



CSRC  
ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

NO. 18, OCTOBER 2020

# CARMEN HERRERA

INTERVIEWED BY JULIA P. HERZBERG

ON DECEMBER 15, 2005, AND JANUARY 10, 2006

Carmen Herrera is a Cuban American painter who lives and works in New York City. In 2017 her work was surveyed in *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight* at the Whitney Museum of American Art; the exhibition traveled to the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, Germany. A selection of recent paintings was shown at New York City's Lisson Gallery in May 2016. Other solo exhibitions have been at Museum Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern, Kaiserslautern, Germany (2010); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK (2009); and Museo del Barrio, New York City (1998). Her work has also been included in a number of group shows.

Julia P. Herzberg is an art historian, independent curator, and writer. As a Fulbright scholar in 2007–11 and 2012–13, she taught at Pontifical Catholic University and Diego Portales University in Santiago, Chile, and curated the exhibition *Kaarina Kaikkonen: Two Projects—Traces and Dialogues* at the Museum of History and Human Rights and the National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago. Her most recent publications are “Carlos Alfonzo: Transformative Work from Cuba to Miami and the U.S.,” in *Carlos Alfonzo: Witnessing Perpetuity* (2020) and “A Conversation with María Elena González: A Trajectory of Sound,” in *María Elena González: Tree Talk* (2019).

This interview was conducted as part of the A Ver: Revisioning Art History project.

Preferred citation: Carmen Herrera, interview with Julia P. Herzberg, December 15, 2005, and January 6, 2006, New York, New York. CSRC Oral Histories Series, no. 18. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2020.

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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 transcription 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.

This interview was edited by the interviewer after review of the transcription. The chronology published in the catalog for Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016) was consulted to clarify some details of the artist's life.

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## 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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# INTERVIEW WITH CARMEN HERRERA

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**Julia P. Herzberg:** Today is December 15, 2005. This is Julia P. Herzberg, and I am with Carmen Herrera, the Cuban-born artist, at her home, at 37 East Nineteenth Street, New York, New York, 10003, in the company of another artist, Tony Bechara, who's a very close friend of Carmen. And we're going to begin the questions from my list that begins with your early life until you left home. So, Carmen, maybe you can begin with where and when you were born, and then talk about your family background.

**Carmen Herrera:** Well, Julia, as I've told you before, I was born in [Havana,] Cuba in 1915, and like all of the people who are born on islands, I always was looking [to leave] the island somehow. I felt a little bit cooped up being there. [*indistinct*] But I love my country, don't get me wrong. And I love my family. I love everything. I had one of the best childhoods that anybody can dream of. Unfortunately, I lost my father when I was three years old, and my mother raised [seven of] us. I was the youngest. She raised us very nicely. We were raised in a kind of wonderful free way, so that all my memories are really glorious. And that's all I can tell you about it. I mean, all the joys of childhood, I enjoyed them all.

**JPH:** Did your religious background play a particularly significant role in your family's life?

**CH:** Very much so. We are Roman Catholics, very much involved with the church, and all [things] Catholic. And to this day, that's what I am. I'm basically Catholic in my thinking.

**JPH:** What were your parents', or perhaps your mother's, political affiliations or beliefs?

**CH:** My father, as I told you, died very young. He fought against Spain for the liberation of Cuba, and that's why he died so young, because he caught malaria; was wounded; and left my mother with seven children to raise. He was very liberal. He was the editor of a newspaper in Havana called *El Mundo*. And there he really espoused all the freethinking ways politically, morally, in every possible way. [He was a free thinker.] My mother was also a newspaperwoman, even in those years. That's many, many, many years ago. She was a pioneer of the feminist kind of thing, [who] kept working for many years. I grew up at various bad moments in Cuba. There were all kinds of revolutions, dictators, and bloody murders of my young friends. But, those [happened], I'm talking now, when I was an adolescent. I'm talking about the dictatorship of my childhood, which I believe was in '29 or '30, something like that. I was very, very young. And it was a horrible experience to live—for everybody. But that really hardened me a little bit. I came out of that Garden of Eden I had been enjoying all my life, to a very cruel reality. So, losing a lot of my friends who were murdered, you know, was pretty hard. Eventually, things calmed down [somewhat], but they never really calmed down. We went from one political upheaval to the next political upheaval, from one dictator to the other. And, that's my history. In the meantime, in 1939, I got married. I was fortunate that I met my husband, an American who went to Cuba. We got married in Cuba, and I came to the United States in 1939.

**JPH:** Carmen, I'm sorry to interrupt for a moment. I just want to reiterate. You were born in Havana, Cuba?

**CH:** Havana, Cuba.

**JPH:** In 1915?

**CH:** In 1915.

**JPH:** And when you say that your father was involved in the revolution against Spain, wasn't that in 1898?

**CH:** Yes, that was the Spanish-American War.

**JPH:** The Spanish-American War?

**CH:** The Spanish-American War, yeah. But we call it the War of the Revolution against Spain.

- JPH: Exactly. But, your father died three years after that?
- CH: No, no.
- JPH: No, he couldn't have. He died three years after you were born.
- CH: Yes, three years after I was born. I was born in 1915.
- JPH: Right. So in 1918, he died, but he died from some kind of wounds. [Carmen's father died on July 16, 1917. —JPH]
- CH: From the results of having been at war. He joined the Spanish, the Cuban troops when he was seventeen years old. He was a child, practically.
- JPH: Were your grandparents from Spain or were they—
- CH: Yeah, they were from Spain. But my mother's father was a Spanish colonel.
- JPH: Oh. What areas of Spain were they from?
- CH: I'm sorry?
- JPH: What areas or what cities or what—
- CH: My mother's family are of Basque origin, and my father's were Castilians.
- JPH: I see. Tell us a little bit about 1937, when you met your husband. What was his name; what he was doing in Cuba; and how did you come to meet him?
- CH: My husband, [Jesse Loewenthal,] met my brother [Addison], who lived in New York. [Jesse] decided to go to Cuba. In those years, people [went to] Cuba as tourists. So my brother gave [Jesse] a letter for my family, so when he came to visit, I met him. We began being together [to see each other] all summer. Then he left, and then he came back [in 1938]. And then he left [after the Christmas holidays]. Eventually, in '39, we got married. In the meantime, before I met Jesse, I tried very hard to go back to high school, because all of the high schools had been closed during these upheavals under dictators during that terrible [period]. So I had to do my high school in two years, [which] would have taken me four [years] normally. I worked very, very hard, because I wanted to get to the university, which I did. And I wanted to study architecture at Havana University [in 1938]. Then I met my husband [when he returned to Havana] in '39, and then I got married and came here [to New York].
- JPH: When did you do your four years of high school in two years, or did you have a tutor at home?
- CH: No, no, no. I just went to the high school [and attended] all of the classes. We were a group of young people that got together and wanted to do the same thing. We studied very hard. We studied hour after hour, until sometimes two or three in the morning. It was—I don't recommend it, actually, it's too hard. But I'm glad I did it.
- JPH: Can we go back a little bit to the period where you were growing up, and can you tell me if there was a particular interest in your family in visual culture, or architecture, or dance, or music?
- CH: Actually—
- JPH: Or literature?
- CH: Actually, my father had collected a lot of paintings; he loved art, really. And my mother had a beautiful voice; and she studied music. And she really trained to be an opera singer. But, in her time, that [profession] was not respectable, so her family, really fought her tooth and nail. She never made it a career, which was a pity, because she had everything, [so much talent]. She was a prima donna by temperament.
- JPH: But she was a practicing newspaper person?
- CH: She was a practicing—and that was all right. But not enough for a singer. *[laughs]*
- JPH: But I bet that there weren't many women of your mother's generation who were actively involved in writing for a newspaper.
- CH: Not very many. Very few. There were a couple of ladies. I mean, they were—avant-garde ladies, I guess.
- JPH: Can you describe, just a little bit, about the particular neighborhood that you grew up in, in Havana.
- CH: The neighborhood I grew up was called Vedado. We lived in a very old house, and very large house, in a very old large house. We were a very large family. And it [Vedado] was really almost like the country. But then the city began moving towards us, and we became kind of a very . . . Well, a very good neighborhood,

you know. People liked to live there. And we had been pioneers because this had been the house of el marqués Armendáriz [?]. Half of the house! He had a tremendous house. And my mother at one point, in a moment of lucidity, bought this big house, which was half of what it had been. It had nine bedrooms so the whole house probably had eighteen bedrooms. And that [house] was only his summer residence.

JPH: I see. Well, when your family first lived in el Vedado, I'm sure there were practically no businesses in the neighborhood. It was really residential, correct?

CH: Oh, no. It was nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

JPH: So, when it was market day, or when the housekeepers went to the market, etc., they probably went to the central market.

CH: They usually returned with all the things they needed for the family. The cook, I can remember, came in with big bags of food that she was going to prepare that day. She shopped every day.

JPH: You grew up, of course, speaking Spanish, because it was your first language, I assume. I don't know, is Basque [*indistinct*] . . .

CH: No, it was Spanish. Spanish.

JPH: What schools did you go to?

CH: Well, school. At first I was privately educated. And, let me see, after that, I went to the French Dominicans. And after the French Dominicans, I went to a very progressive school that had the Montessori method, [*laughs*] which was wonderful. Because the young women that were teaching there had been pupils of Don Carlos de la Torre [Huerta], who was the greatest Cuban naturalist of his time. And they were all so devoted to Don Carlos, and so taken by natural [history] [*indistinct*]. We were little children. They made us remember the Latin names of insects and this and that. We loved it. Because they [the nuns] were young and very enthusiastic.

JPH: So you studied together at the Montessori school at about what age?

CH: Oh, I must have been about nine years old or something like that.

JPH: Well, this is terrific. And what about your friends, as when you were growing up. Were any of them so inclined or interested in art, or . . .

CH: Not at the beginning. Not at the beginning. The friends I met through my family were not that type. But when I began going to high school, I met a lot of very talented, lovely young men and women, and they were my friends. They were my friends of choice. The other ones were the friends that I had been given by my family. And, no surprise, my mother didn't approve very much of them, but I didn't care. I loved them.

JPH: And, tell me. Did you study art in school? I mean, was it offered as a subject in those years?

CH: I'm sorry?

JPH: Did you study art in school? In the Montessori school?

CH: No, no, no, no, no, no. My first encounter with art was, you know, that all children dance, play music, paint, and so on. But, when they stopped being children, [those interests disappear,] as we all know. But, in my case, my mother decided that my brother and I were exceedingly talented, and she spoke to Don Edelman, who was the director of San Alejandro [Academy]. [Frederico Edelman y Pinto was an English teacher and founder of the Asociación de Pintores y Escultores de Cuba. He studied at the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro; he was never its director. —JPH] And he said, all right, send the children and I will teach them. And I began at a very, very early age, going to his marvelous home to study with him. And he would put a cast up, or he would make me copy something. And that's how I began drawing.

JPH: I was going to say, he probably gave you drawing lessons in the beginning?

CH: Drawing lessons. And I drew, and drew, and drew a lot.

JPH: And then, when do you think you started painting? How long did he keep you drawing before you started painting?

CH: Oh no. After that, I had a private teacher, and, later on, something very strange happened. During the time of the dictatorship of Machado [Gerardo Machado y Morales], the university was closed. The Academia

of San Alejandro [Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro] was being boycotted by the students. That's why I never went to San Alejandro. Although it keeps popping up in all of my interviews that I went to San Alejandro. I did not go to San Alejandro. I did not break the strike. [*laughs*] But, I went to something else. It was a group of women that had an organization called *el liceo*. They were extraordinary. They voted, the women. [*indistinct*] Branch of culture, actually. It had a lending library that was very fine. Many Spanish refugees, great personalities [went] and lectured at the Lyceum. [The Lyceum was a women's organization in Havana. —JPH]

JPH: Spanish refugees from the Civil War?

CH: From the Civil War. And it was just all great. And they also had classes of drawing, painting, and sculpture. I began learning there. There was a wonderful teacher, Mademoiselle Chapoton [?]. Very Cuban, although she had a French name. Wonderful woman, you know. All these women made you enthusiastic about things. It was wonderful. I was very, very lucky that way.

JPH: Well, let me think. In 1939, they were having exhibitions at the Lyceum.

CH: Yes.

JPH: And, I can't remember exactly, but, I know that Lydia Cabrera organized [Wilfredo] Lam's first show in Cuba, if I'm not mistaken, in '42 at the Lyceum. And so she—and I also can't remember exactly the year she went back to Cuba from Spain, but it was around 1940. It was a little bit, maybe '39, but maybe '40. [Lam's work was included in a group exhibition at Havana's Lyceum in 1943; his first solo show at the Lyceum was in 1946. Cabrera returned to Cuba from Paris in 1938. —JPH] Did you ever know her at the Lyceum, or did she come after you?

CH: No. No. No. Because she was the older generation, you see. So we had no contact, actually, none. Although, of course I knew about her; I knew about what she was doing. It was all very interesting. It was a very interesting time.

JPH: So you really went to classes and attended different kinds of artistic performances, I suppose, at the Lyceum, while you were in high school or right after high school?

CH: While I was in high school.

JPH: And did your friends go with you, because, I think in those days, you always went with friends.

CH: With a group of people, really. We did all the things together. Remember, there were no galleries in Cuba. There was a museum—there was practically no museums at all. So the only way we had contact with what was going on in the world was through magazines, newspapers, and so on. And every time we got something that interested us, we [passed] it around our little group. But, it was all very exciting and very productive. Very.

JPH: In 1939, when you met Jesse, and then later that year you got married. How many years after high school?

CH: Oh, a couple of—I came out of high school and jumped into the university right away.

JPH: So did you complete your university education in Cuba?

CH: No. No.

JPH: How many years did you go?

CH: Two years. [Herrera graduated from the Instituto de Habana in August 9, 1938. —JPH]

JPH: Okay.

CH: [I studied the] theory of architecture.

JPH: And then you met Jesse?

CH: No, before I met Jesse.

Tony Bechara: You also studied in Europe.

CH: Uh-huh.

JPH: But, before Europe, I wanted to sort of, I wanted—

TB: [*indistinct*]

CH: I just told her.

JPH: Okay. I think I didn't get it. So clarify that for me.

- CH: Before I met my husband, I had been at the university for two years. Then, we got married in '39.
- TB: When did you go to school in Paris?
- CH: Oh, Paris . . . Oh, wait a second, yes. That was in 1929, when I first went to school in Paris. I was fourteen years old.
- TB: That's important.
- JPH: That's important. And how did you get to Paris in 1929?
- CH: My mother just took us. She decided to go with my sister. And I had like a little tour of, you know, we went to France mostly. And I just stayed there at school. They left me there. [In 1931, after Herrera finished the school year, her mother took her sister to Paris, and they went to Italy and Germany before returning to Havana. —JPH]
- JPH: And that's when you were at Marymount college, in Paris? [Herrera was at Marymount International School, Paris, in 1931. —JPH]
- CH: That's when I [*indistinct*].
- JPH: For the year?
- CH: That must have been [*indistinct*].
- JPH: Nineteen twenty-nine?
- CH: Wait a minute. Probably 1930 or '31.
- TB: It was after the crash.
- CH: Yes, after the crash, right. [Herrera went to Paris in 1929 and returned to Havana in 1931. —JPH]
- JPH: My notes might be wrong, but I have, I do have here—I guess they agree with you. In the 1930s, you studied at the Art Students League. [The Art Students League is an art school in Manhattan; it was founded in 1875. —JPH] You studied—you returned from Paris to Cuba, prior to coming—
- CH: No, no, no. When I married Jesse and I came here and went to the Art Students League.
- TB: That's during the war.
- CH: Uh-huh. That was during the war.
- JPH: Okay. So, here. You went to the University of Havana, School of Architecture in '35 and '36. And then in '37, and '38, and '39, you were no longer at the university because of the Machado problems.
- CH: Oh no, that's not—you reversed it. Actually, I went through '37 and '38 at the university. The Machado thing was before. [Herrera enrolled at the University of Havana in 1938 and studied there for one academic year. —JPH]
- JPH: I'm going to turn this off for just one moment, okay?

[*break in audio*]

- JPH: Tony, we were talking about Carmen's formal education, and you had some really interesting things to say about it.
- TB: Well, we have to remember, we're talking about a time and a place in history when, we're talking about the third decade of the last century. And to try and deal in terms of junior high school and high school is a little bit irrelevant, because we are first talking about Cuba and the Caribbean. We are talking about the '20s. We are talking about times of great political upheaval. And, what is interesting from my knowing you, Carmen, and I wanted to ask about this, is the kind of intellectual environment in which you grew up, one that really was basically the base for your education.
- CH: Yes, it was. But I was surrounded by people that were extremely well informed about everything that was happening in the world. And I always, well, I didn't say much. I sat around with them. I learned from my mother's friends, from the friends of my family—
- TB: Journals.
- CH: From my brothers who were much older, and so on. And then I met my own crowd of young people who had these same interests. And that was my education. Actually, when I met those young people, outside



of my social group, you see—they came from different backgrounds, Cuban backgrounds. And we just, because we were all artists, we sort of came together.

**JPH:** But, nevertheless, she did go to the Montessori school. And, nevertheless, you were able to do a formal high school study in two years instead of four years. So you had a very privileged educational background considering the time and the circumstances. [After attending the Montessori school, Herrera attended Colegio Sepulveda in Havana. —JPH]

**CH:** I did.

**JPH:** Yeah.

**CH:** Most of my family was not an average family. They were very different from everybody else. Sometimes I resented it. [laughs] But I'm glad now they were so different.

**JPH:** Were your parents from a very strong economic background? I mean, obviously, they were of a strong economic background, but were they extraordinarily well-to-do?

**CH:** No. No. My father's family had been, at one point, I understand, rather wealthy, and they lost everything during the Spanish-American War. But—

**TB:** You said you belonged to the intelligentsia.

**CH:** Yes, my—yes, but they were very quiet.

**TB:** They were upper middle class.

**CH:** They were religious people, very strict Catholics, and they were different from my mother's side. My mother's side was more interesting, actually.

**TB:** It seems to me that combined with all that during the '20s, you were able to go to Paris and live in Paris [there]. It must have affected how you got your view of the world.

**CH:** Absolutely. A revelation. I mean I suppose I had a mini breakdown when I went back to Cuba. I was so sad all the time. And I knew that it was going to be a long time before I went back to Paris. And it was. And it was wonderful. [laughs]

**JPH:** Now, maybe, we could talk a little about 1939, when you got married, and how you came here, and how your life was the first few years as a young Cuban woman in New York, which, I think, probably also given your background, was quite unusual.

**CH:** Well, you see, what happened is that I was extremely disappointed. Because I thought that I would be received here, you know, as an artist. And, I went to school, I went to the Art Students League, and so on. And then at one point, I was in the class of Jon Corbino, and he told a friend of mine: "I don't know what Carmen is doing here. She should take a studio and find out if she is an artist or not." So, I took [his] advice. But he didn't give it to me directly, but indirectly, and I began painting. It was very difficult to find the vocabulary, and I struggled a long, long time. I finally hit it in Paris. But really, it took me years [to paint] without any direction.

**JPH:** Did you move from Cuba directly to Paris, or did you come to New York first?

**CH:** Well, I told you, I went to Paris when I was fourteen years old. Later on, '39 . . . No— [cross talk]

**TB:** You were here until after the war.

**CH:** Remember the war, we couldn't go to Europe. But we went to Europe after the war, and we had a marvelous time.

**JPH:** So, did you start your art here in New York during the World War II years? I'm sorry, I must have missed a step.

**CH:** I went to the Art Students League. Those were the years I went to the—which was very curious because there were mostly women. All the men were at war. And I didn't like that. [laughs] I missed the men, and they weren't there.

**JPH:** Do you happen to recall any fellow women artists, students at the league, that later became well known?

**CH:** No. No.

**JPH:** Did you make personal friends with any of your fellow colleagues?



- CH: A couple of them. We were friendly. We went out together, and so on. But nothing—nobody was terribly serious about what they were doing. But I was.
- JPH: Yeah.
- CH: But, in my case, it was a search. I mean, I was trying to find out. I had to say something, and it was hard. Very hard. And nobody could help you, really. You had to find yourself.
- JPH: And your classes at the League were painting classes, I take it?
- CH: Yes. Yes. And Jon Corbino was my teacher.
- JPH: For several years?
- CH: For a couple of years.
- JPH: And then after the war, 1945, you returned to Paris again with Jesse? Tell us something about what Jesse was doing during those years.
- CH: What Jesse was doing—Jesse was a teacher. A very, very, well-educated, a very well-read man, a very interesting man that I loved dearly for sixty years. And it turned out to be a very good marriage. And he believed in what I was doing, and he backed me all the time. It was very fortunate for me to have a husband like that. [Lowenthal taught English literature at Stuyvesant High School in New York City. —JPH]
- TB: Did you travel to Cuba during the war years, or—
- CH: Yes, I did. I went a couple of times.
- TB: So there were submarines? Did you have to turn out the lights at night, and . . .
- CH: Well, no, we went by plane.
- TB: Oh, you did.
- CH: Yeah. Of course.
- TB: From Miami or from here?
- CH: From Miami.
- JPH: So, how did you travel to Miami? On a train?
- CH: Train. By train.
- TB: Wartime.
- JPH: And that wasn't so easy, was it, to get a ticket on the train, because I know my family talked about trips that they had to take, for example, from here to the Midwest. And unless they knew somebody—they couldn't get tickets because all the soldiers were on the trains.
- CH: No, we never encountered that.
- JPH: Oh, uh-huh.
- CH: But what we did encounter—and this is a strange story. I had a friend, one of those friends from my young years in Cuba, Alfredo Lozano, a Cuban sculptor, who knew no English. He knew Jesse and I were coming back to the United States, so he said, "I'll go with you. I'll take [*indistinct*]." He was coming here for different reasons, and he was delayed, for a long, long time, by, I don't know, by the FBI, I suppose. Because they kept asking him if he had seen such and such person, a woman. [Lozano] knew her in Havana, and he kept saying, "No, I don't know her." They described her. "I don't know her." Because he had only met this person for a brief second when he went to the studio [of René] Portocarrero, a friend of his, and she was there. How did the FBI know this? It wasn't a question that he was hiding anything. He just simply forgot. You meet so many people, especially Cubans, during those years. So you see, it wasn't easy traveling. And then, I came back from one trip to Havana to the United States, and I [brought] two paintings by Fidelio Ponce for the Museum of Modern Art. Well, they took a long time, they took them off the train to see whether there were any secret messages or whatever, so we had to wait. Traveling to Cuba was not easy. I mean, we had nothing to hide, but . . .
- TB: So, did you ever meet Portocarrero?
- CH: Yeah, sure.
- TB: And what was he like?
- CH: All those people were my friends.

- JPH: Can you name some of the Cuban modernists that you knew then?
- CH: I knew them all, actually. Cundo Bermúdez, Alfredo Lozano, and Portocarrero. Who else? I knew them all. You name them, and I tell you, I knew them.
- TB: You met Amelia?
- CH: Amelia, yes. Amelia was, well, a little older than myself, but I had an enormous admiration for Amelia because she was so strong.
- TB: And that was Amelia Peláez?
- CH: Amelia Peláez. And she was an absolutely marvelous woman.
- TB: And of course you knew Wifredo?
- CH: I knew Wifredo, yes.
- JPH: Oh, tell me how you met Wifredo.
- CH: I don't know how I met him. [*indistinct*] I met him at somebody's house or somebody's studio in Havana, when he was there. And then, whenever [Wifredo] came to New York, he would give his girlfriends my telephone number. [*laughs*] And they would call: "Is Wifredo around?" "Is Wifredo around?" He was very, very popular with the ladies.
- JPH: Yes. Well, he and Amelia actually, I think, were the same age. I think they were—I know Lam was born in 1900. I think Amelia was—
- CH: She's a little older.
- JPH: Oh, is she a little older? She might be. She might have been a couple of years older. Well, what did Jesse do when you were in Paris, and for how long were you in Paris?
- CH: Oh, we just enjoyed ourselves. I mean, he was on a sabbatical, and then he could get a second sabbatical, and we stretched it out as long as we could. And, eventually, we had to come back for the simple reason that we could not afford to stay there. But we both loved France, and those were the happiest years of our lives. And I still love France. Very much.
- JPH: I think you probably were in France for, what, 1950 to 1954?
- CH: Yeah.
- TB: From '48?
- CH: Forty-something, yes, because I had something in a catalog there.
- JPH: You were there from '47 to '50 or '51. [Herrera moved to Paris in 1948 and returned to New York in 1953 or 1954. —JPH]
- CH: Those were all the years that I showed at the *Réalités Nouvelles*, that's right. [The *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles* is an exhibiting society, founded in Paris in 1939, that holds annual exhibitions; Herrera exhibited with the group between 1945 and 1953. —JPH]
- JPH: Now, do you want to tell us about your artistic experiences in Paris? Where you painted? With whom you might have painted? Did you go to anyone's atelier?
- CH: No, no. I'll tell you. What happened in Paris in those years is that you went to a café and you met everybody. Everybody. Artists, writers, and so on, which was very nice because you kept your privacy. At the same time you could have a friendship with somebody. And that's nice. I don't know how it is now: I suppose it's the same. Well, anyhow, what happened to me was that I was walking along the quays in Paris, and I came across some magazines, and there was something called *Réalités Nouvelles*, which was illustrated. And they had had an exhibition. This was after the German occupation.
- JPH: Correct.
- CH: A kind of response to what the . . . a kind of response to what the Germans said about . . .
- JPH: About?
- CH: About the—yeah.
- JPH: And *Nouvelles Réalités* had a kind of very open, broad thematic structure. Abstraction was defined in multiple ways. It didn't have one look or one aspect, and in your book that documents your work, I see that one of the early ones [that was illustrated] was from 1949. Your work during 1949 was rather biomorphic.

CH: Uh-huh.

JPH: And by '50 and '52, it became less biomorphic. And certainly even in '48 you had begun to show the kind of linear directions that would later define your work. Carmen, do you want to talk about some of the stylistic changes or not?

CH: Well, it's a very simple thing. I mean, and I think it happens to all artists. You have to find what I call your vocabulary. That is to say, a way of expressing what you intimately want to say in a painting. And so I wavered into different ways. But, little by little, I developed into what I do today.

JPH: Well, frankly, you really kind of got into the direction of linear abstraction quite quickly.

CH: Yes. That went well.

JPH: Yes, it was. Because, if you look at your 1948 work, you already had achieved that. I mean only one year earlier was your abstraction more biomorphic. So within that year, you made this shift that further evolved throughout your career.

CH: Well, you see, but it was something . . . Remember that, at that point, I was completely alone. I was doing this all by myself. I was trying to find a way to define my work. I found it, I think, and this is what I wanted to do.

TB: Tell me about, you know, it's fascinating to hear you talk about Paris and those years. I love the story of the canvas that you were using on the [*indistinct*] because it was after the war, and—

JPH: There was no canvas?

CH: No. And we were in the country. We were living in the country in France, [which was] like an artist's colony, you know. I forget who—

TB: Obregón.

CH: Ah, sí. [Alejandro] Obregón was living there. He's from where, from—

TB: Colombia.

CH: From Colombia, yeah, right. He was living there with his wife. And when we needed materials I was [*indistinct*] to do. It was very hard to get the material. And, of course, [there was] no linen. But, somebody discovered that if you went to a place where they sold [*indistinct*] for horses and things like that, you could find linen there because linen was used for the horses and for the cattle not to be hurt by the . . . ¿Cómo se llama eso?

TB: The yoke. You know, they used—

CH: The yoke. Yes. And there's where we went. And it was, of course, unprimed. So, we have to buy the linen there and then prime it.

JPH: Oh. How fantastic!

CH: And then, of course, my early work is miserable because the linen was [*indistinct*].

JPH: So, who else, what—explain a little bit about the artist's colony that you lived in.

CH: They were from all over. They were from all over. They were from Poland. They were from Switzerland. They were the English. They were, you name it, Latin American and so on. And a lot of drinking and a lot of dancing, a lot of being young and silly, and . . . But in the midst of all that everybody was working.

TB: Doing what they wanted to do.

JPH: And was the collective studio where you painted?

CH: No. No. We all had our houses, and we all painted. And then we'd go together and [*indistinct*].

[*break in audio*]

JPH: We're going to stop this for a moment.

[*break in audio*]

JPH: Carmen, tell me please, where did you live in this artist's colony in France?

CH: It wasn't an artist's colony. We all had our own studios in different parts of the city. And I lived at Rue Campagne-Première, which was a place that had several artist studios. And I had one of them.

TB: In the countryside?

CH: In the countryside, we all bought our houses.

TB: Yeah.

CH: We bought our houses for a hundred twenty-five dollars, seventy-five dollars. American dollars into francs, of course. But the government was giving away these houses. They had no roofs. They were beautiful structures with Roman carved stones, very heavy and so. There was no roof. The joke, or the trick, was whenever a newcomer came to town, we went over and said, "We have beautiful stones. Would you care for some?" Because we were cleaning our places of the stones. It was wonderful. We were all young and very stupid. And very happy.

JPH: The name of the town that—

CH: The name of the town was Alba-la-Romaine.

JPH: And the province was?

CH: Ardèche.

JPH: Ardèche. And, so, you had to actually renovate your homes?

CH: We had to fix everything. It had no bathrooms of any kind. It had no kitchen. It had no anything. But, it was very hard to get everything. This is a kind of a wild place in France, and it's a very curious town. Alba-la-Romaine it was called, because it was a Roman town, and before—the Roman fortress was still around, surrounding the town. And we had part of that. And we had a beautiful terrace overlooking the whole beautiful countryside.

JPH: And what did you do? Did you go there on weekends? Or did you actually live there?

CH: Oh, no, no, no. We were living there for the summer.

JPH: For the summer. One summer?

CH: We spent several summers—about two summers. And that's about [all] you could take. It was too primitive, really. Actually, it was like camping. And, of course, other people came in. One of the wives of the—Houston, the movie-maker.

JPH: John Houston?

CH: John Houston. Lived there, and [his wife] was an Irish girl. A beautiful woman, from the north of Ireland. A lovely, lovely person. And she used to throw parties and invite the mayor of the town, and the butcher, and us, and so on.

JPH: Was she an artist?

CH: No.

JPH: Were there other artists from Paris that you know who went there also? And who were they?

CH: Well, there was, of course, Alejandro Obregón and his wife, who was a marvelous dancer. And, who else? There were a couple of Latin Americans who escape my mind just now. And people from all over the world. I mean, all nationalities were represented in that town.

JPH: In the summer?

CH: In the summer.

JPH: And tell me, what was your common language? Was it English, or was it Spanish?

CH: Mostly French. And, some English, of course.

JPH: Okay. Carmen, I'm going to—

TB: [*indistinct*]

CH: I don't remember.

JPH: I'm going to switch tapes now, Carmen.

CH: Okay.

## JANUARY 10, 2006

**JPH:** Today is January 11, 2006. It's the tenth, it's not the eleventh. And I'm here with Carmen Herrera, on our second interview. And Tony Bechara, who is also an artist and a very close friend of Carmen's and the president of the board of El Museo del Barrio. We're just going to review a couple of things from the past as we move forward and discuss Carmen's art career. There were a couple of things that I wanted to ask you, Carmen. First of all, I assume that Spanish was the language in your family that was spoken all the time.

**CH:** Yes, it was.

**JPH:** When you went to the nuns' school in Cuba, was Spanish the common language?

**CH:** Yes. The school I went to was the French Dominicans, who spoke very little French, and I was there for a very short period. And, I hate to say it, because I love the nuns, but they are not the best teachers in the world. And so I was having a lot of difficulties, and my mother took me out. [The chronology in the exhibition catalog for the exhibition at the Whitney Museum does not list a Dominican school. —JPH] And then I had a teacher—a private teacher for about a month, and I was sailing. I just loved learning. And eventually I went to a school that was a very progressive school in Havana called [Colegio] Sepulveda. A Spanish woman started the school with two of her daughters, and then she collected a few marvelous teachers from the university who were pupils of Don Carlos de la Torre, who was the great Cuban naturalist. And all those women were absolutely crazy about nature, and they injected us with the love of nature, and we came through memorizing Latin. We were little kids; we [memorized] all the Latin names of insects and birds and things, and we loved it. They had a lot of projects for us. It was a wonderful, wonderful teaching, really.

**JPH:** So, you finished elementary school in Sepulveda.

**CH:** Sepulveda.

**JPH:** Sepulveda. And, your language—they obviously spoke in Spanish. That was the common language.

**CH:** It was the language.

**JPH:** At what point did you begin to learn French? At what point did you begin to learn English?

**CH:** Well, with English, my mother had a perfume business and the perfumes were manufactured in the United States. She came very frequently to the United States, and I came with her. At one point she stayed in the United States for two years, and I must have been very, very young, because I got terribly confused between English and Spanish. And when I went back to Cuba, they put me in with the Dominicans, I had a lot of problems. And the nuns were not too good at picking up the fact that I was struggling with two languages, you see. So, eventually, my mother took me out, gave me some private teaching at home, and then I went to this progressive school that was absolutely great.

**JPH:** So, did you remember English most of your adolescent and university years, or through your adolescent and university years, or did you relearn English?

**CH:** No. I had to study English, of course. When I went to school, we had a few lessons of English and so on, and then, when I went to high school, we had to study English. And I had private lessons. You know, we struggled with English. We all wanted to learn it, and I really began speaking English when I married my husband and came to the United States.

**JPH:** Did Jesse speak Spanish when you met him?

**CH:** Yes. He had been to Spain and he knew Spanish very well. So, communication was possible because he knew Spanish. Otherwise, it would not have been very good.

**JPH:** Did the two of you generally speak Spanish at home?

**CH:** It depended. We spoke English when we lived in New York, because all of our friends and his family and so on, they were all English-speaking people. And then, when we moved to France, something very curious happened. Jesse and I and a friend were at our studio in Paris. And the friend looked at us and said, "Do you realize that you're talking to each other in French?" But, I forgot to tell you, I had been in France when I was fourteen. I went to Marymount college in Neuilly at the time, and I stayed there for about a year.

And I picked up French because I was young enough, at that time, to pick up a language very, very fast, for which I am very grateful.

JPH: Okay. So, I think what we might look at now, and continue looking at, are your early years and middle years.

[*break in audio*]

JPH: Okay then, we're going to start with the early years and, again, repeat please, when you came to New York prior to Paris. Did you have any early exhibitions in New York?

CH: My exhibition? No, I was a married student. I wasn't a full-fledged painter. I didn't think of painting as a career, and I still don't think it should be a career. But you're a painter, you're a born painter, and you're stuck. That's all you can do.

JPH: Okay. So then you were, however, in an exhibit at Nouvelles Réalités in Paris. So we've discussed that.

CH: Yes.

JPH: And now—

CH: Before that, I had gone to the Art Students League in New York.

JPH: Right.

CH: You see— [*phone rings*]

JPH: And, so let us talk about who were some of the— [*phone rings*]

[*break in audio*]

JPH: Okay, so, were there any key influential people who advocated for your work while you were at the Art Students League that you can remember? And, then, let's go to Paris and back to New York.

CH: Well, I studied at the Art Students League with Jon Corbino, and he told a friend of mine that—I was there for about three years—and he told a friend of mine that he didn't know what I was doing there. That what I should do is to go and get a studio and see if I was really a painter or not. And, with that information, I walked out of the Art Students League and struggled [with] painting. Obviously . . . obviously I didn't know whether I was a painter or not. I liked painting, but, little by little, it got ahold of my whole life.

JPH: Right. And when—and then you married Jesse . . .

CH: In Havana. I married Jesse in 1939.

JPH: So, you went back, from the Art Students League, you went back to Cuba?

CH: No. I went to the Art Students League after I married Jesse and came to live in New York.

JPH: And then you both went to Paris.

CH: And then I went with Jesse to Paris.

JPH: In what year, once again?

CH: Oh . . . [*indistinct*]. Forty-something. Forty-seven? Forty-five?

JPH: I think it was '48. [Herrera moved to Paris in 1948. —JPH] Okay. So, can you remember, were there any early critical responses in Paris that had an impact on you?

CH: Yes, there were some. Because, the word got around of all the artists in Paris. We were really a very, very, close-knit group. And, whenever there was an exhibition anywhere, one was invited automatically to a show, so our shows were in many places.

JPH: Did you, when you came back in 1952 to New York—

CH: Yes. [Herrera returned to New York in 1954. —JPH]

JPH: Let's talk about the '50s, into the early '60s first as a—

[*break in audio*]

JPH: Let's talk about, you returned to New York in '52, and you worked throughout the '50s. Your style . . . did you have any residencies or fellowships or exhibitions in the '50s?

CH: Yes, I did. I had exhibitions and group shows in the '50s, but I made friendships with artists. As a matter of fact, I always feel like I belong to the Republic of the Arts. And my friends, I've been much more

comfortable with artists than with anybody else. I know that some of them are a little bit crazy, but that doesn't matter. They feed my necessity, and they understand what I'm trying to do.

TB: So when you lived—when, in 1952, you were living in the Village, in the West Village.

CH: Yes.

TB: And who lived across the street from you?

CH: Yes. I know.

TB: James Agee.

CH: James Agee. Yes. I used to see him from my window. And his book, his marvelous book, had come out, and I'm so thrilled to see him. And then he moved away. He died very young, unfortunately, as we all know.

TB: And, then, of course, South Broadway, the Village, the Park, the Cedar bar—that was the area for the abstract expressionists.

CH: Yes, but I was never a bar person. I was never in those—

JPH: Taverns.

TB: You were friends with Barnett Newman.

CH: I was. Jesse had gone to school with Barnett, and we used to have dinners together at his house or our house, for a long time.

TB: What was his wife's name? Alma?

CH: No. Annalee.

TB: Annalee.

CH: Mm-hmm. And, it went marvelous, you know. I was kind of shy in those years, and I didn't talk very much. I just let him talk. He was so brilliant. I mean, he had such incredible insights into the arts. And that is the best university you can have. If you are lucky enough to meet an artist of that stature when you're forming yourself, there's nothing like it.

TB: Mm-hmm.

JPH: Carmen, did he ever see any of your paintings?

CH: Yes, of course. But I was not completely abstract. I was finding my way when he saw the work. And then later he was always very positive about what I was doing. He was a very gentle person, very nice, and a brilliant man. No question. Of all of that group, he was the only one with any education and brains.

TB: And, so, finally, in that group—I mean the abstract expressionists, [Willem] de Kooning, and [Franz] Kline.

CH: I knew them all. Not intimately, but I mean, I knew them all. I knew de Kooning very well. As a matter of fact, I remember an evening in which de Kooning was ranting about Tamayo's work. He didn't like it because he was sick and tired of ethnic painting. *[laughs]*

JPH: Whose work, Carmen?

CH: [Rufino] Tamayo.

JPH: Oh, Tamayo.

CH: And so on and so forth. And he [de Kooning] was kind of a nice person.

TB: Yeah.

CH: I mean, like I know all what they say about his drinking. That's his business, you know.

TB: No. I mean, he's a brilliant painter.

CH: A brilliant painter.

TB: Brilliant.

CH: They were all brilliant. And some of them great *[indistinct]* too.

TB: Now, was it in the '50s when you got to know [Ilya] Bolotowsky and Leon Polk Smith?

CH: I forget how I met Leon, but that was a wonderful revelation because Leon was doing what I was beginning to do, and that interested me very much. He was very helpful. A lot of technical tapes that he gave me, and so on. We were good, good friends.

JPH: And Bolotowsky?

TB: And Ilya?



- CH: I also met him in . . .
- TB: Through Bobby Buecker, no?
- CH: No. I—through . . . through Mura Dehn, a dancer.
- JPH: Through whom?
- CH: Mura.
- JPH: Mura.
- CH: Dehn.
- JPH: Dehn.
- CH: That’s a Danish name. Her husband was Danish, but she was Russian, very Russian. And she used to have parties and Bolotowsky used to go to those parties, and that’s how we met.
- JPH: Well, they started the abstract expression—association of abstract—what is it? Association of Abstract Art. AAA. [American Abstract Artists, founded in 1936 in New York. —JPH] Bolotowsky and those artists. Did you ever belong to the AAA?
- CH: No. No.
- JPH: You did not?
- CH: No, no, no.
- JPH: Did you ever belong to any artistic organizations?
- CH: No.
- JPH: Okay.
- TB: Did you ever go to any of the club meetings?
- CH: Once. Only once. I mean I felt very uncomfortable. [But] it wasn’t my thing.
- TB: Where was the club when you went to it?
- CH: Oh, I can’t remember that.
- TB: You don’t remember?
- JPH: Why did you feel uncomfortable, Carmen?
- CH: I don’t know. I mean, I’m not a—I don’t know. I just didn’t feel comfortable.
- JPH: Were there many women in that particular association?
- CH: Oh, yes. Three women for every painter. The majority of women, I tell you that.
- TB: Really?
- CH: Oh yeah. I was there. I felt—
- TB: Oh, you mean at the club, but not as painters?
- CH: Oh, no, no. Certainly not.
- TB: So, as painters, it was Elaine, Elaine de Kooning.
- CH: Elaine de Kooning, yeah. And the wife of—
- TB: Lee Krasner. [Lee Krasner was married to Jackson Pollock. —JHP]
- CH: Yeah.
- TB: And Mercedes Matter.
- CH: Yeah.
- TB: And who else?
- CH: I didn’t meet any of them. I’m not sure I met de Kooning’s wife. I’m not sure.
- JPH: Were there—
- CH: I met so many people.
- JPH: Were there any women artists who were more or less your age that were like friends, colleagues?
- CH: No.
- JPH: No.
- CH: No.
- JPH: And none that were older either?
- CH: No.

- JPH: Who kind of took you under her wing?  
 CH: No.  
 JPH: No.  
 CH: Nobody took me under their wings.  
 JPH: Okay.  
 TB: Now, you knew Wifredo Lam in Cuba. And then when you were in New York in the '50s and '60s—  
 CH: Yes.  
 TB: Whenever he came by, he used to stop, and he used to use this as an address for you to— [cross talk]  
 CH: Yes. I was his telephone operator. All of his girlfriends used to call me and ask me, [laughs] "Is Wifredo there?" And that kind of thing.  
 TB: So—  
 CH: He was a ladies' man.  
 TB: Now, in some of the work from the period before you went to your more suprematist style, some of the works show something of Wifredo [Lam], in my opinion. Do you—  
 CH: Well, we were very close, and he was a very forceful painter. I wouldn't be surprised if some of Wifredo's snuck into my art.  
 TB: Like the tondos. You know—  
 CH: Yeah—  
 TB: The tondos from 1948.  
 CH: There is one that is very much like Wifredo's work.  
 TB: Yes.  
 CH: And I never realized it until I saw it after twenty-five years.  
 JPH: Is there an image that I could see now? I'm going to turn this off for one moment.
- [break in audio]
- JPH: You were saying that when I look through the early works—  
 TB: Yes. Through the early works, you'll realize that there are some of the more biomorphic pieces. And she was working, especially from '48 to '51, in which you can see either something that is reflective of Lam's style, or of the tropics, or of the African influence in the Caribbean. And that is very obvious in the early work. And you'll be able to see it.  
 JPH: Okay. I thought what we might talk about were some of the similarities and differences between your early work—let's say the 1952 *Diagonal*, which was printed in the catalog for *Carmen Herrera: The Black and White Paintings*, from 1951 to 1989, and presented at the El Museo del Barrio. So, what about a work . . . What about . . . Where was, this one, isn't it? Yeah, I'm sorry. It's an untitled work. This one.  
 TB: Nineteen fifty-two.  
 JPH: And one that was done later. Well, the one that's on page nine, *Diagonal*, was repainted in '87, but it was after one that you did in '52, so it is representative of your early—  
 CH: Yes. I got a grant from the city of New York, and I had to either go to a nursing home and teach people how to paint, or I could give them a painting. And I chose to give a painting, and it went to the Rusk Institute [of Rehabilitation]. And then, I think, that painting was in my mind, later on, and I decided to do it in a larger, different, slightly different version.  
 JPH: What are the differences that you see over time in your work? I still think that there is a great deal of representation of, or sense of, depth.  
 CH: No.  
 JPH: And movement. I don't think that they're so flat. You do?  
 CH: No, I don't mean it to be flat, and I don't mean it to be optical. I mean, my root really is more geometry than anything. And when I, I had to put aside a lot of . . . oh, I don't know, how can I put that . . .  
 TB: Assumptions?

- CH: No . . . A lot of previous ideas that I had, or that had been given to me, and find my own way. And it wasn't easy. And I went back many times to what I had been doing before, until I finally cleared the path to what I actually wanted to do, which was to use the knowledge I had of architectural drawing into my paintings. It's as simple as that. And then, I was really very comfortable. As I always talk about the vocabulary, the artist's vocabulary, I found my vocabulary. And I didn't have to go back anymore.
- TB: You know, if there is a single law that kind of applies to your evolution, it seems to me, from looking at your work, is that it's one of constant reduction.
- JPH: Yes.
- TB: It's like one towards, uh, keep it simple, towards simplification, towards [*indistinct*]. Isn't that right?
- CH: That's right, Tony, and it's not easy.
- TB: No, absolutely not.
- CH: Very difficult.
- TB: No—
- JPH: And, some of those examples, wouldn't you both agree with me, they're not only . . . They certainly are here in *Yesterday* from '87 and *The Hour* from '87, where . . . Can you talk about that?
- CH: These are very sad paintings for me, because, in a way, I'm very silently—I've never mentioned this, this is the first time I've mentioned it—but I did a painting of two friends of mine that died of AIDS, and both committed suicide.
- JPH: Uh-huh.
- CH: And I think, if you watch them for a while, you realize that they are really very tragic paintings. [*indistinct*]
- TB: And, also, another thing about this drive towards reduction, especially in the last thirty years, there is not a single painting that I know that has more than two colors.
- CH: Yeah.
- TB: Just two colors.
- CH: [*indistinct*] Yes. It was important for me to reduce the colors, and I think that's what I was trying to do.
- TB: Yes.
- CH: I hope I succeeded in some of it.
- TB: I think you absolutely succeeded.
- CH: Oh, you're very nice.
- JPH: But, you know, there are, going back to reduction and going back to simplification, there are two works, also, in that same catalog that I think are quite extraordinary. I think that, well one is untitled, and it's on page twelve and it's from 1960. The . . . it's mostly white, with—
- CH: No.
- JPH: How do you explain the black lines that almost meet?
- CH: This time I hope so.
- JPH: Yeah, very elongated triangles. And—
- TB: They're reminiscent of a horizon in a way. You know, they look like a perspective line.
- CH: Yeah.
- TB: Talking about architecture again, there is a kind of . . . The eye seems to establish it as a perspective point, even though it is not the case.
- CH: That happens. You cannot help it. Like a lot of people think of these as optical, and I—
- JPH: Which is *Untitled* from '52?
- TB: Which is the painting that has been—is now at the MOMA, at the Museum of Modern Art?
- CH: Well, you see, the thing is that, actually the intellect is optical. I wasn't working for an optical— [*cross talk*]
- TB: But it is obvious that one of the characteristics, one of the characteristics that resulted in whatever you were trying to do, was to create an element of illusion.
- CH: Yes.
- TB: And it does happen. I mean, that was not your—

- CH: That was not my—
- TB: Aim.
- CH: Aim.
- TB: Your aim was not to articulate, but your aim was to utilize it as a tool in the search for what you wanted to establish on the canvas. I think that it is undeniable that some elements that later became—for example, in *Green and Orange*, from 1956, or '58?
- JPH: Fifty-eight. [cross talk]
- TB: There is a, this polarity between the orange and the green, in which one recedes, and then all of a sudden allows the other one to recede, and they constantly are interchanging. And it is one of the elements that were introduced seven, or eight, or ten years later, by the whole optical movement. I know that it is not—
- CH: It was not my aim.
- TB: No. Obviously not.
- CH: No.
- TB: Just like in the case of Agnes Martin or Bridget Riley. It is a case in which the optical illusion is used as a technique, as a means to obtain an end, and not as an end in itself.
- CH: That was absolutely hard for me. And I never—really, the optical movement, although it was great, it didn't interest me at all.
- TB: No. But what is interesting, though, is that you preceded it by ten years.
- CH: Yes, well.
- TB: You know. I mean—
- CH: It was an accident.
- TB: Well, you know—
- JPH: I think also that something that's very interesting, you know, to just, to elaborate on—to go back to is the *Untitled* 1960, the elongated triangles on a white field, and the black and white from '61, both in the El Museo show, where you have, again, basically a pure white canvas, but—the middle seems to be bisected by these elongated triangles. And the bottom, from left to right, or right to left, is demarcated by this long triangle. The eye kind of then penetrates, if you will, the canvas. I mean, these are our readings. It brings you in because black, you know, opens up everything and you kind of fall in it.
- CH: Well, you see what—
- JPH: And, and on the contrary here, in color, cobalt and white, from '60, where the white is on the side of the elongated white triangle is on the left-hand side, and in the middle, again, your eye is drawn into an interior that doesn't have a narrative.
- CH: Well, you see, actually, if you look at these, of course—it's difficult to see it here, but, you see, to me, what was interesting, was the—
- JPH: Black and white.
- CH: The white. The two big areas of white.
- JPH: Uh-huh.
- CH: To me, [the big areas of white] are much more important than the triangles.
- JPH: And that's so in both works we're talking about, *Sin Título* or *Untitled* from '60 and *Black and White* or *Blanco y Negro* from '61.
- TB: It is this kind of simple intensity, and very, very intense search that you have, that reminds me, and, actually I've heard you speak of it, of the Japanese haiku poetry.
- CH: Yes.
- TB: Which is also, again, an element of reduction, to try to get to the essence of the problem or of the painting or of the poem, while using a minimum of tools, which, you're absolutely right.
- CH: Yes. That's exactly—
- TB: It makes it even ten times more difficult.

- CH: Yes. That's exactly—you just hit it. Because I always have reacted in an incredible way to Japanese art, which I don't, so much, with Chinese art, but the Japanese, and their reduction of things, the intelligence of the whole thing. And to me it's a tremendous challenge.
- TB: Of course.
- CH: And what I'm doing challenges me, and sometimes I flopped, but sometimes, when I am more or less successful, it's wonderful.
- JPH: Well, you have been able to sustain your vision throughout your career. And you've shown an incredible commitment to it. Shall we shift just a little bit and talk about when and how you learned to document your work? How did you archive your work? Or have you not archived or documented your work?
- TB: Well, it's probably the case that, the artist . . . When did artists start using slides? Do you remember?
- CH: Oh, no, I don't remember.
- TB: Because, you know, that is not so far away.
- CH: No.
- TB: I mean, there was a time in which artists just basically saved, they had to save their paintings and their drawings. But, then, in the '60s and '70s, the possibilities of using slides—
- CH: Slides, yes. Keeping—
- TB: As a means of keeping track.
- CH: Keeping track. Yeah.
- TB: And I know, because I've seen, the way that you've maintained records, that you do have a—
- CH: Yes, practically everything was done on slides, and I do have a lot of them, and that's just about as far as I go.
- TB: And, actually, I think I know why, because this neighborhood, where you live now, is full of photographers.
- CH: Full of photographers, and many of them are my friends. [*laughs*]
- TB: And many of them are your friends, yes. So, that's why you've got—
- CH: That's right.
- JPH: So, to a certain point and in fact, perhaps, after the '50s, would you say, when you moved to this neighborhood?
- TB: The '60s.
- JPH: After the '60s, you went back and photographed all the paintings that you had in your possession.
- CH: Yes.
- JPH: And that was sort of the beginning of, let's say, your documentation.
- CH: Okay. Yes, if you put it that way, that's the way it is. Yes.
- JPH: And did you always sign your work and date your work when it was finished?
- CH: Yes.
- JPH: You did?
- CH: Yes. Practically always. Maybe I—
- TB: Always in the back.
- CH: Yes. Always in the back.
- JPH: Yes, but you see, a lot of artists, you know, would let years and years go by before they signed and, or dated, so, in fact, that is also a way of documenting work—
- CH: Oh yes.
- JPH: And, you know, you sort of don't think about because it's just something you knew you wanted, you did. So you don't think about it as documenting. But it is, in fact. And what other means with which she might have employed which she might not have considered documenting but you did? Did you write down in— [*cross talk*]
- TB: I think that the other kind of documentation that I have seen is the one that comes from the outside. It's the occasional review.
- JPH: Uh-huh.

- TB: I know that, for example, Hilton Kramer has reviewed your work maybe two or three times in the sixties and the '50s. I know that Dore Ashton reviewed your work.
- CH: Was the first one who reviewed my work.
- TB: I know that John Canaday, when he was at the *New York Times* or at the *Herald Tribune*. The *New York Herald Tribune*.
- CH: No. I think it was the *Times*. [Canaday was chief art critic at the *New York Times* from 1959 to 1973. —JHP]
- TB: At the *Times*. So, that is also a way of establishing it.
- CH: Yeah. Well, I kept all the reviews, of course. From the moment that they began noticing my work a little bit here and there. And group shows. And, eventually, the few shows, solo shows I had, and so on and so forth. As a matter of fact, the first big exhibition I had, was thanks to Tony, who made the contact with the Alternative Museum, and I showed there.
- TB: Second. The first was El Museo [del Barrio]. Which comes first?
- CH: Alternative Museum. [cross talk] You were a little kid.
- TB: Well, I'm older—much younger than you. [cross talk] Therefore I forget more. You're right. It was the show at the Alternative Museum in Tribeca, was in '89 or '91, something like that?
- JPH: Here, we have it.
- TB: But this is the El Museo show. That was '96.
- JPH: Ninety-eight. The Museo show was in '98.
- TB: Okay.
- JPH: Okay, so, the Alternative was in the '90s? It was in '98.
- CH: It was '94. [cross talk]
- JPH: Let's look in the back and see. [The exhibition at the Alternative Museum was in 1984-85; the one at El Museo del Barrio was in 1998. —JPH]
- TB: Anyway, they were both reviewed by the *New York Times*. So we have that as a—
- CH: Yes. Yes.
- TB: As a form of—
- CH: And, of course, then I had been showing with the Rastovski Gallery, and I was there for quite a while. But that gallery was struggling financially an awful lot. They closed, they opened, they closed. As soon as they could get some money, and eventually they stopped.
- JPH: Repeat the name, please, of the gallery again?
- CH: Rastovski.
- JPH: And where was it?
- TB: In the East Village.
- JPH: In the East Village.
- TB: When the East Village was starting to happen—
- CH: And then they moved—
- JPH: In the '80s?
- TB: Yes.
- CH: Yes.
- TB: And then they moved along with most of the galleries who were then in the East Village, they moved to South Brooklyn.
- JPH: So, what was your relationship with that gallery? Was that the first gallery that actually showed your work?
- CH: No. No, there were other galleries—
- JPH: Commercial?
- CH: I can't even remember. And I showed here and there, but not very much. I mean, actually, when I got the grant—the city grant—Rastovski was opening. [cross talk] Yes. He was looking for artists. And he went there and they showed him the work they had of people who had gotten the grant. And he liked my work and he called me up, and he told me he was opening a gallery in the East Village. And I said, "East Village?"

I mean, I thought it was kind of weird. I mean it was the beginning of the movement in the East Village, you know. And I said, “Well, my work is very big.” And he said, “Well, my gallery is very big.” So he came up and we talked. They were very pleasant, a lovely couple. And I showed with him— [*interruption*] Oh, that’s okay. [Herrera exhibited for the first time in the Rastovski Gallery in 1986. Feliz-González-Torres (1957–1996) recommended her to the gallerist. —JPH]

TB: Thank you.

JPH: And what was, what was his first name?

CH: Ljubomir Rastovski.

TB: Ljubomir. Yes.

CH: Ljubomir Rastovski.

TB: Was that Croatian or—

CH: Yes.

TB: Croatian.

CH: Who was the Cuban artist that died?

TB: Oh, um . . .

CH: He was represented there.

TB: Gonzalez.

CH: Yes.

TB: Was he represented by them?

CH: Yes, of course.

JPH: What Gonzalez?

TB: Which Cuban artist?

CH: You know, he was everywhere. He was at the [*indistinct*] and he was shown at the—

JPH: ACA? [*indistinct*]

CH: No. Guggenheim and so on. He had a whole thing with canvas. Do you remember?

TB: Oh, of course.

JPH: Felix Gonzalez—

TB: Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

CH: Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

JPH: He first showed with that dealer in the East Village?

CH: Yes, yes.

JPH: Oh, how very interesting.

CH: Not in the East Village, but when he opened in—

TB: West Broadway—

CH: On West Broadway.

TB: Not West Broadway. On Broadway and Houston.

CH: That’s right.

JPH: I see. Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

CH: And too bad. He died very young.

TB: But his career has taken off. He’s having a show at El Museo next month.

CH: Really? That’s good.

JPH: Tell me, Carmen, would you have considered that gallery your first dealer?

CH: Yes, in a way, but whenever you show in a gallery, that’s your dealer. I mean if they— [*cross talk*]

JPH: Well, yes, but I’m just wondering if—

CH: I needed somebody to back me. I mean he was very, very good at backing me. I mean, in fact, he—

TB: Yes. I remember him. He was very persistent and very dedicated.

CH: Very dedicated. He didn’t have a [*indistinct*], I suppose.

TB: Basically, he didn’t sell very much.



- CH: He didn't sell anything.
- TB: He didn't sell anything. No. I think it's the time, you know. Something happened last year in which all of a sudden there was a confluence of timing—
- JPH: Interest and other factors and historical work done in galleries, for geometric abstractions.
- TB: And all of a sudden, now you're selling—
- CH: Now I'm selling, and now I'm showing. But, you know, better late than never.
- TB: No.
- CH: Of course, I have to wait until I became ninety. I figure [cross talk]. I mean, this is ridiculous.
- TB: The key is longevity.
- CH: Okay.
- JPH: Okay, let's just step back a second. The gallery that has shown you in the last couple of years is Latincollector, correct? [Frederico Sève Gallery/Latincollector, New York. Herrera showed at FSG/L from 2004 to 2010. —JPH]
- CH: Correct.
- JPH: And your first exhibit there was when? [Herrera's first exhibition, *Concrete Realities: Carmen Herrera, Fanny Sanin, and Mira Schendel*, was at FSG/L in 2004. —JPH]
- TB: A year and a half ago?
- CH: Uh-huh.
- JPH: And, the second exhibit was last May, I believe, during Cuban Artists Festival Month, it so happened. And could you elaborate, a little bit, because it was a show that was not only successful critically. It was reviewed in *Art Nexus* and in . . . [The festival was sponsored by the Cuban Artists Fund, New York. —JPH]
- TB: It was the cover.
- JPH: The cover. Yes, with the cover. And also in—
- TB: *Art in America*.
- JPH: *Art in America*.
- TB: The *New York Times*.
- JPH: The *New York Times*.
- CH: And I was very fortunate—
- TB: The *Miami Herald*, and on and on.
- CH: I was fortunate that the person who reviewed my show at the *New York Times* was Grace Glueck, because she used to be the critic for the architectural part. And she understood my work, and I knew that she was possibly the one that would understand my work at the *Times* now. And so I was delighted when she wrote about it.
- TB: However, you were reviewed by the *Times* three or four times before.
- CH: Yes, but different people.
- TB: Holland Cotter. Hilton Kramer, when he was at the *Times*, a small—
- CH: Yes. Many years ago.
- TB: Many years ago . . . who was the other one? [indistinct] I don't remember, but, anyhow.
- CH: Anyhow. No, the art painter review by the *Times*, if that is an—accolade, accolade—so . . . [laughs]
- JPH: Can you tell us the number of paintings that were sold, for example, to the Museum of Modern Art, MOMA, out of the last show at Latincollector in May 2005?
- TB: Well, they have reserved—
- CH: Two.
- TB: No. They have reserved four.
- CH: Oh.
- TB: They only bought one. And they only obtained one now. They are considering others. But the one that they have obtained and Carmen received a letter was—where's the letter? [cross talk] Not important. Was the 1952 *Untitled*, black and white. This one.

- JPH: That is in *Art Nexus* on page 71. I see. Excellent.
- TB: That's in the collection already.
- JPH: And, I noticed when I saw your show at MAC—Miami Art Central—in [September through November] of 2005, that there were any number of collectors who have, I imagine, more recently than not, purchased your work. [This was *The Forms of Silence: Carmen Herrera Abstract Works, 1948–1976*. —JPH] And, so, that's a rather big turnaround considering that, for most of your career, you didn't sell privately. Am I right on this?
- CH: You're absolutely right. You're absolutely right.
- JPH: And might we name some of the collectors or not?
- CH: Yes, of course. [*cross talk*]
- TB: I can tell you one that I think should be named because she was probably terribly important in this recognition that you're getting. And that was Ella Cisneros. I think that Ella Cisneros actually bought four or five from the first show. Remember? [Cisneros is the founder of the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, Miami. — JPH]
- JPH: The first Latin American, Latin art show? Latincollector show, excuse me. [This reference was to the exhibition *Concrete Realities*. —JPH]
- TB: Right. And that created an impetus. All of a sudden, an important collector, a woman who is developing a museum in Miami, who has an international-level art collection, all of a sudden takes that kind of interest, other people notice. So, I think, in a way, that her interest in your work and her backing up her interest by actually purchasing your work and purchasing four or five of your pieces, that that actually led to other people really taking serious notice of what was going on. So, she has to be probably mentioned. And then, of course, there are many others. I don't know that they would like—
- CH: [*indistinct*]
- TB: Yeah, there are many others. I don't know if we should be mentioning them, but, certainly, the Cisneros collection. Not Ella, but Patty—the Gustavo Cisneros collection. [This is the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, New York. —JPH] Then there is the, well, I mean, the Brodskys—
- CH: They bought five right away. [*static*]
- TB: He's an Argentinean collector, and I don't think we should be mentioning any of the other names.
- JPH: Okay. So I think anyway we have— [*static*]
- CH: Very serious, because he's a Russian abstractionist, and I think he sort of probably has an understanding of what happened. Which is that horrible heartbreak with his doctor about that brilliant group of people at the beginning of the, at the end of the Stalin regime, and the beginning of the— [*cross talk*]
- TB: And actually, your work, your work probably makes more references to suprematism than so many other of the— [*static*]
- JPH: Yes. Yes.
- CH: And you know, I've read a lot about them, and it breaks my heart to think that they were so young and so generous and spirited, that the way they ended was so miserable that it breaks my heart. Breaks my heart.
- JPH: So, I think we've discussed the marketplace as it relates to you, but, just to clarify some questions that were posed in the formal interview. Again, what would you like to state for the record regarding your relationship to the art market, to museums, and to private collectors? Do you think we've said everything that needed to be said?
- CH: I think we've said everything. I think that all these things have come, maybe a little bit too late for me to really appreciate, and they leave me cold.
- JPH: Okay . . . Do you think, though, more recently, very recently, that the role of Latin collectors has stimulated the purchasing of your work? It would seem that it has.
- CH: Yes. I think so. I think so.
- JPH: And I think that part of that is that the Latin collectors . . . Well, I think that there has become, within the last twenty years, certainly from the '90s on, a greater interest on the part of Latin Americans and, or Latinos here in this country to collect. Would you agree with that? Either of you?

CH: I guess so.

JPH: Tony?

TB: Um . . .

JPH: Is that your experience? I mean—

TB: Well, I think what has become, what is obvious by the kind of reaction that you're getting now, after more than nine decades, is the fact that there is curiosity about what may have been missed. I am—don't have the proof, and I cannot say that because you—maybe you can agree or disagree—but because you were a woman, or because you were Latina, that, perhaps, you did not get the kind of recognition that you would have gotten had you been somebody else.

CH: Oh, yes, certainly. Absolutely.

JPH: Restate that. You feel because you were a woman—

CH: Yes. Because I was a woman and a Latin woman.

JPH: I see. That the doors were more closed than they were open?

CH: Yes. Yes.

JPH: Because there wasn't interest in either?

CH: Yes. And I'm very, very happy that the young women artists have really broken through that kind of a barrier. Not as much as they intended to, but at least they're represented in museums and in great collections, which was not the case years ago. If you were a woman painting, [*indistinct*] stop.

JPH: Well, I also think that historically speaking, through scholarship and curatorial work and patronage, frankly, the early roots of abstraction and its diverse forms throughout South America and the Caribbean, have, once again, have been charted into more of a mainstream direction. And, thus, that recognition has motivated similar institutions and patronage regarding your work.

CH: It's possible. It's possible.

JPH: Have you ever had a commission?

CH: Never.

JPH: Okay. Well then, then if you haven't had a commission, or a public artwork—

[*break in audio*]

JPH: Have you ever had a commission?

CH: Never.

JPH: Okay, well then, if you haven't had a commission or a public artwork . . .

CH: I wouldn't know what to do with a commission, frankly, for I never had one.

JPH: Okay. Or a commercial project?

CH: No.

JPH: No. Were you able to make a living off of your art?

CH: No.

JPH: No. Carmen, have you ever taught?

CH: Yes, very briefly. And I was very unhappy. I'm not a born teacher. And, you have—in order to—

[*break in audio*]

JPH: Anyway, Carmen was saying that her husband was a born teacher, but she wasn't. Is there anything that you might like to add to this talk that we're having at this time?

CH: Well, yes, I would like to thank you for your interest, that's for sure, and also, I would like to say that I was grateful I met Amelia Peláez in Cuba when I met her, because she taught me, without saying it in words, with her gift, that whether you were a woman or whether you were not, that you could do it. And I have tried to follow her path. And I have done it.

JPH: Oh. I think that's pretty great.

CH: Okay.

[break in audio]

JPH: Carmen—

CH: I might say something— [cross talk]

JPH: Oh yes, you can, yes you can. Carmen, talk to us a little bit more about your relationship with Amelia.

TB: Everyone in the art world knows that she was very tough, and her mouth was, she had a—

CH: I wouldn't say that about—

TB: She was very expressive in her language.

CH: You know . . . Look, you see, there was a link between Amelia's family and mine. We were very close. We came to Cuba at the same time, they came, were from the same region in Spain, and [the families] always were friends.

TB: Your families?

CH: Our families.

TB: Uh-huh.

JPH: What region in Spain again?

CH: Well, that was Castile [on her mother's side]. Santander, from my father's side of the family.

JPH: And she didn't have assistants either and neither did you?

CH: She didn't have—

JPH: She never had assistants? She painted alone in her studio in the back of her house?

CH: I don't know if she had assistants or not.

JPH: Have you ever had any?

CH: No. I could have, but, not—I don't like to paint with anybody around, and I don't like to have even—I love music, but I don't even play music. I don't know about you, Tony.

TB: Well, if I could afford them, yes, I want to hire [assistants]. [laughs]

JPH: Carmen, tell me something. Do you keep records, or notebooks or records of ideas that you have prior to your going to paint?

CH: Oh no, no, no.

JPH: Do you make models?

TB: Drawings.

CH: Oh. I have drawings, drawings, drawings. Millions of drawings. I used to use tracing paper, tracing always and throwing them out after I came to the idea that I was trying to—

TB: So you threw away a lot?

JPH: You threw away all your drawings? They're gone?

CH: They're not drawings, actually. They were sketches to get to where I was going. I didn't think they were important. They were not important to me, anyhow.

JPH: Uh-huh. And you've always painted here in your home?

CH: Yes. My home was different from how you see it, you see. I had all that space. From over there to the window was my studio.

JPH: What kind of hours did you—

TB: You should explain that it's a loft.

JPH: It's a loft. Her home is an industrial loft.

CH: It used to be—

TB: About what? Seventeen hundred square feet, with skylights. Beautiful place.

CH: Well, yes. We were fortunate, like [neighbor's name] next door.

TB: Uh-huh.

JPH: And, tell me something, do you feel there is any relationship between politics, in any way, shape, or form, and your art?

CH: I don't.

JPH: Okay.

CH: I don't. and I thank God for that.

JPH: Well, it's been a great, great pleasure.

CH: It has been lovely.

TB: Talking about your interest in— [*aside*]

JPH: The other thing I think I just wanted to ask you, Carmen, is have you given any thought to where you might donate your images, or your records, or your archives in any way, shape, or form?

CH: Yes, I have. I have, and I think that they'll be in good hands.

JPH: Oh that's great. Okay. All right, Carmen, it's been a pleasure once again. I was able to participate with Tony and [artist] Fanny Sanín, when each, when the three of us, individually, participated in the CD when your work was shown at Latincollector, and I'm very pleased that I had this opportunity to do this for the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA. And it's great because you deserve it.

CH: With Fanny, and her husband. They're really very, very nice.

JPH: Indeed. Well, thank you Carmen, and thank you Tony.

[*break in audio*]

JPH: Okay. This is a postscript. Carmen Herrera stopped painting in 1996 when her husband, Jesse, became ill. And she began to devote her entire time to him. At the Miami Art Central (MAC) museum in the fall, at the Carmen Herrera exhibition, there was a beautiful videotape, or a CD-ROM done, and at the end, Carmen reads a poem. Carmen, say some words about the poem if you will.

CH: Well, I thought it was a very nice poem, a beautiful poem, and it sort of described my predicament now. Because, we never think we're going to be old. We can't foresee that we're going to be old. We can't foresee that we're going to die. But, the process of aging is something that we're spared. We don't know that we're aged. And the poem described it beautifully. And—

TB: Who is the poet?

CH: The poet is Edwin Moore.

TB: No. He's the translator.

CH: No, he's the poet. He wrote a poem on some fragments that were found of the poet Sappho. And, then, in that poem—he's using his imagination—Sappho is describing what happens when you get old. And she talks about the myth of one of the [*indistinct*] that is the daughter of Jupiter. And she asks her father to give her lover—she's madly in love with this young man—eternal life. And he grants the wish. But he doesn't give him the possibility of being eternally young. So he gets older, and older, and older. And then they have to part and she goes away in despair to be eternal. [*laughs*] I thought it was a glorious poem and so fitting my predicament now, that I had to read it. I mean, I don't know. [This is Edwin Morgan's "Sappho and the Weight of Years" (2005), a translation of what is known as Sappho's Tithonus poem or old age poem. —JPH]

TB: Very poignant and very opportune.

CH: They [*indistinct*] cry.

TB: What did— [*cross talk*]

CH: In Miami, my niece told me that she took a friend—

JPH: Because you read it in Miami at the exhibit?

TB: No. She—they saw the film.

CH: They saw the film and they saw that.

JPH: All right.

TB: In Miami, it's very easy to cry.

JPH: Okay. Thank you again.

[*end of audio*]



## INTERVIEW WITH CARMEN HERRERA

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