

Oral History interview with Frank Romero

Romero, Frank, born 1941

Painter

Los Angeles, California

Part 1 of 2

Sound Cassette Duration – 57 minutes

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

DENISE LUGO: Frank, where were you born?

FRANK ROMERO: I was born in Whittier Township.

DENISE LUGO: Really?

FRANK ROMERO: Los Angeles. It's part of Los Angeles.

DENISE LUGO: Yes, definitely.

FRANK ROMERO: Santa Martha Hospital. They just gave me a reward as a distinguish citizen as a Santa Martha baby this year.

DENISE LUGO: Okay.

FRANK ROMERO: That's very sweet.

DENISE LUGO: And you were raised with both parents?

FRANK ROMERO: Yes.

DENISE LUGO: What schools did you attend?

FRANK ROMERO: I attended Euclid Avenue School and Robert Stevenson Junior High which is very interesting because it's a teacher school. I had very good teachers. We prepared that way with education ... and went to Roosevelt High.

DENISE LUGO: When did you graduate from Roosevelt?

FRANK ROMERO: I graduated in 1959.

DENISE LUGO: M-hm.

FRANK ROMERO: And I was the first freshmen class that attended Cal State LA.

DENISE LUGO: Why is that?

FRANK ROMERO: I think ... the new campus in east LA opened up in 1959 for freshmen, the first time. It meant that really, its really interesting because that's the first time I mean was there was an East LA College, but this is a four-year college so I was one of the first when the generation that after went on to college. And it was kind of a lot of very interesting it was East LA that could afford after driving to school after community college. And I met Carlos Almaraz there in 1959. So I guess we both were 19 or 20.

DENISE LUGO: okay. I mean how did you start? I mean it's obvious you're an artist now, but when did you [consider yourself an artist or get the "calling as an artist"]?

FRANK ROMERO: I think I was never anything else because I was always an artist and I don't know why. You try to understand everything, as you get older. I think maybe my mother wanted me to be an artist. I mean the earliest time I drew and I asked. I have some pictures at my parents' home things I did in junior high, old books that I drew...

DENISE LUGO: Was there any artists in the family?

FRANK ROMERO: No.

DENISE LUGO: Really?

FRANK ROMERO: That's the interesting part. There's no history of buying art or going to concerts, none of that.

DENISE LUGO: Looking back now at high school and junior high, were you geared to education or how?

FRANK ROMERO: I was very fortunate in going to Stevenson Junior High. I think all through my schooling, even after grammar school I had people that pushed me in art rather than in science because I was a very gifted student in a sense. What I understand today it was very strange because I don't think I got special. I don't think anyone dealt with that well in those days because I was still a mediocre student until I got to junior high. Then I noticed I started to get A's in school ... then I enjoyed it, but I had good teachers. I had mostly good teachers in art. I had Mrs. Martin in 4th grade, sunny painter, very encouraging. Joey Riby(?) who was later in Cal State LA was my junior high teacher. You know and it is very interesting that I got all these people. In fact he sent me to Otis when I graduated from Stevenson Junior High, which was the 8th grade.

DENISE LUGO: Really?

FRANK ROMERO: The PTA used to have these scholarships. So I went to Otis when I was 16 and I transpired. I passed through ... the truth is I went to Otis in the summers, after school and on Saturdays.

DENISE LUGO: Was that on scholarships?

FRANK ROMERO: On scholarships or Joe Meniny(?) liked me very much and he arranged for me to sneak into [Herbert] Jepson's class.

DENISE LUGO: Oh that's interesting! How did you do it? You really liked that?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. I was brilliant; I was always child prodigy. I liked that kind of stuff. As a 17 year old, [Herbert Jepson] took my drawings and lectured to the whole class on, you know, how good they were.

DENISE LUGO: What do you remember of him?

FRANK ROMERO: He's still around, you know? That is very interesting and he is a very low-key teacher. He'd just sit there and draw for hours. I think he learned from the classes that the quality of working in classes was extremely high, very good and so you just learn from what everyone else is doing. And he used to practice what he preached in the subject. I'm still looking at the pictures and it's something I learned in school. I mean I sort of had a right formal disciple kind of art background in Otis. I learned and I knew very much. That was a very creative time in the 1950's at Otis. Millard Sheets was the director. I saw all the master shows.

DENISE LUGO: Did you take classes at all?

FRANK ROMERO: No. I did no clay effects on it, but I saw all the shows. I saw Kathy Nakamoto show. I saw all the wonderful and great shows with all those people that went through there. Nobody paid much attention, I was just a little kid walking around, but I absorbed it all. Quite frankly by the time I was done with high school I was also done with my education in terms of going to art school and things because I spent four years going to Otis. But for all of that I still didn't know how to get out of Otis. At that time there was only the other day school somewhere for two years before you transfer to Otis. So I went to Cal State LA and teachers were not exception at Cal State LA. They looked at the situation but, they knew enough to leave me alone and I had a good time, which is making that school a number of years until I went into strange areas. Like I spent most of my life after school as a designer working for living, you know some how to make money because I wasn't selling art.

DENISE LUGO: What kind of designers?

FRANK ROMERO: Basically exhibitions and graphics.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, I think ... told me that. I was amazed. With mirrors?

FRANK ROMERO: With mirrors. (Laughter)

DENISE LUGO: So is it playful?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. They're basically the county of LA and the Lou Danzinger, and Charles Eames and I guess [Samuel and Joseph Cather] Newson some of his people have gone ... But I worked for all these people at various times at doing graphics. Somewhere between all of that I was married and divorced. I raised kids by myself so I was home a lot and very poor. (Laughter) And I recently remarried.

DENISE LUGO: So going back to your school. So how many years total were you in Cal State?

FRANK ROMERO: So I was in Cal State for 5 or 6 or 7 years.

DENISE LUGO: You're kidding?

FRANK ROMERO: Just because I was half way through. I think in my junior year I went through Charles Eames. It's the kind of situation where you work all the time and after you have to drop out of school, but I continued. All I needed to simply graduate and never quite did just because of catching the rules which I think is it all acted out all illegal and considered a mess and I didn't care because arts is not a kind of thing you need a degree for.

DENISE LUGO: No.

FRANK ROMERO: I was busy working. I was already professional so as a designer in my career. I have always continued to draw and do art.

DENISE LUGO: You started in 1959 in Cal State and started Otis approximately full time?

FRANK ROMERO: I'd say all throughout high school. So I went Otis from 1956 for a Saturday class, junior high school Saturday class. Then the next summer I went. I talked to teachers at high school to give me Saturday class again and also then I started with Jepson. And then I think a year after that I actually hated to go. (Chuckles) Somehow I got in there, they had some Saturday classes and I went all year.

DENISE LUGO: In high school?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, they sort of let you in, I don't know, I don't know, back door. All kinds of ways I got in there. I was there all the time. In high school, in the sense [that it was] very boring for me.

DENISE LUGO: In Cal State you said were there for five to six years?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, yea but also working part time as a designer already.

DENISE LUGO: Oh!

FRANK ROMERO: So I actually probably I went to college almost 7 years. Like I said I began for a BA, but I mean I never pushed on.

DENISE LUGO: Pursued? Ok and uh, ok so let's go back. You met Carlos?

FRANK ROMERO: In 1959. Yeah, he was Charles then.

DENISE LUGO: Yes I know.

FRANK ROMERO: But they changed his name. He was born in Mexico City and they changed his name when he crossed the border.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: He grew up all over. He traveled a lot much more and much more unstable. He had a very close family life too.

DENISE LUGO: Uh huh.

FRANK ROMERO: He lived in Chicago and the valley. His dad worked in railroad and steel mill. I think I moved once, one block when I was a kid and so I lived very close to my family. You know, a lot of cousins but all lived within 5 miles in Boyle Heights. Carlos lived out in East LA in a little house style ... revival.

DENISE LUGO: Right. Where Garfield...?

FRANK ROMERO: I'd say freshmen class, which was interesting, you know, it enables to get an education. In terms of money we had none. We went through a lot; Carlos and I have been very close. I think we worked out a lot of art problems in those early days when we live together; in various places, we lived downtown.

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

FRANK ROMERO: That's right near- which is the Los Center [Lincoln Heights]. He lived on, near Lincoln and 10th.

DENISE LUGO: How did you meet Carlos? How did that happened? Do you remember?

FRANK ROMERO: We had class together.

DENISE LUGO: Ok, what class?

FRANK ROMERO: Oh I don't know. In the freshmen class Carlos tells me these stories that he saw these two noisy people in the back room and I was, and I think I walked in with, um, uh...

DENISE LUGO: Cal State?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah Cal State. With um, what's his name? Paul, I think I remember. He's just another guy from Rose art. I think we were sharing a ride. He said those kids have to be from East LA. I think in terms of the Hispanic kids [going]. As freshmen there weren't many of us. I mean even though it was available to Carlos and I— I can't remember but, it was a small class. It was very small art department small class. So we got to know each other pretty well. Later I think we got an apartment together and all that kind of stuff a couple of years later.

DENISE LUGO: Mm huh. At that time you, did you think you wanted to pursue this and make a living at this?

FRANK ROMERO: Well the thing you don't learn coming out of the *barrios* (Chicano neighborhoods) dealing with the greater society in the real sense (main stream art). That took me along time to pick up; you know "How does it work?" And the truth is that LA in those days the art scene was in its infancy in very small compared to what's happening today. It's much more difficult to get into the establishment. So I didn't know how that worked. No so I was sort of the high faulting artist, so when I met Carlos he wanted to be a he wanted to be an illustrator artist for business. He wanted to be a commercial artist. I think in the end it sort of changed. I went into design for a great many years and Carlos sort of started painting after a while. I don't know the thing of it is you had all these artists first primarily because the rest was to make a living. I mean he was denied but he didn't know and he did a lot of illustrations and stuff for all the windows in New York.

DENISE LUGO: Yes. A lot of artists in fact they are still doing that today.

FRANK ROMERO: Everyone does that most artists have to live. What's interesting about all this that we were dealing with our problems and how to deal with art. We were not talking about politics or being Chicano or anything like that. Carlos and I were very main stream. I'd talked him into going to Otis. He did go to Otis and he graduated from Otis on my recommendation. When he went to New York and I followed. He was there almost there 6 or 7 years.

DENISE LUGO: What year was it did he go in? What year are we talking about?

FRANK ROMERO: Well he was already in New York, 6 years in. 1969 so he went about.

DENISE LUGO: 1963?

FRANK ROMERO: 1966, 1963.

DENISE LUGO: 1963.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, early 1960's. I need to say its 1960s.

DENISE LUGO: Okay.

FRANK ROMERO: And I followed in 1968 actually.

DENISE LUGO: How long were you in New York?

FRANK ROMERO: I was only in New York about a year and a half.

DENISE LUGO: How did you like New York at the time?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I loved New York.

DENISE LUGO: Hold please, this, okay go ahead.

FRANK ROMERO: [...] It was sort of in terms of art it wasn't all. What I found at all interesting, it was very severe I was looking at the Brice show, the William Brice Show at Downtown Gallery, [New York, City] a lot of the images what he used were very much what both Carlos and I were doing some of the 1970s. I thought I knew Brice's work, but seeing his shows just recently, I realized I didn't. I think Carlos more than I was doing abstract stuff, like floating large fields but, the little abstract objects tended to be figurative, you know? It looked like bones and grass and things although they were very abstract because that was the prevalence. It was very cool and all of that. I didn't respond to that kind imaging. Feel very comfortable in New York and so I was only there about a year and a half.

DENISE LUGO: Where did you live?

FRANK ROMERO: We lived down which is now Soho, which is West Broadway and Cambridge. We actually shared a studio, which I said this one time somehow miscoded. The studio that we got for a \$125 a month I think in those days which now supposed to be like \$1,000s. And I think it used to be Richard Serra's, Carlos told me that he lived in, but he took over it but, I shared it with him. He was there for a long time and I was going there for a very short time.

DENISE LUGO: And what did you do for a living there?

FRANK ROMERO: I had left the Eames' office in Los Angeles so I had a good portfolio as well and I was recommended. So I worked as a designer and I ended up working for small agencies and eventually for book publisher Ballentine Books and things like that. That's what I did for a living. I did some very strange work. Very little of it remains from the period New York the moves and all that but it was sort of perfectly, you know it just didn't fit with what was going on. I think it was very interesting. That's the whole background because we both came back to L.A. in the 1960s and that's when Chicanismo and all this stuff happened for us.

DENISE LUGO: Yes. That's after the beginning of Mechicano.

FRANK ROMERO: That's very interesting now. I didn't know it was the beginning of Mechicano and all that but I came back and for all of that Carlos had a lot of emotional problems. He followed me about 6 months later in fact I had gotten married and by that time I had a baby and were living in this house that I am living in today. So he came back and he settled himself moved into our house also. It was a very large house and I think park of all-that happening I was sort of stuck living up my family and all of that and going to work. I think I was working for A&M Records, doing that also.

DENISE LUGO: So what were you doing... designing?

FRANK ROMERO: Designing.

DENISE LUGO: Oh doing album [record] covers?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

DENISE LUGO: Oh interesting.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, boring. (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: Okay.

FRANK ROMERO: But uh it was an interesting part of this aspect. I don't think I ever worked in one place longer than 8 months. It was part of the artists. I'm just difficult I think. Carlos met Gilbert Lujan here out at Orange County. He was at UC Irvine at that time and through him Gilbert Lujan was being with Con Safo.

DENISE LUGO: What year was this?

FRANK ROMERO: 1969.

DENISE LUGO: Yes I know that.

FRANK ROMERO: Gilbert was involved with Con Safo and he was very much Chicano.

DENISE LUGO: What is Con Safo?

FRANK ROMERO: Con Safo is *Calo*, which is slang. It's what you see in all the graffiti.

DENISE LUGO: The *Placa* (gang graffiti)?

FRANK ROMERO: You have the *Placas* (gang graffiti). Frank ... "c" slash "s" (c/s) which is *Con Safos* and it means go back to you.

DENISE LUGO: Oh with flow.

FRANK ROMERO: Flow it means?

DENISE LUGO: Yes, also.

FRANK ROMERO: Back to cozier old man I think it means. (Laughs) In other words, if you curse the *Placa*, the *Placa* curses you back.

DENISE LUGO: *Placa* is graffiti.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah the evil eye, its protection for your *Placa* that's what it is. I think its kinds fun.

DENISE LUGO: All Chicano children just incorporate without even asking.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. Well yes. *Con Saños*—

DENISE LUGO: Was adapted to the name of this magazine?

FRANK ROMERO: A lot of these things that Chicanos do which are bad and naughty you know, uh are of interest and should be cherished because they are part of our culture. And I think that's what Gilbert's saying. Both Carlos and I were very, very white.

DENISE LUGO: That was the beginning of the 1970s, right?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

DENISE LUGO: That was the beginning of the 1970s.

FRANK ROMERO: We were very mainstream and very you know and I'd say Anglo in our outlook to a great extent.

DENISE LUGO: How was your work then? Let's talk about your work then.

FRANK ROMERO: Well I think our work was starting to germinate in a very real sense. I think what happened out of this experience of this time and meeting Gilbert and Gilbert introduces us to Beto De la Rocha

DENISE LUGO: Beto de la Rocha was Diego.

FRANK ROMERO: Which not all of the Los Four, the four original. Judith Hernandez was very close to the group and she came a little after. She was actually in our second show. Carlos met her at Otis so she was a little younger than the four of us. So and then later on I think John [Valadez] was actually was working with Carlos a lot.

DENISE LUGO: Yes. That was happening in the later half of the 1970s?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, right. So it was the last 4 or 5 years.

DENISE LUGO: Besides *Con Safos* there was other magazines, there was *La Generación* (The Generation) by Harry Gamboa?

FRANK ROMERO: That's later, a little later.

DENISE LUGO: That was in 1972'. That was 1972'.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, right.

DENISE LUGO: And then there was another one, do you remember? The one I just showed you.

FRANK ROMERO: "*Chismarte*". Now "*Chismarte*" was done with Carlos and William. What's his name?

DENISE LUGO: ... ?

FRANK ROMERO: No. We'll have to look in the magazine.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: I forget his name. There was another one of Carlos' close associates for many years and maybe it was in the second cover. This is all from the things that all of us were involved in. Like there's a comic book on a shade that probably you never saw that Los Four did.

DENISE LUGO: Yes I saw it.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah you did?

DENISE LUGO: Okay let's talk about—

FRANK ROMERO: William DeGenaro. These photographs from the whole article those are all my photographs.

DENISE LUGO: Yes, okay I know.

FRANK ROMERO: William DeGenaro.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: So Carlos and William DeGenaro developed an art... CAC grant that was um—

DENISE LUGO: What's a CAC grant?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah the originally yeah.

DENISE LUGO: What's the CAC grant?

FRANK ROMERO: California Arts Commission.

DENISE LUGO: Okay.

FRANK ROMERO: I think they actually continued.

DENISE LUGO: Okay now.

FRANK ROMERO: With 6 issues or a couple of years actually.

DENISE LUGO: With these magazines, how did they fit within the community, the Chicano community in the early 1970's?

FRANK ROMERO: I donated articles and obviously to teach them stuff and all that.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, but no one actually got paid for that, it was actually volunteering for the artwork?

FRANK ROMERO: No.

DENISE LUGO: Okay.

FRANK ROMERO: No money! (Laughs) They were published.

DENISE LUGO: It was an alternative magazine.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. I don't know who the audience was. I know the artists bought things or got things.

DENISE LUGO: The *barrio* (Chicano neighborhood).

FRANK ROMERO: I don't know about, you know—

DENISE LUGO: They did.

FRANK ROMERO: You didn't talk to kids.

DENISE LUGO: I did because I remember reading that.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah-yeah. Oh really? See that's the thing I was involved like all of us publishing these things.

DENISE LUGO: I used to buy them at Whittier Blvd because I lived near there.

FRANK ROMERO: I'm living here which was also barrio but also lived in Echo Park.

DENISE LUGO: I think the other one now that I think is doing that in a sense toward a different audience of Chicanos that is "Lowrider" magazine.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

DENISE LUGO: Right? Is currently.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. It's not—

DENISE LUGO: It's different... for different... but at the time there was...

FRANK ROMERO: I buy "Lowrider" printings but like these, these deal with art and politics I think more than "Lowrider".

DENISE LUGO: The social conditions of the barrio of the time.

FRANK ROMERO: "Lowrider" is like television.

DENISE LUGO: Yes, that would have been a whole different homeboy audience, which is different than what we talk about.

FRANK ROMERO: But you know like I've always wanted to "Lowrider" ... Who's magazine should be modeled for that.

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

FRANK ROMERO: These were intellectual.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: I'd like to know if kids did buy it and if they responded to because you know you throw this stuff out and you really don't know the next generation how they are taking it.

DENISE LUGO: Did you see this one? They had the kind of manifesto from Mechicano. Did you see that? That was interesting.

FRANK ROMERO: Well you know I forgot it been so long this is the front cover.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah. I think Leonard Castellanos wrote that.

FRANK ROMERO: A lot of this became so political. So in a sense Los Four was never a group. We did try to incorporate. We tried to do a lot of stuff but we were always just a group of close artists we were trans more than anything.

DENISE LUGO: Let's go back to the early 1970's again, this is when Carlos, you and Lujan started seeing each other then Beto came out and he was the fourth one. How did the name come up? How did it originate?

FRANK ROMERO: Well Gilbert Lujan eventually suggested to have ... at UC Irvine.

DENISE LUGO: Oh, that show.

FRANK ROMERO: We do a Chicano show and there were a lot of shows that preceded Los Four and just seeing you know like...did one called Four Chicano Artists. I think there were a lot of shows like that. There was an interest in this movement because I think even at that point there was some very interesting art being produced. I think Los Four was sort of the catalyst; it was the first show.

DENISE LUGO: The name, how did it derive? You said Lujan was the one that adopted.

FRANK ROMERO: No I did. I invented it. We used to sit in my kitchen and discuss life and art and all that and Gilbert came out with the idea of the show and so we were discussing what should we call the show.

DENISE LUGO: The theme?

FRANK ROMERO: I didn't want to be called Four Chicano Artists. I said that's been done; you know it's kind of silly. So again it's the idea of naming the magazine. I said, "Why don't we call it Los Four?" because it was *Calo* (slang) it was both languages. And it's some thing about "los" which refers to Los Angeles.

DENISE LUGO: But also in Spanish means p--- male?

FRANK ROMERO: Hmm huh, right but anyway but "los" and "four". The idea is to do it bicultural bilingual.

DENISE LUGO: Uh-huh.

FRANK ROMERO: And you know that was, that was a very prevalent idea I think in all the literature were talking about. It's now they called it those terms that come up we speak in two languages.

DENISE LUGO: Biculturalism?

FRANK ROMERO: Yes biculturalism but we you know just talking "spanglish" (mix of Spanish and English language when speaking).

DENISE LUGO: Yes, Spanish. Yes *calo*.

FRANK ROMERO: “Spanglish”.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah that’s a little different than *Calo*.

FRANK ROMERO: *Calo* is slang.

DENISE LUGO: *Calo* was street slang.

FRANK ROMERO: “Spanglish” is speaking in Spanish and English at the same time. Which I remember my mother doing, you know like on the phone, she would say, *digame* (tell me) something because just naturally going into both languages at the same time.

DENISE LUGO: Mm huh.

FRANK ROMERO: I mean everyone used it, you know, very political The Los Four name. In reality it came out of the show so it was at the time but everyone caught on to it. They identified with the idea.

DENISE LUGO: Did you think ...the philosophy, just certain philosophy out of the ... which was just different at the time?

FRANK ROMERO: All we did was fight! (Laughs) There’s a film I want you to see on Los Four and we're sitting in the kitchen saying no I can't agree to that and if you going throw this kind of political line I'm just going to get out. And that’s the way all of us because all artists say we all are very individualistically. Artists are taught in this society to be an individual and it’s very difficult to be a collective but in the end I think for a while in the late 1970s actually all through the 70s we were a collective. We were a collective and did murals together and a lot of things.

DENISE LUGO: Oh I know a lot of things. Going back to the 1970s, when you did, like let’s say early 70s, 70, 71 after being back east and seeing the art. Back east and looking at LA and you said Carlos came in about 6 months afterwards. How did you see the art world?

FRANK ROMERO: Well um it wasn’t the art world. The art world I think in a sense haven't changed in LA but have changed was more the political kind and the movement. In a sense that in Chicano it was important the whole thing and it’s a term we all eventually embrace. So but I think Chicano to me still to this day more of a political.

DENISE LUGO: Let’s talk about that for a second.

FRANK ROMERO: It’s a political position.

DENISE LUGO: The origins of Chicanismo we're not going to cover all throughout the tape forever and ever in hours.

FRANK ROMERO: But it came out of the black community.

DENISE LUGO: The civil rights movement in the 1960s. Especially what happened in East Los Angeles with one reporter.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, Ruben Salazar. I just did a painting this year about him.

DENISE LUGO: When we're talking about the instance Chicano it was really political.

FRANK ROMERO: Oh yeah it was political for sure.

DENISE LUGO: And parents my mother had difficulty ...older Mexicans because there weren't Mexican-Americans. I'm talking to myself. Well we have to have something identification for ourselves in Chicanismo.

FRANK ROMERO: It worked. I would think Margo Albert who was you know very influential and *Plaza de La Raza* (Cultural Square).

DENISE LUGO: She was.

FRANK ROMERO: New Yorker. When she died she, I went to a number of functions ... in Chicano. From a New Yorker, to be growing up in the 1930s.

DENISE LUGO: So it's been...when mentioned you think Chicano at the time?

FRANK ROMERO: Look to me because it was *Calo* a strange word.

DENISE LUGO: Let's talk about the 1970s. Lets we can go back, try to go back. When did it really make sense make to you at the time to be Chicano?

FRANK ROMERO: Because we were so intimately involved.

DENISE LUGO: As individuals?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah and part of the history of that to me it was a real exchange of very exciting ideas and very passionate stances positions.

DENISE LUGO: Like what?

FRANK ROMERO: Well I guess when I was a kid I was called a Mexican-American and if you talk to my parent's generation they consider themselves Americans period.

DENISE LUGO: Uh-huh.

FRANK ROMERO: The truth is the prejudice that exists. I grew up in a California in a melting pot in Boil Heights which is Japanese, white Russian ... Jewish and Hispanic and like 10% Black. I ... got the most integrated school in the nation at the time. The wonderful part of all I was exposed to many cultures so I grew up in a bicultural society. You know, I didn't grew up in ... white west side and in fact I haven't been as east as Hollywood until I was 20. Carlos and a friend of his, the three of us were very close. He took me to Hollywood three times when I was 20 years old.

DENISE LUGO: Isn't something?

FRANK ROMERO: So I mean I've grown tremendously.

DENISE LUGO: So when you went back to New York and all of sudden.

FRANK ROMERO: That was late though, I was already 28.

DENISE LUGO: When you went to New York?

FRANK ROMERO: Yes, I was late and we went to New York. The first time I went to Mexico that year.

DENISE LUGO: Also Mexico City?

FRANK ROMERO: We drove from the west coast to Mexico City and back all the way to New York.

DENISE LUGO: No? It was in that year?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

DENISE LUGO: That's two different cultures.

FRANK ROMERO: I realized very much and that's why Carlos becoming Chicano started to make some sense to me because I was a Mexican.

DENISE LUGO: Let's talk about that for a minute.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah you grow up in East L.A. and this is Mexican ... so okay I'm Mexican whatever that means. When you go to Mexico you realize that you're not at all.

DENISE LUGO: Did you have a culture shock in a sense?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. It was eye opening and very strange but it was not at all like East L.A.! (Laughs) Different kinds of tortillas even, but they're still tortillas but my mother made tortillas everyday out of flour! (Chuckles) When she gave that up probably in the 1970s or 1980s when she did it I did have tortillas and *frijoles* (beans), I hated them! (Chuckles) But I grew up with that stuff.

DENISE LUGO: And, New York, that must have been interesting.

FRANK ROMERO: New York was different but New York is like- that's really your education. You go there to see real art.

DENISE LUGO: How does it feel to go to this big city?

FRANK ROMERO: Wonderful because you realize how cool the collection in Los Angeles is or was.

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) at the time? Let's talk about Alexander ... of the 1970s.

FRANK ROMERO: Well it was part of museums of natural history.

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember that one painting?

FRANK ROMERO: So there were what like 10 paintings there I don't know. I don't remember anything! (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember that one painting of Diego Rivera? And every time he goes...to pick up Diego Rivera paintings...and then they sewed everything.

FRANK ROMERO: Really? See I really doubt I saw that painting.

DENISE LUGO: They only had one Diego Rivera.

FRANK ROMERO: What's interesting is that when you see real paintings it's one thing that you mentioned that all Californians have sort of that idea it's called ...-finish. And you tend to think to make the paintings look like magazine pictures kind of slick.

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

FRANK ROMERO: That's because we've seen so little real art because real art is a lot of it just very poorly painted.

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

FRANK ROMERO: The ideas are much more important than the execution.

DENISE LUGO: When was that?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

DENISE LUGO: You're talking about the formulas...

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. So going to New York was learning how to paint and how you know what art is really how it's really done.

DENISE LUGO: You went back to Mexico City and saw Diego Rivera murals, right in Mexico?

FRANK ROMERO: Yes I did.

DENISE LUGO: How did that feel looking at that stuff? And then?

FRANK ROMERO: Diego Rivera murals in one trip you see so little and it's so ... difficult ...

DENISE LUGO: Did you notice what a difference ... right?

FRANK ROMERO: I think only in retrospect. Yeah.

DENISE LUGO: It's honest oh my goodness where do you go.

FRANK ROMERO: Because seeing all that stuff because 5 years later in Los Angeles we were painting murals so obviously we had an effect but it took 5 years to do all.

DENISE LUGO: Mental?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, it's very interesting. So me and Gilbert and Beto were talking about Chicanismo all of this, which started 1969, 1970, 1971. I think the art grew out of all of that. The art grew out of that dialogue. The ideas came through.

DENISE LUGO: I find in all my research in the late 60s let's say through 1967 to 1970 is a height in Chicanismo. We're talking about civil rights approximately Chavez going on. The things that were going on, the bringing up of East Los Angeles to bus riots and then a lot of people said there's like Sacramento and San Diego ... Well this is what Chicano art has to be. It has to be didactic, it has to tell a story, it has to follow this very rigid structure, palette color and so on.

FRANK ROMERO: (laughs) Yeah my ego is much more wonderful than that because the only person I ever heard things like that, "it has to be this way" was S___ Bowen. She was a Jewish woman hysteria telling a Chicano how to do art. Which I felt whatever I did was Chicano art and it's a position I have always taken. Los Four and myself are always being put down for having a show at the LA County Art Museum. S___ Bowen actually castigated us for doing a show at the Captain Folk Art Museum because it wasn't Chicano. Chicano is so interesting to me because the same thing William said Chicano should stay in its place and S___ Bowen said that and _____ said that because they don't understand what we are doing.

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

FRANK ROMERO: They don't understand at all. I'm doing art, you know? (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: But I'm going back, I'm saying in the 1970s there were philosophical changes. Also there were people that were saying we should be called Mexican-American. Because nowhere lets raise Chicanismo the whole philosophy "We are Chicanos". The art is all the reason I'm bring all this up is because it all very important the identity is very closely tied to the art that was being produced at the time. People told me are you Mechicano. It was very different than they were doing with Self-Help and because I was told a Mechicano-, well we'll take a look at that later on.

FRANK ROMERO: Carlos, _____, and I we're all closest of friends and but trans artists and discussing Chicanismo and a lot of the ideas we really liked and in a sense brought but there's a lot of this stuff going around other people telling you what to do and its kind of the thing I got with the art orientations.

DENISE LUGO: Wasn't it the time though, there a time of ideological clashes between even the communities themselves?

FRANK ROMERO: Myself personally and even the people I wish in the group made me join the organization because we found a much too descriptive. We found work for all the given intentions ... and we were discussing this earlier there's so much you call yourself Chicano and introduce valid for that reason and I don't believe it at all. I think ... communicate even radical ideas in art but there's not, you may have wonderful ideas but you're not communicating so it's a real fine line. And we're always getting in trouble and I mean that's part of the enjoyment.

DENISE LUGO: But there's a early, especially during the—

FRANK ROMERO: I didn't join Mechicano; I didn't join Self-Help but it's true. In a sense we became a group ourselves. I think that's the way Asco went if you think about it. They didn't join Mechicano. We had our own vision we followed our own vision. I think that's why we are so important because we in a sense broadened the concept and the political role. Carlos worked through Caesar Chavez you know? For 2 or 3 years and went up there every week. We all did things like that. In terms of the murals; I think politically I am mature now that's a whole different thing I think then I was discussing art. And the art was tentative.

DENISE LUGO: The art was the content.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah.

DENISE LUGO: Right?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah and that's what we discussing.

DENISE LUGO: That was it.

FRANK ROMERO: I was not doing political pieces and I'm doing political pieces now and they are reflective and they are discussing things what happened then. The death of Ruben Salazar that you mentioned; I just did a painting now probably through what again and again because there's a lot of very interesting ideas about growing up in East LA. In fact that someone like that is killed every week and it's anonymous.

DENISE LUGO: Okay let's talk about now of Mechicano. I looked through many of the records and you and Carlos and Lujan and Beto have been always influential.

FRANK ROMERO: I think we all did shows there.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah. You always had shows so in other words you did not consider yourself; this is what I came up with—

FRANK ROMERO: Mechicano was a click, it was a group and they all had to tug the party along and also they were just friends.

DENISE LUGO: What was the party line?

FRANK ROMERO: Well your telling me about that and I didn't know but you know like I think in a sense a lot of Chicanos again had a difficult time articulating things verbally maybe.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: And the party line was sort of very barrio, you know?

DENISE LUGO: Leonard was a director and I've seen some things Leonard and from ... and other people have said Mechicano was more open than Self-Help was at the time. People in an essence develop their own case and do what they want to do and are very much involved in public during the 1970s going on its different very much philosophically. They say the people at ... San Diego or the royal air force in Sacramento.

FRANK ROMERO: I never understood all of that quite frankly. I met them all. Gilbert and Carlos went many times and traveled. They were much more involved politically than I was but I met them. There was never anything articulated to me that I could understand. Your going back in time when those people were involved were so interesting. I think as outsiders in a sense to Mechicano and as I say you buy the bit you like. I like the idea of doing art for the public and that meant that the East L.A. public *la gente*, the people. I think I bought the idea of doing murals you know so I did murals.

DENISE LUGO: Let's talk a little about the mural aspect. Why pick murals as a public art? Let's say in the being Chicano art in the early 1970s. I want to hear your story.

FRANK ROMERO: I think the fact that I saw the Rivera murals two years before and I don't know unless my personal ... I saw them personally. It all clicked with everyone and all, it's like all of sudden everybody was doing murals.

DENISE LUGO: M-hm.

FRANK ROMERO: And it was in the air and people won't go back and say, "Well you were one of the first muralists" but and I did. You know we did murals in 1971.

DENISE LUGO: You know some of them are real that's if they go back to the 1960's.

FRANK ROMERO: Right. So they were lots, but it was already in the air. That was actually so far long because the first mural I did and Gilbert did and I think Carlos may have did one too. But it was already publically funded so the idea had come up gone ... came back with money.

DENISE LUGO: And when you did your work. Let's talk about your early murals, your early projects, public wise. What did you learn about your early work?

FRANK ROMERO: Well again it came out of the four of us sitting in my kitchen discussing art and being Chicano, both things.

DENISE LUGO: So you tried to find the essence of Chicanismo?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah and one of the things that Gilbert was ___ and laughing but I really liked and I may have embraced it more than anyone or of Los Four group. The only person we did with our permission was through a graffiti mural with spray cans because we liked to get ...kids.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah that's the one.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah well I don't know there's one picture that I can show you. I threw that mural away two years ago because it completed rotted in my old garage but in my work actually that for about three or four years it was all done in spray cans.

DENISE LUGO: But why? Let's talk about it.

FRANK ROMERO: Because I wanted to be a muralist.

DENISE LUGO: Okay what use?

FRANK ROMERO: A *barrio* (Hispanic neighborhood).

DENISE LUGO: What *barrio*? Let's talk about that. What was the problem?

FRANK ROMERO: Well, I think one of the things you see of course is graffiti everywhere, *placas*.

DENISE LUGO: Could I introduce some thing at this point? My research that is coming out that I am currently working on, I would say 95% of all the artists that were involved, Mechicano, Self-Help, ____, Asco, people that were, in other words other ... that came out in the later part of the 1970s were very interested in trying to move some of the kids, were talking about the kids *cholitos* or kind of a gang members. Youth, which were having conflicts, many times very terrible confrontations then warfare. So then the mural let's get to the scene.

FRANK ROMERO: All aspects of society I think the solid prejudices that exists in Los Angeles have total disregard to the community the way that it was cut up by the freeways. I think like there are windows sometimes and I think I was very fortunate going through a special school which was ____ for me because it had student-teachers that were very bright and ... a few years and went on to other schools. You know on the west side so I got them, you got them maybe and in a sense I keep thinking about that for some reason when I was growing up which was in the 1950s and I got a fairly decent education. That was in true 10 years later, everything had fallen apart, the funding, the barrio was cut up by freeways because nobody cares. I am talking about Stevenston got cut and all the areas got cut. I mean, there are freeways all over. I think what you see, going but to the *barrio* (Chicano neighborhood), because my parents still live there, still live downtown is that everything changed and it wasn't any better it was worse. I knew Johnson Welker came in people got very dependent on it. There's positive-negative to all sorts of programs. You see the same thing when you start doing murals for _____. They gave us \$10,000 to do murals. Wasn't even one artist money wanted to do one good mural. They spread that in a sense of over ten artists, so each artist got a \$100, \$150 something like that. I mean we did these murals for love.

DENISE LUGO: And you incorporated the beauty aspect of the *placas*?

FRANK ROMERO: I did. Yeah you talk about that and you talk about the implications politically and of course I understand that but I also saw the implications esthetically and also its history. I think its Siqueiros (David Alfaro Siqueiros - Mexican Social Realist Painter) actually did the painting in the palace.

DENISE LUGO: "Bellas Artes" (Refers to Mexico's "Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes" - Museum of Fine Art)?

FRANK ROMERO: He started it with spray aluminum cans, spray-painting and a machine, you know? Even the historical precedent but I understood intellectually so for me kind of cleaver. Artists are cleaver they take all these different ideas they take politics.

DENISE LUGO: They actually create *placas*, didn't you?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah ... I did one where I actually went in there and painted three big parts and one of them, they were both apart then I sewed them back together. It was sort of like kneading the community back together symbolically and part of that is that all these kids gathered. I gave the kids the spray can and I told them within ... to do the

placa. At some point they have never had anyone an adult told them that you can put your name on a wall, you know? They were freaked out and it took them like 10 minutes before they started spraying and then like 20 minutes later they were chaotic. Then, I added and said, "Listen up! Just give me all the cans and go home." We did this over a couple of weeks and stuff like that. I actually had kids going into the neighborhood and they started ... which is Boyle Heights but actually did their *placas* on artists other paintings then I really came back and did you know my own work over it so it became a unified piece.

DENISE LUGO: The incorporation.

FRANK ROMERO: So the aesthetics were taken care of but I mean it's interesting that I dealt with politics. One of those murals that uh ... Lepousi

DENISE LUGO: Oh yeah!

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. I use a lot of *nopal*, cactus symbols in my work.

DENISE LUGO: To reference the Mexican life.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. But I'm the one who did it on the mural and that was done like in 1973, 1974 and that's a wonderful chord because it should be discussed. I think there was a little painting on it before I did it.

DENISE LUGO: What kind of set up?

FRANK ROMERO: ... southwest corner across from Willie's which is on the north west corner. So I have done a mural there. Spray cans tend to say it like ... in a year. Thought it was pretty well done in about two or three years. And it's so interesting that I got this phone call for John ... but they've given me money and I have to paint a new mural but that's how it goes. Last year I guess just recently the ____ called up John and said, "I'm sorry to do this to you brother, but I just got money to paint." So that mural, that corner most, all the artists right now it's a ... some you know I've been thinking and ... (laughs) Again it's that ritual of the politics of being Chicano or barrio (neighborhood). You still have to call up and say "I'm sorry" or "I have to do this to you." I mean you can't say its because the mural is faded its always financial that somebody offer the money to paint the damn wall! (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: But you see you go to Mexico or Mexican restaurants, that's so natural to paint on walls and it's so interesting!

FRANK ROMERO: It's very interesting. I got one commission for a private individual and it was on a longer ____ but I can do my own artwork. But like John and Carlos for a while when they were very close put up a number of murals. There's a meat market here in Echo Park on Sunset that John did this chicken.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah-yeah-yeah.

FRANK ROMERO: You know that one right here, across from Vargarnes but there are a number of works. Oh! They did “Casa Blanca” (White House) furniture store with flowers and stuff. It’s interesting that our fine arts have gone back in the barrio (neighborhood) in a sense and they are doing what the original muralists in Mexico did in the cantinas (bars), you know? They are doing commercial work.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah they're a kind of *pulquerías* (bars where they serve *pulque* which is a milk-colored viscous alcoholic beverage made from the fermented sap of the maguey plant and is a traditional native beverage of Mexico).

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, the *pulquerías*. In my first trip to Mexico I, Carlos and I went into a *pulquerías* and it was quite an experience.

DENISE LUGO: (Chuckles)

FRANK ROMERO: It that's a whole different ... Indian culture. *Pulquerías* are not met for the *mestizo* (person of mixed race usually native Mexican Indian and Spanish decent) but for the Indians.

DENISE LUGO: Frieda Kahlo and Diego Rivera [paintings] are Mexican...

FRANK ROMERO: That’s very interesting because look even though in the murals one thing that impressed Carlos and myself in most, in our trip to Mexico, the first trip was the painting by Frieda Kahlo in the museum of modern art. That the thing we remember. In a sense our work shows the realism thing in both our work.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah. Mexican art we call it magical realism its just part of it. Okay lets go on the Mechicano. Okay you were faintly associated with it in the early beginning. Let’s talk about it. How did you start going to Mechicano or how did you become aware of it? Did you hear of it all of a sudden? At first it used to be in the west L.A.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah but I think it ... Leonard.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah. How did you meet him? How did you see him at the time?

FRANK ROMERO: I mean Gilbert introduced us.

DENISE LUGO: You don't remember.

FRANK ROMERO: Maybe I went there 5 or 10 times during the whole period.

DENISE LUGO: Uh-huh.

FRANK ROMERO: As I say none of it ever made any sense to me in terms of anything they were doing. Those were men's clubs, boy's clubs. I thought they were okay for the people that were involved and somehow we seemed we were on the outside.

DENISE LUGO: Do you know some of these people?

FRANK ROMERO: Wow! I really don't remember their names. I know of few. I forget his name and you can tell me but the guy that went to San Diego and started--

DENISE LUGO: Oh, Queza and Cervantes!

FRANK ROMERO: I remember him. Yes Cervantes.

DENISE LUGO: They called him baby because he was the young one.

FRANK ROMERO: And there were a number of Mexicans that went back to Mexico.

DENISE LUGO: Yes, Cabrera.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah and I remember that.

DENISE LUGO: I was told that everyone just kind of did their thing. Oh poster! I want to talk about the poster. I have seen several articles that ____ did and talks about the fact that they have their own chapter for anyone to use and they did poster board. Talk about it briefly.

FRANK ROMERO: That's one of the things that maybe Self-Help took over.

DENISE LUGO: After Mechicano?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah after Mechicano. Again I have done silk screens when I was very young at Otis.

DENISE LUGO: How did silk screens function?

FRANK ROMERO: Posters didn't interest me.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah but they functioned as invitations to exhibitions, right?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah and a lot of them were real political in nature and to me I was still an artist. For some reason I didn't get involved in doing that. I wasn't really involved.

DENISE LUGO: There was one that you did for Mechicano for an opening.

FRANK ROMERO: Gee! I'd liked to see it because I have forgotten! (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: I've seen it.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah I had a show there and it was a nice show of black drawings and they were all very serious. I think somewhat tentative idea. I feel like my early work ... 30s but I liked that show. I have a little post card from that show which is very nice and I don't know if I did a poster. I don't remember the poster. So you know the fact is that I had, I knew a lot about ... It's only this year that Self-Help that I finally got involved again and I'm doing another poster next month and I did one this month. I sit around and think a lot I guess.

DENISE LUGO: What was it now?

FRANK ROMERO: It's like ten years later that I'm doing a lot everything people were doing then! (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: Think back why was there, you think friction between ... clubs?

FRANK ROMERO: I think this may be true with Carlos but I grew up in a non-sexist—

DENISE LUGO: Environment?

FRANK ROMERO: Environment and family. The word machismo I never even heard when I grew up. I am very comfortable in the accompany of women and this very true for Carlos too relax them and I've always been somewhat—

[End of Interview]

Part 2 of 2

Sound Cassette Duration – 26 minutes

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

DENISE LUGO: Okay, we're talking about the philosophical differences.

FRANK ROMERO: But if you think Con Safo, you think about Mechicano, even Self-Help in the early days.

DENISE LUGO: Asco.

FRANK ROMERO: No, Asco is later.

DENISE LUGO: Asco was in 1971.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, Asco's a little later. [...] Asco even had union in the group and we did we had two ... but Mechicano and all of these feelings- and I just didn't they were most clubs.

DENISE LUGO: [...] I was told that a while back—

FRANK ROMERO: It's all dismissing it's all very- I just wasn't involved. [...] I wasn't friends with Leonard or all of that; so I didn't know them. [...]

DENISE LUGO: I heard that for a while there—

FRANK ROMERO: We were very motivated politically so we did everything to help.

DENISE LUGO: Mm-huh.

FRANK ROMERO: But it doesn't mean that I went everyday and got involved.

DENISE LUGO: Were you involved in bench painting out there and stuff?

FRANK ROMERO: [...] We all did those projects, yeah. I did graffiti.

DENISE LUGO: You did?

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah that's right.

DENISE LUGO: Do you have a picture of this?

FRANK ROMERO: Oh God.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, that was Mechicano.

FRANK ROMERO: I might.

DENISE LUGO: [...] Were you involved with the Ramona mural projects?

FRANK ROMERO: I photographed them all. Part of my thing was my documentary. [...] The thing that I did, no one did in those days. [...] I had gotten a grant earlier on in a different— in a black group, but ... they're documenting folk art and I ... Chicano was actually given some money to ... East LA. [...] So I actually had money to buy films so I was just kind of fortunate documenting a lot of these things that you're are talking about. [...] I have not done a mural in any of the projects, but I documented them all. I did do the park bench project. See those were wonderful because I remember those were spray can pieces.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah that was Mechicano.

FRANK ROMERO: In those days. [...] I was totally involved politically and emotionally and committed to what was going on, but [...] I was not involved in day to day visiting. When a project came up, I did the project. I was involved in the art aspect of it.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah because going back to the records of Mechicano your name always pops up.

FRANK ROMERO: Oh that's interesting.

DENISE LUGO: All the time throughout everything. That's when I try looking ... Mechicano. Yeah, but what I am saying is that your name comes up all the time. Always pops up. Self-Help always said no until recently that's why I thought it was very interesting.

FRANK ROMERO: But listen, Self-Help is the same thing; it seemed to me in the early days.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, let's talk about the early days.

FRANK ROMERO: Again, there was sort of a group of people that were in there. I mean that's *después* (later) isn't? [...] We tried to get in.

DENISE LUGO: [...] Talk about [the] Goez (art gallery).

FRANK ROMERO: [...] I am thinking of that guy that does the nail stuff—

DENISE LUGO: A lot of people do remember—

FRANK ROMERO: Was he talking Goez?

DENISE LUGO: [...] Yes, He started Goez (art gallery).

FRANK ROMERO: That's so interesting. [...] You mean other than the Gonzales brothers?

DENISE LUGO: Yeah. [...]

FRANK ROMERO: I am talking about John Valdez, William DeGerano ... We all very much in closely associated with ... in one time another in a sense prodigy.

DENISE LUGO: Mmm-huh.

FRANK ROMERO: And they went off on their own; like East Los Quist [...] very much modeled on Los Four.

DENISE LUGO: Yes, I know.

FRANK ROMERO: You know, he was an engineer when Carlos met him ... interesting art. They have been involved in those I'm not sure. I know the Gonzales brothers because I have ...

DENISE LUGO: Was it?

FRANK ROMERO: No after ... wonderful illustrator I always mention him because you know ... but again I was very excited; I liked the idea. These are the things that were kind of wonderful to see happening.

DENISE LUGO: Did you work or have free time? [...]

FRANK ROMERO: At Goetz, I was turned off aesthetically. [...] They're philosophically [...] sort of the *vivas* in a sense. [...] They took a little Spanish attitude. They're Spanish in a sense. They were not at all Chicano and they work with frescos but everyone is working [with it] ... dreadful. It still is.

DENISE LUGO: But to make the best buck the artist would go from Mechicano work for them and go to Self-Help and then come back.

FRANK ROMERO: In a sense really like Los Four and when we had exhibitions we were really vanguard. [...] We are the only ones that have survived in terms of [...] individual artists. [...]

DENISE LUGO: The Goetz didn't make it, explain why.

FRANK ROMERO: Ha! Its sellable; its conservative.

DENISE LUGO: Who would buy that?

FRANK ROMERO: I think even who might buy that [are] up and coming young Chicanos that [are] lawyers.

DENISE LUGO: [Yippy] Chicanos.

FRANK ROMERO: Yuppies [...] that never been educated in art in a sense. [We] think about being Chicano and being all of this; we're all taught that we're poor and you really can't buy original art. I mean to this day my clients are very educated. I just find in my first lawyer who bought ... I was so happy because ... church ... that I can remember. They are very-very few but my clientele are European, Jewish; [...] they are different cultures. You think in terms of art is part of the culture. To this day there's a real prejudice against the visual arts even though there's so much poverty of culture in terms of everything you see the—

DENISE LUGO: Especially in Mexico.

FRANK ROMERO: Especially in Mexico. It's all part of our culture and yet its the only kind of art you absorb is public art. That's right. That's why public art is so important; the mural and stuff.

DENISE LUGO: And so let's explain it.

FRANK ROMERO: But you don't sell these a lot but Goez—

DENISE LUGO: They did murals; they got money to remember.

FRANK ROMERO: 5th street is still up.

DENISE LUGO: [...] Let's talk about that mural.

FRANK ROMERO: I don't know. I think rather like that than all of them but I haven't even looked at it. To this day, it goes not grab my eye. That's probably one of the better projects.

DENISE LUGO: Pre-Colombian motifs.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah. [...] In terms of putting up for the public, see this is the part where they did some good things I really feel. The part I didn't like going into the ... gallery itself and seeing the easel paintings which were traditional moves, traditional paintings; kind of sweet ... almost. Not unlike the stuff you buy that's imported from China that use framed art pieces for \$29.95; the nail paintings ... because he's a really sweet guy but this stuff is just awful.

DENISE LUGO: Who bought it? Who would buy this kind of stuff?

FRANK ROMERO: Because some of the ... did steal some money. I guess they did well [...] Its just strange things that went on there; they got successful. Who did they sell them to? They sold the government, the government bought lock stock and barrel. They really started getting grants but they didn't do anything significant with the grants. [...] I don't know about this art you're talking about. I think it was one of the most successful cards. [...] I think aesthetically lack.

DENISE LUGO: I want to clarify what I know. [...] Art is in a sense in a way at the time it was so many philosophical—

FRANK ROMERO: That's interesting. [...] Like Carlos and I went and took a look and said this is not for us we can't feel. They were just so far removed.

DENISE LUGO: They were commercial.

FRANK ROMERO: Yeah, I think in a sense they were against being Chicano.

DENISE LUGO: Okay, now how did you deal with for instance with the Acorn gallery you both showed?

FRANK ROMERO: Acorn?

DENISE LUGO: Acorn. Let's talk about that.

FRANK ROMERO: I really didn't like it.

DENISE LUGO: That was in 1970's anyway. Carlos did. Yes you did, you showed too. ...

FRANK ROMERO: Carlos met the Acorns through some friends of his and I didn't meet them. The truth is, I went to a meeting with Carlos and ... I was never involved. Carlos tells me later like an East L.A. kid I just stuck my foot into it. (Chuckles) No. So that's wrong. I didn't do the end.

DENISE LUGO: How did you deal with mainstream galleries?

FRANK ROMERO: That's what so interesting about all of this because of Los Four which at the L.A. County initially—

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, we are talking about early 1970's.

FRANK ROMERO: You mean before all that?

DENISE LUGO: Yes. When you first were ... Did they come down and see you? Did galleries come see you?

FRANK ROMERO: No. I didn't start selling. This is very interesting.

DENISE LUGO: But I am just saying, to come and see your work ...

FRANK ROMERO: No, not mainstream.

DENISE LUGO: Was Chicano art considered a novelty, folk art at the time?

FRANK ROMERO: Well that's again only from the ... article from Los Four show. ... It's too good to be folk art and not good enough to be mainstream.

DENISE LUGO: Let's talk about that show. What year was that show?

FRANK ROMERO: What is it? What show it was? 197-.

DENISE LUGO: LA county museum of art (LACMA).

FRANK ROMERO: ... Los Four, 1974. Actually it was at UC Irvine a year before. That was a few months before. That's six months before.

DENISE LUGO: Mm-huh. And let's talk about the work. Los Four.

FRANK ROMERO: Los Four. Again I think this was all very quick. Four years after we came back, Carlos and I. So we were discussing being Chicano for four years already. Had developed some philosophy.

DENISE LUGO: Let's talk about the work that was entered at that show, okay?

FRANK ROMERO: I think the most significant piece this is in terms of where we were was the collective mural and the collective altar that Gilbert did.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, let's talk one thing at a time.

FRANK ROMERO: On the collective mural we did as a group. It's the first time we really function as a group. We went to UC Irvine and had a canvass prime that was 10 by 30 feet. We did that on Monday as a group. ... sick. It was really hard for him being with other people pushing and pulling. He really didn't like that. Like *placas*; one guy would do his placa and someone would embellish it or draw over it, cross it out and do something on top of that. To us *placas* were sort of metaphor for art and it's the same thing. We liked the idea what barrio kids did and yet it's the same thing we do as artists and yet we get paid of it and barrios kids are chastised for it. That was very ... for me. Again I had my working folk art and documentation. I met a kid in the barrio that was one of the most famous *placa* artists. He's on parole; he's on probation. He was under psychiatric care. What was his name? "Playboy" ... *placa* name. [...] I talked to him, he's a 15-year-old kid under psychiatric care and he's an artist; that's all he was. Society couldn't find a niche for him. Artists always feel that way. [...] Here's a kid putting his *placa* all over Echo Park. But when you talk to him, he talks like an artist. He says, "I do because I had to. It's something in my soul and I had to put this up." I mean it's just so fascinating to me.

DENISE LUGO: Was there a slight difference?

FRANK ROMERO: Not really. I mean the things he says is what artists say. It's what von Gogh said and yet this guy was a shrink. What they should have given him is a scholarship to Otis and it's what I got. So there are sometimes when the society says this is okay or you get paid for it sometimes.

DENISE LUGO: You all had ... ?

FRANK ROMERO: We all had our own work. We had two group murals. Carlos was already doing paintings for Caesar Chavez. So we had a very political mural that was against the ... union.

DENISE LUGO: Let's talk about *aparismo* (appearance). You also had an *altar* which is a alter. That derives of the women's ... in Mexico ...

FRANK ROMERO: Of the aggressor ...

DENISE LUGO: Yes, I grew up with it. Was that collective?

FRANK ROMERO: We were in the collective spirit in a sense and that was Gilbert's idea. It's what you have and it's what you now when you do collectives. Someone has the idea

and we put it together. Los Four did a lot alternates and a lot of exhibitions. That was the first one. Gilbert's idea, we all contribute to it and in fact ... and it's a beautiful piece [and] very interactive. We did a lot of very interesting things in that show; totally spontaneous and yet important philosophically and esthetically.

DENISE LUGO: How about the car that Gilbert got in? That was interesting. Lowrider.

FRANK ROMERO: Gilbert did a car. It was his first attempt. Now he's done a whole car and he could only get the front-end marks ... incorporate a piece at the front end of the car. I think one of the most important thing that we did is that we painted the museum walls chartreuse, turquoise and blue. That idea was such a unique thing. Actually it become a political statement [and] caused of ruckus in a lot of things we did. This was a small show that Ernie Debs (Ernest E. Debs) wanted, the supervisor of that district, the 4th district in UCLA, because no one have ever done a show for constituency which was ... Chicano. I think this is the first time that politicians started [to] not overseeing ... all the power of this constituency which no one is really ... political power ... They're not sophisticated political power. They are divided totally. The only reason Los Four happened was because it was political. You can never divorce art and politics; I think that is very true. I think that is very true for the muralists in Mexico; they were very much along with the government. From reading history, you learn that. A lot of the events are paid for by the government ... and private individuals. Now as an artist, it's different [because] you recognize the people that came out of this fiasco ...

DENISE LUGO: Did you work for Harry and the Asco?

FRANK ROMERO: We worked with the Asco group. The first time we ever collaborated- The Asco group was sort of watching Los Four at that point because there was some envy there. Because we got to show and they followed with a smaller show with the rental gallery a year later. Los Four sort of took us all; there were many reasons for that. The media: Where a lot of Chicanos were at alternative action at KCET. Jesus Trevino did a show; interview us ... did another show, so we had an hour on TV. The LA County ... filed us under the film which was eventually shown on channel 28 nationally; that was Los Four film. We got a whole film on it. We had a show in a private gallery in 1975 and we were called Los Four. I think ... for the first time. There were eleven people ... Los Four.

DENISE LUGO: I want to talk to you about Leo Limon. How does Leo Limon come in?

FRANK ROMERO: He was very young.

DENISE LUGO: He was very influenced the school.

FRANK ROMERO: He was like 17 when we met him. He had done a little mural on one of these \$100 mural projects in East LA and Carlos let him do that. He heard about us because we were pretty well known in the community and in the art community especially. He was doing some good stuff. We met him and he shared with us in a

number of shows. I had this whole list of shows; in Sacramento and in San Antonio College.

DENISE LUGO: ... mainstream?

FRANK ROMERO: This was in the Los Four shows as a collective, as a Chicano collective. There were as many as eleven people in that show. So we use it as a political tool to exhibit Chicano artists; for many years, all the way up to 1983.

DENISE LUGO: So in other words, Los Four actually incorporated artists [...]?

FRANK ROMERO: Actually took on other artists ... They were involved in various shows. Part of the thing is what we did; we in a sense curated our own art show. Put artists to go public in very significant ways. We did a lot of shows here. That's what we did, other than getting grants and things. We curated Chicano art shows.

DENISE LUGO: Beto de la Rocha ... when ... and how?

FRANK ROMERO: It's a very long story and I can't really do it here. We met him and we started to have problems anywhere; going through a divorce and stuff. I think divorce [is] dramatic ... Maybe it was a romantic idea that Los Four sort of— the publicity maybe was too difficult to handle also.

DENISE LUGO: What kind of person was he?

FRANK ROMERO: We all looked up to him. He was sort of an artist, artist. He had a wonderful personality. He was a well-respected teacher.

DENISE LUGO: Where did he teach?

FRANK ROMERO: Long Beach, Cal State Long Beach. He was very well respected. A lot of people say ... had a wonderful background. He was a little bit older than the other three of us. But all things he was very much involved in religion aspects of part of life and part of art.

DENISE LUGO: When did he leave the group?

FRANK ROMERO: He didn't leave the group. Basically he continued to fast. He was fasting and becoming thinner and thinner; and he ended up with ... malnutrition. As soon as they kicked him out ... and he went back two weeks later with the psychiatric ...

DENISE LUGO: What year was it? Late 1970's, right? Like 1976?

FRANK ROMERO: It hasn't been that long, I think and I don't really know. But, maybe you're right, 1976. No later, 1977-1978, somewhere in there. Yeah, to make a long story short, he destroyed his body from fasting and his mind was connected. He destroyed all his paintings; he took them outside and burned them.

DENISE LUGO: Is it true? There's a story that goes that he went out and destroyed all his work—

FRANK ROMERO: With his son, Zachary.

DENISE LUGO: —Yeah. He said that he went after all the artists ...

FRANK ROMERO: I think part of it we were all individuals no matter how collective. We were very, very strong. Each one of them is an individual. He's very strong and brave. He may have done that to a lot of people, but he didn't do that to me. He may have done that to Carlos ... For some reason I do have a lot of his work around ... They are the only one that's I have worked ...

DENISE LUGO: How is he? He's no longer ... ?

FRANK ROMERO: He's not functioning. He called up my wife who doesn't know him ... You know it's a difficult thing. I see there's a real "readisense" in our part to go visit him, but we don't; it's just too painful. It's the artist's story. Artists have a great deal coping seeking out society. Very few of us make it. I mean the ones that survive [...] are individuals ... with such demand for art right now, you know, it's silly; its yucky! (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: Why is there, do you think, such importance in Chicano art? ... by mainstream people ... and even Mexico; always shocked ... but everybody wanted to know about Chicano art.

FRANK ROMERO: That's very interesting because five years ago Carlos went to Mexico City and there was such a hostility bite in the Mexican artists about Chicano saying that they didn't have at all. ... it's just barely catching up in Mexico. They were very hostile. What we have is history now. A great deal happened and we're still around. What's left is the documentation and people are very interested. ... We've been around for 15 years now. So you have history in your art. The art is much better than it was.

DENISE LUGO: In what sense? Formalistically?

FRANK ROMERO: I was telling you that a lot of their ideas ... it's so difficult for people like myself. Ten years ago, I think every day now ... you mentioned, you look at my clay piece of Quatzequatel; you know its Hispanic, it's part of Mexican culture, of Hispanic culture. I don't think about it at all ... it's just part of what I do.

DENISE LUGO: There's critics like ... Goldman who has said that there is no Chicano art at all anymore—

[End of Interview]

