is. And I think that it's different but I'd say they're more like - A lot of Roc en Espanol to me is rehashing the Zeppelins, rehashing some of the sixties bands. It's rehashing a lot of that and that's okay. It's really okay. But if we had had more of that in the late seventies, early eighties, I mean, it would be so powerful right now. I mean, it would be a lot more powerful than it is right now. But it came around and it's something that now is on the tips of a lot of people's tongues, man. And now it's on the radio so it's something that's - Like you said, you know, I'm proud that I had that sensibility at the time just like I'll always be proud of what Asco did to help to shape Chicano art.

JEFFREY RANGEL: In the same way that Asco is getting more recognition for being avant garde, in the visual, performative and inter-textual, you know, inter-media art and stuff like that. You can see the parallel developing.

WILLIE HERRON: And I think it was very positive for all of us to go separate ways because to this day, we separately had our high dive and when we dove off the high dive, we did a beautiful three quarter, one and a half summersault flip and spin and landed beautifully. And no one can take that away from us because we did it. But we're no longer on the ladder, getting ready to jump off the platform because we all did and we all made a beautiful gesture on the way and we landed beautifully.

HR: That came through when you guys were at Long Beach and you had everybody out there saying their piece, there was a sense that there was still a lot of connection and respect amongst each other there up on that panel in Long Beach.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: But at the same time, it was really nice to see how everybody had gone in their own directions or building off of what they had done.

WILLIE HERRON: And I think too along the way, people like yourself doing these sort of documentations and it becoming known and accessible to the public, all this information and all our perspectives, other than the popular perspectives that everybody keeps drawing on without talking to us individually, I think that it's a very healthy thing for all of us to then again re-evaluate what it was that we did when we were together. And it's a good thing for more than that reason too because I think that it has made it the powerful artists that we are today. You know, I really do feel that our collective efforts gave us everything we needed to propel us. I mean, to so many extents, that's how we got our degrees. That was our education. On the street, we got our degree. And we got our degree working together.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Next time when we come back, maybe in the second half of this interview, we can talk about even more specifically about some of the shows and some of what that education specifically was and the way that it utilizes those skills that knowledge . . . how you're applying in different ways now.

WILLIE HERRON: Okay.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think this is a good place to cut off here.

END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE B

ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART WEST COAST REGIONAL CENTER  
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION WILLIE HERRÓN

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH WILLIE HERRÓN  
AT CITY TERRACE IN EAST LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
FEBRUARY 19, 2000  
INTERVIEWER: JEFFERY RANGEL

WILLIE HERRON: WILLIE HERRÓN  
JEFFREY RANGEL: JEFFERY RANGEL

SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE A (30-minute tape sides)

JEFFREY RANGEL: Today is February 19th, year 2000. This is an interview for the Archives of American Art with Willie Herrón. The interviewer is Jeff Rangel.

WILLIE HERRON: So actually in the early nineties, it was part of our repertoire and part of our concept to start to tour different parts of Latin America and start doing our material outside the United States, because we were heavily combining the Latin, Flamenco, Moorish kind of influence with alternative rock. We had a lot of influences that we were combining at the time, compared to like the earlier eighties, we were probably a bit more of a basic rock band that sort of combined more of the Euro alternative influence with the fast pace. So we were thrown in the punk category.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What was the change?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, the change was just singing more in Spanish, combining the language even more of the caló and all of that. Just becoming more of a tool, or a style of communicating rather than like eighty percent English, ten percent Spanish, we switched it around in the nineties. And through the eighties, we were predominantly singing in English as a language with maybe ten percent of our material . . . with the exception of certain songs that were all in Spanish, we were combining background vocals in Spanish. Of course, Spanish choruses, English verses, English choruses but a Spanish verse in the song.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did that make a difference in audience that you're trying to reach? Now that you're trying to reach a predominantly Spanish speaking audience versus previously it was more of an English speaking audience?

WILLIE HERRON: No, I think it was just because we sort of felt more inclined to use our daily language and most of us in the group no longer . . . like living with our parents, we really didn't feel that motivated in singing too much in Spanish. But since we were raised speaking Spanish, it seemed like it was an obvious language to

include in our work, but not dominating our work. And then, once we got into the nineties, we just felt that it was time to just include the Spanish language even more.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It seems in the nineties there's a lot more bands who are singing in Spanish.

WILLIE HERRON: Who are doing it, right. So I think it was a combination of us just feeling that we could do it with a little bit more acceptance, even though we knew that it was going to be very difficult for it to be accepted in the early eighties. It seemed like then ten years later, after doing it for ten years, it seemed like it was okay to do it a little bit more and a little bit more. As we evolved and matured as a band, we felt that we had that liberty and that artistic license, where in the beginning, we felt we had to prove ourselves. So we had to come out more in English because we were interested in getting the exposure with English audiences and other English recording artists. When we were billed together, we thought it would be too radical of a departure from the bill to be all in Spanish. Then we would just be pigeon-holed into genres of music that would just expect us to play all in Spanish. Yeah, so we wanted to break into the American music scene so we felt that we had to sing in English first. But, since we were of Latin decent, we felt that we weren't going to leave that behind either. But as we approached the nineties, it seemed like we felt more and more comfortable to just make it more predominantly Spanish and that's when we started to tour through Mexico and play with El Tri and a lot of groups that had huge audiences and we could handle the audiences because our material was predominantly in Spanish, but still with the rock genre. And we had the ten years prior of already wetting our bones and we felt more comfortable.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was there any sort of overt political ideology in the sense that in the nineties recently we've had propositions against bilingual education here in California. So, was there any aspect of addressing those issues at the same time, singing more in Spanish?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think in the later nineties, or from the mid-nineties to now, obviously the propositions pissed us off so to speak. But prior to that we felt it was always an issue. We always felt . . . even in the fifties I felt that we couldn't speak Spanish in school. We couldn't identify with our heritage.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Harry has some pretty powerful stories about that as well.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And to me, it was always on-going and it just added fuel to the fire in my opinion as far as the middle nineties, when the propositions passed. Then that's, I think, threw us back. Because I kind of felt in an indirect way that we were progressing, we were moving forward from those issues and that proposition just like threw us back twenty, thirty years.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Rolled it all back.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, it just threw it all back and it was very upsetting. So, what it did is it just added more fuel to the fire and the fires that were just simmering are now blazing so to speak. And to me, it was good because it made me feel like the Cause was still the Cause and the Cause is still there. And it's not dead, by all means.

JEFFREY RANGEL: In some ways, its disheartening though to have to go back instead of progressing.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. But I think we're a lot more knowledgeable. We're a lot more - We have a broader vision of things and I think we're able to really come up with some fresh stuff now, even though we're rehashing a lot. It's fresh again because there's that blaze that we're dealing with again like in the sixties and the early seventies.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I've got a few questions actually so let me just throw out at you. But, first of all, we should just say for the record that we're talking about your band Los Illegals. I think it'd be good to talk the line up, who the members are. I'm interested in how your audience has changed from when you first started out 'til now. I'm also interested in how you were received in Mexico, touring with some of the major bands in the rock and Espanol movement, in Mexico and around Latin America. And perhaps comparing that scene in Latin America, particularly Mexico City with what's happening in Los Angeles now and sort of the differences that you sort of witnessed in this time period. And then finally, it'd be great if you could . . . I mean, I think one of the real things that Los Illegals are known for, aside from speaking or singing bilingually, is the political content of a lot of your lyrics.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So, I'd think it's be really interesting to hear what you have to say about that and maybe how those issues have changed or not.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think when we first set out to put a band together -- and I'm saying "we" because I always refer to the band, the founding band members which is Jesus Velo, myself, Willie Herrón, Bill Reyes, and

the Valdez brothers, Manuel Valdez and Tony Valdez.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And who played what?

WILLIE HERRON: Jesus Velo plays the bass guitar. Bill Reyes is the percussionist, the drummer. The Valdez brothers played guitars, the electric guitar, rhythm guitar. And I kind of just played from guitar to saxophone to keyboards and did the primary vocals.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Pretty much the front man?

WILLIE HERRON: The front man and in our later years, we started to really integrate and incorporate other members, primarily Jesus Velo has become a very instrumental lyricist and writer along with me. But a lot of the early material, I pretty much inspired and came up with most of the concepts and had most of the lyrics for our first records. The first single that we put out was transformed but it came out in two forms. It came out in an all Spanish version and an all English version of a song we called, "El Lay", spelled e-l-l-a-y. For many reasons, we didn't think it was a good idea to really promote all English, even in the way we would write things. We thought about being from our ancestors as well as some of our parents. The Valdez brothers were probably the closest to being the first generation where Jesus Velo and myself, we were more third generation. Second and third generation here in the United States. But we really felt strong about incorporating our primary language at home, which was Spanish. For all of us, that was our primary language. But being in the L.A. school district, which we were all basically raised and lived when we first formed in East L.A. So we all had similar experiences growing up in the projects, moving from the projects to a house and to me, that sort of creates a certain type of individual in my opinion. I think I would have been a little bit different had I grown up in a home in a neighborhood, a detached home, rather than in the projects where there's all these houses all connected together and you could hear things happening between the walls and from the neighbors. So, with a lot of those experiences being really similar, it seemed really obvious when I started to write one of the first songs. Musically when I wrote it, I started coming up with some ideas of what to write about and at that time, I was working on a project with Gronk and talked to Gronk about the possibility of collaborating on lyrics for El Lay. So Gronk and I co-wrote El Lay. Some of the verses he came up with entirely with some changes once we recorded it and some of the verses I came up entirely. But we pretty much collaborated on the lyrics. And the whole idea came from my stepfather who I had experienced living with as I was growing up who was a dishwasher. When he came to the United States and he met my mom, he was a dishwasher. And we often had discussions as to why he came to the United States and why he was doing what he was doing to try and better his life and send money back to his other family in Mexico, so on and so forth. So I thought it was a really good idea to do this plight of the illegal so to speak and for our first song to be like this anthem for us and to basically call the band Los Illegals, which was a combination of Los Angeles. In our opinion it was like Los Angeles, but it was Los Illegals. But being English and Spanish, mostly everybody pronounced Los as Las, so we often were called Las Illegals. And we accepted it because everybody pronounced Los Angeles as Las Angeles. But some people really they don't understand that that's really Spanish. So it was interesting to play and to accept that there was a play on words. So El Lay, e-l-l-a-y, was obvious to say El Lay instead of L.A. like Los Angeles. So we were toying with all those different perspectives. And to me that's common. That's so common in the combination of English and Spanish being misconstrued. Spanish being misconstrued as English and back and forth. So that was our, that was the track we were on in the late seventies, early eighties. And so being that our first record, we just fell on a roll. And we wrote about songs about the freeways breaking up our neighborhoods. We wrote songs about drive-by shootings. At the time, we were very in tune to what was happening in El Salvador, the U.S. involvement there, how we felt that they were kind of sticking their nose into something that was none of their business. So we sort of wrote songs about that. We just tried to cover everything that was first hand experience, not just something we would read about or something that we thought would be a hip subject. This was about our life. This was about what we were living and it seemed really natural to write about and not be concerned with the record deal, not being concerned with palatability, not being concerned with anything other than playing a sound of music that we were familiar with and also that we liked to play. So we were influenced in the early sixties by the invasion, the British invasion, but we were also growing up with Latin jazz, Santana, Tito Puente. I mean, our parents - we grew up with the music that our parents grew up with, norteños, mariachis, all of that. So we felt just like our language and just like our life style, it had to be all combined together. We didn't feel we were strongly part of one thing and strongly part of another. We felt like we were straddling all these different genres, bot in our lives and in music and in politics, that we just said, "This is what we have to write about. Otherwise let's just be a cover band and let's just play at weddings." You know. And make some good money and be happy being musicians. But no. We were after the message. We were after artistic credibility as creators.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Can you draw a parallel between the subject matter and the sensibility of what Asco is addressing? And what Los Illegals are addressing? And I ask that question in particular because of the title of the first album, Internal Exile.

WILLIE HERRON: Internal Exile, right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Which seems to be something that Asco played with.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm not really clear on that relationship.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, it was for me, in the late seventies when I officially got the band together and started to devote a lot of my time collaborating with the musicians, for me it was very lateral in terms of a transition from Asco to Los Illegals. But, it just played on a completely different plateau. Dealing with audio, dealing with sound, to me was what Asco seemed to be either missing or Asco was ready for that transition and if we couldn't make that transition as a group, then the community and the art world needed to know that transition was forthcoming. So I decided to take it on and to go in that direction and it's really post-Asco, Los Illegals, to a certain degree because I drew upon a lot of the influences and a lot of the ideas that were crystalized and solidified during the seventies that Asco was very, very strong and very active. And just made a transition to that with Internal Exile. A lot of those songs came from drawings and paintings. They were influenced by visual works first. Then they became songs and vice versa. Some songs were written but became very crystalized by an image that then was relative to the song, which came after a sketch, a drawing, a work of art that was a visual piece. So it was a lateral transition.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It seems to have that organic role too.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. So we started to incorporate costume. We were incorporating a superimposing of slides of Asco work, of the murals, of our performances on top of Los Illegals performing. But then use that accommodated, slide projection, any kind of superimposing, we were always very, very in tune to taking our audio a step further and including a visual with it, not just being a typical quartet just playing up there. Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So that performance aspect - When you're playing music, there's always an element of performance, of theatre up there on the stage.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: But this is to take it to a whole new level.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, because we're also including the sense of sound with it now, which is just not a spoken word. Which is now trying to take the spoken word, trying to take the visual and create a melody with it and create a memorable tune that then can assist in understanding where we were coming from, assist in understanding our perspective, and it just seemed like it was a natural transition to go into music.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Tell me about the venues and what . . . the crowds who -- You know, like who was in the crowd? Who would you pointing to at those instances?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, in the beginning it was very difficult for us to get gigs for the mere reason that we were probably identified with the punk scene. And that wasn't really anything that I would say was negative but what was difficult was because what our name was implying and word was out that we were political in content, which at that time I really can't say that there was a Chicano band that solely concentrated on a political overtness which Los Illegals had at that time. And so it was very risky for a lot of . . . the perspective that a lot of club owners had, it was very risky booking us because they associated us with East L.A. and the west side's perspective of East L.A. was, "You're going to get stabbed. You're going to get shot. And the gangs are just vicious. So stay away from East L.A. and stay away from bands that are from East L.A. because they're going to attract that crowd, right? So that was the stereotypical perspective. So what I decided to do in 1981 was I collaborated, because my studio - at the time my art studio - and where Los Illegals rehearsed was at the Self Help Graphics there on Cesar Chavez and Gage. So what we decided to do was I collaborated with Sister Karen on presenting the concept of creating an alternative to the alternative space to promote Chicano groups from East L.A. and book them with groups from the west side to start allowing them the flexibility to experience the mixed crowds, the crowds that are predominantly from East L.A. mixing with the west side crowds, which wasn't anything new. Because you'd go to clubs on the west side and Chicanos and East L.A. people were always mingling and were always going over there anyway. So we thought - but they never come over here. The white groups and the west side crowd never comes to East L.A. So it was going to be a cool exchange if this concept would work. So we decided to call it The Vex, meaning like it's doomed or like it's not going to work, right? And it seemed to just really, really inspire I think a lot of groups. There was a lot of individuals that didn't quite seem to know whether they fit, where they fit, that came out of that period very, very sure that they wanted to be musicians, very sure that they wanted to do music a certain way. And we were an inspiration and I think The Vex was an inspiration.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What were some of the bills like? What bands were mixing?

WILLIE HERRON: Very, very mixed. They were like all keyboard groups, like The Programmer. There were groups that were super, super punk. Black Flag. TSOL. Then there was like groups like that were sort of artsy. You had Eloy Torres had a group, The Rents. There was also Exene and John Doe, X played there. And then you had groups that were even formed here in Los Angeles but the members were from the southwest, like Texas and Arizona. You had Tito Larriva, you had The Plugz. Then at the same time you had Los Lobos and you had theatre groups because there were openers. So there were performance groups also that were doing stuff. And it was a mixture. Then you had like The Undertakers. You had the dark side of the East Side gothic perspective. And then you had the new wave, the supposedly new wave of type of music which mixed sort of hard edged guitar with synthesizers with pop melodies. And it was quite a combo. But very inspiring. Because you had punkers. You had mods. You had greasers. You had rockabilly people. I mean, it was like everything.

JEFFREY RANGEL: All at Self Help!

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, at Self Help Graphics. Even reggae was -- I mean, Bob Marley was heavy during that time. Really heavy. He had already been heavy for quite awhile. And early eighties, he was even stronger than in the seventies.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is this simultaneous with the kind of other clubs appearing downtown and the galleries appearing . . . that scene happening?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, it was all just an explosion.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What do you think accounts for that? Why then? Why downtown? Why is this mixture happening between East Side and West Side?

WILLIE HERRON: I think some of it, to me, just seemed like trying new things and the whole concept and awareness of different ideas being mixed together. Different cultures mixing together and we were just coming out of the seventies, which kind of were sort of leading us from the disco era. That whole rhythm and blues kind of Black domination on tv too. And we were going into I think really, really recognizing the Chicano, recognizing the Asian, recognizing other contributors to American culture, other than the typical - the white and the black. And I think it was just time. The eighties was a good time to start combining everything and then it sort of became stronger and multi-ethnicity became stronger in the nineties. And now we're in the year 2000 and it's almost like - I mean, if you're not aware of that, where have you been? It's like so crystal clear now that . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: And that's perhaps why we have such a reaction to keep the lines drawn more distinctly, kind of that backlash of conservatism. Because it is getting ever more eclectic.

WILLIE HERRON: It's too melted. It's just getting so homogenized. It really is. And that's why I think Los Illegals and today's and along with my art, I just feel like the years haven't passed and the decades haven't passed. I just feel like I'm still producing and promoting a lot of the same ideas. And I have tons of energy for it still. I don't feel like it's old. I don't feel like I'm old and I don't feel like -- I think it's going to take my life time to still pursue everything that I've pursued. And I feel that it's still very viable because there's very few of us contributing to that part of it. And we're still pouring the cement into the mold. And the cement hasn't started to harden yet.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Tell me about the audience because it seems that on the one hand while you have maintained your passion for speaking about these issues or creating a host of different ways that perhaps you're speaking to a different generation now in your . . . at your shows, or Los Illegals' shows than your peers

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: or who you were singing to in 1981 or something like that. How does that sit with you? How does it -- Does it change the way that you produce? Or who you're producing for? How does that shape the relationships with the people that you were working with before versus now?

WILLIE HERRON: I think that regarding Los Illegals, we kind of feel more like we're accepted and we kind of feel a lot more now that we fit in. But it hasn't changed our strength. It hasn't changed our direction. And it hasn't done anything to why we are Los Illegals and why we do what we do. Like we're still motivated by all the issues. We're still motivated by the oppression. We're still motivated by the injustices. We're still motivated by all the things that motivated us when we first put the group together and we said this is what we wanted to write about. We're just making our ideas and our influences available to collaborate with other people that respect that . . .

END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE B



JEFFREY RANGEL: This is Tape 1, Side B continuing with Willie Herrón on February 19th. I wanted to ask you about your reception in Mexico and did you ever play in Mexico in the early eighties or in that period?

WILLIE HERRON: No. No, we didn't. We just did some dates in Tijuana. And some of the dates that we actually did not only in Tijuana but also on Mexican television, stations of Mexican television. Like even broadcasting here locally. We were just - I mean, we were accepted. We got on some of the programs. But we were playing alongside with groups that were still singing Johnny Be Good in Spanish. So we were just way out there. We were really way out there in comparison. And it was very difficult for us at the time because we didn't feel like we belonged there, just like we didn't feel like we belonged in the American scene. So we were struggling in terms of just staying true to our souls and our spirits as to the original concept, to why we got together, why we formed as a band. And we persevered. We weren't very well received when we did our first. In '92, we did our first border town tour, beginning in Tijuana. We played with groups like Tijuana No. We played with --- what was some of the other groups there that have . . . that are now defunct? We played with El Tri. Some of the groups still seem to have - including El Tri who were like mega, mega - you know, eleven, twelve albums. To us they were like the Rolling Stones singing in Spanish. Which is okay. But we really didn't feel like we were - like we really fit. But we had to be there because we were innovative and we were descendants in the same, but we weren't very well received. You know, they were calling us mojudos.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

WILLIE HERRON: Because of our name. And not so much because of what we sang about but just because of the name of the band, we were just automatically called mojudos. We got stuff thrown at us. Same thing when we played here in California. Most of the California venues we were called TJs, wetbacks. So the reaction wasn't that much different in Mexico as it was here in the United States, or I should say here on the west coast.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's fascinating.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. So we never paid attention to that. We never paid attention too much to the critics because we knew what was driving us and we kept true to that. And that's why we were not a palatable band that you would say we could sign a ten record deal. We would just do one offs. And so we don't have very much commercially recorded material because we're a major risk, because we call the shots and we're doing music that we feel is important to do. It's not for the purpose of sale and it's not for the purpose of making mega bucks. It's to document a situation and to document a perspective of young cats that are from a certain area whose parents migrated from Mexico.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was there ever incentive to change the act, to clean things up to go more commercial?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, we had an opportunity actually to record on A y M, which in the middle eighties was a Latin Division of A and M Records. And we had an opportunity to work with some different producers. In fact, I remember even having a meeting with a very famous musician and pretty much just let the label know, A y M. And we let the producer know that we would do what they wanted us to do but we weren't going to compromise that much. That it still had to feel right and we still had to feel comfortable with what we were doing. And we never did that record because we were still signed at the time with A & M Records and the position they took was that they wanted to challenge the material we were putting out on A & M. They wanted to challenge it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Challenge it how?

WILLIE HERRON: By showing that they could produce us and we could put out a better record that would sell better and that would do better.

JEFFREY RANGEL: To a Spanish language audience?

WILLIE HERRON: To a Spanish language audience because the Latin market kind of . . . they were missing the Latin Beatles or this group of five Chicanos that could be more pop and more palatable. They felt we had sex appeal. Everything. They felt we had everything but we were too political. We were too raw. We were too urgent. We were too harsh. We were too radical. And so we disagreed. We said no. That has . . . where we grew up, what we did, what we experienced, dodging bullets and doing all this stuff -- it's in our music, it's in our lives and we can't see doing anything other than what we're already doing. We'll accept your production. We'll go in and we'll do a demo tape. So on and so forth and let's see what we come up with. And I think that probably would have been a really interesting compromise but they felt that they couldn't compromise with us. We had to just sing their way, do it their way or they weren't going to invest the money.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you think that there are parallels again to be drawn with say the world of visual arts or the multi-media or performance art? And with Chicanos in a certain style of - I don't know how to articulate this really - but maybe pressures to assimilate or pressures to change the message, tone down the message a bit for commercial purposes? Can you draw parallels between what you experienced in the recording industry and the

visual arts?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think that it's really important and it has been important for me just to, like I've said before, to just remain true to your purpose and your motivation for longevity. I never felt like I could say that as a kid I wanted to be mainstream, I wanted to produce something that could become mainstream. I was never interested in that. I was always after something that would just . . . I feel that would be just so ahead of everything and so far fetched that it would take years before anybody could put it anywhere, if it could even be put anywhere. To me, being an artist, I feel that's my responsibility. It's not my responsibility to create palatable material that could become commercially successful. That's not my purpose. I think if other artists feel that they're motivated like that . . . I think Carlos Almaraz said that he always had an intention of becoming mainstream. And that worked for him. But I've never had that idea of my work - to be mainstream. Because that's the time I would radically change, if it became . . . even though some of my work has essences of palatability and essences of mainstream, I think it's just because there are . . . I do have a soft plateau about me. There's something about me too that is also peaceful, that's also compassionate, that also can project on that level. But my main motivation is just to create stuff that's just out there. And that's my source of motivation. When something just sounds too sweet and too beautiful, I have to throw some dark little thing in there that just sort of like makes you think of that little corner when I remember just like waking up sometimes in the middle of the night and just like get running out of bed and going to a corner, curling up in a little ball. My parents weren't around. Nobody was around. But I was scared. And I feel that my work needs that little part of me in it all the time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Can you give me an example of the a mural, or a painting, or a song that has that soft quality but yet there's that dark corner in it?

WILLIE HERRON: One of the first songs that comes to mind is Echoes of the Fallen. A song I wrote in the early eighties that ended up on the 1997 recording we did with Concrete Blonde. And that resurfaced at that time. It seemed to be unanimous that that was an interesting enough work that it should be on this record. And to me, it's very haunting. It's almost like beautifully haunting to me. It sounds peaceful. It sounds soft. And beautiful, but at the same time, you're in the middle of ruins. Everything is destroyed. But the peacefulness makes you feel the feeling of hope even though it seems dark. The song. You still come out of it with that sense of hope. You're walking through the rubble. You see everything. The sky is red and it's dark. But you're still persevering. You're still walking through it. You've got your head held up high and you're going to continue persevere even if everything looks dismal. And to me, that's the kind of stuff that I -- That's where I'm at and when I find myself often in that little area, that's where I like to produce. From that source of inspiration.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What about -- is there a different approach to the murals? What you're trying to communicate in the murals? Or is that same approach, that same sense of wanting to communicate that there as well in that medium?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think with my murals, of course, it depends on the commission and the amount of liberty sometimes that I'm given as an artist by the people that are commissioning me or by the organization that has contacted me to produce a work of art. Often, I'm like many other muralists probably could agree, or maybe disagree, that I find that today a lot of the murals including some of my own have a tendency to have to deal with too much bureaucracy and too many people wanting these pieces, these public works of art, to be too much to too many people. And I think a lot of the murals have lost that oneness and that sense that some of my earlier works and some of the works that I've done don't fall into that category. But I just feel as a whole muralism has just taken a step towards being too commercial. And that's the thing where I stopped. For almost eight or nine years, I actually stopped doing murals and concentrated more on my music because, again, it seemed like I was having to come up with new icons and new approaches and new concepts for muralism because everything was just becoming so commercialized. And the problem being that a lot of the corporate involvement and monies had been using these huge panels on the sides of buildings and they're really, really taking the whole concept of these huge paintings and commercializing them so that people don't want and don't embrace anything that represents the people and represents the political issues, the situations. So what I have been inspired to do and I'm hopefully going to be working on my second project is to start targeting high risk communities and approaching institutions that are within that geographical city and presenting high risk youth programs and start to involve them in mural painting, and start to re-create and re-generate new works of art that are by and from the youth, with my supervision and my control to be able to make sure that that comes across. That the youths aren't over-shadowed or overpowered by commercialism. So their message and their ideas of things out there really come out the way that's truly their voice, what they really want to say. And I feel that a lot of them are in an oppressed situation that there's a good possibility that we're going to see resurgence of revolution and resurgence all over again. Yeah. The kids feel . . . I mean, there's too much conservatism, way too much. And they're totally, totally oppressed. And I wouldn't be surprised because I'm seeing it. It's the beginning.

JEFFREY RANGEL: There's some rumblings in the music scene.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, even in the music scene. And that's why I think Rock in Espanol, jumping back on that, has taken such a strong hold of that particular genre of music, that rock but sung in Spanish. That's why it's a very powerful tool. Because it's urgent and it's expressive and I do know that a lot of rock in Espanol artists that are in that genre and that are more innovative also are taking on a very, very strong political stance. And it's okay because it's been done now. And it's okay to do that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Can you pinpoint a time for - yeah, I guess a time when you felt like muralism, going back again, started to try and become too much to everybody in that process. What I'm hearing is that kind of depoliticized or kind of got thinned, got played out so to speak.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you remember a particular time or set of circumstances that facilitated that transition?

WILLIE HERRON: It's really hard to give it a specific date. For me it seemed like that transpired through the eighties. I think I kind of felt that happening with the Olympics being held here when everyone started to turn to the Owimpics, is what we used to call it. The wimpy pastel palette that then all of a sudden you got all this post modern, cool pastel pallet happening. All these mini-malls. These huge malls started being built all through the early eighties also. To me, that really, really affected a lot of communities. It affected the way people viewed colors. It just really, really - We lost the power of the seventies and the early eighties where a lot of black, a lot of orange, a lot of red, and dark blues and these really deep, dark colors just became dominated by the owimpics in the middle eighties and they just had this peach and teal pastel just dominate everything! And then you had all the malls that were this palette. Everywhere. They were going up like nobody's business.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Who makes those decisions? How does that take place?

WILLIE HERRON: I think the Owimpics did it. It made everybody think that, "Oh, these are all the top designers. These are all the people that are predicting the palette of the future. So they're going to do it in the Olympics being held in L.A. and that's going to determine the pallet of the future for the next decade." And it did. It did.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You were a part of it. You were one of the muralists.

WILLIE HERRON: I was one of the muralists. But I tried as much as I could to avoid that sensibility and so when I created the sort of computer generated wrestlers with the dark blue background and the helicopter spraying malathion onto the crowds while they were viewing the Olympics, my biggest drawback was since again I was dealing with a committee, the Olympic Committee, I was told that I couldn't paint my wrestlers with folk style wrestlers' masks, which I had like Mil Mascaras and Solar wrestling together to sort of communicate our heritage. But combine it with that Olympic plateau, right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

WILLIE HERRON: But I still felt responsible to my people and my community and where I was from to still take advantage of the opportunity to be one of the muralists. So that's the only thing I did was I removed the wrestlers' masks, not really giving the faces any distinctive nationality and traded that for the helicopter spraying malathion. And what I did . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did they ask you to remove that too?

WILLIE HERRON: No, they didn't. But that wasn't in my original design. So what I did was in my original design, when I executed the mural, I agreed to remove the wrestlers' masks. But in the midst of the sky, I tried to use as much blue in the pigment in the sky around the helicopters and more black in the blue of the helicopters that when I first painted it, you couldn't see the helicopters until several years later, the blue and the black fade at different rates. And during the years, as it aged, the blue got lighter and the black became more dominant that you could then see the three helicopters spraying something. But then, at that time, I was telling everybody, "Well, they're spraying malathion" because that was, at the time during the Olympics, that was the big controversy. Paint was peeling off of cars. Dogs were dying and throwing up. And they were saying, "Oh, no. It's not harmful for you." But yet, they were spraying all of East L.A. and all different parts of the county, dumping that stuff on everybody. You know? And so, I mean, it just . . . I feel that that's where I saw that it started, with the Olympics. That palette that they created just homogenized and just wimped everybody out. And everybody had to be palatable and you had to be everything to all people. It didn't matter what ethnicity you were from, that had to be toned down.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You end up pleasing very few people in that way.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Because a mural has less of a statement that way, or it's harder to make a powerful statement when you're trying to make it so broad.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. And I think if there's enough public artists doing works and they're from all different ethnic backgrounds, then everything gets covered. I mean, all the issues get covered from all the perspectives. You don't need one artist to incorporate everything because then again it's not a first time . . . it's really not a first time experience unless it's like the Moratorium mural. It's about people getting together, mainly the Chicano community because it was held here. But it was in protest of the Viet Nam War and the Chicanos going to the front lines and so on. I mean, then it's a broad issue but it still hits home because it came from home and it was something that we organized and put together.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think this is really helpful to cast some broader strokes on the mural movement. But I wanted to ask you your specific history and touch on something that we . . . I'm not sure if we got it on tape last time or not. But, you were talking about the fact that as more stories come out about the Chicano arts movement in general and more about Asco in particular, there's going to be a changing picture of what that group was like and how you guys operated together. The stuff that you were able to produce. I'm wondering what specifically you see . . . maybe some of what additions you would like to add to that narrative that you feel like maybe haven't been addressed as thoroughly as other parts of your history. Does that make sense? Does that question make sense?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, it does but I can't . . . I don't know if I could answer that accurately without being more specific.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I guess before we were talking about how there seems to be a pretty well recognized narrative about what Asco was about, what you guys were trying to achieve, different approaches, where you fit in, or did fit in to the whole Chicano arts movement. And that if you had any . . . people are starting to talk about that more critically now. If that's changed your perception of the group or changed your perceptions of maybe what you guys were trying to accomplish, or aspects of the group's coming together, the group's workings that you feel like have been maybe missed in the establishment of what's been put out there so far. I don't know if that's any more specific, if that helps you at all.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think what comes to mind is that lots of times every time we got together, for the most part, if it wasn't just to hang out and go to a party or go to an opening, we always had this way of coming together to produce something. And we always produced something and it's related to a specific date and it's related to a specific event. So it's hard for me to try and encompass that idea of well, what has been missed or what do you feel you need to add that hasn't been expressed yet. I know for a fact that for the most part, to date, probably the most popular notion has come from Harry's writings and Harry's testimonies regarding our endeavors and Asco's history. Where I think probably secondary would be, the next popular perspective would probably be Gronk's perspective would probably be the next. So with testimony now and experiences and interpretations from Patssi Valdez and myself, Willie Herrón, I just feel that maybe that's something for somebody else to put together once they analyze everybody's interpretation and then they can come up with a fifth interpretation.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Let me ask it this way. Are there people who've been critical, written critically about Asco who you feel like have really sort of nailed some things, and what are those things that you feel like people are right on in terms of their interpretations? Or do you feel like there's been some misperceptions that have been sort of passed on because of a lack of that fifth voice, so to speak, at this point?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I don't feel strong about misconceptions or I don't feel strong about while the information that is out there and has been out there is inaccurate. I just feel that it's just been incomplete in that sense. I don't know if that says a whole lot. But I just feel that hopefully it can become more complete with all our stories. All the other stories that have not gotten the exposure. But I can't really pinpoint any one particular written work that I could say that summarizes really the epitome of what our group was about because I think that you'll get slightly varying information and interpretations from each one of us. So I think it meant something a little bit different for each one of us. Although on some pieces, some productions and some performances you might say that there's similarities in the way we interpreted what it was that we were doing at the time. But, today, I can't really say that what I've read and what I've heard has changed anything about how I feel about what we did. I still feel the same. I'm just really glad to be able to be alive right now to talk about that stuff so it gets documented so everyone's perspective gets put together to complete the pie.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay. Then let me . . .

END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE A

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is Tape 2, Side A, continuing with Willie Herrón on February 19th. And as we were switching tape sides there, I wanted to ask you a question about LACE, Los Angeles . . . what does it stand for? Contemporary Exhibitions.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Your involvement with that, what happened to the space. How it was conceived and maybe some of your involvement with it and then how it transformed and how you felt maybe like it was no longer a space where you felt comfortable working, or what not. I'm just really kind of curious about the evolution of that whole process.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I recall just one afternoon being asked by Harry. My understanding at that time was that Harry and Gronk were already part of LACE, along with other artists that had spearheaded putting together the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. And I was asked to come on board in the early stages to just be one of the I guess community artists. I guess they and received a grant or they had some monies available to hire some community artists to become part of their program. And I was then asked to be on staff and work the office certain days of the week and then also spend time going to different schools, high schools and junior highs, middle schools, to talk about my art work. And all of that was part of my position. And I believe it was a CETA position through the city.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you feel like seeing as how that position was created through CETA, were there certain responsibilities in terms of working with youth? Or how did that blend with the overall mission of what LACE was about? \_ \_\_\_\_\_

WILLIE HERRON: Well, to me, the way I felt that I fit in was for me to sort of I guess develop the idea of establishing a level of a role model. To go to schools and to talk about the work I had done up to that point. Because this was already in the late seventies. The work that I had done at that point with Asco, with some of the murals I had done on my own. And at that time, I was already thinking and working on starting the group Los Illegals. So I was in a transition already at that point. But that transition really wasn't crystalized.

JEFFREY RANGEL: LACE became kind of a space to . . .

WILLIE HERRON: to keep rolling through that. But also to take the time to crystalize myself and what I represented in terms of my community and in terms of everything around me, as an artist growing up in this city. So it really paid for me to take that time to become more aware of where I was going and what I had done and to go and to talk to youth and to make my ideas and my concepts and my inspirations available to the youth. So possibly I would inspire the youth to take that on as a career.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see. The idea of working with youth wasn't necessarily something that was new to you. Or where you felt your commitments lie as an artist. And so I'm wondering if maybe that might allow us to talk about the work that you had done previously Ramona Gardens or . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Well, I first kind of experienced working indirectly with youth by already close to maybe eight years when I first created "The Cracked Wall" and "The Plumed Serpent". I was among the few, if not the only artist at that time in East Los Angeles incorporating graffiti. And with the level of respect that I showed for the community and the youth whose names were on those walls, I feel I had already shoe in with creating a dialogue, a very respectful dialogue with the youth in my community in the early seventies because of the respect that I had shown by painting around their names on the walls and not painting them out. Where there was a lot of energy and a lot of effort being put into getting rid of graffiti at that time. There was a lot of anti-graffiti programs that sort of came out of the early seventies. And I really wasn't concerned with obliterating it or getting rid of it. I was more concerned with communicating with the youth that create the graffiti and inspiring them to incorporate it into a work of art. So maybe the public could understand the graffiti as being a form of communication, as an important viable way of the youth expressing themselves and having that room for them to be able to do that without them and the graffiti being considered vandalism, without looking at it from a negative perspective. So with that, it seemed really easy to attract attention to some different . . . how would you say? . . . educators, teachers and professionals in the educational institutions to contact me and to incorporate me. At that time there was a series of anti-gang and also I guess they were calling them drop out prevention programs that Cal State-L.A. actually approached me to work on a project in Ramona Gardens. And I was not to be - I wasn't a commission. I wasn't being paid. But I was asked to volunteer on a pilot that they were putting together for at risk students in Ramona Gardens in that particular area. And I was very inspired by that because actually the Ramona Gardens group, the Big Hazard gang, they're the ones that I understand were responsible for my brother's stabbing. And this was already in '73. So I went ahead.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That soon after?

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. I went ahead and I felt very, very motivated to go and communicate with them and try

and enlighten them to see what it is that they're doing. To see what it is that they should realize, how negative that is.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So did you share that story with them?

WILLIE HERRON: So I shared that story with everyone that I came in contact with while I was working there in the recreation room at Ramona Gardens. And had an occasional visit also from Harry and from Gronk during that time who then contributed to the mural. Who then some days that they came over to visit with me, they also picked up a brush and helped to paint along with the other ten youth that used to come after school. And we'd talk about different problems that we're having at home and how they perceived school, the language break down, and just everything. All the issues.

JEFFREY RANGEL: While you're painting, you're talking about this?

WILLIE HERRON: Right. We're talking about all the issues. And also, the actual mural came about by the youth contributing ideas and drawings and then working with me, I put them all together to tell a story. And we started on one wall and painted all the way around the room until we came full circle all the way back to where we started, which took about three months to execute. And I was there pretty much three, sometimes four days out of the week. And sometimes I'd spend the night there and the parents would actually allow their kids to spend the night there with me. And we would paint until pretty late and then they'd be up the next day painting. But usually it was like a Friday or the end of the week or something that they would spend the night. But that also was often a thing that came along with being there for these kids.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How successful do you feel like those interventions were in young people's lives?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I feel that it was very successful because I understand that at least two that I know of, two students I had at that time became artists. Because a year after that project, I was part of the mural program they had there which sort of fell under the influence of Estrada Courts. What Felix was doing in Estrada Courts, Ramona Gardens took on that similar idea of having murals and artists volunteer and paint on the sides of the housing projects, the sides of the wall.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Who coordinated that at Ramona Gardens?

WILLIE HERRON: It came out of the rec center and to be honest with you, I can't remember what group organized that but I think that was also part of the CETA program in those earlier seventies. Because I think the CETA program went on from '73 or so on 'til about '79 or '80. It went on a few years. So I think that was part of the same program. And so, I know that one of the artists went on to do his own mural. And that was one of the older youth that were involved in the program . . . the drop out prevention program. And so we went on to then I was one of the original artists. I believe the Streetscapers did one shortly after. And at the time I was there doing one, I even think Manuel Cruz was doing his mural there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Three totally different styles.

WILLIE HERRON: And myself. Right. And so, what was really interesting though is again, I mean, almost throughout my career I've had some sort of . . . I've had to deal with some sort of criticism from my own people as far as what they consider Chicano art, what they didn't consider Chicano art. I mean, to this day, there's people that will still argue thirty years later that there are certain aspects of Chicano art that have to be out there, where I may say, "Well, I think that's too negative and I think that that would be misrepresenting in the event that got out. And it's too stereotypical. That we need to expose and to advocate this aspect more than this tiny little fraction that then might get misconstrued because it's more . . ." Maybe to some people it's more stereotypical so it's easier to grow on that. So, I think I've always had to deal with that. And with the Ramona Housing Mural Project in 1974, I was being approached with the "Adam y Eva" that I was doing there, that that wasn't Chicano art. So when I was working with the students, I immediately just stopped working on that. And I also stopped working on the "Ring of Fire" which was the mural at the end of the projects, as you're leaving on Lancaster and . . . I forget the cross street. But I actually started two murals there and I didn't complete either of them for that reason, because of the controversy of the organization that actually was behind getting in touch with the artists. I just didn't feel that it was no longer a comfortable atmosphere for me to be there with that kind of notion, without allowing the artists their freedom of expression.

JEFFREY RANGEL: They wanted more of the recognizable symbols and iconography. "Ring of Fire" and "Adam y Eva" are more surreal.

WILLIE HERRON: Yes. Right. It was too early to introduce a perspective that didn't come from or wasn't overtly using icons that they were more familiar with, that they considered either more Indian or more Mexican and I was just using muralism as a form of education, as a form of expanding ourselves.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did the young people respond to the different feel of those murals that you were doing at Ramona Gardens at that time?

WILLIE HERRON: I think the young people just viewed me as an artist, as a painter.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And that's what you guys do.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. And I felt that that was why I was there. I wasn't there to educate them in terms of their culture, in terms of any of that. I felt like I was there to inspire them to become painters, to become artists and to learn the process of creativity.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

WILLIE HERRON: And I felt that that was the job of my murals, because I had already done my political, done my outreach piece, which was in Ramona Gardens, which was inside the recreation room. That's where those messages came out. And when I was asked to do the ones out in the public, I wanted to create works that would help to break down the stereotype, to break down the barriers, to break down the limitations but for people just to see them as works of art.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was it the same situation at Estrada Courts? Was it the same pressure to paint murals which were more overtly political in nature and that were more consistently recognizable with a certain bank of images?

WILLIE HERRON: I think that holds true with Estrada Courts. The difference there, I feel, is that when I was asked to work on that particular wall . . . and I got together with Gronk and we conceptualized dividing the wall up into frames and stuff, we just automatically painted what we felt like painting at the time without saying, "Oh, it's going to be political. Oh, it's not going to be political. It's going to be surrealistic. It's not." It just automatically turned out the way it turned out without having any pre-conceived notion of exactly what it was we were going to do image-wise. The difference in Ramona Gardens is that those also being different than the approach to the mural in the recreation room, the mural in the recreation room coming from just the drawings of the youth and me putting them together, I actually drew drawings and designed the two outdoor murals. And for me, that was the beginning for me to really start to think about my work and to approach them in a little more of a traditional way. I wanted that experience too. Not just to be spontaneous and paint whatever came to me but also I wanted to explore the whole idea of researching, coming up with some drawings and you have to remember, those murals were in the early stages of me developing as a muralist. So I still owed myself that chance to explore coming up with a design and doing some research and not having the constraints of using symbolism and ideas that everyone else was already painting in the housing project. Why would I even consider repeating what someone else was already doing if I had already painted it indoors? So I wasn't going to like repeat myself. So I saw that it was an opportunity to grow.

JEFFREY RANGEL: At one point did you feel like those programs, or that commitment to working with younger people either faded or changed or . . . was it about CETA money drying up? Was it about a change in the momentum of the Chicano movement? Or was it more about what your experiencing as an artist personally and wanting to explore some different things? What was the whole formula for that?

WILLIE HERRON: I think it's actually a little bit of all of that. And actually the disappointment continued in terms of muralism and doing that as a form of a . . . using that as a form of communication because I had a pretty strong notion and idea as a kid of why I wanted to be a public artist. Why I wanted to create these kinds of works. And with that, it just seemed like the murals that were beginning to sprout and beginning to emerge in terms of the mural movement, that it really . . . the majority of them stereotyped and pigeon-holed muralists because they didn't explore enough versatility. They didn't explore enough different imagery. They kept rehashing the same, a lot of the same stuff. And I feel that it really to this day, I think it's kind of . . . people have this concept and have this notion of a Chicano mural. And I think that with that idea, it really slowed down the investment. It slowed down the concept and the idea of murals and mural painting and that being a way of salvaging communities, of deterring communities from violent activity, from crime.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That slowed it down?

WILLIE HERRON: I think it slowed it down because there wasn't monies being put into that because they were . . . everybody was seeing the same imagery and the same kind of murals being painted. There wasn't enough versatility. They were tired of it. I strongly feel that that happened. And me being just one artist, speaking of myself and my own experiences, it didn't seem like there were enough artists doing different stuff that I was dominated by that whole movement.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Who was doing different stuff.

WILLIE HERRON: What? Besides Asco and the work that we were doing?

JEFFREY RANGEL: And murals in particular.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, the few I think that were doing different stuff probably weren't working often enough. They weren't doing enough. And maybe to this day they still don't have really that many murals behind them and they're not really considered muralists first. They have a few murals but they have moved on to being painters, more like easel painters and stuff. There was stuff that was out there. Some of the things that Los Four was doing, I feel, wasn't as stereotypical. Some of the stuff they were doing. Besides Asco, there was off shoots of that particular group because then I think John Valadez became sort of one of the later members. Then some of the stuff Judithe Hernandez was doing. Some of the stuff that SPARC was doing, Judy Baca, that was also in the seventies. Some of the stuff she was doing was a little bit different. There were a handful of artists out there. But for the most part, most of the stuff that started to go up close to the end of the seventies and the early eighties, it was just losing its momentum because nothing fresh was continuing to evolve out of it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How about different parts of the country? Was there an awareness that say artists in San Francisco or in Chicago or Albuquerque or around the country were taking murals in any different directions?

WILLIE HERRON: I think there was a handful of murals on both coasts that were approaching like I guess sort of what you would say maybe Siqueros started to do by the middle seventies, right before he died, with the poly forum and sort of like really going beyond. Just again, a lot of that stuff just started to become very abstract. It was still an extreme where maybe the surrealistic stuff started to take on too much of a commercial art, sort of an album cover kind of an approach. And it started to like really . . . how would you say? Just sprout too many different directions. So where it didn't help it either when it started to sprout in too many different directions.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Would one of those directions be the work that you were doing for the film industry?

WILLIE HERRON: There's a possibility but again that's in the public eye but in a different way, in a different medium because the final product is produced for film and then it ends up in a movie theatre versus a street where Barrio Nuevo or Geraghty Loma, the guys get to drive by and maybe those guys wouldn't even see those films that those murals are in. So I think in the sense of then certain film makers and certain artistic visions started to use muralism in their films, I think again that whole genre for me was happening in the early seventies all through the seventies and then through the eighties and still through the nineties. For me, my work has always been used in films.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you have a different approach to the murals that you're doing, the visuals that you're doing for films?

WILLIE HERRON: No. Well, normally I'm approached to do works of art for films that really, really take the more popular, the more . . . probably the more publicized style and perspective of my work.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Which is what?

WILLIE HERRON: Which is probably a lot like social and political commentaries. That perspective in my work is more evident than not in the works that I create that I'm commissioned for for films in particular because they reference my street work from the early seventies. And that's basically what they're looking for.

JEFFREY RANGEL: To give their film a feel.

WILLIE HERRON: A feel of L.A., a feel of the streets. So often it even incorporates graffiti still. And sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it doesn't call for that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Have you been happy with the results of the use of your murals in films?

WILLIE HERRON: I kind of just see them as a commission and a project that sort of gives me room to grow in a completely different way than say the work being twenty years later still visible on the street by an adult that at the time I executed it maybe was five years old. Okay. That child at five years old pretty much isn't going to view my work in the film that it was in at the time when he was five. And more than likely now that he's eighteen or nineteen, still hasn't seen the film. So the exposure is completely different. So I'm actually more satisfied with my public art that can be viewed by just anybody at any time versus the film. There's a limitation to the movie industry and I still see it as a commission, but a chance to still express myself in a similar way.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see there being issues about using your murals to give a film a feel of what L.A. is about. On the one hand, that being a good opportunity. But on the other hand, modifying the power of those images and what they're trying to communicate at a street level - It really changes the meaning of the mural in some regard.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.



JEFFREY RANGEL: And so it seems like it could be a real mixed bag in that.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And plus, they're portable. So there's already a mixed bag when you create a work that can travel, that could go places just like the film that reproduces it and it shows in France. It's showing all over. It's exactly the same issue when you create a portable piece. Because that's the concept behind it is for it to be seen in places out of context. But when you create a work that is fixed to the building in a community, then it obviously belongs in its category of that and then you have a category of portables. And that's a totally different issue.

END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE B

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is Tape 2, Side B continuing with Willie Herrón on February 19th in the year 2000. So what I'm hearing is that muralism as a genre, as a medium, is very inclusive. It's a very broad medium. And similarly, Chicano muralism, there's all different ways to try to think about that. There's all different styles. There's all different

WILLIE HERRON: techniques too.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Techniques. Whether it's permanent, portable. Inside, outside.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: At a museum. Done individually, collectively, with youth. There's no one set this is what Chicano muralism is. This is what I'm hearing. And it seems like those discussions really resonate with discussions about what constitutes Chicano art and who should be sort of included in that category, which is always kind of a hotly contested topic.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And it has been from the time I was old enough to be put into that category. Ever since I could remember, it's controversial.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. How do you feel that the C.A.R.A. exhibit handled that issue? Or what was their sort of approach to in some ways defining a generation of Chicano artists at that point?

WILLIE HERRON: I think, again, that fell into the final representation, the works, the final pieces that were selected again to me they tried to cover too much. And they tried to be everything to all people. In fact, I remember somebody even saying that. One of the committee members. So, being an exhibition that was put together in the three, four year period and being an exhibition that came out at the time that it did, it seemed important to me developing a logo and selecting some of the colors and assisting in the committees and being part of all the collecting of information to come up with the final, it seemed that there were just essences of a lot of different ideas. And so there was no one really, really strong concept because it was just -- it tried to just be too much about everything. Where I'm more inspired by things that are a little more specific.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were there shows that you participated in that you felt accomplished that specific focus?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think some of the earlier shows in the middle seventies to late seventies probably may have accomplished it in a similar way but maybe were - Since there was less work to choose from, less categories at the time that could have been created and were put in those categories, I might have to say it was probably exhibits like Chicanismo en el Arte. There was the Ancient Roots, New Visions. They seemed to be a bit more focused on just the power and soul of Chicano art versus what it all means, where it all came from and where it's all going. And the C.A.R.A. exhibit was so global in thought that it was very difficult to put a show together like that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. You mentioned some of the shows in the mid-seventies and it reminded me to ask you about the show that you did in Mexico City, if I'm not mistaken. You got invited by Proceso Pentagano to do a show out there.

WILLIE HERRON: M-hm.

JEFFREY RANGEL: From what I've read about them is that the collective, they were a pretty progressive group of artists, very much tied to the cultural front in Mexico City at that time, in Mexico at that time. I was wondering what that exchange was like. What kind of work you showed over there. And what that was like.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I have always felt a lack of enthusiasm from Mexico on all aspects and all levels of my work. And I think that it seems to me that I don't really feel strongly about being singled out. I kind of feel that maybe other artists felt the same way that I did. But I never felt like the few times that I did come in contact with anyone regarding an exhibition in Mexico City, it was almost like the shows had to originate here first

before they could go over there in order for them to seem like they would be accepted on the level that they should be accepted. Whenever I was approached individually, I never really felt that strong about Mexico really understanding my work and understanding Chicano art in general. And I kind of still feel that they don't. This last incident that I was in contact with again to help curate and a committee that I was on to put a show together for Mexico, they seemed to be still excited and enthusiastic about a really, really small percentage that represents the Chicano. And to me, it's again just relating to the stereotype. I kind of felt that they were just too excited about the gang banging tattooed back cholos in low riders. And that was it. And to me, it's depressing because we're multi-faceted individuals. And there's all these different levels of Chicanismo. And I think that they have this certain notion that we're a certain type and then with this whole movement of well the beach culture, they're wearing Pendletons. They're wearing khakis. They're wearing beanies and they're doing tatoos. It seems like Mexico thinks it's cool because it came via the beach culture. And now it's cool to identify. But we identify with the cholo and that's the Chicano.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What do you mean the beach culture?

WILLIE HERRON: Because the beach culture has allowed MTV, the Generation X, these different video television programs that broadcast in places that get to a lot of youth. It's all of these fads and fashions seem to have come out of the Chicano cholo culture and they're emulating us. They're emulating the cholo, the gangs. They're emulating them but now it's a fashion, now it's a fad. They're emulating us without the politics, without the reason, without the consequences. And they just kind of feel that that's what it's about. That's what we're about. And that's a disturbing part. And they're on that bandwagon, they're on that trip. Yeah. It's all the MTV perspective. And it's something again that it's like dealing with a lot of the stereotypes that we've always dealt with. It doesn't represent all of us. And so, sometimes I don't feel that they understand it. That's why it's important for us to communicate with them. But it's going to take awhile. And I don't feel that they understand Chicanismo. They really don't. I mean, not yet.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What do you think it's going to take to get that point across?

WILLIE HERRON: I think we have to put together a very, very cohesive, historical festival that has to go to all the main cities in Mexico and we have to get television coverage, we have to get major massive investors to make the history and the story very, very clear.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Things for example that the documentary "Chicano!", the history that the civil rights movement . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Right. I think that they have to know the politics. They have to know the different avenues that are all viable avenues that we've all taken and we've all confirmed that they're part of our culture and they all derived from a central point. And that they need that history before they can just jump on the year 2000 and that's what Chicano's about. And I think it's something that is needed. And that's what I was trying to do with this committee and with this last exhibit, was try to put a historical perspective. And that includes the music. That includes all the East L.A. bands that came out of the sixties too. It includes the music. It includes the murals. It includes the performance artists. It includes the teatros. We need a major historical exhibit that brings us forward to the nineties for them to really have the right perspective. And I don't think a show like that has ever gone to Mexico, any of the major cities, any of the major museums so they could have this historical perspective.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is there talk about putting something like that together?

WILLIE HERRON: I'm talking about it with the committees. But I mean, we're like individuals like Asco was. We're not part of any major institution. So we put it together and it's just a matter of giving it the time that it needs to start to get backers. And I think it should open in Mexico City in the Bellas Artes or one of the major - It has to open in Mexico City. And then from there it should travel to other museum venues throughout the country.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What do you think about the exchanges that have been taken place between artists and cultural institutions along the border? Like San Diego and Tijuana or El Paso and Juarez, places like that and it seems like that dialogue has been initiated but perhaps hasn't penetrated into different, deeper into the hearts of either the U.S. or Mexico or Latin America for that matter.

WILLIE HERRON: I think all of those are good grass root approaches and they're necessary. But I'm finding that with the increase of what I sort of feel is the middle class, the increase in the middle class where like middle class in Mexico is like no one ever heard of a middle class in Mexico. It's lower class or upper class. Nobody's in the middle. I think the middle class is growing, growing quite a bit. And so is the technology there. They're becoming very hip to that but they're the ones that are latching on to the MTV and the perspective that it's the cosmetic perspective. And if those border towns are doing anything, they're enlightening and educating the lower class but we're not getting to the middle class and the upper class. That's where we need this major, massive recognized historical exhibition because of the growing middle class and the ones that have the power

structure. All the kids, they just - I mean, the middle class, they're just latching on to that whole tv perspective and it's superficial and cosmetic. It's not the real one.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I wonder -- Once again, I kind of want to take this back to focus on you more specifically. Just like in the process of going over, preparing for this interview, it seems like the way that you have been spoken about as an artist has been primarily for your murals and primarily with the music. And I'm wondering if there's other aspects of your creativity that you feel like need to be more thoroughly addressed? Or things that you feel like you've been doing all along that maybe people have been slower to recognize?

WILLIE HERRON: I think the only other thing that I could add to that is that I've always been interested and I've always have had a handle on participating in working with youth, and incorporating and including an outreach perspective when I work on works of art that are going to be fixed in a certain community. That doesn't seem to be something that I read about often when my work is being talked about. Another thing that has come out on certain written pieces has been my involvement throughout my whole career also as a commercial artist. Also as a designer, a graphic designer. That has not been usually included. If it gets referenced, it's a one line reference. But it's almost like it's taboo or it's like, well, you know, it's not a concrete part of one's existence when you're a graphic designer. I was originally approached. Of course, you know, there were some people - going back to the C.A.R.A. exhibit, there were some people that were really, really influential in helping the Wright Art Gallery and UCLA in deciding who was going to be the main graphic designer. But when I was selected to create the logo for that exhibition, for example, I wasn't selected to create the logo for it because I was a musician and a muralist. I had a very strong body of work of graphic design. And I've always been a graphic designer. A perfect example is the Joaquin Murieta Center on Whittier Boulevard. That, per se, is not a mural. It's a sign. It's like a sign. But for some reason, that's acceptable to one level but on another level, it's like no one has ever investigated and tried to find out, because it's a sign, who painted it. No one. That has never come out on anything that has been publicized about me, when they show my work of Joaquin. But yet, historians and critics have referenced it before when they do important works of written material . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: As part of a larger . . . .

WILLIE HERRON: As part of a larger movement but it's never, ever - I'm never given credit for creating that Joaquin Murieta signage. And that's part of where I cross over into commercialism. Say I did the three murals at Giorgio's, the Giorgio's Tuxedo over in Glendora. They're mural. They're not political murals like with fists and guts and protesting. But they're glorifying the Latino actor, the creative Latino and the beautiful Latino. The very attractive part of the attractive side of our culture. The elegant side of our culture. So that also never gets recognized that I also advocate that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's a very political component to articulating that. Particularly when we're talking about how . . . .

WILLIE HERRON: the fifties.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The fifties. But even now how certain aspects of Chicano culture are being siezed upon and have blown up into fashion statements. It's either Chicano culture is about gang banging or low riding or tattooing. But there's this whole other glamorous, elegant side that

WILLIE HERRON: that doesn't get . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: that can't be. It's not East L.A. so to speak. So, I mean, I think there's a politics that is embedded in producing that kind of image.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you think it's a conscientious thing? Like Willie's about the portraying the dark side. He's about portraying more overtly political stuff and we're not going to pay attention to that because it's commercial. It doesn't fit in the box?

WILLIE HERRON: I think that no one knows about it. I think it's just lack of knowledge, lack of knowing it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Knowing that side of your work, how do you think that would change the whole perception of what your artistry is about?

WILLIE HERRON: I think it would do what I would like it to do and that would be that it would allow people to see another side of me that's a part of me as well.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That soft side.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, not necessarily soft. [noise blip on machine]

WILLIE HERRON: That's going to sound pretty loud. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm sorry. It's a different side.

WILLIE HERRON: It's a different side. And I just think that it's a side that never gets out there. It's the Joaquin Murieta sign that doesn't come out. And when I did the Joaquin Murieta sign for the center, that same year I did "The Plumed Serpent" and "The Cracked Wall". The same year. I did all those three pieces in the same year. So, there's a lot of things that just become more popular because of the things that the critics and the writers are interested in. And they're interested in conveying that side of me that gets out there and that's the side that dominates the written information about me.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Let me ask you this. You've mentioned the way that being raised in the projects or sort of having a less traditional sense of being raised or your schooling, how schooling has shaped you and what not, how that's moved you to speak about some of what may be construed as negative aspects of life in general. What things can you to that developed that sort of lyrical quality in your work?

WILLIE HERRON: I think right off the bat I could tell you it's a lack of education. It's because I didn't go and educate myself to the point where I kind of felt like - and this might not be the greatest metaphor or example - it's like when I got drafted to go into the service. I avoided the draft and did everything I could so I wouldn't feel like I would be changed in the way I felt, my gut feeling that I had, of what my destiny was as a kid. And I really felt that too much school would do the same thing. I would be too influenced by too many things that I would not be true to my real purpose and my soul that's really me. That's who I was born to be.

JEFFREY RANGEL: But at the same time, I hear you stylistically, and we're talking about the range of your work, you're very open and experimental what influenced you will take in.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. And I think it's just existing and observing and being a sponge.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You don't need the formal class

WILLIE HERRON: I don't need the formal structure and I felt that that formal approach to my knowledge would have made me a completely different artist than I am. And maybe I'd be a better artist in a different way. But I wanted to just always feel like I could go up to anybody on the street and start a conversation and be on their level.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Be real.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And just be on their level. And I feel that I could still do that and I feel it's because - not that education's a bad thing. It's just that in a way it was by design to purposely stay out of school once I just finished my basic education. I wanted to work. I wanted to start creating. And on my own terms go to sources of information and learn on my own terms what it is that I know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It sounds a lot like the way that Gronk talks about educating himself.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And it just might be more of a street approach to learning how to survive.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Patssi also told me that when you were thinking about art school and you showed your work around, they said you didn't need it.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And you were good enough and you were like, just go do it.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I was pretty fortunate to some degree to have received two scholarships when I graduated from high school. One to Otis and one to Art Center, the College of Design in Beverly Hills. And in doing so, when I showed my portfolio at Otis, I was basically told that I didn't need to go to school. I didn't need to further my education as an artist, as a painter. Just paint and just work and just create. That I had more work than some of the professors had in their whole life time painting. And I was just getting out of high school. When I went to Art Center and did the six weeks there, I showed them the same portfolio and they just said, "We'll put you in touch with an institution in Mexico and you really need to go to Mexico to learn how to paint." And that seemed really weird too.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I don't understand that.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, again, it was a stereotype. [laughs] I think they were stereotyping me. So I just said, okay.

So then that was it. So I just said okay, well I guess no one's going to give me money to go to school so I'm on my own. And that was pretty much it. I never pursued furthering my education after high school.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's interesting. And a lot of your peers were pursuing education, art education in particular.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You know, John and Carlos and McGu. Some of the folks we've talked about. And it seems how that there's also a generation coming up right now who are going through those channels as well.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And I wonder do you have any reflections about that?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think that if I'm included in any of this information that puts me in a place where I've contributed to a certain genre of art work, I just feel that it's there for a reason and it's not there based on my education, because I have a degree. And it's not based on the fact that I'm from the street and I have no education and I'm a drop out. I think it's just based on the merit of the work, on the quality of the work and what it represents. And to me that's what's the most important thing. And sometimes I used to tell people, my work is more famous than I am as a person. And that's - Every time I would go, I didn't feel comfortable even talking about my work because then I felt that I would be judged on what I would say, how I would look and how much education I had versus if you just see the work, I physically don't exist. My work exists. Judge the work. Analyze it. Put it where it belongs. Put it where you think it should be. And that's my form of communicating. It's not me physically as a person. What it is that I say, what it is - that's important but it's not the most important thing. It's how the viewer interprets what it is that I've done. That's what's important.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That seems pretty unique in the sense.

WILLIE HERRON: It's like I'm already dead! [laughs] Right. I'm acting like I'm already dead but I'm not. And people just have to look at the work and come up with their own perspective.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Most artists are more concerned about controlling how their work

WILLIE HERRON: is perceived. Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: is perceived, spoken about and received.

WILLIE HERRON: And I'm not. Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I mean, I think artists are aware that everyone's going to come to what they do with a different sense with a different subjectivity. But in that immediate . . . precisely because of that, that they want to control . . . or at least articulate like, "no, this is what I'm trying to say." But I'm hearing something really different from you.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Well, just the other day, restoring "The Wall That Cracked Open," just the other day, there was three individuals that I didn't even know. Okay? They approached me and they had just come from the liquor store. And they cracked open their cans of beer like that's what everybody does. When they go through the alley, they find a spot. That was a famous spot for guys who just sit on the steps and drink their cold one for the day, right? All three of those individuals - one was from Mexico, two were born here and were from East L.A., half my age - all three of them had a completely different interpretation of the Wall that Cracked Open. All three of them! And they were all very interesting perspectives and I just even hesitated to tell them the reason behind the mural . . . .

END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE B

BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 3, SIDE A

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is Tape 3, Side A, continuing with Willie Herrón on February 19, 2000. The interviewer is Jeff Rangel. . . . You were telling me about just the other day you were doing repairs on The Cracked Wall and thee three guys were sitting back there. And they each had different interpretations of

WILLIE HERRON: of what that mural meant to them, or what they saw in that mural. And in detail, certain parts of the mural, they had a similar interpretation of what certain details meant to them, but the overall idea . . . . I mean, this one cat, he was so far - it was so far out. But when I stood and took in mind exactly how he perceived the message and the whole idea behind the mural, it made a lot of sense. And I saw things in it from his interpretation that I never realized. And I had never looked at it from that perspective. And when I did, I could connect it to something in my past. But at the time you create something and you're spontaneous, sometimes

you don't know where that energy comes from and why that shape just seems to be comfortable and the right shape and I'm just going to back to why to me it's more important how the people interpret the work, more than the real reason behind it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Really? You feel strongly . . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. I feel strong about that to me. That's what they're going to end up with, the people that don't read about me. The people that are on the street, walking by, just looking at the mural. The people that live simple lives that just go about their daily routine. They're going to have their interpretation and that's what's important to me - is their interpretation of it. Because that's the purpose for doing the work and the people that I'm trying to communicate to that normally don't have art in their lives, that normally don't . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: So how does this process of communication work then? As artist, it seems like you're invested in communicating a certain idea. If that idea isn't being put forth, or being put across in a way that everyone who's perceiving it, then it seems like the work is taking on a whole different life of its own, and you're okay with that as an artist.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. I'm okay with that, the way also going back to The Cracked Wall, the way in 1970 there were certain names and then in 1980 they faded out. And in 1980, there was different names. Those names faded out. In 1990 there's different names. And now those names are coming up with the white wash. And to me, it changes with the people and it changes and the interpretation changes. And I'm okay with the interpretation changing because then I feel then that the work stands the test of time. And it communicates to the people that then evolve and become . . . You know, maybe they're all Salvadorians now and before they were from Chihuahua in the fifties. And now they're all from Nicaragua. But they have a different way of seeing the same work but being from somewhere else, they have their interpretation. And it's still close enough that when some of the work is first executed, you're just going by an emotion; you're going by a strength and a power that moves you to create it a certain way. And sometimes then it just communicates what it communicates to each individual. It's in the eye of the beholder and they have their own interpretation of it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you feel like when you're working, you're tapping into that real guttural - Like, "I don't really know why I'm doing what I'm doing but I'm doing it because it feels like I need to do it" type of thing?

WILLIE HERRON: I think some of the pieces that I have created throughout my career have come from there and that's the part that has motivated me to create what I create. And in some pieces come more from research and a combination of things that I learned by doing research, because I do a preliminary drawing and I approach it in a more traditional way. So those take on a completely different level of communicating to the viewer, to the people, than the one that comes from the gut feeling. But at the end, they still communicate to the eye of the beholder. They interpret it the way they interpret it without the books, without knowing why the artist really did it. I'm not sure that that's really that important. It's just another perspective. I then become like the spectator, like the viewer in my interpretation of it. It's not the only interpretation that everyone has to live with for . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That makes an art historian's job a little difficult.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. [laughs] It's true. I mean, I think that anything else would be limiting because I've heard stories that artists do certain things for a certain reason and sometimes those stories are boring. And the image looks interesting and knowing that while it represents this to me, and it looks like that and this is what I get out of it, sometimes it's far more interesting than the original reason why an artist did what he did.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Or you can be like others who just change the story every time.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Change it. Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: To make it interesting for themselves. So that makes things difficult for an art historian too.

WILLIE HERRON: M-hm. Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: But that's the way it works. All right, I'm going to throw one last question out here for you. But it's going to be kind of a big one. I wonder if there's a way to track, maybe mark, your development as an artist. If you could do that for us here by . . . through pieces that you've done. Like this was really important about this stage of what I was doing. This piece here really kind of is a turning point up here because of this reason or that reason.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, I don't know. I'd have to think about that one, just because it seems like to me, right now, things are broken down in three decades. And I have my body of work in the seventies. I have my body of work in the eighties. And then I have my body of work in the nineties.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, let's just talk about the bodies of work that - if you think that's a good way of breaking it down as well.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So what's the seventies body about?

WILLIE HERRON: I think that the body of work that I created in the seventies came out of the desire to communicate change and to document things that seemed really obvious on the street. To document those things but to also inspire change. The eighties, the body of work I would have to say transformed into music, with the same sensibility, the same reasons, the same approach from my art work from the seventies then transformed into music throughout the eighties. So that was my second transition. And my art work wasn't as . . . didn't play as significant of a role in the eighties as my music did. The visual arts, right. Didn't play as a significant role to put it in terms of a body of work. I probably had like a little bit of a spill over from the seventies into the eighties, as far as my mural painting. But for the most part, the decade of the eighties belongs to Los Illegals as a group and as a body of work. And then in the nineties, I started to go back to - because of the surgence of - The turning point for me was the popularity of the computer as a form of . . . as a tool to create art work. I didn't feel compelled or inspired by the computer when it started to infiltrate the homes and infiltrate business. I didn't feel inspired by it whatsoever. So I started to revert back to mural painting and mural painting becoming once again a strong tool for me to use to communicate my ideas. And also I would say it was a fifty/fifty mixture of music through the nineties where I balanced both my visual art work and my music pretty much was a fifty/fifty mixture all the way through the whole time. For me, the nineties made a big turn around too with the whole invasion, or just the whole issue of the Persian Gulf. That whole . . . that was a very strong message to me that really was an event that took place that sort of retained me in a sense that made me start to become more and more deeper involved with social issues and the way people just have this disregard for other people. And the whole idea of respect, the whole idea of getting to know other cultures and getting to know other people and giving their space and their room to be who they are, where they came from, rather than this concept of everybody's got to blend and mix in and everybody has to eliminate some of their culture, eliminate some of their past in order to move into the future. All of those issues, for me in the nineties, helped to create a person within me that is kind of a culmination of the seventies, a culmination of the eighties and that's the nineties was for me. And then now I'm dealing with really, really going back to the early seventies and working on projects and inspiring projects with the youth again. And I'm going full circle, beginning with the restoration of The Wall That Cracked Open. So I'm like it's 1972 all over again. But it's cool because - And I really have a lot of energy about it because I just feel that it's a whole new generation. And now I'm in a position to educate where before, in '72, I was a sponge. And now I'm not a sponge. I'm kind of like squeezing myself and putting water on other sponges.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is there that ability to - I think muralism lends itself very well to education and to working with young people. Do you feel like there's that possibility with music as well?

WILLIE HERRON: I think there is that possibility with music. The thing that makes music more difficult is that usually unless you play alone, you do things and you're just a one person with a guitar or whatever, I have always thought of music as being a collective creative process. Because you're always working with other creators, where with the murals and my art work, my visual art, I get up in the morning and I could produce something by the end of the day and spend the whole day alone. I mean, I could too with music but the final and the end presentation is always a collaborative. So lots of times it can be as complex as putting together the CARA exhibit. So it's a more difficult way of expressing yourselves because the end result, I think, it has to deal with a lot with sometimes the proper equipment. Sometimes it gets real technical, where painting remains a pretty simple way of communicating a thought and communicating to the youth which dominate the streets. I mean, they need something to look at to make them aware that there are other things besides drugs, sex and everything that could possibly steer them in a very negative path.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I lied. That wasn't my last question.

WILLIE HERRON: Okay. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Does your re-commitment to youth have anything to do with being a parent and raising your own daughter and so forth?

WILLIE HERRON: I think it has something to do with that but it also has a lot to do with feeling like I didn't belong and feeling kind of disconnected as a child and growing up. I think it starts there. Whether I would have had children or not, in the early seventies when I was doing it and working with children and youth that were having problems, it's because I could relate. Because I grew up that way too. And I turned to the streets and I saw nothing but violence and nothing but drugs and nothing but things that I don't know why to this day I wasn't inspired to be that way. I was inspired to paint and to draw and to document it, but to send a message of hope and the fact that there's light at the end of the tunnel and you don't have to grow up this way. To me, that's

been my plight. And I feel that there are a lot of youth out there, if not more than when I was growing up, that need that. And there's a need for people to have that compassion out there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, you have the experience to share.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And that don't need to collect money for it. I mean, I don't feel compelled to be paid for it. And that's another thing why I have the motivation that I do is that I'm not looking to get paid for it. But if I get commissioned to do projects, those projects, I need to include children to assist me because they get the experience while someone else covers me to do the work and to make sure it's done the right way, professionally, from a person that's experienced. But at the same time, I get to share that experience and that knowledge with the children. And I think that's important.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Definitely. Let's wrap it up there for today.

END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 3, SIDE A  
SESSION 3, TAPE 1, SIDE A (30-minute tape sides)

JEFFREY RANGEL: Today is March 17, 2000. We are interviewing Willie Herrón, third session here at City Terrace. This is an interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel.

We wanted to start out today talking about some of the restoration efforts that you are involved in right now and where you see it taking you in the future or how it represents the full circle of where you are with mural production and public art.

WILLIE HERRON: I got this idea in the early nineties. Just driving around Los Angeles, I noticed and became very concerned about the public art pieces that were created in the early development of the Chicano movement, late 60s, early 70s, that were in severe need of restoration or needed some kind of assistance in bringing them back to life. I thought that a lot of the murals that were created in that period in the early 70s also were giving the communities and the neighborhoods a level of dilapidation, just not looking too good. Just giving an impression of the neighborhood that needed to be freshened up. Also, the whole idea of the new wave of immigrants and all the changing demographics in the last 20 years, it seemed very crucial that some of the kids knowing these murals and growing up in these neighborhoods that were now young adults, that, for their sake and the sake of the wave of the new immigrants that it would be a good idea to start thinking about and embarking on a restoration program. I just felt that since there wasn't one that was in existence, to my knowledge, it was a good idea for me, rather than to think about creating new works of art to represent the communities, but to take very important and significant murals based on my opinion that would be reflective of popular demand that I would attempt some sort of channeling some energy to start to get money to do some restorations, rather than creating new murals, even tho' I've been approached and was approached many times to create new pieces by institutions and also other arts concerned "Well, we want to see what Herrón is up to these days" - you know, some of his new ideas and so on and so forth. I felt that the restoration idea was actually a lot more important than any new ideas in terms of public art. I feel that the people moving in to these new neighborhoods and the kids now that are young adults and the new children that it was more important to revitalize these murals rather than to just create a new one than to let all the early 70s murals just go by the wayside or just become insignificant.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were there certain murals you had in mind when you first started thinking about doing restoration? Which ones did you concentrate on? Was it by neighborhood? Artist?

WILLIE HERRON: It seemed a lot easier to begin with my own murals just because there was less red tape involved. I started off with "The Advancements of Man" in 1994, on Soto and César. The previous year they had changed the the cross street, Brooklyn Avenue, to César Chávez, so I thought with that changing of the name of that street and with the death of César Chávez within months of finally getting all the monies together to begin the restoration program for that particular mural, I thought that was a good site. Because of the name change and significance of that mural. It was almost 80% covered with graffiti, from about the last 5 years with the wave of taggers and graffiti artists emulating the east-side or the eastern style - New York, Chicago - that particular style of balloon lettering. In the late 80s, early 90s, completely destroyed quite a few murals. Being an advocate of graffiti artists and being a supporter and also feeling that graffiti is a very important part of our landscape here, that kind of graffiti and that kind of tagging that comes after the mural is executed, I have a different perspective on the graffiti that previously exists and then an artist comes along and wants to do a mural on a wall that's graffiti coated. It's a totally different concept and I have a different feeling of that. That mural, since it was almost 80-90% non-recognizable, I felt that was a good target, a good place. Very popular corner. It's a massive gathering area where massive amounts of people per day gather and catch the bus every 10-15 minutes and it's just a major corner. Once I was done restoring that and made a rededication, I also included on the side of the mural facing César Chávez a new panel on which I dedicated to the plight of César Chávez and the plight of the farm worker. So I did some photorealistic vignettes and superimposing different periods in the



early, early farm workers movement and composed an image collecting all these different sights and different symbols and different periods in time relating to César Chávez and his movement and the plight of the farm worker, and entitled it "We Are Not Animals," relating it to the Civil Rights Movement. Relating it also to the fact that a lot of the conditions were substandard. Almost inhumane for a lot of these farm workers where they slept, where they lived, where they ate, inhaling the stuff they were spraying on the crops. A very difficult life. You know, the pesticides and stuff. It just seemed very overt but at the same time very sensitive to call it "We Are Not Animals," we are human beings and we should be treated as such. That was interesting because I was able to incorporate a new work of art along with the restoration. That was in 1994 into 1995. So I completely restored "The Advancements of Man," and then on the same building, the pharmacy there, I added facing César Chávez, which was Brooklyn Avenue before. I added a new panel to "The Advancements of Man" and dedicated it to César Chávez.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's interesting too on that corner, the murals are two totally different styles too.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Advancements of Man - I don't know. I'm not sure how to pin in that style but it . . .

WILLIE HERRON: I would say it's Siquero-esq.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. I was going to say it's coming from . . . very inspired by the Mexican mural movement.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Whereas the one facing César Chávez, "No Somos Animales" is very - like you were saying - photo-realistic. Even colors, there are silvers in there. Black.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, actually, the whole mural, including the new panel that I added in '95, they were all done in acrylic irredescents. Even the original mural done in '75, "The Advancements of Man," was the first all irredescent mural in East Los Angeles. So, it may look different because of the style that was executed. But it's all iridescent just the same as "The Advancements of Man" done in '75. So that's cohesive. That part of it. But the style is a little bit different due to the fact that I wanted to give it a little more of a WPA period. So the style would sort of incorporate photo-realism with 1930s, 1940s feel which is what I was trying to give "The Advancements of Man" but with a modern vision of the thirties and the forties. So, still trying to keep it all within the same thread, just wanting to give it a little different twist at the same time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's a pretty powerful intersection there for East L.A. muralists. You've got Botello's piece across the street and . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Streetscapers

JEFFREY RANGEL: Streetscapers on the other side. So have you ever restored any other artist's murals? Or have you primarily concentrated on your own?

WILLIE HERRON: I'm trying to think. Probably the closest to that would be prior to I believe it was 1990 that I received a commission from the Social and Public Arts Resource Center to create a mural for the Neighborhood Pride Program. And I proposed to resurrect Carlos Almaraz's "No Compre Vino Gallo". So in 1990, that's about the closest I ever got to restoring another artist's work but that wasn't really a restoration because I didn't work on the original work of art, which only lasted a couple of years and it just severely, severely just became very dilapidated and distressed by the poor preparation. It was on plywood which was previously painted. And I'm sure it was due to economic reasons and not because of the lack of knowledge by Mr. Almaraz that the mural was executed on a very poor surface. So it didn't last very long. And it was a very, very significant and very powerful and very important work of art which inspired very few people because it was around for such a short time. It didn't get a chance to have its impact on the community, its impact on other artists. It definitely influenced me. I was close to just graduating from high school at the time when he executed that mural and actually visited him while he was executing that mural. And I was just totally blown away. And I had already created "The Cracked Wall," "The Plumed Serpent." I had done some of my earlier pieces when that executed.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was he familiar with your work when he was doing that?

WILLIE HERRON: I met him, actually officially met him in 1971 or 1970. He was a judge for an art contest that was called Junior Masters through the . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: At Barnsdall?

WILLIE HERRON: No, that was the L.A. County Museum of Art. I remember going there as one of the finalists. And I actually met Carlos Almaraz there but unfortunately, he didn't select my work as the winner of that particular --

and at that time I was in high school. But that's when I first met him. But then, ran into him again a couple of years later at the exhibition that Gronk, Harry and myself had. Our first group exhibition at the Mechicano Art Center. That's where I ran into Carlos Almaraz. He was very, very excited about our work. And all that was around the same time that he had just finished the mural on Michigan, I believe. Michigan and Soto. Which was one block south . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was it All Nations?

WILLIE HERRON: One block south of that same intersection that we're talking about with the Botello and it was one block over. The All Nations. He painted the front of the building and then along the side, on an adjacent building, still part of the All Nations, that's where he painted the "No Compre Vino Gallo" mural. So, I decided to resurrect it as a tribute to Carlos Almaraz, his work and his inspiration to artists and to the community for that short period of time that that mural existed. I felt it was a very important work of art. So I resurrected it on a canvas maybe about two to three percent larger than the real piece. So I made it a little bit larger. It's on canvas. The canvas was stretched. And it hangs at the old Bank of America Building on Sixth and Spring. Right there by Gronk's studio where they used to have the Latino Lab and they used to do the theatre pieces.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, okay. Is it still there?

WILLIE HERRON: I believe it's still there, hanging way up high, maybe about fifteen, twenty feet up above the lobby, the entrance when you walk into that building. It's in that open area. It's hanging in there somewhere. Along with the Social and Public Arts Resource Center, we made a very, very minor attempt to try and relocate it in an institution or a place that just houses Chicano art. And we haven't been that successful with trying to find a home for it because it does measure ten feet by forty-one feet. And it's all . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's pretty significant space.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, it's a good sized piece for being a painting. Because it's like a painting now. I wouldn't even call it a mural so to speak.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you do that yourself?

WILLIE HERRON: And I executed it on my own, right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow. Significant.

WILLIE HERRON: And so I thought that was an important piece. I did it. It's on public exhibit there on Sixth and Spring. And it's been there since I executed it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Can you tell me how the original mural inspired you? I mean, why that particular piece was so important?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I had a tendency in the early seventies to really, really be inspired by pieces if they were paintings or photographs or films that really just seemed to have a major emotional impact, like when you would view it you would just practically gasp for air or just have this emotional reaction. And for some reason, that piece gave - I got an emotional reaction by that piece. I don't know if it was because of the police clubbing people over the head. If it was the Sacred Heart, the fist, the tears in the eyes of some of the faces. The screaming César Chávez face. There was a lot of emotion in the faces that I saw in the piece. There was a lot of body gestures of emotion that I felt that there was a lot of energy in that piece and not totally, totally understanding it at that time, being twenty years old, and having little to no formal education in art. I just felt the emotional response. And I channeled that emotion into my work. So it was motivating in the way that it didn't seem pretentious. It didn't seem like an advertisement piece. It just seemed like it was coming from his gut and he was saying something about issues that were about people and the suffering of people that I just felt connected to. And it seemed really natural. Everything about the way I felt connected to it, what he was doing, just was very - It still seemed very caveman too at the same time. Because he was painting and he was full of paint and he was using his hands and he had a beard and he just seemed like - I mean, I could just relate to how he seemed out of context of modernism, out of context of society. He just seemed like he was somewhere where I wanted to be. He was already there. I felt it as a power that he had, his spirit or something about it. He was where I wanted to be. And I just felt I was only twenty and here's this guy that's already been through what I'm just starting to go through. So I idolized him.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

WILLIE HERRON: For what he was doing and the little that I knew about him at the time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you guys have much interaction after that?

WILLIE HERRON: Little to no interaction whatsoever. I did run into him after that at the show that they had. At the Los Four show. I did run into him after that. And like I said, I ran into him at the Mechicano Art Center on several occasions, at openings. But other than that, he seemed for the most part when I did run into him, for the most part, like during the early L.A.C.E. period also, late seventies, early eighties, when I did run into him, he seemed very confined in a studio atmosphere which I couldn't relate to and I couldn't connect with that aspect of being an artist. I just couldn't. And to this day, I still have a hard time feeling connected to the confinement of a studio versus painting outdoors and being among the people and being outside. You know, cars, traffic, noise. All of that. I'm more partial to existing and creating under those circumstances. So when I did run into him, it was always either in his studio or it was inside some other building indoors. But that's why I relate to much to that time when I ran into him working on that mural. That was the only time I ever ran into him working outside, doing something outside where the public could come and see him and stop and talk to him.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Although he did a lot of -- He did some murals in the Ramona Gardens and a lot of stuff around town, later on in the seventies.

WILLIE HERRON: I don't know if he did one in Ramona Gardens. I know Judithe Hernández did one.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. I think he worked with her on one.

WILLIE HERRON: He may have worked with her on that one, yeah. I don't remember running across them at the time because I also did three murals there at Ramona Gardens.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. We chatted about that. Were there any other artists who were working in the street or within that time frame who you felt a real affinity with or inspiration from?

WILLIE HERRON: I felt a little bit from the work that John Valadez was doing. And moreso I think because of his ability as an artist, again he could have been non-Chicano. I just admired his ability to execute. His technique is what inspired me, moreso than his subject matter. I didn't - Having two brothers that were cholos and car clubs and low riders and just like riding in them and just that being part of my growing up as well, I never felt inspired to create from that lifestyle. I just never did. So the subject matter wasn't inspiring to me, what John Valadez was doing. His technique was. And himself as an artist in general is what inspired me to want to paint like him. So I was actually - I mean, I never really felt like I could pin down a style that I felt was a Herrón style because I gathered influences by the way a lot of other artists around me were painting and I wanted to paint like they painted and they all painted different from each other. So I evolved into this artist that paints in all these different styles because all these artists inspired me and I wanted to paint like them.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's really interesting and it actually ties into something that we were talking about last session about your reticence to go into, to take classes, to go into education. You'd rather just absorb things. And it's interesting to hear that the people that you're absorbing from are your peers and all these different people that are kind of coming out at this time.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: But at the same time, Willie, it seems that a lot of the drawings that I've seen have a very signature, Willie Herrón style. You know what I mean? Very tight graphite work, pen and ink work. And a lot of the images - When I come across your murals, I know that's your work. How do you explain that?

WILLIE HERRON: Maybe it's because it's a blend of all the other artists that were out there and I took all their styles and blended them. And I feel outside of this community that I grew up in Los Angeles, I think outside of it I would have to say the next major, major influence on me was Siqueiros. Moreso . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Outside of L.A.?

WILLIE HERRON: Outside of L.A., Siqueiros would be the next person that would be outside of L.A. that influenced me. Because I don't recall growing up being able to admire and become influenced by América Tropical. I can't really say that I had the opportunity to visit universities and to visit public buildings to view some of Orozco's work or Diego Rivera's here in locally. So with that, the next thing I could do was just resort to the library and images in books that when I would research to develop and to come up with my own ideas, I often used and became influenced by Siqueiros' work. All of the body of his work; not one particular work of art in particular. But just all the body of his work, all as a life span of accomplishment inspired me to - It actually assisted me and was a tool for me to develop my own ideas. Moreso than verbatim copying something and lifting it right out of one of his murals. I wasn't into that. The end result may have been somewhat of a derivative but not a direct rip off but an influence to inspire me to come up with something of my own. But the source of inspiration, the seed, came from his body of work.

JEFFREY RANGEL: When you're talking about this is reminding me of another question in terms of either

influences or awareness of what other artists are doing around you. From what I hear, your peers here in Los Angeles are your primary influence and then apart from that, Siqueiros' work. But there's maybe an awareness on your part of what's happening say in San Diego or in San Francisco or Sacramento or some of the - either the mural works that are being done there or the graphic work that's being done there by other Chicanos or Latinos or whatever.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. I would have to say in the seventies into the early eighties, other than what was being published at the time, I would say that I wasn't influenced by work being done by other Chicano artists in the United States. I can't put my finger on one particular art piece that was created by a Chicano within the United States in that time period that influenced me. In fact, I think there were a lot of works of art that influenced in a different way. And I would have to say that they were doing things that I said that I would never do. So I think in that sense there was some influence.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's definitely an influence.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. On that level. But lots of times, an influence sometimes is interpreted and it's kind of I guess my limited way of thinking of the term influence is always in a positive way. You end up doing something because it inspires you to do something similar or in that vein. Where what everybody else was doing was inspiring me not to do that and not to have those images and not to have that in my pieces, in terms of the works being created at that time that were from other areas, up north, down south, southwestern, eastern coast. All of that. I didn't feel inspired by that in a way to create something similar where Siqueiros was a total opposite.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Let me flip the tape here.

END OF SESSION 3, TAPE 1, SIDE A  
BEGIN SESSION 3, TAPE 1, SIDE B

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, this is Tape 1, Side B continuing with Willie Herrón on March 17th, 2000. And I remember you saying that the Los Four show affected you, or influenced you in that way, in a sort of . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Reverse. Right, right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . not the kind of work I want to do.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Can you recall any other pieces or shows that that's not what I'm about? Or that's not the kind of work that I want to do? What was it about those pieces that really kind of send you in a different direction?

WILLIE HERRON: I think a lot of the pieces that I'm referring to and - and there's not like one piece in particular because these images were re-occurring images like the murals with the Virgen de Guadalupe. The murals with Emiliano Zapata. The murals with Che Guevara. The murals with Pancho Villa. The murals that just had all the calaveras. Just the Sacred Hearts. Like all of the stuff that just seemed to be re-hashed and continued to re-occur no matter who was painting the mural. So I guess I just tried as much as I could to avoid sort of stereotypical symbols and images that just keep re-occurring in murals. And a lot of those seemed more obviously re-occurring when I would take certain important works from Chicago, from the east coast. Certain works from the southwest. Certain works from up north. Certain works from San Diego. It seemed like a lot of those works, that's what they had in common, were those re-occurring images.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And I think we've mentioned before that your desire to move away from that kind of iconography and those images where certain things that you shared in common with Harry and Patssi and inclined to develop a different notion of Chicano identity, Chicano art is about.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. And we often had this discussion. I mean, on different plateaus, we would approach this discussion but end up with it really the end result or the action that we would take from these discussions, hours and hours at Tiny Naylor's and just like in the wee hours in the morning, we'd often have these discussions of where we should go with the state of Chicano art. And we really felt, and I felt that collectively without actually saying it to each other, I really felt collectively that we felt responsible to taking the art to a different place that would then become a significant marker to work in the future. To inspire the children, to inspire a new generation. We were after the kids that were looking for something different, that were looking for something that wasn't something they could spread across the United States. We wanted to find that little niche and create something in that little niche so if anyone wanted something alternative, they would turn to us for the alternative. We purposely tried . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: A very conscious decision.

WILLIE HERRON: That was a conscious thing. But what we would actually create to fill that little niche hadn't been created yet. But the concept of creating something to fill that little niche so whenever anyone wanted to deviate from the main stream, boom - they turned to ASCO. They'd go to our little corner and find something that was alternative to the main stream.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you feel like there were people that were receptive immediately in the early seventies? Or, has it taken time for people to catch on to what you were striving to do? And I ask that question as also a question of audience. Who was this work - I mean, you are producing for yourselves obviously, but . . .

WILLIE HERRON: Right. Well, I think that it's . . . that's a very difficult question to answer because to this day, twenty-some odd, almost thirty years later, it still seems to be in the niche. Because we were, I think, fortunate that we weren't challenged on the same level that we were producing our work. We were challenged by main stream, like artists that created works that sort of seemed to fit together and fit, be more a part of a larger entity. So therefore, there was no ASCO II, ASCO III. There was no other ASCO group that was doing an alternative niche somewhere the way we did. So in that sense, we were fortunate because to the year 2000, we're still kind of the only ones in that little niche that created that little off shoot, that little branch that kind of went off in a little different, little spot. So in that sense, it seems like our audience is still evolving and our audience is still developing because even the young kids today have a tendency to connect with us. Just like the younger kids did. So I feel that our main target and our main audience were the new generation. And at that time, the generation hadn't come up yet because they were still too young. And they weren't going into their senior year, into college, junior college. To me, that was our primary target. To let them know that you could go off and do something a little bit different. You don't have to use the Virgens. You don't have to have the Aztec calendar, all the pre-Columbian imagery. You don't have to be a Chicano and create art work that only has that to be considered Chicano art.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. What about the cats in San Diego at the -- what's the center down there? The Centro Cultural de la Raza?

WILLIE HERRON: Yes.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And they have Gómez-Peña and Avalos kind of doing some different stuff down there.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you feel like that was ever sort of along the same trajectory of what ASCO was doing?

WILLIE HERRON: Right, right. I think some of those artists as individuals were heavily inspired by what we were doing. And some of our earlier pieces today still seem to be very inspirational. Like wow, we did it and we did this and we took a chance and did that. So, that added that little extra strength or that little inspiration to try something different rather than, "Oh, well. They're not going to consider that Chicano so therefore we're not really Chicano because what we produce isn't Chicano because it doesn't fit in the main stream." We were having to deal with that a lot. I mean, even when I would execute certain murals without submitting a drawing. In Ramona Gardens, for example, I felt like I was being kicked out because they didn't consider what I was doing Chicano.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Here's another question for you that's related. And I've mentioned it earlier. About some of the impetus for creating. We were talking before about your brother being stabbed and gang violence. Or Harry's activities with education and the Blow Outs and media representation of Patssi and Gronk and so on. It seems like your guys are coming from, or addressing issues that are very core to, very similar to what other Chicano artists at the time are addressing. But doing it in a much different way. And it seems that maybe the delivery or the product is -- people have sort of missed that, that part of it. Or do you feel like that's something that's been missed? You know, the actual issues that you're addressing and how they're part of a similar body of consciousness, a similar political movement that other artists are addressing. And have the differences been over-emphasized in that regard?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, that's kind of part of that thing that the definition due to the observation and wanting to define how we did what we did and why we did what we did, and where the inspiration came from and why didn't we feel the need to do something different and yet still be representative of the community and representative of Chicanos throughout the United States. I don't know. I go back to my particular source of creating and I feel that had I really, really - and there's no -- I mean, I don't have anything against people that have spent a lot of years in college. But I feel if I really, really would have pursued my education during the time that I was creating a lot of this stuff, I know I would have created work completely different. And I don't even know if I would have been an artist in general. That I feel that my source and where I'm coming from is due to the lack of education and it's due to me relating to other forms of energy to produce these works, which may put us in a different category because I can't really say that any of us were formally educated except for probably Harry Gamboa. So I think with that, I mean, with all due respect to all the other artists, I mean, if you talk to a lot

of the other artists, I'm sure they have some extended educational background besides high school. Where we're like, we advocate being drop outs. [laughs] So I think with that, to try and like put it somewhere, I keep going back to that. I think that's the reason why I created the work that I created, was because I stood on the streets and I took a lot of that and just created work from it, rather than going into institutions and spending a lot of my evolved - a lot of the years that I evolved as an artist, rather than studying and studying and then producing from some kind of influence from that study, I experienced and produced, experienced and produced rather than studying and producing, studying and producing. That might be one aspect of why maybe it was easy every now and then to take a popular subject or a current event and then have that be a source of inspiration. To then look at your community and juxtapose it somewhere into something that then you create something from. That seemed easier than totally making the piece just a product of that one ideal.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Very cerebral.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. I read it in the paper so, yeah, that's a good idea for a piece. And then you just do a piece as a result of that. There's just that - That's the first thing that comes to my mind. Is just that the fact that we are products of the street moreso than having a formal education. And I think that it did play a role in my work.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you think that also influences your work with young people, or your desire to work with youth?

WILLIE HERRON: Right. And I feel that I could communicate on a little bit different level with them because I don't have that formal training but in a way, I do have the formal training because I'm a product of the streets. So to me, there's a level of formal training that's a direct experience rather than something I read and learned from an instructor.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's got to make you more effective.

WILLIE HERRON: With youth programs. And I feel that that's a very, very important -- just like teachers are important. It's important for that level to be addressed by people that have evolved on that level, where the youth don't have that much of that formal education either. So it's easy for kids to relate to me, to feel close, to feel connected. Because I have that little different savvy.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That different edge. Right. Tell me about your involvement working with youth through the seventies. What's your take on the sort of rise and eventual fall of funding for youth oriented art programs in Los Angeles and nationwide.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, coming from some what of a growing up period where my parents were divorced and I kind of struggled through my formative years with my identity and not having a father role model, I had a tendency to really relate to a lot of the kids coming around while I was working on a lot of my street projects and being accessible to the public. Just the passers-by. I really had a tendency to gravitate to the kids who came from broken homes. And that was just about every kid that I talked to, that I came across while I was working on public art programs, related to youth, at risk kids that were having problems at home, taking those problems into the street, into the schools. Just having hard times with teachers. I related to those kids a lot because I am a product of that as well. And coming from there, I felt that since I had successfully survived and I successfully created a career out of nothing. Never had a formal job. Never did anything in a traditional way. I felt being somewhat of an entrepreneur that I could maybe be a good role model for these kids, to say, "Hey, you know, I was there too. And I remember this. And I felt lonely a lot too. But if you turn around and when you feel bored, your definition of boredom and this definition of boredom, well turn around and pick up a guitar or turn around and start writing or turn around and do some drawings, even if it's cartoons or whatever. But pick something up and create something from not knowing what to do rather than going out on the streets and just hanging out. And just create something." Since it was an automatic thing for me, I kind of felt like it was something that I should share and I could share with these kids. So there were a lot of kids that I've run across today that were part of the CETA program when there was money for artists to go out and reach out into the community, to influence the youth. I kind of felt a lot of those programs were effective. And when money was channeled in that way that they were very effective. Because there's a lot of youth from broken homes that are out there struggling to just to fit somewhere in society and it doesn't help that they're parents are not together. For whatever the reason is, it doesn't help them. It makes it more difficult for them. If money could be put back into those places for programs like that for specifically at risk children, I really feel that we could create a much better society. And we have to start with the youth. So I've always been interested in that aspect of education.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you participate in any youth oriented programs that you felt were particularly effective?

WILLIE HERRON: When I was working on the murals in Estrada Courts.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And who was sponsoring that? Who was organizing that? Who was sponsoring it? Do you recall?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, not Estrada Courts. I'm sorry. Ramona Gardens. That, I recall, at the time was also CETA money that was being channeled for specifically mural programs for junior high. I think it was junior high at the time. Middle schoolers that were at risk to participate in like an art tutoring program after school.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What about like the centros, like Self Help or Plaza or Mechicano for that matter?

WILLIE HERRON: I think they had workshops that were effective. But you had to - with things like that, you almost had to seek them out. It wasn't based on a grade point average that your local school would consider you an at risk student and then, boom, they automatically put you in. That has a little more control and is a little more focused on children that maybe don't realize what it is that they're going through, because they're just in it. Where all the art centers were very effective, but they were more effective because it was either other artists bringing in their kids or it was somehow there was a connection between the youth that used to come in and that community center, versus middle schoolers or high schoolers that really didn't realize what they were going through, but on record they don't look very good so they're re-channeled and re-connected. To me, that's different monies for different purposes. But the end result would be the same.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did those youth respond to your sense of glamour your real experimentation with self presentation and stuff like that?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think that they embraced it because it was different and I feel that a lot of youth are far more open minded than once you start to develop as a young adult into adulthood. I think the older you get the more you put up walls. So for me, it seemed like they liked that. They liked that you were different. They liked that little flamboyancy. They just thought that there was freedom of expression, even using yourself as a form of expression. And so that's what I try to let them know. I try to let them know fashion was important, for you to use that as a vehicle. When you become bored, make something for yourself to wear. Sew something for yourself to wear. Sew something on your pants or do something with your shirt. Like take it a step further, even on that level and that was always well received by the youth.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's just somehow in my mind I'm imagining like maybe some cold young innocent, some cold hard-assed young gangster coming into and just not even going there. Having a hard time with that. But that wasn't necessarily the case.

WILLIE HERRON: No, that wasn't necessarily the case because I really can't say that I dealt a lot with middle schoolers and when I did deal with them, I didn't deal with any hard core youth. I think it's because the hard core youth were either in juvenile hall or they were locked up somewhere. But they were not in the public school system.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And there were artists actually going into prisons.

WILLIE HERRON: Right. So then the whole prison thing. There's other monies to channel for programs for rehabilitating youth in prison, in institutions -- well, not even institutions but institutions too. There were a lot of those programs and to me, those programs were very important. Probably more important than with all due respect, probably even more important than Self Help Graphics and Mechicano Art Center, were the programs for the pintas, you know, like the prisons and stuff. I mean, those . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Those are the most at risk?

WILLIE HERRON: Were the most at risk, yeah. Because they were already off the street and they were already in the danger zone because they were locked up and being taken away from society. And those are the ones, to me, that really, really needed artists and people like us that were interested in reaching out to them, going back to our audience. Yeah, I had the opportunity to work on a couple of pilot programs that never really got off the ground. And I also did a piece in Folsom Prison. But that was already with adults. Those were just with ex-, ex-cons, not like middle schoolers and juvenile hall. But I think the whole juvenile hall thing is definitely an avenue that needs to be tapped and monies need to go in there to develop youth programs in the arts for those type of kids because I think the arts are really important, just because you can create -- like I did, you can create a lot of pieces just from what you feel inside. You can learn to take those ideas and take those feelings and create something from it. And it doesn't really require a whole lot of schooling and a whole lot of anything other than just making connection with your heart and your soul, and creating a work of art from it. And so, the tools could be junk, could be trash that you create a work of art from. Just collectibles that people are throwing away. So it doesn't require - I think the resources are here. But there should be money put into those programs to educate these kids that if you want be alternative, there's ways to be successful and to be alternative. And they don't get that at school. It's like be a lawyer, be a doctor. Be all of these things. Don't be an alternative individual trying to come up with recycling formulas to create art from things that people are throwing away.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think you're raising some of the politics behind youth art education programs. And I think people who are proponents of it would spin something out like what I'm hearing from you right now. Whereas,

other people who might feel less supportive of those programs would say that they're just kind of throwing money at problems that aren't really creating material change. real substantial change, either in the socio-economic conditions of the community or life chances of youth and stuff like that. So, how would you sort of balance those things out?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, the way I would balance them out is that . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, how did it balance out when Model Cities monies is not forthcoming, CETA money were forthcoming and stuff like that?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think if we're talking about youth that are, let's say, middle school age, pre- . . . either preteen or just early teen, right? I think that there's a lot of problems that I saw, not only stemming from the home but also stemming from our education and the lack of an education in that time in that child's life. Now I'm not talking about a college education. I'm talking about middle and high school, the curriculum and the definition of what should be taught to those children during those formative years is what ends up creating the type of people that inherit the power structure. And it has nothing to do with alternative entrepreneurship. That education has nothing to do with it. So in my eyes, a lot of those children, at that age, already know that they want to be different, they want to do something different. And it makes them feel important because they're different. From the beginning they're different. They want to be different. But to push them into, "No. You have to be like everyone else. You have to dress like everyone else. You have to do everything like everybody else" sometimes creates problem children because of that structure. I think it makes them oppose that. And it gives them a very difficult period growing up. It makes it very confusing for them. Where, if they had education and elements and components that would help to recognize, to then divert some of that energy, to add something different to that child in the form of creativity, then we could be seeing more, probably more creative and innovative people that are really, really discovering and creating new things, rather than just falling into the main stream, just taking a job at the bank. Just taking all of these common type jobs and very little creativity and very little chance for contributing something different and something new to society.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It seems like the seventies, the late sixties and the seventies, the early and middle seventies, there was a window when that thinking was being received much more openly, that programs, experimental programs were happening at a much higher rate. Was there a time you felt where that just kind of bottomed out, ran its course, or what happened to all of those?

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I think a lot of those people that seemed to be interested in that burned out, or a lot of the people that were into innovativeness and trying different things seemed to have fallen into a comfortable niche and they just evolved and developed into something that was . . .

END OF SESSION 3, TAPE 1, SIDE B  
BEGIN SESSION 3, TAPE 2, SIDE A

WILLIE HERRON: That's part of the role, I think, that in my eyes that ASCO tried to fulfill. That's that little space, their area that ASCO embarked on and just tapped, like dropped the seed in there. And I think we too had to as individuals, we had to move on. But we have that period in time that we were that inspiration and that source. And it still is being defined and redefined. It'll continue to and it'll try and be put in a certain place but it's a kind of a lonely place right now because the structure and the whole education system is still producing and creating these creative people that are still producing and creating within the main stream. So that's why there was not very much challenged. There were individuals that then started to off shoot on their own but there wasn't a group of individuals that collectively decided to put all their energies together and create bodies of work as a group besides ASCO. And in that sense we were sort of fortunate. But at the same time it's unfortunate because I think that that's why as individuals we had to go off on our own and still create, and still do a lot of things in an alternative way, to establish our strength and to establish our own individual identity, because at the end we were going to be alone and die alone anyway. It's not going to be like we're all going to die together, like in a plane or in a car. [laughing] So we still had to find our own little thing. Because as teens going into our twenties, we were together. We helped each other. We were each other's support system, evolving into entrepreneurs, evolving into this whole idea of wanting to create new avenues and new . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Just making a way for yourself.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah. And to be inspirational and role models for the youth. The youth being our target audience was the people that were our age and younger.

JEFFREY RANGEL: In some respects from the interviews, it's really clear that each one of you has maintained that commitment, or that sense of responsibility to youth, be it Chicano or Latino youth or just youth programming in general. It's pretty interesting to see that that's still maintained. Given the fact that conditions haven't changed that dramatically, do you ever think about re-uniting?



WILLIE HERRON: I think a couple of years ago when we got together to do that presentation at Long Beach State, where I first met you? I feel that that was very positive for us. I can't really say that we would actually take time to try and put together something that we would collectively participate on our own time, like say we used to do. Because we had a lot of time that we devote to getting together on a regular basis. So we were a closer knit family. I think it might take an outside individual, a fifth entity, to put something together to bring us together. That fifth individual, that fifth entity would actually do the work. And then we would come together and say, "Okay, this is your idea. Okay." And then we'd try and just make ourselves available for that. I think that is how we would come together if we were to do anything together again. But maybe there's a possibility in the future that that one or two of us will get together with one of the other members, but all four of us together, that remains to be seen. But I mean, it's not out of the question for me. I'd embrace the idea or the project if it was ASCO, if it was an ASCO thing.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's been really good to interview all of you at this stage in your careers as well because it's given -- everybody's kind of solid in their own direction. And at the same time, we look forward to whatever comes in the future. There's a lot ahead of them.

WILLIE HERRON: Well, I'm happy that we didn't . . . one of us didn't turn out a banker or a realtor, real estate agent or like that kind of stuff. Because I don't know, man, it's just like . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That would be hard to explain.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, right. Whoever that one of us would have been, man, we'd be ranking on them big time! [laughs] They wouldn't hear the last of it, I guess. So we're kind of obligated to each other to just like out do each other, I guess. No, man, I'm going to be more alternative than you; whatever it takes! I think that was part of the energy, I think, too that we shared. And a lot of that part of it I think is still very, very alive inside of us. When we got together in Long Beach, it was pretty obvious that whichever one of us felt any sense of being, of needing anything from any one of us, one of us would have had extra to give to somebody else, to bring that person, to take them where they needed to go. And I feel that we always did that for each other. When we would get together, if one of us was down, one of the other ones would inspire each other to bring the other one back up. And I think that's a good thing.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's important. Yeah.

WILLIE HERRON: And that's why a lot of the youth programs I think are important, because we have that power and that energy to do that to the children too. And it's that same kind of exchange of energy to help lift the other person. To me, that's what ASCO used to do by hanging out and creating things together.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's really nice to hear that. I keep on coming back to this but some of the things that are coming up in these interviews are really rounding out the picture of who the individual members of ASCO are and what the group was about in the first place. Just hearing that youth is an important component and remains so, the collective energies that you guys established there, I think is something that's going to be important to have on tape, for people to know about.

WILLIE HERRON: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think that puts us right where we need to be.

WILLIE HERRON: Yeah, if we need to do another little short . . . another hour or something then once you put it all together . . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That sounds good.

WILLIE HERRON: Just right before, or maybe after it gets back. If there's anything that's really missing.

JEFFREY RANGEL: As far as what you're thinking, are there any . . . is there anything that we've missed so far or . . .

WILLIE HERRON: I think we've pretty much dabbled on all the aspects. It's one of those things where you could write a book. I mean, you could write a book and then we could just stay on one chapter and we could have five tapes of just that one idea, one theme.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, cool. Thanks for taking the time.

END OF INTERVIEW

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