

Oral History interview with Ramon "Ray" Atilano

Atilano, Ray
Painter

Los Angeles, California

Sound Cassette Duration – 62:18

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DENISE LUGO: Where were you born?

RAY ATILANO: In Los Angeles.

DENISE LUGO: How many years were you here before you went to Mexico City?

RAY ATILANO: I was here till I was fourteen years old.

DENISE LUGO: Why did you leave here?

RAY ATILANO: Well we knew my dad was sick so we went down. My dad went down to Mexico he had asthma and very dangerous for him to live here. He couldn't breath.

DENISE LUGO: Smog.

RAY ATILANO: No it was the elevation so he had basically had to go to Lake Tahoe or Mexico so we decided to go to Mexico.

DENISE LUGO: Your father was with the—

RAY ATILANO: With the government.

DENISE LUGO: Mm-huh. And you had brother and sisters?

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah, I had two brothers and four sisters.

DENISE LUGO: And you all left Mexico?

RAY ATILANO: Well all, two brothers left before we did and then the rest of us when we got back.

DENISE LUGO: You had all your education here, right?

RAY ATILANO: I had it up to eighth grade.

DENISE LUGO: You went to school in East Los Angeles.

RAY ATILANO: Stevenson's Junior High.

DENISE LUGO: Talk about when you went to Mexico City.

RAY ATILANO: When we went to Mexico City it was very difficult because the language was a barrier for me. I couldn't speak [any] Spanish. I had no need for it. All my brothers speak spoke English. It was very simple for me I went to school just English here, plus they were penalizing for Spanish. So we went out there and it was very sad because I didn't speak the language.

DENISE LUGO: From there, where did you go to school?

RAY ATILANO: [My dad] wanted me to have a career in the radio business, so he sent me to school but since I didn't know how to write Spanish or anything. So that's where I started to learn a little Spanish; know how to write Spanish. It was very difficult for me, in fact, after two years I quit. I told my dad I can't.

[AUDIO CUTS OFF]

DENISE LUGO: So what happened after that?

RAY ATILANO: I used to draw a lot. Even when I was here, I used to do a lot of drawing, drawing, drawing. My dad told my mom, my dad said, "Yeah we would like you to get into the arts." You don't want one thing the other just keep on going.

DENISE LUGO: Did you go to school to learn about being a technician?

RAY ATILANO: Yes, on the radio yes. But we never [have] seen a radio. Funny thing was two years and we never seen a radio and its just all drawing and it was really frustrating. Everybody wants to go to a school and monkey around with a radio and you know I was doing it since lecturing on how ... the "consistors", the "condensors", months after months you know? Why do we want to learn that for?

DENISE LUGO: What did you do after that?

RAY ATILANO: After that I got a job here and there but I wasn't required to since I was the smallest one in the family of the boys. My family did say, "Well since you're the youngest, you're not going to work, you have to study". So we went to San Carlos and we did the application.

DENISE LUGO: What is San Carlos?

RAY ATILANO: It's an art school. Its the oldest art school in—

DENISE LUGO: The oldest art institution in the Americas. Yeah, the Spaniards started it in 16th century.

RAY ATILANO: So we went there and the teacher says, "You're American?", "Yup", and "Its going to cost you so much" and being an American was very high price and if you were Mexican its very cheap to get in. So I went to Esmeralda.

DENISE LUGO: Esmeralda? Explain.

RAY ATILANO: Esmeralda is part of the *Bellas Artes* and there I waited [for the] principal or what do you call it.

DENISE LUGO: Director.

RAY ATILANO: Director. I waited and I talked to him. He says, "What do you want?" I said, "I want to come to your school." He says, "What are you?" I say, "Well, I was born in the United States but I want to be ..." He says, "You consider yourself Mexican from a Mexican family?", "Yup", "You're a Mexican." I say, "Ok". "Get any class you want." So he took me to the office and right there he had all the doors open for me and says, "Give this kid all the classes he wants." So I took advantage of it and I took everything.

DENISE LUGO: What were the philosophical differences between San Carlos and Esmeralda?

RAY ATILANO: They were very, very different. When you go to San Carlos, they tell you what color to use, they tell you how- you know, you got a shade of orange there going to tell you what color exactly to paint the orange in. Your going use a little bit of orange a little bit of yellow, it's completely—

DENISE LUGO: ... academy.

RAY ATILANO: If you go to an art show there all the same. There's no distinction between one artist to another. And in Esmeralda you have a lot of freedom; you could paint anything you want. And the artists you have at Esmeralda were very known throughout the world and yet in San Carlos they were just teachers.

DENISE LUGO: Talk about the professors at Esmeralda. Just give me some names and some artists that do you think were good influential on your development.

RAY ATILANO: Well we started off with Juan Soriano. He was in the drawing.

DENISE LUGO: How do you spell his name?

RAY ATILANO: So-ria-no.

DENISE LUGO: Okay.

RAY ATILANO: And I started with him and then I had Metero. He was a watercolor and then I had had a teacher who moves a lot; his name was *maestro* (teacher) Lazar and he was an old timer and we never did see any of his paintings never he never did ever show us but I remember that he was very gentle with us and was very kind. In fact too with Valmori and had—

DENISE LUGO: Explain your time in Mexico City, wasn't that rather an exciting time?

RAY ATILANO: Well in the 1950s when I was in school all of the art that came out of that youth, that 5 years, in fact all of them have become great artists.

DENISE LUGO: Do you know some?

RAY ATILANO: Well only Coroneles. Just a few of them became very outstanding.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me, you said you had an interesting time. One day when you saw Diego Rivera working in Mexico City and you actually got to speak to him?

RAY ATILANO: Well we went to the Palacio and we seen him painting.

DENISE LUGO: Palacio Federal, I meant the national building, presidential palace.

RAY ATILANO: The presidential palace.

DENISE LUGO: The *Zócalo*. (largest city square in the world, located in Mexico City)

RAY ATILANO: He was painting a mural and we went out there to see him and—

DENISE LUGO: Tell me what did you see.

RAY ATILANO: Oh fantastic! You know, he came down from the staff meeting and says, “You guys have to smoke marijuana if you want to paint like I do.” “You’re kidding.” It was just a joke but we found out that he did smoke marijuana.

DENISE LUGO: You were freshmen?

RAY ATILANO: Yeah. One of my teachers that I had, he used to make the paint for him. He used to go to laboratory, ground the paint.

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember seeing that?

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah, we did it. That was part of the thing we had to do. We had to do our own thing. As part of one of our classes we had. We had to prime our own color.

DENISE LUGO: Pigments.

RAY ATILANO: Pigments in the dirt and we looked at little taking minted oil or what have you. We did our own paintings you know put them in our little tubes. And we did our own thing that was part of it. So it was very exciting. We'd have these big artists.

DENISE LUGO: You remember one time, there was an artist, when your instructor was leaving for Paris and you had to take over the class?

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah, my teacher Soriano.

DENISE LUGO: What year was this?

RAY ATILANO: Around 1953. He had a one-man show in Paris and he took me to the office and told them that I had to be the instructor.

DENISE LUGO: Your first year?

RAY ATILANO: My first year and I can't believe it, you know, first year in school and I have to be a teacher. And he took off and I took over the class and the one who used to check me out was Edward ... he'd say, "How's class going?" "Oh great." Occasionally, so he was the one was taking in just stood by and checking on the whole class. Everybody was jealous because I was an American, you know, an American being a teacher.

DENISE LUGO: Did they tease you of your Spanish?

RAY ATILANO: Everybody did, everybody was teasing. I couldn't say *quiero* (want) and you know a lot of words for— very difficult for me.

DENISE LUGO: I think about 1940 [or] 1954, you got to see Tamayo one of the gallery opening?

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah gallery, we had a gallery.

DENISE LUGO: What opening? What gallery was it? Talk about it.

RAY ATILANO: ... dinner with was my class.

DENISE LUGO: Okay, he's a friend of yours?

RAY ATILANO: Yes, we made friends in the school and I was very quiet. He'd look at my drawings and he liked them.

DENISE LUGO: What was his name?

RAY ATILANO: I did portraits.

DENISE LUGO: What was his name?

RAY ATILANO: Altalar.

DENISE LUGO: First name?

RAY ATILANO: Ignacio. But he used to have a nickname called *el nopal* (the cactus) in other words, he's always find him painting *nopal*. He didn't want his name to be you know being a general and his name being a general—

DENISE LUGO: Conflict with military—

RAY ATILANO: I don't know what he had but we kid a lot.

DENISE LUGO: Was he an older person?

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah, he was in his sixties. And after I painted his portrait he gave me all of his brushes and gave me a whole bunch of oil paints. I really enjoyed it because it was a challenge for me. [That was] my first portrait that I ever did in all of my life.

DENISE LUGO: You went with him?

RAY ATILANO: Oh we went to the gallery we went both of us.

DENISE LUGO: Santa Rosa or was it?

RAY ATILANO: No the Santa Rosa, is further up ahead. This is downtown close to *Bellas Artes*.

DENISE LUGO: What year was this?

RAY ATILANO: Around 1954, some time around there. And we were there and he said, "Come on, we're going to have our show." I says, "I know that fellow, we went to school together." This was in elementary school so I know him. "Well let's go." So I was right in the middle of both of them and they were, when we met, when we got there, he came up to us and they both stared at each other and none of them wanted to say anything and so the general says, "Do you know me?" He says, "Uh, no not really." He says, "Why do you know anything of any money lend when you were in elementary school?" Some money, some kind of money was involved in it. He says, "You don't have a ..." So he says, "Yup that's me." And he invites himself over. That was my beginning with the big artists so far as far outside world was before having Tamayo and then Siqueiros or anything.

DENISE LUGO: Explain about Siqueiros.

RAY ATILANO: There was a *bienal* (Artistic or cultural exposition or festival held every year) in Mexico and—

DENISE LUGO: What year?

RAY ATILANO: It was in 1956 or 1957. And there was that *bienal* and it was all the artists, my teachers, everybody participated I think. Participants through out the world. All from the United States. Everybody participated. And you're only allowed to articulate the themes. I was fortunate enough for the teachings that I received.

DENISE LUGO: What were their works, do you remember? Explain.

RAY ATILANO: *Pollito* was one of them.

DENISE LUGO: What is a *pollito*?

RAY ATILANO: It was a little Mexican girl with a little *pollito* in her hand.

DENISE LUGO: *Pollito* is a baby chick?

RAY ATILANO: A baby chick. And the other one was- I still have the painting. I sold that painting around \$310 and I still have it and it was called *Los pobres*.

DENISE LUGO: The poor.

RAY ATILANO: And it was created when one of them was laying on the floor, on the street. The other one, just looking at him and they all kind of, all relaxed, all sleeping in the street

The *Pollito* won a prize and Siqueiros was the one who gave me the prize. I got a telegram to my house. Big prize he gave me.

DENISE LUGO: With the money?

RAY ATILANO: No, it was money just a big certificate. Which I treasure, I still have it.

DENISE LUGO: And did you ever see him in person?

RAY ATILANO: We seen him when he was involved with the, what do you call it? The mural he was painting at the los- I think it was his permission to paint the murals the from the movies industry—

DENISE LUGO: Oh "Chila-Chilabusco"?

RAY ATILANO: And from there he didn't paint only the movie stars, he painted politics and they put him in jail because he didn't want to finish it. That's a different story there. We got to meet him before.

DENISE LUGO: Did you get to see him work?

RAY ATILANO: No, well not really. We've seen him you know when he got full of paint and all that but honestly I didn't see him paint.

DENISE LUGO: So rather that was an interesting time to be in Mexico. All these great artists.

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah even Diego Rivera and I went to his studio. Seen him paint.

DENISE LUGO: You did see him paint?

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah.

DENISE LUGO: Talk about the way he painted.

RAY ATILANO: Well he was very quiet he's dedicated to his art and he'd always tell us to keep on working and don't give up keep on working and don't give up. Always studying, studying and that was it. That's the good thing he had about him. Well I lived with all my teachers I even lived with Natero. I was a student in being, have my own studio with me.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me about Diego Rivera's wife.

RAY ATLEANO: Frida Kahlo?

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

RAY ATLEANO: She was a student-teacher at Esmeralda. I think a year before I got there but I didn't really meet her in life. I met when she was already with the *Bellas Artes*.

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember that exhibition that they had of her the retrospective right after she passed away?

RAY ATILANO: I went to almost all of Diego Rivera's—

DENISE LUGO: No, I mean Frida Kahlo.

RAY ATILANO: Oh Frida Kahlo. Yes I did the other things, yeah. So I did see that. She had a lot of Frida Kahlo with all Diego Rivera's on her forehead.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me. It's known and documented that when she passed away they took her... they had a retrospective of her bought her in a bed with *calaveras* (skulls) hanging and she actually was there to greet the people on her bed in *Bellas Artes*.

RAY ATILANO: No, that I don't recall.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, because it's been documented.

RAY ATILANO: No when I was there it looked like the Russian flight was put right there and that's when we were not allowed to be there because one of my teachers told me says, "If you ever want to go back to the United States, never get close to any red flags or any communist parties or you'll be labeled for the rest of your life. They take picture of you and you're a gonner." So it was very kind he says, "Always be careful who you with and be careful what you do." So when Diego Rivera passed away we were there first students we were there. As soon as they were going to put the flag on we moved out and the flag was there and every body took picture and we weren't there anymore so we were pretty lucky because we weren't taken pictures of us.

DENISE LUGO: Who took them?

RAY ATILANO: Well the Communist Party. You see they want to get you in there

DENISE LUGO: Their cabinet?

RAY ATILANO: Their cabinet you know they take your picture its very hard for you to move out because then they really give you a bad time. So I was lucky.

DENISE LUGO: Who were your friends at the time?

RAY ATILANO: You're talking about kinds of painters?

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

RAY ATILANO: There was Donese Coroneles, Pedro Coronel (Mexican abstract painter), Mario Orozco (Mexican muralist). They're all done great. I just don't remember all of them but there was so many beautiful people there.

DENISE LUGO: They treated you very well, wasn't it?

RAY ATILANO: Oh definitely because I was *el pocho* (person of Mexican origin who speaks Spanish heavily interspersed with English)

DENISE LUGO: What is *pocho*? *Pocho* means, it means you're Anglo-sized Mexican.

RAY ATILANO: Even though I was *pocho* for them, they had a lot of respect. They wanted me to join, they had a group. I was in first grade and they were second graders and they already had a group formed by them and they wanted me to join them, I'd figured "Nah, these people are very heavy people." There's Coronel but I met him, we went a lot of times together, we painted together and so forth we participated together in a lot of shows.

DENISE LUGO: You did many shows.

RAY ATILANO: Oh a lot of shows I did.

DENISE LUGO: Through *Bellas Artes*?

RAY ATILANO: Through *Bellas Artes* galleries. I had one man shows a couple of times. Groups that we got together we did shows. Every year we have one or two shows.

DENISE LUGO: What did you consider yourself at the time?

RAY ATILANO: Oh I am a genius. (Laughter)

DENISE LUGO: Ethnically I am saying, not about your artistic talent.

RAY ATILANO: I didn't consider myself an American at all because I don't know.

DENISE LUGO: You blended in.

RAY ATILANO: I blended in so quick that people treated me so nice for the exception that that was bond to happen because [there was] jealousy. I've done my classroom and my canvass are all bended they are all torn and we never found out who did it but every day I would come in and see my canvas always torn. It was a headache ready to resign but since I heard my teachers saying, "Keep up, keep up the good work, keep it up." I just kept on doing more canvas, more canvas and I guess the guy who was doing it got tired of doing it.

DENISE LUGO: Talk about the last year in Esmeralda about the mural program.

RAY ATILANO: I didn't graduate. [...] I still don't know, looks like I never went. [...] I was painting fresco and I had just a title that they gave me to make a sketch up. The theme was lack of schools and while I was painting there was a pan up there from a lady protesting there was no schools and artists went up there and they "scapling" and they starting drawing on top of my painting you know. So he destroyed the whole thing there and I just totally [took] it down and I started again. They did the same thing again. They say, "You guys paint with a lot of guts, paint hard, paint this, paint that." and I just didn't go to school anymore. I just went to my other classes but I didn't pass the mural program. I did half of the mural, I mean you know I studied all the mural but he never let me finish. He wanted me to paint like he did and I just I refused to paint like he did because he said that he was a communist and we all had to paint like he.

DENISE LUGO: Was that kind of majority? Is that the way most people felt at the time artistically?

RAY ATILANO: Well if you didn't go the way they wanted you weren't greeted that good. They were always labels.

DENISE LUGO: *Bellas Artes* promoted that feeling?

RAY ATILANO: Oh no! It wasn't *Bellas Artes*, it was just the teachers themselves because I was participating in those *Valores* which is another gallery it goes on yearly every year. You know *Valores*? Then my teacher says, "You have to bring one of the paintings you did in my class." I said, "I refuse to take one of the pictures I did in his class." I took one that I did with another teacher. I did it with Orozco. He was my teacher.

DENISE LUGO: Orozco?

RAY ATILANO: Yeah. Not Clemente Orozco, this Orozco, I'll get it back in a while.

DENISE LUGO: Okay.

RAY ATILANO: I made a painting with Rodriguez Lozano, one of the four biggest artist there is. I learn a lot of techniques from him so I presented that one and I was always taken out of the list. He says, "Nope, you bring one of my paintings or your never going to participate." The second year I did the same thing. I took another painting from one of my other teachers and none of his. Second year I was taken out of the list. Third year I did the same thing. I was just against him. Why should I do something that they wanted me to do? So finally the third year I participated in it and I was in *Los Valores* after three years of fighting against my teacher.

DENISE LUGO: What is it called?

RAY ATILANO: *Nuevos Valores*.

DENISE LUGO: That means new values?

RAY ATILANO: New values. When you get out of school or you're in school these are the people they are looking all the time forward to. These are the ones want to participate in that kind of gallery. You're a so-called professional. You're in the big leagues so-called. So it's a challenge and I would say that they didn't want me—

DENISE LUGO: It was interesting the way you rose to Mexican mainstream art and then how did it come about did you came to Los Angeles, back home?

RAY ATILANO: Well funny thing I was working at theaters because—

DENISE LUGO: Yeah let's just talk about that excuse me. Club Esmeralda you went to?

RAY ATILANO: From there I had my teacher, who is Juan Soriano and he said, "Do you want to work in theater?" and I says, "Yeah." "Do you do anything?" I said, "Nothing at all." He says, "Okay." So we working for—

DENISE LUGO: UNAM ("Universidad nacional autónoma de México" - National Autonomous University of Mexico)?

RAY ATILANO: University of Mexico. We started working for them and we started working on the *caballito* (little horse) and then from there went to others theaters.

DENISE LUGO: Designs, screen designs?

RAY ATILANO: We had to do the stage scenery from scratch. We had to make a table we would make a table, chairs make chairs everything we didn't rent anything. Everything we did in the theater was made by me and I had some help. It was beautiful because I don't know a lot of money there. I owned anything I wanted. I remember the first time when they couldn't ... flowers and everything started yelling at my teacher he was the greatest and blah-blah-blah. I walked out of the theater tears in my eyes and just walk-walk-walk all the way home. That hurt, but he told me the beginning so all the money you want but I'm going to end up to be famous, I'm going to earn the fame. He was honest.

DENISE LUGO: What was his name?

RAY ATILANO: Juan Soriano but he was honest about it he says, "You're going to earn all the money you want but I'm going to earn all the glory. I says, "Well yeah." Then when it started happening and he was getting all the glory and all the glory I was getting all the money. It was hard to face it. Sure I had a lot of money but everybody would talk about him. "He's great-great-great." And then here me money-money-money. Some of the reporters came up and said, "Hey Atleano did that, not Soriano." So it came out in the newspaper and that hurt my boss. He says, "Hey how come?" I said, "Hey I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything." The big artists right now is Juan Jose Gurrola. He's one of the top directors of Mexico right now. Hector Salazar another big director in Mexico. Juan Lopez Montezuma I put him into the university. He's in the radio business right now. So there's a lot of movie stars that started off with me. In fact there's one right here, we have the cartoonist who worked in *Ma-Ma* magazine, Sergio Aragonés. Sure I met him. We started all together and in fact I've seen him in Los Angeles.

DENISE LUGO: So what happened from that?

RAY ATILANO: So there we kept on going. Working in theaters year after year, after year, after year.

DENISE LUGO: How did you come to L.A. now?

RAY ATILANO: Oh how did I come to L.A.? Well I was working in theaters and my dad says, "I want to go back." All my sisters were born here and says, "We want to go back over there." I told my dad, "Okay, I'll pay for everything. I'll give you the money." So next day he says, "I want the money. I'm going." So he had all the papers worked out from day to another he says, "I'm going to L.A. real quick." [He had] his passport [and] everything. I gave him all the money, he came over my mom stayed with me and one of my sisters. My mom got very sick, you know, losing all her daughters and her husband and everything. My mom had a semi-stroke and so we all had to come back over here to L.A. When we crossed the boarder my mom was praying for me to not cross the boarder she says, "You stay in Mexico. Mexico is for you. Mexico is your career." All the artists here don't come back to the United States and like for my mom right there I says, "You give me the curb, I'll do it for

you." I crossed the border and that was the end of a lot of things because I had contracts for Placio Versi ... because I got contracted at a theater there. I had a contract for a lot of things but here being a good son I left everything.

DENISE LUGO: So when you came back, how long was it before you got involved in other--

RAY ATILANO: Oh what happened was that I get an accident, kind of a freak accident. I got hit in the head and I cracked two disks. I used to wear a heavy brace with metals on my back and a cane. So I couldn't do anything else so I went back to the arts in a way they helped me even though it destroyed my life, part of my life, but it helped me go back to the arts. There was an article in the "*La Opinión*", I think it was my wife read it and she said, "Hey they are looking for Mexican-American artists." Then she called up she made an appointment with Victor Franco without me knowing it.

DENISE LUGO: Who is Victor Franco?

RAY ATILANO: Victor Franco was the founder of Mechicano Arts Center with Moira Bright.

DENISE LUGO: And Leonard Castellanos?

RAY ATILANO: Leonard Castellanos came into the picture after that. Then they came to the house and they see my paintings and they [said], "We'll take them," without me knowing them they took my paintings.

DENISE LUGO: How did you feel about that?

RAY ATILANO: Well I figured geez they take my paintings without no receipt without no anything. They took five or six paintings. They said they liked them very much and they [...] were just going to open a gallery at Melrose and Cienega and it was going to be called Mechicano. I can't relate to Mechicano, so what is Mechicano? It's one of the questions I asked all the time.

DENISE LUGO: How many years was it between you leaving Mexico City and you getting involved in Mechicano?

RAY ATLEANO: Okay I came in 1958 and I got in mechicano in 1950...

DENISE LUGO: 1969?

RAY ATILANO: 1969.

DENISE LUGO: Fall 1969, ok.

RAY ATILANO: No, I came in 1959.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me of your first meeting you had with Victor Franco and Moira Bright.

RAY ATILANO: (Laughs) We had a meeting with him. [...] I was real quick I was showing to be there. I had to attend the gallery so when we opened the gallery for the first time we had we did live music, a lot of TV spots; we had everything there. There was a big opening.

DENISE LUGO: Explain the building. What's the building like?

RAY ATILANO: The building was pretty long. It was not wide, but long; [one] hundred feet long [with] good lighting. We had very good art because we were picked out. We had around hundred artists there but [...] most were teachers that people don't realize they paint. We had fantastic artists at that time.

DENISE LUGO: What was the conflict that Mechicano in that early period that you can recall? Philosophical concept.

RAY ATILANO: The thing that is that we were not concentrated on the so called Chicano because even though they had it in mind but we didn't want the artist to paint the style that the *aztecas* (Aztecs) or anything. We wanted very fine art. We wanted everybody to be free to express their ideas.

DENISE LUGO: How did that differ with other institutions?

RAY ATILANO: Well because we always—

[AUDIO CUTS OFF]

RAY ATILANO: —because being a Chicano or Mexican-American you have to paint like the Mexican. That was not our goal. Our goal was to be free. We had to paint how we felt.

DENISE LUGO: Artistic freedom?

RAY ATILANO: Completely artistic because we found anything that was related to the *indio* (Indian) and *nopales* (cactus) and all that to us—

DENISE LUGO: Okay, okay let's talk about that. There's other places like San Diego, San Francisco, places in Texas and Sacramento—

RAY ATILANO: All those groups came before in a way after—

DENISE LUGO: Yeah I know. I am saying later on—

RAY ATILANO: Oh, later on.

DENISE LUGO: A few years.

RAY ATILANO: What we had was really wanted fine arts, fine arts, fine arts.

DENISE LUGO: Define fine art.

RAY ATILANO: Fine art is kind of difficult because a lot of times you label yourself as a commercial artist and they say, "That's not fine arts." And what is a fine art? You take a beautiful landscape and they say, "Hey that's commercial. Do you have still life?" [...] So we got together when we did our own judgment to see who was qualified to participate in the gallery. We wanted the best, we wanted professional artists.

DENISE LUGO: Do you refer to fine arts as more avant-garde or mainstream North American? Or Mexican art? Define it.

RAY ATILANO: It's very difficult because when you say Mexican art, what is Mexican art? Mexican art is Diego? Or is it Tamayo? Which are very different. Then you find Siqueiros, which is very different. Are those Mexican arts?

DENISE LUGO: Well during the 60's that's when you have—

RAY ATILANO: Then going back you find all the Orozco's which is very-very fine art and you have Salazar which is very strong. You have all the periods of all the artists. You have Soriano which is liberal kind of, what do you call them? Completely freedom. He'd paint a horse with two heads. He does whatever, all crooked and that was their style. But it's very hard to pin point what is a Mexican art.

DENISE LUGO: The early mechicano art, that you can remember, how did it differ from contemporary L.A. art or New York art and Mexican?

RAY ATILANO: It's a talent we had. Some can be recognized as Mexican art, some can be recognized as New York or everything. We had all mixed kind of techniques. So it wasn't really one thing. What we were trying to prove is that we were Chicano or Mexican-American. In our heads we thought, we painted the way we felt we were painted. We were going to be labeled Mexican-American.

DENISE LUGO: How did this art differ from the one being produced in Self-Help later on? Goez let's say Los Angeles. How did the stuff being produced in Mechicano differ? Formally, looking at the techniques.

RAY ATILANO: There wasn't really not that much of a technique because some of our artists participated with the Goez.

DENISE LUGO: Why?

RAY ATILANO: Because they were looking to sell.

DENISE LUGO: Okay let's talk about Goez. What was Goez's function in the community?

RAY ATILANO: The function, they came in more or less the same thing we did. Sure they were all in East Los Angeles, we were out there in Hollywood and we were threatened. We were threatened. They were going to throw bombs at us if we didn't move to East Los Angeles. [...] Why should Mexican art or Chicano art be out there in the west? They said you guys have to be out here in East Los Angeles. So we did move to East Los Angeles and we found out there's a Goez gallery. Their style were completely not different. They had a mission, we had a mission.

DENISE LUGO: Who were founders of Goez?

RAY ATILANO: The brothers Gonzalez.

DENISE LUGO: Their names?

RAY ATILANO: Juan and Joe. They were the founders of Goez.

DENISE LUGO: How did that differ, lets say commercialism towards the non-profit art that came out of your place and lets say Self-Help and some of the stuff that Osco did?

RAY ATILANO: We had so far, we had grants like we had projects for murals and we had grants.

DENISE LUGO: We are talking about the art. How did they differ?

RAY ATILANO: The difference was that the Goez *had to*, not to criticize them or anything, [...] sell and we didn't have to sell even though we did sell. But it wasn't our idea just to make painting to sell, make paintings to sell- no. We had the idea to paint for ourselves and it was so beautiful. Goez had to, to survive, they had to do it. So it was very different.

DENISE LUGO: So there are obviously different more towards commercialism than maybe your work. Is that so?

RAY ATILANO: Not really. I wouldn't pin point it that way. (Chuckles) It's just that they had very good talent and they had very fine arts because we sent some of ours to them.

DENISE LUGO: They use a lot of pre-Colombian motifs.

RAY ATILANO: Well that is a different story. Yes that is true.

DENISE LUGO: Yes, they use many. Many people when they look at their work would say that is very Chicano because you have very kind of urban American life at the same sense recycling pre-Colombian motifs. The work is really quite nice pallets and very much takes from the 1920 muralist school in Mexico, which most people view as Chicano.

RAY ATILANO: Well I cannot argue with that point. (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: No, I am just saying.

RAY ATILANO: We always painted for ourselves and when you start putting labels of who's who and what's that your bound to get—

DENISE LUGO: I am just trying to understand the difference of the art that is being produced. To understand the diversity that was being produced in East Los Angeles.

RAY ATILANO: Yes because we had one of the artist who, I want to mention right now but, they go to the Goez and they paint different because they could sell it there and we can't sell it over here. We can't show it.

DENISE LUGO: Did you actually sell some of your work in Mechicano?

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah! I sold a lot of paintings. Yes quite a bit.

DENISE LUGO: But Mechicano from what I see, the research I've done, Mechicano was geared toward working with the public within the barrio and promoting kind of awareness.

RAY ATILANO: Well it started of with the public and since we weren't threatened then we turned around and worked with the community.

DENISE LUGO: Okay you started off in West L.A., right?

RAY ATILANO: Yes.

DENISE LUGO: Then you came back to East Los Angeles, what was your first location?

RAY ATILANO: In Gage and Whittier.

DENISE LUGO: Uh huh and GOES was on First and?

RAY ATILANO: First and Gage.

DENISE LUGO: Yes and explain how was time in the very early beginnings. Give a little artistic climate, what was happening? Lets say in the early 1970's.

RAY ATILANO: Well they had their own shows and we had our own shows. There was a competition of who had the best artists I think. We were trying to pick out our good artists and they pick out their own artists. They had their shows, in fact, some of their shows we participated with them. We were invited to their shows.

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember any of the early people that were affiliated with Mechicano? Do names come to mind right now?

RAY ATILANO: Limon.

DENISE LUGO: Limon?

RAY ATILANO: Yeah he started Mechicano. Oh the early ones?

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, the early ones.

RAY ATILANO: The early ones was just Gutierrez. We had Frank Martinez.

DENISE LUGO: Franco?

RAY ATILANO: Victor Franco, he wasn't an artist, he was an engineer. So they're so many. Oh and Leonard Castellanos.

DENISE LUGO: Lets talk about Leonard. What kind of personality was Leonard in those times? What do you remember of Leonard?

RAY ATILANO: Very strong, very committed to the arts and had his own ideas. Nobody could change them. Very, very strong in his own ideas.

DENISE LUGO: Did the artists always share the same views?

RAY ATILANO: They didn't get along with him. No they didn't because they would want him to paint what they want to call Chicano art and he was very hard edge. He used to paint on the Anglo more or less side.

DENISE LUGO: Mainstream?

RAY ATILANO: Mainstream. But nobody could change him, he had his own ideas and respect it.

DENISE LUGO: Lets talk about Moira Bright. You remember her.

RAY ATILANO: Well yeah she was the one who looked for the shows or paid the grants and so forth. She was involved ...

DENISE LUGO: They helped finance some of it.

RAY ATILANO: They helped little here and there. Funny you know ... but it happened. Then her son John was the photographer. He'd go out and take pictures of all the shows and what have you. So it was very important.

DENISE LUGO: Moira has spent many years in Mexico City also. And that's where she was very much dedicated to promoting Latino art.

RAY ATILANO: I don't know exactly all her background but her husband was exiled from here. He went to Mexico. Don't know the reason. Then she was divorced and she came back to the United States and her husband stayed in Mexico I think it is.

DENISE LUGO: There was also a couple of Mexican artists that came in. Do you remember their names?

RAY ATILANO: Oh Mexican artists, yeah! Antonio Esparza, we had very good artists, fantastic artists. Those are the ones that owned ... it was one of the beginners Henry De Vega. He was one of the starting mechicano. Santo Lida was another one. He's one of the beginners of Mechicano. Then came the other ones; Jose Cervantes one of the starters. Other people started coming in, like Grijalva.

DENISE LUGO: Lets talk about [Lucila Villaseñor] Grijalva. She was interesting. She was one of the few women.

RAY ATILANO: She was.

DENISE LUGO: Why wasn't there many women involved in Mechicano at the time, do you remember?

RAY ATILANO: Uh there was not that many. I don't think that they wanted to get involved. I think they were kind of scared. [...] In fact I don't think there were that many. After Grijalva came in, I think it was five or six women real quick coming after her. She had a lot of talent and a very good woman.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah she really loved to work there.

RAY ATILANO: Santos Lida there's another one too from the beginners.

DENISE LUGO: And then there's Self-Help. [...] How did you find out about Self-Help starting? When do you think they came in?

RAY ATILANO: Oh they came in a year and a half after we started.

DENISE LUGO: About 1970?

RAY ATILANO: Somewhere around there. They started with, that I recall, a gallery out there at the Brooklyn.

DENISE LUGO: How did their philosophy on art lets say and how did they function differently from Mechicano and let's say Goez?

RAY ATILANO: I thought at the beginning it was going to be like a catholic. You know something real religious because so-called a nun. So we thought everything was going to be towards religion. So they started, we went into meetings and everybody started sharing their ideas with them. I think that they grew through our ideas.

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember any of their artists and why did their art differ? Let's say from the art that you have.

RAY ATILANO: No not that very many.

DENISE LUGO: They also had a very large silkscreen department.

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah definitely! They did have a photo silkscreen and they started making a lot of silkscreen.

DENISE LUGO: But many historians remember Self-Help basically for a few years there they had a very good photography center.

RAY ATILANO: Yes they did.

DENISE LUGO: And that's what many people refer to.

RAY ATLEANO: They had large shows, photography shows. That is true.

DENISE LUGO: Did you work in collaborations with Self-Help in some artistic activities?

RAY ATILANO: I guess we did. Off and on we got together in meetings and we did have a show. If we didn't have photography, we'd call them in and they would bring their own artists. We did have shows, yes.

DENISE LUGO: Was there ever any conflict? Ideology differences between, let's say these alternating groups?

RAY ATILANO: Well I can't answer those questions very clear because my job was more or less director of the gallery. I had to get all the artists. Leonard and Franco were the ones that had to deal with her, not me. I was outside of that.

DENISE LUGO: Yes. So you were the director.

RAY ATILANO: I knew a lot of things that I can't tell anybody. Leonard and they all get together.

DENISE LUGO: Lets talk about Asco. Asco came in about 1971.

RAY ATILANO: They came in and they wanted to have a show in a dark place.

DENISE LUGO: Talk about it. Did you see the performance? Do you remember?

RAY ATILANO: Oh yeah, they're fantastic! They came in and redone the whole gallery. We let them in and in fact they stayed there all night. The gallery was theirs. We gave them the key, "Here's the key, here's the gallery." They put paintings on the wall. They did everything that they wanted to do to the gallery. We didn't restrict it. We didn't tell them what to do or not. The gallery was theirs and they came ahead with beautiful artworks.

DENISE LUGO: Was it static art? Did it hung or did they do a performance?

RAY ATILANO: They did everything. They hung and they did out it anywhere they wanted. That was the freedom they had. That what the gallery was for, it was for the public.

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember the performance and what year?

RAY ATILANO: I think they did three or four shows at Mechicano. The first one was a shocking one because I thought the paintings were all on the wall and no, they were hanging from all over. They had a lot of things hanging. It was interesting. Very interesting.

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember the performance?

RAY ATILANO: Not really because I didn't attend to it because they had their own people so I didn't participate even though I was the director. I left them do what ever they wanted to.

DENISE LUGO: And your silkscreen department, how did that develop?

RAY ATILANO: We had a grant through the National ___ of the Arts.

DENISE LUGO: How did it function? Let's say in the *barrio*.

RAY ATILANO: Like all the colleges that had fun raiser, they wanted to have a gathering, party or what ever; we would do it free for them. All they had to do is come and we'd show them how to do it. They said, "We want three or four hundered posters," and they would come in and help us do it. Everything was for free. We did that for a lot of years committed ourselves free.

DENISE LUGO: How did the public react? Especially in East Los Angeles towards having three different organizations like these?

RAY ATILANO: The public close to us weren't that very involved. They didn't want to commit themselves. First thing they didn't know what a gallery was to be truthful. I am talking about the *barrio*. They didn't know what a gallery was so when they see the gallery out there they say, "What is this? What are you selling here?", I'd say, "Hey it's a gallery, come in.", "What are you going to do in there?", I says, "Nothing. Just come in and see the paintings." You know and they couldn't understand it. It looks like people need to be educated and that's what we did. We started educating people and that's where people start learning, "Hey this is a gallery. These are artists. These are great paintings." But in the beginning people, the doors were open but just refused to come in.

DENISE LUGO: What was your relationship, let's say to the doctor's hospitals? Early relationship. Lets talk about that.

RAY ATILANO: The doctor's hospital; we got that gallery through them.

DENISE LUGO: Let's explain how.

RAY ATILANO: We were having to raise money because we were looking for a location where to move after we got out of Melrose and Cienega. So we had a big fundraiser at the Palladium. We had live orchestra, we had big musicians were there. I think Quiera played there and other groups that are going on right now they played there for us. Plus we had a beautiful art exhibit at the Palladium. We went out losing money instead of earning money. Even though the place was packed, for some reason we didn't get no money. So then we went to have another exhibit at UCLA.

DENISE LUGO: Through what gallery was that? Was the Chicanos studies program of culture?

RAY ATILANO: No that was through a program we had there.

DENISE LUGO: What year was this?

RAY ATILANO: This was in 1970. I invited Mr. Livet, which was the public relations to the East Los Angeles Doctor's Hospital. So he went there. When he was there he said, "What are you trying to do?" Well I says, "We're trying to look for a location. We need a new gallery." He says, "Go ahead, I'm right next door to the hospital. Have you seen it?" I says, "No." He says, "Go ahead and see it and you'll have it for free." So next day I went there and I see the place. It's big, dirty, it was a laundry mat all full of holes, all the windows broken, every thing was just amiss. I talked to Moira Bright and Victor Franco and I says, "What do you think about it?" They said, "We could redo the whole thing." Channel 2 gave us all the panels, circle panels and he says, "We could use those. So lets start doing the drawings and see how we are going to do the gallery." So we talked to Mr. Livet, we says, "We don't want it free. We want a contract of it. We don't want to clean it up and suddenly take it away from us." So we had a meeting with him and we did have a contract with him and he was charging us money for it. We were paying it. Until we were behind a couple of months. Like

always. Survive all the time. Since our gallery was not the purpose of selling so it was very hard. Very, very hard. So from there we got hold of another colleague, Mr. Boss, which has a dealer of cars way out there in Broadway. We talked to him and we says, "We like your place. What do you want out of it?" He says, "Okay I'll we'll rent it to you. What are you guys going to do?" "Art." This is out there in Figueroa and Highland Park. So that's the place were we moved. We had a contract with them and they were very nice with us. We had a chance to grow big but didn't do it. After a year or so there, I resigned and that was the end of Mechicano.

DENISE LUGO: When did you resign?

RAY ATILANO: I think it was in 1976. I submitted my thing and I says, "This is it."

DENISE LUGO: Lets go back to the beginning of Mechicano. There was quite of bit of problems with local youngsters and gangs and things of that nature.

RAY ATILANO: It was great because East Los Angeles has a lot of gangs and we were trying to involved with the gangs. In fact we participated in the- what is it? *La Commision de-* (The Commition of-) We got in touch with a lot of gangs. We would kind of get them united. Paint murals together. We got a group that's always fighting, we got hold of both groups and said, "Look we can get together and paint murals. Lets get together. We're trying to unite all the gangs." Which was almost impossible.

DENISE LUGO: Lucille Grijalva.

RAY ATILANO: Lucille Grijalva painted a mural.

DENISE LUGO: Actually went down there.

RAY ATILANO: She painted a mural at the front of the Little Valley. Little Valley had a building and she went there and painted a beautiful mural.

DENISE LUGO: What's interesting is that she has the building in front of Mechicano which incorporated *placas* (graffiti). Why was this kind of revolutionary in art lets say that you actually incorporated graffiti? *Placas* is graffiti, right?

RAY ATILANO: We weren't really trying to encourage the *placas*. What happen was they had the *barrio* (neighborhood) painters plus the gangs. *Placas* could be beautiful, if they were artistically painted. So some of the artists did paint *placas* and we respect it.

DENISE LUGO: What is a *barrio* (neighborhood) painter?

RAY ATILANO: A *barrio* painter is an artist who really has none of so called background as far as going to an art school. He paints because he feels like painting. People respect him.

DENISE LUGO: What do they paint on?

RAY ATILANO: Oh he paints on wood panel, paper or anything. I mean there's no way that normally since he does not have background he can't prepare a canvass, he doesn't know how to prepare a canvas or anything but his style is very probably immature or-

DENISE LUGO: Naive.

RAY ATILANO: Naive, but then again you find all these artists and they're *barrio* painters. They just dedicate themselves to paint for the *barrio*.

DENISE LUGO: Was there any *barrio* painters in Mechicano?

RAY ATLEANO: Oh yeah definitely! We had a lot of them. Manuel Cruz. We had Cavajal, he would paint in the *barrio* even though he had a different style, but he liked to paint the murals on the street. Even though his style was orientated towards the Mexican type of a thing. Those were painters that were more or less, I mean- DeGerano, he was another *barrio* painter.

DENISE LUGO: So the content was very important to these *barrio* painters in particular, right?

RAY ATILANO: Oh definitely.

DENISE LUGO: They wanted to say a message.

RAY ATILANO: They wanted to relate to the *barrios*.

DENISE LUGO: This booming of "muralism" during the late 1960's, did people actually still go? Kids still write over the murals?

RAY ATILANO: Not as they used to before. In fact we had meetings with the mothers of the gangs and we talked to the mothers. All the mothers called us and says, "How could we stop this graffiti? Everyday we white wash the walls and our kids go and paint on them. What do we do?" I says, "Well lets get all the kids together and get all the gangs and start working together." With the mothers and we went to a lot of meetings. But it didn't work out because the kids have their own idea, they wanted their own *placas*, they wanted no outsiders to go in and if we ever did go into their *barrios* and paint something sure enough its going to be—

DENISE LUGO: So why does like Frank Romero actually brought out the kids and had them work and incorporate their stuff.

RAY ATILANO: We all did that. All the artists did that. We were trying to encourage that. Most of the artists were trying to involve the gangs with us. Yes, there's a couple of people that would cooperate. That's the only way we could survive you know as far as the paintings were never touched at least a couple of months or so. But some other gang would come in and say, "That guy painted ... beautiful painting." That's fantastic, it's a very beautiful experience.

DENISE LUGO: The Chicano movement of the late 1960's. Was it reflective of the clash of all the philosophies? How did you deal lets say with very liberal people? They came in and [...] they wanted everybody of abide to their perspective? Do you know what I am trying to talk about? I am talking about the *movimiento* (movement); Brown Berets, the art alliances people like this. Lets talk about these kind of things.

RAY ATILANO: We were trying to be unique in a way. We were not trying to copy others. We had a lot of people who confronted us and Brown Berets and all those, you know. And we were trying to get together with them but [...] they wanted us to go their way. Like I said Leonard has a lot of guts and he would respect them the way we were. A lot of freedom instead like the groups in San Diego, no they wanted us to paint a certain way. We had to go our way. It was very difficult.

DENISE LUGO: Lets talk about the groups according to you. How do these people differ, lets say L.A.?

RAY ATILANO: A lot of the good artists at San Diego and San Francisco and you have some from San Jose and you have some from Fresno, all those. We had Palomino from Fresno and he was one of our artists too. We had his paintings here. We respected we way he painted but then again some of the other artists were just against us for some reason or another. Didn't like the way Leonard painted or the way I painted. They thought that we had to change our style in order to be a Chicano. A lot of conflicts there.

DENISE LUGO: What happened in the meetings, some of the meetings that you had? Very organized.

RAY ATILANO: The meetings were kind of hard because if you go down to it they take two hours and even days. You know just discussing a few pointers here. "Let's get together." "Come on, let's not fight. Let's unite." You know that was our mission to unite, unite, unite.

DENISE LUGO: All California?

RAY ATILANO: All California. We were trying to get everybody together. Not only us. San Diego was trying to get the whole group together.

DENISE LUGO: What was typical of them to do?

RAY ATILANO: Well the thing is that they would start pin point [and] trying to define what is Chicano art. Well everybody had their own opinion of what is Chicano art. So we could never get together on that point. You know, it was you guys do your thing, we do our thing. You protect yourself, we protect ourselves but lets get in touch. You do your thing. We respect what you do. Let us do what we want and they'd always say, "No you guys are liberal." We were so called the *gringos* (white Americans). You know that hurt because we did not have the freedom to express our ideas. So that was one thing we were never agree. In fact I quit a couple of times and went to the meeting and said, "You know, this is it; I quit." I told Leonard, "I am quitting because I'm not going to paint the way they want me to paint."

DENISE LUGO: Was that basically the big arguments?

RAY ATILANO: Yeah most of it. Yes because we were trying to get grants for all of us and just trying to help each other. "Hey this is the way you get a good grant. This is the way it's written. This is the way this." We would talk to each other in groups. We couldn't get money from the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts). So Leonard would give them a hint, give them information and "Hey, you do it this way." and all this, "Don't use Chicano, use these other words." They refused to do it. They wanted their way or nothing at all. So a lot of times they didn't get what they wanted.

DENISE LUGO: Did they exhibit work at your place or did you do the same?

RAY ATILANO: No. They did come over. We had their artwork here. Uh, I don't have a recollection right off hand that we did show. We did take paintings to San Francisco. We did take paintings to, I think, San Jose.

DENISE LUGO: San Diego?

RAY ATILANO: San Diego I think we did have a couple of them or so. I couldn't send mine because I know ... so it was a big label. You know we supposed to get together. We are not supposed to be fighting and that's a big issue that we've always had fought. We supposed to get together, try to be together, fight together and they seemed like everybody had their own ideas, which is good. But I think there was a point that we should have gotten together and I think there would be no stopping us. I guess that was a big mistake it was. I wished we band together and I think right now would have been great all over the world because we had people from Russia, we had people from Japan, we had people from all over the world trying to get information from us. We would get tours and show Goez murals in the show. Take them to San Diego and say San Diego has this. It will never be just us. We would open doors to everybody. So that was good.

DENISE LUGO: You also had several shows out of Mechicano. You actually coordinated them the exhibitions, didn't you?

RAY ATILANO: Well we had the bench contest in Los Angeles.

DENISE LUGO: Yes explain about that.

RAY ATLEANO: That was through the-

DENISE LUGO: 1971?

RAY ATILANO: East Los Angeles Hospital. Their logo was on one side and we do anything we wanted.

[END OF INTERVIEW]