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ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

NO. 4, NOVEMBER 2013

GILBERT “MAGU” LUJÁN

INTERVIEWED BY KAREN MARY DAVALOS

ON SEPTEMBER 17, 19, AND 22,
AND OCTOBER 1 AND 8, 2007

A member of Los Four, Gilbert “Magu” Luján was one of the pioneers of the Chicano art movement. A prolific painter, muralist, and sculptor, he created works that reflect barrio life with humor but that address issues of concern to the Chicano community. He was one of the first Latino artists to establish an international career. Luján received a BA from Cal State Long Beach and taught at Fresno City College and Cal Poly Pomona. Luján, a resident of Pomona, California, died in 2011.

Karen Mary Davalos is chair and professor of Chicana/o studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Her research interests encompass representational practices, including art exhibition and collection; vernacular performance; spirituality; feminist scholarship and epistemologies; and oral history. Among her publications are *Yolanda M. López* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2008); “The Mexican Museum of San Francisco: A Brief History with an Interpretive Analysis,” in *The Mexican Museum of San Francisco Papers, 1971–2006* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2010); and *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

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THE CSRC ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

The CSRC Oral Histories Series publishes the life narratives of prominent Chicano and Latino figures.

The life narratives have been recorded and transcribed, and the interviewer and interviewee have reviewed and corrected the transcriptions prior to publication. These oral histories are often undertaken as part of a larger research project and in tandem with archival collections and library holdings.

CSRC ORAL HISTORY SERIES PROJECTS

L.A. Xicano documents the history of Chicana/o art in Los Angeles with a focus on artists, collectives, and art organizations. The project resulted in new museum and library exhibitions, public programs, archival collections, and scholarly publications. These efforts were part of the Getty Foundation initiative Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945–1980. The project received support from Getty Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and California Community Foundation. Related support includes funding from Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, AltaMed Health Services Corporation, Entravision Communications Corporation, Walt Disney Company, and individual donors.

A Ver: Revisioning Art History stems from the conviction that individual artists and their coherent bodies of work are the foundation for a meaningful and diverse art history. This book series explores the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other U.S. Latino artists. The A Ver project is made possible through the generous support of Getty Foundation, Ford Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Joan Mitchell Foundation, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation.

The LGBT and Mujeres Initiative seeks to increase archival and oral history holdings that document the Chicano/Latino presence in LGBT and women's histories, the role of women and LGBT people in Chicano/Latino histories, and the importance of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in "mainstream" scholarly research and archival institutions. The project receives generous support from the Ford Foundation and individual donors.

ARTISTS INTERVIEWED FOR THE L.A. XICANO PROJECT

Judy Baca
Charles "Chaz" Bojórquez
David Botello
Barbara Carrasco
Leonard Castellanos
Roberto "Tito" Delgado
Richard Duardo
Margaret Garcia
Johnny Gonzalez
Judithe Hernández
Leo Limón
Gilbert "Magu" Luján
Monica Palacios
John Valadez
Linda Vallejo

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SEPTEMBER 17, 2007

Karen Mary Dávalos: This is Karen Mary Dávalos, at the home of Gilbert “Magu” Luján, and it’s September 17, 2007. I just want to start with a question about your childhood, where you grew up, where you were born.

Gilbert Luján: Where should I start?

KMD: Well, where were you born?

GL: I was born at the San Joaquin General Hospital outside a little community called French Camp, which is a migrant farm workers’ camp—but registered as Stockton, which was a little town nearby—in 1940, October 16. [I’m a] Libra.

KMD: Birthday’s coming up.

GL: Birthday’s coming up. And we stayed in Stockton for about six months, as I understood it, more or less, and then we moved back to East Los Angeles where my mother’s family was. My father was not a migrant farm worker, but he went up to Stockton because his brother, Isauro Luján, was a contractor, so he was, at that point, kind of wealthy. He had built this huge house, and he was a tall man—very commanding figure—and my father was younger. He was a younger brother kind of archetype to his older brother’s success. So he’d do other kinds of jobs, but my father also had had tuberculosis and couldn’t work, in the normal sense of the word, at least [as] Mexican labor. So anyway, we came back to East LA, and then I stayed in East Los Angeles as a kid, all through my childhood, from one year into grade school. This was all during the Second World War, which runs all the way through the late ’40s. And I can tell you that my experiences there were such that—they’re not unlike the immigrant social profile you have today. East LA at that time looked like Tijuana. We had some paved streets, they had a forty-watt bulb at every intersection, and that was the extent of the lights. I remember East LA being very dark, because at that time, it was almost rural. This was in the ’40s.

KMD: What were you doing out late at night?

GL: I don’t know. Taking a leak? [*laughter*] We lived in a shack, didn’t have—

KMD: There was an outhouse?

GL: There was no internal bathrooms. It was just a tin building that they had constructed over a cement slab. We had bunk beds in there. There was no water sources, and essentially it was poor. There was poverty, it was pretty clear. But as a child, I never knew poverty. I never—like most people—maybe Charlie Chaplin’s—but he did, he was very much aware of it. I was not.

KMD: You weren’t?

GL: No, because everybody else around me was also impoverished, so what did I have to compare it with? Plus, as a little boy, you’re playing kick the can and chewing on the asphalt from the—I remember when they paved the streets, [there] was this extraneous asphalt that was on the side, and there was chunks of it. So little did we know it’s not good for you, but it used to—so we used to think it would make your teeth white. That’s definitely an urban myth. I don’t know if it works that way, but we had at that time diets that lacked sugar—sucrose—and we were young, and we had relatively healthy diets. We ate fresh foods.

There was very little of the processed foods that people eat regularly today. So we used to get beans and rice and all these kinds of things and cook it fresh.

KMD: Now, when you say "we," you're living with your father?

GL: It was my mother's side of the family. We were living in the back of my grandmother's house. And my grandfather, my maternal grandparents, were Eladio and Luciana Sanchez [Ledesma]. And at that time they were pretty clearly immigrants because they were here from being born in Mexico, and they had got here in 1926. And then there's a lot of adventures there I could tell you about, because being a laborer, my grandfather had to hustle, and he used to collect things. And he did a lot of odd jobs, and one thing I remember as a child is going around selling orange—pails full of oranges. So we would put them in a bag. We'd sell them door-to-door. And since I was little, I was mostly just carrying the oranges while somebody else would knock on the door. And my grandfather, I remember, would basically offer some of the rotten ones at the bottom, and if it was discovered, people would complain, and he'd replace it right away. Now, as a grown person, I think that that was bad business on one hand, but it was a survival thing. So that's an understanding of my childhood, that there was things that poverty brought to you, and trying to make it by any means possible reduced the moral value of what you were doing. Because we didn't see it as totally dishonest altogether; it was one that's a little more ripe than the other. So I remember thinking about that, because I also was—I must have been about four or five years old when we moved to a street—I mean, we lived on Eagle Street right near the intersection of Indiana and Eagle. And at that time, there was a market on the corner, and we used to use that to shop, and it was just a neighborhood store.

In the '40s, there was many of these little local mom-and-pop shops. They were everywhere, and we had no supermarkets. We didn't know what a supermarket was at that time. So what they had—I was waiting around. I didn't know where my mother was, so I decided, I said, "Oh, they have cherries over there." I remembered. So I walked over there and I walked into the store, and I was four years old. I was little. And I walked in, and I knew where the little brown bags were. I got a brown bag and I filled it with cherries, and then I walked out. And I sat on the front of the curb, and the man's looking at me, and he got the biggest kick out of it—little did I know—so he tells my mother. Oh, my mother got all freaked out. She says—she kind of told me, "No, you got to pay for that." Pay? What is that? So she showed me money. She showed me a penny. I remember distinctly, she made me very aware that you had to give the guy money for what I was getting. I had—and so those were a very early memory, a very clear one, because I was a thief and I didn't know it. And the guy was so kind about it. And I remember stealing—besides pens from work—I remember stealing a burrito one time. I was older, I was in my thirties. And I was caught, and I realized that I was no criminal. I just didn't have it in me. And I often wondered if that initial experience did anything to—I think you have to [be] smart to be criminal, [to] get away with things, and I was always too chicken to do it. And I never wanted to be embarrassed like that again. But my mom was not unkind. It wasn't that she was being—she never hit about it, she just explained, and I think that was why—

KMD: You felt some—

GL: But I used to think about—that these things actually have an intellectual process that you think about. And I was a grown man, in retrospect, thinking this way. As a child I had no notion of these things. And I was just learning the rules in society—you've got to pay money for that stuff. I remember the '40s very much into the Second World War. One day my parents went out to—or my mother went out to New Year's, and my aunt, who was just about four or five years older than me, maybe six, not much, but she was old enough to babysit us. When we were waiting for my mom to come back, we were still awake, and we kept hearing these gunshots and stuff—and popping, and firecrackers, whatever they did. And my aunt who was still very innocent herself, and a child, thought we were being attacked by the Japanese. So she hid us in this closet and she piled all these stuff on us so they wouldn't find us. And she told me in particular—she did the same with my brother and herself—but when my mother came home, there was no kids, and she—anyway, so she was looking around and found us. And I was asleep, because I had just got bored waiting in there for the Japanese to land. So—and they got a big kick out of it. And there was memories

of not so much being poor, but the things that had an impact were for different reasons. And I haven't psychologically figured those out, but I remember them clearly, because of the impact, and [they] have impacted other parts of my life that were influenced by these specific things. Like, I have this tremendous infatuation with Japanese culture, so I was waiting for that. But it was almost like an expectation of—well, the Japanese are coming. So when I grew up as a young man and in my twenties, I became a Zen Buddhist, and was so enamored by Japanese culture, like many people.

KMD: Can you tell me—I'm just trying to get a better sense of the household—are you the first child to be born?

GL: Number one.

KMD: You're number one.

GL: And the old system of being the first child didn't operate with us, because we were no longer—see, we were really Chicanos. We were a step away from the Mexican patriarchal system, which wasn't so patriarchal as people say. My mother always ruled the house as a single mother because my father and mother separated about a year after I was conceived.

KMD: Oh, okay.

GL: And so when we came back to East LA, because of that separation, I went to live with my mother's grandparents. And we also lived in different places of East Los Angeles, but with my father just visiting. So in those circumstances, my mom was in charge of us. We used to go and visit my dad because he lived in the neighborhood. And so there was really—I never really suffered any trauma about their divorce. As a matter of fact, I just understood that they would fight, and they would try to pitch their point of view. And I remember very clearly, I was ten years old, and I realized that my parents were just humans and they had these difficulties, and I dismissed it. So I never really suffered and had any ill effects of the divorce.

KMD: Well, it sounds like you had lots of extended family to take care of you.

GL: And so does everybody else, but sometimes people say, "Well . . ." And I have friends that are orphans, and they really focus on not having those parents. And it seems like such a longing and something that they missed. Well, my dad was around, and—but not all the time, and no big deal. Not unlike families that have sailors in the family and they're gone, and . . . they're gone. But it's not extraordinary. It's not a trauma.

KMD: And so grandma was in the front, grandma and grandpa were in the front end of the house.

GL: Yeah, they're in the front house. Now remember, they had eleven, thirteen kids. And we were in the back. And so there was other children that were, at that point, my aunts, they were old enough where they had their own households. So we moved from my grandparents' place at a certain point to my aunt who was the eldest, and her name was Lupe Renteria at that time. And we lived on—what was it? I think it was—I better not give you the street, but it was—I don't remember the name of the street right now, but it was a duplex.

And my uncle who had been in the army, and had been in the Italian front, and he was [in] one of the [landings]. He got involved in the Second World War in the infantry. But he had the other side [of the duplex]. And I remember the garage was full of stuff. And I mean stuff. I had no idea what it was, but it was just things that we accrued.

Like, I came to understand that poor people will collect anything to have something. And people that walk around with those carts, and people say, "Why do they have all that junk?" It's because it's a material *something*, and it gives you a stability of a social kind that's measured in different social circles differently. I have a friend of mine who's like that. He collects stuff forever, and he has a certain status because he has all this stuff, but it's all junk to most of us. But anyway, we're living in this duplex, and I have real clear memories. And I have a picture, and I have evidence of this in this photograph, which I think you guys will scan, and I'm Spanky there in the corner, a little bitty boy with—

KMD: Yeah. A little cap.

GL: And there's all the family at the time. We lived like immigrants do today. We weren't afraid of being deported so much, but we sold oranges. Not on street corners. We were a little more aggressive; we went house to house. But in those days, people didn't mind making that effort to do things.

Now I find that by comparison, people don't want to do very much for a lot of money. And I remember that we did a lot of things with a little bit of money, including Los Four and including my art career. I've done a lot with very little money. It's amazing. I'm often thinking about, "Jeez, I've accomplished a lot of stuff with poverty-level money."

KMD: Did your family—I mean, this is—

GL: My mother's family.

KMD: Your mother's side of the family? Is she in the photograph?

GL: Yes, she's right here.

KMD: And so these are her sisters, these other women?

GL: Yes. And there's my uncle that we lived with. And Lupe was the lady that we shared—we actually lived in a duplex. I don't know how they put us in there. They packed us in there.

KMD: These were your playmates then. Your cousins are your playmates?

GL: Yes. My grandmother was having children along with her older daughters, so a lot of my aunts—

KMD: Oh, your aunts and uncles were your playmates, too?

GL: Well, playmates, I suppose, but they were around. I had playmates of another kind. Look at how much younger I was. They were all older.

KMD: Yeah, you're right. For that group, you're the baby.

GL: Oh, yeah. I was a little kid.

KMD: So what was the family kind of—what are all the different ways you guys are earning money, outside of the oranges? Was your mom going to work?

GL: My mom used to color photographs. They were always hand tinted in those days. My Aunt Lupe was probably the best money earner. She knew how to butter up men. And I don't want to say anything else.

KMD: Did she dance?

GL: Oh, she was good. She always had men around, and they were—

KMD: And they were giving her tips.

GL: She was a—what's her name?—Zsa Zsa Gabor type. And she'd hustle men for whatever she could get from them. And it was the war years, you know what I mean? There was a lot of stuff going on there. And I remember as a kid, and I was little, and I was aware of it, but I just accepted it as the way the world was. I didn't make any judgments. There was none to be made at that point. So—

KMD: Here we go again.

GL: Going back to my birthplace, French Camp was a migrant farm camp. And it just happened that the general hospital which had been there since the 1800s, I think, was there. And all the births were registered in the town of Stockton, which was I don't know how many miles away—it was five, ten . . . I don't know what it is.

KMD: So your family leaves there after you're born right away. You said about six months.

GL: About six months. My mom returned to Los Angeles, and my dad worked, I think, for thrift shops, like [the] Salvation Army, but he had those kind of jobs that were not very difficult, but allowed us to pay the rent. And I think our rent at that time was like sixteen dollars a month or something. It was really—and it was almost unbelievable today.

KMD: That probably would have been like two hundred dollars or something now.

GL: Yeah, or even more.

KMD: Yeah. So your family settles pretty much with your mother and her side of the family. You're settling in East Los Angeles—

GL: And that was a primary childhood residence, was Maravilla. We lived in—

KMD: Oh, the community of Maravilla?

GL: Yeah. Well, that's what we called it at the time. That's where my grandmother lived. Now, there's different boundaries that people make for Maravilla, but we were a family who were there on Brooklyn [Avenue], which is [near] Macy [Street], downtown, in the late '20s and '30s. During the Depression, my mother was living closer to the LA River. And then much later, they bought a house on First and McDonnell. That's where my grandmother lived, on First and McDonnell, and right across from a Lutheran church. The church is still there. And catty-corner to her place was what they called Eugene, but it was McDonnell Avenue School for Poly-Handicapped People. It was all kinds of stuff.

When I—it used to be during the Second World War, a place for slow learners. If you were there, that means you're dumb, and nobody wanted that. But there was people that had to go there. And then later, when I was going to East LA College in the '60s, that school became a place for multi-handicaps, multiple-handicapped people. And there was people with small heads, there was dwarfism, there was everything that you could think of that people wouldn't be in a regular school. It was emotionally distressed people, there was schizophrenics, everything.

KMD: When you were growing up, you said that people didn't want to go there because that meant you were dumb. Did someone in your family ever attend that school?

GL: I think one of my aunts had to go there. And it was really not that she was so dumb, but there was a language barrier, and there was a psychological problem with being very insecure and very internal. And so that was measured as being slow. I think that the measurements for slow at that time were very crude, and probably more visceral on the part of the interviewer than anything, because my aunt was not slow. She was sure slick enough on the streets, but in terms of social interaction—but when it came to school, she'd clam up.

KMD: What language were you speaking at home as a child?

GL: Spanish. I couldn't speak English until I started the first grade. As a matter of fact, I had to take a leak [the] first day I was at school, and I really was just holding it and holding and I was dying. I didn't know how to convey it to the teacher, and I ran home just—because I didn't want to wet myself. But anyway, I finally went home. I still remember to this day how painful it was. Again, it was an impact that I'll never forget.

Then the next day, my mom—she used to take me to school at that point, because I was still little. And we lived in Eagle and Indiana [Streets], and it was Rowan Avenue [Elementary] School was the grammar school that I was going to. And by the fifth grade, I was one of the better spellers in the class. So I think it's the overcompensation of language, that either you—now at that time, I had no social objections to this country, this culture, and—as a child. And I had no way of doing anything but accepting that I was going to go to school, and this is the school I was put in and I didn't know anything else. So I accepted my early childhood and being a kid, never knowing that we were really poor. We thought other people were poor because we had a place to live and we had food, and just some of the basics, although very little. I always remember being hungry as a child.

KMD: You did?

GL: Oh yeah.

KMD: Did your family get food from the church?

GL: Never.

KMD: What about—

GL: I remember the junk man used to come around. I remember the Helm's Bakery man, and he would give us little doughnut things, maybe to hustle business. I don't know what his motives were. But I remember racing them. We'd all wait for this guy because we could hear this beep-beep—his horn—on the preceding block. And by the time he got to us, we'd be waiting there, and he'd be beeping along, going a little slow, and we'd be running, racing him. There was a Jewish junk man, too, that I remember. He had a horse, and these—this landscape of all these—Helm's bread guy, the milkman and so forth, were very strong images for me as a child. They were my life. This was all I saw. But I'm also trying to characterize that in the '40s, life and the environment was very different.

Now, we lived on Eagle and Indiana, which was upscale to what we were living on the edges of East LA, which was more—First and McDonnell, Ford and First—but it was towards Atlantic. If I could just be descriptive, I don't know if you know the area? So we were actually stepping up and living in this little house next to these friends of my mother. And I remember falling in love with a little girl next door, which I could—and she used to like me too, but she was three or four years older, so I was a little kid. So I remember being in love with her and all that, but not much else that I—I mean, it was all puppy love stuff. But I do remember liking this little girl a lot, and every place that I went to, there was always kind of a little romance that was certainly, if not unspoken, very low-key. It was usually internalized by me, and I wasn't one to be expressing any of that stuff. I was too young.

KMD: Were you being encouraged to explore your—

GL: Sexuality? *[laughter]*

KMD: I doubt if anybody's encouraging a child to explore their sexuality.

GL: No, but that was around. In the '40s, I think people were more innocent. At the same time, sexuality was always around, I remember.

KMD: Did you see people dance, or—

GL: Not dancing, it was like understanding that people had sex, and we weren't supposed to know the difference. And I remember being six, seven years old, and it was just things that were obvious. See, little kids, and I know this about children, they're recorders, and they're taking all this in just like I was. And I was just thinking, "These people really think I don't know what's going on?"

But as a child in those days, you never spoke your opinion. We were a lot more reticent about any experience. We were really expected to be seen and not heard. That was a rule. There was a lot of social rules, and units of meaning, that—because it was in the '40s, I'd like to say that they were innocent because maybe that's how I was perceiving them. I was a kid. And at the same time, I was witnessing the stupidity of some adult behavior, especially when they're drunk, and saying to myself, "I'll never be that way." It was clear, "I will never be like that as an adult." Well, again, I was innocent. It was innocent.

KMD: What kind of adult behavior are you seeing?

GL: Being drunk.

KMD: On the street? In your home?

GL: Yeah, arguing, falling around, being stupid. And I grew up never liking alcohol. I didn't like the way it tasted. And when I got into adolescent life, and got drunk from not knowing how to drink, it even was worse. It was a horrible experience. And leaving a pizza in the back of the school gym—

KMD: Losing your lunch.

GL: Losing the lunch. And I remember being so loaded in high school this one time, because this guy kept insisting that we buy wine, and I hated the stuff. I didn't even like it, but I drank it to be one of the guys. And when I got out of the car, the cold air, it affects you differently, because my legs became rubber, and I was trying to walk across the thing. And I remember everything—never blacked out. And then they gave me the bottle—they got me past the front door because it was a free dance for Mexican kids in El Monte. And El Monte at that time was very segregated. This is in the '56, '57 era—1956. And we were in the dance, and I remember everybody jumping up and down and looking at it in this glazed, horrible drunk feeling. I never liked it.

Then somebody gave me one of the wine bottles, and I got it and just let it go. And the bottle went clink-clink-clink, and here comes the security and the school, whoever was in charge of that thing. And they brushed me out, and they told [me], "Get him out of here." That's all I remember. But I remember very clearly. So when I would get drunk, and this has happened more than once, I was always very lucid about everything that happened. I never lost track of what was going on. I just didn't have control. So they took me to the back of this dance place in El Monte, and that's where I heaved this thing. I remember people coming and taking a look at me and laughing and making jokes. I just was miserable. So drinking was—

KMD: Did they humiliate you on purpose?

GL: No, I think they just got a kick out of it. I don't think they were trying to humiliate me. I don't even think I was humiliated at the time. I just felt like hell. I didn't care.

KMD: Can I go back a little bit to elementary school? From my understanding, East Los Angeles at this time is not specifically Mexican or Mexican American.

GL: Towards Boyle Heights, yes. But on the fringes where we lived, in Maravilla, it's nothing but Mexicans because that's where the real poverty was. Now as I said, when we stepped up, we moved to Indiana [Street], which is closer to Boyle Heights. And if you know the chronological history of that area, the Jews, Armenians, Italians, Russians, were all on the—really, Boyle Heights had a lot of neat houses—they're well-built and sturdy; to this day, they're still built.

And once you get past—jeez, I don't know—when you come further into East Los Angeles, there's almost a place where you can see where the houses were redone in the '50s, or literally wiped out. And so there was this whole restoration program that happened during the '50s to upgrade all of those houses. They put in lights, they put in streets. I remember Dangler being all red clay and Hazard and all those streets.

KMD: So as a child, did you have an awareness that the community was mostly Latino?

GL: No. Mexican. We didn't have those terms, Latino. We wouldn't have known what you were talking about. That's the colloquial thing that I think is more recent, because of the political things that have changed our community.

KMD: So you were aware that you were living with other Mexicans?

GL: We were Mexicans. That's all we had. Now, we had people there that were from Puerto Rico; we had people that were Italian, and they were part of our social circles. They weren't not—and I remember being told not—to really watch our money when we dealt with Jewish merchants because they would always cheat you a penny, a nickel, whatever, and it proved to be true. And some people say, "Well, that's racist." No, that's what I remember, and it wasn't just me. I mean, it was a common thing. People would always be complaining about Jewish merchants.

And I began to understand it later, anthropologically, that Jewish culture of that kind was from an area of nomadic people and camel traders. And people who were business people really drive a hard bargain. It's a survival desert culture that gets transferred into sedentary cultures where this is not a cool thing to be like that. But out there, to get the best deal is a cultural norm. Now, in our culture where you are generous and giving, where they wouldn't cheat you, I found that Mexican people were honest, innocent, to the point of naïve-ness. And that's why we were always warned, because we were fair targets to these people who would earn a penny. We also had people—in explaining these attitudes that were coming out of the Depression—and the Jewish people that we lived around were not wealthy.

So they had to know the value of saving pennies and so forth. Plus this is a cultural manifestation of really understanding the cultural traits that they come from are ancient. And I've read books that talk about a 10 percent savings, capital money. I've read several books that my father made me read to show that economically, the 10 percent idea is supposed to be Jewish, but I think it's a larger economic system that came from that Mediterranean area. But later, I began to discover, because I got interested in anthropology, I began to understand why Jews are insulated. They do business in temple to keep it from other people. That goes back two thousand years. It's not a recent thing. But these traits are something that get transferred over here among people who don't do that, and so there's conflicts. And so I learned to not be a racist. I began to really understand that ethnicity was truly what people are and how they behave and what they do, and we had a culture clash.

KMD: The—I get a sense of the community. I wonder if you can tell me, maybe thinking about your childhood play, when you were out with your friends in elementary school, before you're going off to middle school or high school, where did you play? In the backyard? In the street?

GL: In the dirt. In the street, in the dirt, we used to play—we couldn't play ball in the street on First Street because we'd have a car go by every half hour. They thought that was too much traffic. But my uncles had cars. We played marbles, and having steelies and all the different kinds of marbles, it was really something to have. And we played mostly hide and seek, but then I learned how to play post office with the girls. You get a kiss and all that stuff.

And it went beyond that, in my case, because one summer, I was still young; it went way beyond kissing. And I have a friend of mine who thought that that was child abuse, but as a male, that's a hard one to accept. Being young, and that's why I pointed out earlier—I don't know—people talk about it. I just see it as part of the spectrum of life that sexuality was operating, and among kids. There was all kinds of little things that happened that were very traumatic and dramatic, but I never saw them as negative. At least, I didn't interpret them as negative. And then as I grew up, I understood that young kids do all of this kind of stuff of sexual exploration and behavior in most farms—in farm people—they see reproduction among animals, so they figure that's part of what you should do.

KMD: In the school situation, were you encouraged? You said you went on to become the best speller.

GL: I think that overcompensation had to do with feeling—really having a sense of inadequacy, that I believe came from not being able to speak English. And I think, also, that I had enough teachers there that would advocate that we learn the subject matter, and I don't remember them being racist. They may have been tough, but I didn't ever experience racism, although they may have been, but I wasn't aware of it.

KMD: Right, you weren't aware of it.

GL: So, it came on later in high school, which had some dramatic points I'm going to talk about, where it was very clear that that was my social reality, and that's to be outside the mainstream reality as a Mexican.

KMD: Before I move on to—you're living in East LA, I wanted to go to the next place the family lived, which, I understand, is El Monte.

GL: No, that came much later, adolescence. We moved, after we were at Eagle Street, we moved to—actually, there was a place off of Rowan [Avenue] and Folsom [Street] on the corner. That was after—we lived on Record [Avenue], that was the street that my aunt lived on. It was Record and—and then we moved to a street called Folsom, right by Rowan, on the corner, there was a corner house. Then we moved to Eagle, and then after that, we moved to—let's see, after Eagle, we moved to another place that was on First Street right near Hoyo Mara[villa], which is across the street from a place called La Botellita. And it's still there and it's still called that. And it's on First Street, just as First Street drops into Hoyo Mara, and where the Obregon Park is, but it's on First Street there. And there's a gym there now, and there's a park, and there's a Los Four story associated with that park much later.

But we lived at that place where the owner was named Caransa. And I remember his name was Caransa because we would make this joke that came from the Revolutionary War in Mexico, "Caransa, Caransa, piquite la panza." But this was our landlord. We didn't know the historical reference to war. But anyway, we lived in this place. I remember a man that was working [at] that liquor store was shot by a robber, and he came out bloody, but he shot at this guy, and the bullets went towards—because we were right across the street. We lived in the back, so we were okay, but the people in the front got bullets coming through their house.

KMD: Did you grow up with a lot of violence like that on the street?

GL: No. It happened—I remember it snowed one time in '47, '49. I remember a lot of normal things, like people just living, but I think that was a dramatic instance that people remember, because it was even in the paper. But mostly, I think that I would play with little rocks, going back to your question about what we did as a child, and jumping around. But I remember using rocks and little pieces of wood, and [I] created a landscape in the dirt, and I would make roads.

We didn't have toys. During Christmas, we would get a few toys, but none that were really outside toys. But I still remember having those little trucks made out of metal that were actually put together. I've seen them before in antique shows, but they're little metal cars and airplanes. I remember having those

little things, especially during the Second World War, everybody had a little airplane. [speaking to friend] ¿No quieres agua? Orange juice? Friend: I'm fine.

GL: Let's see, so we lived at Caransa's for a long time, and behind Caransa's is this arroyo. It was just wild. And people throw their trash back there, but that's where I grew up for awhile. Then we moved from there to South Central. Then after South Central we moved to Bassett or La Puente.

KMD: While you're living in East LA, you're at the same elementary school the whole time because that's not very far, all those different places.

GL: No. When I was living on Eagle and Indiana, I went to Rowan Avenue [Elementary] School. Then when we moved back to Caransa's, I went to Belvedere Gardens [Elementary] School.

KMD: Oh, you were in Belvedere?

GL: Yeah, First and Rowan. Now they have buildings in front of the old—there I remember the May Day, we used to have to dance the May Day. I remember about eleven o'clock, we'd be smelling the food at the cafeteria, because in those days, being Mexican kids, many of us were undernourished. So they used to line us up and give us an orange and cod liver oil. Every kid had to go at least once a week. I remember doing a May Day dance, we had to do these Mexican dances. I don't know, it was just part of growing up.

KMD: Was it traumatic going from—you moved a lot. Was it traumatic for you?

GL: Not at all.

KMD: Not at all?

GL: I don't know. [I don't] remember any problems. I remember the changes. [coughs]

KMD: Want to pause for a glass of water?

GL: It's a dry tickle. Water doesn't help. But, yeah, let's—

[break in audio]

KMD: We're back—we had to get a drink of water—and Gil's going to tell me about—

GL: Living in the Maravilla projects was something that was part of . . . Speaking about—when I was living with my mom, we moved around. But my father also lived in Blanchard [Street], which I went to visit many times. And he also lived in the Maravilla projects right across from the Belvedere [Park] gym, and all that stuff. And he also lived on La Verne [Avenue] near Whittier Boulevard and Sixth [Street]—something like that. And so I don't know if I ever realized that we moved a lot. As a child, I think you just accept what happens, and I didn't give it much thought. It never felt traumatic. It was kind of exciting to go to a new place, after all. I mean, it was new and you never knew what you were going to get.

I remember having a friend that I really, really—I always wanted to have a friend, and my little brother—I was always very protective, always hugging him. He was a couple of years younger than me, but it was enough at that early age to be real, I guess, brotherly.

KMD: Responsible?

GL: Being the firstborn—there's a book written about firstborns, and we do take a lot of responsibilities is the norm. But at the Maravilla project, I never thought—I knew that when you live there, you're not rich. But I never thought of being totally down and out because my father had a job, and like most Mexican men at that time, he didn't make much money. And then having these physical ailments like tuberculosis, that he got rid of. He went to a sanitarium in the '40s, actually, and got over it.

But subsequently he always had jobs, menial jobs, that were like, truck driver services and so forth. Nothing real heavy. [He] worked for General Electric, moving around electric motors and stuff in the '50s, and I remember he always smelled like electric motors. Or the other thing that I still find to be a memory of my dad was Lava soap. And so, when you look back at those ages, I think at that age, I remember smells. I remember downtown. I remember different communities that I would really pay attention [to] in terms of scents.

KMD: Was your family taking the bus downtown?

GL: The P-car. [Los Angeles Railway line—ed.]

KMD: The P-car.

GL: The P-car was operational in those days. The trolley cars were very available. Ten cents I think they were, at a given point.

KMD: Did you ever sneak a ride in the back?

GL: No, I was a kid. To this day, I have an aversion about cheating.

KMD: So in elementary school, you seem to survive and even rise to the top of the class. Does that continue on in middle school? I don't know what people called it then.

GL: I think it was, but there was never any pressure. There was never any educational pressure at home. So I did what I had to. I don't think I was an A student because I didn't put much effort in it, but yet I know—I remember being astute in a lot of things that I didn't reveal. And I remember paying attention to things that I just kept to myself. I didn't voice them.

And even to the point when I met Tere [Romo] and the RCAF [Royal Chicano Air Force] and so forth, I used to try to tell people things that I learned about, but there was not much interest. Or somehow I got the feeling that, "Yeah, so what?" I remember going and talking to these guys at the RCAF up north about alternative energy, and I was getting to adobe and they just look [at] me like, "What?" The conversation lasted around three seconds. It never went anywhere. And I tried it again several times, but nobody was interested in physics and those things. So I learned from high school, especially among Raza, that you don't reveal your intellect. It's not something you want to put out front.

KMD: What about your artistic expression?

GL: I didn't think I had any. I was not—I used to draw all the time, but never the framework of being an artist or being in the art world or knowing anything about fine arts; nothing. It was all just kind of kid stuff. I remember my drawings, and to this day, some of the drawings I did, and they were terrible—what kids do.

KMD: Doodling?

GL: Well, even major efforts of drawing Turkey Day and so forth. But they were the typical drawings that kids made; nothing exceptional. There was nothing there to say, "Oh, this kid's going to be an artist." As a matter of fact, they would say, "You should keep your day job, because your art's going to be terrible." I find to this day—and I told Tere a little bit about this—but the craftsmanship that I use was a little bit clever in the sense that I chose to do *rasquache* and folk art to hide any clumsiness; to hide any lack of skill. And then I refined that to the point where I made that a refined *rasquache*.

KMD: I'm not going to believe him, but that's okay. [*laughter*]

GL: Well, that's my attitude.

KMD: You're going to hide behind you have no technique, you have no skill. I'll let you believe that.

GL: No, no. But that's how it was at the beginning. Certainly in high school. Certainly all the way through school, and certainly compared to the other guys in Los Four. What I had was conceptual, but I didn't have the technical skill like Beto [Roberto de la Rocha] or [Carlos] Almaraz. They were way ahead of me. Plus they were being supported by family like I never was, so I had to work, and I had to do a lot of extra things that kept me from refining my technical skills.

The other thing that I had, if I can say, is that I didn't have technical skill. I had uniqueness without straining it, because that's what I was told by teachers. And they—I was a diamond in the rough in many ways because I used to be embarrassed about my execution, but I had a lot of ideas. I had conceptual growth at that time without knowing anything about that having a value. Now, this is in my early—going to East LA and maybe even Long Beach—by the time I did my MFA, it was important to relate it to my childhood. I still was hiding in many ways. I think it was a psychological way of remaining less than and not to your full potential. And having a lot of insecurities and feeling that I'm supposed to be down at the bottom somewhere.

Comparing it to Japanese culture, I found that we weren't being pushed educationally. My mom—when I came out of the service, and I told her, "Well, I'm going to go to college," which they knew I wanted to do, but they never believed it, or they never really gave it much thought. But when I came out of the

service, I said, "Well, I'm going to go to college. I'm going to go and sign up." She goes, "Okay, come home and eat once in awhile." That was it. And then when I tried to tell them what I was learning, "Ah, don't tell us." There was no basis for the intellectual development I was making at school. It wasn't in the context at home, so, "Nah, don't tell us this stuff."

KMD: Did the family read? Did anyone in the family—did they read the paper, read magazines?

GL: My stepdad read all these cowboy dime novels, and he had tons of them, and then those sexy ones too.

KMD: You said before that your father made you read. Was that later?

GL: My father never really made me read. My stepdad was the one that was the reader. Now, my dad also read, but he read more esoteric things, like metaphysical things, and he was into spiritual and Christian—whatever it was that he was exploring, because he used to go to churches all the time. I suspect that those motives were more sensual than theological.

KMD: What do you mean by that?

GL: I mean that most men that hang around churches are not always so pious as to want to study theology.

KMD: [laughter] He's meeting women?

GL: Yeah, there's always women there, and there's always women around churches that have needs. And those needs are sometimes—that are emotional needs are translated into religious shenanigans that really—like preachers. That's why they have a lot of adventures with women because women are going there for solace, and what they get is sexual responses. Now, I was a little kid and I'm watching all this stuff and very aware of it.

KMD: Is your family taking you to church?

GL: My dad used to take me once in a while, but when I was about twelve or thirteen, I wouldn't go to church anymore. I found it extremely boring. Now, I wouldn't mind going to church with the guys, because we'd go there to see the girls. Well, at that time we were—my dad was not a Catholic. He hated Catholic churches. He was not only anti-clerical, but he was anti-church, which is the distinction that he made. But he was a spiritualist that believed in Christ and that mythology, and he tried to get me interested in it, but, eh . . . The church, by that time, to me, was pretty much empty of any significance that had to do with anything holy.

It wasn't that it was my realizations alone. This priest slapped my brother one time because we were riding around on our bikes. We went to this church—I don't know why we gravitated to the church—but this big German guy came out, and he was asking us, "Where do you boys live?" We said, "Oh, down the street." He goes, "Well, where do you go to school?" "Sixty-Eighth Street School." And he says, "Well, why don't you come to Catholic school?" "Well, partly because it costs money."

KMD: Too much money.

GL: Yeah, it costs money, at all. We didn't know how much, but just too much. So the priest said, "You should have your mother go to work so she can send you to school here." Well, the Catholics, that's just what they do. And so my brother said, "Well, why don't you give us the money, which are better known as scholarships," and [the priest] slapped him. And we both stepped back, and we went and told my mother, and we never had to go back to any Catholic anything. And my father was happy. He doesn't—he saw the hypocrisies of what Christian churches had become, way beyond—centuries ago, they became really centers of power, and politics and social—and mundane goals. It has nothing to do with the more holy aspects of Christianity.

Because when I was a young man too, and I mean young in terms of high school—the other thing I hid from people which I didn't really talk about too much, was that I had a real interest in theology. And my real interest in theology had to do with knowing the truth. And the truth meant to me, like, "What's going on in this world? What's up? Which way is up?" So I began to study those things. And one of the early books in my twenties—by the time I had left high school, I was in the service—I was free from the social stigma of being a *vato loco* and having to conform to those values, which meant you don't read. You drink beer and you chase girls and try to get a nice car. And so when I was in the service, those other guys that

were reading the *chavacitos* that I saw—anyway, I read *The Quest of the Historical of Jesus*, which was very pointedly what I wanted to know. Who was this guy, Christ? I didn't know. Again, I had dropped off the Catholic litany a long time before.

So anyway, the point is that we understood at that time, and even living with my dad, I met this other guy, I met this other guy whose name was Albert, and these people were really Christians. Christians in the sense that they were kind, they were forgiving, very bright and intelligent. To me they were very smart. The guy spoke and read Greek and German and Arabic or something. Aramaic. And so he helped me untangle some of these dilemmas of religion. And eventually, I gravitated to Buddhism, which I found to be the most true to reality. And Buddhism, they don't have these illusions of these antiquated ideas that God is a human or has human attributes, and can punish you and all these other moralistic things that societies make up, which is—in anthropology, it's well understood.

But as a young kid, I wanted to find out, so I began to read. I remember *The Red Pony*, I remember Sinclair Lewis, I remember all those guys. Saroyan. I went through Steinbeck by myself, trying to understand the world. By this time, I was becoming a little man, by being in the service. I went in at seventeen, came out at twenty-one. By the time I came out at twenty-one, I was really ready for college. And I mean, I was ready for college, and I was seeking two things: wisdom cultures and the ability to think.

Now, this is a gradual process that I came to, because I kept looking around for mentors, and, "Somebody please help me figure this out. I don't understand all these things." And when I went to East LA College, for example, it was really an exploration of things that I really needed to come and put in my belt. And so I really took school very seriously. And I started out with Cs and Ds at East LA—not very good. And then by the time I went to Long Beach State, I got closer to a B average. And by the time I did my master's, I was getting straight As. And I think that's indicative of just really wanting to just intellectually improve and figure things out. So one of those things was to learn how to think. I wanted to learn, I wanted to know, and then I wanted to learn how to think. And that was the operational word. How do you think?

And so that was the self-generating steam engine that caused me to be successful in school, because I didn't go there for a job. Or—as a matter of fact, I picked art as a vocation kind of half-assed thinking that, "Yeah, I'll be a teacher maybe." But I'd never given it—what does that mean? And I didn't prepare myself to be a teacher. I'd prepared myself as an artist. And later on in these interviews I'll point out, if we get back to it, that I really learned how to perform and operate within the function of an artist. But for survival's sake, I had to be an administrator, [doing] other jobs outside of being an artist, just to survive with my family.

KMD: Let me pause just for a minute.

[*break in audio*]

KMD: Okay. We took a pause and we're back, and trying to get a better sense of your childhood schooling. You said when you first went to school, you were speaking Spanish. You didn't know any English, and then by fifth grade, you'd become—

GL: Adept at the language. And we stopped speaking Spanish largely [in school], but at home we spoke Spanish. But we switched over to English.

KMD: We, meaning—

GL: Well, people around me, my brother. And I think it's common among *chicanitos*, *chicanitas* that grow up in this culture, we eventually leave the Spanish language, at a point. But I retained enough of it to be fluent to this day.

KMD: Did you—you talked about in early school how that was a difficulty. Did you have other kinds of difficulties? Did you have people make you feel unwelcome in the school, or any sense of . . .

GL: I sensed prejudices, but I didn't understand the concept of racism as an institution or a stereotype. I did—and very keenly was aware of people's attitudes and the way they carried themselves and how they

behaved to us. Because I saw evidence of Mexican people being pushed around by white privilege, if I can synthesize it, that was [it].

KMD: Can you give me an example of what you remember?

GL: White people talking really bad to black men and Mexican men in labor situations. I remember the cops beating up Mexicans every weekend just for the sport of it. I grew up seeing all this stuff, and I saw that Mexicans were at a social disadvantage.

KMD: Was your family giving you any instruction about that, how to deal with that, or hold your head up, or . . .

GL: "Don't cause trouble. Don't attract their attention." So yeah, there is—it was also largely unspoken, because—well, living at the house, we never talked about politics. Because she was incapable of talking about politics, and she didn't want arguments at the house. As a matter of fact, we weren't allowed to raise our voice or anything. I remember—oh, I must have been about eight or nine when we're sitting at the dinner table, and I'm arguing—throwing little jabs at my brother who's a little younger, and I called him a pimp.

And of course in those settings, when there's any language—you couldn't say "Hell" or "Damn," none of that stuff. So any language like that was right away a red flag. And so everybody—my mother says, "What? What did you say?" I said, "Pimp." And then they realized I had no idea what it was. They said, "Where did you hear that?" I said, "Over there. School." And they said, "Do you know what it means?" I said, "No." All I know is that being a pimp was not good.

SEPTEMBER 19, 2007

KMD: We're on side B. This is with Gil "Magu" Luján on September 19, 2007. Go ahead, Gil.

GL: I was trying to think about those things that would be reflective of how later I began to think of my childhood with respect to the development of my aesthetics. And I remember doing the—on First Street, I did all these buildings across the street, and it's a clumsy little drawing of kids' stuff. But at the same time, I remember actually conceptually trying to figure out how to map this out. And it was very clear that I had to have measurement and scale, and still keep within the page, and do so much like that. I remember there was definite things I knew I had to get under control to articulate a proper image so that it looked like it was supposed to. And later on, it affected me with respect to not being good enough to do realism, so I went towards fantasy and this kind of *rasquache*-ness that was a way to hide my inability to be technically super-smooth.

And I also remembered that—I found that to be technically proficient reduced something else in the emotional content or the ideas of something. Now, that may not be true altogether. I wouldn't say it's true, but I would say that that was my inclination. I said to myself I wanted something more gritty and more spontaneous than being perfect and technically superior. So I remembered, when I was doing this thing, this drawing of the urban landscape that was across Belvedere—so we sat in the front of the Belvedere Gardens Elementary School and we'd draw First Street, right across the street, and there's a tortilla place, et cetera. And I still have that drawing, which we've got to find. And I remember thinking about art being difficult, in that you really have to develop skills.

And later on, [it] helped to reinforce the idea that art is something you do well, and that stuck with me. It was kind of an idea that made sense, and I was inclined to believe that art is something you do well, not necessarily what the content tells you. In other words, a more basic explanation of art has more to do with a philosophical stance than the content. Especially with us, that we got caught up into doing a lot of social descriptive things, like the Movement kind of ideas.

We needed to elucidate to people who we are and how we operate and all that. But I was on a program—I guess I'm jumping around again, but I'd rather just say it—the first program that came out from East LA. And there was a satellite, a TV satellite program with Ed Moreno, and it was called *Ahora*. And I remember telling them, when they asked me about what I was supposed to do with my art and what I was hoping to accomplish, I told them that I wanted to do poetry. Well, there was a couple of Marxists on the panel, and they got on my case for that, because they felt that my—anybody that's doing art should be responsible to a Marxist ideal, or to represent what pertains to people, that poetry would be self-indulgent. But they misunderstood, because when I meant poetry, I meant a lot of other things that I didn't articulate that time, because I got smashed for even thinking like that.

And I remember at that time, the Marxists were the people that kept thinking that "art is politics," primarily do not understand that an artist is into aesthetics. Now, I happen to be very political, and I'm not against doing political art, but I do it surreptitiously. Like I was telling Tere [Romo] earlier this morning, that my idea of content could be anything—it's like the way I paint. I've got abstract expressionism. I've got all these different schools of painting because I'm not tied to a school of painting. I'd rather express *chicanismo* with all of the vocabulary I can muster.

KMD: When you were younger, before you went off to college, were you experimenting with different—you know, did you have crayons in the home, watercolors . . .

GL: Pencils and those things. Nothing that was—nobody made a big deal out of it, but it was probably that big blue lined paper, or—nothing very specialized. There was no real interest in trying to encourage me to do art or drawings.

KMD: Was there any interest in the home in decoration, in beautifying the place that they lived, even if it was going to be temporary? You know, did they put the curtains in the window?

GL: Yes. But it was at a rudimentary stage, and more important, it was not really considered to be something that they would do to beautify. I remember more that to be *en vogue*, like Chinese modern. I remember there was people in the family that had chartreuse and black furniture in the front room, and they had panther and the flamingo paintings, and the glass and mirrors. So I think that the aesthetics in those days were store bought. Store bought was more important than anything else that maybe later came into—like today, there's people that would rather have handmade things. Or there's a significance to . . . As a carryover, I now draw on suede board, as a carryover from those velvet paintings. But as a Chicano, and later we'll talk about my aesthetics, I hope, that I replicated a lot of those things today in homage to those velvet paintings.

You know now, some people are paying ten thousand dollars for those things. But no, they didn't. Nobody really was prompting me to do art. Like in his case, his father was an artist. My fathers—my step-dad and my father—were blue-collar truck drivers. So no, there was never any aesthetic push or interest. So whatever I did in those days was really very internalized and private, and I didn't really talk about it very much.

KMD: When you were in high school, what are some of the things you did for a fun time?

GL: Well—

KMD: Not including breaking the law.

GL: [laughter]

KMD: Well, I guess not that, without having to turn off the tape.

GL: Mostly going out with the guys, thinking and talking about girls, and mostly about cars.

KMD: Did anybody have a car?

GL: Yeah, a lot of the guys had cars. I never had the ability to raise money enough to go after a car. I lacked that ability to gain income and build money to get what I wanted to. I was not an entrepreneur of any kind. And so I did without a car.

KMD: What kind of cars was everybody dreaming of?

GL: Mostly Fords and Chevys and hot rods, because the kids that were non-Chicanos then, were Euro-Americans. They had more money. And I'm talking about the '50s here because that's when I'm a teenager, in the '50s, and they had more resources than we did. So the cars that I used to go cruising with were old and customized. Like, they'd primer them, they'd put primer—where they take off the chrome, and instead of filling it in, or if they did fill it in, they sprayed primer. And that became a style, of having primer spots on your car. There was—without getting into the details of it, any number of alternations you can make to your car. Like lowering it was essential.

And so those were aesthetics, but we didn't understand them that way at the time. We didn't know that was an art form, although it's turned out to be that's how we describe it.

KMD: Did you guys do this together then? Did you go to somebody's house and tinker with the car?

GL: Cars are a specialization product. You need a guy that does mechanical things, another guy that does upholstery, another guy does wiring. So it does require a team. Now, some guys did everything, but not that well.

KMD: Did you help somebody? Were you part of teams that did that?

GL: Yes, but it was always kind of like, you'd go to some guy's and he's working on the car, and you just help him, taking off wheels or doing—scarring your knuckles for working on metal things, and liking the smell of oils and gasoline. It's terrible now.

KMD: Oh, you didn't like the smell of gasoline?

GL: Not anymore.

[break in audio]

KMD: We were pausing to figure out where we want to go from here. I just want to ask a question about, I understand the family's economic situation and who's living where, but I'm wondering if maybe you could

tell just a little bit about like, what did you do for birthdays? What did people do for Christmas? The family get together?

GL: Yes. I loved Christmas. I'm not a Christian, and I don't really subscribe to the organized religions. But culturally, I love Christmas because we used to go to downtown LA, and see—if you see that movie [A] *Christmas Story*, it tells you everything there about the kinds of youthful exuberance over Santa Claus. And these magical kinds of lights, and the smells . . . Yes, we would get together, and there was always food. And there was all this kind of Mexican *moles* and stuff that we would have. So holidays and so forth were certainly always well represented.

KMD: Did you go see the window displays downtown?

GL: Oh yes. That was a given.

KMD: Was that a delight for you as a child?

GL: Oh yes. I mean, this is why I still am culturally attached to Christmas. And if I'm here at Christmas, I'm going to have a Christmas tree. I [tried] to do it at the studio, but I just didn't do it. But yes, the parties that we had, ice cream and cake . . . I have pictures that show us with the little hats, and eating. I didn't pay attention as a kid, just eating sweets.

KMD: Do you remember if the family was making those cakes, or were they getting them from the bakery down the street?

GL: They were making the cakes, I think. I don't think that we got store-bought things until the '50s, and I think that was the difference. But that was—I think we always had time and energy for holidays and birthdays. And I think we had, at least in my memory, we had a wonderful childhood with respect to parties. Somehow, we would manage to have a party, which a lot of times, the parties that we would go to as well were in the Maravilla projects. And it consisted of listening to these scratchy records or the radio real loud, and everybody getting soused with beer. And we would run up and down, just playing like kids.

KMD: Were the adults dancing?

GL: Probably not too much. Because it was out in the front. In the projects it was hot in the house, so everybody was in the front yard sitting there on chairs, and us kids were just running up and down. I mean, I don't remember altogether what we did.

KMD: You were at least free from adult supervision, probably.

GL: Yes. And again, I didn't know we were—I knew we were poor, but I didn't feel it. I didn't feel it.

KMD: Yeah. Well, let's stop for today. Thank you.

SEPTEMBER 22, 2007

KMD: This is Karen Mary Davalos interviewing Gil Lujan, and today is September 22, 2007. I'm at his home in Ontario. And we're going to do a few more questions about growing up, describing some of the communities you lived [in], and education and entertainment. So let me just get a sense, you lived in East LA from about '40 to '45, right?

GL: Mm-hmm. [Yes.]

KMD: And then there's a period—

GL: Well, up to the '50s, actually.

KMD: Oh, through the '50s, and then South Central.

GL: We went to South Central around '50.

KMD: And at that time, it's mostly an African American community?

GL: No. Oddly enough. Blacks were moving into that area, and Inglewood as well, Torrance. But they had previously been white communities. And in the '50s, as there was an encroachment of blacks, there was a lot of difficulties between the whites and the blacks. But there was not a very large Chicano population then, so we were not involved in [confrontations]. If people were involved, it's just that they were at football games, because that's when [fights would] take place. It was always in the papers that high school kids had rioted somewhere or another. But that was South Central.

KMD: Did you see that kind of violence regularly then?

GL: Not regularly. It wouldn't always happen. But it might happen more regularly than I saw, because I only saw it one time. It was pretty ugly. It was hundreds of guys just punching it out, and we were looking because I was just a young—I'd just gone to the junior high school. But they were mostly high school guys, as I remember. But that kind of strife. And I asked my mother, and I think it was significant that I asked her about why they were having so much problems, what was going on. And she said, "There's good people and bad people in every ethnic group." And that was really my civic lesson from my mother, which proved to be true. It's a generality, but it was true. And I think I took on that same attitude that racism was silly.

I was young. I was forming—like all adolescents, you're forming social views, and that was one of them. Plus we had black friends that were there in the neighborhood on the opposite side of the street. Now, we were in the back, so we didn't count. But on my side of the street, facing west, they were all white, except the last house was black. And on the opposite side of the street, they were all black, except the last house was a white couple. It was the oddest thing, and we used to laugh about, and I don't know that it could have been planned. It just happened that way. But it was an anomaly. We thought it was funny.

KMD: Other streets weren't like that?

GL: I don't know about other streets. It was pretty much—

KMD: And you were living in the back of an apartment or a house?

GL: We lived in a little house in the back. And I remember those years there when I was ten to thirteen or so, I used to love to play ball. And it was—we were always getting into trouble for going out and playing ball on the street. There was hardly any cars. I can't imagine what it would be like now, but there wasn't that many cars, and when a car would come, we'd just get out of the way. It was simple. The rhythms were simple. But I really liked football a lot in those days, and I couldn't get out there enough. Rain, it didn't matter. Sometimes if we could get away, we'd be out there playing in the rain. We were kids.

KMD: So you were playing with a mixed group of kids?

GL: Yeah, it was mixed. Oh, yeah, there was blacks, there was Okies. This kid whose mother would make tortillas with potato lumps in the *masa*. And they were good, and then she puts sugar on it, or butter on it and roll it up.

KMD: Oh, that sounds great.

GL: Oh, yeah. So we used to get those, and she'd say, "They're like Mom makes, kind of, huh?" she'd say. But poverty cultures, I think, all wind up using flour as a device to wrap food or actually, like in this one, she had the potatoes in the *masa*. I don't know how much protein that is. A lot of starch there, but we survived on a lot of really—things now that we don't think are good for us.

But I think we had a better diet in those days, too. We didn't have sodas and candies. I'm impressed that when I go to the store, there's like two zillion different kinds of candies. And I remember maybe five or ten, maybe. Maybe it's just that I wasn't really—

KMD: Were you getting those little delights as a child?

GL: Yeah, we ate, I remember a Cup-O-Gold, but a Cup-O-Gold was so sweet that I couldn't possibly eat one, even in those days. But I remember liking red strawberry soda and root beer and candied apples.

KMD: Was your family doing a little bit better economically?

GL: Yes, because the Second World War did one thing, and they began to employ Mexicans, Chicanos. And as a result, as the economy was really growing in leaps and bounds, and in the early, early '50s, late '40s, there was a lot of people beginning to get the idea of super malls, supermarkets. There was an incredible social energy to improve your life. Track homes were very popular at that time, and going up the ladder was important. And we were sucked up as well as everybody else. We actually got a car, and we got some of the things, the basic necessities. We had a place to live. And we had food.

KMD: Did you have a TV or a radio?

GL: We had a TV. By 1950, I believe, we had a TV, a small one. But radio up to '47, '48. I think by '50—'49, '50, somewhere in there, we got a TV. And they were small and new, but we had one, and programming was limited to the evenings for us. We were at school, and then we'd come home in the afternoon and watch *Beany and Cecil*—were you the one that switched it around for me?

KMD: Cecil and—?

GL: It's *Beany and Cecil*—or was it Cecil and Beany?

KMD: Yeah, I've heard of *Beany and Cecil*.

GL: Beany was the little character. Cecil was the little dragon friend that he had, hand puppets. But I was, at that point, beginning to develop TV viewing habits. It was a treat watching cartoons, and my mom let us do it because we didn't cause trouble. We were there glued to the TV, little did she know. But I defend TV in that there's aspects of TV, even if the programming is bad, that allows you to have a population of kids that are much brighter than our generation. There's a sophistication that takes place, not necessarily wisdom, but a sophistication of, more particular in their taste. They're more discriminating in styles and so forth. So I began to develop this monocultural point of view, like *Leave It To Beaver*, *The Partridge Family*, all these horribly sick medians of society, supposedly, which weren't.

I didn't live in that world. I used to ask people, and none of the people that I knew lived like that. But it was only artificial on TV. Our lives began to be artificial in a way they weren't in the '40s. Now, there are things that I actually thought about as a kid, not as an anthropologist, or not like I'm telling you about it now, but I had a sense of even having a social position that was Mexican, with parenthesis around it. Because as a Mexican, there was places you could not go, and there was things you had to watch, and there was always a white person that could dominate you for any number of little reasons.

But by the '50s and the '60s, we began to respond to the national kind of direction of challenging the establishment in the early '60s, and then going into a full-blown hippie revolution, which is a counter-culture revolution in the late '60s. And so these dynamics, we're watching these. And I think they're important to state because a lot of people think that the Chicano experience is done in the laboratory with the rest of the rats. Because this one fellow once mentioned to me that he thought it was too bad that I only had Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera as artistic role models, thinking that since I was a Chicano, and that's all he knew of the culture, that that's all their was for us.

KMD: Well, tell me a little bit more about some of those early influences, if you're watching *Cecil and Beany* or *Beany and Cecil*, movie stars, actors, movies that you're interested in. Do you go to the movies as a young man?

GL: Oh, yeah. They were the thing to do. I think that we, living in this country, especially in East LA, were subjected to all the movie theatres and heroes and implications of what media was doing to everybody. And they were homogenizing the culture on one hand. Us included, because we were less Mexican and a little more gringo for the experience. So as a result, that's what Chicanos are. They're a mixture of the value systems from two—they're not opposite, but you can probably articulate it better than that, but they're different cultural models. Chicanos and Mexicanos is one thing, and I was in that place where we were striving to be middle class.

KMD: So how did that—what did that look like? Did you wear clothes that you saw? How did you dress?

GL: They were appropriate to a working-class, blue-collar worker. That was the environment.

KMD: Was that khaki pants?

GL: Khaki pants, yeah. Oh, and in high school—then I started getting into Sir Guy's. Before that, we'd get these cheaper versions of shirts.

KMD: What is Sir Guy's? I don't know actually know what it is.

GL: Sir Guy is a brand name, like Pendleton. And these were specifically important, because they did these plaid designs that ironically are Scottish and English, but it doesn't matter, because our script that everybody liked was Old English. So we—and I point that out, it's because Chicano experience is gringo experience, and that makes us United States citizens, not only legally, but culturally. We are products of this combination of the homogenizations of Main Street—you know, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and those fantasies. But that was the standard. I remember *Ozzie and Harriet*. We looked at is as being—[phone ringing]

KMD: You want to get that?

GL: Yeah.

[break in audio]

KMD: Well, what did you watch as a kid, and growing up as a teenager?

GL: Okay. We watched the cowboy stuff, *Roy Rogers*. We wanted to emulate the cowboy stuff. But that's about [age] eight, nine, ten—we'd actually go to the serials at the movies and have horse rides back, like slapping the sides of our pants and pretending to drive these horses after the movie. I mean, we'd actually go up to the corner and stop, and we'd rear the horses back. And I remember that clearly, and it seems correct, because that's what kids did.

But it seems so foreign at this point. It seems so long ago, but I remember doing stuff like that. Mostly we were mesmerized by the movies and TV and dramas and comedies. I think cartoons were a very strong influence for me, and I think there's a manner of my drawing that remains true to that influence. I can draw besides that. There's things that I've done, or that I do just doodling.

KMD: Yeah, what you had out this morning.

GL: Yeah, just doodling. It becomes something else, but then when I'm not doing the cartoon image, well, this drawing that you're looking at now is still a cartoon to me.

KMD: Why do you say that?

GL: Because it's not really—

KMD: Well, it's not classical. It's not classic realism portraiture, but—

GL: Right. And all those scratchy lines and so forth are just a sophistication of just plain lines. And so I remember one of the instructors I had found my cartoon images, which were not necessarily meant to be real, but I had—early on, even at the end of my senior year at Long Beach, I had a particular style of doing these cartoons that was unique. I wasn't trying to be that, but that were innocent and naïve, even at that point. I think they still are, by and large. So that much later, when I met Almaraz, I began to do these really cynical and sinister images, and he made me aware of a dark side of the world. Because when you really press

the description button for me, you'll find that I'm really innocent and naïve to a large degree. But that quality is philosophically a much better place, because it'll allow me to reach Zen and philosophical ideas. Like why a rich man can't pass through the eye of a camel because of his pretense and his arrogance. Not anything else.

But I think later on, I think that my nature was always prone to—like to reach about those little Zen monks. Even as a child, I didn't like scary things because we saw this one movie in particular that was about a white gorilla. And then my mom says, "We need to get milk for tomorrow morning." And it was already dark, and we'd been watching this movie of this gorilla attacking all these people, and I had to go to the store, which was about a block away. Now, I had mentioned before that East LA in those days was darker. They didn't have as much light as they do now. So going to the store in the dark at night was, for a little kid—I don't know, I must have been about [eight or] nine, possibly. Was it '48? I forget. No. Because I used to be afraid of the dark as well. I mean, it was pointedly—they would even try to make me go into a dark room, and I wouldn't do it. And I didn't know what I was afraid of. It was a very vague fear.

But I did think about it for a long time. Like I've really thought about, when I was growing up, almost as a natural process, I would ruminate on things. Maybe—I'm sure everybody does it in their own way. But I was very conscious of how I was looking at the dynamics of the world that I lived in, and I was studying different things. One, when I went to school, it was a gringo world, the rules were different. When I came home, not only was it home and personable and warm and my mother was there—And she used to make all of these really wonderful little *gorditas* and treats, because even though we didn't have a lot of money, she was always capable of doing a lot with very little. I mean, one pound of hamburger might go into three meals. One day with pasta, the next day with rice, or maybe something else, beans.

KMD: So was your— Of different places that you lived, you talked a little before about, it was kind of between El Monte and La Puente?

GL: Bassett.

KMD: Bassett was the name of the neighborhood—

GL: The community.

KMD: And the community? So you notice that these are different—that Bassett is different from South Central. South Central was different from East LA? You were aware of it as a child?

GL: Oh, yeah, we had to be. Part of growing up as a little boy is that you have to be street smart enough to know not to put your nose in [it], and I think I had enough social awareness. I think I was as astute as any other little kid there, not to get into trouble, not from the authorities but from other kids. But kids can be evil, man, when you're there by yourselves.

KMD: But Bassett? That's more Latino, a more Chicano—

GL: No, Bassett at that time was a rural school that was right across from the Vineland drive-in theater. And it was from K to 8, so I went there to the eighth grade, and then in the ninth grade I went to El Monte High School. So Bassett was a very rural experience. We walked to school through the fields, except through the rain when it was slushy.

KMD: Are you living in a house at that time?

GL: We were living in a ranch-style home in La Puente, on something less than acre. So we had horses, we had different kinds of animals, we had roosters, chickens, pigeons. We even had spider monkeys, doves, [and] Shetland ponies—

KMD: Who's gathering all these animals?

GL: Well, we've had them, because everybody there— It was farmland, everybody had something. Chickens, rabbits—

KMD: Is that why you have an affinity for animals?

GL: Yeah, I do. Well, it was a ranch environment so we got involved in raising things, chickens and stuff. But everybody out there at that time, this is '53 when we moved out there, 1953. I was thirteen years old that year at the end of the year, October. I was thirteen, as a matter of fact, because we moved in that house

on Halloween night. There was no lights. It was even darker— Now, we'd come from South Central. South Central in '53 was lit up enough. There was lights—

KMD: Big streets, big boulevards that were well known.

GL: Yeah, and by then, there was enough [light]. Now there's even more. I mean, people don't realize how dark it used to be. But anyway, the point is that the social awareness that I had was about learning how to dress and stand cool. I didn't smoke cigarettes. I didn't even want to.

KMD: Really? No smokers in the family?

GL: Oh, my stepdad. And then my mom would puff on a cigarette once in awhile, but she said that she would just go—

KMD: She didn't—

GL: I said, "What was the kick out of just puffing on a cigarette?" She goes, it made her feel like one of the people that used to come over to the house. But it was a thin reason, it wasn't anything—

KMD: So I actually didn't know you were raised with animals. I mean, my understanding of La Puente is a little later.

GL: And orchards.

KMD: I grew up there.

GL: Well, in the eighth grade, this is '54 maybe, we were asked to write letters to industries saying that we want industries in there. We just wrote them. It was illegal as hell to have us do this, but we did it. Nobody knew it was illegal. We wanted—why are they having us do this?

KMD: So who's caring for the chickens and...?

GL: We are.

KMD: The kids are.

GL: And my stepdad and my mom would do certain things, but yeah, the load was on us. We had to prune the trees. We had a row of lilies in the front that had to be stripped every—you know, so that they looked real nice and green all the time. We had apple trees, prunes—not prunes, plums. And we had this tree that was a peach and a plum combination, so it was an actual fruit hybrid. And the two houses that were there, side by side, were built by these two couples that knew each other from back East. They came out here, they bought an acre and a half and split it, or something like that. And so both of the houses had the same floor plan and everything, and there was a fence that divided all of it. And wonderful friends, the Banks. There was other people before them, but the Banks is the ones I remember the most.

KMD: So you ended up with plenty of room to play ball then, huh?

GL: Oh, yeah. Well, I wanted to play football so bad, and my mom wouldn't let me play football. And it's kind of a family joke, but she let me sign up for boxing. I guess she figured a little bump on the head in boxing wouldn't be as bad. Although we make fun of it, I think her rationale was good because guys broke their collarbones, their legs, and they screwed up their knees—I mean, it's a rough game. And I did really well in boxing, much to the surprise of everybody, including myself, because of my stepdad [David Ramirez]. And my stepdad would sit back, because we used to watch football, or talk about what we watched on TV.

All those years, we watched Spade Cooley. We watched wrestling religiously, roller derby, all those in the evening, and on Friday evenings, that's what we saw. Dick Lane, "Whoa, Nellie!" That kind of stuff. Dick Lane had been an actor, as you know, and was in that *Boston Blackie* series we were watching a minute ago. What else? We liked boxing, and wrestling was funny.

KMD: And you're doing that, what, at the local YMCA?

GL: No, the TV.

KMD: No, the boxing. Where are you hanging out doing boxing?

GL: Oh, I did it in high school. It was a high school Golden Gloves program. So I won two years in a row that when I went and I boxed—I don't know how many, six bouts maybe?—and I won every one of them because of my stepdad. He would tell me what to do. And it just goes to show you that you can be good—I was good, fast, had a good jab, hard-hitting, but I didn't have that killer instinct. I was real *mancito*. I

wasn't a vicious kind of guy. So when I was beating somebody, I would just back off and just kind of whap-whap-rap, but just do light hitting. But nothing—I didn't want it to seem phony. But at the same time, I didn't want to embarrass the guy either, so I would just win on points or something. But I think it taught me a lesson, too, about having a mentor. And I never got one. I always wanted a mentor, and I never got one.

KMD: What kind of line of work was your stepfather in?

GL: Driving a truck. And he would tell me stories. He also took me to Ojai, [and] Port Hueneme, in Santa Paula. We would actually go from El Monte at four o'clock in the morning, pick up this truck and it would be loaded up with stuff—sundries for drugstores—and we'd go on the streets all the way out there. And we'd have breakfast at this café places, and it was great. It was like another experience—we never ate out in those days, and to eat breakfast at a restaurant or a café—it was a coffee stop for truck drivers.

KMD: Did your family by this time have vacations?

GL: No, we missed that. I think the vacations came in by the time I had left the house. And my younger brothers, one was born in '53, so by the time they were older, they began to go on these vacation trips. But we were raised very much like immigrants, culturally. There was respect at the house. I remember my grandpa, when he kind of let me go from having to kiss his hand, it was a mark of being a man if you didn't have to kiss his hand. At that point, you were no longer a little kid.

KMD: And what age was that?

GL: Oh, it was about twelve, fourteen, somewhere in that. I don't remember. But I think it was those little incidentals that just point out that we had a dual existence, and we learned how to live schizophrenically. It was normal to behave one way with *gabachitos* and to behave another way at home. It's not anything just unique to us. As we know, Italians, Cambodians, everybody goes through these social shifts, and cultural values that—and I remember gringo culture. It was distinct, it was just another world.

KMD: Well, give me another example of gringo—

GL: Well, don't forget, I had grown up around *puros chicanos* and people from here, or I should say, more generally, Mexican culture. And then when I would go to places where there were predominantly Anglos, then I could feel and sense another environment, and I would withdraw. You do it intuitively, because you know there's places you've got to not be seen too much.

KMD: Was it happening at school, too?

GL: Yes.

KMD: Really?

GL: Well, in the eighth grade, those things existed, but I was oblivious to them. I know I was, because I didn't see them. I always thought there's personalities—kids have a tendency to get into little cliques. It's just a social aggregate system that is normal to humans, I think, not bad. I had friends, but I was kind of like—I roved around more, but as I remember, I didn't have a clique that I belonged to. Those guys had just stuck by themselves. And like, this Chinese guy, and a guy named Richard who was a really good pitcher. So these were the bigger guys, and they'd walk around, kind of aloof, and they were the big guys. And they were the fellows who really were at the social top of the heap. And there was a woman—oh, I was trying to remember her name, [Carolyn Roman]. But anyway, she really liked me, and I was so dumb, and I liked her too, but I couldn't respond.

KMD: Was this in high school?

GL: No, this was in the eighth grade. And then there was this other woman, and her name was—I think it was Linda. But anyway, she was a *gabacha*, but all *chola'd* out. So I was infatuated with her. She had beautiful calves, big calves.

KMD: So when you get to high school, this becomes more aware, that these are kind of—

GL: Well, when I went to high school, I was hanging around with these two *gabachitos*. And they wore Levis, low, not high water, white socks, loafers, polo shirts—the kind of shirts that were stylish at the time. And simple designs, like a blue shirt with a grid on it.

KMD: How did you do your hair?

GL: I have high school albums. I could show you, and then you could see. But it was longer than it is now, and it was curved to the front.

KMD: You had the—

GL: Widow's peak? Well, it's kind of that. But I remember up to a point where I went from parting it about here to the side, and I remember distinctly where I went from sixth grade to seventh grade, and that no longer was a good haircut. And so I had to shift it. And I remember also shaving my head around thirteen because I had to put on this beanie so I could train my hair back. Because up to that time, I thought it was unruly. And sure enough, it would slick back after you wore the beanie. And the hair grows back, and it gets used to being *aplastado*, and it actually behaves that way. So those were the things that were important because it was part of how you looked.

But one time, this kid goes by with about three or four or five Chicanos who used to hang together, and they always looked like a gang, because in those racist days, if you're—you could be outnumbered real quick by *gabachitos*, and you could be in a compromising position if you're a teenager. Otherwise they'd leave you alone. But the point is that this one guy came by, and he said, "Hey, Chicano *falso*"—in other words, he was telling [me] that I wasn't a real Chicano. Now, I had ties to East LA with family, and grew up in East LA all my life, and so I was offended. And I went and I hit up the guy, and I told him, I said, "Hey, I'm from East LA." He goes, "Yeah, but why are you hanging out with those *gabachos*?"

So just before that time—actually, it would cause me to go shift over to hanging around with the Chicanos—was, that I went to one of the fellow's houses. He took me to his house just to visit, after school. I went over there and everything was cool. I was there just for a few minutes and so forth, then he said that he had to go and do stuff and that I had go home at that point or whatever. So I did, and didn't think much about it. I should have said, "Well, jeez, didn't you just invite me and now I have to leave?" But I never even gave it a thought. And so the next day, he told me he could never take me back to his house because his mom said she didn't want Mexicans around the house. But I don't think he said it quite that clearly, but that was what he meant. And he felt bad, I mean—

KMD: But you knew it at the time too?

GL: Well, I wasn't that dumb. I mean, yeah, she was saying she didn't want Mexicans at their house. Now, he and his cousin never displayed any of them feelings to me. They just accepted me as somebody else, I felt. And then when I switched over to the Chicanos and so forth, I could sense that they were really upset with me, that I had gone over to the other side. And so what this means to me was that I made very clearly a choice as a young kid—naively, I would say—to hang around with "my kind," versus hanging out with people who were racist. But these kids weren't—I never got that feeling from them. And so this is just part of my social adjustment.

And then at seventeen I joined the Air Force, and then I went into another adventure of not having—not being with a bunch of Chicanos anymore. Now I was integrated like everybody in the flight. We had groups called flights, and that's about twenty-five, thirty guys. And since everybody was in a strange circumstance, there was no turf. But there was personalities. And what I did was I began to read, and without shame, because with the Chicanos, I couldn't do that. And it was just these social parameters that don't allow you to do certain things. At first I used to hide my grades from the Chicanos. I didn't let them see that I was getting good grades, and they progressively got worse because they [the Chicanos] didn't have good grades. And when I joined the service and I took some tests, it was high enough where they asked me if I wanted to consider OCS, Officer Candidates School. And I said no, I was going to stick with my buddies. So I was dumb, but young.

KMD: So where were [you] in the service?

GL: I went to Lackland [Air Force Base] like everybody else, and then they put me through Air Police School, which I didn't want. I wanted to be in the medical corps. That's what I really wanted. And I wanted to either be a dentist or corpsman, and they wouldn't let me do it. And this other guy had the scores that

were pretty much like mine, and we wanted to switch. That's where they were sending him, to medical corps, and he wanted to be a cop. And I said I didn't want to be a cop, I'd rather be a medical corpsman. That would make more sense to me, because up to the time when I joined the service, I was studying all of these medical things on my own. I'd get a book and I'd open it, and I'd look at dictionaries and find words and try to figure them out.

KMD: Are you getting these books at the library, or are you bringing them home?

GL: Oh, it must be the library, because we didn't have that stuff around. It must have been the library. I always had a library card. I was always able to get books in the library, and I think it came from living on First and McDonnell—where did we live? But I remember very early going to—oh, yeah, it was when we lived on First, across from Botellita. On Gage, there was a library just north of First Street, and it was a library, and we used to go there from Belvedere Gardens Elementary School. We would go to that library, little neighborhood library. But it was pretty nice, and they had a lot of stuff for kids, and I remember it always being a pleasant experience. I liked it.

KMD: So when you were in the service, how do you get—I'm completely ignorant, how do you get reading material?

GL: We're not prisoners. We get a card, and we can go to town anytime you're not on duty. After the boot camp, and then you get assigned to a group, and then you start functioning as an air policeman. And when you're not working, you can go off and do whatever you want. We also got cubicles to live in. We didn't live in an open bay like the Army or the Marines. It was very much like civilian life. I had gone out to camp, and it was like camping in the barracks. I had my little stereos, I had my records, and I had all this little stuff. I was really into jazz at that point, but I was reading, and I started reading both science fiction, *The Red Pony*, really—

KMD: Tell me about the science fiction.

GL: The science fiction?

KMD: Yeah.

GL: This guy by the name of Dennis Tibbitts, who I still know, and I still am in touch with him, used to read science fiction. And I remember I used to ask him why he read it, and he goes, "Oh, it's weird. It's far out." But mostly I think my impression was that it was imaginative. And even at that time, it must have been eighteen years old, nineteen years old when I met Tibbitts.

I was very curious about the world. I didn't know a lot of things, and I knew it. And I was really anxious to soak up what was being presented in the Air Force as another world. A world free of the constraints that both Chicano culture and my friends created an obstacle for different reasons. And one of them had to do with, it's safer to be among your own than to venture off into the gringo world. And if you go into the gringo world, you're going to become like them, and that was the social crime. It's a social crime to all groups when you leave that group for another. But in the service there was nobody to make that distinction, so I was free to do whatever I wanted to, which was a great freedom as well, that I was cognizant of.

But beginning to read mainstream, I began to read Saroyan and his—oh, jeez. Oh, I was reading the Russians for a while—Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Gogol—and then I went through Mexican. And then I began to really systematically take reading seriously, and I read a lot of literature. And so I was beginning to get interested in history and stuff, but it was—I tried reading history, but it was a little too heavy for me at the time. I remember not having the capacity to sit there and just see all these days and stuff that they said. And my vocabulary wasn't up there at that point. But it all was resolved when I went to East LA College after leaving the Air Force.

KMD: While you're in the Air Force—I'm sorry to interrupt that thought—but you're reading most of your time off, or you're not going out and hanging out?

GL: No, I was a young man, so I read, but it wasn't all the time. But we had a lot of time.

KMD: And you were stationed in Europe?

GL: Oh, England.

KMD: In England.

GL: Well, that was in '59, I took off over there. But I spent a year in the States. I went from Lackland in San Antonio to Bergstrom Air Force Base in Austin, Texas. So I was there for a while, and we had a lot of time. We'd do our job, and we'd be guarding the gate, or we'd be patrolling the base and so forth.

KMD: Was it a big deal to go overseas?

GL: Yeah, for me it was. Because, remember, I had never left East LA very far, maybe [to] the beach a couple of times. But for the most part, it was wonderful. It was the kind of experience that people used to talk about. And I knew it was an adventure. From the beginning, it was an adventure. And it was great. It was like being cared for, in a way, but it was also that at the time, I felt that there was a lot of kind of rules that would govern me being in the service. They really brainwash you into obeying the laws and all that stuff. And I did. I've never been a rebellious kind. Only intellectually, but not as a person.

KMD: So you were saying, you get out of the service and you go to East LA College.

GL: Yeah. Then it really took off. Then I really began to get traction, I felt, because I took a vocabulary building class. I began to take the requirements that I needed, because I figured I was going to use my GI Bill. Well, I didn't. I said, "I'm going to save it for Long Beach." So I struggled and got a job there at the art department. I think it was ninety dollars a month and so on. And that's all I was making in those days. I'd walk everywhere because I didn't have a car.

KMD: Did you live at home again?

GL: I lived in my aunt's and my dad's place. I would alternate. And then finally, I would get jobs like packing trucks on the docks, and they'd have all this stuff. They said, "Okay, move that into the truck." And what you're doing is you're picking up the stuff and running—man, they want you to run. Good old Mexican slave labor. But I'd make twenty dollars a night. I had money. Now, in that time period, you could still probably get dime coffee, a hamburger's probably thirty cents, thirty-five cents. So twenty dollars was something. It was the '60s. I don't remember what things were in the '60s, but they were much cheaper than today.

KMD: Could you help me understand how you're in the service, and you talked about—you wanted to be a medic.

GL: I would have preferred it.

KMD: And that would have led in a certain career. And you come out, and you're going into art school.

GL: No, when I came out, one of the things—like I said, I began to take classes that would prepare me. I took speed-reading. I had to prepare myself for school, I wasn't prepared. Now all that reading I'd done previously was at best an indicator of my enthusiasm to learn, but I didn't know very much, I have to tell you. So I knew it, and also knew very well that because I was ignorant and stupid, and I didn't know very much—and that was an emotional thing—but on a practical level, yes, I didn't know very much. I'd gotten a high school degree, but in comparison to my ambition, it wasn't enough. And I also wanted to learn how to think, but I didn't know that at that time.

But my body, if I could say it that way, was telling me that I needed to know more, and there had to be a larger picture. What was the larger picture? Why do you go to school? Just to get a better job? No. I began to understand how to think and to enjoy thinking. And it was actually—it actually becomes intoxicating when you exercise that particular part of your being, and you can get carried away. But I kept my feet planted on the ground. I think I've always had a healthy pursuit of knowledge without it being excessive.

KMD: So you're taking art classes at that time?

GL: Well, not at the beginning. At the beginning, I was taking general courses as well as educational—well, not educational, I was—

KMD: Preparatory courses?

GL: Not even that. I wanted to know about different fields. I took psychology. It didn't take me but a couple of classes to realize that they're nuts. Those people are nuts. *[laughter]* And I didn't want to be like that.

KMD: You're talking to someone who agrees, so you don't have to go too far.

GL: Oh, jeez. So then I went and I explored different things that I thought about in terms of a career. I don't remember every going to a counselor to settle that question. I thought I would do it on my own by taking classes and discovering what the nature of that field was about. So I remember taking history classes and so forth. History and literature I was really inclined to. I liked them. The sciences—I was interested in geology and so forth, but I remember I got a lousy grade because I fell in love at one time. Oh, it was horrible. And she told me that she couldn't see me anymore, because . . .

She really did me a favor, this lady. She had kids, and she saw that I was wanting to go to school, and she didn't want to hold me back. But I found out later that she was really thinking about me more than I knew. And I was dumb, stupid. I just wanted to get married and be in love. Not that being in love is stupid, but I think that she did me a favor in the long run, because then I continued my education, and I think it was better that way.

KMD: What was the roots, then, of your artistic interest? How do you start moving towards—because you end up with a BA from Cal State Long Beach in—what is it, sculpture?

GL: Yeah, sculpture, essentially. I was always in the sculpture department.

KMD: Ceramics.

GL: Another thing to note is that I was always a lab assistant in the ceramics sculpture lab, in that ceramics lab, from early on. The lady that introduced me to ceramics, a woman named Margaret, got me involved with ceramics in the first place. And she may have even recommended me to [the ceramics teacher]. I know she suggested I ask for a job because she was leaving, so she kind of opened the door for me to take that position. And I didn't know anything about all that stuff. But I learned how to fire the kiln, so I used to fire the kiln all the time. I did it for twenty years, all through my school. I was always doing the kilns, gas kilns. They're more tricky. There's more to pay attention to with those—electric kilns are nice. Computers are wonderful.

KMD: Right, because you're controlling the exact—

GL: Oh, everything, in much greater tightness. But I think the influences, with your question, was that my uncle was a very interesting folk artist, because he had been carving at home, and he did things. He'd laminate wood, carve them, and then dye them with shoe polish and then polish them. And they would look beautiful, they'd look like they had been varnished.

KMD: Wow. Was he selling these?

GL: Nah, he was just making them. There was no market for those things, for one. And I remember I gave him clay, and he made one out of clay. And I took it and I fired it, and I had it for a long time. I don't know what happened to it. It's a shame, because it was a nice piece that he had done. A horse. But that's one influence.

My mother had always been doing artwork, and I think I showed you her little drawing of a woman, a little girl's face with a bonnet. But again, very folk art. No training. My Aunt Helen was also always very interested in drawings. So those are home influences. My Uncle Blas was very good with—he was gay, and very good like, always arranging the gardens and so forth.

So my influences were of people who were doing these things. But later on, as I'll explain why I was a little bit adamant about saying, "Yes, we do have arts, but they're not formalized." They're not educated, but we do have these efforts, these aesthetic intents. And I saw them in my family, from doing little things with sticks, carving a wooden chain out of a block of wood . . . And so these were all skills that I was impressed with as a young kid. But when I went to college, I began to understand that art had other purposes as well, loftier ones. Which takes you into the fine arts world, and takes you to achievements like *Guernica*, not just folk art. So there was in my mind an understanding that there's a level of achievement that does make folk art—

[break in audio]

KMD: We're on tape 2. This is Karen Mary Dávalos with Gilbert Luján, on September 22, 2007, and he was telling me about the artistic influences from the home. I was wondering if, when you're in school, starting at East LA and then going on to Long Beach, what kind of influences are you getting there?

GL: The influences, the early-on influences to lead off from, [were] the family ones. Growing up with the family members that were artists, and beginning to get [an idea] that art was something that—especially when it came from our culture—had more humble kind of roots. That was one influence, one thought, I remember.

And then as I'm getting the lessons of what design is, what constitutes a painting, and all this other vocabulary that comes along with learning about the fine arts, I began to get an idea. And it really didn't clarify it until after I had put a show together called—which was a Chicano art show. It was simply me gathering—I was given this assignment to gather art students that were Mexican American for this conference that was coming up in 1964. And I had mentioned before in most of these interviews that Irene Tovar, I met there. She was an activist [in education], and a wonderful lady [from Pacoima]. And I remember her so well, because she was the only one that complimented us on what we were doing and showed a little word of appreciation, which influenced me again. That just a word like that changed my perception of her, for one, and I always thought of her as a great woman for just being considerate. So those were really conscious thoughts.

KMD: That was in '64?

GL: Mm-hmm.

KMD: And where did that show end up?

GL: Well, we took it down. I mean, we stayed up all night putting it up. We—neither of us, this other kid that went to help me—neither of us had ever put a show together, ever. And we joked about it—first of all, we got this gallon of red mountain wine, and then we got this big chunk of cheese—like three pounds of cheese—and a big loaf of bread, a big sucker, because we thought that's what artists do. And so we were eating cheese and bread and cracking up and drinking wine and getting messed up. And by the time it was three o'clock in the morning, we were still putting it together, and we were all wasted. Anyway, we kept working. It finally became five o'clock and six o'clock and we were still putting this thing together.

KMD: How many pieces were in this show?

GL: I don't know. Maybe twenty, thirty. It wasn't—

KMD: Oh, yeah. And you had to prep the walls?

GL: No, no prepping the walls. We were just trying to find a place to put things because it was a cabin, or it was some room, and so forth. It wasn't a gallery at all. There was no lighting. It was really humble beginnings. But in the process, I'm looking at this stuff, and I'm saying, "Well, what do we call it?" I knew names were assigned to shows, so we laughed, and we said, "Oh, it's a Chicano art show, ha-ha-ha."

So to get to the point is, that really was a high point for me to begin to realize that ethnic art is okay until it's Chicano, then it's not okay. And so when I would have, subsequently, I would have either conversations with people, or if I presented the idea somehow—because by this time, I began to proselytize. I began to say, "Well, hey," especially, you know, I'd get some feedback. "What are you talking about, there's no such thing as Chicano art?"

And I began to get the notion that the more resistance I got, the more clear it became that, yes, we do have art forms, but they're not sophisticated and they're not erudite, and they're just common in the neighborhood in poor areas. And so—and we were invisible, to ourselves mainly. Because I would ask people who were Chicanos or Latinos or Spanish speaking, or at least dark brown skin, that there was this thing that we had to figure out called Chicano art. The minute I start saying, "lowriders, graffiti," and that stuff, they would react that it was vandalism. It's just hoodlums. "You're bringing us down." "You're trying to create a model for us that we're moving away from."

KMD: Is that the kind of images in '64, the artists you brought together for this show?

GL: No, it was all artwork done from classes. There wasn't anything there about Chicanos.

KMD: Okay, so what, it was abstract expressionism . . .

GL: Well, whatever the class assignments were. Most of them were studies, like little light studies, or they would be maybe exercises in gradation. I mean, I have no way of remembering what we even showed, but they were all classroom assignments. And they were not made to present any ethnicity, but these bland, kind of generalized "Make three balls, and paint them in these colors."

KMD: Do you know why Irene—was it Irene Tovar?—who wanted this kind of—

GL: Oh, she was there because they were having a conference. It was an educational conference about the fact that Beverly Hills was getting tremendous funding, and schools in East LA weren't getting collectively as much. So there was an issue. Whatever contacts they had to have [at] this conference were lent by a Jewish organization, which I don't know, but it was [Camp] Hess Kramer was the place that we had it at. And with some research, I think they could find out who was the director and who did what. But the [camp directors] did allow this conference to take place, so they were being generous.

KMD: Were you there when the conference was going on? Did you get to see how people responded to the art?

GL: We—yeah, we were there taking care of things. We thought we were supposed to be the—put up the show, docents, guards, everything. We didn't know. And when people started coming in, we had to put the wine away. We hid it. I'm sure we smelled or something, I don't know.

KMD: So while you're at East LA College, I'm imagining that the Chicano movement is already in full swing in Los Angeles.

GL: In '68 when they had the walkouts, it bubbled up. Since the '50s, with the community service organization and other works, GI forum, and those early groups, there was always activity. I heard people try to make the Chicano movement begin in '66, '64. I don't think you can really pinpoint it that—

KMD: Well, let's say for your experience, what was the [year]?

GL: Sixty-four.

KMD: Sixty-four.

GL: When I put that together, it brought my attention to the fact that people don't even think about Chicano art. I never did, but here it was brought to me, and I said, "Well, look. Look at this bond. Let's explore this one." They said, "Well, that doesn't exist." I said, "No, look. I have it in my hand." And then I began to— independently—I began to explore the idea, and examine it. I think maybe history classes or something, but I remembered [this] very clearly. I had to go and find things from my environment, and I had to put that together.

At that time, found objects were beginning to happen. This was maybe '65, I guess, roughly. And I began to think about it in a way that I said, "I'm going to do this again." So I started collecting artwork and showing it at different places where I would just go in and say, "Hey, can I show this artwork?" And they'd say, "Yeah." Libraries, they're always hungry for something, a display. They're easy. "Yeah, sure, we'll take your art."

And I'd go to high schools, I'd go to friends that I knew, and I would spend a lot of time running around. No money, no rules, nothing. I didn't know what I was doing. One show that's hilarious, I invited Ed Moreno, who was a senior producer from KCET, and Mac McCloud, or McClain—he changed his name because he's a poet—wonderful guy. He was a teacher at Cal State LA. And I invited him to be a judge at this art show that I had. And I collected all this artwork from the different local schools, kindergarten, just kid stuff. And I didn't have no budget, nothing to go on, except I went and I swept the floor on the gym in this one section over and over again, made sure it was really clean.

Then I put artwork right on the floor, one next to each other, in long rows. There must have been twenty feet, and I had them in rows so you could walk by, and you can see two layers. I had them arranged, and then I had another two layers over here, and then my judges showed up, and they're looking around like saying, "Well, what is this?" I said, "Well, this is the art show. I just want you to judge it." I don't know if we even had prizes. I don't even remember anymore. And these guys must have looked at me like, "Boy,

this guy's nuts," or, "What's wrong with this guy to bring us all the way over here to just look at kid art on the floor of a gym?"

KMD: Well, it probably meant something to do those kids though, don't you think?

GL: They weren't there.

KMD: But when they got the prize?

GL: I don't know. I guess so. I don't even remember how I handled that. I think I had ribbons that I got—oh, I might tell you that I was also working as a recreation leader. In other words, I just handed out balls at the office. I had skates, and I had all these things at my disposal to let people use, because that's—otherwise, you're taking care of this park by yourself.

And the fellow that was there before me, I remember when he was orienting me, telling me where the basketball was, what you had to do—they had to give you a license or something, an ID, a library card. They didn't even care what it was, [just] so that they'd bring back the thing. And that was it. And then he told me that these guys were really [tough]. The reason he was quitting is because they gave him a hard time. And they were putting the water on at the gym. They all had keys to these [spigots] that only the gardeners had.

Well, these kids had these keys. I don't know where they got them. So they'd put the water on, and he'd have to go over there and shut it off. Well, then, by the time he shut this one off, they'd have the other, catty-corner—he couldn't see them—they'd have that one going. And so they had them running around all night shutting off this water. So I said, "Well, I grew up across the street. If they do that shit to me . . ."

So anyway, I was there for a few days or whatever, and I finally passed out the word. I said, "We're going to have skating." I made a little sign because I was into art now. I made this little sign that said "Skating on Fridays," so they got all excited. And word started getting out. They were going to do this skating thing, because they had a bunch of skates of the indoor type—neoprene or whatever. So they came. We had them all lined up, and they got to put them on until we used them all up, and it was, I don't know, maybe ten, fifteen people going around the gym. And you had to go this way. And then I had this megaphone, and I'd say, "Okay, time's up, ten minutes," and then the other kids would come in.

Okay, so we were into it. The first night, we were into it. And about half an hour then, this kid came, and he goes, "Hey, Coach, the water's running outside. Somebody put the water on." And I said, "Oh, really." And I went, with my little whistle, I went *brrt*, and everybody looked. And I said, "Come on." I said, "Okay, this is . . ." "What, Coach?"—they called me Coach—and I said, "Okay, take off the skates." "What? We just got started, man. What do you mean? I didn't get a turn." I said, "When that water goes off over there, you get the skates back." And with a little facial gestures, and I didn't even bother to look. The water was off, and it never happened again.

So I think that one of the other things that I'm telling you in that story is that I also realized several things about—if I was going to represent Chicano, I needed to come up with some system of thought. I had to come up with an aesthetic, not a manifesto. That's political. I wanted an ideology that really was substantial in addressing the kind of aesthetic that we had. I wasn't interested in the flash of it all, I wanted to know what really was a substantial idea that made up Chicano art. And so I don't keep you in suspense, it's the culture. That's it. I mean, you can dance around and call it whatever you want, but all of us are bound by the culture. And if you're not bound by the culture, you're not doing Chicano art.

Over the years—And I told you, my advantage of thirty-five years of listening to hundreds of people, what we have is like—and the fellow we talked about the other day, where he says, "I'm a Chicano artist, but I don't do Chicano art." And what we have there is—if I can untangle it a little bit—is that we have motives mixed up with identification. There's an intent to want to do universal art and be recognized like an artist. That's one very solid view. And they don't want to be bothered with being ethnic. And then there's the other guy—the ethnic—that don't want to consider anything except being an ethnic artist. And then there's another fellow—or woman—who wants to catch onto that political star where there's gender

issues or electoral politics or whatever. And they'll attach to political ideals, and there they go on. And this confusion of trying to express that Chicano point of view, you can put politics into culture, but culture cannot be subjugated to politics, and neither can aesthetics.

Now, if you're going to be an artist, you have to decide whether you're going to be an artist or a politician. If you're a politician that makes art, that's one thing. But if you're an artist that makes politics, that's better. So *Guernica* was not [made] by a guy that ran for office. [Picasso] was a guy that was interested in politics and responded as an artist. So I say that these early experiences of knowing that my uncle was a humble folk artist, and also, I saw something larger. Intellectually, I understood that the French people, the French Impressionists, the German Expressionists, all these other people that have ethnic identification with these movements, and that's okay. And one of the reasons why we find objection and resistance is that we don't understand ourselves as an aesthetic point of view because the politics get in the way. We're understood as political artists.

And I think even with Tere [Romo], where she says, "No, everything is done because politics is in our life," and so forth. That fact is true. But the intent to be an artist has to be separated from what is everybody's lifestyle, everybody's social condition. We have to be outside of those definitions because when you're talking about doing art, it has nothing to do with the bus driver's schedules. And what I mean to say is that being an artist means applying yourself to that field, because it's not that sophisticated. It's a field, but they have to have those intentions.

And I defend it another way. You know, you don't go to a baker to make political decisions or pour gold. We live in a specialized society where we have an absolute function that's very real, and most artists don't understand that function. Most artists that I see, especially the young ones, just want to have a limousine and the benefits of wealth. My influences were not about all that. I was really after wisdom cultures. I really wanted to get at, with integrity, the idea of, "What is Chicano art?" in the largest framework I can manage. I didn't want to have a theory. I didn't want to have a regional parochial viewpoint. I wanted to [have] Chicano art manifested in the most widest possible views.

And what that boiled down to, what it took me to was, "Look at us. We're diverse. We've got Cubans, Puerto Ricans. We've got *pintos*, politicians, and crooks, and all these various archetypes." And that's what makes Chicano art so diverse.

KMD: I'm wondering, these ideas that you have—well, two things. Let me start with your uncle. It sounds like you had a growing appreciation for what [he] did. Did you ever sit down and watch him work, once that appreciation was full-blown? Did you study his technique, his content, what kind of composition, the things he was creating?

GL: Yes. He could not articulate any of those things because he never had the training to point them out as individual acts. I did, because I knew that there was a series of decisions that you make to complete a work of art. He did it intuitively, without the intellectual framework. That's what the schools gave me. They gave me an opportunity to not only articulate them, but to create the abstract models in my head to differentiate what the folk artist is doing and the fine artist is doing. And it's the same thing. They're making an art object or painting or whatever.

But the thing [is] that we have biases in our society, and you that are into anthropology know that [they] are really lopsided. The art judgment of a grandmother who has no schooling in art and puts her beautiful boot that she painted as a planter is an aesthetic judgment. Now, down the road, you find art history's made by somebody who presents a urinal. Why can't a painted boot by my grandmother be just as valid? Why can't Navajo blankets not be more spectacular than [Frank] Stella?

KMD: So I'm imagining—like I said, I had two questions. The other is, these ideas you're developing about art, I'm imagining they're getting you in a lot of trouble.

GL: They gave me feedback, yeah. Yes, it was.

KMD: So are you not joining the MEChA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán] or the UMAS [United Mexican American Students] or whatever?

GL: Oh, they didn't care. If I ever talked like that with them, they'd just look at me and say, "Here, have another hit. Have another beer." They weren't interested. The MEChA and those people were not even even remotely interested in the dynamics of the aesthetics of Chicano art. They left that to me. And if I said whatever I said, they would just accept it. They didn't even question it.

KMD: When you were at—

GL: MEChA.

KMD: When you were at East LA, or—

GL: Well—among MEChA. Except that you know that MEChA is always filled with a lot of contradictory input and opinions. So one guy wrote that [cultures take a hundred years to develop and there's no way that Chicano culture could be validated at this point]. When I was putting these *Arte de Pochos* shows together at Long Beach State, because we did the first *Semana de la Raza* there. It was born out of an UMAS meeting, and we decided to have a couple of days to draw attention to our political issues.

That extended itself to a week of events, because we thought, "Oh, why just have a couple events? Why not just do *Semana de la Raza*?" I remember the lady who did it. Her name was Mary Hernandez. She was—I think that was her maiden name—yeah, because then she married a guy named Frank Sandoval. This is how I remember it, in the meeting. And so I brought [it] up. I said, "Well, what about [the arts]?" They said, "Well, do it! Whatever you want to do, just go do it." So I went and I got an arrangement to use [the] campus gallery. They let us have it. And so I went around and I collected all this artwork from Chicanos and so forth, and I called it *El Arte de Pochos*, because although I was a Chicano, that was my banner. I always tried to be as democratic as I could about not using the term that people would be mad about, or—I didn't want a controversy over the word. I wanted people to start looking at the artwork. This was '67 or so.

So I'm still formulating and making the ideas that I had that was essentially for me, an aesthetic retreat to folk art as a starting point—my own aesthetic point—making things out of *palitos*. Like what I saw coming out of the *abuelito* culture, and doing these humble little things that were very *rasquache* on one hand. But I wanted to go from the very beginning. For my own aesthetic development, I wanted to go to the beginning of what would be called folk art. And I actually made things with little *palitos*, and that's where the stick figures come from.

So as my sophistication in art developed, those stick figures became Giacometti images in many ways, or like that little guy on the skateboard that's so popular with the kids. But I wanted to, on the aesthetic track, that I knew that that was my business—aesthetics. It wasn't about politics. Yeah, I was very politically active like everybody else, but I always got in the way with politicians and so forth. I was too eccentric.

KMD: Did you belong to any of those kinds of groups, or [were you] a member on the side?

GL: No, because they didn't take us serious as artists. And plus we smoked grass, and everybody thought that was such a big deal. But it's nothing compared to [their crimes].

KMD: Did the show—I'm sorry, the show you did at Long Beach then for *Semana de la Raza*, how was that received?

GL: Very well. And it began to get attention, because all of the sudden we were in a formal setting, and I realized this. I said, "Man, I've got to do more of these," because this gave it authenticity, this validated us. So by the time I put together Los Four, I started organizing these little group things, like I said, early, like '66. And I think it was '66 when I went to Santa Ana and I did an altar that to me was a cultural exposition. Because in my way, I was trying to define what Chicano art was, and this was part of it, an altar installation. But the installation had nothing but a lot of things that came from the culture. It had baskets, it had shawls, it had food, it had corn, beans, onions, dry corn . . .

KMD: Did you do this altar in the style of—

GL: No. It wasn't like a religious one. This is secular. I made it in the way that, like I said, a museum—

KMD: Installation.

GL: Installation of a culture. And if there was any religious symbols, they were just incidental, they weren't focused.

KMD: So it didn't have that kind of symmetry you see, the four layers . . .

GL: No. It was horizontal, actually. And I don't remember even getting any picture of it. Again, I didn't think it was that important. I was just expressing what I was beginning to examine and explore, and that was the culture.

KMD: Examine and explore in your home situation . . . Are you reading books?

GL: No, I'm sorry. I was at Santa Ana College, and we actually did—they were trying to do—they wanted to have some kind of event for Latinos, Chicanos, at that point. So they said—well, my brother who was there at EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] finagled something for me to get associated with the art gallery. And I remember this woman faculty member, very nice, very open.

And we didn't do anything radical. There was nothing there that was scandalous at all. I think more than anything, it was interesting, only because people would come in and say, "Well, what's all this stuff for?" So—and then pictures of lowriders and so forth. So people would look at it and just say, "Well, yeah, that's Chicano culture," but there wasn't even enough interest to argue about it.

KMD: So in your mind, was this like a mixed-media installation, or is it more like the kind of thing you see in an anthropology museum?

GL: More like a display store.

KMD: Various objects. And did you arrange them?

GL: Oh yeah.

KMD: In other words, did you put, like you said, images of lowriders next to the baskets and the shawls?

GL: No. It was really more the physical space and what it allowed. And I remember I had this long table, and I put these coverings and shawls and stuff. I put a hammock in the back. So it was all just cultural items, but it was horizontal, and I just kind of draped them all like that. I didn't fuss with them too much. I just kind of put everything so it kind of looked like it was there. And I thought if I—I said, "Well, if I fuss with it too much, I don't know why I should," because it looked just what I wanted. So I didn't mess with it too much.

KMD: So you're doing stuff all over the place, like you said, libraries, schools . . .

GL: Wherever they'd let me, yeah.

KMD: Wherever you could get in.

GL: But the images that I was bringing together at that time were not pointedly ethnic like my work. They were still—and I've told this joke before, that when I was doing the lecture over for my son's side street project, and I was lecturing him on getting your shit together, one of those.

And so this kid asks, "Well, can non-Chicanos make Chicano art?" So very dramatically, I look sideways like I'm in the alley selling dirty pictures, and then I tell him, "Well, yes. As a matter of fact, Chicanos have been doing gringo art for years, and nobody's noticed." [laughter] Which is true. See, amalgamation takes place two ways. They're not free of being amalgamated by us. And that's the dynamics that I saw.

KMD: So some of these early stuff was still—it was the kinds of things you were producing in your art class.

GL: Well, yeah, or I would just put them together, because I wasn't being paid for this. I didn't even know I was operating as a curator. I didn't even know what such a word existed. And it wasn't until the second year when I did the second Día de los—no, Semana de la Raza at Long Beach. It was '69. And I remember the dean or something, he said, "Well, jeez, you're doing a great job as a curator." And I said, "Curator, what—?" And so I had to go and look it up. I didn't know what it meant, so I looked it up. And it's somebody who arranges shows and is responsible for the idea of the show. Most people today that curate don't even understand the notion of what curating is. They don't really have the training or anything.

[break in audio]

KMD: Okay, we're back. Magu, you were telling me about these shows you curated at Long Beach, and I just want to get a sense—you know, did you talk to other art students? It was people outside of—

GL: Oh, all the time. Yeah.

KMD: So it was the art students that you knew at Long Beach?

GL: Yes. And teachers. We had Tom Ferreira, who was actually Portuguese, and he wasn't really Chicano per se, but he was kind enough to know that I was trying to get that kind of quality artwork in, and he was very nice. He taught ceramics out there. But I think my point is that I was looking around to find those people that were really making artwork with culture as a real motive and a plan, and there wasn't too many people that were doing that. Then when the Chicano walkouts and all that took place, all of the sudden there was a real big move towards, what did *Aztlán* mean, looking at indigenous history and legacy, and began to create an identity that had to do with being indigenous.

Now, when that happened, then we got a rush of copies of Aztec, Maya reliefs and so forth ad nau-seam. We got—the Virgen de Guadalupe came out, and we began to look at people pulling out cultural icons and standards. Now, I was looking for something beyond that. I was looking for a way to connect those items to contemporary life, but make a third product—Chicano art—as a result of examining those artifacts, but not copying them.

KMD: Before we talk about your leaving art school, because in the '70s, I understand, you meet Carlos and you've—

GL: Oh, I don't meet Carlos until '71. I had already left Long Beach.

KMD: But I wanted to get a sense of—you know, did you . . . You're obviously doing well in school, in the art classes. So you're able to pick up these—as you made the joke, Chicanos have been doing European art, and nobody seemed to care. So you're being trained in—

GL: Like everybody else, a curriculum that had to do with a purported mainstream art, which is Euro-American.

KMD: So any styles that you could—

GL: Any style. In those days, you were—and I think it's to this day—you're inclined to believe that you have to come up with your own particular thumbprint in the art world, your own signature mode of working. And actually, ultimately, visual representation of who you are as a person and what you think. Now, that's my understanding of it. And I took it seriously that I had to do something with—not just doing slogan politics like, "I'm a Chicano artist." But actually proving it, and actually having a semantic ability to allow people to understand that our parameters were wider than just *cholos* and lowriders. Those were just segments of what we had to offer as a cultural base to be influenced by, to actually use as an intent to make artwork.

So like the *Limoztlan* that I've done, I wanted to do an idea—conceptually, I wanted it to be an idea of success. And so I took the limo idea, which is contemporary culture—[a] limousine—and then I made it a *Limoztlan* to identify it with this other mythological idea that we're from *Aztlán*, which is just an analogy. It's a point of reference. And as an artist, I think that those are the things that are the ingredients for what we do. They shouldn't be the final product. But it depends on one's ambition, and it depends on one's imagination, on being able to do what fine artists are supposed to do. And that's make something of it, not just copy Picasso, but gain what he has given you, and then go from there.

KMD: I'm just curious, you know, a lot of the people that I talk to, they say when they're in art school, whether it's the undergrad or the MFA program, they were doing their—whatever their teacher said to do, whatever the professor, and then you had your other stuff.

GL: Yeah, and you should. All students.

KMD: So you weren't the stubborn student who said, "You've got to look," and then they challenged you back, or maybe they accepted it.

GL: No, not me. I didn't. Because I did what I did, and they accepted it. I crossed over. Oh, I had little sculptures and so forth that they just thought they were unusual and so forth, but they weren't necessarily Chicano to them. And they weren't necessarily what they were expecting me to do. Because again, I took the responsibility of moving the slide rule a little bit and saying, "Okay, this is what you calculate—" I did all the assignments like I'm supposed to do, right? But the objects of these assignments is not to emulate

the teacher, although some teachers want that. But the object that I thought was, "How do I add my intellectual efforts on this product that everybody has to do?" Everybody has to do a saltshaker, but how am I going to do what I think I'm speaking to, because the visual language is supposed to articulate an idea?

And so I learned art to mean that you have to be saying, you can't just be making these phony decorative images. There's a lot of—even today when I mentor kids, they have an idea of being decorative with their artwork, that's their motive. I'm alarmed, but nonetheless, they just want the motif to sell. They want their image or whatever they do to just be kind of an emblem of success. It's real tinny to me. They don't really want to develop a aesthetic idea. And then I thought, "Well, maybe I'm being too stubborn," as you might say, "to want a motive to be ethnic." I don't think that's what, for myself, that's what I express, because that's what I've reduced to be what Magu artwork is about. But if you look at my work, it also not only crosses over cultures, but it also departs from being totally ethnic.

Like this dog. Well, he wasn't looking like a *cholo*. The dog itself was very popular. Isn't necessarily Chicano. It's like a Mickey Mouse isn't black, he isn't white, he's not Armenian, he's not Chicano. Everybody can relate to Mickey Mouse. He's a mouse. So I created that third item. And I also, philosophically, have tried to develop an idea that, as long as you stay within the cultural parameters, you can be a gringo and still do that. Because after all, we're half gringo as it is. And it isn't about who you are, everything, but I think intent is the key word.

KMD: Why did you do dogs? I mean, you have a lot of people talk about the anthropomorphic characters in your work. I'm wondering if there's a reason it's mostly dogs.

GL: There's a lot of reasons. It's in art history. I remember wanting to come up with an image, an icon, that was so dramatically me. I wanted to do the Mexican pyramid, Indian reference. And one day I was flipping them around, and it looked like a dog howling. And so I put the pyramid upside down and I made his teeth and his ears and I worked it out. So I made them as buildings, I made them as airplanes, and I made them in all of these different formats, because as an artist, I worked that way. I get one idea, and then I'll give you ten versions of this. And in that way, creativity expands the idea.

I want people to expand their idea of what Chicano art is possible, not narrow it to the old clichés that people argue about, saying, "Oh, we don't want to see that old stuff anymore."

KMD: Old clichés such as . . .

GL: Lowriders and folk art and *nopales* and Virgen de Guadalupe and Frida Kahlo. People have had enough of all that. And I think one of the things is that—

OCTOBER 1, 2007

KMD: This is Karen with Gil Lujan, and today is October 1, 2007. This is our third session. We're on tape 2. And we're going to start with some questions about your unfolding—the unfolding of your artistic training from East LA, to Cal State, on to Irvine.

GL: Yes, I would think that East LA College—when I left the Air Force I went directly and signed up at East LA College. To begin—and not knowing what college entailed. I just knew I had to do it, and I knew it was an improvement in my life. So I went seeking things, like what I was going to do as a major. So I was so green, and although I had been to Europe and I was twenty-one years old, but I still needed to find out what kind of profession I was going to go towards. At least that was by the urgings of the counselors. They kept prodding me to figure it out.

So I wound up—to cut this to the quick—I wound up in the art department as an assistant in the laboratory in the ceramics department for this lady named Margaret, who I'll always be indebted to because she was so kind. And then she said something that was very significant. She says, "Why don't you come and play with the clay while you're waiting for these classes?" Because that's where I would be, staring into the lab waiting for my class, and she'd be tinkering around. Finally she came, and she invited me. I did the sculpture, which I still have, and she goes, "Hey, you've got a feel for clay." So that resulted in me being the lab assistant in all of the ceramic labs throughout my whole education, from Long Beach and Irvine as well. But I think that what was significant at those early stages is that I didn't know anything about the art world. And as I was beginning to find out—when I was beginning to find out what the definition for art was, in fine art terms, it was at a political time when things were being challenged.

Education, values were being challenged. Political accessibility was a big concern. So free speech, and certainly the civil rights movement were warming up, so ethnicity became kind of a focus for me as an artist. Because in '64, I was asked to do a Mexican American art show, which I did, but it caused me to start thinking about, "Do we have an art form called Chicano art?" And it was very vague, and it was very—I remember to this day that it was a very dubious kind of thing that I was thinking, because nobody had ever heard of such a thing, or were even interested in deliberating it. So I began to equate sculptural criteria to a lowrider, graffiti, calligraphies, altars for installations—all kinds of little aesthetic processes. Like any number of processes that artists do was replicated with tortilla making, and the domestic arts with doilies, and all kinds of little altars and things that were done in the house. So when I started making these domestic associations to the fine arts terms, I began to see that, yes, there's something there, but yes, it was crude; it was underdeveloped.

Most of these people were working off of something that was more biological, something more innate than formal training would give you. And generally these people are called folk artists. At the time, politically the climate was about grass roots politics, about getting people involved, which really is the basis for democracy. Everybody should be encouraged to participate. Democracies only work when there's no back room dealings. So anyway, I was paying attention to these things, and I was of course inclined to saying, "Jeez." I was a young guy, and I began to see the disparity between my ethnic group and others more than ever. I mean, I had known that there was prejudices, but then I learned about racism, institutional racism, and that's another story. That's a much more overt hostile act.

So in trying to assess what Chicano art was, I think that I began to take on self-imposed duties like organizing art shows. So I went around and I had a Volkswagen, I think. I had different kinds of cars, but I went around collecting artwork from libraries like I had done for the art department, and I began to show them in libraries. I just went and asked. It was that simple. They said, "Sure."

KMD: Yeah, I remember we talked about that last time. But were your classes in art kind of inspiring you or not inspiring you to do that? I'm trying to figure out that moment between what you're actually doing and what the classes are giving you.

GL: They're also telling you that in order to make fine arts, you have to extract from your own experiences to make a product. In other words, a fine artist is a person that has to accumulate, intellectually and then aesthetically, an idea, [then] physically make it. In those days conceptual art—even today, I guess—requires some physical kinds of result, an outcome. So I knew that if I was to trust my own experience, I was a Chicano, that reinforced the idea of looking for an ethnic motive and making art.

The other thing was that, at that time there was also an interesting part of the art history in this country, that there was a lot of new things that were coming out. The colleges were very active and really wonderful places to be. I think by comparison, now people are asleep. But we were active. We were not only active politically, at least in our thinking, if we didn't actually act it out. I did, but there was others that just were intellectually involved with the ideas. And so the situation at that time called for finding out things that you normally wouldn't turn that stone over because it wasn't ever considered important. Like Chicano art, like Mesoamerican art history, and [a] whole body of what's been discovered since then.

And what I found out in doing my own little introspection of who I was, and at the same time, reinforcing it with archeology and anthropology, was to find out that there was more to Mesoamerica than they had ever told me, and that got my interest. And so I began to make correlations between, why is it that all these other ethnic groups can have art, an art matrix, and we couldn't? In political terms, this Fresno rancher said, "Well, we don't own them Mexicans anymore; we just lease them, we rent them." And I began to understand. That idea was—yeah, we're a piñata group, we're a labor pool. We're the ones that get battered.

KMD: So were you taking classes in Mesoamerican archeology?

GL: There wasn't anything there. This was [the] '60s. And even by the time—well, I was lucky to get a class with Carlos Castaneda at Irvine. He was coming around when I was there in '72, I think. And that was very fruitful, conceptually, because it brought home the idea that we had Zen sages here among our kind, and our forefathers. And that really allowed me to open up to even having visualizations of the world that were nonlinear and non-European in the source that we would get them from. Even African ideas, even Moorish and Spanish ideas, were all translated in this colonial attitude, and we were resisting that at first. At least I was, because I was finding out that art—my history as an indigenous person was not only maligned, but it was also buried, like they did all the temples.

So it just created a resistance, and it created a reaction to me. So I took a proactive course, and I started organizing little art shows anywhere. And like I mentioned the last time, that the artwork that I got was just really—artwork that—Eurocentric ideas that are in place in the infrastructure. That's what they teach.

KMD: Now, give me some examples. What do you mean by that? It was abstract, it was—

GL: Well, abstract is a European idea. Mesoamerican people had also done abstractions, but they were never mentioned. The only abstractions considered were those that were discovered in the late 1800s, like Turner—[the] artist Turner. Or any number—Matisse, Picasso, all these European—all this royalty that we were made to study. Not one mention was made of any Mexican anything.

And yet, now this is—I'm going to school there in the '60s and '70s, and Diego Rivera was an artist that really made the *New York Times* headlines and that had never been replicated until Picasso in the '50s. So for twenty years, this Mexican artist had actually made such a big deal over here. He was—and you know the story about the Rockefeller scandal?

KMD: Right. Were you as a student questioning the faculty, the courses they were teaching?

GL: No. I was never that—I've never been that brave to do that. I had never been that brave to do that. I always was—I remember—Now, I had been going to a Buddhist temple, so my attitude towards faculty was much more passive. But at the same time, curious. I would ask them, I would want to engage faculty in questions, but I would never challenge their authority. Even though that was in the air, I couldn't come up to that. That would seem disrespectful.

And the other thing I thought of is, “Jeez, how can . . .” because we understood the value of peer group teaching, that’s an instrument that will help. But challenging your teacher like you know better is a very dangerous interaction between faculty and students, because obviously the student just doesn’t have the basis to evaluate things like the teacher, supposedly. [*laughter*]

KMD: So how did you manage this conflict between the content of the courses and what you were discovering?

GL: What had come to my understanding eventually was that it didn’t make any difference. Everything that I studied, Mesopotamia, Western civilization, European art—which I know intimately and I love it—is that it made me a better Chicano artist. That’s how I responded. I didn’t refute it. I know a lot of people who say, “Nah, no, that’s a gringo trip.” I said, “No, African art isn’t a gringo trip. They just happen to be the ones that owned the good ones.”

But they did not—PhD did not make this artwork. It’s some guy barefooted with ugly feet out in the bush did this. And a lot of people were doing these kinds of things in the past, and they had an aesthetic value to us. Because—the other thing I learned is that by comparing—this is important, too, because—when I learned that when you look at different ethnic groups [through] anthropology, then you get to compare them. You get to really see the groups in a different light than if you just [see] them from your own prism. Like Margaret Meade said, “You can’t do that.”

So I began to understand that, hey, here the European cultures developed modern art by looking at textiles, Japanese prints, art from the bushes. I mean, African art was done by folk artists, I guess. I don’t know what they would classify those guys [as], because they were trained in a different system, just like Asia has a different system. So the way we evaluate things, we put those down. In our case, as Chicanos, we didn’t have one. We didn’t even have a system to belabor. So—which I couldn’t, I didn’t have anything—at that time. I wasn’t equipped, intellectually, to even argue these things. But I said, “If they could start a movement of art by using that folk art, so can I.”

So I went into the barrio, and this is where it connects, where I began to mature—now, this took years, I couldn’t tell you exactly when this occurred. If I was hypnotized, I could probably tell you, but the point is that this evolved as a thought. To think “well, if they can build modern art from those basic wonderful little humble sources,” I began to look at the graffiti as calligraphy. I began to look at the sculptures as low-riders. And by this time, when I got that idea, it really was an infrastructure idea. It was a larger idea here going on. It wasn’t just—not splitting hairs between the abstract expressionist and the decorative expressionist and they’re all the same.

KMD: Why did you go from East LA to Long Beach?

GL: Because that was—there was a very important reason was—one very important reason was that they had a sculpture [symposium] done by Ken Glenn, who I went to work under in the Long Beach sculpture department. And he was always a really cool guy. He was tough, he was a tough guy. But he had a lot of responsibilities. I always remember him fondly. Him and Steve Warlick, another guy that was very nice, and Richard Harris. These were—he was a master’s student there, but he walked around like a teacher most of the time. I was a young kid, I accepted that.

KMD: And what kind of classes did you take at Long Beach?

GL: The other reason, besides the sculpture symposium, is that a lot of the kids that were coming out of East LA were going to Long Beach. They weren’t going to Cal State LA. Cal State LA never has had an art department like at Long Beach, ever. I say that not because I’m from Long Beach. I don’t really care. I don’t have those kind of loyalties. But there was a lot of things going on. It was just active and wonderful. It was a great time. And conceptually, they were doing things like making, forming metal with dynamite underwater. And the other guy, [Gabriel Kahn,] was laminating marine plywood like they did in ships to make sculptures. And there was a number of very exciting ideas about art.

So the other thing that I think is significant to say is that I begin to understand that good art has a large criteria. I mean, you’ve got to go through a number of things to be best of show. And that is that ideas to me seem to be the primary reason why an artwork is good. It’s significant at that time. Like the *Mona Lisa*.

They make a big deal of that now, but it wasn't then. So in art history, there's all these quirky things that happened because it's about human affairs. And when you deal with art and human affairs, you'd better be ready to be very willing to accept a very broad band of definitions and things. As broad as the whole human experience is, because people often want to make visual arts replicate the real narrow categories of the world—the way they see the world, these little tiny categories. But art's not that way.

And so I was making these larger relationships, because I wanted—in my mind, I wanted to very clearly arrange a—not an ideology, but a description of what Chicano art was to encompass every one of us. There wouldn't be one left out; no one left behind. It wasn't a political criteria. That was included. It wasn't a social one. It wasn't just about people who paint flowers or just people who do portraits. It was including—what would be the definition that would encompass all of it? I say it was the culture that—we all pivoted on the culture.

KMD: So were [you] going—

GL: As a singular element.

KMD: As a student at Long Beach, were you going to friends' exhibitions?

GL: Oh yeah. Yeah.

KMD: And is that the regular part of routine?

GL: At that time, let's see. Well, let's put some dates to this description, because it will give an idea of the times as well. In the '60s, I was talking to the wall. Nobody was listening. I didn't even—I was at East LA College—I was nothing. I was a freshman, freshman, freshman. The point is that I didn't know what I was saying. I wasn't as articulate as I am now. I mean, there's a lot of factors that people just saw me as this babbling guy. And people told me, "What are you talking about?" I didn't know yet, but I unfolded really a kind of need to go back to Mesoamerican ideals and values via folk art.

Now, that's important, because politically—I was being influenced politically—but even more important, this is what I had. I had those humble doilies and brick fences that people would make in these little pseudo-Disneyland gardens in their yard. That was folk art. Now, what we were getting from Mexico was all tourist stuff. It really didn't matter. There was a preponderance of it, and it was wonderful. And I began to see also, aesthetically, I began to get influenced. And I said, "Hey, a Japanese bucket can be gorgeous and beautiful, and it's a bucket. And they sell [for] like ten cents apiece. But it was gorgeous."

So I began to erase these little hierarchies that fine artists usually put on their heads about, "This is better. This is more important. This guy has more training and therefore is more important." And as those things began to dissolve. I began to look at art in a much more, I guess, tolerant way. Tolerant because I didn't have all of the social biases that people used to hear. "Well, I don't like black art," or, "I don't like Chinese art," or, "I don't like this," or, "I don't like the Impressionists." I don't know why people say that, because in any one of those areas, you'll probably find something that would knock you out. Those are big strokes you're making. But anyway, I transcended. If I could put it that way, thanks to my Zen training, to transcend the pettiness of the arguments. I wanted to see the overview, the infrastructure of Chicano art. I was drawn to wanting to put together, however complex it is, however diverse we are, but it all fit in one ship, and that was that we share a language culture.

Just to explain it on the tape, reggae comes from an English-speaking colony, and salsa comes from a Spanish-speaking colony, and they're both African-induced music. So the language is a very formidable element in describing how Chicano artists are different from Hopi artists, who are both Native Americans. Chicanos are Native Americans, I don't care what they say. We're from here. I mean, gee whiz, my parents—my father's side of the family go back twenty thousand years here. But you get these really petty politics today about, "No, you're not as Indian as I am," or "You don't speak Spanish so you can't be Chicano." Those are the petty nonsense that's not true.

KMD: Were you hearing that in—

GL: Oh, all the time. Oh, I was getting—oh, for me?

KMD: Yeah.

GL: People didn't—I'm a very intense guy, and I didn't usually get too many objections because I'd wear you out. I'd wear you down. [laughter] I was relentless.

KMD: So you finish Cal State Long Beach in '69.

GL: It would have been '68, but they held me up by one little stupid—one unit.

KMD: One unit?

GL: And I said, "Well, why didn't you guys tell me before?" They said, "I don't know." This is what I have now, it's just old bureaucrat stuff. And they just keep you longer. I mean, I've seen them do that to hundreds and hundreds of people, I almost think that it's some kind of a policy for them to just hold you as long as they can.

KMD: Get another dollar out of you.

GL: I guess. So I took a [another] course.

KMD: So you felt very successful in the ceramics department?

GL: Successful, I wouldn't say, but I've said I felt comfortable. But hey, I felt that I really had an inclination, a proclivity towards clay, I thought. I've still got to prove that yet.

KMD: Did students have exhibitions at that time?

GL: Students were always having exhibitions, especially master's students. But at that time we were showing artwork for a number of reasons. Some of it was political, doing Chicano art shows for political reasons. And then I was being called to do art shows within the art world, which is different. So I have many facets to my art career. I have the community, I have the art world, I have *galería* stuff.

KMD: What kinds of things within the art world were happening for you?

GL: Me? Mostly rejection. They didn't tell me, but this one guy one time, when I—but this is '71, '72, which is right around the time when I met Almaraz, and I had already gotten my MFA. I think, at this point, it was '73, to give you the real exact time. And this guy—I won't mention his name, but he was part of my MFA class and so forth, which I'm going to speak to in a minute. And he said, "Hey," he told Carlos, he says, "Hey, we don't want no Chicano art here," in an art collective that was being put together by these other people that invited me. And I told Carlos, so he went over there first, opportunistic that he was, he went over there, and he got shut down. That guy would have never said that to me. I would have punched him out.

[break in audio]

KMD: This is Karen Mary Dávalos, and we're on tape 2, side B, with Gil Lujan. He was telling me about his MFA training at Irvine. Well, you were first telling me about this guy who was trying to—

GL: Well, I was responding to the question about "what was my art world life like?" And it was pretty low-key, because I took a path of doing *cholo* stuff. Not even in my own community were they really happy about doing lowriders and professing that those are art forms of ours. [phone ringing]

[break in audio]

KMD: Okay, go ahead. What you were getting involved in, or you said being rejected from?

GL: Yeah. I think that what I want to say, basically, is that while most of the white kids that were going to school there—because I wasn't really scheduled to go to Irvine, that school was not planned for people like me. But I knocked on the door, and I got help to get into the master's program. I don't know if I was even a worthy student, to tell you the truth. I wasn't really that good and everything. But I was very determined, and I found out that perseverance is a really good teacher. And if you don't have it at first, you can get it in time, if you work hard. And I was always honest in this endeavor. I really want to learn, I really wanted to expand my ideas about what it was to accommodate everybody's arguments.

But anyway, we would meet resistance, like this guy telling Carlos that he didn't want Chicano art. Then somebody else made another one, "No dog art." That was directed towards me. Well, that was a

really unkind thing to do, challenging somebody else's aesthetic. But that was what we got. I mean, that was not so subtle, and some were more subtle indications.

KMD: What about your professors in the MFA program?

GL: Some were really nice, some were wonderful, and others were less than kind.

KMD: Did they teach you anything?

GL: Nope, they told me to stay away from them. What I learned was that you are better—you're better off to go towards the constituency you're working for. For a couple of reasons: it keeps you positive, it keeps you going to where you're supposed to be going, and you do less sword fencing, which I did a lot of. I wasted a lot of years trying to argue with people who never were going to like what you're talking about anyway.

So people had an innate hatred for vandalism and graffiti. I had to get past that. They saw lowriders as a *cholo* thing, although it's not. It's a very middle-class recreational hobby, and it's become even more than ever really institutionalized as a family thing. But we had all these objections to the content that I was pulling out, largely because we were going through a middle-class transition of trying to get ahead. And here I'm still talking about *cholos* and lowriders.

And my mom one time told me, because she had heard I had been on TV, and somebody told her that I was talking about *cholos*, and she goes, "Porque estás hablando de esas cosas? Que vergüenza." Or she didn't say "Que vergüenza," but something like, "I don't think you should be doing that. You're going to cause trouble." I said, "But, Ma, what's the problem?" I said, "Look at our cousins, look at . . ." You know, I grew up with khakis and so forth. And she just kind of frowns, she goes, "Eh, I don't want no arguments." That was it. My mom wasn't interested in getting into the polemics of those issues. She just thought it was socially unfavorable. And that's what I faced. I faced a lot of people that thought that the things that I was doing were negative.

KMD: How did you get through?

GL: But I didn't—what?

KMD: I mean, do you do the assignment?

GL: Being dense. [*laughter*] Being dense and stubborn and knowing that I was right about seeking what I had to seek.

KMD: Is the MFA program at Irvine, is it—does it have—was it known for a certain emphasis?

GL: No, it was very laissez-faire. You do what you want.

KMD: You took studio classes?

GL: Oh, yeah. I had an MFA program, a two-year program, and I also was hired to be part of the assistants. They had filled up all their assistant positions, and they gave me an extra one because I was coming in as *raza*. They said, "Well, let him in," and they actually gave me a stipend [for] research. Which I don't know what—they never gave me any research assignments. But I was just tolerated in there, and mostly just overlooked. I tried doing these abstract paintings one time in a class, and I put them up, and they made fun of me because they looked like wallpaper. They said. [*laughter*] And I don't claim to be a painter. I still have some, and they were horrific. I mean, they were terrible.

KMD: So how did you keep yourself—you know, it sounds like an incredible challenge. How did you keep yourself going?

GL: I don't know. I think that being young and full of enthusiasm for life, and an intensity as a person. I just overcame whatever it was. I'm not sure.

KMD: Were you involved in the local Chicano groups on campus?

GL: Well, I tried to associate myself with some political things, but politics is a mean business, and those guys don't want to listen to artists. And they really don't think about things. These are like different religions. They fight about details. They're like the Marxist legalists—they're coming, they'll get you on a point. "Well, here, it says that you can't do that. You can't be like that." As an artist, I think that what's more important is that my training was to absorb as much as I could in information about the world that I live in, and then make social commentary if I wanted to.

But I wasn't obligated to do that. I found out as an artist, another thing—that universities are bureaucratically set up to separate ceramics, painting, and all that. In my head, I didn't separate them. I was going to be an artist, and all those were just details. Those are just different kinds of hats that you wear. You put on a robe of a certain kind for ceramics, and you put a different hat to paint, and you put the glasses on to weld.

KMD: But you had to specialize, and you end up specializing in . . .

GL: In ceramic sculpture. But it was a very loose specializing. They really didn't—I [mean] even, in my MFA, I don't think I did anything in clay. I think I did drawings. They were very open to it, because I think it's a good reason, philosophically. But in my MFA I presented drawings and I made a papier-mâché—a '39 Chevy that was a casket and a wedding thing. At the time, I wasn't married.

And so it was a casket-looking thing, and then it looked very festive, very ethnic. At that point, I was making very deliberate ethnic statements. If they didn't get that it was Chicano, it wasn't my fault. But the other quality I was going to talk about right now is how I think that what I really gained from the MFA, certainly in my thinking, was that art could be anything. These people were really pushing the limits, which is what our job was as graduate students. You had to go and find out the next Picasso step.

KMD: So you may have felt on the outside at Irvine, but you're able to get the first Los Four exhibition at U.C. Irvine. How does that happen?

GL: Well, what happened is that I was organizing not only art groups, which I haven't mentioned yet—I had formed two or three different art groups that were very transcendental. They were formed, and they disappeared just as quick. And I had gone to Hal Glicksman, who was the director of the Irvine Art Gallery. And I told him—I knew he was gutsy because he had shown graffitied doors from the LA prison at Claremont one time, years before I had met him, before I wound up at Irvine, where he was the art gallery director. And then he did—during the Vietnam War, with all these protests, he did a Navy airplane show. This guy was gutsy. He said, "You know what?" And we went in there, and I'll be damned if it didn't remind me of my Second World War experiences with airplanes, and liking airplanes, and having little models and stuff.

So for me—I don't know about others—I'm not for war. I was in the service, but it seemed like a silly argument. We have wars. And they make bitchin' aircraft, and they look beautiful. So this—well, on a philosophical level it was helping me also realize that I'm not going to go for the party line all the time. Yes, I'm against war, but—this. I'm against police brutality, but I support the police. You've got to have them. And as the monsters that create crimes have forced our societies to have police. I mean, there's a lot of Indian cultures that didn't have a police force. They didn't know what it was. The social pressure of the group did it. Now, that's not possible today. It would become too impersonal.

KMD: So get me back to—

GL: Oh, sorry. To what?

KMD: The MFA. You're able to get a Los Four exhibition.

GL: Oh yeah.

KMD: If there's this conflict, there's not a lot of support. You're doing things that they don't understand. How do you talk Hal Glicksman into giving you a show?

GL: I don't know. I was trying to be persuasive, and I'd try to get him to—I was shooting for his ability to see something weird and oblique. I knew that he was eccentric in his taste, and so I was shooting for that. And I don't know what I told him. I couldn't tell you. But it worked.

KMD: Did you bring in portfolios?

GL: Nah.

KMD: It was just an idea.

GL: It was an idea. And then I verbally just kind of told him. I wanted a dozen tortillas, and [I] had all these artists that I knew, and we could put the show to fill the gallery. And I had done it a lot of times before, but never did I realize the implication of what I was doing there. And it was the same thing, like when I won

the Hollywood and Vine contract, I had no idea. So in my life, I must tell you in retrospect, I've been a very lucky guy. I kind of fall into great things. On the other hand, you've got to be ready. If you're not ready, you fall off the horse.

And so I was ready at a time when I really had spent years—before I met Carlos and Frank [Romero]—I had spent years conceptualizing what I was doing. And so Beto, he adopted what I told him seamlessly. I'd tell him, "We've got to go back and revive the Mesoamerican aesthetic." The basic way that they used to think about art. I said, "We don't know those things anymore." And so he'd go for it. But Carlos was an intellectual battle which was very fruitful for me, because it's that counterpoint that made me . . .

KMD: Refine—

GL: Refine the strength, the good point. Because he turned out to be more interested in the politics. So after I had pretty much thrashed Carlos for about six months to a year that I knew him, and I just used to let him have it about [how] he owed a responsibility to the community—because he was disengaged. He had spent five years in New York, and he really had no need to be tied up with other Mexicans. Because when he was going to school, he was afraid of *cholos*, and here's this guy talking about *cholos* and lowriders, and I could see the fear just coming into his brows.

KMD: So was it Carlos and Frank against you and Beto?

GL: Not quite. Philosophically, Beto and I were really tied together because we knew each other longer. Now, Carlos and Frank come out of an experience of going to art classes together long before—ten years before I had met them. So that was the setup. But when we got into discussions and so forth, everybody would argue. There was no history [between us]. You would argue a point, and we would argue with each other, and it was pretty much like a guy thing. We were very sarcastic.

KMD: Banter?

GL: Yeah, we'd banter back and forth, and bicker.

KMD: So if I could jump ahead a little bit, *Los Four* becomes a pivotal group in Los Angeles, and then you head off to Fresno. And why do you start *La Brocha del Valle*?

GL: I didn't start—no, it wasn't me. Ernie Palomino had talked to me one time—I don't know where I met him—at a conference, and he says, "Come up and help me organize these guys." And, well, I had been doing that for some time now. This is now '73, '74, '75. And I had been organizing not only groups, but exhibitions and so forth. Not having any training, not even understanding what I was doing, other than through the experience, and that's how I've learned to curate.

And so I was responding to a phone call that I got from these people that wanted me to apply for a teaching position in Fresno City College, a full-time position. At that time, I was with Mardi, and we were just young in our relationship—I don't know, I think—do we have Otono? Yeah, we had Otono already. He was born in '73. So I got this position in Fresno in '76. So Antonio was already three years old. So there we go. I applied. I went up to Fresno, and I did my interview. "Yes," I was for the farm workers. "Yes," I was politically active, yes. Then *Los Four* by this time had already loomed up as an important event and kind of anointed us as the princes of Chicano art. So I got the job, and I went into Fresno.

And I met these guys, and they used to be sitting around these orange crates complaining about what they ain't got. And a lot of them didn't even have the imagination to think that they could possibly have anything if they organized. I found out that right away. So I went to work. So I started, you know, one by one. I knew I couldn't just make speeches to the group. That's dangerous if you're new. That's like pontificating to people. They don't even know who you are. So I used to go one by one. First Ernie, and I would tell him, "We can do this, and we could—we've just got to get—let's get a meeting together." So within the first sixth months that I was there, roughly speaking, I think we got about some thirty-four, forty people as members. Now, before, there was just maybe half a dozen [artists].

KMD: Now, what are they members for? What's the goal?

GL: Well, *Brocha* was something that they had entertained already. It was an idea that already belonged to them, and they had already had this association in their minds. But what I did when I got there is we

formalized it, and we incorporated. But more important, what we did, what I was pushing for, was to get a Friends of Brocha together. And sure enough, we had women there, they— Now, at that time, I was young and had black hair and I was thin, so I used all my wiles, which I learned from women. [*laughter*] No, kidding. But I used everything I had to try to convince people to work towards this thing called La Brocha as an art group.

And sure enough, we got it together. We had people coming that were willing to wash windows and everything. So now I had to be careful, because I didn't want to be the leader. I never want to be the leader. I just want to be supportive and crank things up. But the leader, I found out later, was an anarchist. [*laughter*]

KMD: Who was the leader?

GL: Ernie.

KMD: Oh, Ernie is an anarchist.

GL: Ernie was the anarchist, but he didn't let us know. He was funny, a wonderful guy. You got to know, he was a crack-up guy. And he used to play the piano and do these wonderful—

KMD: He was part of the beatniks.

GL: He was an artist, he was a beatnik. He did wonderful drawings when he was a kid, wonderful stuff. Quality stuff. And then I don't know what happened. I think he got a lot of premature attention, which can happen, and then all of the sudden, he just flattened out. It happens. And then he never reached those levels again. But he was given—he was paraded around. They gave him presents, they gave him cars, whatever. He told me stories that he was just riding high. And ultimately, he got a job at Cal State Fresno, which was a disaster.

KMD: Now, you were in the Raza Studies Department?

GL: Yeah, La Raza Studies Department at Fresno City College.

KMD: At City College?

GL: Yes.

KMD: And Brocha is a kind of arts organization—

GL: From Fresno.

KMD: From Fresno, trying—

GL: And the surrounding area, yeah.

KMD: And most of these folks are . . .

GL: They're all Chicanos.

KMD: Chicanos, and they're—they have that consciousness? Or is it developing?

GL: Yes, it was developing. And when you say "that consciousness," one thing I learned about being in a movement: not everybody's on the same page. And so that consciousness is qualified.

KMD: Is that—was that some of the tension in the group because they're on different pages?

GL: The tension of the group, always, like most rural areas, was personal. They're not as intellectually prone like UCLA students that are just—these guys, they live among each other. They're not literate, for the most part. They have a lot of passion, they have skill and talent, but it's very underdeveloped. And so—

KMD: And so these aren't students in the—

GL: They were students, everybody was a student.

KMD: Okay. But just starting out.

GL: I think, yeah. Ernie wasn't a student at that point, because he's older than me, and so when I was there, I was already—I was thirty-six, thirty-seven. I was still a young kid.

KMD: So is the group able to accomplish anything?

GL: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. We did a lot.

KMD: What did they do?

GL: Well, I had brought a [Agustín Victor] Casasola show from San Francisco. I was instrumental because I was working at the city college, and I always think I could have done more, but for a person active like me, I

never did enough, in my mind. I was really casual, easygoing. I'd like to smoke, so I was cool and everything. On the other hand, I was a city slicker from the city. And these are country guys. So one of the ways to use, to power leverage, is that if they can't—I mean, there was thirty-something of them against one of me, and they were afraid of me.

KMD: You're the outsider.

GL: Not only that, but I was ahead of the game. I was on the executive board for this Concilio de Fresno. There was fifty-two organizations. So I was politically involved. I was at the school, and I was very active. The farm workers, we would—I was doing a lot of stuff. My ex-wife, Mardi, clocked me, and I had done some forty-seven and a half hours besides my college time that I had to be in school. I was on the community, organizing meetings and all kinds of stuff. I was a chair for the Sequoia Health [Foundation] board, and it was an effort [on] the part of the people who were working there to put a clinic in the southeastern part of Fresno, where there was not one doctor. Not one. And guess who lived there: poor whites, blacks, and Chicanos. So it's an economic issue.

KMD: Name some of those other organizations, it seems important.

GL: Well, I formed a group called the Confederation of Low-Riders. And what was important about that was that it was tied in with the art. Again, pressing for the lowriders in an art place, I got together some guys that started with them coming to my house one night. It was ten thirty at night on Sunday—[phone ringing]

KMD: Go ahead.

[break in audio]

KMD: Confederation—you were talking about the Confederation of Low-Riders.

GL: The Confederation of Low-Riders came about because one evening on a Sunday, these kids came and they pretty much knew I was very accessible as a faculty member. And they complained about the fact that the police were harassing them, and they wanted a cruising lane. There was a cruising lane on Belmont for the *güeritos*, the *gabachos*. But if they went to that cruising lane, the cops would stand in the middle of the road and hit their cars, the paint jobs. And they'd tap their paint job and say pull over, and they'd check them out. You know, those are three thousand dollar paint jobs that they're talking about.

So anyway, I said, "Okay, I'll see what I can do." And I was on this Concilio de Fresno, so I went to the *concilio* and I brought it up, and they said, "Well, what do you want us to do about it?" It's a problem, they all knew it. They were aware of it, and they said, "Well . . ." One guy told me, "Well, you better," he said, "Why don't you see the cops? See what you can put together?" So, as I was always organizing things, I found it real easy to do a conference. So we had the Confederation of Low-Riders conference, a symposium, whatever we called it. We had CHP there, which I had made some CHP friends—these big guys—really nice friends that used to come and speak to my class. And I had a lieutenant from the Fresno Police Department, and because I was an instructor, a professor, whatever, they gave me the time of day, and I got them together.

So we had a day, and these kids came, and they were giving all this testimony to the cops, which they already knew, but they had to sit there and listen to it. And later they told me, "These kids don't know anything, but we have to put up with fellow cops that are very racist." They had their own problems inside the force, between us. Now, this is [the] '70s. So in a nutshell, they presented all this material, and it began to grow.

But I knew at that point, I had to turn it into something positive. I didn't want to have a bunch of disgruntled people, and then with the police there, that's dynamite. So what [Sequoia Health Foundation and I in my capacity as a board member] did is we eventually made this cruise-a-thon, because I needed to change the image of the lowriders, which was, in the Chicano community, all around them. They were cousins and uncles and dads that were doing this. But it was funny that the general community had a negative view, in a way. But it was kind of a negative view that was fed to them. But in reality, they knew

these guys. And these guys, as I came to find out, [their] clubs, they knew of each other. They know who was who, but they never talked to each other.

So in this conference, I got them together, introduced them, they shook hands, and then they became car club buddies. They all knew each other. They stayed within their club. It was a wonderful time in the '70s because all this coalescing of these people was a great thing. We had this cruise-a-thon. We raised all these thousands of dollars because people were supposed to pledge to these lowriders guys if—we did a tour that hit all these little towns, and it was announced, and it went on the radio and everything. So these cars that we had were like a big caravan. They went from town to town to town, and people actually lined up for a five-minute pass-through. And I wasn't on the cruise-a-thon, which I should have been at the beginning. They went too fast. They should have slowed down and let the people—because most people went there, and after five minutes they were all gone, and I got complaints about that. And I thought, "Well, maybe next year."

But anyway, the negative aspect of this is that I told the political people how organized these guys really were. Some of these clubs had ten thousand dollars in the bank, and they used to do this and that, and they'd have fundraisers and all that. And none of the groups there could raise that kind of money, the political groups. And they all—well, they all had money. One of the problems with political groups is that they have money. They're not going to give it up. They want to get it from somebody else. The lowriders, they give their money to the pool, and that's why they get all this money. And that selflessness makes the group wealthy. You're not going to find that but rarely in political groups, unless they're tapping some contingency fund.

Anyway, so that was successful and everything, and then I got a lot—I started getting the reaction, "What are you doing?" And then privately they told me, "You shouldn't be organizing these guys."

KMD: Who's "they"?

GL: The political hacks that were supposed to be the political leaders. The pundits. And they started telling me that I was going too far, I've got to take it easy, I'm scaring people. And I said, "What? Coalescing these guys that are just haplessly just floating here?" I said, "Look what we did. We got out to raise money for a clinic that wasn't in existence before." This is why I'm always surprised at how people can get on your case for doing such a good thing.

KMD: Oh, you had the car clubs support the clinic?

GL: We did a cruise-a-thon.

KMD: The cruise-a-thon was to support—

GL: The cruise-a-thon was what people donated and pledged money, if this guy went so many miles, they'd give him ten cents on the mile, or a dollar on the mile, whatever. I don't remember the details. But the point is that we raised all kinds of money to support the clinic. And again, trying to tell the community, "Look, these guys can serve some good."

And so what I needed to do at that time as an artist is to get that Brocha del Valle to see that collectively they could do more. Get the lowriders together and prove to them that they have to be concerned about public image, because a lot of them said, "Well, we don't care." It wasn't a good—there was nobody really to negotiate between them and the community, so we were doing those kind of dynamics, and it was all working out. And then they went after me, and they went after me to screw it up. And it was Chicanos that did it. And they got some of the presidents—I know this one guy, they started telling them about me, I don't know what the hell they told him, but all of the sudden, they all cooled, and it just fell apart. And I think it's the same Machiavellian things that happen in all kinds of social events.

And this is what I've learned: that when you start doing something good with people that they're not used to, like with the lowriders, getting them together, it scared the cops. Now, I don't see how that could do that, but they must have their own reasons for fear. But—and it's something that I think most people don't know—it's a hard job to be a cop.

KMD: Now, you're in Fresno for like four years, right? Seventy-six to '80. Did you go back to LA to do any other projects?

GL: Well, yeah, there was a couple. I did a silk-screen project. I would do small things, yes.

KMD: Silk screen where?

GL: Carlos Almaraz and Frank Romero and Ricardo Duardo, Leo Limón, and Judithe Hernández, they had a public arts place [Public Art Center], on Figueroa. So I went there and I started to do a silk screen when I would be in LA, every time I'd come to LA.

KMD: And how did that thing go? Did it sell, did you—

GL: Well, it wasn't a happy ending.

[break in audio]

GL: So anyway, I left Fresno in 1980, because I was really—

KMD: But before you leave, you organize mural making with farm workers?

GL: Well, no, I had actually done a mural [*Una Sola Unión*]. Well, for one of the conventions, we did a sixty by forty-foot canvas [in 1977]. It was huge.

KMD: Did you run into Barbara Carrasco then?

GL: I don't remember her [much]. But I was in charge of the mural project. And we did this one, and we got guys from LA: George Yepes, George Lopez, and Fred Payan, John Valadez. They were all my crew that came from LA. And they came up to help paint the mural. And then I got local people to help from La Brocha, but it was mostly a lot of tugging and pulling because people thought that because it was a public mural, they could do whatever they wanted to.

So one time, I was painting away—because I started the mural before I got all this help. We had gotten a little bit of help, but I painted all the mountains up at the top and so forth. And after about two weeks, I got help, and then it began to move. And with John's [Valadez] help, we would project images and then draw them out. I had a crew for everything. Some people would do the heads, other people would do the figures and stuff, et cetera, because people had different skills.

Well, one time this guy was painting this face purple, and this guy says, "Hey, he's painting the face purple." So I get down and . . . There was already all this little mutiny stuff, because [of] the nature of organizing these people at that time. They were not accustomed and didn't know how to work together. And they constantly felt—and having egotistical breakdowns. They would have a lot of petty personality stuff going on, and dismissing the mission. So—

KMD: So in other words, you had a design, you projected it, you gridded that thing out . . .

GL: Yes. That was my mural, and they were supposed to just help. And, of course, the crew in LA was no problem. They were skilled and they helped. And I had a lot—most of the people were good there.

But at the beginning there was always like, you have to prove yourself. The coach has to kind of figure out a way to overcome that, the negatives. So I knew it was coming. I could hear the "Ah, Magu's not even from here. Why is he doing it? Why is he in charge?" All that stuff, which—César Chávez had given me the job. I talked to him directly. So I got down from where I was on the scaffolding, I came down and I said, "Hey, you can't paint that face purple. Let me give you a job. Everybody's got jobs here, and I've got people that do just the faces." He goes, "Hey, man, this is a community project." I said, "Yeah, this is a community project, but I'm in charge, and that's not going to be purple." So he got down and had a little tantrum and he stomped off, and he made enough noise so that everybody could see.

So everybody's like, making these kind of like very quiet little—I guess they thought that he had showed me up, or how do they say, he had talked me—how do they say that—he told me off or something by his actions. And I said, "Okay." I blew this whistle which I had, and I got everybody down. I said, "Okay, let me tell you this. César Chávez gave me this mural job to do. I'm in charge. I've got people assigned to everything." I said, "Anybody that doesn't really want to help with this community project and so forth, you can leave."

KMD: Did anybody leave?

GL: No. See, you've got to do that in a way where nobody dares leave. [*laughter*] It's a known Chicano truth.

KMD: So George Yepes must have been a young guy at the time.

GL: George Yepes?

KMD: Yeah.

GL: Oh, he did a funny thing that I've got to tell you about. Yeah, he's such a—so George Yepes. Anyway, so I got past that. So everybody went back to work, and I got over the "I'm in charge" kind of thing that happens with little groups. And then César Chávez was going to come the following day or something, so I told everybody, I said, "Come on, we've got to get something done, he's going to be coming tomorrow," blah, blah, blah. That was my way to get it going, a little urgency.

So finally when he came, when César came, I said, "This is—César, this is this guy, these are the guys from LA." I introduced them all. And then George Yepes was standing off to the side, just wiping his hands, I saw him over there like waiting. And so I said, "Hey, George," I went like this, "Come on over." I waved with my hand. And so he's coming over and he's wiping his hands, he's getting the paint off his hands, and he sticks his hands out to César, and he goes, "So, finally we meet." [*laughter*]

Oh, my—that was so funny. He was still a student at Cal State LA. Nobody even knew who he was. He was a character there. And I have to tell you that my memories of George Yepes were always very funny. He did some insane things when he was up there. And funny, we laughed. We used to do the mural, we were in *carcajadas* all the time. We had a good time.

And I might say, too, that in the time that I've been in the Chicano movement, I've met wonderful people. We did a lot of cracking up, and being teased. You know, ragging and wolfing and getting on somebody's case is done as a way to—especially among the guys. Now, women can't do this, evidently, not as well. Some *comadre* groups probably could. They could rag each other when they're by themselves. They have these little sessions. But for the most part, I found that women can't do it very—you start getting like—they'll pull out their knives.

KMD: Yeah. It's not part of the culture.

GL: It's not part of the culture. Women can't handle it. But men, you have to. You have to put up with the jibing. It's part of the test of your ability to take it. And at the same time, there's limits to what you can take. But that's another issue.

KMD: So you go back down to LA for sporadic things, so you're mostly in—

GL: Fresno.

KMD: In Fresno.

GL: Then I quit in 1980.

KMD: Yeah, right around the time you become chair. How does a Chicano from East LA become chair of—

GL: Oh, it's easy. Nobody wants to do it. Any department, you know that. Who wants an extra duty and headaches? I don't know what the advantages are, you get one less class or something.

KMD: Yeah. What did you teach while you were there?

GL: La Raza Studies.

KMD: No, but what was the content? I mean, history, art . . .

GL: "Introduction to La Raza Studies." Well, that's an interesting thing to talk about because when I got to class, the curriculum was social and political. That's it. And that's what you were studying. And I thought, "This is no good." I said, "Chicanos don't live by just politics alone." And so I rewrote the curriculum, and I added a lot of other things, like I put a lot of anthropological information in there.

For example, an example of that would be, I would give them, on the first day, a barriology exam, and they'd—I did a couple things. I didn't do it in every class. I would sit in the back. Now, you've got to remember, I looked like a kid at that time. I had black hair. People would come into the class not knowing who the teacher was. So finally, when the class got in, [after] about ten minutes, they said, "If the teacher don't come in ten minutes, you can leave." So there was always people like, ready to just bolt out the door.

So just about eight minutes after the class, the time limit, when I saw people were fidgeting, looking at the clock, I went up to the top of the class, and I put "Mr. Lujan" there [on the board]. And this one guy says, "Hey, man, the teacher's going to come in here and catch you." I said, "Well, I'm Mr. Lujan, and this is the introduction [to La Raza studies]" Now, [I'm] looking at a kid. And he says, "Well, man, you're not the teacher. You're kidding us, right? You're messing around," he told me. "You're messing around." I said, "Well, look," I said, "I'm going to pass out a test. Will you take it or not? If you don't take the test," I said, "you're not going to get a good grade in this class."

So by this time, he was realizing that I'm serious, this teacher—this is what they get. Now, at that time, I was kind of like, I think I was a little bit insane because I took my job more as a promoter of Chicano studies in the Chicano world, and I didn't really have a lot of respect or loyalty to the school. I figured, "Hey, they gave me a chance to proselytize," and I became a quasi-preacher-educator, because what I really had to do was reconstruct their learning ego. Now, I never heard of a learning ego, but I made up the word to let them know that that's what I'm working on there. I formalized a lot of things in their head, like, "There's nothing wrong with thinking. Can you think?" Well, sure, everybody thinks. Then I would make a distinguishing discussion about what really thinking can be if you exercise the idea of abstractly putting together ideas and so forth. But I'd give them the barriology exam that came out of the Con Safos books, and I'd have them mimeographed and everything, and they said, "Hey, how can you give us a test? We just had—it's the first ten minutes of the class." I said, "Take the class, take the test." And I would do *pedo* jokes and *moco* jokes and stuff like that.

So they knew right away at the beginning with my introduction that they were not going to get an ordinary class, and they were going to get somebody who was very—at that time, I was really plying on human relations. I wanted them to be on my side. I wanted them to know that I was there for them. I said, "Hey, don't believe everything I say here. This is not a religious class." I said, "Challenge what I say, and if I don't know something, I'll tell you."

KMD: Were they able to?

GL: Yeah. Oh, right away. They loved to do that. But you know, it's interesting—

KMD: Now, were these non-traditional students?

GL: When you want them to challenge you—phew. I also learned that.

KMD: Yeah. And then they give it to you when you're not expecting it.

GL: Yeah, they can come at you.

KMD: Blindsides you.

GL: Yeah.

KMD: So were they nontraditional students at Fresno City College?

GL: Nontraditional because Chicanos never went to school there. But there was a growing number of kids—this is the '70s—they were beginning to go to school there. And they were doing things like cosmetology and teaching, coach stuff—a lot of the social services. They wanted to help people. The political movement at the time was for us to get together. That was—"Si se puede" was a very strong slogan at that time, because it was being pushed in all the fronts, in all the corners of Chicano activity.

And so I got a threat by—this guy came, he was kind of like a young jock Chicano, kind of middle class, and he says, "Hey, these guys told me that you better tone down your classes or you better watch out." And I said, "Let me tell you something,"—I was stupid—I said, "You go and tell those fools, whoever they are, that they can come and object to anything I'm saying right here in the class." I said, "Bring it on. Come on. They're invited." Of course they never would. They're cowards. They're racists from behind the screens. So this. He went back, and he told them and so forth.

The next day, we woke up to this Jeep that was spinning in my—I had done this wonderful landscape in the front of my yard. Three tons of earth that I'd shaped and everything. And he spun it out like this—my grass and so forth. And then took off. And by the time I went outside, he had turned the corner. That was their response. So—and they did some other things that were even more scary.

But the point is, and I told them, I said, "No." I told every class, I said, "I will not be intimidated. I came here to teach you guys about what La Raza is about, and I'm not going to pull any punches."

KMD: So were you being supported by the administration, other faculty?

GL: No. There were people that were nice, but they were tolerating me and holding their breath.

KMD: Were they making trouble for you? Or these were students that were making trouble?

GL: No, nobody really made trouble for me. In academic areas, there's a lot of huffing and gorilla pounding of the chest, and these were all threats. Verbal bickering about what should be happening in the school. And there's always people that are anti-educational. "Don't teach this, don't teach that." Well, that's not educational. I don't know of any subject you shouldn't be able to teach.

KMD: So were they faculty that were harassing you?

GL: No. Most faculty didn't care. They just saw me as this Chicano rebel, or this Chicano militant—that's what they would say—and then they'd write me off as that.

KMD: You eventually go to get a job much later, in the '90s, right? Or, no, is it 2000? At Pomona. Is that a full-time teaching job?

GL: Cal Poly? No, part-time. I taught at Cal Poly [California State Polytechnic University, Pomona], and that was a class called "Ethnicity and the Arts," something like that. And I just failed there. I was just—by that time, I could no longer get a handle on teaching, and I just—I'd try to get help from faculty but nobody could help me. I remember just going and telling them all this stuff, and they just look at me, and they kind of look perplexed, and then we go and have lunch.

KMD: The teaching career that you have, these part-time jobs, they don't sound like you're doing studio art.

GL: No, it was lecture classes. Well, the one I [taught] at Pitzer [College] was a drawing class. And—

KMD: Was that—

GL: But I've done lecture classes a lot. But I prefer studio courses, it's much better. That's more directly involved in making art and stuff. But I also taught at Irvine—drawing classes.

KMD: Right. I've seen your résumé. You've been kind of around the Southern California area. Are those good moneymaking—

GL: They were good money and everything, and they're really easy. They were easy for me, because I'm academically over-prepared for most of those classes. I was like, wanting it to be more and trying to develop enthusiasm. And anybody that's been a teacher can tell you, enthusiasm is a difficult task for a teacher. It's enough to teach them the content [plus] getting them excited. But I've found that if you're excited [then you learn more]. At that time I was very excited. I was very animated, and I used to do tricks, like I'd do one-legged dips, thigh dips, one-legged, ten on each leg.

KMD: To get their attention?

GL: To get their attention.

KMD: It would get mine.

GL: I also added—I added health to this curriculum. I also added art. And so if you know about anything that has to do with physical stuff, if you do something often enough, you can do it rather easily. So every semester, and during the semester, I would practice these. Of course, I was young, I was only [thirty-seven] years old. I was strong as hell, and so I found them easy. I'd do ten—and not holding on to anything. And I would challenge the class. I'd say, "Can anybody do ten? On each leg. You can't hold [on to] anything." So I had a few guys that would come up and try, and they couldn't do it, because they weren't used to it.

So that was my opportunity. I said, "First of all," I said, "I want you to answer one question before we do this. Do you eat at McDonald's?" And they say "yes," invariably. And I say, "Okay. I don't. So this is a contest." And everybody would crack up. And I'd beat them. I'd say, "So for those of you that eat at McDonald's, this is evidence." I did other little things, like I'd put sugar—I'd make them lay on the table, and I'd put sugar on their stomach, and then they couldn't lift their arm, they'd be weak. It's an old trick, but it works. If you put things into your field that are disagreeable, like bleach, your body responds.

And so we were getting into *brujerías* and that stuff there, and I was telling them, I said, "These *brujerías* are simply knowledge." I said, "There's no real kind of magic that doesn't exist and stuff." I said, "These are perceptions of—" Blah-blah-blah. I had already gone through Don Juan [Matus, a man of knowledge], and I had a grasp for trying to bring into their lives the idea that they—that mysteries—they don't know everything. Science does not explain everything. And because they describe it doesn't mean they know how it operates, or that they know the dynamics of what makes it work, or that they know really much about it. I said, "You know, scientists that just describe air as H₂O, and hydrogen, and nitrogen," I said. "What are they telling you? Nothing."

KMD: So how—I mean, I teach Chicano studies now, so I know that in the '70s it was very difficult to get course material. Where did you get your course material?

GL: I [had to formulate it]. I'd [give] them statistics and everything. I wasn't interested in [singular] truth. I told them, "This is not a religious class." What I was after was their learning ego. And so I would tell them that, you know, twenty-two thousand people were interviewed, and so many people said this, and so many people said that. And you could say, "Well—I don't know if that was true," but it doesn't make any difference. I would bet you money that not one of those students would even remember at the end of the course what I said.

But what was important was the impact of what I was telling them. And what I told them were not really lies, they were half-lies. I made up the statistics to prove what I believe was true. So I wasn't really lying. I was fluffing up the content, making it attractive to them. Oh, I'd do anything to make them understand that what I was telling them had a quality of truth. And then my lawyer, my little lawyer thing, is that, "Everything I tell you in this class is not about truth. You've got to be a detective. What I'm telling you, is it true? If you're really interested, go find out." Because I was after instigating them to go find out—these were kids that did not know how to do research. "Research? That's too hard." Give me a book, and I'll tell you what it said, and—I'll tell you what it said. That's it.

KMD: I wanted to switch gears a little bit and talk about the success of Los Four. I mean, you guys do more than just the first show of Chicano art at LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art].

GL: It was a phenomenon.

KMD: What are the other endeavors that you're able to continue after. I understand you did murals together.

GL: We had art shows in Oakland, in Long Beach. We kept together long enough that we did some other stuff, collectively.

KMD: And you're producing new work for those shows?

GL: Yeah. We were all young, poor, we didn't have any money. All of us, we were all in the same boat.

KMD: Did you guys work in a studio together, or just somebody's house?

GL: We each had our own situations, but Frank, having the house, we would gather at his place. I would stay at Carlos's, like when I came down from Fresno, I'd stay at Carlos's house, or sometimes Beto or Frank, because they all had places. And I'm not a hotel guy anyway, so I probably would have stayed with family.

KMD: When you guys are riding this wave of incredible success after the first exhibit at LACMA, do you get dealers?

GL: Yes, we did. We got people that were interested in—Frank and Carlos were conduits to the Westside. That's more than I was. I was too involved among the peasantry. I didn't go to the Westside. I wasn't interested in the Westside. Frank and Carlos were really the ones that were interested in gallery careers. And me, I was more interested in drumming up a parade for Chicano art.

KMD: So you don't get a dealer?

GL: No. And then my work was terrible.

KMD: You keep saying that.

GL: Yeah, I didn't think it was much.

KMD: Are you selling the work from these exhibitions?

GL: No, not me. No, I was teaching. I had a job, so I didn't rely on it. But Frank and Carlos, they were the ones that really emphasized making a living, and they did. They started working for—they had jobs for a shoe company doing graphics and so forth. They'd get fifty dollars, seventy-five dollars to do some graphics stuff for a shoe company. But they were really—both of them were really more career driven.

I didn't believe I could have a career. I wasn't interested in the gallery scene, I had no ambitions in the gallery scene because I didn't see my work as being viable. I was doing *cholitos* and little corny things. They were all really petty and corny. So they were not these nice finished things that Carlos and Frank—they learned how to finish things off and really polish it.

Frank, at that point, had married a lady who had a lot of money, so he was covered. And then Carlos, he had—his family sold their house in Montebello. They made a lot of money, so they gave him three thousand dollars to just stay in the studio and work. So that's what he did, and he developed a body of work. He started selling it. And Carlos, being much more ambitious and a real camel trader, he—if you look at his face, his name, everything, he looks Arab. And we used to talk about it, because he loved to make a deal. He loved to sell and get the prices that he wanted.

KMD: So how did you feel about promoting yourself, then, if—

GL: No, I couldn't do it. Don't forget, I was coming from a Zen background, being diminutive in person, and self-effacing. And it had nothing to do with promoting yourself. I was—as long as I was promoting Chicano, man, I was a tyrant and a pest, because I'd be bugging everybody about the values of—

KMD: So you're telling me you didn't sell one thing from these major exhibitions. This major—

GL: Oh, I probably did, but it wasn't much.

KMD: So, not enough to live [on], but for yourself.

GL: Not enough to live on, no. Not at all. I had auxiliary jobs, always. I had a family. Now when I came back in '80, I don't know what decade you're talking about here, but to be clear, in the '80s, when I quit Fresno—finally, I quit, I was burned out. And it was a thankless thing that I left. In politics, nobody's ever happy. There's so much compromise that everybody's got sour faces, and I couldn't handle that. Plus for all the good I thought I was trying to do, I got a lot of crap because I was threatening people. Not directly, but directly and indirectly for me.

I mean, I thought I was trying to get the lowriders to have more interaction with the community, a better social status, all that stuff. But, boy, it was threatening to people. And I wasn't—I didn't have good relations with the church, either. I was . . . not outspoken, but they knew. This father, this priest that was on this board—and they put him on the board because he was from the church. And I said, "Well," and I asked this one guy, "Well, what's his constituency?" He said, "All of us." I said, "Shit." I said, "Yeah, you're right, but [I disagree]."

KMD: What board is that?

GL: Well, he felt that all of us were Catholics, this guy. And although it's not true, symbolically, yeah, this priest represented the community just because he was a Catholic priest. And he was a nice man. It was never personal. I thought he was a nice guy. But I had to do things to try to get him out of the picture, because they kept putting him up front.

KMD: He was the front face to—

GL: Well, yeah, because he'd be there [to] do Mass, and everything was centered around it. So we—one time I had—

KMD: Was [this] the Concilio de Fresno, or another thing?

GL: Concilio. Yeah.

KMD: Okay.

GL: El Concilio de Fresno. And when you get—or whoever gets this information together, I have mimeographs and stuff that I organize, like the Día de los Muertos. And again, this priest was going to come and do this thing, and I said, "Well, you know, if you could just come and sprinkle your water and get offstage." I didn't say that, but that's what I meant. And he goes, "No, I need twenty minutes," or something. And I said,

"Hey man, this is my party. This is not Mass." And I should have just kept quiet and let him do it, but I think I really put him off. And I got flack for it from other people who are really strong Catholics and wanted that priest to do these things, and I was against it. And so . . . I'm not a politician.

KMD: So it's the way you saw Day of the Dead as a . . .

GL: Well, I was seeing it as a cultural thing, but I didn't want the church to get too wrapped up into it, because it wasn't about the church. But he got in there, and—see, this is one of the things that really torments me at this point, is that I did a lot of foolish things, politically, even though I knew that I'm not a politician because I say my mind.

KMD: At least a diplomat.

GL: Well, I could be diplomatic at times, but I had integrity to the mission. And a lot of people, they don't have that. They'll bail on you right away, or not support you.

KMD: When you were in Fresno, did you venture up to San Francisco?

GL: Oh yeah. Sacramento.

KMD: And connect up with the other artist groups there?

GL: Oh yeah. René Yáñez up in San Francisco, and Ralph [Maradiaga], who were running the Galería de la Raza. Lorraine García[-Nakata] and Maria [Pinedo]—she was married, she had a married name. But sure, the RCAF [Royal Chicano Air Force].

KMD: Were those important exchanges to you?

GL: Very much, because I wanted always to be part of the group. I wanted to be plebe, I wanted to be part of the mass. I never [thought] [of] myself as being something special [because of Los Four] and something that had to be treated with deference. We did what we did. We were there. We were lucky. And that's it. But we got—I got a lot of personal kind of attitude and so forth just because I was Los Four, and just because of jealousy. And people would see my work, and they'd say, "That guy don't deserve to be given so much attention for that crap." I'd get all kinds of stuff like that.

But look at whose opinion it was. Sometimes the people that were saying this were mediocre artists that had no possible career at all. So they [were in the] art world for six months, and they throw stones. But this is common even in all art circles, I've seen it all over. It's not unique to us.

KMD: Before we close up and take a break for lunch, I just wanted to know if there was one other point you wanted to add about the Fresno circumstance as training ground.

GL: Well, it was training for me, because one of the things that I tried to do was work in the cultural aesthetic development of this group. But the group was finally torn down by Ernie [Palomino] himself, because, as I found out at that point, that he didn't want it organized. He wanted it like it was before; he just calls the shots. There's no meetings, he tells everybody what to do, or what arrangements he wants. And if there's any work to do, just let him know how it's progressing. So it's a real old-hat *patron* system that poor people use and hate.

KMD: Help me understand, was—the major activities of Brocha were exhibitions?

GL: Exhibitions, murals. But the murals were [painted by] individual people. But most of the exhibitions [were] one of the [collective projects]. Of course, teaching art and having parties, and actually being a cohesive agent for artists. That's what Brocha served. It brought artists together. If you wanted to be in the art world, you'd consider Brocha activities.

KMD: Did it actually have a space in the community center?

GL: Yeah, there were several. Mainly, we wanted—after they had a lot of catastrophes with directors and so forth—and I had quit Fresno City College, they said they hired me. And I wasn't even at the meeting, didn't even know anything about it, which I said, "Well, I'll take it, but I want to get together with you guys to tell you what my conditions would be." Because I already knew—they were just messing around, and the only reason they did this is they wanted a ten-thousand-dollar grant released, so they were wanting to get this ten thousand dollars released, and then forget me. I was probably just expendable.

KMD: They needed your credentials?

GL: They needed my name and being the director, and then that would have given them credibility to get the money. But it got held up for some other reasons too. I'm not sure altogether if I remember it all.

KMD: Well, let's take a break.

[break in audio]

KMD: Okay, this is Karen Mary Dávalos and Gil "Magu" Luján. Today is October 1, 2007, and we're on tape 3. We took a quick lunch break and now we're back to talk about some work, some actual works of art. And the first one we have in front of us is from the, um, *Miranda* exhibition . . . Mirando al Sol? Mirando al Norte?

GL: [Mirando] al Norte, and then *Mirando al Sur*. Looking north and looking south.

KMD: Looking south.

GL: And it was, uh, or—it was organized to put together, um, I think it was twenty-six, thirty-six [artists]. I forgot the number of artists, and they had to respond to a Mexican folk art craft items in textile, sculpture, paintings where all these different mediums were used. I got a sculpture that's done by an artisan. I had a sculpture and it was done in clay.

KMD: Yeah, there it is.

GL: Can you see it in there?

KMD: Yeah.

GL: And it's a *calavera*. I wanted one of those buses.

KMD: Yes.

GL: And with all these creatures and devils and creatures all over the [bus]. But they didn't have one of those, so they gave me this one. They decided that this is the one they wanted me to respond to. So what I did is I made a parade vehicle for it. And it's just a little terra-cotta sculpture that's in the form of a kind of a religious Guadalupe, you know, that kind of design. But a *calavera*, now, I don't know what all that means to them, but I think what happens in the cultures today, they've been distorted by the commercial trade and trading that appeals to tourists. So now people are just buying *calaveras* and they happen to be wearing a mantle, and I don't think they think about it too much. It's almost like a trinket level.

Well, I wanted to make this more important conceptually, so I made a parade vehicle, and if you look at the sculpture that's in this book, it has the base, which is made with *palos*, all very colorful. But I also put it on a pedestal. I try to make it—and not the normal pedestals that you normally see. I wanted even the pedestal to be unique, so that's how I did it for this one. But everything there is made out of papier-mâché, wood, and, uh, odds and ends that I'd find, like, some metal. There's paper cutouts that are surrounding the top of it.

KMD: Yeah.

GL: But essentially, it's carrying these two dog characters that I do a lot, the—the stick figures. And the idea is called "Borderless Art" [plaster sculpture], so that the whole represents, uh, a number of features. It has a kind of a hot rod, custom hot rod suspension system. It has flames from the same hot rod culture. But these flames have within them, uh, propaganda, so I use text in—in the—in the flames, uh, which is another little invention that I put together to cross over the two cultural approaches to making cars. Um, the front part of it has—actually has aluminum foil for the chrome part, which is supposed to be the grill—which is really a mouth. [Laughter] And so I make these things anthropomorphic, many times. A lot of the vehicles that I do are really meant to be conduits for culture, so I call them cultural vehicles.

KMD: And this one's got "Aztlán Express" written on top.

GL: I have in the front and back other little— And I think the license plate behind there really describes the title of the piece, called *Trailing Los Antepasados*. So that's where the signature is. But otherwise, I—I try to do something, which— When I first started doing my Chicano art thing I began to do folk art, not because that's all I could do, as some people think, but because I wanted to start at the [beginning]. I wanted to start at the base of something, and I thought folk art would be the thing.

So, I—even though I have an MFA, I've continued to use that folk art for several reasons. It pays homage to the *artesanos*. It gives a—it finger points a—the specific area of wonderful folk art that's spontaneous and has, uh, worldwide museum-level quality things that are now accepted. So there's all these notions, and then it's light [hearted], it's festive, it's celebratory.

KMD: It's also quite funny. It's witty.

GL: It's—it's got all those elements. Like I told you before, when I'm doing a sculpture, it's gender parity there. They've got a male and female. Actually, there's two women—this *calavera* is a female, but I guess the guy—this car could be a male. But I think in those terms. I mean, I try to—and I'm not interested in being politically correct. But I want to address some of the issues to, uh, make it politically neutral at the very least. So, there it is.

KMD: I'm, I'm wondering about the playfulness of the work. I mean, it's both in the composition of the pedestal. This is not the Roman column pedestal. It—it doesn't look fragile, but it looks makeshift. And then on top of the table that the car sculpture sits on is the . . .

GL: The—the *tatami*. Oh, not *tatami*, that's Japanese. The *matate*. No, the *petate*.

KMD: The woven . . .

GL: Yes, it's actually—that's what it really is. It's a woven grass rug.

KMD: Was that from the collection as well, that you were commenting on?

GL: No, no, no, I—I got all that stuff. I had it—the only thing they gave me was that little folk art ceramic terracotta piece.

KMD: So, um, I—I don't know. I find the, the scale of the—of the tires, the—the headlamps, the—it just . . .

GL: That's all hot rod stuff [in scale].

KMD: Yeah, it's hot rod, but it's kind of got that playfulness about . . . I mean, I guess hot rods do that too. They're kind of over the edge, taking it beyond. It's not serious.

GL: No.

KMD: Um, very whimsical, and yet, uh, you know, there is a [narrative] here.

GL: Yeah, but not in a narrative sense.

KMD: Especially because it's on a pedestal, and especially because it's a car carrying this folk piece.

GL: Parade? Yeah. It is. Well, almost everything that I do, pretty much a lot—especially a piece as complicated as this—I take a lot of consideration into a number of things. You're right. That thing that I have underneath the flat base that this cart actually sits on, those sticks that I have there are haphazard and *rasquache*, but they're incredibly strong. That [cab] fell from about I think ten feet, and nothing happened to it, because I [made it out of] [papier-mâché] and [it is very durable]. I tie the rope or the twine that I have wound each [of the] joints. It's very strong. I overbuild. I engineer my pieces to be very strong, yet there's aspects in here of very, very light and fragile like the little paper there. That's really [fragile]. You have to be very careful handling that. Then I had cardboard pieces there, and I often designed these cars so that they can break off. They actually [are easier to repair] if they get broken.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: They'd break where I want them to break, so I can just glue them back on without any damage to the thing. So they are—actually even designed to—in case they are hit or broken, 'cause that's been common with my art pieces. Because I make fragile parts to them, like this—this *sandia*, this, this watermelon way up there, it's really vulnerable. But if you hit it, it would break just where it could be [fixed, at] the real critical juncture where it puts all the pressure. It's easy to glue it back on, because that's—it's been pre-determined that's where it should break. So, what I say is that my thinking goes not only into engineering, but presupposing how this would—in a crash, this is where it would fall apart. And then I could reassemble it without really doing serious damage to it. It's like putting cushioned bumpers in your car so you don't get the full impact.

KMD: I also wanted to talk about the—the use of text in the flames.

GL: That's where I have an opportunity to propagandize or do something that I'd like. I like anecdotes a lot. So, you know, "think, feel culture." You know. "Love. [I] love people, hug and kisses to everybody." All these little things that are not offensive, and readily good, good points of view. I mean, who's going to argue, you know, those things except the most cynical, uh, Republican.

But I think that my intention to make in this piece, calling it *Trailing Los Antepasados*, fits the larger metaphor of us going and picking up the aesthetics of our forefathers and rearranging them into contemporary contexts. And more than anything, integrating those qualities back into our lives. Because as we get into a technological world, oddly enough, all the people don't always see this, but all—it's all the more reason why you need an individual ethnic identity.

And they sell houses that way. I mean, they sell the southern plantation look. They sell the old cottage, English manor. I mean, all those are ethnic ideas, because ethnicity is, uh, not only the DNA but it's your—your class, your language, the way you're educated, the way you behave as a group. And if you can identify with behaving a certain way, then you're a part of that group.

And one of the things that we've, uh, uh, gone over many times with Mental Menudos is that those people that come from south of the border, I don't care what the country is, they all become Chicanos, Chicanas, because they amalgamate here. Now, if they were to amalgamate in London, then they're not going to be Chicanos. They're going to be something else, some other creature. But, you know in anthropology that cultures are constantly overlapping and, and intermixing. Those Spanish-speaking people that come here from everywhere, including Spain—well, maybe not them, but most people will, uh, absorb this culture and become so Chicano, bilingual, bicultural, the whole number, uh, which is common in Europe, but unique in a mono—monocultural country.

You know, at least—at least the idea of a monocultural country is a belief, but is not a true one. It's false. We don't have one culture. Look around. We have fat people culture, we have old people culture, we have rap, we have people that like to be cowboys. There's all kind of sexual preferences that I don't—the list is long. We have different cultures. It's not one thing.

KMD: Right.

GL: It'd be impossible to think of the United States as one thing, but people have these generalizations, so when I go to Europe, and I have gone to Europe, and they ask me what I am, in terms of they want to know what nationality I am. So I mess with their heads and I tell them Chicano, and they have no idea what that is. So that gives me an opportunity to propagandize the people over there and—

KMD: Let's go in the other room and look at some more of your other work that you have.

GL: All right.

KMD: Go ahead. What is this one called?

GL: This one is *Dude con Su Escuincle*, and it's mostly cardboard and I'm going to look at the date here. Jeez, this is really—I need to repair. . . *Dude con Su Escuincle, Two Sides To Any Story*. Jeez, I didn't know this—title [was] that long. It's '80. . .

KMD: Eighty-four.

GL: Now, if you notice that on one side, a—the fellow is a Mexican American and the other side he's a Chicano *cholo*. So what I was trying to bring attention to is that we have all these archetypes, and um. . .

KMD: Go ahead. Okay.

GL: And I made him out of cardboard originally because economically I was always strapped for money, and I found that cardboard was an incredibly hard material, accessible, easy, and also part of the Mexican craft traditions that I was, uh, paying homage to. Like I said, most things that I do are very complex because their sources—every aspect of it, the materials, the way I paint it, the subject matter—are all through the deliberation of a number of factors.

So I wanted to talk about *cholos*, and I want to talk about Mexican Americans. It's the same guy, it just has two sides. You know, some of us are this and some of us are that, but it's the same culture. The

escuincle, I could have said “A Guy and His Dog,” but the *escuincle* connotes, you know, these little fat dogs that they would actually eat like chicken.

KMD: Right.

GL: And they, uh, were, uh, a food item. But it’s all part of the—

KMD: Tell me about how you prepare cardboard for—this is obviously, this is painted with acrylic?

GL: I’ve taught people how to use cardboard, because what you do is you fill in. You get a little bit of water and you mix the glue, and then you fill in all these little corrugated holes that are between the two layers of—sandwiched between these two layers of paper. And eventually as you keep doing that, they fill up and they become hard little round beads of plastic inside of it, so there’s an internal, uh, skeleton to it that makes it very hard and, uh, this cardboard [*knocking*] sounds like wood.

And, uh, so these here, uh, I have—actually I have on this one here, I have wooden cactus on this one. But the figure and the dogs are made out of cardboard, and that cardboard is incredibly hard. That—that would hurt you if you were to get hit with it. I mean, it’s that strong.

KMD: And then your choice of color. This, and this brush stroke that’s very—I can see the undercoat of orange on his shirt. I’m probably not describing color as accurately as you would as an artist.

GL: No, it’s blue over these warmer colors.

KMD: Yeah.

GL: And that way there’s a contrast. Blue against red. Blue against yellow. And look at this really bright kind of turquoise blue-green.

KMD: Uh-huh.

GL: What I do is, like I said when I was talking about being an artist and not following the bureaucratic distinctions between one medium and another, in the same way I also borrow and use painting as a direction, schools of thought, as well. So this is done in a very [deliberate way]. When I was doing abstract artwork in Irvine you leave the undercoats, and you just build and you get lighter and thinner with the paint, so you have these rich kinds of qualities that—that the paint can give you.

So I employ that in folk art. I employ it in these little, this little flat kind of—it’s not even a relief, I guess, but I made it a construction and basically they were easy to build. The base that I have for it makes it a diorama structure. So I just—it’s artificial, but you know, it’s in a little . . .

KMD: Is that diorama structure purposeful in terms of like, art and museum?

GL: Well, I’m setting it up. I’m talking about this guy, but he’s behind this cardboard landscape, which is when you look at it straight on, it’s supposed to be a landscape. But it also frames the base so that it’s not just a flat piece of wood.

KMD: Right.

GL: It embellishes. It takes the idea to another level, and it’s thought out. It’s not just left to be in its most simple terms. So everything that I do, including putting a trim around the base of the wooden base that this is sitting on, I even decorate that. I used decoration as a word because I’m embellishing that piece of wood. And what it does overall, it does help the aesthetic of it.

KMD: Yeah, the composition’s—

GL: It frames it.

KMD: Yeah.

GL: It sets it up on a pedestal.

KMD: What about the cactus and this tree? I mean, these are things that are certainly not, especially because of the color. You have like, a grey on this side.

GL: Yeah.

KMD: The color, it’s the opposite of a kind of realism.

GL: Again, I’m using kind of a, what you’d find in the abstract painting schools. I’m painting the cactus with that same approach, so I want to take and make cactuses. And like any other artist that takes something out of its context, I’m putting fine arts attitude on a cactus, which is normally thought of a folk art item.

So here I'm superimposing one attitude over another. And people not only like it, but they hardly notice it, you know. They accept it. They accept the ability to have abstract painting on a cactus, for one. Now these, these are old. Eighty-four, for example, on this one, and it used acrylics. Again, the way I construct the cardboard and I also layer it at least two or three thick. It makes it very sturdy, and since '84 this thing's been kicked around and it's broken here and there, but it's easy to fix.

KMD: Do you know where it's been—do you recall where it's been exhibited?

GL: No, it's been so many places.

KMD: And what about this other popular piece?

GL: Now, that's called *Spotty as an Adolescent*, and it's a stick figure with a dog head and it's on a skateboard that actually works. It's—the skateboard is an artificial one. It's just a cardboard skateboard that's just large enough to fit this little stick figure. The wheels are actually from a skateboard, so that's accurate, and this little dog is also slanted forward. And when I put the wheels on this thing, on the skateboard, the base of the skateboard, I put the wheels a little bit of an angle so there's—when you push it, it'll do a real small curve.

KMD: [laughter]

GL: I wanted it to at least be more interesting than just going straight. And then when I play with it, I can flip it around and it'll spin and do all these things which—like I said a minute ago, are very attractive to kids. And of course, adults get a kick out of it, but kids mostly.

KMD: Is the stick figure mostly found like a part of a tree?

GL: Yeah. See, this branch here is one piece. It's just a fork.

KMD: Yeah.

GL: And that fork happens to be [Spotty's] legs and his torso that goes all the way up to the neck, and you—I put the head on that stick, as the neck. Then right below there, I've added two separate pieces of wood, and with mortar that I make out of sawdust and glue again, and I make a very sturdy shoulder area to hold the two independent sticks to be arms. So, yeah, that's all constructed. Now, I was a—

KMD: I mean, just the lean of the stick, it looks like a—it's the same posture you see on a skateboard, and on a skateboarder.

GL: So I gave myself a lot of kinds of challenges to make the folk art, do the Chicano art, but at the same time an underlying [theme] through all this is that I'm still a sculptor. I'm a sculptor. I just happen to be doing Chicano art, but that's incidental to my real task of making interesting figures first. They've got to be—see, again, I go back to it's got to be good art first, and then it can have a content.

KMD: Yeah, and what makes this one good art is the—is the movement. I mean, you see. . .

GL: It's in motion.

KMD: It's in motion.

GL: Standing there, yeah.

KMD: Yeah, I mean, his arms are hanging down but it's that kind of, the stance that a skateboarder gives when they're riding, they're coasting. They've pushed themselves along or they're going downhill and they're just kind of hanging back, looking cool.

GL: So I found ways to make these very strong. I found items that anybody could gather together just cleaning their yard, if they have trees, and I've coupled it with an idea that's very popular among kids. Now, I can't do a skateboard. I can go straight for a little distance, but for the most part I wanted to also bring in the kids. Even though I'm an older man, I'm willing to cross over again and do things that are youthful and young, even though I'm not a kid.

KMD: Well, I think all of your work is youthful.

GL: Yeah, I think so.

KMD: Let's look at another one. Tell me about these little statues.

GL: They're sculptures. Statues are what you buy at the— [laughter]

KMD: Sorry, wrong word. They look like the thing you get at the—

GL: No, I am just—I'm just joking.

KMD: At the flea market, that you put in your yard.

GL: Oh yeah, they do, huh.

KMD: They just look like those. Warriors.

GL: Well, if anything, I saw a lot of that garden furniture and garden sculpture. But for me, when I made these little sculptural figures, I was trying to emulate what, the guys in the barrio. You know, everybody like Gallo, Spider Wolf, all these different nicknames. So I made a lot of animals, anthropomorphic animals—parrots, you know, for *parakeets*, and then I made this guy standing next to him with the little hat.

KMD: Yeah.

GL: And if—and he's got a—he looks like a person, and he's got a body and everything like a human being. But the thing that's distinct here on this one with the guy with his hands in his pockets, is that he's got a Buick grill for teeth, and a bumper underneath that for a lip. So that one, when it's finished, will actually have that part chromed.

KMD: Wow.

GL: So I still have to chrome that part. This fellow over here that's not done, but it's a ceramic figure. Also [it] still has that very wide and, and baggy clothes at the bottom of the figure.

KMD: Yeah. And the top is this . . .

GL: And what I did is the reason that the bottom part—it's in two parts here—is these pants, that I made them so wide and so forth. It's almost a pyramid and it comes up to a small waist, and that's an engineering aspect of doing this. I mean, I chose those baggy clothes not to be topical as much as it is that it's an engineering structure to hold the top part of it, which is separate. The arms and the torso, the upper torso, and the head has a very strong pyramid shape to, that it sits on.

KMD: Now, this series of ceramic sculptures, what—how long have you been working on this project? When did it start?

GL: Probably back in the '70s, when I was at, I guess, Irvine. That's when I did the first ones, at this size. I've made them bigger. I've had some that are like three and a half feet—you know, bigger. My brother has one of those. So, I make them different sizes.

But see that red one there with that pyramid dog? Now, one of the things I think, going back to my aesthetics again and talking about aesthetics, is that one day I wanted to come up with an image. I mean, consciously come up with an image that would tie me together with my conceptual purpose. I knew it had to be a Mexican Indian, [which] was more suited to where I was after, and not any colonial image. So it was the Mexican pyramid, and I inverted two of the little pyramid shapes that I was cutting out, and it seemed to me like a dog that was howling when you—when you have the, the two images just kind of in contrast to each other, one in reverse.

KMD: Right.

GL: So, that started the pyramid dogs. And the pyramid dogs was an intent to make me an Indian—Mexican-Chicano cultural continuum. You know, I'm going way back to those pyramids and saying that's my legacy and I'm still with it, because the thought occurred to me is, what if the Europeans never got here? What if we were still running around with feathers coming out of our butts?

And so I said, well, we don't know that, so all we can do is try to restring something together for the sake of our mental health, for the sake of our identity today. Instead of being lost and not having a culture that's respected, is to know that we do have a legacy that's very solid and the foundation is where I apply my aesthetic. That's where I go after. That's what I develop and nurture because it's more honest. And certainly, I found that it was virgin territory when I started forty years ago and nobody was doing stuff like this.

But I think we got, for a while there, we got people replicating Azteca and Mayan art, and they were just copying it. What I wanted to do was go to the next step and integrate it into who I was, and integrate

it into the culture that I'm from. And hopefully, they will also recognize the linkage and not feel like, like we just got here. You know, we're not illegal. That's absurd.

KMD: Tell me about *Our Family Car*.

GL: *Our Family Car* is one that I did originally to—this is easier.

KMD: Yeah.

GL: I started to do this car originally because since the '70s, I had been talking about *chile* flames. You know, thinking about—like I said before, I was looking at icons and so forth that I could implement into my artwork. So uh, *chiles* of course was in the—was in the eligibility area. And I knew it because I had taken physics, that the hottest part of a flame is the tip. So when I thought about a *chile* flame job, I said, "Wow, that's perfect."

And for years, nobody did it, and I didn't—it was like, I mean, I just thought somebody was going to do it, but nobody was interested. So 1984, I put these flames onto the family car. It was a '50s Chevy. So I put the *chile* flames on there, and it became a signature piece, because I did several things. I crossed over hot rod flames to lowrider. I also made a car a, a canvas unlike the traditional images of *payasos*, Indians, Virgen de Guadalupe, or the Pieta, the Mexican Pieta image, or *payasos*. All these different images that were traditionally applied to these cars, and I just went way beyond that and not only put *chile* flames here, but I got a lot of graphics in there that are whimsical. They got pyramid dogs. They've got a lighthearted kind of folk art narrative.

KMD: Well, tell me about the technique. Did you—did you prep and paint this car, or would you work with a crew?

GL: Well, the crew is my cousins. [laughter] So, *Our Family Car* has implications beyond the fact that we just owned that car and took the kids to school. My cousin actually painted it and—I had two cousins actually paint it and do different things at different times, but, uh, that was due—they used a spray gun. But all the graphics I did by hand with a pinstripe machine, I mean, a pinstripe brush. And then I found these crayons, these textile crayons that had—they were lacquer based. And I was going to be using lacquer, so I wanted to be compatible with the paints. So we did. And we—I spent—actually, and that paint job, I've done it several times.

So it was like a work in progress, and I just finished doing it again just about a year ago. I've been reworking and renovating a car and bringing it back up to date. Because when we started in '84, I don't know how many years ago that was, but it's twenty-something years ago.

KMD: Yeah.

GL: And so it needed to be updated in terms of getting rid of some rust and so forth. So now we're taking it further at this point, and I'm doing things that I've always wanted to do like put in a burrito front seat and a taco back. The back of that is a—just two tacos that you're going to be able to tilt forward to get in the back. The back seat is a tamale, and then the upright back part of the seat that you lean into are *taquitos*, like tuck and roll. So I kept the food theme on the inside. The steering wheel is covered with an egg, just an egg. It's just an egg.

And so conceptually, what I've done is I've tried to use food motifs. I try to keep them—to be comprehensive, I kept a lot of food motifs inside the car. And then the outside, I have a lot of other stuff that I've done over the years that are meant to just be graphic decoration. But, complex, so I fill in all the spaces, have a lot of flames, and more than anything, a lot of color. And with maybe twelve colors, I keep going back over there and superimposing them and contrasting them in different ways, so I have actually, like, one hundred colors. They look much more colorful, but it's the way that—talk about a technique that you ask for—I keep overlapping them and I work them so that I'll pick up one color and I'll employ it here and there and put it where I need it. And then I put that—I get another color and I keep doing that. So where I need a red or a red dot or a red nose or something, I'll fill it in with red. And then I put that down and I'll pick up a green and then again, apply it where I need it. And in time, this superimposition and colors in these steps, it begins to get very complex and very colorful.

KMD: Yeah, because the second time I saw it was at [Cal State University] Northridge for that show we were just talking about, and it seemed much more detailed than what—how I've seen it in the book for the Hispanic, the thirty Hispanic painters and sculptors show that was done. [*Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*—ed.]

GL: In the United States, yes.

KMD: Yeah. It becomes the poster child for that show.

GL: Well, yes, and it's interesting that when we went back east, they were going to—we were there at the Corcoran [Gallery of Art], and they wanted to do a poster and a T-shirt. And so they voted, and everybody hands down said the car had to be the poster. It was a given. It's just a—it's a given: car, poster. It just made sense. Okay. Then they voted again for a T-shirt, and I came up again [the] winner, with the dog with the rabbit ears that the own—that the dog puts on the owner. And they said, "No, it's got to be a different artist." And so they voted again, and I won again!

KMD: [laughter]

GL: So they had a big discussion and argument about giving the same artist all this play. Anyway, they did it. I had a T-shirt and a car poster. I was thrilled to death. I can't tell you. It was such a compliment, and perplexing, because all this time I had been hearing "You're doing this, you know, loser art. It's *rasquache*. It's not well done, and it's just folk art, and who you—who do you think you are?" And then all of a sudden this show began to feature, and people began to look at, my work. And it wasn't as simple and *simplón* as they thought it was, but *rasquache* was on purpose. It was my political effort to pay homage to the *artesanos*, but at the same time, say, "Hey, let's erase these, these lines of separating folk art and fine art. They're somebody's fantasy, but they're not mine."

KMD: Do you feel that that worked in that show, then, the *Hispanic Art in the United States*?

GL: Did it work?

KMD: Yeah.

GL: What do you mean?

KMD: Well, that you broke some boundaries by being in that particular show.

GL: One lady told me that I had done a lot towards legitimizing folk art. I was very flattered, but I don't think it's true. I think that folk art on its own has made headway in the last fifty years, like never before. And I'll even go further—go back to the 1800s,—because I know a little bit about art history. We're folk art, and those things were very ravenously collected. In the late 1800s, these guys were going all over, Burma and Indonesia and just buying all this stuff because it was exotic. So those were the initial—In this country and this culture, for the United States in particular, and Europe, this acquisition of folk art overshadowed a lot of fine art at that time. And so now I'm saying in short that, yeah, I'm part of a legacy of recognizing folk art for being what it is: spontaneous and optimistic, always. Don't you think?

KMD: Yeah, absolutely.

GL: Or something like that, yeah.

KMD: Pause it?

[break in audio]

KMD: Let's talk about the Cheech—the items in the Cheech Marin show and in his collection.

GL: Those two were the series that I did that were kind of like a dog and his pal. I did it with a lot of, again, a lot of implications. One of them was man's best friend. Your dog is, in the vernacular, your buddy. So there's all these already built-in cultural motifs with a dog and a man—and a person. So those became very popular for me.

And the other thing that I was doing with those, if you look at the shirts, the shirts have all these icons that I've invented. And [I] also used car culture things, and I mix them up with these little pyramid dogs, and I even have a lifesaver in there for the sake of just putting [in] color. But it's kind of giving you

a potpourri of a lot of images that I use. That's one of the reasons why I designed the shirt. It's actually a shirt that we're hoping to manufacture.

So again, I have multiple purposes for these things. I'm making a drawing, really, and designing a shirt in the future. It's already—it's designed in there, all ready to go. And then manifesting those cultural items, those icons that I want to push forward because I'm promoting them and making people look at them, and they do. I've seen people at the museum looking at them, and they're saying, "Well, what is this and what is . . . ?"

And this is a good time to tell you that I never try to get too esoteric. I want to be very plain and I want to communicate. And I want to communicate to all ages, so I am aesthetically at a level that's, say, I don't know, eighth grade. I don't know, whatever. But from eight to eighty, from eight—maybe from two or three years old. I've seen my little grandkids, when—which is in my son's house, there's all my artwork, and he'll just look at this—all the kids, they just stare at all the stuff. So I know that it has a psychological developmental thing with colors and stuff.

So I've really thought about all these different aspects of what I'm doing with the art. It would be silly to think that I'm just doing this dog and a man, because I'm not. I'm using them as a metaphor to talk about today's culture, and if you look at their faces, they all tell a story. And of course, they get different responses, but . . .

KMD: Now, why do you think Cheech Marin picked out those pieces for the show?

GL: If it's common to what everybody else liked, it's safe, it's not politically whatever, but it touches something deeper. There's a deeper connection with people that is visceral. And Cheech said it, too, that in his movie—that I caught when he had said about this work, is he considered me in the Aesop, kind of Hans Christian Anderson and Grimm Brothers narrative with animals. And I have done that a lot, and I never thought of it that way. So thanks to Cheech, I've got another rationale for why I did what I did.

But I think they were easy combinations at the beginning. The dog I stylized, for one, from the pyramid dogs. And then these cartoon characters that I did . . . I know that consciously even when I first met Carlos, I used to do these drawings. And even back in before I met him in Long Beach, I used to do these cartoonish kind of drawings, but they were not cartoons anymore. I took them a little further so they were actually fine art drawing, but cartoon looking-like. So again I found myself kind of cutting between, you know, two different kinds of ideas or maybe amalgamating those two ideas.

KMD: Right.

GL: I don't know which you could state would be better. But nonetheless, I began to do these dog series and they were very popular. I sold them all.

KMD: You did?

GL: Yeah, we sold—

KMD: Through the gallery?

GL: Through wherever. People came to my house, and to answer your question of why Cheech liked them, that would be a good question to ask him. I think that'd be a good adjunct to this interview.

KMD: Yeah.

GL: To say, well, why did you pick them? Because I don't know, but I'm guessing that people just liked them because they were kind of trippy.

KMD: I was assuming he purchased it from you. He didn't purchase it—

GL: He did.

KMD: Oh, okay.

GL: Directly, yeah. And Linda Alvarez, on Channel Two?

KMD: Yeah.

GL: She bought another one that's the same series. It's Mingo Boy—*Mingo and Fireboy*. Again, it's a large print, and she got it from the Venice Family [Clinic]—no, the Venice, the hospital. The fundraiser out there. That's where she bought it.

KMD: So you—

GL: And Andy—you know who else? Randy Newman also has one of those. So I’m guessing, but they like it because it’s just—it’s visceral. It’s kind of like upbeat, they’re happy, and it’s nice to look at it in your place, or . . . Eddie Olmos has one of my dog characters. It’s a little more sober one, but it’s a guy in a tuxedo.

KMD: The collectors you’re mentioning, they’re buying directly from you, not at a gallery.

GL: Well—

KMD: Or they’re seeing it at a gallery, and . . .

GL: Linda Alvarez got hers at the Venice Family Clinic [benefit].

KMD: You had donated work for auction.

GL: Yes, for that. And then Eddie bought one from me. Randy Newman bought it from a lady that I knew that knew him, and he had told her—or she showed him my work, and he goes, “Hey, I want one of these,” and he bought it. And they bought it at very good prices, which is another subject that we need to discuss, about how I was shoved in the realm of collectors and my prices went up. I didn’t mean to do this because I wanted to stay within range. Then all of a sudden, I find myself pushed into a very small market of people that I don’t always have access to, like Frank Romero did. But if I had access to his, well—I even had access to it. I shouldn’t say that I don’t. And I still do. And Los Four crossed over many years ago. We were accepted by the art establishment. You know, stepchildren, but still, we were there. [*laughter*]

KMD: I’m going to have to cut us short today, and I’m having such a great time. Thank you.

OCTOBER 8, 2007

KMD: This is Karen Mary Dávalos with Gil “Magu” Lujan, and today is October 8, 2007. We’re going to start this morning talking about his formation of Mental Menudo, the factors that led him to establish those groups over time, doing it in different cities, and the kinds of people that—or specifically, the folks that join the group, and any transformations of how he thought about Mental Menudo over the years. I understand you started your first Mental Menudo in 1977?

GL: Yes. It was at Fresno City College where I was an instructor in La Raza studies. And I think it was that context that helped push the idea, although I had thought about it before, and that is that people needed to talk to each other. The idea of conferencing among artists was absent in everybody’s vocabulary and thoughts. Educators did it, the birds and the bees did it, and we didn’t.

KMD: Did you also get the model from, you know, beatniks and others, kind of having a salon that they would—

GL: Oh, no.

KMD: No?

GL: No, no. I never thought about that so much as part of that I think my Zen background allows me to stay in the present. Now, I can make intellectual references to the salons and so forth, but these guys were meeting in cafés and so forth, and I knew about it. But it didn’t really have a significant relationship to what I was doing at City College at the time.

KMD: Okay.

GL: And that was, I was teaching young kids about what La Raza studies was about. And ironically, or not so ironically, it’s my art mission is to broaden people’s idea of what our experience is, so that Chicano art isn’t just thought of as a provincial, parochial idea—a regional one, and then subdivided into these camps.

And so I think that, oh, what is really important is that because I was in that teaching situation and having the responsibility of trying to enlarge their learning ego, their ability, the capacity to understand more things—that’s what college is about. Buckled with the idea, put together with the idea that at parties and social events, people would group together and cha-cha-cha-cha-cha, they’d be chattering all the time. The problem with beer and conversations at a party is they don’t ever solidify into anything that’s worth a lot. Now, they—there can be opinions tossed around, one-upmanship, who can talk the loudest,

and those kinds of dynamics, and I didn't see it as fruitful. I didn't see it as really being something that really got to the meat of the subject.

And that is the conferencing idea that you—you gather and you discuss an issue seriously, you know, and people put their ideas together. So there was this exchange that created this idea, for me, to start a Mental Menudo club. It started collegiate, and so forth, because we were at a college, so I made it a club. I had another, more—

KMD: Literally, was it a formal club in the school?

GL: Well, formal in that I just called it together and we met, but I didn't go to the associated student body, no. I didn't do any of that because at the time, as I just started to say, is that there was a time there in the '70s where people were encouraged to contradict authority, for one, but at the same time challenge it by investigating and being a little more retrospective about how you relate to all this information. That's what I was doing in the classes. I was trying to get them to see that we've been taught to hate ourselves. We've got information about our history that's not only incorrect but a lot of the good stuff is absent, you know?

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: So, like Edison was a Mexicano.

KMD: Right, right.

GL: Blah, blah.

KMD: What about the group itself and those, those early years, I guess, in Fresno? Those were students who were undergraduates?

GL: Well, certainly, if they're going to City College, they'd be undergraduates.

KMD: Yeah. Were the faculty involved?

GL: No.

KMD: No.

GL: As a matter of fact, I had one lady came in, she was in the Spanish department, and she sat in our meeting one time for about ten, fifteen minutes and then she just got exasperated. She just—"This is going nowhere. You guys can't be intellectuals. Only Kant, Spencer, and Bertrand Russell and . . ." Who was popular at the time—Robert Shaw, Kant, and all those guys [were] intellectuals. "You guys are just playing around." And I don't know what she said, but she just dismissed it.

And so the reason I made the Mental Menudos, I saw a very crude intelligence trying to talk, but there was no format. There wasn't the social, cultural traditions and structure that the society needs to be able to conduct something like a conference or like a serious conversation with rules. Not Robert's Rules which are really kind of mechanical, but with rules that would allow for respecting the speaker, not interrupting, and not arguing. Now, this is after thirty-five years of doing these things. I understood by doing hundreds of these. And most of them I felt, they felt, were failures. And what was happening—

KMD: Why would you say that?

GL: Well, because people have to learn how to talk to each other, and what was happening in the Mental Menudos—I would gather people in other towns, like Phoenix, Fresno, Sacramento, wherever I went. I'd gather them, but all I would do is gather people's camps and enemies and they'd go at it. It would—whether it was personal or sociological or philosophical, they'd go at each other. What was missing was the stops to say, "Look, I don't care if you disagree with this guy. Present your case, but you don't have to beat him over the head with your idea. You don't have to be one-up on his idea. He's a different person, so let's respect that—the, the person has all the right."

One—we had one meeting in particular that I'm just going to isolate as a clear example, although it happened not routinely, but it kept happening and caused me a lot of grief. This guy started to—which was on the table, you know, what he thought Chicano art was. And so the guy was just barely into his, you know, mid-introduction of what he was kind of getting to, and this other guy just interrupted—first rule that was broken—and he said, "Oh, no, man, you can't say that. You can't say that." You know, "That's not

true." And I stopped him because I'm the monitor, so I become the heavy and the bad guy. Because without that control, you don't have a good conversation.

KMD: Right.

GL: So I stopped him and I corrected him. I said, "First of all, this brother here has the right to say what he has to say. We're in a—we don't confirm ideas in these Mental Menudos. We share them. We strive to understand other people's opinions about a certain subject. There is no correct . . ." I said, "There is no 'politically correct' here." Everybody's voice has its weight, and so this is probably the value of the Mental Menudos, is it provides a sanctuary, if you will, from people wiping you out because you don't agree with them.

And for that reason, people would leave the Mental Menudos, wanting them and so forth, but some other problems happened. Like people didn't give it enough value because it—"Oh, all you guys are doing is talking." And I said, "Well, you're not doing even—you're doing even less than that. You're not even sharing your ideas with other people. Who do you argue with at a party? You know, another guy with a can of beer in his hand," I said. In these cases, the Mental Menudos were simply a forum and they were a forum with a really—a designated purpose of finding intelligent people—not intellectuals.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: I mean, we're peasants, you know. I'm a peasant. I come from, you know, worker, working-class people, so I have no pretense about being eggheads. And that's the other thing we were accused of. Like this lady, this teacher who was really, sadly, an educator and is so anti-education, telling people what they can't learn. I mean, it makes me want to—

KMD: Did you, in that particular instance when the female professor came in, did the students respond, or did—what was your recollection of their response to what she—

GL: All she did was reinforce what they already knew: that they were dopes, they were farm kids, and they didn't know anything. And so the teacher said—well, I was not of that mind. I was a young kid at the time. I was thirty-seven years old, and I was feisty, and I wasn't going to take that sitting down. So I went on to explain to them what intellectual is. It's about being able to abstract an idea. And we talked about the different kinds of thinking, you know, you can think about it, or you can think to solve.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: Thinking is a problem-solving thing. It's an emotion-solving thing. There's—we apply thinking to many—Anyway, without getting into all that . . .

KMD: So—

GL: We talked about what it was to be an intellectual and what it was to think, because that's what they were there for—school. So it gave me an opportunity to underscore, "You're not just learning a lot of facts here, you're learning facts to support some . . ." I mean, I'm talking to an educator's heart. It's hard to do this, because you already know that our job is to instigate self-generated thoughts.

KMD: Right.

GL: And I mean, essentially, I mean, you can have a lot of approaches, but that's it. That's what I was trying to do.

KMD: So you did them in every city you went to? Or you visited a town, or . . .?

GL: Whoever would listen to me, yeah.

KMD: Once a month, every six months? I mean, how many . . .?

GL: Chicano time. Cuando nos—cuando nos dió la gana. Whenever I could get somebody together, and when there was desire, I'd have a Mental Menudo. A friend of mine called them "Menso Menudos."

KMD: [laughter]

GL: Because I did gather *mensos*, you know, dilettantes, people that wanted to pontificate, people that wanted to preach. And I took—I would take them all on, which was very difficult for me, because I'm a Libra on one hand. But at the same time, I cannot let, like what happened with some of the young guys when we try to let them take over the meetings. If I didn't go, they would give me these reports that, like, in this

one case, again—just to epitomize all this—this kid brought a guest speaker. He introduced him, and the speaker took over the meeting! And he talked about his life, and he talked about this, and he talked about wherever he wanted to, and everybody sat passively. That is not a forum. Sorry.

And these young kids, as much as [I] wanted to have them take it over . . . Because for me, you've got to remember, for me I'm thinking this institution drives—let's get other people turned on, learn how to run a meeting, and with the understanding that artists are shy. Many of them work by themselves, and if they're not loners they're certainly not public speakers. And you have to allow for people to have the courage to speak up. And for some people just with a small group, it's like their heart's beating just to talk in front of a group. It's amazing.

Now, I'm used to it, you're used to it, but uh, there was a lot of dynamics that I think reflected and gave us a—I can give you a social profile of what artists think of what Chicano art is. After thirty-five years, or whatever the number is, '77, '87, '97—how many is that? Anyway, it's been a while, so thirty-some years. I don't know.

KMD: Thirty years.

GL: Well, whatever. The point is that under the Mental Menudos, I used to tell everybody that I gained the most from them because I would attend them and I would listen to all these people, and they didn't have an agenda like most people. I was just listening and gathering the notes, and we have archetypes there.

But going and sticking with the Mental Menudos as a topic here, I think it became—it became known among a lot of people. That was another kind of interesting thing, that people heard about them and they tried to emulate them, but they didn't work. They would tell me they didn't work. You need to have—first of all, you need to have somebody that, like me—and in a diplomatic way. I'm diplomatic, but I can be firm. But you need to cut off people, and you have to be the asshole. You have to really be the one that. . .

KMD: A real facilitator of it.

GL: A real facilitator. And there's people that I see, especially women—I see women being better at it. Women know how to interrupt a man in a nice way! [*laughter*] I'm kidding. No, but they're facilitators—I'm joking, but that's just my experience. [*laughter*]

KMD: So, when you mentioned that you tried to pass it on to— When was this trying to pass it on to younger generations, and what is it to other artists?

GL: Well, I've always—that's a good point to bring up, because I've always had the Mental Menudos as, as a—as just an invitation. I would call up somebody and say, "Hey, we're going to have a Mental Menudo on Friday," which is when they were held, "at seven o'clock." I froze it to Friday, seven o'clock after years of Wednesday, Tuesday, Saturday morning. Nothing worked. Friday [did]. I gave [young artists] all the insights that I had from all these thirty years.

First of all, you go slow, keep the [group] on topic, because you can—in a group you can hop around from, uh, one left-wing politics to art, an art idea, to a personal comment. And the other thing was that you had to make sure that people had completed their say and you have to clip them if they start getting too lengthy, because we can't have somebody tell you their life story. Or the other thing that you have to watch in this criterion that I would give them, is that people go from one subject to another. This isn't like *This Is Your Life*. You can respond to everything on the table here, and the coordinator has to be able to say, "Well, if you have another point, bring it up when that comes up again."

But in all, it was about learning how to talk to each other. That was the principal underlying goal. I would not let them film it and tape it, because that brought on grandstanding.

KMD: Ah.

GL: Right away, everybody became Clark Gable, and . . .

KMD: What about the topics? Did you select them, or did you open it up?

GL: I used to. Yeah.

KMD: What were some of the—

GL: And I always had them, you know. What is Chicano art? Number one of all time—gender issues. The women were always willing and waiting to beat us up about the fact that we're inconsiderate about gender stuff, and then say the most sexist things you ever want to hear, from the women! But they thought they were—because of the self-righteousness of their positions, they would feel—they would feel that it was okay to beat us up.

Now, I think that the Mental Menudos allowed for those things. I did not curb that. That's part of it. People had to vent, but we also weren't—I have all this written out. It's not therapy. It's not a therapy session. Putting it down to the basis is, learn how to talk to fellow artists without polarizing, sharing information technical and otherwise, and networking. I mean there's—I mean, I can tell you here, I got this on my fingertips, because I'd done it for so many years.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: And I can tell you the features of it. If you want to talk about politics, this is a very democratic process. It's democratic because you need to have a constituency that's informed. And there's nothing like town house, town hall meetings to get people together to speak towards a community issue. The Mental Menudo is a democratic intent. It's not fascist. It's not about "I'm just going to invite my friends and just do that." Anybody and their grandma could come in. And that was one of the weaknesses of the Mental Menudos, because my enemies would come, and . . . I don't know, I don't have enemies. I don't dislike people. There's a few that I can say I don't really like, but I don't hate them.

KMD: Critics?

GL: Critics and, more than anything, when—this is ironic, but when you put yourself in the service of humankind to do something very good like getting us together to talk, we'll emerge the most loathsome people. I mean, these people come after you like, you know, they don't like my personality, or "they don't let you talk," or "Magu doesn't let you talk." Well, that was usually the people that wanted to just go on and on about their life.

One guy was there, and he told us his almost—I cut him off, but he almost told us his life story, and he always complained that he didn't have a say-so in the group, that he didn't really get his chance to say his piece. Now, here's an insight of my experience: what he really was saying is that I want everybody to hear my story and agree to it, because I've got you in a headlock and until you—

[break in audio]

KMD: This is Karen with Magu, and it's the eighth of October, 2007. He was telling me about some of the dynamics in the Mental Menudo group. Um, I'm also curious about—you said when you were meeting, you found that Friday after, you know, seven o'clock—

GL: It was generally, you know.

KMD: Was the better time. What about the environment? Are you meeting in people's homes? At campus locations? Where are the meetings taking place?

GL: Originally we held them on campus [at Fresno City College], and after that [Hispanic] educator dropped in on us, I very quickly switched it to people's houses. And those people that went there, I knew would be interested in that, or at least not be disruptive. But we met in my studio, largely in my studio, other people's studios. But yes, it was portable, always portable.

KMD: And you said that you had written some things down.

GL: Oh yeah, yeah. Over and over.

KMD: When did you write things down, and why?

GL: I started writing anything seriously maybe early on, but my handwriting was atrocious and then I'd make mistakes, and I'd do the whole thing over again, which helped my penmanship. But when I started doing e-mail and I could delete and shift and cut and paste, man, I really found it really advantageous to try to write. And it was very efficient, but I didn't know how to type.

But I started writing all these things down many years ago. I don't know, it's all happened kind of organically, but I'd say at least ten—jeez, now, fifteen years I've been doing the e-mails that I think I should—I don't know, I guess we could check that. I don't know how important it is except that it was through doing e-mails that I began to pay attention to syntax and grammar and punctuation. And I've done it ever since, to the point now that I taught myself how to write what I mean. Because at first writing, it was "blah, blah, blah." Garbled. But after you—and you know this, with your writing. I mean, you have a PhD, so you obviously had to face these writing challenges, particularly for yourself. But for me, I realized that I had to write because there was no other Chicano artist as good as Gronk, who's very good at promotion and media. Yeah, excellent. And Harry [Gamboa]. Those guys—Asco.

Maybe this is a sideline, but they were always good at those particular kinds of things. I never did any self-promotion things until I started writing, and they were really never self-promoting as much as they were—or they feel better to my nature. They had a cause to fulfill. I feel very self-righteous about Mental Menudos because they're for everybody.

I can't own a conversation, nor can I control it, nor can I be at all the ones that are going on around the world. So I feel very free from having to be thought of as controlling, certainly not something to control. I mean, I don't see how you could. But I think people have always wanted to take it over. Like when you ask one of these kids [who] were involved, about—Jesus, been going on two years ago, a year and a half ago?—I don't really remember, but at least two years ago. I went to Peter Carrillo's house, who's a young artist, and I know his mother. She used to know my cousin Arturo. And Diane used to always come around and hang around with us with that Los Four thing. But her son Peter's also an artist and so, thus, he invited me to dinner, which I took Mario Trillo and CeCe as friends. And we went over just to have a potluck dinner at their house.

And they had a bunch of artists, young kids that were there. And so we were looking at their artwork and it was kind of like a little commune. It was downstairs and upstairs in this really neat place. It was [a] large, big house, and everybody had rooms and it was really interesting. About three or four artists were there, and so we started talking to them. We got into it about, like, Mario and I, being the older guys, we supported the idea of voting, and they said, "Nah, it's a bunch of crap." We say, "We know it is. But you still got to do it." You have to link yourself up with at least caring about your community to go out there and vote. Let them know that you're—whatever it is, even if you vote stupid. Because a lot—a lot of times—you've got all these people to vote for. You have no idea who they are and what they want and who they are, never heard their speeches, and you've got to vote. So we understood that.

At any rate, what it caused was a mini-Mental Menudo. So I suggested that. These are like the Mental Menudos. So, finally, when we were sitting down to eat, finally everybody gathered around this table. And I did my bit towards selling the idea that these meetings should be regular, we should meet—[because] there's a lot for us to discuss. And they bought into it, and that's how they started. Young guys. What I was really very happy about was that here we had older guys like me and Mario, who's fifty, sixty now, I think.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: And me, that we were kind of—it was an automatic generational awareness that was going on there, which I welcome, because I don't get a chance to talk to a young group of artists very often. They're just—the social context doesn't allow for it. And only at parties. So we started doing [these separate meetings], and at the very beginning I wanted these guys to take over the meetings so they can know how to do it. I had done them for years. I didn't want to do [them] any more. You know, it's a lot of effort. I spent thousands of dollars on these things.

KMD: Hosting the—

GL: Hosting them, yeah. I'd get potato chips and sodas or whatever it was, crackers, cheese, the normal fare that—or whatever. *Chicharrones*, pizza, whatever. We should've made quesadillas. It would've been cheaper.

KMD: [laughter] Right.

GL: But we were—it was a personal thing. It was at somebody's home, my home, but essentially it did work. What did work is that we continued to have them consistently for a year and a half, year, year and a half. I don't remember. It's just—

KMD: This group with the young folks.

GL: Yes.

KMD: Wow. Who are some of the younger artists that were—or the students that were coming?

GL: Well, Peter Carrillo was important to this. He was one of the—the basis of, of the connection. Raul Baltazar, Oscar Magallanes, and later we started picking up other kids that didn't—

[break in audio]

KMD: Okay. Baltazar, Oscar Magallanes.

GL: Magallanes. Yes, and who else was there? He used to always bring a kid named Pedro. I'm sorry I don't remember his last name, but we started together [with] other artists, a little older, like Joe Bravo. Armando Baeza was an old Mental Menudo guy. He was with me from the, jeez, early on. Armando Baeza, B-A-E-Z-A. Uh, who else? Linda Arreola was another old—she was also from the old group that I used to get together. Because before this larger group that we finally wound up getting on the average of thirty to forty-five kids a meeting, and consistency. And I would say that never before in all the years that I've been involved in [the] Chicano movement had we ever so consistently gotten together such a loose-knit, non-affiliated independent [group of] artists coming together once a month. We tried it bimonthly, and that, it was killing me!

Ultimately, I got so sick from trying to keep all this together, because off camera I was dealing with all these personality issues from— All kinds of guys were fighting with each other. They didn't like this, they—and I'd find out about, "Well, he did this. He didn't pay that. She never paid her for this," and God, it was incredible. The dramas of life. I mean, so it is, you know.

KMD: Is this the group that resulted in the exhibition in Echo Park?

GL: No. [Eagle Rock Art Center.]

KMD: No.

GL: Well, kind of, because . . . Ah, you're bringing up a, another bunch of experiences which were very difficult for me. Because I don't—I don't believe in, nor do I trust group exhibitions curated by a committee. And these things—and it gets proven over and over again for a number of reasons, but um, they're young guys and they get enthusiastic and people want to do all this stuff. We had one conversation [that] was very revealing about corporations and collectives. What was funny is that they hated corporations, but they're making billions. They loved collectives, and none of them last over a month. So something's got to be—there's something that their thinking has to adjust there, to talk about the realities of the world.

So, and in the same way, I think that what the Mental Menudos have taught me is that I see the issues that we have as a group, and we have been a colonized group that is still young in comparison to blacks. Now, blacks had right away understood and learned that they're part of the system and they don't have nowhere to go. They were not going back to Africa.

KMD: Right.

GL: And they have to do it in English. So they—what they did is they formed an alternative culture. In our case, we're ping-ponging between two cultures, and the values thereof. It's a different situation and social dynamic. So these are the kinds of things I wanted to bring to the Mental Menudo. But it was always very difficult because there were so many petty things that were going on between people and against me, and against the Mental Menudo. I mean, people find things to complain about. Critics, there's millions of them. But more important though is—and I would—and I conveyed this to a lot of people who would begin to understand but weren't willing to put the energy that I have put into it. And that is that it takes a pretty large commitment to do what I was doing. It's a sacrifice. I finally went to the hospital behind this, stressed out.

KMD: Shoot the messenger.

GL: Shoot the messenger, and having a nature that [meant] I also didn't give up. One of the reasons why I'm not teaching anymore is just this entitlement business that a lot of students feel. You know, "Well, just give me an A." You know, "I was here." So, Mental Menudo is more honest. And I've seen people turn around from criticizing it, never going, and then attending some. They found it boring. Why? They didn't get involved.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: And ultimately, realizing that it was a good thing. Coming around because we need to get together. We as artists must understand that the Mental Menudo, or the— Let's see, some people tried to do these, but they didn't work, because they didn't understand why they were having them. Simple as that. They were just emulating the Mental Menudos in kind of a copycat way, but they didn't have the substance. I know a couple of people that told me about them. The conversations flap all over the place, you know. There's no sense of direction. There's really no sense of why are they there, and me? Pssh. I was equipped with thirty years of knowing why we were there. I had a good reason, because we have intelligent people and they need a time and a place to talk to each other outside of a school. ["I never let schooling interfere with my education." Mark Twain.]

KMD: Yeah.

GL: Schools interfere with learning. And so I often say that people go to college and become stupid, because what they believe, [in] taking a class about something, [is] like reading a synopsis of what the movie's about, and then really believing you know what that movie's all about without seeing it. So there's all this—the Mental Menudo also has an opportunity to dig into issues deeper than headlines, slogan politics, "Viva la Raza." All this stuff that people talk about but they don't practice.

There's a recent book out on Diego Rivera that's supposed to be a big exposé about the fact that he chickened out, and instead of going into the revolution, he split to Europe. And I told my friend—I almost said his name—I said, "You mean to think that you would support Diego Rivera going and fighting and getting killed over a stupid war like the Mexican Revolution, instead of coming back later and causing a revolution to change the image of Mexico for the world? For Mexico to find itself with its indigenous history?" I said that was revolutionary. I said, "Anyway, the Communists are gone. They died out. Diego Rivera is still going stronger than ever." I said, "So don't give me this shit about the fact that, uh, Diego Rivera had contradictions." I said, "You have a contradiction. You got a degree and are stupid, what are you going to do?" [*laughter*] Anyway, that's what I play with—[my friend who jokingly calls Mental Menudos, Menso Menudos].

KMD: So you're—you mentioned that some of the time these groups have younger and older sets.

GL: Yeah, it was mixed.

KMD: Was that the—in the last couple of years? Or was it always—

GL: Yeah, oh, always that way. No, I designed it to always have young— First of all, you have to know the nature of my politics is to be inclusive, always. Always. And democratic. And it cost me more. It's harder to do democratic things. Then you've got to convince the other fool who hasn't got there yet about what we're doing and the value of it. I mean, ad nauseam. "What is Chicano art?" But, being a teacher of art, and an explainer, I would patiently go—even Cubist art, we'd take on. But the question was a fair one from the person that asked it, and every session we had was different. They never were duplicated. The dynamics of the people in the group, the way it was interacted, was interacting, was based on the chemistry of the people that were there.

KMD: Were you inspired artistically by these conversations?

GL: I was drained so much, it was like to, "Why don't I just shut up, stay home, and do my artwork?" Because it's a large, large effort to try to keep people who want to argue and fight and resist. They believe their ideas that they got from one college class to be what the truth is. They have a lot of very naïve notions

about what the world is, and largely because they don't read. They don't go outside their experiences. I have a lot of little small insights about people as a result.

So yes, it helped my artwork with respect to I got insights. Inspiration, I don't know. I couldn't think of one instance for that. But certainly, insights, lots of them.

KMD: Now, what about the other kinds of groups you've worked in? Mental Menudo, compared to something like Brocha del Valle or Los Four, is much more amorphous. So what—

GL: I don't know what you mean.

KMD: You know, it's not a set membership, right? You've done it in different places.

GL: Well, I've organized since the '60s. Once I got hooked onto the idea of what Chicano art is for myself, after that, that art show I put together in '64, it began the wheels turning to answer the question, "What is Chicano art and what relationship does it have to do to me?" And then flinging myself into this thing called the Chicano Movement. I tried to spread my seed—no, that's not saying it right. I try to spread my opinion as broadly as I could. That's a joke. *[laughter]*

KMD: I know.

GL: But anyway, it's stupid.

KMD: So, what gets people coming back, if it's not like a—

GL: I think there's an inherent need to talk. People want to speak, however shy they may be. I've done this before. I pick on a particular shy person who's sitting there, and just taking it in as they always do, and then I'll very carefully and softly, with very soft gloves, draw—try to get them out. And I'll say to them, I'll say, "Look, I'm going to come back to you right now." And right away, you see the alarm coming to their face. But I—and I see the adrenaline going. It's like a color. I can see the adrenaline going into their system.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: And then I let the conversation go a little bit, and I say, "Look," I said, "I don't have—you don't have to answer this question." I said, "But you—I know you have some feelings about this. I know you've got some thinking about this. What would you say?" Whoosh, an avalanche comes out. They vomit all over the floor with thoughts and ideas. As a matter of fact, it's cruel to stop 'em, because once you open that valve and they feel comfortable—I mean, you've got to feel protected.

And one of the things I would tell women, in particular, "There's nobody going to do anything sexist." They—if they say a sexist thing, I'm going to get on their case, even if it's a woman, because women are very sexist today. They feel emboldened and they—and I think it's okay. I don't mind it, because the pendulum swings. Not all cultures are dominated by men, like they say.

KMD: No. Can you tell me more about—if we can just switch gears a little bit.

GL: Good.

KMD: You said you met in the studio. What kinds of studio spaces have you had over the past several years?

GL: Well, industrial buildings, commercial buildings for the most part. I had a duplex in Santa Monica for ten years, or nine years—ten years. And, um, they vary, but they're really shops. They're, they're mostly, uh, a table with chairs around. Normally, I'd have some kind of sink or something, or places to eat. Or if they didn't have a kitchen, I had something similar to that.

But I think the context was always, uh, a studio context, an art context, somebody['s] home, usually one of the artists that participated. We had them, and Armando [Baeza] had a beautiful setup in his backyard in his kiosk. It's gorgeous. He's got a backyard—he's been there for fifty years, so over the years he's made a real [pretty place]. And he had a monkey. He had a monkey tied to a tree there, and the tree's all bare where the monkey runs around it.

KMD: Right.

GL: What else did he have? He had a wonderful [place with ambiance]. It was so nice that the conversation was really dull that time.

KMD: *[laughter]*

GL: It was just too pretty, which is another thing which you bring up, too. Environments? That would affect the conversations a lot.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: In Pomona, more recently, maybe you know, six months or so ago, we tried to get them going on in Pomona, because they were going hot, hotcakes, man, in LA, and these guys knew it. So they kind of wanted it, but they wanted it with beer. And I said, "Well," I said, "it's not going to work that way." Anyway, we got into a clash, and they said I was too controlling [about] everything, just because I didn't want them slurring their speeches in—over a Mental Menudo.

KMD: Is that one of your rule guidelines, you know, to not interrupt, no beer?

GL: I don't care—come drunk! Just don't interrupt, and behave. But when you start saying, "Oh, I love you man," and you know, "Artists love people," and "We want peace in the world," I mean, that's not a conversation.

KMD: That's not the level of conversation.

GL: No, they should go to a bar. That's what bar talk is.

KMD: You also talked about mentoring other artists.

GL: Yes.

KMD: Who are the other people you've mentored over the years?

GL: Ooh, jeez. I don't—I never kept a list! I'll mentor anybody who listens or has an interest in art or shows an interest. But most of them are nowhere near my intensity. I've learned to cool down now, and it's just crushed the little plants, man. I have too much information and intensity, so I have to be careful because I'm either doing shotgun blasts or machine-gunning them, and steam-rolling them over with constant stuff that they're not ready to handle—and that's self-criticism. I had to learn to just tone it down.

KMD: So you're meeting them when you get these teaching jobs, or do people approach you?

GL: No, people come. I, no, I don't advertise. They've got enough—they've got enough problems, but I don't advertise. [laughter] But people come to me for mostly donations of artwork, which drives me crazy. Everybody wants artwork, and everybody would like it for free. And that I understand. Then I think about, "Well, I'm not that way." I'll pay for what I've got to have, or whatever, or do without.

But I really live like a monk. I don't really do much. I got this TV thing which people criticize, but not for me. I find virtues in TV that most people don't pay attention to. And, and maybe the Mental Menudos—to conclude Mental Menudos ideas—is that I really grew as a person because of the Mental Menudos. I saw people I don't want to be like. I saw stupidity, and then I challenged my own pettiness and I challenged my own inability to listen to another point of view, however that person may seem to me. I've been influenced by people who know nothing about art and all it did was show me that I'm the instrument that needs to be taken care of as an artist.

My psyche, who I am, what I think, what I eat—all that affects what I do, and I'm very diligent about at least addressing it. And so the Mental Menudos has helped me tremendously in those ways—what not to be or, uh, people's opinions that, you know, come out of the sky. Kids, mostly.

KMD: I'm curious how you keep this—how you kept it going, because the way you're talking now, it's more like answering your critics. But you know, thirty years of bringing folks together to talk about . . . Did you have a sense of responsibility, like a teacher, you know, wanting to further the development?

GL: Yeah. The Chicano Movement, now, as I told you before, I think that when I was twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-eight, I made a commitment that I was going to help my community, and I just—I still haven't gotten off of it. I'm trying to find that twelve-step program that relieves me of duty. But I'm a—if you look at my astrology, I'm prone to causes. I'm very committed, very loyal to it, and I can't help it. That's the way I am. That's the way I'm wired.

KMD: Now, I know you want to conclude some of this, but I just wanted to get a better sense of—are you, the folks that you're bringing together, they're Latino—Chicano specifically. You said men, women, but these are Chicano artists?

GL: Spanish-speaking cultures.

KMD: Okay, so it's open.

GL: Because a lot of people didn't even have Mexican parents. We didn't even know, because they're Chicanos. I mean, by virtue of the way they behave, the way they went into school, they went to East LA, they did the whole thing. And one parent was from Nicaragua and the other was Mexican, so what do you do with these people? Well, we don't do anything. We just accept them. A Latino, to me, is a poor word for us, because that means the Church to me. The Latin America was selected by the Catholic Church. The [church] said, "That's mine," and "Latin America is ours." And the secular version of that is the Monroe Doctrine.

KMD: Yeah.

GL: And everybody lays claims to us when they need us. [Some] museum[s] doesn't accept Chicano art. We're no longer Latinos to them. It's like everybody that lives [in the United States] is Latino except the Chicanos. That is so absurd.

KMD: Tell me about a lot of the things that you're describing as how to help artists and even the mentoring of artists learning about self-promotion. How have you dealt with the need to promote yourself? Did you get a dealer?

GL: I don't have that need. I never developed that. Maybe that's been one of my problems. Almaraz and Frank were always trying to—I mean, they considered me a dummy for not being a little more selfish, thinking of my self-worth a little more. Almaraz told me, he goes, "Magu, you keep defacing yourself." And I think part of it, he misunderstood, part of it was Zen. We were made to understand that your ego is just, like, part of the furniture. It's not meant to enhance it or— To me the ego's self-concept, and so I never was belittling myself. I was just not egotistically approaching things like some of my fellow artists were.

KMD: Were they encouraging you to get [a] dealer, or to—

GL: They were encouraging me to snap out of it and do more proper business things, which, I was just flagrantly irresponsible to any career. I was stupid. I really was, because in the mundane world, those things are very important. Social circles, how much money you have, and how clever you are in strategies for museums and other—hey, I don't go to galleries. If they're not interested in me, I leave them alone.

KMD: You mean you don't take your portfolio to a gallery?

GL: Heck, no. I've seen what they do. They just, you know, look at it or say they're not interested. But I've found that if they find you, they're interested. If they're interested, you've got something going.

KMD: What are some of the galleries that showed that kind of interest, that you felt respected your work?

GL: Oh, I've had a lot of galleries that called up and solicited me in different ways. Some more shy, some almost kind of like suggested it but wanted me to take the bait, like going there and presenting myself. Uh-uh. I have to say that my art direction in going into this conversation this way is that my purpose in making art to begin with was academic, for classes. Then, it attached itself to this social cause called the Chicano movement. I thought about nothing else. Sell work? It's not worth nothing. Look, it's just crap. Nobody's going to buy this. And it was true. It was true on both accounts. When I first started, it was stupid student work. It wasn't any good. It was just learning, you know.

KMD: What do you think are some of the more important gallery exhibitions you've had, commercial gallery exhibitions?

GL: Commercial. Well, the latest one was Carlotta's Passion [Fine Art], with this fellow named Bob Squires who is the first and only gallery dealer that [I] not only praised but respected and loved. And I didn't find too many [gallery] people [that nice]. There was a couple [in a gallery] called [Oranges/Sardines] back in the '70s, and I met them the other day at [a] Thai vegetarian restaurant right across from Carlotta's. And I'm sorry I don't remember their names, but it was a couple, and they were wonderful with artists. [Carol Colin and Ted Waltz—ed.] And that's the only ones I can ever remember.

All these others are monsters to artists, because they don't respect artists. And the other field problem is that the relationships with business and galleries is monstrous, because they're sharks, and we come like little bait. And when they bite and eat us, we complain and shy away—move away, complain.

Not to the attorney general, but to each other. I think there's a lot of work that needs to be done in the field of the relationships in business. And also in anthropology, because a lot of Raza still doesn't understand what ethnicity's about, and the virtues of being an ethnic person. You know, because some people will say, "Well, we don't have to be Chicanos, do we?" No, you don't. I'm not always a Chicano.

And people—I used to tell the class that. I'd say, "Well, sometimes I'm not even a Chicano." And they said, "What?" And I said, "Yeah! Sometimes I'm brushing my teeth." [laughter] You know, I'm not thinking about what I am. You know.

KMD: What about some of the important, less-commercial galleries, such as Galería de la Raza? And you had—you were part of the *Lowrider* exhibition.

GL: Up in San Francisco?

KMD: Yeah. Galería Posada. You had a whole—

GL: Now, those were non-profit buddies. They were part of what the Chicano movement was about. They were these grassroots efforts, so I always lent myself to those kinds of exhibits because—and they were just exhibits. But ironically, this uh, guy named Allan Stone came in [to] San Francisco, and this is important because Almaraz, Carlos Almaraz, had always told me about this guy, Allan Stone, and that he might be interested in what I was doing because he collected, like, ceramic trucks, you know, diesel trucks.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: And he had a wonderful eye. He was a very respected gallery from what Almaraz said, and Almaraz was dying to be in his gallery in New York. Well, the guy looks at my work in San Francisco for—I don't know what his agenda was, but he was in San Francisco, and he made a point to come to the Mission District to look at my work. Again, my opinion, [that] my work was *rasquache*.

But it was intended to be that way. I did that whole folk art thing for twenty years, as an homage to *artesanos*. It was supposed to be like that. It was anti-slick, for me—anti-sophisticated, artsy-fartsy stuff that a lot of people that are interested in impressing the art establishment with how cute and erudite they can be about art. No, I went the other way. I said, "I'll ride my [motorcycle] bike and go cruising and watch football." Everything they hate. [laughter] So people don't understand that, because they don't know about it.

KMD: Did Allan Stone pick up your work?

GL: He took a look at it, but he told me to call him in New York. I would've called him. But he asked.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: I don't care how important he was, because [I] [wondered] who is this guy "Piedra" [Allan Stone]? I said to Carlos Almaraz, who knew the value of this gallery connection, "What are you talking about? Who, what is this?" But Almaraz as well as Frank—and Rudy Fernandez, another very, very talented artist—they all really seek that Euro-career position. I could care less.

KMD: Did you enjoy exhibiting at the Galería Posada and those types of things?

GL: Oh, yeah. Well, because that came along with the whole social functioning of being with those guys and being part of the Chicano movement, and it was a grassroots effort. I don't think we ever sold any work that I can think of.

KMD: What about the exhibitions—I think they're group exhibitions that you were part of at major museums, like . . .

GL: Almaraz criticized that, because he said that I'm never going to make a name for myself. I'm always hiding in groups. Well, it wasn't that I was hiding in groups. He misunderstood. I was part of group things because that's when they invited me. That's it, simple as that. And I didn't have the ambition to go out and do one-man shows. That was what him and Frank were interested in. I didn't have that career-building strategy.

KMD: What about going to Mexico, having your work go to Mexico? Is that important?

GL: Well, I did it. I got involved with Self Help [Graphics & Art] and [Sister] Karen [Boccalero], and I never saw my work again. Yeah, they just absorbed it, took it, never apologized. Nothing.

KMD: A traveling exhibition? [phone ringing] Go ahead.

[break in audio]

KMD: We were talking about a traveling exhibition or some exhibition that was organized [by a community center] and went to Mexico, but you didn't see the [end]. Do you think your work was better treated in the, like, larger shows, *Hispanic Art in the United States*?

GL: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Those people—well, it's a different league. Not only were they, like, the Hispanic arts were not only funded properly, but—I mean, you can make complaints for any large organizations because there's other things that can happen in large organizations between the cracks. But by and large, they gave us a lot of respect.

I remember one time when I went into—one of my pieces had been broken, and I went there and I was going to—since I was in town, I think it was in Houston, I don't remember now—but they wanted me to govern the repairs. So this one little figure that I had, this cardboard figure, it had come loose or got hit and it was . . . So I just, when I went in there, I just ripped it off, and these people nearly had a heart attack. And I'm looking at this, and well, that's what I do at home, and then glue it back. Because what they were unaware of is I designed my cardboard things to break that way. I mean, if there was weaknesses, I could just pop it off, glue it, and put it back, and you'd never even know. Wouldn't even disturb the paint.

KMD: Right.

GL: See? But anyway, oh, they talked about me for days about how crude I was, [repairing it so brutally], I guess. I don't know. But I shocked them.

KMD: So what kinds of, uh—

GL: I didn't mean to, but that's what happened.

KMD: What kinds of strategies are working for you in terms of getting your art out there and either making exhibitions or sales? Is it—

GL: I think it's a combination of, of trying to make well-crafted interesting humorous work, lighthearted work. Being who I am, the artwork that you see—naïve, a little corny, you know, all that stuff—that's me. And I think that as I get older, I'm not afraid to be that. See, because I hear that, you know, comments about well, "Oh, Magu, he's that folk artist, he tries to be [a] folk artist, or that lowrider guy." Very demeaning to them, because they want to go towards that sophisticated New York level of sophistication. Well, no. I don't care about those kinds of opinions. The only opinion I really care about is what looks good to me, and I don't think an artist is worth their salt unless you have that kind of integrity. You've got to have your own vision, and mine's forty years old. I mean, I'm trying to reconstruct the culture. I'm trying to provide a continuum to Mesoamerica and Chicano ideology today. But it's difficult to get to Chicano aesthetics because we have such a diverse input into making us what we are.

So we have a difficulty, and I often had compared it to pop art, because when pop art became a term that people were accepting, then all of a sudden, uh, Lichtenstein became a pop artist. He said, yeah, he was making a lot of money. He went for it. What other people [like] Warhol, who just did it and didn't associate with that aesthetic because he didn't get it— But he was working with popular culture. So what we need to do is understand that Chicano culture, including people from Nicaragua, El Salvador, et cetera, they've all fallen under a cultural milieu that becomes this Chicano thing. And Chicano's the most widely known and popular thing, I mean name, for what we're doing. It's a—it encapsulates not only the history, but the cultural dynamics of what made us what we are.

And all those people that come from other countries, especially Spanish speaking cultures, and Anglos or European Americans that become Chicanos . . . I know a lot of guys that—Michael Walker, and other people who—Wayne Healy, who's a halfer, half-Irish and half-Chicano, out front. They're not afraid to be what we are. And that's the basis of what a Chicano artist is. You are what you are, and one of our difficulties is people want to attach a national identity to an art movement. And being an El Salvador artist [who] hasn't been in this country long enough to make those merges of gringo mainstream America and El Salvador to give us a distinct view. Those guys are doing lowriders, those guys are doing the tattoos—they're

doing the same thing that Chicanos do. Therefore, the larger umbrella is conceptual only. It doesn't have anything to do with your personal identity.

And I tell people all the time, "You don't have to be a Chicano that has Mexican parents anymore." Most of us are half-black, half-this, half-Chinese, da, da, da, da. And I have a friend who's Irish-Filipino and hung around with us. So there's these variations. But what I strove to do since I was twenty-five, when I was conceptualizing I wanted to have that umbrella concept that encompasses that plays in our field, that participates in what we call Chicano culture. So you can't take the word "Chicano" too literal. Pop art embraced a lot of different styles of art and intents of art.

KMD: And so you want to do the same thing with Chicano art.

GL: That, and what I said earlier about if, if European, modern European art could be made from looking at folk art, so can I. So those are two principal ideas that I was going to encapsulate later, but I can do it now and tell you that I borrowed from art history the idea that Europeans made art from folk. The definitions have to fit the context. A lot of times, people want to be frozen in the ideal world, [asking] what country did you come from? And I think that's a false consideration because when they're doing the artwork, they don't present that [nationalistic] idea.

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: Okay, and that's—that's a distinction. And going back to the Mental Menudos, listening to hundreds and hundreds of people have made me think this way. It isn't Chicano art. [It] isn't as specific as people want to make it, and it's not as small as people want to make it. We're much—people are going to find out in the long run that we're much more diverse. We're multiclass as well.

KMD: Do you need somebody like a collector, like Cheech Marin, who focused on painting and LA-based artists?

GL: Well, Cheech is just one collector. I mean, we've got collectors of the rainbow, because some people will only collect prints. I would say it is dangerous to try to make a specific example of what Cheech is collecting, just paintings, to represent the whole field. That is too crazy. That he doesn't collect sculptures. I mean, paintings are convenient to collect. But he's going to miss sculptures that are very relevant to his collection if he will sidestep [with] that mindset.

KMD: I just want to push the conversation a bit more. You've talked very clearly about what you think, how to define Chicano art and the cultural foundations for it. When you're going to produce work, you know, in the studio, do you—you know, how do you find those inspirations? Is it, you just look out the window and you're—or you think back to family memories or childhood memories? Particularly those things that are very culturally based, the works that are what I would call culturally based.

GL: Well, like I said about the Mental Menudos, is when people ask those questions you just did, they're very much in the present and they really don't take into consideration—I've been thinking about this for forty years.

KMD: Uh-huh.

GL: This is not a new question or is it something that I just thought about recently, but it—it developed from the very beginning of understanding that Chicano culture was a viable motive for making art. That's where it started, and I was twenty-four, twenty-five. I don't know, [in] '66, twenty-six years old.

KMD: So you—you normally have a sketchbook with you.

GL: Yeah, usually, yeah.

KMD: And when you're going to produce something, a work that's either been commissioned, or you've asked to join a show, or you're just a day in the studio. Do you turn to the sketchbook?

GL: I can, or something I start filling in the sketchbook with those notions that come to me, to expressly design and address what it is that I'm after. Say we're going to have a show on lowriders, or altars, or any number of—or the *perritos* that I do. They all are the anchor to what I'm going to. Well, then that's the specific objective.

KMD: Okay.

GL: So sketches are one vehicle for me and conduit to get to an idea. It's a quick way. Other times, if I'm doing sculpture, I'll go after the idea in a different way, where I just start putting materials together. Clay—I start working it. So there's in part, an opportunity to use the material to tell me what it should be, maybe with an idea. And so there's many factors and hundreds of decisions to make an art piece. It isn't as simple as, "Well, what gets your gift going?" What might be getting me going is a good *chorizo* breakfast.

But in actuality, where it goes is the process of creativity that almost everybody that makes stuff enjoys working with your hands. It's really about doing something. It's not about—when you get into the hands-on doing, it goes from intellectual to visceral. All of a sudden, your emotions and how you feel enter into that picture and it only complicates it. It doesn't extract it. I mean, it doesn't subtract anything. To answer the question, there's a lot of things [that simultaneously become] an idea. And I juxtapose even odd ideas. Sometimes, like this one here, like I'm working on doing this car. I'm doing this truck. I'm actually going to build this truck here. And so what I've had to do is I've had to figure out the dimensions and how much this should be, how should the wind—the angle of windshields and how far from the window to the bottom of the cab, and what size tires I'm going to use.

KMD: Building it out of . . .

GL: Fiberglass.

KMD: Fiberglass?

GL: Yeah. So what I'm going to do is get a car, like, from the junkyard, take the body off, take care of the frame, the motor, everything. When you take this off, it's all exposed and the same process happens with art. You get an idea. You go to the foundation of the chassis and the wheels, and you start picking the wheels you're going to—you start with the wheels. What size wheels are you going to use? And then you look at the frame, you clean it all up. Now this is the foundation, and you start building on this foundation of conceptually by the time—since I have an MFA, by that time you've pretty much solidified your artistic intents. And then, the rest of the time is just exploring and examining different ways of presenting your basic premise. Which is what I want to do, is I want to make—if somebody would say, "Well, what do you really want to do with Chicano art?" is I want to combine it with my ancient legacies and new mythologies. That's my job as an artist, and I do it in any number of ways.

You know, I did tortilla drawings in the '70s. I did a lot of stuff, and I made them in sculptures, which I got to do again, because this fellow, Joe Bravo, has been doing wonderful stuff with the tortillas. I really enjoy what he does, but he's an illustrator, so he paints them. The reason—And people have asked me, "Well, why don't you do them anymore? Why don't you keep doing them?" There was something about it being food. [*phone ringing*]

KMD: Hold—

[*break in audio*]

KMD: Go ahead.

GL: There was something about the tortillas being food that—and I saw hunger in the world, and I thought that it might be considered frivolous of me to work with food that way, so I stopped. So, but I think I'm going to do them in—I'm going to—I'm going to continue to do tortillas, but they're going to be ceramic now. And I'm going to do things with tortillas. I'm actually going to be—at this point now, at, at my age level now—I want to go back and explore some of the things that I did. I did a lot of graffiti artwork at that time. Now Chaz Bojórquez is another guy that's done remarkable—I mean, I just, I couldn't tell you how happy I am with what he's done with graffiti. And the world's treated him with respect and, and the kudos that he's deserved for doing what he's done with graffiti. What else have I done? Altars. The stuff I did, altars [at Santa Ana College] in '66 [or about], when I don't think Chicanos were even thinking about altars at that time. So I want to go back and continue to look at all the motifs that I looked at and saw in the barrio. I want to do more graffiti stuff.

Now, abstract works—because that's another area that I've thought about doing—abstract art is an attitude. It's a cerebral thing. Abstract is a mental picture to begin with, so that's where it starts. And so the way to convey abstract ideas is more difficult on one hand. But we have Robert Hudson, we have [Richard] Serra, we have a number of wonder artists today, big names that do abstract work. Carl Andre, John Mason, my teacher, although he did objects and he did things like that. He did a lot of abstract [work], murals and reliefs, so I also want to try to those kinds of things that are less ethnic. Because abstract isn't tied to any—it's not flowers, it's not political, it's not anything else except a kind of [non-verbal expression without normal artistic representation]. It serves many functions, but it's our laboratory. That's where we can smear paint around and learn what paint does without it having to be a horse. And then abstract art is important because it's another language. It has become another thing to—for human expression that's very distinct and important. But when I became an artist, I wasn't interested in being a category of an artist. An artist was enough of a category. Chicano artist, yeah, I'm a Chicano artist, but I'm also a dream—an artist, like I'm a lowrider artist. That is not fine arts. But now it is, because finally I'm glad to see it.

KMD: [laughter]

GL: And I don't mean just being decorative. I mean by—the question of selling out was very popular in the '60s, because like most societies as you know, as in anthropology, a society's an aggregate of values—you've got to stay within those boundaries to be a member. Well, I've crossed out and come back in. I didn't leave. I've got one foot in and one foot out, and I mean that by putting flames on a lowrider. I mean that by being just the person that I am, you know. "You don't talk like other artists."

KMD: Talking about one foot in, one foot out, sometimes I look at the cars and I think that they're more hot rod than they are lowrider.

GL: Well, unless you lift the hood!

KMD: Okay. [laughter] So that's some of your combining of aesthetic styles?

GL: Yes, because just to correct your notion of the two, hot rods is about power and speed. Lowriders are a showboat. It's a butterfly. It's an emblem to show how beautiful you can be. Then if you look at the ego construction of both societies, *gabachos* like that power, that incredible speed records, and that stuff. Chicanos and lowriders, although they probably never think about it this way, are into showing that they're really—they don't look like what you think they are. We're prettier than what we seem to be. We're not really just labor. We can be pretty, we can really go to the dance and shine in a tuxedo. But I see it. I see lowriders, as those aesthetic moves, and I'm so happy now, people. I just applied for a traditional arts grant, and they're accepting lowriders. I mean, I was thrilled. Man, I can't tell you how happy that made me.

KMD: What grant is that?

GL: It's a traditional arts grant, and lowriders was a category that was new. So man, I was—

KMD: You mean in the California Arts Council?

GL: Yes. Well, I don't know who sponsors it. They get funding, but I'm not sure [from where]. But they're up north from either San Jose or San Francisco.

KMD: And one of the categories of traditional arts is now—

GL: Is now lowriders! Right, isn't that great?

KMD: That's amazing.

GL: I think it is, because what it also proves is that all those aesthetic ideas that I discovered in the '60s were true, that we can make art from our culture, and that we should respect it not only because it comes from our grandparents. And yes, it is humble.

[break in audio]

KMD: This is Karen Mary Dávalos with Gil "Magu" Luján, and today is October 8, 2007. He was telling me about his impressions of traditional arts. I lost the train of thought.

GL: Well, what I was really getting to was that I'm going to be making artwork in the future—this is where I was going with it—and I'm going to be making holographic lowriders. And those will actually be sculptures you can buy. You can take it home. I had a friend of mine, Dennis Tibbitts, who I was talking to on the phone, and I told him, I said, "You know, I don't want to just keep doing these little initial levels of Chicano art that I've done for all these years. I've made my point." Now I want to go into technology and begin to do stuff like a holographic lowrider of the ones I make. Not just a car, it's got to be my [art]work, so that it retains that Magu-ism and stuff.

So I'm going to be doing things in the future that are not what I've done in the past. Because as a sculptor, I want to challenge myself into making figures—like all the stick figures that I've done, they're ultimately really—like Giacometti, they can be very elegant in their simplicity. And for me, it spells that you can go into your backyard and get some twigs, and you can make some pretty sophisticated artwork with a little paint and a little shoeshine.

KMD: Well, if you're going to do work with—I don't know, how do you do that holographic—

GL: Well, Dennis is going to do that. I'm not interested in learning how to do it. I want to know what [the technology is] capable of [and expose those elements into new works].

KMD: So you have to have a crew for the technology.

GL: Well, I'm going to have this guy [provide technical assistance]. I'll [make] the image, and then how we transpose all that is beyond my knowledge right now. But I will find out, and I'll get good at it enough to be able to do it myself. I'm not really interested in becoming a technician. It's like a printer for me. I need the printer to help me make a better work of art, so I'm in his hands. I said, "Look, this is what I'd like to do. How do I get there?" So technicians to me are important, and they have a value because they help my work and they make it [possible].

KMD: Well, you've talked about bringing in your family members as technicians, I guess, to help with the car.

GL: Oh, that's been a tradition already. As a matter of fact, car building with this upholsterer, this man—that's what he does, so we're making burrito front seats. Now, he didn't really know how to—he said he didn't even know how to approach that, because what he does it, everything is nice and pulled and tight and secured [in hot and street rods], which is gorgeous work. He does really good stuff. But he doesn't know how to make a burrito. I said, first, I'm going to bring a hotplate, I said, "We're going to have burritos here first."

KMD: Well, let's go eat. [*laughter*]

[*break in audio*]

GL: I don't know what to tell you. These are all prints from a lot of different people, and I've kept them in pretty good condition. I mean, there's Jerry Brown when he was running for [governor]. I was always a supporter of him.

KMD: Were you collecting these?

GL: Yeah, they're right here.

KMD: But what was your intention at the time? Why were you—

GL: To save them.

KMD: RCAF . . .

GL: RCAF, César Chávez. Lot of—this is a photo of a mural that we did that was sixty by forty feet. Look at how small we are.

KMD: Whoa.

GL: We did that in a month.

KMD: That was the UFW convention.

GL: *Una Sola Unión*. And they took that mural and they put it behind their warehouse and let it rot. So, so much for social movements, and—

KMD: Did you do the decorative one in the front too?

GL: No, no. This is all I could do. And this is huge. I don't know how many, it's got a couple hundred images of figures. We have a guy here with a guitar, with chrome that's been painted, chrome-like. I mean, this is incredible. We have Spider Man in there, we had trucks with campers. The articulation of this thing was remarkable. And I'm sorry we didn't get more details. At that time, I was so exhausted from doing this, and I had to just start my semester. As a matter of fact, I missed the first day of class [to attend the conference] because I was doing this [mural and I had to attend the] opening of the convention with César Chávez. And emotionally, I said that we had dedicated all this work to the farm worker. And those are kind of empty things after awhile because you say it here in this crowd, and there are so many people that are outdoing your speeches that it became meaningless after awhile.

KMD: It's a great document.

GL: Yeah. Well, they proved to be less interested in our efforts—

KMD: This abstract [silk screen] with the telephone and the UFW—

GL: Oh yeah. Isn't that something? Well, that's an unfinished one. But anyway, I don't know who did that. But we had . . . This one here, it's kind of a more mystical—this kind of an aesthetic here is more about *brujos* and men of knowledge.

KMD: What's the name of this piece?

GL: I'm not really sure. Let me see.

KMD: Is it printed on the back? So it's been exhibited.

GL: *Hombre de Mystery*. It was done in 2000, it's twenty-four by eighteen [inches], and it's—that's the actual paper size—and it's a Prismacolor pencil pastel, I guess you could call it. And these here are the same thing, these large drawings.

KMD: Wow. These are fantastic, these portraits.

GL: Yeah, I got a bunch of these.

KMD: Are these actual people, or are these composite images?

GL: No, I just drew them. They're more doodles than anything.

KMD: On black paper?

GL: On black paper.

KMD: Why'd you go to black paper?

GL: Because this guy gave me a stack of it. As a matter of fact, the black paper I got—I mean, it's even heavy. I got bunches of this paper. But let's go over here . . . These little long, very long—they're like maybe three, four inches wide, and at least three to four feet long. This one's probably just about forty inches long or thirty-six inches long. But these long strips of paper that have these narratives of lowriders and figures and mostly landscapes, every one of these has a landscape. And these composites of a bunch of cars driving around, and these little villages and architecture that I put—including these large sculptures. These are sculptures; they're not people. But these scenarios, like all these little houses and stuff, they're all done with this Mesoamerican influence, or types. And they also are even more closely related to what I'm doing—storyboards. But instead of doing them in little boxes and showing the sequence, I do this whole kind of, like, you could pan across this and get the whole image better. And if that isn't enough—here, look, there are tons of them. There's a bunch of them in here, here's more.

KMD: There's a stack about two inches fat.

GL: Yeah, just look at . . . This is the mural I did at Santa Monica. That's the drawing for it, which is much better than the actual mural. I can get grittier or something. This one is—

KMD: Wait a minute, back up. Why do you say that's much better? I mean, it's a different—you're using different mediums, so this has a kind of detail and—

GL: It has a quality—

KMD: A quality that doesn't show up in the mural, because I think of the—when you go to paint. I mean, you lose that kind of edginess that you can pick up with a pen, right?

GL: Right, exactly. They are two different mediums, and for me to do this over there, I would have had to approach it differently.

KMD: Yeah, this comes out more realistic than cartoony that you see in the mural.

GL: Yeah, and I did that whole mural by myself. I didn't have a staff. I didn't have helpers, which would have helped because they could have helped me, for example, [with] the sand. The sand is rather flat up there, and this one here has more little texture. But that's one. And here's more of those narratives.

KMD: So are these narratives models, or—

GL: Models?

KMD: Or sketches, or—I don't know.

GL: Oh, these?

KMD: This is the size you're working in.

GL: This is called a sketch, and it's a working sketch of what I was going to do. And I pretty much followed this. It's pretty much—I had this in hand, I had it in my hand, and then I had all these grids. So I'd draw the grids and so forth, and then I would draw these people freehand on the mural. And there's more. . . look, there's stacks.

KMD: When did you start working in this—I don't know what to call it except these long, narrow—

GL: These drawings? They're kind of like storyboard formats, in that they're very long and narrow. They're not that tall. But I started doing them some twenty-something years ago, because all these are really—and most of the work I've done is supposed to be really studies for animation. And so to answer your question directly, these are animation studies. And you can see that—

KMD: Are you making a movie?

GL: Oh, I'd love to make a movie. I'm waiting for my benefactor, or that rich woman I was looking for. [*laughter*]

KMD: Now, these aren't—these are much more lyrical and Impressionist.

GL: Well, this one that we're looking at is just two women looking at what seems to be a nebula of stars, or a cloud, or something that looks white on black paper, and it's just two women looking at this.

KMD: Well, the one to the far right is a part of her face. Very nice capture of the eye, the nose.

GL: Her scale, to be explicit over this tape recorder, the size of her head goes beyond the size of the paper, and that allows me to bring her really up front, close to the viewer. Then the second one, which is back further, shows the whole head. So she, in terms of perspective, is set back a little bit, even though they're both in the same kind of foreground.

KMD: Right. And they—is that an indigenous nose?

GL: What?

KMD: Your nose that you do. I mean, almost like—Josefina Aguilar does a nose, and that's the nose she does. Every sculpture has the same nose. And I was wondering if your noses were intentionally—

GL: I really change them. If you look carefully at the [variety of drawings, they are different]. Look at this . . . Well, they may have the same . . . Maybe you're right.

KMD: Not exactly the same, but they're not European noses, Magu.

GL: No, they're not. I'm trying to do Chicano stuff. Here's just a caravan of cars with a guardian angel in front of the truck.

KMD: Now, this is a different technique you're using here.

GL: Why?

KMD: It might be the same pencil, but it's got—

GL: It's all Prismacolor. You mean the way it's drawn?

KMD: The blending, the coloration.

GL: Yeah, they vary. See, like this one here, it's very subtle, but I put a lot of white at the front of it, and then it gets darker here. It's dark way up here. And I don't know, that's supposed to be like light.

KMD: Coming out of her mouth?

GL: That's speech. All these little very fancy graphics are speech. But it also graphically makes the drawings look very Magu-ish.

KMD: Well, it reminds me of—that curling breath reminds me of the indigenous—

GL: That's where I got it from. That's exactly where I borrowed it, from the codices. Now, here, this is obviously a row of little dogs that I'm going to use for my characters. This one here is a more—it's kind of like a kachina-like structure or person. So I got a lot of those.

KMD: So this is something you've been doing for quite some time. Some of them are wrapped very nicely, protected in plastic and mounted.

GL: And then I hide them.

KMD: Have they been exhibited?

GL: No, none of these. You may be the first person to see these, other than the guy that wrapped them.

KMD: Why'd you wrap them?

GL: Well, to keep them neat, and they're ready for sale. And what's going to happen here in this room is, now I have the product, and we're going to put them up or put them somewhere, and then people can just buy them like this. But I don't frame them, because that's an incredible expense, and most often, people will find their own way of framing these things.

KMD: Now, this one's interesting. The woman's got a hairdo—

GL: A headdress, yeah, and the thing she's conversing with is very futuristic, but it's one of the kachina-like cartoon guys. And if you look at his—like that dress thing on top of his head, which is a kind of an item that they wear to represent any number of things. His nose is like Pinocchio. He's thinking of the corn spirit, that's what this is about. And she's talking and talking.

But also, this is called *Speaking of the Corn Spirit with La Chola*, and this was done in '02, for example. Now, she's got things coming out of her heart, these little colored circles. So graphically, I'm trying to create new kinds of symbols to work with so that people can get used to speech being these really abstract images—little abstract forms they replicate speech for. And here she's thinking about, it's like a *bolillo* and a lot of question marks. Oh, it might be—I don't know. I do try to make some of these things vague, to allow for various interpretations. Now, had you seen that *Borderless Art* car before?

KMD: No.

GL: Well, that is part of the cultural series that I'm doing with cars, and that's a warrior woman up on the mantle.

KMD: Let's look at the car.

GL: I don't even notice that I'm doing it. I don't even know that I had done anything but explain that these—what I've done here with this car [*Borderless Art*]—it's made out of plaster. And it's a Chevy Fleetline, '51, '52, and it's got *chile* flames that are very painterly-like. And in this case, [having a text within] the flames. I just have the *chiles* floating there with little red motion marks, like if it's moving back, like flames.

And then I've done another thing. I put flames on a lowrider. In this case, I have some of the flames painted white, and then I have kisses, hugs, *chile*, and I have different propaganda items that I put—because I use the flames as a way to propagandize the viewer, like [the phrase] "Borderless Arte Express". And over here, I have "Beyond Borders," like "hot, proud, beyond borders." So these are all kind of like little poetry, text, that goes along with the flames. And the back of the trunk, where it would normally be the trunk, is his serape. And again, with these southwestern Pueblo Taos, Apache, all that sector is where my father's from, and there's a lot of Lujans over there. And then here, I change the scale of the *chiles*, if you notice. They're much bigger towards the back. And then on the roof of the car, they're all hearts. So these metaphors are about *chile*. It's a hot flame job, it's a hot car. The *corazón* is, of course, related to the culture as being a hot item. We as a culture, I think, operate emotionally more than anything.

KMD: And on the front, it says, "Califas Chevy Custom." Is that the name of the work, or is it—

GL: I call it *Borderless Express*, but there's enough stuff on here where you can call it wherever you want. But I think we name it different things. On the back bumper—the white bumper—I have in red, "Cultural

Vehicles," which is another [way of] identifying items that I put on these. So that people will understand, these are cultural vehicles for me to express my culture, and lowriders in particular. See these *calaveras* here, these two big ones, or—where's the other one?—there's a blue one, I don't know where it is. It's probably upstairs. But I did those in Irvine back in the early '70s, and these were images that I got as a profile in the codices.

So that big ol' nose there that looks like a Pinocchio nose, and even the shape of the *calavera*, it's very unusual. They don't usually make them like this. But I was trying to be an artist, and I don't want to replicate the *calaveras*, I want to create new ones. And so my job has been to try to reshape mythologies to fit us in our contemporary lifestyles. All these dogs here, they're all bronzes. That's all bronze. So these right here—they're heavy, too.

KMD: They're, like, wearing a, wearing a tuxedo. They're the hip dogs.

GL: I've had that dog since the late '60s. And there's a fellow that everybody thinks is my work, and his name is Pearson. And he does these little mass-produced dogs that look just like my dogs. He did his in '86, so most people, the galleries that I was with, they said, "Well, you should sue this guy for copyright infringement." But I call it influence. I just read [his book]. It was really neat. I like his work. He's done something else to it. And it's very often that artists go to the same place. The pyramid dogs is how [the dog images] started. I have so much that I've invented from my own repertoire that I'm not worried about it. Up on the wall, there's a Toledo, Francisco Toledo, that is two [from his] Kites [series].

KMD: The cardboard . . .

GL: Well, I was working in cardboard, so [Carlos Almaraz] started doing cardboard. And if you look at his early, early work when I first met him, he was doing faces and stuff just like I did. See that picture, *Ghost*?

KMD: Yes.

GL: That was what he was watching, looking at my work. So he went from the New York images to doing these Chicano things. In his early works where he did women that were Indian and Chicanas, those were taken from drawings that I had done. And then being the superior artist that he was, he took it on his own and he took it to the [higher level]. As you know, his work is wonderful and admirable. So now I have to try to catch up with him, basically.

KMD: Hold on, let's—tell me about the cutouts.

GL: Okay. These paper cutouts were done by folding a piece of paper in half and making sure that the folded part is substantial, so that they don't fall apart. And then you cut out profiles, just like they do those silhouette shadow things.

But basically, this is a simple project that I came up with to allow kids at a tabletop to make all these little people, which I cut out first, and I do it freeform. I just cut out the legs, the clothing, everything, then I come back later and then I draw it in, the arms and the faces and all of that. Then I put them on—as you can see, this little box of stuff that I put them on—and those little pieces of cardboard are just the base so that they can stand up. But the requirements for these cutouts—they have to stand up, so I use paper stock of at least a hundred pounds, paper stock, which is like the manila folders that you use in school. They're stiff enough at that range. These are about three to four to five, six inches tall, and they're small.

But I did these originally because like in many of the things that I'm doing, I had seen some Otomí paper effigies that they burned in rituals. And so I wanted to—using them as an Indian source, an indigenous source of an art, something that I saw. Then I translated them into *cholos* and rabbits and all these characters that you see there. That one figure sitting on a chair, for example. And then I used different colors, like one's an orange and the other are all colored in.

KMD: Is that an ink pen?

GL: Yeah. Ballpoint pen. There's a series of faces in the back, which I've done forever, stemming from the idea that we were not on TV. So I started doing these fictitious people, just as doodles originally. So all of my faces that I do like—that are really just makeshift. They're not models.

KMD: Is that what these are over here, these large ones we were looking at originally, you called them doodling?

GL: Yeah, these are doodles.

KMD: What is that . . . that's almost like standard poster size, so it's like, what, forty—

GL: These were at least—we could measure them, but they're big. They're like forty-six by maybe thirty-something. Twenty-eight. We could measure them. I've got a lot of these too.

KMD: The lines are extremely . . . The way you render the flesh, it has a lot of motion and activity that catches both shadow and expression. I wonder if you could talk about that technique.

GL: Okay. What I'm doing here, basically, is using a Prismacolor, and then going over this surface of the face, for example, with different colors. And therefore modeling the shapes by using the different colors, and maybe emphasis by having dark pencils in where the shadows are. And since there's a lot of little shadows, it's kind of like a mosaic, in a way, as if they were little pebbles. But these are lines, as you can see. And I leave the lines—in other words, the black paper underneath is still there.

So there's a texture that is created by the black paper underneath, and then the modeling, the surface of the image in pencil, is where the modeling takes place.

KMD: She's got . . . Is that her hair or a hat or a headscarf? It's purple and red and orange, and this is green. That's his hair. Can you tell me about your color choices?

GL: Well, his is more blue. But it's a blue-green. I probably have two different pencils operating there. And I do it—the color scheme, if you're asking about the color scheme, I did that just to make them artsy. Nobody has hair that color, but this is art. I'm not doing realism here, I am doing something that is really equivalent to creating images of people, Chicanos in particular, and then I attach a little bit of fancy to it.

KMD: Yeah, like the way you capture the—

GL: His shirt.

KMD: The shirt is— We've got dog with tortoise.

GL: His shirt winds up being an area which is in the shape of a shirt. I mean, his body, his shoulders, up to his neck, and this is just a flat area where I can do all these graphics. There's a studio, a house, an adobe structure with a beanie. I've got a guy with a bow and arrow, and here's a dancer. I have moons, stars, and at the bottom of it, it says, "El Chicanindo," because I think that Chicanos are basically Indian people with different kinds of associations. Like some people—I've known guys that are married with Pimas, Diné, or Navajos, or Hopi, so there's all this Mexican and Indian combination. But Raza, our own histories that go back, like on my father's side, it's probably more Apache and Chihuahua and Tarahumara. So I think we're indigenous people, by and large. And so that's my inclination to use all this Indian stuff, that is part of my heritage.

KMD: Tell me about . . . His hair color is this blue-green, and then the use of that same color on the side of his—left side of his face.

GL: Yeah. It acts as a way of unifying the image, because the blue around his chin is attached to the hair, visually. You don't—I don't know how people register it, but they do register that the blues are connected, so everything on his face has a little bit of that blue here and there. And certainly I used it to outline the—if you see it's on the shirt, and I also included that same pencil in the images that I put on the shirt. So these shirts actually have all these images which I'm going to manufacture in time, and they'll actually have all these Magu images, so you'll be able to buy a Magu shirt with all these little images. So that's a merchandising idea that's an outgrowth out of doing these little drawings.

KMD: The stroke over his nose and forehead that comes down into the nose, why does that remind me of the dog figures?

GL: I don't know. Let me ask you. Why do they remind you? [laughter]

KMD: I don't know. It's just that length, that long stroke, the coloration. It reminds me of some of the dog figures, the—

GL: Oh, you mean the humans that go with the dogs?

KMD: Mm-hmm.

GL: Well, really, you've got a pencil, and you've got a large—these are larger faces, which are larger than a life-sized—maybe twice as big as a normal head. So I need to do the pencil lines with longer emphasis. They

just—they're longer strokes. But these little kind of lines, a whole bunch of series of lines which gives me my modeling—it's also kind of an artsy-fartsy thing. So if you notice, I vary them. I cut them across. I don't stay consistent, because if I were to do it consistently, it would be too orderly and too contrived. There's a degree of spontaneity displayed just by helter-skelter lines.

KMD: Okay.

GL: I'll move this forward so you can see the image. I know what it is. But this is Chino—

KMD: And his shirt is saying "Chino"—

GL: His shirt has "El Chino" written over and over again, that's the text to the shirt. And again, I use the shirt as a way for propaganda, like I use the flames. And the painting on this stuff is, again, you can see how—I learned painting from Carlos. I would say, from also every other artist that I've seen paint. But I think Carlos was influential in my painting, because he was really the master painter. Because I didn't study painting, I studied sculpture.

KMD: Well, definitely your brushstroke here has that same kind of blending quality that you were capturing in Prismacolor pencil.

GL: Well, that's learning how to mix paints, and learning how to paint. How to be able to get away with mixing the colors without them muddying up, which is one thing. The other thing is that when you're adding paint, I might put a little bit of lighter color here and then let that kind of influence that kind of red here around the eyes. It's lighter.

KMD: Is this acrylic on—

GL: Yeah, acrylics.

KMD: On paper, or—?

GL: And this was done in when?

KMD: Nineteen eighty-seven??

GL: Nineteen eighty-seven. I'm glad we didn't sell that. This is a great frame and everything, and it's been up for sale and nobody's ever been interested in it, but I think it's a strong piece.

KMD: Very beautiful piece.

GL: Yeah. And so—well, you never know. Oh, here's some more of those that you—the ones you like and I was telling you about? Here's more. And they have this same—this might even have more of what you're talking about. This one has his tongue sticking out.

KMD: Very playful.

GL: Yeah. And this shirt again has these varied—this one is called *Enjoying Your Life* or *Enjoying Your Lifestyle*, and it's got pie, cigars, money, lips.

KMD: Which is an animal figure, too, right. It's a dog or a bunny or—I mean the dollar sign—

GL: Oh, it looks like a dog with his mouth open, see that?

KMD: Yeah, it looks like a dog with his mouth open, ears and eyes.

GL: And here's this very sexy woman in a negligee, something light. So this is a guy enjoying life. There's more, let's see.

KMD: Did you conceive of these as a series, or—I think I've asked you this before.

GL: Oh, this one's not done.

KMD: I get to see it without the plastic, though. Really, your technique comes through.

GL: *Vato con Multicultural Roots*.

KMD: What was that? "Magu '86."

GL: So here's a guy—and I haven't finished this one—but you can see where this one is unfinished—but you can see these lines, the undercarriage, the underpinning of the painting. And as I keep coming over it, putting more pencil lines, then the shaping and the modeling takes place. But below his neck are these roots that are really his shirt. See, that's the design of his shirt.

KMD: Again, all of them have wonderful hair, the coloration you choose for the hair.

- GL: Yeah, because it's more fun for me to be doing that. He's got his hair parted in the middle, and it's like a rainbow. It's got blue and red, yellows. It's like [the] spectrum.
- KMD: So, is the forehead here the more complete part where it's these more warm colors—the red, the orange, yellow? And the cheek, the chin, the cheeks, the side of the face . . . That has greens. So you're going to come over with those warmer colors, or—
- GL: That I couldn't tell you. But I think you're right. You can see where I stop using the reds above the eyebrow. And then below it is this greenish colors, predominantly, and light yellowish creamy colors. Now, whether I leave it like that would depend on the mood when I sit in front of it and finish up this—
- KMD: Yeah, because I think the face is done. I think the face is—the coloration, the composition is exquisite, even though it's more dramatic than the other images you're showing. He's got a red-orange forehead and his cheeks are not, right? Even the side of the face has the blue for the shadow.
- GL: Like a light source or something.
- KMD: Yes. It has a totally different quality, then the others lend themselves to a more naturalistic skin tone.
- GL: Yes, a straw blonde. Because there's Chicanas—like my daughter, she's a straw blonde, naturally. My mother had very fair skin. And so we have that predicament of having people with different kind of DNA and kind of color of hair and so forth. It's always the butt of some kind of conversation, right? The butt-end about the *güerritos* and the *morenitos* kids—the idea of color and racism and all that. So as you can see, her skin and the hair match. She should have this color of hair. Then I did the raccoon eyes to remind them of several things: that indigenous women always painted themselves up, even the men. And we've become these really prissy middle-class people that think that if you paint your eyebrows too heavy, it's cheap and trashy. But those are cultural boundaries that people make up and keep. But I try to—Also, if you notice, I give them all a different expression, because—I don't know if these noses look indigenous to you or not, but if you look at them, I try to vary their nose. I try to—
- KMD: Yeah, it is almost as if you have a—
- GL: A style, or—
- KMD: A model had sat for you.
- GL: On these?
- KMD: Yeah.
- GL: Okay. Here's the *Lovers*. This is an older piece I did when I was much younger. This one is '85, *Los Lovers Jovenes*. Now, this is, I think, a pastel. I never had done these lovers, and there they are. Here's one of a guy, a face—again very expressionistic—a lot of extra lines and just very spontaneous distribution of color and the lines. It's a lot of linear stuff. So I'm using line to construct the architecture of the face, and then the colors are somewhat minimum, compared to others. But he's wearing the hat.
- KMD: Well, this is a different media, too, right? You're using—
- GL: This is pencil.
- KMD: Pencil, and—
- GL: Yeah, it could be maybe pastels or markers, something here. But these colors are coming from something that I don't know what it is. Let's see, they look like crayons. They're pastels of some kind. Then his hat, his little hat, his baseball hat, has the monogram LA, and I have smoke coming out of his head. So I don't know what that means. I have more, if you want to keep looking.
- KMD: Tell me about this image, "Learning to Read."
- GL: This is called *Earning the Learning*, and it's a silk screen that was [printed] by this fellow. But he didn't do—the silk-screen colors were very muted, whereas I needed stronger colors, and he was—I guess he was fudging on—he wanted to extend his inks. Although we paid him a good price, I think. He was paid handsomely, but that he chintzed on the paints. So what I've done with these is I've come back and I've reinserted the color with Prismacolor. It takes me a long time, and it's a lot of color missing. So it was a—
- KMD: Where was this printed? What was the house?

GL: In Los Angeles. And it was done with a—nice guy, I really liked the guy, but he was always snowing, it was always snowing at his house. Now, this particular image, for example, is meant to talk about California. That's why the missions.

KMD: The missions, the child reading.

GL: Yeah. This was always pretty much a project—

KMD: You got the dog with some cool glasses and the jaguar.

GL: And again, it's very loaded up with all these little shapes, and somewhat abstract individually. But combined, it becomes this narrative with a lot of colors.

KMD: But also the humor. I mean, they're ducks. You think you're going to be looking at, like, some Mesoamerican iconography, and then it's a duck. It's got the duckbill, and the way it's open gives that kind of humorous—

GL: When I was drawing this, you could see there's feathers behind this kind that is representing indigenous [people]. On the other hand, it becomes like a sunshine, or like the Virgen de Guadalupe. It has all these flames coming out her. So that's the motif that I used here. I kind of simulated a Mexican hat without it being [one]—this halo he's got over his head. And then I put these little ferns and stuff, just to give me another image besides these that I invent here. But just some decorativeness to it.

KMD: Now, it's a female figure on the top.

GL: She's in the middle. But if you notice, I have male and female on both sides, and then I have female and male. So there's always the duality for me. Now, this [work] is a print. "To my brother Magu, we have shared to the . . ." Anyway, it's a dedication here that I can't read.

KMD: There's too much . . . something.

GL: Visitation, modern heroes. This is done by . . . I don't know. Oh, Rudy Fernandez, that's it.

KMD: Oh, yeah. That's Rudy Fernandez.

GL: Yeah. I just can't read his writing.

KMD: Because there's the heart. I shouldn't have even had to read it. The heart with the profile of the cactus in white. His signature image. Where did you meet Rudy Fernandez?

GL: He came to my house one day. I was living in Santa Monica and this little guy came up into my house, and he had these huge arms and small waist and everything. He was looking all buffed. And he had new khaki—no, new Levis. He was looking real cowboy-ish, kind of like the Colorado, Texas, New Mexico cowboy look at the time. Now, this is [the] '70s. So he was here in town, and he had asked this guy to introduce [him to me]. And then later, he turned up in the Hispanic art show thing.

But Rudy had—this fellow named Joe Terrill, who—a wonderful guy—was putting together a gallery, and so that's where he saw my work. And I had done these little stick figures. But the piece that he had [in the gallery] was very elegant. It was a real simple dog figure with a cardboard background diorama, and it was called *Red Hill Journey*. And I think I still have it, or somebody bought it—I think somebody bought it, I don't remember anymore. This was a study for a museum project—I wanted to paint a room like this.

KMD: Oh, now I see it. It's three walls.

GL: Yeah. And I graphically did it this way. I could have done it with better perspective. I'm cheating here with the perspective. Really, this is not the way it would look. In other words—

KMD: You flatten it out.

GL: Well, I have straight [lines] across the top, then I have the sides come towards you at an angle, so that perspective should come this way. See that? But I'm not interested in that. I wanted to show you this. This is—it's a sky, I always have sky, earth. And these two central figures, again, look at the nose. She's even *chata*, kind of, real weird. It's got a very high bridge. And he's got more of a nose like mine, I would think. I would say. And that's unintended. And then they both wear beanies. And in this repertoire of images and motifs that I got from the culture—you had the burrito, the chicken—do I have any *sandia*? No. I love watermelon. Pants, all these things. Hats.

KMD: You got the needle.

GL: I do? Where? Oh, that. Yeah, well, there's some of those, too.

KMD: But your landscape on the left is like a desert combination. High desert, with the mountain, with snow. And on the right it's the—

GL: It's the neighborhood. If you went to Magulandia, you would find these buildings, and there are all these pyramid dog structures. When I first try to come together—I mean, [when] I try to put together an icon that represents what I was doing, the Mexican pyramid always made sense. One day when I was playing with that image, I inverted one of the pyramids, and it looked like a dog howling, from the two pyramid shapes, one in the opposite direction. So therefore, that was where all these dogs were born, whether they were elliptical or half of a sphere, or just square and pyramid shaped—

KMD: Where the door or window becomes the space between the legs.

GL: Between the legs. And in the mouth up at the top is a passive solar system. It's like, if you keep your windows closed, the sun will heat that up like crazy, and then you have a source of heat. They all looked like kachinas, like over here, these particular drawings here. Because my particular arrangement, DNA arrangement, has the Southwest Indian blood, and then the Tarascan—my mother's on the side of western Mexico, Guadalajara, and we have Dutch blood that's mixed up in our DNA there. But anyway, I'm borrowing from those two areas.

KMD: Let me turn it off while you look [for other works].

[*break in audio*]

KMD: So let's talk about this—

GL: The motif.

KMD: Painted face. Well, he's got like this purple stripe across his nose.

GL: Okay. He's got a band of color between the ears, the top and the lower ears, and extends to the nose. So it goes below his eye and above his mouth, which is this band of purple, and it ends at the ear. Above it, capping that, is a turquoise blue, or something close to turquoise. Also, his eyes are painted, like in one of those little motifs that I use all the time is a round circle with these little extensions here, these three little extensions.

KMD: So where does that come from?

GL: This is to indicate that indigenous people and people all over the world used to paint their face. They would use their bodies as decoration. And we live in a very dull, monotonous world where you don't do any of that stuff. And then you wear a grey suit, and that's supposed to be cool. Most people around the world, they're very, very colorful. So I think it's just part of the way we look at the world, and toning it down—like in China, to just one grey suit for everybody. There's something politically evil about that. It's kind of like stamping out all possibilities that are there—the individual person—which is Western pressure, and then the need to standardize a billion people to this gray something. Now, that's falling apart.

My brother married a Chinese woman and became Chicanese. That's where I get that little comment from, my brother. But when he went over there, when they found out he [knew this dance style, and at the first meeting] they got three hundred people. Now, you've got to remember, there's cities that have like forty million people to a city, it's like—not four million, like in LA—California has what, thirty-five million people in the whole state? Well, they have towns like that. So three hundred people is like, you call a couple of people and you got three hundred in no time at all. And what he was doing was, he was teaching them salsa dancing, boleros, rumba, salsa, all that stuff, because that's what he does; he teaches that. He's interesting, my brother Bobby. And so they are enjoying [salsa now] in China, and they [liked this energetic music becoming vogue].

So a lot of people are afraid that that's what's going to happen when we talk about Aztlán. But I didn't see us having the same circumstance as the Chinese. The best way I can see that we will get back this land is to out-populate anyway, and that's more fun. Make love, not war.

KMD: Okay, we're going to wind up today, and one of the things I want to talk about is how my students, over the last eleven years that I've been teaching Chicano art—I don't get to teach it every semester, but I work

it in. If it's not a class, I work it into the other courses. And they respond to your Magulandia. They respond to icons that they know from their home experience, from their community experience. They respond viscerally—the spirit, the heart, the body, the whole thing—body, mind, and spirit can respond to it. You put into visual language—

GL: What they know.

KMD: What they know, and authenticate it, and just make it legitimate.

GL: That's what I wanted with Los Four, and it happened. Little did I ever know it was going to happen [with such notoriety]. That's what I wanted. But if you would have asked me before Los Four, I would have never imagined.

KMD: So looking back on your experience, what has been that path, as an artist?

GL: I can't help but think of the years of toil and ridicule and people pretty much attacking me for what I thought was obvious and what was [put] in their imagination. And that is that we have a cool culture. But you can't look at it through the gringo eyes because you're going to see something that was going to be equivalent to self-hated. That's the problem. And all these people that come from México and want us to be Mexicans. And as long as they're here over five years, they become Chicanos as quickly as they can, but wrap themselves around a Mexican ideology, [left behind as nationality,] that [they don't return to]. It actually causes the friction that we have, the cultural friction.

The thing is that most *raza*, and [that] the people that represent the Spanish-speaking cultures have to realize, [is] that we can't depend on other people's opinions. We have to do what I think the blacks did and create their own world. And they did, jazz and everything. I can't really think of the United States without Coltrane and Satchmo and Nat King Cole, Ray Charles. I can't see the United States without James Brown or Stevie Wonder. And I won't forget all the females, Ella Fitzgerald, Anita Baker. I know those people like they were my ethnic group. So I spent a lifetime trying to validate our experience, because most Chicanos, man, if you have to vote, they'd probably be more black than a lot of things.

Not everybody, but I think culturally, we're inclined—I am, I certainly am very, very, very black-influenced by music and a number of things. And the politics. So we, as Chicanos, are no longer Mexicans. We've had the influence of a lot of other input, and we have to not only recognize it, but defend it. "Ha-ha, I'm a Chicano. It's a joke." I have been contentious and feisty with people that didn't understand that I was fighting the world in those days. And I'm an older man now, and I'm less prone to fight anymore. I think it's just part of the world that I live in that makes it as crazy as it is, but I'm adamant about completing my lifelong work in validating ethnicity as a motive to make art.

And I've said these things over and over again for years, and encouraging people to conference, to get together and learn how to talk to each other. I mean, there are so many facets to this that it's kept me very busy and made a very interesting life because of it. And you don't know how happy that makes me feel, to know that these kids are responding to [their cultural icons]. Because what I'm doing is I'm painting a picture of them, via—or *vis-à-vis* the culture. Or *vis-à-vis*—

KMD: I don't know what the French, how they say it.

GL: Well, you can't say "para-dig-um."

KMD: [laughter] No, I don't say "para-dig-um." Was that your student? You told me that story.

GL: No, Rudy told me that story. It was this girl he was talking about.

KMD: I'm fascinated by this forty years of productivity that you can see. You know, I see it in my students, they—it's the validation. And you talked about now, there's a grant that has the category of traditional art, and in that category is lowrider.

GL: Specifically.

KMD: Right. What are the spaces where it's still a challenge?

GL: Well, it's like the women's movement. It's not over. Women have increased their social status and standing a hundredfold. I could tell you it's a lot. But it's never going to be enough for some women, that's for sure. And I can see it, as a male, that we still have a ways to go, because not everybody's on the same page,

for one. And secondly, we still have that glass ceiling, it's still there. Even though we have Paris Hilton and some people, some females that are incredibly wealthy, but they didn't do anything for it. Can you imagine yourself with her money and what you could do for your department?

So I say to the young students and everything that they have to connect with their ancestors and create for themselves a new mythology. And they have to make their own mark. I made mine. All I did was say, "Hey, look at this path. It's wonderful, it's great, it's colorful, it's funny. It's full of life and spirit." And this is what *gabachos* like. This is what other ethnic groups [like]. And this is why we have salsa. This is why we have Mongo Santamaría and Willy Bobo and all those guys that are wonderful. Even Rubén Blades, who—see, culture among us, the color is meaningless. We understand it.

There's people that are racist, but for the most part—I mean, *negrita* and *morena*, those are endearments to us if you're not a racist. It makes sense. I'm not colorblind, I'm color ignorant. I don't see that as being a real criteria, as stupid. The color of somebody's skin can tell you something about them, unfortunately. But not to the extent that it's going to give you any valuable information. Like, I know black people that are so racist, and they're colorblind. They only see black. That's what I mean by being colorblind, not the other way. The more popular is that you're ignorant. But I see colorblindness among Chicanos and white people too. They don't see anything except their own. I find that petty.

So I'm after something more substantial. I think that our culture is going to—it's going to [be more popular]. I think in the long run, we're going to become something totally different as Chicanos, Chicanas. [Because] we're going to modify it. They can't be like me. I was born in 1940. They weren't even here until 1980. That's eighty years later—I'm kidding.

KMD: So what do you think? Do you think your sources will change as the Chicano—like, for example, we're out here in Ontario. Now, there were probably many Chicano-Indio people here, but their—

GL: Yeah, before the Gold Rush.

KMD: Right, their cultural influences, their cultural code, their material culture is nothing compared to the ones you're referencing.

GL: No, not at all.

KMD: Well, except for you do reference indigenous motifs and icons and narratives. So do you think, as we become more middle class, or more suburban—

GL: Some of us.

KMD: Some?

GL: Not everybody.

KMD: Do you think your images are going to change?

GL: No. I lived like an immigrant person [in the '40s] that lives today. I've gone into the homes of friends that—I go to their house, and the smells of the house, the Pine-Sol and the whole thing . . . I remember my grandma cleaning all the linoleum floors from one end to—there was a strong scent of Purex or Pine-Sol and all that. And I remember [those days as poverty]. And then I look at the context that I [was] in: the politeness, the social, the cordial ambience there was like when we were kids. But then as you go into a middle-class house, [in contrast] they're more *gabacho*. The kids will walk into the room and never say anything and just go put on loud music and then ignore that you're even there.

So we've adopted gringo culture because we've become middle class. I don't do that here. Here, we are still Chicanos. Even my kids know that when they come in here, they're going to hear oldies, they're going to hear—and they love the music, by the way. My kids have been acculturated much more broadly than a lot of families. My son, Otono, who is part of a group called Los Pochos, they played Tex-Mex. And when they first played over in San Antonio, those guys over there, they were kind of like curious, this California—they never get California groups in Tex-Mex. They're born in Texas. Well, luckily my father was from Texas, so we have that link. But nonetheless, my son, after getting a Cal Arts BFA [in visual arts], actually went back and did Tex-Mex. He chose that music. That was a conscious, viable musical path for him.

And so what you're—going back to what you're kind of [expressing] to [your] young [students] and so forth. Yeah, they're going to have a different experience, but they're also going to have to reach back to anchor themselves. Because if they're only going to depend on contemporary image and so forth, they're going into corporate worldviews, and they're going to be [homogenized] like anybody in New York or Wisconsin or Lebanon. They're all going to be doing the same thing. And the richness of our culture, the value of our culture, is that we do have this unique combination of black, gringo, Japanese, whatever it is, and we're not alone.

I had a Persian girl come to Mental Menudo, and she was studying the [meetings] because she felt that they needed that in their culture for the young kids that were acculturating into gringo culture while their Persian parents were still locked up into the ills of the shah and so forth. Each generation brings an experience that's decidedly different. That's the way the world is. But you go back to Constantinople, or you go back to some of these big centers where—the Greeks and so forth—the same excitement was taking place. There was this incredible mix of cultures where things really catapulted in knowledge and science. How do you think Europe became so advanced? They were borrowing ideas from all over the world, putting it—

[break in audio]

KMD: This is Karen Mary Dávalos with Gil "Magu" Lujan, and he was telling me about the mix of cultures, and how that in fact the Europeans borrowing, stealing, taking from other civilizations led to their own advancement, and that creates the richness. I know you probably want to finish your thought, but I was hoping you could sum up with a little bit of a commentary about your creative process. I—in looking at the work that you have gathered in your home here, the pencil line becomes more painterly. It's not necessarily over time. It seems to depend upon the subject matter, like how you tackle the face, as—well, it could be more cartoony, or it could—your brushstroke has that kind of Impressionistic blending of color, whereas other times it's flat.

GL: I think that's normal to artists that are working [from indigenous sources]. In my case, I'm thinking these things out, or consciously I do consider the strokes and all that stuff. And they do dictate the mood and the results of the artwork. But at the same time, I think, like in Asia, when you do ten thousand drawings, after awhile it's an automatic, spontaneous routine. It really is a routine.

So these things that I'm doing, and I have the mind of always being a student, always trying to figure it out. And I think it's a healthy place, because I keep my insecurities up front. I never want to assume or pretend I'm kicking ass here, or, I'm really doing good. I don't operate that way. I work better from a kind of a real anxiety-free exploration. It's not anxious. But I purposely keep—and I'm very well aware of the wisdom of insecurities. I think Alan Watts wrote a book—something about that. And another guy wrote a book about how great small things are. And so being influenced by those thoughts, I also know what, when I do my artwork, I'm trying to employ a lot of things.

My criteria, and I told you this before, is very complex, more than people even think about. I think about gender issues. I think about being politically correct, although I don't believe in it. But still, I take it into consideration. I take into consideration my audience, my historical place two hundred years from now. I think about any number of things that are things that life brings to you in your life. All the knowledge that I've tried to accumulate after I'd gotten my MFA are all part of a continuing effort to be a better Chicano artist. That's all I think about.

And people tell me, "Well, you're already a good artist." I'd say, "Well, not yet." Because there's—if you stop striving and so forth, it's kind of an egotistical thing that's really foreign to my own needs. I don't think of myself that way. Every time somebody tells me that—and I do get this: "Do you know Magu?" That's one of the things I get a lot. People—I'm all over the place, and people tell me, "Hey, I was in Fairbanks, Alaska, and I was talking to this guy, and the subjects of artists came up, and then he says, 'Do you know Magu?'" I swear, it's almost like that. Now that in itself is impressive to me, because for some reason, and I think I would point to the effectiveness of the work where people relate to it—where people can get some kind of visceral connection to it, is the ticket.

So I don't want to mess with that. I don't want to be psychoanalyzed and so forth. I do enough of that on my own. But I'm very well aware as an artist that I'm the instrument. And the thinking, more than anything, and the ideas in my artwork, however I [undervalue] the skill and the complexity of what I do, it's a out of need not to be out front too much, not to be too much in people's face. The sensuality of the color and the seduction of what I'm trying to do is relying on those people.

And lately, I've been taking, I've been doing *Our Family Car*, and the fellow who was doing the work as in upholstery—a master, he does great work. And so we're now doing the upholstery and making it a burrito and all that, so that's been a challenge for him because he's never done anything like that. He tells me that his friends, they're all *gabachos*, they're all non-Chicanos, except for one Chicanito. He's been coming back in three times to talk to me, and I was finally, at the end, I talked to him. And the response I get from across the ethnic board is curiosity. They are baffled a little bit about flames on a lowrider. They are baffled by all these little—corny little things that are going on. And there's something attractive about it, but still, it isn't what they're accustomed to. So guys are actually coming and taking pictures, telling their wives about it.

Now, you've got to—I mean, I'm telling you that I—you asked me what success was. That's evidence of success for me, that I connected with people and made people think that Chicano art is not all those negative opinions that they [may] have [had] that something else can take [the] place of those negative opinions: something whimsical, something fun, humorous, and something that you would like to own. Because my sales are going up like crazy, and—

KMD: Where are you selling?

GL: Well, I'm in two galleries right now. The Korean gallery is down at the Brewery [Project], and I have—those things are not really going to be selling because the prices are much too high for the casual collector.

And over here in Pomona, where I have—do the show, most of the stuff that I have in there, I don't really want to sell. But I put this one not for sale there, and this guy still wants to buy it, which is sometimes psychologically, "Ay, it's not for sale. I want it!" Well, I told him the price, and then [he] gave me a response—I'm talking to the owner of the gallery. The guy's response was, "Well, hey, I'm from Pomona," meaning, "I can't afford a lot of money." And my usual response is that my artwork is not based on your paycheck. It's as simple as that. But I do have layaway. And so I told the gallery guy, I said, "Well, don't go below this price," like that. And so this guy came back, and he came with a price two hundred fifty dollars less than what was my bottom line.

Anyway, I have these ideas. I used to play really hard-nosed, because I never liked selling. Now, I just find that I just let it go. But it doesn't happen that often either. Like it depends on the situation. At that time, that mood, that's what I chose to do.

KMD: Were you holding onto stuff because of your Zen understanding of your place in the world, and not letting the ego rule, or was it an attachment to the object, the experience of making—

GL: I still don't understand why. I just finished telling you that I don't like to sell, and people look for reasons. People try to find all kinds of reasons why they can accept—Carlos used to tell me, "Oh, you don't want to let go of your work." I say, "Nah, that's not it." "You don't want anybody to make money off your work." I mean, he would go through extremes. I said, "I do not like to sell." How do you want [me to say it?]: "Yo no me gusta vender las obras, que pasa no entiendes?"

KMD: You got me. [*laughter*]

GL: Well, I think people have—I don't have commercial interests. And I want to make money now, but I can't lust for it. I can't. It's just not there. If I never sold anything the rest of my life, I could care less. And some people depend their lives on it, saying, "God, you don't sell [your] work. You're useless." People will buy clowns, they'll by little *mirditas*, they buy [Thomas] Kinkade, for God's sake, and all he does is process the same little *cositas*. So selling work is hardly a criteria of success.

KMD: That's a good story to end on. Thank you.

GL: Sure. Yeah.



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