

Mario Castillo

Okay. It is March 27th, 2002. This is an interview with Mario Castillo, and he is a full-time faculty member at Columbia College in the Department of Art & Design.

And I'll get started by, could you tell us when you came to Columbia and what brought you here?

Yes. I came to Columbia in 1990. And I was brought here through a connection that Columbia College made, John Mulvaney, with the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum. And Reno Arceo was working there at the time as one of the Coordinator of Education or Director of Education, or something like this. He was the one that gave John Mulvaney my name and phone number in Los Angeles. Previous to that, I had been a full-time teacher at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, since 1974. But I stopped my stay there of six years at the half mark and went back to L.A. And I was there for like ten years or so, and then this opportunity came up. When I left U of I, I thought that I could find a full-time position very easily again in Los Angeles, and I was wrong because, you know, for every opening there was, there were like 800, 1,000 applications.

So when this opportunity came up at Columbia College, I thought how wonderful, because I have a lot of friends and family in Chicago, and I would like to get back to Chicago because Chicago has been kind of like my home town, my home base, even though I've been nomadic all my life. And I was born in Mexico and moved around, you know, as a child and a young man. But I've been living the most

in Chicago for about three times and so, I have a lot of roots here. And so, it was the invitation of the possibility of coming here, and so I came for an interview. And the faculty liked what they saw and what I presented, and I wound up here.

What was the reason that your name was given to John Mulvaney? Maybe you can talk about what you were doing at that time?

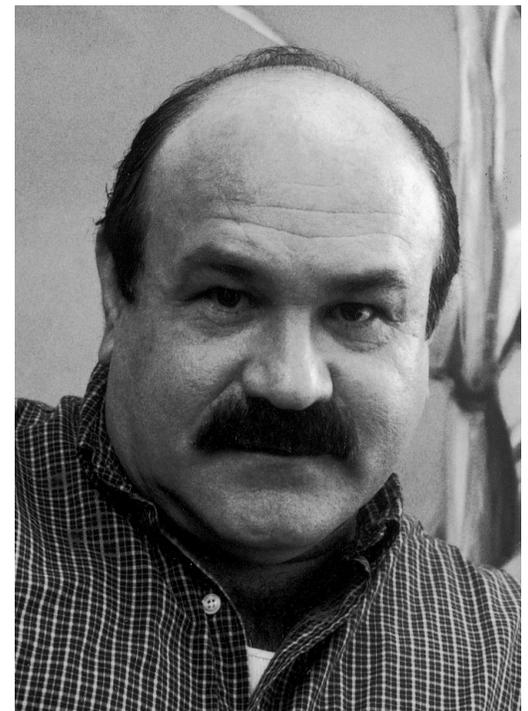
Well, at the time, which was 1990, there weren't that many Latino or Mexican-American artists, who had an MFA and who had teaching experience at the university level. There were a few of us then, there are more now, you know. But that was one of the reasons, I think, that (*inaudible*) gave him my name. But I would hope that it was also because of my experience as an artist and my—you know, my life experience in teaching and in the arts.

Can you expand on that a little bit? You know, what is your area or your specialty and maybe talk about the interview. What did you present to the Committee or to the Department?

Okay. Prior to that, let me go back a little bit, I graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a BSA. And then I went to get my masters at USC, the University of Southern California. Then I transferred to Cal Arts, California School of the Arts, and got my MFA there. And the reason why I'm mentioning this, is because I have—I'm known primarily by a lot of people for being a muralist. And I have done very few

murals, but the reason why I'm known as muralist is because I started the mural movement in Pilsen and actually did the first mural that we could call a mural in Chicago in 1968, it was. But I did my first mural in 1964, when I was a student at Lane Tech High School, and it's still there. So I'm in history books related to the mural movement, and people know me because of that.

But the reason why I mention USC and Cal Arts, is because when I was—my last year here at the Art Institute, I was very much involved with multi-media and technology and getting sound from images and film, you know, by producing soundtracks from film—or film images—so that you would hear the image and hear its own sound—hear the sound and see its own image type of thing. And so that got me into a kind of technological kind of a track, where I was working with a lot of cutting-edge technology with the synthesizers.



There was Renungent, the video synthesizer with Maury Sovotnik, the Electronic Music Box, the Buchla synthesizer and doing sound and light presentations, which at that time, we called them multi-media.

And so, I'd done all these other things, you know, which people don't know anything about. And primarily when I went to the Art Institute, I was studying to be a painter, basically. I love painting, and that's my background and is what I consider myself, a painter. And art, with a second minor in drawing and printmaking. But I've also done a lot of sculpture. I was doing a lot of installations back in the late '60s and early '70s. And body art, performance art, and all of those I've done. And I have this pretty well-rounded background in the arts. I have always felt—because I wanted to be a teacher from a long—you know, ever since I can remember, I wanted to teach art. And I always felt that in order to be a good teacher, I have to expose myself to as many different media, techniques and teaching possibilities as possible, you know. So I got involved with all of these. I forget—

No, that's—and what—you mentioned that you jumped at the chance to interview here at Columbia—

Oh, and represented all that stuff, yes. I did bring a film, that was one of the first to be awarded at a grant from the American Film Institute, when I was a student at the California Studio of the Arts. And the film students had not even applied or done anything like that, and I was in the Art School, and I got a grant. And after that, everybody was applying from the Film School, and they got grants. But I showed them that, I showed them

slides of kind of like a retrospect of all the work that I've done. Because I've been doing artwork ever since I was a child, so I had everything pretty much documented. And I've gone through many changes and movements and styles in my own work.

So I showed them all that, and I talked about the mural movement, also. Because that's been an important part, you know, to Chicago and in my life, you know. I didn't know at the time that it was going to be something so big, you know. It just kind of happened, it became like a new Renaissance.

What did you know about Columbia before you interviewed here? And why did you want to teach here and were your expectations met or were you surprised by what you found?

I first came in contact with Columbia when my stepfather was teaching here at Columbia. My stepfather was Harold Allen, who was the Chair of the Photography Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. And he taught when Columbia was over there across from Lake Point Towers on Lake Shore Drive way back in the '60s. And I liked what I saw when I went up there, you know, to look down at the street scene. There would be an exhibit in the hallway. So that was my first contact with Columbia College.

That's fascinating that you have ties back to the origins of, you know, the Columbia that we know today, that we really date back to the—

It's mind boggling, and it's incredible how it has grown and keeps growing and growing. When I first came here, you know, it seemed big. Now it's even more so, and it

just keeps changing every year. You know, I'm amazed at how much our own department keeps changing in terms of like taking over the whole building at the Wabash, you know, remodeling, and then we'd be taking another floor and another floor and another floor. Pretty soon, we've got to take the whole floor. I used to kid with my colleagues and say, "Actually, we need the Sears Tower," you know, for the huge installations and that.

So I had that connection back then. But then, I kind of lost it a little bit through all those years. And then when I was called to come here, I didn't know anything about the new Columbia, you know—just the basics about it being the kind of school that it is, arts-orientated, communication and arts. And I liked that, because when I transferred from the University of Southern California to Cal Arts, I think that was one of the most important moves that I did in my life in terms of just coming in contact with a totally new world that I really didn't know existed. And I felt that when I came here to Columbia, that Columbia was kind of like offering a space very similar to Cal Arts in terms of the creativity and what could be done here. So that was something very appealing to me.

What was the other part of the question?

And were your expectations met once you got here, or were you really surprised by the atmosphere, the—?

Well, actually, I didn't have any expectations per se, you know. I knew that I was coming to teach, and that was the only agenda I had, you know. I didn't come here to do anything else. I didn't come here to take over the college and whatever,

you know. I love teaching, and that's been my focus. And that's the only thing that I'm interested in.

And when I came here, I felt that it was pretty much the way it should have been or should be. You know, the way it—I'm trying to answer your expectations question, but I didn't have any expectations here. I came for the interview, and I really liked what I saw and I liked the people that, you know, that I kind of got to be familiar with, and I felt that I could fit in very well. There were people that were telling me not to come here, but—

What did they say?

"Don't go there because of this and that and that." And I said, "Well, look, this has happened to that person, that has happened to that person. And we're all different individuals. I feel that I can really fit into Columbia. I feel that I can make a difference there. I feel that I can fit there and work it out for me." Which I did. And it's worked out fine, you know, pretty much.

I'm so curious about that connection with your stepfather, you know, being here in the '60s and you coming in the '90s. Is he still alive?

No, he passed away in 1998.

So, but he was alive when you started teaching here?

Oh, yes.

Did you have conversations with him about Columbia?

All the time, all the time, yeah.

What—I mean, can you just give us an example, maybe, of what you talked about with him after you started teaching here. I mean, that must have been extraordinary.

Well, I asked for his advice a lot, you know, about certain things—

administrative and educational. He was a highly-respected and very loved teacher at the Art Institute of Chicago. Just to underline that, one of the floors in the new dorm building on Michigan Avenue, is named after him.

Can you repeat his name?

Harold Allen, but his legal name is Harvey Allen. The Museum of Contemporary Photography downstairs has several of his photographs in his collection.

And so, students always followed him and searched for him and looked for him because he was an amazing teacher—incredible, you know. But he was such a perfectionist that at, oh, at times, he was just a little bit too difficult, you know, to—

You mean as a stepfather or as an artist?

Well, both, you know. But it was good—as an artist, it's good that you are that way. As a teacher, also, you know, 'cause you're able to find every little thing in the student's work and direct and guide and help the student to do that. I mean, all of us as artists. We are, you know, perfectionists to some degree. Some of us are like 85% perfectionists and others of us are less or more, you know. But he was like very close to the 100 mark, if not there. So, we would talk about all kinds of things.

Did he encourage you—did he like that idea that you were coming to Columbia? Had he kept up with it, did he know—

He's the one that told me not to come here.

Oh, okay.

I didn't want to say that, but there it is—the truth. But I know—I could go into all kinds of reasons as

to why he might have said that. But some of the main reasons, were that some of his very close friends had had negative experiences at the Photography Department with John Mulvaney back then. And I was warned by different people, you know, about John Mulvaney.

Prior to hiring you?

And we hit it off pretty well, you know, pretty much until the very end, there was some kind of distancing. I don't know how it happened or why. I had my ideas, you know, but he respected me, and I always respected him. And he loved my work, and I really actually admire his work, also—his photography. I've done a lot of photography, so I'm into photography. Although I don't practice it, I love photography.

I want to—if you could briefly talk about the origins of your art, 'cause you talked about as a young man and your first mural at Lane Tech. I mean, did that bring a certain amount of identification with the college student as an artist? Do you identify with them on that level as an artist, or not really?

It's just like you're asking different questions. I mean, like two or three at the same time.

As far as the students identifying with me because of the mural or because of the origins of my work in terms of being—are you making reference to my pre-Columbia origins that I use in my work, which I do, or what are you looking for?

No, I wasn't, but then I would certainly like to explore it. I was just wondering that, you know, you are teaching future artists, and at their age, you were a practicing artist, it sounds like.

Does that bring anything to your teaching and your relationship with your students?

Yes, because I talk to them about the importance of being on task and being right on top of things, in order to get the most out of this precious time. Because as we are young, we think that youth is forever and forever and ever. And it's not, and then it goes away. And then we look back and think about how we wasted all that time. And so I remind students of the importance of the precious time that they have while being here at Columbia College, that they are here to educate themselves, they are here to build a career for themselves, they are here, you know, to create the base foundation for their future. And if they throw it out the window because they're partying too much or talking too much in the classroom or not being on task or not even caring about their work, it's only hurting them, it's not going to hurt me.

And so I talk about that all the time of how as a young man, as a young artist, I was really passionate about my work. And I want to kind of like give them that, instill in them that passion so that they can start to actually get involved with creating themselves, because they're the ones that have to create themselves. We, as educators, we kind of just present the things and the information and the space in which they can become who they are really are going to become. And we influence them, hopefully, in positive ways. Sometimes the negative ways, too, you know, but we're there to guide them and direct them and give them constructive criticism so that they can find out what is the truth about what it is that's true to them. And because art is such a unique thing, you have to work with the individuality, you

know. I mean, it's not like in the old times when you had an established academy that everybody had the same philosophical way of thinking, and they had to produce, you know, these classical paintings or whatever, you know. And everybody had to work this way because that was what the guidelines and you worked under these rules, and if you didn't, you were outside of the "in" crowd.

We're in a totally new world where individuality and originality reigns. And it's the power—the more that you have of that, the more power to you. And if you can't touch base with that within your inner self, you're lost as an artist. So as a teacher, as an art teacher, you have to be able to provide that space for the students. And I feel that I'm doing that because I get a lot of positive comments from my colleagues and from other students hearing about other students talking about certain projects (*inaudible*). I feel very confident and positive, though, about what it is that I'm doing.

Let's return to that point about how and why you include the pre-Columbia culture and what part of your art that that holds.

Okay. Remember that I said that I was at Cal Arts? And being at Cal Arts, it was a cutting-edge school—(*inaudible*) in that \$60 million for it to be created. And it was a union between Chenard, the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles and the California Conservatory of Music. The two of them merged and created California Institute of the Arts, which actually I called it CIA, California Institute of the Arts. And when people asked me, "Where do you work?" I'd say, "I work for the CIA." And then I'd pull out my card, and it's CIA, see?

And there I was involved with doing controversial work, which actually was censored by the administration at one point. But the teachers and the students and everybody had agreed and was behind me. And actually, when I came here at Columbia College, at the interview, I didn't tell them about my extraordinary work until later when I was accepted, I started to tell people because I knew I was going to come up for tenure later on, and I wanted people to know, you know, that I took a risk of, you know, they're accepting me totally for, you know, for the kind of work that I did.

But going back to Cal Arts, I was doing work that was installation-related and burials in the walls—it led to that, that was like the ultimate thing that I was doing. But an African-American friend of mine wanted to do a mural of his ghetto experience at Cal Arts. And Paul Brach, the Dean of the Art School told him, "No, you can't do that yet. If you want to do a mural like that, you have to go to UCLA or Cal State or go to one of those other universities that will allow you to do a mural like that. You can't do that here. This is a high arts school." And when I heard that, I said, "Wow, what is this? Where's this coming from? What have I been doing all this time?" And so, it kind of made me regress and rethink and reprocess and revisit my past. And so, I had done a burial of myself on the wall with—one of the pieces that I had done was where I cut myself, and cut my body up and buried in the wall in 20 different spots here from the head, here from the eyebrows and from the (*inaudible*) and then the aura around, it was very—and I did a performance piece with it, too.

And that burial of myself in the wall was my last high art piece. It was like the death of my high art connection. Because after that, I recapitulated back to my past and started to revisit work that I had done and reprocessed it and replayed it and reviewed it. And eventually, I wanted to get involved with my heritage, and so I started to come out with images that were, in my mind, pre-Columbian, stared in my mind, whatever—but just from my mind, you know, imaginary.

And then later on, I actually started to do research. And eventually, one thing led to another, and so for the past, oh, since the late '80s—actually, middle '80s—I started to get involved with the pre-Columbian cultures since 1983 or so—no, actually since '74, when I started to do that. So every since then, I've been doing that, and it led to what I have been known for as my signature work, the layering of images on top of each other, which actually that technique comes from pre-Columbia—no, pre-historic art, cave art. How, you know, cavemen used to layer images on top of each other, and I was doing that in 1961. But now, everything was tied into that and connected to Shamanism (*inaudible*). I was really influenced by those books in the '60s and '70s—actually, yeah, it was the late '60s and early '70s when the first book came out, 1970, '69.

And so, my work with the Shaman, which is a very ancient culture, cultures of lineage that ties to the ancient past of Mexico, brings in all the different aspects of the different cultures. But then, I'd been known for that for so long, you know, and in 2001—not because it was July the 4th, that was the day that I sat down and wrote the “Manifesto.” I

liberated myself from having to use my style exclusively so that I could like do whatever I wanted to do and paint whatever I wanted to paint and do whatever style I wanted to do. So now, I'm doing abstract work, I'm doing this and I'm doing that.

And that was very good because September 11th came by, and I was at home and a friend asked me to turn the television on because of everything what's on TV. And I said, “No.” “Turn it on.” I said, “What for?” So I turned it on and like all of us were glued to the tube, you know, throughout the whole day. And by 10 p.m., I was so frustrated and anxious and tired, also, and full of emotions that I just got up and started to paint. And this 15-foot long—it took from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., and I had another painting—I was going to have a show at Elmhurst College about “Recapitulations,” recovering my past. And I had left—I had selected a phase from the Agony Series that I had done in the '60s to do, but I felt it was too strong. And I was going to put something out that was more harmonic and colorful that was 15 feet long. And so, when September 11th came by, I brought in the “Agony” work again, and did this large work. And I've done several in relation to that. And if I hadn't done the “Manifesto,” I would still be doing my typical signature work, which is tedious and time-consuming and takes a long time to do because it's a lot of meticulous work, a lot of layering.

With the “Manifesto,” and before that, your signature was the layering, you still do that if you want to, but you're not limited to that. And you've tied in the

“Manifesto” as—I don't want to say anticipating 9/11—but it really, it freed you to react to 9/11.

Because if I hadn't freed myself, I probably would not have done anything. Because a lot of artists have their own—I mean, we all have our own way of working, and we say, “Oh, we're not doing that. I can't do that. I can't respond to that, because my work is this way, you know.” And so we are like—we enslave ourselves to a way of working, a perceptual way of working, a certain methodology, you know. And why? Why be restricted to that? I mean, why do we impose ourselves to that? Who is telling us to do it that way, you know? Why can't we just be free and totally free, you know, and do whatever we want to do?

How did the “Manifesto” impact your teaching? I mean, (*inaudible*) or has it extended or—

I told my students about it, especially in painting, and shared with them what I went through because I think that's very important. And I tell them, I tell them, you know, I underscore and emphasize the fact that it's very important to have a body of work for an exhibition. And it's very important to have that work tie itself together, you know. And it's kind of like having a passport to go from one place to another. It's kind of like being able to—it's not so important now, but it used to be, where you needed to be able to draw the inexpressible, paint the inexpressible in order to be called an artist. Now, it's not so important because there's so many different forms of art, you know. It has extended itself.

But I tell my students that it's important that they do a linear type of work and have it for shows, if you're going to and have this work be all tied in together by

some content, by some idea, by technique, by whatever. And I show them, you know, what I've done. And I tell them, that I purposely did this to have a show where each painting looked like it was done by a totally different artist, 'cause I've done so many things. And so I went back to my past and selected certain things. For example, out of—I have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pieces that I've done in terms of drawings and prints and paintings and so on and so forth—sculpture. And I selected this—before the 11th—and I selected this praying lady in front of the crucifix. And it's the only thing like that, in my whole body of work, that I have all the pieces. I don't know why I selected it, it was a strange thing to select. And I finished it. But then September 11th came by, and it fitted right in, because behind the crucifix, I put a sign saying "America's praying for the victims of September 11th." And a lot of things like that have happened, you know, with me and my work.

I feel that art, if it really comes from the heart, can illuminate a lot of things about your life and your whole culture, you know, the whole society. It has to do with being in the present and being in the moment. I tell my students that, you know, "there's the belief that certain people, certain artists—" we're talking about art, certain artists—"are said to be ahead of their times because they're so advanced, you know, in terms of what they create with their work." And I tell them, "that's not true, that's not so. What is happening, is that in order to be an artist, you have to be in the now, in the moment. And it's the other people, that are looking at you and your work, that in the moment that

they're looking at you, they can't see you in the now because they're connected to conditions and programs from the past. And they're so behind in terms of their mindsets, that it makes the "now" work look like it's in the future." It's something that strange.

And in the "Manifesto," actually, I say that the past and the future are in the present, because to me, they are. And I've had too many things that's happened to me that tell me that.

Pretty profound, but you explain it well. I mean, it makes—that makes a lot of sense as a response to that cliché, "Oh, they were ahead of their time, or they're ahead of their time."

I have works which I can't explain any other way that tell me that the future and the past are in the present.

Well, death brings up—and we have to move on after this, because this is so fascinating—but I did want to go back. You talked about at first, when you decided that you were going to get in touch with your cultural heritage, that at first you imagined what that is. And then later, you went and actually did research. What connections did you find between—if I could say the research was, you know, the reality between what you imagined and what you found in your research—were there strong connections, were you kind of surprised at what you projected and what you found?

Let me go back a little bit, because there is a connection to the mural painting, also, and to "The Day of the Dead," of the burials on the wall and all that.

When I did my first mural in 1963, I already knew of Los Tres Grandes, Preveda, or Los (*inaudible*) in high school. I knew of the pre-Columbian murals that had been done, (*inaudible*) and so on. And so, I was basing my influence of my—I mean, that was like my stimulus. But I didn't want to pay homage to the accidental way of aesthetics. I didn't want to pay homage to the Western way of seeing. I wanted to pay homage to the Native American aesthetic, which means that if we're going to say, "Well, what's different?" Well, you know, the Renaissance perspective showing death and illusion and (*inaudible*) and everything in three dimensions; I didn't want to deal with that. And all the Mexican artists, Mexican muralists, had done that, you know—they were dealing with that.

I wanted to do something different and pay homage to the people, the Aboriginal peoples of these lands. And their aesthetic was that it wasn't 3D, illusion of space, it was 2D, flat. And since I was working on the flat wall, I wanted it to be flat. And then I made reference to the Northwest Coast culture, the Native American Northwest Indians. And when I did that, I had studied, you know, exclusively to do that appropriate and incorporate it into my work.

That was in the '60s, then I went through the high art movement thing, you know, and then I wound up in the '70s regressing in a cultural way to my roots with this imaginary procedure. And I had seen enough, you know, "Oh, that's the garden, (*inaudible*)" so that I had it pretty much in memory, you know.

Something just comes up that is curious because, you know, when you get up in the morning, the first thing you see is when you look at yourself in the mirror in the wash-room, you know. And you're washing your face or whatever, combing your hair, whatever, brushing your teeth, et cetera. And so, artists when they do portraits of people—this is something that I've observed, this is generalization, okay?—artists tend to make the features of people like their features, so that everybody in that mural or that painting looks like them, kind of, you know. And so, it's something that we do unconsciously, because it's the one phase that we know the most, you know, or that we've seen the most, or maybe we think of ourselves as being the ideal model.

High ego?

Yeah, I mean, it has something to do with an ego trip, you know. But—now I lost track of what we were talking about before.

With your imagination, and then follow it up later with more in-depth research into the pre-Columbia culture.

Yeah, so that—I thought of that because of, you know, when you do a portrait of somebody else and you bring qualities of your own face into it, it's kind of like a subliminal thing. And so, I was working with subliminal images of what I thought was Aztec and Mayan and so on and so forth. Because I knew, you know, this was kind of like a part of my life, a part of my spirit. Like my face is, you know, by looking at it every day, you know.

And so then when I actually started to do research, most of the characteristics were pretty much the same, you know. The indigenous profile was still present, the horror of Vacui quality of being afraid of vacuums and not leaving any empty space for breathing space, graphically or pictorially, and dense imagery like Vito does, like the Mayan relatives do was there. The macabre quality of death coming in was there. I had been dealing with death and the macabre before, kind of quality aspect of life on and off. And in Mexico, there's such a thing as what we can call "a horrible beauty," or "the beauty of horror." Because we, aesthetically, think of it that way, and it's something that has been ingrained and embedded in our culture from way back, you know.

And so, the only thing that I can say that was surprising and different was when I was doing research for a mural that I was doing of (*inaudible*), the great Aztec capital—I was doing the streets as streets. I mean, I had forgotten that they were, you know, canals—like it was the Venice of Western America. They didn't have any streets, it was in the middle of a lake, you know. And so, things like that, you know, that I would find. But in terms of the style and characteristic and character quality, I kind of knew pretty much that—I just made it more accessible when I did research or appropriated an image.

You had internalized it prior to this.

Oh, yes, yes.

All right. I've got all these notes, but I have to move on to some of these other questions and

certainly relate it. You talk about how important—you've known since you were a young man you've wanted to teach, and that's what you came to Columbia to do. But you also talked a lot about your own work. How do you balance, or are they so integrated—speak to that, that your own work as a professional artist or a practicing artist, and your work as a teacher and your profession in teaching.

Okay, first of all, let me go back a little bit and say that one of the reasons why I also wanted to be a teacher is because my mother was a teacher; aunts of mine, uncles of mine, sister and so on and so forth, it's been in the family. And so having that as a base, I created that for myself.

But as far as the professional work and being a teacher, it's a little bit difficult—excuse me—to sometimes integrate. But then, sometimes it works pretty well because it's very nourishing, also. I mean, you get a lot of satisfaction from seeing that your students are producing quality work, you know. It's almost as if you had created it. That sense that one gets from creating a good painting can be obtained from having 20 students produce a good quality work, you know. So that kind of substitutes for that.

But then sometimes, the other thing happens, not only with myself, but I have heard other colleagues say that sometimes they get ideas from students, you know. Because you have a young mind, and they're doing something—you know, you give them certain parameters to work within, and

they respond in a certain way, their own unique, original way. And they come up with something that's pretty extraordinary. And that might be taken as something that's parallel to your way of thinking and therefore you're going to kind of employ something related to that.

And so you get—just like you influence your students, they influence you to be a certain way. And they give you ideas as to how to improve your way of teaching. It's a never-ending process. That's why it's so difficult for me to keep my curriculum straight and the handouts that I give for a project because it changes from semester to semester. And I don't tie—I'm not a computer person, and it's so difficult for me to do it. If I could do it, you know, on the computer very quickly, it wouldn't be a problem, you know. But it takes me forever.

Anyway, sometimes during the summer, I work a lot on my painting. And that's the way it's been for the past ten years. I have not taken a vacation. I don't know how my colleagues do it that they go to Europe and New Mexico or wherever they go—to Cancun, you know. I have not taken a vacation, I never have the time. Because you know what happens is that when Hispanic month comes in September, in the Fall—September, October, you know—there are a lot of shows that open up, and so I get invited to these all the time. I do about 13—an average of 13 shows a year. So during the Summers, is when I do a lot of the work for that. And so when I come back to teaching, to work here, it's kind of like a relief for me because I'm not under that pressure, you know.

Do you feel the same way in late May, early June when you get into your work?

Yeah, because, you know, you've gone through the two semesters at high intensity, you know. It's not an easy thing to do to be up, you know, four hours, you know, as head of the class and be on top of them all the time and be on task and, you know, have them be doing the work and having the critiques and all that. It takes a lot of energy, as you know.

Columbia talks a lot about, you know, embracing and valuing diversity. Can you speak to— you know, do you think they're doing a good job? And maybe if you could speak, too, to the Latino community at Columbia, and if you feel that there's something you would change, or like to see improved, or what is being done well.

Oh, that's a loaded question. Can we take four hours to answer that?

I don't mean for it to be, but— I don't even know where to start. Let me start at the beginning. When I was hired, rumors were running around that the President at Columbia College had just increased the Latino population in the faculty, by 50 percent. There was only one other person.

Oh, so with your hiring, that increased?

Yeah, to 50 percent.

Now you had two?

So, yeah. So the other teacher was a—his name escapes me—in English, (*inaudible*), in English, anyway. I'm sorry. I can't recall his name.

It might come to you, so don't worry about it.

Anyway, he was the only one here. And then I was the second one full-time. And there were part-timers here and there, I guess. So you can—I mean, you know, after so many years, in 1990, to just have one Latino faculty member in a city which has the greatest—the second greatest Latino population in the States, that's kind of incredible. And I could stop right there, and that says it all. From there, it just goes downhill in terms of how we are represented, how we are discriminated, how we are—so on and so forth. I really get very upset about this question because it really touches on racism, which I've felt throughout my life. And a lot of people, you know, are upset with someone like me who complains about it because they cannot see it or they don't know where it's coming from, or they've never experienced it.

I mean, you know, like I'm talking about things like when I was in Texas as a young man, being taken out of my girlfriend's car because I wasn't supposed to be with her because she was Anglo and I was Mexican. Things like that, you know, that are really—and I'm talking about things like my people being enslaved in Texas on chicken farms right now.

Okay. Given your—and this is something that Louis has said about you—given your holistic approach to life, should there be a requirement, an art requirement, for all Columbia College students? Do you feel that that is or should be a necessary part of the curriculum for all students to at least be exposed to?

That is an interesting question, and being that it's an arts and communication school, I think that that

would really be very important if it just were advised to take at least one class in whatever field, you know.

There was a study done by the government, U.S. government, in the '60s, where they had established a cultural center in a ghetto area where there was a lot of gang activity and crime. And they had youth come in to work with professionals in doing photography, painting, sculpture, et cetera. And they found out after the study that it was amazing how these young people had changed, and how it had turned their lives around. They even had writing and poetry and, you know, Columbia College in that cultural center. And they had all of this there. And it was just incredible how it changed these young people's lives and turned them around a street life of drugs and gangs and all this.

And we know that art can be a very strong influence on people. It's one of the most humanitarian fields, I would say. I don't know, I mean, I guess the opposite—if you put everything in the spectrum, I would say in terms of like maybe signs being at the other end, but I know that the two can merge and can work together as we tend to do it here in the science school and so on.

But just from that study alone, I feel that it would be almost a crime not to have these people who come to an arts and communications school, not to touch base with that wonderful aspect of humanity where they're given a chance to be creative, to deal with their imagination, to touch the spirit. So it's important not to do that.

And I remember in one of the town hall meetings, someone was saying that—

Here at Columbia?

Yeah, that we should require everybody to have a "C" passing grade in English, and everybody should be able to write English very well. No, not "C," I think it was "B." I can't remember, I'm sorry. It was either a "C" or "B." That everybody should be required because, you know, we are a university and everybody should be very eloquent with the English language. And so, I protested about that and got up and started speaking Spanish in front of everybody, you know. And eventually got to English, and I basically wanted to tell them that, you know, "How can you be bringing in these foreign students, who hardly speak any English, into the college and expect them to, you know, write something, take an English composition class and be able to get a 'B', or whatever they require to write when they're going to fail? You know, just because they can't—'cause that's required and they can't fulfill that, you're going to fail them and send them back to their countries as failures? Why take their money? You know, why have open admissions?"

And so, the other thing that goes along with that, which answers this question is, well, if we're going to require everybody to take English, can't we require everybody to take a drawing class, a painting class, a photography class, and so on and so forth?

And get a "B" in it?

Yeah. But, you know, getting away from this and just the fact that it's such a wonderful experience that everybody should have in their lifetime, coming to a school like this

where we have the professionals, we have the facilities, we have the—you know, everything—that's the in for them to really come to terms with it on a hands-on basis and discover that spark of creativity that all human beings have. It would be sad if they went through all their education here and hadn't got a chance to experience that. So, I think it's a wonderful idea.

So, would you say that that's something—and I want to ask you about what you think Columbia does well or what it's done well and what it could be better at or what challenges it has to meet? My mind was wandering right now. Sorry.

Since you've been here, you know, say, you know, since 1990, in the last 11 to 12 years, what do you think Columbia's accomplishments have been? What are they doing well, and what do they need to do better?

I don't think I'm the right person to answer that because there's been so much—there had been so many changes. And I don't think that I can, you know, go down a list in my mind of all these changes that have occurred and be able to answer it properly. And it keeps changing. I mean, you know, it's one way this year, and the next year it's different, you know.

The only thing I can say, is that hopefully all these changes that we're creating, and will create, will be for the better, and what is that? Well, you know, I feel that the main priority here is the education of the students. And it seems—I'm sorry to say it—but it seems that that's not the case with other people. It seems that the corporation is more important than the

students. I mean, then why are we incorporated into a school if, you know, we don't do the best that we can for the students? So that's a big question. I had gotten that feeling now and then, you know, that the students are secondary sometimes.

But yes, you know, a lot of the changes have been for the better and for getting better facilities and this and that, and I think that's wonderful. And I really appreciate the fact that Columbia is on top of things in that regard for the students, you know, trying to get the best equipment and stuff for the students.

What keeps you at Columbia?

I love teaching. I stated that before. And that's basically it. As I said, I don't have any major agendas, and people seem to be upset with me sometimes because I don't have one. And my life is my life, and I'm just being an artist and a teacher, and that's all that matters to me. Doing as well of a job as I can in each one, and that's enough. I don't need to, you know, be here for anything else. I don't need to become the chair of a department or whatever, you know. I'm not—my orientation is not that way. So it's the teaching.

And is part that the students—I mean, you talked about the exchange between the teacher and the student that it's—

I think we have a different kind of a school here. Because I've had students from the Art Institute come to have critiques with me, or have had students who have been students at the Art Institute and have been in my critiques. And they talk about how the Art Institute critiques are very antagonistic, like each student is like

cutting each other's—I mean, "they're like cutting each other's throats." So, they're very negatively critical about the work all the time.

And here, I don't feel it's that way. Perhaps, there might be one or two classes that might be that way, but I haven't heard of any. And I think we have a more positive approach to education here in terms of being more humane about it, you know, so that we can nurture that spirit, that seed, that's inside of everyone that will eventually blossom and become the artist that people come here for.

Where do you think that comes from? I mean, does it come from the '60s and the origins of the college and has continued? What?

That different approach to education that you talked about that might be—that's more nurturing?

I don't know where it comes from, really. I think it's always been in existence. It's just that you have the petty dictators that say, "You do this right now or I will do this and that to you! Go to the corner! Sit over there!" And they punish, you know, and they're that way. And we've had those people ever since humanity has existed.

And then we have the other side, you know, the gentler type of people that are more human and understand that through love, you can also educate. You don't have to be very regimented and militaristic, you know, in approach. And then you have those people that are in-between, you know, that use both. I kind of use both a little bit in order to, you know, when my class starts to get a little bit out of control, I have to keep the space for the one or two individuals who are very

focused and really want to get the most out of their education.

And if somebody's talking about their party over the weekend, you know, and raising a lot of noise about it, well, that's just very disruptive, and I have to remind them, you know. But I don't do it in a harsh way, although I can appear to be very serious and militaristic. I mean, people always confuse me for a detective or a policeman, you know. I don't know why, but—