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ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

NO. 10, DECEMBER 2013

# JOHN VALADEZ

INTERVIEWED BY KAREN MARY DAVALOS

ON NOVEMBER 19 AND 21, AND

DECEMBER 3, 7, AND 12, 2007

John Valadez is a painter and muralist. A graduate of East Los Angeles College and California State University, Long Beach, he is the recipient of many grants, commissions, and awards, including those from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the California Arts Commission, and the Fondation d'Art de la Napoule, France. His work has appeared in exhibitions nationwide and is in the permanent collection of major museums; among them are National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian, Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Mexican Museum in Chicago, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Valadez lives and works in Los Angeles.

Karen Mary Davalos is chair and professor of Chicana/o studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Her research interests encompass representational practices, including art exhibition and collection; vernacular performance; spirituality; feminist scholarship and epistemologies; and oral history. Among her publications are *Yolanda M. López* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2008); "The Mexican Museum of San Francisco: A Brief History with an Interpretive Analysis," in *The Mexican Museum of San Francisco Papers, 1971–2006* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2010); and *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

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## THE CSRC ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

The CSRC Oral Histories Series publishes the life narratives of prominent Chicano and Latino figures. The life narratives have been recorded and transcribed, and the interviewer and interviewee have reviewed and corrected the transcriptions prior to publication. These oral histories are often undertaken as part of a larger research project and in tandem with archival collections and library holdings.

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## CSRC ORAL HISTORY SERIES PROJECTS

**L.A. Xicano** documents the history of Chicana/o art in Los Angeles with a focus on artists, collectives, and art organizations. The project resulted in new museum and library exhibitions, public programs, archival collections, and scholarly publications. These efforts were part of the Getty Foundation initiative Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945–1980. The project received support from Getty Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and California Community Foundation. Related support includes funding from Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, AltaMed Health Services Corporation, Entravision Communications Corporation, Walt Disney Company, and individual donors.

**A Ver: Revisioning Art History** stems from the conviction that individual artists and their coherent bodies of work are the foundation for a meaningful and diverse art history. This book series explores the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other U.S. Latino artists. The A Ver project is made possible through the generous support of Getty Foundation, Ford Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Joan Mitchell Foundation, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation.

**The LGBT and Mujeres Initiative** seeks to increase archival and oral history holdings that document the Chicano/Latino presence in LGBT and women’s histories, the role of women and LGBT people in Chicano/Latino histories, and the importance of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in “mainstream” scholarly research and archival institutions. The project receives generous support from the Ford Foundation and individual donors.

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## ARTISTS INTERVIEWED FOR THE L.A. XICANO PROJECT

Judy Baca  
Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez  
David Botello  
Barbara Carrasco  
Leonard Castellanos  
Roberto “Tito” Delgado  
Richard Duardo  
Margaret Garcia  
Johnny Gonzalez  
Judithe Hernández  
Leo Limón  
Gilbert “Magu” Luján  
Monica Palacios  
John Valadez  
Linda Vallejo

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## NOVEMBER 19, 2007

**Karen Davalos:** This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez for the [CSRC Art Histories Series] and today is November 19, 2007, for our first session on John's life history. John, why don't you start by telling me where you were born and the year and how many folks were in your family?

**John Valadez:** I'm fifty-six. I was born in 1951 here in the general hospital, in Los Angeles here. My mother was seventeen when I was born, and my father, I guess, was about nineteen. She was from Garfield High School and he was from Roosevelt High School. They pretty much separated when my brother was born. He was born a year and a half after me—my brother Leonard. We pretty much grew up in the Geraghty—Geraghty Loma area, which is right down from Chávez here. It was Brooklyn [Avenue], it was kind of off of Rowan [Avenue]. It's kind of where Self Help [Graphics & Arts] is, but up in the hills, overlooking, if you keep going, if you keep going up into the hills, east of the hills. These are called the "sticks." There's a barrio called Geraghty, Geraghty Loma. The other side is the freeway and the Cal State LA [California State University, Los Angeles].

So we grew up there, with my brother and my mother and myself. And then at a certain point, I don't know exactly how old I was—six, seven, could have been five—we moved to the Estrada Courts Housing Project. And my mother pretty much raised us. She had a job. She finally got a job as some secretary, I think. My mother never really drove, so every time we had to go somewhere, we'd either be on the bus or one of my aunts would take us with . . . I pretty much grew up in the neighborhood, let's say. And from Estrada Courts, that's where I saw some of the early gang stuff. My brother and I never really joined any of the gangs, because my mother would beat the hell out of us. She was very [strict]. We grew with a very, very strong matriarchal thing. My mom, she was really tough. She was really strict with us about that. But we weren't really religious. We never really went to church or anything. But she really instilled in us a sense of right and wrong.

**KD:** Was that through expressions, little sayings she would tell you?

**JV:** Oh, yeah.

**KD:** Do you remember any of them?

**JV:** Yeah. Basically anything—basically, about lying. I grew up never really . . . "Don't lie!" Basically, as kids—I always remembered that. Ever since then, and from there, I've always had a sense that it's actually easier, I don't know—just to launch off into that—it's really easier to be honest. It is, it's much easier because you start trying to go into this deception stuff, you even deceive yourself.

Maybe that's how I got into the kind of art . . . I always wanted to be an artist, because I felt like I was always introverted. I stuttered. I had a stuttering problem that kind of kept me quiet, withdrawn. I took speech classes all through grammar school. And I finally got to a point, I think it was in high school, where I finally figured out how to stop stuttering that all these teachers never told us. All these speech teachers, you would take the recorder and they would hear yourself, and someone would want to shame you into speaking clearly. It got to a point where, there was this friend of mine's father, who said that the reason

why I stuttered was because I think faster than I talk and all I had to do was take a deep breath. No one told me that! And sure enough, I'd run out of air. And that's why you stutter, because you're trying to talk and you don't have any air. You're just a kid, you know? So when I learned that, to just take a breath, sure enough, I could. And that was from years of all these speech classes and all these things that I took. There was this big mystery of why kids stutter. So anyway, that was very interesting.

**KD:** What was your first elementary school? Where did you go?

**JV:** I went to Dakota Street School, which is between Estrada Courts and Wyvernwood. In those days it was Wyvernwood Apartments, right down [along Olympic Boulevard]. When we finally moved from Estrada Courts, we went in there for a while. Then my mother got married for the second time to this Italian guy. That lasted a few years. And from that, we were able to move into Wyvernwood. I think my brother and I were the first Mexican American kids who were able to rent in Wyvernwood, because our mother was married to this Italian guy. We weren't Mexican kids anymore.

So some of my friends in that place, they were—it was all working class families, but they were all Anglo and Jewish. It was the Goldbergs and the Ripleys and the Buckleys. These were friends of mine then. So we grew up in Wyvernwood. Let's say between when I was ten to twelve until I finally went to East LA College [ELAC]. The grammar school was Dakota Street School. It's still there. It's between Olympic, and I guess Lorena [Street]. Right around there, where the Costello playground is, [at the Lou Costello Recreation Center]. That's Olympic and Lorena—they have a pool there.

**KD:** What was your school situation like? Did you enjoy school?

**JV:** Yeah, I guess. It was just—it was grammar school. I guess I was a pretty solid C student, you know? I learned how to play chess. We played out in the yard. The best part was in the neighborhood of Wyvernwood. Because there were all of these apartments, a lot of people lived . . . And there were these large areas of all this grass and bushes. As kids, we would play football for three or four hours. I was always outside. It was always these really huge [areas of grass], even to this day. It's different now, because they had to yank out all the bushes as time went on and the crime thing started and people were being mugged in those bushes. But as little kids, it led to having very active imaginations. We could play army. We could play this [game where] we could go under the houses. We were kids.

And then the other part, we would go into the factories, because where we lived [was next to Vernon, an industrial area]. If you go down Boyle Street here, you'll see the big Sears, and that's where we shopped. I got my haircuts. We got our clothes. I bought my first Rolling Stones and Beatles records there. At the Fines Market, I was a box boy. So I always worked. Before that, I was a paperboy for the [*Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*]. I needed to get some money because my mother, whatever she ever made was basically for us to eat and have us clothed and stuff like that. And even when she got married it was a little better. And then she finally married my stepfather, Bob, Bob Vinski. And then I had two younger brothers, almost the same amount of months that separate them as my brother and myself, a year and a half. And they're fifteen years younger, I guess, about fifteen or—fifteen years younger than I am. My brother Leonard, he's a lawyer. He lives out in Riverside. My other brother David, was about fifteen or sixteen years younger, he lives up in the Bay Area. He went to Stanford [University]. He went to Hollenbeck [Junior High School], I guess, and he went to Roosevelt. And also Dale—

**KD:** Roosevelt High School.

**JV:** Right. They went there. And Dale went to [University of California,] Berkeley, and he teaches. I don't know what David does. I think David teaches now, also. So they—I'm the only one who went to a state university. My brother Leonard went to UCLA, became a lawyer. And the other ones, like I said, went to Stanford and Berkeley. And I went to Long Beach. But I sort of jumped—

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** Jumped ahead. Because, it was sort of like, my family with my mother and my brother, it wasn't until my stepfather Bob showed up, there was really a father role. By that time, I was already twelve. I think I was

eleven or twelve. So that was good. They were [married for over forty years]. My mother just passed away, she had a stroke.

KD: I'm sorry to hear that.

JV: Yeah. Thank you. Thanks. It just happened, less than a month ago. She was seventy-two. She had a stroke right after her birthday in March. She was recovering. And it's really a horrible way to go. I don't even think—because of my aunts, she was the youngest of six girls and two boys. Family came out of Texas along the Rio Grande. She was born in Arizona in the '30s, Phoenix in the '30s. What did that look like, you know? Then they finally moved out here. She was the youngest of all of her sisters. And some of them—all of them lived into their—some of them are still going into their nineties. I thought my mother was going to live quite some time. But she had a stroke in March. Just a minor stroke. It only got like part of her—

KD: Paralyzed part of her body.

JV: Right. Part of her body. She was starting to come back.

KD: Yeah.

JV: But she fell out of her wheelchair.

KD: Oh.

JV: She was at home and she hit her head. And then they realized that—she was taking that blood thinning. So she had this—her brain hemorrhaged, or it pushed her brain to the side. And she went into a coma. And that was so chicken shit. It was real. This is like, "What happened?" But anyway, we did grow up around that Sears. So we would play. I'm talking about that, because it's very formative to me. We played by the LA River. We would jump the trains. There were stockyards, the factories, all the glass factories. We would go out in the morning, go out and play with our friends, do all kinds of stuff. In school, also we'd play baseball. It was a real healthy childhood. I really think that it was really, really cool, because we were able to [explore], as long as we didn't get in trouble. We were able to just be outside all day long, come home and just get a piece of fruit, check in, be home as soon as it starts getting dark.

KD: Yeah.

JV: When we were younger. We'd know when dinner was. And as we got older she let us stay out longer. And then, when I always had work—I always had a paper route. And then I always had the job at the market for about three years, all the way up until I went to East LA College. So I really, I really, I really enjoyed collecting music. I would buy an album. This is when I was [a teenager]. I started working there when I was almost sixteen. I sort of lied for about a month or two to get the job.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Because I was really used to having money in my pocket, even if it was a few bucks from the paper route. That paper route—

KD: Help me understand when you were young on the paper route. What did you spend your money on?

JV: That, I don't remember. Comic books, I'd say.

KD: Comic books, there you go. [laughter]

JV: Yeah. Comic books. And then at a certain point when I got older, I was really into music, the way music was changing. My mother, because she was a teenager when we were growing up, we listened to R&B and all of the dance stuff, whatever she was [into]. I was very fortunate because I was being raised during the time where most of my friends, their parents [were older], their fathers were from World War II. And so my mother, she was a teenager. And my real father, he was never around. She didn't want him around. He was with that gang [in Geraghty Loma]. He represented the whole barrio thing that she wanted to keep us away from. Even though he just had bad luck in life. He died when he was forty-two. And then I'm the oldest of fourteen kids, three wives. He [had] some record. He started when he was nineteen. By the time he was forty, he had about fourteen kids, a couple sets of twins, three different wives. We went to the funeral, and my grandmother, from my father's side, was there. My brother and I went. He died in '75. I know I'm jumping around.

KD: That's okay.

JV: But we saw him very few times. He would come to our track meets. My brother and I ran.

KD: When you were high school?

JV: We went to Huntington Park, went to Gage Junior High School, both of us. And we went to Huntington Park. We didn't go to Roosevelt. A lot of it had to do with my father. She didn't want us to start going to Roosevelt and he'd come around. I have cousins who went to Roosevelt, my cousin Henry. I ran against him in our track meets. We introduced ourselves and it was really cool. It was nice. We were both long distance runners. My brother was a long distance runner. And all of those things, and also because I stuttered, I was kind of more of a loner. I had friends, but I tend to be very intense for some reason. And my brother was much more of the popular one. I guess because I stuttered and I kept back.

But that really let me get into my imagination, and I really liked to draw. I remember the very earliest, the most serious drawing that I did, the earliest one, was of Fred Flintstone. And it was in grammar school. I did a copy of Fred Flintstone. And I did it so carefully on a little piece of paper. I wish I still had it. I did it so carefully, so meticulous, that my friends didn't think that I did it. They thought that I was lying and it really hurt. "Look, I did Fred Flintstone." "You didn't do that." "What do you mean I didn't do that?" "You didn't do that drawing." That was like the worst for me. That's just the way you are. I don't know what grade I was in, fifth grade, whenever Fred Flintstone came out.

KD: When it was new.

JV: It was the rage, *The Flintstones* cartoon, because at that time, it was part adult and also kids liked it. So I did a Fred Flintstone. So I kind of abandoned it after that. I really remember that. It was on a little piece of paper and I kept erasing it, getting the eyes and the nose just right and his hair. I remember all that stuff. But then after that, I just remember . . . What kids do, is they do army battles. You put your little stick figures over here, you have tanks and barbwire, and then they just cancel each other out. See who would [be left on the page]. You'd just put all the figures down, and this one shoots that one. And again, it's in your mind. It's like a kid, like a little boy.

KD: Did you play with model planes and model cars?

JV: Sure, yeah.

KD: Did you buy those yourselves?

JV: Yeah. Yeah. We used to buy all that stuff and the Big Daddy Ed Roth [model kits]. My mother was really cool, in terms of, like, when skateboards came up. Those horrible ones with the steel wheels—

KD: [laughter]

JV: Driving neighbors absolutely out of their minds with kids coming down the street with these steel wheels. I mean, we went deaf.

KD: Yeah, they're loud.

JV: Yeah, they're really loud.

KD: [laughter]

JV: And then even the pogo sticks. We'd get the pogo sticks. And my mother also—because while we were growing up, she had her job. And she was still dating. She was in her twenties. When I was ten, she was twenty-seven.

KD: Yeah.

JV: She was still young, you know? She was very attractive. She really loved to dance. And so we would be at home, or sometimes my aunt would take care of us, out in Santa Fe Springs. So I would go with my cousins. They had like seven or eight cousins of mine. So we'd go with them. I just kind of put up with it. They were very religious. My brother hated it. He wanted to be home. I just kind of put up with it. My brother was more [adamant to go home]. He would write—my mother had some of the letters—pleading with her, "Please . . ."

KD: Now is this during, like, vacation time?

JV: During the summer, yeah.

KD: And you'd go stay with your aunt?

- JV: Yeah. Right. Just so my mom could just go to work and then have her own time. She had two boys very young in her life. I think that's one reason why she separated from my father. That's why I mentioned that.
- KD: So, talk about this aunt.
- JV: She had all of these kids.
- KD: There were other aunts.
- JV: Right.
- KD: Did you get together a lot with your family, your mother's?
- JV: *[laughter]*
- KD: Or was it just this one aunt?
- JV: I laugh because my mother got along with two of them. Because they were sisters, they had a lot of battles, you know?
- KD: Yeah. *[laughter]*
- JV: Family battles. And we have real loud voices . . . *[pause]* And it was hilarious. There was always somebody . . . There was one aunt who wanted to take my brother and I away because she *[believed that my mom]* was too young to have us. She could raise us better. Stuff like that, you know?
- KD: What age did you learn those stories?
- JV: Growing up.
- KD: Oh, growing up, okay.
- JV: Yeah, when we were small.
- KD: When you were little, you knew this?
- JV: Yeah, but it was like a joke.
- KD: Wow.
- JV: It was like . . . It was crazy with my aunt Benny—Bernadette. And the other was Emma. Emma's the one that—she had two kids about . . . David was my age. He went to Vietnam. He became a cop. He passed away. And the older cousin was Susan, and she's still around. And my aunt Emma married this guy, he had—he had four or five kids, three boys, I think. He had—wait, three boys. He had five. So with their five—he was a Marine, this guy Rudy, and he married Emma—so they had seven kids.
- KD: Wow.
- JV: And they had one between them. And that was Lydia, I think. I forget, wow.
- KD: That's the aunt that—
- JV: Emma.
- KD: Emma is the one that—
- JV: They are the ones in Santa Fe Springs.
- KD: Santa Fe Springs.
- JV: And for me, that was cool, because, with my mother and my brother, it was a particular kind of . . . We were just being raised up, making sure that we'd be doing good. Stay out of trouble. Stay in school. Hardly ever missed a day of school. It was one of those kind of deals.
- KD: I guess you couldn't if your mom was working.
- JV: Right, yeah, yeah, sure. But just to go to school. It was not about playing hooky, or getting in any kind of trouble. No, just stay out of trouble, because if my mother ever found out... You didn't want to see her anger. It was like, "Thank God." Like now, I think about it now, it's like, "Thank God."
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: So when we went to Santa Fe Springs to live with my Aunt Emma and my Uncle Rudy. And that family—we learned how to live with a big family. Because we had to have powdered milk and powdered eggs. Church was on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday.
- KD: Wow.
- JV: It was a Foursquare Pentecostal.
- KD: Okay.

JV: So you speak all in Spanish. Speak in tongues. And then on Sunday, they have the tamales. And the preacher's daughter was a wild and crazy girl. And my cousin Susan and Ruby and Lena—they were high school girls there—they all went to [Pioneer High School]. Some of them were older than us. And then my cousin David, him and I were about the same age. So that was cool there, because they had a real strict budget. With so many kids, they had a real strict budget. So we'd go to three different markets. For me, it was very different. It was very different [from my own home].

KD: Right, so that was an exciting adventure for you.

JV: Well, yeah, you have to deal with it. You have to put up with it, yeah. I mean, there's a certain [way of living]. And then we saw the freeways being built. The 605 and even the Pomona Freeway here. I remember all of that was being built in the '50s [and early '60s]. And I really had a consciousness, at a certain point, that I was being raised by [a younger mother].

I was born really, really soon after the war. I really had a sense of World War II because of my friends. This friend of mine Jim—Jim Feeney—his father had these books about Adolf Hitler. They actually went in and basically . . . I don't know exactly what they did, but he was in Germany, and they were the ones who went in and seized that part for the allied forces and all of that. So he had these memorabilia. I guess I was fascinated about history and stuff. And also with the music, I really enjoyed music. And I really enjoyed drawing. I became—I know I'm jumping around—but I felt like I was an introvert. I had friends, but I was really used to being alone for some reason.

KD: So take me back. What was it like when the family . . . Did the family get together for Christmas or Thanksgiving?

JV: My mother, no. No. We had our own thing. Once in a while. But my mother, we pretty much had Christmas in our own house. She would give us presents and stuff. I remember her giving us a television, just a little one, for our room. That's when I started watching the *Steve Allen Show* and Jack Parr, and all that stuff. So I remember watching all that stuff and listening to those people talking, especially on the weekends. We could stay up late.

KD: So that was when you were about twelve?

JV: I guess.

KD: Thirteen?

JV: I guess.

KD: What about—

JV: Yeah, eleven, twelve. Ten, eleven, twelve.

KD: It sounds like your mom didn't have a lot of time off for leisure.

JV: Yeah.

KD: Not a lot of vacation time.

JV: No, my mother pretty much loved to read. My mother read enormous amounts. She would rather just sit—because she never drove. She never learned how to drive. So she would be [mostly at home]. So I think my mother traveled in her books. She literally had notebooks, even to when she just passed away. She had little notebooks. She read so many books, she forgot the titles of them. We're talking hundreds of books.

KD: She'd keep track, so she knew—

JV: Yeah, she knew what she read. She could say, "You know what, I've read this." So at some point, she needed to remember. She read everything, like novels and things. She constantly read. She kept the house really clean. She fed us. And her fun time was to sit and read.

KD: Did she go to the library to get books?

JV: Right, she went to the library. In those days, there was the bookmobiles that would come into the neighborhood.

KD: Yeah.



- JV: And they say, “What do you want to read?” And she’d get some books, three or four of her books. And then after awhile they would ignore her. Her name was Flora. Flora.
- KD: Did she get books for you as well as a child?
- JV: No, I kind of got that myself. Mostly comic books, a lot of TV, a lot of movies. Even to this day, I watch a lot of film.
- KD: Did you go downtown to watch them at the—
- JV: Sometimes. Yeah. Well, no. There was a theatre called the Vern, on Olympic there. How funny, I just remembered. Yeah, the Vern. Like twenty cents to get in. And then I remember as a kid, my mother would find somebody and we would go to the drive-in. It was the Floral drive in. It’s up by East LA College. That’s where I saw *King Kong*, as a baby.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: I used to remember—I remember . . . That’s right. I think—I remember certain things because, certain things like that, because we very rarely, I felt, really went anywhere regularly. So consequently, when we did go some place, I really remember it. Even to this day. Even now, I still kind of stay to myself. I created my own little environment when I started having studios. And as a kid, we really roamed around ourselves with our bicycles. We even used to—as we got older, we used to hitchhike. We’d hitchhike to school because we lived right there on Olympic and Soto, right by the Sears. And we’d hitchhike down to [Huntington] Park. Save the bus money so we could have, like, a roll or orange juice. My mother would only give us so much money. And she knew we were hitchhiking, so that money would become [our lunch money] because she didn’t have that much money. Bless her heart, you know? So we would both get this little bit, like thirty-five cents or something—nothing. And I think that’s why I started running, as a long distance runner.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: Because we were really healthy, and at the time we could run forever. It felt like I could run . . . People in high school said, “John, I saw you running. You were running fast!” I was just running. I can’t do it now. Now, forget about it.
- KD: Why don’t you tell me more, before I ask you about the running. Tell me more about the... [pause] this leisure time that ended up happening, the vacation time with your aunt.
- JV: Right.
- KD: Did they do anything? Did they take you anywhere? Or was it—
- JV: The pool. We used to go to church. I went to the darn church [every week].
- KD: Four times a week?
- JV: Yeah. Three times a week. Because it was a community thing.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: They were all friends. Remember, this is post-World War II. My uncle Rudy, he was a Marine in the war. And I have an uncle that I was partly named after, my Uncle Johnny. He died in Iwo Jima. He stepped on a mine. Then my other uncle, Tavo, I barely saw him once in a while. But once in a while . . . But I think for maybe . . . It seemed like for a long time—maybe only like two months, a month and a half or two months—we lived there. Once in awhile, as we got older, my Aunt Benny—[Bernadette, we called her Benny]. She lived [somewhere around Western Avenue]. We would stay with [her]. I would stay with her. My brother didn’t really get along with her. I don’t really remember. Sometimes I would go there by myself. Or sometimes even my cousin Susan would stay with my Aunt Benny. She never got married. She was very religious. She was saved. You know how you get saved? She was saved as a teenager. Never got a marriage. She was saving herself. It was all about waiting for Jesus to come, go to heaven. So I remember being with her during like the Cuban missile crisis. Where the stores were all cleaned out.
- KD: Right.
- JV: We were about to have a [war].
- KD: Right.

JV: I remember being there at her house.

KD: Do you remember being frightened?

JV: I was supposed to be. But with her, it was funny. With her, Jesus was going to come any day, in those days. These were the end times. We weren't going to make it past '68, if we're lucky.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: I know. After a while . . . I was thinking, she kind of got me religious. I used to go to some of the Billy Graham things at the Coliseum with her. We'd take the bus. She didn't drive either. But she lived out there. Now, that is Koreatown now. But at that time, boy, she would take us to some of these churches. We'd get on the bus, and I don't know where this one church was, but I swear—and I'm not exaggerating—I thought this church, the way it was inside the big auditorium—I don't know how old I was—it seemed like it was in South Central. Because there were some Latinos in there and there were black people in there. People would stand up and speak in tongues. Some of them would interpret. There was such a frenzy, I would swear we were almost in heaven. You really felt this transcendent time with people.

KD: Wow.

JV: That was amazing. But with my aunt always saying that Jesus was coming any time now. And after a while, when it never really happened and I was being saved from her . . . Like her, I was being saved from things I hadn't even done yet, you know.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: Much less thought about "what is sin?" That's why, for me, I sort of like—I sort of stopped being so much into Billy Graham, per se, because I couldn't go to movies. I loved going to movies. I couldn't hear music. I loved music. Because that's all sin. Now, it's different. There are Christian rock bands, and they had their own film. But back then, even the TV was suspect. I was born when the TV was born. So all of that stuff . . . I said, "You know, this doesn't make sense. I'm still a kid. Jesus would understand. You've got to live." I wasn't going to—I was making these so-called intellectual leaps of faith for myself. That's what you do: you figure it out. And again, between eleven, twelve, that's puberty time, I guess.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Figure it out. And I always liked history. I liked science. I always wanted to be—I wanted to either get into history or science or something.

KD: What age did you think of that kind of career? When you were eleven or twelve?

JV: When I was in junior high school, I really got into art. I really liked the art classes. Because I always thought the stuff I was doing was pretty cool. I stopped doing stick figures and I tried to draw.

KD: And what were you using? Pencil, pen?

JV: Yeah. Sure. And whatever the school had. Watercolors and stuff.

KD: Well—

JV: My stuff was really [paid attention to].

KD: You have to describe that, because I grew up after Prop 13—

JV: Oh, right.

KD: So I had no art.

JV: Okay.

KD: So what did your school have?

JV: Well, we just had an art class. There were just little projects to do.

KD: Mostly still life?

JV: Collage and stuff. Let's see, what was it? You'd do, like, crayon colors. And then you make it all black and you scratch it.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Stuff like that. And working with construction paper. And Thanksgiving, you draw a turkey and do a pumpkin and all of that. And then you do a [collage], green and red paper during Christmas time.

KD: What did you enjoy about art classes?

JV: That I could use my mind. It was the self-expression stuff. I liked the concentration of drawing and what the results were of drawing. It was like, “Wow,” because I liked the comic books too. The comic books really get into your imagination. With the comic books, I was there. I used to read *Little Lulu* and *Fantastic Four*, all of that. And I would buy those. And it’s funny, the comic book store I used to go to, Harry Gamboa used to go there also. We talk about it. We grew up in the same neighborhood and even though he was more Whittier and Lorena. I was like Eighth and Lorena. And there was this pharmacy. I remember this place always smelled [like medicine]. It had a particular smell to it. He used to go there. I said, “You know what, I may have saw you there. I remember there were kids there and I’d wait patiently,” because there was only one rack, you know, there were racks. There were kids there, other kids. I was kind of shy then. I wasn’t really friendly or anything. And I would wait my turn to go to the rack. What would he—we would joke and I said, “That was probably you!”

KD: [laughter]

JV: He was probably there too. Even Frank. His family lived around there.

KD: Frank Romero?

JV: Yeah. But I never really knew him until I was in college, until the early ’70s. But he lived right down the street, and he did those big [spray-can paintings] at that time. He did those big heart spray-can murals right up here, wherever the shoe store is. And I asked him . . . He did that years ago, in the ’60s. I think it was the ’60s. It might be the early ’70s. So that was fading. I remember that was one of the first murals that I saw, that I actually remember, you know, like people painting on the walls. And then we—I know I’m jumping—I remember we actually painted over his mural, and then the Streetscapers painted over our mural. So in other words, this whole neighborhood, this whole area I’m real familiar with. But I never had a studio in Boyle Heights. But this is where I’m from. But I’m more from where Boyle Heights hits Vernon. And also the stockyards and the river.

KD: Well, I know [from] these interviews, the artists who grew up here . . . For someone like me, who grew up at the end of the county, you guys are very specific about the neighborhood.

JV: Yeah.

KD: With the street, all the East LA, or Boyle Heights—

JV: [laughter]

KD: It’s this particular . . . You described a bicycle. When did you get a bicycle?

JV: Well, we always had bikes. The first bike I ever got [was] when we were in Estrada Courts. It was a great bike. It was a Davy Crockett bike.

KD: What’s a Davy Crockett bike?

JV: It had saddlebags. It was cool.

KD: [laughter]

JV: It looked like a cowboy bike.

KD: Yeah.

JV: It had stuff on it. My mother was pretty cool. She was, you know—

KD: How did she manage, a single income, single parent—

JV: Yeah. It’s tough.

KD: Yeah. Want to pause?

JV: Sure.

[break in audio]

JV: I mean, there was a lot of things that [I remember]. Cal Mex Café down by—almost where Eighth Street and Olympic, like, veer off and go towards the projects and then into Wyvernwood. That’s where we would eat. We would eat there. Even in terms of family rituals, we would go to the Chung King. It’s still there. We’d go to Chung King Cafe on Whittier Boulevard.

KD: Yeah. [laughter]

JV: Every Friday.

KD: Really?

JV: Every Friday.

KD: And you looked forward to it?

JV: I guess, yeah. I mean, we did. Every Friday. And I guess that's when my stepfather Bob was with the family. My stepfather was very—he was a very cool dude to actually take on this woman and her two kids that were almost grown. He was never married before. He's from Montebello. But my mother was beautiful. She was just [something else]. She was—

KD: Were they about the same age?

JV: She was about a year or so older. So we got into his family and they're Polish. His grandmother—my stepfather's grandmother—

KD: I'm sorry, this is the third marriage?

JV: Right.

KD: Okay.

JV: The second one didn't really last.

KD: Okay.

JV: That guy had a big drinking problem. He always wrecked the car. There was some story—Gilbert Pascalli. He had an older son. I never seen him. My mother—they were really . . . I think she only was married to him for only a few years. They were really [incompatible]. He was always drunk, or he'd be gone, or the car would wreck, or something. I wasn't really close to this other guy. She was only married to him for a little while.

KD: She kicked him out?

JV: I guess. I don't know. Just one day, he was gone.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: But my mother was never really like—she never had a lot of boyfriends or anything. It's not like a lot of guys in the house. It wasn't anything like—it was not like that. She only had the serious relationships. And that's when Bob showed up, again, when I was eleven or twelve. And from then on, they were together. And I find it—I left the house at seventeen, knowing that my mother was starting over again with a whole new set of boys. Two more boys, almost the same [age], but these were Anglo-looking Chicano kids. The Vinskis. So I was able to go and live in the dorms, you know, do the college thing. But that's later.

KD: Yeah. Let me ask you about your friends. You talked a lot about playing out in these open fields. And you mentioned a few of their names. Are a lot of your friends Latino, Chicano?

JV: They were all mixed.

KD: All mixed?

JV: Yeah. Because of Wyvernwood. Some guys who came from Cleveland, Ohio—the Webbs. Anglo kids. Another guy was Irish, a real good friend of mine, Jim Feeney.

KD: And that was the same at your elementary school and junior high?

JV: Elementary school was mostly the projects.

KD: Okay.

JV: But by the time I went to Gage [Junior High School], it was pretty [mixed]. I think my brother and I were like the only [Mexican Americans].

KD: Right, you mentioned you were the only—

JV: At the beginning, we were the only ones. They found out who we were fast. But they couldn't get rid of us. Once you get into Wyvernwood . . . They even had a guard. Wyvernwood had guards, like, security guards to keep the kids out from the projects. "You don't belong here, you don't live here." Then with us, it got to the point where people were complaining. Because there were always these group of kids and then there was us. I don't remember—our group was like six or seven, and we all lived in the same area. And

the guard would tell us one day that we're not allowed to play: "You've got to stay, sit in front of your own porch." That was ridiculous.

KD: [laughter]

JV: We got all indignant and went to the office.

KD: [laughter]

JV: We said, "You know what? These rules, we're not going to do that?" He says, "Well, we're going to have to kick you out." "You're not going to kick us out!" We're all indignant, because the guard would chase us. We'd be playing football. And we had a lookout. One guy was Ed, [the guard]—one guy was Ed, an old man. We were kids. And [we'd say], "The guard's here!" And we'd be running for a touchdown, and you see the guard, and say, "Run! The guard!" So we'd scatter and he'd come look for us.

KD: [laughter]

JV: He's not going to find us. We're kids, man. It was crazy. And because we had the sprinkler system in the ground—I haven't died yet—but we would drink the water from the sprinklers. There were different stores. We'd get candy and all that. There were the guards. We would always run from the guards. And then this whole thing about—it's sort of about us guys. And then there'd be a pretty girl, and then we'd all hang around and flirt and all that. I would always—I was always barefoot. We were barefoot all the time. We were just kids.

KD: You mentioned that the place had a guard to keep out all the kids from the projects. Were you aware of that at the time?

JV: Oh sure.

KD: Really?

JV: At a certain point, I knew that I was a Mexican American kid, whatever that meant. My mother never instilled Spanish in us. We grew up in the generation where it ain't going to happen.

KD: Yeah.

JV: We're talking about Operation Wetback and that whole prejudice at the time. And that's why we really followed Martin Luther King's stuff, and that whole civil rights movement, that's where we grew up. And that whole [Vietnam] War thing. I became really political, as most kids did, when I was in high school. But I was aware that I was a Mexican American kid and there were some things that some people wanted to instill, some kind of shame on us being mixed breeds. It was hilarious.

KD: You remember that as a child?

JV: Yeah, but it's ridiculous. I'm American. I'm an American kid. I can do what I want to do. I grew up with that I can become anything that I want to be. I wanted to be an artist at a certain point in high school. I wanted to do what I wanted to do. I just had to pursue it.

KD: You talked about your mother reading a lot and having a love for books. Did she also have a sense of creativity? And I mean that very widely.

JV: Not really.

KD: Like, she thought about food or garden or—

JV: Yeah, she had a garden.

KD: Crafts at home.

JV: She did have her roses. No, she never [did crafts].

KD: No?

JV: She just kept the house neat and clean. And she—

KD: No knitting, sewing?

JV: No. She tried.

KD: Okay.

JV: No. She didn't do any of that stuff.

KD: And then, she wouldn't have a lot of time.

JV: Well, yeah. It's like, for her time, just to be left alone essentially. Just stay out of her hair. And then even as we grew up, she said, "I raised you guys to be really independent, on your own," and I would hardly even call her. As she got older, she wanted me to call her more. I said, "Mom, you didn't really raise us like that. If I don't talk to you, it's because everything is fine, you know?" So once in a while I would call her. Then when she got her stroke, I went to go see her regularly. "Come on mom, you'll get stronger." And she did. I'd give her these pep talks for these places that she was in. I've never seen any of those places, those convalescent places?

KD: Yeah.

JV: And she would make fun of people and—real dry sense of humor.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: And we would see these people. And it's like, "Wow." You never think about it unless you go to these places. Older folks that are basically—they can't take care of themselves, different things wrong with them, you know. Some of them are fine. Some of them it's dementia.

KD: Dementia.

JV: And I never saw any of that. My mother was basically okay. She just—she was just half paralyzed. She was still all there. We would go there, and there would be dinners, and I'd say, "Look, I'm going to leave when dinner starts."

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: She'd say—she'd be talking to these people—she'd say, "That one, she's out of it," [to] some of them on the side, and they were like, "Oooh—shut up."

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: It was like—and she'd say, "Excuse me," to get by with her wheelchair. My mother was, like, it's hard to explain, but she was a character. She stood up to anybody. She came from, you know, East LA, she stood up to all the kids, when the web, the crime started to get worse in Wyvernwood. My stepfather was a yardmaster on Santa Fe Railroad for thirty years. So he got a real good pension and all.

KD: Yeah.

JV: But they stayed in Wyvernwood until, man, I was still in college. They should have left. And they finally got a house and moved out to Claremont. But they were there for a long time. Even my two younger brothers were raised there.

KD: What was your—you said that in high school, you became political.

JV: Right.

KD: Can you talk a bit about high school?

JV: Yeah, I guess that was from the time. High school, I started to really pursue my art classes there. I realized that I wasn't going to be a scientist because I just couldn't do the math. I couldn't get past algebra one. I took algebra one and the first time I got a C. I said, "Well, let me take it again." You have to get a B to go to algebra two. Took it again and I got a D. Some of the formulas. I remember one time, I finally got to the formula, it was right before recess, you know? I got the formula. "Oh, I finally got it!" And by the time recess was over and I had to go to some other class, I forget. And then I say, "Oh, I had it yesterday." I just couldn't do it. And plus, whatever that reward was, the personal reward of finally spending twenty minutes or thirty minutes figuring out a problem and it's point six—it's ridiculous to me.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: It's ridiculous. And if you have one thing wrong, and the whole thing—you have to figure out where you did it wrong. It drove me crazy. I said, "No, I'll take basic math." I stopped at long division and multiplication. That's it. I like history and I like [science]. I got really good grades in those things. And even in, say, English classes. That's because I liked the teacher. In high school, I learned if I like the teacher, I will always ask questions and always be involved. There was this one student teacher once that taught us history. He was great. He was great. He was a student teacher, so he had a lot of energy. So I really responded to him, just the way the guy talked.

- KD: Right.
- JV: It was really good. It was really cool. I remember in class, he says, “Besides John, who . . .”
- KD: Who else can contribute?
- JV: “John really likes this class.”
- KD: So you really did blossom.
- JV: Yeah, also in the music class. I brought a Miles Davis in for the teacher. He put it on and said, “Yeah, that is good music.” Yeah, of course it is. I don’t know where I got it.
- KD: I’m also curious, what did music class consist of? Were you playing instruments?
- JV: Yeah, we were trying to play. We were trying to play instruments.
- KD: What were you playing?
- JV: Wait, I forget.
- KD: Or was it music appreciation?
- JV: Yeah, music appreciation, but different kinds. But they would play classical music and stuff. And so, I brought in this jazz record. He wasn’t into the rock much. Also, in high school, they had this noon broadcast. It was [controlled by] a guy under the name—my friend John Alfred from Huntington Park, and he would play new music. So I would go in there, and I would take over. I would play Frank Zappa and Traffic. Because every week I would get a record. Because I would go [buy one], because I had that job as a box boy, and I also ran after school every day. Like sixth period for me went to like four or five o’clock, because we would always run. Then at noon, we would play music and these guys, they really liked what we did. Because my friend John Alfred, he would take his girlfriend, they would go make out in the auditorium, behind the curtains, and I’d be taking care of the music.
- KD: [laughter] Is this stuff being broadcast—?
- JV: Over the school, yeah, on the campus at Huntington Park. That’s before they put up the fence, which happened in ’67, ’68, ’69. Around then, in ’69. I had a really cool three years. Three years. It’s where I really came into my own. I was a varsity runner and I had a job. I would hitchhike everywhere. We’d go to the beach a lot.
- KD: Oh, really?
- JV: We’d go to the drive-ins, you know. I had a couple of girlfriends. I’ve always had long relationships for some reason. I never really was too flighty or whatever.
- KD: Where do you go running when you’re a long distance runner?
- JV: Oh, I would run home. Instead of taking the bus. I had a girlfriend who lived in Montebello. And sometimes when you hitchhike, you can’t get a ride, so you start running. I didn’t get on the bus. I just started running, literally. One time, only once, I ran to the beach. And then that time I had to take the bus home, because you’re just sore. I got to the beach and, like, I ran [along] Washington [Boulevard]. Because remember, it’s like Olympic, Washington, or even Sunset [that go to the beach]. We would take our bikes and go to Griffith Park. Go through the LA River on our bikes towards Griffith Park, go all the way up to the observatory. We basically just carry our bike up.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: But coming down, boy, that was the best. [laughter] And there’d be a bunch of us, and we’d just be going, and you’d be scared to death on these little bikes. And you can’t put the front brakes on—
- KD: No, you’d fly over the bike. [laughter]
- JV: One guy would fall and we’d have to stop. “Aw, the brakes fell off,” or whatever, you know? And so we’d fix his thong—we had thongs on and stuff. You fix them and the scrapes and all this shit. You have a scrape and, “How bad is it? But goddamn, I want to keep going.”
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: But you don’t because you’re going around a corner, and you’re going to go off that cliff, everything is more exaggerated. So that was a time. That was from junior high, when we started hitchhiking to really get anywhere. Even a younger . . . We would take these journeys. When we went to go see Big Daddy Ed—Ed

Roth was doing all those custom cars out in Maywood. We took our bikes as a pilgrimage there. But once we got there, we were so shy we never introduced ourselves. I think we just bought [the T-shirts]. He would do these drawings. Big Daddy did, like, Rat Fink—

KD: Yeah.

JV: You know Rat Fink? And the Wild Child, the guy with the cars and all that. When he was doing the [Mysterion] car. And we actually bought the little Revell [model car] that came out—we went all the way over there. And we all became [a group]. We had this club, just for a while. And my friend, Joe—Joey Pavano—was this Italian kid. He could draw really, really well. And that's where I got inspired to really draw. I realize that that a lot of the things that inspire me to become an artist, wanting to draw, were friends of mine that were really good. But they never pursued it. Me, I had to always try. I was always trying. It was more of the imagination thing. The guy was really good, but his father—his father was really mean to him, and he sort of went on another path. In those [days, then,] I became friends with this guy Jim, because some of my other friends, they got into like barbiturates, reds and bennies and all that.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And they'd be losers, actually. [Jim and I would] be going to Sears, and they'd be on the stairs of Sears asking for money so they can go get a hot chocolate and take their drugs. Well, the drugs came from the guy who we used to get haircuts with. I forget this guy's name. But we would get our haircut right next to the Vern Theatre, a little barbershop, and one day they finally got him. He was the guy supplying all the drugs, you know, pills—

KD: That wasn't an interest in your childhood?

JV: No.

KD: Wow.

JV: Didn't really because—because my family, my mother always told us that my father was kicked out of the Navy for having marks. She doesn't know what "marks" were. So he was one of the *cholos* from [Geraghty] Loma. It [having tattoos] was part of the gang. But he also developed a back flip for Roosevelt High School. The standing—they call it "The Valdez." Of course, it's Valadez. They always get it wrong. Some of the Soviet women do it off the high beam. It's just a standing back flip. He's the one who thought it up. It's called a "Valdez" to this day. They call it a "Valdez." And if you see the Olympics, it's named after him. He's the one who did it in the '50s at Roosevelt [High School]. He almost went to the Olympics. But during the trials, he slipped. So he was out. That was sort of one of the family stories. We watched the Olympics and she'd be like, "Oh, that's your dad's flip," you know? But the other part was, he was with his friends, and he joined the Navy and he got thrown out for drug use. So, it was like, "You're not going to be like him! Yeah, you better not." My mother was like, "I'll kill you. I'll kill you guys."

KD: So what did it feel like, hearing the stories?

JV: What?

KD: The first story about his accomplishment.

JV: It was great.

KD: That was great?

JV: It was like, that's sort of a little [excitement]. It was just a family story, it wasn't like anything that was [a lesson]. It was almost off-hand. She's like, "Oh, by the way," like, "When they mention the Valdez, that's your father." It's cool, huh?

KD: And so you were able to keep out of the drug scene in high school.

JV: Yeah. Right.

KD: You mentioned one teacher that was kind of drawing you in, that was fascinating to you.

JV: For art, there was a few of them. Well, there were teachers—yeah, thanks—getting me back to high school. There were some good teachers there. I really liked history. And then the art department, there was Ms. Bryant. She used to give us a ride [when we were hitchhiking]. She had a little sports car. She always fought with the principal. Remember, this was when the hippie stuff was starting. I never really



started smoking pot until [almost college], because then everybody smoked pot. When I finally got out of high school and started at East LA College, that's when I started smoking pot.

KD: But the teachers that were—

JV: But in high school, things were happening. And in the art department, there was Ms. Bryant. She would play Wes Montgomery during class. Jazz.

KD: Oh, yeah.

JV: Because at the time, that was by . . . All the rock stuff, like the LA rock scene. I got everything.

KD: You were saying that from your income, working as a—

JV: Box boy. Yeah.

KD: You went almost every week to go buy records?

JV: Yeah, every week I would buy one record.

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos, on side 2, with John Valadez on November 19. He was telling me about his record collection, that he would buy things every week. What kind of things did you buy?

JV: Well, whatever the latest group that would come out. After a while . . . I didn't really start consciously, but after awhile, after the three years being in that market, working, I realized that I was getting a record collection. And at a certain point, I really got into jazz. And part of it was my art teacher. Because I started, like, singing. Because she would play the same song, and I would remember whatever the chords were. The Wes Montgomery. He was pretty popular at that time. And I would sing to it. And people would laugh. Because I'd be like [scatting to the tune]. It put me in a really good mood when I was in art class. I really liked art class.

The other teacher, her name was Ms. Wenzel. She was a true hippie. She had these little granny glasses and she made everything. She was real quiet. She was really cool. And I asked her, "What is the best art school to go to? Let's say that I go to college. I'm not going to, but let's say that I go to college." She said, "Long Beach State." She told me Long Beach State. I go, "Wow, I'll never get there. They have a real good art department." And lo and behold, as soon as I got out of school, I was given an opportunity to go to Long Beach State. So I took it, on the EOP [Educational Opportunity] Program.

KD: Oh, yeah.

JV: I went to Long Beach. But in the meantime, in high school, Ms. Wenzel—her husband [convinced her of all the danger there] was at that time, in '68. They were convinced that the earthquake was going to just break California off. It was during that time.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And they believed it. So she moved to Colorado. So they picked up whatever they had and they moved out of California. They were deathly afraid of the earthquake. But because I was born and raised with this little rumbles, "Oh, how big is this one?" You know that whole big LA thing: "Well, that's a four pointer." We don't know.

KD: [laughter]

JV: "That's like a five-point—no, five point is big—that's about a three point nine. Yeah, maybe around there." Sure, we get the newspaper. "Hey, I was close!"

KD: [laughter]

JV: We always do that, you know? And the people go, "Wow, that was a big one!" Well, it just keeps going with the one when the freeways fall, and Sylmar and all of that. Wow. That is something else. So anyway, that's all of that stuff. But anyway, high school was—I started reading there, that's when I started reading. I used to buy little paperback books, like *Catcher in the Rye* and the Kurt Vonnegut stuff, *Slaughterhouse Five* and all of that stuff. And I started to read because of all of the politics and everything. The Soledad Brothers—George Jackson was [the] name [of one of the Soledad Brothers]. And that was [very political]. I was in high school then. But you see, you're just doing it.

I don't remember exactly when or how things developed. In terms of the music—and I think the music and the politics and the whole art thing for me, it all kind of became one thing to be the expression at that time. I don't want to go to the Vietnam War. That was from like the eleventh or twelfth grade. So you get this consciousness. At that point, you begin to see what the contradictions are in life. And then I did come from a marginalized working class family. And whatever opportunities [I had], I ended up doing it myself. You have to decide what you're going to do, in this whole defiance of [what society expects]. Like, I want to become an artist. I was crazy because I wanted to be an artist. Because at that time, I figured, "Well, I can try to become an artist. If it don't work, I can go work for Ford or the Goodyear Plant, or in [the] Owens-Illinois [Glass Company], that did the bottles for all the sodas."

KD: Yeah.

JV: There was those factories. Bethlehem Steel. There were the car places. A lot of the thinking is, "Endless employment out there." Sure enough, they started shutting down in the '70s. "Wow, what's going on here?"

KD: Do you . . . You mentioned that as a young person you start to have this sense of politics and the political scene. Is it family or friends? Where are you hearing . . . Or is it television? Where are you getting a sense of—

JV: From the magazines, from television. I was always the—I'm the only one [who went that way]. Not even my brother. I became really political when I was going to [school]. Well, first of all, from the last part of high school. Huntington Park was barely involved in some of the walkouts.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Just barely. And then they thought it was some kind of communist thing.

KD: But were you aware of the walkouts?

JV: Oh yeah, but I wasn't really part of it. It was right towards the end there.

KD: Yeah.

JV: I got out of school in '69.

KD: Right.

JV: And I remember that stuff was only when I went to East LA College. In the end of the summer of '69. By the winter I was starting to go to East LA College.

KD: Before you go there, I just want to ask you to clarify. So your sense of the political scene, you're getting it from magazines, newspapers, television. It's not like people are talking about it in home?

JV: I guess. I mean, there's people we would talk about—not my mother so much. My mother was always [apolitical], she was [liberal]. I don't really remember. But I remember my mother was very supportive of what the changes were, what Martin Luther King was doing. When there'd be a film of Martin Luther King [I would go see it]. I remember seeing it again, years later. I went by myself. See, I could go see it, because a lot of people didn't want to see it, but I wanted to see it. See, that's what I mean when I say, I wasn't that hung up on being alone, to go do things and to pursue things on my own. I used to even go to some of the hippie shops in Hollywood. You know, the buttons and all the stuff and all of the posters. I really was fascinated by all that stuff because of the music.

KD: Okay.

JV: You know, and I went to these really cool record stores in Hollywood. And I think riding my bike over there, or maybe hitchhike there. And then I would go to Barnsdall [Park] in high school. I went to Barnsdall Junior Art Center in the eleventh and twelfth grades with others . . . There were these two other girls. It was these two girls. Yolanda and—the other one, I forget her name. She—I actually saw her again. She was on the *Richard Pryor Show*. She was [Russian]. I don't know. She had a Slavic name.

KD: [laughter]

JV: I saw her and her friend Yolanda. And they used to drive [there and sometimes give me a ride].

KD: Was she an actress, an artist?

**JV:** Yeah, sort of. But it was always not quite. She was on the show. Allegra? I forget her name. [Allegra Allison—ed.] She was, like Russian. And the other one was Yolanda Rodriguez. She ended up working for the Mark Taper [Forum]. But in high school, [at Barnsdall] we'd take a film class. We'd take a silk-screen class. We'd take [these classes] after school. In other words, we'd go to school, and then maybe on a Tuesday night or a Thursday night, twice a week, we'd show up there at six o'clock in the evening, and you'd have a class until nine. And then, like, the art teacher would say, "Does anybody want to do this stuff?" I said, "Yeah, I do." So she gave us this information. And the two girls did it. And the other one, Allegra—I think her name was Allegra—she was older, she had a car. It was a big deal. I didn't get a car until I was already in [college]. I just remember the car—when I was in college. So I would just hitchhike there or I'd hitchhike home, from Barnsdall Park and back to take these classes. I took a film class. And they'd be these hippie types.

And besides, in those times, Barnsdall Park was the place where I saw Taj Mahal, the singer, because it was the love-in times. So I would go to Griffith Park, to the love-in, by myself. And I'd get some people [to go] once in awhile. We would always see the Byrds there. And I knew who they were because I bought the music. So you really feel part of it. It was a real LA thing. Part of it was really hippie or Vietnam. So it was either peace and love or tear down the state. It was always kind of [both]. So that's how the politics thing happened.

**KD:** Did you learn as a young man in high school, that if you went into college, you could defer the draft?

**JV:** Yeah, after awhile, yeah. Yeah, sure. Until they had the lottery, because they needed more bodies. But no, there were friends of mine that were right from high school; they joined the service and they were dead in six months. Because we had a graduating class of about five hundred of us, and a few of the guys went over to Vietnam and died, just like that. Just boom, their life is over. I wasn't going to do that.

**KD:** You had mentioned that you asked a teacher, Ms. Wenzel, was it—

**JV:** Yeah.

**KD:** If you were to go to college. You said—

**JV:** Right. Long Beach.

**KD:** So were you thinking . . . I mean, when did you begin to think—did you say, "Oh, I want to go to college?"

**JV:** I wanted to go to college.

**KD:** Did your friends go to college?

**JV:** Yeah, some of them.

**KD:** How did that—

**JV:** Yeah.

**KD:** When did that come to you?

**JV:** That's when you're in the eleventh or twelfth grade. I wanted to go to college to pursue my art. I figured, "I'll go to East LA College." I went there for a year and a half. I had some real good teachers there. Roberto Chavez, Louis Lunetta, and this woman, Ms. Schwimmer. I forget what her first name was. But that was at East LA College. And just like in high school, I had some real good art teachers in high school. I would always come in second. You know how they have these [contests, art contests]?

**KD:** They had a competition and—

**JV:** Yeah, or something. I always came in second.

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** Always second.

**KD:** Did that motivate you to work harder?

**JV:** I guess so. Always second. I never won. It was always, "John, it's really good, but this one is better." Okay, whatever. [pause]

**KD:** Do you remember some of the early criticisms about your work?

**JV:** You know what? Once I got [told] nobody liked the ideas. Because I was kind of a hip kid because of my music and the stuff I was reading and my understanding of things about the politics and about Lenny

Bruce. And my mother went to go see Lenny Bruce twice. Once when he was really funny. “And the second time,” she said, “he was on something and he was just rambling about his court trial.” I go, “Yeah, Mom, I read that.” She says, “Yeah, he was doing a tape recorder.” “Yeah, Mom, yeah, that’s right, it’s supposed to be, that’s what he did.” She says, “Yeah, you should see his stuff.” And what’s funny, after the first time—after that, drugs.

KD: [laughter]

JV: [laughter] “Mom, you were there, you saw that. You saw that because I read the story of Lenny Bruce.” So I liked biographies and just stuff that that I was trying—

KD: There wasn’t other adults or other friends your age encouraging you to read certain books?

JV: I guess. I guess. I mean, that’s when I was [exploring ideas].

KD: I’m just trying to get a sense—

JV: I read the Hunter Thompson about the Hell’s Angels. *Hell’s Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*. I read that—that was like in the high school years and stuff. I was really following my own little path, and some of my friends . . . I didn’t really have a collaborator. My friends, we were friends, but I was always kind of a loner. I really was.

KD: And what about your brother, was he also—

JV: Oh, he was real popular. He was a whole different kid. He was real popular.

KD: He wasn’t reading these things too?

JV: I don’t think so. We were always like [separate and different], because he was younger than me, and he had a social group. I was always kind of [aloof]. I would rather just do something. If somebody doesn’t want to go with me, tough, I’m going to go. That’s how I saw, I saw like War—Eric Burdon and War—at the Whiskey. Because I’m at school, at East LA College, and they said, “Hey, War. Eric Burdon is playing with this new band.” I was talking to people. I was drawn—I want to go. So I got in my car, and I went. Not with them. But I went by myself. And I saw War, when it first started at the Whiskey. It was great, you know? Stuff like that, you know? But I didn’t do that a lot. I wish I had done that a lot. Like I said, I used to go to some of the love-ins. They even had this big rock festival in Northridge, at Devonshire [Downs]. And Hendrix was supposed to show up and he never did. It was the guitarist, Noel Redding, that showed up. And it was like, “Hendrix is supposed to be here, but he’s not here.”

KD: So you weren’t listening to the Chicano bands in East LA?

JV: Not that much. I never really was into [that sound]. Well, I did hear some of them. I mean, Question Mark and the Mysterians and those guys, I knew who they were. As a matter of fact, that just reminded me. When we lived in Wyvernwood, and the La Verne theatre finally closed down, Thee Midneters used to practice there. And because we were guys, we would stand outside. We wanted to go inside and watch them practice, but they let the girls in there for practice, not us. They don’t give a shit about us. They let the little the girls in the [theatre]. Maybe one or two of them are let in regularly to watch them practice. I said, “Damn, I want to watch them practice.” They didn’t let us in there, though. They don’t give a shit about us.

KD: [laughter]

JV: But I remember, like, Thee Midneters practicing. We would hear them practicing. They had this big long limousine, I guess, that they were supposed to use for, like, funerals, but that was their car. So, I mean, I was aware of all of that music scene, but I couldn’t really go to those things until I finally got a car, and that wasn’t until I went to college, because in high school, I was busy. I had a job, and I had to practice running. So I never really learned how to drive. Everybody takes driver’s ed in high school.

KD: You didn’t have driver’s ed?

JV: I had to pay for it after. I had to get out of high school and pay ten dollars an hour for six hours of learning.

KD: Wow.

JV: That’s because I was into the athletics, you know?

- KD:** You said you have this political sensibility in high school. Did your school have student groups that you could join?
- JV:** Yeah, we did that. Thanks for reminding me. We had a—it's funny, I didn't really remember until you asked—we had a debate class where we would talk about social issues. I was, I guess, in the tenth grade. And there was a teacher that, during lunch, we would go and talk about things. That's right, we did that. And sometimes, one time, the teacher freaked out because one of the girls started talking sex. How long does a sperm stay alive in your body? Oh my God, I can't talk about this.
- KD:** [laughter]
- JV:** Who would ask that? What was that all about?
- KD:** [laughter]
- JV:** Where did that come from? He was like, "Uh, we can talk about that later."
- KD:** [laughter]
- JV:** How long does sperm—yeah, how long does sperm stay alive? I was like, "How do you get it into the body?"
- KD:** [laughter] You were still—
- JV:** We kind of figured it out.
- KD:** You hadn't figured that out yet [laughter].
- JV:** I was a virgin.
- KD:** [laughter]
- JV:** And this girl, her name was Jody. She asked that—and sure enough, she was pregnant. And there was this guy—remember, Wyvernwood. So stuff like that, we would talk politics. Yeah, that's right. I forgot about that. That was in the tenth grade.
- KD:** Were there student organizations?
- JV:** Some.
- KD:** MEChA hadn't started, but UMAS [United Mexican American Students], or—
- JV:** Not there.
- KD:** Not there.
- JV:** There might have been . . . See, the only time I hung around with the Chicano kids was when we all ran. We all ran in the cross-country [team]. They used to look at me like, "You know, you don't even speak Spanish, man." And then there were sometimes I would say things and they'd be like, "You do know Spanish! You just say you don't." I'm not going to say one way or the other. I was [more Americanized], but some of these guys were first generation. Their parents crossed the border and stuff. So we knew the difference of that kind of stuff.
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** So all of these things, you can sort of question. I remember even in grammar school, seeing this display where we have all these pyramids, you know, the Aztec pyramids and these women like sewing and making pottery. And somehow they built that. In other words, the illustration was—that's why maybe I like pictorial art—because those women sitting there, like, sewing [or] whatever in the illustration somehow built those pyramids. What's the connection? It was mostly like pictures that created questions for you. We're supposed to be a bunch of—we come from a bunch of stupid barbarian Indians—how did they build those pyramids? What was that all about, you know?
- KD:** You had that awareness, asking those questions when—?
- JV:** I think that I did.
- KD:** You were how old?
- JV:** When you get older, you don't remember when, because it's all kind of like a blur. You're just learning and you're developing and you're asking questions, becoming the same kind of person.
- KD:** Well, did your—I mean, California . . . I don't know what it incurs in the California state curriculum, learning to do the missions like other kids.

JV: Yeah.

KD: So fourth grade, you know?

JV: Yeah, some of that.

KD: I don't know if you had some of that same—

JV: I don't remember. I must have, some of it.

KD: I'm trying to get a sense of . . . If you—not necessarily what year, because I understand it could be hard to recall the exact [date]. But as a child growing up, you're learning certain things in school, and you're not really sure how that can be true. Like you said, Indians are barbarians, or . . .

JV: Sure. Yeah. We were beaners, greasers, spics. But the schools I always went to were pretty balanced racially, even Huntington Park. But the principal at Huntington Park was a real racist guy. Because the prettiest cheerleader, who was this blond girl—this strawberry blond starting going out with the football star, and it was this black guy. He was like, he was fullback guy, he was . . . And they used to hold hands in school. The principal would just come behind them and break their hands [apart, saying], "You guys, this is not going to happen." This was high school, and it was a big scandal. The principal's name was a perfect name: Mr. Heil, as in "Heil, Hitler!"

KD: [laughter]

JV: That was his name. And he was mean! Mr. Heil. And the art teacher and him would always fight about something, the social issues and stuff. Because remember, Bryant, she really liked jazz, right? And also, in the market on Sunday—I would work on Sundays, and the guy, the Sunday manager . . . I'm working on Sundays from twelve noon to nine at night, every Sunday for years. I took that long shift with an hour lunch. And this one guy, he was this black guy, Oscar—I think his name was Oscar—and Fines Market had two markets. One was over here, and the other was on the south side of town. And this guy Oscar, on Sundays after the six o'clock shift would leave—right, they would come nine to six, we were twelve to nine—after they would leave, he put on the jazz station, [inaudible]. And he was so cool. And so I would hear more jazz.

So I really got into jazz. [pause] [John] Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, all that really cool stuff, you know? And then we would get [to eat the food]. So, it would be, like, there was this whole other world besides that rock and roll stuff. So I started to collect some of the jazz stuff, some of the jazz music. His name was Oliver. That was his name, Oliver, not Oscar. Oliver. He was a really cool guy. He was pretty young. He had a real good sense of humor. He says, "John . . ." He says, "Are you going to college?" I go, "Yes, I want to." He says, "Because I saw the way you mopped that floor. You don't mop floors, man."

KD: [laughter]

JV: "You better not." That's the way he'd talk to me. I'll never forget when he told me that: "You're not a floor mopper man, you better go to school. Okay? Because I see you mop the floors, and you're not cut out for that kind of stuff."

KD: So were you getting other support from other adults, either in school or otherwise?

JV: From my mother, anyways. I was the first one to graduate high school, stuff like that. And then a lot of my friends, the friends that I ended up with, they were pretty cool. I was the only one—out of my class at Long Beach, there was some like two other people, maybe three, that went there, that went to Long Beach State, and most of them were some of the Anglo kids there.

KD: From Huntington Park?

JV: Right.

KD: Wow.

JV: Right. And the reason why I got in there—it was a fluke. I went off to East LA College.

KD: Want to talk about East LA College, or is there something we're missing from—?

JV: I don't know. High school is like I really got serious in doing art and getting involved and understanding the whole social fabric of society and knowing about class, and direction—what I wanted to do.

KD: Would you say—you said you listened to Martin Luther King—you were also aware about race then?

JV: Yeah, of course. Sure. I remembered to keep all that stuff, the Black Panthers, even the Brown Berets. I never really got into the [Chicano Movement in high school]. I got into the Chicano thing when I went to East LA College. I really got into it. I was also against the war. I was one of the kids who would go to people's doors and have them sign [petitions] to get us out of the war. It's part of the [Chicano] Moratorium. You know, the Moratorium marches. I was in like three of those. The first one—

KD: That was in 1970.

JV: Right.

KD: So—

JV: Right.

KD: You had a strong awareness in high school about [politics]?

JV: Right. And then really when I went to college, I really got into it there. We were part of all of that political [action]. And also, in East LA College, I was part of a theatre group, it was a *teatro*. Mexican American Center for Creative Arts became Teatro Corazon. And we did "Yo Soy Joaquin," a [Rodolfo] "Corky" Gonzales poem. We did that as a theater piece. And that's when I really got into my art and stuff, because . . . I was actually thinking of becoming an actor, but because I stuttered, I was always [in doubt]. If I didn't get the first word out [without a stutter], I was cool after that. But I'd be [pause] scared to death. I started stuttering up on stage. So I really got into that anger part of that poem, literally. Jump up in front of the audience and jump up on the stage. And the guy who was a theater director, Emilio Delgado, he ended up on *Sesame Street*. You know the guy with the moustache that played the guitar?

KD: Yeah?

JV: That was our theater coach. Emilio Delgado. And then you see him on *Sesame Street*, you know? The guy was really talented, a really good actor, but he didn't have a good face. He had a—you know what I mean?—in terms of Hollywood.

KD: Right.

JV: So he joined *Sesame Street*, and that was his career forever, for a long time, because he went to New York, I guess.

KD: Were the teachers at East LA College . . . Was that the first time that you had Latino or Chicano—

JV: Teachers?

KD: Teachers.

JV: I don't know. I wasn't really conscious of it until then. Probably. One of my good art teachers was Roberto Chavez. He was colorblind. He was a good artist.

KD: What kind of art classes did you take from him?

JV: Whatever they had. Drawing, the modeling classes. That's right, my friend Jim, he was older than me, he had a car. So I would go with him to East LA College while I was still in high school. I had this sketchbook—I don't know if I have it anymore. I had this sketchbook, where I went to the art department and they let me just sit in there and draw. There was this nude woman. I never saw a nude woman lay there . . .

KD: [laughter]

JV: I started drawing her. I did really good. I did a real good drawing. And they asked me . . . I think if I told them I was still in high school, I would get in trouble. So I don't know what I told them. But they liked the fact that I was drawing. And I think that same woman, actually . . . [I eventually] took—her name was Mrs. Borders, I think her name was, at East LA College. That was the first year.

So in high school I had a real sense of wanting to get out of high school and continue my education, because in college it's much more serious. You took commercial art, you took design class, you kept taking those classes. I almost graduated from East LA College. But I had the opportunity to go to Long Beach, through a fluke. The guy says—his name was . . . I forget his name. Ruben Prado. He was in charge of the EOP at Long Beach. And he was seeing this girl in LA. She was a communist that [was friends with] this friend of mine, Robert, that was part of that theater group at East LA College. He used to go see her, because they both worked at the Greek Theatre ticket office, or whatever. He also worked with my friend

Robert Mencia. He was an actor, a serious actor. He was studying Russian literature at that time. This kid, he had a sports car. He looked like he could have been an actor. He was short, but he was really handsome. He was always here. *[snaps fingers]* I loved it. I don't know why I was with him at this girl's house—oh, they were part of the RCP, that's what it was.

KD: RCP?

JV: Revolutionary Communist Party.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: We're talking 1970.

KD: Yeah, okay.

JV: I said, "Robert, I'm not going to go [to the meetings], they just want to sell you their dumb magazine, that boring newspaper." For me, it was like religion. I already went through being a Christian, this is the same thing. I already knew that. Listen to my voice, that's what I get? Come on man, what is this? *[laughter]* We were there, he was going to meeting. I said, "I'm not going to go." I could always just turn around and hitchhike home. That's how it always was with me.

KD: Yeah.

JV: I'll go with you in the car. If I don't like it, I'm out of there. . . . *[pause]* So this guy went to go see her. It was the Chicano guy who ran EOP at Long Beach. He says, "You guys want to go Long Beach?" I remember Mrs. Wenzel, oh my God. I say, "Yeah." He says, "Well, show up on Monday," because school was just starting at East LA. So between Robert and I, I went. I went down there. And I had to take [tests]. From that day I had to get my transcripts and all that, and I started school, and they put me on—they were signing anybody up for EOP at that time. You would get a grant. And you'd get a work-study [grant]. And that's how I started going to Long Beach. First year was mostly orientation classes. I had to start literally . . . And the first week of school was already on.

KD: So, did you transfer courses?

JV: Yeah. I just was there a year and a half, and then when I went to Long Beach. I was like, "You know what? I'm going to start going to school here." And then I had to like, you know. I don't remember what exactly that I did, but everything worked out and I joined the art department, because I wanted to get into the art department. But it took a semester or so. But I did have classes. I guess that they saw that I was taking art classes at ELAC. I was following this art thing at East LA College, so I didn't really have to show a portfolio.

KD: Oh, you didn't?

JV: No, I didn't. I didn't have to do that. People had to after, but I never had to do that. I didn't have anything to show—at least I thought. And I started taking classes at Long Beach and started to get into that. I was there for five . . . I finally got out of there after five years. But it started as . . . And by that time, I was really political at East LA College. When you get to Long Beach, MEChA was like a big party—it was a party over there!

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: I would bring stuff, and they'd be like, "Put it down." These real Chicano militant newspapers. I'd give my right arm to just have a couple of those. They're all gone. So I'd take them down there—

KD: Why are you thinking back now, why would you give your right arm?

JV: Because those things were beautiful. They were really militant, all of the rhetoric. Just to have one of those . . . They would have an AK-47, a clench of the fist, and then all of these Chicano drawings of brown power and all that. It was [unique]. And then they'd have the eagle and all of these radical stuff about taking the land back. But what Republicans are saying, that's what we really wanted to do.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: It was in those papers. *[laughter]*

KD: Yeah. *[laughter]*

JV: They're like, "Oh my God, they're going to re-conquer."

KD: Yeah!



- JV: Yeah, we wanted to re-conquer man. That's funny. That's why. Because I had them. I would distribute those. Because part of that theatre group also—and even the theatre group broke up after a year or so because some of them wanted to pursue Hollywood, and the other ones wanted to do this guerrilla theatre. The stuff that—
- KD: Teatro Campesino?
- JV: Yeah. We actually went to a couple of their [events]. At least one of their meetings—
- KD: Really?
- JV: Where they have the *teatros* come together. It was—I want to say Santa Cruz. I forget what university. They let us sleep in the gymnasium. And Luis Valdez had a workshop. And we were from [LA], and by that time, we didn't want to be Mexican American. No man, we were Teatro Corazon. There were three of us, Robert, and my girlfriend at that time, Mary—Mary Rofloc. She was Filipina-Chicana. She had no—she was very, very [ethnic]. I remember that she was very, very dark. She was very ethnic, okay? Her father was Filipino, and her mother was from Mexico. And they met in Vegas. Her father was seventy. I mean, there was a real difference in age. And her mother was almost indigenous, her mother. Consequently, Mary ended up looking very “What the hell is this?” [That is, exotic]. I remember her—
- KD: You mentioned that the group didn't want to be Mexican American. Was that the time when—
- JV: That's because of the [Chicano] Moratorium. We actually marched in the Moratorium. We had our banners. It was Chicano, Chicano Power. 1970. We were like, “Mexican Americans in the Creative Arts? I don't want Mexican American stuff anymore.”
- KD: So that was the awareness time.
- JV: Yeah. With the theater group. We had a lot of fun. The theater group was great. We were next to the Chicano Moratorium committee on Whittier [Boulevard]. There was a church, and next to it was where the Moratorium committee met. And we were in this church for a while, doing our theater. And then the cops came and they just stormed us. They had the black tape over their names.
- KD: Oh.
- JV: They strong-armed us. They probably put bugs in there. They had cameras. It was a very different atmosphere. But we realized, “We're not going to take up guns, there's no arms struggle here.” They almost wanted to provoke us. There was a lot of shenanigans, a lot of police intelligence stuff going around. “We're not going to win this.” We'd have to do it within—it's what you do. That's why I got into consciously— from being Mexican American boy, wanting to make art. That's why I realized that I want to do Chicano art. And I really abandoned a lot of things that I was doing . . . Much more volatile artwork when I was at Long Beach, especially when I joined the center there.
- KD: Help me understand.
- JV: I know, I'm jumping around.
- KD: It's okay. When you're talking about at the moratorium itself—
- JV: There was a consciousness. Even the group before—that's when we decided to start talking about politics and stuff. Very, very radical. We see—especially with my friend Robert. Because my Anglo friends, they all either joined the army or they went to some other school. So when you get out of high school—that's what I tell my son. Whoever your friends are in high school . . . Of course, it's different, because they have that Internet thing.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: He has friends from grammar school still. But I'm jumping. For us, once high school's over, everybody just dissipates. Everybody does [different things]. We go to different schools. You don't go to school, you get a job somewhere, you deal with the military, or you don't, because people move out of state. So everybody's scattered. So then you develop another set of friends. You know some friends from high school that weren't really friends, like Robert. He went to Huntington Park also, but we didn't really become friends until we took a class—we took a class [at ELAC]. We took an art history class I think. And I knew him. He was half a semester older than I was. So he had this other group of friends, and it was more the Inner City

Cultural Center. He worked backstage there, with all of the [actors]. That's where I saw a lot of black plays. That beautiful actress, I forget her name. She was very, very well known. She just passed away. I forget her name. And I saw her act. It was this beautiful [one-person play]. I don't remember what it was. But I went there because he worked there. I was becoming his friend, so I would hang out with him. And that was during all of that political time too. We're talking about '69, '70, '71.

About between '71 and '72, again my life changed because I went to Long Beach, and that was different. In LA, which was much more of the East LA movement. And I was always on the fringes of it. I mean like Acosta—[Oscar] Zeta Acosta. I went to the trial where he was the lawyer for [Rodolfo] "Corky" Gonzales. We used to go to trial, where they tried to plant a gun on him—he said a gun was planted. We didn't have guns, because they knew that police were after everybody. So they stopped a truck and found a gun. They didn't find a gun, you put the gun there. And that was [when] I saw Acosta. He was always a character through the trial. And then you read his books. And then even when Hunter Thompson was [around, writing], I didn't know any of this stuff. And then I re-read Hunter Thompson's [book about] the Hell's Angels, [*Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*].

KD: Yeah.

JV: I was fascinated, like "What the hell is that?" It was the same guy. And even with Corky [Gonzales], we did his poem, ["Yo Soy Joaquin"]. And there was this other group, where . . . My girlfriend Mary went to [California State University,] Northridge, and she was part of that group in Northridge. But that's [later]. I wasn't at home anymore, I was living with her, in her dorm, going to [California State University, Long Beach]. It took me an hour to get to school from [Northridge]. It was crazy.

KD: [*laughter*]

JV: It was crazy. So we finally moved together in Echo Park. But before that, East LA College, for about a year and a half, there was the moratoriums. There were at least three of them. The first one blew up big. And the other ones the sheriffs broke them up. And one of them, we were doing the play, *Yo Soy Joaquin*, at the Maravilla housing projects. They had this auditorium in the park, Belvedere Park.

KD: Right.

JV: And we were doing the play to these poor people that were being tear gassed. They would bring them in, all beat up, and all sweaty with the [tear gas], and we're doing [*laughter*] the play up on the stage. It was basically a first aid station because people were being beat up by the cops. You open the door and you smell the tear gas. Some of us wanted to go out there. They said, "No, you guys don't want to go out there, because they're beating the shit out of everybody." Sure enough, after the investigations, the police overreacted. Again, they always did. They always had [that plan]. We knew, because I was part of the people that [*pause*] knew who the big shots were in the movement. We were always, like, the theatre group. We're off to the side, but we knew who some of these people were. They'd come talk to us or someone knew them or one of the theatre people went to some of the meetings at the moratorium committee. I didn't really like meetings. Because you go into the meeting and then they give you homework. I want to do my work. I was always like that. That's why I kept out of everything because I wanted to do my thing. Because if you start to join a particular kind of group like that, especially the RCP and all of that, you end up doing their thing. And I wanted to do my thing. So I was always choosey.

KD: So you guys performed "I Am Joaquin" at the various moratoriums?

JV: All over. We did it in a prison.

KD: Wow.

JV: We did this [one show]. You know Plummer Park on Santa Monica Boulevard?

KD: Yeah.

JV: There was a group of Jewish women, older women that loved to dress as señoritas. The beautiful, like, embroidered Latin America thing. And for some reason, the guy—not Emilio, but some other guy, I forget his name—but he got us a gig there, I guess through parks and rec, right? We show up. We're going to do "I Am Joaquin." We're sitting there. The audience is all of these sweetheart ladies. Elderly women, dressed

in their finest Mexican dresses and nice blouses, all colorful. It's almost like the *folklorico* looking stuff, and their hair was in braids. They just loved all things, I guess, Mexican like that. I don't know. So I was like, "Aw man, this isn't going to work. Because we've got to do 'Yo Soy Joaquin' here." And defiant. "I am Chica-mecca, Azteca," and all this—whatever the poem is. So we jump up from the audience. They know we're in the audience. I mean, it's different when we do it somewhere else.

KD: Right. [laughter] You stood out a little there.

JV: [laughter] And some of them just looked at us, like "My God!" There was this collision, okay? We do this play, and I'm like, "I don't want to have to yell at these poor girls." That was one of the funniest ones. And the other one, we did it in a prison. That was a trip, man. That was a different audience. We'd do it for [events]. We did it like a few times at different places. And when we did it [over and over]. I always just, like, [focused on the] acting. For me, it was okay. It was okay. It was more the group of friends that I ended up with and that girlfriend of mine. We were together for seven years. And we lived poor, but we were very idealistic. We broke up during the SLA [Symbionese Liberation Army] shooting. That's sort of how I date things.

KD: [laughter]

JV: Like what was going on? That was '73 or something. We had a big blowup. Because the guy next door to us, he was real political. In Echo Park—a few years later he says, "John, I have you and Mary breaking up" as he was recording the SLA shootout. He says I have to hear this. I never heard it. "You and her were yelling, breaking things. And then on the radio, you had them talking about the shootout. And then I have you guys in the background screaming and yelling at each other." He says, "You got to hear it." I say, "Well, I want to hear it." He said it was bizarre. Because finally when we calmed down, and I left or she left, the waterbed slashed—we were in love, you know? Everything of glass is all, you know, [broken]. [pause] I finally settled down, oh my God, finally. That was like a three- or four-hour argument. We put on the TV, it's the SLA shootout. Oh my God, you know? Just a bad day, you know? [laughter]

KD: [laughter]

JV: And then the guy, he was a bastard, who lived next to us. He was like, "That tape was so amazing, of you and her." Because we were screaming.

KD: Now, when—

JV: It was funny.

KD: I think you had mentioned that that wasn't the first time that you moved out of the home.

JV: Yeah, I was—

KD: You moved out.

JV: I was already gone. I was already gone.

KD: You said in college you moved out of the home.

JV: When I went to Long Beach, especially. Let's see, at East LA—I was still at home at East LA, I think. I have to think about that. There was other places that I would stay at, also. In high school, I would just stay at different people's houses and stuff. I would come home once in a while, and then it was like a family then. And then I was being my whole radical way of living, you know? I wanted to [join the movement]. I was following that. I'm not—I'm very politically involved. With the theatre group, I was taking art classes. I finally quit my job at the market because I wasn't ever going to become a checker. I don't really want to do that. I should have—but I didn't. I said, "Nah, I'm going to follow my art career, wherever that takes me," figuring if it doesn't work, I can get a job in a factory. But the factories were shutting down. The war was taking off. And the whole [Richard] Nixon [era continued].

KD: I should have asked you, when you had this sense that you were going to be an artist, did you know what that meant? Had you seen artists?

JV: I was very idealistic.

KD: [Had you seen] galleries?

- JV: Yeah. The LA County [Museum of Art], the whole Ed Kienholz thing. I really liked Salvador Dalí, because I liked his realism. I always liked to do realism. And I would do drawings from the *Life* magazine. I would look at *Life* magazine, see a portrait and then just try to draw it. Then I went to school. I was always good at drawing stuff from life, but it took too long. I wanted to get [it done before] the time my idea [became stale]. I was still doing the damn drawing. So, the time—I had to figure out how to get my ideas out faster.
- KD: Take me back a little bit, because I didn't realize . . . Most of the people I talked to in your age group, that grew up in Southern California, they weren't seeing a lot of modern art.
- JV: There was some.
- KD: Were you going to LA County Museum?
- JV: Yeah, sure, I went with my girlfriend once, my high school girlfriend. We took the bus. Instead of going to school one day—I know I told you I always went to school. In high school, I must have been in the twelfth grade, and we just took the day off. Instead of going to school, we got on the bus and went to the LA County Museum. I can't tell you what I saw. We also went to the Natural History Museum, in the beginning. Before LA County was built, [the only] art museum was the Natural History Museum.
- KD: I'm wondering if you remember anything about . . . You [were] born in '51. When you're about twelve years old, 1963, LA County Museum has the [three hundred years of Latin American art] exhibit? [*Masterworks of Mexican Art: From Pre-Columbian Times to the Present*—ed.]
- JV: No.
- KD: [*inaudible*]
- JV: I didn't see that. I remember going with my mother to go see the [Edward] Kienholz thing, because that was so notorious. Everybody went to see it.
- KD: I don't think I know that one.
- JV: The *Backseat Dodge* ['38].
- KD: Oh, the *Backseat Dodge*. [*laughter*]
- JV: I mean, my mother went to go see it.
- KD: Right.
- JV: I remember going with her.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: It was notorious. Everybody went to see that. It was a big deal.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: That's why I really love Kienholz. Mostly, I really got into art the way I got into music. Even the San Francisco poster was really influential for a lot of us because it was just so different. I even learned how to write that psychedelic writing, the alphabet. I did a Bob Dylan song. I did "Mr. Tangerine Man" in hippie writing.
- KD: That bubble-letter—
- JV: Yeah, that bubble thing. I did it on these two boards, the whole song. Stuff like that.
- KD: [*laughter*]
- JV: I also did Love—you remember the group Love? They had that weird [logo]. I did that in cardboard, left it outside to dry at my mom's house, somebody stole it. I carved it out and everything, I was going to put it up inside my room. Because my brother and I shared the room. Once he was gone playing, I decided to put my albums up on the wall, put up the album covers. He freaked out and I had to take all that down. Another time I put up all these photographic magazines, which were really influential. That's where I learned about Lee Friedlander and a lot of the street photographers, like Diane Arbus.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Stuff like that, I learned about them.
- KD: So you're doing this on your own.
- JV: Yeah, right, yeah. Because that's kind of what I—I was more influenced really by photography than I was really about art—[painting]—the art trends. I was more into realism. I wanted to reflect society. I always had these things. These friends—my friends would tell me that, while I was in high school, that I would

point things out. “Wow, check that out.” “What are you looking at?” There were these little things. I had some kind of aesthetic. I felt that there were certain [things] that I found really interesting, like between the buildings or the contrast between like a storefront mannequin or the trash or some person. I used to see these relationships, and I wanted to draw those, I started to paint those. I wanted to develop [this]. That’s why I got into art. Because I really sensed it. There was something that I was really drawn towards.

And it wasn’t until many years later that I was told that my father, he used to draw. I never knew that. It was just recently. Who was I talking to? It might have been my mother. She never really told us stuff about him, because he just had—stuff. She was pissed off. I don’t blame her. He basically just went off and had his own—that’s why she got divorced. All he wanted to do was have kids. And he did. He wanted to have an army. I think for him, whatever that was, he just wanted to have kids. And he had a lot of them. And I’m the oldest of all of them.

KD: Yeah.

JV: So many other of them used to come around [wanting me to be the older brother]. I’m not playing that “I’m the older . . .”

KD: [laughter]

JV: I’m not playing that. I’m not doing that one. But, he used to draw. And then my Aunt Güera . . . I never knew what *güera* meant. Her name was Maria. We knew her as “Güera” because she was the lightest one of all of the girls. [overlapping dialogue, inaudible] I never knew until I was, like, fifteen, what *güera* really means. That means “light skin,” right?

KD: Yeah.

JV: “Güera” was her name. That’s kind of the way it was. She’s still around. She has dementia now. She’s in a home. She’s in her eighties. And my mother and her, they were really close. They used to laugh. They used to fight. I mean fight in a funny way. When we were kids, we’d go to Whittier [Boulevard], and they’d both see a bathing suit. And my Aunt Güera, she was a big woman. So one time, for instance, my mother would get the bottom, and Güera would get the top. Because they both wanted it, but they’d be fighting for it.

KD: [laughter]

JV: “You can’t fit in that!” “Oh, to hell with you.” And they would fight like that, and they’d come back to the car arguing. Oh, here they are arguing again. And then later on, they just start laughing about it. “We’re silly.” And stuff like that. And my brother and me would be in the backseat. We’d be in the car, in the parking lot, with the windows rolled down waiting for them, [and they’d be] like, “You guys stay in the car!”

KD: [laughter]

JV: “Can we go to the restroom?” “Stay in the car!” “Stay out of trouble, stay in the car.” We’d be in the car. Anyway, so—

KD: You mentioned that—

JV: Oh yeah, wait, I mentioned that, sorry—

KD: Go ahead.

JV: Güera, she was very creative. She would see like [something in a store]. You know how they were doing all of the glass grapes, that was a big thing?

KD: Yeah.

JV: She figured out how to do it. She said, “I can do that.” So she would go down to Moskatels, a large crafts store, buy the stuff, and make it herself. She was very artistic like that. She did some other things, too. Purses. She’d just make it herself.

KD: And do you recall thinking about that and talking about it as a young man or a child?

JV: Yeah, after a while, it’s like, “Where does this art thing come from?”

KD: Yeah.

JV: It was a saying in the family: “Your Aunt Güera does stuff like that.” But you don’t have to make a living doing that job. It’s like, “What’s going to happen?” At that point, nobody’s going to be an artist. What is this artist trick, you know? Now, Jesus Christ man, what’s up?

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: But at the time, nobody [could convince me]. It's like it wasn't even rational.

KD: So what are you getting in support from them?

JV: I don't know, just from school. I mean, my mother was like, "Okay, this is what he does. He'll be okay." And my stepfather sat me down once and said, "Are you serious about this stuff? What are you going to do?" And I said, "Well, if it doesn't work, I can always just get a job, right? But I'm going to try." I gave him a heart to heart talk: "I'm going to try to do this." It's funny.

KD: Do you remember feeling at the time—

JV: I was really determined.

KD: Oh, okay, determined.

JV: Because I was [idealistic].

KD: It didn't deter you?

JV: No, as a matter of fact, I used to hitchhike. I met some friends. This guy lived at [the same apartment]. He was from Vietnam. He lived in Idaho. So I would hitchhike to go work up on his father's farm, picking potatoes. All we had to do [was get there]. Instead of getting a job in LA, because I had real long hair. I was like twenty or twenty-one, real long hair, and I was just growing this goatee of mine at the time. I probably looked Satanist. You can't imagine. I was real thin.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: So we went to hitchhike [to Idaho]. I had my harmonica. I had my bedroll, and my mother said, "Where are you going, goddamn it, where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to go, I have a job up there." She was pissed. So I didn't call her. My poor mother. I was gone for months, I could have been dead. She said she couldn't sleep for [the duration]. You can imagine. Your imagine— Your son, you have a falling out with your son because he wants to leave town. "I'm already in my twenties. You can't tell me nothing." You know. And I'm going to Idaho to go work on this guy's father's farm. She doesn't want me to go. Then I'm like, "Forget it then." I'm not going to call her. Whatever. So I go and she couldn't sleep. Poor—and when I come home, my stepfather says to me, "Oh my God, you put your mother [through] so much." That's right. I was like, "Well, she was mad at me, she didn't want to talk to me." "You got to call your mom, man."

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: "You could have been dead for all she knows in Nevada, or in Utah. Idaho?" And then I went up a couple of times. And once—because at Long Beach my funding was stopped after about a year. So I had to let them know that I wasn't living with my parents, and that I was happy to support my Aunt Güera, who barely had income, so I could get back into school. So that one semester I worked in the—because I don't want to get a job in the textile industry work, where I used to work, as a bike kid. They told me, there, too

KD: Were you a messenger boy?

JV: Yeah. For the company, for two summers. One summer, the guy said, "John, don't come [back]. It's a sweatshop. Don't come back here. You don't belong here. You've got a brain. Do something with your life. Follow your art career, whatever." The next summer, I come back. He says, "Oh John, you're back." I say, "I didn't get a job that summer." At that time, I was living in a hotel room in downtown LA. It was cool. Now, it's a parking lot to the Jonathan Club, right there on Figueroa. I saw those two big black towers that used to be the Atlantic Richfield [Company (ARCO)], but it's something else now. I saw it as it was being built. It was this hotel room that I was in.

KD: When you were in college trying to make ends meet.

JV: Yeah, when I was between [semesters]. I guess I was at East LA College. See, all of that's sketchy.

KD: That's okay. That's okay. You don't need to sort it out.

JV: But yeah, I remember—so I worked for the textile industry. And the second year, the guy said, "John, don't come back here," because it's easy to get a job there again. And it was like just for the summer. And I was able to at least go out on the streets with a bike. And I would go into clothing designers' [shops], because we would do the buttons for some of the clothing designers. So you see the models being dressed, and

you see the fashion. Or I'd go into a sweatshop to go pick up material to go make cloth-covered buttons. This place was making cloth-covered buttons. And the elevator—this black woman was [working]. She'd be the elevator operator, and she'd been either up and down all day long. [Sticky and] hot. Man, this was LA, you know? It was a great experience. I did it for two summers working for that [factory].

KD: Now, why is it a great experience?

JV: Because you see how they work in a sweatshop. You see this woman on the third floor, every day, all she did was iron. [pause] Whatever the weather was, steam iron. A woman doing the sewing, shop after shop, and also I'd go to this place called beachcomber, they were hip, hippie designers. They were doing like the flower pants with the bell-bottoms.

KD: Yeah.

JV: So again, I'd been a political kid, you'd see the different lifestyles. People thought I could only live and work here—[no future].

[break in audio]

KD: [This is] tape 2, and John was telling me about his summer employment and the different things he saw around town moving around the sweatshops and the designers.

JV: Yeah, so that's—it's funny. If you get somebody to [let you talk] . . . Like, these kind of interviews are really interesting, because you never know where it's going to lead you. Basically, I was trying to do my art, taking art classes, and being part of these theatre groups and meeting a whole different kind of friends. That girlfriend of mine, we both wanted to be artists. She was really good. But she gave it up. She would have been like really, really good. She was almost like Diane Gamboa, kind of. But she was crazy. [laughter] She went to [California State University,] Northridge. She'd do these big vagina paintings, okay?

KD: Yeah.

JV: They're really beautiful, like huge!

KD: [laughter]

JV: She put it on her car, with some rope, to get on the freeway to go—

KD: [laughter]

JV: It flew off the car, of course. It flies off the car. And for a second, there's a guy behind her that saw this—

KD: Vagina. [laughter]

JV: Big expressionist vagina looking at him. [laughter]

KD: [laughter]

JV: Like, "Oh my God!" And it finally falls. It was so funny, that was so funny. Oh my God, that poor guy, like— [laughter]

KD: [laughter]

JV: Hilarious stuff. You know, you think about all that kind of stuff. We were trying to be artists. And I just, I was stubborn. I never gave up.

KD: It sounds like it.

JV: Yeah.

KD: Can I take you back? I forgot to ask you a question and you mentioned something just now that reminded me that this might be important, if not, we can go some place else. In high school, when you're listening to music and having this very '60s experience—

JV: Yeah, sure.

KD: How did you dress?

JV: I dressed like a—you know what was funny? I don't really dress—because I was still younger, I was really into the beach. I was in like trunks. You know, they used to come out with those [surfer-type] trunks?

KD: Yeah.

JV: Because when I went to summer school in high school, I'd go to summer school, and a certain day that I didn't have to work, I'd go home, get a towel, put on my trunks and just hitchhike to the beach and go

bodysurfing. That was some of the most pleasant times. And I'd go alone. Because I really became a loner. To do artwork, you've got to be alone.

KD: You've got to be comfortable being alone, yeah.

JV: Yeah, you've got to be comfortable at being alone. And sometimes, I'm too comfortable being alone. And to this day, I hardly go places. I have to consciously get out more, because I do have friends, you know?

KD: You don't go to your own openings?

JV: Oh no, I go to my openings. I had an art show like three years ago, and I'm supposed to have one this coming March. And also, they might show me at the Plaza [de la Raza] boathouse. But that's something else.

KD: Okay.

JV: But in terms of like, I was really used to being alone from let's say running, from when I used to go buy my music. I mean, I had friends. But it was always [personal].

KD: Did you listen to music with headsets on?

JV: Yeah. Yeah. I did, a lot of times. Especially when I was at the house, I used to fall asleep with them. My stepfather said, "You were twitching and swaying along to what you were listening to."

KD: [laughter]

JV: "You're going to go deaf." He thought like that.

KD: Most people did, yeah, I remember.

JV: Yeah, you're going to go deaf. But I really liked all of that music stuff. I went to a few concerts, just a few.

KD: I'm curious, you also mentioned [Salvador] Dalí.

JV: Yeah.

KD: Did you get that at school?

JV: Yeah, when I was at school, I really liked him, because he was such interesting art, just his surrealist stuff. Because it was realism, but it was very imaginative. I guess most kids at that time liked Dalí, and even [René] Magritte.

KD: Yeah.

JV: That kind of stuff.

KD: Yeah.

JV: When I was looking at a photo magazine, I think the ideas of a point of view and what you photograph and what you leave out of the photograph with different people, was the same thing, what they bring is fascinating to me. It's like a point of view. And that is your imagination of stuff. And when I was real small, I used to play with like marbles. And they would be—they would be like the cowboy and the Indian stuff. And there'd be the fort. I'd be upstairs playing. I don't know how small I was. And I would make with milk cartons and string like this little elevator to put them in.

KD: [laughter]

JV: And then the marbles would like charge the other ones. And they'd say, "What are you doing up there?" I'd say, "I'm playing." They'd say, "Get out of the house." But I'd play in my head with all of these role models about how I was the hero. Even before I would go to sleep, I'd come up with a story. Like, "Today I'm Zorro," I would say, or, "Today I'm Tarzan." And I would basically tell a story, and there would always be a girl involved that I would rescue, and I'd beat up the meanies, before I went to sleep. And I would do that for, I don't know, years.

KD: What a great way to go to sleep.

JV: Isn't that weird? That's like, it's weird.

KD: Sounds quite healthy to me.

JV: Yeah, but it was strange though. So with her—the way my mother raised us, we weren't really religious, she didn't give us any fears of hell, it was more about her. She was our hell. If we messed up, like one time, we were crossing the freeways over here—that's where we lived. There was a sewer that you could walk through that goes under the freeways to Salesian High School.

KD: Yeah.



- JV: Right. Then we'd walk that. Instead of going back through the tunnel, we'd take the freeways. We'd like climb over—we'd wait until the cars [were far enough away]—we're kids—and we'd dash across the freeway, the Santa Monica [Freeway], up the hill, there was this on-ramp. We're crazy, a bunch of kids running across the freeway. And one time this cop saw us, this policeman: "What are you guys doing? Did you cross the freeway?" We can't lie, you know? He says, "I want you to go home and tell your mothers what you did, because I'm going to call them." Sure enough, she says, "Yeah, he called." He didn't call!
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: [laughter] "It's good you told me because he did call."
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: "Wow, man." That's how young we were. But it was all that kind of stuff. But then I remember playing inside the house with these things, and my mother would tell me too, but I was always—Leonard was more [sociable]—he became the lawyer. I became the artist, you know? And always she was—she finally got off my back about it. She never really gave me a hard time. She just worried. When she saw me on TV, I think it was [a] Channel 28 thing, I don't know. We were doing that part of the whole Chicano trip, you know?
- KD: With—
- JV: I've—
- KD: Treviño? Jesús Treviño's stuff?
- JV: I don't remember. But once she saw me on TV, she thought, "Oh, he made it." He's on TV. I still had to borrow twenty bucks here and there. [laughter]
- KD: We've been talking for a long time. Want to pause for today?
- JV: Sure.
- KD: Thank you so much.

## NOVEMBER 21, 2007

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez. Today is November 21, the day before Thanksgiving, and we're in Los Angeles talking for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. John, why don't you tell me about your experience going to Long Beach State?

**JV:** I think the other day I talked to you about how I got in there, sort of like on a fluke of meeting the—I think his name was Jorge Prado. It was about '71, and I met him at this house in Silver Lake, along with this friend of mine there. I don't know why. But he asked us, are we going to college? I went to ELAC, East LA College. He said, "You want to go to Long Beach, Long Beach State?" I was pretty amazed, and I said, "Yes, that has a real good art school." He says, "Well, show up on Monday." And I was visiting him like Friday or Thursday, or could have been Saturday. I know it was, like, just show up. He told me where. And then I went there and started filling out the application, because I guess they were really trying to get Chicanos to start going there. And because I wasn't really good in networking in terms of school and stuff, it was more of this theater group that I was still part of at this time. Maybe it broke up. I don't really remember. But I remember basically just stopping to go to East LA College and then starting to go to Long Beach.

**KD:** What courses did you first take? Do you recall?

**JV:** Basically, just orientation classes, basically. I had an English class. I really don't remember. I really don't remember that first semester. I know it had to be at least twelve units. I don't even think I took an art class.

**KD:** Oh, really?

**JV:** I don't remember. I remember I had to wait. I had to get established in there. And I got a work-study job working in the mechanical engineer department, which was really useful for me for three years.

**KD:** Useful how?

**JV:** Well, I learned how to use [tools], even though I don't really use them anymore. I learned how to use a lot of tools. Because what we did, is we worked in the shop, and this is the mechanical engineering. And the shop was run by two Navy guys that came out of World War II. And I was already fascinated by World War II, and these guys were the real deal. They were basically retired, and they worked on these ships during the major battles, the Coral Sea, battle of Coral Sea, and all these major Pacific battles. And they had these stories. And this is after three years, that they'd tell me these stories.

And most of the other work-study students were engineering students. The thing that we had to do there, is basically we had to fix all the machines the students broke: pressure machines, wind tunnels. They had the first [of the newer engines]. You know, there was that catalytic converter. The first engines that didn't have a piston. It sort of turned . . . I forget the name of it. It was one of the first Mazda engines. Some of them would be wrecked, so they would donate them to the university. And we would have to cut them out using welding torches, [out] of the car. We had to pull them out. Even had to work with asbestos, without [masks].

**KD:** A mask?

**JV:** Any kind of breathing thing. But we were always like breathing [carefully]. I knew it was bad stuff. So I would always like exhale, always spit out. And I was always exhaling. This was terrible. But we're talking '71, '72, '73. About '74, I finally started working for the Centro de la Raza. But just getting established in Long Beach there. I was living [in Echo Park]. I was kind of living all over the place. I had a girlfriend, I lived with her in her dorm in Northridge. Then we moved to Echo Park, eighty-dollars-a-month rent in Echo Park. And we were really broke. I remember during the Watergate trials, we basically—it's student life. Popcorn and 7-Ups, you know? And then maybe a burger. And then we would make rice. And just waiting for your—waiting for my work-study check, or this grant money that you'd basically have to just pay for your books or your art supplies. And we were both art students.

**KD:** So you said you got into the art department without a portfolio?

**JV:** Yeah. Right.

**KD:** So you just entered—

**JV:** I think it was probably—they saw my grades. Because every other class, I was a solid C, maybe even a C-minus student. But in art I got A's and B's, always, all the time. Except for maybe art history, that's the only one. I'd fall asleep, and have to wake up. And there's always these trends. I learned a lot of it, but it wasn't really until I went to Europe and saw these paintings and saw all of the art stuff. And you just sort of learn. You learn these things.

But Long Beach was really good. Part of it was, I felt like I was really politically active. I really was at East LA College. I was part of that theater group, and we were working with the Chicano Moratorium committee. I was part of all of those marches, from the first one. Seeing what the police did and just how strong they were. And I look back, they were really afraid. They didn't know what we were going to do. During the moratorium, they were waiting for us to riot the way the black folk did. But we never did. People are going to tear this place down. Are they going to burn Whittier Boulevard to the ground? A few places went up. They were going back through the streets. I sort of kept away from breaking the windows and stuff. I actually went all the way back because I was in charge of the car. So after I was almost arrested in the park when the police and sheriff [stormed]—this was the—

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** August 29 thing. Everything was cool. It was really nice. [Then the police stormed and fire tear gas.] There were so many people. I still have photographs. Not of that one though, I take that back. I have one of the second or third one. I wasn't photographing by that time, in 1970. This friend of mine gave me a camera. But I wasn't really photographing at the first moratorium. I was just drawing. I was taking my art classes at East LA, and I joined this theater group. And we'd go on a Thursday night, maybe a Tuesday.

And I loved the acting exercises because it was almost [therapy], I'd say. It reminded me when I used to go to church with my Aunt. You'd leave enlightened. The air was bright and you felt really alive through whatever—well, we had acting exercises. It was really physical and vigorous, and then we'd be talking. It was very intense sort of acting exercises that I'm sure most actors know about. It takes your mind to another level, you have to trust your instincts and your improvisation and the intuitive part and the group you're with, you get really, really close. Because you look for exercises where you become really emotionally intimate with each other about anger and about trust and trying to make each other laugh and role-playing—

**KD:** This sounds like, what do they call it, the natural technique?

**JV:** I guess. I guess. I don't know whether it was Harold Clurman, or what was his name? Not Steinburg, but what's his name?

**KD:** [Constantin] Stanislavski.

**JV:** Yeah, Stanislavski.

**KD:** Method acting.

**JV:** I'm not sure. Because this was East LA, Chicano heaven, so I don't know.

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** It was Emilio Delgado. He was the main acting guy. I think I told you last time.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** He went on to Sesame Street, which I thought was really, really funny. When I see my kids growing up and they're watching Emilio on Sesame Street, I thought it was hilarious.

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** It was something else. So that was really cool. And for some reason, that, I said, got me into a lot of activities, handing out newspapers—there was always something to do. There was always—you could always volunteer and do stuff. We'd go to mostly meetings and really discuss [the issues]. Some people wanted to really radicalize and take up arms. And I look back, those were probably cops. Those people, they weren't part of the theater group—there were people in there who were real rabble-rousers. Some of them really wanted to grab onto you, who are you? And since I've always been pretty introverted until I get to know you, and then I'm very extroverted. It's sort of the way I was raised.

Most people I was very wary of, because I didn't want to join the Brown Berets. I didn't want to get into anything that was overtly political enough that it'd take me away from doing my artwork. Because I liked going to my art classes and I had to get decent grades. And I liked this theater group. And that's where I got my first college girlfriend. That's the one that I stayed with for seven or eight years. It was a tumultuous, but very, very—it was fun. We were a really interesting match.

KD: Did you mention the other people that were in the theater group?

JV: Yeah. The only ones that I can remember is a Robert . . . It's been so long ago. There was a guy . . . I don't know their names. It's been so long ago.

KD: Was it, like, five?

JV: There were a lot of us. There were at least twelve, thirteen people. The five I told you about, were the ones in the "Yo Soy Joaquin" play.

KD: Right.

JV: Five or seven. We just cut up the play and memorized like our parts of it. And then as it developed, like, the egos clashed. I've always seemed to somewhat piss other people off. I never really knew why.

KD: [laughter]

JV: All the sudden they were [hostile to me]. Maybe because of my naïve arrogance. I'm always taken aback, like, "What's the problem?" I never could understand it. I think it's because I think I'm something else. I'm something in a cup of Kool-Aid, I don't know what it is.

KD: [laughter]

JV: I have no idea—

KD: So there was a clash within the group?

JV: Yeah, there was a clash. Some of us, we used to think we were really hip. It was true. We used to go all of the films. That's when the Jon Voight's *The Revolutionary* came out, and *Strawberry Fields*, all of these radical films. And we would watch all of the [Federico] Fellini films and we'd watch the [Michelangelo] Antonioni [films]. Not just *Zabriskie Point*, [but also] *L'Avventura*, because my friend Robert, he worked for an art film [theater], down close to where Otis [Art Institute] was, on Wilshire. It was called the Vagabond—the Vagabond Theater. So I get to see all of the films for free. And I get to know the owner, and he knew that I was an artist. So when he moved it over to the Picfair [Theatre], years later, I was basically doing the billboards for him, for the JFK film and then for the [Luis] Buñuel. It was actually a little later. That came in the late '70s. We're talking—this is like '70, '71, '72.

There was a certain break, and I realized that I had to stay in Long Beach. So I had to come back to LA and visit my friend Robert and his girlfriend, Alejandra. We would call her Alex. I would visit them on the weekends. I would feel like I was stuck in Long Beach, trying to get out of school. But there was this transition point, when I was still in LA, East LA, doing the theater stuff. I was starting to go to [Cal State] Long Beach. Robert didn't go for some reason, he didn't want to go. He would have really flourished. He was the one that was going to [become an actor]. One of these friends of mine that really inspired me, to keep going in my art. He was a really good actor. Like, where I mentioned when I was younger, there was a friend of mine, Joe Povanno, a really good drawer—a really good drawer, really good. And he inspired me to keep doing drawing, just to practice harder. So it's always funny to see who really inspires you to do what, and then they end up stopping, and I end up keep [going]. I thought that was all of us man.

KD: You look around and you're the only one.

JV: Yeah, what's up, you know? And so then you have to do . . . The thing for me is, I never wanted to [quit]. I think for me to quit was to fail. And I never wanted to fail, because I don't want to disappoint, because I was already risking too much to really do this impossible thing. And I always felt like—and I really felt, because part of your insecurities—I could never find a job. I couldn't ever get a decent job. Like Sears and Roebuck, I grew up around—I went there with my friend Robert. I wanted to try and get a job. I went in there to apply, [and they said,] "Well, he'll apply also." They told him—he was on one table with someone else over here—I don't know, maybe they saw that my face was kind of scrunched up, and they sensed

insecurity or whatever. They told me that there was no work for me. They told him he could start the next day. [pause] In other words, there was work, but there was always something about me at the time. I think it was like I showed fear or something—

KD: [laughter]

JV: And deep insecurity. Like, “No, this guy is not going to work here.” But I swear, if they ever would have hired me, I would have been one of their best workers.

KD: Well, I’m curious. If you’re giving [off] a sense of insecurity, or at least you’re feeling like that might have been it, yet you’re standing up on stage and doing these performances.

JV: Exactly.

KD: Where does that come from?

JV: I know! I don’t know. I think it comes from being a stutterer and trying to—trying to really find myself. And maybe my determination was so deep, nobody could see it yet. I don’t know. I remember these things because Robert was really—he had a lot of confidence. He had a sports car. He was reading Russian literature. He was supposedly a stoned commie, but [he] was basically Mr. Groovy. Well, he worked for the theater. He worked for the Inner City Cultural Center, which at the time [was] a non-profit black theater group. I forgot where they were, like Vermont [Avenue]. I think it’s still around, the Inner City Cultural Center. And they had a theater. And then he would work at the Vagabond Theater taking tickets, working—he didn’t do the projector. But he would do the popcorn, candy, and he’d be in the ticket [booth]. He’d be like the manager. He’d be in there working with this guy. So we used to go see the films and the owner of the theater—of the Vagabond—he got some Otis [students], because Otis was like a block and a half up. So a lot of the art students from Otis—

KD: Obviously.

JV: Went to see all the Fellini films and Antonioni, and all of that French stuff, and even the Russian stuff—[Sergei] Eisenstein. Like a lot of films, a lot of those films at that time, it was like ’70 to ’72 and ’73. And what the owner of the theater did, is he had these stills of, I think it was “Ivan the Terrible,” or “Ivan the Great.” The Eisenstein film. [*Ivan the Terrible*.] It was this big Russian epic of these battles. [The owner] had movie stills. I think he actually cut them out of the film. Beautiful, pristine, 35 millimeter.

KD: Wow.

JV: And he had the film students from Otis paint them on the sides of the wall inside the theater where all the seats were in black and white.

KD: Wow.

JV: It was beautiful. You go in there, and you have these war scenes, and you know what film it [is]. And the other side was the film—October 28, or whatever. With the baby carriage, which has been used in films ever since.

KD: Yeah.

JV: “Coming Down Potemkin” [*Battleship Potemkin*], I think it was. I forget the name. I’m sort out of practice. And so he had that on the other side with a woman, her face is shot with the glasses and so that was really inspiring also, because when the lights come up, you see this beautiful black and white painting. I actually used that black and white painting technique when I was finally in Long Beach working for the Centro there. And we did the murals upstairs. We were doing the “summer youth employment in climate” stuff. So I sort of used that then. And also, when I saw the black and white paintings at Estrada Courts around the same time—I was already long gone out of Estrada Courts—and they were starting to do a lot of murals there. And I saw Gronk and Willie [Herrón’s mural].

KD: [inaudible] The *Black and White Mural*.

JV: Yeah. And then I met Gronk when I was at East LA College, and I saw Patssi [Valdez]. But I never really met her. Because as they were getting there—well, he was already there—but when she was getting there, I always already going to [Cal State] Long Beach. I remember seeing her. She had this [jacket]. It always looked cool, they always dressed really, really cool, for the time, you know. By that time I was dressing in

the Vietnam—the green fatigue thing, because everybody wanted to dress like that. And I was growing my hair long. My hair got real long, ridiculously. I always had it in a ponytail. But even [then], I was real skinny. I know it's hard to believe.

KD: [laughter]

JV: I was very skinny. [laughter]

KD: How did you meet Gronk?

JV: He was the one who turned me on to Rapidograph pens for ink drawing. I knew what the Rapidograph pen was, when I was in high school, because I took drafting classes there, in, I think, my last year of cross country. And I would have to quit the drawing in a drafting class to go run. In other words, I wasn't there in fifth period every week. And so, the guy wanted to do drawings, and you had to put your drawings up—you know the drafting drawings or whatever?

KD: Yeah.

JV: So I would be really quick. And even though I actually missed days, I got a pretty good B in that class, because of that.

KD: [laughter]

JV: But anyway, at the time, I was introduced to the Rapidograph pen, which was a real fine line, a real even, fine line. And think Gronk was [pause] using them. He was doing his little drawings. He had an Afro and a red velvet cape, like, platform shoes—I think they were platform shoes. He was pretty eccentric. But he was a really nice guy. And I remember meeting him. He was really easy to talk to. He said he wasn't really going to school there. He was basically a dropout. We'd just hang out there. And he knew Roberto Chavez. So I'd talk to him once in a while. He wasn't in any of my classes or anything. That's why I kind of believed his story. He just kind of hung out there. He was doing drawings for I think, some of the Chicano political newspapers that were coming out. There were a lot of them coming out in that time. I remember handing them out. I never kept them.

KD: Yeah, you talked about that.

JV: Yeah, I never had a sense of collecting them. I had one, once, and then somebody stole it. I go, "Man, that's the last one I had." All the sudden it was gone. It was in my old studio. But that's something else.

KD: So, what were some of the teachers that you had in Long Beach in art?

JV: Oh, I had . . . Mostly, Long Beach was cool, because conceptual art was just starting.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And it was a realist school. It was to go to school and just draw from life, draw from models, and a lot of contour drawing. You know those cross-hatching in art for anatomy. The teacher that I found really inspiring [was Maxwell Hendler], and he told me to finally cool it. Because when I got into Chicano shows, I mentioned Max Hendler. He was a—they called him a super-realist. There was a super-realist school. He was a super-realist. He spent three or four years on one painting. He'd paint dust on a bottle, a beer bottle, and it'd look like a beer bottle with dust on it. It was insane. He did a [painting that's at] the LA County Museum of Art. They show it once in a while. It's kind of faded. But maybe it just looks different. But maybe . . . Oh, okay. From East—I know this story—when I went to Long Beach, and Max was one of my teachers. When I was at East LA College, the place to go see art was La Cienega [Boulevard].

KD: Yeah.

JV: That was it, gallery row.

KD: Yeah.

JV: So one day, [Roberto Chavez] took all of our class—Chavez took all of our class down to, I think it was something [called the] Stuart Gallery. It's been a long time. Once in a while . . . I remember the first name, Gene Stuart, or something. Stuart Gallery. [David Stuart Galleries, at 807 N. La Cienega Blvd.—ed.] Right, a couple buildings away from Melrose. And it was a Max Hendler show. I was at East LA College. I was in there for about a year. Max had one painting, it was about six by six inches, another eight by eight inches, one in each room. There was like four paintings in four rooms, one in each room.

KD: *[laughter]* That's it?

JV: But when you look at the painting . . . One was, I guess, his living room in Venice. You see like varnished floor, the light coming in and a TV that looks like it's actually on. And he said—I asked him years later, "How did you get that TV like that?" He said, "Zinc white." Zinc white is one of the hardest whites because it always loses its [brightness]. The color takes over what the white you're putting into it. It always absorbs it. Whereas titanium white, it is almost like Wite-Out. So there was this whole difference. And then there's flake white, I'm still trying to figure that out. Because I kind of refuse to read books unless I can't figure it out myself: "Oh, that's what it is."

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: So anyway, he had one painting in each room. The place is filled. In the back, I see Max—this is like '71 maybe—and he's dressed like Sly and the Family Stone.

KD: No.

JV: He's in a purple velvet hat.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: He has these two blonde girls. I mean, we're college kids, just barely out of high school—sitting there looking at you, like "Look at me, look at me." And I was amazed at his paintings. And one was just a still life. It was an oven mitten and you know the old beer bottles? Like the Brew—

KD: Brew 102.

JV: Man, I'm old.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: I'm so old. *[laughter]*

KD: Can't be that old if I'm that old too. *[laughter]*

JV: Brew 102. The Brew 102 used to just be off the freeway.

KD: Yeah. Yep.

JV: Horrible beer, it tastes like—

KD: Terrible. *[laughter]*

JV: Chloroform or something. It tasted horrible. But it was like a beer bottle with dust on it.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And I know how he did it. He basically put that beer bottle there and the dust collected. And as it collected, he painted it. So there were four paintings. Those two I really remember. It was a living room scene. And there was a beer bottle with dust on it, and a mitten.

KD: And you asked him about his technique and the work?

JV: Yeah, he actually talked—he talked to us that night, because I think Chavez brought us. Or maybe Chavez told us—Robert Chavez—about, "That one's four and a half years, that's three and a half years."

KD: To paint?

JV: Yeah to paint them.

KD: Wow.

JV: Because—and that's really what inspired me. Because I really like being a realist. But I had to get—I was always impatient. And it's not about the time, it's about what you're working on. And for many years, that kept me going. That really kept [me inspired]. And sometimes, I don't know . . . It is religious. It's like "who cares?" But you're thinking, "get over yourself, and get to work." And as you get older—I have a lot more fun in my work. In the beginning, I was very serious. I did this journal that I think I'll show you. It's probably the only thing that really has any value to me, which I really [focused on] and that I started in Long Beach. And it was just a journal of, let's say, images dealing all the way from violence, political stuff, pornography—all of my, like, twenty-year-old rambling writings. It was a pretty raw. I took an Encyclopedia Britannica and basically altered it for the [US] bicentennial in 1976. The bicentennial—two hundred years.

KD: Right.

JV: So I'm going to show them what the two hundred years is really about. I've got that somewhere, I don't know. I'll bring it out, maybe the next time. The—

KD: So you made a book?

JV: Yeah, I made a book. Because from the Centro—I'm sort of jumping ahead.

KD: That's okay.

JV: But, okay, because of Max. Seeing Max, seeing that show, I saw a lot of shows [in the galleries on] La Cienega. I used to go by myself a lot. This is before—I think I had that girlfriend. This is before, I think, the theater group. I don't know how long we were together. It was pretty intense, really great time. It might have been a year, it might have been a couple of years. I really don't remember. I remember that we were breaking up, because it just kind of ran its course. And plus the police—the way the police were really infiltrating all of the movement and stuff, they shut us down. We ended up in this church—they shut that down. The [Chicano] Moratorium people were being brought up on charges. That's after the second or third march. Every time, you would have a demonstration, the sheriff would just come and blow it up. Literally.

KD: Literally.

JV: Just storm the place, you know? All the time. And sure, years later, it was the sheriff's fault. But nobody cared. It's already done. But they were very effective at getting us so pissed off as a movement that [some] wanted us to take up arms. They wanted us to really fight—because they knew that we weren't going to win.

KD: Did you have that awareness then?

JV: Oh yeah, we talked about it. People talked about it, flat out.

KD: Wow.

JV: People said, "We need to take up arms." There was a little group. They never knew who they were. They were called the Chicano Liberation Front. They did some small minor things. They did some bad bombs and all of that. They never got caught because they knew that you couldn't let anybody into the group. And even if some of us had even knew like one or two of them were, never going to think—someone's going to say, "You're crazy. You are crazy." And later on in life, they go, "Yeah, we were crazy." Because that's what we were being pushed to—to do that kind of stuff. To either just basically quit or do something else. Like, I got into cultural work. I became someone who wanted to make a particular kind of Chicano art. That's why I got into those figures. My thing was to—from that book I was doing—I was going in a pretty dark direction. And yet, I felt there had to be this responsibility to do identity kind of portraiture. And that's what that early work from the Hispanic show, that you see in that Spanish show, and I showed that in about '83. But in the '70s, it was basically working with newsprint and felt-tipped pen, doing like really [graphic work]. Just . . . Forget about color. Just doing graphic work. But my first, most serious work, was my second or third year—probably my third year at Long Beach, where I was doing [the most] highly rendered paintings of dead animals that I could do. Dead animals, because I figured [it was] the thing to do. It was a pretty good [idea]. It was a pretty trippy idea. People thought I was crazy. They laughed. I said, "Yeah." That's what I started with "I dare you to buy my work," because I was going to do work [that bothers people], and that was that defiance that came from [anger].

KD: You mean you literally wanted to challenge—

JV: Yeah, because that's part of the time, you know?

KD: Yeah.

JV: Because, okay, I'm learning how to be a realist painter. I was fairly decent at it. I was getting really good grades, really good support. We would have had criticism in the classes and no one would criticize my work. They'd go, "Okay, John, that's great. Next." "Wait a minute, I want . . ." I know it sounds like maybe I could be . . . I don't think I—I'm not an exaggerator. I'd be like, "Tell me something." They'd say, "No, you're doing fine, you're doing good, that looks good." Someone else, well, "Your lines are weak," or your color. Or, "What are you doing here?" I'd put up something [and get nothing], so I started doing [the dead animal



thing]. Maybe it was part of my driving to school from Echo Park. You're driving and then you see this thing on the road. And you want to turn away. I go, "Why do you turn away? This is what we do to these poor animals." Whatever your little twenty-year-old mind is telling you. So I go, "Wow, that'd be cool to paint." Face what we do, you know? Face what this whole urban mess is about. So I started photographing them.

KD: Color or black and white?

JV: Color paintings.

KD: Color photograph?

JV: No, they were black and white. I wasn't doing any color film yet. It was black and white. This friend of mine gave me a camera—that guy Robert gave me a camera, where you have to put the two little squares together.

KD: Yeah. *[laughter]*

JV: I could barely see the dang thing. I'd have to wear my glasses and everything. I still couldn't see the little squares together. So I took a photo class, and he, [the teacher], says, "John, your stuff is always a little off."

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: "Do you get your eyes checked once in a while?" I go, "I think it's the camera, look at the camera." He goes, "Oh yeah, man, you need a better camera. What is that?" I always carried it around in my hand. I had no strap. It was like [an extension]. And I had long hair. I was a character. I really was a character.

KD: An *artiste*?

JV: Yeah, I guess. Broke.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: Mostly broke.

KD: So you're photographing animals on the side of the road.

JV: Yeah. I still have them. I have some of that stuff, some of the black and white negatives somewhere. And I have a couple [of the paintings]. I did a dead rabbit and I did a big cow. Because I went with this friend of mine—I rode with this friend of mine up to Pixley, [California], where he lives. I have that cow around here somewhere. I have the dead cow.

KD: You didn't see a dead cow on the side of the road.

JV: No, but that's—see, what happened is that's where the morbid idea kept developing, where this friend of mine worked on a farm—you can never find anything when you [need] it. Anyway, he worked on a farm.

KD: Do you want to pause, and you—

JV: No, no, no, it's okay. I'll show it to you. What happened when I cleaned the place up.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: And I can't find anything.

KD: Bad mistake.

JV: I know. And it's all rickety and all dusty. It's almost like a pet. The bull is a pet, you know?

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: So anyway, I started from the stuff on the streets—some of them were so abstract, it was like, "Well, you know." And then I would—oh, and then from there, I did a few of them for classes. And then I started doing blow-ups of the Mexican crime magazines—the dead Mexicans. I figured people [wanted] to see us out of here, or dead, so ... Let me show it to you—almost to where they're like sleeping, either dead or they're sleeping. Because the thing was, I was trying to develop realist technique, to have you look at the image, but the image itself, you don't want to look at. So I sort of liked that dichotomy. I figured that's my calling, you know? It came from my book too, because it would be page after page of different graphic stuff. And I'm really glad that I did that book. And I realized that other artists do it too, because I actually [saw the photographer] Peter Beard. He did the same thing. But of course, he lived in Africa and stuff, and the drawings and those photographs of the animals. He did all of these journals and had them all burned. If you remember the story, his house in Montauk, [New York,] it was called [the] Montauk [windmill residence].

KD: Oh, right.

JV: [His house] burned, and all those things burned. And I was doing that same thing. Artists do that stuff. It's a different kind of a sketchbook. I was never really into doodling. I never really wanted to be a cartoonist either. Wait, I don't have too many sketchbooks, I have photographs. I have a lot of photographs, you know?

KD: Like [David Alfaro] Siqueiros?

JV: I guess.

KD: The databank.

JV: Oh yeah, I saw that, yeah. And a lot of photographs, you look at them and they're real mundane. They're not photographer's photographs. Only once in a while, you get one. "Hey, that could be considered a complete Henri Cartier-Bresson image." That [kind of] moment. But for me, very rarely. I'd have to build it myself. I'd take part of this one, part of that. And I've always liked that.

KD: Were you developing this artistic style, this creative process?

JV: At that time, yeah.

KD: At [Cal State] Long Beach.

JV: Yeah. When I started to really get into "what do I want to do?" To sort of be part of the Chicano art movement that was happening. How could I do it? Well, I want to be included. There weren't too many of us that were realists, so I really wanted to become a realist, to really develop my technique. To say, "Chicanos can draw just as good [as the Anglos]." [laughter] Something like that. To show that we can do it too. We're just as good. It's like that. It was really like that, that innocent. Yeah. That was the time—that a time when we were . . . When I was in Long Beach, there was a high school—it's still there, Cal Poly Long Beach. It's a high school. I remember, we used to work with some of the youth there. [Long Beach Polytechnic High School.] I was in my twenties. We were putting up the murals on the Centro. We go to the high school and it [the motto] says, "Enter to learn, go forth to serve." To serve! See [what] they're writing? See what they're telling you guys?

KD: [laughter]

JV: To serve? What is this? And then the kids were like, "Yeah, you're right." [laughter] It'd be like—we were always on edge. It came from being part of that theater group at East LA College, and part of the Vietnam thing. I remember when the sheriff came around, they were having some demonstration at ELAC, and it was a pretty heavy time. It was 1970 or . . . Things were really bad. People were dying then. I think it was right before or maybe right after the Moratorium march. Helicopters would come out to the school, and we'd be like, "Oh shit, here come the sheriffs again." So we made this giant peace sign on the lawn to show them—whatever. You look back now and—the other part was that there'd be meetings and there'd be these *cholo* guys. Everybody was going to school. And that was the beginning of the Brown Berets. And there was these *cholo*, hardcore *cholo* dudes. And the thing about [them] . . . Actually, they were from different gangs, but they were joining together. There wasn't an element [of fighting], but they had police in there, man. I always felt like there were agent provocateurs in those guys. Because, when you get real crazy, uh huh. You're going to get [busted]. I read too many books. I read the [book about] George Jackson and [the] San Raphael [Courthouse] shoot-out. [The] Soledad Brothers. I read all this heavy Marxist revolutionary black nationalism. There were a lot of contradictions to it. The Chicanos were—in terms of that it was even more blatant in terms of the Chicano nationalism versus pan-Americanism. I think that's where the whole Chicano thing and the La Raza Unida [Party] broke apart. To this day, some of the Chicanos still think that people that cross the border should be sent back because they're not [citizens], because they're keeping us from attaining full American rights, because we keep getting [confused with them]. It's like a blame game: "They think that they're us. And we're American citizens." [laughter] I like to use some of the sounds.

KD: [laughter]

JV: Anyway, I should—

- KD:** But you were aware, at the time, that there was provocateurs, and that something—
- JV:** Oh yeah, we talked about it. See, because of the theater group, we were pretty well read at the time. We were discussing things all the time.
- KD:** Read Mao's *Little Red Book*?
- JV:** I tried to.
- KD:** Or was it passed around at least?
- JV:** Oh yeah, sure, of course. It was around. It was around. I'd have it in my car. I guess it was around. It was that time. I was reading the complete speeches and writings of Che Guevara. [*Venceremos!*]
- KD:** Wow.
- JV:** I even did Che drawings. We did a bunch of stuff.
- KD:** So did you continue that kind of engagement at Long Beach?
- JV:** It started to wind down because Long Beach was much more of a social group. There were really heavy radical politics in the early '70s in East LA, East LA College. And even in Cal State. I think about when I went to Cal State LA. I would have been a different kind of artist. Long Beach matched what I wanted. I wanted to be a very serious realist artist. That was because Max was there.
- KD:** Okay.
- JV:** And Bob Click was there. He was another [teacher]. And this guy [John R.] Lincoln, I forgot his first name. And they taught realist drawing and painting. And this other guy Martin there were these older guys. This other guy—there was a guy there, he finally retired, [who] was the only Mexican American teacher there: [John] de Heras. I finally met him. I never took his class. And I never told him why I didn't take his class, [which was] because I didn't want to get an easy A. It was just my stupidity. If this Chicano teacher, if I took his class, I—was almost a reverse—I discriminated against taking his class. I never took his class. I took everyone else. I took all of the Anglo teachers. I didn't take it because I thought maybe it would be too easy. I don't know why. I met him years later and he was like, "How come you never took my class?" I didn't want to tell him, "Because I thought it was going to be too easy for me." I told him—I just [said the timing] was always wrong: "It's always the wrong time, or the wrong time of day, or the wrong class." And it might have been. But I never took his class because . . . I talk about it now because I'm fifty-six, who cares? But then it was like . . . I had these funny little things about me. I had this reasoning that was backed by some determination of mine. Who knows?
- KD:** Did the other artists—did the other art teachers influence a particular sense of coloration technique?
- JV:** No. They just always showed me and reminded me that I was pretty good.
- KD:** So you were getting encouragement?
- JV:** Oh, I was getting so much encouragement. Lincoln, one time, he really liked my contour drawing. Everybody in there was doing hatch-mark stuff. I was okay at it, but I always liked drawing. I could look at something and draw it, just like line drawings. So he liked it. So one time, I was doing contour and somebody says, "How come he gets to do contour?" He would say, "Shut up and do what I tell you." Lincoln was cool. Lincoln would go around the class. And if you look like you don't know what you're doing and you're kind of bored, he just grabbed your paper and would tear it up. He liked that drama. And we would go, "Jeepers!" And we would really re-concentrate.
- KD:** [*laughter*]
- JV:** And it was beautiful because that's what everybody liked about Lincoln. I went back to Long Beach. I taught, like, last year. He retired. He was a real good teacher. Max [Hendler] was cool. Max would get into this [theory], he would get into this [dialogue]. We had this painting class, and we got into talking about art theory. And for me, it went in one ear and out the other. To this day, I couldn't tell you what they were talking about. I was always quiet. I would always listen. They would use this English language—I think maybe it's that academic-speak.
- KD:** Yes.

- JV: That just drives me up the wall. Because if you really want people to really [understand] . . . I mean, people that might contribute to the conversation—if you don't know how to speak in this academic speak, you're out. It becomes this really elitist way of talking, that I feel like, "You know what? Whatever." Whatever. So again, I become a reverse elitist. [laughter]
- KD: [laughter] So you're taking courses.
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: And you're involved in some of the community things in Long Beach?
- JV: That happened after. It was a real different atmosphere. Because I was taking my art classes, I was into the junior year, I think—maybe almost junior or senior year stretched over a couple of years. I was in that work-study in that—
- KD: Mechanical engineering?
- JV: Mechanical engineering [department]. But after about three years, I had to get out of there. I just had [to]. It was time. I was just in there for too long. And those guys—the one guy—they're probably both dead now. They have to be. They were in their seventies then. They were really cool guys. They could [talk]. I really admired them.
- KD: The two vets?
- JV: What?
- KD: The two vets from World War II?
- JV: Yeah. The two vets. And this other guy. He was a Marine, but he was from a younger generation. These two guys worked in the bowels of the ship.
- KD: Wow.
- JV: They could make anything out of a piece of metal. If you have the right equipment, you can make anything. These guys could fix anything. That's just the way that they were. They talked about—let's say one of the Japanese dropped a missile on part of the ship. You have to cut off part of the ship, even though your buddies might be in there. You got buddies over here, too, [but you have to save the ship].
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: They told me stories like that. The Battle of the Coral Sea. They told me there were these guys . . . When the ship's attacked, everybody goes up to man a gun. It was a big, big battle. In other words, you're pushing the Japanese forces back towards the Philippines, one island at a time. I saw it on some of that Ken Burns thing [*The War*].
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: You saw some of that. And there are some stories that just make your hair stand on end. There was this kamikaze guy coming in. I mean, you're just as dedicated as they are. And they're coming in an airplane. And the guy [says] . . . You can actually see the guy drop the bomb. They would be so close to the ship. You don't do it way out there. You're like twenty yards, fifty yards away, coming in, [everyone] shooting at it. They said [that] the best time was this one time, where this guy just drops the torpedo, and one of the rocket—one of the machinegun guys hit it dead center and blows up the airplane and the thing at the same time. Everybody saw it. You could hear the whole ship go, "Yeah!" It's heavy.
- KD: Yeah. It's your life or theirs.
- JV: Jesus, yeah.
- KD: Yeah. Wow.
- JV: Anyway, I don't know why I . . . I guess because I see it. But anyway, I start talking about—I finally had to get out of there. It was summer. The summer comes—
- KD: Did the—I'm sorry, did the stories move you then?
- JV: Yeah, but I guess in a different way. But I guess because when you get older, you get soft.
- KD: You're a young man, or is it—
- JV: It's because I studied it, and my uncle died in World War II, and most of my friend's fathers were part of the war. Some of them didn't want to talk about it and others, you could just see, from the stuff that they

had, that it was different. It was different. I was raised by [a single mother]. But it made me very patriotic. It made me part of this country, knowing that at the time there was a sense of law and order, a sense of promise for the younger generation. We were the children from World War II. We could all be speaking German, and things like that. I believed all that. As a kid, there was the threat of the Russians and the nuclear war. We started digging our own bomb shelters as kid. I was part of that. I was a healthy American kid. And it wasn't until you get into school—

[*break in audio*]

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos on side B, session 2, with John Valadez on November 21. And John, go ahead, you were talking about—

**JV:** You know, I am thinking about all this stuff, and the reason why I felt the way I did. I thought it came from when—again, because it comes from your family and it comes from your [experiences]. And the whole thing about my mother was to be honest. It had to come from that. And that's why I became this really romantic, radical lefty. It's just liberalism just taken to its [conclusions]. To whatever the opposite [is against,] basically, just blind profit motive or whatever.

**KD:** A blind patriotism.

**JV:** Yeah. It was a very idealistic time and there were some really real threats. If you make a decision, believing in the government side, and go fight in the war and all that kind of stuff, you see whatever—the working class opportunities, not just middle-class opportunities—shrinking all around you. So to get into the arts was really [to get into] ideas—and ideas based on principals. And to be part of the realist tradition in terms of art making, and to establish this whole Chicano thing, to make it credible, I felt that I could be part—I could be part of that voice within my own contribution of it. Because I was really trying to see what was inside of me, in terms of not just what a groovy kid I was. But I had a lot of problems too. I was probably sexist. I had too much anger. I was probably racist, like reverse racism. I had to face these things. How much of it is that I'm just an evil person? Or does it come out of some kind of thing that I had to deal with? I had to deal with cultural demons that have just been placed upon me. I had to take them on and maybe kind of mimic—

**KD:** Did you have an awareness then—

**JV:** That's what that book I had . . . I told you about—

**KD:** Okay. You said that was '76.

**JV:** Yeah, that was '76, but I started it in '73 or—

**KD:** Oh, okay.

**JV:** Yeah, I started it—I was anticipating it. I got into that Centro when I finally started to [become more aware]. There was a summer youth employment program, and there was this friend of mine that I went to high school with at [CSU] Long Beach. Her name was Alicia, Alica Delgado. She went to the Centro to get a summer job, because in the summer you couldn't do your work-study thing. She said that they were doing murals. I knew that they were doing murals in East LA. I [hadn't done] a mural yet. She said, "Well, why don't you [come also]. I'll go and you go, and we'll try to apply for a mural job." So we both went because we were both in art classes. I don't know what we showed them. And they go, "Alright, if you guys want to do the mural class, we'll give you twenty or thirty kids for the summer." I go, "Yeah, I can do a mural." I had never done one before, but I go, "Yeah, I can do one." So I realized it was real good, okay. It was real good because they let us do it. And she's the one who told me about the job, but I became the—I became the head guy and she was my assistant. I go, "Oh . . ." She was the one who said, "It's okay, John." That's part of the The-Guy-Gets-the-Good-Job, you know? And the woman's the assistant?

**KD:** So you kind of had a critique then of the patriarchy?

**JV:** Oh yeah, of course. Because we were thinking. We were always thinking about it. But we were thinking, "There it is again." But that doesn't mean that I'm going to change it. It's still—like values, still it's kind of an ongoing thing. But still, there were problems we had to face where the kids wanted to paint like us.

That's when I started using projectors. I started using [an] overhead projector. They wanted to learn to draw a photograph. So instead of them taking all the classes that I took to develop that—we only had a few weeks in the summer program to get these murals started, [so] we started using projectors. We used Azteca-Mayan drawings and we would project them onto paper and then have them draw them, like, tracing the lines.

KD: Right.

JV: And then we would pounce them [by using] pizza perforators [on the drawings]. We would pounce them onto the wall and then they would draw them again. And then someone else would come in and paint them. Then we started also doing stuff of [Emiliano] Zapata and [Pancho] Villa sitting in the [Mexican presidential] palace—that classic photograph.

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

JV: We used *La Raza* magazine, kids holding up demonstration posters. We put that—the kid would be holding it up and it'd be the Zapata-Villa thing in there. We had this big Che Guevara book thing with cigarettes. So we had teams. And the kids would start in the day basically planning these big areas. I would put this black to white acrylic paint, and put grays—like darker gray and a mid-gray and a light gray-white and white—and break it up into like six [areas]. So, there was a point where I had to figure it out for these people. And because I was twenty-something and I did have a temper, for me—I torture myself a lot. I'm really hard on myself. So you start being hard—I was a supervisor. We were supervisors. She, [Alicia,] pretty much said that she could handle the drawing stuff, almost making maps and stuff, and I would do—and I would take the whole group, the whole black and white, breaking it down, and the gradations. When the kids were gone, I would come in and fix it. Some of them were really nice. We were using Diane Arbus stuff—

KD: Oh, really?

JV: [The photo of] those two kids in the park, smoking a cigarette. [*Two Boys Smoking in Central Park*, 1962—ed.]. One of them was a Puerto Rican kid, looking at you really defiantly. And then outside, there was this guy Rudy Martinez. He's the one from Pixley. And he used to do this real nice cartoon drawing with this other kid. He was from [the] Ochentas [gang]. He was a gang member. He did these great cartoon revolutionary scenes. Some people had talent. And some had [not so much]. They would just do anything. And others, some people, we really just woke them up. And other people, they knew they couldn't draw anything. But we'd try to keep them [busy] . “Just do all the yellow areas. So-and-so, show them where a yellow or a red—just base it.”

KD: Right.

JV: And they would put that in. People would go into different groups. There was a big group of us. I'd be running around like a chicken with my head cut off. And if you didn't work, I'd say, “Come on, turkey!” And one day I came in and they had a caricature of me, going, “Come on, turkey!” with my little goatee and long hair.

KD: [laughter]

JV: That's the way that I looked, I looked like that. So it took me a year or so to mellow out. I got people angry. Once I really think about it, if I talk to you enough, I find that I rubbed people the wrong way for many different reasons. But I was really driven. I was really—

KD: Driven by?

JV: Wanting to succeed, wanting to be an artist. If I take something on, I want to make sure that I get it done. I don't want to look bad. Maybe that's the ego thing; it's the ego and about wanting to be a part of what's going on. It really was about that. So that first year—and we actually built this [Centro de la Raza]. There was no electricity upstairs in this *centro*. We were on the corner of Anaheim [Street] and Junipero [Avenue]. It's a Cambodian center now. Yeah, it's a Cambodian . . . Because once we left, the whole new immigrants were the Vietnamese and the Cambodians. And I was already gone.

KD: So, in the Centro you were painting this mural on the second floor upstairs?

- JV: Yes. Upstairs and also along the sidewall. But there was a whole other group part of us. I forget how many supervisors there were—there were a lot of kids because there were summer kids from the high school. Think about it. I was maybe twenty, twenty-one, they were seventeen or eighteen, so the [age] difference wasn't that much. But the fact that we were in college [made us older and more mature].
- KD: Now, Yreina Cervantez worked there as well, was that at the same time?
- JV: No, you know what? That's the way it was. I left in about '75, and that's when she came.
- KD: Okay.
- JV: And that's where I met her. And Magu came in '72. He came—
- KD: Gilbert Luján?
- JV: Yes. And Magu, I met him—yes, Gilbert Luján —I met him years earlier when our theater group . . . I met him maybe in '70. He came in '73, maybe. It could have been '73. Yeah, it had to be '73 or '74, because he wasn't really showing his LA County Museum of Art [work], I think. See, the dates are real weird. But I did meet him in 1970, when we were part of that theater group. We were practicing a scene out of Belvedere Junior High School Auditorium. We were having a guy build a set for us, a set that we could take apart and move around. And Magu came there to talk to us, to sort of see stuff. Because he knew [pause] some of the people. He was like ten years older. So when I met him again in Long Beach, I kind of knew who he was because, again, he was ten years older. Him and I got really tight there, in Long Beach. And that must have been '73, or '74. And when Yreina came was about '75. There was even a really good friend that I have now, that he says—he thinks that him and I met in Long Beach. It's like where the Centro director introduced us. I remember taking some guy around upstairs into the Centro, but by that time, a lot of us who were going to school in Long Beach, we were living there. We were living there because we had to pay rent. And that's where I first had a studio.
- KD: Oh, your studio.
- JV: A big studio. That was my first sense of having a very large place where I could put up my work. Before, I lived with my girlfriend in Echo Park. We were both working off of the waterbed.
- KD: Yeah. [laughter]
- JV: We did our drawings—and that's all I did. I very rarely went out. When I'd [go to school] with work from the house, they'd go, "John, how much time did you spend on that?" Because they realized that's all I do. That's all I did. I hardly ever went dancing. We were just [focused]. I just went to school. At a certain point, I really got into the work. And my girlfriend was a taxi dancer. She was dancing. So then I'd have to pick her up at two in the morning. And sometimes, that poor girl, I would just fall asleep. You would think I would [have] put the alarm on. Over and over again, I'd get up at four: "My God, where is she?" It was a trippy time. I keep thinking of these things. This has nothing to do with anything, but it was just the way time was. So finally, when I moved to Long Beach and lived there, she would come to visit me, because I had to finish school. She was at [Cal State] Northridge. So we went over there, or . . . I don't know, she lived with her parents. That was about '73. If I think about it more, I can really get it down more, what happened when.
- KD: Okay.
- JV: Because I remember it had to be after the Watergate stuff. We were really broke. So I went to Long Beach. Yeah. Then I lived with a friend by Cal State [LA], and then I finally went to Long Beach to live there. And then we lived—I lived with these guys in the Centro. And the Centro was an old movie theater with a whole building, with stores on the bottom. There was a movie theater, but by that time, it was a free store. You could buy—you could get it, you could buy anything.
- KD: What do you mean? Exchanging?
- JV: People would bring [stuff]. It'd be like a second-hand store of mostly junk.
- KD: Okay.
- JV: But they knew that if people [were in need], you could basically get a sofa there. Or somebody brought a stove. Because it was part of that [social idealism]. It used to be run by a lot of '50s radical leftists, by

Anglo working-class Long Beach. And the Chicanos from MEChA, from Cal State Long Beach, basically did a coup and took it over. They started to join the meetings [and then just took over]. They have documented, like Armando Vazquez-Ramos, him and his wife at the time. I met her again, Lola.

KD: Yeah.

JV: She works for the state now. I saw her, because I did a mural for the [Junipero Serra] State Building downtown, and she says, "John, hey John, do you remember me?" I say, "Of course I remember you." She says, "If you have anything about property, come talk to me at state." [laughter] I go, "Whatever, I own a home. I'll pay it off. Can you help me pay it off?"

KD: [laughter]

JV: I did the mural, and she came to see it. So we started talking about it. She says, "Wasn't that some great times, some crazy times?" So that was that whole community. Armando was the one who got me to start doing the murals in there, to run the mural program, along with Alicia. So I just took over the responsibility of that. And I'm glad that I did because of all of the things I had to think about. And I started to use projection. And then I realized a lot of super-realists use that too. I came upon it on my own, just through thinking about it. Why don't I use these tools? Then from there, I started doing slides. I started working from that also. And it was a lot quicker. People used to just do it like really flat. I mean, they used to [use a projector also]. And Tom Wesselmann.

KD: Yeah.

JV: I never saw those things then. I saw them now.

KD: Right.

JV: They have this art channel on the . . . Wesselmann is drawing with the projector. Yet, when I was doing it with the Chicano dudes, [it was,] "What is John doing, my God? Do you know how to draw? No!" I always took a projector to my drawing class because they let me! Of course I know how to draw. It was just to get it done quicker.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And of course, you create other problems in terms of what you're doing.

KD: What problems?

JV: In terms of distortion.

KD: Okay.

JV: Realist distortions and when you juxtapose things. I hate everything to look like a freaking collage. I want to make them look like they all fit on the same page. So, in other words, you have to deal with perspective, you have to deal with landscape, like where everybody fits and direction of the light, and you have to know that stuff. And there are other people who say, "Well, if John can do that, I can do that too." But I would tell them all the stuff that I've been learning, like, "It looks different, it's harder than it looks." Some people said, "I don't want to work like that." They wanted it to work like they worked. That's fine, I'm not telling you to work like this. But they liked my results. But the results come from, my lessons through this with, say, Max Hendler, and going through those classes and learning how to really do these technical things, instructions from eye-hand coordination. And then there was this whole realist movement. David Hockney had this great [article]. You've read that thing. It says that it's gone on throughout history. But the fact was, throughout history, people never talked about it. It was like magicians, you never told your secrets. Or Mr. Radical, me, Mr. Big Mouth, I start talking about it. And instead of blowing up everybody else's, the way realists work, it reflected back on me. "Oh, that's how *you* do it?" Well, that's how everybody does it!

KD: Yeah.

JV: "Norman Rockwell, he didn't work like that." Oh yeah, you think?

KD: [laughter]

JV: "Of course not, it's you!" Like, I'd say, "Oh, you're right." Shut up! Shut up!

KD: Yeah.



JV: But then after a while, they were like, “Okay, you’re right. You’re a little ahead of your time, big deal.” In terms—within the Chicano trip.

KD: Yeah.

JV: It was always like that whole—

KD: Was there a critique from the Chicano artists in the ’70s of your work?

JV: I don’t know. I don’t really [think so]. No, everybody really liked the stuff.

KD: Do you remember any—

JV: No, remember, I’ve always been very sensitive. So whenever—and I’ve always been real competitive. To be—I don’t know, it’s weird. I have really—I don’t know how to explain this. I’m fumbling around because I have artist friends—I’ve always had friends, artist friends and stuff, but, like I said, I’ve always been a loner, worked alone. When we did murals out with the high school kids, not just from Long Beach. We did that about—excuse me. We did that two or three summers. The next summer, they gave me even a bigger [job]. The Centro there, they gave me a bigger responsibility, where Magu was in charge of the murals where basically I lived. They brought more Long Beach students to be teachers. And there were like ninety kids. So Magu just wanted to paint the whole building. And there were mistakes made. Because I let him do whatever he wanted to do. So, a lot of the murals that we started the year before—we did a lot of work.

We really organized it so well. We put them into these groups. A lot of them were like instant . . . Okay, we broke it down, like, “Who knows how to draw? And who wants to know how to draw? And who—” Basically, you have a job, you know? “Who wants to sweep?” Until you get the confidence that, you know, “You can do that.” I learned how to do that. The kids kind of got into it. They don’t want to be embarrassed. You know you don’t know how to draw, and we’re not going to force you to do anything that you can’t do. And I learned it there. Some kids were really good. The ones that I used were the few . . . We would do the black and white murals. Because, with nothing else to do, when they left, I was so into it [that] the next day they show up and the thing is halfway done. I wish I had kept this door. I don’t know if it was an office [door] or another photographer. Again, I was more inspired by photography because they showed real people. I wasn’t into cartooning. [In the painting] there was this black guy. He had a hat on. And he had an overcoat. I put it on the door. Because when you’re drawing like that, or painting like that, you have to paint in the dark, you have to trust it because you only have the projection on. Because I thought it was boring as hell, the way that I did it, to first draw it in and then come and do like a coloring book.

KD: So you were doing it straight from projection?

JV: Yeah.

KD: You were working paint?

JV: Yeah.

KD: [laughter] You are crazy.

JV: You have to trust it.

KD: Yeah.

JV: You trust it. And that’s how I really started to do it.

KD: Wow.

JV: And then you see it and it has this quality to it. So then I was, I was hooked. It was a beautiful door. It was like, “Wow, that’s cool.” Some of the other ones were okay. We did the Che, it was a little heavy, but it was huge. It was like this huge [image]. I’ve got photographs. I’ve got black and whites of it, negatives. I don’t know where they’re at, of some of the things that we did. They were finally all taken out. One was about police brutality. We did this thing on police brutality. People had [to see it]. And then, like, that’s when you realize that whatever you do lasts as long as [you are there]. I learned from that time that muralism was very temporary. It was very temporary, because there is always going to be somebody who is going to come up and graffiti it, or the earthquake is going to crumble the walls. This has all happened. Another

artist comes and wants to make it better. So they kind of ruin it, as far as I'm concerned. Or they make it obvious. Everybody comes in and does something different. So it only lasts [as long as you are there].

And it really is the experience with the kids, whatever your crew is, that lasts a lot longer than the mural does. I remember years later, even, in LA, there were kids that I worked with on a Brooklyn-Soto mural. They come up to you—especially when I was in downtown LA in my studio—they come up to you later and go, “John, hello John, you remember me?” I look at this adult and I don't know who the heck. And they go, “We worked on the [so-and-so].” And I can barely see that face, that little high school face. “Oh yeah, I know you!” They say, “That was the best summer.” I go, “Yeah it was. It's fun, right?” They go, “It was the best summer, the best job I ever had.” We hardly got paid, but we were all working together in the streets, and that's really what the experience was. It was about that.

**KD:** Did you have that observation about murals, their temporality, that it's really the process that counts?

**JV:** It was over time.

**KD:** It was over time?

**JV:** Yeah. And because of the next summer, [it starts over again] when Magu came, and all these other students . . . Basically, I was over at [another place]. It was the lagoon. We did graffiti on murals there because they were going to tear down the building. So they let us do anything, and I was in charge of these other [sites]. I was in charge of the whole building. And I got a city job. That's what it was. I got a city job. Most of them got them through the summer youth employment. And for me, because we did such a great job the year before, they put me in charge of not only doing the little mural project . . . And we used spray cans, and we're talking—this was '74 at least, I think. It was right before I left. It had to be '74. We did spray can murals based on what Magu was doing. They also had sports [jobs]. People had jobs playing soccer all day long, okay?

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** So it was like that. And they had music [classes]. And we had to deal with the lunch [program]. They would come—the monitors [from the state] would come and make sure that we weren't poisoning the poor kids, you know? There were a lot of [kids]. There were a lot of them. We did the murals. But what happened was, what we did the summer before and what became . . . The place that I lived in [had to change]. Plus, I had a sleeping bag, and I was known to sleep in people's houses. And I became [known for that]. I don't think it was quite as mythic as people came to say. They think, “That John would sleep anywhere.”

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** “John was sleeping here and over there.” And if I had a girlfriend, thank God she had a place to live and I would stay there. And if she had an apartment, I actually would be fed, maybe a swimming pool. Very bohemian, it was cool.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** And then on weekends, I would come back to LA and stay with my friends Robert and Alex—Alejandra. And before they went to Guatemala they came to stay with me. Remember when that Guatemalan earthquake was, during the '70s? They came to stay with me [then]. She cried because she opened my refrigerator—I finally got a little place—there was nothing in there. “Of course nothing's in there,” [I said]. “I don't have any money. I'm not starving, trust me. I'm eating. I'm eating, trust me.” For me, it was a place for me to do my large drawings at the time. I was doing the felt-tip pen, on newsprint. I have some of them. They're all shredded. There are a lot of them that are [ruined], you know. I've got them somewhere. They're rolled up. And every time I'd roll them, they'd just crumble. Because, how old are they? They're thirty years old now.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** Felt-tip pen, really elaborate stuff.

**KD:** Were you showing them?

**JV:** Yeah. Actually, the best ones I gave away. Wasn't really selling or anything. I wasn't really showing much then.

- KD: Now, you're still in school at this point?
- JV: Yeah, we're talking about early '70s.
- KD: You're creating this work . . . It's not the class work.
- JV: Right, it's not class work.
- KD: Okay. Okay.
- JV: Class work was different. That's from the dead time. I showed some of them there. I was doing other kinds of paintings there.
- KD: What do you mean "dead time"?
- JV: I was doing dead cattle—
- KD: Dead animals.
- JV: Dead animals.
- KD: Right. Right. Right.
- JV: See, this friend of mine took that [catalog]. He took that catalog where the *Chiva*, one called *Chiva*, was in the Madrid show. [*Pintores de Aztlán*, at La Casa Encendida; the catalog was published in 2007—ed.] Because I sold it to Richard Duardo's sister, Lisa. And she's been trying to get rid of it ever since. She took it to Correia, Patricia Correia has it. And that painting—I know the critic—painting, I did it of a dead goat with a rib cage. It was very loose. I did it in between classes. In other words, I was always painting. At that time [you] can be, because you're young, you've got a lot of energy. And that was [the time that] I'd rather paint than really do anything else.
- KD: And so you have work that you're doing in class, work that you're doing outside of class.
- JV: Right.
- KD: Is any of that being exhibited?
- JV: No, not at the time.
- KD: Okay.
- JV: The only time it showed—the first show that I was in, and I showed some of my dead Mexicans—was in the *Chismearte* show in Barnsdall Park. [The 1975 exhibition at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery in Barnsdall Park was titled *Chicanarte*; *Chismearte* was a magazine published by Concilio de Arte Popular—ed.]
- KD: Right, 1975.
- JV: Yeah. That's when I showed. And they were pencil drawings. One was *Decapitado*. And that's what it was. It was a person with its head cut off. And another one was this guy's name, whatever the criminal's name was, Leoncio Ortega or something. [The title of the drawing is *Irencio Ortega*—ed.] And then the other one's [of] these other people. There was a guy who got, basically, wounded. He had a big bandage over his head. [Someone] still owns it. They were the Helfelds. They live in San Francisco. And Ed Helfeld, he ran the Community Redevelopment Agency in downtown LA for a while. Ed Helfeld. He has two of my works. One was that old drawing. I saw them years later and they both looked at me like, "My God, he's still alive." And I was doing these beautiful landscapes. They go, "John, those are yours?" Because my old stuff was blood and guts, [so] they were used to that from me. I go, "Yeah, I try to do landscapes." They look at me like, "You're doing landscapes?" I say, "Look at them!" They were cool. I think they're all gone now. Yeah, they're [the landscapes are] all gone.
- KD: So did you sell them? It was called the *Chicanarte* show at Barnsdall.
- JV: Yeah. I think it was—yeah, that's right. *Chicanarte*.
- KD: Yeah. *Chismearte* was the name of the magazine.
- JV: Right, of the magazine, and I was part of that for a long time.
- KD: So, did Ed Helfeld buy the art then?
- JV: No, he bought it later.
- KD: Okay.

**JV:** He bought it later. Because when I worked in downtown, [at CRA] . . . I finally got out of school—that was in the late '70s. But yeah, the first show was *Chicanarte*. And they might have shown the *Chiva* painting there. I know I showed the three drawings, and [something else]. I mean, we were so broke, some of them fell off the [hinges]. Whatever the—you know, they were all framed, they were cheaply framed, and yet they fell off the backing. One of them dropped—

**KD:** During the show?

**JV:** Yeah. It was like that. [Once] this guy says, “Why don’t you fix it?” And [the director] says, “Well that’s the way he wants to show his work.” And I go, “Wow, that’s weird,” because probably the guy didn’t want to show my work. And the way it fell, it’s like, yeah, it’s disgusting, you know? And I thought, you know, “People are really affected about buying [or not].” See, I would think . . . Everything had meaning for me. Because if you’re so isolated, you’re so into your own trip, everything has double meaning. And plus, I was—by that time I was reading [George] Gurdjieff, I was reading Karl Jung—his autobiography. A little bit of [Carlos] Castañeda, but that was more like fairytale stuff. I was starting to tell Magu about Castañeda. And that’s where Roberto de la Rocha just gave up art, because he read the Book of Revelations, he read Castañeda.

And as a typical artist figure, you get so much into your own inner voice, and who the hell you are, and what your demons are telling you or something, or what your sanity is telling you. It’s the same thing. I had particular ideas about things, you know, that motivated me to stay doing what I was doing. Especially when I was getting out of school, working for the Centro there. And there were a lot of office politics among the artists also, about ego clashes. Every time I was learning about working with groups. Every time I worked with groups—I was working with that theater group, or I had friends who were very creative together—something always happened that would actually make us spread apart.

**KD:** Some kind of tension.

**JV:** Yeah. Usually, somebody got paid, and the rest of them didn’t.

**KD:** Okay.

**JV:** Okay. Or somebody got opportunity, and the other ones didn’t. Or someone was gonna move on, or someone was gonna try to take leadership, and then someone says, “Who the fuck do you think you are?” And one of ’em, he’s gonna lock his door. “Lock your door? Why you gotta lock your door for?” “Well, I got pencils in here.” “Wait a minute, we bought those pencils!” This happened to me. Or, “I get the keys.” “What do you mean, you get the keys? I know how to get in here, man. Don’t tell me you’re going to get the keys, because they gave you the job.” It was like that. That happened in Long Beach. I’m actually re-creating some of what happened. That’s how I can remember. So everything would [fall apart].

**KD:** Very Brechtian. [*laughter*]

**JV:** Yeah, everything would, like, blow up. And the downstairs at the Centro, [they would ask] who caused the problem. Basically, whoever caused the problem was whoever gave the guy the job. Who started, you know, throwing his weight around.

**KD:** How were the problems resolved?

**JV:** That guy was fired. And we were left [working things out]. The ones who didn’t have to be paid—we were there. And the reason why: a lot of us didn’t want that job. I think they were gonna give me the job, but I would hate to go to meetings. Magu would beg me to go to the meetings downstairs.

I mean, that’s after this one guy—he was Peruvian—he came up. He crossed the border from Peru, and he was an artist. He ended up in Huntington Beach, on the beach. He loved it over here, too. He looked, like, Inca, man. This guy was cool. I forget his name. He was on the beach at Huntington Beach, broke, destitute, sitting there. Basically he said he was just crying. And this blond girl comes up to him and starts talking to him. He ends up marrying her. She actually took him home, married him. You know, helped him to get his green card, I guess. And they lived in Costa Mesa, ’cause they used to say Costa Mesa all the time. So I like to say he lived in Costa Mesa. And he ended up getting slats of wood [for work] and doing these very idealistic Peruvian landscape that were all over the restaurants in Long Beach at the time.

He'd just get fencing, wood fencing, and do these really nice, juicy Peruvian landscapes. I guess Machu Picchu, or whatever it was. And the sky had this rainbow color. They were really cool, you know? I wish I would have had one. So he joined [us]. I think him and his wife, they finally broke up.

But imagine a woman just befriending you when you're destitute, taking you in. That's like—life's amazing, you know? But that made him a little bit cocky, you know. In Peru, they used to call it *plata*. That's why he came to America, he wanted to, you know, get the opportunity. And so he's the one that kind of freaked out. We became friends again, but he was real *indio*. I remember the way he used to [act]. Everybody liked him, but . . . Again, it was a group that just [fell apart]. I learned group dynamics though these different things, and working for the Centro there. So by about '75, I was finally getting out of school. And this guy, Martín Cano, he was a Mexican muralist. He came from the really radical time in Mexico. I think that was his name, something like that. It might not have been his name. He was a Mexican [muralist, radical]. Yreina [Cervantez] would know, because she was there with him. So as I left, there was this whole other group, and the undocumented in Long Beach were starting to protest against the Centro because they could legally only help legal citizens.

KD: Right.

JV: And they needed [help]. They were more destitute than [the legals]. There was this other politics starting at the time, and that's where the whole *chicanismo* and the whole pan-American really clashed. And that was the time that that started to really manifest itself, and people were talking about that. Are you pan-Americanism, or are you cultural nationalists? And I remember the early things about that, and I had pretty clear ideas where this cultural nationalism reminds me of religion. 'Cause remember, when I was a kid, that whole religious thing where you isolate yourself, you're the only ones who are gonna go to heaven, you're the only ones that have a clear idea of what it is, you know, to be free, you know. And the hell with voting, man. We got it, you know? And I remember, at East LA they'd call, like, they'd have these meetings. And I'm getting back to that point where the Brown Beret guys would say, "Oh, you know what? We're gonna walk out of this meeting, and if you don't walk out with us"—it was [in] the East LA auditorium—"we know who you are." They'd be, like, threatening you. [laughter]

KD: At the time, did you find it ridiculous?

JV: We laughed. We thought, yeah. First, we were like, "Jeez, *americanos*, what are you gonna do, kick our ass? Just like you did in the freaking projects?" You know? It's like—it's the same shit! It's the same shit! "You're either gonna join our gang, or we're gonna [get you]." And that was the same mentality. So no matter what the politics were, or what you do, you still kind of take some of your [baggage]. You know, what you feel [about where] you fit into society with, you know?

KD: For you, the issues weren't that black and white, though, it seems like.

JV: No, they were wishy-washy—liberal, you know? I've always been, you know . . . Yeah. No, it wasn't that . . . The only thing that I knew was black and white is, to me, to do my work. That's the only thing for me, that I was in control completely of what I was doing. And I came from a very—very interesting for me—a very strong grounding, [and] that was ridicule. And I was really used to it, maybe because when I was a kid, because I stuttered, I was ridiculed. Shy, stutterer. So people assume that you're not really who you are. And after a while, even with the stuttering, I used to use it to get attention. "You know, you only stutter when there are a lot of pretty girls around, you know?"

KD: [laughter]

JV: [Someone told me that, then I say], "Really?" He says, "Yeah, because you want [attention], you know, it's like really—it's just sympathy in the room." And I started laughing, I go, "I don't know, do I do . . ." "Yeah, John." This friend of mine, Jim. Jim Feeney. The one whose father told me to breathe. Because Jim was really smart. Because of his father, you know, his father was cool. And he says, "Yeah, John. I think sometimes, you know, because [I see you]." But I says, "Yeah, because your dad told me how to get over it, and then once and a while, I still use it. I was just nervous." "Nah, you're not just nervous. Think a little bit more, think more [about it]." You know?

- KD:** So you did indoor murals with the Centro, and you started doing outdoor murals or outdoor projects—
- JV:** Yeah. With the kids. We also worked [in LA]. We also did murals, you know, like, just a few. I was even hired to do somethin' really fancy, you know, like somebody's house. And I did a high school [wall] with this guy—a horrible, horrible mural. Horrible thing. God, it was bad.
- KD:** And why is it bad?
- JV:** It was just a bad, cruel . . . We were on top of the gymnasium. We were on rickety old scaffolding, rickety ladders. The cartoon wasn't really integrated. We didn't have the right colors. This guy—whoever was in charge of it—he just—he wanted us all to get paid and not really put money into the supplies, so it was just bad. Everything we did was bad. And I really couldn't do the kind of graphic stuff that I wanted to do—which is disturbing. Basically it was really heavy political stuff. I just know that if I put these really mean-looking Mexican guys [on the wall], people are gonna get, they're [going to get angry]. So I couldn't do that, you know? I couldn't do the stuff that I wanted to provoke. I had to compromise too much. These people [say], "It's too brown." There was no flesh [color]. We couldn't really get it done. Then, the next day—I didn't blame them—some kids marked it up. And it was this woman, and it was some other guy. This woman—I forget her name, she was a real sweetheart—and the way that the guy was, he says, "Come on, you guys go clean it up, fix it up." [I think], "Just forget it, they're gonna do it again! Forget it. You know what? I'm outta here." She says, "Well, I'll do it." "Okay, you take the money." And he says, "All right, John, I'll have you paint this catering truck." And then we spelled "hors d'oeuvres" wrong, because the guy that had the truck [finally sees it, and freaks].
- KD:** [laughter]
- JV:** I said, "I just matched your spelling and they don't know how to spell 'hors d'oeuvres.' You're the one who gave me that paper." He goes, "Oh, man." And it was in, like, oil paint, [dried already and in big letters]!
- KD:** Oh!
- JV:** I says, "You gotta fix it." "You fix it!" "Forget it." Again, "Forget it, I'm out of here." That's kind of the way that I was. "You know what? [It's not my fault. You fix it.]"
- KD:** So what happened after you graduated school?
- JV:** I came back to LA. And for me it was, finally, I get out of [Cal State] Long Beach. But I was gonna stay in Long Beach. So I went to my mom's house and got my record collection from when I was in high school. I took it down there thinking this was where I was gonna live, and then [I left Long Beach].
- KD:** Took it down to your mother's, or—
- JV:** I took it down to Long Beach, from my mother's house. And then I ended up staying in LA, 'cause I could do anything. I was Bohemian. But I got my record collection there. And this guy who I was gonna live with—I didn't show up for, like, eight or nine months, and he sold the whole thing. He sold it. So to this day, I've been collecting [music]. I didn't really start to, like, re-collect the stuff that I had. Some of it was pretty obscure stuff, and some of it was the standard—all the Doors albums, all the Beatle records, and all the San Francisco [music] with Big Brother and all that. But some of my poor jazz stuff . . . But after that, I thought, damn, you know. I was [to blame]. I blame my—first I blamed him, and he gave me a set of records that were not even close to what I had. But after—once I started making money, whenever I made money, because after I had that job, I really didn't have any kind of jobs regularly. And when I did [I started up my collection again].
- KD:** The one in [the] Centro, and the—
- JV:** Yeah, at the Centro I had work. So I would buy records, but it was more like that really cool '70s jazz funk stuff. Like when Stanley Clarke came out, and then, like, Flora Purim, and Airtio [Moreira] stuff, and Gato Barbieri. So I was into that stuff. And even Doug Carn, which was this very cool black [musician]. I wouldn't call it acid jazz, but it was more like a psychedelic funk. It was real Southern California style. And to this day, I found it again—I found some of it. But I like it 'cause I was a kid then. And I go back mentally, [to] what we were doing [then].
- KD:** Do you listen to music when you're creating art?

- JV: Well yeah, sure. I got tons of stuff. I got all kinds of music. So—but what happened is that because of that, all that music . . . I even found a record store up in Moorpark—it was a barn—that I probably could have re-got all—most of that stuff that I had. But I felt like I had to move on. So I’ve always collected music. But that was a crucial thing, because either I was gonna stay in Long Beach or come back to LA. And so I wanted to come back to LA and join one of these Chicano art groups.
- KD: Oh, you had that intention?
- JV: Oh yeah, because I was used to being with art groups because I don’t know how else I could have got a studio again. I was used to [a space]. I was used to this huge [area]. It was the upstairs of this theater, and we all had our own room. I had the back room, you could put up a piece of work, and not [be bothered]. To this day [I seek that]. And you’d come back and it would be the same. And, whatever you’re working with, even if you can’t work for a particular day for a day or two, it’s still there. It’d look like you just left. It was there for like a week or so, you know, but it’s still there, whatever you’re doing. And I was really used to that.
- KD: I didn’t ask you, when you were talking about the newspaper work, were you working with inexpensive materials out of necessity or choice?
- JV: Well, that’s a good one. You know, I got [some supplies] because there was this art teacher—her name was Donna Rae Hirt. She was out of Boston. And she taught printmaking [at CSULB]. And she gave me a big roll of rag paper—a big roll—and then she had this roll of newsprint. And so I had this art class, and I had the kids work on the rag paper. I said, “This is some of the best paper to work on.” And I thought, you know what, I’m gonna use the newsprint, because it’s self-destructive, and some of the figures that I’m doing are self-destructive themselves, so it makes sense to me. And I still have some of that stuff. It’s in some of the catalogs, like the catalog of the—oh, I’ll find out. It was the one from *Les Demons des Anges* [*The Demons of Los Angeles*] catalog. It has one of my newspaper drawings. You know, this one here. [*referring to artwork*] This was from that time.
- KD: Oh my goodness.
- JV: Well yeah, this is [the best], and that is newsprint. And before I did that, I used to use felt tip pen, because felt tip pen was, again—it wasn’t archival material.
- KD: This is *El Indio* from 1978.
- JV: Right. Right. And the other stuff. See, that’s when the—that was part of [the series], towards the end of all that newsprint. That’s why we’re using photo backdrop paper. I actually thought photo backdrop paper was a little better than newsprint. It’s just thicker, you know? Yeah, that’s me when I had a neck. [*referring to photo*]
- KD: And these others are—
- JV: Pastels.
- KD: Pastels.
- JV: Yeah, those are [pastels].
- KD: These are later. These are from ’87.
- JV: Right.
- KD: So it’s definitely the realist style.
- JV: Yeah. Right. Yeah. And it really was about, you know, identity. That yellow one is the same as this. They were, like, companion pieces. And that’s owned by the Mexican museum in Chicago.
- KD: Yes. *Savages and Glitter*, 1984.
- JV: Yeah. And so, I was [friends with] this woman. We became pretty good friends before she went back [to Boston]. She was teaching at MIA—[Minneapolis] Institute of the Arts. And she wanted me to go back there with her. We were kind of becoming involved. She was about six years older than me. But I thought, “Nah, I better stay. I wanna be a Chicano man. I don’t wanna go back east,” you know? So you make these conscious decisions, you know? At the time, I was like, “Nah,” ’cause I would just be—we would probably get married, and I would be in Boston. I don’t want to live in Boston, you know? I want to be a Chicano

artist. I made a conscious decision. Well, I'll still be friends with her. I saw her again [when she got married].

KD: So when you said Chicano artist, what did that mean to you at the time?

JV: Develop imagery. To make work. For me, it was doing identity. To do highly rendered portraits of people that are marginalized. And when I finally felt that I did it, you know, and then I finally moved on. I know I'm jumping ahead, but—

KD: That's okay.

JV: But when I finally did it, it was this kind of stuff . . . Where is he? Well, he's probably in the back. *Preacher*. This guy. [referring to artwork] This—this for me is what I—when I finally got to that technical level. And again, I would be photographing people in downtown LA. And that is two sheets of paper—you know, that's two sheets. You see the line.

KD: This is the image called *Preacher* from 1983, pastel on paper.

JV: Right.

KD: It was in the show "Hispanic"—I always forget the whole title.

JV: Yeah, right. The Hispanic . . . Thirty Hispanic . . .

KD: *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*. [Catalog for the traveling exhibition that originated at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the catalog was published in 1987—ed.]

JV: Yeah. And for me, you know, shit. I mean, excuse me, but, to get into that show, for me this was like one of the [lucky moments]. This is when I was really with the Public Arts Center [Centro de Arte Público]. And I was friends with [Carlos] Almaraz, that I met through Magu down in Long Beach. Magu took me to a Los Four meeting because Beto [de la Rocha] was already out, you know. He became [saved by Jesus]. He almost died. He fasted—he matched Jesus' fasting. You don't do that, you know? He almost died. He didn't eat or anything for [forty days]. And he became, like, a fundamentalist. I mean he became [saved], you know. And so I remember seeing Beto at the time. He could barely walk. So . . . But at the time I was consciously trying to get to that point [in technique].

KD: A realist image?

JV: Yeah. A realist image. The same idea. A realist image of people you don't really see, you know, inside a gallery. And I dare you to buy it, take it home. That was the idea. It was still that defiant, still that [idealist] . . . Kind of that—whatever that strategy I had.

KD: So you stay in LA instead of going to Boston or Long Beach, and you're looking for a community of artists.

JV: Yeah.

KD: And do you hear about Centro or—

JV: First I got a job. This friend of mine from high school, he gave me a job. And then this woman that we met again. We were both in the Centro [de la Raza] in Long Beach. This was after the Boston thing, because she finally left, about '74, or so. And the other girlfriend that I had [was in] the SLA [Symbionese Liberation Army] shootout with . . . That was finally over. We're still friends, though. This other girl, we both moved to LA separately, and I was living with Robert and Alex and that other girlfriend, Mary. We weren't intimate, we were just all trying to do this art thing together. And so we got this big place where there was a bottom [area], a studio area, and a top [floor] where they lived. And then this other woman came, and I started getting involved with her, and then we moved in together. And I had a daughter about the same time. I have a daughter who's almost thirty now—she'll be thirty—and I have three granddaughters. They just came here to see me yesterday about Thanksgiving—what's Thanksgiving?

KD: [laughter]

JV: And so that was that time. So I had a job for like nine months. I could only keep a job for nine months. That is like the job [history for me]. That and the CRA [Community Redevelopment Agency] job years later. Those were the only steady jobs that I had. Because, for me, I was so used to living and working in this community center thing, doing my art. When I got a forty-hour-a-week job, I was miserable. I couldn't deal



with it. I couldn't handle it. I was so spoiled being out on the streets, and just, you know, I wasn't thinking too much about rent or food. That kind of came [later]. I'd get jobs doing this and that.

Then, so this job—it was with Peaches Records—[from] this friend of mine, John Alford. Right before I got involved with the other group. No, it was about the time. When I came back in to LA I needed to get a job, so my friend Alford gave me a job living with these friends of mine. And then this other woman—I don't know how we got involved—she used to come and see me. And so we got involved. And then I kept this job. I would get on the bus to go out to like Jefferson and La Cienega area along the railroad track. And that's where the Peaches Record—Peaches Records was around at that time, as—you remember Peaches. And they was booming. The guy kept opening stores everywhere, throughout the country. So I worked in the art department, basically doing silk screen bands. It was the record dividers for the albums.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: And the cassettes were just coming around. They had a lot of *mexicanos* working where the cassettes were, and they had a guard that would frisk them every day, see if they were stealing cassettes. And—but yet, I was in the graphics department, working with these guys. And I was [miserable]. I don't know, I looked like whatever I looked like. And I was thinking that I was gonna be an artist, and one day they told me, "You're never gonna be an artist. You're gonna work here the rest of your life." And I'm glad the guy told me that 'cause it scared the hell out of me.

KD: Really.

JV: Yeah, it was like, "Wow. Maybe he's right." You know, "That was the past, and I'm never gonna do the murals and do my drawings and art school's over and now it's the real world." You know. So I thought, "Well, I better figure out what the [next move is going to be]." You know, 'cause I used to be in LA, and there was a lot of stuff goin' on. So I saw *Chismearte*. No, not *Chismearte* [the magazine]. No, Mexicano—what was the name? Mechicano.

KD: Mechicano [Art Center].

JV: See how these are all similar names? Mechicano, which was by Salazar Park. I remember going there. By that time, they were in Highland Park. And then I went from Magu. I met Almaraz.

KD: You mean Centro [de Arte Público] in Highland Park?

JV: Yeah. No, that came [later].

KD: Did Mechicano [move]?

JV: Mechicano was in Highland Park at the time.

KD: Okay.

JV: And they were about to fold. And somehow I ended up going to, oh, Self Help Graphics in '77. But actually, it was about—right—'76, '77 when I came back to town. 'Cause I remember in '77, Sister Karen Bocalero [was there]. I was doing these drawings. Sister Karen liked my little pencil drawings. I was doing pencil drawings [and living] with my girlfriend at the time, and I was in the closet drawing—literally in the closet. That was the only place that I could draw. We weren't really pregnant yet. We were living in Echo Park. Because we were just living together, and the other guys, they did their own thing. 'Cause we tried to create this art thing, but [it didn't work out]. It turns out that I was the completely serious one.

KD: [laughter]

JV: That's the way it turned out. Let's put it that way. And I think even that job [at Peaches], after [the] nine months I had that job, they wanted to move me [up the ladder]. Because I had a bachelor's of fine arts, I had a college degree, they wanted to put me in charge of the floor with the cassettes. Basically the inventory. The boxes would come in, and I would assign the people where to put them in the boxes to be sent out to the Peaches stores throughout the country. It was basically a stock job, you know? So I quit. I said, "You know what? [I'm through]." And there was this one guy who was the head of the graphics department. We didn't get along. He had this band and car club. Because I was such a [stubborn type]. I was so determined, I was like—I had this reverse arrogance, you know? Arrogance [against arrogance], whatever. So I finally quit.

**KD:** It seems to have served you well. *[laughter]*

**JV:** Yeah. I quit. And I don't know how . . . Oh, then I went to Self Help. And then I started doing the Citywide Murals—then I started doing murals for Citywide Murals. That's why I did the Brooklyn and Soto one. And that's how I met Almaraz and George Yepes. I did a job with Yepes and Almaraz. So through Yepes, we did this mural of a freeway. And I did the dirt—there was this little area of dirt. And Almaraz—I had met him once before, but he was always ten years older, you know, and I was Magu's friend. They were very tight. But they were so tight they were competitive, you know? So if I was Magu's friend, I had one strike against me because Magu was a lot of work. And yet Magu got me in there to show *[with them]*. That's what it was . . . I know I'm jumbled, but I'm remembering all this to put it in order eventually for the next time *[we talk]*. They got me to show with Los Four because Beto was out, and they were still getting shows after the LA County *[exhibition]*.

And the thing about Almaraz . . . I became really close friends with him. Our work was so different. I mean, I could actually inspire him. And he says, "You know, that is the new kind of stuff to do." And he pointed to what I did for Self Help Graphics, was the Day of the Dead poster. And I had one of my dead *cholos* under Jesus, giving you the heart. And then on the side, it looked like tombstone *[writing]*. You know, "Day of the Dead, Día de los Muertos celebration, Self Help Graphics." I think it was still here, it was a poster for this site, on Brooklyn *[Avenue]*. Not sure *[where]* it is now. Right before they moved it, that's when I met Duardo, also. I think through Richard Duardo *[I met Sister Karen]*. He was there. And people were attracted to me, to be my friend, because I was sort of new, and I was doing these meticulous realist drawings based on my photographs. All this *[work]*. They're all gone now.

*[break in audio]*

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez, we're on the twenty-first of November. I guess I wanted to ask you about the Brooklyn and Soto mural because you gave the impression that it was part of the—

**JV:** Citywide Mural Project.

**KD:** Citywide Mural Project.

**JV:** Glenna Boltuch? You know her, right?

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** Yeah. We were really good friends at that time. She was really *[helpful]*. She's the one that I showed my pencil drawings to. *[Citywide Murals]* were down by the Coliseum at the time. I think they were in the offices of the swimming pool—the swimming pool there, whatever year that was. So I go in there showing my little pencil drawings. They were really cool. I still have 'em. They're actually somewhere *[stored]*. They're all ripped up, because of some emotional *[display]*. You know, life is emotional. But I don't know where they're at. And they were real urban, based on my photographs, my black-and-whites. So *[Glenna]* saw this. "Yeah, I'll get you to a mural. You just gotta find a wall." So I walked down Temple Street—literally walked down Temple Street then, 'cause that's where I lived, asking stores, "Can I do a mural?" It was all "No. No!" This one guy almost did. But I had a real happy piece of these kids jumping up and down, saying "Hi." It was real, like, you know, *[positive and colorful]*.

**KD:** So when you were going in to ask the merchants—the business owners—about the mural, you were showing them some images?

**JV:** Yeah. The drawing that I wanted to do.

**KD:** Okay.

**JV:** Because whoever says, "Sure, and we'll pay you two thousand dollars," or something, which at that time was a lot of money, plus the paint—

**KD:** Oh, so the two thousand dollars was your stipend?

**JV:** I think. It could have been fifteen hundred dollars. Yeah, the stipend. And plus the paint. And I don't know, that must have been *[1977 or 1978]*. I don't know, I don't even remember. At the same time, the mid-to-late '70s, all this . . . I'm trying to put them in order, but I just—

KD: That's okay. So you finally find someone who says they'll do—

JV: Yeah, I—we finally find—I think that's how we did . . . Oh God, I don't remember. I forget what . . . We were always trying to find a mural. So we ended up doing the Brooklyn [and Soto site]. I talked to Frank [Romero], see, 'cause Frank's mural was all faded. I said, "Frank, they either want you to re-do it or maybe we can go with the Roosevelt kids," [in a summer project]. Before that with Yepes . . . I don't remember. We did a grammar school mural somewhere in the Silver Lake area, and Yepes and I [worked well together]. They put us on TV, but I said, "Yepes, you do the TV thing." Because I always felt like I was always angry and all, and you know, 'cause I would still stress out, and—life was frustrating, you know? So it always showed that on my face.

KD: You met George Yepes at Self Help, or . . .

JV: I don't remember. I just know that he was a character. Oh, I know when I met him. Okay, in '77—okay, I was just meeting Almaraz. I don't know, it's all mixed up. But Magu in '77—that's what happened, I think. I was looking for a mural. Maybe we didn't get a mural yet, but Magu was offered to do the United Farm Workers' Third Constitutional Convention mural. So he invited Yepes [and myself]. That must be when I met Yepes. That's when I met Yepes, and these two guys, Freddie Payán and Jerry López or something. Jerry taught for the school district. Freddie did car spray [painting]. You know, spray [painting on cars, custom cars].

KD: Detailing on cars?

JV: Yeah, with the spray gun, right? Cars and motorcycles in San Bernardino. He was really good on doing highlights in chrome. So we were all [sent up to Fresno]. All four of us, we all met up there with Magu. So I left my girlfriend at the time, Irene, in town, and she had a job. And I went up there to go work that summer in Fresno. It was hot. We worked in the old Bank of America. They had Corinthian columns. You could tell it was a beautiful bank. The whole bottom floor was a safe. I mean, it was from the farming [era], from that era. It was pretty historic. I think it's still there. A pretty historic building with no air conditioning or anything. It was hot. And the mural that Magu got us to do, bless his heart, was I think seventy by ninety feet. Huge.

And so we come up there, and we basically kicked out whoever the Fresno artists were there. I forget their names . . . The La Brocha guys. [La Brocha del Valle was a Fresno art organization—ed.] And they came in, and because were from LA—arrogant as all heck. Yepes was really, really funny. He was younger. He was going to Cal State, and he had an accountant [major] with an art minor. Very smart guy. And so we all joined together. And we joined with the women [muralists] there in Fresno. They worked with us. There was about six or seven of them, and they were the *muralistas* there. And they were really cool. And so we actually blended together. And there was also people that would come in . . .

We were working for the United Farm Workers. We weren't getting any money, but they fed us. We all stayed at Magu's place—at Magu's house—and we worked long hours. But you're working for the Farm Workers. We're doing this huge mural, and like a bunch of idiots [in a hurry]. It was so huge. By the time I got there, Magu had the sky done and the landscape. We were gonna do a march [of people] coming out of the landscape, coming up to you. And Magu has the slides [and images] of that. He kept the slides, [the documentation]. I know he's got 'em. He used to say he didn't have 'em, [that] we lost 'em. And the guy who was photographing for us, he [messed up]. The film went out, or—this other guy from Fresno, he flaked out. I have very little documentation of it. That's what I am saying.

But we didn't know anything about scale, all of us. All of us. So by the time you see it in the auditorium, [the bottom folded out onto the floor]. It's like the Forum, like the Staples Center—[that big an auditorium]. They're on one side . . . We're at the Convention Center for five weeks, we worked our ass off. The camera people [for TV filmed us asleep, we] were so exhausted. 'Cause you know how the press comes in? They would photograph us sleeping. The thing is, [it looked like we were asleep because], you know how boring [César] Chávez is, you know?

KD: [laughter]

JV: So no, we worked our ass off. And plus, when we finally saw the thing, we had people like . . . This big, [folded down on the stage floor].

KD: Oh.

JV: [Everything was so] accurately painted. And by the time [we finished the bottom] . . . Even if they're like this big, they look like [everything was so tiny]. And we laughed so hard. And we had some [scary moments]. But it was fun to do it because, you know, again, we used projection, we used the United Farm Worker art—photos and stuff—and stuff that we brought. And we did Dolores Huerta and we laughed so hard. I don't think she liked it because we made her look a little too—not very attractive.

KD: Rounder, or . . .

JV: Well, Yepes made her look like she had horse lips, okay?

KD: [laughter]

JV: And we had to [remove them]. We have to change this, [and] we have to change that. Oh, and then we wanted to put [the Virgin of Guadalupe in the work].

KD: It was deliberate?

JV: No, it wasn't deliberate! It was just painting style. We really had different styles. Matter of fact, one of the guys [finally] came in [to help from the Fresno area], once we got to . . . For us, the juicy part of the mural [was the larger figures on the bottom]. Five weeks of it, and we hardly slept. But we loved it. We were eating and we were, you know, mostly smoking pot. And we would learn how to [put up with the heat]. Like, sweat—a lot of water—we would learn how to sweat and put a T-shirt around your neck. You'd sweat and sweat and then [take the T-shirt and we] would roll it around in the air to cool it off and put it back on. And you would get [cooler]. Wow, I mean, we're learning how to deal with the heat. To this day [I use that technique]. I mean, for a while, I knew how to deal with heat. I knew how to just work [and ignore the intense heat].

KD: So was the image already planned out when you got there?

JV: Not half of it. There'd basically be [just the idea].

KD: This march coming out of the background.

JV: Yeah, the farm workers coming out of the fields. And then it would just be a cross-section of the different people. And then it'd be César Chávez there, Dolores Huerta, and a few other [notables].

KD: At the front of the [march].

JV: Uh-huh, and with the banners.

KD: Right.

JV: And with the Virgen de Guadalupe that they always used. But, someone said, "The Virgin has got to be in the front of the parade." And we had other faces in front. "You can't put anybody [in front of the Virgin]." I said, "We're not that big of Catholics," you know? I was like, "Just put it in." But there was this big blow-up again. So whoever the Fresno guys [were, they stopped us]. And it was really [sad]. They knew, because they are from the agricultural area, [and knew better]. We're just urban guys, you know? We mix it up. As a matter of fact, Freddy Payán [was great with metal detailing]. I used some of my downtown photos of people [in the mural], 'cause we needed, you know, slides and stuff. So I got that.

I think I must have came up with some imagery. Magu must have told me [to do that]. I remember coming up with some imagery, and we just picked it apart. There was this woman with a baby carriage, and then Freddy was so good at painting the chrome, and he made that baby carriage [look so new]. Like, you know, he would do the sparkle, he would put the front [metal brighter]. He made that baby carriage look like [new]. Wow, that's great! You know? Little things—somebody had glasses on. He'd sparkle [those glasses]. It was so cool. Like a belt buckle—oh my God!

KD: [laughter]

JV: Anything with metal. Anything with metal he would just [illuminate]!

KD: And did these details show up, or was it something . . .

**JV:** Well, no, it didn't show up. The most fun part was at the end. [We had to rush.] We only had [so much time], like, we were in the last week and we had to do these huge faces—huge faces.

**KD:** Larger than [what]?

**JV:** Oh, like as big as this wall.

**KD:** Oh.

**JV:** Because we had to fill the bottom. So at a certain point, like in the middle, we're doing all this stuff. And we're talking about—it was at least ninety feet long. It seemed like it was longer—it was about as long—like the mural that I did [later on]. [One night we had a lot of people painting, and we were all in a line], all the way down, and you look back, and everybody's painting. You hear the brushes painting. [We hear the sound of] everybody painting at a certain point. But before that, we're up on the scaffolding and down, we're trying to bring it up, and then we had to roll the thing up because Magu had this thing where it would roll the canvas up. It was all acrylic, so we kept drawing stuff in, showing how to [do it for the others]. 'Cause the guys I was working with, they picked up on the technique I had. Magu [knew] about my technique from Long Beach.

So when I went up, I remember Carlos [Almaraz] saying, you know, "Why are you gonna go up there?" "Cause I wanna do it!" Because Carlos and Magu, they were like [competing], because Carlos did the first mural for the Farm Workers thing. So then Magu was looking at the second one, and like, "You're doing it because I did the first one." It ended up big, you know. I'll tell you, it's all fun now. And because I was going to go up to work this time, I'm gonna go up there. He wanted Carlos to go up there. He said, "Nah, I'm not going. I already did it. I'm not gonna go up there and do that." [Carlos says], "They should have put me in charge." I don't know what, [or] who should have been. And it would have looked differently [if Carlos went].

**KD:** So you had an awareness that Carlos Almaraz had already been participating in the UFW.

**JV:** Yeah, because he told us. Because I remember going with my [friend to Frank's house], back when Magu [was in the Centro de la Raza]. When we were in Long Beach. And my girlfriend Mary and myself—the Filipina—we went to a meeting because he wanted me to join [Los Four], because he really liked my work. Magu really liked my stuff. And it was so different from theirs, but it was so political, and it was realistic. It was different, it was real different. I could really see why they really liked my stuff, because it was very different. 'Cause they all kind of blended—their work kind of blended, you know? A lot of it.

**KD:** Well definitely Frank Romero and Carlos Almaraz have some style and content overlap. And Magu and Frank have some content and style overlap as well.

**JV:** And Beto was the one who worked for Gemini GEL. He taught at Northridge, and he developed a mural style working with some of the gang kids. He developed a style that he knew that they could handle and still get the message across. He was a thinker—very philosophical. He was very spiritual, and that was his [downfall]. You know, in terms of the art, that was his demise. Because he went to Jesus. He was just like my aunt I told you about, the one who's waiting for Jesus to come and live forever in heaven.

**KD:** Can I ask you about the Los Four experience? I know it's jumping a bit, but I had—you know, I've heard stories that they wanted to bring in somebody else.

**JV:** Right.

**KD:** How come it wasn't you?

**JV:** Well, it kind of was there for a minute, but it never was really real. Because, like I was saying, the time that I was in Long Beach, and because I never had a car, so Magu would take me on some excursions. That's where I met Beto, when he was in his house. And he didn't want to open the door. And then he did, and I was like, it was too quiet 'cause there's no music. I knew that kind of religious fervor from the adults. So I sat there drawing. I drew Magu sleeping, and I did it really well. I forget what Beto told me. Basically like, "Get over yourself," you know? "That's the devil's work," or something like that. I go, "Man, I forgot, sorry. Magu, can you wake up, it's time to go," you know? And the other time, when I met Almaraz the first time is when Magu took us to a Los Four meeting at Frank's house in Echo Park. I ended up living half a block

away from Frank years later. At the time [of the meeting], it was this old hippie house. Frank was a total hippie, and I think Governor Jerry Brown was hangin' around, you know. It was a weird time. I mean Frank had it together. He had this big old house and they're—[Los Four are] all meeting. And Carlos was pissed off at Magu for bringing me and my girlfriend, Mary. He said, "Magu, this is not for new members. We're trying to incorporate as a nonprofit," or something. So Mary and I were like, "Well, damn, should we sit outside?"

KD: [laughter]

JV: And then Carlos [has this outfit, I guessed because] he was a farm worker. He had his farm worker hat, and he was playing his guitar. He's got this little red thing around [his head], he's playing these farm worker songs, 'cause he just got finished doing his mural for them. He could do no wrong because he was with Chávez at the time. So he was a character. He was a character.

And then there was that show I forgot to tell you about, where I saw him again and he got to know me. Well, that's where I showed *Chiva*. That's right, I was in that show. It was called the "Twelve Artists." "Twelve Chicano Artists." And it was in Santa Monica. And I showed it with Asco [and Los Four]. [Valadez exhibited with Los Four and Asco at Point Gallery in Santa Monica in 1975—ed.] That's where I saw Asco again, and I got to know Harry [Gamboa Jr.]. And Willie [Herrón] was always the aloof one. And I got to know Patssi [Valdez] and Patssi's friend. They came all the way on the bus from East LA to Santa Monica. Santa Monica now looks [different]. What is that street . . . Main Street, I guess? You know how Main Street goes towards Venice? Where all the shops are. There was a bank [there]. [Back then] it was a gallery. It's a bank now. That was before Otis [Art Institute], that was before my show at Otis. That was in '77. I remember doing the cards for [the show's announcement]. I did a kid with a spray can spraying something. And Magu's the one that got us in [that show], me and a couple of other guys [from Long Beach]. And I showed a pigskin with some religious stuff on it, [and it was framed]. It was during one of the slasher [episodes in the city]. Buono and the other guy—Angelo Buono. Not the Richard Ramírez [crime spree].

KD: Yeah, that came later.

JV: Yeah. No, this was [a work about crime and religion]. It was one of those. And [Patssi Valdez had a piece of work that] actually [had] a headline saying the slasher was caught. And I did this pigskin, and I was doing [my own version]. I forget what [else]. I think I drew a little bit on [mine]. I did this collage in a frame. 'Cause that was from my book. I was still really involved in trying to get that [completed], that book, the bicentennial crap. It became kind of a workbook [eventually], a daily workbook with ideas and images and stuff. And so I put up this pigskin, and everybody liked it. The Asco people, [I loved their approval. And I said,] "Yeah, I want to join Asco. Yeah, I got Asco sensibilities," you know? I really felt like, "Oh, that's nice!" But what happens is that [I'm with Los Four]. You know, and I show the big *Chiva* painting. And there's a photograph that somebody took and gave to me where my hair's long and I've got this [look. I didn't realize I had it]. I'm still wearing beat-up shirts, and I'm looking up to the side, and I've got my big *Chiva* painting, and . . . [I was surprised], I have that slide somewhere, it's beat up. And that's where the Asco people [and I met].

Harry was always [friendly], even to this day. He was always open. Some people are very closed, but he's very friendly, he's very, very open. We all grew up together from that time. Patssi I really like, because of her crowd. The girl that she came with was this beautiful *morena* woman, but she only had [one] arm right up to here. And they, [she and Patssi,] had these stories about taking the bus there. They always had these great stories about taking the bus. They came all the way from East LA on the bus, [making us laugh]. "Yeah, it was hot!" you know? She has her stuff—it's like those scraps of paper and stuff—and she puts it up, you know, and this and that [other work]. And, "Wow! That's, like, the slasher guy." And then they saw my stuff, and like this is a weird show. And then I forgot about [picking up the pigskin piece], you know? I mean, I got the painting back, but that poor gallery closed because nobody buys anything. 'Cause that piece of meat that I had up there [left a stain on the wall]. It basically rotted of course, but it didn't come down and it left a permanent green stain on the wall.

KD: [laughter]

JV: And the flies and everything. Man, I wish I would have seen that. But since then, because I did that, I was in Asco's mind. You know, I was like . . . As a matter of fact, Gronk kept one of my transfers. 'Cause I did a sketchbook of, let's say rubbings, and that's when I jumped into the other thing. Okay. So I did have a sketchbook where I'd use that [Robert] Rauschenberg method of lacquer thinner. You'd get a printer paint and you would burnish it, and it would leave a print. So I did that when I was in college. But I got into that because then I was doing realism and I had to juxtapose—that's when I was learning to do it.

KD: Your compositions?

JV: Right. Juxtapose realist imagery. And I sacrificed—I mean, I shouldn't have, but I sacrificed all these great photo books that I had. It got to a point that even with that rag paper and news print paper, nothing was sacred. So that's what I did. To this day, it's like, "Oh yeah, right, John, now what?" You know? I had some cool stuff, but I used it all for the purpose of doing the art. What is that? That's some romantic notion of nothing matters but what you're doing, you know? I guess. I don't know. Somebody else can figure it out. Don't look at it like that, right? [laughter]

KD: No, that's what artists do. What do you mean? You're not supposed to hold back the creative process.

JV: I know, it's funny. It's like, "Whatever. Whatever."

KD: So when you said you ruined the art books, you were using the art books for . . .

JV: Yeah. Yeah. Well there was this one Norman Mailer book on Marilyn [Monroe]. It didn't really work. There was one on Diane Arbus that I used. Of course, I got the catalog with the recent show, so I got it all back. Some of it. But the stuff, they were like film magazines and *Esquire* magazines and a lot of like cheesecake magazines too. And *Newsweek*. Some of 'em didn't work. Some of 'em, it didn't work because the paper was too thick or something, or the ink was too cheap. And I would do these pretty elaborate things—

KD: For the technique you're talking about, burnishing?

JV: The burnishing, yeah. And so I showed some of those there because . . . Finally, Gronk, finally . . . He kept some—they gave some to Gronk. And finally, years later, Gronk says, "John, I've had these since that show." And I met him. That was years later, 'cause he gave it to me wrapped up in this plastic. And that's how I became friends with him. Because I put this work up, but they don't forget, 'cause, "This guy's crazy," you know? "Look at this work he's doing."

So when Gronk brought it, I literally opened it up. And I don't think the piece of meat thing was in there—I think he finally got rid of that part—but whatever the other parts of it, it was still a little bit of like contamination of just, you know. And as I opened it up in the sunlight, it literally faded before our eyes. 'Cause the stuff was such a mixture of the old ink on the paper and whatever the chemicals of that rotting meat did to all the stuff. I got my camera really quick and literally photographed it as it faded. And with my girlfriend, we go, "Wow, look at that! It's gone!" And it's like, "Well, I'm not gonna touch it, look at it!" And Gronk gave it to me. "John, I've had this for a while. It's yours, from that show." I kind of abandoned it, you know. It's like, I'll do a piece of work, and, you know, like "I dare you, I dare you" kind of stuff. And the woman who owned that gallery, the poor thing. It was called the Point Gallery. She shut down thereafter, you know. But she showed these—that was my first group. Twelve of us. And the next one I guess was *Chismearte*. [The exhibition was *Chicanarte*—ed.]

To me, [friendship with] Almaraz was a slower process, but I always knew the Asco guys. But you know, you could tell that . . . I was kind of around. And I got to be really good friends with Harry because his son and my daughter were the same age. And we were going through the same emotional things about the relationships we were in with these—

KD: Children.

JV: Yeah. And the mothers. Almost the same, but a little different. But still, you know. It wasn't working, let's put it that way. We would compare notes, you know. And he would tell me these great stories about when he was a bus driver, and we both photographed in the streets. And then I would see him and Gronk at Clifton's [Cafeteria] when I finally got a studio. But then I'm jumping ahead again. And they would come see

us at the Public Arts Center after that happened. And the way that happened is when I come back from [Fresno]. Right, when I come back from the farm workers thing, you know, Magu lived there, you know. [And] Carlos [Almaraz], he wanted to know what happened. And I kind of knew him. But then George claims that he introduced me to Carlos, but he's the one that introduced me to Carlos enough where we could start to become friends. And then we became really close friends. And—but I already knew him before. But I guess I was just in the circuit.

But when he saw the [art work] . . . And he had my poster up from the Day of the Dead. He had it up. Almaraz has my—even though he was broke at the time. He was so broke, when I finally went to his studio—it was on North Figueroa across from, I think it's [Florence] Nightingale Junior High School—this little place he was in. He was so broke he was painting food, you know? That's how hungry he was. He'd paint a taco. And he'd paint it really cool, and like, "Wow!" And he'd show me. He'd have these field paintings from New York and stuff.

KD: Why do you think you and Carlos hit it off?

JV: Well, because he liked my honesty and he liked to argue, and we'd argue for the sake of arguing. I used to get real [mad]. And he would know that, okay, that was just about that.

KD: He'd yank your chain? [*laughter*]

JV: Yeah, yeah, right. Yeah. And I would yank his, too.

KD: Okay.

JV: But when I kind of figured out what his trip was, he was—he was really like—he was older, and it got me thinking. And I guess I stood my own with him. I could have this argument—sometimes he would just be bullshitting—I'd say, "You're just bullshitting me." But he was always reading about [something].

KD: What did you guys talk about?

JV: Everything. We'd talk about my fears, we'd talk about my [art]. He'd help me to understand that I was a serious artist, and yet I wasn't gonna quit. I have a certain technique that I could always abandon or whatever. I could always do something else. I had good ideas and I always worked. I always worked hard. I would rather do my work than basically get a regular job. I'd rather do my work. It's like . . . But I always found work. And that's where I found work with that theater. But it was in that place, [the Centro de Art Público/Public Art Center, where] I also met [Richard] Duardo with Self Help. And again, I was kind of going around [different places], like the Citywide Murals. I'd get some work there, [and I met] Glenna. I knew her more than Judy [Baca]. It was Glenna [Boltuch] that I met—

KD: Judy Baca.

JV: Yeah, Judy Baca. And then I went to, you know, Self Help. And this woman was there I went to school with, Linda Vallejo. [In school] we would take printing classes together. At the time she was not a Chicana, but when she comes back here, she was working in the Mobile Art [program], and she was a real Chicana there.

KD: Is that Mobile Arts—[the] Barrio Mobile Arts [Studio]? [The] van at Self Help?

JV: Yeah. With her and Michael Amescua. And I met the Streetscapers. And then Mechicano was in Highland Park, but they were just folding. I remember I put some of my [work there]. That's why I don't do Day of the Dead, because [my stuff] was not happy. Mine was always [serious], because it came from my crime magazines. I come from my dead—Mexican Day of the Dead, you know. "I got your Day of the Dead," you know? 'Cause one time I showed this [piece and it was rejected], and they were right. I mean, I still have things that really were [weird]. One of my newsprint things from Long Beach. For about five or six years I could bring out a fresh Day of the Dead piece. But it was real [serious]. It was real death, you know? Because it was from the magazines. They really influenced me a lot, these Mexican crime magazines. There's all these graphics.

KD: Did you pick up the Mexican crime magazines here in Los Angeles, or did you—

JV: Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. Always. I always liked them. I had a few of them. And then this friend of mine in Long Beach said, "John, look, I know you like this." It was from his father, and they were old Mexican



[magazines], and they're beautiful. They're from the '50s. I go, "Wow!" For me that was gold. So I did a lot of early work from that stuff. And I tore 'em up. I cut 'em out and I would, you know, do all this stuff with 'em. I still have the scraps of 'em somewhere. Those are what you might be looking for.

KD: [laughter]

JV: They're all torn up. Actually, I see what you're looking for. Yeah, I see. Now I see that.

KD: What the scholar would enjoy. Yeah.

JV: Yeah, even if it's, like, torn-up stuff.

KD: Well, what you took and—you know.

JV: Yeah, well that book. I showed it to Shifra—to be real quick—she said she had nightmares. I gave her nightmares about it.

KD: Shifra Goldman?

JV: Yeah. She says—I showed her my book, and, "John, I had nightmares about the book." I says, "Well, sorry Shifra." "And your writing. You sounded so bitter. You sound so bitter." I was twenty years old! Frustrated. It was, like, this real honest, you know, "What about me? What about us?" All that kind of stuff. And I hated it. I hated all of that. There's no opportunity. This is bullshit. I mean your dad would be like, "Come on, get over yourself." And so . . . But the time out back in LA, I had all this stuff—I have this subject matter—that I work with. And so I think that Day of the Dead thing, I saw it in Carlos's place. He says, "Yeah, that's where it's going, John. You're on to something."

KD: At Centro, or [before]?

JV: Well, [before then]. From that, with Duardo. [Carlos] says he wanted to get out of this studio. [So] we found a place, which was now Public Art—we called it a Public Art Center [Centro de Art Público]—but it wasn't really a public art place. People thought they'd come, and it's a public art [space]. No, we were—it was just a collective of artists that came together to pay this three hundred dollars' rent. Three hundred dollars for a whole floor! And we thought it was a lot of money.

KD: So what role did you play in the center?

JV: Bringing jobs. I brought jobs. I found mural jobs and I did those big banners for that movie [theater]. He was at the Picfair [Theatre], which was on Pico and Fairfax. It's not there anymore. The art house theater. And I did these big butcher paper drawings. I mean, paintings—acrylic [on paper of] the titles of the film. *The Death of Artemio Cruz*. I did *Los Olvidados*. I did *Rush to Judgment*, about the Kennedy assassination. Also I did these big green banners. The idea was, I do 'em in acrylic blue on this green, and, you know, the marquee—the big marquee, they'd put the lights on and they'd show through. I even did some Asian [films], some . . . I forget the—what the Japanese film was. But the best one I liked was to do Kennedy and Jacqueline in the limousine looking out at you in blue and stuff. And I was getting paid hardly anything. But I was getting paid. And I had to do it every week, or every week and a half. [It helped pay the rent.]

KD: Every new shoot for a new movie?

JV: And he kept the butcher paper [paintings]. He kept some of the butcher paper paintings. And years later, he tried to, you know, put them on the market, you know, to sell 'em. [The owner] said even they had the green Japanese one—that's the last one. I must have did like three or four of them over two months or so. And this guy—I guess it's hard to go to Picfair to see an art film. It wasn't the same thing. Because he used to [show the films to the] Otis kids and all the other people in the [area. The Picfair was farther away].

KD: You painted on—with acrylic, and you were using the images from the movie?

JV: Yeah.

KD: And did other people work with you on those, or that was the work that you got? [overlapping dialogue, inaudible]

JV: I pretty much did it because it was my style. At that time, I had to pay the rent. And then again with Citywide Murals, I got another mural. My very first mural was really bad because I was still learning how to paint. I knew how to draw, but to paint, I was still learning how to make the process work. And it was for this Echo Park [community center]. I forget the name of the center. And I remember it was in [Echo

Park]. There for a long time. I don't know where [the mural is] at now, or whatever. And I think Yepes did this little guy in the corner. And it was this Echo Park [setting]. It was a woman and her daughter walking. Showed a little bit of Echo Park, and maybe somebody running. I forget. But it was for the Central City Action Committee at the time.

I was always kind of like, "Well, I'll come around" and stuff, trying to find something to be a part of. It reminded me of my experiences in Long Beach, my experiences with the theater group. But finally when these guys were doing, you know, the upstairs, Carlos found it. I said, you know, "I'm willing to pay some of the rent if I can do this painting here." He said, "Oh well, yeah, fine, that's perfect. That's what we need. We need people to join." I was like, "Wow, this is great!" So once I got in . . . You know, I was really shy. I was really kind of mellow and shy. But once I get to know you, I'm this loudmouth, you know. I'm out there. And that's sort of [what I finally saw]. They finally said, "John, you're not the same person that we met."

KD: [laughter]

JV: "He's not the same guy," you know? "Wait a minute here, what happened to that nice, quiet guy that could do this work? Now you're all pulling your weight around," you know. And so I did the mural there and Yepes was there. Even Judithe Hernández. That's where I met Barbara—

KD: Barbara Carrasco?

JV: Yeah, Barbara Carrasco came around, and Dolores Cruz. And a lot of it was Richard Duardo, because his mother gave him some money to start this print business. So we helped him do his first printing job. They were real estate signs. And he had little—not toothpicks, but bobby pins—I mean, not bobby pins, but clothesline pins—yeah, clothespins [to hold the prints]. And we did some of the—some of his first prints were of my stuff. There was a *cholo*—none of us have any of [the prints]—and there was a *cholo*, and we spelled [the names wrong]. Made sure that we had the *tandos*. We'd call 'em 'tangas.' Someone said, "They're not 'tangas.'"

KD: [laughter]

JV: We misspelled names. So we would [print these images]. I had this [photo]. It was a black-and-white photo. This guy who posed for me [had] this little hat, his *tando* was over here. And then his Pendleton, and then his khakis. I don't know what it was, it was just sort of show, you know, the way they're dressed. And then we had *Cholo*, [the poster,] done in red, white, and green on this horrible paper. It ended up just, you know, [faded]. And we sold those like hotcakes, like fifteen dollars each or something. And even the ones that we kept for later we actually sold because we needed to eat, you know. But it was great times, though.

KD: Did you document your work then?

JV: Barely. Not really. Some of it—even to this day, [only] some work. I mean, I feel that—and these are four-by-fives.

KD: These are four-by-fives [of some of the work]?

JV: And it will be because it's somebody that collected the work has got it in their house and they promise to give me a four-by-five of it. Or I get it. But I try to shoot the work that I do.

KD: I don't want to take you off track. So the first couple of jobs that you helped Richard Duardo with—

JV: Well, I helped the whole group of us.

KD: Okay.

JV: There was Frank and Carlos and Richard. And Leo came—

KD: Leo Limón.

JV: That's right, Leo Limón. And then there was Barbara Carrasco came. And then Dolores—Dolores Guerrero-Cruz—she was around. Judithe Hernández. She was a really good artist and she was doing really well, but she gave it up. She met this guy and moved to Chicago. She was really good, you know? She was really serious, really good. But right when we started to get shows in the early '80s and stuff, she gave it up. And it really showed me that some people just quit, and some people quit right before things were starting

to happen for a lot of us. I mean things started to work. I mean like even with the Public Arts Center, what was his name came to see Carlos—he wanted to put Carlos in a show at Otis. That was '78. So I still had time.

This is when I first had my first big show. Carlos had me believe that I was gonna show with him. By that time, him and I, we were pretty tight because I didn't have a car and he would give me a ride to Echo Park, and he saw my daughter and my girlfriend at the time, and we lived closed to Frank [Romero]—right down the street. And then I would see Frank. Frank's the one that came to my house, and said, "John, you have a baby girl." Because I didn't have a phone. [That] morning, my girlfriend, she didn't really feel good cause she's pregnant. And I says, "Well . . ." We only had one car, and I says, "Well . . ." She said, "I better go to the doctor." She was having contractions.

KD: [laughter]

JV: Like, I'm in bed. "Well, okay, let me know what happens," you know? She was premature, that's why. It was just like eight months or something. So she goes down to the [Los Angeles County] Women's Hospital here. And she calls Frank 'cause I don't have a phone. And Frank comes to my house, comes to my door, and—you know how he is. At that time, he's older now—he's such a character I always smile when I think about him—he says, "John, you have a baby." And I think he drove me down there. He drove me there. And I figured that he would leave me off, right, so I could get the car because she was in—yeah, see how your mind remembers small things? And so . . . But at the time, that's when I got to know Frank and I got to know Carlos really well. 'Cause Magu was still up north. And he was dying to get back down.

KD: He was in Fresno

JV: Yeah. And we would have little shows there. "I need some work from you guys," or this and that. He would really miss being in LA. We're all doing stuff. He'd come down, he says, "You know, I want to move down here." 'Cause he had a house up there and his family and all that. He was teaching at Fresno State or Fresno City or whatever [Fresno City College]. So we were developing the [Center]. By that time, I really felt, finally—you might even notice this—like when I was leaving the Centro de La Raza in Long Beach, I kicked around for about a year and a half. I had that nine-month job, and [was] kind of trying to find my way. I didn't know how to get work. I don't know how, but I did. I always managed to make money somehow, doing something—these small jobs and stuff. Basically living on the fringes. I was between my twenties and thirties. It was my late twenties. I was still struggling in my late . . . In '77 I was twenty-six, so . . . Stuff like that, you know. So, working for the [United] Farm Workers.

And we finally got that group of people together. I would find work and then someone else would find work, and I really felt good when I found a mural that the other guys—that we could all pay each other. It was really good 'cause I never felt that I could do that. I could barely pay myself, you know. But when I found a job, like a big mural job, we did a . . . Actually, I found this big mural job, but I ended up doing something else that was even better. And Carlos and Bejarano—Guillermo Bejarano was part of it. And he came in because he brought that *ChismeArte* book. And he always gave me really bad advice about the covers and stuff. They wanted me to do some of the covers. But I overworked drawings and I didn't like it. And it just showed the pencil. [They said], "It won't photograph." "Yes it will." "But it [won't]." So they had me re-do it. So I said, "I know, just do it." "Nah, we can't afford it." "And should we get a print?" He goes, "Yeah, I'm gonna print it." To this day, I'm still, like, I knew it was gonna work but they don't want to believe me. "Nah, come on, John, you don't know what the hell you're doing. You and your dead Mexican stuff." You know? And that's how we got, at the same time, through—right—through the Mark Taper Forum—

KD: The *Zoot Suit*.

JV: Right, the *Zoot Suit* mural. But I also did some work for the theater group. I did *Metamorphosis* with what's his name . . . Berkoff, Steven Berkoff was the director. He always plays the Russian or the German general. I thought I was bein' the ass—this dude was mean. And there was, like, Brad Davis, who—he was one of the first guys to die of AIDS—he was the actor in it. And there were a few actors. And Ken Brecher, who was from the Mark Taper at the time—who knew Carlos—hired me to do the drawings for the program. And so

I went to Steven Berkoff's practices with the actors and drove 'em crazy with my stupid camera. It was like, "Click! Click!" Always at the right moment when they're so emotional, I go, "Click!" And he says, "Get this mutt out of here! Get him out of here!"

KD: [laughter]

JV: I don't have this—[Berkoff has] this British Cockney accent, and this British—you could tell it was real ghetto. It was like Afro-British ghetto talk, man. Just the way he would say it.

KD: [laughter]

JV: It was all, like, Cockney, you know? He had this thing on his head, and he was like—you know Steven Berkoff, right? And then he looked at me. But then—and then when he saw my drawings, he apologized and—he kind of apologized. He said, "It's okay," you know.

KD: So you used those photographs to create the image that was gonna go on the side of the Mark Taper.

JV: Yeah, for the big photo bills.

KD: Right.

JV: But I pretty much worked—some of them I did on my own, but I also worked with the art director there.

KD: Oh.

JV: Yeah, I didn't really do 'em on my own. She says, "Because it's [Franz Kafka's] *Metamorphosis* and the guy's a beetle," [so] I did this beetle human, and then—'cause he's on the, he's being persecuted—I put this face on the, it's like on the floor, screaming up. And I have the feet, like, stepping on them and stuff. And the other one was like—again, we used that again—it was like a boot coming down on his face. And they entered it in a bunch of, you know, like, theater graphic things and stuff.

KD: You painted that on the—

JV: Well, I did those as charcoals. As charcoal drawings.

KD: Wow.

JV: And they photographed them. But the drawings were mine. I sold a few of 'em from that. I did that—

KD: Do you remember where you sold them out? I mean, did you have just—

JV: People.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: Mostly through, probably, Robert Berman. At the time he was looking at my stuff. But before that . . . And it was through Carlos . . . I forget his name. [Hal Glicksman.] And he was from Otis [Art Institute]. He ran the [campus] gallery with a woman that ended up doing the Hispanic [show]. She was part of that. After a while, she went back East. I forget [her] name. And they might be in there—

KD: Not Jane Livingston?

JV: It might have been Jane Livingston. It could've been her. Let me see, the other guy was [Glicksman], the guy—I see him once and a while. And he knows that he gave me the first show. Because when he went to go see Carlos, I put up my big pencil drawings. I put up my big graphic pencil drawings of this blind woman—[the] *Seeing Is a Blessing* [series]—and this *indio* one. And I had a few of 'em up. And some of them, they weren't very good. And I had 'em up, and this guy—I forget his name. But anyway—and I hate it when I don't remember.

This guy was this really, really cool guy. He was really, really helpful. But when he came to the Public Arts Center, he was looking at Carlos's stuff. And Carlos was doing his *Parks and Wrecks* [series]. And I know his wrecks came from my stuff—came from looking at my dead Mexicans. And I was doing my version of, whatever, my car crash stuff, and that book that I was doing, and he really liked it. And he liked the idea of all the crashes and all the burning palms. But I mean it was like, I never really talked about it like, you know, I influenced him. Because who cares? It was just part of the—I mean, he's the one who got me into pastels. I saw what he did on pastels and I go, "Damn, I want to try that." You know, it was like that. It was always this thing. Anyway, all this . . . The guy was showing up—oh, Stanley. Was it Stan Goldberg? No, that's somebody else.

KD: Yeah.

**JV:** But it's almost like that. He was even at Long Beach for a while. But anyway he came to see Almaraz's painting 'cause he wanted to show him with this guy James Woods. And Woods—it wasn't James Woods. Something Woods. James Woods is an actor. His last name was Woods. And he—when they drained the Echo Park—when they drained the MacArthur Park lake, he got a lot of homeless guys to go dig up—they dug up, like, boats that sunk, teeth, rings. All the guns they gave to the cops. But they basically dug up the lake. And they found all this cool stuff. And this guy Woods, he was like a junk artist. [The artist is John Woods—ed.]

**KD:** Oh, I think I know this—

**JV:** Didn't want to sell anything. And he put 'em all on display. Oars. You know how the oars were lost from the old [boats]. You know, MacArthur Park, it wasn't just gas boats. They used to have panels and stuff. And so he put all that together. And then Almaraz was doing some of his police shootings and some of his wrecks—his paintings and pastels. And then I was there with him. And the guy told me later on, he says, "I don't know why you were there." But I says, "Well . . ." 'Cause that's the way Carlos was. That's why he was so cool. He made me believe that I was gonna be in the show too. But the guy didn't know who I was from boo, okay? So I said, "Well, what about—am I gonna be in it too?" And the guy goes, "I wasn't gonna put you in the show." And I looked at Carlos, and he just smiled and turned away. "You bastard, you made me . . ." He says, "Well, you know what? We might . . ." He says, "I kind of like what you're doing. We might find you a wall." 'Cause I guess I looked crushed, you know. "You know, I think we could find you . . ." 'Cause it kind of fits into the parks and wrecks [theme]." And [that's] "wrecks" with—

**KD:** Yeah, wrecks with *W-R-E*—

**JV:** Right, yeah.

**KD:** *C-K*.

**JV:** And so when he left, I worked. He came back maybe a month or so later, and there were my little meticulous drawings. He said, "You know, I really like—I mean, I like what you started when I first saw it, but I really like what you've done after, like, after I said yes to you." So he put all my drawings up on this one wall. And that was my first show. My daughter was maybe three. Two or—

**KD:** I have it as 1979.

**JV:** Yeah, right. '79. She must have been just barely born. And that's when I had my first insight into Otis. And some of my drawings fell right on the floor 'cause they were real big, like newsprint, or this, like, photo backdrop. And whatever the guy would [wax the floors]—there was always something like that. They're just like from the old *Chicanarte* show, where the stuff falls, and he says, "That's the way he wants it." "That's not the way I want it! It just fell off the hinges." The same thing here, the guy was like, waxing the floors. He hit the drawing. So I had this thing of wax splashed on the bottom. "Well, it's on the floor, you know? Who cares?" Because what I'm drawing—I'm just showing a shoeshine boy—who gives a shit, you know? I could see how people were, you know? So I had to cut it off. These bastards, you know? There's no respect, man. But then I was in that show. I had that show, I got a great review by Suzanne Muchnic. She gave me, like, a really cool review. I sold a few of 'em. And I realized later, the photo backdrop stuff that I sold—I sold 'em for hardly anything, but at that time it's, you know, whatever.

**KD:** Do you remember what you sold them for?

**JV:** Fifteen hundred, maybe. Not more than that. Not more than a couple grand. I don't remember. But there's one guy, he bought this door. This big door. It was a grocery store door. And it had graffiti and it had English and it had Spanish on it. It was all wood grain with that real heavy mesh—that real heavy dirty mesh. And I drew it all—that was like you were sewing. Like, you know, how you're doing yarn, you know? And this guy that bought it, he was this really, really gay dude. But he really liked it. And his boyfriend was this young stud. The boyfriend didn't like it, but the guy, the older guy, he liked it. And he was in this . . . And I remember he had this other pastel, this beautiful storm that this woman did. And he said, you know, "I really like that." And he goes, "Yeah, that's so-and-so, and she works—you work from photographs, right?" "Well, yeah," I says, "obviously." "Yeah. She works from just emotion.

She brings it out.” “Oh yeah, I can see that, but it still looks realistic.” He had this other stuff. And god, that was in the ’70s. So he got that. And then there were other—this other woman bought this woman sitting on TV sets. Now those are somewhere. But I remember that the *LA Times* thing really got me established like that.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And I think Jane Livingston was one of ’em. I think she was one of ’em. I’m pretty sure she was. Because from Otis—I think it was her—went back east to work for Corcoran [Gallery of Art], I guess. But it could be somebody else, though, because the other one, I think she could’ve been on the board. And it was always through Carlos that this other stuff started to work. Because at the time, the Public Arts Center in LA—in Highland Park . . . Him and I wanted to move it into the downtown starving art scene. Because the rents were pretty good. You know, big space. Up there, most everybody was gone. There was a point it was only Almaraz, Richard Duardo, and myself for a few months. And it was really great, because it was only three of us. Everybody else was—they just had to go back to whatever they were doing. People quit for different reasons. You couldn’t pay the rent. You have to pay the [rent].

KD: Everybody had to help pay for the [space].

JV: Yeah, especially to get a key.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: People were resentful. What do you mean? You have to pay somebody to get the key? One guy was like, “Why? Don’t want to have to pay anybody to get the key.” Yeah. I mean, you could come in and work. We used to let people work. But you have to contribute. Someone said I became bossy. Look at me, you know? I became—they said, “John, you are not as [quiet like you used to be].” I remember Richard told me that. I laughed. Well, you know. What are you gonna do.

KD: Outside of the logistics—you know, who’s paying the rent, what space you’re using, who’s gonna clean up—did you guys talk about art?

JV: I think so. [laughter]

KD: [laughter] There’s a lot of stories about the debates at—

JV: Right. You mean that one classic debate which was—it became a wrestling match.

KD: Well, which one are you talking about? [laughter]

JV: The wrestling match between Frank and Carlos. And it’s like—it was always the debate about, are we gonna be profit or non-profit? And that reminds me of the debate from the theater group I was part of.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Are we gonna join Hollywood or are we gonna be avant-garde, guerilla theater? Same kind of debate.

KD: Where was your feeling on that?

JV: I wanted to be able to live off of my work.

KD: Okay.

JV: This whole non-profit thing I learned from the Long Beach thing. They’re gonna audit you and find something wrong. Remember CETA [Changing Education through the Arts]?

KD: Yeah.

JV: Okay, CETA. I never got CETA—I never got CETA ’cause I knew in my heart of hearts that it’s a setup. Because, like, it’s all this liberal free money, but there’s gonna be the other side. And there was always somebody put in charge of CETA, especially the lobbyists. There was this guy—there was a Chicano guy, nobody heard of [him], and yet he was in charge of handing out the dough. And once they were audited, that guy was corrupt. Now where’d he come from? Where’d he come from? And only some people talked to him. He comes in like, “I’m the one in charge.” Was it a political appointment? It’s like a plant. It was always like that. So I was always thinking about this whole non-profit, like, handout thing. And that’s what Carlos and I, we really agreed on. He’s like, “Don’t want to go non-profit.” And I go, “We gotta do our non-profit [step], we gotta do . . .” He goes, “No. We have to live off of our work.”

KD: Yeah, I remember. I heard a story about Carlos saying to people, look, he'd been around the state, and all of the non-profits were being co-opted by these funders who would control what you could produce.

JV: Right. Even with the *Chismearte* magazine. When [Guillermo] Bejarano came in with Victor Valle. Victor Valle [and] I went to [CSU] Long Beach [together]. He became a teacher. Victor Valle, he teaches—he was at [Cal Poly] San Luis Obispo. Latin literature. He would do translations.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Haven't seen him for years. We used to do video together at Long Beach. I couldn't even tell you about. One of those summers we had a video class. We would do videos with the kids. And we would carry these big packs, you know? With the camera. That was great. We'd take it to the beach and then we would ruin it with all the sand. They're very delicate. And they have the three color—red, green, you know, blue, and—all that primitive . . . That's early '70s. I forgot all about that stuff. I saw Victor again working with Bejarano. And there was a state auditor who would come to the Public Arts Center looking for Bejarano—no, looking for whoever was doing . . . He wanted to look at the *Chismearte* books. We put out a little magazine. We did them for a few years. I don't know how they got it. It came to us. We were doing paste-up and layout, maybe the second—excuse me—the second or third issue. I don't know. And then Bejarano took it over. And he was such a hard head. Him and I, we didn't get along. And so . . .

But we contributed—I contributed drawings. I think they actually ruined—that's why, 'cause he didn't know what he was doing. He thought he knew what he was doing, but he didn't know what he was doing. And my stuff looked like crap. I was embarrassed. "Damn," I says, "this is a document and it looks flaky." Of course, of what I put in there. And there's always gonna be, like, I want my stuff to look the best that I can make it look. And when it looked [bad] . . . You know, I put it in somebody else's hands and it's ruined. That's why, you know?

KD: So you had a suspicion of non-profit—

JV: Right. And then when the state would [show up] . . . Because of my experiences in Long Beach—when I left Long Beach—for them it was like, I left too soon. Because when I left, it was CETA heaven. Those CETA grants. You were being paid to be an artist. Whatever.

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

JV: And they were getting pretty good—living wage. I missed all that. I was working the Peaches—okay—Peaches record store on Jefferson and all that stuff. So I missed . . . But then I thought, "You know what?" And then when CETA blew up, it was like, they're dependent on that stuff. And when it's cut from you, you actually feel more broke than you were if you didn't get it. So in other words, you'd have to learn how to—you'd have to learn how to get it yourself, man. You know, find your work. You know, find some kind of gig. We'd call it a gig. And so that's how . . . And so, over there—I forget who was—I don't know who was trying to get the profit, non-profit. And even with Frank and Carlos, one time we were having a meeting—and I hated meetings, its like I'm telling you—we're sitting around, and the table was basically on saw horses and it was this real flimsy table. And Frank's over there, Carlos is over here. All of a sudden—I don't know what it was about—but the table flew up. It flew up. And it was a thin table, it was like little Formica, real thin. And it fell over towards me, and they started just hugging basically, falling on the ground. Frank was big. "Hey man, come on, come on, what is this?"

[break in audio]

JV: What was that?

KD: [We are on] side 2, tape 3, with John Valadez. Go ahead.

JV: Even with Yepes, man, we would get over stuff. I don't know what it was. Matter of fact, I was like . . . Again, I was sleeping there once—sometimes I would work late, and my girlfriend and we weren't getting along and I would just crash there. And I was used to crashing anywhere from my Long Beach days. And I remember waking up to George Yepes fighting with some guy. And the guy was—it was one of Carlos's cousins or nephews, 'cause Carlos was older. And the guy [was] coming over—they were both drunk—the

guy was coming to say bye to me and I was asleep. I go, "Okay, good." [George] says, "Leave him alone, he's sleeping!" So he says, "Fuck you!" "Well, fuck you!" And they started fighting. And my glasses—you know, because I was sleeping—and they'd stomped on my glasses.

KD: Oh!

JV: I go, "Those are my glasses, man!" And they're fighting, and they're just scraping them across the ground. And that woke me up because I gotta see the next day, man. You know, like, "I need these. I need my glasses, okay?" I'll never forget it. And they were fighting. And they actually tumbled down the stairway at the Public Arts Center. The building is still there. I don't know what it is now. They made it a lot nicer. We could've bought it—coulda shoulda woulda—but we didn't.

KD: Any stylistic tensions? Or these [fights] are all over—

JV: No. Stylistic tensions . . . No, we all had different—we all put our work up. Leo [Limón] came, and he was doing his . . . No, we just put . . . No, it was . . . Because, see, [Richard] Duardo was a printer and he would try to use some of our stuff to print. We all influenced each other. [Guillermo] Bejarano was really into that magazine. He would come and paint, and he was taught by [David Alfonso] Siqueiros, so he had a [style]. He went to go study with Siqueiros, so he had a real Siqueiros style. I think it kinda ruined him a little bit 'cause he couldn't get out of it. He couldn't get out of his Siqueiros style. And for me that kind of taught . . . 'Course I have my own style, but, it was like, people have different stuff. But we never really competed. Dolores [Cruz] was always learning how to draw better and better. She always felt different. And Barbara [Carrasco] always had these really intense little intricate drawings. And I told her about . . . She says, "How do you do your hair?" And I told her, "Well, you just, you just, like, you comb it. You gotta—you just gotta comb it in. And it looks like you do every hair but you don't. eventually you'll do enough so it looks like it's all there, you know." We'd actually teach each other stuff.

KD: Wow.

JV: And Carlos [Almaraz] would teach me about . . . Not so much there, but once Carlos and I got into downtown, we'd share this little studio that I found through my friend Jim's father's friend. King, his name was King. He owned property downtown. And Carlos taught me about pastel. And we were always talking about stuff. And we always had . . . I couldn't tell you exactly what some of the conversations are. Even with Richard, everybody has different memories of stuff. And I have one of the worst memories at all, until you trigger something. People said that I did something, I say, "I did? It sounds like I would do that, but I don't remember."

KD: [laughter]

JV: It'd be like that, you know? That's usually me.

KD: Did you feel the group had accomplished anything if you look back?

JV: It helped us to [continue]. It helped us to really [keep going]. We all stayed doing art. A lot of us. The majority. Only—I think only Judithe and a little bit of Dolores. I think because of her health. But only Judithe is the one that—she was only with us for a little while too. She was in there for a little while. She was the only one that really quit. Everybody else just kept doing art. We all became—we're all still friends.

And after Carlos and I . . . We're the ones that moved because Tito—Roberto Delgado—showed up there. And I would do my—I was doing my projection drawings in the back, where it was really dark. It was in the back where the stairs were, and I could close the doors. Really dark. And he started living there. He was an ex-GI guy. And he had really—you know, bless his heart, but when he showed up, so did the mice. In the food, and, like . . . And him and I, again, him and I, we didn't get along either because he was living where I was drawing, so I have to wait 'til he gets up. And Richard brought him in. So again, that's about the only [conflict]. When those—that's when the conflicts happened. There was a point where it was only Carlos, Richard, and me. And Richard and me, we really were into music. He was into music like I was, Richard. So we'd put on, like, reggae music, which was really hip at the time.

KD: Yeah.



- JV: The late '70s, early '80s. And he was making some pretty cool money. So we'd put on the music, and it'd just be loud. Because, you know, I mean, it'd be loud. We could even skateboard in the place, you know? We could even skateboard and he had his sisters, he had his brothers, and sometimes, you know, his mom would come. It was really cool, you know? It was a real nice time. There was even, like, little coffee shops right in the area there. There was more than just one or two. It's coming back. I mean, I live in the area now, you know, and things are coming back. Vegetarian restaurants, like, what was that, you know?
- KD: Yeah. *[laughter]*
- JV: Then, you could actually smoke inside the restaurant.
- KD: *[laughter]*
- JV: And we would go to the movies. We would go to—you know what we would do together? In the Public Arts Center? We would go to Filmex. When Filmex had free films? You know, Filmex, the film festivals?
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: We would pile 'em in the car. It'd be Richard and Barbara, Carlos and myself. Or we would meet there. We'd get in the car during the day—in the middle of the day—and go to Century City for Filmex. And then I would see Gronk there, let's say. I saw Gronk when I went to go see *Eraserhead*. I saw the premier and Gronk was there. We'd go to see these Brazilian films. Like freak stuff, you know?
- KD: Did you get a sense that the group was moving towards a kind of—a certain kind of commercial project? It's been hard for me to track what actually brought in the money. I mean I know about the *Zoot Suit*—
- JV: I don't remember either. I mean, like, okay, the *Zoot Suit* mural—
- KD: I had a sense from one interview that it was—you know, you were doing signs for the local businesses.
- JV: Right. We did murals for some . . . We did stuff for the Sandinistas. We did posters and we did these ticket things when we were *[in struggle]*. There was this guy who ran a furniture store in Highland Park. He would pay us to do some posters and stuff. That was through Carlos. Richard would bring in real estate sign *[jobs]* and we would help him do it, and he would give us some money. Did some murals with City-wide Mural Project. That brought in a little bit of money. And then I would find—I don't know how I found this hardware store. And I think their mural is still there. It was a mural done by Bejarano and Carlos. And I think I didn't do it because I got the Mark Taper job.
- KD: Okay.
- JV: And that paid pretty good.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: And I don't know if that was before or after *Zoot Suit*. I got that stuff. And then I showed . . . I don't remember. We just managed to do it. I really don't remember. But there was like really weird jobs—art jobs.
- KD: So you were able to then—eventually the group dissolves, but Richard stays there and develops his own business.
- JV: Yeah, they sort of had these punk concerts there.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Concerts and stuff.
- KD: And you go downtown.
- JV: Downtown. We go downtown.
- KD: With Carlos Almaraz.
- JV: Yeah. Eighth and Spring.
- KD: And that's a studio that the two of you rent together?
- JV: We rent together. I found the space. And again, I don't know how I made a living. I think I started working for . . . No, that was . . . See, I don't remember. Yeah, we must have got a job through Frank *[Romero]* around that time with CRA *[Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency]*. But I wasn't selling too much work. He was starting to sell.
- KD: Carlos?

- JV: Yes, I'm sorry. Carlos was starting to sell. And he sensed that things were turning [around for him in] about '80. Yeah, god, I don't remember. It must've been—I forget, man. But it was through, like—who really helped him was, like, Jan Turner, I guess, or—
- KD: Robert Berman, right?
- JV: Well not Berman. It was Saxon. He knew [Daniel] Saxon, he knew Jan Turner, and Josine Ianco-Starrels. She ran the Barnsdall Art Center.
- KD: Okay.
- JV: And she wanted to show me, also. But she didn't like my big figurative—my big pencil figurative—because Kent Twitchell was doing the exact same thing.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: And so she said, "Well, I'm already showing Twitchell. I'll show your downtown, like, sidewalk pieces, like that." Because his were conceptually more complete because his drawings rolled up into a box.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Oh, what a genius. I said, "Oh, that's really smart." With me, it was just, like, roll 'em up, put 'em in a tube, you know? And mine—and his was good paper, also. That's the other thing. Which was fine. But when he told some friends of mine, like people from the [scene], that I copied him, they said, "He didn't copy you. You guys just came up with the same thing together."
- KD: Yeah. You hadn't mentioned that you were aware of his work.
- JV: Right. And that's when I really realized—really used to—no matter what you're doing, it's always out there somewhere. Like, for instance, right now, to this day, I'm doing the sea monster thing that I've called *Tales of Oceana*. The other week, they have the IMAX monsters of the deep [film].
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: I mean, what the hell, man? I'm doing that. And I thought, "See, it happens to you." But there are no people in it, you know? Mine are like fairy tales. That's like between pre-historic and animation. It always happens. Even when I was a kid in high school, I was using Rapidograph [pens, doing] these little drawings. We went to Canter's [deli] in high school—this is real quick—[and there were my drawings. Some] guy was doing bubbles and little drawings, 'cause there was a little bit of doing the flowing [ink] and the bubbles and flowers and getting the people and figuring. It was part of that psychedelic thing.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: I never took acid, but it was part of the trend. I wasn't even smoking pot at the time. I was just doing, you know, the drawing—these real crazy whacked-up—before I started doing realism. We'd go to Canter's to go eat when I was in high school. My friend Jim had a car. I'd look in this hippie shop, this Jewish hippie shop across . . . And the exact same thing that I was doing was in there, but the guy was coloring in the little areas. There was another step that somebody took. So I've always learned that—that's where I really learned. First you get crushed, like, oh my god!
- KD: I'm not as unique as I thought?
- JV: Yeah, thank you. Like, oh my. And then I thought, "You know what?" After I tried reading Jung—Karl Jung.
- KD: Karl Jung.
- JV: And even reading [George] Gurdjieff and a few other ones, you get this understanding of the mind.
- KD: Collective unconscious.
- JV: Yeah, and all that kind of stuff. And that really helped. Like, "Oh, that's right! That's where I related to." Never take it personally, you know? You know, it's out there, you know. You just gotta [do your work]. So that was—that always helped, that kind of stuff. But it wasn't like—I never became a convert because I was already a Christian convert. I learned. There's things that things will teach you, but don't give it your all. [Don't convert,] stay selfish. Do your own thing, you know?
- KD: So when you were working downtown with Carlos—describe that. That studio.
- JV: Okay. It was small. It was like half a space. I mean, it was small. It could have been [a big living room]. I don't think it was even as big as this.

- KD:** And this is what?
- JV:** Maybe nine hundred square feet. Eight hundred, maybe? I don't know. The walls were [higher], and it's only—this is only ten feet [the ceiling]. In here is maybe thirty feet, maybe, in here?
- KD:** At least.
- JV:** Yeah. And maybe it was different . . . The rent was pretty good, though. And the other side, which I think [Richard] Duardo took over for a while, that had a rug, showers. This one had a shower too, but I was still living [somewhere else]. I was living in Echo Park, he was living in Echo Park. I was living with my daughter's mother. With my daughter's mother, I was always in and out. It was always, like, sometimes there, sometimes, you know, it's over. But because of my daughter, I kept coming—kept on coming back. And I was doing mural jobs and I was selling a little bit. I started working for CRA because of Frank [Romero]. Frank hired me [to do photography].
- KD:** Community Redevelopment Agency?
- JV:** Yeah. Yeah. He hired all of us from the Public Arts—
- KD:** What was Frank doing?
- JV:** Graphics. He was the head of graphics there because, remember, he worked with [Charles] Eames. So he had a background in design and graphics. And I remember when I was working with Almaraz, we would get paid a little bit through the *Chismarte* to do the paste-up and layout but I hated it. You know the old paste-up and layout before the digital? You have to wax the back of a piece of paper, reduce, print it, reduce it, wax it, put it in.
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** You know, and then you put the photo in there, and you take it to the printer, and the printer would reduce it or he would do his thing to it, and he had to type everything, and then—it's not really what I wanted to do. But I did learn some of that stuff—right when it was out the door, I learned it. [*laughter*]
- KD:** [*laughter*] So at Community Redevelopment Agency . . .
- JV:** I became a photographer. I was the last one to be hired. They hired me as a photographer. And I would go out and photograph for the architects. They were gonna renovate—I went to Watts once, and they were gonna renovate this area. It was run down and beat up. They would send me—you know, a Mexican American guy—into the barrio or into South Central.
- KD:** South Central.
- JV:** Because the other guy had his fancy two-and-a-quarter camera. He never photographed people. I could photograph people. I went into Skid Row, 'cause again, they were gonna redo [some area]. It was the Wexler Hotel. It had a killing a week. I'm not exaggerating.
- KD:** Wow.
- JV:** And now it's a big rehab [facility]. It's on Fifth and San Pedro. And I went in there once they got everybody out and photographed the old rooms. And I did a piece of work called *Moving In*.
- KD:** You took pictures of the architectural elements of the buildings?
- JV:** Of buildings and blocks. Whatever they would want me to photograph. I went in and I shot it. Like with just the look. I mostly [document the conditions of the buildings]. At the time there's water coming through the walls, you know?
- KD:** Oh, you were documenting for them what they—
- JV:** What they bought.
- KD:** Okay.
- JV:** What they bought. And they would rehab [it all]. And then I would shoot some of the rehabilitation. I hated it because they would get these beautiful old homes of East LA—really nice wood homes—and they'd stucco it. And I'd have to shoot it, like, "See how the stucco's better?"
- KD:** Yeah. [*laughter*]
- JV:** I'd go in, and I would, like, ask, "Can I shoot the house?" Because they got loans, I guess, from CRA, to redo the house. I would be sent to go photograph this house, this and that—

KD: What kind of camera were you working with then?

JV: A 35 millimeter. And then I used their Nikons—their Nikon cameras there.

KD: Is that the first time you were using a—

JV: A decent camera, yeah.

KD: A decent camera.

JV: I actually bought one. And then I lost it or I broke it or it was stolen. But I always kept a Nikon. To this day I have a Nikon. But yeah, that's how I started to really use really good cameras.

KD: What kind of lens? 'Cause when I think of your work, I'm thinking, are you using a wide-angle fisheye?

JV: Sometimes. I mostly use a 50 [millimeter] and then I use a 28 that I learned was pretty good from Harry. Harry Gamboa told me that a 28 is wide but it doesn't distort quite as much. And then I was using a 134, which was pretty good, where again, you get a little bit of distance, but it doesn't distort all that much. Because again, I was using them for my work, so I didn't want anything to look—to distort, you know.

KD: Right.

JV: So that's—I always kept that in mind. And then working for CRA, they were all there. And, again, I hated to be inside all day long, so I waited until Frank said, "Oh, John, I think we have a photo job." They hired Carlos. I felt left out for a while. They hired Barbara. They hired Dolores, Barbara, [Judithe]. Carlos was doing stuff. And then I finally got hired. Finally. After a while. But I got the cool job. I was a photographer and I could leave. Sure I could come back and do whatever I was doing for the [architects]. I photographed Chinatown. They wanted these two [areas]. They wanted these blocks for Chinatown. So I go there, just like what Ed Ruscha did, basically just shooting streets. When I did it for them I would make a—I would put the contact sheets on both sides and give it to 'em. Just stuff like that. And then I started using [a photo lab].

KD: Now, are they doing the developing there, or would they send it out?

JV: Yeah, we would send it out. We'd send it out. And I was getting paid temporary. And again, it lasted nine months. It lasted [only nine months].

KD: Now, you made it sound like you also got some artwork out of this, that you did—

JV: Oh, they [took most of the photos]. I always—I gave them most of the slides [and kept] the ones that I know that they wouldn't care for. I actually—I take it back—I was photographing stuff that I wanted to show, also.

KD: Okay.

JV: So the guys that were in charge, they wanted to get rid of Frank. They wanted to purge us, I don't know for what reason. Some of the bosses didn't like Frank.

KD: Too many Mexicans? [laughter]

JV: I think so. The art department—the graphics department. And when they did get rid of us, they hired this woman who basically lied on her application to get the job. She didn't know nothin'. So they had problems after we left. They had this big theft problem, too, because people were stealing stuff in the company. But I never stole anything because I didn't want to wake up at 3:00 a.m. thinking, "I'm a thief." Again, it goes back to when I was a kid. I wanted to be able to sleep, instead of, like, "Where am I gonna get my money?" I said, "That's enough to wake up to. I'm gonna make a living." Like, "I ripped off, I mean, I'm a [thief]," you know? I don't want that, you know? I want to be able to sleep if I can. And it's really true. So at the time, I kept the camera. I kept the camera and my lenses. And I would go take 'em home and come back. Once I finally got out of there, as soon as I left 'em there, somebody stole 'em. And they said, "Well, John did it." And they go, "Nah." People that knew me [vouched for me]. I had, again, this office politics with people that I worked for. They actually bought my work once in a while. They go, "Nah, he didn't do it. There's somebody in the place here." They know that he would blame the Mexican kid, you know.

And then later on when I got my camera, the one guy I knew later on saw me in a restaurant. We were free by that time, back to being, you know, living off your work, and living [as an artist]. I felt much better, you know? I'm my own boss. It's what I was used to. You know, working for these architects, some

don't want you there and some—they don't want you to leave because you're doing work and stuff. I was getting paid pretty good. I liked leaving, but a few times I was put into some dangerous situations that you have to just get out of. And I sort of knew how to do it. When you feel like you're gonna be jumped or attacked in somebody's neighborhood, you just gotta keep moving and don't stop moving. I knew that from when I was a kid. Like, you know, you know if something's gonna happen you just apologize, back up, and I would put my hand on my back pocket like I had something there—

**KD:** Like you had something there. Yeah.

**JV:** To call the cops, or like—you know, I don't have a knife, but . . . There was one guy who pulled a knife, and I go, "You know what? If I push this button, you're gonna have every pig in the neighborhood all over your ass." I said—I called 'em a pig instead of a cop, you know? But that's how I talk—"I don't give a shit. Get the fuck out of here." "I'm leaving, man." "All right, it's cool." And plus, I would look at where—the house they just came out of.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** Like, you know, like—it's all, like, letting 'em know. And then out in Watts [once, someone stops, and] he says, "I'm gonna get my gun and I'm gonna shoot you. What are you doing here with that camera?" And I go, "Oh yeah, I guess you're right. What am I doing here with this camera?"

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** "Finish it up, get the hell out of here." You know? They were some, you know, dicey times. But I loved being out on the streets shooting [with a camera]. Even though I was just shooting buildings. Because I was always shooting other stuff for myself. And I'm finding—I mean, some of my stuff they'd put in some of their programs and stuff. And then when they were getting rid of me, they got rid of everybody first. And then [one of the] the architects that wanted to keep me says, "John, I can [keep giving you work]. How long do you want to stay here, John? I can give you work until [you decide to leave]." 'Cause they says, "Use 'em as long as you can, and then we're gonna get rid of 'em."

Dolores was smart. Dolores sued 'em for firing her for no reason. She got a big settlement. She said, "You guys should do that! They fired us unfairly. No reason." I go, "It's okay." With me, once I left, I was free. I'm back to—I'm gonna try to be an artist, you know? And that's where I got the show at '83 with the Lizardi-Harp [Gallery in Pasadena]. Oh, that's when I got the mural, that's right. Right when I did the [Victor Clothing mural]. Right, right after—

**KD:** Eighty-one is the Broadway Street mural?

**JV:** Right. Eighty to '81. It took me a year and a half to paint it, and that's when I left Carlos's studio, 'cause we were both really cramped.

And he was getting a lot of work. He was getting into a bunch of shows, and he was sending his work around to different galleries. And most of 'em rejected him. And then they came back. Like, people, their galleries folded. And if they would have taken on Carlos, they would have kept their gallery going. It was that [kind of thing]. It depends on what artist [they had]. And he would be—like, he would get pissed off because the work in the galleries [was average]. They weren't as good as his, you know? And he had [confidence]. He was kind of on a [mission]. It was really interesting to really see it, all that stuff. And some of [the gallery owners], they hit themselves forever, like, thinking, "I turned down Almaraz in my gallery. The guy comes in, you know, and I turn the guy down."

It was like—I remember we used to hear all that stuff 'cause we were in the downtown scene then. And that's where I got to know Gronk and Harry [Gamboa Jr.] a lot more and started to go to some of their Asco [gatherings]. The second wave, or whatever. Some of that stuff. And that's when we were all photographed with that famous Harry Gamboa photograph, where I looked very, very, very young. [laughter] And I keep showing it. And I says, "Hey! I lucked out! I got into that photograph." You know. Those are my friends, right? You know. It was cool. It was, like, yeah! Good old times, you know?

**KD:** Do you want to pause for today?

**JV:** Yeah, let's do that. Let's stop.

## DECEMBER 3, 2007

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez. Today is December 3, 2007, and this is our third session for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. John, we left off at one point last time but I wanted to make sure I captured some of the key influential people who advocated for your work early on and key opportunities that came up for you. I wonder if you could comment on some of those early advocates.

**JV:** Okay. Well, when I finally got back from Long Beach and I was kind of kicking around looking to see what kind of groups that I could join, or what kind of opportunities there were for young Chicano artists in the early-to-mid '70s. There wasn't much, as you can imagine. I guess the first one was when I met Carlos Almaraz. He was ten years older and he was doing work a lot longer than I was. And I guess he was a big influence for a lot of us—a lot of us means, like, four or five people. And we—because he was part of that Los Four group . . . And that's when we formed the Public Arts Center. I forget why we called it that. Somebody else probably remembers that more. And so with him, 'cause he was the most—seemed to be the most aggressive in terms of looking for space and, you know, giving us all a pep talk [about] the things that we could do as a group.

So when we got that studio on Figueroa by Avenue 62, I think he's the one that found it. It had real nice wooden floors. It was a huge open space. And with Richard Duardo and Frank [Romero] and the people I mentioned the last time, we all . . . I got up there because I had a [job to do]. I found a Citywide Mural Project for a community center in Echo Park and I asked, "Can I [do it here]?" And that's how I got in, how I got my foot in the door. And then he's the one that took me to New York. The first time I ever went to New York was with him. And that was about '78. I believe that's when it was, the first time that I went, and I think we even met Richard there. Richard [Duardo] was there because he was doing his printing. I could mix it up—I think I went a couple of times, but—sometimes these trips, they kind of blend together. I don't—

**KD:** So they were short trips where you went to show your portfolios around?

**JV:** Yeah. Well, he did. He went to Allan Stone there in New York.

**KD:** Right.

**JV:** I basically went with him just to see [the place], you know, because he lived there with Frank and they worked in a design firm in the late '60s, early '70s. And then they came back. No, I went with him and I met some of his friends there. And I think we met Richard Duardo there. I mean, I have some really nice memories. I was taking black-and-white photographs at the time. I took some really cool stuff. I was pretty intense. And I forget how long we were there. A week, two weeks. He basically was showing his work around, and I was really, like, observing him about what he did. He goes to the galleries and he makes an appointment and he shows his work and he talks to the guys, and I just kind of hung out on the sidelines, like inside the gallery, looking at the artwork. And we went to some of the museums at the time. I stayed with some of his friends that were living there.

And then when we got back, I think that's when we decided that the downtown art scene was pretty exciting at the time. So, I knew through a friend of mine going through high school—his father's friend owned property on Spring Street. So we got a space there on the second floor. It was 815 Spring Street or 814. Sheila Pinkel was on the third or fourth floor, and that's where the photographic—Sheila Pinkel teaches at [Pomona College in] Claremont now. And they were the Center for the Photographic something-or-another. [Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies—ed.] And so people were just starting to rent studio spaces. I think the rent was pretty good. And then eventually Richard moved in—he kind of followed us—but that was about 1980 or '81. I think.

And around the same time, the other thing that was really cool is when Frank got the [CRA job]. Oh, wait a minute. Before that, when we got that studio, I had to find work. I mean, we were always finding, you know, work. So I went down Broadway, and for some reason I walked into Victor Clothing Company. That was on Third [Street], we were on Eighth. I walked into the Victor Clothing Company and I saw this

mural that somebody painted above, you know, the clothing store walls. And it was like Christopher Columbus and Aztec, you know, dancers, and the Aztec warriors and it was pretty hokey but it was kind of cool. I mean, it was a really interesting view of that real cliché.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And so I talked to Paul Harter, who was one of the owners, and I asked him about—I proposed to do a mural on the other side of the walls. And I didn't realize that Paul Harter was into art. He knew Chuck . . . What's this guy . . . I'm terrible with names. He did the Bugs Bunny guys. Jay . . . I forget his name. I forget his name. [Chuck Jones—ed.]

KD: It's okay.

JV: He did the Warner Brothers cartoons.

KD: Yeah, I know who you're talking about.

JV: Yeah, [Paul Harter] knew him really well. And he collected art. So . . . But for me, it was just, finally—I finally found somebody who was willing to have me [do a mural]. He said, "Yeah, show me a drawing." So I went, you know, and I did that—I did the sketches. I always thought about doing this big piece about Broadway Street. I was seriously photographing people in the [streets and store] windows. And that's where I was really starting [to focus]. That was my major subject matter, it was the street. 'Cause I found it really interesting. People shopping, and the cross-section of people, different ages, and the whole history of Los Angeles on that street since I was a child, when my mother would take us on the bus to go downtown. We'd go to Clifton's [Cafeteria] at the time, we'd go to some of the movies, we'd go to the department stores and see the Christmas displays. I remember downtown is like, you know, like the center of the world for me. Especially in Los Angeles, coming from Boyle Heights there. So I found it a rich source of subject matter. Sort of like urban realism.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And so then Paul Harter from Victor Clothing says, "Yeah, that sounds interesting. I'd be interested in having a mural on the other side of the wall." And I wasn't really wanting to paint on the wall 'cause I would have to paint after the store was closed, at night. That's not something that I really wanted to do. So I decided to put it on canvases. I did the drawings. I went back to the [studio]. I did the drawings in a couple of weeks 'cause I had so much energy and so much excitement. And the way the guy saw my drawing style—basically drawing from photographs—he was pretty excited about it.

And I think—I don't know, maybe I got—the whole, like, the first eight canvases, I got, like, eight thousand, nine thousand dollars. I mean, it was really nothing. But we're talking, like, 1979, 1980, where I didn't even know what it was gonna look like. Because I was mostly drawing, I guess. I don't know if I was painting. We would paint out in the streets. This would be the first mural that I would paint by myself ever since college, so I was really kind of naïve and really excited about it. But I needed a place to paint it, and so they showed me the basement. And the basement had—it was barely eight feet tall. We were right under the building and right under the street. You would hear people walk over those metal grates [on the side walk above].

KD: Yeah.

JV: And it would bang. And there was like a [hallway]. It was like a long, narrow hallway, maybe twelve feet wide, about eight-and-a-half feet high. And the murals were eight feet. And I had this friend of mine, Rush Riddle, build the stretcher bars for me. And we bought the canvas. And I don't know, maybe the—yeah, it wasn't more than a thousand dollars [for] each panel, but I didn't really know what it was gonna look like. 'Cause the drawing was one thing, and I just started painting it. I could only paint two canvases at a time, and every time I would finish one, I would have to move it and put the next canvas up.

KD: [laughter]

JV: Yeah, it was really sort of an *Our Gang* format, you know. It was kind of a real, you know, like, pieces at a time with ropes and strings and all this. That's kind of what it felt like. But I was there for about a year and a half painting it, and then I was still in the studio with Carlos, but because I was there so much, painting

the mural, he started to get a lot of different kind of work. And then at a certain point I was coming to Victor's one day and I looked up on his fire escape and I saw that they had, you know, a loft for rent. So I went and asked him, "You guys have places to rent here?" Because I know that Carlos and I were—at that point—we were starting to get kind of crowded. I mean, like, these two grown guys in this pretty small room, and we basically split it with this [dry]wall.

KD: The one on Spring Street?

JV: Yeah, the one on Spring. So from there, I was always going to Victor's. And I was getting a little bit of income from that. And I guess at the time it seemed to be enough. It might have been a little bit more than a thousand dollars. I really don't remember. But I know it was hardly anything. Excuse me. So we might have done some other things. It's kind of vague. And then we were always doing small jobs, and then I was doing that mural. And then at a certain point, I went in there and I asked him, "Can I see that space that's for rent?" And it was this Japanese guy that basically disappeared—it's like, he was renting the place, and he literally left everything and he disappeared. He left his cameras, he left his artwork. He was doing this spray-gun kind of art, this really kind of strange stuff. And they think maybe he went back to Japan. Just suddenly just went home, 'cause they don't know what happened to him. The place had a rug. And I offered all of a hundred fifty dollars—I could rent it for a hundred fifty dollars. They go, "No, John. You could pay us two hundred dollars a month for it." You know. And I mean, that was nothing. And I ended up paying that two hundred dollars a month for seven years.

KD: Wow.

JV: And you talk about things that really influenced me and really helped me. One thing was to give me that mural to do, 'cause after, you know, a year and a half, we put it up above the dressing rooms and it stayed there from '81 up until the late '90s. And a lot of people came to see it. I mean, they would have bus tours of the Grand Central and the Bradbury Building and the Broadway Street mural, you know? It was kind of cool. And I didn't really realize that a lot of people saw it. Matter of fact, Gordon Davidson at the Mark Taper one time borrowed it to put it up in the lobby of the Mark Taper Forum in the '80s. And Mr. Harter got really pissed off because they wouldn't bring it back.

KD: Oh.

JV: They wouldn't bring it back because they had it up, it was great in their lobby. So he said, "John, get [it back]." I think it was up 'cause it was like a huge black wall, and that was his mural. And after I finished the first eight panels, which went about forty-eight feet, I guess. Right? Yeah, something like that. Eight times eight, right? Forty-eight? They were—each one was six by eight feet. Six feet, you know, long, by eight feet high. And I did eight. And they said, "Well, there's room for two more." And I think the amount of money I got for the two more was a lot more. I might have got like three thousand dollars each.

KD: Wow. [laughter]

JV: By that time it was, you know, I sort of—you know, that was good. And then, I mean, Mr. Harter was really good to me. And then when I finished the mural, he had me do the portraits of the people in the store. So I did, like, thirty portraits of pastel of everybody that worked in the store, like, the people that worked in the accounting department, the salesmen. And there was thirty of 'em. And he was really loyal to whoever worked for him. Some of 'em quit, some of 'em were fired, but he kept all the portraits. So when you jump into the late '90s when Victor Clothing was finally over—

KD: Right.

JV: The Peter Norton [Family] Foundation, through some people, bought the mural and bought the portraits, and so they're all kind of together. But at the time, I did the mural. And towards—I don't know what—towards maybe the last few months—maybe six months, maybe eight months, I don't remember—that I was able to move into the Victor Clothing. So that's when Carlos and I—we were always friends, but we kind of separated. And so I had my own studio there, and I ended up staying there on the fourth floor for fifteen years.

KD: Can I ask you a question about the portraiture? Did you work from photography or—



**JV:** Sure, yeah. I photographed the people. They would come into my studio and I would photograph 'em. And it took me a while to do all thirty of 'em. And I forget what I got paid for those things. But at the time, Mr. Harter kept me going. There was a point where—which was really cool to have such a studio like that for two hundred dollars and basically be there in the Victor Clothing for that many years. 'Cause there was a time in the early '80s, after my show, at the same time when I was doing the mural, I was visited by Adrienne Simard, and she had the [Adrienne] Simard Gallery. This was the early '80s—I mean, she must have visited me in '81. And people would come and see me [painting]. I don't know how I met 'em, or . . . It's kind of vague. So that's where I had my first solo show, was at the Adrienne Simard Gallery. And that was on—close to Central. Central and Third. And that's where I showed my pastel portraits without [backgrounds], with just, like, figures with a clear background. There wasn't any background. And I showed . . . I think my *Getting Them Out of the Car* I showed there, too. And during the show, I didn't sell anything. During the show, nothing sold. 'Cause I was basically doing street people and marginalized people—you know, preachers and young mothers with their child and so-called *pachucos* and *chola* girls with make-up. And I didn't sell anything during the show.

I kind of thought that I wouldn't, 'cause the idea was to basically dare people to look at a class of people—highly rendered. I was finally developing a technique through my drawing from photography that there was no cartoon style. There was no stylization. You're basically looking at real people. And so that was interesting. But, finally, people came back. After the show was done, people came back, and I finally sold everything. It took about a year or so. But I guess I did bother enough people that . . . You know, the work was interesting. That type of realism there in the '80s, and I sold stuff. But the prices were fairly low. But again, that's when Peter Norton bought a couple of portraits. And then he bought some other work later on. In that early time, you know. When he was doing his stuff.

**KD:** Peter Norton then came to the studio or came to the gallery?

**JV:** Well, he came to that gallery, at the Adrienne Simard. He also went to the Brockland Gallery—the Brockland area in South Central. That whole Crenshaw [area]. 'Cause I showed a few pieces there. And then I went to his house in the Palisades, and he had one up. One was a taxi dancer. This girl, this taxi dancer that I really liked. And then in the '90s he gave a lot of his collection away to different museums, so some of it is up in Idaho. I know some gallery in Idaho he gave work to. And he gave my work to some gallery—or a gallery or a museum, I should say—in Miami. I have the names written down somewhere. But he gave a bunch of work out, he gave a bunch of work away in the '90s that I heard about. But again, and then, you know, he has—it's part of the foundation. And I don't think he's gonna keep it. I think he'll probably give it away, you know? But hopefully it'll stay in Los Angeles.

And these are people that have helped me, you know, just through the work. Not that I'd go visit them and hang out, you know? They just, you know, they like the work and they like the stuff that I was doing. So one of them was . . . It was Carlos that I sort of teamed up [with]. We used to have real nice conversations and he kept me reading interesting things. And even though I was reading different stuff—of art theory of the time—and our work was really different.

**KD:** What kinds of things were you reading?

**JV:** Well, I was reading mostly—well at the time, I was reading mostly—at the time, I got into a lot of political stuff. A lot about the El Salvador and Nicaragua stuff, and different . . . There was a certain point . . . I think, but that was more in the '90s, when I was reading a lot of Bukowski and Fante—John Fante. Like, a lot of urban stuff. Well, and a lot of stuff about the Illuminati and all that. And the Elders of Zion stuff. Like, it was just like finding different kind of strange, you know, things to [learn]. I was reading all kinds of stuff. And seeing a lot of film because I was in downtown. You know, that's [LA]. The movie theaters, they were still around.

It was a really cool time in the '80s because we weren't making a lot of money, but we'd always meet at Clifton's. And that's where I would see Gronk and Harry, at Clifton's. And that was like the early-to-mid '80s. And then you see the street change because of the rock phenomenon—rock cocaine—and things got

really scary in downtown. That's after I did the mural. When I did the mural, you know, I had kind of a cool opening. My family showed up and, like, other people came to it. It was in the Victor Clothing Store, and people came up to me in later years and says, "I was at your opening of the Victor Clothing mural." And there was a few people there. I don't know how they found out. Some people there I found really, really interesting that they were there. I remember meeting my mom and my stepdad. It was kind of a home thing. And even at the Simard Gallery, the kids from the car show that I photographed—*Getting Them Out of the Car*, which is that car shielding thing—[all showed up].

KD: Right.

JV: They showed up to that. Some of the people that came to the show said they'd never been to a show where the people in the artwork was in the gallery, you know? And everybody was, like, really proud that they were in it. So it was always a—there was this real sense of community in those kind of things. And then in about '86 I met what's his [name]. Croton . . . I forget his name. He was the cultural affairs director—LA City—with Mayor [Tom] Bradley.

KD: Oh, yeah.

JV: Fred. Fred Croton. He was involved with Selma Holo from USC, from the Fisher Gallery. And he told me that he wanted to give me this artist-in-residency to the South of France. He says, "I want to change your life." It was in '86. [pause] Yeah, that's right. Okay. And so I said, "Yeah, sure," you know. "Show me the ticket," you know. "Sure."

KD: [laughter]

JV: And sure enough—it could have been early '87, actually. And at the same time—okay, at the time, I was starting to sell my work regularly 'cause there was this mid-to-late '80s art boom. There was a lot of galleries. And I was selling my work, finally. 'Cause in the early '80s, having a two-hundred-dollar a month rent, I went seven months once without paying rent. Seven months I couldn't pay the two hundred dollars. And I swear, I had . . . Mr. Harter—the store manager, his name was Ramiro—Ramiro Salsedo. He passed away about a year or so ago. On Christmas Day. He had a big family—sisters and nephews and nieces. Ramiro called me up. He says, "John"—the way he used to talk—"John, you gotta pay some rent."

KD: [laughter]

JV: And I swear, as soon as—they called me the same day that I actually sold some work. I sold a drawing. A couple of thousand dollars. And it's like—seven—it's only like fourteen hundred dollars, right? I says, "Ramiro, you don't believe it, I was—I just sold some work! I'll be right down!" You know?

KD: [laughter]

JV: He's like, "But John, you can't go seven months without paying your rent." But that's the way that it was there. Where I was able to, you know, go for some time and not pay the rent. 'Cause there were points in the early '80s—there were times—there were some really significant times. I think some artists go through this, at least in those years. There wasn't that much opportunity, the way there seems to be now for a lot of the younger artists. Where I was doing a drawing, the drawing was coming out, and I could spend time figuring the artwork out whatever I was doing. But I was so broke I would go, "Either go out and find a job or finish that drawing." 'Cause I would know that within two or three months, even though I was flat broke, I mean flat broke. I was on just a diet with oranges, I would just eat oranges.

KD: Wow.

JV: But those are the good old days, you know? But it's like, you're so broke, it's like, "Either I'm gonna finish that drawing or I gotta go find a job." And that crazy part of me would say, "Finish the drawing. Finish that drawing." And there really is a fundamental—I mean, it's hard to explain now, but there was a fundamental decision that you're making. It was like this crossroads.

And even in the early '80s I did get a job also working for *La Opinión*. When I came back from [New York] . . . We must've went in '79. We went to New York again looking for work. I went to *La Opinión* and talked to the owners, Pedro and his sister Monica. [*La Opinión* was owned by the Lozano family; in the 1980s José Lozano was publisher and Monica Lozano was managing editor—ed.] They were the children

of the original owners. And I proposed to do photojournalist stories for them. I did four or five of them. One was about the homeless, one was about the *pachucos*, one was about this Santeria shop, saints and stuff. But the thing is, I always had to get my story translated, so I did the text and I did the photographs. And I've got 'em [stored]—yellowed—somewhere. I've got copies of those. I think maybe the three, four stories, maybe more. At least four.

But the guy that I really had to get past was—he was the editor. First of all, I didn't speak Spanish. I was Mr. Pocho, like real Americanized. I would always have to come in. And he didn't like me. There was something about me. I was like a bother. I would come in with all my photographs, and I'd do my story, and I'd have to have somebody translate my story into Spanish. Just four times, I guess I did it. And the last one, when I was doing the saint shops 'cause I really liked these Catholic [*botanicas*]. One was really old. He thought I was giving them free publicity. This one was this [older place]. There was this lady that had a really cool shop around the corner from my studio. They go, "Why are you giving her free publicity?" I didn't even think of it in that way. So I went to this other place. I said, "Well, I'll talk to another place." They were Cuban. And when I walked in and asked them to do a story, they—I don't know, they must have been doing something weird because they asked me immediately to give 'em the phone number of *La Opinión* to make sure that I was not a cop. And I go, "Why do you think I was a [cop]?" I was more intrigued by, "Why do you think I'm a policeman," you know? "What's [this]?" 'Cause they were really paranoid. And they were closer to *La Opinión*. So they called up and they talked to them. And they go, looking at me, they're, "Okay"—in Spanish, talking—"Okay." And I don't know what they're saying, obviously, 'cause I didn't speak any Spanish. But they're looking with their eyes wide open. "Oh, okay, so what does he look like?" And they're looking at me. So that was more of an interesting story. But this guy from *La Opinión*—like, the owners wanted me to work, but this guy [did not]. Oh, and then, I used their photos. That's the other thing. I used their photo lab.

KD: Ah, yeah.

JV: So I was doing other prints. And other photographers would come in—you know, "Who are you?" And I met some of 'em. And they were doing sports—they're out doing the streets, you know, like news things. And I was doing my own stuff. So I printed using their facilities and their paper and their chemicals. I printed a lot of photographs. 'Cause I knew how because of school. But a lot of those photographs—I don't know, I used 'em for [work, this and] that, and I have 'em stacked up somewhere. They're kind of useless. I was learning how to print. I think maybe I had a photo show or I might have shown at LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions].

That's when LACE opened also in the Victor Clothing. LACE started with Gronk and a lot of [other artists]. And Robert Gil de Montes. And then Joy Silverman came and took over and they got grants. That's where I met Marc Pally and Joy. And through Joy, I met her husband at the time, which was Al Nodal. And Al Nodal took over Fred Croton's job because Fred Croton was fired right when I was getting my [first] residency. But I had nothing to do with Cultural Affairs. For some reason, they called [the Department of] Cultural Affairs in LA, wanting an artist for the residency there in La Napoule, [France]. It had just started. And so Fred Croton, I guess he liked my urban work. He said, "Imagine if we send this guy to Europe?" I mean, I'd barely went to Mexico at the time.

KD: [laughter]

JV: And so . . . And at the time I was dating this girl—I was starting to see this girl, Sandra, who is now my wife. We've been together about twenty years. And so I asked her, did she want to go with me? And that was in '87. And at the time, Croton didn't want to leave the offices of City Hall. And his secretary called me up. I go, "See, I'm not gonna get it. See, that's the way life is." Like, the guy who wants to send me to Europe, he claims, and he's under siege in City Hall. The press was there. Bradley wanted him out. This guy Fred. And it was, like, because he padded his resume. Basically they just wanted him out. He was kind of a cur-mudgeon guy. He was kind of a tough [talker]. He was a tough guy, he was from the East Coast. Maybe his personality rubbed people the wrong way.

So, literally, his secretary called. They were about to close the office, so she says, “Get over here right now.” It was the middle of the day. I was on Third and Broadway. City Hall was three blocks away—literally three blocks away—so I go out of my studio, I walk over there. What’s gonna happen? I get in the elevator, go up. As the elevators open on the floor where Cultural Affairs was—his office. All the cameras—like about seven of ‘em, with lights—just turn towards the elevator. Who’s coming? You know? And I look real dumb, like, “Oh, man.” They’re like, “Who’s this?” You know? Like, “Any minute, we’re gonna just shut ‘em down.” He wasn’t even there. I think they were waiting for him to show up. So I go there, and I says, you know, “Can I speak to . . .” She says, “Are you John Valadez? Yes? Can you come this way?” She literally goes to her [desk]. I’ll never forget, and that’s why I’m re-enacting it. She goes to her desk, she pulls it out, and I have this ticket—round-trip ticket, Pan-Am, from LA, New York, to Cannes—you know, the airport—in Côte d’Azur, you know, or whatever. And I see the ticket, and I go, “You know what? I’m gonna go! I mean, there it is!”

KD: [laughter]

JV: And it’s gonna be, like, the end of October. It was the end of October and I ended up coming back right before New Year’s. So I was there about two and a half months. I was only supposed to be there four or five weeks, I stayed two-and-a-half months once I got there. So again, Fred Croton really gave me my first residency. A couple of other residencies I actually turned down because I was doing these murals for the federal government, but that was later on. But I mean it was something like that, to give somebody like me. Like, what was it, ’87. So I was like . . . For me to be in my mid- to late thirties—I still felt like I was in my twenties—I mean it was just the way things were. And my work was [getting better]. You know, I was starting to show. I wasn’t at Saxon yet. And that’s—and the other one, in about ’85, before I got the residency, I showed [in downtown].

Okay, again, thinking about Paul Harter. There was a show in downtown—you know where the Japanese [American National] Museum is now, right next to MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art]? There was a factory, there was some kind of warehouse. And there was this urban show in there, and they let us show the *Broadway Mural* there. And the *Broadway Mural* was shown, like, basically, on street level. In other words, the way I painted it, from the ground up. And the actor Dennis Hopper saw it. That was in ’84. And so when Dennis Hopper saw it, he loved the mural, so he looked me up. So in about ’85, when I was starting to do *Beto’s Vacation*, which is that triptych with all the water, Dennis Hopper—Dennis Hopper!—came to my studio. And I was like, “Wow, this is amazing!” ‘Cause, you know, I knew *Easy Rider*. He had to remind me that he was in *Cool Hand Luke*. And I remember him in *The Last Picture Show* and in *Easy Rider* and in some of the other stuff. And so when he came to my studio, he was telling me this story that he just was let out of a hospital because he had some drug—mental problems. He’s telling me all these stories. You know, he’s telling me about Natalie Wood, and—he was really, really open because he was just getting [out]. Somebody had to sign him out of this hospital—he couldn’t sign himself out—and somebody let him out. And he was starting his career again. At that time, he wasn’t even in his fifties.

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez on the third of December and this is our second tape for today, tape 4 for the whole sessions. John was telling me about Dennis Hopper coming out and looking at his work at the studio.

JV: Yeah, again, we’re talking about some people who really helped me along and really influenced me. And only in LA can you have actors come visit you. Because he really liked the *Broadway Mural* and he wanted to see what other kind of work that I had. So I just started *Beto’s Vacation*. It was about ’85. I was doing *Beto’s Vacation* because it was literally drawing my own vacation. I really wanted to do water. I really wanted to get away from the sidewalks, people’s clothing. I wanted to draw a lot more flesh than just the shirt. Remember, as a realist, you only draw hands, face, and neck.

KD: Right.

- JV:** Everything else is clothing. It's figurative. It's called figurative, but you're mostly doing textile—texture, really. So I started with the water piece and one led to the next one to the next one. He came and saw it and said he kind of liked it. He was going to go do this film. I don't know if he mentioned what it was or not. But when he came, he said that he kept thinking about the piece, the water piece that I was doing. I said, "Well, Dennis, it's a triptych now." He goes, "Well, let me see it." So he came back; he came back to see it. And he really liked it, he wanted to buy it. So that was like my first really big major sale without a gallery. And then we framed it. And then I showed it. There was a show we had in New York—a one-person show at the Hispanic . . . What was it called? MOCHA, Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art.
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** And I showed it—my portraiture stuff there. And that was, I guess, '86. I don't remember. And we framed them. And supposedly, people told me—because I didn't . . . Dennis [Hopper] wanted me to go because he was an artist also. And he wanted me to go and hang out with his little artist group. They were [going to] one of these Westside restaurants, because other artists told me that they would all hang out with them. But I told him one time, "Dennis, I'm on this side of town. I really don't want to hang out, because I knew the whole Hollywood myth. I take the bus," I told him. He said he understood. To this day, when I tell that story, people tell me that I was an idiot to not go hang out.
- KD:** [laughter]
- JV:** Because again, I might have gotten other opportunities. Because you're basically, as an artist, the worst thing to do is to shut yourself off from the world. But that's my personality. Even to this day . . . I get out more, but I really—you ask anybody that knows me—I keep to myself. I really like to be in my studio torturing myself.
- KD:** [laughter]
- JV:** I'm really used to that, I'm used to that role.
- KD:** Let me ask you, do you think that your paintings influenced *Blue Velvet*?
- JV:** No, no, no. Because remember, he played Frank Booth. David Lynch, he doesn't know me. Remember, Dennis played [that character]. I hope not, because we just saw it recently, Sandra and I. But again, this was '85, and he was going to do this role, and he just got out of that [hospital]. He told me these funny stories. He started telling me stories. He was very, very open. He was very animated—he was just like a regular guy. But then he came back, and I guess his career was taking off. I would see him . . . He also did *Colors*. *Colors* was that movie with Sean Penn. They came back with Haskell Wexler, who did *Medium Cool*, and he did *Bound for Glory*. These are great old, old films. He was the cinematographer and Dennis, he was the director of this gang film. They tried to make it come commercial. It was Sean Penn, and [Robert] Duvall, and . . . What was that Colombian woman? [María] Conchita Alonso was her name?
- KD:** I think so.
- JV:** She was in it. They came one day and they used actual Crips and Bloods—remember, this was the '80s.
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** The Crips and Bloods were like the new hip gang. They had all these hardcore *cholos* trying to be actors. And they have one scene in the movie—and I've timed it—it is almost exactly an hour and a half into the movie. What's his name? One of the Wayans brothers, the funny one. Not the older one, but the funny one. Damon? Or there's two of them, right? He plays [a role] at that time [in this movie]. He [has a scene] at that time, he was in a diaper. He was in Victor Clothing. He gets one of the Easter bunnies . . . He's supposed to be high or something, and he was dancing in the Victor Clothing store. And they have a pan shot, that they actually edited, of him walking . . . Or the police—Sean Penn and Duvall come in and they arrest him inside the Victor Clothing, and they carry him out. But he has a diaper on and he's playing with this bunny in front of the Victor Clothing mural.
- KD:** The mural.
- JV:** And I saw him set up the pan shot. They had a track on the back of the store. And Dennis wanted to use the store and the murals inside the store as part of the shot. It was [cool]. So I saw them there. And I met

Haskell Wexler and Robert Duvall. I love film. I was like, “Wow, what is this?” Again, they wanted me to go to the trailer where they had like a late dinner—you’re on the lot. And this one guy said, “Dennis really likes you, we could all hang out, we could be part of this troupe.” I go, “I don’t want to do that.” And it was because I am from LA, and I know that whole scene just through myths. I don’t want to be a hanger-on, I don’t want to want. It’s weird. That’s the way that I am. Because I’ve heard too many—I don’t want to see the woman who jumps off the Hollywood sign because it didn’t work for her. You are so close to fame and stardom and it didn’t [work].

KD: [laughter] Yeah.

JV: It’s like that.

KD: Sounds pretty healthy to me. [laughter]

JV: I told him on the phone. He said that they were all going to meet at Elaine’s. I said, “You know what? I’ve got a bus card, Dennis.” And he understood that. But through the years, even up until recently, he has bought my work. I saw him a few times after that. So anyway, he was really—

KD: An early supporter.

JV: Yeah, he was an early supporter. Him, and the Nortons, and then Frank Croton that picked me to go to the south of France. And I took my future wife. Ever since, me and her [stayed together]. We used to kid that that was our honeymoon. We weren’t even intimate yet. But we went and we kind of battled each other like, “I don’t know if you’re the guy.” But here we are. So it was [fun].

KD: Did you produce any work while you were over there?

JV: Yeah, I did a mural. And I photographed a lot, I took maybe twenty to twenty-five rolls of film.

KD: Wow.

JV: I photographed every day. We were there for two and a half months. I even had to buy film there. And I bought a lot of music. Before I left, I sold about nine thousand dollars’ worth of work, but cheap. It was mostly to Robert Berman. I don’t know. There was, like, a Hispanic show. Was that after? That came afterwards.

KD: Yeah.

JV: The thirty contemporary artists, that came afterwards. [*Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*—ed.] So I had to shut the studio down and I had to nail the window shut because I felt like people knew I was going to be gone. And sure enough, when I came back, there were bottles of booze out on the fire escape, and somebody tried to open the windows because they knew I was gone. Who knows who these so-called friends or people were.

But the south of France was really cool. We were able to go to Barcelona, saw the Dali Museum. We went to Paris. We got as far as Florence. We didn’t get to Rome, because it was just too far on the trains. And it was really expensive, even in those times. We went to Pisa and Florence. But we mostly stayed around Nice and Cannes, and living in this chateau. It was basically a castle. It was a fake castle, right on the Mediterranean. We were like one or two towns west of Cannes. You could actually walk into Cannes. It took maybe half an hour or forty-five minutes to walk along the coastal route to Cannes. And even to this day, when I see this movie with Robert De Niro called *Ronin*—a lot of those sites are—that’s where we were. I mean, we went to Arles, where Van Gogh was, because we had the rail pass. But it was nice to be naïve, because we had the rail pass, but we never had anybody sign it. Because you were only supposed to use it for ten days or something. We used it for two months.

KD: [laughter]

JV: Because nobody signed it. We finally get all the way to Florence and the guy, he told us in basically Italian-Spanish, which thank God Sandra [Leon] knew a little bit, and we had to get it signed and we need to go into the station that day. I was looking at him like I don’t want to get in trouble. So like a dummy, I did it. And then we only had from that point the ten days—the ten days was right before Christmas, and we had to get from—that’s right, I just remembered. Okay, that . . . We got back and then we went to Paris. And then from then we like only had that night to use that rail pass because the trains, they were expensive,

and by that time, I was running out of money. It was very—it was like Christmas time. So we basically had to get on that train, even though it was full. We were used to just getting on any train, showing the rail pass—this is '87, the end of '87—get on the train. We took the TGV like that—you know, the bullet train—that's how we got to Paris. But back—we got on the train going back, it was packed. People were going out of Paris—

KD: Right.

JV: To go into, you know, the rest of the country. So we basically just got on it thinking we can't afford to pay the train, you know? Because I literally spent all my money buying music, cassettes. Flamenco, Gypsy music, African music. There was that era of music called "raï."

KD: Yeah.

JV: Which became popular. At that time in the mid-'80s, it was really new. It was really new music. And that's where I found Gypsy Kings at the time. Nobody knew the Gypsy Kings at that time.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And in the south of France, a guy put on the record. I go, "Yeah." We didn't hear the singing yet, we just hear the guitar. I was like, "Wow, this is great stuff." Umm Kulthum, who was this Egyptian singer. I came back with a lot of music. I still have the cassettes and they're all—they're cassettes now.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: You can't even play them anymore, you know? They're all wobbly and they fade out, they get magnetized. But I was pretty intense. I guess I still am. But I was really intense. We even bought this little transistor radio there that worked beautifully. We would be on the train and Sandra was a little bit indifferent to me, but I was always seducing her with all my stuff.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: And then we actually did—I did a mural. I had a studio there. Although there were two French artists in the chateau. One of them was Bernard Frize, who to this day is a pretty important French artist. And the other one was French Canadian and he was telling us that he was a Chicano in France, because he's not really French, he's not really Canadian. "That's a Chicano," I told him.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: And Olivier Agid. His name was Olivier Agid. He just came out of Egypt. He had these beautiful photographs from Egypt, from taking the bus. He was very eccentric. In the chateau they had a piano, and he would pluck the strings, and he had half his body buried in the piano doing all this eccentric stuff. And they had these towers . . . We had pretty much—it was maybe a two-story, huge building. It was literally a chateau. We had a French cook, her name was Bridget . . . I forget her name. And she was from Brittany. She would cook all this French stuff, all the sauces and all this stuff, and your diet . . .

And the thing is, we would take off, and the guy says, "John"—the one guy who was in charge. Alan. His name was Alan, and his wife was American. And Alan would [be upset that] we would take off. He said, "John, you're supposed to be here, doing your artwork." I said, "Alan, for me to get on a train and go anywhere, that's part of my artwork. I photograph." He didn't really understand. But when we came back, Sandra and I would be in the studio—bigger than my downtown studio—and I was doing this mural. And the mural, what I did is, I took pastels, I took a box of pastels, a wooden box of [pastel sticks]. If I look, I think it's still over there. A wooden box of pastels, all the colors. And it was [what I brought]. We went into town and we bought paper, and as I was drawing on this huge wall, it was really coarse. Everything was different. Even the walls were different. Even the gesso or the paint. And I thought, "You know what?" Because I would start to draw, anything, just drawing stuff, and you would hear the Mediterranean outside wash up against the rocks. I was like, "This is ridiculous, you know?"

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: This is ridiculous. Because you're just there and part of this is jetlag. I mean, I can go on and on about Europe, but eventually, I designed a way to crush the pastel in the water. In the Evian, right? And I would

crush the pastel and make it sort of a pasty solution and I did a mural. I did a pastel, like, watered mural there, on the wall.

KD: Wow.

JV: Because, I mean, I was used to painting, like, that big, because that's part of the energy. So we would go somewhere, and I would come back with tourist slides. I wasn't developing my own stuff yet. So I mostly used tourist slides and some little imagery that I took from my *fotonovellas* and stuff. I would do shadows of myself on it. And these three bulls . . . Because to me the three bulls were the three artists in the place—there were three of us. And I would do the big temple, the big church stuff. You would see it in art history, but to see these places was very moving. To go see the Uffizi. I spent two days at the Uffizi, ending with Caravaggio, the *Medusa*. We saw the Botticellis. I'm a pretty emotional person. If that doesn't make you cry, you must be crazy. But you see this work. And the [*inaudible*]. Jesus. Oh, and the Rubens in the Louvre. And I thought it was funny, because in the Louvre, it starts with [the French].

And again, I always talking about how the Spaniards—because Franco was just out. Remember, Franco was out in '80. So even in Barcelona, it looked like the west side of LA. But they looked oppressed and there were some really mean looking fascists. And I went to the Louvre and the Spanish was the furthest away from the entrance.

KD: [*laughter*]

JV: If you think about it—have you ever been? I know it's different now. But the Spanish artists were the furthest away. This is the way they treat the Mexicans.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Put them over there, in the furthest wing. It was crazy, because I wanted to see the Spanish artists and stuff. It was really an amazing thing. It was [my] first trip, it was like a magical trip. Even the Intifada [was going on], and I saw the Arabs working in the yards. Remember, I'm from LA. So I see, "Oh, the Arabs are the laborers here." So I would be—with my bullshit idealistic, American, radical politics. Look at the Arabs, "Hey brother." They look at me like, "Who the fuck are you?"

KD: [*laughter*]

JV: "Who do you think you are?" It's almost like, "That's right." And then with Sandra. She looked Arab. And she had these big earrings. She's quite beautiful. She's ten years younger than me. I was thirty-six. She was twenty-six. She looked like she was sixteen. And there were times when guys would follow her. I wasn't even there. And a guy would follow her and then the way I'd find her, how to get rid of him—it happened like three different times—I had to take their picture, and they scattered. It was just a really cool trip. It was like—a lot of things happened. So when I come back at the end of '87, beginning of '88, I basically had culture shock when I came back to LA. I was in shock, because there I lived in a chateau for two and a [half months]. That's a long time to be away. Two and a half months is like you almost forget—you don't forget, but you live a whole another way. I didn't have a job, but I had enough money. Literally, I came back broke.

KD: You were eating well obviously, too, right?

JV: Oh yeah, and I was working. I was still skinny then. I was still skinny. Sandra and I were still going through our changes. One day we were in love, the next day we were like, "You know what, you go your way, and I'll go my way."

KD: [*laughter*]

JV: That's kind of the way it was. And the thing was that towards the end, I had to beg her to loan me some money. She said, "Where's all your money?" I said, "I spent all my money." We laugh to this day about it. I mean, "I spent my money on you."

KD: [*laughter*]

JV: Of course.

KD: Trying to court her. [*laughter*]

JV: You know?

KD: Right.



JV: That was funny. We would come back to the chateau, because we'd have to pay like hotel costs.

KD: Right.

JV: Very expensive, evidently. It was very expensive even in Marseilles. The worst hotel was in Marseilles, because there were bed bugs. It was like, "Oh man, get out of here." The first night we woke up all itching, "There's bugs in this bed." It was bad. It was the only one. When we went to Barcelona, there was a three-star hotel, I said, "Let's get out of here, it's too expensive." We found a two-star hotel. We really learned a lot. So we come back. Most of '88, I only did very few pieces of work in '88. I don't even remember how I even stayed alive. I mean, '88 for me was—I was reading William Burroughs at the time, in '88. I was reading his biography. And I really didn't know that guy was gay. It didn't really bother me because it was such an interesting book. It was Paul Bowles, and all those people that all the writers . . . And when [Burroughs] shot his wife in the head, and all the heavy drug use. I would read that on the bus, because I don't really have a car.

And Sandra and I were—we weren't really living together. It took us a while when we got back. We basically split up for about a month or so, and that was in '88. And we started—she wanted to come back. I guess I was a scary person because I was broke [and] very idealistic in the studio. And I think that's when the Hispanic show started, or—excuse me. So I was able to go to see some of those venues. One of them was in Santa Fe. The other one was in Houston. The other one was in DC. So I must have been making money because I was able to go. But I don't remember. And I did very few pieces of work. And that piece right there was one of my Europe things that I still have.

KD: What is that called?

JV: I guess it's Europe. I don't remember. But I remember having it in my basement at home, and we kind of had this water that came in from one of the rains a few years back. And it was wrapped up and I said, "I got to get it out of there." So that's one of the only ones that I have left from that time. And I think is—what it was is that the pillars are from Italy and I think that the guy, the statuary, I think it's from Notre Dame or something like that. I think it's from Paris and then the tent is from Spain, where the markets are. So I took one element from each country at the time.

KD: Did you do that there?

JV: No, I did it here.

KD: You did it here. So, you did a series, obviously, of images they sold then, if you say that—

JV: Oh yeah, a lot of them. And I showed them in [Daniel] Saxon [Gallery] in '89 or '90. *The Fall of Babel*. And one I started in anticipation of going, called *The Battle of Culture*. It was basically a boy [dream]: a battle scene, people charging what happened to be—they were charging the Gaudi cathedral [Sagrada Família]. It was kind of funny. This friend of mine, these people that collected it in '88, '87 or '88. I don't know, '89, maybe. They gave it to their son. And the son grew. And he's older now, and he always had it in his room. Because people told me later that this kid—that they gave some of the work to their kids and they see it every day. That's what your work does to people. You don't know it consciously, but people tell you years later, "Oh, that piece of work of yours, I saw it every day." And it meant something to them, which is really what you want to hear.

But in '88, when I first came back, I was in shock, because I saw the way we really lived in LA. People that live and don't make a lot of money. People that live in the working class. I knew what it was before. I went because I didn't know any different. But I saw how the people that are a lot better off live. And the way that [changes you], because I basically lived like that for two and a half months.

KD: Right.

JV: I lived a really cool, like "Wow," I thought this was going to go on. .. The problem with me, but not anymore, is that I think it's going to go on forever. This is not going to end. This is finally, I'm finally, you know, living the way I deserve to live. [laughter] Literally. Then I come back and, no, no, no, this was an opportunity. So when I got all of my—I must have had some kind of employment, but I forget what it was. I must have been selling my work. Because I had to develop all of my film. I was still paying rent. All that kind of

stuff. And then when the Hispanic show came, I met Jane Livingston and that guy from Otis, that gave me that first show. His name was Hal Glicksman. The other day—his name was Hal Glicksman. And he was one of the guys who would basically call us. We're going to be in the show. And he's say, "I kind of like your work. I wasn't planning on putting you in the show, but show me more. We'll see, I can give you a wall, show me more." So by the time I came back, I did a piece. He said, "Wow, this is really good. All right, I'll give you a wall." So that was my first three-person show. Right.

And so when I came . . . And then to get into the Hispanic show, *Thirty [Contemporary] Artists*. I was one of the realists, stone-cold realist. That was good. And from that show, a guy from the El Paso Museum of Art went to go in Santa Fe and saw it. And he saw Beto's *Vacation*, the piece that Dennis owned. And again, the part about people collecting your work, is that they let it go for months. Supposedly Dennis had it over his bed. And that's where he always had it. So when it was gone for months at a time, it was even gone during the Cheech show. [*Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge*—ed.]

KD: Right.

JV: Gone for three years.

KD: Three years.

JV: Cheech had to go talk to him about letting him keep it longer, because it was a key component of the show or whatever, stuff like that. But by the time the Hispanic show was turning around and he let it go, because he knows that it really helps me to show that strong work, that work that really . . . So the guy from the El Paso Museum went to Santa Fe to see the Spanish show, and he remembered my work. He was part of a selection committee for the federal art and architecture program [Art in Architecture Program]. They wanted some kind of artwork for the federal building in El Paso. The architecture program, when they build a building, a federal building of any kind, 5 percent of it, the budget, goes to art, sculpture, or whatever. They mostly do sculpture.

KD: Right, public works.

JV: Very few murals.

KD: Right.

JV: Murals are like a cliché now. People are like "no painting." That's like caveman stuff, I guess. But in El Paso they were going to use—what's her name? She uses photo and text, Cynthia Muñoz, or Carmen—

KD: Celia Muñoz?

JV: Celia, yeah.

KD: Yeah.

JV: They were going to put her stuff up, but somebody didn't like the photo-text thing, so they wanted a painting.

KD: Yeah.

JV: So this guy from the El Paso Museum mentioned me, like, "Oh, I just saw this really interesting"—I guess, I'm assuming—"this LA artist." And they said, "Well, find him." By that time I was showing at Saxon, which had to be '89, '90. And again, Gronk's the one that got me to show at Saxon, and that's where I showed. Saxon wasn't really showing my kind of work, whatever that meant. I showed at Saxon a couple of times. I have to think about it. But the European stuff I showed at Saxon, along with *Two Vendors*. That was a pretty cool show. I sold just about everything there, at Saxon. That had to be '89 or '90—that had to be '89.

KD: How did Gronk get you that? I know you were part of the federal art program, [the General Service Administration's Art in Architecture Program].

JV: Yeah, that came about '90. By the time I got that, it was between '90 and '93 or something.

KD: Yeah. After '93.

JV: Two and a half years. But again, I was at Saxon, and the guy from the El Paso Museum—I guess they knew about the Hispanic show. Saxon sent him slides right away. And they liked what they saw, so they invited [me to submit]. So I was [selected], and they [approved]. I was like chosen to do that, to do the mural.

KD: You didn't apply? They chose you?

- JV: Yeah, in a funny way. They were like looking for a muralist.
- KD: Because the local 1 percent for the art stuff, you have to apply, there's a call.
- JV: Yeah, I did apply. I mean, basically—
- KD: All right.
- JV: They asked me to apply. And they liked . . . Whoever the panel was—part of it was the people from El Paso and the people from DC, from the Art [in] Architecture [Program]. Susan Harrison is the one who, to this day, runs it. And the other guy was Dale Lanzone, and he actually went to Marlborough Chelsea [gallery]. And they were the ones that—they came to my studio. By that time, I moved from my smaller studio on the fourth floor at Victor Clothing, and I moved into my friend Kim Abele's studio. She had about twenty-five hundred feet. And, thank God, the walls were [high enough]. They were higher than this. The walls were high enough I could do [the mural there]. It was nine feet—it was nine by forty-eight feet that sat in the atrium of this federal building in El Paso. It's only a federal building. They never had artwork in it at all. It was built earlier than the architecture [program]. They had this enormous American flag in there. And this is a federal building. They had social security, they had immigration—
- KD: Right.
- JV: DEA, FBI, IRS, they're all in there. So you figure that if you're in El Paso, at least once in your life, you're going to end up in there, if not just to apply for Social Security.
- KD: Yeah, Social Security.
- JV: So I—they told me that I got it. It was such a cool program because usually you compete with other artists and you come up with a sketch. They pay you a little bit of money, and then they pick your sketch if they like it. But the way they did it with me was, I was chosen and they wanted to see what I was going to do. I was able to—gosh, right—I was able to fly to El Paso, stay there for a few weeks, basically wander around. I love the border area. One friend of mine from LA lived there, and I met a couple of other guys there. El Paso has a real inferiority complex at the time, like, "We're from El Paso," they should be New Mexico. Because there's lithium in the waters, people are real mellow. I think it was just a kickback town. The cowboys speak Spanish, there's a border. Juárez was wide open. I wanted to do the mural about—Juárez was like [real historic]. There was a church from the 1600s.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: So I really [got excited]. So I read the history of Texas in this really great book. You talk about the Great Plains and the buffalo and when the Mexicans became Tejanos with some of the Americans. And then when the Americans sold them out to become the United States, which happened in California also. All of that stuff. To see some of the politics of El Paso. And I went around photographing, wondering what I'm going to do. So I used some of the landmarks of El Paso, and I did the [border]. By the time, there wasn't any of the [security concerns]. It was right before the first Bush [invasion].
- KD: Right.
- JV: The first Bush war. It seemed like every time I went to El Paso, I also—when I first got there—first time I got there, on TV, there was a Rodney King beating when I got to El Paso. You see it over and over again. The next time, there was Bush—next time I got there, the first Bush was bombing, what? I guess—
- KD: The Gulf—
- JV: Whatever, yeah. Ninety and '91.
- KD: The first Gulf War.
- JV: I'm in a bar with my friend and they're [showing the war]. The next time I go—or another time I went, there was the LA riots in '92. Every time I was in El Paso, it seemed like something was happening. It was weird, it was like a really weird thing. The scariest one was when I went to the mountain—there's one mountain on the El Paso side—to see the sunset. The sun sets at nine o'clock over there.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: The skies are green, pink, beautiful. I come down [to my friends' house]. He says, "John, they are rioting." I talk to my wife and she says, "They're found not guilty." And I say, "And nobody's rioting?" She says, "No."

“All right honey, well, I’ll call you later. I’ll be home on Sunday.” And sure enough, I hung up and I go up to the hill. I was photographing the sunset. I come back and my friend Carlos says, “John, call your wife, man. LA is rioting.” So I go in, turn on the TV, and there are things on fire. I remember calling her, I think it was the next day, and they were in the car just leaving.

KD: It was hard to get through on the phones.

JV: Through the smoke and all that. I thought I wanted to go home, but what for? There was a riot, but I missed it.

KD: It was closed down—

JV: It was weird.

KD: Roads were closed.

JV: So that’s when I was doing the El Paso mural.

KD: And what was the content of the mural?

JV: It’s basically a group of people. The murals that I do—the idea for the murals I was doing, maybe it started with the *Broadway Mural*. When I do a mural, I want people to identify, I want to see themselves in the context of the history and the geography of the area. I did it also with my Santa Ana mural. Because again, when I did the mural for Victor Clothing, they really liked what I did. I never really knew what it was going to look like and they really liked it. It’s people interacting having a little bit of drama. And the store fronts and just painting what I find interesting about the street.

And [the] El Paso [mural] was essentially the same thing. I have kids running. I’ve got a policeman dressed as a conquistador. There’s a cowboy dressed as a conquistador, like they still run the place, you know? And the park, there are these alligators because they used to have alligators in their so-called Central Park. So I used historic photographs mixed with my own photographs. I showed the Rio Grande and this either Yaqui or Tarahumara Indian posing. And so it was like a cross-section of people. And you come in and you see—people would think that they saw their cousins. And you see yourself in your area. The thing is, is to come with fresh eyes and to see them the way that they don’t see themselves. Because I realized, I told people, it’s funny about this whole area, nobody would be here if it wasn’t for that river.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Because it’s desert. And yet, the river is the wall. That’s very contradictory. Some people didn’t see it that way—some people that I talked to. Because I went to UTEP, University of Texas El Paso, to look in their special collections, because I love to look at old photographs, what they have in their special collections. They have this paper, this folded up, yellowing piece of paper, it wasn’t even in a plastic sheet yet, of Benito Juárez writing to Abraham Lincoln. It was there in this folder and all this fancy, turn-of-the-century script.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Every letter is like, “Wow.” I said, oh, that’s Benito Juárez writing about how their constitution is based on the American Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. It’s right here. I didn’t want to touch it. I didn’t want to open, but to see it, like, my God!

KD: [laughter]

JV: I thought—even though I had to wear gloves, you know? And they let me photograph the photograph—I had my camera. And I was just photographing them without really being special about it. I would just lean against something and stand there and shoot. And that’s where I used some of the stagecoach and some of the old [imagery]. I used some of it. And then it took me—that project took me two and a half years. The drawing itself was eight to ten months. Then I had to show it. I had to go down to El Paso to show it, finally. I think—I wasn’t going to take [that long]. It took me like eight months. They go, “We need to see your drawing, now.” So then they show me what to change.

This one guy, he didn’t like me, this one guy. There’s always a cowboy somewhere, even in Orange County, there’s a cowboy. There’s somebody that just [doesn’t get it]. They let you know by looking at you that you’re not supposed to [be there]. I don’t know. They give you that dead eye, that mad dog look, that makes you know that they don’t like you. It’s like, “Who do you think you are?” I’m supposed to be your

cook or something, whatever. It's something, a class—whatever, there's always something. And that guy says, "What is this?" I was basically faking [the landscape]. It really helped me, because I was faking what the landscape was. I was doing the park and the alligators—really bringing the idea together. I would go to El Paso for a couple weeks at a time, homesick. I was like, living in these motels, basically trying to just walk the streets. But I loved it at nights because I would go to Juárez.

KD: Yeah. [laughter]

JV: There was this wild bar scene. Every bar was either for the Juárez people or El Paso, or the GIs from Fort Blix. Before a lot of that killing stuff, that was just starting, because it was about '92. We put up the mural between Christmas and New Year's, between '93 and '94.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: Right when that was [beginning].

KD: Yeah.

JV: Because that was the only time the whole federal building was completely shut down and we can go in there with scaffolding and put the mural up. I had the crew from El Paso, and I paid them and everything, you know. And we also did this other nine by six foot painting that went to a border crossing in this little town of Isleta. They built this truck crossing there, Isleta border crossing. There's a nine by six foot painting, which I think it was [real nice]. I really liked it. It was a big, just a big landscape. It was weird because to be pressured to really paint is different than when I can paint whatever I want to paint.

KD: Yeah.

JV: When you're pressured, this whole pressure is like, you really have to really perform. So once in a while, when I go to El Paso, I still see the mural. You have to go through metal detectors now. And the border is all fenced off. Before, there were big holes in the fence, and not even fence in some areas. People were in the water, you know, it was real different. Now it's all border security. I guess the wall's going to come through there, I don't know. But then, the thing was to get past the drawing [phase].

KD: Yeah.

JV: The one guy was telling me he didn't know what that landscape was, because I had that river and the mountains behind and I made it up. He says, "What is this?"

KD: "What is that?"

JV: He said, "What the hell is this?" I said, "Well, I haven't gotten to that point yet." He said, "That's not the way it looks." He says—I say, "Wow, I better make sure I get this." I'm so glad that I did, because I went to the University of Texas. There's a parking lot that overlooks the river and the freeway, and there's this beautiful area where they come together and the roads go off into the distance. I even did it in a drawing, that area. So there's a mountain. It's right where El Paso, New Mexico, and—it's right at that point where El Paso is on the tip, and there's New Mexico, and then there's Mexico on that side.

KD: Right, right.

JV: It's right where the three lines meet. And there's this big cross on this mountain. And then you see Juárez. And everybody burns their trash over there. It was all dusty. And yet, there's two million people over there and El Paso is only four hundred thousand.

KD: Yeah.

JV: It's like, wow, this is really amazing. So, then, the painting. I painted it here. Actually, I would go down there and then I'd paint the mural here in LA and then we shipped it down there. I got a trucking firm to just take it. And then we installed it. [The mural is titled *A Day in El Pase del Norte*—ed.] So that was two and a half years out of my life. And then the art and architecture people liked it. They liked it so much that they put me on the list for a federal building that was being built here. But that was in the mid '90s and that's the mural that's in the Ronald Reagan Federal Courthouse in downtown Santa Ana. [The mural is titled *Summer Festivals in Orange County*—ed.] And you go into the lobby and it's there. I saw it the other week and it's still up. I didn't put the American flag up on the flagpole. People are always looking for something that I'm doing is un-American.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: I told him, "It's because the flag with the building was empty at the time." And I told the guy—I did it in the mid '90s. Remember Santa Ana in the mid-'90s? Yeah, it was abandoned.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And then the artists came. And the artists came and rehabbed the building and all of that. But okay, so these were things that really helped me along in terms of my career. There was in the '80s and into the '90s—

KD: Could you go back to the one in El Paso? Did they want you to censor anything out or they just wanted to clarify that landscape?

JV: Yeah, that one guy wanted me to clarify the landscape. I had a cross-section of people. The only thing that I changed was I had a woman on a horse standing there looking at you, over these people that were from a park. Then when I went to—every year, they have a re-enactment of the conquistador [Juan] de Oñate. And a lot of the cops dress as [conquistadors].

*[break in audio]*

KD: Go ahead. John Valadez is telling me about the chubby face of a cop in the mural in El Paso. This is side 2 of our third session on December 3, 2007.

JV: The thing about the sketch, I always wanted to—I never feel like I have enough time because there are ideas that come even as you're painting. Plus, I'd always do the sketch. I'd do it in pencil only, because I don't want to be bored to death. If you color it, you're too busy doing a coloring book. So, for me to be motivated . . . So I'd do the pencil sketch, and I had this photograph of a [cop as conquistador], because you need to put a horse in there somewhere. So I had this woman on this horse and talking about the old land or something. And the horse was a little small and the woman had this old El Paso look. But when I went to the de Oñate recreation . . . They used like a community festival—they do it in the Chamizal. The Chamizal was a park that was—it [the land] was disputed, because when the river was the border, [and the river changed].

KD: Right.

JV: One year there was a big storm and then the US took the land. They go, "Well, that's the border," little chicken shit, you know? So that became a dispute. So that became, "O, well make it the Chamizal Park, and Juarez has their part of it and El Paso has their part." So every year they do their reenactment. So you have the mayor of that time—we're talking about '91 or '92. The mayor, he has this big golden cape as a conquistador and this horse. They just love it. All these men, you know, these machos with their horses. And then the cops, these cops, man. This one guy put on a conquistador . . . I almost wet my pants.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: "I got to photograph that! Forget that woman on the horse, man. This is so significant." Me and my political bend, to try to put a little bit of a story—that's why I put [that in]. Even the indigenous guy. I found this photograph because I went to the Tigua [reservation] and they wouldn't let me photograph it because you'll steal [their] spirit, unless you pay them. You know, a lot of contradictions. So the guy, the conquistador, helped. When the guy told me I better fix that landscape because it's not the way it looks, that really helped because it even made the mural more beautiful and much more localized. Everybody knows that spot.

And then when I found that old historic photograph of this anonymous Indian guy with a straw hat with his little bow and arrow and he's looking at you and he has this smile. Actually when I did the mural, I prayed to the [image]. I literally [prayed], because it was so [difficult]. I could barely see his eyes. I literally asked him to help me paint him better. That's how focused I was to really try and get it. He holds up the whole right-hand side of that mural because standing in front of this fence that has sort of like [the landscape of the area and the border fence] that has fallen down behind him and then you see the terrazzo floor, and then you see going to the river and you're looking at Juarez—it's a really important area. And sure enough, I started to see his eyes and stuff.

But pretty much, these devices that could—that I used to really concentrate, to really get such a faded photograph . . . And I made this sort of a violet-purple because Prince taught me that those are royal

colors. So, it's stuff like patches of brown, dirty brown, and yet he's there with that helmet, that area was important, very important for me.

**KD:** The mural that you've described so far seems a bit of play, so you have this sketch, but when you're actually in the middle of it you actually modify it.

**JV:** Yeah, sure, I make it better. And the people from [GSA]—I'll tell you—the people from GSA out of Washington—General Services Administration—they would come to see me periodically, because you'd be awarded so much money and that covers everything, from rent, fabrication, paying yourself, all the way to documentation and installation.

**KD:** Installation.

**JV:** Everything, it's everything. So that's [the job]. You really have to budget your—and then they would come at certain times and they would also come in when you don't expect them to, which I thought was funny. I said, "You people promised not to [surprise]! I could be drunk here. Be nicer." They would laugh. They would lighten up when I was painting. I would surprise these people, because the painting would be coming on. You do a sketch, but then you paint it, and they say, "Oh wow, he does know what he's doing." So that's why they put me on a short list for Santa Ana. I thought, "Man, I'm going to be painting murals for GSA." That was the last one. That was it.

**KD:** [*inaudible*]

**JV:** It was like, "John, we gave you enough money, okay? You did enough."

**KD:** So percent—that must have been pretty nice.

**JV:** Yeah. Well, it was a couple hundred thousand or something.

**KD:** But that was the whole budget—

**JV:** For that, over two and a half years, yeah.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** And then the other one here in Santa Ana, that was three hundred thousand dollars but that was fifteen foot—but I had to rent five thousand foot warehouse, and towards the end, I was paying two thousand dollars a month rent. Rent, two thousand dollars, and that drained [my budget], if you can imagine. That drained [my budget].

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** All the money. But it put my son through a preparatory school. The first eight years of his schooling was at this place called Pilgrim, it's Sixth and Westmoreland, and it really helped—he's a bright kid. Eight years of schooling was about ten thousand dollars—it's like he was going to college. Tuition, it was eight thousand or ten thousand dollars a year for sixth grade.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** But we did it. And thank God we did do it because the kid's really sharp. He's still a normal kid, but he's a really smart kid. A little too smart, I think. [*laughter*]

**KD:** [*laughter*]

**JV:** So that was the '90s, and again, I thought, "Finally, this is the way it's going to be." No, it's an opportunity and you're going to get back to barely your nose above water. And that's the way life—that's how—so those were opportunities from people and different things. And hopefully, they'll keep going. Once in a while, right now I'm up for a mural. You've got to keep going. I'm in my mid-50s and you just keep going.

**KD:** I wonder if you could tell me—in one of the earlier sessions you said that—I think Carlos Almaraz taught you something about pastels.

**JV:** Oh yeah, just basically that you could use it as paint. It is like paint without all the solvents and cleaning your brushes and—because if you think about it, it's just pure pigment. That's all that it is. It's held together by gum Arabic, basically. That is the glue. And when you release it, it's pure color. And the light, the thing about with pastels is—we use, like, incandescent light or some kind of light, it's just really pure pigment. You're dealing with pure pigment. Pigments without all the solvents and that other stuff.

**KD:** Yeah. When you use acrylic—I'm assuming you use acrylic for these large murals.

JV: No, I'm using oil.

KD: Oh, you did them in oil?

JV: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah, they were all oil paintings. What I would do—

KD: I don't think I've ever heard of anybody doing a mural in oil.

JV: Really? Because these are basically oil on canvas. And acrylic dries too fast and it just drives me crazy because I want to be able to blend colors.

KD: Yeah, at least for your technique.

JV: Yes, because that's the technique that I really have fun with. Because acrylic is basically just patchwork. The damn thing dries—and it stinks. When acrylic rots, oh my God, I don't even want to think about it. Oh my God. You have to breathe that stuff. I mean, oil with solvents and stuff, they make the solvents now where at least you can't smell it. I don't know if that's better. The solvents are still in the air, we just can't smell it. I don't know if that's better. But the other thing is to turn your fan on. I had to have my fans on. And when I would have someone who would come to help me, they would do the under-painting and it would still be wet and I would come in and finish it off. And then I would stop painting, I would actually abandon painting for literally years, so when I come back to it, it's fresh for me. Because pastel for me is so immediate—I only get tired of things when they become too easy for me. Again, that's part of my weirdness. When it becomes too easy, I get bored. Because I've been doing art forever. I've been doing it a long time. I don't want to be bored.

KD: Right.

JV: Because I've got the ideas. I've got tons of ideas. And I know how to work with the educated—as you get older, you get slower, but you get more sure-footed, you know, kind of like that. And you know that you might be having trouble today, but you'll figure it out and you're going to have a good time and you're going to have a time where you're just not working. And you just fight through it and it'll come back. Sometimes it'll come back later than you think it will.

KD: [laughter]

JV: But yeah, the pastels were really fun because it was always immediate stuff, [*snaps finger*],= you can do pencil, [*snaps finger*] and then I would paint. After I did the mural, I felt like I could paint anything and then I went back to the pastels, because it was immediate and all of that. So that was like—so the thing about doing those murals is you spend two years, three years—so those murals took about—you figure one was two and a half, and one was three and a half, so that's like six years, six to six and a half years, plus a short year break. You're talking about seven years I was doing those—and that was my forties. That was literally my forties. After I finished the Santa Ana mural, I was out of gallery scene. There was a whole new group of artists—we're talking like '98.

KD: Right.

JV: All this—it looked like another art boom had started. I was out of the art galleries. And I fell out of it. It was like—because I'm doing murals for that time. The one in Santa Ana, nobody knows about it, in terms of what the artists are doing. I might as well just disappear. Because remember, the gallery world is a very fickle scene. It's mostly for the young people and these ideas and painting's dead—especially realism painting, it's really dead. Mostly people are into conceptual, video—it's okay, but I like the tactile. I'm old fashioned I guess. So I had to get back into the so-called gallery scene.

KD: Well, let's talk about—and you talked a lot today—maybe just talk a little bit more about your introduction to the gallery scene with either Saxon or Berman.

JV: Right, yeah, right. That was the last of the '80s, my show with Berman. But everybody got along with the guy. He always does his little moves and he's got some business practices that he's the main—every time—when you deal with dealers, it's like an economic marriage.

KD: Yeah.

JV: It really is. You join your—the whole game is the 50 percent thing—I don't know where that came from. They get half your money. They're supposed to bring collectors to you. It's kind of an even thing. As you get older, you realize that dealers make out a lot better because they have a group of artists. And if there's



an art boom like there was in the mid to late '80s, some people, depending on what artists get into the gallery, they're doing pretty good. The artist is just as good as his last show, basically. You're just as good as your last show. And once in a while, you'll have people who really collect your work. The thing about doing art, I know that—it only feeds the spiritual part of you. It also can be an investment. Like common artists—I really don't want to think about it too much, because I might stop making art. I like to do it because real selfish means I get to paint or draw anything in my imagination, what do I want to do? And it started with that whole Chicano thing. I wanted to make Chicano art. Now I am a Chicano who makes art.

KD: Who makes art.

JV: We actually had to talk through that when we would meet with different people. In even the early—this Concilio [de Arte Popular] time—

KD: Yeah.

JV: With Magu [Luján]. The Concilio de Arte [Popular]. And basically it was all the little art groups from San Diego [to Sacramento], when they had the water tower, all the way to the RCAF, to the [Royal] Chicano Air Force in Sacramento. When they and those people in San Francisco, the people in Fresno, La Brocha [del Valle], even the Public Art Center, the so-called Public Art Center. And for a while, Mechicano [Art Center]—Leonard [Castellanos], and Spunky, and all those guys. And people would [meet]. It was mostly guys. We would meet. And there would be this ego face. It'd just be people pontificating kind of, "I'm the best artist. We've got to make Chicano art." Guys would get in front of everyone and try to lift everybody up, like, "We are artists also," and this and that. And some people, like Malaquias [Montoya], who didn't even go to these things, literally were like, "How can you make a living off of your work, you're basically selling out your culture." What are we going to do? Teach? Just like you? [They'd say], "You're living off of the culture." [Then we would say], "As a matter of fact, you get a state check. You get pension. You get a sabbatical, a health plan, and you're the one calling yourself the arbitrator of culture." You can decide.

So people go in there idealistically trying to make Chicano art, and you say, "Don't join the galleries, teach." What's that? Is our work worth it? I'm going into this because I remember what some of the main arguments were about: "You guys are selling out." It wasn't like I grew up in the Palisades and I'm over here slumming. This is what I know. I mean, who else [is going to do it]? For me personally, I'm working from crime magazines as my major influence. Who the hell is going to make, much less buy the work, based on crime magazines? Or say a shoeshine boy? Who is going to buy a shoeshine boy? I dare them to buy the work. I'm not like—you're the one doing my happy cartoon, not that—see, I hate to put anybody down. You and your clenched fist. How many times can you paint a clenched fist with a broken chain on it? And it's like, "Oh, and it's not for sale because I have integrity." You've got a teaching job. It's like that. I started yelling because it used to piss me off.

KD: Were you vocal about it then?

JV: No. No. I was among friends. He'd say, "John, I need to talk." I'd go in there—

KD: Close friends heard these [comments]?

JV: Yeah, all this pontification. As a matter of fact, one time we were set up. We were set up, because I was smart enough to know that Cal State Northridge was a hotbed of cultural nationalists who got all these kids in there and neutered them—basically, neutered them—they wanted to be artists, "You're going to be a sellout," and they would consistently list us as examples of sell outs.

KD: Who's "us"?

JV: Oh, the Streetscapers, basically anyone who was showing in galleries. We were all showing in galleries. All of us who were showing in galleries: the show with Berman, the show with Saxon. If you put your art up on the wall and you call yourself a Chicano artist, at that time—I don't know about now, I don't know—we were the [epitome] of sellout. Because students would come to me when I was doing the Santa Ana mural. This sweet girl would come to me and say, "Well, what do you say about my teacher calling you a sellout?" I told her [my side]. I told [her my answer], and she wrote it in kind of a nicer way, went back, and the teacher gave her an A on her paper. She said, "The teacher gave me an A." I said, "Good, did he

listen?" I said, "Oh, you didn't really tell him the way I wanted to tell him." Another time—people like Raul Ruiz. Another one—he's the one that did *La Raza* magazine. And instead of talking about organized crime and how they're fucking up *el barrio*, and if you mention their name, you get a death threat. We're talking about heavy, organized, drug crime, in the barrio. No, he's not talking about that, he's talking about us artists. We're the big threat. It's bullshit. It pisses me off. At least for me, I talk about it, when they mention it to me—for them, it's a lesson plan [calling artists sell outs].

KD: Yeah.

JV: Semester after semester. And I'm telling people that come out of Northridge, "You know John, you're right? Because I became a teacher. I wanted to be an actor or something, but my teacher told me I was going to be a sellout." What does that do? They still join a band or whatever. You want your teacher's approval. It's like church.

KD: Yeah.

JV: A bunch of classic Catholics in there. "Oh, you're going to hell." Basically, I told them, Culture Clash, once . . . Basically, it's like—because Richard Montoya, Malaquias is one of his uncles.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Basically, supposedly we've got Che Guevara and now César Chávez at the gates of heaven, keeping us out of Chicano heaven. "No, you guys sold to the galleries, no. You're off to hell." What is that? There is this Chicano heaven, this paradise? It's the same—it's bad.

KD: What about the other [argument]? I think you've gone down this path. What about the other, what I perceive—and I could be wrong, so correct me if I'm wrong.

JV: Okay.

KD: The internal argument among artists about this particular content or style is what makes it Chicano.

JV: All you have to do is look at the Hispanic show, look how many styles are there—there's even Puerto Rican and Cuban. *Les Demons des Anges*.

KD: Right.

JV: You can tell me a style, maybe a color. Look at that one—look at that there, from Amelia, from installations to Patssi, as compared to anybody else in there? What is it in there, where the guy from Europe, who was a curator, and got us [to show in Europe]. He said, "Is there a Chicano art movement?" I think in the show, he says, "No, there's just a lot of Chicanos making a particular kind of art." Maybe there's some symbolism that some of them use. There are diverse styling. We're not all in lockstep. But there is something. Maybe we're—plus now, even Chicano is like, "You guys are dinosaurs now." And maybe there are some kids that take it up, but they do it [differently]. Kids, I call them kids, they're in their twenties and thirties.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And they do videos. But they basically do the stuff that we were doing, but they are doing it again. They do it a little fresher. They say, "Oh, I remember so and so did that." Because I'm old. I'm in my 50s. We were starting right when I came out of high school. I was lucky enough to get into it when I just got out of high school. And I went to college. Even in East LA, there wasn't any Chicano art. There was none of that. There was mostly political art. It was only when I went to college that it started to be passed around. And the main groups was Los Four, for LA—

KD: Yeah.

JV: Los Four, and Asco. And they were really different. Just look at those two. One was conceptual, Andy Warhol-ish, Dada-ish, and they did that on purpose, with the Dada, and all those. Even to this day, I've got this book on Dada and it really is beautiful—it started, what's that town, I forget? [In Zurich.] I started reading it, then I forget. Anyway, that's fricken Asco in the cafes and just like with the Concilio guys, people would gather, read some poetry, pontificate, have ego wars, "I don't like him because he took my girlfriend from me," or [something else].

KD: Yeah, it sounds like the Beatniks. [laughter]

- JV: Yeah, like that. It's the same thing. Yet, at the end, everybody would do the group hug and you would respect your elders like José [Montoya]. I was lucky enough to meet José—
- KD: Montoya
- JV: José and Esteban Villa. To this day, I saw them. I saw them when Cheech's show went to San Francisco.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: And I'm just so—I'm just so proud that the guys know me. I don't have a neck anymore [and Esteban draws me].
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: He says, "John, you look like them now." I'm like, "Yeah, I got grey hair too." But you know, I knew them when. I'm really proud of that.
- KD: What about Cheech? He wants to argue that there's a Chicano school of painting.
- JV: Yeah, but when you start to articulate it, or when you start to try to describe it, it kind of slips from your fingers. That's the thing about it. It's kind of hard to describe—you can see it, you can see something. And most—most people say it's because you use those hot colors, just like your salsa colors, you know? Or even some of the imagery is different. Even in the Mexicans, they weren't doing the kind of work that the Chicanos were until the early '80s, and they'll never give us credit.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: They were always looking at art magazines. They wanted to be New York— or Europe-looking art. At a certain point, they started to deal with their [own cultural imagery]. What we thought was a goldmine of imagery and stuff counter to the American, all that stuff, whatever that is, you know? Even though, I wanted to be a realist, I really enjoyed doing stuff without a style, even though it became a style. I don't want it to look like—you know how like some realists, it all looks like them? Like you do [caricature].
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: You have a way of working that—I don't want to do that, I want it to look like what it is. I go straight for the imagery itself, the whole photographic way of doing it and then knowing how to change it, and knowing how to make it look like they all fit on the same page, that takes a particular way of working.
- KD: Right, composition.
- JV: Yeah, composition. Everything is—they say, "Oh John, you use collage," I go, "Well, everything's collage."
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Everything's collage. The conceptual—even if you're a writer, everything is—they go, "Oh yeah, but you do this," but we all do that. People really try to tie you down to a particular kind of—I get a little bit upset and go, "Don't pin me down like that, okay? I'm a realist, but I do what I want to do." That very American thing, I want to do what I want to do.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: I dare you to buy it!
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: I still have that, you know? Even if I don't—as I got so old, but it's still on the tip of my tongue.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: [laughter]
- KD: You want to pause for today?
- JV: Sure, yeah, because you wanted to—
- [break in audio]
- JV: I'll try to be short, you'll see.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: I'll try not to get too carried away.
- KD: No, get carried away.
- JV: [laughter]

## DECEMBER 7, 2007

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez. Today is December 7, 2007. We're on our fourth session for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. And I just wanted to take you back, John, a bit, and make sure I covered enough ground on Public Art Center. When I asked you about factors that brought the group together, you had mentioned Carlos Almaraz. But I was wondering if there was not just people, but if there was a sense of what was going on, the desire to work with other people, why this kind of configuration? Self Help Graphics had already started.

**JV:** Right.

**KD:** Mechicano was just down the street.

**JV:** Yeah, they were breaking up for whatever their reasons were. A lot of it has to do with personality and where you think you might fit in. The thing with Self Help Graphics, when I first went there in 1977, I came in fairly green. I actually quit a job working for this Peaches Record Company. One of my very rare forty-hour-a-week jobs that for me, coming from all that freedom that I had—well, of course, economically free too, I wasn't making too much money—I really wanted to get back to doing my art. So I went to Self Help Graphics and met Carlos—no, not Carlos—Richard Duardo and Barbara Carrasco. And I re-met Linda Vallejo and met Michael Amescua. But there was another, her name was Sister Pius [Fahlstrom], not Sister Karen. Sister Karen really liked my work and I got along with her. But I felt like they already had this thing established, I wasn't really too interested. They were doing printing. And I was looking for a place where I could set up a corner and do my art. But my art was fairly raw at the time. I was doing this very intense urban work, coming from my death series and from my crime magazine. I think Self Help was—even though I did do a Day of the Dead piece that's in that [catalog].

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** I don't know if that's in there or if something else is in that catalog. Maybe another piece is in there. I did another piece with Richard Duardo.

**KD:** Okay.

**JV:** But I'll talk about that later, because that's kind of an interesting story, how that ended up there. But at Self Help, I came across Sister Pius, and I was working with Richard briefly. He was doing a piece, working with some print. He said, "Go find some newsprint for me." So I got up. At that point, I had been there less than a week, maybe three days. I thought I would try to help him, we were about the same age. He liked my drawings. Everybody liked my realist drawings. That was my seductive part—I could put up my drawings and everybody would be like, "My God, who is this guy?" I kind of knew it—I was pretty confident in terms of my work. I went up to Sister Pius at Self Help and I said, "Do you have any newsprint?" And she turned around and looked at me, just like a good nun that she was, "Who do you think we are here? This is not a charity. You can't just walk up and think that we'll give you stuff." And I was taken aback and was just like, "Well, Richard Duardo told me to . . ."

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** I just looked at her. In those years, I just froze up. I was like, "Wow." I just went, "I got to get out of here. Okay, I don't belong here." That's what turned me off about joining that group—having any sort of confrontation with anybody—and that was one of my first encounters with—Richard Duardo got me in trouble a lot, let me tell you.

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** I'm not even kidding. But that's something else. But then the Mechicano, they were doing maybe before or after that—around that same time when I was seeing where I could fit in, seeing if I could join a group of people—because the idea was to get a studio. We came from this collective ideology. Because at Long Beach, that's what we did at Long Beach. There was a whole group of artists who joined this community center and we opened up the upstairs. We were never funded, but at least we had a space where we could work in [and go to CSULB]. We worked with the Summer Youth Employment Program during the

summer and of course during school, I had the work-study and the EOP kind of financial assistance. So with Mechicano, I took some of my graphite, my felt-tipped pen drawings, based on some of my death series—the Day of the Dead for me was easy. But it wasn't very happy. I always got dead people laying in front of people that might have killed them. There was a dinner table—I wish I would have kept those. Those were felt-tipped pen on newsprint. A lot of them are destroyed. The others are so brittle that if I unroll them I literally see the sun age them in front of me, like Dorian Grey in front of me.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: I'm not even kidding.

KD: Yeah, felt-tipped pen doesn't—

JV: Oh, it was just my idealism about self-destructiveness—with the subject matter, it fit so perfectly.

KD: You mean you knew it at the time?

JV: Oh yeah, of course. That was part of it.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: But I very rarely showed them. Somebody told me, "Sure, it's one thing that you did all of that work, John, but did you exhibit them?" But that's a whole other criteria, like was there a witness? I got the work now, yeah, but you never showed them. I showed a few of them. I put this one up at Mechicano—it was the Mechicano Art Center. By that time they were at Highland Park, down the street from where we opened up the Public Art Center. So I went in there and put up my thing, and they told me to take it down, because it was so raw, and Day of the Dead was happy. And there was this photographer, Victor Alemán, and he was from Central America and he had these beautiful photographs of this little embryo in a jar—he was walking down the street in some Central American country and he saw it on a doorstep. It might have been Mexico—I don't think it was Venezuela. So he photographed this jar and he actually approached. I remember it was like three or four photographs he had in sequence. You're walking down this little colonial looking street, in Latin America, and as you approach a jar, the last one, is this little embryo. It was this very strange sequence. It was really cool. Because it was cobblestone streets and this little step, and it was just like a chance encounter.

KD: Yeah.

JV: So they told him to take that out of there. And they told me to take my drawing down. And I think I was with George Yepes at the time. George said, "How dare you, I'm going to take my work down." And they go, "No, no, no, you can leave it up." Because they thought we were going to start bad mouthing them, and the worst thing to have as a reputation around the Chicanos was that you're soft. Whatever. So Victor Alemán, he wasn't even Chicano, he was coming around, he says, "To hell with this stuff, what's wrong with these people? Everybody's uptight." I don't know if they were getting community funding or what, but shortly after [that] Mechicano folded, or they stopped.

KD: Was that exhibition planned?

JV: Every year—

KD: Okay.

JV: This has got to be '77 or '78. This had to be right before we put up the Public Art Center. So that job I had, I finished it in '76. I finally—I think they were going to promote me. I think I mentioned that earlier.

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

JV: Okay. So, anyway, this is what my wife gave me to get my skin—it's so dry, the pastel dries you out. It's intensive repair lotions. This thing's killing me. Okay. That was that. Finally, when I met Carlos, and they were going to have a group and because it was really [difficult] to find a place where I could work with people and we could help each other find work, and in any case, we would all help pay the rent.

KD: The rent.

JV: And we would share things. We would share cars, if all of us had cars. We would find out about different things going on—like I said, we used to go to filmings. It was a really cool time. I was doing some murals. I tend to—I surprise myself that I consistently found work for myself either through there or through the

streets—I always contributed. I mean, you could ask Richard about it. I was surprised. I always contributed and I always had a place where I could work.

KD: Was it graphic assignments?

JV: It was all kinds of stuff—like, I was working for .. Okay, there were murals, graphic, paste up, layout work, that I helped Carlos on. The stuff for the Mark Taper—

KD: Right.

JV: The stuff for the *Zoot Suit* mural—

KD: Right.

JV: That was for the Public Art Center. I actually spent a lot of money taking photographs, way too much money—they told me. All my photographs were all like close-ups of the wall. I was just a kid. We were all just kids. We put up the scaffolding. We made some money. I actually wasted a lot of money. I've still got the photographs—I can't do anything with them, who knows where we shot them. The mural and stuff—

KD: Do you remember Barbara Carrasco joining you on that?

JV: Of course, she did the face—she did the hands and the faces. She's the one who did the real sensitive [parts]. She even helped us with the drawing. We were in the studio doing [the design]. Yeah, of course. Barbara was there. We all contributed something. We all did something.

KD: What I find fascinating in terms of Barbara's work and yours, is that you both have an incredible hand to render realistic human figure.

JV: Yeah. Yeah.

KD: And yet she was asked to do the faces and the hands.

JV: Yeah, I wasn't that good yet. I was [shaky]. Plus, I had my own technique.

KD: Okay.

JV: My own technique is to spend a lot of time to get it done. Her way of working was a little bit more—everybody has their own temperament, you know. And for me, it didn't really bother me. I think with me, I learned—I did the suit and the drapes, and we learned how to use this lens, we had to cross the street, because it's so damn big. Then when Eddie Olmos came up one day and says, "That doesn't look like me." And we looked at him like, "They told us to not make it look like you because you're going to be out of here in a minute," or something. We gave him this look like, "Yeah, it's not like we didn't try, you know?"

KD: [laughter]

JV: It was funny. And it was cool—

KD: So you were instructed not to make it look like him.

JV: Right. I forget actually what it looked like. It took us like three weeks. I forget to put it up. It was fun because that Lewis Carroll theater, I remember going there to see rock bands. [Earl Carroll Theatre—ed.] I saw Love there, you know, Arthur Lee. And across the street at the Palladium there was a teenage fair that we used to go to as kids. There was this group from England called the Fool, and they put up this psychedelic—I'm talking about '68, '67—they put up this psychedelic mural, "The Fool." I forget, they were doing the rock bands in there, and that's when I saw Arthur Lee and Love, and I forget who else was in there. But Love was one of my favorite bands at the time. So when I saw those guys doing that mural—it was a beautiful mural—but all they did was do the mural over the paint that was there. They weren't really talking about it. It was beautiful. It was stars and rainbows and dancing. I can barely remember—somebody had to have photographed it. Somebody has to have it in a photograph somewhere. I don't even know what year it was. It had to be the—I must have been fifteen. I had to be fifteen or sixteen. I thought like, "Wow."

And then I find myself back when I was twenty-five or twenty-six and I'm painting the mural there. And I was like the center of the world there, I was like "this is [it]" because I knew the history of the Sunset and the whole [Earl] Carroll trip, where they had these big square cement blocks with people's names on them. That place had big bands and it's still—I guess it's a TV studio now. So we're doing the mural and then all these Chicanos from all around southern California were coming to see *Zoot Suit*. It was really cool, they came off the bus as we're painting the mural. We're looking down at the people and the lights

are on it. We finally got it done. It was only up a month. It wasn't a mural, in the traditional sense. It was a billboard. It was advertising. Again, that was probably one of the biggest things that the Public Art Center did, was the *Zoot Suit* mural. It was Leo Limón, Bejarano did the *olin* sun where the Zoot Suit guy stood on.

KD: Oh right, right.

JV: And there was Carlos and Barbara. I think even—I don't know if Dolores was part of it. Dolores was always in and out. I don't really . . . There was this other guy, Ramon something. He was a dancer, an Aztec dancer, and he helped. These guys, man, they put the scaffolding up. They had to go all the way up the building—it was a good [forty to fifty] feet, scary as hell. We had to strap it to the building. And then for some reason they brought it down without killing themselves. I wasn't a part of that. I don't know why. We were doing—we had a team and we would do different things.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: There would be a different team thing. All the sudden the mural's up—I mean, the scaffold's up, and then the mural, we'd get working on it. And then we'd go in the middle of the street on Sunset—everybody used to cruise Sunset at that time.

KD: [laughter]

JV: And the cops would come and say, "Get out of the street." They almost pulled over, but it was so crowded, you had to keep going and go, "Oh shit man." Then you see the prostitution on the street. The guy across the street that owned the Orange Julius, he was a cop. Because we were learning the street, what was happening right there. He's a cop because the cops would go in there, and whenever there would be some weird things going on, the guy would call the cops and all the sudden the cops would be there. And then they'd go and say hi to him.

KD: Yeah.

JV: It would be this weird thing. Then I saw Johnny Mathis drive by. Stuff like that. Now that I'm thinking about it, all the different things—

KD: So was it for you, both a cultural experience as well as this artistic process?

JV: Sure. Of course, it's all that. We're doing that whole Chicano thing. Before we did the *Zoot Suit* mural there, we saw it at the Mark Taper. Because I got to know Kenneth Brecher, he did *Savages* [the play], he worked with Gordon Davidson. That's how I got the *Metamorphosis* jobs. [*Savages*, by Christopher Hampton, was based on Brecher's field research in the Amazon—ed.]

The thing about the *Zoot Suit* mural that was so amazing is that when the play ran its course, it was going to go to New York. They said, "Okay, the mural is coming down today." By the time we got the phone call—by the time we got it out there . . . It took us like four weeks, five weeks, to get that thing [completed]. It took them less than an hour to sand that thing off the wall. By the time we got there, it was gone. I was going to photograph them sandblasting it off the wall. By the time we got from Highland Park—I got all the way to Hollywood there—it was gone. It was like, "Damn." Again, that was a lesson where murals don't last. Nothing is sacred. It's the experience. It's always the experience which always lasts a lot longer than the actual mural, especially in LA. Now, they're trying to save the murals and look what happened? All the graffiti artists know that they're being saved, so that's why they bomb those with their writing. I don't mean bomb literally with explosives.

KD: Yeah, I know.

JV: They basically put their big bubble letters on the murals, knowing that they're going to be saved.

KD: Oh, so they figured it out.

JV: Right.

KD: I thought it was a kind of desecration. But no, they went to the sacred spot—

JV: It's nothing personal. See, they had a graffiti conference, and a friend of mine, Guevarra, came to talk to me. And some muralists . . . I can understand, it's not about you. It's like, it isn't about you. They can leave their name, their little bit of legacy, whatever their name is, a little bit longer than [on blank walls]. I see the graffiti crews drive by here every day in the morning, if they get here early in the morning. Same thing

in Highland Park, the mural that Barbara and Carlos and I did there on Figueroa, by the junior high school. Nightingale, is it called?

KD: Yeah.

JV: It's all graffiti, and it's been there forever because of our mural is registered. You can't even see it anymore. So the guy from the city, one of the Cultural Affairs guys, sent me a registered letter. I thought I owed city taxes or something. I get a registered letter—I get it and go, "Oh man," because I'm used to those letters, you know. I go to the post office, it's always bad news. I get it, I go, "I paid my taxes." It's about the mural. They're saying, "We regret to inform you, that if you don't clean your mural, we're going to erase it because of the neighborhood community of that area, Cypress Park, have decided that it is an eyesore." And it is an eyesore! Leo Limón was paid for a while to repaint our murals. To repaint the mural. And the drawings that I did for that stuff, for that—they were destroyed, they were mistakenly thrown out once. Carlos did it. But he did it on accident. That was a mess. He just threw everything out, to clean up a hallway once, in the Public Art Center. And so Leo was paid for a while, and he even gave up. I called the guy up on the phone and said, "You have my permission to sandblast the thing, because it is an eyesore."

KD: What year was that?

JV: This just happened two months ago. This was out in Figueroa. You can't even see it. In fact, half the mural was already wiped out. We had this Mayan thing going. I mean the mural always promised that we were always going to—we were always going to face the graffiti artists, not even that, even their gangs there. That's their wall, so they're going to mark it. We turned the stairs into a Mayan temple and stuff. We had a lot of ideas. We did that mural in nine weeks. It took me back to all of the work we did in Long Beach in nine weeks, six or seven weeks. I'm a slave driver. I just get it [started] and get it [working]. And they do the basics—it's great to have a team do the undercoat. We were doing flying tortillas—they looked like potato chips.

KD: [laughter]

JV: We did the flying tortillas and we did the—

KD: Who was "we" again?

JV: Carlos. We were the supervisors.

KD: Right.

JV: It was Carlos, Glenna Boltuch—

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: Barbara and myself. And we were the supervisors. There wasn't anybody else, I don't think.

KD: And the students from the school?

JV: The students from Franklin High School.

KD: Oh, Okay.

JV: That's where I met [Sandra]. Even though we didn't date for ten years later, that's where I met my wife. She was graduating from high school. She's ten years younger than I am. I tell people, "Yeah, we met when she was in high school." They go, "What do you mean in high school?" She was in high school.

KD: [laughter]

JV: She was seventeen, I was twenty-seven. We didn't really—it was nothing. Ten years later, she was twenty-seven and I was thirty-seven, we got involved. So that was [another project].

KD: That was another mural through the Center.

JV: That was through the Citywide Mural Project.

KD: Right.

JV: It was Summer Youth Employment.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: But the wall was so big that they hired Carlos.

KD: Okay.



JV: And I think they hired Barbara too. I don't know, you'll have to ask her. So we were the supervisors. We had like fifteen kids from Franklin.

KD: So you owned the copyright on it, so that's why you're getting this letter.

JV: Right, because it was my sketch. I'm the one who went to the city council—Patricia Russell was the councilman before Art Hernandez was—we're talking '70s right. I go to show my drawing, she says, "I like your drawing, I like what you want to do." I had this girl like dreaming—she had her eyes closed. She says, "She looks dead to me." I thought, "Man, has she seen my older work?" She's not dead. She's dreaming, there's like clouds, dreaming about the past, dreaming about the culture and all of that. And then, we've got the Mayan observatory—it was during the Star Wars craze, '77 and '78. So the observatory, the Mayan observatory, that round building—

KD: Yeah.

[*break in audio*]

JV: It's landing. It's the second coming of the Mayan. It's like a joke. And then we actually used the kids running towards the spaceship. And the kids running were the kids who were painting it. We had to paint them. They had to draw themselves and then paint it—in the studio of the Public Art Center, I would photograph them running down the street and then they would draw themselves pointing, running and they would draw it. It was fun. It was a lot of fun. The first part was they had to scrape that building down. They had to scrape it down. This poor woman, who had this little apartment, we asked her if we could use her water. She said sure, she was a sweetheart. We never paid her back enough, her water bill went up to like eight hundred dollars a month. We had it running, we needed it for the paints, we were down the street. It was really dry out there. And we paid her three hundred or four hundred dollars and we're sorry. She said, "Oh my God, my water bill." It wasn't all fun and games. We did some damage to some people's income for a while, recklessly. But those were the times. But the Public Art Center worked for as long as it did.

KD: Okay.

JV: So that's Public Art . . . I don't know.

KD: And my last question was, from your perspective, what led to the breakup of the group?

JV: I don't know—I guess people just, to be part of the group, you have to keep bringing in art. Maybe people just lived in different places. There were different jobs. People got a regular job. I remember once—Carlos and I decided to go into downtown because of the booming art scene I thought that was really interesting.

KD: Do you have a memory of Richard Duardo bringing in—

JV: Tito?

KD: Yeah.

JV: Oh yeah, that's what I mean, I was about to say that. At a certain point, there were only three of us, Richard, Carlos and myself. And then, I don't know, this guy started living in the back, where I was drawing.

KD: You mentioned that before.

JV: I think I mentioned that earlier. And we didn't get along. Whatever. We didn't really get along. He wasn't really back there, he's kind of gruffy. He came out of the army. And whatever my personality is, he looked at me as if I should have went into the army, clean me up.

KD: [*laughter*]

JV: He was like, "You know what, you've got an attitude, we need to clean you up." I was like, "Whatever, man." Why? Because I've got hope?

KD: Yeah.

JV: Whatever. The guy was a—he had hygiene problems, as far as I'm concerned. We really clashed, so I couldn't really draw back there whenever I wanted to.

KD: Yeah, you talked about that.

JV: And then Carlos and I went to New York. And then—oh, we decided to—I found that studio place [in downtown], and then we were there for about a year, I don't know. That's when it gets kind of vague,

because all the sudden, Richard [stays in Highland Park]. And they had their thing. I went to a few of their things. They had a big music thing. But once I moved downtown, I was living in Echo Park, it was hard for me to go back to Highland Park just to go visit, because I didn't have a car. I was on the bus.

KD: Right. Right.

JV: That's part of it, I believe. It's hard to get on the bus to go visit Richard. See what happens then. Richard, he was a character himself. So, yeah, eventually, we were the last three, then when Tito came, shortly thereafter, I was gone. It was like, "I've got to get out of here." My little paradise was done, as far as I'm concerned.

KD: Was it ideological, or just personality?

JV: I don't remember. It was just time to go. And we were only there for—Public Art Center was only there for about a year, two years, I don't remember. You might ask somebody else about that. I remember it was time to go—whatever we had, we put in a truck and it was time to go because I found that place on Spring Street. Again, I'm the one who found it, because for me that was really cool, because I was sort of keeping things rolling in terms of the things that I needed to do, because I needed a place where I could work. To this day, I need a place where I need to work where I'm not being bothered when [I] need to work. It's not only that we both have our own space—so when Carlos and I went downtown, he had his part of the room and I had mine. And it was literally a small room, and we put up this fake wall. He was doing his painting and his pastels. And I was doing my drawings and I was starting my pastels. I don't know what the heck I was doing.

KD: Yeah, you talked about that.

JV: Yeah, that's sort of how we got out of there. Then shortly thereafter, I guess Richard couldn't keep the whole music thing going—I don't know, he has his own story with what happened there. And then he ends up moving in across the hall from us. We all used to go to Gorky's in the morning. And then eventually when Richard left, the owner of the building broke the wall down, took out all of the bathroom, took out everything that they had on the other side—the other side, it was pretty plush. It had a little bedroom, a little area to work, he had his own shower and bathroom. The next thing I know, Richard's gone, and the whole side there—he [Carlos] got both sides.

KD: Wow.

JV: Which was cool, it was beautiful. He had that for a long time. At that time, I was at Victor Clothing. And at that time Elsa started coming around wanting a painting class. This is it man. Painting classes. That turned into marriage and a daughter. So, at that point, I didn't see Carlos quite that much, once in a while, but he also made it clear that she didn't want to be around—those bachelor days were over.

KD: [laughter]

JV: I'm not kidding. I mean, I'm kidding, but I'm not kidding.

KD: I know what you mean. I've been on the other side of that. [laughter]

JV: So that's cool, that's the way it is.

KD: So, could I change gears and ask you—to think about what would you would say to a young artist who is getting into a relationship with a dealer.

JV: Before I do that, I wanted to add a couple of things—we were talking about becoming a Chicano artist who wants to sell in a gallery, which within the group of so-called Chicano elders and this Chicano thought and Chicano thinking was a very controversial step, because I guess some people would think in the academic world, specifically in the visual arts, that that was a very blasphemous thing to do, because Chicano culture is sacred. It was not something to be sold on the market. And we talked about that because I got very excited and it got in my head and I got very indignant.

But part of it was, part of the argument, part of whatever that intellectual exercise for some of these academics in the university came out of the university system, out of the north and out of Northridge. I wanted to ask them, "What about writers who write about the cultural Chicano experience? What about

filmmakers who make movies about the Chicano experience? What about poets?” You know what I’m getting to.

**KD:** Why is it that the visual artists can’t sell? It doesn’t make any sense.

**JV:** Yeah. It is intellectually dishonest. And no one has really talked about that, probably because we take it so personal, us visual-types. Once you stop making it personal, you start looking at it analytically and saying this is bull. It doesn’t make any sense. Why is it us? So, a bunch of us used to sit around—and plus the gallery system, it’s one of the hardest things to do. You might as well go to Hollywood, do commercial graphics, get into computers, visual effects, get into something else. I think a poet has it even harder than an artist. A poet has to sell a book and be a part of publishers. It’s tough.

**KD:** Right.

**JV:** So why is it that visual artists get all of this grief?

**KD:** So when a theatre group gets together—

**JV:** Exactly, theatre group, actors.

**KD:** Do they pay the performers? Do they pay the people who worked the technical side of it, and did the theatergoer pay for tickets?

**JV:** Right.

**KD:** Or was it all considered for free?

**JV:** Of course not.

**KD:** Obviously *Zoot Suit*—

**JV:** There were other places too. With that organization, which was just starting at that time—Nosotros, Teatro Campesino—they had their thing. And even Luis Jimenez, he did the one movie. What about Moctezuma Esparza [who] did the movie [*The Milagro*] *Beanfield Wars*? He did it with Robert Redford. Does that mean it’s okay? It’s such a bogus argument and nobody has really addressed it, because, for myself, that can try to ring some sense into this thing, I don’t want to be on the same program with these people— because it will get so emotional, and there’s such a way of people talking to each other. I don’t know if we’d get to the real problems. It’d have to be written down. Even if it’s still relevant, I don’t know if people have changed their minds.

Even with some of the leaders of this idea, like Malaquias [Montoya], what do you think of his own nephew, Richard, with the [sketch comedy group] Culture Clash? They make fun of these cultural things, and [their] whole thing [is] that it’s so precious that you can’t really make personal work about it. That doesn’t make any—I can do name-calling, which I’m good at—it just doesn’t make any sense. I mean, writers, you write about your experience. I mean, look at Arte Público Press. Is that—why is that valid? And what, we’re doing a “sellout”? I like all the name-calling. That’s why I say—

**KD:** I like your phrase, “intellectually dishonest.” That’s brilliant. [*laughing*] I’ll borrow it and quote you.

**JV:** Good.

**KD:** It doesn’t make sense. I’ve heard these arguments. They get quite fuzzy. They want to clarify: “Well, Arte Público Press is okay because it’s a Chicano venue.” Okay, then what’s not okay? Well, the list gets modified with each incident.

**JV:** If we sell with the Anglos.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** If we put it—because the gallery is run by a Jew, or run by Anglo-Saxon, it’s got to be a non-profit, nobody makes money. Like a church, [a] nobody-makes-money kind of place. You just show your stuff and then take it home and put it in your own little temple, everything’s cool. But if you try to make a living off of it, it’s a sin. It’s this whole Chicano heaven thing that I mentioned the other day. It’s waiting for to go to Chicano heaven. And there’s Che and César at the gates saying, “You, no, you made a halfway decent living on all of that work.” It’s like, where did that—it’s like . . . And the other thing—I’ve talked about it. Anyway, that’s all I have to say. That will sort of add to what I said the other day about, you know, people making a nice living pontificating [on] this kind of stuff.

- KD:** Well, I just find it fascinating. I don't think I've ever seen the same critique for other arts.
- JV:** No. It's the particular instigators of this stuff, who say it over and over again, and that's fine. But to make it a lesson plan, that's a sin. To make it a lesson plan, so a kid, he can get an A if you mouth out whatever the professor's saying, but if you ever try to like [argue the premise]. There's some people who actually—I've talked to kids, a few, who actually went to those classes and were turned off to the whole Chicano thing because of that.
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** It's like, "What is this?"
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** They thought to themselves, nineteen- and twenty-year-olds, "This doesn't make any sense. This is all bullshit."
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** That's why it was stuck in the mud, or part of it.
- KD:** That was my experience. *[laughter]*
- JV:** Talk about the blame game. But because we are in catalogs, we've got to get out of LA.
- KD:** Well, I also think it's a skewed understanding [of] how the art market works.
- JV:** How about how any market works?
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** How about the film market? How about story writing, people that write?
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** You got a check? Who's it from? I don't know.
- KD:** Yeah, like, you're saying how difficult it is to get into the gallery scene.
- JV:** Oh yeah, and that's what you're talking about, getting to these kids, the young people; they have a lot more opportunity now. It's really amazing, because whereas when we started, because of our age and the timing that we started and what we were doing, there wasn't much there, we actually grabbed on to the art boom of the '80s.
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** Where all of the sudden, people were buying our work and we were getting known, and then the Hispanic show comes around and there are some other people—the guy from Europe came in '86 and '87, Pascal, who wanted to show some of us in Europe. Some people, he didn't show their work, he didn't like their work. It's really difficult to be one of the ones to be consistently chosen to be shown. My work had, it had a particular look to it, and other people didn't quite make it. I thought, "Man, it's tough to be that."
- KD:** What, the horizontal hostility?
- JV:** Well, yeah. There wasn't really—well, some of that. I didn't really see the hostility to my face, there were some people that. It was like, I don't know, that's why I kind of keep to myself. I don't get out there much. People are really—my wife, at the time, she used to tell me, "That guy doesn't like you." I'd go, "Really?" She goes, "see the way he treats you?" I don't care, the guy's an asshole. "No, they don't like you." I go, "It's probably because I'm showing more than they are."
- KD:** Right.
- JV:** Whatever. I was always used to it. I was always used to being very independent and not everybody's going to like you.
- KD:** So did you ever find yourself going head-to-head with a dealer, or a curator?
- JV:** Yeah, recently. But with Saxon, no. The only thing with Saxon—let's see, before Saxon I was with Simard. While before that I was—wait, my mind's going, *[zipping sound]*. My first one was Adrienne Simard, and that was cool for a while, except for they were kind of eccentric. When they were downtown when my show was there, one of the women in there, her ghosts in there or somebody—it was Adrienne's husband—I forget his name. He finally came out of the closet; the guy was gay. So Adrienne, they broke up, and it wasn't the Adrienne Simard Gallery anymore, it was the Simard gallery and this guy was European.

And I mean, I don't care, him and his boyfriend—it was this Japanese guy. I did his portrait, the Japanese guy. I don't know, one of them was in the gallery, and then they said there was an evil spirit in the gallery, so when my show was up, they had somebody going around doing a cleansing [or] an exorcism in my gallery. So all of my artwork had a cross in some kind of oil, holy oil, put on all of the Plexiglas in there.

KD: Oh, no.

JV: I thought it was funny, because I went in there, and I saw it, and there was a portrait of *La Butterfly*, and right over her forehead, on the Plexiglas, there was this dripping oil. I go, "That's kind of cool, what is this?" They had this—it was real wacky. And then the Simard [Gallery] . . . It's all about money. I forget why we had a falling out. They went to—oh, that's what it is. Something happened where I got pissed off—because they never tell you what they're going to do—they basically shut that gallery down, and they moved somewhere on Beverly, and they didn't tell me. So I got upset about it, because I didn't know what they were doing, so I just quit. [At] Lizardi-Harp in Pasadena, there was Grady Harp and Lizardi. He was a Latino guy and he was a child psychologist. Frank Romero and I showed [at Lizardi-Harp Gallery]. And right before—I showed there in, wow, I don't know . . . Eighty-six, I had a show. We did pretty good. That was my second gallery [show] like that. And then, again, they had a way of getting paid and taking forever to pay the artist.

KD: Oh, I have it. Eighty-six and again in '89, Lizardi Art in Pasadena.

JV: Yeah. Eighty-nine huh?

KD: That's what it says in this catalog.

JV: Wow.

KD: *Art of the Other México*. [Catalog for the traveling exhibition that opened at the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, Chicago; the catalog was published in 1993—ed.]

JV: I think I only showed once. But, '89, no—well, maybe, because '89 was when I moved to Saxon. And when I told Lizardi-Harp that I was moving to Saxon . . . People take it personally. And I did it because they sold this piece of mine and they took forever to pay me. They were real funny with the money. When you're an artist, as it is, you only get 50 percent, with people you have to cover. They got paid. I actually found the woman who bought the work, supposedly, behind their back. [I called her.]

KD: Because you're not supposed to talk to collectors?

JV: Oh yeah, because they're the ones—it's all the cloak and dagger, behind the veil and this—

KD: Is it the idea that if you talk to the collector directly, that the collector will go to the studio directly and do it without the gallery?

JV: Of course. It has to do with who benefits the most.

KD: Right.

JV: They have this place, they go there. You know—

[*break in audio*]

KD: This is Karen Davalos on side 2 with John Valadez. Today is the seventh of December. And I wanted to ask you, John, because I think you're the only person that I think I can actually pitch this question to on our survey.

JV: Cool.

KD: How did you acquire a dealer? Why did you change dealers? Most people have not had several dealers.

JV: Really?

KD: Really.

JV: I'll tell you, the first one, with the Simard Gallery, I don't know, Adrienne came to me when I was doing the *Broadway Mural*. She came downstairs into the basement when I was painting the mural. And she said she wanted to have a show. I don't think I had any work yet. And the show we had was about a year or so later, and that's where I showed a lot of that work, a lot of my portraits and stuff. That's after I got out of painting the mural, went upstairs [at Victor Clothing] and started doing the portraits. By that time I was doing

the pastel, and I was doing the figures and some of them are in the Hispanic catalog. The preacher. The girl with the blanket. That's all the work that I've showed there. There was a taxi dancer, a few other things. The butterfly and the *clavo* guy. Those became works that people thought [meant] I did all gang members. I only did those two, but that's because they stuck in people's [minds].

KD: Right, they became iconic.

JV: Right, that's what I really wanted to do. I wanted to register in people's minds that kind of work. So that's where I showed at Simard's, and then at Simard's, when we had a falling out because they weren't paying attention to me. They eventually folded. But we were on good terms, because they wanted me to [do] a portrait [of] . . . I forget the guy's name. Alán, or Allan, he was from Europe. And Adrienne, she was African American. She was really cool. I don't know what happened to her. She might have—I don't know—she might have moved out of LA. I have no idea. Alan's sister, she was really savvy in the art world. She wanted me to go, but I just felt like I had to get out there. Once Adrienne was gone, I thought, this other guy, he wasn't into the arts, you know. Artists need to be shown what you want, that they can back you up.

I forget how—maybe Grady Harp approached me, and he was a urologist at the time, and his partner, Lizardi, he was a Chicano guy, and he was a child psychologist. They were really funny with the money. I don't mean it that way, but there was this always weird money thing. With Simard, there was hardly any money anyway. It was wasn't about that. They were making moves and not including me in it. I got mad about that. There may have been more to that, but that's basically what I remember. With Grady Harp—Grady was cool. But when I had my show there—when anybody would diss me I felt like I was giving half of my money to these people. And when I felt any disrespect or anybody I found taking advantage of me, I was pissed, because I'm not taking advantage of them, because I'm bringing my work and I'm one of their artists.

So, when I had my show, the guy that was [in charge was not a gallery person]. [Grady] went on vacation during my show. I was like, "Wow, what timing is this?" And the guy who was in the gallery [during] that [time], I don't know, one of their boyfriends. The guy didn't like me. He was very haughty. I was like, "Well, if this guy is going to be in the gallery while my show is up, this is going to be bad." So I was pissed about that. I sold a few things. And yet I never got paid. It was so frustrating. Finally, at one point, there was one drawing I actually wanted to keep and it was a [double portrait]. It was a Chicano muscle man [and a matador in a pose-off].

KD: Yeah.

JV: [A] wrestler, standing next to this matador. And that's when I came back from Europe—maybe I did show that when I came back. Wow. A few things—I don't remember. Was that before? It might be after I developed that technique. I don't remember. I really don't remember.

KD: The technique of using images from—

JV: No, using the crushed pastel [as] paint.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: Because I use that in this way. I had to have done it when I came back, so I did have a show there and then I did show at Saxon. Wow, that's interesting.

KD: The owners are obviously not artists, not in the art world.

JV: No, they wanted—

KD: They were investors.

JV: I'm sorry. Yes.

KD: Is that how you think of them?

JV: Yes, they were investors. They were a doctor and a psychologist. They had money. So they rented this building on Colorado, right where the 210 goes under the Colorado Boulevard, across from the—it's still there. It's a bank now. Right across from that Maserati, Rolls-Royce dealership. And they were there for a while. They had [artist], DeLoss McGraw, there, and Frank, and they had some sculptors.

KD: Is there a type to each gallery?

- JV: You mean a type of person?
- KD: No, a type of art that they gravitate towards?
- JV: Mostly realism. I mean, for me it was mostly—there was someone like McGraw [who] was more of a fanciful—sort of an illustrator—very, very different, kind of a pretty work. I wouldn't call it—I don't mean it in a bad way, but it was kind of decorative. What's his name, used to come in and buy it all the time. The actor from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Gregory Peck, loved his work. Oh yeah, loved his work. He didn't like my work. [laughter] Which is cool.
- KD: Well, I guess the gallery, or the curator of the gallery, would want a very different style for each of the artists that they were showing.
- JV: Yeah, I guess whoever they were bringing in.
- KD: The diversity helps create the market
- JV: In fact, at my show there was a sculptor who was doing realist sculpting with dancers. And during my show, this guy became really nervous and bought a sculpture, looking at me like, "I'd buy your work, but I want this." I don't care, man. Sure, it'd be nice. That's the nature of art; you've got to be—that's the thing about telling the kids, you've got to know what the heck you're doing. It's... [pause] You've got to believe in your work. You also wanted to be [kind of] blinded, you want to be focused on what you're doing and don't compare yourself with other people.
- KD: Okay.
- JV: You've got to be really centered—because you start to compare yourself—you've got to find whatever your vision is. It's very intangible, a very intangible thing.
- KD: And what about dealers trying [to] influence what you've created?
- JV: Yeah, some people follow it, and some people don't. I don't know if I did, but you might want to try it or tell them that it's not going to work. I remember I was doing some work for the Venice Art Auction for a long time—you know the Venice Art [Walk and auctions] for the [Venice Family Clinic]?
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: I would have to come up with a piece of work for them and sometimes I would purposely get soft. I was thinking, "You know what? Forget the blood and guts, do something nice." They didn't want it. They brought it back. They don't want that. It's in the dark with pastel. They want whatever your working class trip is. I thought, "You know what? I cheated myself, I was fooling myself." You can't fool anybody out there.
- KD: Wow.
- JV: It was a good lesson. Even today, I do what I want, and then part of me . . . Max Benavides says, "You're always ahead of yourself, you're always ahead of your audience," because the stuff I was doing back in my early years, they didn't want it; they wanted what I did before. And then when I was doing the work and some people responded to it, I only did so much of it; then people wanted that stuff. I was like, "I'm not doing that anymore." It drives my wife absolutely crazy.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: "Why don't you do it?" Because I don't believe in it. I don't want to feel like I'm like a cobbler. I'm dealing with my ideas and stuff, you know? And only really when it comes back naturally, then it's okay. When I feel good about it—not like I'm doing it because I think I'm going to make a couple of extra dollars, that's the worst and that comes from my Chicano commie upbringing. That's where that comes from. That, for me, is selling out—is doing that, trying to hit the market niche or something. That makes my skin crawl, even to this day, and much to my demise, evidently, once in awhile. So with Lizardi . . . Okay, because there would be some shenanigans with paying us, the money. They were only paying us payments.
- KD: That's okay.
- JV: And I know that the woman had already paid them off. Because after they pay it, they have to wait thirty days to make sure the check clears and the building doesn't fall. I don't want to wait thirty days—the check only takes a week. The woman lives in Pasadena: How hard can it be? It was just funny. Then it was

like three months. So I called her. I don't know how I found her number. And she laughed, "Oh yes, I have it. Oh yes, I love it. I bought it because the muscle bound guy looks exactly like the guy who cleans the classrooms." [laughter] She had a crush on the guy and he looked like him.

KD: [laughter]

JV: I thought that was so cute. It was like a guilty pleasure—that's him. [laughter] I thought it was so sweet. "Well, thank you, ma'am." She was a teacher.

KD: I've never asked this question before, but I always assumed that I know part of the agreement is 50 percent.

JV: Right.

KD: I've never seen differently, although young artists—

JV: Sometimes it's forty-sixty.

KD: Yeah, younger artists will tell me it's forty-sixty.

JV: Right.

KD: I guess they're not established yet.

JV: They get the 40 [percent].

KD: Yeah.

JV: Oh my God. And if you are established, I could get 60 [percent] and they could get 40.

KD: Yeah.

JV: See? It's a racket.

KD: I just assumed the paying was automatic.

JV: Oh no. Well, it should be.

KD: Did you ever write out—there's never a contract or an agreement.

JV: Oh, I'll get to that. I learned never to write an agreement, because they'll hold you to it, especially if you're a successful artist, especially if your work sells. Successful means—you're not in *Art in America* every other month, but people want your work. Plus, you have a resale. When people get tired of [the work they bought], that's where they make the money. It's better than stocks evidently. [The artist] only gets 5 percent, and they triple—people are buying work for whatever, and for me it's flattering or whatever. And they will triple their money within three or four years. But somebody else wants it. Maybe a museum wants it.

KD: Have you actually seen resale of your work?

JV: Oh yeah, that's Saxon. I'll get to that.

KD: Okay.

JV: I'm trying to get past Lizardi. I called him. He was pissed that I [had called the woman]. I said, "As a matter of fact, I'm out of here." He says, "I know, you're going to go to Saxon, aren't you?" It wasn't [Grady], it was Lizardi who talked to Frank and myself. Frank, I think, was leaving [also]. I don't think he went to Saxon; he went somewhere else. And the guy told me, the guy told me, Lizardi told me, "You know what? I know you're—" he was a child psychologist—"you're never going to make it. I know your type." I said, "Damn." He said, "You're never going to make it. How dare you think that you can leave us and you think you're going to—" and then I talked to Frank and he said, "He told me the exact same thing." I go, "What's wrong with this guy? He's got mental problems. He's a child psychologist and he's trying to cut our knees, off you know?" Thank God I left. This woman says that they didn't want to pay us because there are some dealers like that. I have stories where they rip people off totally and they leave for five or six years.

KD: And when you made this cut with them, when you made your break, was your work in the gallery?

JV: I took some of it out.

KD: Okay.

JV: See, I don't really get a lot—I don't do a lot of work. I don't do a lot of work. My work takes a month to two months to do each. Like this was two and a half months to get this thing out. [referring to a work] Once in a while, I'll get a piece out in a week because I'm focused and I know what it is, the idea is complete.



Really, it takes so much longer, not because of the rendering as much as what is it going to look like finally? To me, that is torturous fun.

KD: Because you don't work from a sketch.

JV: Right. I work from an idea. I work from a figure. I work from a [pause] person or two doing something, and where are they, and how can I take it beyond this thing? Which, for me, it's great, but it slows the process down. But that's how I'm used to working, but I follow that, because that's, for me, it's the way to work. It's real fun, and it's nerve racking—I live and die and all that. That's just a personal thing.

KD: The artistic process.

JV: Right. The artistic process—it's just like a writer. I really see [painting] and writing as the same exact thing.

KD: Yeah, but you've got something on the kind of writer I am, because you're working on more than one piece at a time.

JV: Oh, yeah?

KD: I cannot do that. I don't know a lot of creative writers that do that either.

JV: I don't know. This is the first time I've really taken a thing about the ocean and done more than one or two pieces on it.

KD: Okay.

JV: The first I've done that. Maybe it's because I've always done ocean work and I really got into it. And the first two pieces, the first one at this scale, this friend of mine—

KD: What is that, like five—

JV: Yeah, it's sort of, like, four by—

KD: Four by six [feet]?

JV: That is fifty inches, and that's seventy-six.

KD: Okay.

JV: And the first one, it looks like—it's the same scale, and it looks like this. I've got it here. Here it is, it's not a great reproduction, but—see, that's it there. It's the same thing. And there's this caveman-looking Chicano going for the squid and sea serpent in here. And it's to scale. That was the first one. It's called *Sea Monsters and Freight*. It's a terrible reproduction of it, but it looks really cool. So then, from there—there's one that I'm framing now that's the size of the skinny ones. Oh, thanks, by the way, for helping me bring the shoes in.

KD: [laughter]

JV: So at Lizardi we did that, and we had a bad falling out. And then years later, [Grady] ended up coming around. And I ended up working with him. The other guy I didn't want to see again. When somebody attacks you like that, I'm not really—it comes from my mother. I hold a grudge. And I can stay away. I don't hold a grudge where I try to like—

KD: Right, hurt them.

JV: Find out where they live, burn their mailbox or anything. I just stay away from them. That's just the way it is. I think recently—sometimes, I'll hold a grudge against people and they don't even know it. I'm one of those, you know.

KD: [laughter] It doesn't help you.

JV: "Why is John acting moody around me?" "I don't think John likes him." Yeah, because I heard what you said back in 1987.

KD: [laughter]

JV: I remember how you treated me. I'm one of those kind of guys, you know.

KD: At least you're honest about it.

JV: I think it's funny, you know. The thing, when you do your art, you really see yourself, and I think it's hilarious.

KD: Yeah.

- JV: So then I went to Saxon [Gallery], because Gronk talked to [Daniel Saxon], and Dan came to see my work. I was working because I was doing a lot of work based on my European stuff. I was just working, working. And so with Saxon, when I showed him this, he pretty much put most of the work on this announcement. This is the announcement for the show. And there's a few of the images in the back. And that isn't all of the show. That's like three pieces, or like two or three.
- KD: I remember these, yeah. [*inaudible*]
- JV: Yeah. That's what I showed there, mostly from Europe.
- KD: Right.
- JV: Also, the one that's in there, the *Two Vendors*, the one from that one catalog, and the *Condenados*. *Condenados* is the one owned by the Mexican Museum in San Francisco. It was a really strong show. It was, like, the beginning of 1990 and that's when I showed there.
- KD: Yeah, this is [from the series] *Condenados* (The Damned). New pastels, January 12 [through] February 17, 1990. And it's *Fall of Babel*.
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: Nineteen eighty-nine. Which I've seen, in pastel on paper.
- JV: And *The Chase*.
- KD: *The Chase*, which was—
- JV: Yeah, *The Chase*. I want to see—
- KD: The picture is just—
- JV: I want to see if they'll let me show that. I'm going to try to show it in the Plaza [de la Raza museum] this year, in the boathouse.
- KD: And who owns this stuff?
- JV: I don't remember. I'd have to look at my files. They live in Santa Monica—they live in Malibu. And—
- KD: *The Chase*?
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: I would imagine.
- JV: Saxon [actually could have] sold that nine times, he said. I can only do it once, and he said, "Can't you do another version of it?" I said, "No, I can't!" He said, "John . . ."
- KD: You don't think that could work?
- JV: He said, "John, I've never met an artist like you." Basically, who wants to stay broke.
- KD: [*laughter*]
- JV: It's like—it's hard for me. It's got to come from my heart or forget about it. That's the way it is. That's the way I am. I don't know. I'm used to it.
- KD: So the other one that you're referring to, the *Two Vendors*. It's at the Smithsonian, right?
- JV: Right. Yeah, that was part of that show. That was like—that was like a real strong show. [*Arte Latino: Treasures from the Smithsonian Museum* traveled to six cities in 2001 and 2002—ed.]
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Then I showed in . . . *Immamou*, that's like a figure underwater. I was really on a roll at that time, because I came back from Europe [with ideas].
- KD: This is my favorite piece.
- JV: Yeah. I really enjoyed it. I really enjoyed working on it. It was good to see it. That's why I went to the opening to see it.
- KD: I can't do centimeters—two hundred and eight—
- JV: It's big. It's almost like that. It's almost as big as that. [*gestures toward work*]
- KD: All right. [*laughter*]
- JV: Yeah, when you do it in centimeters—it's basically that wide. That, and the same paper. It's that wide, whatever that is, that's—
- KD: Fifty-something.

- JV: And then it's a little taller, whatever the ratio is. That's the size of all of that work. Even the *Fall of Babel* was on that roll of paper.
- KD: What kind of paper?
- JV: It's 100 percent rag. It's Pangaeen, you know, rag. It's acid free. It lasts forever.
- KD: No, but—
- JV: I learned from my old—
- KD: This one . . . The composition is just so amazing with the *Two Vendors*, because the dolls work so well with the female faces—
- JV: Right.
- KD: At the top.
- JV: I had fun. I had a lot of fun.
- KD: And again, could you tell me, what comes first? Was it the two men?
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: I'm not sure if the description here is accurate. [*referring to Arte Latino catalog*]
- JV: It is. That's pretty much the story about—on Broadway I would see these guys with their shirts off in the summer. It's smoggy. And it's hot. And there are some Mexicanos and guys walking down the street, and I see them coming and say, "That looks weird." And then I see this other guy, and when they saw each other I said, "Wow, that's cool." It wasn't those guys, but I saw something a lot like that. So then I went through these *fotonovela* magazines. And I saw these two guys with their shirts off. And this refers to when the pope came, and people were standing and making pope hats out of newspaper. [*laughter*] So I put one on there, and those guys were from *Fotonovela* magazine. And this guy with purple pants. That's all '70s.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: And the other part is the way the storefronts were. Even though, I put this rug or whatever—I made a rug instead of the sidewalk.
- KD: The street. But are they the same image that you used for the—?
- JV: No, they are totally different stories.
- KD: Yeah, I love that.
- JV: Everything is. But the challenge is to make them look like they belong on the same—
- KD: Yeah, checking each other out.
- JV: Yeah, like "What's up?" You know.
- KD: That's just a wonderful composition.
- JV: Yeah, that was a good journey doing that one. Again, I remember how long it took. I had a little black and white TV, and I could just work. You're broke and your debt was not as [high]. It was just a different time.
- KD: Where did the gals come from?
- JV: Different—again, a lot of different magazines. The girls were all in distress. I wanted to use this sexual tension thing. I even wanted to use my wife—this is my wife here.
- KD: You're kidding.
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: [*laughter*]
- JV: That's when we were in La Napoule. [*pause*] That's how I can remember when I did it. Where are some of the subject matter—I was started getting—I guess I was getting out of Europe and getting back to the urban thing. And the work was becoming a lot more allegorical, like the *Fall of Babel* and *Condenados*. *Condenados* is not in the reproduction. I guess I have it somewhere else. I guess the actual pamphlet that Saxon made, that was my announcement. I had lots of them and I only had one left because we used to just give them out. I had a lot of them. I said, "Dan, do you have any more of them?" And now he says, "No John, that's it." He only had some for himself and all of that stuff. And the reason that Saxon and I, we finally had our falling out, is that, in the mid-'90s, people were coming, wanting work. He also had people that collected my work, in the late '80s, early '90s, even earlier from Lizardi Art, they would bring

him a piece that they bought. So the Saxon would determine what the resale price is. Saxon would get [20 percent]. And it would be double or triple the price, because the original price really wasn't all that much. With the resale, in California the artist legally gets 5 percent.

KD: Right.

JV: Saxon would take 20 percent. And the people who brought it in would get 75 percent. And so what happened to that fifty-fifty? Why didn't I get a share of the 25 percent? That's why I left him, because [he] wanted me to have a show with [him]. I said, "Why don't we have lunch?" He was all [thrilled] to have a show. He did it to me six times. He resold things six times, and I only got 5 percent, and he got 20 percent, six times. He sent me a letter from Europe saying, "John, I'm thinking about you, wish you were here." I go, "That's my money!"

KD: [*laughter*] That was cruel.

JV: Oh, I'm telling you!

KD: [*laughter*]

JV: But of course Gronk was his main guy. Gronk and him—

KD: So collectors knowing that he's—you're in his stable, or whatever people call it—

JV: Yeah.

KD: You're represented there.

JV: Right.

KD: If they want to do a resale, they know where to go.

JV: It got to a point, yes. It got to a point where the resale was competing with the work I was bringing in. Because the resale, the people wanted, that's the work that they know. The work that I'm doing now is like, "Well, I don't know if I like that yet." That's what Max Benavides, "You're always ahead of yourself." But that's the nature of being in art. I know I feel like I'm being all like, "Oh, woe is me."

KD: Right.

JV: That's why I lock the door, because I go out there and I start beating myself in the head about all of these economics and the market and the percentages.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And what Saxon did to me six times, finances . . . "Dan, look."

KD: What's in it for me? [*laughter*]

JV: Look, I get 5 percent, you get 20 percent. Yeah? It's legal. I said, "Well, I'm leaving." He looked at me in shock. "That's it." He thought I was going to get another show. He had this little bungalow. It was okay, because he had those glass guys from TJ [Tijuana]. They came up and they made it.

KD: Right.

JV: Because he was a Chicano thing. And that's when I was doing those . . . [*pause*] It must be—that's when I was doing those federal mural projects.

KD: Ah, right.

JV: That's a time in there too. Oh, and plus, from the first one, from the first mural, he took a big percentage, from the money that I made from the first El Paso, because remember, he sent the slides immediately. But I think he got too much. He said, "You shouldn't have given me so much money." I said, "Well, why don't you give it back?" "Well, you gave it to me." See, Saxon was into Saxon.

KD: So, a dealer can make money off getting you a gig?

JV: Yeah.

KD: When you're being represented by a dealer?

JV: Yeah, we never sign anything, it's just kind of an agreement. I think I gave him 20 percent, but I gave him 20 percent of the gross.

KD: Yeah.

JV: I was young. I was naïve. He didn't catch it. That was one strike. And then this resale thing, after I found out how many times he did it, that was another strike.

- KD: Can you give me a sense of resell range, how much things were reselling for?
- JV: I don't remember. I don't even want to recall. It was maybe double, maybe . . . I don't know. People would make like five thousand or six thousand dollars clear over the whole thing.
- KD: Whoa.
- JV: Yeah. And I'd get 5 percent. And Saxon would get 20 percent of it. That's what I keep saying over and over again, because to this—
- KD: That's painful.
- JV: It's very painful, because it's your work. What happened to fifty-fifty? That's only if I bring in new work. And the people from Chicago wanted some work. So this guy brought this huge thing of mine, which they own, which is "Savages and Glitter." And Saxon—I almost bought it back from Saxon. It was for eleven thousand dollars. I said, "You know what, I would do it, but just hold on to it." When they came—
- KD: Are you talking about the gallery?
- JV: No, no, the Mexican Museum.
- KD: [overlapping dialogue] Yeah.
- JV: And they wanted something from me. Saxon pushed *Savages and Glitter*. Well, that is the best piece. But I got this other work. He goes, "No John, it's too late." I go, "What do you mean it's too late?" In other words, my resale work, I only got 5 percent. I'm [not] kidding. I've got to calm down.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: I talk to going back in time, it's too painful.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Even today . . . It's '07—it was twelve or fifteen years ago. So, anyway—
- KD: They end up in the show, in Chicago, part of the other Mexico sources and meetings—
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: I think that's 1991, is the year. Oh, sorry. Exhibition tour, '93 to '95.
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: They have *The Border/La Frontera*.
- JV: Yeah, which is five different pieces. You see four. I don't like the way they—
- KD: Oh, is it like one doesn't—
- JV: There it is there. [referring to *Art of the Other México catalog*]
- KD: Right, one doesn't go with the entire traveling—
- JV: No, it was all there. It was just the way that they showed it there. All those sit next to—they sit together, even though they're sold to [different collectors]. I still have one of them. I still have this one here. There are three of them owned by one person and the blue one bought by somebody else. I don't know who—again, I'll have to go find who owns that one. That one was sold first. And again, those are as big as, I guess as big as one of these sheets.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: It's a monster. It's like five of them. And they showed up all over the place. I still have the one panel with the guy—
- KD: Forty by fifty and a half inches.
- JV: These are thirty-eight by fifty. That's the way the paper, that's how I used to buy [the paper], just sheets of it. Now they're thirty-eight by fifty inches. They were forty or fifty . . . I guess forty. I don't know. Yeah. I still have one.
- KD: These are very allegorical.
- JV: Right, that's what I was going for. It started when I came out of Europe. It started right before I went to Europe. I just wanted to get [away from] straight portraiture. I wanted to get into my story telling, and not being really specific, letting it have different meanings. And here, this landscape links up to here.
- KD: Yeah, that, I remember.
- JV: Yeah, but the way they showed them there. But they showed four different pieces.

- KD: No, at the exhibition, I remember seeing these.
- JV: Yeah, what drives me crazy about the catalog is that the fifth one is on the other side. This doesn't make any sense.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: But you have to let it go.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: But that was Saxon. So when I left Saxon, I didn't really have a show. For what? Because I was doing all of the murals. [pause] Maybe I was in somebody's touring shows.
- KD: Yeah, the mid-'90s was a lot of touring shows.
- JV: And then I was talking to Craig Krull about showing them. I figured, well—even when I finished the Santa Ana mural, I got a mural to do . . . I was kind of kicking around at a certain point, and then I got the mural for the state [building] in downtown LA, which nobody sees. Again, nobody sees it. That was the beginning of these. About 2000, 2001, to about 2003 or 2004. And then I was going to keep working. Then I was going to show with Craig, but because Patricia Correia was selling Chicano art, Saxon retired. She wanted to take on that mantle. So people came around wanting my work.
- KD: But they had to love—
- JV: Chicano one-stop shopping. I was kind of reluctant about it. And there was this one guy, Walter, who owns this communications company, who wanted my work. So she came to me, and through her, I sold some work to the guy. I thought—I have a soft heart I guess—I said, well, I'll give her a show. So I gave her show. Her business practices are not—it's the least comfortable experience I've had with a dealer, let's just put it that way.
- KD: Worse than what you've already described?
- JV: Yeah, worse. Because at least, other people would follow through—let's say you would get a message—if it doesn't benefit the Correia Gallery, you will not get the message. If she doesn't get a big chunk of whatever—there's no private business with her. It goes through her and that's it. So I had the one show, even my press release. I hated it. It was like juvenile. I rewrote it, sent it in, it comes back the way they wanted it. It wasn't even her, it was their staff. Somebody felt that they were a writer. Again, I didn't write. I didn't sign any contract, because one of the artists in there warned me, "John, I signed a contract, don't sign a contract, because she will hold you to it," and this person who was in that gallery could not leave for six or seven years. They made a lot of money together, because the woman's work is beautiful, but it was so beautiful that Patricia would not let her go, she had to fight in court to finally get out.
- KD: So it was an exclusive relationship?
- JV: Oh yeah, it was really bizarre. Even though it would work for both of them, they would argue and it got to be—because I learned a few things about it, it got to be a miserable thing, because if you sign a contract with her, she'll hold you to it, because the contract is always—she's real good business person, but it's only in her favor.
- KD: So you're held to only work with only that one dealer.
- JV: Right.
- KD: And you have to—
- JV: As long as it's in the city—
- KD: for so many months—
- JV: I'm sorry. Sometimes, if you show, and you want to show in San Diego, she wants to get a third.
- KD: Oh, okay.
- JV: Even if it's through San Diego, but she's got to get something out of it. She can show in San Francisco or back east, but she's got to get something out of it. Or let's say you have a Christmas sale or a rummage sale in your house or something, that's okay. Anyway, I showed them—I had that one show. I had four pieces, I sold them all. It was fifty-fifty. It was like people who came were like, "Hey, John's showing again." And then people like that bought some work, only two. And then she had two people go in there—one saw the

article in the newspaper and saw the image that I had, and they liked it from the *LA Times* review. They went in and bought it. I don't know who this guy was; I've got to look at the records. And then somebody else did. But the thing that really turned me [is] that I should have showed with Krull—because he's much more trustworthy. Everybody has a reputation throughout the—the art world in LA, when you talk about talking to young people—never rip anybody off and listen to what the reputation is of the gallery. Because artists will tell you. People will tell you. Artists want to protect you. We're not trying to rip each other off. We're trying to warn each other. That's why I was warned, like, "Don't sign a contract." As soon as I heard that, I told other artists that were going to show with Correia. She always wants to sign a contract. Don't sign a contract. And then she wants to hold on to the work, five months after, which is frustrating because you know she's not selling your work. She has only—she basically puts—she's a kind of gallery that just puts the work up and stands in front of it. There's never any follow-through.

KD: No hustling.

JV: She doesn't even care what you're doing. She has no understanding of your work. She just says, "Isn't that neat?" That's about it. She basically just stands there. And when I did the press release how I liked it, her website was horrifying, because you're part of her roster.

KD: Yeah.

JV: They click on you and they see this horrible reproduction of your artwork and it's got this forty thousand dollar price tag on the bottom in big italics. Talk about just making your skin crawl. If that doesn't turn anybody—I told her, "Take the price off the work." She didn't want to do it. I said, "Please, take the price off." It's horrible. It's tacky. Have them come in. Talk to them. Don't put thirty thousand for this. Twenty thousand for that. Forty thousand for that. And the image is washed out. It's the digital age. You've got to make it—

KD: Make it look good.

JV: Look at other galleries on the internet. Look. Look. "Oh, it's standard." Stubborn and angry. So finally, it took me three years to finally like get her to get so angry with me, I'm out of there. I'll never step in there again.

KD: She hasn't updated her website.

JV: What?

KD: She hasn't updated her website.

JV: Oh no, she finally took me off—for instance, I don't know if I should do this.

KD: *[laughter]* Do you want me to turn it off?

JV: No, it's okay—yeah.

*[break in audio]*

KD: Can you say that again?

JV: *[laughter]* The whole thing about the art—especially when you get to my age—sometimes you have your ups and down and sometimes you just make enough work to pay your bills. It's not like you're going to go to Europe; you just stay afloat. And as long as your work can keep you afloat, I think that's what most of us can really ask for. That's successful.

KD: That's success.

JV: To be able to *[survive]*, even if it's just like barely. You pay your bills and you have some sense of integrity. I don't want to start to pontificate. That's not what I said, or at least before you turned it on.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: That's the idea, just to be able to pay your stuff. So anyway, this guy Walter *[Ulloa]*, he is a true collector that wants the work. You got the one, and then I sold him the other piece. And the work is for his corporation. And everybody who works there is into music and stuff, and they love it. There's artwork. Most of it came through the Patricia Correia Gallery.

KD: So it's up in his—

- JV: Yeah, it's called Entravision Communications [Corporation]. They're in Santa Monica where all of the people—in the Water Tower buildings, what's it called? Water Court?
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Next to where MTV is and . . . It's in there. If you ever go up there, you can see a lot of really cool artwork.
- KD: I know.
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: *[laughter]*
- JV: And most of it was bought through Correia. And after that, when this guy knew that I wasn't there, he came to me directly and bought some work in the last year.
- KD: Paying the bills.
- JV: Yeah, paying the bills, paying the mortgage. Imagine trying to—
- KD: So you don't have a dealer now?
- JV: I'm about to [do] show with Craig Krull, but right now he's leaving me alone. But to get work up for his show in this coming March, I have to sell some work to keep [going].
- KD: So what do you mean when, he's leaving you alone? Does that mean he's not pressuring you to have an exclusive relationship?
- JV: Right. That's the kind of dealer—he understands. I'm fifty-six. I've been doing this for a while. He knows that whatever I'm going to show is going to be interesting. He's always wanted to show me. He knew me in Lizardi-Harp [Gallery]. He's the guy I got along with in Lizardi-Harp. He's the one that—he went on break. I think that was the guy. For me, it wasn't, again, it was just who replaced the professional, and that happened to happen during my show. See, the whole gallery thing is not—it's different than the work. If you're thinking about the gallery, the business, while you're working, you're not going to get any work done. It's separate, it's a whole different—it's contradictions, it's so contradictory.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: When you hear all of these cultural nationalists, Chicano academics talking about how we're ripping off something, they don't know what they're talking about. Talk about going in big circles, huh? *[laughter]*
- KD: *[laughter]* Yeah, that's a good one.
- JV: They don't know what they're talking about, man. I dare you to try it instead of getting your—I already said all of that.
- KD: I'm just fascinated by the collectors that you mentioned. And you've said before that you don't cultivate them, you don't hang out with them or cultivate a relationship with them—that just doesn't match your personality. Are the Latino collectors the same way?
- JV: Yeah. I don't hang out with anybody.
- KD: Okay. And what about museum curators? They come and they're interested in your work for a show.
- JV: I don't know. I think I get so shy, I almost come across as being antagonistic. Because I don't want to be disappointed. I don't want to be let down. And I don't want to feel like I'm standing in front of them with my hands out—
- KD: Yeah, like a puppy dog.
- JV: Yeah waiting for the—
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: That's not. I don't know. I guess I'm too macho. I don't know what it is.
- KD: It sounds like it's uncomfortable.
- JV: It is. It's very uncomfortable.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Especially the way I was raised with my mother, she didn't really have a lot of people over to the house. And my social skills, I was very shy, hard to look people in the eye, directly—I should have been a Scientist, so I could look back. *[laughter]*
- KD: *[laughter]* So, when folks come for a show, do you show them slides? Do you show them the work itself?



- JV: Yeah, the work itself. No, you mean somebody who wants to show my work?
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Well, they come to the studio.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: They see what I'm working on.
- KD: So, it's usually the current—
- JV: Yeah, or just reputation. They say, "I want to show you." I say, "Well, I'm doing this." And they say, "Yeah, I like the idea." That's like when Krull came here, I told Craig that I was going to show—
- [break in audio]
- JV: Because part of it is like, "Why do you always show [with] Chicano art themes? How come you don't show [with] the other people?" Because they don't ask.
- KD: Really?
- JV: It's that simple. I would say, I would like to show in, like, California surveys or in the West. I'd love to be collected by LACMA, MOCA. I'm collected by [the Museum of Contemporary Art] San Diego, a piece there. And the Mexican museums. I'm in the UCLA Special Collections, because they have a photograph of mine. This whole Chicano—"Why do you always show with the Chicano?"—thing. Because they're the ones who always ask me to show. I'd like to ask, formally, right now, to show with the rest of the Anglo artists or California artists. But it doesn't work that way. They have to find you. They put you in their shows. Maybe, for me, I was doing these murals for a while, in my forties. So I jumped out of the gallery circuit. Or maybe the work that I was doing at the time, they didn't really see it, or maybe it's too Mexican, or it didn't really work. I don't know. But people always say, "How come you always show with Chicano-themed shows?"
- KD: And who's asking those questions?
- JV: I don't know. Some people, other artists, like, "Who do you think you are with a bag of chips? How come you always show with . . ." One of them is Llyn, his name is Llyn [Foulkes], a very great, older artist.
- KD: I'm surprised that an artist would ask, because—
- JV: Some of them question this whole Chicano thing.
- KD: Oh, okay.
- JV: Well, that's the only place I can show regularly. Now, I'm over fifty. They want forties. They want people in their thirties and forties. I'm like, "Okay, fine." You've just got to toughen it up. When I was in my thirties and forties, you were nobody!
- KD: Well, I think it ... Wasn't that big show of *Hispanic Art on Paper* [at LACMA] in '89?
- JV: Yeah. That was through Berman. I don't know if they bought anything or if it was just a show.
- KD: I don't think they bought anything.
- JV: Plus, it was downstairs in the education department.
- KD: That's what I was going to say. [laughter]
- JV: Yeah, see? As a matter of fact, I had it on my résumé for a while, and I thought, "Wait a minute, I have to take that off." I thought they bought a piece. They just showed it.
- KD: I don't think they sold it.
- JV: I didn't take it off my résumé, because I was assuming—again, that was Berman. I didn't even talk about Berman. But he falls into line where it's—the thing about dealers, imagine, dealers have ten or fifteen artists, a show every other month.
- KD: Right.
- JV: So they're—I got to pay the rent here. I got to pay the light bill. I got to send out the announcements. So what? That's fine. If they have to frame it—excuse me—they sell the work, the framing cost—you really test the dealer, like how much are they really going to do for you? Also, what do you ask them to do? I never ask them to do a catalog. Other artists come in and get a catalog, because they ask for it. I don't ask for it, I expect you to do it for me because I'm such a great guy. It doesn't work that way. But that's

my personality, and I'm maturing and learning. Even though I'm fifty, I'm really forty. You know that whole thing? How the fifties are the new forties and the forties are the—

KD: [laughter] Thank you, you just made my day.

JV: [laughter] Because sometimes, I really feel like I didn't start to really get it together until I was in my thirties. People right now—remember, we talked about the differences for the [generations], the opportunities now for the twenty-year-olds. My God. "Oh, you've already shown, you're already done"—it's like come on, man.

KD: Right.

JV: We were the ones trying to open the freaking door, but you guys are showing all the time. One time at Self Help, [with] Michael Amescua, this kid, stood up and said, "Why don't you older guys stop making art to give us younger guys an opportunity?" [He] said, "Sit down!"

KD: [laughter]

JV: [He] said, "Why?" "Because you've already done it all. You guys have already . . ."

KD: A lot of mythology about—

JV: This whole misconception about, "Come on, give us a chance," like the pie's only so big. The other side is you shouldn't even be that, that there shouldn't even be that pie.

KD: Or that you control who gets sliced.

JV: Yeah, that's a good one.

KD: Like those shows, well, that's who asked me.

JV: Yeah, it's that simple.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Oh come on, guys, there's this mafia. No. That thing in Europe, the guy talked to a bunch of us. He kicked some people out. People got pissed, they got hurt. It didn't really work.

KD: All curators do that.

JV: Exactly, and it's how you deal with it.

KD: Yeah.

JV: People don't even ask. It's better to not ask. It's one thing to be like, "I'd like to see your slides to maybe put you in our show," and they go, "No, no." That hurts more than—they're not even asking you. At least they have to ask. You see the difference?

KD: [laughter] Yeah.

JV: It's a subtle difference, but it means a lot more. Right. Exactly. There was one show. It was at the Hammer last year, the California show. They mentioned the Chicanos in the catalog. Southern California, but they don't want to show us, because—I don't even remember what the paragraph said. "There's this whole Chicano thing here, but we're not even going to deal with that." Well, join the club. That's unique? Damn. Goddamn it.

KD: [laughter]

JV: Anyway, that's the whole gallery thing.

KD: Well, could I have one question, if I could bother you for just a few minutes.

JV: We can keep going as long as you want.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: There's no pressure here.

KD: You mentioned the Plexiglas. I guess I'm just really ignorant about that. Because it's pastel.

JV: Yeah.

KD: Is it always displayed in Plexiglas?

JV: Once in awhile, I just [showed] the work without it.

KD: Okay.

JV: I just did it in [inaudible] because I couldn't afford it.

KD: I was going to say, that's another calculation I never even thought of.

- JV: Right. And now—
- KD: Plexiglas is very expensive.
- JV: Yeah, framing is very expensive.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: And sometimes, I consider that in the pricing that I do. Remember, in terms of the dealers that you tell younger people, you look at a work and you know what your work has gone for and you know what it takes you to do it. And you think of a number—it's very abstract—and remember that, whatever number you come up with, the gallery has to double that. Yeah. So, somebody says, "Nah, that's ridiculous, because I don't [want] my work going for that much money." Think about the higher you go, you can't go back down.
- KD: Right.
- JV: Because it looks bad, everybody's paying attention, which is bullshit, but whatever. I always try to keep it at a point, whatever affordable means. That's why inside a studio it's different—because for me the prices are not as much as what the gallery would be, but it's not 50 percent either, see what I mean?
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: For me, it's fair enough where I can look somebody in the eye and say, "This is how much I want for this work."
- KD: Do you do the math?
- JV: Oh, yeah.
- KD: Do you say, "Okay, leave two months and if I made such and such dollars, then . . ."
- JV: No, no, it's not even about that. It's like, in the gallery that would sell for seven or eight grand. I could give it to you for six, here, without the frame.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: The frame—you frame it the way I want—let's say that's what I say. Then, there it might be twelve thousand dollars. Here, it'd be nine thousand. Knowing the work and the uniqueness of it and just how much I like it and the size and this and like the work—it's very intangible things. For instance, that one that I just did. In here, I'd let it go for like five thousand dollars. Is that too high?
- KD: Too low. [laughter]
- JV: So that—
- KD: It's her shoes, maybe I like her shoes. [laughter]
- JV: That's what Sandra said. Because the other one sold for, let's say, like six thousand dollars.
- KD: The one with the serpent?
- JV: No, the one with the shoes.
- KD: Okay.
- JV: No, that one was—
- KD: They're the same size.
- JV: It's real different. When I had them next to each other, it was real interesting to see the two. That one, with the shoes, is going back to the work that I used to do.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Which is really cool for me, because I didn't do it on purpose. I went full circle. I really got into that subject matter. I'm in that ocean. I'm in those stories, you know? Then they got real crazy. And because that one got really crazy, I came back. That he-she.
- KD: The one with the he-she, with three arms.
- JV: Yeah, it's called the *Queen's Harvest*.
- KD: Right, *Queen's Harvest*.
- JV: That one really brought me back to doing the figure. And this one is going to take me back to putting other people in the water, stepping into the water, where I was doing—took me back to this piece called, *Low Tide* that I showed—hardly anybody saw it—I showed it at the Correia Gallery. But if you weren't there for

the first week or two, you never saw it because the people in the gallery gave it to the guy before the show was over. He wanted it now. I said, "Don't take it now. Wait, it's part of the show." No, he wanted it. What kind of gallery is this?

KD: That is strange. I've never heard of that.

JV: They broke every freaking rule. They even came up with rules.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: People, collector friends, friends in Miami I haven't talked to in years—because remember, I was doing all of those murals—so I was out of the gallery thing. People from Hollywood, even though, again, I don't hang out with them, but we are friends because they see my work, they live with my work every day. I am in their house every day. Not me, this guy, but me.

KD: Yeah, your spirit.

JV: Right. I'm in there [the Correia gallery] every day. So they send a note saying, "John, hey, went to your showing, give me a call, my number is this." And this other artist, "John, where were you?" They didn't give me those messages until seven or eight months later. I go, again, another insult. You people don't have a clue. I was so embarrassed. I didn't call them. I'm not going to call. They thought I never got the message. It's too embarrassing.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Instead of calling eight months later, "Oh, I got your message."

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: What is that? "Jesus Christ, John." "He's busy," or "He didn't get it," or "He's an asshole."

KD: There's no logic to not cultivate the relationships.

JV: Exactly. I know.

KD: Right.

JV: It's insane. It's insane.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: I'm going back there. I'm going back to a lot of areas in my life where it's right here again. I got to throw a *limpia*, am I? *[slap]*

KD: *[laughter]* That's fun.

JV: *[laughter]* On my own forehead, spin in circles and light the sugar cane. Oy!

KD: So the cost of Plexiglas.

JV: Okay. The cost of Plexiglas, it's because of framing. You've got to frame it. Any kind of—

KD: You mentioned it didn't occur to you—

JV: Even watercolor, pencil, anything but paint, has got to be covered.

KD: Yeah.

JV: So nowadays, we use the UV protection, and some people even want non-glare.

KD: Yeah.

JV: It's like, today I'm picking up a piece—I thought I would have it before I came in, but it's not going to be ready until two, so I'm not going to get it until five. Because the guy's coming over too. I can call him and see if it's ready. Because if I bring it in here, he'll see the way it's framed.

KD: Right.

JV: How much is that frame? It's close to five hundred dollars for the frame.

KD: Yeah, easily.

JV: But it is museum quality.

KD: Right.

JV: Because it is an investment. Some people can't afford it. So I think when I have the show, I might just use regular Plexi. Part of me just wanted to show it in the frame without the Plexi and just let them put it in. I always just want to do things—just put the frame, put the molding, ready for the glass and just show the work. Some part of me wants to do that. One thing I came up with, you see these tabs?

KD: Yeah.

JV: I don't have to pierce [the artwork]. I showed it like that in San Francisco, and Rupert García said, "John, how can you show your work . . ." I had pushpins in it, or maybe I had staples. I said, "It's archival." He said, "John, it's tacky." That's when I showed that [piece] *One to Five.*, and I said, "Yeah, that's the way I can show it. I can't frame it."

KD: You can't afford to frame it.

JV: You look at the work and: "Oh my God, John." People don't care. It's a community gallery. It's at [Studio] 24, Galería de la Raza, years ago, when I was showing with Amelia [Mesa-Bains].

KD: I thought it was actually quite clever that you don't pierce the paper.

JV: Oh, it took me years to do that. When I did the *Fall of Babel* I used a note one day [and pinned it], because I don't even know what it's going to look like. You forget about the pinhole. I pinned the note to the big sheet of paper and it was in the clouds. So when I had it framed, the collector goes, "What is that hole in there?" When you pay [big bucks]. I don't blame him. All the sudden you're, like, ["Oh shit"].

KD: [laughter] "What is that hole?"

JV: They're like, "Wow, there's a hole." And they said, "John, you've got to come fix it." So instead of panicking, I went over there, and I got [tissue]. I brushed it up and stuck it in the hole. And I used a little bit of white glue underneath it and I put it behind there.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And the guy from the frame shop said, "John, that's good man. You got to work for me."

KD: Restoration.

JV: It was basically like, "Oh shit, what do I do?" You can't put a piece of paper back there.

KD: Yeah.

JV: It's all in the white clouds, so I just, through sheer panic, got some paper, some white paper and just stuck it—you know how it's torn?

KD: Yeah.

JV: Genius, genius, I did it. I was like, "Oh, thank God." It'll take years to fall off, or turn yellow by that time.

KD: [laughter]

JV: It's still stuck there.

KD: Do you want to talk a little bit about—oh no, we've gone through more than half an hour. Let me get out of your hair for today. Thank you.

## DECEMBER 12, 2007

**KD:** I thought I queued this up . . . Yes I did. This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez. Today is December 12, 2007. This is our fifth session for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. And today, John, I wanted to start with some questions about your teaching. You had mentioned that you taught at Long Beach State at one time.

**JV:** Yes.

**KD:** When was that and what kind of students were you teaching?

**JV:** Well, I was actually called to teach, was it last year? It was last year or the year before. I taught just—just one semester. They were trying to get me to teach there because I went to school there. I went back and I taught, it was called “Advanced Life Painting.” I thought it’d be kind of fun. I actually didn’t really like it. Even though—I didn’t really read the reviews afterwards—there were only, like, eight students because my class was added late. So a lot of people didn’t even know what kind of instructor I was. People already got their classes. So I got eight. I started with about ten. It got down to eight, because it’s supposed to be advanced, like, painting.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** So it’s supposed to be all models. But the way the system works there, is that they’re supposed to pay this modeling fee, and according to how many students you have is how much the modeling fee is. So, long story short, we only had models for the first four or five weeks. But mostly, the class was—they would come in and paint—we painted—I had a thing at my feet. I brought in my bull’s head. They had taxidermy there with owls and stuff. We basically just talked about art. It was kind of interesting for me because some of them were doing art-related projects. One guy was going to do a family mural or a mural for a family company and he wanted to know how to get paid and stuff, how does he charge and stuff. So I would go off for twenty to forty minutes talking about mural making and the whole business of doing the work and also the gallery scene. That was another day.

People would come in with their painting styles. I was open to a lot of people’s styles. I guess I’m not really a big art theorist. I like people’s effort and what they’re doing intrinsically in their work. In each artist I saw—some were lazy. Some thought that they were the best in the world. This one guy was so funny. People’s, just the way people were, this one guy could paint the background—because it was mostly realism there. This one guy was good at painting—he liked ships and he liked the harbors. So he’d go out there and paint meticulously the backgrounds. And coming into the foreground, as the imagery got larger in terms of whatever he’s—the tubing or some factory thing. Then he’d put the figures in—he wouldn’t finish it. So the background would be this meticulous, tightly rendered, cargo boxes, meticulous cargo truck boxes as they come off the ships with cranes and stuff. He would meticulously put those in, yet when he got to the workers, he wouldn’t finish their shoes. Some weird kind of stuff.

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** He was really good. I said, “You’ve got to finish your work.” And this other guy was really good. They were all good, this was advanced life painting. And this other guy—

**KD:** Studio arts?

**JV:** Right.

**KD:** BFA students?

**JV:** Yeah, most of them were BFA art majors. And I basically learned—what I’m trying to say is, I learned as much as I taught. And the class, we couldn’t really get into the painting things, the work, well, we stopped having the models. And I guess for the first year, I was kind of an easy mark. But I did give one guy a D because he was obviously working me. I really didn’t want to give him a D but he really didn’t paint. Everything was brown. The guy could paint really good, because I could see some of what they were painting for some of the other classes.

**KD:** Wow.

**JV:** So what they were doing for my classes—these teachers have reputations—when I went to school there, other teachers were the same way. They give you tons of work. You're constantly working for these people. Portraits, they'd have them do a portrait a week, plus the other work. They'd do a self-portrait, that's what it was, a self-portrait a week and all of this. I would have them use a life and also use imagery, personal imagery and stuff. Some of them worked pretty good. And the other ones were faking it. I really had a mixed—the faculty kind of apologized to me saying that the next time, I'll have a better class. I thought that I was going to disappoint them. I said, "You know, I want to come back." I went to school there five years, five and a half before I finally left. I felt like I never left, I just got old.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** I was just in the same painting classes. And that drive, there and back, wasn't something I really enjoyed. I felt like I had to detox, just from the driving. That's what most people do. I hadn't done it for so many years. I didn't really have to do that. And so, I thought I was going to disappoint them, I could tell. There was this woman [teacher] there, I said, "You know what? I don't think I'm going to come back." She said, "Well, it's not up to you to decide, we decide if you're going to come back or not. And we decided that we don't want you to come back."

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** I started laughing. See, that's classic, I think I'm going to disappoint them and then they say, "We don't need you." But they did call me. They wanted me to teach—they sort of skipped a semester. I told them no. I have taught before, like I was telling you. In the '80s I taught consistently through UCLA . . . What is that Artsreach program they had in the '80s through UCLA extension, Susan Hill? Susan Hill in the early '80s, ran the—you know, all of the arts programs for the prison system. I taught in both the California Institute for Men and the California Institute for Women. I guess it's Pomona, or maybe both of them were in Pomona. There's even a women's prison in Fontana, like out on the Pomona freeway as far as you can get. I taught for five years or so. It seemed like it was quite a while. I taught all the way up until, it seems—I went on my residency to the south of France, then I tried to teach again when I came back. But I was so out of it. I just had to quit because it was just [over]. So I taught from about '83 to about '88. Pretty much just two days a week, driving out to Pomona, and it'd be [intense]. That's why driving, for me, it's a challenge.

**KD:** I hear you. [laughter]

**JV:** I'd have to get on the freeway in the afternoon, two thirty or three in the afternoon, to get there by six-thirty.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** Because you are in the face of traffic, the height of traffic. You just stay in the fast lane and crawl all the way up until, God, I don't know, forever. But to come home, it's only forty minutes, because it's late at night and you just fly home.

**KD:** So it was evenings that you taught.

**JV:** Yeah. For a while, I taught at CIM, but I didn't really like the [male psyche, the] whole atmosphere in the prison. Guys are just weird.

**KD:** You mean the posturing between males?

**JV:** Yeah, that's why these guys are in jail. They always pick fights. "I'm a man and you're not. I am a free man." There's just a lot of tension. At the time [through UCLA], there were actors who taught theater, there's guys who taught music, video, creative writing. That's when the prisons had a lot. They had exercise yards. Some guys would just beef up all day long. I found that part just troubling, unnecessary.

**KD:** Part of your critique was the way masculinity was expressed?

**JV:** Yeah, I guess the way, because I was raised by my mother, I'm a sensitive guy. I hardly ever fought. I don't like boy's clubs. It is unnecessary and it just rubs me the wrong way. I just try to avoid it. I have always been a loner, which helps in the work. I enjoy being alone working, reading, then I go home. Only in the art

classes I could deal with anybody's mind. Anyway, there was this one guy that was half-baked. angel dust damaged his brain cells. He was into the devil, the devil was into him.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: That's what it was.

KD: Right.

JV: He was one of these great, bizarre, dark [drawers]. Everybody was afraid of him. They were afraid of his drawings, because he would use charcoal, only charcoal, and he'd do like these hallways of these serpents and devil dogs guarding. And all the way down the hallway, it was a throne, where the devil sat. That shows, like, a lot of really negative drug use. But I liked his work because it was so committed, it was so strong. This stuff, it's like the punk stuff, remember, this was the '80s. Then there was this other guy, this black guy would come into the art class once in a while, real talented. Lots of these guys were really talented but out in the streets, they get into crime. But there was this black guy who would look at magazines of these green-eyed, blonde models seductively posing, and he'd make them black girls. Really good.

KD: Whoa.

JV: He would make them into black women doing the same thing. I thought that was so cool.

KD: Yeah.

JV: But the guy would only show up once in a while. And there was this other guy, Charles, Charlie? Charlie was this black guy. When you taught in prisons—remember, this is over the years.

KD: Yeah.

JV: When you taught in prison, they said, "Don't get involved with them." The one thing that I learned is don't find out what they did because it will change your attitude about them.

KD: Yeah.

JV: When I found out what this one guy did, somebody told me, some kind of a—I don't know, he killed his kid or something. He doesn't know that you know, but the way you change, because in prison, everybody is in that bubble. He knew something happened because I just couldn't look at him the same way. And this guy, Charlie, he was a really good painter, and we really got along, and I did what I'm not supposed to do, is I gave him my phone number when he got out because he won my trust. So in my studio, I got a call from him. He was out. I go, "Oh, wow." I go, "Hey," because I was going to [help him]. He was really good. He even knew that he shouldn't be calling me. He said he was going to come and visit. I said, "All right." That was when I was in my downtown studio. But before he could come visit me, he broke his parole violation, he was back in prison. So when I see him in prison, I go, "Hey what are you doing here?" He goes, "Well, he broke his parole, he's back in art class."

When they get out—I really learned a lot—when they get out, they go back to what got them in trouble, their neighborhood, their friends, whatever they're doing out in the city. And then there was this other guy, he was an Aryan. This is all in the same class, a few years in a row. I forget how many weeks it was, how we would teach, eight weeks, twelve weeks, then we would stop and then start again.

KD: And you saw mostly the same people?

JV: Pretty much. Some would come in and out. There was a hardcore group of six guys and at the beginning. One guy had a good idea that actually happened. He wanted to do murals. This was the Aryan guy. He was doing this cup and he had swastikas on it and he was asking me how to improve his cup. I think it was just hilarious stuff.

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: Well, maybe the swastika, you should give it a shadow, or say, instead of making it so anti-Jewish, just make it white supremacy. It was real crazy, you know, real crazy stuff.

KD: *[laughter]* Right.

JV: I was trying to make it [better, regardless].

KD: You worked with the concept.



JV: Yeah, I tried to make it a better Aryan cup. Because what about blacks and what about the Mexicans, what makes it so Jewish, anti-Jewish? And they were in the same class with this guy who was doing his devil stuff. And then once in a while, you'd have these troublemakers come in, prowling around, up to no good.

And then once, there was this guy who came in, I only saw him once, but the way he was talking, he sounded like a street professor, or a wise—I don't mean wise guy like he was a smartass; the guy had wisdom. He would speak in parables. I couldn't tell you exactly what he said, but his manner and the way he was talking about what the other guys were doing in the class and the things he had to say, everybody listened to him. He was kind of an older guy. It was like, "Who was that guy?" It was just somebody from the yard. I taught in the minimum security.

Some of the officers, when they would see some of my art books, figure books and stuff, they didn't know what I was doing. One time I brought this can of paint, it was a particular color, to make flesh-tone. It's a green-gold. He said, "Okay, I have to check this out." I say, "Okay." I open the can and he's talking to me, real nice and common. I say, "See, it's a can of paint." He goes, "What color is that?" He stuck his pen in it and swirled it around and looked at my face as if I was going to be like, [*gasps*] like he caught me bringing in drugs.

KD: [*laughter*] Right.

JV: "You're crazy man, I don't want to end up here. I'm not going to bring in—what, weed? For the guys in here? Make a dime bag, make thirty dollars and get fifteen years?"

KD: Exactly.

JV: And then—he realized that I looked at him like, "Oh man, what are you doing?" Then he had to pull his pen out and it was all full of paint and stuff.

KD: [*laughter*]

JV: And for the both of us, it was a shocking moment. I said, "Man, I'm not stupid." But what had happened is they're supposed to stamp your hand.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Because you're coming in. But the guy forgot to stamp my hand. So I'm walking halfway down the road because [the] guard's house is maybe a hundred fifty yards away from the minimum-security entrance. I'm like halfway there, realize the guy didn't stamp my hand and it was getting dark. So I turn around, walk all the way back and say, "Hey man, you didn't stamp my hand." He goes, "Who you are?" I said, "I was just here, remember, with the paint?" He said, "You could be anybody, I don't know who you are." Then he says, "I'm just kidding you, I know." I was like flush. They have that much power. I was like, this dude has it out for me.

KD: He could have locked your ass up.

JV: I had my ID, I looked like a free guy.

KD: Yeah.

JV: It was crazy. So after that, you get like—you have to be always looking because you're actually going into their environment. So in the men's prison, even with the officers, it was just too much. So I tried teaching with the women and it was a lot more fun. I had Patricia Krenwinkel in my class, one of the Manson girls. A lot of the women were—

KD: Patricia?

JV: Patricia Krenwinkel, "Kremmy." She was one of the Manson—

KD: Oh, Kremmy.

JV: Yeah.

KD: [*laughter*]

JV: She was the oldest one there. She had the parole numbers that was only, like, four digits. Everyone else was six or seven, seven at the most, or at the least. She had four. She was never going to get out. She was a real good artist. They called her the "old man." She hardly ever talked. You could see that she had this infamous guilt, you know.

There were other women in there for just about as serious stuff, too. But the women were a lot easier to work with. I think even the women there, who are the ones who came in every day, who were just the art administrators there, they always hired me. We did mural painting. We did pastel painting. We did pastel drawing and painting stuff. I felt like that, even though that was a little further to get to. Some of the stories, you wouldn't even believe some of the stories, like—they didn't like to call themselves guards. But the guards were knocking them up. There was a whole undercurrent in there.

KD: Yeah.

JV: They wanted to be called officers. [The inmates] told me a bunch of stories. Some of them [were wild]. I like to be friendly with people. And if I got really close to some of them, some of them would back off. And some of them got a crush on me. They'd come in all made up. I'd be like, "Why'd she get so made up today?" Because of you. I go, "Oh, man." So I'd have to back off.

KD: Right.

JV: So there was really a lot more honest dynamic. And sometimes, the best compliments, when you teach in the prisons is when they tell you by the end of your three-hour class that they forgot what time it was.

KD: Wow.

JV: Three hours went by like it was just twenty minutes ago. Oh, wow, that's a compliment. It's because they forgot. Because they're in there for years.

KD: Right.

JV: Anyway, it showed me that—that's why I had to quit. When I went to my residency and—like an idiot, I come back with my slideshow of my travels. They don't want to see that. I didn't realize it. Here I was in Spain, and this is Paris.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Really nice photos and stuff. Place is dead quiet. They didn't breathe. This is where I stayed, see, it looks like a castle, you know? I stayed in this room. This is the Leaning Tower of Pisa. By the end, I go, "Oh shit." It was not cool. I messed up. I didn't really realize it. Some of them were like, "Wow," but some were like, "Shit man, I'm in jail." Their shoulders were round. The thing about teaching in prisons—I think that's why I told you about Long Beach State, with students, especially in art, what you want to paint, how you paint it and how you present it, either confident or kind of like, "What do you think about this, teacher?" Really exposes what kind of people we are. That's why I think it's like therapy. Maybe that's when I went to Long Beach, it was like therapy because that's what I learned—I just realized that, talking to you—that's what I learned in the prisons.

KD: For them, it was therapeutic?

JV: Yeah. It was—yeah, because—yeah. I guess, for me too, at a certain point, but I don't want to think about that too much. But in terms of the students. I was just thinking about that—it's still going into my mind. That's how I kind of see students, because that's what I learned. A few times I taught classes through Self Help Graphics, nothing really established, like teaching for the Unified School District, or [pause] or junior colleges. I taught for the Ryman [Carroll] Foundation. I did some lectures and things like that. And through Self Help I taught a pastel class in my studio, downtown, in the '90s. And everybody who took my class, they were all artists, like Patssi Valdez and Yreina, and what's his name, his last name is Adonis?

KD: Alex?

JV: Yeah, Alex Donis. [laughter] Adonis, he would love to be called Adonis.

KD: [laughter]

JV: He took my class.

KD: Yreina Cervantes.

JV: Patssi. This was in my studio downtown. I thought I was going to teach kids, people who were coming up and stuff. But these were my contemporaries, they wanted to learn my pastel technique. I don't think I really taught it. [laughter]

KD: [laughter]

- JV: We basically just did drawings and talked. We talked about getting in galleries. Just the regular art [scene]. I was surprised who was in my class.
- KD: What did you charge per class?
- JV: I don't think I charged anything. From Self Help, I don't even know if I got paid. I don't remember. I must have gotten paid.
- KD: You mean, it was at the studio, but it was through Self Help?
- JV: Right, and they would sign up.
- KD: Right.
- JV: And it was people that had worked at Self Help. When they found out I was teaching, they were teaching over there. I thought it was weird, you know. I didn't do it again, because I guess I'm really selfish with my time. I really like to—I don't like to commit to too much other than to get my work done. I would do [a few things]—
- KD: One of the questions here says, “Does your teaching compliment or interfere with your work?”
- JV: I guess I find that it interferes. I really don't want it to. I really feel bad because I feel selfish, you know. It's true. It's true, it interferes. The pay is okay. Don't get me wrong, it helps me pay the bills, but I don't know. People like it. I was telling you, my wife and son were reading the comments I was getting from my six students at Long Beach and they said, “John, they really liked you.” I said, “Really? We hardly did anything.” “But they said they learned a lot from you.” I also showed them my artwork. Some of them were really surprised. They said that some of the teachers that they take never show them their artwork, never. I thought that is weird, you know? I would bring my work in and talk about how I did it and how I developed this whatever storyline. That took hours. Each class was about—I think it was a four-hour class with like a half hour break or a twenty-minute break.
- KD: So, at one point you said it was a challenge to do the long drive on the freeway. So, if it were closer—
- JV: Oh yeah, I think that I would do it if it was closer. I don't really go out and pursue a teaching job. I won't go to Cal State LA and say, “I'm ready to teach you guys, let me know.” I guess it's because, again, today I feel that way, I don't want to be rejected. I don't have to go out there and ask and have them tell me no. They already filled up. Who do you think you are? Northridge is just as far, although I have some friends that teach there. I would teach at LA City College, but so would everybody else. This guy told me that he teaches chemistry in the city [community] college system and in terms of pay, they pay more than the state university.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: I was shocked. No, they pay the best.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: City College, and you say, “Yeah, of course.” I never knew that. That's sort of like teaching at East LA College. I remember this one guy from Northridge . . .
- KD: But at City College, you wouldn't get those upper division students, you'd just get the beginning—
- JV: I kind of like beginning.
- KD: Oh, really?
- JV: Because I remember when I was a beginner, and then I was serious. Because sometimes, beginners take instruction better than the ones who know what they're doing. They say, “Well, what do you think of this?” A lot of them think that they're really good, but they're beginners. It depends on what they're doing, especially in terms of art making. This one guy, he wasn't in my class, but boy, this guy looked like—when we were in the '70s—he was immaculately hip, almost hippie hip. Even his girlfriend was very gothic, and they were always together. There's this really cool painting of this guy. I looked at him like, “I remember you.”
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: His paintings were okay, real dark, lot of varnish. But his frames were—this gold with the velvet and all the effects. I said that guy is going too far. I don't know how long he's going to do it, but he's got it down, this whole look and sophistication. He's at Long Beach. It was cool.

The thing about Long Beach, when I went back, it was fun to go back, because the trees looked bigger, everything grew. I couldn't—I would drive there and I'd have to get something to eat and I'd go to where I used to go when I was a student. But that's not for the faculty, it's for the students. And it was bigger. So I felt like, [when] I was in there, I said, "I got to get out of here." Faculty eat, they bring their own lunches or whatever. After a while, I would just grab a coffee and sit in my car and read the paper, in the faculty parking lot waiting for the class. Then I'd [go] right to the class and I would maybe get another—no, I'd just get that one coffee. But maybe I'd go to the little galleries that were showing the student art. And that'd be it. Just teach a class and get out of there. And that's the routine that you'd have to do. You're supposed to have [a routine].

**KD:** Was there an attempt on behalf of the full-time faculty to integrate the part-time?

**JV:** I don't know. You know, it's funny, because the guy who was the department head, he remembered me. I didn't know who he was. Even when I saw him again, I didn't recognize him. I don't know what it is. Anyway, he remembered me with the Adrienne Simard Gallery. He said he met me then when I had my [show]. He had a studio down there. He was the department head. He wanted to keep me there. I guess he wanted me to go [teach] because I came from Long Beach.

**KD:** Right.

**JV:** And then he—I always mentioned that I really liked it there. So, I was an alumni that was still making art, still out in the scene.

**KD:** Right.

**JV:** Stuff like that. But yeah, that's about all of my teaching that I did. That's pretty much it. The main [parts] and the consensus that I forgot to tell you until now, in the '80s, when I was teaching in prisons—

**KD:** How did you get that job teaching in prisons?

**JV:** I think I applied. Somebody told me about it, so I went to UCLA to the extension building to where the UCLA extension classes are.

**KD:** What was the appeal?

**JV:** Teaching in prisons, I felt—because I was kind of a . . . I was being flippant when I said, "I'm going to end up in prison one way or another anyway, so I might as well teach." It was just a job. I forgot how I got it. There was somebody else that I knew who taught in there. I don't know if it was Kim Abeles. Somebody was teaching. I even met the theater people. And then I got along really well with Susan Hill. She was the one, she was in charge of that. I still see her once in a while. She comes to my shows and stuff. And at one point I taught [at a juvenile prison]. The way I had to finally [quit], I actually turned down a job because I didn't like the way the institution acted towards their inmates. It was a juvenile detention out in Whittier. There's this big jail for the kids.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** And the guy [in charge]—I got in there and the head guy was on vacation. And there was this other character that was in charge. Their whole thing was carrot-stick approach. So with me, I like people to get [self-motivated], find things of self-worth. Well, that was too liberal for this guy. Basically, if they didn't behave in my class—some students didn't want to be in there. If they don't want to be in there, I don't want you to be there either.

**KD:** Right.

**JV:** I don't want it to be this holding pen. I guess, with the adults, you're in there, you signed up for it, and there was always a guard there, obviously, in the men's prison. And sometimes in the men's prison, the guard would determine what the inmates could or could not paint, if [the guards] had a power trip. Guys wanted to paint girls. I said, go ahead, do it. They would paint these beautiful—their fantasies—they would paint these beautiful women, not pornographic. Not at all, no pornographic—

**KD:** Really?

**JV:** But it would be pin-up stuff, they find them and paint them.

**KD:** Forties, '50s pinup?

- JV: More like '70s and '80s pinups. You'd be surprised what guys can do with their imagination.
- KD: Imagination. *[laughter]*
- JV: But anyways, it's just this side thing. But the officer just cleaned it up. He said, "No," he said you can do unicorns or the Aryan whatever-you're-doing, or your devil dogs of death. He was finally transferred out. For a while, we didn't have a guard. So I said, "You guys can paint whatever you want." It got embarrassing, because these guys got this big board [and painted]. They pinned up these three beach girls, just blaring at you.
- KD: *[laughter]*
- JV: Maybe the guard had a point. What am I going to do with this?
- KD: *[laughter]*
- JV: Oh man, too much freedom, that's right. You're in jail man. It was funny as hell. Over at the women's—not the women's—over at the—
- KD: The juvie thing?
- JV: Yeah, the juvie thing, and it was all guys. It was called Nelles [Youth Correctional Facility], right? It's in Whittier. It's still there. I remember they were trying to change it, make it bigger. But the guy who was in charge, I didn't like [his method]. I told him I didn't like the idea that if the [kids], if they mess up in my class, they get more time on their sentence. I don't want to be part of giving anybody time. I'm just in there to teach. I was trying to structure the classes. The guy wanted me to dump the pastels in the middle [of the table] and no graffiti. Why [can't] they do the graffiti? I don't mean the graffiti against the walls, but you know how they were doing those [letters, the intricacies]?
- KD: On paper.
- JV: Those real elaborate—
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: See, it was too soon. This was, it was right before [1987]. See, everything was based around [1987]. I can remember things easier in the '80s because it was based around before and after my residency in '87. So I know from '86 to '89 what was going on, because it was such a determining part of my life. I knew what came before and what came soon after. So the guy, he brought me into the [office] and basically told me that I was going to do it his way, or I have to just get out. And his way was like, "Who do you think you are, you're giving them hope, you're giving them false hope. They're all losers, and they're all going to go back to their neighborhood with all this hope that you're putting into your head and they're going to fail again." They're already failing. Some of the kids were in there for killing their parents.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Others were in there for heavy drug use, gang activity, even in the women's prison, there were women there who happened to be in the car when their stupid boyfriend's friend shot people up. They all got twenty years.
- KD: Conspiracy, yeah.
- JV: So there was a reality. In the woman's prison, I said, "You know what?" I came back after right after La Napoule, I said, "You know what? I'm going to take a break." I just came back and I'm going through some changes. LA to me looks like a big prison. That's what I'm thinking, I have to reassess things in terms of okay, so what happened? They said, "Well, we'll be here." I said, "Well, I'm going to take a break." They said, "We'll be here." She's got twelve years, she's got nine years. She doesn't know how long. They all have these years over them. This one's a short-timer, she's only got three years. Because we never would talk about that stuff. It was basically I was just visiting them. I was a guest, that's where they live. And it was just, I tried to make it funny, but it was like, "Damn, man."
- KD: So the tension between your freedom and their—
- JV: It was always there.
- KD: You were aware of it at the time?

- JV: Yeah, I was aware of it somewhat, but I [really] became really aware of it as time went on, I really understood it. So when I went and taught at the juvenile detention place, the way they had them set up—there were some really troubled kids there, but some of them really liked what I was teaching them. The guy wanted to me to forget about lessons and basically [become] a romper room. He says, “Either you do it that way,” and he wasn’t the main guy. So Artsreach would work with them—
- KD: Oh, Artsreach probably worked with, like, the warden.
- JV: Yeah, whoever the main guy was, he was on vacation; the other guy took over his position. He was more street himself. He was an authoritarian. He saw me as [an idealist]. Was my hair long then? It was probably like it is now.
- KD: Challenging authority, the wrong kind of guy. *[laughter]*
- JV: Yeah, I was artsy-fartsy. But there was this other artist that taught there and they got along evidently. I never knew who this guy was, but he talked about [him]. This was the guy. He would compare me to this other guy who would pretty much do whatever he wanted him to do. So he told me either—I’ll never forget—he told [me], “Look, take a week, come back next week, and either you do it my way, or you do the highway.” So the next week, I said, “I can’t do this.” I put the whole list down. So basically I quit. And that created a whole—because he didn’t think I was going to quit. I told Susan that I can’t deal with the policies there. Susan was shocked, she said, “If you quit, you have real good reasons.” And because he was in charge, I kind of liked it, because the guy needed to learn that we’re not all his inmates.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: He got in trouble because I quit because they knew he was authoritarian and he was second-in-command. So, one time when we gathered like where the artists and this guy showed up. I was just about to go to Europe. We gathered in Solvang. I was photographed with him as if we’re buddies. We’re both like really tense. He pretty much let me know that I got him in trouble. Why did I quit? I said I couldn’t deal with his policies. He said—I said, “I don’t want to argue about this stuff, let’s just pose for the photograph. Okay. Bye.” And [Susan] told the guy that I was one of their best teachers. I was always there. I was always involved and stuff. “Wow, I didn’t think I was one of your best teachers there.” And then when I went to Europe and I came back, she was happy that I was going to teach again. I just couldn’t do it. I wasn’t the same person. I tried to figure out who I was when I came back from Europe. Even my work was changing from that real urban identity and trying to find beauty in this urban setting, this urban LA setting. And that even came away from my book and this whole putting all these graphics together, all this war, blood and guts and torture and sensationalist imagery. I was pursuing some of that. Then, I got into [allegory].
- KD: Before you go into that, can you answer . . . So you would come with a curriculum planned, to the prisons, that was your own?
- JV: It would be [mixed].
- KD: Or would it be—
- JV: Well, yeah. In the woman’s prison, it was easier because I would talk to the women there. I forget what their names were, Amy and Becky. It’s funny how . . . I remember Becky, Rebecca. They were there all the time. They would talk to me about, “Oh, we want to hire you again. The inmates like you. What should we teach next time?” There would be this break, three or four week break, and then it’d start again. Or it seemed, or maybe a month or so break. “Let’s see if you can do a . . . John, can you teach murals?” I say, “How would we do a mural?” [She] says, “No, we have to do it on a four by eight panels and then we’ll find a place to put it.” I go, “All right, that sounds good, we could do this.” So we would do that.
- KD: So they’re basically technique-like classes.
- JV: Yeah, right.
- KD: You weren’t allowed to do subject matter.
- JV: Sure, we did that. I would let them do the subject matter, find out what they’re doing, what they like to do. I was really trying to figure out what they wanted to do and work with them. Some of them didn’t want me to work with them at all. So I left them alone. They would tell me some days—some of them

are really smart. They'd say, "John, we're really weak today because they haven't fed us protein in about a week or two." Everybody was lethargic. And some of those women were so emotionally distraught that they were on medication. They were just sitting there like that.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Just wow, man. And some of them, I would joke—there was this one woman, they called her—that was her nickname, it's not me—they called her "Thunder Thighs," okay? She was this big girl. She was like Richard Pryor. She was funny. She had us rolling, laughing. She was just crazy. She would give you the insight of what was going on in there. She had her name written across her T-shirt. She was overweight. She was so funny. And this other one was in the hippie drug movement. She was in there for, I don't know, acid or something. She said she was part of a real famous case. I was like whatever. She was from San Francisco, she loved Van Morrison. A lot of them were busted and a lot of that would [seep in]. So they would put that into their art, into the stuff they were doing. And it depended on who the officers were or who the supervisors were, on what they could do. Because, it seemed like if you were there a long enough time, you were much more sophisticated with what they were trying to get away with.

KD: Wow.

JV: And for me, it was like, this is a trip, man. So the one that really haunted me for a long time was that juvenile detention place because I knew I wasn't going to have a good time and I wanted to try and do a curriculum. So I would rack my brain for a week, talk to other friends of mine that taught and find out stuff that they were doing and I would try to do it in there. For instance, we'd get a paper bag, I'd find some toys, at the time my daughter had toys—

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez on the twelfth of December. This is our fifth session and our second tape for today. Go ahead, John, you were talking about—

JV: I guess, and the kids—I think I was there three different times before I was told to clean it up, try not to be so positive. But I would bring stuff, I'd bring bags of—because I'd really rack my brain to have some sort of particular class structure. Because, I was [trying to have classes]. It was pretty open ended, there was no specific theme. I was just an artist to come in and teach them drawing. And paint, forget it man, that wouldn't have worked. Even the pastel, it got messy. And the kids were all—they're trouble and they're always testing [me]. I brought this African mask, pass it around and let them hold on to it. This African mask, it was a hard piece of wood. It comes back broken in half. Instead of [getting] all mad, I said, "Whoever did that is pretty strong, that was really hard wood." They all looked at me like what was I going to do. I said I can glue it, didn't make a big deal out of it. And by doing that, you win some of their respect, because it's not a big deal. Of course, that's what I thought.

KD: Did you ever—I'm trying to think of, when you're in an art class, in some place like Long Beach or even Self Help, and you go through giving, I don't know if want to call it critique, but applying how most people improve. Do you think of it differently when you're working in a prison? Are you worried about their feelings?

JV: Not really. I don't know if I'm ever—oh, you know, it's a good point because that reminds me. Okay, that's a very good point. The way that I would avoid that is that I would see what styles people were using and I'd go find a fairly well known artist at the time that was doing the exact same style. Like, you know who was really good? That guy Clemente? He was an Italian artist in San—the artists at the time who were big were, like, Sandro Chia, then Francisco Clemente and Julian Schnabel. I would find these catalogs or find like some Picasso and stuff. I would go in and say, "See, the way you're drawing, the same thing." You see? The difference between the way that you're doing it [and them]. Then they say, "This is my art." It's the way that you show it. Even German Expressionism at the time was perfect. German Expressionism at the time was ugly art. Just slap, dash, emotional, and they would look at it and see . . . See, for me, it was to show them that everything is valid as long as you think it is. So I kind of avoided things that look like that.

There were times that some people would [be protective]. You could tell that they didn't want any criticism. Maybe I got a little sensitive to people because of the way I was raised. I would always try to [read them]. My mother taught us, taught me, how to try to read what they're feeling that day. Are you in a good mood? Are you not in a good mood? You don't want to be bothered? Is there some warmth in the room? I learned that just from observation. Maybe that helped this creative mind thing, because as I got older, my wife would show me that whatever I thought was going on in the world wasn't really happening, it was just my own mind. So you have to temper that. I used to think that, "Oh, that person's thinking that, and that." And it wasn't necessarily true. But in the prison things, it kind of helped. It kind of helped for me to gauge how people were. Stuff like that.

**KD:** You mentioned that sometimes when you were working with students, you would talk about how you came about a particular image or how you worked through the storyline. Can you tell me about one of these, then?

**JV:** Sure.

**KD:** *Pool Party*, 1986, oil on canvas.

**JV:** Okay.

**KD:** One hundred-seventy by sixty-nine inches.

**JV:** Yeah, that's a painting. The other one is *Revelations*. *Pool Party*, when I did it, it took a long time for it to leave my studio. It was a fun painting to do. The woman with the hose is my daughter's mother. I wanted to use just a regular person, to do the Southern California painting. Like, we never had a pool. But the girl washing the dog—this is a good example of when I got different things, different imagery from my photograph and created a reality.

The girl washing the dog was the girl living across the street from where we lived at the time in Echo Park and she was washing her dog. I was coming home from the bus and the dog was barking at me and giving me this look. He was tied up. It was a cool summer day. And then Irene [with the hose] was, I think, she was with her sisters and they were watering the kids, because her and her sisters they all had kids about the same age. They were all five, six, or seven. It was just a nice California thing. I couldn't figure out what the background was because I almost wanted it to be this middle-class LA setting. Yet, the whole thing about this time was that LA would have this tragedy—shoot-outs. I was going to have a shoot-out in the background. But because of the fires, like Griffith Park and Bel Air fires and the Malibu fires. I always [wanted to be current].

**KD:** Isn't that weird? It's like you're talking about today.

**JV:** Yeah, right, yeah.

**KD:** It's 1986. Was it painted during the year of '86?

**JV:** Yeah, '85 to—

**KD:** Oh, '85 to '86?

**JV:** Eighty-five to '86. And it was in my studio for a long time. I couldn't get rid of it. It was like this huge painting. And finally, finally this guy [almost bought it]. Some people liked it, but it didn't fit in their home, it was too big for their collection. They didn't know where to put it, because it was just a big painting.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** The thing about the painting which was really fun, was there were a few things about it, where like the woman is watering the pool. The pool doesn't need any water, but the dog does.

**KD:** [laughter]

**JV:** But the fact that the fire's back there, the pool appears to make you feel safe from it because you've got water there. But it's really about, the idea about—you're in the house watching the news, [wondering,] "What's happening in LA?" This big city. You go outside and, "Oh, the fire is there." So I'm sitting here in Echo Park safely, and the fire is maybe a mile away and you don't feel threatened by it. You can see the helicopters—or let's say there's some wreck down the street. Even to this day, we'd be watching a car chase late at night, and then you hear the helicopter, because they're coming up the [local] freeway, late



at night, and then you hear it. That's got to be the idea that this kind of work reminds me that it's real LA living. What's nice about this work is it still has—it isn't dated. It could still be now, which I think is kind of a fortunate thing.

**KD:** I mean, not just the fires, that whole idea, the way we distance ourselves, this kind of idyllic, fantasy work, and the tragedy going on in the background, completely oblivious to it. It's right there unless—of course, that one, it is creeping, there are nice houses back there in the hills.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** And the bushes—I was really doing, I was really trying to experiment with paint and flesh-tone. That's when I could paint, and I just really figured out what I was going to end up doing. And I remember in the background, I had to stop because I couldn't figure out what the background was. I had these guys crouched, shooting at cops, there were cop cars on the corner. But it was too dated, because it was from the Texas tower. You know that guy, what's his name? Speck, was his name, that shot the kids in the '60s? I was going to use [that]. I'm glad I didn't use it . . . *Life* magazine—

**KD:** The image from *Life* magazine with the story?

**JV:** With the Texas school tower. He was one of the first ones, who went up on the tower in some university—

**KD:** And knocked off some kids?

**JV:** Yeah, students.

**KD:** Whoa. [Charles Whitman shot students from the clock tower on the UT Austin campus in 1966; the story appeared in *Life* on August 12—ed.]

**JV:** Yeah, he went up the tower, it was real famous. Speck? I forget his name. It was a very famous guy, from the '60s. I'm glad I didn't use it. Because I was used to the cops coming around and chasing—even through here, since I've been here, there was a car chase and it ended up down the street. There's something, there's always something. So that was *Pool Party*.

**KD:** It actually says here, '87. It might be a typo. I can see—

**JV:** Probably. Eighty-six or '87. But yeah, that's what they did.

**KD:** And it's—what I always found interesting was, like you said, it had that middle class, Chicano, successful, they own their home.

**JV:** [laughter]

**KD:** And you're telling me this is a composition that you created?

**JV:** Yeah, right, right.

**KD:** And then *Revelations*?

**JV:** *Revelations* was really going into allegory as far as I could really push it at the time. Symbolism and, like, the terrain, and even that mysterious floating figure tied to the other guy.

**KD:** This?

**JV:** Yeah. And then the Aztec mask of the moon with the baby. And they're in their underwear. That's really, that's kind of, that's the way—this work came from when I was doing the El Paso mural project.

**KD:** Oh.

**JV:** I was really struck by the desert, away from the river. I felt like I was doing [another story]. El Paso had so much for me, that I actually did two or three pieces after the mural. And that's one of them. There were people who crossed the border, they crossed with nothing. It was like, the whole was, it could be part of the Iraq War, it could be going into the underworld. In fact, I really wanted people to look at themselves and tell me what they think it is.

**KD:** The narrative here, what strikes me is that in *Pool Party* there's a consistent—one story that's being told.

**JV:** Right.

**KD:** But here, in *Revelations*, there can be many?

**JV:** Right, because—that's why it's called *Revelations*. They're looking off and something is being revealed to them. And to me, "revelations" means that there are multiple meanings in that piece. As a matter of fact, there was a guy out of Chicago—

- KD: He's wearing, like, an antler.
- JV: Right, yeah, because that's part of the Yaqui deer dance thing. Because it really had to do with the El Paso thing. The fact that Cheech Marin ended up with it, I thought was [great]. I think I sold it to somebody else, or maybe they're the ones that got it. I don't remember. I remember it looked like him at the time, but now [he tells me] it looks like Richard Pryor.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: Yet, there was this woman, this artist friend. [Her] mother—her mother was really upset that I put those people in there in underwear. She said, "Why do you have to paint Mexicans in their underwear?" Wow, everybody takes it personally.
- KD: I thought it was so accurate that she was wearing a purple bra.
- JV: Right. [laughter]
- KD: [laughter] And then *Getting Out of the Car*?
- JV: This goes back to '84. That's when I really got serious with doing these tableaux. I used a car, because at the time, car shootings were pretty recent in the early '80s. Guns weren't really a big deal. People still used the good ole chains and clubs and brass knuckles and rocks and sticks. When guns came in, it seemed real chicken shit, like it was a real cowardly thing. I was trying to comment on that, just the senselessness of human violence. That's why I took it all the way to the ocean, the way we slaughter fish. Are we going to eat that thing or is it just hunting? Are those guys fighting? The car show thing, that part was fun, because I actually used a car club at the time, most of those people around that car posed for me. I even had to take some people out, there were just too many of them.
- KD: So unlike the others that we were looking at, this was not from a photograph that you had in your data-bank or one that you were using?
- JV: That was like fifteen photographs, even the floor.
- KD: You posed this.
- JV: Right, I posed most of them—
- KD: Most of them in the car.
- JV: There are maybe two or three of them that are not [in the composite]. The kid is separate, this girl is separate, and obviously he's from something else too. But everybody else—
- KD: The angel.
- JV: Right, and everything else, they posed for me, in various forms.
- KD: And is it—this is in a book, so it's very hard to—I've seen this, I just don't remember. Does it break?
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: From black to blue?
- JV: This is what I do.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: It's two sheets of paper, and one was black and one I made sky.
- KD: And this floor here?
- JV: That floor was fun because it's like the sun.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: It's in front of Clifton's Cafeteria.
- KD: I was trying to wonder why I know that.
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: That was downtown. Everything else is from street photography. I photographed people fighting. Those people with the fish. This guy, he took a vacation down to Baja. And I ended up with his photographs. So I used part of it there. This piece again, it started and I didn't know where it was going to go. I really got [into it]. This was the time that I really started to trust that I didn't know where this thing was going to go, when I'm going to get this stuff done and just let it go. It would take me sometimes a long time to really

figure out. Especially those. That one is really carefully composed. And as I got older, it got a lot more fun. That time, I was really like, “Wow,” I knew I was on to something. I had to reassess the piece, because when I get it done, I feel like, “that was then.” But as time goes on, some people really respond to this work fifteen years later. So, I really felt comforted, I guess is the word—there are probably other words—that the work still holds up for people over time. It still means something.

KD: Well, *Tony and Eddie*?

JV: Yeah, *Tony and Eddie*. The guest is leaving.

KD: [*laughter*] Eighty-six.

JV: Yeah, '86. That comes from—for a while, I was an apartment manager in, I guess it's like East Hollywood. Silver Lake, East Hollywood. There are some parts of Silver Lake that are not Silver Lake. If you're south of Sunset, I think it's East Hollywood.

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

JV: [*laughter*] That's where we were. And I was now an apartment manager. Even though the images there are—some of them are from my own personal furniture at home, and then my studio looking out [into the hallway]. Some of them were from my daughter's little toys and her chair and stuff. Yeah, all of that was from my house, and the sofa. But some of the other stuff, [like] the table with the coke on it, and the rug and all of that, and the sky in the background, those are from *fotonovella* magazines.

KD: You use this again, don't you?

JV: You mean the guy being—his hair being yanked up?

KD: It just looks like . . . I thought I saw it in one of these—

JV: Maybe.

KD: He just looks so familiar. I couldn't find it. I just looked—

JV: You know what I realize that I didn't realize then? Some of the *fotonovella* stuff from Mexico City, a lot of those guys are the actors that act out in these comic books. They're all still shots and they put these Spanish cartoon balloons over them saying stuff.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And they use the people over and over again. And they're pretty well known stars at the time.

KD: Yeah.

JV: I didn't know that, being *pocho* from LA. I thought this stuff—it's very burlesque, it's fun. So again, that was like *Two Vendors*. That's like *Two Vendors*, where I saw something and so I tried to re-create it. And the thing—excuse me—the thing I saw there . . . Is my shirt on backwards? I'm sorry.

KD: No, you're dressed correctly. [*laughter*]

JV: Suddenly, I'm like—

KD: You want that on tape, right? [*laughter*]

JV: [*laughter*]

KD: John Valadez knows how to dress himself.

JV: [*laughter*]

KD: Sorry. [*laughter*]

JV: Well, what happened is that—at a certain time you're apartment manager, and we have to collect rent.

KD: Yeah.

JV: People hate your guts. I don't get the money. But the fact that every month, I have to go around, and who didn't bring their rent down to our apartment, we have to go up there and chase them down. Because we'd be paying half the rent. I paid half the rent, but I had to take all the trashcans [down to the street every week]. At that time, we had trashcans that guys would dump.

KD: Right, not the ones on wheels.

JV: Right, because this is, jeepers, I don't know. This is '78 through '80. So anyway, one day, these guys [in an apartment] were fighting. The story goes, downstairs the water was leaking through the lights. There was a lot of roaming upstairs, there's water leaking through the lights. I go through, “Yeah, there is [something

up], huh.” I go upstairs to see what’s up. Somebody broke the aquarium. They’re fighting. It’s urban theatre. I call it “living theatre,” man. Urban theatre, they’re fighting. I knock on the door. They open the door. They’re all sweaty like “What?”

KD: [laughter]

JV: “Can you guys turn it down, and clean up that water? It’s leaking. You’re embarrassing yourself.” They weren’t doing that, but the imagination goes.

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

JV: So that’s where that came from. I always like to do the thing where the woman is kicking the guy’s ass. In more ways than not, that’s what really happens. The other way, it’s just too easy. But when a woman can just kick your butt . . . again, she actually was in—in the actual imagery, she was fighting this other woman, and I don’t know what he was doing.

KD: This is not a composition—

JV: Right. Yeah. To do that, it’s too easy. You know what I mean? I want to have her pulling hair. But putting the guys here, it wasn’t a girl fight. For me, that’s kind of what makes it fun for me. He had these little trunks.

KD: Painful. I always thought you did skin because you really liked it.

JV: Oh yeah, sure, of course.

KD: I mean, the composition in *Revelations* of his flesh is just so beautiful, the red, yellow, green.

JV: Oh yeah, I was really fascinated with flesh. I would even tell my family, the last time [we] went to New York, I was a bit loud, I’d say, “Look at that, see? I told you, that woman’s flesh was green?” “Dad, cool it.”

KD: [laughter]

JV: I swear to God, if I painted that, nobody would believe it, look at it! They’d be like, “Dad.” This guy was looking at us like, “What the hell are these tourists talking about?” It was like a freak show.

KD: I always thought that there was other layers in *Tony and Eddie*. This purple back wave.

JV: Right, yeah, yeah. That’s studio, that’s when I had my studio, that’s opened into another person’s [area]. Again, it’s just to show rooms and stuff.

KD: The relationship with the space.

JV: Yeah, it’s always about the composition.

KD: Beautiful. This is later. Two thousand and one, *Car Show* on canvas.

JV: Yeah. For me, [*Car Show* is] like a big pastry.

KD: [laughter]

JV: And the girl’s pants are sort of like the—yeah.

KD: Well, was it from a photo?

JV: Yeah, again—

KD: You saw people doing this?

JV: At a car show, yeah. That was all about five years—

KD: I’m most curious about this one and this one.

JV: That is real.

KD: The girl with the big eye, and he’s looking right at her thigh.

JV: He’s looking right at me.

KD: But she’s showing him—

JV: She’s about to put her leg over his shoulder, and they were being photographed from the front.

KD: [laughter] Oh, okay.

JV: That is what fascinated me about the car show, because it was more about the guys and girls flirting—there was this heavy post-AIDS flirting.

KD: Yeah. Yeah.

JV: And when I used to go, it was more about the cars. And the women were part of the car. You got a big fancy car like that? You invest in the car and you get the pretty girl.

KD: Yeah.

- JV:** Now, it's like—now, it's even—I don't know. At the time, it was the mid-'90s, when I was doing the Santa Ana mural. And I'd just [have to] take a break and go to the car show at the sports [arena]. It started about '95 or '96, and I finally stopped in 2001. I figured when I can walk through a car show and not have the same energy, I knew it was over. Then I'd have all of this imagery. For me, it's just people posing. It's posing either for my camera or for other people. I went to Vegas. I went to San Diego. I went to Oakland.
- KD:** Was this all intentional investigation?
- JV:** Oh yeah, I would take off. I was on a roll. I would like . . . Okay, the big car show in San Francisco. I'd try to get my family to go. They're not [into it], because they're bored to death. They went with me to the Vegas. Because Vegas was like the end, and they went. I'd go to the car show and they'd go, with my son, they'd go get sugared up, with video games or [Circus Circus].
- KD:** [laughter]
- JV:** We're not really gamblers or anything. Then I'd meet them back at the hotel. That was a painting that I started right when I got out [of the Santa Ana mural]. I finally quit that five thousand square foot . . . When I finally finished the Santa Ana mural, and I was really into painting. Because of that big mural, I was painting [snaps fingers] [effortlessly].
- KD:** Right. The mural itself is oil.
- JV:** Right. I was still painting. So I wanted to do my *Car Show*. I was trying to do drawings and stuff. In terms of paint, it's a whole different process. I had the facility down. Like today, I haven't painted in a few years. I mean, I did one or two quick things, but I've got to get back into it, because I feel like I've lost it. It's all planning, and it's really what you put up and stuff. It's a different process. So I wanted to get it done before Cheech's show. So I barely did [finish it]. They literally picked it up two days after I stretched it, it was still wet.
- KD:** Still wet.
- JV:** And for me, it was one of the best ones. It was a joke. It's a car show, but it's mostly the girls you know. I mean, you do see some trophies and things, a little bit of cars. And I think the one it really saves it before it becomes too cheesecake is this couple here. She's a little overweight, but she's still [posing]. Which is what we like about—I mean, it says something about us as a society and things. Some of us are just trying and are on the fringes. I like the sense of the [crowd], and the guys with the cameras. It's really nice to [see it again].
- KD:** Yeah, especially the way he's not, I mean you could be looking at this woman here, but it could actually be between the two women.
- JV:** Yeah, right. Yeah.
- KD:** It's just the idea of looking.
- JV:** Right, yeah, right, that's—yeah. And they're all from different places. Like I said, some are from San Diego, some are from the sports arena. Sometimes I had to be careful, because one time I almost used this other figure with these two people off to the left side. I almost used this other girl and this guy hugging, but I'm glad I didn't do it because she was a model. I saw her later on, on the front of *Low Rider Magazine*. I thought, oh, thank God I didn't use her. Because then it would have changed it.
- KD:** You like the kind of ordinary people.
- JV:** Yeah, it worked better. You know what's fun? Those knees, painting those chubby knees.
- KD:** I was just about to say, that's my favorite part.
- JV:** [laughter] It was really fun. It was fun.
- KD:** The flesh.
- JV:** Yeah.
- KD:** The other thing that I think is interesting about the composition is . . . It's . . . It almost reminds me of some of your other work that you said other people describe as a collage, like the one behind, because there's multiple planes. They're almost on different planes, because they're just so close.
- JV:** Yeah. Right.

- KD: Who stands that close? *[laughter]*
- JV: You'd be surprised because they would stand close and then take a group photo.
- KD: So you did several years of investigation going to car shows.
- JV: Yeah. Right.
- KD: But you didn't know where it was going.
- JV: Right.
- KD: That was part of the experiment.
- JV: I just liked it. Yeah. I had a few *[ideas left]*. I might have one or two left in terms of one or two figures, one or two situations that I could put together that will still be interesting.
- KD: Is this the only image that came out of all of the investigation?
- JV: No.
- KD: There are others?
- JV: Yeah, I have a few. There isn't anything here. There's that—you know that catalog that came out that it was more like a whole group of artists? Whatever it's called, Hispanic artist stuff? Did I bring it? I might have.
- KD: You had it, I don't know if you've moved it.
- JV: No, I don't think I had that one. You know, it's the one that—the other part of it was, is centennial. Anyway, yeah, it was almost like that. See, that came from car shows.
- KD: Yeah. Yeah.
- JV: That one there. And then I just got tired of painting the cars, because I really wanted to—well, that's something else. I got into doing this ocean stuff. I have a few of those. And most of them are pastels. That's the only painting. I really enjoyed it *[Car Show]*. When I didn't see it for a while, I saw it in San Francisco, I really enjoyed seeing it. I said, "Wow, that's a good painting." It's funny to be saying that. But when you're painting it, you don't see it.
- KD: So, wait a minute, you've done some in pastel and some in oil. When you're working—would you call this a series?
- JV: Yeah, the Car Show *[series]*.
- KD: So when you're working on it, you're doing the different media?
- JV: I don't know. Yeah?
- KD: Because, right now the studio is all pastel.
- JV: Yeah, it's all pastels. Yeah. Because, again, I just finished the Santa Ana mural that I was still painting. I tried to paint that in my garage, which is real small.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Then, from there, I rented the Avenue 50 and I rented the back studio there. I was in the small room, the one that Tito lived in. I was in there. I was only paying like four hundred dollars a month for this little room. I was like, in between the bathrooms. So I would work late at night when there wasn't anybody around. Yet I didn't have any privacy because I was in the middle room, and the other room was full of car parts. Alpha Romeo car parts, the room I finally went into, and I rented that to do the state mural. So I guess right before the state mural, I finished that painting in the big room. I started it in the smaller room and, again, I didn't know where it was going, but I was able to paint it.
- Then, when Tito came in I said, "Look . . ." He was going to get *[the big room]*, that's right. The Alpha Romeo place was going to move out. So I said, "Look, can you guys let me rent it enough to paint the state mural, then I'll give it back?" Well, I stayed there for five years instead of the couple of years that I was going to do it. I told Tito one time, "Okay, Tito, do you want the space, or do you want the rent?" He goes, "Well, I'll take the rent." Well, fine, I'll just stay. But then I had to get the door closed, because people were coming in to use the restroom and they were rifling through my stuff. I probably had really cool stuff for people to look through. I had all kinds of stuff. Whatever. Finally—that's another story. *[laughter]* I get carried away. Anyway, I did the mural there. I did that, and then I did the state mural. But, I was really glad that it came out the way it did.

- KD: That's the Junipero Serra State building in downtown.
- JV: Right. Junipero Serra.
- KD: And that composition is what? I don't know if we've talked about it.
- JV: California history.
- KD: That's right, you did talk about it.
- JV: I should have brought pictures of it. I could give you a CD. I should have done that, give you a CD of my murals. I've got them on a CD. I'm going to get you that.
- KD: Okay.
- JV: So you can look at them. Look at the murals. I did it—I actually burned it for this project and then we have it on the computer. Before the computer crashes and I lose it all, I should burn another copy.
- KD: This is jumping. I should have done this in order, but—
- JV: All of those, those ones in the '80s, they were done about the same time.
- KD: Because this is water.
- JV: Right.
- KD: You said that—
- JV: Yeah, those were all done about the same time. Eight-four, '85. I was very productive then.
- KD: Getting towards the water and *Getting Them Out of the Car*.
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: So what happens with water?
- JV: Well, it gives you an emotional feeling. Looking at water is very emotional. For me, it's very moody. I love the ocean. I really enjoy rendering it. I like being there. So, I really enjoyed doing that piece. I forget which one was first.
- KD: You mean *Beto's Vacation*?
- JV: I think I did that one first, that they're in the water. For me, that was pretty thin times.
- KD: Is this accurate? This says, *Water, Land, Fire*.
- JV: Right.
- KD: Is this image on the left here water and the image here—
- JV: Yeah. Land was that blanket thing here.
- KD: That's what I thought.
- JV: And fire is basically guys looking at the girl and the girl looking at fire underneath. It's like a double meaning there. See, the thing about guys, even if there's a tragedy, the girl's real pretty, you're checking her out. Even if you're running out of a building. "That girl's cute," as you're running out.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: That's how guys are. Again, there is some humor in there.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: That's the way we are. We can't help it. I swear to God, we can't help it. You can beat it out of us, it's not going to work.
- KD: So, these are, I imagine from your image bank?
- JV: Yeah, all of them are.
- KD: How about the water?
- JV: Yeah, same thing. Yeah, when I went up to Big Sur. Yeah, that's where it's from. Then the blanket, I bought it somewhere. For me, that was like paradise, you were in the boat too long. Again, the whole piece was about getting away from drawing the streets outside my studio window. It really was about taking a vacation. I call it *Beto's Vacation* because a lot of the boat stuff, with the fish, came from this guy Beto, who went on this Baja fishing trip and I ended up with his imagery. I don't know. I didn't steal them. I get slides at the time. It could have been from the Public Art Center. Any time someone found slides, they took them to my area. That could have been it. They put it in my area of the studio. "Slides? They've got to be John's." Like that.

KD: Okay.

JV: Because I always worked from photos and stuff. And so by the time I got downtown, I had all this stuff.

KD: So that was part of the transition. You said that at one point, your work changed. You were very serious in the early years and now you're more playful. That's one of the kinds of transitions. But also, as you mentioned, now not doing the street anymore.

JV: Yeah. Actually, you know, it's really true. Even though I want to, I've got the idea from this [Indian] cigarette. There's this Indian down the street here on Chavez, close to Soto Street. There's this woman who owns this *botanica* on the other side, it's like a dress shop. She has this carved Indian figure. I was drawing it. I had an idea. I've got this really cool, indigenous historic imagery that I wanted to put this carved Indian [into]. I've got it in the background, I just started it. And then I was going to show the store, all the religious saints, and in the background, all of these Indian wars and Indian images as to where the carved guy comes from. I have it in my head. But it bored me to death. I was tired of drawing like cupboards and street and stuff. I'll get back to it. I might do it. Maybe I should do it as painting. Even like this, even the street, I made the street really colorful with the bands of street. Even though it is from Europe. I really tried to just really fill it up, when they were building those reefs and stuff.

KD: Well, the pastel that you're talking about, it's got so much purple and blue.

JV: Yeah.

KD: And the dog is red. One of the dogs is red.

JV: Yeah. It's at night.

KD: But is that one of the things that you were working against, the color palette being different?

JV: Yeah. I was really trying to push it. I was trying to paint night. I remember the colors kind of looked—at night, there's different kinds of light. There's a neon, which is blue-green, there's an incandescent, which is yellow, and then they have argon, which is a weird kind of coppery. And then there's another one, halogen and then argon. Halogen is more greenish.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Neon is—there are different lights.

KD: Right, and then the temperature of the air will also change the color of the sky, which will give a bluer—that's what it reminds me, it looks like Chicago on a cold day. [*laughter*]

JV: Yeah, right. It's called the *Ramblas*, which was in Barcelona.

KD: Is it harder to do with pastel, skin or water?

JV: I don't know.

KD: Is that the right question?

JV: I don't know, because [what's] hard for me is [finishing].

KD: What's the process for each one? Is it the same or different when you're rendering flesh or rendering water?

JV: Well, with pastel, you never have the exact right flesh. You can experiment. Either it's flat or you can make it look warm. It depends on what the rest of the palette is. As I've been doing the water, there are certain colors that I use. I use from blue to green, sometimes I put in purple. But sometimes I don't. I'm really trying to—as I'm trying to do the series, I'm getting into the emotion of the water. The water has its own temperament as I'm working on it. And now, I'm going to put some more figures—I'm putting some figures back, like you would find in the streets of LA. But I want to put them in the water, because that has an interesting connotation also. I've got three months for the show, but I'll probably be working on it until the—up until the end. I want to get two paintings out, we'll see if I can. I'll probably just get out one. I'm really going to try to get two paintings out and a few more. I want to have like twelve pieces. So far, I have eight, just about eight. I feel like I still need more. I don't know what's going to be in the gallery, if I have too much or not enough or what the theme is. I've kind of lost it, because two of the pieces that were part of this show are in people's homes now. So it changes the show. Because I can't show them, so I just have to let it go. One of them, had to do it as a painting. The other one I can't do as a painting.

KD: Why not?



- JV: It's too elaborate. I'd have to spend the next two months on it myself. That's the one I showed you the first one. Sometimes I think that the first two or three pieces are the strongest, but this thing, I've been on it for almost a year. And the pieces change. Every one that I finish, any kind of work that you make, the one that you just finish is your favorite because it's the newest. And the ones in the back, you have to remember when they were your favorite and why they were your favorite. People will be seeing it for the first time.
- KD: Right.
- JV: They see it differently.
- KD: Well, it's like, with *Beto's Vacation*, the one of the triptych I assume is called *Water*, that blue water is so dangerous. It just swallows them.
- JV: That's a technique. That's a technique. The thing about pastel. I kind of came up with some techniques on my own. I thought that I had it together. I came up with some techniques—the way—why it looks like that is, okay, like that, everything is black [pastel grounded into the background]. What I did was I had a white sheet of paper, huge.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: And I would just use black charcoal, black pastel, and just make the whole thing black, except for where the figures are. The figures, you would leave white and I would do the undercoat [of them green]. This is like painting.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: And I'd do the undertone, green-blue underneath. And then I would put the flesh tone over that. Then I'm going to make them really, really sunburned.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Okay. So, then the water, I drew the water over the black. So that made it deep.
- KD: Really deep.
- JV: Yeah, I did that on all of them. By the time I got to the third one, I had it down. So I thought that—I had a bunch of techniques that I [discovered].
- KD: Why didn't you use black paper on this?
- JV: It's true, because it's still not the same.
- KD: It won't produce the same—
- JV: It's not the same.
- KD: So this, this is pastel on paper, them getting out of the car. Is that the same thing?
- JV: Yeah, that's all black pastel. Black and maybe some blue, I don't remember. Some people used blue and black. But mostly black, and some might use red. The thing is that, one day—I guess maybe it was in prison. When I was teaching in prison, there was a woman that taught ahead of me—or maybe it was in a bookstore and she had a book. She had the book and I looked through it. And all of the techniques that I thought I came up with myself were in the book.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: I was like, "Man." So I told her, "See this book? I thought I did that. I did that." Instead of looking at a book and doing it, I had to figure it out myself. I was like, "I should do this, I do that." I thought everything [I did was unique]. It was kind of crushing. It was funny. Typical me.
- KD: I think it's typical of everybody.
- JV: It's like you think you have it down.
- KD: You handle it better than most of us, actually.
- JV: I just laugh it off.
- KD: I know this is in a book, the Cheech Marin catalog, the *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge*. I don't really like the coloration they did. Is there something in the sky on fire?
- JV: No, it's just the blue over the black and then that's just a cloud.
- KD: Okay.

JV: But people do see stuff. On this thing, check it out. People see whatever they want to see, it depends if people are high or not.

KD: So the stuff that was in the Cheech Marin show, it was mostly late '80s.

JV: Yeah, exactly, up until the early '90s.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And—except for the piece. That's why I wanted to get it in there. Come on, you're showing me fifteen years ago.

KD: Yeah.

JV: Yeah.

KD: That's—

JV: Karen, the reason there's such a gap is because I did those murals.

KD: Right.

JV: Those seven years, eight years—

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez. We're on our fifth session on the twelfth of December, 2007. And John was telling me about being out of the gallery scene, because you were doing the murals.

JV: Right. And—

KD: So you're saying, the gap in the gallery scene.

JV: And the personal work.

KD: Right.

JV: Yeah. And I really felt it. Especially when I finished them, after two years, two and a half years, I have to get a show up, because I make a living off of my work. And so, but the thing about murals—I might have said this before—mural making is a different public [experience].

KD: Yeah.

JV: [In public art] they're forced to see your work. Especially out in the streets. But inside all these government buildings, they come in and either look at it or have to go deal with their problems in the courthouse or whatever, you know. I hate to smile, but that's probably the way it is. You don't have time to be looking at art when you're being sued or suing someone, whatever it is. It's a whole different thing, I want people to see it differently. And when I do work for galleries, I do whatever I want. And actually, you have a choice to go in there, more times than not, you have a choice to go see it or not, what the artist is doing and what they're saying and all of that kind of [seriousness]. But like I say, as I get older, I have a lot more fun doing my work. Maybe I need a tragedy in my life, I don't know.

KD: I don't know, the one in *Chicano Visions*, I think they're a combination of play and—

JV: I always try to have a sense of humor.

KD: Tragedy. I think there's a sense of irony, especially in *Pool Party. Revelations* to me, has always been dark.

JV: Yeah, it is.

KD: Whatever they're looking at, the couple—

JV: The thing about *Revelations* that I think was funny, there was a guy from Chicago [that wrote about the mask]. I have the article somewhere. It happens to a few of us artists. You get these people that [seize upon a particular idea. Someone that looks at the work and only see's what is of personal interest, and that knows] about that moon mask.

KD: Yeah.

JV: It has to do with the woman's cycle. Everything had to do with that woman and that baby and that mask. He wrote this whole piece on it. And that man [in the pastel] should not even be there, the piece was about the woman and the mask, because the guy knows about the Aztec mask of the moon and the turquoise and the symbolism. And the guy gets in the way of whatever of [the author's] dissertation was.

KD: [laughter]

- JV: It was funny. I've got that somewhere. You might even know who he is.
- KD: Yeah, I think I do. I'll keep my mouth shut.
- JV: [laughter]
- KD: [laughter] Yeah, we ruin a lot of [scholarship].
- JV: Yeah, like [a lot of things].
- KD: You might want to talk to the artist. [laughter] I mean, there is another narrative that could be—I mean you're saying it wasn't your intention, this moon mask and the—I always thought there were bits of fire flying on top of her head.
- JV: Sure, yeah. Well, yeah, it all comes off of that.
- KD: Yeah, the baby, I could never figure out what this was. I just knew it was hands and feet.
- JV: Yeah, right, it was just kind of laying there.
- KD: That was grotesque to me.
- JV: I think I got it from—I forgot where I got that. I think it could be from one of those paintings of—it was a European painting.
- KD: It looks classical.
- JV: I think it's, like, Jupiter eating his children. [Saturn devouring his son—ed.]
- KD: Oh, so it could have been [grotesque].
- JV: It could have been something like that. Other people said that it was about abortion and the baby. I said, "Wow, that's pretty good."
- KD: No.
- JV: The thing about the guy tied—we're tied to our past.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: We're sort of tied to our indigenous mysticism. But it's really about the border and that desolate landscape that's away from the river. And there's others like that. And I think the pastel becomes [iconic]. I just enjoy it. I mean, for me it doesn't matter. It looks like I painted it.
- KD: Yeah, it looks like a painting.
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: I've seen it. I've seen it three times, and I thought it was a painting.
- JV: Yeah. I guess, in terms of how my technique—my technique improved from them—*Getting [Them] Out of the Car* to that other one, to *Revelations*. It got deeper.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Even to this day, it's getting looser. Even though it looks tight—it looks tighter—I'm actually drawing looser. It's kind of—maybe because I know how to do it. I'm not really concerned—I'm more concerned with picture making than I am of the technique. The technique was getting people to get attracted to it. Regardless of what's in the work, I want it to be—first, I want it to be that I can do the technique to get you in front [of my work].
- KD: Those definitely draw you in because so much is going on, you just want to keep reading the narrative.
- JV: Right.
- KD: Each individual viewer is going to sign [in]. Like *Car Show*. There's so much narrative there, there's so much story.
- JV: Yeah. And these days, I don't do as much story, because I feel like I'm loading up too much. The only one that I really got into the story again, was this one. *Queen's Harvest*, over here on the wall. I got into a lot of narrative. And finally, I got [caught up]. I finally had to just leave it alone. Because once you get into story telling each element either adds or it detracts and it's not really specific about what [first was rendered]. That was a guy, and I turned him into a girl. Sort of like a guy, but he looks like a girl, with that Patty Duke haircut and stuff. That's when I was trying to get into like really heavy imagery again. But now, I think for a while, I try to keep it simple.
- KD: Now, is that a whale that's been harpooned?

- JV: Yeah.
- KD: And it's bleeding.
- JV: Up on top, yeah.
- KD: So it's a reversal. This sea is the sky, right?
- JV: Yeah. I guess it was to put [two stories together]. That is from the past. That's sort of the ancient waiting, and this is more of a contemporary, maybe about what's happening to the ocean. And I always put these weird characters next to the ocean. It's almost like the other one is *Getting Them Out of the Car*. They're by the ocean. There's something nefarious going on.
- KD: Yeah. It has that anchor set on the ground so the people in the present are anchored to the past.
- JV: Yeah, right. I had to do that. Leads and stuff.
- KD: But she keeps it playful, otherwise it's very ominous and dark.
- JV: Right, yeah.
- KD: Foreboding. It's like the other one with this—what did you say it was, [part hippo and part octopus]?
- JV: Yeah, *Hippoctopuss*.
- KD: Yeah, with the playful background.
- JV: Yeah, it's still playful. Even the thing that looks like a . . . *Bait*. It's a little crazy. But it's still playful.
- KD: Yeah, [in *Bait*] she's arching back, like you'd see somebody in a pool.
- JV: Right, exactly.
- KD: She was kind of doing a flip.
- JV: That's why I liked it. It was such a weird way to be flipping into the ocean.
- KD: Is this a good example of what you mean by that looseness?
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: Because you create parts with the slimmest line—
- JV: Color.
- KD: Pigment, yeah.
- JV: That's what I like to do. Just to do less is more. I used to really—I used to get crazy with just doing little toes. Once in a while,= I get caught up in that again. It's just like, "Come on man." It's like ["Dude"]!
- KD: Toes aren't hard. [*laughter*]
- JV: Yeah, I could have gotten into the—I could have done hangnails if I wanted. But I'd have to be like, "John, John, just move on, just keep going."
- KD: This series, *The Border/La Frontera*, there's four images. Or, wait, five.
- JV: Five. Yeah.
- KD: Yeah. We talked about them before. This is an example of that kind of detail.
- JV: And again, that came from—that I did along with *Revelations*, when I did the El Paso thing. It got real—it was such a fun time there. There was a lot of stuff that I didn't put in the mural that I really [wanted to] talk about. Even those naked guys, you know? [*referring to number 4 of the series*] Those naked guys were from a prison.
- KD: Where'd you get them?
- JV: They were from a prison line-up. And just because you really see full frontal male [nudity].
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: It's not very erotic at all.
- KD: Well, especially men with foreskin.
- JV: Yeah. Right. [*laughter*]
- KD: You've created the unimaginable for the twentieth century.
- JV: Again, that's, like, guys crossing the border.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Standing in the water. I mean naked guys, but other people just crossing the border. Some cross every day. Some came [over] one thousand [miles or] something. And you see them. And even the border patrol

knows the difference. When I crossed, I was always dying to be stopped, thinking, ["Doubt me,"] but I don't look like them. I don't look paranoid. I don't look afraid. People can read each other there. And there's also—in El Paso, under the bridge, there are guys who have these big truck inner tubes that they would put people in and carry them across. But they would know when the border patrol was there and when they weren't there.

KD: Yeah.

JV: The border patrol would like race up, or sometimes it would just a good time. They would know when to take a break. I mean, these guys were federal workers. They would take a break. But there's even tunnels—

KD: Yeah.

JV: Like sewer tunnels that they know about that link the sewage with Juarez and the sewage with El Paso. This guy worked [for a friend of mine]. So anyway, this guy worked in my friend's frame shop, but he lived in Juarez, it was cheaper. He lived in Juárez. Every day, he crossed, every day. He's a good example of somebody who lives in Juárez. He speaks English and Spanish, and he comes from families that worked on both sides of the borders from the '20s, you know? There's this whole history.

KD: And you were meeting these folks as you were doing the work for [the El Paso mural]?

JV: Oh yeah, I was there to do the research [in El Paso]. And then I kept going back [to when] I installed [the mural]. I had to use [my friends], some of the guys there and I paid them and stuff. There were about four guys I would always be there to see. If I wasn't in town, they wouldn't really talk. They were friends, but I would bring them all together. Well, El Paso was real spread out too.

KD: That's true.

JV: They had their own lives, they had their own things that they were doing.

KD: There's still, in the composition of *The Border/La Frontera*, that's not in your work, but it shows up every once in a while. Certainly, we have multiple planes going on in *Revelations*. And the one here, that's on the walls.

JV: *Thanksgiving*, I call it.

KD: Yeah. But like *Thanksgiving*, but done in a different way. On top of the same plane is another image, this other image, like conquistadors. I'm sorry, this is so hard to see.

JV: Some of them are from the codices.

KD: Yes.

JV: That one is in Oxnard. That's at the Carnegie [Art] Museum.

KD: That's right.

JV: Let me get one. The only one left. It'll give you an idea of how big they are.

KD: Okay.

[break in audio]

KD: I'll wait.

[break in audio]

KD: Large! [laughter]

JV: With wires hanging around. But anyway, this is the only one left that I have. [referring to number 1 of the series]

KD: Wow.

JV: So you have an idea of just how big they are. Oh, that thing, I really missed it up. See? I damaged this?

KD: You didn't do that just now, did you?

JV: No, I didn't do it now, but I did do it. Oh well, that's the way it works, I might have to fix it. Because that little scratch in here—

KD: Yeah.

JV: I really wiped it out.

- KD: So this is a dismembered image from the codex.
- JV: Right, and this guy here—man, did I wipe that out—he is from the statue in Juárez that points, I guess, towards Mexico.
- KD: Right.
- JV: It was for the Revolutionary War. And boy did I mess that up. I’m going to have to redo this. I didn’t realize I did this.
- KD: I hope I didn’t make you do it? *[laughter]*
- JV: You can’t see it right? Oh shit.
- KD: You are wearing it. No, yeah, it’s the same color.
- JV: It’s the same color. I think every time that I’ve moved it—
- KD: Then you have an image of people coming across the border on the bottom.
- JV: That is the immigration catching someone.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Yeah, I should have covered it. I can fix it, though. There are ways to do it.
- KD: I was curious [as] to the way you stored—
- JV: Hardly ever. Sometimes I cover and then I show it and then I put it in the bag and the cover comes off. Because some of them, it’s hard to just hold on to them the way that I should. I figured when I put it back there—I think I did that earlier. But it happens. *[coughing]*
- KD: This is the only thing that comes out of the ground in El Paso, right? There’s a little mountain in El Paso?
- JV: Oh yeah, Franklin. I’m not too sure if that’s Franklin or that’s—that could be on the other side. Or really I might have substituted.
- KD: I just like the way the lines of the sky, they move up and out of the brown and this area—
- JV: See, this area there, next to that statue, it was so delicate, and I had that guy in there, now I have to put it back. It will teach me to cover it. I’ve got to cover this stuff.
- KD: And his hands are in flames.
- JV: Yeah, this is the only one that didn’t [move on], because, I guess, this is dark. This is a very moody piece.
- KD: And then your man was animalistic hungry.
- JV: Yeah, well that’s the character, the people that—they come across. I remember when I was doing a mural, people would just come through, they just got to LA. They didn’t know where they were going. This one guy started crying in Spanish. He was telling me—he was literally walking through downtown. The factory area, Santa Fe and Seventh. He didn’t know where to go. He couldn’t go anywhere. He made it. He was tired and crying. I gave him a couple of bucks. He wanted me to hire him. I said, “I can’t hire you.” It was in English, I told him, “I don’t have any work for you.” I told him to either walk down this way . . . So at least he got downtown, he would find people who would help. You could tell, he just got off of something. A truck, somebody’s car. He was hungry and beat up. They have that look, but they’re here.
- KD: Deer in the headlights.
- JV: They made it, all the way to LA.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Told him, “Just keep on going.” And you could tell the way he’s dressed, the way he’s looking at you—he has this look. He started to break down. I said, “Look man, you’ll be okay.” We couldn’t really [talk] because I have horrible Spanish. I told him, “You’re going to be okay.” Because if he acts up too much, they’re going to take him back.
- KD: You’re right.
- JV: Then he’d really start crying in that truck. I used to see them. I used to see them in those big trucks. I couldn’t put in the El Paso mural, when you see it, you’ll see what I mean. For pastel, [that damage], it’s not bad.
- KD: No, it’s not bad at all. *[laughter]*
- JV: *[laughter]* I mean, in terms of that area that I smeared.

- KD:** Oh, okay. [laughter]
- JV:** That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying, in terms of whatever the damage was. This, this is funny.
- KD:** Yeah. This is *Día de los Muertos que Conquistas*.
- JV:** Okay, Richard Duardo . . . I was going to do this as [a print]. See, this is one of my non-funny Day of the Dead pieces, you know? Now, what year was that? Seventy-eight.
- KD:** Nineteen seventy-eight.
- JV:** That was when we were in the Public Art Center. Now, the thing about Duardo, Duardo was the one that got that in this book. Because when I did that, he only printed [maybe two prints]. This is the actual mockup, that's why it was in all different colors.
- KD:** Oh.
- JV:** Those went into crime—like I used to tell you about, my old crime magazines. I used to cut them out and make images of them. And even some of my own prints. This is my own photography.
- KD:** The dog and the woman sitting on the—
- JV:** The wall.
- KD:** Wall.
- JV:** Looks like a car hit it.
- KD:** Yeah.
- JV:** That's when I used to go wander around. I still have the negative. We did this. I mean, I did this. I said, "Okay, let's do . . ." Because I did one for '77, the one that Sister Karen got me to do. The next year, we're in the Public Art Center. We're doing a Day of the Dead piece. He printed, I don't know, two or three of those things. He said, "You know what, John, nobody's going to buy them." We didn't do a run. We never did it. And yet, years later, "Hey, I got one of John's 'Day of the Dead.'" "Duardo, you said nobody was going to buy that." And he has a Day of the Dead piece [as a print].
- KD:** [laughter]
- JV:** What do you call that? I mean, I shouldn't be—but I like to be honest about things, you know. And I think we only did . . . The thing about Duardo, he was like a brother. More than a buddy. A lot of ideas that I wanted to do with him. The first prints, if you just think about it. He's known for all of the stuff that he did in the '80s, with all of these artists. I was never one of those.
- KD:** Right.
- JV:** Because he never asked me to do it. I even tried to get a job there. But I guess he felt that I was doing my own thing, he was doing his own thing. He got all these artists to do these silk screens. Later on, we were going to the Getty [for an exhibition], and he was like, "John, why didn't you ever do a piece?" I was like, "Don't even get me started." He said, "You know, you should have come and asked me?" I said, "I asked you for a job, man." I was thinking [that] to myself, but I wasn't going to get into it. A lot of times I just hold my tongue, because I [know] how I get. I get emotional. And then [after] I get it out, and everything's cool. For that piece—he shouldn't have even kept that thing. It's good because that was my mock-up. Those were all a lot of my imagery.
- KD:** So this is not—I'm not looking at a serigraph, as it's labeled on the page.
- JV:** No, that's the mock-up for the serigraph. He must have the serigraph. No, I got a copy of the serigraph. He only did five of them. He only did a few of them. And then it was like, "Well, you were right." It was probably true. Look, that's why I stopped doing the Day of the Dead stuff, because that's like, ["Am I too dark?"]
- KD:** How you saw it.
- JV:** Yeah. You know.
- KD:** Probably, in the '80s and '90s, there probably would have been a small market with the Goth. But everybody's doing this very cheerful—
- JV:** Yeah, I can't relate.
- KD:** And when they do the surreal, when they do the images of death, it's usually related to—
- JV:** It's like an altar.

- KD: A gang. Right. Right.
- JV: Right.
- KD: Right.
- JV: It's like an altar and everything's there on the [stage], which is cool. What I was doing it, in those times, it was pretty dark stuff. I've got some of that imagery that I should put on a CD also. But when I saw that [what Duardo did], I went, "What?" I did not even get a print. It's in my garage because he finally gave—wait a minute. I don't know how—I thought I was going to get the mock-up, because that was my mock-up for it, but no I got a print. It was cool. It was not marketable. We didn't do it. It was not the way it appears.
- KD: [laughter]
- JV: It's not like we did a hundred and then two hundred of them and they went out like hot cakes, at five dollars each.
- KD: Okay. The last thing that I have, because I didn't bring that one book unless you have it today ... [pause] This gets back to your street LA scene. *The Wedding*, oil on pastel.
- JV: It's the black and white [photo] there?
- KD: They didn't reproduce the entire show [in color].
- JV: I thought it was in color there.
- KD: No.
- JV: I guess not. I forget.
- KD: Their [catalog] is all done in black and white, except a few color images.
- JV: Right. Right.
- KD: Where's the color ones? Here they are.
- JV: Good, good.
- KD: Maybe it is in here and I just didn't turn to that page.
- JV: I thought I saw it in color. I could be wrong. Because the actual piece, the woman who owned it put it above her bed and it just dried out. I've got a four by five [photo] of it, the way it's supposed to look.
- KD: The custom—
- JV: She killed the colors. That's [a great loss].
- KD: Oil on—this says pastel on paper will dry out and lose its color?
- JV: Oh yeah, especially if it's in the sunlight all the time. It's one thing for once in awhile, but [constantly, no]!
- KD: Faded in the sunlight.
- JV: Yeah, there it is faded.
- KD: There it is. You're right.
- JV: Yeah, there it is. So, all the reds faded. She wanted me to redo it for her, the woman who owned it. I told her she was crazy. [I could never bring it back to life.]
- KD: I can never tell if they get these years right. This looks like you wrote '82, and here they have '85.
- JV: I don't remember. The 2 could be a 5.
- KD: This is the kind of early work you were talking about.
- JV: Right.
- KD: This urban, LA, Chicano experience.
- JV: Yeah. There was this guy [at] Victor [Clothing] . . . For me, it was personal. There was a guy who worked in Victor Clothing. He was a salesman, Esteban. That's his mother and that's his bride. I photographed their wedding. I said, "You know what, you don't have to pay me, just let me have this picture." Because for me—it was at the Exposition Park rose garden, [and the best photo].
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: I took out the roses and everything.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: But you have the bride, this very fair-skinned bride, with this mother-in-law who looks so indigenous and so stoic, like, sitting on her wedding dress. For me was so symbolic about a lot of stuff.



KD: Yeah. *[laughter]*

JV: So I said, “Dude, just let me have this.” And I might have to do it in pastel. [Then] I saw the piece. The woman loaned it to the Gene Autry Museum. I saw it a few years ago. It looked horrible. It was so faded out, I felt so bad. And then the woman, I talked to her and she [called]. Every time she calls me, she tells me she wants me to call her. I knew what it was about. I didn’t want to tell her no. She finally got it. [I said], “You know what, you ruined it, I’m not going to go in there and fix it up for you.” For me, I don’t know why—I know, it’s because I’m so meticulous.

KD: Well, it’s a different kind of damage.

JV: Plus, I was a little angry. I was a little angry that she didn’t take care of it. All you got to do is get the UV protective. Even Shifra [Goldman] told her, “You should be ashamed of yourself.” You know, Shifra was [tough].

KD: Yeah, she would have said that. *[laughter]*

JV: Yeah, “You should have been ashamed of yourself. You should have taken care of this thing. What were you thinking?”

KD: So the coloration here in the catalog for CARA—

JV: Is faded.

KD: Is the faded image I’m looking at it.

JV: Well, it’s faded, but it’s not as faded as it got. It wasn’t much more red and stuff. That was still pretty good. Again, I was just learning how to do it. The woman he met—God, I think she [finally] had like eight kids or something. She was a taxi dancer. And they were all from Mexico. He looks like his mom, like really dark and really [stoic]. I don’t know where he’s from.

KD: Well, I think the fascinating tension is, it’s on this plane of grass, there’s no cityscape anywhere.

JV: Yeah.

KD: It’s almost anywhere, but it’s not. We all know that it’s a particular park in LA.

JV: Yeah, it is, it’s very LA.

KD: And when other folks look at it from other parts of the country, who come from kind of the same Chicano-Mexican US experience, I think they must place it in their own park.

JV: Sure.

KD: How many [works were yours]? And what part of the show was it in?

JV: Oh, it was in the contemporary artist thing.

KD: That’s right.

JV: The thing about CARA for me, it was a cool show. But of all the work I was doing, they picked that one. They picked that. I go, “You know what? There’s a lot of other stuff, but go ahead.” But people really responded to it. Sometimes it lives better in these catalogs than it does [in reality]. That showed me that in real life, that thing is gone. I’ve had one piece burned in someone’s house. So we did a digital image for him. Because I wasn’t going to do it over again. Again, it’s hard to do it over again because—

KD: The moment’s gone.

JV: Yeah, I’m driven by other things and just to get it out again. I don’t replicate. Like this thing, I messed it up, so I can do that. It’s in the dark, so I didn’t really see it. And you’re right, I might have done it when I put it back there. God, it’s so dumb. Anyway, that’s what I mean, when things get ruined like, I’m like, “Come on, man, get it together, [or get over it].”

KD: That’s right, you need an assistant to do it for you.

JV: *[laughter]* An assistant, yeah.

KD: So in the back of the catalog, they have these bios.

JV: Yeah.

KD: It’s all alphabetical—you know what I’m leading up to. It says, “Index of Artists,” and it’s going to say your name, the birth year, resides in . . . And then the catalog number of the work that’s in the show.

JV: Right.

KD: And some of them, most of them have a little paragraph.

JV: Yeah.

KD: So John Valadez doesn't saying anything.

JV: Okay, to be honest, knowing who I am, maybe I was bored to death with doing those things. I could have been upset that they didn't pick something that was a little bit more blood and guts of the work that I was doing.

KD: Such as?

JV: I don't know, anything else, even the car show stuff.

KD: Yeah.

JV: I mean, at that time, whatever else I was doing. That was one of the most [banal]. It looked like a wedding itself. It looked like a piece of pastry. Maybe it was because what's her name and her husband were into this—which was cool. Whatever the theme that they liked about what I was doing. When they asked me to do a quote, I just shrugged them off. When I get upset—I just didn't want to do a quote. Sometimes I would do—I don't know where I've got one . . . It's embarrassing. After years, you go, "Oh my God." Especially the ones where you would pontificate a little too much. Oh, that's embarrassing. Like that one, I think I just shined them on, like, "Oh, you picked that. I would have liked to have picked something else, but you picked that, so go with it."

KD: You got lucky enough to be in part of the show that—

JV: Sure, the contemporary types.

KD: The contemporary. *[laughter]*

JV: Whatever. But there was a lot of people. That was one of the first shows of that kind of stuff.

KD: Yeah.

JV: But yeah, the quote. I think I just shined them on. And maybe—that piece, I love that piece. Now, for me, it only exists in a four by five [transparency]. Everything else is gone. Even the guy who [I] did it [for], from Victor Clothing, he came back years later saying that—he talked to my wife, but she talked to him and she reminded him what the deal was. I think he thought that I have prints of those, because people think that because their family is in these catalogs that I've got stacks of those things and I'm making money off of him and his wife and his mother's picture. Maybe his mother passed away.

KD: Oh, they think it may not be one original.

JV: Yeah. They think I'm making bags of money out of it. Plus, he doesn't remember that I told him I wanted that image [for photographing his wedding]. The thing about that is that even though you do it with this oral agreement, they forget. Especially like twenty years later. Because after Victor Clothing closed, he called and somehow found [me]. And she knows the story. My wife knows everything. Twenty years, she's like, "You've said that six times. You've said that one, ten times. I know that story."

KD: *[laughter]*

JV: Jesus, let me come up with something new. It's impossible. I don't want to hear it.

KD: Did you shoot a lot of weddings?

JV: No.

KD: Just out of friendship or relationship, you did that wedding.

JV: Yeah, because again, it seemed like, it seemed really cool. I don't know how I did it. I talked to him about it. I wanted [me to shoot for him], because at the time I was photographing different stuff. He wanted—I said, "I can photograph the wedding." I photographed the wedding and everybody treated me hostilely. Can anybody smile in this place? Most of it was just crap. I gave him all the slides except for the one. Some were a little dark. The ones in the garden were cool.

KD: What'd you shoot with?

JV: Just that camera.

KD: Yeah.

JV: I think the one with the windows that stick together.

KD: Yeah. [laughter]

JV: I might have had—I think some were dark. I remember, she said, “How come I look so sad?” He said, “Because you don’t smile.” He told her in Spanish.

KD: [laughter]

JV: He said, “Yeah, nobody smiled.” “[John’s] a photographer.” “Oh, all right.” I don’t know, the wedding, it was a wedding, I guess. I guess they were in love. I don’t know. They had a bunch of kids. I saw her years later and she still looked at me like, “Oh yeah, you’re the guy who photographed us.” But it was all [a memory]. And we had—there was like a gathering. They’re all family, except for me, and I’m *pocho*. So I can just put my camera in their face and—maybe they were [in fear]. People sometimes [panic]: “Shit, I’m going to be deported.” You never know. I don’t know. They were weary. Unless you’re at a festival or something. That could have been it, I didn’t think about that.

KD: What was in the show at Madrid?

JV: Oh, these paintings. Paintings that I never show, I never try to [exhibit]...

KD: I think you took the book home.

JV: No, I didn’t. I didn’t.

KD: You moved it.

JV: I’ve got it here. I showed it to someone. It’s somewhere around here. [laughter]

KD: Wait.

JV: Wait a minute.

KD: Hold on.

[break in audio]

KD: We’ve got two catalogs here. Let’s start with *Pintores de Aztlán*.

JV: Yeah, that’s the more recent show.

KD: Right.

JV: And that’s one of the last things that I did with the Correia Gallery. These people from Madrid—and I guess it’s a [community] place. A place [like] how LACE Gallery was. They did different stuff, or maybe even like . . . That’s my stuff there, always starting there.

KD: Always after Patssi. [referring to the catalog]

JV: Yeah.

KD: [laughter]

JV: When we were in France for this show, *Les Demons des Anges*, they go, “Are you guys married?” Like Frida and [Diego]. I said, “Yeah, but when we got divorced, she dropped the A.”

KD: Dropped the A. [laughter]

JV: She would laugh. We would all be joking around. But that was [the later 1980s]. There’s these people who wanted to show Chicano paintings, and the only paintings that I had were ones that I had rolled up, thinking that people aren’t really going to buy [this stuff]. That one is *Pocho Crudo*, that’s a diptych that I have in the back there. That one’s wrapped in plastic by the way, that one is protected. [There were] pretty strong pieces that I did when I was doing the Santa Ana mural. [They were] my reaction to all of the TJ murders that I was reading about in the ’90s. That just pissed me off. Even to this day, they’re still [relevant].

KD: The women of Juárez? What they called the women of Juárez?

JV: No, see, that came [after].

KD: No. You’re right.

JV: [Most] people would relate that to it. That [work] was more for the [TJ murders], I guess. That was more [for] that. But no, this was in [the mid-1990s] in TJ, where they shot this prosecutor and his family.

KD: Oh, okay.

JV: And because of the drug wars, they would find people [dead].

KD: Right.

JV: [I used imagery] that was in some of these magazines.

KD: Right.

JV: The body was just wrapped in a box, and they would open it and she was burned, beaten, everything. And then the other part of it was they had her shoes, her little white pumps, these little delicate . . . You look at it and it was really the portraiture. I started that piece—I did it. It was one of my last pieces on Broadway, my Broadway studio. Because I remember that my daughter helped me paint. She got sick because she was doing the flesh-tone. Even I got sick because I got the color down so right, that I felt like I was painting with flesh and blood and puss. I don't get disgusted, okay? But that disgusted me.

KD: This was a very realistic painting of the dead.

JV: Yeah, I did it the best that I could. Again, it has that tiara on it.

KD: Yeah.

JV: And then, the headdress was from another painting. For me, it didn't really work [on the other painting]. For me, the other painting was this painting here, is the other one, the one where the guys are handcuffed. [*Sueños en Pasadillas*.]

KD: Yeah.

JV: That one. That headdress was this part. And it didn't really need it.

KD: What is this? "From sueños en pasadillas"? Is that what it says?

JV: Right, "from dreams to nightmares."

KD: Yeah.

JV: Again, it's from my El Paso thing, crossing the border to get American stuff [or get busted].

KD: Yeah. The Crock-Pot, the coffee maker.

JV: The popcorn, toasters, you know.

KD: The couch.

JV: And there's a figure on the couch.

KD: On the couch, yeah.

JV: And so, the headdress from *Pocho Crudo* is from that painting. But one day when I was doing the Santa Ana mural, I saw the headdress and I go, "I wonder if it fits?" I didn't really like it over this [painting], but I like the headdress by itself. This was like a diptych. But the painting was big enough by itself. I've only shown it once, in a bar. It was this art thing, right when I was doing the mural. It was like this art place and it used the bar [as the profit]. So then, when they came, I said, "I've got paintings."

KD: Yeah.

JV: I only show them once in awhile. The [Spanish] woman came to Correia. I rolled them out and she liked them because it's very strong stuff. I don't show them because nobody's going to buy this stuff. Even if—I'm very ambiguous. I had fun painting them. But in terms of [commercial], they really show when it's their time. Other than that, I never really put them out there.

KD: Again, it has more of a sense of collage than—

JV: Right.

KD: *Thanksgiving* and—

JV: Those are real issue paintings, those are paintings about dealing with issues.

KD: *Savages and Glitter* from '86.

JV: Yeah, and that's a companion to *Thanksgiving*.

KD: Yeah, a companion to *Thanksgiving*.

JV: I was going to do a third one, but I flaked out.

KD: Are these the same—they're not the same man, but from the same set of images?

JV: Yeah. It's the same kind of [imagery]. It's from Mexican crime magazines.

KD: Right.

JV: And their shackles are like jewels.

KD: Jewelry.

- JV: Yeah. And the other one is from the Mandan Indian [paintings]. That's George Catlin.
- KD: Yes.
- JV: The famous George Catlin painting that was so cool, and I just had to do it. And that's when I was in my studio painting whatever I wanted to paint. I paid like two hundred dollars' a month rent. Those were cool times. [The 1980s.]
- KD: And you did it on this canvas where [its not framed].
- JV: Yeah, it was like banners.
- KD: Yeah, did them like banners.
- JV: I showed them at LACE. It's shown, but that's the one I really miss. It's in a nice place now, but I really liked it.
- KD: Oh, this [*Savages and Glitter*] is the National Museum of Mexican Art in—
- JV: Chicago, yes. So, it's in a good place.
- KD: Yeah, I've seen it there.
- JV: Oh, you have, cool. I haven't been to Chicago. Oh, and then the one on the back, I didn't even know—
- KD: Whoa, '75.
- JV: Oh, remember, I told you this piece I called *Chiva*?
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: That I did in between my art classes but never for a class? That's it. That's the one that Lisa Duardo ended up buying years ago.
- KD: Lisa Duardo is Richard Duardo's sister?
- JV: Yeah, sister. It almost burned in a fire. I didn't know this thing was going to be in the [Spain] show. I only saw it when I saw the catalog, because Correia and myself had a falling out.
- KD: How'd they track it down, I wonder.
- JV: What do you mean? I think Lisa had it in there, she was trying to sell it through Correia Gallery.
- KD: Oh, so she was working the value.
- JV: Yeah, the value angle, yeah.
- KD: Get it into show.
- JV: And see, that's the one I showed in *Chicanarte*. Remember, I told you.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: I showed *Chiva*, and I showed—that's the piece [that Lisa Duardo owns]. That's what I would really love to do more work, the stuff that got into the *Chicanarte* show in '75. Yeah, all those drawings are—
- KD: Completely, at that moment, if we were to say, "What is Chicano art?" This is a huge range of things and this is a wonderful example. I mean, it has an impressionistic style, but certainly not the content of the impressionists. Right?
- JV: Right.
- KD: It's oil?
- JV: No, it's acrylic. Does it say oil?
- KD: I don't know if they're saying "*oleo*" is oil.
- JV: Yeah. For me, that piece was like—I was just shocked it was in the show.
- KD: Yeah. It's a wonderful piece though.
- JV: But it does relate to *Pocho Crudo*.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Which, that was cool. [Lisa Duardo] had it in her room for a long time. She bought it when she was just a kid. She was just out of high school. She used to come to the Public Art Center and she paid, I don't know, five hundred dollars or something for it. She paid me in payments.
- KD: This passed over?
- JV: Yeah, that's a painting.
- KD: Acrylics?

- JV: That's acrylic and oil. That was just an idea.
- KD: It's kind of a man from the top, looking down on his head.
- JV: Yeah, and the guy's bleeding.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: He's floating. And if he turned around, he's looking up. I thought it looked better like that. I think [someone was] pulling him out of the car wreck. But I think it did originally go the other way. And again, it was from these [magazines]. I mean, I've really been insolent—
- KD: I mean, the background is what's so unusual. This is certainly you, this one is.
- JV: You know what the background's from? There were these kids in—
- KD: I wonder if that was when you were married to Patssi. [laughter]
- JV: [laughter] That's right. The background is based on—there was a guy in Highland Park. I think it was [in] other areas, to combat graffiti—
- KD: Yes!
- JV: They put these vines.
- KD: I knew it! I was trying to figure it out.
- JV: [laughter] I thought, "That's it!" That's cool I want to do that. And that's what I did. I might have gotten fancy and doing the little colors in between. But those leaves—
- KD: No, that's what that is.
- JV: Are what those guys used to cover the graffiti.
- KD: Right, instead of blotting it out and making the wall look ugly they do the vines.
- JV: They do the vines.
- KD: And then when you do the vines, it's harder to do your own graffiti over it.
- JV: I guess.
- KD: No, I've seen it. It's a brilliant technique.
- JV: It's funny.
- KD: I didn't know it was guys making their living doing that, though.
- JV: I guess there is. Yeah, there's a particular guy that does that. I see the graffiti crews, even right out here, there are graffiti crews with pickup trucks with every shade of beige and grey—
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Just half asleep, they're [painting]—
- KD: The abatement team.
- JV: At six o'clock in the morning. From six to eight.
- KD: Yeah. This is actually really fascinating. You know, when you think of artists, when they really jump out of their technique or style or content, this is really that type of piece. Because you're not—
- JV: Right.
- KD: This is already '96, right? You're already getting into the mode where you didn't want to do the urban.
- JV: Right.
- KD: And this is a very urban context.
- JV: Right. I always switch. It depends on what it is. Something about painting that head really moved me and then driving to work, I thought, "Maybe I'll try to that vine thing." Maybe I did the vine first. I don't remember, because again, it was '96, it was ten years ago. And then there was one of these paintings, I did it, I liked it, but I didn't think anybody else was going to like it. Okay. That might be something to put up there, something about me. Like *Pocho Crudo*, same thing. Even with this piece, there's part of me that's really motivated to get it done, to get it out, and then there's a part of me, the other John, [that] is real chicken shit. He kind of flakes: "Oh, people are going to [not like it]." There's another part of me that—so I just wrap it up and put it away. I think it's that, the one that's real driven to get the work out, and the other part of me goes, "What are you doing?" In other words, it's like, "What are you doing?" Like that, for

instance, I was embarrassed that I had that girl pulling the guy's pants down. I thought, "You know what? I don't want to be associated with that kind of stuff." So, I painted it out.

**KD:** Yeah, I haven't really seen many—I don't think I've seen anything of yours, thinking of everything that I've seen in catalogs or at an exhibition where you're disrespectful of women at all.

**JV:** Yeah, right. Right.

**KD:** That's your intention?

**JV:** I guess. Yeah. I don't know. I'm not—I think some of my car show stuff is borderline. That always gets guys looking at it.

**KD:** No, I think it's, for me, what makes it work is that closeness. It looks almost inhuman. I know people stand that close but only in certain circumstances, like you're saying, if you're posing for a picture, on the New York subway—

**JV:** Right.

**KD:** There's a kind of proximity that makes it not real.

**JV:** Interesting, yeah.

**KD:** At least for me. And then all of them together.

**JV:** Yeah.

**KD:** And then the couple on the side, that looks like some kind of private dance party scene.

**JV:** Yeah, I think the guy is trying to get her to pose or he wants to—because basically they're strangers—I think he wanted to grab her.

**KD:** Oh, they're strangers, that's funny.

**JV:** Yeah, because they're posing for someone's picture. So, they're having fun, and they get their phone numbers.

**KD:** I mean, to paint bodies in sexy ways is one thing—

**JV:** I've got some erotic work, [but] I just bury it.

**KD:** That's what I'm saying—

**JV:** I've only shown it once.

**KD:** I don't call that one particularly erotic. It's that closeness, that intimacy that makes it less human, or less real. It enters into the surreal.

**JV:** Yeah, interesting.

[break in audio]

**KD:** This is Karen Davalos with John Valadez. Today is the twelfth of December. It's our fifth session and our second tape for today. Go ahead, John, you were telling me about the *Car Show* and working the composition.

**JV:** Yeah, the thing about the woman lifting her leg, that's a very tense area. But for me, the guy is looking at me.

**KD:** Yeah.

**JV:** Because the guy was a *cholo*, and they don't like other guys photographing them, because they've been in a lot of crime, or there's this macho thing. You can see that he's [tense]. That's what I love about—that's what art is, that kind of stuff, that realism. You think that he's glancing over, that he's looking over at her lifting her [leg].

**KD:** Yeah, you're right, he's not. He could be.

**JV:** He could be.

**KD:** Her crotch is right in his face—

**JV:** Because of his glasses. But he's looking at me. A lot of those guys, they don't like strange guys. If he was only photographing for his group of his friends. There were times I had to be careful and smile and not make a big deal and get the hell out and just keep moving.

**KD:** Right.

- JV: Because there was this group of guys, but I was trying to get a particular . . . Even when she lifted—I just shot it. Things are just moving. You get it later and go, “Wow, that was a cool moment.” Those shorts for her were too tight, but they’re all like that.
- KD: *[laughter]*
- JV: They’re like, whatever.
- KD: No, I thought it was excellent commentary on the car and the sexuality.
- JV: Yeah. Yeah, it’s a whole another age. For me it’s like observing this whole another generation. And even when I stopped doing the car show stuff, there are people that to this day have DVDs of just the girls.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: They’re getting a little raunchy, and the cops have to come and cool it down. It’s not a strip show. This is a car show, man, you guys got to cool it. So it gets louder and louder until a point where, I don’t know, I think Jesus comes and it clears it up.
- KD: I’ve seen a Jesus car show.
- JV: Oh wow, really?
- KD: A car club that is all into Jesus. They don’t have any images of women’s bodies on the cars.
- JV: At one show, they would show their daughters, or their kids, or their little babies on the hood. At another one they showed all this pornography. This guy was like, “How could you try to run with this thing on your car?” For me it’s like doing, one of these artist quotes, “One day you’re going to regret it.”
- KD: *[laughter]*
- JV: What was I thinking?
- KD: Here’s another one. So you kept on looking—
- JV: Let’s get some light in this place.
- KD: What was the erotic material that you did? It was for yourself or for a show?
- JV: Yeah, it was a Photoshop stuff. I’m not going to show it, because I’m not in the mood. I’ll show you one that was covered. This other one—I hate this kind of light, but this is the best kind of light that we can use. Let me get some paper. God, I wiped that thing out. I better not show my wife cause she’ll get pissed off at me, give me her lectures that I already know. “I know, I know.” *[pause]* But yeah, that’s the *Les Demons des Anges*. That’s a good example of some of my early work about identity and stuff. I need to clean this off.
- KD: In ’89, it’s the one that—
- JV: There I go, I got it. *[pause]*
- KD: France and Barcelona.
- JV: This is about all that I have left. *[pause]*
- KD: Oh my God.
- JV: *[laughter]* Yeah. I was really trying to—
- KD: Is that pastel?
- JV: Yeah. I was really trying to push the whole idea of men looking at women to a point where, “What about this man? Does this turn you on too?” I did a whole series of them and some of them are really bizarre, even crazier than that. I did them at a Photoshop thing from, like, ’99 to, like, 2001. I did enough to do a deck of playing cards. But I didn’t do it. Then I picked five of them and I did drawings of them. Some of them are like, out there. It really is a test, whereas—some people get really pissed off when they see it. Other people think it’s funny, like, “What the hell is this stuff?”
- KD: Yeah, I thought you were making fun of men.
- JV: Yeah, I am.
- KD: You’re not making fun of women.
- JV: Yeah, right. But some women would talk to me like, “What are you doing there?” Then I’d explain it and they’d say, “Oh, okay, I understand what you’re doing.” So yeah, it is—when you deal with sexual imagery, it’s still in America, it’s dicey.
- KD: Yeah, we’re pretty hung up here. *[laughter]*



- JV: People get personal. People think it's them.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: It's not you. I don't know you. So that's that stuff.
- KD: And this is—
- JV: Yeah, *Les Demons des Anges*. That is inside Victor Clothing. I was waiting for the guy to tell me to smile. He said, "All right, we're done." I was like, "Wait a minute."
- KD: You look like Eloy Torrez here. *[laughter]*
- JV: Yeah, exactly. And then the painting behind it, that is Victor Clothing, and that is my wedding mural.
- KD: Yeah, the wedding mural.
- JV: And that's at MALDEF [Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund] or something.
- KD: Really?
- JV: In downtown LA—isn't MALDEF downtown now?
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: Supposedly, they have it. They never invited me to see it. And that is one of my pencil drawings.
- KD: *El Indio, '78*, one of your pencil drawings.
- JV: From newsprint, yeah. And those are some of the three—they put them all together, but they're examples of my downtown portraiture that I did at the time.
- KD: *Mother and Child, Broadway Vendor, and Luisa*.
- JV: And they're in the same format as that one there, as those long skinny ones.
- KD: Oh, okay.
- JV: Because, before in the Hispanic show, they were much more life-sized. But then I did these smaller ones. And they showed those. So, the Europe, this Europe thing showed this early work. Before my work got really allegoric or a little bit more about [stories].
- KD: Yeah, this is what you would say is the difference right?
- JV: Right.
- KD: These are the portraits, compared to the allegorical with multiple layers.
- JV: Yeah, this is where I really started to get serious about just doing people. And that's why I got into skin tones and the way people present themselves, how they're dressed.
- KD: Mostly—it still has their narrative. You're drawn in by "Who is this person? What's their story, what's the story behind them?"
- JV: Yeah. Right.
- KD: But, these other images, which actually aren't that far apart.
- JV: Yeah, that whole—
- KD: This is '84, with *Savages and Glitter*, right?
- JV: Yeah, the real breakthrough with that was defining that line-up of guys and then putting the jewelry on them. And also, those faces. These are—what are those? Those were ID pictures from the wedding store on the second floor. When this guy died, they threw a bunch of this stuff out and I found them. So I kept a lot of this found photography. Even Kim [Abeles] used some of them. She did a chair. She put all the photos on the chair of all these faces. It was pretty cool. She even used some of them at the time.
- KD: I've seen *Clavo*, in '83.
- JV: Yeah. It's still owned by Mark Kreizel. As you can see, some of that work was shown in the earlier—that's just a store right there. That's how they used to—that's how they do downtown.
- KD: *Mpica*.
- JV: Yeah, *Mpica* is just part of a sign, I just titled it that.
- KD: So, *Two Vendors* is done?
- JV: I don't remember. It's done later, for sure later. I don't know how much later.
- KD: Eighty-nine.
- JV: Yeah.

- KD: See, I think your allegorical stuff is breaking through quite early.
- JV: Yeah, right, it did. Another one I told you about is—that is when I anticipated going to Europe, when I got that residency. It's kind of a washed out image of it, but I started out before I left. Remember when I told you that there was a Gaudi church?
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: That's up there.
- KD: Yeah. Oh, right, you did describe this one to me. *Battle of Culture*, '89.
- JV: It's a little washed out. That was a lot of fun, doing that one. I started it before I left and I finished it when I came back.
- KD: And the sky too, has that same kind of emotional sense that your water does.
- JV: Yeah, that's kind of the idea there. Because it really is about the idea of different groups, the French and the Spanish, my God, fighting constantly. And the Italians too, and even the Brits, the French and the Brits, my God. Evidently, if you see European history, those guys fought like crazy.
- KD: You were saying that the process is different between the pastel and the oil. What do you mean by that?
- JV: I don't know if I said the pastel—well, basically because one is liquid and one is powder. And for it to get to the same level of the realism, I have to go through another process. I have to paint more to remember. But the paint, you have to keep it clean constantly. You have to keep cleaning your brushes and the solvents.
- KD: Right.
- JV: Even the solvents have changed. When they use the—it's called—even the Turpenoid they use, it's not as strong as turpentine. It's more gummy, something weird. I'm even getting used to that.
- KD: Where you can hit the wall with pastel.
- JV: Sure, but pastel, you can only do up to three layers and then it gets—
- KD: It doesn't stick.
- JV: Yeah, it glosses over or something, so I learned how to sand it off—excuse me, I use very fine sandpaper. First I brush it, then I wipe, because you've got to get the teeth back in the paper. Whereas paint, you just paint it over. But the paint, you have to paint over—if you paint, it's got to be a consistent ... I think I know why paint peels off, because if you have a fine—let's say you have globs of fine paint. It's picky. Oil is real picky. I always learn that as painting comes back to me, there's chips. That's because the paint is not—there are dry areas that you put down and it doesn't adhere to anything.
- KD: Right.
- JV: Later on, it flakes off. And conservators is like, "Yeah." They had the conservators follow the Cheech show. The woman loved me because she had to always check that painting—because that was her job—to check that painting in every venue. And it was slowly coming apart. Then they finally got some conservators from Houston to fix it. That's all these people do is fix paintings. And the woman, I talked to her on the phone thinking, "Oh, I did something wrong."
- KD: That's the nature.
- JV: I go, "Thank God." It's embarrassing.
- KD: Well, pastel has it's own particular issues.
- JV: But look what happened. The thing is, as long as you can protect it and fix it—
- KD: It doesn't fall off the paper and— [*overlapping dialogue; inaudible*]
- JV: Not really. Degas, it's in the paper today.
- KD: You're right.
- JV: If you take care of it. The only thing the d'Orsay, the museum in France—they have all of these beautiful Degas pastels. The room's dark and the light's low, and you can still see them, they're still there. Those are ten years old. There are even guys who say—there was a paper guy, the guy sells paper—he said, sometimes pastels last longer than paint, depending on what the solvents were, the paint grounds, the kind of paint you use.
- KD: Do you pay attention to that now?

- JV: I use the good paint, I use Gamblin, which is supposed to be—
- KD: Right.
- JV: But you have to trust people.
- KD: Right.
- JV: The one who really experimented for either good or bad was Siqueiros, that guy loved new stuff. Give him a new polymer, man, he was into it.
- KD: *[laughter]*
- JV: Sometimes it would last and sometimes—there was this painting that he did, it was in the paper, in some dungeon or some cellar. It was in the *[Los Angeles] Times*. There was this woman that he married in LA, with a beautiful photograph of them. Did you see that article?
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: She was a poet, Ecuadorian.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: He did this painting of her in this thing, it's still there. It's really cool. I think they were going to take it out or something.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: She was his muse with this crazy—
- KD: This shows actually quite—it's a good representation of the variety of the style, of the obviously pastel to oil, how you can't tell the difference—
- JV: Yeah.
- KD: From the photograph and for me, sometimes when I see them up close in person.
- JV: You're just talking about my work there.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: I think everybody's work, it has shown a wide variety of what Chicano art was. They had some guy from San Diego. They even showed some of Magu's, like, those stick figures.
- KD: Yeah.
- JV: In Europe, they didn't know what that was. They go, "Who is this Magu?" People love Magu, because of that stick. I think it really influenced a lot of people there at the time. We're talking about the late '80s. They showed a good section of us. And then we came back to LA and nobody cared. Nobody knew about it. We come back to LA and I think LACMA called me up once and said, "Do you have a catalog?" No. I'm not going to give a catalog to them.
- KD: *[laughter]*
- JV: They asked us. They asked us all for a catalog. I said, "I'm not going to give you my catalog, you won't do anything for us." *[laughter]*
- KD: You want to pause, so we can regroup?
- JV: Yeah.
- [break in audio]*
- JV: I'll say something.
- KD: Okay. We're going to try to end up with John—John is being pressured—
- JV: *[laughter]*
- KD: By me, to give me some closing thoughts.
- JV: Well, I think, from those ideas, what you might, what you're trying to say is like, for me to be doing art for such a long time. Ever since, say, from high school. I got really serious when I got into college. It really became a Chicano artist mixing the political feelings that I was feeling into my work. And as I've grown and kept doing work, and—and how people have seen the work, how the work has maybe lived throughout these different years, up until . . . Why I keep doing art. I'm unemployable. It's—as I get older, all of these issues, I really trust that it's somehow going to be revealed in the work itself. The work really speaks more

about let's say what I'm thinking about, what effects motivates me. What motivates me, to get more work done. Right before—I guess the passion even matures as you get older.

I see, like with my daughter . . . She has my granddaughters up in a school in Mount Washington. They asked my daughter if they knew me. "Do you know John Valadez?" My daughter said, "Yes, he is my father." She said that, after that, they've been treating her really, really well, and they treat her daughters really, really well. And if that has anything to do with it, that is great. When she was in junior high school, they would tell us, "You know what, don't let anybody know, because they're just going to get this and that." So she didn't. And later on, I was like, "Why did I tell my daughter that?" Because I was, like, I was too young. But, as you get older and you see that there are people out there really affected by your work—they see your work . . . And sometimes it's better to not really know too much of that stuff, because then I may feel like I may never have to do any more work at all.

In other words, what motivates me now, what am I doing now, and the things that I see in the world? Like, even in heavy political work, I've told you, it's too heavy and I rolled it up. And even this whole question about the erotic stuff, I don't want to see it. I mean, I'm going through it, and I've shown it once or twice. A few people have taken them home, they cover them up. As long as I keep trusting that, and I can roll them up when I want to. They don't have to go, "Hey, it's not as bad as I thought it was, or it's not as great as I thought it was." It could go either way. And my opinion is only—just because I made it, it's still in a other people's hands in a lot of ways, a lot of work you do. Even, where you show, and how long the work survives and how it survives, or what it means lately as to what it meant when you do the work. So as long as I've sort of satellite around what my drive is and what my motivation is and try to stay as honest and to reveal that, that's really all a person can do. Just to really try to stay there and try to keep some of that peripheral stuff as just what it is, another opinion about your work.

KD: Thank you.

JV: Okay.





## INTERVIEW WITH JOHN VALADEZ

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