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Oral history interview with Jesse Amado, 2004 May 31-June 7

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Transcript

Interview

Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas

Interview with Jesse Amado
Conducted by Cary Cordova
San Antonio, Texas
May 31 and June 7, 2004

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Jesse Amado on May 31 and June 7, 2004. The interview took place in San Antonio, Texas and was conducted by Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas.

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

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova from the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Jesse Amado on May 31, 2004 at his studio at 526 San Fernando Street – correct?

MR. AMADO: Correct.

MS. CORDOVA: Great. And, Jesse, my first question is a really easy one. When and where were you born?

MR. AMADO: When and where. I was born in 1951 in – here, San Antonio, Texas.

MS. CORDOVA: And was your family from here originally?

MR. AMADO: My father [Jesse Amado Sr.] was originally from Arizona – Tucson, Arizona – that's where he as born – and his father was a Spaniard, and I never quite understood – or I never was very specific about where he was from, my grandfather, because he left my dad at a very early age, when my dad was a young boy. So that information is really quite missing, the Amado lineage –I'm very vague about that. I'm not sure where my father came from – my grandfather came from on my father's side.

MS. CORDOVA: But he was from Spain originally?

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh, yeah. Yeah, my dad was – looked like a Spaniard. He was a gorgeous, handsome man. I wish I could have been more like dad sometimes but maybe not. Anyway, it's an interesting story.

Now, my mother's side – my mother [Frances Amado] was – like she was second-generation American. She was from south Texas, from San Diego, Texas. I mean, she was not from south Texas, I'm sorry. Her family – her dad and mother lived in south Texas, in San Diego and then they moved to San Antonio. So there's this lineage of Tejanos that my mother's a part of.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you spend a lot of time growing up there in south Texas?

MR. AMADO: No, no.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you visit them much?

MR. AMADO: Yes and no. I mean, I did at the very beginning when I was very, very young. We would take pretty much – it seems like almost on a monthly basis we would go down and spend the weekend or so, because, you know, the Prada line was still down there and I had probably about nine girl cousins and about two boy cousins that live there still, you know? But they were adults and I was probably four or five or so.

And so I remember those trips, those frequent trips, and I used to love to go even though I was a little bit uncomfortable sometimes but, you know, for the most part it was just a great, big playground, you know, sandy, dry, and lots of cotton fields, lots of hikes, you know, through the chaparral and going hunting rabbits and snakes with the hope of maybe spotting an Indian. And my cousins, my boy cousins – and they were probably in their 30s, I would say – they would always set me up by maybe like leaving a whip out there, you know, like they would claim that it belonged to an Indian, or they would make an arrow sticking in a post, fence post, and claim it was an arrow. And of course I believed it, you know? I was disingenuous; of course I was going to believe it.

And so I used to love that part of it, you know, riding horses and climbing on cows and –

MS. CORDOVA: Were there parts that you didn't love? Is that –

MR. AMADO: Well, there was parts – I mean, I just kind of never really got used to the food and I never really got used to like certain other parts of it. I mean, that many people sleeping in like two rooms, for instance. I guess my modesty was kind of challenged, I suppose, at that point. The outhouse and stuff like that. But the rest of it was great.

MS. CORDOVA: Now, what did your parents do for a living here in San Antonio?

MR. AMADO: Well, you mean before I was born or –

MS. CORDOVA: Sure, I mean, if you want to sort of take me through how they – end up – even met, how they met.

MR. AMADO: Right. Well, okay, let's start with how they met. As far as – my mother was – she came from a large family also. I think there was, oh, maybe seven girls and four boys – or six girls and four boys? So again, it was a large family and all living in one house, even as adults – a lot of the aunts and uncles had stayed there, you know, even as adults, they were still living there when I was growing up. But I never knew my grandfather or my grandmother on either side. I never had grandparents. They all died before I was born. I had a great uncle that maybe was a surrogate grandfather and he was the one that sort of kept the family together and, you know, involved in – caring for each other, essentially. So that was kind of what my mother came from, and she was born here in San Antonio and she was basically a sales clerk at a clothing store.

I remember a lot of stores that she used to tell me about. I think it is called Sol Frank Company, and basically they specialized in making military uniforms, so it was a tailor basically. And they had tailors there and they had – they would make custom uniforms, custom hat accessories, you know, like ribbons, and hats and gloves and swords and things like that. I mean, it's right across the street from Joskes, old Joske's, which is, you know, an institution of San Antonio, an institution – [inaudible].

So I remember she used to talk about that quite a bit and she would even write commercials for the company that were back then before the advent – the real advent of television – as we know it now. She – they used to make advertisements that they would show after movies, you know, in between movies. And so she used to be – she used to make those advertisements. She was a very attractive woman also.

MS. CORDOVA: Did she model then?

MR. AMADO: Well, she was sort of an actress, I would say – model/actress. [Laughter.] Doesn't that sound so – [laughter]. Never made it big but she was, you know, the local pretty girl around here I guess. So my father was in the military, in the Army, and was stationed here and that's where they met. They met at San Pedro Park during a student party, I think. My dad was very shy, extremely shy, even more shy than I am, which is an interesting thing because shyness can be misinterpreted so many ways. You're either too sullen or you're too – you know, you're such a snob, or Jesus Christ, quit going around acting so superior, you know. So my dad was like that, but they met and they fell in love and got married and then he got out of the Army.

And so he had a very interesting life, and really a lot of it was caught up to me when he was dying, which was in the year 2000. My mother died first and then my dad died two months later, so I lost them both, that's, you know, within that period. But at least I had an opportunity to talk to my dad before he died and finally started to listen up and he told me stories. But he was basically someone that quit school and was illiterate because of that. When he quit school he was in the first grade. I think he was seven years old, and he had to help support the family. And so he took to the streets and he became rather adept with street culture and he became a tough guy. Nobody messed with my dad. That became a rule of the streets, the mean streets of Tucson – [inaudible] – and so that's kind of how he survived, and he learned how to be a survivor in that way.

So it's really an interesting story because ultimately my father turned out to be one of the most gentlest and kindest men I've ever known. And he was so sensitive, incredibly sensitive. He would cry a lot and – and he was sort of – he was a big crier, my father. I actually made a piece that's in the San Antonio Museum of Art about my dad, just how he cried. So that was about my father, but – which was kind of ironic. I mean, it's a strange story to be hearing – to hear him – telling about being the way he was and being a tough guy and really –I guess just a bully in a way.

MS. CORDOVA: And then when he met your mother he decided to move to San Antonio?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, right. I mean, he had gone to – he was a World War II veteran so he spent a couple of years in Europe in the campaigns in the South Pacific. And so he used to tell me a few stories about that, being in the

military and being – well, most people in a war situation, those atrocities that always accompany those war experiences. Everyone I guess that's been in war had a similar story about losing a friend or just being in that situation. So there were a few of those stories, and I know he didn't really want to talk too much about that. So he came back and then that's when he met my mother.

But as a consequence of all of that, being a tough guy, being respected on the streets, nobody messes with me – I remember one story that he related about a young Asian – Chinese student that was going to school in Tucson, and everyone picked on him. So he went to my father and offered to pay him a little bit of money and feed him every day for protection. So my dad offered him protection, and as a consequence to that my dad really loved Chinese food. That was his favorite cuisine because of that. I said, "Why do you like it so much?" And he told me the story. So that was kind of what he was all about. People were scared of him.

So until – in the end his mother finally told him that, you know, if you don't stop this you're going to get in a little trouble. You're going to get killed or you're going to end up in jail. So I guess he heeded his mother's advice and that's when he joined the military I think, the Army. So he kind of cut that out. But I'm sure he was a pretty mean bastard in the fields of war too as well.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you get any of that? Did that – I mean, you were shy but not that side.

MR. AMADO: No, no. I'm pretty much a pacifist. I really turn the other cheek and I don't like aggression or confrontation very much. I've only recently learned how to really deal with that, to kind of stand up for myself.

What I'm leading up to is that because of my father's situation as a young man and also because of being pulled historically into this era where there's a war going on, this last, great, big war that involved so much of the world, that conflict, I think he was really molded by that and, really, when he came out of the military – all you need is guns. And how to fight, and so that's what he did; he was a gunrunner. He used to be a gunrunner between here and Mexico. And so he became this criminal, really. So he was running guns between here and Mexico, like I said, and he became very good at it, and it became a very lucrative business for him.

So for the very early part of my life I do remember living pretty much a high-style kind of life because he was making very good money, and we had the two-story home and – actually it was right here about where Hemisfair [Park] is now, so it was like really older, older neighborhood, and – you know, the maids and the cars and the beautiful clothes my mother and dad used to wear, and things like that. And then he – but then my dad was also kind of – he was really a philanderer and so he was – sometimes he wasn't at home. Sometimes he wasn't home for days and – you know, just the typical pattern – a lot of men that were philanderers – gun runners used to do about that – and so I would always – he sent for my mother to go get me and she knew his hangouts – from inside the bars a lot. But my dad was such a charming man that – he was shy but very, very charming, and everybody seemed to love him – that he would induce me to stay by offering me sodas and chips and stuff like that. So I would sit there with him instead and my mother would just get furious and tell me to come out. She was waiting outside. I remember that kind of conflict.

So there was that dysfunction in my family too. So I guess I was seeing all that and it just became part of my history as well. So it was a very interesting experience.

MS. CORDOVA: Did he stop being a gunrunner at some point?

MR. AMADO: Well, what happened – I was leading up to that – what happened is that, yeah, he got caught and he got caught in Mexico. So it took every asset that we had to get him out of trouble. It cost us everything that we had to get him out of trouble. So at that point everything changed and it became a matriarchal situation. It was no longer a patriarchal situation. And my mother just took charge of the family and she said, "Well, this is the way things are going to be from now on," and my dad deferred to that. I guess it was a very, very, very humbling experience for him.

MS. CORDOVA: About what year was that and how old were you?

MR. AMADO: I was probably about five. And so whatever year that was, '56 – mid-fifties sometime. So that was a big change. The maids were gone, the maids were leaving – packing and leaving and the cars were being sold and the furniture was being sold and the house was being sold and suddenly we were like dirt poor. We didn't have anything. And my dad had no capabilities really of making a living because he was illiterate and he just knew how the streets worked and nothing more than that.

And it was a traditional family. My dad was going to go out and work and my mother was going to stay home, and raise us, my brother and myself. And my brother is mentally retarded, by the way. He's still alive but he's mentally retarded. So there was that factor as well, that situation, you know, just the two of us and basically it was my brother, he was mentally retarded, and there was me, so I was kind of like an only child in a way because there was little communication with my brother because he was – you know.

MS. CORDOVA: And what's his name?

MR. AMADO: His name is Gilbert.

MS. CORDOVA: Gilbert.

MR. AMADO: And is he older or younger?

MS. CORDOVA: He's younger. He's two years younger. And he's still alive.

MR. AMADO: Where is he now?

MS. CORDOVA: He's staying in a home that is a home for mentally retarded folks. And – he's in a good situation; he's in a great situation.

MR. AMADO: What did you do at that point when you were poor and you had this brother with a mental health situation?

MS. CORDOVA: Well, the options were very limited for those kind of kids. I think there maybe there was two schools in San Antonio that were actually equipped and able and capable of doing kids like that.

MR. AMADO: You have a very quiet voice, so I just want to make sure – if you remember, just try to keep it up a little.

MS. CORDOVA: Keep it up, all right. I know.

Oh, yeah, so it was a problem. It became a problem because they just weren't very sophisticated and – not to the extent they are now. They didn't have the capabilities that they have now. So my brother was a problem at school so my mother eventually took him out of school and he never went back to school, so therefore he just never developed – his mind never really developed like it should have so he never was able to really speak eloquently or fairly – learn to read and write and do anything like that. So he became very – he was never self-sufficient, so he became very dependent on my mother. And he lived with them until they died.

So that was another situation I was kind of – well, not necessarily dysfunctional but certainly odd and not normal, and seeing my other – you know, my other friends and what their family situation is like. Which always seemed to be a better situation than my situation, but ultimately maybe it wasn't. But anyway, it was not an easy thing to experience all that, especially later as an adult, being able to realize the – just the pratfalls and all that.

MS. CORDOVA: What level of education did your mother attain?

MR. AMADO: She was a high school graduate.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. AMADO: So she was – she was literate and she loved to read, and that's something that I picked up from her. And she also had the artistic talent. I remember she used to draw things for me. Whenever I'd ask her – beg her sometimes – to draw something for me she would draw something. So I know that that ability comes from my mother, because I used to do that as a child – I used to draw a lot and make things. And I guess basically it all reverts back to my situation, being kind of like an only child, so I had to rely on my imagination a lot, especially in the early years before I was really old enough to be able to go out on my own, and I was perhaps 12 or so, then my mother – I had a little bit more freedom to seek out my friends and therefore I was able to do that, and it was another distraction – my time– my mind, so that I didn't have to rely on my imagination so much to kind of do that for me.

So I used to spend a lot of time by myself in making up imaginary games and imaginary situations, and I would kind of go into my dad's garage and make things, make my own toys with whatever was there. And I would sit at the kitchen table and draw a lot too.

MS. CORDOVA: What kinds of things did you draw?

MR. AMADO: I used to draw just whatever drew my fancy. Sometimes it came out – eloquent sometimes. I don't remember exactly. I do remember the comic books and I do remember things out of magazines – you know, pictures out of magazines like Life magazine. I used to do that a lot too. A lot of times there was illustrations in there like a Civil War uniform, so I used to like to draw that. I was kind of fascinated by uniforms, I guess. And I guess history, I guess – history and war, because I remember in fourth grade I would always draw these scenes on a sheet of notebook paper. They were war scenes. It might be a sea battle or it might be a battle on land, but

I would draw all the tanks, all the armored vehicles and all the soldiers. Then I would hand them to my friends and then my friends would blow them all up with their pencils. I mean, they would just get a pen – you know, like that.

So I used to do that. I remember especially – it was the fifth grade, which meant I was 11 or something like that –

MS. CORDOVA: Why were you so interested in war?

MR. AMADO: I don't know. It was just a fascination of some kind. I don't know, I just related to that. Maybe it was because of my dad, maybe because of the knowledge that my dad had gone to war, and I admired my dad so much, loved him so much, because my dad was just – like I said, he never, never, ever spanked me – never, ever spanked me, and hardly rose his voice to me. That's my mother; she was the disciplinarian. She was the one that chased me around the house with a belt, stick or something like that. I would run to my dad and my dad would try to protect me but it wouldn't always work.

MS. CORDOVA: What would you get in trouble for?

MR. AMADO: Just being mischievous, but she was stern – she was a stern disciplinarian. So I didn't get away with too much. If I just disobeyed her just a little bit then that was a good cause for her to blow up and discipline me – you know hit me, spank me. I think she just was kind of bitter, I guess, at that point. I'm starting to realize that she was just kind of bitter about the situation.

MS. CORDOVA: Because of your whole shift in economics and –

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: – the philandering?

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh, the philandering, and their retarded son and the constant care that that took. You know, it just didn't work out for her, I don't think, and I don't think she was very, very extremely happy after that. I don't think so –

MS. CORDOVA: But your parents stayed together?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, they stayed together – amazingly so. But it was very dysfunctional, especially towards the end. It was just at odds all the time, arguing all the time. It was so hard to visit because they were always, like I said, at odds, and I always had to take a position, and that is the hardest thing to do. I didn't want to do that because they would solicitate me to listen to their story and take their side, so I had to do that all the time. But I really felt sorry for my dad, but – and my mother. I knew how she was. She would just push him. She was – inflatigate herself – she wasn't very mature.

MS. CORDOVA: Where did she get this artistic side, do you think?

MR. AMADO: I don't know. I'm not really sure.

MS. CORDOVA: What kinds of things did she draw?

MR. AMADO: People, figures, like that – and she used to sew a lot and she would embroider a lot, I guess so, and of course embroidery requires design and all that, so she was very good at that as well. And so she did those kinds of things. She did crafts things too, quite a bit. So she just had a, I don't know, propensity, affinity for doing those kinds of things. And so that's probably where I picked that up too, you know, just wanting to make things with my hands. That's a compulsion, I guess, make someone do that kind of thing.

MS. CORDOVA: What kind of a student were you like in school?

MR. AMADO: I was a good student. I was a very good student. Now, I was a good student most of the time. I was above average for sure.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you enjoy school or –

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm, I really enjoyed school. I really did. It was just a year too long. Really it was just a year too long.

MS. CORDOVA: A year too long?

MR. AMADO: Yeah. Instead of 12 grades there should have been 11 grades and then my whole life would have

been completely different.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MR. AMADO: Oh, yeah, it would have been completely different. That one year really made a difference in my life.

MS. CORDOVA: What happened?

MR. AMADO: What happened?

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. AMADO: Okay, let's fast-forward to the twelfth grade. I was on track to be an architect, and I had the support of the teachers and I was doing really good in school, although I was – I turned into a smart ass at some point, when I went to high school, I guess. And so I was always cracking up, disrupting class, getting in trouble, getting sent to the vice principal all the time. Back then they used to paddle you, so I used to get a lot of paddling. So in spite of that I was still a good student, very much, and I was making good grades. And I took some industrial drafting courses, because they didn't have any art classes. And I excelled at that and so the teacher really thought – the instructor really thought that I had a penchant to become a very good architect. And I was winning awards and stuff like that.

So what happened is that he was able to get – with his help I was able to get – my last year in high school was to get a scholarship to Texas A&M for architecture, but by the time – midway into the semester – or into the school year, I just decided that that's not what I wanted to do. I just lost interest in school. I lost interest in studying. I just became really, really bored by the curriculum and I just was not interested in that at all. It wasn't vibrant – it didn't have much to offer in terms of inspiration and I just wanted to – I don't know, I just didn't want – I couldn't see myself doing another four years of school. That's the last thing I wanted to do. I didn't want to be a desk anymore. I didn't want to behave. I really just wanted to go out and experienced life a little bit.

So because of that I just turned it down and I became even more mischievous during my last year. I really got into a lot of trouble. And I even was – I was – I got – for two summers I studied – because I was on this architectural track I studied with O'Neil Ford, who was a renowned and successful architect in San Antonio. He's designed a lot of UTSA [University of Texas, San Antonio] and Hemisfair [Park], he was a part of that, and there's homes everywhere that he's designed. So he was sort of the patriarch of architects here – [inaudible].

And so I was able to work with him for two summers. And so – and I was doing very well, but there was an incident where I got caught – you know, because I used to have a key to the – this is kind of embarrassing but it's true nevertheless. I had the key to the office and I took my girlfriend there once so we could make out, and he caught us making out – more than making out, let's say. So I was so embarrassed, you know, and he was so funny because he wouldn't turn the light off and he was just kind of looking at us – looking at her more than looking at me. Of course she was a beautiful girl and she was like completely naked. Of course he was going to be looking at her. So I just asked him, "Well, could you first please turn off the light and we'll get out?" And so the next day I called and said, "I can't go back; I quit. I am too embarrassed." And he says, "No, no, no, no, no, don't worry about it. It's okay. It really is okay. You can come back and we'll forget all about it. Just don't do it again but come back." And I said, "No, I can't. I just can't."

And so I think that kind of also contributed to the fact that – and that was the summer before my senior year so those two – well, that incident I think really had a major contribution to my decision as to not be an architect.

MS. CORDOVA: I can imagine.

MR. AMADO: So that's fast-forwarding to that.

MS. CORDOVA: That's quite a story.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, so that was it. I wasn't going to do that and I wasn't going to go to school, and there was a war being fought, a very unpopular war. I had a cousin who had come back from the war and he said, "You don't want to go," and he told me the horror stories of it. And I read *Catch-22* [1970] and I became aware of actually – to be hero you didn't necessarily have to go to war. You could walk away from war. You could turn it down. You could be a resister and still be a person of character. So that's what *Catch-22* taught me.

So I knew that I couldn't do that, but I didn't want to go to school so I really had no choice, or I couldn't go to – I didn't even think about going to Canada. No one ever talked about going to Canada in San Antonio. So I ended up joining the Navy as a consequence of that, and –

MS. CORDOVA: Did you feel like you were about to be drafted?

MR. AMADO: Oh, I did. I got my draft notice, and I went for the examination and I got accepted, or whatever it is, classified 1-A, I suppose, back then, and so with that kind of hanging over me I just became aggressive and just joined up with the Navy instead. So I went off to become a sailor, and I was like 17 years old. And so that was a very interesting part of my life. It was a big change. I had never really – I had been to parts of Louisiana, I'd been to parts of Mexico, I'd been to Tucson, but I'd never really ventured much further than that because my family just didn't travel. My mother didn't like to travel so we never traveled anywhere extensively or very far.

MS. CORDOVA: When had you traveled to those places? For what reason had you gone to Mexico or Louisiana or –

MR. AMADO: I used to go with my aunt a lot. My aunt used to like to travel, and she was single. She was an old maid, like we used to call them back then. And she would take my cousin and myself all the time with her on trips, and my favorite uncle. So the four of us would just go around on trips – her trips. She was great. She was really great. I used to love her for that.

MS. CORDOVA: Was your cousin also a boy?

MR. AMADO: No, it was a girl.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. AMADO: She was one year older. Oh, yeah –

MS. CORDOVA: What about – sort of to backtrack a little bit, what did your father do for a living after –

MR. AMADO: Oh, okay.

MS. CORDOVA: – after the crash, if you will?

MR. AMADO: After the crash, right – the market crash. Well, we he decided not to jump out of the building and commit suicide –

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] That's a good start.

MR. AMADO: And it was my great-uncle that really saved him because he – oddly enough, he worked for Tobin Aerial Surveys, which is just right down the street, and it's a building that Linda Pace just bought where she's going to make her new home and apartments and stuff. But it was a mapping company and Tobin made his fortune from making maps for the military, and then having the acumen to be able to switch that and making maps for the oil companies after that, so he made a great fortune out of that. So my uncle – great-uncle worked there and so he got my father a job there. He became a surveyor. So that's what he did; he was a surveyor after that.

And he struggled to learn it because – luckily it was about numbers and he was good with numbers. He was really good with numbers so he was able to read maps and utilize mathematics even though he couldn't read. So he managed to – we managed to survive for several years until things started to change and there was more things required from him. So it became too much pressure and stuff, and it was very stressful and he got a stroke. He was probably – he was very young. He was probably my age. I'm 53 so he was like – I think he was 53 as well and he got a stroke. So he just was on the couch even since then. So he just kind of stayed at home after that. And – yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: How did your family manage?

MR. AMADO: Well, my mother was always kind of in charge anyway so she just kind of became even more in charge then. Her duties became more intensified. Now she was the one who had to drive the car as well – I mean, my father was able to do – he was just affected; he walked with a limp and it affected his speech but he was able to function fairly well, but there was a lot of things he couldn't do, and so that – frustration set in with him too because he was such a vibrant, virile man for all those years – great dancer, the whole thing – always very – joie de vivre – just loved life. And so that really knocked him down too.

So that was another minor little tragedy in our life, in our family life, that one had to deal with once again. So –

MS. CORDOVA: Were your parents religious at all?

MR. AMADO: Uh-uh.

MS. CORDOVA: So you didn't grow up with any religion?

MR. AMADO: Well, I mean, they required me to go to church. I mean, they at least were responsible enough to make sure that I went to church, but even at that point, like in high school, even a little bit earlier, I just turned away from religion too. I was sent to church on Sundays but I never went, because I lived in near-downtown area in the King William area – I grew up there – and so that was always within walking distance of downtown. So I would walk to church with my friends, and after a while we just stopped going to church and we became disinterested and disillusioned with it and so we would just mess around, go to the hot dog stands and walk up and down the river or looking for mischief and – or go the movies – anything but go to church.

MS. CORDOVA: And your parents didn't go?

MR. AMADO: Uh-uh. My parents didn't go. So it was easy to get away with it, and – but at first I was – church was good; it was good. But actually my – all right, let's really back up – talking about church. I always make this claim, you know, and become very traumatic when I make this claim that – melodramatic, you know, that my very first art project – my very first art piece was – see, when I was four years old my mother sent me to parochial school and I was going to St. Mary's church school downtown because you know that's when we still had money. Anyway, so she wanted to get me – she believed in education so she wanted to get me started right away, and I was somewhat precocious. They didn't have any age requirements back then for when you could attend parochial school. Otherwise, public school you have to be six years old. So she was antsy to get me going so she sent me to parochial school.

So what happened was that – well, I was in parochial school for several months and since I was in the first grade we would always line up to go to mass in the lobby for the school, and one weekend I had spent with my girl cousin, Bonnie – the one that I used to take trips with – and I was really fascinated with her because even though she was like really – like she was seven, I guess, something like that, she was painting her toenails, so I became very fascinated with that. I was just fascinated watching her do that. I think I was probably sexually turned on by that at that point. I think it was something like that.

And so I watched her very, very intently and then, like I said, every day we would go to mass. We lined up, and since I was Amado I was always first in line, and there was this statue of Christ that was right there at the doorway leading into the tunnel that led into the church, and its feet was always at my eye level. And so I kept looking at that for a couple of days and then during recess one time I went back and I painted the toenails of the Christ red, like I had seen my cousin do. And so when I did that, that was blasphemous. I was kicked out of parochial school.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MR. AMADO: Yeah. So that was my parochial school experience. So my mother said, "Oh, shit, you're not going to a private school, you're not going to parochial school, you're going to public school." You're going to have to wait and all that.

MS. CORDOVA: So there were no second chances at parochial school.

[Laughter.]

MR. AMADO: There was no second chances – no second chances whatsoever, which was just as well. The sisters were so cruel. They were brutally cruel.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, they were tough, man; they're hard. I didn't like them too much. But nevertheless, that's what I did. And so that was my first art piece.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you have any idea that what you would be doing would incur such consequences?

MR. AMADO: No. No, no, no, no, none whatsoever. No, it was just – it seemed like a good idea. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and I just didn't have enough discipline to be able to go back. Ultimately that's – my compulsions are so strong that I get into trouble that way, even as an adult. I've got control of that now but a better part of my adult like I was very compulsive and I just said, "Fuck it" – stuff that I – I knew I was being really irresponsible. I wanted the experience, you know? I wanted that life experience. I wanted to know what it felt like to do that.

MS. CORDOVA: Now, was there any – maybe jumping ahead a little bit back to the Navy, is there any control that you could take of that particular situation, or was it pretty much you were sent wherever they were going to send you and –

MR. AMADO: Oh, no, I didn't have – no, I didn't have any control of that.

MS. CORDOVA: And so what was that like? Where did you end up going to school?

MR. AMADO: Oh, that was probably what changed my life, going into the Navy. You know, you go to boot camp and you get sent – I got sent to the West Coast, to San Diego, and that was, whatever, four or five months, and then I had – we took aptitude tests and they found out I had an aptitude for doing work in communications, so I went to a communications school – electronics and communications, and so I became a radio man, what they call someone that works in communications. And so that was great because I was operations. It wasn't like – you weren't a deckhand. You weren't working like working in the bowels of the ship on the engine. You weren't an engine man. That was the hard work. That's what I didn't want to do. So I just – my intelligence at that time kind of saved me from that kind of fate in the Navy, so I was –in operations, which is much easier and much cleaner, and much more interesting. The people are a lot more interesting.

And so, you know, the war was fuming and I was thinking maybe I need to go to Vietnam. Maybe I shouldn't have chickened out. But I didn't aggressively – I just said that but I didn't aggressively seek it. And I ended up going to the East Coast. I went to Newport, Rhode Island after about nine months or so of being in the military. And that was great. That was the greatest experience that ever happened to me, because from there I met a lot of interesting people. A good friend of mine was from New York, in Brooklyn, and I used to go to New York City like every two weeks with him. And the family took me in and they really liked me and kind of even – I almost felt like a son to them.

And so that's when I became very, very familiar with New York City, because a lot of times I'm just going by myself, going to the city. It was so fun. You know, this very, very shy south Texas brown boy just figuring things out and just take a lot of trips by myself. Sometimes I would even go to New York City by myself because I had some friends and I would stay with them and hang out in Manhattan a lot and – I used to see a lot of art too because it was like free. Museums were free at the time. Galleries were – if you had the courage to go into a gallery you could do that. And I used to see a lot of like early work – Rauschenberg's back in the late '60s – I'm talking about like '69 to '70 I would say.

MS. CORDOVA: I was just thinking what a sort of conflict or interesting situation to be part of the military but also walking around in the late '60s Manhattan, New York, and sort of in the art scene, which was very much, I would say, against the war.

MR. AMADO: Oh, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: And so, did you ever feel like an outsider in that regard, as just someone coming in from the Navy, or was –

MR. AMADO: Or vice versa, even.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. AMADO: No, I never did. I was pretty adaptable. I was kind of a comedian at that point. I learned how to become that. I found out that people liked me for some reason, and so they either gravitated towards me or I gravitated towards them. I just made a lot of friends during that time. Maybe it was my naiveté or just my enthusiasm for life, or just my – willing to take risks and do things that weren't allowed to be done – break the rules. I mean, I either – when I was in Newport I had a roommate who was older than me, who was a college graduate and the son of a doctor from New Jersey, and he was like the spitting image of Paul Newman. And I learned a lot from him because women loved him. He was a magnet for women, and we were roommates, and so I learned a lot about women just from observing him. He was good. He was really good.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you learn?

[Laughter.]

MR. AMADO: Well, just how to deal with situations and learn how to meet women and talk to them and not be scared of them, not be shy around them, and how to be confident – a little bit more confident around them. Although, you know, I was just an awkward – I was never him, that's for sure. He was the master. But I was kind of the shy sidekick that was mysterious: what is he anyway, what's his nationality – that kind of thing, because back then on the East Coast the last thing that they thought of was – they though I was everything else but Mexican –

MS. CORDOVA: What did they think you were?

MR. AMADO: Oh, everything: Jewish, Italian, Portuguese, Middle Eastern, all that, Cuban – So that was kind of an interesting position to be in. So there was –

MS. CORDOVA: How did you respond? Would you identify yourself as Mexican American or would you just sort of –

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: – allow yourself to be seen however they wanted to see you?

MR. AMADO: Sometimes. It depended– most of the time – if I liked them I would reveal to them what I was and who I was. Otherwise it's just, again – a minor thing that didn't really, you know – who I was – Anyway I was just bringing that up because it was an interesting experience – life experience to have Paul Newman as my roommate. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: I can imagine.

MR. AMADO: And he was a hell-raiser. Oh, my god. We used to drink like 10-cent beers, spring beers, and play pool a lot and just – oh, we were always getting in trouble.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you stay in touch with him?

MR. AMADO: No. No. Once, I left – I left first; I was transferred – we never did.

MS. CORDOVA: To where?

MR. AMADO: I went to Little Creek, Virginia. I went into the amphibious fleet. So, actually what was really unique about the situation in Rhode Island was that it was a communications station. It was the big communication station for Vietnam and the fleet. And so it was big. There were a lot of people that worked there, so I got to meet a lot of people and had a lot of misadventures there too, a lot of fun there.

How are we doing?

MS. CORDOVA: Good.

MR. AMADO: Okay. What was I going to say? Oh, and so they had the main station and then across the bay – we had to cross over the big bridge, the Newport bridge, to get to – there was this mainland site where the transmitters were – all the transmitters – and so I was – I was – I was transferred to the transmitter site. And so at that point I kind of had my own crew. I was in charge of the crew. And so – and they were very, very lax. Back then you couldn't grow a beard, you couldn't grow long hair, but I had a beard and I had long hair, so I didn't look like I was in the military. I looked like a civilian. And so that helped a lot. I could make up things about who I was, because back in Newport there was a couple of girl colleges. We'd go to the bars where they would go and we'd just make up stories because we didn't look like we were in the military. So that was kind of an advantage that I had.

MS. CORDOVA: You guys sound like terrors. [Laughter.]

MR. AMADO: I don't know if we were or not. I don't think we caused any real harm.

MS. CORDOVA: Just flirting.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, just flirting, goofing. But that was kind of an advantage. So when I went to Newport, Rhode Island – I mean, to Little Creek, Virginia, I took about a month and a half off before I went – my hair really got long. And so I show up for duty on this ship and everybody is like giving me this look like – everybody's got hair shorter than this, or this short, and they're just like looking at me as I'm walking down the hallways, and then later on I found out that they thought I was like an undercover agent, that I was working for the police or something like that and I was there to bust people and that was the way that I was going to be able to get in.

But that turned out to be a very interesting experience too because I was in the Caribbean fleet, so every two months we would pick up a bunch of Marines – despicable Marines from North Carolina – and just drop them off somewhere in the Caribbean. And then we would just go island hopping on our way back and it would take up to two weeks to get back and we'd hit all the islands. So I had some really, really interesting experiences all over the Caribbean – all over, from Aruba to Costa Rica to Guantanamo Bay.

Once we went there, and that was a horror. That was like a total wasteland. It was like T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* [1922]. It was so amazingly – I just – were just there for two days and it was hellish. Really, I was never so scared in my life. I had to deliver some messages to a couple of ships down the pier and I had to go – at the time that the bars were letting out. Oh, god, everybody was picking fights – everybody was just in a belligerent mood, and I swear it was the most hellish scene I've ever seen in my life. It was just really, really incredible. I'll never forget that, just – everybody was just like this – like a scene out of some decadent bacchanal scene that you could

imagine ever painted by anyone. It was like almost Bosch in a way. It was really incredible. And now we own a lot of Guantanamo Bay and what it represents. I remember that – just that little slice of land in the southern part of Cuba. I had no business being there.

That's what it does. It results in this kind of behavior where you just decide in yourself to become something else. You become ancient or something, something else. It's evil – it's really evil.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, what's kind of fascinating about your description is using T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Hieronymous Bosch's paintings. Did you have the language to create this comparison at that time or is that sort of coming from –

MR. AMADO: Yes, I think so, because I have always been a voracious reader, even as a child. Whenever there was a comic book or whatever I was always reading, always reading. And so when I left high school – even in high school I read a lot, and I continued reading. So I was just – when I was going to New York City a lot I would go to bookstores a lot and I would – and I was keeping up. I was getting the books that needed to be read. So I was always reading. So, yeah. I mean, more than anything I have literary comparisons setup all the time. I became in love with literature before I became in love with the visual arts. That was – even when I went back to UT and I was taking some art courses, you know, and being asked to maybe major in art because I was doing pretty good, and I said, "No, I really want to study literature." So that was my first choice, the written word.

MS. CORDOVA: Had you also been writing a lot in high school?

MR. AMADO: In high school? Not really. But once I got out of high school, yeah, I was like an avid letter reader – I meant letter writer, and I used to keep journals, and I used to even get creative with like the official journals that we would keep. Like I said, even when I was on a ship I had my own crew so I was in charge of this crew, and we used to have to keep a log every day. And so one time we went off to the Caribbean and I was so bored that I started making entries into the log that referred to like a space adventure, like we were going off to space. And so I made all these entries, pages and pages of these entries, and I gave everybody a fictional name. I was whatever, Space Captain, or something. I forget now. And so I got in trouble for that. Once someone discovered that these entries were being made I got in a lot of trouble for that.

But see, when I went on that ship I really had a bad attitude. I really just – I knew I could get away with a lot of stuff and I did. And if I thought I was a hell-raiser before or you thought I was a hell-raiser before, I really became a hell-raiser then.

MS. CORDOVA: And this was in Rhode Island or in Virginia?

MR. AMADO: In Virginia when I was on the ship.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, when you were on the ship.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, the amphibious ship. Yeah, it was just like – talk about a – bacchanal. A lot of drinking, a lot of drugs, a lot of philandering and just – it's just amazing – amazing what I did. Just a lot of – and I was just crazy. I mean, we're in the Caribbean. We'd go to a port and we would – every one of us would score a pound of pot, a pound of weed, because it was so cheap, you know, 60 bucks – and the greatest weed in the world. Everybody would bring it on board. And I was in communications so I always knew when the dogs were going to come on board. So we always got our shit and stowed it way in the bowels of the ship where no dog would ever want to go, because we had friends – potheads that were engine people too. And basically we'd just – like a bunch of satyrs led by Pan, all over the ship at night we would just go from one – always stay one step ahead just smoking our pot and having a good time. It's a good sensation, being stoned on the ocean where all you can see is water and sky at night, or stars and one moon.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you ever use pot for creative inspiration? Was that ever part of it?

MR. AMADO: No, not per se. No, not per se. It was just recreational and just a way of escaping and, yeah, just having fun, trying to make the best of the situation that we were in, being in the military. But, you know, I made a lot of friends, again, a lot of smart people, a lot of interesting people.

MS. CORDOVA: And sort of going back to New York – and I know that the bookstores and the art scene were important for you –

MR. AMADO: And cinema too.

MS. CORDOVA: And cinema too. And maybe you could just talk a little bit about where you would go or what movies you were seeing or what artwork was really reaching you.

MR. AMADO: Well, I would just see so much art, whether I went to the Metropolitan and saw what was in there

and/or just accidentally walking into galleries – you know, Jasper Johns – and just knowing – feeling that I could do something like that too and not really expressing it – not verbalizing it but just thinking that I liked it and that I could do something like that. But I never really, really pursued it, not at that time. I was still too young. I was, whatever, 19 years old or something like that. I thought I was still too young. For me I was still too young. I had bigger fish to fry, let's say. I'll save that for later, but not now. I'm young and I'm full of spunk, you know, so I'm just going to seek adventures.

And then cinema, very important because suddenly I realize that foreign films were being made that I've never seen here in San Antonio, but I used to go to the Mexican cinema a lot. I used to watch a lot of Mexican movies with my family at the Alameda, and so that was really important. But there were foreign films. These were like – people were speaking French and Italian and German. It's like, oh, my god, that's interesting. And I guess one of the very first films that really struck a chord with me was *L'Avventura* [1960] by Antonioni. And I actually have done lots of work about that, which we'll discuss at some point.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, I remember your work.

MR. AMADO: So that was really, really an important film, to the point where today I even still do work about it. I still do – I still did a piece – Bruce – [inaudible] – bought it.

MS. CORDOVA: Should we talk about its importance then or should we save it?

MR. AMADO: Let's save it.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. So, then, I thought it was funny when you said, those were foreign films and Mexican films here were not foreign films, which I think is indicative of San Antonio in some way. What about the – did you grow up speaking Spanish? Was that the primary language in your household?

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: So what about the challenge of learning English for you? Was that –

MR. AMADO: It was an interesting challenge. But, yeah, I was frustrated a little bit at first because I wanted to express myself and I couldn't do it because I had to go to public school and you weren't allowed to speak Spanish in public school. Actually, you were punished if you spoke Spanish in public schools, only English. So I had to struggle through that the first year. But then the second year became much better. I learned quickly and I – so I made the transition okay. The first year was really hard thought. My first grade was really, really hard, but gradually after that – I even started to win some of the candy that was given out as prizes for excelling in the courses – in your assignments at the end of the school year when summer draws near.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you think your bilingualism has contributed to your interest in literature and writing and language? Is that relevant at all?

MR. AMADO: I don't think so. I've never thought of it that way. I've never really considered it that way, not really – not really. No – no, I wouldn't say.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you still use Spanish regularly?

MR. AMADO: Not as much as I like to – not as much as I used to. It's rusty. It's very rusty. What I do when this happens, I thrust myself into the language by going to Mexico and spending a month or two there and getting the words back, then I'm okay. But I have to do that. Yeah, that's how I do it. Otherwise it's really rusty and I can't communicate like I want to. I couldn't be speaking right now in Spanish.

MS. CORDOVA: A complete switch.

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: So what year did you get out of the Navy?

MR. AMADO: Um, 1972, I believe – in the spring of '72, two months early. I was able to get an early out. It was very classic, very cinematically classic, looking out the back of that taxi as I'm driving and waving goodbye to my friends: so long suckers! [Laughter.] I am free!

MS. CORDOVA: And where did you go?

MR. AMADO: I went to New York City for a little bit, and I went and got a job on a tanker and I was going to Greece, in communications. And I took this tanker to Greece and I got off and I stayed in Europe for about two months and just roamed around Europe, most specifically southern Europe. I'd never been to northern Europe

till a few years ago. And so I did that for two months, or maybe even a little bit longer, about two and a half months. And then I came back, and then I got the same job back on the tanker – it was going back and I came back here. So that's kinda how I did my European tour.

MS. CORDOVA: With the tanker job?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, yeah, just a teletype operator – communications, transmitters, receivers, that kind of thing – just kind of like my work earlier on the ship. I was a sailor.

MS. CORDOVA: So the Navy really did allow you to see the world.

[Laughter.]

MR. AMADO: I was a sailor. Yeah, I do – what do you know, that I was a sailor. Never. And I was just like – I mean, I never had that ambition or thrill or desire – okay, so we're going to the coast or we're going to Corpus Christi. So you would play in the surf and that was probably the extent of my experience with any kind of bodies of water, and suddenly – totally when I went there on that ship the first time and had all this long hair and stuff like that, immediately they took me to the barber and they cut it all off. And so I go to my assignment, where my little office was, and suddenly I feel this – I'm doing this. I said, "What's going on? Where are we going?" I mean, "Are we going somewhere?" And she said, "Yeah, we're going to the Caribbean for a couple of months." And I thought, "Oh, my God, what?" I'd never, ever had any experience like that.

But I was a pretty seaworthy guy. I never got seasick. As it turned out I never got seasick. Everybody else did but I never got it. Just somehow or another I had sea legs and I was just meant to be a sailor. I was meant to do that. Odysseus, that's me.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you ever go back to sea after that, after the tanker?

MR. AMADO: No. No, and then I ended up living in New York City for about a year after that.

MS. CORDOVA: And doing what in New York?

MR. AMADO: I worked at the New York Stock Exchange as a teletype operator.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, right. Okay.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, that friend that I told you – that Italian friend that lived in Brooklyn, he got a job there after he got out of the service, and I certainly looked him up when I went back, and he said, "Yeah, I got this job; I think you can get a job there too." I said, "All right." So I went over there and I got a job there, just a teletype operator. It's how they used to do things back in – teletypes – and it's the fastest form of communication.

MS. CORDOVA: [Inaudible.]

MR. AMADO: [Inaudible.]

MS. CORDOVA: Hey, I'm going to end this tape, so let's take a quick break and I'll switch tapes.

[END DISK 1]

CARY CORDOVA: We are recording. This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Jesse Amado on May 31st, 2004. This is session one and disc two.

So, Jesse, we had sort of just gotten to living in New York after the –

JESSE AMADO: Oh, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: – many trips to visiting New York, and was it a different experience to actually be living there in the city?

MR. AMADO: No, it was kind of more of a continuation of the way it was before, but it was, you know – it was steady work now. I mean, as far as a living situation, I lived with this family in Brooklyn. But I was – I was making more friends and just finding my own way and not always – a lot of times staying in the city for days, not coming back to the house and – yeah, I mean, it was a great time. It was – back then New York City was tough. It was tough. You know, Lower East Side.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, right, early '70s, definitely.

MR. AMADO: It was – Times Square was not the Walt Disney Times Square that it is today. It was really, really a

tough city back then.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you ever scared?

MR. AMADO: Yeah. You know, sometimes I wandered too far and I would find myself in a potentially precarious situation so I would get my wits about me and get the hell of there as soon as I could. You know, just like get carried away sitting on my thumbs, I've got to get back uptown quick.

Yeah, I was – back then it was a much different New York City. It was truly a jungle and it was really hard and tough and you really had to take care of yourself. You couldn't just wander off like you could now. Now it's very safe compared to how it was back then.

MS. CORDOVA: And you were living in Brooklyn –

MR. AMADO: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: – with a family. Would you often come into Manhattan?

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm [Affirmative].

MS. CORDOVA: And your work was based in Manhattan, so –

MR. AMADO: Yeah, right, so I went into every day. A lot of times I would just stay overnight too, because I started dating this girl, she lived in Greenwich Village, so I started spending time with her quite a bit, and just kind of hanging out in Washington Park and doing what New Yorkers do. I'd go to the cinema a lot. I didn't really – during that time period I really didn't think about art too much, but I was thinking a lot about the kind of books that I was reading and also I was writing more as well. And I was going to the cinema as well and I was really getting interested in the cinema a lot. So those are the kind of things that I was seeking out.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you interested ever in a career in film?

MR. AMADO: No other than maybe a film critic, because I used to do that. I used to write papers on film – when I was at UT of Austin. I would just – I did it for one student. They liked the results and so I was able to generate like a part-time job over that. I used to like to do it because I really enjoyed writing about movies. So I used to do that kind of thing. But that was the extent of it.

MS. CORDOVA: Why did you leave New York?

MR. AMADO: Why? Because my parents, my family. That was about the time my dad had his –

MS. CORDOVA: Right, of course.

MR. AMADO: – his stroke. And I visited once and I could see that he was going to need some help. And that's ultimately why I decided to stay in San Antonio. I had opportunities once I graduated from UT of Austin in arts and school – but I chose to stay in San Antonio because I felt ultimately they were going to need me, and so it's kind of a decision – like an only son kind of thing– and so that's why I stayed in San Antonio instead – instead of going off somewhere like I really wanted to. And it came to pass. He did need me. I took care of them for about – oh, almost a year. One year my mother was really sick and she came down with Alzheimer's and then my dad was just deteriorating – completely deteriorating at that point, and then my little brother, who was so dependent on them for everything – oh, it was a tough time. But I made it. [Frances Amado passed away in April 2000, Jesse Amado, Sr. passed away in June 2000.]

Then I knew at that time why I did it – So, oh I was lucky, I was lucky enough to make art between deciding to – or not leaving – ultimately I ended up staying.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you return – you returned to Austin or you returned to San Antonio?

MR. AMADO: I returned to San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, so you returned to San Antonio and –

MR. AMADO: And I started taking courses at the community college – San Antonio Community College just to get my prerequisites.

MS. CORDOVA: Because you knew you wanted to go to college at that point.

MR. AMADO: Oh, yeah. That's what I was going to do, exactly.

MS. CORDOVA: Had things changed for you?

MR. AMADO: And I had the GI Bill, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. AMADO: I had the GI Bill so I could do it. Everything was different. My mom would say "You're not the same boy." So I kind of tolerated being there for a year until I was able to get into Austin.

MS. CORDOVA: Is that where you wanted to go or it was just – it was local, it was more –

MR. AMADO: Well, it was local and it's where I wanted to go also, and, yeah, I did it in three years, so I hunkered down and did it. I loved it; I really loved it. Then I knew it was probably the best decision – it was a good decision to do it – to go off and, like I told you at the beginning, or however far we're into this – I just didn't want to go to school at that time. I was sick of it. And if somehow I had been compelled by someone, somehow, something – that – to – to go to college then, I might have not gotten what I got out of it ultimately. And I would have been an architect perhaps.

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe. [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: Maybe, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Except for that one extra year.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, except for that one extra year.

So I'm glad I did it this way. I'm really glad I did it this way, because then when I went back to school I really appreciated it and I was a really good student, and it was meaningful. I was not like the rest of the kids. I was not a frat boy; I was not into the parties and you know. I was the only student that was – that wore like a sport coat to class – kinds of East coast things – and those kind of things, those kind of distinctions that – and I was older, what everyone loves, maybe 22, 23, 24 maybe. So, yeah, it was good; it was a good way to go. I'm glad I did that.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you know you wanted to be an English major from the start?

MR. AMADO: Oh, yeah. No two ways about it.

MS. CORDOVA: No two ways about it.

MR. AMADO: I couldn't think of a better way to go through school than just reading books and learning about books for four years – I thought this was brilliant. I could do this for the rest of my life, and I almost did but I changed my mind. Part of it was my destiny or fate, had I not stayed here in San Antonio or hadn't I just put them in a solitary institute, my mom and dad, and – yeah sure, or else I might have ended up doing it for the rest of my life, I don't know, you know having an opportunity to go to graduate school at, which was a very progressive school at the time.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, yeah.

MR. AMADO: Latinos were wanted to go to school there, so I was going to be one of them. But then I said, "Well, what am I going to do now?" So I tried teaching here in the public school system and it lasted two months. I quit. I couldn't take it. It was awful.

MS. CORDOVA: Why?

MR. AMADO: It was just a bad experience and the kids weren't really interested in English like I wanted them to be. And maybe I just wasn't a good teacher; I couldn't get them to be enthusiastic about it. And I was just totally disillusioned. And then I had this notion that maybe I wanted to also be a visual artist. Maybe I wanted to do that too. I mean, I started thinking more about that at that time than any other time before it. And I'm not sure – maybe I saw myself as a failure; maybe I could never be the writer that I wanted to be, but maybe I could have been. I'm not sure. But maybe I was feeling some doubt at the time.

And so because – well, whatever reason it was, I can't say specifically, I just started thinking more about the visual arts and became more interested in that and started looking at that more through books and magazines or whatever – whatever shows I get to. And then I was in a quandary about what to do for a living, and I thought about going back to graduate school and seeing if that scholarship would still be available or the opportunity to go to graduate school would still be available, and then I remember that I had a friend that was in the fire department and I remember he was going to – he was going to school too. He was actually studying English too.

And I inquired about it and he laid it all out for me, explained to me how it worked, and I would work one day and you were off two days, and I thought, that sounds really good, two days off. I thought, "I'm going to inquire about it."

And so I went and applied and before I knew it I was hired and I was in this little blue uniform climbing this ladder like this monkey and dangling off the rung of the ladder because my feet kept slipping off. So I was a fireman suddenly – training for a fireman anyway.

MS. CORDOVA: And what year was that? How old were you?

MR. AMADO: That was in 1977. So I was shy of my 30th birthday. I was 28 – or, no, wait. I was 26 – yeah, 26. Yeah, something like that.

MS. CORDOVA: I mean, a fire – working for the fire department is actually a pretty scary job after – I mean, you sort of had just come back from the Navy and –

MR. AMADO: And I jump into another uniform –

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: – four and a half years later or four years later, or however long it was. Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you even thinking about that or it was just sort of a secure job and it allowed you the flexibility that you needed?

MR. AMADO: No, it was just fate. It was just fate. It was all kind of pre-planned ahead of time. The only thing that I could do that would counter all that was to make art – seemed like a brilliant theory. I mean, what can I say? I was born to be an artist and so I just thought it was kind of laid out for me because I never thought about being an artist, but somehow or another I was going to be an artist. So this is the way it had to run that I was going to be an artist, I think.

MS. CORDOVA: And how did you learn – I mean, what –

MR. AMADO: Oh, just because of the circumstances that were, like I said, predestined for me, where this path is just kind of littered with breadcrumbs and I was picking them up as I was going along and suddenly there is the tower of art, and I knew that a hundred floors up was da Vinci and 50 floors up was Picasso and I would just have to start at the bottom somewhere and so I was going to do that. I was going to do that. I heard the art angels calling me; I couldn't resist.

MS. CORDOVA: And you had taken some art classes at UT, right?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, for non-art majors and I was doing some good things. I was doing some good things. I was actually painting – I was a painter then– doing some realistic paintings.

MS. CORDOVA: Realistic paintings?

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh.

MS. CORDOVA: Really? Of what kind of subject matter?

MR. AMADO: Just banal, urbane scenes and situations – different people, like headless people, just their bodies, no heads. The point of view was just lower. I was just kind of shifting it lower a little bit, just lowering my eyes – and you could just see – stomach out, you know, just wanted to get the stomach in and the heart out – and just get the stomach out. I did about three of those paintings.

MS. CORDOVA: But you remember them well?

MR. AMADO: I remember some – one of them in particular. The first one just slightly. Just so I'm changing the world or just waiting for someone to change the world

MS. CORDOVA: And why did you shift the perspective like that? Is there a special reason you did that?

MR. AMADO: I don't know. I don't really know. I just knew that I wanted to do them a different way. I just wanted to do something different than what everybody else was doing. Everybody else was – their perspective was really traditional.

MS. CORDOVA: And then when you got out of UT did you continue creating art on the side?

MR. AMADO: No. I joined the fire department and I finally had some money so I was kind of enjoying that for a little bit. I was just enjoying that. And then I made a decision to go back and become an artist. So I went back to the community college – San Antonio Community College, and surprisingly they had a really good program there. They really do – and they still do. They put out some pretty good students and teachers – I mean Mel Casa was there. He was the head of the department when I was there, and he was very encouraging. Actually, he was the first one that ever bought any of my work.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MR. AMADO: He bought two of my drawings while I was there. And I was making art like I used to see in New York City, and they allowed me to do it.

MS. CORDOVA: And what did they look like, those drawings?

MR. AMADO: The ones that he bought? They were just very dark, luscious, dense, really about services and no real references to anything at all recognizable. They weren't exactly formal. And I'm trying to think what they – the subject matter was – I know there was a specific subject matter but I can't remember exactly – but I remember them being very dense and darkly and velvety and satiny and really about materials and services. But there was some underlying theme to all those but I can't remember what it was. It was probably something literary I'm sure.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you have like a specific moment when you just said, I'm just going to go for it, I just want to be a visual artist; that's really what I want or I mean, I know you'd had all these breadcrumbs along the way and it's just sort of a slow process of evaluation.

MR. AMADO: No, oddly enough I didn't have an epiphany over the art. I really didn't. I just woke up one day and I decided to do that. I just woke up in a glass factory and I had a hammer in my hand and I just decided to start breaking some rules. So I really – I felt kind of – I felt like I was, I don't know, just going down a path where I was taking a path that I really didn't want to become. And I just didn't want to be a fireman. I just didn't want to be like my firemen friends. I didn't want to start collecting cars and children and things like that. I didn't – I thought that was mundane – I just didn't want – I started thinking about who I was and my experiences, what my passions were and why I did this – why I've done this – to avail myself an opportunity to make art – and so I just kind of snapped out of it, wiped off, shook it off.

And so I did that and just made a decision that I was going to pursue it and the first thing I went to do – SAC, San Antonio College – and started taking some classes down there, just so I could get some feedback and some direction – yeah that's what I wanted to do.

MS. CORDOVA: And what did you learn there? What did you take away from that instruction?

MR. AMADO: I took a lot – I really took a lot because I really – I dove right into it. I really dove right into it. I was very productive, very prodigious. I was always working a lot. It's all I did. I mean, it's what I wanted to do for a long time, for the two years that I was there.

MS. CORDOVA: And you mentioned that you were doing a lot of work like what you had seen in New York. Was there – ?

MR. AMADO: Sometimes. I remember doing like a little Jasper Jones painting, kind of a little big bigger but kind of not linear like his but sort of dancing around the canvas sort of. I remember that. And then I just started developing my sensibilities and my vision as far as what I wanted to do, and I wanted to do – I was just interested in surfaces and materials and paint as a material, and also thinking about painting as sculpture, sort of thinking about Frank Stella a little bit and what he was doing, and shaped canvasses – you know, Ellsworth Kelly. And so I started kind of making a hybrid of those two artists. They were – there was a shape – a perimeter shape that was not rectangular or square, just slightly askew. And then just also they were like sculpture that had, that was just built up of the space. I made stretcher bars so that when you stretch the canvas there is all these spaces that were created – independent actual physical spaces – trying to think of the right, exact word – There was a buildup of the space from illusionary space into the real physical space.

MS. CORDOVA: And 3-D.

MR. AMADO: And 3-D. Yes. So I started making a lot of things like that. I had fun making these things.

MS. CORDOVA: Would that be your first sort of sculptural work at that point?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, yeah, I think so, because I did take sculpture but I was just doing the assignments, but painting – I really liked painting. I was able to have a more cohesive vision and be able to keep that cohesion,

just keep a steady palette – what I was really thinking painting should be like. And lots of drawing and lots of drawings and lots of printmaking, the traditional mediums.

MS. CORDOVA: And then at some point [1985] you switched to UTSA [University of Texas, San Antonio.] Is that correct?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, it was great. I mean, I had such great instructors at SAC and they were very, very supportive, and I was doing all kinds of things, but I knew I had to move on. So, since I was tethered to this area because of my job and my family I went to UTSA. It was an interesting choice, actually. But anyway, I went there and I showed up and – well, keep in mind this whole time that I'm making art I'm aware of my ethnicity and who I am, and my family and my traditions. And also my history and my background and some of the life experiences that I had that were not traditionally experienced by someone from this area, and what their vision was and how different my vision was having had all these experiences away from this area.

And so I was bringing that back with me and I really wanted to say that but I wanted to say it – I mean, there was no denying my name, and some of the very first drawings I made were about my name, just because I wanted to make sure that there was no deniability on my part about who I was and where I was coming from, but also have a recognition of where I had been and been through, you know? And I felt that there was no reason why a Mexican-American who saw Texas could not see that too. I was giving myself permission to do that, even though other factions saw it as compromising myself, kowtowing to something that didn't belong to me, let's say, or wanting to be a part of something that I had no business being a part of: Chicano making white man's art. But I looked at it like a totally diverse, in this other light.

So I just was hoping to express that one should give themselves just the permission to do something like that; the individual should give themselves permission to do whatever they want to do regardless of who they are or what they look like.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you at all looking at or paying attention to the Chicano art movement?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, sure. And I think the one that did it the best was Mel Casas. As far as I'm concerned, I mean, he's brilliant – so he was a good influence on me. He really was.

MS. CORDOVA: Was he one of your teachers as well?

MR. AMADO: No, we never had a class together. It was just – he was just head of the department – but I was doing well, accelerating, I knew exactly what I liked, and he was ardently passionate, always fair, always around. So he took an interest , I mean, you know, you you're your mentors, and whether he wants me to say that or not, I will. I mean, I've gone on record as saying that anyway and he didn't seem to mind.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm sure he doesn't.

MR. AMADO: No, really, he's great. I like him very much. So anyway, so that's when I went to UTSA and I'd go to the painting department and it's really, really awful. It's horrific. I will never survive in this painting department. What am I supposed to do? So I show up for admissions and Steve Reynolds happens to be there – and he teaches ceramics at UTSA – and he's the counselor and he says, "Well, why don't you just try ceramics if you don't want to try painting, just try it." So I backed myself into ceramics. It's like, "Oh, my god, okay, material, okay, I can work with any material." That was my credo, you know, I can work with any material and make art out of anything – anything.

So I was going to be working with mud and clay. And so I did, but not very extensively. Basically I would just take big chunks of clay and then I would just slice into them – just spontaneously and intuitively and informally and just start composing like I would be doing a drawing perhaps that quick and intuitively, I guess, and then I would just start putting things back, the parts that I cut out, start rearranging them and putting them back into it. So I'd keep the cube intact, but it was reconfigured completely. And then I store it in the kiln and fire it and then hand-paint it, and that was it. That was the extent to which I was going to make these things. I wasn't going any further than that.

And then I went to – then I was taking all the other courses and I was doing pretty good with everything else and – let's see – then I started losing interest in ceramics and I wanted to do more sculpture, and I wanted to do other things because I really wanted to get away from the formalism of these works. And one of the best stories I ever have to tell is at that time – yes, it was – Dave Hickey – I came for – no, wait – yes, yes it was. Okay, yeah, Dave Hickey came to San Antonio to do sculpture, and so I took classes from him. I took one class with him. And it was wonderful and he turned out to be a wonderful, generous man who had a lot of things to pass on. And it's just the way he did it, in his humorous, sardonic, insightful way of saying things, like a creature. It was great. It was just a wonderful experience.

And I showed him my slice and he said, well – this was his retort and it was the best that I ever got – he says, "Well, these are really great and beautiful and all that," he says, "But you cannot continue to go to dinner parties with architects." And so that really sunk in. In other words, I really didn't have any content. I really wasn't talking about anything that had meaning. So it was, okay, you're right, absolutely. So basically I just – through my painting class I got the Gardner book of art history [*Art Through the Ages*, Helen Gardner, 1926] and I just tore out the sheets individually and I dipped them in paint, I had like four buckets of paint, dipped each sheet, then I would chew it up. I was playing basketball with it, throwing them into a wastebasket [*Bank Shot*, 1989], it was just – I was doing just something – I knew I had to do something and I didn't know quite what to do, so I just took the history of art and I would look at what I was tearing out the sheet and I'd look at whatever image was on there, or whatever, both as – a tagline was on it or just – I was just going through history and I was going back in history. I started at the back and going towards the front of the book. And that's kind of how I did it.

MS. CORDOVA: So you took the book and you –

MR. AMADO: Ripped out each page individually –

MS. CORDOVA: Each sheet you ripped out –

MR. AMADO: – and then just crumple it up and just dipped it in paint and just threw it at the basket – the wastebasket. I was playing basketball with it.

MS. CORDOVA: And did it actually end up creating anything at the end or was it just more sort of the act or the process?

MR. AMADO: It was more the process than anything, but I had this thing that was kind of interesting: wads of paper got scattered all over the place, dipped in different kinds of paint. And then of course – I had a canvas in the back that I was using as a backboard, so that was definitely into – so that's kind of what I dealt with, and it worked, it really worked. So I started making meaningful things. But David really did.

MS. CORDOVA: And about when was that? The mid-'80s?

MR. AMADO: No, it's a bit later than that.

MS. CORDOVA: I know he was –

MR. AMADO: It's '87, '88, something like that.

MS. CORDOVA: He curated a show you were in in '89 that was – was it the –

MR. AMADO: Oh, it was at the mall.

MS. CORDOVA: At the mall.

MR. AMADO: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. AMADO: That was funny.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah?

MR. AMADO: Franco Mondini was in that too.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, really?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, and a bunch of us that were undergraduates.

So, '89 – you know what? Yeah, it had to have been it. I'm confused as to whether I was an undergraduate there or a graduate student there. I'm not quite sure which I was at that point.

MS. CORDOVA: I know you've got your MFA in 1990, right?

MR. AMADO: Nineteen-ninety. So I might have been in graduate school, but I don't know. I'm really confused about that.

MS. CORDOVA: But so –

MR. AMADO: Anyway, regardless of if it was graduate, undergraduate – but he's the one that kind of steered me away from the formal work.

MS. CORDOVA: So your work sort of – you became much more conscious of content as being a very important in the creation of your work.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, and I start using more metaphors to endow the work with meaning. So that's kind of how I did it, I just kept them ambiguous and I used metaphors either in terms of the form or the material or the surface or the shape, something that would kind of generate and galvanize everything that this is about. So that's kind of how I started doing that.

MS. CORDOVA: Is there a specific work that you see coming out of that conversation?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, I think – I started working with fabric and wooden boxes that I fabricated, and carpet tacks, those strips of like wood with tacks structured into it that fit along the edge of floors to the carpet won't peel up. So I started using that and basically I was just taking these strips and adhering them to the surface of the boxes and then I would open the box slightly and I would put like an inner tube inside it and inflate that, and so it was like an organ of some kind sticking up from the womb. And then I would stretch the fabric over the tacks that were completely covering the surface, so the strips were adjacent to each other and really covered, so – Then I put the fabric over it, just like rip through the fabric, and so you would have this contrast of this very vulnerable material of the inflated tube juxtaposed to this spiky sharp pointed material – kind of like the inside-outside kind of thing [*Untitled*, 1990].

MS. CORDOVA: Is this the work that you started doing at the Fabric Workshop? Is that –

MR. AMADO: No.

MS. CORDOVA: This is prior to that.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, that's prior to that. That was in graduate school.

MS. CORDOVA: So you were inspired to start working with cloth and fabrics prior –

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: When was that happening for you about?

MR. AMADO: Well, that kind of – I think that kind of started with painting, you know, of canvas and stretching canvas – so this was sort of that same process but instead of having a smooth surface over a punchy area, it was this hard area that was made sharper by these tacks, you know, on the surface of it. So I was doing the stretching but then all the tacks would be coming back through – yeah, so it kind of came from that.

And I just really was thinking about fragility and the human condition and the contrast of those two things, of the inside and the outside – the hardness that we sometimes project about ourselves in order to protect ourselves – psychologically or emotionally, or any other way, but mostly those ways – to protect the very sensitive and vulnerable and fragile insides of ourselves. So it was kind of about that. So that's why I say it's kind of metaphorical in a way with that subject matter – the human figure or even the human condition, if you wanted to be more general about that.

MS. CORDOVA: And where were you getting these materials? Where were you finding them?

MR. AMADO: Oh, just fabric stores. They weren't really specific to – they were just very generic. Then I'd work from like painting different clothes – stains sometimes the human

MS. CORDOVA: And when did you start selling your work?

MR. AMADO: When? Well, my BFA show was at – San Antonio College had this wonderful space that was a house that – it was the Koehler House [Pronounces it "Kaylor."].

MS. CORDOVA: The Koehler House?

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh. Koehler [Pronounces it "Kaylor."] or Koehler.

MS. CORDOVA: All right.

MR. AMADO: And it was a house that was built by the founder of Pearl Brewery, and it was a beautiful, beautiful Tudor house. It was gorgeous. And they had that house for offices and they had one floor that was done for –

they had a house that was for – for exhibitions, so there was basically five – six rooms in this gallery. So I had my – I had my BFA show there. And so I just treated it where each room was kind of a different aesthetic or a different style, and it was this – there was a group show of five different artists – there was five rooms. And so that's kind of how I treated it: the paintings, then the sculpture, and then the prints, and then sculpture and painting. So it was fun, it was great. And that was in '89, I believe.

MS. CORDOVA: If you were to see that show today, what would you think, or what thoughts would you have?

MR. AMADO: I would think that the show would probably hold up even today in a way. I really liked so much of it a lot – so much of it I liked a lot. It was an interesting thing to do because I was allowing myself more liberties, because I was thinking of myself as this split personality, like five artists – five different types of art. I really enjoyed that. That way I wouldn't have to be stuck in something, and that – maybe people would develop expectations from that, like he's always going to be making felt pieces like the Fabric Workshop.

And so that was the genesis for a lot of the things that I've done since then in terms of always making something that's unexpected or that maybe might have my signature on it in one way or another but is completely different from the body of art previous to that. So I've always wanted to do that, and sometimes to the detriment of my career because I tried to push something like that that's schizophrenic, whatever syndrome. It's like, make up your mind. How do you expect me to sell that and then you come and do this and there's no continuity? So you can't do that, you'd say – Oh but you can, you can you can –

MS. CORDOVA: Well surprisingly the art world doesn't always know how to respond to change.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, and you would think it would – the nature – the mutability. So that was kind of the determination – self-determination at that point about what I was going to be doing. And I could afford to do that because I was working for the fire department and I didn't have to rely on my art to make a living from it. So I was going to allow myself to do that. It was like being back in the Navy again, having all these adventures and not having expectations and just living for the moment and, you know see things with their eyes.

MS. CORDOVA: Can we just pause the tape for a second?

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right, we're back after just a brief break. And, Jesse, I was sort of thinking during the break – I was thinking about what you were saying about fragility, and I was wondering why was fragility so important to you at this particular moment? Why was that resonating for you as something you wanted to concentrate on?

MR. AMADO: I think there's probably – I do know, or I can certainly take a calculated guess as to why it is. Some of the things that I told you earlier about my family I think is part of it. Another part of it is that's just my mojo; that's just the way I am. That's part of my character. I'm an extremely sensitive person so I can feel empathy for situations and just – that particular characteristic of a person, and also I think, finally, and maybe mostly – but I'm not positive about this – is just having worked for the fire department and have seen so many glimpses of mortality and just the unpredictability of it all, and just how fragile – indeed fragile, emphatically fragile we are about being inhabitants of this world, this phenomenal world that is sometimes not very sublime at all. I've seen people – I've seen all kinds of people that have died for one reason or another, and some people have died instantly and they had no idea that they were on that path, and that's how fragile life can be. And when we are pitted against these forces, we're just like a baby, as fragile as any child, any infant against these great forces. And you read about them all the time, and they are fascinating stories but at the same time very, very tragic stories.

So I think those are some of the contributing factors. I was thinking about that and wanted to make art like that, and I did make other work – other bodies of work that were even more specifically about that, not so much metaphorically but just a little bit more specific about that.

MS. CORDOVA: Are there particular people or particular events at your work or wherever that were sort of – I'm just wondering if there was a particular fire situation or something –

MR. AMADO: Well, I do remember that show that we last mentioned, that I last mentioned to you –

MS. CORDOVA: The –

MR. AMADO: The one about the – the five artists thing that I was doing –

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. AMADO: – when I was a split personality, five artists doing the show. One of the pieces that I did was about – the one room that I did was taken specifically from this train wreck – well, it wasn't really a train wreck. There

was a train accident where someone had fallen asleep on the railroad tracks and as a result of that, miraculously he didn't die but he did lose a limb. Actually he lost two limbs. He lost a hand and a leg. And it was curious because here's the accident and him, and then you have to walk like 50 feet this way and see the limb over here. So I made some pieces that were like these truncated things things, these forms that kind of looked like a calve or femur – they were shaped like that. And then they were manipulated and elaborated with different surfaces, but at one end, at this thicker end right here, there was – it had these independent – but I had chains attached to that part right here that were just coming out of that rampart either at one chain or several chains, or a very long chain or just a bunch of short chains.

And so that was kind of a metaphor in speaking about that, how we are chained to these – this chain of events that can happen to us or just the whole idea of being chained, imprisoned, captive, and just the gift of what we call the world and just how not so empathetic it is sometimes, and how cruel and vicious, and it can just snatch you away, whatever force it is that's there right next to you on your left side or your right side, I don't know, but it's just there to snatch you away – I don't know – a capricious snatching away. One has no understanding for it or even predictability of -

MS. CORDOVA: I'm thinking it is the job that you do that is so constantly reminding you of mortality. Did you ever think about leaving it or getting away from it? Was it ever just too traumatic?

MR. AMADO: During that time?

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, or even over time.

MR. AMADO: Well, I have been retired for two years.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. AMADO: No, I didn't. Somehow or another it created a balance because – you know, with this world, this insular, well, this tower of art that I recite, it sort of provided a balance against that, or maybe with it that just kept me in touch with the real world. And, yeah, it's good. I see a lot of artists that deal with angst, and they have no idea what angst is. They don't know what angst is. They don't see their brother that's OD'd or seen the sister that blew her head off with a shotgun in a barn, or see the mother whose daughter is about to give birth and she has no idea she's pregnant; she thought she was just gaining weight, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, accidents, and the shrill – the screams of people that are being extricated from cars and all the blood and all the guts and all the flattened skulls of motorcycle accidents and all that stuff. Now, that's angst. That's really angst. And it's not a splatter of paint on a canvas and call it angst and tell me you know something about it.

So, yeah, sometimes it works like that. Sometimes it sets me off and it makes me mortified to encounter something like that. It's like I want to take it off the wall.

MS. CORDOVA: I mean, so much trauma –

MR. AMADO: Indeed trauma, emphatic trauma.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you look at art as like a space of calm or a type of – is there any kind of problem solving that is going on, trying to sort of deal with all that trauma, not just for yourself but for the viewer? I'm posing a question that's very vague. I'm just sort of listening to what you're saying –

MR. AMADO: I'm very psychological. In the depths of my psyche, is that true? Is that really why I'm doing it? Is that why my art is as quiet as it is and as tranquil as it is and as calm as it is and reflective as it is? I have yet to figure that out. I don't know. I really don't know. Or if it's just something that has always been with me and this is just something that I believe in and it's espousing some sort of way of living, a lifestyle that I think is probably – or it could be probably more convincing to a better quality of life, just to shut everything off and just look at the essence of things and consider the essence of things and just take out all the external stuff out of it, because essentially that's kind of how I work. I bring a lot of stuff into the work, as much as I think is out there, whether it's provided by me or whether it's provided by the culture or the psych guys or whatever it is, and then I start taking away and I start taking away, and then that's what I want to be left with. I want to deal with it as quickly as I possibly can.

And most of the times you have no choice. You can only deal with it briefly because this highly mediated world that we live in, it's just a bombardment of information and images and that you can only deal with it in a brief time, and that's kind of how it's spoon-fed to you anyway. Sometimes they don't really get that spoon all the way into your mouth – kind of inches from your mouth, you don't even go to chew it over or ingest it, you know, it's taken away.

So if I can just even eliminate that completely, that would be great to me. I mean, that would make me really

happy to do, and just make things a little bit more simpler and not so Byzantine, you know, so complex and intricate, which is probably not the norm. I mean, that's just the way I see the world – that's the way I would like to see it. But then at the same time when I see something Byzantine, let's say, I like it too at the same time. I can see the value in it. I can see the meaning of it, and I can see why someone would have to do something like that. But I think at the same time – I think there's more of that than not and so I try to just hold this other end up as much as I possibly can. And it's difficult to get – I mean, it's difficult to be understood sometimes that way. No, I take that back. Maybe that's not what it is, but it's a lot easier to be dismissed that way because I think more people nowadays need more information, more associations. The more you give them the better off they feel about it. If it's a cast of thousands it's better than having a soliloquy of some kind, you know, that's going to demand your attention and some amount of intellectual work or some kind of subliminal – just the sublime subtleties – poetry, those kind of associations.

So it's a conflict. Sometimes it's a conflict.

MS. CORDOVA: How do you respond to being defined as either a minimalist artist or a conceptual artist? Do you think those are valid terms for what you do?

MR. AMADO: I like them. I like them for what they are. I really do. I must admit that, yeah, that's – I prefer that more than anything – minimalist, conceptualist, yeah, yeah, I think that's very true. And, sure, I like that.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you find yourself – when did you find yourself gravitating to this particular style of art?

MR. AMADO: Probably after that – I think it was always inherent pretty much. I think it was always inherent. I think it's always been there. I think so. I think it's always been there. But I was a student, you know, so there was – I don't know. I mean, who looks at a student's work and considers it seriously anyway? And who can say, what about that student? A pig can find a truffle – a blind pig can find a truffle anytime, you know, so maybe that's what's happening here. So let's wait and see what happens with this. Let's see where this develops and where it goes.

So at that point you really have to rely on yourself and you really have to rely on your instincts, on what you feel that you're doing is the right thing and not let anybody spoil it for you, which was a great thing that I give a lot of credit to, you know, the staff at San Antonio College because that's my beef, that's what I don't like or agree with entirely about academia, the ability to do that, to take a really talented and sensitive, passionate person who wants to be an artist and have them – I don't know, certainly not castrate them but circumcise them and say, we can't have that, you know, and you have to do it this way. And it really discourages a lot of students, and I've experienced that firsthand. I've experienced it firsthand at UT of Austin when I taught there last semester. I really did, and very much so, and I was saddened by it. The art was gone and suddenly it was about something else. It was suddenly about why don't you graduate to get a teaching job somewhere, just to get the assignment done. I want to do it this way and I don't really care about being – you know, that kind of thing. So the artist doesn't really survive.

How did I get to that tangent I wonder? I was just wondering how I got onto that tangent of thinking.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh –

MR. AMADO: Oh, about minimalism and –

MS. CORDOVA: Yes.

MR. AMADO: Or and how did I know it was – or when did I first realize that that was the style that I was after?

MS. CORDOVA: Yes, that's exactly where we were.

MR. AMADO: So, I guess the short answer is that either you know or you don't know.

MS. CORDOVA: And with the short answer I'm actually just going to switch tapes and then maybe if we could talk for just another 15 minutes or so?

MR. AMADO: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: Is that good?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, that's going to be good. Yeah, that'll put us at 1:00.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, is that good?

MR. AMADO: Yeah.

[AUDIO BREAK. END DISK 2. BEGIN TAPE 1]

MS. CORDOVA: [In progress] – Jesse Amado for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Today is May 31st, 2004 and this is session one and disk three.

And I guess just maybe, you know, only a couple more questions for this session –

MR. AMADO: All right.

MS. CORDOVA: One is really like, what – what I've been observing as someone that's been coming and interviewing artists from San Antonio is that a whole new sort of – the city has become much more receptive to artists in a number of ways. And one of those ways I see is the Blue Star, that a large number of galleries seemed to have opened up over the years –

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: – and there seem to be more facilities. And I'm wondering, when did you start taking advantage of those situations, or how you came to participate in them, or what role you took with them, if any at all?

MR. AMADO: Well, it was very timely. It was very, very timely. Having made the decision to stay here in San Antonio, something like that was very timely for me as well, personally speaking. Because that was right around the time that I started going back, you know, to art school. And suddenly this very radical thing happened and we were all pretty amazed by it and very supportive of it. And we could see that it was something that was going to develop, that there was something that had an impact on the community, and not only the community – I mean, not only artists but all of the community.

So it didn't take very long for me to, you know, be involved in their shows – their inner shows, I guess, maybe three years later. I mean, this was in '85, I think, or '87 – yeah, about '88 or so, maybe even '87, I had a – you know, I was in their summer shows. So that gave me a lot more confidence.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you find –

MR. AMADO: My audience got, you know, bigger as well. It expanded beyond, you know, the realm of academia and it enveloped the students and the teachers there. So that was good.

MS. CORDOVA: My question was, really, did you find a community of artists or people that you were able to sort of – that were able to help assimilate you intellectually as an artist? Did you ever feel part of something like that year?

MR. AMADO: It was much later on, yes, but it didn't happen initially at that time.

MS. CORDOVA: When did that happen?

MR. AMADO: I would say, okay, aside from the, you know, the interaction that you have at school, either as an undergraduate or graduate. Okay, excluding that, let's say – and that's always your biggest worry, you know, as a graduate student, once you leave, you know, where are you going to get that interaction?

It actually happened to me several – well, let's see. I think what you're asking is how I want to answer this, because there was, you know, someone in my life – a woman in my life that was an artist, and a very good artist, and there was always that going on between us. Okay, so I had that. But I think the question that you're asking is one that I should answer this way, in that at that time, you know, a few years after being with this woman, we made a decision to move into this underdeveloped area, which is just south of town here on South Flores Street. And I moved in there and we helped develop that house. It was a great big house – it was beautiful, you know, like 2,200 square foot house that was over 100 years old. And it was mess but it took a lot of work; we got it in shape.

And then after I did that, Franco Mondini moved in and Chuck Ramirez moved into the neighborhood. They were like neighbors. And at that point we created this situation that was not only like a haven for alike artists, and there were a handful or two handfuls of us that were very much, you know, talking and thinking about the same thing, or the same kind of art, or the same kind living, or the same kind of wine, or the same kind of food. You know? We were all just doing that, you know? And we were able to just congregate in this situation where that was just being engendered – that was being nurtured, you know? And so it just grew from that into this incredible thing.

MS. CORDOVA: About when was that?

MR. AMADO: That was about 1995. That was in 1995. And so there was this era that we had that was just so

robust and so full of life and so full of conversation and art that lasted for probably four years – three to four years. And so I think that was probably the time that that was at its fullest – you know, that kind of situation, that kind of family. And it was fun, too. It was a lot of fun. It was constant fun and constant, you know arguments and debates, and all that about art.

MS. CORDOVA: And now, your partner, your girlfriend, was Rebecca Holland?

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh. That was Rebecca, right, I was talking about.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. And you met her when?

MR. AMADO: I met her when I had a residency at the Bemis Foundation in Omaha, Nebraska. That's where we first met each other. And that's where we started to develop a relationship at that time.

And that was a very interesting time as well, artistically. That was the show that I specifically made work about fertility. And the crowning piece for that show was when I – it was an image that I used – I reused actually – not an image, but an object. And basically it was sheets of steel on the floor, and in the middle of those sheets of steel – you know, thin sheets of steel – in the middle of that was a paper cutter, and then I bought dozens and dozens and dozens of calla lilies – okay, you know that piece – you know, I just sliced their heads off, the blooms off the stem of the calla lilies. And so that was – and all the rest of the work was about fertility, in one form or another, you know, and using different medias and different forms and materials to kind of push that idea forward. And that was the last piece I did [*Lily Pond*, 1994].

And I remember that very well. I remember doing that and really actually feeling – I had this really strong feeling about that, as if something – either I was injected with something that really made me even more aware of that condition or either something was – like slipped out of me somehow, you know, through my spine so that I became even more fragile at that point, you know – either then or in the future, or maybe I still carry that with me, I don't know. But I did feel something when I did that. And all those beautiful blossoms just falling off, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, there's something almost violent about that piece.

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: Killing all the flowers I guess in sort of a brutal way.

MR. AMADO: Maybe that's what I was feeling. Maybe I was, you know, the aggressor, and maybe that's how I was feeling fertility – how it feels to be the executioner, the tyrant.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, it definitely seems to be taking an action. I don't know if that action is – if I've seen that action in your work in other places –

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: – or if that was a new direction for you.

MR. AMADO: Oh that was kind of new. But I really wasn't thinking that way. I was really in the place of – I really was. I was really with the flowers. But someone had to do the dirty work, you know, and it was me. It was my idea; you do it, the calla lilies were saying: you know, don't expect one of us to do it; it's your idea so you do it. And so I did, just to make, you know, a statement about that. I knew that a lot of people would see and think about, maybe reconsider, you know, their own prejudices and biases and ways of thinking, states of mind, about you know, just treating other people.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you find your work is getting even more fragile? I mean, the fact that you can't keep these flowers, that they're very temporary in their situation –

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: – is that a direction for your work?

MR. AMADO: I think it's always been a direction of my work. I've always used the kind of materials that are just – have great capability of decomposing, for one, like that latex that I was using. That'll certainly do it over a period of time. But it's okay. That's the way it should be, you know? It doesn't have to be permanent. It doesn't have to outlive us. We can outlive our art, can't we? I think so. And I'm not the only one that thinks that way. There's many, many artists that think that way.

MS. CORDOVA: It's true, many artists think that way, though a lot of them attempt to document their work

through photographs and that sort of thing. Do you do that? Is that –

MR. AMADO: Not really. I really don't. I don't make that part of the process. It's sort of – I don't know – it might be a perversity, the way I think about it, you know, to do that, or it might be a compromise. And I think the work loses its integrity when it's done. But that's just what I'm thinking and that's just how I feel my art should be considered. And I completely understand why anyone would want to do that – photograph it and document it. It should be. It should be. But I don't want to do that.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, actually, I think maybe that's sort of a good sort of juncture to think about that, and that sort of impermanence of your work, and I'd like to come back to that on our second session if that sounds good to you.

MR. AMADO: Okay. Yeah, sure.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, well, then with that I'm going to end session one and we'll be back.

MR. AMADO: Thank you.

MS. CORDOVA: Thank you.

[END SESSION 1]

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova for the Archives for American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Today is June 7, 2004, and we are at Jesse Amado's studio and this is session two and disc one. As I was saying, Jesse, I was listening to our interview from our first session and I really enjoyed hearing it. And one of the things that comes to mind in doing a project like this, which is devoted to Latino artists, this specific project that I'm working on, is how do you feel about being claimed as a Latino artist? Is that an appropriate labeling for you and what does that mean to you in terms of your career or how you think you're perceived?

MR. AMADO: Yeah. Well, that's a pretty – okay, let's see if I can grab a hold of something and kind of go from there. I think it's complex. I see it as a complex issue, almost Byzantine-like. It's so intricate, you know, and complex.

Well, I think we touched on it a little bit, did we somewhat, last time, and just, you know, just my position about how I wanted to bring my experiences into my work, as usual, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: We discussed your relationship with the Chicano Art movement and Mel Casas –

MR. AMADO: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: – and you've mentioned the importance of your ethnic identity. So, I mean, we did cover that ground a little bit.

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh. But this is kind of like part two of that question, right, let's just say, if you will.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, exactly.

MR. AMADO: How do I address this? I just don't like labels, to begin with, you know? And so I don't want my art to be considered as strictly, predominantly, mostly Latino because, you know, my experience is so varied that it's really not – it's not really the only thing I'm talking about. It's not what I'm trying to exclusively express. I think when I come into the work, you know – I mean, there's not denying who I am, you know? And I think there are certain aspects of it that I think are very, for instance, Mexican. There's something sort of sensuous in the way that – I mean, the work turns out to be sensuous in the way that I think incorporates some particular characteristics of Mexican culture, you know, in terms of just contrasting – you know, contrasting materials and how that can turn into a sensuous, you know, object or idea or just flavor, anything like that – a smell, whatever.

So I think I bring that element to it. But you know, that's an abstraction. You know, that's very blue and it's a very abstraction. But ultimately I just think that because of who I am and because the work always seems to be about something or somebody that – I mean, it's just really hard to deny that there is that kind of feel to it.

So, you know, given that, do I want somebody to think that it's Latino art, you know? Do I have to deal with it in those terms? And when I do deal with it in those terms – or more specifically – I mean, I once made this – it was a food; the exhibit was about food.

MS. CORDOVA: Was it the lard?

MR. AMADO: The lard. You know, the lard wall [*Another chubby boy contemplates painting without paint*, 1991].

MS. CORDOVA: I haven't seen pictures. I'd love it if you could just describe it. Tell me about that project.

MR. AMADO: Well, basically, you know, it was an interesting show. Tommy [Thomas] Glassford was in it and Franco Mondini. Alejandro Diaz actually curated it, and other artists from Mexico – you know, chocolate teeth and, you know, watermelons and lard and whatnot. You know, all that kind of stuff. So he asked me to be in it. And there was a wall that was – I still remember the dimensions: eight foot by nine foot. And it was kind of like a free-standing wall. It kind of worked as a barrier, you know, between – to just divide this room. So that was my wall.

And so I really, really wanted to this piece that was about me. It was autobiographical; it was a self-portrait. And since it was food, I thought about that a little bit and just went into it. Being the minimalist that I am, you know – the post-minimalist – I wanted to do my white painting, you know. And so this essentially turned out to be my white painting. It was kind of just, you know, purifying the surface, making the surface blank again. You know, Rauschenberg did it and everyone else, you know, had their white painting, so I wanted to do that too. So this is how I do that. So I just took the wall and I slathered it with, you know, with lard. And it eventually required like 86 pounds of lard.

So at the time, I was, you know, maybe in my – it was, I was in my early 40s I suppose. And, you know, of course I made this wonderful story up about probably by that time in my life, having ingested the foods that I had as a Mexican American, you know, the tortillas and the refried beans and the tamales, et cetera, you know, all that food that requires lard to make it taste so good. Maybe that was the equivalent of the amount of lard that I've eaten up to that point. You know, I mean it's an exaggeration, but you know, it certainly stresses that point; it's a beautiful exaggeration, quite frankly.

So that was – I mean, when you do something like that and talk about it in those terms you know. And then I just called it – I forget what I called it, "A Chubby" – did I say maybe like "A Chubby Brown Boy Reflects on a White Painting," or something like that. There was some kind of reference to that.

So what happens when you do something like that, you know? Is it really Latino art? Perhaps I guess it is. And so I've been kind of courted that way lots of times. And sometimes it's a good thing, you know, just to have that identity out there and seeing the kind of work that it is – you know, seeing that it's not dealing with the usual, typical iconography; that it's not a painting but it is a painting, that it eschews color, the usual palettes, you know, just those characteristics of Latino art that, you know, have become pretty much part of that particular landscape. I mean, there are some expectations and characteristics that immediately define, you know, what Latino art is.

So in a way I don't mind that label because I can offer something else new that is just new, you know, and a different point of view and a different concept and, you know, still is pretty much true to life about the Mexican American experience. So it depends just within what context. I mean, this food show was a great example, you know, of having Tommy Glassford and some other Anglo artists involved in that too, you know, but having that influence – you know, Tommy being white but growing up in Laredo and living in Mexico. This particular artist that, you know, cast teeth and chocolate being from Europe somewhere but living in Mexico and having that experience as well – like that. I really enjoy that.

So in that particular context it makes lots of sense, you know, to label someone a Latino just to be part of that expression, part of that, I don't know, dialogue, I suppose. You know, it talks about the variation and the diversity of not only, you know, backgrounds and heritages but just visions and experiences. So if I can bring that into it, then I don't mind that label. And then just having somebody like Victor Zamudio Taylor talk about it in those terms but the context that he puts it into, you know, and just another level of meaning, you know, that is there but rarely is talked about in most other Latino art.

So that's why I say it's so complex, and here I am, you know, circumventing this whole issue because sometimes I really like it and sometimes I really hate it, you know? And it can be a dilemma and I just don't know how to deal with it sometimes.

MS. CORDOVA: Sometimes I think the desire to form a particularly Latino art comes from a desire also to sort of create some sense of justice, some sense of inclusion, even though it also, at the same time, often creates an exclusion. Do you think that you've ever approached your art with that sense of justice or that desire to sort of correct notions of what it means to be Latino or –

MR. AMADO: It could have been a reaction to that, you know. I mean, having seen enough of it, having seen enough exhibitions of it and how it persists, you know, I guess it was – when was that show that also went to San Francisco that Cheech Marin's –

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, "Chicano Visions"?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, right, from his collection. And it opened up here in San Antonio. And I think that was in 2001, late 2001 – November of 2001. And going to that, and – I mean, it was splendid indeed. And there was a big splash about it and it got a lot of press and all that. But at the same time, when I saw that – you know, before going there, saying, well, I'm a Latino and, you know, thinking that why am I not in that collection? Why do – Gabriela Trench was working at the Finesilver [Gallery] at the time and said, "Yeah, yeah, I've shown him your work," and he's always interested, but still I'm not included in that collection. So having that in the back of my mind, I'm just wondering, you know, why I'm not inclusive in that.

And then the exhibition comes to town and I go to it and I'm so glad that I'm not in it, you know, strictly because of my heritage, my background, my skin color – is that enough to be want to be in an exhibition like that? No. No, it's much more deeper than that; it's much more complex than that. And so I was so glad I wasn't in it because once again, you know, it was rehashing so much of what has been dealt with and I think in a way resolved. You know, whether it's been resolved positively or negatively, it's still been talked about in a dialogue several – let's move on. And then again, you know, there's just too much of it. And there's just – you know, it's just putting paintings on a wall, in a way, you know?

And maybe there's some sort of thought behind how it is hung in terms of maybe chronologically it's the way it's supposed to be, but then, I don't know, it just – there was – I think there was a lot of, you know, shortcomings in that show. And you know, it's a collection; you see it and okay, it's a collection. This is your collection. It's like bringing out your collections of stamps or something like that and putting them all out on the table so everyone can see. It was very similar to that. So then I was very, very glad that I was not part of that. And it just made me again understand why I'm not part of that, and maybe it's a better thing for me not to be a part of that.

So it vacillates that way, you know? It's inclusive, exclusive, good, bad: yes, I want to be part of that; no, I don't want to be part of that. You know, but I talk about Cantinflas's death, you know. I did a piece about that one time, because I really –

MS. CORDOVA: What was that one?

MR. AMADO: Hmm?

MS. CORDOVA: Which was that one?

MR. AMADO: Oh that was – it was part of that Bemis show, you know, because he had recently passed away, and so I just took, you know, an image of him with me and I included it in one of the pieces, only because I thought he was brilliant, you know, what he did and what he represented and what he contributed to Mexican culture at the time. And he was brilliant in what he did. So I liked that. I liked that a lot, you know?

But then you cross a border and, you know, you encounter a slightly different culture than that. And it – but then there're so many similarities still. You know, we have a lot of pelados in San Antonio, as we do in Mexico, that still, you know, have the same characteristics as the pelados there. So – and having to deal with that on a pretty much daily basis. I think I lived next door to a bunch of pelados but luckily they're on the other side of the street – I mean, it's around the corner. But, I mean, I observe that, you know? And there they go, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: And they are the traditional iconography of Chicano art?

MR. AMADO: They could be. And maybe I think that's probably – I don't think I see enough of that. I think – I mean, they're not low-riders and they're not pachucos, but I still think they're pelados because of their aggressiveness and how they use aggression to sort of express being dispossessed of so much and being marginalized, and how else do you react to something like that? But still they're like creeping up towards middle class because they all have their red aggressive cars with the shiny, beautiful rims. I mean, they still have that. They is still so much of the machismo there still.

So it's kind of interesting. It's just kind of a new level – a new stage of that kind of thing, that whole pelado thing, you know, which I don't think has been investigated very much by our current Latino artists.

So – How did I get off on this tangent?

MS. CORDOVA: Well, actually I'm going to switch you in a new direction, I think, and my question is – I just want to go back to the lard for a second and ask you how technically did you apply it? But it also put me in mind for something else in which I think maybe you're falling in and out, or I'd love your ideas on, and that is the gap between painting and sculpture or the crossing over, that you seem to be becoming more catalogued as a sculpture artist or as an installation artist. And so maybe you could talk about the dimensions of that struggle or that labeling, but starting with the lard.

MR. AMADO: Okay, painting and sculpture, right?

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MR. AMADO: I went into this thinking that I wanted to be a painter, and I think we talked about how I became a sculptor instead. But even when I was making paintings, like I said, I was thinking in terms of sculpture and real space and how paint could articulate real space that way. So – and I think painting – I like painting a lot; I like the issues that it presents, and I think about it quite a bit but – and sometimes I do make paintings but – I don't know, make paintings and they still look like sculpture to me. I mean, they still look about – they still seem to be about real things in real space, you know, instead of this illusory characteristic or aspect to them. But I also like doing that too. I've made some works that were very illusory, that created an illusion; that were flat, that were on the wall, and then having done that, make like shipping pallets that are made out of marble and granite, and trying to get that same illusion from the real thing.

So maybe they're just like really interchangeable for me. And I still think of paint as a material and I like it as a material. I like how you can spread it and make it flow and do things like that. So it's not so much about the illusion but it is about the material. And I guess that ultimately brings me right back to sculpture, you know, in terms of materials and how you know build, construct with materials and how materials bring some kind of baggage with them that helps the work even more so. Certain materials work better for certain concepts than others so.

MS. CORDOVA: Was it difficult to make the lard stay where you wanted it to?

MR. AMADO: Well, first of all, I just covered the whole wall with plastic, and then over that I put like screening in so it would have a grip to it, and then I just covered it completely with the lard. And unfortunately – or fortunately – it depends on how you look at it – it was in the middle of summer, and one of the things that was advantageous about this wall, besides its prominence, was that there was an air conditioner right next to it. But that air conditioner, it turned out, didn't work, so clumps of it started to come off – which turned out to be kind of interesting ultimately. It really did, quite frankly.

Have you even seen it?

MS. CORDOVA: No.

MR. AMADO: I think – let's see, oh, here it is. There was something in this magazine about it. It's just a very small reproduction but you kind of get an idea. I think this one also has the drips on it. I think it's starting to fall apart at this point. So, yeah, then I went home and I came back and it was like dripping all off the wall, and I thought to myself, "Well, how can that be? Where's the air conditioning you promised me?"

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. AMADO: No, it was intact, actually.

MS. CORDOVA: After this picture –

MR. AMADO: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: – which is in *Museum and Art*, September 1993 edition.

MR. AMADO: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: [Inaudible.]

MR. AMADO: Of course. So there it is.

MS. CORDOVA: And it sort of goes with your interest in surfaces I can see immediately because it has that sinewy –

MR. AMADO: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: – or sort of fluctuating surface.

MR. AMADO: Right. And I had a choice between two types of lard. There was Regline and there was Armour, and Armour turned out to be much nicer. It was more iridescent, pearlescence. The other was a little bit flatter and not as shiny.

MS. CORDOVA: What a wonderful thing to learn. [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: Yeah. I mean, if you're going to do something like this, you know, there's lard that's a little bit more

proper than the other.

MS. CORDOVA: Had you sculpted with food before? Did that come up?

MR. AMADO: I think I have. I'm sure I have, somewhere down the line. I'm trying to think. What was it? I know I have but I can't quite remember. Well, anyway.

MS. CORDOVA: Is the side portion part of it?

MR. AMADO: Well, it's not really part of it but it's just another piece. Basically it's just a cake on a shelf with a can of lard on it as well. So it is a chocolate cake. We made this beautiful icing that sort of mimicked the lard on that.

[Phone rings.]

MS. CORDOVA: Should I pause the tape?

[Audio break.]

MR. AMADO: Sorry for the interruption.

MS. CORDOVA: No worries.

MR. AMADO: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: And maybe sort of switching off to another tack that – I was recently struck by one of the images of your work. It was in the "Taking Liberties" [1992] show, and you did two pieces that I was fascinated by and I thought maybe you could talk about one or the other, or both. One was called *Institutions* [1991] and it had tiny little beds in it. And put me in mind: did you create those beds individually? Did you have someone create them for you? How did you create them, and what was the overall motivation for that particular piece? I immediately thought of your brother actually.

MR. AMADO: That's good. That's a good reading, actually. It's – okay, that show, "Taking Liberties", there was actually – that piece came from my MFA show, the *Institution* piece, and then the other one –

MS. CORDOVA: Is it *The Guarantee Turns 200: A Passion Play of New Criticality* [1991]?

MR. AMADO: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: I think I might have it –

MR. AMADO: Oh, right, I know. It's the one with the birdcages.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, okay. All right. Okay, I have – those come from two different – from two different directions, actually.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, they seem very different.

MS. CORDOVA: Uh-huh. Well, the one that came first was the *Institution*. And – right, that's the *Institution*. See, this one was made – this was part of my MFA show and it turned out that I was offered to be a part of a show – a three-person show at Blue Star at the time. And this is the other one.

So I was just thinking about my state of being at the time, and going from the educational institution, from academia, into the institution of art. So these sort of work as a metaphor for that, you know, just the suspension of being kind of in a place that's sort of in between and everything that academia offers and doesn't offer, and the prospect of tragedy happening, being institutionalized. I mean, it was just like there was so much of that into the piece that I just really loaded it up but kind of made it look so it wasn't so loaded, let's say.

Part of the reason that these are suspended is that I took reproductions of different artists that had dealt with some sort of human tragedy, like Goya's. There was reproductions of a Goya underneath there, and just either tragedies of wars or civil unrest or anything that kind of disrupted institutions. And so that's why I kind of suspended them, and not saying anything about them, and then hopefully having someone discover them. And a little girl finally saw them underneath, and when she started looking underneath, other people started to see that there was reproductions of that kind of thing.

So it was talking about that and just talking about just being in a place that you become institutionalized and you wonder what that really means and sort of breaking away from that and going – [inaudible] esse suete [ph,

term credited to Spanish film director Luis Buñuel] – on it. So that swing, that particular swing and the potential for dashed hopes, let's say, and being uncertain about that.

This worked out pretty well – academia worked out pretty well, so what's going to happen in the real art world? So it was about that and what all that implies. And just lead – these are made out of lead.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you make those?

MR. AMADO: I made them but I got really, really very thin sheets of lead, lead sheeting, and I just fabricated them – that's how I was able to make the sweet little lead covers for them and all that.

MS. CORDOVA: They are sweet.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, they're very cute, to be made out of lead and all that.

So that's what that piece was about. So it was kind of coming to terms with the fact that I was leaving academia and going into another institution, and what that meant to me.

Now, this one here – this piece [*The Guarantee turns 200*] was as a result of acquiring an NEA grant in 1990, and that's when Jesse Helms was on his high horse about censorship. So I got the money and then I also had to sign a form saying that I would not make any offensive art with it.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: So it was about censorship. So that piece – I made that piece and I made this piece.

MS. CORDOVA: And –

MR. AMADO: And so the show was here in town and so I spent the majority of the money just putting the show together. And basically what this is is doves that are metaphors who represent the inhabitants of this wonderful country – you know, the citizens of this wonderful country. And then this last one there is like two little dove eggs because they had to be together for a while, while I was conceiving the show, and they had little doves – they laid some eggs.

But essentially – okay, so you have these guys and these are – these plants and stone monuments are –

MS. CORDOVA: Beneath the cages.

MR. AMADO: Beneath the cages and it's like the First Amendment in three parts. You probably know that.

So over the course of the exhibition eventually the birds will completely defecate and obliterate the First Amendment.

MS. CORDOVA: Right, because there's no newspaper in their cages to block –

MR. AMADO: There's no newspaper – exactly. So basically what happens – you can see it gets all messy, and basically that's what I was trying to say. If we're not careful all these liberties are going to be taken away from us and we won't – we'll shit on our own liberties in a way, kind of how it's all set up so that – now is a prime example, giving up our liberties in return for security – this whole illusion of security.

So that's what that was about. It was just really in response to that kind of demagoguery of we don't want offensive art, we don't want Mapplethorpe all over again. So if we give you this money you can't do that. So it's really about censorship, and this was just another piece about that. These, again, the lead and these bookmarkers – I mean, these bookends, you know, this ferocious-looking eagle kind of represented this country. And these are just a list – a partial list of books that are censored each and every year. I think there's institutions –

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, is that what they are?

MR. AMADO: Yeah. There's an institution in Chicago that keeps tabs on this, and I think every September they come out with a new list of books that have been censored and taken off library shelves. And it's an incredible – even the Bible has been censored at some point. *Tom Sawyer* [1876] – just books that have become very representative – on shelves of everyone. So that's basically what it is.

MS. CORDOVA: What about when you're choosing your title, because what's partly striking about those is the titles that are rather evocative, especially the first one, *The Guarantee Turns 200*. The subhead is what caught me: *A Passion Play of New Criticality*.

MR. AMADO: Well, it's my literary background that brings that into it, you know, the poeticnesss of what I think is happening within the work. It's poetics. You know, it's associations – putting associations together and then you come up with meaning that way, but it's going to take a little – you know, a little thought a little reading into the work, and that will, you know, bring you to that point, you know, bring you to the last stanza of the point and then you understand what all these metaphors were about and these references and associations as you read them and put them together and figure it out. It's not – it's not the seat. You know, if you were at the shore and you heard the sea – you were at the shore and you put the conch shell up to your ear and you heard something, and you know about that experience, that experience of putting that up to your ear and hearing the sea.

So, instead of being –

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A.]

MS. CORDOVA: [In progress.] And I'm curious, do you ever read a book of poems or even read a novel and sort of try to then create a work from that, or is it much more separate in terms of inspiration?

MR. AMADO: I think it's much more separate, you know, but it certainly informs the work, certainly.

MS. CORDOVA: Are there certain poets that you seek out specifically?

MR. AMADO: Not so much poets, you know, but more like authors, like Salman Rushdie, and anyone that's just a good wordsmith like him. And you come across them every once in a while. You search for them and you come across them. Salman Rushdie for sure is the one that – the latest one for me that I can think of right off the top of my head.

MS. CORDOVA: Why in particular him?

MR. AMADO: Well, I mean, I know the stories that he talks about. There's the stories of disenfranchised people and his experience coming from India and going to England, and sort of like some sort of sense about that, about that particular experience, and just reading – having the stories in front of you and then – I mean, I like to read books and savor them for their words and the way they're constructed and the way they're put together, and he's – he's really good at it. He's a good wordsmith. He's incredible. So that's what I like in a book. It takes me a long time to read a book, going back over it over and over again and seeing how he said what he said and how he said it, the words that he chose to say it.

And so, I think that influenced my work – why is this work better than the other; why is this color better than that color – and put that kind of same thought into it. What happens a lot of times is the conception of the piece is probably 75 to 85 of it and then the execution is the other 25, 15 percent, or whatever it is, and so you – I mean, if I can just structure myself that much then – it's like training for – to play a sport of some kind. You train and you train really hard and then you go on the field and maybe it comprises of that same – similar percentage, but you have so much fun doing that, executing and accomplishing and hopefully you come out with a win.

So I kind of set myself up that way, and then when that 15 percent happens, or 25 percent happens, then the play comes into it and whatever other aspects of the art-making process comes into it, the execution part of it.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you have to lock yourself in a room and tell yourself, I'm going to think of something today, or do you sort of more go through life and start taking notes on something that you might come back to later, or do you actively seek out events that will cause you to create something?

MR. AMADO: It's the latter part. You know, I don't lock myself into the studio. Like I said, it's always about something or someplace or somebody. Like recently I was thinking of going to Austin because they have the NCAA track and field meet there this week. I hope I can find some time to get away and see that because – I went to a local track meet here and just sort of – I was just fascinated by the spectacle of it, just people running and just the physicality of it and the competition of it and just – in the middle there's – everyone is just there; all the competitors are just there and they're warming up or they're interacting with each other, and it's kind of like a Andreas Gursky photograph, you know, just a bunch of people engaged in this one event that manifests itself in a lot of different ways. Some are alone, some are in groups, all these wonderful colors and wonderful sports colors which are sort of bright.

And so I go for that and then I end up taking videotape of the losers in the races, and so I kind of want to follow on that and call it, like, dashed hopes, like I said earlier. You know, you have so many hopes – I mean, it's kind of like the art world, you know? You compete and you run a race, and you run a good race but you come in last and you don't get the prize – you don't get the Turner Prize, you don't get to be in the Whitney, that kind of thing.

So I'm trying to make that analogy between the competitiveness and the reasons one gets to be the golden boy that year, or not. And so, trying to get that reaction of the loser as opposed to the reaction that we all are so

used to when we see the winner come through. Everyone – the camera always focuses on the winner –

MS. CORDOVA: And so this is –

MR. AMADO: – the triumphant winner.

MS. CORDOVA: This is film that you are taking and then you're going to create something out of that film?

MR. AMADO: Hopefully, you know, or just keep it filed away somewhere, hopefully maybe bring it out somehow, somewhere.

MS. CORDOVA: And that I guess leads me to start thinking about how you're work seems to be – I think it seems to be going more towards film, or maybe that's always been there and I just didn't see it, but I know film has always been important to you; it's just maybe works like *L'Avventura* [1960] are making it more obvious.

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh, more obvious. Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: So maybe you could talk a little bit about that, that train of thought, how that has been growing in your work, the direction towards film, even towards working with video, which is new.

MR. AMADO: I think it's been a slow, slow transition because, again, there is a subtext to anything that I do. Obviously I'm in the visual world and I relish the visual world and I like being in that world, but at the same time the literary world is still very important, and it's always been there, like I said, as a subtext or some shadow of some kind. So I've always relied on that, you know, and still loving movies and still publicly getting something out of movies that maybe we're not so – I don't know, so obvious, you know, that – that obviously worked into the work but still be influential in terms of just how things are composed because I'm not really – I'm not really a figurative painter or referential painter – you know, a representational painter. And I think movies lend themselves a little bit more to that than painting does.

But there's other things that I've taken, like – that's why I like Antonioni and how he worked with space. And so I think I – if anything there was always that. That was offered to me by a director such as Antonioni and how he deals with space, and how space can be brought to film and create something, create a mood or create a relationship between architecture and human beings, and that being a really important aspect of my art. That's the early influence of cinema in my art, you know, particularly, and just the pace, you know. Antonioni films and others, you know, have a very, very, very slow pace, and I like that a lot, just the pace that I also learned from them – from others that are alike.

And then I guess finally recognizing it, the influence, and just say, well, I'm just going to really, really look a little bit closer and longer at cinema and let's see where that takes me. So, again, I went back to Antonioni and this kind of sprung from that. You know, it's kind of like the springboard for what I've been doing recently quite a bit.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, what is it about *L'Avventura*, aside from the pace even that was especially drawing you to that film? When was the first time you saw that film – when you were in New York?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, when I was in New York and very young, just walking the streets and just happened to walk into this particular cinema and that's what was showing, and not being very familiar with – getting to be familiar with foreign films and discovering that whole world and how wonderful it was and sort of start to seek it out a little bit more, but not knowing who Antonioni was and not knowing what that film was about, still very naïve and unlearned about cinema – foreign cinema.

And then I saw it and it was just amazing – it was just – there was – I couldn't really articulate it at the time but I was just swept away by it. There was – and each time I see it – probably in a very superficial way the first time with Monica Vitti and saying, "God, this is just an amazingly beautiful, sophisticated woman, I want someone just like that in my life" – and really hating the male character and how he treated her. So it was really just about that relationship and how they related to each other, and just the milieu that they were involved – you know, the bourgeoisie – aristocratic bourgeoisie, you know, moneyed – wealthy old society, that – hell, I didn't know anything about that – and the clamor of that and just how seductive and desirable that was.

And so, I liked that and I thought, "Wow, that was an amazing film." And so every time I go back and watch it it seems to just get richer and deeper, and I get more from it each time, even now – even when I went back three years ago, or whatever it was, and recaptured it, it was different; it was just different and more beautiful and more meaningful. I mean, then you find out just how layered that movie is in terms of what it has to offer.

MS. CORDOVA: And I guess one of the things I think Antonioni is known for and that's perhaps striking about that film is his visuals, right, that sort of incredible cinematography, and yet what you have done is sort of looked at something on the side, the text, the actual dialogue that is happening and you've actually maybe given less

significance to the visuals, and that's an interesting decision. Maybe you could speak about that.

MR. AMADO: Well, what I've tried to do is not necessarily lessen the significance of the visual but just sort of giving the viewer – or what I've tried to do is make it – let's see, just to equalize, I suppose, you know, the dialogue with the visuals, where I've given you a certain amount of time to determine whether the visuals or the text is more important in away, sort of, you know, because I think our typical experience in watching foreign films is that we have this kind of dilemma where we have to read it, and sometimes we miss the visuals because you just don't have time; there is just not enough time within that frames, those sets of frames, to really look at the visual. And so you're reading and then suddenly you look up and it's gone. You get a split second of it.

So what I've tried to do is slow up that process and give you even more of an opportunity to read the text and be able to see the visuals, but at the same time what I'm doing is also taking away everything that doesn't have text, that doesn't have a subtitle. So I'm kind of reversing the process instead of reading so much that you know what the plot is, you know what the narrative is by reading it, and so therefore you get a pretty good idea of what the movie is about just by the text even though you don't see it visually. So I'm sort of reversing that process, giving you all the time you need to read the text as well, and just by cutting out the other visuals that don't have text, and seeing if you can put the movie together like that just by the text alone.

Yeah, it's kind of like that. It's just sort of rearranging how you look at a foreign movie and what that means.

MS. CORDOVA: And then what I think I see happening is that the text has then – you've then sort of turned it sideways in other work, I guess.

MR. AMADO: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: And so the text, in many ways then, becomes illegible or much more difficult to read and then becomes a vision of itself. Did you do that –

MR. AMADO: A visual form, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Was it in *Beauty Spot* [2003] that you did that or – I'm not sure what the first work that you might have done using that technique is. But that's an interesting transition too because you can't necessarily read the text anymore; it's become the image.

MR. AMADO: I think I started doing that – yeah, it becomes the image, it becomes the form, and so I'm using that as an element to create, you know, visual forms. And so either I've heightened – in a way I've done two things. I think I've heightened the text into a form that carries something visually that it didn't before, so it's taken on more of the retinal experience of seeing things, the ocular experience. But at the same time, what it does – simultaneously it just – the meaning becomes a little bit more obscure and it's a little bit harder to immediately comprehend what is being said. And maybe it's not that important anymore, but still, it might be important enough for someone to want to take the time to read it. And that's happened.

And, really, essentially that started – I was thinking about those things, you know, from the very beginning when I made – you know, I sat down, I said, "I want to watch *L'Avventura* again," and so I started to watch it and I thought – and I started thinking about all these things and I started thinking about translations, how sometimes the translation isn't such a true translation, particularly when you're watching – when I would watch like a Spanish-speaking movie, you know, Bueñuel or something like that. There was so much lost in the translation. So that just came to fore.

And then I decided that I was going to do this text thing, you know, all the subtitles to*L'Avventura*, and so that's when I got that – and I wanted to slow down the pace so I wanted to just be able to slow myself down as well in order to have a better understanding and a feeling of that. So I just – right there, you know, I just put the video on and I sat in that same chair that I did – and I got one of those DYMO labelers, and just because that would be a way of really slowing it down, not word by word but letter by letter. And so, yeah, like, I don't know, seven months later I'm still doing it and –

MS. CORDOVA: That is almost torturous –

MR. AMADO: It is almost torturous.

MS. CORDOVA: – to put yourself through that letter by letter.

MR. AMADO: Exactly.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, why did you –

MR. AMADO: Like a penitent – some kind – self-flagellation penitent. But I liked that. There was something

unusual about watching a whole film that way, almost frame by frame in a way, or seeing how many frames were within the text, the subtitles, because sometimes you get two or three frames; sometimes you get several – several frames, 20 frames or something like that. And so, that's when I make – when I make the video it's kind of a dissolve where a subtext is there but suddenly you went from one text to the next. So sometimes it was sorter, sometimes it was longer, so you get more movement out of it.

So that was one thing to discover about it. But I did, and so what I had – and I had like this 50-some-odd tapes, you know, 20 feet long of subtext – of subtitles rather, and so – and that's when I – you know, I was at a point like, okay, so now what? What am I going to do now? And so that's when I just started making drawings out of these tapes, basically just laying the tape over the back of the paper and just doing rubbings of that. And so – and trying to mimic in a way just what film is, just capturing of light and creating images that way through the process of emulsion and fixing and developing, and now you get it. So it was kind of put myself into that place. Some are darker than others; some are lighter.

So I had, I don't know, 30-some-odd drawings of this particular experience and some were so dark that you really couldn't make out the text. So it was just kind of like this process, the slow developing process that eventually got me to – like that show, the Beauty Spot show where eventually I ended up doing this – this is pretty much what I'm doing now.

MS. CORDOVA: Right, and this is your *Reading Adorno by Poolside* [2003].

MR. AMADO: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes, and so the letters are actually sideways coming off of the canvas, so that would be an incredible struggle to read, right?

MR. AMADO: It would be, indeed. I mean, you could possibly do it. I think it's physically – but this piece would be so frustrating because it's 15 feet long – it's over 15 feet long.

MS. CORDOVA: And there's something rather unusual about creating a piece that is so horizontally directed rather than – I mean, I think we see a lot more happening with painting, especially like in the verticality of it, and this is just like a snake across the wall then?

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh. I mean, it's completely linear, which is a big characteristic of text. But even then we're not used to reading something that lengthy. It's always on the page so it's broken out – you know, there's sentences, there's lines on a page and that would help with the process of reading it. So if you really stretch it out, which is what I really wanted to do with this Adorno piece; I really wanted to make a really, really long piece, and I would like to eventually make even longer pieces than that but at a much later time.

MS. CORDOVA: And why [Theodor] Adorno?

MR. AMADO: Why Adorno? Well, that was because – that's funny – because I was thinking about, you know, beauty for the show and the different manifestations and thoughts about beauty, and I always remembered Adorno from my underclassman days, you know, at the university in Austin and going to either – what's the name of that park there that has that beautiful pool, that –

MS. CORDOVA: Barton Springs?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, Barton Springs – either going to Barton Springs or a friends, you know, apartment and taking Adorno and reading Adorno by the poolside, and especially when I took it to Barton Springs. You know, I might read four pages in four hours because there was other beauty around me then –

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: – like really beautiful girls that were so distracting. So I was just trying to – I mean, that was a personal experience but at the same time it was about beauty, the different forms of beauty, and the incomprehensible Adorno and the very comprehensible beauty of a woman, that I knew so well even at that young age.

So that's why I really picked him, thinking about beauty – he always talked about beauty, when something was beautiful to him.

MS. CORDOVA: That story actually makes the piece – I mean, it just has a profound new meaning for me, just hearing that story of you by the poolside and looking at women and struggling through Adorno. And I'm wondering if sometimes you feel like your art needs the back story or if people should just come into it and create what they will.

MR. AMADO: Well, for me it helps if it has the back story, and –

MS. CORDOVA: Do you make an effort to include that somehow, or –

MR. AMADO: I don't know. I mean, I think I sort of give – like any good title, it gives you an idea of what the work is about, and so I try to allude to something like that within the title. And, I mean, I think some people know who Adorno is and I think most people know what poolside is and what reading by the poolside is, what that is like. I think everyone's done that. And so that kind of sets it up – you know, the title kind of sets that up: you're going to crack open this book and you know more or less what this book's about, but at the same time you're not really – I mean, that's why you crack a book open, because you want to know what the story is and how it all is going to end up.

And so, bring your own – by all means it's ambiguous enough. Please bring your experiences and everything else: your privileges, your biases, your tragedies, your joys, everything that you can bring to a work and make your own reading out of it. I mean, it's ambiguous that way.

MS. CORDOVA: I think what's also wonderful is that – I mean, Adorno is just, in reading, quite complex.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, it's a struggle to begin with.

MS. CORDOVA: And you've made him even more complex. You've taken the possibility of even understanding him and stretched it to new limits.

MR. AMADO: Right, in incomprehensibility of Adorno. Because, yeah, it's a tough read. It's a really tough read. What the hell is he saying? So you read it over and over again. So that was part of it, too, you know. I remember struggling with that and not having that sophistication at the time to really kind of get it but just really struggling. You know, it's like – parts of it I was really happy with it, but it was – yeah, that's part of why I brought him back in in talking – picking up a philosopher that was really tough that way and sort of making a statement about philosophy and just that whole malarkey maybe, perhaps, of philosophy, but still using language. And anybody that uses language is – whether it's Cantinflas and the way his no-nonsense language of course reflected the times, the wordy era of – the political wordy era of Mexico at the times in the '30s and '40s – you know, politicians making all these promises and never really keeping promises. Like I said, it was just demagogic.

And so it was just political speak that made no sense at all. So he was doing the same thing, essentially, a pelado up on stage making – saying all these things that didn't mean anything. It was just total nonsense. So whether it's that, using language to express that kind of attitude or way of life or political situation or socio-political situation, or Adorno, high art – you know, low art, high art and both using language for their purposes.

MS. CORDOVA: Right, because you haven't just applied this strategy of words to Adorno – you've used it for several others, right, by now?

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: Who else have you used this for?

MR. AMADO: Well, I've taken James Brown lyrics –

MS. CORDOVA: James Brown and his *Please, Please, Please* [1956]?

MR. AMADO: Right. Simply that.

MS. CORDOVA: I mean, what a good match for Cantinflas, right? What you were just talking about.

MR. AMADO: In a way, yeah – taking language – exactly, from Cantinflas to Adorno and James Brown in the middle, or anything, the tag lines of magazines, fashion magazines. I did a piece recently on Tracey Emin because I've been just kind of fascinated with the association between fashion and art and that close relationship that's been established probably from the beginning but certainly now. I mean, open *Art Forum* there's four or five full-page ads from Gucci and Prada, et cetera, so that's even become even more obvious – [inaudible] – too. So I kind of got interested in that so I got a subscription at *W* magazine because there always seems to be, every month, a feature on an artist, whether it was Ellen Gallagher or Tracey Emin or anyone like that – you know, Andreas Gursky.

And then I became interested in the taglines – you know, the bold print that's interspersed within the article of – a quote of theirs. So that was another thing too. I mean, that's one of the things that – and song lyrics, subtitles, interviews from artists, interviews of Andy Warhol from the '60s and interviews with Marcel Duchamp from the same time. So it's just a variety of sources and references that I'm looking for, and not necessarily

predetermining any of this. It's just today I'll wake up and go to the library or the [Marion Kooglery] McNay [Art Museum] and see what I can find there, or I'll just go to my post office box and get an issue of – get the latest issue of *W* magazine and see what's in there, like that – kind of like that.

MS. CORDOVA: And why fashion? Why – what's –

MR. AMADO: I don't know. I like it. I like fashion. I like what it represents and I like clothes and I like looking at the clothes, just the whole phenomenon of fashion and how it dictates so much and steers how we look and how it wants us to look, and just the language that's also used, the specific language that's used in fashion as well. I mean, it's almost like – [inaudible]. It's saying a lot but it's really saying nothing. It's basically recycling clothes, basically, different eras. You know, the whole recycling thing is kind of interesting to me. And just because – I don't know.

MS. CORDOVA: Why is the recycling thing interesting to you?

MR. AMADO: I'm not really sure. It's just that they use it so well and they make it look new all the time. And maybe that's what artists too – in a way. Anyway, beautiful clothes, beautiful women, beautiful people, that's nice. I like looking at that. I make no qualms about that – pretensions about that too.

And also, I've done some prints where – like I did this one particular print. It was like the Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter collection and essentially I just picked out these colors that represented the seasons – you know, the green for spring and the certain – almost like a designer kind of green, and the winter, this icy cold blue, and the summer, this brilliant orangy kind of – [inaudible]. And then I just took what you see in all fashion magazines – you see the spread but then – and then it's always described, the clothes that they're wearing and how much they cost. And so I just lifted that text and just eliminated the figure altogether but just lifted that text. And so they were kind of like portraits but at the same time they were about the seasons and nature. You know the figure within nature and then just how it can be described, this figure, by the clothes it wears and the money it costs, so I kind of isolated that.

MS. CORDOVA: And so then is it a critique too? I mean, often when you look at those astronomical figures of what it costs –

MR. AMADO: Right. Yeah. Yeah, it's a critique – it's a critique about that, and also the astronomical cost of art too and how it is very elitist and exclusive as well. I mean, you have to have a lot of money to afford some art and you have to have a lot of money to afford some clothes. So it's about that eliticism and the choices that one as an artist or one as a fashion designer can make about the right color. So I made the decision about the right color to represent summer. I mean, it's like an artificial color. It's all about the artifice, you know. It's, okay, it kind of reminds you about summer, but just briefly it does that. Okay, you get it but then you sort of hopefully are seduced, are swayed, persuaded by the artifice of the color, beautiful color like that.

So it just varies – it just comes from different sources that are really mostly about culture, things that our culture has produced through thought and language, not so much about nature, not so much about things like that, organic things, but just the artifice of nature and where that comes from – like that – maybe not specifically that but these are all springboards for making something that I make. And I don't ever say that I'm part of the intelligentsia. I'm not that; I'm not an intellectual. I'm just sort of out there roaming and looking and comment – just a commentator.

MS. CORDOVA: That's your role.

MR. AMADO: That's my role, yeah. That's exactly my role, the ever-persistent voyeur and just looking and looking at interesting stuff.

MS. CORDOVA: All right, I'm going to stop us there for now and I'm going to switch tapes.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B.]
[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.]

CARY CORDOVA: All right, we are recording. This is Cary Cordova interviewing Jesse Amado for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is June 7th, 2004 and this is Session two and disc two.

And during our little break here, Jesse, you brought out a couple of images of some of your more recent work which I see is a tagging onto what you started with *L'Avventura*. And in particular, the – you have taken the label tape or the image of the label tape and then you sort of – it has actually become, in many ways, what you see as negative film, sort of cascading down like the cinematic movie film that you would often see but instead of the images or instead of negatives, it's text label. And so – at least that is my observation. I don't know if that was at all relevant in the creation of this piece or if you would like to talk about how you started thinking about that.

JESSE AMADO: I mean, I'm sure that was part of it. I don't think it was specifically something like that. I mean, but that's – I like that reading. It's a good reading, actually.

No, it was – it was just really simply the fact that I was doing what I was doing because I wanted to make these drawings and suddenly finding myself with all these tapes, you know. And like I showed you previously, just taking the tapes and putting them on – you know, mounting them on canvas and sort of making paintings of this, you know? And just the way it sort of arranged itself because I started this endeavor and I didn't know what I was getting into so I bought a bunch of black tape and then I would run out of tape and I had to go back to the store and buy some more so – all they would have is blue so I would buy blue and then, you know, just – I would go again and all they had – they were out of blue so I would have to buy red, you know. And so that kind of dictated the color scheme in these things and so that was kind of interesting how that worked out.

And then I just kind of let these little spaces in between just sort of emulate like the flickering of a film when you are watching it. And then, again – and going through that experience and realizing that there was something about the tapes themselves that could be utilized. And of course they are always rolled up because they are going through that little machine and having them fall out of your hand and having this kind of configuration start to happen. So there was a possibility of manipulating that and so basically that is what I started doing.

The first one I did was this one which was really personal. I was asked by, at the time, which was TFA [Texas Fine Arts Association] – Sue Graze's. Every year she asked artists to do an edition – a print edition. So that year she asked me and so I said, sure, I would love to. I was, again, doing this mostly. So basically, I had just gone through this breakup. I had been in this seven-year relationship with Rebecca and so we broke up and I was very affected by that and trying to deal with it and resolve it. And so I just decided to make a – this print about that and call it *Fury of Love* [2001]. Essentially this left panel here – the red panel – is taken from just the idea of how a relationship starts and how thrilling it is and how passionate it is and so – just sort of composing a love letter that is representative of most first-time – I mean, a relationship and just the first experiences that you have in a relationship – like I said, the thrill of it and the passion of it. So that kind of represents that and it's all very positive and, you know, we are going to be together forever and ever and I'll never stop loving you – that kind of thing, you know, that kind of passion.

And then this is the blue, colder letter, you know, the kind of a goodbye letter and that language that is used when you say goodbye to someone and you part from someone, so the particular language that's used there and the particular language that's used here, and so it's kind of interesting.

So, you know, I could have just done that but then what mediated this time period between these two – these two times? It was just listening to music and – cathartic, it could be soothing at the same time and just kind of helps you get through the process of loss. And so this was a song lyrics to a particular song that I was listening to at the time when I broke up and which really helped in healing. And so – and then just thinking about, well, how am I going to represent that? And so it came out looking like this. It's sort of not so rigid and geometric but just loose and lyrical and rhythmic like a song.

And so that just opened up other possibilities so these things started happening – just orchestrating and producing these things and using reflection to kind of work just because it seemed like the right thing to do. It was just a decision to be made. And so I made a symmetrical thing – symmetrical. Song lyrics – now this was another letter that I compare and this was song lyrics here and this was a love letter with the song lyrics together – two colors. And this was taken from an article from *Vogue* magazine – the curator showed P.S.1 and so –

MS. CORDOVA: That was dramatically different, though. I mean, it's – both in color and in form. What – [laughs] – is that indicative of the subject matter?

MR. AMADO: Yeah, yeah. I was trying to encompass something as the subject matter and – right because the article essentially was about P.S.1 and what they were doing about P.S.1 but eventually, it digressed into what these curators were wearing, the high fashion of that. It kind of – it's like that, you know. It's kind of like this pinwheel sort of effect, just takes you in circles like that in this very pretty – so that is kind of what I was trying to do with that.

And then this one was – I was going to show in ARCO in Madrid so I just took a Spanish *GQ* – you know, *Español GQ* and just, again, took the text from the fashion spreads that described the clothes and the cost of the clothes – basically that's what I was doing with these, and sort of trying to make them in a way figurative, sort of symmetrical, a configuration of figure and it just sort of, you know, gather at the bottom and has something else. Like when you let your pants down, or you're dress, you know comes off your body, kind of thing. And then that was it, pretty much that was it, with those DYMO tapes and what I did with those.

And then also I was doing those Mondrian things which were kind of interesting.

MS. CORDOVA: And those were out of the label tapes, correct?

MR. AMADO: Uh-huh, right, yeah. I just substituted the lines with the label tapes. And basically just, you know, looked at Mondrian painting and just kind of reversed it, you know. A real Mondrian painting would have the yellow, like the yellow here and the red up here. So it's just kind of like the mirror image of it, you know? And essentially they were the same thing. I mean, they were both very influential. James Brown, for instance, with you know, the hip hop culture, you know the rap culture. They all represent. And I think Mondrian kind of did a very radical thing too, you know, what he was doing. And so it was that influence. And I think it was Minimalist: "Please, please, please baby please don't go; I love you so." And basically – it just repeats itself over and over again, you know, with some inflections of some kind or with certain, what do you call it, anyway.

So I kind of made that association too. I think that they're pretty much influential in their own ways as well. And I showed these to, I don't know, one of the curators from Whitney – I forget her name. Geez, I wish I knew her name now for this interview.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: Well, she was one of the curators for the Whitney and I can't quite remember which – oh, what was her name? My God, I wish I knew it now. Anyway, we all know who she is. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. AMADO: But I showed her these and she was sort of shocked that I would do that. She was sort of – you know, she really felt that Mondrian was sort of untouchable, that it was almost blasphemous for me to be doing something like this.

MS. CORDOVA: Really? What –

MR. AMADO: And I said, "Why?" You know, James Brown, come on. What about James Brown? You don't seem to say the same thing about James Brown but you certainly say it about Mondrian. And I tried to explain to her the connection and what I was trying to do with these things – kind of really honoring both artists and really just doing that but she really felt that it was a desecration of some kind. Believe it or not, I guess she really holds Mondrian in high regard and steer clear of lowbrow art when it comes to Mondrian. There is no room for that. So it was kind of interesting that she did that.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MR. AMADO: Singer? What was her name? Deborah – Deborah Singer. Was it Debbie Singer? Debra Singer, I think.

So that was – I was really surprised by that reaction from her – just, oh, interesting – really interesting.

MS. CORDOVA: You know, it's a – it's a really interesting idea to put those two in conversation because a person never put these conversations together and – yeah, a fairly new idea that I guess some could see as –

MR. AMADO: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: – conflicting.

MR. AMADO: Conflicting, exactly.

MS. CORDOVA: But only in reverse, right – only the appropriation of Mondrian, not the appropriation of James Brown.

MR. AMADO: Exactly. Yeah, exactly. So that's really pretty interesting.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. One thing that I was noticing about – are they all digital photographs that you had?

MR. AMADO: Digital prints – digital photographs, digital prints. Right.

MS. CORDOVA: What is really remarkable about looking at them is how they still keep that 3-D effect and the shadow and the – when you look at them here even as a flat image they still sort of jump off the –

MR. AMADO: Yeah, particularly, like, maybe –

MS. CORDOVA: – off the screen.

MR. AMADO: – you know, like this one here.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes, and what an interesting effect of digital photography. Maybe you could talk about getting involved or choosing to use digital photographs. What has led you to that point?

MR. AMADO: It's just really logistics. It's just the fastest, best way. Probably the best way to kind of, I think, to get these images – these particular images, this particular tape and just because you eliminate the normal way of taking photographs, you know, the normal process of photography – the film. You know, you kind of eliminate the film developing process. Just the immediacy of it, you know. It's almost – it probably took as much time to determine this particular shape than it did just to take a photograph of it.

So I kind of wanted to convey that immediacy of it, just taking this and just kind of letting it unfold like it wants to and then just making a few adjustments and just kind of having that and saying, okay, that looks okay, let's take a photograph of that and see what it looks like immediately. So I think it was the immediacy part and it was just a response just to the material and the form that it will take because of how it's used – how it functions, how it's used in this type – role.

MS. CORDOVA: And actually, probably – sort of just switching but going with what you were saying, I'm still thinking of how – the commentary you received about your Mondrian-like work and I'm wondering how influential curators or gallery owners have been on the psyche of your work or where – have you taken criticism and sort of said, "Well, I could think about that," or have you said "No" – or what response in general – or what has been your traditional relationship with the gallery and museum?

MR. AMADO: Well, that's also a very interesting question. What I have always enjoyed doing – and I'm sure I have my very good reasons for doing this and sometimes I can come up with really good reasons for doing this, but I have always enjoyed being able to do new things. I mean, still keeping sort of a lineage, you know, a signature, if you will, of some kind that kind of identifies the work as my work. But really just kind of exploring new things as much as possible whether it's new ideas or new concepts or new forms or new materials – whatever it is.

And some people – curators, I think, are much more open to that. And because I worked for the fire department all those years, I was able to subsidize doing this kind of thing and so I did and I persisted and I insisted on doing that. And of course, you know, galleries don't really want you to do that. They want you to be a little bit more consistent – they want consistency there. That makes it more marketable and easier to sell. So there has been that conflict before – yeah.

And so I think I have come around. It's not that I feel that I have sold out or anything. It's just that I have really have found something that I think will – that I can investigate and take a long ways. And so establishing that – taking a couple years to establish that and having the galleries comfortable with that and then now I'm starting to gradually expand a little bit beyond that, just being able to make them understand that I understand and have them be a little bit more comfortable with what I'm doing. But now it's just taking it a little bit further – really kind of –

It's just like that drawing over there, for instance. That's a recent drawing – the one that's wrapped up up there and it's basically taking that shape of the letters that are incorporating imagery with it as well and just incorporating like paintings with these things – with these letter forms. So I'm kind of gradually leading them into that direction, too.

So I don't know if that answers your question or not.

MS. CORDOVA: One thing I found interesting was reading somewhere that Chris Erck said you are among the artists that led to the opening of Finesilver Gallery, like, the – that recognizing a certain degree of talent existed in San Antonio was enough for – to sort of decide – sort of to buy –

MR. AMADO: Really, he said that?

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: That's nice. I had no idea.

MS. CORDOVA: Isn't it? [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: I had no idea that he said that.

MS. CORDOVA: So, yeah, and I – and of course, isn't that a compliment to you and to your community, I guess. And yet I think artists are often in a situation where they are struggling to deal with what a gallery wants or what is sellable or that the ultimate, sort of, idea of selling their work often casts a pall on the creation of it.

MR. AMADO: It does. Yeah – I mean, yes. Very recently I heard that from a local artist here because they want

him to do – he is going to be in a show in Paris and so they are putting that show together thinking that, maybe if he did some more paintings like he did two years ago, and he is not ready to do that yet. He wants to move on with his new things. But then having to compromise and do that anyway because that's what they want and so – and he also wants to have a show in Paris and so that is what he does and that's what we do and those are pretty typical stories.

You always hear about that. You know, do the same painting but this time maybe, you know – I don't know, maybe put a little bunny in there or something like that, because that's really how it works. Collectors come in and say, I want a painting just like Peggy's – just like that. And so – so yeah, okay, we will get you a painting just like that. You know, the quick phone calls of the artists – we need more paintings just like that.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: So it's – I mean, that's an oversimplification and quite an exaggeration but it's very similar to that. You would be surprised.

And I always wanted to avoid that. I don't want to get stuck doing that because I don't think it's the nature of art-making and it just kind of takes away from the investigation, you know, going into something with a doubt and making inquiries and hopefully saying, well, I'm from the school of humanity, I want to know about these things. I want to know why things happen the way they happen.

You know, you stop that investigation by doing that and I always wanted to be able to have that. I mean, I think that's what art was offering. It was giving the license to be able to do that and that settled into some kind of conventional mundane life, having the same thing day in, day out, having the same figures in front of you, the same dust, the same people – everything. So, I don't know. That gave me just the occasion to do what I did.

And just to be able to excite myself to be able to come into the studio. It's a new idea, it's a new form, where is this going to take me? It's like play – you know, learning from a new game and so that is good, I think, for me certainly to get into the studio and be excited about being in the studio instead of, well, I got to do the same painting again – maybe just a little larger this time, whatever. I mean, it works for some artists. There is that kind of rigor, I guess, that an artist probably needs to have in order to do something like that but maybe I'm just not that disciplined or rigorous enough – or maybe not. Maybe my attention span is not like it should be in order to maintain something like that. Maybe I have a deficit of some kind – attention deficit of some kind of –

MS. CORDOVA: Well, and I'm also thinking about that, in doing research to prepare for this interview, I ran across an article that was in *Business Week* about –

MR. AMADO: I heard about that article. I haven't seen it yet.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. [Laughs.] It apparently – Microsoft Corporation's curator, Michael Klein, has suggested that your art should be among good art collected for around $2,000 or something like this and I think it was, "- whose edgy metal sculptures" – yours – "based on movie dialogue and subtitles sell for $2,000 and up," and you are quite the recommendation from this curator of Microsoft Corp. But I'm wondering, like, what you think about something like that, which is putting your art on the marketplace but very much in a collector sort of idea of that it will be nice featured design and it's good content because it's movie-related. I'm wondering what you think –

MR. AMADO: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that's quite right.

Well, that's the first time I have read that – had anyone read that article. Chris sort of told me about it but I never got a copy of it so I didn't know exactly what was being said about it although he gave me his good seal of approval on that. So, I don't know. I really don't know how to respond to that. I think –

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe I can rephrase the question if you are – sort of think – what do you think about the afterlife of your work, that it's, like – that it does go on sometimes. Do you have particular hopes for where it goes on to or is that not your concern?

MR. AMADO: Well, I think I was – yeah, I was about to answer it within those terms, quite frankly, because I guess that's the only way I can answer it.

No, I don't get that – well, let me put it this way – I don't get that sentimentally attached to my work. I make it and I enjoy it here in the studio for a while and then I'm ready to let it go and I'm ready to go on to the next thing, and of course just realizing just how there is a market for art and that it's all part of the game. That's just how it's played and that's how you persist and go on. So I'm ready to just give it to whoever and let them put it wherever. I just don't become that attached to it and it's fine. Just – it's gone. It's fine, you know.

I mean, it's simply that. It's the process. It's really the – I have come to a point in my life where it's really about

the process. It's not about the fame; it's not about the money. I mean, that's – I think that's something else altogether to think about and why it happened or why it didn't happen and the extent of it or the dash hopes of it. I really just want to be involved in the process. I just want to make my art and whether it's – and just the level of success that I have had – it just doesn't really matter.

And I'll let somebody else worry about that. I'll let FineSilver or whoever worry about it and make it marketable if it's possible. It doesn't matter whether it goes to a collector or MOMA or – it just – as long as it's just out there somewhere and it's – I'm free from it so that I can go on to the next thing and maybe not be so much influenced by that past thing and just, again, keep my options open and look for the next path to take, so to speak, if you will. Yeah, it's – it's something like that. If that's any – if that's a good enough answer for that question. Yeah, just let it go and go on to the next thing.

MS. CORDOVA: Is there any work that you found it incredibly difficult to let go of? Is there – are there certain pieces that you hold special in the heart, or really you had a complete – it is the process and –

MR. AMADO: Yeah. That very seldom happens – very seldom happens. But I did discover that it happened just recently when I went to Barbara Davis and there was two pieces that I really, really wanted – you know, there was an edition of a piece that I really, really wanted and the sculptural piece that I made. And that's – that has been the latest and probably one of the very, very, very few times that I have done that, that I want to just have them for myself.

I'm kind of glad that they have been sold because I just – I don't know. There is something about just these little paintings that I made – had done on aluminum and – because I think they really remind me of my dad when he passed away [*Cry*, 1995]. And it was kind of taken out of *The Odyssey* [ca. 800 BCE] – you know these little paintings that were about *The Odyssey* and just somehow I know they are related to my dad and relating it to me more, sort of, you know, that journey, looking for home, finding happiness at the end and everything that we have to encounter along the way in order to find happiness.

And, yeah, I have just lost my dad and all that so that would – and then I made this piece – a sculptural piece about three or four years ago that I just like looking at it, and it's made out of marble. It's the Bronte sisters – collection of the Bronte sisters and I was – just made these, like, this marble book covers for them and I took the actual contents of the book and then slid them into those book covers – those marble book covers.

MS. CORDOVA: Really.

MR. AMADO: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Marble book covers. Which would be fairly –

MR. AMADO: Yeah, they were really heavy.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: I mean, and – but they are shaped kind of like – they have a, like, a concave – no, that would be convex backing to them so they fit into your hands really nicely. You know, but they are really – they are just about this – well, okay, here is the book and I guess about that wide and then the convex backing. So you just pick up – they are really quite heavy but you can really hold them very nicely in the book – in your hand.

And so I just did a series of books like that because at the time they were talking so much about computers and those hand-held computers that you can just take everywhere.

MS. CORDOVA: PDAs.

MR. AMADO: PDAs, and how you could load up eight or nine books into those and have them and read them like that and I was just dismayed about that. I was really – I couldn't feel – I couldn't think that people were thinking that way. They just lost touch with books and literature and just the touch and the flipping through the pages and the smell of it and the comfort and the intimacy of it. Yeah.

And so suddenly it has become a burden to carry a book and so that is kind of how I did those books, for instance.

MS. CORDOVA: You heightened the burden of carrying it but it was also a gesture of love – I guess – I mean, create something like that.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, right, right. Yeah, to maintain the strength and the admiration, devotion in order to want to do that. So that's – and so this – that was the other piece.

So those little paintings and those two books of the Bronte collection – Bronte sister collection.

MS. CORDOVA: Why was *The Odyssey* such a good text for commemorating your father? Why that text?

MR. AMADO: Just because it seems to be – I don't know. It's – how do I put it?

I think it's a story that everybody can tell, and it's a story about the journey home, that journey to find your home, your – have a home – and have happiness ultimately. For a Penelope that is waiting for you or Ulysses, whoever, depending on who you are, your sex. I think we are all just kind of on that journey, each and every one of us, hoping to attain that and sometimes it's a little bit more difficult than other times or for other people and – but I think it's a story that is really what we are about. It's our lives; it's what we do. We are put here and have this journey and hopefully we find happiness at the end of that journey and ultimately when we find home or finding whatever that is. So –

MS. CORDOVA: You included the word "rest" in there, right? Is that – was that meaning, like, when you finally reach that – the end of that journey?

MR. AMADO: That and just rest in peace kind of thing because my dad had died and so maybe that was his ultimate rest, I don't know. It's hard to say. Knowing my father and knowing what he went through at the end, maybe in his mind he never really found that place. I was very doubtful if he ever did find that place like he wanted to find it just because of all the drama and just because my mother was such a hard, bitter woman in so many ways that maybe he never really found that. So that's kind of how – that's what I was thinking, that's what I was feeling, that's when I made that piece – like, they – yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: And maybe it was also a command in the end.

MR. AMADO: [Laughs.] Well, I don't know.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: That's a man that just has fallen flat on his face, the way it rests, just made it look like it was falling down. Yeah, that was an interesting piece, too. It was a big, big piece on the wall.

MS. CORDOVA: You had multiple pieces, correct?

MR. AMADO: Well, it was basically like a drawing on the wall. You know, I just kind of drew that big sheet of graph paper on the wall and it's pretty big – 20 feet by 15 feet, 20 feet, something like that. And then just adding those little paintings to that access part of the wall, sort of indicating the journey because that's kind of how they're made. You know, these two directional arrows running across the plane of the painting so you have this narrative progression within those five panels so you see them going across the movement of it, the timing.

MS. CORDOVA: And what I'm – one thing I wanted to do ask you for sure – it's even going back to something you said earlier about the punching the labels as a penitent?

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: And I'm wondering if you ever look to your work for sort of spiritual meaning if there is – and in part I'm asking that because I've also read – I thought there was an interesting reading of your use of Calla lilies is also a reference to the Catholic Church or Catholic religion. And another work of your project – oh gosh, it was early on – it was for the Spanish Remnants exhibit in which you used all of this rich purple and gold fabric and for – it was like a bicentennial exhibit that was at the Arlington Museum of Art in 1992. And –

MR. AMADO: Oh, god, I'd forgotten all about that one.

MS. CORDOVA: And – [laughter] – someone I guess had a reading that it suggested the rituals of the Catholic Church.

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm.

MS. CORDOVA: And, you know, naturally, I guess I want your thoughts on should your work be read in a Catholic framework, especially since as a young person you distanced yourself from the Church, or what the spiritual relevance of your work is for you.

MR. AMADO: Well, I know that it's thought about – you know, for instance, those two articles that you just told me about. It's kind of interesting – it's not something that I really – I don't explicitly want to do it, I don't think. Although I feel that I'm a spiritual person. But it's so obviously there, apparently, because a lot of people always want to talk about that.

MS. CORDOVA: Or they're reading you as Latino and Catholic, which I think is another possibility.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, exactly, yeah. Or even – I also have gotten a lot of, you know, Japanese spirituality. You know, that's all – I've encountered that quite a bit. You know, it reminds them of that kind of a spirituality I guess, that very quiet, calm, sedate, Zen-like quality to the work as well, too, so. So I've had to contend with that and not really knowing what to say about that. But knowing that I do, I do appreciate that and I do look at it and I have looked at it a lot, you know.

I forgot the – there was a particular movement in Japan in the '50s that I looked at a lot as well. Just because of the spiritual aspect of it and just the material aspect of it, just the organic materials that you use and it was just this incredible minimalism that was even predated the minimalism here in the United States. And it was a lot more spiritual – it came from a spiritual side than it did from, you know, an aesthetic or industrial side, let's say. So I know I was influenced by that.

Now, the Catholicism is also kind of interesting because yeah, it's definitely there. That's – that I know for sure. I mean, where else would you see or just – you know, outside of the Catholic Church where else would you see something like you do see in the Catholic Church – the sumptuousness, the colors, the incense, the Baroqueness of it and how it's not exactly extravagant but the auspiciousness of it as well and just the ritualistic part of it as well. And the symbolism of it and yeah, it's bright.

I think it's overwhelming and yeah, of course. I think that's part of – just being a kid and going into that and seeing that and saying well, this is amazing. I don't – where else do I see this, you know, but there? And –

MS. CORDOVA: Are there particular examples for you that you can actually see where you were grappling with that?

MR. AMADO: Mm-hmm. No, not really.

MS. CORDOVA: Just a subcurrent.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, exactly. No, and then of course I read a review once – I think it was Bill Davenport in Houston that wrote a review about the show I had there at the Contemporary Arts Museum uptown, and it was indeed – imbued with Catholicism, and he saw it as a real negative – but I saw it differently because – and I was vindicated by that, but I saw him looking at it through a Protestant lens and therefore he misunderstood what was going on and the relevance of it. So I was a little bit disappointed that someone would take that kind of a subjective approach to something that I thought was not only Catholic but it was about an experience of a human being living in this world today and the history of not only humanity but of art history as well.

But like I said, I was vindicated because that very same show was included in Dave Hickey's top 10 for the year in *Art Forum*, so I felt really vindicated at that point.

MS. CORDOVA: That would do it.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, and he said some wonderful things about it, just the poetic aspect of it and I was able to – he said, I don't know, just some really nice things about installation art and how this was a good example of how installation art could be and should be, and just putting it together like one would put a poem together as opposed to just throwing a bunch of stuff in a corner and scattering it all over the place, just to have that kind of poetic rhythm to it – is what he was seeing in the show – and he's basically a redneck from West Texas.

MS. CORDOVA: And which piece was that?

MR. AMADO: It was the – I think we call it "Renascence" [1996].

MS. CORDOVA: At the Contemporary –

MR. AMADO: At the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. And basically we just took a bunch of different pieces – older pieces – different, from previous works – like some – And so that's why we call it "Renascence" – because we had some, yeah that's it, had maybe about – So that's what it was about. So you know, like the piece, the Latin piece was in it as well. Well, I did large scale drawings – there's not too many photographs of the works – just kind of did a different thing – the studio, of what I was doing in the studio to do that and I used some – and then I also did the piece – like that one's in it – the Keller [ph] piece, you know with the – did that one there as well. And it was also the last show before they did some renovation – and so I was able to intervene in the space – so I was able to cut into the walls – cutting through the wall and rip up the carpet and incorporated that into the show.

MS. CORDOVA: That must have been fun.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, it was kind of fun.

MS. CORDOVA: Bash on the walls of the museum. [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: Yeah, exactly. I mean, it was enough to just stop when I did, I suppose. I mean, I wanted to keep going. If I could have just convinced – [inaudible] – let me continue on and, let's not do this show; let's do another show where I'm ripping up things and smashing into walls and let's see what happens to that. That would have been great.

MS. CORDOVA: What an opportunity as an artist to be able to –

MR. AMADO: Yeah, if I'd have know that, that would have been the thing to do. The last show in a space before renovation. That would have been so much fun.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, and what about – just maybe sort of keeping with the spiritual, there's one piece in particular I wanted to be sure to ask you about is *I Pray then I Play in the Collective Landscape* [1995], and this one includes the latex suit.

MR. AMADO: The one I just pointed out.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, but you must have had made for you, and what possessed you to make that? And maybe just talk about the motivations behind that.

MR. AMADO: Let's see if I can make this rather quickly. Well, it was conceived during my residency at ArtPace and, again, it was about a personal experience. I had actually just gotten divorced so there was this thing that I wanted to do to sort of start anew, so I thought about cleansing and so I used soap and water as pretty much the process and the materials that I wanted to use in order to accomplish this. So because the other artists involved, like Annette Messager and Felix Gonzalez-Torres – where maybe Felix Gonzalez-Torres spent a total of one week here and Annette maybe about two weeks, so they were gone most of the time, and the place had just opened – this is the first residency at ArtPace.

So I kind of had the place to myself, so I had my studio and I wanted to go through this cleansing process, so the first thing I did was I had this six by whatever, 15-foot long mirror put on the wall, and so I just kind of went through this bathing and cleansing in front of this – this kind of like this performance process thing in front of the mirror.

[END TAPE 2, SIDE A.]

So I was kind of doing that and watching myself in the mirror doing that – being beside myself and doing that.

And so it was just about this whole body thing. And there's this body focus, and so it just kind of evolved into so many people saying, "God, your work is so much like Joseph Beuys'," and thinking about Joseph Beuys' felt suit and what that was – the meaning behind that suit, for protection, let's say. So I wanted to make something that was like the suit but not about – actually it was more about vulnerability and fragility.

So I made it out of – had it made out of latex to my measurements and – because – it was diaphanous, you could see right through it. It doesn't afford much protection, I can tell you that.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you try it on?

MR. AMADO: No. No. I would rip it apart if I did probably. And it's such a fragile material, and it gets brittle real fast. So there was – so it was – the antithesis of what Joseph did with his suit is what I was doing with my suit. So that's really where it came from and then putting it in the cabinet with the glass doors, sort of like a closet and have it exposed but protected at the same time and just having this huge mirror – the first time I use a huge mirror – and just having people come up to it and being able to see themselves in it. It's a collective landscape. Just giving them an awareness of the fragility of life and what we go through in order to survive, like cleanse yourself.

So, yeah, short story about that – that's basically what it was.

MS. CORDOVA: Probably somewhere along the line I should have asked you when you got married. How long were you married?

MR. AMADO: I got married – years – 1990 – '91, I guess, my first year. I think I was married for four years – two years married and two years separated. You know, we went our separate ways. So that was – when I got divorced was right about the time that I had the residency at ArtPace

MS. CORDOVA: In your, I think your interview, you talked about how you were looking for a new direction in your work. I guess it's sort of in tandem – your life situation and your work.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, I was, again, wanting to go on to the next phase in my personal life. There was something else that was going to happen.

MS. CORDOVA: One of the other things you mentioned in that is that you were referring to someone who had – you referred to a neighbor who had opened up a botánica. And I was wondering –

MR. AMADO: That was Franco.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, I was thinking that must be Franco Mondini. And what an interesting thing because of course the botánica has been so instrumental for his work – and there you are taking it and applying it to your work in a very different way.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, because of the soaps and the – the types of soaps that are offered in botánicas – different soaps for different ailments and different healings – I mean, different ways of healing. So you use a particular soap if you want your love to come back, that kind of thing. I mean, there's just so – many of them, and just because – just aesthetically, graphically they're so – I love the boxes – and it was just – and I incorporated that at the very bottom of the cabinet. There was just a line of soaps, boxes of soap, and the color of them – just a way of infusing color into it as well, and an additional meaning to them as well.

And also I hung a bunch of charms from the sleeves of the – that I got there as well, different charms for different results, whatever different hopes and wishes –

MS. CORDOVA: Were you having a lot of crass interaction with Franco?

MR. AMADO: Oh, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: I know you worked together on the Blue Star on Piston St. There was that project as well.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, working directly with that.

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe you could just talk about your relationship with Franco or what you think each of you did for each other.

MR. AMADO: Well, right about the same time I moved into this old house on the south side of town here just south of downtown, and it was just a very old dilapidated house that needed a lot of work, and I knew the owner and we made a deal, and so I worked on that house for several months, and it was a beautiful, beautiful house, and it needed so much work but it was such a beautiful space. It was incredibly spiritual – high ceilings, thick, you know, stone walls, the whole thing – lots of space, enough space to actually open up a space there that I was renting, an alternative space called HouseSpace. I had several shows there about four times. I did this for about four years and about four or five shows a year, showed a lot of artists – like I showed Chuck [Ramirez] for the first time, at a really good, important show. You know, he'd been doing these little shows here and there, little groups shows, but I did – you know, like the "garbage bag" – you know, he did those for that show.

And then, so I moved into there and just kind of established that place. Rebecca and I moved in together – we did that. And so once I did that, well, then Chuck and Franco followed me into that space and they became neighbors. They lived next door and Chuck was upstairs and Franco was downstairs, and it was a botánica, and I knew the people that ran the botánica – it was a couple. They wanted to retire so basically they sell the business to the owner, Brent Widen, and he just went in and just took over the – Franco went in there and just took over the business and kept a lot of their products, a lot of their merchandise that they were selling, and so – in a true botánica sense, there was a lot of that – medicinal purposes and healings and all kinds of things like that. And then he just started infusing it with his own aesthetics. So he was just like what he is now, just a blending, a melding of high and low art. He has some of my pieces in there and he had just whatever you can think of, just put it all together, just make this cacophony of images that were pretty overwhelming, and really just quite new. No one had ever seen anything like that before.

But that's what he did and that was his contribution to the community at the time. And that place became quite a hotbed. We had the best time for three years, maybe – two or three years, just always something going on there. It became like a place of gathering, a point for so many of the artists in town, and we were always doing events and exhibitions and parties, and more parties and more parties. It just became – not only the partying but it was just a great place to gather and have dialogues about art, predominantly the low arts versus the high arts. And that was pretty much the polemics of Franco, always wanting to bring the two together, and that was his dialect.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you feel that experience was transitioning you in any way?

MR. AMADO: No – no, not really. No, I haven't really played a real active part in something like that. I've always been involved in something like that but I'm just kind of there to – not just only observe but just kind of let things go through me and them. At the right time, at the right moment I'll speak up and say, you know, that's bullshit; how can you do that? I don't know what that would be, some sort of felicitator, some sort of censor, some sort of judge, some sort of witness to it. And you just kind of let it work that way and not be – because we're talking about extremely dynamic characters and I don't have that kind of strong, dynamic character where I can just talk at the very top of my voice and rant and rant about something like they do. So for me it was just a matter of just sitting back and listening and then just speaking up at the time that I thought was necessary to make them understand really what they're saying. So it was like that.

And so that's been kind of my role at those kind of things. So it wasn't really changing; it wasn't really affecting or influencing me. It was just an interesting dialogue that we would have. And, yeah, of course we all enjoy that as artists and we seek that out and enjoy it, and it's good when you can have it like we had it, for the length of time that we did.

MS. CORDOVA: And that would have been the years –

MR. AMADO: From '95 to about '98 or so.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MR. AMADO: And then I think I moved away in '99, and then Franco I think might have been gone by then; I'm not really sure, and Chuck followed suit after that. So it was a good run. It was a good run, and like I said, it was pretty out there – he was very out there.

MS. CORDOVA: And what about – one thing I wanted to ask you also was there was something called "Disenchantment" [1999] in which it also included a performance apparently, and it suggested that you sang the Beatles' *Love Me Do* [1962]. What was that? What was that – and was this you venturing into new terrain or was this just a happy sort of situation?

MR. AMADO: No, it was right about the same time that I was doing a lot of glutathione and I incorporated a lot of small drawing into it as well. And so it was just kind of a watershed in my life. I just wanted to get out there, because it seemed like I had come full cycle – full cycle because things really – my whole worldview of things really started to change when I went to New York and I was there, and experiencing that, and part of that experience was *L'Avventura* and here I was doing it again, so I thought about that and I just wanted to do a piece that talked about that full cycle. And so it was a multimedia event. You know, that's when I first used video and that's when I did the performance, and I actually had some drawings up as well, and I just wanted to express that passage or that full cycle that I had just completed.

And so I did that, and it was fun. And part of – when I was very, very young, when the Beatles first came out, it was really funny because a bunch of us really got caught up in that, young Latino brown boys in South Texas were fans of the Beatles, so we formed this group and we did Beatle songs. And one of the songs that I used to sing was *Love Me Do*. So part of what I was trying to say, that there is a lot of pathos and lot of pompos and just so much uncertainty in this world and it's really hard to focus in on one thing, and really trying to clue into the psych guys of the times, which meant so many things, just how we were so mediated and connected globally, was kind of an interesting thing.

So I just wanted to bring all that into it, and also talk about the cycle that I'd gone through. So,*L'Avventura* was a way of opening things up because it represented what was happening to me in the '60s, and then closing it with singing *Love Me Do* was a way – it also represented something else in the '60s – I had completed the circle. And basically I just did the drawings, which were about *L'Avventura* and there was – I did a video of where I was – I did the subtitles – the whole film was subtitled – and at the same time I was showing – projecting a video of – on that window there was a wasp nest with about four or five wasps, and I just was videotaping that, and at the same time I had the soundtrack to *L'Avventura* going, you know, and so it seemed like they were responding to the soundtrack of *L'Avventura* and particularly the helicopter scene where they have – it's coming down and you have that helicopter sound going and it seems like they were really active and buzzing around. So that's how I incorporated the soundtrack of *L'Avventura* into the piece, with the bees.

And then I also – I went to the gallery in Houston and just took a video of me working, walking from this store called *L'Avventura* to Saks Fifth Avenue, and talking about the consumer aspect of things and just how important it plays in our capitalistic society and fashion, again, and – yeah, and what fashion projects, the beauty of fashion, the arbitrary beauty of it.

So it was bringing in these things like – and then the performance part was – I had this really beautiful Ethiopian

woman dressed up in very suggestive sexual way. She had this really tight red rubber top on and very tight jeans, walking around looking like a model, and she had this Luger that her boyfriend had, this German Luger [pistol used by Nazi officers during WWII], and she was holding that in her hand, and I gave her a bunch of targets –stick-on targets – stick-on targets, and she was just going up to different people and putting on these targets and just rubbing it on with the back of her hand with the Luger on it, and just try getting people – just how people are targeted for one reason or another – fashion targets certain people, art targets certain people – you know, just the whole notion of being targeted.

And so she was doing that during the whole process of the performance. And then at the end I sang*Love Me Do*. I got up on this little platform that I made and just offered a very positive conclusion to all this, the whole notion of love and the hope of love, and basically I just went and grabbed her hand and we walked home hand in hand after singing about love. So, the threat, I took the threat away, in a way of speaking, with the possibility of reconciliation and love over – triumph, I guess, over all this targeting and bees buzzing and consumerism and just all that. So it was great, it was fun; I had a good time doing it.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, and a fairly new thing for you to be doing.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, completely.

MS. CORDOVA: Have you done anything like that since or do you think you will?

MR. AMADO: No, I really haven't done anything like that since. It was just appropriate and really necessary to do it at the time.

MS. CORDOVA: A process.

MR. AMADO: Yeah, a process that would do something for me more than anything. But people enjoyed it; it was fun. I had people – it's a real catchy little tune. I had people singing that song for days after that. Yeah, really. That was probably the best part. I must admit that was probably the best part: I'm still singing that tune, Jesse, it's still in my head. [Laughter.] I said, it's a great song, that's why.

So that's why I did that at the time, just keeping with things that I wanted – I was – especially when I do something here in San Antonio. I want people to come to my shows and expect something different – not expect the same thing. So that's part of why I do what I do too.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I'm thinking that I've kept you talking pretty long – [laughter] – so I'm thinking we can probably –

MR. AMADO: All right.

MS. CORDOVA: And actually that's a really nice point to sort of wrap up on because one theme that I see as a constant in your work is this constant sort of seeking how to be different, how to approach something in a different way. And –

MR. AMADO: Mutability, that's one of my key words – just be mutable. It keeps things open and flexible, and the possibility for reflection is always there because of that, and that's a good thing for me. It keeps you from becoming arrogant just to be able to have a lot of flexibility.

Anyway, I'm sorry.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, is there anything that you want to add to the tape that we haven't said already? And if not that, then is there anything you want to say about your future direction or what you hope for yourself or the direction of your work.

MR. AMADO: What I want for myself. No, I don't think I want to add anything. We've covered so much of it so well. I appreciate your questions and all that. I don't know. My odyssey continues.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MR. AMADO: It does. The journey is – I'm still in the midst of my journey and just looking for home and happiness. Whatever comes – whatever Siren or Cyclops or whatever comes in the way I'm just either going to look forward to it or not and just having to deal with it, and then just taking that experience and making art out of it. It's just the journey – it's just the journey that I am taking and know that I'm going to be taking for a long time still, so who knows what the future holds? I have no ambitions to a particular thing. Like I said, it's – I just want to be involved in a process. I still want to keep that process going. If I can keep that, if I can maintain that, if I can just keep making art, that's really what I want – no specific goals other than that.

MS. CORDOVA: That’s great. With that, Jesse, I’m just going to say thank you and I’ll stop the tape.

MR. AMADO: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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