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ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

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JUDITHE HERNÁNDEZ

INTERVIEWED BY KAREN MARY DAVALOS

ON SEPTEMBER 26, 2009, AND JULY 14, 2010

Judithe Hernández is a Los Angeles-based artist first recognized as a muralist and now widely known for her works in pastel. A member of Los Four for ten years, she participated in ten major exhibitions with the art collective. She has exhibited internationally, and her work has been acquired by private collectors and major institutions, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, the El Paso Museum of Art, and the Bank of America collection in New York. She is the recipient of a COLA fellowship from the city of Los Angeles, and she was selected by the Los Angeles Transit Authority to create the art for the Santa Monica Metro station, scheduled to open in 2016.

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 JUDITHE HERNÁNDEZ

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SEPTEMBER 26, 2009

Karen Davalos: This is Karen Davalos with Judithe Hernández for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series], and this is our first session of oral history. And today is September 26, 2009. Judithe, I wanted to start with just some really simple questions about your family: where you were born, where your family is from.

Judithe Hernández: Born in Los Angeles, March 16, 1948. We didn't originally live in East LA. My parents, that is. Neither of them is from California or Los Angeles. My mother's from El Paso, Texas. My dad's from Benson, Arizona. During World War II my dad was stationed in San Rafael, California, and when the war was over they decided to move to Los Angeles, but in those days they moved to the Exposition Park area. They were on Figueroa at Forty-Seventh Street. It was before it was an African American neighborhood. And it was near Exposition Park near USC, and they lived there until I was about four-ish.

KD: Did they call that—we call it South LA now, South Central.

JH: Yeah, I think. If you have to call it something I think it was called South Central because that's what it was. And in those days it was still mostly white folk and some Latinos who were coming in after the war. But by the time I was four they were talked into moving. There was an influx of African Americans, you know.

KD: Right.

JH: They preferred to be with other Latinos, so they moved to East LA where . . . I think my mother's godmother said, "Oh, I know there's a place for rent," blah, blah, blah, so we moved. So I grew up actually—spent my life from about four almost to the time I left Los Angeles. It was within the first quarter of the block of Woodman Street, at the corner of Main, at the far edge of Boyle Heights. It was sort of at the border between Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights, which was a block from the railroad tracks. We always lived within walking distance of the tracks because my dad worked for the railroad—Southern Pacific Railroad. So you would always hear the trains go by and the television would always get drowned out by the damn train coming by. *[laughter]* It was for reasons of work that we always lived so close to the tracks. Following the move to that part of town I went to Griffin Elementary, which I think is still there, and then I went to Abraham Lincoln High School up on Broadway.

KD: What we call Lincoln High School.

JH: What we call Lincoln High School, absolutely.

KD: Okay. And did you have brothers and sisters?

JH: Yes, I have one brother. He's thirteen months older than I am. He's an attorney, he's been a deputy district attorney for nearly twenty-five or thirty years now. Senior deputy district attorney. *[laughter]* Jaime, *J-A-I-M-E*. Nice guy. Very, very left-brained.

KD: And while you were growing up did your mother ever work outside the home?

JH: She did. When we were small children, not so much. When we got a little older, she did. You know, my dad is a guy who—he was a car man. Car man—*C-A-R M-A-N*—for the Southern Pacific, and those were the guys who kind of were jacks-of-all-trades. When the trains came in from trips—passenger trains—they would go through, and whatever the car needed to be, you know—serviced and put back into duty again—they would . . . Whether it was electrical or upholstery or carpentry or whatever it was, they would go through and fix it and get it ready for another trip.

And he never made a whole bunch of money, so at one point my mother did work outside the home. When we were probably, oh, you know, [in] sixth or seventh grade, she began to work outside the home at one of the local dime stores—they called them dime stores in those days [*laughter*—owned by a very nice man [whose] last name is Jaffey [?] And because my brother is Jaime and I am Judithe, they used to think we were his kids. [*laughter*] Nice Jewish kids, right, Judithe and Jaime. So there we had—there are some fond memories of visiting her while she was working. But for the most part—

KD: At the dime store?

JH: At the dime store, yeah, which was a terrible underutilization of her talents and her intellect. She was an amazing woman. She was college educated. She didn't finish college. She went to Texas A&M. She had an amazing father. My grandfather was a guy who was a Mexican immigrant but he was self-taught six or seven languages, [and] was a chef for [the] Fred Harvey [Company], which was kind of the premier dining place in railroad stations, which in those days . . . Where they have, like, the equivalent of the airport [restaurant].

KD: Right.

JH: And it wasn't just a train station or the bus station. He was an amazing guy. He believed in women's suffrage. I think he even campaigned for women's suffrage—thought women should do whatever the hell they wanted, whenever their gifts allowed them to do. He had no restrictions on his daughters. If they wanted to smoke or they wanted to drink, his only caution was that if you take a vice you should be able to pay for it. No one should have to pay for your vice. Of course he left my grandmother by the time my mother was fifteen, [*laughter*] because she was very parochial and very traditional and he was just a man ahead of his time, very interesting guy.

I never got to know him very well but my mother was a product of that relationship, and she was well educated. She was brilliantly well read. She spoke English and Spanish fluently, and she was the reason my brother and I, you know, considering the neighborhood we grew up in, definitely became the people that we are. My father was smart but never had the opportunity to go to school. He didn't finish high school until World War II, when he was in the Army, and then he completed a GED. Not for lack of smarts, but just for lack of opportunity, and not the same kind of—he wasn't empowered by his upbringing to be, you know, to be ambitious, to want to do more with himself intellectually. My mother certainly was, and she is absolutely the reason that my brother and I pursued careers as professionals rather than simply—

KD: So where did they meet?

JH: It's funny, they were put together by her cousins. She had some cousins in the Central Valley that she would visit in summers, and he was dating some—one of their friends. And they kept telling him—my father was beautiful. He was absolutely one of the most handsome men I have ever seen. He looked like Cary Grant.

KD: Really?

JH: Of course if you said that to him, he said, "No, no, he looks like me." [*laughter*] He was just the most handsome guy, you know, six feet tall, dark, handsome. He was gorgeous. Quiet, you know, kind of that silent, macho type. And my mother was beautiful. And they kept telling her they have this, you know, handsome friend that she must meet. Eventually they did meet and he's, you know, ditched the girlfriend, and before the war—no, by the time the war really got underway . . . They got married in 1942, I think. So she was a war bride. Unfortunately, it was probably a marriage not made in heaven. They were too different. [*laughter*] But they stayed together their entire lives even though they were very different people. I always felt that my mother was not completely fulfilled, you know.

KD: Well I'm trying to understand. She went to Texas A&M . . .

JH: She worked for the biggest department store in El Paso those days, the Popular. She was an executive in human resources, and she was just on a visit to LA or to Central California when she met him. He was not someone she would have run into in her own social circles. She dated non-Latinos and professional guys, and, like I said he was gorgeous. I mean, she just was swept away, [*laughter*] which happens. It's funny

looking back on your parents' relationship. It's always kind of odd, isn't it, when you think about them as young people and how they can be either over and above their rational concerns? You know, when they think is this going to work, and they can be overtaken by these tremendous feelings and passions, and they wind up probably making a mistake but they do it anyway. [I think of] parents as being out of control like that. *[laughter]*

KD: Did they stay married?

JH: They did. They stayed married. She died in—oh gosh, I'm blanking out, I forget when she died but . . . It was 1990, that's right. It was the year before my daughter was born. And by that time they had been married, what, for fifty some-odd years, and then my father passed away in 2000. But they held it together in the best tradition of their generation. You know, once you're married, you stay married.

KD: Right. Right.

JH: You know, unless there is some egregious thing that one of them is doing, like beating you and—

KD: Does that mean they were raised Catholic?

JH: Yeah. *[laughter]* Well, my father didn't give a shit, you know. He didn't—I mean he had been raised a Catholic but he was like totally non-practicing.

KD: Right.

JH: My mother gave it lip service, I think. I think it was the fear of what would happen in the afterlife that kept her from being too non-practicing. She raised us as Catholic, so we went. We did the whole nine yards, the communion and the confirmation, and all that stuff.

KD: Confirmation.

JH: Yeah.

KD: So you went to church on Sunday, or . . .

JH: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

KD: What was the parish?

JH: Sacred Heart. Sacred Heart of Jesus. In Lincoln Heights.

KD: And—

JH: And I did not go to Catholic school because they knew me from catechism and no way would they have me *[laughter]* in school.

KD: Now why do you say that? That's pretty early on. What were you doing as a young five-, six-, or seven-year-old?

JH: I was a devil child. I was always incredulous and I always asked too many questions. I would raise my hand in catechism and ask the dreaded word "why?" They knew they didn't want me. I never took anything on faith, never took anything on faith. I remember I was telling a friend not too long ago—I remember my first communion and thinking, you know, we walked up, we got all these little brides who walked up to the altar and got the host for the first time, and then everybody filed back into the row and they sat down. And they got on their knees and they were having some kind of incredible emotional spiritual event. And I'm looking at the girls on both sides of me. I said, "Uh-oh, I'm not feeling this." *[laughter]* I'm the only one who's like looking around. I said, "Oh damn, what am I not doing right here?" I guess it's the story of my life. I just—I could not—it didn't work for me. The whole, you know, take it on faith thing just never got—I don't know.

KD: Was your family spiritual, though, if they weren't very religious?

JH: No, no. Like I say, my mother gave it lip service. She was really funny. She'd have some of the candles and stuff, but for the most part I think the intellectual side of her was so strong that she believed that you had the power to make your life, to do the things to make opportunities for yourself, that nobody was going to do it for you. I remember one of the first things that really stick in my mind is serious conversations we had when I was in high [school] and she said, "You've already got three strikes against you, you realize that. Number one, you're Mexican, big problem. Number two, you're a woman. And number three, you don't have any money. We don't have any money. So if you are going to do something with yourself—you know

you have the abilities—you have to get out there and work for it. And any attention you bring to yourself must be positive.” Without realizing what she was telling both of us, my brother and I . . .

But it’s like Machiavelli 101. You have to know what your enemy knows. She didn’t describe the larger society or white society as enemies, but they were the competition. And she was very aware, painfully aware, that the education we were getting was not like what white kids on the west side of town were getting. The opportunities would be horribly limited for us if we weren’t able to compete at that level when we were out of high school and college. So she was determined to make up for that. And she dragged us to every free thing that there was in LA. You know, the museums, if there were concerts—I mean, you name it. Because my parents just didn’t have the kind of bucks. And so we did—

KD: I’m curious. When you said she was teaching you three strikes against you, what age, do you recall—or when was it very present in your life? If you can’t remember the first time, can you remember that was something you were being taught as a—

JH: Certainly from early on, from the time we got to school. I mean, in terms of doing well, “You must do well, you must do well.” And by the time—I would say, like, junior high, then she articulated a little more frankly about what the issues that we were facing were. She was a realist, absolutely realistic about the world. She didn’t have any romantic notions about people being nice. I mean, she had friends from all walks of life. She had white friends, black friends. She was an unusual woman. The more that I think about it, especially as I get older and I can appreciate the way she was in a way that I couldn’t when I was a teenager.

KD: You said she had a few things around the house—candles, crucifix, what?

JH: Right, the crucifix.

KD: Was there an altar or *ofrenda* in the home?

JH: No, she didn’t do that.

KD: Or a special place where family mementoes and family pictures and [of] those passed away?

JH: She had maybe the equivalent of a small altar in her bedroom that were just our baby pictures and our little bronzed shoes. I mean, her children were everything to her. She absolutely concentrated every energy she had on making sure that our lives would be different. She succeeded beyond her wildest dreams, I think. I think one of the most touching moments I ever had as an adult with her was she went with me to a presentation I did at [the University of California,] Santa Barbara. I was having a show. This was, like, in the late ’70s. I had a show in Santa Barbara. I went to the university to do a talk and I took her with me. And she sat in the audience and then we went to lunch later. My mother was really tough as nails. She was a tiny little thing, and she wasn’t free with praise, but I remember at lunch she said to me, “I had no idea how incredibly good you are at what you do.” And I was like, oh! Blown away. I mean, because I had taught. And art—she always said she doesn’t know art, she doesn’t understand art, but since other people who do know art say that I’m good she would take that. She knew that I taught, and it was a presentation on the work. And coming from her, that was just like . . . I felt like I’d finally made it, for her to finally articulate those words that I’d been dying to hear. Because she was very—you know, praise was not something that was coming from her. She would say, “That was pretty good,” but there was already room for improvement.

KD: Let me take you back before I go forward. Grandma and grandpa on both sides, are they immigrants, then?

JH: It’s funny. My mother—this is funny—going back to my mother again, she always told us that she was born in El Paso, Texas, which we found out when she died was a lie. She was actually born in Chihuahua. Why she felt the need to tell us that—and we literally did not find out until she passed away—I have no idea. And now I won’t be able to ask her that. But my brother—he was the [executor] of her estate—was going through her papers, and he found her naturalization papers in there. So she was born in Chihuahua and then at some point they crossed the border and they came into El Paso, and that’s what she considers her hometown. So she was an immigrant. My grandmother, her mother, was from Zacatecas—last name was Mireles, Monica Mireles. She was another fascinating woman that I didn’t ever know very well, but from things that my mother would tell me about her she seemed like a terribly complicated, interesting woman.

My grandfather, her dad—my mother’s father, my maternal grandfather—I don’t know exactly where he was from in Mexico, but he was from Mexico. On my father’s side, my grandfather was from Guadalajara or just outside Guadalajara, but his wife, Maria, and her family had been in an Arizona territory for generations, long before it was a state. So I’ve got this mixed bag of being—

KD: Was that an awareness as you were growing up? I mean, obviously your mother being from Chihuahua, no, but that you knew that the grandparents were from Mexico—

JH: Yes.

KD: But yet one was—

JH: Yeah, we did know that. I was always one of those kind of kids, and I’m still that way as an adult. And my friends frequently tell me that my way of getting to know people is to interrogate them. *[laughter]* So maybe I should be on the other side of the desk, interviewing you. I used to sit around with my grandmother—especially when I got old enough to appreciate that this was a really interesting human being. When I was there I would sit across from her at breakfast and stuff and ask her questions. And I remember when I was in high school I got an opportunity to spend a lot of time with her late in the evening. She came to our home and spent, I think it was like a summer, and we would sit up late at night and drink tea and watch old movies and I would pump her for information. I’m so glad I did, because a lot of these stories I never would have heard otherwise.

And [I] gained an appreciation for the incredible life of this woman who raised twelve living children on a salary of a man who worked for the railroad. All decent, hard-working human beings who raised nice families. Kind of the unsung hero. *[My grandmother]* was to me the personification of those women of that period: totally uncredited, unsung, for all that they gave up, all that they did in terms of raising children. I mean this was in the era before Pampers and refrigerators and microwaves. Actually, when we first started going . . . My earliest memory of going to my grandmother’s home when I was just a little kid—and it was not the pleasant memory—was the fact that I kind of didn’t like to go to her house because there was no indoor plumbing. This was in the ’50s, there was no indoor—

KD: In—

JH: In the house.

KD: In the house in LA?

JH: You had to go outside. No, this was in Arizona, when we’d go visit her home. You had to go to the outside. It wasn’t inside. I don’t think she had indoor plumbing until maybe the late ’50s. So going to my grandmother’s house was a trip. I did not like going to the bathroom. So that’s why I stayed with my cousins, because they had indoor plumbing. But this was a woman who did all this, who made every tortilla, every meal that was served. I mean she did—

KD: All before everybody’s awake to make the meal.

JH: Yeah, working like a dog for twelve kids. And then there was this army of grandchildren eventually who would also be at that home. The mind boggles when you think about all the work this woman did.

KD: So was your immediate family the only . . . They were alone in LA?

JH: The outliers? Yeah. We were the only ones in California. We were stranded. We were away from both of the families in Texas and in Arizona.

KD: But obviously at one point grandma comes to stay.

JH: My maternal grandmother lived with us from the time I was in high school. My paternal grandmother would only come for visits. And then various family members would come and visit. We always went there for summers.

KD: You did?

JH: Yeah, I feel like a Southwesterner to a great extent. I spent almost every summer of my childhood in Arizona and Texas. And it has a lot to do with, I think, the way I see things visually—the desert, the whole atmosphere of the Southwest.

KD: That is good to know. Colored palette, everything.

- JH: Yeah, it just wasn't East LA.
- KD: And you're doing this with your brother?
- JH: Mm-hmm.
- KD: And mom and dad? No, I can't imagine dad is—
- JH: Usually just my mom. The three of us would hop on the train. Because—since he worked for the [railroad, we] did a lot of train traveling as a kid. We traveled for free. And we'd go out and visit the folks in summer-time. It was wonderful.
- KD: Did anybody in the family speak Spanish in those homes?
- JH: Yeah. Well, it's funny. My father, he hadn't grown up speaking Spanish. I forget why. I don't think we really asked him that question. Eventually, yeah, he spoke Spanish more. I mean he had heard it but he didn't speak Spanish on a daily basis. He understood. Oh, I know what it was. When he was a young man during the Depression he used to ride the rails around looking for work. He hopped a freight train and he traveled all over the United States. Eventually he wound up playing semi-professional baseball in Mexico. Yeah, he was quite an athlete, and he skied and he played ball and he was beautiful. He was this all-around guy. He had to learn Spanish. The Spanish that he knew, he had to improve when he was in Mexico for a while. My mother was totally bilingual, and they would speak Spanish occasionally. They always spoke English to us, because that was one of the things my mother, and I disagree with her about that, but that was what she did was—
- KD: They believed that that was going to give us an advantage.
- JH: Absolutely. She said, "They'll get you on that if your English isn't perfect. It has to be. That has to be the language." And since I stammered as a child—I had a terrible stammer, I just couldn't handle both languages—so the doc said, "You've got to concentrate on one or the other." There was no choice. You know, we spoke English.
- KD: And your brother was the same? Or did he get more—
- JH: My brother never really picked up Spanish. He sounds like a goddamn gringo now when he talks. *[laughter]* He looks like an Indian but he sounds like a gringo.
- KD: So your mother sounds like a very strong-willed person. Were you aware of her political beliefs or her political affiliations?
- JH: Oh, gosh, we would not have survived had we not been Democrats. Republicans were not allowed. *[laughter]*
- KD: Like my household. I tell my kids, my biggest fear is if you become a Republican.
- JH: Yes! *[laughter]* Your family said the same thing! Absolutely. And it's funny, later in her life her dearest friend in the world—and they refused to talk about politics because they knew they disagreed. She was almost kind of this Julia Child, you know. White, tall woman who was an avid, avid Republican. And they were the dearest of friends as long as they didn't talk about politics. But no, [my mother] was very political and she appreciated the ability of politics to get things done and she worked for the Democratic Party in Los Angeles. Probably one of the few Latinas who was kind of civic minded, in that respect, in the political respect. You know, there were the big sales and that kind of stuff that most ladies did in those days, but she was political. She would go out and go door to door for her candidate and stuff.
- KD: Did she take you along?
- JH: No, she didn't but she talked to us about it. I remember when JFK was running for president, and we almost went down to [see him speak] when he made an appearance [at the Shrine Auditorium] in Los Angeles. But we didn't. But we watched it all. And I mean politics was always part of the dinner conversation. My house was very different in that respect. When we sat down at dinner my father generally didn't join in. Sometimes he wasn't even there because he was working, but my mother would always, you know. We'd talk about school, talk about what we were doing, talk about homework, and then we'd talk about politics. Yeah. And so, yeah, I've been a political animal my entire life. I'm sure that I was the only twelve-year-old kid in East LA—I don't know about the rest of Los Angeles, but East LA—who had their own

subscription to the *Daily Worker*. [laughter] We had talked about it in class and somehow I got an address and I sent a dollar, or whatever it was for a subscription. That started coming to the house, and my mother freaked out because she knew it was a Communist newspaper. And my father was like, “No, it’s about unions and stuff, so this is okay. I’m a union member.” All right, so I got to keep the *Daily Worker*.

KD: Was he vocal in his union sensibilities, or . . .

JH: He was very loyal to his union. I mean that was just what men did. Because it was such a huge part of their life and even their social life. The union, he played for their baseball team and we’d do these social things with his friends because they were all union brothers in the Southern Pacific [Railroad]. It was a whole social world. It was not like families are today where everybody has their own social sphere that they run in. I mean, families did things together. We went to picnics and ball games.

KD: But generated through this union community?

JH: Exactly.

KD: Wow.

JH: All the men who worked on the railroad.

KD: So he worked six days a week?

JH: Pretty much, sometimes seven, depending on how busy it was.

KD: Did he leave before you got up and he’d get home—

JH: Oh, yeah.

KD: So you’re seeing father in the late evening and that’s pretty much it?

JH: Generally. Usually at dinner. And on the weekends, when he had weekends off. But sometimes he would work weekends, too.

KD: So when there’s leisure time you’re saying sometimes it was picnics and baseball. And other things. You said mother took you to museums and concerts?

JH: Yeah.

KD: Can you recall some of that?

JH: Anything that was free. We’d go to the museum of the, what is it, natural history? Next to the Coliseum? I don’t remember art museums in particular. I don’t think there were any in those days in Los Angeles.

KD: Let’s see, how old are you in ’63?

JH: I’d be, like, twelve, thirteen.

KD: So ’63 is when—

JH: No, not ’63. I was twelve in 1960. So yeah, I’d be thirteen.

KD: In ’63 the Los Angeles County Museum splits and becomes the Natural History Museum and what we call now LACMA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

JH: But it wasn’t on Wilshire Boulevard.

KD: The Natural History Museum stays on—

JH: Right, stays in Exposition Park.

KD: The dinosaurs and—

JH: Right. We went there a lot.

KD: You did?

JH: Yeah.

KD: So you’re looking at displays of stuffed mammals, right?

JH: Right.

KD: Do you remember the California [History] Hall with the—

JH: Yes.

KD: Little dioramas of—

JH: Yes, the dioramas there. I love the dioramas.

KD: You do?

JH: Oh, yeah, gosh, those are amazing. I love those things. And we also went to—

KD: Why did you like them?

JH: It was almost like time travel. When you're a kid and you looked at these things, because there wasn't anything like—I mean, that was state of the art in those days. I mean, kids find that laughable, but when you were a kid like me, because we were still watching black and white television with Milton Berle and Bob Hope and stuff. And so to walk into this . . . Well, I don't know, there's also this atmosphere, and you can feel it at the Field Museum [in Chicago, too]. The way they used to build these wonderful old museums with these gigantic halls. I mean the volume alone was kind of almost spiritual. It was like a church. And it was this cavernous . . . And it was dark and you'd walk along these lighted scenes of the past, of the prehistoric period. It was better than television because things were three-dimensional and looked so real. It was like walking into the past. A kid like me, with my imagination, I would stand there and I could look at that for a while and the things would begin to move. I could see the animals getting up from where they were and beginning to move around the space.

KD: I think I have a three-part question. So, this is unfair and you can just take the parts you want to do one at a time, or not at all today. I'm curious [about] your sense of Mexican heritage when you faced those particular dioramas. Because I've done a lot of investigation on those dioramas—just recently have taken my own students. So they're looking at the dioramas and they're going, "Wait a minute, all the native people come out to look, like, really stupid, really dumb."

JH: Oh, when you [got that far at the wing]? Yeah.

KD: So you had no recollection of looking at—

JH: I do remember the Native Americans. I think the thing that bothered me the most is that they tended to be faceless and I thought that was odd. But I guess I didn't have a negative political reaction or identity crisis because I would fill in the faces. I guess I didn't know why they were faceless. But I'd go, "Well I know what they look like," and I could just imagine what they were like. But I appreciated seeing the context of the figure and the clothing. That's another detail somebody went to, to create this realistic environment. The fact that they were faceless now, I would walk in and I'd probably interpret that in a, you know, a myriad of ways. But when I was a child—

KD: So was there a positive feeling when you saw the—because part of it is Mexican California as well. So they start with indigenous, then they do a little bit of the Spanish missionary and the founding and the conquering, but they also have a couple of dioramas—I don't know if there's actually quite a few—but there's two that are the more . . . I'd say you could have a positive feeling. Like, one's a Mexican wedding and one's a Mexican dance. So if you saw, or if you remembered, thinking back, the ones that were about Mexican heritage, did you have a—

JH: I can't say that I really remember those, but I wasn't filtering. I was just a kid. I wasn't filtering things in that way. I mean, my world was entirely Mexican. I didn't know anyone white well until I was in college. My entire world . . . I mean, when I lived in East LA you didn't have to learn to speak English. Everybody spoke Spanish. Everybody you knew was Mexican. There was the occasional Chinese person or maybe a couple of holdovers from the old neighborhood who were Italians or something, but almost everybody was Mexican.

KD: And your teachers?

JH: The teachers were not. You know, it's funny. I think when you're in that kind of a school, when you live in a—it was a segregated school system. The kids from East LA were not the same kids on the west side of town. There was no expectation on our part that the teachers would look like us. [We felt] that school was something separate from home. So the fact that all the teachers were white—I didn't even think of them as being whatever it is they were. I mean, their names were different, they looked different, but it's almost as if their ethnicity was not important at all. They were teachers, and what they looked like and who they were just didn't, I don't know, it never—

KD: So I guess what I'm trying to reconcile is, your mother eventually is very clear about the three strikes against you. So in her mind . . . And you said you felt that was coming earlier, just articulated probably at the age she felt you could hear it that way, right?

JH: Right.

KD: Is there conversation in the home [about being] Mexican or [being] proud that you're Mexican? Or it's just, as you said, everybody's Mexican. There's no reason to articulate it.

JH: Probably more the latter. Occasionally, when we were older and the Chicano civil rights movement really began, she would make more overt remarks about that, about being proud of who you are. But she didn't raise us to, you know . . . When we were kids it was not—I mean, she would talk about things that were Mexican. She would talk about my grandparents and what Mexico was like. It was all positive, it was all really nice, and you could see that it meant a lot to her and that she felt that it had great value. It brought this wonderful element into the lives of people who were Mexican to be Mexican. You know, the art, the music. But she didn't talk about it a lot.

We'd go to El Paso and of course we'd have to go to Juárez because her cousin Frankie had a restaurant and a bakery there, so we'd always have a reason to go to visit and then have lunch and shop. And Juárez in those days was a very different place, as was Mexico, I think, as a whole. And my memories of that—it was just all that good stuff, was just reinforced because every contact I ever had with anyone who was Mexican, and any place I went that was Mexico, was just this sea of people who looked like me. This familiarness of everything—of the smells, of the sights, of the sounds. And most important to me as a kid—the most important thing about that contact was the color. Every time I went to Mexico . . .

I was saying this the other day too, when I was at CSU [California State University], because somebody asked me what color paper [I use]. Do I always work on black paper? I said, "Yeah, I always work on black paper." And you know why? It's funny, somebody asked me that once. I had never really thought about it, and when I thought about it I thought, "Damn, it goes back to the time when I was a little kid and we would cross the border to Mexico. And you'd hit some of that schlocky tourist stuff and among those things—everybody recalls these—the velvet paintings." You know, the Elvis Presley. And I used to think, "Damn, that's exactly what I want to do." I loved that. Just the color popping up on that black velvet background just made such an impression on me. I remember thinking, "Oh!" And later, when I was older and went to Mexico—real Mexico, you know, down to Mexico City and Oaxaca and other places—it just became so clear to me that the color that I enjoyed in those velvet paintings is everywhere in Mexico. It's in the environment. It's probably in our DNA. Those magentas and the violets and the greens and the reds and a love of putting all those colors together in one spot is just part of who we are.

KD: So did your family have a velvet painting?

JH: No. My mother thought of them as tourist schlock.

KD: Did they have other crafts or art in the house?

JH: My mother's appreciation for art was always very, kind of—she liked things that she could recognize.

KD: I'm trying to be really open with that, from women's crafts, embroidery, crochet, to how she might have presented her house. Did she put together a room a certain way that was pleasing to her? Or that wasn't important, she didn't spend any time on that.

JH: No, she had an aesthetic sense. I remember her sister—my Aunt Helen—my mother always said she was the artistic one, that's where I got it from, because she was married to a jeweler and she designed things. She had a beautiful—well, my mother had a great style. I don't know why she used to say that my aunt was the one who was the creative one. As a young woman she was very beautiful, and she was a tiny thing, maybe five feet tall, and [had] tremendous taste. When she was working and she was a single woman she was incredibly well dressed. Beautiful, very classic, elegant clothes. I mean, you would see her on the street now and you'd think, "Ooh, what a classic-looking woman." There was something timeless about her, her ability to put things together. She had that aesthetic sense.

And she did have an aesthetic sense, but she never thought of it that way. She did crochet and embroider and do all those typical things a woman from her generation did, but she didn't think of them as high art. Because she had, I guess, gone to college and had a typical education in that respect. That, you know, Western art is where it's at. And, so I mean, her idea of great art is still life and the great masters and stuff like that. I mean, what I did was not art. *[laughter]* For a long time. She'd always say to me, "Can't you do flowers or something? Can't you do still lifes?" "That's not what I do, Mom." Okay. So she never really got into what I was doing, except that she was fair enough to say that if other people who know [about art] think this has value, then I'm willing to concede the point. But it was not her taste at all.

KD: So she has crocheted. Did she sew as well?

JH: She didn't sew well, but she was an incredible cook.

KD: Really?

JH: Oh, God. You know my grandfather, her father, had been a chef, and her mother didn't cook at all. But she would go with him as a kid to the restaurant. And she was an incredible cook. Incredible. I mean, people still talk about her.

KD: You're saying even these things that you saw, she didn't appreciate? She said it was Aunt Helen that has the artistic talent?

JH: Yeah, she didn't give herself credit for that. I think she always thought of herself as smart and that she was—it's funny, the word didn't exist, but she thought of herself as a "multi-tasker" because she did do lots of things at once. You know, she was organized. She would say she was organized. And that she had taste. Because our home always did really look nice. She couldn't afford the best, but whatever she did get was very tasteful.

KD: When did you become aware of this artistic aesthetic talent?

JH: In her?

KD: In her.

JH: I think I always appreciated it. Our home always looked different, it always felt different, from the other neighborhood homes.

KD: Can you describe it a little bit so I have a sense of that?

JH: Gosh. The colors of the furniture and stuff were always kind of very tasteful. It wasn't like the trend du jour, although she did cover it with plastic, *[laughter]* which is typical of housewives in the '50s. But it was always kind of classic, muted tones. And she'd find a still life or landscape or something, a reproduction she could put up, that just kind of put things together. Everything was balanced. She liked symmetry, so the sofa, the coffee table, the lamps, everything was very well balanced. And she did have an appreciation for the form and composition of space. Since I always lived in it I probably never thought about it until I went to other kids' homes and there was a real hodgepodge of feather flower arrangements with neon Jesus on the wall and candles.

KD: So you have a reproduction in the home, and she's taking you to museums. Did you say you could remember art museums? I mean, we're not really sure if—

JH: We probably did, but I can't remember. But we did a lot of, you know, anything related to science, to history, when there were free concerts.

KD: What about magazines and books, encyclopedias?

JH: She read everything, and we always had reading material. We always had books. I remember kids would come over to the house would remark, "Gee, you've got a lot of books." I mean, they lived in homes that had no books. We had magazines, we had more than one newspaper. She always bought books. We always received books as gifts. We used to think it was a bummer when we were kids, but that's what we'd get for birthday or—I mean, we got a couple of toys here and there, but we'd always get at least one book.

KD: And it's a novel, a fiction?

JH: Yeah. All the great classics. I mean, we had them all on our shelves. We had Robinson Crusoe and Hans Christian Andersen. Like what you and I did for our children, my mother, that's what she did. I mean books,

books, books, books. And, fortunately, she had a cousin who was a lithographer, so we would get these really nice books. And of course we didn't really appreciate them enough, but . . . [laughter]

KD: What do you mean? They were well-produced children's books?

JH: Yeah, they were beautiful hardbound books with the gold trim and everything.

KD: Wow.

JH: Yeah, they were nice books. But they had no pictures.

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Judithe Hernández for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series] and we're on the second side of our tape on September 26, 2009. Judithe was telling me about the books she'd get as a child that had no pictures. [So] your mother had many newspapers, not just one subscription, books in the house. [Were there] maybe those encyclopedias or references that you could get from the dime store, or you actually could get them from the gas station sometimes.

JH: Yeah, we had a set of encyclopedias.

KD: And were you looking at them?

JH: Oh, yeah. And we also had at least one unabridged dictionary because my mother, like I said, she was very well read and she insisted on Standard English, and if you asked her what a word meant or how to spell it, her classic answer would be, "What is the dictionary for?" So you had to go to the dictionary. But how can you find it if you can't spell it? "You're going to have to find it. It's in there somewhere." So eventually we'd find the word, read the meaning. I mean, thank God. I mean it's a habit that I fell into for the rest of my life. I used to like to read the dictionary, just to pick up words that I didn't know or could add to my—

KD: So what do you mean, you'd turn to one page and just read?

JH: Yeah, I'd just look. I'd say, "Oh, that's an interesting looking word," and then look at the definition, yeah.

KD: Did the dictionary also have little pictures, too?

JH: It did. Because we had a big unabridged dictionary. So there were occasionally pictures and stuff. I think by example she taught my brother and I—who's an attorney, so he's very well spoken—of the power of your personal ability to express yourself. One of the things that she always would say—and I say it to my daughter, it makes her crazy—"If you can't say what you mean, you will never mean what you say."

KD: Ooh.

JH: Yeah. [laughter]

KD: I think my kids and my students would shoot me if I said that, but you're right.

JH: But she hated it when she would go somewhere and you'd be talking to people who had a vocabulary of about thirty words, and every other word would be a bad word, or a "you know," or "tu sabes" and "blah, blah." It would drive her nuts. She said that is the first way that people judge you—when you speak. And if you sound like an idiot, even though you're not, they're going to think you're an idiot. So you can't afford to sound like an idiot. She was very, very insistent that we learn to speak well, and standard English.

KD: Let me change gears a little bit. Your dad's not always getting the weekends off, but you are doing some leisure time. Did the family ever take holiday together?

JH: Yeah. Sometimes we'd actually drive to see the families and in the process of doing that we'd take little side trips. I remember going to the Grand Canyon and to—what is it? Oh, shoot. Oh, this is a funny story. I remember when we were little kids—I remember the car. The car was great. It was like a 1952 Chevy coupe. It was this wonderful—it wasn't old in those days, it was newish. Coming back from a trip to see the families in Arizona and Texas, we went through Las Vegas. And I was like five, maybe my brother was six, and it was raining. It was amazing. It was one of those periods when it rained a lot and it had been raining and we were on the way to Las Vegas.

My parents found a theater that was showing a movie that we could see, because they didn't have child care stuff in those days. I remember it was *Land of the Pharaohs*. [laughter] My mother bought tickets, got us popcorn, and took us in the theater—because in those days mothers could do that—sat us

down, [and] said, “When the picture’s over, come out. I will be waiting for you.” So it bought her a couple of hours to go gamble. So we happily watched the film, ate the popcorn, drank the soda, walked out when it was over. And it was raining a lot so it took her longer than she thought to get back, so she was late. And you know, she wasn’t there and she wasn’t there and more time passed and she wasn’t there. And my big brother, who’s supposed to be taking care of me, starts to freak out.

KD: Aww.

JH: He begins to cry, make a scene. He’s screaming and yelling, “She’s left us here!” Attracts the cop. Somebody calls a policeman, and I remember thinking—I was just so embarrassed. I wasn’t afraid. I thought, “She’s going to be back, just chill.” But he was totally freaked, and he is just hysterical now. So people are trying to calm him down, and I’m like inching away from him, “I don’t know this boy, I have no idea who he is.” I was so embarrassed. So finally my mother shows up and everything is okay.

Yeah, so we had wonderful adventures as a family. My father didn’t go with us to Oregon—we went to Oregon, just the three of us—but that was another interesting trip. When the train left LA, the next stops it made—big stops so you could get off and go get dinner or eat something—was in San Francisco. But it didn’t stop in San Francisco, it stopped on the other side of the bay, in Oakland. And in those days the train station was in the black neighborhood.

KD: That’s right.

JH: We didn’t know that. So my mother takes us, we were like twelve and thirteen maybe, walking to the neighborhood outside the train station to look for a restaurant. It was soon very clear that we were not in the neighborhood we thought we were going to be in. But people there were very cool. There’s this woman with her two kids, we wound up in the soul food restaurant, had a great dinner, and walked back to the train station. But it was an adventure because I sensed a little amount of fear from my mother, about “Oh my God, what have I done, where have I walked these kids?” It was at night. But everything was fine.

KD: Why did you go to Oregon? Did you have family there?

JH: No. The man and woman we were visiting had been friends of my parents that they had made when they were in the army together. They had been army wives together, and my father and this gentleman had been army buddies. They kept a lot of their friends from World War II. It’s amazing how many friends they had and almost none of them were Mexican. They were all kinds of folks, so it was kind of neat to go around and see some of them, meet them, and experience the different [cultures].

KD: And riding the train, that was like a regular experience.

JH: Oh, it was wonderful.

KD: So it stayed mysterious and exciting?

JH: Oh, yeah, every time. Because the passengers were always different. Even though you’re looking at the same landscape. But as a child every time you took the trip you noticed more and more. I remember getting off at Yuma. That was the first stop as you’re going to Arizona. You left LA at night and you stop at Yuma in the morning for breakfast because they didn’t have dining cars in all of the trains. So we’d get off there and I think—oh, the things that I should have bought in those days. Native Americans would line up along the ramp to the train station selling all this beautiful silver and turquoise jewelry and blankets and moccasins. [laughter] It was great.

KD: When the family wasn’t taking a holiday but doing celebrations maybe at home, like birthdays . . . I don’t know, did you celebrate Easter and Christmas?

JH: Oh, yeah.

KD: Tell me about those birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving.

JH: My mother, I don’t know if she felt it was an obligation or whether she—I think she genuinely enjoyed—I mean, it was a break from the usual routine. You know, those kinds of yearly events. Easter was always, always a new dress, new clothes for my brother, new shoes. You know, the basket, the candy, we’d go to church. Christmas was always a big—always tamales. Thanksgiving, the American holidays, as well as the

Mexican holidays—the holidays were always getting together, [whether] just us as the nuclear family, or sharing those events with another family with whom we were friendly, or larger gatherings.

I think the thing that was neatest about that time was that, unlike kids today or families today, people entertained each other. There were always a couple of men in the social group that were musicians. They were amateur musicians. One guy played the accordion, somebody played the guitar, somebody sang. They would always entertain the rest of us. And the kids would be encouraged to get up and do something. You'd dance or you'd—I don't know, it was a very different time. It was wonderful when people shared themselves with their friends. The women would cook and there'd always be the great divide between walking into the kitchen with all the ladies in the aprons and all the men out in the living room with the cigarettes in those days.

KD: At what age did you become aware of that?

JH: Oh, real soon. It was so obvious. In the '50s there was this tremendous divide that split the house in half: this was the ladies side and this was the men's side. When you're still a kid you can walk between both, but after a certain age you have to pick a side. I liked them both. I thought the men were fascinating because they were sitting there with cigars and drinks or beers and they were talking about sports and politics, and the ladies were in the kitchen talking about recipes and their husband leaving their socks somewhere. I don't know, it was just this wonderful—you got a real understanding of the roles that adults played and what things seemed to be on their minds that were not on your child's mind at all. So it was a kind of a nice sneak preview of the future somehow.

KD: Your family celebrated Thanksgiving, too?

JH: Yeah.

KD: What did mom make?

JH: Turkey. It was a complete American holiday. Same with Fourth of July, too. It was hot dogs and barbecuing outside.

KD: You said Mexican holidays. Which ones did you mean?

JH: Not Mexican holidays as much as a religious holiday. Or a holiday like Christmas or Easter had a decided Mexican flavor to it. You know, the food. At Christmas there was *posadas* and midnight mass. I mean, it was celebrated in a Mexican way.

KD: So you went to midnight mass and—

JH: I didn't. I mean, occasionally. My mother would go. I think I went a couple of times.

KD: And she was making tamales, or was she buying?

JH: No, are you kidding? In her house? She would never have somebody else's tamales. Oh, no, we made them. I make them. And I say thank God that my mother showed me how to make them, because mine are killer. Just like hers. I mean I'm a pretty good cook and that's strictly because of my mother. She didn't consciously train me, but she would insist that I help out on these events so that I would learn how to make these things. Thank God she did because, God—

KD: And brother too, or no?

JH: No, he can't cook. No, that's not true. He does.

KD: But she didn't insist that he take part?

JH: No. That was very typical. You know, the boys were—

KD: Just checking.

JH: She wasn't that liberated.

KD: Tell me a little bit more about the community that you're growing up in. Let's see if I heard this right. They owned their home?

JH: No. They never owned a home until I was in high school.

KD: So they were renting a house? And the folks that are in your neighborhood are also?

JH: I don't know.

KD: It's mostly homes at that end of—

- JH: Yeah, they were single-family homes. And people owned, or they rented in our case. My parents didn't have enough to buy a home until I was in high school.
- KD: But these are homes with yards—
- JH: They're California bungalows. Kind of typical. Smallish, but they had backyards like those typical bungalows. I guess they were from the '20s.
- KD: Did you play in the backyard when you were a kid?
- JH: Oh yeah. My dad had various and sundry things. He'd put up a tetherball thing for us, there was a basketball hoop for basketball. It wasn't a big yard, but yeah, that's where we played. In our neighborhood the backyards all kind of butted up against each other so you could see the kids on the street that went this way because their backyard was—and then there was ours and of course all the ones down behind us. So the kids, we were never in front of the house. We were always in the back of the house playing outside.
- KD: Do you remember any—I mean, was that how you found fun as a child?
- JH: Yeah.
- KD: Or did you prefer to draw or read? Being outdoors was what you looked forward to?
- JH: I mean, that's what kids did. There was a time for playing outside with your friends, because there wasn't a lot of television in those days. So that was kind of after school and on weekends. If there was somebody around to play with, you'd probably be outside. Indoors the things that were entertaining, at least for me, were to draw and read. My mother was a tremendous reader and instilled that love of reading in both my brother and I, and so we had books to read, and so we read.
- KD: So you were picking up crayons and colored pencils and—
- JH: I always had art supplies. I mean, from the time they figured out that that was something I liked to do and I seemed to have a facility for. I mean, my mother saved drawings. I think I still have them somewhere, from [ages] two and three that were really pretty decent for a kid who was only two or three. She was a good saver. Thank God she saved this stuff or else I wouldn't have it. She saved a lot of drawings from—
- KD: This is before school.
- JH: Yeah. There was always things to draw with, things to read. I mean, we had toys and there were always books. I mean there were always things to entertain ourselves [with] and to teach us stuff, and art supplies was just one of those things that I never wanted for. If I needed something to draw with, there was paper, there was—
- KD: I imagine in elementary school you're also doing drawing, because at that time art is still part of the curriculum. Are the teachers giving you support for that?
- JH: I don't remember support, but—
- KD: Or they're interested in saying, verbally—
- JH: I think they were aware that I was, you know, "She likes art. It's something that she's good at and she likes it." At a certain point in time, most kids who are visual are tagged in their social group as the artist, the musician, the smart one, the pretty one. You always are kind of tagged, and yeah, that tag seemed to hit me pretty fast. "Oh, she's the artist." Because I liked to draw. I always did.
- KD: And you said your neighborhood was mostly . . . You don't remember very many white or Jewish or Japanese American, Chinese American [neighbors]. So mostly Mexican, and the school, I'm imagining, was the same.
- JH: Yeah.
- KD: You were saying the kids get tagged. Were you like the only kid, or was it you and somebody else?
- JH: I think in my little room there was just me. I was the artist.
- KD: And then you go on to—you didn't mention a middle school.
- JH: No, in those days Lincoln was seventh through twelfth [grade].
- KD: Elementary is K through six.
- JH: Yeah, I just went to two schools. I went to elementary school and I went to Lincoln because it was junior and senior high school.

KD: And you're walking to these schools? I'm trying to remember the distance from where you said you were.

JH: My mother walked us to—because we were a few blocks from the elementary school. And when I was going to Lincoln, I forget how. I know we used to take the bus. I think it was the public bus. I mean, I remember walking when the weather was okay. It was a little bit of a hike. It's about a mile from where we were living. But we also walked. But mostly it was—we'd catch the—I think it was the 12. It would take you straight in to Lincoln.

KD: So when you get to high school did you have a curriculum as an art class? Because I'm imagining in elementary school there's not a class, it's just part of the curriculum but one teacher is doing it.

JH: Yeah, there was an art class. And of course the moment I got there the art department got hip to there's a seventh-grader who's got some ability. And so I was always kind of on their radar. Which was nice because by the time I left Lincoln, I had been mentored by one of the women art teachers, who was just this tremendous woman. It was kind of a love-hate relationship. She was very controlling, but she was also very ambitious for the students that came her way that she felt had real potential. And she was very supportive.

In fact, it's really funny. Not too long ago, Leo Limón said to me that . . . By the time I left Lincoln in the twelfth [grade], I had had a little private studio off of the classroom of Mrs. Downey's room because I had been her star student for a couple of years, and I won this big scholarship, and I was the fair-haired girl. It was her storage room, and she had taken everything out of it so that I could have a private studio. That's how much she believed in my ability, God bless her. So Leo said, "You probably don't know this but after you left I got to use your studio." I completely forgot about that. I said, "Are you serious?" He said, "Yeah, Mrs. Downey had it still, and I was the one that got to use it." I said, "Good lord, isn't that amazing?" Teachers have always played an important—have been important people in my life, which is why I love people who are in education, especially at the elementary and secondary level. They're so influential. I hope that they understand that. Mrs. Downey. There were a couple of other teachers—Mr. Talley [?]
—who were just so . . . I can't imagine I would be the person I am today without them.

Talley was this closeted gay man from Texas, white, teaching in a ghetto school. Probably because they knew he was gay and it was not a good thing to be in those days. And he wound up at this ghetto school with a whole bunch of Mexican kids who were rather indifferent to Shakespeare and other things. But he had radar for kids who had any brains in their head and were willing to grow and benefit from the things that he wanted to expose us to. And I can think of all the people that were in the class that I had with him who kind of moved along with him through high school. All of us did something with ourselves. Carlos Moreno, who is the chief justice of the supreme court now in California; Moctesuma Esparza, [who works in film]; me; Xavier Reyes, who was a film director as well. So many people that he handpicked to be in his group of—kind of the chosen. And he was the other person who exposed us. He would take us to the opera. He was a theater guy. He had been an actor so he had all these connections in the theater. He would get us free access to—

KD: All his class?

JH: No, just a group of kids that he identified from across the spectrum of his classes. He took us to a preview at a movie studio of Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove* before it hit the theaters. He would take us to the symphony. My mother loved him because he would do all the things that she would if she could afford to do it for us. He made such a difference in the lives of the few kids that he felt that he could influence. He had such enormous love for what he was doing and for teaching and for imparting knowledge. And he made such a difference in my life. I mean, I just can't imagine how I'd be without his influence.

KD: He's teaching something like literature or?

JH: Yeah, you know, they gave him a couple of English classes to teach and he was the coach for the drama club and he taught drama.

KD: And Mrs. Downey taught, what, drawing?

JH: Art. She was the chairman of the art department.

KD: So she taught you drawing, painting?

JH: Right.

KD: Were there other media that she was introducing?

JH: Yeah. It was being in her class, the minute that she could see what I did—it was kind of like, it was more like being her group protégé. She would simply bring things in. I would be sitting at a table by myself until I had my little studio and she'd bring in stuff and just put it in front of me and say, "People will take this and do this with it, and you can probably put it on blah, blah. But why don't you play around with it, see what you come up with." It was like my own independent study class in high school, and it was wonderful.

KD: Because the rest of them are doing a still life, a bowl of fruit.

JH: Exactly. She'd set up something for the rank and file who were just taking art because they have to, and I had my own curriculum. I could basically do whatever I wanted. I had a very privileged, unusual experience as a high school student in a ghetto school.

KD: Hold on just a minute, let me pause.

[*break in audio*]

KD: You mentioned a scholarship. Was that for some summer program?

JH: No. It was, I think they call it, if it still exists—I think it still exists—Future Masters. It was a scholarship that was funded by—and I don't know if it still is by the same people—the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and [the] Sears-Roebuck Foundation. It was the very first scholarship that they gave. The competition was at the museum at LACMA. This was 1965, because I was a senior in high school. It was a citywide competition of the best art students in the city, a lot of whom I knew because we had been in these previous kind of art honors courses around town. So Mrs. Downey of course wanted me to compete. So you've got to take a portfolio of stuff and I remember it was so funny—and this taught me a very important lesson about sometimes not following the rules—the packet of information had said X amount of pieces and no larger than X inches in either direction, so the work could be manageable. And there was one piece that I had done that was four by eight feet.

KD: Jesus.

JH: And she said, "You must take this." I said, "I can't take this. The rules say it can't be greater than blah-blah inches." She said, "I don't give a shit." She was very earthy. And she treated me like an adult, she was great. She said, "No, you must take this. I don't give a damn what the rules say, you are going to take this piece." I said, "I don't have a car." "Find somebody who has a car big enough and take it." So, shit. I prevailed on this guy who was in my class whose father had a station wagon, and he drove me to LACMA down Wilshire Boulevard with this thing hanging out the back of his dad's station wagon. And I turned it in and they didn't say no.

And it turned out to be the absolute best thing I could have done because several of the other kids who were the fiercest competition were all people who had been in the same class that I had been in, the same honors art course. So many of the pieces that we had taken were of the same subject. So they kind of had to throw those out because they were all the same. So the deciding factor was this piece that I had brought that I shouldn't have brought but I did, which won me the scholarship. I remember when they announced my name, number one, I couldn't believe it because I expected to be somewhere down the line, and then there was only one more left and then I was the one who got it. I was just frozen to my seat. And William Wilson of the [*Los Angeles*] *Times* was one of the judges, and he said that they had had an especially tough time because we had this shared work that we had done. And he said, "And I want to show the rest of you what was essentially the tie-breaker," and they brought it out and everybody's [*gasping sound*].

KD: Can you describe this work for me? Do you remember it?

JH: It was a falling figure. In fact, it was a figure very much like that one that's down the wall of the double-headed figure. I was a big fan of Rico Lebrun in those days. I looked at his work a lot. [Lebrun was a] well-known Californian painter. And [my painting] was a body that was somewhat—and I guess that's why

I have this fascination with falling figures, I don't know—a body who was sort of in pieces that was kind of falling through this kind of cloud-like atmosphere. It was this big painting. It was very loose, very kind of expressionistic. Lots of big—

KD: Strokes?

JH: Yeah, big brushes. It was really pretty mature work, now when I think about it, compared to what the other kids were doing. It was definitely the tiebreaker. They could see that this was somebody who was maturing beyond the little still-life setups and stuff that we were doing in high school. And if I hadn't taken that piece I would not have won. There was nothing else that would have, you know.

KD: And this came from one of those independent assignments? She didn't say to you, "Take a piece of canvas, four by eight"?

JH: Yeah, she brought in this big piece of—it was a door. It was a hollow-core door is what it was. She said, "Paint on this."

KD: Really?

JH: Yeah, she brought it in one day and says, "Here, paint on this." I said, "Oh, that's kind of cool." She said, "Just paint on it." That's a sign of an excellent teacher. When you know that you have a student who—the only way you can challenge them is by giving them as little direction as possible. And just say, "Okay, you need to think about what you're going to do with this thing. Here it is, here are the pieces, here's the stuff—go play, go do something."

KD: School sounds like, at least for the arts, quite enjoyable.

JH: Yeah.

KD: What about the rest?

JH: Sucked. *[laughter]* Bunch of people that are doing their time, they didn't give a shit. There were a few. And Mr. Talley was certainly one of them. But it was a ghetto high school. There were a lot of people there who were just doing their time. They were glorified babysitters.

KD: Were you aware of that at the time, or you're just bored because you're not being challenged? That's what I'm trying to figure out.

JH: I think both. I was aware that they weren't especially interested in teaching us anything. They were simply interested in crowd control, for the most part. And then, like any big urban ghetto high school, it was also filled with a lot of kids that you wouldn't give the time of day to. They didn't care [that] they were going to wind up welfare mothers or prison bait. The small group of kids that I ran with, which was this tiny little group—and other high schools must have been much larger—of the smart kids, the square kids, the ones who were going to go to college. But it was such a tiny, tiny group compared to the regular rank and file of kid who was there, who was just not like us at all. We were rather different.

KD: So were you having a drag in, what, I guess math and biology and . . .

JH: I mean I was interested in those subjects. I wasn't necessarily good at math. I liked biology, I like physiology. I was a pretty good student, but it wasn't an exciting atmosphere. Art was, for me, but it really wasn't an exciting atmosphere. When I got to college then I knew that I had some makeup work to do because there was the foundation that I lacked completely in terms of things that I should have read, concepts that I should have understood by now that other kids already did because their curriculum was so much stronger. So when I got to college I realized I needed to do some remedial stuff, plus take some other things that were going to give me some advantages. I mean, I don't blame them. It was a huge high school and money didn't get spent there. It's typical, the way educational systems run now. But I thank God for those individual teachers who made learning interesting and gave me gifts that I would never have gotten anywhere else.

KD: Did you do anything extracurricular? Even just going to the football games, to—

JH: Sure, yeah.

KD: Clubs?

JH: I wasn't a big club person. I definitely did only one semester of drill team because I don't have any sense of rhythm. People were over here and I was over there. Not going to be in drill team any more. I was pretty much a regular kid of the '60s in those days, in terms of . . . There was always the football games. And because of Mr. Talley I went to the public speaking and the extemporaneous speaking competitions and poetry recitations. Which was great, because we got to see these universities that—

KD: Right, they would be at the university campuses.

JH: Right. You know. God, I'd never seen what a college looked like. I remember the first time I went to USC I was just blown away. So I did that kind of stuff. I mean I was a pretty normal teenager. I mean, you couldn't have looked at me the way you can now and you can tell who an art student is because they're all dressed in black and they have pierced ears and a Mohawk haircut. In those days I looked like any kind of normal teenage kid. We just did the normal stuff.

KD: What kind of music did you listen to as a child? Or as a teenager, I guess I should say.

JH: I went to the first Beatles concert when they first came in '64 at the Hollywood Bowl. My girlfriend and I actually won tickets on KRLA and we went. So I became a teenager—I was a teenager when music was moving out of the Elvis Presley period. I remember listening to '50s rock and roll. I loved it. The Platters, Elvis, all that stuff. I enjoyed it a lot. But then when the British invasion happened and rock and roll just took on this other . . . You know, I listened to that a lot.

I've always been a jazz person. One of the other tremendously influential teachers at Lincoln was our music teacher. I played in a junior band for a couple of years—clarinet. I couldn't play it now to save my life. One of the things that was neat about that class was that our teacher was a professional musician. He was doing his daytime gig because you can't be a professional musician and live. He was African American and he would take some of his students—the ones that were interested and into it—he would take us to these trips to the south side of town to the black jazz clubs. I actually went to the California Club in the late '60s, which was a very famous jazz place, and there were big guys that played there. Thelonius Monk and Miles Davis and Charlie Parker. And I didn't know who they were then, but, I mean, when I think about it now, Jesus. And he was a wonderful musician and he would jam with them and we would sit there. I still have drawings in a sketchbook from the '60s that actually have pictures of my California Club—this is from Otis [Art Institute]. I'll have to find it for you.

KD: Yeah, that would be amazing.

JH: There are these drawings of a guy and a flute and some other things because I love jazz. I think that's where my love of jazz came from, because of what he exposed us to—these incredible musicians and evenings. I can't imagine these crazy little Chicano kids with this black man down on the south side of LA going to . . . I don't know why my mother let us go, but she did, thank God. I've always loved jazz, I've always loved rhythm and blues. I don't know where I heard it. Maybe it was from Mr. Benson's class, I don't know, but I still have Big Mama Thornton and other people in my collection that I listen to a lot. And then the '60s turned into Bob Dylan and all that stuff, and who could resist that? Especially the protest stuff.

KD: And your friends in high school?

JH: Friends in high school . . . I still know some of them, the ones who were in that same group of geeks, the ones who were the good students. Like Carlos Moreno, Moctesuma Esparza, Jesús Treviño. The women don't stand out very much. It's funny. I was always the girl among the boys. I mean, that was just my fate, it seemed like. I was always the lone girl. But in a way that was wonderful for me because I got to know a lot about men by being their friend before I was ever interested in being anything more. So it was a good thing for me, to be one of the guys.

KD: I guess I was hoping I could find out what kind of things you wore and contrast them with the other girls, but there wasn't a lot of girls around. But do you remember what you wore?

JH: Sure, we wore all the stuff that the girls wore in those days. In fact, because I could sew I would make . . . My mother wouldn't let me wear my skirts too short. But, you know, the platform sandals that everybody had. And not tie-dye, I wasn't into hippie. And certainly by the end of the '60s my personal uniform had

transformed into OD [olive drab] green paint pants and black T-shirts. That's still about what I wear now. I spend most of my time in jeans and T-shirts. I was never a clotheshorse.

And I remember [in] the early '60s people experimented with those psychedelic prints and stuff like that. I did a little bit of that, but in the barrio that just wasn't ever the style. The style of the '50s persisted for a long time. The straight skirts with the white blouses and the artificial flowers that people used to wear. I didn't own a pair of jeans for a long time because my mother didn't approve, and Chicanas didn't wear jeans for a long time. They wore pants. They wore slacks and skirts, but not much jeans. Those hippie girls wore that stuff.

KD: I guess that's the other thing I was trying to uncover, the categories that you grew up with. You know, when I was growing up it was surfers and stoners.

JH: Oh yeah. Because there were so few white folks. When you looked at Lincoln [High School] across the end of the quad, there was a sea of brunettes with the occasional blond sticking out. Surf music was—no. You didn't listen to surf music in East LA. I didn't have an appreciation for the Beach Boys until much later in life. And there was this well-established, not resentment, but mistrust of white kids and their trip. We didn't like their clothes, didn't like their music, didn't like their cars. By that time cars were an issue, and anybody who had a cool car was terrific.

KD: But you weren't dressing like a *chola*, or . . .

JH: Are you kidding, with my mother? Jesus, I would have gotten a size-five wedge buried in my forehead. Oh no.

KD: But that was a category?

JH: That was definitely a category. Those were the bad girls. I was a respectable girl. Respectable girls don't dress like that. You know, the world was so divided that way, especially in my mother's mind. There were those girls who were respectable and those who aren't, and you don't dress like that because that's what those girls dress like. So I was never—no, didn't do that.

KD: Sounds like we're getting near the end of high school, and I don't want to go too much beyond that, but you graduate in '65.

JH: No, I graduated in winter '66.

KD: You said you were a senior, sorry about that.

JH: [Senior year began] in the fall of '65, and then . . . It was funny, in those days we had winter classes. Because of where my birthday fell I graduated January of '66.

KD: And finishing high school, I'm imagining since your mother did some college there's talk at home about going to college?

JH: Are you kidding, there had been talk since I was in kindergarten.

KD: Really?

JH: Yeah, her mantra was "when you go." It wasn't ever "if you go." *When* you go. Everything that we had done from kindergarten through high school was preparation for college. It was a no-voter. We were going. I think she often wished she had had more control about what I would be studying.

KD: Yeah, because I have, you go to Otis.

JH: Art was not probably the thing she would have thought. But the fact that my brother would eventually be in law school—that was something they could wrap their heads around. They could relate to that. A lawyer.

KD: So was it dad also, or was it really just mom? Did mom get dad on board?

JH: Whatever she thought, that was what he thought. I mean, she knows this is her trip, [she's in charge].

KD: So you couldn't divide mom and dad if there was a question, play them off each other?

JH: Absolutely not.

KD: Full front, parents say you're going to college?

JH: Absolutely. And we'd find a way to pay for it. Fortunately I had a scholarship, my brother had a scholarship, and so they supplemented what we did. But they would have done anything. If we had gotten admitted to Harvard they would have found a way to pay for it. They were very adamant.

KD: So you knew you were heading to college. When did you start thinking about "What am I going towards?" You're getting a lot of support in the arts, so is it already under Mrs. Downey that you're thinking about going to art school?

JH: That was my plan from the time I was a child. It's funny, I've talked to other people who are like me, and then those who are the flipside of the coin. There are some people who know from almost infancy and it is a straight shot. Everything you do is to get you to that point. There's no question about it, nothing can change you, you'll never change your mind about it. That's how strongly you feel it. You seem incapable of being moved off that course. And [there are] some people who have no idea and they waffle between one thing and the other and finally something hits them. My brother was kind of like that. He could have gone a lot of ways, and then suddenly . . . He got back from Vietnam, got back into school, went to Occidental [College], and then suddenly going to law school seemed to be the right thing. Before that, I'm not sure he really could have told you what he wanted to do in life. But I knew from the time I was the smallest kid exactly what I'd be doing, what I'm doing now. There was no other choice for me. I can't do anything else.

KD: So you've said quite clearly that mom wasn't really happy with this.

JH: But she—

KD: How was she expressing that?

JH: She didn't say, "Don't do art." She was looking at it from a very practical point of view. She would say, "You know, artists don't make a lot of money. What if you don't get married? What if you do and your husband gets sick? You have to find a way to support yourself. And so you have to be able to do something that people are willing to pay you to do." I didn't want to listen to it. I knew she was right, but . . . And so, again, teaching seemed to be the obvious thing, which most artists did in those days and still do. That's kind of your daytime gig and then it leaves you time and you have enough money to keep body and soul together while you do your own work. I spent thirty years in higher ed. It was wonderful. It was a great experience. But it was never my—how can I say? I worked hard at it, I was good at it, but it was a way to do what I really wanted to do, which was to make art. I guess that's why I never thought about getting more involved. I didn't want tenure, I didn't want full time. I didn't want that responsibility. I wanted freedom.

KD: Let me end this one here, because we're almost near the end of this tape.

[*break in audio*]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Judithe Hernández. This is tape 2 for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series] and we're on September 26, 2009. And we were just going to talk a little bit more about growing up and the family.

JH: I forget who the conversation was between. Either I saw this on CNN or I read it in the newspaper: two famous people were talking about their childhoods and one of the things that became clear to them, as they were talking about growing up, [was] the influence that it had on what they did as whatever it was. I forget, they were two famous musicians or something. Even though they had come from working class families they had had happy childhoods. When they think about the totality of their childhood it was good. They had no complaints, they wouldn't change a thing, it was a happy time. And I often wonder whether that—I guess it does. You know, a terrible childhood can drive you to do good things, to make something of yourself in spite of it, but I think a happy childhood . . . When I think about growing up, I never felt disadvantaged.

I'll never forget, when I was just a kid they took us to downtown LA. In those days there was a department store called Bullocks that was very la-di-dah, and there was some sort of something there that we were going to from school. And I remember the teacher giving us the last minute behave-yourself talk before we got off the bus, saying, "I know that some of you probably have never been in this kind of store, and may not be aware of how you should behave, but . . ." and I thought, "What?" [*laughter*] You know,

just because we're a bunch of brown faces here you think we're wild animals who don't know how to behave in a store like this? And yes, I have shopped in there. I mean, I don't know. My childhood was tremendous. I would not change anything about it. I think the fact that what we lacked was money and some of the advantages that money does bring, in terms of allowing you the freedom to explore the world a little more. I didn't travel to go to Europe until I was thirty. But I can't imagine a better time in my life than when I was a child. It was just wonderful.

KD: Never went hungry then?

JH: No. And if there were any financial troubles or something like that, that my parents struggled with, we never knew about it. It never affected us.

KD: They never screamed and yelled about it in front of you?

JH: No. And we never went without. I mean, we were always told what our limit was. "Yes, we can buy something at the store today, but today we can't." Unlike some of the yuppie parents that I see in stores today who just load these kids down with shit. We had a great appreciation for when we had the ability to choose a toy or not. But it was all good. I just cannot remember anything about it that I would change. There was no terrible experience, no unhappiness.

KD: Were you aware of that as a child when you saw other friends' homes, or . . .

JH: Yeah, because there were a couple of kids . . . In fact, our neighbors next door, the husband was a terrible person. He was domineering and occasionally violent, and you could hear them. He would be screaming at the family, and his wife would be terrorized, and occasionally you'd see her with a bruise or something. I knew that other kids had different homes, but in my home we were totally protected from that. I know my parents made a concerted effort to make sure that whatever terrible stuff [was] out there in the world—because we didn't live in the greatest neighborhood—as much as they could shield us from that, they did. I always thought sometimes they were smothering us a little bit, or maybe didn't trust us, but now I know that they were protecting us from being exposed to certain things they thought were unsavory or questionable in our environment that they couldn't control other than to keep us away from it.

KD: What do you mean?

JH: Some of the kids who lived on the block were obviously headed for prison or for the welfare. And a lot of them did. They became welfare mothers with a bunch of kids from guys they don't know. I can think of at least a couple of guys, or more than a couple of guys along the block, who died young. They were in gangs and shit. My mother in her genteel little way would say, "There are people in this world who are nice people, who are quality people"—"quality," that was her word—"and those who are not. We're quality people, those are not your kind of people." So she would draw those distinctions. In high school I couldn't do that. I mean, I had interactions with kids that I know she wouldn't approve, but they weren't friends. Being in that environment, the street teaches you. You have to find a way to navigate the world with both types. But they weren't friends, they were just acquaintances. Yeah, it was interesting.

KD: So just a few last questions about high school and then we'll quit for the day. And this has been really wonderful, by the way. You have to make a decision to apply for college. Does that happen in high school? I mean apply, to actually apply, you know you want to go, but to make the application.

JH: Right.

KD: And does Mrs. Downey help you with that?

JH: Gosh, I don't remember. She had already helped in the sense that she had been a student of, and was a friend—more a friend than a student, but I know she would take his courses—of Joe Mugnaini at Otis. She sent me to a course there when I was still in high school. I don't know if I was a junior or a senior. She sent me to one of his classes for the summer. I knew him before I went, and she had already paved the way. When Joe saw what I could do, and I won the scholarship, you know. I was courted by Chouinard [Art Institute] and some of the other places. But since I knew [Joe] and I liked him and I liked the school, I knew that I would apply there. Unfortunately, Otis in those days, I think like Chouinard, was not a four-year undergraduate program. It was only two years. So I had to go to East LA [College] and do GEDs and then transfer

there as a junior. So that's what I did. Went to East LA, went to LACC junior college [Los Angeles City College] on Vermont. I think I took a couple of courses there, did most of the credits at East LA, and then eventually transferred to Otis in . . . '71? No, '69. Damn, '71. I think I got thrown out, and then I went back. No, I was thrown out in '70. They threw me out at one point. I was dating this guy, and then I was involved in all this protest stuff, and I just wasn't concentrating on school. And I don't know what I flunked, but they threw me out. My parents were furious. And then I was reinstated and then I finished graduate school.

KD: That sounds like another good story. We'll get to that the next time.

JH: That is a good story.

KD: Thank you so much. We'll stop for today. I really appreciate your time, thank you.

JULY 14, 2010

KD: [This is Karen Davalos and I am here] with Judithe Hernández for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series], and today is July 14, 2010. And this is our second session for her oral history interview. And it's been quite some time since we last spoke, so I was hoping we can just do a little bit of talking about leaving high school, finishing high school, and then going on to your higher education arts training. Because I had a question here: when was the first time that you left home?

JH: Not until I got out of graduate school.

KD: Really?

JH: Yeah. It was cheaper to stay. I mean, no rent, good food.

KD: Food, that's always for something.

JH: My mother was the type who was very old-fashioned. You know, you don't leave your house until you get married. Although, after I got out of Otis I did move into an apartment, but I was about twenty-four by then.

KD: So you finish high school and the application is straight into Otis?

JH: No, in those days [at] Otis Art Institute you did your first two years of undergrad somewhere to do the [general education courses], and then you transferred for the last two years of the major into Otis for the BFA, and then stayed two more years if you wanted the MFA. So that's what I did. I went to East LA [College] mostly. I think I went to LACC, too, for a couple of courses. And then I transferred to Otis in 1969, I think, was my first—

KD: So were you taking arts classes during those other two years?

JH: Oh, sure. It was unavoidable.

KD: Unavoidable because they couldn't keep you away?

JH: Yeah, couldn't keep me out of the art department. But you know, [I was] doing the English and the math and that kind of stuff just to get that out of the way. Actually it was a very good thing at East LA, a kind of historic thing, because Kent Twitchell was also there and we've been friends for over forty years. Who else was there? Patssi [Valdez] wasn't there yet because she's younger than I am. I guess Kent and I [came] out of that generation of artists that went to East LA [and] have had careers since. There were some other people who didn't necessarily go on in their careers, but they were really wonderful additions to my life in terms of the kind of people they were, and just knowing them was influential. And then in high school I had already made a connection to Otis because my high school art teacher, Mrs. Downey, was a friend of Joe Mugnaini. I don't know if I mentioned that last time. And he already knew who I was, wanted me to come to Otis. So I was just on a mindset at a fast track to get my act together and get to Otis so I could do art all the time.

KD: You mentioned at one point during our last interview that you carried a sketchbook all the time.

JH: Yeah, still do.

KD: What's the California Club? It's all in the—

JH: That was a very famous jazz club on the south side of LA that our music teacher at Lincoln took us to, which I still have that sketchbook. It's got sketches of a black jazz group playing, the group he played in. Because, like most artists, you have a day job. He was a music teacher in high school and at night he played at the California Club. And famous guys like Charlie Parker and, I don't know who else. All of the big jazz greats who were black floated through that club. So he took a bunch of his little Chicano kids down to see real jazz.

KD: Did that stay with you?

JH: Oh, absolutely. I mean I listen to jazz in the studio to this day. I love jazz.

KD: What kind of music are you listening to in the studio?

- JH: Like I said, jazz. I love Miles Davis, but I listen to Los Lobos, my old compadres who I love dearly. I listen to, the only thing I don't listen to consistently—I listen to classical, I listen to everything, [but] country western is not my favorite. But other than that—
- KD: So that's not going to produce any creative spark?
- JH: No. But jazz and, certainly, I like atmospheric music too. There's a guy named Steven Mikos [?] who is a German ethnomusicologist or something, who does the most interesting, beautiful music. He plays all the instruments. He sings occasionally and it's this language—I don't know whether it's a real language or something he made up but it's the most . . . And he travels, he's one of these guys who just picks up sounds and then puts them together in the most interesting ways. It's beautiful stuff to listen to. And you don't know what's being said, but it doesn't matter. It's almost trance-like.
- KD: When you were a student were you listening to music in the studio?
- JH: Oh, yeah. I used to be the one that people designated to put the tape together. "We need a new tape, Judithe." All right, so I'd sit at home. And in those days you'd have to stop the recorder after the record was up and put in another one. But yeah, I love music. It's great to work by. Of course I must confess I also watch television. But I feel I was totally vindicated one day when I was watching an interview with Itzhak Perlman, world-class violinist, brilliant guy, who sheepishly admitted that when he practices—because he practices every day—that he watched TV. [*laughter*]
- KD: So there's part confession and part—I'm curious why an artist would feel like that's a confession, or something that requires [an apology].
- JH: It seems kind of lowbrow to be watching TV. I'm a movie addict, so I put one movie on after another. It's also a way for me to know how much time I've been working. After the movie starts and ends it's been about two hours. So then I know, okay, I'll go to the bathroom or get some lunch, come back, put on another movie, by the time that's over it's maybe time to leave the studio unless there's something else to do. I just like the visual and the noise. I don't know, it's kind of white noise—something. I don't know, it's weird.
- KD: You're not the first artist that has talked about that. So I'm wondering if it's, you know, the rest of us watch television and we go into alpha brain waves. I don't think you're going into alpha state.
- JH: Really? As opposed to what other kind of brain waves?
- KD: Those are more like sleep and unconscious.
- JH: I don't know. I don't know how it contributes. It just seems to balance—I mean sitting in your studio in silence is for me not a good thing. I have to have some other kind of music or something going on. And not just random noise, that doesn't help. It needs to be something that either I can occasionally pay attention to because something catches my eye, or I like this particular scene, so I'll stop and watch, or—just music that kind of envelopes you. I don't know, it's hard to explain.
- KD: We'll let somebody else think about that. I'm just fascinated by this early introduction to jazz as a young person in high school.
- JH: Yeah, that was pretty awesome, I mean as far as I was concerned. I never would have ever been introduced to it otherwise. My parents didn't listen to that kind of music. They listened to Pedro Infante and folks like that. Although my mother did have a real thing for Mantovani, which I just loathe to this day. And Lawrence Welk, oh God. We watched that show every goddamn Saturday night or whatever it was. But yeah, I was never big huge for rock and roll. I certainly don't listen to rock and roll now. I hate the stuff that the kids listen to now. But I listened to my share of—and I still prefer the stuff from the '60s and the '70s. I listen to the Rolling Stones and what's his name? Eric Clapton and the Doors. I love that stuff. I'll never get tired of it.
- KD: So you're in high school, and you get some good direction to go on to college?
- JH: Yeah. I won the first . . . I think they finally changed the name to something called—it's really pretentious. Future Masters scholarship. That was given [by] LACMA and [the] Sears-Roebuck Foundation, which I'm sure doesn't exist any more. [The Future Masters Art Program was sponsored by the LA Junior Chamber

of Commerce—ed.] I was the first winner of that scholarship in 1965, which ensured my tuition for Otis, which was really nice because my parents didn't make a lot of money. Yeah, my experience in high school was different. And that particular teacher, Mrs. Downey, was one of those individuals who I think . . . Because when she was born, for a woman pursuing a career in the fine arts [it] was probably more difficult than it has ever been since then. And I think she invested a lot of herself in students who had talent, and especially women. And I think she saw in me a way of fulfilling her ambition and really pushed me hard, gave me my own little studio, which . . . Leo Limón inherited [the studio] after I left high school because he followed me at Lincoln. I was the only kid in the LA school district, I think, who had their own little studio. Off the classroom she had carved out a studio space for me and insisted that I work at a more interesting level than just what she was giving the kids in the classroom to do. She was the reason I won the scholarship.

I did this really large painting one day—it was four by eight feet—and the scholarship rules had said that the portfolio had to be of a certain size, “couldn't exceed blah, blah, blah.” And the day before we went to the scholarship meeting she said, “You need to find a way to get this there.” I said, “It's too big.” “No, you must get this there.” I said, “They're not going to take it, it's too big, they won't even look at it.” “I'm telling you to take this painting. I don't care how you get it there but you need to get this painting there.” So I talked this friend of mine into taking it. His dad had a station wagon, [so] we threw it in the back of the station wagon. It was in LA County [Museum of Art]. William Wilson was one of the judges of the scholarship along with, I forget, some other people. [Wilson was an art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*—ed.] But I remember it was so funny what he said afterwards. [They] took my regular portfolio plus this piece. They let us take it in—they didn't say no. And apparently that was the tiebreaker because there were three or four other students [with] whom I had been in the same honors art course, and so our portfolios were somewhat similar because we had the same paintings, these same setups.

KD: Same assignments, yeah.

JH: That was the tiebreaker. They called runner-up number five, number four . . . When they got to number two I sat back and said, “I'm out of this competition.” They called my name. I nearly fell on the floor. When they did, they brought out that piece and there was this kind of “Ooh.” Audible, you know. “My God, that's why she got it.” It was really a nice painting and it was totally more mature and more, I guess, just more mature than the things that had been in the regular portfolio. And it was huge, comparatively speaking. My fellow competitors out there realized what had separated me from them. So I thank her to this day. If I hadn't taken that it could have been a three-way tossup as to who won it. But William Wilson was so funny. After it was over he said, “You know, I wanted to be an artist and I tried really hard, and every time I had a show I let that become my focus and the work sucked. I got tensed up and I did terrible work.” He said, “So if it's any comfort to you guys”—because we all knew he was an art critic—“all critics go to hell, okay?” [laughter] And I thought, “Thank you, that's where you guys belong.” But that was—

KD: Do you remember what the painting was of?

JH: It's something I still do today, which I've never gotten over the fascination of: figures falling through space. And it was a sort of Rico Lebrun-ish figure, kind of. Transparent in areas, and it was just tumbling through space. More-than-life-size figure falling through the air. It was only two colors. No, it was three: sepia, black, and white. I don't know whatever happened to it, but that was the winner for me that day. And thank God. I don't know how I would have gotten to Otis otherwise.

KD: So you started East LA community college, you're taking some art classes, you meet Kent Twitchell when you're at—

JH: East LA.

KD: You had already had some sense of the walkouts and things like that, right? So what's going on, on that campus?

JH: The whole thing was very young at that point. Even the word *Chicano* was tentatively used by people. I remember I said that to one of my teachers when I was at East LA—no, I referred to African Americans

as black because African Americans were using the word *black* by then. And he shot me this look and he thought I was being disparaging. I said, “No, that’s what—”

KD: They’re using.

JH: Like we call ourselves Chicanos, they call themselves black. And it was funny, it was a little hard to get used to because it was new and it was so—since you’ve always lived with it. I knew what it was like when even just saying that you’re Mexican American was not a good thing to have to say about yourself, although we couldn’t get around it. But then to use a word like *Chicano*, it was incredibly inflammatory around some, even my parents’ generation. They resented it a lot. And white people didn’t know what to make of it at all except that it seemed to be an affront, not to them but to the social order. It sent a ripple out that they didn’t like because now your place was not clear any more. You know, you were carving out another, separate—you know, we’ve already classified you and now you’re saying you’re something else, and it really was resented.

So people were very careful, I think, except those who wanted to be really in your face. And I wasn’t all that political at first. I came from a pretty conservative household. My mother, I think I said before, was college educated and very interested . . . I mean, her mission in life was to make sure that we were successful, that we weren’t stopped from using our potential. And anything that she felt was going to be a distraction or detract from our abilities to be accepted, so to speak, she did not approve of. And since I lived at home, her rules were my rules. So I didn’t bring that kind of stuff home. I didn’t get overly involved. It probably wasn’t until I was in college. And by that time the green light was on and everybody was into it. In fact, I remember in ’70 when the march—

KD: Yeah, the [Chicano] Moratorium.

JH: The Moratorium. Friends and I were going, met at my house. My mother fixed us breakfast and sent us on our way. Little did she know it was going to turn into a police riot. She thought it was going to be a peaceful demonstration. It was something that you grew into, and I didn’t become a full-fledged practicing member until probably I was in college. I mean Otis, not East LA.

KD: Really? So it was more at Otis?

JH: Yeah, much more. Probably because I was only one of five Chicanos there. It was easier to sort of band together this small little group of people. And that was even before [Carlos] Almaraz showed up. He didn’t show up until ’72, when we were in graduate school. And in fact, I started Otis in ’79, but if you notice, if you looked at the days of my graduation, I got my—

KD: Or ’69?

JH: In ’69, right. I didn’t get my BFA until, actually, ’73, not ’72.

KD: I have ’74.

JH: That was MFA. I washed out a year. I became so involved.

KD: Really?

JH: Actually, yeah. I was involved and also dating this guy. It was very distracting and I flunked out. Not my art courses but—

KD: Flunked as opposed to stopped out?

JH: Yeah, I flunked out.

KD: Wow.

JH: Yeah, and they said I had to stop out. My parents were furious. I had to stop out for a year, then I went back and finished. But there were just too many other things to do. We were doing a lot of other kinds of organizing and stuff, and I was involved with this guy, and I just didn’t go to school often enough.

KD: I think in the ’70s you provide illustration for the journal *Aztlán* that comes from [UCLA].

JH: Yeah, ’70.

KD: Which hopefully we can talk about after a break.

JH: Yeah, ’70, ’71 was when I started doing that. But so, yeah . . . I’m not proud of that, but I just wasn’t being a flake. I mean, I was getting involved in this other stuff. And then eventually I went back the following

year. I had to stop out a mandatory year and then I went back. By that time, actually, it was a lucky thing because then I would have missed Carlos. We started back to school together in 1972.

KD: What kind of artists are you admiring at this time?

JH: Right now?

KD: No, in the '70s when you're at Otis, either as an undergrad or in the MFA program.

JH: I would say it was still then in the realm of the classical Western Renaissance guys. Because that had been my training. The training I had in high school and then certainly at Otis— all of the professors were classically trained Europeans, for the most part. They were not from the United States, they were European. And the heavy emphasis was not on even American contemporary art, although people talked about it. You had our survey courses where you learned about it. But the gold standard that was held up in terms of drawing, painting, design, sculpture, was the Renaissance and Western art. And I mean, it's hard to argue with that. I mean those guys are—you've got to kiss their feet, they laid the foundation for all of us. I still believe that to this day. I don't approve of what a lot of art schools do these days, which [is not to] teach kids [this foundation]. It's like being a writer and not having a vocabulary of more than five or six hundred words and not knowing what sentence structure is, not knowing what grammar and punctuation are. How can you write well? Even if you have great ideas, how can you write? And a young artist, even if you eventually discard [what you've learned] and glue tin cans together, you can't do that with authority unless you've done this other thing first and mastered it. I think.

KD: So you started with drawing?

JH: Absolutely.

KD: And then probably went to—

JH: To painting.

KD: With oil and—

JH: And we painted with a limited palette so that we could understand value and hue and all that kind of stuff. We did sculpture. And we did sculpture from the ground up. We built armatures, we did plaster casting. We did everything. We did all the Renaissance kind of stuff, and it was invaluable training, invaluable. I mean, I reach back for that every day that I work. There was this one guy, he was second-year drawing. . . I think he's passed on now. Alan [Zaslove]. He had made his reputation as an animator, I forget from what studio. But he was the kind of guy that looked at a drawing and he would say, "I really love this, but there's this little point here on the body. If you just extend that line a bit, watch what happens to the figure." And suddenly this figure that had been flat on the page suddenly gained volume by virtue of a detail. He was one of these guys who understood drawing at that level, those tiny details. And to this day I look at what I do and I stand back and I do that, I make myself Alan [Zaslove] for a few seconds and say, "What am I doing here that isn't working? Oh, there it is." And thank God, thank God, for those guys.

KD: He was another professor?

JH: At Otis. Yeah, the second-year drawing guy.

KD: Anybody else that you remember like that?

JH: Joe Mugnaini who was one of the loves of my life. He was this incredibly virile, exciting Italian man. He was wonderful. He was like a father, he was like an uncle, but he couldn't help what he was. He was a product of his generation. He loved women and he reacted to women like women. He respected your mind, your talent and stuff, but he liked women, too. So there was that element whenever he interacted with women. And some of the other girls, it was the beginning of the white girls', women's, thing—[the Women's Movement]—and they were all uptight. I remember this one girl, she put up this conceptual piece of her used tampons or something.

KD: Right, you're in LA and the [Women's Movement] is underway.

JH: God, they were so in-your-face. It was so obnoxious. And they hated men so much. And they didn't like Joe, and I loved Joe. I thought he was great. He'd come by, and he'd do this to your arm, and I didn't mind. I mean, I come from Latinos where you're hugging anyway, so it didn't bother me. But a lot of women

thought he was sexist. Maybe he was, but he was always nice to me. He was a tremendous influence. He encouraged me. He just always believed that I was going to fulfill my potential. He was an amazing man. I just loved him. And of course Charlie White. Charlie White, he was this little fire-hydrant-size plug of a man who was just . . . Did I tell you what happened in that drawing class one day?

KD: I don't think so, because I don't think we've talked about this at all.

JH: The best day I've ever had in my life probably. I mean, everybody knew Charlie. He had a huge reputation, and he was our first-year drawing teacher. When I was at Otis, until I got involved in this other stuff, I was very serious. I was always serious about the art classes. It was the other classes that I blew off. We had something that passed for a physics course and I forget what—bullshit stuff—I just didn't pay attention to that. But the art classes I always got A's in. So I was in Charlie's class and I loved him. I loved his work. Because he draws too. He's a drawer, he's not a painter. He's like me, he draws. And he gave us an assignment, and I always took those drawing assignments very seriously. Went home, worked all night on a drawing that I thought was worthy to show for the critique the next day. And then my fellow students and I walked into the critique room, put up our drawings. Charlie walked around for a second, and then he launched into this absolutely just explosive tirade. He hated everything he saw, called it bullshit, wasting his time, what the few mother-effing, you know, "Wasting my goddamn time with this shit," da-da-da, and he just went bananas for about two or three minutes. And all of [us] just shrank in our seats, and we were so embarrassed and mortified. Then when he was finally done, he had exhausted himself, he said, "And the only person this doesn't apply to is Hernández." I said, "Yes, yes!"

KD: All the rest of them are saying how much they hate you.

JH: They all turned and stared.

KD: Good for your peer relationships.

JH: Oh my God, I just was like six feet tall all of a sudden when I walked out of there. It was just the best day I ever had.

KD: What was the assignment? Was it a human figure, or . . .

JH: It was a human figure and he wanted us to—it was two figures I think. He wanted us to create something where these two figures related in a very kind of integral way. And people made these really kind of trite drawings of a man and a woman together. And I had sort of taken . . . And it was something that I was very interested in then, because I loved Rico Lebrun, of taking bodies and transparencies. And I moved these two bodies together and actually did that. Yeah, he loved it. I worked hard. It was a good drawing.

KD: So you had more than just technical skill. You had vision, talent, other stuff.

JH: I guess so. And I've talked to students about that. And in fact I was just talking to a young man in my studio last week who came by for kind of a chat with the old guard. And it's funny to be in a position now—

KD: The old guard? Do they tell you that, or you just use that word yourself?

JH: Yeah, I mean that's the feeling I get. You know, can I come by and show you some of my drawings? Because they feel I guess by virtue of—

KD: You've been at it for forty years.

JH: My longevity and stuff, yeah. Whatever success I've had, I can give them advice. And I said [that] one of the things about being an artist is not just about being technically good. It's much more. It's much, much more. And it has to do with being intellectually open. It has to do with things just beyond your ability to make something look like something or to put a couple of patterns or colors together. If you don't have anything to say, if you can't take those skills and translate them to the interpretation of the content, if you don't have ideas—and ideas are based on other things besides making art. That's the mechanics of it.

It's like a writer who knows grammar and has a great vocabulary. They're not going to write the next great American novel if there's no idea there. And ideas come from literature, they come from science, they come from music, they come from all those other disciplines that you don't think you have any interest in, or any vested interest in. And actually you should have a greater interest in those things because

they feed you intellectually and creatively and they give you something to think about, a question you want to ask.

I mean, I've been told—and I've come to believe it as I get older—I'm essentially a storyteller. If I could be a writer I might be, because I like words. But you know, that's not my thing. But I like to think about something and then try to give it an image that will take the spectator to a certain level, but the end of the story is not provided. You know, the onlooker has to provide the end of the story. I personally don't believe in having to stand around and explain what I do until I drop dead because some day I'm not going to be there to give people an explanation. And there is no right answer anyway. So I want people to be able to look and come to their own conclusion about what it is, whatever meaning it has for them personally, because everybody's feeling about something is as valid as anyone else's.

KD: What would you say at that time were your sources of intellectual stimulation?

JH: That was a great learning curve for me starting in high school because of [Mr. Talley], the English teacher we had. He sent me on a path of reading great literature, being very interested in film. He was a very interesting man, very tragic. He killed himself several years after we were out of high school. He was gay and in those days, you know . . . That's why he wound up in a barrio school, because I think the cat had gotten out of the bag and they put him in the worst place they could think of. He was a white man from Texas who was gay, and he wound up in the barrio school, right? He was an actor. He had a lot of actor friends, and he was a great teacher. He introduced us to Shakespeare, took us to the opera. He had friends in Hollywood and we went to a screening, before it even hit the theaters, of Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove*.

KD: Wow.

JH: Yeah, we're like seventeen-year-old kids and we're sitting in this—I think it was at Paramount [Studios] in one of the screening rooms. And we're like, when that thing was over, when the bomb exploded, we were like "Oh, my God." We could not believe what we had seen. And those kinds of exposures that early on—especially for kids who had not been exposed to lots otherwise—was absolutely . . . It was like putting, I don't know, supercharged molecules into something. All of the kids that I remember in high school that moved in the same circles . . . One of them is now California Supreme Court Justice Carlos Moreno. I've known him for centuries. Another guy is an electrical engineer, another guy became a physicist. All of us who were exposed to that just went on, even though our families . . . We didn't have families who could support those interests, because they [hadn't] been their interests. But they recognized that these were good things that were going to forward their children's careers, their aspirations.

I would not have become the person I became had it not been for that early exposure to those things. And as a consequence, [I] gained this tremendous love for things beyond just the Mexicano and the Chicano. I mean, I love those things too, they're part of my DNA, but these other things were like . . . It's almost wrong to put it this way, but I think of Machiavelli, what he said about "know your friends and keep your friends close, but you should keep your enemies closer." And you should know these other things because it's the framework for the world. Whether you don't approve of that world and know what you think of that world, if you don't know those things how can you expect to be able to function, to counter some of the things you think are bad, if you don't understand the framework in which that world is formed?

KD: I don't know if you could understand that they're bad.

JH: Right. You might resent it, you might feel the vibration that there's something wrong here—

KD: But you won't have the—

JH: But your arguments would be hopeless against that kind of knowledge.

KD: So at Otis you mentioned that it was a small group and so you guys band together. Were you guys sparking off each other creatively, or was it just politically?

JH: Mostly politically. Because I was the only woman, and the other four or five guys, they were all men. And then when Carlos came . . . Yeah, I was the only Latina, literally, out of—it was a small school, four or five hundred kids. But I was the only—maybe there was one other, but she was from another country,

Colombia, somewhere or something. Yeah, I think it was mostly for moral support. And then also, I think we understand each other's work better than others. Because by that time there were those elements stylistically that were creeping in that were not like the non-objective kind of stuff that our white classmates were attempting to do.

KD: You say "stylistically" creeping in. What do you mean by that?

JH: Things that were decidedly Latino symbols. I was beginning to use hearts and virgins, and there was a lot of Catholic things going on, that kind of stuff. Things you wouldn't see in other people's work. And I think it's maybe cultural because of Catholicism and other things. We're kind of a symbolic people. We almost talk that way very often.

KD: Very metaphoric language in Spanish.

JH: Exactly. And that crept into the work eventually. And once we had some foundation in the skills, then, as we began to think about our own work, we began to incorporate Chicano Mexicano symbology because it was just so natural.

KD: And did you have to do an MFA project?

JH: Yeah.

KD: What was that like? I haven't asked this question before, so if it falls flat please forgive me.

JH: I can dig that up and show it to you. I decided to do a project that wasn't just a portfolio. I also wrote—I can tell you I've always had aspirations to write, although I don't write well, but I like to write—and I took the option of writing and doing a portfolio project. And it was about the use of Chicano symbology.

KD: Really?

JH: Which I thought they were going to blow me out of the water because these were all Renaissance guys and they couldn't necessarily support that kind of . . . But they were interested in the topic and they felt as long as I could support my assertions they could be open-minded about the use of that kind of symbols. I've got it somewhere. I saved my master's thesis.

KD: Yeah, because I'd like to see what you thought, in the moment, were some of those key symbols. Because if you pick up the degree in '74, by then Goez [Art Studios and Gallery] has already started, Mechicano [Art Center] has already started.

JH: Yeah, at that time a lot of things were—

KD: So were you in any of those earlier exhibitions, or . . .

JH: I think the first Chicano exhibitions that I was in had to do with Los Four. I did my first mural in '68, but it didn't last. They didn't like it.

KD: Really, you did it in '68?

JH: Yeah, '68. It was not far from Otis. It was at the First Unitarian Church. And, ironically, Judy Baca, I think, did another mural there, some many years later. But yeah, it was a little too heavy for them and they didn't like it, so they gave me my money and then they painted it over. I was like twenty years old or something. Anyway, that doesn't count. So, I think—

KD: Yeah, it counts. It's just unfortunate that it was lost. Do you remember the content?

JH: Yeah, it was really interesting. It was very kind of, again, Rico Lebrun-ish, sort of an apocalyptic view of the world. I guess I made my mistake . . . Instead of starting with the present and making it more optimistic, I started with the beginning, or the past, which wasn't that great. They couldn't see where I was going, so it didn't last.

KD: Was that like a . . . I'm trying to think. In '68, did they already have—it wouldn't have been like a CETA project or anything?

JH: No, no.

KD: It was just their own—they wanted their own and they sought out—

JH: They had this—it was like an outdoor space that was part of the building. It came in, and so there was an interior wall that was shaded and they just wanted some visual there.

- KD:** I'm trying to figure out how they found an artist. Because it's not until like '69, [when] Goez opens, but then it's '70, '71, '72 [before] they're really functioning like a clearinghouse, from what I could understand.
- JH:** I think that either somebody . . . Because I had to come to a couple of classes at Otis, prior to going, that they had in the summertime. And either somebody at Otis—because it was not far from Otis—said “Would you be interested in going to see about this mural project,” or somebody gave them my name. It was one of those kind of very random things that just happened. I lucked into.
- KD:** And probably in terms of technique you hadn't had a lot of training in painting, a lot of outdoor spaces, on their walls or whatever exterior . . .
- JH:** No. But I had already painted big, so I was comfortable with monumental space. It was about, maybe only like, five or six feet up, and then maybe about twenty-five feet long. It wasn't huge.
- KD:** You had already done “monumental work”—what do you mean by that?
- JH:** In the studio I had painted four by eight feet, and I liked the idea. I think I had done a couple of things that were multiple panels when I was in high school. So the idea of [covering] monumental space didn't frighten me at all. I liked painting big.
- KD:** How did you solve the problem of taking a composition that was probably smaller, or did you compose on the wall?
- JH:** Probably a little of both. I mean, I sort of still do that today. I have a plan, because you really can't start something that big without a plan. But it's sort of just a very basic plan and then it evolves as you do it or the drawing evolves before you get started. Once you see it up there you go, “Eh, it doesn't quite work like I thought it would on this paper,” so you begin to change. I mean, I definitely had a plan. When you have a commission to do something, you've got to show them what you're going to do. And I think my plan varied too much from what I showed them originally and they weren't too thrilled about it.
- KD:** So you end up painting about nine murals, at least, between '68 and '83?
- JH:** Yeah, something like that.
- KD:** When do you start picking up, like, I don't know, gridding or projection or whatever technique you end up using?
- JH:** I think with Los Four, when we figured out there was a mechanical process we had to adhere to, especially if we were going to work as a group. You just couldn't be that loose. We had to have a plan. So there [was] usually a principal designer. Like the work that we did for—there was a show at Cal State, I think it was. We did a temporary mural for them. That one was not as well composed as it might have been. Carlos [Almaraz] and Frank [Romero] were the co-designers on the piece for César Chávez. Not the one that was in the building, but a temporary one. And somewhere along the line, I think when I was at Otis, we also talked about transferring work to a larger surface and using grid technique. Because projectors were impossible to come by. Once you understand what it is you want to do, then you start doing your homework and finding out what's the easiest way to do it.
- KD:** But was it learning from other folks who are out there doing murals, or was it going to—
- JH:** A little bit of both. I mean, since we had been trained, you know, we were college educated, we went to the books first and we had been exposed to the ideas of the Renaissance guys who used a grid technique. And then a little bit of, “What am I looking for?” Anecdotal stuff from people that had actually done it. Like Gilbert [Luján]. I think Gilbert had actually done a mural before any of us, you know, as Los Four. So he had had some experience: *this works, this doesn't*. And by that time we also knew Wayne Healy and Dave Botello, who had been doing murals, so we all kind of shared information.
- KD:** So you're meeting folks as the group Los Four, or you're meeting people at a particular—
- JH:** No, actually prior to Los Four, as early as '70. In fact, last night I was having dinner with Joe Rodriguez and a couple of other people and we were talking about it. That as early as maybe 1970, '71, I met Leonard Castellanos, who was a wonderful guy. He was always very nice to me. I know some people don't like him, but he always treated me like a lady, and he was very helpful in terms of introducing me to people and encouraging my work, and doing silkscreen at Mechicano and stuff. And he and Gilbert Luján and Bill

Bejarano and some other people that early on—and there’s many more. I can’t think of all the names now. Bob Gutiérrez.

KD: But all the folks who were basically at Mechicano?

JH: Yeah, and people who wound up at Self Help [Graphics & Art], the early organizers in Self Help. The Goez guys I probably didn’t meet until later, because they’re somewhat older than we are. But the guys who were getting together Self Help, Mechicano, and the kind of unattached groups like Los Four. Not Asco, they weren’t part of the mix. They were too cool for us, or we weren’t cool enough for them. There were these attempts, the first attempts at organizing, and I even have some photographs. I don’t know if I shared them with you. Who did I send JPEGs to? Anyway, I’ll send you some of a meeting that happened in 1971 at a little place over on the Eastside. I think it was part of the public school building or something. They let us use one of their spaces. And you’ll see a lot of faces in the crowd you’ll recognize. Saul Solache, who was here at UCLA. A lot of people in those photographs.

KD: Nineteen seventy-one. Would that have been the Chicano arts moratorium? Not moratorium, symposium. International institute or something like that.

JH: Maybe that’s what it was.

KD: On oil.

JH: Yes, that’s what it was. That’s what it was called. I had completely forgotten, but that’s what it was. And those were, I think, the earliest attempts that I personally attended at doing organization of artists here in Los Angeles with a broader discussion of joining forces with artists from the south, artists from Central California and from Northern California. Oh, there are so many familiar faces in those photographs. I’ll have to send you some of people who went on to try and make those things happen.

KD: Were those discussions also about what is Chicano art? Do you remember any of that?

JH: Yeah, and that was really lame. [*laughter*] In fact, I have a picture. Gilbert Luján is sitting next to Bob Gutiérrez and they’re holding up this painting and it’s rather a kind of abstract—you know, not objective—painting, and I don’t remember what the discussion was, but I thought, “Why are we talking about this? It just seems kind of . . .” You know, people are going to paint what they’re going to paint. To this day the issues come up about imagery and stuff and how Chicano is it or what content does it have to have in order to be considered Chicano, which is . . . I don’t even want to have that discussion with people. But it was important then.

KD: It was important then.

JH: It was important then. And people were very concerned about it reflecting—you know, coming up with some iconography that spoke to who we were, and [they] almost wanted to create a mandate for “if it doesn’t have some of these things, how can it be Chicano art?” I never felt comfortable with that. I thought if you’re Mexican, it’s going to happen there, and it’s going to happen differently for everybody, and it’s a hard thing to legislate. But some people were very autocratic in wanting, you know . . .

KD: So your impression of those meetings, or what you took away from those meetings, was [about] working together, actually?

JH: Yes.

KD: Northern California, Southern California.

JH: Right, that there was a concern about, number one, artists organizing to do things like murals, and these concerns about . . . Actually it was funny. It was kind of an early concern, I guess, as seeing ourselves as a school of art. And trying to control that, which I thought was kind of nuts, but, you know . . . Also, I think what became clear to me . . . And I know Viviana Chamberlain was there and Sylvia Morales was there, and there was a couple of other women, I can’t remember who they were, who were not girlfriends of the guys. These were women who were there as artists. There were many, many women there, but they were just girlfriends. They were not artists. And I think I remember—my overriding thing was that it was very male dominated. They weren’t really interested in talking about sharing the responsibility, much less the power. And that was kind of—you know, I don’t know, unsettling.

KD: At the time, you didn't have trouble interacting with the white guys that were really patriarchal, but were you having trouble interacting with the Chicanos that were patriarchal, or . . .

[*break in audio*]

KD: This is Karen Davalos and we're on side 2 with our second session with Judithe Hernández for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. And I had asked her about her own kind of feminist sensibility in the 1970s. I'm not sure if [you were] thinking back to the way you were interacting with certain male teachers. Was it thinking back about their way of acting, or were you noticing it then [in the '70s]? But certainly with the male artists that you came to know.

JH: I never had trouble with white men in terms of [my] being an assertive, strong, opinionated human being. They never seemed to have issues. I mean, the American feminist movement was well underway, and I think the personal or the human dynamic between men and women in white society or American society had always been different from the Latino dynamic between men and women. And [white men] didn't seem to have many issues. In fact, as far as I was concerned, the guys at Otis who I knew who were not Latino were very curious about what was going on with all these guys in East LA and [wondered], "What is that about?" They were very curious to hear. I just recently got in touch with a friend that I went to Otis with, a white guy—a guy named Michael Knight, who found my website and sent me an email. It was really cute. He said, "I remember you as this fiery young woman." [*laughter*] I said, "Good lord, what did I say?" He said, "You were all over the place politically. It was very interesting to talk to you." But Chicano men . . . And I understand where it was coming from, but at that age it was so frustrating.

KD: That's what I was trying to get a sense of—

JH: There was this paternalistic—

KD: So at the time it was frustration?

JH: Yes, it was frustrating. They gave lip service to wanting women to be there—the few of us that there were, that they considered us peers as artists. But then when we got there, there was this paternalistic kind of macho attitude about our ideas and about giving us responsibility. And if you look at the head table I don't think there's a woman up there at the dais, there's only men. And the questions from the audience, I don't know . . . And that was something that I encountered over the whole term of that. I mean Chicano men just never, in the '70s or in the period . . . Intellectually they understood, but emotionally they never accepted. So it was very hard, and I don't think I'm the only woman who feels that way.

KD: Oh, no.

JH: Even among Los Four I had to fight my battles. I always had Carlos on my side but Gilbert and Frank and Beto [de la Rocha] were—maybe it was because they were straight, I don't know, [but] they just were very hard about some things. They weren't very sensitive about certain things. It was tough.

KD: So would you say that you joined the collective because you were getting some . . . I mean, obviously there had to be some . . . So what's pulling you towards Los Four?

JH: They were happening. Their ticket had been punched. It was practical from my point of view. And from their point of view as well. They wanted me because they felt, and they said it to me, "We need a woman because it's what we should do."

KD: Again, the intellectual understanding.

JH: Right. Because they felt that it gave them more credibility as a group, to their principles. That, at least on the surface, "You see, we have a woman." But on the other hand they also wanted me. They wouldn't have taken me if they didn't think [I] was as good or better than they were. And they recognized that this is a woman who has serious talent. In fact, I think it was Gilbert—he's never owned up to this, but apparently one of the first reactions, I think, when he saw my work, to Carlos, was "Oh, my God, she's great. She draws like a man." So yeah, that's what I was up against. But on the other hand I recognized them as all being enormously talented, much better than any of the other people I knew. Their ticket had been

punched, the show at LACMA was happening, and I felt this is a relationship that could be good for both of us. I will help you to give you credibility as having a woman and being inclusive and moving the political—

KD: So you joined Los Four actually shortly after they formed, then?

JH: We had already discussed me joining the group. In fact, if you look at the film about Los Four—the one they did about all four guys as they were preparing to do the LACMA show—I'm in that. [*Los Four/Murals of Aztlán*—ed.] I'm in various scenes in that. So we knew each other then. We talked about it, and it happened just before the show opened. But I wasn't part of that show because that had already been set. It was Los Four. But every show after that it was actually five of us. But we decided to leave the name alone because it had already had an identity. It had brand, so why change it? We'd lose the connection people were already making to that.

KD: So what were some of those early exhibitions that you did with them that you thought were successful?

JH: All of them were. It was an interesting blend of stuff. You know, our work, as different as it was, really had a way of working together very well. Carlos and I worked together very well. That's why when we painted murals. He and I worked together well, because I think we were more able to give up our styles and work in the style of someone else. We had less ego about that. Frank and Gilbert—and Beto, God bless him—were very attached to the way they worked. Maybe it's because they're not comfortable working differently or loosening up, or . . . I don't know what it was, but Carlos and I didn't have those kind of issues. What was the question?

KD: I was curious about the things that you did with Los Four that you would call successful.

JH: It's hard to remember what the shows looked like now, and I would be totally dissatisfied with them if I saw them now, but at the time I thought they were really interesting. Things worked together. We were kind of on the same track in terms of color and imagery, although our interpretation of the same imagery was somewhat different. I think our work complemented one another. As many kind of arguments and stuff as we had outside, just in terms of being a group, when push came to shove and the work got on the wall, it all kind of happened. So I don't know, [was it the] most successful show? I really—

KD: Was there sales from these shows?

JH: Oh, no. [*laughter*] Nobody bought. I think that was the time in which Max Factor bought the collective piece we did for KCET. They bought the graffiti mural, or several pieces of it. No, I don't think any of us sold very much work in those days. It was too new. People didn't know what the value of it was. There was one guy—he was a pharmacist in Beverly Hills—who just liked the look of the stuff, and he bought several. He passed away many years ago. But he bought my work, he bought Carlos's work. I haven't the faintest idea whatever happened to it. Both he and his partner are dead now. I don't know what happened to that work, but it would be worth a small fortune, especially Carlos's stuff.

KD: So were there any other folks that you thought were influential in advocating for your work early on?

JH: There was a Swedish man. God, what was his name? I don't know how he met Frank. Frank may have met him because he was married to Nancy Wiley. That wasn't her name because she had had a previous husband. He was a wealthy Swedish businessman who lived here in the United States. I think he lived in Malibu. Somehow he found out about Los Four, liked Los Four. He never bought me, but I think he bought Frank and he bought Carlos. And when he was in Europe he talked to [the] Beaubourg [Centre Georges Pompidou] about us, and they laughed him out of their office. Eventually, ironically, sure enough, Chicano work showed up at Beaubourg many years later. Yeah, was a supporter. Certainly Edith Wyle, who—I thought she was terrific. I just thought she was just the nicest woman. I really liked her. Patrick [Ela], who was [the director of the] Craft and Folk Art [Museum of Los Angeles] back in those days. [Edith Wyle founded the Craft and Folk Art Museum of Los Angeles; Patrick Ela was the chairman of the museum's board of trustees—ed.] Cecil Ferguson, who was the curator of the Los Four show at LACMA. He's Cecil Ferguson Gallery now on the south side. There were a lot of people in our corner. Mura Bright, who was one of the first supporters of Mechicano, was a tremendous supporter of Latino art. But these were people who had traveled, who knew and appreciated Mexican art. And what we were doing seemed an

extension of that, or at least [in] their experience and mindset. They had already fallen in love with Mexican art of the '40s—well, of the twentieth century. And when Chicano art came along they understood it immediately and liked it.

KD: So would you say that your work in collectives was really important? Because from there you go and do work on the *Great Wall*? I mean this is all kind of happening simultaneously, but that's obviously a very collective experience.

JH: It was and it wasn't. You know, such a huge project and every artist that worked on that first section, I'm sure that that's the way the process continued, everybody had a hundred feet. And your crew, your ten or twelve kids, you designed your part of the wall. I remember the process being we all got what our historical assignment was: we came up with an image, a plan, of what those hundred feet would look like, and we sort of discussed it a bit, and then we just did it. We just went out and the paint was there and we got our kids together and transferred our drawing and then just painted the thing. Maybe after that there was another system, there was more collective. But my experience, because I did that first section, you know, nine thousand, ten thousand feet, there were . . . I forget how many artists. There must have been seven, eight, or nine artists, I guess, that each did a hundred feet. I mean, we had a lot of meetings. I was working for Judy [Baca] in those days. I worked at the—

KD: City Mural?

JH: City Mural Project. That's where I knew Judy from. I worked there for about a year. And I don't remember it being that—she was new to it, we were new to it, and it was just the tremendous responsibility of meeting these deadlines and getting these things up and not falling on our faces. So there wasn't that much collect, you know, it was just a matter of getting this thing done.

KD: I guess I'm trying to figure out, you know—on paper you look like you're very involved with some of the major collectives and organizations. You did silk screen at Mechicano, you are a member of Los Four, I'm pretty sure your name comes up with CAP.

JH: Yeah, the Concilio [de Arte Popular]? We used to go to the meetings.

KD: Then [you are part of] SPARC, right? So what did I just do? [I named] four or five of the major [arts organizations developing in the 1970s].

JH: But it was unavoidable in those days. If you were a Chicano artist the world was so small that everybody literally knew everybody else. Everybody worked on everything, it seems like. You were just pulled and pushed in every direction and you got a phone call in the middle of the night or the day before: "Can you come help us?" It was very fluid. It's hard to explain. And that was the days before cell phones and shit and email. You get a knock on your door at two a.m.—"we were just at the studio, we thought we'd come over." I don't know how to explain how the communication worked, but people just appeared—

KD: The camaraderie or—

JH: Yeah, we hung out from morning till night. You know, after school or after working on somebody's mural, then we'd go back to Self Help Graphics and you shoot the breeze, you go across to this little restaurant. What was the name of that? They had the best food, oh my God. Café Europa. And oh my God, they had *licuadas* to die for and carnitas and all this neat stuff. And we'd go over there and eat, and then we'd just hang out. We'd go back or we'd go to somebody's studio. It was just days of doing those kinds of things, where we'd get in my car, we'd drive to San Francisco. We always stopped at Button Willow because that was before you got on that horrible stretch of 99 where there's nothing. And we'd stop at the Denny's there, and Carlos would get two or three coffees for the road, and we'd get back on the highway and drive all the way to San Francisco. Or sometimes we'd go to San Juan Batista because we'd do stuff with Luis Valdez and [El] Teatro Campesino. We used to stay with his sister Socorro, who was a riot.

I remember one time in particular. Carlos and I, [and] Luis Oropeza, who's an actor, we drove in my car. We got to Socorro's in the middle of the night. And I don't know what Luis was reading, but there was something that he had been reading in the car, I think, that was in Spanish and there was a word in this thing he was reading that he didn't know. The word was [*burbujas*]. I'll never forget. None of us knew what

it meant, but since you had all these actors in the room we're trying to go to sleep and they just kept trying to define what this meant.

KD: It became a game, a cue for them to perform.

JH: An hour, they traded these. Oh my God, you're trying to sleep and we're laughing and oh my God, it was just hysterical. They were such great people. I loved going up there. And then we'd go on to San Francisco to René Yáñez and all the crowd in the Mission. And we'd wind up in Sacramento with the RCAF [Royal Chicano Air Force] and shoot pool with them and try to have a meeting. And Tere [Romo] can, she can fill you in. She remembers who—those meetings were like. You know, I don't even remember because it was like being on autopilot a lot of the time. How we happened to be here and there and then somewhere else.

KD: Sometimes it sounds like it was just traveling to have these conversations . . . Or [was it] also [to] show and see work?

JH: It was either for a show or a meeting, a Concilio meeting, or some other kind of thing where these groups would meet. I don't know how much work ever got accomplished, but what it did accomplish is to form these wonderful friendships and associations that, to this day, it's like I can go to San Francisco and see all these people and it's like no time has passed. Thank God for Facebook. A lot of them are on Facebook now. Juanichi [Orosco] is on Facebook and René Yáñez is on Facebook and we talk and it's wonderful because we have this bond that is so special. I think it must be like people who worked for the antiwar stuff during the '60s or '70s or who did any other political social work. Those experiences, especially when you're young and sometimes when you're put in danger or you really have to put your integrity on the line, the other people you share that—boy, man—that goes almost deeper than marriage and other things because you've really shared an experience with those people that is very bonding.

KD: I don't want to get too far ahead. When you're working with Concilio is that in the '70s, early '70s, as well?

JH: It had to have been after '72 because Carlos was one of the great motivators of the Concilio. So it was, yeah, between '72 and '76, I would imagine.

KD: Help me understand what Concilio was actually.

JH: It was an attempt to—I think at first it was going to be . . . And you know, Bill Bejarano probably has a much better recollection, because he was very instrumental in helping Carlos with the Concilio. It was about creating a newsletter, some kind of document where all of these events and stuff could be published and could be shared with people across the state. He always felt—it was kind of Gandhi-esque—that he felt we needed some kind of published thing that bonded a community together. So he was very interested in getting this magazine off the ground. But it also meant going to these other areas of California and talking to those folks and seeing what their interest was in doing collective things together. You know, coming and helping them, they'd come and help us. But it was centered here in LA because Carlos was the one who had the biggest interest in moving the magazine forward, and Bill wanted to help him do that. They had an office on Figueroa where they did that. And Leo Limón came by, and once he got out of the army he came by on a fairly regular basis and got involved. I helped out. By that time I was, gosh . . . After Otis I had to get a job. I had to get a day job. But I moved out—I started teaching in '74, and then I moved out of my parents' house. Then it just became a challenge to find the time to do the work and do these other things and make a living so I could pay my rent.

KD: Where did you start teaching?

JH: The very first place I taught—I taught for East LA [College], but it was a class that was at Sacred Heart of Mary High School, over towards Montebello at Garfield. Garfield near Whittier. God, those girls. I almost thought teaching is not for me. They were a trip. Geez. It's really funny, one of the people I had dinner with last night was a gal who was—she wasn't an artist, but she was involved with Mechicano, she knew the guys there. And she's the one who knew Roberto Chavez, who the chairman of the Chicano studies department at East LA [College], who was looking for people to hire for this new department. And Marielena was the one who said, "You should go over. He's looking for people." And he hired me, and the first

class I taught was over there. Then the class I got after that was at the college. Then I think I taught there for about ten years.

KD: I'm sorry, you lost me. You taught—

JH: The first class was this high school class, essentially. And then the following semester the class he wanted me to teach was on the campus of East LA [College], and then after that I always taught on the campus. But that first class . . . I don't know why it was that . . . It was, it was a class that was being sponsored by the college but it was taught at Sacred Heart of Mary for the high school art department. I forget what the circumstances were, but that's where I started.

KD: So you went from teaching high school students to college students.

JH: To college. Which wasn't a huge leap. I mean, they were all young, too.

KD: Just a couple of years.

JH: Yeah, a couple of years—

KD: Or months, depending on—

JH: I wasn't much older than they were. Yeah, and then after that I taught on the campus of East LA. I taught for the Chicano studies department and then I picked up an art history course with the art department with Tom Silliman, who has since passed on. He's the reason the Vincent Price [Museum] exists. Without Tom Silliman it wouldn't exist. That was my day job. Then I picked up some other gigs. I worked at Cal State [University], Long Beach, and Cerritos College.

KD: I have a whole section where I can ask you about working as a teacher, so let me bracket that for now. I'm going to pause.

[*break in audio*]

KD: Okay, we took a little pause and I'm back. I just want to ask some questions about Los Four. They had already started, you joined them, and you describe your sensibility of why you want to join them. Could you give me a sense of the dynamic of the group? You know, who's at the center, who's at the margins, what kind of roles are being played, how does it handle conflict?

JH: It was like a family—

KD: More interested, obviously, in aesthetic conflict as opposed to—

JH: As opposed to personal conflict?

KD: Yeah.

JH: It was like brothers. They were like brothers in a sense.

KD: Really?

JH: Frank was the older brother. He was older. He had a child that he was responsible for, his wife had checked out on him, and he had a house. So Carlos had begun staying with Frank after a certain point. And then Gilbert at that time, I forget how Gilbert met Carlos. He told me how that happened and I don't remember. Then he brought in Beto, who was a tremendous printer. His life began—he was a master printer at [Gemini GEL]. A very intense man. Very thin, very intense. They were just this interesting group of personalities. I think what bonded them most was the fact that they were all very good at what they did. They all liked each other's work, in spite of the fact that Beto, God bless him, didn't like me at all. He liked my work. We really knocked heads. He didn't like the dynamic of the group being changed. He was a man with a lot of emotional issues that certainly led to him going down a very different path later on in life. But, at the time, I represented something that he didn't want happening to the group. He just didn't want another person in the group and he especially didn't want me. We've certainly come to peace with that since then. He's a totally different person now. But he gave me a hard time when I showed up. And Carlos, Frank, and Gilbert were more interested, for their own various and sundry reasons, in having me. Mostly because they felt I could add something stylistically to the group and symbolically to the group because I was a woman. But we admired each other's work so we really didn't critique each other. We didn't say—

KD: Oh, really?

- JH: No. It was that kind of relationship. I don't know how other groups handled it. We never—
- KD: Did you paint in the same studio or were you drawing in the same studio?
- JH: The only two of us who ever shared a studio space were Carlos and I, because even at Otis he shared space with someone else. On Figueroa, Carlos, Richard Duardo, [and] a whole bunch of other people—John Valadez—we shared that space. That was the only time we shared studio space. But when we met, when we had Los Four meetings, we would sit in Frank's kitchen and all of us, just because we just can't help it, would sit there and draw in our sketchbooks while the meeting was going on. Occasionally, when we were working on a collective piece, then certainly those issues came out. "I really think this area should be blue and da-da-da." But otherwise, I don't know if it was a matter of being in sync or just respecting other people's way of handling their imagery. We really didn't talk about our work that much. We didn't confer about—we didn't ask each other's opinion. I don't remember doing that.
- KD: So meetings that you're having, [they] had to do with—
- JH: Shows.
- KD: What was the next project and—
- JH: Right. Political stuff. Usually Carlos was very intent on us educating our brains about alternative political philosophies like communism. We got dragged to Maoist study groups and stuff like that. Together at those meetings we fed the intellectual side of our political philosophies and our artistic philosophies, or at least Carlos's hope was that we'd feed those intellectual pursuits into our imagery. And that's what the arguments or the discussions tended to be about, about whether or not those philosophical things, those political things like Mao and whatever—
- KD: Were you talking about, like, Mao's *Little Red Book* and—
- JH: Yeah.
- KD: And the idea that the artist was for the people?
- JH: Yeah. I mean Carlos was very, very interested in that whole concept of artists being totally in contrast to the Western artist, a special point of view that we'd been raised with at Otis. I think Carlos was in a sense the most adventurous politically, and even artistically, of the group. He never let himself be confined by the randomness of what his ethnicity was. That was just an accident of birth. And he wanted us to be more adventurous. And Gilbert has told me this—and I laugh, but whatever—that they felt I was too conservative. Too parochial, whatever.
- KD: In your visual expression?
- JH: No, no.
- KD: In your politics?
- JH: My politics, yeah. I wasn't radical enough for them. And I thought "Well, shit, if you were a woman you wouldn't be either," but, you know.
- KD: Your friends' memories of you at that time are that you're incredibly—
- JH: Yeah, that I was too—
- KD: Radical.
- JH: I wasn't radical enough, yeah.
- KD: So did you feel at the time that Carlos's political philosophy, or what he was reading—from either Mao or other sources—was influencing you? Or, how did it gel with you?
- JH: It certainly gave us pause. I don't know how much of that, you know, the things you learn very early on in life have such a tremendous influence on how you think, and I think it's very hard to change. Some people do successfully change those points of view, but the older I get I guess sort of the pendulum has swung the other way, that I've gone back to . . . I don't think of artists as being special, and I don't think I'm a prima donna. I don't think I'm a diva in any way. I think in spite of whatever little success I've had, I don't think of myself as being that special. But for me, art now, at this stage of my life, has become a very private pursuit. I'm very interested in exploring the things that interest me, not necessarily being . . . And Patssi [Valdez] and I have had interesting discussions about this. I don't see myself as being the representative of my race

necessarily anymore. At one time in my life I really did feel that very strongly. I think a lot of us did. We felt that it was incumbent upon us to put ourselves out there in our work as representatives of *chicanismo* and Mexicanos. The ideas, not so much even the symbology, but the political ideas behind our work—the things that the murals and our studio work was saying about what we thought was wrong. And I still do that. I mean you’ve seen my newest work.

KD: Yes, the new series on Juárez and the stuff on—

JH: Yeah, Juárez and the immigration stuff. I still tackle themes that I think are important—I mean, emotionally important to me because I happen to be Mexican. But I’m not so tied to the idea that there are only certain symbols that one can use. [I believe] there’s a more sophisticated intellectual way, a more satisfying way for me personally, as an artist, to speak about those things. I think in the long run, perhaps, it’s a more mature and more powerful way to speak to a larger audience. I don’t see my audience as being exclusively Mexican American or Chicano. I think it’s [that] anybody who wants to stop and look at it should have an experience equal to everyone else’s. And that’s different.

I thank Carlos for that, because I think that if he had insisted that we read all this other stuff and begin to think of our work in different ways, that changed my attitude, could have taken longer to come about but at the time I thought it was just one more thing I have to do. You know, because he wanted us to learn about the Russian Revolution versus the Chinese Revolution and read all this stuff and talk about this stuff. And he was very good at that. I mean, intellectually he was so facile. He was so smart and so bright and he seemed to get it all, and it was always something of an effort for me. I enjoy that kind of stuff, but I don’t want to spend my life really becoming an expert at it. Whereas he always seemed to—or it seemed easier for him, I don’t know. And Gilbert had his own kind of indigenous thing happening and I guess, [out] of all of them, I was the one who—and maybe Beto, too, in his own way—we were the ones who were really interested in just doing our work. We were artists. We wanted to draw, we wanted to paint, we wanted to just explore that and just do it and not talk about it so much. I think maybe Frank, too. Carlos and Gilbert loved to talk.

KD: Yeah. [*laughter*] Let’s take a pause and have some lunch.

[*break in audio*]

KD: We’re back after the short lunch, and want to continue with these questions about working in Los Four. What would you say were the major accomplishments of the group, and then the major challenges?

JH: The major accomplishments, God. This is with the advantage of thirty years, nearly forty years of looking back. Recently there was an article in *Creative Review* I think is the name of it. It’s a magazine in the UK that wrote . . . The article was about Self Help Graphics but the author prefaced or—explaining the phenomena of Chicano art and Self Help Graphics and that period of time by saying that it was widely recognized. And I don’t know by whom, but according to this writer [it] was widely recognized that Los Four, naming all of us including me, had been the authors of Chicano iconography of the 1970s, that we had invented the Chicano visual alphabet.

KD: Wow.

JH: And I thought, “Really?” I was blown away. If you say that to Gilbert . . . Which I did. He acknowledged the fact that he did invent it. [*laughter*] Single-handedly. But I thought “That’s really interesting,” and when I think about it . . . I don’t know. Certainly there were other people, many other people, who were using symbols that became identified with Los Four, like the sacred heart and a lot of the skull [imagery] and all this stuff. But they had not had the wide exposure. You know, after LACMA and then what happened to us after that. And if in fact because of that we helped put those images on the map, that’s the reason why. We were lucky enough to be the ones who were using that which caught the imagination of people outside the barrio, and suddenly you were seeing that in other places. It wasn’t intentional. It’s just something that, you know, totally being at the right place at the right time, I think.

- KD:** I think Gilbert tells a story about the opportunity to do the exhibition, which eventually goes to LACMA, and he was going to do eleven artists. [*Los Four: Almaraz, de la Rocha, Lujan, Romero*—ed.] I mean, you know, it was going to be this big group and he said no, he liked the four. He liked that idea or concept, or somebody proposed—I don't know exactly, but it seems like it was a bit of serendipity.
- JH:** That's funny because I always thought the Los Four show at LACMA was just a larger version of what they had done at [the University of California,] Irvine, I think the year before.
- KD:** Right.
- JH:** I don't know if it was [Lukman Glasgow] or Cecil Ferguson or somebody who had seen the Irvine show and [thought] that it could be expanded and be the first Latino show at LACMA. I could be wrong about that, but I think that's what happened. The Irvine show had happened about a year before and that had sparked somebody's imagination, the idea of taking the show on a larger scale to the LA County.
- KD:** What about major challenges for the group?
- JH:** The major challenges were to harness the egos [*laughter*] so we could talk without arguing. I think our major challenge was communication because we often did argue. We were very different people. Carlos and Gilbert were close—they were very close, they were very dear friends—but they often clashed because Gilbert was coming from this *indigena* point of view. Carlos was a Marxist-Leninist socialist, and very sophisticated, very well read, very worldly. Frank was just too busy with survival and Beto was in his own world. It was hard to communicate sometimes. We heard each other, but we didn't really hear each other. You know, we didn't really—
- KD:** That's what's so fascinating. I think I would join in your assessment of looking at the work [which] was coherent in terms of maybe color palettes or thematic or whatever, but the way you approached art is so distinct, and even at that earlier period was distinct.
- JH:** That's why [I said] what I said before: we really didn't critique each other's stuff. We admired each other's work, and I think we felt, "I can't tell Gilbert what to do or suggest something to Frank." I mean, they're doing their own trip. I think that was the good part of the relationship, the fact that even though they could be somewhat paternalistic and sexist on occasion, they never felt like they needed to tell me that what I was doing was not valid or not good enough. And I certainly never said that, or even thought that, of their work.
- KD:** Is all of the support for the group coming through sales or are you guys writing grants like everybody else was doing?
- JH:** No, we didn't have grants. We all had day jobs. Gilbert was working, I think, in a junior high when I first knew him. It was some average job or something. Beto, he had been a printer at [Gemini]. Frank was on welfare and was still in school and living at home. We didn't have grants. In fact, this is a funny story. Carlos and I, in order to pay the bills, we taught at Plaza [de la Raza] for awhile. They had classes there during the summertime for kids. And Louie Perez of Los Lobos—that's why I've known him for so long, because he worked with us as well. And the way that they got us paid—you're not going to believe this—and somewhere I know there must be a record in some dusty drawer. Larry Ramirez, who was the director in those days, had a daughter—he was maybe twenty years older than we are and he had a grownup daughter who was working in some county program for the rehabilitation of drug addicts. Carlos and I, and probably also Elsa Flores too—I think she was working there, she was just a young thing—and Louie Perez. We had to go and sign up as drug addicts in order to get a paycheck. I shit you not.
- KD:** There went your political career.
- JH:** If somebody ever bothered, if they had the kind of investigative powers they seem to have with computers and everything, oh my God. That's how we got paid. Larry was very apologetic but he didn't have the money and his daughter could slip in our things under the rug. It was some kind of CETA program.
- KD:** Yeah, I would imagine.

- JH: And that's how we got a paycheck, by signing up as drug addicts who needed rehabilitating. So we all did these things. We never depended on—Los Four didn't support itself as a group, I mean in that sense. It was an organization.
- KD: Were you cultivating collectors in this early period?
- JH: Yeah. After the Los Four show at LA County [Museum of Art], especially when we had the studio on Figueroa. I remember Margo Albert came up once and she admired my work—never bought anything, goddamn her. I thought she would. She had plenty of money. And that Swedish man whose name I cannot remember and the pharmacist from Beverly Hills. All of those people showed up after the show at LA County. Because Los Four really did put Chicano art on the map. I mean, if anybody wants to give us credit for doing anything, I think we did do that. In a small way we started the ball rolling with that show, or Los Four started the ball—
- KD: So you're getting a sense of that in the moment. Does that sense of the historic significance prompt you to start archiving your work?
- JH: Hell no.
- KD: No? Really?
- JH: Because there wasn't a sense that it was important. You know, if I knew now—or if I knew then what I know now, I would have paid a lot more attention to saving stuff. I can't tell you, it makes me sick every time I think about it. One of the times when I moved, after we moved to Chicago, I couldn't bear to move this garbage one more time. I had rolls and rolls and rolls of negatives of all kinds of photographs that I took over the years of Los Four, of meetings, of you name it—the march, the moratorium—I threw all that stuff out. I just couldn't bear to move it one more time. I'd held onto it and held onto it and I just couldn't bear to move it another time. I just threw it all away.
- KD: So let me reverse that a little bit. You did the documentation.
- JH: We did some. It was very sporadic.
- KD: You're taking photographs.
- JH: Yeah, we did. I mean, some of us did have the presence of mind to, but it was for personal reasons, not because we thought we were going to be famous or historic or people would want to write about us some day. We just thought it would—just to share with the people who had. . . It was totally non—it wasn't full of ego, I think, the way some artists are now, thinking that they have to—
- KD: What about just tracking your own aesthetic development?
- JH: No.
- KD: Did you take slides?
- JH: Oh, I took slides. Very sporadically.
- KD: Really?
- JH: Because it was expensive. Just didn't have the money to do it. That's why a lot of my early work I have no photographic record of, even from that time. Some of the slides have gotten lost. You know, you lend them to somebody and they never give them back to you. A lot of the work, the spray-can pieces, I don't know where they are. They might exist because I gave them away. I couldn't schlep them around one more time, and I gave them to somebody. It was stupid, I know, but we had no sense that what we were doing would have any value beyond that time, or certainly not forty years from now. Who the hell would care about this stuff?
- KD: So when did you start documenting your work and archiving it?
- JH: Oh God, probably not till the '80s. By that time we had reputations. The last mural that I did, the one on Spring Street [*Recuerdos de Ayer, Sueños de Mañana*], is photographically very well documented. But by that time—by the '80s—by that time I'd had a show in New York and I was on the map. That's why I should have stayed in LA. But by that time I began to seriously take photographs. But the damage was already done. I'd thrown out a lot of stuff. Frank is a pack rat, God bless him. I'm not a saver. I throw things away, so I should have paid more attention.

KD: I'm always struck by the folks who say "No, that it's about . . ." They didn't have a sense of its value, but the people who do it don't talk about the future. So I'm trying to get a . . . Like, instead of asking you the question . . . To think now, like, what might have been going through your head at the time. It was too expensive or too time consuming? Or when you took the pictures it really was just about a personal document—just like you would at your daughter's graduation?

JH: It was. It was for friends. Because there were those various publications, the Concilio [de Arte Popular], and other things, and we just took photos to have an archive of things to draw on. It really wasn't very egotistical, interestingly enough. We didn't think that we should document this period because it would be important. I don't think that ran through anybody's mind. I don't think any of us ever thought . . . And, like, I think you and I talked about once. I mean, when I was a kindergartener in 1952 or whatever, it was—I think if somebody looked around the room at all these little brown faces and said, "This person is going to accomplish something important," they wouldn't have pointed to me. [laughter] Or any of the rest of us with brown faces. You know, we never had a sense that we were going to . . . Even then. Because it hadn't happened, until that point, that people thought of Mexican Americans as contributing something beyond clearing the dishes off of your table or picking the fruit and vegetables that you ate at dinnertime. There was no sense that we contributed to the United States, to their identity, in any way. I don't think any of us saw us as becoming a school of art.

KD: So let's stay back in that way you were thinking at the time. You have a clear sense of the different kind of artistic intentions, or . . .

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with Judithe Hernández and today is July 14, 2010. This is our second tape [today] for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. So my question was, which probably got interrupted, did you have a sense that these different arts organizations or collectives had a specific political or aesthetic orientation?

JH: We were all very different. As much as we shared, we all approached the same political objective in very different ways. Self Help had Sister Karen [Boccalero], who's a very powerful presence. It always seemed to me—and this is just my perception—that she was more of a working atelier. She wanted people to produce artwork that could sell and keep these artists employed so they could survive. She supported all the important political things, but that wasn't why she existed. She wanted to run an art studio for the artists who worked there to produce art that would sell [and] that would become a place for artists to work. Like in Mexico, like the great ateliers in Mexico. Mechicano was a real maverick. They were so loose. They were so fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants kind of guys because Leonard [Castellanos] was like that. And it's funny, because Leonard is an MFA from Chouinard. He's a college-educated guy, but he's real barrio. He always was. Gilbert has often called him a thug. He was so barrio even though he was this college-educated guy and also a brilliant, brilliant silkscreen artist. Whenever he came—and he was a very tall man—he would always come with these other guys who were these big mean-looking, tough Chicano guys [who were] like his gang. He moved in a group. Like, he had these bodyguards and they were very intimidating. And I think that's why Gilbert probably never warmed to him very much, because not only did they knock heads but [Gilbert is] short and these guys are big and intimidating. And they had a very—almost kind of gang orientation or form or organization. People floated in—

KD: You mean in terms of loyalty gang orientation? You don't mean violent?

JH: No, not violent, but I mean in the way they interacted. There was no structure. Guys floated in, people floated in. "Oh we're working on silkscreen, you want to do one?" You know, "Here, here's some stuff," and they'd help you do it. You'd stay up all night, smoke some joints, drink some beer. It wasn't organized in any way. It was very loose. Although, they could have more structure when he did the mural in the prison at Lompoc. I didn't work on that mural at all—it was only the inmates—but I went up for the party that he had afterwards in the prison. In fact, one of the people I had dinner with last night was one of the gals.

He invited several women because they didn't get to see them that often, so he invited a lot of his female friends to come up for the party. And Carlos and I went. There were moments . . .

And Leonard was a huge presence. When he gave an order it was a kind of thing almost like in [a] gang when the *mero mero* speaks. Everybody else, "Uh-oh, the man has spoken." So then they do things. It was a persona that certainly was very important when he did the mural at Lompoc. I don't think he could have led those inmates if he hadn't been a man's man, because they would have eaten him alive. And he had that kind of persona back at home. But he also . . . I think because of its [Mechicano's] lack of formal organization and a leader who was very consistently organized and focused on the group, I think that's why it sort of had these moments where it faltered. Joe Rodriguez—God bless him—he had come in, I think, probably [the] mid '70s and joined Leonard. And then when Leonard sort of took power, [Rodriguez] assumed the responsibility—he and Spunky Jimenez—and saw it out to its end. [Joe] was the guy who really oversaw the murals at Ramona Gardens [housing project]. By that time, Leonard was history. I didn't see him much after that. That was a whole different dynamic. Very barrio, very kind of Chicano gang. And then Los Four was this really kind of bizarre mix of kids who'd grown up in East LA and were all college educated and have traveled a little bit. Carlos and Frank had lived in New York. We were just kind of, we were sort of kind of like, I don't know . . . What would be the equivalent of us? Sort of bohemian yuppies. And then there was Asco—

KD: Yeah, but you weren't bohemian enough.

JH: And then there was Asco, who were just enough, [a] bit younger than we were—like about five years—or than me. They were much younger than Carlos and Frank, who are almost ten years older than I am. They were cutting edge, very edgy, different from us. I'm sure they thought we were as square as you could get. But we knew each other. We didn't hang out with them. I admired what they did. I thought it was very interesting. But we were also different. And then the RCAF was more like Mechicano, with a little more overtones of organization. The guys in the Mission [in San Francisco]—René Yáñez at Galería [de la Raza]—they had a lot more organization, but they were different. They had other influences from other kinds of Latinos because of the Mission. They had Salvadorians, Nicaraguans, and that kind of stuff. And then in San Diego, that's a whole other bunch. They have a whole kind of different, laid-back attitude. So even though we shared this common overall agenda about Chicano art and pushing forward the social agenda of César Chávez and Chicano civil rights and all that stuff, we all went about helping and doing our part in a very different way. Just because of the personalities of the organizations.

KD: And you're saying you were aware of that at that time?

JH: Oh, yeah.

KD: It was apparent to—

JH: It hit you in the face every time you got together. And that's what often stood between us. It was like gangs and the respect. That when these different groups from the regions got together everybody got very territorial. It was very obvious that we came at the same issues in a very different manner. Just the manner of approaching it mechanically and how you get it done was so different. You know, the guys in Sacramento were too laid back. You couldn't get them to sit down for five minutes. You know, "Elena, where's the beer?" And, you know, [to] get them to seriously talk about something and make an agenda and follow it. It was very frustrating because we were all so different.

KD: You didn't mention Goez. Were you aware of the gallery or didn't work with them?

JH: I really wasn't. That was a money-making operation, and they worked a business. I didn't see them at a lot of these things because I'm sure they were maybe involved, but they weren't at meetings. They were running their business. I can't remember a time—maybe I can count on one hand when I saw Johnny [D. Gonzalez] and Joe [Luis Gonzalez], and it was usually at their own place. We went to Goez and saw them. I don't remember them—

KD: But you didn't try to exhibit there?

JH: No, I never did. My work would not have fit in, I don't think. Never even considered it. They just seemed—

- KD: What about running into Robert Arenivar, who designed most of the murals? But I don't think he executed them because he was always drawing.
- JH: Robert?
- KD: Arenivar.
- JH: I don't think I know him at all.
- KD: But you knew David Botello?
- JH: Very well. I went to his wedding.
- KD: So probably after—when he starts Los Dos Streetscapers.
- JH: Yeah, when he joined up with Wayne [Healy]. And in those days they had George Yepes with them.
- KD: I wonder if we're missing a group. What about the group that did . . . It comes later, though. I'm missing a group.
- JH: We did Asco, Los Four, Streetscapers, Self Help, Mechicano.
- KD: And Concilio [de Arte Popular] is where they're coming together?
- JH: Concilio, yeah, is pretty much where—because it was other people involved with that. It just wasn't visual artists. We had writers, historians, and others who were involved in that. And that wasn't really a group. It was a very loosely cooperative effort among all these other groups.
- KD: You talked about the studio space you worked in. Could you comment about how that physical environment might have modified or influenced your work?
- JH: Gosh. It's funny, I don't know if other artists in the past have ever—when they talked a bunch about their work with their colleagues, you know. I'm imagining Picasso sitting around with all these other people. But when we were together we all had our little spaces. I remember I had a sheetrock wall that separated me. When it was open you could walk right through it. And then Eduardo was over here in his corner, and John Valdez was the other way, and Carlos and Frank had the space by the windows. You know, people walked around and came around and looked, and they'd sit there for a while and watch, but we didn't really give advice.
- KD: Like, the dimensions of your work are changing because you went from a certain size studio to another, or [different] light?
- JH: Not that I recall. I think that having more room gave me the ability to do larger work than I had been doing in my parents' home. But I remember the environment being very conducive to working because of the people doing the same thing. I don't mind working in a studio with other people as long as I have my space. And John Valdez took over the job of making the music compilations [*laughter*] because he was very good at that. He's the one who introduced me to [Antônio] Carlos Jobim, and he used to have this wonderful mix of Brazilian stuff and all kinds of interesting music. There would always be somebody there from early in the morning to late at night.
- KD: What was your favorite time to work?
- JH: I'm a night person.
- KD: Really?
- JH: My best thinking goes on late at night. Although by force I've had to change to being a day person. But I still, like, if I could go back to the studio—now my studio's outside my home—but, like, around twelve o'clock or one o'clock [a.m.], I'd go back to the studio to work some more. It's a nice time to work. You know, take a nap and then get up and work. Your brain's sort of functioning in a different way.
- KD: So when you're on Figueroa in that studio, how are you guys paying for the space? Are you all sharing the cost?
- JH: Yeah, we're all kicking in. We all had day jobs so we're all kicking in money.
- KD: Let's talk a little bit about the kinds of day jobs that you had right after graduating from Otis. You said teaching.

- JH: Yeah, I was teaching mostly in several different places. The first teaching job was East LA, and then I think maybe Cal State in Long Beach was next. I taught for them for about ten years. I taught at Cerritos for about almost that length of time. These were all part-time jobs, one class every semester.
- KD: And you did drawing?
- JH: I taught in the art department at Cerritos for a while. No, I taught there exclusively. I taught drawing and painting a couple of times, but then they needed somebody to do Mexican art history, so then I did that for a while. Mostly I did Mexican art history. And then I taught in the Chicano studies department. I taught a Chicano culture class. And at Cal State Long Beach I didn't teach in the art department. I taught through Chicano studies, but I taught Mexican art history, pre-Columbian to modern.
- KD: Wow. So you were doing studio and art history. I didn't realize that.
- JH: I don't have a degree in art history, that's for sure, but I knew enough about it that I—
- KD: Usually an MFA in art is good enough for people to hire you to do that.
- JH: And at East LA [College] I taught for the art department and for Chicano studies. I taught at Occidental [College] the year before Barack [Obama] was a student. Wow, he could have been my student, shit. I did work for the American studies department there. I taught a Chicano culture class. And I taught at Pomona [College] for a while. I did painting and drawing for a couple of semesters at Pomona.
- KD: What kind of students are you getting at these different places?
- JH: In the art classes—in the studio classes they were art students, of course. In the history classes it was mostly like the people at Cal State Long Beach. Mostly students who wanted to go into education and needed a fine arts [class]. But most of them were intending to go into bilingual programs, and so they thought, "Why not get some cultural background by taking Mexican art history?" So a lot of my students were from the school of education, and they were all Latin, and they just wanted to fill in their culture and art requirement with something that would be pertinent to the student body they'd be dealing with.
- KD: Did you ever feel that teaching this day job was interfering with your own creative process?
- JH: No, because you can be in the studio all day, but that could be pretty deadly if you don't have something else to do. Certainly can't pay your bills without it. But I like teaching. I wouldn't want to teach as much as I did in those days because it can definitely interfere with your time to work, but it's a great way of staying in touch and being current with a younger population who never cease to amaze me with the things they teach you. I like young people. I think that's why my daughter—even though we're separated by forty-four years—her friends think of me as the cool mom even though their own mothers—I'm old enough to be their mother. They don't think of [their mothers] as cool, but they think of me as cool. It keeps you young. Or maybe it's just chronic immaturity, I don't know. *[laughter]*
- KD: I have never heard that phrase before. Did you feel a responsibility to those students? I mean you had lived through—
- JH: Oh yeah.
- KD: The Chicano Movement on the campuses.
- JH: And at first they were very close to that because I started teaching in the '70s. I started teaching in '74, so it was like preaching to the choir. "Yeah, yeah, we're all into that." But by the time I got to the '80s I was like this dinosaur. "You're still talking about that?" And I used to tell them—I was very frank about it—I said, "You guys, especially you with the brown faces out there, if you think this is over, you're out of your minds." You know, "You guys did that, it's all over, and now I have to go and I have to get a job that makes at least forty thousand dollars a year, blah, blah, blah." I said, "This is such a tenuous thing that's happened. It's only begun to move in the right direction. Don't rest for a second, don't think for a second that your generation and your children's generation will not have to deal with it. You may not have to go out and march, you may not have to put your butt on the line in front of a nightstick or get gassed by tear gas, but it's not over. Some racism is extraordinarily subtle and you don't realize you've been fucked in the butt until after it's happened and you've walked away. So beware." And I know they thought that I was crazy. And I met some of them years after they had been my students and they said, "My God, you were right."

But I don't know, I've always felt a responsibility to share what I know if I can, and that includes art. That's why I see students—that's why I have students come to my studio, or young artists come to the studio. Over the years I was always surprised. . . And thank God for the Internet, because the traffic has even increased. Over the years, even after I moved to Chicago, I was contacted by no less than two or three graduate students [who were] in Europe. I had a German, a couple of French kids, a Spanish kid, an English kid who had somehow read something in some catalog and found me somehow—and this was before the Internet—who were doing their dissertation or their master's thesis on some aspect of Chicano culture, Chicano art, and they wanted to interview me. I couldn't believe it.

KD: Did you grant those interviews?

JH: Absolutely, every single one of them. I love to talk. I mean, these students are so interested and they have such a sincere interest in understanding the period. And [the subject] has nothing to do with them at all, they're not even Americans. I've always been contacted by lots of Americans, too. And now, because of the Internet, I get requests all the time. Like I said, I just got a request from a girl who's doing a dissertation on Chicano art at the University of Essex in the UK. And the thing that's neat is they're turning me on to other things. She said to me in her email, you know, "We have a Latino museum at the University of Essex." I said, "Are you shitting me? I don't believe it." "We do." And so she sent my name to the gal who's the director. I said, "Gee, thanks. I wouldn't be opposed to having a show in England." And it's just wonderful to see how this generation—it has skipped one at least—see this as such an interesting art movement that they want to write about it, that they want to leave a written record. God bless them. Every single kid who calls me, I never fail to respond, I never fail to give them feedback. I send them photos. I think it's great.

KD: Did you ever have a student in studio class that you thought had potential?

JH: I saw a lot of kids that I thought had talent but they lacked the one thing that really makes a great artist: they didn't have a vision. They didn't know what they wanted to talk about visually. They had skill, but the thoughtfulness that is required of an artist is almost something that's more important than skill. I went to high school with a guy who I thought was one of the most talented people I think I've ever met. His skills were extraordinary even as a young man. He drew like Raphael or Michelangelo. His skill was extraordinary, but if he had a two-digit IQ I would have been surprised. He was an idiot. Never read, he had terrible grades. I think he wound up pumping gas, and then he got some girl pregnant, and then who knows how much longer he survived after that. He had skill, but he had absolutely no intellectual capability whatsoever, and so what good was that skill? Went straight down the toilet.

KD: I want to change gears a little bit and talk about the murals that you do, that you've done. It comes a bit later, I think it's '84, the show at the folk art—

JH: That's '81—'80, '81.

KD: So it comes in the '80s, and we're mostly talking about the '70s right now, but you're certainly doing mural painting at the same time you're doing this work that would end up in a gallery. At the time—like I said, thinking before '81—did you see that as a conflict or challenge, or even aesthetically distinct?

JH: Murals versus studio work?

KD: Yeah.

JH: Gosh. I would say normally the distinction between mural work and studio work is murals tend to be commissions. You're working for someone in particular, and they're paying you. Which means to a certain degree—although some artists can afford to say no, like Diego [Rivera] famously did to changes—if you really need the money, you have someone who is buying the product and they can have input. The last big mural that I did, on Spring Street, was done with a lot of forethought about what I thought the LA 200 committee—bicentennial of the city—expected to see. I expected that they would want to see something more historically encompassing, or rather, traditional and more historically informative about the history of Los Angeles in those two hundred years. So that certainly told me that if I expect to get this commission I need to do something that is in the ball park, rather than what I might want to do—something a bit more

political with a stronger point—because I could use the money. So that does necessarily dictate how you work on something.

Where in my case, because I never—and this is funny, people don't believe it, I mean, this in all sincerity—I never expected to make a living as an artist, ever. I knew that the possibility of selling work and living off your work was so small that rather than have an expectation at all I would remove that by doing something else, by having a day job, by teaching because I like teaching. It still kept me in my world of art, and it also was very freeing because it meant that I never had to worry about what the content of my work was. I would always be the author of the work, of its content, of its imagery. I didn't have to ask anybody's permission, I didn't have to worry about what else anybody would think, because I didn't care if it sold or not. So I've been completely free to do whatever I wanted to do and not worry about that. The fact that it's selling now is icing on the cake. I mean it's really nice to have people willing to lay their money down because they can live with this image but I never, ever, ever thought that I would make a living by selling art.

KD: Were the murals something that you enjoyed because of the form, or the public nature, or just the paycheck?

JH: It was kind of a combination of all those things.

KD: That's kind of unfair, but—

JH: Yeah. I mean the paycheck was definitely a big motivation, but I like the challenge. Any time you work on a scale that's three stories it's pretty challenging.

KD: Three stories.

JH: Yeah, that was the—

KD: Not two?

JH: The last one was three stories. I nearly chickened out on that one. I remember the first day I was standing . . . And after the building had been primed, they put up a scaffold. And I stood at the bottom and I looked up and I thought to myself, "Oh shit, I can't do this. I can't get up there." I was ready to chicken out. I said, "We're going to have to give the money back. I can't do this." And suddenly my father, who was then in his late sixties, started to climb to the top. All the way to the top. And I thought, "Damn, I guess if Pop can do it. If I stand here, what kind of fool do I look like when my sixty-eight-year-old father is going up there?" So I got my butt up there and it was a lot of fun. But it's very challenging. I mean, covering a space that big. It's the biggest thing I ever did, and physically it was hard.

KD: You're working with a team, I imagine.

JH: No, it was just me.

KD: Are you kidding?

JH: Totally—almost every final brushstroke on the final surface is me. That was 1981. We worked from the fall of '81, I think, into the first of January of '82. I had just gotten married. My husband helped me prime the wall and do some of the big blocks of color. My dad was there. He helped mix paint and kept things neat for us and stuff. And then occasionally I had some friends fall by. Carlos came by one day and painted. Stan Wilson came by, Kent Twitchell came by. In fact, Kent Twitchell took some of the pictures I have on my website of me standing in front of the mural. But it was me. You know, I wanted to do it alone. I had worked together as a collective, I had worked with other people. We had already talked about leaving Los Angeles, and I wanted to be able to do something that was, really, pretty much my own as much as possible. So that the last bit of paint that went on the wall, the details, I had done completely on my own. So that was fun. Every other mural, some kids were helping you and it never turns out exactly the way you hope, but then you have to let that go. That's the nature of being a muralist in a team. Not everybody can paint as well as you can, or sees it the same way you do, and you just have to let it go.

KD: Did you enjoy that creative process?

JH: Yeah. It's a lot of fun. Because you can see the end. I mean you know, I don't know many muralists who ever work and varied that much from the original plan. It's just too big. When it's something small you can

take a detour, but when it's that big and if you have a client who's already okayed that image, you can't play with it any more. So watching it go up and finally getting it done, it's a neat thing. It's kind of fun. So I enjoyed that, I did.

KD: Did you do work with the UFW [United Farm Workers] then? You talked about that briefly.

JH: Yeah, we did a big temporary mural for the second convention, something—

KD: So these are the murals that were on a canvas or some kind of—

JH: Yeah. We did it in the old TB hospital up there in La Paz. There were wings of the hospital that were totally empty after all the beds were moved out that the UFW didn't use, so there was a canvas, must have been, gosh, I don't know, sixty feet long, that filled this wing of this hospital. We worked on the floor. Mark Bryan worked with us, too. You know the artist Mark Bryan? Wonderful painter. He went to Otis. We knew him from Otis. He was our token white boy. He used to hang around with us. He's up in Northern California now. His work is so good. It's just so good.

KD: You were doing these because Carlos invited you, or . . .

JH: Carlos got us, yeah. He said it was important to go up with César Chávez, and I said, "I agree with you." And so we get in the car and we drive to La Paz several times. We'd live out there for a long weekend or for a week and work and then drive back to LA and go back out again. He spent more time there than I did. He got involved with their newspaper, and he was more enamored with the farm workers than I was. You know, part of my family lives not far [from La Paz].

KD: Oh, really?

JH: They live in places like Selma and Reedley and Dinuba, so I knew all about that stuff. My uncles were—I had one uncle who was a foreman of a ranch that grew a lot of fruit, they had lots of orchards. As a kid I had been out there and I picked fruit and shit, and I wasn't that enamored of farm work. I just didn't think it was all that exotic. I knew about that world. But Carlos was very interested. I said, "You go ahead and pick your own peaches if you want to do some hard work." Carlos, he was amazing. He was like a child. He had this tremendous focus on something he loved for a certain amount of time, figured it out, sort of like a Rubik's cube, and then he moved on to the next thing. César Chávez. And that lasted for quite a while, maybe about a year, maybe a little longer, and then he finally had all that figured, did what he did. I mean, he did a lot of good. He did lots of stuff for them, became very well acquainted with César. We met César a couple of times. And then he moved on, came back to the city and spent more time doing other things. He moved from these short-term objectives to the next. It was a very interesting way to work. He was a fascinating guy. I miss him to this day. I miss him all the time.

KD: I wonder if you want to talk a bit about the illustrations you did for *Aztlán*.

JH: Oh, God.

KD: I can actually get them if we pause.

JH: No, I remember there very well. I wonder if they kept the originals. They should have.

KD: That I don't know.

JH: They should have kept those. That was wonderful for me. I can't thank Juan Gómez-Quiñones enough. He was [a] very dashing, incredibly handsome young guy in those days. And he seemed so much older than I was and in fact he's not that much older than I am. He's maybe five, six years older than I am, but in those days he seemed so sophisticated. He was always in a black turtleneck with black hair and this huge black mustache—very handsome and very macho. I had been dating this Chicano law student. That's how I met Juan and the Chicano Center, which was very young in those days, and they were starting this journal. [Now the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center—ed.] And he said "My girlfriend is an artist, blah, blah, blah," and I met them and they said, "We need a logo, we need cover art, da-da-da." I said, "I can do that." And they paid. They paid money, so I said, "I can definitely do that." So that started our relationship. It was just that informal. I said, "How many drawings do you need for the inside, how many stories, and you need a cover . . ." And then I designed the original logo, which they liked very much and used that for several years. And then for five years, every time they settled on the essays, they would tell me "We're going to

need eight drawings, we're going to need seven drawings," whatever, and the cover. I would do them, bring them in. Everything was fine. They never told me what to do, what not to do. They said, "Most of these are going to be like Native Americans versus Chicanos, da-da-da." Never really said what I needed to do, just left it up to me. Which, I was like twenty-one, just this kid. So it was a great gig. And then I got to do *Floriscanto [en Aztlán]*, the first volume of poetry by Alurista. I think I've created a—

KD: I actually would think that, for the non-artist student, that those images you did, those covers for *Aztlán*, were much more influential [in] setting in our mind what Chicano art was.

JH: Really?

KD: Than any painting or—yeah.

JH: You know, not too long ago, [Alurista] and I were talking on the phone and the first volume of poetry came up. And he said to me, "Don't you understand how influential . . ." He said, "It's not just because of my poetry but the illustrations that you did for that, those put *indigeno* work on the map." I said, "No, other people were doing . . . You know, the barrios." He said, "Yes, but those wood [cuts], there was something about the combination of the poetry and seeing those images on the cover," he said. "The one of the Aztec, the eagle knight that you did," he said, "I have seen it other places."

KD: Everybody does it.

JH: People copy it. I said, "You're kidding." I said, "I've never seen anybody copy that." He said, "Oh yeah, people copy that." He said actually . . . Maybe because it was in book form that other people got to see it, [that it] became the impulse for people to start to do *indigeno* art. I said, "Damn, I had no idea."

KD: It might not have been the only impulse, but certainly because it had this life beyond an exhibition or a protest, a demonstration where someone's carrying a placard with art, or the poster that went up to announce a gathering. I come to the work in the '80s, seeing *Aztlán* or the cover of a book that you did. And then someone else is—so it has this incredible life. But literally, at the time, that was also, I think, a way . . . Because it's going to say right on the cover "*Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*," or whatever it was called at the time. International journal of Chicano studies. [*Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and the Arts*—ed.]

JH: Right, it was.

KD: So the word and the icon go together. Now, you just said that you did them as wood cuts?

JH: For the poetry. For the journal those were ink drawings. They were all just line drawings. Because it was offset print so in those days, they didn't have sophisticated—they were doing it low-end printing, so it had to be very clear images. So they were all ink drawings. That's why I wondered if they kept them, because there's a whole bunch of original ink drawings they would have if they didn't throw them away.

KD: We'll have to ask. There's not been that many directors, so—

JH: Because I tripped out Chon [Noriega] the first time I met him when I came here, maybe three years ago. He was showing [my daughter] Ariel and I around—and I've told her the stories about all of the stuff I did for them—and we walked into one of these rooms here on this floor, and we walked in and there were these posters and covers and stuff from the past, and I don't think even Chon realized. I said, "I did that, and I did that one, and I did that one and that one, and that one. And that's mine." And he's like, "Oh, my God." I said "Yeah, I did all this stuff."

KD: Yeah, that would be institutional memory that he wouldn't have.

JH: Yeah, he was blown away. I don't think he realized just exactly how much I had done for the journal.

KD: I looked when I had seen that you had worked with the center. I have a whole collection of the journal.

JH: Do you?

KD: Yeah, it was a gift doing a gig—that was my payment.

JH: Nice gift.

KD: Oh yeah. So I just started flipping through. "Judithe Hernández," "Judithe Hernández." I was like, "Oh, my God." One of the things that's important is, the journal is—

JH: That's why you knew who I was when I sent you that email.

KD: Yeah.

JH: I didn't expect you to know who I was at all.

KD: That was not the only reason. I mean, I knew your name from Los Four.

JH: But still.

KD: But what happens is the journal sets the tone, which becomes like the standard in the field, now that "interdisciplinary" doesn't just mean humanities and social sciences. It also means the arts.

JH: Thank you.

KD: So Chicano studies has always had, at least in California, at its core both art history and studio art. So everywhere you go it's not the best-funded position or it's not a full-time position, but they're always bringing in artists to teach either the art history class or the studio art class. And the challenge is, on campus, getting that. If it's a studio class you have to collaborate with somebody in another unit because most of our departments are in social science units [and not in art departments]. But that sets the tone in the '70s. And even more so because your work appears in the pages, not just on the cover.

JH: Yeah, that's what's nice, because now they don't do that. They only do it on the cover.

KD: They can't afford it. But I get a sense they didn't say to you, "We want this theme," or . . .

JH: It was totally up to me. They told me how many drawings they needed. "We need a cover, we need eight drawings, nine drawings, ten drawings," whatever it was.

KD: Or they would make the size appropriate, or were you doing them by size?

JH: I worked at a slightly larger scale because they reduced them to fit the spot in the story. The cover was always to size.

KD: So where were you getting your impulses, then, your aesthetic and artistic impulses?

JH: From all the stuff that was happening. I rarely had any manuscripts to read. I don't think I ever read any of the stories or the essays. I remember what I did the time before and, well, you know. I exploited different cultural aspects of Mexican and Chicano culture. There's one particular volume I remember, they were all kind of designs that were based on Native American, you know, the southwest sort of looking things, and there was another one that was all Day of the Dead kind of looking things. I just chose something that happened to grab my imagination, something I'd been thinking about, and just did several drawings along those particular lines. Because they had to make sense graphically together. That's the only thing I cared about, that it maintained a theme throughout the volume since I didn't know what the stories would be about. They were just kind of a way of dressing up the page so it didn't matter.

KD: So you were thinking of it as—

JH: As a visual kind of suite of things that linked the front page to the last essay, but not related to the essay at all.

KD: Were you working in series or suites at the time, [in] your own work?

JH: I've always done that. It's just been a normal thing for me. Some artists don't do that at all or some artists only ever do that. Every painting they ever make looks the same somehow. But I've always thought about things—it's hard to explain. You see something in your head, inside you—and I never see it clearly enough to make a definitive version, and so I work on it over a course of things until I'm happy that I've come sort of close to what I thought I was thinking about, and then by that time something else will have sparked my imagination and then I move off. You know, like the Adam and Eve and the Juárez [series]. I mean, I've always worked, I just like to work the . . . And then things recur because I'll feel differently about them. I always use the example of Matisse. Over time, I think it's a fifty-year span, where he does that figure. In fact, I think they're here at UCLA, the bas-relief figures that at first are very traditional and then at the end of his life they're so abstract and so simple. But it's the same thing interpreted over a span of about fifty years.

Just like the falling figure thing. Since I was a kid I've had this falling figure thing. Yeah, I continually—I will always do that. [I'm] always trying to, I don't know . . . I guess I'm trying to get close to whatever it is I've seen or felt about the feeling of falling through space. Trying to grab that moment of whatever it is

you feel as you fall through an empty space and put that on a two dimensional surface somehow. It never ceases, the fascination for that image never ceases to leave me. I will always probably do a falling figure.

KD: You're not talking about the sensation of fear that we get?

JH: Not the fear. Maybe the freedom of it.

KD: Freedom, yeah, exactly.

JH: Or if there is—

KD: Because when I think of that sense of falling through space, it's the moment of. . . Somehow in my dream state, right before falling, I don't know what it is, but it's usually I'm lying in bed and then . . . [*gasp*] And I catch myself.

JH: You catch yourself.

KD: And my sense of it is not the free fall liberation, but the fear of hitting the ground or the sensation of—

JH: You save yourself from hitting the—

KD: Yeah. But you're attached to something else. So you're talking about this—

JH: I guess somehow in my psyche I have the feeling that falling freely without the fear of hitting anything must be kind of like what birds do.

KD: Flight.

JH: You know you aren't going to get hurt so you don't have to be afraid. Like when people jump out of airplanes. They describe that feeling and they don't have the words. And I know I'll never do that, but the freedom that one feels—I think when you feel totally supported and you're able to just be in space must be an amazing thing. So I don't know. I'll always fool around with that, somehow. Just never ceases to leave my imagination.

KD: I think we've gone on for a long time today, and I don't want to wear you out so that you start to regret this.

JH: No, I'm not worn out.

KD: But let me take a pause.

[*break in audio*]

KD: So we're back after a quick pause. We're still talking about your early work in the '70s and as a student at Otis in the early '70s. I was wondering if you could reflect on some memories of early critical responses—and that can be both ways, negative commentary or positive—as well as key opportunities that you had. Certainly the scholarship that gets you into Otis is one, but anything else like that. Residencies, fellowships, or exhibitions.

JH: There were no residencies, no fellowships. Did we say the thing, for the record, about Charlie White?

KD: I don't think we did.

JH: The Charlie White story?

KD: You talked about Charlie White. Remind me which one.

JH: The drawings had been brought into the class and—

KD: Yes, you did.

JH: Okay. You know, I've been very fortunate, and I say that with a little bit of disingenuousness because I always worked very hard. I mean, I've always taken very seriously, and I said this years ago for an interview, a story for a magazine. Somebody asked me the question about what I do, I mean actually creating the work and my audience, and I've always felt very strongly that—when I was in school I always took the studio classes incredibly seriously. I worked so hard to perfect my drawing, to perfect my understanding of composition, of paint, of color, of texture. I paid incredible attention and worked so hard to get it right because I have this tremendous belief—

[*break in audio*]

KD: [This is] side 2 of tape 2 and Judithe was talking about her attention to studio work and taking it so seriously.

JH: I've always thought that if I was going to be essentially a storyteller—because my work is figurative, it's narrative, it's not non-objective—I want people to clearly understand what I, or rather I clearly want them to be able to see an image and read the story that they see in it and come to their own conclusion. But in order to do that, if the story is weakened or the message or the intent is weakened, if my ability to create that message is not the absolute best craft that I can put forward . . . I feel so strongly about creating something that comes from a point of complete mastery of what I do. I hate things that are poorly made, and art is number one on the list. I mean, you see somebody who's got no technique, no matter how wonderful the idea is, if the execution is shoddy it ruins it. I have always been absolutely maniacal about being sure that, even to this day. I mean I draw every day. I'm highly critical of my own work. I just work very hard to get you to that perfect state, which never happens, which is fine because once you've reached it you never get any better. But I always try to make sure as much as humanly possible to do the very best in terms of the mechanical, and then hope that the inspiration, the content, equals that.

So I always worked very, very hard, and I think it showed because I always had such good feedback. I said to you earlier I never thought I'd make my living as an artist, never wanted to, and because I didn't rely on that I didn't necessarily wait for people to pat me on the back and say how wonderful I was. But I've always had such good feedback. Even when it didn't sell, people always said, "God, the work is beautiful, it's incredible stuff." I mean they always were very encouraging, always—

KD: So you're talking about folks who come to the gallery or come to the studio?

JH: Yeah, or in reviews.

KD: In reviews?

JH: Yeah. In fact, I tell Carlos Tortolero every time, in a show, you get a good review. Because the reviewers always, even when they hated . . . For instance, the [group] show [*Rastros y Cronicas:*] *The Women of Juarez* that was there, [at the National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago,] last year, the reviewer [for the *Chicago Tribune*] hated the show. She didn't hate the show, but she didn't like it. She thought it was unworthy of the subject. I know, this woman . . . I don't even know if she's an art critic. He [the newspaper's art critic] retired or died, and they didn't hire [another] one, so they probably passed it off on this other woman. She didn't write good things about how the show was mounted, blah, blah, blah, but she loved my work. Every time I showed her [*The Border*, which depicts one of the victims,] it got a good review. It's been very validating because I think I must be hitting the mark.

The reaction to what I do is always that it's not like what other people do. My stuff is very unique. That it's beautifully executed. [Passage omitted at artist's request—ed.] I think what people have said about my work [is], even though the image is difficult to look at, it's also beautiful, and that's what compels people to want to stop and look. You can't take your eyes off of it. Even though it is hard to look at, you want to stop and look. And that gives me a great deal of satisfaction because I work very hard to produce a product that is first rate. I totally believe in that. And I've seen so much bad art lately I just want to vomit.

KD: So what are the similarities and differences between your early work and your more recent work?

JH: A lot more skill, number one. A lot more skill after forty years I've been doing this.

KD: You mean technique—

JH: Ability.

KD: Or, what about the media?

JH: Everything about what I do. I mean, across the board. The older you get, the longer you do it. I think every day as an artist. You know, I've dealt with the human body for so many years I know it so well. And still, I still do research. If you open the file cabinet in my studio you'll see these endless photographs I've torn out of magazines, stock photographs off the Internet, of hands, of feet, of bodies, of birds, of cactus. I mean, I never take for granted that from memory I can remember how a hand looks when it does this. I'm going to find a photograph and look at it to make sure. Because there's an authenticity about nature that you can't

generalize, and that's [where] a lot of young artists are making a mistake. They think if they just do this and this and this quickly, you know . . . Some people can get away with it. The Abstract Expressionists, God bless them, they had a way of handling gestures, but there was an authenticity and an understanding of the underlying human form that gave the work substance and power and a reality that was absolutely correct. But other people who aren't quite so talented, who try to generalize the human form and think . . .

I remember I said this to my art teacher once when I was a kid, and I'll never forget it because it was such a lesson. I had distorted this figure, but it was distortion without purpose. I distorted the figure just because I could, but it didn't mean anything. And I was too immature and too young to know that's not a good thing to do. And she pointed that out to me: "You can distort the figure, absolutely you can do that, but you must do it with the comprehension and understanding of why you're doing it and what you expect to accomplish. This accomplishes nothing." And I was crushed. I was crushed. But years later I understood that she was absolutely right. If you do it just meaninglessly because you can do it, or maybe you can't do anything else and you do it just because you're trying to cover up your lack of comfort with this particular part of the body—you can't draw feet so you just kind of gesture it there—you can tell. You don't have to know anything about art. People are very perceptive. They can tell when you're bullshitting them, in speech and in a drawn form. So to this day I sit around and I fill up books with drawings of hands and feet and heads. I love light and I study shadows. I watch where light falls and how it falls on faces, where it creates the shadows. Do I take liberties sometimes? I do, but after forty years I can do it and make it look real, make it look like it's supposed to, even though nature wouldn't necessarily do that. But you have to learn those things over time, and if you don't practice and practice and practice . . .

KD: Your early work was in a range of media. Is it still?

JH: You know, yeah. I do a little spray can. Did a lot of spray can. In fact, some of those pieces will be at the Vincent Price [Art Museum]. And I was much looser, and I still like to go—I mean, I still can do loose and I can do tight, and it depends on where my head is at the moment. And I'm beginning to do more again. But there was a time in my life when I didn't do a lot of work, and the place where I feel the most comfortable, that makes me feel the most secure, is when I'm drawing something at a high level of detail for me. I'm not Kent Twitchell—I don't do photo real—but for me a very controlled tight drawing is something that I have a mastery of, and I can sit down and that gives me a great deal of pleasure to do that because I'm very familiar with that. Working loose, you have to be a little braver. As I've told my friends who paint, you know, in pastel, in what I do, there are no happy accidents. You have to have a plan.

Right now, at this stage in my career, my plan is pretty simple. I don't have to plan a lot because I've done this for so long and I know where I'm going with it, so when I sketch out a plan it's kind of minimal. It's much less detailed than I used to do when I was younger. But you know, if you make a mistake you can't go back and paint it out. So you really, really [have to] know. And that appeals to me. I guess maybe I'm a control freak, I don't know. But I don't make that many mistakes. I don't like to waste paper. At ten dollars a pop I don't want to waste a piece of paper.

KD: So you said in the early years you would sketch it out on another sheet, or . . .

JH: I still do that.

KD: Or give yourself some guidelines.

JH: Yeah. But it was much more detailed. And it depends on what it is. When it's something loose then there is no sketch. You just get up on the paper. But I like thinking about it and, especially for a piece that's going to be somewhat more controlled, I do like to have a plan. It's just that now I don't have to draw it out with as much detail as I once did.

KD: I'm wondering if, when you were younger and you didn't have a lot of money coming in, were you concerned at all about the quality of the pastel, or the pen, or the ink, or the . . .

JH: I should have been.

KD: And now you have a much more clear sense of—

JH: Oh yeah. You know who taught me that was Carlos.

KD: Really?

JH: Because he caught me drawing on . . . When we moved into the studio in Highland Park, on Figueroa, I was drawing on seamless photo backdrop paper because you could get it so big. You know, when you go into a photographer's studio they'll have these big rolls of paper they pull down so you can have a seamless backdrop? You can buy that paper very cheaply because it's terrible paper.

KD: It's like a butcher paper kind of thing.

JH: No, it comes thicker. It has a pretty nice surface, but it's not acid free, it's not going to last forever. It's not good paper. But it was the size that I was after because the Arches Cover, the stuff [paper] I use now, the handmade French paper, it's like ten, twelve dollars. Depending on how much of it you buy at a time, the price goes down, but the large sheets are anywhere from ten to thirteen dollars a sheet of paper. I couldn't afford that, so I used seamless backdrop. And he said, "Judithe, no, no. Shouldn't do that, this paper's shit." I said, "I know it, but I can't afford the good stuff." And he was right and I knew it. I had to stop working on terrible, terrible materials if I wanted this stuff to last, for people to take it seriously. That was another part of becoming a professional artist was to work on material that was worth its value if somebody was going to buy it from you. They don't want something on butcher paper. So yeah, it was probably about the '80s when I really started to buy good materials. The thing about pastel, the reason I love to work with it, is it's like working with actual light. Almost makes you feel like God. You're working with pure pigments and light. A little box of pastels of a certain brand—it's more expensive than drugs. It's very expensive. But good materials, if you've earned the right to use them, make all the difference in the world, God.

KD: You haven't said a thing about content. Similarities, differences to your early work.

JH: You know, content is very much a product of time and space, the time and space that you're in. And where I was then was very immature. I don't know, thoughtless in a lot of ways. Even though I grew up in a tough neighborhood, I had a wonderful childhood. I had a wonderful childhood. I don't remember being challenged or deprived or anything. I didn't suffer. I had great parents who did the very best they could by us and a very warm family and great memories of my childhood. So I really wasn't drawing from some well of frustration or psychological pain that some people are working from. I was a pretty happy person. I'm incredibly normal for somebody who does what I do. I mean, I've been told that. You're an artist? Wow, you don't seem like an artist. But I do have this other side and I think it's probably not until I was in college—it was only hinted at when I was in high school because I tended to be a little brighter than average. I wasn't the smartest kid on the block, but I hung out with the smart kids, and I think when my intellectual life really took off [it was] by being exposed to really great literature and people who had challenging ideas and greater understanding than mine.

I mean, to this day I love to sit around and talk about philosophy. I don't know much about it, but I love to hear people who know about a subject talk. I don't want to put my two cents in, but I like to sit there and listen to what they have to say because you form some kind of, I don't know, some organic understanding of certain subjects that you're not an expert in but you feel that you know something about something—just because you're a human being, you've had shared experiences. But it's interesting for me to hear other people talk about things like philosophy and compare them, and literature and science. And I'll sit there and I think, you know, that's what I felt was right, and now they just said what I felt was correct. I didn't know that it was correct, but now they've validated what my feeling was about that particular thing, which I find very interesting. So I read a lot of stuff and I don't always understand everything I read but it'll stay with me.

And when I became a college student and was exposed to all of this new stuff, it just fueled my intellectual life—which changed everything. I think as I became older and more mature I began to feel or change what, originally for me, had been just kind of—I don't know. I think a lot [about] us in those days, and I think it's the reason that when I look at that work now, the imagery is interesting. The execution, maybe not so great. The materials were shit, that's for sure. But they're so young. They're like when you

see the drawings of children. They're charming because they're so young, but they're obviously not the work of a fully mature artist. Or when you hear somebody play some music and you know they're going to be a good musician someday. They're great for a kid, but it's not Itzhak Perlman. And when I look at my own work from that time that's what I think. It was on the way. It was moving in that direction. But now that I'm sixty-two, I feel that the work that I do is just so much more complete, so much more, I don't know. It's grown up.

KD: That's a good place to stop. Thank you.



INTERVIEW WITH JUDITHE HERNÁNDEZ

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