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Oral history interview with Juan Sánchez, 2018 October 1-2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Juan Sánchez on 2018 October 1-2. The interview took place in Brooklyn, NY, at Sánchez's studio, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Juan Sánchez and Josh T. Franco have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[Tracks 01, 02, and 03 of SD card one are test tracks.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: This is Josh T. Franco, interviewing Juan Sánchez on October 1, 2018, at Juan's studio in Brooklyn, New York. So, Juan, let's just get started with the day you were born and the context of your family and early childhood.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, my mother and father came from Puerto Rico. They came from Puerto Rico in the early '50s. They met here. My mother was born in Maunabo, Puerto Rico in 1919, and she passed away in 1987. My father was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, but I'm not quite sure—I think he was born in 1923, but I'm not quite sure about that; I have to check that out. My mother died in Brooklyn, New York. Ironically enough, she died in the very hospital where she gave birth to me and one of my brothers, Brooklyn Hospital. My father went back to Puerto Rico and—I'm trying to remember, I think he passed away in 1992, '93. He went back to Puerto Rico and he passed away there.

We always lived in Brooklyn. We always lived in various parts of Brooklyn. There was a time where we were living in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and that's where I went to elementary school up to the fourth grade. [00:02:00] And then from there, we moved to Bushwick, and I finished my elementary school. The elementary school that I went to in Brownsville was—I'm surprised to remember—was PS 156. From Brownsville to Bushwick, I went to PS 106. So I finished sixth grade and then I moved to junior high school, Halsey Junior High School, in Bushwick.

The community that we always lived in, Brownsville, was a very heavily African-American community, even though there was also a strong Puerto Rican presence. But the majority, for the most part, were African Americans. There was a white population there, but it seems like at that time, that they were moving out of the area. And so it just became a very strong black/Puerto Rican community. There was also a strong Jewish presence there. When we moved to Bushwick, I remember that that was a very strong Jewish community, and then it gradually started changing into an African-American-Puerto Rican community. So by the time I moved out of Bushwick, that was pretty much the scene. [00:04:00]

We always lived in large—well at least during the time in Bushwick and Brownsville, we lived in large tenement buildings. At a certain point, in Bushwick, we moved into a much smaller, residential building, which was about four stories high, so we were living with six families within that building.

So I went to Halsey Junior High School during that time and then I didn't go to the neighborhood high school. I applied to the High School of Art and Design [. . . –JS]. I got admitted into the High School of Art and Design, so I did high school there. During the time that I was in Art and Design High School—and from Art and Design High School, I went to Cooper Union. During that whole period, I was living in Bushwick. Actually, even during the time that I was in graduate school at Rutgers University, I was living in Bushwick. At some point after I graduated, we moved into Cypress Hills, Brooklyn. So we were kind of like deep into Brooklyn, and throughout the years we keep coming further and further.

And then I finally moved to—I left home in 1981. [00:06:05] I moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. And Williamsburg was a very, very strong—had a very, very strong Puerto Rican, Latino presence. And it was an interesting dynamic because the South Side of Brooklyn was a very strong Puerto Rican population, so the North Side—you know, which was further away—there was a very strong Polish community. On the South Side you had Broadway, and behind Broadway was Division Street, and after Division Street, that was a very strong Hasidic community. And of course I had closer proximity to that community than to the Polish community. But in essence, when I moved there, it was a poor, working-class area and an economically depressed area. And I would say the same in terms of the other communities that I lived in Brooklyn. They were working-class, economically depressed areas.

I remember during the time that I was in Bushwick, buildings were falling apart, being abandoned, torn down, and you were surrounded with a lot of empty lots. And the buildings that were still standing up, they became shooting galleries, because there was an incredible influx of drugs going through the community. [00:08:07]

During the time that I was in Bushwick, that was what's happening, even during the time that I was in elementary school, in PS 106. That's when a lot of kids started engaging in smoking pot. The most popular thing at the time was sniffing glue. I avoided any of that, you know, but I've seen a lot of my classmates through junior high school sniffing glue, becoming heroin addicts. I had a number of cousins in Bushwick because we moved to Bushwick, but there was already on my father's side—he had a number of aunts, sisters of his mother, that were living in that area and within close proximity, so we saw them often. We went over to their place often, and so on and so forth. I've seen some of my cousins—some joined the Army, and others just became heroin addicts.

I remember, during the time I was in junior high school and even during the time that I was in high school at Art and Design, I would go to Bushwick Park to spend the day playing handball, and it was one of the most surreal things. I always find it kind of odd, but now that I look back, I thought it was totally surreal, because on one side of the handball wall—you know, we're playing handball. On the other side, nobody was playing handball, it was just a bunch of guys shooting up, you know? [00:10:00] One of my cousins would come out, you know, cleaning his wares: "What's the score?" You know? Things like that. It was so weird, you know?

Of course, I experienced that. One of my uncles, the youngest brother of my father, would come along to play handball. He was living in the same building with my aunt then, so he also kind of kept us straight and always kept an eye on us and whatever. He was probably about two years older than me. So we see how people are being affected in that neighborhood, particularly in that park. Also, Bushwick High School had this—they have a gymnasium that had a swimming pool, and they also have—what do you call that, an area where people would run?

JOSH T. FRANCO: A track?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: A track field. It was a very vibrant, very active kind of high school on the one hand, and the other hand, a lot of the students there, particularly the males, were getting hooked on drugs. And that's where I started seeing, along with my cousins, that proliferation of drugs hitting in the neighborhood. I've been approached on a couple of occasions, if I would be interested to make money and sell drugs in the street with them. And I didn't want to touch the stuff and I didn't want to get anywhere near that kind of business, so I always said no. [00:12:03] There was a little bit of pressure, but the fact that I wasn't in that community as I used to be—because I was always commuting from Brooklyn to New York, and then a lot of activities relative to Art and Design, and going to museums and galleries and all that—literally kept me [laughs] out of Brooklyn, except for the weekends. And even then, I was at the studio at Cooper Union just working.

So I was totally, totally taken away from that community. And so from time to time, I would visit certain areas, just out of curiosity, and see the stagnation and the same people there, getting older. Even during the time that I was in Cooper Union, still living in that neighborhood, I would hit Bushwick Park and the handball court. And it's just one of these bubbles where things are very stagnant and you see the people getting older, and you see the junkies deteriorating terribly.

During that time, the cousins that were shooting up in that community, they left. Their mother died, they left the neighborhood, but then there were other cousins that began to surface and get hooked to drugs. One of them, Papo, used to hang out with us. His father and mother lived in the Bronx, but he was always coming down to Brooklyn to hang out with us, but then after a certain point he stopped hanging out and he became a junkie and got into a lot of trouble. [00:14:07] And at one point, he got arrested and convicted for some kind of a crime. After a lot of years in jail, he came out apparently clean, but about two or three months afterwards, he died of an overdose in the bathroom of his mother's apartment. So, you know, that's the kind of environment, that's the kind of situation, from a negative standpoint, that I was living in.

On the other hand, there's this other vibrancy in terms of living in such a community where the culture and the music, the activity, was very lively and very stimulating, you know? That's where I got so much exposed to African-American culture and music, because I had a lot of friends. And that's where you had the bodegas, you know, which—originally, the bodegas actually came out of the word *bodegón*, you know? And it was the Puerto Ricans that started calling their grocery stores bodegas, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I didn't know that, Juan.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah, yeah. It's so funny because, you know, when we would go to Puerto Rico, they say, "Oh, you know, this guy from the bodega." "What bodega?" It's something that originated from the Puerto Ricans living in New York, because there was that dynamic in terms of how they spanglicized certain words. You know, the roof being *el rufo*, and so on and so forth. [00:16:09] They would make up these words and all of a sudden it's like, "*La bodega, vámonos para la bodega*." You know? And the word—what's the other word? There's a Spanish word for hardware store, *la fetería* [ph]. "*Vámonos para la fetería*." *La fetería*, that was—I heard that in Puerto Rico. When they say *fetería*, I said, "What the hell are you talking about? What's a *fetería*?" Right? It's a hardware store, you know, so people would call it the hardware store but with this weird accent that didn't

sound like English. It sounded like something else, you know?

So it was an interesting dynamic as I was growing up, how, you know, dress styles developed and how fashion impacted that community. People wearing sharkskin pants and shirts, and these shoes, which still—I mean, there's a British company that still produces shoes, but, you know, what was called, at the time, playboys.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, are they Stacy Adams?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Are they Stacy Adams shoes?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, the *shinadas* [ph]. Chicano shoes, yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah. I kind of miss those shoes. I wish they brought it back out.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I think they put out certain versions of it, but, you know, there were all kinds of leather colors, suede, black, brown, whatever. I mean it was amazing, but it cost money. At the time, you know, it was Pro-Keds and Converse that was the thing to wear, and that was costly at the time, even though it was $10 a pair. But it was costly, relatively speaking. [00:18:03] So the fashion thing, how people dressed, the kind of haircuts that they had, which were very short haircuts.

The music, you know. So you had the R&B and then you had what was becoming salsa. Before that, a lot of music from Cuba, a lot of music from Puerto Rico and other parts of Latin America—but for the most part from Puerto Rico and Cuba—coming through the radio waves. That's what I woke up to; that was the radio station that it was on. So I was growing up with all that and then outside, with my generation, there was the boogaloo, the shing-a-ling, you know, there was the Ray Barrettos and the Eddie Palmieris experimenting and doing all sorts of weird things, which—my father said, "*Eso no es música hispana*," you know?

But it was that fusion that was going on, and what they were calling at the time Latin music, you know, in Spanish and English—very much influenced by Cuban music. So you're talking about a people that didn't really have a direct access to Cuba, but the music was blaring through the radio. And of course, with the Puerto Ricans, as well as other groups in the United States and Latin America, Cuban music has had such an incredible impact, and that has had its influence in terms of how other countries and other ethnic groups identified with it and they created their own music.

But in New York, particularly in the Bronx, the way that music was developing—where they would combine jazz and rock and whatever they knew of Afro-Cuban music and so on and so forth—it became a very interesting dynamic that I was growing up with, and constantly buying the next new album to check out what Freddie Pacheco from the Dominican Republic is doing here in New York. [00:20:37] So there was that fusion, which later into the mid-'70s then—you know, the publicity people behind Fania Records labeled it as salsa, and that's where [ph] it became.

And then there was Izzy Sanabria, who was a graphic artist who was doing most of the album designs. He started a graphic design company that was strictly directed to design album covers. He founded this publication called *Latin New York Magazine*, and that was my funnel too. I was always aware of the latest Fania All-Stars concerts, I was always aware of the latest Ray Barretto album, I was always aware of what the Gran Combo is doing. And so that was the scene of what became part of the Nuyorican culture at the same time, especially when I was in Cooper Union.

You know, the Nuyorican Poets Café opened. [00:22:00] I was going practically almost every week, to check out the poetry readings and the music bands that was playing there. I would go to—I would find out from somebody that there's going to be this poetry marathon taking place at so-and-so's loft, which would be like an artist's loft. I would go there and that was like a 24-hour thing, and that's where I got introduced to a lot of the Nuyorican poets, as well as African Americans. I've heard poetry by people coming out of Chinatown, Native American. It was just—and from there, then they had—they did a number of those, and they always had a table laid out with their chatbooks and publications, and I would buy them.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you name some of those people?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, one of them, which unfortunately passed away, this Chinese American by the name of Jean Chang. At those marathon readings, that's when I got introduced to Amiri Baraka.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What was that first reading like?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, it was a poetry marathon. I don't know whether he was poet number 20 or whatever, [laughs] but some of them were like, okay, you know, fine, next, next. And then there was others like him or Jean Chang, which was very soft but very inner-reflective, you know, but then there's Amiri Baraka, who blows the place out. And then there was this other woman, who—thank God she's still around—by the name of Sandra María Esteves. And she did her thing, and she's half Puerto Rican and half Dominican and has published several books, including recorded a number of CDs. [00:24:05]

And then the one who really blew me away is a guy by the name of Louis Reyes Rivera, who is Puerto Rican but interestingly enough, like the rest of us that our parents migrated, you know—in his case, he goes back into the 1800s. I mean, he has roots going back so far that—I don't know, what is he, the fourth generation or something? But the point of the matter is that this was a black Puerto Rican who not only had a very strong sense of his Puerto Rican identity, but even a stronger sense of his African American identity. And so even though parents and grandparents and great grandparents were all Puerto Ricans—but they were black people. And he always lived in places like Bedford-Stuyvesant—actually, he died in Bedford-Stuyvesant—where he really linked up with the black community and was really caught up with the Black Liberation movement, and so on and so forth.

So when he got on stage, his poetry—first of all, he was an incredible deliverer, and at the same time, everything that he—and he didn't read it. He memorized. I mean, he just recited it. I don't think it's even memory. I guess he memorized it at a certain point, but once he got on stage, he knew it by heart and he just delivered, you know. And he was one of the most—he and Amiri Baraka, I thought was one of the strongest at the time, but Baraka always read from his text. [00:26:02] This guy would just get up there and just deliver, and it was very political, but at the same time very personal and extremely historical, a lot of the references. So when I bought that first book—I'm trying to remember the name of the first book; it's in storage—there was just a lot of references that I had no idea what the hell he's talking about, and I had to go out of my way to learn what was it that he was talking about. So his poetry was extremely educational.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did he play with language in the poetry in the, like, spanglicized way?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yes, yes, he did, but not as much. Not as much as the people like Miguel Algarín—he was one of the readers in those marathons, and Pedro Pietri was there as well. Hernández Cruz, who later moved back to Puerto Rico, Juan Hernández Cruz, the first book that he came out was titled *Spics*. They were always playing with the language back and forth and so on and so forth. Louis Reyes Rivera's cadence, even though he played with that language—but at the same time, it was very criollo. You know, it was like you would have think that he was from Louisiana or something like that, because even his English had that accent, that cadence, you know. And yet, he would take poems by Juan Antonio Corretjer or Clemente Soto Vélez and he would translate it perfectly. This guy was also an excellent translator. [00:28:10]

And there has been other books of some of these poets, translated into English. I don't want to name the people who translated, but there's even a book that came out on the poetry of Julia de Burgos, and his was always better. He really understood the language in a very intimate way, and he also understood how words that have a certain significance—depending on how they're used, how that significance changed, because it's not about that, it's about something else. So he really had an incredible connection to the Spanish language as culture, most important to the Spanish language as it's spoken in Puerto Rico. And he was the one that really impressed me the most.

Of course I was enamored with Sandra María Esteves, and of course Pedro Pietri was another person that blew me away, because he's like—you know, I compare Pedro Pietri, in poetry, to Eddie Palmieri in music. Because Eddie Palmieri was always referred to as *el rey de las teclas*, but really the "spaceman of salsa," because he was always experimenting and a lot of the music—there are moments where you can dance to the music and there are moments where you have to sit down and deal with it because it becomes so abstract, because free jazz also had an impact in his music. You know? And so sometimes he would go outside of it and people would get upset, "Oh man, there he is, going off." [Laughs.] [00:30:00] But I compare those two because they have that kind of mentality, but with Pedro Pietri, there's this black humor and there's a certain cynicism. And yet, in that same poem, there's this sense of hope, you know? So he's really, in a way, almost schizophrenic in the way he went back and forth, but it's that surrealist language, you know, coming from that kind of poetry as well that really attracted me to him.

I was surrounded with all of these people that was feeding me on so many different levels. And I was caught up with—especially when I got in Cooper Union and I decided to, what I say, defect from advertisement and illustration, what was called at the time commercial art. I just defected to the fine arts, you know? I was always trying to figure out, "How the hell am I going to transmit this?" And of course I was exposed to, you know, artist collectives, Puerto Rican artist collectives, the first one En Foco.

In 1973, if I remember, there was an exhibition called *Dos Mundos*, which I still have their portfolio catalog. And that was an exhibition of Puerto Rican photographers, in the United States and in Puerto Rico. It was a unique show at the time. The show that's taking place now, *Down These Mean Streets*, is an echo of what I saw that year, except that this is a larger collective of artists and covers other groups—the Chicanos and so on and so forth—within the United States. [00:32:12] But the En Foco, *Dos Mundos*, literally echo the very communities in which I was living in, except that they covered mostly El Barrio and the Bronx, and I'm living in Brooklyn. That exhibition also introduced me to the urban, to the landscape environment of Puerto Rico. I had been in Puerto Rico twice when I was a child, the first time when I was about five years old, the second time when I was about six or seven. And after that, I didn't go back to Puerto Rico until I was like 26 years old.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did you ever ask your parents why they moved?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: No, I never did. I mean, it's a question that occurred to me much later in my life, but for some reason, I never was able to catch up as to why. In a way, I guess I never really pursued that question because throughout the years—you know, you just start reading articles and materials in terms of Operation Bootstrap and the Puerto Rican migration and so on and so forth, and so I immediately assumed that that was the reason. My parents were dirt poor in Puerto Rico. And what I mean by dirt poor—because I remember those two summers, especially in the last summer, which I was about six or seven, where, you know, I spent the summer with my grandmother and her 10 sons. [00:34:21] My father was in New York, his sister was in New York, all the rest were living with their mothers. And, you know, we're talking about these shanty houses. You enter into the house and, you know, dirt floors.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: You know? I never saw my grandmother in a pair of shoes. I'm sure she had a pair or two. I always saw her in *chancletas*, in the slippers. And as far as my other uncles, they would just walk around barefoot. They go into town, they walk barefoot. On certain occasions, if there's some religious ceremony going on in some church somewhere, they had their white shirts and pants and they had their pairs of shoes. But on a day-to-day basis, it was a barefoot existence.

I remember there was a time where they used this—I guess it was a schoolhouse, where they would move all the—you know, they would just open it up, just put out the chairs, moved out all the school desks, tables, and that was a day for a screening of a movie. You know? So somebody would come with a projector and the reels, and if there wasn't enough chairs, it was the milk crates. [00:36:04] We would sit down, immediately try to take the front part of the space so that we have access to the screen, and most of the people there were all barefoot people, and their clothes were pretty shabby or whatever.

So, I would—I mean, I—like I never posed a question directly, because in terms of my memory as a child and what I've experienced and what I have started to read later, it seems to me like [laughs] they came to New York because like the rest of the mass that—to find a job and improve their living conditions, you know?

In Puerto Rico, when I was a child, there was no toilets, there was the latrine, you know? And toilet paper was a newspaper, which I had great difficulty—I remember as a child, I had great difficulty. I wasn't happy going there, you know? "I need to go to the bathroom." "Well, there, go"—you know, where's the toilet, where's the [laughs]—so I was, like, going through a lot of changes. But what I'm saying is that with the experiences that I've had, and the things other people have talked about—I've heard other people talk about as to why they came.

My father, when he was living with us, would gradually bring one of his brothers over to stay with us, get him a job at the factory that he was working, and then after a while, they would get on their feet and then they move out. [00:38:03] My father was doing that, you know, gradually, with a number of them, and then others followed suit, bringing in other brothers into the fold. In a way, my father was—well, he was the oldest, so he was the person who took that kind of responsibility. But obviously they were coming because things were bad. They would send part of their paycheck to the mother and their other brothers, you know. So that was the thing that was going on, and I was very clear about that. There was one point where I had to share my bed with one of my uncles. You know? So, you know, I think I've experienced and seen enough to understand what was going on and why, for me to even occur to ask the question. I think the question has already been—you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. When you were that age, were you starting to have a sense of a desire to make art? Or were you looking at art? Or what was art for you at that point, and your family?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, I think I really got interested in art when I was about five years old. In a way, my father influenced me, because my father would—you know, I mean, on Sunday morning and part of Sunday evening, he would just spend the day at home and watch television, watching old movies—which at that time wasn't so old—and watching cartoons. [00:40:13] So I would sit down with him and watch *Looney Tunes*, and *The Flinstones* was primetime, right before *The Ed Sullivan Show* or whatever. And my father also—I mean, he would be reading these books which deals with history, you know, World War I, World War II. He would just be buying

these softcover books and he would be reading them.

But at the same time, he would be buying dozens and dozens of comic books, and comic books published in Mexico. At the time, if there was a comic book on *The Flinstones*, they would publish the Spanish version of it. They would just translate the bubbles, you know, or whatever, right? So there was *The Flinstones*, there was *Popeye*, there was a lot of *Superman, Batman* comics. At the same time, there was a lot of comics that originated from Mexico, *Viruta y Capulina*, you know, all of these comedians that were making movies in Mexico, Cantinflas, comics, you know, whatever.

And interestingly enough, he never shared it with me. He would just, you know—he would be reading the newspaper and the other books in the living room, but in the bedroom, all of his comics was stashed under the bed, and he had boxes of comics stashed in the closet. And I discovered them one day when they went out grocery shopping. And as most kids do, the parents are away, so you, like, sneak into their rooms to see what happened. [00:42:11] One day, I found a box, a cigarette, I lit it—no, I don't like it—you know. And I was always like a sneak, looking at things and putting them exactly as I found it. When I discovered these boxes under the bed, I pull it out and behold, all these comics along with *Playboy* and whatever. I started looking at it and I was fascinated, because many of them are unfamiliar. But the familiar ones, you know, it's like, this is stuff that I've been watching on television.

At that time, there was no Superman animation, and even though the old Fleischer—you know, I didn't see any of that at the time, but there was the George Reeves television series. So I was like, *Superman* comics? I would look at them and I would start reading them whenever he wasn't home. So he went to work, I came back from school, I snuck in. After a certain point, my mother stopped nagging me about it and I started drawing from them. One of his cousins worked in a paper factory and since he noticed that I was always drawing—"Oh, that's Superman?" It got to the point where I didn't need the comics anymore. I was drawing them on the spot, and drawing Batman and drawing the Flinstones, and on and on and on, and since he noticed that I was doing that, every time he came by the house, the apartment, he would bring bags of scrap paper. [00:44:08]

And then I discovered that the pharmacy, there was an area where they sold Crayola crayons or whatever, so I would go and buy the crayons, and I was always on the floor, drawing. My parents would throw these parties with loud music blaring and a lot of people coming in, smoking and drinking, and a lot of food, and they would be slamming the floor, dancing, and I would be somewhere in the corner of the living room, on the floor, drawing, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And I never got into dancing. I was caught up with just drawing. In addition to the drawings, I also started—maybe a little before that, I started getting my mom to buy me coloring books. *The Jetsons*, whatever, right. But then after a certain point, I started drawing on my own and I started developing my own stories. Unfortunately, I don't have none of that stuff. I started making my own comics.

A lot of the other stuff also—the other thing that also impacted me too was that my father, along with the comics—and some of the comics, what is now called *fotonovelas*—some of these comics were like photo-comics, which was like rehashed over and over again, because they would cut the figures and put the figure in a different scene and then draw around it or whatever. A lot of photo-comics of *El Santo, El Enmascarado de Plata*, and *Blue Demon*, you know, the popular Mexican wrestlers. [00:46:02] My father was always watching wrestling too, but not from Mexico. So I put two and two together. But those wrestling magazines from Mexico introduced me to all these characters.

I remember at some point or another, he took us to the movies to watch, for the most part—about the only thing that we ever watched when he took us to the movies was Mexican movies. So, you know, Maria Félix, Jorge Negrete, El Santo, Cantinflas, that's what I was exposed to, because at that time, there was quite a number of movie theaters in different parts of New York, and that's all they showed: Spanish movies, but for the most part Mexican movies. So that whole golden age of Mexican cinema, that's something that I grew up with.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh. My grandma still watches those.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: What's that?

JOSH T. FRANCO: My grandma still watches those regularly. [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah, you know, because you're talking about a Puerto Rican community that just came straight from the island. They created their own neighborhoods and community. My father learned English because he had to go out and work, but where he was working was with a bunch of Italian Americans and African Americans. So that English slang—you know, he never really learned how to speak proper English; it was that slang. I remember when he would talk English, it was like—you know. Of course the Puerto Rican accent on

top, but the vocabulary and the language was very African-American and in certain moments, the way Italian Americans were speaking English, some of that cadence sneaked in as well. [00:48:10]

My mother learned some English, but not enough for her to engage in a conversation. She was one of so many that coming to the United States and living 30, 40 years in the United States, never learn English. You know? I remember a poem by Pedro Pietri where he talks about his mother, "And my mother lived in the United States for X amount of years and she never learned not a word of English," and then the last line, "She was a genius." [Laughs.] You know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes. That's great.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So I didn't go to a so-called American movie theater until I was maybe in the sixth grade, because one of my teachers decided to take us to the movies, to watch *True Grit* with John Wayne.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: That was the first time that I've ever gone to see an English-language movie. After that, I started going with some friends. That class introduced me to it. It was close by, you know, and then I started going—not regularly, because I couldn't afford it, but every so often I would go. *The Greatest Show on Earth* and things like that. But my point is that you talk about these bubbles, these communities, where the painted signs are all in Spanish, the pharmacy is in Spanish, everybody speaks Spanish, and outside of that neighborhood—or, let's say, entering into another bubble, which is going to school, where, okay, it was English, that was what was going on. [00:50:14]

In a way, that gave me, as well as a lot of other people from my generation, great difficulty, because it was like a schizophrenia where it got to the point where relatives—my parents were like, "No, he doesn't speak Spanish" or whatever, you know, and at the same time, outside of that environment, I spoke this terrible English and I didn't understand what the fuck was being said and I was always behind in my reading level. But throughout all of that, the one thing that kept me very engaged was drawing.

And what happened was, is that when I was finishing intermediate, junior high school, and I ended up in these art classes in Halsey Junior High School—but the idea of art was comic books and advertisement and illustration. And that's the reason why I chose to go to Art and Design rather than Music and Art, which was more of a fine art—Art and Design was illustration. They also had architecture and photography, commercial art. And at that time, being an artist was being a commercial artist. [00:52:03] My inclination or my fancy is to do a book, album cover illustrations. You know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Before you got to Cooper Union and your school before that, were there art classes? Were there any kind of arts in the public schools?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, in the fifth grade, there wasn't no—as far as I remember, there wasn't no art classes until I moved to Bushwick and started attending PS 106, and that's when I entered into the fifth grade. There was this woman at a certain point that was going from class to class and asking teachers if there was anyone that had any talent, because she's putting together an art class. What happened was that even when I was in PS 156, since I was always drawing and whatnot, the teachers always put me to do the bulletin boards and to draw things. The library had me draw whatever I wanted, so I drew lions and whatever—mostly cartoons—to decorate the space. The social studies teachers, everybody was recruiting me to make art for them, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So what did the city asks you to do now.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: You were doing back then, what the city hires you to do now.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah, yeah, interestingly enough, you know? So my teacher said, "Oh, this guy can draw, look at the bulletin board he just did," you know, and whatever, right? So she put together a group of students. And once a week for 45 minutes, I would be in that class and do her assignments and whatever. [00:54:08] The problem that was happening at the time was that teachers noticed that I had this talent and I got recruited to be in this special class once a week, but at the same time, I was a little bit of a delinquent, you know? I was always getting into trouble, I was always in fights, and—this is [laughs] a really weird, interesting story. All this is going to come back to haunt me.

One day I was going to school—and at that time, I was in the sixth grade—and passing by the park, I saw these boxes. They were, like, thrown out but they were full of stuff. Of course, you know, I noticed that it was full of magazines. So I went into the park, looked through these boxes, and they were all pornography magazines. Hard pornography, okay? This is not *Playboy*. No, hard pornography. So I'm looking at this, you know, of course I

remember along with the comics, my father had pornography too, so I said, "Oh, okay, this is pornography," right? That's the only time where I had, like, this weird entrepreneurship, where I decided to stuff a number of those magazines into my bag and I started offering to my friends, and then my friends would hook up with other people. I would be selling each page for like five cents or something like that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So I got caught and of course I was nervous, "Oh, they're going to suspend me," or whatever, right? [00:56:04] And that on top of the fact that I was always getting into trouble, because I'm always fist-fighting with people, you always come across—and it's not even a question of me starting fights. It's just that you had these bullies, and then after a while it's like, "That person, look what he did to him, and him, and that person is not going to do that shit to me," and so I fought back. Sometimes I won fights and sometimes they beat the crap out of me, but the point was that I was always getting into fights, and then all of a sudden, it's like, I get caught with a bagful of pornography. So as punishment, they didn't suspend me from school, they suspended me from the art classes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's terrible.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: That was like an incredible blow. And then they told me, "Until you start behaving yourself, you're not going to take any more art classes with Ms. Thurston." Ms. Thurston, recent graduate from Pratt Institute. So anyway, I found my way to not get into more trouble. The suspension probably lasted like two weeks. She would go back to the teacher and, "How is he doing?" "No, he looks like he's learned his lesson" or whatever. So she put me back in class.

And then later on, she told me about the Art Saturday program at Pratt Institute, and I got very excited, you know? First, she put me into the triple-A poster competition. [00:58:04] I was one of maybe three students that she selected to do a poster on whatever theme—in terms of traffic, follow the green light, whatever—and I fucked up terribly. What I did was just so awful that when she looked at it she said, "What a piece of junk." You know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: What happened? Was it just pressure?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I think it was the pressure, and I think it was—well, it was like being commissioned to do something and I knew what it was all about, and I had the ideas, but for some reason, I just didn't have the skills. The letters had to be hand-lettering, and so on and so forth, and it was just one of those first-time kind of situations where I just didn't have a handle of it.

What followed afterwards from that lesson—that I knew because then I started looking at posters and things like that, you know, that you see in newspapers or whatever, and then I got a better grapple of that, but I wasn't exposed to that kind of thing. So, you know, I disappointed her on that end. It was one of those city-wide competitions where several schools submit their posters and they pick the one that wins.

But still, after that, she talked to me about Pratt Institute, and I said, "That would be terrific." And then she gave me a note to give to my parents and my parents read it and somehow, she ended up coming home, in the living room, and she starts telling them what the Saturday program is about. "Your son is very talented, I think it would be wonderful if he would start going, it's only every Saturday from what time to whatever time." [01:00:27] My father was very interested but discouraged, because you had to pay a tuition and he just said, "I don't have the money." At the same time, "I work six days a week, so I work Saturdays so there's no way that I could be taking him back and forth." You know, that kind of thing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So, you know, she said, "Oh, that's too bad, this is so important," or whatever. He said, "I understand, and I want the best for my son, but we can barely make ends meet here." And of course I was very young.

JOSH T. FRANCO: How old were you then?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I was in the sixth grade, so I think I was about 12. Maybe a little older, because my parents started me kind of late. I didn't start first grade at the age of five, I started [laughs] at the age of seven. They go like, "Oh, we have to take him to school." All of a sudden it occurred to them, "You should be going to school by now, right?" So yeah, I must have been like 12, 13. And of course I was so disappointed and said, "Oh [groans]," you know. My mother had to pull me aside and say, "Listen to this, if your father had the money you would go but that's not the case."

Anyway, Ms. Thurston collected the money from my teachers and other teachers in the school. [01:02:02]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: She collected the money and I'm sure that she put a chunk of her own money in there, and before I knew it, she picked me up at home, took me to Pratt Institute via the buses, taught me what bus to take, where to get off and transfer to the other bus, to head to Pratt Institute. And she did it for two Saturdays straight. And then the third Saturday—I was on my own—I got lost but somehow I found my way. And then I was going every Saturday to Pratt.

And the kinds of stuff that I was doing there was totally new, nothing that I had done before. But it was exciting and it was the first time that I started working on these canvas panels, and brushes. Oh, she took me to Pratt the first day; she went to the neighborhood art store, which is like across from the campus—there were two art stores, right now there's only one—and she just bought brushes and painting panels and pencils and erasers and acrylic paint and oil pastels. She just—she bought me the portfolio, you know. I mean, this woman just prepared me for my first day.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What was her full name, do you remember?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: No, I don't remember her first. I may have at the time, but I don't and what was in a way—not to exaggerate—almost tragic, is that there was a time where I would drop by the school, when I was in junior high school, to say hello and she was there. But then some years passed, I was already towards the end of the High School of Art and Design, and I got admitted to Cooper Union, and then when I came to visit her, you know, my former teacher: "Oh no, she left three years ago. [01:04:24] She got married." I was like, "Any forwarding address?" No. You know, so she just disappeared from my life. I only remember her by her first name. Maybe if I could do some search in terms of who were teaching in that school at that time, hopefully I could find something.

Very young, you know. I always thought that she was probably Jewish. But, you know, very young, frail, big glasses, a chain smoker, so her teeth wasn't all that great looking. But boy, she really took to me, you know? She was the one that literally opened the path, you know, to what I am today and I always remember her. You know, that's how things happen.

I got admitted to Cooper Union as a graphic design major. That was my portfolio. But as part of their foundation year, I was introduced to sculpture, 3-D design, drawing, painting, photography—which I was introduced to at Art and Design, but that was like a four-week thing. [01:06:04] So at Cooper Union, it was a full semester of photography. You know, foundation courses. And then there was other courses, foundation also in terms of graphic design, which at that point I was bored with it, because I already knew all that stuff from Art and Design.

But for some reason, when I got introduced to the other areas—and at that time, when I was taking foundation in photography, that's when I got exposed to the En Foco exhibition and saw the work of Puerto Rican photographers. At the same time, my sophomore year of college, this art history teacher—she was teaching pre-Columbian art—was a Cuban, Melita del Villar, who, you know, just started—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, Juan, I think there's a microphone under your arm.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Oh. Yeah, okay. Melita del Villar was teaching pre-Columbian art, and also she was teaching African art. You know, a white Cuban, and of course was just one of two or three Latinos in the art school, and two or three blacks in the art school, so obviously she was kind of focused on me. One day she dropped by my studio and was looking at my work and—you know, at that time the Mexican muralists, as well as the mural movement that was going on in New York, and then later I started checking out African-American artists. [01:08:10]

The first book that Samella Lewis wrote, which was published by the Metropolitan Museum—I guess it came out of a show which I didn't see, but when I went to the Metropolitan Museum at some point, I came across this two-volume book, two small books on African American art, and so that's when I really got exposed to that. It was very political work and she's a Cuban exile, so she's like, "I don't agree with what you're painting here, but"—and then she gave me the address to El Museo del Barrio, which at that time was storefronts.

If I remember, I think it was on Lexington Avenue. There was one storefront on one end of the block, and the other one. The one, the first section, they had a lot of—they had like a gallery-full of Taíno artifacts and African artifacts and things like that, and when I entered into that space, there was a couple of people conducting a class with a group of school kids. So I saw that and I was like, "Oh, my God, a Puerto Rican museum."

Then they told me, "Oh, there's a second part of the museum at the other end of the block," and that was a gallery that was showing contemporary art. There was a Taller Boricua exhibition. The guy that was sitting in in the gallery, Gilbert Hernandez, was a member of Taller Boricua. [01:10:01] I came in to look at the show and we started talking and engaging, and you know, I said, "It's the first time I've seen Puerto Rican art, because at

Cooper Union, they just teach you whatever, and there's nothing there that tells me anything about Latino art or even African-American art."

So we engaged. He had a couple of his paintings there and everything as well. So he said, "Well, I'm part of this group, I'm part of this artist collective called Taller Boricua," you know, and what the hell does *taller* mean and what does Boricua mean, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: It's like, my Spanish was really—[They laugh.] So I said, "Okay," and then he said, "Do you want to visit them? We're only like a block or so away from here." I said, "Cool." He gave me the address, so I went over, and it there was this flight of stairs that goes up and then there's the door, and then—I'm trying to remember the exact address, but the point of the matter was that the person who opened the door—"What do you want?" "Oh, my name is Juan Sánchez, I'm an art student from Cooper Union." "Yeah, yeah, what"—you know. "Oh, Gilbert sent me here, and he told me that you people make Puerto Rican art." [They laugh.] And so he said, "Okay, well come in." The person who opened the door and let me in was Jorge Soto.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: You know? At first it felt a bit intimidating, as if he had like an attitude or something. Once I entered into the space, he showed me around. He took me to his space, showed me what he was doing, and then he took me to some other artist's space. [01:12:06] He took me to the print shop—their thing at that time was strictly silk screen—and showed me all the posters they were doing and whatever. He opened up these flat files and he started showing me prints by Antonio Martorell, Tufiño—I mean, he started pulling out these woodcuts, as well as screen prints, by the artists, artists from the Island.

So he exposed me to so much, and then later on, Fernando Salicrup came in and Rafael Colón Morales, who was also a member of Taller Boricua—they took me to their spaces to show me the work and everything. And I was, like, amazed. You know, I was, like, really very happy. Of course I also—you know, because that's what happens when you go to art school, is you always look at things critical. So, you know, sometimes I would look at work and I say, "Well, you know it's alright, [laughs] you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. What were some of the specific—what was the work too much of or not enough of, in your mind?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, what happened was—which of course in the years that pass, I just have a very different perspective. All of these guys [laughs] who are art school dropouts.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Okay? They all went to Art and Design. None of them went to Cooper Union. Otherwise, I think they would have stayed. But maybe not, because I went through shit there too, but my mission was, "I'm going to graduate from here. [01:14:08] It's a scholarship program, I'm going to graduate from here." But many of them are, like, Pratt and SVA dropouts, and they have their own spiel about art school—"It's all bullshit" or whatever, which I can understand.

I mean, I remember one day, in one of the classes—I had Hans Haacke as one of my professors during my first year—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: —at Cooper Union. He was teaching this introductory class, but it was all conceptually driven.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I had another sculpture teacher that was teaching me how to weld, how to work with wood, and so on and so forth. And that was divided into three parts. So he taught one section which was more conceptually driven, and for the life of me, I couldn't handle it. I didn't understand what the hell he was talking about. Everybody else did, you know, but I didn't. But I do remember on one occasion—and every time I brought the assignment in, when I thought I had a handle of it, he engaged and he talked about it and everything, but in the end it was like, you know, "It's a failure," right?

I remember one day, I spent like two days working on that assignment. I come in to set up and one of the students comes in and says "Oh, shit," and the others, "You haven't done the assignment yet?" "No." "So what are you going to do?" "I don't know, man." So he pulls out an apple, a green apple, bites into it, and then sticks pushpins in the area where he bit. Right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah. [01:16:00]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So I mean, now, since I'm a professor at Hunter College, I'm going to be looking at that for hours and having a conversation with my graduate students. But at that time, it was like, I was 19 and totally—you know? Man, they spent a lot of time on that project, and I'm like saying, "This is"—

JOSH T. FRANCO: What did Haacke say about the apple?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well you know, he would ask questions. He would lead the conversation, he would ask the questions, students would respond to it or blah blah blah. The point was that a lot of time was dedicated to it, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: But he was the kind of guy who will point out certain things and ask the student, Why did you do that? And then it was a back and forth with the rest of the students, which is the way I conduct. But the point was that everybody had something to say about the piece. I didn't get a sense that anything negative had been said. He presented the piece and well, you know, How many of us are presenting today? Okay, 20 minutes each, 25 minutes each. So he went through the whole thing and "Next," you know.

I present my stuff and I presented—what I did was, I took—I found this tree branch. I found this pot that was thrown away somewhere. I filled it with soil and then I put the tree branch in it, and then I covered the tree branch with aluminum foil.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Right? I just—I didn't know what the hell I was doing, and so when it came to the presentation, the Q&A, I didn't have any answers. [01:18:07] It was like, "I just did it because I thought—okay." This is—

JOSH T. FRANCO: What was the assignment, like found objects?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: To make a found objects sculpture? What was the assignment?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Something like that, yeah, something like that. Make something out of an object.

I just didn't have—you know, first of all, at that time, I got admitted into Cooper Union and I wasn't even on a 12th grade reading level. Okay? So people would engage in conversation and words would just be just like another language. I didn't get a handle until later in my sophomore year, what's that frame of mind, what's the context, what's—you know, the context, and so on and so forth.

So I kind of understood the assignment, but what I executed I thought was right in line, because it was something outside of the norm of what I do. And what I do was to always have some logic, or some sense or whatever, but that's coming more from a commercial illustration reference point, you know? And when was I introduced to Duchamp? Introduction to art history? So, I presented the piece and everybody's, "Hmm, hmm."

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And he—you know, "Yes," you know, whatever. And they started asking questions and I didn't have a clue as to what to respond with. And yet, I thought I had it. You know, I thought I finally got a handle on this. [01:20:06] It looks like art, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: But the point of the matter was that, you know, other similar things followed, and then after a while—once I really had a deep conception of what conceptual art is, and what all of this is all about, and what is the discourse, and the semiotic relationship between materialism and concepts as signifiers. Once I got a handle on that, even then, from time to time, someone would present something that—you know, bullshit, bullshit, you know?

But at that point then, that's where the bullshit doesn't go any further, because the person who did the bullshit just didn't really conceive what he or she was doing, which is what happened to me with the branch and the aluminum, you know? So once I got a handle on that—and from time to time I would come across similar works in graduate school at Hunter. You know, I go back to that experience, among others.

But the point was that these artists from Taller Boricua, it looks like they didn't do as well and maybe even

worse, and they just said, "Fuck this," and they left. So they had this attitude. And so, "You go to Cooper Union, what for?" You know, it's like—that kind of thing?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So I almost got shunned because I was going to Cooper Union. But at the same time, they were very welcoming. [01:22:04] And then later on, all of a sudden they started going into their pockets, looking at their quarters and, "Oh, you know, we've got to get something to drink." I think it was Jorge Soto that pulled out a reefer and started smoking: "Do you smoke?" "No, no, I don't touch the stuff." But we put our coins together and Fernando went out and got some cheap wine and beer and we just spent the rest of the night together, drinking and smoking. I got to Taller Boricua about two o'clock in the afternoon and I left el Taller about one o'clock in the morning.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow. Was it the same building it's in now?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is it the same building still?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: No, they were in another building. That's what I'm saying, I'm trying to remember the exact address. We're talking about 1974, 1975. They were in another building but within the area. What was I about to say? No, it's a totally different location, but it was like a block or so from where El Museo used to be, and they had the whole floor to themselves.

So I left about one o'clock in the morning, maybe later, head back to Brooklyn, took a shower, and went to school. It took a while for me to get back to Brooklyn. There was no point in going to bed, so it was that kind of thing. [01:24:06] And so the following day, I went to school. And then from that point on, then I started going up there more often, because they always had changing shows and whatever. And what's his name, the photographer, Hiram.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Hiram Maristany.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Hiram. He was a director of El Museo at the time.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I talked with Gil and said—because at that time, I was a sophomore at Cooper Union. I did a multi-projector slide presentation. I still have the tape and I have the slides, but they're totally out of order. I've been thinking about one day putting it together and maybe transferring it into video.

But when I got introduced to the work of En Foco, that was like a lifesaver for me, because I had already one semester of photography, and I was doing the assignments, and some of them was okay and some of them were just awful. I just couldn't see myself within the medium, but when I saw *Dos Mundos*, it's like, it clicked. And then that's when I started shooting in my own neighborhood.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And then later going into El Barrio, and going into the South Bronx, and shooting anything that looked like something Puerto Rican. Graffitis, murals, *botánicas*, storefronts. [01:26:00] I would go into the *botánicas*, take pictures, ask the guy permission, take pictures. I would take a lot of portraits of people. I first started shooting a lot of that stuff in my neighborhood, in my household. So, portraits of my mother, my brothers, her bedroom, the shrine that she has on the bedpost. Everything that I identified as being Puerto Rican, I was shooting left and right, because that En Foco exhibition just gave me the clue. There are some photographs that I have, which I haven't taken out since 1979, that now that I look at it, I say, "Oh, this looks like so-and-so's work." You know? So there's certain photographs that it's like, "Oh, man." It's like, I look at it and say, "Wow, you know, talk about plagiarism."

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: But, you know, a young kid with a cheap Yashica camera.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I found my identity through photography because of that show. So that awoken, you know, "Well, there's got to be Puerto Rican painters or whatever out there," and that's how that got hooked.

And then, in my final year at Cooper Union, that's when things started surfacing in my work. Then I graduated, I continued doing the work, especially in photography—for the most part black-and-white, and later I moved to Kodachrome, color slides—and bit by bit, doing these large paintings, which were very much influenced by Mexican muralism, and the mural movement in New York. [01:28:09]

And I stayed out for about a year and a half. I got frustrated because I couldn't really focus on my work because I had a day job, which was a lab technician in a commercial lab where I was doing a lot of black-and-white, color printing, for advertising agencies and things like that. The money was good but the overtime just took me away from my own work, and I decided that the only way I could go back and focus on my own work was to go to graduate school. That's the only reason why, you know. I wasn't in the least interested in going to graduate school, because I had enough of college.

That said, but after a year and a half out there, trying to continue my own work and the job, and just trying to survive at the same time—you know, I was still living with my mother. My father left when I was about 12 years old, and from that point on, it was welfare. So by the age of 12, I would get these part-time jobs. There was a number of places—which was part of the garment industry, but it was in Bushwick—where there would be people behind sewing machines, putting together patterns for clothing and things like that. I would go there once or twice a week to sweep the whole place, and they would give me like five dollars or whatever.

So I started working at that point and then, during the time that I was at Cooper Union—one of the things about Cooper Union too, is that it was such a cultural different reality from Art and Design High School, which was a pretty diverse body of students, to a school where it's all white people, you know, and the language and the way they speak and the way the teachers, professors, conducted their class and everything. [01:30:27] I was totally out of bounds. I was like, in a whole different context.

But at the same time, you know, I was also working. I got a job working at this fast-food burger place, which was at that time [Goody –JS], and later they franchised into Burger King. I was on the grill. If I wasn't on the grill, I was at the cash register, putting in my hours and scheduling my hours around my classes. And that was a bit of a stretch, you know. I got a bit overextended. So on top of being in an environment that I don't know what the hell is going on, not being at the same reading capacity that I was, names and words that I never heard of, and on and on and on—my first year at Cooper Union was awful. I ended up with all Cs and the classes that I didn't get Cs, I failed.

And then the second semester, I didn't fail any classes, but I got all Cs, and some of them were C-minus, and I faced the [academic –JS] committee made up of faculty. I'm in bad shape, I could be dismissed from the school. [01:32:17] And two faculty members spoke for me. One was Reuben Kadish, who I had in one of the introductory art history classes. And the other one, in photography, Eugene Tulchin. And Reuben Kadish. They were asking me, "Well, why are you doing so bad or whatever?" And I think I was a bit embarrassed to tell them about my own personal situation with the family, the finance and all of that, so I wasn't able to give much of a reason. Of course they asked me, you know, "Are you working?" "Yeah, I got a job." "Where do you work, how many days?" Whatever.

Reuben Kadish spoke up and said, "I know Juan has done terrible and I could say the same for my class, he did terrible. But there are moments where I got a sense from him that he's an intellectual. It's just that he hasn't figured out his handle, you know. But we should give him another opportunity because I think he's going to do very well." And Eugene Tulchin said, "Well, you know, the work didn't meet my standards, but one thing that I did see is that every time I went into the darkroom, before and after class, he was always in there trying to print and do the assignments. [01:34:16] And I realized that he was working too hard. It's just that he didn't—he just didn't have a clue what the hell was going on."

So they decided to, on my third semester, my sophomore semester, to—"Okay, we'll put you on probation, but if you don't improve that semester, you're out." That was the point where I had to really evaluate what was my situation and what was my life, and I decided, "I have to cut my hours working" and "I'm going to have to talk to my financial aid counselor," because there was a tuition-free program, but you still needed money for art supplies or whatever. But at the same time, it was like, "I'm going to have to build up on student loans, not just to take care of my material needs at school, but to also deal with the situation at home." You know? And that's what I did. I decided on that, and then I would work at the Burger King on weekends and full-time during the summer, and I started improving on my grades and things started falling into place.

Since I was able to get a handle of what I wanted to do through my work and the encounter with El Museo del Barrio, Taller Boricua, that exhibition En Foco, and then later on, "Oh, En Foco is this group." [01:36:20] I went to their office and met Charles Biasiny, who was directing En Foco at the time, and I met other photographers or

whatever. And then once I started showing him my silver gelatin prints, he invited me to do a presentation along with other photographers, to engage, to share work or whatever. So that helped me a lot. What's his name, who was a director of El Museo del Barrio—because I started to talk about the multi-slide presentation that I put together.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Miriam.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah. I talked to him, I said, "Listen, I'm finishing this project"—which was a two-semester course with Eugene Tulchin—"I would like for you to see it and tell me what you think." I knew he was a director, but I also knew that he was a photographer. So he said, "Okay, well, why don't you come on such a date. We don't have this equipment, I know, but I'll figure out a way of bringing in the projectors, this box, the dissolve unit, which you hook up to the projectors, and you hook it up to a reel-to-reel tape player." [01:38:00] He said, "Okay, well, let's schedule you. We'll do it at the gallery, and you come and you show me what you've done."

So I put it all in a shopping cart and I just wheeled that through the subway and whatever and got there, and the gallery was full of people. I had an audience, which freaked me out, like, What the fuck is this? [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you remember who was there?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, some other people from Taller Boricua. I think Adal Maldonado was there at the time. I do remember there were just a lot of faces there. I suppose that there were a number of people that was working at El Museo. Of course, Gilbert Hernandez was there. But, you know, these metal fold-out chairs were all lined up, they were all—I had to walk through, set up the equipment, and I did the presentation, and then we engaged into a conversation. That was amazing, that was just incredible. It's not something that I could put on my résumé and say "I had a show at"—you know, but it was just that kind of thing where I felt that I was embraced. You know?

The piece, which was called *Mi Mundo*, was almost finished. I was still doing editing with the images, I was still moving sequencing around, and I was also doing—that course was amazing. [01:40:00] I even learned how to—of course, I can't do that now, but this is back in the days of slicing and pasting the tapes, editing the sound track or whatever. Some of the soundtrack were cassette recordings of a rally that took place at Brooklyn College. Because at that time, they were struggling to establish a Black and Puerto Rican Studies department, and one of the speakers was Richie Perez of the Young Lords. And I recorded his speech, and I integrated that, music. I interviewed my mother, I recorded my father having a political conversation with some people in the living room, and I just put it all together. The piece wasn't quite completed but then I completed the piece for that class. There was maybe 12 students that registered. I was the only one, the only man standing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Really?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: They all dropped. Yeah. Yeah. It was hard work and very labor-intensive, but at the same time—and I think what helped me through it also is that since I was a little kid, I was always fascinated with movies, you know, and watching movies on television and things like that. It's like creating a moving picture with still images, you know? And I learned the dissolve unit, if you program it to throw a sequence of images, in less than a second, you can literally create motion, like a motion picture. [01:42:04] So I learned all of that and I finished the project, I got an A.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Congratulations.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: To that day—because I would visit him [Eugene Tulchin –JS] from time to time. He's now about 80 years old and he lives in Jersey. He invited me to dinner a couple of years ago and he invited a bunch of people, friends of his, a couple of them were teaching at Cooper Union as well. And he would even tell me from time to time when we're alone together—it's like, "I remember when you almost got kicked out of the school but in all honesty, you were the hardest working student I ever had, period."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow. Wow.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So he gave me—the first semester, he gave me an A, and the second semester, upon completion of the project, he gave me an A-plus. And then later, he commented to Hans Haacke—I came out of his class with a C, right?—"Oh, did you have Juan Sánchez as a student?" And he said, "Yeah, [groans] I did," you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And he said, "Well, you know, he just finished this course and he's the only one that stayed in the class, and you've got to see it." So he caught me in the hall, Hans Haacke, he says, "Oh, Gene told me that you did this slide presentation, this audiovisual slide presentation." And I said, "Yeah, yeah." And he said, "Well, I

would like to see it." And then at that time, I said "Well, Tulchin told me to schedule a day so that I could borrow the lecture room and do a presentation, and I'm working on that, to invite people to come." I asked him if I could do it, because of my experience at El Museo del Barrio. [01:44:14] I said, "You know what, I should do something like this at Cooper." So I made the reservation, scheduled the date, set up the equipment. Everybody came in. Hans Haacke brought his class.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I said, "Oh, shit"—[they laugh]—and put it on, you know, and engaged in a conversation back and forth, which was another breakthrough for me because in all of this, part of—it was not just a question of not having a handle and not understanding what was going on, but I was an extremely introverted, shy person. So just to be in front of people and stand in front of them was, like, nerve-wrecking. Even during that presentation at El Museo and the presentation at Cooper Union, I was still nervous, especially seeing him come in with his group of students and everything, but they engaged, they asked a lot of questions, he had a lot of questions, I had a response to them. Of course, something very familiar, something that I'm living, you know.

And then it was over. Everybody left. Hans Haacke stayed behind and then he was, like, so impressed, so overwhelmed. And then he said, "This is really amazing, what you did here, Juan." And then he posed a question: "Juan, what happened to you then?" And I told him, I said, "Well, you know, I guess I wasn't ready and there was just too many things. [01:46:07] I was too distracted, I just couldn't get my head into anything."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did you tell him about *Dos Mundos*?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: About what?

JOSH T. FRANCO: About the En Foco exhibition?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: No, I didn't tell him anything about that. I just told him that I figured out how things worked out, I figured out what were some of my issues, and this is something that I really believe in. He says, "Okay," you know. But he asked me that question like, "This is so terrific, why didn't you"—[laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Right. And the same thing happened with someone that I took film with. You know, it was like, he was there, "Why didn't you do this for my class?" But nothing—it was like, you know, irregardless of the circumstance and all the shit that was going on in my life and everything, I could say that I kind of like blossomed late.

But luckily, that started to happen during my sophomore year, and then from that point on, everything was fine, man. Getting the work done, I have a focus on the assignments, and then after a year and a half, went back to graduate school—that was such a cakewalk—and realizing that part of the situation—that happened also once I started going to graduate school, and I realized that, Okay, I had my issues and I had my challenges, but this school is so fucking tough on you, man. [01:48:02] You know, it's like, people graduate and they're still a little whacked out from how hard they push you in that place, and then you graduate having the sense that, Okay, well what did I accomplish here? I know a number of people who graduated with me who are not making art, who went through some trauma during the time at Cooper Union, and I see the same thing happen when I was in graduate school with a number of students.

But what I realized was that here's a bunch of photography majors who still don't know how to develop a roll of film properly, and I had to teach them how to do it. You know? And here's this other person who is having trouble with this. There were quite a number of exceptional students in my group, but then there were others that were, like, so mediocre. So once I started going to graduate school, I began to realize that despite all of my challenges and the fact that I blossomed a year after, that I was really trained exceptionally well. It's just that you go through all of this, you graduate thinking that you're still an idiot, and you have all of this ammunition. Afterwards, I started taking other classes and then I started going to—because Hans Haacke was having a lot of shows at the time, and I would go and see his exhibitions, very conceptually dense work. [01:50:00] I remember a series that he did with the Esso logo, which is now Exxon, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I went to sit down and ask him questions about it. But I would go to the gallery and it's not the kind of work that pops at you. This is something you have to deal with, you know? It was amazing that I would go to that show for three hours, and look and read the text and look at the whole installation, and then come back again. So I fell in line, you know? And so when I went to graduate school—and I went there specifically to study with Leon Golub, and—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you say where you went to graduate school?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I went to Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. And because my grades went up quite a bit—you know, I was getting As and Bs, still got a couple of Cs, but my grades improved tremendously—but because of my first year, it only went up to about 2.6 or something like that, and the GPA has to be at minimum 3.0. So when I applied to Rutgers, I also applied to Yale, which interestingly enough offered me admission. But I applied to Yale in photography and I applied to Rutgers in painting.

I visited Yale and the facilities are incredible, and at that time, you know—which I didn't know, but he was one of the people that interviewed me—was Larry Fink. [01:52:05] I think Tod Papageorge was there as well. But after the interview—and I showed my prints and whatever—Larry Fink followed me and says, "Boy, that work is really terrific." He invited me to lunch, so he treated me to lunch, and I says, "Well, you know, I didn't know you were teaching here but I like your work and I'm glad that you're teaching here." He says, "No, I'm leaving next semester, I only have"—this was like a one-year contract—"so I'm not going to be here next year." And then he said, "Do you really want to come here? There's a bunch of snobby people here." And I felt it. I felt that, you know?

And at the same time, even though I applied as a photography major, I still wanted to do my paintings. And at that time, it was just a lot of hard-edge color field paintings or whatever, and I said, "Hmm, I don't know how they're going to engage with my work." Because I had somewhat of a problem with that work at Cooper Union as well; there were some that embraced me and there were some that didn't know what the hell—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Was your painting then similar to, like, now, the motifs?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I started—similar on the one hand, dealing with Puerto Rican identity, history, but very much in the style of muralist art. You know, very much in the style of—it was figurative. But there was the flag, the raised fists, you know, it was just on and on and on, you know, which was a complement to what I was doing in photography.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure. [01:54:00]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So he said to me, "If you get admitted, that's fine, but I don't know if you're going to be happy here." And for the most part, the students that were there, the ones that I met—and they had a couple of student representatives during my interview. One of them was white, the other one was Asian, and then after that, all the students that I met and everything were white students, and very enthusiastic. Of course, they're trying to selling their school, this great program, whatever. But Fink said, "I don't know if you're going to be happy here, Juan. Think about it. Where else have you applied to?" "I applied to Rutgers." "Okay, well, so-and-so and so-and-so is there." "Yeah, yeah, true," you know.

So once I found out about Leon Golub, whose work I had been looking at for a while, and then I found out that Mel Edwards was teaching there—and I've seen his work at the Studio Museum in Harlem—and then I found out about Ralph Ortiz that was teaching there as well, then I said, "You know what, I'm going to Rutgers." Yale offered me admission but I turned it down. The other issue also is, "I guess I have to move to New Haven, Connecticut." I don't want to do that, you know. And it's expensive.

So I opted for Rutgers and it's been terrific. The only challenges that I had was trying to make my work better. [01:56:00] I actually went to graduate school, because after Cooper Union, I barely had time to deal with my own work, and I was very, very aware of this shortcoming. There's still some issues I need to resolve here, you know? I still—you know, I was very aware that I was working in a style and a language that were awfully derivative. I remember one of my painting teachers [Harvey Quaytman –JS] turned me on to what's his name, [R. B. Kitaj –JS], and he told me which gallery represented his work. So I went to the gallery and the people there were very generous, and they started showing me some of his work, and they had a catalog. They gave me a catalog of his work and I started looking at his work in relation to what I was doing and it's like, Oh, wow, there's something similar here, but this guy is amazing.

So it got to the point where, critically speaking, I needed to go back. I need time to continue to figure out and find some resolution in my work. And that's why I went to graduate school. And when I found out about Leon Golub and some of the other people there—I didn't know that Bob Blackburn was there at the time, but he was working as an adjunct and I met him at the time that I was in graduate school, and I would visit him at the printshop from time to time, but at that time I didn't have any interest in printmaking.

So, you know, that was an incredible experience, but I was, like, hungry and ready to handle whatever they threw at me. So, you know, I graduated with a 4.0. [Laughs.] [01:58:12]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Which is what happened with my daughter, interestingly enough. She had a rough time in school and it was always like a back and forth kind of thing. And of course, you know, as Spanish speaking parents, we're so insistent that she learn Spanish, but then that was getting in the way of her assimilating to English. She did fairly well undergraduate school, but when she started graduate school at Teachers College, boom, everything clicked and she's like—you know, she's like me, a late blossomer.

And then after graduate school, my first two shows after graduate school—and maybe like six to eight months after graduate school, my first show was—if I remember, my first show was at the Bronx Museum, the year I graduated, 1980. And there was this young curator, Janet Heit, that was working there, and she knew Leon Golub. And Leon Golub said, "You should look into the work of Juan Sánchez." So she called me one day, she came home. I was still living with my mother. All the paintings that I produced back at Rutgers, plus some stuff from Cooper Union, were all in the hallway, you know? [02:00:08] And I started pulling stuff and showing her or whatever, and she included me in the show called *Young Painters, 1980*.

And then my second exhibition [at the new museum –JS], by way of Mel Edwards, the title I think was called *Selections*, and I think you have a catalog in the Archives. That was a show where they would ask artists to select a younger artist for an exhibition, and so Mel recommended me. And so that was my second exhibition. And I say exhibitions, because I didn't have any other exhibitions before then, after graduate school, so those first two exhibitions were museum exhibitions.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: The only solo show that I had under my belt back then was in 1979, when I had a solo show of my photography at this gallery space on East Fourth Street called Photo Gallery. I'm trying to remember—I know the name of it. Alex Harsley is the guy who runs the place, and it's one of those spots where a lot of people—Dawoud Bey—a lot of people have showed there in the very beginning of their careers. And I've been checking out that gallery forever, because even during the time that I was at Cooper Union, that gallery was only a few blocks away from Cooper Union. So every so often I would go and see the show. A real small, tiny, narrow gallery, and he was always there, smoking his pipe. [02:02:03]

I would see the show, hang with him from time to time, show him prints, and then one day I approached him about doing a show and we did the show, and it was like the first—it was literally in the first semester of my graduate study at Rutgers, and a lot of people showed up and among them was Leon Golub. He showed up with Nancy Spero, with a bottle of wine, and so that was my very first solo show.

But then after graduation, it was he and Mel Edwards that—and then from that point on, it was like a domino effect because there was always someone who saw the shows and, "Who is this guy?" And you get the phone calls, and they continue. You continue to be invited to all sorts of group shows and whatnot, you know? So it just happened like that, so I to this day—well, that's not true. There were a couple of attempts where I sent slides to galleries, and they never answer you back or they'll send you the slides with a little note, "Thank you but I'm not interested," or whatever. So I did that maybe about two or three times, but at the time that I did that, I said to myself, Why did I do that? You know, why set myself up for rejection? [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Because you had to hustle then.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: When I'm in these shows. You know, you look at the résumé and it's amazing. "Wow, I was in 20 shows that year?" Some of them were great and some of them were what other people call dog shows, but the point was that I had quite a bit of visibility. [02:04:09]

The way that I was able to get my paintings out of the hallway was that I got into an artist residency at the Henry Street Settlement. During the time that I was there, which was like from '81 to '83, I did a lot of the work which ended up in group shows, and I even curated two exhibitions there. One was *Beyond Aesthetics*, and that's when I invited Leon Golub and a host of other artists for that exhibition. And then the second one that same year, in 1982, a photography show, *Evidence*: *Twelve (12) Photographers*. And I invited a number of really strong, well-known photographers, among other photographers. Part of my agenda was that—during the '80s, there was just this huge proliferation of political art shows, but for some reason, I never saw blacks or Hispanics or anybody that was not white in these shows.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Who were the—was this, like, Group Material time?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah, Group Material surfaced, ABC No Rio. Fashion Moda. But with Fashion Moda, they were out in the South Bronx and I had no problems with Fashion Moda. [02:06:04] I mean, these people were crazy in terms of—I'm trying to remember the name of one of the founders, who I think was a German. I'm trying to remember. Joe Lewis was part of that collective. There was quite a number of people, and what was interesting about Fashion Moda was that they're out there in the Bronx, right in the midst of that whole hip-hop graffiti movement. They brought all of these people into the space to do shows and to participate and give space to

many of these graffiti artists, to make art or whatever. They really integrated into the neighborhood. I say they were crazy because they did things totally unorthodox from the norm. You know? There's an opening, there's the cheese, there's the wine, blah blah blah. There's an opening and there's a fucking wrestling ring in the middle of the gallery and they hired the neighborhood wrestling group to perform. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's awesome.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So they mobilize all these people to the opening, to see wrestling, and then to deal with the artwork, you know? So that was amazing.

And with Group Material, they invited me to be in a bunch of shows, and I participated in quite a number of them. After a while, I kind of left because I felt that they were kind of selling out. I was there when they organized—I'm trying to remember the name of the show, but it was an exhibition dealing with anti-intervention, U.S. intervention in Central America, which then spinned off to Artists Call Against Intervention in Central America. And then from there, Art Against Apartheid, which spinned off with another group. [02:08:08]

Group Material was kind of interesting, for the most part, you know, young white artists. They invited me, they invited a bunch of artists of color, to participate in various shows, concentrating on various themes. They also did a show dealing with the Atlanta children murders, black children disappearing and then being found dead. They did all kinds of thematic shows. So I participated in quite a number of them, and at one point, I thought I was part of the group, but not necessarily. I was just brought in to participate in shows, but I was never part of that collective that made decisions together, what they're going to do next, or so on and so forth.

And then the last thing, they invited me to participate in the Whitney Biennial. I'm trying to remember what year that was, but the Whitney Biennial invited Group Material to participate. The theme of it was—the name of what they were doing was *Americana*. They talked to me about participating. They were interested in a particular piece that I did, which is a four-panel piece, made up of—each one was like 30—each panel was like 30 by—was it 30? Yeah, about 30 by 66 inches long. They were all rectangular pieces, and I made them in such a way that they could be stacked on top of each other or if I want to use the whole space, lined up right next to each other. [02:10:05] So they saw that piece in a show and, "We want that piece, we want that piece." I said, "Terrific," you know?

But then as time went by, they started inviting a lot of artists, you know? Then Andy Warhol was invited, LeRoy Neiman was invited, Claes Oldenburg was invited. All of a sudden, they started inviting all of these people. And in the beginning it was like—because even Faith Ringgold at the time, even though she was a respected, well-known artist, she wasn't anywhere near where these other artists were. She didn't have the kind of gallery representation or anything. So all of a sudden, they're inviting all of these artists and I'm saying, "Why? We've been doing these incredible shows, why are you"—you know, it's like they were inviting these artists, I guess, for credibility or something?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Star power or something?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Star power, whatever. I got into it with them. I said—you know. The reason why I got into it with them—you know, maybe it was more personal on my part, was that—"Oh, Juan, we can only show two of the four panels."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Okay? Which panels is that? Okay. "Juan, we only have space to show one." Okay. "Juan, the group is having a lot of issues; why do you use so much text in your work?" Well, you have Barbara Kruger and all these fucking people, what are you talking about? You know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [02:12:00]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Anyway, so I go to the opening, which is usually a hard thing to do. Even to this day, I have difficulty going to openings at the MoMA or whatever, so I don't go to—I try not to attend unless somehow I'm involved with it. But I went to the opening. And the old Whitney, when you enter, towards the elevator there's that room to the left. And that was the room that was given to Group Material. It was a nice, sizeable room. So I saw the show. All of these other artists were occupying a lot of space, some of them had three or four pieces. And I was reduced to one piece. It was installed salon style, which is fine, because [laughs] that's what they do. All these other groups, it's always salon style. I didn't have any problems with that.

But what really hit me more, besides the fact that I've been reduced—that my piece has been changed to one panel—is that it became this—I thought it was going to be a real critical analysis of what Americana means for certain people. Oh, you saw packages of Jell-O pudding on the walls, you see them right in the middle of the installation, a washing machine and a dryer, you know, and it's almost like the whole thing was so diluted. At the

same time, there were political works. But the point was that it was so diluted, to the point where I felt, you know, Wow this is—I don't know, I mean this show is so weak in comparison to what Group Material was doing.

It was with Doug Ashford that I had been going back and forth. So he was there with his baby in his arms and everything. [02:14:05] "So Juan, what do you think?" I just looked at him, you know, and he said, "Yeah, I get it," and then I left. And then, later on, they called me because they got invited to do this show, I forgot, somewhere in Europe. And at that time, I haven't shown in Europe or anything, but I said, "No, I'm not interested." And he said, "I knew you were going to say that." And I said, "Do we have to have this conversation? I just feel that—what is a hole in the wall of gallery space, or a hole in the wall place, where we just took it because the landlord hasn't rented it yet, and just painted it and did our thing?" You know, Group Material was very radical or whatever. Tim Rollins was—

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JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Actually, it was Tim Rollins that brought me into Group Material, and then he later left to start his KOS thing. He got invited to the Whitney Museum, all of a sudden you people get all, you know, sissy and shit. You know, it's like, that was a time for you to tear the fucking place down. You know, anti-establishment, anti-gallery, blah blah blah, the canon, fuck you. You get invited to the Whitney Museum and all of a sudden it's like—you know. And I said, "I really resent that and I resent the fact that you used me and on top of that, that you also compromised my work. I don't want anything to do with you guys." So that was the end of it.

Of course, that book came out recently of Group Material, and I'm spread all over the place, because I was a part of it. And that's fine. I'm glad that—you know. Sometimes when things like that happen, you get erased from the history and you're not included. So I'm grateful that I'm in the book. And there's been other artists who did those kinds of things, and they use you but it's all under their name. It's like, you know, a so-and-so installation or whatever. That was also part of the struggle of, you know, you're kind of out there and people get a strong sense as to what you're doing, and they want a piece of you. Often it's been wonderful, other times it's been situations like that.

That was my only real engagement with an artist collective. [00:02:02] Everyone else, like ABC No Rio and Fashion Moda, they would invite me to participate and here's my work and everything is fine, but I think part of it was—because even though I had been invited, I didn't engage any further because of my experience with Group Material. And yet, you know, they did some wonderful stuff after the Whitney show, but I kind of felt that, Wow, what's going on with you? It just happens, and it also put me in a position.

There's been a few shows where—because curators then, all of a sudden, they're putting together political art exhibitions, many for good reason and good cause, but others just to create a sensation or whatever. So they would invite me and Leon Golub, a bunch of other artists who are kind of like left-wing, and then they would bring some other artists that are—you know, their work is political but extremely reactionary—into the fold, and have that kind of thing, and I'm saying, "I don't want to be involved with that. Why should I put myself in that situation?"

JOSH T. FRANCO: But this is what motivated you to curate yourself?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, the fact that there were, at a certain point, too many shows happening, and Puerto Rico is never in the conversation, but Central America, South Africa, whatever—and for the most part it's just white artists—my motivation was to—you know, if you're going to cry crocodile tears over how the black man is treated here, I'm going to bring some black artists who fucking talk about it. [00:04:18] Let it come from the horse's mouth, you know? Let me have Native Americans. I had people like Jimmie Durham participate in those shows. I had Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans. I had quite a group of artists, male and female, that—you know, this is the issue that you're addressing, it's from your own experience.

And then I scattered a few others, but with someone like a Leon Golub—Leon Golub was a great artist but he was also an activist, and he engaged, and he was part of various movements, and so on and so forth. So he's always been a real deal for me. Nancy Spero. You know, there's a bunch of others that, you know—but then you have these others that, all of a sudden, it's like that's Baskin-Robbins flavor. It's like, "Oh, it's political art." So everybody's doing political art, everybody's doing—you know. And even to this day, which is something that I tell my students, it's like, Okay, why are you concerned about this? Okay, wonderful. Do you know these people? Are any of them your friends? Or it's just this anti-Arab, anti-this, you know? Yeah, but do you know any of them? I mean, have you sat down with them? I don't know, are they part of your inner life force? That's just something from a distance and, you know, it looks good, it looks interesting, but do you know any of these people? [00:06:00]

I mean, there was a time when straight out of graduate school, being involved with these shows and these groups, all of a sudden I'm—you know? Unfortunately, they're all gone, but all of sudden Palestinian artists were getting in touch with me. You know, people who went to graduate school in the United States or whatever.

They're going back home because they want to start a school or whatever, and I was engaged with them and it's just wonderful.

My point is that there was quite a bit of opportunism, like any other art movement, where all of a sudden it's like, "Well, I'm doing this but, you know, this will probably get me more exposure." It's just opportunism. You know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I'm not taking away that there's quite a number of people who are sincere and all of that, but it just got so out of hand. And, you know, why am I not invited to these shows? It's like, whatever, you know. And then I would look at the whole scheme of things and it's like, everything is addressed but Puerto Rico is like nothing. So at that time, with the exception of what Taller Boricua were doing or whatever, I was the only artist that was even addressing that. I was the only artist that even addressed the fact that we have political prisoners. You know, not only Puerto Ricans but African Americans, and so on and so forth.

And as much as I look at the spread, you know, they dealt with a lot of interesting and significant issues, living among artists of color, but that was the one thing that sometimes—and I don't know why, because in the '70s and the '60s, there was such a strong campaign for people who have been incarcerated because of their political activity, like the Angela Davises and so on and so forth. [00:08:14] But then, they reached a point where you talk about the broad thing and, okay, police brutality and all that, very critical, but then at the same time, that other layer where there's a number of advocates that have been arrested and convicted and framed, who are rotting in jail, and there's no real campaign to demand the release of these people.

And so I got very caught up with the Puerto Rican political situation. At that time, it wasn't even political prisoners. At that time, there were prisoners of war, because a number of them were allegedly involved in armed underground movements, like the FALN and the Macheteros and so on and so forth. But, you know, there was a movement within the independence movement to address that issue, and I was the only artist, at least here in the States, that was addressing that. So I fell even more to the extreme left. You know? I was doing these paintings about that and I would—in every catalog that you have, I dedicate—you know?

I mean, I was dead on in that campaign, because my feeling was that whatever the outcome—let's suppose Puerto Rico do become the 51st state, or just maintain their so-called free associated state status. [00:10:03] The priority is that whatever it is, there has to be, within the negotiation, the release of these people. And so far, they've all been released, but I also heard about two women that are now in jail.

So it's an ongoing thing and during that time, you know, the '80s, working with Group Material and being in a bunch of other group shows, the FBI tapped our phone. The FBI was following me, my brothers, my mother. I mean, there was all of these things happening. So it was, like, this period where it's not just me working on a subject matter. It's me being directly involved with it, working with committees and political organizations on all of these issues, and experiencing persecution.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Were you working with Lucy Lippard's efforts?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, I collaborated with a number of her efforts and I also submitted artwork and things like that for the PAD/D [Political Art Documentation/Distribution] publication. My engagement with Lucy—you know, Lucy was also an incredible person. She brought me in quite a number of shows that she curated, and has also written reviews where my work has been mentioned and so on and so forth, and of course she included me in a couple of her books. [00:12:00] So she's been a very strong supporter. And of course, she was involved with Artists Call and Art Against Apartheid, among other things, and I was there with her. Yeah, I think that's about it. She was always in the field and she understood very clearly, in terms of where I was coming from. And you know, she's given money, she's put her name in petition and things like that, in relation to political prisoners and things like that. That's another one that I felt was very genuine, you know? And she understood my argument and she understood my complaints, and she always found ways to bring many different artists into her shows and discourse.

JOSH T. FRANCO: How would you feel about taking a little break right here?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah, I think we can do that. I need a bathroom break, which is only a few moments.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, yeah, that's what I was thinking too.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: What would you like to do?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Let me pause this.

[END OF sanche18_1of1_sd_track05.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay, so we're back from lunch. I think we ended around grad school, right? We've gone through that and then the exhibitions you were in right after. So we're in your full-blown adult art life, I think now. One thing I would love to get on record: When did you meet Ana Mendieta?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, I met Ana at the time that she was having her very first New York show, which was at the A.I.R. Gallery. Leon Golub, who was my professor at that time, invited a bunch of us to go to the opening. So I went to the opening, and of course there was a lot of people, and he introduced me. It was a very brief introduction. He introduced me and at that time, I think it was during my first year in the graduate program, so we exchanged some words. Later that evening, he and Nancy threw a party for her at their loft. So we went over and I talked some more with her, we were sitting on the sofa.

It was her first solo show in New York anyway, and it was very exciting, those large photographs of her dwelling, sculptures. And she had some drawings, but for the most part the photographs, nicely framed. [00:02:18] We talked a little bit about—you know, I had questions about her work and she responded, and she asked me what I was doing and I told her what I was doing. It was very brief, because there was a lot of people there and everybody wanted to talk to her, and people were drinking. It was a very nice, festive reception after the opening. I didn't see her again until 1982.

I was in a group show curated by Geno Rodriguez, who was the founding director of the Alternative Museum. It first started as the Alternative Center for International Art. And I was going there frequently during the time that I was at Cooper as well. He was also a photographer that at some point was part of En Foco, and then he kind of like split from that and started the alternative center, the Center for Alternative Art, and that was the center that, you know, was showing artists of color. So, Latino art, he had a group exhibition on Chicano art, he even had shows of contemporary Iranian art. So later, it became the Alternative Museum and it moved to West Broadway. [00:04:00] Actually—yeah.

And so he curated this show called *Art + Politics*. And I was in the show, among a bunch of other artists, and she was at the opening. She was at the opening because Mel Edwards brought her to the opening, and that was my second encounter with her, but she remembered me, you know? And we talked about it and she asked me, "Which ones are your work?" So we were kind of like 200 feet from two large diptychs that I had there, and she looked at it and then said, "Oh, we have a lot of talk about; we have affinities here." She said, "My work is not political but I like"— you know, and the paintings had a series of Taíno petroglyphs embedded into the oil paint, because I would apply the paint wet and then I would draw, with oil pastels, the petroglyphs and all of that. And so we got into it, and then we exchanged numbers, and then I called her some weeks later. We got together at a bar and had some wine and talked a lot about each other's work. I've been following her work ever since, since that A.I.R. exhibition.

And we became friends. At some point, she invited me to her studio, which was really her apartment, and she was making these sand-soil floor pieces. [00:06:04] She was asking me a lot of tentative questions in terms of—because she was using this, she was using that, and it wasn't working out, so I recommended that she probably use acrylic medium and mix the soil and the sand with acrylic medium, and then apply wet on a hard surface. I gave her some recommendations, you know, and she started making them. She would draw the shape of plywood and cut them, and then apply the wet material on it and let it dry, and then that became the pieces which she would assemble into these floor pieces, which—you know, I mean, there was quite a difference in terms of how we dealt with indigenous images or symbols, because I was literally going to various parts of Puerto Rico, making rubbings and photographing them and literally just drawing them, just copying them. You know?

And her research, which—Puerto Rico, not even the Dominican Republican—her research has been for the most part in Cuba and various parts of Mexico. Later on, she—I'm trying to remember what other Latin American countries she visited, but she was always looking for these dwellings where there's all kinds of artifacts dealing with indigenous culture. [00:08:00] She kind of took them and she recreated them. In a way, she took those elements and made them into her own image in a way. She created her own petroglyphs, so to speak. So there's a transformation or, if you may, even a metamorphosis, in terms of how she took that and made it into something that is more identifiable to her, even though there are a number of pieces that have original names, just to point to where it derived from and what it symbolizes. But we got into those kinds of conversations.

Later on, in 1982, I curated a show called *Ritual and Rhythm* at the Kenkeleba House, and that was an exhibition that dealt literally with that, with rituals and rhythm relative to music in rituals, and expanding into jazz and Afro-Cuban music, and so on and so forth. I invited a whole bunch of artists, this was the second show that I invited Jimmie Durham to participate, and Papo Colo. There's been quite a number of people that in some form or another have been dealing with ancient primal roots. And then there are others. Mary Beth Edelson. I invited a host of—you know, a really nice mixture of male-female artists. David Hammons. All of the pieces were created

for the show. And the catalog—there were documentation of the pieces in the show, which became the catalog, so the catalog came out after the show opened. And I asked artists to write statements. Some of them wrote statements.

Well, the only person I think who submitted a poem was Ana Mendieta. She did a wall drawing with soil. And the title of that piece was *Madre Selva*, and the title of the poem is *Madre Selva*. So, so many years later, I borrowed that name for my video pieces, in homage to her, and in a couple of the videos I incorporated the poem. I had Sandra María Esteves record it and it opened in a couple of the videos; it opened with that poem. But she literally created the piece right on the spot. She came in one day with bags of soil and acrylic medium and plastic gloves, and Papo Colo also was going to do a wall installation somewhere else, but he kind of had it laid out, you know? She just came in and I said, "Oh, wonderful, what are you going to do?" [00:12:02] "I don't know." "Do you have a sketch?" "No," you know. And I said, "Okay, well, whatever." [They laugh.] Of course, with the expectation that whatever she's going to do, it's going to be spectacular. So I said, "Well"—you know.

At that time, I was kind of like beginning to work without having to make preparation. She did the piece, which was magnificent. And she submitted the artist statement, which was the poem based on the piece, and that's it. What was so interesting also was the opening, because we had the opening and a lot of people, all the artists showed up. It was incredible, the work that was created for that show. And I actually—which I'm still looking for—I do have documents, black-and-white photographs of the installation and all of that. You already have a copy of the catalog from the exhibition. But it was so funny. Alma and I was at the opening and we kind of like came fashionably late. The opening was supposed to be at, I don't know, two o'clock or something—I think it was a Saturday afternoon—and we arrived there around three o'clock. And just as we're entering into the space, there she was, dressed in a cowboy outfit, okay? Dressed in white, white boots, jeans, a shirt with—what do you call these things?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Fringes?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah. And a cowboy hat. You know, I looked at Alma and said, "That's weird," you know? [00:14:04] So anyway, "Oh, thanks for coming," whatever. "Oh, congratulations on the show; are you happy with the way things turned out?" Because she's always very concerned about who are the artists and—you know. She doesn't want to be associated with mediocrity or whatever. She knew a lot of the artists that was in the show, and then there was a bunch of other artists that otherwise, never heard of, you know. I brought in some fresh voices into the mix.

We just kept in touch, you know? There's been times when Mel Edwards and his wife, Jayne Cortez, would invite us to dinner and we would go over, and she was among the guests, and just have a good time together. Other times, I would just get together for a few drinks in a bar, or we've gotten together to do gallery-hopping in SoHo. We kept in touch and there was a constant communication. There was a time when Mel, Jayne, and I would get together at some coffee place in SoHo and eat pastry and just have a good time together. There's a group shot, which I have to see if Mel can send me a copy. He did send me a copy of the photograph but I lost it, where we had one of the passersby take a group shot of us at the table. We went through the thing, you know, marrying Carl Andre and—you know, but not even Mel or Jayne were invited to the wedding or anything like that. [00:16:20] It was just something that was very closed and immediate. So I guess in a way it's like an elope. And that's about it.

I met her sister at one occasion, but then after her death, that's when I met and solidified a friendship with Raquelín Mendieta, her sister. Immediately after she died—I'm trying to remember the name of the person, her name is Kate something. I can't remember the last name, but she did the very first documentary on Ana Mendieta, so she interviewed me and a whole bunch of other people for that documentary. And on the day that I was being interviewed, which was in a loft somewhere on Delancey Street—the day that I came in to be filmed, Raquelín came in for the interview. And, you know, through the funeral and the memorial service and through the trial, Raquelín, her family, and me and Alma, see more often of each other.

Alma did a theater performance piece titled *Madre Selva*. [00:18:09] Raquelín collaborated with her, with costumes and other things. So the *Madre Selva* project—actually, Alma was the first to initiate on her end, with this theater piece that evolved throughout the years, and the final performance was at PS 126, I think, in the Lower East Side. It was a full production in which I designed the costume and other people—María Elena Gonzalez did the set design.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Really?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I have slides of that stuff. I'm trying to remember the name of the composer who is a jazz

composer; she did the music for the production. It was a really incredible, big deal thing, which by the way, you do have a copy. It's like a black-and-white little catalog, of that particular production, with all the credit lines. I shot pictures of the rehearsals and things like that.

There was a point, especially—I guess it was—yeah, in 1982. I met her in 1980. I know that it was her very first show and it was at the A.I.R. Gallery. And then a couple of years later, I met her again at my opening and then from there we connected and we constantly kept in touch. [00:02:01] In her travels—which I finally found the stuff, but I don't know how—in her travels, she was always sending me postcards. So I collected them, but they got damaged in a fire, so whatever she wrote in ink or whatever, it kind of like spread, which is a crying shame, but Alma finally found them and said, "I don't know if the Smithsonian can use this." But anyway, so she always kept in touch in her travels and sent me jokes, and she always signed, Tropi-Ana. You know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I asked her, "Why do you always sign it"—"Well, referencing the Hawaiian girl in the Tropicana orange juice, and that is me." You know? [They laugh.] I said, Okay, Tropi-Ana, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And that's it, really.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Since her death, and after going through the trial and still coming out with the impression that Carl Andre killed her—even though I never thought for a minute that he intentionally killed her. I think they got into an argument, there was a pushing fest, and he's a stronger guy and she went out the window.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You attended the trial?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: What is that?

JOSH T. FRANCO: You attended the trial?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Alma attended every day. There were maybe two dates that I couldn't attend, because I had a lecture gig outside of New York, so I couldn't attend those dates, but we attended the trial from the very beginning. [00:22:03] I missed about two or three, and Alma attended all of it. Ruby Rich, the critic—I met her through Ana at another get-together, just having coffee—and when I was visiting her, Ruby Rich dropped at one point too. So obviously, we reconnected during the trial thing and she wrote this incredible article for the *Village Voice*, which speaks everything about what went down in the trial and everything.

There was something that I wanted to say, but now I can't think of it. Oh, yeah, well, you know, what happened was that after her death, Elizabeth Ferrer had a gallery in the Lower East Side and it was a commercial gallery, if I remember well. She did an exhibition in homage to Ana Mendieta. So there was a bunch of—she put together a bunch of women artists and for the most part, they all created work especially for the show. So I caught that.

And then, during the trial, this artist collective, WAC [Women's Action Coalition], started a campaign posing the question, "Where is Ana Mendieta?" They did a series of street manifestations, with a poster that they created of Ana Mendieta from one of her photographs, a photograph of Ana Mendieta and "Where is Ana Mendieta?" [00:24:10] It was like, this whole campaign claiming that Carl Andre murdered her. So that happened, that was happening. I'm trying to remember. I don't think it happened during the trial, it kind of happened after the trial or maybe towards the end of the trial. At that point, it kind of felt too little too late, because a number of the women that were called in to testify—women artists who knew Carl Andre and in some instances had a relationship with Carl Andre—didn't want to testify.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And since you had heavyweights like Mary Boone and Leo Castelli financing his defense. I'm trying to remember. I think a number of them were not only represented by some of these people, but felt as if, if they were to testify, that would be a threat to their career or they won't get picked up by them. It was some really fucked up thing where these women didn't show up to testify about his character. There was one particular woman who I don't remember, who apparently had a relationship with him and had a very physically abusive relationship with him.

So when these other things started happening—and even recently, you know, every time Carl Andre is showing somewhere, there are a bunch of them. [00:26:09] Of course, this is a younger generation of artists, but back then in the '80s and into the '90s, you see these manifestations, and I kind of felt that they failed her. At the

same time, you had people like Barbara Rose making statements that if she had an exhibition or whatever, it was because of Carl Andre, because she's a mediocre artist. So you had those kinds of things that was going on at the same time.

When it's all said and done, how she was presented on trial—the defense attorney, which was a team of about 20 guys, they tried to present her as this crazy woman whose art showed a suicidal tendency, and at the same time pointing out, as you well know, these works come out of rituals like voodoo and Santeria and all that "evil stuff." All of that was presented on trial in his defense and he said, "Oh, she committed suicide, she threw herself out the window to spite me because I'm a famous artist."

At the time, obviously he's a fixture, but her career was moving forward. She got a Guggenheim, later she got a Prix de Rome. She died immediately after her Prix de Rome residency. [00:28:00] She decided to stay in Italy because she loved it and there's a lot of things happening. She had a commission from her alma mater, the University of Iowa. I remember one day she came, we had dinner, and she was showing us drawings. She was also showing us these four-by-five transparencies of the sculptures that she was doing in Rome. So things were happening, things were moving forward, had a whole life ahead of her.

But she did mention that, you know, she's going to divorce him because the guy is a womanizer and, you know, she feels he's not loyal to her and whatever. That evening, at Mel and Jayne's apartment, she got drunk and she was saying all these things, she's going to divorce him or whatever, and then we went home. And she only lived like two buildings away from them, so they made sure to take her home, make sure she's safe. And then she went back to Rome.

She was coming back from Rome. Mel called me to say, "Oh, she's going to be coming, she's already back and she wants to have lunch with us, and we're going to have lunch at Poco Loco," a Mexican restaurant in SoHo. We were there for lunch, waiting and waiting, and she never made it. To our surprise, because sometimes she was a little late but she always got there, you know? [00:30:15] And of course we didn't have cell phones or anything like that at the time.

Well, we had our lunch and this was on a Saturday, and the following morning I got a phone call. I'm trying to remember the name of the artist who—they know each other and they were actually classmates in graduate school. Noah Jemison. Noah Jemison calls me and he calls me from Washington, DC. I think he was doing a residency gig in Washington, DC. Noah called and said, "Juan, have you heard?" And I said, "Heard about what?" "About Ana." And I said, "Well, the last I heard is that we had a lunch date and she stood us up," you know. And he says, "No, man, it's in the news, I heard. Her body was found on the roof of a building, with just her panties on, and it looks like she fell onto that roof." And I said, "What?" And of course, I had a breakdown, and then I told Alma, and then I said, "I'm going to collect myself." I called Mel and I said, "Mel, did you hear?" He said, "What?" "About Ana." He said, "What happened?" I said, "Noah Jemison called me from Washington to tell me that she's dead." [00:32:01] And then, before you know it, the news covered it. No big deal, no headlines or anything.

I forgot, they were in—I forgot what floor they were on, but that's the building, which was on LaGuardia—LaGuardia? No, on Eighth Street. And then there's this other building and across the street was a delicatessen, and the testimony from the delicatessen was that—I forgot what time in the evening, they heard this huge thump, as if something heavy dropped, and they looked out and they didn't see anything, but then the following morning, her body was found on the roof of the building below. That's when the whole thing happened. So, I was saying, God, you know, what time did she fall off the window? And now that I remember, I think it was like a late lunch kind of thing. The point is that she didn't get to us, and we felt that she didn't get to us because she was already dead, you know?

So anyway, that was—that's how I got the news, and it was interesting because I got the phone call not from someone that was in New York, but someone that was in Washington, DC, in addition to someone that—you know, they were in graduate school together but they didn't necessarily like each other. But when I did the *Ritual and Rhythm* show, I also invited him to do an installation. [00:34:03]

Anyway, that was it and then, you know, the reason why I mentioned the Elizabeth Ferrer show in homage to Mendieta, was because there was just a proliferation of a lot of women creating artwork devoted to her. I was very slow to even think about that. I ended up doing, starting—I did a painting which wasn't all that successful maybe like 10 years later. And then later on, years after that, I did a large—I think it's like four or five feet—mixed media print, in St. Louis, Missouri. And that was very successful. And from there, that print gave me the idea to do the *Madre Selva* video, which was premiered at Lehigh University. I guess the impact, people really liked what I did and they encouraged me. They told me that I should continue and do a series of *Madre Selva*.

So, that's what initiated the project that I'm working on now, but I'm not the kind of artist that something happens, then all of a sudden the following week, I'm making a painting, you know? [00:36:00] People do that all the time, and I need to process it, I need to internalize it, I need to have some understanding from a more

deeper personal vantage point, rather than just react and whip out whatever. And so, with Ana, it took a long time before I was able to do something. And it wasn't that easy, because even as I think about her now, I feel a lot of grief. But anyway, that's the story, that's the history.

What's interesting about the video project, at this point editing the fourth installment—because there's going to be a multi-channel video installation, and another version will be edited into a one-channel, for a more traditional theatrical screening—that it's coming from some of her artwork and in a way, it's a dialogue with her artwork. And it's the one opportunity in which I'm creating work that is so different from what I usually produce. You know, I'm entering into a realm of ritual, ritualism, fantasy, surrealism. It's tapping into a side of me which has always been a part of my life on one hand, through relatives and whatnot, but on certain levels it has surfaced in my work in terms of religious iconography and things like that. [00:38:11] The *Madre Selva* project really deals with other things like ritual, mysticism, metamorphosis, all of these things that I have come to understand about her work.

That's playing into the video and it's another side of Juan Sánchez, because I always—I've always been a science fiction buff, you know? When I was going to Cooper Union, I decided to pick up the book Homer's *Odyssey*, which was covered in one of my English classes in high school but I just wasn't capable of sitting down and reading it. I picked it up again, you know, because it left some impression. I've always been a kid that's always been involved with fantasy, science fiction, monster movies and things like that. That's another side of me, and so I'm a Trekkie and a *Battlestar Galactica* fan. Not too much with the *Star Wars*. So, you know, that's a side of me that the *Madre Selva* project kind of like opened up in my creative practice.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Thanks for sharing that.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Sure.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Talking about Elizabeth Ferrer and the downtown gallery, what about MoCHA [Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art] and INTAR, were you involved with those galleries, those museums? [00:40:09]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: MoCHA, INTAR?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Were they the same thing or two different places?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, INTAR is another nonprofit gallery. INTAR [Hispanic American Arts Center] was founded by Max Ferrá—I'm trying to remember the name of the person. He and a group of others. They were Cubans that started the INTAR Theatre, which was Off-Broadway, and they did a lot of theater productions, not only in terms of Cuban theater, but Latin American theater. The Theatre also had a gallery. Inverna Lopez [*sic*], who is a painter.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Lockpez, right?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah, Lockpez. She was the one that was curating and organizing the exhibitions there, and so she included me in a couple of group shows. One of them, Lucy Lippard wrote a wonderful article. Actually, one of the group shows that she wrote about was a two-person show. It was me and this other painter, a Dominican by the name of Manuel Macarrulla.

And I collaborated with INTAR years later because they were going to stage a production by Culture Clash, [Nuyorican Stories, 1999 –JS], and Culture Clash wanted for me to be involved with the theater production. We met with them when they were in New York and they were showing me printouts and Xerox copies of stuff, of my work, and saying, We want this to be in the projection; we want it to somehow become a set design, an urban space with a fire escape or whatever, but somehow integrate your work. [00:42:20] So they got a stage designer, and from a number of my slides, he designed this set, and that was built, and that was the backdrop for their theater piece. I'm trying to remember the name of the theater piece.

But it was up for about six weeks. It was always full house. It was the first time that I collaborated with INTAR, more so with Culture Clash, and I introduced them to a number of people, some of them Nuyorican poets. My brother and I had a conversation with them about certain things that was happening in the Lower East Side and in El Barrio and in other parts of the city. They sat down with my brother Sam and talked to him more about his life, because he's always been like an activist as well as a social worker, and from that conversation, they brought Sam Sanchez on stage. One of the actors personified him on stage. It talked about—oh, I remember, it's called *Nuyorican Stories*. So that has been my connection and my collaboration on a number of occasions with INTAR.

And then MoCHA, the Museum of Hispanic Art, or something—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [00:44:04] Caribbean Hispanic Art?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah. Nilda Peraza was a director and the founder. It was first Cayman Gallery, and then it later involved into the museum. I've been in a couple of group shows. In one instance, I did a huge wall installation in one of the group shows. Later on, she invited me to be part of the advisory board. And I was part of that until they folded. They were part of *The Decade Show*, in which they and the Studio Museum in Harlem and the New Museum collaborated, had a number of meetings, quite a number of meetings in which I participated. They also had open meetings where a lot of artists and a lot of people came to have a conversation as to what happened in the '80s, you know? And that's resulted to *The Decade Show*. I was fortunate enough to have my work at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and to have worked in MoCHA. So they invited a lot of artists.

At that time, during *The Decade Show*, that's when I met James Luna, and that's when he was doing that performance piece. Laying on the table, you know? And then I met him again on other occasions. I think the last time was in Chicago, for a CAA conference. That was an interesting period because I met so many interesting artists, many of whom I've heard of and know of, but to meet them in person and see their work and go to the openings and into the programming and all of that, it was quite an experience. [00:46:14] So I was in a couple of shows there, I was on the advisory board, and then the last major thing was *The Decade Show*.

And of course I knew Nilda even from the days of Cayman. Because when it was the Cayman Gallery, I was at Cooper Union and, again, along with the Center for Alternative Art, Cayman was one of the places that I would visit too. Except that Cayman was a Puerto Rican, Latin American gallery. In that particular area, the Lower East Side, those were the two spots, among other galleries, that I was always going, because I was seeing art that was more relative to my interests. Nilda Peraza, during the time of Cayman and through MoCHA, she was the one that started the very first biennial of Latin American graphic arts. Artists from all parts of Latin America, as well as from all parts of the United States, submitted work for this print biennial. She was the first and to this day the last. And she produced some catalogs. And I think I participated in one of those shows as well. [00:48:02]

It was one of those places, especially when it became MoCHA, where they were curating, organizing, more shows in a year than El Museo del Barrio or any other museum. And the diversity of work, you know. The last show they did, which the marshal came in and kicked everybody out and locked the museum, because they were behind in rent or whatever, was an exhibition of installation art, which was curated by Julie Herzberg. And right in the middle of a tour, [laughs] they kicked everybody out and put a lock on it. That was the end of MoCHA, and that was like maybe four months after *The Decade Show*.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Who were the artists in the last show?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I'm trying to remember. Cecilia Vicuña. I think Luis Camnitzer was there, Liliana Porter.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What about Angel Suarez-Rosado?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: What's that?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Angel Suarez-Rosado.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I don't remember. I don't remember.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So that's how it ended.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: It was a very interesting show. I mean, it was all installation art, they were all very different. I don't remember if Julie designed the exhibition. But it was an incredible show and in a way it was a crying shame that that happened in the middle of the exhibition. [00:50:03] I think the exhibition was probably up for about a month or so. So obviously, it closed much earlier than it was planned. I sometimes wonder where that archive ended up, because they really went out of their way—even if it was something very low-budget and humble, they always went out of the way to do some kind of documentation, some kind of catalog, something, for each of the shows. They do have—they've produced quite a number of catalogs.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I think some of it, or maybe all of it, is at Hostos, I believe.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But I know Luis and Freddy Rodriguez and Susana Leval have all taken it on themselves to tell that history.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Okay, okay. Actually, that's where I met Julia Hirschberg, and that's where I met Susana Leval, because she was also a curator there. She's curated quite a number of shows as well. It's a very important museum and I kind of fear that it's just one of those things that has happened, but how much of art history will absorb that, because they certainly filled a vacuum.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And Nilda Peraza was this crazy woman who was a champion for Latino art and Latin American art, while at the same time a very sly and slick politician, and that's what caught up with her. [00:52:11] Keeping up a place like that, with a shoestring or less than shoestring budget, was quite a challenge. So it always came down to mismanagement of funds, which could be falsely presented as fraud or whatever. I don't think she put anything in her pocket. All she was doing is managing the place, and she got a grant for something, and this [laughs] urgency, and then she'll figure out how to get the money for that grant that she got for this something. It's like that kind of thing, and it all, you know, kind of like fell apart for her. A very smart, very sharp, very street woman. Charismatic. She had all the qualities to be a politician and maybe end up in jail later, but the point of the matter is that she was—I believe that she was a visionary.

To cross the street from the New Museum to MoCHA wasn't too much of a stretch in the sense that you saw the show at the New Museum and they're always top-notch shows or whatever; you cross to MoCHA, nothing to be envied, you know, quality work. Quality work. And most important, introducing works of artists that you've never seen before. So in a way, they worked even harder in contrast to what the New Museum was doing. Because after a certain point, the New Museum then became more commodified and more standard. But what made the New Museum so incredible when Marcia Tucker founded it was present work that for the most part are not part of the canon, work that is marginalized, women artists, other artists. And boy, they had a really wonderful stretch of many years. [00:54:38] But then after that, it kind of like became another institution, you know. And MoCHA—and I'm saying, they also had their share of shows that wasn't [laughs] all that great either, you know, but if anything it was always fresh and it never grew stale, to the very last moment.

JOSH T. FRANCO: When is the first time you heard the word Nuyorican?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: At the Nuyorican Poets Café. I heard it at the Nuyorican Poets Café and I heard it at—which was only a few blocks away—the Nuyorican Village, which is a whole—that was another spot. I'm trying to remember the name of the person who founded it, but he was—Miguel Algarín was for the most part a poet. He was also a professor of English at Rutgers. This other guy was a playwright, and that spot also had their open marks [ph] and their poetry reading, but a lot of concerts. That's where I was introduced to the music, live music, of Roy Brown and *Aires Bucaneros*, and very Latin jazz. [00:56:08] That's where I saw for the first time Jerry González and the Fort Apache Band, years before they recorded their first album. But the term Nuyorican, that's something that I heard from both sides, and I've heard poets use the term.

What I'm trying to remember is—I don't remember who created the term. I don't remember if it was Bimbo Rivas, you know, who named that area Loisaida, and then it became official, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Or Miguel Piñero, or—what's his name, the guy that I just mentioned, who taught at Rutgers? Anyway, I don't know who coined that, and then it kind of like catch on, you know? But it was in the Lower East Side where I began to see, to hear that.

I'm trying to remember. There's an anthology that came out in the '70s, [Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings –JS], which I still have, which are prose and poetry from the New York Puerto Rican experience, and the word Nuyorican is used in some of those poetry. It was edited—okay, Miguel Algarín again, and this other poet who is actually from Puerto Rico and spent many years in New York and became part of that movement. [00:58:11] Oh, I don't remember his name off the top; it will come. But those two edited that anthology. No, I'm sorry, it was Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero who edited that book, *Nuyorican Poetry*. I came across that book before I find out about the Nuyorican Poets Café and even El Museo del Barrio and everything. That was the very first book that really spoke to me about Puerto Rican-New York identity. And that's where I—you know, Sandra María Esteves, José Angel Figueroa, Luis Cruz Hernández, Martín Espada. And within that group, it was multigenerational. You know? Martín Espada, at the time, was one of the youngest of the group. And that book was published by Valentine Press, something like that.

At the same time, they put out that book and then they put out another book on African-American poetry. [01:00:00] There's another book, which is also on Puerto Rican poetry, but a selection of poetry written in Puerto Rico translated into English. That's where you got your Julia de Burgos, your Clemente Soto Vélez, among others, and a selection of Nuyorican poetry. And they made an analysis in terms of the affinity and the contrast between the two. Those books came out in the '70s. It was amazing, because that was it. There was nothing else until later, when Miguel Algarín and some of the other poets started putting out books. The *Puerto Rican Obituary* came afterwards, *Spics*, *Yerba Buena* by Sandra María Esteves. And then these things started happening, and getting awards and *New York Times* reviews and things like that. But those are the first things that really kind of like touched on me. And then later, I came across the visual artists.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What about Papo Colo and Jeanine and Exit Art? What's her last name? I forget—I'm forgetting it right now.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Papo Colo?

JOSH T. FRANCO: And Jeanine?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And Jeanette Ingberman.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, yes.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, going back to 1982, when I was curating the show at the Henry Street Settlement, again, I was an artist in residence there, and part of the deal is you could teach a course, you could organize a show, whatever. [01:02:03] I decided to organize a show and that's when I organized my very first exhibition, which was *Beyond Aesthetics: Art of Necessity*. And again, it was in contrast to the fact that all these other shows were happening and there weren't any artists of color in these shows. So that was my way of making a statement. You meet artists, you talk to them about being in your show, you ask for recommendations, they throw names at you, you visit those as well. Papo Colo was one of those names that I got from somebody, and then I followed up on that. He still has the same address on Canal Street. So I went and visited him there, you know? And I talked to him about the show or whatever. Do you know Papo Colo?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: He's quite a performance. He's always on.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did he call his place the tree house even back then?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: The tree house?

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's what he calls his apartment, when I visited him.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I don't remember, but I know that that apartment was a center point for a lot of people, a lot of artists, a lot of poets. Not necessarily Nuyorican poets, but a lot of Puerto Rican poets, a lot of playwright, musicians, actors. I've seen people in his place that my mother was watching on soap operas. It's like, What the fuck?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: You know, it's like—because Papo Colo has a very interesting history. I mean, he does go back to—I would say that he's like a transplanted Nuyorican. But in essence, he's still Puerto Rican through and through. Because he was born and raised in San Juan. His father was a famous light middleweight boxer; I think his professional name was *Coloncito*. [01:04:04] And he grew up in a household where you had all these celebrities, all these people coming in and out of the house. He grew up with all these people. And so, you know, once he transplanted himself to New York, these same people and others just kept coming through his apartment.

When I met him—I was organizing the show in 1982, so I met him in 1982, maybe late 1981—he was living with Jeanette Ingberman at the time. At the time, she was the curator at the Bronx Museum. I didn't include him in the show because the work was kind of like all over the place, and yet I was intrigued by the work. It was just one of those things where the work doesn't fit within the scheme of what I want to do, but this is incredible shit, you know, and very diversified. He paints, he draws, he makes sculptures, he does performance, and they're all very strange looking, weird stuff, outside of my own sense of aesthetic, you know.

But then as time went by, I began to notice how much he borrows from primal culture, and that becomes his language. An extreme improviser. He doesn't make any drawings, he doesn't plan out anything, he just do it, you know? He'll take scraps of wood and whatever, hammers them together and creates these very interesting pieces. Extremely talkative, extremely well-read. [01:16:00] I always had to write down names of people that he threw at me, so that I could find out who they are or whatever. Very well-read. An intellectual but a very different type of intellectual, because he doesn't like to be challenged.

He was disappointed that I didn't include him in the show, but for some reason I was still—I would just drop by like everyone else and he would receive me, you know? At the time, he was doing quite a bit of drugs. He was an incredible endless pot smoker, so I had to get into a different mindset, because if I'm going to visit Papo and hanging with him—he's always showing me stuff that he's doing or whatever. It's always very stimulating and quite frankly I enjoy being with him, but I have to sustain myself within that fog of smoke, pot and whatnot, so I kind of like—but I knew him very early and then, that's when they started evolving and came with the concept of Exit Art. At that time, it was this kind of thing where they would curate shows, they would mount shows, but in various spots. And later on they decided to take on a space, and then things took off from there.

Oh, what's interesting about Exit Art, this whole conversation about hybridity and all of that, is that it's a

different vocabulary, it's a different language, it's different terminologies and whatnot, but when it's all said and done, I came to realize that all of that has already begun through the Center for Alternative Art. [01:08:24] The whole idea about challenging the canon, showing artists that the canon doesn't pay attention to underrepresented people, so on and so forth. They covered also, like, Eastern European art and so on and so forth. All that stuff that Exit Art named as their platform was the platform of the Alternative Museum.

That was the platform that Geno Rodriguez set, but they're two very different personalities, two very different languages, and unless you pay close attention, they're both talking about the same thing. But I believe that the Alternative Museum—and Geno is not—I mean, he's kind of arrogant and whatnot, but he's not as flamboyant as Papo Colo. But I kind of felt that the Alternative Museum set the platform for Exit Art. It's just that Exit Art is far more charismatic, and the team of Ingberman and Colo was a perfect team, because he's like the crazy genius that—you know, he wakes up in the middle of the night and he has this crazy idea. [01:10:06] She's the one that takes it and gives it shape and form, and brings some rationale to it and intellectualizes it and packages it. So they complimented each other in a very strong way and each one had their own creative way of putting things together.

What was interesting about me in relation to Exit Art, is that Exit Art became this hotspot and everybody wanted to show at Exit Art, so the same dynamic—everybody sending them piles of slides and they didn't know what to do with it. They opened some of the packages and other packages they didn't open, or if they open it, "I'm not interested," that kind of thing. So like most museums and galleries or whatever, but there was a point where—they've included me in a number of shows, group shows.

And then there was a show called *The Social Club*. I was there. I think May Stevens, Rudolf Baranik, Golub, Spero, David Hammons, whatever. But it's about social statement, commentary, political art. They invited me to the show and it was about four months before the show opened, so I decided to create a piece for that show. They were, "Fine," you know, "Oh, terrific." [01:12:00] It ended up being like a four- or five-panel piece on canvas, and it arrived at the gallery still wet. You know, I finished it like maybe a day or two before [laughs] they picked it up. And really carefully, they had to package it. It was like, "Juan, man." It's like, "I'm sorry." [They laugh.] It was like, the art handlers with the white gloves had oil paint on their gloves and shit.

Anyway, the point was that the painting oxidized on the wall, as expected. And I'm trying to remember the name of the person who was head of acquisition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. So he came and saw the show, and long and behold, they purchased the work for the collection, which was the most amazing thing and a major thing in my career. You know, it's like, a museum—this is the first museum, and it was the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And they saw it at Exit Art.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: And they saw it at Exit Art.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And they bought it. That painting never came back. It went from Exit Art to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It went through a period, because they have to show it to the board and whatnot, and then a year later, I got the check and the under-the-table deal, because nonprofit art galleries and museums or whatever, if they're so inclined to take a percentage of the sale of an artist's work, it can't be no more than 25 percent. I mean, that's by law. But Exit Art doesn't function that way. [They laugh.] They said, you know, "Any of the work that sells, we want 50 percent." I said "Yeah, but you're working like a commercial gallery and you have a nonprofit status or whatever." [01:14:04] You know what, I didn't care. I kind of like made an issue of it for a little bit, but then on second thought I said, "It's going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art." So I gave them the 50 percent.

And then later, I submitted an application to the New York State Council for the Arts. That's about two years later or something or that? I think *The Social Club* happened in '85. The point was that I submitted an application to get a grant to produce a suite of prints, and I needed a nonprofit arts organization to be my sponsor. So I asked them to be my sponsor, they agreed, and I got the grant. I produced the prints and Lucy Lippard wrote the essay for the portfolio, which later became the essay for her *Mixed Blessings* book. The same person who came in and acquired the painting, two years later acquired the prints. I made an edition, about 25, but I only made like 10 portfolios. Portfolio number one, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What is the official titles of these? The painting and the—

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, I don't remember the official title of it, but I know that they published it in a book dealing with art education, methodology and whatever, and that painting is one of the works that they use to do workshops and whatever. [01:16:04] I don't quite remember. I have slides of it at home, so I could always give you the title. The other one was *Guariquen*. Actually, it's the same portfolio that's in the Smithsonian collection,

which—Carmen Ramos exhibited three of the five in the Americas exhibition. So again, this guy come—I think his last name was Phillips—and long and behold, another sale to a museum collection. At that time, it looked like the Metropolitan Museum was the only one that would acquire my work. Everybody else is like, [demonstrates whooping sound.]

So then, you know, I got into a conversation. I said, You know, this is really wonderful or whatever, you've been giving solo shows left and right. David Hammonds had his first major solo show there, Jimmie Durham. A whole bunch of people are having shows there and I was frustrated because I was, like, in 3,000 group exhibitions but nobody offered me solo shows. And so I had this conversation with them and you know, Jeanette was kind of like, "Well, let me think about it." It was like those kind of responses, like "I don't want to deal with it" kind of thing. So I said, "Okay, whatever," you know. But it's frustrating because they included me in two, maybe three shows, and the last two shows you included me in, you know, you got your 50 percent. [Laughs.] And of course what's wonderful about Exit Art was that, you know, that wasn't the first time. [01:18:05] They already have a history of placing artists' work, through the shows that they put together, into museum collections. And part of it was because they did not function like most nonprofit art galleries and whatnot.

That was one of the criticisms, because I remember I was in the New York State Council for the Arts Museum and Galleries Panel, where we read proposals from the Met or MoMA or whatever and determined funds for their exhibitions. One of the things that came up on several occasions is—they were like, kind of suspicious about Exit Art, because they're not really functioning like a non—they're more functioning like a commercial art gallery or whatever. I kept my mouth shut, because I always felt that one of the major frustrations is that you are in all these shows. They just put up the work, they don't really care about how to enhance, how to advance the artist's career. They don't have time. They put up the show, they put it down, and the next show. That kind of thing, you know. They have a tendency of neglecting people who may have interest in the work and what they do is they'll give the artist's number and let it go at that. They don't follow through. They don't "Let's talk," you know, they don't do any of that.

Exit Art would wine and dine these people, and that's why they were so successful. That's why they had an impact on an artist's career. They had an impact on my career, because that Exit Art exhibition—oh, and let me tell you that. [01:20:02] So, long and behold, all of a sudden, I got the Guggenheim. That's when they called me. "We're interested in the"—you know, "Juan, we thought about it, let's do a show." My wife was saying, "You should say no to them because, you know, I'm sure there are going to be other galleries that are going to be after you, for sure." And I said, "Yeah, that's true and I'm annoyed by it, but you know what? My paintings are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I've shown in a site where a lot of heavyweights were showing right beside me, and despite that—and I know it's very opportunistic as far as I'm concerned, but on the other hand, they didn't have to include me in these other shows or whatever, so let me, you know"—whatever.

So we did the show, and long and behold, a feature article in *Art in America*. You know? And that put me out on the map because then, a lot of invitations. Skowhegan. I was flying all over the place for two days, one week, visiting artist gigs. A lot of people have been calling me left and right and including me in more and more group shows and things like that. So, Exit Art has had that kind of impact and even—you know, even in the career of David Hammonds, I mean, that was an incredible show and it got incredible reviews and things like that. So I kind of felt that they really spearheaded—they put my work on a whole 'nother plane. [01:22:08]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The next thing I want to get into is teaching, but I don't know what time it is. Oh, it's four o'clock, Juan. Did you miss your alarm?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Oh, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: We should stop now, right?

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JOSH T. FRANCO: This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Juan Sánchez in his studio in Brooklyn, New York, on October 2, 2018, for the Archives of American Art. This is day two of the oral history. So, Juan, thanks for yesterday. It was great. Today I would like to start by just digging into particulars about your work. We heard yesterday about your grad school experience in-depth and the development of photography largely, so it would be nice to talk about the trajectory of your painting too. So maybe that's a place to start, with your interest in painting in grad school, who helped you develop that practice, and when some of the motifs that still are in your work started appearing and why.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, maybe just to continue a little bit—to then go directly into what had happened to my work and what I'm doing—I have to say that despite some of the hardship and struggle just to assimilate into a college environment, especially an art school like Cooper Union, my encounter—which didn't work out too well in the beginning but then became very fruitful afterwards—with Hans Haacke definitely led to a number of things that I strongly contemplated in relation to my own work. As a conceptual artist whose work at the time was very

text-laden, but juxtaposed with corporate logos and other type of logos and symbols that signify imperial, corporate, capitalist power—upon studying his work—at the time, he did have a number of exhibitions. [00:02:27] I'm trying to remember the gallery in which his work was shown at the time, in SoHo. But that same gallery also—as a result of encountering his work there, it became a routine for me to drop by that gallery and see what other shows are happening.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you remember where it was, the intersection in the city?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: It was on West Broadway. And I just don't remember. I don't know whether it was 250 Broadway, but it was that block where there was a lot of galleries, and across the street from the gallery was the Mary Boone Gallery. Of course she worked with him, and then she left to start her own gallery, and interestingly enough, it was across the street from his gallery. Hers was a ground-floor gallery. His was in a building that was full of other galleries, and I think he was on the third floor or fourth floor. Leo Castelli's gallery. And I think it was one of those galleries, I think was in that building. [00:04:00]

I came across the work of Victor Burgin and interestingly enough, a different strategy and yet similar element, except that his work at the time was predominantly photography. And many of the photographs he shot, others he appropriated, dealing with—what he appropriated was, like, industrial photographs of people working in factories and so on and so forth, but he also did a lot of photography of his own, and there was text that was embedded into the photograph. The text would be like a paragraph that would be the lower part of the image, so you were able to read the text legibly and you still had way to see the rest of the image. And the images were black-and-white images. It was, I would say, Marxist writings about labor.

So I was very impressed with that and then later on, through that same gallery, if I'm not mistaken, I came across the work of Conrad Atkinson. These two artists are British, British artists, and Conrad Atkinson had a whole other strategy, very different work. He was working directly on the wall, painting, drawings on paper, painting and writing directly on the wall, inserting objects—working gloves, all sorts of elements that represented factory labor—and slogans, to unionize, and on and on and on. [00:06:27] It was a bit more overt and definitely something that—I'm talking about maybe like 1974, or ['7]5, where I've seen something a bit unusual, which later will become installation art and things like that. So that type of work, among other artists, really fell into the recess of my mind.

When I started going to graduate school—and as I mentioned, you know, there was Leon Golub there and there was also Bob Blackburn, among others. I was kind of like caught in this bind where the work that I was doing, even though it dealt with Puerto Rican identity and nationalism and Puerto Rican independence, so on and so forth—the reason why I decided to go back to graduate school, with the frustration of not even having much time to continue my work, is because I felt that the work was just too derivative. It was too derivative of muralist art. [00:08:00] It's not like—I appreciated and still appreciate muralist art, and I feel that it's something that is still necessary and I really am hoping that there's even a larger boom of that surfacing in a lot of urban areas. I know that Philadelphia has really enjoyed an interesting renaissance in that regard. But I felt that the work was a bit derivative and I felt that within the so-called art world, the art schools, the canon, so on and so forth, not much tolerance for that kind of work within a gallery context.

And so I had to think about a different format, a different strategy. I think that the work of Hans Haacke and the other artists that I mentioned gave me some clues. In graduate school, I came in as a painting and as a photography major, so I was still doing my photography as well as my paintings, and it occurred to me, you know, Why not combine the two? Photography as documents, because the photograph took on a documentary direction—like the Robert Frank and the photographers in En Foco, and so on and so forth—and then, you know, combine it with painting and with writing and the use of collage.

What had occurred to me when I was looking at the work of Conrad Atkinson is that I live in an environment that has walls like that. [00:10:07] The neighborhoods that I lived and continue to live in was always full of walls, cluttered with all kinds of advertisements, announcements and graffiti and guys tagging on each other's work, and this layering of acts, of gesture, of identity, identification, sloganeering, political statements. There was a time when I was working with a particular group in support of the five Puerto Rican nationalists to be released, and then later on in support of 11 other political prisoners that were incarcerated, that demanded the release of these Puerto Rican activists. I was out in the street with other people. There are times where I designed the very flyers or posters, and we would go out in the late evening, pasting these posters and flyers on walls. And we would hit various neighborhoods. On [laughs] a couple of occasions, we also hit certain subway stations.

At one point, my brother and I were arrested at Union Square, and they took our posters and our wheat paste, and they took us to the nearest precinct and we spent the day there. [00:12:03] Later, they released us; interestingly enough, they didn't give us a fine, but they certainly threatened us when they caught us. We were about to run and they said, "Stop!" They said stop three times and we stopped, because we said, "They'll shoot us now." They took the posters from our hands and they tore it up and threw it on the floor and stepped on it.

And they took the wheat paste, the bucket that we had, with the brush and everything, and then they took us to the precinct.

But to go back, those kinds of activities and just the immense manifestations of graffiti, and the city walls and the subway, and, you know, the beginning of the whole breakdance phenomenon and everything. All of that just kept surfacing in remembering these other artists' work, and so in graduate school I said, "I'm going to try this. I've been postering the street for a while; why can't I do the same inside my studio?" And that's when I started taking some of those posters and printing some of my own photography and taking bits and pieces of newspaper and ads, and making these collage and integrating them with acrylic and oil paint and oil pastels. [00:14:00] Get into even drawing and painting at the same time, and then looking at the Cy Twombly paintings, you know, which are so gestural and everything, and seeing how gestural I was spraying *Viva Puerto Rico Libre* in the street and things like that.

It all fell into place in such a way that I arrived. I would say at the tail end of my second semester in graduate school, at that very point, maybe a month before the semester ended, the fall semester ended, that's when I started stretching canvases and started experimenting. I showed it to one of my seminar class, and I was doing a tutorial with Leon Golub, and he was very excited about it and very encouraging, as always. And then, the spring semester, which was the semester that I was to graduate, I went full force and I ended up with a body of work which became my thesis show, that I thought really announced that I had finally arrived, and now it's a question of venturing further and really developing.

I felt very different at that point of graduation, in contrast to that final point in undergraduate, Cooper Union, because I graduated—and I was satisfied with the work that I completed. I had two student thesis shows at Cooper Union, one in painting and another one in photography. And so I was pretty satisfied, but when I—but after that you know, I looked at the paintings and I said, I have to break away from this language, because it's one of those—well, if you want to make political art, that's the standard. [00:16:13] I wanted to break away from that, because so much of modern art has impacted and has influenced me.

So at that particular point, when I graduated from the Mason Gross School of the Arts, I graduated with a body of work which ended up in the shows at the New Museum and at the Bronx Museum. These were the works that came out of my thesis exhibition at Rutgers. And then from there I followed through and I got more and more involved with the semiotics of all of these elements which have so much layers of signifiers and narrative, and really thought very seriously about, "What is photography? What is this type of photography?" And very aware also—I mentioned Robert Frank, but I also was very aware of Joel Meyerowitz, who was one of the pioneers in color photography. I was very aware of the incredible black-and-white photography: Arroyo, DeCarava, and a number of other African-American photographers. Gordon Parks. And of course there's the En Foco group.

So in studying and really getting a real understanding and handle of what that is all about, that influenced more photographic work, and that influenced looking at my inventory of my own photographic work and a number of them finding its way into my collage paintings. [00:18:14] I broke from the tradition with my earlier paintings of making sketches and drawings and studies, which some of them the Smithsonian have, which would then result to the final painting. That was a lot of fun and it certainly put me in a situation to really analyze the elements and how I was composing the elements within the scheme of the square or the rectangle. But what happened after a certain point is that you become like your own mannerist, where, okay, this is the drawing, this is where I'm going to take off from. And it wasn't really a question of taking off. It was really just a question of replicating that image, except that now you're using oil paint and the image is more developed. Sometimes I would add certain elements that were not in the original sketch drawings or studies, but not much really changed. It was just a traditional way of transitioning from your studies to the painting, which of course—I learned so much from the masters, you know?

Whereas, when I started experimenting with the various elements through collage and writing text and using photography—also taking into consideration how much I really love Abstract Expressionist painting and that whole spontaneous improvisational process that that carried, I went in that direction. [00:20:24] I didn't make any sketches. I just started right on top of the canvas, and some of it didn't work out well and others was beginning to fall into place.

I began to get a really good feel of painting from a spontaneous improvisational point of view, and at the same time became more and more aware of the material itself and the differentiation of material, the way it is used differently. Taking something that came from a particular context and bringing it into another context, to speak to what you're trying to say. Material in terms of which—Abstract Expressionist art really taught me to really appreciate the very viscosity, the very surface quality, and the wide range of application of paint on the surface. That's when I started mixing beeswax into the paint. That's when I started diluting the paint to create a staining watercolor quality. That's when I started applying a layer of paint with oil pastels right through that layer, which digs into the paint and when it dries, it creates somewhat of a relief quality on the surface. [00:22:16]

I really got more and more engaged with the property of painting through the various elements there that I was using. I was improvising. I did have an idea in mind. It would start with a photograph, other times it would start with a text that I wrote, or a stanza from a poem written by a Nuyorican poet or written by a Puerto Rican poet from Puerto Rico. The text can go back and forth between Spanish and English, other times it was just English or Spanish, but there was at least my own proximity to using Spanglish in my work, you know, and understanding how the photographic image transmit a narrative or information, in contrast to a drawn or a painted image, in contrast to a text straight from a newspaper clipping, or text straight from poetry, or even something that is just pure descriptive. All of these layers, I started really getting more and more involved with, and stimulated.

So it got to the point where the painting would go through various changes and would twist and turn towards different directions almost on a day-to-day basis, to the point where I found myself working the painting up to a certain point and then all of a sudden in my mind comes this image with a fragment of that painting, and I would just cut that canvas out and collage it onto another canvas and continue the process. [00:24:19] So it was a kind of activity that was so intellectually, physically—the process of it all—so dynamic, that I really had an incredible, and continue to have a wonderful, time making these paintings. At the same time, on a day-to-day basis, I would look at the painting just to see what happened yesterday, and I would meditate on those paintings and then other things started surfacing, and then I started adding and subtracting other things.

It's a process where the beginning of the painting will end up being something totally different in the end. And that's because I have been going through a journey through these paintings. And this journey always with a cultural, political, personal semiotic maneuvering of all these elements. Because I discovered through this process, which is different than what I was doing earlier, that I am really engaged in a conversation with myself. I seek, I thrive, for that painting to show me something at the end of the journey, upon completion of the painting. If I feel that I haven't learned something from it, and it just became an execution and the painting looks great and people love the painting, and so on and so forth—well, okay, I was on automatic and I know how to put these elements together to pass the test, so to speak. But in terms of my own concerns and needs and what I'm trying to find, I want some kind of a dialogue with myself and I want some kind of growth at the turn, at the completion of that piece. [00:26:36]

It's a methodology, it's a process, unlike what I was doing before, where I would constantly learn more about who I am. And it continues to give me moments where sometimes I'm confronted with things that I try to forget or have forgotten, things that surfaces from the painting, which sometimes, you know, I'm embarrassed or ashamed of. It really puts me in a place to not only reflect, but also to expose myself. And then I have to make the judgment call: Should I keep this or not? In most cases I do. It's a very vulnerable kind of situation, but then I came to an understanding that if I'm making art to make political, social, personal statements, I think I have to make myself vulnerable to the spectator. Because I felt that that was a humanizing element, that even if there's something that I didn't want to expose before, this is it, here I am. You know? [00:28:18]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Would it always be clear—when you say you expose things in the paintings, is it in a way that the spectator would see that part of the painting and realize what you had been through specifically? Or was it a code that you knew what was being exposed?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I think it's both. But the one thing that I did experience on a number of occasions—when I had my very first solo show [of paintings –JS] in New York, at Exit Art, there has been a number of people who on the guest book has written their reaction. And they were, like, very sensitive reactions. And we're talking about people who—you know, some were Puerto Rican, some were non-Puerto Ricans—that wrote some interesting statements where they felt that the work has touched them in a very strong way. I remember one—I can't quite quote it, but to paraphrase, I remember reading one where—"I don't necessarily agree with what you're saying but I was so moved that I have to congratulate you for being so sincere."

There was—well, there's an old friend of the family, actually an old friend of Alma, my wife, since the days in Puerto Rico, who—according to Alma, he was madly in love with her but she wasn't quite interested, but they kept tabs. [00:30:13] He got married, had children. He actually became a pastor of a church, and then they later moved to the Bronx and settled there and he was pastoring in a church in the Bronx and kept in touch with us from time to time. We became very good friends. One day, he went to Exit Art to see the show. And he went alone. I think he was between appointments and he was in the city and he said, Let me check out Juan's exhibition. He's a guy who is not your typical art gallery visitor, you know what I mean? From my understanding, this was the first time that he ever entered a gallery.

So about one or two days after he came into the gallery, I dropped by Exit Art and I would talk to the people at the desk and I said, "Oh, how's traffic?" "Oh no, people are coming"—whatever, you know—"but yesterday or two days ago, this short guy in a suit came in, and there was nobody in the gallery, and he was looking at the show, and he was in here like two hours." I said, "Oh really?" They said, "Yeah." "It wasn't a critic or anything like that?" "No, a critic don't spend that much time." [They laugh.] They said, "They're known to come in and in 10 minutes, they see the show and then they write a wonderful review or a terrible review." [00:32:05] I said, "Okay." "No,

no, he doesn't look like the kind of person that visits a gallery. Let me show you, I think he was Hispanic, a little dark-skinned and all that." And one of them said, "He was here for a long time and he would sit on the bench in front of some of those paintings and just stare at it, and then towards the end, he started crying." You know? And I said, "Really?" I said, "Did he sign the book?" "No, because we were really following him and he got up, you know, got back to his composure, and then he left and didn't say anything." And then I said, "Oh, wow," you know.

So that same day, I went home and Alma: "Oh, so-and-so called and he saw your show." I said, "Oh really?" "Yeah, and he said that he couldn't get out of the place. He wanted to stay there forever and that the paintings took him through so many emotions, and he said that at one point he cried." And I said, "Oh, wow," you know? That is amazing. So that was one event that kind of like indicated to me that maybe the impetus behind what I put in there—you know, they can't read it, "Oh, just because Juan went through this and Juan went through that," but definitely, I felt that perhaps that emotional investment does convey, you know, even if it's in an abstract sort of way. [00:34:05] And other people have commented this, like, "I don't know what, but kind of like there are moments when I'm like moved." And of course there's the paintings of my mother and so on and so forth, so that's very typical. And they say, "Well, you know, I'm Italian and that painting reminds me of my mother," or whatever.

I also had another experience, I think in 1992, where Julia Herzberg curated an exhibition of painters to participate in—I think it was the very first Cuenca painting biennial. And Luis Cruz Azaceta was among us, Candida Alvarez, a Cuban who passed away by the name of Roberto Gonzalez, [and Josely Carvalho –JS]. There was about five of us, and we went to the biennial and it was amazing. We had a whole gallery to ourselves, each one of us had about four or five paintings, and we did a couple of group tours. A lot of people coming to see the show, a lot of student groups brought into the gallery. On the second day, we had for the most part students, university students, and so we gave a talk. Each one talked about each other's work, or our work.

One of the students approached me and very serious—you know, a young woman, and she asked me, "Aren't you aware of exposing yourself that way?" [00:36:17] And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" She said, "I don't know, it's just that there's a certain degree of sentimentality and there's certain things—and even the way you talk about your work, you actually talk about yourself, which is the kind of conversation that most people don't like to engage with each other." I said, "Yeah, yeah, I understand that, and I do that because I think it's necessary. It's like one human talking to another human and try to break the barriers of political and cultural differences, from one human being to the other."

She said, "Yeah, yeah, but you go beyond that and I wonder if you get embarrassed by that." And I said, "All the time." And then she said, "And I wonder if you know that other people are embarrassed for you." And I said, "Yeah. Yeah, I do." And I said, "Those are all of the risks that I'm taking and this is all that I am embracing from that, because once that happened, you become vulnerable and then you have to contend with what I'm saying, rather than just being rhetoric or whatever." And then she said, "Okay, well, I respect you for that," and then she walked away, [laughs] you know?

And I said, "Okay that's"—but at the same time, it was one of those experiences where the way she spoke to me and the way she articulated what she was saying to me, again put me in that vulnerable position where I was thinking to myself, "Yeah, maybe I shouldn't be doing this" or whatever. [00:38:14] It was almost like her putting me on the spot, but at the same time conjuring the courage to face that and to say, "Yeah, yeah, everything that you're feeling and seeing, yeah that's true, and that's who I am. That's my art and that's who I am. And even in moments where I'm not comfortable, I'm comfortable with that."

So to answer your question, a lot of the elements that are more rhetorical or whatever, sure, people will receive that and either they deal with it or not, but the other element—and combining the personal, the autobiographical, with the social and the political and the cultural and mixing it up and things like that—I feel that is an effective strategy, while at the same time, as a visual artist, I go through a process and through an experience that is very fruitful, that is very beneficial for me. Sometimes, political artists sound almost selfless, but I feel—and perhaps I was like that at one point, especially when I was in art school. "I want to save the world! The proletariat!" Blah blah blah, you know, but that was a period where I was going through a lot of changes myself and an identity crisis where the art became that vehicle to find myself. [00:40:00] And a lot of issues, personal issues, relationships, whatever, personal issues, which I bottled up. And then art, to make a political statement, was the vehicle even to get away from that.

But in graduate school and especially after graduate school, things started to open up more and more. And even dealing with some of the poetry, reading Sonia Sanchez and Giovanni, they really put themselves out, and yet they convey in a very effective way, and they're very strong politically, they're very strong feminist writings, and very strong in terms of conjuring the history with the African-American experience in the United States. Amiri Baraka, much more militant, much more political. You do get a bit of his personality through his work, but the sentimentality is literally absent. It's a very militant political force. So you learn from all of these things and you

do see these kinds of examples, at least within the area that I want to focus on, where, perhaps unconsciously, they expose themselves anyway.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What about the—you started talking about this a little bit. You mentioned Cy Twombly and recognizing your own gestural-ness, and I would like to hear more about specific forms, like the swirl that shows up in your work so much. The circular—like the painting behind you actually. [00:42:13]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: How do you define that? Spirals, I guess.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: You know, it was just one of those things. This is something that became a bit more—I wouldn't say recent, but it kind of like started in 2000 or so. Again, I have to harken back to the Taíno petroglyph, where, you know, I was redrawing these elements, and the integration of text. Sometimes I would use stencils and things like that, but for the most part they're my own handwriting, and coming to an understanding that writing text is also drawing.

You know?

So it got to a point where—by then, I've already had years of not only teaching painting and photography on an undergraduate level, but I was also teaching beginning and advanced drawing. And giving exercises to students, not only to give them the technical skills but to also be very internal and reflective—as I try to be in my work—in their drawing. So I give them all kinds of exercises, which is a bit unorthodox, to a certain degree. You know, like making drawings from listening to sound effects, to music, you know? [00:44:02] Drawing from poetry, other things that are perhaps a little bit more typical like blind drawing, and so on and so forth. I realized—you know, I kind of like laughingly realized that I've been teaching drawing at Hunter like for ten years or so, and I don't draw any more. [They laugh.] I don't draw, I don't ever draw. I just get on top of my surface and get to work. I have an idea, I don't even jot anything down you know, and then I come to realize, "Oh." Then I try to draw again, just to see how I draw. A still life or whatever. I still have some skills but I lost so much, because I've been so out of practice.

There was a time, especially in junior high school and high school, as an illustration major, where I had incredible skills, and with gouache and watercolor I could paint something very realistically, you know? If you're selling a car, I could paint that car, and it's nice and shiny and it's made out of metal and so on and so forth. So I realized that I lost a lot of those skills and then I said to myself, You know what? I'm just going—you know, I mean, at one point, I was just working with oil pastels on the surface, but then I said, Let me get myself a bunch of oil sticks, because that is much richer in pigment and it's literally oil paint in a stick format, and I'm going to find my way to see if I could draw as well as paint.

And this particular painting, which is on the assassination of Stephen Biko, was one of many where, at a certain moment, I would just take the oil pastels and draw whatever that was somewhat approximate to what I was trying to convey. [00:46:19] And so, with this painting, fences—you know, metal fences and bars referencing segregation, demarcation, separation, privatization, so on and so forth—is something that was in my mind when I started making these lines with the black oil stick. And then the circle is a symbol, a shape that throughout the centuries carries so many universal significance. Because the circle, according to what I have read, can signify perfection, totality, cycles. In many of the religious Renaissance painting, the circle plays a role in terms of spirituality—even in Buddhism, and so on and so forth—spirituality, holiness, so on and so forth. It carries a lot of those elements, but the circles that I implemented in these paintings are not perfect circles.

JOSH T. FRANCO: They're not complete either.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And they're not complete either, exactly. In other paintings, they're complete but they're not quite perfect. And then you have these circles which are a collage element where if—you know, from a distance it looks abstract, but on closer inspection, you begin to see that it's the face of a crying baby that's inverted. [00:48:22] That cry can mean a cry of rebellion, of anger, of despair, and on and on and on. And that derived from—it was very much influenced by David Siqueiros's painting. I'm trying to remember the title of it, but it's a very small painting where he has this group of Ethiopian babies that are crying, and one of them, his head is really exaggerated, large, and they're starving and they're crying. When I first encountered that painting—much, much earlier—it felt as if I hear the cry, you know. I mean, that image is so powerful that I really felt as if I was hearing the cries.

And then there's this other painting by Munch, *The Holler* [*The Scream*], and he also did a variation of woodcuts. When I saw that painting, I felt the same way, I felt as if I hear the holler or the cry in the background. That's the kind of experience that those two paintings gave me at that point. And when I started working on this series, I thought about those paintings and I said, How can I evoke a reaction where maybe, hopefully, perhaps, people experience that in their mind as something audible? [00:50:17]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Are the photographs detention centers? Are they people on [inaudible]?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: The photograph in the bottom part is the body of Stephen Biko in a refrigerator, in a meat refrigerator, where he was kept prisoner and beaten. And that's where he died. But in terms of what I was talking about with the cry, I had this photograph of Liora in her mother's arms and she was crying, and I just zoom in on that, and then I created these circles or what I sometimes refer to as these mandelas, and that's what carries throughout the series. In this particular painting, I used an actual photograph, a couple of photographs, where somebody snuck in a photographer when no one was around, to shoot those photographs. So those photographs were then snuck out and distributed. Because he disappeared, nobody knew what was going on or whatever, and you know, he was kidnapped and tortured and beaten to death.

From time to time, which is evident in this particular painting, I may appropriate a painting or a piece of a painting from a well-known work, and in this case the rose floating in the sky above a landscape is a fragment of a painting by—I'm trying to remember. [00:52:10] I think it was either Salvador Dalí or—I think it's Salvador Dalí, but I think it may have been René Magritte. So you know, there's also a funerary quality in adding these flowers into the piece. And in an odd sort of way, since the paintings, the series, uses postmortem photographs of people—because I've made a lot of paintings appropriating images, heroic images, of Che Guevara and Pancho Villa and Pedro Albizu Campos and Lolita Lebrón, you know, these heroic photographs whether leading a march or addressing an audience or whatever—I really wanted to use a very different image, because these people, because of their advocacy and their influence, the impact that they were having, were assassinated.

I think I may have spoke yesterday about the *Passion of Christ* movie, which kind of confirmed that I was on the right track. It takes a bit of work, even searching through the Web, these kinds of images, and then when I find them, then I hope for the best that they're high resolution. Sometimes they're not, but you know, it doesn't leave me any recourse but to use them anyway, and put them within the context of other elements.

But in essence, they are also memorial paintings, which—at the time that I was conceptualizing the series, there was so much going on throughout the neighborhoods. You know, people being killed in the street, drug wars, or some innocent person being shot, or child. All of a sudden there's a mural, a memorial to that individual. [00:54:31] So all that was going on at the same time. So they're memorial paintings, but they're of people, some of them very well-known, others not so well-known.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Does the series have a name?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: The name of the series is called *Cries and Wounded Whispers*. At first, I named it *Cries and Whispers*, but someone reminded me of the Ingmar Bergman movie and I said, "Oh, that's right," and that's a whole 'nother [laughs] conversation right there. So I decided to add the word "wounded" because—it's kind of interesting, I mean, there's a history that is written about, printed in books, whatever, and there's that history that is it not recorded, but it has happened. The cries, the impact, the suffering that these things have caused, in many cases are heard, and in other many cases are not heard, but it's still there. And so the reason why I started with *Cries and Whispers* is because these are the cries that you could hear loud and clear, and then these are the whispers that are the cries from a distance. And at a certain point it's still there, though you can't hear it. [00:56:06]

The "wounded" really speaks to the fact that it doesn't matter how long ago these things have happened, the after-effect and the consequence of these events still bears presence today. So, you know, it could turn from a loud to a distant cry, but memory through what has been recorded, and memory through what's being carried through people, from generation to generation, oral history, still prevails. And it may change somewhat, but the essence of what that story is, is still relevant to even the reality that people are going through today. So for me, the memorial paintings, it speaks to history and it speaks for those who have been recognized on one hand, and those that have not yet been recognized. So you may come across a painting of a particular individual that within the mainstream they have no idea what that's all about, but it's something that I dug out by suggestions of other people. Because people have come to the studio, looked at the paintings I've been working on: "Oh, have you thought about so and so?" "Oh, no I haven't. Let me write that down and let me think about it more," or "I don't know who that person is," you know? And once I do the research, say, "Oh, my goodness, this is really interesting and that should come to the surface." [00:58:05] So it's a mixture.

The Che Guevara painting, you know, are among a number that has entered into pop culture or pop consciousness, whatever you want to call it, but then there are others, like that young woman that was killed by a sniper at the end of an election in Iran. There was a documentary that—well first, the moment that it happened, I got the blast on my end. It's like *boom*, you know. And I saw the video and it was really shocking. And then there was some stuff that came out of it. What overshadowed it was the fact that this person, again, is elected president and is a dictator that's been there forever and—you know.

But then HBO, maybe a couple of years later, came out with a documentary about this young woman, and that's

when I really broke down, because—I've forgotten what age she was, but she was the same age more or less of my daughter, and had a life that really is reminiscent of so many young women her age, where—you know, they recorded her room full of posters with pop stars and so on and so forth. And other than the fact that they're different pop stars, it's no different than my daughter's room. So I really broke down and then I said, I have to do a piece on that.

And it took me a while, because as I said earlier, I just don't react to something and all of a sudden I'm painting. I needed time to process it. [01:00:08] I went to the Web and I did a little research and then I said, Okay, is there any—you know, that video that I saw two years ago, is it online? So I did get it, I got stills from that. That became the background that started the painting. I found this beautiful photograph of her, and that became the foreground of the painting. Her death and the impact of that really inspired what was then called the Green Movement, and so green was the dominating color in the composition. I decided to create a part of the image with her portrait, and her name repeated in the background in Arabic. And then I continued on from there and that became the painting. It was shown at the BRIC Exhibition, and obviously it caused quite an impact. I'm trying to find here if I have an image, so that you could get a better sense of that. [01:01:59]

But the point of the matter is that that was—that is still an ongoing series, and the circle, in various forms, is a signifier that plays throughout the series.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What's the title of this work?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: It's *For*— [Neda Agha-Soltan –JS]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Her name?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Her name, yeah. *Para Neda Agha-Soltan*. But I put in Spanish, *Para*, and then her name.

This one deals with Abu Ghraib, and the sensation that that caused. I started on that painting maybe a year after the newsflash and all of that, and it took me like five years to finish it because it went through so many changes. I tend to work on two or three pieces at a time, and sometimes, when I get to a point where I can't move any further with it, I let it go for a while and continue with the others and start new ones, and then I go back, and so on and so forth.

That's also what goes on in the process. There are certain paintings that, even though there's a lot of meditation in between, there's certain paintings that would take maybe a month, two months, others maybe five or six, and others a year or more. When I feel like I'm stuck with a particular piece or I don't like the way it is going but I don't know where to take it from there, I'll just leave it out so that I could look at it every day while I continue working on other pieces. [01:04:09] So what happens also is that there's a dialogue that takes place between the pieces, and certain things that I may realize in one piece may well inform what's going to happen with the other piece, or may bring a resolution to this piece that I've been [laughs] working on for three years. So it's that kind of intercourse that I also like in the process.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I think it makes sense, because we're talking about memorializing people too, to get into your public art projects. So maybe—what was your first big commission? I assume it was a mural.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, yes, as a matter of fact my very first big commission, which took place in Corona Park. I don't exactly remember the exact address, but there was a book that came out a few years ago on mural art, and that piece was included. It was commissioned through City Arts, which in its beginning was an artist-found collective that was devoted to making murals throughout the city, and that work was something that I was seeing and was very much influenced by during the time that I was at Cooper Union. They called me and they asked me to submit a proposal for this rehabilitation center where they treated people in recovery from drugs, and also they treated people infected with AIDS. [01:06:18] They had a building where they had many of the people that they were treating living there. And it was called the Louis Armstrong Rehabilitation Center. From what I remember, it seems like Louis Armstrong put in a lot of money for the founding of that rehabilitation center. The rehabilitation center was not that far from his residency.

So the idea was to create a mural dedicated to Louis Armstrong and to be painted on the side of the building, which was exposed out to the public. It was a five-story building and it had to take that whole area. So I got the commission and they gave me a couple of art students, one from Brown University and another one from Hunter College. And I wasn't teaching at Hunter College at the time; that was back in 1987. They also put together a crew of people from the center, to assist. So I had two wonderful undergraduates that really helped in taking leadership, to help me to orchestrate the other people who are not artists and maybe picking up a brush and paint for the first time. [01:08:16]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you remember their names, the undergrads?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: One of them, her name was Jolie Shulman, and she later became Jolie Guy because she decided to adopt her mother's name, had issues with her father. The reason why I remember her is because she was an undergraduate at Hunter College, and then later she got into the MFA program there, and she was part of the student organization that would invite artists to give a talk. And of course, you know, I got invited to give a talk. At the same time that I was invited to give a talk, I was one of the finalists for the full-time tenure position at Hunter College, which Jolie sent me the notification, you know, because she really wanted me to teach there. Thanks to her, I applied and I went through the process and I got the position, and then at some point, I did a tutorial with her, and then she graduated and then she moved on. But we always kept in touch, you know. And she got a PhD and—whatever.

The other person, for some reason, literally disappeared. After that experience, I haven't—she never kept in touch. You know, it was like she just—I don't know what happened to her. An Asian American. But she was also wonderful. So I remember those two, but with Jolie, I remember her completely because she kept tags in my life. [01:10:11]

But, you know, I did the whole routine. I did more drawings. I did a grid system, calculated the scale, and we scaled it up on that wall and we did the mural and it turned out really, really wonderful. Along the way, I made some changes in the design. I used a portrait of Louis Armstrong. I'm trying to remember what was the text that was embedded into the image. When I was first asked to apply for the commission, I didn't know much about Louis Armstrong other than his recordings and his cameo appearances in movies, you know? And through many people, especially coming from the Left, you know, they just conjure up this image of Louis Armstrong being an Uncle Tom and a sellout and blah blah blah, you know. One of the greatest trumpeters that ever lived, whose impact and influence still prevails, but then after a certain point, he just became this, you know, Negro entertainer.

But then I asked people at the Center: Is there anyone that I know that knew him or worked with him? [01:12:00] So they gave me a couple of names and I called them, I visited them. One of them was very, very passionately involved in telling me so much. He pulled out recordings, very old recordings that are not even—they're out-of-print recordings. He was a musician and he talked so much about Louis Armstrong, and then he told me this story about Louis Armstrong going to South Africa to visit Mandela, and the trumpet that he was using at the time, he gave it to him.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow. Armstrong gave it to Mandela.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And Mandela has kept it throughout his life. So that was the one thing that kind of blew me away and moved me to tears, and I said, Okay, so what pop culture has done to him—and obviously he has to make a living—that's all that people know of him, that he's an Uncle Tom and everything. And then he told me about other stories where he would look at the auditorium and see the segregation of the audience, and he would say to the manager, I'm not going to start the concert until these people up there are brought down, that they're mixed.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: There had been concerts where he didn't perform because the manager said, No fucking way, and others—it's like, because there's so much money involved—cooperated. [01:14:10] And I said Whoa, you know, why [laughs] all that shit is not out there? You get tired of going through—it's almost like those that don't know the full history of a Paul Robeson, you know, and they look at these movies and say, Oh, you know, fuck the movie, stereotype, whatever. And yet this guy was an incredible advocate, to the point where he got blacklisted, had to leave the country, whatever. Armstrong didn't do that but there were moments where he acted it out and said, you know, I ain't going to play a note until—whatever, right? And the Nelson Mandela encounter. So, I said, Okay.

Immediately, I envisioned the mural. And in the center of the composition is a floating trumpet. The top level, there's an African motif, the second is a portrait of Louis Armstrong with text embedded into the portrait. The third level, because it's divided into four parts, is the floating trumpet. The mural stayed there for as long—until recently. I think the building was torn down like five years ago. [01:16:05] This was back in the day where people were still tagging and graffiti-ing, you know, whatever. And then in the bottom of the mural are all the credits: the mayor—who I forget it was at the time—City Arts, blah blah blah, right? That's the only area that they graffitied. Everything else was clean, you know. Only time faded it a little bit.

That was my very first mural and it was an incredible experience because in addition to the research and really finding out who Louis Armstrong really was, and encountering at least two individuals, one of them that really impacted me. Because the other one worked with him or whatever, but I think he knew him more superficially, and so he just had a lot of jokes that Louis used to tell. But the other one took me on, was constantly staring at me as if he's trying to see through me. And I know that stare, it's like, "Are you full of shit or what?" You know?

Then he started opening up and shit, "Look at this!" You know, like, amazing.

So in addition to all of that, community involvement, starting with a small group of men and women who were in recovery in the program, and other people passing by and, "What are you doing?" And if it's not me, it's one of my assistants that's showing them the study and explaining to them and whatever. [01:18:04] All of a sudden, people were showing up with food, and if I wasn't there at that time, my assistant and other people had food. There was an embrace, and I think that speaks to why that mural wasn't touched by any graffiti, except for all the official credit lines, you know? So that was my first experience.

And then, in 2008, I got a commission to do a train station for the MTA. It's the 167th Street stop in the Bronx. That was one of a number of subway commissions that I was nominated for.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is this the one—instead of Myrtle Ave., you did 167th?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, it's the one that's on 167th. I'm trying to remember the line. I think it's the number four line.

JOAH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: When you go up the stairs, there's a series of glass murals. The motif that I used throughout the series was the hand. And then there's a circle within the hand and then there's another hand, and I did all kinds of variations, including the four seasons. I got nominated about three times, and the first two times I didn't get it, and then I got it the third time. It's an elimination process where they nominate a number of artists, we have a meeting, we present our proposal, and then from there they select the one person who gets the commission. [01:20:10] I don't think I have it here, unfortunately. But the director, Susan Bloodworth, she pulled me on the side when I was nominated for the [laughs] third time and said, "Juan, stop submitting political work."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: "And stop submitting stuff that has religious iconography." Back then, I was using a lot of Catholic iconography in my work, and she said, "Especially those Catholic iconography. Don't take offense, it's not because I'm Jewish. It's just that the work has to have a certain neutrality." I said, "Okay, I understand." So I thought and I thought and I thought, and then I said, "Okay, well"—I came out with this concept. And the proposal was a series of collages made up of Color-aid paper. And I said, "Let me buy me a box of Color-aid and submit them as collages, so that they get a real strong sense of the kinds of colors that I'll be using," which—even with gouaches or watercolor, I won't even get approximately to the intensity of what I wanted.

So I bought a box of Color-aid and that's what it was. It was a series of images where the hand became central. [01:22:09] I guess I didn't quite listen to her, but you know, it had a mosaic quality, very much reminiscent of windows in church and whatnot. And the hand was central, but then I put a hand, and then there's a hand inside the hand, and then another hand. I played with it and I played with the four seasons and everything. So I submitted that and I got it, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And then it ended up being faceted—what they call faceted glass, where from the sketches, they would do a cartoon, which is a mapping, of the various colors, and they would cut the glass, thick chunks of glass, pure colors, and they would embed it into a frame and they would pour this melted iron, black iron, which fuses and pulls all the pieces together, which really created that churchlike stained glass effect. And that became the commission.

Unfortunately, the design of the station went through changes. And the MTA—which was then known, MTA for the Arts—their budget has been cut, the MTA budget has been cut, and then all of a sudden my commissioned work has been cut. [01:24:04] I was supposed to have quite a number of these glass pieces, on both sides of the elevated station, and throughout the floor that leads to stairs where there's a token booth and all of that. And every time, I would get a call and say, Juan, we have to reduce it. Okay. How many do I have? Oh, the wind stands are eliminated. I designed these beautiful—okay, fine, so how many windows do I have? Okay, this is how many windows. And then they would call me back, and to the point—they cut it to the point where whatever is there is there, but it wasn't to the satisfaction of what I anticipated. Because it just kept cutting down, to the point where—the real experience is when the public takes the stairs to the elevated station where the token booth is, and that's where you see the richness of it, but the two opposite platforms has been reduced to two or three little windows. So it was a major disappointment on that end, but I'm glad that I did the commission.

What followed after that, in 2009, was a commission from the New York Public School Construction Authority. They were building new schools throughout the city. [01:26:00] There's a new one that they were planning on doing in the Bronx, which would be an annex to the James Monroe High School. Later it became the James

Monroe Educational Campus, and it was a brand new, five-story building where—they was going to keep the old James Monroe High School there, but the annex was going to be made up of chartered high school programs: one dedicated to film, another one to art, another one to music, and interestingly enough, another one dedicated to math and science. I had the whole building to myself. I had two walls which were to be 12x20-foot murals, on opposite side to the entrance. Students would enter and they would be crossing through these two murals, and the rest of the floors were friezes throughout the floors.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Juan, can we take a break for a second?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Sure. [Tape stops, restarts.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay, we're back from the break. We were talking about Monroe and you were starting to describe the friezes.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Right, right. That commission to this day is my largest, because it's a brand-new building, it's five stories, and if you were to count the basement, where there's the cafeteria and the gymnasium, I guess there's six floors. [01:28:11] So as I said before, I had the two 12x20—maybe 25—foot murals, on opposite walls, and then I had all of these friezes.

Part of what I wanted to do was to take portraits of students at James Monroe High School and also do a number of workshops with them, and integrate their work and their portraits into the design. And so I met with a couple of the art teachers, and of course I spoke with the principal, and they had no idea as to whether that high school—at that time, it wasn't quite sure whether that high school was going to move into the new building or what. It was very vague. But they did know about the project. The high school principal was very cooperative, introduced me to a couple of the art teachers, and told them to help me in whatever way because, "This is what I want to do." One of them was not cooperative at all and the other one was cooperative, but only up to a certain limit, because for some reason he didn't have enough influence to mobilize students for the photo shoot. [01:30:07]

So I came in on the day that we agreed on. It was after school, and I came in early. The principal gave me a classroom which was spaced out. The furniture was moved to the side, and there was this—I guess you call it a bulletin board, but it's really in place of the blackboard, where with markers they write notes for the students to copy or whatever. It was the only white surface in the corner of the room that I could use as a backdrop. I went in and I waited and then I went to the class of the other art teacher who was cooperating and I said, "Nobody is around." So he said, "Oh, I forgot." He was supposed to take his class over.

So anyway, we ran all over the building just recruiting students: "Do you want your pictures taken as part of a mural?" Whatever, you know. And I had a very good group of students I shot individual portraits. Some of them wanted to be shot with their boyfriends or girlfriends and that kind of thing, and they went through their usual antics in front of the camera, so I recorded all of that. The art workshops that I wanted to do never happened.

Oh, the other thing also, is that I wanted to include—actually, I wanted to bring all of the elements that I do in my work into this mural project. [01:32:00] I also asked the principal that it would be nice if—"Is there anyone that's teaching English or creative writing or whatever?" "Oh, yes, there's this teacher that's teaching creative writing and they're doing a lot of poetry or whatever." So I had an encounter with that teacher and I said, you know, "Is it at all possible for you to conduct a workshop and talk to them about the themes they want to cover and for them to write two, maybe three stanza of poetry?" So this was like weeks before the photo shoot. That didn't happen. And then, in a rush, she put together a bunch of work that the students had done in her class, but they were so long and I couldn't even cop a stanza for any of them, so I couldn't bring that into the mural.

The only thing that I brought into the murals were the portraits, and I integrated that with all sorts of elements. I noticed how rich the student body was. You know, you had blacks, you had Asians, you had people from the Middle East, white students. It was a really wonderful mixture of students and that brought into mind that I have to use elements, patterns, symbols, anything that represented that diversity of people, and what kind of like bound them together is that they're all dressed in hoodies and baseball hats and whatever. [01:34:09] I did the design and, you know, long and behold, it became the mural.

I got together with one of my former students, Zac Fabri, who is a performance-combined media artist, and he makes his living doing digital work, design, so on and so forth. So I sat down with him, I collected a series of patterns through the Web. I drew, I painted certain elements, which was then scanned. We just pulled it all together and made these friezes. I think there were like 13 of them and the two murals, and this is what resulted.

JOSH T. FRANCO: There's a lot of [inaudible] papers too.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah. What dominated throughout—you could go through them—was their portraits. They were all shot in color, but I kind of like sepia-toned all of them. And so a lot of the elements that I used are symbols,

but in a way, I used them very abstractly. [01:36:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: The hands are very important.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: There's photographed hands and there's painted hands.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah, I shot some hands. And I think—oh, this one doesn't belong here. Yeah, this is one of the mural pieces, and so one mural has male hands, the other one has female hands, and then the flat map of the globe was divided between the two, and then there's other elements that I added to that. So that turned out really terrific. I was very happy. There were some challenges, because the measurements of the various sites keeps changing. There was a point where once they confirmed all of them, the tiles were produced, glass pebble tiles. There were certain sites that were a little short, and we had to cut to accommodate them, and it changed the design a little bit. Not that much, you know. I said, "Okay, it still looks great," whatever.

There was no ribbon cutting for that commission. I don't think the MTA ever do, unless it's some superstar in some big train station in Manhattan. They didn't do any ribbon cutting for me or for a bunch of other people in my group. The most disappointing thing was that they didn't do a ribbon cutting. [01:38:11] That was towards the tail end of—what's his name [Blumberg –JS]—he was ending his third term as mayor, and after that came de Blasio. They didn't want to do any ribbon cutting or anything, and from what I heard from one of the people at the commission, they didn't want to create a big deal where it would get media attention because that would give him more credit in his accomplishment.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Which—you know, there were quite a number of schools that had been built, and art commissioned for those schools, under his mayorship, you know? That was disgusting and I said, "That's fucked up. This is one of the biggest things I've done in my career, it would have been nice." I was anticipating a ribbon cutting. I was going to make said announcements and you were going to do your announcement. I was going to send an announcement. I wanted a crowd of people to be there, just like having—this is my solo show!

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: It's an installation piece! It didn't happen, and I went there on a number of occasions, with friends, to give them a tour or whatever, before the school officially opened. And I haven't gone back since. But I have heard that the school has changed. One of the schools wasn't realized, and then there was an elementary school that was part of the facilities and, as always, all these kinds of schizophrenic changes that the city goes through at the last minute. [01:40:14] But I think the film school and the art school and the music school definitely opened.

I haven't had the courage to go back and look at what I've done. But luckily, the commission hired a photographer to document the whole thing for their own use, and I, with my camera, documented a lot of the installation as it was being installed, and I shot my own finished, complete work throughout the building. So I have quite a few documents on that. And it was great. I'm thinking about going back again and seeing, visiting, get a pass, whatever, see what's going on. They built this beautiful auditorium but they decided in the last minute that they don't want anything in there. My mouth was watering for the auditorium and my mouth was watering for the cafeteria. So that changed, but everything else was terrific and then I didn't have a ribbon cutting. So that was my third commission.

My latest commission—and I'm waiting for a date this month, to fly over and to supervise the installation—was a mural that I did for the University of Notre Dame. [01:42:11]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, great!

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Gilbert Cardenas, he invited me to do a temporary installation at the art center that he was directing. And he invited a number of artists to do temporary installations; it's a group show. There was a time when I was going through my chemo and everything and I said, You know—and it wasn't even for a long duration, it was like a five-day installation. I think it was for the Day of the Dead. I said, "You know, I'm not in shape to do it, and to do it for five days doesn't necessarily tempt me to even push myself, but I do have a counterproposal." And so he asked, said, "Well, what's your counterproposal?" "I want to do something permanent, and I want to do it in this material that I used for this high school commission, and if there's a site that could be found anywhere within the campus—or outside of the campus, if there's any community center, anything that I could do this piece for—I'm willing to do it. It's just a question of you raising money."

So he flew me over to South Bend and he took me to the campus, he introduced me to a bunch of people. He

gave me a tour of the campus and he took me to the cathedral that they have on the campus. And I was blown away by that. [01:44:11]

JOSH T. FRANCO: The football Jesus.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: The football Jesus, touchdown Jesus, yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah. And we continued talking until he said, "Well, why don't you work on the proposal and we'll find a place." And I said, "Fine." I wanted to get paid for the proposal—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: —in case nothing happens, you know? He's kind of like, "Okay," and I'm like, "Well"—you know. I thanked him and I said, "Okay, I'm going to bust my chops on this. If it doesn't happen, at least I get paid for this." He tried to find a site and everything and, "Let's put this on hold, I really want this project to happen," whatever. The reason why I mention the cathedral is because the cathedral had a great influence in what's going to be my handle with this mural, thinking that it would be created within the campus. Outside of the campus, that's going to change the whole scenario altogether.

So all of a sudden, after about a year or two, he called me and said, "Oh, they're going to be building a new student center and they're looking for three or four artists to commission work, which would be placed in various parts of the center and I would like to submit this proposal." I said, "You know what, let's do that. [01:46:00] Let me rework the proposal a little bit more and you can submit them." And long and behold, I was one of the artists that got the commission, and it was to be managed by the director of the Snite Museum.

It's taken a while, because I had to wait quite a bit for the construction to reach a certain point where I could go and see the site and whatever. They gave me the size of the wall. That changed on a number of occasions but then it was finalized. And then I worked the design, went back and forth between the Snite Museum and I guess the board, to look at the mural and state their opinions and finally get the green light. So there was a back-and-forth kind of thing, but what was amazing was that I had certain elements in the mural that I just kind of put it there, but I figured that they were going to take issues with. And for the most part they didn't.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What were those that you were worried about?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I mean, you know, to put Martin Luther King in there is fine, but to put Malcolm X, that could be a little—you know. "Who is Pedro Albizu Campos?" They have no idea, but once they found out, you know, "Well, oh, I don't know." Angela Davis. The Virgin de Guadalupe is always welcome, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: [Laughs.] That's a sure thing. [01:48:00] Chavez as well. So the point was that they only objected to two things, which was Angela Davis—I replaced her with Angela Mayou [ph]—and then there was one sequence, there was one piece, that spoke to police violence on youth, and they didn't want that either. And I could understand. When I work on these commissions, they want Juan Sánchez but they don't necessarily want Juan Sánchez in his studio. They want something that is a Juan Sánchez, but, you know—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Who was the Angela Davis replacement?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Who was the Angela Davis replacement?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Maya Angelou.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, Maya Angelou.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Angelou, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great, okay.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Quite frankly, I love Angela Davis and I really wanted her [laughs] in there, but Maya Angelou was perfect.

JOSH T. FRANCO: She's great, yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: You know, she's perfect. And extremely inspirational and yet poignant, but inspirational at the same time. So I said, "You know what, okay, I'm glad that they didn't want her." She's a communist, she's anti-religion. I said, "Okay, fine, you know, a Jesuit university, fine. If they would have let me get away with it, she would have been in there, but when it's all said and done, I'm glad that I had to replace her and I found the perfect person." And then, with the one on police violence, I had a hand holding a gun pointed at a youth, you know, a black youth. [Laughs.] [01:50:07]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Good try, Juan. [They laugh.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Not only did I try, but I went over the top. It was like, "Juan, come on now!" [Laughs.] I went over the top. I went on the deep end, you know. And I was telling—I showed it to some other people and say, "I know they're not going to do it," but I guess I wanted them to go through the motions of saying no. You know? So what I did was I created one which spoke more about, in general, gun violence in the United States. So, two guns pointing at each other and both guns has the American flag. And this is the result.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow. So it's going to be stained glass.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: It's going to be on glass, pebble glass, so the surface is going to be glass with a pebbly surface, and it's going to be mounted directly on the wall. It's an interesting fabrication process, because they digitally transfer the image on a metal plate and then they sandwich it with a sheet of glass on top and a thin film of another metal, which is coated in white, and that becomes the tile. They're all 12-inch tiles that will create the overall image.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Why the fetus?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Birth, new generation. [01:52:00] You know, humanity always taking a hold of the earth. Continuation.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I like that the first image is a fetus and the last portrait is of—oh no, it's not the last, but Frida Kahlo is in there. The last portrait is Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. That's great.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yeah. I'm working on an image key to give a breakdown of each one of them, and also—which I'm still working on—I need to give the credit line to the photograph, which I appropriated, including that mural. I know where it was done. I'm still having a hard time finding out who made that mural.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Taína Caragol may know, because she's been working with Dolores Huerta so much over the recent years.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Okay. Why don't you give me her contact—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: —so that I could pose the question; I can send her the image. Images that I appropriated, there are some that are more like—what do you call it? Images that you don't have to necessarily give credit to. But all the other images that I appropriated—like the one of Gandhi, I'm still having a hard time finding who shot that photograph. The Frida Kahlo, that's very obvious, I found that very easily. But I want to—in the image key, just a description, who was this person, so on and so forth, and then a credit line.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. That's a—

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So I'm waiting. They told me that the week of the 15th of October is, like, a fall break. And that's when there's no students around and they could do it. [01:54:02] So I'm very anxiously waiting for the date. I think it will take—it's 12x22 feet. It will probably take a day to two days to install. I just want to be there when they open up the crates and spread out all of the tiles, make sure they're all in good condition, and then supervise the installation.

And then, there's a couple of other artists that have fallen behind as well, so they still have to determine whether they'll do a separate thing for me or, when all the rest are done, do it all together.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Who are the other artists?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, one of them is Martin Puryear, the sculptor.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh that's right, yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I don't remember who is the third one. There was a fourth one because the wall in which my mural is going to be installed—there's another side to the wall where a video artist was going to install a huge

screen and create a video dealing with the history of the University of Notre Dame. But that project fell through. I asked, Can I have the other side?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So there's three of us.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: The Martin Puryear is already installed. It's the other one that has fallen behind.

I had to sign this very complicated contract, and I had the director of Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts to sit down with me and go through this contract. And she gave me some very important recommendations for changes, which they all follow through, amazingly. [01:56:03] You know, it was like, she would ask me, "This is not good; this looks more like bad intentions." [Laughs.] You know? So when I went back and renegotiated—"Oh, okay." It was like, "Well, let's put it there." It's like what I did with Angela Davis, or with the gun violence thing. Let me see if I can get away with this, you know? "Oh, okay." You know? So they helped me a lot, to clear that out.

But it had these set deadlines, and the fabricator fell into problems where one of their equipment broke down and it's going to take two months to get it back up, and then I had to call them and say, "Hey, you know, originally this was supposed to be installed last spring semester." And they were fine and said, "Well, we understand you can't rush things and things like that happen. You still want the best to be installed so, you know, we'll wait on it, let us know when and whatever."

So anyway, there was a few hiccups here and there, but the tiles have been delivered, they were put in storage, and I'm hoping to be flying out there soon.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great, cool.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Perhaps—which is kind of interesting—it's the one mural out of the four art commissions that is closest to what I do in my studio. And very much to my surprise, with only two little glitches, they let me keep all of it. [01:58:08] So I feel very comfortable with that.

Oh, the other thing that I forgot to mention is that I did also arrange to fly to the university for a couple of days and do a series of workshops with art students at the university. I ended up with six of them, all females, three of them from the MFA program and others from other concentrations, but they were also part of the student organization in support of the Snite Museum. I did a number of art workshops. We engaged in a conversation. Before we even went into all that, I did a presentation of the mural proposal and what's the direction, and we got into a whole conversation. You know, how much do we need to embed in the mural the history of the University of Notre Dame, and the culture? And so they created artwork that reflected that. And so there's artwork by students.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: And there's research that further enhance the mural. So it's not just my design, but there's input, there's contribution by a number of students from the university.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Juan, can you—I'm thinking of the areas we haven't touched on directly yet, and I think teaching we haven't really. So can you talk about your first teaching job and how you made your way to Hunter? [02:00:01] Where that fits in with your—

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, my first teaching job was when I was an undergraduate at Cooper Union. During the spring semester and the fall semester, I think I taught three semesters at Cooper Union Saturday program. The Cooper Union Saturday program was founded by a group of Cooper Union students, for the most part—well, not for the most part. They were all students of color. Jeanne Moutoussamy, who later became Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, the wife of Arthur Ashe. I'm trying to remember the names of the other students, [George Mingo –JS]—I met them when I came in during my sophomore year, and they were all juniors and seniors, and they started the Saturday program.

They were a student organization that would meet every so often, have conversations about what's going on in Cooper Union, the fucked up situation that they're dealing with, the fact that there are a very small number within the student body, that it's an elitist school, and on and on and on. And that's when they decided to put together a Saturday art program open to high school students throughout the city of New York. No portfolio requirement, just an application, and they selected students based on the questionnaires and whatever. [02:02:02] For the most part, from the city, from the urban environment, that they hit on many of the high schools that is obviously saturated with black and Latino students. And it was free. They offer classes in

painting, in drawing, in photography, in sculpture, and in architecture.

So they were running the program. Jeanne Moutoussamy was the director of the program, she graduated and then Marina Gutierrez came in and she started teaching in the Saturday program and she became its director. And if I'm not mistaken, I think she's director to this day. But that happened after I graduated. Actually, when Jeanne Moutoussamy left, it wasn't Marina Gutierrez, it was Michael Brathwaite, who was a classmate, a painter, who took over the directorship. And it was through his directorship that I started teaching.

I was teaching painting to high school kids every Saturday. I didn't have a clue as to what I was doing on the one hand. But on the other hand, I took a number of assignments that I was doing, especially during my freshman year at Cooper Union, and I kind of like redesigned it and I was applying them in my classes. I was teaching them how to stretch canvas, and teaching them the color wheel, and drawing and painting from the model, and collage. [02:04:02] We did all sorts of stuff.

I'm trying to remember the name of the other person, because the classes were not taught just by one person but by a team of two. We would have meetings periodically to talk about what's going on in our class, and some of the challenges, and so on and so forth. We shared these things, which was very helpful, and we continued doing the class.

During the time that I was doing that, there was always these number of students that were applying to art schools and colleges. So although there was another class, which is portfolio preparation, those students that I was teaching, I would help them with their portfolio, not only to get into Cooper Union, but to Pratt or wherever they could get into. A number of these students had been admitted to Cooper Union, others went to Pratt School of Visual Arts or any of the CUNY Colleges. So that was my first experience, and that was when the teaching bug bit me.

After I finished Cooper Union and took about a year-and-a-half break, I went to graduate school. I wasn't thinking about becoming a TA. I was just focusing on my own work and taking the courses, and you meet a bunch of fellow students there. [02:06:00] One of them—I'm trying to remember her name—she was a TA, and she was a TA for Leon Golub. That first semester that I was there, she was TA-ing for him, and then came the second semester. She fell ill and she suggested my name to Leon, to take her place in the meantime, and Leon said, "Absolutely." So I met with him on several occasions and then—actually, that wasn't the first TA I did, but let me finish that and then I can go back.

The point was that I had meetings with him, it was very interesting. I don't know if they still have that same setup, but it was an interesting setup because the classes was divided into two parts and each part was three hours. So Leon taught one part and I taught the second part, with that same group. His was an afternoon class, mine was an evening class. So I sat down with him, I developed a curriculum, we went over it, he suggested that I make certain adjustments, which helped tremendously. Every two weeks, we would get together and, "Okay, what's happening? What's going on?" And we had that conversation, he tells me what he's doing. We tried very hard, that whatever I did, in some way or another complimented what he was doing. Because he's the professor, no?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [02:08:00]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: So that collaboration worked out very well, but unfortunately, the person who had the appointment first just got worse and worse and never came back that semester, so I ended up teaching that whole semester.

And then, she got better during the summer break and she was ready to come back and he didn't want her back. He brought it up to me towards the end of the spring semester, like, "Oh, God, what's her name, so-and-so has gotten better and she's planning on coming back." When he said "she's planning," I'm saying, "Hmm, what's"—you know? So he said, "You're doing so great—you've done so great with the students that I want to keep you. If I could find another class for her I will, but I don't want her back." And I said, "Oh, my God, that's very delicate, because she's a friend."

But he told her and then, you know, she obviously got a bit bent out of shape and there was a lot of friction between us, because it's like, "The reason why I'm not back is because you agreed to continue working with him." And I said, "Yeah, but he said that he doesn't want you back. He only had you for about three weeks. I worked with him for 12, 13 weeks in the semester, so obviously, he has much more experience working with me and it's obvious that he—you know, it's nothing personal, and I like doing this and I'm learning a lot, but you've only been around for the beginning two or three weeks." [02:10:14] So I could understand that. "How can I say no to that? I think if I was in your shoes, I would have understand it; it's very obvious."

Anyway, the point is that our friendship just—you know. Later on it kind of like got fixed up, but the point of the matter was that I did two semesters teaching under Leon Golub as a TA, and that was incredible. And at the

same time, when I decided to take her place, I had enough confidence because of my Saturday program experience.

What I wanted to note was, that was my second TA for Rutgers. Because my first TA, which lasted a semester, was with this professor who was an art history professor and he was teaching an introduction to art history, and he offered it to me because he had seen me perform in the group critiques and all of that, and he was impressed with the way I conducted myself. And he, you know, "Would you like to be my TA for my class?" At first, I thought it was a studio course but it was an art history course, an introductory course, and I said, "Well, you know, I'm not an art history major," and he said, "That's okay. What you need to do is follow through with what I'm teaching. [02:12:02] There are certain things that I haven't been able to sit down and do research on, to further enhance my lectures, but you could do that for me and on the second half of the course, you could cover that for me."

So I did it and it was good. I really enjoyed it, but I was still uncomfortable because I would rather do a studio rather than an art history. So I did the semester with him and then I said—you know. There was also a lot of work on the side where I had to—and since he knew I was a photographer, I had to go through a lot of books and photograph images and make them into slides, and the whole nine yards, so there was a tediousness that went along with that.

So I said, you know, "Thank you, it was wonderful, but I don't want to do this anymore." Then, at that moment came the opportunity to take this person's place for Leon's class, so then I, I guess, defected from one place to the other. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you remember his name?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you remember his name?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I don't remember his name, but interestingly enough, he passed away a year or two after I graduated. But I don't quite remember. If I was to see the name, it will—I'll point it out to you. He was one of those faculty that even during the group critiques—because we had group critiques with the individual professor conducting the seminar, and then we had these other group critiques where students from different classes would get together, and a group of faculty would be there as well. [02:14:02] He was always getting into arguments with the other faculty, even with Leon Golub, get into this really heated argument and all of that. A feisty guy.

I think part of it, why he approached me, other than observing how I conducted myself in this critique, is that we were both commuting from Port Authority to New Brunswick, so very often we rode together to school. You know? And that began to happen with Leon Golub too, and sometimes even I would stay in New Brunswick, working until 10-something, make sure I take the last bus back to Port Authority, and sometimes I would be riding back with Leon or with him. So we talked a lot, you know?

So anyway, so that was my first TA gig and then—which was on my second semester of my first year. And then I finished my second year in graduate school, TA-ing the last two semesters—

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JUAN SÁNCHEZ: —with Leon Golub.

So the rule—I don't know if it's written, but the spoken rule has always been, at the time, that a TA is someone who is on the second half of the graduate program. The first two semesters, you're not considered for TA. That didn't happen to me. I got a TA on my second semester of my first year. So, unlike other people that ended up with one to two semesters as a TA in the graduate program, I graduated with three semesters under my belt. So I got more teaching experiences. I've experienced a series of situation in relation to students that were terrific, and in other cases hard-earned experiences. You know? And then, at that point, it really confirmed that this is something that I really wanted to do.

During my last semester at Rutgers, I became a member of the College Art Association. I submitted a résumé to a bunch of universities that had openings. I went to one of the conferences in New York and sat through a bunch of interviews with people looking for teachers. I ended up realizing that I didn't want to move out of New York.

A lot of my other colleagues found jobs in the Midwest. [00:02:02] They traveled to wherever the job was and then established themselves there. I didn't want to leave New York. I got—well, I don't know if the word paranoid is—but, you know, I'm saying to myself, What is this black Puerto Rican going to do in Colorado or in Utah? It's like, I don't know if I'll even [laughs] last a semester. What kind of environment am I going to enter? Let's

suppose that the school was half decent in that regard, but then, you know, the state or whatever, you know. So I've always been very aware as to, you know—I mean, what part of New York are you in? No, no, I'm not going there. So I said, I'm not going to go out there at the risk of—not so much physical harm, although that's always been in my mind, but just going there and being miserable. It's like, I'm totally out of my element. You know?

So I stopped applying. I just didn't—you know. And what I was doing was whenever there was an opening at SVA or at Pratt or at Brooklyn College, I would apply. I got no response, and then one day in the *New York Times*, I saw this announcement for Hunter College. This was like eight years after I graduated. Because when I graduated from Rutgers University, I was unemployed for about six to eight months. I was going to all sorts of job interviews that had nothing to do with me as an artist. [00:04:00] I had to take tests and some of them were city programs. I flunked them all, I can't pass a goddamn test, I couldn't find a job.

Then all of a sudden something came up at the Queens Museum. Their education department had an opening for someone to conduct tours, develop workshops for children, adults, train docents, write programs for exhibitions that are taking place, and turn it into workshops and train docents to give tours and things like that. It sounded so much up my alley, and a lot of the skills that they were asking, I got it at Rutgers University.

So I applied to that. It was a city government-funded program. I got the job. The salary was miserable, but at least I'm working. I had my ups and downs, but overall, it was a wonderful experience to have an exhibition of Gorky mural commissions installed in their gallery—that was the show, that was the catalog—and for me to study this and develop programs and train docents and give them a tour of the show, and pointing out certain elements, which they of course like robots repeated. But the point is that that was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

And that was where I met my wife, Alma. [00:06:00] Because at the time, we needed—I suggested that for these tour workshops, since there's a component that deals with children, I would like to bring music, dance, and theater into the fold. But we need to bring someone with that background, to sit down with me and develop that part of the syllabus, and then for them to conduct these workshops. So we interviewed a number of students, and Alma was among them. She was a graduate student at NYU in theater education. And she got the position. Because she had all the qualifications. [They laugh.] We worked together, and she did a series of workshops. You know, the various shows that were coming in at that time.

They also started doing the Queens artists' biennial, which was concentrated on showcasing artists living in Queens. It was amazing, the things that she did with children and with adults. That had an impact in further developing the program on my end. It only lasted a year, less than a year. The program was cut; I was unemployed again.

And then after that, I got a call from Cooper Union, and Cooper Union was looking for an admissions counselor. That was the title, and the job is for you to go to all of the high schools and the college art fairs, to represent Cooper Union. [00:08:00] Bringing the catalogs, talk to parents, what are the requirements, what are the deadlines, whatever. I gave it a different shape, to the position, because I said, Well, I'm an artist, I graduated from Cooper Union School of Art, I graduated from Rutgers. I'm painting, I'm showing, I just finished a gig at the Queens Museum. I will represent the School of Art, the School of Architecture, and the School of Engineering, but I want to also work closer with the School of Art and the School of [Architecture –JS]. Because they were sending out faculty to these art school fairs, but sometimes they have problems finding someone to—you know. So I said, I'm willing to cover that. If a faculty can do it, fine, but I'm willing to cover that.

So Pratt Institute was having their portfolio art fairs, where a bunch of art schools from all over the United States would go there and look at portfolios and consult students on their portfolio. I participated in that. I went to all the high school fairs, which was very challenging, because this was all in the evening and I had to carry boxes of catalogs. It was me and a bag full of these things, you know, and sometimes I used a small hand truck. Through the subway, because I'm not a driver.

So I did that for eight years and then what happened was that in 1978—no, I'm sorry. Because I started there, I finished—God, I'm trying to remember now the timeline. [00:10:04] I graduated in 1980, did the thing at the Queens Museum, after that it was Cooper Union. So I worked from 1981, '82, through 1988.

In 1988, I got the Guggenheim, and by that time, I was kind of like burnt with Cooper Union. Nobody was interested in my transferring from this administrative job to teaching, and so I said, I'm never going to get a teaching job here, I have to start looking out elsewhere. But I got the Guggenheim and I was under the naïve expectation that now that I got the Guggenheim—I got the Guggenheim and a professor teaching English at Cooper Union got the Guggenheim that year. And we went to the party that they throw for new fellows and all of that, and that's when we met. He asked me, "Oh, you're from Cooper Union too?" "Yeah, but I work for the admissions department." "Oh, how interesting, because most of the time, they usually give it to professors or people who are in the field." I said, "Well, I guess I'm an exception but quite frankly, when you look at my

résumé, I am in the field."

So he congratulated me and everything, and then we had coffee a number of times, and then he asked me, "Why aren't you teaching?" "I guess it's politics. You know how it is with students. You're an administration student, and I had a bad start, and I guess in regards of whatever, I guess they don't want me there." He said, "That's terrible because not everybody gets a Guggenheim." And I said, "That's true. Not everybody has the kind of track record that I have, where some of the faculty there can't even compare." You know?

So I decided to leave. I resigned from my position against the advice of the director of admissions. You know, "Juan, just take a leave, congratulations on your Guggenheim. Just take a leave because you'll have a job to come back. What if you don't have a job? Do you have a job lined up?" I said, "No. I'm going to stay out for a year and then figure it out." And other people, friends, "You're doing the wrong thing." I said, "Why do I—I got a Guggenheim, it's $25,000. That's going to keep me afloat for one year." $25,000. I was getting like $15,000 a year. You know, it's like—so I'll be living a little bit of the high life too, and I'm going out of faith, but I want something else other than coming back to this. As a matter of fact, if I was to do that and I come back to this and stay there, it would be like a failure to me. I don't want that.

So anyway, against many people's advice, I just decided to quit and I would just focus working on my work or whatever. The money was running out, Alma got pregnant. I get a phone call from Hunter College—an application that I submitted like a year ago. And, you know, they want to interview me and whatever. So I went. [00:14:03] I jumped through a lot of hoops and I got the position, and long and behold, towards the end of my Guggenheim period, I started teaching at Hunter College, in 1990. And that's been the case, you know?

So there was a number of hurdles, and again, my experience with Cooper Union has been really very good on the one hand. It's just that it got a bit tiresome, the administrative part. I was supposed to—and, you know, they sell you the Manhattan Bridge, because it's like—it was kind of like patronizing. "You're a person of color, we know that we have issues, that we don't have enough non-white students in the school, we want you to help us to accomplish this." And so I was supposed to submit a list of students that I have encountered, for the School of Engineering, for the School of Architecture, and for the School of Art.

For the School of Engineering, I didn't have too much of a problem. It's just a question of finding those students who had the kind of SAT scores required to enter a school of engineering. And, you know, I didn't come across many, but I came across quite a few. And some of them even came from Williamsburg, you know, which was amazing. I would give them a list of maybe 10, and if they took in five, I would be happy. Sometimes they took in more than half of what I recommended.

The School of Architecture was very supportive. And I didn't have as large a list for the School of Architecture because, okay, they had to submit a portfolio, they had to take a test that was mailed to them, and they had to have their grades, especially in math. [00:16:19] But I would submit four, five. Sometimes they took them all, sometimes they took maybe half.

It's the School of Art that I was having a goddamn problem with.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: You know? More often, they didn't consider any of the people that I was recommending. Sometimes they would take one or two. It was very frustrating. They didn't—I wanted to be a part of the selection process. "No fucking way," or whatever. During that whole period, that eight-year period that I was at Cooper Union, I was exhibiting like mad, I was invited to be a panelist for NEA, for New York State [laughs] Council of the Arts. I had been making decisions with other people over individual artist grants, projects, fundings for museums and art institutions. I've been out there, you know, so it's not like I'm an idiot. So at that point, you know, I said—well, it was even long before I stayed there for eight years, that I decided that I've got to leave.

So anyway, things happened with the Guggenheim and whatever, and long and behold, I took my chance, I'm never going to come back. And then Hunter came into the picture. At the same time that Hunter came into the picture, I've had other interviews, with Parsons at one point. And my experience—the interview experience at Parsons was so awful, in terms of the kinds of people that interview me. [00:18:11] There was some weird antagonism. There were people that I didn't really like. One of them was the dean of the school or something like that. So I said, I don't want to work with these people.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I had the same experience with Parsons when I applied there. They accepted me for grad school there, and I went to visit and I didn't want to go.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I don't want to work with these people. At the end of the interview—and I took a lot of nerve of me, because I was like shaking, because I said, Well, there's nothing else out there, these are the people that

I'm facing. Hunter yet didn't enter the picture. But then I said, Juan, you made a decision not to come back to Cooper Union, why do you want to come back? Maybe it's within your field or whatever, but these are people that are even worse. And not that the people at Cooper Union were bad. It's just that I had my frustration and there was a block.

But these are, like, nasty people. So, "We'll call you," whatever. "If you move up to the next stage, we'll call you." I got up and I said, "You know what, don't call me. I'm not interested." And they kind of like, "Why?!" And I said, "Well, why don't you think back and just review what happened here? I think that you'll find the answer. And if you don't find the answer that's fine." And I left. I left with a heavy heart, but at the same time I said, "I don't want to be there." [00:20:00]

So, shortly after, then Hunter College came into the picture and it was beautiful. The interview, everything. Everything was just wonderful. At the same time that I was going through that, the student organization invited me to give a talk, which gave the opportunity for the people from the P and B, which is made out of faculty members—a couple of them came to my talk, and there was one or two other faculty that came to the talk, so obviously they came back with a report. Then it's been—you know, you have your rough moments working with an administration. And teaching is always challenging, but what I really appreciate—to me it's a great blessing—is that I'm teaching, I'm encountering these amazing students, both undergraduate and graduates, and it's the kind of dynamic that in some form or another just feeds me as an individual and as an artist. It's just another kind of energy that comes back into my work.

The point is that I'm in an environment where there is a creative intellectual discourse that's always constant, and there were many moments where those kinds of conversations have had a certain impact or an influence in the way that I think about my work. So it's a two-way street that really, really complement each other very well. And that has been a very critical component in my growth, in my development, not only as a teacher but also as a practicing artist. [00:22:14]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. I think those are all the big areas I had in mind. Is there anything we haven't talked about? [Laughs.] We've talked about a lot.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: That's a $64,000 question.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [Laughs.] Anything to add—

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I'll probably come up with the answer as an afterthought.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —that has to be on the record? Yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: When I hit my head on the pillow or something. Oh, I don't know. I really don't know. Maybe for you to think about—I don't know, I think all that can't be covered. I just can't quite point my finger at—you know, it's—I don't know. Oh, I could tell you an experience that I had at Princeton University.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Which—you could go into the Web and find tons of information about that.

I'm trying to remember what year was that, I think it may have been 2002 or something like that. I know that it was a year that we had a fire at home. The apartment above us had a fire and it made some really terrible damage in the upper floor. We got water damage. And at that time, I had my flat file full of prints and I had my catalogs. [00:24:02] I lost most of them, and a lot of my own prints, and I lost quite a number of prints from exchanges with other artists, and the rest of the apartment was water damaged.

Later that year—oh, and that happened during my very first sabbatical, so it was 2002. My very first semester sabbatical, that was totally ruined because of the fire. Whatever plans I had, to focus on my work and to do some traveling, just went out the window. I made some money from some sales, so the plan was for me to hit certain parts of Europe, certain parts of Latin America, do some traveling and sightseeing, and that all went out.

You know what? It wasn't 2002. It was earlier, because Liora was about three years old at the time, so that must have been in 1993, '94.

The point of the matter was that Princeton University, a curator that does exhibitions there—and I'm trying to remember, since they have a number of schools. There's a school that has a major in social and political studies, and it's an area where a lot of people that's looking towards politics or working with people, society, things like that, would major in. And that building, that area had a gallery. [00:26:11]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Juan, can I—[Tape stops, restarts]—okay, so Princeton and the gallery.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yes. So, the person who runs the gallery invited me to have a show. And that was at a time when, you know—the reason why, in addition to the fact that that incident, it spoiled my sabbatical twofold—one is that, obviously, that was a situation that was going to take so much time, just to go through that. And on top of that, our apartment was so damaged that I had to move the family to a hotel, and we spent about six months there. All the money that I saved for my trips and whatnot was gone.

So when the opportunity came with Princeton, yes, we talked about doing a show and doing a lecture and things like that. And for some reason, I thought we talked about, Well, what would be an artist fee, you know? The point of the matter is that the show did take place. She made a selection of works that were very nicely installed, but then a group of white Irish students took offense to the way that I was using the Catholic iconography. [00:28:17] They called it anti-Christian, racist, hateful, you know, the whole nine yards. And they organized to protest and demanding the closing of the show. At the same time, they recruited the campus clergy and they recruited a bunch of people from various religious faiths—Muslim, Jews, Buddhists, everybody—to support them, because, "This is hateful art."

JOSH T. FRANCO: What were the examples they were pointing to?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: They were pointing to just some of the elements: the sacred heart, you know, the hand with the stigmata, images of Christ, you know. All these things that spoke about how Europe conquered and colonized the Americas under the blessing of the Vatican, and how, through their whole genocide process, used religion to justify what they're doing and how in the process they even converted huge numbers of indigenous people and then later killed them, after they built their churches. You know, the whole story, the whole nine yards. [00:30:18] The elements references all of these things, even though it was more specifically dealing with Puerto Rico. But the thing about the paintings also is that they connect—there are moments, there are many moments where it connects with the history of the rest of the Americas.

So the curator, whose name I don't remember—but it's all in the—you know, you can just Google it, it's all there—got very scared, very frightened, and she didn't have the courage to defend the exhibition. There was like a town meeting for me to face an auditorium packed with people. And I went there with my brother Sam. I sent out some emails to people. They never responded, which was very disappointing, because I wanted to go there with a group of other people, to have a dialogue and to have a conversation.

I did the presentation myself and I told them, I said, Listen, I was born and raised a Catholic. I'm not a Catholic now, but that was my upbringing, and I've had my wonderful experiences and I had my not so wonderful experiences. [00:32:10] When you deal with the history of colonialism, you cannot deny that the Catholic church played a very prominent part in all of this. That cannot be denied. And my work references those things. It's not something that I make up. It is the truth, and whatever exaggeration is in my work, it's still true, you know? And that's that. My intention was not to offend, but for those of you who are sincerely aware and clear about such contradictions, quite frankly, you cannot stand by and make a defense towards that.

I ended it by saying, "There's a lot of people here. Some of them are, you know—I see some Latinos, I see a group of people here. They know what's up. I don't know why they're here, maybe they're here to support me or to hear me, I don't know." But they even had some Latino—I don't remember—who was there to support this group. I said, you know, "This is the truth. I'm not ashamed of it, I have no apologies. If you want to have a conversation, that's fine, but I for one can say that if I see a Catholic, I don't hate that person, in the same way that if I see a Jew or I see a Buddhist or whatever, I don't have no hate for anyone." [00:34:12] So, you know, "This is it, this is what my work is about, this is my thesis."

And then I went along to say, "If you really want to go into that direction, then perhaps—I'm sure that in the university of Princeton, Princeton University, I'm sure that there's a lot of theses and doctoral dissertations that speak to what I'm expressing in my art. So what are you going to do with that? You know, are you going to take away the PhDs and the masters degrees from these people that has written this?" You know, I said, "This is ridiculous."

Still, a number of faculty and other people spoke against the work. The university newspapers, you know, "Hateful art by"—you know, whatever. It's all in the website. And they demanded that from now on, proposals have to be submitted to certain panels to approve. And of course the woman succumbed to that and I told her, I said, "You did two things. Forget about me. You're a major disappointment, I feel that you betrayed me, you brought me into this. But forget about me, you betrayed yourself. You betrayed the freedom of a scholar, of an art historian, of a curator. You gave that away. Now they're going to dictate what the fuck you're going to put on these walls." And I used the word "fuck" because I was angry. [00:35:57]

And then I left, you know? And of course my brother sat within the audience, and he said some things, but then when someone asked, "Well, who are you?"—"I'm his brother." "Oh, okay." So that was dismissed. [Laughs.] Right? But the point of the matter was that the show did not close, the work was returned, I never got paid for it.

The show that followed that was an exhibition on baseball and I didn't care to look any further, what followed after that. The point is that that got—

JOSH T. FRANCO: What happened with that curator?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I don't know if she's even still there. Oh, now I remember.

Earlier this year, I got an email, because they're putting together a chronology in some kind of a book in terms of the history, the kinds of art exhibitions that have taken place at Princeton, and so they wanted permission to use images from my exhibition for the book. And I said no. "No, you don't have my permission." The person who wrote to me—you know, I don't know why, because that person must know what happened after all. The campus, I mean, boy, did they write and protested it, whatever—asked me why and I responded, "Are you really asking that question?" [00:38:09] And then I said, "Well, thank you for the invitation but no, I don't want that exhibition to be included in the book. And that's it."

That was like a split-second decision and the follow-up to the second email was even less than that. I just didn't want to deal with it. It's the first time—no, it's not true. It's the second time that I've had that kind of reaction to my work. The first time was a two-person show, and I'm trying to remember at which state university it was, but I was invited to be in a show. Oh, God, I don't remember the name, I'm trying to remember the name of the SUNY school.

JOSH T. FRANCO: New Paltz?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: New Paltz?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: No, it's not New Paltz.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Binghamton, Purchase, Brockport.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Purchase sounds familiar. What others?

JOSH T. FRANCO: SUNY Albany, I think is there.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: It's not SUNY Albany. Well, I know that Howardena Pindell—I don't know if she's teaching there, but she was teaching there at the time, but she wasn't there when I had the show. [SUNY Stony Brook. *Freedom Within: Paintings by Juan Sánchez/Installation by Alfredo Jaar*. –JS]

The point was that it was a two-person show. The other artist was Alfredo Jaar. [00:40:00] So there was a selection of my paintings in one part of the gallery, and Alfredo Jaar took another part of the gallery and did about two or three installation pieces. One installation was a wall piece where he had a drawing of a cow, and in that drawing there was this black child sticking his head up his butt. Now, his installation was dealing with drought, with hunger, and the situation that's going on in the various parts of Africa. That piece speaks to the despair of people trying to convince the cow to give milk, and for some reason, they were speaking through their rear end.

And all of that is documented, because, you know, Alfredo Jaar, he's like—so, a lot of students and faculty that walked through the show took offense to that piece. I was okay, I don't know why. [Laughs.] but the point of the matter was that they took offense and there was protests and rallies and whatever, and they wanted to close the whole show. [00:42:00] I don't know why I don't remember her name, because she had a lot of courage, and she defended the work and she defended the show and got into this whole argument, "This is a university, this is an art gallery, a university art gallery." So she was very good, she was very courageous.

And like I had to do with Princeton, Alfredo had an encounter with the groups, to talk about his work and what the work is all about, and it wasn't anything what they think. Of course, the people that took offense to that and then rallied were the black students at the time. In the end, his presentation didn't quite satisfy people, but the show did not close, and it ended and that's that. But that was my very first experience, but Alfredo Jaar was the target.

The thing with Alfredo Jaar is that—and we had that conversation. You know it's like, "Well, what they're going to see is a red-haired, blue-eyed guy there," and they immediately—"Oh, this is a white guy" or whatever. But I knew that—because in one of those conversations, which he kept very hidden, it's not like something that he—other artists, Chilean artists have done so—but, you know, he comes from a Palestinian ancestry. [00:44:08] So I said, "Why don't you just tell them what's up, you know? You're not just some white guy from Queens that's doing this. You know? That will bring a whole 'nother context, because your art has always been dealing with political issues and is an analysis on all levels, including economic, dealing with those issues on an international

level. So that's what you could—you are a political, very conscious artist, that's what you're doing. And hey, you have—you're connected. It's not like—it's an interesting subject, you are connected. You know?"

He didn't want to deal with it. He said, "No," you know. That is a subject that has never entered into his work either. It's just one of those—it's like, once upon a time black people tried to pass as white or something. Is this being recorded?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: But, you know, I was kind of like disappointed. I said, "Okay?" So I guess we all have our own closets, but I'm saying, "That's ridiculous," you know? So obviously—and the world doesn't really know, but I said, "Once you tell them what's up, maybe the Jews will get upset with you, but everybody else will be cool, or at least they'll think a little bit more." So he didn't want to go there. That was the first incident, and then the second was the one with Princeton. [00:46:00]

And then, in my travels, a visiting artist gig at the University of Colorado—the show that Exit Art curated traveled there, went there—visited a bunch of students' studio, did my lecture. During my lecture, a number of people—because that was a base where you had ROTC—a bunch of guys dressed in fatigues just stepped out and left. Some in the beginning and others towards the middle. You know, "I don't want to hear this shit." I've experienced those things from time to time. But in general, when I use the word receptive, it doesn't necessarily mean that they all agreed with me, but that they sat down, they heard. There's always people that come and compliment what you're doing or whatever. "I'm doing this work about that," or whatever.

But I know that throughout my career and I would dare say in all of my lectures, I can't say there hasn't been one where—there's always people in the audience that take offense to what you're saying, and don't agree, and so on and so forth, and sometimes the questions are very poignant to state that. The best I could do is, "Well, Google. And then we can have another conversation." It's not about hate, although there's a bit of angst in some of the pieces, but it's not about hate. If someone has his hands around your neck and is choking you and you protest, is it because you hate or is it because [laughs]—

JOSH T. FRANCO: You want to live. [00:48:00]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: —the person is killing you? You know, so put things in its proper context. I'm not a black supremacist [laughs] or whatever, I'm just saying what it is. But I think those were two events, and of course the second one directly in reaction to my work, that—I suspect it was going to happen sooner or later, but when it happens it does shake you, maybe even shake your very foundation. But then I say, "Well, what else did you expect? But of course, onward." Because that's what the word "struggle" means. I'm sure that I'll be facing future confrontations, subtle, overt, whatever, and especially at this time, this period, more than likely more so.

So we'll see what happens, but my point is that there's so much going on in terms of how this work has affected and has evolved me, and how much I have benefited from it—while at the same time confronting a bit of obstacles and challenges, and very strong supportive, and at times mixed or negative, reaction—that I feel that the work is really a living entity. I feel that in terms of the making of the work, the process of the work, it's a continuum. It's constantly, I would say, becoming. [00:50:16] I don't think I will ever reach to a finite. There's always the next paragraph, the next chapter. It just goes on and on and on and it keeps evolving. So it's life, so to speak. Along with that and my own internal experience with it, there's the external elements and circumstance that, along with the good and the bad, is also going to be a constant.

And then the other thing also is—because sometimes when I look at work that I've done in the '80s and the '90s, and I could see how much I have changed, but still support, the work—this is me, this is who I am—you know, it's interesting how time still also has an impact in how the work evolved, because within that context, I also have evolved.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That seems like a very good ending line.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Oh, okay. Okay. I was about to ask: Do you have another question? [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I don't have any more off the top of my head.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: What's your time situation? Is it possible to get a sandwich and maybe somewhere it may stimulate another question or something? I don't know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, let's get some food and we can think about it.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Okay.

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JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay, this is Josh T. Franco and Juan Sánchez, back from lunch, on day two of Juan's oral history for our final session. Juan, I think one thing we haven't talked about, as a group or a thread, is the printshops you've worked at and the residencies you've held. So maybe we can start with Lower East Side Printshop, which we haven't discussed yet. So if you want to talk about your involvement there and then we can go on to the others.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, let me begin that—I mean, my first introduction to print was actually at Cooper Union, and it was a one-year silk screen course. It was two semesters. You weren't obligated to take both of them, but there was part one and part two. That was the first time that I've ever taken anything with regards to printmaking, and at that point it was screen printing. I think it was a very good experience. I think I learned a lot. Of course there's the technical drudgery that you have to go through in order for you to then create a system of control and production. The course was not only teaching techniques in screen printing, but also techniques in terms of editioning methodology. I learned a lot from it. I don't think I produced anything of value, but it's there and it certainly was a breaking point, a breaking introduction to printmaking. [00:02:14]

So I took the two semesters and then I went on throughout my tenure at Cooper Union. And then when I was going to Rutgers University, printmaking was nowhere in my mind. I was just focusing on three things. I was focusing in painting, photography, and I've had an interest, an aspiration, to explore video and film. I did one course in film at Cooper Union and that was that, and when I came into the Mason Gross School of the Arts, I took a number of video courses. That was quite a learning experience. At the end, it was neither here or there, even though I have stuff that perhaps may be worth looking at again and reviewing.

I didn't take any printmaking course at Rutgers, but what happened was that I met Robert Blackburn, who I've heard of but I never met before. And that was because I went to this other campus where other courses, especially in art history, was taking place. All of the studio courses were taking place in downtown New Brunswick and art history courses was elsewhere in the campus. [00:04:14] And so, I discovered that there was a huge printshop there, as well as a huge sculpture shop for wood and metal work. And so I just went in to browse, to look around, and there was Robert Blackburn. I didn't even know what he looked like, it was just a name that I was familiar with.

I introduced myself and we talked and I had a wonderful encounter with him. And he said that I should take a printmaking course, not necessarily his, but that I should take up printmaking. There was a number of occasions where every time I dropped by for art history, I would come earlier, because I knew he was there, and I would have these exchanges with him. He kind of got disappointed that I didn't take any printmaking classes, but I was so involved with the other courses and also struggling with the video courses, that I just couldn't figure out—I didn't have any opening to try a hand at printmaking there.

But what did happen was that after I graduated—maybe about two years, three years after I graduated, he called me and, "Oh it's been a long time, yeah." [00:06:06] And he told me about this artist program. It was, at the time, called the Third World Artist Program. And it was a program where artists were selected to learn various printmaking processes, and in the end, a portfolio of the group would be produced. So he told me about it and he told me to apply, so his printshop sent me an application and I worked through the application and sent them slides of my work, my paintings, and I got into the program.

So I was among about six artists. One of them I remember because I always kept in touch with her and she's here in New York. The rest, I don't know what has become of them. One of the artists was Tomie Arai. We took classes in etching. We took classes in lithography. You know, various techniques. The printshop, for the most part, is a lithography, intaglio, print shop.

It was a very trying period because already—and now that I remember, that was like 1983, '84—I was pretty much very involved with my work. Producing works, exhibiting them. [00:08:14] That program put me in a situation that I wasn't quite ready for, but I went through it, and that is that I had to become a student again, and learning the process and everything that goes along with the various technique and processes. It was something that I had to go through without the ego getting in the way, and kind of like expecting to produce work that you think is complete and that you could exhibit. Learning the processes was very hard, because it's very tedious. And the results, a lot of disasters. Every time I went to the printshop, I ended up coming out with a very stiff neck, so it was a very stressful experience.

And then, part of it is that you take these classes and you go through the motions and whatever, but the printshop is open. So before classes, between classes, after classes, on days that you don't have classes, it's there for you to go and to work on your assignments and to use the printshop, and so on and so forth. It's a collective printshop, which—for the most part that's how it is with university printshops. [00:10:03] You share presses, you take turns, you do this, you do that, and that's the dynamic. The only difference is that you had artists that are very developed and mature in the medium and it works to their advantage. They work on the plates, they process them, they wait on line to ink it, they wait on line to print it, but then they go back, re-ink

the plate, wait on line to print it and that kind of thing, and they already was in the groove, and that's a dynamic or whatever. For someone who is very clumsy and flimsy, you know, you take your plate to the press and when you peel off the papers, it's nothing of what you expected because you processed the plate wrong or whatever. I mean, that created a lot of tension as well.

But one thing that I did—and, you know, at a certain point, I said, "Well, this is the deal, this is who I am within this situation. I have to accept it and deal with it if I'm going to benefit from this." But in addition to that, it was a space of international artists. You're talking about artists not only based here in New York where, you know, you have for the most part artists of color. Black, Asian, Latino, some of them coming from various parts of Latin America like Peru, Ecuador, Mexico. It was quite a diversity and there was also a number of artists coming from Africa. The Bob Blackburn Printshop had this other program where they were bringing artists from abroad, to have a similar experience. [00:12:01] Others they brought in specifically because they're also master artists or developed artists in their own right, to produce limited editions with them.

And so, all of these things were going on at the same time, and I was kind of like in awe, while at the same time overwhelmed. It was a situation where I felt a bit fragile, because seeing these incredible people coming in and out, you know, and producing work and everything, you felt a little incompetent or whatever; you're not at their level. It was an interesting dynamic and that was the printmaking world.

But I finished the program, we did a portfolio. The printers that's in the envisioning program helped us produce the prints, so that was a savior for me, and it ended up being a wonderful portfolio. Jayne Cortez was the person who was—we decided as a group, would be the person to write the essay for the portfolio. And she wrote this wonderful poem, and it was terrific. So I finished, I'm gone, and still thinking about, "What was my experience there? And what was really my frustration?" You know, because I really came to understand that it was me. Everything else that was in place was there to take me through various stages, but somehow I think my sense of inefficiency or whatever, and the rush, the impatience of coming out with a finished product, so to speak, got in the way. [00:14:21]

And then one morning I woke up. It was like—what is it, with, like nirvana? It was like one of those—well, it was just one of those enlightening moments where it all fell into place and I knew what was going on. I come to realize that the problem that I was having is that I had to learn the techniques in a certain way and apply them in a certain way, and there's a certain methodology. There's an orthodoxy of how these things are done. And that wasn't really my temperament, but I was forced to go through that, and that's the way they teach and that's the way a lot of printmakers work.

And I had this dream and I said, You know what, I should just think about making prints the way I paint. I should think about using similar methodology and strategy in the way that I apply paint, in the way that I apply collage, in the way that I cut and tear pieces of canvases and adhere it to another piece of canvas, and so on and so forth. [00:16:05] Sure, they taught me this technique about chine-collé, where while you're printing, at the same time you're adhering another piece of paper onto the surface of another piece of paper. But the way I did it in painting was different. And then all of a sudden it was like a brainstorm and I was like, Oh, now I understand. Now I know how I should be working these prints.

So with that in mind, I applied for a grant at the New York State Council of the Arts, and the grant was to produce a suite of five prints—a suite of five mixed-medium prints, that's how I called it at the time—dealing with Puerto Rican history and politics, and so on and so forth. It was going to be a portfolio, and an edition of 25. And part of the deal was that from that edition, I would donate a number of these portfolios to a number of institutions. Which in the end, I ended up donating it to the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, I donated it to—I forgot what other places I did, but the point is that from the edition of 25, there would be a number that I would donate to institutions, for their collection.

I got the grant, I approached a number of people, master printers here in New York who have their own printshop. [00:18:00] What I got was—you know, it was a small grant, it was like $12,000. I sat down with Bob, I talked to Bob as well, and I showed him the drawings, the sketches. And he looked at it and he got very excited, and he also got very excited that I came back. He said, "Why are you coming back?"

I said, "Well, I need to conquer this. I'm not satisfied with the results, but I was happy that I went through this, and I need to conquer this, but of course I need the help. The reason why I was able to produce a piece for the portfolio is because so-and-so assisted me in this and I would like to work with a master printer, which gives me all the freedom to decide and make whatever twists and turns necessary to make the prints. I want the prints not to look like prints. I want the prints to look like something that I just whipped out on paper." Because one of the struggles I was having is that there's just too many printmakers. They make their prints and you know that it's a print and it has a certain sterile, overly technical rigidity to them. "I want these prints to be as fresh as a painting, as a watercolor, as a drawing, and all of the prints are going to be bleed." And to this day, all of my prints are bleed. There's no borders around anything.

So he was excited. He gave me this printmaker who was there for a while and then she left. [00:20:02] I'm trying to remember her name, but she was a Chinese printmaker who worked there for a while, became one of their master printers for the editioning. I worked with her and I also spoke to an old friend from school, from Cooper Union, who was still in Cooper Union teaching printmaking, a Native American by the name of Lorenzo Clayton. Lorenzo Clayton is a painter, an incredible painter, and he does these constructions in which he combines sculpture and painting, and he also does these very complex prints. He [was a fellow student who –JS] studied with me at Cooper Union. He's a little older than me. I think he came from New Mexico.

So I went back to him and I said, you know, "I want to make this print, I have this portfolio." Bob said, "Well, we could help you produce three of those prints." And I said, "Okay, well I think I know somebody who could help me with the other two." So it was a breakthrough for me, because what I ended up doing—each of the prints are multilayered, physically. Each of the prints are made up of two or three, sometimes four layers of paper. And in some instances, there was one print which was produced at Cooper Union, that I also went to a botanica and got these cards with the image of San Martín, and there was thread sewn in different parts of the card, so I got a bunch of those as a collage element. [00:22:17] I made a series, an edition of a black-and-white image, silver gelatin print; that became another collage element. I printed silk screen and then on top of that I printed lithography on top of it.

Those things were not introduced to me at Bob Blackburn, but then again, those are beginning classes and I was just applying a lot of advanced stuff on the spot. So I would print silk screen one color, texture and washes with lithography, and then another silk screen on top, and so on and so forth. And I would tear that print and collage it onto another print, and continue printing from there, and it just went on and on and on, and it became this very rich textured, layered, combined-medium prints. They had lithography, they had screen printing, they had silver gelatin prints, they have religious cards and elements.

I went through that process in both print shops. Lorenzo was as crazy as I was. It was like that kind of collaboration where he didn't care how many plates or how many screens, and when I reach a certain point and we look at it—and we were editioning right on the spot, we didn't even do a proof. [00:24:13] And I was looking with him at the print, "There's something missing," and he's like, "Yeah, I think there is." And then, "Ah, well, [laughs] let's do another silk screen!" And we go and we did it, you know? With Bob, it was a little bit more controlled, but still—he didn't want to go off the deep end like Lorenzo and I did. What was so funny is that in spite of that—which I didn't really consider a limitation. I just had to be a little bit more conscious as to how many plates and deal more with the combination of the colors and how to combine it in such a way where I could get more mileage out of it, and so on and so forth. But we did similar things.

What was funny was that the three prints produced at the Bob Blackburn Print Shop were a little thicker than the one that was produced at Cooper Union with Lorenzo Clayton, because those prints went up through the press [laughs] so many times, that it became almost like a stiff, thin piece of biscuit, if you want to call it, you know? But beautiful prints. And so, combining those five prints together made the portfolio. And then I said, "I need somebody to write an essay." And of course, who was the person that came to mind immediately, because she's kind of like been there for me from the beginning, was Lucy Lippard.

So I approached Lucy and of course—I approached Lucy, and even before we started the editioning, I brought my portfolio with the sketches and the drawings, because that's something that I wisely decided. [00:26:03] I said, "I have to do some sketches, some drawings, plan this out a little bit and then from there I'll just take off." So I came to her loft and I showed her these mixed-media sketches. There were collages, there were acrylic medium, pastels, whatever. I said, "These are the sketches for the prints that I want to realize. I got Sandra María Esteves to contribute a poem for the portfolio and I would love for you to write the essay." That's the essay that ended up being in the *Mixed Blessings* book. So she agreed to it and I said, "I'm broke but would you do it for an exchange of a print or two?" And she said, "Sure," you know? So she did the essay, that was included in the portfolio. She selected two prints, which was in—I think it was in her collection, but I think she donated to some institution somewhere.

The Metropolitan Museum bought the very first, portfolio number one. Again, this project was under the sponsorship of Exit Art. And recently, through Carmen Ramos, that portfolio is in the Smithsonian as well. But that was my breakthrough. That was the project that really dismantled and demystified and cut down on the anxiety of making prints. [00:28:00]

Later on, I knew the people at the Lower East Side Printshop for a long time and I visited the site on a number of occasions, and then I got invited to do a print with them. Susan Rosco [ph] was the master printer who was teaching classes in screen printing and etching and monotype printing, and so on and so forth. So I did a couple of editions with her, which was a wonderful experience. It was the first time that we tried—well, not the first time, but it was the second time that I worked with collagraph. It was strictly collagraph, with monoprinting, and I copied an image—it was laser copies. We used a Canon laser printer in a copy shop and I had them print images on 100 percent rag paper. And with that print, we did collagraphy, we did the monoprint, and then I tore

a hole in the middle of each one and inserted the laser print from behind. So there's an opening. And one of them was an image of Christopher Columbus with a crucifix in the middle, and the other one was an image of this woman whose face is covered by the Puerto Rican flag, but she's holding a crying baby. And of course, that was my daughter Liora. [00:30:12]

So we did that edition with them, and we did a number of other editions that followed until—I guess in 1992, the last edition that we did was in collaboration with Dieu Donné paper mill, and their thing is about paper and paper pulp painting, and making editions with paper pulp, and at times combining other printmaking techniques with it. And so I did one with them. I did two with them, and that was in collaboration with the Lower East Side Printshop and they turned out terrific. There's a show that they just opened at Dieu Donné—they have a gallery, in addition to their paper mill—called *From the Archives*. A curator from the Metropolitan Museum made a selection of works from their collection and it's now part of a show, which I have yet to catch up with. But that was an interesting experience.

Washington University, in 1990, very well-known for their printmaking, and they have a reputation of having one of the largest print presses in the country, because it was custom-built to that scale. So they could print something as long as 10 feet, because they have this huge platform, and when they put the plate on it and the paper on top of it, instead of the print going through the press through a handle, it's motorized. [00:32:20] So Joan Hall, who was leading the printmaking department at Washington University in St. Louis—she wanted to start an editioning program where she would invite guest artists to do a residency and to do an edition with a master printer, and having a number of graduate printmaking majors assist in the edition.

Her specialty was papermaking. So the residency there was, "Let's first make paper, this is the design, let's cut stencils, let's use color paper pulp to squeeze through these stencils on the wet paper so that it really bonds together. Let's print one, two, three collagraph plates. We've never done a four-color lithograph." That is to say they've never done a four-color separation from a photograph. I had a slide of an image that I wanted them to make a lithograph from, at a certain size. So they did the color separation, they created the matte, they exposed it onto a litho plate, and then the challenge was the registration, so you could get a sharp, perfectly registered full color image, photographic image. [00:34:23] And so it was the yellow, it was the red, it was the cyan, and it was the black plate. Each one of them was tabulated, you know, as—once they join together, it makes a perfectly balanced, neutral color print. That was a challenge.

But we went through all of that and the print ended up like a four-foot print—a diptych—one on top of the other, and long and behold, the Whitney got a print. I think the Bronx Museum also got a print, and the Smithsonian has a print. That was another print that was an incredible breakthrough. I came back again, four years, six years later, and made another print titled *Soles y Flores Para Liora*, using the same technique and the same almost heavy-handed layering of different processes. And this time the lithographic photo print was in black and white, because the photo was shot in black and white. [00:36:00]

It was just one of those images where one day when Liora was about three years old, she went into her mother's things and pulled out socks and a dress. She also got a hold of her makeup and she plastered her face with lipstick and her mother's socks became gloves that went all the way up her arm. She took something of her mother's and put it on and it was white, and then she put something else, I think a veil or something, on her head. So she came down—because our bedroom was on the second floor. So she came down and she presented herself and said she's ready to marry—I forgot the name of the kid, but he was a neighbor, an upstairs neighbor. "I'm ready to marry so-and-so," you know? And we were laughing. So we took her to our neighbor and knock on their door, and so the mother opens the door. I think his name was Matthew. Matthew was right behind her and then we presented her, "Oh look, Liora, look how she dressed herself to get married." And then Liora said, "I want to marry Matthew." And he freaked out, he said, "No! No way!" And he ran out to the back. It's like, we were calling him at the door, he didn't want to come back to the door.

But as an opportunist, I just pulled out the camera and I shot pictures of her. And that became, in a way, the central part of the composition. [00:38:03] I did this abstract flower, which was all paper pulp and collagraph printing, and that became another dominating part of the composition. I submitted the print to one of the—a print biennial, the San Juan Print Biennial in Puerto Rico. And this is the print.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, I've seen this print, yeah.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: It won an award and it then became part of the collection as well.

So, I went to Washington U on a number of occasions, and other—there have been other printshops, like the Innovative Printmaking Workshop at Rutgers University. I've done like three, four editions there. The last one I think was done in 2009. I've produced quite a number of prints throughout the years, which resulted—oh, I also was invited by a master printer in Tallahassee, Florida, to work with him on prints, and they were all monotypes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Who was that? [00:40:05]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Oh, I'm trying to remember. Let me see if I—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Watch your microphone.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I don't think I have the catalog. Right now I can't remember his name, but he brought me over, he has a printshop. He didn't do anything other than monotype printing. He had a system where you could put layers and layers of colors on top of each other, through a pinhole registration. I was there for a week and I produced about 40 prints, and then we divided them in half. Actually that was sponsored by Miami Dade Community College. The director of the gallery there, Steve Canan [ph] I think his name was—he's the one that actually invited me to do an edition, because he's seen my work, he knows my work, and he really wanted me to come over and do this project. He wanted to periodically invite artists to do prints and split the edition. Their half would be part of their collection, it wouldn't be sold. So I did about 40 prints and Steve came over and between the two of us, we split the prints in half.

When it's all said and done, all of these prints that I produced became part of a survey that Alejandro Anreus curated, when he was a curator at the Jersey City Museum. [00:42:06] The show traveled. The show obviously took place in the Jersey City Museum. It traveled to the University of Colorado as well, they took that show as well. It went to the University of Puerto Rico. It went to the University of New Mexico. It had about five or six stops that it traveled and they did a really wonderful catalog, which they exhausted, and maybe I have about 10 copies left of that in storage.

It was not only a survey of prints that I produced throughout the years, but there was also a selection of works on paper. Some of them were collage works on paper that I did for the artist book, the *Reconstruction* book project, with all the [poets –JS] that were pulled together, edited by Luis Reyes Rivera, which didn't get off the ground. So there was a selection of those pieces and there was a selection of other works on paper. It got good reviews, it got good response.

And then from there, I continued to do more prints. I'll be working on a print with Pepe Coronado, in New York.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I was going to ask about that.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: We already had a meeting and we already discussed the image that I want to produce. I want to do a print on the Mirabal sisters and their assassination by the Trujillo regime, so I'm going to do a triptych, combining archival digital printing with screen printing, chine-collé, collage, a little bit of hand coloring. [00:44:28] We already talked about how we was going to approach. I did a mockup, a digital mockup to show him, and so we're in that process now.

I did a number of prints with Wildwood Press. They're also located in Missouri. And the person who heads and owns the printshop, Maryanne Simmons, I met her when she was a graduate student when I was working on the prints at Washington U. And then after that, she graduated, she worked in the printshop for a while, and then she left to start her own printshop, and we've done quite a number of prints together. One of them is an homage to Ana Mendieta, and that kind of like spearheaded the video. I made the print when I was approached at Lehigh University to create a piece for a solo show. And it was a grant that they got, where they would invite artists to do a solo show, but in a medium that they're not known for. That's when I proposed to do a video installation, and one of the videos was homage to Ana Mendieta. [00:46:04] So when I proposed that, I already had the prints produced, and that became the guide for that video.

So in a way, one of the fascinating things about printmaking is that sometimes some of the prints are produced by way of the painting that I've done or am working on, and other times the prints influence other paintings. And in this case with the *Madre Selva* print, that influenced the *Madre Selva* video, which now led to a full-blown project that I'm still working on.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did you do—like two summers ago, weren't you in the Dominican? Or was it Puerto Rico, where you were?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, yeah, two summers ago I was in Puerto Rico. That was an interesting situation, because the curator who proposed a show and invited me to participate is a sculptor by the name of Melquiades Rosario Sastre. He's a sculptor and he's also done a bit of printmaking himself. He proposed to one of the museums—I think it's the Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico—he proposed an exhibition titled [*Concreto en el Arte: Art con Concreto* –JS], so it's like a play on words. [00:48:00]

The idea was to invite artists to work, to make pieces out of industrial material. Be that lead pipes, cement, whatever, but materials that are used for construction and so on and so forth. Plastics, whatever. He invited me and that was like—I mean, I've known him for years and we have been in a number of group exhibitions together, we've become very close friends, he's been a very good friend of the family. But, you know, I'm not a sculptor. [They laugh.] I did very bad in my introduction sculpture class.

So I asked him, "Well"—you know? He sent me the proposal and he sent me a list of artists, with samples of their work, that he invited, that are going to participate. And they're all sculptors. He said, "Well, there's some other artists," and he threw some names that are conceptual artists and performance arts or whatever. "And they're happy, they want to do something, I have no idea what the hell they're going to do but"—you know. "Okay, fine, well, let me give it some thought." And then, I realized that those tiles that I've been using for my art commission—yeah, they're industrial materials there.

So what I did was I did—digitally, I put together collage images, and then I had them fabricated on tiles. But instead of glass tiles like in the commission, I had it done on ceramic tiles. And the idea is to assemble them, but in a very thin slab of cement. [00:50:05] So I had the tiles made, they were shipped to Puerto Rico. I went to Puerto Rico, I went into his studio and we made two blocks of cement, very thin. I think they were like 48x40. They were rectangular, vertical pieces. I applied the tiles onto the surface, we developed a hook system to install it on the wall, and those were the two pieces. It was something totally new. I've used that material only for commissioned work, but not as individual works. And the show happened.

And something out of that show happened where a fashion designer, who has fashion shows every year, came up with the idea of inviting artists to lend something of their work. The school where he was teaching, the idea is for students to select a work of art and to create a gown or a swimsuit or whatever, based on that artist's work. And so he saw one of the pieces at the exhibition, and so he asked Melquiades if I would be interested in participating. [00:52:00] I said, "Sure, you know, what the hell, that would be very interesting to see." So obviously, the fashion show happened, they shoot pictures of the models wearing the clothes next to the artwork and—you know, very interesting, very curious, especially with my work. One was very, very blatantly political and the other one was more Afrocentric, with the mask of *el Vejigante* worn by a woman from the waist up naked, and the mask. Somehow, the student came up with a design on that and Melquiades sent me some digital images of the event.

But that was a project that—I flew to produce the work, because there was no way that I was going to be able to create that work, and at that time, I still didn't have my studio. I had meetings with a number of people, with museum people, the whole nine yards, because I wanted to do a series of that type of work. And I was thinking about doing these wall, as well as freestanding, pieces from the floor up. I remember a show at Gagosian, by—what's his name, Serra, Paul [*sic*] Serra.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Richard Serra?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Huh?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Richard Serra?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Richard Serra. He had these huge walls, scale, steel, you know, standing up from the ground up. He had dozens of them, and you could walk through it and around it or whatever. [00:54:06] I wasn't thinking on that scale but I was thinking about on a scale where it was taller than people, and doing a series of full figure portraits of people and producing them in these tiles, and then created these concrete blocks. I had the kind of conversations where, "You finance the show, I'll produce the piece, we'll have the show, and you could have the piece." I'm not going to be able to take it back to Brooklyn. It's just one of those things, you know? And thinking about, "Maybe you can pick a spot where it could become a permanent installation or something." You know? Anyway, all of that just—after a while, it just went out the window and it didn't happen.

Shortly after came the hurricane season and the damage that that caused. I decided to participate in the show because I already visualized what I could do for the show, and it made all the sense in the world and it really fit within the concept of what the show is about. The other thing was that it was a way of planning out a future show, where I could come back, rent out a space, hire some people, maybe Melquiades could head the crew or whatever, and just produce a body of those pieces for a solo show. [00:56:00] At the same time, he mobilized some collectors that collects his work, they expressed interest, they definitely want to be in on it, but when it's all said and done, I think under the influence of alcohol and good food that's what they said, but they [laughs] never showed up again, so it was that kind of thing.

That was a show that—you know, I thought it was pretty ambitious, and at the same time, it was one of those shows that if it were realized, I don't know if that show could ever travel. But it would be a permanent fixture in Puerto Rico. Unfortunately that didn't happen, but I'm still thinking about using tiles for future pieces, here in Brooklyn. I'm still processing it and figuring out—and also the financing of that, but that's something that I'm laying out for the future in terms of another new body of work, working strictly with that material.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great. I think this is a good picture, Juan.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Any last words? I'll give you the last word.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Oh, my goodness. I think the last word for this first part was adequate, [laughs] but then we continued, so what can't I say to follow that, you know?

I'm just happy that we're doing this. I'm very happy that the Archives of the Smithsonian has given much interest to my work and to my trajectory, and we're still in that process where we're still adding more documents to the papers. But I think it was a wonderful opportunity for me to digress, so to speak, and think about things and remember things and events, and remember those periods and the kind of work I was doing at the time. [00:58:40]

You know, it really gave me an opportunity to look back into all those things and to have a stronger sense, a stronger perspective of my trajectory. Sometimes you don't have that sense, you know; everything seems a bit fragmented and nonlinear, so to speak. And even though our conversations have gone different directions and made different turns, and so on and so forth, the point of the matter is that there is a trajectory and there is a linear aspect to it. It's just that those twists and turns is just a way of grabbing to the multidimensional aspect of that experience.

So it feels as if I could go on and on and on, and constantly just remember more and more about things. The little things that I couldn't remember—remembering certain names or whatever—I know they will come back to me, but there were things that I haven't given a thought since the day of that event, that I remembered for the first time. [01:00:09] It's just a good experience, to know that you have a history, that you have a trajectory, and that people are interested in hearing about those things and hopefully—in a way it has contributed greatly to me, but hopefully it will contribute to those that will listen and look into the papers. So, thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]