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LAURA AGUILAR

INTERVIEWED BY CAROLINA MIRANDA

ON MAY 14 AND 15, 2014

Chicana photographer Laura Aguilar is most widely known for her black-and-white nude self-portraits. She also created candid portrayals of friends, family, and members of her Chicano/Latino and LGBT communities. Her work has appeared in exhibitions nationally and internationally, and in 2017 a retrospective, *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, was held at the Vincent Price Art Museum in East Los Angeles. Aguilar, who lived and worked in Los Angeles, died in 2018 at the age of fifty-eight.

Carolina Miranda is a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, where she covers art, architecture, design and film for the *Culture High and Low* blog. Prior to this, she served as staff reporter at *Time* magazine and was an independent journalist, contributing stories to *ARTnews*, *Fast Company*, *Architect*, *Art in America* and National Public Radio. She is a regular contributor for KCRW's *Press Play*.

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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.

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Carolina Miranda: All right, so we are recording. This is Carolina Miranda with Laura Aguilar in Rosemead on Thursday, May 15, of 2014.

Laura Aguilar: Fourteen.

CM: Fourteen. It goes by faster than you ever think. So, I guess, let's start off with a few basics like, you know, where were you born? Where were you . . .

LA: Oh, okay. I was born in San Gabriel, California. And on my mom's side I'm the fifth generation that was born in California in the San Gabriel Valley, and the first one that didn't learn to speak Spanish. [*laughs*] But, yeah, so that's where my roots are.

CM: So on your mom's side, fifth generation. So they date back to the nineteenth century?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Do you know what they came here for?

LA: No, they were here before it changed.

CM: Oh, they were here before it was [the] US?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Oh, okay.

LA: And it's all the women. It's all the women on my mom's side of the family. They all married pretty much immigrants. Or, when the law changed and they came back, you know. They—the women never left. The men did, but you know. [*laughs*] So.

CM: So the women are what sort of what tie you to California?

LA: Kind of, yeah. This particular area. They started up in where Rose Hills is, which is Whittier, and they slowly moved this way to the mission, and then they turned around and started going back. [*laughs*]

CM: Started going back inland?

LA: Back towards, you know, Whittier. Because I grew up over that way. And, you know, this house is made by my mother's grandfather and her uncles built this house.

CM: Oh.

LA: And they started it in '24, 1924, and finished in 1926. So.

CM: Building this house?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: That—we're sitting in front of a white, wood . . .

LA: Yeah.

CM: Single-story bungalow.

LA: And that cactus started out as a little cactus, and it was here, then it was over here, then it was over there, then it came back to here. [*laughs*]

CM: So it's not graded—

LA: And it's grown all these years, like 'cause . . . A couple of years back—more than a couple of years—when I was sort of in my twenties, I guess, this thing had nothing but ivy take over it, you know. And so I slowly, for about five years, cut the ivy off and brought it back to life. But at one point in my cutting, the ivy looked like it was a top hat. Derby hat.

CM: Because you had cut everything on the bottom until it was left with an ivy hat?

LA: Kind of, yeah.

CM: It's like a tree. There's something really magnificent about it. Now, so what was your mom's name?

LA: Oh, Juanita.
CM: Juanita . . .
LA: Almenta Grisham Aguilar.
CM: Juanita Amita . . .
LA: No, no. Juanita Armit—I don't know how to pronounce it.
CM: Juanita Armita. A-R—
LA: Okay, just Juanita. [*laughs*]
CM: Juanita. Juanita, and then what was her maiden name?
LA: Grisham.
CM: Grisham Aguilar. Aguilar was your name, your father's name?
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: And then what was your father's name?
LA: His mother's maiden name was Guerrero.
CM: Okay. And then so he was Guerrero Aguilar—
LA: He was—
CM: Or he was Aguilar Guerrero?
LA: He was Paul, yeah, Guerrero Aguilar.
CM: Was he born in the US or was he born in Mexico?
LA: He was fifth generation born here.
CM: Fifth?
LA: First.
CM: First generation. So it was his parents that had come?
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: Do you know what part of Mexico they came from?
LA: The only part we know is that they're from the state of Guadalup—no. Starts with a G.
CM: Guadalajara, or . . .
LA: No, it's not like . . . I think it's [*indistinct*].
CM: Guerrero?
LA: Yeah.
CM: Okay.
LA: That's all I know, is that—'cause my grandfather came here. And when my cousins and my dad and his sisters were growing up, he did not want them to speak Spanish. He came here to have a new life for his children, you know. I mean, because they were all born here. And so he didn't want them to speaking Spanish beyond, you know . . . They spoke Spanish probably until they went to school, then it was just like, you know. And my grandfather and my grandmother never really got English down, so it's kind of, you know. I don't know how the older ones' sisters got around things. [*laughs*]
CM: How they communicated, how everybody communicated.
LA: With their parents, yeah.
CM: Exactly.
LA: 'Cause my dad's Spanish was really bad. And when he was in World War II, it's segregated, so he was with all Latino men. You know, Mexican men, whatever. And they would tease him because he didn't speak Spanish, or when he did, he was, you know. So he picked up a little bit more in the army and, but he never really mastered it. My mom, who my grandfather who was Irish, wanted his kids to speak Spanish, because the grandparents were here and they didn't speak any English. And so my mom was very fluent in it, and my dad wasn't. And people would always laugh at my dad when he spoke Spanish because he wouldn't pronounce things right. They could get what he was saying, but then . . . So my dad, basically, would speak Spanish only to someone if they had no English, you know. 'Cause otherwise he knows—he would just— You know, people would talk to him in Spanish, he answers back in English. [*laughs*] So sometimes,

people—and my mom was more fluent than he was, so it was just kind of funny. 'Cause sometimes people would say to my mom, "Juanita, what did he say? I can't figure it out."

CM: She would translate for him.

LA: Kind of, yes. His Spanish was really bad.

CM: Now, what did—what did like your family do? Did they—when they came to California, were they working in agriculture? Did they have ranches? Did they—

LA: Actually, no, they lived in the city. My grandfather, I found out just right before my dad died, 'cause I had never asked him what he did. And he goes, "My father worked for Firestone, the tire company, and he was a plumber."

CM: Your grandfather did?

LA: My dad's father was a—

CM: Your dad's father.

LA: Was a plumber.

CM: Oh, got it.

LA: And he worked at, and he worked at Firestone. And they didn't live too far from the factory itself, you know.

CM: Oh, so they were in LA?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

CM: Okay. And what did your dad do?

LA: He was a welder.

CM: A welder?

LA: Thank you, because I can't pronounce certain letters.

CM: No sweat. No sweat.

LA: So yeah, he did that. He made construction. He made—I mean, you know, he did construction work. But then at home on weekends, he did all these other little things. He made benches. He had a thing that you put the metal in here, and you walk around it and it curls itself. [*laughs*] So I used to do that.

CM: Oh, was it like a rebar bender? Like you could bend metal with it?

LA: No, not quite, 'cause it was like a flat thing, and then you would have pieces of metal here and here and here. And then we'd have little rods that are like an inch across and then—so you start with it here, and you go to here, and then you come back down here. And you have sort of like an "S." So it was really easy to do, so that's what I used to do with him.

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: And I used to also do all the varnishing on the benches. [*laughs*]

CM: He had you as an assistant, a carpentry assistant?

LA: Sort of. Well, my brother was his first one, you know. And him and my brother made a playhouse for me that was fourteen feet off the ground. [*laughs*] Wrought iron, had [a] stairway straight up and a spiral stair coming down on the other side.

CM: That sounds awesome.

LA: Yeah, my dad did it more for him than for me, to be honest, 'cause all the adults loved to go in and sit in the house. [*laughs*]

CM: Admire their handiwork? [*laughs*] Now, what did—what did your mom do?

LA: She cleaned houses. But she worked for about fourteen people, and she saw them every other week, you know. It was just basics, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: [*Indistinct*] a little bit tidy and most of the people she worked for were actually Mormons, and they—most of them live in Arcadia.

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: So I used to go up there sometimes in the summers because they had pools. I used to love to look at all those peacocks around the neighborhood.
CM: That's right, Arcadia. That's the official bird of Arcadia.
LA: Yeah, 'cause of the, um . . . what was it?
CM: Who was it that left those peacocks there? I forget.
LA: Well, Lucky Baldwin had the property that's the Arboretum, and from there—they can fly, so they would fly and go into people's yards, and people in that neighborhood did not like those peacocks. But they couldn't shoot 'em. [*laughs*]
CM: That's great. And so then, when did your—do you know roughly when your parents got married or how they met?
LA: Well, they met through my, my . . . Okay, my dad's parents both died young. When my dad was nine years old, his father died. And when he was fourteen, his mother died. And he's from a family of nine [*indistinct*] nine kids. I mean they were adults at the time, but—
CM: [*referring to family photograph*] This was your father's . . .
LA: Family.
CM: Family. His siblings. They were a family of nine kids?
LA: Nine. Yeah. And this is my father here. Which one . . . Yeah, that's my father, and that's Uncle Gilbert.
CM: They're good-looking guys!
LA: That's my grandparents. My dad's parents.
CM: Wow . . . That's quite a mustache.
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: Do you know what their names are?
LA: No.
CM: No. Okay.
LA: And, um . . . I think his name was actually Paul, I think. 'Cause my dad was named after him. I think. I'm not a hundred percent sure.
CM: Okay.
LA: And then those are the three youngest sisters when they were in high school.
CM: Wow.
LA: Now, so my—both my dad's parents died young. And there was nine of them, and the three oldest sisters were married. And the oldest sister, Inez, took the boys in. 'Cause there were only two. And then my godmother, who is Sara, who is number three, 'cause— And Sara's husband said, "No, we're starting a family. That's not—your family's not my family. Your family's gonna be *our* family." So he didn't take them in, but my aunt—my Aunt Sally—I mean my aunt . . .
CM: Inez?
LA: Sara. Sara.
CM: Oh, Sara.
LA: She took four of the girls in. I can't pronounce "girls" right.
CM: That's okay. I understand exactly what you're saying.
LA: Oh, okay.
CM: That's all that matters.
LA: So she put off having her family until the last one started high school.
CM: Wow.
LA: So, you know.
CM: So some of the sisters took the different children in that had been left—
LA: Yeah.
CM: Stranded when your . . .
LA: When the grandmother died. When their mother died, 'cause she lasted. She lived longer.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So then my, so my mom—Aunt Mary, which is this one here.

CM: The one in the middle?

LA: Yeah.

CM: With the big smile?

LA: Yeah. She went to school with my mom. And so did Sara and Nancy, but they were younger than my mom and my Aunt Mary. So my mom knew Aunt Mary, and then she introduced him to my dad when he was home from, you know, the army. And so they started to date. And then she met my uncle Gilbert, and my—no, she didn't meet him, she knew my uncle Gilbert from grammar school, 'cause they were in the same grade. But my father was older and didn't go beyond, I think, sixth grade, and so, because he found that he needed to work to help his brother-in-law. You know, it's just the way he was, you know. So it's funny that my Aunt Mary didn't know that she knew Uncle Gilbert, because they lived in two different houses.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: Both in El Monte, but just different people were taking care of them.

CM: Yeah, yeah.

LA: You know, so. And they were best friends, and she introduced her to my dad.

CM: Oh, okay. So she was the one who introduced your parents.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: And do you know were they like in school? Were they already—

LA: No. My grand—my mom was in school. She was in high school, and my dad was in the army. And he had been home, you know, so.

CM: Did your dad serve in Europe?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Do you know where he was?

LA: All over. [*laughs*] No, but I didn't know until after he died, and my Aunt Mary told me that he was in, where they had that D-Day of—

CM: Normandy?

LA: Yeah, he was at Normandy, but not [*indistinct*]. He didn't come in on the water. He was already on the land. And I didn't— My uncle, my mom's brother, told me that, what my dad did during the war, because he never talked about the war. And he goes, "Well, he used to drive people in and pick people up and take them back." He was a driver, and when he wasn't driving, he was marching. [*laughs*] So. You know, so, that's what my dad basically did, I heard.

CM: Wow, wow.

LA: I never knew that.

CM: That's incredible.

LA: And my dad got shot twice in the army.

CM: Oh, really? And did he have scars? Do you remember?

LA: Not really. But I never saw his knees. [*laughs*] But he had got shot below each kneecap. Two—at different times.

CM: Ouch.

LA: You know. And then, you know, when we had the second one, the doctor happened to give him some information that "someday you're going to have arthritis because any time you break a bone you're more in chance to have arthritis." And my dad had rheumatoid arthritis. And when it hit him, it hit him like a huge bl—wall falling on him. He couldn't lift his hands over his head, and he couldn't walk from the restroom to—from the bedroom to the restroom. We had—my brother had to help him, or my mom, or me. He was just like [an] invalid for like two years. Then somebody—my mom talks to everybody—and this woman, my mom was telling her, "Oh, yeah"—because she was at the post office. And she goes, "I

haven't seen you for a while." She goes, "The last two years I was at home. I had rheumatoid arthritis." And she goes, "That's the same thing my husband has." And she goes, "I went to a chiropractor"—no, the punching one.

CM: Acupuncture.

LA: Acupuncturist. And so she said, "It really did wonders for me. And then, that's now why I'm back at work, 'cause I could move again." And stuff like that. So my dad was taking a lot of different experimental types of medicine. And one of my cousins' boyfriends at the time was a pharmacist, so she would ask him. Because they were experimental. They weren't yet, you know, known. And so a couple of them, he said to not take at all. [*laughs*] So, but then when, you know, the woman talked about that, he decided to try it. And it wasn't painful to him, so he kept on coming back. And then within about a year, he started to be able to move his arms again and stuff. And I was learning how to drive, so I would drive him to the, to the . . .

CM: To the acupuncturist?

LA: Yeah.

CM: And this would have been when you were in your teens?

LA: Mm-hmm. This was . . . Yeah, because I just—I had just started to drive. I mean, because I had a permit to learn to drive. So I would drive my dad there. And it was in Chinatown, and it was behind a liquor store. And at the time it was illegal.

CM: Acupuncture was illegal in California?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah, actually the whole United States. It didn't become a legal thing until like '70.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: Well, I got out of high school like '79 or '78, it became legal. Before that it wasn't, and then, you know, there'd be times when the doctor's office would get raided and then he would have to go to his house. So then, you know, after a while he'd come back to the same place. And then . . . you know. So it was like, you know, he just had to— They didn't, like, you know. He never got— They just like, "You can't be here." [*laughs*]

CM: Oh, my God. I didn't know that. All that history.

LA: Yeah. It was not considered medical. I mean, it'd been around for thousands of years and helped people, but it's not considered medicine.

CM: Yeah.

LA: They just didn't want to have to compete.

CM: Yeah. [*laughs*] Now, so your parents then, like, they meet. They eventually get married, right?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Now, what brought them to San Gabriel?

LA: Well like, El Monte's right over there.

CM: El Monte's right there.

LA: San Gabriel's right over there.

CM: What community—

LA: San Gabriel's over there.

CM: Yeah.

LA: South San Gabriel's where I grew up at. And in between was Rosemead, and I don't know when it changed. But, you know, so—

CM: So they were always like, in this area?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Well, actually, my dad grew up in the city.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But once he . . . Yeah, they grew up there. Then they moved to El Monte because her two sisters lived in El Monte.

CM: Okay.

LA: And so she was taking care of the boys and the girls. So. But he orig—I mean, he grew up over there, you know.

CM: Great. And then, and so then your brother, he was older, right? Do you know what year he was born?

LA: I think ’52, but not a hundred percent. He was seven years younger than me. And I’m . . .

CM: Seven years older than you?

LA: [*laughs*] Yeah, seven years older than me.

CM: And what was his full name?

LA: John Lee Aguilar.

CM: And it’s L-E-E?

LA: Mm-hmm. And Lee is the middle name. Not just one whole name. And so.

CM: So he was born in approximately ’52?

LA: Probably, yeah. Because I’m born at the end of the year, and he’s born at the beginning of the year. So I’m not a hundred percent sure.

CM: And then you came in ’59?

LA: Mm-hmm. At the end of the year. I always point that out. I was at the end of the year. People wanted to make me older, at the beginning of the year. [*laughs*]

CM: You’re like, “I’m practically the ’60s.”

LA: [*laughs*] Almost. I know I’m at the end of the baby boom, so.

CM: You’re like the last one. [*laughter*] And then— So what was—what was John like?

LA: He was very social. He was very sweet. To me, as a big brother, he was very sweet. He had patience with me. And then there were times that he wanted to *kill* me, but he didn’t. [*laughs*] I could see it in his body [*indistinct*] actually believe!

CM: I think that’s every sibling, right?

LA: Yeah. So, I mean, because, I don’t know. [*indistinct*] I don’t know, ’cause it’s just, it’s all I had. And then he had— There was a boy named Bobby who lived down the street, and his mother died when he was I think six years old. And so he was my brother’s friend. So a lot of times as I was growing up, Bobby would be spending the weekend with us. He would go on vacation with us, and da, da, da. His father was, you know, a single man, but he was older. And Bobby had a sister and brother, and they were like twenty and twenty-five years older than him.

CM: Wow.

LA: So, you know. So Bobby became part of the family. And then there’s these two other brothers, Teddy and Gary, and their mom and my mom went to school together. And so they would come over all the time. And if Bobby wasn’t around, Teddy would go with us. You know, or Gary. Usually Teddy went with us, ’cause Teddy and John were the same age, and Gary and Bobby were like a year and half older than them. And so—

CM: So it was like an extended family.

LA: Yeah. For a small moment of time I had four brothers, you know.

CM: Wow.

LA: Until they grew up and left. [*laughs*]

CM: What kind of stuff did you guys all do together?

LA: Well, okay. They were not necessarily wanting me with them, but . . . [*laughs*]

CM: Nobody ever wants the younger sibling with them, but you got to hang out anyway.

LA: My grandmother died when I was seven, so after that my brother was responsible for me during the summer months, you know. And so one time we were at this place where my dad would take him and the boys on the weekend. So they all had motorcycles, and it’s like this empty side of the mountain. Little mountain, you know. [*laughs*] And so they decided to go one day without. “We’re going to walk the bikes over there so we’re not driving them over there. Once we get on the dirt, we’re free to not to get arrested.” You know, in their eyes. So my brother and me are going up like a little bit of a slight hill, and I guess the

choke— Or something happened that he started rolling back. And he told me to jump, and I jumped, and then he jumped and then the bike fell down with gravity, and I scarred my leg. [*laughs*]

CM: The bike came down back on top of you.

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah, 'cause I fell first. My brother fell second, and then the bike came—just with gravity came down. And a little bit of the muffler hit my leg, so it was like, really bad.

CM: Wow, ouch.

LA: I was crying like bloody murder. And the three of them—the three other guys, you know, and my brother—are chasing me on their motorcycle and saying, "Stop crying! We'll take you to the movies. Stop crying! We'll take you and Jamie to the movies for five weeks. Stop crying! We're going to do this," you know. "We're going to do that. Stop crying!" I cried all the way home. My grandmother was still alive that year, but—

CM: So you we're running around, basically raising hell with the boys?

LA: Pretty mu— Well, they had no choice sometimes, you know.

CM: You were watching them raise hell. Doing boys' stuff.

LA: Mm-hmm. Digging holes inside of a mountain. Where we lived was—right behind where I grew up at, was a . . . oil fields on Texaco. Actually, my mom grew up there because my grandfather was a caretaker of the grounds, and so he, you know, they had a house on the grounds, and that's where my mom and her brother—her sister and brother grew up at. And so . . . When we were kids most of the [*indistinct*] were taken. There was one big huge one that had a hole in it. I mean it didn't have a hole in it. Yes, it did. So, but it was empty, and I would love to— You could climb into it, because it was like—the hole was like right here, and you could climb into it. It was empty, and so you could make all this noise and hear the echoing.

CM: Oh, my gosh. So it's like this empty oil well?

LA: Mm-hmm. Or a can. A major—huge can of oil. It was empty. It had been empty for years.

CM: And you guys would go play in it?

LA: Well, I would more than they would.

CM: Wow.

LA: But they used to go on the other side of the house where my mom grew up, and then they were building a cave, like a little cave on the side of the hill, and so.

CM: You were wild.

LA: They always had to watch me to make sure I wasn't following them over there.

CM: Their man cave?

LA: Kind of like, yeah.

CM: They didn't want the girl wrecking their man cave. [*laughter*]

LA: But then, when I got a little bit older and they got tired of the place, I took my friends there. [*laughter*] So we continued on.

CM: The tradition of going to the cave?

LA: Kind of, yeah.

CM: Oh, that's great. Now, I mean, but it sounds like you guys got along really pretty well.

LA: Pretty well. Yeah. You know, my brother's patience was a lot better than mine, so if it was the other way around, I wouldn't have been that nice. [*laughs*] If I had the same personality that I grew up with, you know, I would not have been nice to him. So I'm grateful that he was the one that was born first. My mom was grateful. One time, I'm in high school and . . . No, no, actually . . . My mom had cancer when I turned twenty, and she was taking, you know, chemotherapy and all that stuff. And so someone suggested to her from the chemotherapy place, "Maybe you should get some pot, you know, and make cookies or something like that and smoke it." It would help the nauseousness, because she would go to chemotherapy one day, the next two days she's throwing up, and then the third day, she'd go back to chemotherapy. So you know it was—

CM: She's just wiped.

LA: Yeah, she was extremely wiped. And so a friend— So my mom called me and she goes, "Can you get some pot for me?" And I go, "Yeah, sure." And she goes, "I knew your brother wouldn't know where to get from." I'm thinking, "Oh, my brother, he knows exactly where to get it from." But my brother was the golden boy, the golden child, you know, and I wasn't. And so my mom said, "I knew you could get it," 'cause, you know. And so I got it. Called a friend up who I knew smoked and got me some pot and showed me how to make—roll it up and all. So I had my first joint with my mom, and she thought I was always doing it. [*laughs*]

And so, and then another thing is like one time it was . . . I don't know how old I was. Maybe, yeah, a little bit younger, I guess. Maybe not. Anyway, she said to me one day, "I'm so grateful Johnny was born first because, you know, he was eighteen in 1969. If you were eighteen in 1969, you would be in the streets of San Francisco and peace sign and all that stuff," you know. "And you would have given me a heart attack." [*laughs*] So she's grateful that Johnny was born first and his temperament was the way it was. I guess she knows that my temperament was been the same, you know. [*laughs*]

CM: Now, was Johnny like a good student? Did he do—

LA: He was an okay student. He wasn't a great scholar. He wanted to do drafting. He was always drawing things and stuff like that. And then he got a job and then he liked having income, so he stopped going. He went to community college for a little while, but he liked having income so he stopped. And he worked in construction. Yeah, and so.

CM: What's your fondest memory of him?

LA: Ah . . . okay. My brother became really sick and I knew it. And, but he wouldn't say it to me. And so one day my dad was telling me, "You better talk to your brother because—before you won't be able to talk to him." So I called him up. And he goes, "Yes, I'm dying." You know, and all that stuff. I go, "Why haven't you told me?" He goes, "I don't know. I just didn't want to." And I go, "You know, you've been my hero my whole life." And I go, "When we were seven years old and we were going to go to . . ." At summer school they had on Wednesdays a film—a cartoon film—and popcorn. So we could walk over there. And my friend Bobby's mo—no, Jaime's mother—was going to take us. And she got sick, so she couldn't take us. And then I asked my brother if he would walk us there and so he would. So he did. Oh, I have to go back a little bit. I love Baby Huey, [the] cartoon.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I couldn't say my brother's name until I was maybe eight. I called him "Hohn." He didn't like that. So I couldn't— But for some reason I was able to say "Baby Huey." So I would call him Baby Huey. And his friends would come over and stand in front of the yard: "Can Baby Huey come out and play?" And so that day he walked me and four of my friends, you know, to school. And as we're walking by Bobby's house, they all came out from the driveway and said, "Oh, look at Baby Huey and his little ducklings." [*laughs*] From that day he was my hero. [*laughs*] You know, he was really— I mean, that's the best I ever had with him. I mean, he was always good to me. And sometimes, you know, irritated by me, but never mean to me. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah, yeah. And so then you had called him—

LA: Baby Huey before that.

CM: Yeah, but when—when he was dying, you said that you then called him.

LA: Oh, I called him and talked to him on the phone. And then I told him, "You know, you've been my hero since that day." And I told him the whole story. And I go, "I don't know why you don't think I—I, um, I feel this way about you. I thought you always knew." You know, so.

CM: What was his response?

LA: I couldn't see it. He was on the other side of the phone. I mean—I can't—it's hard for me to take people's—on the phone, because I can't see them. Unless I know them. But, you know, at the time he was sort of like getting a little— He goes, "Oh." [*laughs*] So you know, I mean . . .

CM: Why was that moment so important to you?

LA: To tell him?

CM: Well, the Baby Huey moment, where he was walking—

LA: I mean, 'cause basically from that point on, I just saw him as the greatest brother ever. You know. Before that he was also nice to me, but from that moment on, I just thought I was the luckiest person to have him as my brother. You know. 'Cause I had lots of cousins who didn't like their brothers or sisters, so [*laughs*] the arguments and stuff. So I was like, you know. Pretty much there was a big gap. So that—I always thought that the big gap is what made it easier.

CM: Exactly. And what was your brother like as a person? Like did he make jokes? Was he low key? Was he—

LA: He was low key. He was very social. He was like, you know, talked to anybody, like my mom. I'm more like my dad, because he didn't talk to many people and neither did I. [*laughs*]

CM: More shy?

LA: More shy.

CM: A little more reserved.

LA: But I was . . . not so much shy, but . . .

CM: Maybe reserved.

LA: Yeah. But for me it was more because people—because I was teased all the time for not being able to speak right.

CM: Oh, when did that start? Was that when you were a kid?

LA: Well, I went to school, and it was dominantly Anglo. And a lot of my friends were German and Italian. You know. So, anyway. And there was very few Mexicans, you know. Latinos. And so when I went to school they thought, "Well, she'll grow out it from kindergarten to first grade." First grade to second. Third grade they put me in—second grade, they put me in therapy, speech therapy, two days a week. And I saw this woman from the second grade to the eleventh grade for two hours a week. And I have no clue what her name was, because it was just me and her. She'd say, "Laura, let's do this." I'd go, "Okay." "Say this. You're not listening to me, Laura." And so she was, you know, she would—Tuesdays, she was patient with me, and on Thursdays, she wasn't. And I figured, you know, Tuesday is the beginning of the week, so she hasn't had to deal with too many people yet. [*laughs*] So I didn't really take it personal, but she would always say, "I said this and you said . . . You're not listening!" And, so.

I found out as an adult that I was . . . audio . . . Wait . . . Audio . . . No. . . I'm dyslexic, but I don't hear sounds and the way they go. And like, you know, everybody had told me, even the doctor that, when I found out about it, she goes, "It would have been better if you'd learned Spanish as a kid, because it would be easier to translate from Spanish to English because in Spanish, all . . . the sound is the sound. In English, it's not. It breaks its rules all the time." And that's why, you know, maybe that's, you know. And so a lot of people thought I was from New York because I couldn't—I have trouble with R's, you know. And, or Boston, or whatever. And you know, so.

There would—my mom thought my accent was so cute. It drove me nuts when she would say that. And, you know, it's painful, and I didn't talk a lot 'cause— And from the first grade, kindergarten actually, there's Bobby and Tommy and Becky and Lisa and myself. So there's, you know. We all lived in the same street, so we all played together. So by the first grade—more so the second grade, I think—the teachers wanted to have one or two of those kids in the room for me, so they could say, "Bobby, what did she say? What did Laura say? Becky, what did Laura say?" And then by the third grade and on, other people spoke for me. And most of those kids didn't move, except Becky and Tommy. And so, I'm in high school, and I'm saying something to this person who's a *chola* and, you know, I usually didn't want to interact with them because she scared the shit out of me. [*laughs*]

CM: Nothing like a *chola* to scare the shit out of you. [*laughter*]

LA: And so I said something. She wanted, right then and there in the hallway, to beat me up. And she's yelling at me. And then Jimmy, who was in my class in maybe the third grade and the sixth grade, he walks by and says, "Oh, no! Wait a minute. Wait a minute before you hit Laura. What did you say, Laura?" And I said

what I said. And he goes, "What did you think she said?" And so he figured you know, it was my speech that didn't make the conversation correct.

CM: There was a misunderstanding?

LA: Mm-hmm. And then he just says, "She has trouble with her sounds" and stuff, and walks on his way. And they walked on their way. And I'm like, "Okay, great." And then everybody spoke for me. They always spoke for me. "Laura thinks this." [*laughs*]

CM: And how did you feel about that?

LA: Oh . . . It's better than not having any friends. [*laughs*] You know, because these are all people that lived in my neighborhood, you know, or two blocks over. And I mean it bothered me, but I didn't really realize how much it bothered me until I was in my twenties. I was just so—I just gave over to it because, you know, they knew me and I wasn't necessary extremely happy all the time. They would always point out that I didn't like boys and da da da. And then there was always some story about [*indistinct*]. And I didn't know what the word *lesbian* meant, you know. And I was in the third grade, and this sixth year—sixth grader. But her brother—they were identical twins, these two girls. One was an angel and the other was the devil. But at school they dressed the same, so I couldn't tell which one was coming at me until they started to speak. And so the one that was the devil was always trying to beat me up. And so one day, she's on top of me, *on* the ground, and she has her fist in my face, and she says to me, "Say, you're a lesbian." And I figure, "Hmm. I'm on the ground and her fist is my face . . . I don't think I should say that word." [*laughs*] So that was the first time I heard the word, and didn't, you know, then maybe—

CM: But did you register the meaning of the word?

LA: No.

CM: No.

LA: No. And then like, maybe the next year, they moved, because they were there for maybe two and half years in the neighborhood. And, so that other times, a friend of mine's sister stopped her from beating me up after we got off of the bus. [*laughs*] I had no idea why she was always after me, because I didn't really choose to interact with her. [*laughs*]

CM: There are people like that. There are people who just seek it out.

LA: And her sister was the nicest person, you know.

CM: And so—I mean, the kids made fun of you for not liking boys. Was this an issue for you?

LA: No, no, no. They didn't make fun of me. They would just suggest that I don't like boys and—

CM: Oh, got it.

LA: And I'm thinking, "I always playing with them. I'm always fighting with them. I don't know why they think I don't like them." [*laughs*] And see, my mom basically gave me a lot of freedom. And so when I was a little kid, you know, "Go out and play with the boys. They have more fun climbing trees," whatever, you know. And, "But at four-thirty you gotta be home and be your daddy's little girl." So. My dad was predictable in everything he did. He would leave at five thirty. Get to work at six. He would leave work at four thirty and he'd be home at five, you know. And so at four thirty me and my best friend Jaime would sit on the corner. Because it was a dead end street that I grew up on, and we would sit on the corner waiting for him to come. And as soon as he would turn the corner, he would stop the truck and me and Jamie would get on the back of the truck. On the . . . I dunno—

CM: On the fender?

LA: Fender. And we would ride three and a half houses up to our home, and then we would get off. It was the funnest thing we had to do that day. Every day!

CM: It was like your routine.

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. [*laughs*]

CM: That's great. Now, what was the name of the elementary school you went to? Do you remember?

LA: Yeah, Potrero Heights. It's over here.

CM: Petrillo Heights?

LA: No, Potrero.
CM: Potrero Heights?
LA: Yeah.
CM: Potrero Heights.
LA: Yeah.
CM: And you went to that all six years of elementary?
LA: Yeah, I was the last group that had sixth grade. And then they started changing it to four-four-four.
CM: Yeah.
LA: You know. But, and I went to the high—and the high school I went to was my brother's junior high, and it became a high school two years before I went to there.
CM: Got it. And what was the name of that school?
LA: Schurr. S-C-H-U-R-R.
CM: Oh, okay. Schurr High School?
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: Or Schurr high—junior high school?
LA: No, it's high school.
CM: High school.
LA: It was high school when my brother went there. When I went there, it was a high school.
CM: Okay.
LA: And then, my brother went to Montebello [High School].
CM: Okay.
LA: Which is down about a half a mile from Schurr.
CM: What was the experience of school like? I mean, you mentioned a little bit these school speech classes you had to do, but you are dyslectic also, so I can imagine that—
LA: Well, you see, the thing is, I wasn't diagnosed until I was twenty-six years old. I went through my whole life in school failing, getting Fs and you know. I was put back in the fourth grade, and they hoped, you know, by that I might get better or whatever. And then when I was in the eighth grade, leaving middle school to go to high school, I didn't want to go to high school. And so I . . . I mean—yeah, I didn't want to go to high school because I knew I couldn't read. And so I was trying to get kept back. And they go, "We can't keep you back." They only keep someone back once, because otherwise you'd be turning, whatever. You're eighteen when you're in the seventh grade. [*laughter*] But anyway, so, I went to school and I mean—
CM: So school was not a positive experience? It's not like—
LA: No.
CM: What about on a social level?
LA: [*laughs*]
CM: No?
LA: Social level was the people of my neighborhood. And sometimes they would say, "Oh, you're not interested in that." Or, you know, "That's not you, Laura." They took me as I was, but then—
CM: Yeah.
LA: So, the lesbian thing would come up from time to time at home, too. But they never used the word *lesbian*, so—
CM: How did they address it?
LA: Oh, my aunts and my mom, you know, when family came over, the adults. The adult women would be in the kitchen talking and gossiping and all that stuff. And I remember hearing one of them saying, as I walked by to the outside . . . I don't know which one, but one of them said, "You know, Nita, you gotta do something before she turns out like Mary Inez." And I just, you know, as I walked right through, I'm going, [*indistinct*] "Mary Inez lives on a farm. I don't want to live on a farm. Mary Inez plays softball. I don't like

softball." The fact that she lived with this woman for nineteen years didn't make it clear to me until years later. [*laughs*]

CM: You're like, "I just don't want to play softball."

LA: "And I don't want to live on no farm." [*laughter*] And then about a year or so later or something, you know, my Aunt Mary goes, "I want to give you a quinceañera." And I looked at her and go, "You have seven daughters and four of them are older than me. And you never gave any of them a quinceañera. Why do you want to give me one?" "Oh, I just wanna give you one." I go, "And we're Methodists on top of it. That's a Catholic thing. And a Mexican thing." [*laughs*] So I didn't have no quinceañera. [*laughs*]

CM: You said no to the quinceañera?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: I'm just going to pause it.

[*break in audio*]

CM: So, it's like you had a sense— I mean, but you had a sense in elementary school, even if you didn't know that you were technically dyslectic, that there was just something that was preventing you from learning in the same way that other kids learned.

LA: No. I mean, I don't even know why I survived school, because basically I went to school for fourteen years. In kindergarten and then repeat the fourth grade. And basically all I ever did was get F's, you know. I'd get teachers saying, "You're intelligent, Laura. I know you are, because you ask really good questions. Don't write 'em down though." [*laughs*] So, you know, no one picked up on that. I had one teacher in the eighth grade that . . . She was someone that was saying, "You're intelligent. You ask very good questions." So she goes, you know, "Why don't you come . . . When does your bus come?" I go, "We're the last bus. And it takes some people home and comes back for us." So it was about fifteen minutes after school. So she goes, "After school, come over here and I'll go over the spelling list with you, and sound them out and say the names." And after about maybe six weeks, I was getting As. And then she said, "You could do it on your own now."

CM: No, 'cause you were learning orally.

LA: By her, yeah.

CM: Like if you heard it, you learned it.

LA: Yeah. And, okay, now this is another thing that—big painful thing in my life. But, going back to the third grade. Yeah, third grade. I had to do some homework one night, and I'm in the kitchen eating, and my mom goes, "You're not leaving this table until you eat those green beans," and I'm like . . . "And you're not gonna watch TV." And see, there's a wall—and it's not really a full wall, and you can hear the TV. So I didn't care, I sat there. Drove her nuts. And then she would say, "Go to bed," you know. And then the next morning she tells me she did my homework for me, but she wrote with her wrong hand so it looks like I did it. [*laughs*] So then I turned it in. Then she asked me later, "How did it come out?" And I—how do you tell your mom she failed a third-grade test, you know?

CM: She failed it?

LA: She failed it, yeah. Which meant I failed it, which is sort of regular with my school life. But I couldn't, and my teacher saying, "Why don't you ask your mom to talk," I mean, "help you? She says your brother's always willing to help you." And I go, "No, he's not." I mean, that was the one area where my brother wasn't great about. He would throw a dictionary at me, "Sound it out!" Cause he used the dictionary a lot. I mean, he had that—a dictionary with him always, you know, because he couldn't, I guess, spell straight out. You know? But he could sound things out. He could figure it out, you know. I could never, you know, figure it out because it's just letters. Sometimes I read the definition and then I could figure it out. Might be this. Hopefully it's this. It means the same thing. [*laughs*] So, you know.

CM: That's rough. I had friends that had dyslexia growing up, and it's just like . . . I feel like kids spend so many years going, "What's wrong with me? I just can't . . ."

LA: Pretty much, yeah.

CM: It's like you're hearing—it's like this language you don't understand, almost.

LA: Yep. Most people are visible dyslectic. Being auditory is not as— Of course, has to be not that mainstream, [*laughs*] but it was really hard my whole life.

CM: You're unique. You're unique.

LA: There's other people I know that—I also know that there are a lot of musicians that are dyslectic. Can't read their music, but they can sure play it, and they can make the music.

CM: Exactly, and if somebody plays music they can copy it, but they can't read the notes. A lot of musicians are like that.

LA: And there's more boys than girls that are dyslexic.

CM: Oh, that's interesting.

LA: It's also the same thing with autism. I mean, autism and mental retardation. There's more boys than females.

CM: And how did it—and how did it get to the point that you got diagnosed? How did that come about?

LA: Well, I graduated from high school. Went to East LA [College] for a while. Okay, I could tell you my East LA story now.

CM: We will. We'll get to East LA. That's going to be its own section.

LA: Okay, but . . . Okay.

CM: It's like we're focused on the dyslexia . . . Yeah, yeah, tell me whatever you want.

LA: The first teacher I ever had in my whole life was at East LA—I mean of color, a person of color. His name was Ross Hernandez and he was my photography instructor.

CM: Ross Hernandez.

LA: Ross, R-O-S-S.

CM: Okay.

LA: Hernandez, yeah.

CM: At East LA College?

LA: At East LA College. And [the] first teacher I ever had in my life that was a person of color. So six weeks on in the class, he pulled me to the side and said, "You can't read, can you?" And I go, "Not, really." And he goes, "Come with me." And I—see, I always thought that adults—teachers were authority, and I can't talk back. I was still young in that moment. [*laughs*] A year later I changed. But at that moment . . . So he walks me across campus, has me do a little test with the counselor. The counselor trying to—she told me that I was something—that they don't have the services to help me here. And that was it. So she put me in an English as a second language class. And English is my only language. And when I was in the class, the instructor—I was actually doing a little better than I had before—and then he goes, "What's your other language? Let me help you. What's your other language?" I go, "English." [*laughs*] He goes, "What do you mean?" I go, "English is the only language I have." He goes, "Who put you here?" I go, "A counselor." [*laughs*] And he goes, "Okay."

And so, and then Ross said to me, "You're not going to take a class in photography until you learn to read." And stuff like that. So, I will go in more detail later. So that was like a great opening. I had a, I took a psychology class, and this teacher said to me, she goes, "You know the way you write is very creative. It's not close to it but it's very creative." No, because I would find the strangest words to put together to make that word or parts of the word. So she goes, "You actually do say what you're trying to say, but it's not spelled actually the right way." So she goes, "You're very creative." That was first time that someone was somewhat nice. You know, a lot of F's.

CM: So then how did it get to the point that you were officially diagnosed? That was after East LA College, right?

LA: Mm-hmm. I went to Pasadena City College to take a class in lithography, because printers use— The lithography part is in the darkroom for the making things for the print, you know. So I figured I'm halfway there. I know how to use the camera and stuff. So I went there, and then after about maybe a year, maybe six

weeks, the instructor told me to go see this woman. He had sent me there and so I saw her. And they gave me a test and they did another test and they did another test. And they go, "Would you come back for six more times?" And I, "Sure, yes." And so after six weeks of going two hours each week, um, the diagnosis, and they did all these things. [*sighs*] So they— From that, she explained to me that I was auditory dyslexic. And to me it made sense for all those Thursdays when my speech therapist said, "You're not listening." [*laughs*]

CM: Exactly. You were listening, you just weren't hearing it.

LA: I was listening—hearing it. Right, yeah. So she said that's the reason why, and there's an umbrella over dyslexia. And there's all these little things, 'cause you're either very high or very low. You're not really—your ability is not in the middle at all, really, so you're very smart. And you're very not [*indistinct*]. And she goes, "That's one of the things people look at when they do these tests: to see those things." Like I could do calculus in the abstract form with colors and stuff, but I hadn't, I was—because I was taking this test and I would like get so frustrated, and then he goes, "Oh, you're doing really good." The tutor, you know, whatever. And then I go, "I can't . . . I want to stop." She goes, "Well, we're done. But you got a hundred percent on that." And I go, "What was that?" She goes, "The colors are an abstract version of calculus." I had no idea what calculus was, but she goes, "You're very good at it." Anyway, okay. It doesn't make sense to me because you had this color and this color which equals this color, and then had you get them and then add them, and then do it. And so . . .

CM: Oh, that's interesting.

LA: And I was dying the whole time. Vocabulary, I was pretty good with. Decent, you know, because I'm always listening. [*laughs*] Not talking, so I'm always listening. So I was pretty good with my vocabulary.

CM: And how did you feel when you got the diagnosis? Was that a bit of a game changer for you?

LA: Well, it was like a couple a days before my twenty-sixth birthday I found out I was dyslectic, and it made sense. It was very painful. How come no one else could have figured that out? I remember being put in remedial classes in junior high. When I was in seventh grade I was in a remedial class—learning disability group—and next door was the functionally retarded. F-R. [*laughs*] Great, you know. I didn't know that they were there the whole year, and I didn't know until almost the end of the year when someone told me that's what the name— A student teacher who said, "Oh . . ." I go, "Who are they?" And then she goes—she uses the initials—and then I go, "What does that mean?" And she goes, "F-R." And I go, "Oh, great."

Okay, this is a little bit in the strange way like that. When I was in the second grade, this boy named Tommy—Johnny—was sitting next to me, and it was the first week we had our spelling test. [I] didn't know if I was spelling them right, and he was scribbling on his paper. And the instructor, the teacher came by, and she looked over his shoulder, and she goes, she took the paper from him. She went to the phone on the wall, called. It ended up being the principal. He came, took Johnny and left. And she goes, "Laura, it's none of your business. Keep doing . . ." So, I was always afraid that someday the principal was going to come in and take me away. I didn't see Johnny again until I was in the eighth grade and he was in that Retarded—Functioning Retarded class.

CM: Oh, my God.

LA: And so it was like I was always frightened that people would take me away from that.

CM: And that no one would see you?

LA: Pretty much, yeah. And I mean already that people would see me because they would always ask Becky and whoever around me, "What did she say?"

CM: It's like you were there, but you were already invisible kind of thing?

LA: Yeah, pretty much. And then also when I—but then when I was diagnosed, I took a class about the different ways people cope with it or manipulate things in their lives to get where they're at. And so I took this one class, and I go, "It's always been hard for me to look at a board when they're writing it down and listen to it at the same time." And I go, like when I was like in the third grade, I used to always look out the window or the back door. And so one day the teacher was so pissed off at me, she put my desk facing the door and

had it open: “Look all you want, Laura.” And I go— You know, she would get mad because she’d be writing something on the [board] and I’d be looking out the window. And she goes, “Laura, what did I say?” And I would say exactly what she had just said, and she would get mad because I’m acting smart. [*laughs*]

CM: It’s like you couldn’t win.

LA: I couldn’t win. And then they basically said that’s because it’s too much stimulation for you.

CM: Oh.

LA: A lot of people have, you know, can’t take more than one thing at a time. And so I’d be listening, but I couldn’t, you know. I was listening to what she was saying, but I didn’t really think of an answer at that moment. But I knew what was going on around me, you know.

CM: You were registering everything.

LA: Pretty much. But it’s like, it was hard to do both at the same time. When someone says, “Look at me when you talk.” [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, stuff like that. So it was really hard. And, actually, it used to frighten my mom because I was so much, um . . . an exc—inner person [*indistinct*]. She would get scared sometimes when I would just sit and space out. It frightened her because—

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah, it just—she just was always frightened about it. And so, I dunno, it scared her because I was like disappearing and I was present, you know. And so. And then she would go to parent conference meetings and say, “Well, she has a brother. He could help her.” I just—it was always sad because, you know. My brother helped me with math and stuff like that but not spelling. That’s why he was always throwing me the dictionary. “Look it up, sound it out! Look it up, sound it out!” [*laughs*]

CM: You’re like, “Easy for you to say.”

LA: [*laughs*] ’Cause he could look it up and sound it out. They’re just letters to me, but I couldn’t just say that to anybody, ’cause they just couldn’t understand why I couldn’t learn, you know. And so.

CM: Was there any aspect of school during this time, be it elementary school or high school, that you did enjoy? Like, was there a music class or an art class, or was it all just kind of shaded by the . . .

LA: Well, I liked kindergarten. We got to paint and stuff like that, but the thing that was really interesting was that I went [to] a preschool. And at that time, preschools were on like every other block, and so I wasn’t afraid on the first day of school. I wasn’t afraid of being left behind, you know. And Tommy was crying, and I kept on saying, “Be quiet. Let’s go have fun. We’re going to finger paint,” and da-da-da. And his mom says, “Laura, he doesn’t know what— You’ve been going to a preschool. So he doesn’t know. He’s afraid that I’m going to leave him and not come back.” I go, “Oh, okay.” But I kept on saying, “It’s going to be fun. Finger painting!” [*laughs*]

CM: What about high school? Who did you hang out with in high school?

LA: Oh, Nadine and Rosemary, basically were the two. I mean they lived in— Oh, Tony, who lived in the neighborhood. Tony was Mexican, but he had red hair. And I go, “What happened? Your mom and your dad had dark hair. How did you get that red hair?” [*laughs*] It was bright red.

CM: Someone, somewhere along the way, hooked up with an Irishman. There are a lot of Mexican Irish.

LA: I know. I met some.

CM: Well, you’re Mexican Irish, too.

LA: Well, you know, a lot of Mexican Irish went to Mexico at the turn of the century ’cause they came here in the twentieth century. They didn’t like all that hatred toward them. And they figured, “We’re not getting jobs here, we’re not doing this. So let’s go to Mexico. They’re having a revolution. They’re Catholic, we’re Catholic.” It’d be something. Just the language, would be the barrier. And so a lot of people that I met in Mexico, their parents, or grandparents, came during that time.

CM: Oh, that’s interesting.

LA: So, yeah.

CM: My husband's Mexican Irish, too.
LA: Mm-hmm. Does he speak—
CM: He doesn't speak a word of Spanish.
LA: Oh, he doesn't.
CM: His parents didn't teach him. Well, it was part of that whole generation—
LA: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.
CM: Of, you know, you fit in, you assimilate. You know, we don't want—
LA: When I got involved with the Chicano community I thought I wasn't legitimate because I didn't grow up in the barrio. I didn't know what I had to say. [*laughs*]
CM: Everybody's got—every experience is valid. And then when you were in high school, what kind of stuff did you do after school or in your spare time? Did you have any activities you were into? Did you work? Or . . .
LA: No. I got [a] great allowance, so I didn't have to work.
CM: Oh, really.
LA: My dad gave me like sixty dollars a week.
CM: Sixty? Six zero?
LA: Yes.
CM: Oh, man.
LA: And see . . . Okay, where I lived was, there's three streets and then there's the Pomona freeway. And so on the other side of the Pomona freeway was a restaurant, and that was pretty much it and a gas station. And so once I—my dad gave me that much allowance once I started high school. I just asked people, "You want to go to dinner with me?" And we'd go, 'cause basically it was for me to take care of myself. "This is, I'm giving you this so you can take care of yourself." Because my dad would have a second job and he wanted my mom there. And so she would go meet him there and she would do his little games, and knitting and crocheting, and then my dad would say, "I have about a half hour left," and she would come home and make him dinner. So . . . And usually that might be eight o'clock or nine o'clock. Sometimes ten. So that's why I had my allowance. So I could take care of myself.
CM: And what was your dad's second job?
LA: Welding. He worked for the company that my brother worked for, but he fixed things because he was a welder and they needed a welder. So it was like, "Ask Paul if he wants to work for us from time to time." And then he did, and then it became a regular thing until he got sick. So . . . and it was like he worked hard, and he also sort of played hard in a sense. He would—I always saw that the money he made from his second job was the money he used to drink. And [he] gave things away. He gave my bicycle away three times. I mean he gave three of my bikes away to cousins. And then he would buy me a brand new one. And it's like, "The other one I liked better." [*laughs*]
CM: So he would have these moments of like ebullience where—
LA: Oh, he would—he used to, "Little kids, go get Uncle Paul a beer." And then he would—we'd go to Vegas a lot, so he would always bring home a bag of those dollar quarters. I mean dollar bills that are big size, not the little ones they make these days. And he would give the kid—one of the kids—one of those. "Thank you, Uncle Paul." He would just love to give them those dollars. [*laughs*]
CM: Wow. And was he a drinker all your life? Or did that start at a certain point?
LA: As long as I know him, he was a drinker. I don't know if I realized it when I was really young, but—
CM: What did he drink?
LA: Beer.
CM: Beer?
LA: Beer and beer and beer and beer. And beer.
CM: Constantly.
LA: [*laughs*] And when he was drinking no beer he was drinking Hi-C orange and 7-Up.
CM: Wow.

LA: He didn't like milk. I love milk. My mom used to have to keep track of me because I could go through two gallons, a whole icebox of milk. I could do that before the whole week's over. [*laughs*]

CM: When it's ice cold—

LA: Yes.

CM: And some cookies?

LA: Yeah, so—

CM: Wow. And what was—I mean, did your dad behave in other ways when your dad was drinking, too. I mean was he [*phone ringing*] aggressive or . . . Here, I'll pause.

[*break in audio*]

CM: Sorry I'm having such an allergy. So, I mean, what was he like when he—

LA: He went down different roads. He would go down sentimental alley.

CM: Be nostalgic and—

LA: Oh, when he drank, he'd sing. He loved his music.

CM: Really?

LA: He loved mariachi music, and then—how old are you?

CM: I'm forty-two.

LA: Maybe you might have seen her. There was a . . . What's her name? She was a white woman who sang Spanish music, but some mariachis and . . . Eydie Gormé!

CM: Yes!

LA: Those two albums of hers, the one with the really tight blue, fancy sweater and a beehive hair—

CM: Yes.

LA: Cashmere sweater. I fell in love with [that] picture and that woman singing. My dad would sing all her songs to me and dance with me when he was drinking. And he would sing—we went on like long drives. We'd go from here to the desert, and it was pretty much highway most of the way once you passed Indio. And so my dad would have his music in the car, in the camper, and he would sing all the songs to me. He loved to sing and dance to the Andrews Sisters, and he would sing the Mills Brothers' songs. And he had his mariachi music. So he liked to sing a lot when he was drinking.

CM: Did he play an instrument or . . .

LA: Nope.

CM: Was he a good singer?

LA: I don't know what is a good singer or a bad singer, but he didn't hurt my ears. So I guess he was okay! [*laughs*]

CM: He sounded good to you.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: So sometimes he'd get sentimental.

LA: Yeah, sometimes he would get sentimental and then somewhere down the line it would change. He would take another turn and then that's not—wasn't good. 'Cause he would sometimes go straight to anger because he would be feeling that my mom must be luring him in front of the people. So that would be the war piece that's so . . . And my brother was older and sometimes he would— Had to be between the two of them. And so a couple of times my— One time there was a Friday evening, and it was like every other Friday we would go out to dinner 'cause every other Friday my dad got paid, so when Daddy cooks it means going to a restaurant. [*laughs*] So one day he didn't want to go the movies, and so when he got home, my dad says, "Why don't you take the kids to the movies? They want to see the movies. Go take them to the movies. Leave me alone," da-da-da, you know. So she took us to the movies. We came back and he threw half her clothes out in the street and started calling her names and stuff. And my brother picked them up and took them in the house, and he pushed my dad against this big chest thing and it came down on him. And I don't— The next day, my brother, my dad didn't say a word about it. Always the

next day you would never say a word about what happened the day before. Except I would. If someone points it out, I would, "No, no, no. He did this!"

CM: The total younger sibling thing to do.

LA: No, it's more that my mom was an excellent liar and I'm not. I can't tell from people that they're lying unless I see them, and you know there's a lot of times I just don't read people right. So they are lying to me, but I just don't think so until later I find out they were lying. So I'm not really good at lying to people. So—I mean a friend of my dad's would call up, and my dad would say, "If it's anyone I'm not here." And I would say to this guy, "He's not here." And he'd go, "Laura, I know he's in the kitchen. I could hear him in the background." And then my dad starts yelling me. I go, "He's not here!" [*laughs*] And he would make me say that to his sisters when they called. My godmother particularly: "You could talk to her; she doesn't get angry with you." "Yeah, really?"

CM: Omigod. At what point in all of this did Gilbert, your friend Gilbert, come into the picture? Was that in high school?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: How did you meet him?

LA: I was a senior and he was a sophomore. Yeah.

CM: So he was a couple of years younger?

LA: Yeah. And he was—

CM: What was Gilbert's last name?

LA: Cuadros.

CM: Cuadros?

LA: Let me go get something. I'll be right back.

CM: Okay.

LA: I always called him Gilbert because I knew where he came from.

CM: Oh, okay, so he went by Gil Cuadros.

LA: As he became a writer.

CM: Yeah, C-U-

LA: As he got older.

CM: A-D-R-O-S. Great. And he went by Gil, but his name is Gilbert?

LA: To me he's always Gilbert.

CM: Okay.

LA: Sometimes it used to bug him. I go, "I'm sorry Gilbert but you've been Gilbert since the beginning, and I'm not changing because you want to act like a white boy!" [*laughs*]

CM: Now, how did you meet him?

LA: Okay, so I was in photography. I was like two classes ahead of him. So I was in photography one day after school, developing some film, and I came out and he was there, and we just started talking a little bit. And then I go, "Wow, I go shooting a lot. Wanna come with me? I have a car." And so his mom thought it was great that I had a car. He knew someone older than himself. [*laughs*] And so we go downtown, and I go, I'm trying to take a picture of the Bonaventure when it was brand new and there wasn't a lot of things around it. "And I'm going to lay down here in the gutter, so you make sure that anyone who comes around that corner, they're not going to hit me." [*laughs*] So we sort of—I just kind of became friends. And in a lot of ways, I mean, he was able to take me because I wasn't as bad as his stepsister. 'Cause she, he goes, "She comes in here and wakes me up and kisses me. I don't want . . . And she knows it irritates me." Anyway, so it's almost like a kid brother and stuff. We just sort of seemed to go through a lot of things similarly, not necessarily at the same time. But in the end, you know, he came out way before I did. And—

CM: How old was he when he came out? Was it in high school or later?

LA: Out of high school. Maybe twenty-one. And then my dad was an alcoholic, so I focused on that issue. And he didn't want to deal with it, but his mother and dad were alcoholics. And he didn't deal with it until

after . . . Actually, this would be a great read, to tell you about our—he writes about our friendship when we were really young.

CM: Oh, that's fantastic.

LA: To, so . . .

CM: Yeah, I'd love to read it. So you guys kind of had these kind of like parallel experiences?

LA: Mm-hmm. Like, you know, I started watching this great show on TV on Sunday mornings called "Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt." [*laughs*] [Charles Kuralt hosted *CBS News Sunday Morning* from 1979 to 1994—ed.]

CM: I remember that show. It was a great show.

LA: It was the best show I ever had. It was my school in a lot of ways, 'cause every three weeks there would be something visual art, and then there'd be writing and then there'd be music, you know. So it was always regularly every three weeks they'd change it, and so on. And so the first time I heard about this show, [it] was in Chicago, but coming to LA later that year. And so I told Gil, "We got to go to that show." And then I knew a little bit about it because I listened to the show. And then when we got there, he started reading. "How did you know that?" I go, "Because I watch the show. I don't read, you know that. So I listen." And so it was a show at the county museum. [*The Russian Avant-Garde, 1910–1930,* opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1980—ed.] And the county museum is like seventeen miles from here, and it could have been a thousand 'cause it was a foreign place. When we went to museums in school it was the science and industry, you know, and his—

CM: Natural history—

LA: Natural history and science and something. So that was it, when we went to high school, you know, in grammar school and junior high.

CM: You didn't go to art schools? I mean art museums when you were in school?

LA: Uh-uh. Uh-uh.

CM: Not one?

LA: Not one, yeah. So me and him went to that one, and I always saw—

CM: And which show was it? What show was it that had appealed to you that you wanted to go see it?

LA: It was the Russian avant-garde show. I wanted to go see it because of what I heard about it from the little five-minute thing on TV. And it was fascinating. They talked about Stalin, and I really didn't know about him yet at that time, and how he used the artists to get his stuff across. You know, he had artists make signs and stuff on the trains because Russia is a big country and they go— And so that was the best way to get everybody knowing who he was and who's he's fighting for and all that stuff. And then once he became in power, he got rid of all the artists. He threw them out of the museums and stuff and their work and all that stuff. So, I found that fascinating, that there was some work that was actually saved from that period. So I went to go see the show and I liked it.

CM: Was that the first time you'd been to the county museum? And that was a trip you initiated?

LA: Mm-hmm. Because see the thing is, after high school the two of us became very compe—in competition with each other.

CM: Competitive.

LA: We were competitive, yeah. We wanted to know something more than he did know. And so I knew something about that show before we got there. And then he read like, "I told you all that stuff." [*laughs*]

CM: You were trying to outdo each other a little bit.

LA: Pretty much, yes. What do you know and what do I know, and who's going to find out first?

CM: It was healthy competition.

LA: Mm-hmm, yeah. But it was kind of funny at times, too.

CM: And what was that experience of going to the museum like? I mean was this a little bit of an eye opener for you in terms of . . .

LA: Well, there was one comfort thing in it. See, to me it was, it's like the other side of the world. And if it's my mom, she would probably say, "It's not for you," and all that stuff. So I never told her as I drove her car away. [*laughs*] And then, so, it was . . . What was the question again? Sorry.

CM: It was like, what was the experience of going to this museum, like for the first time and looking at art?

LA: It was strange, because I wanted—once I got in the room that had the show I wanted to see, I was okay, but finding that room and going to other things . . . I just didn't understand any of the stuff, especially abstract work. I just couldn't understand why that's so important and big and expensive. And so, you know. And—

CM: All fair questions.

LA: Yeah. So I felt like, you know, it's like, okay, this is more how I saw me and Gilbert on our friendship. We were like those two little kids crossing that bridge with the angel watching over us, 'cause we went places that we never knew anything about and felt as isolated as you could possibly be, 'cause all we had was each other. And so that was, you know, sort of like going to the museum and all the other places we went to. But I was very comforted by the fact that most of the security at the county museum is Filipino, and my family's—all my, my dad had seven sisters and six of them married Filipino men, so all my cousins are Filipino Mexican. So it just felt, "Oh, someone safe to talk to." Wouldn't talk to a white man who was standing there as the guard. He might think I'm up to something. That was my attitude about that. [*laughter*] My mom always said, "Stay in your neighborhood. Don't go. You're not wanted there."

CM: Yeah. And what about seeing the show itself, this Russian avant-garde thing. I mean, was it interesting to you? Did you . . .

LA: I think the only thing about it was the fact that I knew something that he didn't know. [*laughs*] And I enjoyed it the whole day. And then beyond that, we just left. Now, I went to New York City with a high school group that I—when I was . . . A year after I graduated I went to New York City, and every other year they would go to New York with some kids from the photography class. And then another school where my instructor came from, their school in Burbank. And so we'd go, and then, so they needed chaperons, and since I was out of school I could be a chaperon. I was eighteen, so. But I got a discount on the fare and all that. So we went to museums. I wanted to go see—I really liked Ansel Adams's work at first. And then I heard about, um . . . oh, what's his name? Eugene something. Smith, maybe. No. I might come up with the name later. I just—right now it's out of my head. But he was the color version of nature, and then Ansel Adams, black and white. So I got directions how to get to the Museum of Modern Art. Oh no. Which is the biggest one?

CM: There's the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

LA: It was that one. That—it was that one. So I asked someone as I bought my ticket, "How do you get to this Eliot Portis?" That's the name of the photographer.

CM: Who?

LA: Al, Al . . .

CM: Ellery?

LA: Kind of. Porter.

CM: Ellery . . . Oh, okay.

LA: Yeah. So I asked them how to get there, and they go, "You go up these steps" [*indistinct*]. I went up there, walked around the thing, and then left. And then when I told—when I got back to the hotel later that day, "What did you do today?" and stuff like that [*indistinct*]. And my instructor—he wasn't actually my instructor, he was the one that was asking me—but, you know, he goes, "So what did you go see?" And I go, "I went into the Metropolitan Museum and I went to go see the Eliot Porter show. Then I left." He goes, "You walked in there to see one show and you walked out?" I go, "Yes." [*laughs*]

CM: You're like, "Yes I did."

LA: [*laughs*] I go, "There's nothing else there I know about, so why should I stay?"

CM: Yeah, Eliot Porter. He did a lot of the national parks.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: And those landscapes and the desert parks.

LA: Yeah, but his was all in color.

CM: All in color.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Now, how did you come across Ansel Adams's work to begin with? Where did you first see it?

LA: Hmm. At the [Department of] Water and Power. [*laughs*] The Water and Power, downtown. They used to have, um . . . you know, they have a—where they have meetings at and stuff. And so every month they would have—somebody in Water and Power is really into photography and started a group, and then they would invite photographers to come and talk about their work. So I saw Ansel Adams there. 'Cause I had read—

CM: And you saw him speak?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I saw him speak. And he talked about his work, and there was maybe at most thirty people there. You know, 'cause he wasn't—

CM: Was this when you were in high school, or you had already graduated?

LA: I had just graduated.

CM: You had just graduated. And how did you hear about the . . .

LA: Oh, somebody—oh, in the, when I went to—after I graduated from high school, I still went back to the school, but at nighttime for the adult classes so I could use the darkroom. And then one of the teacher's, you know, one of the adult people said, "I go to this [*indistinct*]. And I asked her to bring me a schedule, and so she did. I went to other ones, you know, 'cause . . . And I remember myself—sometimes I ran into her, sometimes I didn't. And I just thought they were fascinating. I also saw Ruth Bernhard.

CM: Wow.

LA: You know her work?

CM: I'm not too familiar with it.

LA: Okay. Well, she's . . . Well, she was rather old, but she was still old when she died. No, but she was a photographer in New York, and she did lot of commercial work. And then she did stuff that was somewhat on the side of her commercial work. But later she's known for these beautiful pictures. Photographs of a woman in a box naked.

CM: Yes!

LA: Long, and different sizes.

CM: Yes, I know exactly who you're talking about.

LA: So that's Ruth Bernhard.

CM: Okay. So tell me about the Ansel Adams talk. What was that like?

LA: Boring. [*laughs*] But the pictures, the photographs, were beautiful. So—

CM: So there was like an exhibition of the photographs?

LA: Mm-hmm. They were like laid out. Like I said, it was only maybe eighteen people. It was never a full place.

CM: And you're like in a conference room?

LA: Kind of like, yeah.

CM: Kind of, or a little hall.

LA: Yeah, yeah. I mean because he would show the slides, but then he would also bring some to show you the real—how it looks and all that stuff.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then I learned about his system, which I didn't ever find interesting.

CM: You didn't?

LA: Oh, I found it boring as hell.

CM: Why?

LA: Because it's a lot of testing. [*laughs*] A lot of keeping track of things and stuff like that. I mean I'm a pretty good printer, but I could never get to that level because I can't be patient enough.

CM: That sort of that refining of color and tone?

LA: Mm-hmm. Well, I think I do good with tone and color, but it's just, I just found it more mathematical than visually entertaining, you know. I mean he was the expert. I mean, I loved him until I saw Eliot Porter, then I sort of like dumped him. [*laughs*]

CM: Really? Now what did you love about his work when you first saw it? What appealed to you?

LA: Oh, just nature. Yosemite, stuff like that. I just found that's what I liked about it, and it was beautifully put together. And then as the years went by, I just learned that it was more technically particular. And I mean it was beautiful and . . . but it was so much technical stuff involved in it. So I just like, I thought that the technical stuff sort of takes the creativity away. I mean, I'd never say any of his pictures are bad. Actually, he was a very good portrait photographer because he used to do portraits of people to make a living. He was supposed—his father was disappointed that he did not go the track he wanted him to go, because he was a pianist and he wanted him to be—he was good. He was really good, but it wasn't his passion. And so there were ties sort of broken between them on that.

CM: Oh.

LA: But then he got—he started doing photography. He also went to Manzanar and took pictures of Manzanar for a government state thing. But he also became friends with [Toyo] Miyatake and Miyatake had a gallery and a—actually not a gallery. He had a studio downtown in little Tokyo and he was a very famous photographer who did photograph his community and all that.

CM: Wow.

LA: And so then I go, "How did Ansel meet Miyatake?" And I don't know who told me. It was Ansel or someone else brought him up, but Miyatake would have maybe every other month he would write different photographers. And they were all men, of course. And he would show their work. And he had this salon thing, you know?

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so he had Edward Weston there. He had Ansel Adams there. He spoke about his work. He had big people and names at that time.

CM: Did you go to any of these?

LA: No, that was before I was born.

CM: That was before you— Oh, yeah, that was way early.

LA: Yeah.

CM: It's like early twentieth century.

LA: I met his grandson, and—

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: I mean he was part of the business. And it's like he, he was the first—his great-grandson, because his . . . or great . . . I don't know which one, but he was a grandson of him. And he was the first one to say no to taking over the business because it's basically passed from one to the other. And even though he was still alive he was still running Miyatake's studios.

CM: Wow.

LA: But his son was taking the pictures and stuff, you know, stuff like that. Except special people he would do his own. So—

CM: Wow. Do you mind if I stop?

[*break in audio*]

CM: So I love that. Any other Department of Water and Power talks that you went to?

LA: I remember Ruth Bernhard and Ansel the most, but I think I maybe went to maybe six before they ended up—stopped doing it. Liability kind of thing, because there were a lot of people who weren't employees, so it was more liability.

CM: Oh, God.

LA: Not that anything was going to happen in the auditorium thing.

CM: Yeah.

LA: They just—that was their excuse to end it.

CM: Yeah, yeah. Maybe they didn't want to fund it.

LA: I don't think they funded it. They just offered it because it was an employee who brought it up—

CM: Got it.

LA: At the time. So . . .

CM: Now what about . . . Did your family do any cultural stuff together, like listen to music, go to concerts, read out loud?

LA: My mom couldn't read.

CM: Your mom couldn't read?

LA: Yeah, I told you about the third grade.

CM: That's right. She failed your test.

LA: Mm-hmm. And my dad wasn't sure about his reading, because he would read something to me and he goes, "Is that what I'm reading?" And I go, "Yeah." And sometimes I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I would still say yeah, because I didn't want him to know that I couldn't read.

CM: Yeah.

LA: It's good, you know. Because he had—he only went to the sixth grade. So . . .

CM: Your father did?

LA: Mm-hmm. So he wasn't always sure about things that he read, but he would go over it several times, and then—and then ask me, is that the sense, is that the gesture of what he thinks it is. I'd go, "Yeah."

CM: What about your brother? Was he into any cultural stuff?

LA: No. [*laughs*] No.

CM: But he was the one that instigated your entry into photography in a way?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: How did that happen?

LA: My brother bought a camera and it had all these lenses: the telephoto, right angle, micro and macro, and I wanted to touch them and he went [*slaps hand*] "No." And I go, "I want to do photography. I want to take pictures." [*slaps hand*] He goes, "This is too expensive. It's not a toy. But if you get into a photography class in high school, I will let you use it. Not have it, use it." [*laughs*]

CM: And this was when you were in . . . He got this set when you were in high school?

LA: Junior high.

CM: Junior high?

LA: Yeah. So, yeah, it was way before I knew they had photography in high school.

CM: Wow.

LA: I knew they had photography in junior high, but it was for those brainy kids. You know, excel kids. You know. So I go, "Damn them." [*laughs*]

CM: Screw those kids.

LA: Pretty much. [*laughs*]

CM: So you were motivated to take a photography class specifically so you could play with your brother's camera?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: That was—

LA: That was my motivation.

CM: That was your motivation.

LA: I couldn't touch it until I had a class, he said, and in the meantime he bought a little enlarger and he bought camera [*indistinct*] and trays and tanks to develop the film. And he showed me how to develop the film, and then he showed me how to make little prints of them. And I basically photographed—and I printed up a lot of pictures of girls playing volleyball at the net and boobs bouncing up and down, you know.

CM: For you brother? Those were photos your brother was taking?

LA: Yeah, they were the photos my brother took. Yes. And then he moved on to the beach in the summer. It was bikini tops and stuff like that. [*laughs*]

CM: So he had you as lab assistant?

LA: Mm-hmm, pretty much. He—

CM: Where did he build his little lab?

LA: In his dark—in his bedroom.

CM: In his bedroom. What? He taped all the windows off and—

LA: Taped all the window off. He put in somewhat in the closet. It was long sliding doors, so . . . And basically that was it. And then I started getting sick, and my mom told him, "Take that outside." [*laughs*]

CM: Because you were inhaling all those chemicals. You probably had no ventilation system.

LA: No. [*laughs*] About a year or so later, I got into photography, and then after that he made me a darkroom outside in the patio.

CM: Wow.

LA: And it was a really neat darkroom. It was like maybe seven feet wide by thirty feet long because it was half the patio.

CM: Wow.

LA: So. And it was—actually it became my escape from my parents, because they would fight a lot. And my brother was now working and on his—had his freedom. Came and went as he pleased. And so if I would walk through the living room sometimes, I would get caught between them, and I would have to be forced to take a side. And I didn't want to take a side because no matter what, I would never win. And so, years before that my uncle—we went to Alabama because my Aunt Lenora moved back there when I was five years old. So the year after my grandmother died, we went to go visit him that summer. And so, anyway, I was seven and a half, I guess, getting close to eight. And so my uncle would play with his kids, chess, and he explained all the characters on the chess board what they were. And when he explained that the pawn is just there to be the buffer between the king and queen: "It's not important. It's just there to buffer until they—you get kicked out." And that's basically all it was, and I realized who I was in my family.

CM: Wow.

LA: You know, I realized that I'm the pawn between the two of them.

CM: Wow. So the darkroom was the way of escaping that role?

LA: Mm-hmm. And sometimes I wasn't even printing. I was just laying there and just had my music on.

CM: Wow.

LA: And it had an air conditioner. My house didn't have an air conditioner but I [*laughs*] did for my darkroom.

CM: Now when did you take your first photo class. Were you a freshman in high school? Or . . .

LA: No, I was a junior in high school.

CM: But by then you had already been printing your brother's photos for a number of years?

LA: And my counselor would—I asked him, "Let me take photography." And he goes, "No, that's for students who come to school." And I ditched a lot. Oh boy, did I ditch.

CM: Really?

LA: Yes, even when in grammar school and junior school, you call in and say why Laura was sick. When we got to high school, couldn't do that. I had to send a note, and so my mom, the first time I was sick, she wrote a note and the person at the attendance said, "You've only been gone one day. Did you have your tonsils taken? I go, "No, I had a sore throat." She copies something of the medicine thing and put the wrong

thing that I had. So I told her that and she goes, "Okay, next time you're sick have Nadine write you [an] excuse and—"

CM: Who was Nadine?

LA: My best friend. [*laughs*] So I ditched a lot because she would sign my notes for me. So my mom one day got really angry because she was called into school to talk to the girls' principal. Who knew we had a girls' principal? And she said that "Laura's been in school seven hundred days and she's only shown up for thirty of them." So my mom begged me to go to school and not to ditch so much and stuff like that."

CM: What did you do when you were ditching?

LA: Come back home and watch TV. [*laughs*]

CM: Hang out?

LA: Pretty much, because no one was going to be home until four thirty. My dad was the one who got home after. I'd get home about two thirty, and my brother was on his own by that time. If we were still in school, he would get home maybe at four o'clock, and my dad and my mom would always get there before he got home.

CM: Wow.

LA: Because he was angry that she didn't work part-time.

CM: So they wouldn't let you take a photo class because you were a freshman—

LA: No, they— I was—

CM: And you had poor attendance?

LA: I had poor attendance, but I didn't really try to get into photography until I was a junior and then—I mean, a sophomore—and then I started hounding my counselor who lived two blocks away from me. I would see him [in] the neighborhood, and I go, "Andy! I want to be in photography." He goes, "Excuse me, Laura?" I go, "Mr. Sikes. But you said at home I could call you Andy because you're at home. You're not at school." He forgot he told me that. [*laughs*] And then his daughter and her husband lived up the street from me, and it was a dead end street. So I would hear that old Volkswagen go up the hill and I would just wait out in the front yard, watering, and waiting for him to go by so I could yell at him about giving me a photography class.

CM: So you were determined [that] you were getting in that photography class?

LA: No matter what, yeah. And—

CM: So when you finally got in, what was . . .

LA: It was— In lot ways I realized it was the way to fail, because it put me in the second semester. First semester they were learning how to develop the film and make a contact sheet and print. Second semester, they just do more printing. But see, I already knew all that because my brother taught me. But if it wasn't for that, I would have failed. And then, anyhow, at the end of the semester I was getting ready for summer school, and he goes, "I spoke to so and so and she's looking forward to having you in her ceramics class next year." I go, "What do you mean, ceramics class?" He goes, "I've talked to her and said you're very creative." And I've mentioned I wanted to take ceramics, but I wanted photography more than ceramics. And then he goes, "You know, because I think you're wasting your time. You can't see. You have no sense of composition." And you're wasting his time, even though he was going to be teaching literature the next year. I didn't need his okay because I passed with a C.

And so my senior year, basically we had the guy who was the first time teaching, and he was just for [*indistinct*] and after school. And he was a young guy, and he just graduated from college. And his thing was, "Okay, you guys are seniors. I want a portfolio of travel images by the end of the year. And half of the year—in the middle of the year I want to see how you progress. Seeing and all that. So by the end of the school year, you're going to have at least twelve pieces. A body of work." And so he was cool. We didn't bug him, he didn't bug us. If we needed help, he would show us what we were doing wrong and all that, but it wasn't really much of a class to be honest.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And—

CM: Do you remember his name?

LA: It might be Sievers, but I'm not 100 percent sure. It's a word in there, kind of Greek, I think it was. But I'm not 100 percent sure. And then at the same time, that year was the guy who was taking over Mr. Barrett's place. He was there from first period to fifth period. And so he was setting up. rearranging everything, remodeling everything, putting backdrops. So . . . but the last two hours was his free time and the other guy's time to teach us. And so sometimes I'd ask him because he wasn't that great. [*laughs*] You know, during explaining. So sometimes, so . . . And then the following year I graduated.

CM: In what year was that? What year did you graduate from high school?

LA: Seventy-eight.

CM: Seventy-eight?

LA: Mm-hmm. And then I came back at nighttime, and was in the adult program, so I could use the darkroom. And that's when I met Gilbert, because sometimes he'd be there after school finishing up his work. And then so we started talking, and he was only two years younger than me. So I go, "Let's go here, and let's go there." And he said, "Great!" And he was very shy. Um, we were both shy, but . . . you know, when you have two shy people you talk a lot." [*laughs*]

CM: You understood each other.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Now, what was finally being able to do photo—I mean, did your brother finally relent and let you use his camera, once you had taken the class? Or did you get own gear? How did you—

LA: Oh, he basically he was not shooting anymore. It was just sitting there collecting dust, so he gave it to me.

CM: Oh, nice.

LA: You know.

CM: And what kind of camera was it?

LA: Lumia, I think. Nikon, or . . . I mean, I don't know. It wasn't expensive but it wasn't the cheap one. It was somewhere in the middle as a brand.

CM: It wasn't a little point and shoot?

LA: No, no. It had—

CM: It had lenses.

LA: Lenses that you could put on and take it off. And then—

CM: Like a thirty-five millimeter.

LA: Mm-hmm. It was a thirty-five, but it had all these lenses that [were] changeable.

CM: And what about it drew—I mean, what drew you to photography? What did you like about it? I mean, because you weren't that into doing the ceramics class, even though that . . .

LA: No, I wanted to do that, but—

CM: But not as much!

LA: I wanted photography, yes.

CM: But not as much. So what appealed to you about photography? What drew you to it?

LA: I can't go beyond the fact that my brother had, so I had to do everything he did. [*laughs*] I mean, basically, that's why I started, you know, like that's the reason why he said, "You're not, until you get to class, where I give you the camera and touch the camera. Until then you can't touch it." And then he showed me all the other stuff. So it's like pretty much basically everything my brother, did I wanted to. I was his tail—tagalong. I was in his shadow all the time.

CM: Clearly there must have been something there that drew you to it.

LA: Not really.

CM: Not really?

LA: Not really. It's just that he had something that I wanted to use, and he wouldn't let me use it until I learned how to use it. And in the meantime, he let me do his printing and stuff. And then he gave me five bucks a

roll of film. That was a great deal. He supplied the camera goods. He supplied the paper. And he supplied five bucks a roll [*laughs*] to be developed. And he found that I kind of liked it. So I kept on doing it, and when I got into the class, he kept his word. And then I just started doing this stuff. And then I started being told I had no sense of—

CM: So they told you, you had no sense of composition?

LA: Mr. Barrett, at the end of the semester, said that I have no sense of composition.

CM: This was the counselor?

LA: No, this was the teacher that was teaching—

CM: This was the teacher.

LA: That was going to go back to literature. He [said], "No sense of composition. You can't focus. And you're wasting my time." [*laughs*] And I just grumbled. And I just sort of grumbled my way out, and I go, "Wait a minute. I don't need his approval." I passed with a C, so I signed up for it again. [*laughs*]

CM: You're like, "Ha! Take that!"

LA: Pretty much.

CM: But what led you to sign up for it again?

LA: The fact that he told me that I couldn't see and control this and that. Found out I had—I was nearsighted in one eye and astigmatism in the other. So that helped the focusing. [*laughs*]

CM: So what kind of stuff did you take pictures of when you were starting out? What was interesting to you?

LA: First we did class assignments. But I could show you my prints.

CM: Oh, sure, that'd be great.

[*break in audio*]

CM: Oh, this is your first class assignment?

LA: Of one of them. I think it's—

CM: So it's a photo of a basset hound wearing a cowboy hat next to a pumpkin? [Fig. 1]

LA: Yes, the cowboy hat, that was my birthday present from the kids I babysat.

CM: Can I take a picture of this quickly just so I have it for my notes? So this was from high school?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: So whose basset hound is that?

LA: My basset hound.

CM: What was his name?

LA: His name was Joey. And he was a "she." My cousin and— When people came to visit, we would always take them to Universal Studios. So this time, my little cousin Tricia, at the time she's like maybe five. When we were getting to the area, Frankenstein starts walking toward the tram. She started crying like crazy, and no one could— And my brother kept on saying, "When we get off of the tram, Tricia, I'll buy you, I'll take you to the store and buy you something." And so they bought a stuffed dog that looked like Joey.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: It was a basset hound. And then her sister got married, and the Basset hound was my cousin Evie's dog, but they were moving to an apartment. They couldn't keep it, so she gave it to me.

Figure 1. *Joey*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches.

CM: Oh, wow. And what led you to put the basset hound with the hat and the pumpkin?

LA: It was supposed to be a still life, and I tried to convince my teacher it was a still life. And he goes, "He could breathe." I go, "Yeah, but he doesn't really move." [*laughs*]

CM: He's a basset hound!

LA: She's a basset hound.

CM: *She's* a basset hound.

LA: I always—it took me years to remember that she was a she and not a he. And she had personality, I swear.

CM: Yeah, you can tell by looking at this picture. She looks kind of resigned. Like, "Alright, I'm gonna sit here with this hat on my head."

LA: "I have no choice. No choice. No choice."

CM: So what else do you have there? Are these some of the early—

LA: These are—

CM: Pictures that you did?

LA: Stuff from high school, yeah.

CM: Now, did your high school have a paper? Did you work for them too, or that was—

LA: No, no, no.

CM: At ELAC?

LA: No, no, no. That was ELAC.

CM: Okay.

LA: They had a paper, but that was for the smart kids.

CM: Oh.

LA: Yeah, there was—did that. Anyhow, too, you know, they were all the bright kids.

CM: Yeah, the yearbook, the—

LA: Yeah, yeah. I had it a little bit ago. Oh, here we go. Let me find it. This was the first thing that I got an award for.

CM: Okay.

LA: Optimis—optimistic.

CM: This was . . . You had applied for an award, right?

LA: Yeah. I mean, it was a competition and the teacher wanted us to send something, so I did. And I happened to get an award for it.

CM: And this was a kid shooting a Winnie the Pooh.

LA: Yeah, with a cowboy hat. [*laughs*]

CM: And what led you . . . Now, what led you to this composition?

LA: No, the teacher said, "Do it. [*laughs*] Submit something." And I submitted this and . . .

CM: No, but I mean, where did the idea come from?

LA: Oh, it's supposed to be something positive, and I figured he wants to take a picture. He wants to be a photographer. [*laughs*]

CM: It's so cute.

LA: I know. His name was Scotty. And I used to babysit him.

CM: He's shooting his bear.

LA: Yeah. Well, actually, it was my bear that my brother won me when he was taking the girlfriend out. And they were at a carnival, and the girlfriend [says,] "Oh, you're so sweet taking your little sister." [*laughs*] That's how I got that stupid teddy bear. And this is what I did in high school. I didn't really interact much with people. Want me to take it out?

CM: Oh, if you want.

LA: Because I didn't really have these copied.

CM: So this is like . . .

LA: High school.

CM: High—this is a high school image . . . It's of . . . What are we looking at?

LA: It's on a boat.

CM: On a boat. So we're looking at the mast, headed up?

LA: Yeah.

CM: With all the ropes or the ladders?

LA: Well, yeah. It's actually on the Queen Mary.

CM: Oh, wow. And then is this the Queen Mary as well? [Fig. 2]

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: And these are still from high school?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Okay.

LA: I did a lot of color then. I didn't have to print it. I just took slides. And this is . . . I started doing football for the high school, for the guys.

CM: Wow.

LA: And then I also did track and field and other things, and I would sell them to the boys, and give them to the teachers who were their coaches. Usually the coach was—one coach was teaching mathematics and another one science, and I passed those classes. And I made money from the boys, you know, five bucks a shot.

CM: That's great.

LA: And this is . . .

CM: Yeah, and they get like this nice framable . . .

LA: And this is the only time I ever did a studio project.

CM: Okay.

LA: It took me six hours to do that.

CM: This image of glasses, mugs?

LA: Yeah. And having the light that . . . Yeah, it took me six damn hours to do it.

CM: Creating that sense of reflection?

LA: Yeah, it was an assignment and I really dreaded it. And then . . .

CM: Do you not like studio stuff that much?

LA: Yeah, I'm not—I didn't want to be a commercial photographer. None of us liked the reason why we did studio, so that you could learn to go and get a job after school. I liked to photograph. And I did this, like this slide, and the other ones were slides that I took and had them printed later.

CM: So this yellow barn. You prefer outdoor? [Fig. 3]

Figure 2. *Queen Mary*, 1978. Chromogenic color print, 9½ x 7½ inches.

Figure 3. *Untitled*, 1978. Chromogenic color print, 11 x 8½ inches.

LA: I like, well, see I didn't . . . I was shy. I didn't really talk to people except my little cousins who I could boss around. [*laughter*] And—or other people. See, Joey was also—he was . . . I really miss the one that I had—that she had…

CM: Is this your cousin, sitting on Joey?

LA: Yeah. This is of my other cousin who's my godchild. So . . . You don't need to take all of them.

CM: Just for my notes.

LA: Yeah. Now, this is like. I think it's a great picture because it's, like, my little cousins look like orphans. [*laughs*] They all look like that. [*laughs*] Everything was made by their mom or their sister because—

CM: And she's your cousin?

LA: She's my cousin. She's number one of the ten kids. And this one and this one are her—not her boys, but another sister's boys. No, she's not the first one. She's the fourth one, and then he's the youngest. And then this is the friend of the family. I don't remember his name, but—

CM: The tall guy on the left?

LA: Yeah. He—

CM: And then the two little kids are her kids?

LA: Yeah. These two are hers. She had four girls and these were the two youngest. I baptized Diana, and I ended up getting Melissa in the deal. So every time Diana came to stay with me for a week, I had Melissa, too. I mean I didn't mind it. It's just, you know, because . . .

CM: It was, "Buy one, get one free."

LA: [*laughs*] Pretty much. And then I would babysit for my cousin Becky. And she had a boyfriend that was married, and so every once in a while I would stay with all four girls for the weekend.

CM: And who are these in the contact sheet?

LA: Oh, these are Tonya and Galen.

CM: Are these family members?

LA: Yeah, it's my cousins, yeah. Basically, my cousins are the ones that taught me how to actually take portraits of people.

CM: So it was like you were shooting your family, you were also shooting outdoor stuff, sports?

LA: A lot of—well, sports was before school, and I made money off it. It wasn't because I liked it.

CM: Okay.

LA: It was just something that I was sort of fascinated with.

CM: Something to do.

LA: Something to do and make some money. And then this is the farm that . .

CM: Which farm is this?

LA: Out in Hemet. It was my mom's cousin's farm.

CM: Oh, that's right.

LA: And I—a lot of these I've never been able to print because I've never had the time to go back. But I love these pictures that I was beginning. So, in some ways, you could see from some of these little proof sheets, my eye was starting to develop it.

CM: Yeah. Looking through these abstract shapes . . . You know, interesting. Oh, and then this image right here is this one right here. Of the coffee tin?

LA: Yeah.

CM: This is still in high school, all of this?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: These barn contact sheets?

LA: Yep. And my mom's cousin had a farm out in Hemet, and so we would go out there. Here's some more of the color stuff that I did.

CM: Wow. Your high school teacher was crazy for saying you had no sense of competi—composition. I don't know what he was talking about.

LA: I know. But he was Mr. Intellect—Intellectual. I mean, he just said what he said. And I found out I needed a—and then years later—

CM: Do you think he was just picking on you?

LA: Yes! [*laughs*]

CM: You're like, "Hello!"

LA: Yeah, there was very few girls that took the class.

CM: Oh, that could be part of it, too. Yeah, these shapes of the rope, the details of the ship, this railway . . .

LA: Lot of form there.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I used to drive my mom, because she would take me and my friends to the farm, and she would take the side route to the farm. And it was like, "When are we gonna get there?" She'd stop the camper and she was, "Kids come on. Look at this! Look at the texture in this dirt." And look at this, and look at that. And I'd be in the camper, in the top of the camper—[the] bed—and I'm like, "Mom, you've seen one tumbleweed, you've seen them all! Let's go! Come on!" My friends didn't understand why I was so grumpy. [*laughs*]

CM: Wow. Oh, and this has some of your New York shots from 1979.

LA: Actually, it's 1970. Yeah, '79, because that was the year I graduated from high school.

CM: Central Park covered in snow. Now, I mean, was there . . . You know, you mentioned that you were shy and that you didn't like to talk so much. Was there an aspect to being behind the camera that also offered a sense of protection? Like this—

LA: Yeah.

CM: This way of communicating that didn't involve—

LA: Well, see, like I said, I started out with my cousins because I was bigger than them and they would listen to me.

CM: They had no choice. [*laughter*]

LA: Pretty much, yeah, pretty much. No choice, yes. So here's a whole bunch of them, you know.

CM: Omigod, this is so cute.

LA: Had to be over there.

CM: So you started out with them, in terms of shooting people?

LA: Yeah, because I was taller and bigger than them, and they had to sort of, they didn't do what I wanted them to do. That was the thing that I had to learn about them. Let them do what they want to do as I think I'm going to do what I want to do. But I—they always seem to win. Here's some great pictures.

CM: Oh, so they taught you that part of photography is collaborating with your model in a weird way?

LA: Mm-hmm. Well, I learned how to direct people later. I mean, I didn't realize it at the time, but I also learned about patience. Because okay, I would go every summer— Every spring, my brother and me would go down to the desert, to my aunt's house, and we would spend Easter week there. And so at the time, my little cousin Tricia was about maybe four years old, or maybe five. And so every morning she would walk around me, like a ten foot—between me and her. And she didn't know who I was. Then by the afternoon, we were playing, and she's giggling and hugging me and all this stuff. Next day, we'd have to start all over again. And so my aunt— I go, "I can't. . . ." It bothered me. I go, "Aunt Mary, how come this happens?" "She doesn't see you every day. You come maybe once a month and here for this week. You're here for a whole week. So that's why she starts to get up to—she starts to be more comfortable with you by the end of the day. But then when she wakes up she starts all over again. She's a little kid."

CM: Yeah.

LA: I go, "Oh. Don't take it personal."

CM: Yeah, they're just kids.

LA: Yeah, so.

CM: So this is just when you're beginning to get the mechanics of . . .

LA: Yeah, and trying to order them to pose for me. Have them pose for me. Not necessarily an easy thing to do.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then the ones that I did, they— Too much, they look too like, too much like . . . They were for holiday things, and—

CM: Yeah.

LA: Stuff like that. And it's just like, I love this one, like the three girls.

CM: The three girls?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Oh, that is a nice one. I love the roller skates. This reminds me of a friend's kid.

LA: That's my godchild Diane.

CM: That's your godchild Diane. The one on the right hand side?

LA: This is Diane, Karen, and Tina. Tina's the oldest. Oh, and let me see, this is Diana and that's Melissa.

CM: So cute.

LA: I know it. She was littler.

CM: But, yeah, I was wondering. Is this the way—is having the camera in front of you a way of just getting a little, of communicating in a different way, I guess?

LA: Well, I thought it was more a way to be bossy to people.

CM: Really? [*laughter*] I mean, did . . . But did it give you a sense of authority? Do you feel—

LA: I don't know. I don't . . . To be honest, I don't know. I didn't think of it at the time.

CM: But I mean, in retrospect? Not so much?

LA: No, it gave me something. It gave me something that I felt that I was good at, yeah. See, then there's Mikey. But, I mean, I had to learn to deal with kids. So, you know . . .

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then I started getting a little more understanding from them to me, you know. "Okay, let me stop being silly and let's take the picture the way she wants it." [*laughs*] I've got several . . . This was like . . .

CM: The kids playing pyramids?

LA: Yeah. And then, you know, making silly faces, and like, "You can't control us." [*laughs*] And then, carrying . . .

CM: Great.

LA: This is Georgie and Jason.

CM: These are nephews?

LA: No, cousins.

CM: Cousins?

LA: Yeah. Mom is number one, and they're cousins.

CM: They're driving, like, a little car?

LA: Yeah, it's supposed to be a fire truck that they're standing on. Georgie is the oldest one, and Jason's the youngest one and—and Jason. I'm close to both of them, but they're very different people, Georgie and Jason. Georgie was kind of a—kind of an angry, aggressive kid. He was the first born, so everything he did was right. And Jason was the second, and Jason was very much—he was very cuddly. He was sweet. He wasn't angry. Georgie was, most of the time. My cousin Georgie had an accident when he was twenty-one, twenty-two. He was in the air force, and he was home on leave, I guess, and he had an accident. He had bought a brand new motorcycle, and until after the accident they didn't know how it—it ended up. It was leaking oil. And he's driving it, and he does a curve, and the girl that was with him had never really been on a motorcycle. She don't know that she needed to lean with him. So they end up skidding. And he was very fortunate that he skidded into where he did at the time. The guy, who was in the house at the time, came out, and he was an off-duty paramedic. So my cousin didn't have a pulse at the time. He came out—So he saved him, you know. And then he lost a lot of his memory and his vocal—it took him a year and a half to be able to take care of himself again. To move, to walk, to speak. And he cannot remember before high school. The farthest back he can remember is high school.

CM: Wow.

LA: And he doesn't remember anything before that. And let me tell you this, but you can turn it off for a second.

[*break in audio*]

CM: It's great looking at people's earliest images.

LA: I realize that they taught me a lot of stuff because it took forever to get this picture of them. [*laughs*]

CM: This is all the cousins?

LA: These are the original ones. The first ones. Because then, after we got the next generation, I have, you know, because . . .

CM: So, get them all neatly seated.

LA: Yeah.

CM: It looks like on a—

LA: A back of a truck.

CM: Back of a truck. Oh, a truck bed?

LA: Yeah. And that's Jason. He's my favorite of all of them. His son is my godson.

CM: On the left hand side? The kid in the white T-shirt?

LA: Yeah. And the one that's not paying attention over here.

CM: It's like herding cats, isn't it?

LA: [*laughs*] What time did you say it was?

CM: It's quarter to one.

[*break in audio*]

CM: Before we get to East LA—

LA: Okay.

CM: I just had a couple more questions, sort of about your youth. I mean, were there . . . You said that you ditched school and come home and watched TV. Like, were there any TV shows or movies or anything like that—sort of like pop cultural—that were really important to you growing up?

LA: *Dark Shadows*. [*laughs*]

CM: *Dark Shadows*. You were into *Dark Shadows*? Why were you into *Dark Shadows*?

LA: Oh, I mean it was—I didn't know it at the time, but it was my first soap opera. I'd get off the bus, and we would all run home and go to turn the TV on and see *Dark Shadows*. Exact timing. You know, I would have to cross from the bus, and it was four blocks. I'd get home, turn the TV on. "Don't bother me!" [*laughs*]

CM: What was it that appealed to you about the story?

LA: Oh, it was the vampire, and . . . back east somewhere. I don't know it just was, it was strange. And so it turn—it got me into the soap opera life. [*laughs*]

CM: Are you into soaps now?

LA: No, they just ended a year or so ago. The two of my—my two favorites.

CM: Really. Which were your two favorites?

LA: I saw *All My Children*. And it started out in black-and-white and it was a half-hour show, and then it went to an hour. And then I started watching *One Life to Live*, also because they were back-to-back. And I stopped the line at *General Hospital*, because I could be in the house twenty-four hours watching soap operas. This is a little too much. Or I could miss one and watch the other one and then catch up, if you're sick. And when we went to school, someone would be home, like Sandy was home and I'd call her up—my cousin—and I'd go, "What happened this week?" And then all you need is two days and you're back to where you're in touch with what everything that's been going on for the last six months.

CM: Exactly. Exactly, that so-and-so is really so-and-so's daughter. You know, so-and-so is having an affair. Now, was sci-fi like something that appealed to you? Was that an element of the *Dark Shadows*, or was it just really that sort of personal plot twisting?

LA: It was just the mystery of it. I like mysteries, and so I think that was it. But I didn't like sci-fi then until I got older. I liked *The Next Generation*. I didn't like the first generation. [*laughs*]

CM: You like *Star Trek*?

LA: I love *Star Trek*. The second—*The Next Generation* and *Voyager*.

CM: Yeah. Patrick Stewart?

LA: Yeah. Yeah.

CM: "Make it so. The line will be drawn, heah." [*mimicking Stewart*]

LA: And the doctor, and the mind control. The other doctor that could read your mind.

CM: Yeah.

LA: I got into them. They made more sense to me than the stupid— Every time they landed, he had an affair with a woman. [*laughter*]

CM: The original *Star Trek*?

LA: Yes.

CM: Yeah, William Shatner had to hook up with an alien.

LA: Yeah, every time.

CM: With a hot alien. [*laughter*] It was always like a hot alien with size C breasts.

LA: [*laughs*] I guess so.

CM: Like, wherever he went.

LA: Yeah, I didn't care for it that much. My brother loved it, and—

CM: Really?

LA: So that was his thing.

CM: What about movies?

LA: I loved the Herbie movies.

CM: Yes!

LA: And, "The Computer Wears Tennis Shoes." [*The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes* (1969)—ed.]

CM: Oh, I don't know that one.

LA: There was like maybe four or five of them. And it was Kurt Russell. He was a teenager at the time.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: And so he was the computer that wore tennis shoes.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: And all his friends. It was like a group of high school kids and stuff they get into and get out of, and the computer guy would always find a way to get them out safely, you know, of whatever that was going on.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But I loved it be— It was fun. It was a teenage movie, and I was not yet a teenager, but maybe, you know, nine or ten. So it was something I looked towards, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then the same time, there was Herbie loves . . . *The Love Bug*.

CM: Yeah, Herbie, *The Love Bug*. I think I watched all of those, too, although I can't remember half of them now. It's like, "Herbie Goes to Monaco," "Herbie Does This."

LA: Yeah. And it's really weird, because I always say that [*indistinct*] "The Computer Wears Tennis Shoes," and people—a lot of people have never heard of it. And I go, "Some people have, must have because it was in the show theater." I would see it. I wasn't the only one that would go see it!

CM: I'm sure—

LA: And there was four of them, or five of them.

CM: I'm sure somebody's put them all on YouTube or online or something like that.

LA: I also watched, what you call it . . . In the morning, before I went to school, I would watch *Davey and Goliath*.

CM: Oh, okay. What was that?

LA: Oh, so. It was—you know the guy that made Pokey and . . . the

CM: Gumby?

LA: Gumby and Pokey?

CM: Yeah.

LA: Well, he made this series of *Davey and Goliath*. And Davey is a boy and Goliath is the dog, and the dog talks to Davey. And basically, it's like every week, it's about some moral situation. It's basically, it was done by the Lutheran church.

CM: Okay.

LA: And it was a half-hour cartoon. And there's Davey and then his sister Sally. And when the Goliath would remind him about the lesson that he learned that week or whatever, [he'd say,] "Davey, I don't think Jesus would do that." [*laughs*] You got to go and look at it on a—

CM: I will.

LA: Because a friend of mine I got him at church to turn it on. And I go, "Yeah, that's the same way I remember them." I loved them. I didn't really think much of them because I didn't go to church—grow up going to church. My dad's sisters—

CM: Yeah, I was going to ask you that. Like, did you guys— Was that a factor in your life at all?

LA: No, not really. My dad's sisters were all very religious, and my dad would—

CM: Methodist as well, or Catholic?

LA: Methodist, not Catholic.

CM: Okay.

LA: My Aunt Bea was Catholic. My mom's side was Catholic. My dad's side was Methodist. And my mom's father was Baptist. So she really wasn't crazy about church in general, because when she was like maybe ten to maybe fourteen, there was a couple summers they went back east to stay with my grandfather's family, and they would take her to revivals—

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: Out in the countryside. And she didn't really like them much. And so. And then when she was here, she would go to— My grandmother was Catholic, so she would go to church, but my grandmother was her own version of what she should, you know, her religion and all that. She loved to go fishing on Sundays. My dad would like to go out to the nature on Sundays. You know, "The only days—my only day off, and I don't want to be inside a building" was his attitude, but don't let anybody say anything bad about God or Jesus. And pretty much that was it.

CM: It was like their own private faith.

LA: Mm-hmm. My grandma used to tell me this. And it was so weird, because, I mean, I remembered it all these years, [but] didn't understand it until I started going to this other church. And they basically used the same prayers, or, you know, "God is within you." And my grandma would say, "You know, I feel closest to God when I'm out in nature and you don't need a building to go to, to prove and mark on your calendar that you are faithful. You carry God inside you." And that was it. And I never heard it again until I started going to this church, and basically started off the services [with] "God is within you." And then the audience would say, "Also with you." I refer to them as audience and the stage. [*laughs*]

CM: Like it's a show.

LA: Pretty much, yes, it is. I mean, okay, when I first came to it, I go, "Okay, they have a marching band." The procession to me is like— I used to photograph the drill team and marching band in high school occasionally, because of my friends being them. And so to me it's like the choir comes. That's the cheerleaders. No, that's the drill team. And then the kids with the cross. I forgot what it's called. Acolytes come in. So then the staff—I mean, the preachers, because it's a big church and we have a lot of preachers. And then the

people that are called lay people. They are the ones that give out the bread to you. No, the wine to you. And always the preacher gives you the bread. So they come down.

And so I took a class about learning about the church, and then I go, "You know, I saw . . ." I described it to them. And I had them in hysterics because I told them how each group was part of a parade. And so I really liked the parade stuff. I didn't really understand so much what they were talking about, and sometimes I think that they would say this name of this tribe and long ago. Sounds like something that was on a sci-fi show because it sounds like an alien culture. [*laughs*] So I started going to this church called the—it's an Episcopal church.

CM: This was recently?

LA: About five years ago. It was five years ago I—was the first time I went to church. I never went to—

CM: The first time you went to church. Do you know if you were baptized or anything?

LA: Oh no, I was baptized. I have a baptism papers. I was baptized when I was a baby.

CM: So you're official.

LA: I'm official Methodist. [*laughs*] And so I choose to be Episcopalian, and so I learned a lot about it. It's more "Confirmation" became "confirmed." And so a lot of Catholics are re-confirmed. You know, they're—I mean, they always make the joke that it's Catholic light. [*laughs*] There's three levels of the church. One's the basic, just for people who are poor and just working. So you just give them the basics. Then there's the middle one, which we are, which is more political. Then there's the top one, which is more . . . leaning toward Catholic and Protestant. Because the [Episcopal] church is out of the Church of England.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Yeah, so, you know. So it's both— They argue, they have a different balance between the two of them.

CM: Yeah.

LA: The more older and conservative you are, the more traditional, the more Catholic stuff, you know. And the first week I was there, they were doing this thing. It was a big day, you know, my God.

CM: With the holy water?

LA: With the—no, with the smoke.

CM: The smoke?

LA: Yeah.

CM: The incense?

LA: Yeah. And I go, "This is too Catholic." And then my friend explained it to— It has Catholic tendencies, but it's not always this way. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah, yeah. Special events.

LA: Yeah, yeah. Usually four times a year we have incense and they always warn people the week before that there'll be a TV in the guild room, and if you don't like incense you could still join in and watch it from there, you know.

CM: It used to make my sister sick. My mom used always used to have to carry her out of church because she would be all dizzy from the smell of incense.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Now, I mean did you guys do anything else as a family, like go out camping, or . . .

LA: Oh, we were— Oh, no, we did camping.

CM: Vacations?

LA: We did lot of— Actually, it was strange, as I got older I found out that a lot of people never went on vacations, that I knew, you know. I thought *everybody* went on vacations. My mom loved camping, and the two weeks my dad had for vacation or the three weeks or eventually four weeks, he did whatever she wanted. There was no drinking because it was just him and us kids. [*laughs*] And then my dad would do a lot of . . . My mom loved nature and she loved natural parks, and we would go to them and would camp and—

CM: Like what parks would you go to around here in Southern California? Or did you go to Arizona or . . .

LA: No. We went to Wyoming, Montana.

CM: Nice.

LA: And I saw the big water come out of the ground.

CM: The . . . Old Yeller?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Oh, no, not Old Yeller, that's the dog from the Disney movie. That's Old Faithful.

LA: Old Faithful, yeah. That's—I think that's in Wyoming or Montana, one of those two. But we've been in both.

CM: It's in Wyoming.

LA: Yeah, because we went to both of them. Both of them have big national parks.

CM: Yeah, Yosemite—that's in Yosemite National Park.

LA: No, Yosemite's in California.

CM: Yosemite's in California . . . Yellowstone!

LA: Yeah, Yellowstone.

CM: The allergy pill is eating my brain. [*laughter*] Yellowstone is in Wyoming, and that's where Old Faithful is.

LA: Okay. I just remember going up to those places.

CM: And would you guys drive there, like, it'd be a big road trip?

LA: Yeah, we would drive. And I remember the first—the first trip I remember, I was four years old, right before I went to kindergarten. The summer before kindergarten. So there's my mom and dad and me. And then here was my cousin Becky, and . . . No, Arlinda and Marlene and my brother. So they sat on the back of the car. And so when I got tired I was, lay across them.

CM: The laps?

LA: I was this baby, sort of. I had command over the place.

CM: That's awesome.

LA: Because if I had command, I was quiet. If I didn't have command, I'd be making too much noise. [*laughs*] It was my mom's easiest way to deal me with on driving trips.

CM: It's like, "Okay, let her do whatever."

LA: Mm-hmm. And then, so, and that summer was . . . Whenever it came on the radio, I would sing, "What's new pussycat?" And then, [*sings*] "I'm Henry the Eighth, I am. Henry the Eighth, I am, I am." Those two songs, I just for some reason loved them. Had no idea that they were from England or anything, you know?

CM: Yeah.

LA: Or what they were, you know. But it was my favorite songs, right? So I would stop and I'd say, "Be quiet!" And I would sing it. Or sometimes I would let them join me, but you know. [*laughs*]

CM: Those were the Aguilar driving—

LA: Vacations.

CM: Trips.

LA: Yeah, we went to British Columbia. We went to this national park up there. And it had a big swinging bridge between one side of the park and the other side of the park. My dad's thing was, "I'm going to sit below this tree." Or, "I'm going to find a tree to park near so I can have open the back of the car. And I have my radio and I have a little table, and I have my soda and I have some cheese and stuff. So do what you want." [*laughs*] You know. "This is what your mom wants, so go and do it." That's why he brought other cousins along, so she had more of us to—

CM: So then he could just chill?

LA: Pretty much, yeah, yeah. And, uh . . . and so he decided to follow us a little bit to this point. So he was on this side, and he goes—my mom was crossing the bridge and my other cousins were already over—then he goes, "See your Mom? Why don't you run across?" And so there was no one on either side of her and she was in the middle of this bridge that's swinging, and I ran across and she's screaming for bloody murder. "Laura, stop that!" "Daddy said to run!"

CM: That's great. That's so funny. Now, do you think those trips inspired your own appreciation of nature? I mean, nature appears in your photography.

LA: To be honest, I don't think so, because I wasn't crazy about nature.

CM: Really?

LA: I was dragged to it. [*laughter*]

CM: You were dragged?

LA: I was dragged.

CM: You were not loving it?

LA: No, I wasn't loving it. I mean, as I got older, like young teenage—like, you know, twelve or fourteen—I put down a demand. "Two days out. One day in a hotel with a shower. [*laughs*] Or I'm going to make your life miserable." [*laughs*]

CM: That's so funny.

LA: It seemed to work, you know. Then later we had a camper, and we would go up to Lake Tahoe a lot and this place called Camp Richandson . . . Richardson. It was basically you had to be a family unit or they wouldn't let you there.

CM: Okay.

LA: And then across the way they had cabins on the lake. And then down the road they had stables for pony rides—horseback riding. And your horse follows the other horse and the other horse follows the other horse. So I loved that. I would always go horseback riding.

CM: So you enjoy horseback riding?

LA: Yeah, I had a horse once.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah.

CM: What was the horse's name?

LA: The first one was named Güera.

CM: Güera?

LA: Yeah, I named it after my mom! I didn't know what it meant at the time.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: Yeah, 'cause my dad always called her *güera*. And the only Mexicans I really actually knew was my family.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And my dad's—you know, like I said, my dad's sisters married Filipino men, so all my cousins were dark. My mom was the only white skin around, you know? [*laughs*]

CM: She was the *güera*.

LA: She was the *güera*. And I didn't know what it meant, so I named her after my mom. And I thought she should be proud, and she wasn't. [*laughs*]

CM: Now, when did you have this horse?

LA: Maybe fourteen.

CM: Fourteen?

LA: No, fifteen, maybe. No, junior high. Maybe thirteen. Somewhere in junior high I had it.

CM: Somewhere around, then, thirteen, fourteen years old.

LA: And then I— Okay, so the horse came to us. And it was really skinny, and you could see the bones of its ribs. And the guy that we got it from was a friend of my, my dad's. And my mom never liked him. She thinks he's abusive to animals and all that stuff. And my little Chihuahua-dachshund dog, you know, she would not let him in the yard. My mom goes, "Animals, no." [*laughs*] And so he got this horse for us. It was like, you know, a hundred dollars, I think. I fed it and my mom fed it and my brother fed it and my dad fed it. And it got really fat. So I said, "Stop feeding her. She's getting really fat!" You know, so I'm the only one who's going to feed her. So one morning I go out there, and I see a colt. And my neighbor across the street, her horse—Joyce's horse—was going to have a horse. A baby. And her horse was older, so they didn't

know that she would make it past the birthing of the horse. And so I go, "Go tell Joyce her horse had the colt in the backyard and left it." My mom goes, "Ah-h." This is like five-thirty. And she goes—she stumbles, and she goes, "Oh, no, Laura. See that over there." And I go, "Yeah." She goes, "That's the sack." I go, "What's the sack?" She goes, "That's where the horse came out of. Came out of your horse." You know. My mom grew up on a farm, so, you know.

CM: So she knew?

LA: She knew. But you know—I always say this—she grew up on a farm, but I think more it was that when she was growing up there were more places that were like farms.

CM: Yes. Around—

LA: Not necessarily *a* farm.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, there was more, you know . . . So, anyway.

CM: It was a little wilder.

LA: Yeah. [*laughter*]

CM: For sure.

LA: So she goes, "No, no, that's your horse. It came out of your horse." "Ohh." Perfect Appaloosa markings. Solid black body. White spots on the butt and a diamond right on the head.

CM: Oh.

LA: It was beautiful.

CM: What happened to that horse?

LA: Sold it.

CM: Sold it?

LA: Well, I mean I sold the pony—or the colt—and the mother to a friend of my dad's at work. But a different friend.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And he was—his nephew was the sheriff up in, uh . . . Needles? No. Something that's near a river. It's in Las Vegas.

CM: Reno?

LA: No, it's not Reno, because it's not—

CM: Not Reno. That's a—I know which one—

LA: It's near Vegas, but that way or that way.

CM: Yes.

LA: And it's near the—

CM: It's on the river.

LA: It's on the river, yeah.

CM: Yes.

LA: It starts with an *L*.

CM: Laughlin!

LA: [*laughter*] That's the one.

CM: Together we'll get through this!

LA: [*laughs*] So yeah. So he was the sheriff. And then he goes—his horse that he takes out with him now is getting older, so he wanted to get a new, younger colt. A horse, you know, so he could train it. And he goes, "It's great that—this is a colt, you know. It would be easier to train the colt as it grows up to be around the sound of guns shooting and not be afraid."

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because sometimes they would have to go and, you know, shoot a gun into here and—so that people would pay attention and not supposed to do that.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Or firing things to sort of point out things. So, he bought the two of them. And so I knew it was going to be taken care of really well.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so then I got an enlarger, and my brother turned the patio into—half of the patio—into a darkroom.

CM: Okay.

LA: So that's where that money came from. I still had a little bit of money because I had two horses. When I bought one, I only had one, and when I sold it . . .

CM: Yeah.

LA: I had two, so that bought my second horse. And I only had that for maybe a year and a half.

CM: Really. And what was the second horse's name?

LA: Pippi.

CM: Peepee?

LA: No, Pippi.

CM: Pippi.

LA: Like Longstocking.

CM: Like Pippi Longstocking?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Thought it was like Peepee . . .

LA: [*laughs*] No. I know what that means. [*laughs*] I didn't just have a name to change it to, so I just kept it.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And it was a show horse for doing competitions. And so sometimes I would forget about that part of the horse, and I would squeeze my legs tight around the horse when it was, pretty much when it was galloping. And the guy who was training me how to ride the horse goes, "Don't do that because the horse knows how. It will move by your legs not the—"

CM: The reins.

LA: The reins. Because it's trained to do shows and competitions. The reins and the legs together work with it, but it doesn't— So if you put the—if you hold tight onto the horse, the horse is going to go fast.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because it thinks it's supposed to be running.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So I go, "Oh, okay." So that horse didn't last long with me because— Then my neighbor who had stables behind my house, they let me keep my horse there. I babysat their kids, so. And the little boy wanted to do competitions and I didn't, so I let him, you know. Him and his dad would do the show stuff with my horse. And then eventually I decided, you know, "I'm spending more time with photography and this a beautiful horse and it's being neglected." So I sold it. So, to somebody they knew.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So, that was my two horses.

CM: Those were your horse period.

LA: Well, see my horse period would have started a lot earlier. When I was seven years old I was going to have a colt. I mean, a pony. And my dad made the little shed for the pony because in our neighborhood it was zoned that you could have livestock. So my dad made a little pony house in the backyard and got the saddle. My dad was always doing it the back way—backwards first—and he got the saddle before he got the pony. And right before that, my dad went out horseback riding with the guy that worked with him that got it, you know. And so, my brother came home with a broken shoulder blade all wrapped up, you know. And she goes, "What happened?" And he says the horse went up, he fell down, and that was pretty much it. And [he] went to the emergency. And he had to be kept for six weeks because his shoulder.

CM: And there was no horse?

LA: There became no pony because my mom said, “My big baby fell down. I don’t want my little one falling down. And breaking an arm.” I was—I hated my brother for that. I was so angry. Then—

CM: You said, “How *could* you break your—”

LA: Pretty much.

CM: “Shoulder blade.”

LA: Yes. And then the next door neighbors, Mark and Tracy’s father, bought the pony. And it was, “My pony!” And my dad gave them the sa, sal—not the salad, the saddle. And they were my friends. Tracy and me were best of friends. His bedroom was right across from my bedroom, and we’d talk to each other all the time. And then his mom would come and say, “Tracy has to take a nap.” And she would close the door—window. [*laughs*]

CM: Hilarious.

LA: Yeah, because at nighttime we would talk to each other too, until she says, “He has to go to sleep.” [*laughs*]

CM: And then that’s that.

LA: It was way before we had the tin can thing, which never, ever worked, you know. So Mark and Tracy decided to let me ride my pony that they got.

CM: It was *your* pony as far as you were concerned.

LA: As far as I was concerned it was my pony. So we went down the dirt road that was near where I lived. And one was on one side of me and the other. They were walking me on that pony. And they were my age, and his brother was a year older, but, you know, they were my age. They were walking me on my pony down the dirt road. [*laughs*]

CM: It was so wrong, huh?

LA: And so the pony hit a little hole in the dirt road and got startled and then started running towards the orchard—the lemon orchard that was right there. And it kicked me up. And I sort of had long hair at the time. I used to have my hair down to my knees—ponytails—but my hair got caught in the thing. My brother and his friends were on the back porch of the house and they could see the dirt road and they were watching me on the pony. And then they ran over and then they just stood there and laughed at me. And Betty, whose house was next door, she comes and yells at my brother and his friends to get me out of that tree because I was hanging. My hair was tangled in the branches. And I was screaming and the boys were running after the pony and, like, two of my brother’s friends went after the pony, too. And my brother just stood there laughing. [*laughs*]

CM: Omigod.

LA: So if it wasn’t for Betty, I don’t know. I might not have had long hair. [*laughter*] So that was the only time. And then I didn’t ha—until I was fifteen I think I got the horse. And I got that because when my dad was really sick. I—he didn’t want anybody to come over because just noise made him upset and all that stuff. So for two years I had nobody come over to my house, you know? So he said that I was so good and didn’t complain about it and all that, he would finally buy me that horse that I should have gotten when I was little. [*laughs*]

CM: Omigod. [*laughter*] So moving on to ELAC [East LA College]. Are you good, by the way?

LA: Maybe let’s go get something to eat.

CM: Let’s go get something to eat. We’ll talk about ELAC and your art when we get back. Okay?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

[*break in audio*]

CM: Okay, so before we get started, let me just make sure I have the chronology right. So you graduated from high school in 1979?

LA: Seventy-eight.

CM: Seventy-eight. My apologies. Oh, ’79 when you went to New York as part of, as a chaperone on that trip?

LA: Yeah, yeah.
CM: Right. Okay, that's what I was confusing. And then did you got to ELAC immediately or was there a time in between?
LA: No. I just went there. Maybe—
CM: Like the following year or—
LA: I think there was a year that I didn't go anywhere, and I just went to the nighttime class to do the darkroom.
CM: Okay. The old nighttime at your old high school?
LA: Yeah, yeah.
CM: At Shurr High School?
LA: Yeah.
CM: And then, and so ELAC, you probably would have started in maybe like 1980? Around there?
LA: Seventy-eight, '79 . . . Yeah, '80 probably. The fall of '80. And then I found out my mom was—had cancer and . . .
CM: The fall that you—
LA: That Christmas—
CM: Started at ELAC?
LA: No, in Christmas time. No, no, no.
CM: After high school graduation?
LA: I think—no, I think I did go to East LA right after high school, because . . . I met Sybil and my friend—
CM: This is Sybil Venegas?
LA: Yeah.
CM: And what did Sybil do?
LA: She taught Chicano studies, but I got to tell you the story first.
CM: Yeah. Okay.
LA: Okay.
CM: I just want to figure out—
LA: Oh, yeah. Yes. I'm pretty sure it was '79 when I went to East LA, 'cause my mom died in '80.
CM: Okay.
LA: And I had just turned twenty-one. So, I went to East LA and I took a Chicano studies class. But this is actually in '80, not '79.
CM: Okay.
LA: And, actually, I took it because Gilbert [Cuadros] was— I, beginning of the semester, and I go, "Gilbert, you want a ride home? I'm going right now," and he goes, "Oh, why don't you sit in my class. It's just one hour, and you can take me home." I go, "Okay." And so we're walking across campus, and I go, "So what class is it?" And he goes, "Chicano studies." And I started laughing and saying, "You've got to be kidding. You're dad's gonna turn over—he's gonna get mad as hell." And he goes, "Yes, I know, but it fills—"
CM: Why? Why would his dad get mad as hell?
LA: Years later we figured it out. Because his dad was a painter, and he had a family and he had to take care of that, so he couldn't, like, be painting, being an artist.
CM: Yeah.
LA: You know, so. And he had a family before he had Gilbert's family, you know, and so. But Gilbert didn't find this out until he was more of an adult. Why he—sometimes he was angry at Gilbert, and sometimes he wanted to support him, you know, because he was creative. And so, anyway. So I go and I started laughing. And he goes, "Yes, I know. My dad would have a fit." And I just started teasing him all the way. "Chicano studies. You gotta be kidding?" Da da da. You know, because I grew up in, there was very few Mexicans in— And Chicano studies was something that happened in East LA. Somehow I found out about it, knew about it, but it never really—

CM: It was not something you associated with your own experience.

LA: No, yeah. And so the funny thing is that the summer before my mother died, because she died in October—no, November. Like a week—eight days [after] my birthday. But to me she always died on my birthday. So—

CM: When is your birthday? I don't think I got that.

LA: October 26.

CM: October 26, okay.

LA: I'm a Scorpio.

CM: So am I. Saucy and fiercely loyal.

LA: I don't know about that. [*laughter*] No, I had my—one of my supervisors I worked for in a lab, he did that. He's been doing that for years with his mother, so he did my whole thing and he goes, "You're more masculine." I'm going, "God." He goes, "Not that kind of masculine. Your personality is more masculine. Your signs are more, you know, the man's side of things." And he goes, "You're interesting because you have on, it's—you divide it into four parts of the unit," you know. The space stuff and all that. And he goes, "And you're only on half of this side. The other half is nothing. So everything's on these two sides." And so I go, "Oh, okay." And he told me stuff, and I, like, "Actually, okay, I like that. I like that." And then, you know. And that was it. I paid him fifty bucks and I went home.

CM: And then that was that.

LA: Yeah, that was that.

CM: But we were talking about your mom's death and then this Chicano studies class.

LA: Yeah, I know.

CM: I'm bringing it back.

LA: Okay. We had to get on that circle and go around.

CM: I know. So Gilbert says, "Come with me to his Chicano studies class," and you start laughing.

LA: I started teasing him all the way across campus. And I go, "You know your dad's not going to like it." He goes, "Yeah, but I'm not telling him." See both our dads were from similar backgrounds in a sense that his dad was from Northern California in a rural area and most of Gilbert's family worked in the fields and stuff. And his dad came to LA and got a job as a mechanic. And he worked at Busch—Budweiser's factory . . . Whatever factory that is. I dunno. It has several different names of beer, but it's—

CM: Oh, that big beer factory up by the 210?

LA: Yeah. Yeah.

CM: Yeah.

LA: He used to work there. And he was the supervisor in the end, but he was a mechanic in the beginning. So, and then, he would bring all this beer home that was dented. If it—if some of it got dented, it got into the pile that you could take it home. [*laughs*]

CM: That sounds like a good deal.

LA: Yeah. So, but anyway . . . But he found out later in life that his father was a painter, because his father never talked about it. And then when he did finally tell Gilbert about it, he had, you know, he goes, you know, "I had to stop it because I had a family to take care of, you're responsible for." He goes, "That's why I stopped," you know. And so that was Gilbert's background, and . . .

CM: And that's why his father would have found, what, something like Chicano studies would have been frivolous or . . .

LA: Frivolous and we're middle class. You grew up in Montebello, not East LA, you know. Like it's that far apart from each other. It's ironic, but you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: There's the thing that Montebello is better than East LA. And it's more a—it wasn't so graffitied up. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah.

LA: And stuff, you know. And I remember my mom making comments about the grape—the farm workers striking and stuff.

CM: Like what kind of comments?

LA: They're just causing trouble for everybody else.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: You know, so.

CM: What did you think of it?

LA: Didn't really think much of it, to be honest. In a sense because I wasn't political at that time. And—but in the desert I kind of understood it, because in the desert I have three uncles that had farms. One of them had the packing shed, and he had a lot of that. My Uncle Victor, he had a lot of that. So my Uncle Johnny and . . . I—who . . . I forgot the other person. Two of my uncles, when they had—'cause they just basically grew wheat, you know. Wheat, I think, or stuff that cows eat, whatever that is. So they didn't need a lot attention to it. They just, you know, planting it and cutting it. That's basically times when they were most working on it.

CM: Yeah.

LA: The rest of the time we would just automatic on and off with the water. [*laughs*] So they—

CM: It's not like they were harvesting potatoes or something.

LA: Yeah. So it was, so they had a regular job with my uncle. And then when they needed to care for their land, they would take it off and do that. And so my Uncle Victor was rather successful in the area, and I heard about the grumbling about the United Farm Workers because they were like, something happened out there in the desert when somebody's thing got caught on fire. The packing shed. And they blamed it on the United Farm Workers. And later on they realized it wasn't just maybe somebody who said he was da, da, da. But anyway. So there was a little bit of, you know, "You're speaking up. You're not supposed to speak up. Just do what you can."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "Work hard."

CM: So there's this tension there?

LA: Kind of, in a way, yeah.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Down there. Because at the time it was hitting the news a lot.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And they were all over, protesting and stuff.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So my uncle . . . So then my mom—it was my uncle's side, and my dad, well, you know, whatever. So, anyways, so that's—I mean, I just got that feeling all the time that you don't bring it up. [*laughs*] And . . .

CM: And so then here's Gilbert going to this Chicano studies class.

LA: And his father is the same way as my father, and his family were people who worked in the fields, you know. So it was just—it was different. And, let's see. Already Gilbert was very good at photography and being more creative and you know. So his father was a little bit, "Hmmm. He could make a living out of being a photographer, commercial photographer." Then Gilbert said, "I don't like—if I find photography not stimulating enough . . ." I go, "Boo hoo hoo." [*laughs*] And then, when Gilbert's partner—boyfriend, partner. John died, it was—John got diagnosed on a Monday and he died on a Friday. And this is '89.

CM: Wow.

LA: And so, it's like, and then Gilbert lost John, and John was a wonderful man, you know. But he was older. It was fifteen years older than Gilbert.

CM: Wow.

LA: And he was more freer in that era. When you're free and, you know, all that stuff. But, you know. So. And then all the friends they had was through John, because he had known these men for— They would go to

Laguna Beach for a three-day weekends, da da da. You know. All his—John's friends were out there and stuff. So a lot of his friends dumped him after he died, you know. Didn't call back or anything, and so. Terry Wolverton was, is a writer, and she was teaching writing classes at the Gay and Lesbian Center because she had a grant from the California Arts Council at the time. And so I knew her. I took one of her classes. And she had a class specifically for people living with AIDS, you know?

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so I kept on bugging Gilbert about taking it. He liked to write. So every time I went over there I would put another brochure down on the table in the living room, and eventually he did call up and went. And then several years later, Terry was his angel. He had dementia one weekend. He came over my house to talk about his angel. I told him to get out of the hell of my house and go see your angel. "Why aren't you there? She's your angel. I'm not." [*laughs*] But, see, that had to do with, uh . . . I don't really dislike Terry, but Terry represents something that my brother, my dad were always after. My dad was happy to have my mother who was very fair-skinned. You know, my brother, he dated different girl—women, some women of color. Usually they were Filipino or Hawaiian. But mainly everyone else was white and blond hair. And my sister-in-law, my dad would say to me, "She's the daughter I always wanted." And I would say to him, "Well, whose fault it was that I didn't—I don't have blue eyes and blond hair? Whose fault, huh? You know whose fault that is? It's yours." [*laughs*] My sister-in-law has blond hair and blue eyes and she's a nice person. She's a born again Christian. On some issues, she's just very much born again and other issues, she's open, so you know. So Gilbert and my brother was usually dating girls who were white, and usually everything was sort of being more in the white community than the culture community. Not saying that I spent a lot of time in the culture community myself, but I just, you know, I was thinking. I didn't think that blond hair and blue eyes was the goal.

CM: The end all, be all.

LA: Yeah. And John was blond hair. He was an Irish boy and from a family of ten, you know. So he was a nice guy. He was really great. And he talks about John in the article—

CM: Oh, okay. Great.

LA: And my relationship with John during that time, so . . . I got off track, I know.

CM: Totally off track. Let's go back to the Chicano studies class. Was Sybil Venegas teaching that?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yes, so, I went and sat into it, in the class that Gilbert was going to and which Sybil was doing. And it was on Mexican Modern art. And so she did a slide presentation, you know. Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, [David Alfaro] Siqueiros, [Jose Clemente] Orozco, you know. And she talked about all these people just a little a bit. And then at the end of the class she goes, "Does want anybody want a handout—want an add card?" And I raised my hand.

CM: And you're not even in the class.

LA: I wasn't in the class. I didn't—and I laughed all the way across campus about it being Chicano studies. And I'm the one that raised my hand and ended up staying. Well, I stayed there for the art classes, not the history. I didn't care about the history part. The Treaty of Guadalupe? I didn't care about that. [*laughs*]

CM: You're like, "Whatever."

LA: I don't like politics now, I don't like politics then. [*laughs*]

CM: So you're in this class where they're talking like about artists, and . . .

LA: Yeah, she presents these—for the—you know, "This is what we're going to do and go over." And these artists, and I was, like, I never saw anything like Frida Kahlo or Diego and Siqueiros. I mean, there's all these bright colors and stuff. My mom used to always tell me that I had my Aunt Rachel's taste in colors. And so every three years after a certain age, I was able to repaint my bedroom, and I could pick it. So one day I picked robin blue. And what it was on this little square, and what it was on the walls, it was very different. It was very different. It was like glowing light down the hallway. She goes, "When you're not at home, close the door." [*laughter*]

LA: So. And then she would go, "You have your Aunt Rachel's taste in colors." And, see, Aunt Rachel and Uncle Harold lived in Watts when I was a little kid. And it was a purple house in Watts. And then they moved into . . . . Cerritos, which was like, Cerritos was basically a small town of cow farmers—you know, milk—and they started selling the land off and building houses. So they grew up in that. So they went—they lived in that house. They still do. But she didn't go with her wild cousin outside but inside. [*laughs*] So my mom would always say, and I never understood why, even though she would point that out, "Your cousin's taste is like your aunts'." And when I went to Mexico, I saw colors so much rich in the house, on the outside of the house, with the environment around it, you know. And I got it, my mom said.

CM: That's where you got it?

LA: That's where I got it from, you know. I mean, I got it. I understood what she meant about Aunt Rachel's colors—scheme—and my color scheme, and . . .

CM: And what appealed to you about those colors? Why do you think you were drawn to them?

LA: In some ways, some of the colors were more ground. You know, like earthy? And then other ones were just way to the other extreme, like purples and reds and stuff. I just found it—and then the trees, you know, particularly more like in Oaxaca and stuff. It's more of a rural place until you get in to the city of Oaxaca and all the trees have white paint on them. I didn't understand that, but I'm like, "I'll figure it out later." [*laughs*] But it's just the colors. I didn't—I realized when I came back after a couple times in Mexico, when me and Sybil went there, I just realized it, really. I bought this book about portraiture of Mexican families. And some were more aristocratic, some were not, some were poor, some were, you know. But all the colors—there was something in almost every color in that book. They related to—no matter economically what classes they were, they had the same colors, you know, and stuff.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Like I said—

CM: They were something that transcended race, class—

LA: Yeah.

CM: Everything.

LA: And I would say, more the—people have more city and a little more, you know, financially richer. Those tones were usually very earthy tones. Wasn't really bright, but they were earthy tones. And the more rural, it seemed to be brighter because, "There's no other house around us. We're here!" [*laughs*]

CM: Exactly. Exactly.

LA: So, yeah.

CM: Omigod. So now what prompted the decision to go to East LA College?

LA: It was the only one that was nearby.

CM: That was basically the deciding factor?

LA: Pretty much, yeah.

CM: Pretty much.

LA: I mean I barely grad—I graduated high school without being able to read and write, so I figured East LA would take me. [*laughter*] I don't want to put East LA down, because it's a good school.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But that was my attitude towards it, you know. And I just wanted to take photography classes. I didn't take English. I didn't take anything else—

CM: Yeah.

LA: Until four years later. But, uh . . . So, photography. And then I just wanted to be in the darkroom again.

CM: Yeah.

LA: More than just the two nights a week, you know.

CM: And so you and Gilbert were there at the same time? Roughly?

LA: I was there before he was, and then—

CM: Okay.

LA: He was there a year later.

CM: Got it.

LA: I think a year later, yeah. So, like, I met him in the beginning of the second year, and that's when I met Sybil. And she changed my life.

CM: And how did—yeah, let's talk about that a little bit. So you walk into this Chicano studies class that you had laughed at the whole time.

LA: Well, let's get back to it. I just want to show you some of this stuff when—

CM: Yeah, okay.

LA: I first started doing photography at East LA.

CM: Oh, here. Let me get my, uh . . . So I have it from my notes later.

LA: Detour. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah. So this is—you're freshly arrived at East LA?

LA: Yeah, these are the cla— I like abandoned buildings and stuff, and—

CM: And so you were shooting in downtown LA?

LA: Yep, this was in downtown LA. And this was in Long Beach. This was the end of the Pike in Long Beach. And I just, you know, I was attracted to things that did not have people in it. [*laughs*] Let's see . . . This one I love. Oops, I don't have a print. I mean—and this is, you know, burnt place.

CM: Just the textures?

LA: Oh, I just love textures.

CM: Now, you're so into color, yet your photography is—

LA: Black and white.

CM: Black and white. Why is that?

LA: Black and white is cheaper than color and, but most of all, I like black and white. You know. I mean I like the richness and the darkness and . . . Color is more expensive and has that— I've never been able to do my own color. Because every time I took a color class, all I heard the whole semester was, "Too magenta. Too magenta." I still to this day do not know what magenta looks like, but I'm always "too magenta" in my mixtures. [*laughter*] So, I just like black and white, you know. [*referring to photograph*] That was upside down.

CM: I can turn this one over.

LA: Yeah, I know. So this is at the end of the Pike. 'Cause they did different stages of— When I was in high school, I started over here with the Pike. And then this is later. So they finally got—this is like the last block and a half of the Pike— [The Pike, a resort area in Long Beach, was demolished in 1979—ed.]

CM: Okay.

LA: That I photographed.

CM: Now, was this during this period—were you starting to look at other photographers, too, like Judy Dater and . . .

LA: No, not really. I mean, I don't think it, that came until more years later.

CM: That was later?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Here you were still just kind of learning?

LA: Well, I was doing photography, and I didn't want to photograph people because I don't talk to people. And so this was perfectly fine. There's lot of texture in it. I like the texture. And, see, I used always talk about my mom saying to my friends, "Look at the earth. Look at the texture. Look at this." And I go, "You seen one, you seen 'em all. Let's go!" And so I—it took me years to realize that I got a lot of my sight from my mom, because she was so much into features of people's faces and texture. We would go to the . . . country fair every year. The first day we would go with my dad and my brother and we'd go to the races. Second day, my dad would go to the races, me and my mom would just go through things. And she always liked to go see those damn pigs and sheep, and it stinked in there. It was her, it was her childhood again, so. She

wanted me so badly to join the 4-H club. They still had it around, but it was in El Monte. I go, "I don't want to do no thing with no cow or goat or sheep." [*laughter*] So . . .

CM: You're like, "I don't think so."

LA: Pretty much, yeah. All the things she wanted me to do, I could never do it. I could not be a good sports person.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Was she a good athlete?

LA: Yeah. She was in the GAA. She was like cap—president, her senior year at the GAA. Girls Association—Athletic Association. And she was a team player. She played volleyball. She played basketball. And so, then, she liked teams, and her sister liked individual athletics. She liked archery and tennis. And so it's strange that I'm more like my mom's sister. And sometimes she would get angry at me, really angry at me. And she would use her sister's name when she's talking to me, you know. And I didn't know why until I met her. It was really hard that the woman that I always wanted to be my mother was my Aunt Lenore. She had a sense of humor. She would talk to her kids. My mom never really talked to me. She talked to me, but not with me or at me or whatever, you know. We never had conversations with each other.

CM: Oh.

LA: And my Aunt Lenore came, and she said, "If there's anything you want to know that's going on with your mom, you tell me and I'll let you know. And I'll explain it to you." And da da da. And she liked to paint. Oh, there's a painting in the living room that's—my aunt did of my mom when they were in high school.

CM: Oh, I saw it.

LA: Yeah, so. And my grandmother painted. She did more a landscaping thing. Water paints, you know. I have a couple of her paintings in the house. And so my mother and my grandmother, my grandmother . . . My mother was my grandfather's favorite. She was the first and she was my grandfather's favorite. Lenore was my grandmother's favorite. And Art, their brother, was hanging on for, you know, hanging on a ledge most of his life [*laughs*] for them because he was the boy. He was always in trouble. He was always doing something, you know. My grandma used to put cans with string on the front door and the back door so she would know what time he came in, 'cause [he] would wake [her] up by making all that noise coming in the kitchen. And then she—

CM: That's great.

LA: Moved to putting them in the sink—you know, in the kitchen, so that he would come in that way. He would step into them. So, you know. So I always heard the stories of my uncle and the things that he did. And one time he actually slept on the thing that goes up and down on the oil rig.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: Yeah. [*laughs*]

CM: Omigod!

LA: So. 'Cause that's what—my grandfather was in charge of the fields there, you know. So.

CM: And so it was from your mother that you were—got into texture, you think?

LA: Oh, no, I—

CM: That she was the one that cultivated your eye?

LA: Yeah, but I didn't know it at the time.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I was also very much rebelling against my mother—

CM: Of course.

LA: Because that's what you do as a daughter.

CM: Yeah.

LA: The son does it to the father, you know. But she was—and see, I hated the fact that she was so social. She would talk to everybody, and that meant I had to stay with her until she got done talking to this person.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I, you know, it would take forever to get home.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And my Aunt Bea and her were like that. This is my Aunt Bea's house. I took care of her until she passed away, and she was ninety-seven when she died. Oh, let me show you something.

CM: Okay. [*pause*]

LA: This is me, maybe two years old. I don't know, 'cause there's no age. But that's me and my Aunt Bea.

CM: Oh, wow. She's beautiful.

LA: And this is my Aunt Bea at ninety-four.

CM: Aw. I think I saw that photo on a website somewhere.

LA: Yeah. So, I mean she looked older when I was younger, and she looked younger when I was older.

CM: She looks like a ham.

LA: Yeah. She was. She loved that dress.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so, when she died, I had put it with her.

CM: But it was your Aunt Lenore that you were most like?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Or you got along best?

LA: Yeah. But I didn't—no, no, no. This is— Okay, my grandmother died. My grandmother and Bea were sisters. My grandmother died when I was seven and a half. And Bea was always here. And Bea was—my mom and Bea, and Lenore and Bea. She treated Lenore and my mom like they were her children, 'cause they were a tight family and she never had kids. So, you know. And she never got married. So my dad had told me, he goes, "You know, when I first got married I took your mama on a vacation. And she said when we got home, she goes, 'Paul, next summer can we take Bea with us on our vacation? 'Cause she doesn't ever go anywhere, but she takes care of everybody.'" So Bea was always on our vacations, you know?

CM: Oh, really?

LA: Yeah. So.

CM: That's great.

LA: So she told me that story. And she liked my dad, but a lot of people didn't like him. So, she wouldn't talk about her side of the family that disliked my dad. And so my mom, after my grandmother died, so there was that tension. But Bea goes, "I deal with people how they are with me, not how they are with other people." You know, so.

CM: That's a good philosophy.

LA: So, yeah. So . . . and yeah. [*laughs*]

CM: That's a good philosophy.

LA: And when I was, like, in high school, she had her eyes opened up. There were cata—she had cataracts.

CM: Cataracts?

LA: Then all of a sudden she was eyes like this, and then all of a sudden she was all like this.

CM: Wow. Like, all of a sudden her eyes were literally open?

LA: Yeah, yeah. And um . . .

CM: So going back to this issue of texture, 'cause you raise a really interesting thing about your own work. I mean, would you say that's one of the primary effects you go for in your photography, is sort of recording this sense of texture?

LA: Um . . . You know, I like texture, but I've never really thought about where it came from. But I do know that I always refer to my mom. I believe that there's two people that gave me my sight: one was my mom because of her— [*sound of wind chimes*] Driving me nuts about looking at this person's face, look at that person's face. They're from South America. I keep hearing them. That is a second—after we see the cows and the pigs, then we sat and watched people walk by.

CM: Yeah, yeah.

LA: So, it drove me nuts.

CM: And so she was the first person who gave you sight. Who was the second?

LA: My dad's oldest sister, who raised my Aunt Inez. She went blind when I was ten years old and she passed away when I was thirteen. And so she lived out in the Imperial Valley, and they didn't have any blind centers over there. So she came up here for a couple of weeks. And during the week she would be at the eye, ear—eye institute on Vermont. And so back then they would have people stay for, like, a week. They would teach them how to move around their home, what they had to do to the people in their home to tell them how to map it, things—anything [that] moves—to map it on their hand and say this is moved over here. And so, and on the weekends she would stay with us, and me and her, she goes, "Let's go for a walk, Laura." And she would say, "You know, ever since I went blind people always think that I can't hear because they speak to me slowly and loud. [*laughs*] I'm not deaf, I'm blind!" And she could still see shapes, so she wasn't—I mean, she had some vision. But it was not anything really in focus anymore.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So she could see shapes and colors and stuff. So she would say. We'd go for walks, and she would go, "Tell me the color of the sky, right now. And tell me the color of the flower," or whatever, you know. And so I would tell her the colors and stuff. And so, I really believe that my mom and my great—my dad's sister helped me with sight, because I saw things differently because she was blind. And she made these beautiful tables of text—of, um . . . You know, things like that, what you call them? Tiles—

CM: Mosaic tiles?

LA: Yeah. She would make these—she made a large table. She made bowls of [*indistinct*]. And she didn't have any sight at that time, but they were so beautiful. But she had remembered her colors, she said.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So, you know. And then, so . . . And then so then we went to go visit her like a month after she went back home. And so my Aunt Inez's house, and it's a small house, and my Cousin Sandy, who's two years younger than me, was there. And Sandy's afraid of Aunt Inez because she's very strict and because she used to work at the grammar school and Sandy was in the grammar school. And so she's always been afraid of Aunt Inez. And so she's looking around for something in the house, and she's like moving this, moving that. I go, "Auntie, what you looking for?" And she goes, "I'm looking for a pin." I go, "It's right in front of you. Can't you see it?" And Sandy went, "You're going to get it now!" And my Aunt Inez walked behind my dad and put her hand on his shoulder and said, "Paul, don't you ever let Laura lose her sense of humor." She saved me! She saved my ass. My brother even pointed it out to me. [*laughs*] So, you know . . . And the only time I ever saw my dad cry was when my Aunt Inez died.

CM: Really?

LA: They came home from the hospital. We were down at my other cousin's house, and—my aunt's house—and he came in and he was crying. He wasn't screaming crying, but you could see the tears, and I never saw my dad cry.

CM: Wow.

LA: And I didn't see him cry when my mom died either.

CM: Wow.

LA: You know, so. And my mom goes, "You know, Aunt Inez was like his mother. When his mother died when he was young, and she took care of him and Uncle Gilbert. So that's why he's crying." And so I go, "Okay."

CM: Do you remember how Inez was spelled? Was it I-N-E-S or I-N-E-Z or Y?

LA: No, I don't.

CM: You're not sure?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Okay. Well, we'll take our best stab at it for the transcripts.

LA: Ines, Inez. I'm not sure which one.

CM: Yeah.
LA: I think it's Inez. I mean Ines, but I think it was also spoken as Inez.
CM: Inez.
LA: So, I don't know.
CM: It could be spelled in so many different ways.
LA: Yeah.
CM: That's the thing.
LA: I think it's kind of like Inez de la Cruz.
CM: Yeah.
LA: That Inez looked familiar on the book. Could have been that one. But anyway, I could always call someone and ask them.
CM: Sort of Juana Inés de la Cruz?
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: Yeah, I think she spelled it with an *I*, right?
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: I-N-E-Z or S, I forget. Well, I'll look it up.
LA: Yeah.
CM: Okay, so back to ELAC.
LA: So back to ELAC. So then—
CM: Back to ELAC. So . . . you meet Sybil, and then—
LA: I haven't yet met Sybil. I was—
CM: You haven't yet met Sybil?
LA: I haven't yet met Sybil. And I was doing black and white, and I was basically warehouses, and—
CM: So you're doing your urban decay?
LA: Yeah. And then, you know, when I would go sometimes to the night classes at the high school, the adults said to me—all the adults would say to me, "Well, that's what you do when you're young. Then when you get a little bit older, you don't want to be downtown. [*laughs*] But that's what young people do. They want to find out what might cause them problems." [*laughs*] Danger or something. So, "It's perfectly fine that you're doing that, Laura."
CM: Yeah.
LA: You know, "It's your age."
CM: You're living dangerously.
LA: Yes, 'cause . . . yeah. So . . . the last year I had gone one year with photography and I barely knew—I didn't do yet darkroom, then, until the second year I was there. And, like I said, I had found out my mom had cancer, and she was—they gave her three months. And that was in December and she lived to be—and she went [to] October. And she wanted to be here for my birthday. And so. . . . There was this teacher that was filling in for another teacher that was on sabbatical, and her name was Suda House. S-U-D-A. And she was this young—
CM: And "House" spelled just like the word *house*?
LA: H-O-U-S-E.
CM: H-O-U-S-E.
LA: And she was showing a lot in group shows. She had been—she had graduated maybe like six years earlier, and so she was teaching. And she had gone through a divorce at the time, and so she was this independent woman and she was not that much older than me. Maybe ten years. Nine years. So I met three people when I first went to East LA. Mei Valenzuelas. She was the lab tech at the time. And so—
CM: Mei?
LA: Venezuelas.
CM: Venezuelas? Or Valenzuela? [Mei Valenzuela—ed.]

LA: I think so. I could always ask. She sends me checks from time to time. I could copy it next time she sends me one. [*laughter*] She helps me out when she can.

CM: Yeah.

LA: I'm always grateful when it comes.

CM: Yeah.

LA: 'Cause somehow, for some reason, something falls apart right after I get it. [*laughter*]

CM: Really? It's like the universe knows.

LA: Yeah. Anyway, Mei was the lab tech at East LA College, and I was very, very, very shy. I didn't talk to many people. And there was the tech room. You know, or outside. Everything for the darkroom that you need to check out was in there, and that's what she did. And then there was, across from that, the doorway. It was a double door—Dutch door—there was, like, a stepladder. And at the top I would just sit there and listen to everybody talk to her and ask questions about how to print or this or that, you know. And she would give them advice and, "Next time try this" and da da da. And so she eventually she started to talk to me. And she goes, "How come you don't talk to people?" "I don't like them." [*laughs*] Simple. [*laughter*] And then she—I go, "How did you get into photography?" She goes, "Well, it was right after painting. Photography was the next thing in the catalog." [*laughs*]

CM: Wow.

LA: So, I know someone else who went from psychology to photography. Psychology, painting, and then photography. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah, yeah.

LA: And her same comment was, "It was in the catalog. It was the next step."

CM: Exactly, next logical progression.

LA: Yeah, yeah. So she—painting was her first medium. Is more her passion, I suppose. She was—she's a very good photographer, but . . . She teaches photography, so I don't know if she does it as much as she used to. But, you know.

CM: Is she still at East LA College?

LA: Yeah. And she's a part-time person because she's not a full-time. So they took one of her classes away, and that's kind of really sad, because she teaches usually a beginning class, a black and white photography in the first semester. In the second semester she usually does a creative photography class. And so usually she gets about 80 percent of the people that were in that class go to that [next] class. So she usually gets in the Saturday classes, which start at nine [o'clock] and ends at two, so she gets—she gets people who really want to do this and really know that she's there to help them. And so there's been different people in charge and stuff, and the last person that retired was the last person that I met when I was at East LA photography. And he had been—his name was Doug Kopinski—and he had been chair and all this stuff. But, anyway, so Mei was there and she would talk to me about painting. And so one day she brought in some books of painters. Not Siqueiros. The modernists . . .

CM: Abstract expressionists?

LA: Oh, European artists.

CM: The geometric modern, like, abstraction?

LA: Like—okay, Picasso was one.

CM: Oh, like the early moderns?

LA: Yeah, yeah. Picasso. And then there was a man who was older . . .

CM: Miro.

LA: Yeah. And . . . it was an older man than Picasso—

CM: Georges—

LA: That he idealized. I mean he always went to his— They became equals at one point. He lost his sight near the end of his life, but he did, like, paper things.

CM: Yes! I know who exactly who you're talking about and the name is . . . He's a French—

LA: Yeah.
CM: Artist.
LA: Yeah.
CM: Georges Braque!
LA: No.
CM: No?
LA: Mm-hmm. I don't know what his name is right now, but . . . Maybe Monet. I'm not sure. [Henri Matisse—ed.]
CM: Okay.
LA: Because, that's one of the names of the people I remember. And I seen, you know. So, anyway. And he was also—there was also another artist that ended up killing himself really young. And that's when he—There was a movie about it, but it starts with an *M*. And this guy was Jewish, but he hid the fact that he was Jewish because of the time period. And he was an alcoholic. He painted this one woman. It was his love, the one he had a child with. And she always had a certain face. The same woman, the same face. The same—he would do it over and over and over again. And—
CM: Modigliani?
LA: Yeah, 'cause he said to her, "When I put someone's eyes, that's because I really, truly find that this is the finish." And that was the last painting he did, and it was the only painting he had her eyes. Like, so many years he painted her, but her eyes were never opened.
CM: Wow.
LA: And the last painting he did was of her eyes being open.
CM: Wow.
LA: So . . . And I've heard from other people reading something on Pablo Picasso that his last words was his name—the other's painter's name when he died.
CM: Modigliani?
LA: Yeah. So they—
CM: That's interesting.
LA: Had an interesting relationship with each other, you know. And Picasso was more out, and Modigliani was more of a quiet person and somber. And he was the light of the world at the time, when he was really young, so. But he admired him so much.
CM: Yeah.
LA: So, anyway.
CM: So you're learning about these guys?
LA: Yeah. Well, she's showing me paintings and stuff, and you know.
CM: Yeah.
LA: So then she goes, "You want to read?" I go, "Not really." She goes, "Why don't you try a paragraph." And I read a paragraph, and then she'll read the rest of a page, and I'll read another paragraph. So she talked to me about painting and painters and that was her first love and now she's in photography and she loves that. And so she actually talked to me. I didn't have very many people that were older that talked to me, you know. My brother would talk to me, but he was very limited when it came to feelings. He goes—you know, when my mom died and after she died, he goes, "I know girls need to talk to somebody, so if you want to go see somebody I would pay for it." And so he paid for my therapy for the first year and a half because he—like he said, he knew "girls need to talk." [*laughs*] I don't even want to talk about anything.
CM: Yeah, yeah.
LA: So he paid for me to go to therapy.
CM: And so this was someone who was actually speaking to you.
LA: In person, yeah.
CM: In person as an equal?

LA: Yeah. She never talked down to me. She talked to me. And sometimes she goes, "I hope it's not—you feel embarrassed." Because sometimes her daughter would be there, and her daughter was like nine years old at the time. And I'm barely reading and her daughter can read a lot better than me. But you know, I go, "No, it's okay."

CM: Was that a really significant moment? I mean was that something you had—you talked a lot about people sort of speaking for you. Did they speak down to you a lot?

LA: Well, I assumed that it was the same thing. You know, down and for me, you know. So, yeah, so Mei was, you know, she talked to me about a lot of things, and she talked to me about her husband. Her ex-husband was an alcoholic and he became part of AA. And her daughter goes, their daughter goes—when she got a little bit older she went to Al-Anon-Teen just to understand her father more and all that. And she would—she really talked to me a lot on the same level. But she goes, "Don't you think that I mean—I don't want to be your substitute mother because I don't." I go, "You're not old enough to be my substitute mother, but you're old enough to be my babysitter." [*laughs*] Because she's like fourteen years older than me.

CM: Then she is.

LA: I go, "If my mom would have trusted a babysitter, she would probably let you babysit me."

CM: [*laughs*] So Mei ended up being one of the key people you met at ELAC?

LA: Yeah. Between nineteen and twenty-one, I met three people, and Mei was the first person. Second person was Suda.

CM: Suda House?

LA: Suda House. And the third person was Sybil.

CM: Sybil.

LA: And they changed my life in drastic—I mean, Mei made me feel that I wasn't stupid. And I might be slow, but I'm not stupid. I have a brain and I observe a lot of things and all that stuff. And sometimes she used to drive me nuts when I go, "What do you think about this print?" And she goes, "It's pretty good." And, then, so I would bring out my stuff, take everything down, bring it. And then she goes, "Well, you know, next time . . ." I go, "Why didn't you tell me that before I turned everything back in?" "Next time, try to print a little bit more here or here."

CM: Yeah.

LA: So she drove me nuts with that thing, because she, like, "You know, well, you got to learn it on your own, but I give you points."

CM: She was being a critic.

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah, so. She is a good critic, you know.

CM: Everyone needs one.

LA: Yeah, so.

CM: And then Suda. How was, how did Suda help? So you said Mei treated you . . .

LA: Well, Mei was like to me like a cousin, you know. Like, um, or a big sis—I don't know what to have a sister is, so I don't know. But I have lot of female cousins, so I saw her like a cousin. I saw Sybil the same way. So Suda came in. She's this artist that seemed at the time being published a lot in, like, the *LA Times* and stuff like that, with some of her shows. And she happened to be teaching there for the year, and she only taught beginning and creative photography. And so when Ross [Hernandez] had walked me across campus and said I can't take photography class until I learn to read, Saul, who was the official lab tech—Mei was the junior lab tech—and Saul heard that and made a comment in front of Suda about how Ross was a jackass. And so— [*wind blows*]

CM: Do you want me to get that?

LA: No, it's okay. I'll get it. So then Suda walked in when he was going—telling Mei that Ross was a jackass. And so Suda asked him more questions, and Mei told him that my mother had cancer and was terminal and all that. And so I didn't really know Suda that much because I was in the middle—intermediate class—middle, you know? So I wasn't taking beginning. And she goes, "You know, I only teach beginning and creative

photography." And she goes, "I know that you like photography a lot. And I heard that your mother's rather sick, and I know that photography makes you happy, so any time I'm teaching just go into the darkroom. Do what you want. Don't listen to Ross. Do what you want. Ask me questions if you want to about your photography, whatever." But she goes, "During my time here, just go in the darkroom."

CM: Nice.

LA: Yeah. And then near the end of that year she was teaching a couple classes at UCLA in the extension program, so I went out there, took some of her extension program classes. And then that summer I found out she was moving to San Diego and it broke my heart because she became like a substitute. Like my cousin Sara. I have a cousin Sara that I was always close to, and she was like another Cousin Sara. But, you know.

CM: Like a mentor, too?

LA: Mentor and, yeah. And she tried to— Okay, so one day she said, "Laura, you know, why don't you and some of the—get some of your friends here and go—meet me at the county museum." [Los Angeles County Museum of Art—ed.] And she goes, "I'll buy you lunch if you come." And I looked at her and I said . . . To me my first thought was, "That's like the other side of the world." And this is before me and Gilbert ever went to the county museum. And then I told her, "You know, Suda, I don't think so." And she goes, "Why?" And I go, "Because that's what little white ladies do after church on Sundays." [*laughs*] That was the county museum to me. That was another world, even though it was twelve miles away. It was someplace that I don't fathom that I could fit in or be a part of. My mom had a lot of things about class. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah.

LA: And you know your place. So there was a lot of that. And, so.

CM: And the county museum to you at that time was just not your place.

LA: It was the other side of the earth to me. Like Santa Monica's the other side of the earth to me. [*laughs*] But, you know, so. It was just something I didn't think I could reach, you know. And then I started—

CM: But Suda pushed you to reach it?

LA: Mm-hmm, yeah. But I didn't go with her. I didn't—she knew that if she hung that lunch with her I would come. Several months later she said something to me that I didn't pick up on right away. She goes, "You know, I love you, Laura, but not the way you want me to." And I didn't come out to myself until I was like twenty-four. Twenty-six or twenty-four. She was saying what other people said about me, and I just didn't want to give it a label. So, you know. So, and Suda really tried to push me to see myself as an artist. And then she, you know, she would be in these group shows with some of her fellow graduates from, you know . . . Something in F, near the ocean. Some university over there in Orange County.

CM: Fullerton?

LA: Yeah. So her and several other people, they seemed to be in the same shows and they seemed to be this little group of people. And Jack Butler and her and a couple of other people. I don't remember the names, really. So she tried go beyond, you know. Then she—when she left, she—you know, she was involved with LACPS, Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies. And it was on the Westside, and that summer they moved back to the Eastside. And they were downtown on like Spring and Seventh, you know. You had to climb up the steps to the third floor or fourth floor, and it was like a funky little building, and they were painting it all inside and all that. And Suda said, "Go see this woman Katherine," and then so I went. And I volunteered to help paint, and Katherine was very nice to me. And then I want back again another time, and then there was like Bob Rule and Jack Butler. And I met Jack through Suda and Bob Rule—was in several shows with her. I didn't meet him through that day. And then, "Oh, yeah, you're a student from East LA." "Yeah." They always emphasized that I was a student from East LA. [*laughs*]

CM: Even though you're not from East LA?

LA: Yeah. But, you know, Suda was out in the jungle for a year. [*laughs*] Suda's a very nice person, but she was very much conservative.

CM: Yeah, yeah.

LA: There were times when she had—some of the guys would tease her about something, and she actually thought they were gonna—they were—you know, that was something they were gonna do. They were just playing with her mind. Mei knew it. I knew it.

CM: Yeah. Yeah.

LA: And she's freaking out. But anyway, it was a little bit their fun. You know. So that people would all say, "Oh, you're the student from East LA." "Yep." And then what really made me mad was that Bob Rule. I think that's his—I don't even know how to pronounce his name close. He asked me if I could get him some cocaine. I said, "No.'

CM: Who was this guy?

LA: He was another professor from another—I mean, he showed in the circle that Suda showed in, in a lot of, like, shows.

CM: Got it.

LA: And so I knew his name.

CM: And what he assumed because you were the quote-unquote "student from East LA" that you could pick up some coke.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: At the corner bodega or something?

LA: Mm-hmm, yeah. Just like my mom thought I could get pot for her right away, which I actually did, but . . . Did I tell you that story?

CM: Yes.

LA: Okay, so—

CM: It's hilarious.

LA: [*laughter*] So, yeah. And—

CM: I think I'd pass out if I had to smoke a joint with my mother. [*laughs*]

LA: [*laughs*] Well, you know, she didn't ask me for much help, so when she did, I did it.

CM: Yeah, of course.

LA: I mean like, and she thought I was the expert in it, so. Which is rather hurtful at times, when I think about it, you know. Because my brother died from cirrhosis of the liver. He did cocaine and he did drinking.

CM: Oh.

LA: And that's how he died. So it's like, you know. My brother knew a lot about drugs.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And he sort of put me on my "Don't you go down this road." But he could he do it because he was a guy.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So, anyway.

CM: So you're talking about—and so the three women who kind of changed your life. So we've talked about Mei, Suda, and then, now, Sybil. How did Sybil—

LA: Sybil.

CM: Change your life?

LA: Well, she introduced me to Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco, [José Guadalupe] Posada. She introduced me to the Day of the Dead. And I would always see her talking with students, you know, after class. And sometimes I asked her, "Could I go?" I go, "What's the Day of the Dead?" She goes, "It's in East LA." And she goes, "Do you know East LA.?" And I go, "Not really." And then she goes, "You want to go with me to it?" I go, "Yeah." So then she goes, "Meet me in—at Chicano studies on Saturday at this time and I'll drive you there." I didn't know what it was. And we went there. We went to the cemetery first, and then had a procession from the cemetery. I didn't know what a procession was either. We went from Evergreen [Cemetery] back to Self-Help Graphics, and then they had the festival.

And then—oh, let me go back to Suda House. When Suda was there she did alternative photography. These are things that were done in, like, in the '60s or the '40s or . . . And so basically what you do is

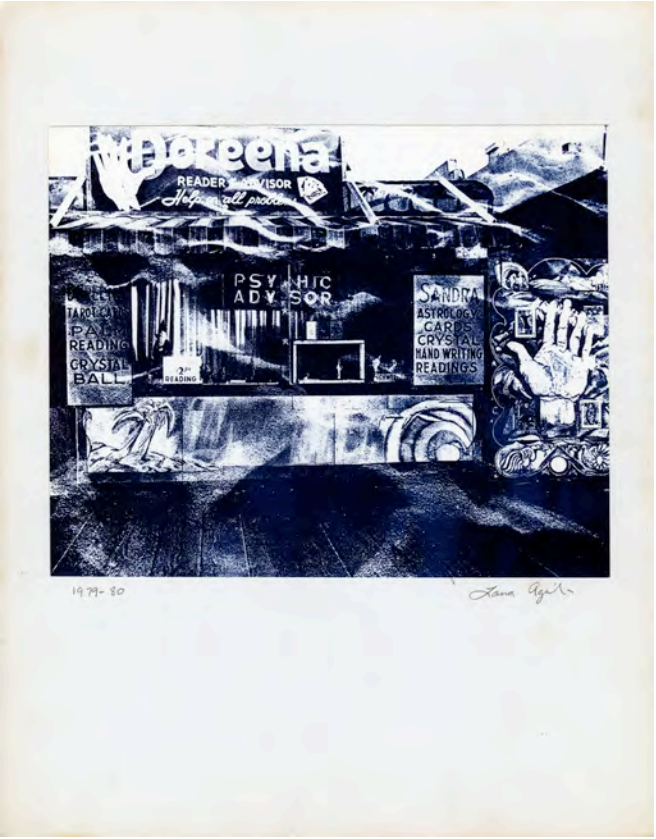

Figure 4. *Untitled*, 1978. Cyanotype, 9¼ x 11¼ inches.

you get a negative, and you make—well, you have a neg to start with, and you make a print of it on a neg which is only negative on positive. And then from there you could put—you lay—you coat paper that's, you know, it's art paper and it has to have a certain texture to it so it would hold the blue. And then you put the negative on top of it, put a glass on top of that, leave it in the sun for about twenty minutes. Depends on the time of the year. Sometimes you would be only twelve minutes. Other times you would be twenty or twenty-three. And then you'd get an image, so. And so she was teaching alternative photography. And so she was teaching these things that were done in the beginning of photography, basically. It's the beginning of seeing the trans—to being able to take an image and make it transparent. So this was the different type of—this was silver, part of the . . . Part of the chemical was silver. And at the time—no, it was gold . . . Silver or gold, one of those two. And at the time—this is the late '70s. I mean, early '80s. There was—it went high, so like an ounce of it cost a lot of money. And so several of us got together and bought one. I only tried it once in—I like the blue better. Once I did this one, and then I did that. I like the blue better, but then— [Fig. 4]

CM: I like the blue, too.

LA: You know, so. And then this was from a pinhole—this was from a toy camera that I got. And I'm—

CM: That cityscape was the toy camera, or this?

LA: No. Well, this was the toy camera.

CM: The abstracted building shot?

LA: No, no. No. This came from the—you know. This is in front of Time magazine. Time, uh . . . *LA Times* had a statue in silver and all that, but I—what I did was I split them together.

CM: Oh!

LA: You know.

CM: So you—

LA: And then—

CM: So you, yeah, you created a symmetrical . . .

LA: And then I went negative and positive. So, you know, as this part goes, you know. This is . . .

CM: Wow.

LA: So.

CM: We're going to have to get another picture of this. My first job in media was at the *LA Times*.

LA: Oh. Did you know Monica Almeida?

CM: No. It was just for a summer.

LA: Oh, yeah, she was—

CM: I was a paper pusher. You know, I did like expenses and I filed stuff.

LA: So then I also did—when I was first in photography at—'cause Suda was doing all this alternative stuff. She had us do pinhole cameras. This is from a pinhole. And this is from the pinhole camera. And, yeah. And so I like making, you know, getting an oatmeal box and putting a needle in through it and put paper in it. Go—and you know, so, that's what I did. So I liked it. And then I continued doing it because I really liked the glue part of it. And it's called cyanotype. And so all these—this size image is from this size of an egg, because you have—

CM: Yeah, it's literally the negative on the paper in the sun.

LA: Yeah. And then you get—if you reverse the negative to positive. So, you know.

CM: Wow. Oh, that one's beautiful.

LA: This one . . . I have a thing for palm trees. Every once in a while I'm somewhere, and I just take the picture again.

CM: Really?

LA: People always ask me, "Why you like palm trees?" I go, "'Cause it's what California is." I mean, from my childhood, on San Gabriel Boulevard all the way to school was twenty—from my house to my school, my preschool—kinder—my grammar school, there was twenty-two palm trees.

CM: Oh, those tall skinny ones?

LA: The tall skinny ones, yeah. And these tall big ones, you know, on San Gabriel Boulevard going toward my school. So I would count them as I went by the bus every morning and every afternoon.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then they widened the street and they got rid of all those palm trees, and I died.

CM: Awww.

LA: Besides, they made the Pomona Freeway and then they got rid of the dairy that was there. And they had—where the Pomona Freeway is, that part of it was a dairy.

CM: Oh, they mowed it down for the freeway.

LA: Basically. And they took all those cows. I like cows. I love milk. And my grandma would tell me the brown and white ones are the ones that give you chocolate milk. And I go, "Which one gives you grape?" [*laughter*]

CM: So when someone like Suda told you that you should consider your photography art, or you should consider the idea of art, I mean, how did you receive that idea?

LA: I thought she was crazy. I mean, because I just didn't really know what art was, and I knew that everyone talked about how Suda is an art photographer. And then she was teaching us all this, you know, ancient stuff, because this was like the beginning stage of photography—

CM: Yeah.

LA: In general. And that's really before [*indistinct*] alternative, because it's something that's been around for years. But it's not, you know—it gives a different perception of regular printing.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So. And so, like at the time when Suda went to school, they had this camera that they—you could buy at Sears, and it was called the Diana camera. And that was a plastic camera, and it actually did pretty good for pictures. Then they made a copy of the Diana camera, and it's called the Holga. And so a lot of people— That was my era, when they had the Holgas. And they still have them in some shops.

CM: And what were these shot with?

LA: Originally it was a 35 negative.

CM: This is a 35 negative, this blue alternative printing?

LA: Yeah. No—yeah. It was a negative that was a black and white negative.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Made it one, you know, made one positive. Then made—then I made a—

CM: A negative?

LA: Positive, and then a positive—I made one of each.

CM: Got you.
LA: So that I had the positive and the negative. And so.
CM: And what kind of camera were you using? Were you still using your same gear from high school?
LA: This was my brother's camera and this was downtown LA.
CM: Okay.
LA: And this was 35 negative.
CM: Okay.
LA: So was this. And this was where the police department—this building was the police department. It used—
CM: Oh.
LA: To be on the corner of—
CM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
LA: Yeah. So.
CM: And then, so this is, like your first year at ELAC, is when you're taking these images?
LA: Well, the first year I just—
CM: The second year?
LA: The second year, because the first year I just took one class.
CM: Okay.
LA: And that was slide presentation. Everything was slides.
CM: Gotcha.
LA: So you just showed your slides.
CM: You just showed your work on a slide.
LA: Yeah, yeah. You photograph Cibachrome, or, you know, the other—I forget the names, but they were slides. And they would present them and talk about them and why, what you saw on it.
CM: Yeah.
LA: It was the class, this one man who was close to retiring. And he did all those years and, you know, he really didn't teach me anything. But, you know, it's interesting what other people did.
CM: Now, you had mentioned the other day, too, that your time at ELAC was difficult as well.
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: Why was that?
LA: Well, like I said. Ross walked me across campus and told me I couldn't take another photo class until I learned to read and write. And, you know, all these years in school I didn't know how to read and write, so I didn't think it was going to happen soon. [*laughs*]
CM: You're like, "I've been through twelve years of this and it still hasn't worked."
LA: Fourteen.
CM: Fourteen at that point?
LA: Because I was kept behind, yeah.
CM: Yeah.
LA: And then you add kindergarten to it, so. I had fourth grade twice.
CM: Fourth grade? So kindergarten and fourth grade you did twice.
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: Okay.
LA: I didn't do kindergarten twice. I just did it once.
CM: Oh, okay.
LA: But I hadn't gone to pre-school. In that time there wasn't pre-schools everywhere, so.
CM: Gotcha.
LA: It was actually something special, I suppose.
CM: So really 'cause of this guy Ross?

LA: Yeah. I mean, basically, like I said, he was the first teacher I ever had that was a man of color. And he was a *man* and he was a—

CM: Oh, Ross Hernandez, right?

LA: Ross Hernandez. And so when he said that to me, it almost like, broke me. And that's when Suda said, "I heard what Ross said, and if you want to take my class . . . Just do whatever you want, because I know it's a rough time right now in your life. And this makes you feel good and happy, so just come during my time and forget what Ross said."

CM: Exactly. Well, that's good.

LA: And then, so. Yeah. And then Mei was there, and she was—she wanted to make sure that I understood that she's not a surrogate mother. I go, "I know." But she was—she talked to me more than my mom ever talked to me.

CM: Yeah.

LA: My mom talked to everybody under the sun but me, you know. She also overprotected me, like—

CM: Yeah.

LA: When she had cancer, all my cousins knew about it. And I knew it was cancer, but I wanted her to say it to me, or one of my aunts to say it to me, and none of them did. And then—oh, my Aunt Mary and my Aunt Rachel said, "We don't want to go behind your mother's request. She doesn't want you to know about it." Something like that. And so my cousin Ceci was very close to my mom. Ceci and my brother were born the same year, so Ceci, my brother, Vicky, and Becky were all—they were always pictured together because they were all born the same year. [*claps*] Cute little kids.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so Ceci was very close to my mom. And so, and she lived in Montebello at the time, so my—I would go over there a lot to her house and her ex-husband. And he was always doing pot and stuff. But when Ceci's first child was born she was cerebral—she had no bone to keep her back up.

CM: Oh.

LA: Cerebral palsy or something like that. But she—

CM: Yeah.

LA: Didn't live beyond a year and a half.

CM: Wow.

LA: You know, because she had no spine.

CM: Eeesh.

LA: So my mom was—you know, we were not that far away, so my mom would take care of us, you know. Linda. And she gave Ceci a lot of support because her mom was dying. I was up in Lake Tahoe, so it wasn't, you know. And so, you know, so. I—when it happened, I called Ceci, and she came—she goes—on the phone she said, you know, "I cannot tell you what's going on because your mother asked us not to." And, you know. So that confirmed it, but I wanted somebody to actually *say* it to me.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know?

CM: You're like, "Treat me like an adult."

LA: Yeah. And so then Sara came down. She lived in San Diego, and she came down. And my brother and her had gone out—and Ceci—gone out to dinner, and they got back and they were drunk. And Sara comes in the house and says, "You know, I think I need some coffee, so take me to Norms, and let's go have coffee." And so I'm driving out the back of—I'm driving my mom's car out of the driveway. My mom's screaming, "Don't listen to a word Sara says to you!" [*laughs*] And then we get to Norms and Sara goes, "I need some coffee first." So she ordered coffee. She had a couple of sips, then she goes, "Ask me what you want to ask me." And I asked her, "Is my mom dying?" And she goes, "Yes." She was the first person to tell me. Couple days later, my Aunt Lenore came, and she said to me, "Your mom has cancer. It's terminal." She told me everything, and she said, "If there's anything you want to know about what's going on with your mom, ask

me and I will tell you." So they were the two people that, you know. Sara did it in a very bumpy way, I suppose. [*laugh*]

CM: A little brusque.

LA: Yes. Yeah, but that was Sara and Ceci, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: The two of them, oh, they were hilarious when they drank. And when they were angry they were hilarious too. But, you know. [*laughter*]

CM: Now, who of the three women that you mentioned to me, was it one of them, the ELAC mentors, that convinced you to do the campus newspaper?

LA: No.

CM: None of them.

LA: None of them.

CM: You decided to do that on your own?

LA: Okay, but let me get to that part.

CM: Okay, sorry. I'm getting ahead of myself.

LA: Yes, you got to stop.

CM: [*laughs*]

LA: No, Sybil turned me on to the Day of the Dead. She opened [up] painting, painters [to me]. Then I took a pre-Columbian art with her the next semester, and I really loved it.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah. And so, you know. I met some art—I started meeting artists in the community, and I started saying to them, "You know, I'm a photographer." And see, for about ten years, all these artists I photographed saw me as a photographer. You know, like a PR photographer for them. You know, I gave them pictures of what I did. They thought I was creative with my photography and my printing of them, but they didn't see me as an artist. They never even referred to me as an artist until I was in this show at Loyola Marymount that Sybil curated. And it was the year that they were having all these, you know, for like three months there was these art shows all over LA. It had to do with, I think, the Olympics at that time.

CM: The Olympics 1984?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That would have been it.

LA: So I was in that show at Loyola Marymount. And that's the one I did [the] three-piece *Three Eagles Flying*, and the How Mexican Is Mexican [series].

CM: I thought that *Three Eagles Flying* was from way later, or—

LA: No, it was there. That was the first time I ever showed it.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah.

CM: It was in the early '80s.

LA: Yeah, let me get something from inside. [*pause*] And when I got there to the opening—

CM: Sybil curated the show. What was it called?

LA: *Image and Identity*. [*Image and Identity: Recent Chicana Art from "La Reina del Pueblo de Los Angeles de la Porcincula"*; the exhibition opened at Loyola Marymount University's Laband Art Gallery in September 1990—ed.]

CM: Okay. And this was in 1990?

LA: Yeah. And so I got there a little late—

CM: So were you still studying at ELAC during this time? No, right?

LA: Maybe it was '90. I think I was off and on there until like '92.

CM: Okay.

LA: Yeah, because I took a—and when I took this journalism class, I didn't need the photography darkroom because they—

CM: You could use the journalism one.

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Got it.

LA: So that was basically the only reason why I did it.

CM: Were you mainly taking classes so you could use their darkrooms?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I mean I took a psychology class once, you know, and all that. So, the curator—I mean, Sybil's the curator. She didn't even know it until she saw it at the opening. And I usually am always early at these things but this time I decided, "I'm going to be a little late." [*laughs*]

CM: Mm-hmm. Just, "I'm going to make my entrance."

LA: Yes, yeah. And then a couple of people came up to me and said, "You got to see this. Don't get mad." And then he showed me this, and I went to the—to the director of that gallery, and I go, "What the hell did you do?" He goes, "I thought it was going to be that way." "Did you see the image? It's not put it up that way. You know, this is my image, this is the way." And I gave him a lecture.

CM: Was that wrong? It's installed the wrong way?

LA: It's *Three Eagles Flying*, and it's all this.

CM: All verticals?

LA: All verticals. American flag. The Mexican flag. And I explained to him why these two symbols need to be the same way as this symbol, because it's all about the relationship. The flag—the American flag is imperialism, which is usually the eagle. And the Spanish name—my Spanish name is Aguilar. They added an extra letter when they came across the border, but it's still Aguilar. That's [Spanish for] *eagle*, and so, you know.

CM: Until they published it wrong.

LA: *He* published it wrong. He took the—I go, "Why didn't you ask Sybil? She was curating the show. She knows the way it should have been." And I go, you know. And I just spent—I gave him the riot act in the middle of the gallery.

CM: And so this is the Loyola Marymount—

LA: *And* on top of it, the thing is that everybody loved the three—they loved both of them. The Nature Self-Portrait [series]. [*sound of wind chimes*] She was, um . . . Oh, what was I saying? [*pause*] Anyway. [*pause*] Oh, so I was the only photographer in the show. And the guy Gordon, he was the director of the show. You know, director of the gallery.

CM: The wind isn't cooperating, is it?

LA: Not really. So Gordon was the director, and he thought, you know, he made a decision. I go, "Why didn't you talk to the curator? She would have told you straight out that that's not the way it's supposed to be." And then Sybil had told me already that Gordon wasn't sure about me because I was a photographer and all the other ones were painters, you know. And he wasn't sure about me, and he had doubts about me and—

CM: And what was Gordon's last name?

LA: I don't know.

CM: But he was the gallery director? [Gordon Fuglie was director of the Laband Art Gallery from 1989 to 2006—ed.]

LA: Yeah, yeah. So. And she goes, then. Then, so this opening to all these people that I photographed because I did portraits of them, I thought that, you know, that I did really nice portraits of them. And they, a lot of them used them in things for a catalog of this year or that. But basically, particularly all the men, they saw me as a photographer that photographed them. I'm not an artist. I'm a photographer and a photographer documents things.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And that's how they saw me. At this opening I became an artist to a lot of them. A lot of these men who said to me straight out, "I never knew you were an artist." [*laughs*]

CM: At this point, how long had you considered yourself an artist? Like what was the point that you started considering yourself an artist?

LA: Well, to be honest, not until I was thirty-three. But I knew that I wasn't just a photographer. I knew that I was creative in my photography, but I couldn't really accept it yet. My friend Sandy, who I did a picture in her room—I used to house sit for her—and it's called *In Sandy's Room*. Everyone wants to know if we had a relationship, and the relationship was friendship, but, you know. But, so, I named it after because I knew she would like that name in the catalog or something, you know, so. And it was this room in her house. She was this diet freak or . . . Not really a freak, but to me she was a freak. All these herbs and stuff and things like that. And then she would go out with somebody and go camping, hiking. She would smoke a lot. [*laughs*] You know, that's, what—anyway.

CM: It's herbal.

LA: It's herbal, yeah. So, but . . . And she saw that I had a crush on her, but I couldn't put that word to it, you know.

CM: You weren't really there?

LA: Yeah. And from the time I met Sandy, she referred to me as an artist. And she's, you know, she was . . . When she was born, she grew up in Monterey Park, and then they moved to Pasadena. Her father in his first marriage had a business, and it went down. And he started another business, and it went down. And then this time he had a business and it was successful. And so Sandy was the second fam—marriage. And Sandy's brother—she had two sisters and a brother from the first marriage. And particularly the brother was the one she always interacted with. Because he was maybe the youngest at the time, of his first family. But he was—he took over his father's business, and his father had him running the business when he was sick, and all that, and ended up leaving it to him and [*indistinct*] stuff to Sandy and her other siblings, you know. And so . . .

CM: How did you meet Sandy?

LA: I met her in the lithography class up at Pasadena.

CM: In Pasadena.

LA: And she just, you know. She was stylish before you knew what was stylish, I suppose. She would come in with these old, old clothes, you know. Later it became a thing in stores.

CM: The whole vintage—

LA: Vintage stuff, yeah. And she just came in all '70s, and like, that's kind of weird, but it looks good on her.

CM: Yeah. What was her last name?

LA: Sandy . . . I don't know. I could look it up.

CM: But you guys ended up becoming good friends?

LA: Yeah, we still are. I have to call her. I haven't yet told her about this. So, from the minute I met her, she talked to me as an artist. Her mother painted. Her father was a—his hobby, I mean not his hobby. He was a great pianist, you know, he could play classical music. He was very good at it, but it wasn't his livelihood. And her mother painted. So she would go to a lot of museums with her mother and stuff like that, so. And she was then more middle class when they moved there, when she was in sixth grade. And she would say it about her friends. She goes, "You know, they all come from very rich families. They all think they're artists, but they're only getting through the doors because of their parents." And she goes, "You're a true artist, Laura. I know you don't take it on, but you are." And when I was thirty-three I decided to accept it. But she—I met her at twenty-two, and from that moment I met her she kept on calling me an artist.

CM: Really?

LA: And she would introduce me to her friends who were so-called artists, whose doors was opened because of their fathers, you know. And a lot of them didn't succeed after the door was opened. It got slammed down because, you know. I mean, I remember hearing Lucille, Lucy Arnaz Jr., saying that "they're always

saying when you have famous parents, you're coming in on their, you know, thing." And she goes, "No, you know, my parents opened the door, but I had to make it through. So it wasn't because of my mom or my father. They just—they taught me that you—they will open the door for you, but that's all they get and then do for you."

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so you have to have something there, you know.

CM: Exactly.

LA: So, you know. So Sandra was always telling these people that I was an artist. None of them really ever even really interacted with me. They're all white middle-class people, but Sandy was this, you know, out there and liked everybody. And so she would come to class stylish—stylishly late. I mean there was—we had lab time to work in the dark[room] in making screens and stuff and copying them, and Sandy didn't know a thing. And I was with—I knew photography negatives, so I helped her a lot, and then she would help me. But she never really finished the course, nor did I. But, you know.

CM: [*sings*] La, la-la, la-la.

LA: But, I mean, the instructor had a little crush on Sandy, and she knew it and she would point it out to me. And she goes, "See, he doesn't ever say anything to me when I come in an hour and a half late." Because it was a four-hour class, four days a week. And usually half of it was in the darkroom, making negs and transparencies and stuff like that.

CM: Did you do any self-portraiture during this time [*indistinct*] ELAC?

LA: No.

CM: No.

LA: Oh. So let me try and—so then I—back to East LA and being introduced to the Day of the Dead.

CM: Yes.

LA: This was the first Day of the Dead I went to. And let me see . . . [*looks at photos*] And these are pictures . . . Oh, here, let me just show the Day of the Dead stuff first. This is a famous painting that I think has this couple on it that somebody did for a band and got out there. Lot of people have the same stuff that was there on that day.

CM: Omigod. This is so good. This looks like Evergreen Cemetery?

LA: Yeah. [*pause*] And this is Evergreen, too. [*shuffles photos*] And, you know.

CM: So that's great.

LA: 'Cause this was at Self-Help [Graphics & Art].

CM: This was, like, Self-Help used to organize these, right?

LA: Mm-hmm. And this is—

CM: These parades?

LA: Well, this was the first one that they did. Procession from the cemetery to Self-Help. They did that before, but it was the last time they did it. You know, so. I mean, I didn't—you know. Just the city had issues. It's getting bigger and bigger every year, so . . .

CM: Mmm.

LA: And then a couple of years after that they stopped having it there, and the Photo Center took it over. And later I was working at the Photo Center. [Los Angeles Photography Center—ed.]

CM: Wow, these are great. [*pause*] Who's that?

LA: I don't know. He's an artist. He's a—

CM: Is that Willie Herrón?

LA: No. Um . . . it will come to me. Not now, but it will come to me. [*laughs*] I can't think of it right now. Norte. Something Norte. His sister's a poet. [Armando Norte—ed.] [Fig. 5]

CM: Oh, his sister's Marisela.

LA: Yeah, and he's a painter and, you know. [*indistinct*] So I took this picture for the newspaper at East LA College. Now see, how I got into the newspaper thing was my friend David, who was also in photography.

He was the guy who did the newspaper stuff. And then he would leave and be gone for like a month or so. And so the second time he left for a little trip, when he came back, he goes—They kicked him out, and they went over to the darkroom and said, "We need someone to do some printing for us and take a couple pictures at the . . . And on your free time you could use the darkroom there." So I said, "Yeah!" I ran over there and he—when he came back, he was telling me how to do things and stuff, because he really thought I would be good at it. And he goes, "I just did it 'cause it was something to do."

Figure 5. *Armando*, 1984. Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 inches.

CM: Exactly.

LA: And not necessarily, you know. 'Cause he really wasn't working on his—any kind of degree. He was just a floater in life. And years later, I found him and he [*indistinct*] doing well. So then, this is like, um . . . So I shot it again. This was a student that plays piano. This was a student from photography. And have you ever heard of Arnold Newman?

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: He had a picture of a piano like this and some famous guy who was sitting there, who was a pianist. And it didn't have the chalkboards in the back. But when I saw it, I had to put it up because it wasn't up when I photographed him. But I didn't like this, so I wanted to do it again. And I'd rather have someone pretty. [*laughs*] It was Margo. And she wore black all the time, so it went perfect, you know.

CM: Yeah, it goes well with the piano.

LA: And then back to the cyanotype. I had this one and the hand palm, but I cannot find the hand palm.

CM: These are the fabric?

LA: Yeah. I learned the hard—I put together a little blanket? And I found out the hard way that you don't wash it because the detergent would take it off. [*laughs*]

CM: Oops! Oops.

LA: So I was told that, yeah. I go, "Why did I do this?" And Suda goes, "The church just [*indistinct*] away." So this is a picture of my mom when she was a baby.

CM: Oh, wow!

LA: And this is a Xerox. And also it was an alternative thing at that time. People were going to Xerox places, making pictures on the color Xerox machines and stuff like that.

CM: Yeah, Xerox was big for a while.

LA: Yeah. And then it was—everybody had access to one.

CM: Yeah. It was easy and cheap too.

LA: I remember it cost me like seventy-five dollars for an hour on the color machine. You'd go crazy, but you only have an hour.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So this was a building—beginning of a church being built in Montebello.

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: And it's a major big church. But see, I was doing more graphic. I always liked things that were kind of graphic at the time. And then I would mix them again. Get, gather—'cause this is the basic, the first one.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then these, I just—as they were getting built and built, I would just take another picture, or I would just decide to double them. And so I would go into . . . These are doubled and cross—they cross each other and stuff. You know, so . . . To me it's kind of very—it's very abstract.

CM: Yeah.

LA: What it is I don't know, but I like it. [*laughs*]

CM: It works.

LA: Yeah, so pretty much.

LA: It works.

CM: And so at what point did the newspaper come into this? The campus newspaper at ELAC?

LA: It came in when David left for half the semester and they came over. And then I just started photographing performances and . . . [*shuffles papers*]

CM: I got that off the floor. [*shuffles papers*]

LA: Can you move your little cup?

CM: Oh. Yes.

LA: So, this was a magazine that the newspaper did twice a year. And so the cover's mine. [Fig. 6]

CM: And so this is what you did work for? Oh, and here's the other stuff.

LA: Yeah. So this is from this magazine.

CM: Élan magazine, you did work for.

LA: We had, you know, topics and all that.

CM: I'll just get a couple of examples to show and have. Okay.

LA: You could take a picture. [*laughs*]

CM: You're like, "Get on it." [*pause*] Oh, that's great. A rare color shot.

LA: Yeah, well, at the time I was still doing color from time to time. So these like [*indistinct*] when I had the whole paper to my—whole page to myself.

CM: Right. From the Day of the Dead.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: How did you like doing this kind of work?

LA: I actually enjoyed it, because I didn't have to necessarily talk to people.

CM: You could just take pictures?

LA: Yeah, because I'm the observer, you know.

CM: Yeah.

Figure 6. Cover of *Elan* magazine, 1980. 8 x 10 inches.

LA: I just tell—you know, they knew that I was coming, and then they just sort of, like, be nice to me and, you know.

CM: And just let you work?

LA: Yeah.

CM: How long did you work for the campus news?

LA: Maybe two semesters.

CM: Two semesters?
LA: Yeah.
CM: Oh, and there's that photo of the pianist.
LA: Yeah. Okay. This one I have [*indistinct*] going to the pumpkin patch.
CM: Now, were you working during this time as well, when you were a student, or . . .
LA: Kind of.
CM: Kind of. Like jobs here and there?
LA: Well, I kind of at the same time was doing . . . I got fifteen hours a week from the PR person for East LA College.
CM: Oh, okay.
LA: And I would go and—I hated that, really, to be honest, but she pushed me into it. And she goes, "Just be in the background. Just shoot. Unless you have to make a group picture, and then you have to interact with them. But most of the time we just want you to go and document what's going on." [*shuffles papers*] So, yeah. Isn't that cute. [*indistinct*] Classes on weekends, community classes . . . and—
CM: And then during this time, your mother's ill as well, during your first years?
LA: No, she had died at this, by this—
CM: She had died already.
LA: She already died, yeah.
CM: What year did she die?
LA: Eighty-one.
CM: Eighty-one?
LA: Or '80.
CM: And what kind of cancer did she have?
LA: Well, we didn't really know, exactly. A year after she died I found out that she knew she had cancer and she chose to do nothing about it. And for years I felt like she committed suicide. And I told my Aunt Mary that one day, and she goes, "You know, I've always thought, too." Because she knew about it a year before, and she—every time I asked her what the doctor said, she just said "to take some aspirins." And I don't think he just said that.
CM: Yeah.
LA: "She chose not to do anything about it. And, you know, my brother's an ass. [*laughs*] You know, he's a good man and he's an ass, you know. But I think your mom thought that'd be the only way she could get away from him." You know. So I used to always have this dream that my mom would leave my dad and go to live on the farm with Ruth, her cousin. 'Cause my mom was—she was in heaven every time we went to the farm. She loved the openness of it and, you know, all that stuff, you know. And going up in the hills. And so. I always thought she would be happier there. And my dad wanted a big family, and my mom couldn't give [him] that, you know. And so there's always—he wanted her to adopt kids, and she didn't want to do that. You know. And like, you know, she wasn't supposed to have me.
CM: Really?
LA: Yeah, because when she had my brother she had this thing that now is not a problem, but then it was. And it was like her legs would get so swollen. It's like poison sort of goes into the body.
CM: Oh, wow.
LA: Yeah. But now they have pills and shots for that, like, you know.
CM: Yeah.
LA: But she had to be bedridden when she had me. And I was premature.
CM: How premature?
LA: Seven months.
CM: Oh, you were born at seven months?
LA: I was born at seven months, yeah.

CM: Okay.

LA: So, you know. Two months early. And when we were born, when I was born . . . Oh, I could show you this, now I know where it's at, this other thing. I did a piece at Self-Help Graphics about it, so you know. [*indistinct*] So, I mean I would just do that. Get my name and, you know. I had access to the darkroom. And I used to—they were all into words and . . . Actually, I got the job to also take the paper in to the newspaper. At, on Monday nights, they would put the paper together, and I would have to make the prints. And then I would drive at two in the morning down to Glendale. I wouldn't [*indistinct*] the words. And drop off the text and stuff. So they pay me for my mileage and—

CM: Yeah.

LA: This is a guy that I photographed. His name was Michael, and one of my earlier portraits of him was at East LA. And so.

CM: Mm-hmm. That wood behind him was great.

LA: Yeah, it was at Philippe's parking lot.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Oh, nice. [*laughter*] So, I saw in your bio that it said you graduated from ELAC with a photography certificate. No?

LA: I don't know where that came from, because I never graduated from anything beyond high school.

CA: Really?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Somebody got a little creative writing there?

LA: Probably, yeah.

CM: That's interesting. What year did you finally finish taking classes there?

LA: Well, in a lot of ways I never really stopped, because I took classes until I was twenty-two, I think. Or twenty-three. And then I started doing more of the high school nighttime adult stuff because it was easier. I could do more things there. And then, occasionally I came back over the years. Oh, back to Ross Hernandez on this thing. So Ross was an asshole, walked me across campus, told me I was a disgrace to our race because I couldn't read and write. And then two weeks later, his wife comes and takes me out to lunch. And I think her name was Linda. And she takes me out to lunch, and she talks about the fact that her mother had just passed away from cancer. So she wanted me to know what might be happening to my mom's body and stuff like that. So it's like really hard to hate the asshole when he does that. [*laughs*]

CM: Has his wife sit you down and—

LA: She took me to lunch, and she just talked about the fact that her mother had just passed away, and she took care of her for a while and it's very painful and hard for the daughter to do this. And if you ever need someone to talk to, to call her up and stuff like that, you know. So. I would not call her—anybody out here—even if they offered to me. It's just not—

CM: Yeah.

LA: I wouldn't—couldn't ask the questions that no one else was answering for me, so.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But it was, it was nice—it was great of him and it was nice of him. And then years later I went to Pasadena City College, did the thing with lithography which I never really ended up doing, found out I was dyslexic, started taking classes on writing and reading, classes that were for people who are dyslectic to learn different ways to maneuver yourself through language and stuff. And I didn't take any photography there. I should of because I knew one of the guys—big guys, Jack Butler—at the time. He was really nice to me. So occasionally I would take a night class so I could use the darkroom. Basically what I did off and on, over the years, was take a "twenty-eight" class, which is basically darkroom time, extra darkroom time, so. And then Ross was extremely helpful to me. He was proud of me and all that stuff.

CM: So he ended up redeeming himself?

LA: Yeah, redeeming himself from being an ass. Yes, he did! [*laughter*]

CM: Now, during all of these years, Gilbert is still a regular presence in your life?

LA: Yeah. From the minute— But, he was my assistant when I went out photographing my things and stuff. And he was doing writing with Terry and got—he was published several times. He had a book published. And that's what I was looking for, but it's not there, so. I don't know who I lent it to. But he had a book of poetry done before he died. [*City of God*, published in 1994—ed.] And he basically wrote about his partner John. How. . . the first half of the book is about John dying and the hospital situation and everything in the hospital, what he went through. The second part is just poems that he—some of them he wrote about his mother, and . . . Well, there was one he wrote about his mother. It was kind of harsh on her. But, you know, she deserved it, in my attitude. She would call Gilbert up. The problem was—okay. Gilbert had gone out with another friend from high school, and they went out to the Hollywood parade in Santa Monica—I mean on Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood. And his friend got picked up by somebody. And then he just hanged out and got picked up by a guy and then went home with him and slept with him. And so when he came home his mother goes—you know, he had like some rash here underneath—"Have you been kissing a man?" And he goes to her, "If you really want to know, I would tell you, you know, 'cause your my mother." And she goes, "I really want to know." And so he told her! And he goes, "I'm being honest with you. I've always felt this way." He had a girlfriend once in high school, but he never really felt anything beyond friendship, I suppose. And so she goes, "So, are you gay?" And he said, "Yes." And she said, "You have three hours to leave this house." Because he would be a bad example for his two younger brothers, which were, you know, at the time the golden boys.

And so what they ended up doing, he left. I—he called me, and I was at home, and he goes, "I need to move out. My parents are kicking me out of the house," da da. "Could you come bring your van?" I go, "I don't know. I'm going to Orange County to see—to listen to Judy Dater talk about her new book. I have to be back by eight o'clock." And I was, "Damn you." I went up there, and he filled his stuff in my van, and then he went to John's house. And him and John worked together, so they were friends. And John liked him, but didn't want to—he was young, so he was [*indistinct*]. Then he ended up staying, they fell in love, and they went together for five years. And very much, you know. Gilbert pursued more classes at, in Pasadena, going—taking classes. He loved religions. And he, you know, to add to his writing and stuff like that. He loved ancient religions and stuff. And he became a part of a cult, which I never really understood. But I never questioned it because it was what he needed. And so.

CM: That was Gilbert, or John?

LA: Gilbert. John was a good old Catholic boy. Wasn't necessarily going to church all the time, but he was a good old Catholic boy no matter what.

CM: Got you.

LA: Gilbert was raised Catholic but didn't, wasn't a good old Catholic boy because he didn't like it in the beginning. So, do you want me to move over a little bit more with the table?

CM: Sure.

LA: I never really understood that it was a cult, and he referred it to as a cult.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah, and . . . But Kevin, his second boyfriend after John died, several years later, he met Kevin. And Kevin was a performance artist and Gilbert was a poet. And so they would be at the same things [*indistinct*] after a while, so they started dating. And Kevin was involved in that cult thing. And I don't know if he still is, but he was at the time, and he introduced it to Gilbert. And Gilbert became a part of it. He became a member of that cult and stuff. But he never really explained it to me, but it had some things that I—Egyptian kind of bug, and things that are symbols, and this, that religion. And so. It was he needed, you know. And, at the time I had no desire to do anything with religion, you know, except think the way my grandma thought. She always said, "You carry God inside you." I always thought it was really strange until I go to the church I go to and they use that phrase all the time. "God is within you and also with you." So, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So I thought it was really weird, because that's basically—I remember that. And her and I would have lunch with [the TV show] *Sheriff John*. There was KTLA and it was a local show that was produced by Maggio carrots. My uncle had a packing shed in Holtville, this small little town. Right across from his packing shed was Maggio carrots. It was the biggest producer. It was the biggest business in that little town. [*Sheriff John's Lunch Brigade* was broadcast on KTTV; the Maggio produce company was one of the sponsors—ed.]

CM: Wow.

LA: And every year for Easter break, they would have an Easter parade. They would have Easter contests at the high school, football players chasing after a football that's all greased up or pigs and then—

CM: Yeah.

LA: Grabbing them and all that stuff. It was hilarious. And tractor pulls. And then they would always have a carrot cake contest, and all my cousins that are older than me, I mean, they were girls, they all won first place for the carrot cake. I love carrot cake to this day because of always eating those carrot cakes.

CM: I love carrot cake, too.

LA: So, you know. Yeah, so . . . So I would watch *Sheriff John,* and he would, like, show a cartoon, and then he would put himself in front of the TV—in the camera, you know—and then he would put a prayer. And he would go, "God is good, God is great," and something else. I don't remember it. So he would—we all have a prayer, then watch the cartoons after, to eat our lunch with. Two cartoons, him saying that, mentioning someone's birthday, whatever. And then two more cartoons, and then it was a half hour show, so.

CM: Yeah, yeah.

LA: And then he would wish us a good day and all that. And then there was a late afternoon show and my grandmother would watch it, you know, the two o'clock show and one o'clock show. And they were all—So what she would do is take, you know, try to make me take a nap. And she would sit there, and she would do her rosary. I don't know if she ever finished the rosary because once I was asleep she was back in the living room watching TV. [*laughs*] You know. But I remember listening to the chant of [*indistinct*]. I mean, whatever. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for our sins," and something, something, something.

CM: Yeah. And then the "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

LA: Yeah. And, you know, the funny thing is that, you know, Our Lady of Guadalupe, you know. Never knew that part of the name, but I always had a picture of the Lady, Our Lady of Guadalupe on the doorway to my bedroom. Whichever bedroom I had as a kid, there would be Jesus and—Jesus Christ—and then there'd be Baby Jesus and Mother Mary and other children adoring Jesus Christ. And then there was Our Lady of Guadalupe. And so I only did prayer with my grandmother. And so she would always say, "Let's pray to Our Lady." I didn't know there was a "Guadalupe" after the "Lady." [*laughter*]

CM: You just thought of her as Our Lady?

LA: As Our Lady. Yeah. "Don't forget, you know, to pray to Our Lady." And so I didn't know it was Guadalupe until I was in Chicano studies.

CM: Wow.

LA: I go, "Oh, yeah."

CM: "Oh, that's who that is?"

LA: Yeah, always called her Our Lady when I was a kid.

CM: That's hilarious.

LA: In my prayers. So, you know.

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CM: So I had, I had wanted to ask a few general questions—

LA: Okay.

CM: About your work before we get sort of into, like, specific series and stuff like that, because I wanted to have a sense of how you work.

LA: Okay.

CM: And so, I guess the first thing I want to know is: As a general rule are you someone who shoots very instinctively? Like, do you kind of go into a situation and you kind of feel it out, and you shoot from that? Or going in, do you know what you're kind of looking for? Like what—how would you say?

LA: I don't know what I'm looking for until I start shooting, to be honest. I don't have an idea. And I would tell people to come over and do a portrait of them, you know. I would always start off close up, and then I would move myself way back, and then I'd be in the middle. And it's usually the first roll that was always the best stuff. But see, I was—I would talk to the people and look around their house and ask them questions about like the music they like. Mei [Valenzuela] was a big Bob Dylan fan. Didn't like Dylan then, but now I do. [*laughs*] And I had a very close friend, and she loved Dylan.

CM: So you kind of socialize when you're shooting somebody?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: You socialize with them a little bit?

LA: I'm asking them questions about their lives there, and whatever would you feel comfortable in, and stuff like that, so you know. Photographed her.

CM: So, it's really, it's this very sort of instinctive process in a way. Like you're not going in thinking, "I'm gonna shoot the portrait in this way, or I'm gonna shoot myself in a landscape in this way."

LA: No, I have no clue until I start shooting. And I know that it's not the first idea I have that ends up being this series of a body of new work. It's just playing around and saying, "Oh, okay." Like I did the lesbian series, and Gilbert seen that and he loved it. And then I started doing some self-portraits because I was trying to . . . get myself to understand about— I was doing nude and the Clothed and Unclothed series.

CM: Yes.

LA: And everyone would say, "You know, it's kind of a lot for us to stand here naked while you fuss with that damn camera." Because it was a four by five. And every—I'd say, "Go this way," they'd go that way and—'Cause it, the camera is what our eyes see, with everything upside down.

CM: Oh.

LA: And our brain tells us it's right side. It turns everything right side up.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So we don't know the difference. And lens on a four by five is the same thing. It doesn't have that thing that changes it for us. So you have to—I mean you can't, you just have—

CM: It's like right is left and left is right, and—

LA: Yeah. I mean, they are still standing on the ground, but you can't say go this way and you mean the other way. So after a while some—most of them just said, "Okay, the other way." [*laughter*] You know, so, because they got—

CM: So the Clothed/Unclothed [series]. I mean, how did it come about that you started shooting these pairs of people with clothes and without. I mean, was it a natural progression that came from one shoot and you thought, "Hey, this is a good idea," or it was an idea you wanted to explore in advance?

LA: No, it wasn't either. Well, in a way it kind of . . . Well, there was another photographer that I saw that she photographs of students naked and with their clothes on. But that's why I changed the name. [*laughs*] I got the idea from someone else, and who doesn't get the idea from someone else?

CM: Exactly.

LA: So, you know, and everyone I know that I looked up to got an idea from someone else before them. So, you know. It's just a different angle to it. Same thing, different angle.

CM: Who were the first people you shot for that series? Do you remember?

LA: Actually, myself.

CM: Yourself?

LA: Mm-hmm. Well, see—

CM: Was it by yourself, or with someone else?

LA: No, my own self.

CM: You're by yourself. Was this one of the first self-portraits? I'm sorry I have to ask all these questions.

LA: I know.

CM: I'm terrible.

LA: First self-portrait, I don't think so.

CM: Okay.

LA: I think there were some other ones, more playful ones. Okay, so . . . I did the *Three Eagles Flyin*g. So I was telling a friend of mine, "I want to do a new series and I want to photograph myself with my clothes on, with my clothes off, and I want to have a statement about how I feel about my body and how I feel that people take away my person—who I am because of my body's being large, you know. I'm not beautiful and not this and not that." And she goes, "I feel the same way, but I'm on the other end. I'm very thin. I have very tiny, tiny little boobs, and my hair's always been short, and people always think I'm a guy." And she's not, and doesn't sound like one. "I wear earrings so that they know I'm a girl." And so she said, "I'll write something down and you can photograph me." Now, she went out on her vacation for a couple weeks, and then in the meantime, my cousin Leslie came to town. And Leslie has beautiful, long hair. And he's gay, he's open, to those that want to know. To those that don't want to know, he doesn't say anything. So he has long hair, and I want to photograph him. He's a very thin guy and good looking. But because of the long hair, he looks very Indian. And I look Indian when I'm in Texas and New Mexico. They always think I'm Native. More so in New Mexico 'cause—

CM: Because there's so much Native there?

LA: Yeah, and there's a certain type of tribe that most people are on the heavy side and, you know, that's been in the genes since the time of day started. You know. So, you know, a lot of people assume that I am, and I go, "No, not really, but thank you." You know, my grand, my grand—Bea's, my . . . Bea's mother, I have only one picture of her. I have a picture of her as a child, and then a young woman, but it's like a portrait-portrait, you know. And then there's a picture of her chasing around the house here. That's my mom, and she's like—my mom's like this high, you know. So she's coming around the corner after her, and my mom's at the edge of the picture. And I saw her face. I go, "She's very Indian." Bea goes, "Yeah." Bea was more Indian, but I didn't really see what my mom saw. But she knew more, I guess, about the . . . That's why she liked to stay at the county fair and look at people, and say where they're from and, you know. And I'm like, "It's hot. I want a banana split." [*laughs*]

CM: You want a banana split right now?

LA: No, no, I would say that to her.

CM: Oh, you would say that.

LA: No, I was like sitting there. Like, "I'm suffering here."

CM: You're like, "You're sitting here talking about people's facial features and I want a banana split."

LA: Pretty much. We'd wait in the sun, usually. That's why "come on, I want a banana split."

CM: Well, who doesn't want an—especially on a day like today, right? [*laughs*]

LA: I can't have bananas because they have too much potassium.

CM: That's right. That's right. No bananas. Okay, then just the split. [*laughter*]

LA: Can't have ice cream either, because I can't have calcium.

CM: Oh.

LA: I love milk, and it's been the hardest thing to give up milk.

CM: 'Cause of the kidneys?

LA: Mm-hmm. It doesn't process right, you know. And high potassium, if it—there's things that are potassium and then there's things that are potassium, then there's things that are *potassium.* The highest it is are the things we can't have: avocados, bananas, you know, beans. It's really hard to not be—to be a Mexican and not eat beans. Because until I was twenty-one, I didn't eat beans until I was at that corner place with Barbara and she forced me. She goes—she made fun of me that I didn't eat beans and I'm a Mexican. "What kind of Mexican are you?"

CM: What kind of food did you guys grow up eating?

LA: We grew up eat— My dad liked steak and potatoes. And my uncles, who were good cooks. My uncles, I [*indistinct*]. Three of my uncles were *really* good cooks. Uncle Frank and Aunt Mary were the ones who we were closest to. The ones that had ten kids and my mom's friend from high school. Uncle Frank was a great cook. Aunt Mary was a little bit less than Uncle Frank, but, you know, she was a great baker and she became a good cook because Uncle Frank was an excellent cook. And Uncle Frank taught my mom lot of the Filipino dishes. And so we would have a lot of more, you know, Filipino dishes. I love adobo, and adobo—I like pork and beef, but I don't like chicken adobo.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah.

CM: My husband makes a killer chicken adobo. [*laughter*]

LA: So I'm not a chicken crazy person. Occasionally I do have chicken, but . . . So, we ate a lot of, you know, like um . . . That time I had sit at the table and eat those beans it was . . .Why can't, I can't remember the name of the dish. It had little meat, but it had a lot of beans. I mean string beans . . . Chop suey? . . . No, I don't know. But we had a lot of food that my uncles made. So, you know.

CM: But going back to Clothed/Unclothed, because I think we're getting on a food discussion now, [*laughter*] like how did you choose your subjects?

LA: Well, originally I was gonna do myself. And then my friend Anne said she would do something. And then I—my cousin was in town and I photographed him. But I didn't have the heart to ask him to write about his body. My aunt said she would write about her body, so I thought, "Great, I would do mine first and then I would do hers." And then, in the end, I never did her. Because she saw all the other ones and said, "I don't think so."

CM: Why?

LA: Oh, you know. She just thought, you know, "It was really naked." [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah.

LA: So, you know. And—but she, you know, so she gave me the idea to continue it. But I also—even though she said she'd write about it, I didn't want to ask my cousin Leslie to write about his body. And, because I don't think he ever had a problem with his body, but, you know. Because he was very healthy and thin and good looking. And so I was like, "Ehhh." But my friend Willie [Middlebrook] he said he would write about his body, but he never did. [*chuckles*] So it was basically about the next step of dealing with my body. And then all these other people came along and liked it. And I had a lot of gay men who wanted me to photograph them and their husbands or boyfriends or whatever. But I just had a lot of gay men wanted to be photographed by me. And I go, "You find me two women, I don't care, straight or gay. You find me two women, and I'll take a picture of you and your partner." Because all I'd get is men who want to pose for me, you know? Getting women were hard. And I got my friend Joan Niatake . . . I don't know what her last name is, I can't remember it. But she was teaching—I was her lab tech at Glendale College. And so I asked her, and she goes, "You know, Laura, I'll do this just to support you." And then Willie's wife and a couple of other women that were in it, and they all said that they're only doing this to support me. It was not something that they wanted to do. They thought that the idea was good but, you know, they constantly reminded me as they're being photographed that they wanted to support me. You know, Monica Palacios,

Diane—I don't remember her last name. I photographed them, and they kind of said the same thing. More Monica than Diane. [*laughs*]That, "I'm being a good sport and trying to support you on this concept," you know. Do you know those two?

CM: I do not.

LA: Oh. Monica Palacio's a big person in the lesbian community as a, she was a comedian and she writes a lot of poetry and she does a lot of stage stuff. And she teaches here and there and now and all that. But she was, she came from San Francisco. And she's from San Francisco and she came down here. And when I was more into the community—the Latino community, the gay and lesbian Latino community and stuff. So, you know. There's the lesbians [*indistinct*], and the gay man and then the one who put together all the letters. [*laughs*] I still feel this way when they go bi-sexual, da da da, da da da. I go "Why don't we just say, 'Everybody who's not straight?'" [*laughter*] I think it would be a lot easier.

CM: But it sounds like it was really organic. It's almost like one person led to the next, to the next, to the next. It wasn't like—you wouldn't set out to go, "I'm gonna shoot these twenty people or ten people—"

LA: Yeah, no. I—

CM: Or whatever.

LA: I just didn't— One person saw the other person's work, and then they, "Okay, I'll go with you." Because it's always hard to sell someone on a concept that they don't see.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Like when I started doing the lesbian series, I did that because I was very much in the closet. But I started going to this center in West Hollywood called Connexus. And it was a women's center and it was separated from the Gay and Lesbian Center, which had everything gay—99 percent gay and one room for lesbians, [*laughs*] pretty much. And so, you know, then all the lesbians who worked in the center decided, "Let's go put this other group together." Connexus and stuff like that. So . . . I forgot what I was . . . Where did I start off at? There was something . . .

CM: How you—

LA: Oh, yeah. So I started doing—so I was asked to do a series for a conference in East LA for a therapist who worked with the Chicano community, and they might be gay or coming out. So the conference was for therapists who work with patients that are gay or lesbian and the coming-out process to themselves and to their community, to their families and all that stuff. So they go, "Do you have an idea of how to do this?" And I said, "Yeah, sure. I got an idea. I take a photograph and ask them to write something about themselves and put them together." And that was the [Latina] Lesbians series. And this other photographer I love, he does a lot of writing with people and conversations and poems. Or he creates an image and he makes this—he has the story, and then he puts pictures to it. Another photographer that I had gone to a workshop basically did what Duane Michals does, but he changed it to a photograph and then a picture with the writing. So when I did my series I did the same thing. And, um, so I figured, you know, nothing's new. That's what they keep on saying about everything. Nothing is really new. So. [*laughs*] So that's my—if they say, "Oh, that looks like Jim Goldberg," I'm gonna say, "Nothing's new." [*laughs*] "Because I'm gonna say, "Jim Goldberg . . . If you look at Duane Michals, you can see that nothing's new." [*laughs*]

CM: Exactly, exactly. No such thing as a new idea.

LA: So, you know, I had that down.

CM: So it was this series that kind of came out of circumstances in your life?

LA: They gave me some—they gave me $200 for film and paper and—

CM: This is for the Latina Lesbians series?

LA: Yeah, this was the lesbian series, yeah. And the thing is, in a strange way, is that I didn't really know any Latina lesbians. Everybody I knew were white lesbians, you know. Occasionally there's some other colored people in there.

CM: Yeah.

LA: I basically hung out with this one circle of crazy people for about five years. Anne was one of them, but she wasn't crazy. Her partner at times was crazy. And then this other woman, Joanne, she was crazy a lot. And so it was basically almost every—it was half white and the other half was black or Latino, and but everyone was with a white partner. So, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And several people were with—several of the people. 'Cause one night I was at a New Year's party at this woman's house, and it was the same group of people, and she goes, "I used to be with her and I used to be with her and I used to be with her." And I'm like, "Oh God." And they all say, "Yeah, I used to be with her and she was this way and this way and we broke up, yet [we're] friends," because the lesbian community is so small. You just—it happens a lot. There's a lot of people, lot of people have always referred to as a [incestuous] community.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because in the course of a year, these are the only people you know, and stuff like that, so.

CM: How did taking these pictures, because you weren't out yet when you did the Latina Lesbians series, right?

LA: Ah, sort of.

CM: Sort of?

LA: But not to, not to any strong degree. Yes, I was—

CM: But you were—were you out to yourself?

LA: Yeah, I was going to Connexus and that's how, you know.

CM: Oh, got it.

LA: So this woman, Yolanda Retter— Have you ever heard of her?

CM: No.

LA: She was a librarian at UCLA. She was the one that brought me to UCLA. [Yolanda Retter Vargas was the librarian at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center from 2003 until her death in 2007—ed.]

CM: Oh, okay.

LA: And she passed away about a year or two after she started working there. And she was very much a political person. She was always in the community—the gay and lesbian community. Every time I saw her, she was arguing with someone over the fact—you know, it was always around the issue of white and colored people. And so she always would get on people's nerves. And it was kind of funny, in a strange way, that at her funeral, people were talking about her. They would say their little homage to her, and the people that she fought the most with became her closest friends. And this woman who was in charge of the Gay and Lesbian Center, she would call her on everything, and they ended up becoming friends. They were enemies most of the time, you know. I don't know if they saw themselves as enemies, but they just saw themselves in a place where they would have to stand their ground with her, you know. And so over the years, she became friends with almost all of the people that she sort of jumped on about this and that or whatever, you know. Political correctness and all those things. So, you know.

CM: So it was through her . . .

LA: That I started doing the lesbian series.

CM: Okay.

LA: Because, see, it was Connexus, which was in West Hollywood, and Yolanda made issue with Connexus: "Why don't we have a space in East LA and have an East LA Connexus?" And they got in contact with this mental health center in the edge of East LA and the beginning of Compton—no, Commerce—and the side of Montebello. So . . . they gave us a two rooms, I mean two spaces, twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday. So we had group meetings, or this or that, or talk, or whatever, or social stuff. And then they asked me to do a . . . something about being, coming out. So that's when I did the lesbian series. And I wanted people to write about how they see themselves and where they're coming [from]. "Just give me a paragraph on yourself." And so a lot of people I photographed were lawyers and therapists and teachers. Mostly everybody in the lesbian series is mostly high—had education to a certain level. Now—

CM: How did you find these women?

LA: Yolanda. I knew Yolanda. I didn't know anybody but Yolanda. I mean, I didn't know Yolanda when I first came to photograph her. Okay, see, at this point I'm doing portraits of people in their homes and trying to get—I get a sense by looking at their stuff and in order to talk—maybe talk about their music, the books, you know, the art stuff. And when I walked into her house, I thought, "Oh, God, I don't know what to do." She had her living room, her kitchen, her dining room, had from the bottom to the tops, bookcases with everything, all these books, 'cause she was—she ended up being a librarian, what [*indistinct*] she studied to be that. But she had every book you could ever imagine on politics and color and all this stuff, and I go, "What the hell am I gonna say to *her*?" [*laughs*] So I introduced myself, "My name's Laura Aguilar." And she goes, "Laura." [*with Spanish pronunciation*] "No, my name's Laura Aguilar." And she goes, "Laura." And after maybe six times she goes, "No. Your name in Spanish is *Laura*. I'm not going to say your name in English, so you're just gonna have to get used to that." [*laughs*] And she goes, "You didn't really grow up in the community, have you?" And I go, "Not really. I grew up in the suburbs." And—although years later, I found out that she grew up in the suburbs in New Hampshire. [*laughs*] And her father was a professor and, you know, her mother's family was the Latino family, but her father had taught at the University of Guatemala. Or one of those Central American— She was there with her father. For four years he was teaching university down there—one of those countries, Central American countries. And so, and she spoke perfect Spanish, I suppose. I can't tell the difference between perfect and not perfect because it just sounds like nothing to me. [*chuckles*]

CM: It all sounds the same?

LA: Pretty much, except the one phrase I used to say to my dad, and he—it was "No dinero, Papá." You know. And he would say, "You know, Laura, that's cute, but after twenty-five it ain't cute no more, so don't bring it up again."

CM: [*laughs*] Now, when you were shooting people, when you were starting these series—Clothed/Unclothed, the Latina Lesbians—were people, did you pose people? Did you give a lot of direction? Did you let them pose themselves? Like what was the dynamic between you and your subject?

LA: I let them pose themselves. And then, see, for the Clothed/Unclothed series, what I did was I used positive negative negative. I mean Polaroid. It was positive negative, so you could show them the positive.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then you had the negative and [*indistinct*] just rush it right in and be very gentle with it because the film was very tender.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know. And so I would show them that. I would put them on the table. I'd go, "Which ones do you like?" And I would have them sign a model release at the end of the session, and I'd go, "Are there two you like? Are there four you like? Are there six you like? Let me know which ones and so I can a have variety to choose from."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "But I want to make sure that you like 'em."

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so they'd go, "Let me . . . " Maybe they gave me four pictures that they like.

CM: Gotcha.

LA: I mean two [*indistinct*], and some people would pick only one. So sometimes I would try to show another one, look at it differently, and I used to get what I wanted but, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But it was slow to get it, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: I was just happy to make this other pair that I like, compared to the one that they like.

CM: Exactly.

LA: And when they saw a big 16 by 20, it's like, "Oh, yeah, I could see that one better, too." So then I had them sign the model's release for it. And 'cause I don't want to . . . Because it's a vulnerable thing to be naked, you know. And it was bad enough just to be naked in front of myself, me and the camera. It was terrifying. But I had a long cable release, so I could just click it from stepping on the bubble.

CM: Really? Now, what was that—I mean, what inspired you to get naked in front of the camera for the first time? What—

LA: Well, see, it goes back to Sandy and her house. I mean her house is a '50s house. And there's all these home journals from the '50s and magazines that she would get at flea markets and stuff. Almost every single one had something about dieting and stuff about women's body. And Sandy loved those. Everything in that house was '50s, you know.

CM: Really?

LA: And she loved—

CM: Where did she live?

LA: Pasadena.

CM: In Pasadena?

LA: Yeah. But she just loved the house and all these things. She's always talking about this diet and that diet. She never really—I don't think she ever really was on any particular diet. I mean she said there were three things in life that she loved, and that was sex, food, and exercise. Those are the three things that mattered to her. [*laughs*]

CM: Simple needs. A woman of simple needs.

LA: Pretty much, yeah.

CM: So you're in her house, you're seeing all these books about dieting . . .

LA: And just, you know, I'm housesitting because she's down for the summer. She became a teacher so she could have three months off for vacation.

CM: Oh, yeah, nice.

LA: Because she didn't want to be a teacher—you know, she didn't want to work regular jobs.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So she—that's the only reason. She became a bilingual teacher on the cusp of things. She graduated from Santa Cruz, which doesn't give you any grades. You get a pass or fail.

CM: Exactly.

LA: And it was liberal arts, so, you know. What do you do with liberal arts? So.

CM: Exactly.

LA: She got—LA Unified School District was reaching out to get bilingual teachers and she happened to be—she loves Mexico, so she learned Spanish, 'cause one summer she had a boyfriend who had a little bar on the ocean, you know, and rented out scuba gear. And she stayed with him for three months, and she learned Spanish there. And the next year she had another boyfriend in Mexico. Sometimes she had the same boyfriend for two years in a row.

CM: Wow.

LA: Or skipped a year with him and someone else.

CM: So she would take off.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Was Sandy was white?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: So she'd take off, and you'd house sit her house?

LA: Mm-hmm. I mean, she offered it to me. She didn't—she goes, "I don't really need someone to watch it."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "Because the neighbors are really good, but I know that you live with your aunt and your dad. I know it could be crazy."

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I go, "Yeah." And she goes, "Not your aunt. She's a sweetheart. But I know that you and your dad don't get along, so why don't you take a break and house sit for me?" So, you know, it was basically she just let me have the freedom, you know, myself. And sometimes I thought of my ideas there and did them. The *In Sandy's Room* started out in another way. I will be right back to bring you the thing.

CM: Okay. The next wave of photos.

LA: Right here, *In Sandy's Room*.

CM: *In Sandy's Room*? [Fig. 7]

Figure 7. *In Sandy's Room*, 1989. Gelatin silver print, 12 x 16 inches.

LA: Yeah. I did that one day. I did some before that and I made some proofs, and then I did that one. There was this poem that I was reading at the time.

CM: What inspired you to do this? I mean that's what—

LA: I'm getting to it.

CM: We're getting to it. Okay, sorry, sorry. I get very excited.

LA: No, I mean, you know. And Sandy's very much into her body. You know, she's very—she does yoga and all that stuff. So, like I said, she has those three things that make life wonderful. And so I always thought she was a different kind of person. I mean she was definitely a model, but not like I was. And she would sort of push me in that direction sometimes. And there was this, um . . . So I was sitting there. I did a couple pictures one night, and it's in one of those piles there. And it was basically, I just did a torso picture of my torso. And then I put it up and I go, "Oh, this doesn't look so good." But there was form there and all that. And then I decided, you know, to start house sitting for a while. So I'm gonna do this picture, you know, of me sitting and having the windows open behind me. And the reason why I had the windows open behind me was about this little part of a poem. It's one paragraph of a poem that Nikki Giovanni did, and it was dedicated to Billie Jean King at the time that she was going through the divorce with the girlfriend or wife whatever, before it was legal. But, you know, it was a big thing. And so she goes— It's called *Mirrors*: "The face in the window . . . is not the face in the mirror . . . Mirrors aren't for windows . . . they would block the light . . . Mirrors are for bedroom walls . . . or closet doors . . . Windows show us who we hope to be . . . Mirrors reflect who we are . . . Mirrors like religious fervor are private and actually uninteresting to those not involved . . . Windows open up . . . brings a fresh view . . . Windows make us vulnerable." So, I had that, I had that idea to— And then, see, behind here's some bushes outside her own room, but behind that is a low fence and people walking [*indistinct*]. So to me, it was more of a challenge. I wasn't standing actually in the window, but I knew there were people on the other side of that window.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But they couldn't see me.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, and I just like [*indistinct*]. So that was my big challenge, and that—and the poem, just one paragraph of that poem, I think really says why I did it. I mean, I didn't see it as that, but then I realized, "I've been reading that poem a lot," and mainly that first paragraph. 'Cause I had to ask my cousin Paul what is religious fervor, and so I had no idea what that was. And so he explained it to me. And I said, "Oh, that works."

CM: Now, how did it feel to be naked in front of a camera?

LA: I pretended it wasn't there. [*laughs*] That one! I pretended it wasn't there. I was just enjoying the day, being naked, had the fan on me because she had no air conditioner, had a soda. I had one picture that I had the newspaper in front of me, but that was just a little too corny.

CM: How did you feel when you saw the image later?

LA: [*sighs*] I wasn't yet comfortable with it. And so Gilbert came over one day when I was sitting at Sandy's house. And he lived in Pasadena, so he came by. And I showed him. I had gone—I was doing the Clothed/Unclothed series, I think, or was I doing this first . . . I can't remember which one came first. So I showed some pictures to Gilbert, and he goes, "Oh, my God!" That was the Clothed/Unclothed series. . . . I don't know now which one it was, 'cause there was . . . I think *Sandy's Room* came first, and then I started doing some—started to do the Clothed/Unclothed series. But they said—one couple said, "You know, it's really a lot for us to stand here naked in front of you even though you're not really paying attention to us. You're fussing with that damn camera and we're standing out here for hours. You need to do something to make it faster." And I thought—I went down to my friend Willie's studio and set a camera on a tripod, and then I moved—put tape behind me at a certain height at the edge of the frame. And so I would move the camera until I got that edge. And then I had the top, and then I would have—I would tape myself to this edge of the frame and to that edge. So. But I was basically just photographing this part of me.

CM: Yeah, the trunk.

LA: The trunk, yeah. And so, I just—I took sixteen rolls of film that day, automatically. You know, had a air bulb where you stand on it, it clicks off. I was using Willie's camera, which is automatic, so I could just click, click, click away. And I clicked, clicked, clicked away for sixteen rolls in one afternoon. Developed them, made some proof sheets. And I was trying to— Gilbert, he goes, "Omigod! This is the greatest thing you've ever done!" I said, "You didn't like the lesbian series?" [*laughs*] "No, Laura! It's just that you keep on growing, okay?" [*laughter*] "'Cause the last one you did is your baby, and now you're saying this is the good one. It hasn't yet turned into my baby yet."

CM: Yeah, yeah.

LA: So.

CM: Why do you think it worked? Why do you think it worked to show yourself naked?

LA: I just thought I was gonna—okay, I thought Gilbert was gonna to look at it and say, "Omigod." He didn't. He thought it was a great step for me.

CM: "Omigod" in the sense he wasn't going to like it?

LA: Yeah, yeah. I thought he was gonna be, you know. He was a man no matter what. He's gay, [but] he was still a man, so I thought—

CM: Yeah.

LA: He was gonna say, "Oh, that's disgusting." And he didn't, and then I showed it to my fellow photographer Jim O'Reilly. He was a Irish guy. I can't think of his last name first. But he, um . . . I was his excuse when he went on photo shoots that I never was at with him. Because his girlfriend he had at the time . . . He had like three girlfriends at one time, and the main one met me, and the main one that he was truly in love with. Eventually he did marry her. He had these other two women. And so that one met me, so she realized I was a lesbian, so there was no problem about me and him being out together.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So he would use my name a lot. And then he was a mechanic, so I took that advantage back when [*indistinct*] broke down in my car. But, you know, he's a really good friend of mine. And he was like—he was a very cheerful guy. And so he looked at it. He goes, "This is great!" I'm thinking, "Two men that I show, they say it's great. They think it's wonderful. I don't know what's wrong with them!" [*laughs*] And then I showed it to my friend Willie, who was my supervisor, and good photographer and a friend of mine, and he thought it was great. And I'm going, "Oh, God."

CM: What did Willie supervise you in?

LA: The Photo Center. He was the—

CM: Okay.

LA: The junior director, or whatever [*indistinct*]. When the director was done, he was next in line. So he thought it was great and um, and I'm like, "Damn, I've got three guys that like it and think it's great and

wonderful what I'm doing. I don't know what's wrong with them." [*laughs*] Pretty much. I just did it, you know, 'cause it was like, I kept waiting for someone to say, "Oh, how dare you do that?" And it didn't happen for many years. It did happen but it didn't happen for—

CM: It did happen?

LA: Yeah, it didn't happen for many years though.

CM: Where did that—when did that happen, and who—

LA: Some woman. I mean, it was in a gallery. It was in . . . Oh, what's it called, what's it called, what's it called? San—Santa—

CM: San Antonio?

LA: San Pedro?

CM: Here in—

LA: Angel Gate. It's—

CM: Angels Gate.

LA: Angels Gate, yeah. And so they had a, you know, I had a small studio, and Willie had a little bit bigger studio. And they had a gallery there. And so they asked me in one of those shows to show some work. And it was my pictures, my naked—nude ones. But they were mural size because I was a lab tech at Otis Parson, and we had, were starting—we were building a mural room, and so someone had to test it out. So I did! [*laughs*] "I'll volunteer to test it out." You know? And then I— So I did these five images, and it's called *Five Lauras*, and they're like three by five feet.

CM: Wow.

LA: So I showed them—before that I showed them at USC [University of Southern California] in a group show there. And I'm standing at the other corner and Suzy [Kerr], who was the director of LACPS [Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies], said to me. She goes, "I don't know why you're standing in a corner, Laura. We all see you." [*laughs*] So, I go—she, "You can't get away from it, Laura, in this small gallery." [*laughs*] So, you know, I go, "Okay." And Suzy was another person that really liked it from the first, when she saw *In Sandy's Room*. But she liked *Three Eagles Flying* the best, and she pushed me to make it bigger. Willie said, "You know, I have a pack of ten sheets of 20 by 24. Why don't you make it bigger? This image needs to be bigger." So I—he gave me that pack, and I printed them up, and in a strange way, it's the first time I saw my body naked.

CM: Really?

LA: You know, I saw the form and shape of my body in the, the—in the flag at my face, 'cause you see the shadows of my arm against my body. You see the shape of my breast and you know, it's the first time I saw myself. It's not like I never saw myself when I got in the bathtub. I was always naked then.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But it was different in this, 'cause I saw more of a form in my body—

CM: Yeah.

LA: That I never really thought I had. You know, so . . . That was the thing that opened the door, and I then just kept on going with it. Because I kept on waiting for someone to say, "Ooh, that's awful! How dare you?" No one seemed to ever say that, you know. I mean one person did years later but, you know.

CM: But by then it was too late!

LA: After that time there was only one person that said it all these years, you know. Other women—there was this woman, she was a feminist artist in LA. She's a little bit—she's older, but, like, maybe when she was fifty she shaved her head off, and she's a performance artist, and if I see her I know that who she is just by her name, but I don't remember it. So at one of the shows I had an opening of, from my grant I got from the Cultural Affairs department, and that was my Center series. At the opening—and now she's a very big feminist artist, you know, and I've never, ever really related to feminists. Feminism, matter of fact, I didn't know what the hell that was in the first place, and I knew it—what it had to do with it was white women. Had nothing to do with me. And all the women in my life was going to work, 'cause I saw all the women

in my life work, you know. My aunts worked, my cousin—few of my cousins worked, my mom worked. I knew eventually I'm going to work, you know. And so I didn't understand what the women's lib was about, 'cause I'm thinking, "Why are they out in the streets talk—making post—I mean, protesting that they want a job? We can all get a job." I didn't understand what career meant, and that's why they wanted the higher education to get a career and all that stuff. So, I go—so at the time I just saw it as like, "I don't know what's wrong with those women." You know. [*laughter*] So, you know.

And then—I mean, years later . . . I mean, okay, so that's my little thing about . . . So this woman, she's this big feminist artist in LA. And she's done some major things that pretty much I didn't understand, but later I did. But—you know, when I started to learn to see things more. But I saw some of the things she did, and I just thought it was stupid. But—and then I realized there was a lot into that performance. I wasn't into performance yet. Understanding performance more than being into it. And so she's at this show, and she goes by, and she looks at it, and she makes a loud noise about how wonderful this is, da da da. She turns around, and someone says, "That's Laura," and she comes over to me, and she goes, "You got big brass ones, Laura." And I just like, to my—Susanne [Vielmetter] was my gallery person at the time, and I go, "Susanne, I really don't like that," you know, 'cause like "why is it that a man and their balls make it important. So now she's referring to me as having big, you know, big balls, you know? What does that it make—why does that make something produc—?" I don't like the word in the first place. You know, the "balls" part of it.

CM: Who does? When you get down to it. [*laughter*]

LA: So it's just, you know. It's just like—I don't understand why that . . . And the way she meant it was positive, but it was in a circle of all these women and other artists. But, you know, it was just like . . . And she's this feminist artist, which I never really understood what the feminist artist was, yet. So, couple years—actually, couple years before that—you can look at my resume to have reference to all these things.

CM: Ah, yeah, I have a list of the dates.

LA: So there was a *Bad Girls* east and a *Bad Girls West*. And the west one was at UCLA. [*Bad Girls*, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, opened in 1994 and was organized by Marcia Tucker; *Bad Girls West,* at UCLA's Wight Art Gallery, opened in 1995 and was organized by Marcia Tanner—ed.] And the opening was postponed for a week because we had that earthquake in that side . . . You know, [on] Martin Luther King's birthday.

CM: That one where the 10 [freeway] fell down?

LA: Yeah, and it fell down. I mean, it was amazing ''cause it was on a holiday that was, you know, a holiday. And people were just starting to take Martin Luther King's birthday off, so lot of people were taking it because it became a federal holiday.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And it was lucky, because it was a Monday morning, and that's a busy hour for people going up to Cal Arts and from LA people coming . . . You know, it's the main way to get to Northern California and main way to get back to Southern California is through that area. And a part of that freeway fell. So they were lucky there was only a couple of people that actually died from it.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, 'cause—

CM: It would have been a disaster.

LA: It would have been—it was in the peak hour—

CM: Yeah.

LA: Of traffic of people going to work.

CM: Oh, I remember.

LA: So, then the one in *East Coast*, I gave them a mural piece of *In Sandy's Room*. And then the one in the *West Coast* I had *Twelve Lauras*. And each one was like 18 by 24. So it was full matte, filled up the frame. And I had a 645 [medium format camera], which is a two and a quarter negative, but it had a 35mm frame, in

the sense that you don't use the whole two and a quarter, but the frame that you have is equal to a 35 format. So. And you'd always choose to do two and a quarter or you'd choose using that regular format. You had—just change it on the camera. So I did it all in, like, full frame and all that. And so I wanted to—I liked the frame part of it, so. I was kind of late on it. I go, "You know, could I just deliver it to you since I live in LA?" And they go, "Sure, no problem." They had the earthquake. They postponed. They couldn't get back into the gallery for three days.

CM: Wow.

LA: Because of the state had to go over the school and make sure everything was safe, da da da.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So then they started to putting things in place to hang. And I brought my work in, and this woman, "Oh, great, Laura, you got it here in time, da da da. We're starting to hang today, but hopefully we're done by Saturday when the opening is happening. And so, great, just put it here." And I watched. She goes, "You gotta see everything's laid out, and this is where you have something—this one's your wall, and da da da." And I'm looking around. Everything. A lot of pink, lot of dildos, and a lot of stuff. And I just don't know how on earth I got into the show, because it's such feminism.

CM: Yeah.

LA: White feminism.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I just like, don't realize how I got there. Now, my friend Carla, the lawyer, who's in the Latina Lesbians series, she goes—she was getting upset with me 'cause I was looking at that very strange. And then the show at USC, you know, she said, "You know . . ." Because I was complaining that I was the only person of color. She goes, "But you *are* in the show and they get to see what you're talking about."

CM: Yeah.

LA: And, "Do you want to be a big fish in a small pond, or a small fish in a big pond?" I go, "The other one [*indistinct*]." She goes, "I would rather be a small fish in a big pond because, you know, all you have is nothing but time to grow." [*laughter*] You know? And so she goes, "Think of that in that way." So, I tried to think about it that way, and maybe she had something to point to it. But, you know, I still felt uncomfortable, because everyone else was white. You know, they're all feminists and they're all educated, and I'm not white, I'm not educated you know, and I'm not middle class. And so it's like, I have no real—nothing to understand about these people.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know.

CM: I mean, who did you imagine was the audience for your work?

LA: Well, I knew that this was a big show because the woman from New York came out here and we had lunch and she wanted my mural size picture—

CM: Yeah.

LA: Of *In Sandy's Room*. She loved it. And her name was Marcia [Tucker] and the woman who was doing it on this side, her name was Marcia [Tanner]. Different last names but, you know, so. But the woman from New York really made me, you know, "This stuff is great," and stuff like that and . . . So, I didn't go to New York. But I could—the big mural size I knew what it was going to look like on a wall, and she loved it. And, of course, they asked if I would donate it to them, and of course I said, "Yes." Because how else are people going to know that you're in someone's collection. Some people bought stuff, some people didn't. They just asked, you know. So, anyway. 'Cause you need to put—you gotta sell it yourself out there.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Particularly when you're dealing with issues that not everyone deals with.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So, you know. So, like I said, I was walking around that room, and I just kept on shaking my head. And I don't know *how* the hell I got into the show. I don't know *why* I'm in the show. I don't know [*indistinct*]—I

don't know why they keep on asking me about jobs or career or this or that. I'm like, "I don't have one. I work here and there, and I get fired from here and there. Move on to there, and someone doesn't want it, and I end up taking it because they didn't want it." My friend really got a, um . . . They were doing art in prison—lock-up, with kids in camps, in high school age, you know? And so Willie [Middlebrook] is a black photographer and real— He passed away a couple of years ago. He was my best friend. And he would show and stuff, and he goes, "I was offered this job, but my friend, so-and-so, turned it down. And he's a Buddhist, and he's the most passionate, um, passive person I know. And he didn't want to go and be—" He goes, "No black man wants to walk into a place that they're gonna be shut in." You know, you have to go and hear that, you know . . .

CM: That clink?

LA: Yeah, that clink. "No black man in their right mind wants to do that. And he's a Buddhist, and he's very peace and love and all that stuff, and he won't do it. So he passed it on to me, and I'm passing it on to you." [*laughs*] And I ended up doing it. I loved it. It was a great—

CM: Really?

LA: It was a great experience. Yeah.

CM: Wow.

LA: You know, so.

CM: But, I mean, did you see your work as something that . . . Did you see your work as something you created for Latinas? For yourself? For—I mean, who was your ideal audience?

LA: Well—

CM: Who was the ideal viewer?

LA: See, I can't really answer that 'cause there's a part of me that feels like I was constantly trying to challenge myself to forget who I am. And then, on the other hand, you know, I picked topics, you know, like the lesbian series and then the Clothed/Unclothed, and both of them had to deal with me and looking for a people to look up to and . . . you know. So that's what, like, when I was doing the lesbian series, you know, there were therapists, there were lawyers, there were, you know, people with higher education. But then that show became something, and a lot of people liked it and talked about it. I was kind of sick of it. I wanted to move on to something else. And so I applied for a grant through LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions] and this comes back to what Robert Gil de Montes had told me ten years earlier. [*indistinct*] "Art week there are competitions. Submit your stuff. Submit them, submit them, submit them. Once you put them into the mailbox, forget about them. It's like playing the lottery, but you gotta play it."

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know? And he goes, "You never know when you apply for this grant, but you don't get it, but someone who is judging there would see your work and say, 'We could use it for something else.'" And it actually happened. The woman who was from LACE, the director of LACE— I had applied for this, I think it was the LACE grant, but it didn't get accepted. And she called me up and said, "You know, I really love the stuff you sent. I'm sorry you didn't get the grant and, but I hope this doesn't offend you, but would you like to come and show your lesbian series in the book store?" "I'll be there with my ladder!" She goes, "No, no. I have people to hang for you, so don't . . ." Because it was a bookstore, so it was up on the high—on the wall.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But she loved the lesbian series. So she remembered it.

CM: So it ended up getting exposure.

LA: Yeah, because she was a judge on a thing I didn't get the grant for, but she remembered the work. And Robert said, "People—the more you submit work, the more people are gonna see your work, and eventually they're gonna get tired and give you something."

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because they do see that it is growing or going somewhere. And so, like, I took his attitude about it. Just, once it's in the mail, just forget about it and wait until something comes back.

CM: Yeah.

LA: I have a lot of, "Thank you. Try next time."

CM: Yes.

LA: You know. And so, after a certain point I stopped saving them. But I've shown them to other people who are young artists. And I go, "See, this is what I did for a long time." I tell them the story about what Robert told me. I took his attitude, you know, and so I just passed that on.

CM: Wow.

LA: "You know, you can take whatever you want from it." So.

CM: Now, have you consistently done your own darkroom work, or has there been series on which—

LA: Yeah. Well, that's the reason why I worked at the Photo Center, so that on off hours I could use the dark room for myself.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I didn't have to use my darkroom in my garage here.

CM: Wow.

LA: Because I could only do small things there.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, and so. And it was just, they had air conditioning. But I did have air conditioning back then, but I would throw the power off in the house so I didn't use it.

CM: Oh, okay.

LA: [*laughs*] You know?

CM: Now, during this time, was there a place you dreamed where you would show your work?

LA: No. Because I didn't know where to dream about.

CM: You were in the moment.

LA: I mean, no, I didn't—

CM: You were kind of in the moment.

LA: Well, see, I'm always self-doubting myself because I don't have an education. And everybody seems to be educated and talking in big words and . . . One thing about hanging around in my early twenties, I met a lot of people who were poets or writers. And I learned some—you know, I made friends with some of the newspaper people. And I would ask them, "What does that word mean? What does this word mean?" So they would stop and tell me what the word means. They loved words. People who are writers love words. So I would, you know, befriend these people and go hear them do a poetry here and there. Not always did I necessarily understand what they were talking about, but I just liked to go and listen. And then I would ask them, like when we have coffee or something, "What does that . . . ?" They, someone would be talking about something, and I go, "What does that mean?" That person would stop and explain what that word means. People who aren't writers don't seem to ever want to do that. [*laughs*] So, it's just what I've taken out of that era.

CM: Writers care about words.

LA: They love words. They like you to ask them about words. They want you to understand the words that they use. And performance artists, they all—its—words are important to them.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And to me, it's my shortcut of education. [*laughs*]

CM: Is talking to writers.

LA: Talking to writers, yeah. [Performance artist and playwright] Luis Alfaro became a very good friend of mine and—

CM: Luis?

LA: Alfaro. I don't know if [*indistinct*] correctly.

CM: Alfaro, yeah. He's at USC now, right?

LA: Yeah, he's been there off and on.

CM: The playwright?

LA: Yeah, he's the playwright there. Um, what you call it?

CM: I know exactly who you're talking about.

LA: The MacArthur artist.

CM: Yes. Genius.

LA: Yeah. Genius, yeah.

CM: Genius grant.

LA: He got that years ago. But, so. And he used to do lot of poetry in the community, the gay community, 'cause, you know. And he would do stuff, and my friend Gilbert and me would go to poetry readings, 'cause Gilbert was a poet and I like poetry readings. Didn't always understand what was being read, but later I'd ask Gilbert to explain things to me on the way home. But, so, there was this one poem that he would do a lot in the gay community. I mean, it just seems that A Different Light bookstore in Silver Lake would have poetry readings. They would have women once a month, on the second month. They would always have a woman poet, or two or three, one evening on Saturday at the book, Light store. [A Different Light; the bookstore operated from 1979 to 2011—ed.] They would also have a night for men and poetry, and so I would go sometimes when Luis, you know, 'cause we were all, like—Gilbert, me, and Luis, we were sort of—Gilbert and Luis were closer to each other in the sense of what they were applying for. I was applying and stuff, and we would just, you know, be happy for each other's, you know, what they got. And—

CM: Yeah. How did you meet Luis?

LA: Through Gilbert.

CM: Through Gilbert. Okay.

LA: Yeah, I heard him because I read [*indistinct*] "You gotta go see this guy, he's really good. He's very physical in his poetry," and stuff like that. So he was doing his thing, and then he talks. It's a—he's just amazing, his writing. He was referring to his aunt, and his aunt has this Guadalupe light and it turns. And so he was talking about his childhood and going to school elsewhere from Pico Union. His parents, his mom dragged him over to Don Bosco, which is a prep school and a Catholic school, over here in San Gabriel, south San Gabriel. And, you know, when they lived in Pico Union—I had no idea where Pico Union was, and I knew where that was 'cause I would always go by it. And he goes, "You know . . ." So, when he got the grant he gave, he bought his parents a house because what they did to get him an education.

CM: Wow.

LA: His brothers may not have the education, and his sister, but he had the gift, and they did everything they can to get him opportunities.

CM: To feed that gift.

LA: Yeah, yeah. So, you know, I go, "Real—that's nice for you." And he goes, "The thing—ever since I got the thing, it got me more gigs." And he was for temporary—for about five years he was at the Mark Taper in the focusing of working on minority—Latinos.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, there was the Latino one, there was the woman one, there was a blind one. [*laughs*] I mean, you know. And then this guy retires, and then they let all the others—the women, the browns, the blacks, the gays, the lesbians. They all got wiped out of the system of Mark Taper. [Gordon Davidson, artistic director of Center Theatre Group, which includes Mark Taper Forum, retired in 2005; in 1977 he launched a series featuring new plays developed by minority and disabled artists—ed.]

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, because the guy came from New York, and he didn't want that. [Michael Ritchie was Davidson's successor—ed.]

CM: Yeah.

LA: He didn't want to deal with that. [*laughs*] And the other guy, who was—who was, had been there for years, he nurtured it.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know. And he brought people, one color and group at a time, you know.

CM: Exactly.

LA: But it got to a point where there was a lot of them there, working on projects—

CM: Yeah.

LA: And their own—to focus to their own community. And then so he was, you know, kind of—he was getting a lot of grants anyhow, so he went other places. But there was this poem that he did. And [*indistinct*] he would stand there and he would talk about the light of Guadalupe and how his aunts— It moved, and there's like, moved like this and moved like that. Me and Gilbert would be in the back of the room and do the same thing as he's doing, and he would just look at us like, "Uhh . . ."

CM: [*laughs*] That's great. Was he one of the people you shot? Like, have you shot Luis as part of anything?

LA: Yes. I did when the Clothed/Unclothed series. Now, I was photographing lot of people in the Clothed/Unclothed series. He knew it. And he's not opposed about being drag, because he's done a lot of in-drag shows and shows and stuff. [He said,] "I don't think so." And then I bugged him, and I bugged him, and I bugged him. And then I was getting—I had like twenty of them, and I think it's close to ending this series and I can't do this forever. And so I called him up one more time. I said, "Okay, you could be in drag." And he said, "Fine, when do you want to do it? This weekend?" [*laughs*]

CM: And that was that.

LA: That was that, yeah. Once I said he could be in drag, he would— So he's the only one that I have a triptych of the Clothed/Unclothed. It's him with clothes on, him naked, and him—

CM: In drag.

LA: In drag, yeah. Soon as I would listen to his portrait that he wrote about women, and it's like, "God, he's a great woman." [*laughs*] He is! He has women down, you know, and their feelings. And it's just like, it's just amazing.

CM: Yeah.

LA: He's very sensitive to women. And he's sensitive to men and all that stuff, but sometimes I just, I forget that he's a man, that he wrote it.

CM: Wow.

LA: Because it's very—there was this one thing he did about a woman who worked all week long, six days a week in a sewing factory in LA, but Saturday night was— Her life began and end on Sunday morning—you know, Sunday evening. And she would go out dancing, and he had her down. I mean she's a fictional character, but she sounds like a real person—

CM: Yeah.

LA: That he sort of took on, you know.

CM: That's skill.

LA: And—yeah, that is. I just love that. And there was other things that he did. He's very physical. He used to be. I don't think he is as much anymore, but he used to be very physical in his readings and stuff. And he would—I'd see him at Highways. And he'd be wearing a roller skate helmet because he was doing a scene on roller derby and run into the back wall and that wall and that wall as he's doing his scene about a person that's a woman from, you know, his—

CM: Doing a performance?

LA: No, a woman who was—he's a woman. More feminine maybe. I don't say if he directly saw himself as a woman. It was more . . . You know, I don't remember now to be honest, but it was a lot about the physicalness that he would, like, bang himself against the wall. But he's on roller skates. He's like—'cause, you know, we had that downtown when I was growing up, and he's just a little bit younger than me. And so, he used to go to the roller derby all the time.

CM: Wow.

LA: 'Cause, you know, it's near where he lived.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Not that far from Pico Union, so.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But the piece was about constantly going into the wall, constantly going into the wall, keep on— And it was a very interesting piece. [This was a one-person play titled *Downtown*, which opened in 1990 at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica—ed.]

CM: Wow.

LA: He was, like I said, he was, when he young he was more physical in his performances.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So.

CM: Now, *Three Eagles Flying*, how did—that was after's *Sandy's Room*, right?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: How did you . . .

LA: That was also after the five mural pieces and the *Twelve Lauras.*

CM: That was after the mural pieces. How did you conceptualize that piece?

LA: It just happened that weekend.

CM: Really, in a weekend?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Where were you? Where did you shoot it?

LA: Oh, no, no, no. *Three Eagles Flying*. I was thinking of *Sandy's Room*. I photographed it at the gallery. I mean the Photo Center. Because they had this velvet, you know, like 10 feet by 12 feet of, it was black velvet on—and they had a couple different fronts for it, because people used to use it for shooting pictures of people. And so I like the black format. And then the rope that I had belonged to a friend that I met through the Photo Center, and her name was Sandy. And I go—she goes, "Oh, I have a friend that I borrow his rope from him, and so you can use it." Because I told her what I wanted to do. She's the one who actually helped me put the rope around my neck. She's shorter than me and so she pulled it a little bit tight and I said, you know, "Watch it." [*laughs*] But, you know, see the thing is that she would call me, upset, "I gotta give that rope back to my friend on Monday. So you told me about your idea. We're gonna have to do it this Sunday." You know, so we did it that Sunday. Photographed myself, you have the film, looked at it, came back, photographed another roll, photographed her tying it around my neck and my torso and all that. And then the flags were easy to do. I did a little bit after that, but the part of me being, you know—

CM: Being in it.

LA: Now, see there's this woman, who was in the Lesbianas Unidas, and I asked her to—if I could pose her that way. 'Cause I wanted to do it, but I really didn't want to use my body. And she goes, "You know, Laura, when I first met you I thought you were harmless." And I go, "What do you mean?" She goes, "I thought you were harmless. You're very quiet, very shy. But now, who knows where this will end up at? I'm not going to pose for you." [*laughs*] "Nude." I go, "I'm talking to you and you're sitting on the counter and—in the kitchen—and you're stark naked and—but you're not going to pose for me." [*laughter*] She was a big nudist, you know. And so I'm just like, "I don't believe this!" She did pose for the Clothed/Unclothed series but, you know. And then when she said, "I don't—I have no idea where it's going to land—what wall it's going to land on, Laura. So no way am I going to pose for you. Do it yourself! It's your idea! It's about you." So Sandy said, "I have to give—take the rope back to my friend on Monday night." Push comes to shove, I did it myself, you know. But I really didn't want to do it myself. I wanted someone else to stand in for me, you know.

CM: That's interesting.

LA: And have that imagery and everyone, basically, when I tell them that they go, "You were right to do you."

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I didn't want to do me.

CM: Now, for Clothed/Unclothed and I guess for a lot of the nude shots, in general, what do you think the nudity . . . I guess for Clothed/Unclothed—let's focus on that. What do you think the nudity reveals? Like, what do you think it is people can see in those pictures as a result of the fact that people are clothed and unclothed? Like, what—

LA: I think lot of people are more com—um, in the series, I think that people when they're nude, they're actually—if they're, like, a couple and they're a really good couple, you can see the freedom in it. You know, they're not freaking out, they're not standing—sitting like, you know. I did my friend Rudy and his girlfriend at the time. And—and one we did like I did with everybody else. But then [for] one I go, "Oh, come on. I want to do this one." So, you know, it's an idea of a painting, you know. Grandfather and mother in front of the farm with the stick and the thing. So I had them hold something. I can't remember what. It's not in the main image that I've shown. But I go, "I just want to do this since you're here." You know. "Oh, why not?" Then I did a triptych of two sisters. I mean I did . . . trip—I did two images, but I did it of brothers and sisters that lived together. And the guy who worked at the Photo Center with me—and he was kind of crazy, but he was a really good photographer. But he didn't always pay attention to what he was doing in the darkroom, so he ruined some really great negs. But as photographing, he was—he had an eye, amazing eye. But he just didn't really follow through on a lot of the technical stuff. And really didn't—just wanted to get it to that person so they could use it in some ad, and then that was it. He didn't care. You know?

CM: Yeah, yeah.

LA: But, you—I go, "You know, you're really a good photographer." And Willie would tell him that same thing. "You've got an eye that's just amazing." And, but he just didn't care about the technical part of it.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Anyway.

CM: How did you meet Willie?

LA: I met Willie, it was maybe a year or two before the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Watts Riot.

CM: Okay.

LA: And so he invited me, 'cause he got my name from this other guy who was teaching at Otis. Don something. He's up in Northern California. He teaches up there. Antón. Don Antón. And he was teaching at Otis at the time. And so he gave my name, 'cause he didn't have the time to sort of get involved with this group. And then Richard [*indistinct*] was in it, and Adam something, and . . . So there's five women—there were five photographers that are black and five that were Latino. And the reason why they wanted to do is that in the twenty-five years since the Watts riot, Watts is definitely, you know, is more Latino.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And more Central American.

CM: Yes.

LA: And so that's why they wanted to bring us in, you know. We were all Chicanos, but, you know. And they didn't get the grant, but we met each other. And then Willie was working at Martin Luther King hospital as a photographer. He would photograph injuries, and he would photograph surgeries, and he would, you know, photograph . . . He had a hard time doing this one. He goes, "It was always painful and hard to photograph a child that was raped. And I had to photograph them, and I'm a big man, and the nurses are there with her." You know. It's like it was just hard to do because he thought of his daughter and his—he had two daughters and he would think about that. And actually he worked with what's her name . . . She's a model. She had that show on modeling, teaching them how to model . . . Tyra Banks.

CM: Tyra Banks.

LA: Her mother was a photographer, and she worked with him in the hospital.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah.

CM: What was Willie's last name, again?

LA: Middlebrook.

CM: Okay, Middlebrook. That's right, Willie Middlebrook.

LA: Yeah. So he would say—he would talk about it. "I knew her when she was a little string—all she was, legs and arms," you know. "And she was—"

CM: Of Tyra Banks?

LA: Tyra Banks. He goes, "I remember her when she was nothing but, you know, arms and legs, like a little string bean." Because he, she—her mother worked with him. And I think he was over her. You know, he was her supervisor, I think. But, so he would talk about that every once in a while at the Photo Center.

CM: That's so funny.

LA: And, but so Willie said that, you know, at one of these meetings he goes, you know, "You should come by where I work at. I work, at King Medical Center" in Watts, or South Central. And then he goes, you know, "We have the thing for photographing. You need to photograph your art to send it out, and we have a great light-up setting, a set to copy things. Just come over any time you want to copy some stuff. And it's just simple. You put your camera on the thing. You just shoot it. And we already know the lighting. It's perfect."

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so I did. And then, you know, we would talk to each other a little bit. Then Donald Bernard, who was also one of the photographers in this group . . . I moved into Hollywood on my own. And not a very good neighborhood actually, I found out later. When you go check for an apartment, you don't go in the middle of the day when everybody's at work. You go in the evening and check it out. Because at night it was so much different. I mean the street was—you know, a lot of Eastern Europeans. You know, Greeks and that area. There were a lot Eastern Europeans. And then on the street . . . My building, I lived here, there was an apartment building next to me, and it was an old one. It was something James Hotel, which basically all the drag queens lived there. And as I walked home, 'cause I walked home. I had a swing shift that I worked from two to midnight, so I'd be coming home around one or so.

CM: Wow.

LA: And they'd be getting ready to put all their makeup on. I'd walk by their window and they—the window would be open, and there's all these guys going back and forth, "Look at my lipstick. Is this good?" [*indistinct*] And then Gilbert and John came one day to my apartment, and they go, "You know, Laura, how did you find . . ." I go, "Devon told me her girlfriend Naomi's in this apartment." He goes, "Did you check it, really check it out?" I told her when I checked it out. He goes, "Next time, check it out during night time. Don't just do it at . . ." He goes, "We're two guys together, and we are afraid to walk up the street." [*laughter*] So there was transies and drug dealers and, you know. Then families that were—just kept to themselves and all that stuff, you know.

CM: It was Hollywood, basically.

LA: It was Hollywood. It was . . . Hollywood kind of, sort of down to Santa Monica. I forgot what street it—I think it was on Hollywood and Griffith? There's like a Catholic school, parochial school on the corner. There was a Ralph's, and, I think. And the next street was Garfield.

CM: Okay.

LA: And that's where I lived. But I was close to the main street. And I used to come home at two in the morning sometimes. And so it was a little scary different. [*laughs*]

CM: Sounds like it. Sure sounds like it. Now, where did the Plush Pony series begin? How did that take off?

LA: After showing the lesbian series and—oh! This is the real reason why I started doing the *Three Eagles Flying*. I had the idea, but . . . Okay, the lesbian series. A group of women for, like, three years, we did some fundraising for this group in Mexico who wanted to have a lesbian conference for a week. And so we put together quinceañera. We put together, you know a—we got some women from the Bay Area came down that are all mariachis. And they're all women and they—and we made money, and we sent money from that. And then we had a haircut thing at Sunset Junction. And so all the money we raised we sent down to Mexico. So, you know. And they'd be talking about this series, and they'd want me to take this series. And

I go, "Yeah, I'll give it to you. You can take it with you. I don't necessarily want to go." And they would ask me, and I would say no. And they would ask me, and I would say no. And they would ask me, and I would say no. And then my friend Deborah was in town, and we were on Santa Monica Boulevard. I mean, it's not Santa Monica. We were on the boardwalk in Santa Monica.

CM: In Santa Monica?

LA: In the Venice area. We were walking down, and I was telling her about this, and she, and I walked a little bit ahead of her, and she hit me over the head with her bag, and she goes, "Next time someone offers to send you somewhere, you say yes!" And so I went to another meeting, and they asked—they go, "Okay, Laura, this is going to be the last time. Would you go with us to Mexico?" And I said, "No." And they go, "You know, we'll be there for you." And I go, "Okay." "What made you say 'okay'?" I told them about Debora hitting me over the head. So—

CM: Why had you turned them down?

LA: Because I didn't want to go to somewhere where I can't communicate with people. And all of them said, "Oh, don't worry about it. We'll be there with you. We will translate for you." We got there. No one wanted to take the time to translate for me. They were enjoying being with their Latina lesbian sisters. I don't speak Spanish, you know.

So this one woman, who grew up in San Diego but has lived in Mexico City her whole adult life—raised her kids there—she goes, "I don't really speak English that often unless I go visit family in San Diego. But um, and my kids, I never taught them English. So I don't mind translating for you." And then this other woman who was, um . . . she was a white woman from Arkansas, and she was working for the Peace Corps. And she goes—and she's been in one of the Central American countries for about a couple of years, so she goes, "I can translate for you. Don't worry about it." So then the first day of the conference there was a big argument between the lesbian—Latina lesbians from the United States. Well, I mean there—everybody that was there was lesbian, but okay. So there was a problem between the American women and the Mexican women. And American women were upset that the first workshop was on empowerment and the persons that led it was these women from Sweden and who gave them money to . . . Sweden? Sweden, whatever the country that has the holes in the cheese.

CM: Yeah. Switzerland.

LA: Switzerland, okay. So the Mexican women from—you know, the Chicanas from the States—said, "You don't understand about racism. You know, you have classicism and we have racism, and you don't understand the difference. And to us that is a big issue. We spend—we put these events together. We made a lot of money for you guys, and we put a lot of money of our own to have the events, and you do this to us? We came to be empowered by our lesbian sisters, and you have these white women telling *us* about . . ." So for the next two days there was arguments in between workshops about the Mexican women and the American women, and the Mexican women assumed that all the women from the United States had money.

And so they put us—the first night we were there they put us in this ho—this house that wasn't yet together. It barely had doors. It didn't even have doors. But it had the shape of a door, and then some days the door would be on it. And then they had two restrooms that had no doors on them, but they were working restrooms. There was no heat and it was, you know, and it was frickin' cold. We all had brought—they told us to bring some sleeping bags, so, "You might have to share a room with someone." All the women from the United States that were in that cement hotel, or whatever it was, complained. And the next day we got into the hotel that was across the place from us. From the event, you know.

CM: You're like, "We're not doing this."

LA: See they assumed that—okay, no. This is, okay, this is a little bit long story, but . . .

CM: It's all right. It's all right.

LA: On the way in Mexico City, I ran into some of the women, because we were all supposed to be at this house. And I had directions, so I just gave it to the cabbie and they took me to where I needed to go. And

now from the minute I got off the plane they were all speaking English to me 'cause they knew I'm an American. I'm wearing jeans, they're wearing jeans. They're Mexican. It's these women who were Mexican, wearing jeans. [*indistinct*] It's like, I don't know how they could tell. And I don't say a word, and they just automatically speak to me in English. You know, so. And then that continued on, you know, and then I'm there. The women who were going to translate for me just didn't want to take the time to think about translating. And so they left me hanging. And then I met these other two that gave me some—would help me from time to time. If they were near me, they would help me. And I'm so used to living in a world where no one understands me, and I can't communicate to them, so it really wasn't hard to be there. But, you know, I mean in that sense.

And so the two women that were the ones that were helping me, they took me to the something-mart, where they had a lot of stuff out. Tourist stuff. And so they go, "Let's go. Forget this argument going on." So the argument was going on for two days, between these to the—Chicanas, you know, from the States, and then the Mexican women. And they were arguing that the other one doesn't understand them. "They have taxes and we have racism, and don't you understand the difference, and what we go through. And then you invite these white women to tell *us* about enlightenment?" You know, "We came here to get enlightened by our Latina sisters." I'm just like rolling my head like, "Yeah, sure." They're all the political ones. I wasn't really—I didn't see myself as being political, so I just like, whatever. I came all this way. I didn't pay for it. Someone paid for me to go. She wanted me to go, so she paid to get . . . And, um. So I didn't have to pay for the ticket. And I went and came back home, so I did all. But it was very interesting along the way. [*laughter*]

So basically, so, when I came home, I started to think about going to Mexico and my mom and myself relationship. And then the fact that my mom spoke Spanish fluently, and my Irish grandfather wanted his kids to speak to their grandparents and to understand the language. My dad's parents did not want—his father did not want them to be Mexican, you know. "American, absolute American. Mexican American emphasize the American. Never let someone say you're a Mexican." So that was my dad, you know, and his father and him. And so, you know. So to me I was thinking about that. And see my mom was also very fair-skinned, and she was *güera,* but her sister and brother weren't, so she got treated better in school than they did. And she would say, "They're my brother and sister," and teachers wouldn't agree with her, you know. Had same last name, you know. So she always had a chip on her shoulder about the fact that people would judge the color of your skin. So every day I went to school—particularly in grammar school, until about junior high—every day she would say, "Be on church behavior." I knew what that meant. We never went to church, but I knew what that meant.

CM: Yeah. Yeah.

LA: You know, they're gonna judge you 'cause of your color. You know, "We are not a lot of us in this neighborhood." And then when you don't speak Spanish—English very good, they can't understand why I don't speak English. They're convinced I speak Spanish. No matter what I say, no one listens to me. No one listens to my parents, and they don't teach us Spanish. You know, I might be put with these two girls that are speaking Spanish only. And I would look and listen to them and, you know, the teachers say, "You speak Spanish." I go, "No, I don't." It's a familiar sound because my dad speaks a lot of Spanish music in our house, so the sound is familiar. It doesn't mean I understand it.

CM: Exactly.

LA: There are a lot of songs I could sing that I have no idea what I'm saying. The wife could be wounded by her husband and I don't know. And I'm singing this song, but I don't know it, you know. So it's a song. It's music, and the music was in the house, you know.

CM: Yeah. So this was part of the inspiration for *Three Eagles*? I mean, 'cause that's how—

LA: Yeah. I mean, it was basically that—how my mom was always feeling, that no one saw her as being Mexican. And then when she would talk to some—one of my dad's friends who didn't speak English, they would be surprised that she spoke Spanish. And, like I said, the only people that I saw beyond—that were

Mexican beyond my—the neighborhoods that were—or the, you know, the couple families that lived in the neighborhood—was my cousins who were all Filipino and black, um Mexican—dark—that makes dark really nicely tan. Even kids, you know. And so my mom was the only white person in my whole family, you know. And so, I mean all I had on my mom's side of the family was my Aunt Lenore, who lived in Alabama, my Uncle Art, who was always on the road because he drove trucks and girlfriends here and there. Eventually, he had a wife, and I couldn't stand that woman but . . .

CM: That's a whole other story.

LA: That's a whole 'nother story. And . . . so, you know, they were the only [*indistinct*] and Bea was the only family I had. Was Bea, my mom, and my mom's sister and my uncle. That's all my mom had, as her family goes. I had my Uncle Frank, who died when my [*indistinct*] my grandma died. And Uncle Frank was always . . . He would come over to school with his nickname, 'cause my mom couldn't say his name when he was little, so they—she called him Kiko. I don't know why, but it was his nickname. And so I would always call him Kiko. And he would come over, like, on Saturday after—early Saturday morning or late Saturday morning, early afternoon. And he would come in the house, sit in the lounge chair, fall asleep. My little Chihuahua dog would jump up on [him] and play with his stomach and then find the perfect space to lay down on. And Kiko would, you know, talk to my mom, fall asleep in the chair, wake up when the menudo was done, because my mom made menudo every Saturday, because Saturday night and Sunday morning my dad would need his menudo. So, you know. So he, Kiko, would always say, "Is my soup ready?" [*laughs*] "Have some soup." "It's nice seeing you. See you next week."

CM: [*laughs*]

LA: Or the week after, because our next-door neighbors was his wife's cousin, so his . . . My Uncle Frank and Uncle Johnny were brothers, and they married two sisters. And one of the sisters disowned my mom when my grandmother died, so they weren't—one of them—Ernestine wasn't as bad as Lucy, but Lucy was just basically, you know. We were never invited again to her house for anything after my grandmother died. And I'm pretty sure it had something to do with my dad. But no one would answer that question. And then, so, you know, she was sort of turned away. And so it's just—there's a lot of these things that my mom had. She had a huge chip on her shoulder that people see that first. So she instilled it in me and my brother that you have to behave right. You know, "People are going to think the worst of you because you're not white, da da da." So I had my whole—I had her constantly saying that to me. You know. And, you know—and you know what I finally did. She died and I had tickets [*indistinct*] used to live in Pasadena. I swear I went to Pasadena City College. I'd been out there. I had a car. I'd drive all over LA. And I was taking this class in Pasadena, and I had little dreams of being beaten up 'cause I was Mexican and I was on the streets of Pasadena. [*laughs*]

CM: Oh, my God.

LA: You know, I mean, I had nightmares.

CM: That's how ingrained in you it was.

LA: Yeah, yeah. That I'm not at a place I—and who knew there were a lot of blacks in Pasadena?

CM: Yeah.

LA: Until I went to the college, I didn't know there were blacks in Pasadena. It was like, "Oh, great. There's blacks."

CM: Yeah. Yeah.

LA: [*laughs*] But, you know. So, 'cause when anytime we went to Pasadena for the Rose Parade. Day after Thanksgiving, my mom and me would drive up to Pasadena and get our parking spots, and she was happy 'cause she loved that damn Rose Parade. I hated it.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Of the nineteen years . . . uh, nineteen, twenty . . . Of the twenty years that my mom—I was alive, I went eighteen times to the parade.

CM: Wow.

LA: And then when I turned twenty was the last time she went, 'cause she just said, "Aw, I think it's time to let it go."

CM: Wow.

LA: But she knew she was dying. We didn't, you know.

CM: She was getting—she was ill.

LA: She knew she was ill. She actually ignored—okay, this is the thing that I started to talk about. My cousin—her cousin in Hemet. I always thought that my mom committed suicide.

CM: Uh-huh. Yeah, you talked about that earlier.

LA: Yeah, it was under her condition. And then when I talked to my aunt, her best friend, I got her together with my dad, and she thought—said the same thing. But I didn't bring it up until ten years after.

CM: Really?

LA: Because I couldn't really say that.

CM: Deal with it?

LA: I had enough trouble just with the fact that she died. And then a year after she died, I started getting informed that my dad lost the house that I grew up in. He was like a year away from owning the house, and my mom— [*packaging crackles*] No thank you. Maybe later.

CM: All right.

LA: She made—

CM: We're looking at the—

LA: The first show I was ever in.

CM: This is the first show at Self Help Graphics? [Fig. 8]

LA: Yeah. And the thing is that Judy made this graphic thing because she had a print place, and then she left this space open so everybody could make their own invitation as one of their pieces that was going to be in the show. That's mine.

CM: Nice. Looks great. Who's in the picture?

LA: Her name is Devon, and she's a friend of John's and Gilbert's. And she was Gilbert's supervisor, and she was into S&M and her partner was into S&M. But, yeah. But she's changed her name a couple times in the time I knew her. Every couple of years she would become a new person. I never understood it and actually I got kind of frightened by it, so.

CM: What? The S&M or the name changing?

LA: No, the S&M thing! [*laughter*] No, you know, I mean she took me to the first gay bar—eventually, lesbian bar, whatever. It was a lesbian gay . . . it was a men's gay bar, leather and lace bar. But once a month they let the women join them.

CM: Gotcha.

LA: They were showing some movie later that evening.

CM: Where was the bar?

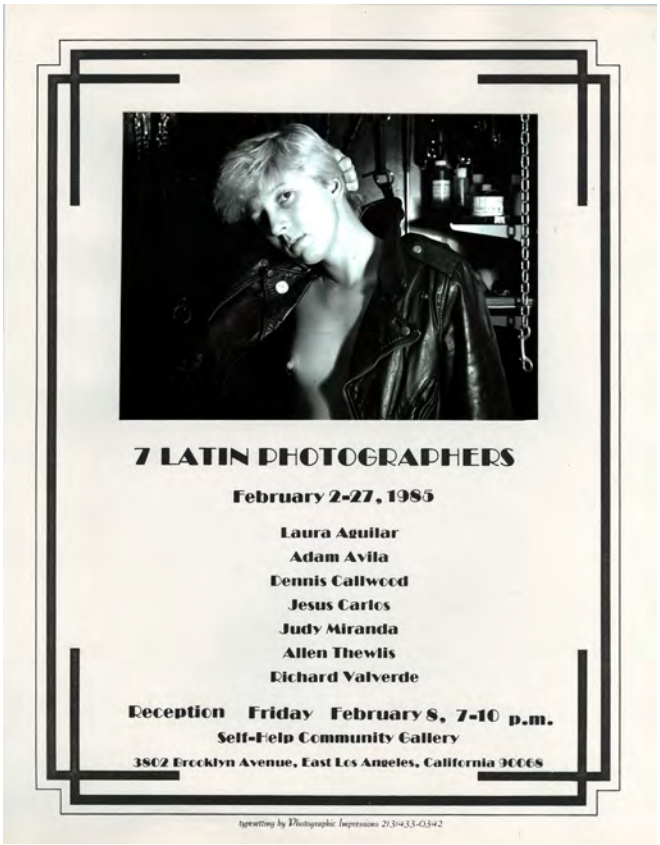

Figure 8. Flyer for *7 Latin Photographers* at Galería Otra Vez, Los Angeles, 1985.

LA: It was in Hollywood, right across from the big Astro Burger. And there was, like, a bicycle—motorcycle shop, and then they would open half of it so they could have their thing there on Sundays. So I went to that. I met her before that. We were at a restaurant. It was lesbian, a gay restaurant in Silver Lake. And then we went to—and when I met her there, I met her after something I was working at, and so I had pink on. And she goes, "You're not going to wear pink. We're going to an S&M bar. You're not going to wear pink." I go, "Don't worry about it." And I went to my van and changed, and, "Is this fine?" She goes, "Yes." [*laughs*] "I was not going to take you to a place like that in pink."

CM: [*laughs*] So speaking of which, this brings us to the Plush Pony series.

LA: Mm-hmm. Also, the reason why I did the Plush Pony was that . . . I felt that the lesbian series was not full enough.

CM: In what sense?

LA: Oh, they're all educated people, you know. Except me. I was the only non-educated—highly educated person in the group. So I thought it was like, it's a little bit, you know, not full circle. And I found out about this bar in East LA. Or, I'm not sure. Sometimes I don't know where East LA ends and next one that's sort of like East LA begins.

CM: Boyle Heights?

LA: Yeah, I don't know the differences.

CM: Do you know what street it was on?

LA: You'd be coming from downtown on Valley, and at a certain point you would turn this way. And up the ways there was a little bar called the Plush Pony. [Plush Pony was located in the El Sereno neighborhood, at 5261 Alhambra Avenue; it closed in the early 2000s—ed.]

CM: Oh, okay.

LA: It was a neighborhood bar. It wasn't very big. And it had been that way forever as a lesbian bar, you know. And, so, I went there, and I asked the owner. And I told the owner what I do with my photography. It's about showing the culture. He goes, "Yeah, I don't care, but you just have to ask people if they want to be posed. Don't force them into it." I go, "I wouldn't do that."

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then, so—

CM: So this was not a place you hung out at on your own?

LA: Not really. No, this one woman took me there, and then another woman took me there. I mean, just knew about the bar. I remember spending New Year's Eve there one time with another friend. And so every time I went, I mean, I felt so out of place 'cause, one, I don't dance really well. I mean, I don't know, I don't speak Spanish. Most everybody speaks Spanish. I mean they all speak English, too, but, you know, it depends on the music and how much alcohol they have, they will only speak Spanish. So, you know. And I always felt out of place and wasn't butch enough. And I didn't want to be butch, but everybody always tried to put that on me, that I'm—because a lot in the '90s was like butch or femme. And then we all became anogymous.

CM: Androgynous.

LA: Androgynous! Yeah. [*laughs*]

CM: Yes. Then it's all about androgyny.

LA: Yeah. So then they kept on changing every so many years, and I just like, "I'm not either or."

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, so.

CM: You're like, "I'm Laura."

LA: I'm just me, who is confused on a regular basis. You know, I'm just trying to be honest. And being honest seems to be an awful thing that people find in me.

CM: Yeah.

LA: I mean, I don't know why. See it's hard for me to lie, because my mom was an expert liar. And she hurt me so many times. She would tell me stuff and I believed her. I always believed her, and that problem came knocking at the door and I had to deal with that.

CM: So you could—so you couldn't lie to people.

LA: So—

CM: Back to the Plush Pony. So you would just go to people at the bar and just ask them?

LA: Well, I—okay, this woman Nancy took me there, and then Isabel and Nancy started seeing each other. And I knew Isabel, so they both tried to push, you know, "Let's go some more." And then I went with another friend. So there were several people that were behind me, trying to get me comfortable there. And I was comfortable, but I didn't know. I wasn't comfortable enough to say, "I want to take your picture." So then, after being there and going to a couple of the baseball things that some of the people belonged to. Teams, you know. Hanging out, watching baseball, which I find very boring. My godson is a baseball player and I find it boring as hell, except when he's up there. But, you know. I really hate baseball. [*laughs*] So then I—okay, so then I asked the owner. He said, "Fine, you just have to ask people and don't force anybody into anything." I go, "Okay." So then I came a couple weeks later. I walked around because I started to know some people, and I walked around and I said, "You know, I'm an artist in the community and I've done a lesbian series and I want [*indistinct*] professional. I want to do—make a more whole circle of the Latin lesbian community, and, you know. And so, you know, everybody here seems to be, you know, working class. And I wanted to make the circle of who we are."

CM: Yep.

LA: And so I go, "You know, I want to—I'm an artist." And I kept [*indistinct*] pointing out that I was an artist, like that's something special. And they go, "Uh-huh." And then they ask me, "How much?" I go, "No, I'm gonna give it to you." So, being free—to give them something for free was suspicious to them.

CM: Really?!

LA: Like, "What does she want from me," you know. And after several people saying, "No, thank you," this other woman, I talked to her and I go, "Would you . . ." And she goes—she asked me, like all the other ones asked me, "How much?" I said, "Five bucks." She goes, "Okay, I'll sign it." And I gave her [an] 8 by 10 print, and I gave the bar these 11 by 14 *beautiful* prints. After the series was done, I gave it to the bar and then I came back to the bar and they were on the wall *stapled*! [*laughs*] They want to kill me ten times here!

CM: You practically had a heart attack.

LA: Yes. I saw that, and my friends were—they were just, like, cracking up. I go, "They stapled it. They stapled, they stapled it. It's beautiful! It's a beautiful print! It's taken me a long time to be able to print—print like that, and it's a beautiful print, and it's not cheap and— [*laughs*] That's my art, and it's stapled!"

CM: Oh, my God.

LA: So I had a fit. But once I said, "Five bucks," she signed the release even before I took the picture. And so then she started talking to other people, and she—once she did it, then other people said "Okay," you know. And the funny thing is, is in the lesbian ser—the Plush Pony series, there's a picture with her and her girlfriend. And she's more the male kind of per—you know, persona, I guess. And so she has a man's shirt on and whatever. And the girlfriend was all fingernails and dye. You know, she's really pretty, but she has her finger like this, pulling on the edge of her shirt. And I always tell people when I show that to classes and stuff, I go, "Who has the relationship here? She does. That little tuck, it says who's in control." [*laughs*] Everybody laughs and agrees with me. [*laughs*]

CM: Why, because it's such a gesture of control or . . .

LA: Well, I kind of see it as, I don't know. Maybe that could be it, but I think it's more like, you know, and particularly that bar, and more, more definite rules of being femme and being masculine. And, you know—and you know, you didn't have someone who's masculine as a friend. I mean, someone who saw him—that person—as more masculine. You don't have them as a friend and have a girlfriend. You have a

girlfriend and that's all, you know. Or you have other people that are . . . I forget the rules, but it's just, like, you know, everyone is what they are, and we don't divide them. You know, kind of rules.

CM: There's rules about who hangs out with who.

LA: Yeah, basically. Femmes cannot really be friends with butches who aren't their partner. So.

CM: Okay.

LA: That was basically, the basic rule to play. You know, so. And I had several of them posing together, and they were mostly butches. But there was one actual real man in the picture. And when I say that to them, I go, "Who is it?" And I go, "They actually had the guy with a real beard. He's the only man in that series, you know, in that group." And I go—and they go, "Why does he go there?" "Because it's down the street from his house, and his wife knows where he's at and nothing's gonna happen." [*laughs*] And sometimes she comes and joins him, you know. But basically, that was why he's always there. And they knew him, and he was always friends with the butch guys. And I guess he might have flirted with the women—the feminine women. But that world was very divided. "This is the way it is." And economically, you know, there are people who worked in post offices. There are people who worked in grocery stores. There are people who don't work and live on welfare. There are people who have been in jail, and been out of jail, and been in jail and been out of jail, you know, so. And Joanna was the woman that was the butch in that couple. And she warned me of some people, to be cautious of them. So I liked it. She was looking out for me. [*laughter*]

CM: Yeah.

LA: But the whole thing, in general, to me is this: I'm asking people to pose. I'm telling them I'm an artist, and they go, "Uh-huh." They're just like my family. "Uh-huh." My family—my older cousins—say to me, "Are you working?" And I would say, "Yes." I didn't want to say no. And then when I said, "Yes," then it's okay to talk about my art. But if I'm not working, "We don't want to hear about your art." You know, 'cause that's just fliberous. Is that the—

CM: Frivolous.

LA: Yeah, that's what it is. You know, so.

CM: They say, "Oh, she's an artist."

LA: Well, yeah. None of them really ever—the older kids have never gone to any of my openings.

CM: Really?

LA: Couple of my younger cousins did.

CM: Now, what did you learn about photography and, I guess, yourself doing that Plush Pony series?

LA: I was not in my—I was not in a happy environment. No, I mean not happy, but I was out of my place in there. You know, one, I don't speak Spanish and almost everybody speaks Spanish. I'm not butch, I'm not femme. But I come across to a lot of people in there as being kind of soft butch. [*laughs*] And it's just like, I don't know how to be what I am not. What I'm not, you know. And so I had a hard—and even in the general opener in lesbian community, sometimes I would be labeled butch. It's like, "I'm not butch." I might look it because I'm big and I always took butch with being more big or masculine. And I didn't think I was masculine at all. But I am big. So, yes. I don't know. And that's why it was a big thing when I did the, the *Three Eagles Flying* and when Willie gave me the 20 by 24 paper and printed it up. It was like the first time I saw my body. I saw the shapes of the shadows from the light on my breasts and my body. And it was really weird, because like I said, you take a bath and take your clothes off every day and you go—or a shower. But you just don't really pay attention to your body because it's your body. And when it's in the developer for five minutes and slowly coming up, it really changed how I saw my body.

CM: How did it change it?

LA: Well, in a strange way I saw myself as more feminine than I ever thought, because I've always been put with the assumption that I'm more masculine. You know, in my family, like, that's why my aunt was constantly trying to get me a quinceañera. And then my mom was always trying to get me in a dress. And my little cousin Kimmy . . . After my brother died, I think, I ran across Kimmy, and she gave me her number.

And she talked about her brother Gary, and Gary was gay and her dad didn't have a problem with it. And he's living up in . . . Seattle and, you know, and, "Dad's okay with it." "Really, your dad's okay with it?" She goes, "Yeah, no problem." I go, "That's good for Art." And, you know. So. Then Gary died. And then they had a memorial service at her cousin's house, you know, on her mom's side, because all she had was her dad, and my mom was gone. And she goes, "You know, your mom used to take me shopping." And I go, "Really?" And she goes, "Yeah. She used to talk about she would—that she liked to take me shopping for dresses because I liked them and you didn't." [*sound of passing truck*] Big diesel.

CM: Yeah. Wow. So it's like you were—

LA: But she would say it like, "I'm sorry that your mom did that for me." And I'd go, "It's okay, because it was you, not me." [*laughs*] So, I mean, I think she—and I go, "I kind of thought she was taking you out a lot," you know, but, you know. And, so. That was fine. It was taking her away from trying to force me into going.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And Kimmy loved to go shopping, and my mom loved to buy her dresses, you know. So.

CM: It's uh . . . It's interesting the way people try to put each other in categories so much.

LA: My mom ignored all the things my Aunt Mary would say, because she didn't—

CM: Really?

LA: I'm sure she understood what she was implying, but my mom just never really, you know.

CM: Your mom was like, "I'm just not going to deal with it."

LA: Pretty much, yeah. And, you know, "I'm not going to . . ." You know, it's like, "I'm not going to force it." In some ways she wasn't going to force me into *that* part, but then she still wanted me in a dress. But, you know, that was strange in that certain way, 'cause no one is perfectly okay with anything, in general.

CM: Yeah.

LA: There's always a little bit of a hesitas—hesitant to it.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So my mom was more about that, you know. She was like—and they brought up Mary Inez, and, you know, like I said, I had my idea what Mary Inez was. Two things that I didn't want to be was on a farm and playing softball. [*laughter*] You know.

CM: Now, I mean, what about—okay, so all during this time, I mean obviously you're dealing with issues of your own sexuality as well. Like when did you—did you come out officially, or was it just something that—

LA: I think my art let me stumble into it, and then become part of this community, that community. And [I] found a place that at times I was very comfortable with and at other times I just . . . It was time to move on from this community to another community.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then—okay, so, when I did the Plush—the lesbian series first and then the Plush Pony, I got criticism from other photographers that were straight men because I'm documenting my own community. How could I be, you know, how could I photograph my own community? White people go into other people's communities and photograph them and document them and educate them to themselves.

CM: Yeah.

LA: I mean, they would educate them who they are to themselves, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And like, we're, you know—and it's just like . . . So, I got a lot of that from the man photographers about me photographing. [*indistinct*]

CM: That you couldn't be objective or something?

LA: Yeah. Because I come from that community. You know, yeah. And—but in a way, it is a tradition of documentary photography, is you go, and mainly all the photographers were always white.

CM: Yeah.

LA: *Look* sent them in and *Life* sent them in, and they were white men. There was only one black man photographer, and that was Park—

CM: Gordon Parks.

LA: Gordon Parks, yeah. And, you know, and—

CM: Yeah, when you think about *National Geographic*, too, it was white male photographers going into Africa and Asia and Latin America.

LA: Very—I mean, until even twenty years ago, women weren't there. There weren't any there [as] photographers for the cover or anything like that. And my friend Monica [Almeida] who was one of the—she ended going from the *LA Times* to the *New York Times*, and when she was working for the *LA Times* she was an intern. And she goes, "For three years I've had to have this damn cell phone." I mean, um—

CM: Pager?

LA: "Pager on." She goes, "If I was to ever not answer a pager I would lose my job." And so, she goes, you know, "And then I'm past the three years. Now I'm a full-time employee." And they still gave her a hard time. When the Night Stalker was around? Ruben, whatever his name was?

CM: Uh . . . Richard Ramirez.

LA: But they caught him in East LA. And she was at—she heard the thing on the radio—the, you know, the police. And she got to the spot and the guy that was at the *Times* said—told her to leave the place and have this other guy from another place come to the place, you know, to photograph. And—and the thing was funny 'cause all the guys sorta supported her. They said, "Leave her where she's at." And then the guy who was supposed to go and replace her didn't go to replace her. And he called her and said, "I'm not coming." You know, and all the men there were supporting her—the men photographers—'cause she happened to be there at that time. And why send a man just 'cause he's a man to take this picture? She was here. She was in the neighborhood. She caught it on the radio. She got there when the same time the police got there.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, so. And the so, so then when she went to New York, she was in the *New York Times*, and she did a lot of traveling for them. And her boyfriend . . . I don't know if it ever came to be marriage, but I don't think so. But her boyfriend at the time she was living with, his father was a big-name photographer in news photography, and he had to live up to his father's shadow. And she was living up to hers, and she was a woman equal to him, and so there was all these little issues, you know. Not so much—I think he supported her, but he always had that thing of his dad's legacy over his head. You know, so. And he would be . . . other male photographers would make comments about the fact that his girlfriend's, you know, doing better at this moment than he is. And, you know, it seemed to go like this, this, this, this, and with them—each other—they were okay with it, but it was *other* photographers around them that always pointed it out. You know, so.

CM: So, sort of going back to your own experience during this time, I mean, when you saw these photos of yourself nude, you're doing these series about lesbians. You're kind of, it seems like, finding yourself to some degree?

LA: Yeah. I mean basically . . . No. If you look at every step of it, it was—it's somehow to try to fix myself. Or just get settled with myself. I mean, I didn't speak to people.

CM: Like to come to terms with yourself?

LA: Mm-hmm. 'Cause, like, I was content photographing walls and buildings and things that was just texture. I didn't want to interact with people. I was always shy, 'cause I would start to talk and then they didn't understand me. And they would say it again, and I'd say it again, and I just felt ashamed, so, because of my speech, you know, so. I preferred being with nature and objects and so . . . When it's just one person, then what's it called? It's not is— When you're alone?

CM: Isolated? Or . . .

LA: Yeah. I was more comfortable being isolated than I was around people. And I mean my whole life, because my mother was a talker. She talked to everybody. My dad was grumpy. He didn't talk to anybody. After she died, you know, I started to go with him to the grocery store on Fridays 'cause my mom would go to

the grocery store on Fridays. And so when my mom died, I would meet my dad there, and we would go and buy food and stuff. And then we'd get to the cashier, and the woman would say, "So and so much money." And my dad would turn to me, open his wallet, give me the money, and then I had to hand it to the woman, 'cause he wouldn't interact with people he didn't know. 'Cause he was very, you know.

CM: So he was using you as an intermediary?

LA: Yes. And she looked at me, and she didn't know who to give the change to. [*laughter*] I go, "Just give it to me. It's going to be in my pocket anyhow."

CM: Now, I mean, but what about your family during this time? I mean, you're hanging out with the lesbian community. You're shooting—

LA: They didn't know anything I was doing.

CM: They didn't know what you were doing?

LA: My dad had—

CM: Did they have a sense that you might be a lesbian or . . . Did it come up ever?

LA: Not directly. My sister-in-law's mother asked me one day. So I'm in the back of the car, and my brother and my sister-in-law are in front. And she goes, "Have you ever asked your br—" You know, I was in the back of the van. And she goes, "Have you ever asked your brother, or tell your brother that you're gay?" And I go, "No." And she goes, "Want me to ask Becky to ask him?" And I said, "Okay." And then Becky asked him, and then Mary passed on what my brother had to say about it. And he basically said, "Well, you know, I don't have a problem with it. Whoever she is, is who I love. And most of my life she's not been what my dad wants her to be, and so, you know, I think that it wouldn't be good to tell him, 'cause they're not close and that ain't gonna ever get them closer." But he didn't care.

CM: Your brother didn't care?

LA: My brother didn't care. He—you know, he basically was more worried about me telling my dad. And like, "Why in the hell would you think I would tell Daddy?" I'm sure Daddy thought it all the time, you know.

CM: Did you ever tell your dad?

LA: No.

CM: No?

LA: What for? You know, I mean . . .

CM: But it was kind of understood, certainly?

LA: I'm pretty sure it was, you know. And that's why he—I was—see, my dad disliked me because I was too much like him. And my brother was too much like my mom. See, Saturday morning, you know, "I have an idea. I want to go this place." And my mom would say, "Ask your dad." So I asked my dad, and he would say, "No." And then I'd come back with another thought about, "How about this?" And he would go, "Okay." But if he ever said no twice, I never went back for the third time, because I just knew, I'm just gonna have to figure out something or do without his approval for that day, you know. I mean—

CM: Yeah.

LA: If I wanted go to the movies and have mom drop us—me and my friends off, that's—and I had to get my dad's okay for it.

CM: It's like no is no.

LA: No is no. Yeah. Plus, I know that with Daddy, don't ever go to the third strike. Three strikes you're out, and I mean, you could be out. I just knew that my dad's personality was like, he would sometimes say yes the second time, and sometimes he would never say yes, you know. So I just—at the third time I just let it go. And my brother would be the opposite. He would be rather passive with my dad. Hang out with my dad all day. Working in the garage with him. Do this, do that. And then [*indistinct*] around five o'clock say, "Dad, could I use the car?" And I said, like—tell my brother that he was the worst. Because, like, I asked Daddy. He says no. I go back one more time. If he says no, I never go for the third time 'cause I know it's gonna be no. So . . . And then I changed that. I have to make my own plans that doesn't need his approval. And

Johnny would sit there all day long helping my dad do this and that and just being with my dad, and my dad loving that. And then my dad would say no to him. [*laughs*]

CM: He'd still say no?

LA: He would still say no. Not a lot, but there was a small percentage—

CM: Enough.

LA: Of the time he would do that. And I just, you know, would like tell my brother he was a wimp, you know. But then, you know, to me, Johnny was, in my dad's eyes as golden, so. I never really thought about it, that it really hurt him, because mostly he got what he wanted. You know, 'cause he was the only boy, and . . . So.

CM: Now, you said earlier that it was, like, in your twenties, I guess. Was it in ELAC or maybe a little later, that either you discovered or you came to the conclusion that you were a lesbian? I mean was that—

LA: Well, I see—

CM: How did that happen?

LA: Well, see, like I said, in third grade that girl was on top of me, and I figured if she's on top of me, she has her face in my face, and she's telling me to say I'm a lesbian, I figured it's not a good word.

CM: So you knew then?

LA: No.

CM: No?

LA: I just knew that that word was not a good word because she's on top of me and she has her fist in my face.

CM: At that point you hadn't had attractions to other girls?

LA: I don't think at that time. I was in the third grade. Girls got along with each other. It wasn't a big deal that you slept together.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And things like that. My best friend would come over and we would sleep together all the time. And it was never an issue, you know. And so I don't think that I was conscious of it. But, you know. And like I said, I was in third grade, she was in sixth. And then, as I get into early high school, my aunt's throwing out the quinceañera thing. You know, and stuff like that, and—

CM: And the references to Mary Inez and her farm.

LA: And her partner Dale. And living on a farm and playing softball.

CM: Softball.

LA: But I told, when I actually— And so years later, my godchild is having—she just got married that day, and we're in the yard and having food and stuff. And she came over and sat by me, and she goes, "How is it that you've been able to come out to your dad?" I go, "I never come out to my dad." And she goes, "But all the other cousins know you are." And I go, "Yeah, I know." 'Cause . . . they will never say it. Some of them won't say it to my face, but they know when they say, "That's just Laura."

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know. And then I said, "Well, did you ever come out?" And she goes, "No. I never came out to anybody in the family." And I go, "Well, I knew you were a lesbian because Claudine was your goddaughter, and she saw that ring that Dale left—had for you, that she loved you." So, Claudine was four years older than me, and she told me what that was about.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, so. But then, you know.

CM: But you just know?

LA: You just sort of know, yeah.

CM: You just sort of know.

LA: And then Becky, who had the four girls that I used to babysit. And Diana was the second to the youngest and was my godchild. She said one time—I said to her, you know, if Diane . . . She goes, "You know, if Diane

brings it up, then answer her and be honest. But if she doesn't, I don't want you to really bring it up until she's older."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "If you want to bring it up into conversation, but not until she's older. But at this point, if she brings it up and she asks you, be honest with her. That's all I ask for you to be, is honest to her."

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know. [*dog barks*]

CM: So who was your first crush? [*pause*]

LA: This girl named Beth, who was in the sixth grade, and I was in the fifth grade. But, you know, I didn't do anything about it. But she was the first crush I had.

CM: Yeah. Well, that's what crushes often are. It's just like . . .

LA: Then in high school, there was another girl. I was a freshman, she was a senior. And she was sweet as can be. And she was kind to me. But she knew that I had—I didn't have the words to put to it, but I wanted to be around her all the time. And she was very kind to me and, you know. I mean, years later I saw that, when I look back and think about this and that, I realize, you know, these people were really sweet to me. But, I had no clue that what they were trying to say to me, that what I—they understood what I was looking for, but I wasn't going to get it there. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah. It was the wrong place.

LA: Wrong place, yeah, so. And . . . then I started doing the lesbian series and the Plush Pony, and it really wasn't yet. I mean, I came out between twenty-five—well, twenty-three to twenty-five—very slowly. Then I just met—like I said, I had all these friends that were dominantly all white, and the other half were women of color. But there was no women of color together. Everyone was with a white person.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah. And so . . . I don't know, so. And they were very sort of closet-y. And then I found out later that lot of people in the community are—there's a little niche, and they have—a lot of people say, in the lesbian community, say that there's a lot of incest in the sense that we are [*indistinct*] girlfriends, and we may have traded people over the years.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And after some amount of time, there's no one else to go to but maybe back to someone that was around before.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So it's like, you know. And everyone would say, "Oh, yeah, she was my girlfriend long time ago, and then I was with her, and then I was with her," you know. And then that's when I really started to see it as being incestuous, you know—

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because it's a small community.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, so. Then I met the [*indistinct*] lesbians, and then that became another small groups. But there were three groups in one. And the Latina lesbians were Puerto Rican. And then there were the Cubans, and then there were the Chicanas. And they all seemed to also date each other. I mean . . . Yeah, so it was like, lot of the Latin— So they would always refer to the island girls, the ones who came from Cuba. I mean—

CM: The Caribbean ones.

LA: The Caribbeans, yeah. I mean, 'cause, like, the . . . I didn't like that Puerto Rican banana thing. It's kind of, like, cooked—

CM: Yeah, the plantains?

LA: Yeah, I didn't like that. It looked ugly. I don't like to eat ugly things. But I did like that pork stuff. [*laughter*] So.

CM: I mean, what circles did you feel most comfortable dating in?

LA: None.

CM: None? [*laughs*] You're, like, you're your own—

LA: I don't know where I fit in. In my whole life, I don't know where I fit in. And I usually seem to find myself fitting in when I'm just alone. And that's kind of sad, but it is my personality. You know, I know how to exist alone. I don't know how to exist with people.

CM: Really?

LA: You know, I teach workshops with kids, you know. I'm really, you know, I talk. I mean, at times when I'm working with the kids, I find I'm surprised of who I am with them, you know, and what I give to them and what they take from me, you know. And it's just like, I didn't know I was that good. I mean, kind.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because I grew up in a weird family, so to speak, mainly because of my dad and not fitting up to what he thought I should be as a girl.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And that I didn't look at my dad like, you know, with idol-ness. See, my problem was I hit kindergarten and after that Daddy was not that big of a deal anymore.

CM: Yeah.

LA: I had the whole world out there with me. [*laughs*]

CM: Exactly. Exactly.

LA: Until kindergarten I was Daddy's angel.

CM: Wow.

LA: And I adored my daddy. And I would pretend to cut his hair with plastic scissors. Give him a shave, too, with—

CM: Really?

LA: A plastic thing. Yeah.

CM: Oh, my God, that's hilarious.

LA: And he would sit there. One day I was—he was sitting here. And I had Jack, and I was cutting Jack's hair with some scissors, and he goes, "You used to do that to me." I go, "I know. They were plastic scissors, Dad." He goes, "You gave me shaves." I go, "Yes, I know. They were blue plastic razors." [*laughter*]

CM: So, I mean, this brings me a little bit to the Nature Self-Portrait series, because I think that was like this absolutely transformational—

LA: Yeah.

CM: Body of work in a way.

LA: From the Clothed/Unclothed series to—and then the *Twelve Lauras* and *Five Lauras* and—

CM: Yeah.

LA: They were all more or less, sort of exercises to me.

CM: Uh-huh. The previous work?

LA: Mm-hmm. I mean, I was just getting myself—I saw that, that when I photographed myself in [*indistinct*] spaces. That was the day I did, you know, fifteen rolls of film, thirty-six exposures in Willie's studio. And then I showed it to Gilbert and he goes, "Oh, my God, that's great!" And then I would say, "You didn't like the lesbian series?" The last one was always my baby.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, the one that I'm moving into is not quite there yet.

CM: Exactly.

LA: You know—

CM: You're still feeling your way around.

LA: Figuring out how it's going to go. And when I feel comfortable with it, it's my baby again. Diego, come here! [*to the dog*] We got to remember to be quiet, okay? It's the afternoon, and you're driving me nuts at this time of day. Go in the house. Do you want me to tie you up? I tie you up, in the house.

CM: [*laughs*] So this was the Nature Self-Portrait that was right after your father's death, right? Or no, Gilbert's death?

LA: Gilbert's death, yeah.

CM: It was right after Gilbert's death.

LA: Yeah. So the thing is that—

CM: Gilbert died before or after your father?

LA: Before my father.

CM: Before your father.

LA: After my brother and before my father.

CM: After your brother and before your father.

LA: Yeah. So, um . . . So I was invited to go to England to meet this—a friend of mine moved to England. She was the director of this gallery in, photo gallery in Newcastle. And so she was sponsoring—Newcastle, the gallery, was sponsoring someone from the Black Gallery in England—in London, and London was sponsoring me. So when they called me and said, "You know, I'm from the Black Gallery, would you please call us? We want to put you in this show with, you know, this other gallery." And I called them and go, "You know, I'm Mexican." The guy said to me, the guy said to me that, "When you're in England, if you're not white, you're black. So, you know, it's not a problem, Laura."

CM: Yeah.

LA: I go, "Oh, okay." It's not like black is different here. And he just said, "If you're not white, you're black." You're Indian, you're—

CM: Do you know what gallery it was that you were going . . .

LA: Oh, no. The gallery that sponsored me was the Black Gallery in London.

CM: Okay.

LA: And the Newcastle Gallery sponsored the person that was from London.

CM: Okay.

LA: So we—so they just traded sponsoring. So, you know, it looked like they were helping someone else out.

CM: And so that's how you were going to end up with a show there? That's how the—

LA: Yeah, Newcastle, yeah.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And, so my friend Michelle was the director there, and she told me—she goes, "We just traded people to support, even though, you know, we'd already tapped someone we wanted, so we got 'em. We just had different people pay for it, for when they got grants from the government." So. And so I went up there, and I did not like Newcastle at all. I didn't like it at all. I didn't like England.

CM: Why not?

LA: 'Cause people stared at me. Like they've never seen someone of color and nor did they see someone large before.

CM: Really?

LA: I hated being stared at. And so, you know. I was supposed to be there for fourteen days, and after the ninth day I said, "I want to go home."

CM: You're like, "I'm done."

LA: "I'm tired of this place. It's cold, and it's Novem—it's May, and it's freezing to me." To them, it's not freezing. To me, it's freezing, you know, 'cause I'm from California. So I didn't like it. I didn't like being stared at by adults and stuff and even little kids. And I didn't like being . . . And then, so the Black Gallery brought the woman from the Black Gallery from London to up there. And so, we met, spent the afternoon together, talked about what we might be doing, da da da. And Michelle kind of gave me some background on the other artist, saying that she thought would go good together, 'cause she'd been in and out of mental places. You know, she's struggles with depression, and I struggle with depression, and see, Michelle knew that. And so she thought that would be an interesting thing. And so, it was.

And then so, when I was there, Michelle goes, "Do you have any idea what you want to do?" And I go, "You know what? I want to do nature. I want to photograph myself in nature. You know, Judy Dater has been doing it for years, and I think—I've been in the studio doing myself nude. And it's like been this big secret. And then people liked it, then I showed it. And so, I think I want to do the—this time go out in nature and photograph." And so. The money that I got from London was a nice amount, but I hadn't yet done anything. I use, using that grant money to pay for my bills and spending time with Gilbert for the last six months of his life. And then he died, and then we took care—me and Kevin took care of stuff and gave things away to friends and gave things to, you know, Out of the Closet store and thrift stores and . . . So then we had three weeks before we had the memorial service. So I called Delilah [Montoya] up, said, "I need to come out to New Mexico. Are you available?" She goes, "You're lucky. I'm here. Come right away, or come next week. I'm not teaching right now, so I'm just home playing with my grandkids," you know.

CM: This is Delilah Montoya, the photographer?

LA: Uh-huh. So she took me around to some people she knew. And some friends lived on a reservation and they were Indian. And other places that were national parks and, you know, and sometimes I found some spots. And then all of a sudden, someone sort of found us, and I'm naked and she's taking a picture, and it's just like, "Oh." We pretended they weren't there, and they pretended I wasn't there. So, you know, it was kind of funny, 'cause—

CM: And how did you envision the series? You said that you wanted to photograph yourself in nature, like outdoors. Did you scout the locations first? Did you . . .

LA: We just—well, see that's the thing. It's like my—one time I took my—Delilah was in town and she wanted to go to Vegas, and I wanted to go out into the desert. And my friend—my dir—my . . . Susanne Vielmetter, who was the dir—the owner of the gallery I was being sponsored by—it was her—she came along for the weekend, so. And so she started talking to me. And she goes—because Delilah and me worked on the—together. She was my assistant on the whole Nature Self-Portrait [series]. She goes, "How do you find a place?" I go, "Well, let me show you." And Delilah's driving. Susanne's in the front. I'm in the back, eating some Cracker Jacks. I go, "Okay, stop!" And so Delilah stops, and I go get my stuff. I get my camera, and Delilah's my assistant, helps me carry the tripod, da da da. "Let's just start walking." We start walking. I saw something. I liked it. I stopped. I put the camera on the tripod. I took some pictures. Then we walked a little bit more, found another spot. Then we walked a little bit more and didn't find anything, so we went back to the car. That's how I do it. [*laughs*]

CM: It's totally just you see something that speaks to you?

LA: Yeah. Yeah.

CM: And is it—what is that landscape that speaks to you? Or you just don't know until you see it.

LA: Yeah, I don't know until I see it. 'Cause I, I mean, I don't—and particularly then I didn't really know what I was doing. The first series, you know. And then when I went to Texas and got the Artpace grant for two months, I didn't know what I was doing there, either, so. [Aguilar's Artpace residency was in 1999—ed.] I mean I really don't think I saw the—I think the first time—the Nature Self-Portrait, I think there were moments that I did see it. But then there was moments that I didn't see it, but I just kept on, like, pretending I knew what I was doing. I had this focus and it's like my focus ain't that clear, so. [*laughs*] And then—

CM: And then for that Nature Self-Portrait series, so how did the mechanics of it work? Do you set the camera up on a tripod with somebody else taking the pictures? Were you taking the pictures remotely?

LA: No, no, no. That time it was just, I would set the camera up, Delilah would be—I go, "Delilah, this is what I want to lay down here." And Delilah was shorter than me. And I go, "Put your hand up there." And I go, "That's pretty much my length between." You know, just have her arm would make the length of my body. And then I'd go, "Okay, so let's trade places. The camera's focused. This is what I want, exposure-wise. Bracket the shots for me, and then shoot two bracket one way, shoot two bracket the other way," you know. So I'm going to find—I'm gonna get something no matter what, 'cause I'm bracketing, so . . .

CM: Yeah.

LA: And some had more detail than others. And then when I'd get in the darkroom, whatever which one I want to show more detail of, that's the negative I want to use. So I would have her do that. And then I would—you know, once I laid down, because of the exercise that I did in Willie's studio, I really had a sense of how to see through my camera before, without being behind it. So I would say, "It's my head." I would put my arm out. "Do you see my hand?" She goes, "No." "Okay, okay. So come back here and sit here." I back myself with the camera up, put— 'Cause I wanted little space around me, but not a lot of space. And so, you know, I did that. That's how I sort of did it.

CM: It was, like, instinctual.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Like very sort of—

LA: And I, like I said, I really got it from doing that exercise in Willie's studio, because I put lines on the floor so I know how far I could go this way or that way. I was shooting from a certain part of the background.

CM: Yes.

LA: It was mostly my hip and up, and so I knew what space I had.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And it was just me.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Just me and the camera.

CM: So all that time in Willie's studio . . .

LA: It was just me and the camera.

CM: Started to pay off.

LA: Yeah, because, you know. And I really did that mainly for the Clothed/Unclothed, because people were saying, "It takes a lot of time to stand here naked with you fussing with the damn camera."

CM: So you wanted to fuss with the camera as little as possible?

LA: Yeah, and make them feel more comfortable. Because sometimes I would get cussing at the camera 'cause I don't remember left or right, you know. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah. [*laughs*]

LA: So, yeah.

CM: And then—I mean, the shapes that you put your body in, was that something that you saw a similar shape in the landscape, you played with it, you like—because, I mean, I see so much you're playing around with the lines of your body and the lines of the landscape. How much . . .

LA: To be honest, I'm not that much conscious of it, to be honest. I like the air if we—if something moves, I just have film, you know. If I take two or three pictures and I felt it was good, I might track a little bit—back up a little more and do a couple more. But if I just felt that it didn't really work, I just like, laid down little bit, got a little bit of sun. "Okay, let's go on." Sometimes I just wanted to, you know, just be there. And it was strange 'cause, you know, Gilbert had passed away.

CM: Uh-huh.

LA: And I watched him die for ten years, you know. The last five years—

CM: He died of AIDS?

LA: Mm-hmm. The last five years he almost came to death five times, in the last five years.

CM: Wow.

LA: But, you know. So it's like I went through that. I lost my brother, then I found out I was losing Gilbert. And he was the next family I had. And he was the last person in my life that knew my mother. So I had someone who could agree with me or disagree, because he knew her. I don't have anyone. I had Bea, but she wasn't—she was the aunt to my mom and not—I don't think she saw the arguments between us. Gilbert did. And she also saw—and he also saw that my mom was, like, trying to be extremely nice to me, and I was being mean to her, when she was taking me and my friends out from school to the farm, because

I was just grumpy. And, you know. And so sometimes he would tell me to give her a break and stuff like that. So, he—and he knew my dad very well, so, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So, he was my last . . . he was my main last friendship from childhood. Even though I met him as a teenager. But it's basically that's what it felt like.

CM: Yeah.

LA: A last real family member, you know.

CM: So that time in New Mexico was really, I mean, there was some mourning going on.

LA: I went there. I took the train and I listened to my music and I just looked out the window.

CM: What kind of music were you listening to?

LA: Oh, the same kind I still listen to. I like country music. I like folk music. I like bluegrass music that's more country. I like bluegrass and country music together, but I don't totally like bluegrass by itself, and I don't totally like country by itself. I like it when it's a little bit of both and sometimes a little bit of rock, country and bluegrass there.

CM: Who are you listening to right now?

LA: Oh, I listen to a lot of people. But I found, a year or so, maybe two years now, I found Hank Williams.

CM: Oh.

LA: I hear lot of country singers and rock singers saying, "This is a Hank Williams song, and he was a great influence on my life, and this is one of his songs on my album." And I kept on hearing his name over and over a lot, and it wasn't just country. And when I did listen to country, it wasn't straight country because it was just too corny. And so like, you know, I spend a lot of time in the darkroom with Joan Baez. And sometimes it'd help my mood of the printing, because sometimes the music was very moody. And other times it was very cheerful. But, you know. And I loved the songs about Dylan after they broke up. [*laughs*] You know.

CM: Omigod.

LA: So, you know. And . . . so, one of my friends that I photographed—Monica, who was a *Times* photographer—I photographed her out on the street because she was always out on the street, and then she photographed me. And so she photographed me where I lived, and then she goes, "You know, the minute you put on Joan Baez you get really somber." I go, "Really? I find her, you know, fun. I mean, I like her music." She goes, "The stuff you have right now is very som—you know, her earlier stuff is more, you know, very somber." Because it was like— 'Cause she start, she was in the beginning of the revamp of folk art. So a lot of that stuff was songs that were done a hundred years before, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And mostly Irish songs and English songs.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, came over on the boats, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: The hill people in Tennessee and stuff, they knew the songs. They passed it on, but they never wrote it down.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so, of the Carters, A. D. Carter was the husband of Sara. And the other one was Johnny Cash's mother-in-law later in life. And so that family was the Carters, because they both married brothers. You know, so.

CM: Yeah.

LA: What's her name's mother was married to the other brother, and then so was the Carter family. And then, I can't think of the name right now. June Carter.

CM: June Carter. Was married to—

LA: And she became a—she was a singer when—at a certain point the Carters were no longer together 'cause they got a divorce. And so Mother Mabel sang, and she had her three daughters with her, and they were

on the radio in the ’40s, you know. Little bits of June Carter there. And then she, you know, she continued in country. But, you know, at a certain point country was this sort of very narrow—

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so, she sang what her mother sang, and she learned the music that her mother was teaching her and all that. Because it was from the mountains.

CM: All this stuff that was passed down over the generations.

LA: Yeah, yeah, in the . . . Ar—no . . .

CM: In the Appalachians?

LA: Yes, the Appalachians was, you know. And there was a lot of people from Ireland and from England and Germany. They were just not educated people. They were working people. They just lived off the land. And so it was a different class of, you know, people. So, um. But I liked the music. And—

CM: So this is the music you’re listening to on the train out to New Mexico.

LA: Yeah. Well no, at the time I wasn’t.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: Two years ago I found Hank Williams. I heard him all the time because lot of country singers would say, “He was my favorite influence,” you know, and this and that. Everyone has a song of his on an album somewhere or another. They’re rock, or they’re country. You know, everyone found something from him. And he died early in life ’cause he was an alcoholic and all that stuff. But he was—he wrote a lot. Now, the reason I brought out the Carters was that the man in the group—the husband of one of the Carter sisters—she—he went around and bought the story—the song from people. They didn’t have the right to it. It was passed down and down. But he would get them to sign a paper that they were the ones that gave him the song.

CM: Wow.

LA: And he became rich, you know. And that was during the Depression, you know. ’Cause they were from the Ozarks, and they went around—

CM: Yeah.

LA: And he talked to people and they would give him the songs, and he would get copyrights on them.

CM: Wow.

LA: So most of the songs the Carters did were not—

CM: Were not their songs.

LA: Really theirs.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Yeah, although he did—

CM: They were folk songs.

LA: They were folk songs, and they were, you know. But he got the rights to them because he was smart enough to go get someone to say that “this is my family” or whatever, and they just got rights.

CM: Yeah.

LA: They were the true people that wrote it or not. No one really, truly knows.

CM: Yeah.

LA: ’Cause they didn’t have no proof to say that it was theirs, because they gave the rights over to him and he had a contract. So they couldn’t really take it back.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know. So he was smart in that way.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And it was—and it was, like, he was a really smart man for the Depression era.

CM: Wow.

LA: You know. And so, and . . .

CM: Okay. So going back to you and New Mexico, because we could talk about the Carters—

LA: Yeah.

CM: For a dog's age. So you're on the train to New Mexico, Gilbert has passed away . . .

LA: Listening—a lot of the music was—

CM: You're listening to music.

LA: Some of Joan Baez, some—

CM: Some country?

LA: Some country. But my favorite in country is Emmy Lou Harris because she is never the same. She's always doing some type of country, but it's never the same. She goes from bluegrass, more bluegrass, to more country, back and forth, in between pop and country, you know. So she's never the same in every album. And I think that's why I liked her, because she was always trying something new or going back to something old, you know.

CM: Yeah. So you get out to New Mexico. And you said that you spent the first few days just kind of messing around.

LA: Yeah.

CM: What were you doing?

LA: We were driving around. "How 'bout this spot, Laura?" I go, "It's okay, but I don't think so. Let's go for a walk. It doesn't feel right." And Delilah, about the third day, said, "Okay, you have a week left before you have to go back home. So are we gonna get started doing the nudes?" I said, "Fine!" And I just walked over to the spot here, bring the camera, set it up, and I took my clothes off.

CM: [laughs] This is how you met a deadline for a gallery in England.

LA: Yeah. But the thing is that I wanted to do nature out in—photograph myself nude out of nature, 'cause the ten years before that I was photographing myself in the studio, and this was a big challenge to me. But the challenge was that I wanted to follow someone that I adore, and that was Judy Dater. And she did some nature pictures of her as—since she was nineteen. But she's also a very . . . thin woman, and—

CM: Statuesque.

LA: And statuesque, yeah.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then, so, like, when she was—I took a workshop with [*indistinct*] Friends of Photography, and I asked a lot of questions about, "And when did you take these pictures? And when you take those pictures?" And she goes, "These pictures I did when I was around forty years old. And I basically wanted to photograph my body at forty because I've been photographing it off and on, and other people have been photographing my body since I was nineteen. So I was, you know, I worked out in the boonies at some university." And she—on weekends she would go to the dead lands. Wherever that is? I don't know where, 'cause lot of different states have—they refer to the dead lands.

CM: Yeah.

LA: It's more, you know, sand and stuff. And she goes, "I would just go places on my own and take a fellow instructor with me and help me set up the camera," and all that. And so—

CM: Wow. How did you meet her?

LA: I met her at a workshop at Friends of Photography that I got a scholarship to.

CM: Okay.

LA: I met Joyce Tenneson there, too. And—

CM: Wow.

LA: Joyce Tenneson and Judy Dater were big influences for me. So, I when I met Judy Dater first time, it was before I was in the workshop. I was at a conference down in San Diego at that hotel that had the first electricity. Near the island. Coronado Hotel. [Hotel del Coronado—ed.]

CM: The Coronado.

LA: Yeah. So the conference was there—

CM: Over by San Diego?

LA: Mm-hmm. And the conference was there. So I went over, and I was hanging out and I saw Judy Dater. That morning I was sitting in this group, you know. She was on the panel, and I was in the front row, and she sat right next to me because she was getting ready to be on the stage. And I, "Oh, wow." I was too afraid to talk to her. But I was like, "Oh, that's Judy Dater. I'm sitting next to Judy Dater," you know. [*laughs*] And then she was one of the panelists. And she talked, and then someone else talked, someone else talked. And you go on to the next whatever that you want to listen to, and then there was a break. And so I saw her in the afternoon at this one place, and I was sitting in the back and she was sitting in the back, and she got up and left.

Oh, I asked her, could she—would she look at some of my work. And she goes, "Oh, I have about a half-hour and—after this," you know, "in the afternoon, between this time and this time, let's meet in the lobby at the hotel." I said, "Okay." But I saw in one of the rooms that she left early, so I left early. And I had my portfolio with me, and I go, "How about now?" And she goes, "Okay, let's sit down." And we talked and she talked about my work for a half-hour instead of the fifteen minutes she said she was gonna give me. It was—I was, like, blown away. And then I saw her a couple years later when I got another scholarship to go to a friend's photography workshop up in Monterey, you know. And that's when I also met Joyce Tenneson. And Joyce Tenneson is a commercial photographer and a fine art photographer. And she does—she became more famous in Europe than here, because in Europe she did all this stuff for European *Vogue*. And she goes, "United States—American *Vogue*, you have your hands tied behind you."

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because, you know, even though it's supposed to be, you know, high class and all this stuff, it's supposed to try to follow the European *Vogue*, but you can't really show anything on the body.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You can't have two women standing close together.

CM: Yeah.

LA: In America, you have two women standing so close together, it's lesbian shots, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Art directors would tell her this, you know—

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because the person who's—who they're paying for them to make that ad would tell that person.

CM: Exactly.

LA: And she goes, you know, she goes, "It's like having my hands tied behind me in the United States."

CM: Yeah.

LA: So, 'cause she had shown more in shows, and she was in a group show in Europe somewhere, and she said one of the *Vogue* editors came and said, "Would you," you know, "be interested in doing a two-page thing in *Vogue*?" You know, the European one. I don't know which country, but—and she said, "Sure!" And by the time she got done with that job she had sixteen pages. You know.

CM: Wow.

LA: And then that opened her, you know, life. I mean, commercial life.

CM: So what did she say about your portfolio?

LA: Who, Joyce or Judy?

CM: Judy.

LA: Judy. She asked me questions like, "Why a Latin lesbian series? You know, it's similar to Jim Goldberg's book *Rich and Poor*." I go, "Yes, I understand that, but also, if you look at Duane Michals, he does the same thing with pictures, numbers, and a story, you know." And so I was like, "Duane Michals was before, and Jim Goldberg. I'm after Jim Goldberg. Who's after me, whoever." But they—I mean, they had publishing. I didn't. They had publishing.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so she goes, "Why Latin lesbians? I go, "Because the gay and lesbian community's very separated, like the rest of America." [*laughs*] And, you know, Judy's, you know, an educated white woman, you know, and she got it. And she goes, "Okay." And so she wanted to give me criticism, but she didn't want to hurt my feelings, so. But she was very tasteful in how she criticized some things. Some things I looked at and changed, you know. But it was like—

CM: Like what? What piece of advice did she give you that you were—

LA: I cannot truly say what. It's just that I know that it happened and— [*dog barks*] Diego, stop it! [*indistinct*] Good boy.

CM: So she, she—

LA: She just—

CM: You can't say exactly how she affected your work, yeah.

LA: 'Cause I don't remember. But she—the fact that she spent a half hour with me when she was only going to give me fifteen minutes, that was— And she asked me good questions and for me to think about it. I didn't have— She goes, "You don't really have to answer now. I'm just asking you a question, so, you know, maybe it's something you want to think about." So stuff like that. So she, she made my day, my year.

CM: Wow.

LA: You know. Because I saw her work 'cause of my friend Mei at the Photo Center—I mean at East LA College, you know, she gave me a book that was done by Judy Dater and Jack Welpott, who was her husband at the time. And I go, "You know—" And she goes, "They're really nice portraits, you know, so why don't you look through and tell me what you think." And then I go, "You know, Mei, I noticed something, but I don't know what it means, 'cause on one page it would have a zero and a cross, then it would have zero and an arrow." And she goes, "Oh, that's male and female." It was from the '60s, you know, and I'm not from the '60s. You know, I'm from the '70s and I had no idea what it was about. So she pointed out—she goes, "Jack Welpott is the husband, and she's, you know, they're married to each other and they photograph the same women. But it was a man's view and a woman's view."

CM: Oh.

LA: And I seem to always like the ones from the—that had the woman and the cross, you know. You know, her—not an arrow going to the other way. So, you know, when I got the chance to talk to her, I mean, I was just glad. 'Cause, I mean, I saw her work and I, and I was— Next time I saw it, second time I saw it was at a workshop, and I asked her about "How do you get that?" And she told me about this developer and I go, "I got a scholarship to come to this workshop that's, like, nine hundred dollars, and you told me one thing that changed everything for me." It was this developer that I was not using—

CM: Yeah.

LA: And how to use it, you know. And, you know, and . . . [*laughs*] It's kind of funny, 'cause that's, you know, it changed how I started to print.

CM: Yeah.

LA: 'Cause I was more contrast-y and paper was more contrast-y early on, when I first started doing portraits. A lot of the Latino artists, they're—they're very like [the photos of] the abandoned buildings, 'cause the paper was very rich in silver at the time. And then at a certain point silver was expensive and the paper was expensive, so they kind of— And then, when they came out of this depression of the silver being so expensive, then they changed some of the paper. And I—took me a while to like it. And then it worked, but it was a different tone. It's like some of the pictures from the beginning, from the early '70s, '80s. I cannot ever repeat them from the ones I have printed, because the paper says different. It has so much silver in it. It was so contrasty.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then, over the years—

CM: So rich.

LA: Paper changed, you know. And different papers changed, and I would like this one over that one 'cause that one's too warm, this is a little bit contrast-y, but not majorly contrast-y. So it was, like, paper changes and, you know, so, it changed a lot.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So.

CM: Now, when you saw your untitled—your Nature series. You get back from New Mexico, and then you print everything out. You print everything out. What did you think, when you saw those pictures for the first time?

LA: Well, first I—I didn't know. I felt the same way when I was sitting there naked, and . . . I was surprised with myself, to be honest.

CM: Really? Why?

LA: 'Cause it's out of my boundary. I mean, I was out of my safety net, you know, by being inside, you know. And see, I said to Michelle in England that I wanted to do nudes out in nature. And I just wanted to do what Judy was doing all along, you know. I mean my body's not like hers at all, but I wanted to see what it would be like to—it was a challenge for me to see about putting my body out there in nature. And so then, when I got there and I said I had the idea, she said, "You only have two weeks, you know, and you've got to go back in a week, so let's start doing it," you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so, "Fine." So we started doing it. And then the last shot I took with her on that week was, we went down a dirt road and Delilah would say, you know, "Sometimes it's not so safe to go down a dirt road that has no markings on it, because there are a lot of people who have ranches and farms. And lot of people grow pot, and they don't want to see you coming down the dirt road."

CM: Yeah.

LA: So we had to make sure, you know, it doesn't say, "Don't trespass," you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So we were going down this one—one night we were seeing "Don't trespass." And I wanted to go down that one, and she explained that to me. "We don't do that."

CM: Yeah.

LA: [*laughs*] And so we went down this dirt road, and then all of a sudden we found a lot of cows, so we turned around and came back. And I go, "Why don't you stop here?" And then there's the tree, and so I'm—and there's a log before the tree. And I'm sitting there. We just took some pictures. And my back is to the camera and my hands are up like this, and there's this tree. And I'm saying—I was singing some stupid song in my head. And then she goes— And then this guy's coming down the dirt road and we could see— The dirt road is like a little bit like this, you know. And so every time we went down—

CM: Like, undulating.

LA: Yeah, so we could see the dust. And she goes, "Laura, someone's coming." And I'm over here, and then—and there's this really rough ground, because it has all these stickers from cactus and, and then [*indistinct*] over here at the road. And I'm saying, "Throw me my clothes! Throw me my clothes!" You know? [*laughs*] The guy stops. She turns around and talks to him. I jumped over the—I mean not really jumped over, but I moved myself to the other side of the log and got my clothes and put them on. And then he, you know, says, "See you later," you know. And so she—he came up. I go, "What did he say?" [She] goes, "He just wanted to know what us girls are doing." And he was just smiling. And Delilah goes, "You should have seen the smile on that dog's face. The two of them had a big smile watching you," you know. And I'm going, "Oh, great." And he goes—and she goes, "He can't wait to get home to tell his wife what he saw today." [*laughter*] I go, "Thank you for telling me that." [*laughs*] That was the only—and then, I forget. "This is the end. We've done it. We don't need to do anymore because someone came upon me." And that was in my head, that I was going to stop if anybody came across us, you know. So. It was just sort of something I had to jump into. But I said I was going to do and so I—

CM: You just jumped into the pool with two feet, it sounds like.

LA: Pretty much, yeah.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Like, you kind of had this idea, and you went after it.

LA: I mean I was, like—and Delilah pointed out that I was there for a certain amount time. [*to dog*] Diego, shut up! Diego, come here, baby. [*laughs*] Yes, baby.

CM: It's that hour. It's the witching hour.

LA: It's "Everyone's going for a walk except me." And I usually take him for a ride in my car. And he'll stick his head out. That's my walks with him. [*laughs*]

CM: How did you meet Delilah?

LA: She was—she answered a thing that I was doing at the Photo Center for a show that I was curating. And then we talked on the phone. And then four years later we met in Houston for a Fotofest. And she was doing installation, and I was doing installation. So we were there early, and a couple of other people there early who had installation pieces. So we started. I go, "Oh, Delilah Montoya, you were in my—" She goes, "I was in one of your shows you did at the Photo Center." I go, "What? You were?" And I remember talking to her daughter on the phone, because every time I called, Delilah wasn't there. So her daughter was—and her fourteen-year, nineteen-year-old daughter was—either one of those years—she was telling me what her mom couldn't tell me, and so. I talked to her daughter more than I talked to her. And then, so we finally were in a show together, and we were happened to be there. So we just started talking. And she said, "Anytime you want come to New Mexico and if I'm not teaching somewhere else and I'm home, I'll take you all over the place."

CM: Nice.

LA: And so it, you know, that happened. My deadline—I spent my money to pay my bills, and Gilbert died, and I had a deadline to send work over into England by November, and this was August. And so it's like, it's now or never. And then I, you know, I used Judy Dater as my ideal, because I wanted to follow—I mean, my body compared to her body out in nature is this whole different thing. So no one's going to say I'm really copying her. And, you know, so it's just like, you know. And so that's basically how it started. And then the other—then I got a residency at Artpace in San Antonio, and I was there for two months. And I went around talking to people. And I had shown once before at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center [in San Antonio], and so I went to those women and asked them if they would pose nude for me. And they said, "Well, I don't think so."

CM: That was the Motion series?

LA: Stillness [series]. Wait, wait . . . Stillness, then Motion.

CM: Stillness, then Motion. And those came out of Texas?

LA: Texas and New Mexico.

CM: Okay, so Stillness also came out of New Mexico?

LA: Uh . . . No, Stillness was just Texas.

CM: Okay.

LA: And . . . the next body of work was . . .

CM: Motion.

LA: Motion. And it was a little bit in New Mexico and a little bit of Texas. San Antonio.

CM: Okay. And that was from 1999. I saw that—I saw that in one of your—

LA: Okay, 'cause I don't really remember each year.

CM: And the Stillness pictures? What pictures were those?

LA: The Stillness pictures? [*laughs*]

CM: Were those pictures of you and those sort of, like, scrubby Texas landscapes?

LA: With big boulders. And I was in a—

CM: With big boulders.
LA: A dead riverbed.
CM: In a dead riverbed. Okay, I know which ones you're talking about.
LA: Okay, so.
CM: I'm just trying to remember which series is under which title. And then the Motion ones are when you posed with other women or other women posed for you?
LA: No, some of the San Antonio stuff is with other women but there was [*indistinct*]. Stillness was when I was on the grant.
CM: On the ranch?
LA: No, on the grant.
CM: On the grant.
LA: When I was there for the grant that Artpace brought me out there for.
CM: Okay. And then—
LA: You know, like I said, I went around asking people to pose for me, and everyone said no, but one person said yes. And there was two people that said yes, and they went out with me, so. One of them I would have photograph with me was Jan, and then the other one was Gloria, who would photogra—I would have a couple pictures taken with her. But the majority of them was me by myself.
CM: Okay.
LA: And, so.
CM: So the majority of the Motion pictures, you're by yourself?
LA: No, Stillness.
CM: Stillness. Okay.
LA: Because Stillness is what I did, and then got Artpace. And there's, like . . . Let me just go get the little thing, and I could show you.
CM: Okay, that'd be, probably be a good idea. [*pause*] Okay, so what are we looking at now?
LA: This is the publication from Artpace. And they did—each artist got their own little thing about what they did and why they did it.
CM: Okay.
LA: And so this is in Texas on a dead riverbed. And that's—she was assistant—

[*break in audio*]

CM: Okay, we're looking at the publication that was produced by Artpace?
LA: Yeah. And so they tell you a little story about the artist and what they were doing.
CM: Oh, cool.
LA: And the last paragraph in the thing was some bullshit stuff that this writer from New York had to put in.
CM: Really?
LA: And it had nothing to do with my body of work, and I was—
CM: What was the bullshit they put in?
LA: Something about the neighborhood in the '40s was a prostitution neighborhood by Artpace. And it had nothing to do with anything I was doing. But this woman wanted to have—I think she had—from Linda. Her thing was to tie every—why the person was doing the artwork in San Antonio. And this person came. Her name was—what was her name . . . It's in here somewhere . . . Laura Cunningham, who's a writer in New York and big shit person. And she was supposed to interview me the day we had a lecture of the three artists was going to have—you know, was having a lecture. And so she didn't talk—she gave me five minutes, and she talked about herself for three of those minutes. About the project she just got done doing, why she's in San Antonio, and da da da. And then she didn't really ask me anything. And then when the—when we were on the panel, there was Mona something. She's an English woman, but she has, her family's from the Middle East. And—

CM: Mona Hatoum?

LA: Yeah, yeah. She's a big person.

CM: Yeah.

LA: She had a big, thick catalog when she was there.

CM: Yeah.

LA: She was really sweet. And so . . . We—she was one of the artists. And then there was an artist from Austin, 'cause they would usually have—pick an artist from Texas, mostly south Texas, an international artist, and another artist from within the United States. So I was the United States artist. [The artist from Texas was Regina Vater—ed.]

CM: This is for Artpace?

LA: Artpace, yes. So they would have a two-month residency. And they give you—you have an apartment for yourself, and you have a studio to work in. And that studio, at the end of the two months, is going to be your opening—where your art is going to be for the opening. So we each had our own studio and gallery or—we had the space to work in all these places, you know. And—

CM: Yeah. And so it was the Stillness photos that you showed. It was these photos of you with other women in the dry—with the boulders?

LA: Yeah, like with Jen here.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And then this is out in the desert. And that was Susan, but we don't say her last name.

CM: Okay.

LA: It's not supposed—no one supposed to know who these are, but, um . . .

CM: They're supposed to be kind of anonymous players?

LA: Yeah, but everyone in South Texas knew who Jen was. [*laughs*] I mean, with Esperanza, and with, you know, knew her. And so. And there was divi—there was somewhat of an issue between Esperanza and Artpace because it was more elitist, as they saw it, you know. Which it was. But I was very grateful for that time, and I got eleven thousand dollars for the whole two months to—

CM: Nice.

LA: Create work and enough money to cover my bills at home, so.

CM: Nice.

LA: It was really nice.

CM: That's great.

LA: I never had anybody that nice to me since. [*laughs*] But it was a great—it was a very good experience.

CM: Wow.

LA: And then, so I would go around, and I was talking to women at the Esperanza, and they said no, and they said no, and they said no. But, um, and this is Gloria, and Gloria and Jen were the only two that agreed to help me out, you know. And then—then, so at the opening, everyone came around and said, "Well, if you ever come back, I'll pose for you." And so I came back in September . . . I think, or October. I came back that follow—that same year. And I said, "You asked—said, 'If I ever come back . . .'" And so then—

CM: You're like, "I'm here!"

LA: "I'm here." So that's when Stillness . . . Nature Self-Portraits, Stillness, and then Motion. And that's when I got other women to pose with me.

CM: Okay.

LA: So, at, you know, it's like I only had Jen and Gloria to help me. And either Jen would photograph, photograph the picture for me, or . . . I had a twenty-one-year old girl with me. I don't remember her name at all.

CM: Okay.

LA: She was just sweet as can be and twenty-one years old. And she goes, "Oh, you gotta look at all the butterflies over here." And I'm thinking, "My God, look at the branches over there."

CM: [*laughs*]

LA: You know, she's twenty-one years old. "Okay, look at the butterflies, dear," you know. There was these branches that in—were going like that. Like they—

CM: Like, gnarled?

LA: They were almost dancing, like—

CM: Wow.

LA: And I did some pictures around that, you know.

CM: Oh.

LA: So I loved it, 'cause I used me, Jen, and another person who I—she was probably [*indistinct*] don't remember her name.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But history is hell. So we just used all three bodies, sort of moving with the branches that were there, and kind of like, a little bit when, like, a dance kind of, you know, of me and Jen and our motions. So.

CM: Yeah. Now, all of these series were in the wake of your father's death, right? Like after your father's death?

LA: Stillness was . . .

CM: That was the most immediate one, no?

LA: Stillness wasn't yet there. My dad died after I got back—wait, no . . . Yeah, my dad had just died, and I went there to do that residency, and that was Stillness.

CM: Do you remember what year your dad died? Was it in '99 or . . .

LA: I don't know. Whatever year that was. I mean he had died before I went there. Wait . . . Did he die before I went there or no? See I'm kind of confused right now. 'Cause, let me see. When I came back he was dead. Okay, so my dad died first. He died in June, and Bea died in November. And I went that following year to Artpace, because my residency was from March to the end of May.

CM: Okay.

LA: So, yeah. Diego! Sorry. Diego, Diego. Doggie biscuits, Diego. Oh, he don't care. He just barks at anyone that walks in front [*indistinct*] in front of my house. [*laughs*]

CM: It's like, "Don't tease me like this."

LA: Particularly dogs, he gets upset. But Delilah took him for a walk to Starbucks one day when she was staying over, and he ran away from her. He pulled himself out of his leash.

CM: Really?

LA: Then another friend was staying over, and she was going to the Starbucks, and she decided to take Diego for a walk. And he got out of his harness then. And, you know, so it's like he sees a group of men, he's frightened as hell.

CM: Really?

LA: Because we think he got abused by men. He acts that way around men. Then when he sees that you're okay, then he—as the man goes, 'cause I have more male friends than females than I have in my life. So, yeah. Anyway.

CM: Now, so. And all of this was—so this was in the wake of your father's death and Bea's death?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: And you cared for your father, right?

LA: Mm-hmm. Me and my father didn't get along well. I mean, I was everything to him until I hit kindergarten, and then he wasn't everything for me, and . . . [*laughs*] And until I was about nine years old, me and my dad did lot of things together. My mom sort of, kind of pushed me on him, so that if he had me doing on a Saturday, he wouldn't drink as much, 'cause he had me with him.

CM: Mmm.

LA: So we would go to the—we would go to buy metal and, you know, get some more gas for his routing thing. And we would go to the flea market every other week and check out things. And I would always come out with one of those punching balls [*laughs*] and a pickle in a bag. [*laughs*] You know, it's mainly lots of people selling tools to each other.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And all that stuff. So I found it boring, but I liked the pickles. [*laughs*]

CM: But by the time he was dying, how was your relationship?

LA: It wasn't really anything between us. I mean, when I turned eleven he sort of dismissed me to the motherland, and the motherland didn't want to teach me how to cook or sew. [*laughs*]

CM: So you were kind of lost in between them?

LA: I was in between, yeah. 'Cause see—and then years later, I was talking to my Aunt Mary about it, and she goes, "You know, I'm noticing with the other kids, the younger ones, and I think it's that he doesn't know how to be around girls when they're starting to develop. And I think he doesn't want to do anything that might come across as not appropriate." And she goes, "You know, your dad really never got fathering because our dad died when he was fourteen." And he—somewhat for the most part was, was he raised himself as a man because he felt that he was the oldest son and, you know. So he went into the Army and sent all his money back home to his two sisters to split it between them to take care of the other kids and stuff like that. So, she goes, "He went from being a little boy to working, to helping out Uncle Johnny, and then he went into the Army. And then he got out of the Army, and he met your mom and married her, and he really didn't have much of people telling him how to be," you know. And he just took responsibility by sending all his money home to his sisters to take care of the rest of the family. So he always had issues, because younger brother, 'cause he never did that. And so there was issues always between the two of them.

CM: And so you get to this point where now he's dying. You don't have a relationship with him to speak of.

LA: Not really. But the last six months—well, maybe in the last four months of his life, something happened that he had, like um, went into a seizure. So I called the paramedics, and they came over and they took him to the hospital. And then like, it took—his blood sugar was off, and they couldn't get it normal for a period of time. So it took them like three of four days for them to figure out how to get it even again. And then he stayed another week before he came home. And so, after that happened—okay, two weeks before my dad—this thing happened. My dad was in the hospital. Oh maybe a month before this happened. And my Aunt Connie was celebrating [her] seventy-fifth birthday, and her grandkids came from all over the states, you know. And so, since my dad was in the hospital, she told the grandkids, "Let's go see Uncle Paul." And so I was in the bedroom—I mean the room with him. And the doctor comes in and the nurse, and my dad goes, "This is my sister from San Diego and my grandniece from Texas, and my other grandniece from South Carolina, and the other one's from North Carolina, and da da da." And then he stopped at me. And then the nurse was standing next to me, and she goes, "So who are you?" I go, "I'm nobody. I'm just his daughter." And my cousin from the—my cousins, across from me, started laughing, because they knew—I mean, they understood. I mean, they didn't approve of it, but they knew how my dad treated me.

CM: Oh.

LA: Like I wasn't—since I wasn't a son, I didn't really matter to him at that point in my life. From the age of eleven, he sent me off to the motherland. Mom was supposed to teach me how to cook and sew, and she didn't do either very well, and she didn't teach me how to do it. And so, you know. And so, like I said, my aunt just kind of figured it out. She goes, "He just didn't know how to behave around—he didn't want anything to come across that he was not protective of a girl, you know, when they started to develop, you know." So he—she goes, "I think that's what he did, because I saw him with all your little cousins. And he kind of, when they got around ten or eleven, he sort of like, you know, kind of pushed them away. And then when they were in high school, he sort of came back—they came back into his life. And he would dance with them at parties and stuff." He loved to dance with people, you know. But for me, I just didn't want anything to do with him at that time. So, you know.

CM: And then you end up taking care of him while he's dying.

LA: I took care of him. And he looked at me in a sense that, "Why are the hell you doing this?" And actually, he asked me that the day before he died. And I said to him, I go, "You know, Dad . . ." Because . . . so when I

saved him, he had told me that, um, "Thank you for saving me. I've been close to death twice. When I was in the war, when I got shot." And he goes, you know. Then all of sudden, he started telling the custodians, the nurses, that I was his daughter. For the last month of his life, he introduced me to everybody as his daughter. But before that he didn't say anything about me to people.

CM: Wow.

LA: So. So then he started, you know—saw the light, I suppose, and saw that we better make peace between us. And so the night before he died I go, "You know, I've done all this so that I can make peace with you before you go and not have to spend ten years in therapy over you." [*laughs*] And I go, "You know, you want always . . ." And I go, "Daddy . . ." He couldn't understand why I was taking care of him, and I told him, basically, "Because I don't want to live with the guilt of not doing for you what you did for me." I go, "Anyhow, you know, we didn't get along from a certain point on because I was too much wrong for you, as a girl." And Johnny was too wrong as a boy for him, you know. And, "I was too much like you," and he didn't like that. "And I am strong and pigheaded as you." So I go, "But the one thing that I always knew is that you cared about me. I can't really say you loved me, but you always made sure that I was safe. When I lived in Long Beach, you made sure my car was working. If anything was wrong [he'd say], 'Let me know, I'll get it fixed.'" Because he couldn't fix things later. 'Cause when I was younger, he used to always fix people's cars and stuff like that. But then he got arthritis so bad he couldn't do that. But I go, "You would make sure my tires were good, you'd make sure—" [*indistinct*] Sometimes he would even actually made me do the work on the car, 'cause he would just tell me what to do. And I just hated oil. I don't like oil or paint—

CM: Really?

LA: On my hands. Yeah. So. But so he would force me into doing things I didn't want to do. But, you know, 'cause his comment was, "My daughter's not going to be helpless." [*laughs*] "Why can't I be helpless? I want to be helpless. [*laughs*] I want someone, someone to change my tire for me. I don't care if it's a man or woman. I just don't want to do it." [*laughs*] "You're just lazy. That's not the way to think about it."

CM: Hilarious.

LA: "So my daughter's not going to be helpless, and—"

CM: So you kind of came to terms with him—

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Before he passed away.

LA: Yeah, so that night—the night before he passed away, he asked me why I was doing it. I go, "Because, you know, Daddy, no matter what, you always made sure that I was safe. We had our issues with each other. I was not perfect. I wasn't the daughter you wanted, and you're not the father I wanted, but you cared about me. You made sure that I was always safe, and so I know you love me in your way. And I hope you know that I love you in my way, and that's why I'm doing—spending this time with you to take care of you." At the beginning of him getting really sick, I would take him to the—to chemo, and then come home. And I would sleep for about fifteen hours, 'cause I slept a lot out of my depression—was sleeping for a long time. I would sleep, you know, ten to fifteen hours so I didn't have to deal with my life. And so, once I got home from taking him to the doctor or the hospital, I would take a nap. He would be sleeping, I was sleeping. And then, I was always depressed. I didn't know what words to use to [describe] it and, you know, until I got older.

CM: When did you start having issues with depression?

LA: I remember at ten years old.

CM: And feeling . . .

LA: Um . . . I didn't know what the word was, but it was suicide, you know. I had these suicidal thoughts since I was ten years old.

CM: Wow.

LA: I wanted—I photographed abandoned buildings so that something might happen to me. So, you know. I mean, I didn't realize it at the time, but I realized it a little bit when I got stopped doing the abandoned

buildings. I was trying to get myself hurt by doing stupid things so that . . . I mean, 'cause I really couldn't kill myself. But I wanted to die all the time. I was depressed. I was suicidal. But I knew—I think I always knew that I couldn't do that act. I was always waiting to be in the bank when someone wanted to hold up and needed someone as a hostage. And I wanted to be there because I wanted to kill myself. I told my therapist that, and she said [*indistinct*]. I go, "I've been dreaming about it 'cause I want to volunteer, because I don't really want to be alive, but I don't have the guts to actually take my life."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "So if I could save someone else's life, I would like to be there."

CM: Yeah, "I could go down, but in a blaze of glory." [*laughter*]

LA: I save someone else's life, so, by them using mine. So.

CM: Do you still feel that way a lot?

LA: No. No.

CM: No?

LA: But it's taken a long time not to feel that way.

CM: Really?

LA: Mm-hmm. It took a long time just to say that out loud and that I was depressed, because I didn't know the word for depression. My mom would always say and my Aunt Mary would say to me, "You're just moody, Laura. Stop being so moody." You know, so. I realized in therapy that moody was depression. [*laughter*]

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know. And I was always to myself, anyhow, because it just was, you know. And it drove my mom crazy because she was so social. And I was too much like—she would yell at me, "You're too much like your father." I didn't argue with her, so I don't know why she's getting upset with me. She knows what the problem is. [*laughter*] I don't need her to yell at me every other weekend over that topic.

CM: Do you think the depression in any way has formed your work? I mean, do you see any of that in your work? Or has the work been made in periods in which you weren't depressed?

LA: No, actually, [*indistinct*] the work when I was kind of depressed or very depressed. It brought me out of my depression.

CM: Really?

LA: Have you seen my video piece that I did on Joshua Tree?

CM: Yes!

LA: Okay, that's what I'm talking—what I was talking about, that is a lot about the artwork.

CM: Yes.

LA: That when I went out into nature, a lot of it was to kind of find some peace. When I first—the Nature Self-Portrait series was when Gilbert died, and I was trying to commit to what I said I was going to do. But it was like taking the train, listening to my music, looking out the window for fifteen hours, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: It was very peaceful.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I didn't have to talk to anybody, or I did talk to someone, or, you know. So I liked the train. And then I got there, and Delilah and me, for about two days, didn't do anything. And she finally said, "You have a deadline."

CM: So you have a friend that kicked you in the butt, you'd say.

LA: Pretty much, yeah, yeah, yeah. She was great about that. And then, so . . . So yeah.

CM: So the work was a way to kind of work through it?

LA: Well . . .

CM: Through the mental state.

LA: When I did the Nature Self-Portrait, I, at the time, I felt I—all of a sudden I kept on thinking of my grandmother and her saying that she loved to be—she was always close to nature when—she was always closest

to God when she was in nature. And like, when she would fish, and stuff like that. And all of a sudden I'm thinking about her all that time I was out there in nature. And I was thinking about what she would always say about feeling close to God out in nature. And there was one picture of the Nature Self-Portraits that I wasn't going to use, but I showed it to one of my therapists. I mean my therapist would be on vacation, and another therapist would take me. 'Cause there was Dylan, and then there was Juliana, who would take me when Lori was on vacation, 'cause Lori didn't want me not to be talking to someone.

CM: Yeah.

LA: 'Cause I saw Lori for about eleven years, you know.

CM: Really? Where was this?

LA: At the Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center. And originally I saw someone else before her. Then I started seeing her, but they took me—they divided—they split the mental health into mental health and addiction recovery mental health. So Lori was in that place. And she kept me—she told me at one point, she goes, "You know"—and it's more than three years—she goes, "You've been here longer than you should be, but I keep—I want to keep working with you. I really want to work with you," and stuff. And she was my foundation and taught me a lot of things. And so she goes, "You know, we don't usually take a client more than thirty-two months, and you've been here, now, ten years." [*laughter*] And then when she would be gone, like I said, these other two would take over, and, you know. So when I was seeing Julie . . . Julianne, Julianne? Whatever, Julie. I showed her a couple of pictures. I go, "You know, I've been looking at this one picture," 'cause I made 8 by 10s of all the pictures, then I started making the 16 by 20s. But then there was this one that I kept on looking at, and I go, "I don't know." And it was actually . . . When I went there was the beginning of me taking antidepressants. And so there was this high on this antidepressant I had. It was like a high that I couldn't believe. I couldn't believe life was good.

CM: Really?

LA: I couldn't believe I was so unhappy. I couldn't believe it. It didn't last long. And then it came down— [*dog barks*]

CM: Diego.

LA: Diego! [*pause*] Quiet!

CM: We're going to bribe you with dog treats.

LA: We always—I always do. He knows it, too. He'll be in an argument, and I would say from the kitchen, "Doggie biscuits, Diego!" And he comes running. Trent always laughs at that because, like, he can hear that word. Nothing else he could hear. Tell him to be quiet, he doesn't hear that. [Trent is Aguilar's roommate—ed.]

CM: Exactly.

LA: You say "doggie biscuits," he comes a-running. So what—

CM: You were on the antidepressants and—

LA: So it was the first time I was on an antidepressant. And, uh, because I refused to take medicine for years. I mean the first therapist I ever had told me—every therapist— And a lot of the therapists I had were people in teaching situations, where it would end after six months, so then you got someone new.

CM: Somebody new. You had to start over, yeah.

LA: You had to start over, yeah. So. And then, when I saw this woman Julia for about three years, and then I started seeing Lori 'cause Julia left the center. And I saw Lori for about thirteen years, maybe, or ten. There was times when I took maybe six months off, a couple of times, you know. And then we got to a place where it was just going around in circles and I had nothing new to say, but I felt safe with her and I didn't want her to let go of me, so. And then I didn't see anybody for five years. And then changed my medicine and . . . I had seen the counselor. There was a nurse practitioner at the center that has—you know, she's a nurse practitioner. She's psychology or whatever, so she could give drugs out. And she was—they finally got someone to be—

CM: A psychiatrist.

LA: Psychiatrist. And she had the, you know, had a doctor [that] backs her up because she's a nurse practitioner. Oversees her. And so she asked me about what I was taking, and I told her. And then she goes, "This, I think . . ." And after I talked to her for about an hour, she goes, "I think there's this other pill that I think would be good for you to take, but you need to talk to your therapist—your doctor—at the mental health center. And so she goes, "Do you want me to call and suggest it to her?" I go, "Yeah," so. And then she calls me back like a week later, and she goes, "I talked to your doctor. She's not very happy about it, that I suggested this to her, so I want you to know ahead of time that you might be—she might be a little upset with you for talking to me."

And so then I went in and I saw her the next month and came for my refill of my medicine. And she said, "So, I hear you're suicidal." I go, "I've been telling you for three months that I am, and you haven't listened to me, and . . ." And she goes, "Well, I told you, I won't try anything new until you change—until you get your tests about your diabetes." Because she had to do a blood test every six months, and in that blood test they tell you that your sugar's off, or whatever. And I just ignored it. And then she looks at me and she goes, "Why are you not dealing with this?" I go, "Because my father is a diabetic and couple of his sisters have died from diabetes and it takes a lot of work, and I have no desire to be alive. So why should I take the medicine?" And she leaned back and she goes, she goes, "Okay. I'll try this medicine with," you know. 'Cause I went to this woman. She said—she goes, "You know, the brain has—the depression is in three parts of the brain." And the medicine I was taking was this part of the brain. "Maybe you should take this side, you know, of the," you know. "And you're a creative person, and it's more in the creative side of your brain. But depression's in those three parts of the brain that depression goes to. And, you know, some are more serious than other ones." So she goes, "I think this would be a good med." So then, when the—I said that to the doctor, she leaned back when I said that you know, "that I've been suicidal. You don't listen to a word I say. And I know it takes a lot of work to be—to deal with diabetes. And I don't want to do that work." And so then she changed my medicine. And I've been on that medicine ever since and been—it keeps me more balanced.

CM: Really?

LA: I've gone into, still, depressions with it, but not enough to feel suicidal.

CM: Okay.

LA: I mean I've gone—I've had my depressions, and I will have them in the end, but I, you know. With Lori, she helped, she . . . she stayed with me for eleven years. I kept on telling—so then when she finally said, "I have to let you go." I go, "I told you so." [*laughter*] Eleven years later she—you know, fifteen years later, twelve years later. I don't know. And she just started laughing. "Okay, Laura, I know you're okay to be on your own." 'Cause, I mean, she saw me way longer than she should have.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And, so. But, so when I was—Lori was on vacation, so I was talking to Julia and I said, "I don't know. I keep on looking at this, and I think . . ." And I showed her the other pictures that I did. They were all 8 by 10s, but they're already set from when— But I keep on coming back to this one. And she goes, and she goes, "Well, you . . ." To me, what I saw was that there was something in it. I couldn't figure out what word to use to it. That there was a peace in me that I haven't felt that I have in me. And it was the medicine. I mean it changed my life. Was the moment that it came to a big drop. I mean, 'cause it then becomes routine, that medicine in your body, you know. And then about a year later, we changed to another medicine, then another medicine. And then I've been on the medicine I am now for at least ten years. So.

CM: But you feel that that one photo almost marked this moment?

LA: Well, it—I felt, I felt happy at that moment. I felt content. When I look at it I felt content.

CM: And you feel you can see that in the photo?

LA: Uh-huh.

CM: What photo is that?

LA: It's number ten in the Nature Self-Portrait.

CM: Number ten in the Nature Self-Portrait.

LA: I think it's ten. I'm pretty sure it's ten.

CM: Okay.

LA: But I'm sitting there, and my face is sort of to the side. And I'm on a big rock, and I'm at top of the rock, and I'm nude, and I'm just sitting there. [This is *Nature Self-Portrait #11*—ed.]

CM: Oh, I know which one you're talking about.

LA: And I look very content. And I said that to her, and she goes, "No, you look very an-an-ange—

CM: Androgynous?

LA: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Like an angel, but it's an—

CM: Angelic?

LA: Yeah, that's the word.

CM: Angelic.

LA: And then I go, "That's a nice word to use. I don't see myself as that, but it's a nice word to use." And I started sitting with it and sitting with it. And so I decided—okay, I had a deadline. I had a couple weeks to decide, and I made that part of the series. And—

CM: Do you, do you look back on these photos with a sense of pride at what you've been able to achieve?

LA: Sometimes. Other times it's just, it's just work that I—that, uh . . . Not that I—I don't dismiss my work. It's just that all my work is around some type of depression period in my life, you know.

CM: So can it be difficult for you to look at it sometimes?

LA: Usually when it's an opening. And it's new work and other people see it and they have their reactions to it. Like I said, when that woman said, "She's got big balls. Brass balls." And I'm like, "I never wanted to be a man, and I don't really care about the idea of thinking that that's what I want. I'm—and she's a feminist and how dare she use that word to me." [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah.

LA: But it, you know—

CM: How do you want to be seen?

LA: I don't know. I mean, I just don't want to be seen as, you know, a hard-ass woman.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, and—

CM: Because I see that a lot of the articles write about the Chicana, lesbian, heavy.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Like how do—

LA: Yeah.

CM: You feel about those characterizations?

LA: Well, I can say, "Yes, that's all parts of me," but it's not who I am. But, you know, because of all those parts of me, I get in these shows that other people—when I'm like in [*indistinct*].

CM: But you also get into these shows because your photography is good.

LA: No, yeah, that too. But, *but* . . . I don't know when it was, early '90s or late '80s—I think it was early '90s—in LA there was lot of shows around gay identity and all this stuff at different universities around town. And there was always Cathy Opie. Do you know her work?

CM: Of course.

LA: And myself, and then there's all these other people in between. Cathy Opie is over here, as the radical woman who's doing transvestites and all that stuff.

CM: And S & M.

LA: S & M. And then I'm over here, with the lesbian, Latina Lesbians series, and in between are everyone else. And Cathy, at one of the shows we were at, we were at both ends, and she goes, "Hi Laura." And I said, "Hi, Cathy." And we talked about the fact that were always on the end.

CM: You're like the bookends?

LA: Yes, you know. And we don't get—no one really knows where we fit in with everybody else. You know. So.

CM: I mean do you, would you prefer—

LA: And Cathy—

CM: Would you prefer that your work be analyzed in the context of other photography, not necessarily that? I mean, you talk about your influences, when I think about like Edward Weston and Judy Dater and—

LA: Yeah.

CM: You're not necessarily referring to the . . .

LA: No, I'm not.

CM: Queer culture stuff.

LA: Yeah, I'm referring to photographers. You know, the queer stuff is something that is more, um . . . But, like I said, Cathy did S & M and people trying to change themselves, transvestites. And I met her, and she's a really nice person. But I had a hard time because I had a friend who was into S & M, and I photographed her, and I had issues with that. She—I mean, when I—she asked me to do a scene with her and her girlfriend in an abandoned building. She was tied up and had a ball in her mouth, and her girlfriend was ripping it, and I just couldn't deal with it. I freaked out in the middle of the shoot.

CM: Really?

LA: And said, "I can't do this." And they—she got kind of mad at me 'cause I'm a wimp and all that stuff. And, but I go, "Here's the film. You get it developed. You do whatever you want with it. I'm just very uncomfortable, because I see you as my friend and I think you're getting hurt." She goes, "It's not hurt. It's play."

CM: Yeah.

LA: I go, "I understand how you see it."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "I can't help that I don't feel that way."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "I feel that you're being hurt. And you're my friend and I care about you, so I—it's bothering me too much, so I can't be here."

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so, you know. So I gave her the film, and she got it developed and stuff, and she liked the pictures. And so um . . . So but it—seeing Cathy, she was doing the S & M that she's into on her body, using it as a format. And I'm not into that, 'cause when [*indistinct*] was in it. I'm sorry, I knew a little bit more about that community, you know. And then, so, it was really different. One time when I went to this—the first bar she took me to was the S & M bar, and it was—it was lesbian night there, with the gay men. But, you know. And people—I remember talking to this one woman. She was walking her girlfriend with a chain around her neck. And she goes, "I don't usually like to come to these because I might run into some of my patients." I go, "What do you do?" She goes, "I'm a therapist." So when I went back to therapy that week, I asked Lori. She goes, "No, I don't go to those places." I go, "Good." [*laughs*] 'Cause I talked about this woman who was like walking her girlfriend around with a leash and talking about how she doesn't like to be with people who are not into the scene.

CM: So you don't necessarily see your photos in the context of those types of pictures.

LA: No.

CM: At all.

LA: No. But I found it, um . . .

CM: But other people do?

LA: Yeah. Kind of.

CM: Kind of.

LA: I mean, when I photographed her, they kind of thought I was more into S&M and it's not—I'm not, but she was my friend.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And that was her thing. And it was just her showing her stuff off, that's behind her in her little dungeon. So it's really [*indistinct*].

CM: Yeah.

LA: But when it was actually her and her partner doing it, and she was— [*dog barks*] Diego! Sorry! It's just that I couldn't see . . . I thought—I mean, I knew more about her, but I didn't—she would share this side of her.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But I couldn't take it as it's being play.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, because—

CM: You didn't feel it that way viscerally?

LA: Um, yeah. It was hard to say—go along with it, you know. And see, Devon was—her mother was a prostitute and her younger brother was forced to see the guys with her Mom. And she left when she was fourteen. She had a girlfriend that was twenty-one, and she was with her until, you know, she was twenty-one. And she was in this relationship—that relationship. But she had a very abusive life. And her partner is deaf in one ear. She's a really good artist, and um . . . But she was into S & M. They were both into S & M. That's how they met each other. But her girlfriend—I can't think of her name right now—she was deaf in one ear because her father beat the shit out of her as a kid. And so, it's like she can't hear out of that ear because the dad—her dad beat her.

CM: Wow.

LA: You know. And so she lost her hearing. And I couldn't understand how this "play," as they referred to it, was fun.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because there *is* some pain to it.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I don't understand. But then, I kind of like little fantasize about the fun of the hitting and stuff.

CM: Yeah.

LA: But I go, "When someone hits me, I want them to hit me with a feather."

CM: Yeah. [*laughs*]

LA: I—no belt. I want a feather.

CM: No belt. No—

LA: I want it to be tickled.

CM: No pallets or whatever.

LA: [*laughs*] And then she would lie to me and like, you know, "That's not it at all." I go, "I know." But, um. So. There was this—because we were friends, it bothered me. I didn't know her partner really that well. I would see her occasionally. But I, you know, I was more friends with, um . . . Deborah . . . What's her name first? I forgot what the last name was. I mean, she changed her name during the time I knew her. For about five years she changed it three times.

CM: Wow.

LA: Devon was the last name. I remember that.

CM: Devon.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Now, how did you meet Susanne Vielmetter? Because I just want to make sure I get this episode. I'm almost done, actually.

LA: There's a whole bunch that I didn't show you.

CM: Oh, there's still a whole bunch we haven't seen?

LA: Oh, there's a whole lot of bunch.

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: I mean I have a lot of portraits of the artists that I met in the community—

CM: Yes.
LA: Before I got to some point.
CM: Yes.
LA: And so I have a lot of their portraits.
CM: Well, what we can do is, let's um . . . Let's talk about Susanne Vielmetter.
LA: Okay.
CM: And then maybe we can—because it's starting to get dark.
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: And I also need to—
LA: Get home?
CM: Get home. So, yeah, let's talk about Susanne, and then maybe we could finish up the other stuff.
LA: Okay. Well—
CM: We'll figure out a time that works.
LA: So I was in, I was—this woman from New York had called me about a show, okay?
CM: Uh-huh.
LA: This has nothing to do with Susanne yet.
CM: Yeah.
LA: And so she called me about she was doing this show in Europe, and she wanted to get information about me, and—
CM: Is this the Venice Biennale?
LA: Yeah. And—but see, I didn't know what it was, and it didn't mean anything to me. And I said, "Oh, that's nice." And she goes, "That's nice? Don't you know . . ." And then I started telling other people—friends that were in the art community in LA—and [they] go, "Laura, that's great!" You know, "It's good for you!" And their eyes would open and their smiles would get big and stuff.
CM: Yeah.
LA: And I still couldn't figure it out, get that *a show*'s gonna change my life, 'cause they said, "It's gonna change your life." It didn't change my life. [*laughs*]
CM: [*laughs*] You're like, "Let's be real."
LA: It changed Daniel's and someone else. Two guys that were men in the—and, anyway. It changed their lives 'cause they're men. And, anyway . . . And so.
CM: Daniel who?
LA: Martinez.
CM: Martinez. Yeah.
LA: Asshole.
CM: Really?
LA: He does all this talk that he's supporting you, and then he talks about himself. At the opening, at the UCLA, of the *Bad Girls West*, he started talking about, you know, "We need more women of color." And I'm standing nearby him, and I looked at him and I go, "You know, Daniel? I'm in this show." 'Cause he was going on that, "There's no women of color in the show." And I'm like, and he's like, doesn't see me, and 'cause he's always about himself.
CM: Oh.
LA: It's about *Daniel*. Daniel's always selling himself. So, you know. I just, like, shook my head and just like, "That's fine." You know.
CM: So this lady's calling you about the Biennale?
LA: And she goes, "There's this show in Europe. It's in Venice." And I go, "Venice, California?" And she goes, "No, Venice, Venice." And I go, "Oh, okay." And she goes, "I need you to send me some samples of your work. Some slides so I could send [them] to the community so they can see what you—how you've been growing as an artist," you know. So I did. And then she calls me back six months later and says, "You're in

the show as—in the Biennale—and it's usually for people—you're in the section that's for newcomers, but because you're a person that's a minority in the United States, I did a lot of selling to them and gave you an extension on the age." Because I was five years over the age that they would have to the Biennale to that version of it. 'Cause it's for newcomers and they end it at thirty and I was thirty-five at the time. And she goes, "There was a couple of other people there, [*indistinct*] and I thought about you being an American, being a minority, and then not having access to education." So she goes, "I fought for a year for them to allow you to be in the show. You and a couple of other people in the show." Because we were all over that age. We were all over thirty. And she goes, "This is going to be a big thing." And I just really didn't get that part about, you know, an age thing, and—but because we're minorities in the United States, she sold it as that we have—don't have—great opportunities. And so everybody—the cutoff they gave her to thirty-five. And so most of us were about thirty-four, thirty-five, you know. And so we were all in that show there from the United States that she curated. And she—

CM: What did you show?

LA: Clothed/Unclothed series.

CM: Hmm.

LA: So, you know, um . . . So I—she called me back. "You're in the show." And I go, "That's nice. I wanted to show in Europe this year. I was thinking about it on New Year's Eve, and my goal was to be in a show in Europe." And she goes, "You don't understand what the show is." I go, "Yeah, you told me it's a nice show. It's in Venice," you know. And my work's going, I'm not. Didn't expect myself to go. And she goes, "This is a major show." Until I started telling my friends in the art community, when I saw them eyes, you know—

CM: Bug out.

LA: Bug out and they're happy for me, I realized that it is something big. But I didn't realize how big it was until I got the catalog six months after the show was down. It's a thick catalog. It *was* a big thing. [*laughs*] [Aguilar's work was shown in the Aperto section of the 1993 Venice Biennale—ed.]

CM: You didn't go to see it?

LA: No, I had no means to get there. And I was doing a residency in Syracuse, and they tried to catch me. But I was in Syracuse for a month, and they got me the last week of Syracuse. And if I had that letter from them a month earlier, I would have been able to use the money from Syracuse and *their* money to get myself to Europe. And then, at the same time, I'm thinking, "How can I really do that when I don't speak—I can't speak English at all." I mean that people can understand me in English and spell. I can't spell anything. Who am I gonna know? And I just sold myself out to them.

CM: Yeah.

LA: This wouldn't happen—anything else. So I stayed in Syracuse and did that. But, so I got it the last week I was in Syracuse. The letter from this woman that some organization was going to pay half of my ticket there.

CM: Wow.

LA: And so I had to come up with the other half. But Syracuse gave me a certain amount of money that I was spending on all the paper that I was printing. So had I known that, I could have used some of that money, you know.

CM: Wow.

LA: And little savings. Or maybe could have got some money out of my dad. And actually, my dad sort of was proud of me when I went to Notre Dame to teach—to speak. And he goes, "They're sending—they're taking you out there to talk?" And I go, "Yes, they're taking me out there to talk about my work." And he goes, "What's so big about your work?" And I go, "Nothing to you, but to me it's something big."

CM: And to other people.

LA: And to other people. And he was impressed that I was going there for three days and I was going to be paid five hundred dollars to talk. And it was Notre Dame because he, like, watched the football games.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So, you know.

CM: Wow. And so in all of this—all this Venice Biennale stuff is going on, and Susanne . . .

LA: Oh, so, the Venice Biennale ended, and then I got my work back. But see, I had some problems with this woman, and she was in New York, because of communication. She was German and she's European. I mean she speaks German. She speaks—I don't—I think she's German, but not a hundred percent. But a lot of people in Europe speak other languages.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so she speaks Spanish and she speaks—you know. And she's in Spain a lot, so. Every time she called me it was a headache because I couldn't understand her, and she couldn't understand why I couldn't understand her. And I explained about being dyslexic, and she didn't—and I hear sounds differently. She couldn't understand that, and she would talk fast. And, you know, I'm just, like, "You're not listening to me." And so then I finally, you know, I bugged her for like six months to get my work sent back to me, but for a different show, but it was in New York. It wasn't the Biennale. And then I finally I got the work sent back to me. But I had one more day of arguing with her on the phone. And then that afternoon someone calls me, and she goes, "My name's Susanne Vielmetter and I'm looking at photographers. And I work for this other woman's gallery," and, you know, "I'd like to see some of your work. I've heard about you from other people." And all I thought to myself, "Another German." [*laughs*]

CM: You're like, "This is all I need."

LA: Yes, that's what I thought. Because I go, "One more person I can't understand." But her English was a lot better than the other woman's English. Because I think she was confused half the time because she spoke English, Spanish, and German. So. [*laughs*] I just figured that I gave her that mean word, that it was because of all those languages she didn't know what she was talking to at that time. Sometimes I just couldn't understand a word she said. So.

CM: So that's how you ended up having Susanne as a gallerist?

LA: Ah, she wasn't a gallerist yet. She was working for this other woman who had a gallery, and she wanted to see my work 'cause Joni had said that if she goes out and finds some people, she would let her have a show in August, 'cause that's usually in the month that she was closed.

CM: Yeah, the down time.

LA: And a lot of galleries are down in August. So she was gonna give Susanne that month to have a little show. And then when I went to go show—when I went to go see Susanne and brought the work that she was thinking about using, Joni wanted it for another show, but she wanted it in October when the real shows are happening. And then she insulted Susanne about—basically saying she doesn't know what she's doing. Susanne was the one who took her there, to Germany for one of those big art fairs. And she got contacts there. And, you know, without Susanne she wouldn't have been able to function there because she doesn't speak the language. And Susanne is German and speaks the language and knows the art community and all that stuff. You know, because she went to the school for art, and so she knows the people and stuff like that, so. And then, so, she insulted Susanne. Susanne said, "I quit." And then I took my stuff back. And Joni was upset with me because I told her, "I don't—Susanne wanted this work for this month and I said, 'Okay,' but I don't want to have to produce new work for you because you want me to produce new work. I don't have the time. My father just got diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and I've been told that goes very quickly, so whatever time is left I need to be there for him. Because I don't want to regret it for the next ten years of my life."

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so she got upset with me. And basically she blurted out that—and then Susanne told me why she had that issue. Her father was gone her whole life, so she doesn't understand why I'm gonna stand there for my father. And I had mentioned so many things about my dad and how sometimes cruel he could be, and she goes, "Why are you . . ." I go, "Because my mom died and I had ten years of—it took me ten years to get over her death. You know.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And, but that was a lot about art [*dog barks*] each other. Nothing that, you know. And so now my dad's dying, and, you know, it's a big thing in your life when someone dies. And I need to sort of at least be peaceful to him or try to be kind to him before he leaves this planet.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And like a month before he died, you know, he had that little thing. Ambulance came, took him. And from that point on he introduced me to everybody. He loved me. "You're my daughter." And then the night he, the night before he died, he asked me, "Why do you do all this stuff?" And [he] said, "Why are you doing all this stuff? I know I'm not always been nice to you." And I go, "Yes." And I go, "But the thing is that you always took care of me and you wanted make sure I was safe, no matter what. And, you know, there was a lot of times I cursed you, and I'm sure you did that to me, but I never heard it out of your mouth. But I'm sure you thought it in your head every time you were yelling at me." But you know, but I go, "I watched you all my life." And I go, "Actually, you're hurting my feelings because I've watched you my whole life. You were always there to volunteer to make a patio for one of my uncles to build steps out of cement." Because we had a cement—my dad loved the cement thing. He would help everybody, you know, tear down these trees, put a patio . . .

CM: Yeah.

LA: I go, "You were always there to help everybody." You know, uncles were good cooks, and they would cook for us and taught Mama how to cook. But, you know, "You always did things for your family. It was—I was raised with you talking about family, and you do things for your family. You're always there for your family to help out." And I go, "Like I said, I keep on going back to the thing that, you always made sure I was safe. You know. And we had our relationship and it was mainly from your side that it screwed it up." [*laughs*] I gave him all the credit. And I go, "I was the kid, you were the ch—" I mean, "I was the child, you were the adult." And so. It came—

CM: So this is, this is going on as this woman is trying to wheedle you into—

LA: No, no, no. This is a couple months later.

CM: A couple months later.

LA: And it's the night be—the night—next morn—the next afternoon my dad died.

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: But that evening he was asking me why am I being so kind to him this last six months.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I expl—and I go, "You know, the last time you're going to hurt me by asking me that question." He goes, "What do you mean?" He goes, "I know I haven't been extremely good to you." And I go like, "That's true, but you always cared about my safety. That's as much as love you could give me, was that." Because see, he always thought money was the—'cause he didn't have things.

CM: Yeah.

LA: He was poor, and he was—his parents died young, and he was the man of the— So even though he was living with his sister and her husband, he always saw himself as the man of the family. Had to help support. And he stopped school at sixth grade, got jobs. I mean then they didn't care whether people were young and stuff, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Because it was, you know, the '40s, '30s—late '30s, early '40s. So I go, "You know, you've been an example my whole life, and you've always made sure that I was safe, so, you know, I've always known you've loved me."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "But it's been hard taking your love."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "Because lot of times there was a lot of anger and hate."

CM: Yeah.

LA: "And I couldn't fit up to be what you wanted me [to be] as a child or a daughter, you know. And I couldn't, you know, look at you with the eyes that I had when I was four years old."

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, that stopped when I hit kindergarten. [*laughs*] And by the time I was ten, he sort of dismissed me to the motherland, and I didn't learn how to sew and cook. And she didn't want anything to do with me either, but—I mean, in that sense.

CM: Yeah.

LA: He wanted her to be like his sister. My poor mother had his sisters to deal with, because they were all sewers and they all cooked. My mom didn't sew, didn't cook, you know. My grandmother—her mother—went hunting with my grandfather and shoot deer in the hills of the farm land, you know. And they would, you know, go camping and, you know, all this stuff.

CM: Yeah.

LA: My grandmother wasn't a homemaker either. But, you know, she—my grandfather and her were perfect together.

CM: Yeah.

LA: They just—they enjoyed life together. They enjoyed fishing and cooking and eating and drinking, you know. Bea was always upset that Mary drank too much, but—

CM: Laura, I hate to interrupt.

LA: So.

CM: My—no, my memory card is almost full.

LA: Okay.

CM: So, um . . .

MAY 22, 2014

CM: So we are starting day two of oral history with Laura Aguilar in Rosemead, California. It is May 22, 2014, and I think we'll start the day by looking at some pictures, right?

LA: Yeah. These are the earliest stuff that I did. This is like in the early '80s. There might be one or two that might be like late '80s but most of these are the early '80s. This is Eddie and— [Fig. 9]

CM: And this would be—you are—you've already left high school at this point?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Because you graduated in . . .

LA: In '78.

CM: In '78.

LA: So this is like early '80s—'80. Like, '82 maybe, to '85. And there's some that are a little bit later. But like this one. A friend of mine was a—well, I didn't know him. He became a friend. He was a poet, and he was doing a show with his poetry at LACE. And so he had me photograph different men in his life, you know. And this is Monica, who was a—

Figure 9. *Eddie*, 1983. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches.

CM: This is Monica Palacios?

LA: No. No, no, no. Monica Almeida. She's a photojournalist, and she was working with the [*Los Angeles*] *Times* at the time. And then she also worked with the *New York Times*.

CM: This is her again?

LA: Mm-hmm. This is when she was in—she came back, but she was working for the *New York Times* at that time.

CM: And how did you know Monica?

LA: She came to an opening. My first opening I was at, at Self-Help Graphics.

CM: Oh.

LA: And we started talking. And then so I asked her if I could photograph her, and then she goes, "Well, then I could photograph you?" And I go, "Okay." [*laughs*] So, you know.

CM: And then what about the friend, the poet?

LA: This is the poet.

CM: Oh, that's the poet. And what's—and that's the same guy from the first photos you just showed me?

LA: No, no, no. That's just someth—he was doing a thing about his poetry.

CM: At LACE?

LA: Yeah. And it was about being a gay man and relationships, so he had me photograph different men to, and you know. What he put it to that I barely remember, but it was a little strange. But, you know. I had some really good photographs.

CM: What was his name?

LA: Oh, you know, I got to look it up. I have it. Pablo . . . It starts with an "A." Hold on.

CM: Okay. [*pause*] The poet is wearing a shirt with barbed wire and a screaming figure. [*pause*]

LA: But I'll probably find it later. I mean, really quickly. And—

CM: Okay. Okay, so it's a poet and his name is Pablo?

LA: Right. His name is Paul. It's funny because I call him Paul—Pablo—and my friend is named Pablo that I work at now. I always call him Paul. But he gets, like, "My name is Pablo." I go, "I know, I know."

CM: And did he have you—did he commission those portraits?

LA: Oh, no. No, no. He just—I don't know how we met. I think through a mutual friend. One of my teachers at East LA College and him were friends. And so she gave me his number, and we got together and I started doing portraits of him. And, um . . . This is Eddie, who's a friend of his and Robert.

CM: And Eddie was the guy who was doing the show at LACE?

LA: No, no. Paul was the one.

CM: Paul was the one doing the show at LACE. Pablo. Okay. Got it.

LA: Yeah, yeah. And he was the one of the people that posed during that time.

CM: Got it.

LA: You know, in the house.

CM: And then, in terms of doing these kinds of, this kind of portraiture, I mean, how did you—like, how do you set these up? Do you have a conversation ahead of time? Is it kind of like, you just play it by ear? Do you have settings chosen?

LA: No, I—basically I set it by just chance, because I didn't know where—I went to his friend's house, you know, and then I looked around at his—his friend's partner is Robert Gil de Montes, who's a painter. And there were some beautiful paintings that I used as the backdrops. In uh, like this. One of his paintings behind him there.

CM: Okay.

LA: And then another painting behind him. And this is Robert's partner. They—you know.

CM: So it's just really playing it by ear?

LA: Mm-hmm. Right.

CM: And then do you have—I mean, do you have . . . 'Cause all of these subjects seem quite comfortable in front of you. I mean, sometimes people can be a little self-conscious.

LA: Well, I think—you know, what I mean . . . What I think usually happens is that I usually do like three rolls of film on one person. And usually somewhere in there they get relaxed, you know, not maybe. And sometimes they're relaxed in the beginning and then sort of like, after I make them do all these stupid

poses, then they kind of get all uhhh." [*laughs*] But basically it—it just sort of always just happens, you know. And this period of time, I was extremely shy. You know. Haven't yet come out to be . . . sure of myself, so to speak.

CM: So this is the early '80s. You're not necessarily directing people, or—

LA: Well, I kind of, to a certain level. And then this is something I did for— Paul was also, um . . . This is Los, Los, uh . . . I don't remember. But this is Willie Herrón, and he had a band. [Fig. 10]

Figure 10. *Los Illegals*, 1984. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches.

CM: Oh, that was his band. God, I'm trying to think of what that band's name was.

LA: Something with "Illegals," I think. And it—

CM: Los Illegals, I think it was.

LA: Yeah.

CM: They're so—they have such a great glam look.

LA: Mm-hmm. And the thing is, is that also I'm very shy. I didn't—I assumed that he was the—it was his band. And someone asked me why. I go, "Because he was so cocky." [*laughs*]

CM: The guy in the middle?

LA: Yeah, him. And he's the drummer. But see, I found out later that *he's*—it was really Herrón, [that] it's *his* band. But he was just very sort of, you know, casual. And, you know. And he was just often, you know, like "I'm all this hot stuff." So it's like, okay, I put him there. [*laughs*]

CM: The drummer got the middle.

LA: Yeah. This is a good friend of mine. Pat Matel, Martel. [Pat Martel—ed.] And this was in '89, because I have it on the back with eight— And I—as a, she's a wonderful person, and I just love the picture, 'cause I always see when I look at her face in the profile, she has a very Mayan face, you know. [Fig. 11]

CM: Yeah.

LA: Classy lady.

CM: Yeah, beautiful.

LA: And this is Pam. And she's a friend of my friend Sandy. And she was home for the holidays, because she was at—at the time she was at Brown [University], you know, on the East Coast. And so she wanted to do some history of her family. And her grandfather's getting older and he was, you know, he's gonna pass. And so she wanted to get stuff in the house before the step-grandmother takes everything. [*laughs*]

Figure 11. *Pat #1*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 9 x 12 inches.

LA: And so this is him, uh, so when we got to the house, and every time we got into her room, he moved to another room—the grandfather. And he had a TV in all these rooms, and they were all on because there was a basketball tournament. And so, when I got into the dining room, I go, you know, after I did this picture of her, I go, "Go get your grandfather." And I put the two chairs next to each other. He came. He sat down and he gave me three shots, and then he got up and left. [*laughs*] [Fig. 12]

CM: And that was that?

LA: That was that. And then when he saw this picture, he grabbed it out of his son's hands and took it, and, "This is mine." [*laughs*]

CM: Beautiful shot.

LA: This is a picture of Sandy.

CM: Now your friend Sandy, tell me a little bit about her. Who was she? How did you get to know her?

LA: Well, like I, um, I kind of started to tell you about it. We were in lithography class together at Pasadena City College. You know, like I said, she would come in late and not think much of it. See, her father had a company in Vernon that was a printing—they did, they had, um . . . He did the, you know, did the labeling for, like, IVs and stuff. And he had—he created something that was able to do it so he could put the print on it and all this stuff. So he had his own patent on it. So he had really good, you know. But I didn't really, you know. So her dad wanted her, you know, she went to San Jose? And you know, he goes, "Well, since you're gonna be a, I want you to least know something about the family business." 'Cause her brother took over, and he—I know the dad had no fear that she would ever actually do anything, but he just wanted, like, you know, "Get a job or go to school." And so she went to Pasadena. So she would just come in very casually, you know, just sort of like, "La, la, yeah, yeah." [*laughs*]

Figure 12. *Pam and Grandfather*, 1984. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches.

And I just thought she was hilarious. And then we became partners in the dark—you know, during the graph—the printing. And then I showed her some of these photographs, and she thought, "Oh, you're an artist." And I go, "I don't see that way." But, you know. And so she's the first person that—she always insisted that I was an artist. When she introduced me to her friends, you know. And I'd just, like, I was always like, "Don't say that." I didn't really accept—I didn't really see myself as she saw me until I was thirty-three, and, you know. And I really saw myself being an artist then, but. And then she was teaching—

CM: Are you guys, are you guys still friends?

LA: Oh, yeah.

CM: Do you stay in touch?

LA: Yes, as much as you can when you're not—You know, she lives up in Northern California.

CM: Oh, got it.

LA: But we just keep in touch, and we do call each other and talk a lot. And she was teaching—she got a teaching current, you know, license for . . . This is like '80s, I don't know, late '80s. And she was teaching high school in Bell Gardens. Bilingual education, you know. And so she asked me, can I photograph the kids? And these two are sisters. And another student. [*pause*] And then she [*indistinct*] and these are some of the boys in the class. And she goes, she thought it was always interesting that—how they adjust to America more than their parents can. And then, like—and she goes, "All these people—you know, all these boys are from different parts of Central America and usually they don't get along with each other. But, you know, when you're in school, and this is America, they have that whole, um . . ."

CM: They have that immigrant experience in common.

LA: Together. Yeah, yeah. And so they adapt to the culture faster than their parents might ever.

CM: Exactly.

LA: And then I was doing the Water and Power in Pasadena. The biannual—the annual report for the city of Pasadena.

CM: How'd you end up doing that?

LA: A friend of mine got me the gig because she was a PR person. And it's a one-year thing. And so we were downstairs, and we—I met all these guys who were working at this part of the power plant. And the guy goes, "You know, she's gonna be the photographer. She's gonna be walking around here. She's gonna be taking pictures of you guys working," da da da. "And so, you know, work with her." And then, so when the manager—the supervisor—left, one guy just said, "Oh, fuck him. I'm not going to have my picture taken by anybody." So. But no, this is not it. But, so he was one of the guys showing me around. And then he was—

CM: The guy on the right was one of the guys showing you around?

LA: Yeah. Because like this, you know, grids and stuff. And we're really high up and stuff, so. And this guy was sort of following around, kind of like going slowly with his hat, and I go, "You want your picture taken, don't you?" He goes, "Yeah!"

CM: So the guy on the left is being a ham?

LA: Mm-hmm. [*laughs*]

CM: That's great.

LA: I mean, because I got cussed out by a lot of these old white men, you know.

CM: They didn't want their pictures taken?

LA: Yeah, 'cause they thought it was just, you know. I mean I could understand. And then, she's an engineer.

CM: Oh, wow, that's a great shot.

LA: And she goes, "Don't shoot my shoes." And I go, "Why?" She goes, "Because they're heels, and I'm not supposed to wear heels up here on these grids and stuff." And she, you know, this—she's from behind the—she was from, like, one of the Russian countries, you know.

CM: Uh-huh.

LA: And so, she was a petite woman, you know. But she, she moved around like she had, you know, boots on instead of high heels across those things. She goes, "I get in trouble all the time, so don't show my feet." So, yeah. And I think that was like in '87 or [*indistinct*].

CM: Now, how did you end up going to Pasadena to begin with? What prompted that decision to [go to] Pasadena City College?

LA: I did all I could in photography at East LA [College], so I decided to go there. I don't know why. Oh, yeah, I wanted to . . . No, I don't actually remember why. But I somehow found myself in the lithography program. Oh, yeah, that's why. Because maybe I could get a job if I get trained and all that, because it's very similar to—I mean, the darkroom part of it, you know. And so I did that. And then when I was there, the instructor told me to go speak to this woman in, you know, another office and tell her he sent me. And then that was the only disability center. And so she goes, "Come back for the next six weeks for one hour each week. And we're gonna just test you." And then after that, that's when I was diagnosed with being auditory dyslexic. And before that I had no clue that there was such a thing. And then I also found out that all those Thursdays in my speech therapy. My therapist says, "Laura, I said this and you said that. You're not listening," you know. So it made sense, you know. I finally got a piece of the puzzle down. This was in Pasadena.

CM: Oh, wow. [*pause*] My phone is freaking out.

LA: Is it too much glare?

CM: No.

LA: Okay. So, yeah, I waited, and I had him here and I had him here. That was the best one.

CM: The old man under the fire ladder.

LA: Yeah, as he's walking with—

CM: Now, was Sandy— What was Sandy's last name?

LA: Shutser . . . I can't pronounce it right.

CM: Schuster? Maybe something like that?

LA: Maybe something like that. [This is likely Sandy Schuster—ed.]

CM: Something like that?

LA: Yeah.

CM: She wasn't, she wasn't Mexican? Or Mexican American?

LA: No. No. Oh, no, no. But she spoke Spanish.

CM: Oh, okay.

LA: I mean, she was bilingual, 'cause when she became a teacher she goes, "The whole reason, Laura, I became a teacher is not because I thought I really wanted to be one, but you have three months off a year." [*laughs*]

CM: So Sandy was a bit of a slacker?

LA: Pretty much. Yeah, because she was spoiled. I mean—and she also knew it. And she goes, "I'm very privileged that my dad spoils me," you know. So when he died, her brother said, "I'm not Dad. You'd better get yourself a job." She was supposed to work for the par—you know, but she never really did. She would come in, like—she took me there one day and I met her brother Richard. And he goes, "Okay, Sandy. You're supposed to be here at nine. It's two." And see, her aunts worked for the company and her cousins, so it was like a, you know. Richard was the head of it, but it's like all these other people doing other things, and he's like, "I can't . . ." You know. And he, so he started talking to me. And I go, "Yeah, you should be here at nine, Sandy, not at two. What time do you get off? Four?" [*laughs*] So, you know. And then, so I, you know. So, it was just sort of we just sort of crossed each other's paths. And then, when her dad was dying, sometimes I'd be over their house, and he would say something to her about, you know, being more practical. And he goes, "Your friend works hard." And she goes, "Well, you know, Daddy, you can't change me now." [*laughs*] "It's just way too far gone. He spoiled me my whole life. He's going to stop it now?"

CM: So she was a slacker, but very good-natured about the fact that she was.

LA: She was very, um, yes, she was very . . . She knew that how fortunate she was for it. 'Cause she kind of grew into his money. I mean, her brother and sisters were like at least twenty years apart from Sandy, and Sandy was the only child in his second marriage.

CM: Oh, got it.

LA: And so when Richard was a boy, he had started a business but it went under. And then he started another business and it went under. And then this third business he started, it became like a, you know, he was very successful at it. And then Richard became his, you know, the one who took over it. And so, you know. Richard worked hard, but it's just sometimes, you know, it was really weird. When I first met Richard and Sandy, they would—Richard would just make comments to her about how lazy she is, and then she would just let it roll off her back. And then, years later, they are now, I mean, really good friends, you know. But for a long time it was just that, you know. And Sandy even said it. She goes, "It's just that I happened to be born during the time my dad was successful. And Richard was there when he had two businesses going or," so, you know. And so, you know. "So he thinks that, you know, I'm spoiled." And she goes, "I am! Daddy did that," you know. So it's like—

CM: How, how important was Sandy to your development as an artist?

LA: I don't know so much about how she added to my art, but just the fact that she always saw me that way. And, like, you know, she had all these friends that are from wealthy families. And she goes, "You know, Laura, their parents opened the door for them, but you have to keep it open once you go through it. And a lot of these people don't do that. They don't follow through with anything that," you know. And she goes, "And I know that I'm spoiled," and da da da, you know. "But, you know, you're really an artist. You work at it and you don't want to acknowledge it yet, but you will someday," you know. You know, and so she [*indistinct*].

CM: So she encouraged—she invited encouragement?

LA: She encouraged—yeah, she gave me a lot of encouragement. And she also—just her personality was something I never thought I could be around, 'cause she was very open. I mean, most everybody I know is just about like, you know, to themselves. 'Cause they were all—most of the people I knew were as isolated

as I was. So like in high school, there was another photographer. His name was Juan, and we used to go out photographing together. But we were both basically very, very shy people, you know. So it was easy to be with each other because we didn't demand each other to be talking, you know.

CM: Exactly.

LA: And all we did was just like help each other do the photographs and stuff like that. And then Gilbert, in a way, was that, too. You know. But he was like, you know. He was a little bit more, you know . . . He was just younger than me, and he was more outgoing than I was, but not yet. He waited a couple more years and then it just popped out of him. But, you know, and stuff like that. So we kind of both grew up together, in that sense.

CM: You guys had that shared experience of . . .

LA: Being—never going out of our limits.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know, boundaries. Because how our families see where we should always stay?

CM: Yeah.

LA: Yeah. So, yeah.

CM: So during this time that you're hanging out with Sandy, how is your family viewing your photographic work? Like, how . . .

LA: My photography was—as long as I didn't bug them about it. I mean, to be honest, they never really cared. My brother knew that I was very—I enjoyed it, and he made the darkroom for me. My dad knew where I was going all the time was to take pictures, so he didn't think anything much of it. He never actually ever really looked at my art, except the stuff I did of family members. And beyond that he didn't really, you know, really care. But he supported my, what I wanted. You know, it's always been strange, 'cause pretty much a lot people in my life, beyond my family, sometimes are just there to support this thing, but not necessarily a lot there for me. I mean they love me, and they support me, and they push me, but [I] hardly ever see them. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah.

LA: So it's kind—it's, you know, it's, it's kind of hard. And then, after so many years, they sort of automatically become like family, 'cause I forget how much they know about me. [*laughs*] And I about them.

CM: But, I mean, I think it just sounds like Sandy . . . Sandy was such a key person to you in some ways because she did things like, "Laura, you *are* an artist."

LA: And then she was very, very much an out . . .

CM: Outgoing.

LA: Outgoing person, yeah.

CM: She sounded very—she sounds very charismatic.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Like the kind of person everybody wants to hang out with.

LA: Mm-hmm. I don't know. But yes. Well, maybe. But, you know, I mean, she—I, you know, although I met a lot of her friends, I didn't really ever fit in with them and, nor— And she goes, "Don't be—that's just my friends, 'cause I've known them since we were in high school and stuff like that," you know. "I grew up with them and stuff." And—but, you know, she goes, "They're all spoiled and I'm spoiled and I know it, but they don't seem to acknowledge it." [*laughs*] So since—I mean, she was very . . . very much . . . She knew who she was and she was grateful for what she had, you know. And so not a lot of people are. They think they deserve it, you know?

CM: They're entitled.

LA: Yeah. So. And so. Yeah, that's why I really liked her. She was more outgoing than I was. I'm very, when I met her, *extremely* shy. And she goes, "How do you do all these pictures?" I go, "just 'cause it's one-on-one. I'm not good in groups of people. I'm good with one-on-one," you know.

CM: Do you think, do you think the shyness was simply your natural shyness, or do you think it was also the issues of the dyslexia and the [*indistinct*].

LA: Well, when I met Sandy I didn't know I was dyslexic yet.

CM: But you, but your whole life, you'd been hearing that there was something wrong with you—

LA: Pretty much, yeah.

CM: In terms of—

LA: Yeah. Well, my mom was constantly trying to push me out to be with people, you know. Because my mom was very social and my dad wasn't, and I was more like my father. And so she was always pushing me. And it was really weird until Sandy had—her first child is autistic. And when she used to, um. I remember when she was little and—you know, she found out when he was like two and a half, so she got really into finding out how to help him, da da da, you know, and all that stuff. And she goes, you know. So we were having lunch at this hotel. And she was visiting 'cause she was down moving. She had lived in Texas. So she was in town for something with her husband and the kids, so I went down to have lunch with them. And she goes—I go, "He's perfect. Look at how quiet he is. He's content." She goes, "Yes, he's content, but he doesn't want to be with people, Laura, that's the problem." And, see, I always thought my mom was pushing me out to be—to get away from her. You know, "Go, go." And I started to see my mom, and I saw Sandy even though we're very— I'm not autistic, but I think I have tendencies, from being around other people that are autistic kids. So she goes, "No, she—yes, he's content, but he needs to interact with people. That's what life's about, Laura." And so I guess at that moment I just understood my mom and all her pushing, you know, and—

CM: But she wasn't necessarily pushing you away, she was trying to just get you—

LA: To be open to people and stuff, 'cause I was very in my head. And, like I said, way before I ever found out that I was dyslexic, it's just that I used to frighten her. My mom would get frightened when I would get into this place of just staring into space. And it really made her frightened and angry sometimes. And what could break me out of it, is someone going in front of me, you know. Because I could just sit there and just space out. And behind my house was a lemon orchard, and at the edge of the lemon orchard—the orchard sort of went like this, to down. And so there was all this space that I would just stare at. Sit there in the field and just stare out, and it drove her nuts. Because I was thinking of things. And you know, those big huge wire things that—

CM: The electrical towers?

LA: Yeah. And, you know, they're disappearing, because everything is going down below earth, you know. But they were in, like, the back, behind my house, that I used to always think of, you know, I used to—in school you would have papier-mâché, and you would, like, put it over something. And I used to think of putting little squares over here and this of papier-mâché, like, pink and, you know, curlers. Like, 'cause they were always pastel colors. And then, you know, I hated all those Godzilla movies, but I was thinking, "Ah, these could turn into, like, robots," you know.

CM: So you were imagining this landscape kind of turning into something—

LA: Yeah, else, yeah. And see, my mom always thought I was daydreaming too much, and maybe I was. But it just made her nervous because I could just be there for a long time, you know. I mean, I didn't realize it then, but I realize looking back, that's what she was always getting angry about, you know, so. And then one of my cousins—well, I want to tell you it, but I don't really want it to be used.

CM: Okay.

LA: Okay.

CM: Okay. Let's continue to look at pictures.

LA: So this is a little bit more around like—

CM: These are also from the '80s?

LA: No, these are now '90s.

CM: We are now in the '90s.

LA: Yeah.

CM: These are portraits of friends or . . .

LA: Mm-hmm. This is—her name's Nancy Rosenblum, and she's a photographer and an editor. I mean she edits films and stuff like that.

CM: In the denim jacket?

LA: Yeah, in the denim jacket. And then here's another one of her. So she used—she photographed all these women in—or people—in their environment. Yeah. She was doing a series on lesbian women, so she would photograph them in their environment. So she asked if I—if she could photograph me. I said, "Okay, but could I photograph you?" And she goes, "Okay." So.

CM: And how did you meet her?

LA: Through her partner. I mean, you know, it was probably through Connexus, which was a women's organization. And I used to—because I was very shy, I would volunteer and help at the bar. And people who are, they're coming for beers are more friendlier [*indistinct*] and so I got to know people that way, more than just to be in the background, you know. So.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And it was fun. [*laughs*] And—

CM: Was this—and this was before you did the Latina Lesbian series?

LA: Yeah, she's not—she's white lesbian. [*chuckles*]

CM: Well, obviously. But this is before you had gotten sort of the idea of the series.

LA: Well, no, I think the series was going on at this time, and I just seemed to, you know. Her partner and me would go out a lot because she was—she's a photographer, too. And so, Mary—I never took a picture of Mary, but we hung out a lot. And so one day I said, "Oh, you look . . ." You know, because she's older than me. And I go—she goes, "Laura, when you're an artist and you have no money, you can dress however you want." [*laughs*] And so that's why—'cause I was saying, "Oh, you look young for your age. You know, the way—the style you wear." That's what she told me that.

CM: So if you're an artist and you're poor you can dress however you want.

LA: Pretty much, yeah.

CM: That's [*indistinct*].

LA: And have your own mystique about you.

CM: Exactly.

LA: And then years later, she got a job and [was] teaching. She goes, "I have now, I had to look like an adult again." [*laughs*] So this is Raquel.

CM: Raquel? The curly hair and profile?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Was she a friend, too?

LA: Um . . . well, acquaintance. Friendly, [*indistinct*]. . And, you know, I did her for the lesbian series, but I never got her writing. She was part of Lesbianas Unidas and GLLU. [Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos—ed.] So, I mean, so . . . Oh, and this is my cousin that I was talking about his son.

CM: Oh, okay. Your cousin Carlos?

LA: Mm-hmm. And he was always very neat.

CM: That's a beautiful one.

LA: Yeah. And he's, you know, when he went to kindergarten—first day of kindergarten, he's ready for school and all this, and he comes out in his Sunday school clothes. And his mom goes, "What are you doing?" She goes—he's going, "No, no. You're not wearing your Sunday school clothes to school." [*laughs*] You know? Because he's, like, very perfect, you know. And I thought it was really funny, 'cause when he graduated from high school he joined the Marines. And I go, "Why you joining the Marines?" He goes, "I'm getting tired of my mom telling me what to do." And I go, "You've got to be kidding. When your mom's bugging

you, telling you what to do, what do you think they're going to do in the army. I mean, the Marines?" [*laughs*]

CM: All they're going to do is tell you what to do.

LA: What to do. [*laughs*] Anyhow. But then, they're also very stylish.

CM: Yeah. He's very dapper with his sunglasses and his tie.

LA: He's like maybe seventeen there. I don't know. This is Robert Gil de Montes.

CM: Okay.

LA: He's a painter.

CM: This is the painter?

LA: Mm-hmm. And this is years later, so this is in the '90s. So, this picture, now that so many years passed, I'm going to use it in the show if we [*indistinct*]. So he was telling me about the day before, he was—someone was taking him somewhere, and this car was coming at them, and he said—he goes, "We almost got hit and I went like . . ." And he goes, "Don't you dare show that picture!" It's funny. [*laughs*]

CM: And you captured that moment?

LA: Yeah, because he was telling me the story about the car coming at them, you know. [*laughs*] I love it, but I have to put that [*indistinct*].

CM: How did you meet him?

LA: He was the first—he curated the first show I was ever in at Self-Help Graphics.

CM: At Self-Help?

LA: Yeah.

CM: That was the 1985 show?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Now, how did you come to participate in that show?

LA: To be honest, I don't know. I mean, I really don't know. Oh, I think . . . Because I showed you the invitation, right?

CM: Yes.

LA: My friend who was the person that did the printing part of it, I'm pretty sure it must have been through her. Because he contacted her, and she just said, you know, I was one of her students. And I was just barely, barely starting to do photography, you know. I mean, and so. I mean, and Judy, she pushed me into a lot of things. I love Judy. She's a wonderful person, and she taught alternative process. But, you know, the one thing about her was that sometimes she would make mistakes, but she could never produce them again because she didn't know what she did in the first place. Then years later I read a book on Imogen Cunningham, and they were referring to how she was a slob in the darkroom, and there were sometimes she didn't know what she did. I mean 'cause it was really weird, because she was—she started off in chemistry and became a photographer. And she became a photographer at a time that, you know, women were not necessarily photographers. And she photographed her husband nude on a pond. You know, in a little lake, you know. And when she was in a show in like I think it was 1910, she was labeled an unfit woman for photographing a man nude. It was her husband! [*laughs*]

CM: Omigod.

LA: So, I mean, I thought she— So from that point on. I just, like, any time I saw her work I was, "Oh, she's great. She's hot, yeah." But, yeah, it was funny because it was—'cause the book had a little thing, a paragraph in the paper, and she was an unfit woman for photographing a man naked. But a man could photograph women, and they're not unfit. [*laughs*] So I thought she was a neat, interesting person.

CM: That's great.

LA: And this is Yreina Cervantez. [Fig. 13] You know her?

CM: I do not know her. Who is she?

LA: She's a painter, and she teaches at [Cal State] Northridge, and—but she does murals. When I first met her she was doing a lot of murals, and she used to get kids from gangs, or trying to get them out of gangs, to

help her and stuff like that. And so. And she's a painter. She's very meticulous in her paintings. I mean she does murals, but when she does more smaller ones, it's just amazing, her detail and all that. And so this is another picture of her.

Figure 13. *Yreina Cervantes #1*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 9¼ x 13 inches.

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: She always—yeah, she's just—she looks well-dressed, no matter when you see her.

CM: Yeah. Always wearing, like, the traditional—

LA: Yeah.

CM: Clothes.

LA: Mm-hmm. I've never seen her in just average clothes. I mean, to be honest.

CM: T-shirt and jeans?

LA: Yeah, I've never seen her in that. [*laughs*] I don't think I've ever—

CM: Oh, that's great.

LA: I suppose, yeah. So this is . . . Anyhow. And . . . I did this for her because she was graduating and they had to have some pictures for her show of her. And I always try to do— I love— See, when I go into people's homes, and I want to photograph them, lot of times I just look at like what the music is, what they have in the book shelves, what's, you know. And then when I start photographing them, when I try to ask them questions about it. So this is like you know, it's just like, it's perfectly her. And if you've seen her drawings or her paintings, you could see there's a lot of that imagery in her, in her pieces.

CM: Uh-huh.

LA: So. I don't know if I pronounced the last name right. Was it—

CM: Yreina Cervantez. Y-R-E—

LA: Well, I don't know. I just copied it from somebody.

CM: Yreina—

LA: 'Cause I have it in a phone book, so.

CM: Okay.

LA: But, yeah.

CM: Oh, and this is Ricardo Valverde.

LA: Uh-huh.

CM: Wow. Who has the big show at the Vincent Price right now.

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Now, how did you know him?

LA: Well, he was one of those five photographers they were trying to get us to do a thing for Watts's twenty-fifth anniversary, but it never came through. But he was one of the guys that I met. And it was him, it was Donald Bernard, and Willie of the, you know, people that were involved. They became—

CM: Willie Herrón or Willie Middlebrook?

LA: No, no. Willie Middlebrook. But at first I thought—you know, I really thought he was gay.

CM: Ricardo?

LA: [*nods*]

CM: Wow.

LA: And Willie would laugh at me because how I came to that conclusion. Because he's so, well, neat. And I go, "Because, you know, most of the straight men I know—once my brother had a girlfriend he didn't get so fancy up anymore. And I see my cousins do that too." And so it's like, you know, he's like, he must be gay, 'cause he's so very—

CM: Put together.

LA: Yes, put together. And very, you know, stylish. Willie just started laughing. Yeah. Then, so. But—and he was very, uh . . . Latino men are not that to me.

CM: Yeah.

LA: [*laughs*] In searching for someone, and then once you get in the— And so it's like, I just thought he was gay 'cause he's just too together and sweet. And so.

CM: Is that his wife?

LA: Yeah, that's Elsie. Yeah.

CM: Elsie. That's great. [Ricardo and Esperanza (Espie) Valverde—ed.] [Fig. 14]

LA: I mean I just . . . I *love* this picture here. I mean, I love both of them. But I mean—actually I love all the pictures I did with them, because it's like they have such a connection with each other. I can't say a lot of people do. I mean they do love each other and all that stuff, but it doesn't seem to come so natural. Because this is just them being casual and talking, you know. And even in, you know, this one, there's such a connection still, you know. And it's like a little bit of caution, because someone's taking their picture. But I just like, you know.

Figure 14. *Richard and Espie #5,* ca. 1990. Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 inches.

CM: But yeah, there's a naturalness to their—a looseness to their gestures.

LA: Mm-hmm. Their [*indistinct*]. I mean, 'cause a lot of people—I can't say that happens with a lot of people, even though you know they're in [a] good relationship. It just doesn't always come across, you know. And it's just like, so natural. [*pause*] And he had bought a lot of, like, different people's paintings and graphic stuff, you know.

CM: Uh-huh. Now, how did you meet Willie Herrón to do that band shoot?

LA: Oh. No, I didn't meet him. Paul was sort of doing, like, PR for him.

CM: Oh, Paul the poet?

LA: Yeah. And so they wanted a picture for *LA Weekly*.

CM: Oh, got it.

LA: I mean, it was a little thing, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so Paul told me to go photograph them and all that stuff, so.

CM: So it wasn't like you knew them from art stuff, or . . .

LA: No, I didn't.

CM: Did you ever see Asco do any of their performances when they were coming up, or . . .

LA: No.

CM: No.

LA: But I did see some near the end with Harry [Gamboa] and Gronk. And I just thought it was bizarre. [*laughs*]

CM: What did you see?

LA: No, no. I just didn't get it. I don't *get* it. I don't *get* it, you know.

CM: But do you remember what you saw?

LA: Not really. But I all I know is that I don't get what is, why everyone writes about these people. [*laughs*] You know. And then particularly Harry and Gronk, they're very much up here.

CM: In their heads?

LA: You know, yeah. And there's nothing wrong with it, but I just don't *get* it. You know, what I'm seeing. And it's like this, this—the visual, and then there's the words that they use, and I just didn't—to me it was very confusing, you know. I mean, I'm just not that in touch. [*laughs*]

CM: That's fine. You don't have to like it.

LA: No, no. I didn't dislike it. I just found it puzzling, to be honest.

CM: Oh, gotcha. Gotcha.

LA: More that. More that. And like, I don't know why they call *this* art. Conceptual or whatever. I mean, you know, so. And this is Gina. [Fig. 15]

CM: And that's with a portrait of Billy Holiday behind her?

LA: Yeah, she loved Billie Holiday.

CM: Oh, really.

LA: She's a musician. And I met her at East LA College in a Chicano studies class and kept in contact for a while. And then we just . . . And then Sybil [Venegas] and her were friends and lost contact with Sybil. And then Sybil ran into me and wanted to get in touch with her. So then we started seeing each other again. I mean, 'cause years ago she was my friend, and then people move away, and then come back. I mean I didn't move that far. But, so.

Figure 15. *Gina*, 1984. Gelatin silver print, 10¾ x 14 inches.

CM: This is . . .

LA: Vincent. He was one of the students in my photography class.

CM: Vincent, before this peeling wall?

LA: Mm-hmm. His brother—I can't remember his brother's name right now, but his brother and him went into photography. They're two years apart. His brother's more into like, punk rock at that time, you know? And his attitude was there. I'm not sure this is—yeah, this was when he's singing.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Okay. So.

CM: That's the LACE guy, right?

LA: Mm-hmm. But, he was—

CM: The guy who was doing the show at LACE?

LA: No, he wasn't doing it. Pablo, Paul was doing the show, and Eddie was just part of his pieces.

CM: Oh, Eddie was one of the men in his life?

LA: Yeah. I mean more—I mean, not like they were real—

CM: Yeah.

LA: But, I mean, it was just that he was doing some of his poetry to the images, so he just photographed these people.

CM: Oh, okay. Got it.

LA: And so. And this is Cynthia. [The photograph is titled *Cindy*—ed.] [Fig. 16]

CM: And who's Cynthia?

LA: Oh, it was an old friend. I mean, I was going to photograph her, I mean, for the lesbian series. But when I finally got around to photographing her—

Figure 16. *Cindy*, 1988. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches.

CM: She's wearing a hat and a tuxedo shirt?

LA: Yeah, well, it's a zoot suit outfit, you know?

CM: Oh, she's wearing like a zoot suit?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: That's great.

LA: But it never happened. I mean, she sort of left her partner and became straight again. But, you know. But, I just love the picture. And she was a really nice person. A good person who I liked at the time. And this is my friend Susana . . . Susan . . . Suzanna? And then Cheryl, her partner at the time.

CM: Is this in their house?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: In their dining room at that glass table?

LA: Mm-hmm. And then she's in—is more my friend than Cheryl. But I like Cheryl. She's a nice person. She's a psychia—psychologist, or something like that. And so this is some of my portraits. [*indistinct*] And this is—

CM: So we're looking at stuff you did in the lesbian community?

LA: Well, this happens to be it. I'm—

CM: Okay.

LA: It might go back and forth.

CM: Okay. That's fine.

LA: So this is Holly Hughes. Holly Hughes? Yeah, Holly Hughes. I think it's Hughes. Can't, oh . . . I love these pictures I did of her. I mean these are ones that I would like to make bigger. I just never had the time. [*pause*] She got a—she was one of the four of the NEA that got the grants taken away from them. [The NEA rescinded grants to Hughes, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Karen Finley in 1990 because the agency deemed their work too controversial—ed.]

CM: Yes.

LA: And so I met her during that time. And when she came in—and she was doing a performance at Highways at the time. It was her and Tim were one—two of the ones I got there, of the four. [Tim Miller co-founded Highways Performance Space in 1989 and served as artistic director until 2000—ed.]

CM: And how did you end up shooting her?

LA: Because she was in town, and it was right when that thing happened. And I don't know who brought me to see her and photograph her. And so I photographed her. Then a couple of years later—I mean, she would be back here, and back and forth. And she was in a relationship with Phranc, who's a folk singer.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And, so here's some pictures of them.

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: But the one thing is, I love the fact that this—this is, like, these are people who say, you know, it's like I had the highlights and shadows and stuff, and it just looks—the lights popping in, like, little—looks like the lights on [*indistinct*]. I'm not sure of that.

CM: It's like dabbling her face?

LA: Yeah, and it's very . . . I don't know. It was so simple, you know. 'Cause the thing was just, everything was just right at that moment and that space, you know.

CM: This one's really cute.

LA: And see, when I found out she was with Phranc, "Oh, yes. I want to photograph her." I love Phranc. I just always thought she was neat. [*indistinct*] Sometimes with someone who is a performance artist . . . This

I thought was mine. Sometimes this was just, it was so simple. And she's being herself, like she's doing a show, so.

CM: Against the white background.

LA: Yeah, the background. It was just, you know. All right. Well, let me try to put them in some of the pieces that I saw them as. [*indistinct*] Somehow, I mean the things that I see in it that I want to play around with, you know. And it's sometimes when someone is like a performance artist, it's hard to tell what is *her* and what I'm taking—getting out it. I mean, 'cause she poses and she—everything is visual. Gilbert was that way, too.

CM: Who?

LA: Gilbert.

CM: Gilbert.

LA: Yeah, I mean he saw visually.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so, you know, so. I mean, I just love these pictures I did with her. I used to have them the way I kind of wanted to play with them later, but, you know. And this is in one of the rooms in Highways and had—all it had was light coming in on the white walls, so it was perfect, you know? But, you know, I don't know if it's coming across.

CM: No, no, no, totally. [*pause*] You get the sense of somebody almost dancing before the camera.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Like the sequence of photos of Holly.

LA: And kind of like these too, in the same way. It just—she didn't move. She was just there, and I was enjoying the light coming through and, and you know.

CM: Do you know if they're [Holly and Phranc] still together?

LA: No, no, I know they're not.

CM: Okay.

LA: They broke up years ago.

CM: Do you stay in touch with them? Do you stay in touch with a lot of your subjects, or is it a lot of just come and go? People sort of come in and out of your life?

LA: Pretty much, yeah. I mean 'cause, like, you know, Holly would—I only knew her because there was all that thing on her and—

CM: The controversy?

LA: And she was out here at the time when it hit. And she was involved with Tim Miller at Highways, so. You know, they wanted some pictures, and so I did pictures. But I don't remember if they were ever used or anything. But I mean I loved the pictures from my portfolio, you know. And I just loved this picture. [*laughs*]

CM: That's a really good—the one with the car. It's pretty fantastic.

LA: There's a couple of other ones I had, but I don't know where they're at, at the moment. [*laughs*] And then I did a lecture series at the Photo Center, and so these are some pictures of Suzy Kerr and . . . I can't think of her other friend's name—partner. They were—they did performance. I mean they did performance work. And so, we did this series of photographers, performance art, whatever. So there was a series of six groups of two people that came. It was during a summer thing. And so I curated that in partnership with Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, which Suzy was the director of.

CM: Okay. And Suzy's the one in the light-colored sweater with black pants.

LA: And black hair.

CM: On the right-hand side of the photo.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Okay. Just so we can keep our descriptions straight.

LA: [*laughs*] Oh, here. Okay.

Figure 17. *Phranc and Holly #1*, 1993, printed 2016. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches.

CM: And this was for an abortion related-event, or no?

LA: No, no. It's just that that work was around things like that.

CM: Okay.

LA: They were just posing in the studio, their little studio.

CM: They were doing their thing.

LA: They were just doing their thing.

CM: Oh, and here's a big photo of Phranc and Holly with the big Falcon car. [Fig. 17]

LA: I just, uh, yeah. 'Cause it's always—they look so similar, but they're not.

CM: I know. [*pause*] It's such a sexy car. [*laughter*]

LA: Yeah, too bad she didn't have her surfboard coming out of the back.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Yeah, 'cause she surfs.

CM: Holly or Phranc?

LA: Phranc, yeah.

CM: Oh, okay.

LA: Yeah. Actually, Barbara Carrasco went to school with Phranc.

CM: Oh, she did?

LA: Yeah. And so, I'm—when, a long time ago at the Women's Center [*indistinct*] and Phranc was there. And she goes, "Oh, you know, I used to go to school with Phranc. And I go, "Yeah, really?" And she goes, "Her real name is Susie." [*laughter*] [Susan Gottlieb—ed.]

CM: That's such a girly name. [*laughter*]

LA: So she goes up and she goes, "Hey you, Suzy." And then she turned. I mean she wasn't angry, but she just like, she doesn't hear it that often called to her.

CM: Yeah. She was Phranc. She was already Phranc.

LA: Yeah, she's been Phranc for some time. And she was on tour actually in Europe and her brother was killed in Santa Monica, and so she came back. And I think that's—she just disappeared, I mean, for like a year or so.

CM: Wow.

LA: Two. Her and her brother were very tight, 'cause when she got kicked out—when she came out to her parents—

CM: Phranc?

LA: She got kicked out right away, and her brother was always there for her. He was younger than her, too, but she just, like, it really crushed her when he died. He was killed. He was murdered, you know, in Santa Monica.

CM: And then this picture over here?

LA: This is my friend Beverly, who was in the other picture with the side profile.

CM: Yes.

LA: No, Beverly is the partner. Pat is my friend.

CM: Pat? [Pat Martel—ed.]

LA: I mean I'm friends with both of them, but—

CM: With the straight gray hair?

LA: Yeah. And. [*pause*] Yeah, so. These are . . . can't tell if that's the same one or not. Maybe it is. It's just toned differently.

CM: Mm-hmm. It's more like a sepia.
LA: Mm-hmm. So, I mean, I like them. They're nice people. And I just love—
CM: I think it's great.
LA: I didn't notice it. It's like a theme on the lighting.
CM: The dappled light?
LA: Yeah.
CM: Now, where were you printing all this stuff during this time? Because I remember you telling me that, you know, that you kept taking classes places so that you could use their darkroom. So, like, where was this stuff from the '90s being done?
LA: Pretty much until the end of the Photo Center. I used to work there, and that was the only reason I worked there and put up with a lot of . . . bullshit. [*laughs*] It really was the best thing about that place.
CM: Now, what were you doing at the Photo Center?
LA: Oh, I was—
CM: And this is the IPPS?
LA: No, no, no.
CM: Oh, no, it's just called Photo Center?
LA: It was the Photo Center through Cultural Affairs Department. And it was on Park View on 4th.
CM: And this is the LA Cultural Affairs Department?
LA: Cultural Affairs Department, but it was Photo Center.
CM: Okay.
LA: I mean, and it had studio space and—basic studio space—and it had dark room, and so. Basically, I set up the chemicals and hand out equipment, take the money for the rental.
CM: So you were working as kind of like a lab tech and assistant?
LA: Yeah. And then I hung shows and—
CM: And this is in the '90s?
LA: Yeah. I think it—they closed it in '97, so I was there for about five years.
CM: Got it.
LA: And the only reason—
CM: Where were they located?
LA: Fourth and Park View.
CM: Park View. Which is where?
LA: It's near MacArthur Park. [*indistinct*]
CM: Okay, so, like that Westlake area?
LA: Yeah, it's in that area. And then on the other side is MacArthur Park, over there. A hand throw away. And at the time, Otis was right across from MacArthur Park.
CM: Yeah, yeah.
LA: So, yeah. So I worked there, and it gave me access to the dark room and that was mainly the only reason I put up with all the bullshit. When I first got there—I don't know, is this so much facts for you? [*laughs*]
CM: It's alright.
LA: Okay, so. And when I first worked there, the secretary—I was just starting to do the lesbian series. And Willie hired me, and he asked me after he hired me, he goes, "How come you never asked Glenna [Avila] for a job?" I go, "Because she doesn't like me." [*laughs*] "Oh, no, she's mad at me." And Willie goes, "Oh, great. Thank you. But now you're here." Because she was on maternity leave, and he hired me.
CM: Oh.
LA: So, and then—
CM: And this was at Photo Center?
LA: At Photo Center, yeah. And, so.
CM: Why didn't she like you? Who was it that was in charge of her?

LA: Oh, she didn't like me because I—okay, this is kind of—I had a show at the Bridge Gallery. And, you know, the bridge from east and west, you know, City Hall. [Bridge Gallery is located in the walkway between City Hall and City Hall Annex on Main Street—ed.] And then I had a show at the Photo Center before this happened. And then she paid this woman to interview me, and all I did was giggle through the interview. And the woman sort of like said, "I thought you said this was really a photographer," and da da da, and that's why she put the money into having this person interview me. And she goes, "You're acting like a child because you giggle." I go, "Yeah, I'm sorry." And then, as she's getting more angry with me, I go, "Because when I get—when I feel someone's angry, I giggle." You know?

CM: When you get nervous?

LA: No, when there's anger around me.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: Yeah. It's just something I do. It doesn't make it better. [*laughs*]

CM: I'm sure. It probably makes things worse.

LA: So, yeah, so. So she was like, you know, "I gave her this opportunity," and da da da. It's like yeah, well, you know. "Thank you." But she just like, I don't know. So in that sense she kinda didn't—I didn't ever ask her for the job, so. And so she was on maternity leave and he needed somebody. He hired me. So then when she came back, she's like, "Okay." And then, it's really weird between Glenna and me. And there was this other woman who's a lab tech. Her name was, uh . . . I can't think of her name right now. Maybe I forgot it 'cause I just couldn't stand this person. [*laughs*]

Okay, well so, there was this other person and me, and we did a lot, and Glenna gave us opportunities to do things. So first she gave me an opportunity to curate a show. Then I did, and then the other person wanted a chance. And then, then I did another show. And then, so it's like, so Glenna liked this other—oh, I think her name was Betty, but, or something with a "B." Could be Becky, but who knows? So Glenna liked her because . . . So really it came to this. You know, he goes, "This is how Glenna sees the two of you. Glenna and this other person is in her car and she's going towards a cliff. The other person, she's not going to say anything to Glenna, and they go off the cliff. You and Glenna are in the same car and you're going towards the cliff. You tell her to stop and she's angry with you for that. That's you and Glenna and that's Glenna and her." [*laughs*]

CM: That sounds like some major office dysfunction there.

LA: Uh, yeah. And so—

CM: And her name was Glenna or Glenda?

LA: Glenna is the director. [Avila was director of the Los Angeles Photography Center from 1982 to 1991—ed.]

CM: Glenna. Okay. Glenna something or other?

LA: Yeah, something or other. But it was just, because when he put that out there, I go, "Yeah," [*indistinct*]. And see [*indistinct*]. Okay. So when I first got there and Glenna still wasn't there yet—she was on maternity leave—the secretary— Her name was, um . . . It was a nickname, kind of . . . Peewee? . . . No . . . In don't—okay, I don't remember her name either, but she was the first secretary from hell. And I worked as needed, so I could work the whole year—I could work half the year full time, or I could work the whole year twenty hours a week, you know. Eighteen hours a week, actually. And then I could make it to the end of the year. So I did that. And so. Oh, her nickname was Petey. And so she had been, the secretary had been—she was in the police department, then she came to us. And then couple years later she left, because if you bounce around the city as a [*indistinct*] you get a, you go—each time you go back to a new place, you get to go up a level. So she was basically bouncing to get higher up. And so. But she didn't—I was doing my lesbian series, and I was showing Willie in the office, and she got really—from that point on she didn't like me. And, but I don't think she really cared about me. Before that, she was polite before that. And so she said, "That's, you know, a sin against nature," da da da. And then Willie goes and says, "You know, I'd rather have people loving each other than killing each other. So I don't really have a problem with that," you know. [*laughs*]

CM: Go Willie.

LA: So then, you know, so then she didn't like me. *Then* she left and got up a couple steps more higher pay when she went back to the police department. And so then this other woman came in. Camille. And Camille was an art—I mean she graduated from art school, you know. Single mother and all this stuff. And every once in a while she would just get really angry with me. She gets really angry with Willie too. Willie did not want to be alone in a room with her because she had these things that come out of her. [*laughs*]

CM: But I think the most important thing is that during this time you had lab access.

LA: Yes, but during this time also I had her trying to constantly get me fired with Glenna.

CM: Oh.

LA: You know. And then so, you know, it was just really hard just to, I mean to, I had to put up with people dislike— So she disliked me because she—I was getting lots of reviews in *Art Weekly* and other magazines, and she would see them and she was like, "Oh, I saw that," you know. And then I go, "Yeah." And then, and then she goes, "Why aren't you happy?" I go, "Oh, no, I'm happy. It's just that I would prefer to have a regular job and health insurance than to have three part-time jobs and no insurance." You know, and it's like, you know. And so she would always complain when she couldn't be creative because of her daughter. I go, "Don't do that to your daughter, because you *chose* to go chasing after men that you want to get to be your husband." And so it's like, "Don't say your daughter's the reason why you don't do your art." You know? So she didn't like me said that to her either.

CM: Yeah, sure.

LA: And so then she would constantly—every time I got a review, she would talk about it. I go, "You know, I cannot pay my bills with a review. Yes, it's nice that I got acknowledgement, but it doesn't really do much for me, to be honest."

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know. I mean, it helps my ego a little bit to hang in there.

CM: But that was about it?

LA: Yeah. This is one of the— We used to have graffiti art. I mean, kids come and do graffiti art at the Photo Center. Like we had, I think it was, we did it three times before we had to stop doing it because too much stuff came along with it. [*pause*] So this is one of the few things that I got kind of commissioned for. I mean, I actually got commissioned for. And this is for a new station. Rampart Station was moving to a new location, and so they wanted to put this like a, like a, um . . . Six images. Wait, three—

CM: This is the Rampart police station?

LA: Yeah. It's when they moved from where they were to the new building.

CM: Uh-huh.

LA: And so this was like, uh . . . I think there were six images, like, you know, two, two, two?

CM: Uh-huh.

LA: And so I photographed—I was commissioned to photograph community people. And they gave me the people to photograph, you know.

CM: So people who lived kind of in the Rampart area?

LA: And involved with the Rampart station.

CM: Okay.

LA: You know, like I got kids who worked with the, you know.

CM: And this was being exhibited at the new building?

LA: Oh, no. It was going to be a permanent piece. So I was doing—

CM: It was going to be a what?

LA: Permanent piece.

CM: Oh, permanent piece that went at the station?

LA: Actually, I think . . . Yeah, I think it was nine. Three and three and six. I think it was nine images. And so I was photographing people in the community. And the other photographer that he brought—Richard brought in—was going to do the police officers.

CM: Okay.

LA: And then I did some stuff of different staff. I see the [*indistinct*] of kids here. [*hums*] So, and um . . .

CM: So is that piece now at the police station?

LA: Yeah, it's in the lobby, actually.

CM: It's in the lobby?

LA: And years la—and you know, when they had the . . . when they had the opening reception for the whole building, my father was—just got diagnosed. And so I just didn't—

CM: Go?

LA: Go to it, yeah. And then I never actually went to it, and then about five years, maybe eight years later, I went to it. I saw it. I go, "Oh, nice." [*laughter*]

LA: All I know was that I got money and I did this.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And it was gonna be up. So these are, like, just different people they had that were involved with the, you know, and business people. And then this is stuff behind the scenes.

CM: How did you get this gig?

LA: This guy Richard, I don't even know how I got it. He—I think he saw my work. He knew someone who knew me. I don't remember who.

CM: Do you know approximately what year this was? It was the year your dad was diagnosed, so. [*pause*]

LA: I think '99.

CM: Around there?

LA: Yeah, or '98. Yeah, something like that. And then, so I did stuff for the, you know, other staff people.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And . . .

CM: Oh, this is great. Sort of people at the office?

LA: Yeah. And, you know. And then. [*pause*] So these are like assistants to dep—to . . . Oh, what are they called?

CM: Chiefs or sergeants?

LA: Yeah, I think so. But they were the staff.

CM: They were the support staff at the police station.

LA: Mm-hmm. Detectives. They worked for the—

CM: They worked for the detectives—

LA: Yeah, they worked for the detectives. All the paperwork. Yeah. I knew I'd come up with something. [*laughter*] But that [*indistinct*], and that was very commercial, and I don't do much commercial. I'm surprised that I even [*indistinct*, *long pause as more boxes of images are brought out*] So, I'm going to show you my cemeteries of everywhere I go. [*laughs*]

CM: And this was in early . . .

LA: This, oh . . .

CM: You started— Cemeteries was one of the early things in your photography, right?

LA: Yeah. So I mean, I don't know. From like high school, all the way until present. You know what I mean?

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: But mainly, when I—when I was in high school I used to go to Rose Hills, because it's beautiful. And I would use the background—

CM: Where is Rose Hills?

LA: Over there. [*laughs*]

CM: Oh, right here.

LA: No, in Whittier. It's this side. It's about five miles, six miles from here.

CM: Okay.

LA: And so this is in Oaxaca, when I went there for the Day of the Dead.

CM: So all of these photos on this table are from Oaxaca?

LA: Right now, yeah. [*indistinct*] Everywhere I go, I photograph cemeteries.

CM: Okay.

LA: 'Cause one, I grew up always going to cemeteries. I mean with my mom and my grandmother, and Aunt Bea would go too, to the San Gabriel Mission. And we'd start in the cemetery here, then we'd go to this one, then that corner, and then this corner.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And then we'd, you know, we'd have lunch, and they would just talk about all these people. And I never knew, or . . . But it was just something we always did. Then when my grandmother died, we—me and my mom would always go and take flowers to her and my grandfather, who I never knew, who named me Laura Leigh. [*indistinct*]

CM: Oh.

LA: No, no, 'cause I was named after his sister who died in childbirth. So that's where my namesake came from. And this is my England—English—

CM: Wow. Okay, so there's a lot of cemetery photos. Now, what appeals to you about cemeteries as a place to shoot?

LA: One, I mean like I said, just that it was something I always did. Go places to and spend time with family there, and . . . But when I went to England, and when I was in Syracuse, I realized, you know, how—more so in England—that, you know, the craftsmanship of the, of the, you know, like the angels here and stuff like that, was just amazing. And then they're like 500 years old, and, you know. And it's like, you know, of years and years of [*indistinct*].

CM: And then some of them are centuries old sculptures.

LA: And see, I don't, you know, maybe because I grew up in California and went to Universal every time someone came to visit us, that it's just like, you know, it's kind of hard to imagine something being there 500 years. [*laughs*] See, like I said, angels have feet.

CM: Angels have feet.

LA: Yeah, that's what I learned in England. [*laughs*] So. But it's just, you know, it's peaceful, and it's just . . . I love the craftsmanship 'cause it's something you don't see anymore.

CM: Umm. That's true. People don't get gravestones like this anymore.

LA: They get some that are, like, engraved from a machine.

CM: Yeah, they're usually very smooth.

LA: Yeah.

CM: But not the statuary.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Here is a Celtic cross.

LA: Mm-hmm. Now this one is one of my favorites because, okay, you have to really look at it good. 'Cause it says, you know, this person, and then—let me get it out of here so you get to see it. Okay. See where it says this person's name, "wife of the above"?

CM: Yes.

LA: I didn't see it when I photographed it, but I—when I was developing it, I go, "Oh, how amazing!"

CM: Why? That she would just be listed as—

LA: As the "wife of the above."

CM: The "wife of the above." That's all—that's what she was reduced to in death.

LA: Well, see 'cause the thing is, when I saw this, I was going more for shapes like a chessboard. You know. Then, like. And so, like the next couple, like, you know, "These kind of look like chess pieces to me." So,

like I said, I didn't know it. I didn't see it that way. But I when I saw it in the darkroom, I go, "You gotta be kidding."

CM: Wow.

LA: And then these are the old condominiums and here's the new ones. [*laughs*]

CM: Oh, wow. Yeah, exactly.

LA: So.

CM: This is in Ireland or England?

LA: England. Yes. Northern England. Newcastle. [*pause*] Okay, so this is also in Oaxaca. [*pause*]

CM: These are more gravestones in Oaxaca.

LA: Well—

CM: Or like shrines?

LA: Yeah. Well, that's a community where people don't, you know, have actually a place where they bury the person.

CM: That's a communal grave?

LA: Yeah. And then like those again, see—

CM: These, these are very modernist.

LA: Yeah.

CM: The shapes on these are remarkable.

LA: Like I said, it reminds me of chess pieces. [*pause*] And that's the poorer part of—I mean, we went to a couple different cemeteries. Some are poorer than others.

CM: Where—when were you in Oaxaca?

LA: Mmm . . . Like, '90, maybe '94 the first time.

CM: Why were you down there? Just to—

LA: Day of the Dead. I got a grant and I had money to go somewhere, so me and Sybil went to Oaxaca. Ah! I went through a culture shock.

CM: You went to what?

LA: I went through a culture shock when I went to Mexico.

CM: Really, why?

LA: Well, okay, so. Get in to Mexico City, then we went to the pyramids. Avenue of the pyramids?

CM: Yes.

LA: And—

CM: Teotihuacán.

LA: Yeah. And then a couple days later we went to Oaxaca. And then when we get to Oaxaca, we get out of the airport and they have steps, and then there's a little building there. And I swear it was like we were on a movie set somewhere. [*laughs*] It was very tropical and all that. And then we get to town, and the guy that, you know, he goes, "Oh, you go down this, and your hotel's over there," and da da da. So we get there to the hotel, and it's a long, long day. And when—we sat down on the bed. And it's like, "This is awful." And I see what was down—I go, "Sybil, we only have a mattress." I mean we had separate beds, but I go, "There's a mattress and then the cement!" [*laughter*] And then I was reading again the description of the hotel in the book that we picked it from, and it says, you know, "Tile floor shower," you know, bathroom. I go, I see the tile, I see the tile on the floor. I see the sink. I see the toilet, but I don't see the shower part. The whole room is the bathroom, so the shower was in the middle, so you just hit the thing, and you know. So it had a tile on the bottom. [*laughs*] And I started to cry.

CM: [*laughs*] Why?

LA: It just—oh, the next thing that came is that the—when the toilet flushed, there was a pole right outside the apartment. I mean the windows from—and you could see things coming down. So I was . . . [*laughs*] The people who were above us, their shit coming down, you could see it. And I said, "I don't want to see that!" [*laughter*]

CM: You're like, "This is a little too rustic for me"?

LA: It was just too primitive for me, I suppose. Oh, but it was also another thing before it. You have to go down this street, and there's this bend on both sides, and then you go through it and then you turn, and there's the hotel over here. Which it wasn't the problem, but it's just that going through that. It was the meat market and all those flies and everything. It's like I couldn't— "I'm not eating here!" [*laughter*] [*indistinct*]

CM: How long were you there?

LA: I think we were in Oaxaca for five days.

CM: Five days?

LA: But we had stopped in Mexico City for three days, you know. So but yeah, it was the first time I was actually in— My brother, I think he had just died, or the year before. And then when I went down there, Gilbert was in the hospital and he was really sick. You know, I mean, he thought he was going to die, and I thought he was going to die. And when I went to go see him before I left, anyhow, he was like really weak and all. And he goes, "I'm sorry." And I go, "What do you mean, you're sorry? He goes, "You know, your birthday." I go, "Yeah." Because my brother died the year before. And it was like I finally decided to celebrate my birthday, and then my brother died a month later. And my mom had been, ten years since my mom had died. So. And he goes, "I know you think I'm going to die, and hopefully I don't. But, you know. And if I do, I'm sorry."

So I had this—it was the first time I had a grant, too, that gave me money to go somewhere. And so . . . So then I cried that day about that hotel, and Sybil said, "Okay, tomorrow we'll go look for a new one." So we went to go see a new one, and the only problem that there was, was that I could live with, so all you had to do was jiggle the toilet thing. I could do that! We do that at home all the time! Okay, so this was a lot better. And it's right in the *zócalo*, you know. So I thought, "Okay, I can do this." And then so, we started walking around town and sightseeing. And one day we found a bakery. So the next day I wanted to go back to the same bakery, and she couldn't remember. And so she asked the guy how to get there. And I go, "Okay, he said right. Let's go left, because every man we ask directions to had no clue, but they just have to tell us how they think we should get there." You know? "And they don't care once we leave their sight [*laughs*] if we get there or not." So this man said to turn right, I decided we turn left. And we turn around the corner and I ran into a woman that was in a photo workshop with me in Monterey couple a years before that.

CM: Wow.

LA: So she was with her partner there. It was just great to run into Jenny. And she knew that—she'd been to Oaxaca several times for the Day of the Dead. So the next three days we hung out with them and, you know, it was really nice, 'cause they knew where we were going and they loved to shop.

CM: And did you—were you taking pictures this whole time?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

CM: Did you take pictures of the Day of the Dead celebrations as well, or—

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Were you focused more [on] abstract architectural—

LA: Well, no, no. I mean, well, I liked that. I mean I—

CM: The cemetery stuff?

LA: The cemetery stuff. It's just something from my mom and Aunt Bea, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so we did go there to photograph. And then one day we went to, well, out of town. I mean out of Oaxaca, you know, like half-hour ride on, um . . . We went to this other town and they celebrate the Day of the Dead on the thirty-first. So, and the cemetery's at the top of this hill. And as we get closer to it it's just like . . . It's amazing. It's beautiful. All this light coming from, you know, the candles and stuff. And you get out. There's no plugs there. You know, it's a cemetery that's on top of this hill. And then there's buses there and all these people coming out of the buses to go to the cemetery. And so me and Sybil thought,

"Well this is too—this is sacred ground. Are we going to take the camera," da da da da da da. And so she asked this woman who had some kids with her, how does she see the people coming in and taking pictures. And she goes, "It's . . ." She said something that was great. I don't remember per se, and then me and Sybil felt, "Okay, we're not crossing anyone's," you know, "boundaries." And she actually invited us to come to her house the next day, but we were going to be somewhere else. And she's a school teacher, and so Sybil and her connected, you know, and all that. So—

CM: And this is Sybil Venegas from East LA College?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Okay.

LA: And, you know. And friend, family—extended family to me.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so, it was great. And so it—she gave us the freedom not to feel guilty, 'cause basically that's what everyone was coming to, and then—oh, she said something, that it's not about the ego, it's about the remembrance of family and sharing and you know.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: So [*indistinct*] we felt, I mean, great, because we didn't feel like we were like all those other Americans coming. [*laughs*]

CM: Exactly. Exactly. Now, what—was this your first trip to Mexico, or had you been before?

LA: Second time.

CM: Okay.

LA: The first time I came, I came for this Latin lesbian conference.

CM: In Mexico City?

LA: In Mexico City, so.

CM: That's right.

LA: And when we were there, we spent the day before we left, we went to the pyramids there. So. And then, so, you know, they—you know, Day of the Dead is around, is right when they have the elections every year. So every corner of the *zócalo* has a stage, and every different part of it have their music or their talking, you know, and just go around in circles. And they had a little carnival and stuff. And so I love this picture, but I don't really want to ever truly . . . I show it when I do lectures and stuff. But it's like, these three little boys asked us—you know, I had a camera, my other friends had a camera—"Would you take our picture and then pay them?" And I said, "Okay," you know. I did, but I go, "You know, I can't really want to show this, because this could be put on any magazine and saying how these poor people, you know, and these poor children." And, but, you know, we didn't want not to help them, so we, you know.

CM: You took the picture?

LA: I took the picture.

CM: And gave them some money.

LA: And I gave them some money. And see it's like—and to me that's this is like something you could rip someone off and get money for.

CM: Yeah.

LA: I just don't feel that work—

CM: You don't want to make money off of it?

LA: Yeah. No. And so. But I love the picture. And I sometimes talk about it when I talk to students about photography or working in community and what does it mean. And so.

CM: Exactly.

LA: You know. And then we met these two little girls—I mean, the sisters. And 'cause like they had rides and games you could play, so they just sort of tagged along with us, and we got them stuff. And—oh, and then so one of them was playing a game and won somebody something, and she could pick what she wanted. Now, we all later started laughing about it, because she's the one who came—she was the youngest sister

and she came up to us, you know. And then followed, you know, and hung out with us. And then when she got the thing—she got a little basket, 'cause she's the business woman. She's gonna put stuff in that and walk around trying to sell it, you know. [*laughter*] But we just knew right away, she's—and the other one wanted a nice little comb. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah. Yeah.

LA: So it's just, it was just—it was really sweet, 'cause it was great to have these people just sort of pop into it with us, you know, that evening. You know, the boys went in the morning and the girls went in the evening at the carnival thing.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so yeah, we just had fun.

CM: Yeah, yeah. How was that trip important to you as an artist, or was it?

LA: I don't know if it was important as an ar— I don't think things like that about. It's just things that I do, and then I like what I'm doing at that time, and then I'm growing or whatever. But I don't see things like that, because I don't see them as . . . I don't see going there as a project.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: You know. It's what I experience and what I like. And maybe someday it would be a show, but it's not necessary. It's just being in the moment of the place, you know. It's more about—yeah, it's that, and mainly because I don't have—I can't communicate really. So, you know, 'cause I don't speak Spanish.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so it's like, you know, like I didn't really want to intrude in, you know, people's— So like, it's easier to like hit— This is at the one at nighttime. I mean, no, during the day [we] went to this one.

CM: The cemetery?

LA: The cemetery, yeah. And it's just . . . [*pages rustle*] This was a couple like, at another one that was a very poor cemetery. So, it just . . . I don't know, I try not—I don't want—I respect the Day of the Dead, and I respect cemeteries in general. Because it's, I don't know, it's, to me it's family again, like I said.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And some from—more from England.

CM: These are from England?

LA: Yeah.

CM: And what were you in England for?

LA: Oh, they brought me out to England to, um . . . put a show to—I mean, I was invited to meet these, this other artist from London. And Newcastle was sponsoring her.

CM: This one's awesome.

LA: Yeah. And so I came to England to meet people about a show, and that's when I made the commitment to photograph myself in nature.

CM: Okay. Oh! That was why you needed to do, then do that series that you did at Delilah's.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Or, with Delilah. [*pause*]

LA: Yeah, so. But like, this one angel again, all these—

CM: The dramatic poses?

LA: I didn't think about it that way. [*laughs*]

CM: [*indistinct*] I mean, when you think about the sculptor making that piece, there was, you know, a lot that went into it. I'm gonna have to stop because I need to change batteries.

LA: Okay.

[*break in audio*]

CM: So how did, how did you come across Judy Dater's work?

LA: No, I want to continue with this—

CM: Okay, let's finish talking about [*indistinct*]
LA: Finish talking about my cemeteries. [*laughs*]
CM: Cemeteries, and then we can talk about Judy.
LA: Yeah, so. This is like in Boston.
CM: Oh.
LA: No, no, not Boston.
CM: Massachusetts somewhere?
LA: No, no, no. It's in New York. Syracuse.
CM: Okay.
LA: It's uh . . . It's at the . . . Right across from the . . . Canada. It's . . .
CM: Buffalo?
LA: Buffalo! Yeah.
CM: Buffalo.
LA: Boston, Buffalo.
CM: Fantastic.
LA: Oh.
CM: And this is in Buffalo, too?
LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Well . . . Might be 'cause I did some at the, at the . . . No, I think it's at—in Syracuse. 'Cause the college ends and then it's the cemetery. And then, as soon as you pass the cemetery, it's where all the dorms—housing for people in the college.
CM: And—
LA: Now, this is one of my favorites. [Fig. 18]
CM: Really?
LA: Because—
CM: [*reads inscription*] "William Gary"?
LA: Yeah, it's because it's like, you know, this angels and these are probably people who had wealthy money, but it's about the love of the person. And it's a little rock that they chopped out. You know, I mean, you know, it's hand made. And it's just, like, that's more than a beautiful angel. Actually, they are equal to me, you know.
CM: Yeah, yeah.
LA: 'Cause it's more of love, you know.
CM: With the little raccoon statues.
LA: I know, they're plastic little raccoons. [*laughs*]
CM: That's great.
LA: So, yeah. [*shuffles photos*] This is Buffalo, too.
CM: Okay.
LA: So, yeah. Same ceme—yeah, so. There's no name, there's no name, but she's there. [*laughs*]
CM: Exactly. Doing her thing.
LA: And so, let's see [indistinct] . . . [*shuffles photos*]
CM: Do you still shoot cemeteries?
LA: Whenever I have a—not so much here, because I know them all.
CM: Yeah.
LA: I've been through them all.
CM: What's the most interesting cemetery to you in the LA area?
LA: I like Evergreen.

Figure 18. *New York #4,* 1994. Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 inches.

CM: Evergreen is good.

LA: Particularly after we have an earthquake.

CM: Why?

LA: Because angels fall.

CM: Really?

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: And you find that makes for interesting pictures?

LA: Mm-hmm. And see they—if it's a, you know, if it's something that does actually make things fall, they won't put anything back up for six months to a year because we might have aftershocks. So. I mean, and we don't—most parts—cemeteries don't make statues anymore in California.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Or at least this region. [*pause*] So, yeah, I like Evergreen, I think, the best. And there's a couple of other ones. This one is my favorite. [Fig. 19]

Figure 19. *Barcelona, Spain #1*, 1996. Gelatin silver print, 9 x 7 inches.

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: Barcelona.

CM: This is in Barcelona. A skeleton kissing—

LA: A man.

CM: A man.

LA: A dying man.

CM: Wow, this is incredible.

LA: And then here's another one of that piece.

CM: Wow. Oh, this is from behind.

LA: Mm-hmm. [*shuffles photos*] And then I found . . . [*shuffles photos*] I mean, the craftsmanship is just amazing.

CM: Yeah. This is in Barcelona, too? The old man with the beard?

LA: Yeah, yeah. And the interesting [thing] about Barcelona is that— I mean, I was there, and I had a day, and we went— The person that was taking me around, we had to go to the, a certain building. I had to show my passport, that I'm only going to be here for a couple of days, so they would let me go and take pictures. Otherwise you have to get an approval ahead of time to take pictures of the ceme— That's one of my angels with feet.

CM: Angels with feet!

LA: That's one of my favorites of a lot of them.

CM: Why are you—why do you like the idea that angels have feet?

LA: Makes them more human, I suppose. I don't know. I just never saw . . . I never thought about angels having feet. Until I started noticing that they have feet. The older the cemetery is, they have feet. As we get closer to now, there's no feet.

CM: Then the robes—

LA: [*laughter*]

CM: Then the robes cover up the feet.

LA: Yeah, but it's like the feet is part of the humanness of what angels—we think angels are.

CM: Hmm.

LA: You know. I don't know what we really think angels are, but, 'cause I wasn't really seeing things in a religious sense. I just always liked . . . But you know, I can't—see, I can't figure out what it is about cemeteries that I like. Beyond the . . . just the texture.

CM: Umm.

LA: Look at that. I mean, this—

CM: A wood cross.

LA: This is in New Mexico.

CM: Now, when did you take this? Is this when you went out to do the Stillness series with Delilah?

LA: No, no. I was, I think . . . I think this is one of the times I went with Delilah.

CM: Okay.

LA: Yeah. I mean, it's just that this is what I did the first couple of days when I was avoiding doing the nudes.

CM: Mm-hmm. Oh, so it was on that trip? Okay.

LA: It was on that trip, yeah.

CM: You're like, "I'll take pictures of cemeteries, so I don't have to . . ."

LA: Yeah, I have to move my way into it, you know.

CM: Yeah. You're like, "Let me think about the setting a little bit."

LA: [*laughs*] [*shuffles photos*]

CM: Ooh, this little one. It looks like a little mini wood church. This is amazing. [*shuffles photos*]

LA: So what [is] left of that cemetery . . . is just . . . [*shuffles photos*]

CM: Do you like the darkroom process? Is that something you enjoy?

LA: Yeah, it's very quiet and, you know. Most of my early work, when I did work in my darkroom, it was a lot of Joan Baez early work. And it kind of gets me in the mood, 'cause it's kind of deep, I suppose, or kind of depressing.

CM: Little melancholy?

LA: Yes. And about Joe Hill and . . . [*laughter*] But I loved it, you know. When I was photographing Monica, the photogra—the photojournalist— And this also has to do with the environment, 'cause you can't really can't put flowers out there. They'd be dead before you leave, you know, the grounds.

CM In New Mexico?

LA: Yeah, in New Mexico.

CM: 'Cause it's so dry.

LA: Yeah. And I, you know, it's just that, you know . . . I think sometimes, I think these are more precious than the ones that are all fancy.

CM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

LA: Because it's just, you know.

CM: Because it's everyday people doing some gesture?

LA: Mm-hmm. Of remembrance and, you know, so . . . And there was this one . . .

CM: I agree.

LA: That I did in . . . I think it was in New Mexico, too. And it was . . . I forgot, now. [*laughter*]

CM: So the darkroom process for you is a nice, enjoyable quiet time?

LA: Kind of, yeah.

CM: Have you always shot film? Do you ever shoot digital?

LA: No, I do it now.

CM: You shoot digital now?

LA: Yeah. But I still don't have anything to print things. I mean, you know, I have . . . I have a lot of things on digital disc right now, whatever.

CM: When did you start shooting digital?

LA: Well, I haven't done a lot of it. Maybe within the last five years?

CM: Okay.

LA: But it's just been a little bit, because I didn't have a digital camera myself.
CM: Okay, got it.
LA: I like things like that.
CM: The texture on this peeling Christ?
LA: Mm-hmm. [*pause*]
CM: The rock.
LA: Yeah. And I mean, I kind of approached the, the cemetery like I approach people. Started, go back, come back in. 'Cause it is to me like a portrait of . . .
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: You know. So. This is my little book of when I'm gonna get time to work in the darkroom again, these are the ones I'm going to print. [*laughs*]
CM: Okay. [*laughter*]
LA: Or maybe one of them. It's like when I get, come down to, you know.
CM: So you keep this black notebook with the—
LA: Little proof prints, you know.
CM: Proof prints of—
LA: Yeah.
CM: Of the—
LA: Of what—
CM: Images.
LA: Of images that I like and hopefully someday will be put in some kind of like, you know, piece.
CM: Yeah.
LA: You know. Like this one I loved. Mother and daughter.
CM: Wow. I always think of that—
LA: This is in . . . Georgia—
CM: I always think of that Los Lobos song "Angels with Dirty Faces."
LA: Oh.
CM: Have you heard that song?
LA: Uh-uh.
CM: I think you might like it. [*laughter*]
LA: This is in Barcelona. . . . These are from Barcelona.
CM: Okay.
LA: I mean, this is what I would like to do digitally, you know, and just play with, you know, the shapes and the forms.
CM: Sort of fracturing the body, splitting it up into two images?
LA: Pretty much, yeah. And then here's like, you know . . . And it's all together.
CM: Creating a sense of movement?
LA: Pretty much, yeah. So . . . Here's all the—
CM: The skeleton holding the figure in Barcelona?
LA: Yeah. Yeah. And then this is Texas, and this is Texas. This is England. . . . Not sure where this is. I think it might be Georgia, too.
CM: The headless statues?
LA: Mm-hmm. I love these of Oaxaca. I mean this is at the pyra—
CM: Pyramids?
LA: No, this is—
CM: Teotihuacan?
LA: Yeah, yeah. . . . On my travels.
CM: Travel images?

LA: Yeah. [*shuffles photos*] Pretty much this has my cemetery stuff. [*indistinct*]
CM: It looks like a few other things snuck in there.
LA: Now, this one is more . . . If I had to print it again, I have a little diagram, of where to [*indistinct*], you know.
CM: Where you want to burn.
LA: And when you want to, you know . . .
CM: Highlight?
LA: Lighten, you know? [*pause*] You want to get the picture?
CM: I got it. Oh, here. Perfect.
LA: And so, I love cemeteries.
CM: I can tell.
LA: [*laughs*] But I also find a lot of people like them, too.
CM: Yes!
LA: I mean the pictures, not necessarily hunting for them.
CM: I like wandering around cemeteries as well.
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: It can be really beautiful.
LA: Let me go to the next thing. I want to show you these all, 'cause I have a lot of them over all the years. So I just wanted, you know, to just get it out of the—
CM: Just kind of flip through? See stuff?
LA: Yeah. 'Cause it's, it's something that I'm always attracted to, wherever I go.
CM: Yeah.
LA: And it also tells you about the community by, you know, when it's really hardy. A flower will die in a half-hour, you put plastic things or, you know, other things. There was this one. It was great. There was the mother on this side and then the husband was on the other side. They're sort of facing each other, but the husband has—can—cement around it. A little like this—
CM: Like a little cement—
LA: Frame.
CM: Frame.
LA: Like a frame. And that's all cement. And it has "Dad." And then it has beer can here and a beer can here. And that's all it had. And then Mom's over there, with bunny rabbits and angels and, you know, all these other things. And still—and see my brick thing, but all this other stuff's there. It's like, you know, like Easter bunny and then Santa Claus and . . . It was hilarious.
CM: Omigod.
LA: And Dad was just beer. [*laughs*]
CM: Let's keep it simple.
LA: That's all we can say about Dad. He liked his beer.
CM: [*laughs*]
LA: So I thought that was [*indistinct*].
CM: Here, do you need help with that?
LA: Camera. That's a toy.
CM: So this is a toy camera?
LA: Yeah, and also—
CM: Now, what led you to experiment with a toy camera?
LA: Oh, it was sort of when I first started photography, in— Suda House, she was teaching alternative process, you know. Old style. I mean, how— And so I got into doing the pinhole camera. Then I started doing—then I got—there was this camera that was in the '60s that, like, Suda and her friends, they all grew up using that in photography class and high school and stuff like that. And it was a little camera called Diana. And it's plastic, and Sears sold it for sixteen bucks. And it was really good. And so when I was starting to do

this stuff in the early '80s, they had came out with a new camera called the Holga, which is similar to the Diana, but it's a two and a quarter negative. And then you had a thing that you could take it—you could make it like a 6 [by] 4.5 [cm format] negative, or you pop that thing out and then it's a nice square negative, but it has light leaks.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And that was the whole thing about doing the, you know, playing around with a plastic lens.

CM: Yeah.

LA: 'Cause this is just plastic.

CM: It gives it a sense of kind of . . . almost like a filter.

LA: Yeah.

CM: It's not as sharp.

LA: No. And it's, and it's yeah. And, but it . . . I guess for me it was a big challenge to make images that weren't sharp. And this is a photographer from Canada. I can't remem—Susan? I don't remember her last name. And this is Dennis Callwood. He's a photographer in LA. And this is Ron . . . I can't think of his last name right now. And he basically—Ron has been on the streets photographing vets for years. [Possibly Ronald D. Corbin, who exhibited his work at the Los Angeles Photography Center—ed.]

CM: And these are all toy camera portraits?

LA: All toy camera portraits of photographers. [*laughs*]

CM: What years are this?

LA: Oh, let me see . . .

CM: Approximately? [*pause*]

LA: See, early '90s? Yeah, 'cause I was a lab tech at this time for one of the colleges. So, okay. [*moves boxes*] Okay, this is toy camera again, but this is the parade that Gilbert was talking about, "Beyond the Track."

CM: Yes.

LA: So. [*moves boxes*]

CM: This is the lid.

LA: Okay. I thought I brought two things up.

CM: I think it's behind you.

LA: Oh, okay. See, these—oh, I found them again. I didn't know I still had them.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah, 'cause they were in the garage. [*laughs*] I'm happy to find them.

CM: Yeah.

LA: [*indistinct*] Old friends—

CM: All this will come in handy for the—when you really start hardcore research on the Vincent Price show. [*Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell,* at the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College, September 16, 2017–February 10, 2018—ed.]

LA: [*laughs*] Yeah. Let's see.

CM: And then tell me a little bit about these.

LA: Oh, this is my Will Work For [series]. [Fig. 20]

CM: Will work for?

LA: Yeah, that's the title of the volume.

CM: And you would choose—you would ask people to make a sign of what they would work for?

LA: No, no, no. It's just, you know, how everyone at the, at—when you get off the freeway, has something they—

CM: Will work for food?

LA: Yeah, and stuff like that. I wanted to work for access to being an artist. [*laughs*]

CM: Oh, so these are self-portraits?

LA: Yeah.

CM: When are these from?

Figure 20. *Access + Opportunity = Success*, 1993. Five gelatin silver prints, 6 x 4 inches each.

LA: Oh, I don't know. Let me think. Let me see. "Access plus opportunity . . . equals success." [*laughs*] [*indistinct*]

CM: So these are from the '90s as well?

LA: Yeah. One of my pieces. So.

CM: The texture on the cardboard here is incredible. You could see the . . .

LA: The cans?

CM: The bottoms. Yeah. The cans or bottles that the box held. [*moves boxes*]

LA: Where's the lid for that?

CM: It's right here. Will Work For series.

LA: Okay, so, me being dyslexic and not knowing how to spell things. My friend Maria was helping me that day, and I asked her how to you spell *access*. So she spelled it out. And go, "Are you sure?" She goes, "Spell it any way you want, Laura." And then I didn't realize it wasn't spelled right, but it has that meaning of the word *access*, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So. And then I was at—this was at Barnsdall Park. You know—have you been there?

CM: Yeah. Yeah.

LA: Okay. So, it's when you're leading up into the park. And it was so funny, 'cause the guy who was in charge of Cultural Affairs was having lunch with the director of that building, and they were just coming down and they saw. They just started laughing and kept on walking. [*laughs*]

CM: Have you felt, really, like throughout the course of your career, have you felt like you had good access to the art world, or have you felt kind of outside of it?

LA: I've been, I've been—I just do my thing. I mean, to be honest, and I never knew about seeing—I mean, photography's been the only way I could express myself, you know. Even—I believed in myself, and people didn't think I had a sense of anything. But, um, and it's like as long as I had control of having access to it, then I could do whatever I want with my money, you know. So. But I never have ever felt a part of any kind of . . . 'Cause I've been alone the whole time doing this.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: I might have lot of people help me, you know. But it's just, it's very much isolated. And then when you work in the darkroom it's very isolated.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You know. And it's lot of people who—lot of photographers I met, some of them prefer the darkroom than shooting. And it's very rarely you find people who like both parts of it. And I like both parts of it 'cause I like the solitude, and then just, you know. The—just being in the work and then having to come up— It's really weird, 'cause it's like, I've been doing this for, I don't know, since I was seventeen years old. And I still

find it like magic, you know, in the dark room. It's just the image pops up, and it's like, "Oh-ooh." You know. So it's like, I don't know. It's very . . . And sometimes when I say that, people are just like, "Uhh." You know, it's like I'm making it too simple. But it's not. It is simple. I mean in the sense of how you—

CM: How you view it?

LA: Yeah. And to me it's . . . it's been the only thing that I could sort of express myself.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: You know. This kind of work started giving me that, you know.

CM: Now, for photos like this, do you crop a lot in the darkroom? Or do you tend to frame when you're shooting, and then that's the frame you develop? How—I mean, how do you—

LA: Well, with this, this is full frame.

CM: Yeah.

LA: You see this kind of border around it?

CM: Yeah, yeah.

LA: It's full frame. So I didn't do anything to this or this. It was ready set that way. So what was the question?

CM: But in general, I mean, is that something—do you crop a lot when you're developing? Like, "Oh, I'm just going to use this piece of the negative"?

LA: Well, that's what— Doing portraits, I would start close up, and then I'd back away and meet in the middle. And so I always try to get certain distance from the end, back and forth. And then I decide from the contact that I make. It's like you don't want to crop too much, 'cause when you do the negative, the image has more contrast to it. 'Cause, yes, you're blowing it up one little lame part of that little negative. So you know, you try to—

CM: So you'd rather edit yourself during the photographic process, not in the darkroom so much? In terms of the frame, the framing?

LA: Well, ye—I don't think of it that way, you know. I just know that you have to get people comfortable with you. Some people get a little nervous, the closer you get. Diego, go get it! [*laughs*] It's a squirrel, they climb up there. See? He doesn't chase squirrels for some reason.

CM: Really, he's not into squirrels?

LA: He likes birds. [*laughs*]

CM: He likes birds.

LA: And lizards. [*laughs*]

CM: He likes birds and lizards.

LA: So, okay. I don't, I don't know. I just don't—I don't know how to describe, 'cause I don't . . . It's just what feels good or what looks good, you know, when I'm deciding to do what we're going to do.

CM: Got it.

LA: So.

CM: But in the darkroom, you play with things like shading and contrast?

LA: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I mean, yeah. [*moves boxes*]

CM: Here, take this one out. Okay.

LA: So this is another Day of the Dead. And this is at the Photo Center, and I think it was '93.

CM: Okay.

LA: And these, a lot of, you know. Okay, so. This body of work came out of, uh . . . we had the Photo Center and we were having the photo—Day of the Dead shows every year. So, this year, I de—a friend had a backdrop he got in Mexico, and I borrowed it from him. And then this is my parachute, and then I made a coffin.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And Glenna's husband had put together the—made the coffin for me. And I gave him a case of beer.

CM: [*laughs*]

LA: And then, when I brought—

CM: Little barter?

LA: Kind of, yes. It was—he goes, "Oh, I'll help you." And, so. And these are these people. And so, when people came, you know, I had this [*indistinct*] for like, you know, five dollars a Polaroid. "And would you mind if I also take you with my own camera?"

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so, then they just had to sign a model's release. And so. So I photographed people and, you know, the money I made that day—even though I really didn't make any and I was charging five dollars a Polaroid—I made the money to buy the case of beer and then to pay the paint and then the board. And I had four dollars left over. [*laughs*]

CM: So, you broke even?

LA: I'm not a business person, you can see. [*laughter*]

LA: That's my friend Mai, who is a lab tech, and that's her daughter. And then it's Elena. And see here's some of the kids that worked on her mural—one of her murals. And this is the only one that I gave a title to, and this is called "Fig Leaf to." [*laughs*] That's Richard. [Fig. 21]

CM: What's Richard's last name?

LA: Valverde.

CM: Oh, this is Richard Valverde. Okay.

LA: [*laughs*]

CM: So you knew him well?

LA: Umm.

CM: But he got you gigs, right? No?

LA: No, not necessarily. We just sort of crossed each other's paths.

CM: Paths, okay.

LA: And after a while it just, you know.

CM: I guess if you're into photography in LA at that time, you're going to run into each other?

LA: Mm-hmm, at openings and stuff like that. But, you know. Harry [Gamboa] and Barbara [Carrasco]. This might have been the last time they were ever in a picture together.

CM: Who?

LA: Harry and Diane and Diego. [Fig. 22]

CM: Oh, yeah. They don't talk to each other, do they? [Referring to Harry and Diane Gamboa, Harry's sister—ed.]

Figure 21. *Richard Valverde (Fig Leaf to)*, 1989. Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 inches.

Figure 22. *Harry Gamboa Jr., Diego Gamboa, and Diane Gamboa*,1989. Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 inches.

LA: They don't speak at all to each other. And that became a poster for the next, following year's Day of the Dead.

CM: Who's Diego? Was that Harry's son?

LA: Harry's son, yeah. [*pause*] Father and son, too. Okay. Let me see. [*pause*] And this is Linda, Harry and Diane's sister. She does like jewelry and stuff.

CM: Another Gamboa?

LA: Mm-hmm. [*pause*] Oh, I love those two kids. Particularly him. He was great. So. And that year, he had done this piece with it, so. This is Diane—I mean, Margaret Garcia.

CM: Margaret Garcia.

LA: Yeah. You know her?

CM: In the long dress. No.

LA: Oh. She's an institution.

CM: Really? Now, this is really interesting. So you said that you grew up, like, not really identifying so much with your Mexican culture. Yet, once you became an adult, you did shoot a lot of things that pertained to it.

LA: Well, I stumbled into it.

CM: You stumbled into it?

LA: Yeah, I found out we were closet Mexicans. [*laughs*]

CM: But, you know, you're shooting Day of the Dead, you're going to Oaxaca, you're shooting Latina lesbians. Like, there's a lot of that. The Plush Pony, I mean that was like a lot of Latina women. I mean, was that a way you think of like embracing it, investigating it? Like . . .

LA: I kind of feel like a lot of my life is—that's been good things that have happened out it—is stumbling into it, 'cause it wasn't really my intention. I mean, you know, I never intended to—decided to go to a Chicano studies class. And then other things rolled along. Meet artists, going to readings, and [*indistinct*]. And so this one is called—

CM: So it's almost like one thing just led to the next.

LA: It's seems like it always happened.

CM: Like very organically.

LA: Yeah. And this is a piece that I did for the Day of the Dead family. So, yeah.

CM: 'Cause your family probably didn't celebrate Day of the Dead?

LA: They didn't know anything about the Day of the Dead. I didn't know anything about the Day of the Dead and stuff. So. That was from one of the first Day of the Dead I went to. [*shuffles photos*]

CM: So, like, when people—you know, there's, like, so many write-ups—Like, a bunch of those museum, uh, pamphlets that you gave me—all talk about, like, you know, Laura Aguilar, you know, Chicana photographer. Like, how do you feel about that label? About that identification? Do you . . .

LA: Umm.

CM: Have you come to embrace it later, or is it still something that seems . . .

LA: Oh, I embrace it now. It's just, but when I first, I didn't . . . I felt—see I thought that I couldn't fit into the Chicano community because I didn't speak Spanish. Then Barbara [Carrasco] doesn't speak Spanish, and Harry [Gamboa] doesn't speak Spanish, you know, but they grew up in the barrio. And I didn't grow up in the barrio. And so I always felt like, you know, I wasn't quite sure if I could own it. You know. Because I didn't feel like—like I said, I felt—I wanted when I went to Chicano studies class, to learn more about the culture. That's when I realized that we were closet Mexicans, you know. [*laughs*] And you know, my dad, every once in a while, he would take me to get my car fixed and drop it off, and then the guy would speak to me in English and he would speak to my dad in Spanish. And he goes—and he goes, "Why does he always speak to me in Spanish?" I go, "Because you look Mexican. I don't." [*laughs*]

CM: 'Cause your mom was fair, right? You said she was half Irish?

LA: Mm-hmm. But, I mean, my dad, his whole thing about being an American, more than being Mexican, is the thing that I'm kind of referring to.

CM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Of course.

[*break in audio*]

CM: So we're looking at a large portrait of Susana.
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: And this is, again, from the '90s?
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: Late '90s probably?
LA: Actually, no. Probably middle.
CM: Middle?
LA: 'Cause it was when I was doing the lesbian series, but . . . you know.
CM: But then you do a lot of side stuff as well—
LA: Yeah.
CM: As you were working on that.
LA: And see, like with this, she had beautiful light, but she didn't want everyone to see her. So I had a parachute, and I put it over the window so the light gets diffused and it's still beautiful light. And, you know. So.
CM: You like the dappled light effect on people's faces, it seems.
LA: I guess so. I never thought about it that way. And then this is one. And this one is called *At Home with the Nortes*. [Fig. 23]
CM: [*laughs*] And who's that?
LA: They were married.
CM: Okay.

Figure 23. *At Home with the Nortes*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches.

LA: No longer, but they're the Nortes. That's . . . He's a paint—he does, um . . . He does car—I mean, he is—he does animation for his living. And so, actually, this is one of the cartoons that he works for at the time. And then, you know, he has his little dinosaur feet. [*laughs*]
CM: Now, did you stage this photo?
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: You had them paint themselves and . . .
LA: Well, it was for, gonna be the Day of the Dead, and it was around, you know, and a family portrait. And so they just—it was like two weeks before the Day of the Dead. They lived in Montebello and they did the kids and each other, you know. And then I said, "I kind of want to have like a . . ." And then, so he goes, "I have a perfect image for it." That's one of the images from a scene he did, you know.
CM: That's great.
LA: So, yeah. These are my little odd things. [*laughter*]
CM: The odds and ends.
LA: Yeah. It's like I don't always just do one thing at a time.
CM: Yeah, yeah.
LA: You know.
CM: You've got like a bunch of things going. Well, like, I mean—
LA: When the opportunity comes, when someone's going to pose, I take it.
CM: Exactly.

[*break in audio*]

LA: Oh, they're behind you. [*laughs*]
CM: Here they are. Start with this one?
LA: Yeah.
CM: Oh, this is Gilbert, isn't it?
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: Had you talked about shooting him before his death? Was that something you discussed?
LA: No.
CM: You just did it?
LA: Well, see . . . Yeah, I just did it, because it was, like, the end of our friendship. I mean it was, you know, making a circle as us. 'Cause he was at every stage of my photography growth. He was one of my—usually my first beginning person I—my guinea pig. [*laughs*] And I knew that he would have not have minded, you know, 'cause that was our relationship, and it's also for me. So then I had to do—I couldn't do it because of my brother. I knew it would not have been something he would have wanted me to do.
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: He would have understand why I needed to do it, but I know it wouldn't—it would've bothered him, so I didn't do it.
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: And this I felt safe to do because that was our relationship, you know. It was about all these little—Like I said, we grew up together, you know.
CM: Is he the only person you've ever photographed dead? Or have there been others?
LA: One would think I would know. [*laughs*] But I had to think about that.
CM: [*laughs*]
LA: I did Bea in her coffin.
CM: You did Bea in her coffin?
LA: Mm-hmm. And I knew that—
CM: That's a little more traditional, right?
LA: Yeah.
CM: 'Cause this is Gilbert on his deathbed.
LA: Yeah.
CM: Right?
LA: Yeah. I mean because I happened to be there, and his—
CM: You were there when he died?
LA: Um, I got there about a half-hour after he died.
CM: Okay.
LA: And so his parents were there, and they— Kevin, his ex-boyfriend, basically had them going on a goose—you know, a little thing to get something, so that I could come in and take pictures. 'Cause Kevin knew that it was our relationship. So he understood why I needed to do it. And so.
CM: Incredible photos.
LA: And there, I mean, there's beauty there.
CM: Yeah. Oh, there is.
LA: I mean, you know. Just like—
CM: How did you feel when you developed them? From 1996.
LA: [*indistinct*] How did I feel? Well . . . I needed to do it, so, I mean. And I felt it's the end of a friendship, you know. Instead of an end of a relationship, it's the end of a friendship. It's the end of my childhood. Like I said, he was the last person that knew my mom and my bro—my everything. My brother.
CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: Okay, now, so *this* is an image— I was at a workshop in Santa Fe—in Monterrey. And, you know, we had—it was a nude workshop. And I didn't know what to do with the man, so I went and I saw this in a room and I brought it out. And I said, "Here, pose." 'Cause I didn't know how to direct a man. I didn't know what I wanted to do with a man. I understood what I wanted to do with a woman, but I didn't know what I want to do with a man, so. [*laughter*] So that was my first male nude!

CM: You were like, "What do I do with this?"

LA: Pretty much. And then I was asked to do this little pamphlet.

CM: *Live with HIV*.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Now, was this before you had done the Clothed/Unclothed series, or this is parallel?

LA: It's probably around the time, or a little bit after. In the middle, probably. I can't—

CM: Okay, so this concept of having people who are nude together was something—

LA: No.

CM: You were already, like, working out?

LA: No, not really.

CM: No?

LA: They asked me to do it because they knew of my nudes. So.

CM: Got it. Got it.

LA: Yeah. And then because I'm in the community. So they just asked me to do this, 'cause it's for man of color and— Actually, I kind of really got in—I did—you know, into shapes and stuff. [*indistinct*] It's the same image, but, you know, just . . . And I gave them all the choices they could have of these images.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And it's like, [*indistinct*]. It's like, you know, the full frame, or the more tightened crop.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: [*humming*] Yeah. And this is, you know, this is, like . . . Just, you know, a shot after a shot. Just the difference, you know [*indistinct*].

CM: Yeah. To get like the different variations in the pose?

LA: Mm-hmm. So these, what I did for that, 'cause they asked me to. And, you know, I find, found that, I haven't—I was looking. I knew I used to have a stack of them, and I don't have them anywhere.

CM: These HIV pamphlets?

LA: Yeah, yeah, 'cause it's like, you know, I go— I don't remember who I did it for.

CM: So incredible.

LA: And it's, yeah, for some organization but it doesn't even have the organization, because it was a grant through the city.

CM: Now, you were out at this time already, right?

LA: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

CM: When did you, when did you come out?

LA: I don't know. I stumbled out like everything else in my life.

CM: Was it like, just a kind of like, it just kind of happened?

LA: Umm, no.

CM: People kind of figured it out, or . . .

LA: No, no. Like I told you, everyone was always suggesting it before.

CM: Really?

LA: I mean in my family and my cousin and, "We got to do something about Laura before she ends like Mary Ines."

CM: Oh, that's right with her, with her farm and her—

LA: Yeah. Girlfriend and softball thing. So, yeah, it just . . . It just was, I just couldn't put a word, a thing to it.

CM: I mean was there a particular woman you met that made you realize like, "Yes, I have feelings of deep affection"?
LA: Yes, it was Linda Ron— I mean . . . [*laughs*]
CM: It was who?
LA: It was Wonder Woman. Lynda Carter. [*laughs*]
CM: It was Wonder Woman. I love that. I have a friend of mine who figured out he was gay when he realized he thought James Bond was hot. [*laughter*]
LA: It was Lynda Carter and it was Bionic Woman.
CM: Oh, uh . . . what's her name. The blond woman. [Lindsay Wagner—ed.]
LA: Yeah, yeah.
CM: [*sings*] Da da da na na na.
LA: Yeah, yeah. [*laughter*] But Lynda—Wonder Woman first.
CM: And this was—how old were you when you were like . . .
LA: Fourteen. I mean, I had a crush on them. I didn't think about it until years that that's what it was.
CM: Got it.
LA: You know that, you know. But—
CM: But it wasn't really sexual yet? It was kind of that crush?
LA: Well, it was, "Yeah, I want to be with you."
CM: Yeah.
LA: It was a crush, yeah.
CM: Yeah.
LA: So, about fourteen years old.
CM: Uh-huh.
LA: 'Cause other people were putting the words to it, and I just didn't necessarily—
CM: You just kind of rolled with it?
LA: Well, no, I didn't roll with it. I didn't necessarily like people telling me what I was, because everyone was telling me what I thought and I what I felt, because of my not talking a lot and—
CM: Uh-huh.
LA: And he's a writer and a poet, and he— This is for some—he wanted me to photograph something for something he was doing. Of his, you know, card from his show. And I can't even remember his name.
CM: With the long hair and—
LA: And the long hair—
CM: Hairy chest?
LA: And, you know, yeah. And so. I played—I love his hair. So, that's amazing.
CM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm .
LA: So and . . . I did that the same time I was doing this. So.
CM: Now did you come out, come out, or I mean in terms of like, with your family or . . . I mean obviously with friends it's one thing, but . . .
LA: Well, my mom was dead and my brother, in a strange way I came out to him. but not directly to him. But—
CM: Your brother was gay?
LA: No, no, no, no, no. I came, I mean . . . gay. My sister-in-law's mother thought, "Has, have you ever brought this up to your brother?" You know?
CM: Oh, okay.
LA: I want—this one I want to [*indistinct*] to the end. 'cause it's like more [*indistinct*]. [*moves, opens boxes*] Ah, this is Mexico. This is in Oaxaca, too.
CM: With baskets. So your sister-in-law was the one who brought it up . . .
LA: To my brother, yeah.
CM: To your brother?

LA: My brother said he didn't care as long as I'm happy 'cause it's hard to be happy in life, and but don't—

CM: That's a pretty cool brother.

LA: But don't tell Dad 'cause it ain't gonna get him any closer. [*laughs*]

CM: So did you never tell your father?

LA: Why? I mean my dad didn't see me as . . . He had his, you know, women were for men and to do everything they want, they told you to do. And I just [*indistinct*] daughter 'cause I ignored that statement.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And this is my fantasy when I win the lottery ticket and then when I win the Big Spin or whatever. This is going to be my back—looking at my backdoor window.

CM: And where is this?

LA: Mexico City. I mean it's near the pyramids, you know.

CM: With a just a field of corn?

LA: Yep. Or just a, just countryside thing. I like country.

Figure 24. *Plush Pony #2*, 1992. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches.

CM: You like country?

LA: Yep. But not on a daily basis. I could—

CM: You like to be close to the city still?

LA: Well, yeah. I mean I could spend a week or two out in the country, but then that's [*indistinct*] much as it. Unless I'm doing [*indistinct*] work in a dark room that's in the country. [*laughs*]

CM: You could have your—or you win the Big Spin, I think you could build your own darkroom.

LA: Pretty true, yeah. [*indistinct*] So here's the Plush Pony. So. [Fig. 24]

CM: So this is the Plush Pony series. How did you come to the Plush Pony for the first time?

LA: One of my friends knew about it and said, "Let's go. We're over here. Let's go." This is a funky bar and very much into old school, you know. [*arranges photos*] Old school, like, you know, femme and butches, and you don't cross them. You know, so. [*indistinct*] He's the only guy in this picture. He's the one that lives around the block. His wife knows that there's no harm for him to go there. [*laughs*] [Fig. 25]

Figure 25. *Plush Pony #18*, 1992. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches.

CM: Oh, yeah. Exactly.

LA: Oh, so.

CM: Exactly. The ladies aren't going to be into him.

LA: Yeah, so I knew this bar before I met Isabel, and Isabel had the idea of me photographing, 'cause I photographed, I did the lesbian series and she saw it. And she goes, "Have you ever been to the Plush Pony?" I go, "Yeah, I've been there a couple of times." And she goes, "Why don't you, you know, photograph?" So we did a thing at the Photo Center and the studio so I could have examples to show them when I went around selling myself as a photographer and an artist, you know. [*laughter*]

CM: This is before you were comfortable with calling yourself an artist, then?

LA: No, I was actually comfortable with my, you know, I was comfortable with myself. But the thing was that I went around and said, "You know, I'm an artist in the community. I photograph, you know, I try to show the whole community and positive images and da da da da da. And I'm an artist and if you would sign my model's release I would give you a nice photograph from when I shoot you."

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And, "Uh-huh. How much?" I said, "No, it's free." I kept on saying, "Free. Free." And I think they didn't trust me 'cause I was giving them something free. So when one, when Joanne . . . When she said, "How much?," I decided to say, "Five dollars." And she signed my model's release and she posed for me. And then all the other women started coming.

CM: That's great.

LA: But, but it's like—

CM: So all of sudden they took you seriously?

LA: When I put a price to it, yeah. And then no one paid me five bucks. [*laughs*]

CM: So they said they'd pay you five bucks, but then they didn't.

LA: Yeah, because, I mean, if I—if it's for free, what's up? You know, that's how I saw them taking it.

CM: Oh, got it.

LA: So that's why I put a price to it. [*points to images*] And then she said yes, and she said yes, and she said yes, and then they all kind of followed behind her that day, 'cause I went one day and did this all. And, let's see. Yeah, this woman . . . Oh, they came all the way from Pomona, this couple.

CM: This couple?

LA: Yeah.

CM: With the checked, zigzag shirts?

LA: Mm-hmm. The older woman [*indistinct*].

CM: Uh-huh.

LA: But it's just, you know. And again, I had these women just give me an idea to show them, but I didn't do much. I mean, like I said, they weren't easy to convince. 'Cause, you know, and like I could understand it. It's like, what do they want? Because I don't, you know, it's free and nothing—

CM: Exactly.

LA: Really is free. So it was that kind of attitude, and I couldn't blame them. Now, this is Manazar Gamboa, who was a poet. [Fig. 26]

CM: Oh, that's right.

LA: And he passed away some time ago. And this is from one of the pictures of the woman I did in the lesbian series.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And this is Carla Barboza, who's a lawyer.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And, okay, there's a [*indistinct*]. So when I went to her house to photograph her, I saw this chair, and I go, "Oh, oh," you know. And I said, "Okay, I got to photograph you in this chair." And she goes, "Why?" I go, "I'll show you later." And, so, this is her lawyer outfit.

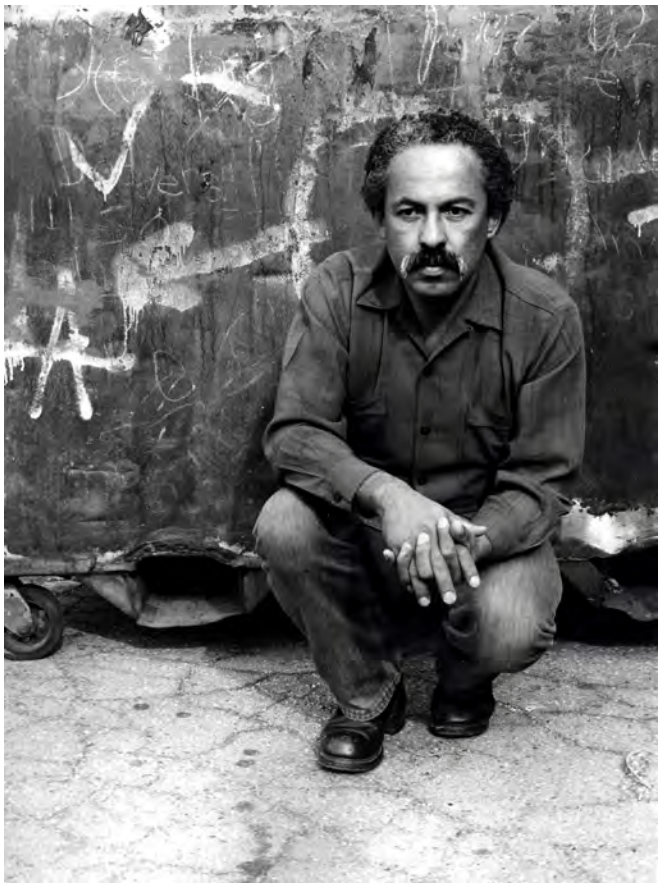

Figure 26. *Manazar Gamboa*, 1985. Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 inches.

CM: Mm-hmm. I like the boots.

LA: Yeah.

CM: That's great.

LA: And so I photographed it. And the next time I saw her I brought a book from Judy Dater I had. And it's an image that Judy did of this woman who's definitely a dyke in this picture in 1970.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And it's almost the same. Different people in the chair, but it's just that same kind of chair. And that, just that [*indistinct*]. I mean, 'cause I adored Judy Dater's work. And, you know, it was like I *had* to do this. Even though it's a copy of someone else's picture, I got to do this because, I mean, no one's really—could do a perfect copy. But it's like—

CM: Yeah.

LA: It's . . .

CM: It's your—

LA: Your, my wishes.

CM: Tribute.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Your tribute.

LA: Yeah, yeah. Well, that's what I called it when I did the Nature Self-Portrait pictures, when I was like in a, um . . .

CM: A ball?

LA: A ball, kind of, yeah. There's three of those images and they're all sort of dedicated to her, because she's been my biggest influence about nudes and nature and stuff like that. So she has this one picture that she's wrapped up in a fetal position and it's all these little rocks around her that are white and sparkle, you know. The white out in the, you know, on a dark dirt, I guess, you know. Anyway, and so, you know, [*indistinct*] when I saw those big boulders I go, "We got to come back tomorrow," 'cause it was late in the evening when I found them. And we were standing in front of Delilah's, who lived on the edge of the Indian land.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so, it was up on the peb—pueblo?

CM: Mm-hmm. On the, on the mesa?

LA: Yeah, on the mesa. Yeah. And so I go, "We're gonna come back early tomorrow morning when the light's in the right place. And so I moved one of the boulders over just a little bit, 'cause it just was too—I needed to be in a certain place, and those three had to be—

CM: In relation to the boulder?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So, um . . .

CM: So you will move things around for the purposes of your photos?

LA: Yeah. I mean if I could. I mean if I couldn't, I—you know, I tried to move it and—

CM: Yeah.

LA: We *did* move it and I only needed to move it just a little bit. So I did that, yeah. And so that was my homage to Judy Dater.

CM: Wow.

LA: Those three pieces, you know. So, yeah. [*laughs*]

CM: Moving boulders. Did you do that a lot in that landscape stuff or . . .

LA: No.

CM: Just to keep going?

LA: That was the only time I've ever actually done that.

CM: Okay.
LA: Because it was possible, you know.
CM: Let me move this. [*refers to items on table*]
LA: I could have worked it from another angle.
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: I probably would have if I couldn't have moved it. But when I moved it, it's like, "Oh."
CM: No, that photo's so perfect. It's hard to imagine it any other way. So how did you come across Judy Dater's work?
LA: Oh, my friend Mai had given me a book that she had. And it was called "Judy Dater and Jack Welpott," who was her husband at the time. And it had the symbols of man and woman on each page—
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: At the bottom. I didn't know what they were symbols of. I go, "You know, that's funny. I like all the pictures that have this on the end of the page." And she goes, "That's the woman's sign, so those are the images that Judy did." I go, "Oh, okay."
CM: Wow.
LA: Yeah. And I really found out that I—and then I started seeing her work in photo books and history books and all that. so. And then when I said I met her at a conference and I actually touched her shoulder and asked her if she would talk to me. [*laughs*]
CM: And you were like, "Whoa!" [*laughs*]
LA: Yeah. She gave me fifteen minutes. She said, "I have fifteen minutes." And then I took advantage of it and I got [*indistinct*] half an hour.
CM: And you turned it into half an hour, didn't you?
LA: Mm-hmm, yeah.
CM: That's good.
LA: Okay, so did I, did I show you these?
CM: Yes.
LA: I don't remember.
CM: I saw these.
LA: 'Cause there was a couple I found out after you left and [*indistinct*].
CM: Yeah, I've seen all of these.
LA: Okay.
CM: These are all Day of the Dead.
LA: Yeah.
CM: Yeah.
LA: And this is the first Day of the Dead.
CM: Yes. Yes. This is the Self-Help Graphics, 1983 Day of the Dead. It's early on.
LA: And this is back to some of the . . .
CM: Experimental?
LA: Angels and experimental process.
CM: And what process is this where they're in blue?
LA: Cyanotype.
CM: Cyanotype? Okay.
LA: Yeah.
CM: Just get one picture so I have it. And then this is you also playing with the image, creating like a symmetry?
LA: 'Cause, yeah, 'cause when you—like there's something magical in this, you know. It's just funny 'cause it just sort of like, makes it. . . I don't know. You can see something else coming, gonna come out of it.
CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: You know. And just, yeah. So. I want to make sure I got through all of these [*indistinct*], you know. I have a lot of Day of the Dead, so. [*moves boxes*]

CM: All right, so we're looking at another box of portraits.

LA: Well, these are more— Yeah I, a couple of them I've think I've shown you, but then there's other ones I—

CM: Okay.

LA: That I found, so.

CM: And these are early? From '80s or early '90s?

LA: Umm, let's see. This is late '80s. No. Late sev— early '80s.

CM: And these are . . .

LA: Gilbert!

CM: Who are these?

LA: Gilbert.

CM: Oh, this is all Gilbert.

LA: Yeah. And this is, what, a year before he died. [Fig. 27]

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: This is when he's like, somewhere after high school. He was like, he got arrested. So that's [*indistinct*].

CM: Oh really?

LA: Yeah, for uh . . . everybody was taking money at the cash register at Montgomery Wards. So that was like fifteen of them that got fired. [*laughs*]

Figure 27. Gil Cuadros, 1993. Gelatin silver print, 12 x 8½ inches.

CM: Oh, really?

LA: And so I was teasing him 'cause we went to, out— He had, his dad left him in lock-up for overnight to learn a lesson. And he got the lecture and all that. Had to see, you know, a parole officer for six months once a month, yeah. And so I, we went to the Queen Mary. I said, "You know, this is going to be your picture if you don't act right." [*laughter*]

CM: "This is how you'll be remembered."

LA: Yes, yes, yes. So that, this is an abandoned hospital in Glendale. I found all these places that were abandoned. This is one of those abandoned buildings. And this is years later. And chubby. And here's a pinhole camera.

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: Image. And then these are from negatives, and you made a contact. [*pause*]

CM: This is Queen Mary, right? 'Cause I recognize this—

LA: Yes.

CM: This vent, this vent from the other, uh . . .

LA: Yeah. I mean, this might have been made a couple years before he passed. And this for another thing for men living with AIDS. And who I did that for I don't remember, 'cause I don't remember any, seeing any piece finished after it, you know. Like the pamphlet the other one had. And [*indistinct*].

CM: Did um . . . How did you find out that Gilbert had AIDS?

LA: He told me.
CM: He told you? I mean did he have it for a long time before he passed away?
LA: Um, no. John, his partner, he was diagnosed on a Monday and he died on a Friday. And this is in ’98.
CM: Wow!
LA: Eighty-nine, I mean. ’89.
CM: Eighty-nine. So this is before all the . . .
LA: It, I mean, it’s already during the time of AIDS and all that, and it’s like a lot of people died fast. But that was . . . ’Cause John worked with, he worked with the homeless on Skid Row.
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: And he, you know he was a psych—
CM: Psychologist?
LA: Yeah. Well, not quite that one but, you know. Um . . .
CM: Psychiatrist?
LA: No. Social worker.
CM: Social worker.
LA: Yeah. And so he, that’s where he worked downtown. And so he got sick right away and thought it was, you know, just a plain flu. But, ‘cause he was working around all these people who had been living on the street and then—
CM: Yeah.
LA: There are all around you coughing and all that stuff so, you know. He didn’t think much of it. Then he—
CM: Had he lost a lot of weight? Was there like a noticeable . . . There wasn’t that noticeable AIDS wasting or . . .
LA: No, because he, like I said, he was diagnosed on Monday. He died on Friday.
CM: Wow.
LA: You know. And then I didn’t know anything about it until he died and then on that morning Gilbert called me up crying and said, “John died this morning.” And, “Come over.” So I went over and . . . And then after that, within less than a year, all John’s friends, that were their friends, abandoned Gilbert.
CM: Wow.
LA: ’Cause I mean they had been friends with John since they were all young men, you know.
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: And so, it’s just, you know. There’s no friendship left for Gilbert, you know in that, ’cause they would go out on, with couples weekends down to Laguna Beach and all this stuff and things like that. So when John died, you know, besides the fact that it took so quickly, he didn’t want to deal with it and I kept on saying, “Have you got—”Me and a friend of his, Devon, we kept on, you know, “You got to go get tested. You need to know.” And all that stuff. Eventually, he did, and then they gave him like a rough estimate of three months.
CM: Mm.
LA: You know. And he lived with it for ten years. And the last five years of his life, every year he got to a point where he was almost dead, then he would turn. So, you know.
CM: Come back?
LA: Come back, yeah. And be healthy again, you know. But then, you know, so. But every year for three years, it was really, um . . . it was just hard. And then he didn’t want to deal with it and he, um . . .
CM: And this is a time when AIDS is still quite stigmatized, right?
LA: Still, yeah, yeah. I mean, it’s been in the news for some time, but it’s still very quickly and all that.
CM: Yeah.
LA: And I kind of got sort of angry, ’cause I go—I was sort of angry at John. Although I loved him, I was kind of angry at him. Because I could understand Gilbert and his being young and, you know, and in love. But John had, should have had some more common sense. ’Cause Gilbert said, “We didn’t test ourselves, we didn’t

do this, 'cause we thought our love would keep us together." You know. I'm like, "Idiot." [*laughs*] You know, I was angry when I heard that, you know. And he goes, "Yeah, I know." But that was, you know. And I'm like John is fifteen years older than Gilbert, and it's like John should have known better, you know. And I know he loved Gilbert and all that, but he . . . You know, I—you know, you could understand and you can't understand. You know, I mean it was just sort of like, "We're gonna live life [*indistinct*] to the full." But then you leave someone behind and, you know. And he had lived ten years with that, getting close to dying. And his parents disowned him, and all of that stuff. His mother would call him at work for like five years, 'cause he still kept that job, and she would call him up and, "Are you still gay?" And he would say, "Yes." And she would say, "I have no son." You know, and hang up. She did that once a month, you know. Call him at work, you know.

And then so it was really hard when . . . The last week of his life that she . . . I mean they were there, him and her, his father were there. And, you know, she goes— And at the funeral, 'cause Gilbert had it written that he did not want his parents around him when he died. I mean they had no right to be there, so that Keith, Kevin could have kept them out, but he just—as long as they weren't causing too much problem [*indistinct*], you know. And then lot of—the night before he died, a lot of his friends, who were writers, came and, you know. He had a book that was published of his poems, and basically everybody read one of his poems. And his parents were there and, you know, and try—and there was this one poem he wrote about his mother, and, um . . . kind of harsh in a certain spot of it. But, you know. And Terry, who was the teacher that got him into writing and helped him get this thing published, she read that poem that there was a thing about him and her, and about his feelings about his mother. And they weren't nice, you know. And so we were all wondering is she gonna actually say it, or is she going to be kind. And she actually read it the way it was. She goes, "I had to be honest to him, you know, not his mother."

CM: Yeah.

LA: And so it was, you know. And it was just that [*indistinct*] was so much love in that place. And light, you know, of all the people who loved him and fellow artists and writers and, you know. And his mother just was kind of like— So I ended up bringing—the next day I brought some pictures, a lot of the proof sheets of pictures I did of Gilbert. And she's looking and, "He looks so much like my youngest son." "Yeah, idiot. He's your oldest son!" [*laughs*] I [*indistinct*]she just, they said a lot of dumb things. And then—oh, this thing about him and the bed. I remember when I came in the first time that they were there when I was there. And, you know, she has this rosary around his hand and like he's sleeping. And I went over and I go, "This is not you anymore, Gilbert." And I took the rosary off. I put it on a stand right next to his bed, you know. And I go, "This is not who you are anymore." And, you know, I'm talking to Gilbert, not her. I don't *care* what she thinks. "I know this is not you anymore and this is not your wishes." So I moved the cr—the rosary and put it on the table. And then I started, I got some lotion and started rubbing his arms with lotion. And I just was there. And to that moment, she never touched him. She didn't come that close to him. She was, you know. And it's her son who's dying, and she couldn't even touch his hand, you know.

CM: Why? Because you think she was afraid or just repelled?

LA: I think she was, I mean—I think she was, well, I think she pretty much was that, "This is the, this is the end and I don't want it to be the end. And yet, no matter what, he can't be who I want him to be, 'cause he's not gonna ever be the son that gave me grandchildren." You know. And I don't know why she really even, you know, worried about that, because her second son did pretty much promoting children into this earth. [*laughs*] So, yeah. So it just, it was just I felt angry when she goes, "Oh, he just looks like my younger . . ." "But, of course, he looks like your younger son. He *is* your son," you know. And so I was like, uh . . . It was just, it was kind of hard. And I asked Kevin, I go, "I thought Gilbert didn't want them to be here." He goes, "Yes, he did that, but it seems like he is hanging on just a little bit longer 'cause he needs whatever he ever got from them." And I understood what he said, what he meant. But he goes, "Once they, if they cross the center line, I'm gonna tell them to leave, 'cause I have the proof that he didn't want them there," you know.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: "But for the moment it seems to be helping him," you know. And so I agreed with him and all that then, so.

CM: Wow.

LA: But it's just that, you know, she just didn't know how to be around him, you know.

CM: Yep.

LA: And like the last six months of his life—maybe the last year—his dad would come maybe like once a month out to West Hollywood and take him out to lunch or just spend the afternoon with him. You know. And that was a big thing that his dad did, 'cause, you know, it was separate between like him and his wife about this issue. And—

CM: So his dad was more accepting than his mother was?

LA: I wouldn't say more accepting, but he's like, you know, "This is my son still. I still love him." But when she loved him she had all these conditions about how he should be for her to love him. And so it's like, you know. And I know that his father totally didn't change his view on gays, but it was his son, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: So there's some of that that he was allowing himself to be there for Gilbert. And one day, we were—I picked him up and his dad was just leaving. And I go, "That's your dad." And he goes, "Yeah, he's been coming by, you know, every couple of weeks." And so we went to the movies, and as he's walking to the car he looked "Ohh." So when he got in the car, he goes—sorry [*indistinct*] speaking [*indistinct*].

CM: No, no, that's fine.

LA: So then, you know, he's walking to the car, and he gets in. And I talk about, "Oh, that's your dad." And he goes, "Yeah." And then, so we started driving 'cause we were going to go see a movie, and he goes, "How do you think I look?" I go, "Do you want the truth or do you want me to lie?' And he goes, "Lie, first." I go, "Oh, you look wonderful." "And now the truth." And [I go], "Well, I look, you look like you're fading away." And his face had that skeleton look, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Cheeks poking into the face, you know.

CM: Yeah.

LA: Empty and all that. And then he ended up living another six months before he passed away. But, you know. And it's just so . . . I mean, I could always be honest with him 'cause he asked for it, you know. And then I wouldn't, usually wouldn't say that directly with someone I don't know. [*laughs*] But, you know, we were all pretty . . . At different times in our life we pushed each other a little bit beyond what we were able to do at that moment. You know, so.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And we still survive and we remain friends. So, you know.

CM: Wow.

LA: So, yeah. So, let me see . . .

CM: So this is a binder dedicated to images of Gilbert?

LA: Well, this is a lot of the negative contact sheets of him and stuff like, you know. And this . . .

CM: He's so young there.

LA: Yeah.

CM: A mustache.

LA: And right here, that's the youngest. [*laughs*] And [*indistinct*] a poet. [*laughs*] It's the poet coming out. [*laughter*]

CM: Everyone's got to have their style.

LA: I know. [*shuffles photos*] There, that's [*indistinct*]. Let me see. [*pause*] The house that she bought, I refer to it as "In Sandy's Room," 'cause, you know.

CM: Okay.

LA: And it was just more, just that connection to her.

CM: So this was the original "In Sandy's Room," is the image of Sandy sitting on the chair?

LA: Yeah. Well yeah, I mean, I didn't, I don't refer to it as "In Sandy's Room," but it happens to be Sandy's room. [Fig. 28]

CM: It happens to be *in* Sandy's room. Okay, got it. Got it. I was a little confused. Sorry.

LA: And it's also that this body and this—her legs into a pool of [*indistinct*].

CM: Oh, wow.

LA: It was just so that she had [*indistinct*]. So this is what I refer to as "Angels Falling."

CM: Okay.

LA: See, they're all laying down.

CM: Yeah, they kind of keeled over during the earthquake.

Figure 28. *Sandy*, 1984. Gelatin silver print, 5½ x 6½ inches.

LA: Yeah. That's everything. So, um . . . [*shuffles photos*] So this is something I've been working on and haven't yet found the one that I want makes . . . So these are some of the bigger images of the, of my test prints of posing in front of the camera, you know. And until I printed them I really didn't—

CM: What was it like for you to pose nude in front of the camera for the first time?

LA: You know what? I didn't, it wasn't a problem, but when I started making the contact sheets it made me nervous.

CM: Really? Why?

LA: I mean, it made me a little uncomfortable and then, who am I to do this? You know, my body's not that great and, yeah. And I have a . . . not a connection to it, and like, "What am I doing?" And then it turned into a body of work and people liked it, and I don't understand it, and, you know.

CM: Were you surprised that people liked it?

LA: Yeah, actually I was. But, and I see—when I look at it I'm always thinking it, seeing it more as shape and form, And that part of it. But not, not like it's not me. I mean I'm very much aware now that it *is* me, but at the time I think that's when I looked at it, it was more about those things. And then also confronting my body.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: So this is the theme, now.

CM: Did this whole process make you more comfortable with yourself?

LA: Well, like everything else, I don't know it at the time, and then it just becomes a part of me. So, I suppose, yes. But I'm not always that conscious of things.

CM: Yeah, you didn't register it necessarily?

LA: Yeah.

CM: Well, I think while things are happening most people don't registering, register.

LA: Yeah.

CM: It's always in retrospect.

LA: And like, and for me it was more of an exercise. So, 'cause I was doing the Clothed/Unclothed series.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: So this is some work that I've done out in Joshua Tree [National Park], and I haven't yet found the one I really like. I have so many of them. [*laughs*]

CM: And this is, uh, this Joshua Tree work, this is the stuff that was filmed by the Chicano Studies Research Center, right?

LA: Yeah.
CM: It's that small documentary?
LA: Yeah. 'Cause I've been back and forth to Joshua Tree, anyhow. So, yeah. And then I just haven't . . . You know, 'cause I can't print myself anymore, so.
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: And I kind of like . . . So, like I have so many of them I can't—when I put them together, I can't pick one. [*laughter*]
CM: You're having trouble editing.
LA: Hmm. Let's see. Here's some more.
CM: Wow.
LA: You get the point? [*laughs*]
CM: Yeah. No, they're just great.
LA: And then there's this one. [*indistinct*]
CM: Oh, this is just amazing.
LA: That is a digital camera.
CM: This is from a digital camera? And what's the printing process?
LA: No, no, no, no. It's a regular negative, but it's printed digitally.
CM: Oh, it's printed digitally?
LA: Yeah.
CM: And that's you inside the alcove in the rock?
LA: Mm-hmm. Now, we were recording one of my interviews during this.
CM: Yes.
LA: And it's just funny, 'cause this guy came around, and he just sort of parked across from us on the other side. And he just smiled and looked and then left, you know. And I'm like, "Oh, God, give me a towel." [*laughter*] I had a stepladder to get into that hole.
CM: Uh-huh. So it was already a little awkward?
LA: Yeah. Well yeah. I was really—I couldn't go anywhere if I wanted to.
CM: You're just kind of trapped naked in this hole?
LA: Pretty much.
CM: Have you been busted a lot—naked—for these series?
LA: No, I've, two times I've been . . . and someone . . . And actually two times, and they were both in Joshua Tree. [*laughs*]
CM: Really? Where people catch you naked?
LA: Mm-hmm. And there's this one, and [*indistinct*].
CM: And then this is in color? [Fig. 29]
LA: Yeah, and this is Joshua Tree and this is digital. First digitals I did.
CM: This is digital photography?
LA: Mm-hmm.
CM: Okay.
LA: This one, never really made a commitment to it, but this is . . . This is a exercise or—
CM: Okay.
LA: Maybe I'm writing about my body. I got to go to the restroom.
CM: Okay, go to the restroom.

[*break in audio*]

Figure 29. *Grounded #108*, 2006. Inkjet print, 16 x 20 inches.

LA: Actually—
CM: These are all Joshua Tree images?
LA: Yeah, but I just never really shown these, 'cause I'm not sure about them yet.
CM: Really?
LA: And I may never be. I mean, sometimes you just don't. I'm not like, I don't know.
CM: And when was this session. When did you do the Joshua Tree images?
LA: Actually, this is probably one of the first ones I did, before I found that boulder, and I'd been focused on—
CM: That you nested in?
LA: Yeah. [*laughs*] No, no. Not that one. The other one where . . . It's a big, it looks like a body.
CM: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.
LA: Okay, so let's see. [*shuffles photos*] Yeah, so here, these two. I mean, they're just a little bit different.
CM: Okay.
LA: I mean, as the body goes. And I was trying to somehow kind of like work with this, you know.
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: But I don't know. I guess [*indistinct*]
CM: I mean how, how much—is there a lot of test photography that goes into this? Do you ever do Polaroids? Do you . . .
LA: I used to, when they had, make, when they had them. They don't have 'em no more, 'cause everything's digital and you could just look at it. So . . .
CM: And are these digital prints or these are film?
LA: No, these are black and white. They're still film, before I, yeah. .
CM: This is still film.
LA: This is before I started—I can't do film because I can't focus on detail.
CM: So you are still . . . Since you're shooting film, you're shooting this without knowing exactly how it's going to come out when you print it.
LA: Pretty much.
CM: You have an idea?
LA: Yeah, I have an idea 'cause I've been doing my body so much in nature. So I have an idea of the shapes and what I'm looking, trying to do with my body and trying to do with surrounding and similar shapes.
CM: How do you—I mean, how do you, what do you do with your body in these situations? What are you trying to do with it?
LA: In all honesty, don't know. It's just something I'm trying to figure out on a regular basis, you know. And then I start to get comfortable, and I think I know what I'm doing, and then I go to the next step. Each body changes, you know, a little bit. Not a whole lot, but it does. And it seems to be more relax—more . . . Nature Self-Portrait, I did it because I had made a commitment to it, and I had to show it. And then after it was shown in England, and after, you know. It was about a year after Gilbert died that I finally like, started to look at it, 'cause, mainly was I had to do it and send the work, you know? 'Cause I made the commitment and I spent the money, so. And then I started to get more into as seeing it, you know, and so. And then . . . These I like, but I'm not sure, because I don't know what I'm doing here, to be honest. And then when I saw that big body . . . It was funny, because Sybil [Venegas] found that big, huge rock, you know.
CM: Mm-hmm.
LA: And it was maybe about a month or so after the woman who did . . . Latin woman . . . "Bridge Called Our Back"? [*This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa—ed.]
CM: Oh, Cherríe Moraga?
LA: No, not her . . . She died.
CM: Gloria Anzaldúa.
LA: Yeah. She had a—she was a diabetic and she had a diabetic coma, whatever.
CM: Oh, really?

LA: Yeah. And so, and I had read about her, 'cause—oh, *This Bridge Called Our Back*, is I think it's called. Yeah. So I never read it, but I just always hear all these Chicana women artists talk about that book and lesbian artists and all that stuff. So, I was just thinking this would be great place to do an homage to her. And I, my homage had lot of women naked, because I'm slowly going towards that rock. [*laughs*]

CM: Oh, really? The sort of idea of the bridge?

LA: Kind of, yeah. And the, the what you call the . . . When people, like, are on their knees, going to . . .

CM: Oh, they're doing a pilgrimage?

LA: Yeah, pilgrimage. And it'd just be all these Latin women naked. Can't find them to do it all the same time though. Can't find even one to do it with me. [*laughs*] But you know, so I've been playing with that idea. And then, if I can't have a group of people, I have this figure. Just the thing about the body. The rock is like, you know, Mother Earth. And it's so weird, because I used to hate that phrase, 'cause when I was in my early twenties, I would see Linda Vallejo. Do you know her?

CM: I don't. But I know who you are talking about.

LA: So, and she all the time when she was talking about her work it was always Mother Earth this and Mother Earth that. And I was like, "Oh, brother." [*laughs*] 'Cause to me she was just this '60s kind of person, you know. And she's older than me.

CM: It was too hippie-crunchy for you?

LA: Yep. Yeah, feely-touchy. [*laughter*]

CM: But, I mean, okay, so when you're doing something like this, is it really, like, are you thinking texture? Are you thinking tone? Are you thinking a combination? On shape?

LA: It's about shape and it's about movement of my body. See, at the time I was doing, I had a grant from the Getty, and it's actually the only time I ever spent some money on myself through a grant. And I had $25,000, I think. No, that was from a different one. But, okay, I had—it was $1,500. So I used $3,000, or $1,500 . . .

CM: Anyway, you had a grant.

LA: Anyway, I had a grant. [*laughs*]

CM: The amount doesn't matter.

LA: Yeah. But for me, I spent like over a year and maybe a year and a half. I went, I drove myself from here to Topanga Canyon early in the morning so that I would do this workshop with this woman that I sort of stumbled upon at Highways once, at a, you know, workshop. So then I asked her, you know, "Do you do these?" And so she would do these special ones in Topanga Canyon like once a month, you know, a four-hour thing. And so I went there. Then after, when I got the money from the Getty, I put $3,000 of my money to spend on just the private sessions with her, you know. And so, um . . . It's a lot—it's called "Continuum." And it's so many different things out there. It's seems like it's very similar to everything else, but the work she was doing was called "Continuum," and it's using your body as air and water.

CM: Mmm.

LA: And when you do the movements, you're doing them in small very synced movements, when you stay in it. And then it was really hard for me because it was so slow. It was really hard for me. But in the end I loved it. You know. I mean, it took me a while to really get in to just moving a little bit.

CM: It was almost like these tai chi movements kind of thing?

LA: I'm not quite sure not. I don't know.

CM: Tai chi is where they do those exercises—

LA: Yeah, I know, I know that, but it's not so much like that. It's just, like, you just slowly move. And you use these balls, and you move on the balls a little bit.

CM: Like the medicine balls?

LA: Yeah. Well, the big balls. I don't know what you call them. [*laughs*] Yeah. And so it's like, it's almost like sometimes I felt it was like dancing. Sometimes I thought it was like Pilates. I mean because everybody—you know, the wheel's only been invented once, and we all keep on reinventing it in different ways. So

when I started, I'd done some Pilates, I'd done some yoga. And so it's a little bit of this and a little bit of that. But the teacher's philosophy, or the one who started this thing, was that you worked with your body as the body that is nothing but water, you know. And when you breathe, she was so good visually at describing how to breathe. And there was this one thing she would say, "See your spinal column and when you take a deep breath in and you blow it out, see a ribbon and as you blow it out, the ribbon goes around your spinal column and out." You know. And it's so visual. I mean, she gave me all these visuals to it. And so, between, um . . . between Nature Self Portraits and still—between Stillness and Motion [series] is when I was seeing her. And then so when I finally did Motion, everything was so much easier to direct people because of all that movement and how to move slowly and stuff.

CM: 'Cause she'd been describing to you how to move, so then you were able to take that—

LA: And how to breathe and how to, like, you know, focus, and on moving your body. It was always about the body and how you move it.

CM: Now, how do you think, because, I mean before, and I think this may have been off tape, I was remarking about how your postures in those nudes in Sandy's room are so different from the work you do now. That those early photos were still like a little defensive or protective of your body, whereas now they're just so much more open. What kind of evolution have you seen?

LA: I mean I never thought about it that way. But I mean, from Nature Self-Portrait to Stillness, I saw a difference. And saw a difference.

CM: What difference did you see?

LA: I don't know how to describe it, but I saw a difference. And, I suppose, be more comfortable with it, you know. And, but from Stillness to Motion, that's where I really saw the biggest leap, because all of that stuff I did with her.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And—

CM: All that movement study?

LA: All that movement and breathing. And so, when I have the Motion, I have more people in it. It was lot more easier to direct them, because they understood how to, um . . . Before I would have to show you this or that.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And I wouldn't know how to describe it, you know. And—or I would say [*indistinct*] "No, no, no. Uh," you know. And I just didn't have the directions of my body—my own body to have, to be able to tell someone else how to put their body in, you know, so.

CM: How do you feel about— I was reading some of those museum pamphlets, exhibition pamphlets. How do you feel about the way people address your weight in what they write about you, or your body?

LA: Well, I mean . . . I've tried not to think about it too much, and I try not to take it too personally, you know. I mean 'cause it's basically, I mean, everyone who writes has an agenda, as everyone who takes a picture has an agenda or paints a picture or does that. We have all our own agendas to point out how we get—how we could see something, how we could talk about something, how we understand someone else's work, you know. So it all depends. And sometimes when there's something I don't like, I just ignore it. Because there's one person in particular I just ignore.

CM: What has this person written?

LA: It's not so much what she wrote. It's what happened on a panel that she was the group leader. And there was that [*indistinct*]. It was at Artpace, and at the end of the show, we had—we had our own shows. Each had our own gallery, and we had the opening, and then we had a lecture thing going on. And so she talked to the other— She was supposed to interview me before the panel, and then she would basically talk about herself for five minutes and then ask me questions about three minutes, you know. Because she was talking about her coming from New York to San Antonio on this project, she's working on with her filming, da da da. And so, I just, like, you know. And then, when we're on the panel—before we got on the

panel, she was asking one more question. And I go, "She's saying that I, you know, she's telling *me* that I'm from that era of the '70s." I go, "I was fourteen years old when the seventies hit. I wasn't that conscious," and you know. And so she's like—because there was a thing about the Women's Building, and so they're from New York and that era. And I go, "That was something I could not relate to, 'cause to me that was all white women." And I couldn't understand what the big deal was about trying to get a job. I knew all the women in my life worked, so I'm going to work because that's just, you know. But see, I didn't understand that the feminists were fighting for a career. And I was thinking job, career, same thing, just work. [*laughs*] And so she's like putting me into the '70s movement, and I go, "I wasn't conscious in that."

CM: That wasn't what you connected to.

LA: Yeah, I wasn't conscious of anything that was going on then. [*laughs*] So, it's just, you know. And so then she just sort of dismissed me on the panel. And, you know, I was keeping myself as calm as could be. And as soon as it was over, I went into my studio, and I told my friends to leave, go to the reception after at Linda Pace's home. [Linda Pace (1948–2007) was an artist, art collector, and philanthropist—ed.] And I didn't want to go, and they didn't want to leave me and, you know. And so it's like, 'cause they were like, they were angry too, about what happened. And so, you know. It was just being dismissed as a human being. And then, you know, she's this art critic who's a big name, supposedly, and she has no knowledge of anyone unless it's from her point of view. I'm not a white woman. I'm not highly educated like she is.. She's, and she's from a very, she's from the South and, [I] think, first generation that was educated, you know. And so she's gone beyond her, where she came from and all that stuff, and into the lecture. And it's like, you know, "You could look at my work, and you could say whatever you want, and you could . . ." But, you know, it's like . . . I mean, I was surprised that I didn't walk out of the—off the panel because everyone agreed that I should have, you know. And it wouldn't been—or they agreed that if I had done it, they would not, you know, have any bad feeling. I mean, they understood what was going on and how I just maintained my anger. Which was actually surprising to me, because I usually let my anger go off. [*laughs*]

CM: What do you do when you let your anger go?

LA: Well, I mainly did it with my dad, so I just like— It's kind of hard to, sort of— [*laughter*] You know. No matter what, he had to endure me, because I was his child. [*laughs*]

CM: Now, so it's—I mean, but it's interesting because it goes back to that idea of being dismissed or other people thinking they can speak for—

LA: For me, yeah.

CM: Yeah.

LA: It's a thing in my life. [*laughs*]

CM: Yeah. Now, what about the landscape aspect of a lot of this photography. I mean, you just showed me a bunch of snapshots from Joshua Tree that don't have any figures in them. Is that—has that been a common part of your practice? Do you frequently take pictures of landscapes, like that sort of is a way of testing things out or . . .

LA: To be honest, no. I mean I don't—I used to do landscapes when I first started doing photography and I didn't interact with anybody else. You know, no people, no bodies, not anything. Just a landscape. And I think when I went to Joshua Tree that time, I had been gaining some weight, and I was back to the heaviest I've ever been before. And I was just sort of like, "I don't want to go out and do nudes of my body again at this moment." And so . . . "But I'm here in Joshua Tree and I'm seeing all these shapes and forms, and maybe I should just photograph them." And maybe, maybe I might get back out there doing some more, but maybe I won't, you know. And right now, that's basically where I'm at with that. I mean, actually I've lost weight from then to here. And, you know, I just don't know what's going to happen the next time I go out. So, I mean, it's always there, that I might continue on, but maybe I might not at this point. And maybe I'm focusing more on the shapes and forms and how you could see some of them. A lot of people may not see this. You have to point it out to them.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so it's like, you know. I see things so much that I see other, you know, in shapes.

CM: In shapes.

LA: And things that I could see something else, as like as a copy *of*, you know. And so. That's very simple for me to see things that other people don't see, you know.

CM: So that idea of, it could on its own just be the pictures of these forms that you see in the rocks.

LA: Mm-hmm. In nature and rocks, and the light of the day and time and things like that. So, you know, I'm just doing that because it's just been easier at the moment.

CM: Are there any landscape photographers whose work you have really admired?

LA: Well, I mean Ansel Adams when I first started out, and Eliot Porter. But beyond them, I really don't watch—I mean, I don't buy books. I don't go to museums that often, unless it's that one day of the month that it's free. [*laughs*] And, you know, I'm in the collection at MOCA and I have a lifetime membership, but I don't—rarely, rarely go there.

CM: Why is that?

LA: 'Cause I don't understand most of the stuff that I see in there. [*laughs*] I don't know that I really want people to know about that part! [*laughs*]

CM: That's fine. I don't understand half of the stuff I see in there either.

LA: But the thing that is interesting is, that years ago, I would go there and I was like, "I don't get this. I just don't get this." And then someone would come by with a group of people and talks about it. And I still look at it and I don't get it. And the funny thing is, I see things that I never saw before when I do see abstract art. And I could actually see things. So, I guess it's, you know, I'm maturing, I suppose. But it's just, you know. [*laughs*]

CM: Have you ever been into painting, like the—when I think of like Georgia O'Keeffe's like Southwestern landscapes and those kind of things. Has that ever been something . . .

LA: Well, I always—

CM: That appealed to you?

LA: I love Georgia's paintings and stuff, but I'm not a painter, and I can't even draw.

CM: But, I mean, is it something that maybe you found it—you looked at, you found it inspiring. Or it may have been an influence, or . . .

LA: Well, I mean, see the thing is that . . . I mean, because you asked me, I think a lot of her paintings, and I saw stuff right away in it, in the abstract form of it. And I loved her colors and imagery and . . . But I really, you know, I don't really pay attention, because I don't really have money to buy books. I don't have cable. I don't have . . . [*laughs*] I have just the basics of everything in my life, you know. And so it's just something that I don't . . . I used to go and look for it and stuff when I was younger, because it was taboo. See, the one thing in my house that was sort of—I was yelled at by my mom was when I used to buy books. And one of the books I bought once was a book of Georgia O'Keeffe. And it's like $35 and it's all beautiful pages of color, you know. And a little, small amount of text. But, so, my mom would see me spending money on books. "That's a waste of money." 'Cause I can't read, and she knew I couldn't read and all that stuff. And so when I would get home, I would go into my bedroom, open my side window, go back to the van, get the book that's in a bag, go to the side of the house, throw it into my bedroom through the window. It was like I was bringing drugs into the house, but it was a book! [*laughs*]

CM: You're like, "I hope nobody sees me with my book."

LA: But see, the thing is, my mom was very practical, and so she saw it as a waste of money. [*laughs*] It's—[*background noise*]

CM: We cannot catch a break here, can we?

LA: You want to go inside?

[*break in audio*]

CM: All right. So, we were talking about books and influences. So it's not something you've been hardcore about, following the work of others? I mean, you have photographers and artists that you've been a fan of and whose work you admire, but it doesn't sound like you're, like, "Oh, my God. I have to see so-and-so's show. It's the latest," whatever, whatever.

LA: Well, see, you have to be conscious to know what the latest is. [*laughs*] No, but the thing about that bringing a book in, was just that my mom saw it as a waste of money because I can't read. And, actually, this is one of the more painful things of my relationship with my mom. But when I was seventeen, sixteen, my mom wanted me to drop out of school.

CM: Why?

LA: 'Cause she figured, you know, I'm sixteen years old, can't read, and what's two more years? You're not going to learn to read in two years that you haven't learned in all these years. So she wanted me to get a job. And she could get a job for me to clean houses. And she goes, "You have too many high ideals about, of yourself," and you know, "it's honest pay." And I go, "I never said it was, wasn't something," you know. I go, "But why can't I want to be an artist?" You know. And then, so. So that was really hard. And then she got sick, and see, we kind of, you know. I always saw my older cousins—female cousins—that when they were at a certain age, they'd be fighting with their moms, because it's that what are you doing at that time of your life. You're trying to let go and move on your way. And so, and I always saw that when they were like in their late twenties, they would usually make peace with their mothers and, you know, back into the family and all that. So I always assumed that that was going to happen, 'cause I saw my other cousins go through that struggle with their mother, you know. And, uh . . . but then my mom died, and I never had a chance to make pea—we never had a chance to make peace with each other. Because she was my mother, I was her daughter, and you do, you know. And she was overprotective of me, which I hated. And she made everybody else in the family overprotective of me. And then when she died, they all said, "Well, we did that because it was what she asked us to do, and now, you know, you need to just take care of yourself and be on your own." So, I was like, you know, I got abandoned by all of my cousins after she died, you know, so.

CM: Wow.

LA: I mean it's, you know. So anyway, so . . .

CM: So at one point you said it wasn't until you were thirty-three that you considered yourself an artist. Like you had doubted yourself as an artist. Members of your family had doubted.

LA: Well, as long as I was working, it's okay to talk about my art. If wasn't working, they would not tolerate me talking about art. Because, you know, "If you have a job, okay, then you can talk about your art. If you don't have a job, I don't want to hear anything about art."

CM: I mean, what to you is being an artist?

LA: You know, I really don't know. I just know that because I'm not reading and lack of skills of writing, I needed to have feelings that I didn't have words to, and it seemed to develop in my photography. And then, also, it developed in meeting people who were artists. And, I mean, I never saw myself as an artist, as Sandy saw me, from the minute we met, as an artist. But, I would see, meet other artists and, you know. So it's just . . . I don't know. I just saw it as something that I seemed to want but didn't mean it was going to give me a living. [*laughs*]

CM: As with most people.

LA: Yeah. And see then—and my mom was practical, like, "You should just start working," and, you know, "it's honest pay." And it's just . . . it was just hard, because that's all I wanted, to get into photography. And this is before I got into photography. And then after that happened, you know, it just . . .

CM: It just became part of that process?

LA: And when she was dying, she kind of let it go, because she was dying and, you know. So, but it's just, you know. And my dad and my brother supported me, but they didn't really care about it. They saw that it was what I was constantly wanting, so they ena—helped me.

CM: They didn't get in the way of it.

LA: Yeah. They didn't get in the way. And they kind of supported it by giving, making me a darkroom.

CM: Okay.

LA: You know. So.

CM: But not necessarily praising your work, or going to your shows all the time, or things like that?

LA: No. My dad had a, my dad— My senior year in high school we had the art show, you know, and my mom and dad—and my brother made my dad go to it. And so, I got, I don't know, maybe five first-place trophies in different categories of work. And when we got home my dad goes, "I didn't need to be taken to school." Oh, because near the end of one of my trophies, my instructor said, "It's amazing that you produce so much work, Laura, since you're always talking to everybody." That's what my dad heard. "I didn't need to be told how much you talk." [*laughs*] "Now," you know. And my brother goes, "Dad, she got three first places and two second places," something like that. And, but that didn't mean anything to my dad. It's just that he heard that that's all I do, is talk. [*laughs*]

CM: So, what was it that led you to consider yourself an artist? Was there something that happened that you thought, "Yes, I am"?

LA: I can't remember what it was, but I think it had to do with a couple more grants that I got that made me . . . I think it was . . . 'cause it was before, I don't know. See, I can't think of what year I was, I mean what age I was when I went to San Antonio. 'Cause like the stuff that I did when I was working with this woman on the body movement, that added a lot to my work because I knew how to direct people better, you know. And, so.

CM: And probably you knew how to even direct yourself better, I imagine.

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So, I don't know if that's around that age period or not, because I can't really remember why. But, actually it was pretty—thirty-three was a good year for several things. I think I got a big grant that year. That's why, you know. And it wasn't the first grant, but other grants that I had were like small ones and this was a big one. I think that was it, that made me see it.

CM: That is was like, "All right, enough things have happened where I can now kind of consider myself one."

LA: Mm-hmm.

CM: Legitimately.

LA: Yeah.

CM: Now, at what point did Susanne Vielmetter come into the picture, and how did she come into the picture?

LA: Hmm. Well, no [*indistinct*]. Okay, it's like I said, I had this other woman that got me into the Venice Biennale. And she had a German accent, and she spoke—Spanish and German were her two languages. And English was her third language. So. So when I had that frustration with that woman, when Susanne called me up, all I heard was the accent. And I'm thinking, "Oh, not another German." [*laughs*] You know. And I said, and I just said, "Okay, why don't you [*indistinct*] and I can show you some of my work." Because she wanted to see about some show that she was going to do in the art fairs in Europe. And I go, "Okay." And she was a very nice person. We had nice conversations. She liked my work, you know, and she thought she could do something with it. And if I would lend her these pieces when she took it to this art fair in Germany, which I had no understanding what it was, but, um . . . It was just that, you know, it was just sort of that. And then—

CM: She called you up?

LA: She called me up, yeah.

CM: She called you up.

LA: Out of the blue. But like I said, that accent. All I thought about was the woman before her that I had to deal with, that was a little pain in the butt. 'Cause I couldn't understand her. And she would say she would send it to me, and she never sent it. Took me six months to get a piece back from her. So, you know.

CM: From what? From the woman from the Venice Biennale?

LA: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Okay.

LA: But this was way before it became the Venice Biennale, because she had put me in two other shows. One in Spain and one in New York. So. But, so like I said, the minute I heard her accent I'm like, "Oh, a person I can't communicate with." Because of my hearing. I don't hear the sounds right, and so it's like, you know, anybody with any—I mean, a Southern accent, Boston accent. I mean, when I hear other accents it's just like, "Oh, no. How could I interact with this person?" 'Cause most likely I'm going to misunderstand what they're saying to me because I don't hear the sounds, you know.

CM: And so what convinced you? What about Susanne convinced you to go with it? Because she ended up being your gallerist for quite a while.

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah, when she started her gallery, yeah. I just . . . I found her sincere. I don't say that I found many people in the art community sincere. And so basically she was, she was—she was what she said. And I think, and that's something that not too many people do, you know. And she was honest and she was sincere, and she saw something more than I saw, as selling. She sold stuff for a while, but then at a certain point I wasn't selling as much because basically . . . I had so much work, but, you know, but maybe my other stuff was not the stuff that she sold. To sell it was always the body stuff, and I just was tired of doing the body stuff. And so it's like they want more work and I wasn't making money. I mean, I made money, but I didn't make money. I made money to exist for another six months.

CM: Yeah.

LA: And that, so.

CM: It's like just stepping stone to stepping stone.

LA: Pretty much, yeah. And, I mean, I was grateful, because it helped me to continue to make work. But then at a certain point I was still behind in my, my just living expenses, you know. Being behind on gas and water and things like that.

CM: The basics.

LA: And so she offered one time to give me some money just to go out and shoot something, and I told her I couldn't take it for that reason. Because I cannot go and spend money on trying to make art when I can't pay my water bill. And then she goes, "Use it for whatever you need it for," you know. And so when she finally said, "I can't represent you," I was okay with that because I understood what she meant. It's a business and I'm grateful for what she did for me and what she continues to do by giving, when someone contacts her, 'cause I have no one. Everyone knows that anything that they try to catch me on the computer, nothing ever answers back because I don't have a computer. I can't type. I can't spell.

CM: So they call her?

LA: So they usually call her, because that's the reference that I used to be sponsored by her. I mean, I used to be represented by her.

CM: How many years were you with her?

LA: I don't know. Maybe five.

CM: Five?

LA: Or four, or six. I don't know.

CM: So she picked you up after— The Venice Biennale was in 1993, right?

LA: Yeah. But she picked me up and she went independent.

CM: Probably in the late '90s was when she probably started a gallery in the . . .

LA: Well, see—

CM: Was it the '90s? [Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects was founded in 2000. Vielmetter previously worked at Newspace gallery, owned by Joni Gordon—ed.]

LA: She was with Joni, and she came to look at some work that she was going to go, this art fair in Germany. And so she goes, "I'd like to try to show some of your work." And I said, "Okay." And then after that, she came back. Joni said she would give her one month in August. And that's usually a lot of galleries go on vacation that month. So I was going to show her some work, and I brought it that day to see her and Joni

about it. And she wanted me to—Joni wanted me to not do Susanne's show and wait for October to show this work. And I said, "No, I agreed to be with Susanne." And then Susanne finally had it with Joni and, 'cause basically it was a big slap in the face saying, "You know, she's not good enough to produce you. I can," you know. And Susanne was the one who took her the year before to the art fairs in Germany. And it's like, you know, she had no connections there. And Susanne was very, you know, opening to showing her where to go, you know. And so that day, Susanne walked out and quit Joni. And [*indistinct*] I told Joni, "I'll be back." And I took all my stuff with me. [*laughs*] And I never came back. And the last time, I'm leaving the door and I told Joni, I go, you know, "My father is ill and he's terminally ill. And I need to spend this time taking care of him, because if I don't, I'm going to regret it for the rest of my life. And I've done that once with my mother." You know, because, somewhat because of the way she kept me as her little girl. That I couldn't talk about it to her, you know.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so I, so Joni couldn't understand that, you know, and so. And then that's when, about a month or two later, Susanne had her first gallery space. And I think she was there for a year. Then she moved to a bigger space. And now she's at where she—I think she's still at the same place the last time I seen her. And it's a pretty good size place, and she's very successful at it. And not a lot of people are, and she's very sincere. I think that's the— She is a very sincere person, and I think you don't see that a lot in this kind of business. It's about making the money and, you know, pushing you more. And, you know, she loves art and she likes people, and she will, if—she's loyal to people. Like I said, she tried to help me, push me just to get me to do some—just do something new. One day, just go, but, you know. And so I understand when she said, you know, "I can't do it anymore." And I understood that, and I have no problems with her doing that because I understand what business is. But, yeah. And then my ups and downs with my depressions sometimes was just too much, you know, as a friend. Besides like being my gallery person, she was a friend.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: Because she was a friend first, before she was my gallery person.

CM: She kept an eye out for you?

LA: Mm-hmm. And you don't find that really a lot in any kind of businesses. So.

CM: What—I guess, looking back, if you had to pick a work or a body of work that you just think—either you think is your best work or your most transformative or key work—what would you say that is? What was like the tipping point for you?

LA: Nature Self-Portrait, and then each step after it. Each group, each body of work was just continuous. It's just that it started there.

CM: Nature Self-Portrait was, like, the break?

LA: Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm. I mean, 'cause I did all those others, you know, the Clothed/Unclothed series and lot of the stills of working out and going to see space and stuff. But it was the, you know, like I said, I made the commitment to do this work. I wanted to do what Judy did out in nature, and it took me ten years to get from starting to doing nudes in the studio to getting outdoors, so. And I put that—that's my goal, and I'm going to do it, and then all the stuff with Gilbert that happened. And then I just went out and did it, and it happened, and got the work over there on time, and kept my commitment as that part goes. And since then, each group, each body of work that I've done next was just continuing on. And Artpace was the big thing, you know, that changed that too, because from Nature Self-Portrait to Artpace, which was Stillness. And then coming back later that same year. And 'cause when I was trying to get other women to pose for me and telling them what I was trying to do, they couldn't see it and couldn't, you know. And when they saw what I did during that time, they said, "If you ever come back, we will pose for you." And so I came back in October that year. [*laughs*]

CM: And you're like, "You guys said you would pose!"

LA: Pretty much, and they did. [*laughs*]

CM: You're like, "I'm take—remember how you offered to pose? Well . . ."

LA: 'Cause, like when you tell them something, and you have this idea and you don't have anything to show them, it's like, it's like being a sales, car—used car salesman. Like I'm trying to sell you on something that you just can't see, and it's gonna be good. And you think it's not, because I'm a used car salesman, but, you know.

CM: "You're asking me to get naked, and . . ."

LA: Yeah. So, I mean, yeah. So, I mean, I understand why people might be unsure of me because they don't even know me as a person. You know, I'm this stranger that came to town and said, [*laughs*] "Come take your clothes off out in nature." [*laughter*] "With other women you might know or may not know!"

CM: It's art. [*laughter*] Now, what about, um . . . You know you've mentioned that in the last half-dozen years or so, you've had a move toward greater spirituality. How do you think that that has affected your own . . . I mean, has it been, what five years since you joined the Episcopal church?

LA: Well, yeah.

CM: Longer than that?

LA: It's probably been five years.

CM: It's probably been five years.

LA: But, like, the first two years I just basically wasn't sure. I kept on coming back because I liked the music and I liked the people that they had come talking about stuff. Now, meet, um . . . In between the nine o'clock service and the eleven-fifteen, there was an hour where they had people come. Guest speakers. We had Tom Hayden. We had Gloria . . . what's her name? Well, we had—I mean, just some big names in politics and social issues and interesting [*indistinct*]. Sometimes I don't understand a word they say, 'cause they're talking about economics, which I have no knowledge of money in the first place. So it's boring to me. And then sometimes I look around the room, and it's all these white-haired gray people, and I'm thinking, "Ohh." I hear my mom's voice saying, "You're not in—this is not your place." [*laughs*]

CM: But you've made it your place.

LA: I've made it my place, yeah. But sometimes, I still wonder sometimes, when I look around that room, 'cause this so middle class and so not who I am, you know. I mean, 'cause—

CM: But maybe it is!

LA: I don't know. But, yeah. But, I mean, I found a place that I feel comfortable there, and I found a sense of God that I hadn't felt since my grandmother died. 'Cause when I was little we would pray, even though they were child prayers, and all, my grandmother [*indistinct*] used to say that, you know, God is always with you, inside you. And I didn't really get it. And then when I started going, when I went to this church, the first thing, they start off the sermon after they come in, in the parade, as I refer to it. The choir and then the clergy and the singing.

CM: The procession, when everybody comes in.

LA: The procession, yeah. Singing, yeah. And then the first thing the minster would say is, "God dwells in you." And then the audience would say, "And also in you." So it's just like something that I could remembered, but I couldn't remember why. And then there's prayers. The next thing the whole community says is, "Almighty God, to you our hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts with the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you and know you." And that's like, I had to learn that paragraph because I just liked that whole first part of it. And it's like . . . And then, you know, I would come. And then I'd, you know, for about—after six months, I started, "So since I keep on coming back, maybe I should go do that Eucharist thing." And then I would take the bread and put it in my pocket. [*laughs*] 'Cause when I was a kid, me and my brother be in back of the station wagon, and we'd have those Nestles wafers, you know.

CM: Yes.

LA: And he would go, "Here, my child." [*laughs*] And then do the cross, and then I would just say the same thing to him. And my mom would yell at us from the front of the station wagon, "That's not funny. You don't know what you're saying."

CM: Oh, those Necco wafers.

LA: Yes, Necco wafers.

CM: The Necco wafers. Oh, my sister and I used to do the same thing.

LA: And my mom would just have a fit with us like, you know, 'cause she thought we were just making—

CM: Like you don't mess around with that.

LA: We were making fun of it, and, yeah, basically you don't. And I had no clue, 'cause—I mean she was raised Catholic, but, you know, she didn't continue this, you know. Anyway, so, um . . .

CM: I mean, do you think you're . . . this—do you think you're sort of discovering, or rediscovering, religion has affected your work or the way you see your work in any way?

LA: Yeah, I think so. And sometimes I think some other people thought that it was taking me away from my work. But it's . . . it's something I need, and it's . . . as my—it's who I am as a person. And it's, um . . . I struggle with depression and I'm on anti-depressants for over twenty years now. And medicine works for a while, and then it finally fades. And sometimes you have to change the types of medicine. But I've had a history of depression since I can remember, you know. And over the years—

CM: You said earlier since you were fourteen.

LA: Since I was ten.

CM: Since you were ten. Excuse me.

LA: Yeah. And so, you know, just in, you know, I was always referred to as moody. [*laughs*] "Get off the couch. Stop being so moody, Laura." And, you know, "Interact with people," and stuff like that. So, the religion has helped lot of things inside of me feel . . . Lot of it also has happened, it was that the medicine that I've been taking for years finally kicked in. I mean, it worked, but just a little bit. And then after so many years it just seemed to be just more, and I was . . . How I got to church was going through yoga. Something that I never thought I would do. And see this guy named Pablo, he came into my life because he was doing some work on Gilbert Cuadros's writings and stuff, when he was going to college. And so he found his way to me through Terry, who was the teacher that taught him writing. And she was doing yoga classes, you know. She still teaches and writes and stuff, but yoga's her like her thing.

And so she would do these workshops on Wednesday mor—Monday and Wednesday mornings at eight o'clock in Silver Lake. So I agreed to go for six times. And then I kind of go, "Oh, this is sort of—uh, it's a little corny and it's a little, I don't know." It's Terry. She's very in la-la land in life, and all that. She's too optimistic for me. [*laughs*] But she's always been that way. And she laughs at me when I point that out to her. 'Cause she's kind of sometimes, "I don't know, you kind of float over the ground. You don't necessarily walk on it." [*laughs*] So, I started doing the yoga. And then it was really, you know. And then I, and I actually stuck with her for three years. And, but at a certain point, almost near the third year, I started to think, "I like this. I enjoy it. I'm doing things I never thought I would do. And I'm chanting things I'm not truly understanding what they are, but it's part of the breathing and the moving." And, like, Terry's whole thing is that if you can't reach it, lean towards it. Eventually, you *will* reach it.

CM: Yes.

LA: [*indistinct*] "And if you can't do it, don't push yourself, because you don't want to hurt yourself," and da da da. And so I've taken so many other classes with other people, and they weren't all that nice. So I kept on coming back and then joined it. And then, so. But then I kind of got uncomfortable, because all of a sudden I thought, "This yoga and this teacher who started this particular type of yoga, a guru, sounds, is a little bit too religious for me. In a sense that I feel like I'm betraying God." Even though I never really went to church, I have an idea who God is for me. But I never really necessarily thought God—I was welcome to God either, at the same time, because of my two sides of my family are Catholic and Methodist. And they're both fanatics about it. I really shouldn't say that. But, you know, they're—they're just very much into it and I wasn't raised around it, so. And all I knew is that I had known too many people who were Catholics who ran the other way. [*laughs*] Not into any religion, just away from that.

CM: Just away.

LA: Yeah. And so, you know, all my life I just heard all my friends complain about being Catholic. And then my aunts were very Methodist and church was everything, and it's like my—

CM: And so you thought the yoga kind of violated that a little bit?

LA: I think the yoga was starting to seem to be like a god, and I didn't find that comfortable. I mean . . . and then—

CM: And so that's what led you—

LA: Well . . .

CM: To church, or . . .

LA: Almost. But the thing is, is that the administrator at All Saints was on *Oprah* [*Winfrey Show*], and they were doing a different topic each day for the week. And then the second part of it was the next week. And Ed had spoken to this person that called in—Skyped in—and asked questions. [The speaker was Rev. J. Edwin Bacon Jr. of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena; the segment aired in January 2009—ed.] And Ed answered that "all gays are a gift to God—from God." And then, of course, the next week Oprah said, "How was your week, Ed?" [*laughs*] And he basically said, "There were lot of people who understood I was talking about and then a lot of Christians who are very vile." Yeah. I think that's like a bad word, right? Poisonous, kind of?

CM: Yeah, like they're . . .

LA: Yeah.

CM: They're bad people.

LA: There's a poisonous of what, you know. And then so, and then he goes, "And a lot people, yes, called me [and said], 'I don't know where it's at in the Bible. Show it to me.'" And he goes, "Well, basically, God says everyone is his child, so it doesn't need to be in the same gays or blacks or whites or . . . God loves everyone, 'cause he created them." So, yeah.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And so I heard, I saw the second part of it, and I go, "Hmm, my friend's been bugging me for years to go to All Saints because she goes," and—

CM: And it's in Pasadena?

LA: It's in Pasadena. And so I called her up and I go, "Are you going to church this week?" And she goes, "Yeah." And I go, "Could I go with you?" And she goes, "Yeah." 'Cause she's always asked me over the years, here and there. I had a therapist that I saw for ten years, and she would bring up church to me every once in a while. And she goes, "You know, you live near Pasadena. There's a really good church called All Saints. It's very open. It's inclusive," and all this stuff. And, "Why don't you check it out?" And she brought it up maybe twice a year, you know. Every six months she'd just throw it out there. So. But then, because of what I saw—Ed and his openness, too—that I went. And then when I got there it was their—four times a year they do the smoke thing, and that happened to be the first time I went, they were doing that. And it looked too Catholic to me, so I was nervous. [*laughs*]

CM: You were like, "I don't know about this."

LA: Pretty much, yeah.

CM: But then you went back.

LA: And then I went back, and I kept on going back. And then I decided to—since I keep on coming back do the Eucharistic, but I really didn't do it for another year because I kept on putting it into my pocket. And I touched the wine thing. 'Cause, you know, the thing is, I've had wine about four times in my adult life, and each time I spit it out. So, I forget . . . You could touch it, or you drink it, and I don't want to take some wine and spit it on the minister. So I just—

CM: So you just touch it?

LA: Touch it—touch it, yeah. [*laughs*]

CM: What has church given you?

LA: Um . . . Actually, I mean, I'm doing . . . because I have something I wrote about it, but, um . . . Well, it's given me a sense of belonging, and it's given me some peace, and it's given me some patience. It's given

me a lot of patience, you know. And it's something that's always been hard for me to do, to give myself, is the patience.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: And it's given me . . . it's given me wonder, you know, about . . . I don't know if that makes any sense.

CM: Mm-hmm.

LA: But it just, it has opened that up inside me.

CM: Your being able to be, to experience wonder?

LA: Mm-hmm. And life opens up with wonder. So, yeah. And I took a class about learning about the, called "Newcomers" class. And you learn about the church itself. And then everyone will talk about what their upbringing was, or not having any upbringing in any kind of religion. Then I took a confirmation class the following year. And I was really nervous about the confirmation, because I wasn't— A lot of people were from other religions, and they were like, you know, seeing this as where they should have always been, in this type of church. And I kept on thinking like, I don't know if I know enough about the Bible, because I find the stories and stuff a little . . . couldn't understand them, da da da. Or didn't think I was smart enough, because I'm looking around the room like in those [*indistinct*], and all these people are older and [with] white hair. And, you know, very, you know up—middle class, even though the economy has hurt them, too. It just sort of like, I just didn't feel like I knew enough. And so I was going to back out of being confirmed, but then one of my ministers said, "Laura, do you think all the—do you think that the, you know, followers of Jesus were geniuses? They weren't. They were fishermen." [*laughs*] "So get over that part of it, Laura."

CM: Good point, huh?

LA: They weren't geniuses.

CM: They didn't go to school.

LA: Yeah. But something later kind of happened over them, so they had the knowledge. But anyway, she said that to me, and I just looked at her like . . . [*laughs*] So, I don't know. It just, um . . . So, I mean, I kind of wasn't ready for it. Like I kind of wasn't ready for the yoga stuff? But I sort of found a place, and . . . So one year I went to, during the Holy Week I went to every service they had on Holy Week, and went to the whole steps of everything. And then, you know that movie, *The Passion* [*of Christ*]? I didn't know it was the part of the Bible, and so during the week of Holy Week they go through the whole story of the Passion and stuff. And then from that point on, I saw the Eucharist differently, and more in touch with it. [*moves boxes*] So, um . . . And then everyone's friendly. A little too friendly, actually, for me sometimes. It's just a little too much, all this kindness. It kind of drove me nuts at times.

CM: You're a little more cynical, huh?

LA: Pretty much, yes.

CM: [*laughs*]

LA: Yes, I am too cynical. I mean, you know. So. But, you know, I mean, it's . . . I don't know. It's given me a lot of peace and things I never thought I would feel. And I still, you know, tell the ministers my views on things, that I don't kind of . . . you know. I mean, I never opened a Bible until I was there. And then, you know, I asked my friend who's in communications. He does all the editing and filming of things that go on there. And I asked him. I took my brother's bible to him, and I go, "So what does this mean when it says this," you know. "Acts one, chapter two? I mean, how do you find those chapters?" And then he showed me how to read them, to go to those things. And I go, "Okay, that's the first step."

CM: Knowing how to read it?

LA: Knowing where to look when it says this and then this, so you could go to it, you know. I didn't know where that was. And so . . . [*opens boxes*] I'm just trying to find this one thing . . . Yeah, and just went to a lot of workshops and just listened to a lot of people talking about things. [*shuffles papers*] So. This was something I wrote for first class I went to, on learning about the church. [*reads*] "My heart and mind was filled with darkness. My heart would not see, hear, or believe. My heart was closed. I was doing yoga. I started breathing, moving my body in ways I couldn't believe possible. My mind started to open. One day in class I started

crying. It was very hard to allow myself to cry in front of others. The instructor asked what was going on and I told her. 'Now, what do I do with this? Now, what do I do with all this in my heart and my mind and my—and the light stuff. It is breaking through.' She just smiled. We talked about spirituality and God. She said, 'Think about God and you, and move on from there.' And I just thought she was crazy," because she was very cr—you know, open, she's—to me she was crazy constantly. "And that's beyond me and I couldn't get it. I left it alone. I saw Ed on TV talking about this beloved. I thought about what is this beloved stuff?

So I came to All Saints to check it out. I really love the parade,"—the procession—"the music. Very joyful and uplifting, the minister talking about God, love, community, peace, and justice. This is not the church I remember. Maybe I can give it a try more. Let's see what will happen. I have always believed I wasn't worth God's love. I wasn't good enough for God's love. I had no right to God. I was working on letting that go. It didn't come easy. Every day I felt ashamed. I had to control my anger with myself. I struggled with the reading, spelling, writing. I can't fit in here. I'm afraid I'm not smart enough to fit in here. Almost every week you're introduced to this new book and you feel you ought to read it and I want to read it. The minister says God dwells in you and the people answer, 'And also in you.' I know my heart opened one day. I heard it. I felt it. I got it. God also dwells in me, too. I never wanted to claim to be a Christian. Now I have felt it and want to be a part of it. And I'm looking forward to learning much more and to continue on." So that was the first class.

CM: It's beautiful.

LA: So. I never could find the other one. I'm actually a pretty good writer. I mean, it takes me a long time, and Keith helps me with it. And Keith's sister is dyslexic, so he understood me right away.

CM: Really?

LA: Yeah. So, I don't know. [*shuffles papers*] So, I don't know . . . Usually it's right in the front of something, but I just don't see it anymore. I mean I'm actually proud of it, but I can't find it.

CM: You can't find it, right?

LA: And this is one day that I was at church—

CM: Oh.

LA: And I told Keith to take pictures of me, because today I'm in a good mood. [*laughs*] Doesn't happen—

CM: Wearing your like daisy headdress or sunflower headdress.

LA: Oh, yeah. And I've been three years in charge of the Day of the Dead at our parish.

CM: So what do you want—sort of veering back to the issue of your art—in all of this? What do you want viewers who come to the Vincent Price Art Museum, what do you want them to take away from your work?

LA: You know, I don't know what I want from others. I just know that this is my journey, and if you want to come and look at it, I hope you get something out of it. And if you want absolutes, I've never been someone to understand what absolutes are, so I'm sorry I give it to you. You could like it, you could not like it, you know. And if you don't like it, that's your prior—you know. Everybody—it's about what you like, and what you don't like, and this is who I am. And I've been told sometimes I'm a little too honest, which I don't understand as a bad thing. But I don't know. Maybe it's because I always put myself more as feelings that are not necessarily understanding yet. So, I mean, I don't know. I don't know that any show's supposed to give something to other people. It's just what I do, and it's what—it's my passion, you could say. And it's, at the moment, a lot of my peace and it's a lot of my centering that I never—words that I never would have used before. [*laughs*] Centering, peace.

CM: They were too hippie-crunchy.

LA: Pretty much. [*laughter*]

CM: Too feely-touchy.

LA: Yes, too feely-touchy. That's the word! Yes, those are the words.

CM: Too feely-touchy?

LA: Yep.

CM: You could throw the words *goddess* or *Earth Mother* in there, too, but that's kind of . . .

LA: No, that's going too far for me. [*laughter*] I mean, when I first met artist in the community and she would talk about Mother Earth, and I was like, "Oh my God."

CM: Like, "Give me a break."

LA: Pretty much. [*laughs*] I mean, I felt the same way about yoga. Who knew I was going to stick around for three years? And I was regular. Every week. At least one of the two days I would go. Sometimes twice a week.

CM: You know, it's always interesting what you learn something from.

LA: Yeah. And then all along, you know, Terry being that optimistic person that she is. And that drove me nuts. She would just—I would complain, and she would just smile. [*laughs*] And I go—and this was one of the days that it was the hardest things to acknowledge—and I go, "When we were doing this certain exercise in yoga and chanting, I saw Gilbert there." And so she goes, "Yeah." I go, "Gilbert was smiling. He couldn't—his smile was so big 'cause he couldn't believe I'm here. I can't believe I'm here. And he's—I just see him smiling. And it's just like, oh."[*laughs*] And I told her that, and then she just smiled. I go, "See you're doing it too."

CM: "All this positivity. It's killing me!" [*laughter*]

LA: It's gonna drive—it is, basically, because I didn't grow up around that. I know hostility. I could interact with it. I could, you know, go through it. I could let it just bounce off my back. But the positive stuff is another story.

CM: You're like, "This is unfamiliar territory."

LA: Yes, because I feel like I'm out of control. I don't have any control over this, because I don't know how to be it.

CM: You don't know how to react. Do you ever feel Gilbert's watching out on you?

LA: Well, that day he was. He was just laughing, because there was a chant that we were doing, and the more you do it and the faster you do it, it sounded like something else. And he goes, "I know you want to say . . ." Oh, what was thing that Popeye said?

CM: "I am what I am"?

LA: Yeah. Basically, yeah. I think that was it. And he's smiling at me. He goes, "I know you want to say it. Go ahead. Say it. Say it!" [*laughs*]

CM: He was just there for you.

LA: His smile, his spirit, and his teasing me was there for me that day.

CM: That's awesome.

LA: And, I mean, and to just to acknowledge it is a big thing, because I would never acknowledge things like that before.

CM: No. Yeah.

LA: So. And so yoga opened me up to go to church.

CM: Yeah. It's like everything like leads to the—

LA: Leads to something else.

CM: Everything leads to the, everything leads to the—

LA: Next thing.

CM: To the next thing.

LA: Yeah.

CM: In this kind of organic way, it just happened.

LA: Yeah, yeah. So, it's just . . . yeah.

CM: That's cool.

LA: So, I mean—I mean I have no clue on where I'm going. I just keep on going. And there have been many times I never thought I was going to continue to go. And so, you know, "Hey, I'm here now." So that's . . . I'm finally enjoying my presence here. [*laughs*]

CM: Good. Good! Well, some of us enjoy your presence here, so . . .

[*end of audio*]

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