



CSRC
ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

NO. 6, NOVEMBER 2013

LEO LIMÓN

INTERVIEWED BY KAREN MARY DAVALOS

ON OCTOBER 2, 4, AND 18, 2007

Artist and community activist Leo Limón lives and works in Los Angeles. During the early years of the Chicano art movement he was involved with Mechicano Art Center, Plaza de la Raza, and Centro de Arte Público. Limón is widely recognized for his murals and prints, many created at Self Help Graphics and Art, where he helped develop the organization's annual Día de los Muertos celebration and the Atelier printmaking program.

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

INTERVIEW WITH LEO LIMÓN

OCTOBER 2, 20071

OCTOBER 4, 200732

OCTOBER 18, 200765

OCTOBER 2, 2007

Karen Davalos: This is Karen Davalos with Leo Limón. Today is October 2, [2007]. We're in Highland Park at Avenue 50 Studio. Leo, thank you for giving me your time today. I wanted to ask you some questions about your early life, about your childhood. Why don't you start by telling me where you were born.

Leo Limón: I was born in Boyle Heights, East LA—Los Angeles, California—and—fourteenth of April, 1952—in the year of 5 Tecpatl, 1 Malinalli Trecena, in the day 3 Ocelot. So I thought I'd put that in because I refer to my past, my ancestors as a relationship to what's going on now, okay?

KD: Are you the first child in your family?

LL: I'm the third in line. I have two older sisters, Nellie, and Tomasa, and one younger brother, Ernesto.

KD: And what kind of work did your parents do?

LL: My parents were laborers. They were blue-collar workers. My mother was a shoe cutter, and my father was a day laborer. He did a lot of construction work and things of that matter. And as far as I know, my father had gone through a—he came from Mexico, I'll put that in there. My mother also, my mother was from La Paz, Baja California, and my dad was from Cuahuila, Mexico. And my grandfather, on my dad's side, was from Zacatecas, somewhere down there. My dad was as dark as a black stone, evil looking [*laughter*]. I didn't come out that way at all.

KD: [*laughter*]

LL: And my mom was *clarita*, *güerita*, *chapara*, and they both got to know each other, goo-goo eyes and all of that stuff, up at Chavez Ravine, when it was Chavez Ravine. La Loma, Bishop's Road, you know, before the Dodgers arrived, or that whole mayhem that happened there.

KD: Did they tell you stories about Chavez Ravine when you were a child?

LL: Little excerpts. They really enjoyed it. It was the oldest *barrio* here in Los Angeles, and people were good with each other. Again, was because of the existence they had to live in the '30s and the '40s, you know—'50s also. They were always having to go down into the city, to come back up to the hills.

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

LL: And to look down into the city that was always changing. And they saw it changing and then, you know, along came this promise, and the promise killed everything and then it changed from there.

KD: You mean the promise for—

LL: Housing and so on. Both my mom and dad's side lived up there. It was later on that my dad saw my mom somewhere downtown and then all that changed. They got together and started cohabitating, and then my sisters came along, then I came along, then my brother came along. So that's how it all occurred. I just want to note that my dad and my mom weren't together when I was born, and that's why I have a tendency to go towards the woman, feminine side, which is a plus for me. And I cry a lot, which is good. And it's because of my mama and her spirit. And my *tías* and my grandmother and my *niña*, godmother were together on the same property on my mom's side. And they were the angels of my family. And my dad's side, [*laughter*] my dad had four brothers and one sister, my Aunt Sally, [who] never married. She actually was like a caretaker to my uncles. My dad was the eldest. She kind of took care of my uncles who were in and out of jail and mischief and drugs and you name it, it was going on. But still again, I grew up with these two family extremes, and of all things, they both—

KD: What do you mean, “family extremes?”

LL: Well, like I said, one was like the dark side, and the other side were like the angels. Some were in jail and this side were never in jail. I was like, “Wow.” I only saw my uncles every five years on my dad’s side. And realizing that, I said, “Wow, that’s interesting.”

[*break in audio*]

KD: We took a quick pause to check on the sound.

LL: Like I was saying about my parents, and the extreme that I saw—because again, it was like my dad shows up, I’m two and three years old, and I don’t recognize him as my dad. And then there it is. “There’s your dad,” my uncle told me—my uncle Ynez, on my mother’s side. And it was interesting, again, because I was just a little toddler, but I recognize things in stories that I tell today with my Spanish accent—not accent, but my Spanish-speaking background. You know, being Chicano, Mexican, Latino, Spanish, whatever it is you want to call me. It’s okay—but, now I refer to myself as an Indian. See? I go way back and say I’m an Indian born to Spanish speaking Indians that moved, migrated up to [this] English speaking Indian area.

KD: Did your family tell stories of border crossing?

LL: My dad simply said there were bullets flying overhead when they were leaving Mexico.

KD: Wow.

LL: Right? [*laughter*] And I said, “Wow, okay.”

KD: Did your family come during the revolution, then?

LL: Yes. Yes, they were leaving over there. I said, “Wow,” I guess that’s all I heard about then. Another story my dad told me was, “When they offered me the marijuana, I just jumped in the water and kept swimming in the river. I didn’t want anything to do with that.” I think that was his way of telling me about drugs. I kept it in mind when the full circle went round, [when] it came to my youngsters about drugs and so on. I jumped into the water also—or the library. [*laughter*]

KD: [*laughter*]

LL: Water referring to the world—and then gave them all the information they needed and said, “It’s your world and it’s your life.” You know?

KD: Do you remember explicit instructions on how to be a good person from your mother? I mean, it sounds like your father was giving you some, even though he—

LL: Oh yeah, my mother, it’s “Portate bien.” Don’t do this, don’t say bad words. Things of that manner. It was interesting though, my dad did have this thing to say [to] my mom in a quiet way because my mom couldn’t read and write. She was illiterate and couldn’t, you know. And there was always my uncles and my aunts who would help my mom in signing papers and whatever it was. And I always found that interesting when I found out that my mom couldn’t read and write, and I thought she did because she’d look at papers and things I’d bring home. She liked my drawings and whatever I did in kindergarten and whatever I did in the grammar school there.

But still, again, I guess I excelled my brothers and sisters, and my dad finally showed up and I started growing up. I simply said, “Hey.” He bought a ’59 Chevy pickup, and [said] “Get in the back.” Yay! We’re going for a ride. Then all the litter on a stick became so apparent. Billboards, litter on a stick. How do you read that? What does that say? It was like a challenge between me and my sisters. [*train whistle*]

KD: There’s the train.

LL: Oh yeah, that’s interesting. [*laughter*]

KD: [*laughter*] It isn’t too loud. It’s coming. We’ll see if we can keep going.

LL: Okay. But I guess that’s where education starts, everything that’s around you.

KD: So you have a distinct memory of noticing words?

LL: Oh yes, challenging my sisters. “What does that say?”

KD: Hold on.

LL: Okay.

KD: Pause.

[*break in audio*]

KD: Okay. When did you notice that your mother wasn't reading? When you were a child?

LL: When I was real young. Yeah, she never read. We had newspapers and things. It was just a matter of—it was interesting because there was no supermarkets, there were just mom and pop stores. I grew up about two blocks away from Self Help Graphics. That was down on Gage and Brooklyn Avenue at that time, and now it's Cesar Chavez at Gage. And we lived on Dozier and Record Ave. And looking down Dozier Street, you saw these tall palm trees, and when I designed the logo for Self Help Graphics, I incorporated those same palm trees. What [a] coincidence. But when we walked down the street towards Dozier, we headed right toward the depot of the Red Line that stopped there, of the train where the depot was. And it's still a depot, right at the end right there. I still remember those days, jumping on those trains and riding down there. Again, it's memories of what was, and what isn't there anymore down First Street.

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

LL: But my mom, you know, would bring us books, bring us things. My sisters were interesting too because my sisters were getting help from my Aunt Sally from my dad's side. My aunt took a liking to my sister Nellie. And I don't know, my sister was sharp. She was a sharp young lady when we were younger. You know, she tried to keep me in control. I'm the boy, I'm the first boy and I'm running around wild.

KD: [*laughter*]

LL: My sisters were real helpful, but yet—

KD: Did you have silver spoons in your mouth from your sisters?

LL: Oh no! Not at all.

KD: Oh really? [*laughter*]

LL: No. No. My aunt from my mom's side—her only sister, Teresa—she took a liking to me. I was the first boy from my mom. And I was hers. She took care of me as much as she could. As I said, my dad didn't show up until I was two or three years old. And so my aunt was the one who put me on the enriched white flour diet, which made me grow and grow, and probably a part of me is still part *tortilla*. Right?

KD: Mh-hmm.

LL: And it's funny, right, because I use that as an example when I talk to kids about my experience. I go, "You know, we used to have little TVs, and they had tubes, like light bulbs inside the back, and it would warm up the room!"

KD: Yeah.

LL: And they didn't really have horizontal hold back in those days. [*train whistle*]

KD: Is that going to go on for a few minutes, I wonder? Let me see if I can hear it on the tape. Yeah, keep talking.

LL: Yeah, uh-huh. So again, I would watch television, and television would have [*clapping*] live audiences. Interesting. I would say, "Wow, this is cool." I'm a little toddler. Then my aunt knew I was hungry because I'd get feisty and I'd want to do things, so she'd put me in front of the TV and lo and behold, she'd give me a tortilla with some butter. It was interesting, though, because in front of the TV set, I'd be there, eating my little tortilla, and then I'd hear the applause on TV, [*clapping*] and then from the kitchen there was applause coming also. And I'd go to the kitchen and I realized that my *tía* and my mom were making tortillas.

KD: [*laughter*]

LL: So, I grew up *gordito* because of tortillas, and *loquito* because of TV. [*laughter*] And television has very much had an effect on me because of—you know, it's another entity.

KD: Yeah.

LL: It's like a brother-sister, it's like a parent to us because it's just that other entity of us. And it's like we need nourishment, so we turn it on until the day came where that all changed. Well, now I'm jumping way—

KD: Yeah, tell me what you used to watch on TV.

LL: Oh there, was *Chucko [the Clown]*, *Soupy Sales*, and there was—what was his name? *Sheriff John*, and Jack Paar, I remember Jack Paar, going way back, and Steve Allen. Steve Allen was like, wow, he was the charmer.

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: I was still [young] and I remember, and of all things, another family member that really affected me was my Tío Chayo—Rosario was his name. He had—that’s on my mom’s side—he had a touch of polio, again. I blame it on the government. Polio showed up all of a sudden and my uncle got a touch of it. He wasn’t married. He was young and he lived in the back room of [my tía’s] house. He sang in the shower and he greased his hair back and he worked on Plymouths and Chevys and Fords. He had a book collection and musical instruments. I was like “Wow! I wish my dad was like that!” But that was my Tío Chayo, but [he kept] very much to himself. But still, he’d show me the ukulele and I’d pluck it and pluck it.

In the meantime, my Tía Teresa had her Agustín Lara albums burning up over there, the big 78s *[scratch noise]* scratched away. *[sings]* “Acuerdate de Acapulco aquellas noches . . .” and of all of those things. I named my first son Sol Agustín after [him]. Because again, it touched my heart. It reminds me of my tía. And I said, “Hey,” there was all of this flavor. And on my dad’s side, just straight dry *[inaudible]*. There was nothing. Eventually we had to move around because my mom said, “Hey, [we] can’t stay with your [tía],” so we moved to a little place over there where Self Help Graphics [is], in that area. Then we moved up the hill on Bonnie Beach [Place]. We could look down into part of East LA and Belvedere Junior High School.

KD: Back up just a minute so I can get a sense of who was living [there]. Was this a house that many of the family members—I guess you would call it your extended family members—[lived in]? But this is your tía, your tíos—are [they] all living in the same house, or is it in an apartment?

LL: They lived in a house.

KD: Okay.

LL: And then there was another house in the back.

KD: In the back.

LL: Which is where my *[niña]* and *[niño]* lived.

KD: Okay.

LL: Uh huh. And then my *[tía]*, my *[tío]* and my [Tío Chayo] lived in that same house. Then my [Abuelita Cecilia] was there also, but very—but she had passed away when I was maybe [five] years old.

KD: Okay.

LL: So then I realized, she’s gone. That woman that chased me, you know? She was always touching the wall. Then I realized later that she was blind.

KD: Oh.

LL: You see, and I didn’t know that. I remember I would just be swinging away, then I realized that if I kept quiet, she would not know where I was.

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: Or if I just didn’t pee or poo poo, she wouldn’t smell me. *[laughter]* Because I realized she did that.

KD: Were your brothers and sisters the only kids in this area—this house, this property that was shared?

LL: Yes. Yes. And, then again, my aunt took my sisters and took care of them for a while. I think she did, because I don’t remember seeing my sisters. And then I think my mom got a place and my sisters were with her for a while. And then again, we moved with my mom, my brother and I, and then it was, like, real scattered. I remember coming to the Lincoln Heights area. Because my cousin [Fred] now owns this property that my grandfather and my father purchased—

KD: Wow.

LL: And something happened between my aunt and my father—a dispute—and then my aunt said, “You’re out,” through the courts. And so now my cousin owns this property. And he’s by himself. He manages it because it’s a two-story, old Victorian.

KD: Wow.

LL: My aunt refurbished it and turned it into a living quarters downstairs for two apartments. It’s real nice, across from the fire station.

KD: Your mother has moved you. Is this out of a sense of, well, you guys are getting older? Do you remember the reason for the move? You said, “We can’t stay at the aunt’s house anymore,” the *tía*.

LL: Yeah, I think my mom wanted to be by herself because she realized that my aunt, my aunt was already—well, let me put it this way, my mom was thirty-seven when I was born. My dad was forty-seven. *[laughter]*

KD: Really?

LL: So I came into a world of older folks.

KD: Yeah.

LL: I think that’s part of why I have respect for older people, because I learned these people aren’t loud, they already lived their lives. And I was like, “Okay, I guess this is the way it is. This is cool with me.” No problem. I got a lot of *abrazos* and kisses and that was fine. I wasn’t making any noise. I thought I was cool. Older people are different, I’ll tell you that.

KD: Yeah, different pace.

LL: Yeah. And it was like, “Wow, this is cool,” you know? Then I come to find out in my astrological thing, according to the *Mexica* Aztec calendar, hey, I’m full of fire, and hey, I’m meant to go out there and do things. Well, I turned out to be more mellow growing up with older people. Then my mom moved to the Dozier Street and Record [Street], and it was like, “Hey, there are a lot of kids! Wow!” “Who’s the fat kid? You’re the center!” You know, when we play football out there. I said, “Okay, I’ll play.” I learned how to whistle, how to cry, how to fight, how to hit a ball. They found out, hey—I was still a little *gordito*, but—and even there it was interesting.

Pat Sakai, a Japanese woman, took care of us as we were little. My mom was out at work. And that was interesting, too. We lived in a downstairs location of a house. Upstairs was two or three bedrooms. Downstairs was, like, one bedroom, [a] front room and kitchen kind of deal, and tight, cramped quarters. And again, I was outside, in a big yard. Now I go back there and I look at it, it’s so small.

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: Back then it was giant.

KD: Was that your elementary school years?

LL: Yes. Yes. I remember just walking down Dozier, and there was Hammel Street [Elementary] School, and Hammel Street School is still there. It’s changed a little bit, of course. And the friends who lived right down the block, the kids who lived right upstairs, we got into scuffles and fights and [did] things. And everything was okay. And when I [got] to school, I remember being asked, “Hey, where’s your nutrition money?” I had ice cream on my lip and a little bit here. *[laughter]* I bought it. I ate it already. It was great!

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: I’ll drink water when nutrition comes around. The grammar school was interesting. Another thing, and I’ve said it to other people, was that my mother named me Yreneo, no middle name. *Y-R-E-N-E-O*. Notice I pause at the *O*.

KD: Mm-hmm.

LL: My mother, like I told you, was illiterate. And she said it to someone and they spelled it *Y-R-E-N-E* and forgot to put the *O*. So when I’m growing up, my mom called me “Neno,” for “Enano.” And I was like, “Cool, [I] don’t care what you call me.” But no one ever called me Yreneo.

So when I was growing up, when it got interesting was when I got to school—you know that English speaking Anglo teacher would say, “Where is Irene?” And then years later *[laughter]* Johnny Cash and “A Boy Named Sue.” I really connected to that song. *[laughter]* Because little kids, when you’re small, they

said, “Limón,” or “Limóne.” I said, “Hey, right here. No, no, my name is Neno.” The teacher realized what was going on. She told the next teacher, first grade, second grade. So, let’s take that out because it’s hard. It’s “Neno.” They called me “Neno.” *N-E-N-O*. And then I got into scraps with the kids because I didn’t understand what was going on. Then my uncle came out of jail and I was maybe ten years old and he said, “How’s it going Irene?” I go, “How did he hear that?”

KD: Yeah.

LL: And two years later, I went to the Hall of Records [and] got the forms, “Here you go folks.” Yeah, I want to be named Leo. Because my sister’s yearbook from junior high school, there was only one other Leo. I’m going to be the other Leo. That was the only reason. Even though there were sixty. I don’t know what it was—I saw some articles on da Vinci, and other—and I said, “Well, Leonardo, Leopoldo. I don’t know, Leo’s fine.”

KD: So you changed your own name?

LL: Yeah, I named myself Leo. *[laughter]*

KD: Your family was okay with that, or did they call you Yreneo?

LL: No, no. My mom started calling me Lee. I said, “Hey, Mama.” She said, “That was my grandfather’s name, Yreneo.” And I said, “Wow.”

KD: Yreneo.

LL: And then I had this thing for the Y, you know. It’s interesting, how over the years, how perception as far as the—even my understanding of how the media works with the words and so on, and how I’m bilingual. And I use that from the get-go. From applause to the TV tubes, to transistors, to technology and Jews from downtown. I have to note that because pawn shops downtown were Jewish.

KD: Right.

LL: And I knew that *[laughter]* because I’d see downtown Los Angeles, the grand central—

[break in audio]

KD: We’re back. We had to check on something. Take me back to your schooling, to these teachers changing your name and [mispronouncing] your name. What was it like in elementary school and even, I guess, middle school as well?

LL: It was embarrassing because as a little guy, you know, there’s girls in the classroom. It’s embarrassing for the teacher to call you Irene. *[laughter]* You know the Johnny Cash song, “The Boy Named Sue,” and everybody basically spoke Spanish. Maybe there was one black kid in the class, and maybe one or two Anglos and that was it. Everybody else was brown. I was like, “Aw man, they’re calling me Irene.” Then I realized—then I’d forget about it, because I’d go home as Neno, Neno, Neno. It just didn’t matter. The circle were okay with it. The boys weren’t calling me Irene. When they did, I’d rip their shirts or punch them in the face or something and they’re like—and then I’d get punched back and *[fighting sounds]*.

KD: Just like the song. *[laughter]* The boy named Sue becomes very tough.

LL: Yeah. And like I tell kids, even now I tell guys, “Remember when we were younger guys? You could punch me and you could run so fast, and I couldn’t run because I was too fat. But I get you. You couldn’t run away from me. And then my size and my strength, and I was out there playing football and all of that, made me stronger and stronger. *[laughter]* And then I’d get you and I’d kick your you know what around.” *[laughter]* The older guys remember me and go, “Oh yeah, I remember the fat guy.”

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: But they didn’t encounter the fat guy like me because I had this thing because my brother came out to be the skinny [one] in the family. He could eat all the tortillas and he wouldn’t gain no weight. And I was like, “Aw, bummer.” And my brother grew up to be athletic, got trophies galore and stuff like that for playing baseball and football. And I seemed to have been his trainer throughout our youth.

KD: Really?

LL: Yes. Because there I was, and I'd say, "Come on, let's play, let's play, let's play." And he had the knack to follow me, because my dad and him were distant—more distant than I was from my dad already. But I had learned to pay all respects to my dad and I had that old teachings of, my father said something, I said, "Mande." And my mom, and anybody else, "Mande, mande." And that's, like, lost now. Unless you speak Spanish and have that background, it was, "Mande. Si, si, muy bien." Because I remember going to the store and breaking through the "Huelga" signs and Cesar Chávez and grapes and going, "Get out of the way!" My dad [sent me] to get some milk. "Move!" I was a little kid, so it was like, no problem. [laughter] It would just come on and I'd see them, and then later on realize, "Oh, that was the Chávez people! Wow, all right!"

And then again, you know, it's a story of junior high school, the kids—you know, some guy found it on my record. He worked in the attendance office and saw it, and he made mention of it once in the hallway and I slammed him up against the locker and said, "Hey, man, the name's Leo." "Yeah, I know it." I said, "Hey, my mom can't read and write." And the guy looked at me, and he goes—you know, and he realized from there, that was it.

And then the athletic thing still was part of me. I'd gone in junior high school—I don't know if I should keep going on in that track, with the education thing, the family thing—because the family thing is still part of that. Because I got into junior high school—I went to Nightingale Junior High School—and there, I excelled. And I was being guided through the education system to a blue-collar type of work at the end of high school. And I saw that when I got into high school—I really didn't realize that when I was in junior high school—but the athleticism was still there, the—I'm an Aries, the ram horoscope sign, so I'm like hardheaded. It doesn't matter, I have no abandon, I just go into things. So what, you know, whatever happens to me, it's okay. And I got into athletics, the after school athletic program they had. And it was just a bunch of young guys. The girls were on one side and the boys over here, and we're playing sports. But that's where all the—I guess they call it, you know, you're a jock—I didn't realize that. I was still at home with my brother watching American English TV, because there was very limited Spanish-speaking TV—

KD: Exactly.

LL: And I'd say, "Hey, look, there's the first Super Bowl! Wow, we were there!" We used to watch it. And then at the [Los Angeles] Times Boys' Club, they used to give us free tickets or rides to the Coliseum—the sports arena—to go see basketball or football. And then my brother was really into that, and I was like, "Yeah, it's cool." But I'd go play, and I wasn't athletic. I was like, eight. You know, there's a library up there and I'd look at books and play pool and table tennis, and got awards for that. My brother was getting trophies for [sports] and I'm getting ribbons for this other stuff. Anyway.

KD: Did you go to the library on your own, or . . .

LL: Well, there was one, a real small one inside the Boys' Club, and I'd always . . . Like I tell you, Steve Allen was one of my mentors—TV mentor daddies, gurus. And I was just like, "Wow, listen to him!" He's playing a *melodica* on TV. He was cracking jokes—"Schmock-schmock" and all that, and I was like, "Ha-ha-ha!" But it came real—it came to me, and I realized years later—actually just a few years ago, when the teachings came to me about indigenous timetables in which you're born, and I was born in the infancy time. So I'm always babylike, and I was happy and smiling and ready for something, whatever it is. Doesn't matter, it just comes. And here I am on a bike and people look at me and chuckle and whatever. That's okay. It doesn't matter. That's not what it is. It's when I'm feeling the breeze and God and the spirits.

KD: What about the playfulness, the freedom of being on a bike?

LL: Oh, yeah. I go round and round, and right here up the hill that I come—I hate walking up that hill. But when going down, I just hit it, and it's like, watch out. And I'd get in the middle of the lane, and cars come and honk, and it's okay. [laughter]

KD: Was your father part of your childhood or did he kind of come and go?

LL: In the beginning, he was on and off. And then it became—jeez, what was it? I was still in grammar school. My mom's appendix burst and then we had to go live with my dad. And there's—my dad had to go buy

some beds for my sisters, and then I slept with my dad. It was interesting. And then my dad was just that way, and I said, “Wow.” And he had a downstairs area, which is where there was a kitchen. I guess it was a—what is it? There were not supposed to be any bedrooms downstairs, because it was a two-story house, and I guess they just said, “Hey—” There was supposed to be a dining room, and sliding doors. Real nice. But they had converted it and put a door and a wall right here, and then there was a restroom there. Which is fine, and then the chain-pull toilets were still in, which was really interesting. And then upstairs they had the same thing, except there were bedrooms upstairs.

KD: I see.

LL: But they converted a bedroom that was upstairs into a living room. And then the kitchen turned out to be a real small kitchen, but no dining room upstairs. Which was interesting. My aunt lived upstairs, and my on and off uncles who came—except for one uncle who lived there. My Uncle Andrew, who changed his name also to Andrew from Andres, because the kids would call him and say, “Undress, undress,” and I’d say—and I found that out years later. My uncle had already passed away, God bless him. But he said—my aunt told me, “Yeah, they used to make fun of him because his name was Andres.”

KD: Did your family speak Spanish at home?

LL: Oh, yes. Everybody.

KD: And the kids were speaking—

LL: Oh, on and off. You know, we spoke English.

KD: English.

LL: Yes.

KD: And what about when your mother was scolding you? Or giving you commands? You said that was in Spanish?

LL: Oh, yes.

KD: Did she ever learn English, or . . .

LL: No, no. Not really. She said a few words, but she’d mutter them. And then later on in life, my mom—the factories and all that, no one knew that loud sounds would affect your hearing, and then she became deaf. Not totally deaf, but she wore hearing aids. And we realized after—“Hey, Mo-om!”—that she wouldn’t turn around. “Hey, her hearing’s gone.” And she had this knack to clean her ear or do something with a bobby pin, and oh, my God, that would also affect your hearing drums and so on. So again, it’s Q-tips, nothing but Q-tips, and “Hey, kids, don’t stick that in your ear,” for my kids. So whatever came along, we’ve learned from that, to pass on something better, to be careful of things that happen. But then again, I can’t say to my kids, “Hey, you know.” I tell them, you know, “I’m art-supply poisoned,” because I didn’t realize it when I was younger.

KD: Oh, you mean the—

LL: No one in my family said, “Hey, you know, if you put the lacquer thinner all over your hands when you’re finished cleaning those silkscreen things you did for years that it would absorb into your skin.” And then later on you feel these, like—and then it’s like these things, and you go to the hospital, they say, “Well . . . Oh, yeah, you worked with that? Probably got chemical poisoning inside you.”

KD: Toxins.

LL: Yeah. And it’s like, you don’t realize. And I remember seeing from junior high school the skyline of LA, and it was brown. That’s when there was no unleaded gasoline. And then to learn all of this other stuff over the years, becoming an eco-Chicano artist, I got into the ecology thing and finding out about MTBE, you know?

KD: MTBE?

LL: If you go to your local gas station, and before you pump in that gasoline, just look at the warning signs that are right there posted. It’s a carcinogenic. MTBE, and it affects women’s breasts. It affects women’s breasts.

KD: Yeah. I don’t want to take—but did you . . . I don’t remember a lot of gas stations in Boyle Heights.

- LL: No. There were a few. Little ones. But again, they started growing as the population grew, and those big Chevys and Fords . . . They were around, but they were real small gas stations. And they sold white gasoline, white gas. I remember my dad would—I'd go purchase some white gas for this pump torch that he would use. They'd buy something called white gas. It could have been airline gasoline or kerosene that he poured in—pump it, give it pressure—and then he'd use it for the roof and things. It was like the old-fashioned torch. And I was always like, "Wow! That's going to be mine later on!" And I don't know if it got lost somewhere.
- KD: Did your family—were they spiritually involved? Religiously involved?
- LL: My dad went once or twice to Catholic Church, Roman Catholic Church here in Lincoln Heights. And you know, he got on his knees, and—he didn't tell me nothing, just did it, went in, sat down. I guess he was praying. But he was never that at all. And my mom, yeah, she had this affiliation with a small little church, Protestant. And it was down there in Lincoln Heights also. I remember seeing this photograph, it was my mom and my grandmother with a group of people with this partially built structure that they had a hand in having it built. It's on Avenue 18, I think it is. I just said, "Wow." Albion Street, where there's one of the oldest schools in LA, a grammar school called Albion Street [Elementary] School. Albion and Avenue 18 and Downey Park, it's part of that. I never found out who Downey is, but I'm going to find out, now that it's come to mind.
- KD: So she was part of a congregation that—
- LL: Yeah, and that was on and off also. I remember as little kids, this guy, Hermano Perez, would show up, and he had two daughters and a wife and a few other people who lived up there in the Hazard Park area above—where Self Help Graphics is. And they'd pick us up and take us down to Lincoln Heights, It was like, "Wow!" I guess that's why I later on kind of attached to spiritual black music, and I started listening to jazz when I was eleven or twelve years old, and—
- KD: Really?
- LL: Oh, yes.
- KD: Were you listening to records or radio?
- LL: Radio. And again—a fluke—my cousin Richard on my dad's side from one of my uncle's sold me for five dollars this big, clunky carry-around radio that I could plug into the AC-DC thing. Nice. An antenna and all these dials, and I could listen to rock and roll in the '60s. And then all of the sudden, it was like, I went to flip the AM to FM or the FM to AM and the little dial went in, the little switcher, and I couldn't take it out. So it remained on FM, and then I started listening to classical music, Asian music—they had a station there. And then there was jazz, and I said, "Hey . . ." [*humming*]. Then there was Steve Allen who had this whole thing with playing the piano, and I said, "Hey, sounds familiar. Yeah." Then later on—you see how I do that? So I got the beats, and it was interesting.
- KD: Was anybody at home musically inclined? You said you had an uncle that was playing—
- LL: An uncle, yeah. My sisters never took up, nor my brother. No one had a guitar on my dad's side. No one.
- KD: Was music part of the household?
- LL: Not at all. My dad—
- KD: Really?
- LL: Yeah, my dad, when the old radio—I remember he was listening to the Cuban affair, when Cuba was going through something, and then the tubes burnt out and he couldn't get anymore tubes from the—what was it called back then? I can't remember the name of that store. Anyway, it's something else . . . Rite Aid, now it's Rite Aid. Thrifty. That's right. Thrifty stores. So no more tubes, no more radio. And then I remember—you know, my aunt's house, our little house where we lived with my mom, there was a TV. Got to my dad's, there was no TV. Then one day my aunt decided, "I'm going to buy a TV. Here, you guys can have this TV." "Hey, we got a TV again!" Then when that burned out, then there was no TV.
- KD: There was nothing.

LL: But that was okay. I got to go out into the street again, and I was small, still young. My uncle bought me a little bicycle in the East LA area, [with] training wheels, and I learned how to ride that around. And then, watch out, I'm still on a bike. Since that time, I'm—and my dad had tools and I became, well, as they say, mechanically inclined. My sisters, never. They had bikes, flat tires, forget it. Me, I always had a bicycle, tubes.

And then where we lived—interesting, because I note this—in front of us was a fire station. On the sides and behind us were boarding houses for men. And then, it was interesting, on my dad's side, one of my uncles had two sons, my cousin Richard and my cousin Frank. My cousin Frank turned out to be gay. And I said—I didn't know that at that time, but he acted funny. And I thought it was funny. But he was just happy and running around with us and grabbing us and punching us, and I go, "Hey." That's not the way my uncle is, but that's okay. Pinch my nipple or something, and I'd think nothing of it. I'd just pinch him back and run. So it was nothing. He never tried to kiss me or do any of that stuff.

And him and my cousin, they were close. And my cousin Richard, he was older than my cousin Frankie—my cousin Frankie was dark, *moreno* like my dad, and my cousin Richard was light skinned like my mom. And he was older and he was part of Clover, there was this local youth group. If you use "gang" then it's like, gang, right. And I said, "Hey—" And then I remember the story of my cousin telling me, "Yeah, that chicken queer brother of mine—we're out there in Dogtown and—the Dogtown came out and we're Clover, and we're fighting and my cousin's right there." His brother with his 45s standing there going, "When are you guys going to finish fighting?" He didn't stick up for my cousin as they beat him up. And I said, "Hey, well, I guess—" And then they find out there were other members, on my wife's side, she had a gay uncle, and then on my mom's side also, one of my cousins had a lesbian daughter and a gay son.

KD: Sounds like a normal family.

LL: Yeah. And then I realized later on about dominance between husband and wife—one's a drinker and one's passive—and I said, "Well, that's okay." And then I realized denial also, when the young man passed away at a very young age—my cousin—and it was like, "Wow, how come he's saying all this crap about . . ." You know, they call my son the four-letter word, and I'm like, "Wow, he's just putting on blinders." And they go every Sunday still to go put flowers on his [grave] since he passed away over fifteen years ago. And every Sunday it's the same routine. But what can I say? I knew he was saying his son was gay, but he said, "I'm going to get that son of a—he said my son was gay," and he didn't say "gay." He didn't say it.

But at the funeral when I saw his friends—and I had seen them at a restaurant in the El Sereno area. I was there, and "Hey, hi, hey, oh yeah. [He's] coming over later. Come and sit with us." And I sat, and then [he] and his young friends walked in, and I said, "Yeah, he's gay." Cool. I had—there was no blinders on my face and my brain and my heart. "Hi, how you doing?" And I recognized one of the young guys—he had gone to Lincoln High School. "Ramon, hey, do you remember me?" "Yeah, you were the artist back then." "Yeah, you remember, yeah. You know my cousin?" I thought that was so cool.

KD: So a large family, and at some point, many of them are accepting of all kinds of lifestyles.

LL: Yes.

KD: What about how they respond to your progress in school? Is your family—I'm using the word *family* because it sounds like you were raised by many women, not just your mother, not just your father. Was your family encouraging with schooling, or was it something they left to the school to deal with?

LL: Oh, yeah, they left it to the school. The only thing was, my father in the morning would say, "Go learn something." That's all he says, "Go learn something." And when I'd go to school, I'd just—I guess it was my eye that saw things happening and how to go around those things, and how to just progress while I was in school. Again, my hands could do things that I found. Hey, you know. I wasn't really artistically inclined, but when I learned a little bit of origami, [I] could make a little bubble—someone made it—and I said, "Oh wow. Check this, a little message inside." And then this teacher saw I was doing it one day. She goes, "Hey, look what Leo knows how to do." We moved from one school to the other—from East LA, from Hammel Street School, to Albion Street [Elementary] School, when my mom's appendix burst—

KD: Right, when you were forced to go—

LL: Yeah. I remember sitting there and we were singing “The Old Man and the Clock,” and all the kids would hit the table when it was time to—and I went *click-clock-click-clock*, and I was the only one who click-clocked with his [tongue], because that’s what I learned, the song from the other school. And the kids chuckled, and I remember when that happened—you know, little things.

KD: You talked about the teacher discovering some artistic talent. Were you drawing and painting or doodling at home as a young child?

LL: A little bit. I remember the butcher wrap, the pink butcher wrap from the *carnicerías* that they’d bring home. My mom, she’d clean it off with something and then let it dry and we’d draw on that. It was just . . . flowers, not dried flowers but plastic flowers. They were already out. And maybe try a little something, try to doodle a little something. I could never do anything. I was just—I didn’t have any training. The art was whatever was behind that calendar, look at the calendar, and then just do little doodles. That was about it.

But junior high school, the athletic stuff I took off into. Of all things, the first semester, or that first session of [after school] sports, they had baseball and track and field, and I hit a few home runs. I could already hit, and still it was a struggle to run, but it’s okay. But then again, the coaches saw I had heart, and that’s different when they see you have heart and spirit. They see you as a different entity in the group. Does he have leadership? Does he have that kind of stuff? And I did. I realize that because my teammates, when it was time for track and field, they told me, “Hey, don’t come out. You don’t have to come out, it’s okay. We’re already in first place in baseball.” And I said, “Okay.” I showed up anyway.

And at that time, my cousin’s *Playboy* books—I remember Newman was doing these—in the joke section, these little women with nylons, these black nylons and black hairdo—I related to that. While everybody else on the other pages were blonde or brunettes, no one had really black hair. So I related to these little drawings, and I tried to draw those on T-shirts.

KD: Really?

LL: Yeah. Of all things. And the coach saw it and kind of chuckled, because I couldn’t—I didn’t know what I was using, the enamel paint from the little models. You know, you’d buy—

KD: Did you do models?

LL: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

KD: Car models, airplane models—

LL: Well, you know, Christmastime, that’s what they’d buy us. Big Daddy Roth models with Rat Fink, those kind of things. I wish I would have kept them. But at that time, that wasn’t what it was. But I remember doing—I took metal shop. They did have metal shop and, you know, drafting and electricity and wood. And I really had a knack for cutting wood because my dad had tools and things, and I would cut things. And I wish he would have had electric drills, but my dad was so old-fashioned and we’d—

KD: Hand tools.

LL: To drill holes and stuff, and so I became pretty good with that. And then I come to find out my grandfather, who I did know for a short time, until I was about five or six, I think, on my dad’s side, was a carpenter. But by the time I’m able to recognize who he is and sit next to him watching *Bonanza* on TV and boxing matches—and he had crutches that he walked around on—but he was already a very old man. My grandfather was interesting, wrinkled face, totally wrinkled. And my aunt having to take care of him, and my other uncle’s having to take care of him also, and then my dad being the eldest, everybody else respected my dad, and said “Mande” to my dad also.

KD: Do you remember being aware of that as a child?

LL: Yes.

KD: The distinction that this was the response you gave to adults, and then people are responding that way to him?

LL: Yes. Yes, and I started to realize how deep that teaching was to my other uncles.

KD: Did you think of it as respectful or did you think of it as something else?

LL: No, it was respectful.

KD: It was respect.

LL: Because my dad came up the staircase one day and I'm there with my grandfather. And my dad said something to me and I sucked my teeth at him. And then my dad walked away, and then next thing I know, I feel something crushing, hitting me on the shoulder, and it was my grandfather, his—

KD: His cane—

LL: Yeah, his crutch. He struck me. And it's wood, and I went, "Ah-h." I started crying. And he said, "Nunca le chupas las muelas a tu padre. Tiene respeto." And I remember that. I went—I guess I had heard it or seen it somewhere, or maybe my brother would do it a lot—nobody else. I remember that. And I said, "Oh, whoa. No pain. Don't suck your teeth, you ain't going to get that pain." So I never sucked my teeth at my dad again. And when I'd hear kids and stuff—and now kids today, oh, my God, they've got Bart Simpson to learn etiquette and manners from. But then again, you know, why don't they do a "Bart Simpson Has Manners" tape and put it out? But again—so the parents and my teachings were from being around older individuals. And then seeing my cousins who were ten years my age, a little older, I was like—and then their kids came along and we're about the same age, and I'm like, "Wow."

I'd call my cousin "cousin," and her daughters were supposed to have been closer in age to me, which they were. It was mixed up, and I was like, "Wow." Now I have a cousin who's twenty-seven, and it's like, wow, I've got this young cousin. He's the age of my kids. It's interesting because my uncle had a birth real late in life in San Francisco. And then my aunt went for him, because my uncle passed away with diabetes and his mother couldn't take care of him and was going to throw him into a foster home, and my aunt went and brought him here. So then she adopted him, and he calls her Mom. Of course, no problem.

And it was interesting, again, this thing about ages and people's responsibilities and things happening in our family lives, my dad's side, my mom's side. And again, it's just us. I have one aunt left on my mom's side, which was an aunt married to my uncle, so she was—and then on the other side, there's no one else. There's no more of the elders. Everyone has passed away.

KD: I'm curious about—your family sounds like they had to do a lot of work to sustain this household. You said your mother worked in factory work. Was she home on the weekends?

LL: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes. She was a nine-to-fiver kind of person.

KD: What was the weekend like?

LL: My mom was always wanting to take off. "Let's go to the park. Let's go, let's get out of here. Your father's dry. He's just—nothing's there. Let's go."

KD: You mean he's broke? Or is he—

LL: Oh, no, no. My dad wasn't broke, no.

KD: What does she mean, "dry"?

LL: No fun. He's no fun.

KD: Oh. *[laughter]*

LL: He doesn't want to go anywhere, he just wants to sit at the house.

KD: So where'd she take you?

LL: To the beach, catch the bus or the train, or [to] the parks, just to get away. Go down Olvera Street.

KD: Yeah?

KD: Yeah. Just to get away. It's just like, "Eh, your dad's . . ."

LL: What were those trips like for you as a child?

KD: Oh wow.

KD: It was fun?

LL: Oh yeah.

KD: It wasn't, "Oh, my God, where's my mother taking me this weekend?"

LL: Yeah. And then one of my mother's brothers might be all . . . Vicente, the elder, he was a construction worker, more of a jack-of-all-trades in the community, and he was always doing something. He had bought

properties and everything with the amount of money he made with that. And then he always had a car, and, “Come on, let’s go.” And my mom goes, “Yeah!” We’d go down the Long Beach Freeway. It was a long ride, but we’d get to Long Beach and the Pike, or Santa Monica to go to POP [Pacific Ocean Park], we got to see that. That was a blessing, I’d say, to see POP, because it’s—

KD: It’s not there anymore.

LL: Not there, yeah. And you—again, you know, it was interesting, because it was just to get away and see other things that were out there in the world. I had seen them on TV, and I said, “Wow, yeah, found shells, seen dead fish.”

KD: So going beyond Boyle Heights . . . Was it later Lincoln Heights?

LL: Lincoln Heights? Yes.

KD: That was no big deal for you in your childhood, getting beyond the community?

LL: Oh, no. Oh, no, no. Actually, my adventurism was, like, in full gear because I had a bicycle and my backyard was the LA River. And my uncles—one of my uncles had properties in the Elysian Valley area.

KD: Really?

LL: My Uncle Vicente, who had made money and bought properties. And I remember going there and then going . . . There was my other Chayo, my Uncle Chayo always liked going into the river, where I was at this weekend, matter of fact, with a hundred taggers.

KD: I heard about that.

LL: And you’d go down there and go, “Hold on!” And he’d pump it up and we’d start going fast, right underneath the [5] freeway. Then he goes, “Hold on, hold on!” And he’d hold on, and we’re, like, little kids, and then he’d just turn the wheel. He wouldn’t put the brake on. All he had to do was turn the wheel and the vehicle would go into a—

KD: A spin.

LL: A spin, and the water would splash on you, and it’s like, “Yeah-h!” That was so exciting, so much fun. And then he might—Tío Chayo took me to Marrano Beach or the Whittier Narrows area. I remember getting thorns and things in my foot, because I had *chancletas*, but I should have had boots or shoes on. But you know, when you get to the edge going into the water, experiencing this naturalness with the vegetation and ducks, and being in the water and seeing pollywogs. And so I mentioned things to the kids more in passing. On the—what freeway is that? The Long Beach?

KD: The 710?

LL: The 710, by Cal State [Long Beach], right, between Floral—there used to be this area there that was the red brick manufacturing area. The Floral Theater was there, and then there was this area that was like wilderness. Now the freeway’s there. It’s all closed off, but I still see this channel where water still comes out of the ground, and that’s how they captured—it goes into the drain.

KD: Yeah.

LL: But we used to go up there, and [play with] pollywogs and lizards and things, and a daisy BB gun, shooting at cans and things.

KD: Sounds like a rich childhood. We haven’t really gotten to high school yet, which is when most people have these experiences of awareness, so I’m trying to understand your early childhood. Did you feel like it was a rich childhood then, or . . .

LL: Yes. Oh, yes. And again, a lot of that’s due to my brother. Yeah. My brother—remember, my brother’s always on my side. [I’m] three years older than him, and he’s always like, “Hey, what Leo does, I’m doing too.” It’s interesting, I didn’t realize that until years later. My brother was following along until he could hit a ball and go run around and be on his own. When he got his bike, then I showed him how to fix the tires. And still, I’d fix his tires so he could be out there doing what he was doing.

But my brother was—especially when my mom passed—didn’t pass away, but when my mom—you know, the appendicitis, that was a big thing for us. Because all of the sudden, we’re at my father’s, and my father decided, “Well, here, you guys get my old bed. I’m getting a new bed.” And so we were there, my

brother and I. Before, we had a bunk bed type situation with my mom. And then me and my brother in bed, and I thought I was going to go to sleep, and I feel—I go, “Hey, hey!” And then my father threw us out of the house. [laughter]

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Leo Limón, and we’re on side 2 of this tape of our first session on October 2, [2007]. He was telling me a story about his brother needling him in the bed, and his father kicking them out to the porch. Or just outside?

LL: So my father throws us outside, and we go out and sit across at the Mobil station, the gas station across the street, right next to the fire station. And we’re looking over, and we said, “Hey, let’s go sleep inside the truck.” My dad had a camper on it, and he had some cots in the back. And we went there and slept inside the camper. And my sister went in and got my dad’s keys out. It was all a little sneaky thing to make it work so we didn’t have to stay outside.

And then, yet again, remembering my brother doing those things, it lightens my heart. Yet again, all of the turmoil my brother’s gone through because things didn’t work out for him . . . Also I realized, hey, he’s an intelligent man, and he’s still struggling, but all blessings to my brother. He’s out there struggling. I don’t know where, but he’s out there. There’s the whole drug thing, and in high school, the neighborhoods, things like that. He was even in the service, and I thought Mormons had changed him up in Montana. He was in the Air Force, but [he] came back into the same slot again that he—we all fill when we come back.

Some of us don’t, if we have any affiliation, but we did have affiliations here. Luckily mine was the art thing out here, and I just fell back into that when I came in from the service. But so again, my brother, in our youth we were always together. And I was a little fat kid and we were like Laurel and Hardy. But my brother always could outrun me. But yet again, I challenged him. And that was the whole thing. I challenged my brother. He realized physically he could do things, but on the other hand, I don’t know, I heard it—someone [said], “Work first, play later.” And I got home, I did my homework, and then I’d go outside and play.

KD: Were you good in school?

LL: I wasn’t bad. I had good grades. I could pass tests. I went through school—

KD: Did the teachers—

LL: I always felt I was slow. I never caught the math thing. I never caught that because it wasn’t on TV. TV taught me . . .

KD: So you had verbal skills.

LL: Oh, yes, yes. And it wasn’t until later, actually high school, where I honed in on the dictionary, and I really—I developed a drawing style from, or a technique, excuse me, from the dictionary.

KD: Really? You’re going to have to tell me what you mean by that.

LL: Well, a dictionary, you just open it up and you find illustrations inside the older dictionaries. Bernhardt—I can’t remember the other name. Bernhardt . . . Meridian, or something like that. You open it up—the older ones—and there’s a black and white illustration. And then I said, “Oh, see that? We’ll start from there. Just look at that. What is it?” The page and whatever. By then, that’s when I had started into the art thing in high school. So when I sat down, I said, “What should I draw?” I had finished my homework, and there was my dictionary, and I’m like, “What should I draw?” What are you going to draw when—

KD: The dictionary is your source of inspiration. What a great story. [laughter]

LL: Thank you, thank you. But there was no *chicanismo* in me; there was nothing. Nothing. It’s just like . . . well, my aunt listened to Agustín Lara and nobody wore a mariachi suit, and—

KD: What about, what did you eat? What did your family eat?

LL: Oh, yeah. Potatoes, meat and potatoes.

KD: Really?

LL: Yeah. But still, you know, Mexicanized. Definitely. And always tortillas.

- KD:** And you're describing flour tortillas. You didn't say corn. You said she gave you the enriched—
- LL:** Well, as long as—until my mom got too tired. Then she said, "That's it." But my mom just kept on making handmade flour tortillas, with our help. And I said, "Oh, yeah? No problem, Mom. I'll help you knead the flour and let it rise, and I'll make little *bolitas*. And thank you, Mom. No problem." A dozen tortillas, it was there.

Then my dad took off into white bread, and then—my dad never really brought soda home. Just in the summertime, he'd bring us soda. "All right, let's have some soda." That was cool, but, like, my parents were older, and my relatives were older. They always had this thing about going to the Grand Central [Market] on weekends, because that was the place to go. Even though Safeway was opening, [there were still] little markets. I remember Rowan and— [*car alarm*]

[*break in audio*]

- KD:** Okay. Go ahead. We had to stop for a little bit of noise.
- LL:** But yeah, Safeway. It's the market thing that opened on César Chávez, or what's César Chávez and Rowan Avenue now, two blocks away from Self Help Graphics. And I remember when it opened, I was there. The first Safeway, right there on—
- KD:** And that was a big deal then, huh?
- LL:** Yes. A big deal.
- KD:** But the family continued to go to the Grand Central Market?
- LL:** Yes.
- KD:** Now, were they taking cars or taking the bus to that?
- LL:** We took buses. My aunt and uncle didn't have a car. Well, my other uncles did have cars, but that was the mode of transportation. And we'd get to the Grand Central Market and buy all of the provisions that my uncle's business needed for what he did at the Southern Pacific downtown. I guess it's central Alameda, Seventh Street depot, receiving—produce-receiving depot, where he had this plot or this lot that he rented or leased. I don't know which. But he had one. I know because I was real young, and every morning . . . Or in relationship to the Grand Central Market, it was like we'd get there Saturday mornings, and [had] Chinese food. [*laughter*] This Chinese place where they had food. And we'd eat, you know, my uncle always bought a combination. So there was fried shrimp and chop suey and egg foo yong—mm, I don't know. But it tasted great. Then we went throughout the place, and [there were] a lot of eggs, and certain items—always the same.

And walk away from there and go down—what was that? That's Third Street, I guess? And then we'd reach—I guess it was Spring Street—no, Main Street. And then on Main Street were all these Jewish pawn shops. And I remember the [American] Barber College, the Main Street Gym, Johnny's Shrimp Boat, and then all of these fascinating things behind the glass of these pawn shops, and it was like, wow. I was always like, "Wow, where did they get all of this stuff? What does that guy do with all of that stuff in there?" And we'd get back home, and my uncle would always buy fifty-pound bags of beans, because—and then *harina, la piña*—and they would buy that stuff only because my aunt would knead, do dough, the day before Monday.

So Sunday she'd be preparing all of this stuff. My uncle would be slicing all kinds of long green onions and so on, getting things ready, and they would make chile rellenos, a lot of them. Maybe two or three dozen, preparing them. Because my uncle had this little lot that he rented, but he would sell homemade burritos.

- KD:** No.
- LL:** And every morning, my aunt and my uncle—my aunt, not my uncle, just my aunt, she'd already be making tortillas [with] the *harina*, and my uncle would be mixing the eggs—
- KD:** They had, like, their own business.

LL: Yeah. And then my aunt and uncle . . . And the wax paper was all cut, and then he'd take two bags. And then my uncle had Bull Durham bagged tobacco, and that's why my cousin just couldn't understand how I could roll the joint so good and so fast at my young age—I'm ten years younger than him. [laughter] "Oh, yeah, I can help you there. Watch. See?" Because my uncle was hacking at making this ugly little thing, and two or three puffs and just throwing it away. Then I found out years later why. It was like, ugh, Bull Durham? That's tobacco roots or something. But nonetheless, there it was. It's one of those things he loved. And I remember, I was in the military, I found tobacco stores in the East Coast and I sent it to him in Mexico.

But still again, my aunt and my uncle had this thing where they made chile relleños. And Don Ynes, when he'd walk in through this gate, it's interesting. This big, giant, two-side type of gate had this—it was like an opening. And I always envision it as my uncle's silhouette of his body, because he would get through it, instead of going all the way around to Sixth Street. He was there on Seventh Street. And then as he walked in, it was, "Buenas dias, Don Ynes!" I remember all of those guys working, the people—the *tomate*, the cilantro, chile, jalapeños, you name it. Then my uncle had this big—he had this big bowl, and you could hear him chopping. And I'm a little kid, at three o'clock or four o'clock in the morning, [snoring sound] and I always swore, "I'm going to stay awake." And I'd always doze off.

KD: You wanted to be part of the scene?

LL: Oh, yeah. I was part of the scene, you were part of the scene. And he was selling seasonal stuff. Christmas trees during Christmastime. And in the summertime, "Don Ynes, *la sandia*." We could tap watermelons, come up with a real nice sweet *sandia*. Things of that manner. And burritos.

KD: So lots of good Mexican food. Lots of good cooks.

LL: Oh, yeah. When I'd wake up out there in the depot, on some crates and stuff, and then my uncle said, "Well, [inaudible] *burrito de frijole*." And I was like, "Yeah, that's all I want." It was interesting. You know, I remember my aunt and my uncle. A lot of boxes and stuff. My uncle's taking us down to the Greyhound terminal, and then loading up, [going to] Mexicali. And then family, they had family down there. I never really got to know that family, that side.

KD: You didn't take trips to Mexico?

LL: Just to Mexicali. And then my uncle, God bless him. But my aunt, when she got diabetes . . . And then I remember the little thin strips for testing. I don't know what [they were for]. I guess it was her urine or something, something like that. And then she passed away here. She's buried here at the Calvary [Cemetery]. And then my uncle said, "Hey, my dream is over." Then he sold the house, the property, to a cousin of mine, and then he went back to San Miguel el Alto in Jalisco, Mexico. It's close to Guadalajara. Then for two summers—

KD: San Miguel—

LL: San Miguel el Alto. Then I'd go out there—I think three times I went out there when I was in high school. And I rewired the whole house from—just wires to come in the outside. I said, "I can do that. There's no problem." I'd gone to junior high school here and they had taught me electricity. And I said, "Oh, what's that—little caps, nothing—hey, got one back on." My uncle's making money letting the kids watch TV for five cents.

KD: Why did he settle in Jalisco? I didn't get a sense that you said the family was from—

LL: That's where he was born.

KD: Oh, okay.

LL: That's where he was born. And he said, "I'm going to back to my roots," and he passed away there. And so that was exciting, too. I painted a mural out there, and . . . who was it . . .

KD: Was that as a young man?

LL: Teenager.

KD: Really?

LL: When I was a teenager, yeah. I'd go out there when I was a teenager. Get on the Greyhound here, go down to Baja—or not Baja, but Tijuana, or Mexicali, and then catch the Tres Estrellas [de Oro bus]. And then the Tres Estrellas would take me all the way over there, and then he'd see me there. Or I'd just catch little buses to get to San Miguel el Alto. I had learned how to do that.

KD: So you did that trip more than once?

LL: About three times I went out there.

KD: You and your brother, or just . . .

LL: No, just myself, solo. And I'd go out there with jeans and some T-shirts and stuff, and I'd come back with flour-sack shirts and *peon*. And I look real *peón* in a straw hat—dark, *moreno*. And then when the border patrol would always stop us somewhere along the way, when we're already inside the USA, [and] say, "Anybody here?" [*laughter*] I wouldn't say anything. It was the *picale* thing, you know? And I'd always wait. Especially when I got to the border one time, and the officer was just like, you know, that border guy was just sitting back just chewing his cud. And I didn't say nothing, and I was just looking—I was dark, I had my straw hat on.

The ladies, they'd make me these things because I could read English. They would receive correspondence, and they'd say, "Por favor, joven." I'd say, "Siéntase, señora. Ah, estan en la carcel. Ai, lo me tiene porque . . ." or whatever it was, and I'd read it to them. And I'd say, "Hey, this is cool." And then I started saying, "Hey, how come you guys don't revolt against this little system here? There's something going on here in this little town. I see it. Somebody in power is doing something here that—"

KD: You were making those observations as a teenager?

LL: Yeah. Well, teenager . . . you know. I get into high school, it's like 1968. I walk out, it's the blowouts at Lincoln High School, and I'm there.

KD: You're at Lincoln High?

LL: Sal Castro is my guidance instructor, and Frank Cruz—

KD: I don't know how I missed that. [*laughter*]

LL: And you know, I said, "All right, Chicano power! . . . Can you please tell me what *Chicano* is? I am a Chicano, what do you mean by that? What does that mean?" And it took me a long time to realize when my ceramics instructor said, "Oh, yeah. Look, this is part of your culture," and so on. And I said—I opened the book, and no ceramics—ceramics from Mexico. And I couldn't read what Nahuatl was, and I said, "Yeah, okay, right." When I got into the art thing in high school, that's what really turned me around. That's where I developed the dictionary, what-to-draw, what-should-I-draw dictionary technique.

Back to the dictionary. You'd open it, find that subject and what happened, just how I'm speaking now. You'd figure, "Hey, the guy's got a little knowledge, he can speak the way he does . . ." It's only because Steve Allen and all that other television sense came to me, and I said, "Oh, wow." I started reading every word that was on that page with that illustration, and I'd throw it in, whatever that knowledge was. And what's in the dictionary? That's right, the whole universe. And I said, "Wow, look, I'm learning all of these things." And this is just recent that I decided to do—it's puns, it's all—this whole art thing is a big joke, because—

KD: What do you mean?

LL: Well, you know, how serious am I going to be in this existence that's so short? And it's from a Latin term, *ars longa vita brevis*, which is "art is long, life is short." And now I'm saying, "Hey, I know Latin, because I'm a Limón, or Leo Limón." And then all this thing with the young people and their hands signs and all that. I have formulated things in that manner, too, where I'm changing images of deities, especially La Virgen de Guadalupe. She's no longer like this—

KD: With her hands together.

LL: Yeah. Her hands are like this.

KD: Ah, making a sign.

LL: See?

KD: Yeah.

- LL: But that sign is this. And no one realizes that until I explain, this is one of maybe a dozen *olin* symbols, seventeenth day on the *calendario*, and it stands for “earthquake.” But it actually stands for *movimiento*, and it basically stands for duality. So I say, duality, get it? Night and day. There’s this battle, a clash between Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. And then—oh, did you ever meet Mrs. Christ or Mrs. Buddha or Mrs. Mohammed? Oh, interesting, isn’t it? Duality. Now you’re talking. Now you’re talking sense. And then I tell that. And now something called zeitgeistmovie.com came out—oh, my goodness, finally. That makes things much more clear now. I didn’t realize that. And I mean, I had seen the crosses for years—never really realized in the *papal* cross, and then the doctrine of discovery, you know. I’ve gone into that. Four months now I’ve been on the computer. Four months. After fifteen years [inaudible], and I’d Wikipedia, and—whoa, that mouse—it’s crazy. All of this knowledge that’s coming out where I’m just like, “Wow.”
- KD: It’s like reading the dictionary again.
- LL: It is, with the electrodes. And I’m realizing, wow, this is real dangerous too. Because before, things were, as it is right now, verbal, oral. And without that mouse, you’re virtually left without anything. Like I tell kids, “Hey, you have to learn how to draw. You can do all the illustrations, all the nice cute stuff on your Photoshop you want,” but if they . . . I’m, like they say, “old school.” I said, “I know how to draw, and I could teach you how to draw fast, because—you know. And I could give you a dictionary and show you how to draw with a dictionary, and improve your vocabulary, so when you get out there, you won’t say, ‘Yeah,’ you’ll say, ‘Yes.’” And it’s that simple, you have to play the game that’s out there to be part of that game. And yet again, it’s interesting, because I have—I come from another angle where college was almost there, but yet it wasn’t. I was looking for something else, because I left high school with this power pack—
- KD: Tell me about high school.
- LL: High school. Oh, it was 1968. The walkouts, the blowouts. I’m a metal shop major person, right? I was headed toward metal shop. No problem. Junior high had turned me into that little animal I was going to go be. Blue collar, no problem, no problem. The family was like, “Yeah, Leo does metal. Look what he’s brought home from junior high school.” Plates and hammers and these things, right? And it’s like, “Oh, well, okay, no problem.” I knew I had knowledge. The teacher said, “Hey, you got good grades.” I go, “Well, I do my homework, and then I go out and play.” It’s all I knew. But the walkouts and the blowouts led me to think . . . And then the high school, a little accident in the football circle. You know, I got stepped on, I couldn’t use my arm.
- KD: Whoa.
- LL: And then I just said—and then the blowouts and the walkouts and the—you know. High school art 101, you know, it’s just an elective. The teacher said, “Hey, you know, maybe you want to draw. Here’s a sketchbook.” And then I was like, “What’s ‘Chicano’?” I was asking, what’s “Chicano”? And then there was MEChA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán] and Chicano studies, and I learned a little bit of something. But it still wasn’t—it was just so fresh, so young.
- KD: Were you participating? Did you leave the school during the blowouts?
- LL: Yes. Yes. Made some signs. Tried to make Zapata—and that’s about Pancho Villa—Zapata, excuse me. So I just tried to write letters, and then, as that first semester progressed, the teacher said, “Hey, you know, next year you might want to compete for a scholarship to go to art school on weekends,” and I did. He said, “You’ve got to draw nudes, though.” I said, “Oh, yeah, no problem, the girls down the street—Catholic schoolgirls, no problem.” So I got some of my cousin’s *Playboy* books, and all of these poor girls with club hands appeared, so I tried to hide them—
- KD: Oh, it’s hard to draw hands.
- LL: Have you tried to draw a hand?
- KD: It’s very hard.
- LL: It’s easy, just five phalanges that go out from a . . . anyway. So I competed, and they said, “We like what you said. You didn’t really have nothing to really show us in your drawing ability, but maybe you’ll learn how to draw.” So I get to Otis [Art Institute]—

KD: What do you mean, they liked what you said? You had, like, a statement that you sent along?

LL: No, no, they came to the school.

KD: Oh, they came to the school?

LL: Yes, yes.

KD: Wow.

LL: And you know, it was this group of people from the Saturday tutor art class. And it had started in the mid-'60s after the Watts riots, and they had said, "Hey, why don't you start up . . ." City Hall was appeasing the people in the black community. And so they founded a black savings and loan company out there in the Lynwood area, I think it is, or Pico Union area—somewhere out there. And the black community—and they said—they found someone, and then that guy knew this guy, who was Al Porter, who was art director with [LA] Unified Schools. And then Bill Tara—ooh, Bill Tara, the main man. William "Bill" Tara, right. And he was like a guru out here on the West Coast, [in] advertising. And [a] white guy, white hair, real cheap clothes, cheap cigars. Little Volkswagen. Owned an all-electric home right up from Otis, [in] MacArthur Park. And another home across the street, and another home.

And he'd go down the street to go sleep in this little rental room that he rented from some guy. It was interesting, Bill Tara. And I was like, "Wow, look at what this guy has. Wow. Cool. I guess you can make some money with advertising if you get into it." And he was like, "Wow, you guys are Chicanos, huh?" Because, yeah, me and—well, they chose me from Lincoln High School, and someone from Garfield, and someone from Roosevelt, [Frank Hernández]. I think the Garfield person came but once—it was a young lady, [Mia Garcia]—and then she didn't come back again. And then there was—well, you know, the brown tokens, and then there [were] two or three Asians, [Alan Takemoto, Glenn Iwasaki, and Vicky Matsumoto], and two or three Anglos, [Pearl Beach and Kirk Silsbee], and a lot of black kids.

KD: Now, were you aware of this dynamic of tokenism, and "give the bone to the community," at the time?

LL: Oh, no.

KD: No?

LL: No, I just walked in. I was still a high schooler, and I walked into this school, and I'm there early, and I walk in, and there was already one Asian kid laid out right there. The genius. He's laying there. He was a genius, he's still the genius, he'll always be the genius. Glenn Iwasaki. Oh, what a brain. And he had a big head, too, where that brain was held. He had a big brain. [laughter] Real intelligent young guy. He had been around. His parents owned the little market situation inside the Grand Central, so he'd go there right after the art school thing we did. And it was not the normal faculty. It was a mix of professionals. The morning was advertising. In the afternoon it was life drawing, to learn how to draw from the body. And then cartooning.

And so I didn't know how to draw. So, like, I tell people now, "I learned how to think, and then I learned how to draw." So watch out. You're going to have to pay me if you want me to think. Draw, I could draw anything for you, that's no problem. I learned how to draw. I know the basics, the principles, all that good stuff. Simple for me. For other people, it's difficult to see a hand is just five phalanges, you know? Just like that. But it's okay. What you know is what you know, and what I know is what I know.

KD: That's right.

LL: And you went through the ABCs of where you're at, and I know the ABCs of where I'm at. And you think it's easy, and I think it's—you think what you do is easy.

KD: Oh, no, I don't think what you do is easy. [laughter] Let's be clear.

LL: [laughter] But to create something, you see. That's my job. And what you do is your job. But the Saturday tutor art class just—wow, it's just like portfolio after portfolio from top-notch advertising agencies.

KD: Wow.

LL: Bill [Tara] would call someone and say, "Hey, come on down and show a portfolio for me, would you?" "No problem, Bill." [laughter] Bill did favors for people, like everyone does. When you're younger, you say, "Oh, sure, kid. Come on down here. Maybe I can help you. Go this way, go that way. Why don't you talk to this

person?” You know, that chummy-chum thing was always there. And so I just said, “Wow, this is fantastic. All of this stuff.” And there was no computers. They’d send portfolios from overseas, from Asia, Europe . . . there it’d show up, and these art directors would come and say, “Hey, look at this.” They’d just choose one. “Look at this.” These kids are from New York, these are from Chicago. “Look at this stuff.”

KD: What was that like? How did you respond to these different—

LL: Oh, it was fantastic. I was just like overwhelmed.

KD: Did you gravitate to a particular course? Because you said it was drawing—

LL: No, no, it was advertising in the morning—

KD: Advertising in the morning, and then the—

LL: The afternoon, lunchtime. And then in the afternoon it was life drawing or cartooning. They wanted you to be able to see things and grab on to things to see what other people are doing so you would know which way you’re headed. And then in the afternoon, it was just basically, you manipulate the material. So the morning time was like . . .

The thing was, there was no professional—there were no instructors that would instruct us. It was just like, “Hey, how are you guys doing? How was the week? Throw your sketchbook right there on the table,” and we’d go and open up everyone else’s sketchbooks. “Wow, she’s from the Asian community. Where’s she from? She’s from the black community. He’s from the black community. He’s in the black community? Wow!” And we were all like *bzz*, just electricity. And then—oh, Frankie. Frankie was from Roosevelt. He’s noted for helping start Self Help Graphics.

KD: Frank—

LL: Hernández. Francisco Hernández. UC Santa Barbara wrote something on Self Help Graphics, you’ve probably seen it. It’s in an archive on—

KD: I didn’t know him by Frankie, that’s why. *[laughter]*

LL: Oh, yeah, yeah. Francisco Hernández, and—we were chums. We were soul mates. Frank had lost his eye on one of those imperial TVs with those knobs that came off—*plink*. He was real young, and so he had this complex. A Chicano. You know, a good looking guy. But he went towards the artist’s thing that—real personal stuff. He was like the Van Gogh of East LA, and I was just like, wow. This guy could draw like a champ. He just had the heart, because—it didn’t matter, it just—it didn’t matter. He just sat down and just . . . and I’d go, “Wow, Frank. You sure can draw good, man. Show me how to draw, man.” But it was his life outside of his house, and things in his family, that was part of his life. I was just in admiration of Frank.

And he would always look at me as the brain. And I was like, “What do you mean, I’m the brain?” He goes, “Ah, you do your homework and all that. You work after school as a janitor, and you go to the library. And then you’re always in there, always in there.” I go, “Well, hey, bro, I’m just trying to learn what it is I’m going to be facing later on life.” And he was like, “I guess.”

And his mom . . . I met the family, and she said, “Take him with you. Please, take him with you. He’s just wild.” They tried to take care of him. They took care of him. There was [a] problem through his schooling, and after high school, that was it. He had to find a life, and Frank wanted to be an artist.

KD: Did he give you pointers then about drawing? Did he help you out with technique?

LL: No, we just got stoned, drank, went driving around. His mom would buy him a car, and—without reverse. *[laughter]* It was funny. But still, again, Frank tried to go to school, and he met Sister Karen. He introduced me to Sister Karen, by the way.

KD: Really?

LL: Oh, yes.

KD: When was that?

LL: Oh—well, before Sister Karen became an entity—1970 or ’71, I think it was. I’m not really sure. But we both graduated in ’71.

KD: Okay.

LL: It could have been '71 or '72, around there, too. But Self Help Graphics was just starting up. And they were in between Chicago and St. Louis Street, on the third floor, I think it was. And it was just like, you know. I met Sister Karen—didn't think much of it. They just had this thing there. I actually wanted to go to down the street to go to meet the *viejo*, Manuel Cruz, who was our mentor. Because he was the old guy that was already making Chicano Power figurines—little Brown Beret women and men and Cuauhtémoc, and he's doing things with that. And we were like, "Wow, look at this old guy," with his figurines and stuff. We wanted to imitate him. Of course we wanted to follow in someone's steps.

But you know, I just went to school during the week, and the weekend was over there at the art school. And then you go walking through the art school, you see the painting classes and some of the other instructors who knew our faculty from our little class thing. And our little class thing, nobody was from the school. Everybody was just a professional.

KD: Right.

LL: So when I learned—like I said, I learned how to draw. First I learned how to think, and then I learned how to draw. The dictionary thing came in ever so much, because I would look at it, and I'd go, "Hey, I'm learning words." The English became better, and I just started—boom, and then the—after school, the library was just fascinating, because I'd go to the main library downtown.

KD: Oh, really?

LL: And I'd stop at literature, and I'd stop at science and geology or whatever it was, one book of each—not too many, because it got heavy—and I'd end up in the art department. And I'd just start going through this section, and I saw every book that was in there.

KD: Wow.

LL: I didn't read it—

KD: Did you systematically look at all of the books?

LL: I just kept—

KD: The European masters, or architecture? What was it?

LL: All of it.

KD: Everything.

LL: Everything. And then I said, "Oh no, they're just talking about Michelangelo here. There's no pictures." I want to see pictures, I want to see what they did.

KD: Okay.

LL: Because the Saturday tutor art class . . . Sure, in the morning, "Hey," all right, looking at all of this advertising. But it got boring. It's like—the guy's talking letters, typesetting, and illustration, and this "you know how it works," and so on and so on. And it's like, that's all nice stuff, but that's real technical. And then we'd meet a guest and they'd talk about their art career and so on. Basically advertising. And then [in] the afternoon, you know, we'd go down to this little place and make sandwiches.

Some guy from—I guess he was from New York or Chicago—had this place there with his dad, and we'd BS with the guy, and . . . It was interesting. And then the art store, H. G. Daniels, was right next door to that. Some of those guys would walk in there and they had the itch, five-finger itch. And they'd come out, "Hey, look at what I got! I got a Rapidograph," before they put those little tracers and any of that stuff. So—but still, again, as they walk in there, "Oh my goodness, look at everything that's in this art store!"

KD: Was it like heaven?

LL: Oh, inks, nibs, paint, paint, paint. I never had an interest in paint.

KD: Really?

LL: Never had an interest in it. Just black and white. I wanted to learn how to draw good, and so I went towards the chalks and Conté.

KD: Were you using pen and ink? Oh, okay. Conté *crayons*.

LL: Pen and—oh, well, the drawing class, the life drawing, you know. They put us in front of a live model, "Eek!"—we're all teenagers—"Eek!" And men, too, "Ugh!" But that's okay. And again, "What are you

drawing?” you know? “Uh, I don’t know. I don’t know what’s underneath that body.” And so it was like, to the library! Anatomy! Okay, okay, I get it. Oh, the structure, you know. They’d put a skeleton, you know, skeletal thing in front of us at the—

KD: That was your own exploration? Going to the library to look at anatomy books?

LL: Oh, yes. Where would you find in art, anatomy? To see what the masters did? Oh, jeez—and da Vinci and his studies and stuff. I said, “Wow, this is great stuff. So that’s what [is] in there. Wow. And that’s why this does that—”

KD: The arm, the muscle moves when you squeeze your hand, yeah.

LL: And that kind of stuff. And I said, “Wow.” And in high school, you know, that’s when it all started accumulating, and I started thinking. Where it was like, “Wow, I’ve learned how to draw a young lady in front of me with a pen, a wedding band, a watch, little glasses, little curl coming up on their head—” It’s just little things you see. And Mr. [Charles] Keck, in high school, had given me a book on quick sketching, so it’s just like—oh, there. See, that fast. “You saw it, Leo, right? You saw it, right?” I said, “Yeah, I saw it.” Our memory banks are always being filled.

KD: Were you getting encouragement from your high school? I’m trying to figure out how many art classes you actually had. There’s one on the weekend, but then you’re also taking classes at Lincoln.

LL: In Lincoln, there was just an art class. You always took it.

KD: Okay. And it was a whole range of techniques and media, or what?

LL: No, it was always—I guess it was life drawing. They did have life drawing, a class in life drawing. And then, you know, I took another class in lettering, poster making. They had something like that. More or less, because it was who was teaching what. The teachers saw you had an interest in something, they would put you to the side and let you do what you wanted to do. Mr. Keck had a general education of art type thing, and he roused up my curiosity with his displays of all of this old material he had there. A lot of old materials. “What’s that? What’s that?” And I’m in a bandage because I got hurt that first semester I played football, and then I never went back to play football. And it was interesting, for the next two years, I got slugged in the arm a lot by tackles and guards and linemen who said—

KD: Because they wanted you to play?

LL: “Aren’t you going to play, Leo? God.” And I said, “No, man, I’m into art now, bro. I’m trying to find something in art. I don’t want to go up there and get hurt again.” That chump coach didn’t pay attention when I said, “I got hurt, I got hurt, I’m really hurt. I know when I’m hurt if I can’t move my arm.” And he said, “Rub it off, rub it off.” I tried rubbing it off and it hurt more. I said, “No, man. If the coach is still there, I’m not going to play. That’s it.” And they’d get me when I was up there in a gym class, and if the team was up there they’d come and tackle me and hurt me, and I’d still—I’d so had it.

KD: Was it a male playful testing, or . . .

LL: Oh, yeah. The testosterone was flying around everywhere, and I was just like, “Hey,” I had it too. And I chased them, knocked them down, and they’d get mad. And then we’d play football on the side also, without gear or any of that stuff. And I was still—my arm was fine. And they realized I could hurt them just as much as they could hurt me, and the weight wasn’t—nothing. It was on me, but my flexibility, my strength was there, and I could get in, knock them down. And they really—and they knew that, and they would have an eye open for me. And they tried to get me too, because I knew that . . . Anyway. It was interesting.

KD: A side of you I didn’t know! I can’t imagine you—I mean, you are a very gentle man. I can’t imagine the rough football type. It’s fascinating. I know you’ve talked about this other places, in terms of the blowouts. But was it a scary time? Or was it exciting, or—what were your emotions then?

LL: I saw the sheriffs were driving around the school a lot for awhile, and you know, I just said, “No, I’ll stay inside the school system.” I’d started that summer. They said, “Hey, you want to work in the school?” I said, “Sure.” I said, “I want to be up there in the gym.” They said, “No, you work with the janitors.” And I said, “Okay. Cool.” Got me into any classroom I wanted to.

KD: Oh, you’re right.

LL: And then I found—when I went in the science [room], then I found books on physiology, and I went, “Wow. Wow.” And I said, “Good, just learn some more stuff.” Look at these charts and things. And I said, “Cool.” And that added more towards my flavor. And then—again, it’s just how to swing a mop. And then I learned from veterans who had come back and were working as janitors about Vietnam, and I remember seeing Vietnam on the television tube. That was interesting too, because I had seen it even when I was in junior high school. All the carnage and that kind of thing. And it affected me. I didn’t have any family that got through that—like I said, older family meant they had been to Korea. Basically, some of my cousins—but then, none of my uncles were part of that. They were nationals here.

KD: Did your family, when they were watching stories about Vietnam on TV, was there discussion, a critique of—no? It was just part of the news?

LL: Yeah, it was just part of the news. And I don’t remember my dad ever even sitting down with us to watch TV. He wouldn’t do it. He didn’t care about it.

KD: Really? Not even his day off to relax?

LL: No. He’d go do something outside.

KD: No boxing, no—

LL: Oh, yeah. There was the sports thing, the boxing. That was about it. There was really nothing else, unless there was some Spanish. Then channel 34 started coming in, and then my mom and *novellas* and those things. That’s okay. It took away our TV time, but still, again, I was always at the Boys’ Club over there, playing ping-pong or pool. Challenging the cholos, and winning the cholos and getting into fights with the cholos, because I got good. And of all things, the craft shop that was there.

This was junior high school, and there was this one man, Bill. Bill—I can’t remember his last name for the sake of me. But he still works—he used to work at H. G. Daniels. And I remember seeing him there, and saying nothing to him, because maybe—I don’t know, I just didn’t. And now I salute him, and I pay all kudos to the guy when I see him at the art store in Pasadena. And he sees me, and he goes, “Oh, Leo,” this older guy. And I’d say, “Hey, you used to be at the Boys’ Club.” And he’d tell me, “Hey, yeah. You want to do some arts, kid?” And I’d say, “Yeah, okay.” And a hot plate, a hot plate and then a pan, a piece of paper and crayons—

KD: Oh-h—

LL: And then the crayons would go—it would melt. And I’d go, “Wow. Okay, I’m bored. I’m going to go over there and make a knob or something for my cousin’s Chevy.” And then I was sanding, and then you know, like I said, my dad had tools and stuff, and so plastics came along. And just the smell was irritating. But still, again, you know, put it together.

KD: Irritating—poisonous. [*laughter*]

LL: Yeah. And then, you know, it’s just a glue, and stick it together, let it dry, put your name on it with tape, come back later, form the shape and then cut the shape on the saw and all that. You had to know what you were doing. I never cut myself. [I] made a lamp or two for my mom with the legs and stuff.

KD: Sounds like there were adults in various environments, from school to the Boys’ Club to the weekend class. You said it was at Otis?

LL: Yes, at Otis.

KD: Giving you encouragement in creative expression, whether or not they called it the arts or not. Were you aware of that at the time? Did you start to think of yourself as, maybe I’m good at the arts?

LL: I had something. I just figured it was energy. Way back then, I just knew I had energy. At the end of the day, that was it. I had to go to sleep, get ready for school the next day. But I was always ready. I packed my things in drawers that I had. I was ready for the next day, and I had my homework and everything. So that was it. And there was no problem. The only thing was that the schools were always interesting, from grammar schools, my name thing, to junior high school, the sports thing, and girls, and the guys and the classes we were taking there. And then to high school. Then a total awakening of what were you doing before, and where you were headed towards as far as an occupation.

And then it was like, all of the sudden, one day from blue collar to white collar professional. I said, “Hey.” I realized, hey, I’m going to go into something professional. And I said, “Yeah, I’m going to try commercial art.” Yet again, it’s real ironic that it’s, like, commercial art, but then it’s, like, fine art commercial art, because I’m thinking in a vein which is cultural community advertising.

KD: Okay.

LL: You see? Even way back then, [when] I was in high school, everybody wanted my signs. I couldn’t really letter but I could draw that tiger at Lincoln, because I’d see the illustration, no problem. And the teacher really liked me. Her name was Mrs. Eleanor Downey, and she was the head of the art department at Lincoln High School, and she had come from San Francisco and studied there. And so here she lived up in [the] Pasadena-Altadena area, and she had an affiliation with Joe Mugnaini, who—and Charles White, who were instructors at Otis. And I said, “Wow, this is cool.” I see the guys over there now and then, but—and then Charles White turned out to be one of our instructors when I was first there. This cool, black, suave man who had painted murals and did these wonderful paintings—

KD: Painted murals and—

LL: And pen and ink illustrations that are just beautiful. You know, the blackness in his culture. And I was like, wow. Just around a bunch of white old women who were praising him, and I’m like . . . And it was interesting, because remember I told you I started listening to jazz when I was eleven or twelve years old. By the time I got to high school, I was be-bop-be-be, nothing could stop me. Watch out, I had John Coltrane in me, and Leonard Feather would teach an afternoon Sunday radio class on his view. So I learned about the Congo—what was it, the Congo Square in New Orleans, all about that, and the ragtime.

KD: I want to ask you about—when you talk about music and you talk about the communities you grew up in, I could guess what a girl would be wearing, but I have a hard time figuring out, how did the guys dress? What were you wearing as a teenager? Was it reflecting this jazz music, or was it . . .

LL: It was interesting. It was always jeans and T-shirts and sweaters, sweatshirts.

KD: And your hair?

LL: Almost orthopedic shoes. My dad had something about shoes. You’ve got to wear shoes that are—

KD: Good shoes.

LL: Yeah. He’d take us . . . And on my mom’s side, my aunts and my uncles, they’d just let us wear rag shoes, real soft things. And my dad was real hard-pressed [about] things, and so when it came to shoes, I said, “Oh, give me those orange things with those real soft cushiony boot things, and I’ll wear those.”

KD: Orange?

LL: Yeah, they’re orange-y in color.

KD: In men’s—

LL: Work boots.

KD: Work boots. Okay. Got it.

LL: But they came in sizes I could wear, and I said, “Yeah, those will be fine.” And then one day I said—in junior high school, I just did a flip. I just said, “Okay, I want some wing tips.” Because my aunt had gone upstairs and found these shirts that my cousin had worn in the ’50s, and my aunt would just meticulously take care of things, and bags that smell like mothballs and stuff. But she pulled out these Van Heusen shirts and Pendletons and things, and I went, “These fit me. Hey.” And then my dad said, “Oh, let’s go down here and we’ll buy you some slacks.” I never really had long hair, I’d always comb my hair to the side, go to the barbershop. I was clean-cut. And it was cool. And man, I looked good. And I was like, “Hey, I look good, and I’m smart, too. Hey.” And that was junior high school.

KD: Was that cholo wear?

LL: No. No, not at all, even though my friends, their cousins knew about my cousins, who were part of this gang or that gang or this gang. And then, summertimes, we’d meet and we’d have picnics, and we’d all be together. Who cares? But that was the older generation. The newer generation, no. They had problems. And seeing themselves with each other, because of an affiliation. And I wondered if it was part of how

the system was treating us, and how—even at that time, I’d say, “Wow, how come the guys are acting . . .” Because of technology, again, the Chevys and the low-riders now is dying away, too. Here come the new imports. Everybody’s got a Volkswagen, everyone has a Datsun or this and that.

It’s interesting how technology, too, has a change on society. And I think by that time, the status quo knew what they were doing with the . . . You know, I had just heard about and read a little bit about subliminal messages on TV and tapes about making you want to buy things or do this, and I said, “Wow. I ain’t going to watch TV at all and listen to it.” It’s interesting how now I tell kids, “Look at TV 24/7. You want to learn how to draw? You want to be an artist like me? You’ve got to learn how to draw. If you’ve got to learn how to draw everything, now you have the capability of [the] pause [button]. And if you see something you like, you can sit down for hours and draw from what you see there. If that’s what you want to draw. And I like that, and I do that, too.

KD: Did your family—

LL: Wait, wait, let me finish.

KD: Oh, sorry.

LL: The thing I was saying is that 24/7 meant watch it, but don’t listen to it. Put another channel—listen to different stuff. Don’t just listen to hip-hop, rock and roll—turn it to classical. Turn it to talk radio, and listen to different aspects of that. Now that whole Spanish thing that’s out there, wow, you can listen to these guys clown around, and there’s serious stuff, too. But listen to different stuff so you have flavor.

KD: Getting new influences.

LL: Yeah. There’s jazz, and when I tell kids that I listen to jazz, and “Hey, there’s salsa. You can always listen to KXLU or something like that. Alma Del Barrio on the weekends,” man, I’m always on that. For years, that’s what I listened to all day long. I just—six o’clock in the morning until six o’clock in the afternoon, it’s just, like, I would have it on. But that’s where you’re from.

KD: That’s where I’m at. *[laughter]*

LL: See, it came. I honed in.

KD: What you’re talking about, that’s [the] kind of the question I was trying to figure out for your childhood. These new influences, going to see new and different things. I mean, certainly your mother’s taking you to the beach, and your uncles are taking you other places around town. Do you get to the museum or anything ever?

LL: Just through the schools.

KD: Through the schools?

LL: When they’d take us there. And I found—I think we related to this earlier—was that my backyard was the LA River. And then I kind of lost it again, but here we are again. There was a Mobil gas station across the street, and I went across there and I got a map of LA. And I had a bicycle, and I started going north, east, west, south.

KD: You’re kidding me.

LL: A little bit at a time. My backyard was Elysian Park. It’s just this big park. Good thing for me, I knew that, and I’d walk up that thing just because I knew there was going to be an exciting ride coming up, coming down that thing.

KD: Down that hill? *[laughter]*

LL: And man, was there ever. But I’d go all the way up to the different parts, riding my little bike around, and then come down. Then I realized when I saw the map, and I’d look out from way up there, I could see different sections of LA. And I said, “Well, it’s interesting, it’s coming into my mind that I have to go see different places.” So the bike would take me, and I’d always choose a route, from here to here. I’ve got to get back before it gets dark, from here to here. And I’d always go to the four directions. Always going off further. And I finally catch a bus, and I can go even further out and come back. Just to see what’s out there. And I guess at that time it worked for me.

KD: You were in junior high? At a high school?

- LL: No, I was in grammar school.
- KD: Grammar school, discovering the city.
- LL: A little bit of the local area. And I said, “Oh,”—I remember going to Lincoln Park—“But look at all these streets that go to Lincoln Park.” I could go this way and this way, and I could get there. Just to go see what’s around there.
- KD: Wonderful.
- LL: And then I’d see my friends sometimes. “Hey, yeah, hey!”
- KD: I’m just curious, because you said the schools were taking you to the museums. In ’63 they had an exhibition at the LA County Museum [of Art]. At the time, it was what we now call the Natural History Museum and LACMA—it was one institution in ’63. Did you happen to see the Mexican exhibition?
- LL: In ’63?
- KD: Yeah, it was 1963.
- LL: Mm-mm.
- KD: I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about any difficulties you might have had in school. You mentioned that math was hard. What about race or class? You know, usually this kind of stuff happens in high school, though some kids notice it earlier, that there’s kids that have better clothes or better lunches or . . . You mentioned going to Otis. Was that the first time you were exposed to Asian American kids, or seeing white kids in greater numbers?
- LL: In grammar school, there was I think one black kid in the whole school, and I was being brought up by an Asian woman. And then there were some Jews who lived down the street. I remember there were Jews because they said they were Jews. They had some kids. But there was—in grammar school, I went—like I said, there was a little bit of a mix. No, really there was no mix. It’s when I went to Albion Street School when we moved—my mom’s appendix thing. There was the kids from the projects that were bussed in. They were black. And then it was a matter of learning what they were about, what they do and how they talked and this and that. And then television gave you this whole other perspective.
- KD: Meaning—
- LL: That it was real racist. From the cartoons, from those black crows and the way they spoke and that kind of thing. And I thought it was funny, of course. That’s what it’s there for, to make it funny. But not realizing, hey, you’re being manipulated to see them that way. And a lot of people never get over that.
- KD: So as a child, did you feel like you encountered that kind of racism?
- LL: Well, I saw it—after a bloody nose and a busted lip. And then my friends standing up for me, then me standing up for them in grammar school because there were some kids that were rough. And sure enough, when we saw them, we said, “Hey, all right. We’re here, we’re going to stand up to you, so you better know that.” And it was interesting. The way they spoke, whatever it was, it was okay. I wasn’t against anyone. It was okay with me. It’s just that, you know, you treat me wrong at that time, I’m going to treat you the way you treat me. And I wasn’t thinking, “Well, let’s see. I’ll be diplomatic about this, and be at peace, and try to talk about peace.” No. It was like an eye for an eye. You’re still a kid. And my dad was not in any way a gentle guy. Real quiet, but something that happened to my grandfather, the people two houses down . . . And that was it, there was no more properties beyond it. The freeway had come in and taken out all of these properties that were there.
- KD: Oh, right.
- LL: And they did something to my grandfather while he was in the garden or something, the man down the street. And my dad would go down there and punch the guy out. He’d go out there, and the firemen would run out and stop my dad, and the police would come, and this and that, blah-blah. My dad one day, we’re sitting in the truck, “Go out there and hit that kid.” I go, “The kid with the Boy Scout suit on? All right.” “Yeah, he’s pulling the leaves off the *aguacate* tree.” And I’m like, “Uh-oh. Hey, you know what? I’ve got orders.” [He] throws the ice cream at me.

Years later, I see the young guy and he goes, “Do you remember me?” I go, “Oh, yeah, you’re the one I punched and then you threw your ice cream at me, and then I threw it right back at you. Hey, man, you know what? My dad at that time . . . I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to . . . I was never that way. Right, until I shot you in the ass—excuse me—with a BB gun. But that was a ricochet, I wasn’t really trying to hit you.” I really shot at the ground and it ricocheted and hit him on the butt, and the cops came. I lied, and they said, “You said your name was—” and I said, “Oh, I’m sorry, I was wrong.” They took my fancy BB rifle, oh man.

That was about it, though, the scope of things when I was younger. I was basically on my bike again, just riding around and enjoying some of the relations with some of the kids in the local neighborhood. And yet again, my parents were real quiet. My dad wasn’t—just hardworking, and just saved his money. Because we weren’t around, I guess he was just saving the money for something. And if anything ever happened, he’d—I’d say, “Oh, I have a pain on my side, Dad,” he’d bring out castor oil. And I’d go, “Wow, I guess this is the remedy. All right.”

And yet again, you know, my dad started buying skim milk, and I just said, “This isn’t milk.” Then again, my dad and my mom come from a different time. They were with *caldo* and a lot less meat, and vegetables, and no junk food, no sodas. There were sweets, but not the way there were when we were around. Different generation. Then again, it’s interesting, my daughter’s starting to puff out a little bit. But still she remains, while my sons are thin. You think I’m heavy, [that] my sons would be heavy. Nope. And I wouldn’t—

[*break in audio*]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Leo Limón. We’re on our first session on October 2, 2007, and this is tape 2, side 1. And Leo was telling me some wonderful family stories, and stories about growing up as a young man, high school age, elementary school, junior high. Did they call it junior high then?

LL: Yep, junior high.

KD: Okay. I just want to ask you a question about your storytelling abilities. Is that something that you got from other family members, that somebody was a storyteller? Or is this something that you developed as an adult?

LL: I just found that reading a lot of stories, short stories, little stories—little essays have always interested me. Like fairy tales—those were always interesting to me because I don’t want to read a whole fat book. I’d rather skim through something that was short and brief but came to the point. And if it had content, that’s what I tended to find more interesting. And in school, I actually found the Brothers Grimm.

KD: Ah.

LL: I found that. Chinese and Japanese, Asian stories, European short stories, and then I found Mexican folk tales. I said, “Wow,” this is La Llorona, the story about her and different examples.

KD: Were you reading that in high school?

LL: No, junior high school.

KD: Junior high school. Wow.

LL: And then I found, again, I liked that stuff and I said, “Okay, I’ll read this and I’ll read that.” Just stories that were shorter. And lots of jokes. *Playboy* had this whole thing on the jokes and the little woman by [LeRoy] Neiman. I always likes the jokes. And then Steve Allen had this thing about the way he spoke also. It was like this little story with a start and a middle and the end, and “Ha-ha-ha-ha!” It’s always a funny thing at the end. I said, “I like that.” And then music.

KD: Yeah.

LL: I guess music came into play when I was younger also, where Leonard Feather said, “This is on the civil rights movement. This is on the black experience.” I always told myself, “This is interesting, but erase black or African and write in Mexican or Latino,” because their story’s just like our story, but our story goes back further.

KD: In terms of being here in the United States, being here before it was the United States. Were you becoming aware of that in Lincoln High School as well? I'm imagining that it's Sal Castro, right?

LL: Yes.

KD: People like Sal are helping you think about this legacy of Mexican heritage. Is that where it happens?

LL: I think I had said earlier that the ceramics teacher gave me this book on Mexican pottery and so on, and arts and crafts. I said, "Cool, but I can't really read some of these words, and I wonder what it is." But the art world, per se, had taken me into the Eurocentric side, because I'm wondering, "What is it?" And it wasn't until I got to Los Angeles City College and I took a class in art history, and I'm looking at this slide-show again and again and again, and I'm real bored. And I snapped and said, "Wow, if I can, I'm going to go to Europe. I want to go to see where this stuff comes from, that's here, that they're teaching us about so I can know what it is." I'm looking inside the museums that are so precious to them, according to Carlos Almaraz, who was a partner of mine at that time, who I had met in high school.

Now I'm out of high school and in college. He's still around and I'm still affiliating with him. But he's still out there working it and I'm like, "Wow, look at this stuff that Carlos does." But nonetheless, his travels and exploits sparked me also. And the thing that also sparked me at my young age in high school, was that we had made a move in 1967 from this house where my aunt, my dad, the whole family was at, at one time. We moved three miles away to the hills of Mount Washington, right on this other side; this side.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And this dead-end street into this old house. My dad just wanted it because it had a large property from one side to the other. I said, "Wow"—the house was a wreck. "Dad, what are we going to do first?" And he never did anything. *[laughter]* I said, "Okay, we'll just make sure the windows are nice." And my mom said, "Hey, whatever it is, this is the way it is." I said, "Wow, this is really broken up." Not the walls, but it's just old. The foundation as kind of cracked.

KD: Did it leak in the rain?

LL: No, no, the roof was fine. The plumbing was okay. But it needed a lot of work. But this is my dad's thing and I guess he had been saving all of his pennies, all of his money, you know, take this castor oil and start going to the hospital. And then it was like the previous family that lived there, who were the Nocars—their last name was Nocar, *N-O-C-A-R*. Ironically enough, I went under the house, and the Nocars were travelers. World travelers. I found pamphlets from the '30s from Versailles, and from Rome, and from Belgium, and I went, "Ooh, what's this? This is gold leaf lettering. And what's this acid stuff?" I said, "Oh, it doesn't smell like anything at a distance. I'll just leave it alone."

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: And it was interesting. I realized what the red rocks and the big crystal rocks were about because I found Arizona, maps from Arizona and New Mexico. These guys are traveling around. I think it had something to do with my saying later on—I was all ready with my own maps. But to find these other old maps, I said, "Wow! Hey, now maybe, hmm." Can you imagine two months ago, when I found Google Maps. Oh!

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: I started traveling, and then I found the Höchst, Germany, [in] Frankfurt, that area where I was stationed with the military. I satellited in, found the posts. It was interesting because I took photos of the place from a helicopter and it was interesting how I said, "Look, there it is. Look honey, come here. Kids look!" It was like, "Wow!" And then places I went traveling around . . .

KD: Before we zoom ahead to your time in the service.

LL: Yes.

KD: How does high school end? Are you thinking "Get a job, go to college, confusion?" What are the thoughts at the end of high school?

LL: The counselor said, "Where the hell have you been?"

KD: *[laughter]*

- LL: Really the counselor said, “Where the hell have you been? You’re tenth in your class and there’s three hundred and some kids. Where the hell have you been?” I said, “I’ve been here. Where do you think?” He said, “Well, do you want me to sign you up for college?” I said, “I already did that. I want to go to Long Beach State.” *[laughter]*
- KD: Oh, you had already done it. You did it on your own.
- LL: Well, it’s not hard. It’s just forms and places to call and then get there and it starts working. That’s what they told me, so I’d do what they told me. And it’s just like, well, it didn’t work. In high school, the Saturday art class—
- KD: Yeah?
- LL: Prior to leaving high school, it was, like, the [Los Angeles] County Museum of Art that had a contest, an art contest. What was it called? “The Future Masters High School Art Competition.” I came in fourth place. Frank, my friend with the eye, who wasn’t even going to go—I told him about it, and then I helped him punch holes in his sketchbook that he ripped up. I’m over here, Mr. Follow-the-Rules. I’m mad at everything. Went through the trouble of—Bill Tara again, gave me this mat board and stuff and I’d cut it. And Mrs. Downey taught me how to cut. I knew the machine to cut. I was like, I knew how to play pool. There had to be a—
- KD: Straight line.
- LL: A sharpness to things, you know? So then I learned not to cut my fingers like I did in the beginning. And then I went, “Hey!” Frank is just a *rasquache*, and Mr. [Paul] Tanzawa, one of the art instructors, came to pick us up in his MG Midget. So I had to exhale even more to get into the front seat, to get in.
- KD: *[laughter]*
- LL: And Frank is in the back seat and we’ve got our portfolios, right? And we get over there. I got fourth place, and Frank got second place.
- KD: Damn. *[laughter]*
- LL: The passion behind his stuff—
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: Was just like you wouldn’t believe. I was just like, “Wow.” Well, a week later, his mom bought him a convertible ’63 Impala and that same night we went to Brooklyn Avenue Shakey’s and he crashed into this pole. *[laughter]* Oh, Frank. You know, you had only one night—
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: And we had gotten stoned. And I said, “Frank, let me drive, I can drive. We could have brought my car.” And he said, “Nah, nah, I got my new car.”
- KD: How did you have a car?
- LL: I worked after school and I had some money. And then cars back then, I think I still had the ’51 Chevy Powerglide Coupe. It was—I think I paid a hundred and fifty dollars for it.
- KD: Oh, my goodness.
- LL: Oh yeah. Now you can’t even touch it. My brother got it for us, “Here’s the money.” See, it’s like, I tell my kids to go buy a computer. I don’t care if you know what it is. My brother brings up a car. I go, “Wow, this is immaculate. It even has skirts on the side. Wow.”
- KD: Wow.
- LL: In good condition too.
- KD: So, high school.
- LL: So I get fourth place and I’m already doing spot drawings for *Westways* magazine and I had did some animation for some erotic or some porno place down on Melrose somewhere. They had some place, I went in—saw it on the bulletin board at the art school. I said, “Hey, yeah.” They give you a time sheet, this and that. You shoot it. Carlos Almaraz was telling me, “Hey, you can do things with your talent,” and so on. “There’s a mural thing going on out here.” So I painted a mural about two blocks away from Soto Street, in

the '70s—'70 or '71, or excuse me, '71 or '72—just one of those fluke things again. The high schooler spray canned a spray can mural—

KD: Spray can mural.

LL: While the other older guys have brushes and paints. I said, “Well, for a hundred and fifty dollars, you’re really sweating a lot to do something like that, but that’s you.” Just see how things happen. Am I one of the “OGs?,” the youngsters ask. Well, I’ve never brought that out. I’ve never shown myself. I’ve never—people don’t interview me. That’s why there’s so little information on me. Because I’m just working and I’m working to the point where it’s gotten to this. Santa Barbara has a little book on me, and Tere Romo knows about this. And they’re archiving my stuff.

KD: Great, great.

LL: So that’s things that I have, that I’ve already given them. And so the next phase is coming up again.

KD: Yeah.

LL: Good things happen, which is good. But still I’m hustling, and I know that there’s questions that I’ve read about, what I think of the art world and that whole thing. High school was still real exciting, but yet it wasn’t enough. The art I had learned, I was very competent with what I was doing.

KD: But you seem to have this notion that you know you should go, or want to go to college. You’re already taking care of it. Your other friends, are they doing the same thing?

LL: Yes. Yes. But they were going to junior college. I should have done that, but I didn’t. I eventually did, and then I joined the service. Only because I could read and write and I could see the writing on the wall—the President Nixon, and the so-called “almost impeachment” and pardon and resigning and all that. And Vietnam was coming down. I just said in high school, “Here it is, I’m about to get out of high school, everything is fine. Goodbye.” And I went to the Broadway warehouse. I was there a month. I get a call, some guy had heard my name through that Saturday tutor art class. They recommended me because I’m fresh out of high school. And I did some spot drawings and things and an album cover for Frank Zappa.

KD: Wow.

LL: Yeah. And I met Frank up at his place up there. He said, “Go outside and smoke.”

KD: Did you know who that was at the time?

LL: Yeah, I had heard his name now and then and his quirky little, “Duh duh duh duh duh,” sounds. Then I met him, and I had to listen to all of his albums. I had to. And I did. Calvin, him and Johnny Walker Red, they were out in the back, and I’m outside smoking a little herb. Man, yeah, I dug it. I just said, “Yeah, this is crazy.” And I did drawing after drawing. He used all of my drawings for his inside sleeve cover, all of my drawings.

KD: Wow.

LL: Yeah. Studebaker Hawk, and all these guys, and Johnny the Mountain, and Ethel on his shoulder, and he’s hunched over. Calvin is the art director. And then there’s a little statue and he’s like, “He’s knocked out,” after drawing all of these ideas.

KD: [laughter]

LL: And then later on, I’m in the service and these young women soldiers come up to me, “Hey, excuse us, are you Limon? Yeah, do you know Frank Zappa?” I go, “Yeah, uh huh.” “What’s your first name?” “Leo.” “It’s you!!!” [laughter] He had put my name, this constellation, floating couches, birds, cows and things, and I was one of the stars, one of the little constellations.

KD: So you got credit for it. Hey, that’s pretty good.

LL: Oh yeah. And his first songbook, Frank Zappa’s first songbook, I did a few illustrations for that. Calvin liked them, put them in there with these other real competent guys who are doing stuff. And then when you ask me who are my favorite artists. One of my favorite artists was a cartoonist.

KD: Yeah?

LL: There’s Picasso, the masters, the other painters. But one of the thinkers [is] Saul Steinberg.

KD: Oh yeah.

LL: You've got *The Labyrinth*, precious little copy. Nobody touches it.

KD: Right.

LL: Nope. Nope. Nope. You know, it's here.

KD: Yeah.

LL: To draw those little thin line Rapidograph things probably, and to come up with that kind of stuff was like genius, as I confirm to Michelangelo, just thinking-wise, of what he could come up with. So, I found myself wanting to get to that point. But I can't, I'm just too flexible. Flexible means that there's so much around me that I'm trying to struggle with to earn a living by trying to sell art. And then on the other side, trying to relate to my community, to try to still make it right. So you know, like I say, I don't reinvent the wheel. I'm in the wheel, and I'm just taking things from that wheel, and now I'm challenging democracy. After all this time, the walkouts, the blowouts, and all, it's all had its relevance to what I've come up to [at] this point. And I know we're going to be [talking] more in the interview. I found a dollar bill in Latin and all of that. Wikipedia helps me, and I get into all of that. And I'm into all of that. You saw *Zietgeist*. Did you ever see Liefrezone.com? This guy who won his case about paying taxes, where he doesn't have to pay taxes. We don't have to pay taxes. Drive on drill sergeant, like the guy would say in the military.

Yet again, you know, learning all of these little verbal things, I throw back at kids. And my whole thing is, when I give classes, I order brooms. I can teach a boy how to sweep. Once he learns how to sweep, I teach him the ideas about religion and duality, and then our culture and then how church, or *a templo*, are the same idea, same process, but you need that broom to keep it clean. And then it relates to women. The first temple is the one right under your feet, which is Mother Earth. So you see, it's an eco-thing, because of the [teachings] looking ahead seven generations. So again, I've done it. I've done it! I've said it. And if [I'm] not saying it, it's in my art. I've got the greenhouse syndrome since I discovered in the mid '80s, Chico Mendes, the Brazilian. I read up on him and how he was assassinated and all of that. Wow.

So when [Edward James] Olmos came out with a movie, I think I saw a little excerpt about it—I haven't even seen the movie. You know, Hollywood guys just kind of do movies about things and you don't hear about it anymore. It's just, I'm going to do something on him because when I walked in, the first thing I said was, "Hey, [I'm] giving honor to 1968, Mexico—the Olympics and the tragedy with the students and those that died that day." And I've already talked to Kathy Gallegos about next year, maybe seeing if she has a red carnation show in dedication to them because it's, wow, a lot of years later.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And it can't be forgotten. Nor can the Trail of Tears, or how I relate Spanish-speaking [natives] to English-speaking [natives], the history to 1492 and all of these little things like the doctrine and the flag and the sand. It has to make relevance because now, the dollar's there and I found symbols. Just look at the seal.

KD: Yeah.

LL: The eagle with the cluster of thirteen stars above its head, and the shield and its chest, and then it's holding in its talons arrows—the Department of War.

KD: Yes.

LL: Wait, there's another talon, what's it holding? It's holding an olive branch. It's supposed to be the Department of Peace. There's legislation in Congress right now for a Department of Peace—Kucinich from Ohio brought it up a few years later, and here it is. His placard that he's putting out [. . .] says: "2," the peace sign, then the earth and "8." [2008.] And so if someone's talking about peace, I'm going with someone who's talking about peace. Everybody's talking the same old jive, the same jazz; all that jive. Well, what's the difference between "She's got a husband who used to be present, and he killed a lot of people, and started one of the most . . ."

KD: That's a good place to end, let's talk about peace. Let's pause for today.

LL: Kill Bill [volume] 2.

OCTOBER 4, 2007

- KD:** This is Karen Davalos with Leo Limón. We're in Highland Park at Avenue 50 Studio, and today is October 4, 2007. This is our second session for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. Leo, I wanted to return to that moment after high school, to learn how you actually enlisted. I'm imagining, or were you drafted into the service?
- LL:** Well, when the time came, after high school—I think I had mentioned earlier that I had gone and worked for the Broadway Warehouse. And then I got a call at home and it was a gentlemen, Calvin Schenkel, who was with Reprise Records and he [had] gotten my name through Bill Tara from the Saturday tutor art class. And he said, "Hey, do you want to do some drawings for the project I'm doing for the Frank Zappa circle?" And I said, "Sure, why not? Sounds great." And I got into this old Plymouth convertible, floor to panel of Pall Mall filters.
- KD:** [laughter]
- LL:** And off we went to [the] top of Eagle Rock. And from up there, from this little house he was renting there, I started doing spot drawings. And just drawings from the music I was listening to. Then they used that for an album cover for [the album containing] "Billy the Mountain," and Ethel on his shoulder—a Frank Zappa LP. And some of the drawings were also used for his first songbook, Frank Zappa's first songbook. So I was off and running. Like I said earlier, I think I had mentioned the Future's Master Contest, at the county museum.
- KD:** Yes.
- LL:** Okay, that's covered. So then, when I got this job with Cal Schenkel, I had also started going to LACC [Los Angeles City College]. And I said, "This is going to be fine. I'll not be taking a full load, just electives," actually. I was thinking, I actually signed up for music and not art.
- KD:** Really?
- LL:** I always wanted to do music. I had bought a piano from our neighbors across, a stand-up piano.
- KD:** Wow.
- LL:** And I'd always play and play on it. Like I had told you previously, I had started listening to jazz at a young age. And I always wanted to play Monk or the Duke or something. [laughter] I never got there, but still it was always enthusiastic for me to want to get something.
- KD:** Yeah.
- LL:** But yes, I saw that—I was going to school, and I was taking a class in art history. When I saw the images up there, I said to myself, "Hey, they're just showing me Eurocentric and American art." And even back then, I realized those values are theirs. They don't tell me anything about myself being indigenous. I have an indigenous background to this continent and how they've broken it up into pieces and said, "That's south, that's central, and this is north." Even though, I believe it's a wrong term to say, "Love America," it should be, "Love North America," because again, South America is Spanish speaking. And this up here is French, and this is English.
- KD:** Right.
- LL:** So, in my analysis of history and time, I come from a family that's—I say it's Spanish-speaking [natives].
- KD:** Right.
- LL:** While I live in an English-speaking [native] territory. And then, the whole thing about the Chicano struggle and when I first heard about it in high school, about Aztlán, you know, that mythical place where the Aztecs came from? Well, now I know it's the Mexica they were talking about. So now I say—so I look at an overall view of history and I say, "Hey," but again, in jest. And people look at me and they realize, the older folks that I'm around, they go, "What is Leo brewing up?" Because again, I say, "Welcome to the county of Aztlán." Because again, it's territorial, but it's inside the *continente* Anáhuac. Okay? And again, Anáhuac is south, north, and the sides.

- KD:** Were you having this awareness in community college about this Eurocentric art history because of the *movimiento* organizing and the way people were talking at Garfield? Is that where you got some of that language, the critique, the European masters only, and I guess some American artists as well, but American only being defined as North American?
- LL:** Well, I saw that there was virtually nothing out in the libraries. And I was like a bookworm, looking and looking, looking for the right flavor, the right taste. It was there, the masters just turned me on, from Europe. And then there were modern drawing instructors here in the Americas from different states that put out books in the '20s and the '30s. And I saw their drawing styles, and it was like the masters from Europe. Then I saw the masters from Mexico. And then I read and discovered, well, they were European trained. They went over there to learn the classical and they came back and then they refound themselves again. But all this time while I was in high school, I met Carlos Almaraz, when I was in high school. It was probably a year I got out of high school—I graduated in 1971 from Lincoln High School.
- KD:** Right.
- LL:** But meeting Carlos was like wow, here's this little man—who wasn't Carlos, he was Charles, actually. And then later on, you know, upon my return from the military, he said, "No, no, don't call me Charles anymore, call me Carlos." But Carlos was very, very influential on my life, because there he was, an older Chicano. He was a Chicano nonetheless, even though he was looking for his Chicanoism. He was already there. He was learning. He had books. He reminded me of my Uncle Chio when I was a little boy. He sang, had *guitarras*. You know, he was looking for something also.
- KD:** Where did you meet him? What [were the] circumstances?
- LL:** I think I had met him at the Mechicano Art Center. And while in high school, that's one of the places I would go just to hang around with the guys to see what they were doing. Basically, they were all already college graduate guys, some musicians guys, and one guy who worked for the mortuary, Jerry. They played music. They had a great time. I was still young and I had to leave early because I was still in high school. [laughter] Nonetheless, it was interesting though, because I saw these guys again, and it was art.
- KD:** Yeah.
- LL:** It was art related. And the whole thing in high school, going to Otis. At Otis, they were basically Anglo guys—women and men there during the daytime, studying, and there were a few Chicanos around. I think Carlos was one of those people, also. He was going to get his master's. I think that's where he was going to get his master's. But he had a studio there, also. I'd show up on Saturdays.
- KD:** A studio at Otis?
- LL:** Yes, at Otis.
- KD:** Okay.
- LL:** But he was with, who was it? Tony, I can't remember his last name for the sake of me. But Tony was a really nice guy and had a studio with him. And [they were] in the studio section they had across the street at Otis.
- KD:** Right.
- LL:** And Carlos said, "Come on over man, let's smoke a joint. Isn't this nice?" And I'd say, "Yeah, that's real nice. I got to go." I want to go to MacArthur Park and look at the ducks and draw the ducks.
- KD:** [laughter]
- LL:** And again, Carlos already had, he was already on a road. I was still at stop and go, stop and go, trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do.
- KD:** How'd you discover Mechicano Art Center, I mean, as a young man?
- LL:** Again, Frank Hernández.
- KD:** Okay.
- LL:** Who was from Roosevelt. And again, I told you that little story about him. He received second place, I received fourth place in that Future Masters contest. And he had been on the Eastside and saw Sister Karen, Manuel Cruz, the Mechicano Art Center. And that was on Gage and Whittier Boulevard, right on

the corner, right next to the doctor's hospital, East LA Doctors Hospital. And that's how I found it. He said, "Yeah Leo, there's this place. Let's go down there." We checked it out. We really didn't frequent it that much, but we did go, to go see, and see what the guys were doing. And unfortunately for me, I was not able to keep a card, just an announcement Carlos Almaraz made. I remember he made—he had one of his first showings here at the Mechicano—and I remember it was a dog and stars, and the dog was howling at the stars. I don't know where I put that card for the sake of me. It was a treasure in itself.

And then when I enlisted in the service. In this "World of Art" class I discovered, "Hey, I need to find out what that is that I see up there, where it came from." Because I see it at the museums. And if everything around me revolves around that ideal, I say, "Hey, I'm going to go to Europe and see it face-front." So some of my friends who were in the Saturday tutor art class, and in LACC, they stayed in college. I enlisted because I could read and write, and I could see Nixon about to go through changes. So I went off into the service. I said I wanted to do illustration. They held off for a few months, then said, "There's nothing in art, but come on in." They had a slot in something that's similar to art or illustration, and it was photography. I said, "Oh wow, here it is." I'm going to confront it. I'm going to challenge it. I've always had this numbers thing—one and one is three.

KD: [laughter]

LL: You know, so I said, "Okay." I went into it. I enlisted. Off I went. I told the family. Everybody was in shock. "Why are you going into the service? We're here, we're the *movimiento*." And I got right out of high school and Carlos Almaraz [said], "Hey Leo, let's go visit César. I'm working with César up north, César Chávez." We went off to visit César. Carlos was very into his Marxist-Leninist-Mao thing. Actually, Carlos gave me my first little Mao book. I was like, "Wow, cool, yeah, the people, the people." But what does this mean? What's really going on in China? I found out that Mao is just as bad as any other leader. Leadership is what? It's how you treat the people.

But anyway, I just simply said, "Okay, Carlos." Went up there and had a great time for about a month. My back was too sore from sleeping on the floor in a trailer with this family that had this thing going on there. So I said, "I'm leaving bro. I'm looking for something else in my life." [laughter]

KD: You stayed for a month, though?

LL: Yeah.

KD: What were you doing?

LL: There was a newspaper called *El Malcriado*.

KD: Yeah?

LL: And I was like, "Hey, I'll do spot drawings, no problem. And I'll help clean this. I'll help clean the yards, whatever it is," and just watch the *campesinos* come in. Those who would come in to be in the offices and work there. Then they'd have campfires every night. And I would say, "Hey." It was nice meeting César, way back then, and his two giant German shepherds—really nice dogs. But still again, I said, "No, this isn't where I want to be. I have other plans. I still want to go to school. I want to go find something else." That's when I came back and started back into the school thing. I guess when I enlisted, I said, "Wow, this is going to be a big change." Back then, Uncle Sam was saying, "Anything you want to do in the service, we'll offer it to you." And they had a whole list of things.

KD: Right.

LL: From cooks to technicians to photographers to illustrators. And I said, "Okay." They opened that spot for photography, also a guarantee of where you'd be stationed. I said, "Europe, of course!" That's where the whole art world thing was coming from, as far as I was concerned. So they sent me to New Jersey to go for my photography schooling.

KD: They actually trained you?

LL: Oh yes. I needed training, right? Hold the camera, shoot the camera, it's a certain process. I was an 84 Bravo, Army still combat photographer. All right, in front of the Marines. The camera would be going "click,

click, click,” and they would be going, “bang-bang-bang.” I didn’t care. It was the military. It becomes this, like, male psychosis, where it’s like I’m the soldier I’ve seen on TV. I’m the cowboy.

KD: Can you help me understand the role of photography in the military? They want you to take pictures of . . .

LL: Name it. As long as there’s a work order, they’ll say, “Hey, go into the field.” If it’s combat, you go take photos of—there’s various forms of photography. There’s on the ground or in the air, night photography, straight photography. The enemy, “Go see what the enemy’s eating, where they’re pooing, what they’re doing.” Everything, with photography.

KD: It’s part of surveillance, I guess, is what you’re saying.

LL: Oh yes, intelligence.

KD: Right. Right.

LL: Intelligence. There was, it’s no secret—it’s there.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And like, then again, I kind of saw myself as Frank Capra. Maybe I can take that one photo of a guy getting shot. But again, I knew I wasn’t going in that direction in the military. I saw that Vietnam was closing down. Nixon was—something was going to happen to him. But there I go to New Jersey, and of course, New York, New York! I was there about three months.

KD: Did you go to New York?

LL: Oh, all I’d see was the back of the Statue of Liberty. But hey, as soon as I crossed over on the buses that would go to New York—then I’d take buses in various directions again. I had a map, and I’d get off in directions, different states. And if it was just a few days of leave that we’d have, I’d go further and just come back. And I made sure that I was safe and okay. Again, it was interesting. It was as if I was an immigrant, only because in the military they give you a green card.

KD: [laughter]

LL: Interesting that you get a green card, you’re like an immigrant. You’re, like, issued, military issued—it’s a green card. So anyway, I went to New York, saw it, enjoyed it. And there I saw shows, different shows, the museums, some of the jazz clubs, Central Park, wow, the Guggenheim, yeah. Wish I had a skateboard.

KD: [laughter]

LL: Or a bike, that would have been nice, coming down on a bike. But again, just seeing that and the pretzels, the bagels, the flavor of what New York was—[the] Twin Towers.

KD: Yeah.

LL: You know, all of that. I’m like, “Wow, fantastic, good.”

KD: Do you remember any of the artists that you saw or any of the works, if it was a younger artist, somebody who doesn’t really have a name? Do you remember some of the things . . .

LL: They were having Matisse.

KD: Ah.

LL: At the big, the old Metropolitan [Museum of Art]. They were having this Matisse show there. And photography, they had photography on exhibit also. And there was all kinds of—again, it was European art, [at] the old museum. And then the Guggenheim, they had—what was that? I can’t remember for the sake of me, but I saw, again, lots of art, just experiencing the fact that, “Hey, I’m in it.”

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

LL: And I actually went with Doug Heinlein, Doug Heinlein—he was from, where was he—his father taught at Kent State.

KD: Oh.

LL: So he related to that whole ordeal that happened there when the students got shot.

KD: Right.

LL: Then he was like, “Hey, wow, you were in the Chicano Moratorium. Oh wow. Yeah, it’s the same man.” When the authority gives the command, bang-bang-bang, people get hurt or killed. I said, “Yeah. It’s not going to end until something gets changed.” So anyway, he and I were good friends. He was also into the

photography thing. I don't know where he went in Europe, but after the training in Newark, New Jersey, then it was off to Europe. Then, when we got there, it was Frankfurt. We ended up at some post there at Frankfurt. And then they said, "You know, where [do] you want to be stationed?" I said, "Anywhere's fine." You know, here in Germany. It was definitely going to be in Germany somewhere. Lo and behold, in three days, three days later, someone came from the—after they found a slot for a photographer—and off I went to Höchst am Main, which is just this little town. Again, where was it? Again, it was a fabric place, where they manufactured fabric and stuff. And it was great.

KD: The kind of place where everybody works at the factory, everybody's employed by this one?

LL: Yeah.

KD: Okay.

LL: But again, it's more than that. From what it was, I guess during the war, after the war, it had gone through changes and there were still places around there, again, [with] swastikas and the graveyards from the Nazis.

KD: Really?

LL: Yeah. They didn't put them somewhere else, dig them deep and hide them. They were there.

KD: Wow.

LL: But again, it was interesting to just pass by the gate and [say], "Oh, look it." The swastika on grave markers. But still again, it was interesting being in Germany. Germany was another fascinating place. Again, when I got to that post, the induction center there, the first thing they said was, "You can go outside the gate, but just make sure you're back and you're ready for the next day. You have a locker and a bunk. Here's your room." So you know, change into civilian clothes, go to the guard's gate, and the guy was a Chicano. I said, "Hey ese!" Yeah, yeah, yeah, he's from Texas, this young guy. I go, "Hey, where's the train station at?" I said, "I want to exchange currency." He says, "Just go straight down the street here and throw a left and it's right around the corner." Okay.

So I'm walking along and I get there and it's all brand new. It's like you just arrived somewhere. It's, "Hey, I've landed. What's here? Look at the license plates. Whoa, look, this is great!" Went into the train station, again, exchanged currency, bought a map, and then sat down, had a bratwurst and a beer. I said, "This is going to be great!" First thing I do, is I walk straight into the sex district, the red light district.

KD: [laughter]

LL: Checked it out, walked all over, looked at all of the girls, all of the sex things going on. Find Mrs. Müller's Sex Shop. Said, "Great! Great!" And the map indications of where we were at, we're, like, two blocks away from the actually river, the [Main river]. And then I said, "Oh, there's the museums." There's the Römer, and then there's the cathedral. It was interesting, fascinating. I saw this in the books.

KD: Were you ever scared? Was this your—well, it's not really your first time away from home, but it's your first time away, well, any of those moves away from home.

LL: I think I had gone over that when I was a little boy and my map said, "You going that way?"

KD: Oh, really?

LL: And whatever I encountered, it was there. So what?

KD: Okay.

LL: And I know people, [and] so on. And then I returned. Hey, it was okay. When I was in New Jersey, that was different. I did get a little frightened when lots of the populace was changing in color when I started going towards, what was it—Virginia, or Carolina. I said, "Wow, [a] lot of black people, a lot of black people. Little towns we were passing by, there were lots of just black people.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And then some were just white people, just white people. [laughter] And there were no taco stands. Nothing like that nowhere. So when I get off the bus, and okay, it's a return trip. So I wouldn't go too far out. I wouldn't just show up somewhere and start walking away from where I was at. Okay, just look around and absorb it. That's all, you know.

- KD:** Okay.
- LL:** Whatever I can see from the bus, that's fine. I'm not going to go over to that little farm over there to see who lives there or any of that stuff. It was one of those things. But again, I just go back, [and] end up in New Jersey again.
- KD:** Did you use that same strategy when you're in Europe?
- LL:** Yes, just like when I was a little boy, just say I'm going to head off some place, make a little mark where I'm going to end up, just to ride back. Because I already knew that it'd take me so long to get there that it'd take the same amount of time or more time to get back, depending on the weather or situation. So then, again, they came for me one day. Well, I go back to this post. It's great, it's interesting. And then these people arrived, GIs from the post I was going to be at, McNair Kaserne. And it was beautiful because the train [was like] like the metro here.
- KD:** Yeah.
- LL:** That goes out to Long Beach or it goes off to Van Nuys or Pasadena. The same thing happened there, where I was at. The train would go out to the town I was at, turn around and go back into Frankfurt. So I was like, four or five blocks away from that. Then I went to town, got drunk. *[laughter]* Actually, I went into the EM club, the Enlisted Men's club, and got drunk.
- KD:** Yeah.
- LL:** These guys who had driven me to this place, I promised them a beer if they drive around a little while. We were on Army gasoline, so no problem. We were just driving around the town checking it out, just to see it. I saw the river there. I said, "All right!" The river was right there also. So then again, I said, "Hey, there's trails. There's farms close to it." And so, when I got to the post I already had an idea. And then it's just good to make camaraderie with the guys there. And the GI women, they were there also—there was a whole contingency, a whole area where they were at.
- KD:** Really?
- LL:** I was with women too, who were part of my squad, the company and the place I was at there. And again, it started being part of this Army structure: you have to be at a certain place at a certain time, dress a certain way, act a certain way, take orders, don't say nothing. If they lead you into the zone—
- KD:** How did you respond to all of that?
- LL:** Oh no, it was okay.
- KD:** Really?
- LL:** It was like, "I'm going to do what they want. It's okay because they're paying me to play soldier." Then again, I wasn't being paid to be a mercenary, like it is now.
- KD:** Right.
- LL:** I feel like they're going out there to play mercenaries and it's dangerous to play that. Because again, while they're in Europe, some of the personnel that were arriving—you know, one or two guys would show up—who had more rank than me, they were sergeants. These guys were also photographers, but they had been in Vietnam.
- KD:** Wow.
- LL:** So they still had time to burn off, or to do—so they sent them to where we were at. And wow, they came fully packed with photographs, slides that they had taken in Vietnam. I never stepped a foot on Asian soil—Vietnam—but I did with photography and just tons of this stuff. These guys had just lots of it, lots of it, and so did the sergeant who was in charge of us.
- KD:** Do you remember your reactions or response to seeing those images?
- LL:** I was just overwhelmed because there was a lot of it.
- KD:** Was it black and white photography?
- LL:** It was color.
- KD:** Color?

- LL: Oh yeah. There was black and white too. These guys were photographers, and they could take all the footage they wanted.
- KD: Right.
- LL: You didn't have to give it to the Army. You have your own film. You can use Army film. But it's all part of that thing, the way it was back then. Now they don't even let you have a little cell phone to take photos, because they don't want you to see what's really going on, otherwise the war would have stopped by now. But it's not a war, it's an invasion. And again, it's different. So, Nixon left office.
- KD: Right.
- LL: Then Ford took over. And then I heard that, and I said, "Okay, Vietnam's going to shut down." Sure enough, it closed down and I was still in Europe. The population there—I mean I saw it on German TV, just a little bit, but then again, the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, [the] military newspaper, had articles about it. But yet again, it wasn't, "We lost." It didn't say nothing like that.
- KD: Oh, I see.
- LL: And then, I started playing the Army photographer. And that's when the trouble started. Yeah. [laughter]
- KD: Trouble started?
- LL: I wasn't a bad boy or anything, it's just that I had a specialist who was marching us around—meaning, when you get in the service, they give you a rank. When you start off as a private—
- KD: Right.
- LL: Private first class. Then when you reach fourth class or sergeant, then you become a specialist.
- KD: Specialist, right.
- LL: Well, what happened was, specialists can't march. Soldiers can't march anyone around because you're a specialist. You have to have "hard stripe," as they say. And then again, it was like, "Okay," I guess—we were marching around with this guy and I say, "Hey, me and the other guys—" I've always had fun. [laughter] "We have to go to the depot," I mean—what was it called?—I'm trying to remember what it was called.
- KD: Describe it for me.
- LL: Where the vehicles are at.
- KD: Okay.
- LL: When we get there, we clean up and then sit down and sit down and sit down and sit down. And then go outside and clean up some more. Then I say, "Well, when are we going to take photographs? What's this all about?" Anyway, as it stood, it didn't bother me that much, so I had books to read and things to look at.
- KD: I'm sure it was boring in between, waiting.
- LL: Oh yeah, for something to do. Something to do. And that was it. You were on call in case something happened. And then again, one of those things, my sergeant's name was Martin Wilson. Nice guy, I think he was from the Midwest. He had been to Vietnam. Well, you know, I called him Sergeant Wilson, then put a little slur to it, like Dennis the Menace. It was [high-pitched voice], "Sergeant Wilson." [laughter] I was the only one cutting him like that. And he got angry at me at times.
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: But then again, it was like, there was another girl there, Jenny, she was from California. So she's blonde, blue-eyed, thin lady. We were fun. We were both from California. I was just like, "Hey, surf's up." She was from up north somewhere. And we were just good friends with the other few soldiers that were in our squad. And it was okay. But again, there was another guy [Rick Cuthrol] who was—where was he from? Rochester, New York. And he was like a little magician character. He was a short little guy with a big moustache. And everybody thought he was a little off. He was okay, but he was just eccentric in his own way. He was really loud. [loud sound] You know? And he was real loose, no starch. I figured, hey, what I would see, I would follow to a—to be a good soldier, one would have to be like a good soldier. So I ended up there without a uniform. No uniform.
- KD: How'd you end up without a uniform?

LL: They'd say, "Where's your uniform?" And I'd say, "I didn't know I was supposed to have brought it?" It was my first month there. Then I got some money and went and bought some. I went and bought six uniforms and three pairs of boots. Kept everything shiny, full of starch. Once you put it on, there was a crease. I was, as they say, STRAC, you know, Strategic [Army Corps]. And I played the game just like they wanted.

KD: Okay.

LL: We had duty in the morning. You know, to sweep, clean, pick up cigarette butts, real simple stuff. Nothing to it. We'd have fun and get back in line and march off to your day's duty, which again was to clean up, pick up cigarette butts, do this or that. There's an assignment. You can go take pictures of tire tracks or maybe somebody got killed in maneuvers or something in Europe. People got killed, even there in the motor pool—that's what they called it.

KD: The motor pool.

LL: And I took some shots of this one guy once who got caught between a deuce and a half, you know there are like eight tires in the back and he got mangled between the tires walking backwards and it crushed him to death. There was blood everywhere and I took photos. It was one of those things, and I was like, "Well . . ." You know, the whole thing about death.

I got over it when I was in Mexico when I was a teenager. Because I saw a—I went to a butcher, the butcher's out there in the *matanzas*. And I walked in, the first thing I see is this young boy, already, I saw these guys hitting the cow in the head, right? And this young boy already having a young cow all to himself. They had him all strapped up, and you could just hear his knives clanking together and he just cut away. [*cutting sounds*] I just saw him cutting up an animal. I said, "Wow."

And when I was a little boy, I remember going to the poultry places, out there in East LA—because there were no supermarkets, but there were poultries. And my Niña, she would say, "Hey, quiero patas de pollo." Or she'd choose a chicken and the guy would go back there and [*clucking sound*] the poor chick would get defeathered, still alive. And then they'd do something to his neck. And then they'd cut him up and open him up and gut him right there.

KD: So were you afraid, at least those times?

LL: Well, when I was very little. I was like, "Oh, wow." Wow. It was like—then once my uncle, we had this rabbit. We had him for a few months and then I see my uncle hitting him in the head, boom, boom, boom, and then he's gutting him.

KD: So was this like a natural process to you. Is that what you're describing? That it didn't bother you because you saw that animals are . . .

LL: That we're no different. All we have is are these things in us that are part of—and the rest is muscle and bone. That's all that it is, just muscle and bone. There's nothing here that's vital. You could cut it and we'd still survive. Anything here, and uh oh. Because this is the machine. This is the machine.

So when I saw, you know, photographs and things of people dead, it didn't affect me that much. Because again, in Mexico, I saw two or three guys who had been shot and killed or in an accident. And when I was a teenager, I looked. You know, you look, you come and see it. And you know how people are fascinated with death. And even in that time, more Frankenstein, Dracula, horror . . . And now it's totally, it's . . .

KD: Nothing.

LL: The kids are desensitized. They're like, "Oh, so what? So what?" But yet again, I guess that's the difference in how I am, the kids, and how I talk to them about their moms. I talk about their mothers. "You wouldn't like to see your mother like that, right? You wouldn't want no one to do that to your mom, right?" But still again, "Hey, why are you going to go do that to someone's child? Remember that young guy belongs to some woman who really worked her butt off to have those kids. No matter how she has those kids, it's still a nurturing thing. So just remember that. Don't go hurting anybody else's mother. You can kick his ass, but don't kill him." [*laughter*] There's no sense in that. But again, the military was interesting. I got to go to plenty of museums. I got a Eurail Pass, went traveling around.

KD: Wow. Did that inspire you?

LL: I don't know if it was inspiration. It was like, "Oh, we got to go catch the train again!" Don't want to miss the train, because I want to get on the train right now. It was later in the afternoon, so I could sleep. I'd wake up, and I'd be in a better place, or a different place. And then—it was interesting though. In Germany, finally after about a month, I went to the photography shop. There was a shop on post for dependents and GIs, so you could use it. And all the guys were always like, "Leo, come on, let's go to the photography shop. You know, you can meet Betty." I said, "Nah, man, not yet. Not yet. I'm going to be here for another two and a half years. There's no problem man. Leave me alone." "Want to go downtown man? There's a jazz club down there. It's real nice."

KD: Yeah.

LL: Or, "Hey, do you want to go to a museum?" The GIs would go to the EM club and drink or stay in their rooms. I said, "What's up with that?" I don't understand. There's *oompah-pah*, there's *Fasching*, there's *Oktoberfest*, oh my God. *[laughter]* "You guys are staying in the post?" *[laughter]* And just like now, people would give me flyers. I'd put up flyers and things.

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Leo Limón. He was telling me about going to the photography shop and meeting Betty.

LL: So then I meet Betty. Betty's a nice Midwest woman, middle-aged woman. And she had a teenaged daughter, a real beautiful little girl. And she was a dependent. She's not a soldier, she's a civilian. And she was there in the photography shop. I had passed the photography shop many times on the way to the rec room and the pool tables, where I got to know who the hustlers were.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And who was cheating who, and which of the tables were good, [and] where the good pool cues were, only because I figured maybe I'd make a little bit of money, because I was a pretty good pool player. I had grown up at the LA Times Boys' Club.

KD: Right.

LL: And I knew how to play pool really well. And yeah, so I—

KD: Did you make some money on that?

LL: I made some money, oh yes. I got some people real angry, and they got me afterwards.

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: I remember. But everything was in the dark, and sure enough, they got their money back.

KD: Wow.

LL: But I eventually learned how to beat them at that game. My cousin Richard, over here in the states, I sent him a letter and sent him some money and I said, "Buy me some type of interlocking cue stick, wood or metal." He sent me back this beautiful pool cue, and it was aluminum and it folded into itself into a sleeve, like that.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And it made a funny noise, "bonk." And man, it sure worked in saving my life. Those guys showed up again, I think it was them. They were from another post.

KD: Yeah.

LL: But when I won their money again, *[laughter]* even using the worst stick there in the rec center, I still won. They just couldn't believe I could make shots the way I did. You know, so they got me again, but this time I had this aluminum stick with me. I swung it like a bat and hit a few of them and they ran. No problem. *[laughter]* They didn't want to do anything other than that, and that was fine.

But then again, I was more careful. I decided, "Hey, I'm going to cool it, since they really need their money." They want to take my money but they want to take it back in some violent way. Well, I approach

it with violence. But finally, there was an arts and crafts shop there, and I actually walked in there before I walked into the photography shop.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And there was a sergeant in there. He showed me some arts and crafts. Actually, I made this ring there.

KD: You're kidding.

LL: No, I made this.

KD: What is that made of?

LL: I guess it's nickel or silver.

KD: So you . . .

LL: And he showed me how to cast. But you remember, I was into the metal thing in high school?

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

LL: So I already knew more or less, but it was just at a smaller scale. And then I made leather things: some bags, some wallets and things. Then, I finally said, "Okay"—because I'm good with my hands—I said, okay." The photography thing, the guys are always going over there with Betty, and I knew Betty. "Hello, Betty, how are you doing? I'm Leo." "Oh, you're the one they keep telling me about?" "What? What are you talking about?"

KD: Why? Did you have a reputation?

LL: I don't know. I had been there two months and I'm not showing up there. I'm everywhere else except in my little specialty, I guess. I was supposed to be pigeonholed. I was out in the street. I had my bike now, avoiding cobblestone streets for sure. *[laughter]* But I was going around, and so I can get out.

KD: Right.

LL: I started tasting the wine and the beer, and where we can get some good pizza. And the guys who were there longer than I was, I'd ask them where was a good place to go—or the sergeants who were stationed there for a year or two. I'd say, "Hey, Sarge, can you tell me where?" They'd tell me. I had the map. They'd point it out.

KD: Where's the worst place and then the best place, your exploratory style took you to?

LL: I guess it was right across the field from where we were at.

KD: Yeah?

LL: I went down this dirt road, and it looked like a clump of trees, and it was actually a graveyard. It was real awkward, it was just this rod-iron gate, not tall. Like maybe four feet in height.

KD: Yeah.

LL: But graves, but it looked like the poor man's graveyard. I don't know. It struck me because there was farm, farm, and more farm, and then a freeway. It was in the middle of no place. I don't know, it was just nowhere. And then another place was near the water where the factories were, it was just, like, dead. Nothing was there. *[laughter]* Large pipes with sewage that was going into the water, and I said, "Oh well, it's all different."

KD: Yeah.

LL: But I've seen it in other places too. So I said, "Hey, so what?" It's better to go and check out the touristy things like the buildings and the facades on buildings and so forth. And there were some there. Germany is Germany. It wasn't all blown to pieces. Some of it still survived. Then they brought it back to look a certain way, and it was there.

KD: What were the best places that you explored?

LL: To me, I actually really enjoyed the park. There was this park. The whole company would march out of and then go down the park. And it was like this big, vast park. And the residencies were there on the sides—apartments. And *[it was]* more like a neighborhood situation.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And then it led off into fields, and then it was just like open ground, and then there was this waterway. I guess a tertiary that went to Main *[River]*, and I used to really—well, there were geese and ducks.

KD: Did it remind you of home?

LL: No, it was just like, I don't know . . . I took a photo of some geese real early one morning. There was fog, and the geese were there and it looked real eerie type, but it was beautiful. I had seen it. Then I had a good time in that park also. I made money there.

KD: Really?

LL: Oh yeah, I would tell some of the young ladies in the post, "Hey, have you sent Mom a picture of yourself in uniform in front of the post or all prettied up?"

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: And then there's weepy willow trees and I could take some photos of you if you look real nice. You know, wear some low-cut things, and I'll take some photos of you.

KD: You're very entrepreneurial.

LL: I said, "Hey, might as well use it for something instead of just take photos of . . ." which I did. But as it turned out, just a few of them said okay. And I did, some of the GIs, the men also, "Hey Leo, I hear you're doing this thing." "Yeah, give me some money. You pay for the processing and all that. Give me a few bucks and then hey. And then I'll give the negatives. It's all yours, I'm not going to do nothing with it anyway. So you make a funny face, it's your funny face. You keep [it], you know?" I had two cameras, so I'd take black and white also.

So I did have some recollection of some of those guys and some of those young ladies. And again, a little bit of money and then—that was one of the places I really enjoyed—that park, just because it was serene. Just like in the LA River here. You go inside the LA River, there's all kinds of growth and there's some ducks. There might be some large walls there, but then it's like, "Wow," you're in the middle of the city and then you're not. Then you hear the rustling of the water. And sometimes now, there's carp swimming around. I'm like, "Wow, this is fantastic." I've been going there since I was a little boy.

KD: So when you come back from the service, what's the first thing you do?

LL: I surprise everybody. I didn't tell them I was coming back.

KD: You didn't?

LL: No. They knew that I was getting out the latter part of '76, and when I come out, "Hey, I'll come back home and let's see what we can do. I'll just come back and I'll be back." And I came back and I went to my sister's house in Glassell Park, my sister Nellie. Her and Raymond lived there with their little girl, Maria Teresa. She was just a baby when I had left, and now she was four or five years old, a cute little spunky thing. She was running around and everybody was like, "Look, it's Leo!" I knocked on the door.

KD: Did you like causing that kind of—

LL: I'm up at six in the morning for years, right?

KD: Right.

LL: So I'm here at the front door at eight in the morning, they're like, *[laughter]* on a Saturday. I woke them all up. My sister Tomasa was pregnant. Two days later she gave birth to my niece Yvette Marie. They were like, *[crying]* "He's back." "Leo put on some clothes," and "He walks around the house naked. Oh my God."

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: "You've got to find some clothes." It was interesting, I had gone—back in Europe now. I don't know, I was there a year. I was like, "Well . . ." You know, there were all the drugs you wanted in the military.

KD: Yeah.

LL: Anything. And I knew it. And I saw it. And I experienced some of it. But I said, "No, I'll drink some of the wine, some of the beer, that's fine, the local stuff." But then I also said I really wanted to lose more weight. And when I get back home it's going to be a longer life if I don't get back home saying, "Hey, it was all about wine and beer, drugs, women, men, whatever it was." So I saw something that was posted up on transcendental meditation. And I went off into transcendental meditation. *[laughter]*

KD: You did?

LL: Went to some classes, got a mantra. Then I was meditating like crazy.

- KD: What were you meditating on?
- LL: A mantra.
- KD: Can I ask what your mantra was?
- LL: No, no. As they say, "This is yours."
- KD: Yeah, okay.
- LL: And so I'd sit there and meditate in the morning, in the evening, for fifteen minutes. It changed me. It really changed me.
- KD: Tell me about that change.
- LL: Oh, the change was interesting because the meditation would rest my conscience much more than just deep rest when I would go to sleep. Then I'd find that I'd come out of meditation in the morning time, it felt great. I was feeling better. Then I was watching what I was eating. The cereals, even if it was just the little Kellogg's stuff, or oatmeal. That's what I was eating. I was avoiding all of that greasy stuff and eggs, and all that good stuff that used to be good. *[laughter]* I started a regimentation of running in the morning—two or three miles—running by the post and then going back to this little place I was staying at, and then going back to the post in the morning. It was cool. I was able, again, to lead some of the PT, physical training—
- KD: Really?
- LL: Because I was losing weight and I was feeling great. I guess again . . . There was this woman, Susan. What was her husband's name? He was the tuba player for the symphony. She was into the arts, fell in love. She was already a married woman, but she was hot. I don't know. Nothing ever became of it, but she kept saying, "What's happening to you? Leo, where you going? Why don't you come over to the shop, the arts and crafts shop?" I stopped going to the arts and crafts shop. I just started going running after our work session. Then I'd go off into this whole other thing, where it was, *[breathing sound]* and I got to breathing and read more into the pranayama. Got books on yoga.
- KD: Really?
- LL: Then I was taking a class in tae kwon do. Then I'd buy magazines on black belt this, black belt that. Then I'd look in the back pages and there were advertisements for all kinds of publicity on books and so on. So I said, "What's this tai chi?" I bought books on tai chi, started doing tai chi in the morning also. Then I found out that there are so many hard fists, and so *[few]* open palmed *[styles]*. I started to discover the yin-yang, and I started to read about the philosophy of Zen and the Tao and so on. I said, "Oh, okay. I kind of get that."
- KD: Did you say this is the period where your spiritual life really opens up?
- LL: Well, I think the spiritual stuff really opened up when I went to some museums and I saw indigenous artifacts and I went, "Wow, what the hell are they doing here?" I said, "I can't go anywhere in LA," except maybe the Southwest Museum, where I grew up at. And I'd go in there and see it there, but—you know, it's like . . . *[sighs]*
- KD: Not Mesoamerican.
- LL: Nope. Or North American Indian.
- KD: Exactly.
- LL: And that's when I started thinking about, "Wow, Chicano power. I got to go back and really hone in and study more about our past to really know more about it so when I talk about it," because now I know what some of the schools of art, so called, are about. So when I came back, I said, "This is wonderful, guys." I met up with some of the guys I went to *[art school]* with, when I went off to Europe in the army and all of that. I said, "Show me some of the books." I would say, "Oh, I went there and I saw that. Oh yeah!" And they were like, "Oh that Leo." *[sigh]*
- KD: What do you mean?
- LL: He already experienced it].
- KD: Oh.

- LL: Something that would take them years to find and get away from what they're doing. They'd have to go up and experience that.
- KD: I had read that you studied art in Europe. Is that what you're describing to me? This was your informal education? Or was there something more formal?
- LL: No, that was it. That was it.
- KD: Now, it sounds like it was part of your personality, this discovery. So was it conscious? You deliberately went to the museum and thought, "I want to see this." Or was it part of your own, like I said, going on an adventure and journey and path?
- LL: That was my personality.
- KD: It was just part of—
- LL: It [was] just the spirit, everything. Like I say, my stars were aligned with this path I was on. I think years later . . . Reading Vine Deloria Jr. But anyway, it was the Red Road I was on. But I had to go in that direction. It didn't matter. I was a [native] out there. I was a Chicano [native] out there, because I see Chicano, Chicana. And I pertain now toward more, what I call now, Chicanana.
- KD: Chicanana?
- LL: Chicanana, because I was born into this world by a Chicana, and my nana gave birth to my mother, who was a Chicana. Chic-anana, or Chi-cana-na. And I like that better than Chicano/Chicana. Let's stop putting a slash between them and just be reverent to our nanas. And again, right now, it's hitting you right now that I think of the tragedy in this ideal showing up here to become what this is now.
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: Fourteen ninety-two and all of that. It hurts me. Our grandmothers and the children that died because of the lies, the lies, the lies. The doctrine of discovery. It's all related.
- KD: When did you start studying those things? You said that when you were in your—when you came upon some Mesoamerican artifacts and wanted to learn more. Does that learning continue during the time you are in the service or when you come back, hitting the books?
- LL: No, when I came back.
- KD: Okay.
- LL: When I was over in Europe, I wanted to find out about the Third Reich, wanted to find out about Stalin and Trotsky and Lenin. Carlos had given me that information.
- KD: Right.
- LL: I had gone to—what was that? RCP? The Revolutionary Communist Party.
- KD: The Revolutionary Communist Party.
- LL: RCP meetings here—a few of them—and I said, "What are we arguing about? What are they talking about, man? Aren't you supposed to be good with each other to live a better life with each other?" And then it's the other extreme they were talking about. And back then I wasn't consciously making a—other than an open comment that these guys are fighting with each other—I don't want none of that. You know, there's something better out there. I'd rather be happy in my life. If you make the other—if you make the neighbors—if you're okay with your neighbors, that's cool. Do you know who your neighbors are? Do you know who lives across the street?
- KD: Right.
- LL: It's make love, not war. Peace, peace, you know? What do you want to look like, like a soldier, like you're trained and you can kill if need be? Or hey, I can be functional and help the community in a better way. By what? When coming back, some of the younger friends I had kind of feared me.
- KD: Really?
- LL: Yeah, they said, "Wow, you've been out there in the Army." I just go, "Yeah," and wave my hands. And you're like, "Ooh." [laughter] That didn't take long to get over, but they'd kind of chuckle nervously.
- KD: Wow.

LL: Oh no, I'm not a killer bro, relax. But I can kill if I have to with my hands. I've learned martial arts and that kind of stuff.

KD: Tell me about the first Day of the Dead that you observed. You said it was very near the day you came back.

LL: Yes. What was it, the twenty-ninth? I think I got out of the service the twenty-ninth of October, and then a few days later, November 2. I came back and I saw Carlos and he said, "Hey, there's a . . ." I went to Frank's house, Frank Romero's house. Then there was Frank Romero, [who] hadn't changed much, and he was still nervous as ever. And the place didn't look any different. Was still the worst house on the block. Never took care of his garden or anything, and the welfare guy . . .

But still again, he told me about Self Help Graphics. They were going to have this whole thing. My cousin, Richard, lent me his hopped up Camaro with big wheels and a hot motor. It was cool. I could drive it. It had a stick shift. I called some of my friends, and I only found that James Borders, who was a black friend of mine—I think he had gone to Crenshaw High School. But he was in the Saturday tutor art class. [I] went for him, saw his mom again and his lovely sister, and we went to the Day of the Dead celebration. It was the old First Street opening, where they'd open the gate.

KD: Right.

LL: And I'd walk in, and "Wow," check out the skeleton thing they were going through.

KD: Do you remember the style of the *altares* they were doing?

LL: Again, it was photography, candles, *pan de muerto*, fruits, offerings, some indigenous things were mixed in there. The things that you could buy at Olvera Street, the tourist type stuff. But then the march started and I said, "Okay, all right." I saw people with masks.

KD: Oh, the procession that they would do.

LL: Yes.

KD: Did you go to the cemetery?

LL: It was at the [Evergreen] Cemetery.

KD: Oh, okay.

LL: And we were coming out. And I pull out my Swiss army knife and I went over to the ivy and I cut some large ivy off of there, some large branches—the vines—and I made [corona] reeds and put them over my head. And I went to my black friend, and he put it on and he was like, "Wow, this is crazy, this is crazy, this is crazy." He had heard about it, but never participated. Then we went through the procession, went through the event that they had. Self Help Graphics, on the third floor I think it was, at their old location.

KD: Yeah, their old location.

LL: It was fantastic. I said, "This is it. I'll be back next year for sure." I went and said hello to Sister Karen. She didn't remember me. And I couldn't find Frank. I didn't know where Frank was—Hernández. But still I said, "Hey this is cool." I went looking for Frank. I found Frank. Frank was really in a bad way. He was doing drugs, had gained some weight. There was no direction, no real direction he was headed in. I said, "Frank, hey, you going to school? What are you doing?" Nothing much.

Then Carlos Almaraz was painting some mural. He was painting it with Judithe Hernández. And they were at the Ramona Gardens painting this mural. And that's when I got back and saw them there. Actually, I was an admirer of Judithe. She had been at Lincoln High School, two or three years prior to my arrival there, and what she had left behind, I actually stepped into her shoes.

KD: Really, what do you mean?

LL: Because this art director, teacher there, Mrs. Downey, had helped Judithe along, I guess, with more introduction into the arts and so on. Judithe could draw like—wow, I was like, "Wow." I was, like, overwhelmed. She was really good. Then I met her. "Wow, I remember seeing you at Otis. You were walking around with some of the other students, chuckling and laughing." She remembered me, but not me. I was just this high school kid with a sketchbook and Army fatigues.

KD: So meeting these artists, did you get a sense of what you were going to do?

- LL: Oh yes. Very much so. Probably high school, leaving high school, it was already like, “I’m on this path and I have this talent.” And they taught me how to think before I draw, or how to think-draw. But again, all I ever wanted to do was to do [tuff] drawings.
- KD: What do you mean, [tuff]?
- LL: Just things that would have an effect. When people would see it, they’d go, “Wow, that’s interesting. That’s different than what the other person’s doing.” It was just a term back then. “Hey, that’s tuff.”
- KD: Oh, okay. I know what you mean, “tuff.”
- LL: Tuff stuff.
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: Yeah. So I said, “That’s too simple,” you know? That’s too simple. [*laughter*] When I came back from the service, it’s like I’m going to jump back into something—I went to the library and I started looking at books on indigenous things. [*bells ringing*]
- KD: Can we pause for the *paletero*?
- LL: Ah, yes.
- KD: [*laughter*] There you go. [*inaudible*]
- LL: So I found some books on indigenous teachings, and I said, “Oh, this is interesting.” Read a few books on Castaneda—Carlos—and I said, “Okay, the experience.” And I said, “Wow, this is interesting, again.” And when I had gone to Self Help Graphics, the Day of the Dead was over, and it was 1977. I came across Michael Amescua. And then I went there and saw him there and said hello to him. He and—there were other people, but now it was like seven or eight years later than when I first went to Self Help Graphics. Carlos and—I can’t remember the name. Bueno y Ybarro, Ybarra y Bueno. [Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibañez—ed.]
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: They were these two gay artists from Mexico who were working, doing things with Sister Karen. And Frank Hernández was there, on and off I think. Then years later, they weren’t there. Michael, Linda Vallejo was there, and Cecilia Quintero—I think she was there. And they had the Barrio Mobile Art Studio, truck thing. They’d go out and give art classes and things of that matter.
- KD: Really?
- LL: And they had this little screen-printing shop area. And lo and behold, I’m with Carlos, bothering him a lot. I needed work, I need something. I needed to make some money somehow, some way. I decided I’d start going to school and get the GI bill thing, and I met my wife, right. Then, she was just a young lady who walked into the Mechicano Art Center that had moved, when I left LA. They had moved from the location in East LA to Figueroa Street, right up here on Avenue 54, I think it is.
- KD: Right.
- LL: They were right on the corner. I walked in and they say, “Hi, hey, there’s Limón!” And Carlos Almaraz and Guillermo Bejarano were there—what, two buildings, a parking lot away, in some apartments they called “The Office.” But there was a bedroom in there also, so Guillermo lived in there. And I was like, “Hey, you know, what can I do? How can I help?” They said, “Make some prints.” You know? I said, “What do I have to do?”
- KD: Had you made prints before?
- LL: No, not really. I had cut a design of a face. I was into these face things with heads, like half heads and half face and—I saw some illustration like that in some magazine years before—I did it for the Mechicano Art Center. I said “Mechicano,” everybody said “mEE-chicano,” but I said, “Mechicano.” But I said, “Hey, can I make some prints?” Lo and behold, back in Europe, I had ordered some magazines through the mail on tattooing. You know, the machines and so on, and I had gotten a tattoo at Sammy’s Tattoo Parlor out there by the [Main] river. And there were all of these designs, and I said, “Hey, I’ll do some birds.” But I made these bird designs for the Mechicano Art Center, six or seven of them I think. And I was using the studio known as the “ChismeArte.”

- KD: ChismeArte, right.
- LL: The studios, and—
- KD: You mean the magazine [*ChismeArte*]?
- LL: Yes. So I went in there. And they had a table at the Mechicano itself, and then I'd start trying to learn how to cut stencils. And they'd say, "Just don't cut through the plastic," and I did, and I did, and I did. And I got a little bit better. Then it was interesting that they had a stamp and not—an embossing stamp.
- KD: For the prints?
- LL: For the prints. And then they said, "Sign them like this." I had no idea about the print, how the series would go. I had never been taught that.
- KD: Okay.
- LL: So it was like, well, okay. I signed, dated it, put my name on it. Then they did a calendar for that year in 1977. And I think 1977 was also the year that I went to a meeting for the *Días de los Muertos* for that year. And Carlos and Frank—was it Frank, no it was Guillermo and Carlos and myself—went to a meeting at Self Help Graphics. And I said, "Hey, I got a '59 Chevy pickup, and I'll do something. A float."
- KD: A float?
- LL: A float. [*laughter*] I was the first one that came on four wheels.
- KD: You're kidding me.
- LL: Carlos did a Virgen de Guadalupe, put it on top of the cab. And then the back—I built this type of structure on the back. There's photos.
- KD: Was it a homage to the Virgen, or was it playful?
- LL: It was playful. Frank's mother—Frank Romero's mother and her girlfriends made paper—
- KD: Paper flowers?
- LL: Paper napkin flowers.
- KD: Yeah. Yeah.
- LL: And I put it all over it. And I forgot, I should have taken all of that stuff to Self Help Graphics and put it on there. I put it all on there in Frank's front yard that morning. And at five miles an hour, I slowly crawled through Sunset Boulevard, Brooklyn Avenue [*laughter*] until I got to the top of Evergreen and the parade, the procession was just coming up the hill. *Beep, beep, beep*. Everybody yelled, "Yeah! The float's here!" And the news media guys were there. And it was really a pumped up thing by then. And I turned around. The police gave me an escort and I led the parade, with the Virgen in the front, was a big skull I did with spray and glitter, and it said, "Los Four." And somebody ripped it off in the parking lot.
- KD: Oh.
- LL: Somebody ripped it off.
- KD: So this was a venture of Los Four?
- LL: Yes. Yes. Then we had a showing, posters and banners at Cal Poly Pomona or something like that. I remember that.
- KD: Was this the time that Judithe was working with Los Four?
- LL: Yes. Yes. Then we all had images. Frank brought some canvas—you know, canvases with grommets, put it in already—and said, "Here, whatever you want to do."
- KD: Was that, like, one of your first exhibitions then?
- LL: With them? Yes.
- KD: Tell me about some of your other earlier exhibitions. You're gone while the *Chicanarte* [exhibition] in '75 takes place.
- LL: Oh yeah, *Chicanarte* took place. Yeah, in the service, in Europe, I received this packet from Carlos, and it's [when] Los Four are born. And I'm like, "Wow, look at this. This is great." This foldout thing.
- KD: Wow, yeah.
- LL: And I'm like, "Wow, why didn't they tell me? I didn't even know they were going to have this. Hey, I could have been Los Five!"

KD: *[laughter]*

LL: Maybe. But, you know, I never had picked up a brush. I wasn't—I had never taken a painting class. Those guys were doing things like that, and I was always drawing, I was always illustrating. I still never found painting as attractive as something I want to do. Even until today, I have to paint. I know I make some money off it. But it's that I'm a draftsman first, painter, eh, later. And I take it like that. I really do. I learn how to draw, and that's what I do best. And that's what I said. I learned how to think, and then I learned how to draw. That's what I do easiest. It's like breathing. When I see Carlos . . . In my younger years, I'd watch him. And he thinks about what he's going to paint, how he's doing it. It's cool. It rubbed off. People have definitely compared—not my painting—but my drawing to his.

KD: But your drawing.

LL: And I go, "Well, you have to remember, he already had experience in what he was doing, but he was also looking through my sketchbooks." And I already had a very good grasp of the illustrative feel. I was drawing everything that was out there. And I was using, you name it: inks, some pastels, and techniques that I had seen in the art school there.

KD: Yeah.

LL: Hey, tell me it didn't rub off.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And the stuff he was doing, hey, of course. He already had a style or a sense of how his figures, or how he was going to draw things. And when I'd show up with some books on Saul Steinberg, he was like, "Hey, ese!" I'd said, "Did you see this, yeah?" He'd go, "Where'd you get that?" And when I got some jobs doing some little strips—what was it? I was doing something with animation, after I did this thing with the Frank Zappa thing. I got a job in Santa Monica doing some animation stuff, and Carlos was like, "Hey, ese!" It was always, "Hey, ese!"

KD: Was that before you went into the service or after?

LL: Yes, before.

KD: Wow.

LL: I said, "Hey—"

KD: Did you come back and go into that line of work after the service then, since you already had some—

LL: No.

KD: No?

LL: Went back into school. I was going to take computer typesetting. And it was like a machine the size of this room.

KD: *[laughter]* Yes.

LL: Tickertape.

KD: Yes.

LL: And then I was sitting there, and I read an article about, hey, it's going to have effects on your testicles and this and you'll have crooked babies.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And I said, "Oh, I'm not going to take this." It was interesting, I didn't go back for the second—the first session was all about design and this and that. I was like, "Ugh, jeez, this is real boring." But yet again, it was okay. I was helping out the instructor a lot. But then again, *[laughter]* I was, like, enjoying myself. This art thing I have already. I want to learn how to do that. Then I start hearing about the new computers coming out, and it all just passed me. I could have been there. It was all there and I probably could have been the first to have everything. I'd probably be the, you know—but it's something different, that's all I say. It's all the way the stars are aligned to how it is today. That's fine. No problem. I'm just happy that it's another beautiful day for everyone and everything.

KD: What do you think some of your early key opportunities were?

LL: As far as?

KD: As far as an artist.

LL: Oh, just in the finding or recognizing or coming across individuals who had a talent. My high school art teacher. The metal shop teacher in junior high school, Bill what's-his-name from the Boys' Club. Just influences—men again. Women, I saw, but they weren't as influential. Mrs. Downey was in high school. She was the department head. She was the grandmaster flash. She said, "Everybody," and I said, "Sure, I can have that back room? Great!"

KD: When did you start painting the cats?

LL: Around 1970, the thing at the art school. I went there and said, "Oh, wow, people do things in art." The mural painters do their murals and Mel Ramos does women on animals. And this other guy did churches in Europe. I said, "Hmm." Then there's Peter Max and the Beatles. Then I remember the cats way down Los Feliz. I lived in this area over here.

KD: Yeah.

LL: But still, it was my backyard and I started riding my bike, going down there. I had a friend who lived down there and I'd go see him. Then I said, "Hey, this is interesting." Lo and behold, I stopped down there and went down there and saw the drain covers, and I remember the cats. I said, "Hey, maybe I'll just come and paint a cat." And I did with a brush and paint. And then it was years later, [laughter] just years later that I came across Trade Tech [Los Angeles Trade Technical College] around 1978, '79. And Mr. Ernest—I went to a class in sign graphics, and he said, "Remember, time and place." Then I reverted all the way back to 1970 when I was out there in an old hat and the paint is sticking and its enamel—is this the right enamel? This is house enamel?

KD: Oh, you were using enamel.

LL: Then I tried latex and this roller. And then, aw man, things can get messy, as I discovered. And then one day, you know, and I saw a dead spray can. I picked it up and said, "Hey, this might have a possibility." So, again, I was buying a few cans of spray and then spraying right on and discovering I better use an undercoat. I started to see that art, art had arrived in high school.

KD: Right.

LL: When I got there in '68 instead of '69—the art class and so on, the Saturday tutor art class—there were books on art techniques. And the teachers said, "Hey, you have to put rabbit glue over your canvas." I said, "Rabbit glue, what the hell is that?" They didn't even sell that at the store. [laughter]

KD: No.

LL: It's just gesso. Different times. "Mrs. Downy, it's gesso." "Oh, that junk?" [laughter] Mr. Keck was saying, "Hey, all of that acrylic is going to turn gray one day." So what am I going to paint for? I'll just draw.

KD: You told me once when we met at a gallery that there was a woman with children painting cats. Was she—

LL: Yes, oh yes, Mrs. Jacquie Meyer. Her son gave me a call [in] 1997. Lewis MacAdams from the Friends of the LA River wrote an article about me and the cats in the *LA Weekly*. And then her son—I don't remember his name—gave me a call and said, "My mom would put us on the little red wagon and paint paintbrushes and rollers and whatever. And we went down there and painted the cats. And that was in the late '50s." So a little boy from the neighborhood here, on a field trip, which we had funding for back then, went to the zoo. And there's the cats. Ah, love cats. Felix, yeah, right! That's a river? Yes. I don't know. You know? Then I remember my uncles having properties on Elysian Valley, Frogtown. Going down there and seeing them and throwing a rock at it, and bonk!

KD: [laughter]

LL: And then rather than it—throwing rocks at bottles or something else. The place was empty and barren, just rocks. [The US Army Corps of Engineers] used to come in and tear down any vegetation back in those days, the '60s. So lo and behold, along comes the art idea. I went down there and said, "Hey, I'll paint a cat." I don't know, it was like Felix. I tried. Then I went up further up to Los Feliz. I went up there to paint one. Then I saw cops up there, more cops up there than down here. I said, "Oh, I'll stay down here. Then

again, I was always apprehensive. I said, “[Pop] did teach me right.” You don’t want to destroy private property or anything, so I just never documented anything. I still didn’t know this or that about a camera.

KD: When did you start to document your work? Much later?

LL: In the [’80s], I think?

KD: Wow.

LL: Yeah. It’s just something I just go do, like ride a bike, do something. And then some of the kids down there. One guy I saw, chubby guy, older guy, [I] said, “Hey cat, what’s up!” He said, “What?” I said, “Yeah man, I remember seeing you years ago, man. I used to come down here, man.” He said, “You remember me?” [laughter] Then I met my *tocayo*, a namesake, some kid. “Hey Leo, remember me?” Another Leo from Frogtown. “Hey man, what you doing? You going to go paint some cats? Want a beer?” [laughter] Seven or eight Frogtown homies down there cruising their bikes. It’s interesting, about two years ago, they got a twenty-four pack and a big boom box, and they’re scrawling some names on [a] wall down there.

KD: [laughter]

LL: “What’s up!” “Hey man!”

KD: Tell me about the other organization you were a part of, Aztlán Cultural Arts Foundation.

LL: Aztlán came in the ’90s actually.

KD: Oh, okay. That’s much later.

LL: But when I was going to the East LA Occupational Center, in ’77 or ’78, somewhere around there. Then my first son was born, my son Sol Augustin. I was going to classes there. Then I started going to Trade Tech in ’79. Then in 1980, my son Pablo was born. I had been going to Self Help—not Self Help Graphics, but to Trade Tech. I’m on the bus one day—I don’t know, my car broke down or something—I’m on the bus and I come across Michael Amescua. And he’s on the bus and he goes, “Hey homey, what’s up? Hey, Sister Karen is looking for a graphic artist or something. Why don’t you come on down. We’ve moved. We’ve moved.” “Where’d you go?” “Gage and Brooklyn Avenue.” “Isn’t that the CYO building?” He goes, “Yeah, we’re there.” “Two-story building?” “Yeah.” So I said, “Okay. Hello. Hey, hi, this is Leo Limón.”

Well, you asked me about organizations. In 1977, I told Carlos, “Hey, I’m going to do a float.” Yeah, cool. Then I said, “Hey, how about working it out so I can go down to Self Help Graphics and make some prints?” When I had left to the service, it was myself and Frank and Carlos and Gilbert and Beto. But, I had met Gilbert, but Beto and I had never . . . No, I had met Beto once or twice.

KD: Beto?

LL: De la Rocha.

KD: De la Rocha.

LL: So, lo and behold, [laughter] I come back and Carlos has a squad of a few guys. It was John Valadez, George Yepes, Richard Duardo, and Judithe was there—Hernández. And I come back and you know, [laughter] I just come back and, “What’s up everybody? What’s happening?” And everyone is like, “Who’s the new guy?” The *Chicanarte* had gotten together.

KD: Right.

LL: And that thing, and I wasn’t there. And I’m like, “Chicano power, *orale*,” and Carlos is like, “Oh, that’s Leo.” That was, “That’s Leo.” And I’m just doing things, [laughter] you know? And it’s like the training then really set in for the military clean up. I had a broom. “Hey, you guys can sit around all you want. I don’t care.” Clean up Mechicano, sweep out the front and this and that. Everybody’s like, “What the hell is this hurricane doing here?”

KD: [laughter]

LL: Shit. You know?

KD: Were you an organizer and cleaner?

LL: Well, just that I said, “Somebody’s got to do it.” And hey, it’s this much out of this much time I have on this earth. The other hands aren’t working. That’s what I keep telling kids. “Hey, get a broom. Get a life.”

KD: What other roles did you play in these organizations, Mechicano and Self Help?

- LL: Well, before we get there—
- KD: Okay.
- LL: I said, “Carlos, blah-blah-blah-blah.” Richard Duardo heard it? And he goes, “Hey Limón, I’m working at Gemini GEL.” I said, “I heard about that. That’s a famous print place right?”
- KD: Right.
- LL: And he goes, “Yeah. And I just got out of UCLA and I’m doing something with Self Help Graphics.” And I said—and Frank said, “Hey, you can use my garage.” The garage had holes in the roof.
- KD: Use it for what?
- LL: Printing.
- KD: Wow.
- LL: And I said, “All right Richard.” We showed up, went in there, cleaned it out, as much as we could. Interestingly enough, remember that show that the Los Four people had? They had thrown their paintings in there and they were rotting away. And the paintings were just coming off the canvases after a few years. They were coming right off because of wear and tear. I had this Chevy and we threw this junk in there. And then well, we needed something to throw on top of these things and tied it down. And then we threw them into the trash when we got there. [*laughter*]
- KD: You used the canvases on the paintings as your tarp to cover your trash?
- LL: And just left them there in the trash because Frank didn’t want them. Frank didn’t want them.
- KD: So, you’re surrounded by people who don’t document their work.
- LL: It’s not a conscious thing.
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: Unless you start saying, “Hey, we have value,” you know? But again, what is it? I don’t know what it is. You know, unless we start putting it out, “It has value,” then people are going to start saving their things. And I guess we’re going to be like “them”, whoever “them” is, who want to save everything, but for what, again? It’s the way we’re being treated.
- KD: Yeah. So you clean up this garage and—
- LL: We went in there, [*laughter*] and then Frank walks in, “Oh shit, aw shit, aw shit, aw shit!” He went, “You could have thrown this away, and now this!” And he made another mess, and Richard and I are like, “Oh damn.” Then Carlos Almaraz is steaming right ahead. They had a meeting, had a meeting, this and that, and then somehow someone found this location right across from the Highland Park Theatre on Avenue 58. [Highland Theatre is at Avenue 56 and Highland Avenue —ed.] Lo and behold, we all came together. “Hey, we’ve got to pay some rent. Here’s a space. Everybody gets a little space.” And the Public Art Center was born, [Centro de] Arte Público.
- KD: Right.
- LL: Guillermo [Bejarano] was doing his *ChismeArte* [magazine]. Everybody was doing things. Lo and behold. [*refers to artwork*]
- KD: What’s that?
- LL: You never saw this, *Tales from the Barrio*? By Los Four and Friends?
- KD: No, I haven’t seen that, it’s gorgeous.
- LL: And again, everybody had little things they were trying to do.
- KD: Did Liberty Hill fund this?
- LL: Yes. Yes.
- KD: That’s amazing.
- LL: And *ChismeArte*, Guillermo, El Concilio, that’s at a distance, but it was there with people who were working [with] the Concilio. I got to know people and then that was the Public Art Center. The Mechicano was right down the street and—
- KD: Now, from what I understand, the Public Art Center was doing is basically—
- LL: See? [*refers to photograph*] Soon to be my wife.

- KD: Oh, that's Margarita.
- LL: Yes. Here I am, and here's another one of my little things. I don't know, it looks like Carlos's thing. I never did that kind of stuff. But yeah, everybody had their stuff doing their thing.
- KD: Commercial ventures, right? Signed paintings, graphics—
- LL: Signed paintings, murals—
- KD: Murals.
- LL: The mural thing was really taking off. Let's go back to 1970 or '71. Carlos tells me, "Hey, Lukman [Glasgow] is looking for more artists to do something on Whittier Boulevard." That's right, '71, that's right, right after the big blowouts, the Chicano Moratorium.
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: Again, appease the population. I said, "Okay, hey, how about—sure, I want to go paint a mural." Here's the locations. I met Lukman Glasgow. Lukman Glasgow, he was a potter, but he had administrative talent and he was working for the Department of Public Works or—no, no, no, Parks and Rec. I meet him and he says, "Hey, here are the locations at Echo Park, and there's the warehouse and the scaffolds and all of this. We can only pay you a hundred and fifty dollars to paint a mural." And I said, "Yeah, fine. I don't know how much it's really worth, but it's okay. No problem." So they gave me addresses, and I went and looked and I found something up above a storefront. No store, just storage actually, and said, "Oh cool, I'll do it there." It was already primed, and I said, "Okay." I measured it, went home, did a drawing of these heads coming out of heads and these hands coming like clenched fists and peace signs, and I said, "Okay, cool." And I got my brother to help me, and my dad lent me his truck. We went up there and got the materials and stuff, and I was ready to go paint a mural. I had gone and seen the other guys, and they were slopping paint and moving it.
- KD: Yeah. These are—
- LL: Other artists.
- KD: Sponsored by Glasgow?
- LL: Department of Parks and Recreation.
- KD: Right, Parks and Rec.
- LL: I said, "Cool." I'm getting the paints and things, and I look over there and I see these boxes full of spray paint. And I look at the liquid and go, "Hey." And he goes, "Oh, you can use whatever you want." I put all those brushes back, got the spray can. My brother was salsa-ing off for hours—and I got up there and I did a spray can mural.
- KD: Wow.
- LL: *[laughter]* So I must be AOG, like I tell the young people. I'm an ancient oldie but goodie.
- KD: *[laughter]* But goodie.
- LL: But again, I guess that caught on with the spray can, and then that's why I went down to the river and kept painting cats. But then, enough of that. Back to the Public Art Center, the Mechicano, being up here. We had art shows there. I was able to show some art, sell some art through the Mechicano Art Center. Then the Public Art Center thing opened up and the Mechicano faded away.
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: They had to close. Again, no money, no funds. And it was too small. And then a small place for screen printing, without the prints we'd come across. But you have to write grants and then you have—and then the mural thing they were doing out there in the community was fading away because everybody had been painting murals, you know? And I don't know if that was the get-go or the start up—the initial pull on the rope to start the motor in 1970 with Carlos and all those other guys along Whittier Boulevard. I think it was. And then it caught on at Pomona and it was full blast. And I got back [from the Army]. Estrada Courts and Ramona Gardens and the streets had murals everywhere. I was like, "Wow."
- KD: What kinds of projects did you do or get through Mechicano or the Public Art Center?
- LL: I helped John Valadez paint some of his murals, [and] Carlos and Frank. I'd just go out there, a few days.

KD: What kind of work did they give you that they identified was your talent? Because that's what I'm learning. Someone does this, some does that. What did they identify as your talent?

LL: I was just general.

KD: Really?

LL: "Just paint in, Leo, just paint it in." That's cool. I had talent, but I wasn't into faces or anatomy or anything like that. I had never taken a painting class, and I wasn't really even painting. I was doing things like—the prints came easy because I could draw and then Richard Duardo, God bless you, [said,] "Here Limón, this is for you." He gave me this really, really great stencil-cutting swivel knife. I said, "Really? All right, *ese*." Only because I jumped on board with him to be a part of the screen printing idea at the Public Art Center.

KD: Okay.

LL: Which wouldn't have happened if I hadn't said, "Yeah," when they said, "Leo, you want to come with us to paint murals?" I should have, but I said, "No man. Richard, he's got nobody. I'm going to go with him."

KD: For the Gemini [GEL] project?

LL: No, the Gemini was out there.

KD: Oh, okay.

LL: This was the Hecho en Aztlán adventure with Richard Duardo and his family. And I tried. He just basically pointed at things and I didn't know what to do. I didn't have no screen printing. But he had to teach me how to cut and draw, and I started doing things. And then I was going to Trade Tech. I couldn't pay the rent there, so that faded out. They had to come for the key because I didn't want to let it go. There was too much attachment to let it go. And then I saw Michael Amescua, and then he said, "Self Help Graphics moved. Why don't you come down?" in 1980. I show up, [and] Sister Karen said, "Well, we'll give you a month's trial." I said, "Okay." Ten years later, "I got to go. It's been fun."

KD: Tell me what you did for ten years? Then we'll come back to the other things, but what'd you do at Self Help for ten years?

LL: Well, I started teaching kids about screen printing and making stencils, real quick types of stencils. I had learned more about screen printing. Then I was taking the lettering course in sign graphics at Trade Tech. And I knew more now about sign painting. And I had actually told myself way back in high school, "We're going to need signs. Somebody has to make signs." Then, at the Mechicano, somebody has to make signs. I can't really make signs. Then I said, "I want to get into computer graphics," when I came out of the service.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And I said, "Yeah, I can make letter forms, maybe I can make signs." Then I went and took the sign painting class, got to Trade Tech. "No problem Sister Karen. What do you want?" [*laughter*] Sure enough, she was the organization that it took and could use Leo. And Leo—and Sister Karen was more than happy to accommodate me with some supplies that I needed for painting signs for her. I just took off into you name it. Grabbed the broom, swept the place, moved Sister Karen's junk out of the way. Then I said—or, her "supplies." Excuse me.

KD: [*laughter*]

LL: And then I simply just went into teaching kids in a little corner. Then I got the whole area. This was 1980. Then I said, "Sister Karen, I'm in . . ." I can't remember his last name, he was printing for Self Help Graphics on and off. He was freelance.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And he came by. I had met him. *Mirenos*—

[*break in audio*]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Leo Limón, and today is October 4, 2007. Leo was telling me about his work at Self Help Graphics and working with a person named Jaime.

LL: Jaime was Méxicano, and he had been printing for Self Help Graphics for I guess a few years in their old location. And when he met me, he was happy to see that I knew how to cut stencils really well. Richard

Duardo had shown me the master's touch, and I had printed with Richard Duardo at the Public Art Center. And the first prints that we did out of Self Help Graphics—here, I'm showing Karen Davalos the *Tales from the Barrio*—were small black and white drawings that I did for Día de los Muertos. And so, those you should look for in case you ever want something that's archival or timely.

It was an empty studio space with a table, no racks, and we threw all the paper [prints] on the floor. And all that night we cut up these prints, little ones, and I sold a few of them at the Día de los Muertos for 1977, along with that float. So busy—I don't know what busy is. I guess it's just energy. If you got the energy, hey, then again, it's okay. But there was again—thank you, Richard Duardo, because he has helped in just knowing silkscreen. It has helped me out. When I need money, hey, I pull out some prints. Now it's posters. It's even cheaper than a print. Now my prints are just more money. People don't want to shell out money for prints. But someday they'll kick themselves and say, "Oh, I should have gotten a print." There's just this many prints that someone makes. There's this many and then there's this many and then—oh, when you could have gotten something here.

And Richard Duardo and Self Help Graphics was like, wow, it's like a blessing, because Sister Karen said—I think Sister Karen, underneath, knew that I was one of the boys, and nobody was going to Self Help Graphics. They opened up this new place—

KD: What do you mean?

LL: That nobody was going there to go venture into the art thing. And I went there and after two or three months, I said, "Sister Karen, Jaime's gone. I know how to print. Can I go downstairs and print? You know, here comes Día de los Muertos, [1981]. Do you want me to go down there, Sister Karen?" She goes, "All right, Leo." I went down, and [said], "Sister Karen, I need this and I need this," and she goes, "I have to spend money?" I said, "Well, I want to register. Richard Duardo taught me how." And she knew Richard because Richard was working with her at the old place, [a] very on-and-off kind of thing. But I started [printing] some things, and I showed her, and she's just like, "Oh, my God, why are you printing that Indian stuff?" I did a few Azteca dancers from the John Valadez technique, just projected up, did the drawing. And I did—the registration was super tight. It came out really beautiful. Then I did some of those things, and I just went off into Día de los Muertos—Día de los Muertos, I mean—Sister Karen said make something. "Sure, no problem, Sister Karen."

KD: So did you do the poster that was to advertise the event?

LL: The advertising for the event, and then after two years, I said, "Sister Karen—you know what, Sister Karen? I can't stay here. I can't make no money off of this."

KD: Well, that's what I was going to ask. You weren't selling them, or if they were sold, the money didn't go to you?

LL: Right. And I just said, "Sister Karen, maybe we should talk. Maybe we should do something with artists. The Barrio Mobile Art Studio thing's been working for a few years, but this is a real good facility to have something really nice to do stuff with artists." I mean, Gronk came in. I mean, I wasn't there, I had, did other things, but Sister Karen said, "Oh, this would be pretty good." And sure enough, this other gentleman, Jaime, had made light tables. I mean, this guy was real good with his hands and made light tables, and he had made screen-printing jigs that you could actually print fabric on.

Well, in came Stephen Grace, and Stephen Grace was one of the printers, and he—[a] magnificent man he was, [a] little *flaquito gabacho*. He was gay and he was like—he was skintight, baby. He knew exactly the drop printing. He had printed for years.

KD: I don't know—I've never heard that name before. What kind of work did he do?

LL: He was a printer. Really nice guy, really intelligent. Really wanted to do things for the communities that were out there, South Africa and all that that was going on. Johannesburg and so on. And yet even here, things that were happening with the communities here, the Latino community. And he was just into it. He was progressive, he was out there. But he could print like a champ, and man, did he ever. And he just moved Sister Karen out. I just put up with Sister Karen's things, and he just like—just moved it all out,

made it really top notch. And he just printed away. They got big giant racks. We went to Richard Duardo's. And I was working at Richard Duardo's doing separating, color separations.

KD: At the Hecho en Aztlán?

LL: Yes. By then he had started calling himself Multiples.

KD: Multiples.

LL: And I said, "Yeah, I can do color separation, Richard, and I know how to do a little airbrush." And that came in real handy. And then we did some [Hiro] Yamagatas, just this Japanese painter. At that time the printing was really taking off. And at Self Help Graphics. The Public Arts Center had died away. Richard had stayed there, because he could manage the rent, I guess, with some other people. And other people moved in. John Valadez [and] Carlos moved out. They went downtown. And the whole new flourishing—the Big Orange started being recognized. It was real interesting, because the *LA Times* was noting it a lot, and was saying, "The Big Apple—ah, it's the Big Apple." But still, for the Big Orange to exist, we got to go down there and get the stamp of the Big Apple. And it was real weird, and it's still the same. It's still their game.

But even back then, it was like, "I don't know, guys. Hey, I'm just Limón, and I just want to keep doing Raza stuff, or the Chicano stuff." What is that, anyway? Actually, Michael Amescua has a degree in Meso-american anthropology, a degree from Oxy [Occidental College]. And I said, "Hey, *ese*." I said—when I go down there to have lunch, I go, "What's this book about? Whoa, what's this one? Tell me more about Náhuatl. Oh, you have a dictionary." And then Michael also knew Tony Portillo, the good brother from San Pedro. And Tony was ever so much into the sweats—the circle—the red circle. And we connected and just talked.

KD: Did you do sweat? Did you start doing sweat?

LL: Mm-hmm. And then I just said, "Hey, this is fantastic. I like this." But still again, "Hey, I'm sorry guys, I've got a young family growing at home." I've got to go home. I can't play this other game. Things take me a lot longer. Anything I want to do at Self Help Graphics, I was doing it. Sister Karen—I left Self Help Graphics for about a year—no, for a few months. Sister Karen said, "Hey, use this other room upstairs." I used to have this big room. I got this little room—

KD: Like a studio?

LL: As a studio.

KD: Wow.

LL: And then—

KD: Did you have to pay for the use of the studio?

LL: Just in barter. Just as a barter.

KD: Really? I'm trying to get a sense of things that Self Help provided to artists. For example, I learned that when people were in a workshop, the atelier—I don't know how to say it in French, so you'll just have to forgive me. So, with the *taller*, you get 50 percent of the run, and you can do whatever you want with that. And I also learned through these interviews that—I'm not sure if it's all of the ateliers, but that you had supplies. I mean, certainly you're expecting to use the machinery, the racks or whatever for printing, because those are things—that's why you go there. But I also learned that you got paint, paper. At least some of the people I've interviewed. Now, I don't have any record that you were part of a *taller*.

LL: I was at atelier number 2. I wasn't part of number 1. I didn't—I wasn't in the first atelier, which would have been no problem, but I was teaching the artists how to make stencils. And the second, and the third, and the fourth, and the fifth. I just kept going. I was there, I had a studio there. Sister Karen said, "Hey, the next one's coming up, Leo." I said, "No problem, Sister Karen." I go down there, "Hey, this is an airbrush, if you're going to use airbrush. But these are dots. This is what you'll come up with if you combine this color and this color."

And all of the sudden, Stephen Grace got rid of all the oil paint, and then he brought in stinky water-soluble ink—smells like ammonia. And I said, "Hey, well, maybe you'll get this effect, I don't know. I'm not really versed with that, but hey." And then someone walked in one day and said, "Hey, we're having this

mono-print silkscreen technique taught to us [by] “some woman.” Why don’t you go down there, Leo, and check it out?” And this woman had some brushes and ink, and the paper was underneath, then overall color, and then rip, squeegee, pull up, and, “Wow, check it out. Nice.”

KD: Do you remember who that was?

LL: That I don’t. That, I don’t remember. And then I said—then Sister Karen said, “Hey, we’re going to set it up downstairs, Leo.” There was another printer. Stephen Grace, I think he had left, and I think it could have been Oscar—was it Oscar Duardo? It could have been. I’m not sure. Richard Duardo’s brother. [Oscar Duardo followed Stephen Grace as master printer –ed.] And sure enough, I went down there, and they had the brushes and all that stuff, and I’m ready to—I did something. I went, “Ugh!” I went upstairs. “Sister Karen, this is junk!” For me, I’m not a painter. Those who were painters could manage, because they paint.

So all along, for me to paint . . . I don’t paint. I draw paint, meaning I actually have . . . Again, I saw it in the questionnaire. How do you produce stuff? What are your techniques? I use a mustard bottle, little ones, with black or white, and I draw the image, and I leave it a little so it dries a little. Then I scrape it. It leaves the impression, but I just scrape it with a scraper or a card. I just go like that. There’s this beautiful line—people like my drawings. People that wanted to buy my paintings, they’re just drawings. When I was at Self Help Graphics, I said, “No, I’m sorry, I can’t. I have to fill it in.” But it’s because I can draw. The way I draw is just like, wow, it comes out. So I draw it with a squeeze bottle.

Well, anyway, this goes back to the print shop. I went down to the print shop and I said, “Hey, can I put some ink inside a bottle?” Then next week, there’s all the colors you want in squeeze bottles. And I said, “Yes, just my cup of tea.” And then we started going to Nova Color to go get the little squeeze bottles, because that’s where you buy them.

KD: Tell me how that particular media—you know, compare one to the other. What do you get from the enamel versus the water-soluble—

LL: Ink?

KD: Ink.

LL: Again, it’s flat. They’re both flat. But again, the old oil color was much richer and much more saturated. And really, the new stuff—well now, it’s not new, but water soluble is very pastel-y. Real pastel-y.

KD: Is there—is one more runny, or . . . I don’t know what the word is that I want to describe.

LL: No, it just depends on how you—how much viscosity you want.

KD: So the coloration—that’s the word I was looking for, viscosity. Thank you.

LL: Yeah, again, you know, as much water as you put in, or as much thinner that you would put into it, would bring it to a real thin consistency.

KD: So that’s not the thing. You’re looking at color. You saw color and went after color.

LL: Oh, yes. Yes. And then again, screen printing is just one color over another color. And then if you use the transparency method, it’s—you put more clear into your paint. And remember, it’s from light to dark, so the dark covers these lighter areas.

KD: I want to make sure I heard you correctly. You were basically the teacher, the technique teacher, at the workshops. But did you actually do one yourself where you got to produce something?

LL: Yes, I did the—

KD: You said number 2.

LL: Nineteen eighty-three, that was atelier number 2.

KD: Okay. And did they have that system in place that I was describing? I’ve heard people that are talking about something that happened later. Did you get 50 percent of the run?

LL: Yes.

KD: And supplies, is that right?

LL: Yes, from the start. Supplies, no. You never got supplies. No, it was just the prints, just the prints themselves. Maybe Sister Karen worked out something with someone to get something, but Sister Karen—

KD: You were bringing your own paper, you were bringing your—

- LL: No, that was all provided.
- KD: Oh, so you were bringing your—
- LL: And printer.
- KD: Okay. That's what I'm trying to figure out. You were—you had paint provided?
- LL: Everything. Printer, area, time. You had from Monday 'til Friday to produce a twelve-color print. But in the beginning, there was maybe three or four colors. It's all experimental, remember, atelier. And then when I walked in, it was like, "I'm ready." The guy was like, "Whoa." And because I knew the techniques of the *Dando Gracias* print that I did, he suggested—he saw my stencil—he said, "It might be off a little here and there." And I said, "Well, what can we do?" And he said, "Hey, make a water-soluble stencil for the over-all," and I said, "Sure." And then here, he put too much water as he was adhering it to the actual screen Stephen Grace did. And then he tried to remedy it when we were printing, and I went, "Nope. Quality control, Richard Duardo. Quality control. Quality control, come on in." And so that night I had to re-cut the whole thing, and I came in with another one. And he was real careful this time with his sponge, got it on there, peeled it off—it stayed right on there. And then, voila. And then everyone . . . Sister Karen used *Dando Gracias* so many times, [for] so many things. And I said, "Hey, that Indian stuff, right, Sister? Better call the Pope. Hey, [we] got a winner here." [laughter]
- KD: Did you find that the workshop functioned as a way to share and inspire, or was it just, these are a group of people [who] come in? So the first part of that question is to you as a participant in the workshop, number 2. The second part is your observation being the person who's there year after year after year, watching all these different groups. So the first part, was there sharing, collaboration, feedback?
- LL: Oh, yes. There was a theme. There was always a theme Sister Karen would choose. And you know, anyone walking in there . . . Sometimes it was just like something real obscure someone would do, but that was the theme. They found the subject matter they wanted to use, no problem, whatever it was. I—being who I am, I was always like, "What are you doing? Oh, yeah? Oh, cool." You could make it look this way or that way by incorporating this and that when you do your color separations. And I said, "Hey, look for—if you don't like the color, tell them to do it over." And the printer never wants to do that. Of course it's a lot of work to clean the screen, to get it ready again. And I said, "Hey, you're the one in charge here, not him. He's here to provide you with a service through Self Help Graphics. He's getting paid for it, and you're the artist." If he says, "Oh, that's bad . . ."
- KD: Did you find you had to tell that story, encourage artists over and over every year?
- LL: Yes. I said, "Hey, there it is. You're the artist. What you're producing here." People came in and they had talent. Also, they knew screen printing. A lot of people came in. They had gone to college, and they had everything there. They had been taught screen printing in that manner, also, but not as much hi-tech, like at Self Help Graphics.
- KD: Right, the experimentation.
- LL: But it was still so basic. I found it so basic.
- KD: What do you mean?
- LL: It's just a piece of plastic, registered markers. There's your area—go for it. Seems real simple, but in the end, it's like, "Oh, you've got to cut it right on or it's just going to ruin . . . Then, do you remember what kind of squeegee he's using, and how much pull is coming across? You know how much it's going to pull that. How's the printer feeling about this?" So again, knowing the technique, knowing everything about the materials. Like I'd explained to them, I said, "Hey, remember, it has off-contact. That screen never [sits on] the surface. There's ink waiting to be printed on there. And then when he presses down on it, it's right in the center, it's going down, he's coming across and stretching it. And so you think over here it's going to hit. Maybe give it more space so when it hits it, covers it, ah, you're safe. If you have a little white line around it, it didn't hit, so don't print right over print. It's always a little bit into the print itself, the next color.
- KD: And that was part of the teaching that you did.

- LL: Mm-hmm. Just a few, five I think. Five or six. And I just said, “Hey, here it is,” and then Sister Karen said, “Hey, these guys are doing okay now.” And I said, “Okay, I guess. That’s fine.” And I just continued printing, and—not printing, but painting and drawing. And Sister Karen was using me as inspiration upstairs. Just simply “Come on in, Leo. What do you think?”
- KD: Really?
- LL: Yeah.
- KD: What kind of things did you talk about with her when she said, “What do you think?” What did she run by you?
- LL: She’d go, “Hey, Leo, this printing thing.” I go, “Oh, we need [to take another] step, Sister Karen. This is real cheap paper. Why don’t we use some high-quality paper, some Arches or some . . .” I knew about it through Richard. And so I said, “Oh, Sister, it’s all there. Hey, why don’t we call in some guy, somebody out there, and creative this thing? And how about three colors a day, or four colors a day, or have a theme? Or how about out-of-state guys? Are there any moneys there, Sister Karen, for that?” I mean, it’s just ideas. She probably had them too, but still, again, she had to hear it from somebody.
- KD: These are the things you’re talking about.
- LL: Oh, yes. And it was just like, “Hey, yeah, I’ve got some friends. Yeah, I’ll call them up.” “Hey, *cuates!* We’re going to try to set up a gallery downstairs. The fathers from the San Paolo bookstore are moving out. Come on by, *ese.*” I said, “Now’s the time. I’ll buy you some brews! Come on!” They came down. They built the walls inside Self Help Graphics, the Galería Otra Vez, just because I knew some guys. And I said, “Here it is, Sister Karen.” And again, Sister Karen, I said, “Sister Karen, what’s that old press downstairs doing there? Are you ever going to do any etching?” “Oh, you’re right, we should do etching. Oh, there’s this guy from Chicago coming in, he’s come by a few times, José Antonio Aguirre.”
- KD: Oh, really?
- LL: And I said, “Oh, well, Sister Karen, yeah.” And José was already on it. He’s like, he’s sharp. And I said, “Yeah, Sister Karen. Interesting.” And then [Roberto] Tito Delgado was our correspondent, our traveling correspondent. He’d be going back and forth to México, and he’d come back with eerie stories about floating bodies in the rivers up in Chiapas in the ’80s. So he was already there. That’s why you look at Tito Delgado’s stuff, wherever it’s at, you’ll see he’s putting human and mechanical together. He’s basically talking about that whole issue, that whole issue about humans and machines. He used to do a lot of death, but—well, not a lot of death, but just the issue out there with little people and their ideologies.
- KD: I was actually surprised to find that you have an image that has to do with death.
- LL: Oh, yes.
- KD: Because I always think of your work as so—
- LL: Happy?
- KD: Happy is a good word. Happy is a very good word. Cheerful, inspiring.
- LL: Oh, thank you.
- KD: Romantic, beautiful. And this one from the CARA [Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation] exhibition—
- LL: *No Vale, Homes.*
- KD: *No Vale, Homes, ’78.*
- LL: Yes.
- KD: And unfortunately, I only have the black and white from the CARA catalogue.
- LL: Oh, yeah. Spray can. And I just said, “Hey.” You know, I saw some youngster out of the service, and I went to go play some basketball with Guillermo Bejarano, and we saw this young homeboy get beat up. One against seven or eight. I yelled and yelled, and those guys walked away slowly. They were looking at me, and then I saw that youngster get up and walk away. Then later on, I heard he had died. Didn’t shoot him, but that same thing. And then I heard gunshots out in the streets—still hear those gunshots. Again, it’s about one homeboy killing another homeboy. Hey, wait a minute. And then again, the Día de los Muertos thing.

- KD:** But this is turning it around. I mean, we do Day of the Dead to celebrate the connection of life and death—a playful parody of death—and sometimes making fun of our own life, not taking ourselves too seriously, right? But this is the thing. This is death itself. This is not playful.
- LL:** Oliver Stone bought it. Oliver Stone. He’s really into that death thing.
- KD:** Now, how did you connect with Oliver Stone?
- LL:** He saw it.
- KD:** At what gallery?
- LL:** At the CARA show.
- KD:** Oh.
- LL:** And he says, “Hey, I want that. Ask him how much he wants for it.” He paid for it, and I said, “All right, cool.” Again, not thinking, “Oh, maybe I’ll save it. Maybe years later it may be worth more,” because of just the fact that it was in. And then, you know, it was the idea of this young individual losing his aura, his life—that flash when he was born. It’s being wasted right there. He doesn’t know that that other guy could have maybe become one of the great thinkers, one of the great doctors, someone in our barrio who could have cured AIDS, cancer, something. Could have done something good for us. And he’s spending time in jail, or maybe he’s—because again, we’re so . . . Oh, I mean, I know I have drawings somewhere where I show all this in cartoon form. I try to do a painting, but that’s as far as it got. You see the bellbottom shoe—
- KD:** Well, in black and white, it’s wonderful. I mean, even in black and white.
- LL:** Yeah, the color’s real interesting.
- KD:** What part of this is spray can?
- LL:** The pants—
- KD:** The pants?
- LL:** The overalls. Uh-huh. The bodies. I actually cut stencils—
- KD:** So even the composition of the figures, you could do with—
- LL:** Yeah. Uh-huh. I cut a stencil, and then I sprayed it and I threw it away. Interesting how over the years I’ve done stencils. And then again, because of Santa Barbara archiving some of the stuff that I have, I’ll be giving them some of the stencils that I’ve done which are actually based on the [prints] that I’ve done.
- KD:** Wonderful.
- LL:** Which are actually based on—what’s it called?—poster board. Where I just get the poster board, cut it out. It hurts my finger, my middle finger has always been the one to take the brunt of the pressure. And then I’d spray it. Voila.
- KD:** Well, I’ve heard that you need a strong finger for spray cans, too.
- LL:** Oh, yeah. That too. But again, the story was, hey, you know, *No Vale, Homes*. It’s not worth it to kill that other young man, our own kind, or any kind, because again, life is too precious, and you didn’t bring into the world. You’re not God. And again, it’s interesting. To me, I looked at it, and then I had it in the corner one day. I’m looking at it and I’m realizing that when—even now, when I’m looking at [it] now—because I’d see it like this. It’s just this painting idea. I’d put it in the corner. Couldn’t sell it. Nobody wanted it. And I’d see it and I’d say, “Oh, wow, look. It’s the gun, it looks like an atomic explosion sideways.” And I said, “Wow.” And again, it’s just a puff, like a *pow, boom*, you don’t hear the bang ’til after you see the smoke.
- KD:** What it reminded me of was the kind of power from an atomic explosion, devastation. It’s just a little bullet, but it’s the same kind of devastation, the taking away of one life. I think it’s a beautiful composition.
- LL:** Thank you, thank you. And again, Día de los Muertos. This is Día de los Muertos, it is Día de los Muertos. Again, to us, part of our cultural identity, right, going back to the ancients. Death wasn’t spooky Frankenstein this or that. And we’d offer ourselves to the *templo* to have our hearts taken out, to be honored to give this sacrifice, this *corazón*, to the next day, to the next generation, to the corn that’s growing. That’s tough.
- KD:** I know I’m jumping ahead a bit, but in terms of the CARA exhibition, I didn’t realize that this painting was purchased because of CARA. Had it been exhibited before, this painting?

LL: I think so, at the Public Art Center. I showed it there. The—we were having a Day of the Dead, and I said, “Oh, I’ll show this.”

KD: Do you remember the response?

LL: No one really responded to it. The other stuff was real skeletal kind of thing.

KD: This was dark.

LL: Yeah, it was real—yeah.

KD: And that’s what I was saying before. This—it’s a different take on Day of the Dead, where we normally do the cheerful, playful, make-light. You’re bringing us back to the serious side.

LL: But again, I was doing the lively, the spontaneous kind of stuff, along with that. There’s both sides to the balance scale. And I think that was the only piece that was under the social comment section. I don’t think there was anything else that was that deep. And I said, “Everybody’s got beautiful things, I know that,” but again, *muerte* portrayed like that is always different.

KD: So [that’s] how you saw it in the gallery, under social commentary.

LL: Mm-hmm.

[break in audio]

KD: We’re back, and we’re going to pick up the thread with Self Help Graphics and the work that Leo did at that institution. Tell me more about some of the other contributions.

LL: I think just being there and having the energy that I had. [I had] a young family, also. I couldn’t have done it without my wife, Margie. She let me do it. She saw that I wanted to do the art thing, and I was going to try my best to make money and survive. And still, she still questions it, and I’m going, “Okay, well, I’ll still come up with money somehow, some way.” And she said, “Go on. You’re getting home real late,” and I go, “Yeah, I know.”

I spent a lot of time over there cleaning and doing things. Not just cleaning, but Sister Karen—when I got there, the hall was a mess. There was this system already implanted in that building where the bookstore was downstairs, the religious bookstore. And Sister Karen comes in and has two-thirds of the downstairs and all of upstairs. And on weekends, the hall would be rented to *quinceañeras*, birthday parties, whatever, weddings. And the boys, whoever they were, were more than willing to heave their—excuse me, their empty bottles towards the trashcan in the corner where the Virgen de Guadalupe now stands. So Sister Karen changed all of that. She got rid of that woman. Everybody got pissed off in the neighborhood, and then she started working—

KD: Okay, help me out. Were the people renting from Self Help to have their events at the hall?

LL: In a way, but this other woman was, like, the manager, so Sister Karen said, “I’m taking over. This is my place.” No more beer on the ground and all the craziness that’s been going on here. And then Sister Karen started working on the place, fixing it up, making sure the windows were all changed, and then the rest-rooms were changed. It just started changing, little by little. Still again, Sister Karen would rely upon me to come in and do certain things. Then again, I would just do them. Like the area to her office, she had to come in through the back door, the front door. I just said, “Sister Karen, let’s lock this door. Let’s do this.” Then Sister Karen started having events. Willie Herrón, and the Vex. Punk rock took off in there. And he was downstairs. Michael Amescua—

KD: What do you mean, he was downstairs? He had—

LL: He was where Michael—right next to where Michael Amescua’s studio was. He had this little—which turned into the . . . It’s like that little gallery section for the print room that’s downstairs, for the etching room. That was Willie Herrón’s rock and roll studio. Let me see, what else? The Streetscapers were there for a while. I don’t know if at that time, but they were there, I remember that.

KD: So it sounds like several groups are coming through and having [some] kind of space.

LL: A little bit of space, right. And the print shop was downstairs, and I was in the print shop downstairs.

KD: Are you on staff?

LL: No, I'm staff, but not on staff. I'm just one of the others that is part of the stable. And if there was money, there was money; if there wasn't, there was no money. And that was okay. I remember the young artists coming in. Yreina Cervantez, Diane Gamboa, and a few others that were part of the Barrio Mobile Art Studio. And Sister Karen had hired them. They'd come in, they'd park their cars or whatever, get on the little taco truck, and away they'd go in the mornings. And they'd return, and they'd come into my space down there, because there was a restroom there. They could use that.

And I was just, like, printing away, trying to do things with Sister Karen and the other projects we had going on. And I just said, "Hey, Sister Karen, I'm not making much money down here, and I've got to make money, because the family," and blah-blah-blah. Then I started doing stuff with Richard Duardo. Then I—like I said, I left for a few months, came back, and we already knew we were changing downstairs. I said, "Sister Karen, I don't want it." I helped bring it in. Michael Amescua came in and saw the sink. I said, "Get your torch and take out that center part of that sink." That sink is still there.

KD: Yeah.

LL: Oh, yeah. So it's just memories of things that were there. Willie Herrón had gone in and built this whole area there where they have the [arc] light burner, the stencil burner. It was more to that. Willie had built these big walls and put a process camera, an old process camera that Sister Karen somehow had gotten somewhere, and I was like, "Wow, yes!" That's the technology that still existed when I had gotten there.

And I was still going to school, and I had stopped—no, I had graduated. I'd gotten my certificate in sign graphics at Trade Tech. And I was so busy there. It was an awkward year or semester or something. I didn't go to a—we didn't have—my graduating class—a ceremony-type thing, so they said, "Hey, come back next year, and you can pick up your certificates." And I still haven't picked up my certificate. I went the other day with my daughter. She's going there, Rosa Lynda, she's going to Trade Tech now. I went in and I said, "Hey, can I get my certificate?" And she said, "Oh, yeah." And then the woman said, "Here's your paperwork," and I went back, and she goes, "Wait, did you ever apply?" I said—

KD: You have to apply to complete your certificate?

LL: Yeah, to get your certificate. I said—

KD: You have to pay money.

LL: Yeah, seven or eight bucks. I said, "Oh, okay. Sure, here it is." "No, you've got to come back next—when the next semester begins, so you can get it at the end of the next semester." I go, "It's okay. It's, let's see, 1980. It's okay. Time's not an essence here." [laughter]

KD: So you had completed that AA degree in '80, in 1980.

LL: [No.] I stayed there for another year taking commercial art. And then the gallery, the Otra Vez gallery was happening. I think Eloy Torrez arrived, and he used to use the downstairs space area. Patssi, Gronk came back. It's just—I'm going fast because I'm trying to remember some of these people. There was a Peter Sparrow. He was a printer, but he was also an artist. He was also part of the Barrio Mobile Art Studio. There was Jack and Myra. They were this couple, she used to dance at night at some salons downtown. Jack was a great sculptor with wax. He's doing dragons and things. And he was there with Sister Karen trying to help her move things from left to right. Sister Karen was a packrat—

KD: Sounds like it.

LL: And it was okay because I still have some of these old sheets of some sensitized plastics that somebody gave her. And she said, "Maybe we could use this some day," and it was all downstairs when I moved in, and it was like, "Oh, oh, oh." And then it was the holidays, and then Michael Amescua and I were like really getting—he was teaching me more and more, and he didn't know it. He was just telling me things. I'd ask him things, and he was—the washing machine, and mulching paper, to use it in Sister Karen's press, where he'd pour it in and put . . . He was finally using his torch and cutting shapes out, and I was teaching him about art. He was anthropology, he wasn't art. But then, I was showing him things. He was doing things, and he was always doing things with Sister Karen, even from the older place he had come from. And again,

you know, we were coming in, and I was saying, “Hey, brother, what’s this? What’s this? Why don’t we do this?”

Again, as always, I’d think of things, and Michael would too. We’d sit there. We came up with the fifty-two-year fire *ceremonia* [New Fire Ceremony], we found out about the *calendario*, the Aztec *Mexica* calendar, every fifty-two years. I said, “Why don’t we do a fire show on this end,” and we started having fire shows outside. Have an art show inside with things dedicated to fire and water, and outside have something that would be an offering. And then Sister Karen said, “You’ve got to stop it. This is the third year, and look what it’s doing to the asphalt. It’s making holes, because it burns.”

Then the Día de los Muertos. I remember one day, I don’t know, ’80, ’81, ’82. I said, “Sister Karen, I have all these little things that I’ve been making out of cans and stuff.” And there’s Dolores Guerrero-Cruz, and a friend of hers, [Lis-say], and who else? Some other people. I said, “Sister Karen, if you don’t mind, I’d like to have a little Christmas sale inside the print shop downstairs.” So I went to my mom’s house, cut some branches off the pine tree so we’d have the smell of resin, which is Christmasy, right? And people walked in, [and we] sold a few things. The next year, we were upstairs. And then after that, ah, [the yearly] Christmas sale.

KD: Huge.

LL: Yeah. Then I said, “Sister Karen, what are you doing with all those prints? Why don’t you sell them, have a sale?” And it was just like, “Hey, Sister Karen.” And then I was upstairs, and Tito Delgado, he had a little space there. I said, “Tito, what do you have there?” Do you know Tito Delgado?

KD: Yeah.

LL: He goes, “Oh, it’s a cover letter. I’m going to go see some galleries.” Mid ’80s. I said, “Let me see it. Do you mind if I make a copy?” “Sure.” Wite-Out, “Leo Limón.” Wite-Out, “Leo Limón.” “Hello?” “Yes, hi. I’ve got some slides of my work. Yeah, I know Carlos Almaraz.” “Oh, yeah?” I went out there, I went to the Westside. I hadn’t been out on the Westside. I wasn’t really thinking of a fine art venture at all.

KD: What year is this, you say?

LL: It’s ’83, ’84, around there. And then all of the sudden, I’m out in the Westside, and it was strange. It was like, I was an artist and I show up to an opening to some of these places, I’m like overdressed. It’s like, “Oh, I’d better shave at least.” And then, it’s interesting, I took off. They could sell my work, and I realized, “Hey.”

KD: What were some of those galleries on the Westside?

LL: Well, I went to maybe three or four galleries and just applied, and said, “Hey.” And they said, “No, you’ve got to come at this time of the year.” And I went to this guy who was selling posters for Richard Duardo on Main Street [in] Santa Monica, the Robert Berman—the B1 Gallery.

KD: Yeah, B1?

LL: Uh-huh. And Robert and I just hit it off. I said, “If you can sell it, I’ll make it.”

KD: And did he?

LL: Oh, yeah. We had a few group shows, and then he goes, “Leo, why don’t you have a one-man show?” “Sure.” Before I got in the place, it sold out. Next year, sold out.

KD: You mean it sold out before opening?

LL: Three or four years, yeah.

KD: Pre-opening, wow.

LL: Yeah. Mike Milken, the junk-bond king, was alive and well. This is the ’80s, no problem. Everybody had money.

KD: Yeah.

LL: Oh, yeah. And I was—and I just said, “Hey, no problem.”

KD: Did you do, like, exclusive dealer with him, or . . . ? Some artists do that, I’m just trying to get a sense . . .

LL: I had heard that, but I had never gone to anyone else. I didn’t have to. I was making money with that guy.

KD: Yeah. What was the arrangement? Fifty percent of the sale?

- LL: As always. Yeah. The only thing I didn't like was, [he said], "I won't let you know who bought the piece, because you might go out and invite him to your studio, and they'll go buy more." I have never liked that. That's nothing they should say. It's my business, too. So if he sells it to some guy, hey, [the] guy can come over and buy whatever he wants.
- KD: So you had no sense of who your collectors were?
- LL: Still don't.
- KD: Wait a minute, but—
- LL: They never let you know.
- KD: Isn't there a law that you—if there's a resale, you get a certain percentage of the sale?
- LL: If you ever find out that occurs. If you ever found that occurs.
- KD: So this discourages you from—doesn't let you have access to—
- LL: Right.
- KD: But don't you also cultivate a relationship with collectors, so that—
- LL: I—people would just say, "Hello, I bought some work. Thank you very much." I guess I'm scary or something. And I'm out there working on art, and I never—I just said, "Hey, if you want to, I'm here." I guess. "I don't know what you want. It's okay with me. If you like my art, it's fine." I can't remember the woman's name, she came by Self Help Graphics, [and] said, "Hey, I give tours." She came by, I got a few bucks just to talk, and I gave some to Self Help Graphics. And then she goes, "Hey, I've got some people who would like to meet you." And that was the first time that ever happened. [I] went to Santa Monica, this young couple—the townhouse, condo thing—[they] said, "Hey, we like cats, baseball bats," because he's a batboy as a young guy. Now he's an attorney and the wife works with selling merchandise or something. [I] came up with something and went back. Ooh, beautiful dinner.
- KD: Was it like a commission, or something you already had—
- LL: Mm-hmm, a commission.
- KD: Oh, okay.
- LL: And again, you'd know, somehow my books get lost, and I don't remember the name, and maybe I'll see them somewhere. But again, you know—
- KD: It wasn't important to you. Did you go to the openings at B1?
- LL: Oh, yes.
- KD: And you talked, and [would] be polite, and . . .
- LL: Oh, worse than that. Worse than that.
- KD: What do you mean?
- LL: Do you remember Michael Amescua at Self Help Graphics?
- KD: Yeah.
- LL: He was mulching paper? Well, he had gotten away from just mulching paper; he had developed a tank. Not a tank, he got rid of the washing machine. And he'd put five-gallon container cans, the waste paper from the archival paper right next door. He started cutting it up into smaller pieces, then I went over and I started it up. [I] throw some water in there. Then he got some type of jig that he set up with a generator, "Rrr-r-r!" So you got oatmeal instead of real lumpy something or other with big pieces of paper. Then I started going there and making hearts, and then I've been using the heart image. Which I didn't realize. I got this in Europe—
- KD: The tattoo.
- LL: And I remember—Corazón Productions, Carlos and the Los Four guys had the *corazón*, but I never painted *corazones*. I never really drew *corazones* in the '70s, none of that stuff, really. I think I did a drawing or two for some GI girls. They were like, "God, you can really draw!" I go, "Yeah." But the—I started making big *corazones*, and then they got smaller. And then I found CelluClay at the art store. Just add water, mix it, and then I made small little hearts, real hearts, painted them real pretty. And then I'd show up to the art shows at the Berman. I'd say, "Hey, Berman, come here." "What's that, Leo?" "You see the one that's

right here? Little heart?" I said, "That's for you." I said, "Hey, I have like another two dozen in here for the ladies." I said, "You tell me who buys, because I'm going to give some out." I will save some for the buyers. "Hello, I'm Leo Limón, and I'd like to offer you a piece of my heart, or actually one of my hearts. Would you like one?" "Oh-h!" Buttons. "I get to pin it on you, and you give me a hug and a kiss." This way the wife will get real jealous. "Thank you very much. Bye."

Then when I'd be on the Westside in the '80s, eating somewhere. I'd get, "Mr. Limón? Hi, Leo. Hi, yes, I met you. I'm one of the collectors." She pulls out a bag, and there's this little skin of paint. [She] said, "I forgot to take it off. I put it in the washer, and it all washed away." [laughter] "Give me your address and I'll send you another one." Then I just kept on. I'd give *corazones*, little *corazones* as offerings again, and then you wonder about that old cliché, you know, "Those savages would rip their hearts [out], then eat their hearts." I saw that on an Enquire [*National Enquirer*] magazine one day, and I said, "Okay, it'll be the sacrifice," the *corazón*. I'll start doing the *corazón* image. But I called it *Corazón* and I called it *Yollotl* and I'd do the hand sign with the olin, and I'd put it over the heart. It's the olin *yollotl corazón de movimiento* kind of thing.

Actually, I'm doing a Día de los Muertos right now. I have a Tonantzin like this, I just started the painting. I went and got some canvases, and she's within the cacti. And then the cacti looks like a large figure, and then the *tunas*, right, are skull faces. Again, it's just—again, the kids are waiting for me to do something, so I did it, and then they go, "Oh, how come I didn't think of that?" Then I have two snakes, one in the back of her and one in the front, just rolling like this. And the snakes look real interesting, because I've got on the Google—like I told you, I'm new to this technology—and I went right over here to Cypress Park and I googled maps. And I got there, and there's a new park, new state park, called Rio Los Angeles, Rio de Los Angeles [State Park]. It's right over here on San Fernando Road. It's a brand new state park right in my neighborhood, over here, this other park. A few years prior to this whole development. And there's going to be more development in this whole area.

It's—so someone came along with an art project, the MTA, and they hired some guys, and they did this snake. And then they hired the Streetscapers to put this thing, and I was part of some teachings at the classrooms in the local grammar schools. And I taught the kids the Aztec calendar, their year signs, and then the 'Scapers had—they could choose anything. They chose some of the kids' things that they did with their designs and one of my *calli* [Tonacalli] house designs—so it's on tile—it's on there. But, I was telling you, I did this Day of the Dead thing with these two snakes? Well, I got onto Google, the maps, and then I satellite—put the satellite thing, and I saw the snake from above. See, when you're there at floor-level, the snake opens right in the center, and it goes, like, for maybe fifty feet, and it's all gravel. I don't know if you've been there?

KD: Yeah, I've seen it.

LL: And then the head, it's circular. Then the walkway turns out to be the tongue, and it goes around this other structure where there's a whale—a replica of a whalebone that was found in Lincoln Park—and it's ancient, and it's standing up. It looks real spooky. But I saw it from up above—

KD: Yeah, the area.

LL: And so now I've turned that into the face of the snake, and it looks like the eye of the snake with the tongue. And that's what's going to be part of this painting.

KD: Well, that's clever.

LL: So again, it's how you see things, and there they are. And again, that's how I—I guess that's creativity.

KD: It certainly is creative to me.

LL: But again, you know, I don't reinvent the wheel. It's there already, and if you see it—

KD: [laughter] I'm laughing because you make it sound like it's so obvious.

LL: [laughter]

KD: Let's end for today. That was wonderful.

LL: Okay. Thank you.

OCTOBER 18, 2007

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Leo Limón. Today is the eighteenth of October, 2007, and this is our third session for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. And I want to start with some basic understanding of the organizations that you worked with or were a part of, through the course of your life. We talked a little bit about Mechicano. Could you give me just real—let’s real quickly go through some of these questions. When you were there, who were the other folks that were around?

LL: At the Mechicano Art Center?

KD: Yes.

LL: Leonard Castellanos. And there was Armando Cabrera, Ray Atilano, I believe his last name was, Jerry the Undertaker—

KD: Who was Jerry the Undertaker?

LL: He’s—I can’t remember his last name, but that’s what we called him. I can’t remember for the sake of me. He was a saxophone player, and has been playing the East LA circuit for years, and he is an undertaker.

KD: Okay. So he really was an undertaker.

LL: Mm-hmm. Then there was Ismael Cazarez, or “Smiley,” as we call him. He was about the same age I was, a teenager. And then there was our half-pint, Spunky . . . Francisco—Jiménez? Was that his last name? Uh-oh, he’s going to get mad if I don’t . . . I’ll find his name. But Spunky went on to Cal State University Santa Barbara, and he’s out here in the community working to improve the betterment of the communities.

KD: Wow.

LL: Mm-hmm. Women, oh, my goodness. There’s one or two women who would hang around, but I can’t remember their names because I seldom saw them there. But they were involved.

KD: Were they younger than you, or older?

LL: Older.

KD: Oh, okay.

LL: Oh, wait—yes, I remember one. Susan—ay, ay, ay, Susan. I can’t remember her last name. I met her at LACC when I started going there after high school. And then somehow she found out about Mechicano. She showed up, and she painted a beautiful mural right outside the—on the walls out there, just as I did. I guess that same year in ’73, when I took off for the service.

And Harry Gamboa would probably have slides of that mural that I painted out there. Because he had a sunroof VW, and he showed up, parked, and popped up right through the top and talked to me and took photos while I was painting this mural, which was based upon Los Tres—I believe it was Los Tres. It was a group of guys who were trying to do things about the drugs in East LA. And I did an image of a person, real large, with a skeleton face. I was, I think, the first person to do [a] skeleton to resemble them or represent them out there. And then it had a transparent face over it, and then it had—they were shooting needles into its arms, and there was tracks all over its arms. And then there was halos, which I did with spray can, now that I think about it, spray can doves over the head of this piece that I did out there. Again, interesting, everybody else is real like chickens and mariachis and that type of ruralness to México, but I said, “Hey, I’m city, rural, and this is what’s here.” Even back then, I think I had a message.

KD: Now, Los Tres, that was literally some three guys who were organizing—

LL: They were arrested by the cops. They found them out there. I think they tried to work them over. And Elizabeth Martinez’s book notes them in there. And I think that same illustration, there’s a photo of that piece on that same page, because it spoke about that. And I spoke to her years ago, so you could probably find that image there.

KD: Would you say now Mechicano is getting, is acting as both a gallery and a—I guess a business, right?

LL: Workshop, gallery, storage, storage room. They started doing screen printing. And I guess that’s where it started for me, when they said, “Do an image,” and I did. I did this image which I was really into, which was

a face of a person with half a head, then another head coming out of that, and then another head coming out of that. And it was the same type of image. And then the eyes, there's something about shooting out rays, and it had symbols within the eyes—these rays that were coming out of the eyes. Same type of image I did for the first mural. I'm thinking '70 or '71 on Whittier Boulevard at Fickett Street, and I have slides somewhere of that mural.

And that's when—I think I spoke to you about this—Carlos Almaraz told me about this fellow, Lukman Glasgow with the Parks and Rec, and [he] said, "A hundred and fifty dollars, paint a mural." And then my brother and I got together, went to the warehouse, found spray instead of paint in a can—well, spray cans. And then we put the scaffold up. I got up there, and the director, Bill Tara, from the Saturday tutor art class [came], and he took these slides. And he gave me these slides. That's why I have these slides. Otherwise, there probably would have been no documentation. Just me and my brother up there. But my brother's—

KD: Because it was destroyed, the mural was destroyed.

LL: Oh, yes. It was a spray can mural. Again, aerosol art—

KD: Doesn't last very long.

LL: No. But it was like two blocks away from Soto Street. And I think that was part of the start of murals that started popping up in those early '70s with the home—the places where people lived, you know.

KD: You mean Ramona and—

LL: Ramona and Estrada.

KD: And Estrada, right. Estrada Courts, Ramona Gardens. That's pretty amazing. And that was again through the parks?

LL: Parks and Rec of LA City.

KD: Now, did the folks who come to Mechicano already have a Chicano sensibility, or they were still kind of sorting that out?

LL: Oh, no. These were older fellows, and they already had a way—they already knew what was happening. Yeah, it was Chicano power, in essence, to an indigenous past that would make relevant of Aztlán. And if they were to see me now, they'd probably trip out, because I would tell them, "Hey, here in the county of Aztlán, in the continent of Anahuac." Then they'd probably see me again, say, "Oh, good, he did his studying. He did his research to say that." Because otherwise I wouldn't say it. I'm seeing it as a continent, not a county, and Aztlán was just this little area in México, and then the Mexica and Aztec type thing. So I'm saying, let's involve all our indigenous relatives of this place.

And again, it was interesting, I was listening to Carlos Mencia, the comedic joker, and he made relevance to white people: "And they go anywhere, and they're white people." But he goes, "I'm Honduran. I go over here, I'm Mexican. I go to Miami, I'm Cuban." I said, "Well, that's good, because now I'm going to refer to myself as [Native]." I said, "No, no. Call me [Native]. I'm going to refer to myself as [Native]." I said, "No, no, call me [Native]. No, I'm not Mexican." Yeah, I'm Mexican, but—everybody that's brown, proud. Hey, we're [Native], we're actually [Native]. We actually came up from—I find myself, as my parents being Méxicanos, they were Spanish-speaking Mexicans. And they—my friends, some that are out here in the Highland Park area, their parents were from reservations here in the United States, so they're English-speaking [Natives]. We're still [Natives], no matter what we look like or whatever. It's the language thing that has broken us up. And then again, you know—

KD: So you mean indigenous to the place.

LL: Indigenous, exactly.

KD: Yes, this is our place.

LL: Yes, exactly.

KD: I'm curious, since you brought it up again, and I remembered it was in other notes, did your family talk about their border crossing experience?

LL: No. No, my mom never really made reference to it. And my dad, he just simply said when he was in Coahuila, he said he remembers the Federalists showing up, and there were bullets flying overhead. And everybody ran for cover, and they got the heck out of there. That's all my dad ever said.

The other thing my dad said was, "Yeah, when we were out there as boys on the river, when the boys wanted to pass me that little *cigarito* of marijuana, nah, I jumped in the water." And I said, "Okay, I get it. Lesson number—another lesson." I said, "Okay." So in reference, I did the same to my sons, and my daughter. I said, "Hey, whenever they start passing you the joints, just call me. Tell me it's happening." They did, and I ran for references at the library, and brought them back book after book on hallucinogenics, the downfall of drugs, or the goodness of drugs. And so now, they're good young people now that aren't reliant on drugs because they got over the fascination. And then they realized, hey, I'm chemically poisoned because of screen printing and things that I did. I didn't put on gloves and so on. So again, I've always talked to them about the environment, the environmental issue and so on. And so they've seen that over the years.

KD: When did you learn that you were chemically poisoned, that your body has toxics?

LL: Oh, it's just things that I've read and seen and heard on *Roy of Hollywood* in the middle of the night, where people talk about poisons, chemicals, things of that matter. And it has to be, because the body hurts, and I know things aren't right. Then again, I just give thanks to the spirits. I get up, I'm happy, and that's the best way to attack—or not attack, but fight those type of things. Because if you stay glum and gloomy the way—the machine, supposedly it's working, but yet again, it's real broken. And trying to make it [a] better one is just, think of how a better day in Anahuac is.

So I don't think about the United States—oh, but that's further down the line.

KD: Yeah. You want to tell me about—we talked about Self Help pretty extensively, but I did have a question about the teaching you did there. Did that spill out into other places? Were you teaching at other institutions or even in the grammar schools or elementary schools?

LL: I went around to schools, and I went around to community centers, senior citizen places, and I was teaching screen printing. And I'd choose a subject and I'd go out there, and I'd just familiarize the kids, adults, whoever was there. Libraries, I went there also. And I set up a space. I had a jig, a board with a screen, and I'd set up, and I'd let each one do an image of whatever they're doing. And I knew how to work it, the mechanics of it, so everybody got their image and got it onto paper, and so they had something to show at home of an image that they cut out of something. And again, I want to do that.

I could have did drawing. I did some drawing there at Self Help Graphics, and screen printing there at Self Help Graphics. And color separation. That's what I did do more of with kids that came to Self Help Graphics. And then again, Sister Karen liked the fact that I said, "Hey, I'll volunteer and have kids come in, and they can . . ." Q & A type situation, as I worked. Because it's interesting that, you know, you go somewhere, you're not in your environment, so when kids come in I'd have ten to twenty chairs spread out. They'd walk in, I'd just be working. I'd say, "Hey, check it out!" I'd be working away, having fun, have the radio on, and they'd be watching me. I'd be eating, I'd spread out fruit and whatever—they're eating. And then years later, you know, I'd get taps on the shoulder. "Hey, excuse me, are you Leo Limón? Hey, you know what? You pressed in my brain, and I've gone to college. Now I'm teaching, I'm doing this."

KD: People who had been in your audience.

LL: Yeah, when they were kids they came by and, and I'm glad. I say, "Oh, fantastic! Do you buy art? Hey, come and visit me! Here's my card. Don't forget me!"

KD: So these teaching experiences were mostly in—were they volunteer things that you did, or these were ways that you would make a little extra money? Do a little workshop at the library or something, for example?

LL: Out of Self Help Graphics. They were basically on a grant. We [would] get grants for about two or three years. I did that. And then the rest was volunteer there at Self Help Graphics. But volunteer really means barter, back then at Self Help Graphics. Sister Karen said, "You want the space? Okay, but you've got

to do something for me, too.” And after ten years, it was like, I could have kept on going, but again, it stopped there.

KD: So it was like having access to the studio and access to the machines, right?

LL: Oh, yes. And then again, because I wasn’t sitting around, I was always doing something. And there was always the broom. And Sister Karen was always like—

KD: When you—if I can keep you on this path for just a minute longer.

LL: Yes.

KD: When you take on these teaching jobs, whether it’s out of extension of the volunteer work, or whether you do it for a little bit of cash, do you feel a kind of responsibility to certain communities? Are you targeting a certain kind of student that you hope to reach?

LL: I just wanted their attention. And whatever—again, it’s what teaching’s like. My father said, like, “Pay attention, I’m talking to you. Don’t suck your teeth at me.” Those early lessons. And it was like, “Okay.” So then I tell that to kids. I go, “Don’t suck your teeth at your parents. Are you listening to me?” I said, “Listen. That’s why you’re here.” And it was just the teachings, I felt it was part of respect that I’m trying to pass on to them.

KD: So was it mostly Latino, or *México* kids, or Chicanos?

LL: Oh, yes. Yes, a lot of them. And they’re in the East LA area.

KD: Did you ever feel pressure to focus on a certain kind of group, like a Latino or a Chicano or Spanish-speaking group? Or this just came from—

LL: Oh, yeah, out of art.

KD: Your sense of community.

LL: Mm-hmm.

KD: What about the kinds of places where you were interacting? If it’s at the library, if it’s the grammar school, did you get a sense that it was respected by the artists coming in, or—because you got to remember, part of my question comes from—I was born in ’64, and ’79, I think, or ’73, I want to say—is Proposition 13. So most of my schooling is without the arts. It’s literally devalued. So I’m trying to get a sense of, when you go into these educational spaces, did you feel like it was valued?

LL: Oh, yes. Very much so, yes, because the kids weren’t . . . Again, with very little out there in the community, and then bringing culture to them, talking to them about indigenous this and indigenous that. But yet again, the subjects we choose were—if I’d go to like, a playground, I’d go, “Hey, let’s do sports,” because the kids like sports. If it was a library, I’d go, “Hey, we got to get a little indigenous here.” But I always had something to show so that they’d know, hey, you know, I just didn’t start yesterday. And this is important to them. And it’s like a cultural awakening for them, also.

And so the first things I did at Self Help Graphics were really, really tight registered, almost what I called John Valadez–style images, but they were of indigenous dancers, the *danzantes*. And there were women and men. And they were just standing there because when I said, “Let me take your picture,” they did. And I took their photo, and then as a slide. And then John Valadez is a “projecterist.” He projects things, and then he can do them to look like what the projector looks like. And so I did that, and when the kids saw it, they went, “Ooh, ahh, wow.” And I said, “Yeah,” and then I explained what screen printing was about. But I said, “See this? This is just part of this,” I said.

Then I bring out another image of something John Valadez did, which was *Cholo*, and then go, “Ooh, it’s the homeboy.” You know, it was a homeboy with a little hat and his Pendleton and his baggy khakis, and you know, his little Hush Puppies, and he’s standing a certain way. And I’d go, “You’ve seen this image before, right?” And then they’d see it, and I’d go, “Yeah. Cool, huh?” And then I’d pull out—and right there in there in the library there was always college manuals, or college catalogues. And I’d go, “See this? This is what you’re going to look like when you go to college, when you’ve made it. You’re going to think like you know things. You’re going to know things not to do out there.” It was just this image I’d give them. I wouldn’t show them an image of what they were going to look like. And I’d go, “But see, this cholo, and

that *danzante*, they're going to college right now. Believe it or not, they're going to college, and they're going to get degrees. They're going to further their education, and you can too. Why not? What's holding you back? Hey, does your mom drink? Does your dad drink? Do they do drugs? You see bad things happening? Hey, listen. I grew up in it too. Remember that."

So they, you know, "Remember, you can do better. Just be respectful. Don't yell back. Don't talk back. Just—*calla dito*. But do your thing, be ready for the next day." And just those little things, I'm like [a] fatherly type. And me with a young family, just say, "Hey, do this, do that." And it was interesting because my kids saw me growing up doing that to them, too. And I'd tell them, "Hey, there's a calendar." Not just to my kids, but all kids. I said hey, "I went to the military," blah-blah-blah. And then in the library especially, I could pull out books on militarism, pull out the wars, and I'd go, "See? This is what war gets you." And I said, "This is like out here in the barrio, huh?"

KD: Did you develop this kind of—I mean, this is a very responsible sense of education, respect. Was that something that you came back from the war, when you served your time in the military, or something you went in during these moments where the Chicano movement is getting off the ground? When did that hit you?

LL: Ah, when I went into the service.

KD: When you were going in?

LL: When I went in the service, I knew I was going to go to Europe to go see art, where the art had come to the United States from.

KD: So I'm just trying to get a sense of—I mean, what you're articulating to me sounds like a very strong kind of give something back to the community. What I call, in my classroom now, one of the foundations of Chicano studies that came from the Chicano movement, that we want to share what we have and give something back. Is that what was going through your head with these lessons to young people, about going to—

LL: No, no. I think it was more from the teachings I picked up on when I was younger. And it was real simple sayings that you hear, but you actually do it, you do it in a certain way. Which is interesting, because again, I don't know how you teach, if you have to do the paperwork to do that kind of stuff. But again, I'm like an oral instructor, and if you listened, it's in there forever. It's just memory retention that, boom, peaks again, and then you remember then, and it stays there. Because in the beginning, you remember it. It kind of goes in, it goes away until it comes back. Boom, then you remember it. "Oh, yes, now I remember. Not as much." Then if you're really interested in whatever it was at that time, then you'll go back again. But it's oral tradition, because I heard it so many times.

And I remember seeing some movies again with the old [Native] chief or someone, and then the younger brave there or someone there, "Oh, ugh-this, ugh-that." And I kind of chuckled, and I said, "Oh." But again, it made relevance. And then, you know, when I saw the other flipside of Tonto, the Lone Ranger's trusted companion—hey, that guy was making bucks. I'm glad he was there. He was no Tonto. Hey, I wish I would have been a Hollywood [Native]. But yet, growing up here in Tinseltown, la-la-land, it's the same thing. You've got to perform.

I'd tell my son just yesterday, as a matter of fact. I said, "Did you hear me speaking on the telephone?" He said, "Yes, I did." I said, "Good." I said, "Hey, did you hear me speaking on the telephone?" I was speaking to one of the head superintendents—not superintendents, but one of the head people of this permit process that I'm going through with the Department of Water, Water and Power." And for me to get permission—I couldn't—like I told my son, "Did you hear me when I got the phone? I said, 'Hello, how are you?'"

KD: Dramatic tone, and—yeah.

LL: And I said—yeah, and I told him I learned all this from TV. You've got to put on the act. And I said, "But yet again, I'm so loose, but I speak this way in front of people because they're adults." But yet I can,

because—you know, jazz and music and all of the upbringing I had, and TV. I learned how to imitate it. So then again, I'm not going to go—I can go back to anywhere I want.

KD: Did you need any of these skills when there was conflict in the organizations [when] you were working in the Chicano movements? Like Self Help or Mechicano or the Public Art Center, when there were conflicts there?

LL: When I was a teenager, I found I didn't really need it that much; I was just flowing right along. They always—in the end of meetings and so on, people say, "Leo, do you want to ask us anything? Do you want to say anything?" I say, "Oh, I just came here to listen, absorb. And then later on, I'll do something." Lo and behold, I was basically the push-broom kind of guy. But again, I was seeing things, and that's why later on, my whole thing went toward the sign painting thing. I never thought I'd go that way, but I saw a necessity for it while I picked up on it in high school. But later on, I said, "Man, I'm going to need to pump out some signs when it's a protest or something."

KD: Tell me about the training that you got at Trade Tech in sign painting.

LL: Oh, Richard E. Earnest, God bless him. That man just fascinated me. He was so full of sign painting, so much knowledge in that, tricks that he taught me. I was like, "Wow." I was in awe of him picking up a brush.

KD: Give me some examples of these tricks that influenced your artistic expression.

LL: Real quick, palette-ing a brush. Since I never took a painting class in college, I can get a liner, and I know what kind of brushes I need and how to make the paint consistent enough to hold that paint, and I could make a nice, long, stretchy thin line. Breathing techniques, how to do that—it was part of that. It was part of that circle.

KD: Did you say breathing?

LL: Yeah, breathing. Sure, you have to breathe. If you breathe in a different way, your line will come out different. Signs are basically lines that are diagonal, vertical, horizontal, and hoops, loops. That's all it is. But then again, it's knowing how to breathe to accomplish from one point to the next. It's putting the brush down—how close it is, how consistent. And then remember, it's the shoulder, not the hand. You don't paint like this.

KD: Like this wrist moving?

LL: I'm over here, I'm a drawer, right? I'm a draftsman.

KD: And the wrist is moving.

LL: Yeah. So it's like, lock it and go for it. Lock it, go for it. And then it's interesting how I see the taggers—you see how a lot of reference comes to different things. Taggers go, just like they're going to line it like I would on a sign.

KD: With your whole arm moving.

LL: With my whole arm. The kid goes up like this—I'm watching him—and then he won't spray it. He'll just mimic the movement, and then he'll go, bam, and I'm realizing that he's doing a breathing exercise also, because he's going up there and he's going, "Yeah, baby. I'm going to hit it now." And he'll go once, twice, and he'll go, "All right." And when he stops, I know he's meditating. It's just this whole process of the whole consciousness of art, again, being in a meditative state. You're enjoying what you're doing, even if it's pressing a little button that sprays up paint. Same with a brush. When I go up there, it's like, "Wow."

And then people have asked me, "Hey, how have you used that knowledge?" And I go, "Well, just look at my paintings. I'm a draftsman first, and I don't paint nothing. I draw everything, and I basically . . ." I know this going ahead, but I just simply get my canvas, coat it with black gesso, and in turn that becomes also my black line later on if I want it to be. And then I just simply get the drawing, the illustration that I've already drawn. And now I come to find that I don't ever have to do another drawing. I've drawn so much over the years, I have piles of it. It's just like I tell the kids and the wife, "Hey, that's where the money's at. All my drawings, the paintings." Because again, painting is okay, but it's the excitement and the meditative state that I get into, because I started with drawing. Because I learned how to think and draw. I didn't learn

how to think and paint, I learned how to think and draw. So when I sit down, that pencil, that pen, whatever instrument I have, it becomes my brain, the extension of [it]. So when I get down to painting, that's how it comes out.

KD: Let me get some images. Hold on just a minute.

[break in audio]

KD: Okay. We're back, and we're looking at some of the images. These are from the Cheech Marin collection that—from 2001. So I guess my first question to you, Leo, is, did he purchase these before the show was talked about, or as the show was getting ready to go?

LL: Oh, before.

KD: Before, okay. And this is the technique I'm imagining, one of the things. This image here is *Frida [con] Palomas* from 2001, acrylic on canvas. It's got that black background. So could you tell me a little bit about this image and the creation of it?

LL: I simply found a postcard with this image of her in black and white, and I decided I'd do a Frida Kahlo. I had never really painted, per se, from something like that before. And basically the background, which looks all mushy and this and that, I basically was clearing out my palette, which is basically a box with lots of paints. And I was just pulling them out and rubbing them on the canvas, and I said, "Hey, I'll use this as a background for this painting." And so then I did the image on top of that.

And then again, just techniques. Again, you know, I start with the drawing the whole image on the black canvas and then filling it in. It's just like paint-by-number, except I have the numbers in my brain. But yet again, as I go along, I change certain things, and I add certain things, like Frida, and then with pigeons, yeah. She also had that monkey on her shoulder and various other animals. But her—I indicated by the little house, by the tic-tac-toe of love inside the little blue house—it's actually a blue house. And then two TV antennas, one which shows a sickle and a hammer, for her—that thought that she had. And then the other one is the Aztlán, the Aztlán, the idea of an Aztlán TV antenna. Because you see the egg there, but yet people would say, "Oh, that's a TV antenna, just the old V antenna." But again, it's interesting how they're pointing at each other.

KD: I even see little *calavera* faces on the bottom of her ruffle. You have this kind of hatch marking that renders the lace at the bottom of her skirt, which is a very—this is a classic. I associate that with Oaxacan textile.

LL: Oh, yes, that *reboso* just hangs down.

KD: Right. But at the very bottom, using that technique of kind of [a] hatch mark where you don't detail everything, it allows you to pull out these little faces.

LL: And like earlier, I had told you the techniques I had learned in Trade Tech. For instance, under her hand here. I'd start here and then I'd do a line all the way across. I wouldn't aim it. I brushed it down, like a stroke.

KD: Now, these other two images, this is—

LL: Nineteen ninety-one.

KD: Nineteen ninety-one. Oh, wow. It does go back. *Un Poquito Sol*?

LL: Oh, yes, *Un Poquito Sol. Más Juegos*.

KD: *Más Juegos*, more games. I can't read from this side, sorry. This—these are also acrylic on canvas, right?

LL: *Más Juegos* is actually a pastel.

KD: I thought so. I was going to ask you about that.

LL: And then he commissioned me to paint that image on a canvas, a four-foot by five-foot canvas. And I said, "Sure, brother, no problem." It didn't come out looking like pastel does. Pastel paper has a very rough texture on it. And you know, I love it. It's great. And I use black, and so what you see there, I didn't paint in or draw in, it's all part of it. I see the line around the nose, or this area here, just by putting color to indicate the shape. Simple enough.

This other one, *Un Poquito Sol*, it was a takeoff on the *Cucuy* of Carlos Almaraz. This image you use to do, and I found . . . Again, I was starting to pay homage to Carlos who had passed away in '89, I think it was. And again, I was doing Los Angeles, some of the cityscape which again interested me, and then the bridges. And I was doing *danzantes*.

KD: The cityscape is what I associate very strongly with your work. It was downtown.

LL: And at this time, I had the tic-tac-toe of love going on. You see, here's the tic-tac-toe. And again, I started changing what you perceive. I mean, the sun, right—a person's face with a pair of sunglasses. And then the nighttime, again with the glasses of some sort, it was death coming along at night, or is it the daytime? Then I was making up stories also of things that were happening. This has to do—this is the cosmic *mujer* coming in from the planet of Ajuua. Something I made up when I heard that the Hubble spacecraft broke up in space. I said, "Oh wait. It took one photo right before it broke down, and the photo was of the planet of Ajuua, it was a block away from Pluto."

And from there came the cosmic *mujer*, and she came with a sombrero, the *caracol* earring of her universe and the *cola*, and then her hand in the shape of a gun. Todas pistolas muchachas. And she's coming in pointing at the cross, and the dog is barking at city hall, that whole thing, and then the music. And then, you know, with Huitzilopochtli, the hummingbird spirit, and then homeless spirit—homeless angels pushing their carts like they're phantoms. Is it night? Day? But still again, playing with the idea of duality. Omteotl again with duality, and then the great *corazón*. And then Cheech liked that.

KD: And movement that you achieved with the heart and the—

LL: As you can see, it's line. I use a real soft creamy acrylic paint, and I basically put it in a mustard bottle, and I used it that way. And so I draw everything that's on there.

KD: Now—so there are also drawings that you then paint—paint-by-numbers, fill it in. So the narrative, that comes to you first, or as you're attacking the canvas?

LL: As I'm attacking it, as I go to it. Yes, because I have drawings, I have a drawing of—like I said, of the *danzantes*, of the riders on the horses, and Chico Mendes—him there losing a sombrero, and then the manmade fires, the bridges. It's all reference that I already have. And then you'll see the tic-tac-toe repeated again.

But the pastels I love just much more, because it's draftsman-oriented. And then here's the ancient ballgame of *tlachtli* in *Más Juegos*, right up here on the right side. This is the ball with skull faces on it. And here's the foot kicking it, and then here's the stage, and here's again the duality playing here. And then over here you have the houses again with the TV antennas. Here you have backward capitalism again. There's Aztlán again, except you have a woman. She's smoking a cigarette. Here's her cat. And then there's—she's dreaming about her prayers that she's giving to the existing of this life. And then how was the ballgame [was] played, because each of the *templo* sites—they're never going to be ruined—each of the *templo* sites have a ball court. And yet I found information, I have a book on the ballgame, but it does—it just says, well, it's in reference to the political, the social, this. But it doesn't say, "All right, [whistle] start the game!"

This one's about—but I found in reference to the Omteotl and all that reference Omteotl, it's so important. And so I started putting in images like *tecpatl* from the Aztec calendar because I want people to see it, to make reference to it again. Because I'm from the [Native] Spanish background, and yet again, now and then I do find English [Native] imagery that I use from here. And it's the same thing, they thought it was the same thing as we did. We just designed it differently. And then again, we built stone cities, big ones, giant ones, but yet it was depending on how nomadic you were. But over here, the buffalo, and all of that.

KD: There was no reason to settle down over here. There was plenty of—it was a very fertile land.

LL: And then imagine when Columbus—ugh—showed up, and saw everybody butt-naked. I think it was those who achieved something were able to go there and live in nirvana. Hey, you're one with nature. I said, "Wow, perfect." I wish I would have been around. That would have been nice, hey? By the beach,

coconuts, bananas, and what have you. But yet again, like again, like all that information that was burned and—

KD: Lots of references. It's very deep, each of these two images.

LL: And then there's always the speech symbol, women speaking. Like I said, in the beginning, I was brought up by women, and I always wanted to pay back my mom, God bless her, for this life she gave me to simply say, "Hey, women have a voice."

And the wife has seen that I've always wanted to do that, because, again, I don't know, in reference [I can] make women—you know, I can make women very sexual, sexually oriented, but I didn't get into that. Yet again, I—you know, I jest at my wife, and then I tell her, "Yeah, you know, when I was a little kid, I used to look at those DC magazines, and there was this ad in the back, and I ordered a pair of X-ray glasses." And then that's where the joke comes in, and I said, "I put them on. There was a black cloud over me, and lightning struck me," right? [laughter] Just like Spider-man. He gets bit by the spider. "Well, I got hit right in the eyes when I had those X-ray glasses on, and I can see through everything now. I don't need the glasses, I know what's underneath." And she looks at me. She goes, "Oh, be quiet, Leo." [laughter]

KD: I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about the aesthetic process. You were saying you have a lot of drawings.

LL: Mm-hmm.

KD: So when you're putting—you were actually composing either at the easel with paint or paper with pastel drawings. Do you have these things spread about you, or you looked through them, or you paste them on the wall and then you bring them to the new thing you're creating?

LL: I pull them out of the file, I pull them off the wall—something that had happened previously. And like that one there, a *Cup of Tochtli*, I was thinking about *tochtli*, and *tochtli's* right on the cup, and *tochtli's* one of the year symbols of the calendar, the Mexica Aztec calendar. And I said, "Oh, this may be cool." But then I said, "All right, then I'll have the heat, the evaporation going up, the swirls. That would be cool. But what else could I incorporate here?" And then again, I take things that I have and I say, "Oh, that's nice. I like the way it looks. I don't have to add anything else." I think when I did this—what year was that?

KD: Ninety-seven.

LL: Ninety-seven. There was a constellation passing by, and so I put it in there. And then I also make reference to Venus up there in the left-hand corner. Again, it's an indigenous Venus. And then the *nopal*. And then images in there, and—

KD: The hummingbird.

LL: Mm-hmm. Hummingbird is not, per se, [a] hummingbird, it's Huitzilopochtli. Huitzilopochtli was the main deity of the Mexica Aztec, which was the spirit—not a god—a spirit of war. And it was to train to be that fast, to be like Huitzilopochtli. You see, the faster you were, the better a warrior you were, the better protector you were of the village, of yourself.

KD: Now, he's purchasing—this is '96?

LL: He purchased—

KD: Ninety-two.

LL: Mm-hmm. Oh, yes. Mm-hmm.

KD: *I Dream of Chico's Corazón*, '92, acrylic on canvas. It's small, it's ten and a half by thirteen and a half inches. How did you first—how did Cheech first learn about your work? I think you have the most items in the collection in this show.

LL: Yes. Cheech and I met at the Berman gallery in Santa Monica, California, and I guess he had purchased something there, and I was real happy that he did. And, "Oh, man, Cheech Marin! Hey, Cheech Marin, all right! Another *marijuano* in the crowd, amongst a lot of others." But yet again, it was real—just a per chance meeting. And that was it, it was real—just a per chance meeting. And that was it. He just came back years later and said, "I want to buy more stuff," and he did. And basically he bought lots of my work in one shot, boom, and—

KD: Oh, really? Many of these are from that one—

LL: Mm-hmm.

KD: He dealt directly with you at the home, the studio, but not at the galleries?

LL: Well, at the gallery he bought, I guess, one or two small pieces, and then later on—he knew about me. But yet I was never out there, “Hey, here I am. I’m for sale,” that kind of thing.

Again, Chico, Chico-man, that’s what that is, and the themes that I’m playing with, and the way I use verbiage again. Chico-man theme really meant not Chico Mendes, who lost his life trying to be an organizer. He lost his heart, his identity, and they shot him at home. And then the woman, in her life, the tic-tac-toe, that could have been his heart that she was there playing with. It could have been his wife. And the fish suckling on the bottom of the boat is an earring design that I found in a jewelry book on Mexican jewelry, and this woman had it on. I went, “Oh, there’s the river. Cool.” I did a drawing of it, just [in] my little sketchbooks. Got home one day and said, “Hey, this would be cool. Here’s the river, more of the river.”

KD: This is actually one of my most favorite. *Los Muertos*, from 1998. And the reason I say that is, I love the—I’m just going to give you the words that come to mind. You might have other ways to describe it—

LL: No, that’s fine.

KD: Dreamy, dreamy, sensual, soft, the way you hit the acrylic on the canvas. It’s just my own aesthetic. These are louder. These have more movement. The other ones we were talking about, *Un Poquito Sol*. Even this *Más Juegos*, which I understand in the book should be credited as a pastel, right?

LL: Yes, uh-huh.

KD: And the other pastels, they have just a lot more kind of action, the way you use line, the way you create the rapid movement of line. But *Los Muertos*, it’s not like, nobody’s moving. It’s just at a different pace.

LL: It’s very subtle, real subtle. Again, some guy came by with some canvases that were all painted up, and there’s really nothing to it. And I said, “Oh, cool, I’ll just paint on top of it.” And I left his colors right on there. I think they were oil paints, actually.

KD: Are you kidding me?

LL: Nope. And I painted it right on top of it, I said, “Oh, this would be cool. I’ll just add a little color here, a little color there. Oh, cool, works for me.” Real pastel-y.

KD: Now, some of this is not your brushstroke?

LL: No. Oh, yes, my brushstrokes [in] the background. The background was overall just wishy-washing colors, and I just simply came on top of that. But I liked it so much that I said, “No, I’ll leave it, whatever it is. Especially down here where the river is, behind the river—those colors.” They were there. And I said, “Oh . . .” I watered down my pastels—not my pastels, but my acrylics—to where they looked watery. Here’s that image again, here’s the fish.

KD: The woman in the boat, the fish.

LL: But yet again, boom, right in the center is that skull-faced-looking heart. And then again, these pair of hands coming out of nowhere hitting a conga. The Virgen de Guadalupe. And here, ever so present, in Acatl, the year we’re in now, Tecatl, the year we’re coming to, Calli, after that, and then Tochtli. Or, if you start here, which I did, this is the year 2000, all right? Two thousand and one, 2002, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, so this will be 8, 9. Or, 1999, ’98, ’97. So here I’m giving you, right there in the corners, a lesson. And once you take it on, hey, it’s like reading the calendar. This could be Tonatiuh, the image of the sun spirit. But yet I add so much more to it also, the tic-tac-toe, city hall, the Placita Church. And then yet again, here I am with my daughter.

KD: There’s you on the bike.

LL: And then my daughter and her Hot Wheels. But yet again, it was fun doing it.

KD: And this is one of the other things that you were starting that I’ve seen, the framing.

LL: Oh, the curtains. The curtains of the stage. Again, it was—I found something by Shakespeare, “The world is but a stage.” But yet Carlos Almaraz, he had made reference to the stage for many a year. So I never used it. I just said, “Well, it’s there,” because Carlos—well, that Berman guy, Robert Berman up there in Santa

Monica said, “You know, you and Carlos, man, if I get you guys together, man, you’re dynamite. You whip out pastels just like Carlos does.” And I go, “Oh, no, I don’t. Carlos whips them out. It takes me a little bit longer.” Because again, [of] the way I work with pastels. I wish I could paint or draw like Carlos, but yet I can’t, because my subject matter is totally different. But still, we make reference to about the same type of thing. But he was the master blaster. He had me in a head spin when I was a teenager, and I was like, “Wow, man. Little man, you’re great. You’re going to be great.”

KD: Do you think—

LL: And Carlos, also, and I’ll reference to him, I respected him so much. And being around him when I was younger, people would ask me, “Hey, did you take anything? Like in those days when you were with them?” Oh, there was plenty of opportunity. Oh, yeah. Nope. Why should I? I respect the guy, he’s my mentor. Shoot, you’d never want to take something—

KD: Well, you wouldn’t have been thinking of those things then. I mean, you wouldn’t have known that he was going to be so successful.

LL: And then those canvases in Frank’s garage. They used them as tarps to throw over the trash. [We] went in and threw away that. And everything else. I asked him, “What should we do with them? Throw them away? Sure, no problem.” Should have kept one, that would be interesting. *[laughter]*

And one little point here. Tito Delgado—Roberto Delgado—I have one of his great paintings. I don’t know, it’s six foot by eight foot, I think, something like that. Five foot by eight. He again, the doctor, he messed up and bought some of what he thought was a coating that he was going to put on his beautiful oil painting thing that he did back in the early ’80s. And that’s when his hands weren’t as bad, and his gradations were really, really small gradations—little things with oil. And so again, just like the Almaraz situation here, just like with Frank Romero and his garage, he discarded this one painting. He left in Self Help Graphics [in] this storage room, this water heater in there. And the frame got bent and started going crazy. And forever and a day, even when I was downstairs working in the screen-printing shop, there was no curtain on this little room, and I’d see his painting taking in the sun. And I remember going in there. “Sister Karen, let me go in there and get supplies and things.” And when I was doing things, I’d see his painting back there. And I didn’t think much of it, just that, “Oh, Tito’s painting’s back here.”

Then I finally started asking him about it. And then, I don’t know, thirty or forty gallons of wine later, a few pounds of grass, I don’t know, burritos and food, pushing them, he said, “All right, take it.” So I did, I have it in storage. That sealant he had put on top yellowed when he had it, and so he said, “Oh, I’m not going to sell this.” And yet again, it’s going to be unfortunate, but I’ll have to have it taken off the frame—

KD: Restored, yeah.

LL: But yet he built that frame. That’s the whole thing about Tito. He would build his frames. But again, that’s saving money, doing it himself, having the know-how. He built them real good, except this one he put back there. And it was just leaning against something. But this yellowed pigment he put on top had actually lifted off the paint. It didn’t do nothing to do the paint. It just came off like dry skin after you have a callous of some sort. And so when I got the painting, the first thing I did is I peeled off like three or four feet of this yellowed pigment that had a little bit of paint. Just—you could see it, and now, boom, underneath this beautiful painting that he was working on.

KD: Wow. So people were experimenting with stuff, it sounds like, in [the] early days.

LL: Well, he was.

KD: He was.

LL: Well, again—but yet again, I guess he found this product, [and] said, “Oh, I guess this is it.” And he put it on it, and no . . .

KD: Not the right product.

LL: And—yeah. And so again, I scored on this painting. I’m saving it. Nobody touches it. It’s not at home. The frame is kind of crooked, so I have it in storage, safe against from—

KD: Do you think it will be helpful with the future nest eggs or something for your kids? Selling it?

LL: Oh, yes. When we convince those Latino philanthropists that are out there, they'll finally realize one of the great painters out of East LA is Roberto Delgado. And him and his way, he may seem like a crass type of guy. He's real intelligent. He taught me about the *New Republic* magazine and stuff like that when I first met him. I wasn't really into the *politica*, even though I knew about it, but he was really into the Washington thing. I said, "Well, tell me about this. Tell me about all this."

KD: When did you first meet him?

LL: In '77, I think it was, when we started the Public Art Center.

KD: Tell me about the Public Art Center.

LL: Richard Duardo and I were trying to print some Día de los Muertos, posters or little things that I did for Día de los Muertos. And [after] I came back in 1976 from the service, I went to Self Help Graphics and found, two days later, it was the Día de los Muertos. And me and Borders, James Borders, a friend of mine from the Public Art Center—I mean, from the Saturday tutor art class—went to Día de los Muertos celebration. And then I found Carlos and so on, and then I got back in the mix.

And then there was a call for meetings for the Día de los Muertos. I showed up, and I said, "Hey." I had purchased a '59 Chevy pickup truck and used it as a float, like I think I told you earlier. Made flowers. And there's photos somewhere, and all kinds of TV media showed up. But I showed up late because I started fabricating everything and putting it all on the truck at Frank's house up there on Kellam [Avenue], when we lived up there in Angelino Heights—Echo Park. Then [I] drove real slow past Olvera Street, got applause as I was passing Olvera Street. And I had a pair of overalls, and there was a dead couple next to me that my girlfriend back there, my [future] wife, Margie, had made with another couple drinking and partying and things we did. And I got there and I was late.

I passed Self Help Graphics on the way to Evergreen, and I get there, and it was great because people were just—they were like, "Wow, look at that—where did that come from?" And I get there and just as they were coming up the hill from the cemetery on Evergreen, I turned around and I led the parade down the street. And I just kept honking my horn because I knew I made a loud noise, and there was a cop right in front of me in his car with . . . And I just kept honking and honking and honking on purpose. [laughter] But the Public Arts Center—I jump around, don't I?

KD: That's okay.

LL: Richard and I found that Frank wasn't going to let us print in his garage, because he came back after we had cleaned it out and set up a clothesline with clothes clips, clothesline clips, and that's how we were going to hang the prints, old-fashioned style. And we had a table, and it's going to be set up, no problem. Just a black and white thing. Frank threw a tantrum, a fit.

We got pissed off, and a week later we got together and said, "Hey, there's a space." Carlos had found a space up here in Highland Park, 5600 block, I think it was, in Figueroa, right up here. And there it was. At that time, Mechicano was down the street on [Avenue] 54, I believe it was, and Figueroa. And it was an old music hall. Big giant space, staircase in the back that went throughout the back, out the alley. And a restroom in the back and a water source and a stairway in the front and windows. It was great. And across the street was a theatre.

KD: Now, what was it before?

LL: A music lesson place, a music studio. And so we went in there, agreed we'd all pay rent, and split the cost on the rent.

KD: So at first, who—how many people are splitting the cost?

LL: Oh, it was Carlos, Frank, Guillermo, [George]—

KD: Oh, wait, so Frank goes in on it too.

LL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, of all things, yeah. Then George Yepes, Richard Duardo, John Valadez.

KD: That's nearly everybody.

LL: Uh-huh. Oh, yeah. So it was nice. And then we went in there with Richard Duardo. He set up a table, and we printed these little images that I did back in '77, and they were for the Día de los Muertos. So I guess

those would be the collectible right there. Real small, little black and white images of a guy, a puppeteer, kids, and then *danzantes*, a girl dancing around.

KD: Now, were these announcing an event?

LL: No, just Día de los Muertos. I just did pen and ink on acetate. I just drew it down, and then Richard went to Self Help Graphics and then shot it onto the screen, brought it back, and then we just threw black on there and just—we didn't have any racks or anything. We just threw the paper right on the floor, and then that night picked it all up after it was dried. And we cut it right there by hand with the rulers the next day that whole procession took place. But then the Public Art Center from that point on, you know, we started meeting there. Brought in chairs, tables—because we knew we were going to set it up somewhere. And Guillermo Bejarano—you know, he does Aztlán.net—he started bringing all the equipment that he had in the little apartment down the street on Avenue 54, and then started setting up to do the *ChismeArte* through the magazine—through the Public Art Center. And then he went through there.

And then, you know, everyone else brought in tables and things to draw [and] paint. And then you know, it's always fascinating to watch Carlos there for hours, painting away. We close the front door, and just start working on things. And then the—I think it was Richard Duardo and some of the other guys at the time [started] to fabricate these walls, like a gallery-type situation in there. And then we had some meetings, and it was like, you know, Richard Duardo wanted to do a screen-printing venture in the back, and in the front it would be, you know, everyone would have a little space. It would work that way. And then Richard coaxed me into going out to dinner with him, and I said, "Okay." Him and his girlfriend, Sue McKinsey. And I didn't realize it then, but then he said, "Hey, Limón, I want to start this screen print thing. Come in. My family's going to come in and help me out, and—financially." And I said, "Oh, cool. Let's work it." I said, "Yeah, no problem."

And then of course, I saw that he needed something. John and all the others were painters. They were muralists, they were doing murals and things, graphics. And I said, "Poor Richard, I've got to help him to do something back there." And sure enough, the Aztlán Multiples, he had it all set up—a logo—and he knew what he was doing. And, but yet again, he was working it and trying to do things, so he didn't pay any attention to me. And I just got frustrated, and I just—well, I did a print or two, I think, with him there.

KD: So were you going into—I know this tape's going to end, so let's—

[*break in audio*]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Leo Limón, and we're on side 2 of our interview. And Leo was telling me about the beginnings of Aztlán Multiples. So did you go in as like, a partner, economically, with him?

LL: Yes.

KD: And then that relationship didn't sound like it lasted very long.

LL: No. The thing was that I was just simply paying in for the rent with the other guys. So was Richard. Except when they asked me "Leo, do you want to come and paint with us?"—which I should of—and I said, "Nope, I'm going to partner up with Richard." And so it was a backflip that I did right there. And they looked at me, and I said, "Hey, I want to go with Richard. I want to help him out." Because I saw that he was going to need someone to back him up. Otherwise, what was the use? And I didn't really know screen printing that well, and I said, "Hey, this is an opportunity to learn screen printing," just like I had learned photography in the service. I had no idea what photography was when I—well, I knew what it was, but when I went into the service, and I learned what f-stop and shutter speed and all that stuff was about. When I came to screen printing, Richard was the master at it already. Like I said, he was already in affiliation with the Gemini GEL down out there in the Westside, and I said, "Nah, this guy's got his stuff together." I could see it, no problem.

And so, you know, I got together with him. Hey, you know, Richard was, like I said once again, he's one of the Chicano forces out there that has helped all of us in reproducing our work in multiples. Because once . . . If you can't sell a big painting, you sure can sell a small print, and you'll make at least something

so you can just keep on going with that little bit of something. And yet again, Richard's a real intelligent guy, and you know—you know Richard Duardo?

KD: Yeah. Did you—when you talk about having meetings, was that just to organize the space and, kind of logistically, who was going to be where, and who, how much paying into the rent?

LL: Yeah, that's what it was.

KD: No discussions about Chicanismo, the ideology, the politics, the—

LL: Yes, we spoke about that.

KD: The definitions of Chicano art?

LL: No, we were Chicano art. And the *ChismeArte* magazine, coming out of there. What else was it? We were living it. We still are. We always will be. Then again, it's your take, like I said, again, on how you perceive things. And like I said, now the guys might look at me differently when I'd say, "Hey, welcome to the county of Aztlán in the *continente* Anáhuac." Because again, back then we were talking about things, and we were seeing things happen, because it's just individuals that you see doing things out there that you take note of. And then basically, people look at me and go, "Hey, Leo, do us some drawings." That was basically it. They knew I could do the drawings, just give me the materials. What is it? I read something and do an illustration for it, and there it was. And it was that simple, I'd—

KD: And these were for the commercial projects that the Public Arts Center was doing?

LL: It was for the cultural projects that was part of *ChismeArte*, and posters, banners and things.

KD: So did you do illustrations for the magazine, for *ChismeArte*?

LL: Oh, yes, a few.

KD: Did you sign those?

LL: Did I sign those?

KD: Yeah, did you sign Leo Limón at the bottom of the image?

LL: Oh, yes. Put my initials or something. But the consciousness was there. We weren't really saying, "Hey, look at the—let's talk about the walkouts and the blowouts of the '60s, the late '60s, or stuff like that." We all made reference to something that we knew about, and we knew was out there, because we'd see it in the news. And then the medias weren't as embedded as they are now, so we heard about that stuff. And there was more—you know, there was still Chicanos, Chicanas out there talking about what was going on in different places through the *ChismeArte*, through the other *centros* that had spawned and were getting funding—government funding, private funding—and it was growing.

But yet again, I kind of feel we didn't—you know, we're this new, new little seedling that had been planted, and it was just started to break ground. And what was out there for us, when on the other side, the art world already was a big giant Venus flytrap that was waiting for a little fly to get in there and eat it up. And it already had its backing. It already had this whole government thing behind it—the tax thing, the Hamptons. That whole thing is all set up.

KD: And the Hamptons, you mean those wealthy philanthropists who are supporting the arts, or supporting the institutions that—

LL: They—again, I feel that that part of culture was being nourished. We were never nourished. We are nourishing our *cultura* again, our *indigena*, by just being here and doing this, I feel. Back in those days, I had read about artists going off to the Hamptons because there was Pollock and Warhol and some others, but what it was is, it was the rich in New York who saw . . . Again, the institutions were just simply keeping their cultural identity alive by simply saying, "Well, we can get the brown guy or we'll get the white guy. Oh, sorry, brown guy." So get the white guy. If he studied, he's got a degree or something, cool. He's going—we don't care what he's doing as long as we get our own and put our own into this circle, which was with the galleries, and then putting them together with publications and so on. And so all again, and the whole tax thing was set up so that, hey, the guy could come in, a buyer—

- KD:** So when did you become aware that the—getting in the gallery but having the publication was also important, like either a catalog or getting reviewed and having your image in the newspaper or the magazine or the trade journal?
- LL:** Oh, way back in the day when I was high school. Mrs. Downey had *Art in America*, *ArtForum*. I started reading those things, and I got real bored. Because I said, “Wow, what are they talking about?” They were talking about—not per se the artist in reference to other art schools. And I said, “Uh, okay. I guess.” But then again, it was like, this identity thing I was trying to find as a Chicano. And where was I? Where was I? It’s like, United States? And then I’m going, “Wait a minute. What’s this United States stuff?” If it only started yea years ago. What was here before then? Oh, that’s right, *indigena*. So now that’s why I make reference to Chicano as the new tribe. We’re the new tribe here.
- KD:** So—but you were actually having success with the stuff you did in the galleries.
- LL:** Oh, yes. That was the mid-’80s. I think I told you. Tito Delgado was at Self Help Graphics, he’s passing by. “Tito! What have you got there?” And he goes, “Slides and a cover letter.” “Hey, let me see your cover letter. Mind if I make a copy of it?” Made a copy of it. “Thanks, Tito!” Saw his slides. So I got his—
- KD:** So you do the same kind of—
- LL:** Yeah. I just, I got out the Wite-Out, took out his name, put my name in there, and then went to the galleries. And then went to the galleries. And then, you know, said, “Here I am. Would you be interested in selling my work?” And I think that was different from what Tito would probably have said, because I went out there and said, “Hey, do you want to sell my work?” I said, “Hey, I’m making it. I want to sell it. I know I have a reference to this background that’s rich. I have people that I know.”
- KD:** What were other artists saying?
- LL:** You know, again, the aesthetic of art—that jargon, you know, that whole thing. It’s like, “Would you look at my work?” I said, “Do you want to sell my work? You make money, I make money, and I’ll keep making it if you keep selling it. If you don’t, I’ll go somewhere else.”
- KD:** Yeah.
- LL:** That’s what it is. But yet on the other hand, like I said, you know, at an early age I said, “Wow, there’s the New York [Big] Apple.” And I heard that so many times, and the magazines and everything. And then [in] Europe. And then when I went to the Army, and then I saw—like I said, “Where does this art come from? What’s the relationship to it?” And then I said, “Okay, look at these articles that they got, or these artifacts, over here in Europe, and they are ours, indigenous-speaking.” And I said, “Oh, history’s a big part of this.” That’s what it is, it’s just history. And we have to know, in history’s time, and it’s just like we’re getting the watch and going backwards.
- And so I guess that’s why, in time, I made reference to, and I teach the Aztec calendar. It’s a clock. And now I found out certain dates that are relevant, and look, they’re coming up. October 28, 2011, something’s going to happen. The Maya calendar ends—
- KD:** Where do you do this investigation? I mean, are you getting books from the library and—
- LL:** Yeah.
- KD:** Are they written in Spanish or English?
- LL:** English. I can’t really read Spanish that well, but English. And I’ve heard—
- KD:** So good archeology—
- LL:** That’s out there. Yeah. And it’s all written saying this is what they wrote about.
- KD:** So you’ve been making this investigation for quite some time. Did that transform the consciousness of any of the other folks you were working with at either the Public Art Center or Self Help and Mechicano?
- LL:** Oh, yes. Definitely. Definitely, because again, it seems like I do things and then years later, things go in that direction. One of the first things that came that I did when I came out of the service were those little prints. Well, no, it wasn’t even that. It was a tattoo, designs of birds that I’d got from a catalogue.
- KD:** Right, you told me.

- LL: And I said, “Oh, this is interesting.” And then years later, now Tattoo Heaven, everything’s out there. I said, “Wow, if I only would have . . .” I’d be the tattoo needle of this place. *[laughter]* Which is interesting. Then again, things just happen. And you know, it’s just—did I do something? I mean, I did Quetzalcoatl for my kids. Little T-shirts. Because I was at Self Help Graphics and I could. And Michael Amescua was my teacher.
- And I said, “Hey, Mike, tell me about Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca,” blah, blah, blah. And he had all of this stuff from his schooling at Oxy, Occidental [College] over here, and that’s where he got his degree. And I said, “Hey, tell me more, tell me more. I want more information so I can expound on this information that I’ve always wanted.” Because it would have taken me longer to go out and find it. It was just—the stars were aligned. I finally came up with that one, and I said the stars were aligned—and Michael, Self Help Graphics, Sister Karen, and all that. Which is good, like we’re aligned, our stars are aligned. And you know, today’s a water day, today is Atl day, according to the calendar. And water flows, and water is wonderful. It always has to find that bottom, but yet it could kill you, too.
- KD: Do you consult the calendar every day?
- LL: I look for the date. But now I know it pretty well. It just keeps going. It’s just when the new year comes, it’s always switched, and I go, “How do they do that?” I’ve never found that. But it’s okay. And there’s two calendars. There’s a guy who has it on Azteccalendar.com, right?
- KD: Oh, yeah, I see what you’re saying.
- LL: So I push—I bring that one up every morning, and I bring that one up every morning and I see what the day is. And then I go to that day and I see what its shadow soul is, see what reference it has to it, and what the night thing is. And the Mayan numbers on the long count.
- KD: Now, you’ve just developed a facility with the computer, so that’s new.
- LL: Yes.
- KD: What did you do before?
- LL: There was books, calendar books and stuff.
- KD: Do you have these books at your home? Are you—shelves and shelves and your wife’s going to kill you because you’ve got too many books?
- LL: Oh, no. I basically have a few indigenous books, and the rest is just about the world at large.
- KD: Do you know the titles or what you’re working with? The books—the authors or the titles? Because I’m really curious about the source.
- LL: The Thompson, Coe—
- KD: Michael Coe?
- LL: Yes.
- KD: Yeah. He was my professor.
- LL: Oh, really?
- KD: Oh, I avoided him, to tell you the truth. *[laughter]*
- LL: Ah, really, yes.
- KD: Yes, with the classic texts, yeah.
- LL: And again, it’s when I went to bookstores and I’d see these. And as of recent, I’ll tell you, a few days ago—it’s here in my pocket—I finally found a shop that sells patchouli oil. It’s called the Alexandria [II Bookstore]. It’s up here in Pasadena. And I said, “Oh, fantastic, honey. We finally found a place where Papa can go buy his patchouli oil?”
- KD: What’s that for?
- LL: Oh, smelling like an old hippie.
- KD: *[laughter]* Oh, that’s heavenly. I know that smell.
- LL: Oh, yes. *[laughter]* Remember that?
- KD: Yeah. How do I know that smell?
- LL: Oh, hey. It’s me.
- KD: Do I know old hippies? *[laughter]*

LL: Here I am, eh? But here's the Alexandria, and [they] have a great book collection about metaphysics and, you know, Alan Watts and all that.

KD: Yeah, I can just see someone who's a researcher that is more versed in—you know, because I'm an anthropologist by training. But I didn't do archaeology, that would be able to read the references in your visual record. There's just so many. You tell me when we sit down and look at an image. But someone who knows that already could just, "Oh, yeah, here he goes . . ." and read it. I think that's fascinating.

LL: But then the books that I have—you know, I have a book on marriage, marriage rituals.

KD: Indigenous marriage rituals?

LL: No. Just today. Today's marriages. Everything from Jewish, Arabic, Indian—

KD: What's that interest from?

LL: When I go to the library, it just—stars were aligned. I was at the Cypress Park Library before it closed down, and I got to know the ladies. [I] gave workshops there, and I said, "No, no, buy me a burrito and some water, that's cool." And I'd give workshops to the kids about the river, the cats, some drawing. And they said, "Hey, we're closing down doors because they're building another one for us down the street. You want some books? We'll sell them to you real cheap." So you know, I got these Michelangelo books that are like, brand new. And they said, "Give us fifty cents or a dollar."

KD: Nice art books.

LL: I mean, you know, fifty-dollar, sixty-dollar books for one dollar? I said, "Here's twenty dollars." They said, "Leo. . ." I said, "No. Here's twenty dollars. I know what books are worth." So you know, they had a lot more books, and I said, "Oh, oh, where do I put these! Move out of the way, honey. They're going to go here." And it's just—again, you know, I get them and I ex libris them so that my kids can have them. Because again, I have one book out of five or six other books that I had, it's a Cezanne book that Carlos Almaraz gave to me out of this box of books, and it survived these robberies that I went through at the Aztlán foundation. And inside of there, when I opened that first page, it says, "Charles D. Almaraz." I love it, because it makes reference to the guy I met.

And then we went through our little thing. I got out of high school and he was, "Come on, Leo. You're out of high school." "Yeah?" "All right, now what are you going to do?" Go to school, do this. "Hey, I'm up there up north with César. Want to come up with me?" "Sure." Went up there for about a month, couldn't stand that trailer, came back. And then, you know, went off into the service. I saw Charles right before I left, and I came back. "Hey, ese, don't call me Charles. I'm [now] Carlos." So he had found his Chicanismo, even though he was already talking about it.

Again, you know, when you move away from yourself, from yourself, and you move away from it, it's not really your fault. It's just life—you're taking your steps in life. And you know, whatever they call you, it's even like my name, I think I told you about my name, Yreneo. It was like, "Wow." I had to change it. You know, now it's interesting how television, everything that's verbal, the language thing, you know. And in Spanish, you know, it's "Lio, te pongo entre un lio," and I didn't know that. I didn't know that, because my parents didn't speak that way. Never said *lio* other than calling me Leo when I named myself Leo. So then it's like—and then Léo, and then people go, "Ah, Louis Limón?" I go, "No, Leo Limón." "Oh, Louis Limón?" And I go, "Oh, okay, I get it now. All right."

But the language thing is so important, too, because the way kids are today. The youth, the way they want to use language as an art form, and the taggers are out there, and the writers are out there, the graffers are out there. And as of recent, about one hundred or so many showed up at the confluence here at the Arroyo Seco Wash at the LA River. And you know, I went walking around watching them write their thing, and they all have their thing. Didn't see any *politica* up there—nothing that said "Chicano," nothing. I don't know if some guy had come by, but said something about Mexico, *libre* something. But it was already starting—someone painted over part of it. And I'm wondering, did someone did that previous, before these guys came? I don't know.

But I did see that, and it was just that little bit. Then one of the older guys would say, “Hey, Mr. Limón, you want to do something? Go ahead, do something on the wall. We know you do the cats.” And I go, “Nah, I’ve got [my] message, guys.” [laughter] If I’m going to do anything there, I’ll do a cultural thing or I’ll do a real political, hard-nosed thing.

KD: Is that what led to your creation of Aztlán Cultural Arts Foundation? The sense of doing it with a message?

LL: The Aztlán Cultural Arts Foundation, it did have a message, oh yes. But I—the title came from the—

KD: No, I mean the purpose, the goal behind it.

LL: In a sense. But again, yet it made reference to Aztlán and the foundation of Aztlán. And in the end, that’s what brought it down also, because we had people who were thinking in that circle, and they had blinders on and didn’t want to open up and see.

KD: What were the forces or factors that brought the group together, or why you got this going?

LL: It was Armando Martinez. He had come from Riverside, and he had met me at Self Help Graphics prior to my leaving in the late ’90s—I’m sorry, ’80s. And I said, “Sure. Here’s some drawings for your Aztlán . . .” Aztlán, what was that? I don’t know. He had this—Aztlán journals or something like that. And he was out there in Riverside, the university out there. And I said, “Well, here’s the drawings.” And then I left Self Help Graphics, and he was living out there with his wife, Donna Ramirez. And then they still didn’t have kids. And then I was here in the neighborhood, and he shows up, and I’m painting out graffiti out of this mural that John Valadez had painted in ’79, actually—1979, with a group of kids. Some program that he was part of. And you know, it was because my mom had said . . .

You know, I took her by there, because John gave me one day to be out there and paint the mural, and I said, “Oh, cool,” and he gave me credit. I said, “All right, John, thank you.” That’s when we had the Public Art Center and all that. And I said, “Hey, this is fantastic. No problem.” My mama, I took her by there, and she said, “I like it.” I said, “Oh, good.” That’s all it took, and we lived close by. And so I was taking the graffiti off of there, and just using my own funds, my own paint. And then Armando shows up, and, “Hey, brother. Here’s your drawings back. Thank you very much.” And I go, “Okay, thank you.” And then he said, “Hey, wow, you’re taking the graffiti off?” I said, “Yeah.” He goes, “Are you getting funded? Anything like that?” I said, “No.” He said, “Hey, maybe we can get something from the local councilman.” I said, “I don’t write. I don’t even have a computer.” I didn’t have a typewriter. I said, “No. I don’t do that stuff, bro.” And he goes, “I’ll do it for you.” “Sure. Okay. Cool.” And he did it. He made the appointment. We went to see Councilman Mike Hernandez, who I had gone to junior high school with.

KD: You’re kidding.

LL: And we met him, and he said, “Hey, so you’re taking out the graffiti? Hey, where’s your studio? I remember the Public Art Center.” And I said, “Nope. It’s no longer. I’m not there anymore.” He said, “Oh, okay. You looking for a studio space or something? Hello, Mrs. Rodriguez? Come in here, please.” You know, his secretary. And then [he] find[s] the addresses, and, “Next time you come, Leo, we’ll talk. How much money do you want? I can’t really give you money.” And we talked about moneys that were there or weren’t there.

In the end, I got the piece of paper. I went to Standard Brands, and they had some funky paint in the tube. I took it. I never used it on the mural, you can’t do that. It’s for canvas and stuff. So I just kept using my own paint. My paint was more expensive, but I still used it. I took out most of the graffiti that was on there, but didn’t really give it a complete cleaning. I took out stuff and worked it. And then next time we went, Armando and myself—what was it? The councilman [Hernandez] came down, we took a photo [of] the big giant check. It’s one of those PR things that he had to do.

KD: Yeah. Exactly.

LL: No problem. No problem. So we went up there, and in jest—well, not yet, but I said, “Hey, here’s your list. I can’t afford none of this stuff, brother, so here’s your list back. Thanks a lot, but here goes.” In jest. I said, “But hey, how about one of those jail cells in the old city jail on Avenue 19?” Ha-ha-ha, everybody laughed. And then he goes, “Hello, Miss Rodriguez?” We went back next week and he goes, “Hey, guys, there’s a space in there. Would you be interested?” And it took off from there.

One dollar a year lease, we got a space and a restroom somewhere on the other side of the building. Oh, that was terrible for women. Well, I could do it as a man. But for women, oh, it was terrible. Got one door, go downstairs, I mean, by the time you get there, you had to find it, you know. And I said, “Oh, jeez.”

KD: It was an old government building that—

LL: City jail.

KD: Civic—city jail.

LL: City jail indictment—inductionary—

KD: Inductionary.

LL: Oh, yeah.

KD: I know what you mean. Okay.

LL: And so it was a prisoners’ type [space]. Carmen Zapata and the Bilingual Foundation [of the Arts] was on the other side, which was [the] judges’ quarters—wood paneling, oak wood.

KD: Oh. So did you use the space as a studio?

LL: No. It was used as a space for the community. And basically it was like, I had an office, and of course I wasn’t the computer guy and Armando was, so he brought in a typewriter and started sitting down, and then we started talking politics. We showed—the first thing we did was show a movie, Noam Chomsky.

KD: Oh. Okay.

LL: Yeah. [*laughter*] And he was really into it. And I said, “Cool.” And then we did a call out for the community to come in, and “What can we use this space for?” and blah, blah, blah. Raquel Salinas showed up and did her Virgen de Guadalupe thing. And then, you know, we started doing things. The small theatrical troupe came in and started using it on—once or twice a week. Then we started the calendar, and then it started taking off. We just started showing drawing and theater and movies, and just trying to figure out how to make some money.

KD: So the arts in general, not visual arts.

LL: In general, right, right.

KD: And were you making money on them coming in to use the space, the other organizations?

LL: It wasn’t other organizations. We were just basically saying, “Hey, you can use it,” because it was just a space. It was two rooms, two large rooms and then a restroom somewhere else. And then what we did is, well, we went hunting, seeing what was in that building. But we found doors were closed. There was a restroom on that floor close to us, but it was locked, and it was the bakery and the kitchen, and then the cafeteria for the guards. Small place, not really large. It was large, but back then, when they built the thing in the ’20s, I think, it was like, big. And it had elevators that would go up and down, in those days [that] they built it. But when we got there, [the] doors are closed, [the] elevators had snapped lines, and they were on the bottom floor. So we get there, it’s a mess.

Then we found one door that was open, and it was to go downstairs. We found the restroom down there, and we made it work. It was all tiled, and it was where they have a large area where they’d pass out clothes. The washing machines were on the other side. We couldn’t get there, but that’s where Carmen Zapata had her area. But we found a location down there and said, “Hey, this is interesting.” And you know, I guess hair-raising events occurred in those first few months. You know, you’d go down there with a flashlight and you’d hear “ree . . . eeer. . .” You know, spooky movie sound bites. And then down there, there was a cat, there were two cats that lived there.

KD: Oh, okay.

LL: They would find a dead cat, dead rat, things of that manner. Said, “Oh . . .” Then we found the basement, you know, and tried to start cleaning it up a little bit, [to] try to make it work for us.

KD: This is just you and Armando, right?

LL: Myself and Armando, uh-huh. Yes.

KD: And your goal is to just create an art space, a cultural center?

LL: Yes.

- KD:** Okay. And he had earlier talked to you about, like, “Let’s get some funding.” So were you able to ever get funding?
- LL:** That was different, what happened after that. When we got the Aztlán foundation. He never applied for grants or anything. And he could do that, but I don’t know, he never really did. It never went in that direction. He wasn’t spending the time there as, per se, a director or one of the co-directors. I was the one that was there most of the time, cleaning it, cleaning it, cleaning and cleaning.
- KD:** And you only had one dollar a month rent, you said, so—
- LL:** A year.
- KD:** A year. Wow, that’s even lower than I was thinking. So you’re not—you don’t have a lot of expenses, except for the ones that you want to incur because you’re fixing up the place.
- LL:** So when we have just a movie viewing of some sort, we’d charge one dollar or something like that, so we got some funds in. And then from there, you know, we put some of our own money [in] to try to do things. And then when I’d have things up on the wall, people would buy them. And again, you know, I really left the Westside alone. Didn’t even go to the Westside. I said I’m going to really stick to my guns and try to do everything out of here. And I did. I already had a clientele, and I said, “Come on over.” And it was like big, empty rooms, a few chairs, a few tables. “Hey, Leo, what is this place?” [*laughter*]
- KD:** Oh, so you were able to use this space to exhibit your own—
- LL:** To show it.
- KD:** Yeah.
- LL:** I didn’t really exhibit. We—the walls were like—
- KD:** Oh, okay. I know what you’re saying. Like a studio show is what sometimes artists call it.
- LL:** Yeah. Uh-huh.
- KD:** Okay.
- LL:** And people would come, and I’d sit, and I’d just prop up things on chairs, and I really had a lot of prints that I did at Self Help Graphics. And I said “Hey, I’m selling prints. Come on over. Check it out.”
- KD:** And it worked? It worked for you?
- LL:** Oh, yes. Yes, uh-huh. Little by little, I got people to come over and buy things and do things out of there. And I said, “Hey, this is what I want to do.”
- KD:** So the funding is not necessarily something that’s really going anywhere.
- LL:** No. Not at all.
- KD:** Are there—is that creating any tension in the group? For the two of you, or whoever else comes in to work?
- LL:** No.
- KD:** You guys are enjoying this kind of cultural center that can service the arts and the community and not look into—
- LL:** Mm-hmm.
- KD:** Okay. What ends up happening to Aztlán cultural center?
- LL:** We got to a point to where we had break-ins, and people were coming in and doing things with our people there. And I said, “This has gone too far.” We were real lax with some of the people there, giving them keys. And it was okay, but then—I don’t know if they had friends or what have you. And then they were—you know, people had come there and seen the place for a few years and said, “Hey, this is an easy place to do something to it.” They never lit a fire or anything like that. It’s just that someone had found that, “Hey, we could break in and take things.”

At the time, we were trying to make another move in there. I was moving from one space to another space, and I had all my stuff in boxes, and put everything in this other space. And I thought it was going to work because I was letting this other space go so we could use it again for programming and so on, for a classroom type situation. And then I found they were getting into my things. They even took the refrigerator we had.

KD: Whoa.

LL: And then where I was at, that's where the elevator was at. I guess somebody had access to the elevator, and that was—it was a freight elevator. And it was usable, because the city would use that to get up and down the second and third floor to put trashcans, furniture, and stuff.

KD: Storage.

LL: Storage. And still, the building is a white elephant to the city. If they're ever going to use it.

KD: So you had several kinds of people coming in. Mostly Chicano artists and creative folks.

LL: Oh, yes.

KD: Now, were they mostly on the margins?

LL: Young people.

KD: Okay.

LL: Young people, college-age people. We took on theater troupes. Our in-house theater was [Teatro] ChUSMA, with Alberto Ibarra, their director. And you know, we opened up this space that was the kitchen. We got in there when Mr.—what was his name?—Mr. Thompson or Mr. Williams was about to leave. He said, "Hey, Leo, you know, we're leaving the space. We're moving somewhere else." I said, "Oh, okay." So then we contacted the councilman's office and said, "There's this other space, it could be available, what do you think?" And they said, "Hey, let's use the space." They said it was okay. So we went in there and we started using [it]. For some reason, there had been some mix-up—we found out later than there hadn't—paperwork hadn't been put out so that we could use it.

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos. We're back again. We had to take a quick pause. Leo was telling me about all of the different groups that were using the space at Aztlán cultural center—Cultural Arts Foundation. Now, what exactly are the years that this organization is in play?

LL: Nineteen ninety-three until 2000.

KD: That's actually a good amount of time. That's about as long as our cultural groups stay around, especially if it wasn't getting funding. You're able to do this out of pocket until it gets too much.

LL: Mm-hmm.

KD: So when you decide to step away, does your partner also agree?

LL: Oh, no. Things had happened where I had to virtually pick up a *Robert's Rules of Order* and start reading it, because suggestions from friends of mine—because I was always just too lax on that kind of situation. And I said, "Okay." So when I started reading *Robert's Rules of Order*, I said, "Oh, my goodness." Conflict of interest with him and his wife, Armando and his wife. And then, you know, we started having meetings and then just bringing up points of order. And, "You're out of order." [laughter]. Bang, bang. "Who gets the gavel?" It turned out to be that way, because that's the rules. And we had become a non-profit organization, and then some money started coming in through—again, you know, I got a call from Al Nodal.

KD: Really?

LL: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

KD: From CAD, the Cultural [Affairs Department], or whatever.

LL: And he said, "Hey, do you want to do the cats in the river? I know you do them." And I said yes, and it was all part of a consciousness that he had already started about the whole graffiti thing. And then I said—I got thousands of dollars—I said, "Oh, good, I can do this all by myself." Not really. It would have been nice. I could have did it, no problem, but I said, "No, this is a cultural center, we're going to work it out." I brought some politician friends of mine in, and I said, "Hey, look at this space. How do you think we could make money out of here? I want to try to make it grow, maybe get another floor, or two floors above us, get this elevator working . . ." Anyway. I was dreaming, just like everyone else would.

And again, I was the only one with a broom, pushing a broom around I found. But it was, basically, [everyone was] lazy, didn't want to pick up a broom. But I'm over-trained, also, [from being] in the military.

And as a high schooler, I was always an after school or summertime janitor. And these veterans in the school system, they were Vietnam vets, they taught me how to swing a mop and how to clean things fast, easy. No problem, get it done. And I think that's how sign painting came in also. Because—well, we go revert back to that.

Because at Self Help Graphics, Sister Karen got El Limón, and I just, "Sister Karen, we need a sign. Sister Karen, we need stationery. What if I design the logo? Oh, here's some designs, Sister." "Okay. Let's go with this one." "I'm glad you like it. Good." That's the logo they've used ever since.

My wife, she said, "Hey," she said, "Hey, I'm not going to go out and work. And I'm going to take care of the kids." And then she became PTA-oriented, and then she became PTA president for a few years at school. The principal cried when we left—because the kids grew up and they had to go on, and so did we—because we had made so much money for that school. And all she did was, "Hi, honey, I need a sign, this sign, and I need . . ." Did I know how to do sign painting? Hah! Was I set up? Oh, jeez. I'd just pull out the old flash and—boom!

KD: So were you able to—then your wife could—was she paying you for that through the PTA?

LL: Oh, no. Oh, heck, no. That's just community, that's just the family. Shoot, that was all fun.

KD: So you're able to manage this place, it sounds like mostly—I mean, that's my interpretation—mostly on your own. Are you getting any artistic work done? Does it—well, I guess you did, because some of those paintings are between 2003 and—1993, excuse me, and 2000.

LL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure. I'd go to the back, set up something, and paint. And I had my office, but I'd use it also to teach kids in, also. So I would put things to one side, and I always had something going because it's just nervous energy. And so again, the cultural thing was there, and the book[s] were always there, and I would go to the library and get books and information.

KD: Do you work on more than one piece at a time?

LL: Yes.

KD: You do.

LL: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

KD: Okay. How does that happen? How does a person do that?

LL: See these two arms?

KD: [laughter]

LL: But do you see, these two arms just follow orders. When this says this is going to go over here, then this—the commander's always saying, "Hey, you can't throw the paint away." It doesn't make any sense. I've got extra, and I always put extra, so it makes me use it on something else. And so I just don't have it as one thing, and I have cut cardboard ready right there, so I'll make things that I could sell for one dollar, five dollars, ten dollars, and then I have the paintings. Small, four hundred dollar, five hundred dollar painting, or a two to three thousand dollar painting over here. And then, you know, that's how it goes.

And then it's like, I have material to read and look at, and I'll look at movies, and now it's set up—I really like it. It didn't happen like that before. For a few years it was really bad. I couldn't even function. It was real bad. Just moving around, financial things. Then my wife says, "Hey, the boys are going away, and now it's time. It's just me and the daughter, and I'm going back." And I said, "Yes." And she goes, "Let's move in together." and I said, "Okay. When, where?" So I had to hustle. "Oh, hey, I've got to sell something—oh, I've got to sell something." So I come up with some money, and then found this place we have now.

KD: Excuse me—you and your wife had split for awhile, is that what you're saying?

LL: Just lived in different places.

KD: Okay.

LL: And now we're going to do it all over again. My son wants to move in, and—

KD: So you're able to successfully market yourself, is what it sounds like.

LL: Out there, yes. Sell things.

KD: Do you have any—I don't know if I asked you this before—does that make you uncomfortable, or is that something you feel comfortable with? Like getting on the phone, "I've got to make a sale."

LL: Oh, no.

KD: No?

LL: No, it's just—it's so much, it keeps happening. See the big smile on my face?

KD: Yeah.

LL: I got a call from the Department of Water and Power. They said, "Hey, we received your e-mail. We like your—we see your images, the cats." Now they're saying, "Well, we need . . ." If it's okay with me, the head guy said, he goes, "I just need another head guy to make the signature on your paper. How would we send this to you?" I said, "E-mail it to me," and then I have permission to be in the river through the Water and Power, to paint the footings on the pylon tension wire things.

KD: Wow.

LL: And I already gave them a list, where I'd go.

KD: Is that commissioned, or is that—

LL: No. Again, I'm just going to go down there and do it.

KD: It's just out of the—

LL: I had called [Councilmember] Eric Garcetti's office, and I spoke to a gentleman I had met and known for a few years, Mitch O'Farrell. And I met with him over there on Hollywood and Western in their offices there, their field offices. And I said, "Hey, I want to paint some cats up there on the footings. This is your area." And then he said, "Well, this is, but not this side," blah, blah, blah. And then I said, "Hey, man, all this graffiti stuff? Man, what a shame. You guys are spending thirty million dollars a year. Give me one, and see what I can do in a year with a bunch of kids." And I said, "Hey." I'd have a good salary, that's for sure, for a few years. *[laughter]*

KD: Can I ask you what the salary would be for you?

LL: Oh, I want fifty-five thousand dollars on up. That's reasonable. And I said, that'd be nice, and all I want is a ten o'clock to two o'clock job. From ten o'clock until two o'clock, and I'd be the LA River Cats Project. Which I already am, all I want to do is—I'd need an office, a supplier somewhere. And I'd need these paints, and I'd go and fix the cats, and I'd paint new cats. And then I'd give workshops, and then I'd bring schools together to become sister schools. And then started [a] bicycle club, paint a mascot, one of the kids would do [it].

And then I'd go across the river, or we'd adopt a bridge and then set up a calendar, and there's hundreds of schools. And then set up a system so that the sister schools meet once a month. Two or three kids get a broom, sweep the place down, cool. Go eat, and then have picnics together, and bike shops—bike club, like the LA Coalition for Bikes. They come and create a bike club, show the kids. And we bring in the Palabra program from the National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute, so they learn about morals and values and stuff like that. So the kids are like, "Wow. Somebody cares about us." And in the meantime, the taggers, the writers, can come and start expressing themselves on the walls, and then I can bring in instructors to give the tagger[s] information.

KD: So are you going to be on their staff, or are you going to be a non-profit?

LL: No, they're staff.

KD: Excellent. Brilliant. *[laughter]* Yay! That is such good news.

LL: So that's what I'd like.

KD: Did you think of all of this on your own? I mean, this is—

LL: Well, yes.

KD: This is a brilliant strategy for helping understand the need to express yourself among youth. And then also the commitment to social good.

LL: Thank you. Thank you.

KD: Wonderful.

LL: I've been thinking about it for years on end. Like I tell you, again, it's my mom's flair. She was real quiet, my mom just sang and made tortillas, and did what my dad needed to have him comfortable. And then it was, you know, the love for my mom. But again, I came up with another idea. I just proposed it last month, prior to the Latino Congreso. There's an Alianza del Rio I went to, and these guys, as far as the Spanish-speaking guys who are trying to do things in the river, or river-consciousness, bringing it to the Latino community, which we are. But, you know—but we're Indians, actually.

But I came up with an idea, I actually have a model that I built. I actually went to Michael's and bought little fake trees with spongy green foliage on it. I never did that, but I did, I had to make it look like a park. I came up with something called Art Peace Park/Circle. Art, *A-R-T*, peace, *P-E-A-C-E*, park-slash-circle. It's a square box, right—it's a light bulb box that I have. I painted it, got it together to make it look like a little building. And it's supposed to imitate the—be in part self-sufficient, like the Debs Park Audubon building [Audubon Center] that's solarized. And have a water system from the city and then drain back into the city type of thing. And that would be a building which would be used for and by the neighborhood city councils that are now in existence.

And it would be right next to the river because they're about to spend two billion dollars from this area right down here, known as Elysian Valley, up to Sepulveda. And they're going to find areas, use eminent domain, do whatever they're going to do. It's in the master plan, and—well, you know, they want to break cement and rebuild cement.

KD: Right.

LL: And I said, "Well, hey, why don't you bring in something that's cultural, something that's from the heart?" And since it didn't start from the get-go when I got there to these meetings, and I said a few things and I saw it go in one ear and come out the other—one of my dad's saying[s]. And I said, "Hey, well, I'll just come to the meetings and listen." And like other meetings, "Hey, Leo, do you have anything to say?" "Oh, no, I just came to listen and participate in my own way, because you know me, I'm the artist."

And so here it comes, and like I said, way back there—you know, it was quite a few years ago [that] I said, "Hey, they're going to come out with a beautiful book." Real Photoshopped, all the way. And sure, because I opened it and I started laughing, and people [said], "What are you laughing at, Leo?" "There's no graffiti! There's no expression in here." "Oh, there's this section on art." Yeah, there's one of my cats, thank you very much. Of course, you better include me. And I said, "Well, that's nice, but where's the art?" And then they'd talk about Judy Baca, and the Great Wall up there and all that, and I'd go, "Yeah, that's fine too, but . . ."

KD: Right here. [*laughter*]

LL: Yeah. Right here.

KD: That's before—

LL: No, right here. Right here, right here.

KD: In the heart.

LL: Yeah.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And I said, "Hey, Art Peace Park." So it's a building where you can come and have neighborhood city council meetings. And then I thought about it, and I said, "Oh, this is great! Here it comes!" Ready, Karen?

KD: Mm-hmm.

LL: And I said, "Then use the—almost the same idea as the Hunab Ku." The unit of measurement. It's Mayan. It's also one of the deities. But yet again, it's a unit of measurement, and it's a circle which is the spiritual, and the square which is the material. And I said, "This is great. The square is the material."

KD: Right.

LL: And I said, "How about this circle? Oh, yeah, how about a wall that circles, goes around this building?" And then, there you go. You have a place for the kids to come and scrawl all they want. And then you can create things again on this wall that talks about themes. And we could give them teachings. There is funding

for that. You don't have to spend all of that money—moneys that would be for abatement would be part of this.

KD: Mm-hmm. Because it's a strategy of abatement, actually.

LL: Exactly. And then I said, "Hey, so now the kids can create. Now there's no hassle about, hey, where can they go? Are they writing on the walls? Well, they're going to come use their thing over here where they can come and create something on this ten-foot wall, or—I don't know how tall you can make it, but—

KD: You sound like an architect.

LL: Well, a spiritual architect. Then—here it comes, ready? Here comes accountability. On the inside would be everything you ever wanted to know about who's running government.

KD: Oh, wow.

LL: Now, Karen, you would find the Constitution, in Spanish and in English. It has to be bilingual. And then you could find the Preamble. Not all of the Constitution, not everything, but just certain things. The three parties of government. And then you would find everything about the Palabra program. Something about the river, something about voting.

KD: Do you envision this as a mural, a didactic mural, or more like—

LL: It would be in panels.

KD: Panels?

LL: It would be these panels that people would take care of. And it would be one of the people—wherever this building would be built, that council district, the councilman or person would assign one of their field deputies to run it, because they're basically kids from college who have gone through that, and they have knowledge as to do things. And—well, you hire those young people to start running it. Calendars, the building would be kind of exclusive so that it would be for the functioning of politics, or of meetings, or of Palabra. So people would dialogue from that community.

And then of course there would be spider web ropes or strings that go out to the other ones, the other neighborhood councils, so that they can meet here also. So inside you could have a meeting going on, and then outside there would be circles—cement benches, so they'd be set, they wouldn't be moved, and there'd be one entrance and one exit out of this thing. And I mean, you could just jump right over this thing, soft corners. It wouldn't be—and then around it would be hedges and trees.

KD: But architecturally, to encourage dialogue. I mean, what you're describing in this space.

LL: So you see you, and you see them. So it's not someone's head you're seeing.

KD: Yeah.

LL: So, and again, the neighborhood council, there probably aren't over twenty people in it. See what I'm saying? And if there are, then they—they get on the calendar to use the bigger mother lode, the building where there would be an inset—not inset, [an] in the wall type of situation, [a] closet for twenty roll-out tables on a dolly. And then one hundred chairs, so you could also have movies you could show. And then upstairs would be—it would be a two-story thing.

KD: Yeah, this is what architects do, or urban planners.

LL: Well, I'm going to talk to [Councilmember] Ed Reyes pretty soon about this. I haven't spoken to him yet, because this is all—you know, I went and bought those little trees, little Michael's trees with the little spongy tops. But—and the inside, you'd also have a panel of federal, state, city, and neighborhood representatives. So Mr. [George] Bush, I know how to email you, and I know what your phone number is, and how long a term you have, and what party you belong to. And your vice president, and our—you know, it goes down the line. So everybody has to be accountable. So there's no longer this excuse of, "I don't know we—"

KD: "I didn't know who my representative was."

LL: That's right. Now who's representing you in your city council? "Oh, hey, we talked to you about this tree, and me and my neighbor are having problems." You know? Go down there, there's his number. "Oh, hey, listen." You don't know who represents you?

KD: Have you been this involved in politics before?

LL: I think it's been since I've started this whole art thing when I realized it's all about history. And history, being as it is, this 1776, but yet 1492, and then 2300 BC, you know, when we left the other side. And then, because they said, the first Americans came over on the Bering Strait.

KD: Bering Strait.

LL: And I said, "Well, wrong. It was Indians. We got tired of those white guys, those black guys, and those yellow guys fighting amongst themselves, and we just came over here and we re-founded this place." Yeah, right. But because it's in Rand McNally atlas books about history in 2300, I said, "Hey, yeah. We'll use that." See, I don't reinvent the wheel. If I was reinventing the wheel, I'd say, "No, we were already here. What are you talking about? We landed around the Yucatán. There's a big giant explosion that took place there, and it's in the—it's in Mother Nature, something happened there.

KD: Oh, the recording of the explosion.

LL: Boom.

KD: Yeah.

LL: A meteorite, was it? Or a satellite that hit there, you know? We landed, and, "Okay, all right. This looks all right, yeah. Why not?" *[laughter]* It's our story to tell, and the map's there.

KD: You use futuristic images in your work, too, don't you?

LL: Well, trying to make relevance to it, because the teaching's that what you do now, seven generations from now will pay the price or they'll reap the benefits of what you were thinking. And it's all from here, you know. And many people can say it, but what are you really doing? Are you just arguing the fact? Or are you waking up and saying, "This is another beautiful day. Let's make it another beautiful day for seven generations from today." So what can you do today? You can plant trees. You can talk about peace. Smile, it's another beautiful day. Hug the kids, kiss them and tell them, "Oh, create peace. If you get a gun, remember, shoot peace. Don't go out there talking about this. And if you're going to . . ." You know, again, it's positive attraction.

KD: Yeah.

LL: Now I saw Zeitgeistmovie.com. Have you seen that?

KD: Mm-hmm.

LL: And then, you know, I listened to *Roy of Hollywood*, [on] KPDK, 90.7 FM for years. And when I could, I'd wake up and, "All right, what's he talking about? Who's on the radio?" Just to fall back to sleeping. I'd always hear a little something, and there's always a sketchbook. "Oh, okay, some guy named .." And then I'd listen to it later in the daytime, when I could go back and—you know, there's a whole computer thing now.

KD: You'd hear stories on the news and you'd make sketches, [it] influenced [your] sketches as well?

LL: People's verbiage, what knowledge they're talking about. And now—like I just said, Zeitgeistmovie.com—how about liefreezone.com? What's his name? Gary, Larry? I don't know. Louisiana. He's an attorney who fought back, and he doesn't have to pay taxes. Uh, hello? We are not required to pay taxes, other than for the state.

KD: Right.

LL: We don't have to pay no tax—anything—to the federal. But yet we're paying taxes. Well, at least you guys on the mic, on the other side, are. And then Uncle Sam is pissed off at me, and I have to live underground. I can't bank, and I don't drive. That's another reason, because they suspended my license and stuff because I said, "Uh-uh. You're wrong. I'm not going to pay that." And wife's just like, "Oh, God," and she's having to pay it because she has a job. Because otherwise they garnish her wages, and then I pay her to pay them back. Anyway, it's an interesting situation, but yet I'm holding true to my convictions that, hey, life will lead you in different directions.

KD: Why did you decide not to pay federal taxes?

LL: Well, like I said, look at—get on the computer and lie, *L-I-E*, freezone-dot-com. And you'll find out this guy is making relevance to—there is no law, and on *Roy of Hollywood*—what's the guy's name? Schiff, [Irwin] Schiff. He's serving prison time, because the judge in Las Vegas said, "This is my court. It's my law." Because he said, "Here's the proof. You have no proof. There is no statute that says I have to pay taxes for my earnings." And that guy threw him in jail. And Karen, you're paying the government money they use to go kill people.

KD: Yeah.

LL: And that affects me a lot. And again, not you, Karen, per se, but you know, there's . . . And then, you know, the great rip-off. I mean, it's all out there. And then they've shown it to you on—in Zeitgeistmovie.com. You know, the Rockefellers and those guys, how they did it and how they manipulated the tax thing. But there's actually people—and again, that's why I'm stressing the department of peace. The department of peace. You know, I walk around with my peace—

[break in audio]

KD: It's positive energy and wants to create a department of peace rather than a department of war. [honking] There we go. [laughter]

LL: It's the president. It's his nose.

KD: So I wanted to get a better sense of this kind of global, spiritual—spiritual's the word I use—yeah, spiritual sensibility and its presence in your artwork. Now, I happen to have two images. I'm not sure those are the ones you want to talk about as the best examples.

LL: Oh, yes. Yes, they're about women. They're about women.

KD: I thought so. So tell me about these. This is—

LL: *Dando Gracias* and *La Cruzada*. They're screen prints I did at Self Help Graphics. And, I guess, *La Soñando*. It's a reclining nude, and she's reclining, and there's part of my whole—at that time I was doing these. That was '96—

KD: Eighty-six, 1986.

LL: Eighty-six. Oh, excuse me. I was doing my graffiti pieces, where I would get a piece of paper, and I would just do graffiti all over a piece of paper, a big giant sheet of Arches or Strathmore, whatever it was—white paper. And I'd just get number 2 pencils, and I'd just scrawl all over it. I had a sharpener, an automatic sharpener. Anyone that walked in, I would give them a pencil and say, "Throw some graffiti on there, pencil-style. Don't draw anything." There were a few kids who came in and wanted to express themselves. I said, "No, no, no. Just line stuff. Just line."

KD: Just the block it.

LL: Just the line, uh-huh. And it was interesting. Women would really put their whole family tree, if they could. That was great. Whatever I was listening to on the radio, I'd put big, giant letters on there. Then I'd turn the paper upside down until it was totally just filled up with graffiti, pencil graffiti. Because I found—I saw a movie one day where the detective walked into the bedroom and no one was there. And under the lamp was the writing tablet that the criminal had written something, and so he comes over, and he gets the pencil, and sideways, rubs it against there, and this latent image comes up. And I said, "Hey, that's cool. That happens on paper that I can . . ." One thing led to another. I said, "Hey."

So what I did is, I'd do that so that the interpretation of sound or light as sound would be interpreted in my way, this way. This was a print. I actually could get a sheet of acetate and get opaque marker and write all over it, and then print it. I couldn't do it on the paper, write on the paper. So I did it in this manner in which the whole place, you could see, it's over the woman's body. It's the *corazón* behind the bed there, and in the serapes floating around. And it's—you know, there's writing on the wall. It's through—it's like gamma rays just shooting through us constantly, 24/7. And there's this woman, she's laying down. It's the first time I did, per se, a nude this way, but again, I thought of the wife. She thinks I don't see her, and there she was.

KD: Is that image of your wife? A portrait?

LL: The wife I wish I would have married. But my *güerra*. But still again, my wife's light skinned, real light skinned, [a] *güerra*. But again, hey, I said I want to do a nude, because I wanted to say something about women, our culture, the serapes. That was me back there, that giant *corazón* looking at her and trying to establish more relevance to the culture, the serape culture. That idea of being *México*, and then laying in a sheet of saguaros that are down there. And it's just a design. And then this blanket laying [on] her, and she's real quiet, real serene. And a lot of the women who bought these really enjoyed it, and are still enjoying it. They'd tell me, "Hey, I bought that *Soñando* from you when you first did it, and I love that piece so much, because it's me. It's like I'm laying down, it's part of me." And I always enjoyed that, but yet again, like I would say, "Hey, that was me back there watching you, watching you rest."

But yet, it's interesting how I do see my wife, and I see all this energy when she's asleep. Oh, it's so nice when she's asleep. When she's awake, oh, my gosh, [she's] my better half, and I better act right. I better do things to try to make things better for her in some ways of whatever I do. And she knows that that's what I've been trying to do all these years, because it's been with her support. And the way I am, she already knows, if she says something—*bzzt*, it's on. And if I'm not drawing it, then I'm going to talk back and tell her about what I'm thinking, which is interesting.

KD: Now, the *La Cruzada* is about crossing the US-Mexico border?

LL: Yes, yes. And it's way at the bottom. Well, to start off, Sister Karen said, "What the hell did you do?" I said, "What do you think?" It's like that vacuum that goes right to the essence of where it's all started with a woman crossing from one side to the other with a basketful of *corazones*, her family, but this babe's got looks. I said, "Hey, she's long and dark and beautiful." And I said, "Hey, but they're all dark and beautiful. It's just not their size." I said, "She's leaving a place where the *nopales* are enraptured with *tunas*, coming to a place where there's a few *tunas*. But in time, there will be a lot of *tunas* there, because there will be more of an understanding of this cross, or this bridge that we cross."

KD: Yeah, I see a lot of the iconography that you used in the other images that we talked about.

LL: Here's the Royal Sombrero Society that's on both sides of the bridge, or that *cruzada* means. Again, it means . . . It's not the crossing—or things that are crossed. The bridge has crosses at the bottom—the tic-tac-toe of love. There's crosses there. Then here's the mixing or the crossing of, like I said before, here's Spanish-speaking and here's English-speaking Natives, Indians.

KD: Different symbols from those different indigenous—

LL: Yeah. And then here we come to the intervention, the arrival of those we saw as one—man and horse, going both ways, mixing us up. And then here's our communities of tepees and houses. And then here's the United States, where we're still trying to bring this covenant belt the Iroquois Confederation gave to [George] Washington, and he threw it in the closet. And I saw PBS one day, and they were giving it back to the Iroquois Confederation—that belt, that same belt. And when I saw that image, I said, "Oh, there's unity." So it's just one native speaking to another native and trying to bring or mesh together ideas. And I said, "Hey, here's a flagstaff, indigenous flagstaff, Chicanos being here. Corn." And then one speaks one way, the other speaks another way. It could Spanish or English or just dialects.

KD: Referring to the—

LL: The language that's spoken.

KD: What do you call that symbol?

LL: The *caracol*.

KD: The *caracol*, coming out of their mouths in different directions.

LL: Mm-hmm. And then here's the greenhouse syndrome, spewing out *x's*—that's pollution. And it's a red house, it's a red truck. It stands for hot, and with a little greenhouse. And then the yellow is like, the fire, manmade fires.

KD: What about the palm trees? Is that your LA [icon]?

LL: It's LA-ish, uh-huh. And then again, here's the artist's palettes, or Mexican—

KD: US and Mexican—

LL: Mexican American. And then again, you know, see how the flag's backwards while this one reads right. And then again, the codices were read from left to right, you see? And then here's Wovoka, the spirit of Wovoka being the buffalo image in the clouds, and then music. And then here's the fish, or the idea of Christ—but yet, hey, that's a bunch of bones. Again, and now—

KD: Yeah, that was pretty clever.

LL: Zeitgeistmovie.com makes me see it in another manner. And then there's air traffic, and then there's Mexica stars. And I think there's even nuclear signs or nuclear waste floating in the sky.

KD: How do you get this stippling effect? I mean, that's—I mean, this is serigraph. This is amazing.

LL: Oh, thanks. Airbrush. Airbrush. I pulled out—you bring down the pressure on your compressor or your tank, and you make the airbrush spit. It's—once you turn it on, you go, *brr*, the hummer—just sight it—you go squirt, squirt, it goes *psst*. That means fine dot. Then you bring the pressure down, and it goes *psshhh*, and then that means it's going, you know—there's larger dots, where it's like—it was like this, and it's like that. And then, you know, it's just building it up, because it's just not . . . At one time, you go around, and it's like—and I learned as a stencil maker that you really have to apply it over and over to make it consistent. And then notice the dark to the light. I had the printer print a dark to light blue, because again, that's the way it is. It's darker out there. It's darker up there, and it's lighter down here.

KD: In the atmosphere.

LL: Mm-hmm.

KD: Yeah. These are both owned by Gary Keller, I take it? Or by the Arizona State University?

LL: I don't know. I think they had requested slides, or they had gotten slides from Self Help Graphics. And then of all things, there's always the funny part of all this whole thing. It's right here.

KD: Yeah, your picture is the most humorous.

LL: Because again, Jesse Avila, a photographer friend of mine, said, "Hey." I asked him, "Take some pictures of me. Come over to the Berman Gallery." In the '80s. And I said, "Hey, why don't you take a picture of me?" So I went like this, and I liked it. And Picasso said, "Hey, I will stay young at heart." And things that I've read before, and people are always stating, "Hey, you only get old when you think you're old." You stay young at heart if you feel young at heart. But yet, not only that, you become old when you think old.

So I said, "Hey, forever and a day, I'll do—make faces. I'll do something that will always be like the jesting type of person that I am, and happy that I am." And then the movie came out a few years later, right? *Home Alone*? And everyone goes, "Hey, Leo, you copied that kid." I said, "No, no, he copied me. I already had that down." And then, yet it's so serious. I've learned how to make a pretty picture out of an ugly story, because this intervention, you know, coming in—I think that's a real ugly story. And it's still an ugly story.

KD: Do you mean the—

LL: The riders on the horses arriving and killing people, virtually killing people over this whole idea of the guy on the cross. Which, again, doesn't seem feasible now that I've seen this movie. But yet again, the doctrine of discovery, I'm trying to find that. I've found some things that just pertain to it, but it doesn't really give the verbiage. I'd like to read it, so, you know, "I, the papal blah blah." And I know it says that, and I just want to have it to show them. And of all things over the years, especially now, over the last five months on the computer, I've found Latin quotes. And I said, "Oh, cool. That's just what I want, baby."

So I'm looking through it, and I said, "Oh, 'Deus vult,' which was the Crusaders' slogan, which was, "In the name of God." And I said, "Yeah, baby! Yeah!" And you see, just finding that and relating it to that movie again, where they said, you know, Constantine the First said, "All right. Forget natural law, and hey, now we're Christians." Because they figured out they could control people with the Crusades, and then, God this, God, God, God, God, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

So you know, when I see the Bible, just like this morning, KPFK is having a fundraiser thing, and one of the announcers said, "Oh, listen to this." And I'm listening, and this guy goes, "Oh, yeah, the evangelists

have been going out with the most simplest technology.” It’s solar run, and they’ve gone to ninety—they’re trying to get every language, right? There’s six thousand-something [languages] out there. And they’re trying to go out there and give it in their own dialect to the whole evangelistic thing. And it’s a little box, and they simply—it’s solar, and all you have to do is point to the sun and then you’ll get it in your language: “Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ,” just trying to get it. And I’m going, “Yeah, I’ve got to get this. I’ve got to put it on, and then I could give it to the people.” So people would go, “Hey, zeitgeistmovie.com? What?”

KD: There you go. These are interesting selections. I’m not—you said you didn’t know that you were in the book. You didn’t submit them yourself?

LL: I knew about it, and they said, “We’re going to include you in this book.” I said, “Thank you very much.” They needed my permission. And I said, “Sure, no problem.”

KD: Because these are interesting images. I mean, this one is *La Cruzada*, which has that narrative quality, very—what I refer to in your work as sense of place, very much grounded in history and place. There’s always this acknowledgement of this place as an indigenous location, right? And then the story that came after, but there’s—it never forgets that. So *La Cruzada*, to me, speaks to a great body of your work. *La soñada*—

LL: *Soñando*.

KD: *Soñando*—it’s—that is actually not a piece that I would think of as yours. I mean, I think about the heart, and I look closely at the detail and the coloration and that rapid line that gives the heart the movement. That strikes me as your technique. If we were in paint, you’d talk about brushstroke, right? So that’s an interesting choice to use. But even the coloration . . . I mean, the shadow on her blanket is with pink, like a pink tone. It’s a really interesting. I’m wondering if this ’86 piece represents something from earlier work, and then the ’91 piece has something from later work. I wonder if you could talk a bit about the changes, the differences or the similarities in your work over time, from what you’re doing now to what you did in the past?

LL: In the ’80s I discovered that I could use a plastic sheet of Mylar or of acetate, which I did, to make a stencil or two. And then at Trade Tech, the commercial art class, they taught me a little bit more refinement. But yet again, I already knew—all the teacher really said was, “Hey, just get this finer sandpaper and sand it a little bit more so you can make the template, and then make your image and there it is.” And I said, “Well, I’ve been . . .” You know, I took Mr. Earnest’s class there in sign painting. And he taught us how to do things where you can have something on the surface and place something, and never touch it—just by never touching it, but still coming in with your lines and whatever to paint your sign. And there it is.

KD: You’re protecting the surface itself.

LL: So I said, “Hey, Sister Karen.” The pack rat, God bless her, she said, “Hey, what do you have? Sure, we’ll take it,” whatever it was. And she had these large sheets of this acetate that was film, sensitized film that had expired, I don’t know, in the ’70s, and there she is in the ’80s. And I’m going, “Oh, okay. Can I use that?” She goes, “Oh, sure, you can use whatever’s there.” I said, “Okay, thanks.” Pull out a few sheets, cut them down to size, and then I start making these stencils. I said, “You know, I’m going to repeat . . .” I figured, instead of once again trying to come up with something new, I’m just going to remake the composition. Because what you see there, like *La Cruzada*, I think I used that it was part made-up imagery, and stencil work that had been, you know, another composition with the stencils. And so I did a few of them. I did a few prints at Self Help Graphics that were—where I was using my stencil technique. And then again, knowing airbrush, I just spray, spray, spray, spray.

KD: Yeah. It is a different technique.

LL: And it would come up soft or hard or . . . Then I could scratch away over it and so on, and then they’d give you this effect. But I always wanted to use that at that time. It’s what I had at that time, I’d use at that time. And I think the *Soñando*, I just said, “Oh, I don’t want to do nothing with airbrush, stencil on this. I want to create a woman to still use airbrush, to create soft subtleties,” and that’s how that came about, you see. While on the other hand, the other ones were hard-edge stencil stuff, stencil ideas.

- KD:** What about the—what would you think were your most important works? Because I’m looking at ones that people collected, and I’m putting value on them because they’ve been collected, but maybe there are other works that you’re thinking—
- LL:** As far as prints are concerned?
- KD:** No, all of your body of work. What are the ones that you think of?
- LL:** Oh, I—again, there’s so many. I mean, you know . . .
- KD:** Your public work?
- LL:** The stuff I’ve done out there? I’m not satisfied.
- KD:** Really?
- LL:** No. They’re nice, they’re cool. But it’s until the end where someone else can say, “Hey, we really like this.” I mean, *Dando Gracias* was just shown everywhere, and Sister Karen said, “What are you doing this Indian stuff for?” Yeah, right, and oh, it all pertains to an Indian thing. The logo, Self Help Graphics, is indigenous parrots, birds, with a yin-yang sign.
- KD:** I never thought of that. That’s very clever.
- LL:** Sister Karen—
- KD:** How did you get the Catholic to do that?
- LL:** I said, “Here it is. If you don’t want me to do it, have somebody else do it. Plain and simple.” She’s like, “*Grr.*” I said, “This is what I do, Karen.” And I think I still have examples of other things I did.
- KD:** Hey, let me ask you that question. If somebody said, “Oh, I’ve got to have a Leo Limón, I’ve got to have a Leo Limón,” what are they referring to?
- LL:** Oh, the spirit. They want me. They really don’t want—you know, the art is second.
- KD:** There’s not a particular image or composition that they’re thinking of?
- LL:** They could possibly be looking for something like that. But again, I just delve into so many things that are out there. Everything’s alive. Everything’s alive. Even the Day of the Dead, they might even want Day of the Dead stuff. And they want it for a good price, and I go, “Sure, I’ll give it to you for a good price.” And if I don’t, hey, there’s my easy payment plan.
- KD:** Did you design a payment plan for collectors?
- LL:** Sure, of course. Want to buy something? Hey, no problem, what is it you like? Hey, take it home with you, I don’t want it. It’s up to you to be honest and pay me on time, and if I don’t have to be calling you. Otherwise, I’ll come and call on you. [*laughter*]
- KD:** Have you had to—no, I shouldn’t ask you that. But so you’ve let people use an installment plan?
- LL:** Oh, yeah, of course. That’s—the galleries do it. They go, “Hey, pay us this much.” Because the gallery’s got to keep going. Hey, I’m my own gallery. And so again, it works.
- KD:** Is it asking people to put a certain percentage down?
- LL:** Oh, yeah, I always ask for half, and then the rest, give me small portions. And when it comes in, I’m able to live and keep going. I never have any money. It’s always—you know, my daughter’s there now, I just give her money. “Here, take this, that’s all right. I’ll make more money soon.” Tonight I go to this art show thing that I’m part of, Day of the Dead, in Glendale. I’ve got to call my son and tell him, “Hey—”
- KD:** Yeah, I’m taking up your time.
- LL:** No, no, no. We’re okay. He knows—
- KD:** Okay. I’m really—I’ve got all these questions about market, right. And you are your own dealer. You are your own, getting the work out there. I find that really amazing. Have you ever had collectors say to you, “Oh, give me the . . .” I mean, you talked about Cheech Marin wanted something he already had in another media, right?
- LL:** Mm-hmm.
- KD:** He wanted a pastel into an acrylic.
- LL:** Yes, uh-huh.
- KD:** What’s that like?

- LL: Oh, it was price.
- KD: It's about price for you.
- LL: Yeah. I said, "Hey, I'll give it to you for this," and he said, "Okay, no problem."
- KD: Was it about the same size, or—
- LL: Oh, no, no. The pastel's like a twenty-eight-inch something, and I did a four-foot by five-foot painting. Then some guys came in a U-Haul truck and signed off, and there it goes. *[laughter]*
- KD: Now, I'm imagining that's a nice commission.
- LL: Oh, yeah.
- KD: The commission should be nice.
- LL: Oh, yeah. A few thousand bucks.
- KD: Excellent. So you don't mind requests from collectors?
- LL: No. Just sold something to one of my—not students, but one of my young protégés from the Aztlán foundation. They showed up, they were—they still are A La Brava Productions, they're putting on the Cine Sin Fin [film festival]. And yet again, you know, like I said, "Hey, you know, Cine Sin Fin isn't mine. Yeah, I could hoard it if I was doing it, but if you're going to do it, take it." The idea, Cine Sin Fin.
- KD: Oh, so when you had it at the Aztlán Cultural Arts [Foundation], that's the name you gave to your film series.
- LL: And we did a few of them. And then the A La Brava boys showed up, and they were right out of Berkeley, in that area. And I said, "Here," and they saw it, and they said, "Hey, we want to do a thing on it." And I said, "Sure." The group got together and said, "Sure, of course." They want to do it? "No problem. Take it." And I made these long—I think I had one-foot rolled paper, butcher wrap, and so that's what we had to use. And I made a stencil, and airbrushed—not airbrush, but just a stencil. And then I have them somewhere. Again, they'll be put in the collection with Salvador [Güereña], over there in Santa Barbara. And so that's how I did it.
- And then they said, "Hey, we still want to do it." And then Aztlán closed down. And then we started again, and I said, "Oh, cool, they're doing it out there. Cool." It's just—I tell them, "Hey, remember where it started. Ten percent." If they make it big. But still again, that's, now, in two weeks. No, in a week. I'll be out there with them. I saw them. And like I say, one of them showed up and said "Hey, I'd like something." And I said, "Cool, it's worked out for you, your education, and now you're making money. Cool. What would you like?" He said, "I like that one right there. How much is it?" I said, "Blah, blah, blah." Then he looked at me, and I said, "But for you, blah, blah, blah." And he goes, "Hey," and I said, "Hey, again, you're on the payment plan. Can you handle it?" He goes, "Yeah, I could pay for it all right now." "Oh, cool. Pay me, and then I'll finish it."
- KD: So you don't have disagreements with collectors. That's amazing.
- LL: Well, then the other day, I had the guy with the big bucks, big, big, big bucks. He's about to sell—
- KD: Hollywood?
- LL: No, family money and stuff like that, millions. Just—and now he's going to split up the company, the whole thing with the brother. And I said, "Oh, really?" He goes, "Yeah, I'm tired of that whole thing." I go, "Oh, cool." Then [we] went out to lunch, and then we went and saw the baby, the wife's son's daughter here in Highland Park. And I said, "Oh, all right cool," and I look back. "Shh, be quiet, the baby's asleep." And I said, "Oh, okay. No problem." And then the young lady met me, and she's into design and stuff like that. I didn't know that. My collector's wife, her son is married to this young lady, and she's Latina. And he's Jewish. Anyway, as it turns out, he's a surfer. And he's got—here in the barrio, there's all these surfboards outside. And he teaches barrio kids how to surf. But none of this, come back.
- So I said, "What were you looking for?" And then it's interesting, I've known this fellow since the late '80s, before I left Self Help Graphics. He had come over to Self Help Graphics. He had a project to do, he had to do. It was the one percent sales thing.
- KD: Oh, okay. One percent for the arts.

LL: Uh-huh. And he had to use some artists, and so he chose me to be the main honcho of this project. We did an eighty-foot Quetzalcoatl on his building, incised in building relief type of thing. So it's there, and it came out kind of awkward because we wanted to do all three hundred feet of it, big giant—that would have been tough. And then I said, "Hey, I'm not doing this by myself." I said, "No, there's other guys." So again, I want to spread out the bucks.

KD: So you designed the image?

LL: It was my idea, the Quetzalcoatl, and then it was Michael Amescua, Roberto Gutiérrez, and then—what's his name?—Arturo Urista.

KD: They did a car relief carving?

LL: No, just drawings. They gave me drawings. I put it together, and I said, "Here it is." And then we gave it to a fabricator [who] did it with foam core. And then that costs more than they paid us. And I said, "Oh, shit, we could have did that." You know, after we saw it, I said, "We could have did that." But nonetheless, like I said, then the guy came back. And I said, "There's—what do you like?" And then she said, "I like that."

And they were interested in my AIDS piece, something I had on the side there, and someone returned it to me. They didn't show it, but they had it for about two years in the garage. And I said, "Oh, you're bringing it back finally? Okay." And then I looked at it. So now I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to do with it. But this couple saw it, and this fellow—his brother passed away because of AIDS—he saw it, and they said, "Talk to us about it."

KD: How many regular collectors do you have? More than ten?

LL: Oh, no. A handful at the most. Just a few people that are out there. And I seldom call them. It's just things that come along. And you see, it's just how—the nature of things. And that's how it is. It's just—you know. *[laughter]*

KD: Well, you have a lucky star, or some angel, or some other spirit.

LL: Well, it's work. It's work. And like here, the gallery here asked that same question, the Arroyo Arts Collective. How does an artist make money? I wrote something out but I didn't send it in. I said, "Ah, I'm not going to tell them how I make money." Then they'd get mad at me, because I wrote, "I jump on my bike, and then I start peddling away, and I'm going down the hill. I let the wind blow against my face, and, oh, it feels so wonderful. And then I start thinking of how I'm going to make money." That's it.

KD: Yeah, no, I believe you. You just told me.

LL: *[laughter]* Because I go, "Hey, it's another beautiful day," and hey, if I make someone feel right about it . . . And because there's a calendar, and things are happening, you know, the Department of Water and Power . . .

KD: I know. I believe you. You don't have to convince me. I just heard you tell the story.

LL: That's probably going to put me on the map, finally.

KD: Yeah, you're right. The public work.

LL: Yeah, because—

KD: But I also see—it's also what I was saying to you. It's the scale, the vision, this community collective—solving a problem, answering questions. I mean, there's so many reasons why that—the two projects that you describe, public water and power that's in the—

LL: On the utility roads.

KD: On the utility routes. And then the other, that's creating—

LL: Art Peace Park [Place].

KD: Yeah. I mean, it sounds like you need to—well, you will. You're going to meet an architect, and the architect is going to say, "Give me your idea today, Leo." And then they're going to design things based on your ideas, these connections you make. It's urban planning. So you need the urban planner and the architects. So you'll run into them, I'm certain.

LL: Oh, yes. Yes.

KD: Let me—can we go to that big question at the end?

LL: Sure.

KD: Okay. Let me turn the tape off for a minute.

[break in audio]

KD: So we're back. We took a little pause to figure out how we want to wrap up for today. And Leo, I want to ask you if you can reflect on the ease or difficulty in negotiating the art world, and the particular pressures of Latinos in the art world.

LL: I think it was earlier when we spoke that I was trying to refer to the Hamptons, which is simple enough. We need more people who participate with the financial backing to donate spaces to artists, so that the lovely ladies in the other room who are working away, to do what they're doing, can have someone go, "Hey, we see something in you." And then there's that gallery thing that has to do with that whole Hamptons thing. And then a lot of people don't see that. They just go, "Oh, well, there's this place, it's real expensive, and there's these artists."

Well, you have to do some homework, like I did, to find out that there were a few artists that went there [who] didn't have anything. They only had this certain thing that the gallery people said, "Hey, give them a break." We went out and got drunk or something, whatever it was. Then they said to their patrons in New York, who have a lot of money, and [they] said, "Hey, this will go this way." And it did. And then all of a sudden, we heard about these guys making a lot of money through the galleries. Because then the tax thing came in and started working them.

KD: You mean Chicano philanthropists investing in galleries.

LL: And publishing companies.

KD: And publishing companies.

LL: Oh, yeah. So you publish what's coming up, what they're doing, and then the galleries in turn can somehow attract the other people who are making good money to buy some of this work. And then work it out so that if that game is still being played. So that investment is a big part of it, to where the artist is just like, "Well, I'm going to teach, and that's cool." Which a lot of artists do. And they've got enough, and then—you see, again, Karen, it breaks down to a cultural aspect.

KD: What do you mean?

LL: This is America? No, this is the United States. This is the United States, and this is, by all means, a system that's set up. When you go to the museums, what are you seeing? Culture. And who's in there? You see, it's there, boys and girls. They're saying it's culture. They're not saying we are; they're not saying we are, as Indians. They're saying, "Hey, it's us. It's us English-speaking people." And then they have their—what were they called? Alternative? No, hyphenated Americans, there you go. I know I'd find it. Hyphenated Americans who are—they look white, but yet they're presumed to be English. And then it goes back to the Spanish ideal and us speaking Spanish as Indians. And then our brothers and sisters here who speak English, but yet, they're still like us. They're Indians.

KD: Yeah, they're Indians. Yeah.

LL: So again, it's when we revert to stop saying we have this Spanish thing behind us. It's when we, all day, we're Indians. And this is Anahuac, the continent, and right now, on Turtle Island, according to my brothers and sisters who—here, I'm caretaker of *tongva yagna*—this area. This is where they were for thousands of years.

KD: Do you do *ceremonia* practice?

LL: Every day. I play my flute and I say thanks, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," especially [to] my nanas, the *mujeres* in my life. And Karen, I'm so happy to know you. I hope my aura has gone to you, because you've come to me, I'll tell you that. [sound of crash]

KD: Oh, that didn't sound good.

LL: Oh my God.

KD: That sounded like a car wreck, huh?

LL: Accident.

[*break in audio*]

KD: We paused, because we thought we heard a terrible crash. You were telling me about your daily *ceremonia*.

LL: Yes, the *ceremonia* is always in thanks. Again, it's my offering. It's an offering back to the essence of the Ometeotl and all that is important to me. And it's duality. And I just—I have this funny little photograph that I found in some magazine that's of a tigress, and she's giving a snarl, it's like, *grrr*, like that. And I look at it every morning, and it's the wife. And I go, *grrr*. I've got to remember who the boss is. It's not me. I'm only here because of a woman, and that woman in my life is my wife and all the other women. And so when I say things to my wife, I go, "Look, honey. Oh, man, so many women in my life, but you're in my heart; they're not. They're around my heart." But I say, "Hey, you're in my heart."

KD: Would it be too strong to say you're a feminist?

LL: Oh, no. Not at all. I called a woman the other day, Lola de la Riva. She was documenting us back in the '80s, and she's got the records up there. If she, God bless her, she's gone through many visits to the doctor, her heart and stuff. Lola de la Riva. And her daughter, Osa, a doctor. Osa de la Riva, USC.

KD: Mm-hmm. I know her.

LL: Uh-huh. And her mom, I told her, "Lola, I made up a new name." I'm tired of the slash between *-o* and *-a*. Chicano/Chicana. And I go, "I was brought into this world, Lola," because I know she's a feminist, and I go, "Lola, I'm tired of that, so I've gotten rid of the *-o*." And I said, "Now, I refer to myself as *Chicanana*, because I'm a Chicana-na, or Chicanana. Because that was my nana—was my mom's—or my father's mother, and the Chic, or the chick, or the Chicana. I was brought into this world by a Chicana, which was my mom. And I go, "Hey, that'd be better than saying, 'Oh, I'm a Chicano, a Chicana.'" Like again, you know, it's Leo and the words again. And I guess it's in part my mom, who was unable to read and write. I said, "Mom, someday, I'll be able to say words and things upon your behalf."

KD: That's a beautiful way to end. Thank you.



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