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Oral history interview with Alberto Mijangos,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Alberto Mijangos on December 5 and 12, 2003. The interview took place in San Antonio, Texas and was conducted by Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas.

Alberto Mijangos and Cary Cordova have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

CARY CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Alberto Mijangos at his studio in San Antonio, Texas, on Friday, December 5th, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is session one and disc one.

And I'll start us off, Alberto, by just asking what year you were born and where you were born.

ALBERTO MIJANGOS: Okay. I was born in Mexico City and July 25th, 1925.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, and were your parents originally from Mexico City?

MR. MIJANGOS: My mother was from Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, and my father from Oaxaca.

MS. CORDOVA: How did they meet?

MR. MIJANGOS: It's very interesting because that was during the Mexican Revolution and my mother was living in Chihuahua in the city of Chihuahua at that time and my father was working for the Mexican army providing money to the different fronts so they would pay the salaries to the soldiers, and he used to travel a lot in very dangerous situations. Since a lot of revolution happened in the northern part of Mexico at the beginning, there's where he used to move most of the time to Chihuahua - Mexico City, Chihuahua, Mexico City - and that's where he met my mother. So it was kind of romantic kind of -

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: One of those movies - Mexican movies - about the revolution.

MS. CORDOVA: I see. And what was - what was their sort of family backgrounds like with - can you tell me -

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, it's interesting. I'm sure you know the northern part of Mexico how different it is from the south part of Mexico, so it was very interesting. My father - seems to me like he had more Indian blood I think. He was a very good-looking guy and dark complexion and also green eyes, and he never claimed that he was very much coming from the Indian background, but it's a very interesting thing. I remember asking him, well, what about us or Indians and he would say, have you ever seen an Indian with green eyes? So he was very proud of his green eyes.

And my mother was very much of a - kind of an aristocrat and she was - she had totally complete Spanish blood, so it was that kind of an interesting difference - that relationship of the individual that comes from south meets this aristocratic, beautiful woman from the north, and then the families are all concerned about what's happening here? And finally they got married and they moved to Mexico City after the revolution.

MS. CORDOVA: I see.

MR. MIJANGOS: And they lived in Mexico City. My father went into the business of selling pianos. He had a big, big company in Mexico selling pianos. So I remember those days that - vaguely because I don't have a very good memory - how interesting it was and this huge house that we live in and with all kinds of maids all over and having these funny dresses that they used to put on me and I have two sisters and I was the youngest, so I was very spoiled when I was a little kid, and always a rebel.

MS. CORDOVA: You were a rebel?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, always, always, always. And because my mother spoiled me, I used to get away with anything - everything. But it's an interesting period in Mexico definitely. It was just after the revolution and everything was getting organized in ways of government, people that never dreamed that they would be part of

the government – that were taking over the government. People with very, very little experience and everything else, and Mexico City was a beautiful, beautiful city.

My father used to take us to drives in his little car and I remember during that time that that was the – again, another confrontation. What they used to call it? The War of the Cristeros, which it was a religious war and it was very bloody – very terrible. And I remember driving on the highway, seeing some soldiers hanging from trees dead, or some people hanging from trees dead and my father would cover my face immediately with all these terrible, terrible scenes that – people in Mexico they were used to that at that time. It was interesting, interesting situation.

And also I think it was during the time that the great thinkers began to be concerned about the identity of the Mexican, and so that was a lot of energy in Mexico. Very, very, very beautiful situation that I had the great experience of being in a way not part of it, but just a witness of some of these situations. So when I became a little older, then my father went broke and we lost all our money and we had to move to a middle class neighborhood.

MS. CORDOVA: How old were you?

MR. MIJANGOS: I was like eight years old at that time – eight or nine years old.

MS. CORDOVA: And your father had money as a result of the pianos?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, the pianos, yes. He went into a business selling pianos at that time and it was just the most wonderful business because everybody was buying pianos. There were no radios. And then the radio came and it ruined the whole business of the pianos, and that's when my father lost all his business. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, my goodness.

MR. MIJANGOS: It's incredible, you know? And all these years since this happened up to today that I look around and I say, this is incredible how fast technology moved into something that we used to see just when I was little older in movies like Flash Gordon. And all these situations that we thought, well, maybe in 500 years from now something like that is going to happen, like television and stuff. But it happened real fast and we had to change and we had to really, especially – well, I think for everybody in the world, but for people from Mexico, I think it's been that struggle of catching up with the world, and we can never catch up. We just run and run and run to catch up. Trying to catch up – trying to catch up with something – something else is happening and that happened to me in my art. I was so impressed and involved in giving everything that I had and embracing the Mexican movement. Diego Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros: they were my heroes and so that's – that's the beginning of my painting. I went to San Carlos and in San Carlos I couldn't accept it very much because it was so academic, and by that time the avant-garde in Mexico was Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco and –

MS. CORDOVA: What years were you there?

MR. MIJANGOS: – a little bit of [Rufino] Tamayo. Hmm?

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, sorry. What years were you there?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, okay – I think between '35 and '40-something – '43, '40-something. That was my development a little bit in the arts. The reason that I took this direction is because I was very bad for everything else and the schools – I was always flunking all these grades and my father was very concerned about my situation. Then I used to get very sick. For some reason something was wrong with my digestive system and I used to miss school a lot. And my mother was one of those mothers that she would take care of me in extreme, and so if I would get a little sick she would put me in bed and she would put me on a diet and she would keep me in bed for days, so I had to do little drawings and things. So here I am in the school I was the worst student, and then with my drawings, people begin to accept me and like me and I think we have this inside of us that we want to be accepted and liked and loved. So –

MS. CORDOVA: When did you start doing these drawings?

MR. MIJANGOS: When I was a young – maybe 12 years old; something like that. And I would just copy comics or invent my own comics and also make portraits of people around me and – interesting. Why – well, I know the reason. People begin to say, hey, that's good. So I said, well, I don't have any other choice. I'd like to be a doctor or a lawyer, but I don't have what it takes to do that so I have to become an artist.

MS. CORDOVA: Had anyone in your family been an artist?

MR. MIJANGOS: No.

MS. CORDOVA: What did your parents think of this?

MR. MIJANGOS: My mother was a beautiful person – she liked opera, she liked classical music, she loved beautiful furniture. She loved beautiful floors and good taste, so she was delicate and concerned and aware of beauty and a high level of living and I think I have that from my mother. And my mother's side, I had an uncle who was a professor – a very important professor of Mexican history at the university and also he liked opera and concerts. And when I was maybe 13 years old they – we were kind of poor and – but my mother made the effort to take me to a concert and I was very, very shocked about it. And then in the neighborhood where we were living – all these young guys that were going to universities and we were so much aware of all the situation of the world and we discuss and we have deep, deep, deep conversations at the late hours at night in the streets of the neighborhood – you're sitting in the streets. Very passionate, and I think that helped me a lot and that inspired me tremendously to have these friends around me.

MS. CORDOVA: Your friends or your parents would have these conversations, or both?

MR. MIJANGOS: No, my friends. No, my parents wouldn't get involved and – my mother once in a while, but not with a deep understanding of the contemporary situation during those days. She was just the dreamer of her life and the past and the good – kind of an aristocratic world that she lived in when she was young and she always talked about that, and together with that I think there was some kind of a feeling that she didn't develop completely her awareness about what art is all about. It was very difficult at that time, I guess; and lack of communication and education and all that.

MS. CORDOVA: And your father? What did he think?

MR. MIJANGOS: My father was a very, very quiet, angry bureaucrat. He became a bureaucrat and worked for the government and I think he was kind of very much angry about what happened to him – losing all his money and not being able to recuperate, but just to accept the fact that he had to be part of the middle class and the bureaucracy – working for government, which he hated. And he started drinking a lot and – kind of a lack of communication totally with my father. My father didn't understand me. I didn't understand my father. He wanted to discipline me and I didn't, so when I was about 17 years old I think my mother died.

MS. CORDOVA: You were young.

MR. MIJANGOS: I was young. And then I started going to the San Carlos Academy of Art, and I stayed there maybe a couple of years. Something like less than a couple of years.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you even know about San Carlos, or what brought you to that institution?

MR. MIJANGOS: It's precisely that my conversations with my friends in the neighborhood. We had a group of very bright people. Some neighbors from Cuba and the young son, he was about my age, he was an artist and he hung around with a bunch of pseudo-intellectuals. And we used to go out to – because we were living close to downtown in Mexico City we used to go to cafés – intellectual cafés and sit there and talk about art and bullfights and books and philosophy, but I would listen a lot to them. So my aspirations right there began to move into that situation, and I think in kind of a defensive way because I didn't have any academy. I was not going to schools like my friends that they were going to universities, and I was just hanging around working here and there and really developing this other world in the arts of the philosophy and things like that that excite me tremendously.

It's like something is telling you where to go and you don't know where is – what is that place – the art, and you are almost like in the dark. You're there, but you don't know what it is. Is it like I didn't know what art was all about and why I had all this positive energy to get involved in all of that.

MS. CORDOVA: Had you had any formal artistic training prior to that?

MR. MIJANGOS: No.

MS. CORDOVA: And so what was the experience like of being taught art at San Carlos?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, in San Carlos it was terrible because we had the old school of old teachers against the Mexican movement very much – I think a lot of the teachers were from Spain and I didn't like it at all. I was just – they put me to draw and to draw and to draw and forget it. I just cannot. And also perhaps it was my fear of schools that I had because I had horrible experiences in schools of not being able to learn, so every time I got in there I would feel very uncomfortable.

I think I was born with a problem of learning, of memorizing things and I tried but I just couldn't make it in schools. So I stayed in San Carlos for a while and then I quit.

MS. CORDOVA: What made you quit finally?

MR. MIJANGOS: The San Carlos?

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. MIJANGOS: I didn't like that - I thought I was not learning anything and - but not because I felt superior that I knew what I wanted. I didn't know what I wanted and yet but I didn't like that, so I moved. I just quit.

MS. CORDOVA: And what did you do then?

MR. MIJANGOS: By then it was the Second World War more or less.

MS. CORDOVA: I see.

MR. MIJANGOS: Then I joined the Air Force in Mexico, but as an assistant to a commander and I started this funny life - very interesting - working with the commander and the commander was in charge of some group of pilots. And we used to fly every day with the commander because he liked me, he liked to talk to me, so he said - every morning he said, "Come with me, we're going to fly around." So we go and fly in this airplane and I was having fun with that and also I was almost like his secretary - personal secretary, so I had people working for me too and I was having fun. And then I discovered a bunch of possibilities - the uniform, going out with girls, and started having little drinks and having fun and - [doorbell rings in background] - uh-oh, can I go?

MS. CORDOVA: Sure. Let me stop the tape for a second. [Audio break.] All right. We're recording again and we just broke where you had just joined the Air Force and you were finding out about girls.

MR. MIJANGOS: Finding out about girls and the Air Force and also finding out about tequila.

MS. CORDOVA: Tequila. [Laughter.]

MR. MIJANGOS: So during that time it was an interesting thing. They were supposed to send a group of soldiers and Air Force to Japan to help with the war and I signed to go because I needed some excitement and I thought it would be great for me. But my physical was not in good shape, and so instead of that they sent me to the hospital and they operate on me - my appendix - and I missed going to Japan. And during the operation it was such a simple thing, but I almost died because when I opened my eyes the nurses were kissing me and telling me, oh, I'm glad you're back, and so I had a funny experience at that time. I don't know what happened, but I stayed in the operation for four or five hours.

And so I missed that opportunity and I almost died. And then I returned and I quit the Air Force. I fell in love with a beautiful girl from Monterey and she moved to Monterey, so then I said, "Well, I'm going to go to Monterey" and I quit the Air Force and I went to Monterey. And that's very interesting because when I got to Monterey, I went with some friends that I convinced to go and in Monterey I heard people talking about coming to United States. So we returned to Mexico, my friends and I, and then I start working -

MS. CORDOVA: You - Mexico City?

MR. MIJANGOS: Mexico City. I start working as a window display person designing, and I met these guys that were working there - that they call themselves artists and I was very happy to be around artists. And that's when I did my first little painting because they invited me on a Sunday to go out with them to paint the landscape and I never painted a landscape. And being in Mexico [City], you don't live with landscapes. You don't live with nature. It's just cement and stop signs and all kinds of things like that, but not really trees and land and the emptiness of no buildings. So it was very confusing for me and also it was the first time that I was trying to paint in oil, so I did a funny, funny, funny painting that I still have, but it is very ugly. And I was very disappointed and I didn't want to show it to my friends or anything. I just hid it and I don't know how it's following me. That painting should be - I don't know why I didn't burn that. But now I look at it and I say, how in the world did I ever dream of being an artist when I failed so much?

Now this situation, it's also very interesting because here I am failing in school, failing in everything, and then the real thing comes: some real artists invite me to paint. That is my greatest opportunity, and I go and paint and fail and then I go to my little house - my little place, and I look at the painting and I cry - I say, this is terrible. Everything is gone. I'm nothing. I'm nothing.

MS. CORDOVA: So even at the time you felt it was not a good painting.

MR. MIJANGOS: It was not a good painting because I felt that it was not what I wanted to paint. I didn't know what to put. Water - it was a little river or something. Water - I don't know how to mix colors to make water and it's transparent and all that stuff. Why did this guy bring me here and then why did I accept I didn't know how to

paint, and I kept telling these guys, yes, I'm already one – an artist – and all that.

MS. CORDOVA: Why did you?

MR. MIJANGOS: That's kind of a crazy world, crazy life, crazy thinking of – I don't know. I think I know what it is: the need to be able to do something to be accepted, even lying perhaps.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.]

MR. MIJANGOS: Could be, but you know.

MS. CORDOVA: Could be.

MR. MIJANGOS: I believe we all go through those things. [Laughter.] Something happened to me very similar when I was younger. My mother signed me up for the YMCA and I was like 12 years old. So the first time I went to the YMCA I'm a real skinny – I had never been swimming or anything. We did little exercises and then the trainer took us to the swimming pool, and as I'm passing by, we went through the shower and then to the swimming pool – I'm passing the swimming pool, the trainer stopped me and asked me, you new? And I say, "Yes." I say, "Yes." And he says, "Do you know how to swim?" "Yes." "Okay," he says. So I look around and he's looking at me, so I say I have to act like I know how to swim, and I jumped in the water and I almost killed myself because I would start rolling and rolling and rolling and they got me out and he got so mad at me. [Laughter.] "How come you told me that?" You know, I hated to tell people that I didn't know what to do things, and even if I knew I was going to die jumping in the water – goodbye, world. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: So this is a special quality of yours.

MR. MIJANGOS: That is – I think it is – relates to "Yes, I know how to paint." That kind of a thing.

MS. CORDOVA: Tell me about – even just learning about Los Tres Grandes because I know that they were sort of influential for you. Where were you learning about their works if it wasn't at San Carlos?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, when I was working on these terms I kept this little group of pseudo-intellectuals or intellectuals from the neighborhood, and there were like three or four and I kept going to this cafés to – intellectual people around – hanging around there – beautiful, beautiful. We talk there about philosophy and art and everything and finally I accepted the fact that I needed to see some art, and I was lucky to find out that Diego Rivera was painting at the National Palace in Mexico a huge mural. So I went there and I was just – he's such a big guy and he was – and a big attitude about painting and there was a bunch of helpers and people watching him and it's so interesting how we conceive or we think what art is all about when we don't know too much. And when I saw him painting, it impressed me tremendously because he was working on his mural and he needed some water and he didn't have water, so he spit on the wall to mix his color there, and I went wow. [Laughter.] And that impressed me tremendously. Those things, I still feel that – I had the feeling of how God sees or why he is doing that or – I don't know. Or maybe, maybe it's easy to paint if he's doing that.

MS. CORDOVA: If all it is is spitting on the wall.

MR. MIJANGOS: Is spitting on the wall. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: And would you say one of them influenced you more than another? Was Rivera or Orozco or Siqueiros –

MR. MIJANGOS: No, at the beginning – I think at the beginning Orozco influenced me more than anybody else.

MS. CORDOVA: Why?

MR. MIJANGOS: I think he was more – how would you say – easy to understand. He was working with this woman crying so dramatic and these dark colors kind of a Goya, and I – it was – you see a woman crying. Yes, he hits me right in my heart and at the beginning I thought that was the whole thing. The next one was Diego Rivera, and then after Diego Rivera, I went to Tamayo. And then Siqueiros not much, but now I'm beginning to understand more Siqueiros than I did ever, and Diego Rivera too.

MS. CORDOVA: What do you mean?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, to me Diego Rivera – he's a genius really. When you see some of his murals, number one, to minimize the human figure and stylize the human figure and relationship with the pre-Columbian school, but without doing pre-Columbian. Doing what he was doing, the way he knew how to do it. But the mentality of presenting this narrative, which is the whole history of Mexico together with some strong ideologies, and to organize it in ways that you can read it – that it's beautifully done in color in which even though it's a strong

color, it's pleasant reading the whole mural. And it never jumps too strong here or there, and he has some flatness that is absolutely wonderful. So to me a person that works so much and so many murals that he did, maintaining that style that he imposes as a real Mexican movement at that time, which continues to be very, very, very strong and powerful – to me that is great. That was – he was one of the greatest.

I like Siqueiros because of his interest in changing techniques and changing the use of materials also – very, very important. And I think a lot of American artists learn a lot from Siqueiros and the use of house paint or automotive paint and his textures – the work with – he had a crazy, crazy world inside of him – very, very macho and not romantic at all. It was some – an individual, very angry, very strong, and that's the part that I think is a little bit not on my taste, but that I admire very much– that painting with the hands [standing?]. It's incredible. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Would you call yourself a romantic?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, I think so – very much. Very much I think.

MS. CORDOVA: How come?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, how would I say? I feel that painting – my painting at least – has to relate a lot with that language of the musician or the poet – and the poet speaks with words, the musician speaks with music. I like to speak with paint and create a poem with paint. I'm very concerned about that very much. I'm very concerned about what I'm telling you by the layers of paint that I paint – that I work with – and why I allow some layers behind the layers to show and to present some kind of a –I would say kind of like archeological feeling that something was there before. And that in a way is kind of romantic.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. MIJANGOS: The notion of knowing that someone that was there before, trying and going through the same painful journey that I went through. And in my painting you see that kind of a layers and layers and layers of paint and trying to create a movement or push and pull in some of the areas so you can stop and look and look little bit behind at past time, not the present time.

MS. CORDOVA: I know your painting has changed a lot over time, but would that be a quality that has stayed consistent in your work?

MR. MIJANGOS: It's the same craziness of who I am. See these changes and these intentionality to catch up, like when we started conversation, the Mexican is trying to catch up – trying to catch up with something that is happening. It's very interesting: there was a president of Mexico, Porfirio Diaz that said, poor Mexico, so close to United States and so far from God.

MS. CORDOVA: God.

MR. MIJANGOS: And that's very interesting because we are there and we are watching United States and we want what this country has because it is the most powerful, wonderful country in the whole world, and the worst country in the whole world, and everything happens here. It's very strong and extremes – extremely wonderful, beautiful things, incredible discoveries, great technology, humanistic approaches, and then we go and kill a bunch of people. That is so sad. But it's precisely that attraction of the energy of this country what a lot of Mexican people – a lot of people from all over the world – have, and Mexico happens to be a neighbor totally different from what United States is, but we want some. I don't know what it is, but some of the incredible – I mean, I think it's so human. I think it's a great, great situation how we develop, how we grow with this incredible giant next to us. It's beautiful. Beautiful.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, and that leads me, maybe, to ask you: how did you end up coming to the United States? How did that even happen the first time?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, I began to see my situation in Mexico in a very, very difficult, very, very painful way – I saw – can we stop? [Phone ringing in background.]

MS. CORDOVA: Let me pause that. [Audio break.] Okay, we're back recording. Mexico. Painful.

MR. MIJANGOS: Painful, Mexico. I began to stink in my neighborhood because I was not working, or I was working but not working. I was drinking a little bit too much. [Phone ringing in background.]

MS. CORDOVA: Do you need to get that?

MR. MIJANGOS: We can wait?

MS. CORDOVA: Sure.

MR. MIJANGOS: Okay. It's going to ring like four times.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. You were drinking.

MR. MIJANGOS: I was beginning to drink a little bit too much. I was a total rebel. I kept asking my friends for a little money here, a little money there so I can survive. And their parents and the whole neighborhood – how neighborhoods in big cities are? It's just like a little town, everybody knows everybody in that little neighborhood, so people started talking about me and of course they were scared. It's dangerous for Alberto to be like that and look what he's doing, and I kept saying, well, I'm an artist. I'm an artist. And I really was not an artist or – I don't know.

So one day I packed my little piece of luggage and I started walking in the street on the highway. Now, can you imagine a person – and I think I was 20 years old or 19, I don't know – holding my little clothes on the side. That reminds me of Charlie Chaplin walking on the highway all the way to the United States – maybe with a few pesos in my pocket. I got rides and rides and –

MS. CORDOVA: You hitchhiked?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. And I end up in Reynosa. And I don't remember how – I think I remember how I passed the first time, but I don't remember. I swam the river.

MS. CORDOVA: You did?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, I swim the river and –

MS. CORDOVA: Was it too difficult to just get across otherwise?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, the thing is I went to the river. I remember this very well – I went to the river, I was scared of Reynosa. It was such a funny place and I went to the river and my hopes were in the United States, my dreams were in the United States. I would smell the bubble gum and the Lucky Strike cigarettes and the way they smell it was about rich, about comfort, about every – all your problems are going to be okay at that time, so that's part of the – [Kenny, studio assistant arrives.] – This is Kenny who works for me.

MS. CORDOVA: Hi.

MR. MIJANGOS: He is an artist and he has a studio and so – we're recording some information about my life. And so – so then all these dreams about the United States and my experience in Mexico gave me so much energy, and as I was in the river looking at the other side, there were a couple of guys there, also trying to cross the – and they were workers, people from ranches or people that work in agriculture and they're strong and powerful people. So I asked them, "What are you doing?" And they said, "We're going to cross," and they said, "You want to join us?" And I said "Yes." They asked me, "You know how to swim?" "Yes." And so we put our clothes on top of our heads and we start swimming and cross the river and then they guided me a little bit to different places, and we ended up in some area close to McAllen or Edinburg, Texas; something like that. But outside because we didn't want to go to the city, and they wanted to do some agricultural work, so we end up in a place where they were picking oranges. And I asked for a job and they gave me a job there picking oranges.

And I discovered that there was no place to stay. We had to make a hole and sleep there and, we gave them a little money to bring us some food, and I never tasted a flour tortilla in my life. They were bringing flour tortillas and some kind of bologna or cheese or funny things. So anyway, I spent I would say like two or three weeks, and one time the truck came to pick up the merchandise and I went and looked at my face in the mirror and I got scared. I looked terrible. I've been there three weeks, no shower, I hadn't shaved, and I hadn't combed my hair or anything. My clothes was just all beat up and I got scared, so I went to the owner of the place and I asked for my money and he gave me my money and I just run away.

I walked to some place where I found some noise and it was getting dark and all of a sudden I began to see these beautiful little houses with lights inside. Beautiful to me at that moment, but they were kind of poor people living there, but the light inside and the warm, and I began to cry there, so I'm saying, gosh, what am I doing here?

So I kept walking and I ended up in a little place where there were some warehouses or something like that and they were packing tomatoes and oranges. And this guy came out and he said, "Are you from Mexico?" "Yes." "You want to work?" "Yes." And he took me to his house – [audio break, tape change] – crossing back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and –

MS. CORDOVA: So you did actually get deported back to Mexico several times?

MR. MIJANGOS: Deported many, many times.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.]

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: And would you always swim back across, or what?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh.

MR. MIJANGOS: Then I started working as a dishwasher. And then I rented a little apartment and I went and bought some oil paints because I needed to learn how to paint with oil. And I did like 50 portraits of maybe - because I would get in my little room and it was really hot and I would look at the mirror and start painting and painting and painting and learning a lot about how to mix colors and all that. Incredible - but it was very beautiful because I had that intention of really - I didn't give up and say, okay, I'm working here. I have food. I can stay here and then go back to Mexico - whatever. I wanted to be an artist. That's all I had in my mind and I had to paint and so I tried very hard to learn on my own painting. And at the same time I tried very hard to learn English and tried very hard to learn how to cook so I could become a cook instead of being a dishwasher.

So finally after some time I talked with the owner of the restaurant and he give me a job at nighttime cooking - fry cook.

MS. CORDOVA: Where were you living at this time?

MR. MIJANGOS: In Edinburg, Texas.

MS. CORDOVA: In Edinburg.

MR. MIJANGOS: Edinburg, Texas. Yes. It was -

MS. CORDOVA: And any particular reason why you ended up there?

MR. MIJANGOS: Ignorance. I didn't know any other place and I wanted to situate myself and kind of organize my life. I met a beautiful guy that I remember he had a mark on his face and he was Mexican-American and he would play violin and paint, and he would visit me in my apartment and he look at my work and he was very, very excited. "You are an artist, Alberto." So he would protect me. He would come and bring me food or help me with money or try to protect me and advise me about what United States was all about.

MS. CORDOVA: What was his name?

MR. MIJANGOS: I don't remember his name. I have a terrible memory, but it's just like an angel. A person that beautiful, so detached from whatever I had or whatever I was - just very, very impressed about my work.

MS. CORDOVA: What kind of work were you doing then?

MR. MIJANGOS: I was doing portraits - portraits and bullfighters.

MS. CORDOVA: And bullfighters. [Laughter.]

MR. MIJANGOS: Bullfighters.

MS. CORDOVA: What drew you to painting bullfighters?

MR. MIJANGOS: Because I thought that they will sell. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: And were you selling your portraits too?

MR. MIJANGOS: No, no, no. Bullfighters maybe one or two but for little money. And it was so exciting that somebody wanted to buy one of my bullfighters and -

MS. CORDOVA: What was the first work you ever sold? Do you remember?

MR. MIJANGOS: No. I'm sure it was a bullfighter. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Was there a lot of demand for bullfighters?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, well, you come to United States and you want to sell what you think the Americans want. And it's confusion. Very few people wanted bullfighters - they don't like bullfights in the United States. You say, "We are good bullfighters in Mexico. Here I sell the bullfighters." And I even told them that I was a bullfighter. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: And did they believe you?

MR. MIJANGOS: Of course. [Laughter.] When you're young you can really do all kinds of things.

MS. CORDOVA: And what else would you tell them?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, that I was an artist, that I was a bullfighter, and that my life was just that kind of thing - that I wanted to work in the United States and then go back and I didn't know if I wanted to continue being an artist or a bullfighter. So it was just conversation to impress people around me and to make friends or create some kind of excitement.

MS. CORDOVA: Now, were you able to create a sort of new community and sort of remove yourself from the painful situation that you had been experiencing in Mexico? Were you still drinking?

MR. MIJANGOS: I kept drinking, but it was some kind of an escape, really - my drinking. I felt this real hole inside of me of not knowing who I was. And that horrible secret that I kept within me about I know that I am not good in school, that I am not very intelligent, that I am lost completely, that I am not really an artist, but I'm pretending just because I don't know what art is all about. And I know that one day perhaps I will find out what art is all about and then I'm going to fill the hole within me, and that's what kept me going. And I will go and drink and get in fights and get in trouble and continue.

MS. CORDOVA: And this is all part of your rebel quality, right?

MR. MIJANGOS: Mm-hmm. [In affirmation.]

MS. CORDOVA: What - how did you become a rebel, or what makes you describe yourself as a rebel?

MR. MIJANGOS: My father told me one time, he said, "Do you see that there's two directions? One direction is open, it's beautiful, and the other one is full of thorns and problems. And you stop, look, and you see that you can go here, but you prefer the other one. Why?" And my answer, I said, "I don't know." But that's what it really has been all my life. That - now I related it with some of my own philosophy, my own feeling of looking for some power in the dark. Some awareness or some awakening in the dark, and I think the same problem of painting. If you don't look for these areas, the softer, easier way is not going to put anything in the canvas. Because usually when you surrender, when you have all these problems, when you don't really know what to do and you say okay, you tell me - and you talk with the canvas and then something happens. And I think that's what - sometimes I feel that when you are in that position and you go through all these processes in working on the canvas, there's always some energy that remains there, that makes the piece transcendental. Swim and come out the other side. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Swimming is important.

MR. MIJANGOS: Half dead, but on the other side.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes. And so what year was it that you first came to the United States?

MR. MIJANGOS: I don't remember very well, but it was like '42, '43.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And you stayed mostly in the Edinburg area?

MR. MIJANGOS: I stayed in Edinburg because when I was accepted as a fry cook, my salary went up and then I start buying nice clothes and little things that I really wanted all my life. And then I found out that they were paying me less money than everybody else, and I went to the owner of the restaurant and I said, "How come you're paying me less and I'm doing the same job that these guys are doing?" And he told me, "Because you're from Mexico." And I said, "Well, I don't accept this, so I'm going to quit." And I went to the kitchen - I remember, I went to the kitchen and took off my apron and left it and there were two dishwashers there who liked me a lot because I was example for them, you know, I became a fry cook there. And they came looking at me, "Alberto! Alberto! Think what you're doing. You're quitting." And I say, "Yes, but I cannot accept this. I cannot accept this." And they said, "But this is the best opportunity in your life," and I turned to them and I said, "No." And I

walked away.

It's very interesting. I met some guys then that were going to Galveston, Texas, so they took me to Galveston, Texas. And then I looked for a job in a restaurant and I got a job in a restaurant. And then I started decorating nightclubs - painting murals and decorating nightclubs - I don't even remember what I did, but usually, they tell you, well, I want a cowboy here and some clouds and cows and stuff, so I would do something like that. And then I started trying to become a graphic artist and I started looking at magazines and developed techniques for illustrations and stuff like that.

So in Galveston I think I spent maybe a year, or a year and a half and I was drinking more and more, and one time I woke up - I woke up and I said, "I cannot stand this. This is horrible. This is going to kill me." So I packed everything and I got on a bus because I had some friends in Chicago and I had their address and I had like six dollars in my pocket and I said, "When I get there what I'm going to do is I'm going to take a taxi and go to their house and say, I'm broke. Here I am. Help me." So I got in the bus and about maybe four or five hours or six hours later I sobered up a little bit and I said what in the world am I doing? [Laughter.]

So we - I rode in the bus and I started seeing in this journey what the United States was all about. I stopped and I saw discrimination in the most horrible way. Restaurants that wouldn't allow blacks to eat, restaurants that you could never use, and the way people looked at me also, it was so scary - really scary. I began to see the other side of the United States and it was just depressing - very depressing.

MS. CORDOVA: What year would this have been? Was it after the war or was the war still -

MR. MIJANGOS: After the war, after the war - perhaps a year or two after the war.

MS. CORDOVA: Like '46, '47?

MR. MIJANGOS: '46, '47.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. So you just took the bus directly up to Chicago?

MR. MIJANGOS: Directly to Chicago and the bus stopped and we got off and people looked at us funny and the blacks went one way and I didn't know where to go?

MS. CORDOVA: Where did you go?

MR. MIJANGOS: I went to the blacks because I was afraid that they were going to tell me something because they're looking funny at me and I'm not going to confront them and they tell me go that - the other way, so I followed the blacks and the blacks looked at me like who are you? [Laughs.] So it was very confusing.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. MIJANGOS: Very confusing.

MS. CORDOVA: And how was your English at this point?

MR. MIJANGOS: I had to learn English - the little English that I learned during that time - it was all during the time that I cooked. I remember the first night that they left me alone in the kitchen, and they opened the door - one of the waiters opened the door and I was cleaning something and she gave me an order sheet, just hamburger with da da da da da - just trembling and I said, "What? What? What? What?" It's very interesting and usually I - if I didn't know there was somebody that spoke English and - [inaudible] - what did he say? What did he say? Que dijó? Que dijó? And they would help me. But that's the best way to learn language - [laughter] - I'm telling you. You learn it fast.

MS. CORDOVA: Pressure.

MR. MIJANGOS: Pressure.

MS. CORDOVA: And so when you got to Chicago -

MR. MIJANGOS: When I got to Chicago I had my six or seven dollars in my pocket and I got off and I stopped a taxi and I said, "I need this address." And he looked at me and he said, "You're in the wrong town." "What? You mean there are two Chicagos?"

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.]

MR. MIJANGOS: "No," he said, "I'll take you, but it's going to be like six dollars or something" and I said, "That's

all I have." "Okay, I'll take it." So he took me and it was on the outskirts of Chicago.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: And I knocked at the door of these guys that were – I think 20 people living in one little house. They opened the door and here I am. "Who are you?" "Oh, you don't remember me?" "Yes. Oh, yes." So they let me stay there and they said, "No problem getting a job here. You're going to get a job." So they helped me.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you know them?

MR. MIJANGOS: I met them in Galveston. They were working for the railroad track, so they were strong, powerful guys and they hung around together. They were from the same little town someplace in Mexico. So I hung around with them because we used to going out and drink and everything, so they liked me a lot so I went to Chicago and I stayed with them for a few days and then I got a job – two or three jobs. And physically I couldn't handle those jobs. It was very difficult, so they fired me because they said "If you keep doing this you going to get hurt because you're not strong enough to do this." So then I went and started working for a restaurant.

I decided that I didn't really want to live with these guys, so I moved to the YMCA and I rented a little room there. And then I got a job in the chain restaurants – some chain restaurant – and it was real neat because immediately they made me a manager of that restaurant. So I was making good money and then I decided to go to the Art Institute – Chicago Art Institute – and I started meeting some artists.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you find out about the Art Institute? Or did you know about it?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, because I went to little bar around there and there were two girls who were graphic artists and they liked me. They liked the idea of the bullfights and –

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] You told them you were the bullfighter?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. [Laughter.] So they started giving me advice what to do and – it was real funny because they were illustrators and there was a circus that came to Chicago and they loved to go to the circus and sketch the animals and the things and that was exciting for them and they invited me. And another failure because I couldn't do the circus – I couldn't do the drawings. And they were just excited making these elephants and – with watercolor real sketchy kind of beautiful and all that and I couldn't do it, so I started thinking, oh, I'm not an artist. I'm not an artist. I'm just a bullfighter painter. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: And you're not a bullfighter.

MR. MIJANGOS: No, I'm just painting bull fighters. That's all I'm going to be doing the rest of my life.

MS. CORDOVA: But you were getting more interested in the graphic arts?

MR. MIJANGOS: I was getting more interested in graphic art and I watched them work and everything. They kept telling me, "You're going to be good. You're going to be good, Alberto, but you need to study. You need to do this." And I say, "Okay." So then I went to the Chicago Art Institute and they accepted me to take certain classes. So I took two or three classes and I enjoyed it. I didn't like the design class very much because they put me to do some pre-Columbian designs and I said, "No, I came all the way from Mexico to do pre-Columbian designs here in Chicago?"

MS. CORDOVA: Is that what they were teaching all the students though?

MR. MIJANGOS: All the students. It was – that beginning a few years – and then they changed to some other things, but that was so funny that the first class I went to the teacher said "We're going to do pre-Columbian design." Oh, okay.

MS. CORDOVA: Were they also sort of looking at the work of Rivera and Orozco or –

MR. MIJANGOS: No, it was totally pre-Columbian – totally pre-Columbian. Very interesting because, you know, the pre-Columbian design is just fabulous, so it was interesting and I enjoy some of the techniques that they use. I learn a lot – a little techniques to working with –

MS. CORDOVA: Like what?

MR. MIJANGOS: – charcoal and illustration boards – beautiful – that I was able to really enjoy the drawing there. And also I felt strong because I was Mexican and I was a little familiar with the pre-Columbian situation. So that was an interesting, very interesting period. The time that I – I think I spent three years in Chicago.

MS. CORDOVA: How long?

MR. MIJANGOS: About three years.

MS. CORDOVA: Three years.

MR. MIJANGOS: About three years, yes. It's kind of sad because of the weather that changes so much and I was working in a restaurant and I would get up at 4:00 in the morning and I go into this little place and it was real cold, and wait for the train and then go to work and when I got off at 4:00 or something it was dark again. So I never saw the sunshine. It was kind of sad.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you miss Mexico?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. And that's why I drank so much. [Laughter.] Missing Mexico. Singing Mexican songs. Excuse me, I'll be back in a minute.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, I'm going to stop the tape and change to another one. [Audio break.]

This is Cary Cordova interviewing Alberto Mijangos for the Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art. This is session one, disc two. And we had just left off the last disc with missing Mexico while in Chicago and maybe you can just talk about even just being in the United States or being homesick or what that meant for you and maybe what it meant for your painting.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, it was extremely beautiful, the change. I was anxious to meet people from Mexico and I was anxious to learn a little bit more about what the United States was all about and the art in the United States. So I kept the friends that I had from when I'd write to Chicago and they'd introduce me with some other friends. And then I met two guys - very interesting - one was from Mexico City and he was also interested in art and the other guy was also from Mexico City, but he had been living in San Antonio, Texas, and he was a photographer - a very good photographer. He was working with some big, big photographic studios in Chicago.

MS. CORDOVA: What was his name?

MR. MIJANGOS: I don't remember. Gabriel. I think Gabriel something. Sanchez. Gabriel Sanchez was the photographer. The other guy - I don't remember the other guy. But anyway, we would go out and talk about Mexico and have fun and all kinds of things. And he kept saying - this Gabriel keeps saying that he wanted to go back to San Antonio and open a business and - just talking and we met a bunch of musicians - Mexican musicians and Latin-American musicians and I became interested in playing bongo with them. And I learned a little bit about it and it was just so much fun because at that time I think Tito Puente and a bunch of young musicians - Cubans and Puerto Ricans - were Perez Prado, mambo, and all that fabulous period of Latin music and tropical music. It was very exciting in Chicago because there were areas that they were really involved in this and we used to go and dance there and it was just fabulous.

MS. CORDOVA: Where did you go?

MR. MIJANGOS: I don't remember the places - the name of the places, but I remember very well that we used to go to a place that was big and there was just the - these bands were playing there. And there were a bunch of guys with dark hair dancing with blond girls and it was really neat because that really felt like we were something that this country needed - that kind of music, that kind of dance, that kind of a simpatico approach to the world and the way we laugh and the way we talk. It's some kind of a freedom, I guess. Maybe we felt so free.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you feel like you'd found more of a community that you - than you had found in Texas?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, yes - definitely, yes. Texas was very difficult for me because I came from a big city and when I got in Chicago, immediately I felt like home, and it was very nice - that part.

One time I remember I used to - after my classes, I used to go up to the museum and look around. And the first time I went by and I discovered a little painting by Salvador Dali of a giraffe in flames and fire [*The Invention of Monsters*, 1937, 51.2 x 78.5 cm., Art Institute of Chicago]- something like that. And I used to go every day and just look at that painting and stay there, just looking at that painting. I was just absorbed and admired so much the techniques and the idea and the surrealism - I didn't even know what surrealism was all about, but it was that kind of a dreamy idea for a painting. And so it was just like going to church - finish my class, I'll see you, zoom. I go through all these rooms and I just go to my little painting and see this painting and admire this painting and then I would feel good and I'd go home.

One day I go and look at my painting and then I turned and going back home and this friend of mine - the photographer - stopped me there. He was there at the museum. "Hi, Alberto. How are you?" And we stopped to talk and while we were talking I turned and I saw this other painting and I said, "Gosh, this is fabulous. How

come I've never seen this – stopped to see this?" So then we had the conversation. The next day I had two paintings to see. One was Salvador Dali and the other one was El Greco [*The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1577, 401.4 x 228.7 cm., Art Institute of Chicago]. So here I am so exciting because I felt inside I'm beginning to understand what painting is all about. I like it. I like it. I like it.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] And so had you spent a lot of time in museums in Mexico City?

MR. MIJANGOS: Before?

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. MIJANGOS: No, not too much.

MS. CORDOVA: Not too much. So this was really the –

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, the – San Carlos had a nice museum, but it was just very, very – some of the colonial religious paintings and some sculpture pieces, and of course museums – Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. But nothing from outside of Mexico really. I'm sure they have some Grecos in Mexico, but not in museums or not at that time or I didn't know where to look for a Greco in Mexico. Or I didn't know who El Greco was in the first place. But there I discovered this painting and it was wonderful. Well, maybe in a couple of months later I was visiting the whole museum and looking and looking and looking and getting real excited about it. And I think that was my greatest learning, not the school, but the museum. And that's what I really needed. Not that people should do that, but at that point and that situation in my life, it was very important for me to see. Yes. So it was great.

MS. CORDOVA: What were the other two classes that you took at the Institute?

MR. MIJANGOS: Painting and drawing.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you remember who you took them with?

MR. MIJANGOS: No.

MS. CORDOVA: Did they have much of an impact on you at all?

MR. MIJANGOS: The painting did have some impact on me, but the drawing – I've always been a good draftsman and I enjoyed drawing, so it was something that I was, one of the best in the class there.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MR. MIJANGOS: And people liked me a lot because of my drawing. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: That was a first for you maybe – to be the best in your class.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, yes. It was really neat too because what helped me a lot was that the training that I had at San Carlos – that they put me to draw and draw and draw and draw. And when I came here, I took drawing, but I took figure drawing and I was able to really – I was able to see more the values for instance, the tones, light, medium light, dark medium light, and dark medium light; and volume and the figure and it was easy for me to do it.

MS. CORDOVA: So did you come to appreciate your training from San Carlos more?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. I began to say, "Oh, I should have stayed there." [Laughter.] Why go through all these difficult situations if I had all the possibility if I had just stayed there? I didn't have to pick oranges and wash dishes.

MS. CORDOVA: What about being in Chicago? You talked about the racism you encountered going up to Chicago, but what was it like as a city to live in? Where were you living and did you feel racism was a problem for you in the north?

MR. MIJANGOS: No. I don't – I think it was racism, but my behavior was always, always – I didn't feel there – when I met people I wanted to be part of the Anglo groups and I was well accepted with my bullfight tales. [Laughter.] Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Where did you live?

MR. MIJANGOS: I lived at the YMCA, then I moved to I think it was south 63rd or something like that – an

apartment. And then I met this woman that – in the restaurant when I was a manager she used to come to have lunch and she'd flirt with me, and so we start going out and she was very, very much interested in opera and I didn't like opera at all.

MS. CORDOVA: Even though your mother did?

MR. MIJANGOS: Even though my mother did like opera, but I didn't like opera and so – but we just hung around. We'd go for drinks and I think we lived together for maybe six months or something like that and then we end up in a big fight and that was the end of it, but it was a nice, nice experience. She liked painting and she liked my work a lot, and that was something that I began to really feel that I was sharing with the world something that I had.

MS. CORDOVA: Was she an artist too?

MR. MIJANGOS: She said she was an artist and just like when I was saying that I was a bullfighter.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: So this guy – the photographer – he invited me to come to San Antonio because he said you can help me so much because – with your ideas we can open a studio – photographic studio and we can become partners.

MS. CORDOVA: Though – had you had any background in photography?

MR. MIJANGOS: No. No, but I worked in the studio with him sometimes and I would say, "Why don't you put this light? Why don't you – now take the photo." I didn't know how to use the photo, but I was in composition and style or something. He wanted that part of me, so he offered me this situation and I accepted and I said, "Sure I will go." Because I was getting sick and tired of not seeing the sun in Chicago – very little. Even though I loved Chicago, that part was depressing.

MS. CORDOVA: And had you ever been to San Antonio before?

MR. MIJANGOS: No. So I came to San Antonio and I talked to him and he got me a place to stay and he was already renting his studio – so I started designing everything for his studio: all the equipment and tables and stuff and office. And I was having so much fun and I was doing some paintings in the studio there. When we finished working, I started painting and then I – there's a Mexican painter – I don't remember his name right now, but I can find out. He was a crazy guy that was living on the outskirts of Mexico with crazy hair and he would scare people. He was painting these very, very expressionistic figures of poor Mexican people, but the tragedy of being poor you could see in the canvas – all these things that you didn't see in these other guys. Goitia. Goitia.

MS. CORDOVA: [Francisco] Goitia.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes Goitia. I don't remember the first name, but his last name was Goitia. And I started – I have been very influenced by him. And then I started doing a bunch of mother and child because people liked them and bought them from me, and I enjoy doing them. Embracing the Mexican school of art here, it was very difficult for me to look at the other side or to look at abstractionism and all that. It took me some time to start absorbing that.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you find yourself more inclined to embrace the Mexican school as a result of being in the United States?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, and I don't know. I think it must have been my insecurity also. That's a very interesting part of it. But never claiming that I am an American or that I – that I embrace totally this culture, and I think it's not some arrogance or some kind of pride. It's just the fact that I didn't want to think, and I still think I am in the same situation: I don't want to take the responsibility of claiming a space in this country, and it's so much easier to say I am from Mexico. I'm sorry.

MS. CORDOVA: Part of this project of oral history is a project of interviewing Latino artists of Texas. Do you identify yourself as Latino even?

MR. MIJANGOS: As Latino? Well, I don't like to use that word. I identify myself as I am. I'm Mexican and number two I'm Latino, but first I'm Mexican. Mexican people are very different than the rest, with the exception of Peru

perhaps. That has more pre-Columbian background.

MS. CORDOVA: Would you call yourself American now?

MR. MIJANGOS: American now? Well, we can get to that a great experience that I had in Mexico not long ago.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, we'll do that. Okay. We'll - I'd actually like to step back maybe just a little bit and go back to your comparison about the museum as a church and that made me just curious about your religious upbringing and what kind of background you had.

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, my religious upbringing. That's very interesting because - well, I was never, never, never totally sold on any religion. My grandmother in Mexico used to make me pray the rosary every night because she lived in my house, but I did it only because she would give me 25 cents after I finished praying and every time I prayed the more I acted like I was really praying and believing, she would raise the price. She would give me 30 cents. Now you prayed real good - here's 30 cents. So every time that I hit my chest like I'm praying a lot she would look at me and she would say, "You're going to be a priest. Here's 50 cents now." So I'd run to the store and buy candies, and that was very nice. But inside of me I never felt like I really believed. But I believed - but I didn't believe what was there - something funny. And so I never, never did this church situation or believed - embrace any religion. But I did a series of paintings on the memories of my grandmother taking me to churches and the feeling of the churches. The smell of the churches and the walls of the churches.

MS. CORDOVA: When did you do this series?

MR. MIJANGOS: I did this series in the '80s.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And what about your parents? Were they religious at all?

MR. MIJANGOS: My father was not religious. My mother was, but not like going to church every Sunday. That was very nice. My grandmother was from Oaxaca.

MS. CORDOVA: So your father's mother.

MR. MIJANGOS: My father's mother. She was praying every night. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: And so that stayed with you.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes, but kind of in a scary way. It's funny that - that kind of - well, the churches - they're funny. Huge, big churches built 300 years ago and it's very overwhelming. Powerful stuff for a little kid. How you going to - you mean God lives here? Smells funny. Everything is falling down. What are you talking about? I'd rather believe in Santa Claus.

MS. CORDOVA: And so when you started doing these mother and child paintings, what did those mean for you?

MR. MIJANGOS: It was the meaning of a Diego Rivera, Orozco and all those guys painting peasants and not an Indian with a little girl. And I touched the hearts of American people, and they bought it. They felt guilty and they would say, "I'll buy it."

MS. CORDOVA: So were you getting a good market for your work?

MR. MIJANGOS: I started selling mother and child like crazy. Every time I needed money I painted one and I would get money and I go and get drunk.

MS. CORDOVA: And when was this? What years was this?

MR. MIJANGOS: When I came to San Antonio. I started in Chicago but then when I came to San Antonio, then it really started working, but the thing - the thing when I came to San Antonio is that one time we were in the studio and we were drinking and these guys that compete with my friend - they had other studios - we were talking about politics and I expressed myself and they told me you're a communist and the next day they called immigration and they accused me of being a communist - immigration came and it was during the time that -

MS. CORDOVA: Mid-'50s then, or early '50s.

MR. MIJANGOS: Early '50s. The late '40s - [audio break, tape change] - sitting down doing something in the studio and these two guys came in and asked for me and they said "We're from the FBI," or something "And you're under arrest." They took me to jail. And they interrogate me for a long time and I spent like three months in jail.

CARY CORDOVA: Three months?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Here in San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: Wow, what were the charges?

MR. MIJANGOS: No charges, just suspicion – the charges that I was illegal, but the suspicions that I was a communist.

MS. CORDOVA: So what kinds of questions were they asking you?

MR. MIJANGOS: All kinds of questions, with guns. They would threaten me with guns. One time we went to pick up my clothes at the beginning at my apartment and this guy said, “Why don’t you run? I let you run.” And he had his gun. I said, “Oh, yes, no, I’m not running. I’m staying with you.” “Come on! Run! Run! I would like to see you running. You’re free. Go.” Just playing on those terms, and – but in talking about religion, in that place the second day that I was in jail – it was a huge place. There were like 100 people there and we had different cells. And I think the second or the third day the guy that was in charge of everybody inside the group – one of the prisoners was the leader and he left and for some reason these guys came to me and they said, “You have to be the next leader.” So I said, “Okay.” So they gave me a good cell and cigarettes and everything that I wanted there because I was the big boss there.

MS. CORDOVA: Why did they select you?

MR. MIJANGOS: Because I looked different, because I talked different – something. So I enjoyed it so much, so when they told me that I could go home, I didn’t want to go home. I would have stayed there. So funny.

MS. CORDOVA: Now do you know who accused you of this?

MR. MIJANGOS: Cortina – Cortina. Something like that. The photographer I know – I don’t – I’m not sure if it’s Cortina or something, but something like that. I forget. So they sent me to Mexico and they told me not to come back ever. So I went to Nuevo Laredo and I stayed in Nuevo Laredo for a couple years writing letters to the State Department in the United States complaining about why did you do this to me – why do you do that to me? By then I met a Mexican-American girl here and she was my girlfriend and I wanted to marry her because my life was totally unmanageable – completely unmanageable and I need somebody to help me. And I saw one time that she was so neat and she opened her purse and got a little brush and cleaned her shoes and I said that’s what I need.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] What was her name?

MR. MIJANGOS: Lucy.

MS. CORDOVA: Lucy.

MR. MIJANGOS: And I married her. After I came back again, see –

MS. CORDOVA: Well, let’s go back a little, why were you accused of being a communist? Why – was there any rationale to this?

MR. MIJANGOS: The rationale was that we got drunk and I started talking horrible about the United States and talking about socialism because I was – my years in the school – the first years that I went to school they were under Cardenas – President Cardenas, and he was very socialist. So even the English classes that I had were about a socialist guy living in Russia taking English classes. So it was so funny, and I believe it was more like most artist and I think we are so, so much aware about social issues, about discrimination, about human rights, about all this for some reason it’s within us and I think I don’t know what it is. It must be the sensibility or seeing people suffering or going to all these kinds of injustices situation. So I was drinking and I really open up and this guy called complaining. I don’t know why he complained, but the accusation was – because of the interrogations was that if I had any connections with some groups in Mexico or here in the United States and all kinds of questions.

MS. CORDOVA: While you had been living in Chicago you had never been deported?

MR. MIJANGOS: No, not in Chicago.

MS. CORDOVA: Just while you had been in Texas.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: And then so you'd come back to San Antonio. You'd been in San Antonio for how long before this happened?

MR. MIJANGOS: I would say maybe four or five months.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And then you ended up in Nuevo Laredo?

MR. MIJANGOS: They deported me to Nuevo Laredo and then this photographer friend of mine gave me the address of a photographer in Nuevo Laredo, so I went to him and he was such a wonderful guy. He said, "You stay here and I give you a job putting color in photographs." So I got a job right away there and I stayed in the studio - in his photo studio and I made all these funny, funny - what a wonderful job because it was all these funny people coming - [to be photographed]. Very Indian looking people and then they wanted it in color and I'd color it with oil paints and I really put all my heart in it. I really enjoyed doing it because I wanted to make them so happy, so I was very successful at that because I was so willing to do it.

And I spent a lot of time there and I got involved in a lot of problems - because of my drinking and fighting and all that stuff. And finally I got a letter from the State Department saying that they would give me the resident's visa.

MS. CORDOVA: How did that even happen given the circumstances?

MR. MIJANGOS: I don't know. Maybe they felt guilty about what they did to me or something, but in the letters I was writing I was saying that I was going to marry an American citizen. For some reason I kept - in all my craziness - I'd write letters very strong and I'm hurt so much about your constitution and about your ideas of America and immigrants. It's some - and what you have done to me, it's so cruel because I am not a communist and this and that and that and I'm an artist. And I think I touched somebody there that I receive a letter, and the day I receive the letter was just so incredible because I thought this is not going to work. I just wrote these letters as a hobby now just for something to do. And finally I got the papers and I came to San Antonio with my papers.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you keep copies of those letters?

MR. MIJANGOS: No. No.

MS. CORDOVA: And how had you met Lucy? When did you meet her?

MR. MIJANGOS: In the studio - photograph studio.

MS. CORDOVA: Here in San Antonio before you were deported?

MR. MIJANGOS: Here in San Antonio before I was deported.

MS. CORDOVA: Tell me about meeting her.

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, when I met her she was cleaning her little shoes and then I said, well, I think I want to invite you and we went out, and she was a very beautiful human being with a beautiful family - Mexican-American. And it was something, again, with my craziness and I needed somebody to help me. Nobody's going to help me. I'm the one that can help myself, but see this codependency and almost getting hostages - hostage. The wrong reason for doing it, but I was so lonely, so lost, so everything that I said if I get married I'm going to change and I'm going to be different, and it really helped me. It helped me a lot. But there was not tremendous love or involvement in me thinking like her, she thinking like me. She was just a wonderful human being, and we had five kids. We got married and -

MS. CORDOVA: What year?

MR. MIJANGOS: It was I think in 1950, '54 or something like that. And by then I was working - I was painting a lot by then and I started working for a department store here as a designer. Joske's of Texas was the name of the store.

MS. CORDOVA: Joske's?

MR. MIJANGOS: Joske's.

MS. CORDOVA: So you came directly back to San Antonio and got married?

MR. MIJANGOS: I came directly to San Antonio and I went to a beautiful little hotel on the west side owned by Mexicans and started looking for a job and I got the job and once I got the jobs then we started thinking about

getting married and got married and we rented an apartment. And I was enjoying my job because the workshop was fabulous. It was a big place and at that time you did displays from scratch and design and did your own thing and they had paint and brushes and tools, so I learned a lot there.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you learn?

MR. MIJANGOS: I learned to paint big. I used to paint all the backgrounds for the store and so I was able to use big brushes and paint scenes of incredible – five windows and the whole story about the West, with cowboys and houses and people with guns and Indians and all the stuff that they wanted, so I loved to do it. And I was very good. And the same thing happened, I found out that I was not making a lot of money and I asked “How come you’re not paying me?” “Because you’re Mexican,” they told me. And I said, “Okay, I quit now.” And I quit and I said “I’m going to freelance and I’m going to charge you \$25 an hour if you need me.” And sure enough they called me and then I started making \$25 an hour with these guys, and painting a lot more.

MS. CORDOVA: That was good money.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, it was really wonderful money. I started buying clothes and by then I was married and I was feeling really wonderful. That’s an incredible period in my life that change everything. This is interesting. I’m charging \$25 an hour and doing a good job. I had my first daughter. I’m really enjoying that life. Very proud of what I was doing, and then I met this guy from Mexico, he was sent to San Antonio to be in charge of the Mexican gallery at the Mexican consulate, and he was an artist. Gamboa – Raul Gamboa. He was an artist – a great artist. I loved his work, but a little bit too much like illustrations, but beautiful techniques. And he started teaching me little, little, little bit about painting. And then after a year – I helped him organize and translate for him and took him to meet people and everything, so I worked real hard trying to help him to promote the gallery and everything and translate for him because he didn’t speak English, so at one year he called me and he said, “I want to talk to you.” “Okay.” He said, “You want to take my job because I just can’t live in the United States? I have to go back to Mexico.” And I said, “Do you think you can give me the job?” “Yes, I already talk about you and they want to meet you.” So they met me and the ambassador from Mexico met me and he liked me a lot and he gave me the job, and they told me you’re going to have a diplomatic passport and this is your job. So I went to Mexico and they gave me a diplomatic passport and I returned to San Antonio as a diplomat.

MS. CORDOVA: What a change.

MR. MIJANGOS: What a change. And from there we got the idea of opening the Mexican Cultural Institute in San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: How did that idea come into being?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, I was very uncomfortable in the Mexican consulate because the consul was very jealous of my promotions, so I needed to expand and to have power, so I kept asking, “Will you send me a teacher so we can teach dance? Can you send me this? Can you do this?” And pretty soon we had an institute. I moved away from the consulate and I worked there for 13 years. And that helped me to put my kids in school and to meet an incredible amount of very important people from Mexico and from the United States: intellectuals, artists, dancers, musicians, poets. And I learned from them because they would come and stay here for a couple of weeks and I would invite them to my house. They cooked for me and they treated me beautifully. We had drinks and we had – I learned a lot from them – painters and all kinds of people.

So that was mainly my big, big school was that job that came to me as a miracle.

MS. CORDOVA: Through a friend.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Right.

MS. CORDOVA: And so what – just in terms of time, what year was your first daughter born?

MR. MIJANGOS: 1955.

MS. CORDOVA: 1955. And when did you start working with Raul?

MR. MIJANGOS: With Raul? I think it was in 1958, and by ’59, I became officially in charge of the gallery.

MS. CORDOVA: And so you – by ’59 you’d left behind the department store and the contracting work.

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, yes. Yes. Very gladly I told everybody no more freelancing.

MS. CORDOVA: And so when you started on this adventure, really, with the institute, how was this impacting your work now?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, there is a big change there.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes?

MR. MIJANGOS: There was a group here in San Antonio of young American artists trying to do avant-garde art, and the name of the group was The Men of Art Guild. Okay, the Men of Art Guild, I think they invited me because I was a diplomat, not because of my art. Because they knew that I was an artist, but I was doing mother and child's and they were doing abstractions, so they looked at my work and – beautiful little pieces, not all, but I did really incredible pieces because I kind of discovered my own style – my own way of expressing myself with these pieces, and my own techniques, so it's – the first time that I started doing very unique work of my own. You know, my own signature, it's when I started doing these mother and child's. And I was selling them, so it was really good. And when they invited me to the Men of Art Guild, they – some of them liked my work, but a lot of them looked at me like what do you mean you're doing figurative and Mexican? What's the matter with you?

So I met a couple of guys – I opened my own little studio in Margarita [ph] here and then I invited one of the artists – Mexican-American artists – what's his name? Mel Casas. Mel Casas. He started working with me and he was kind of insistent, "Why don't you change to this? Why don't you change to this?" And one time I said, "Okay, I'm going to do abstract." So I started painting abstract painting – abstract and it was during the Vietnam period, so my abstractions were some horrible warriors – horrible warriors depicting a little bit the feeling that we all had about what was going in Vietnam – monsters, but very abstract – very abstract – very abstract.

MS. CORDOVA: So was it Mel Casas that finally led you to try abstraction?

MR. MIJANGOS: Mel Casas. He was such an incredible guy. He looked at my work and he started saying "Why don't you send this work to the museum in Dallas because there's a competition there?" Oh, no. So the next day I came and he had packed the painting – a huge painting and his – his – my painting packed and his painting packed and we sent the work. I was accepted and he was rejected, and he kept being my friend – my friend during that time. Kind of very nice. Reminds me very much of that guy I met in – during that – with the violin that used to come and try to help me. And the most beautiful thing is when another artist believes in you. That is a great feeling because it's so honest. I'm doing what you're doing, but I like a lot what you're doing and I know you don't like very much what I'm doing.

MS. CORDOVA: But you must have also been supporting them back, too. Would you say?

MR. MIJANGOS: I'm sure. Yes. So that was an interesting period.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you even meet Mel Casas? Just through your job at the Mexican Cultural Institute?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. I met a lot of people – Men of Art Guild. I invited him to join the Men of Art Guild. They made me a president of the Men of Art Guild.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: And then I organized a big exhibition of the Men of Art Guild at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico.

MS. CORDOVA: That's right. I read about that. Now that was late '70s or when was that?

MR. MIJANGOS: I think it could be early, early '70s. Maybe '70 or '71.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: Something like that.

MS. CORDOVA: And tell me about the planning for that and your selection and how that happened. –

MR. MIJANGOS: My boss needed some motives – strong motives to continue in his job and to claim that the Institute or whatever we were doing here was important, and I suggested this in a conversation: what if we bring a present for the president of Mexico and we have an exhibition at the Fine Art Palace of the Men of Art Guild which are North American and Mexican-American artists working in a very contemporary way, in which I am the president also of that group. So he loved the idea. He arranged everything and they called us with – I invited 10 or eight – I don't remember how many artists and we stayed in a hotel and we were interviewed many times in the press and everything and then the president of Mexico at that time – I don't know who it was, but I have photographs of that we invited us to his house and we sat with him and conversed with him and it was nice. Two times we did that.

MS. CORDOVA: So at that time were you defined as a Mexican artist, or an American artist?

MR. MIJANGOS: Mexican artist. Mexican artist. Yes. And the Chicano movement started.

MS. CORDOVA: That's what I was curious about. Actually I was thinking about that and how was that influencing you?

MR. MIJANGOS: With my abstractions – okay, there's some artist friends of mine that supported and they also encouraged me to say what I'm going to say. I was painting these horrible things about monsters – social criticism about something, and then I start signing the painting Con Safo – C line S [C/S] – because I saw it in the graffiti here, so actually that was in a way an intention from me to become a Chicano artist without really knowing yet what Chicano art was or anything. So those pieces – I don't know where they are, but I did a bunch of them. By then I had an exhibition in Boston – in one of the universities in Boston and somebody stole a huge piece of mine and I made a big fuss and we never found that piece. And some of those pieces with Con Safo were in that exhibition.

MS. CORDOVA: And did you know what Con Safo meant when you were using it?

MR. MIJANGOS: I knew what Con Safo meant and I was very, very touched by that because it's so Mexican. It's so Mexican, and the relationship between me as a director of the Mexican Cultural Institute and the Chicano group – they were very much against the Mexican government, so they considered me an enemy so they never accepted me as a Chicano artist.

MS. CORDOVA: Why do you think they were against the Mexican government?

MR. MIJANGOS: Against the Mexican government? Because they were sold to United States, because they were not embraced and defended by the Mexican government because the Mexican government was scared to death of touching that situation. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: I see.

MR. MIJANGOS: And very misunderstood and I tried to explain to my boss the ambassador of Mexico in many ways, and I kept my relationship with many Chicanos here because I believed in them and as a matter of fact, one time there was a celebration of the 16th of September here and the Chicanos invited me to give a speech and my boss immediately called me to Mexico to give me some job to do something there for a couple of weeks and then he sent me back here.

MS. CORDOVA: So why didn't he want you to speak?

MR. MIJANGOS: He didn't want the Mexican government to get involved officially in any celebration of Mexican-Americans.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you think about that?

MR. MIJANGOS: On the other hand, we will always talk and he would say, under the table we can help them as much as we can because we love them, but we don't want to lose our jobs.

MS. CORDOVA: And – I mean, you must have felt a little strange at this point. Sort of having this experience of having lived in the United States for several years at this point, but still being Mexican but also perhaps sympathizing with the Chicano movement?

MR. MIJANGOS: From the beginning. It's my blood. It's my blood.

MS. CORDOVA: But did you also feel excluded from the movement at the same time?

MR. MIJANGOS: Very much excluded, and in a way from basic principles of them in which I don't know if they – we will embrace them as demagogic, but for them – the worker, mostly the guys that are more in the Indian culture – how would you say it? Socially and economically in the very low situation.

MS. CORDOVA: Working class.

MR. MIJANGOS: Working class. And not the intellectual or the – because they consider that as the problem. And in a way it was a little bit embraced with some ignorance by the Mexican-American, and perhaps, the problem of the same fears from them to the way we are as the same fears that we had in relationship with not hurting the United States, so there was this separation and very interesting.

I felt good because I was always open to them and I was willing to do anything even if they fired me; like the invitation that they gave me. And I helped a lot of the Mexican-American – the Chicano painters, I think I found some kind of a problem sometimes when there's a group and that group embraces a name, and an ideology, to

do something about it. There's very few good, creative people there. Lots of mediocrity [sic] goes around there because they need the group to become something and then that is the poison in many situations because they deal with ego and fear about holding on to something and they start blaming – they become codependents to this group not because of the ideology, but because of the very personal interest in belonging to a group, because without the group they're nothing.

And so you have to – at any given position in the contemporary problems that we're living now, as the past, you have to be very much aware in not what is being done, but what they are doing. And that's something that we have – I have to really do it because I don't want to just throw myself into this group of mediocrity that have very, very – [unintelligible] – interest.

MS. CORDOVA: What kind of interest?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, the personal interest.

MS. CORDOVA: Personal.

MR. MIJANGOS: Personal – [unintelligible] – interest of their own survival.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes. So in – also in a way you didn't mind being outside the group, or –

MR. MIJANGOS: I didn't mind being outside the group because – not because of the position that I had because when I left the Institute I continued to be who I am. As number one I am Mexican and I think I can help a lot more in many ways with attraction rather than promotion because we think on the same level of high human interest – of human awareness, and there's nothing wrong with that, and if they accept me or they don't accept me I am not going to play the political part of that because I am not a politician and I don't want the politicians and I think they stink.

MS. CORDOVA: When the group Con Safo was formed, that must have been after you had been doing these paintings.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Correct?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. The group Con Safo starts and they – I'm not invited and I was very hurt. I was very hurt because a lot of them were my friends and they helped me and we identified so much in our conversations, but politically they felt that I didn't belong in that group. And I think that's the story of my life.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] Always feeling outside.

MR. MIJANGOS: The outsider. Yes. The Americans don't accept me either. One of my pieces was bought by this company – a telephone company –

MS. CORDOVA: SBC [Southwestern Bell Company].

MR. MIJANGOS: SBC.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. MIJANGOS: A large piece. They bought it with the idea that I was an American citizen and when they were producing the catalogue – a huge, thick catalogue – they contracted this guy from the University of Texas, an art historian of Chicano art. I don't remember his name. And he called me. He was going to write about me and then the first thing he said, "Oh, but Alberto, you're Mexican." "Yes, but what does that have to do with art? I'm Mexican but I've been in the United States for so many years. More than 50. More than my age I spend more time in the United States than in Mexico and I'm painting here in the United States and I'm dealing with all the aesthetics and the world and politics and the social ideas and the philosophy of what the United States is all about in the world, and that's why I am presenting in this painting, and you want to tell me that because I am Mexican I shouldn't be accepted in that collection? What kind of mentality is that?"

So they printed the book and they put a photograph of this size with my painting just with a little note that they have—instead of giving me a page like they gave to all of the artists. So that's the story of my life.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes. It's a difficult situation.

MR. MIJANGOS: It's difficult on those terms, but actually what do you get after – what has he won the guy that has a full page there? Or that I don't have the page there? It does not affect anything.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, in a way I wonder if that has impacted any sort of sense of your recognition as an artist; that working here in the United States you're perceived as a Mexican artist, but from a Mexican perspective you're not necessarily perceived as a Mexican artist anymore. Is that a correct sort of reading that happens with you?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, yes. I think in a way it's beginning to make sense for some people – my direction, what I'm doing and – but I am not conscious of that. I don't have resentments for that. I don't have hate for that. I think I prefer this situation because it allows me to have a lot of freedom and to be alone and to discover who I am, to really go deep inside me and try to see the potentiality that we all humans have in a creative way, and the incredible universe that exists within. And really the journey of doing the work, it's what really counts. It's what really comes to the bottom line. It's exactly that. And when you are in my situation – in my position, it's that confrontation with the canvas and also the fears of – also because I'm a human being and the lack of backing that I get from all these society groups, museums, organizations, kind of give me sometimes a little feeling of that I still like a Mexican trying to catch up – trying to catch up. [Laughter.] In that crazy run.

MS. CORDOVA: So at this point you left the Institute in 1972. Is that about right?

MR. MIJANGOS: 1973.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, and why did you leave it?

MR. MIJANGOS: Politically, every six years we had to turn over and then be reaccepted again.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: But this time – and so it's very political. A new director is out – the old director is out, the new director comes. He or she revises everybody and she or he fires whoever she wants to fire and hires whoever, and changes ideas and philosophy about what the direction of the Institute should be. And one of those I didn't fit in the ideas of the new director and I was kicked out.

MS. CORDOVA: I see. So you were just getting excluded left and right in the early '70s. [Laughter.]

MR. MIJANGOS: Excluded left and right for many, many, many things. Many things.

MS. CORDOVA: And what did you do next?

MR. MIJANGOS: When I was fired from the –

MS. CORDOVA: The Institute.

MR. MIJANGOS: First, I was having problems with my life and strong – my drinking continued. My marriage was – to me was a very, very, very heavy, heavy, heavy responsibility even though I have the most fabulous kids ever. No problems at all with them, they are the most beautiful people. The problem of the Institute prompted me to go totally insane, and so I separate from my wife. I didn't have the Institute and I started drinking a lot and thinking very little. And one day I tried to commit suicide and I ended up in a mental hospital. Horrible. When I opened my eyes, there was this guy next to me. Don't move because he was afraid I was going to jump out at him.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you try to do?

MR. MIJANGOS: Nothing, I just scared to death.

MS. CORDOVA: No, I mean how did you try to kill yourself?

MR. MIJANGOS: With a bunch of pills. The next apartment from where I was there was this guy that was always with a bunch of pills, so I opened his door through the window and he was working and I went in and got all these pills and took them. And it was so funny because a friend of mine that was little crazy, he was a writer, he called me when I was getting in my bed to die, and he said, "Alberto, can I come and use your typewriter so I can practice?" Because he was practicing then. And I said, "I'm sorry, you can't have it because I just took some pills and I'm going to die." So he called immediately, 911 and shoosh! They came and start hitting me in the face. Took me to the mental hospital and I spent two weeks and when I got out it was just yikes, better get out of here.

So I decided to find a rich woman, move away from here. So I went to Oaxaca.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] And we'll take a break and we'll stop the tape right there. [Audio break.]

This is Cary Cordova interviewing Alberto Mijangos. This is for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. We're still in session one and this is disc three. And we just ended with a little bit of a discussion of a, well, of a complete shift in your life.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Moving from the United States after an incredible depression.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: So I decided to move to Oaxaca. I had never been in Oaxaca and my father talked to me so much about Oaxaca. And that kind of romantic feeling of going and helping some people there. Oh, doing something exciting. I thought about opening a school for languages and culture and art and crafts. So I arranged a beautiful place with my uncle that he rented me a place that must be like 200 years old - beautiful. And we put some workshops and beautiful patio with a cafeteria and everything and we started advertising in the United States and it was - I think it was some kind of a depression during that time in the United States. It was '73 or '74 - '74 - 1974. So I opened the place and I hired a bunch of artists from Oaxaca and it was beautiful. Young people very, very excited, and then in the advertising we had only two students that came and it was a real, real fiasco because I was spending a lot of money and I was not getting any money back because I am not a good businessman, so -

MS. CORDOVA: Like many artists. [Laughter.]

MR. MIJANGOS: So what was happening is that every night we would all get together in my school and all these teachers from the University of Oaxaca they would come and we would talk and - fabulous. During that time there was a big movement in Mexico also against the government and all these heavy heavy-duty situations, so in Oaxaca was the nucleus of very leftist people trying - [audio break, tape change] - to organize groups. Dangerous. And I didn't know anything too much about it because I came from the United States. After spending so many years in the United States, I came to Oaxaca and I'm a dreamer and all these people excite me, so I never asked anybody for credentials or anything.

So one day -

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, no.

MR. MIJANGOS: One day we're sitting down about 10:00 in the morning and I see these three guys coming in with guns asking for a couple of the teachers I have, and unfortunately one of the teachers was passing by, so they tried to grab him and there's - we started discussion, "What do you want to do?" And "Well, we're looking for this guy da da da da." And this guy runs to me and then these guys come and trying to grab him and we get involved in a big trouble. I'm trying to stop the whole thing and I end up on the floor and this guy - my teacher - ends up with one of their guns. So he started moving around with a gun and he runs to the third patio of the house and goes to upstairs and he starts running away and these guys run after him and I heard some gunshot and then all of a sudden, 20 minutes later the street is full of soldiers and police and machine guns and it's a big mess. And all the people - hundreds of people around just trying to find out what was going on.

I am from the United States. I came from the United States from Mexico. I don't know too many people in Oaxaca. In Oaxaca everybody looks at me like I'm a different person - like I'm not from Oaxaca. They don't trust me very much and finally they see all these people there and they begin to make stories about he must be a communist. He must be this. He must be that. So finally they arrest me and it is some - the next day in the big photographs of me going to the jail followed by some soldiers with machine guns like I was a very dangerous human - very dangerous person.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you have copies of those photographs?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, good. [Laughter.] Who was the teacher?

MR. MIJANGOS: These guys - I don't know what, but they were kind of very interesting, very intelligent people and they came and one was teacher and working with leather - beautiful stuff - but they didn't look like poor people. They look like middle class students, but they had this kind of a craft deals because they kind of - that's what you do - I do this craft and it's beautiful and I don't care about money. But they came from Veracruz and they were looking for job and I gave them a job because they were good. But they were supposed to be big leaders or big something. I never found out what they were supposed to be, but they were being looked from the big time people from the police department. They knew about them.

MS. CORDOVA: So what happened to you?

MR. MIJANGOS: So what happened to me? I called my lawyer and immediately I have a lawyer there, so I called my lawyer and my lawyer said "Don't fight, don't do anything. You don't know anything. You just came from the United States. This is your school. And we going to try to get you out immediately." So they got me out because they didn't find anything to charge me, and once they got me out I still had a lot of friends in Mexico, so I called my old boss - at that time he was - Vice minister of communications in Mexico. Miguel Alvarez Acosta. And I told him about my situation and he was such a wonderful guy. He said, "I want to believe you even though I might be crazy because this is a dangerous situation, but I believe you that you're innocent, that you're not involved in this, and for that reason I help you, but if I find out that it is not true, I kill you because this is very bad for me - could be very bad for me."

So he started moving things in Mexico City and also with the governor of Oaxaca and then they let me out. They didn't charge me with anything, and they after 10 days or so they allowed me to go inside my school because it was - police were staying there. And my fear - my greatest fear was that I was afraid that some of the guys that lost the prisoner - the guy they were going to arrest - they had so much resentment about the whole thing and they were going to charge me that I helped this guy and also for that reason they were going to put some - maybe some narcotics in my school and charge me with possession of narcotics. We didn't have any narcotics. We only had good Mescal and so I'm glad that they helped me in Mexico. So they opened the school, they allowed me - but my business went down. Nobody wanted to be there. Nobody wants to do anything with education or anything.

MS. CORDOVA: How long had the school been open when that happened?

MR. MIJANGOS: About six months, so I almost lost everything, but my lawyer came to me and we were talking and he said, "Why don't you open a restaurant here?" "What do you mean? I'm not a businessman; I'm an artist." "Yes, but I can help you." So we make a deal and we signed a contract. They were going to do the restaurant, use my space, and they were going to give me 50 percent of the money that they make. So that was fabulous. So I spent like two or three years in Oaxaca doing nothing and making money.

MS. CORDOVA: With a restaurant?

MR. MIJANGOS: With a restaurant. And I didn't have to work in the restaurant, so it was great. I hung around with artists there and I got to meet quite a few artists. I traveled with Tamayo a couple of times.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MR. MIJANGOS: Because of connections that I had with the Institute and a cousin that knew Tamayo very well, so I walked around Oaxaca with Tamayo and had wonderful conversations with him and fights with his wife - she was just horrible to me personally.

MS. CORDOVA: And why was she horrible?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, she was defending Tamayo. She was very afraid that people were going to take advantage of Tamayo. Sometimes maybe it's true. Tamayo was a - just a painter. He didn't know what was going on around him, so Olga was very much - don't get close. Don't do that.

MS. CORDOVA: You had admired him for such a long time. Tell me about even meeting him. Was that through the Institute?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, it was so funny because number one I thought Tamayo was very emotional because of his color and the way he looks. And when I went to see him for the first time in his studio, I discovered that he was working with a little palette knife, applying color in a very small places and building the painting and I thought that is impossible that you can create this area - this space - that speaks so much and move all the way there in the most funny, crafty way. No emotion. And it confirmed everything with the conversations that I had with him. He was a calm, unemotional person; an Indian from Oaxaca who hated to be an Indian and he wanted to be white and he always wore a suit and a necktie. Funny person.

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe reminiscent -

MR. MIJANGOS: But an incredible painter.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes. Yes.

MR. MIJANGOS: But that kind of got me out of whack to see why - where did that come from? And then I started studying his work and I think he's one of the greatest painters, colorists - he's the greatest poet with color, but the subject matter - men with a flute, a man talking with another man, a man looking at the moon, a woman

talking to the another woman – that’s that subject matter just one form, one person, and so it’s not too deep.

MS. CORDOVA: Not too deep.

MR. MIJANGOS: But very beautiful. That’s what the greatest part is that hiding in this intellectual conversation that he wanted to have on a high level of what art is all about. With these figures, the conversation of one figure or two figures and they’re playing piano or selling something or a guy with a bicycle or a woman on the telephone – he got to that high place because of he’s Indian – very much he’s Indian. The one – the person that he was hiding inside him came out and saved him because the other part about trying to be intellectual and being in a high-level European thinking person didn’t save him. What saved him was the Indian sensibility – beauty.

So it’s a person that inside another person that hides that person that at the time of painting that person appears and then he hides him again, puts the coat and the necktie and goes out to the world. But when you talk to him and say, wait a minute, there’s anybody there?

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe it reminded you a little of your father with his indigenous side, but his green eyes.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. This is my very personal opinion about Tamayo.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you feel that you attempt to also pay homage to that indigenous heritage of yours through your father, or because he was not as open about that part of the identity maybe that didn’t translate as much to you?

MR. MIJANGOS: Hmm. I love Oaxaca, but I don’t relate to Oaxaca. I am a stranger in Oaxaca, and I love Oaxaca and I understand Oaxaca very much, but by the same token I am a stranger in the other side. It’s an interesting thing. My identity, it’s very difficult to grab it, and I can live here and there and there and use different masks, but – and really embrace and understand that world, but feel uncomfortable in both worlds. It’s a funny feeling like the example of eating and don’t know if you want to use the fork or the tortilla.

MS. CORDOVA: That’s a great comparison. I love that. Now why did you leave Oaxaca? What finally brought you back to the United States?

MR. MIJANGOS: When I left Oaxaca, they kicked me out of there because I was drinking too much and I end up here in San Antonio really, really sick. And then here in San Antonio I reorganized my life. I stopped drinking totally and I started surrendering to all these stupid dreams, and I decided that I was going to paint. That was just my thinking.

MS. CORDOVA: What finally was the last straw in terms of stopping your drinking?

MR. MIJANGOS: When you’re an alcoholic it’s a silent situation that nobody understands. It’s scary for people to see you. Oh, he’s a drunk. But alcoholism is an illness and I don’t know if you remember talking to me about this hole that you have within – this feeling that you don’t belong anyplace. Not claiming your space. And that is a very lonely, lonely feeling that you can only calm down and push it down with alcohol – with a drug – a high level of alcohol and you’re okay for 10 minutes.

Then this deal of changing is either you change or die, and I didn’t want to die. If I keep drinking, I want to die. But if I – it’s a possibility that I can live like everybody else, which I’m afraid and scared to death, then I want to live because I love humanity. I love being here experiencing, learning, loving. So all that change me.

MS. CORDOVA: Your family must have been very concerned too.

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh.

MS. CORDOVA: You had attempted to kill yourself.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: You left for Oaxaca and you were –

MR. MIJANGOS: Divorce and everything.

MS. CORDOVA: – still drinking. Divorce.

MR. MIJANGOS: And then the reunion – the united?

MS. CORDOVA: Reunited?

MR. MIJANGOS: Reuniting was a process and continues to be a process. It's a beautiful process and it's - I'm so grateful that - it's so wonderful that I was able to see both sides of the coin. And that I came to San Antonio and I was just totally in a hole and I sold my business in Oaxaca.

MS. CORDOVA: The restaurant?

MR. MIJANGOS: The restaurant, and I invested some money here so - to my kids. So another restaurant so they could build a restaurant and I put all my money there and one year it was - we couldn't make the business, so then I made a big decision. The big decision of my life of saying, I'm just going to paint because I've been trying to be an artist for a long time and I had all these distractions - all these distractions in every aspect of my life and everything against me and me running away from me. For the first time I said if I starve to death, I don't care. I'm just going to paint. And I started painting in '81 - 1981.

MS. CORDOVA: 1981. What year did you actually come back to San Antonio?

MR. MIJANGOS: '79.

MS. CORDOVA: 1979. And so the couple of years of dealing with the restaurant and then dealing with alcohol and finally 1981 a start of a new you.

MR. MIJANGOS: A new you.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.]

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: I think that's a great point for us to end this session and then come back to 1981.

MR. MIJANGOS: '81. Yes. Well, yes, because it's a new you.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes. I think we'll stop here.

MR. MIJANGOS: We want to put this guy and open a hole and push in there. You're dead.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And we will come back to 1981.

MR. MIJANGOS: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, I'll stop the tape. [Audio break.]

All right. This is Cary Cordova interviewing Alberto Mijangos at his studio in San Antonio on December 12th, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is our second session and disc one.

We left off our last session by talking about how you had come into a new you in 1981 that had sort of been about leaving alcohol behind and finding a new style in your work and I was thinking maybe you would talk to me about what alcohol had meant for you in the past and what it meant to be free of alcohol in terms of your work.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. I think alcohol definitely allow me to be able to leave because my life was so very much on a constant, constant fear and - I don't know what it was. I - kind of like I felt like I was not with my foot on this Earth; that I was just without any space around me. I didn't feel like comfortable ever, and alcohol allowed me to move into this direction, and so I drank for a long time and I thought I could never be what everybody else, a person without the drug and the alcohol that can allow you to participate and be there. And all of a sudden I got so sick and tired of that life that I decided to quit and it took me a long time to kind of embrace the new life - the new me that I was. And I began to really feel and participate and everything that was around me instead of escaping.

And then I got my ideas about painting that they were totally different about what I was doing before that, and I didn't want to start immediately in my painting and I started doing some small little watercolors and stuff, but I was not the angry person that I was before, and I was afraid that I was going to end up doing little landscapes and I didn't want to do that.

So I was totally lost and by just moving around I think I kind of embraced Rothko. I read about Rothko and I loved his work and especially the use of color, and I started doing some watercolors inspired by Rothko and I didn't want to use acrylics or oils because I didn't want to do exactly what Rothko was doing, so I used paper and watercolors and I started this series that I called the pre-Columbian series and I started using some pre-Columbian symbols in - floating in the color of Rothko more or less and the transparencies of Rothko, dealing

with watercolor. It was very, very interesting and I think that allowed me to go a little bit further in my painting because of the transparencies that I liked to use. And I used to use very strong, heavy-duty paper and I used to go outside my studio and use the hose to put water real strong in the work and almost erase everything – and then come with transparencies and use water again and more transparencies, so keep building the work. And it was really exciting looking for accidents and all kinds of things. All of the sudden I began to paint again and I'm moving to canvases and mixed media. It changed my life because I embraced art more concerned, more aware of what I was doing or what I wanted to do. I think it's a very interesting feeling at that time – inspired. And also the fact that I was sober was also kind of a great feeling.

MS. CORDOVA: So your sources of inspiration changed, too. You started looking at a different group of artists perhaps?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, I think I was playing kind of a catching up. Like when we begin to talk about this. Catching up with what was going on in art and I took Rothko to move into more conceptual approaches and to more of what I'm doing now. So that helped me a lot to go back a little bit – to step back a little bit in the work and begin from then. More about technical situations that I wanted in my work than the subject matter really, that it was not very important at that time.

MS. CORDOVA: And where did you move from Rothko?

MR. MIJANGOS: From that series I moved to the tee-shirt series.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: From that series I begin to work on the tee-shirts, so actually I work on this pre-Columbian pieces quite a few years of the beginning of the '80s and then around '85 or so then I began to use the tee-shirt and I began to use – to paint on a large scale.

MS. CORDOVA: Just to go back for a second, why did you call it the pre-Columbian series?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, the pre-Columbian series because it was kind of like Rothko and I introduced some pre-Columbian design and forms of – it's real interesting; I have a friend that he kind of makes fun of my work and he saw the first pieces and he says that's a pre-Columbian spaghetti because it was all kinds of forms moving around.

MS. CORDOVA: Why did you leave that behind?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, I did so many and it was just for the excuse of finding new techniques that I wanted to embrace, so once I found those techniques, I moved to the next step in which I wanted to talk about who I am and what I am and my own experiences and I chose at that time to talk about the tee-shirt which kind of represents the cross – the Christian cross, and that began a very interesting series about my experiences when I was a little kid and my grandmother used to take me to churches in Mexico and I was impressed by the colors of the churches and the grayish and the old walls and how huge they look, and the gold and the crucifixions and all that. It's not something – kind of strong for a small kid to be exposed to that powerful display, so that stayed with me for a long time.

And what I did with the tee-shirt – number one – it was very much an abstraction. The tee-shirt is just a T and I chose to work in a series with a very simple form to continue talking a little bit more with color and paint and technique – I mean, transparencies, than to really deal with something more complicated than that. So color at that point was very important for me. Texture: I use all kind of paints and materials, mixed media. I started a painting with acrylics and then I moved to oils and house paint and all kinds of sand and rags and collages and stuff that I enjoy very much.

At that time I discovered a Spanish artist, I don't remember his name right now, but I will remember in a minute. And then that allow me to participate a little bit more in what was going on in art and it made me feel very comfortable to see that there were quite a few artists moving in the direction that I was going. It was very, very, very interesting. So I stayed with the tee-shirt and worked with the tee-shirt for a long time and very strong. And I'm mostly making prints and drawings and paintings, small images and large pieces, perhaps for five years and out of those five years I produced maybe 200 pieces or something like that. And I began to sell and I began to be recognized with that style of – that work that I was doing during that time.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you remember the first tee-shirt painting that you did?

MR. MIJANGOS: No.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you know –

MR. MIJANGOS: Because, I did two or three at the same day and then the next day I did three or four more and - small images, so - and maybe I throw those away or something.

MS. CORDOVA: And how did it change over time? How did the tee-shirt form change for you over the course of your use of it?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, mainly and what I was trying to say with color - mainly what I was trying to say as a painting, not as a drawing or subject matter. It was just - the tee-shirt was just as I told you: the excuse to express myself openly in painting in ways that poetry speaks and ways that music speaks, and what I think in my work now and since I started the tee-shirts is it's more of listening to a symphony in which the color is not present strongly - excuse me. [Telephone ringing.]

MS. CORDOVA: Let me pause that. [Audio break.] We were discussing color.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. What I been trying to project is to totally fall in love with what color is all about because I think that's the way I can speak, but not to present color to the viewer so the viewer can discover it immediately or in a decorative way or the idea that other people have about Mexican or Mexico - the color of Mexico and the strong things and the strong blues and the strong this or that.

My approach started to work by embracing the grandfather of the blue, the grand-grandfather of the yellow and the red and going almost into the grayish tones, colds and warms, to create these spaces and dimensions and lines and forms that can speak on their own in a mysterious way, but strongly with color without the viewer discovering that they're looking at color. I don't know if that - you understand that.

So as you can see - the color does not jump and the color becomes a mysterious grey tone that create questions to the viewer.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. MIJANGOS: So that was the beginning of the tee-shirts and the pre-Columbian series that I did inspired by Rothko. That began to really open incredible possibilities for me in expressing myself with color and using just the forms of whatever I was talking about as an excuse, so the tee-shirts were just an incredible journey - a beautiful time that I enjoy very much - very emotional.

MS. CORDOVA: And you purposefully sought to counteract the stereotypes of color with the Mexican -

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, definitely.

MS. CORDOVA: - personality.

MR. MIJANGOS: I respect Tamayo tremendously. I love his color and I think Tamayo is also one that inspired me very much in my work, but even though I think Tamayo is the greatest colorist in Mexican art I didn't want to go in that direction either. I went a little deeper into the grayish approaches of what I do because I wouldn't consider myself color field artist. It's something different than what I do.

MS. CORDOVA: How do you see it as different?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, I see it in a more spiritual way. I see that I can express my spiritual feelings with color and it - in a mysterious way - I want to use color in a very mysterious way. I want the viewer to really get involved in trying to define or feel or dance with what I am talking about, which is a very low-key, as I told you, kind of a grand-grandfathers of the primary colors.

MS. CORDOVA: And let me ask you, because I know that one of the things or one of the themes that you have been dealing with more and more is this idea of into the darkness that you've been discussing - this idea of - and when does this most emerge in your work? Is it around this time or is it later? And what does it mean?

MR. MIJANGOS: It's very interesting, your question, because I think it's a process of - a process of awareness - of awakenings perhaps. To me the way I can illustrate it a little bit is if I enter into a dark room and I sit and I wait and wait and wait to see what's there and I begin to discover that a few forms emerge and in a very mysterious way. And forms that I could not see the first time when I enter because I was not accustomed to the light, so the patience and the intention to discover the magic of the forms as my eyes begin to see something that is emerging there. That's more or less what I talk about about color to me. It's a process of emerging into something that is magical and this begin to appear in the work or in my inspiration.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you feel that you are becoming more experimental at this time?

MR. MIJANGOS: Always. Always experimental, always moving from one style to another style to one form to

another form. It's a very interesting part on ways that why I do what I do. Why I don't stay with a series and produce for the rest of my life more or less the same, the same, the same. I think that it's very interesting. I cannot do it, so what I choose to do is get in the dark in something that is totally unknown and begin to investigate and begin to produce something. It's just like getting in the gold mine, find the gold until I don't see any more gold, go out and look for another mine, which is very dangerous - which is very, very crazy in a way because the feeling when you get out of the mine is being totally in the dark.

I don't know where I am. I don't know what's going to be the next step. Why should I go into this painful, painful situation in my life? I don't know. That's the way I've been always and I choose to be like that. I don't like the other way. I'm not too interested in my daily taco. I cannot accept the fact that I have to look for easy ways in order to be recognized or in order to sell my work because I will be engaged in pleasing institutions and pleasing galleries and pleasing museums and pleasing - and not really free.

My life has been about searching, about getting in the dark constantly and coming out with more intentions and more awareness of learning a lot more and getting more satisfaction about discovering a little bitty miracle that is right there and that satisfaction to me is what pays for everything that I do.

It's kind of crazy; and I don't know, perhaps also it's defending the way I am because what I am is what I am and I might come for millions of fears about something, but that's the way I do things. That's the way I paint.

MS. CORDOVA: And it seems to me that also maybe at this point in the mid-'80s you were getting a little more established, at least here in San Antonio, as an artist.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, of course because I quit drinking, because I quit working for anybody outside of - and I decided just to paint and I needed to eat and I was lucky that I was able to sell a few pieces here and there and make a living as an artist. I decided to limit my life, and the place that I was living and my food, my clothing, and to be very, very economical in all those areas so I could have the freedom of painting and doing what I wanted to do.

MS. CORDOVA: I know that the San Antonio Art League named you artist of the year in 1986.

MR. MIJANGOS: In 1986 they named me artist of the year, yes.

MS. CORDOVA: And what did that mean for you?

MR. MIJANGOS: It meant that - it was not a great thing.

MS. CORDOVA: No?

MR. MIJANGOS: Not to me, no. But it was not a great thing. I want to show my work. I want you to like my work. I paint for you. I want to be loved. I want to be accepted, but I don't paint to become famous. I don't paint for that to please my ego because I suffered tremendously in the past trying to get in galleries, trying to get in museums, and being rejected so many, many, many times in my life, so I decided to really get involved in what I do and just to deal more with attraction rather than promotion.

MS. CORDOVA: What was the most painful rejection in terms of your experience?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, well, I always wanted to have exhibitions or a one-man show in some museum and I could never get it. I didn't know how to put the whole thing together and make sense of what I was doing, and I failed constantly, constantly. And I failed in many, many other ways. With the Chicano movement I did some works at the beginning using the Con Safo signature in some ways and I embraced their ideas very much because I am Mexican and I was rejected by them in ways that they didn't consider me Chicano. They considered me Mexican and you're Mexican and as Mexican you cannot be Chicano because you have to be Mexican-American or something like that and have our ideas and our experiences to really express ourselves and be what we are.

And on the other side with the North American - the Anglo - I was also considered a Mexican painter, so how many Mexican painters are in San Antonio? I think I'm the only one. Really, really the great minority. The only one. So that - not only that, but also perhaps the fact that I was changing the styles here and there and there, it was almost impossible for me to fit in any situation. [Audio break, tape change.]

CARY CORDOVA: What do you feel are some of your greater successes?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, my greatest successes was many, many years ago when I was in Edinburg, Texas. I was trying to work in portraits so I could learn how to paint, and I discovered the use of ochre - yellow ochre - and I was so happy. I was really happy because I thought, if I had been in school I could learn this maybe in a class easily, but to me it was like, wow! Look what I can do with this. And I keep playing and moving it here and there and there and that yellow ochre allow me grayish my colors and I didn't know how to do that and I was so proud

of myself. Now I can paint because I learned how to use the yellow ochre. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: That's a great story.

MR. MIJANGOS: It's funny.

MS. CORDOVA: And so a large part of your ideas about painting seem to come out of color.

MR. MIJANGOS: They come out of color, and – really the greatest joys in my life has been precisely that. All of a sudden – move my approach to the canvas. Instead of putting my will and my ideas on the canvas, surrender to – until I cannot put any more and everything is coming so ugly – surrender to the canvas and then begin to become an enabler to the canvas and what – what do you want? Okay. I don't know what to do. You tell me. And the canvas will – I establish a conversation with the canvas and by establishing, it's a beautiful relationship. It's just humble, beautiful, because then you begin that – a world begins to form and not created by my will and my ego, but by a magical relationship in which at one point I feel the presence of a – some light around me that it's guiding the whole situation.

It's just so much harmony at one point in my work, that it's the greatest joy, the greatest feeling to know that you and the canvas are alone in the world and it's just that relationship that is so mysterious and it's so deep into my own being, it's happening at that point. And it doesn't happen very often, of course, but I have to embrace those minutes – those periods in my life in which, that's one of the reasons I paint I think. It makes me feel very good.

And the result is definitely about me – about finding who I am, which I think is the most important thing: who I am.

MS. CORDOVA: Who are you?

MR. MIJANGOS: Who I am. I am a wonderful spirit and anxious to see the light and to learn and to embrace and not afraid to get hurt; challenging; grateful to be alive, to know that awareness – it's a fountain in which I can just go in and reach myself with all the magic that it's happening constantly – discovering little miracles, not big ones. They don't come very often.

MS. CORDOVA: That's true. How long did the series of tee-shirt paintings last for you?

MR. MIJANGOS: I would say maybe five years. Something like five years.

MS. CORDOVA: And when did the next series come about?

MR. MIJANGOS: The next series started I think in the beginning of the '90s with the *Olympia*. I had the opportunity to travel for the first time to Europe and I visit Paris and I saw – I was very interested in seeing the contemporary art and my wife kept bringing me to the museums – the strong museums – and one of the pieces that impressed me tremendously was *Olympia*, and then I thought about doing a series with *Olympia*, in which sometimes, narrative is – it's interesting as long as it's not too demagogic.

So *Olympia* – *Olympia* I did, I think, nine pieces on *Olympia*.

MS. CORDOVA: Why did *Olympia* touch you or reach you?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, it was very controversial. *Olympia* was a very controversial piece and continues to be very controversial by one of the greatest painters. So then I relate these with the controversial situations in which we live today: political, social, and economical and racial and every direction. So I decide to use the *Olympia* – the image of *Olympia* and ways of seeing the world, and at that time there was a – the AIDS situation in a strong way and it was so dramatic and so horrible to know that this illness was killing so many people and there was no way to come with a cure – with some treatment. And the situation at that time, I think it was Reagan was the president in the United States and there was so much questioning about how come he's not doing what he should be doing about AIDS? And I did a painting of gay individual as *Olympia*, and with a face of a – how do you call that? How do you call those bones?

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, a skeleton. A skull.

MR. MIJANGOS: A skull. The skull in the face, and around then a series of symbols and I collage a picture of Reagan on – why? Then I met this woman that she was a very young student and she had cancer and she came to pose for me and when she came to pose for me, she was going on these treatments – horrible treatments. She lost her hair and she was such a beautiful person. And I question that, too. Why cancer? And she died before I finished the painting, so I did a series – a painting of her with wires all over and that machine connected to her for the treatments and, the misery of the human being, the misery of what we going through or the – what we

have to pay for the extension of making big corporations and for what we are and what we do now. It's a funny world.

In Chicago – I visit Chicago and I saw this street woman trying to create a beautiful, artistic set-up like a display around her while she was resting in the park, and to me that was just a hope of whatever you are, maybe there's some beauty. And I put a painting of what's her name? This artist that –

MS. CORDOVA: Van Gogh.

MR. MIJANGOS: Van Gogh as one of the decorations for her.

MS. CORDOVA: That's his room painting.

MR. MIJANGOS: His room painting. And create a world of fantasy around her because that's what she was. She was in the middle of a park living by herself in a most lonely way, but she surrounded herself with a bunch of funny things. Perhaps she didn't have a complete mental control or something, but it was kind of sad.

MS. CORDOVA: So *Olympia* was a tragic figure –

MR. MIJANGOS: A tragic, tragic figure.

MS. CORDOVA: – for you for all times in multiple situations of people's lives.

MR. MIJANGOS: Multiple situations and different – and my only concern was not to become too critical and move my flag strongly in a very demagogic way, because there's a lot of this political painting and, questioning about many artists, which I think it's okay, but the painting stops being a painting and it becomes more of a political movement, which I don't agree very much. I think painting is first, and if you can express something with painting as painting it's perfectly okay. I think I did like nine pieces on *Olympia* and –

MS. CORDOVA: Did they all represent different figures that you had come into contact with?

MR. MIJANGOS: Different. Yes. Yes. Different situations, different figures of what was going on at that time in my life – in the world. So it was moving from a kind of an abstraction situation from the tee-shirt because it was more abstract to go into something narrative, that's another crazy jump that I did.

When I finished that, then I think I started a series that I called Chones. And that series – what Chones is in slang it's panties in Spanish. And what I wanted to talk about is about the secrets that we have – all human beings and all the secrets that I have, and so I did great images. It's when I paint large, large, large pieces and I enjoy it very much, and by then I had some control of a lot of techniques that I could use and I enjoyed tremendously going in from lot of texture that I was using before to a large canvases without the gesso, just dealing with some kind of a watercolor technique and building that into something strong.

Again, this becomes very much part of the paint – that I feel that the transparency and the two dimensional it's so interesting to deal with [a situation] in which you can create layers and layers and transparencies and allow the viewer to feel like it's something behind that that it's also been there and it's alive or it was alive sometime. Some kind of an archaeological feeling on the diggings.

And to me, that two dimensional situation that you can present in your painting, it's very interesting – mysterious because you can see something behind that, and behind those layers that it's happening and that for some reason you kind of half-way erase and you started another idea, another layer or another life that appears there and destroy it again and work on top of that with something else. To me that is what – it's so interesting in presenting and the limitation that I have of a painting with a two dimension possibilities. I can create a series of dimensions in your conscience – in your mind and your experience dealing only with the two dimensional situation without the tricks of dealing with architectural drawing perspectives.

MS. CORDOVA: Would you say that the Chones paintings were still spiritual in some way?

MR. MIJANGOS: Mm-hmm. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: How so?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, it's a situation about honesty, a situation about –communication with honesty talking directly to another human being and really looking at that human being as a spiritual being, and to deal on those terms of I am talking to you with all my honesty and I'm talking to your spiritual being which is beautiful and perfection, and in that communication there's an incredible experience of really, really admiring what creation is all about.

Sometimes I remember talking to my son and my son will look at me like his father and I would look at my son like my son. Not long ago my son, who is 40 years old, I went to him and I told him, I don't know you as a human being. I know you as my son, but I want to know you as a human being. And he says, "I want to know you as a human being, too." And our relationship changed incredible. Now we know each other spiritually and it's no longer that situation about seeing objects or seeing a table like a table or seeing a cat like a cat. It's totally different. We have that opportunity and we lose that because of what's going on in the world, so we cover ourselves. We don't want anybody to see our Chones.

MS. CORDOVA: I find it interesting that you went from the tee-shirts to a nude figure to the Chones.

MR. MIJANGOS: And then the Chones. So I'm dealing with underwear almost. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Or at least the layers that cover the human body or that don't.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: What was San Antonio like in terms of the 1980s and opportunities for practicing your art?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, it's impossible that - it's - San Antonio, it's a place that deals with - not very urban. Not urban. It's a huge ranch and there's a lot of people with a lot of money, but old money, very conservative - very, very conservative and the landscape - and there's such abundance of land. There's ranchers and there's people that just deal with ranches and all this. I come from Mexico and Mexico's so urban and it's so difficult - to me it seems very painful that I cannot embrace a landscape very well because I'm accustomed to walking the streets and looking for signs, cars, buildings, walls, people just confronting me - so close to me that I am just getting all these images. And Texas is totally open, so there's a landscape there. There's such a concern about the blue bonnet and the cows and things like that, and the cowboy and all that.

So the great majority was not too concerned about what's going on in art as art changes and consciousness about what aesthetically changes, and so we are sitting in a place in which we are totally unknown. We are not even present. We are totally invisible at that time.

Then things begin to change a little bit and for one reason or another a lot of artists moved to San Antonio and the museum begins to present or invite artists from other places.

MS. CORDOVA: The San Antonio Museum of Art?

MR. MIJANGOS: The San Antonio Museum of Art. The - little function, but at least it was something. And then the Blue Star [Blue Star Arts Complex] and little by little, San Antonio now I think there's a place for a lot of artists that produce, but not to be recognized or not to have opportunities to show - to express. Today it's much better than the '80s and before the '80s, what is this? The Linda Pace - Art Pace space that is fabulous, wonderful. So it's getting some sophistication, and now it's beginning to feel like, yes, it's nice to be here because you can produce, life is not so fast, communication is not such a big problem, and money you can afford to rent a space or to buy a space to paint and it's very comfortable to work.

The reason that I choose San Antonio is because I like to go to Mexico a lot; I like to go to New York a lot. I cannot afford to live in New York. I cannot afford to live in Mexico. So being in San Antonio, I can travel to Mexico City and I can travel to New York, so it's comfortable. It's comfortable to be here. And I don't know, I think also it's peaceful. I don't know; in New York or Mexico City there's so much movement, and so I will be so entertained by other situations with people, friends, and galleries and museums that wouldn't allow me to be in peace with myself.

MS. CORDOVA: Have you ever felt any of the initial racism that you encountered when you first moved to Texas here in San Antonio? Has that ever intruded on your career here?

MR. MIJANGOS: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I think it's my attitude. When I have exhibitions, when I show my work, I have this feeling that people come to see my work as if I had this huge, big ego and I want to celebrate my birthday four or five times a year. And I appreciate these people that come to me, but the way they come to me and when you're in an opening and say, oh, Alberto, congratulations. Well, congratulations about what? Number one. And I like your work. And then you have to go to that level and - oh, thank you very much, because you - and it becomes social and totally out of what's happening there. And what's happened in your studio when you were looking at the painting.

So my approach is not arrogant, but honest. Somebody comes and - I like your work. Yes. I like it too. What do you like about my work? Let's talk about it, or something, that can help me a little bit to stop playing that social game that is so uncomfortable. It's so very, very uncomfortable to feel that just your fat ego is there in the center of that gallery or museum and you want these people to come and tell you congratulations. I don't like it

at all, and so that attitude to me is very important for what discrimination is all about. And in part, I can participate in being discriminated and – who are you? Well, my name is Alberto Mijangos. What can I do for you? Who are you? Direct and aggressive as they are with me, and with love, but creating some honest presence there with whoever confronts me instead of pretending to enable or to please that person and to allow that person to play with that situation, to take advantage of me or whatever they do.

I had many opportunities in which people treat me in a funny way, but I feel sorry for them. Like some old people will come to me, at my age, and they call me boy. Hey, boy. What? The other day I was in a restaurant and there was – I don't want to mention his name, but he was a director of a museum and I was eating and when I got up I passed by his table and he said, "Oh, here's my compadre." Something like that. And he was sitting with a couple of people there, and I couldn't stop. I went back to him and I said, "Will you please, please, please don't call me compadre? My name is Alberto and I just don't appreciate the fact that you call me compadre." And he went, like, "Oops. I'm sorry." "It's okay," and I went – and I was with some friends, too, and then went my friends went, why did you do that? And I said, I think that is very important to do – to tell people to stop doing that to me. I don't appreciate that. It's not funny, it's not gracious. Don't do it to me. I don't hate you for that. I don't want to hit you or anything, but I beg you, treat me for what I am. My name is Alberto.

MS. CORDOVA: It was a presumption on his part to use that –

MR. MIJANGOS: Presumption on his part or something that they're accustomed to do. It's just it's the same thing we do in Mexico. It's not like this is the only country in the world that discriminates. The whole world discriminates. I discriminate. See, I think that that is the problem: that we – if we fight these guys or these people, it's like putting ourselves in the same position of saying I'm right and you're wrong, and that's the problem with the world about what is right and what is wrong; what is evil and what is not evil, or goodness or angelic or graceful or whatever.

I don't like to play that game. I think everybody has the same problems. I discriminate. You discriminate. But I try to be aware of that and try to control myself a little bit on both lines: forgiving the person who discriminated against me and forgiving myself for discriminating, and then it doesn't become that confrontation – constant confrontation and with that increased hate and increase the problem instead of solving the problem.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, this sort of brings me to another question, perhaps off track, but what has your relationship been like with dealers for your work, or galleries?

MR. MIJANGOS: Very difficult, I think as with every artist. Getting to a gallery or getting with a dealer is almost like a marriage. It becomes so emotional for their part and my part. You have to make money. You have to eat. So I understand these people, and they handle my work. Now it's different – little bit different because I have some background and I don't sell too much, but people like my work and I have some clientele. Galleries treat me nicely and many – and because I don't beg or – I learned this – I think it is important for the artist to learn, number one, which galleries are the ones that are dealing more or less with the work that you're doing. That's very important because sometimes a gallery is dealing with realism and I go with my abstractions and of course the gallery is going to say no thank you. That's the first thing, and the other thing is to understand that galleries are dealing with business. It's a business situation and it's not so much of what we think it is.

So understanding that, if a gallery is interested in my work I allow them to deal – with respect of my space and their space. I am the painter, this is what I'm doing. If you like what I'm doing, it's okay if you want to sell it or do whatever. Unfortunately, there's not too many – there's very few galleries and too many artists, so it's very difficult to get in a gallery.

MS. CORDOVA: Who was representing you in the '80s?

MR. MIJANGOS: In the '80s? I had a gallery in Houston. I don't remember the name. I had a gallery in Houston that was representing me and in Mexico also a couple of friends represent me. My style changes constantly, so the gallery get out of whack when they see that I change to something else and they have to look for other kind of customers, so it's not that it's easy for me to – that is, I have more success having people and collectors that come to my studio and buy some of my work here.

MS. CORDOVA: So more via private sales?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: What do your collectors seek in your work?

MR. MIJANGOS: There are different types of collectors. I think sometimes you can really see in the eyes of the collector if they really embracing the same feeling in your painting as you do, and that's beautiful. Many collectors, they collect for the name or they collect because they need something in the viewing room.

MS. CORDOVA: What did the San Antonio Museum of Art collect of yours?

MR. MIJANGOS: The Museum of Art has a large image of a tee-shirt.

MS. CORDOVA: Why do you think they wanted that particular image?

MR. MIJANGOS: It was a donation. Somebody talked with the curator and says, I like Alberto's work very much. Choose one and I'll buy it.

MS. CORDOVA: [Audio break.] All right. We're back recording. And maybe I could just step back for a second because I'm still very interested in the *Olympia* paintings and - what was - had you lost anyone to AIDS as well?

MR. MIJANGOS: No. No.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: No.

MS. CORDOVA: But you had lost someone to cancer; your friend the woman who died.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: I see.

MR. MIJANGOS: But it was just kind of a general feeling at that time I think. We were talking a lot about that, and I also think that at that point there was a consciousness about the gay movement and about the needs of the gay, and it's incredible to know what, what's happening in Africa and all these places, the problems of AIDS. I don't know, but I see a lot of artists interested in looking for a better, more idealistic way of living in this world and it's always something going on and it's okay, I'm concerned. I have concerns for humanity and one of my big dreams is to move back to Mexico in some small, little village and just to have a place with flowers and painting and music and good food and wonderful friends and just paint and talk about all kinds of beautiful things that - they're always around us, but we're confused with all the situations.

MS. CORDOVA: Have you found a good artist community here in San Antonio as a result of those changes you were just describing in the city?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, I have a couple of friends, but not too many. I don't belong to any group - as I told you, I - and also I am not too social with people, so I - you see, my telephone doesn't ring at all - never. Once in a while. And people don't come. There's some quietness that I sure appreciate that. And as part of it I am very introverted. I just don't know how to handle people too much. I'm very involved in my world. I have a class here that I've been teaching for the last seven years and I have a group of artists - about 12; 12 more or less - that they've been with me for five or six years and I enjoy very much seeing how they progress and some of the serious interests that they have in working. When they come to the class they really apply themselves to what they're doing, and to me that's beautiful. I really enjoy it.

MS. CORDOVA: When did you begin teaching?

MR. MIJANGOS: On and off on many occasions. It's a good way of making a little money and enjoying and sharing also the little that I know about painting and art. And also the relationship with the students is very interesting, so - I started on and off since I was at the Mexican Cultural Institute. When I was directing the Mexican Cultural Institute I was teaching a class there.

MS. CORDOVA: Are you still in touch with some of your students from there?

MR. MIJANGOS: From that period?

MS. CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

MR. MIJANGOS: One or two. One or two, yes.

MS. CORDOVA: One of the things that I've often read about in terms of you is that you are described as an incredible teacher - a very successful teacher in terms of working here in the community. Why do you think you're so successful or represented as so successful as a teacher?

MR. MIJANGOS: I think the part that is interesting with my students is that, since I change constantly in my search styles, I am able to - and as a matter of fact I try to give them as much as I know of all the tricks that I learned because I want to get rid of those tricks and start looking for other tricks, and to me that's what happens

with my classes – that I totally open and I work individually with each of the artists and their own style and what I try to do is just open little doors to them and to expose them to a greater landscape – more of what they’re looking for, and it’s been very interesting.

As I walk around when my students are painting, I can catch immediately what the problem is in their work because they are so involved in what they’re doing that they miss a couple of places, and if I go and just say, what do you think about this area or this form or this color that you’re using here? And then immediately, oh, yes. And they start working and completing their work. And we talk a lot about art and about the life of the artist and the principles of the whole thing.

MS. CORDOVA: We’ve discussed several Mexican and European painters that have influenced you. Are there any American painters that you feel – well, I guess aside from Rothko perhaps.

MR. MIJANGOS: Aside from Rothko? Duchamp to me – but Duchamp became American I think. Which one – De Kooning.

MS. CORDOVA: Duchamp and De Kooning. [Laughter.] Two great American artists.

MR. MIJANGOS: Rothko also American artist. They’re from American movement, but they were from Europe – some other – some place.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, one of the things that I sometimes see in your work or possibly in your more contemporary work are references to – I’m just blank on his name – flags. Jasper Johns.

MR. MIJANGOS: Jasper Johns? At the beginning I liked Jasper Johns a lot. I was so impressed with his techniques and his use of encaustics and his ideas, the American flag the way he painted it was just absolutely great. That’s what I like about painting, that kind of layers and layers, and he did those beautiful pieces.

And I think he’s very American – he was born in the United States. Jasper Johns.

MS. CORDOVA: I believe so, yes. [Doorbell rings in background.] Let me pause it. Or actually, I’m just going to stop the tape here and change to a new tape. [Audio break.]

This is Cary Cordova interviewing Alberto Mijangos. This is disc number two, for session number two and we were just discussing Jasper Johns and his work.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Well, of course after abstract expressionism, the new painters that arrived including pop art, which is very, very, very strong –

MS. CORDOVA: Well, let me ask you the question a different way.

MR. MIJANGOS: Different way.

MS. CORDOVA: And maybe my question is more about how you feel living in the United States has shaped you as an American artist or has shaped your work – the creation of your work.

MR. MIJANGOS: I think it’s very important. It’s very important, but because of the exposure – the United States is the center of art in the world and not because of American artists; because of all of these artists from all over the world that came to work after the Second World War, and the next situation. To me, this country it’s incredible in so many, many, many ways, and I think there’s such an incredible energy too, that is not found in any other place in the world, to create, to experiment, to really do whatever you want to do in the art world. And with everything that happens on that positive side, it also happens in a very negative side. And it’s very, very difficult to know which direction you should take or what you want to embrace because there’s abundance on both sides and it’s so much attraction.

When I came to United States from Mexico, I was doing mother and child, and – [Audio break, tape change] – was selling mother and child a lot and I had people who invited me to move to Santa Fe and become painter of the Southwest and relate a little bit with the Indians there and with my background as Mexican and to keep doing these paintings of Indians with little kids and stuff like that that I could sell immediately and become rich. I had that opportunity and I knew about it, but I just couldn’t do it.

MS. CORDOVA: When was that?

MR. MIJANGOS: That was in the ‘50s. I took advantage of that economical situation. I sold a lot of those little mother and child every time I need money for to buy a bottle I would paint a mother and child and sell it, but I didn’t want to be there and I knew that there was a great – but a lot of artists around me went into that direction, and instead of that I kept on searching in other directions.

MS. CORDOVA: Who invited you to do that? Who invited you to go to Santa Fe?

MR. MIJANGOS: To Santa Fe? There was a group of collectors here dealing with folk art from Mexico and also art from Santa Fe – they live in Santa Fe and they told me, Alberto, you can really become very successful in Santa Fe because it's center that one – for that kind of art that sells a lot. Next to New York, Santa Fe. I think. It's incredible.

So that's the beauty about this country, I think; that you have opportunities to move around. The thing is to have the wisdom to make the choices that you have here. That's so interesting that there's the – kind of a buffet there and you have to choose, and you go around and choose whatever you want to choose and be aware – becoming aware of that, that's important. And knowing what you want in life. Definitely the journey has been much more difficult for me economically and in a way of surviving or satisfying my own ego choosing the direction that I choose, but I feel much, much better. I feel inside of me some honesty and I just think what about if I had chosen to go to Santa Fe and I would have a lot of money and success on those terms, but I would be so sick carrying that kind of Chones with me. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Painting all those mother and child paintings still.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: So actually, yes, let's bring – let's go back to the Chones paintings because – what followed the Chones paintings? What came next for you?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, the Chones. Oh, right. The – after the Chones I started reading the *Tao te Ching* [by Lao Tzu] and I became very involved in that part. My spirituality and my religious beliefs were very much outside of – with a lot of doubts about the creation of this Earth or whatever. And by reading the *Tao te Ching*, which is a very poetic way of talking about the creation and the human being, it gave me an incredible insight and then I decided to make a series of it – *Tao te Ching*.

And my painting changed completely because it became more an object, perhaps abstract or geometrical, surrounded by a very, very settled background without any transparencies, sort of more in the flat approach. And it began, again, to the idea of the mystery and my inspiration on this was about that any simple object it's very important and all depends – if you move it away from where it should be, like in this case let's say this table I put it in my gallery and hang it in my gallery, it can become – that's exactly what we were talking about, it's not an it anymore. It's – it has the energy and the energy speaks, so and that series that I did I used in a way sometimes abstract objects or forms or some objects and surrounded these objects with a background that emphasized the energy of the object. And so it became a very, very kind of a minimal approach to the work. Very conceptual also, and it was a tremendous departure of dealing with all these abstractions that I was doing before into these.

And some of the interesting parts here is that I had the opportunity – three or four months ago to present an exhibition of the '80s to 2000 of my work and I was always interested in seeing if there's a relationship or a continuity between one series to the next to the next, and the only way you can tell is by presenting them in the huge gallery, and it was pretty scary because I said, "Gosh, what's going to happen? They're going to think this is a salad and that has no connections at all one to another one, and perhaps I'm going to die with these questions, of what I am living here. I don't know."

So when we hang the exhibition, it was a very pleasant – very pleasant feeling for me to see that perhaps there's a relationship – there's a presence of my hand there in each of these different series. And to me, that's it. I don't have to see any more. That's enough for me to feel in peace about the work that I've been doing. It works very nice.

So with these series, I feel that even though it perhaps one of the most different series from what I was doing before, because I am taking an object and surrounding it with a background, that I'm sure that if I ever had a complete retrospective of my work it will be some understanding of where I am coming from or where am I going.

MS. CORDOVA: Is this when you began to introduce numbers into your paintings?

MR. MIJANGOS: No, the numbers I use – I introduce them from many, many years ago. Actually – in the '80s, actually, is when I – not before the '80s.

MS. CORDOVA: When did the numbers emerge, and could you talk a little bit –

MR. MIJANGOS: I think the – a little bit about my – my understanding of God, or my understanding of the spiritual world that I needed to form because it was too difficult for me to understand religions and especially the

Christian religion that I was born with – introduced by my grandmother and my mother and my family.

It was always – I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. And when I change my life from alcohol that was giving me some power and I needed to embrace or replace that with something else, I look for spirituality and it had to be a very honest situation. And the use of the word God would take me precisely to the beginning when I was a little kid the way God was introduced to me, so I needed to change that and I replaced it with some numbers that appear in my life for some reason or another and I took preference or attraction to certain numbers in my life. It was number one, number five, and number nine, and all of the sudden I begin to create my own definition of these three numbers. Like, one: the beginning. Five: my life. And nine: the end. And that one, two, three – it becomes almost like trinity of that beautiful thing about waking up in the morning, doing whatever you do, and then going to bed. That, to me, it became so deep and beautiful and it was my own – again, something that I didn't want that everybody have that it needed to be some invention of my own so I could be comfortable with it and really embrace it. It becomes deeper and deeper as time pass by and I use it a lot in my work. When I finish my painting I say thank you for the creative power – I put 159 in the painting someplace and – there.

MS. CORDOVA: In a way I am actually reminded of Con Safo. It's your own 159.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. It is exactly that. And it's also that little mysterious thing that you don't – it would be so different if I put: thank you God. [Laughter.] It's just so personal that I can just put 159 and people say, what is it? What is it? Well, they don't have to know, or maybe they – if they ask me they will know.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm suddenly also reminded of the *Olympia* painting that you did for the homeless woman which you have the series of numbers leading up to 159.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: And does that series of numbers as a form have a particular meaning for you? The sort of block –

MR. MIJANGOS: In the narrative approach when I was talking to you about these paintings, especially it's a homeless female that all of the sudden in the middle of a park in Chicago surrounded by this incredible, fabulous fashion store and jewelry and all kinds of elegant things she sets up in the middle of that part a space for her in which she chooses what she wants and an elegant way of a rag hanging from a tree or a piece of paper or a book or an umbrella or a funny hat that she was wearing. Everything was of her choosing and that reflects some sophistication. No matter where you are, I want to be different and I want to surround myself with things of my own preference. And so to me that was some kind of a grace in the middle of all these deep limitations she is finding some abundance around her. So the only way to express it is to put next to her a series of numbers starting from any number, like let's say from 95 and then 96, 97, 98 until I went until 159 and I end on 159. In other words, it's a journey in which you travel and then all of a sudden you find out or you went with an awakening of knowing that you are in the middle of abundance no matter where.

MS. CORDOVA: And that actually takes me to another painting of yours in which you use the infinity symbol.

MR. MIJANGOS: The infinity symbol.

MS. CORDOVA: And is that perhaps another representation of 159?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Or is that different? What does infinity mean for you in your paintings?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, it's – that is the deepest question. What is infinity and the awareness of infinity is just – the awareness is what makes infinity. The awareness is what is your ego: the awareness of your ego; the awareness of you. It's what infinity is all about, and to me in that painting everything – it's these layers and these questions that I am asking, and the main question is precisely that: the awareness of infinity, which is the most profound question that anyone can ask because it's so much outside of our comprehension. It's so deep and far away from our comprehension that it becomes almost the question about God, the question about creation, the question about awareness, the question about love.

MS. CORDOVA: So what answers were you able to find when you read the *Tao te Ching*?

MR. MIJANGOS: The answer – the greatest answer was that the god that you can tell is not the eternal god. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm trying to understand how you read that. If you can see the god, if you can interpret some form of god that cannot be the eternal god?

MR. MIJANGOS: That's right.

MS. CORDOVA: Correct? Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: It's the unknown. It's the unnamed. Something with no name has to be the one that create the name.

MS. CORDOVA: Which actually leads us back to that theme of into the darkness?

MR. MIJANGOS: In the darkness. In the dark is where you find the mystery, and in the middle of the mystery the light comes. Light appears as an illumination or as an awakening or as another level of seeing yourself.

MS. CORDOVA: And so how did you follow up this incredible series of paintings? What was your next step? In dealing with all these eternal questions, where did that lead you?

MR. MIJANGOS: That is the same question that I asked for infinity. What's next? And if there's anything next. The way I feel right now is that , all of a sudden since I saw my exhibition, a kind of a mini retrospective, I question myself: why did I change from the tee-shirt to something else? Why did I change from something else to something else to something else? Do you think it's time for me to stop and perhaps go back to the tee-shirt? Or perhaps go back to the mother and child that I did a long time ago? And then I can go back to these unfinished worlds that I create and to say, okay, I can do a little bit here. Now with more freedom, now with more peace of mind and the way that I complete my search - that I complete my exploration in ways that perhaps I find the same answers in all these series, and then I can feel - I can give me the present - it's just like a gift to me - to go back to embrace something that I went through and left unfinished perhaps.

So I can go back to the tee-shirt and I say now with all the experience that I acquired in this journey I can go back to the tee-shirt and not struggle anymore about being different or looking for the next style, but just embracing that that peaceful place that I'm looking for when I told you a while ago I dreamed that I want to go to Guanajuato perhaps and get a place and just sit and contemplate all these episodes in my life and perhaps play a little bit with some of those, too, in a more peaceful way, maybe in little details. I like to work on this corner of the painting and with a little bit more interest and something like that that's more like resting.

MS. CORDOVA: So in a way maybe you're still in this last series of paintings you're still working through it and you might change or you might not right now.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Though in looking at the work that's on your easel right now, you're working with some brighter colors than you've been using in a long time. Is that correct?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes. I think I'm beginning to introduce perhaps the son of the father instead of the grandfather. [Laughter.] I'm beginning to get closer to the colors and to me it begins to show a brighter future - a brighter, happy ending to my journey, perhaps, in which I found Esplendor. I don't know how you say it in English. Esplendor?

MS. CORDOVA: Splendor.

MR. MIJANGOS: Splendor? Splendor. Yes. Energy, beauty, gratefulness, tremendous amount of passion and love for everything that moves, everything that is there, everything that I see.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you think that you'll ever go back to more representational work?

MR. MIJANGOS: I feel like doing some drawings. In drawings I'd like to do something more representational. Too bad we don't have time to see some of my books that I sketch and sketch and sketch and sketch and write notes and - because those - those little sketches, those little notes are much freer of the ego than the big paintings.

MS. CORDOVA: How do you mean?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, they're more direct. I'm traveling or I'm sitting down in a restaurant and I make a sketch and something straight comes from my mind and my feelings and my energies. Comes right there with pencil and paper on a little napkin perhaps.

MS. CORDOVA: And do you use those sketches to create some of your big paintings?

MR. MIJANGOS: No. No. It's another world I think. It's another world.

MS. CORDOVA: So drawing for you is a very different mode of art than painting?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: How do you see the difference? How does your painting not use your drawing?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, it's like when I draw I am a bird. I'm flying. When I'm painting I have to build the airplane and get in the airplane to fly.

MS. CORDOVA: One of the things that I find fascinating about some of your paintings is the level of texture that you also have started to build into it, and I imagine that's something that you simply can't do in drawing.

MR. MIJANGOS: That's right. That's another part and that's a very good observation. It's - and also color.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. MIJANGOS: And also color. So texture and color and the layers and the layers and the layers that I tell you about it are - the same feeling of dealing with a drawing. What I do [when I'm] drawing it's just a black and white on a paper and, yes, some - perhaps I rub something, I drop a little bit of coffee I'm drinking on the paper and I put some layer there, but in the painting you have that time also - a situation that it's so interesting. Yesterday I was working with this painting. This morning I work a little bit with this painting, but this morning I'm different than what I was yesterday.

Someone in Oaxaca told me one time: you don't dry your clothes with the sun of yesterday - yesterday's sun. And so you have to be in a today situation with the sun of today. And in the drawing it's right there. In a few minutes, boom, it's there - a sketch. And with a painting it's that process of who I was yesterday and who I am today and what I didn't see yesterday I can see it with today's sun and perhaps tomorrow I see a different situation in my painting and so that process is very interesting and the understanding of traveling through this time and allowing myself to manage that time, to control that time, not to allow time to take me someplace. I have to finish now or I have to do this now when I cannot do it anymore. To say I let this painting rest and when I come back tomorrow, or that feeling of the - Alberto with different eyes, different glasses to look at the - at the piece, and it's a nice situation that peaceful kind of a relationship of visiting those worlds. I come back tomorrow and I visit and I have a different conversation, a different energy.

MS. CORDOVA: You have another wonderful piece that is constructed of rags and a quilt and then you've painted over them. When did you begin to use fabric in your paintings?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, I use it in many, many - in the tee-shirts, for instance, I used collage - a lot of collage in fabrics and things, but some of the black paintings that I did were precisely after I read *Tao te Ching* about the dark. And working with a very flat color that has no transparency, the texture becomes so very important because of the light that hits the texture in different ways and it can become very dramatic. [Phone ringing in background.] Excuse me.

MS. CORDOVA: Can we pause this tape. [Audio break.] Okay, so we were just talking about your use of fabric in your paintings.

MR. MIJANGOS: The use of -

MS. CORDOVA: Fabric. Cloth.

MR. MIJANGOS: Fabric. Cloth. In my work sometimes - it's interesting, I think you saw two or three pieces there that sometimes for some reason that's totally out of the series that I'm working, but I have some interest in experimenting with something and I'm - perhaps I paint one or two pieces and I put them away, and usually those are the ones that I sell the most for some reason. The - like this piece that you saw with the dark clothing and quilt; it was just an experiment that I saw the quilt and I said, this could be nice with these colors or these colors, related with the black paintings that I've been doing for some time.

Sometimes I do figurative work just on a very abstract way that don't fit with any of the stuff that I'm doing at that point, and I just put them away and -

MS. CORDOVA: We talked about the significance of the tee-shirt and Chones. Does the quilt have any significance for you?

MR. MIJANGOS: No. No, because it was one of those pieces that all of a sudden I feel like painting without any - just with the idea of techniques and textures and dealing with the limitation of the black. Some areas very flat and some areas kind of shiny - transparent.

MS. CORDOVA: And then you had another painting that was substantially different, which we actually discussed earlier looked a little like a virgin image or -

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: It has that quality to it.

MR. MIJANGOS: That belongs in a way to the *Tao te Ching* series. You know, which I'm dealing a lot with objects, sometimes of folk art or sometimes of geometrical forms with a lot of texture. It's a very interesting series that I'm having a lot of fun with it. This time it's more like I work in different areas and then I go back to the series of the *Tao te Ching*, but I'd really like to enhance it a little bit more. I think there's a lot more to be said on that direction.

MS. CORDOVA: How can you relate the virgin image to the *Tao te Ching*?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, to me all these images come from the same place. My approach in this is like I use a popular art object. I used the virgin as a popular object and I deal with it – precisely with the idea of putting this virgin in the dark instead of putting it in the light. And when I put it in the dark and you can hardly see the pictures and you begin to discover that it's a virgin after you observe the painting. To me, that sends more or less the same message that I want to send about the darkness and about the mystery and where the real energy is in the dark.

MS. CORDOVA: The virgin image also makes me think of – because you can't see her face – the *Olympia* paintings in which there are no faces.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Can you talk about just the absence of faces in your work or why you choose to do that?

MR. MIJANGOS: When looking at the face, immediately he becomes human – totally human, and the fact that we see so many faces we don't stop like we were talking a while ago about the real communication – not with the face, but with the spirit – and I think that's one of the reasons that I remove the face in those paintings. I think it is more important, the spirit of the form, of the piece, of the human. When we look at the face, it kind of changes a little bit because it becomes so much of evading your eyes or evading my eyes or your presence. It becomes more physical perhaps and not deeply into what you are as a spiritual being.

The face is a little bit – and the paintings – and the religious paintings to me it's demagogic in a way, I mean, it's theatrical. You see this face of this virgin with a suffering face, and then you become compassionate about her and you relate to the suffering of the human being and I don't think that's so necessary for these people to touch me spiritually. Not with my feelings, it's more with awareness of the unknown of the dark in which we all exist – our spirits.

The spirit is dark because we don't see it. It's mysterious, right?

MS. CORDOVA: I think so.

MR. MIJANGOS: You think so. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: You have another – [phone ringing in background]. All right, I was just about to ask you about another set of paintings that you did. It's a four-part group of paintings that you said were together as an installation that were – inspired, by a photograph? Is that correct?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, this is the project that I work with another artist – a photographer. And we were invited to do an exhibition, and we chose to go out and photograph, so we went for lunch and after the lunch he had his cameras and outside of the restaurant there was a space that seemed to me like the homeless people hang around there. And we were looking around and I saw this container of cigars that was all scratched and beat up and I – the form attract me also; all the accidents that happened to this piece, so I asked the photographer to take pictures of that.

And we based our exhibition precisely on that object and it's very much like part of the *Tao te Ching* situation that you bring an object that was a piece of garbage and that piece of garbage becomes a tao situation, which has its own energy, its own personality, and its own part of what the creative miracle is.

And therefore it's something to respect if you put it in the right surrounding – in the right place. The ideal situation for the artist is to bring the invisible to the visible, and dealing with that object was very interesting. So we did a series of works with that object, and I don't know too much about manipulating computers and working with all that, but I directed the whole thing. I just watched the person dealing with the computer and I said, "I like this, remove this and add this." So we ended up with a beautiful series.

From there I was so impressed that I started a small series of four pieces dealing with the same object.

MS. CORDOVA: Who was the photographer you were working with?

MR. MIJANGOS: Bob Maxham.

MS. CORDOVA: Bob Maxham?

MR. MIJANGOS: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: M-A-X-I-M [Actually spelled Maxham]?

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: And it sort of leads me to ask you about the presence of photography throughout your life. I mean, I think about you tinting the photographs early on, you coming to San Antonio because of a photographer friend –

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: – and this work with photography now. Have – do you think photography has overtly influenced your work?

MR. MIJANGOS: Not much. I think mainly I influence the photographers.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] Okay.

MR. MIJANGOS: It's interesting because I think photographers love painting, they want to be painters, and they use the camera instead of the brush and it's kind of a – painting is there and photography is here and I want to touch that part of painting, so there's some photographer's friend of mine that come to me with that beautiful, beautiful kind of a mystery about – I want to know a little bit about painting and I love painting and tell me about painting. And working with the photographers and painters, I think it's a great situation because I don't know how to use a camera, but I always want to take a photograph – a good photograph. I mean I see everything and I – take that and take that and take that, and it's fabulous. It's good when you have somebody waiting to follow you.

I traveled with Bob Maxim in Europe and he was carrying all this incredible equipment. He could hardly walk and I was just telling him why don't you take that picture and take that picture and take that picture over there. He was just crazy – going crazy taking pictures.

MS. CORDOVA: That's great.

MR. MIJANGOS: I didn't have to carry this stuff.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] Yes, you had your own walking camera. And how did those photos turn out?

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, I forgot about this. Talking about photography, when I finished the series on *Olympia*, he came to visit me once and he was very impressed with paintings and I said, do you think we can put a setup here, like *Olympia's* bed with a model and the real people and then we can photograph everything? So we set up the whole thing with models. Even we were able to bring a black model for the companion of *Olympia*, and a cat, and we set up the whole thing and we took a series of photographs and he has the whole collection. I don't have any – I have just a few pieces of that series, but definitely it's a work together. We didn't work together not more than one exhibition – couple of exhibitions. We show that exhibition in Houston someplace, at some university.

MS. CORDOVA: So you showed his photographs with your paintings of *Olympia* at the same time?

MR. MIJANGOS: No, we just showed the photographs there.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, but that would be wonderful to see the two together also.

MR. MIJANGOS: Oh, yes. Yes. I would like to talk to him and see if we can set up an installation of those photographs here because they were very beautiful. No, I've used that word so much – “beautiful” – but they were nicely done and dealing with *Olympia* with photography is like *Olympia* is already there and you're taking photographs of *Olympia*. It's very interesting.

MS. CORDOVA: Did the photographs follow your canvases or were they at the same time?

MR. MIJANGOS: I had the canvases first and then we did them. Maybe a year later or a couple of years later we did the photographs.

MS. CORDOVA: I see. Did you ever do any other projects like that?

MR. MIJANGOS: With photography? Small little things. Not heavy-duty things. Like walking around with him or work – helping him sometimes in some exhibitions that he has; curating the exhibition or giving him ideas or just hanging his exhibitions. I enjoy that very much.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm conscious of that we've been talking a long time and I think I want to try and start wrapping up our conversation here, but I thought I'd like to ask you just about the – getting this studio space here. When you got this wonderful, large studio space and how it's also grown as a gallery, and maybe you could just talk about that a little bit.

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, after moving from one empty warehouse to another empty warehouse to another empty warehouse, I think that's the pattern that many artists follow in cities. In San Antonio and in other cities. I was so sick and tired of moving all this equipment and tables and easels and paintings, so then I started thinking and looking for a place to buy and we were able to find this huge area and I talked with a friend of mine and he bought part of the building and I bought part of the building – [audio break, tape change] – and it's very comfortable because it's just like if I was paying the rent by the month, and since I had so much space I built a couple of studios that I rent and a gallery. But the gallery – I built it just to kind of look at my work and hang sometimes my work there and see how it would look in a gallery with the lights and everything, and it helps me a lot.

And sometimes I invite artists that I like – friends that I like and they show here. Some of my students sometimes they finish a series and are very excited to present it at my gallery. But it hasn't been very successful and when it's selling, we don't sell too much.

CARY CORDOVA: No.

MR. MIJANGOS: Rarely sell something.

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe because you're not a dealer.

MR. MIJANGOS: That's right. It takes a lot of time and – yes. Selling, promoting, and talking to people on the phone and bringing people to the gallery is very difficult.

MS. CORDOVA: Though on the other hand you seem to be part of a larger cultural movement in San Antonio with so many galleries having opened recently, it seems to me. Is that fair to say that there are a large number of galleries?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, not really – I shouldn't say that, but not really good galleries. There's a lot of galleries because they're not real serious galleries, and people try to open a gallery and a gallery is a very difficult business and there's not too much customers, so these galleries – a lot of galleries opened, but they close and other galleries open and they close. There's not too many galleries. I think maybe Austin has more galleries than San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I was also interested to see that you're getting represented by a gallery in Troy, New York, recently.

MR. MIJANGOS: In New York, yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: – that a number of San Antonio artists are being represented by this gallery. I guess that was featured in the news recently.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes, it's a real neat gallery. I like it very much, and they sell some of my work and they try to extend to Manhattan and perhaps they might do it. I love Troy. I visit Troy and it's totally a different world – it started raining – totally a different world than what Texas is all about. The owner of the gallery, is from Puerto Rico and she's a fabulous promoter and I think she's doing a great, great job with the gallery; very much.

She's beginning to have some connections in New York and Manhattan and perhaps she might work for the Museo de Barrio in New York, and that's going to help us a lot.

MS. CORDOVA: I would imagine.

MR. MIJANGOS: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: So maybe as sort of a wrapping-up question, what do you see as the future for you and your art and its progression, or maybe if there's something that I haven't asked you that you think we should include on this tape what would that be?

MR. MIJANGOS: Well, I think – I don't know if I can make very clear the – this situation about the changing so

much and chasing all the time. To me that's the part that I - how would I say? Perhaps that I'm rich in the fact that knowing why I'm chasing all this time and what's the positive and the negative about the chasing, and not reaching that part yet. And I think it's natural. My feeling is that everybody has creative possibilities. There's some romanticism about what the artist is all about, but I really believe that every human being has potential creative powers.

Now, how we use those powers and how we take advantage of that incredible gift is up to the people. Like in my case - I decided that there's nothing else around me that I can participate in but the visual arts, but for the rest of the people, like a bookkeeper, there's always that when I talk to people they say, I wish I could paint. I wish I could do something. I wish I could sing. I wish I could dance. I wish I could make music. And we all have it. We always, unfortunately, want to take art as the Olympics, and get a gold medal there. And if you don't swim like with a possibility of getting a gold medal or getting in the Olympics, you're not a swimmer? Yes, you are a swimmer. You can swim all the time. And I take it on those terms. I think art is for everybody and everybody should participate and everybody should honor the art in ourselves and what we are because that could be very well the solution for the world - when we realize that we have that innate need to share with love, and sharing with love or doing anything with love, even sweeping the floors with love, it's so unique, it's so special, and so creative.

So that awareness in a way can really spread that love and compassion for human beings; to know that you are a potential creator and to see everybody as such instead of idealizing people. You're an artist and you're going to - it's kind of an uncomfortable situation because in my eyes everybody has something to share, a way of dancing that is very unique.

MS. CORDOVA: I think that's a wonderful note for us to end this session on, so I'm just going to stop our tape with that beautiful remark.

MR. MIJANGOS: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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