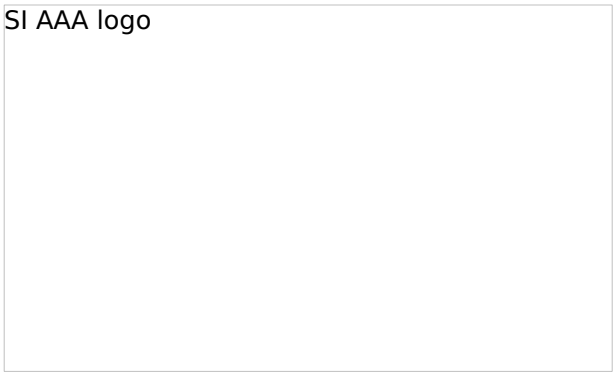

Oral history interview with Amalia Mesa-Bains, 2019 Nov. 3 and 4

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Transcript

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Amalia Mesa-Bains on November 3 and 4, 2019. The interview took place in San Juan Bautista, CA, and was conducted by Adriana Zavala for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Amalia Mesa-Bains and Adriana Zavala have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[Tracks mesa19_1of1_sd_track01, track02, and track03 are test tracks.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So this is Adriana Zavala interviewing [Maxine] Amalia Mesa-Bains at the artist's studio in San Juan Bautista, California, on November 3rd, 2019, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Card number one.

Okay. So we are ready to begin. So, Amalia, thank you for having me here at your studio and for agreeing to do this for the archives. So why don't we begin with my asking you to tell us when and where you were born, if you would like to talk about your childhood, family background?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I was born July 10th, 1943, and it's been a big debate about exactly where. I was born at O'Connors Hospital, which I think was located in Santa Clara, California, but later moved to San Jose. So there are different biographies that will list me, but I believe it was Santa Clara. And this is very early on. It's, you know, not even the end of the war yet, so it's a period of time where most of the Mexicans lived in particular areas in the Santa Clara Valley, which was an orchard and cannery town, so it was agricultural and fruit-producing particularly.

When I was first born, my father had graduated from being an itinerant farmworker to being a ranch hand. So we lived in farmworker housing on—I believe the name of the ranch was the Boxer Ranch. It would've been in the area now that is part of Silicon Valley [laughs]: Sunnyvale, California. But it's a time when there's not even sidewalks in some areas. There's a lot of, you know, walking on dirt roads.

We then moved into the town by the time, I think, I was probably two or three. So I was a little toddler. [00:02:02] I have some early memories. In those days, they use something called pinch pots or smoke to keep, I guess, insects away from the fruit. And so I remember wandering in the orchards with my parents, and I really liked the pinch pots, but they wouldn't let me touch them. And I've always been very *envidiosa* of my brother Larry, who's passed now—Larry Mesa—because he's the only one that has a picture in the orchard. So I have in my installations taking that photograph, and I have Photoshopped him out because I wanted to have like a sort of origin picture of this land. So the early childhood, I have pretty clear memories by the time I'm—not quite at grade school—I haven't gotten to kindergarten I think yet—but being among my family.

So my immediate family was quite small for a Mexican family in that era. It was just my brother and I. And I remember people asking me, Well, where was the rest of my family, like my brothers and sisters. I never knew what to say except, "Well, there's just two of us," and they would look at me like that was very fishy. But my extended family was very large. My father had I think seven other siblings. He outlived all of them but one.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But that part of my life was—what I would call as—very collective in an ideal sense. When you're in a working-class family, I don't think you know that you're poor, that others might see you that way. Because there's always so much food and there's so many people and you're—you never—you always feel protected because there's so many.

Even—I remember when we would go with my father and his brothers, they would—not commission but—they would be hired to do an orchard, and this would be in the spring and summer. [00:04:01] I hadn't started school yet and so we would all pile in the pickup trucks and go off to these orchards, and they would shake the trees, and the fruit would fall. The women would usually do a lot of the picking, and the children, we just ran around. I got paid a little bit; I remember I bought my first doll suitcase with my pay. So my memories of my childhood are really very familial. That's all there is. And in fact, I don't think there was allowed to be anything else.

And I remember being in school and my mother warning me because there were white people by then. And even by high school, Lockheed [Martin] had come in, so you saw for the first time real middle-class—so by the '50s, the town had begun to change. And I remember experiencing going to the movie theater and having a woman say very loudly, "I'm not going to sit next to that Mexican." And I didn't quite understand what it was about, and my father got up, and he moved us to another part of the row, so it wouldn't be near. And the husband apologizing to my father, but I really didn't quite get it. Years later, I pieced it all together.

So yeah, it was a very—I would say a very happy life. You know, give or take the usual neuroses of childhood and growing up, but safe. Safe and loving. That's what I remember.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Do you want to share your parents' names?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes. Marina González Mesa. And she was born in a little town that was then called San Pedro de las Colonias, and it was in the state of Coahuila. It was northern. My father's background is more well-known to me and fairly illustrious in the sense that his mother, Mariana Escobedo, was the grandniece of Mariano Escobedo, the general of the north that captured Maximilian at the Cerro de las Campañas. And so he's in the castle of Chapultepec, there's a little shrine there. And, you know, the *avenida*, Mariano Escobedo, so. [00:06:13]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I knew a lot about that sort of history because of who they were. And my grandmother Mariana was the only grandparent I had. By the time I was born whoever had been her husband—husbands—they were all gone. And my mother was born out of wedlock, so there were no grandparents on that side. So she was sort of, for me, my first matriarch. I mean, she was it. And she was physically a very imposing person. She was born in the 1880s, but she was a little bit under five-six, weighed probably about 160 pounds, and pure muscle. She was strong and big. I believe she was *mulata*. I thought back on it many times, I looked at the picture multiple times, and then thought, "Oh!" Nothing made sense till much later when I married my husband Richard [Bains], who's African American, and he looked at her, and he said, "You do know your grandmother's Black?" I said, "No!" And then he said my uncles were, and I said, "No! Mexicans come in every color!" You know? And I realized that that was just all absorbed in the family.

She kept the same last name as from her first husband. And we were on the wrong side of the revolution. That's always been an embarrassment in the Chicano Movement. Everybody was claiming Zapata or whatever. And I was like, really quiet.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Because my grandfather, Rafael Mesa, was—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Rafael?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Rafael. Yeah. So, Mariana Escobedo was my grandmother, Lorenzo Escobedo Mesa is my father. So it's Marina and Lorenzo are my parents, then my grandmother is Mariana Escobedo, and she was married to Rafael Mesa. [00:08:01] But he was working for the army, and I think he probably ran the—wherever they converted the goods, and he did all the buying and so he was like a treasurer in a sense. He signed the forms for all that. So he was a target, and eventually was executed by Pancho Villa I think and whoever was with him at the time.

And two of my uncles, younger ones, were taken away by Villa, and my grandmother never saw them again. She had two other brothers who were younger than her, but old. Older, you know, teens. And they were in military school when all of this was happening. So my father was a toddler, he was like three, and my uncle Louie was a year old. And after Rafael was executed,

and—you know, there are many stories about her cutting her hair off and burning the family papers. Whatever it was, it was so traumatic for her that she actually never spoke of Mexico again.

So unlike many Mexican Americans or Chicanos in my generation, I had no connection to Mexico, no family that I knew of. It took years to find out. I did, but my grandmother just—that was—the door was closed. And actually, she was 20 years old, so I can imagine. I've written about it. I've been written about a photograph for *Cameraworks* [*SF Cameraworks Quarterly*] once that is the photograph of her. She's pregnant with my father, and her two brothers are with her, and one of them has the baby goat on his lap, and they're all dressed with their little hats and everything.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And she has this fiery eye, she had this incredible face. She was very very beautiful but nothing to fool with. I mean, everybody knew that about her. My memories of her are always about her muscles because I didn't know that women had muscles. [00:10:05] I remember sitting on the kitchen floor, we were all babies playing—my cousin and I—and she would reach down to pick up like a crate of peaches or something, and you would see these big, bulgy muscles. So when she told you what to do, you did it, and you didn't ask any questions.

She was, in some way, the person that introduced me to discrimination. I don't think I could've understood it except through her. So as I say, in my family, she really was like a queen. And she had very long hair, and she would wind it up in a braid; it looked like a little crown on her head. And when we would go to the grocery store, she would take me. I was older by then, maybe like seven or eight. But she didn't like to speak English because she couldn't speak it well, so she pretended that she didn't speak it at all, and I would go along to be her little ambassador. She always dressed very well to go even to the grocery store.

One of her sons, my father's—one of my father's younger brothers died on the way to World War II. It was a training exercise. Ambrose was his name, and he was 18, and he died in a plane crash in one of these training exercises. And from that point on, she dressed in *luto*. You know, she was always either in black or gray or navy. And she never wore color again. She always had this kind of long wool coat that she would button up and her purse on her arm, and we would march off. And I would be so shocked because they would be rude to her. And I would be just shocked because I would think, How can they be rude to her?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: You know, that was my first realization that they saw something different than I saw. You know, I knew who she was, and they didn't. She was just a Mexican to them and so it was like—it happened with my mother too, even, and my mother was lighter skinned and quite beautiful. And even still, we would go to a department store, and we would wait and wait and wait, and I would be tugging on my mother, saying, "Ask her, ask her." [00:12:06] Mother said, "No, we'll wait until they—you know, they'll come to look after us." Well, they wouldn't. And finally, she would have to say, "I'm very interested in that blouse." They would look at us, and, "It doesn't come in your size," and they would walk away. It was called Hart's Department Store, and all the ladies wore black with pearls, and they all had the same kind of hairdos. And once again, we were just Mexicans.

You know, this is like, the late '40s, early '50s, and it's not segregated like the South or the Southwest, but it has the same rules in the sense that children are punished if they speak Spanish. You're not waited upon. That's why all the Mexicans went to the drive-in movie theater. I never knew why until the day we went to the indoor theater, and the woman said something to me, and I went, "Oh, well, that's not nice." So you learn little by little. And everyone thought California was just, like, this golden land, but, oh, there's always been two Californias. There's the Mexican one and there's the other one.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And what town was this that you—so, was this in Sunnyvale?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: This is Sunnyvale, Mountain View, the whole Santa Clara Valley.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I saw the change when Lockheed came in, and that would have been in the '50s because I was just starting high school. Middle school, high school. And kids had things called rumpus rooms, where they had their own rooms so the parents wouldn't deal with them.

And they all got cars on their 16th birthday, and it was like, What?! You know—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: These were your peers?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: These were my peers, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I was one of those people that could cross over in the sense that I was very popular in school. All of my friends were all white girls. I was the only Mexican. Of course, when they got in trouble, they always blamed me.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Their mothers would say, [laughs] "Were you with that Mexican girl?" I was like, "I'm the one that's not in trouble." [00:14:01] I learned a lot over those years, and I don't think it came to me until I graduated from high school, and then I was in a rage for about [laughs] five years. You know, just like, pissed, really angry. Realizing kind of what I had accommodated that I shouldn't have. You know, like my girlfriends would get a crush on my brother, but they couldn't date him because the parents wouldn't want them to. And instead of standing up for my brother, I would make excuses for my friends. Because I just couldn't figure out how to deal with it.

And all of that life, I look back on now—people are so, like, happy about their high school years and they were—one, they keep their friends. Oh, no way. And I was really popular and had lots of friends, but when it was over, it was over for me. I never wanted to go back to that again.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: You moved on?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. And I think that's why the Chicano Movement was so powerful to me, because I was in a sort of no-person's land for a number of years, and meeting Carmen [Lomas Garcia] and Maria [Pinedo], and all of them, it was just like, "Oh, thank God, there is another world, and I can be part of that." Because I wasn't Mexican, and that was very clear. I had never been to Mexico. I didn't speak Spanish. My parents spoke English to us and occasionally Spanish to each other, and always Spanish with the extended family.

But I was just sort of not quite there. And I remember being in school, and every year you had to fill out this form for—I think it's probably federal funding—about where your parents were born. And there was a line, and I would just hold the pencil and sit there looking at it because I knew they weren't born in the US, but I also sort of knew that I shouldn't write that down.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I see, yeah.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And then the teacher would come along—you know, these kind of slightly chubby, white teachers who are very friendly—and she would go, "Oh, honey, you know your parents are born in America! Just put US!" So I thought, "Well, I can do it, she told me to." I would write "US." [00:16:11] And for years, I don't think anyone outside of the community really knew about us. My parents were undocumented, both of them.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: My father had come through during this moment in the Revolution when Rafael gets killed. There's a year or two where my grandmother is sort of like, not herself. Her brothers escaped from the military, they get together with her, and they—I don't know if they rode the trains or how, but they came into the US. They were recruiting Mexicans then—this is around 1917—for agricultural work. And they go to Pueblo, Colorado. And I know it because there's a picture of my *tía,* my aunt Angie, in a little tin car with Pueblo written on the front of it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Angie is your father's sister?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And where were they from in Mexico? Do you know the name of the town?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: My father was born in Querétaro. And so when I started doing that ancestry—you know, questioning where—I found that my father's birth certificate was witnessed by all these generals. And then that's how I learned my grandmother's maiden name and found

out that that family was very middle-class. And it showed up later. My grandmother was very good at business. All the boys got their own home in a day when Mexicans could hardly buy property. But she had a way of handling things. She would go with them to the banks, and she would—I don't know how she knew, but she knew.

It was kind of confusing. I mean, in school, I was treated not like the Mexican kids. [00:18:01] One, I was bigger, taller, and lighter skinned, and I spoke flawless English. So I was always swept off with the white kids, put in advanced classes, and I always felt caught between these two worlds. And even when I remember studying civics—maybe that's the 10th grade, I can't remember when it is—and I find out about citizenship and birth. So I remember coming home to ask my mother, "Was I born in Mexico?" "Oh, *mija*, you know you were born here." I said, "Oh, were you born in Mexico?" "Yes, you know your father and I were born there." So I said, "So am I a citizen?" "Yes, you're a citizen." Now, my next question is, "Are you citizens?" "Well, we live here." They never would talk about it, except I knew because everybody else talked about the fact that they didn't have papers. And it wasn't until the 1960s, when several of my Chicano friends were doing films on the *migra,* and we were showing the film at our house in San Francisco, and my mom and dad were there, and they got up and left the room.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And then later on, I found out that the movie upset them. And then finally, we talked about it. So Richard helped them get a lawyer and they had to—it was very hard for my father because he was much younger when he came, and they had to trace their life in the US year by year to prove they had never left. And luckily, when they got married, which—she was pretty young, she was 20—they took out insurance when we were born. And that little stub that you got, it was a little booklet, they had for all the years. Then they had to get affidavits from teachers—who were really old by then, because by the time my parents became citizens, my father was in his 80s, and my mother was in her 70s. [00:20:04]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So all of the years of my life until I was [laughs] at CSUMB, my parents really mostly didn't have papers. They got their green card while they were in their 60s and 70s. And it was a sort of aspect of my life that was never spoken of, but I think two things happened.

One, I became kind of adversarial about rights. If I saw somebody being bullied or if something wasn't right, I would be the one that would march up. And so I constantly got in trouble, a lot. I remember once they had to bring me home from middle school in the school car for discipline because I said something rude to a teacher. I swore at her, and that was because she allowed a child to be hit by someone else, and she allowed this southern girl's father to come to our class and insult us all. And about half of our class was Mexican. And I knew why she was doing it, and I knew why the little southern girl didn't like being there. I thought it was wrong, and I got into an argument with her and then I said something rude and left the room and then they took me home.

And my mother was so wonderful. [Laughs.] She said, "Ah, Maxine"—because that's my first name—"she would never speak like that. Well, whatever happened, I know that Maxine only did it because she didn't think things were right. She would never do anything wrong." She just had this idea about me and so I felt that I should live up to her ideal. And my father was the same way. He would always say, "You know, you have more than most, so you have to look after other people because look what you have." And I don't know what he meant [laughs] because really, we didn't have that much. I think he meant abilities and talent and whatever he saw. [00:22:04]

And he was the one person in our little community of the extended family and the *compadres* and all of that, that everyone came to because he was bilingual and biliterate. He had been an insurance salesman when they didn't have white salesmen that would go into Black neighborhoods in East Palo Alto. They hired my father and trained him, and he was great with paperwork and numbers; he's very very intelligent. And lots of my special books—I have a few still left—they were like first editions of *Ivanhoe* and *Black Beauty*, and I remember they had engravings, these little tissues. They came from the maids who got them from the rich people who threw these books out. And the maids would give them to my father because that's who he sold insurance to: the Black maids and the housekeepers and the butlers. They would say, "Take this home to your girl, I bet she's smart like you."

And so I had this whole picture of what my father did as sort of someone who solved problems.

So people would come to him if they were going to try and buy a house or buy a car. Any contract, they would have him look at it. And if something happened where something was going wrong, he would go with them to talk to their boss or whoever it was, and that was how he was known. And so, I think it passed to us to see the world in this way.

And I think that's very very common for Chicanos. If you look at any of the big activists, you'll find someone in their parents or grandparents that stood their ground, and that's how they learned it. I don't know that it just comes naturally with being Chicano. Well, maybe it does because you—we grew up in a time where you did have to say what was supposed to be done.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:24:00]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And that was harder for my parents when that started happening for me because, you know, they were fearful. And also when they were young—first married, I think—and they lived in LA—my brother was born there—they were both working in Santa Monica. I think she was like a governess for a very wealthy family in Beverly Hills, and she took care of a little boy. What was his name? We were always jealous of him. She used to talk about him. So they would meet at these dances, and that's how they got together.

And they got married, and they went to rent a house. Wilshire Boulevard was like a dividing line, and they were going to rent a house on basically the white side, and it was a little cottage or something. They were just renting. And the woman liked them; they were a very handsome couple. And then when they went back to sign the papers, she was very sorry, but she couldn't rent to them because people in the neighborhood had a petition and had thrown a rock at her window, or something had happened.

And so I remember years later when they would talk about it, they would say, first, "*Maleducados, esta gente*." I mean, "They're not right." And the second would be, "You should never go where you're not wanted." And so that was the governing rule until I met Richard. And then, of course—he wasn't raised at all with that, as a Black person. He was raised pretty much the opposite. And I was mortified for the first few times we went anywhere because if we didn't get seated, which we usually didn't, he would ask for the manager. And I would go, "Oh, I'm not angry; let's go, let's go." You know? And then later I realized, "Oh, he's right." If you didn't go where you weren't wanted, you just wouldn't be able to go anywhere.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Anywhere. Where was Richard raised?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: East Palo Alto, but summers in Louisiana and Texas. [00:26:00] Big family, big extended family.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And did your mother work?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: My mother did for a while. Douggie, that was his name, the rich boy. Douggie this, Douggie that. We all hated him. We would never see him. He was—one day, we were in Los Angeles, and she asked my father to take her by this house—he was grown then—and she went in to see him, and he hugged her and just said a few words, and then she came back to the car. And so we're like, "Oh, who's that, Dad?" You know, because who hugs my mother except for my father? Well, that's Douggie. "Oh, my God!" Because we still had him in our heads as this little kid.

She learned a lot from that, and she passed it on. Living with rich people, you learn lots of different things. And also, it skewed her idea of white people. I don't think she knew that there was [laughs] another kind of white people except those people. That was really funny. When she—when I would have a friend, and I was going to go to their house to eat, she would say, "Oh, well, their house will smell strange to you, but don't say anything." And then she would say, "And if they're going to feed you, don't ask for beans or tortillas, anything like that, because they won't have that." Well now, that's totally—it wouldn't be true, but then it was! My mother was correct, and I followed her rules for everything. She had all kinds of little rules. Yes.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So she worked as a—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: A governess—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: A governess.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —and then by the time we were born, she was cleaning houses. That's

how I learned about the back door and the side door. She used to clean houses on Moffett Field for the admirals and the high-ranking officers, very very beautiful homes for a military base. And we would go there to clean, and we would have to either go through the back door or the side door.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: You would go with her?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes, on days when she—you know, I was—it was like a Saturday, and I wasn't in school. She would take me with her, and I would just help out. I really didn't do anything. [00:28:01] And they would give us their castoffs, which is how I got interested in perfume.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: They had these cut-glass decanters, and I would fill them with colored water, and it was [laughs]—it started very early on, my love of perfume bottles. Yeah. My mother was very hardworking, but then there came a point where my father didn't want her working because he wanted her to stay at home with us. So then he worked two shifts at the cannery so there would be enough money. Both of my parents are very hardworking, and it's something I learned from them.

My first job, I was 13, I went to cut apricots in the packing sheds, and I had to get a work permit. It was a little orange card, and you have to have that to have a job. And then from there, I went on to working in the cannery every summer once—I think I had to be 18 or something. I paid my way through San Jose State doing that. And sometimes, the work season would overlap with the beginning of school, and it would be very difficult. Richard always says that's why he fell in love with me, because he had never known anyone so hardworking.

So I would get up at around 3:30 in the morning to get ready to walk from, I think, 16th Street in San Jose down to the Greyhound bus depot to catch the 5:30 train that would get me to Redwood City at S&W Fine Foods by 7:30. Because it stopped at every little place. And then once I got there, it would drop me off and then I would have to walk across the train tracks and down a road to get to the cannery. And then I would come back every day. And I did this, and he thought that that was just amazing. So he decided he would get a job in the cannery at a night shift or something, and I said, "I—I don't think you should do that, Richard, because you didn't really grow up like that." And my father had told him stories about, "Oh, you know, you stand there, and the peaches come down the line. [00:30:04] You hold the crate, and they bounce in, and it just gets harder as you stack because then they get higher and heavier." And Richard didn't I think really believe him until he went to do it. And he lasted one night. [They laugh.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: He lasted one night, wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow. So that was while you were a college student at San Jose State. And is that where you met Richard?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes. He was at San Jose City College, but he actually appeared to be the landlord of my friend's house, where my friend lived. And I didn't find out till much later that he didn't really own the building. He was renting it and subletting it, so he didn't have to pay rent. Entrepreneurial even then. And I also had seen him at a coffee house. He was a folk singer then. And I sort of put the two people together and went, "Wait a minute, that's the same guy." Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And—I'm sorry, you said that he was at City College in San Francisco?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, San Jose.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: He was at San Jose State?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay. And tell me about your college years. Were you an art student?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, first, I went to Foothill Junior College for two years. Because I realized, you know, even though I had been considered quite brainy in high school, I didn't apply myself. I was more like a party doll. I was the only student ever impeached from public office.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I was the social chairman for my class [they laugh] and I got impeached for keeping bad grades.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: This was at the junior college?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, this was in high school.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: In high school. [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So by the time I got to junior college, I had to make up everything. So I took a lot. And then I got to San Jose State, and I realized that classes weren't as good, so I had to redo them again, the art classes especially. [00:32:02]

So San Jose State—I don't know if I should tell this story or not.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: It's entirely up to you. You don't have to.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It's somewhat pivotal in some ways. I didn't learn to drive in high school like everybody does. I finally learned to drive so that I can go to San Jose State. And maybe two weeks before school started at San Jose State, I went to Foothill College to get my transcript to take with me. I had gotten my license either that morning or the day before, so this is my maiden voyage.

It had been raining—Foothill College is in Los Altos Hills, a very rich city—and for whatever reason, they decided not to close the road where everyone came into the college, even though it had been raining. And they were doing roadwork, they were jackhammering. So somehow, with the fates being what they are, I was starting to make a left turn, and the road completely collapsed under the back of my tires, and the car was just rocking back and forth. I thought I hit the brake, but in the commotion, I hit the gas pedal. There was a boy—I think he was on a bicycle, I don't think it was a motorcycle. No, it might have been a motorcycle. And I killed him on impact, I'm sure.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, my goodness.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And then the car just sailed to the side of a building. I was fine, except not mentally. And that began a long period of depression, anxiety. And also the parents of the boy, they wanted to sue, of course, but they weren't really that interested in me. [00:34:06] Los Altos Hills, one of the richest cities in California at that time—the company that had done the roadwork was a big-name company. By the time it was over, the mother and father and sister were suing each other to gain rights to whatever would come out of the boy's death. And I was just sort of not a player in it, except that I had to keep going for these depositions over and over again. You have to relive it.

So my mother, who at that time had had some stomach problems from an ulcer, and they had given her some sort of tranquilizers, she just started giving them to me. So I was a little bit of a zombie. And then two weeks later, I had to go to San Jose State for first day of school, and there was no question that I would drive because there was no way I would be able to. So my father took me to school every day for the first year. And it was not long after that, the second year, that I met Richard. And I was just starting to come out of it. I remember he took my tranquilizers and threw them away, and I was like, "Don't do that!" Because he had tested one and passed out quietly, and I took like three or four a day, you know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And it colored my life for many many years. I didn't drive for 13 years, went to therapy for many years. And actually, when we were involved in the accident in 2003—which was how many years later? Wow, 40-something years later, 40 years later—I remember waking up in the intensive care, and the first thought that came into my mind was, "Now, we're even. I've erased the debt. I'm here, and who knows what's going to happen to me, and I've just paid my dues, and I can't do anything else." [00:36:02] And so it was always there. It never, never went away. It went away for periods of time where I wouldn't think about it, but any little thing could trigger it. Even to this day, driving down—is it 101?—coming back from San Francisco, every time we pass Almonte Road and the turnoff for Foothill College, I turn my face the other way because I don't want to see it.

And I think, you know, that those kinds of traumas, they propel you in different ways. I couldn't waste my life. I just couldn't. I felt like I owed it to somebody to do something. And it was also really—test your faith in yourself, and it takes years to recover from that sense of having done something wrong. You know, Catholic, Mexican guilt. So I do consider it as a sort of formative experience in the direction of my life. Plus, of course, all that I learned from my parents. But I think it made me—I wish it had never happened. I don't think that bad things happen for good reasons. I think they just happen, just like they say shit happens, and the question is really what you're going to do with it. And that's the making of you: What do you do with it? And it took me a long time to figure out what to do with it. What did that mean? Why did that happen? And that's when I left the church. Because my mother, of course, very devout, thought that the priest would help me, so she called him immediately and they came to the house. And nothing. They made no sense to me.

And Sunnyvale was still a fairly small town then; my family was very well-known. They were all sports stars and ran this grocery store, and just—everybody knew who the Mesas were. And so it was—I felt like I brought shame to my family. [00:38:02] There was the guilt of having hurt someone, and then there was the shame of having embarrassed my family. Which—I don't think they thought that, but I felt that.

So all of that took many years, many years, to sort out. And I think it's probably why I found the field of psychology so important, having gone through so much and then gone to therapy to try to figure it out. I felt like it was a field of healing. But in the end, healing was a different thing for me than being a therapist. But it took me a long time to figure that out too, so.

I think about it often because people ask me, "Well, how did you get there and did you"—assuming that I had a plan. And I never had a plan. I simply responded to events that came upon me, people that I met, opportunities, but there was no plan. And so, you know, getting a PhD in psychology in the end did not turn out to make me a therapist. I mean, most people think it's in art history, and they don't even know what it's in. So yeah, but that was a very big turning point.

So college was an uphill struggle for me the first two years. So I did an extra year because I felt like I sort of, just like, was in a fog that first semester at least and maybe part of the second.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So you did two years at Foothill College, and then you ended up doing three years at San Jose State?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what were you majoring in?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, my mother had always known—well, they knew I was going to be an artist from day one because I'm, like, third generation in my family. My father's brother—one of his brothers and then one of his uncles, my grandmother's brother, they all had been artists, and I have cousins who are artists also. So I think that immediately—the minute I showed any kind of promise or just started drawing and making things—they kind of knew, and they facilitated it. [00:40:09]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How old were you when you started? I mean—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, I call myself a lifer. There are people who come into art later in life, and there are the ones that just begin that way. They begin their—I probably was like four or five, three or four, I don't even remember. I just—I'm writing right now this article. It's a book about different artists and their lives—"How did you get to be an artist?"—and I'm writing mine in a series of postcards. The first postcard is the story of the pencil, and how the first pencil—I couldn't hold it very well because I was quite young, but I noticed that wherever the pencil went, this funny little line seemed to be following it. And it was very magical to me, and I would test it and go this way, that way, and find out where it would go. Of course later, I realized I was making the line. But at the time it seemed as though the pencil itself was part of this little road that was being elaborated. It was my first recognition—really, essentially, the power of the pencil and what drawing could really be.

And then as you get along in school, people ask you to draw things for them, for the cover of their notebooks and then later on for the yearbook, and you're always drawing, drawing, winning poster contests for like, safety posters. My dad especially—because the talent part was on his side—I remember they got me my first easel when I was about seven. So my first studio was on the back porch in the little house that we lived in, and I shared the studio with my dog, Tubby,

and the washing machine, which I was terrified of because—wringer washers—I was afraid my hand will get stuck in it. [00:42:02] So he bought me a little easel. And then there was the paper, but it was very expensive. So what he did—because he was working in the grocery stores then—is that he would go to the butcher shops, and at the end of the butcher roll, they can't use the paper, and they would give it to him, but it would always have little crinkly edges from being rolled up. He would cut them into squares and put rocks on them, so they would flatten out, and those are my first papers.

And then later, when I was in high school, I remember they wanted you to get an oil painting set. This is by the time the Lockheed kids were there, and this is nothing. But for someone who doesn't have a lot of money—that's like about 150 bucks, and so my parents saved their money, and they bought me a little set. And so when I would have trouble in class with teachers that were, I thought, like, too heavy-handed, I would always feel like, "I can't let them do this to me because my mother and father saved money for me to do this, and I'm going to do this. And I am not"—you know?

I would get in trouble because teachers were—I look back on it and I think, I can't believe anyone would ever do it. You're working in a drawing, and this man comes up with a big crayon, then he draws over it because he doesn't like the way it looks. And you're just like—it's my first recognition, I was about 15—"I'm the artist, what"—and so I remember tearing it in half and storming out of the class, saying something rude once again because I had a very potty mouth.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Which I still do. And he wrote in my yearbook, a couple of years later, something about, "You were my butterfly and I wanted to clip your wings." So there was something else really creepy going on, but I just didn't want to deal with it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah. Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. No, I found all the way through my educational experience that I didn't fit in well. [00:44:06] Whatever the expectations were of me when I was younger because I was Mexican, and the expectations when I was older because I was smart. And I tested really high, I didn't fit either one. I was sort of like, not quite—that's been true for many years. I mean, I don't know that it's—it's different now because I'm older and I'm established and people know my work.

I felt that way about the Chicano Movement. I felt like I didn't fit. Honestly, I'm sure someone's written about it, but a lot of the women of the early Chicano Movement—and [Judy] Baca and I talk about this—were the girlfriends, lovers, or mentees of the men of the first generation. And I didn't come in that way. I came in fully formed with a Black husband, and, you know, there was a little bit of racism still there. I don't think people really—not as a matter of trust but just maybe didn't see me as a part of their cohort. A lot of them had gone to the Art Institute or CCA. Some had gone on G.I. Bills, and then the girls had gone after. I just was sort of the odd man out. And that's why I think it's just [laughs] ironic that I'm now seen as sort of this dowager queen of the Chicano Movement. I'm thinking, like, "No, it wasn't that nice, and it wasn't that easy."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And that was all sort of in San Francisco, your entry into the Chicano Movement—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —in San Francisco, in the Bay Area?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, you know, I met Luis Valdez. We were in school together at San Jose State, and I was taking Romantic Literature of England and so was he. Oh, he had that most incredible voice. [00:46:01] The teacher used to have him read Keats out loud, the *Globed Peonies*, and I remember I had a mixture of awe and fear. First of all, he looked really Mexican to me, and I just wasn't used to that. Like everywhere I went, there were no Mexicans in San Jose State [laughs] in the 1960s. It was whiter than white. And the art department, definitely not.

He was in the theater department, and he used to come in right before class. So everybody would be milling around waiting for class, and in he would come—you know, not a tall man. That was in the sort of early *actos* period, so he was always in a—it looked like a guerilla warfare. You know, he had a flak jacket and sometimes a beret and always black Ray-Bans. And he would have, like, a babe on each arm, these really beautiful theater babes: redheads, blondes,

whatever. Thank God Lupe came along and saved him.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And [laughs] then we would go into class and then he would speak, and I would just be petrified. I don't know why he frightened me except that I think I was so white-ified by that point. I had tried so hard to fit in, and there was this person who just was himself doing what he wanted to do. And I was sitting on, like, a barrel full of rage, just a barrel full of rage from all the years I'm trying to be white and not getting away with it, and—I don't know, there was just something about him. He kind of set me free. He doesn't—I mean, I tease him about it now because at that time I don't think he knew who I was.

Richard and I were living in a—not an apartment. It was an old Victorian house, and it was on the ground floor, it was just leaky and whatever. But right next door, the *teatro* was rehearsing. Somebody lived there, and they were doing the world premiere of *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa,* and there was a guy who used to stand in a refrigerator box with just his head sticking out doing his lines, and I was mesmerized. [00:48:12] I would open the kitchen window and try to be doing the dishes while, like, watching out the window and, you know, like, eavesdropping.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was so great. Yeah, he had a lot of effect on me.

So I knew there was this whole Chicano thing; I just didn't understand exactly what it was. And it was a word that my parents would never have used because it was a slur, you know, a sort of pejorative term. It wasn't until I got to San Francisco—and we came to San Francisco for Richard to be in a rock band in the Summer of Love. So I was a hippie before I was a Chicana.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes. Oh, yes. And ran around with this whole, like, multiracial group of artists and performers and musicians and—you know? We all dressed like—oh, we all made our own clothes from leftover pieces of this and that. And I remember a friend that—he got to be friends later, he was Puerto Rican—he came by once, and that was a period of time we—a lot of nude photographs and people were making calendars. It wasn't really that it was so sexual as much as it was so liberating. You were liberating your body. And I remember this friend said to me later, "You know, after I visited you and I saw you later at the Galería, I thought, Well, she better not ever show them those pictures." [They laugh.] Because Chicanos are so uptight! In that era. They really—no, it was like—you know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.] Wow. Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was very Marxist and *pshhshh*. And I came in, like, from a completely different point—this is why I think really I didn't quite fit and they didn't quite trust me, weren't quite sure. And it was only that I was mentored by Yolanda Garfias Woo, who was best friends with Ralph Maradiaga, who was the codirector with René Yañez, that I had creds. [00:50:04] Because otherwise, I simply wouldn't have. Because I hadn't gone through any of the politics of it at that point. Eventually I did. But at that point, I hadn't.

Yes, I look back on those time and I think, How funny. Good thing they didn't really know who I was. They wouldn't let me do anything. But René was pretty open-minded, I must admit. Much more so than the rest of them.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So your entry into the movement was really through the Galería de la Raza and through—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, first Casa Hispana de Bellas Artes. So it all started because in '69, I went into a program called Teacher Corps, which was recruiting people of color for communities of color through—San Francisco State program. But unfortunately, San Francisco State had just started the Third-World [Liberation Front] student strike, so we couldn't cross picket lines. So they had to put us out in these old Victorians in the Western Addition. And so that was—I didn't really go to San Francisco State till, like, the second year. And so a third of the time, we were in classes; a third of the time, we worked in community; and a third of the time, we did team-teaching.

So I was lucky because I got Yolanda Garfias Woo as my team leader, who was probably one of

the first truly indigenous Mexican teachers in the San Francisco Unified School District, and one of the most brilliant teachers that I have ever seen. And she was also—I—I can't really say it well enough because it's so emotional. I saw her—we took her to the opening of the Oakland Museum because she's quoted on all the walls because she was, like, the queen. We took her with us. We got a wheelchair for her and everything because it's hard for her to walk now.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: How old is she?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: You know, I think she's in her 80s. Mid-80s maybe? [00:52:00] It's hard for me to tell, but she looks very—she's always looked very childlike. You know, she's very petite—I mean, short—and always dresses in indigenous dress or Japanese or Chinese clothes, because her husband was Chinese. And he was a fantastic painter. They were the model for Richard and I for our life. Because they didn't have children, they loved to travel, they were both artists, both educators.

She opened the whole world to me. You know, outside of my parents and Richard, there has been no one in the world who had more influence on me. I didn't know about Mesoamerican things, I didn't know about folk art, I didn't know about weaving, I didn't know about craftspeople and toys, and I just didn't—I think I just didn't know anything. I think about it, and I think, "God, what was I? Like, a tabula rasa or something?" She just presumed I knew these things, so she shared everything with me.

She introduced me to the Days of the Dead. We had always loitered around the graveyards because in my father's family, the dead are never really dead. And there are constant conversations about them at every meal. If you serve something: "Oh, wouldn't your uncle Henry —would've loved that? That was his favorite." So it wasn't that I wasn't used to the dead, because I was, but I had never had it formalized. My mother kept a version of a home altar. My grandmother had a definite bedroom home altar.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mariana?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mariana, yeah. But Days of the Dead didn't really exist till the '60s in the US, except maybe a little bit along the border. So when Carmen Lomas Garza came to San Francisco in the '70s, that was another sort of crossing point. But I met Yolanda in the late '60s, and she was doing the earliest Day of the Dead altars and celebrations in public schools. And so I worked with her on that, and developing curriculum, and—oh, yeah. [00:54:05]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And was she in predominantly Mexican public school system? Or—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, she was in the Mission most of the time. Yeah, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But she was famous, you know, because she just influenced so many people in the years in which she was more active.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I didn't even realize she was still alive. Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yes! And what a charmer. I said to Richard, "Now, you know, she might get tired"—blah blah. And later on, he goes, "Are you kidding?" [They laugh.] He said, "She has been—had such a good time, she had a wonderful time." And, of course, everyone knows her, and everyone was so thrilled to see her because you don't see her that often.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Does she live in the Mission?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No. She lives in—oh, kind of near South San Francisco. And Gary died—gosh, I think it's been 12 years now.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That was her husband, Gary Woo?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes, Gary Woo. He died, and—oh, and she invited Richard to be part of the Buddhist ceremony with him. That's how Richard got into ethnomusicology and how he learned about Chinese music and ended up playing—well, Japanese court music, gagaku, and then Chinese lute. It was because of Gary.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, I'm not kidding you; they just like, transformed our lives. And then over the years, you know, we would move away, and we would only see them once in a while. One of my alpaca's name is Yoli because Yolanda was here when it got born. She came in, we had lunch, visited, blah blah. And then everybody's leaving, and there's a placenta on the ground, and this little scrawny thing trying to stand up, and then we went, [gasps]. So that was it, the baby got a name. Yes.

No, she's an extraordinary person. I mean, she has more skillsets than anyone I've ever known. He built her a teahouse in the backyard, a real teahouse with a hibachi and everything for them to do their tea in the afternoons. They had a big apple tree, and she hooked up her backstrap loom, and she would weave every day in the afternoon when she came home from school. [00:56:07] She has one of the largest collections of indigenous textiles, from villages that don't even exist anymore. And what she did—she probably—I don't know how many, maybe 34 of these little books that are like leather-bound books—and she interviewed all of these weavers, and she coded their system of weaving. They look like a cipher of some kind. They're like lines and dots, and it's all coded. And they are trying to buy it from a Dutch museum, the whole textbook, but she won't let go of things yet. She will eventually, but—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did she teach weaving as well?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Only through public schools. Only as—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So she didn't train other artists or—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, no, I don't think so. I don't think so. And it was one of the other connectors because I had—well, it was because of—her ethnic fabrics and tribal arts became really interesting to me, so I ended up starting a school of fabric arts with a friend of mine in what was the Galería's building on 14th Street. We did it for a few years till we ran out of money.

And then I used to teach ethnic fabrics at one of the extensions in San Francisco. I was going through my—that whole cabinet there is my friend's collection of indigenous textiles. He was the person that taught me, and she taught me. So between the two of them, I learned a great deal. And I visited and traveled in Mexico to Chiapas and the Zinacantán villages and—

But she was the one, you know? I count myself really blessed and lucky because I could've been put on another team, and I would never have had that chance to be with her. Two solid years. [00:58:02]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow. And she introduced you to altars and altar practice? So what were you—what was your art before you met Yolanda Garfias Woo?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: [Laughs.] Well, it's odd to say, but I came through San Jose State during the mid-'60s, and there was something called new media materials, and by "media," they meant, you know, "types of art." So what was coming into play there was things like plastics—Uvex plastics that could be formed and shaped—lacquer painting, metal flake sprays, car art. And I was a total aficionado of car art because my cousins used to do pinstriping, and I went to some of the really big car shows at the Cow Palace with my cousins. They were all boys, and there was me. And I used to read through my brother's car magazines. There was a man named George Barris that would add these fiberglass fins on to these cars, and he would do these—we would call them now ombré, but they were like faded colors that would change across the car.

So when that was being taught, I was totally on board. So my earliest works were shaped canvases with sort of metal flake sections on them. I was in—selected—one of the exhibiting artists in the Phelan Awards in 19—I think it might have been '65—'67 maybe?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Phelan as in P-H-E-L-A-N?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes, James Phelan. It was—I don't know that they do them anymore, but they did for years. Lots of very well-known California artists are part of that. I sometimes look back at the catalog and I go, "Oh, my God, I didn't know he was in there!" Because it was in the '60s. [01:00:04]

So when I came to San Francisco, I was really doing these shaped forms and some line drawing. So when I got to the—Casa Hispana de Bellas Artes had their first Chicano show going to Delano, and this must have been around '68, '69. And Yolanda had introduced me to the people there, so I submitted some, like, large cactus drawings and—well, it never came back. It just stayed in

Delano, I guess, I don't know.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I didn't care. I mean, it didn't really matter to me. But that was my sort of first foray. And, you know, being at the Galería didn't mean I exhibited at the Galería. I never had a show there until after all the boys left. And Ani had a show for me.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And who is that, Ani?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Ani Rivera, she runs the Galería now.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So this is current. We're talking—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Recent.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —two, three years ago. Recent, right. All those in-between years, I was on the board, I raised money, I did the ReGeneration Project, I would come in for Day of the Dead and do, you know, a piece. But generally speaking, no.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Not as an artist doing a show there?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. Oh, no, not a show. I would be in a show occasionally. If they had to fill it out, you know, then they would stick me in there, but no. I don't think—I actually think that René more than anyone was really surprised at how well-known I became.

So, by the '70s, we had done the Frida show [*Homenaje to Frida Kahlo*, 1978]. And I didn't really do a piece in that show. I helped collaborate on the altar, but I didn't make a piece for that show. I had done a window altar for her once—the year before, '75 or '76—for her birthday. [01:02:06]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

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AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And then when Ralph put together *The Fifth Sun* show at the Berkeley Art Museum—and this must have been around '77, I think—he did invite me to do a big piece, and I did a big altar for Frida and Diego, of which there's almost no documentation.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I mean, I think—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Why is that? Why you think? You didn't take photos?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, no. You know, this is going back to the discussion about commercial. I never thought of the work I did as monetized in any way. I did them because they were needed, you know, for Day of the Dead or for the altar shows, and it wasn't really till maybe when I did the altar for my Uncle Louie at SFMOMA when they did the—oh, what's his name?—the printmaker. Posada. When they did the Posada show, they invited me to do an altar, and so I did. And I think that's the first time, other than *The Fifth Sun* show, that I crossed over into a museum and not the Mexican Museum or Galería or SPARC. And I really didn't consider my work anything but ephemeral for at least the first—what, '70—yeah, the first 10 years.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And it wasn't until *Chicano Expressions*, when Inverna Lockpez came up from INTAR, and I did a piece with her, which wasn't very successful—but she somehow saw something in me and gave me a solo show in '87. And that show was reviewed in *Art in America* as one of the 10 best shows in alternative spaces in New York. So that opened the door, and it got reviewed—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That was a solo show at INTAR?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. And that opened the door. I got reviewed in *Art in America* and

Artforum. [00:02:05] And I learned that if you want to have, like, recognition, you have to go to New York. In those days. There was no other option. Showing anywhere else was never going to get you in an art journal. And I don't think until that happened that I even knew I wanted that. But even then, there was nothing to sell. There was nothing to sell. For—what was the first one, '95? So from, say, '75 to '95—20 years, there was nothing to sell because I just made them. I just showed up with bags and boxes of things, and I would put it all together and then I would take it apart and take it home.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But you thought of them as installations at that point already?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: No? You thought of them as altars?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. And it wasn't till the '80s when people started doing installation art that I sort of was captured under that rhetoric. But it wasn't of my own making. But I understood that the spiritual sense and the sacred space that I had been doing could not be done in big museum venues. It just wouldn't work. They didn't let you light candles, you know, if they're collecting museums; they freak out over flowers or anything with a bug in it. You know, no *pan de muerto*. You can't do anything.

And so eventually, I did start calling them altar installations. Because I had to demarcate them from the earlier work, which had essentially been within what I would call a spiritual tradition or a sacred space in the community. And I saw that as my function, you know, that I would help people to retrieve memories. I've written about it after the fact, but that—it's funny. Somebody quoted it on Instagram and I was reading the quote and thought, "Wow, that's really good." Then I got to the end of the quote, and it was me. [00:04:12]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And it was—and I went, "Oh, no, did I say that?" And then I realized it was from a podcast at the Smithsonian when they showed the *Dolores Del Rio*—what was that—a few years ago, and they interviewed me.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, in *The Latino Presence* show.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Uh-huh, uh-huh [affirmative]. And I was talking about the function of memory, and I think that if I look at—you know, people ask about legacy. The only two things I can point out are *Domesticana*, which I think gives a sort of rubric for understanding certain kinds of work. And the other is the function of memory as a contemporary strategy, and the idea of what I call politicizing spirituality. That one of the most subversive acts you can have is to remember when everyone wants to you to forget, and when everyone tells you a lie and you have to deny that and you have to find the truth. And that's what spirituality will do for you. Almost nothing else can, you know?

And so over the years, my move from doing altars per se to, like, the cabinets of curiosity, the libraries, the laboratories, even the landscapes. Those all became interrogations of historical points that I wanted to understand better from both the public and private sense. And that would not have come if I hadn't seen or hadn't experienced for myself the sacred as a sort of powerful defiance of modern life, if not capitulating to this notion that, you know, religion is dead or whatever. And not to be on the other side of it, which is not to capitulate to colonial religions that were part of your destruction. [00:06:00] So, to me, spirituality stands apart from all of that and is really your own set of practices, your own beliefs. And they link you to your family, to your ancestors. We're lucky we have that because a lot of people don't have that.

It was one of the things that brought Richard and I together. At first, he was a little hesitant, like, "What is that stuff?" You know? Because in his family, when people die, you don't ever go to the graves, and you don't ever—like, you don't really talk about them anymore. I think it's too painful. And I was all about, like, "Oh, look at that graveyard! You want to go see it?" And he goes, "No!" And he could not understand why I thought graveyards were so beautiful or why I wanted to make altars. And then as time passed, he started to join in and then it became—especially as I began to examine the Blackness of my own family, which is why the *Wunderkammer* was really important. It was my first time to make a public formal statement about the *tercer raíz* and what I share with Richard in that world.

And I'm sure other couples make this up, but you do make up sometimes a mythology about

your destiny, why you came together, why you were always supposed to be together. Our very first one—and they're sort of our fake wedding pictures—have to do with Rahotep and Nofret, and they were a couple in Egypt. During the time when they flooded the Aswan Dam, they took them out. They're very small, but we used them as a sort of prototype for ourself because I look just like her and he looked just like him when we were young.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So they're sculptures?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes, they're sculptures. He used to say to me, "You know, you were Nofret friend and I was Rahotep." And then I would say, "Yes, and I was an Aztec princess and God knows what you were."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But we were supposed to be together, that's what it—[00:08:06]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I think you build those mythologies, and they help you to sustain yourself. Because a long-term marriage, as you well know, is not for the fainthearted. It's as hard as aging. Well, you are aging in it, and you're shifting positions of power, and you're changing who you are—not fundamentally, but your interests, your abilities. Everything changes, and the two of you are constantly trying to, like, keep that together. So if you mythologize or find a way romantically to capture yourselves as enduring and eternal, it makes it easier. But not everybody does it. I think artists are more prone to it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So when did you leave painting behind?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, I was never very good at it, okay? So. [They laugh.] And I had a lot of trouble with color. Now, metal flake sprays, I was happy and I could do that. But when I really had to watercolor or—you know, I was the generation that came up with the plastic paints. You know, before that, there weren't any.

And I must say that I don't think I was very good at it, and I didn't follow the rules in school. [Laughs.] One of the paintings finals they allowed you to—I don't know. You were allowed to use any surface to paint on, so I bought a set of gradated size beach balls and these nesting boxes in plastic, and I used my acrylic paints and I painted all over them. And then when it came in for the final critique and I laid them out, pulled a box out of box out of box, and rolled the balls out: Fit, absolute fit.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: He thought I was insulting him. His name is Eric Oback, and he had developed a particular brush for painting. And so he was appalled by the whole thing and was threatening to kick me out of the class. I had to submit another portfolio just to get through. And that was when I knew I was really not a very good painter, or maybe I didn't have the gist of painting straight. [00:10:04]

But when we got to San Francisco, and I was still—by then, I was painting on fabric because I always loved fabric—batik painting, stencil painting—and then I got to the Galería or we got to the Mission and did that first little ink drawing. And I did this very early installation, but I didn't know that's what it was. A friend had an apartment, and I had been working on these drawings based on little dolls, you know, ceramic pieces that had been found at some of the archeological digs. I had done drawings and then pretty soon—I wasn't a ceramicist. I tried, but I wasn't very good at it. So I started using baker's clay where you bake the little dolls. And I made all of those, and he said, "Well, you should make a dig, and you could stick them in there." And I said, "Where am I going do a dig?" He said, "You could do it in my apartment!"

So [laughs] he had a room with a door. We put a table in front of the door, we covered it with a cloth, we dropped a cloth over—I guess over the door and the door opened in somehow. We got all this dirt and piled it underneath, and I found all these—like, somebody had broken pots and then I had my little dolls in there, and you could actually crawl up inside and see, and we had a little flashlight for people. I even made a little flyer for it and everything. And I realized later—this was like in the '70s—wow, I realized later, "Oh, that was an installation!" But I just was making it up. So there were many years of me making up what I was going to do. And the traditions of the Days of the Dead and the Home Altar and the Galería, they helped me formalize

it. But even then, I never could stick to it very long. And then by the '80s, I was starting inventing the vanity and the shaped pieces like the *Santa Teresa* piece with the nun's habit. [00:12:02]

I was thinking about, the other day, that nothing I've ever made started with a drawing. It always starts with research, like something I'm reading and then I go interview somebody, then I find more books on it. And pretty soon, I develop an idea or words or a vocabulary, and then that triggers a set of images that eventually turn into an installation. But I'm not like Carmen or Rupert [García] or others who are studio artists, who really start out making images directly. Mine is very indirect, and it might take me a year or two years before I get to actually making something. It's just—that's why I have these big books that are filled with all the notes and the scribbles and the, you know, things I tear out of magazines. Even *Santa Teresa,* I went to the Carmelites and interviewed the head honcho. What was she called? The mother.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: The mother superior?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, she was scary. It was through a screen because you can't see them. They're not allowed to be seen.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Where was that?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: The Carmelites in San Francisco.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: In San Francisco?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. So *Santa Teresa* came before *Sor Juana*. And I liked *Santa Teresa* way back from the days of seeing the Bernini, you know, with the darts going into her. I always thought that was such a voluptuous piece.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And when you were interviewing the Carmelite mother superior, what did she think of what you—did you tell her you were an artist?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I told her I was an artist, and I told her that I did works that were similar to altars. Not necessarily like the church but sometimes more like a home altar that was a Mexican tradition, which she seemed very comfortable with. And I said, "Santa Teresa has been one of my favorite, and I think, you know it would be really wonderful since—her writings"— and I was very familiar with her writings. [00:14:02] You know, the seven mansions, the whole thing where you reach the elevated state of union with God. This whole mystical writing was just something I really loved. So the fact that I was knowledgeable, I think, made her calm down. But then the worst part is that they lent me a beautiful statute of Santa Teresa and I lost track of it. I haven't seen it for years.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, I'm sure she's dead by now. It was like, when I was in the '80s, so I'm sure.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right. Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But that doesn’t alleviate my guilt. And I keep thinking, "Well, what am I going to do when I find it?" And somebody said, "You aren't going to do anything, Amalia, because the Carmelites aren't there anymore." [Laughs.] I said, "Don’t tell me that. Oh, my God." Richard teases me about it: "Well, we're going to find that nun pretty soon!" Because we've been cleaning out one storage facility and moving it to another. I honestly really don’t remember what happened to her. She was in a shoebox all wrapped up, and the show traveled, and I did it again here and there, and then somewhere I just packed it up and don’t know where I put it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I know.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So the show at INTAR, was that the first *vanitas* piece?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: INTAR?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: The Inverna Lockpez in New York.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. No—well, I think I didn't know it was a—you know how I found out about vanitas? I remembered it from school, but I had completely forgotten it. That and Walter Benjamin had slipped my mind. And then Victor Zamudio-Taylor came along, and he read it, just totally read *Dolores* as the vanitas piece, and I went, "Oh, my God, he is right."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, he read the *Dolores Del Rio* altar as a vanitas?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes. When I first met him, he said something about, "We were just in Paris together." And I said, "We were?" He said, "Yes, you were a very big hit." And then I realized who he was. [00:16:00] Tomás Ybarra-Frausto was supposed to—it was NACS [National Association of Chicano Studies] in Paris for whatever reason, and Tomás was supposed to go and present on *Dolores*, and then Victor was his student at the time. So he sent Victor in his stead because Victor had already thought up this whole vanitas tradition, the specter of deaths that renders all vanity useless. And that's how we became friends.

We had a very intense and strange relationship. I can't think of any other way to explain it. And he became my sort of scholarly muse. [. . . –AMB] He would give me these little presents. I would sit and mesmerize while he would describe these spectacles in the New World with virgins stepping out of the glass ball that had spinning snakes on her ear—I mean—and how they had tried to recreate the notion of paradise with all the animals, but the jaguars got loose and started killing things. [They laugh.] And I never knew whether they were true or not true, but I loved the story so much. And then he introduced me to the emblems, so that's how the *Emblems of the Decade* got started, the *Amblemleri.*

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: The *pictura*, the *inscriptio*, and the *subscriptio*. And that's where *Borders and Numbers* were.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: *Inscriptio*, *subscriptio.* So he gave you some of those frameworks? Concepts?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Totally, yeah. When I was doing the precursors to *Borders and Numbers* at M.A.R.S. Artspace—and that's early 1990, and it—I was sort of workshopping this idea. [00:18:00] He gave me these two terms because we were all very engaged in the run-up to 1992 and the Quincentennial, so there was sort of a nationwide rage, and we were all digging up anything we could. Carmen did the whole piece at Smith College.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Carmen Lomas Garza?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, *oof*, that's a monster piece. It was almost like the road to Tenochtitlán, and there were altars along the way. There was an altar to redeem Malinche, and just was a brilliant piece. I wrote on it for her catalog.

But at that time, I was trying to look at the whole issue of the invasion and the loss. This idea that we don't suffer from a loss of memory but a memory of loss, that we live always with what is missing, what has been taken from us. That's what I mean about spirituality. It's been taken from us, erased, and then we're supposed to believe it never existed, but we know better, and that's what eats at us and makes us so angry all the time. And so Victor said, "Oh, you know, in the New World, the drive into the New World, they had two points. One was *curiositas*, to know the other, and one was *speculare*, to see the other, to observe the other. So *speculare* became what later was *Numbers*, so lots of mirrors and magnifying glasses and telescopes. And then *curiositas* was the cabinet of curiosity, which then turned into the bedroom in *Borders*.

So *Emblems of the Decade: Borders and Numbers* really came out of that early work with Victor. And he helped me do it. His mom died in the middle, so he had to leave. And he came back. And I don't know where the pieces are. [00:20:01] But some of the images behind that original *Border* are pictures of him as a child, pictures with his mother and father. His mom's candy dish was on the top. He's gone now.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But his life, you know, became so difficult and so scandalous. For my own mental health and sort of sanity, I finally just had to let it go. I felt a certain amount of guilt because he was my friend, but I also just couldn't tolerate. Being with him was like being in the eye of a hurricane. It would be still for a while and then *whack*, it would go up again. And so once he went to Mexico, we kept in touch by email, but not much more than that. But I am eternally

grateful to him for the work that he did and the things—and, you know, he could read and write in English, Spanish, Italian, French, and German.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So it was amazing. I mean, the scholarship that he had. It's a shame he never finished his dissertation and even a bigger shame that he never wrote a book. I think someday someone a long time from now will collect his essays in a book. It's still a little touchy, you know, because he got involved in—caught up in some pornography ring, and that's why he had to leave the US and go to Mexico. His ex-wife and the daughter were damaged by it. And even when I'm—at the Galería a few years ago, I was—the year after he died, I did *Borders*, but I dedicated to him. His wife was so angry at me and—ex-wife, as I've known Beth since I've known him.

Sophia was alright with it, but Beth just has too many bad memories. And she, I think, felt like I had somehow allowed him to be as he was and turned the other cheek, and she's wrong because I didn't know. [00:22:08] I didn't know until it happened. I remember Tomás calling me, he said, "You should get ready because this is going to come out publicly." And they wanted me to write a letter of support, and I said, "I can't do that, I'm in a teaching facility. I can't have that bounce back. You have no idea what that could do." And I let it go because I knew Victor, and we had had a falling out over something he said to my sister once after staying there, that was right on the edge of that, and I couldn't forgive him for that.

That's really the main reason we stopped being friends. He always wanted to insert himself in my family life, and I kept saying to him, "You know, we have this friendship; you can't be that—you can't be in that. That's sacred, that's separate." You know, I've lived a public life and traveled everywhere and many many friends, but my home is my home, and people who come into my home have to really be my friends, trustworthy people. And if you can't be that, then you shouldn't be coming into my family, least of all to my sister or Richard. Woah! And Victor was volatile and unpredictable. You never really knew. [. . . –AMB]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But I did learn so much, and it helped me to really—even curating *Ceremony of Memory and Ceremony of Spirit*—he was in the first part, *Ceremony of Memory*—we had many discussions. He wrote for that catalog. So he really encouraged me to look at memory as this trope.

Because up until that point, people were writing about Chicano art or Latino art along sort of ethnic identity lines, and I really wasn't so interested in that. I was really interested in: What are the crosscutting strategies and the sources of them, in terms of our redemptive or reclamatory practices? [00:24:09] Why are we doing that? And why is Juan Boza doing what I'm doing? We are from two different worlds. Why? And I had to talk to lots of different artists—Pepón [Osorio] and all kinds of other artists, Uruguayans, *chilenos*—to find out what it was we shared and what it was that created this need to remember.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And Juan Boza was—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Cuban.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —Cuban. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Cuban. He died early too.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you had met him?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes. Nilda Peraza was still at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and they took *Ceremony of Memory*. They were going to be one of the sites, but I was still in the very formative stages, but I hadn't finalized the artists. So I came there, and he was there, and she said, "Oh, you need to meet Juan." So he was there with his slides, and I was there with my slides, and we sat on a bench in the museum, back-to-back, holding the slides up to the light, and every once in a while I would turn to look at him. He would turn to look at me. It was like, "What?! What?!" Because it was so clear that we had shared this space, both of the sacred and of just the practice itself, the making of these things.

We had been in a show, it was called *A Hispanic Shrine*, something weird like that. But we mostly just socialized. We hadn't really had a chance to talk. And that was when the earthquake happened in San Francisco and I had to get back home. It was '89.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, the thing about coming to New York, besides that you get recognition, was then I learned about the Latino and Caribbean world. Up until that point, I had been in the Chicano and the, like, pretty—that and the African American, pretty hard core. [00:26:05] And then when I started coming to New York, I started meeting all these Latin American artists. Oh, my God, Catalina Parra, Liliana Porter, Ismael Frigerio, Jorge Tacla. Just like, the whole world opened up and I went, "Wow, this is so amazing!"

And there were things in common, but there were things that are very different. I once made a schematic, but I don't know what happened to it. I was trying to understand, What is it about Chicano art and what is it about Latino art that makes them look so different? The palette. Why, why, why? And I finally figured it out in my—I thought I figured it out in this sort of fumbling way—that the experience of racism in the United States in our generation was sort of hidden, and so it was covert. You would think it happened and then you would say something, and people would act like, "No, I didn't mean that. What? You're so sensitive." So that the experience of it was covert by that time, so our response would have to be overt. That's why Ester had to make *Sun Mad*. You know, that's why Rupert had to make those posters. There was no other way than to really hit it.

The opposite was true in Latin America. People were dying and dictatorships, and *desaparecidos*. So what they were experiencing was as overt as you could get, so their responses were very covert. I remember Catalina Parras's *Imbunches*, which put this little gauze over the mouth of these little creatures, and it was all about everything. And Rimer Cardillo was doing these insects pinned down and muffled in cotton in these little open boxes. So everybody was working. [00:28:07] And I remember Rimer telling me, "You know, Amalia, we couldn't meet more than six people. If there was more than six people, we would get reported because they thought we were organizing." And of course, they were, but—and by that time, and this was New York in the middle to late '80s, there was a diaspora coming out of all the dictatorships— Argentina, Chile, Uruguay—and those were the people that I met. And then the Caribbean artists and meeting Marta through Lowery [Stokes Sims] and doing work with the Caribbean Cultural Center, that completely changed my set of experiences of thinking about how art is made and why is it made.

And I knew that other Chicanos, particularly of my generation, not too many of them had that experience. Because the Chicano world could be very insular, very hermetic, you know. People stay with the same people forever and ever and ever. Which is wonderful, but at the same time—I think later by the '90s, people started going out more. But that was a good experience. I mean, learning about Latin American and especially the Caribbean, because that's where you could really see—what is it?—worshipping under the skirts of the virgin.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: That was it. I got it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So, when you said—and I don't disagree, I think it's interesting—but you said, Why is it that—well, it's recorded—Chicano art and Latino art look so different? But what about somebody like Pepón or—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Caribbean. Juan, Caribbean. [00:30:01]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, they're the—they're—to me, Puerto Ricans are almost analogous to Chicanos. They're like, in your face. Oh, absolutely. Ah!

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So you were making a distinction to the Latin Americans?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Latin Americans. I'm talking about Chile, Argentina. To some degree Peru, Uruguay. I don't know as much about Colombia and Bolivia because I didn't know artists from there, but I did notice some of—and the palette was much more subdued. Our palette is high. Well, it was in those days. Now, we're all kind of mixed together. But I'm talking about starting, like, in the '70s and '80s, looking at that type of work.

Oh, yeah, Juan Sánchez, I looked at it the first time, and I thought, Oh, that's kind of like Chicano work. It's like, It's got of everything we like! It's got flags, and it's got flowers, and it's got hearts,

and it's got fists, and it's got people, and it's got all this stuff that we really love. And Pepón and I, we're like—you know, he's like my younger brother. I think of him that way.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But it's interesting. I think your analogy of covert racism-overt response, overt violence-covert response, is very astute. I had never thought of it that way.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I spent hours trying to figure it out over the years as I would go there and come back, and I would think and think and think. And I remember as a child as I confronted racism, even into my teen years and early adulthood, if I said anything, people always acted like, "Well, no! Oh, honey, no!" Like, "You're just imagining this." And I realized, "No, I'm not." But it was very—I call it gaslighting, you know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I am looking at the watch.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Should we break?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I think we should also because my gravelly fruit is—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah. Okay. So we will stop here and resume tomorrow.

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[Track mesa19_1of1_sd_track06 is a test track.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay, this is Adriana Zavala interviewing Amalia Mesa-Bains at the artist's studio in San Juan Bautista, California—it is now Monday, November 4th—for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. We're still on card number one. Okay, now we're ready to go. So.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, one of the things that I think has played a really really important role—in both my art life and my own personal development—has been the role of other Chicana artists. Some of that was, in a way, strangely artificially constructed by my dissertation, which was a study of the influence of culture on the identity of a group of 10 Chicana artists. Inclusive of those were early pre-Movement artists like Gloria Maya and Virginia Jaramillo. And then late—then the other group, which included Judy Baca and Santa Barraza and Carmen Lomas Garza. All of those people were Movement artists. And some became very close and deep friends, and some were before I started my dissertation. I had a lot of trouble in school because they felt I was too close to the subject matter and I wouldn't have enough sort of critical distance. But I didn’t really care.

You know, I went to school to become a therapist, because of my own psychological health and because I taught in public schools through the Teacher Corps program and I saw that many of my students had such deep emotional problems. My school was across the street from a housing project, and one of the heaviest in the city outside of maybe Hunters Point. So I constantly had to study and take night courses to try and figure out how to deal with these troubled children in my regular classes. [00:02:01] They were my students.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What were you teaching?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I was teaching elementary school. I was teaching first grade.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, wow, so the full first-grade curriculum?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yeah, I was a public school teacher. I didn’t go into staff development until later. So I taught directly in the classroom for at least—first five—maybe 10 years. I worked in a school that was right on the edge of the Excelsior District and the Mission, so there were both Black and Brown students that came to me.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: What was the school?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was the Paul Revere Elementary School, off of Courtland. And those students, you know—oh, no, this was before that. This was when I taught at—it was called LeConte School, and later when the principal passed away, they renamed it Leonard Flynn for him. But that one was directly in the Mission, on what was called Army then, Cesar Chavez now, and right across from the housing project.

And in fact, I had a mother's group that I used to run out of the project, just a little conversation group. It was mostly single moms, impoverished, struggling, you know, and it was a housing project that had been overrun by sort of drug people, you know, the vendors. And so they would take over an apartment, drive a family out, and use it. They did target practice on the fence. There was a park on the other side. Oh, no, it was heavy duty. Once when—and we lived not even four doors away from the school. They had to put baffling up on the school wall because a teacher got shot in the arm when they had a shootout in the project, which was directly across the street. [00:04:01]

And one night, we heard all this shooting, so Richard and I were in our bedroom, we got down on our knees, and we were peeking out the window, and you could see the gunfire in the dark that went on for hours. And the next day, not a word in the paper, nothing on television. Finally, I asked one of the local policemen who walked the beat, "What was going on?" He goes, "Well, you know, the problem is they had more firepower than we do. And if we were to try to control it as we did the other night, we always lose, and if we were to bring in the kind of weaponry we need to subdue it, the public would never tolerate it in a city like San Francisco. So we just do the best we can to kind of curb it." That's where—my first teaching assignment was Hunters Point and that was—I can't even go into that, that was like another world.

The second one was in the Mission, and while I went through that, I learned that I didn't have the skills, the clinical or psychological skills for dealing with this, so I took all these classes at night, meanwhile working my way through my own issues. And being heavily influenced by a Latino Jungian analyst, Renaldo Maduro, who—I was part of a group that he hosted of artists talking about their dreams. It was a dream group based on a study he had done at Rajasthan, India, of dream painters. So I was sort of moving toward the field of psychology and decided that I would go ahead and get that degree. I already had an undergraduate degree and a master's degree in interdisciplinary education through Teacher Corps, a lifetime teaching credential.

But I think I saw that there was maybe something bigger that I might do, so I applied twice and finally got in the second time to the Wright Institute in Berkeley. And whilst I was teaching, I went to school, so I had to work out a negotiation with the school district to work in the childcare centers because they had split shifts. [00:06:06] So I would do the morning shift, which started at six, take the kids and get them all set up, you know, the little milk and cracker thing and all that. And then I would leave or I would go to school and take one or two classes, come back, do the late afternoon half-shift, close it up, make sure all the parents picked the kiddies up and off they went. And then at night, I would go back to the clinic and do my clinical hours.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I had to learn to drive again after the incident when I was younger because I had to go across the Bay Bridge four times a day, and it was totally exasperating.

But in the midst of that, I went there first because I thought there was a connection between creativity and culture. So I was looking at bilingualism and biculturalism and aspects of creativity. There's cognitive similarities, complexity of mode, tolerance for ambiguity, permeation of boundaries. There's all this literature on how the mind of a creative person and the mind of a bilingual and bicultural person are very similar. So that's what I went to do, but eventually, I finally realized that I really—as all dissertations—wanted to study myself [they laugh], so I studied my friends instead because I couldn't be in the cohort, so I put them.

And everybody loved it. They were all happy to do it and so I did many years of interviewing. I met new people too. Juanita Jaramillo in New Mexico. So I tried to get a geographic and generational span. And in the midst of doing that, I had to interview Judy Baca. So we knew of each other, but we had never really met. [00:08:01] This was in the early '70s. So I remember she was still living in Topanga Canyon. She and Donna Deitch had split up, and she was living alone in a house they had in the canyon.

And so, one of the aspects of my dissertation that made it unusual is that it was, of course, under human subjects laws because it was a clinical dissertation. It wasn't an art history one. So, since I was looking at the influence of culture on the construction of identity, I had to look across certain dimensions, and some of the dimensions were family dimensions. They were, like, roles in identity, gender, gender and sexuality, family, and art, and sort of creativity. So without thinking about it ahead of time, I realized that I was actually unearthing some of the material around sexuality that was not openly known or part of the Movement. And because the early Movement always had to struggle with the role of women and with homosexuality, both of which

they didn’t do well with.

So when Judy and I started talking—and this was many many years ago; 30, no, 40—40 years ago, wow—much of this came out. And so as the hours progressed—it was, like, seven hours or something—I got up to leave, and she took my hand, and she said, "Okay, now we're best friends because you know more about me than my own mother does, and I trust you with that." So I said, "Okay, I'll take care of it." And which is why I never made my dissertation available, other than a summary section. I locked down all the chapters with all the interviews because I felt that I had to protect people's privacy in respect to who they were at that time. [00:10:12] It doesn’t matter now, and they've all said to me, "If you want to publish it, you could," you know. It's a different story now, I would write it differently, but—because I published it in the '80s, so it's 30 years past.

That was my sort of confrontation with Shifra Goldman. She called me. She knew me, and she had come to the house a couple of times, and I knew we were in different pages because we [laughs] had a brunch once, and she took me aside in the kitchen, and she said, "I don't know what's going on with you, but you should not be serving Richard like that." You know, this whole feminist thing. And I said, "I felt you knew about Mexicans. Don’t you know about Mexicans?" I said, "I serve everybody when they're in my house. That's what I was taught to do, that's what I love to do." And I said, "It has nothing to do with patriarchy. It's called hospitality."

And then later came the phone calls around the dissertation. And she knew, you know, she had her ear to the ground. She said, "I would like the dissertation now that you've completed it." I said, "Well, I can't really do that. You know, it's under human subjects laws. No one is identified, they're by numbers." She said, "Oh, I know who they are." I said, " I think that's part of the problem, is that you more than almost anyone would know who they are. And since I can't give you the data of interviews, I could give you the summary." And then she just got really nasty and she said, "Well, look, I don’t need anything from you. I can go to the microfiche," and hung up the phone on me. So I put the lock down, and it has remained there all these years. And people get in and they get parts of it. But I just couldn’t trust her. I just thought, What if she writes something? You know? [00:12:02] And it wasn't just about homosexuality. It's about sexual trauma in the family, it's about all kinds of things, fathers and abuse, and—I mean, just the way all families are. And I just could not have that be a public discussion.

And human subject laws, you have to keep it locked up, which I did for five years, and then you can go back to your subjects, and if they allow you to—and then time passed and I went on to other things, and I never redid it, although I would like to do sort of a version of it. Because I think what I captured then—which I find very ironic because I thought we were really established then—is that I caught them at the beginning of their careers. They were what other people would call emerging. And I thought we were it—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —you know? We had gotten there.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And they have changed so many times over since then. But that was in an odd way—besides my work at the Galería and meeting Carmen and Ester, that's sort of how the network got built. I would say that after all these years—what, 40 years—I still consider Carmen Lomas Garza, Ester Hernandez, Judy Baca, Patssi Valdez—even Santa, who I don’t see very often—I really consider them my *comadres*, you know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And one of the astounding things that I discovered in my dissertation—Yolanda Lopez was in it as well—was that almost no one had children. And the iconic figure in most of their lives was their grandmother. Almost all of them. And it was so fascinating because I think what happens in larger extended families, like Mexican families, is mothers and fathers are so busy going to work and trying to care for the children that it's only the grandparents who are surrogate parents that step in and are at a time in their lives where they're not engaged outside the home. [00:14:20] They are the home. And so those are the people like in my life and Judy's life and Santa's life and Carmen's life and—yeah, and Yolanda's life—they were the people present for you.

And then there was a third thing that I discovered which I've carried with me always—is that we

all thought of our work as our offspring. I can't remember who said it, but one of them said, "Well they're like brain babies, you know? I just get them and then I have to give birth to them."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And so I think for a lot of us, it was not just happenstance that we didn't have children. It was part of an understanding that we were already committed to a creative life that would produce that. And that—I mean, some like Ester had their children early, early in life. And then some like Yolanda had their children later in life. But the bulk of us—Carmen, me, Patssi, Judy, there's a couple of others—we didn't have children at all.

So that network that I think of as my *comadres* there, they have been there for me through really the toughest times, the good times and the bad. It was the door into a kind of life that without them I don't think I could have had, which was a life of belonging. For all the reasons I talked about that when I was younger and had my white rage where I woke up and one day and went, "Goddammit, you know I'm really mad I did all that." [00:16:12] It's my own fault, you know. And it never worked, and I never passed, and in the end, somebody's mother would call my mother and insult her. And these were girls that I was best friends with, and yet on a dime it could change. And I saw how my brother was treated. I just finally came to the realization—it was in college—you have to have to be what you are. But I didn't know what that was. I wasn't a Mexican, never been to Mexico, didn't speak Spanish. I had a Mexican upbringing for sure. You know, the food, the music.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: The grandmother.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: The grandmother, the family, the extended family. And *compradazco* because my godmothers were like the gold standard, they were fantastic, but I still wasn't really Mexican. So then coming into that world of the other women—and it was the women, not the men. The men never really—I mean, that's—with the exception of Rupert, I would say none of them really registered with me. I interacted with them, I was—I admired some of them, but I was never close to them.

Whereas Carmen, I'll never forget the first day I met her. I was sitting on the floor in the Galería, and I was trying to do a paper cut. And I did mine all freehand. And I wasn't like her. She's like—measures a lot; I was like, *whshh* [verbalizes cutting sound]. [They laugh.] And Yolanda Garfias Woo had already put hers up, I was finishing mine, and Mia Galaviz never finished hers. We had to finish before she got sick or something.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mia?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Galaviz.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Galaviz, okay. [00:18:00]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So this was my first piece. It was called the *Altar for Five Women*. It's already—we were exchanging the word "*ofrenda*" for the word "altar," which is really, in nomenclature, incorrect. The altar is the permanent ongoing record of the family life, and the *ofrenda* is the temporary, extended, ephemeral recognition and honoring of the dead. But we flipped them around. I couldn't make sugar skulls. I tried [laughs] so hard, and I didn't know that there was a binder required. [They laugh.] So I would get people to bring me sugar from Mexico, then I thought, "Maybe it's brown sugar, and they paint it white." I tried and tried, and every time I take them out of the mold, they—*whack*—fall apart.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: They just fall apart.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And finally, some years later, somebody said to me, "You know, there is a binder. You know, a merengue powder? I go, "Oh, well, nobody told me that."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So I ended up making these soft sculptures because I had just come out of this whole thing of being a textile artist and educator and running this gallery. And I had a new Husqvarna Viking that did this—it's a sewing machine, and it does this incredible, like, embroidery; you can control it. Oh, it's so—this was like, in the '70s, and it was just very expensive and fabulous. So I made these little soft sculpture skulls, and they were all embroidered, and they had rickrack on them. And I hand-stitched, because I did a lot of hand

embroidery, the names of them all. So there were five women. It was Mariana and Amalia, and Amalia is my mother's mother, so that's my grandmother. My *tía* Angelina who had passed.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Angelina, mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Frida. So that was '76, so I had already discovered Frida by then, I think by '70—'75, I went—or maybe it was '73. I can't remember the dates. And then my friend Susana who had died when we were just out of high school.

So that was my first, and I'm sitting on the farm cutting, and Carmen walks in. [00:20:03] And by this time, Carmen has come from Texas where she's kind of *ranchera*-style, you know? And she's going to—she's with René Yañez [whispers] before he's with Yolanda.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, they were a couple? Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yes, they were. He brought her there. He made her curator of the Galería. They never had a curator before.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I see, okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So it was Ralph [Maradiaga] and Maria and René and Carmen. And—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Maria?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Maria Piñedo. She ran Studio—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Piñedo.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —24, the store. And Ralph Maradiaga, of course. So she comes in and she goes, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm making"—she says, "I know that, but why are you cutting like that? So she's explaining to me the correct way to do it. And I'm talking to her about Frida Kahlo, and she always says that I'm the one that told her about the Frida because she didn't know anything about her. And we just—it was like, instantaneous. Yeah, I mean, there were moments like that where you meet someone, and there's this intense recognition that you belong together for whatever reasons. And I was—I think I was still—'78, oh, I was in my 30s, right? Yeah, born in '43, so.

And it made me so happy to sort of feel like there was a place, and that's why the Galería was so great for everybody. Every Saturday at the Galería was like a surprise day. Whoever it was passing through, from Dolores Olmedo to, you know, just about anybody, they would come by the Galería on Saturday if they were in town. And there would be couches in the back, and everybody raised their kids there, we babysat them. The Galería was—the Galería was like a living home. It's very different now because the world has changed, but that was my entry point into meeting many of the other artists because we were doing their shows. [00:22:05]

Patssi, I don't know how I met Patssi. We were in a show together in the early '80s and then she invited me to things, and I would—I went to their *No Movie* premiere. And then once I went when they were doing the filming of *No Movie* on the roof of the building across—it was in the industrial section, across from where Gronk lived in that big hotel. By then, it was—the second generation was in, so it was like—Daniel Martinez was part of it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I loved the *No Movies*. I thought they were just so brilliant, and I came to understand them better. John Valadez was also one of the few people that I really considered, like, a genius of that moment. You know, his work style, everything about him. He was a big aficionado of *¡Alarma!,* which was one of those, like, tabloids in Mexico that only Mexico can have [laughs] because it's so outrageous. One of Frida's painting, *Unos Cuantos Piquetitos* comes from one of those tabloids about a man who murdered his wife and said, "Well, it's just a few little picks," you know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So that whole period of time at the Galería, I would say from the mid—almost late '70s through until we left in the '90s, it was central to my life. Richard and I were on the board of the Galería for 18 years. He was the president for I don't know how many.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yeah. So I felt like even though I was an adult, I sort of grew up there.

And that sort of opened the doors for me to try other forms. So when I was there, even though I didn't show there very often, I was known for the altars. [00:24:08] So I would show at Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, at SPARC in LA, Posada in Sacramento, the Mexican Museum, but it was always around Day of the Dead or an *ofrenda*. And it wasn't until I did the altar for my Uncle Luis Mesa at SFMOMA during the Posada show there—and that was like, maybe '80 or '81—that I started to cross over. That was my first museum show. I had been at the Mexican Museum. We were still at Fort Mason's then, it was very small, and I did my first *Sor Juana* there.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: At?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: At the Mexican Museum.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: At the Mexican Museum. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And when it was at Fort—no, not Fort Mason. No, it was at Harrison Street. Folsom and Harrison, around there. Was it? It was part of Far West Lab, I think. And then later they moved to Fort Mason and I did a couple of pieces there.

But once again, because I was so involved in the board role at those places, I rarely could show there; it wouldn't be really that appropriate .

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I think that neither Peter Rodriguez nor René Yañez [laughs] ever thought of me really as an artist.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: As an artist, yeah.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And Peter Rodriguez was at the Mexican Museum?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Now, there was a man. Tremendous aesthetic sensibility. He had one of the most beautiful homes I had ever been to. I remember sitting there just like, rotating my eyes around, thinking, Oh, my God, I want a house just like this. Yeah. Because he collected, and he had been to Mexico, and he was quite a bit older and he had—was born near Stockton. [00:26:01] It's interesting. Rupert was, I think, French—they're all very close to each other—and Peter Rodriguez was among the first group that helped to found the Galería. And then later, he founded the Mexican Museum.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What—can you elaborate on his conception of what the Mexican Museum was going to be or was, you know, vis-à-vis the Chicano Movement artists, the Bay Area, or Mexican art?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I think about it a lot now because of this whole turmoil going on at the re-visioning or reconfiguring of the museum now, in 2019. I was there at the opening in 1975, and I spent a lot of time with Peter. And he was a difficult personality. He doesn't—it was never easy. What I think happened to him is that he went to Mexico—I would imagine he was in his 20s. He wasn't really out, but I would say that he knew his orientation. And I think he met many other Mexican artists there who befriended him. Chucho Reyes. He was not friends with but, you know, interacted with [Rufino] Tamayo and lots of other people.

I think the coming into Mexico at that age and seeing the Mesoamerican work and the folk art and the colonial art was just mind-boggling for him. And he began a very modest collection. And I think that's been at dispute in the new configuration, that it's all fake. I think some of them are copies, but some of the colonial pieces are actually quite good. There was a point at which he included Chicano art in that, although I think he would've used the term Mexican American, but it was never ever framed as a museum of Mexico. [00:28:09]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: See, that's where they're wrong. They think Mexican Museum means museum of Mexico, under this new leadership. That's not what it meant. And if you look at the

early visioning, he takes into account—and even the Mexican art, he was collecting, I mean, amazing—[Alejandro] Colunga, both contemporary and, you know sort of classic—Rivera, Siqueiros, and what he could afford to get or given to him. Mostly drawings, some really big paintings. And then he began collecting, or the museum began collecting, more Chicano art: John Valdez, Gronk, Patssi. And I think that came later. I really wish I could remember the dates.

So when Peter's tenure ends, and it ends in a rupture—which always has to do with money. You know, museum boards start getting filled up with money people and they think that this thing isn't making money, and, Why isn't it making money? So let's get rid of this guy, and we'll get somebody, and then they'll make money. We never make money, so you have to raise money to run the museum. It's not for—I don't—it's why they call them not-for-profits, because they're really not. How come they don't know that?

So Tomás and I were on the board when they decided to off Peter, and it was interesting because he had cultivated a lot of Anglo collectors, and people that I think he thought were his dear friends. Well, they were the ones wanting to get rid of him. So Tomás and I fought to the death practically over a severance package for him because they just wanted to let him go.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: This is Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, obviously?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And Peter almost never forgave us because we were present when it happened.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So he thought somehow you were implicated in—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, that we hadn't stopped it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And he—I don't think he ever understood. [00:30:03] We couldn't stop it, but what we could do is to give him a soft landing. And then David took over after that.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: David?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: De la Torre.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: A little bit on the difficult side too. So I think the Mexican Museum has reinterpreted its vision as different leadership has come in, and that's not unusual. So David, I think, oversaw a lot of the Chicano collection that came in. He's friends with lots of the artists who were younger then, not anymore. Then after David came—ah, Maria Acosta-Colon, enough said.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Maria Acosta-Colon?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Acosta-Colon.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Acosta-Colon.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, not our finest hour.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And how did you meet Tomás?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: [Laughs.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I don't think we've talked about that, and that's—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, you know—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —obviously so important.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It is, and it's so funny. Let me think. Well, he was at Stanford at the time. And I'm sure it was through the Galería, but what I remember the most was, we were his neighbors, his nearest neighbors. We were about maybe four or five blocks away. He was on Capp Street, not too far from—I'm trying to remember. And we were across Army on Precita [Avenue]. So he gave us a key to his apartment and said, "Well, if I lose my keys, can I call you,

come and open it for me?" We said, "Yes," not fully understanding why he would do that until the 15th time. [They laugh.] And then we realized—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: He knew himself.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —he was truly the absentminded professor. He routinely left his briefcase on the train platform coming home from Stanford. [00:32:02] Occasionally it was returned, occasionally it wasn't. He was always buying new briefcases. Ah, the most adorable person in the world. And Dudley [Brooks] didn't live with him then, but he would come often. And they had relocated from the Pacific Northwest, where they had lived for quite a long time.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, right, because he taught at the University of Washington.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Right, right. Even then, he used to do dinner parties at this wonderful kind of Parsons table that was all mirrored—I always remembered that—which I think he inherited from Peter or something. He and Peter were very close friends. Yes, so—and I'm trying to find a way to say this. Tomás has a very romantic nature, and he projects on to his women friends the fantasies of these very extravagant and glamorous lives. I kind of a little bit fit the bill, so he was totally devoted to my persona. [They laugh.] I used to say, "You know that's not me, right? You know, that's your version of me." But I heard lately from people that he shared his version of me and my life with so many other people I don't know. I'm like, Oh, my God, I hope he never talks to Richard. He's just so much fun.

And a brilliant scholar. In our casual conversations is when we would come up—Reclamation, came up with; Nutrient Sources, we came up with. Yeah, because everyone was trying to sort it out then. We were so close to it. It was just happening. It wasn't like we were looking back at it like historians. We were in the midst of it, and we were—this is the key to it: We were defending it. And in order to defend the something that is so important to you, you develop a sort of warrior language. [00:34:07] You define things, and you codify them. They're like weapons that you're going to use when you go out there to get the show, get the money, fend off the people that want to take your things away.

And Tomás is not like me, he's a gentle soul. He doesn't do that kind of stuff. But he often gave me the tools so I could do that. Along with plenty of other people. I was never alone. There were lots of people whose job it was to stand up. But once I got the PhD, then it cast me into a different role, so I wasn't like the other artists. Now I was Dr. Amalia, and I was required to do that work, which I did not mind at all because I love a good fight. It's like—I think it's kind of healthy, until it's not.

And, you know, those years in the late '80s and early '90s when I did my duty in the museum world—I was telling you about that with the Black and Hispanic museums or when—what was her name—Riva Castleman or something like that. She was one of the curators at the MoMA in New York, and I have no idea how she ever found me, but she invited me to put together two panels for a discussion. This was the early '90s, I think, or maybe late '80s. They were doing some kind of, I guess, show on the chronology of the museum, and they wanted to talk about diversity, but they didn't know how. So she called it "a generation apart," meaning we're here and they're there. And so she asked me to put two panels together. And so I did, and I had really just the best of the best. [00:36:03] I had David Driskell, Kinshasha [H. Conwill], Lorna Simpson, Luis Jiménez, Inverna Lockpez—oh, was it Luis Cruz there? I can't remember So I had—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Luis Cruz Azaceta?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. We were friends then. So I had two sets of people, one were administrators and one were artists. I thought it would make a change, but of course it didn't. That's when I finally realized that I and many like me were court jesters. Our job—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: You were giving cover—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, was to give cover, so they could act as though they had in fact attempted to deal with this. And the more enraged you were, the happier they were because they could take the slaps, and they knew you were leaving the room in about an hour and a half, so they could put up with you. The only time it didn't work was when Marcia Tucker brought us to the Association of American Museum Directors, the first go-around from that book—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. *Different Voices*?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And that was at the University of Chicago. Was that where it was? Yeah, it was in Chicago. They were not ready for it, and they were enraged. It was after that that I decided, That's it, I'm going home now. And not long after that, I discovered how sick I was with this pulmonary disease. And I do think stress was a really big part of it. I had this horrible technique—I look back on it and think, Was I just insane?—where I would sit like this, with my hand in my neck and when my pulse got to a really high rate, then I would go because I knew then I was ready to do it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But I couldn't do it until I reached that point.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah, that's so unhealthy then.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, God, yes, it was, and my blood pressure going through the roof. Yeah. [00:38:00] I mean, so they're—so at that point, you finally decide, I've had enough. I've done this for, what, maybe starting in the mid-'80s to the early—I only did it like five, six years, and it's—nothing's changed. Nothing has changed. Only I have changed. I'm more bitter, I'm more angry. I used to describe myself as a cultural attack dog that didn't have teeth or claws anymore. I was just going to sit by the fire and drool, you know, [they laugh] because I just couldn't do it anymore. And Marta, Marta really helped me because the same time—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Marta Moreno Vega?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Moreno Vega, yeah, and Lowery—Lowery Sims—because they came as a package. They're the very most unlikely [partners –AMB] in the world, but they really are just the best of friends. Lowery was still curator of 21st-century at the Met, assistant curator, and Marta has started El Museo del Barrio, the Association of Hispanic Arts, of course the Caribbean Cultural Center, NALAC. I've heard about—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: She was involved in NALAC from the—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: We all were.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I didn't realize that.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. Marta, Judy [Baca], Tomás, and I were the first four at the beginning. We're in the records. We gave the first opening speeches, though Marta has played a big role because Marta—I'm the good talker, but Marta is the good organizer. She knows how things work because she's built at least five organizations that I know. She just built a new one in Puerto Rico.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, really?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: The Afro-Caribbean Corridor. It's like—I don't understand it completely yet, but she's already got a space, she got people there working, clearing the jungle, getting things set up.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, I know. You always keep your eye on her because whatever is the thing you should be doing, she'll already be doing it. Oh, she comes into my life very regularly if I get off track. She gives me a little *manda*, like, "Amalia?"

What was it? What was the thing I wanted to do? [00:40:01] Oh, Center for the Arts, Yerba Buena Gardens. I brought her in with Amiri Baraka and all these people, had this big conference because I thought—foolishly, once again, I thought, "Well, this is going to be the premiere community center, like really, really high level. And after she met all the board people, and we had this big conference—oh, that's when Amiri Baraka told me this thing that I never forgot.

You know, we were in that battle then between mainstream and ethnic museums. And we saw them as sort of oxymoronic. And he said something to the effect that there are—like the two poles of—one is of self-determination, and the other is democracy. Self-determination are our own museums, which we have built, and the mainstreams are democracy because we have paid taxes for this, and they need to respond to us. And it isn't one or the other. We have the right to both. And it was so—I'm not doing it justice. It was so brilliantly said, but when the whole thing was over, Marta looked at me, and she said, "You know, it's not going to work. You know that,

don’t you?" And I said, "Probably." She goes, "Yeah, you can't build a grassroots organization except from the ground up, and this is not a grassroots organization."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: The Yerba Buena?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. "This is a civic institution coming out of redevelopment, and you're never going to get ahold of it, no matter who you bring in." And she was right, over time. Baraka Sele was our first hire. So brilliant, so charismatic, she didn't even last a year. And I remember when it was all going down, and I went to Baraka, and I said, "You just tell me if you want me to draw the sword, I will go out there and fight for you to the end." And she just patted me, and then she said, "No, *mija*, I'm ready to go." [00:42:02]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And what is her name? Baraki?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Baraka. Baraka Sele.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Sele.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. She's at New Jersey now I think. She was active in Black Arts Forum. And she's a performing arts person, she was going to run our theater, and they just—I think they were—they hired her because she was just like the most stunning person. She had bracelets from here to here on each arm, which she never took off, all these silver—and she was just stunning, a big, tall woman, very very—just charismatic. But when it came down it, they really couldn’t do what she wanted to do. You know, they were too many.

You know, in San Francisco—I learned this because Richard was at the symphony for so many years. San Francisco was old money, and the families, of which there maybe five, they divide up the cultural institutions, and they pass them on to their children because of their patronage. So, Ted, that was his name—no, Ned Topham was the son of—gosh, her name's left me—very very big money, Spreckels family money. She was on the art commission with me. So she gave him that, so—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: The symphony?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: The symphony. She was, like, old money but very—she was wild. So she gave him Center for the Arts. Whereas the Bechtles would take the symphony or the people from the newspapers would take the ballet. Everybody would divide it up, and it was never spoken, but everyone knew that. And as soon as Ned Topham came in, I knew.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: This was the Yerba Buena?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Uh-huh [affirmative], this is Yerba Buena. It's not going to be a community—because there had been committees in the communities, all the communities—you know, African American, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Latino—for a good 15 years trying to get to the point to have this big center. [00:44:14] And I was the last one standing, so I went on the board. I was the vice president and then—I mean, I sort of struggled with it for about 10 years, and finally I thought, Nah.

And this all is the same period of time where I get the pulmonary disease, and Richard decides that it's this, this pressure—I'm on the art commission, I'm on the board there, the Mexican Museum, the Galería. It's like, he says, "You know, you can't even go out the door of the grocery store without somebody buttonholing you because they think you're going to do something for them. And then whatever you want to do is contested by the mainstream, so you're just between a rock and a hard place." And that's why we left, so I could—he thought I would get well. And I did finally get well, but it took a long time. And, of course, you know, I'm part of the problem because I like a good fight. So we got to CSUMB, and I did it again, and Richard went, "Oh, okay, it's you."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Well, this morning, when we were not recording, you offered a really interesting analysis of that, which had to do with the way that these cultural institutions opened the door just enough. I'm paraphrasing.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Can you reprise that?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: You know, I sort of remember it, but you see, I'm the person that if—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So, you were talking about this woman who invited you this—whose name we're struggling with. What is—Riva something or other.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Castleman, I think.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah. And how basically she did these panels, she brought you in to sort of show that they were doing what needed to be done, but then that positioned them to be able to apply for federal funds to do—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, oh, it was the—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —with the community.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —Black and Hispanic museum discussion.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Exactly.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. And the truth of it is, in the '80s particularly, the so-called multicultural era, mainstream institutions had realized that their audiences were dwindling, the old white rich people were dying off, and their offspring weren't interested in museums. [00:46:14] They were interested in the environment, or they were interested in labor, justice. It wasn't—they weren't going to get the same money. So they had to build new audiences.

And their move to build new audiences was to engage leadership from diverse communities, particularly ethnic museums, in conversation. Ostensibly, to discuss how to improve their museums, but really, it was a sort of bait and switch—like you used that word before—where you're brought in. Oh, they pick your brain till you're, like, senseless by the time—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And they drag you everywhere, and you meet every little person—well, big person—rich people, luncheons, coffee klatches, all this stuff. They show you off, and you're like this sparkling thing. And then when they have just gutted everything you know, you're free to go. And nothing changes except they have your Rolodex, they have figured out how to do, what, Family Sunday, they know how you work. And they have all the cues now, in respect to Latinos, about how we enter into culture. Because we enter in differently. One, we don't ever travel alone. You go to the Modern or to the Met, apart from the school groups, you might see two, three, a lot of single people.

I used to give the analogy of the shopping centers. You go to Del Monte Shopping Center in Monterey. If there's some Filipinos, you'll see a group, but it is a bunch of like—like, there's largely white people, a woman alone or a woman with her friend, a man alone, a woman with this, a man with his wife. You go to Northridge, [laughs] and it's like—there's like—it's like a paseo. [They laugh.] You know, they are just like, groups of people walking. [00:48:05] It's the mother, the father, the grandparents, the children, sometimes a *tía* or a *tío*—oh, often the godmother, and there are just so many people. They even put in carousels so the kids can play. There's places to eat everywhere because that's what people do.

And I always think [laughs] it's because we grew up in families that are larger than the average nuclear family. We enjoy most of the time, we get sick of each other sometimes, but we enjoy most of the time to do things together. Meals are a very big part of that. *Fiestas*, you know, *danza*, I mean, everything is just like together. And Mexicans, more than almost any other group that I know, really enjoy to be together.

So they go to museums the same way. If you watch them in ethnic museums, they come in in groups. So that was one of the first things you had to teach these people in the mainstream.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I saw this yesterday at the Oakland Museum.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes, yes, and—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: This Family Sunday.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, Family Sunday. And you need to know how to greet people. You need to know how to make them feel welcome. So we gave them all of that.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: All of that.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: All of that. And we got nothing in exchange. And so I felt that in that period of time, I gave away a part of myself that I had to take back.

And it was Marta and Lowery that really saved me because we formed a sort of antithetical series. Because at the same time that this museum thing was happening, these conferences and massive group shows—big Asian American, big African American—they were all happening and touring. But it wasn't changing the complexion of the museum, its holdings, its acquisitions, its curatorial staff. The only place you saw the people of color were in security. Everybody knew that.

And so Lowery, Marta, and I would sit around kvetching. And so Marta said, "Well, we're going to put together some gatherings." [00:50:02] So she had, because of her previous work, a sort of large extended family. Kalamo is in it, there's—the other Pedro Rodriguez from Guadalupe was in it, and Jack Tchen was in it, sometimes Margo Machida. Oh, Peter Jemison. Sometimes Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, myself—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wait, who—after Margo Machida, who? Someone Jamieson?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, Peter Jemison—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Peter?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —a Native American.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Uh-huh [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: John—sometimes Texas, the Texas guy—what was his name? Tex Wounded Knee or something like that. I can't remember his name anymore.

But it was what others would call multicultural, and she would just call it people of color. So we would come together, and we designed a series of conferences called Cultural Diversity through Cultural Grounding, and that was the keyword. She was saying, What you're doing has nothing to do with us. This is what we do; we are grounded in this. And so, the first conferences were bringing—and then she's so brilliant. She saw—because she's an Africanist, she also reached out to the Caribbean and reached out to the African diaspora in Europe.

So she and I officially met, although we knew each other, at this cultural exchange conference at Oxford. We had been brought there by some British American education group; I didn't really know them. We were all brought from different parts and then we formed our own little, like, group. So it was Marta and myself and some people that came with her, I can't remember who else. We discovered immediately that it was, like, at a really high level. [00:52:03] The *maison du culture* that did all the recordings of folk artists around the world were there, the minister of culture from China, the head of one of the big universities at Nairobi, Indian people who were like really high up the food chain, head of dance. And just, wow, it was amazing.

And one of the things that we ended up bitterly fighting over was the exploitation of folk artists. How they were brought into Europe, you know, housed in gymnasiums or all kinds of places. Then they record them and then they don't pay them and then they sell the records. And this cultural exchange model was, in many instances, a model of exploitation and a sort of discarding. I used to call it—it's sort of like the virgin, you know, they fuck her once and threw her on the side of the road. They didn't like that, so we stopped saying that.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So Marta, because she's such a good organizer, redeveloped a platform and everything, which we presented at the conference, which [laughs] eventually made the people supporting us cut the funds because they were mortified that we had behaved so badly. And even I thought to myself, Didn't you know you who we were? Why would you have invited us if you didn't think that we would, like, say something, anything?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Say the truth.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. And then I learned a really big lesson, which is the beginning of my

Irish education. So we're forming this group and then a guy comes to us. He's Turkish by ethnicity but Welsh by nationality. So the Welsh, Scottish, and Irish come to us in a cluster, and they're very angry at us, and they say, "You don't know anything about Europe. Do you know who the first people of color were? It's us. Do you know your history? Do you know what they did to us, and took our land, and this, and this, and this? [00:54:01] So you need to include us in this group. You can't leave us out. Where are we supposed to go? We can't talk"—

And a real sign of the whole direction of it was that I got there a day early, and I had dinner with [a member –AMB] of the British Arts Council. We were having this lovely [. . . –AMB]—a lovely conversation, a very fancy place to eat. And then I mentioned some activity, and he said, "Oh, oh, darling, oh, our Blacks are not like yours in America. We, we, we don't do that." And I thought, Our Blacks. And I knew I was in trouble, and I thought, Oh, my God, where am I? And that was really one of the beginnings of Marta and I organizing these conferences, and I was just one part of many people that she works with. But she's like a sister to me, you know? And she's my same age, maybe a year older than me, and she looks 10 years younger.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: [Laughs.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: She's timeless! We're always saying: What is it? What does she eat?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: [Laughs.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: What cream does she use? And she and Lowery are always figuring things out and working out things.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So we started with *comadres,* and now we're sort of with a different cohort of *comadres*.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, it was a different cohort, but it's the same thing.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: They are my *comadres*.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: More of an East Coast one.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. They are my *comadres*. I put Marta and Judy Baca in the same category of extraordinary visionary leaders who have both the intellectual and political ability to almost create anything they choose. Marta writes books, she produces music, she produces performing art, she's led the Caribbean Cultural Center. She's retired now, supposedly, but it will always be hers. When she opened the new building, she had a big show and I came and did my *Border* piece. [00:56:01] I think you saw it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah, I did.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. She's one of those people, if she calls me up and she says, "Amalia," and I hear that voice, I think, "Oh, God, what?" She'll tell me what she needs me to do—"I need you to do this"—and I will always do it because I know that she's always right in the sense of right-hearted. She knows what is true and what is just, and she will not do something that is not. Whereas I can be conned into things because I'm excited and don't pay enough attention. And she's taught me to ask some salient questions about, "Who's funding this?" You know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: "What is your intention?" It's like getting married or something. Because sometimes I don't. I'm just so enthusiastic about something, and I've been through some bad ones. Festival 2000—I mean, some really—mistakes. I mean, I would probably do it again, but I would be better at it. But you need to really—especially if you end up, by your intention and the intention of others, a figure of leadership, you don't have the luxury to make too many of those mistakes because people follow you and take you at your word, so if it turns out that you've screwed up, you've screwed it up for them too. So she's been very very good for me. She's like my barometer. And I know when she tells me that I need to be wary of something, I should really pay attention.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: What was Festival 2000?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, jeez.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I mean, we don't need to do—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: It's up to you.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was billed as the first multicultural festival in San Francisco, and it was in the '80s, and they called it Festival 2000. It was looking toward the future.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, got it. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: New Wave Festival in Los Angeles is sort of analogous. Except when that broke down, Tom Bradley called all the big boys to the table and said, "Write the check." When we started breaking down and running out of funds, the mayor went the other way. Rudy Nothenberg, you know, the cultural arts guy said, "No." They didn't want multiculturalism; they saw it as a threat to the mainstream institution. [00:58:04] San Francisco is a small city, so the ballet, the opera, and the museums play an enormous role. And Grants for the Arts funded them, and then they would take little chunks and fund the other groups, which is primarily them.

So Festival 2000 was trying to bring the highest level of art of diverse communities from around the country: American Indian Dance Group, Spiderwoman, Bill—the dancer, Bill, Bill, Bill.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: He's another MacArthur—you would think I would remember—and his sister is a friend.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I can't—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: You know who I mean.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah, I know who you mean. Bill T. Jones.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Bill T. Jones. So his sister [Rhodessa Jones] worked in the city and did performance stuff. She does *The Medea Project*, which she does theater in the prisons, so they did a project together. We had everybody funding. We had Polaroid funding this whole mapping of educational centers across the city. It was a spectacular project. I mean, just—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But you were there sort of as a board member not as an artist?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes, as a board member helping to organize it. And so when it all fell apart, and we saw the money coming to the end, I tried to stop some of the performances. I was afraid they wouldn't get paid. And Leni [Lenwood] Sloan, who was the charismatic director of the project, went behind my back and told them that I was exaggerating and it was fine to go ahead. They were performing at, like, the opera house and all. I mean, it was huge venues.

And sadly, because of the money, it was viewed in retrospect as a complete failure. But in fact, three-quarters of all the projects, because they were commissioned over two years, were completely funded. [01:00:01] They went forward, and there were exhibitions and books and catalogs and performances. And when it was all said and done, everybody resigned except Evy and I. What was Evy's last name? She's an older Black woman. We were the last two left standing. And when she moved away, she was quite elderly by then, she gave me the box—I have it in my archives—of Festival 2000. "In case, Amalia, it ever comes up, you can tell them what was." She wants me to write something, and maybe one day I will. I should have written it in 2000.

But that was another one of those moments where you take a step out and you think you see something really great that could happen for the city, but it doesn't because the powers-to-be don't really want it to. That was another one of those lessons. Everyone was very excited about it at the beginning, but when they saw that it could fall apart, they let it fall apart. I'm not saying they made it fall apart. They let it fall apart. It would've taken less than $100,000 to save it but they wouldn't do it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wow. So you were doing all that work and—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: [Laughs.] Yes.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —sustaining a career as an artist. Not becoming a clinical person?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Right. [They laugh.] What was I thinking? I left the school district in '89, took a job at Far West Lab doing educational research. I came in to work on a book on case-based teaching in diverse classrooms.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And there is a publication on that, right?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. Yeah, oh, it's been republished. Oh, my God. If I had ever been—if I had ever had copyright, I would be rich by now. But, yeah, I worked for an organization, and it was theirs. They brought me in because the woman that was heading it got into—she was a white Jewish woman, and she got into fights with all the Black teachers in LA. [01:02:02] They won't have anything to do with her. So they brought me in to clean it up and I really—

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AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —liked it. It was a very very—it was just a really important model. And what I worked on—besides finishing up all the narratives with the teachers and getting it organized with the other woman—was, I wrote the teaching guide, how to use it in teacher training. Because when I had been in the school district the last 10 years, I had been in staff development for court-ordered desegregation. So I spent a lifetime—it felt like a lifetime—trying to get recalcitrant teachers to be prepared to teach students of color that they had never taught before. Because once we bused and moved everything around, these teachers—and most of whom in San Francisco at that time were white and over the age of 50—were now teaching students they had never had any encounter with.

It made me a really good teacher, when you learn how to teach and have these different models. You know, literature-based approach, I mean, to reading. The whole model of what reading really consists of, and learning, who brings what into the classroom, what you as the teacher provide as the text. And not knowledge or information but real meaning is really your goal. And at that time in San Francisco Unified [School district], they were using Teacher Expectations & Student Achievement, TESA, and then later it got to be GESA [Gender Expectations & Student Achievement], so it was gender-based. But they were good teaching tools, which I took into university. And I developed the first course there and case-based models for teaching about public art. So we had a course called Ways of Seeing: Controversial Cases of Public Art, because I had been a commissioner of art through the era of the Pioneer Monument in San Francisco, which was just an explosion. It was so heavy.

I look back at my life, and I see that there are through lines, and one of them is conflict. [00:02:06] When I look at Judy and when I look at Marta, it's something we all share. And I always think to myself, the question is: Is that our innate disposition? Is that the historical moment that we were born into? Is that the role that we accept? Why? Other artists and other leaders—no, if you're leading an institution of color, you're going to be living in conflict. It's just the nature of it. Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So, let's see, where would you like to go next? Do you need a break?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I'm going to get some water.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Let me unpin myself, so I don’t—

[Audio break.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: You're so good at making that work.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.] It's pretty—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: We got a new one, and neither Richard nor I figured it out.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: This one is pretty idiot-proof.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, good.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah. So it's 12:15, November 4th, picking back up again with Amalia Mesa-Bains. This is Adriana Zavala for the Archives of American Art. We were just regrouping, and we thought we would talk about the ReGeneration Project that you did.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So this is kind of a segue from the work with Marta and Lowery and the collective that formed the Cultural Diversity through Cultural Grounding. At one point, we all wanted to bring younger people into the discourse, so each person who was part of the collective or any of the organizations sent younger members, and I brought people from the Galería that were already in ReGeneration. But the discussion I had had the year before with Marta and Lowery about the idea that we needed younger people and my recognition that [laughs] you're really missing the boat if you think you can change the mind of a white man over the age of 60 who has made his career in Euro-Modernism. [00:04:15] You know, like, don't even think it could ever happen. So rather than beat your head against the wall, or in my case, take the slings and arrows—because they can be very very rude and vicious—I just took all that I knew and all my friends in the—I took them back home, and I went home. That's how I said it to myself is: I'm going to go home now, I need to rest. And you know, I was already on the verge of illness and then I got sick, which was in '91 with pulmonary disease. And then I started coming out of it.

In '92, I got the MacArthur, which I always thought was a sympathy vote because I was so sick. And people knew I was sick because I had to quit so many projects. And so I took part of the money and bought a new rug for the Galería, and then of course a studio for myself, and then I used part of the money for an organizing model that I ended up calling ReGeneration. I didn't know there was a *Regeneración* magazine and all of that prior. But ReGeneration was really an outgrowth of all of the young people that had contacted Carmen Lomas Garza, me, and Judy Baca, and Ester Hernandez. These were young people who wanted to know: What was the Galería like then? How did you do this? How did you become an artist? What's the right way basically to give service to your community?

So, instead of just responding to each of these individuals, we designed this program, and I had the new studio so I ran it out of there. It was really the idea that this young group of people would be able to learn about history but also begin to plan their own projects. [00:06:12] So ReGeneration was a call, and we had already had contacts through junior colleges and other kinds of universities—and even libraries, we posted—and you had between the ages of 18 and 35. I remember because Mary Karen Davalos [*sic*] was [laughs] very mad at me because she was too old for it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: She said, "Well, could I just come in, and I could observe?" And I said, "No." I said, "I'm enough of a psychologist to know that participant observers don't work. Because everyone else knows you're observing, and it makes the process too artificial, so I can't do that." She forgave me eventually, but I remember she was very put off by it. And there were other people that said, "I think that's an unfair demarcation. I'm really immature, and I should be in there." [They laugh.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: "I might [laughs] be 40, but"—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —"but I'm still"—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —"I haven't figured this out."

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —"like 22." [Coughs.] I'm so sorry.

[Audio break.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: We started ReGeneration, and the Galería sponsored it, although a couple of people there had some trepidations about it. So we organized them into, I think, three or four committees. There was a curatorial committee, to plan a year's worth of programming at the Galería. There was a writing committee because we wanted people to learn how to, you know, not do art historical writing but do some sort of, you know, cultural criticism. And then we had a group in education that were particular—some of the projects for public schools. And eventually they developed their own group out of it, which was sort of like—that was slam poetry, open mic. [00:08:01]

And so it went on for about two years. There were some hits and misses. I put—once again, my

penchant for sociopaths, I just can't resist them. Well, because they're always very charismatic and charming and brilliant. And I put one young person in charge of a large portion of one of the sections, and it sort of imploded because he was very cruel. And then later on, it was really—I realized that he was transgender even before I think he knew.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, wow. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I remember I had a conversation with him about, had he thought about going to counseling? Because I thought maybe—because he tried to be queer, but it didn't work because he was too, too delicate, too femme-y, too like, just *blugh*, you know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And his brother, who was very out, was very angry at me because he said, "Why are you calling [inaudible]"—I said, "I'm not calling him anything. I'm offering to arrange someone he can see. He's clearly so miserable, and whatever you think is working for you isn't working for him."

Anyway, they finally stepped down, but I would say the bulk of them stuck with it, and they had characteristics that were very notable: middle-class, mixed-race, not too many Spanish-speaking, queer and later some trans. And, of course, feminists. It was very inspiring, actually, for those of us who were older, and Judy flew in from LA and did workshops and Carmen did and Ester. And interesting, the men had—I think I might have invited some, but I don't think they were very interested. It was maybe a more matriarchal model. They would have been our children maybe, or grandchildren maybe.

And then what happened is that they began to take jobs in the Galería, which transformed the Galería. Some people were not happy about that because they ended up leaving. [00:10:07] But I look now around the country and I see them, you know? Ondine [Chavoya], Gilbert [Vicario], different artists. Dío Mendoza, who teaches in our program. All kinds of young people.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Dio Mendoza?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Oh, you've got to watch him. That's some mighty artwork. I sent Gilbert over to see that show, he came back with his mouth open, and he said—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Really?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —"Whoa." Yeah, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So he teachers at CSUMB?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, in our VPA [Visual & Public Art] program, and he has a show right now at the Triton Museum.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, okay, I'll look that up.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And, you know, I think it was very transformative not just to the Galería. I would've liked to have other people try the model. I wrote up the thing and sent it out, but, you know, people were busy their lives. But we produced a little brochure for each show. We did the first queer show at the Galería. What was it called? Something *Hearts*. The feminist show was called *Up Inside My Head*. Yeah, it was—it was quite enlightening you know? And it helped me get through my illness because it gave me something to look forward to.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, I'm struck when you mentioned that this started in '91, '92, because then you were doing so much around the quincentenary. [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, oh, we did such a good show with the Galería. We did a series. This was right before ReGeneration started. We did the first Central American show. Pepón Osorio did a solo show. Oh, no, he was in the Caribbean artists show. Him and Juan Boza, and I think Juan Sánchez—I can't remember. There was a lot of people then. [00:12:04]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, so that period of time was a kind of regeneration. That's funny I didn't think about—it was a regeneration for me. Trying to get my health back, trying to resituate myself in the Mission again, not traveling so much. And then by '95, we then moved to

the campus.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then that was another whole wave of institution building?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And institutional racism at a level I would have never imagined. We went there because we thought it was [sighs]—well, we knew it was visionary, but we thought it was open. So many of the first faculty were Latinos so it seemed like, Oh, wow. So it was going to be Judy Baca, Richard Bains, and Luis Váldez, and I was the cheerleader. I was going to go along and help out and then Judy changed her mind, and I ended up there because I was already there anyway.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you want to talk about that some or should we move on to talk about—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, let's do that after lunch because it's a whole—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —sort of—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —we'll talk about the art after.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Where shall we go now?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Well, you mentioned Ondine, Gilbert, Dio Mendoza. Is there anyone else that came out of the ReGeneration that you want to mark?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, Pilar.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, Pilar Tompkins Rivas?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: No?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —the other Pilar. Agüero, the artist. And Carolina, she's an artist in LA. What is her last name? I see her all the time on Instagram.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Carolina Caycedo? No. She's Colombian.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah!

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: That's it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. I think that's her. I think that's her. [00:14:00]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So she was also part of ReGeneration?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was really an interesting mix of students and young people, and they were very very anxious to have a sense of belonging. I think that was the real goal of ReGeneration, was to help them build and network the way we had. And the word "network" wasn't even used when it was happening. We just had friends and—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Let's move your mic up just a little, maybe, yeah. There we go.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Okay. Yeah, so I think that my goals for ReGeneration were very kind of short-term. I just wanted to give them a chance to find a sense of belonging, develop some leadership skills, and try to get the Galería to sort of move forward. And in that respect, I would say that there were some people in the community that didn't agree with me. There's always been a kind of critique that the Galería moved away from its original foundations. And what I like to say is: You know what, we were the lucky ones, we had the beginning. It's a different world now. It's a different history now. You just can't keep doing the same people.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So were folks like Maradiaga and Yañez still involved in the Galería at this point?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: No.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who was directing the Galería—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Ralph was dead. Ralph died in '85.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And René left in '87. So I think at that time, it would have been Liz Lerma, I think. Might have been, because then after René came, Enrique Chagoya and Humberto Cintrón maintained a dual leadership. And then after that came Liz Lerma, and after Liz Lerma, Carolina —what's her name—de León? [00:16:08] No?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh. Ponce de León.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Ponce de León. And then after that, of course, Ani. I've always thought that the Galería should be fluid in that way, should be able to—[coughs]—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I'll pause it.

[Audio break.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It shouldn't stay in a fixed state because culture doesn't really work that way.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And are you still involved there now?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, only with Ani. I mean, you know, she asks me for advice and I sort of try to help out. No, it's too—I can't—well, I don't drive anymore. And it's kind of a lot to ask of her too, to go back and forth. So they call me on the phone. They come here. At times, they come here and get me and take me there. I'm like their grandmother now.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: "Let's go get Granny, bring her, bring her to the event." Yeah. I have high hopes for it. We went for the groundbreaking, and I gave a little talk and pep talk, and just—I think we'll make it, I do. I have much more faith in the Galería de la Raza than I do the Mexican Museum. Because it's grounded. You know, it's that whole thing I go back to, what Marta always said: "If it's not grounded, it won't work."

That's one of the problems with the Studio Museum in Harlem. It was never grounded. The Studio Museum in Harlem came out of socialite ladies, friends of the—was it the Met, or the—MoMA! MoMA, friends of MoMA. So, I remember when I was there at *The Decade Show*, and I would go out during the daytime in my coveralls because were wall-painting then. To go get something from the hardware store. [00:18:08] And then [laughs] the brothers on the street say, "Hey, girl, where are you coming from?" And I say, "Oh, I'm at the Studio Museum." "Where is that?" I say, "It's in that block right there." I say, "You don't know the Studio Museum in Harlem?" "We've got a museum?" I'll say, "Yes." And I realized that lots of people who really lived there really had no idea that's what that was.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Really funny because it just isn't really—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Was that when Lowery was there or—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, this is before Lowery.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Before Lowery? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No when Kinshasha Conwill—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, okay, mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I loved her. She was really a lot of fun. Thelma [Golden] has done wonders with it. But it's really, you know, now big money. She has that whole gala, and it's just sort of really super Black bourgeoisie, really super-duper. I would like their money myself. [They laugh.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Well, that's interesting. You know, sort of in my orbit, we talk about that, that Black and African American art in the United States—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, jeez.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —has an established place now, and there's a collecting base and patrons that support it—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, absolutely.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —and Latino-Chicano art still hasn't quite figured that out. There are very few collectors.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: They had the university system, though, see, coming out of abolitionist, abolitionist movements. Having university systems means producing leadership, intellectual and social brokerage, that we did not have. And I think, you know, going as far back as, you know, the concept of the talented tenth. Oh, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Because there are very few Latino collectors. There's Cheech Marin, there's the Durans. [00:20:00]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: The Durans, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who else? [They laugh.] We've named them.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And that's it. I don’t know many others that have big collections. I mean, people buy here and there.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And even, you know, within the Black and African patronage circles, there are collections that cross-pollinate African and African American—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —and there might be some conceptual challenges there, but the folks that collect Latin American art don’t do that—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, do not.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —with Latino-Chicano, right?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Right, right, right.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So that's had a major impact on, you know, artists like you that make complex work that—you know, there aren't sort of—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I would get caught between the categories. Like, that art show that they have in Spain. What's—no, not Marco. What is it called?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, the art fair?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes. I can't remember the name.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Marco is in—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Was in Mexico.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I will look it up.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Look it up.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, so one year, I was invited to that.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative], to the art fair in Spain?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. Zaya. What's Zaya's first name? [Octavio and Antonio –AMB] They were two brothers—really really good curators—and Victor was writing for the catalog. And they approved my work and then somebody [laughs] stepped in and said, "But where do—this is North America."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: ARCO.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: ARCO, that's why I got Marco. ARCO. And said, "But this is North American, and she's not North American," so then I got popped out. Then about two years later, they did one that was Latin American. And then when I was supposed to go in, they said, "She's North American." I popped out.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I thought, Wait a minute. Well, what am I? And I remember even when the *Ante-America* show was going on, and somebody wanted to invite me to the conference, and I think it might have been Venezuela or someplace where it was showing. [00:22:11] And my name came up and they said, "Oh, no." Something about my being American, North American. I mean, they only wanted Latinos, and I'm thinking, That's a little strange. So even as Chicanos, I always felt like we didn't quite fit even the internal categories for a long time, let alone the Latin American categories. We just don't.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And even in Mexico, almost antithetical. When I did the *Art of the Other Mexico*, which, you know, built out from the idea that there are two Mexicos, one on each side of the border, and this is the art of the other Mexico. And we did this wonderful schematic; it took us three days. And first, everyone in the room had to say what their favorite works of art were, Chicano works of art, so we listed all of those. And then we figured out what those represented. And it's symbolic, like hearts, cactus, whatever, all that. And then we had to organize those according to a sort of conceptual framework. It ended up to be land, family, and afterlife. But we had all these bubbles all over the wall, and we redid it three times. I have it somewhere in the archive. We never published it in the book. I wanted them to put it as a transparent—like a vellum page at the beginning.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That would've been amazing.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It would've been amazing because you could really see how it would be. They didn't do it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Who else was involved in that project?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Jacinto Quirarte, but he quit in the middle. I don't know why. I'm sure something happened in the background that I didn't know. René Arceo, Helen Valdez, myself, and was—Carlos was there.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Carlos? [00:24:00]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Tortolero.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And, yeah, that was it. Jacinto and I were the outside curators, René was

the in-house curator, and then Helen was, I think, still the director then or maybe they were transitioning to Carlos.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: At the Mexican Fine Arts Museum?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, and Carlos was very Mexican-oriented. And sometime after that, I really discovered how anti-Chicano he really was. I was there with [Guillermo] Gómez-Peña and Tomás Ybarra Frausto for some event, and he asked me if I wanted to look at something in the back room. I went in there, and he just casually started this conversation, which ended up into this tirade or diatribe about Chicanos, how people like in my generation—Ramón Favela said the same thing once, "It's the cult of the personality," you know? Like—I guess they're thinking of like José Montoya and all these people, and I'm thinking, "Well, that's true everywhere, what's unusual about that?"

ADRIANA ZAVALA: The mainstream has that.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, they have it all the time. I remember just leaving the room kind of shaken. It was so shocking to me that I didn't even have a response because I thought, Is this really happening? Didn't I just work with you? Didn't you invite me here with—then I realized he just had wanted to say it to somebody, and I just happened to be there. It wasn't at me, it was just general. And I got it straight later when I realized, Ah, the not-belonging story again.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: "You people," as he would say. Because we all started out together in a historical and political moment. They didn't come into being until the '80s. We had already been at it for 20 years, and I think he felt like an outsider because true Chicanos were in Chicago, but they were José and—oh, the scholar, what's his name? I never remember his name. And he didn't connect with them at all. And so I realized, Oh, that's what this is about. [00:26:02] So I kept my distance with him after that, but I will work with him now because I think, you know, he's proved himself. He's lasted a long time.

So when we did the *Art of the Other Mexico* in—I think it was Arte Moderno in Mexico City—and they had a big fancy dinner for us at one of these big haciendas, and, you know, we were at the ambassador's table, and everybody was there. And all the *Nuevo Mexicanos* were there, because this was, like, the late '80s, early '90s, and you could hear them muttering in the room because we don't speak good Spanish or because basically we're the offspring of their maids and [laughs] butlers. That's really what it is.

And then get up the next morning and read this review that Raquel Tibol wrote in *La Jornada*, where she singles me out because she always had a little bug in her bonnet because I answered her back. She was good friends with Shifra, and so they, I think, both thought of me as a lesser being in their orbit. Raquel just trashed it. And I heard that they were in-house using words like *naco*, you know, it belongs on the street. It's like, not, you know, real art, too *chillante*, you know, just like all that stuff.

Oh, I had so many experiences with Raquel Tibol that were so strange and unusual. I had been there for this Dialogue of the Americas in the '80s, and I represented the North American contingency but the Chicano one. And then the African American one is Ishmael Reed, Polly, Marcia. Angela Davis didn't come at the last minute, but they had some heavy hitters. [00:28:01] And there were a few white people. And then on the Latin American side, my God, they had everybody. Ernesto Cardenal from Central America, Retamar from Cuba. Hugo—he was the prime minister then, I forget his last name. Anyway, they had these dialogues about the exchange between the two nations and I—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: This was in Mexico?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And I was selected to give the—they couldn't give one North American response because we were too fragmented, so they had a Chicano, a white, and an African American one. But in the midst of all this, we would go to these luncheons and stuff, and Jack Forbes was there. *Chicanos of Aztlán,* I think that's the book; I can't remember. He was very close with a lot of Native Americans because he was a Native American, and he had been at DZQ [Deganawidah-Quetzalcoatl University, Davis University] and all this, so he's very Chicano oriented.

We're having this luncheon, and Raquel was sitting on one side of me, and Jack is sitting across.

And I never forgot it because at some point, Jack was referenced as Native American, and she looked at him and said, "Not you." He said, "Yes," and he gave his tribal thing, and she said, "No."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: She had no—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: She disputed him completely.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —framework.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And then she turned to me, and she pointed to my face, and her finger was like that: "She, yes." And I'm thinking, "I'm a mestiza, what's wrong with you?" You know? And then I realized, I don't think that was a compliment. Let me think this over. But so rude and so clumsy and so, like, uncivilized, you know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Undomesticated. She said whatever she wanted and was like, Fuck you. That's exactly how she operated. And I thought to myself, Remind me never to go to lunch with you again. And Jack and I laughed over it later, and I said, "And you!" And he goes, "And you!" [00:30:02] [They laugh.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, yeah. Amazing, amazing.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So the North American representatives were you, Jack Forbes, and who was—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, Jack wasn't.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, he wasn't?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No. Somebody named Vincent something. He's from Central America, and then was it either Polly or Ishmael? They thought Vincent was white, okay? Because he was non-Chicano. So I don't know quite what that was. And then I think either Ishmael or Polly was the speaker for African Americans.

And I gave a very impassioned speech about how we were the grandchildren of the revolution, and we were the sons and daughters of their domestic workers. But we were also the people who received their children on the other side of the border, and that the same blood runs through our veins, and that they needed to recognize that we would always be there. You know, it was a sort of solidarity speech: You think we're so different? No, we do the work for you when you send your children there. Who do you think educates them and takes care of them?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: You know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. Because it was really true.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Do you have that speech in your archive?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, it's printed in lots of places.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, good.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was printed in the newspaper, and I think that's what she got so hot and bothered about.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, in the Mexico City newspaper?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, one of them.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow. And this was called Dialogues?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Dialogue of the Americas. And we did an exhibition at the same time,

Através de la Frontera. Oh no, that was later! *Através de la Frontera* came a little later. That was a good show.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That was a Chicano show in Mexico?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Uh-huh, uh-huh [affirmative]. Oh, even Yolanda Garfias Woo's work was in it, and I think I had something in it. Oh, Rupert did the poster. It's the most beautiful poster. You don't remember, his one of the assassinated Mexican worker?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: That's on the field of this kind of golden raw, this beautiful warm tone. And they had film showings and exhibitions and—[00:32:05]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: What was the institution hosting that?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I wish I could remember. It must have been a university, I would think. I have the poster somewhere.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow. So when else has your work been shown in Mexico? So was your work in the *Art of the Other Mexico*? Were you—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, no—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: No?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —because I—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: It wasn't—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —curated it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah. No.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So has your work been at—in the—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Only in the—*Distant Relations*, the Irish Chicano show. I didn't go because it was—at that point, anything very much above sea level was off my radar. I stopped going to Mexico City and Santa Fe and many other places because—just my heart wouldn't withstand it at that point.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, so that was—I forgot about those. Those were all going on in the '80s. And it was also one of those, you know, every step of the way, you learned something new.

I remember [laughs] Tomás and I are at one of the big events for the *Através de la Frontera,* and we walk into this room, and all these posh people are in there. They're all Euro-Mexicans. And so later on, we're going back to the elevator, and he goes, "You know what?" I said, "What?" He goes, "We were the only Mexicans in the room." [They laugh.] I said, "I think you're right. We're the only ones that look like Mexicans." Because I thought, "Am I in the wrong party? This looks like a bunch of Italians, not even French." Yes!

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.] Very funny.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I made a decision at that point. Whenever I was in Mexico, I spoke only in English, especially professional settings, and I made them translate. Because I thought, I'm not going to get up there in my clumsy Spanish. I'm going to talk to you on the best level that I can, which is English. And English to me was—from the days of defending my grandmother, English has always been my weapon. [00:34:03] I don't feel there's anyone I've ever met that I couldn't stand up to and state my case. In fact, I am actually more articulate the more angry I get. I have to be a little bit ticked off before I can, like, grab the mic. When I did *Latin Tempo,* the TV show, it was syndicated. There was one in Chicago, one in Los Angeles, and the one in San Francisco. And Tomás Román started it first because he had been brought from KTVU to KPIX. This was in the '80s. I mean—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: From KTV—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —U.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —to KPIX.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: To KPIX. So I was in the first cohort that formed the Latinos in communication. So we were the first Latinos on television in the Bay Area. So I did this show. He gave it to me because I was his endless surprise guest. Because whenever somebody didn't show up, he would say, "Amalia, I need you." I said, "Should I wear a wig, or how about a scarf? So they won't know it's me?" Because I could talk about various things, you know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So finally, he said, "Okay, you're going to be the host now." I said, "No!" He said, "Yeah, yeah, you know how to do it. You're just sitting in the other chair, that's the only difference, and you get to ask the questions." So I took over in I think '85 or '86. I did it through till '88. And I got to produce it, which meant that I could decide every show, so that was just like, life-changing.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And so it was showed in Chicago?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, only after a while. It was in San Francisco, then they did it in each city. So Yolanda Nava did it. That's how I got to be friends with her. Yolanda Nava did it in LA, and I did it in San Francisco. But Samuel Betances from Chicago trained us. And I call it the 15-minute-at-the-mic rule. So it was not just about TV, it was just generally public speaking. And he was brilliant. And so he said to me, "*Mija*, when you get the mic remember this. They're never going to like what you have to say, so you say it no matter what they ask you. [00:36:08] Say what you came to just say, and you say it till the end because once they hear you, they'll never give you the mic again."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So it's called 15 minutes at the mic. You start and you go to the end, you don't even take a breath, you just get all the way to the end, and then they just go, like, "Oh, shit."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But you were heard.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yeah, you're heard.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: If not by them by at least someone else, right?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, I have espoused it for years because I think it really works. Now that I'm older, I don't have to do it anymore, but I did when I was younger. And the thing with the television show was, it helped me to perfect my speaking capacity. Because, you know, it was a morning show, a community show. I used to tell Cecil Williams that I woke up the Bay Area for him, because I came before him. It was like six in the morning or something.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh really, it was on that early?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. Well, I taped it, you know, ahead.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And so to have—and it would air again at two in the morning. And I have these crazy friends calling me from someplace: "Amalia, you're on TV!" I said, "No, I'm not, I'm in my bed, you better call me tomorrow," and I hang up the phone.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And so, when the red light comes on—and it was not a high-level show in their eyes, so you didn't get a teleprompter or anything like that. You had to memorize everything. And so you had to do this intro, and they played this Chick Corea piece that was really shoulder-shaking, but they say, like, "Don't shake your shoulders because you're"—then, they made me stop wearing necklaces because they rattled on the mic. So when the red light

would come on, and my friend Tomas taught me, he said, "Don't let them put the light on in the camera, turn it off. Because you're going to look into that dark spot, and you're going to leap through it, and you have to exaggerate because the medium is very flattening. And if you talk in your regular level, it doesn't mean anything. So you've got to like, *woof!*" You know? And I learned to do it and I loved doing it. I used to joke and say I was Oprah before there was Oprah. [00:38:03] I was the chubby Mexican.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.] And so you produced the show, so you could choose the topics and bring people on?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I did everything. I did AIDS, I did the dropout rate, I did every artist that came—I did Dolores Olmedo talking about Frida. Oh, my God. Well, that was at our private dinner.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But she—you had her on the show?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Talking about Frida, or just on the show?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: On the show talking about Frida because she was there for the Frida show. And, you know, she always wore catsuits. She didn't like dresses; she wore pants. She would have this black cashmere catsuit and this black mink vest on, and she had a necklace on that had belonged to Porfirio Díaz's wife, and she had these snake cloisonné earrings. And honestly, my cameraman—I saw it later, I said, "What were you thinking?" He said, "I couldn't help myself. I was mesmerized by the jewelry." [Laughs.] There's all this close-up on her ear and her neck, you know? She was fascinating!

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But wait, which Frida show was that?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: That was when we were doing it at the Mexican Museum.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, so it was like, one of the later ones.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: She had lent money—I mean, lent the show—with the understanding that her—what would she call them? [Phone rings.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I'll pause. Do you want me to pause?

[END OF TRACK mesa19_1of1_sd_track08.]

[Tracks mesa19_1of1_sd_track09 and track10 are test tracks.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So this is Adriana Zavala interviewing Amalia Mesa-Bains at the artist's studio in San Juan Bautista, California, on the afternoon of November 4th, 2014. We're still on card number one, but this is our afternoon session. Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, we had talked earlier about this idea of transitions from one type of work to another, but I think before I get to that, I sort of have to do a precursor, which has to do with—I think it begins with my mother, who was herself kind of a fashionista and also who worked for a very wealthy family in Beverly Hills.

One of the funny stories I think I might've shared before was that when my mother first got hired from a temp agency, she just walked in, and she had one of her favorite dresses on. It had, like, pleated, fluted butterfly sleeves and very fitted and then kick pleats on the bottom. And she had her Cuban heels on. And I'm sure she looked, like, very *moda* because my mother was so beautiful. And [laughs] they were desperate; the woman that they usually send people to was having a party that night, and the woman didn't show up. So my mother was the only one in the office, so they just said, "Go, go, go." And my mother told them that she was a very good cleaner, which she was. She's methodical.

So she gets to the woman's house, and they're getting ready for throwing something. She asked her to please clean all the chairs in the dining room. And I think she meant just dust them off and maybe sponge them, I don't know what. They were that kind of furniture that's creamy white, and there's dark paint areas within the—the French kind of Rococo. So my mother mistakes that for dirt.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Gasps.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And she just, with her whole little body and heart, cleans and cleans and cleans. And the woman comes in, and she said, "Oh, my God, how did you do that?" And my mother said, "Oh, well, it looked a little dirty, so I thought I should clean it." And the woman I guess must have had a really great sense of humor. She started to laugh, and she said, "Well, you're a keeper then, anybody who worked that hard." [00:02:06] She said, "It's okay, that this is the way they're supposed to be," and she hadn't taken too much off it. And so then the woman kept my mother eventually as a governess. But she grew up then. She was a teenager then.

My mother had been born out of wedlock, fairly abandoned from about the age of 11 on. Amalia put her in a convent school outside of Los Angeles at about the age of nine, but then Amalia ran out of money and she stopped paying. So my mother—it was an orphanage and a school, so my mother became essentially one of the orphans. And she earned her keep, because they just adored her, by cleaning. She always said if it hadn't been for the nuns, who knows what could've happened to her. Because Amalia's husband or whatever he was at the time, was in—the black market prohibition was ongoing, and he ran a radio station on the border in Tijuana, and so there was a lot of back and forth. So my mother didn't see Amalia very often. I think she came on Sundays, and she would wait for her at the top of a hill. And I saw from pictures of my mother as a child that she didn't have nice things, you know, not nice clothes.

Eventually, she had to leave the convent, and she went to live with a woman named Doña Lupe, and Doña Lupe was—she called her Doña Lupe because she really wasn't a relative. She was somehow related to the black-market boyfriend. And she was involved in bootleg. So my mother said her job was to sit at this little table, which had a buzzer underneath, and if police came in or somebody, asked too many questions, she was supposed to hit the buzzer. And that will alert them and they—you know, it was bathtub gin stuff. My mother used to say, "Oh, I had no idea what I was doing. I can't believe I did that." She was still mortified years later. [00:04:00]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But I think she lived on the kindness of strangers, really. And she never had very much to eat, and she went place to place wherever this family would take her.

At one point, the black-market boyfriend came to visit my mother, who I'm telling you was like a movie star. Actually, people from Hollywood had found her and tried to talk her into coming for, like, some sort of talent thing, and my mother said no. My father said, "You know, your mother was so beautiful that the men in the neighborhood would wait in the grocery store"—it was like a coffee house, a coffee store—"to see her go"—either it was to the market or to the post office—"every day around three o'clock. And they would all be standing in the window watching her." And she was oblivious. [They laugh.]

Eventually, she has to leave the convent. She's bouncing around. And so, her first job—once again in the pleated outfit with the Cuban heels—is at the Ortega Chili Place. So she's in line, and they looked down the line, and they see this beautiful girl. I think it was a pink or magenta, kind of pinkish dress, and they wave her out. She has to tie her sleeves up. They gave her a job right then, you know, doing the chilies. And then later comes the woman with the house in Beverly Hills.

So that is a long way of saying that by the time I was born, my mother had several rules. One was, we didn't work.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, the children—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: We didn't clean—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —didn't.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —we didn't—she polished our shoes every day just like we were in a hotel and she was the maid. There was a piece of paper on the kitchen table; you put your shoes there, and the next morning when you picked them up, they were polished. And you were not to leave the house with your shoes scuffy-looking. And even my hair, because I had big bushy hair then, she plaited up in like a *trenza* and then she would curl the bottom. And everything—and all my clothes were handmade because she didn't have the money to buy things, but she knew how to sew really well, and she didn't want me ever to wear hand-me-downs. [00:06:03] When I became a hippie later on, and she saw me in what she called dead people's clothes—because I

got them at the flea market—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: At the thrift store [laughs]—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —and rummage sales, she was so appalled she cried. She would go in the other room and cried.

So my mother raised me with a distinctly not-working-class view of the world. I didn't cook, I didn't clean, I didn't make a bed, I didn't wash a dish. I was your first Chicana princess. And on top of that, by my mother's standards, I was quite tall. At that time, I was a shade under five-six, and she was very small, so she thought that because I was tall, I could wear anything, so she would fashion me these outfits. She would look at magazines and, like, when Balenciaga came in, and Dior, she would copy these clothes. But she would put them together. This is by the time I was in my teen years. I remember wearing outfits to school that, now that I think about it, were totally inappropriate.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I would have to wear a merry widow under them.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: What's a merry widow?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, it's like—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Like a girdle or—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. It's a vintage body suit basically, but with bones holding your chest up, and you get hooked in it or zipped in it. I would have to wear them because she would make me clothes. Like there was one—it was this beautiful watercolor fabric.

And we would go to the fabric store. That's where I got my interest in textiles. That was my favorite outing. We would take the bus to San Jose, and we would go to the fabric store and pick things up. She taught me all the differences between cotton and rayon and wool—and she hated synthetics—and, you know, shapes, like dolman sleeves and just—she knew everything about sewing. And my job was to help her lay things out, although I was very bad at it. My sister ended up doing it later, you know, 16. And she was really good. But one time, she bought this yellow, like, watercolor thing, and it was cinched waist and had a big pleated skirt. It was like the '50s, you know? [00:08:04]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And it had long sleeves, but the sleeves were open here with these little pieces sewed in, so I couldn't wear a bra. She frequently made clothes for me that I couldn't wear a bra.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Like for Valentine's Day in middle school, she—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, my goodness.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —made a red chiffon dress that had pleats and tiny little rhinestone buttons, a belt that was covered like a professional belt, and underneath it was a—some kind of a satin slip that had tiny little spaghetti straps. So I had to wear, once again, a strapless bra. My mother would send me off in these outfits, like I don't know where she thought I was going.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Like, to something, I don't know what. I got used to it, and all my friends were, like, so envious. I even had friends whose mothers were not nice ladies, and my mother made them dresses in high school because they didn't have a dress, you know, for certain events.

So I grew up in this sort of like, strange, quasi-European notions of table settings and cloth napkins and shoes polished and pretty dresses and jewelry—my mother loved jewelry—and the makeup. And the sitting by her when she was at her vanity when she would be putting these creams on, and she would give all these lectures. "Now *mija,* there's a point in which you must

use the creams," you know. And I was just like, "Yes, Ma." [They laugh.] Now, I think, "She was so right, and I should have started earlier."

So I think that Tomás more than anyone else had sussed it out over the years, that he calls it cosmopolitan. That unlike a number of other Chicanos in my certain generation, I'm not coming from a rural background like Ester in Delano or Carmen in, you know, Kingsville, and I'm not really coming from a city either like Los Angeles, although I probably would be closer to Asco than I would be to some of the people in my peer group. [00:10:08]

So I look at my work, and I think that it has the same layers I do. That it's like a sort of cutaway of who I really am. And Tomás always got it because, well, we shared so many things in common. When he was trying to write my *A Ver* book, he went to a Balenciaga show, and he sent me the catalog, and then he wrote me and said, "I think I have it now."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: "I get it now." [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I'm thinking, No, it's not a fashion book. Because I did work in the fashion business from like, '84 till about '88. I had a business called Du Femme. And my partner was French Moroccan, and I designed all the fabrics, and she designed the bodies. We were in ready-to-wear—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —you know, the daily. We sold in all these little poshy shops like Obiko [Sandra Sakata's shop in San Francisco –AMB] and—you know, they don't exist anymore. We formed the first design network in San Francisco—Design Network—in '84. Many people died out of that because of AIDS.

But fashion has always been a really deep interest of mine, and I follow fashion. That's why I like Instagram. People say, "Why do you waste your time?" I said, "No, you don't get it. In Instagram, I can see every house I want to see. I can see them in Marrakesh, I can see them in Paris, in London. I can see every show before it goes out. You know? I'm in McQueen's vault, I'm in Dior, I'm in"—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —"I get to see them all." And it's a thing that, I don't even buy the magazines much anymore because I just go to Instagram and I find the postings. So most of the things that I follow have nothing to do with Chicano and Latino art, but that's the other part of my life that I always maintain.

And because Richard was very involved in Africana and in jazz and in—we had a very hybrid life. [00:12:00] And Tomás used to say that about our houses wherever we lived, that they were very cosmopolitan because we had a cosmopolitan life. You know, Richard was with the symphony when I was at the art commission, so our life often consisted of having to deal with extremely wealthy people. You know, Dodie Rosekrans she was the name I was trying to think of.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: You told me—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I've met—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —about those parties.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, I mean, wow! I went looking in her closet, which was two rooms of rolling racks, so I now have rolling racks. I realized that's what a closet should be, it should roll around, take things out, put things in. Yeah, so that is a precursor to the role of fabric in my work, the sort of Baroque gesture of decoration and exuberance that I think comes from the love of porcelain and china. I remember reading about one of the trophy wives in New York who hired a plane to bring Marie Antoinette's sèvres set of dishes, porcelain dishes on a plane to New York. They had to be strapped into the seats, you know, the little boxes.

And even though I had the critical viewpoint in sort of a kind of colonial interrogation, there was another part of me that was decidedly, you know, quasi-colonial. I'm an Anglophile, I'm a Francophile. I think anything French is good. [They laugh.] I think their food is the best, their clothes are fantastic. They just don't make great art anymore, but they did.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And then the British thing is just my love of, like, you know, [laughs] *Brideshead Revisited,* my favorite story of all time.

So I see myself sometimes as a living contradiction by the way I live and my politics and my upbringing and my role in the community. [00:14:01] To an outsider, they didn't make any sense at all. But somehow—you know, we have this now, we're in our late '70s. When we started, he was the son of a maid, and I was the daughter of a maid, and we both came from very religious upbringings that we had left. We both were extremely working-class, and what joined us together is really our similar experiences of discrimination. So when I was with Richard, I could say anything I wanted about white people, and I wouldn't hurt his feelings. And vice versa.

So, you know, there's a part of all of that life that is a hard one. You know, we bought our first house by selling our car, borrowing I think $5000 from his brother, selling our rings—we had some beautiful rings—and we bought our first house. And that's how we did it. And then Richard was very good at real estate, so he bought more and more and more, and now, when we left San Francisco, all that got sold off. And when I got the MacArthur, I could buy the studio, and all of that went away, so we could have this. But I would sometimes hear—the grapevine—disgruntled people saying things like, "Oh, Amalia's so lucky." It's like—as though they thought luck was behind this?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, come on, you have no idea. Like, picking cotton. My brother and I picked cotton. I mean, we weren't very good at it and we fooled around a lot, but my family picked cotton in the days when the San Joaquin Valley and Fresno were cotton-growing. My uncles all worked at the Hotchkiss Ranch. I came from a labor, agricultural laborers' family. But my mother prepared me for another kind of life, and that's the honest truth. The reason I could transition as I did is because my mother had already in her own innocent way sort of trained me to look for certain things and be prepared for certain things. And I think that that made a huge difference. [00:16:16]

So when I look at my work, I understand why sometimes people misread it. When I did the *Venus Envy First Chapter (Holy Communion Moments Before The End)*—and it was supposed to be in the Whitney in '93. But I was in the last cut, and then Benjamin Buchloh, a heavy Marxist fellow, thought my work looked like some old lady from South Texas, and that it was religious and lacking any kind of critical, you know, sort of intention. So then Thelma got mad about it, and Thelma put me into the little Whitney, so I showed at the same time, and I was listed on everything. But I wasn't really there.

I knew that people were struck by the beauty of it, but they didn't read the walls, and they didn't understand what I was really asking questions about. Or maybe what they got was exactly what it was: the conflict I have between beauty and politics. You know, between, say, the Baroque and the colonial, and the postcolonial. Because I can't get over it. I still love it, and it's part of me. When I was in the fashion world, it was perfect for me because I was so happy. It was all the things I like to do, and I designed all the fabric, and we hand-screened them. They were all silk-screened. We had fashion shows. I had an entire, like, group of professional Latinos that bought our clothes.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. It was really, really fun, but you can't make money out of it. And I had some money because the school district had laid us off. [00:18:00] Last hired, first fired, you know, I was in that generation. And then eventually, I went back to the school district and then I finished my PhD, and I went back to the school district again, and that was when I was running the court-ordered de-seg[regation].

But through all of those lives, I always made art, and it was never really separate or distinct from those things. Whether it was research for my curriculum or whether it was aspects of my fashion design and my love of textile and, "Give me some glitter and gold spray and I'm good to go"—all of that was always folded back into the work because if I said to myself like, "What is your DNA?," it all feeds into that. My DNA is my work. It's what I make and every thought I have eventually makes its way there. Doesn't matter where it comes from. It could be a conversation, could be a research project, could be something I'm writing, but it keeps looping back in.

And so, when I think about, "How did I make that transition?"—because I was a very well-established *altarista,* which—I didn't really like the name and felt that I had already made certain

strides in transforming the model. I started out, you know, under Yolanda Garfias Woo and had, you know, the three tiers, and I understood, you know, the crafts that went into it, the paper cuts, the sugar skulls. And then later, I started doing interpretations of home altars, and I knew what those were too. But eventually, I felt limited by them. But I had a persistent need to create sacred spaces, I think probably for my own healing and also because I—that's a part of my thinking, a sort of spiritual way of looking at the world.

So eventually, I wasn't satisfied with the three tiers, and then by accident, I invented the vanity for Dolores. [00:20:02] It wouldn't have happened until Dolores del Río, because she was so beautiful. And I met her. You know, I saw her.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, really?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, I met her. She died I think in '84, and I met her that year. Ralph Maradiaga, who started Cine Acción, was really a good friend and one of the founders of the Galería, and he helped host a special reception Cine Acción hosted for Dolores Del Rio when she came to the San Francisco Film Festival. And that's where we saw her, and she died the very next year, so I thought, "Oh, I have to do it." Also my mother loved her, and we watched her in all the old films at night. And so, she required vanity. It was almost impossible not to do it, you know? And not just her, but her characters: *Madame Du Barry*, you know, the flame of Tahiti. It was funny because she was a real bicultural icon because the parts that she did in Mexico were nothing like the exotics of the West, you know, Hollywood cinema. So that was the first break and then—that happens in the early to mid-'80s.

By the end of the '80s, I've been going to New York and met Latino and Caribbean artists. I've been—I was invited at a conference to propose an exhibition I would curate like a fantasy. And I fantasized *Ceremony in Memory*. And I presented it, I collected all the slides. It was just a notion. And then a man came up in the audience, and he said, "You know, I'm from New Mexico Contemporary, and I'll put on the show. You just tell me what you need, and I'll raise the money." And I thought, "Really?" And that's how it came to be. And then later when I did *Ceremony of Spirit* through the Mexican Museum, that was sort of the next stage. [00:22:04] And all of that happened from the mid-'80s to the end of the '80s. And *Le Demon Des Anges* overlapped with that because it came from the end of the '80s to the early '90s, as did the *CARA* show.

So all of these things were piling up on top of each other, and in it, I had opportunities when I went to France to do different versions of *Dolores*, none of which came back. She's out there somewhere, who knows where. You know, so it started out as the altar, and it turned into a church and then a chapel and then had stations of the cross, and I made all these different books. And everywhere we went—Patssi and I, because we travel together—we found things. You know, all these little stores in Barcelona and the flocked bulls and the holy cards. Then we get to Lyon [France], which has this big Arab section, and we're like, totally in heaven because they have everything you ever wanted.

And so little by little, the materiality that was coming into my life, that I had a tendency toward, was beginning to change the way in which I created the pieces. But each time, it always began with some sort of thinking and research and along came the run-up to the Quincentennial, which is already starting by '90. I had been doing a lot of research on Mesoamerican materials prior to Carmen's piece at Smith College, so I did a little reading for that. And found things that—they're very tortuous, very very—they were just horrific to me, how the native people—you know, the break of the world, the shattering of it was so profound that they didn't want to live anymore. [00:24:08] And even though they had been captured and not wounded, they would find ways to kill themselves, you know hang themselves, tuck their feet up under them, whatever it took because they couldn't be in that world anymore, because the world was gone that they knew. So those kind of things really drove my thinking and then Victor [Zamudio-Taylor] came along. And so pretty soon, I was looking at these historical moments as sort of aperture that had to do with history, land, and violence. And I had to find my way through that and make something that I thought would be useful.

And that's how *Borders and Numbers* were developed out of that. And then that—you know, I had already moved toward the botanicals, and that led me then, eventually but further down the road, to the landscapes and nature pieces. But the first part of it was really that—and I'm not a historian, so I find these things—I'm not even a scholar. I mean, I always say this. I'm a sort of organic thinker, and I respond to things I find that have merit to me or trigger some ideation that I might have. And because I was trained clinically, I psychologically make my way through things and I think about what they mean, and who did that and said that and why.

So I wasn't—I've never made studio work. I say this often, and people never believe me. I just—I was an intermittent artist—I was always an artist, but intermittent producer. I almost produced on demand. "They're having a show, Amalia, they need you to do this." So, "Okay, then I'm going to do this." [00:26:01]

And then after a while, I began to see that I had developed a kind of model that I could use, which was the tables. And then the tables began originally at M.A.R.S. Artspace in *speculare*, then they turned into numbers in the *Emblems of the Decade: Borders and Numbers* at Studio Museum. Eventually, it turned into *Sor Juana*'s desk and library with the tables there again, and correspondingly I talked about my TV show. So once again, everything from the outside world folds in. I had folders and folders because I produced these shows. I interviewed people, I collected data on the dropout, on the AIDS crisis. All of this became the data of the table.

So I would have these, like, cash registers strips coming down, and they would have on them the rising population of cities in the Southwest, the numbers of AIDS, of Latinos dying—because I worked on those projects. I was being trained clinically during a period of that time, so I was brought in to work with people who were trained to handle Latino AIDS patients. And we couldn't do public education because we couldn't mix the men and the women. And we couldn't use the language of the materials produced by the white queer community; those were too brutal, too graphic. We had to develop. So we developed—and I was not a participant as much as an advisor—*Ojos que no ven manos de* something.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: *Ojos que no ven manos*, mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, and they were like—one was a *Lotería* series, another was a film series, and they were always to talk about basically the bisexuality in the Latino community. So that people could be prepared, could have safe sex. [00:28:12] It was very difficult. And at the same time, people were dying. That's why I responded so much to Pepón's piece, the *Velorio*, you know, because—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: To whose, I'm sorry?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Pepón's piece.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, Pepón's piece, mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: You know, because those families had not been able to celebrate the death of their children. There were no big funerals, and you couldn't invite your family because the question about how they died and the stigma. So he invited these families to basically have their funeral service in the museum. And each of those coffins had an image on an acetate of the face of the young men. And he created all the little floral arrangements. It was so very beautiful—I cried through the whole thing. The thing in the dark and the little candles, I was thinking, Wow.

Because I lost so many friends. This San Francisco Design Network that I talked about, which started in mid-'80s, by '89—everyone including my very best friend Richard Valentino, who I started in the textile school and with the fashion design, and who I had been friends with since the '60s, he passed away. I was sort of his caretaker and then later, his partner passed away, and I was the trustee for the estate, so I had to go through all of that. I would say at least 20 or 30 people that I knew very well, other designers, they all died. We stopped going to the funerals because it's just too much.

So all of that data and that emotion filled into the table. And I've never written about the table, but I think it's worth thinking about because it becomes a site of both a quantitative and qualitative life of a community, from the '80s through the '90s. [00:30:11] And I even used data from the, you know, Mesoamerican period, the annexation, dates, locations, geographic parameters, all of the numerical. And then, of course, the *Borders* across the way was the familial embodiment of that sort of quantitative experience.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So that was—so the *Numbers* was at the Studio Museum and *Borders* was?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: At the Studio Museum. They were across from each other.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: They're across from each other. Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And you can see *Borders* in some of the reflections of *Numbers*.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Got it, mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I've changed *Borders* a lot over the years. At that point, I was heavily into the whole deterritorialization and postcolonial language, and so I wrote things on the wall. It's very different to me now. The last time I did it, I used self-portraits from DACA that they did in our program. And when Victor died, I used *Borders* as a way to honor him. So *Borders* has become a very flexible piece. I've probably done it more than any other piece.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Where did you do the installation with the DACA students?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: At the Richmond Art Center, last year. Because when I first did *Borders* in 1990, I was working off of—and this goes back to my school experience of, you know, preparing teachers. I had been working with a group that produced books on diverse children, and one of them was *Crossing the Schoolhouse Border*. California Tomorrow was the name of the place, and they were anticipating what finally came to happen, which were the demographic shifts. And so they collected a lot of data, interviews, worked with teachers and administrators. [00:32:06]

So *Crossing the Schoolhouse Border* was really very early on, and I was still in the school district in the early '80s to mid-'80s, when we were receiving the children from the diaspora coming out of Central America. So my training as a clinician helped me to deal with children who had witnessed such trauma and violence in the war. And I've always maintained—everybody goes on about Salvatrucha, and the gangs and stuff—hello, where do you think they came from? The death squads. We fostered the death squads that eventually intervened in their life in the most violent and ugly way, and generations later, you have the living embodiment of that disaster. People don't want to talk about it, and that stupid president, he goes on about it, and he has no idea who they are. He doesn't know what we did in Central America, no more than they know what we did in Guatemala. Talking about Guatemala and all these places now, how do they think they got that way? You know, the chickens come home to roost. We made messes everywhere, and we've been paying for them ever since.

So that whole process of moving from altars and these sort of sacred rooms into the laboratories and these sort of quasi-scientific approach, because, you know, I'm not a scientist, but I love scientific paraphernalia.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So I started hanging out at all these chemistry shops where I could get secondhand chemistry stuff, those big long tubes and the globes and—so I started building laboratories. And I think the first one—when was the first laboratory? Well, this must be—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Was it the one at Cornell for *Revelations*?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: That was part of the table. [00:34:01] What year was that?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, that's the table.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: That was '90?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: '92?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But that is part of the sort of laboratory approach because I would use microscopes and telescopes and magnifying glasses. My first full-blown laboratory was a perfume laboratory in the *Fin del Siglo,* the World's Fair piece. And that was 2000. And then that translated into the *Curandera's Botanica*.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: What was the World's Fair piece?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, the whole piece—the whole show, this was the one at Bernice's when she opened in 2000 in Miami. I did something called *El Fin del Siglo: The Latina World's Fair.*

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That's right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And it had a hall of history, hall of fashion, hall of labor, and a hall science.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Hall of history, fashion, labor, and science?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Science was the perfume laboratory, and that's where I have the little glass shelves with the beautiful women's bottles, and the table is covered with writing that has to do somewhat with the emerging of the history of perfume with a history of *curanderismo*, and the idea of healing, seduction, and set. It's all rolled together. And that table migrated later, eight years later, into *Curandera's Botanica*.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And that was for the *NeoHooDoo*?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And that was part of my healing process. That was five years after the accident.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: 2008?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. And I had come to recognize that the *susto* that I experienced, the trauma of that accident, is that whole phenomena that *curanderas* know. Which is that when you have terrible shock and trauma like that fright, *susto*, all of it, your soul flees your body, and you are an inanimate person, and that's what I was like. [00:36:17] I was very flat, and my sister used to be very afraid for me, and she would tell me later, "I was so scared. I thought you would never come back." And I said, "Well, I didn't know I was gone except that I don't remember very much." I mean, there were—and it was years, and I went on in life, you know. I tried to keep working, I missed a year of teaching, then Judy had the stroke, then that was it, I left.

And so I didn't really work again till 2008 when Franklin was doing *NeoHooDoo* and I knew that it was the right show for me to be in. Through all of that, I worked with different people who knew about healing, and I read a great deal. Judy had a girlfriend, then Martha—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Judy your sister, or Judy—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Judy Baca.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —Baca? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: She had a girlfriend named Martha Oropeza. She's a muralist, but also she teaches about healing, and so they would do like little *limpias* on me and—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Is she also the one, the person that did the *limpia* for your *New World Wunderkammer*?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. So over the years, I made my way through that, and then simultaneously—and this comes again back to the historical moment and why is it that I choose to do a certain work, why do I change direction. And that was the sesquicentennial when they're celebrating—they're basically celebrating the annexation when they created false war and steal 51-point-what percent of Mexico's northern empire. [00:38:02] And I'm still mad over that, and I wasn't even there. [They laugh.] So I plowed into that one, and I created that *Private Landscapes and Public Territories*.

And then funny part of that one is that I didn't actually do it myself. One of the faculty at school —who, at the time, I believed was an installation artist, but she turned out to really be a theater person, but nonetheless—I couldn't travel, I was, you know, dealing with my illness, taking care of my sister. There just was no way. So it was *Interzones*.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That was—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I never once knew—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —the show?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yep, in Copenhagen. And every once in a while, you look back at your life, your artist life, and you go, "That was a mistake." You know? Shirin Neshat was in it, everybody was in it, the Cuban—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So it was a mistake not to go?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, yourself? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIANA ZAVALA: What year was that?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: 1997, I think. Because again, sesquicentennial was 1996. Oh, no, 1998, the end of the Mexican—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, no, no, here it says 1996.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, maybe it—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: *Interzones* in Copenhagen and Uppsala.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And they made the fences. So I had done the armoire, which was a redo. Why do I do that? I had a perfectly good armoire for *The Virgin's Closet,* but I was too cheap to go buy another one and it was just sitting around and I thought I would never do it again. So I took that, I had the doors mirrored, I meticulously painted all these leaves and foliage around it, and I turned it into the armoire for *Private Landscapes* and *Public Territories,* which is sort of an origin piece because it really starts with that first orchard that I Photoshopped my brother out of. [00:40:16] And it hangs, a little picture of that orchard hangs inside the armoire and then what's written in it are the names and places in Mexico and in the US where my family emigrated from and to.

I kept, like, adding things to it over the years, but it was first done at *Interzones*, and my friend who was a light specialist talked me into the idea of projecting a *parterre* for—I love *parterres*. That's another one of my French things that—I watch endless French gardening movies because I just love seeing them.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So I ended up later printing a *parterre* under canvas for the floor. And so I hand-cut a lot of the moss myself and sent it off, but she thought she could project the parterre floor from the ceiling, but she didn’t know till she got there that they had doors that opened all the time, and the light kept coming in. It was really not successful.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, I see.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But it—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: This was your colleague at CSUMB?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, but it turned out fair enough. But what I realized later is, that would've been the next group of art friends I would've had for years to come.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: All the artists that were included in that show?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Xu Bing. Oh, my God, oh, my God, no. I look at the names—I don’t even want to look at them anymore because it gets me too upset, and I think, What were you thinking? I wasn't—I just—I couldn’t cope with things too much anymore.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Well, that's where the fear of missing out comes from because you missed out on one like that—[00:42:00]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Like that, and your life changes, goes another direction. And they go up, up, and away. And I used to watch their careers over these 11 years, and think, God—no, over, what, 20, 22 years—and I think, Oh, my God.

So back then, it wasn't the family or all that. Back then, it was my own health. It was the pulmonary disease, that's what it was, and not being sure that I would handle air flight to Europe, that's what it was. I've had these two major health moments where, as a result of it, I couldn’t go places that I wanted to go and opportunities. I mean, I went anyway after the pulmonary disease and I started to get better. I did the residency, which was another great one, the residency in Dublin at the Museum of Modern Art. I spent about a month there.

And I was always the secret IRA fan, you know, I just love them so much, in the symbolic sense. So when I was there, I got to go to Belfast and visit, you know, Bobby Sands's grave and go to see—oh, those graveyards are the most beautiful I've ever seen, wow. And then they took me to

see all the murals and put my finger in the bullet holes.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: That was that Mexican-Irish show.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Uh-huh [affirmative]. *Cercanías Distantes*?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I fit in better with the Irish people than the Mexicans.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Because Daniel was the other Chicano and he had wanted nothing to do with me.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Daniel?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Martínez.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Joseph Martínez. [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yeah, Joseph, I forgot. Well, I didn't know him as Joseph, but—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So he was the other Chicano artist in that show?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, and Rubén Ortiz [Torres], but he was really more Mexican, and they just studiously avoided me because I was the old gal in the room and—you know? And I think they thought my *Circle of Ancestors* was very reductive or something. I think I heard that.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That's what you made?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:44:00] Because the truth is we were from different generations, and the memories I hold of farmworker life and, you know, my attachment to Sor Juana as my guide through my dissertation—you know, those characters that make up my circle of ancestors, plus my family, were so passé to them.

When I was there, I finally got it. It was like that covert-overt. I had another flash. Why? Why did the Mexicans hate our work so much? Like they went around and they are *mexicanos*, but of course, they came out of the auctions at Marco. They were commissioned to make those works. You think they were chasing around images of *Virgen de Guadalupe*? No. That came because they were commissioned to do it, so they could sell them to the rich industrialists.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Well, and they were also appropriated, you know? Like there was a postmodern satire in their work and what was valued by the state that later was sort of visited upon them as if they were serious about it, right?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. And this is what I discovered there, in Dublin. I kept thinking kind of my feelings were hurt, but more than that because I was so much older than them. We really weren't in the same *onda*. I was looking at Silvia Gruner's work, the O*riginales* where she sticks her fingers in them.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Was that piece in that show?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I think it was, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: The *Don't Fuck with the Past, You Might Get Pregnant,* that piece?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. I think it was, and she had been showing at the Galería over the years. And so what I finally got was exactly what she so eloquently stated, is that the material of the past that gave us identity as minority people fighting the erasure and domination of a majority society. Those trickles of Mexican history, Posada, the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, they were our family's material from the little *calendarios* to the paintings on velvet to the little statues that you would buy in these little *mercados*. [00:46:19] Our family was from that level of class.

They were from middle-class families. They went to Europe when they were 14 and 15. Javier de la Garza, Galán, even Rocio Maldonado or Silvia Gruner. So what I realized is the material that we loved and protected us and sort of held us in place as *mexicanos* was to them an imposition of a nostalgic state that they had no interest in. And they thought it was really kind of really silly. And so they made fun of it, and that's what they did with it.

So I thought to myself, Oh, so you look at my chairs, and you think, you know, How sort of naïve and lacking in any sort of critical dimension you are to use these things. Because they never were able to acknowledge the class difference. If my mother had stayed in Mexico, she would've been cleaning their houses instead of the houses. And I always said this to people. "Don't you wish you were"—and I said, "No. I have this life because I was born in this country where my mother and father could raise me to have the opportunities to become what I am. Had I been born there, please, I would've helped either clean their houses." And that's who they are. They are a different group. Just like the time Tomás and I walked out, and he said, "We're the only Mexicans here." [They laugh.]

And I felt the same way when I was at these big events, you know, with all of these artists. [00:48:06] Other than Felipe Ehrenberg, who came into our lives very early in the '60s and '70s at the Galería, especially in the '70s. And he used to stay with us, you know. He was just a great human being, one of the really sexiest guys left on the planet until he died, I swear. [Phone rings.] Where is Richard with that phone? Yeah, so—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So he showed at the Galería?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, he did stuff with us. You know, he was very big in Europe, and he had been in Africa. He was a book art guy. He was on very the very mod thing.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And mail art, I think.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, yeah. So he would bring in shows from us from book artists in Mexico, and he would just come and hang out.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But he treated Chicanos with respect?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, absolutely. When we took *Art in the Other Mexico* to Mexico, none of those Mexican artists would have anything to do with us. He hosted a big thing for us out of this house, the one that's in the middle of, like, hell. It's a fabulous place but—and Lourdes was his wife by then, and she was the world's greatest cook.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Lourdes Grobet? No?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: No? Okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No. Oh, he was with somebody else before, long before, yeah, and that's another famous story that I only got bits and pieces of. Someday someone will tell me the truth about it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. So these years that passed where I traveled here and I traveled there and then I would come back home and do my job and then try to write and tried to do my work, then go on another trip, it was—I think about it now, and it was very difficult, but it was also very bountiful because I drew so many inspirations. When Patssi and I went to Chartres, and I took pictures in all the museum there because we're on our way to Paris.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, uh-huh, uh-huh [affirmative]. [00:50:00]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I just left there [inaudible], and my head was spinning. And the second thing was when we were in Paris, *Magiciens de la Terre* was showing at La Villette, and Patssi and I took a car out there. And, oh, my God, other than Frida's house, there's got to be no other place I've ever walked into where I really thought I might faint.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Really?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And it was just like, [gasps]. I couldn't, like—I recognized that to do work

at that scale, because these were huge pieces, one, you had to have a lot of money, and you had to have a mechanism, a structure of people who help you do it. So there was mix of, like, the sand painters and African people carving caskets that looked like onions and things. But in between were Korean artists who were pulping newspapers in washers and dryers. And as it was pumping, pumping, they take out the pulp, and they would shape it into these snakes and dragons and then they would spin it and splatter on the wall. It was like this living moment. And it's such a scale. I could not get over that.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And that was all in the *Magiciens de la Terre*?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And he took terrible flak for that. That ended his career.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who was the curator of that?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Hugo something.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: [Jean-Hubert Martin –AZ/AMB] I think they thought he was exploiting, similar to what I talked about at the *Maison de Culture* at the exchange thing in Oxford, it had a bit feel of that. I think they came there and never been into cities at all, some of them, and they were housed there for several months while they worked on these pieces. But there were some beautiful juxtapositions. I mean, really, there were just pieces you'll never ever see again because the place was so huge. [00:52:01] And you could walk on these ramps over the top because it had been an old train station, and you could look down on the mandalas.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. That's the first time I saw the *Chileno*—oh, why has his name left my head? Very famous installation artist.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Alfredo Jaar?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. The first time I saw Alfredo Jaar. Oh, yeah. So even though it was really hard to do these things, and I'm flying back and forth and coming home and getting up the next day and going to work the very next day—I'm totally jetlagged, it doesn't matter—I feel like all those years sort of fed my creative interests and allowed me to make these different breaks. So the landscape pieces that came out of the first *Private Landscapes and Public Territories* and the botanicals sort of led their way to the book pieces on agricultural history in my family, some of the cast pieces, I started doing plants.

And there was a moment, a very fabulous moment that didn't come true. John Hanhardt was the curator for performance art and installation at the Guggenheim and I have met him at Pepón's show in Puerto Rico. We spent time together.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: John Hanhardt?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And he really liked my work, so he said, "I want you to give me a proposal for an intervention. The Guggenheim is booked for years, but I think I could do some kind of an intervention." So I designed this piece that had to do with the glass plants again, but very big size with films running in them. Like these large glass mint plants with a story of my grandmother picking the mint outside our kitchen door and coming in and throwing in the pot of boiling water on this loop where she goes out, she picks, she throws, she picks, she throws. [00:54:08] Now, I can still see it.

And then the crash came, and I didn't get it together fast enough, but it wouldn't have mattered because they lost 75 people at the Guggenheim. His budget was cut in half, and everything that wasn't already scheduled was backburnered and essentially—he was very candid, he said, "I can call it backburner, but it—I'm just going to say, I won't be able to do it." And I said, "Okay, I understand." But I felt like I had my nose against the window, and I was right there and I—and because he wanted to do it in New York and Bilbao. So we took a trip to Bilbao, and I looked at the space and thought, "Well, this would be a really hard one to intervene because it's so big, the ceiling, and there's so—awkward angles. It's not a museum for looking at art. It's just a show place. So I saved up those ideas that maybe someday I'll get to do.

I even met a woman once who looked like a younger version of my grandmother. I should have

taken her name. I know who she is.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I thought—well, she's too old now—that I could get her to play the actress in the story. [They laugh.] So, to me, like, art-making is always this kind of moment of recognition. It's like—what did they say about—Walter Benjamin—it sort of flashes up in a moment. He talks about history that way, and in that flash of a moment, you see everything. And to me art-making is like that. A little door flies open and *whoosh*, there it is and then it closes, and you've got to try and remember what it was, and see if you can't find a way to do it.

The Fowler was the highest level of doing the laboratory and where I could actually—and I translated it on to *Wunderkammer* by—by early 2000 I was thinking—oh, I know why. [00:56:11] Because when I did the show with Bernice [Steinbaum] in 2000—at her new show, which was based on the World's Fair—I had been going to a project at the de Young before it became the new building. I had a friend of mine, Pam MacDonald, put together, and she lent me the slides after it was over. It was a show called *Odunde Odunde*, and it was like something to do with African art. But I found out—and it was in 1994, it was part of the centennial of the de Young. It was 100 years old, 1894 to 1994. And then I found out that it had been a World's Fair site, and that they had had women of Dahomey in a tent with fake animal bones on the floor. So I recognized the sort of relationship between—you know, the Hall of Man turns into the museum, the World's Fair turns into the museum.

And I have followed James Clifford's work for quite a long time, and had made up my own little schematic because I do that; I make schematics because they help me understand. So then there was the, you know, sort of western and then there's the other. And so one is the museum, and the other is the Hall of Man. You know, one is the artist, and the other is the master. And everything falls into those categories. And women and people of color fall under the Hall of Man and then the white men fall under—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: The museum.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —the museum. The artifact is replaced by the masterpiece. [00:58:02] And then at some point around the 1980s, the two spaces crash into each other, so you have Fred Wilson doing his work, you have Gómez-Peña in *The Year of the Caged Bear* [*sic; Year of the White Bear*]. We run into each other, and we're the thing in the middle, and we can't be placed here, and we can't be placed there. So they're not quite sure what to do with us and—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That would be a great title of a book: *Thing in the Middle*.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Thing in the middle, because that's what we've always been. And I found that studying the World's Fairs sort of led me to, you know, scientific racism and then it led me eventually back to the cabinet of curiosity, which I had started with, I don’t know, 20 years before.

Then I really, really wanted to do it specifically. And Lucian, who wrote the article, was a student of Jennifer's, and he was doing a conference at Santa Cruz on the curator as translator. He asked me to come, and I could put on whatever I wanted, so put it on the idea of *The Latino Cabinet of Curiosity,* and that led to the piece eventually at Fowler [Museum]. I always say, since Fowler, everything is kind of downhill.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Because I'll never ever—the Heard couldn't match it, no one could. You know, all those departments at your fingertips, building things for you, and going into the collections and spending hours, you know, trying to decide which headdress out of the 40 headdresses you should really use. And they take them out with their little glove and turn them around, and you get to look at them. It was just like a dream. [01:00:00] It was hard on Richard because the African stuff really freaked him out. He kept getting upset and going outside.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And Marla Berns was incredibly supportive of—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yeah, jeez, you couldn’t get any better than that. And it was so sad to give it all back. [Laughs.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But you've also talked about putting those objects—I mean, when we spoke

before, you talked about the importance of sort of coming to an understanding that you were introducing those objects to one another.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I remember—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I was calming them for what they were. So I used categories like violence and war, because I felt like people just like to look at these things from a distance. And when you first see the arm clamps and the leg clamps and those knife blades that lock on to your wrist with a curved blade and you slash with it—when you see all the things that had been brought to bear on people in times of sort of colonial violence, you're really sort of appalled. But it also—I was older then. If I had encountered that when I was younger, I think I told you that I would've just imploded. I would've probably picketed the museum. I don't know what I would've done.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.] You wouldn't have done an installation.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, I certainly wouldn't have. And I think she was shocked that I did, but I told her, "You know, I've been through a lot in my life; it's different now, and I treasure these things." And even though I know that they were taken sometimes by force and other times by greed, I'm sort of glad they're here because I don’t know what would've happened to them. Although Marta Vega said to me, "Amalia, no blood. Anything with blood on it, I don’t want you to touch it, don’t you use it."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Because I called her. She was my advisor for the Caribbean and Carmen was my advisor for Mesoamerican.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Carmen Lomas Garza was?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, yeah. And Marta said, "That's the one rule. You don’t want anything that's been used in sacrifice because it carries too much energy with it." [01:02:03] And that was an interesting—

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ADRIANA ZAVALA: —distinction between the work that came out of Mesoamerica and the work that came from Africa. The African pieces were active as is African religions, you know, full of energy. The Mesoamerican works were all burial pieces, so they had a sort of quiet life. They weren't so extreme. But each of them—I picked eight pieces for the prints—needed to be re-contextualized. You needed to understand what their function had been and where they belonged. Because otherwise, you wouldn't know. So grouping them together was the first stage of making a conversation about events and about atrocities and about the rituals of life. And then the second part was selecting very, you know, symbolic pieces that needed to have a context.

And so this happened to me as I worked on prints all along from the '90s on, which is that I like the prints because there are layers, so you have a foundational layer. In some instances for me, it's a landscape photograph or—and then you have a second layer, which has to do with perhaps the botanical or some other form of knowledge, and then the last layer is your sort of current life. So when I did those pieces, I used either a map or some sort of a diagram for the back of it, and then I put in something to do with the social history of that piece, how it was used in dances or ceremonies, and then finally the piece itself. So I felt that that part of it worked really well. Because then I could live with myself, and I didn’t have to feel as though—because people ask me, "How did you do that? I don’t think that"—I said, "Well, I had to make my peace with it because I really wanted to see." [00:02:07]

It all started because I saw [José] Bedia had been allowed at the Fowler to put together an exhibition of some of their work, and I thought, "What?! I want to do that!" So I was kind of shocked when I heard it, when he—Gilbert talked about the Heard Museum, and I thought, "Whoa, that would be really interesting." Because that whole question of indigeneity has been bouncing around forever. Tonya—what is Tonya's last name? She's a well-known Native American. She and I had a conversation in StoryCorps at one of—yeah, look me up in StoryCorps. And it had to do with one of Marta's—she was part of Marta's cohort of practitioners, and we

made all these conferences. Tonya [Gonella Frichner] is her first name, but if you find my name, you'll find the StoryCorps thing. Is it StoryLab or StoryCorps?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: StoryCorps.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: With the Smithsonian, the StoryCorps, or where? [*sic*; *Roadside Theater* –AZ]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, this is the one that moves around, and they did it at Marta's [Moreno Vega] gathering and then they matched us up.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh. I'm trying to look it up now, but if I don't find it, I'll look it up. "How to Altar the World"? No?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay, I'll look around.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. Yeah, I'm going to look for it too because maybe that would be helpful for me for the Heard. Okay, because I know that—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And this person is Tonya?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Tonya—she's well-known. We had a wonderful conversation about that: what were the differences, what were the similarities, and why it upset everybody so much.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Around the Fowler work or around—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, no, this is way—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —repatriating?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —before that.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, well, over.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It had to do with the difference between North American natives—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, got it—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —and Chicano indigenous perspectives, which they didn't rate very high. [00:04:04] You know, it was like that we were pretending, or "wannabes" is the better word for it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So that might be something that animates doing something at the Heard.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, yeah. So where shall we go now?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Well, let's see. We've—let's see if we've covered all the transitions. So we talked about altars, to labs and libraries, landscapes and nature, botanical. Healing? Did we—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: We didn't go too far in healing, which has been my life for so long. I mean both in the lived experience and then trying to make things for it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I was thinking about the *Curandera's* [*Botanica* (2008) –JG] project.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: The *Botanica*?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah, the *Botanica* where you had all the *milagros* and the lavender?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And it's got two levels to it. So it's—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That table—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It's the table again, and in fact it's the same table from the perfume laboratory. It has the same crazy writing on it except I changed it and added a new thing, so there's all these layers on it. It's not easy to read, but I didn't really care if people read it or not. That was really funny. I did it at the Menil, like the über-white cube. And so the opening night

like rich, rich, rich ladies, oil ladies. They're in their 70s, maybe even 80s. You know, Chanel-ed out, Dior, they're like, maxed out. And then Joseph [Newland]—he's Swiss—something, he was the head of the Menil then. And notoriously private. They took me to meet him, and I stood in the doorway, and he muttered "Hello" and said one other thing, and I realized, Okay, time for me to go now. [They laugh.]

And so the opening is going on, and he comes up to me, and he's all flushed, seems upset, and he says, "Did you mean for them to go into your installation?" [00:06:06] I said, "No!" And he said, "I shall take care of it." So he went in, and he scooted them out. What they had done, they walked all over the lavender. You could hear it crunching on those fancy high heels. And then there were these dome, half-dome, I don't know where I found it, but they magnified. So you could read the writing. And they were moving them around.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: To read it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: In your books, in your—?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: On the table.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, the surface on the table?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Oh, they were doing the book too. They wanted like—you know, turning the pages. So he shooed them out and then he had somebody come out right then, and they nailed down a little wooden thing that your shoe hits when you get too close. I don't think that would stop them anyway but—yeah.

So the Menil piece, that's 2008. It comes five years after I'm recovering, and I'm still having surgeries, and I'm back to myself but not really completely. I had planned to do the fourth chapter of *The Road to Paris and Its Aftermath*, because it was after our trip to Paris. And then everything seemed to fall apart.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So that would be chapter four of *Venus Envy*?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And there was supposed to be a room like a hallway room that you walk through before you went into *The Curandera's Botanica.* She would be the last room, and that room would have—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: This was at the Menil?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: No?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: This was in my head because the—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, got it, okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, the Menil, I could barely get that done.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I see, okay, so there was going to be another iteration that would culminate in *The Curandera's Botanica*—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Right.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —but before that—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I did it first because I needed it. But that one was supposed to have this hallway with, like, French drawing, you know, from like—I can't even think of who—and melded with the abstraction of the crashed car. [00:08:07]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, and this was from the accident in 2003?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], because I have it on a printout there. And then I never got around to it, but I ended up doing the *Botanica* because there were so many things from that that I had accumulated during my period of trying to heal myself.

[Audio break.]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Okay, we took a brief pause. Alright, so we were talking about *The Road to Paris*.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: *The Road to Paris and Its Aftermath*. So, the hallway room was supposed to have blowups of the smashed car—not the car but the surface of it. It's very beautiful, it's very abstracted, and then these French drawings over it. And there's to be a walkway of shattered automobile glass, but with a plexi over it, so you can walk on it. And it takes you to the last one where you find the healing. So when I constructed *The Curandera's Botanica* I put my grandmother's image in the lightbox because she had been my—basically my historical connection to healing. She was not a *curandera,* but she knew things.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: This is Mariana. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Mariana. So when my father was young—and he had a lot of bronchial problems like I do—she would get these branches from the pine tree and put them in a big jar of water and let them sit for about a week, and then after that, make him drink part of it every day. And that's because the resin in it does, in fact, cause an expansion in the bronchioles. And then later, maybe dicier but still interesting, he developed skin eruptions, and she started—I don't know where she got it—snake powder, and she would sprinkle it over his food, and he ate it and did what she said. [00:10:01] And I have to say that my father's entire life that I knew him, he almost, like, spontaneously healed. I told you that all the surgeons and all the doctors are going at it, and it didn't matter. Whatever it was, he recovered from it.

I remember after my mother died, and we were all at the house together, my niece and nephew and my brother and everyone, and he went to sit down in one of these chairs, and somehow he missed it. He fell, and I think he hit his head on the corner of a table or something. He had a huge gash. So everyone panicked, and we were trying to take him to the hospital. He refused to go, so we just put a cloth on it. So the next morning, I went over, and I thought, Okay, I'm going to either put a bandage or we're going to the hospital. So I go over to look, it's already closing up.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And it was true all the time that I ever remember. He had so many accidents in his life, really big ones, and he always recovered from them. My mother said, "Your father's like a cat with nine lives," but it's really that he had this capacity for healing and endurance. And so he always said it was the snake powder. So I grew up with all these stories too, that when he was a child, and they lived in Los Angeles, and they were on a back alley, their apartment or the little—it was probably a shack—opened up on to the back alley. My grandmother sent her two brothers, his uncles, because he was still little then, to go to the grocery store. And they went down the road, the little back alley, and they saw a man get shot in the back of the head, and they ran back, and they were so frightened. And one of them got really sick, *con susto*, very listless, apathetic. So then they did like the turtle blood thing, and they rolled the egg over him. And I used to listen to all those stories, and I just love them. So I was always predisposed to that kind of healing.

And then I mentioned earlier my friend Renaldo Maduro, who was using a *curanderismo*, as a model for therapeutic encounter. [00:12:10] He was a Jungian therapist. And people like Concha Saucedo had been using a model of the home altar as a therapeutic entrance point for therapy with patients.

So I thought of those healing things as I was trying to recover from the accident. The accident was like—almost like time stopped, and I was locked into this moment, and I couldn't get out of it for the longest time. When I was in the—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And this was a car accident that you had with Richard, you were driving in your—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, 2003.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —BMW?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: He was driving, and somebody hit us, and the car started to spin out. It rolled over, and my leg was thrown through the window and my—I was upside down, so I broke

my C1, my wrist, my elbow, my ankle, and my leg. And unbeknownst to me, shattered my elbow. So actually, I was very lucky to survive because the C1 is right at your brainstem. A couple of little moments here or there, and you're done for. And so they worried a lot about my being paralyzed over time. [Microphone rustles.] Okay, did I—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: You're okay.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Okay. And so I ended up going up to UCSF because they were better. But it took, you know, almost a year of this horrible brace. I slept for three years—longer, almost four years—in a hospital bed downstairs because the break in my leg didn't heal well. That's why I use a cane. And so it was hard to go up and down the stairs, and I was still in the neck brace, and then after that, I was recovering from the elbow surgery, and then after that, it just went on and on and on. [00:14:00]

The worst part of it really was just this feeling that I couldn't get back to myself, that I was always going to be slightly damaged. I devised ways—I mean, even when I was in the recovery center, I did the left-handed drawings because the only thing that was free was my left hand. Everything else was like, braces, bandages, like, whatever.

And my mother—I got flowers every day, it was really crazy. [Laughs.] I don't know where they all came from. And so I started sharing them in there because it was a hospice as well as a recovery center. And my mother started bringing my stuff from home, so she made a, like, a little altar for me. So I could work on those drawings. And that was how I—that and saying the rosaries. Because I had to get through hour by hour by hour, and it was the only way. I mean, I couldn't sleep really much. And, of course, when you're there, they're poking you and taking your blood and doing all that. And I had to be able to demonstrate that I could walk 150 steps and I could get in a car. And they had a little mini staircase in the therapy. So I insisted on going twice a day for physical therapy, which they didn't agree to at the beginning but then they let me because I complained about it so much. Because I wanted to get out of there sooner. I just didn't want to be there all through Christmas. I just couldn't face it.

So eventually, I got through it and I got home, and that's when it all started again, and I realized, This is really bad, and maybe I will never, you know, walk well or move well or make things or be myself, you know? Because I think when you're in so much pain, your mind is foggy all the time, and you're not yourself, you don't think well. Finally, after about a year, it had healed, the C1, which they couldn't believe. No one believed it, but it was true. [00:16:02] They had me come back and forth for X-rays. I went back to school, but I didn't last very long because my mother got sick that same spring after I had the accident, and she died. And a year to the day of her death, we had a memorial for her—I think I told you this—in the backyard, and my sister had a stroke.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, no, I didn't realize that's—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. It was—there were like, I don't know, 50 people; they're all my mother's friends and relatives.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And that's when Judy [Mesa] had her stroke?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. One of my cousins said, "Judy is acting very strange." And I remembered in the morning her being in a rage about Dad not changing his clothes. And I thought, "What is she"—I said, "Judy, Judy, you have to calm down, we have all these people coming. He'll be fine. I'll go, I'll get Richard to help him." And then later on, my cousin said, "She's not right. She's saying funny things." I said, "Okay, I'll go talk to her." And I knew immediately. And my father already knew, and he was waving me over to him, and he said, "You need to—your sister to the hospital." I said, "I'm going now."

So Richard took over the party, and I took her to the hospital, but even in her most extreme state—because it was huge hemorrhagic bleed—she had such a big brain [laughs] that she remembered where the address book with her doctor's address in it, so he could consult with the doctors there. Because once she moved out of San Francisco, her disease was so complicated, nobody in this area even had a clue about how to deal with her. So for a while, we took her back and forth to the doctors there, but eventually, we had to adapt here. So when she had the stroke, it was terrifying because I didn't know if it was from the disease or what it was. And they never ever said, they never ever could pinpoint it. That traditionally in her disease, people didn't have strokes. But, you know, it's mixed connective tissue disease, so something could've gone wrong in the vascular system. [00:18:06]

So that was—after that, I finally retired because I had a baby monitor—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: From the school system?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: From the school, yeah. I had the baby monitor, I had to run home every day on my lunch hour, and I had other people in the neighborhood checking her in the afternoon.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But you weren't living here then? This was—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: You were still living there?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was on campus. And my father was living with us, but, you know, he couldn't help her. He was 93 years old. So I finally retired and then we moved here, and she came to live with us here. And that changed my life another time. And I think sometimes now for me, making art is a survival strategy. Whereas when I was younger, it was very fecund, very very life-giving and just really fun. And then as the years have gone by, it is how I hold on to life. Because—because [cries] sometimes it's too hard, and you have to have a way, a way to think out.

You know, I always said artists are like garden-variety neurotics. I mean, some of them are; some more extreme. But generally, we're like everyone else. We're not quite at the level of schizophrenics, maybe a few bipolars, but we're like your garden-variety neurotic. The only thing that sets us apart and the only thing is that because we have the capacity to transform, we just make the world the way we want it to be or we think it should be, and other people have to live in it, and we do too, but we get to change it for a little while every time. That's why sometimes Richard and I—I'm surprised he doesn't understand because he's a musician, but he stopped performing many years ago. He didn't—it was a different thing to him. And he always says, "Well, maybe it's time to stop," and I look at him like—[00:20:05]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.] "But then I can't remake the world."

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, what's going to happen to me? My friend Mildred Howard and I—she's my sister too—we talk about once a week, and she says, "Okay, I'm quitting." I said, "You know, you're not quitting because it's not possible to quit." She says, "I know, but I want to quit." I said, "Yeah, well, we all want to quit, but then somebody calls us." And Richard makes fun of me so much because I'll be like real whiny and saying, "Well, I really think this is it, Richard. I don't think there's going to be any more shows, or no one is going to come and get me." And then, *boom*, they all come, and he goes, "Oh, poor Amalia, no one is going to come and get her." And I said, "Shut up!" [They laugh.]

But now, I'm determined because I feel like, Oh, it's the old gal time. You know, Carmen Herrera, 101, Luchita Hurtado, 98. I mean—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah, somebody else I just read about who's 104. Who was that?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: That's Carmen Herrera. She's a hundred—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: There's another one—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Another one?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I think so.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Wow. Yeah, I feel like, you know, why not? Why not?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So now, that—now is going to be your moment with the Triton show, with the Heard.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: The Heard, yeah, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what's in Chicago?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, the—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: You said the one in Chicago.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —MacArthur Project.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And that's the same time, so I have to figure out a way to do it ahead of time and have everything shipped there so then I just show up for, like, a couple of weeks. But they do want me to the come from the class, so I have to work that out.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow, and then you just did the altar for your sister Judy at the Oakland Museum?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: How did that come about?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, I called them from the—where were we?—the hospital. This happened every time. When my mother died, the Oakland Museum had asked me earlier—not much earlier because they would—starting plan in the summer. [00:22:07] They asked me if I wanted to be in Day of the Dead, and I said, "No, I don't really do that much anymore." Then my mother got sick, then my mother died. I'm at the hospice, my mother has just died, and the first thing I do is go—and I don't even have a cell phone with me then, I just used the phone in the hall and I called them. And I said, "This is Amalia, and I've changed my mind. It is a really important thing for me to make an altar. Can I still be in?" They said yes, so then that worked out.

Then my father died, and I called around, and the Oakland Museum had already closed up. But the San Jose Museum gave me a space in their atrium, so I did that. Then my brother died, and there was no place. Everything was completely sealed up. And so I contacted the Steinbeck Center because our university had bought into it, and so I was able to do it there. But they didn't keep it open regular hours, and there was no promotion, so it was hard for people to see it. But it was good for my family, so they all flew in and then they could be there.

And then Judy died. And I called them from the hospital, and I said, "I really have to do this." And there was this new young girl, Erendina, she's just lovely. She goes, "Oh, my gosh, it's like a miracle. You're on our short list. We're doing the 25th anniversary of the Day of the Dead, and I thought it would be so hard to get you." I said, "No, you got me, I'm coming." And they came to visit like three or four times. It was almost like a commissioning piece. And I knew what I would do. Judy had liked two pieces a lot. One was *Dolores Del Rio*, which they weren't going to let me borrow, and the other one was the holy communion piece. [00:24:06] But she also had two favorite movies, which was Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* and Audrey Hepburn in—oh, what is it?—*Breakfast at Tiffany's*. So I decided to give her a Marie Antoinette room. She didn't ever wear pink or anything like that, but she was quite girly. She used to say—we would watch that movie over and over again and she would say, "I wish I had a room like that." [They laugh.] And I wanted to bring in piles of the macaroons, but they wouldn't let me do it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, because for her celebration of life, I had a—in the French macaroons—you know, those little crunchy—I had, like, a tower. And Marie is still in the window.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, I see.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No, we redid this whole thing, and we draped everything. Oh, it was so beautiful.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, we had about 100 people. Gilbert [Vicario] flew in from Phoenix. They were great friends. She used to call him Gilly. They would go partying together. Yeah, it's a different world without her. It's easier, but it's harder. And that's the way life is.

So I think, you know, when you talk about art in the different categories of making and the way in which you come to making, you're always living in it all the time. You're having illnesses and death and joyful triumph and awards and honors and then crashes and burns and all the things that happen, and it's sort of like—making time is like thinking time. It lets you think out all those things and find a way to live with them. And I think if I hadn't had that, I don't know that I

would've survived all the things I've—not had to, but just simply a part of life, and I'm no different than anyone else. [00:26:01]

I look at my friends' lives, and I see what they go through, you know, when they lose their children. I have a friend whose husband died of AIDS after he came out, and her son died in a boating accident, and her daughter committed suicide, and her mother died, and her friend too, and her brother died of cancer, and that woman keeps on going and going. And when I feel sorry for myself, I used to call up Jean, and she gives me a pep talk. But she taught me something. She said, "The only way to deal with that loss is to make things to work." She said, "I take these flower arranging courses, I followed my master to"—her sensei—"to Japan on a tour of ikebana competitions." She just came back from a tour of England and the gardens, like the Chelsea Flower Show in Sissinghurst and all the places I dream of going. And she also makes couture clothing, which she started making for her daughter.

Her daughter, my goddaughter, Monica Maduro, was the youngest person to ever sit on the board of trustees for the de Young Museum or the Fine Arts Museums. And Dede Wilsey handpicked her because Dede always thought that her son should've married Monica. They all went to the same ritzy high school, even though Monica was like the poor student. And she was beautiful and brilliant, but life was too hard for her, and you knew it from the get-go. She had cancer when she was 11, and she had so many illnesses.

So that's why I say, you know, no one sidesteps it. You know, you went through it with your mother, you go through it. No one sidesteps it. But we—we who make and create and write, we have ways to deal with it. And in that sense, I feel that we're extremely lucky. I don't feel, like, put upon. I feel like—you know, I kicked in the doors when I could, and now I get to rest, and in between I might make things, but, you know, I have never had any complaints about it. No, not a single thing. [00:28:05] Sometimes, I wonder what the next form will be. You know, because I've changed forms so many times that I think, Well, what's the next one? And I really don't know.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Hmm . I think maybe it has to do with getting ready for the end. I do, I do. I think about it a lot. Because of my diseases and stuff I'm sort of on borrowed time pretty much and—but I have a high energy, so I manage to overcome things. But I think at some point—and that's what this archiving and trying to get the pieces ready to be sold—it's kind of preparing yourself so that whatever you have made that you think might be of value, you can put that where it needs to be. And I feel like our generation had the greatest gift of all. We had a generation that was interested in us. We had young people like yourself and others who write about us, who care what we made. So whatever we did, it's a document. There's no forgetting it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: No.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No. And I feel like that's just like, the luckiest thing in the world. Because when I was making it, I never thought there would be anybody to say what it was. So sometimes, I did it for other people because there wasn't anyone else around. *Domesticana* was that. You know, *Domesticana* was me being pissed off at that little blonde Venezuelan thing, and the other one was just me wanting to set the record straight. *Rasquachismo* was just a little too male-dominated for me, and I had to find a way to talk about it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you've had amazing interlocutors, both other artists and—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, my God, yes. [00:30:00]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And then the people who've you've been close to, from Victor to Tomás to Jennifer Gonzales to Marla Berns to—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yeah. I mean—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —Lucian Gomoll. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, and you don't even see it coming. You're just busy, like—and you—and I used to have this friend. I met him through the cultural exchange thing at Oxford. He's just a stunning guy. And then we became lifelong friends, and then he—he was in the middle of a divorce then. And he married beautiful Yvonne that we love madly, and they come almost every year to stay with us. When they got married, they spent part of their honeymoon with us and

then they went off to Mexico.

And he said to me one time, "Do you know what people called you when we were all in New York?" I said, "Oh, I don't want to know." He said, "No, it's very good." I said, "Well, okay, what was it?" And he goes, "They called you The Supernatural." [They laugh.] I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because nobody thought you ever slept. Because you were too busy!" And I said, "Well, I'm not anymore. There's no supernaturals left in the house. I'm just trying to get through day by day by day."

But you know, being around you, being with Laura [E. Pérez], Gilbert, you get a kind of energy and you get new ideas, like I told you about the Chicano show. I'm trying to talk Laura into it; she should do it with you. No one's ever done it. I always thought someone will do it. And now, we're in our 70s and 60s, and some heading to the 80s, and we've never gotten our fair share in the art history world. There's never been a major book, there's never been a major show, and I feel like that should happen because they're interested in people from the past that were there, and we were there. So I've been badgering Laura. She has enough to do, but I said, "We should be thinking about it. And who could pay for it, who would fund it, where—who would sponsor it, where would it go?" Maybe [whispers] Crystal Bridges, who knows? [00:32:06]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And then I would like it someday that we'll get back to talking about our Frida thing. But I know now, after you've talked to me, about what was going on at school. You know?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah. That's why three years have gone by.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, no, I understand completely. Well, I wasn't in a hurry either. I mean, I was just trying to survive here the last three years. Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But maybe we can make that happen because—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, I think we can, and I think we should. You know, before all that material, like, goes away. I feel like they're going to take my Frida box, and it'll be hidden away for several years, and we won't have access to it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah, that's—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: That one I'm keeping out. I'm not going to give that to them until later, much later.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah. Well, Laura was very excited about that. Was there anything else that you feel like we need to talk about that we haven't covered?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Well, I mean, clearly, Richard is the elephant in the room. And I don't know what I would say about it except that, you know, he's the guy. He's been here from the beginning.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah. You were very young when you met.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, I was about 20 when I met him, which I guess is very young. But you know, by Mexican standards, I should've been married for at least two or three years.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And have five kids by that time. [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, I know. Thank God my mother didn't care and wasn't embarrassed that her daughter had never married in all those years until 20. And I didn't marry Richard until I was almost 23 I think. But we only ever had one date. We just went out once and that was it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That was it?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. Yeah. I'm not even sure why. And then I tried to get him to marry me, and he wouldn't.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So I left and I went to New York because I had applied to the School of

Visual Arts.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, really?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. I thought I was running away, and he didn't even know. He thought I was going out there to visit my relatives in Chicago. So I took a train to Chicago and a bus to New York. [They laugh.] And then I realized that I really missed him, and he kept writing to me, and it was so sad and—[00:34:03]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: So did you actually matriculate at the SVA?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: No. I just—I postponed it and then I came home and then I never went back. And it sort of wrecked my plans. My plans included being famous at 40 in New York.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And, of course, that didn't happen. No, 30—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Well—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I was supposed to be famous at 30 in New York. So I was closer to 40 when it started to happen. And—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: When INTAR—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: INTAR.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Those were golden years.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Well, that's not too bad to be 10 years—just 10 years off your mark.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was only 10 years off.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That's pretty good. Yeah, 1990—no, that was Steinbaum. Where is it? INTAR?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: INTAR is '87.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: There it is, '87.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: '87.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: *Grotto of the Virgins.*

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, yeah. She was another very important mentor figure. She was the first person that told me I needed to have a proposal and that I needed schematics—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Inverna Lockpez.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —and that I needed a budget. Yes! Because I didn't do any of those things. You now, I was the lady with the bags of stuff, and I just—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Of stuff [laughs]—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —made—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: You showing your bags and stuff. [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: —and I would show up and put things together.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: *Hmm*.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, and she was the doorway to all the other artists because they all showed there. And she was the first person to really have Chicano shows. *Cafe Mestizo*, which is the best show any Chicano ever did, the Avalos show, she did it there. Oh, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: I don't even know if there's a catalog for that.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: There is.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Is there?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It's a little tiny one. Because I remember the cover of it. I don't even know if it's in my archive. It might have been once mine but I'm—sometimes, I give things away to people. Like I gave Chon Noriega my *No Movie* pin, and I regretted it years later. I wanted to get it back, but I knew that would be rude. [They laugh.] [00:36:00]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Well, maybe he'll listen to this oral history and put it in the mail. [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Oh, God, don't let him listen.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: At least I didn't talk about him. Oh, that was another story. We talked about that, right? The *Revelaciones* at Cornell?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Oh, yeah, we talked about that—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: *Pfffft.*

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —last time.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, that was it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: At the Johnson Museum.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah, that was humdinger. He was such an innocent. He, like, walked in there, and had no idea. And you know, he has this sort of man-crush on Raphael Montañez Ortiz, who is one of the craziest, wildest guys in the world. He's lovely, lovely, but you know, he was major Fluxus with the smashed broken pianos and dead chicken blood and whatever. Yes. And [laughs] the people at the university freaked out over his *Books not Bombs* thing.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Yeah, yeah.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: They just didn't know what to do.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: But your interview in that little documentary they made for that is actually really good. And—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It's very useful.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: —it's not easy to find but anybody, anybody who's listening to this oral history and doing research on Amalia Mesa-Bains, needs to watch that interview for *Revelaciones/Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence* at the Johnson Museum at Cornell, where they told you could have that Bailly painting with the Black boy in it?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: [Laughs.] Yes.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: And then they took it away and—

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Then they took it away, and they gave me a simulacrum. They gave me a photo blowup.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right. But they let you make the altar to Cesar Chávez with the actual pre-Columbian objects?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yes. They didn't care. Yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That says it all.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It does, it does. And I didn't care what he thought, you know, so I put his big quote under the fake painting on the wall, "I'm afraid you'll undermine the integrity of the art object."

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I signed [the director's name –AMB], which I can't even remember anymore. See, when I first went there, Victor had arranged part of it, and the woman that was the [previous –AMB] curator, [microphone rustles] she was—oops. She was very interested in my using the painting, and she was very interested in *Vanitas* artwork, and she just loved the idea of the—how I might use it in the piece, and she was going to make everything available. And then she left the museum. [00:38:15] So by the time we finally got there a year later, it was like no and no and no. No, those days were like, you know, everything that's sort of an experiment. I mean, Chon had never curated a show before. He wasn't a visual arts person. Well, he was in the sense of film. But not art.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then the whole Daniel Joseph Martinez's thing in the courtyard and—yeah.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Not just the courtyard. The cafeteria every morning, reading his reviews. [. . . –AMB] And so Gronk went out and graffitied his own work and got everybody livid because they thought it had been graffitied, and he had done it himself. And it was his way of making fun of Daniel's piece that was graffiti that Daniel got mad at the students for, after he told them to be social revolutionaries.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Right.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And then—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: "But just not on my art." [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. So I don't think a lot of people got the sort of satire of it. That's why he did it.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And then later on, just to rub salt in the wounds, he went out and did an à la Brava [ph] mural on a fence just to show that he had it to do, you know? Gronk is, you know, pretty formidable.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: [. . . –AMB] Oh, it was such a smarmy little place. I mean, they were definitely saving money, and they didn't provide meals for us. We had coupons to eat with the students in the cafeteria. And it was just gross food. So we just started sending out for pizzas every day. And then there was the rampant drinking because it was very cold, and no one was really getting along too well with anyone else. So.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow, that's an important exhibition.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It is, it is! And it was really really a beautiful one. There were some—Maria Brito's piece is one of the best she's ever done. And, you know, I took Chon to task in that because he appropriated a number of artists for my *Ceremony of Memory* show and then never mentioned it in the catalog and said his was the first one to do such and such. So I called him up, and I said, "Shame on you." I wanted to say, "Don't bite the hand that feeds you; I raised you, boy." So.

Between Tomás and I, we put a lot of energy into Chon, and his career, and we saw something in him, and he has that. But he also has his own view of what is happening. But it was an important show. And then the finale was, [laughs] they put Victor in one of those—did I tell you that, about the apartment?

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-mm [negative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Okay. So they have these visiting professor apartments, and they put him in it, and they're filled with these rare books, and they're just beautiful apartments. So he decided to have a party and then—

ADRIANA ZAVALA: They put Victor Zamudio-Taylor there. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Bad idea. So they decided to have a party, and we all aggregate there. And it goes on till about two in the morning, till somebody somehow pulls a fire alarm. And all the fire trucks come, and it's a huge commotion, we're all on the lawn in the dead of night. And

then we all get sent back to our places and then we leave, and about two weeks later, we get this letter about missing rare books and do we know anything about them. [00:42:09] We all just go, "No, I have no idea." I knew exactly where they were.

You know, the thing about Victor is that he was a brilliant and fashionable and styling—just, he was a flaneur of the highest order. You know, we went everywhere in New York, and everywhere they knew him. They would come out of Le Relais on upper 16th saying, "Hi, Victor! Victor, come in!" We had free drinks everywhere we went. We went to De Niro's Bar when it first opened, free drinks sent over. He knew everybody. We would lunch at Bonwit Teller's. We would just have—yeah. He would give me gifts that I have no idea where they came from. Moschino scarves, these incredible pieces of jewelry. He would collect up the hangers from Chanel that they discard at the end of the day, clean them up and bring them to me, so I can have my clothes hanging on them.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: On Chanel hangers. [Laughs.]

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: He knew me so well. [They laugh.] Really, he was like a best best friend. Like a girl that turns into a guy that is your best friend and knows everything you need and like. And at the same time is so brilliant and can, like, fix carpaccio like no one else, and knows the latest wines, and has stories, stories, stories. He used to run the River Café, and Catherine Deneuve would come there and—oh, [Princess] Soraya, these famous women. I had my own little table at the River Café. A little table, but I could always go there and sit. No, he was spectacular.

The first time we went to an event together, it turned out it was Basquiat's birthday party. Uh-huh [affirmative]. And I didn't know that. [00:44:06]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: And I ended up in the top room with Kenny Scharf and I forget who else. And I remember seeing Jorge Tacla on the way up, and I was in my turban phase then, so I had this gold Baroque-y turban. So I looked like it was okay for me to go in there, and I had no idea who Basquiat was.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: [Laughs.] Right. Oh, wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Not a clue in the world. And Victor could take you anywhere, and he knew everyone. So, you know, I miss that. I have to say that was hard to give up, but it was also dangerous because he knew people he probably shouldn't know.

And now I think about him more because he's gone. And part of, I think, the aging process is reflecting back on the sort of moments of change and the individuals who allowed for that to happen, either by provocation or resistance. And those people who make up a sort of set of characters that are the mythology of your life. Even though they were real, they become as time passes more grand then you even knew. Because you don't have that anymore when they're gone, and then you think, "Oh, that's what it was. God, I should've been more grateful!"

I mean, he had me to dinner at Princeton with Miguel León-Portilla, and we discussed the concept of flowers in the Nahuatl language. And they read poetry to each other, and I was like a fly on the wall. Years and years later, we were all together again in the *Road to Aztlan* opening, and León-Portilla came over to the table and Victor was there and I was there—I think Valdez, I don’t know if Patssi was there. And he said to us that "You, the Chicanos, have been the ones that saved Aztlán for us, for all of us for all your years of faith in it. [00:46:07]

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was just a fabulous moment.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Yeah. He just died recently.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That's profound.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: It was, because he did know that. He had always really liked Chicano art because he thought that we maintained this belief in what others saw as mythic, but he knew it was not mythic. It actually had been a place. It actually was, as *The Road to Aztlan* showed, a

sort of generative space of exchange of sacred materials and beliefs, undivided, unbordered, that was what we were. And Chicanos, in this fumbling naïve way—people like Jacinto Quirarte and others who were the early Mesoamericanists, they had given us the guidepost for finding those things. And we didn't always know exactly what they were, but we believed in them.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Wow. I love that, a borderless space.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I'm going to think about that and what I have to do next.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Alright, I think we've terminated. That's a good way to end.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: That's a good place to end.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Right, yeah.

ADRIANA ZAVALA: Alright. Thank you, Amalia!

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: You're welcome.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]