

Oral History interview with Leo Limón

Limon, Leo, born 1952
Painter

Los Angeles, California

Sound Cassette Duration – 28:50

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DENISE LUGO: ... 1986.

LEO LIMON: Hello?

DENISE LUGO: (Laughs) Leo, when were you born and where?

LEO LIMON: I was born here in East LA, 1952, April.

DENISE LUGO: Where did you grow up?

LEO LIMON: I grew up here. Basically around the neighborhood and Self-Help Graphics because actually ... a long time ago. Right down the street on Dozier.

DENISE LUGO: ... (?)

LEO LIMON: I went to one grammar school down here Hammel Street [Elementary] School and then I moved from this area. After moving ... we got to five points, Lincoln Heights, Clover area, ...

DENISE LUGO: And what high school did you go to?

LEO LIMON: I went to Lincoln High School.

DENISE LUGO: When did you find out ...

LEO LIMON: Find me out? It was around high school. I just got into high school. My first high school art class. The instructor was Mr. Charles S(?). He's real interested in seeing me develop [as in] artist or a potential artist. I've shown, in junior high school, lots of ambition into the arts.

DENISE LUGO: What year is that?

LEO LIMON: Junior high school? It was 1965 or 1968.

DENISE LUGO: Give me of an idea the kind of ... ideas that were immersing

LEO LIMON: I graduated from high school in 1971.

DENISE LUGO: ... (?)

LEO LIMON: No. ... I was always out in the Lincoln Heights area. ... There wasn't anything. My family was well. I had uncles and aunts who lived around.

DENISE LUGO: How about the murals? ...

LEO LIMON: What happened was, in high school the instructor once again he saw that I had good talent and he suggested that if I wanted to make some money off of it and I said, "Sure!" He goes, "You'll get sent out going to a special class to learn more about art?" I said, "Sure!" His class asked me to be a Saturday tutor art class.

DENISE LUGO: Where?

LEO LIMON: At ... Carson.

DENISE LUGO: ... Frank.

LEO LIMON: Well, Frank was way before me. But anyway this class consisted of being judged. You had to be judged by this panel of men. They were a few artists, fine artists, commercial artists. The guy who was in charge of the class was Mr. William Joe Kara.

DENISE LUGO: What year was this?

LEO LIMON: This is 1969. In 1969 he came to the high school. Well, my high school instructor suggested, "Hey, Leo get some 'nuddy' girl books. So they can see you drawing life drawings." I was doing natural things; flowers, trees, trash cans. (Laughs) Anything I can draw. The high school in 1969 when the walkouts were really banded in a way and I started seeing—

DENISE LUGO: Why the walkouts?

LEO LIMON: The high school walkouts were happening around town.

DENISE LUGO: Why?

LEO LIMON: Well you know. The bad education.

DENISE LUGO: They were protesting.

LEO LIMON: Everyone was protesting the war, protesting bad education. You know, everything was bad.

DENISE LUGO: Civil rights.

LEO LIMON: To some extent, yeah. I was influenced by that. I saw Zapata out walking the line. No one had *bigotes* (mustaches) like this. Later on I saw Zapata and Leonard Castellanos. My sisters were already in high school when I got there so I just walked right into the line. I was dazed because I went there to become an industrial arts major. You know, like all the other Chicanos at that time. They didn't want anybody to go to medicine and law or any of the kind of stuff. Maybe they showed little interest, but we know how it was. Right? If any of you are any yuppies out there, then hey! (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: Okay so tell me you started doing Otis. Did you like it?

LEO LIMON: When I first got there, I was so crude in my craftsmanship. It was good. It was a minority class; you see Blacks, one or two Whites, Orientals and a few Chicanos. Mostly Black.

DENISE LUGO: Who was in that class? Do you remember Frank?

LEO LIMON: Oh, Frank Hernandez! And Jorge somebody, who was also chosen from Lincoln High School and he was a cartoonist. He was real good, but he didn't stay long. He had ambitions ... So when I got to Otis, all these guys were working in sketch books. Primarily it became a sketch book fetish for my high school years. I mean every where I went I had to sketch it out, I was drawing. I picked up super fast. Then about that time Frank Hernandez was living down here, closer to Brooklyn and he said, "Come on down. I want you to meet a friend of mine down at this all nations gym recreation center. Come on down, I want you to meet Manuel." I said, "Alright." You know who what is. Manuel Cruz! So I met the *viejo* (old man) down there one day. (Laughs) He's out there and he offered me a little Brook's brother and I said, "No, man I'm right here. Twenty yet."

DENISE LUGO: How did you see Manuel? I mean, your first impression of him.

LEO LIMON: Manuel? He's real "*vasquache*". Boy you should of think of those side paintings last a long time ago. But if he were to be cranky ... a confident person by now. (Laughs) Don't believe in Manuel! Don't believe it! (Laughs) So anyway I met Manuel there and this other fellow. I don't recall his name.

DENISE LUGO: Ramses?

LEO LIMON: I don't know.

DENISE LUGO: What was the function of this organization?

LEO LIMON: With All Nations? It was just a gym. [...] It was a Catholic kind of thing. Where it was open for kids to come in. Almost like a boys club kind of thing. When I got there, Manuel was out there in the parking lot, trying to have art sale and I kind of chuckle at the fact that they didn't have a sign up or anything. I think it said, "Sale" and it almost looked like one of these yard sales. So nobody was coming around and they were out there sitting in the sun talking. That's how I met him.

DENISE LUGO: What was he selling? Do you remember?

LEO LIMON: He was selling statuettes of the Pachuco and the Brown Berets.

DENISE LUGO: And the little small ones made out of ...

LEO LIMON: The little ones. He was into *Cuauhtémoc* (Aztec ruler of Tenochtitlan between 1520 to 1521). He was doing that kind of stuff. *Adelitas* (folk song to come out of the Mexican Revolution about Adela, who was a women soldier), he had those made *también* (also).

DENISE LUGO: What are *Adelitas*?

LEO LIMON: They were the women that followed the Mexican Revolution. [They were] women soldiers. So there I met him and then from there, Frank took me down to Self-Help. He lives right there, in that area. Then I met the young Sister Karen. Didn't have any *canas* at all. *Canas*, white hair, you know? Her place was just starting.

DENISE LUGO: Describe that.

LEO LIMON: It was empty, boxes all over the place and people were working on it.

DENISE LUGO: What people? Do you remember?

LEO LIMON: There was this one fellow, Carlos. I don't remember his last name, but he was real prolific. He was doing all this beautiful decorative stuff about women. Based on women. Ibáñez and Bueno, yes, combination of two guys bringing together. So they did these beautiful images and it was wonderful! [It brought] more inspiration to me. About that time Manuel, I have seen Manuel, and he had told me about Mechicano. It was Frank *también* (also), I believe. Then I went down there, to Mechicano to check it out.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me, what was your impression?

LEO LIMON: When I first got there I laughed because as a small kid living down here, around the Brooklyn area, my *tía* (aunt) used to live going down that way to get across the Santa Ana freeway and I passed that place. It used to be a laundry mat and I used to go in there to play pinball. So there I walk in, now it's this large place and two story building with a little bit of art outside. You know, I've seen Zapata posters and things of that matter.

DENISE LUGO: When was this? 1971?

LEO LIMON: No, this is 1969.

DENISE LUGO: They opened in the fall of 1969.

LEO LIMON: About 1970. I started and I liked it. I met Ray Atleano down there and my good buddy Armando Cabrera. Leonard was there, Smiley, Guillermo, Frank and ASCO people. And that's where I met Carlos, I think it was.

DENISE LUGO: Carlos Almaraz.

LEO LIMON: Right.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me ...

LEO LIMON: Mechicano was more *barrio*. Much more *barrio*.

DENISE LUGO: Explain what *barrio* means.

LEO LIMON: Ground level as opposed to third floor level or second floor level. That's all it was. You had to walk up stairs to reach this place, this Self-Help. While the Mechicano was just a walk-in type of thing.

[Audio cuts off]

DENISE LUGO: So talk to me. You are in Mechicano.

LEO LIMON: Mechicano was at ground level and you could walk-in and see what was happening with the place. You saw art as you walk in [and] outside, while Self-Help Graphics was something else down stairs. I don't know, pizzeria or something. All it had was a sign that said "Self-Help Graphics". Unless you heard about it or somebody knew about it, then you'd know it's up there otherwise you didn't. Well now it's totally different. Self-Help Graphics is a whole building [that covers] a parking lot and there's an artist right out there in that little parking. You see them doing this art and there's galleries down stairs and people are interested. There are places like this in the *barrio*. So this is one of the important areas of spots in the *barrio*.

DENISE LUGO: What kind of art was that on the walls? Do you remember?

LEO LIMON: At the Mechicano? Like I said some of these guys were college students and there was graduate students types. So there was that kind of art up there. There's complete work, there's nothing but half done, printing with the *chavalos* (guys). Armando would bring in these psychedelic type things. I was going to Otis and I was seeing this stuff and I didn't go, "Oh wow!" you know. I was just saying, "Oh there's someone in the *barrio* doing stuff. There's an artist in the *barrio*." I thought I listened to these guys talking about all their little stories about school. That's what I was basically interested in because I was going to go to Long Beach State to try to get a teaching degree, but then that all fell through and I didn't go to any college at all. Then in high school I was doing good there and the people at the Saturday tutoring art class I was in they express concern as to what I was going to do later on. The whole class was basically to introduce minority students to professionals. They had a thousand dollars CVC grant. It was a great adventure for them. Thousand bucks to buy paper and pencils and instructors were free. So

these guys would come in, they were top rank commercial guys, fine art guys; it was fun. Then after one semester there, the following semester I had a high school class in ceramics and these older crowd was there; years and years. There was a print shop across the hall and one of them was waving these little strips of paper in front of me and then I said, "Aw that's great." He goes, "You know, I use it to flip pads." And I go, "Oh that's great." Then the printing teacher came inside and he nearly— because I was one of these inspired young artists doing all this stuff. I was real good at it. I remember the first semester, I could draw like Michael Angelo and everyone was going, "Wow, he can draw anatomy!" (Laughs) I getting sketch with girls. They showed interest because I showed interest. So he made me all these little flip pads and I took them to this Saturday tutoring art class and a few weeks later we had an animation class begin. Out of that some of those guys are animators now. They do stuff for Hanna-Barbera. You name it. They've done stuff and they're doing stuff right now. They're in New York, they're in LA and that was fun. You could watch cartoons all morning long instead of listening to commercials because that's what they were showing in the beginning. [It was] just an awaking, the commercial stuff. Then the afternoon, we'd have lunch and then we'd have life drawing class. Then they changed that to a cartoon class. Or which ever we wanted to go. So it was life drawing first and then cartooning and then I stayed into that. I became friends with Jane Holtan who's up in ... he was top notch, New York and stuff for the longest time but he was along with these other guys. This guy Bill Tara, he had it all. He was one of the founders of Illustrators of LA. So he knew everybody and he had everything, but he smoked cheap cigars and drove around in a dirty old green bug. (Chuckles) So no one was looking at him as, "Oh, God!" Bill was always there and he helped me out.

DENISE LUGO: ... (?)

LEO LIMON: Marvin Ruben was part of that. Bill Pargio(?), he's an artist, an administrative type, he works for ... insurance company. ... That's where I learned how to draw. We had this vicious contest going on a weekly basis in that class because everyone could draw like mad. We produced at least twenty pieces. We'd just whip it out because you are carrying your sketch book around, you're drawing and if you had other things to do, you made less drawings. Getting away from my janitorial services, I was working in high school doing that. When I was in high school I'd draw. And then (chuckles), that's how I got some art materials from later on *tambien* (also).

DENISE LUGO: Did you ever get into Chicano? Talk about your development with your uncles. How did that come about?

LEO LIMON: Well, I met Charles and so he was always talking about the revolution, art for the people and then it was great. So I listened along to what he had to say because he had a lot to say. He was an interesting person at that time; he still is, not as much. He called me up and said, "Hey, come on down. Let's talk and let's see what you got and work on it." He started off young and end of the field of arts somehow, some way. So he introduced me to Frank Romero.

DENISE LUGO: What did you think of Frank?

LEO LIMON: Frank? Oh I thought he was a sissy. He's so polite, so arrant. So he's different. He was all broke, I gave him chicken to eat a night. Surprise, you know? (Chuckles) But anyway it worked real fine.

DENISE LUGO: Wait a minute. How about Beto de La Rocha?

LEO LIMON: Beto, I met down there one day.

DENISE LUGO: Talk about that for a few minutes.

LEO LIMON: Beto, I didn't get to know very well, to tell you the truth, nor Gilbert Lujan (Magu). They lived far away. They didn't want to go and meet at Frank's and I was hanging around with Carlos and Carlos would pick me up or I would ride down there. You know just to meet and talk and listen to these guys' work.

DENISE LUGO: Work in Frank's kitchen?

LEO LIMON: Frank would work in the kitchen or his front room or living room, but it was just like a giant studio; the whole thing. Carlos lived with Frank at that time and he had a room up stairs.

DENISE LUGO: Why?

LEO LIMON: They have known each other in New York.

DENISE LUGO: Yes, I know in 1969.

LEO LIMON: Then they've come down here. Frank had a little girl, Coco and Frank was taking care of her. She was dressed in the latest Frank could find at second hand stores. She looked like a little opi (?) who just gotten off the model-T. God!; all these long shirts. You what she looked like? Frank dressed her, right? She looked like a normal little girl. Her momma was not there. She was gone, but Frank was talking care of her and her grandma was there sometimes. His (Frank's) father would come over. And Frank's place is a mess, but it's such a great mess. At that time I was also helping him break wall. Enough to break the plaster off the walls and put up large pieces of work that Carlos and him have worked on. At that time we were just good friends, good friends. I don't know, even lovers. (Chuckles) But anyway, Beto came down one day I met him and a real warm person, showed interest. He didn't talk about himself, didn't say anything, just "hi". [...] There's so much going on in art. I was more [into developing] my craftsmanship.

DENISE LUGO: What is the concept of "*El Corazón*", The Heart? ... You were going to sell them? What was it? Remember that? Talk about that.

LEO LIMON: I don't know. They were working into the "*Corazón*". They had something called, Frank did, the four guys—I don't know if it was before or after—but they had a card and had *corazones*, *Corazón Productions*.

DENISE LUGO: That's what I am talking about.

LEO LIMON: It was an image that they brought up. I guess they develop it somehow founded in the religion artifacts that they saw in the *barrio*. I had nothing to do with it.

DENISE LUGO: But your work now has a lot of ...

LEO LIMON: Right. My time's come, but I am expressing "*El Corazón*" in a totally different way. I just used a flat image, but then I tried to make it mean something more than just a decorative thing and make it more of a universal thing.

DENISE LUGO: Did you collaborate with Los Four at all in anything?

LEO LIMON: No, they were Los Four.

DENISE LUGO: No they were Los Four in 1973.

I was in the army.

DENISE LUGO: Okay tell me. How did that happen? From there, you decided to go to the army?

LEO LIMON: I was going to go to college in 1971 when I graduate from high school, but then I went down to Long Beach and I didn't like it. I don't know why. I guess it because I went into an office and there was two *güeras* (white girls) in there and this black girl. And I said, "I got my paperwork." A *negrita* (black girl) got my paperwork and this girl come over and goes, "Hi. Can I help you?" I [thought] what's the black girl going to say. She turns around and opens her eyes and starts chuckling to the other *güera* (white girl). And she goes, "Oh the black girl!" 'Black' was not being used at that time. (Chuckles) It sounded funny to her for some reason. I looked at her, like as if I have said something wrong. You know, it almost seemed embarrassing because I said, "Oh the black girl got my stuff." Because I went to this Saturday tutoring art class and it was Black and I said, "Hey, Black what's happenin'?" It was easy for me to say it. I guess anybody else walk into the office, didn't talk, I said, "Oh the negro girl." I don't know, whatever. I didn't say those kind of things. When I said that, it just shocked me. I just walked out of the office and I forgot about it. They said, "No, get out." I just didn't want to deal with it. I just walked out, came home and then—

[Audio cuts off]

DENISE LUGO: After you came home what did you do?

LEO LIMON: I didn't do anything. I just went to work. When I got out of the high school, before I got out I was already doing some type of commercial artwork. I didn't get any formal training in the commercial arts or really the fine arts. No instructor, "Here's the art you're going to learn," or paint or anything. It was just the sketchbook stuff. So I was doing animation when I got out of high school and I was did Paul Bunion. I was looking up the adventures of Paul

Bunion. It's a small studio out in the Santa Monica area and it was funny the stuff I did. Paul Bunion looked like Chicano with a beanie and rolled up sleeves. He's a Chicano! He's out there. (Chuckles) It was fun. He got nominated for some award they are giving out. They were just nominating, right? After that I was working for some fellow who was working for Frank Zappa and then I did lots of drawings. He got my drawings into one of his albums. This guy would pick me up, he lived close by up in High Park. Then from there, it was great. I don't know, one day I just I was looking at a map or something and I saw this thing on ... and Vietnam; and it was just about over. I said, "Wow," and I went to go register because I didn't register at eighteen. I was almost twenty. So I went in and I registered. Then the guy goes, "Wow, it's pretty late." Then I go, "But hey so what." I walked out and my number never came up but Vietnam was just about over. Then 1973, I was around Mechicano and I painted a mural.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me about that mural.

LEO LIMON: I painted that mural when I came back from Mexico. I went down to my uncle's house and he lived in Jalisco.

DENISE LUGO: ... little coffee shops?

LEO LIMON: No. I've just seen photos ... I just related to it. I don't know, *gallinas* (chickens) and stuff like that they were here already. So when I got out there was *Descalso*. I just saw it, you know? It wasn't that bad. In a small town, the borders get so bad, but way out there someone had to take care of each other somehow. Out there was great. I got to see, smell and taste. When I came back I painted a mural out there. My uncle had this big giant wall and I said, "Can I paint a mural on it?" I painted a large abstract. ... They loved it; bright colors and stuff. I came back here and the first thing I was hearing about was— What was it? It was in the paper about *Los Tres*. Did you ever hear about that? The drug. These guys were caught with drugs or something.

[End of Interview]