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Oral history interview with Benito Huerta, 2004 Feb. 29-Mar. 2

This interview is part of the series "Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas," supported by Federal funds for Latino programming, administered by the Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives. The digital preservation of this interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Benito Huerta on February 29 and March 1, 2004. The interview took place in Arlington, 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.

This transcript has been lightly edited. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

CARY CORDOVA: All right, we are recording. This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, conducting an oral history interview of Benito Huerta at his home in Arlington, Texas, and this is Session 1 and Disc 1.

And, Benito, if I could just start us off by telling me – or you telling me where you were born, when you were born, and maybe a little bit about what your life was like growing up.

BENITO HUERTA: Okay. I was born in Corpus Christi on April 30, 1952 and grew up – was the first of a family of nine children, and my father was from Monterrey, Mexico, although most of his life he lived in the United States. He was, I think, about one year old when he – they moved to this country. His mother moved his family to this country. My mother was born in Tynan, Texas – small town outside of Corpus Christi, and her father was part German and also had Spanish blood – I guess it's like Mexican blood. And her mother was Tejana – Texan – but was of Mexican decent and spoke only Spanish, but my grandfather did speak German as well as English and Spanish.

And grew up in Corpus Christi. I went to – I was brought up in the Catholic Church and as a result went to Catholic schools up until the seventh grade, and went to Chrysler King, which was from grades 1-7, and then I think I went to two kindergarten Catholic schools. One was Sacred Heart and one – I think was – I think – [inaudible] –was called the Cathedral, and Sacred Heart was actually near my grandmother's house – my father's mother's house. And then we finally, like I said, went to Chrysler King, and during that time – I remember I had always drew as a kid, and I remember that there was another friend of mine – another student who the nuns thought was very gifted. His name was Rodrigo Cortinas [sp]. We used to call him huelo [sp], and he and I, I remember, would draw these, like, hot-rodders – these monsters and hot-rod cars onto handkerchiefs with black markers and we would sell them for a dollar to students – [laughs] – so we tried to make some money off that, and things of that sort.

So that's – I remember that one of my vivid memories was – I was listening to the radio and listening to early rock-and-roll – early '60s – and drawing at home, and I just enjoyed that activity. And I remember one time that the character on the radio was doing a takeoff on Wolfman Jack and so they had a character called Wolf Baby, and I remember the Wolf Baby was going to run for mayor or something like that and I sent in a drawing poster for reelection of Wolf Baby and my name got mentioned on the radio and I just thought – I thought, wow, this is great.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: So you know, that kind of was encouraging and then when we moved to Houston, I told my parents that I did not want to go to a Catholic school anymore. So I started –

MS. CORDOVA: Why? Why did you say that?

MR. HUERTA: I don't know. I think that I wanted something different, and I don't know why I thought that. I mean, I actually enjoyed my friends at Catholic school. I had a good time in Catholic school, and – but for some reason, and I couldn't tell you why – it was just an innate kind of thing. I just wanted to do something different and, I think – and that kind of reasoning still affects me now with my work, even.

And so, they said, okay, even though they had already enrolled me in – I think it was Holy Ghost School. I decided – I went to Jane Long Junior High in Houston. We lived in Bellaire, we moved to a city – within the city of Houston – called Bellaire, which I don't think my father realized until a few months after we moved in that this was a whole different municipality. But, the junior high I went to was actually in Houston, and I remember that my whole character changed. I went from kind of more of an extrovert to an introvert in junior high and I think part of that was that Bellaire was, I think, predominantly white from what I remember, and it was a time of

assimilation of, you know, my family trying to assimilate into the culture and trying to suppress our heritage.

Surprisingly enough, our next two neighbors in a row – consecutively – were Latinos. So that was – it was kind of odd that there was, like, three Latino families in the neighborhood. But I remember there was a distinct difference between growing up in Corpus, which I remember hanging out with my friends out in the streets, playing football and baseball on the streets and doing all kinds of mischievous things, and in Houston, it was totally opposite. Nobody was out in the streets. Everybody was inside and it was a real different attitude and I think I went into that. I just, kind of, became that I guess, and I remember that I felt that since I was in this more white culture, then – Corpus was pretty mixed – that I started dressing differently. I used to wear like blue jeans and – or khaki pants because khaki was what – I was at a Catholic school – and a T-shirt and now, I started wearing, you know, more, like, dress-up clothes. And part of that came – thinking came from TV shows and the fact that you would see TV series like *Hazel* and *Leave it to Beaver*, and I kind of just thought, well, this is the way that white culture is so you start dressing that way.

And I remember also being, a little odd at school because, again, there weren't many Latinos at school and I remember, I guess, for the first time I kind of experienced the idea that I was different when I was walking from where the bus left me – walked back home, which was about – I guess, about a mile – maybe a mile and a half, and somebody called me a nigger and it was like, you know, it's like I'm looking around – [laughs] – and I was like, who are they talking to? But obviously, it was pointed at me and then at school, I remember right before school – when they allowed the students to get into school – that somebody started pushing me and, you know, I was trying to figure out why they were pushing me. I tried to push back as well but I just, like, all of a sudden was thinking that I am different was introduced to me. And so I guess it was the raising of my consciousness that started happening at that point.

MS. CORODOVA: Did you grow up speaking Spanish?

MR. HUERTA: I grew up speaking Spanish and that's all I spoke, from what my parents told me, up to 5 years old. My father said that as a – you know, now that I'm going to go to school and it's going to be English that they were only going to speak to the kids, and even though I was the first one, I think, by that point, I had two sisters that were younger than me, obviously – and that they would only be speaking to the kids in English from that point on so that they would have an easier time to go through the school system. And I remember having really – having a lot of difficulty in English class throughout school. So that was one of the things –

MS. CORDOVA: How did that show up? Like, what do you remember specifically?

MR. HUERTA: I just remember that I was always, kind of, struggling to figure out how the grammar works, because I think my mentality was – it was – I was probably thinking in Spanish and then here I am trying to figure out how to write in English and – which was totally foreign. And that was also, I think, my father's idea of assimilation – you know, to get into the culture and suppress your own heritage and suppress your language. I mean, a few years ago, we have been – we have had – I have realized that, you know, speaking Spanish and English could be a benefit. You know, I would have continued that but it's, like, hindsight. And so, I mean there's some things that he regretted but at that time it was more, like, how to survive in a culture. And I think that myself and my next sister, Susana, were probably the ones who probably kept knowing the language. I'm probably not as fluent as I could be but, like, my younger brothers and sisters – they don't know any Spanish at all now. And then my sister, Susana, who has actually gone back and is very, very fluent in Spanish. So that was one of the things that ended up happening as we made that kind of crossover.

MS. CORDOVA: Did your parents stop speaking Spanish at home?

MR. HUERTA: No, between each other, they spoke Spanish, and then we would go to my aunts and uncles' houses from both sides of the family and everybody spoke Spanish and so for me, it was still there and I was still – and I could understand everything they were saying and – but I would speak back in English. You know, I was kind of brought up to speak in English. So – and my – most of my families aunts and uncles and cousins – most of my cousins would speak – they all grew up speaking English but my aunts and uncles would speak English and Spanish. And so – and my grandmother, my father's mother and my mother's mother would only speak in Spanish. They didn't learn much English. My father's mother was one that I really never cared for, or liked, so it didn't bother me to not communicate with her but my mother's mother, I loved a lot and we would – I would try to speak Spanish with her because that's all she could speak and then we would have big, kind of, rhetorical arguments because something that were just – that were just there that were not personal that were just, you know.

I grew up, I guess, with sarcasm in our family and that was an accepted mode of communication and, I guess, in a way, of showing affection and there was a lot of sarcasm between myself and my grandmother.

MS. CORDOVA: What would she do?

MR. HUERTA: Well, she would say, you know, she would just say something like cabron and, like, you no-good nothing. And there was one point I started growing my hair real long and so, "You need to get a haircut and blah, blah, blah," and says, "Oh, you know, what are you talking about," and then they would just – we would used, like, dirty words, you know, and it was really kind of funny because in my – when I go to my mother's family's house on Sunday, of course they would all come together to my grandmother's house and my aunts and uncles would be using foul language, but not to hurt anybody but they just – it was part of just talking – where my father was kind of more puritanical – you talk that way in front of family – it was, like, it was – [inaudible]. And I just didn't – there was all of a sudden – there was this dichotomy of thinking that, I guess, like, it's acceptable over here but it's not accepted here, and it's like – what, you know, I didn't understand that.

I guess, one of the other things I would say that was kind of interesting – I would have to say that's kind of interesting growing up in Corpus is that part of being with other friends of mine, growing up kind of in a sense as a kind of a gang – you know, it wasn't really a gang, it was just a gang of friends together – I learned how to steal, so – the reason I'm saying that is that I kind of stole a lot of things throughout my life and ended up – when I was in graduate school and ended up where I could not afford materials, I was really very broke and I ended up stealing art materials. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: And I remember at a certain point in my life, that I just told myself, I need to stop doing that and I literally just made a decision and stopped because it got to the point where I could steal something so easily that it almost, like, didn't think of it. And I felt that it got to the point where that's not right and also I was changing again, thinking wiser – I need to change my life and certain things I need to do to change that and you have to become responsible for the things you do, so I just thought that I needed to change that part of my life. But I have to say that graduate school – I mean, I stole some food as well so I could eat, and I tried to make it a thing where I didn't steal from individuals. There was this thing where you didn't steal from individuals. You could steal from stores but not individuals. So it was a really weird sensibility but it was part of my upbringing – I mean, part of – not an upbringing by my parents but it was part of my life upbringing.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you ever get caught?

MR. HUERTA: Never got – well, it was interesting because I curated a show – "Cesar Martinez" – for the museum at Corpus Christi. It was in 1998 and H.E.B. was one of the sponsors of the show and they asked Cesar to speak and they asked me to speak and then they also – I think, Carmen Lomas Garza was doing a smaller show and they asked her to speak. And so I brought up the idea – that detail – when I was still living in Corpus, I went to H.E.B. and I remember I stole something like a packet that had, like, cards in it, like, I don't know if it was baseball cards or whatever, and it had like gum in it and something else. And it was really, like, a little package – you know, thin and flat, and so I put it in my blue jeans pocket and I remember this guy came up to me and he said, "I saw what you did." So, he said, "Take all of the things out of your pocket." Well, I had a bunch of other things in my pocket so I took everything except what I stole out of my pocket. And then – because it was a flat item, he couldn't really tell. And so, he let me go. And I told that story because I said, well, this was at H.E.B. grocery store and I said, I'm sorry about it but that happened. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: So that was the only time and I never got caught again and, I think, that was one of the reasons why I decided to stop because it became too easy. It was, like, you didn't even think of it, and I never tried to do it all the time, it was just that I mean, I could do it and I did every once in a while.

And I remember I have another artist friend of mine from undergraduate school. After I came back from graduate school and he came back from graduate school and we were with some other friends and we went to the store and I stole, like, some candy or something and I offered him some candy and they couldn't believe that I stole and said, "I don't want that" and – because he was brought up real strict – Protestant, and stealing was wrong, and I think that start kind of lead to question myself, and, you know, I didn't stop right then and there but started getting me to think about it.

MS. CORDOVA: Would you consider yourself brought up as a strict Catholic?

MR. HUERTA: Well, strict – what do you mean by strict?

MS. CORDOVA: Well – [laughs] – I'm not sure but I know that a lot of Catholic imagery starts to pervade your work and so I'm really interested in your –

MR. HUERTA: Well –

MS. CORDOVA: – initial response to Catholicism.

MR. HUERTA: Well, let me put it this way because I think that – that when I was growing up Catholic, I mean, one of the things that happened besides going to church and all that is – one of the things I remember as a kid and one of the things that made an impression on me was coming across these holy cards that have images – you know, the saints and all those. And one of the – and I told people – I said, you know, if even if you didn't think of it as a religious image – if you actually take the religious part out of the image and to look at the imagery, where like a Christ is holding this heart that's hovering above his hand and it's on fire. I said, you know, as a kid, that makes an impression on you, it's like seeing, like, a surrealist painting. That's kind of other-worldly and so for me as a kid, those images made a really strong impression.

Also the fact that I think that I really had a good time in Catholic school. I had a good time, you know, with my friends and that was a good period in my life and I was happy and I think when you are happy, I think, things that you experience during those times make a strong impression. You know, as opposed to if you didn't enjoy it, then you would be repelled by it.

So when we moved to Houston, and I became an introvert, one of the – I think one of the good things about becoming an introvert is, I guess, was that I started reading a lot. And I ended up reading – what is it those called – *Good News for Modern Man*, which is a translation of the New Testament into modern English and I read that and started getting into reading about religion more and it was funny because of reading that, I realized that I didn't want to be Catholic anymore. [Laughs].

And it also made me start believing that, personally, that I didn't think any religion was good – that I thought that God transcended all that and that I did believe in God but that the religion was more man made, and as a result, flawed, and a flawed way of practicing one's faith. Don't say that that's bad for other people, it's just for myself, I realized that in reading those – in reading that – the New Testament – that God is in everybody and later realized that some of the thinking was real similar to what Joseph Campbell would bring up in *The Power of Myth*. I thought that when I came across that series of Bill Moyers' interviews with Joseph Campbell, I thought this is exactly what I have been thinking since I was about 17. And I just didn't realize other – you know, somebody else thought that way, too.

MS. CORDOVA: How old were you when those came out?

MR. HUERTA: Well, I think, those came out in either the late 70's, early '80s or something like that. So – but I mean, this – I started – I went through this after – when I was in – I think, I was about 15 or 16 when I started, like, investigating Catholicism and religion – I mean, really consciously started thinking about it, and that's when I started to move away and decided that I didn't want – was not a Catholic anymore. I was not going to be religious at all and I just felt like – that, you know, all this is really church. [Laughs.] You know, this was one big church – the whole universe, you know, because, I mean anything that's living is God and whether it's also – any living organism that is doing evil or bad is – to me, is also part of God.

So it's – when I started doing that, started moving away from it but then at a certain point in my own work, I started investigating the things that made a strong impression on me when I was younger and it was, in a sense – I remember when I got – when I started painting in University of Houston, and I know this is kind of getting out of chronology, but when I started painting my last year in the University of Houston, I had all these electives left over and I started taking painting, advanced drawing, lithography, watercolor, and short story writing, and I excelled in all those classes and really, for the first time, I started enjoying myself in school – [laughs] – which, I think – I never really enjoyed school and I don't know why but I never really did and then for the first time, I was really enjoying and I was really beginning to learn. It was like the beginning, for me, of learning.

And I wanted to learn more about art, I wanted to learn more about everything and – but I was doing some – the works that I was doing at that time led me to do – well, around – I guess around 18 or so, I got into a state of depression. I was depressed – I don't know why. I couldn't tell you. Maybe I just – maybe – I don't know what it was, but when I started painting, I started taking imageries from newspapers that were somewhat violent or something dealing with death, and I started using that imagery in my work and using that as, in a sense, to kind of express my feelings without having to be literal. And so, I kind of used them to express my feelings, and it ended up being about a year and a half of work that I thought expressed myself really well and by that time, I kind of exhausted that series.

I remember I was having a show in the gallery of the University Center of the University of Houston. I remember hanging the show and these two women came in and they said, "My God, who did these – [inaudible] – violent, depressing paintings?" And I remember by the time that series was over, I was not depressed anymore [laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: And I was, you know, I just, like – I couldn't relate to that person anymore. And so, I realized by that time I was – it was during the summer of when I was going from undergraduate to graduate school, and so when I got to graduate school, I said, I really need to lighten my subject matter. And so, I remember I had read a

book in high school that I thought was – I thought was a great book and really enjoyed it. It was a book called *Trout Fishing in America* by Richard Brautigan [1967] and it was kind of – it was not really about trout fishing, but it was kind of metaphorical but it was very much a surrealist kind of writing and I really enjoyed it. And so, I used that book as a way to mine the subject for material for my work and all of a sudden, you know, these trouts – and I was known as a "trout man" in graduate school and at the same time I was doing other kinds of work. But it was a way to, kind of, like, you know, distance myself from the work and just think about – to experiment with different kinds of materials and different mediums and different subject matter, even.

I remember that it was 1976 – it was the bicentennial and I – the first month I was at the New Mexico State University. I had probably about – because it was, like, Las Cruces was in the desert, it was totally different than Houston, I hadn't known many people at that time. I just was a stranger and so as a result, I just did work and I ended up with probably about 15 paintings and about 30, 40 drawings – works on paper – and couple of prints and I had all this – this whole classroom filled with my work at the end of a month and a half.

And I remember my graduate committee and one of the – I had come in and this one guy on my graduate committee spent the whole time that they were supposed to talk to me about this one painting. It was – I made a bicentennial stamp motif that was roughly six by five feet or something like that and it was two men hanging – two black men hanging from a tree and then I put, like, bicentennials, you know, and then – I think, it was like 13 cents back then. And he was upset about it because of the subject matter and he said, you know, well, this is a bicentennial, we should be celebrating the good things and I said, "Well, yeah, but we should also remember the bad things we have done so that we don't forget that we have done those things – so that we don't redo them again." And I felt, in a sense, somewhat good about it because I felt that this painting stirred him up and I think that art – it's supposed to do that – be provocative. I think art is to do that as well as, I think, to inspire as well.

And so, again, the unfortunate thing was that the rest of the work did not get talked about and I felt that I was not very good. So – but it also led me to the beginning of several confrontations when I was in graduate school and that was the first, and I thought it was a good way to start, I guess, my – in a sense, my real-life learning experience because that would later come again in real life. And I felt like if you believe in something, you need to defend it, you know, and fight for it. So –

MS. CORDOVA: How did you come to the decision to go to graduate school?

MR. HUERTA: Well, like I said, I never painted until, like, my last year at University of Houston, and I graduated and I decided to take another year of more of the same classes – and I think it was almost the same – to see if this whole art thing was a fluke or not. And I think one of the things that, when I started painting – it was not that I felt like I was naturally good at it, but it felt natural to me. And one of the things that – one of the memories that – almost like it was a thing that related to me was when I was a kid – going back to being a kid in Corpus – drawing and listening to a rock-and-roll station. And I thought, you know, this is – it felt that good and that comfortable, and I thought, this is something that feels so good to me. You know, maybe I should investigate this because this is – this would be – at that time I was going to go into graphics – commercial art – at the time – it was called. And even though it was in the art field, I think it was like a 180 degree turn. And I remember I took another year of post-baccalaureate classes and one of my teachers Gail Stack suggested and recommended that I go to graduate school.

So I applied to, I think, three, four graduate schools and I think Las Cruces was the one that not only accepted me but they gave me a teaching assistantship the first year, which they normally don't do. They give them only the second year and – because I couldn't afford it. So that's one of the reasons why I decided to go there and I realized that it was, in a sense, a really good thing for me, going to Las Cruces. It was not the best thing for me as an education because I don't think, in the end, that it was a good school, but it was a great school for me in the sense that I was – I ended up doing a lot of work and learned a lot and it was – and I think they allowed me to do that, and I thought it was – I felt really good about that until, like, couple years after I graduated and I remember one of my – one of the instructors there ended up buying one of my paintings – like, the first semester I was there, he bought one of my paintings. So I was, like, nobody ever really bought a painting of mine and now here a faculty person was buying one. I felt really good and he ended up becoming – he ended up replacing the other chair of my graduate committee because the chair of my graduate committee was having trouble with me.

Is it time?

MS. CORDOVA: No, no.

MR. HUERTA: Oh. So he later told me – I went to go visit him – I actually went to visit my painting, and so ended up having a conversation with him. And he told me that when I was in graduate school, everybody thought – you know, a lot of the faculty thought I had a fuck-you attitude – [laughs] – and I didn't realize that. I mean, I didn't realize – I just thought that you go to school and you paint and draw and you do the work and I felt like I did a lot, a lot of work in school. And I never thought I, you know, had that attitude, you know. I just thought I was

allowed to do what I wanted to do.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you think you still have that attitude, or –

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, in a sense. I actually begin to realize it. I have – I think I do have that attitude and, I think, it also is a good thing for me in the sense of, I guess, a survival skill because I think sometimes – I remember, I was being looked at for a show. I think that it was the one that – the *Hispanic Artists of the United States* [*Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1987] show –

Salud.

MS. CORDOVA: Gracias.

MR. HUERTA: – and that Jane Livingston and John Beardsley were doing and they became a little interested, they really liked the work and at that time, I was also in a show called "¡Mira!" ["¡Mira! A Hispanic Art Tour" 1984] which was a Canadian Club sponsored show, and I had gotten first place in that show and I traveled for two years. And there was a – two paintings – two real large-scale paintings of mine in the "Mira!" show and John and Jane wanted to use those two paintings but the tours – the shows overlapped by a couple months and "Mira!" did not want to release those paintings for their show and they wanted to use a couple of some – two or three newer works and as a result, they dropped me from the show. And I had even been – you know, kind of, like, promoted as being part of the show already, and I thought, oh, this is going to be great. And so, I was never – I was not in the show and I thought, you know, to myself – in my attitude, I told people, well, fuck them. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: But the attitude was, like, I'll just go back into the studio and paint another masterpiece. [Laughs.] And that has always been, kind of, my attitude – is, like, when I didn't get into shows. There was another show called "Fresh Paint" ["Fresh Paint: The Houston School," 1985] that the Museum of Fine Arts did. It was Barbara Rose and Susie Kalil curated. And I had been back in Houston for about 5 years at that time, and they did this show called "Fresh Paint." It was about painting in Houston and I was not included. I think, I was not included because they didn't know but the artists that they did use for the show that were Latino – I think, they were, kind of, like, scraping the barrel. They were looking for somebody to represent the Latino community. And I felt, you know, that I should have been in that show, as well as another friend of mine who, I think, was overlooked and –

MS. CORDOVA: Who was that?

MR. HUERTA: That's a friend of mine – David Caton. Again, we were, like, undergraduates at Houston. He's an extraordinary painter, and at that time, I thought, he should have been included in the show. He had gone to Yale and came back and was doing some incredible work. And, I thought, you know, they really didn't do their homework and I thought this not only as an artist but as a curator because I also curate shows and I think that when I begin to start to formulating my own thinking as a curator that, you know, if you are going to do this kind of job, you really need to be thorough about it. And I felt like they didn't really do a thorough job. I thought they were trying to include people more for – as a token than to really represent, you know, a painting.

And so – and I said the same thing. I mean, I said to Dave – I remember saying, fuck them, you know, we'll just go back and paint some more masterpieces and really show them up later. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: What was the first exhibit you curated?

MR. HUERTA: Well, it was in undergraduate school. You know, one of the things I remember is that we started painting – I mean, when I started painting, I was asking, well, what do you do with these works now that we have painted them? You know, it's like –

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: And so, I ended up starting organizing exhibitions and one of – I think one of the first ones – I got a bunch of students at the University of Houston – our friends, and we went down to the University Center.

Now, to go back a bit, this whole thing about curating and organizing, I think, goes back to when I used to be on the program council of University of Houston. I ended up, at one point, becoming the entertainment chairman, and my responsibilities and my committee's responsibilities were to come up with people who we want to bring for concerts and to, you know, have concerts at the University of Houston. And we co-sponsored several shows like Stephen Stills and the Grateful Dead and a bunch of other bands with promoters from – who were like promoters. And so, we did collaborations and it was a way to make money for the entertainment committee and to bring more concerts, and we had a budget of – and I was beginning to realize, now, we have a big budget –

we have $15,000, and I think our budget was the largest of all the committees. And so, within a year, I think, I ended up doubling our budget. You know, we ended up having, like, about $30,000 in our budget.

But then we ended up also booking people like – one of the first people that I booked was George Carlin, and it was when he went – he was, like, becoming really hot right around that time period. And when we booked him, we booked him for, like, $1,250. A month after we booked him, he was – his price had gone up to $12,500, and but – because we had booked him –- you know, it was already set, it was a contract. So he came and we sold out the show and, I think, we had Steve Goodman, who was a Chicago performer who later died and was a good friend of John Prine, who I also then brought later, and I brought – I wanted to bring somebody who the committee wasn't really crazy about but they ended up supporting me – we brought Randy Newman. And so, you know, people like – [inaudible]. And so, one last concert, so our committee was so successful that it turns out some of the other committees were wanting our – some of our money because they were beginning to exhaust their money.

So I decided I was going to blow it all. [Laughs.] So I decided to book Stevie Wonder, and initially, we had worked with another promoter and we were going to co-sponsor the show with the Rolling Stones in 1972. Barry Faye out of Denver Fairline Productions, who I met in Kansas City during the National Entertainment Conference, said he wanted to bring the Stones to Houston and I said, you know, we would like to work with you – you know, maybe co-produce the show. And he said, okay, we ended up talking and then at some point, we decided not to but we decided that we would lend our services so our students could get into the show and work the show for free as ushers and stage hands and all, et cetera.

And Stevie Wonder was the opening act for that tour at that time. And he had – somebody in the band or one of the members of the band got sick or something so they didn't open the show so the Stones ended up playing longer – they did two shows at that time. And there was actually a film that came out later – there was actually two films that came out later as a result of that tour. One was *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Rolling Stones* [1973], and that film – part of the film is in – from the shows in Houston, and the other part is from the shows up here at Fort Worth Tarrant County Convention Center. The other film that came out of that tour was the one that I have been wanting to see – is the Robert Frank film – *Cocksucker Blues*. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: And so – because it was – he did that film during that tour. So since Stevie Wonder didn't, you know, perform in that show, he came out with an album, which was, I think, the transition from his earlier stuff to his more mature work, which was *Talking Book* [1972], and it came out a month before he came to Houston – the show that we had produced. And as a result, we didn't sell – we didn't – I think, we lost a lot of money in the show, and we had probably about 1,500 people there out of – you know, I think, we could have had, like, in the whole place hold about 8 or 9,000 people.

So we lost money but the show was great and nobody – none of the other committees could take our money away –

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: – because we blew it, which was fine, and I had to resign from the entertainment committee because my grades had plummeted. During that time, the Vietnam War was happening and I had – they had lottery numbers, and I had number 29. And so, when my grades plummeted because I was spending more time in my entertainment committee, I was – I got a letter to – from the government to – requesting that now, I was eligible for the draft because of my grades being down and so I was asked to go for a physical, which is the preliminary, and during that time, I started seeing a draft counselor. And other options were coming up, whether, you know, like, the idea of leaving the country or going through a legal process and one of the things that I remember, interestingly enough, was my father switching from kind of, like, pro-war and then – he was – my father was into boxing. And so, when Muhammad Ali came out against the war and was not going to fight, said, "Well, why should my son fight if he's not going to fight?"

So it was interesting that he was all of a sudden backing me, and I don't know that he realized what was going on because I don't think I told him during that time. And it turns out the day of my physical was the day that – Lyndon Johnson had just died a few days before, and the day of my physical became a national day of mourning so all the federal offices were closed. So my physical was postponed, like, about three or four weeks later. During that time period, Nixon ended the war in Vietnam, so I never had to report for my physical after I had gotten all of those and had it rescheduled. So the war was over and the threat of going into the army was over so –

MS. CORDOVA: Lucky. [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, I was pretty lucky. And then, you know, I brought up my grades the following semester and

that time – that was about ’73 and I think in ’74 is when I started painting, and I graduated in ’75 and then went back and took another year and then ’76 is when I went – September of ’76 – when I went to New Mexico State.

Going back to my father and boxing – I think the whole idea of organizing and curating came from – when we were in Corpus, my father used to promote boxing matches and organizing boxing – he was also a manager, trainer, boxer. So I think, that psyche of organizing things was there, and I also think – sometimes I wonder if that’s part of my German heritage, also – organizing. [Laughs.]

So – but, I did other shows. One of the last – the show that I took at the University Center – going back to that – I guess I went off of that – was – there was a one-day show. We went in and I knew all the people from the University Center because of my days of when I was booking concerts. So they said, “No problem, you can have this whole big area” – it was a sitting area, and it was huge and it had all these walls. So we came in one morning, put up the show and we took turns sitting, and then that night, we took them down. So it was kind of – all of a sudden, people would come in and they said, “Oh, we have all this artwork” and it was a surprise and it was great, and the next day it was gone and they were like, “Well, what happened to it?” And I kind of liked that idea that – because for me, art is about also seeing and seeing things, and I think that they were almost like – they were expecting it to happen again and it didn’t happen, and it’s, like, well, you should think about it when it doesn’t happen.

So it was kind of experiential that way, and then I did another thing called Moving Picture Show where you got one student – to take one work and we actually walked around campus and stopped around really heavily congested areas where people – there was a lot of foot traffic. And people were asking what are you doing, what is this and all those kind of – so, there was a direct interaction. I like the idea of taking art to people where there’s no art, and I liked that idea. It was kind of, like, being inside a tour, I guess.

The last show that I put together was – I remember that the faculty were – their job is to critique the students and all that. So – oh, that was another thing I wanted to do – was to – I decided that – let’s critique the faculty. So they had a faculty show and at that time there was a student art association, or something of that, and so I suggested – I was in it – that we come up with a forum of questions that would – like, critiquing the faculty, and we would pass them out to students. And then it got to the point where some of the faculty wanted to have their input and I ended up, I think – decided not to be part of it because they became part of it, and I thought this is – it should be the students’ responsibility and even if the question is not sophisticated, it’s our responsibility. We should be in charge of it, not the faculty. And it ended up happening but I think there was a compromise. And so, I decided I didn’t want to be a part of it, so it ended – the critique ended up happening. I don’t remember the results of it.

So I decided to do another thing where I organized another show of students doing one faculty member and doing their work and then I decided to add the theme of sex to it to, kind of, spice it up.

MS. CORDOVA: So doing it in the style of the faculty members –

MR. HUERTA: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: – but with the theme of sex.

MR. HUERTA: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. HUERTA: And I ended up getting a room, which was a lithography room that had these presses but it wasn’t really being used as – for anything. So I got permission to use that room for a week and we had the opening on April Fool’s night. And I remember there was one non-student – a friend of mine – Mel Chin, who I had also asked to do a piece and he did a painting of one of the faculty members. And I remember a few of us coming up and doing these cardboard figures, in case nobody showed up for the opening so we have a bit of an audience. And painting these cardboard figures and we had, like – I painted a cardboard figure of this black guy in a tuxedo suit serving drinks because I notice when you go to these openings, again, you could tell, there’s not many minorities going to art openings at that time, and usually, the guy serving drinks was black. And I thought, we have this guy there, so –

I did one painting – one of faculty, and I worked with David Caton to do another faculty member, who was John Alexander. And I remember we timed ourselves to see how fast we could do the painting in, and it was, like, an hour and a half. And he later told us because he was showing his work later on – said that he would take it to his gallery because he thought it was so close to his work that if they sold it, he would split his share, 50-50, with us, and we decided that we didn’t want part of that, so – said, no. And so I ended up selling to another friend for very little money.

MS. CORODVA: Why didn't you want a part of that?

MR. HUERTA: I just thought that was deceptive, you know. I think it's, again, it's, like, I'm beginning to formulate, I guess, my own ethics – code of ethics, and I just felt like that was wrong in deceiving somebody who doesn't know that. I mean, he would actually do the signature, and, you know, one way, it could have been kind of like Duchampian kind of thing but I just felt like it wasn't really done in the spirit of that. It was done for the show and this is what it was.

It was interesting – the faculty ended up liking the show. I remember at the time, though, that the chair of the department who came – I can't remember his name. His first name was George – Bunker. As he was leaving, he just said into the room, like, "Congratulations and good show." And I thought it was really odd that the chair of the department was – didn't know who exactly was responsible for this, and didn't even want to find out, and as a result – he liked what had happened but, you know. And I felt really, kind of, odd about it that here's somebody in a position of authority who allows an issue – if I like something, I would say, "Who did it?"

And then later on, I remember – because I was also taking a class from John Alexander, and we had a critique and I didn't have any work at that time to be critiqued. And his friend James Surls was there and it turns out Ed Ruscha was there, who I didn't realize until a couple days later that he was there at the critique. And if I had known, I would have – well, the show downstairs is my work, you know. But I just didn't think of it. I just – kind of literal, like, you got to have a painting to be critiqued, where I could have said, well, the show downstairs is my work, even though it's produced by other people.

So I remember after the critique, we were walking out and all that, and I think John was kind of upset because, I think, he wanted to show off his students, and David and I and a couple of other students didn't bring in work for the critique. And I remember John stopped and he calling us, like, facile bastards – [laughs] – and not being pleasant about it either. And, you know, it's like, well, fuck him. It's like that attitude is always there.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] He was also a mentor for you. Is that true, or no?

MR. HUERTA: Well, it's yes and no. I mean, John's style as a teacher was – there's two teachers I was taking at the time. One was Richard Stout and one was John Alexander, and it was interesting. We would talk about this with other students that would be taking those classes. And they both could come in and say, "This work is great, okay?" But John would just say that and then go off and Richard can – would sit down and say, this is why it's great. Or, you know, reverse. And what you got out of Richard was more of an intellectual – analysis of the work, where what you got from John was that his energy – he has this, kind of, like, nervous energy. He's always got to be moving. So I think the students picked up on that energy more than they picked up on what he had to say.

There's something that – it was interesting that I took a watercolor class from John and there was a piece that I did and it was a piece that – dealing with sexuality and it was, like, real blatant. And he ended up, kind of, talking, defending the piece and talking about the whole idea of sexuality and also controversy in art and blah, blah, blah – to defend this piece that – at that time I was, I guess, trying to be provocative. I was really pushing, like, oh, okay, let's a take a little, simple, kind of, idea, like watercolor, which a lot of people – at that time think of as Sunday school artist would do, and push the subject matter. And one of my influences, I remember, at the time was Larry Rivers, and I remember he was doing pieces that dealt with sexuality so I just thought, well, why not deal with that? And I did a piece called *Phallic Symbol* – [laughs] – and it was like really literal, real blatant and –

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. HUERTA: – also used – did a close-up in watercolor of Michelangelo's *David* right on the crotch area and then had another penis – really large penis over that and it said in block lettering, you know, *Phallic Symbol*. And we talked and, you know – I just, I don't know. I just – I have that – also that attitude in my work, sometimes. I do things that are – kind of, push the limits and I remember having a disagreement with a curator who was curating a show at Arizona State University – Heather Lineberry was the curator. And she didn't want to use any of the works that were very provocative. She wanted to use the more subtle works, which was, I think, fine but I just felt there was a whole other body of work that I knew that can be very provocative.

So, anyway, going back, I think that John – there are certain things I learned from John but, I think, there's things that I just learned from other teachers as well. But I think that Gail Stack, I think, I have learned a lot from. She was very – she took – I guess, I think that she really took notice of me and really encouraged me, and I felt that, I guess, of anybody – I think she was more of a mentor and Linda and John – it's interesting that I remember seeing John Alexander and he had a show that Jane Livingston curated and was about 8 years of work, which was, I think, the best period of his work during the '80s. And the show was out here at SMU [Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas] and I was down in Houston – I came up with some friends and at the party later, he asked me how my work was going. I said, well, I think it's going really good. I think it's actually stronger than

your work. And I think – and he said, well, that's not hard to do. So we kind of like agreed and I think later, I think, his work just, kind of, went downhill. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: You have a real subversive side that I see coming out, especially at University of Houston, but you were so quiet, I guess, in high school, or having moved to Houston. How did that burst even start to emerge?

MR. HUERTA: Well, I think, going back to being in Corpus – I think, that whole idea of stealing. I think, the whole idea of that, in a sense, there was a part of me that was, in a sense, hidden because, like I said, stealing is something you don't do. To do it, you have to do it in a way that nobody sees you doing it and nobody knows that you did it. So, as a result, there was there was this secret part of me that was, I think, is kind of subversive.

And I think that – I also think that the relationship between my father and I was not a very good one and I think part of that subversiveness was to subvert him, as well.
There was a whole mentality, you know. I felt that relationship with him and the rest of the family was not a very good one, and it's still not – it's still a problem. I, long ago, resolved with him – to accept our differences and all that, but I think that there are a lot of things that he did in his life that affected our – us – the family – that we're very destructive, and not very good.

And, I think, some of the things I ended up doing – I remember one time we were talking in the car and I was, I guess, about 14 years old and, like I said, sarcasm was something I grew up with and I remember saying something sarcastic to him because he had done something that really displeased me, and I just felt like I would answer him sarcastically. And it wasn't conscious, it was just, like, automatic – intuitive, like, survival skill, you know. So I was sarcastic with him and I think that the whole idea he represented – father figure and role of authority – I think, then carried over to other things where that role of authority is, like – I guess, I started questioning, you know, who is an authority, you know? What is an authority? And for me, it's like, now that I'm – as a curator, people can see me as – in a role of authority. So that's why I question the roles of authority because I question it with myself. It's like, is what I do any more or less important than what somebody else would do?

So I think that I think about as an individual and it ends up affecting my work, and I think that, you know, that whole questioning arose from that and I still have that. I still feel that. I feel that way in everything – whatever I do, and I have a brother who has become Born Again and I question his whole thing of religion and he doesn't question it at all and I just find that so odd, you know. And I think to really lead a really full life is to question things to get, I think, a better understanding of them, if nothing else. Doesn't mean that what you believe in is right or wrong – it's just that what you believe is different. And you kind of tailor make things for yourself. But to be honest the subversive attitude is always there and I think it's even there, I think one of the things that goes back to my own work, I guess, is one of the things that happened is when I find myself like ended up repeating myself, I kind of get bored – and that's when I started subverting myself to the point that I need to change because I don't want to be bored with my work. I don't want to be bored with my life – I think that also came out of my – I think another real strong mentor was Mel Chin – we were in high school together. We didn't know each other – met in the art club briefly – and I dropped out because I realized that the art club was a real social thing as opposed to really talking about art. Then later about five years later – after he got out of Peabody College – he came back to Houston and we remembered knowing each other from art club, even though we didn't know each other real well and we became real close friends and I remember some of the things he was thinking – though this guy was really thinking about some things really deeply we started having these real serious – conversations about the same time. Both of us had a sense of humor about things and I think that's the other thing is to – you know, I like the idea of thinking about things seriously but taking them – [laughter] – seriously either, you know. That's the other part of it is that you know, to be serious about things but at the same time not to be so serious about it that, you know, you go through life with a long face and not enjoying it, so.

MS. CORDOVA: What do you think that, in sort of your exchange, what do you think Mel Chin was offering you and what were you offering him?

MR. HUERTA: I think that what we offered to each other is that we were really seriously investigating, you know, like what art really was and is and the whole activity of art and what it meant and what it should encompass as far as, you know, ideas and subject. And I think that what he saw in me and what I saw in him as well was that there was already a deep commitment to it and the fact that, you know, he participated in the show that I did, you know the Mock Faculty ["The Partial Discovery of the Long Lost (Mock) Faculty Exhibit", Art Annex, University of Houston, Houston, Texas, 1976] show – and the sense of humor. The thing I also liked about Mel was that there was a sense of humor and I think the same thing, you know, with me. And we were like kind of like in the same boat at the same time. You know, and then some time in the mid-80s he ended up leaving Houston for good. But I felt that there was a lot of things that I'll learn from him. There's a lot of things that I still learn from him. I mean, later I ended up curating a show of his work.

But it's also interestingly enough, I mean, it was the same thing. Like when I was an undergraduate student at U of H, Lius Jimenez had a show at the Contemporary Arts Museum. And that was a big influence. That was a big thing for me because one of the things I saw also was the fact that this was a Chicano having a big show at the Contemporary Arts Museum and it's like, I thought if he could do it I could do it. And it was interesting because in 1990, I had a one person show at the same museum and they brought him and we did a dialogue and I thought, you know, finally came to being, even though I was actually offered a show at the Contemporary Arts Museum when I was in undergraduate school.

James Harithas, who was a curator for Luis's show was also a good friend of John Alexander's and would come to school – I think he even taught for a semester or so. And he saw my work and he wanted to give me a show at the Contemporary Arts Museum and I told him no. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Because why?

MR. HUERTA: Because I had only been painting for like a year and a half. And even though I felt like I was doing a strong body of work, I felt like it would be deceptive. You know, like, you know, I thought – I guess, again, going back to the whole idea of museums. I thought museums were reserved for people who had a proven record. Later, you know, that's been revised because now museums – I think part of what museums should do, contemporary arts museums should do is take a risk in saying look, you should look at this guy's work or this woman's work and because we think they're doing some interesting stuff. I think if I thought then the way I think now I would have said yes. But I didn't. And so I said no and later, you know, when I had a show there I felt comfortable and I felt like the work deserved it.

At the same time, the unfortunate part of having a show in a museum in the city that you live in is that there are people who question the show. And, you know, I was good friends with the curator and I got people saying, "Did you sleep with the curator?" You know, to get the show – which I – you know, I had told myself, because there was an artist who kind of was doing that. That was well known. And actually, I think, ended up becoming somewhat successful – [laughter] – because of that. And I told myself I would never do that. I would never use like sex to get myself ahead. There's like, again, I'm building a set of codes for myself and I said I would never do that for myself. And I was really upset, particularly when two of my friends came up to me and specifically asked me that question. It was not only the fact that there was a rumor going around, you know, Houston, but that two of my friends would actually come out and ask me that.

And I was disappointed and I said, "Do you mean to tell me that you don't think my work is strong enough to have a show at the museum?" [Laughter.] You know, it's just like, it subverted that whole notion of like, "You're any good." And, you know, it was disappointing. But I felt that that was a really strong show. And the show ended up traveling for a couple years through Exhibits USA and the reviews, most of the reviews were really good for that show and I felt, you know, somewhat vindicated by it.

MS. CORDOVA: How do you respond to negative criticism?

MR. HUERTA: Fuck 'em. [Laughter.] Well, you know, it's like – I remember I got a really bad review from the local newspaper in Houston when I had a show in 1993 at Lynne Goode gallery in Houston. It was the first exhibition that I had since my Contemporary Arts Museum show. By that point, my – I had gone to East Carolina University in Greenville. I was a visiting artist. The fall semester after my show at the Contemporary Arts Museum. And I was there for the whole year.

During the year, I decided my end of my work is completely flipped. I mean I ended up doing some – I decided I was going to experiment with subject matter and I was just going to stick to painting for a while because I was using different materials that accumulated at the show at the Contemporary Arts Museum. So I decided that, here I go again, you know, going off on a tangent. And I knew I was going off on a tangent but I decided that I was going to explore anything and everything that came into my mind as far as subject, and do a painting of it; just do it and not think about it. Just do it the best I could. Resolve it and then go on. So I did a series of small paintings, which I think kind of seem more like sketches, but they were 30 by 30, or 24 by 30-something. Actually some of the paintings that are in the hallway are part of that series.

And I ended up having a show called "Aneurism" because I attributed the idea of, that artist sometimes, even when they're kind of following a kind of linear direction in their work, might come up with ideas that do not relate do that work at all. And my feeling was that if you don't it ends up creating a backlog of ideas and things that if you don't do something about would create this blockage. And then you have a creative aneurism. That was my kind of conceit for calling the show "Aneurism." And so I showed like 24 of these small pieces and I did four large paintings. I also had this really large scale torch plywood piece with some rhinestones, and then I had –

MS. CORDOVA: Wait, which one was that?

MR. HUERTA: It was two pieces of plywood put together and it was like a circle with a rabbit's head. And then on one other area there's a circle that was burnt and it has like a – the imagery was from a Picasso plate, sheep heads. And I had like rhinestones where some of those were. And I remember that even the people at the gallery where I wanted to put it, they didn't want to put it there because they would have to like be right across from it. And so we put it down the hallway and upstairs they had given me one room upstairs and I had like two books. One was a book that was a kind of a retrospective of the first ten years of work. And I was thinking that the whole reason for that book was I thought well, if nobody's going to give me a retrospective to show the first ten years of my work and my develop, then I'll do it in performance. And I did that. And another one was of my – it was chronicling my Christmas cards that I had done up to that time.

And then a series of cups – I did 37 cups that I'd been working for about nine years. And I've been working on the book almost as long. And because of the book was the first ten years but I think I finished it for the show in '93. So I think I started I think in '85 or '86 or something like that. And so I forced myself to finish both of these ideas for the show. So I had all this work.

MS. CORDOVA: Let me pause you just for a second so we can come back to "Aneurism" because I know this tape is almost over, so stopping the tape.

[Audio break.]

We're recording. This is Carrie Cordova interviewing Benito Huerta. We are session one, disk two. And Benito you were just describing all this work that you had created for the "Aneurism" exhibit at the Lynn Goode gallery. And I think you were going to say that maybe you'd gotten some negative response to it?

MR. HUERTA: Yes, it was interesting that I felt there was a lot of work created for the show. And at that point I also felt like each of the exhibitions that I did should not just be just an exhibition of work but it should be making a statement. And I was – like I said, that the statement for me was that an artist, you know, sometimes has ideas that don't conform to their living and direction of their work. And in this case I wanted to go and buck that trend and create different kinds of images and but I felt a conviction was that with all this work something was being said. And I wanted to be spontaneous about it. And I wanted even to show some of the flaws, some of the pieces that were – you know, I even included pieces that I didn't think were strong pieces, as far as some of the smaller works.

I ended up getting – I remember that there were people, friends of mine, who – it ended up being somewhat of a controversial show. And I knew that beforehand. I knew that I was – people were going to expect a continuation of what they saw at the Contemporary Arts Museum and instead I gave them something else. And I think that first, I think people don't like to be confused – [laughter]. Even the art world, which I think is, you know, sometimes could be, you know, liberal-minded, I think the art world is like the rest of the world. They want to see – they want to expect something that is not going to be so different. And so I threw them a curveball and I knew that. I mean, I was doing that for myself, basically, really. But I knew it was going to be interpreted that way.

So there were three reviews that came out and the local paper basically started off like saying Benito, you know, had a good reputation as a curator, as an artist, and basically saying like, I was like a bad boy and doing this bravura paintings. And I just felt like, you know, it was a real put down.

MS. CORDOVA: Doing what kind of paintings?

MR. HUERTA: Like these bad boy, bravura. It's like you know, he's so confident; he can do anything he wants to do and he thinks he can get away with it kind of attitude.

And I just felt it was very negative and then there was a review in the weekly, the Houston Press, by Susan Kiel, who I respected it and the review was mixed. She commented on there are some works that were sexual of nature and that she didn't really want to know – [laughter] – about my sexual nature. And but she felt like some of the works were like really major and some important works. And so there was kind of like a split decision about the show. It was kind of like some works she didn't care, you know, they were like, what would be the word – indulgent. And in other works, that she thought were very important, strong, and challenging works. And then there was a review in *Art Forum* that you know, the guy liked the work because I also realized that he was an artist, Tom Moody. And his work was kind of like eclectic and he liked the eclectic attitude of the show.

So I just felt like this was typical. Again, there's like three individuals with three different attitudes towards the show. And it was typical of also I remember hearing that other friends of mine were arguing about the show and some didn't like the fact that it was different than what was done before. And some didn't like some of the things that were happening in the work and then some of them felt it was great that I was doing different kinds of work, that I was pushing myself, and you know, not settling for the same old, same old. So it stirred a lot of controversy.

And I remember there was a big party at my place at the studio that lasted like 4:00 in the morning. And it was great partying. Friends of mine came with guitars and then there some – my studio people were dancing to, you know, music that I had on the stereo and drinking, eating. It was a lot of fun. And somebody made a videotape of that party and I always been trying to find that video.

But I thought it was, again, I thought it was a really strong show. I remember the invitation; I had taken a photograph and I had shaved my head. And a friend of mine was living with or had married an anesthesiologist and they had gotten a drawing of how they would actually cut your head for a brain operation. So they had marked these dotted lines on my bald head and I lay like on a table and had a bed sheet sort of like gurney. And so the card was a black and white card. It's a square, just like the photograph. And my head was – like I was shown from head and then, you know, the rest of my body was that way and then my feet were just kind of sticking out. And then you could see the dotted lines.

And then I remember that a collector in Houston had gotten it and was very moved by the photograph and she was asking how much – she was interested in buying the photograph for the piece – for the invitation because I was part of the show. And they told her and all that and then she said, you know, she started saying that a friend of hers had an aneurism and then, you know, she started talking about that. And then she wanted to know how I was doing because she thought that I actually had an aneurism. And then when they told her I didn't have an aneurism she got really pissed off and hung up. [Laughter.]

And then ironically, you know, this whole show – I ended up doing a couple other shows kind of based off "Aneurism" and one was in El Paso. It was very controversial, the University of Texas at El Paso. And I remember somebody write – and it ended up being moved from the main gallery to the small gallery, which was called Glass gallery. And that somebody had written something really bad about the show and then somebody else said I didn't like what the person above said so they ripped off their comments. And said, you know, I don't agree with them, I think this is a real strong show and blah, blah, blah. And I thought it was really sad that somebody would – even though they didn't like my show. I didn't care. I mean, it's like, the work's done. But that somebody would tear somebody else's comments out because they didn't agree with them, which I don't agree that they should do that. You know, even if they didn't like my work, you know, it's not going to kill me.

So I thought that it had provoked – [laughter] – a strong reaction from people there and I remember that in a newspaper. I don't know if it was the student paper or the city paper saying something like that after this controversial show they were following it with another show and it was of Manuel Ocampo, who's Filipino but he has, you know, Ocampo's a Mexican last name. He wasn't in that show *Helter Skelter* in L.A. So anyway, isn't it interesting that they said they were going to follow up my controversial show with another, you know, like loaded show. I thought it was hilarious.

And then I remember I had a show at Texas A&M and I was calling it like – because I think I called "Aneurism: The Sequel" in El Paso and then I wanted to call it "The Son of Aneurism" or something like that. But the show in Texas A&M – I got a call right before the show opened and it turns out one of the people who was helping the in the gallery who I had met – had an aneurism while she was driving and then she had car wreck and she died. And they wanted to take my photograph, which is called "Aneurism" out of the piece, out of the show. And I said that's fine. That was more important. And I thought it was interesting that, you know, there was this whole thing that kind of related to that. So and then I ended up doing the show but the show happened.

And there wasn't much controversy about it there except for that, you know, that one incident. Oh, the other thing during the show, towards the end of the show, was when that incident happened with the fire. Where they were burning those logs for the UT, Texas A&M game?

MS. CORDOVA: The bonfire.

MR. HUERTA: Oh, the bonfire. Those people died. It happened during that time of the show and I remember – because I remember calling. I was asking for my transparencies for the invitation to be sent back. And the woman said "We can't talk right now because there's an accident that just happened." She didn't elaborate it. It was in the news that evening though. I realized what was going on. So there was these two major, you know, incidents that happened with my show there, which is kind of weird.

MS. CORDOVA: It does make me think that your work – I think, intentionally you try to provoke, right? And that in this instance it was okay to censor that one particular piece given the circumstances. But have you ever felt censored wrongfully in which you had to fight to have your work presented? Has that ever been an issue?

MR. HUERTA: No. I never – I don't think I've really had my work censored. You know, for me, the thing with removing the piece from that show – in the end it didn't bother me as much because I had already come up with a idea that, you know, art is important for me and I think in one way it's kind of saved my life. At the same time I also realize that art is not life. [Laughter.] Life is, I think, more important than art. And so I think that, you know, in deference to this person's, you know, aneurism and death and you know, I think to remove the piece was fine.

Because I mean the piece is made and done and it will be seen somewhere else.

But we did have a situation. I mean, we had a situation when I was curating Luis' show and the Exhibits USA did not want to use a couple of his pieces. And one of them was the O.J. piece he did where he has like O.J. slashing, you know, his wife. And then the one of where the woman castrated her husband?

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, Lorena Bobbitt.

MR. HUERTA: Lorena Bobbitt, he had done two prints based on those two pieces and they didn't want to have them in the show and he really wanted them. And, as a curator, I feel as a curator one should in a sense, work with the artist in the sense that I have an idea of what I want to show in the work but the artist also sometimes want to show certain things. Even though I don't think that those pieces are formally real strong works, I felt like if he felt strongly for them that they should be in the show.

And so they finally relented and they allowed them to be in the show and when they opened at the Dallas Museum, they were talking about taking them out of the show. And he was talking about threatening not to have the show. And the compromise that I came up with was to put a warning sign up so that people, you know, you enter this room, there's subject matter that, you know. So for me it's like, let the people decide if they want to see it or not. And don't censor it and keep it in the show.

So that was kind of a touchy – both those times were kind of touchy because Exhibits USA was really kind of strong-willed and Luis is very, very strong-willed. And then with the Dallas Museum, Luis was threatening not to have the show there. But that, like I said, got resolved. So those, you know –

MS. CORDOVA: And you used a warning sign for your work, too, right?

MR. HUERTA: Well, for "Aneurism," yeah, there was a warning sign. But that was Lynn who wanted it. I didn't – you know, and I said fine. She's paying for having the show up and she's paying for the invitations, she's paying for the receptions. You know, it's her money. I mean it is a commercial venture.

Some of the work in there is, you know, dealt with sexuality and dealt with – you know, I had this one painting with all these dirty words in it and you know, my mother felt uncomfortable about it. She went in, saw the show – [laughter] – and walked right out because she was very uncomfortable with it.

MS. CORDOVA: That's the work that the words are just listed kind of in a –

MR. HUERTA: Yeah. It's called *Brave New World* and it's has all these dirty words but part of the reason it has – there's a line drawing of a brain. And within the line drawing of the brain, there's a eye and the line drawing radiates out in a color field kind of pattern in the sense it goes from, you know, colors of a pallet, you know: from yellow to orange to red, purple and blue and green.

And the whole idea of that was that all these words, which were risqué or taboo at one point in my life, you know, those are words as, you know, George Carlin says, seven words you don't say, you know, in the media. And then all of a sudden you're hearing these words. Like I remember that "son of a bitch" being said on TV for the first time in this show and there was this big article like, you know, why don't, like we should use this word because it was relevant. And then all into like, you know, Saturday Night Live in the 80s was all of a sudden just like, you know, they started incorporating all these other dirty words. So it became fashionable to use these dirty words that were once taboo. It got to the point like, you know, with hip-hop and all this that, you know, all of a sudden it's fashionable.

So I decided to use fonts that were, you know, kind of like, different kind of like, like fashionable because I used like designer colors to draw – to paint them in. But I would also use a certain font style. And I wish I had written this down. But I used like different font styles to relate to the word. Like the word – there's a frankfurter style of font and it was used for the word "cock" – [laughter]. So it was like that kind of relationship of the font to that word.

And the whole idea was that – in that piece – was that as we progress technologically and culturally, sociologically I felt we were kind of digressing. And also the idea that the creative eye or the mind's eye could also not only be creative but it could also create things that could be destructive or Big Brother-ish. You know, like that whole idea of like they're putting the cameras now at the intersections and they're talking about hidden cameras, you know, out in the malls and in the parking lots, which have been – you know, sometimes have been good because when they caught that woman, you know, hitting her kid in the parking lot and they caught her. And then recently caught that guy who, you know, picked up that girl and later found the girl's body. So in the one way it's good but in the other way it's just like, you know, now this information about you is, you know, can be easily accessed. I mean it can – they say that it only takes about five minutes to get your social security number and before you know it, your whole life's in somebody else's hands, and money. So I think there's – you

know, that painting was about all those kinds of things. And that, you know, referring to those, yeah.

It's funny because – this was a water color that the Blanchard [ph] Museum bought at Austin. And I thought it was interesting and – [inaudible] – and I'd come to the opening and we went to have dinner and she told – I found out David Berman told me that later, actually a few months ago, that she called the next morning. She said I can't get the words "cock" and "motherfucker" and – [laughter] – "son of a bitch" out of my head and she wanted the painting, that piece from the collection. And I thought, yeah, they're going to get, buy it and store it away never to be seen again.

But this was a watercolor I did after the painting and then I did a – in that show I also had a work on paper that was graphite and drawing, in which I had the brain underneath it with an eye. And this one I just wanted to use the words and the fonts and all that kind of came out.

MS. CORDOVA: But you only use English words.

MR HUERTA: Yeah, I thought about doing a Spanish – [laughter] – version of it and I just hadn't gotten around to it yet. [Laughter]. So, because I know that, you know, for most – you know, everybody would know this. I mean people who were Latinos would know these words, as well as people who were, you know, white. So I just felt like this was something that everybody would understand. If I used Spanish words, only a certain community would know, you know. And then there has to be translated and sometimes translation doesn't quite cut it. But I have thought about it and I thought about doing it but I haven't done it yet, so.

MS. CORDOVA: I was thinking of that work as you were talking about your grandmother and your grandmother swearing.

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, it was really funny because we used to swear along with each other and then my father got real upset with me swearing, you know, at one point.

There's another thing I have to I guess say that which I think ends up being part of that subversiveness. And it has to deal with my name. My full name is actually Benito Huerta de Lozano Jr. after my father. And when I decided I was going to be an artist I decided I will only use Benito Huerta. And the reason for that was that my father, my grandfather, my father's father was left behind in Monterey. My grandmother left him, took her kids, I think there were four kids, and brought them into Texas. And she came from a family of money and as a result, had some power. And my understanding that – the reason I wanted to, you know, use this name was that my understanding was that I looked a lot like him. And I had the same characteristics, same personality kind of traits. And one of them was that, you know, I was kind of like laid-back and quiet. You know, which I think I am – [laughter] – in one case. Because what people would tell me, my aunts and uncles would tell me about him. I thought like there was this tie, this relationship between he and I even though I'd never met him and my father had never met him. And my father actually has an antagonistic relationship with him even though he'd never met him. Because he felt that, my father felt – he was the youngest of the kids that moved here. I think he was, like I said, one year old. But he felt that his – [audio break, tape change] – tried to come over and see the family, whereas his older brother said he did, twice, cross the border and that my grandmother, his mother, actually, you know, got him turn back. You know, called the highway patrol, Texas Rangers, whatever, and got him, caught him, and turned back when they heard that he was coming. So my father felt like, you know, that his father didn't really care. And I think I remember my mom telling me that right before they got married that he felt like – his father had died right before they got married, maybe a year or so before. And he felt like he had wished he had gone down there and it was a regret. But he never kind of like, in a sense, forgave him. And I felt that in a sense I had – he, my father and I had the same name and I had – we were the only ones in our family that had Huerta.

And at one point I found out that my father and his older brother actually were at some point trying to see if they could change their last name from Lozano, which is my grandmother's name, back to Huerta because – and actually it was Huerta de Lozano, but when they crossed the border they dropped the de and Lozano became the last name, where it should have been Huerta de Lozano.

So, I felt that, you know, if we had been born in this country our names would have been Huerta. And I felt like I you know, felt like there's this void. So I said, well, maybe I'll fill this person with his personality like what I do.

So but, when I did that, I didn't realize that it was going to cause a reaction, a negative reaction from my father. And he never liked it and my understanding is he's still a little uncomfortable about it. Even though he's become more comfortable in public with it, you know, it was kind of sometimes odd because people would, you know, as I introduce him, before I would say, you know, here's my father Benito Huerta Lozano, they would say Mr. Huerta. [Laughter.] And I remember in the beginning he would get really upset about it. But I felt that, you know, this is part of his life and that's part of his name. I mean his name is, you know, that. So it was in a sense to create this new personality.

And I think part of it was also the fact that when I was in Houston, the introverted quality of my life was like there was this, again, in a sense there was Huerta, which was the artist, and there was Lozano, which was the person. And I think at some point it was like how to resolve to bring these two people into becoming one at some point in my life. I didn't realize that until later that maybe there was something subconscious about that because I felt like, as you said, I mean it like, there was this one personality that seems somewhat quiet, and subdued and laid-back, and then there's this other personality. And I think when I was living in Corpus as a kid I think they were all one and the same. But I think when we moved to Houston, their personality split. And I think through the work I've been able to work all that out and become one again, in a sense.

MS. CORDOVA: It makes me think of the DuBois' double consciousness when you say something like that. You know, the sort of aspect of also you're reckoning at that moment with your assimilation or not to assimilate.

MR. HUERTA: Mm-hmm. [In agreement.] Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: And yet, the tactic of choosing to lose your last name is also an act of assimilation but not? Is that sort of both recognizing what your name would be had you –

MR. HUERTA: Mm-hmm. [In agreement.] Right.

MS. CORDOVA: – you know, had your family followed that particular route. But also a way to sort of mark your difference.

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, but also I think it's also the fact that I think in recent years I almost now always say it was the old last name Huerta de Lozano, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: Why?

MR. HUERTA: Because I think that that continues a tradition that is more Mexican than it is in this country. Where it's interesting, during the 60s, the hippie movement, there was this whole idea of like feminism coming into it and then that women would, you know, use a hyphen, like keep their last name and then use their hyphen the last name of their husband. So it's kind of like to say I am still an individual but I am with this person at the same time.

So it's like the whole idea, I think that, you know, I mean for me it was just like before it was – it is kind of in a sense to mark your territory by saying I am going to be this one person. And then at the same time, you know, still use like Lozano. I mean, you know, legally still keeping Lozano. And that was the other conceivable is that if I ever became famous, I could still hide under the name Lozano. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: What you get – [inaudible].

MR. HUERTA: So, and you know, it's interesting that you can in a sense do that. It's all just kind of like things that I don't think about now. I do think about how it affects my father still. But again, I think more of it's his problem than my problem.

MS. CORDOVA: And what about your mother and her degree of support for you being an artist or changing your name or any of these issues?

MR. HUERTA: She's been very supportive. She's always been supportive. But I think it's support because she, you know, she's a mother – [laughter]. You know? I remember when I was in Las Cruces and she would send me food, you know? Things that, you know, she obviously could withstand being shipped. But she would send me food and when I was in Houston she would give me, buy me groceries and stuff. And she didn't understand what I was doing, though.

And obviously my father didn't understand. I remember he came up for my graduate show at New Mexico State and then brought my brother Carlos with him, who's nine years younger than me. And I had done a portrait of him and I had the word, the name Lozano over his forehead. And it was a portrait based on a small black and white photograph and he looks real stern and at peace. I didn't tell him that that was going to be in the show. I didn't tell him, you know, about the painting. And as we were walking into the gallery, one of my fellow graduate students was walking out and he was going to introduce himself. He said, "Oh, I know. I saw your picture in the show." And he didn't understand so he saw the show and then he was upset about the painting because it didn't portray him in favorable light. At the same time, I felt it portrayed him in the way that I knew him.

I remember that I struggled with the painting of his face and I had gone through six different variations on his face. And I got the way he looked but I didn't get the way he felt. At a certain point I felt, this is the way he is. And it was kind of intuitive. I knew exactly this is what I want and then the rest of the painting was very easy.

I think it's still very strong painting and but his reaction was not favorable and he didn't like it. I had even

offered it to him, that he could have it, you know, just he could keep it, and he didn't want it. It wasn't until later, I think in the late 80s that he finally said I'd like to have that painting and so I brought it over to his apartment.

And I remember a couple years after because my parents split in '85 I think it was '85, and got divorced and he got broken into and I had given him my University of Houston – I bought the ring for the University of Houston. But I didn't buy it to fit me; I bought it to fit him because he never graduated from high school because he got drafted into World War II. He was more in the clerical role, he was really young and then he signed up in the army and then with five, six months he had, Korean War started and he went to Korea and got the Purple Heart a couple times because he got injured.

So I gave him – and I was the first to go to college in our family so I said, you know, here you can have this ring. And that ring was stolen when he was broken into and he had my other ring, which is a high school ring and that one I fitted for myself so I ended up giving that to him because for me that didn't mean the same thing, you know. I mean material things to me are not – they're not important to me as they are for him. For him they become more symbolic. So I gave him those and he now still wears the high school ring. He really regrets that that other ring was stolen.

But at that time, he said you better take the painting back. It's, you know, you never really know And I said, you know, they're not going to steal a painting. Because I mean I got broken into this house two Valentine's Day's ago. And, you know, they took TV, and some CDs and stuff, but they didn't touch the artwork, they didn't touch the books. So, and you know, what are people going to do with art?

I remember a story, when I was still living in Houston, the 80s. A guy was driving a truck of art stuff, and really like major artists. And was taking – I don't know if it was taking it from Houston to New York or back but he had stopped in a restaurant somewhere in Texas on the highway and he came out and the truck was gone. It was stolen. And it was a big kind of paneled truck and they thought, probably the people who thought we're going to steal it thought there were TVs and stuff in there. They abandoned it several miles away. They didn't take anything because all there was were these paintings. And they probably didn't even know who painted them. But they were like major like artists from the 60s. Like there was like Motherwell, and de Kooning, and some other artists. That was really funny. So, we just thought, you know, people they're not going to steal artwork.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] Going back a lot – after graduate school, what did you do first?

MR. HUERTA: After graduate school, there's another story. My father, when we were in Corpus, right before we moved to Houston, said I'm thinking of moving the family to either San Francisco or Houston. And I remember that we moved to Houston and I remember the 60s and I felt like I missed out on the hippie movement, the flower power in San Francisco in the late 60s, because that's where it was happening. And then I started seeing movies and seeing, you know, San Francisco. And I thought what a beautiful place.

And I thought when I graduated, I thought well, you know, I'm half way there. So I decided to move there and I didn't have any friends, I didn't have a job. I had met a friend of Mel Chin's one time. And he lived in Oakland with his brother and – but I didn't know him well. I think that we spent New Year's Eve together with Mel and George and a couple of those guys. So I went there; didn't have a place to stay. Didn't have a job. Had about 200 dollars, 250 dollars.

MS. CORDOVA: What year was that?

MR. HUERTA: This was 1978. This was like August. I think I came back to Houston during the summer and then went back to Las Cruces right before I left.

And I remember I took a flight from El Paso and that was also interesting. My friend Don Collum, a fellow graduate of mine, we had a show together, the graduate show together and this one other person. And he was going to drive me to the airport and I felt – this friend of mine is very laid-back and so he was just kind of taking his time. So I was like I think it's like getting kind of late. And so by the time we got there, we went to the counter and they said, well your flight is about ready to leave. They said you better just take your luggage and run. I mean, literally run. So I ran and Don and his wife took the – I think I had like one piece of luggage, and a suitcase and a guitar and they followed me. And I ran, and I ran to the gates. And they said, the plane is moving away from the gate. And so they called the plane, the plane stopped. And the plane was beginning to move back. The thing was separated coming back away from the plane. They stopped and the plane stopped and they kind of moved the gate. When they got closer they opened up the door of the plane and I literally jumped about 18 inches to get into the plane. They closed the door and left and then my luggage got put on the next plane.

And I went to San Francisco. I ended up being there two years. And worked, found a job in south San Francisco at a wholesale frame warehouse. Within – I don't know, maybe, I can't remember – four or five months, I became the manager of the warehouse. And I ended up having three people work for me eventually. I was the one who hired people to work for me. And then they ended up changing the salary system there. They were going

through like a lot of turnovers and I felt that we cannot keep people, you're going to have to pay them more. And so they brought up everybody's wages and as a result, my wages were improved greatly and I was making some good money. And I found a place in San Francisco, which had a great address: 711 Leavenworth– [laughter]. And then later realized that on the other side of Nob Hill along with everyone was Mark Rothko lived on that same street.

And I lived there, I worked full-time. I didn't have a vehicle so I took the SamTrans down to south San Francisco and then walked from there to the job, which is a couple miles, or a mile maybe, mile and a half, something like that. It took about 15 minutes, 20 minutes. And where I was living was between Nob Hill and Tenderloin. So I have to go through the Tenderloin and I remember going to the bars and they were already open early in the morning. People were already drinking. And SamTrans's just on Mission Street.

And then I remember going to the Philip Guston show – the retrospective – it was the show that I think he later died like a couple months after that opening. And it's really interesting because a few years ago they have a video of Philip Guston, an interview with him and that show. And I remember I saw that show and it's just so weird. And then the had a Jasper Johns show that was a '78 retrospective was traveling and that was there. So I remember seeing those shows.

And then also going to hear music because I'm really into music a lot. Again, going back to the reason I was going to go into graphics was that because I was always drawing. I thought well, this would be a good way to make money if I could make like concert posters and album covers like you did, you know, starting with Sgt. Pepper, and after that it became this art form. And so I thought that with music I could be able to do my work, to do artwork.

And I literally was offered a job a year before I graduated from University of Houston with Pennzoil. They were looking for – they were starting an art department within the company and they wanted to hire me. The money was really good but I told them I had one more year of college and I really wanted to graduate and so come back in a year. Because I showed them I had already done all these concert posters. And I told them I did all the lettering, the drawing, I would go and pick out the paper and the inks and they were just like – at that time, I did it on my own. I didn't learn it from school. And they were really impressed with that and impressed by the portfolio. So it was kind of unique for somebody to do all those different things, you know, so. And then it was in that year when I started painting and I never went back.

And so when I was in San Francisco, I was – I remember that I done a lot of experimentation in Las Cruces and I think I wanted to do work that was more personal. And I remember that I decided that I wasn't going to do any paintings for a while because my paintings were always large. And I always felt like paintings should be bigger than human life, so to speak. Whereas drawings, or works on paper, should be you know, anything like this and smaller. Anything that could be, you know, within my grasp.

So I started developing – and I had this idea towards the end of graduate school. Again, I was just playing with the idea of like, you know, because George Lucas came out with *Star Wars*. And I thought, well I'm going to make Flying Chalupas. And so I started creating this Flying Chalupa Productions and it was just, you know, make believe. And I remember if George Lucas could make money off of Star Wars, I could make money off of Flying Chalupas. So when I got to San Francisco I literally said well, you know, let's take that a little further, I mean let's really – so I thought, you know, chalupa is kind of, is about me in the sense that I am Latino. I grew up making chalupas, I eat chalupas. It's part of culture. I like the idea that chalupa's also a carrier, like a boat because you can consume, so you could also consume it visually.

And so I started off actually trying to make them look like chalupas and then I remember doing this charcoal drawing going from left to right, drawing these kind of linear drawings of chalupas, then going down. So it almost became sort of like kind of pictograms. Like, later people then think of a Mayan, you know, symbols and drawings. And I thought I never set out to do that; it just happened. And then I started creating symbols and imagery that related specifically to my life as a Latino but also to my life as a person because there are some things that are shared in the culture. And I really wanted them to be more, you know, personal.

And I remember I drew them on – I saw a show of this artist who I think he lived in, well he was in Stanford, Nathan Oliviera. And there was a show of his prints at one of the galleries there. And they're really beautiful. They're small and they're dark and there's a bit of rubbing out and then coloring in. And there's a really beautiful one. So I thought of that and then I also remembered seeing the album cover of Talking Heads' *Fear of Music*, which was like a black album cover but it had the texture of a manhole grate and I liked that.

And when I was in Las Cruces, I remembered started to pain on black velvet.

MS. CORDOVA: What made you start painting on black velvet?

MR. HUERTA: Well, I think that you know, again, growing up at Corpus we used to go to the border all the time

and seeing all these black velvet paintings. And at that time, that was what was there. But when in Las Cruces, we were close to El Paso, it was about 45 minutes away and we'd go a lot of times, friends of mine go across into Juarez and of course you'd see black velvet paintings.

And I thought, well you know, why not paint them black velvet? I mean there's all these black velvet paintings. You know, and I just thought that's another material. They're using it to do that but I could use it to do what I wanted to do.

And so I remember the first painting I did on black velvet. It was a typical like wolf fight scene. But it was atypical in the sense that it was almost abstract. And I mean, there's a whole area of black velvet that's showing and then there's this kind of like area where it's painted but it's the figure-ground relationship is almost so one and the same. And then it really popped out against the black velvet and I really liked the way it looked.

And then I did a pillow based on Manet's *Olympia* painting. And I used the top half of her painted on black velvet. My girlfriend sewed it together, made a – put a satin backing with satin piping and stuffed it and made it a pillow. And then she and I went to Frederick's of Hollywood and I got pasties and put them on her – [laughter] – tits. And then I – because at that time was labeling things. I put her name *Olympia* across her head. And the it looked like she had really heavy mascara on and that stuff and I did that piece and I think like another one or two pieces. So it was like the beginning of that.

So when I started to do the chalupa series, I found some black paper. The first black paper I bought was German etching, which didn't have a very good surface. And I did one drawing and it was really rough looking. I didn't like the way it looked. And then I later came across a Black Arches black paper, which was much smoother and I started using prisma colors on them. So that was the beginning of my chalupa series.

And when I finally got moved back to Houston – after San Francisco, I went to New York and then back to Houston, I started painting, I drew my first black velvet painting with chalupas on them. And it went through several transformations because the middle part ended up being kind of like dealing with toilet humor because I had installed a toilet paper rack. And then made, on black paper, these drawings like of this linear imagery that I'd created. And like each piece was a different image and I rolled it up and put it into this thing so you could you know, bring it out. I remember putting it in that state in a shell and somebody remarking about how, you know, that was like potty humor painting and it was like, I didn't really want it to be about that. So it changed over a period of time and eventually got resolved, almost like ten years later – it was like '92.

MS. CORDOVA: In what work did it get resolved?

MR. HUERTA: Well, I ended up doing a piece – I started working with different materials late in the late 80s, again. And I used some lead and I had cut out like a heart and – I didn't cut it out actually used torch to cut out the shape of a heart with this lead. And I actually was using the negative part of it to pour another piece on white. Like the other shape, that was a heart that was kind of ambiguous and put it on a piece of plywood and then I mounted that on the piece. Before when there was still the toilet paper thing, the background squared around it. There was nothing on it. And then I decided to put the imagery, or paint imagery of what was on the roll around the border. So it was kind of like a grid of chalupas and then there was a square within the middle. And in the square there was like a toilet paper rack. So along the border of the square was this imagery and I put X's or something in between this imagery. And then later I kept that and took the toilet paper out and put the plywood. And I beveled the edges.

And then I, you know, it was during the time. There's a lot of things with AIDS going on and then my brother had come out and said he was gay. And so, you know, it was like made me real conscious of AIDS. And so I ended up putting a red ribbon on it and calling it *The Hive* because I forgot what the previous name was. And I was thinking *The Hive* in the sense of like a bee's hive is like how we would live.

You know, my whole chalupa series started off with a grid and I think part of it was the fact that I was living – when I was living in San Francisco, we were living in these apartments and I didn't know my neighbors. So all these lives were going on at the same time in the same building but I didn't know any of them. So and I never got to know any of them during that time.

MS. CORDOVA: So the grid pattern that you continue to use started in San Francisco?

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, but it was an actual like, you know, square grid kind of thing and then – I lived in a – before I lived in Leavenworth, I lived for about a month in this – right off Polk Street – called the Young Man's Guest House, which shows how naïve I was.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.]

MR. HUERTA: But part of it was that I didn't have enough money to get an apartment so they said well this place

across the street rents by the week and it was – I think it was like $25 for a room and $30 with a window. And so I took the one with a window. Because the rooms that didn't have a window actually had a window but they looked right up against a brick wall that was like right next to it. So I didn't want to see that. And I remember one time waking up in the middle of the night. And there was just like glow, this orange and red glow on the ceiling and I looked out and it was this brand new, like Firebird on fire. And I found out later that there was a drug deal. The guy who owned the Firebird had screwed somebody else and they got back at him by torching his car. And I remember getting trying to be picked up during that time period by guys. So it was just kind of an education.

And right toward the end of my job, I got fired. And I knew I was going to get fired because I was already – the people who were working for me – I had one last review and in the review I was telling them that I'm thinking I'm going to get fired. So I was already beginning to train one of them to take over my job. The person who would normally take over my job would be the next person in line but she didn't like the owners to begin with and they didn't have a good relationship. So I figured they're not going to pick her once they fire me. They'll pick this other guy, which they did. And so I got fired and then a friend of a friend who lived in New York and she said that she would rent me a room there for $100 a month. And you know, I said great.

So when I got fired I went for unemployment and got the full amount. There was so – [inaudible] – a lot of money at the time and I decided I would not work. I would pretend to be looking for a job. Because the guys – I felt like I was fired not for the right reasons but for a way to save money. And they trumped up charges.

So during that summer I remember it was the first time I went down to the Galería de la Raza down on 24th Street and I met René Yañez and Carmen [Lomas Garza] was working there with René. And then Ralph Maradiaga was there and I think he – I don't know when he died, I think it was like a year or two later. He was a really nice guy.

And I remember René and Carmen went to show my work at the Galería but I had told them that I had already decided to show my chalupa drawings at a Mexican restaurant down 24th Street. And I had there's a restaurant called Mi Casa, which I had gone to before and I liked the food and I ended up asking the guys if it was alright to show my work there and I said I would buy beers from him and buy some guacamole and stuff for the opening. And so he went along with it and said okay, you know, you could do that. And so René became supportive – I think he ended up helping co-sponsor the show and hired a guitar – [audio break, tape change] – and he helped with some of the reception stuff and it was great. Like again, I like the idea of going out and putting artwork in places where you don't see artwork. And I like the idea of working with a person who's in the restaurant business who didn't know nothing about art. [Laughter.] And he got really – he loved the whole reception because, I mean, it was packed and we had a great crowd. And I don't how much money I spent there but I spent some money on his place and I ended up giving him a small drawing later that I did. And so he was real happy and he said you know, come back again sometime, you know. And like, you'll probably become famous but don't forget us.

I remember going back two, three times and eventually at some point I just didn't go back simply because I didn't go back to San Francisco that often. And René, you know – Henry told him I was moving to San Francisco and it was really – you know, because he saw my work – really was trying to dissuade me from moving to San –

MS. CORDOVA: You mean, to New York.

MR. HUERTA: – to New York. And at that time he wanted me to meet a friend of his, Rupert Garcia. And I never got to meet Rupert. And I finally met him at the Chicano Show that opened up that René did for Cheech that's traveling around now.

And actually that was my first contact with René in years. But I saw him here and there and went to the Galería de la Raza when I was in San Francisco because I think that, you know, I was real supportive of what they were trying to do. I like the idea of a place being in the community and a lot of the programs that they were doing. I felt, you know, a lot of the things that I was doing they were doing.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you find out about it, do you know?

MR. HUERTA: I don't remember. I think it was just through just like, you know, the paper, you know, what's out there. And it's like at that time I was really familiar with San Francisco and I wanted to go to – I think I wanted to go outside the norms or like, you know, the traditional galleries and see what else is out there. And I just came across it and showed them my work and they wanted to give me a show.

And I think Carmen – when I moved to San – when I moved to New York, Carmen was putting a show together of Latino and Chicano artists who do self-portraits. And I ended up being in that show and I made a piece for that show.

Right before I left San Francisco I moved over to Berkeley and Oakland and my friends that lent me a motorcycle as my way to get around. I rode a motorcycle for a couple years – or no, for the summer.

But I also had my shows of chalupas at another gallery, which was a frame shop that I met through Wholesale Frank's place. And this guy said I'll give you a show and so I had a show there later with the chalupa pieces.

And so I remember in Berkeley that I was doing the self-portraits. And it was in charcoal and graphite. And it was just like looking in the mirror and doing just a straight-on portrait. I hadn't done many portraits before, my self-portraits. So I was like, I really wanted to get it right. And I thought it ended being a strong piece and they had it in the show and they did a little catalog of it. So –

MS. CORDOVA: I thought I had an image of it – just taking a quick look.

MR. HUERTA: So anyway, that was – and I looked in New York City and I liked living there. And I remember Susan, who's the person whose place that I was renting from. Remember she was dating the brother of Chevy Chase, was a lawyer, but I didn't really like him. I just thought, you know, this is not going to work out, which it didn't. And we get along pretty well.

And then right before Christmas, I remember my mother calling. My parents had just opened up a restaurant and they called about it. It was I think the day before I got fired – [laughter]. And they were telling me they just opened up the restaurant and outside of Houston. No, that's not mine.

MS. CORDOVA: No? Hmm. Oh well.

MR. HUERTA: Mine's is better than that. [Laughter.]

Um, and I remember they opened up a restaurant outside Stafford. And right before the holidays my mom called and said my father had a heart attack and was in the hospital and would you come back to help, you know, with the place. I knew that if I was going to move back, I'd have to move back completely because I was on unemployment. I still was on unemployment. I was getting a check every two weeks. And when I was in New York every time I get a check I'd go visit friends up and down the east coast. So I went up to Maine and Massachusetts, and Philadelphia and visited friends. And so when I moved back to Houston I had to like move my unemployment, the whole idea to Texas.

MS. CORDOVA: How long were you in New York?

MR. HUERTA: I moved there in August, beginning of August, and was there 'til like about Christmas time. And then I moved back – I wasn't there very long.

MS. CORDOVA: And that was which year?

MR. HUERTA: 1980.

MS. CORDOVA: 1980?

MR. HUERTA: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. HUERTA: That was 1980 because I was in San Francisco from '78 to 1980. And then during that summer of 1980 is when I moved to Oakland and Berkeley. I moved to Oakland and was staying with some friends of mine. They had a room outside that I could live in. I had no toilet, so – [laughter] – when I had to use it I went outside. Then they lent me a motorcycle and I remember getting all these – not traffic tickets, but I got tickets because I was parked on like, on a sidewalk as opposed to parking on the street. And I think they ended up getting the tickets and so I felt kind of bad about that. But it was fun driving a motorcycle around the bay area.

And I lived in Berkeley. They asked me – my friend's brother was saying it was time for me to move out. And so I got a place in Berkeley and there's one in this house. They rented the room out and so I was in there and that's where I did the self-portrait.

And then went to the Berkeley Museum and I remember they had Hans Hofmann's – Estate – had given them a bunch of painting that they had to exhibit for 25 years and I didn't like Hans Hofmann's work. So it was just like uhhh. [Laughter.]

I remember seeing this guy that I knew in Houston was having a show at the Matrix Gallery. His name was Julian Schnabel. [Laughter.] And so he was having the beginning of his name. And then I later found out in 1980 when I moved to New York that he had done black velvet paintings and it pissed me off.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] Right.

MR. HUERTA: But I mean, he came out of Houston. I mean, I had met him at the University of Houston. He was one of Richard Stoffs [?] students. And I remember Richard later, in the early '80s, said that you know, he wanted me to come over his house because there was a guy by the name of David Sally who's a friend of Julian's and you know, he's doing this talk and was going to have a thing afterwards. And I never made it over.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] And yeah, and you guys had developed the same sort of idea but separately.

MR. HUERTA: Well actually, you know, there was a guy in Houston by the name of Earl Staley who actually done black velvet paintings. And Julian I think knew Earl. Earl was kind of eclectic in his work and I liked that about him. What I didn't like about him was I don't think he was very good at his craft. He came up with a lot of great ideas for art and for a while, he actually – I thought it was going to become really big because he, you know, Earl, got a big show at the Contemporary Arts Museum upstairs and then that show went to the New Museum and then that same year he got the Prix de Rome and then he moved back to New York. And I thought, you know, that's – he went up, up and away. But Earl never, it never clicked and moved back to Houston and ended up starting an art department in Tomball. And I thought, you know, this is how the art world is. You got to face the fact that, you know, sometimes you think you're going to make it and then it doesn't happen.

I remember a friend of mine, John Hernandez, having a show at the Dallas Museum and I remember either the day before or after his opening we were at a bank. And there was a street guy walking across the bank. And he had like a sack behind him, which I thought carried his personal stuff. And I told John, see that guy? He had a one-person show at the Dallas Museum about two, three years ago. [Laughter.] So I wanted to keep it real. You know? It's like don't think that just because you have a show at a museum, all of a sudden your life changes. A lot of people thought of me with the Contemporary Arts Museum that it was like up, up, and away. And I just feel like, you know, it's up and down.

I – you know, it was interesting – I remember when I was in graduate school, Richard Workstrom [ph], who was the director of the gallery, he said, you know, with my work at the time, he said you're doing really hot work during a really cool time, meaning the aesthetic was minimalism, conceptualism. The kind of work that I was doing would probably be appreciated during the 80s in New York. But by the time I got to that – by the time the art world got to that New York expressionist movement and also seeing like people like Leon Golub who's been doing it all the time, I was then doing cool work because all of my chalupa series was really cool work. And cool in the sense of it not being expressionistic, as being more thoughtful about the way I was working. I was even relating the work to being like the serial music of Philip Glass, this kind of repetitive style.

And I thought, you know, this was – like my work was not in sync with what was going on. And it didn't bother me. I just like accepted it as the way it is. I just felt you just got to be true to the work. And so –

MS. CORDOVA: Why did you return to Houston?

MR. HUERTA: Because of my mother calling about my father having a heart attack. And they had opened up this restaurant. So I went back to Houston, moved my unemployment thing to Houston so I knew that once I moved I couldn't –

And it was interesting, though, that the former employers hired a lawyer and they appealed the decision about my unemployment and we had a two and a half hour phone conversation on the phone and I remember thinking to myself. Now, to kind of train myself for this two and a half hour ordeal, I said think like Mr. Spock – [laughter] – think logically. Because you know, they're going to make a lot of statements and you have to be logical about them because otherwise they'll get you. So I remember that's what I thought during the interview and it was like they had a judge and they brought a couple people from work that testified really against on their behalf instead of my behalf. And they lost the appeal.

And when I moved to Houston, they appealed again, but the appeal had to be based on the previous appeal, which was the phone. So I asked for a transcript. It was like this thick. And the appeal had to be based not on new things but on things based on the transcript, based on the former appeal hearing. So I wrote out, you know, my statements and won again and during that time, for a month or two, my unemployment was held. If I lost the appeal, I would have to pay back what I had been paid. So there's like all this money. I was getting good checks for unemployment at the time.

So for a couple months, when I moved back, I was living with my parents. And I think my father – I remember going to my father at the hospital and said, I hope you didn't move back because of me. And then at that point I wanted to kill him – [laughter] – because I did move back because of him. I mean, that was what my mom wanted.

And so, and I was working at the restaurant because they had several restaurants before and I had – when we

moved to Houston, I worked at my father's restaurant. He used to have barber shops in Houston, in Corpus, and then we moved to Houston and opened up a restaurant. Bad location. It was a fried chicken place. And I worked there and then when he opened up a restaurant in Rosenberg I worked for him there. And I've been working for him from the age of 13 to 17 and I said I'm tired of working in a restaurant. And he said, the only way you're going to get out of here is if you end up getting another job. So within two weeks I started working at Foley's Department store in the stockroom. At the restaurant I went from cleaning, you know, washing dishes, to waiting on tables, to cashier, to cooking. And I just, I didn't like it. I didn't like the restaurant business.

The last few months, my father started opening really early in the morning and like, by 6:00 in the morning or 7:00 in the morning and then would open until like 2:00 Sunday morning. And I would come with him and he would leave about 10 and I would be the one left to close the restaurant. So I was like really young and I remember, you know, I had to make a drop-off at the bank so I had to count the money. I had like $2,000 in cash and I'm like 16, 17 years old, drive to the bank in the middle of the night and make a deposit. I mean, drop it in the dead of the night trying to deposit and drop it off. I was stopped by the cops a couple of times. You know they're like, what the heck, you know? They began to realize who I was and you know, left me alone. But I thought it was just bizarre. And then I'd be so tired that you know, sometimes I'd go off the road because I'd start falling asleep going back home because it was about a 30, 40 minute drive from Bel-Air to Rosenberg. So I decided I'd never work in a restaurant until my mom called. And I worked there, I thought this is only temporary. And my father said once he got back on his feet, he was okay, he didn't want me working there and I kept working there until I felt everything was fine.

MS. CORDOVA: How long was that time period?

MR. HUERTA: It was very long. About maybe a month, six weeks or so. And then I just started kind of like hanging out with my friends.

And I remember going to Nashville, Tennessee with Mel, driving this funky car that every time Mel drove real fast would have a blowout. And I would drive like – I didn't drive at the speed limit, but within five miles of the speed limit, which has been my tradition since. And we would drive along there without any problem and he would get behind the wheel and drive fast and then we'd have another blowout. Two or three blowouts. And he was going to make a film. He was making a film called *The Driven Man* and we filmed around Nashville. And this is the first time I've been in Nashville and I had some friends and I remember they made martinis. It was the first time I had a martini.

And then we drove back and it was like the day of my birthday. And stopped somewhere and we had some barbeque and we got to my house. And I have a sister who was born five years younger on the same day. So my mom was having a party for her and for me, hoping I would be back in time, which I was. So we went in there and there was all this food and we had ate just a couple hours ago. So it was kind of fun.

And then sometime that summer I moved out and found a place on West 16th Street. And this two-story house that leaned toward one corner and a property with two other houses. It was really cheap; it was like $200 a month.

So and it was at that point that I started painting again. Because I was still doing works on paper and drawing stuff but I just felt like I was going to paint again. I wanted to do, I decided I wanted to do it. I didn't want to be doing it smaller. And so that's when I started painting again.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you start doing at that point?

MR. HUERTA: I was still like finishing the chalupa series and I continued them in New York when I was there. And I was doing a series of state pieces where I had the outline of a state that I lived in: Texas, New Mexico, California, and then I did one of New York while I was in New York. And –

MS. CORDOVA: Did your restaurant experience give you some of the basis for focusing on food, too?

MR. HUERTA: Well, yeah, probably. You know, subconsciously. I mean, I didn't really think about it but, you know, I again, I was learning, I had learned how to cook at my parents' restaurant. So it was kind of like I had that experience. That's why I say I know how to make chalupas, I know how to eat them. It was something personal so that was, you know, part of it. So maybe that was kind of like the basis of that.

And the restaurant in Stafford, I ended up putting a lot of my work up. Before I moved back, they had a painting that I'd done in undergraduate school of James Dean that I gave my sister because she's into James Dean a lot. And so I said, you know, she just gives me $50 dollars I'll do this big painting of James Dean. It's like four and a half by five and a half feet or something like that. It's of where he's in front of the house in the movie *Giant* and he's sitting in the car. And I remember that somebody came into the restaurant; they wanted to buy the painting from her. And they offered her $10,000 and she said no. I was really surprised but at the same time – and this

was like 1980. And I was like surprised that she, first of all surprised that she said no, I was surprised at the fact that she would – that somebody would offer that much for the painting. [Laughter.]

So I had some of my chalupa drawings and it was really funny because one of my cousins whose husband and I were having like breakfast there one time and he was saying, you know, what is a chalupa? And it was really funny because I remember what Laurie Anderson had said one time about, you know, like – languages. Like I think artists are always trying to communicate and make that bridge to others and try to use language that they would know. But because we're artists, there's always a suspicion about what we're saying. So you know, when my – this was a perfect example where my cousin's husband was asking what is a chalupa is and he told me and I said, well that's it. And so as a result, you know, that mystery of what a chalupa was kind of removed. I mean he thought it was something else. It wasn't.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter.] With that, I'm going to stop this tape because we're almost done.

MR. HUERTA: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of the American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Benito Huerta. This is session one and disk three. And we had just ended with the chalupa, or what the chalupa was.

MR. HUERTA: Mm-hmm. [In agreement.]

MS. CORDOVA: When did the chalupa series end? Or what made you leave it?

MR. HUERTA: Well, there was a – what year was it? It was around '83 I think, '84. I remember - there's sometimes a thing in my mind that clicks off and I remember like I was getting bored with it. I felt like I was exhausting everything. I felt like I was beginning to repeat myself.

So I ended up doing a series of works on paper. And I think there was like seven in the series. And I referred to them as "Desecration Series" because I felt like in order to sometimes to go ahead you have to kind of like, you know, how you move beyond the body of work? And at that time, I felt like I had to kind of like desecrate it, make it to an object that I didn't care much about. And so I ended up desecrating these seven works. And I remember one of them, I think going back to the *Fear of Music* album by Talking Heads. Like I don't want to fear a flying chalupa.

And I ended up – it was like a 22 by 30 in this grid and I took a razor and just slashed it. And so it was a bunch of X's and stuff. Another one it was called *Assassination of Certain Chalupas*. And it was kind of a like the chalupas were small on the outside and it got bigger until there was one big on in the middle and I took it to a rifle range and used my brother's 22-rifle and shot it from behind and seeing how good I was because all the bullets almost hit like within this radius. And a friend of mine here in Dallas actually owns that piece. He wanted to buy it.

And there was another one, *Certain Chalupas Held Hostage*. And that one was like a diptych. And one was more – two different slightly colored chalupas, groups of chalupas. And then I had like colored string and one across them in these two grids and then Mrs. De Menil from the Menil collection bought that piece. She saw it in the show and bought it.

And then there was another one called *Wages of Sin*. And that one I used pastel and something else and again, it's kind of like, what a cross is like negating the whole drawing. And somebody bought that piece.

And I had another one called *Weathered Chalupas* – where I did these chalupas and our forgotten chalupas. And I put it outside for two, three months. And then showed it after that as it was. That didn't sell because it wasn't a pretty piece. [Laughter.]

So I can't remember. I have to look at my slides for the other ones but basically it was a way to move beyond that. And in the paintings I was still doing the grid but I was beginning to incorporate a figure, an actual figure into it. And there was a series of works that I did that were transitional that were from about '84 to about 1987, '88, that thing. And that led to the new works.

And I remember in '87 I actually sat down and did about 25 small works. Pen and ink works on paper, white paper. And I had a seven by eleven ratio that I came up with. I decided that I liked the idea of seven by eleven that relates to wrestling – not wrestling, to gambling.

And it was kind of like, you know, I felt like art can be like that in the sense that you have this kind of given so then you see what happens with it. But I also ended up using that ratio for all the works aside from the square format. The square format I related to the idea of boxing and wrestling rings. So again, you have certain

elements that go into it but you don't know what the outcome is going to be.

MS. CORDOVA: Mm-hmm. [In agreement.]

MR. HUERTA: And that related back to my father and boxing. And so that was like the two formats that I would use as far as, you know, rectangular imagery and square imagery. And that became kind of like an ongoing thing to this day.

MS. CORDOVA: Did your father gamble?

MR. HUERTA: No, well, in a sense. He didn't gamble per se but he gambled with, I think, with his life in a sense. I mean, he was in boxing. In the end it was not a profitable business for him. I do have another uncle of mine that gambles a lot. [Laughter.] And has actually made a lot of money from gambling.

So, but I like the notion that art – somebody said, do you play like poker? And I said well I don't play games. But I do play with my life – [laughter]. Because I feel like to be an artist it's like, you know, there was no assurance that you're going to be making it as an artist. And that you can like, you know, really live off your work. Unless, you know, you were one of the very few that became famous and successful, so to speak. But even if you became famous you might not be successful financially. So I just think that to be an artist is to just really gamble with your life. And so you don't know what the outcome's going to be.

It's not, you know, where like you become a certain executive that you expect to be promoted and you expect a certain amount of money and that sort of thing. There's certain expectations when you go into the business world.

So I used those kind of like ratios. And I remember I was incorporating the grid of chalupas but I also, how do I break away from the grids. So I took the linear imagery and I also would take, I would blow them up and overlay them with the linear imagery and that became the exact fractions. It became another kind of grid, a more organic kind of grid.

And then a lot of the compositions were to be later used in my following work and that series of work led to the works that led into the show at the museum. In a sense, they were still personal but I was thinking of like artists like Jean Arp who kind of created their own vocabulary of imagery. And I was thinking of, in that way. And I wanted to incorporate other materials like I had done in graduate school and sometimes in undergraduate school but this time to not make it so obvious, to make it much more subtle and nuanced. And I really, really was – wanted to know, you know, how to really work these.

During those times, I think like big influences were like Jasper Johns and Anselm Kiefer because of their surfaces and the kind of like what went on into the works. And that's one of the reasons I started kind of using straw in the works. Not because – I didn't use them the same way Kiefer did but I really wanted them to last a little longer, so I would like paint each straw or dab each straw with some paint and stick it onto the canvas. So even if the straw would fall apart there would be some residue of it left behind. So those were used in those paintings.

MS. CORDOVA: You often use the straw within the figure, right?

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, well those were in the transitional pieces. The transitional is where they had distinctive, figural elements and they were in a sense, in those pieces, what I did in the background was divide it, and so it almost like the figure was moving from one room into another room and the whole idea was the transition of moving from one idea to another idea. And the figure was me moving in a sense, so to speak. Whether it was a male figure or a female figure because I used also a female figure in it.

And there was a gridded area. And then in the female painting, there wasn't a – what I later used. It was something more like an abstract patterning situation and I actually used some wooden dolls cut up and painted them and had them on there and I slashed it on either side and created this kind of overall patterning of that in this other room. And then the one that I did of myself, there – [audio break, tape change] – the room, that I was moving into that the grid area was smaller and the other room as bigger and it was like the overlays going to them was the background. I really liked the way that worked.

And there was another painting that I'd done earlier that I thought was a really strong piece that I think was stronger than anything that I'd done during that period. And it was called *Execution with Memories*. And I used the St. Sebastian motif and I used myself as the figure and I was naked and I'd been struck with arrows and the arrows were actual wooden dowels that were painted black with feathers that were stuck into a piece of plywood that's behind the canvas. The figure was like a linear drawing of me with and then inside of it was this gravel mixed in with black paint. So it created this, you know, texture. And then on the outside behind me was the wall of the grid with this imagery that was all personal iconography. And then the floor was kind of like straw and there was like a wallboard at the bottom of the wall, like a little running board.

And I called that *Executed with Memories* and the whole idea that the fact that artists are like, you know, naked. And they have to reveal themselves in their work, whether it's, you know, figurative or non-figurative. I think all art is personal, whether it deals with just formalist – attitudes or whether it deals with something that's real personal. Like, you know, like Alice Neel's kind of work.

MS. CORDOVA: Why were you drawn especially to *St. Sebastian*?

MR. HUERTA: Well, I think it's again, I mean the whole idea of again, using this kind of like religious imagery for metaphor. And I remember talking with another friend, you know, about St. Sebastian. And there was a movie that I think Derek Jarman had done, called St. Sebastian. And we talked about it and my friend was gay and we talked about those kinds of issues. But we also talked about art. So I thought, you know – I liked the idea also that St. Sebastian didn't really die from those arrow wounds. You know, he ended up recovering and then went back for more and actually died from that.

So, in the end, it's like, you know, all those things – it's like you're a public target for critics or for anybody to say anything about your work, whether it's good or bad. That's why, in the end, you know, it's like I wanted to deal with it in my work so I know how to deal with it in life. And it was a way to kind of deal with that – with the public persona of being an artist and criticism. And that was what the work was about.

I mean, just like the whole idea with the painting that my father was in a sense to confront that relationship in paint and deal with it. And I felt really great after I did that painting. I thought it was a really strong painting. It was one of those paintings you feel like it upped the ante in your own work, and you felt like all the other works had to come up to that same level. And there's very few works I think in any artists' career that you know, where the ante's raised and it's like, and it's not about competing with somebody else. It's just about competing with yourself and trying to doing better. And that painting of my father was one of them. But I think that those kinds of things were trying to deal with certain kinds of issues in the works.

And I think that the work for me, the artwork for me, was in a sense, has been very much also like therapy. I've been able to deal with a lot of issues in and through the work that as a result, has made me want to better myself as an individual. So the work started, I mean, really had an effect on me as an individual.

That's why I say, in the one sense, it kind of saved my life. Because I remember when I was going back to Corpus and I remember some of my friends after they got out of high school they get married or they were into drugs. And very few of them like did anything with their lives. And I felt if we had stayed in Corpus, I wonder, you know, how much of life I would have had. I probably would never have been an artist.

And like I said, I never knew you could be an artist even when I started painting. And really it was that education that all these – they had actual artists come into the University of Houston as visiting artists and they had Malcolm Morley come in and Norman Bloom came in and Salvador Scarpetta came in. And for me, I felt like these people could make – if they could be an artist, and make a living, you know, you could be an artist. I mean, you know, that whole idea that really starts sinking in that there were these actual artists doing art. I mean, you know, and that's what I wanted to do.

Before, I mean, my father, when he came to New Mexico, said that his idea was an artist was somebody who put their works on the side of a car or the gas station on some corner. [Laughter.] Well, after I moved back to Houston I actually dealt with that cliché and actually did a show at – I asked somebody who had a garage, George right down the street from the Museum of Fine Arts and I said if I could borrow his garage for a weekend to have an art show – [laughter]. Some friends of mine who are art consultants, Bill and Janice Wilhelm, had a big truck and they allowed me to use the truck to bring all these big paintings and stuff. And over two days I had a show there and I put out an invitation. And people would drive by and say what the hell is this because it wasn't the typical thing that they would see. So you know, again, it was a way to get my work out to a different audience. But it was also, I like the idea of dealing with that cliché when my father said well, this is what I thought of an artist. So I decided well – [laughter] – that's a good a idea. So I ended up doing that.

And then I think as a curator, you know, I ended up curating a show, another show in New Mexico state and it was – I remember when I got there I felt that the students were kind of a little laid back. So I decided to stir things up and have a pornography show. And I intentionally used the word "pornography" because I really wanted to get people to say they're either going to do it or not do it. I didn't want anybody to be sitting on the fence about it. So all of a sudden people said they were going to do it and actually some didn't do it.

But I got a call from the assistant dean in the graduate school or something and she called me in and I didn't know what she was going to talk to me about. So I went over there and she said that the Board of Regents heard that you're going to do a – [laughter] – pornography show. And I had a teaching assistant who said there was another teaching assistant in the English department that, in the course of their reading, that the book that they were talking about had four letter words but they were – she was actually saying them in class. And she lost her teaching assistantship, which I felt like oh, I see. I could lose my teaching assistantship if I do the show. And then

she also said the other possibility is – and then she was not telling me that this is what will happen, but what could happen. She said the other thing was, and it was like, I felt like it was a veiled threat was the art department's budget is not very big – [laughter] – to begin with. So the art department could be punished as well.

So after the meeting I felt like, you know, I had this heavy load. And I went and talked to the Richard Wickstrom [ph], the curator of the gallery, the director of the gallery. And because he was on my committee and we talked about this problem and tried to figure out other ways and eventually came up with the idea of putting everything behind a veil, a black veil. And you couldn't even pick it up. So we decided to have the show, and I ended up calling it "Trout Fishing in America Undercover [Little Gallery, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1976]" and I did a lithograph and it was a piece that was like covered up.

And it ended up causing more controversy – [laughter]. It was in the school paper, it was in the city paper, and they were saying, is there a thing with censorship? And you know, we – ended up saying it's more of a conceptual show but there's all this undercurrent of what it really was about.

The assistant dean in the graduate department who'd called me in was really supportive of what I was doing and told me the things as more of a warning. And so she offered her house to have an unveiling. So we took everything over there and had an unveiling and invited people. And she said, well, this isn't pornographic at all. And I said, well, I know – [laughter].

I felt like, you know, you take something like that and you put it in the hands of artists it's going to be more erotic than pornographic. Pornography has no aesthetics. You know, erotic art has aesthetics and that's the difference I think. And I said I wanted to use the word "pornography" because I felt I really didn't want people sitting on the fence about this. I really wanted them either to do it or not do it. And it was a way to like, you know, get people to confront people. I really wanted that.

And then I did another show where it was like a competition of doing ties. And I would award a prize of one of my paintings as the first prize and the second painting. The second award was a print and the third prize was the book *Trout Fishing in America with Richard Brautigan*. [Laughter.]

And so I did that and then I curated and had a show in the Cabinet and also had fun. And then I had also a show in the little gallery of my work. And I had one part of the gallery was like a studio, a replica of my studio. So I wanted to do something different.

And I remember Luis was in residence and he had a show at the gallery there in New Mexico and he was in residence for a week and he saw the show. I really got to know him during that time because I met him in Houston when he had a show, but really got to know him in Las Cruces. After that we kept mostly in touch by mail and I would – once I asked him if we could trade and he said yeah, but we never got around to trading. And then when my show came up and there was this kind of the whole thing happened where was this cycle to have a show at the Contemporary Arts Museum.

And then a few years later I was in the advisory board of Exhibits USA and I had already had – they had knew that I was an artist who was also a curator and that I'd been like, you know, put out some ideas for a show for me to curate. And one of them was Mel Chin and they liked that so I curated the Mel Chin show for them.

And then during that time the advisory – there was a idea to do a retrospective of Luis'. And I thought that you know it was a good time for him to have a retrospective that would travel. And a few months later I got called to consider being the curator for the show, which I thought – I was honored and at the same time, it was just so odd for me to go from being kind of like – he was like a big influence and now here I am curating his show – [laughter]. And a 30-year retrospective on top of that.

And then like the curatorial – when I moved back to Houston in 1983, I got to that point was that I curated another show, friends of mine and it was a second show at Diverse Works, which had just opened up in Houston. And it was called "Seen and Unseen [1983]," kind of a takeoff of another Talking Heads song. And then there was a review of the show and that's, I think, when I had shown two black velvet pieces and both chalupas . One was with the toilet paper and again, I don't remember the original name for it. And the other one was to be, was called *Schizophrenia* which was in its first state. And the first state was that it was diptych and it was chalupas, both panels were chalupas – on velvet and then on canvas. Later the canvas I later took that – I redid it. I took that painting off and restretched the canvas and did a grid of the imagery on the left side.

Now *Schizophrenia* had to do with the idea of, you know like, Latinos in this country I felt like were, kind of like, was the popular idea of schizophrenia is this split personality. Well, you know, that's how I felt in the sense that you know, we have this Mexican heritage and then we grow up in the mainstream, white, cultural world. And so there's this split and it's like, how do you – it's one and the same thing and yet there're two different things. So it was kind of like dealing with that idea as well. And I felt like it was a really strong painting conceptually.

And so and as a curator in ’85, I was asked by Maura Kelly – because I presented that other show, “Seen and Unseen” to Charles Gallagher, who was the founder of Diverse Works. And then Maura Kelly asked if I would curate a show at Lawndale Arts Center and she would actually pay me for it. I think it was like $400 or $500, something like that. And at that time I had a show at Square One and she saw the show and she liked it but she wanted to ask me if I’d curate a show. And I said okay, but since I’m getting paid for it I didn’t want to be part of the show. I started separating myself. And she said, no I really want you to be part of it.

So what I ended up doing is – the show is called “Cowboys, Cadillacs, and Computers.” And each of those titles suggest a section of the show that would be curated by a different person. I ended up doing a huge installation called “Cowboys, Cadillacs, and Computers” and it was a three-dimensional, you walk in and out. It was like this big TV screen with the state of Texas kind of like a stage coming out of the TV screen, coming you know, three-dimensional. And then the state of Texas was covered with corn chips and then there was like these ponies all around the edge of the stage and each pony was done by a different person. Or one person would do several ponies and there were like different textures and different things. There was a tornado made out of barbed wire, and the Alamo made out of piñata. [Laughter.] And then you walk in there’s like a dirt path and on the side of the dirt path there’s like broken glass to be like, you know, kind of like the landscape of Texas. And there was a moon that was cut out of a drapery and there was a projection and from the projection there was cowboy imagery projected from the backside. But you couldn’t really see it from the front. You had to kind of be really back there to see it. You could walk in and out of the TV. And we had like the different artists had done different things that related to cowboys.

And then I borrowed three mechanical horses, ponies that you put a dime in. And they had them like one, two, and three. And then borrowed the wooden Indian from somebody and they were kind of like, you know, looking like this but they were looking towards the TV. And so it was kind of pointing the direction where you should go in and then somebody asked, well why did you have the ponies? I said well I thought this would be another way of looking at art – [laughter]. You know, by putting the dime in and going up and down.

So I had a painting, it was my last painting in graduate school and it was a postcard, a takeoff on a postcard of Texas. It had the word “Texas.” In the “x,” there’s a subtle “j,” for in Spanish it’s “Tejas.” And then I took out, on top of the “a” there was a, like a drive with these palm trees. And I took that out and I put the Kennedy assassination in. So it was like my way of thinking was changing in the sense that I still want to be provocative but in a subtle way. So I retitled the pieace and called it *Greetings de Tejas* and I had that in the show. And then I also borrowed, this Wheeler Boot Company had made these boots and in front of each boot it had a t-e-x-a-s and on the back it had the six flags of Texas. And we had that in the show because I really wanted it to be Texana. So that was that show.

And then within a year there was a show that Midtown Arts Center was putting together and they had hired Frank Fajardo, who’s an artist to curate the show. And it was going to be a Latino show.

MS. CORDOVA: Just by the way, was that your first installation?

MR. HUERTA: Well, it was the first kind of installation on that scale. I mean it was huge – it was like 13 feet high by 24-25 feet wide and then several feet deep. And then I also recorded music specifically that would be playing as people view the piece. So it was really multi-dimensional. But it was the first piece that was done on that scale. I felt like you know, when I was doing the studio thing in Las Cruces and then I’ve done the small installation in my studio that was a takeoff of the 13th Bicentennial thing I had done earlier. That was more three-dimensional.

So I was really kind of like wanting – I was really, when I was in graduate school, experimenting with a lot of different things but I felt that that was – I’d only been painting for two years and I felt like in a sense I remember John Torriano came in the last semester I was there. And he basically said that you’re basically creating the art world here. I mean, in a sense, I was doing everything. I was doing all kinds of work. And I felt that was kind of true. I was learning about art by doing all these different things. But that’s why when I got to San Francisco that I decided to really become more focused and limited.

And that way of working took me from 1978 all the way up until 1990 I think. And then when I got into North Carolina the first time, that’s when my work started going all over the place again. And that’s when I had “Aneurism” – it was a show of all that work. So it really, you know, it was really kind of changing and so I felt like I liked the idea that for a while I could go in a linear direction and then move away from that and go in any direction. And that I could do anything I wanted to, which is one of the reasons why I always rejected to calling myself just a painter. And I felt like I preferred the word “artist” because I wanted to be able to have the freedom to do whatever I wanted to do, and whatever scale, and whatever media.

And I felt really, you know, I felt that again recently when I did this – I did a sculpture for the San Antonio Convention Center that was contained materials that I’d never used before. Just a bronze, stainless steel, -

[inaudible]. And you know, I think that piece surprised a lot of people because they probably didn't expect me to be all of a sudden a sculptor – [laughter]. But I'd done other kinds of sculpture before so I never think of it as being different. It was just, you know, somebody said, why are you doing this piece? And I said well, I've never worked with these materials before and I really want to work with some of those materials again.

But in the faculty show that happened last fall, I also had a second variation of a piece I did at the Dauntin [ph] Museum in the previous summer and it was a veil of prisms. And I really now like the idea of doing more of those kinds of works. And somebody said well, there's veil of prisms – and it was like 12 feet, almost 14 feet high, by about 9 feet across. And the prisms were separated by strands of three inches and within the strands, three inches apart. Well somebody said, well this seems to show your feminine side. And so I thought the bronze piece, that other piece, was more my masculine side. And so, you know, I think there's that whole idea of your feminine side, your masculine side. I'm just like, it's all the same thing. It's just different facets of, you know, an idea, I think.

But you know, the – going back to the curatorial stuff. 1986 Frank Fajardo's putting the show together and was including me in the show and he said I want your work to be the poster for the show and they're going to do a catalog. And then Midtown Art Center reneged on that offer. They couldn't afford a catalog. And I don't think they could afford the poster. So he decided not to do it. The next year they asked me if I would curate the show. And I had just won the "Mira!" competition in New York.

And that was kind of funny too in the sense that I had entered – Maura Kelly suggested that I enter the show's competition and it was in New York. And I thought well, this would be a good way to get my work outside of Texas, because I'd always wanted to do that. And I was accepted in the show and I called up Mel Chin, who was living in New York and he said I could stay. And he said he was thinking of taking down his sculpture that he had done in Bryant Park where the library is. And I said well, if you take it down during this time period I can help you. And so he said okay. So I was there for a couple days earlier. And was helping him take down the sculpture.

I think the third day or fourth day that evening was the opening of the "Mira!" show. And I said we need to go because it's getting late and we didn't have time to go back to his place and shower and change and so we went directly from there to the Museo Vivaldi [ph] where the show was happening. And Mel's girlfriend Helen, who's now his wife, met us there. And we went in to the show and they gave us these packets and I didn't even look at it. We went to the bar, of course, first thing. And we were trying to order drinks. And Hiram Walker Canadian Club was all their liquor. They didn't have anything different. And so they said, well we can't serve you because they're making these announcements and I said okay. But I remember Mel saying, "But he's one of the artists in here." And the guy said, "Congratulations, but we still can't serve you." [Laughter.] So they looked in the pack and there was a catalog of the show and we're looking through for my piece and it came – *Schizophrenia* and the *Tres Equis* were in the show. And *Tres Equis* was like the third, I think it was the third, of my chalupas series in the painting style.

And I remember when we got to *Schizophrenia* all of a sudden I heard the words "and the second place winner is" and they didn't say my name and I thought, didn't get it. I'm not going to get anything. And then they mentioned you know, first place winner was me. And so I – it was a total shock and I went up and went up on stage and all these photographers and I shook this guy's hands, said congratulations and then gave me an envelope. And I didn't know what was in the envelope. It wasn't until later that I realized it was $5000 check. And the funny thing was that I was broke. Mel was kind of broke because he couldn't pay any of the people who were helping him. But he would buy, you know, lunch and dinner, stuff like that. And this check, as much as it was, which was great, I couldn't cash in New York because it was a Michigan check. So it was like I had this money and I'm still broke. [Laughter.] So I had to wait to go back to Houston to deposit it.

And so they told me they were having a party afterwards and they said I could invite one person but I have, in a sense, this entourage. And I said well, yeah but I'm working with all these guys and you know. And they said well, since you're the first place winner you can invite them all. And so we all went. I remember they had cooked a pig and it's got an apple in its mouth. I remember drinking some more – I think they had like Two Fingers, which is like their tequila brand. And later they ended up – part of the prize it turns out was that I get $5000 to donate to an organization or for a scholarship.

When I had been asked to do the show, this other, what they called the Texas Hispanic Show, that I wanted them to pay for my trip to Turon, Texas and see studio visits but I wanted to take the bus because most of my people could only afford the bus and not take an airplane. It also was a way to like think about all the work that I'd seen during the bus ride. So I took a bus ride starting December in '85 and traveled the state, came back in two weeks, and went to Dallas.

And that's when I met Celia [Alvarez Muñoz] and Celia picked me up from the bus stop. Showed me John Hernandez's work that I'd never known. But I ended up knowing his work because I'd seen it earlier. I think in '85 at Betty Moody Gallery in her previous location. And then saw a bunch of other artists' work. But it was like

when I saw their works, they kind of set a standard for the show. And then from here I went back down to Austin, did studio visits and then to San Antonio. In San Antonio, Cesar Martinez showed me around, set up a bunch of studio visits. He and I were in a show in '83 in New York called "Southwest Perspectives" done by the Alternative Museum. And we ended up knowing each other and kind of becoming friends and then in 1983 we kind of in a sense, that trip kind of solidified out friendship. And then from there went to Corpus and somebody from Corpus drove me down to Brownsville and to Mission to show me these other artists' work and then I came back up and went back to Houston. And it was like right before Christmas.

So I saw a lot of work and then I decided while I was making this tour, some of these people would say well, is he going to come up here? And so that's when the idea of touring the show – and I ended up calling the show "Chulas Fronteras [Beautiful Borders]." I borrowed it from a Les Blank film called *Chulas Fronteras* [1976], which is about conjunto music. And which was German, Mexican kind of like thing, you know. And I thought well, that makes sense because again, you know, my German heritage is there. So I felt like, you know, that'd be a great title because I like the idea of like beautiful – [audio break, tape change] – and the idea that, you know, the frontier's there to like also go beyond, that it's only there in your eyes.

So that's what I called the show and then I ended up asking if Midtown would pay for my phone calls if I could set up a tour, of which I ended up setting up a tour around the state. And each place would pay for one-way shipping, but literally it would be me flying out, renting a truck, and taking it to the next place. And when I was formally in the show then I said, what I want to do is take the $5,000 from Canadian Club and give it to Midtown Art Center, earmark it for the catalog for the show.

So that's how I ended up doing the color catalog for that show, and the cover was a kind of like a still life, alter-like piece at my mom's house – or at my parents' house at that time because it was around – I think it was around the time that they were split – and set up a lot of personal things. And then I did a silkscreen poster that used my piece that of like the – the gridded system with imagery, but imagery dealing with Hispanic imagery so that it related to the show. And then I had the name of the show, and what it was titled, and my name, and I left it blank so each venue would get some and then they could, you know, fill in the rest. And then that took up a year and a half of my life.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, that was your first big show, right?

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, that was my first big show. I was being paid $1,000 for a show I was not in, except for that aspect.

And I remember Jamie – I don't remember her last name, but she was writing a piece about Texas art for *Art in America* and it was going to be a two-part series, and she ended up hearing about the show and we ended up talking about it – and I think it was the first part; there's a whole page of all the people who were in that show, plus me, one of my works, and then a whole section just devoted to the show. And I just said, basically, I feel like the art world is as racist as the rest of the world. [Laughs.] And I think that – that really pisses me off that some of these artists who are, you know, I think very good artists are not being recognized by the mainstream, and the mainstream being the white world. And so I felt – and she wrote it like I said it. I was surprised. It really stirred some things up.

One of the things that, again, bothered me after that show was a lot of people started thinking of me only as a curator. So I decided I didn't want to curate for a while and I decided to, you know, focus on my work, which led to the body of work that would be at the Contemporary Arts Museum that Marilyn Zoglyn [ph] curated. And I remember she was talking about that she had been asked to do the show for the Brooklyn Museum. And she was thinking of like five Texas artists, and she was thinking of me being one of them. And I said something like – I mean, it was an offhand comment, and we were becoming friends, and I said, why are you putting me in a show in Brooklyn when you don't even consider me for a show at the Contemporary Arts Museum? [Laughs.] I mean, you know, it's like, I don't understand it; it's like if you like my work why don't you show me here as well as there, as opposed to there but not here? It doesn't make sense. So that's when she said, oh, you know.

And so she later offered me a show at the Contemporary Arts Museum. And it was all work that was going to be all new. A lot of the work had not even been done when she asked me to do the show, because it was like two years in advance. And it was at the beginning of that new kind of gridded system, and so I felt real strong about show.

There was another review in – there was a review in one of the weekly alternative newspapers and they had put me on the cover of the weekly. And it was like I had taken like this huge step in my work and all this. And I remember the art galleries were like upset because they had never been featured on the front cover of this weekly. So I thought – [laughs] – that was kind of funny, but, you know, they later got their fame.

So it was – I felt like when I got that show that my reputation solidified as an artist and then a curator. So and then I accepted to curate a Hispanic women's show for Waco Art Center. And I ended up doing that show, and

there was one woman who was supposed to be in the show, Surpik Angelini, who decided not to be part of the show because she heard that Waco was kind of redneck. And I thought, you know, isn't that what art is supposed to be, is to reach out and – you know? And she just didn't want to go for it, and then she later told me she regretted not being part of the show, because they toured that show and they had it really cheaply and it went to Galveston and Houston and two or three other places, and there was a little catalog.

And by that point I felt comfortable being a curator again and being an artist, so my work was being seen in both. And I was being seen as a professional curator.

MS. CORDOVA: And that work, or that exhibit, was a particular response to the "Hispanic Artists of the U.S.", was it not, or the sort of lack of women in that particular field?

MR. HUERTA: Well, yes and no. I mean, it was – no, not in my regards. I think that, yes, there was a lack of women in the "Hispanic Art in the United States" show, but in "Chulas Fronteras" show there were only, I think, three women artists in the show, and a lot of people – there was one criticism, and I really was pissed off about it, was that they felt like I was, you know, sexist in the sense that there were more men in the show than there were women, and the same a there was in the "Hispanic Art in the United States." But a lot of people didn't realize – and there were critics who were not Hispanic – the Hispanic culture is a chauvinistic – [laughs] – culture, and particularly at that time, and there were not many women artists compared to men artists that were Latino or Hispanic or Chicano. And then to find good women artists was even smaller.

I think that nowadays you probably have an equal amount of women artists that are Hispanic and Chicano, you know, but back then it was like – you couldn't find them because there weren't there. I mean, their numbers weren't there; it's just that simple.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you go looking, in particular for that exhibit that you curated?

MR. HUERTA: I went looking, and for Waco, they wanted the focus to be that, and I said, fine, because I think that within – I think it was like within five years after "Chulas Fronteras" I was doing that show, and I never got to see – I saw the show once, I think it was at the Galveston Art Center I ended up hanging it because I had moved to North Carolina and that show traveled, so I never got to see it at Waco and I didn't get to see it installed, and I really – as a curator I really regret it because I feel like a curator I should be there to install a show. I should design the lighting as well. And I didn't do that but I did it in Galveston because I happened to be here when it opened in Galveston.

But I think within the five years after "Chulas Fronteras" there were more women out there, so I felt that was good but I still – the numbers, I don't think, are as many as there are now and I think that I was, again, criticized when I did that show for the Austin Museum about the number of women artists in my selection, because I had like – that show was another – it's almost like it really bothered me; I didn't want to do that Chicano show for the Austin Museum because I didn't want to do another Chicano show.

So, that's Kathy Vargas and Victor Zamudio Taylor to curate the show, and then we ended up breaking off and did our own sections, and Victor ended up asking Henry to come in and work with him, and Victor was initially asked to do the show but he didn't know that many artists. So that's why he asked Kathy and myself to be co-curators. And my section – and I got the first part of the gallery – was to do with the idea of collecting, and I had about 23 artists, Chicano artists, and it specifically was Chicano, and so I excluded Latino or Latina artists and dealt with just Chicano. And so I had all styles –

MS. CORDOVA: Were you critical of that decision or did you support it?

MR. HUERTA: No, I just – well, I wasn't critical because I just felt like what's happening is becoming more specific, because at that time there was also Latino shows but Chicanos were not in it. [Laughs.] You know, this whole think about Latin America and people don't realize "Latinos" refer to Latinos here born in this country as opposed to Latin Americans, but they were being referred to as Latino as well. So there's these other Latino shows that are about Latin America but there were no Chicanos in them.

So it didn't bother me, because I remember one of the critics said, like, you know, Latin America – art from Latin America is real hot right now, which it became fashionable because all of a sudden there were all these Latin American shows.

But what I wanted to focus on was the executor working with – started working with the Dallas Museum because Luis's show was going to open up that same – was it that same summer? I think it was '97. I was looking at what the Dallas Museum – they're putting – I think they're beginning to put a book together and I remember they paid like $900 to get the reproduction rights to I think the Diego Rivera piece they had in their collection. And I felt like what was happening is that they didn't have much Hispanic, Mexican, Latino, Latin American art in their collection. So I began to realize that I'm then looking at the Austin Museum and looking at their walls because I

was looking to see if I could borrow a piece from them. They didn't have any – much in their collection.

And then I had to look at the Museum of Fine Arts because I was asked to do a painting in the museum with three other artists, and they were all Latinos, and we were able to use in some relationship something from their collections. So I also went through their collections. And they're a lot more – they were beginning to have more of a Latin American – and Latinos in their collections. But I just felt like a lot of museums then – and I felt like what the idea was, that there was a lot of these shows that were beginning to happen, but for me it was like, let's go beyond the show; let's go into the collections. Let's go beyond the collections like who's the curator, who's the director, who's staffing the show – these museums. And it's like – you know, it's business as usual and they're doing a lot of these shows because they could get easy money for them.

And so what I ended up was having 23, 24 artists like salon-style on one wall and on another wall I had a Jasper Johns print that was borrowed from the Blanton because he's – you know, the American artist, worth a lot of money, and everybody has to own a Jasper Johns; then a piece from the Austin Museum, which was, I think, a Robert Henri painting, early, you know ashcan painter. And then I borrowed a velvet Elvis painting from a friend of mine because, well, this is what the rest of the world has. And I felt like, well, this one wall is what is not being collected, and that was my statement and I was trying to make a statement about that, and they had a new director come in who wanted to tone down my curatorial statement, and I said no; I said, you know, you can change the words to make it sound better but I don't want it to change. And we argued about it but I felt she'd end up respecting what I wanted to do because I wanted to be – critique not Latino shows but collecting, the whole idea of collecting.

And I got criticized because there wasn't any women in the show but some of the women I wanted to use were in other parts of the show – you know, the ones that Kathy curated, the ones that Victor curated. So Kathy wanted to do more typical things, and then Victor and Henry wanted to do things that were – art that didn't even look Hispanic or Latino, which, you know, I feel like – [inaudible] – is what I wanted to do with that show, where I wanted to bring in works that were not typical, and I felt like I really did that. I didn't want to do it again; I didn't want to repeat myself as a curator.

And then after that point, shows that I would curate I didn't want to – I didn't want to do more Hispanic shows. [Laughs.] You know, it's like, when is the rest of the world going to wake up? Let's go beyond this. Let's take the next step. And that's one of the things that I told the Austin Museum. I said, you know, what you really need to do now is do a one-person show, and not thinking it was Hispanic, but I said, like Celia – you know, do a show – obviously she is Mexican-American, she is Latina. It's a woman and it's like – but let's blur the distinction. Let's say this is a retrospective of Celia Muñoz, not say this is a Hispanic show, and let's go beyond that, because I think that now we're having artists who are reaching that age that their work needs to be seen in a broader context.

So when I came here, that was one of my goals is to do a show like for Celia, present something that – her age, you know, she needs to have a retrospective, or survey – we could only do a survey because my space is not that big. And I've told her, I said, you know, hopefully this will encourage a museum to do a bigger retrospective which would include her other works, her public art works, her installations in the show.

The show, when it opened in San Antonio, was a lot broader because it incorporated one of her installations and a bigger installation. So I felt really good about that show but that show can't travel to every location. Not every location is going to have 10,000 square feet.

And then to do a catalogue for a show –

MS. CORDOVA: It's a beautiful catalogue.

MR. HUERTA: Thanks.

MS. CORDOVA: So it was – again, for me as a curator it's like this is what I espouse; you better back it up – [laughs] – and I feel – at the same time, the other thing is I'm in Arlington now, this is an Arlington institution; you should back – you should support your local artists.

One of the things I have was the Dallas Museum with Bonnie Pitman, who has just joined as a deputy director of the Dallas Museum, was having these community forums, and I was privileged to be invited by the Handley's to have a dinner with just a few people to talk – and this was a community forum – to talk to Bonnie about our perception of the Dallas Museum, and I said, you know, one of the things that the Dallas Museum, even though they had this show of Linda Ridgeway and Nic Nicosia, those shows were originated by two different institutions in Houston, and they should have been originated by the Dallas Museum. And in both cases, the Dallas Museum had to be coaxed into having that show.

And I remember that Talley Dunn from Dunn & Brown reinforced that because the Dallas Museum was not going

to have those shows, and a lot of the major funders for the show in Houston were on the board of the Dallas Museum. So was like, wake up, curators. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: That's what you've done to some extent.

MR. HUERTA: Mm-hmm. So I think that as a curator those are the kinds of things that I think about. But also, you know, that's one of the reasons why I also wanted to curate like Mel Chin's show. It wasn't about a Hispanic; it was about an artist and their ideas. And that's one of the reasons why when I came here to the Gallery at UTA, I decided that like one of the first shows that I ended up doing – I ended up doing a show of Kathy Vargas and Connie [Arismendi] but really the one of her shows I really wanted to do was Cesar Martinez and Susan Harrington, and I remember people saying, why did you – why are you putting this artist with a Hispanic artist?

It's interesting; they didn't ever say, why are you putting this white woman artist with this artist? And that really – and I said, just look at the work, and there's a lot of similarities in the work. But it's just because somebody had a Hispanic last name and they were Hispanic and Mexican artist, you know, all of a sudden they saw them in a different light. And I was saying, I want to blur that distinction, but the only way to blur it is by bringing those comparisons. I said, it's not going to work if you keep segregating artists; you're going to have to start mixing them in, and this is where I feel like what I want to do here is I want to break down those barriers by not distinguishing between Hispanic and white and African-American and Asian-American. It's like, let's look at their ideas and look at the work for that and see the commonalities, or the differences, and talk about those things and not talk about, you know – yes, I think every artist, including white artists, are influenced by their cultural backgrounds, but it should be that way.

I remember that when Jane [Livingston] and John [Beardsley] did Hispanic Art in the United States, one of the ideas I wanted to do, and never did it because I didn't think it would get off the ground, was I wanted to do a show as a curator called White Bred, B-R-E-D, and on the cover of the catalogue would be Jasper Johns' piece – one of those pieces that's a metal piece and it has a piece of white bread, and have artists who were in the show who are white but who do work which has very little expression in it, like Philip Haley, Agnes Martin at that time – you know, very geometric, Donald Judd kind of stuff – but also to talk to them sociologically about their backgrounds and how their backgrounds might have influenced their work. But how many artists would want to be in that show? [Laughs.] And here a Chicano is curating this "White Bred" show, so it's like –

MS. CORDOVA: Threatening.

MR. HUERTA: Yeah. It's – when you put it in reverse it's a different thing, and so that's why I feel like, you know, let's get beyond this. I think the "Hispanic art in the United States" in all those shows that happened in the late '80s, early '90s are important in the sense they end up opening the door for mainstream to start acknowledging – because something like Carlos Almaraz' work, it would have been a strong influence also. Mark and Julia Schnabel's work. And some of – like just like some of the murals were influential on Jackson Pollack's work, but nobody really talks about it, you know? So it's like, instead of like looking at the second generation, let's look at the first generation.

So that's what I wanted to – that was a concept that I wish I could have done but I knew that it would never – could get done.

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe you'll do it in the future.

MR. HUERTA: But it's not as interesting now. I mean, sometimes there's some things you want to do, like when I was asked to curate the 10th anniversary show for Blue Star – they have an annual San Antonio show – and one of the things I though of doing, which would have probably run me out of town and probably made a lot of San Antonio artists angry, was David Hickey had been asked a few years earlier to curate a show and he upset a lot of people by picking one artist, Henry Stein – and he had a one-person show of Henry Stein's work, and I thought how artists appropriate other artists' work. Well, I thought, well, why not appropriate another curator?

So I thought I would appropriate David Hickey's show and use the same words and installed it in the same way as it was installed before, but all the labels would have not only English but Spanish and have the catalogue in English and Spanish as well, and have the same essay that they had in his show and use it in the Spanish translation, and then talk about appropriating his idea as a curator.

And I told that to about two or three artists in San Antonio and they thought it was brilliant. And I think Henry was one of them. But they also knew that I couldn't ever show my face in San Antonio again.

MS. CORDOVA: Why?

MR. HUERTA: Because in a sense it was – first of all, it was a white curator, it was a white artist that would be showcased. It would exclude everybody else from the show. I don't think that they could see the grand gesture

of – I think a lot of people would only see, I'm not in this show, they didn't even look at my work, blah, blah, blah. And I think – sometimes I think there's times for those kind of ideas to happen and there are times it's not the right time.

But I feel like those kinds of things are – you know, as long as I'm still living and I'm still capable of doing it – so, you never know. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I think on that note I'm seeing that I'm getting to the end of another tape. Maybe we can close out this particular session.

MR. HUERTA: Sure.

MS. CORDOVA: Though maybe I could ask one last question and that would be, did you ever want to be a musician?

MR. HUERTA: I guess, yes. I think, in a sense – I mean, I grew up, like I said, listening to music. I promoted concerts and add it to my record library back then. I met a lot of musicians. I was a stagehand for five years. That and concert posters paid my way through school. And I love music. I think particularly in my formative years as an artist, including undergraduate and graduate school, music was probably much more influential on my work than other artists' work. And I think even to this day, I think like someone like Neil Young is still a big influence because of the way he approached his – the way he makes music and how he experimented and took risks and whether, you know, it garnered him any critical acclaim or financial acclaim. He didn't care. He had a lot of integrity, I thought, and I felt like that was something more like what I wanted to do with my work.

When I moved to San Francisco I took a guitar with me that my sister gave me when I was in graduate school and I took guitar lessons, but I just felt like it would take a lot to get to a point of just like being a really good musician and just keep it up all the time. I have friends of mine who play music and I wish I could play with them but there's been probably less than a handful of times that I've been drunk enough that I actually sing and make up the lyrics as I go along. Because they're in the same state I am it's fine and they actually enjoyed it. [Laughs.] And I've enjoyed it too but it won't happen many times, but it could happen again. But I love music. I like going to hear music.

I think one of the things I like about music that's different than art: it's done right on the spot. And the closest I come to was when I was doing the painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in '96 and people would see me paint and people could ask me questions, and that was part of the whole thing about that project, and I enjoyed that project because of that and at the same time it also was a way to kind of get over some inhibitions about making art in front of people. And I like that. I like the idea of like kind of overcoming some fears and stuff when I do artwork.

So I think that's why I say that art has been somewhat therapeutic because it's really – it's opened up a lot of avenues for me personally, not in the sense of career moves but just the way I think and feel. You know, you can't tell right now but I have a lot of CDs. I'm a music junkie. I have to, like, buy probably some music every week. And my brother and I, who is nine years younger, grew up listening to music, and I remember he was like – I think he was like nine or 10 years old when I took him to a concert I was working on – one of the concerts I produce is – or co-produced when I was at the University of Houston is the Allman Brothers' Mahavishnu Orchestra, and he was like 10 years old and he was like backstage, and I remember one of the groupies, you know, I'd asked to watch him while I do some business. [Laughs.] So he remembers that pretty well.

But as a result, I mean, it's kind of like – he says that his taste in music was a lot better than some of his contemporaries. And he goes to hear a lot of music himself and buys a lot of music, and so we talk a lot about that all the time.

MS. CORDOVA: It seems like a significant influence so I thought I'd ask.

MR. HUERTA: Yeah. And I wonder if part of it was just also that maybe our race, our culture is like, you know, likes that as part – I mean, I think rock and roll kind of like was a big part of my life but I also think the music that my parents were hearing, and my mom – I remember my mom listening to the radio all the time, listening to music, so I'm wondering if some of those things also subconsciously get to you and you think about it and it's like – I remember in graduate school my girlfriend, we got up one Sunday morning – or I got up and I put on a Rolling Stones album, and she said, I can't believe that somebody will put up a Rolling Stones album first thing in the morning on Sunday. [Laughs.] So, I don't know that I'd do that now, but it was just like, I got to put some music on.

MS. CORDOVA: All right, well, with that I'm going to end this tape and we will start again tomorrow.

Thank you.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MS. CORDOVA: We're recording. This is Cary Cordova with the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and interviewing Benito Huerta at his home in Arlington, Texas on March 1st, 2004. This is our second session, disk one.

And, Benito, maybe you could just start us out about some of your images that are especially used over and over, especially maybe where the map comes in or the technique of constantly including maps or global images.

MR. HUERTA: I think initially when I was in undergraduate school there was a period in watercolor class, I ended up doing a series – I was looking at Jasper Johns' work and looking at and thinking about his work, and I ended up doing a series of watercolors that were kind of influenced pretty much by his work, and I remember starting a series of – one series, one watercolor I did where I had like the names of the places that I worked at and their phone numbers and then like my supervisor or something like that, and I had it – like he used the lettering that it's already kind of cut out and you go in there. So kind of similar to John's but what I wanted to do is become much more autobiographical, and then I just would apply – in that case I would deviate from the way John used colors and in that one there's a lot of, like, browns and stuff because I felt like a lot of the work that I was doing was much more like labor stuff, so I kind of equate that with that kind of coloration.

And then I did another one called *A Few Choice Words* and there was like a bunch – that was one of the first ones that had like a lot of dirty words in them, and –

MS. CORDOVA: And that was in grad school.

MR. HUERTA: That was in undergraduate school.

MS. CORDOVA: Undergraduate.

MR. HUERTA: Undergraduate school. And it was called *A Few Choice Words*, and I think a friend of mine in Massachusetts has that piece. And it was all these dirty words, but the way they were painted it was kind of like "a la John" so that it became a little bit more abstract and you really have to read them, but they were there. And then during that period I remember doing a map of Texas and there was always – I think growing up in Texas there's kind of a pride in being a Texan, and I liked the shape of the state and I had seen other things – art to do with Texas, and so I ended up using a map of Texas.

And what I ended up doing is I had like the names of the cities going across within the shape of the state. And then as – and then I started coloring them with – I think it was like red, white and blue because the state flag was that color. But there were overlaying colors. And then toward the bottom of the state I allowed the water colors to just start like dropping, so it looked like the bottom letters in the bottom of the state didn't have much color at all to them, so it looks like just kind of like fading out or something.

And then the next one I said, well, if I did one for Texas I should do one for the United States, so I did one for the United States, and I did the same kind of thing where at the bottom of the country it started just kind of dripping down. And the backgrounds were kind of neutral. I mean, in that one the background was like I sprayed on a watercolor through a spray and it had like a bluish water kind of look to it which I kind of liked. And when I was doing the Chalupa series – and I had already lived in California and New Mexico and I was in New York – well, I think it was in California when I started doing the states. I remember doing New Mexico and California, and I also was doing one of Texas. And the one of Texas – and I was calling them like *The Wondering Lone Star* and wondering it was like – it was more like W-O-N as opposed to W-A-N, so it's not like wandering around but wondering – *The Wondering Lone Star*, you know, *in the Land of Enchantment* or something like that, or *The Wondering Lone Star in the Golden State*. And then when I was in New York I did the one of New York State and called it *The Wondering Lone Star in the Empire State*.

So there was still – like I really wanted to deal with – and particularly it became even more autobiographical, I thought, than the pieces that were done with the watercolors because the imagery was more my imagery and the way I was drawing them was more mine than it was like John's, but it was also, in working that way, was a reaction against the way I was working in graduate school, which was much more expressionistic.

And then every once in a while I would end up using the maps and later on in the late '80s I was using maps again, but I wanted to deal with more political kind of situations, and there was – there's a large painting called *Divas, Destruction, and Depravity*, and in that one I had – there was two inserts within this larger field, and the outer field was these nudes from girlie magazines and also from art references, because when I was a kid in Corpus – or maybe it was actually – no, it's when I was in Houston I remember going to – I was walking from Bellaire High School and I remember going by the drug store, and I would go in there and I was looking for *Playboy* magazine. [Laughs.] They didn't have them enclosed at the time. But I also looked – they would have like art magazines and I would look at them, and for me, I wasn't – again, I didn't realize that you could be an

artist, I didn't know much about art, but when you look at some of the art magazines and they had nudes in them, to me they were no different than the nudes you'd find in girlies because it was just like they were both reproductions, they were both flat imagery, but they both dealt with the nude. Obviously one had more aesthetics than the other, but they were still, for a teenager, you know, it was like wow.

So that was kind of like a reference, but also the idea – later the idea –*Divas, Destruction and Depravity* – probably the idea was that in our society, in our culture, the way we see women is they're either as a sexual object or we put them on a pedestal, you know, like high art, and we – I think males usually don't see women as – a lot of times as being an equal. And I think that was what that was kind of about. And the inserts on plywood, on the right side I used a map of the world looking down from like the North Pole, and I had – a friend of mine taught me how to do gold leaf and we've gold leaf the whole side of that, and then I used a soldering iron to burn in the lines of the countries into the gold leaf.

And I liked the idea of it because in preparing for the gold leaf – and underneath there's a reddish substance which is kind of like referred to as a ground for the – that you put on top of the gesso before you put on the gold leaf. I liked the fact that I was burning the gold leaf into the ground. [Laughs.] Then I ended up putting like rhinestones that were color coded for political hot spots, environmental hot spots, places where there's like starvation, places that were having wars between countries, and then the places that have hot spots that were like troubled areas.

And then on the left side – and there's another part but before I get to that, on the left side I had used imagery that had to do with destruction a lot – weapons of mass destruction, and so I kind of used the linear drawings of those things and then overlaid them, and then what I did is routed out the plywood and melted lead into the grooves. And I realized the lead was not adhering to the grooves, so what I ended up doing is creating kind of a stencil of where the routing was, and from the back I put the drawing behind it, and then I had nails coming out from the back so that when I melted the lead into the grooves it would wrap itself around that nail and that's what would hold it. But it became more dangerous as a result because there was like these little nail points coming out, which in the end I kind of liked that too. And then I burned the surface of the plywood, and then on the corners where it was rotted I cut back some of the wood so some of the natural color of the wood comes out, so just visually so I could just pop out some of the imagery.

This was something that I was almost finishing, and I had a show at the Weil Gallery in Corpus Christi at the Texas – at Corpus Christi State University, which is now Texas A&M, and I had not finished the gold leaf – I was finishing it up – a friend of mine, Bruno, allowed me to work in his studio – and –

MS. CORDOVA: Was Bruno the one that helped you with the gold leaf?

MR. HUERTA: No, this was another guy. This was Ray Bellinskus [ph]. He was conservator, and at that time he was married and his wife was a framer. And he would also – now he's like been – I don't know if he still does conservation, but I think he does but he also like sells objects from other countries to people, furniture and stuff like that.

But he was the one who kind of taught me, and we ran out of gold leaf, and I went to the guy who I used to work for when I was installing – when I moved back to Houston for a few years I was installing and delivering artwork for this company, and it was called Master Frames, and Mario Petrocianni [ph], who as Argentinean, was the owner, and I called him up and said – because I knew he did gold framing – gold leaf framing, and so I called him up and I asked him, like, we've run out, and he said, come on down. And we basically matched the gold leaf, you know, because I had like one more swatch, and we matched it, and he just gave it to me, which is great that some – I already had spent like $350 on the gold leaf. [Laughs.] It was an expensive piece.

And so, when I was in Corpus the day before, I brought – the outer section was already at the university and I had brought the insert I fit them in the back of my truck and Bruno said I could finish working on the piece at his studio. So I ended up putting the – doing the routing – I mean, doing the soldering and then laying down the – I don't think I did the rhinestones there. What I ended up doing is – it was almost like about two, 3:00 in the morning at this point, and one of the things I wanted to do was get a torch and create a swirl on the gold leaf and come to a point around part of the North Pole, and for me it was kind of like a metaphor for the unraveling of the ozone layer.

So I had to do kind of like with that. And I remember Bruno trying to convince me right before I did that not to do it because I didn't know what was going to happen. It was an experiment that could go wrong. I mean, $350 goes up in smoke and it's a piece that – [background noise].

MS. CORDOVA: Let me pause the tape.

[Pause.]

All right, we're back recording. Do you remember where you were?

MR. HUERTA: No.

MS. CORDOVA: Just talking about *Divas, Destruction, and Depravity*.

MR. HUERTA: Okay. Yeah, I remember Bruno coming out to the studio about 2:00 in the morning and saying, don't do it, but that was part of the thing I really wanted to see what would happen. And I think it turned out really great, because what happens is with the gold leaf, where it torched it – and I had to be kind of like light on the way I was doing it – it ended up bubbling up the gold leaf and then creating these kind of swirls, and then right at the North Pole it got a little bit more burnt and charred and I liked the way it looked.

I remember when it was shown at the Nelson-Atkins Museum [Kansas City, Missouri]. When the show traveled around after it was at the Contemporary Arts Museum, part of the gold leaf started kind of coming down, and they had a – their conservator made up a solution which could adhere the piece on there, but what I ended up doing – what they ended up doing is they had to put it in the syringe and then they had me do it where – sticking it into the top of the world, and somebody took a photograph and then had it in the newspaper. I thought it was very – you know, kind of like shooting up the world.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. HUERTA: So –

MS. CORDOVA: Would you say your work was becoming more political at that point?

MR. HUERTA: Well, there was a – right around '88 or so I remember that I was reading a book of poems by [Ranier Maria] Rilke, and one of the things that they were talking about – they were talking that the life of an artist is that there's two stages and the first stage is kind of like looking inward, and then the second stage is to look outward. And I kind of related to that in the sense that in like the Chalupa series I really wanted them to be personal; I really wanted to make, you know, something that was about me in a way that expressed my feelings, but with – the works later it was about – and I think back, part of it is like as you're growing up and you're making kind of like decisions about how you're going to live your life and how to conduct yourself, I think that you start then – it's like saying, okay, I'm learning how to do these things but now how do you apply it in the real world?

And so, it was like – because I've always been like – liked listening to the news, I'm involved – I feel in some ways sometimes I'm kind of an activist in what I do; I feel like one should be engaged in the world, but to be engaged you need to be informed, so I try to keep myself informed.

So I think that the later work started becoming much more about not just me but my relationship to the community and to the world at large, and it went back and forth, because I think that was really important and I think that that's one of the things that in my later work I was wanting to deal more with, and it was – I think that Rilke, in the discussion about his poetry, he was talking about that – or they were talking about that in the book. And I thought, you know, I feel like you don't want to get stuck in one place all the time. Again, it's the idea of changing, of moving, and I like that idea.

I think the later works, you know, like the things that I started doing, "The Aneurism," it was – I think it was more to be more unconscious about things, in a sense like – you know, you got all of these ideas and you just like let them out and don't think about them, don't even be critical of them, whether they're good or bad or anything; just, like, see what happens when they come out.

And some of the investigations that I've been doing, like with the watercolors and the graphite drawings is like, I did so much work during that period that I really didn't get to investigate it, and so then one of the things I liked – again, I'd probably end up picking it up – you know, looking at jobs and seeing how he takes imagery and uses different media. And I like that idea of kind of like doing variations – not variations but investigating how media could affect the way something looks and change the character of it.

At the same time, by doing that I was learning to expand the media that I was using, the vocabulary as far as what I was using. I always liked the idea of trying to incorporate materials that I hadn't used before. Because sometimes I think, as an artist, that one could easily get comfortable with being good at what you do to the point that it gets so facile that you don't even be critical of it anymore. And so by incorporating new materials, it presents kind of – you know, you have to learn that again; you have to like start all over in learning how to use that material. And by doing that, I think it brings in kind of a certain awkwardness that I think is more honest because it's like as you're learning, you haven't mastered it, and I like that, and sometimes I know that in some reviews up in – I've been critiqued like that's not a good thing, but I feel like I think that sometimes I prefer the awkwardness to something that's more refined because I think it's a little bit more honest.

And again, I go back and I was talking about it with some other artists, and I go back to the – going back to a music analogy where in the early '70s Neil Young had done an album called *Tonight's the Night*, and it was about the death of his two roadies – well, one of them was a roadie, one was his friend and they both OD'd, and he did this tribute album, but it was like after he had been drinking a lot – he and his band had been drinking a lot of tequila and smoked some pot, and in the middle of the night they would go into a recording studio and they would play, and some of the songs were off-key and the singing was not – was kind of shaky here and there, but there was a rawness, a power that came from that that I felt was more powerful than his other band mates, which was Crosby, Stills and Nash, who put out an album that was so refined that it just didn't have any emotion to it.

And for me that's – that really struck a chord in the way I thought about things. And even if – I notice that sometimes I get – I notice myself being comfortable with certain kinds of ways I work, so that's why at a certain point my brain goes off and says, you know, you need to change, you need to do something different, you need to subvert it or whatever, to keep growing, and I feel like that, again, goes back to what we were talking about yesterday, that idea of challenging yourself and pushing yourself. And that's one of the things I like about art.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you ever feel like you're trying to do too much?

MR. HUERTA: Yes, and it's actually kind of come to – in the last couple years, about a little over 10 years ago I also helped start an art magazine in Texas called *Artlies*. And it was kind of a community situation, and then there was a friend of mine, Wade Chandler, who called me up and said, I want to start an art magazine, are you interested? And I said, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Who was that?

MR. HUERTA: Wade Chandler.

MS. CORDOVA: Wade Chandler.

MR. HUERTA: He's an artist who now lives in Chicago with his girlfriend. And to back up before that, I had sat on several NEA panels, and the last one that I sat with at that time, Dave Hickey was on the panel, and there was kind of an informal alliance because we were both kind of like – liked Texas and we're from – you know, I was from Texas and he was from Texas. So we were talking – I realized that my peers, my contemporaries, the people who I felt should be enlightened because they're in the art world, knew very little about Texas, and their views of Texas was still kind of like cowboy and art and Western art, and it really – it was an awakening that really bothered me, and I think that – and they were surprised by the number of applications. I think we had like over 26, 28 applications from Texas, and we were just surprised how many applications, and how many good applications there were from Texas.

So that made me start thinking, well, why is that? Well, you know, usually it has to do with – I mean, I think that Texas is really rich with artists, and I've felt that I made a commitment, once I moved back to Texas, to stay here and be part of the state, and again be kind of an activist, and I did that in a role as a curator because I think as a curator, what I try to do is get other people's work out there, and it's an art form that's – they're different things – you know, the people's artwork can make statements. And I realized that what we were missing in Texas was a critical analysis of what was going on and a dialogue about the things that are going on in Texas. And nobody knows much about Texas because a lot of the major magazines, when they write about Texas, it's like they're doing their Texas thing, profile of this time, and then next time is going to be Las Vegas, the next time is going to be Nebraska, you know. And then in the review section it's like one review usually out of – and this has happened in every issue, you know, of something in Houston or in Texas, and there's so many cities in Texas.

So I remember that I was on a – a co-juror for Texas Biennial here in Dallas in '93, and I remember talking to Al Harris, who actually had the job here at the gallery at UTA which back then was called Center for Research in Contemporary Art, or CRCA, and I remember that I talked to Al and we both, you know, during the course of three days talked about that Texas needs an art magazine. And unknowingly we were both kind of formulating already magazines. And I was starting CIRCA – C-R-C-A – or C-I-R-C-A – and came out not too long after that, and then down in Houston we came out with *Artlies*. And at that time, Wade, who was the executive director for *Artlies*, I mean, he and Donald – I can't remember his last name; I can find out later – and a woman by the way of Laurie Nelson, there was four of us who went down and signed our names to incorporate and make *Artlies* official. And that was in November of '83 [sic], and then in February we came out with our first issue, and we had a fundraiser and we raised –

MS. CORDOVA: Was that '94?

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, of '94. And then I remember that we raised about $3,000, and Wade was – as much as I like Wade – really didn't control how the money was spent and all that sort, and the designers – and I like the people

who designed the issue but, first of all, they overdesigned the first two issues and they ended up spending all our money. So when Wade decided he was moving to Chicago I ended up taking over as executive director. There was about $64.00 or $67.00 in the account. And –

MS. CORDOVA: How had you gotten sponsorship to begin with?

MR. HUERTA: Well, we didn't really have sponsorship. I mean, that money really was spent – and we got a good deal on printing. The editor who did the third issue – and the fourth issue; there was two people, Kay Loftis and this other guy who I can't name right now – Chris – I have to look up the name. But anyway, they felt the same way I did in the sense that what I wanted to do was to do more of a real rag production in the sense of I really – it wasn't so much about the way it looked more as it was about just getting the information out. And I'd rather start off cheaply and then build up as opposed to the way we started when we started off kind of almost kind of fancy and then spent all the money. And then we're practically broke.

So I remember Kerry Inman – Inman Gallery got us paper – she donated paper, and the DocuTech – it was DocuTech printing that we got it printed, and we had to staple the whole thing ourselves and then distribute it ourselves. And I remember being at – it was Chris Ballou's apartment, you know, putting this issue together, and then distributing them. And we started trying to sell advertising. It was really cheap and everybody wanted to keep it really affordable. At the same time we didn't get many advertisements in the beginning because we're new and people didn't know how long we were going to last. I think the longest an art magazine lasted in Houston was two years.

So we got – we ended up getting stronger and the issues started getting better. They were kind of funky, like I said in the beginning, and then people got – wanted to get better design, and then one of our board members, Missy Feeley [sp] and her husband, John Bryant, got involved. He wanted to design the issues, and he was into computers and so he – we allowed him to – because he wasn't going to be getting paid because nobody was getting paid at the time. Nobody got paid at all for the first few years. It was all a volunteer basis and one of the things that I wanted to start doing was send out about – I don't know, I think around – beginning around 50 to 70 issues to museums around the country and I was already building up a mailing list of those people.

And so I wanted to get the word out and we weren't really covering the whole state, but as I – because I as a curator traveled around, I felt like I was trying to make contacts and see if I could get writers to write about those other cities. And occasionally I would write a review myself when I would travel, so I was trying to get more of the state covered and then I took a break when I went to North Carolina in '95. I was up there for the semester and John took over as executive director and almost kind of shut down the magazine because I think we had at that point $500 in the bank, but it wasn't enough to print the next issue.

And like when I moved back I said we can't do that. We need to keep – we got to figure out how to keep it running because otherwise our advertisers will just leave us and we need the money because slowly it was starting to build up. And we got it built up and as the production got better and the writing got better and we started covering more of the state and then in '97 when I was coming up here I remember – I forgot what year it was, but it was probably '94, '95, we decided to make the cover in color. We could actually afford doing a color cover and making the paper inside a better paper, and we decided that for the first one we wanted a cover that didn't have a lot of color. We wanted it to be real subtle, and that was something that I wanted to do because I just felt like, you know, here you go to having something where you can use color and now that you can use it, you know, use it in a way that you can barely tell. [Laughter.]

And that was like – that was my own thing and I had to convince, you know, like John and the editors that that's what I wanted to do. We had guest editors come in for every issue or try for every issue. Sometimes they would work and sometimes they would not and it was hit and miss and for a while the editors were in charge of the reviews as well. And at some point I decided that this wasn't working that way and we decided to separate the front matter from the back matter, which is the reviews from the essays. So we had an editor for that and then a reviews editor, and that's been, you know, working really well since then.

When I moved up here, I suggested that John and I become executive co-directors because the production was still happening in Houston and he was still – and he was down there. And I also wanted to kind of, in a sense – he was very committed to the magazine – in a sense to start grooming him to eventually take over, which he did in 2000. And then I became – we had a really strong board, but as a result we ended up working by, you know, board rules and I ended up being vice president because I didn't want to be president. I didn't want to be – I was trying to start stepping away.

And then there was – this last December I officially resigned from the magazine because the 10th anniversary is this year and we're having a series of celebrations and actually there was a kind of a little bit of a – we had a reception at the El Paso Museum yesterday afternoon, or our magazine did, and it was one that I set up with the museum there and they co-hosted the reception to just celebrate the magazine's 10th anniversary in that area.

We don't have a real strong presence, which is why we didn't do a big kind of party.

We did one here in November for Dallas and Ft. Worth and then we'll do another one in San Antonio and a big one in Houston, but I was also – I began to realize I really wanted to cut back. I had turned 50 almost two years ago and I really wanted – I was really feeling like I was not doing much artwork, and the curatorial stuff – I still was asked to curate shows in other places outside of the gallery here, but I try to keep it to a minimum. I didn't want to do too many.

And I decided that I wanted to start cutting back my service, you know, to the community and kind of concentrating on just running the gallery here and working on my work. And when I got offered about a year ago – I got offered this job in North Carolina – it was actually for a whole year and I – but I couldn't do it because I had some public art projects that I was trying to finish. And I had a show slated at that time at the art museum in Corpus Christi. It was going to be a survey of like 13 years worth of work, so I said well all this is going to happen in the fall and I can't do it. I can't come in the fall, but I can come in the spring. And so we made that arrangement.

And then my show in the museum in Corpus got pushed back now two years, so it's now in November of 2005 because they were in the campaign – capital campaign for a new addition to the museum and they weren't – the director wasn't spending much time raising money for the shows and so he said that we'd postpone it and he'd be sure to raise more money to do a bigger and better catalogue. I said, okay I'll, you know, settle for that.

So – and so, you know, things didn't go as planned with the fall so, I mean, I probably could have gone, but the chair of my department was concerned about, you know, the show at the gallery, which I've got to install tomorrow – start installing tomorrow. I'm going to come back for that on my own time.

CARY CORDOVA: And let's pause it. [Audio break.] We're back recording, and I guess one thing I just wanted to clarify is that – just for whoever's listening or reading this – is that you are presently working in North Carolina right now.

MR. HUERTA: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: And we're just here in Texas because you're on a visit.

MR. HUERTA: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: So you'll be returning shortly.

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, I'll be going back next Monday.

MS. CORDOVA: Right, and I guess this must have emerged also out of your first artist-in-residency there in 1990. Is that –

MR. HUERTA: No, this – in 1990 I was at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina and I was there for a whole year. Probably financially it was not my best move, but it was – that was – ended up producing a lot of work that went into the show "Aneurism" – producing different kinds of ideas that I think I'm still kind of following in a way. And then in '95 I was asked to come to University of North Carolina in Greensborough for the semester and the money was really good and they had an apartment and a studio for me, so that was – I'll be right there.

And how I ended up getting into that position was there was the director from the Gray Gallery of East Carolina University for some reason was now in Greensborough for a few months and was a kind of adjunct curator for about six months there and suggested to the chair of the visiting artists committee that they bring me, and that's how I ended up coming up.

And they have a show at the Weatherspoon that was an annual, now it's biannual, it was called "Art on Paper," and he got me in that show when he was there and then when I came up I was invited to be in the show since all the faculty are automatically invited. And they ended up buying a large work on paper – you know, that's a take-off on *Cast of Characters* that was like 80 by 80 inches, so I was real happy about that and that's how I was able to afford to buy a computer and start learning how to type for the first time. So because all the – it was really funny in writing the essays like for "Chulas Fronteras" was all longhand and then now I could write and easily write on a computer and I enjoy writing on a computer because you can move words around and paragraphs around and all kinds of stuff. It's very – some –

MS. CORDOVA: Do you think you'll ever get into digital art?

MR. HUERTA: Well, in some ways I have, but not – I have not learned it myself. Some of the stuff that I've been doing for public art, a friend of mine, Joel Quintans, who is at the university – we've become good friends. He's

actually the designer for our brochures and our catalogues and invitations and he offered his services to do that because he was – he thinks of himself as an artist as well, but he didn't do much – I mean, as a photographer, and so I asked him if he would do some of the stuff that I wanted to do, but he could do it quicker because he knows it, but it's something that I actually want to probably learn a little bit myself so I'm not totally dependant on somebody else, but I kind of like the idea of working with somebody else too because – and I like the idea of kind of like bouncing ideas, you know, and he would tell me – I said well, have you thought of this, you know, that way, you know, about this. So it's kind of nice. I kind of like that and I think that's one of the things about public art that I do like is that we work with other people.

But it's not the first time – I mean, I've collaborated – done some pieces over the years with other artists and I enjoyed that. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

MS. CORDOVA: When does your public art career begin? When is the first work?

MR. HUERTA: Well, the first one – I think the first major one I feel was the – was in Houston and it was – the city of Houston was going to build – they had 11 acres of land on the east side of Houston which was more minority neighborhood and they had 11 acres which used to be a – their bus and trolley, I think, maintenance warehouse place. Anyway, they had – were going to do this – build single family homes and make them affordable for people who couldn't afford homes.

And they had asked me if I would be – I forgot how I was chosen, but I was asked to be the lead artist and I ended up getting other artists working – coming up with ideas. And part of our thing was to design a signage for the – to design some kind of fencing system, sidewalks, and parks, and so we did.

And then there was also Charets [ph] with the architecture department of the University of Houston – for them to come up with ideas for housing that could be affordable. Well, it turned out that underneath the ground there was a lot of lead because of the oil and, you know, the gas and all of that stuff. And they already knew that it probably had to be remediated, but it turns out the cost was about double than what they thought, so – and then all of a sudden it came out in the community and nobody wanted to live on the site, you know, because of that, even though it was going to be cleaned up.

But it was really interesting. I remember one of the ways it was going to be cleaned up was it turns out that some of the soil that they would take out is sometimes used as a base for like highways. They'll take some of this other stuff and it'll become the first base – layer of base for a highway, and so what they were thinking of doing is taking it and putting it as a base for the streets in the neighborhood there, and I thought, this is really stupid.

But our plans got approved and we were set to go and I was working with the engineers that the city had hired and they were obviously in the beginning skeptical of working with artists, but I, you know, realized that I was going to have to in a sense extend myself and learn a little bit like their language. And after a while we began to – really working well together and they were, you know, very helpful in making sure that what we were coming up with was incorporated and then to our specs.

And then when the thing with the lead came out – I mean, the whole thing was just put on the back burner. It never happened. And then I think – in a sense I think they in response to that kind of failure and the fact that I spent a lot of time and effort, I was asked – invited to interview for the metro streets project in Houston. And what metro was going to do in downtown Houston was narrow some of the streets and they were going to reroute some of the busses because all of the busses were coming through Main Street, so they were going to reroute some of the busses to go through other streets

And two other artists – Richard Turner out of Orange County and Rachel Hecker from Houston – were asked to be the artist and we would come up with ideas for different things, but we were also given a separate area to really kind of develop an idea for and I was given like the 19 blocks of downtown Main Street to come up with a design for the sidewalk. The sidewalk, again, was going to be extended, so come up with a design.

So I worked with Ray Della Ressa [sp] architects and came up with these patterns and designs for the sidewalk on Main Street and then there would be these pieces of granite that had textures from around the world and then there would be also signature stones because there was going to be three areas of downtown that they really wanted to sort of highlight. So the signature stones were going to be kind of in those areas and those signature stones would also incorporate the textures that we were suing, but a little bit more specific. And those were color – they had color in them, and it was a place out of New Mexico that was – that knew how to make them.

So we made our proposals and I was also asked on the side by the downtown association to create a piece of artwork, and I came up with doing a totem of masks from around the world and it was going to be about – my proposal initially was eight feet, but they suggested that we go to 13 feet and it'd be about six feet in diameter

and it would be right across from the Alley Theater, which I thought would be appropriate, and we picked out a location and the budget was approved.

And then when I moved up here there was a thing about the city of Houston was thinking about introducing light rail and of course they were going to go down Main Street, which meant that they were not going to use my designs, and then the plaza where my totem was going to be was going to be totally renovated and there was not going to be a place for the totem anymore. So I didn't – and they didn't even tell me that. I had to, you know, call them and find out what was going on because I was waiting for me to go ahead and start working on it because everything had been approved.

And some of the designs – I made the designs for Main Street on the intersections – the crosswalks and also in the middle of some of the intersections. And some of the crosswalk designs ended up being used in other crosswalks, but nobody every told me, so one time I was in – when I was working for – designing two light rail stations with PDQ Architects in – or PDG Architects in Houston I remember going downtown for a meeting and seeing this crosswalk and I said, that looks like my design. And I had to go back and take some photographs of that and so that was like one of the first things and I was really disappointed that, you know, I thought I'd come up with some really great designs. I mean, I still got paid, but it was really disheartening to go through all that work again.

And I think I was invited to again interview for the light rail stations they were doing in Houston as a way to make up for that, which – yeah. Yep. And actually the designs that – there were some other designs that I thought were really even better, but the Medical Center is kind of conservative. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: And so that's a pretty frustrating first experience with public art and yet you continued.

MR. HUERTA: Well, I get – I got – during the meantime I got another commission at the San Antonio convention center and that was the one that I worked with bronze and – [inaudible] – and stainless and that really kind of scared be because in that one I was doing all the work. I was coming up with the idea. I had to come up with a budget. I had to come up with actually doing it and, you know, fabricating the pieces and installing the pieces. [Sounds of car horns outside.] There's our musical cars.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughter] – I know. Like a Morse code of horns.

MR. HUERTA: Yeah. So it's – and that was kind of scary to be kind of in charge of everything, where with the light rail stations I would come up with the designs and somebody else did them.

I was also – when I came up here I was chosen to do one for Richardson – the light rail station on Richardson. And I enjoyed doing that. I think I learned a lot from that one and I wish I'd – the things that I learned I had already knew, but it was like a learning experience. And I like the way it turned out, but I was trying to think of more of a complete solution to like the light rail stations, which I think would actually more apply to like these stations. I think they end up working better because I looked at some of the light rail stations in Dallas and I felt some of them – some of them, not all of them, were hodgepodge. They were like the walkways were designed one way and then the things for the cladding for the poles were designed one other way, and so it was like it didn't quite mesh together. And so I really was trying to be more conscious about that. I was trying, but I think I tried too hard. Sometimes it's good not to try so hard.

And, I mean, sometimes it's better to sometimes intuitively do things as well, you know, because sometimes the brain gets in the way when you're making art. But then I came up with the DFW [Dallas/Fort Worth Airport] project that I'm waiting to work on and that design's been done. It's a matter of – picked out the terrazzo colors and all that, so I was real – again, it was really kind of funny how I got the one I'm doing now is I was asked to do another one and it was a medallion and it was 12 artists who did a medallion that would be in front of a gate. It was at the international terminal that they're building right now. And I turned in my design and they were really happy with it. They thought it was really strong. And I got paid and a week later I got a call from the guy who's in charge of the art program there at DFW and he says Peter Haley, who was supposed to do these platform designs didn't want to do them. He said he didn't want to do floors anymore, so he ended up doing something else, so they were looking for an artist and they didn't want to go outside. They wanted to get somebody who was already there and so they looked at the medallion artists and – because they were all local. Some of the bigger names, you know, got the bigger commissions.

So they asked me if I would do this other one – this platform design. It was going to be a two-platform design so it was more money and there was a bigger budget and it was a bigger kind of canvas so to speak because they were like – each one was like 30 by 300 feet and – but they said, if you do this, you can't do the other one – the medallion – because you will be the only artist to have two commissions and some of the others might be upset about that. And I thought like, you know, what some of the other artists are making on the other commissions – the bigger commissions – I don't think they should worry about it, you know. But I said yes and so I came – I ended up doing that, but again was kind of disappointed because the medallion piece I came up with I thought

was a real strong piece again.

So – and I just – and I ended up finishing the piece down in San Antonio and installing it in December and they were very happy. It went over budget, but I hope that will get me other commissions. And then I ended up doing a commission – the PDG Architects were doing an elementary school and they were adding buildings and then a new cafeteria and they had set aside money for artwork and this was not, you know, percent. They just set it aside and they asked me because they liked, I guess, working with me and they said, we're thinking of having like food on the – you know, we have this area above the cafeteria that would be just a long wall and I thought of a friend of mine, John Hernandez, who is into, you know, more colorful, cartoonish stuff, so I said I'd do it, but I would collaborate with a friend of mine.

And so I accepted the commission and John and I came up with drawings – sketches for the preliminary foods and then we kind of made two, three designs from layouts and met with the architects and the principle and settled on the designs – the final designs and the final color for the walls and for the pieces, and then I ended up cutting out all the pieces and gesso them and got John to paint them, but painted my images as well as his images and then I ended up just laying them out and installing them. And also that turned out to be a good collaboration and I enjoyed the – you know, working on that and John was able to make some money and I was able to make some money and everybody was happy, so –

MS. CORDOVA: And you guys have collaborated before, right? Or you've at least exhibited together.

MR. HUERTA: We exhibited I think two or three times. One was in Miami at the Miami Dade Community College and we collaborated on the cover of the catalog. I was asked – I asked if we could do that and they said yes. They didn't have much money, so – but it was okay looking catalogue and the way it turned out. I mean, it was just kind of as simple design kind of thing.

And then we were asked to do a two-person show at the Grace Museum I think it was like two summers ago. And also after that John was initially asked to do a show – a documentary art show which is above contemporary culture, which is their book art section and they wanted to do a – show John's books and I ended up – remember taking John for a meeting over there and then the person who was running the place, Alan Governor, asked me – about me and asked if I would be interested in showing with John. I felt really uncomfortable. It think that was the first time we were actually going to show together, or maybe it wasn't. I don't know when the Miami-Dade thing happened now, but it was around that time and I remember being uncomfortable because it was John's show and, you know, we weren't asked together at the same time.

And I asked John how he felt about it and I said, look, if you don't want me in the show I could – I'll understand it and I'll back out of it, but he said it was okay and so we ended up showing together. And that's when I showed some of my books and I remember Alan Governor was kind of like – oh, I think he was kind of leery of the fact that, you know, I was down in Houston and I said, you know, when I come up it will only take like a day to lay them out and hang them and all that stuff. And he thought it would take a lot longer. And I came up when I said I would and laid them out and put them up and it was done and he was real happy with how fast I did it.

MS. CORDOVA: Just to – how significant has bookmaking been for you as well?

MR. HUERTA: Well, I ended up doing one – I think a couple of them in graduate school. One was a hamburger sample book and then one was a trout book and it was like seven trouts, and I still have that one. And it was basically doing collage to make these trout-like imagery and then I took regular paper and then just like masked off a certain area and then I used black spray paint to create a background and then just collaged these pieces onto them and then like put rice paper in between them and I just – I kind of like the idea of working intimately in something that you would have to pick up and it was different.

And so, you know, when I started working on my retrospective, which I called "The Greatest Hits of Benito Huerta from 1974 to 1984." You know, it was – I wanted to do it in book form, but I wanted to have like the expensive book and the medium priced book and a cheap book, and so it was going to be this kind of thing that was going to be a major activity and I ended up getting all the book – I mean, all the pages done. I did a narrative. I wanted to talk about each of the images and I had a friend of mine who, you know, typed it all into a computer and she helped me with the technical aspect of the writing because I was still developing my writing and then I put all these pages together and just, you know, formatted and put them all together and I had a book or two or three already put together for the show at the "Aneurism" show.

And I thought, you know, it was an important book but I also did a color Xerox version and then I did a black and white version and those were like – I was going to sell – I remember that – I forgot whatever age that I was starting them was going to be the number of books I was going to do, and it was kind of this corelationship [sic] to that.

I haven't really done books except, you know, work in my sketchbooks and stuff. Right now, I'm you know,

consciously working on two – three sketch books and – [audio break, tape change] – and each one – one is my regular sketchbook, but one is a small book that has like some really nice paper that a friend of mine got from Venice or Florence and I'm doing some watercolors in there and then the other book is one my girlfriend has given me and I'm doing pencil drawings – graphite drawings in them.

So I really kind of like tried to – when I got up to North Carolina, I said I really want to concentrate on getting back into drawing and working and getting into a routine. And so –

MS. CORDOVA: Is there any reason you're particularly drawn to North Carolina, or is it just the happenstance?

MR. HUERTA: It's happenstance. I remember when I got asked to go to North Carolina the second time I said I guess – you know, there must be a thing with North Carolina and places that start with the word green in them – the university, you know. And I was just thinking recently, because a friend of mine bought property – Mel Chin bought property in North Carolina and I thought, you know, it's interesting because I stayed at his place on the way to Greensborough and I thought, you know, this is kind of interesting.

It's like he and I have this relationship and it's not, you know, kind of like I haven't seen him in a long time, but it's one that seems to be continuing somehow. And North Carolina's been another bridge to our relationship and that how he ends up being – you know, living there and then I end up having these job opportunities up there and have kind of this relationship with – because I know people there now and stuff and it's just – it was really kind of bizarre and, you know, it makes me think how, you know, sometimes life works that way. I mean, you're not conscious of it; it just happens.

MS. CORDOVA: What about leaving Houston? Was that difficult?

MR. HUERTA: Yes, it was, but I remember the last year or two I was looking for a place to buy to create a big studio. I had outgrown my studio on Wood Street and – which is a great place, because my brother ended up getting the studio above me like a year or so later. And I love Houston – I mean, Houston is great because it has – there's a lot of energy and there's a lot of good stuff going on. There's a really can-do attitude that I like about Houston. It's just, you know, you've got an idea, let's see how to make it work. And there's a sense of camaraderie there between artists and – it may be changing, but there's a camaraderie there that I had never experienced in any other city in the United States, and I don't know why.

Maybe it's because Houston – nobody cared about Houston as far as art for a number of years, and yet I think with the De Menils being there and I think with the University of Houston and then later on with the core program at the Glasel [ph] school, Houston started really maturing as a city as far as its culture was concerned.

And I think that I was an active part of it because I was on the Boards of Diverse Works and on Lawndale [Lawndale Art and Performance Center, University of Houston, Houston, Texas] and then starting the magazine there and the fact that it's based there in Houston, you know, says a lot for Houston. And I think that – but at the same time I felt, again, I was – I felt I wanted something more in my life and I couldn't say why. I just felt like something needs to happen.

And that's when I was curating Luis' show that I was going to start at the Dallas Museum, I called these collectors in Dallas and said I wanted to borrow a piece of Luis that they owned and they were – they had given money to *Artlies* and, well, actually it was about the time that I did ask for the first time. I asked them if I could borrow the piece and they said, yes, and while we're at it, you know, would you consider curating a show for DVAC, because they're a part of the Dallas Visual Arts Center. And there was a series of three shows called "Establishment and Revelation." The first one was called "Establishment," and then "Establishment and Revelation," and then "Revelation," and it had to do with past Texas artists, present Texas artists, and up and coming Texas artists. And I was asked to curate the second one and it's – and I said, well, this is my fee and they said, okay, we'll pay it.

And so that was bringing me up to this area in '96 – in the fall of '96 and the show happened in January of '97 and then I was asked to do a show at the Bathhouse Cultural Center in May – a one-person show – and they were – they had closed down to do renovations and so they wanted me to do the first show after the renovations and I – "Chulas Fronteras" had shown there and so there was a relationship and I said, you know, I like that idea. And then Luis' show was opening in May around the same – I think it was like a week earlier or a week later or something like that.

And then in March I got a call from Dalton Maroney, who is a sculptor instructor here at UTA saying we're looking for somebody who is an artist/curator and we're looking for a minority. And so it was a targeted search and so I said – I suggested Kathy Vargas because she was the only minority in Texas who was an artist and a curator. So I suggested her name and then in the end I said I would like to be considered. And I remember Dalton like a year later – a year and a half later told me that when I mentioned that he said, you know, we've got our person, you know.

So I felt like – because obviously other activities were happening up here, I felt like I was coming up here often and that was – going back to the Barrets I remember when – after they asked me to curate that show I asked them, well, now that we're off the subject, you know, would you donate money to *Artlies*, and so that's when they started donating money and they were a big support financially for *Artlies* when we were making this leap into a really stronger publication.

And it was really – and I think that phone call was like all these hats that I was wearing. It was so bizarre. And that – and it felt really comfortable that I could have a show of my work and I had this major show of Luis' – a retrospective – and the show at the Dallas Visual Arts Center and then I was – in April when I had the opening of my show at the Bath House, the chair of the department came over with a contract for the university and it was kind of like all happening at once and I felt like I must have been meant to come up here.

MS. CORDOVA: 1997 was a big year for you.

MR. HUERTA: That was a big year. It was a really big year and then when I came up we had a seminar thing. We had a – like I said, we had a seminar for Luis' show in July or something and I came up – or no, it was earlier and I came up and took an extra day and – to look at houses and found this house that one day and – at the end of the one day of looking at the houses and ended up making a decision to buy and made an offer and counteroffer and all that stuff and ended up with this house, which was like the first time I ever had anything like this. And it was – and that was kind of interesting was that my studio in Houston was a storefront which means I had no yard. I had like a sidewalk and parallel parking and there was a street. It was a busy street. It was a city one which was like becomes Montrose, which is right by the museum.

And I remember when I had a show at the Contemporary Arts Museum I'd tell people I'm having a show down the street – at the museum down the street. And – but my studio didn't have much light coming in. It had two small two-story windows in the studio and then there was like a big storefront glass in the front, but you couldn't really open it up because otherwise people would see in and I felt like I didn't want to get broken into. So it was really kind of dark and it was about 1,000 square feet, 11-foot high ceilings, and like I said, no yard and very little light. So then I come to a house that has a huge yard and a lot of light and it's been a great house. But I felt like, you know, things – you know, like I said, that we're meant to be up here.

I also felt like by moving up here there was kind of like a clean slate. There was kind of like, again, somebody – I remember when going to different places – it's like when I went to graduate school, the people who know you are not there and they're not looking over your shoulder seeing what you're doing, so you can do anything you want to do and I like that attitude.

And I remember that a lot of people were surprised when I moved up here that I would move up here from Houston and a lot of people were really glad that I was up here and kind of for the first time I felt that I was kind of appreciated. Even though I felt like my friends appreciated me in Houston, it was interesting to hear it from people who, you know, knew you – almost like your reputation and kind of knew you, but didn't really know you. And it was a – it was kind of nice to hear that.

And then the other thing that kind of surprised me was that after I moved up here I had three or four offers to come and interview for other jobs. [Laughs.] It's like now that you're out of Houston, you know, how about this job? And, you know, I felt – I feel loyal to UTA, but at the same time we've also – there's been some problems there as well, so –

MS. CORDOVA: All right, well, I'm going to end this disc because I know we're almost at the end, but I'd like to come back to maybe how your artwork has changed from being here in Arlington. Okay. So I'll stop the tape. [Audio break.]

All right. We're recording. This is Cary Cordova interviewing Benito Huerta on March 2nd, 2004. This is session two, disc two, and Benito I was just asking you if your artwork had changed since moving to Arlington or what you saw as a possible transformation just by change of place.

MR. HUERTA: Well, I do think that environment does have an effect on an artist. There was a show at the – a 10-year survey of Brice Marden's work at the Dallas Museum and he had done this painting that had a similar composition – but each of the three paintings was done in a different location. One was in – I think outside in Pennsylvania, one up in New York City, and one in Greece and the coloration was really different.

I remember when I went from Houston to Las Cruces and my paintings in Houston – the ones I had – were doing were more earth tone – not very much color, and then all of a sudden there's some introduction of color. I mean, really strong, vibrant color in the work and – in New Mexico and then when I moved to San Francisco and I started doing the "Chalupa" series, again the influences of the people I told you about yesterday and things and also the way the city was affected, you know, I think I started composing the chalupas.

And then the fact also that I didn't do any paintings while I was in San Francisco and in New York City and then moved back to Houston and started painting again, but I wanted to kind of continue the "Chalupa" series because I wanted to – I had not done any paintings of those. So I started – I was going to do the paintings, but at the same time by the time I was doing the paintings I was ready to move on as far as subject matter, so the paintings didn't – the series didn't last very long in paint, but I also ended up doing some ceramic pieces for the first time in New Mexico in '82 and that was my introduction to ceramics and I really enjoyed doing that.

And then when I came up from Houston, the stuff that I had been doing was still being kind of a relationship to "Aneurism" and then when I moved up here I remember a friend of mine, David McGee, doing a painting of – doing a series of paintings off Picasso and he did – he took on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, but I felt like he didn't really take it on. He just kind of like reproduced it and then he put a monkey in front of it and the monkey's mouth was like opening or screaming or whatever, a la Francis Bacon and then he had like a paintbrush and the monkey was dressed in a tuxedo coat and shirt.

MS. CORDOVA: Who was that?

MR. HUERTA: David McGee.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, David McGee.

MR. HUERTA: And I went to his opening because I was considering him for a show up here and I saw that show and I saw the – actually I think I saw the painting in the Texas Gallery in a group show and it really made me think, you know, it's like that one painting of Picasso's has been, you know, an intriguing one for me and for a lot of artists obviously, but, you know, to me it kind of like is a portal into, you know, 20th century art. And so I decided that I wanted to take it on myself, but I didn't want to do it in just one painting, so I decided I was going to do a series of paintings and the first one was going to have to have – kind of be a part one and a part two. It was a companion piece, and that was like the beginning going back to doing a series of work that kind of related to each other, which I had not done since the "Chalupa" series and – but this one would be one that I would take a subject and then evolve it with each piece and change it.

And the first one I did was I did a kind of a recreation of the Picasso and then the bottom of the still life – I had heard that Picasso wanted to add a skull, so I ended up adding a line drawing with glitter of a skull at the base of the still life – over the still life that he had painted.

And then from another painting or composition I had these holes in the Picasso that were – the holes were of the next painting – the companion painting and which that painting there are these body parts flying about this kind of organic grid that I've built up over the years and it's male and female body parts. And then that painting I felt I was kind of doing – you know, I was dealing with the idea of relationships because the idea of Picasso painting was the idea of a relationship with a prostitute who got him VD. So I felt, well, this is my interpretation of a relationship, which, you know, was about another painting that dealt with the breakup of a relationship and my emotional response to it and this was kind of like taking the composition and doing something else with it.

And I liked the idea that my composition was mostly like blues and the idea of like being blue – the – in the songs and all this kind of stuff. Also the fact that it was flat and that was a tribute to what Picasso – the idea of Picasso flattening the picture's plane and so in my opinion I put these holes that were fragments from his "Les Demoisselles" so it's almost like you were looking through his or my paintings and you would see – you know, in a sense you would see where our painting or my painting came from and that relationship. And I was trying to build that relationship.

And then I also added a snake, which was – I had used in a painting called *Fin* [pronounced Fin] or *Fin* [pronounced Feen] and I kind of used it in that because of the whole idea of like the idea of Adam and Eve and evil, but also thinking of rebirth and how the snake would shed its skin.

And so then I did that companion piece and then the next painting I wanted to do was to do one on black velvet and at this point, because I was up here, I decided to – most of my paintings have been six and a half feet square as far as the square form because that's what I could take out of my studio door in Houston, but here I have bigger doors, so I went to seven by seven feet. And I at some point would really like to get up to seven feet by 11 inches by seven feet and 11 inches to go through that – using that element in the work.

So when I started doing the velvet piece I – what I really wanted to do was to make the – two women who had these more African markings on their faces and make them more like the rest of the women as far as their face, but I thought that for today the scarification is tattoos and piercings and so I thought that is what I would do is make them contemporary. But I also like the idea of recontextualizing it in black velvet because as probably he did with his subject matter, the subject matter was – was about prostitutes and it was a low, low art form of subject matter, you know.

So I thought by prostitutes that are walking the streets, I thought by painting on black velvet – you see black velvet on the streets of, you know, Juarez and border towns, so I thought there's a nice corelationship between that and bringing it back down to a level of bad taste kind of thing.

And so – and I also wanted to paint a little bit more expressionistically and then I also added a couple piercings – real piercings into – and since I'm working with black velvet, it worked really well. And then I added a – there's another element that I added was a lead panel and I didn't do anything with lead; it was kind of a more – you know, just buying it and putting it over a plywood structure.

And the reason for the lead was the other person who I think has made a strong mark on 20th century art is [Marcel] Duchamp, and there was a quote that somebody had heard, and I don't know who had made it, but what I had heard was that Picasso was known for what he did and Duchamp was known for what he didn't do, so – and I always liked that quote and so I thought that Duchamp, you know, with the ready made here. I just bought the lead and the lead is, you know, a material that a lot of artists use nowadays and it's loaded with all kinds of symbols and metaphors and all this kind of stuff and I like that, but I also like the fact that here was this black velvet kind of garish painting and then here's a simple lead structure – there's nothing to it. And the idea that Duchamp, like with the ready mades and found material and also, you know, like creating minimalism coming out of that aestheticness I think, so there was this kind of like yin yang thing happening with that piece.

And then I used a Rolling Stones title that was *Exile on Main Street* and called it *Exile Off main Street* because it's something you would not see on Main Street, you know. It was interesting because I ended up doing the show with David McGee in our gallery and I was asked to do the show because I was a new professor and they felt like the students should see the work of new professors. So I allowed myself to show with David and then we titled the show *Exile Off Main Street* and it was picked up by one of the reviewers as being like, you know, here are two minorities because David's African-American and they're off the main stream, you know. So it was kind of – and I didn't ever think of that, but it's interesting again how again I like that idea, but how somebody interpreted it – a simple title that I took off a Rolling Stones song – you know, album.

And then after that I – the next painting I did was I decided to take one of the women out – also, the other thing with the *Exile Off Main Street* piece was that I wanted to make the women diverse as far as ethnic and cultural background, so I tried to do different kind of colorations of skin tones for each of the women, so I really wanted them to be diverse to kind of reflect, again, the modern world we live in.

And the next painting, which is the – well, actually after that I did a large work on paper that's with charcoal and watercolor and it was basically kind of trying to reproduce *Exile Off Main Street* but as a drawing and – large-scale drawing and I kind of liked the way it looked, but one of the things that with black velvet some of the imagery like the tattoos kind of like receded and you really didn't see them and so with a drawing it kind of popped out again. But I wasn't real happy with it, so I ended up taking it to North Carolina this semester and not reworking it, but working on it some more and now it's to the point where I feel really good about it.

But right after that I ended up doing – taking one of the women out and adding – made it a solitary figure and keeping the still life and I remember the still life on the black velvet I added the skull as part of the still life, so it was not an integral part of the composition. So I took that still life and put it at the base of this woman and then added wings, and the wings – it was like the colors of the Mexican flag, but I also had her bruised. It looked like she had a black eye and her eyes were kind of reddish.

And around that time my sister had been physically abused by her boyfriend who ended up going to jail for several months and she had like a hairline fracture in the skull it turned out, and so I thought like – you know, I thought like well here are people that sometimes you see in the street and you think they're just – you know, people think negatively of them and sometimes they're people of color and at the same time they could be really good people and sometimes they end up getting hurt and these people could have tattoos and they could have piercings and you think, oh, you know, they're trash and stuff like that. But, you know, I think because I am a Latino I know what prejudice is about so I feel like, you know, you need to see that they're – you know, some people can just be really good people and you never would think it, you know, from different perspectives, but they are.

And so it was about that whole attitude or idea. And then the painting, one of the reasons I ended up wanting to do the wings is because I really wanted to introduce that concept into the next painting, which was going to be called *The Eyes of Benjamin Franklin* and that became a little bit more of a complicated painting. And in relation to that painting I did a painting of just wings – nothing else, it was just wings kind of floating on this background which, again, after I finished painting it I didn't like and I actually took it to North Carolina and just finished repainting it and really, really like the painting a lot now.

But in this painting I decided to use Paynes gray to color the background, which is the figures, and had the woman with the wings come in and the woman from – the second from the left is completely eliminated. And did

a lot of tattoos and all the – and painting the areas where the piercings are instead and it's all kind of more in grays and then I had done a series of prints in which I had taken – it was called *Hands of Fate* and it was a silkscreen that I had done with Sam Coronado in Austin and in the background was a map and on the middle ground there was these handprints and within the handprints there was the G-8 countries – the flags of the G-8 countries and then on the top of that was a snake.

And at some point I had asked Sam if I could at the very end put in some extra paper to do just a print of the snake and separate it, so we just had like a snake floating and he liked that and so we printed a few of those. And that was a trick that I ended up doing with the silkscreen version of *Cast of Characters* when I ended up doing a second version by adding paper as a third color and then changing the third color to a different color and then printing everything else the same along with – as it was with the other edition.

And some – because I knew – I did lithography in school I knew printing techniques. I knew what you can do to make variations of things so Sam was kind of dubious and I said, look, I'll put in the paper myself and I'll, you know, just take five sheets and I'll pay for them. And he says, no, I'll do it. We'll just put in like six or seven sheets. And then later said, no, we'll put in 10 sheets – extra sheets and so we got a different variation of *Cast of Characters* and then with *Hands of Fate* I just wanted the snake and we ended up doing several of them and he really liked the way they looked and we thought about doing another version of it.

And –

MS. CORDOVA: How had you gotten involved with the Serie Project?

MR. HUERTA: Sam called me up and they had – Sam was starting this silkscreen project. It was kind of – the model was self-help graphics in L.A. – in East L.A. and – but he'd gotten a grant and he would invite artists to do prints, but the thing is he wanted the prints to be cheap. You know, like $200 – $250. The problem I had with that is that, you know, some artists' careers are – you know, the work cannot be sold at that level, so we had to work out something differently for that, so – but I came down and did *Cast of Characters* as a first silkscreen. And again using my charms I was able to, I think, get 11 or 12 colors out, because we were supposed to only use 12 – 10 colors I think and so I ended up getting like 11 or 12 colors out of him. And like I said, we did another edition. I think it ended up being nine – extra in a different edition – a special edition.

And then so he invited me back and then did *Hands of Fate* and then when it got – after I almost finished working – I was there for four days, and then we did – we were doing the snake thing and then he asked me if I would come up with an idea to do a print that he could sell for $250 because my pricing was not going to be the same as it was for real cheap prints because my prices are a little higher. [Audio break, tape change] – so I told him, well Sam, I wish you'd told me when I first got here because I could have been thinking about it, but I immediately came up with the idea – I said, look, there's this screen that has all these handprints and you already have it done and what I'd like for you to do is you just do that and I want you to take a crisp one dollar bill and put it over the middle, but with – and I said it has to be brand new and with one corner folded and so – and I want to call it "In Case of Emergency, Pull." And so you could just be able to pull it in case of emergency. And so at least I knew that, you know, my print was worth a dollar – [laughter] – and then – but I also liked the idea that Sam would have to get – have to spend more money putting money on my prints and it was kind of funny.

And I thought it was a nice idea and actually it was based on another painting called *Hands of Fate*, but I changed the format of the snake and made it more circular where the snake in my painting comes out of the top. And then in the painting – at that time it was still only G-7 countries and like a few – and like six months later after I did the painting Russia was added.

So I decided that I wanted to use those handprints on *The Eyes of Benjamin Franklin* and I also got – I had – before I even painted I actually got a $100 bill blown up and silkscreen in the middle of the painting and then I, you know, covered it up and painted the background with like *Les Demoiselles* and then they had – and then came in and painted the handprints on top of that.

And I thought that, you know, like Benjamin Franklin initially – you know, Benjamin Franklin was, you know, a founding father of the country and, you know, a scientist and all this and there was a kind of in a sense there was a spirit that was honest at one point, but now he's on the $100 bill and now it's like money is – like he's now equated with money as opposed to being equated with, you know, what he did and I think that now like with art people now when I say when people want to look at the *Mona Lisa* – there's probably some people look at the *Mona Lisa* as a painting and a lot of people probably see it as how much is it worth and I remember seeing Joseph Beuys stigma where it says kuntz [German for art] equals capital and – or money equals art and art equals money and I though, you know, how true that has become, you know, where people now see art – particularly in the '80s when there was like this – where Reaganomics created a lot of millionaires and people were buying art not because of the art, but because of the status of like saying look, I can afford this. I can afford

art.

And I thought that, you know, power – the idea of power was also, you know, behind art and behind, you know, collecting of art – the power behind money and money that you need to collect art and to have power and all those kinds of things. And so that's why I call it *The Eyes of Benjamin Franklin* because it's almost like he's looking and seeing all these changes happening and – but he's looking from, you know, within the center of a $100 bill.

CARY CORDOVA: And I think I asked you this off the record, but when did you start using money in your paintings?

MR. HUERTA: Well, I started using them in the monoprints in 1984. I started using them because – in the monoprint series that Gil Cardenas had was sponsoring or commissioning for the Galería sin Fronteras. He wanted to deal with – he wanted the subject matter to be the border, and I thought, oh, here we go again with the border. It's like, look, Latino artists are always struck with, you know, certain subject matter and so we ended up doing this – when I first got to working with Peter, I already had some preconceived ideas that didn't work out – quickly didn't work out and I realized this is not going to work. I've got to change it because I only have two days.

MS. CORDOVA: Peter?

MR. HUERTA: Peter Webb, a printmaker there.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, right.

MR. HUERTA: And so I ended up working out some of the things – I had brought some map imagery and all of a sudden for some reason I think I started thinking like NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] and all this and economics and so I started taking dollar bills and sticking them on there and then twisting them and putting them on there and I started thinking, well, you know, that maps as far as geography and money – as far – and then I started, you know, thinking about – in the next series I thought about using Mexican money because it's more, you know, American Mexican money and that kind of thing.

And then I remember in a – [inaudible] – series there's one where I use a lotería card and then I cut out the middle part and have like George Washington from a $1 bill looking from behind that. And then I used another lotería card of a skeleton by itself and then on either side is a dollar bill has been folded and then put on and creates just kind of like a window that's kind of opening and revealing this – revealing death.

So I was thinking about all those kinds of things and then that's something , you know, where the idea of the $100 bill being used in the painting and the idea also, you know, for *In Case of Emergency*.

And then the next painting was to take it to the level of – [inaudible] – de la Frontera, which is recontextualizing two of the women into – onto the border; the one that's crouching and the one that's standing in – with the wings. And I remember when I was doing the painting because I was – I paint at the school in the same classroom as the students, and I remember when one of my students who was actually from Juarez and had studied with a friend of mine in El Paso – the community college there – when she saw the background imagery of the mountains she said, oh, that's Juarez and El Paso and I said, yeah. So it was really kind of nice to know that somebody made that connection, but that's because they knew it.

And also the idea that the woman would be – crouching would be, you know, holding a Mexican mask instead of like the African mask that was an influence on Picasso's painting, so it was like recontextualizing it and also the idea like, you know, here we go on the border again and the whole idea like Boys Town and Prostitutes and – but at the same time going back to that whole idea is like, well, wait a minute. You know, it was like how do you know these are bad people – that kind of thing.

But that was kind of like – that was going to be pretty much the end of the series. I mean, I've done variations off of that and stuff. So it was kind of like a long one, but it was one that I felt real satisfied with in the sense that it did all kinds of things for me and it was one that I was dealing with a subject matter that has been kind of like sacred, so to speak, in the art world and one that I really wanted to deal with head on and change it and make it more mine, which I think I finally did. [Laughter.]

So – and then, you know, other stuff. I mean, that was a series that I kind of took on for a while, but the kind of organic kind of grid has been also kind of continuing off and on. I haven't really finished that. I'm actually working on a couple of smaller paintings in North Carolina, but I'm also thinking of doing different things with them now – changing them. It's something that's – kind of in a sense it hasn't been really for me exhausted, but also at the same time I don't want it to be the same thing, you know. Right now I'm thinking of them more as paintings.

I really want to make them real painterly and give them more depth as paintings, but also – I'm also wanting to add other materials and I'm also thinking of taking some of the monoprint series ideas and turning them into large-scale paintings in themselves, and that's one of the things I want to do when I'm in North Carolina. I actually talked to Sam about making silkscreens with larger – you know, like the $100 bill and maybe a $20 bill and $5 bill or something like that and also with some pesos. And then make –silkscreen that onto the canvas and then creating this more larger abstraction and – and I really want to do a whole series of that.

And I – it's kind of like another challenge because now these – those would be more abstract and they'd be large-scale abstractions as opposed to, you know, certain areas being abstract. And then the monoprints – I think they work as monoprints, but I really want to know how I can do that on a large scale and still have the fact that it's a painting, but yet it as a relationship to the monoprints, you know, as far as concept, but again that's one of the things I want to do in the paintings, so there's like more changes again, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: I want to step back just for a second and ask you about Galeria sin Fronteras was making – when you think about it, you were saying that that was a commission in a way, but I was wondering about in general your relationship with galleries over time and how that has developed and also now that you run a gallery has that changed any of your concepts about your former relationships?

MR. HUERTA: Well, I think going back to how I got into galleries, I remember that in Houston I had gone to a couple of galleries and they were not interested in making studio visits, and it was interesting that the people who first came to my studio were John Beardsley and Jane Livingston, and it's like I had curators from a museum come to my studio before I had a gallery person come to my studio. And I thought that said a lot. [Laughter.]

And then I moved from West 16th to Studio Wood and at some point my work was getting to be known and I remember one of the galleries – William Graham Gallery, which goes by Bill Graham gallery, finally decided to come do a studio visit and – but, you know, he was kind of putting me in the classification of Mesoamerican, you know, and all this kind of thing. I really respected his gallery and what he was doing and then I talked – I ended up talking to some of the people who showed with them and they also respected him, but he – inasmuch as I like Bill – I mean, I thought that he wasn't a really – he wasn't really out there as far as trying to sell the work and so I ended up saying no. And I think that one of the things was that I – at this point I didn't really care to just jump into a gallery just to have a gallery, so I was real conscious about not getting into a gallery situation.

And then at the same time I remember when I got the show at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Lynn Goode was beginning to court me and she finally opened up her space and I said I'll look and see what happens. And there were a lot of artists that I didn't like in the gallery and a few years later she cleaned – she did a little housekeeping and cleaned some of those artists out and she asked me again and I said I would do it this time because I felt like she was going – finally kind of going in the right direction.

I liked the fact that she was young and she was energetic and there was no history. I mean, she was creating her own history right now, so I was kind of for that. And she basically kind of allowed me to do what I wanted to do. When I was going to do the – when she came to the studio to talk about doing a show at the gallery in '93, I remember that I had these two strands of work. I could have done the show like it was a continuation of the CAM [Contemporary Arts Museum] show, but I didn't really want to do that in Houston so – and she went for doing the newer work – the different work. And I had already done a painting called *The Yin* and had already started working on *A Cast of Characters* and so she was – and she saw those small paintings I'd done in North Carolina and so she was – said let's show that and I said okay, and I really want to show some books and stuff and she said – gave me the other gallery upstairs. There's two smaller galleries and she gave me the bigger of the two galleries upstairs.

And Galeria sin Fronteras also asked me to do a show around the same time period so – it was a one-person show so I decided to show newer work and some work that was in the CAM show and it was before the show – this was in '93, so the show – the show that toured around the country was already over, so there was one piece or two pieces that I wanted to show from that show that had not been seen in Austin and then do some – and had some new pieces – some newer pieces.

And I also asked if we could do the square invitation of one of the pieces in the show and they said yeah. And so like – I think like one – right at the time – the shows kind of overlapped a little bit like the show in Austin opened up in I think September or October and it overlapped the show in Houston and that opened up and I remember a writer coming in from Austin. She had saw the show and she loved it and she thought she was going to see the same kind of work in Houston and was like, oh, this is different. [Laughter.] So and I kind of liked that. I don't know if she liked it or not, but I kind of like that – you know, the fact that I could surprise people.

But then Lynn Goode sold out to another gallery and then they closed down and I had my last show there. I had another show, *Cast of Characters*, upstairs and it was all these paintings related to *Cast of Characters*. And then the main painting got – actually ended up getting sold before that show, but it was – still hadn't been shipped

out yet, so it was shipped out during the show or toward the end of the show, so it was a small show upstairs that I really wanted to do like this little show of that idea.

MS. CORDOVA: And maybe since we're there you could talk a little bit about the idea of *Cast of Characters*.

MR. HUERTA: Well, you know, in my paintings I'd been using all this different imagery that I had been using from that other – from the grid work that I'd been doing. I call it kind of a spaghetti western grid, but it's kind of like I was developing all these other imagery and so I decided that I wanted – I decided that I wanted to do a painting that incorporated all this imagery and I thought like, well, I like movies, too. And I thought, you know, in the old movies they used to say cast of characters, so I liked that title for it. And I also thought that I'd never worked with the color orange very much in painting, so I really wanted to make an orange painting. I mean a really orange painting. And so in the background I had the map of the world, but it was upside down so the whole orientation of what is right side up and – you know, confusing.

And then I had a totem of imagery that I had used in some interesting paintings and it was like there was a duck's head that was at the bottom on top of a brain and the brain was like, you know, this is where ideas come from – you know, your thinking. The duck's head came from another painting called *Sister* – [inaudible]. And so I took that and it was like a duck's head that had a top hat on and then there was a flayed sheep's head from a Picasso painting and I remember seeing like he had done like the series of flayed sheep's head over three or four days and each one was like a different style. The one that I gravitated to was the one that looked like the most bloodiest. And I liked the coloration because it's kind of bloody red, too, and then there was like a human heart because I used it in my corazon sacrado pieces and then there was also a rabbit from the painting called *Easter* that I used and then there was also the devil's ceramic mask that I had and so I had that in the painting as well.

And in the drawing of *Cast of Characters* there's a chalupa on top of that even, so – which is not in the painting. And then on the right side is these big circles that come from some of the paintings that I did in the early '90s that had to do with organic grapes in which I had in one painting that I'd done these body parts I talked about earlier I had like taken circles of those areas and I'd lift them and put them on another painting that had the grid and so they're kind of like taking off and so you see part of a body and part of a grid and so they were kind of taken out of context so they were – part of those circles were stacked on the right and part of them were off the canvas, so it looks like the canvas continues.

And then on the left I had in different fonts all the lettering of the title of the piece *Cast of Characters* and painted different colors – each one was painted different colors. They were all – they were maybe about an inch and a half maybe at the most as far as height, but they were painted sideways, so turn your head to look at them. And then there was a ruler – a real ruler that I got and I gessoed one side of it where there was like the name brand was, so allowed for the measurements to be still there and then I ended up doing a rainbow, which is like, you know, the palette that an artist uses – all the colors.

And then the map imagery was painted kind of in a very loose manner, so there was – some of the painting was kind of runny and very painterly, and I thought that was one of my strongest paintings. I really liked it, but I remember in the studio at Studio Wood this – I had – the studio there was broken down to two rooms. There's the studio and then there's a front room. And I remember I had a really strong like a 500-watt light on where the paintings would normally be painted on in that area. And I remember looking then in the evening one night at how the room just glowed in this orange coloration. It was just amazing. And I was telling somebody that – you know, I was showing that to somebody and said it looks like the aftermath of an atomic blast because it was like this orange color and I was just bathing everything in the studio in orange and it was just amazing.

And so as a result, I really liked that image and I ended up doing the silkscreen and I ended up doing, you know, the larger work on paper that the Weatherspoon now owns and a whole series. And then later I wanted to do – when I moved up here I wanted to do a take-off on – of this painting that's in the hallway, which is called *Heaven on Earth* and I wanted to do – and that was kind of based on the – my take-off on the Courbet painting *The Origin of the World* and so – but I wanted to blow it up to seven by seven feet and paint the woman in the – in grays and then have the *Cast of Characters* again, you know, but this time the background being gray as opposed to having some kind of color. And the only color there was this color band which was painted directly on the canvas and on the edge – on the corner and then I had the other circles that had a hint of color in them that were again in the same manner.

And but what I think happened – I think on that one I had elongated it slightly the whole thing so they were a little longer than the original *Cast of Characters* and I ended up really liking the way that turned out and then, you know, I think I had used it on this other painting called *Cacula*, which is a little more – had a more painterly background. So there was this – that's why I ended up going to do that show *Cast of Characters*, although the origin of the piece I did a take-off of *Origin of the World* I called *The Origin of Characters*, but that was not shown in that show.

Unfortunately, I was not able to go to my own opening because they changed the opening at Lynn Goode Gallery and then normally they would have it on Saturdays and I had already – the show with Mel Chin that I curated was opening in Scottsdale, Arizona, and I'd been asked to do a talk because he couldn't be at the opening but he was going to come back later and do a talk, so they had asked me to come out for the opening on that, and it was on Thursday, and then Lynn Goode ended up changing because all of the other galleries on the street she was on were changing their gallery opening nights from Saturday to Thursday because they were trying to get rid of all the stragglers who came in and were drinking all their free liquor during the openings, so they wanted a more serious crowd, but it didn't work so they ended up going back to on Saturdays, but it screwed me up because I had already committed to going to Scottsdale.

And then –

MS. CORDOVA: So from the Lynn Goode gallery you went to where or what –

MR. HUERTA: Well, in '98 I curated a show of Cesar Martinez. It was a survey show for the museum in Corpus and that opened in '98 and I was – initially I was asked to write the essay for the catalogue and I agreed to it and their money was good and then Bill Otten, the director of the museum in Corpus – and this was going to be part of a series of Hispanic artists that he wanted to showcase, and Bill asked me if I would come down to San Antonio to look at some of the work that was going to be in the show since – you know, since I'm writing the essay it would be good and I said as long as you pay for it, I'll be there, so he did.

And then at Cesar's studio I remember he brought – Bill Otten brought a funder – one of his funders or board members and right there in front of like Cesar and this board member and myself and Bill says, well, you know, why don't you just select the work for the show. So essentially I said what you're doing is asking me to be a curator for the show now, and it was just like, you know, this is really a backend way to do this.

So I said yes, but we'll have to talk about terms and so later we talked and I said this is what I'd like to have and I ended up picking out the whole show during the time I was – I ended up being there a little longer and picked out the whole show and Cesar was represented by Parchman Stremmel Gallery in San Antonio. They came down and at the opening they said, you know, we'd really like to talk to you. And later called them up and they said – you know, I didn't know what they really wanted to do and I was hoping that they'd be interested in my work and they said, well, we'd really like to show your work and so they took me on and we ended up scheduling a show for – was it 1999? 2000? It think it was 2000 – spring of 2000.

And then the D. Berman Gallery was opening and I got a call from David saying, you know, we want to be – we want to have you in this show – our first show, and it was called *Pattern Language*, and it was a four or five-person show and that's what I ended up doing. In that work I had the more kind of gridded kind of works in the show and then it was like I had to call and said, look, it's been a while and all these other people who were in that show are now getting like two-person shows and I'd really like to show again and he said okay, so he paired me with a friend of mine, Frank Tolbert.

And here and there I've been asked to be in gallery – commercial gallery shows, but it's really – I think that's really different than non-commercial gallery spaces and I felt like when I came here that this is a university gallery and that we should pay of shipping both ways. You know, that's my feeling and so as a curator that's what I decided to do: to pay both ways. And they – and we went from having a five exhibition plus two bachelor of fine arts exhibition to four exhibitions because I remember the first year I was here I was asked to curate a show – since I'm a new curator, to curate a show right off the bat and they gave me – they opened a slot and said I'd really rather waited till the following fall that way I could kind of get used to knowing the gallery and all that.

They were really asking me that I would do that, so I ended up doing the show of Kathy Vargas and then I was asking Kathy, well, who would be good to show with you? And then she said how about Connie? So Connie Arismendi were the first show. And then I had gotten the president – well, the chair and I got the president to sponsor a dinner for the funders for the gallery, so it was the first time – the first of four times that the president would fund a dinner in the gallery for the funders and they asked the artists to be there and they both were.

I'll leave out the sordid details about some of the – how that got to happen, but it was good because the president had – we had some old brochures that the previous director had done – the previous two directors, Al Harris and Sig Reyes. And he said – and he had asked the chair how much it would cost to produce it – a brochure and she kind of like said, well, I can find out how much it would cost, so we later sort of ballparked a number and he gave us money and it took a little longer because I ended up writing the essay because we couldn't afford to write – to have an essayist. And I didn't really – I decided that the money it would raise would also pay an essayist for the brochures, so that's how I got started.

But there was another show that was scheduled by – that was to be curated by a colleague and that show was like three or four weeks. It was a short show and that fell through and I had to fill it in real quickly. [Audio break,

tape change] – and that was one of the reasons I didn't want to curate his show while – you know, because I was afraid something like that might happen and that – and so I had to curate a second show in the semester – in the spring semester and so far that was the only show that we had not done a brochure for and right now we have the money to go back and cover that base.

But I felt strongly as a curator in a non-commercial gallery that the artists should be treated like they're more important and I felt like that we should be pay for shipping and we should document every show and we should pay them good money for lectures, so I was determined to raise money because our budget only takes care of the exhibitions. It doesn't take care of lectures or brochures.

So I was able to raise money and got a commitment from the Handleys that they would give money every year – a certain amount and they would give it as a donation so that there would be no earmarking for certain things so I could use it in any way I want. And then Arlington camera has been almost been almost a regular donor to the gallery and then we got a city of Arlington grant and some other money here and there.

And then for this other show I ended up writing several grants and ended up getting a lot of good grant money for that show, but that was a larger show and it was more ambitious and it was a big catalogue and I knew it was going to take up a lot of work, but I felt, again, strongly that we should support our local artists even though like in her case she's internationally known and she's in several museum collections and had several museum shows, but there's never been a survey and so this was like the first, I think, of other shows that I'll do, but I don't want to do them too frequently because it takes up a lot of energy. [Laughs.]

And then the catalogue – I mean, it's like I design the catalogue myself. I mean, the guy who is in there as designer is the one who physically put it together, but it's based on, you know, what I wanted so that was – and I feel real strongly about that.

And then that other thing was that I didn't want to show like her public artwork or installation work in our gallery and for the tour. And I told her at the very beginning that our space can only accommodate so much, so I need to really focus the show on that and if she didn't like that we could just drop it and let it go, although later on she would try to say, you know, well aren't we including installation in the show and so on, and I said no. I had to be real clear about what the show was going to entail.

And I think it's been a real successful show. I think she's been real happy with it and again now we've sent out a lot of catalogues all over the country and so that people, you know, know the work and know the show, so –

MS. CORDOVA: When you arrange a gallery showing, is there anything specific that you look for in the artist's work? Is there – when you're trying to choose what you will show?

MR. HUERTA: Yeah, I mean, I try sometimes to show things – like I think I talked about yesterday like Susan Harrington and Cesar Martinez.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. HUERTA: The idea of like there's something similar in their works, although, like, again you know, somebody thought well how come you're showing this artist with this Hispanic artist? So I'm trying to break down these kind of notions of going back to ethnic and culture – [coughing] – excuse me. I'll get some water.

MS. CORDOVA: All right, we're back recording.

MR. HUERTA: Okay, the other thing is like I also – the other way I like to look at things is how you can have different kinds of things so that they're so different that they really don't compete with each other. And I like that idea and I try to do that.

I remember doing this one show with Michael Whitehead and T. Paul Hernandez and Michael's work is much – in a sense, Michael's work is dealing with abstraction, but he comes about it in a kind of more romantic way in his approach to making the work, where T. Paul's work in the end has this kind of romantic quality about it. So there's this kind of romanticism, but one is in approach and one is in the look, and yet I really wanted to put them together and I really wanted to keep it – in their case, the installation kind of spare and I think it really worked.

And then also I did a show of a figure. It was like the figure three plus three times three where it was like three two-dimensional artists and three three-dimensional artists and each had three works and it – one was Rosemary Mesa, who did a drawing right on the wall and I asked her if she would do like three drawings on the wall and we talked about where it would be placed in the gallery. And then I had James Cobb who did this computer imagery of these kids that were – whose bodies were completely covered with tattoos and they were amazing. And then Jay Sullivan who did these figures – these three-dimensional figures that were somewhat like

using straw materials. And then Tre Arenz, who was a ceramicist in Austin. Actually, I was going to ask another woman, but she backed out and I ended up asking Tre to be in the show. She was doing some new work that had to deal with the figure, and so I used those. And then there was an artist from San Francisco, Frank Bourne, who had these small paintings.

And I really wanted to keep it to a single figure and that was the one thing that was common to everybody's work was they all dealt with a single figure. There was never multiple figures. In the end, because of a combination of all those works, there would become multiple figures – I mean, you know, in the space. And then there was Francis Bagley, who was doing some different kinds of work. I used – there was a bronze piece and then there was a piece that she was using – a material that she was draping over and then there was another piece that was much more skeletal.

And who else was in the show? I can't think of anybody else. So it was kind of a nice – and then the way I installed it – you know, one of the things that's nice about the gallery and doing regular shows, you can start playing with installation – laying out installation and that was like the other thing that intrigued me as a curator is design of installation and lighting and I really liked the idea of having a place where I'm so familiar with it that you start playing with the way it's installed.

And I liked, really, the way it looks and I felt like my colleague, Marilyn Jolly, has learned from me because I think she installed the show pretty well, although there's a few pieces I would switch around because simply because of the way it visually reads – certain things read and so that's where I think as a curator and doing it for a number of years you're just like – you do things a certain way, but it's only almost like make them – you tweak – you know how to tweak them even when you're beginning, so you don't even think about it. You're already doing the things automatically. And that's why, I guess, I like the idea – like as an artist too is like people will be thinking about all these different kinds of ideas and imagery and materials to get to the point where you don't even think about it. It's just so kind of intuitive, but at the same time don't get complacent about it.

You know, I think the other think I think for me as an artist is to keep on growing and, again, to maybe incorporate new materials, but as a curator it's to also keep on looking, you know. And I think that was the other thing that I feel a curator should do is keep on looking and be open to – you know, somebody asks to do a studio visit, I'll go do a studio visit.

Recently we got a grant from TCA I shared with Clint Willour at the Galveston Art Center and we for a grant from TCA to just go out and do studio visits and, you know, be able to go to other places other than the usual and it was kind of nice to know that I could do studio visits and financially it was taken care of for a whole year, and so I ended up doing more studio visits than usual. I mean, I actually went out and did them because I had a year to spend the money and so I felt almost – I told Rick Hernandez, who is the director of TCA I hoped they would continue that, but I hope that they would actually split it between a museum curator and then like either a non-commercial gallery curator like an alternative space or a university gallery curator. One is because the university or alternative space don't usually have much money to go do studio visits, so it would be good for them to, you know, get out.

The museum curator, even though they have money, never really focus, I think, their attention on the backyard – [laughter] – because I feel like – and I mentioned this to Bonnie Pitman, I said, it's interesting – who came on as the deputy director of the DMA – and I said, look, you have curators – the contemporary art curators and they're flying off to Europe; they're flying off to New York, but will they make a studio visit to Arlington? No.

And I think, you know, that's – but you see, when I make that statement I have to back it up as a curator. I mean, I feel like that's what I do. I go out and do stuff and I think their role as a curator should be looking at work here as well as in Europe and in New York. There's some great stuff being done here. So I feel like, you know, if I'm going to make these kinds of judgments and complaints, I need to make sure I back them up myself.

MS. CORDOVA: Sounds like a policy that you've pretty much followed through your life.

MR. HUERTA: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: And I think that's actually maybe a good note to be ending on because we've been talking a lot about the future and what you anticipate and what the challenge is. Maybe I could just sort of ask, as an artist do you see your work going in a specific direction right now and then with that question if there's anything else you want to add to this tape.

MR. HUERTA: Well, not – I don't see going in any other direction other than what I mentioned earlier about, you know, being able to do in a sense abstract work that still has a relevance.

One of the things that I found interesting in my own work and I think I really learned a lot when I did that retrospective book and I began to realize that as an artist and maybe for who I am I always have been – even

though the work has changed in a lot of different directions and ways, there's always been a tie to not necessarily the figure, but the representational, whether it's a human figure or whether it's a map. There's just a relationship to some reality as opposed to going completely abstract. And I think the idea in these large-scale paintings that I want to do that the majority of the piece will be abstraction and that is something that's really kind of new and different. And to just be – allow myself to accept that.

But at the same time, the map and the money part of it will also be there. That in a sense still ties me into the reality. But that's one of the things that I've kind of discovered about myself and that I have to have some kind of link to the real world somehow in the work. And I could never have the work – even though sometimes I've done art about art, I could never really – even the art about art has commentary about modern life and I think that I could never just do art about art in that sense, even though I would make a comment on it.

So I think those are the kinds of things I think about in the work and, you know, what is it and where do I see the work going? I don't know – I don't know, but that's what intrigues me, you know, is because I don't know. And if I knew, it's like, you know, I don't think I'd be as interested, you know. It's like, well, it takes the surprise out of it and it's like you don't know what's going to happen in life, but that's what makes the whole – makes life living is like you want to find out what's on the other side.

And people ask me – it's interesting, people ask me since I got this job and got this house and I'm building a studio if I'm going to stay in Arlington for the rest of my life, and I said I don't know, you know. I don't know what's going to happen, but all I know is that I'm going to continue to make art and I really want to push myself and I really want to grow.

And the other thing that I think one of the things that's interesting for me was that when I was a student and when I was a younger artist people would ask me, you know, who were my influences and I would name, you know, like Larry Rivers and Jasper Johns and Duchamp and Picasso and Manet and Goya, Velasquez, and on and on and on. But now I say, you know, really it's more my friends. I mean, I look at all these other artists still, you know, but it's my friends I have real dialogue with and look at their work and I see them changing and it makes me think about my work. And they're having shows in galleries and museums and they're now become much more influential, you know, in the sense that I'm having a real dialogue with living artists and, you know, it's like I still like looking at those other people, but I love seeing new works, younger artists, and artists that I don't know and – it's like I like hearing new music, you know, and it keeps me – you know, making me feel like I'm alive and that's what art is about.

It's – I find that some of my colleagues from before I got into art who were – when I was into music – you know, we talk about music nowadays and they're still listening to the old stuff – [laughter] – and it's like I'm glad I'm not there, you know. I mean, I like and I still hear that stuff, but I like to hear new stuff and it's the same with art and I like to see where it takes me and so far it's been – you know, I've been pretty fortunate. I can't say, you know, like I'm famous and rich, but I feel like I'm still able to do what I want to do and I feel like – as I said when I was younger, I said if I can still make art, you know, I feel I'm successful and that is what makes me happy and I guess I wished that more people would find that whatever that makes them happy – that they find that because that's what I've found.

All I know in the end – right now is that I want to do more of my art and I just want to curate. The teaching is a way to do that stuff. And the classes now that I've developed, professional practices is kind of about my experience as an artist and as a curator and working with contracts and the business of art and I think that's now a required subject at our University of Texas in Arlington.

And then I developed a works on paper class, which I really enjoy now. We just do critiques once a week of – and they bring in a new work every week and I like that. Real diverse – they can do anything they want to on paper on any subject, any material, medium. And I made those classes enjoyable for myself, and I think if I can make them enjoyable for myself it's enjoyable for others and I've had a lot of students tell me that they learned a lot and it's really helped them for the ones who have gone out there, so –

MS. CORDOVA: Great. Shall we end it there?

MR. HUERTA: Sure.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. Thank you. Stopping tape.

[END]

Last updated...September 12, 2007