

2-1973

Interview no. 63

Manuel Acosta

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Interview with Manuel Acosta by John H. McNeely, 1973, "Interview no. 63," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Manuel Acosta
INTERVIEWER: John H. McNeely
PROJECT: El Paso Area Artists
DATE OF INTERVIEW: February, March, and May, 1973
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 63
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 63
TRANSCRIBER: Gilda Pena and Lourdes Tinajero
DATE TRANSCRIBED: March and August, 1973

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Artist; born in the town of Villa Aldama, Chihuahua, in 1921; grew up in El Paso, Texas; veteran of World War II; attended College of Mines, University of California at Santa Barbara, but has received no degree; naturalized citizen of the United States.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Autobiography; former Art teachers, including Urbici Soler; Peter Hurd; personal experiences.

4 hours, 73 pages

[Note: Tapes 1 and 3 are transcribed; tape 2 is not transcribed.]

Manuel Acosta
by John H. McNeely
February 28, 1973

/Transcript begins a few minutes into the interview./

M: Well, let's get started here. I wanted a biographical sketch in as much detail as we can get you to go into. You were born in Villa Aldama?

A: /Yes./ It's north and east from Chihuahua City, about 25 miles.

M: Not very far, is it?

A: Well, you could easily have two beers along the way, be there in no time!

M: When were you born?

A: It was a very, very good day as my mother tells me, and she was /skipping/ and hopping across the main irrigation acequia--ditch--playing around there; and then I was born.

M: Right in the ditch?

A: Yeah, about May the 9th, in the good year of the Pancho Villa fracas in 1921.

M: How long did you live in Villa Aldama?

A: I was still clinging to one of my mother's breasts when she walked over the Santa Fe Bridge.

M: Is that right?

A: My father sent her ahead and then there were relatives living in the presidios right behind the El Paso Laundry, which is right there on Santa Fe and Chihuahua Street. That's where I started growing up, and then one or two of my brothers were born in that place.

M: Presidios. Do you mean tenements?

A: Yeah. They're still there, right behind the El Paso Laundry building.

Then my father stayed on in Villa Aldama and then eventually he came over. In those years, as they tell me, they just walked across. There was no such thing as visas or passports or declarations of anything. They just walked across.

M: Well, I think until Congress passed legislation in 1924, there weren't any restrictions.

A: Oh, so I was a legal wetback. (Chuckles)

M: What was your first schooling?

A: It was at home. I remember my mother would take us all at certain times of the day and she would bring out the abecedario; it was a little alphabet book, and she would just give us hell with it: B-a-c-a, aca; b-u-rr-o, burro. So we learned to read and write Spanish. So when I went to the first grade at Beall School, I could read Spanish, and so I cheated the rest of my life in school, because I would read everything in Spanish and memorize it, and I got along fine.

M: Well, that is remarkable. Your mother must have been a very cultured person, then.

A: As I had heard many stories from the other relatives that are still living there, my grandfather and grandmother had quite a bit of land there in Villa Aldama and they had their cattle and their little farm; and so they were fairly well off, because my mother and her sisters had music lessons. They went to school there, and so they were fairly well-educated. They were doing fine till the Revolution hit them, the little village. And so that's when they began to disperse, you see. My father went off on several expeditions into the mountains. You know, they would take sides and sometimes the federales would swoop into the town and then everyone would

scatter. The guys would hide, you see, because they were after the men. Then when they left, the villistas came in and so that's why my father was in and out. That's when my aunts began to start coming this way.

M: Which side was your father supporting?

A: I would say the villistas. He had some harrowing tales to tell. Some-time you might talk to him.

M: He'd be a good one to talk to. Did he actually fight with Villa?

A: /Yes./

M: You say you went to Beall School?

A: Yes. I was there till the third grade and then we moved from those tenements down to North Santa Fe Street, right in front of the old Providence Hospital, because one of my aunts had moved up there and she rented a house, and it was big enough that we moved up /there/. And of course the Depression was at its worst about this time. So we moved up there and I remember we slept in the backyard. We had the beds all over with sheets over the beds to sleep there at night. And then of course we all shared the big house in the daytime.

M: Was that along where the Texas Employment Commission is now?

A: Exactly, right there. I went to Vilas School then. And of course my brothers and my only sister had been born in the meantime, and they were growing up. I remember dragging my youngest brother from Santa Fe Street all the way to Vilas School on his first day in class.

M: I guess you never remembered Gilbert Roland, did you?

A: No, no.

M: He went to Vilas School, I think.

A: He's quite a few years older; I didn't know him. Later, I saw him in movies

but he had already gone to Hollywood.

M: Well, then, you went to Vilas School.

A: I was there for maybe one year and then we moved again, and that move was down to Dolan Street near Val Verde. There again my father was getting a little money. He was then working for the Phelps Dodge Refinery, which was called the Nichols Copper Company. He was just getting a few dollars a week, but he was so proud he never accepted any relief and he forbade my mother to ever accept any cans of food. Remember, then the government doled out government issue. All the cans were sort of an unappetizing green color. You could see them going from one neighbor's house to the other. They would exchange, see, to change the menu. But my mother would never accept any, because my father would say, "If I find one of these cans around here..." He was very proud and he never accepted anything from the government. So we just made the best of it; we grew up on frijoles and chile verde and tortillas.

M: Did you go to some other school after Beall?

A: Well, while we were living there I went to Burleson School. That's where I graduated from grammar school. Now it's the Jefferson High School. Those were the happiest years, as I remember, because I was maybe nine or 10 and the place then was beautiful. Every house had two lots, or three, and they had fruit orchards. And of course there was no pavement, and very few street lights. Everyone had an outdoor toilet, and there were no alleys. Between the blocks there was an irrigation ditch and the water ran freely along the ditches. So we spent a very happy childhood there because we went to school and we were taken to church. Our big deal every day was to go to Rosary in the evening and then Sunday to church, and my

brothers were altar boys. And I never was one, but I was always around them or with them, and we would help my father decorate the church.

M: What church was that?

A: That was Our Lady of the Light.

M: Is that the one they tore down?

A: No, it is still there and they still use it; but they built a new one on Delta Street. So they had two churches. That was quite an experience.

And during that time, during school vacations, we had an Uncle José in La Colorada -- it's a section that's right across from Ysleta and Clint on the Mexican side -- and we would spend three months with him. There was Antonio, my second brother, and Francisco, the third one down the line, and I. This is where we learned to pick cotton and plow the fields and cut the alfalfa, and take it and bale it. We learned to milk cows, take care of horses. So that was a very exciting era, especially /for/ me, since I was the oldest. I learned quite a bit. So when the three months were up, we were sneaked across the line there in Ysleta, right across from the Lee Moor Ranch.

M: By then weren't they guarding the border?

A: Oh, they just had barbed wire, which was all over the El Paso area. We would just raise up the bottom wire and sneak under. And my grandmother would come along with us and we would just go back and forth as we pleased, always looking out for the Renchis*, as they were called. (Chuckles)

M: You lived near Burleson School, then?

A: Well, right on Dolan Street. We lived there for quite a few years.

M: When I first came to El Paso, very near there in an old frame house lived that painter, Leola Freeman. Did you ever know her?

*Rangers

A: I knew her much later. I think the studio that she built is still there on Concepcion Street. She sold part of it and I think she rents a little bit of it. Mrs. Freeman is now living in México somewhere.

M: Oh, she is? Well, when I was first out at the College of Mines, her daughter went there, and of course she has a son, Bill Freeman. But she had an old frame house and it seemed to me that it must have been torn down. She lived right near the canal, near Alameda Street, very near Burleson School. But you say you knew her later?

A: Oh, yes. It's when I had been to art school and was involved in the exhibitions that I began to hear about her. There was a big dairy on Val Verde Street next to the canal, so that's where we would go by to school every day, and we would see this old German-looking lady who ran that dairy. She'd be after the cows and she'd be milking them, and she'd be breeding the cows. We would get next to the fence and watch the old bull get on the cows, and the ladies across the street would always holler at us, "¡Muchachos, bájense! ¿Qué está viendo?" (Laughs) "Get the hell out of there!" What the hell you looking at? Keep going!" (Laughs) We knew when we'd see the old bull ready, so we would even be late to school. But we'd hang around there and watch all this going on. This lady, she knew what she was doing.

M: You knew the facts of life early.

A: Oh, yes. Down at the farm, my uncle had a beautiful stallion, a horse that's called El Charro. We learned to ride him. He was a mean one-- he would bite our rear ends every time we led him to water. He was a helluva stallion. Whenever he would smell in the air that some mare was getting ready somewhere in the community, he would break down the

fence /in/ the barn, jump, and disappear all night. Next morning, my uncle would get another horse and go find him; and sure enough, he had broken down another barn and there he was, with the mare. (Laughs) So there was an eye-opener.

Then there was the tranquility with which people lived, and the simplicity, and how they prospered. The kids grew up healthy. They didn't have much but they had the staples, good food, and everyone did a lot of good hard work. It's all gone now. I have gone back and there's no trace. You know, like the old song "Las Cuatro Milpas," exactly like that. It was just a three-room adobe house with a lot of little barns, and there was a well; and of course the big canal with the ditches for irrigation. We would go bathe in the ditch. Then on Sundays, we would all gather at the big canal, and that's when the ladies went swimming and bathing. (Laughs) We would all sort of happen to arrive there at the right time. They were these voluptuous, dark ladies in the water with great big white robes. They didn't wear bathing suits, no such thing. They wouldn't go in naked, but they just wore these flowing white robes. /We/ were there watching and hollering and screaming, and they would be around, and they'd start being playful, and then we'd be playful, jump and dive under and discover all kinds of things under the white robes. (Laughs)

M: This was at the ranch your uncle had?

A: Yes.

M: Was that your mother's brother?

A: My mother's brother. There were times when my grandmother and grandfather lived there, and they would go back to Villa Aldama and come back. Sometimes

my Uncle Agustín would be there, and they would take other little tracts of land and develop them and cultivate them. And my Uncle José was the prosperous one there. In other words, he had one horse more than the others. He got into the political aspect of this little village, and when he won the election--he was the alcalde--he had a celebration, one big dance in the schoolhouse. It was a one-room schoolhouse. Lo and behold when he was celebrating, someone came in there and shot him. That was the end of José Sánchez. So that was the end of that episode in our lives, because soon after that the widow--he married several times--just took everything, including the latest things that my uncle had acquired.

M: What was the name of this town?

A: La Colorada.

M: You don't have any idea about what year he was killed?

A: 1934, because soon after that I graduated from Burleson.

M: They went through the 8th grade at Burleson?

A: No, they only had seven.

M: Then where did you go?

A: Then, since no one was interested in my going to high school--it was unheard of in /my/ neighborhood, there on Dolan and Val Verde very few students would venture to go to high school--I just sort of stayed out for one semester. I still had a hankering to go to school and there was no money. But one day I decided that I wanted to go to school, so I walked all the way from... Oh, in the meantime we had moved from Dolan to Findley Street. See, the man that rented the house, who was my father's co-worker at the old copper refinery, decided to get this house back, so we had to move. We found this house on Findley. It was a rambling old

adobe house; no electricity, just a water hydrant in the backyard, and the traditional outhouse (laughs) next to the hydrant in the backyard. So, we moved there because that was the only thing we could find at the moment, and so we sort of went back into history again, because we had to light candles and kerosene lamps. It was very bad, but I think a month or two later we moved across the street to the house there on Findley, the one right on Hammett. So we lived there six, seven years, and that's when I started going to Bowie School. I was still living there when I graduated from high school. I used to walk from this address all the way down the boundary line across the Japanese vegetable gardens and then /to/ Bowie.

M: Your oldest house and studio was on the corner of Hammett and Findley?

A: Yes. The house is still there, the one that we rented is still there now.

M: So you went to school at Bowie for four or five years.

A: Yes. When I got in, somewhere I got very discouraged and I dropped out another semester. So /that/ was one whole year /I lost/, because some of the graduates from Burleson graduated ahead of me, those that stuck with it. But I was determined then. You see, my father was still earning very little, and then I began to get jobs checking laundry at the old Acme Laundry on Missouri after school. Several kids--we'd go down there and check laundry. We'd smell the dirty feet for weeks after that. (Laughs) Then I worked in the cafeteria washing dishes, just to help myself along. Of course, we had many relatives in South El Paso and sometimes at noon, when I didn't have money for lunch, I would just walk eight, 10 blocks, go visit the aunts

or the uncles and have a lonche.*

M: About what year did you finish at Bowie?

A: I think the teachers were very happy on January of '41 when [I] finally graduates. (Laughs)

M: Was Bowie particularly different then?

A: Well, certainly. It was just one square building that's there next to the new one. Miss Octavia Glasgow was the Art teacher.

M: Oh, I didn't know she was an Art teacher.

A: She's the only Art teacher I had there.

M: She's the one who lives in the old Magoffin home.

A: Yeah, she's the daughter of the late general.

M: And the granddaughter of the Magoffins, James Wiley Magoffin.

A: Miss Glasgow tried very hard to teach, but at the time, the schools didn't have any supplies. There was no Art program. I would be painting all these pin-up girls and she would shake her head at me, "Don't you know there are better things /to draw/?" The she would bring some paintings with religious motifs. There are still some paintings I did at the Lady of Guadalupe Church, because she insisted. But there was no such thing /as/ an Art program at Bowie. They tried but it was just a matter of doing something quickly, in an hour.

M: Do you feel that Miss Glasgow helped you?

A: At the time, I was too indifferent because no one really was interested in me as an artist. No one encouraged me, so all I did was express myself and just did what I had to do. But there was no guidance or inspiration. What I did was get into bad habits. You see, I had never really

*sandwich (derived from lunch)

seen a real painting. Everything that I discovered about painting were from reproductions. So that habit of trying to emulate what looked like a painting, it was so small that for years I tried desperately to paint a very slick, almost photographic /picutre/, because I didn't know about the vitality of real paint, of canvas, seeing the things close up. So for years I had that habit, that I wanted everything slick, as I saw them in magazines and art books.

So as soon as I graduated, the Second World War was on us, and my friends of the neighborhood /and/ my brothers all were joining up--the Navy, the Army, the Air Force. Since I was still a wetback, I tried to join up and they said, "No, you're not a citizen. You can't go in." So all my friends and brothers started going off into the adventures of the military, so I stayed home for about six months. Finally, one day Franklin Delano Roosevelt took notice of me and sent me that very gracious invitation that says, "Greetings." And so I passed the physical with flying colors and off I went into the Air Force. I had some of my first taste of military life here in Fort Bliss, at the old Logan Heights tar paper shacks. They had four eight-by-eight little square things, about four guys in each. And that's how I was inducted with all due ceremony. (Laughs) Then I was sent to Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, where I took all the exams and all the aptitude tests. One day they told me that I was being sent to the glider mechanic school. They just sent us wherever they needed us. So I started right there learning about patching gliders and putting them together. I immediately got busy and started doing copies from photographs for the soldiers, because I still had that feeling of wanting to paint. They would send them home.

M: Portraits of the soldiers themselves?

A: Sometimes, but mostly it was from photographs of their sweethearts or their mothers or somebody. But then I was sent to New York, and that was my first glimpse of the big town. We were there for a while, and then we moved around to the Carolinas and Kentucky. I didn't find any blue grass, and there were no fast horses and slow women--or was it the other way around? See, all the things I'd read about I was looking for, and it was a big disappointment when I didn't find them. However, the first snowstorm that I ever witnessed was in St. Louis, because in El Paso the snow doesn't come except when the archbishop comes to town. And on and on it went. Finally I saw Broadway and 42nd Street and I saw Sonja Henie in person ice skating. I went to see some musicals. I didn't have a chance to see an art gallery whatsoever. See, we were only allowed to go out at night, and it was a very short time.

So the next thing I knew, we were being herded into a boat for overseas. It was called the Mauretania. It was a luxury ship that was converted to a troop ship. And what a lousy time we had! We were down in the fifth hole, and we slept in hammocks; and they had about five or six hammocks, one on top of the other. I remember trying to get either in or out of where I was supposed to sleep. Some guys didn't bother to get at the top ones--they just sprawled on the floor. Then half the time, half the troops were sick. What a mess! I had never seen anything like it. Everywhere one would go, somebody was puking! (Laughs)

M: Seasick?

A: Yeah! Oh, the latrines were a mess. They had those elegant bathrooms when it was a luxury ship; but they just put the urinals and the bowls

and took out everything. So I would go in there, /and/ there were guys hanging on the bowls with their heads stuck in there, just puking! And every time the boat would roll, all the crap would go from one side to the other. Ugh--what a mess!

But, I would sneak out with my good friend from California--we became very good friends. And it was so hot and smelly down there at night we would sneak up past the guards--five stories--to the deck. We would hide behind whatever and we would be there for hours just enjoying the beautiful scene of the sea at night and the fresh air. Then we would sneak back in and sleep the rest of the night. Finally we got to Liverpool, England, and that was /the/ first giant step for Manuel Acosta on the European continent. The first thing /they said when/ we got off the boat /was/, "Now, be courteous to the Limys." (Laughs)

M: Liverpool was rather a drab place.

A: It was so dirty, so black. It was another great disappointment. See, I thought of the emerald lions and all that crap. It was terrible! Poor people everywhere. We were there just a little while, and were sent farther into a glider camp, an airfield. That's where I spent a whole year, at Swindon Wells. It was very near /London/, because we got passes to London all the time. We assembled gliders there in this airfield and did all the dirty work--the KP and the guard duty and all that. We got drunk in the little villages and raised hell up and down the English countryside.

Then came the preparations for D-Day, and we prepared I don't know how many hundreds of gliders. That was a stepping-off point, so I met Polish troops and all the Allied troops that were sent there--paratroopers.

We packed them into the gliders and they went over to Cherbourg, France, or wherever they dropped them. Then, later, we followed. They just moved us from England over into France, right behind the action. While /at/ this airfield /near London/, I had an acute attack of appendicitis. That was the only one time I was sick in the Army. I was sent to the hospital immediately and I had my appendix out. So that's the one good thing I left in England. (Laughter)

While I was there, that's where I did more art, because the officers had their clubs--little Quonset huts--and they could say, "That Acosta there is an artist. Let him decorate." So I hope they're still there. I had Betty Grable life-size all over the walls; Alexis Smith, Hedy Lamarr, and what have you--all these pin-up girls. I would do numbers on the barracks doors and the sergeant would do all kinds of favors for me. I would get fried chicken at night, anytime; and free butter. I would get passes and I would get liquor ration and cigarettes for doing all these odds and ends--painting numbers on doors and decorating this and that. I did quite a few portraits there, charcoal and pastels. We were never sure /how long we would be there/, so I never bothered to get any materials, but just enough to get by. I charged \$20 per portrait, so I always had money to go on furloughs. It was always to London. One time we went all the way up to Scotland; several of the guys in the barracks. I tried to get to Ireland, but they had closed the entry ports; it was off limits. But I did get to see some of my first masterpieces in London. There were very few paintings available because they had all been stored, but I saw some of the wonderful Gainsboroughs and Romneys and Blakes. That was my first encounter, you see.

M: Well, in Edinburgh they had some famous galleries, too.

A: Yes. What I did see was very briefly, because furlough was just a day or two. They were all very fancy noblemen or personalities in that plaid, the Scotch outfit. I had my photograph done in one of those Scotch uniforms.

M: Did you find out what the Scotchmen wear under the plaid?

A: Well, I didn't know what they wore, but I knew what I was wearing! It was just ordinary, dull drab, Army G.I. shorts! (Laughs) I have a photograph of that somewhere.

M: I guess that really wasn't a good time, though, because of the bombings. They had put most of the pictures away.

A: We went through that in London several times. The buzz bombs were the new things. They just started falling, and several times we were in London feeling our way around in the dark. I never got to know so many people so intimately just walking from one bar to the next. You'd go out, and you couldn't see a damned thing! You'd just go around feeling! (Laughs) You were either feeling or somebody passed by and felt you! (laughs) Then you could tell if it was a woman, a tart--a "taht" as they would call them. They would wear fluorescent jewelry on their shoes, or anyplace they would move. You'd see their bracelets. And you would spot them because you could see these little /lights/. You'd come up and get with it, you see. They'd immediately establish the price or whatever. Some would say, "Now, love, how about a door job?" It was very cheap. (Laughs)

M: You had to stand up.

A: Yeah! (Laughter) They should have paid us to do those things, because it was the most horrendous sexual encounter that I can ever imagine! You had five minutes to do it, and you had to do it standing up! The

funny thing is, we had a contest going on in the barracks trying to think of some way to convince them to at least squat down! (Laughs) But they said if they ever got caught off their feet it was a fine. It was just one of those things. People would go by and they knew what you were doing, but they wouldn't pay any attention. And of course, only G.I.'s and tahts would be out anyway! (Laughs)

But it was a great educational thing. But the best thing as I remember was coming face to face with a beautiful painting, the real thing. That's when I decided to be an artist, seriously.

M: These that you saw in London?

A: Yes. I decided then that that was the challenge, to paint that way, to put /on/ a canvas what I had seen there that impressed me so.

M: You don't remember what galleries you went to?

A: I didn't know them by name at the time. I just went there because I was curious. My soldier friends just went out drinking and whoring; but I went out first to the galleries. Sometimes they went with me, but most of the time they said, "We'll see you later." I even went to see some musicals. I went to the famous Windmill Theatre in London several times. I got to see a beautiful movie by Lawrence Olivier at the time, "Richard" somebody or other. I went to the Buckingham Palace and the changing of the guard, the changing of underwear (laughter), and up and down the river.

Then my outfit went to France, but I was left in the hospital near London. So when I got well from my appendix operation, a big airplane came for me. It was a proud day /in/ my life because I was the only one waiting on the airstrip, and here comes this C47 cargo plane landing there. Here comes the sergeant, he says, 'You're Corporal Acosta? We have come to

pick you up." I was the only passenger, and they flew me back to my outfit near Paris; it was Coulomier. When I arrived there, Oh, what a fanfare! All my buddies came running out /on/ the airstrip, immediately tore my pants down and said, "Let's see the operation!" (Laughs) So for weeks, everywhere /I was, they'd say /I, "Show them, show them!" (Laughter)

M: Looks like that's the most action your troop saw.

A: We were always repairing gliders behind the lines. As I say, I had a tremendous vacation because I was never in any particular predicament, except that now and then I almost would fall asleep during guard duty. It was hard to do, because we had the long shifts then. In the states we had two hours, three hours off, and on. Down there you just got stuck with it from 8:00 at night till 6:00 in the morning. It was dangerous for one thing because we were always guarding airfields or gas depots. But that was the extent of the danger other than getting the clap or somebody stealing the ration coupons. We had rations, and every month or so we'd go to the KP and get cigarettes and chocolate bars. I would save them, because I didn't smoke then and didn't care for candy. So I had a great big stock of cigarettes and chocolate. So when I went on furlough, you see, that was my Diner's Club Card. (Chuckles) I could get anything with it!

M: I guess famous places like the Louvre weren't open then.

A: I went there, but the salons were half empty. They had put away all these treasures. /There were/ very few /pictures on the wall/. I just think they had enough that they could take care of in case. Of course, the Germans had looted; they had been there and they had just been ousted out, and we were right behind. They left some lousy red wine and some very weak-tasting beer, and hardly any champagne. (Chuckles) So we were

out of all the good things in that respect.

So, then we were sent to Germany, and then after a while they didn't know what to do with us. So I became a Medical Assistant. (Laughs) It was just a title that they gave us to keep us in line to get on the boats back. Then, of course, the beautiful day when the war was declared over, we were in this little town of Cire Moutier in France. The church bells pealed and the villagers wept and screamed and hollered. We ran like hell down into the little bistro and had some lousy French beer (chuckles) and some horrible-tasting red wine. It was always vin rouge or vin blanc. It was just the color that was different but it tasted yech!

M: Well, you never got to go to Germany then?

A: We were there, but just like three months; and back to France again.

M: And then you were sent back here?

A: And then we were sent to Marseilles and that was our farewell to Europe.

M: About how long were you in Europe?

A: Well, let's see -- I was a whole year in England... So off and on maybe a year and a half, two years.

M: And from Marseilles you came back to the United States?

A: We were escorted around the Rock of Gibraltar--I got a look at it--and then on to New York. Immediately we were taken off the boat, given a furlough to New York, and we were on solid ground again. [I] saw the Statue of Liberty waving "Hello!"

M: You were discharged then?

A: Right at this Camp Shank, I believe it was called, we were all sorted out again, each one going different ways. I found myself on a train to El Paso. So I arrived in El Paso and I was still not a citizen. (Chuckles) Everywhere

I went the Sergeant would say, "You're not a citizen, but as soon as we get settled here I'll see to it that you're a citizen." When I was in Paris, I wrote a letter to the Stars and Stripes, bitching and complaining about the fact that I was not a citizen. Whoever was the /Consul/ or Ambassador in Paris, the "big chief," wrote me a letter which I received when I was in El Paso and already a civilian. He said, "Corporal Acosta, next time you're in Paris on a weekend pass, I will take care of your predicament and make you a citizen immediately." (Laughs) So, I went through the process here in the court, submitting the application and all, and so I was eventually made a citizen. Then I immediately enrolled at what was then College of Mines. That's where I met Urbici Soler.

M: They had already set up an Art Department?

A: I think Vera Wise had been a decorator somewhere and they asked her to start an Art Department. Then Urbici was hired to teach sculpture. When I met him he had already finished the monument on Cristo Rey.

M: This was along about '46?

A: '46, '47, somewhere in there. Then I stayed a semester, then I went to Los Angeles, the Chouinard Art Institute and stayed about a year. Then I went up to Santa Barbara for another six months at the University of California there. Then I decided I had enough instruction and started out on my own. /I/ came back to UTEP and took a couple of courses with Soler, and that's when I met Peter Hurd, through Soler.

M: At the College of Mines you didn't take anything but art courses?

A: That's all I wanted because it was too involved taking /courses/ for a degree, and I never got the degree. Many times I am credited with having a degree from UTEP, but I don't have one. I lack quite a few hours.

M: Well, you must have taken other courses besides Art.

A: Oh, I liked English; I've always liked English. I took some French and some math course, which I flunked miserably. (Laughs) Some writing courses with Haldeen Braddy--that helped me tremendously. I think that's the one I enjoyed the most.

M: How did Mr. Soler influence you?

A: For one thing, he was the first one to give me a sense of how a person can influence a younger one, because he was such a universal type of a person. He was well-educated, he was sophisticated, he liked to surround himself with educated people. This I got from him immediately, that you can be anywhere, and if you look out for these people they are there. He would bemoan the fact that there was very little of what is known as culture in El Paso at that time, especially regarding the arts. He had a horrible time there at the college because his hands were tied--no materials. One of the most horrible things was the thing of no undraped models. They all had to wear bathing suits, and to him it was a sacrilege. He would say, "Sacre bleu, how can you paint the human figure if you don't see it?" He was the first one to tell me very outwardly, "You are a lousy draftsman, but you can see well. Someday you're going to paint." (Laughs)

M: What courses did you take with him?

A: Sculpture and drawing.

M: Did you do oil paints with him?

A: No, that's all he taught--just drawing and sculpture. He had a terrible time because I was still with that old habit that I mentioned before, about trying to do a slick thing. And he'd say, "No, you have to show the texture of the crayon, the pencil. You cannot hide it. You make everything look

like warmed-over butter." He had a helluva time with me; but, you see, I had to get away from that. Eventually, I did. But he was very honest with me.

M: Did he advise you to go to Chouinard?

A: No.

M: That was your idea, then?

A: It was just that I had taken the courses that he had offered, you see, and I couldn't repeat them, so I went to look elsewhere. I went over there because that's where I could get what I wanted. Of course, I was using the G.I. Bill of Rights, which paid for that. Otherwise I might be a good mechanic or at least a carpenter. (Laughs) That was a tremendous help.

M: I don't know much about this Chouinard. Is it a very old school?

A: It is. It's still in operation.

M: Is it a famous art school?

A: Yes, it's very well-known. The good thing is that you can take art from 7:00 in the morning till 10:00 at night, every day except Sundays. That's what I did. I was there taking a complete course, from the ground up, with drawing, with nude models, with paint. All the instructors were then professional, working artists.

M: That's the school Jimmy Drake went to?

A: No. He went to the Art Center, the newer school.

M: Were there any particular teachers there at Chouinard that you felt were outstanding?

A: I remember Millard Sheets. He's still very well-known.

M: What did you study with him?

A: Painting, with a commercial slant to it. I took quite a few courses in

everything. At the time, though, they didn't have some of the newer things that they're teaching now; but they had photography, they had film-making, they had design, advertising, fashion illustration. One can get a complete education there.

M: You were there about a year?

A: Yes, that's all that I could take. But I went every day.

M: Then you went to one in Santa Barbara?

A: Yes. And then I came back to El Paso and decided to strike out on my own. Señor Hurd became my _____.

M: You were already living there at the corner of Hammett and Findley.

A: Yes. It was a little dairy there. The man that owned a house there on the corner had two or three cows in the back, and my mother would buy the milk from this lady. We got to be good friends, going after the milk every day. So then this couple decided to move to California, so they asked my mother, "Why don't you rent our house," So, we moved there. We were only renting the house. There was only four adobe rooms and three wooden shacks.

/Interview No. 3, tape No. 3, of Manuel Acosta by John H. McNeely on May 22, 1973. Tape No. 2 is not transcribed./

M: Mr. Thurston was telling me about Frederick Taubes being here at Lamar School. He thought that was right after the Second World War, maybe about 1948, and that you were in his classes. What impressions did you have of Taubes?

A: I think he knows his craft and he knows the materials very well, and he's a great one for explaining them--what they're made of, where they come from, and how to use them. He's an accomplished authority on that, even the framing--how to do frames and how to finish frames.

M: What frames are appropriate for which pictures.

I wanted to ask you about that book that you did the illustrations for. The other day they had an article about Ricardo Sánchez, his rising as one of the outstanding Chicano poets.

A: Yes.

M: Were you trying to illustrate the topics of his poems?

A: No. It just happened that I contributed my illustrations to the book because no one got paid for it. It was a labor of love and Dr. Raymond Gardea is the one that sponsored the publishing of the book. So he bore all the brunt of the expenses. I was asked to do the illustrations. I was asked if I would charge any money for the work, and I volunteered my services. I said, "I have some illustrations that can already be used," and some that I had planned to do anyway. It's all involved with Ricardo's background in South El Paso. I lived in South El Paso, so it was just a matter of doing a few more sketches. I found that all my drawings for this

just happened to be the right thing.

M: This article in the paper the other day sounds like it's going to be re-printed by one of the big publishing companies. You didn't see that?

A: No.

M: I made a clipping of that. I'll bring it to you.

A: That sounds great. For Ricardo, the fact that Doubleday decided to print the book as it was, except in a paperback edition, was a great compliment to Sánchez.

M: One thing that we never did put on tape was your having to move from your studio on Hammett Boulevard to this location, 366 Buena Vista, and the circumstances connected with that. I thought that you could tell us about that. I remember it went on for years.

A: Well, I happened to come across the knowledge that there was to be a freeway built. It was about four years before I actually got thrown out. We were asking for a permit to do some remodeling on the house and around the house. I was told by the inspectors, or whoever gives out those permits, that they were not allowing any more remodeling around the area because of the proposed freeway. That's where I got the first hint that eventually there'd be a freeway. So four years later it was an actual fact. So I was told that I had to find another place, that my place--my studio and all--would be evaluated at fair market price, and that I would be told when to move. I was given a deadline to move. It was a big monkey wrench in the whole operation. It disrupted my painting for about three years. Everything fell behind--all my schedules for shows, for commissions.

When I was finally paid off, it was nowhere near what was the total value in both material things and esthetic evaluations, of all that happened

to me as a person, as an artist. But of course the highway department would never think about such things as the fact of somebody just being moved from one place to another and /starting/ again. Of course they have no concept of such things. They just said, "We have to move you. Find a place. Here's the money. Go buy something like it." They're just down to earth about it. No sentimental values are considered, no shock involved. They don't consider shock. Some people get shocked when they get thrown out from the place they lived in for a long time. Then they don't adjust to where they go, you see. Living in the neighborhood for years--twenty years, twenty-five, forty, fifty. When you're fifty years in a place, no matter how much better the other place is, the adjustment is tremendous. All these things I have been noticing since I was ousted from my place. Of course, what I got paid for the place is nowhere near what is involved now, both in money and personal reactions to all this.

So I spent a year looking for a place, because houses and studios, you can never find them ready made. I just couldn't possibly have moved into somebody else's studio. I had to do it myself. And that's what happened. My sister and her family and I combined our efforts. So we found this place that has five lots and three are already built upon. The two that were left is where my present studio is. Of course, I don't miss the old place at all now. It's like yesterday--who's going to worry about yesterday? It's gone. We brought everything we could out of the old place, including the ghosts even rattling around and hiccupping.

(Laughs)

M: You didn't try to get any more money out of that?

A: Well, me and money just don't seem to have any love for each other. It was

a boring thing to even think of going and asking for it. I hate to ask for things. So I said, "There it is. Let's go. So start all over." I would hate to go around asking for it.

M: Well, you can go to court on those things, can't you?

A: But it's just a big bore to me. I would rather start all over again, accept it as a challenge, and start anew. Money can't pay for all those things. So, start another phase.

M: It's especially hard on old people to have to move.

A: Yes. It almost changes complete cycles, complete thoughts, beliefs. Even religious manners and methods and customs are changed. Like my parents, a Sunday without mass was cardinal sin. Of course the church was there just a half a block away. Then when we moved here, you see, since they don't drive a car, they began to be dependent on someone taking them. And eventually that led to all kinds of complications. So, it's hard to accept, but they don't go to mass. Now, you see, inside of two years a tremendous change has come over them because of this move. They have accepted it and said, "Well, we don't want to bother someone to take us this Sunday, so we won't go." For them it was a tremendous sin to miss Sunday mass.

Now their friends used to be their everyday worry, an everyday responsibility, at least to ask how they were. Now months go by and they don't talk to each other because they have been all scattered all over the place. And so that changed, they're sort of lonely for companionship. And if it weren't for the telephone, you see... So that was a tremendous change. I see it because I study all these people and I wonder what is it that made them change so much. They were so intimate. All their family activities were shared with the others--births and weddings and funerals and all the

bit. But now it is such a distant thing. If somebody is born /they/ say, "Well, it's a good thing." Somebody dies, they send flowers and that's it. There's none of the other personal, immediate participation.

M: It was more like a village over there.

A: That's why I say the highway department personnel, having no concept of what goes on because to them it's such an impersonal job. They say, "Well, we will condemn your property if you don't move out." (Laughs) That's it. Who do you appeal to? The state of Texas? You live in the state of Texas and you pay the taxes that makes the state of Texas possible. So it's like your own family kicking you out, right?

M: Well, I remember that John Meiggs and Peter Hurd or somebody was saying how you could never create that atmosphere all again that you were losing there, and that the State Highway Commission ought to pay you for that.

A: I figure that if I had had the inclination to go that route and to get a lawyer and raise all that hell, eventually I would have gotten something. But suppose I had gotten several thousand dollars for whatever--it wouldn't have changed the fact that I would have to be out of there.

M: You'd probably have to pay the lawyer the money you got.

A: Many good things have come of it anyway.

M: What do you feel are some of the good things?

A: For one thing, I expressed myself in building another complex completely by hand with the help of relatives, friends, which was a great undertaking in any language.

M: Well now, when you first got here you housed yourself in the garage.

A: Yes. But that's the only place that was big enough to put all my belongings in and still do some painting, some drawing. But a garage is a garage, and

I spent eighteen months in it.

M: Did you draw up the plans for the studio yourself or have a friend do it?

A: Yes. I began to get ideas as to what I wanted, and then I did several floor plans; and then consulted with John Meiggs, who is a very talented architect. After a few suggestions from him, a few changes, this evolved-- what is now here. This is only half-way through. It needs all the nice things, the adornments, the fringe benefits. But at least I got enough to get in and start painting.

M: And your friends and relatives were the ones that helped you with the actual building?

A: Oh, yes.

M: It took you about a year to do that, didn't it?

A: More than that, eighteen months. You see, I financed it by just selling paintings. I spent about \$11,000 for materials only. No one got paid. I didn't pay myself, and I didn't pay my relatives or friends. So actually, the \$11,000 went to materials.

M: It looks like if you'd had a contractor do all this, it would have cost you forty or fifty thousand.

A: I got some bids and that's what discouraged me from giving a contract to someone.

M: Doing it that way?

A: Yeah. One medium sized bid was \$28,000, and there wasn't to be any more in it than there is now. In other words, there were no fancy catches whatsoever. And I thought that if I even spent \$28,000 on what was on my plans, that was outrageous. So I decided to start doing it myself--of course, after being encouraged by my friends and relatives. Because when

I was in the garage, /they'd say/, "When are you going to start the studio?" I just didn't look like I wanted to. So they said, "Why don't you do it? We'll help you." It began to build up and one day I got up and I said, "This is the day." And I started on the plans, /went to/ City Hall, got a permit, and it started.

M: Then the kind of unveiling ceremony, that was along in May, wasn't it?

A: No, that was in August of last year. Really, the last few days in July, about the 29th.

M: That went on for a couple of days, didn't it?

A: It took two days to celebrate it properly, not only for myself but really to get in all the people that helped build it and let them have a good time and enjoy it.

M: What were some of the features of the dedication? Didn't you have a priest come and bless it?

A: Oh, yes. Supposedly Peter and Henriette Hurd were to be the padrinos.

They were the guests of honor to come and do the holy water, spraying around, and the invocation, the beautiful words, and all that. But at the last minute they could not come to the celebration. So without getting panicky or fainting at the news, I said to John Meiggs, who brought the news to me, "Well, John, let us not panic or fart or what. Let's go ahead and you do the honors." (Chuckles) So he is the one that dedicated the place with a few choice words. The Father Jesse Muñoz, a good friend, a good musician, was asked to do the official blessing of the kiosko outside since he's a sort of bohemian type priest anyway. So he did /the/ rite, sprinkled holy water on everybody around there, and sang a few songs on the guitar. Then the more formal thing, Msgr. Quinn came over in place of Bishop Metzger, who

was ill at that time and could not be here. He also blessed the inside part of the studio. I asked him politely to bless the place and cast out almost all the devils. I said, "Please leave a few around so /that/ we have a little color and character." He said, "Okay, I will do that." (Chuckles) So he left a few devils around.

M: That's Msgr. Quinn who's the chancellor of the diocese?

A: Yes.

M: He's an artist, too.

A: Yes. That's the reason he came, because he said that in his own way he would be doing something worthwhile. And the bishop was to have been royally feted when he got here, but he couldn't, so...

M: One thing I noticed was that you made this studio particularly large, with the idea that you could have maybe concerts or theatrical performances here.

A: It had been going on since it was dedicated.

M: I see. So the Oro award's design for the Teatro de los Pobres, have they given their plays here in this studio?

A: No. The place is really adequate for one-person performers, or two or three, or dancing. But it's quite a problem to seat a number of people. But on my own I did present the monologue of "La emperatriz," with Yolanda de Anda, which was one of my first really theatrical efforts. We managed to seat 150 people, and we had a standing room only audience. Mostly everyone that was invited spoke Spanish well and understood it very well, because the play was in Spanish. We were surprised to discover that there's many people in El Paso who like theatre but they have never exposed themselves to it or someone invited them. In other words, they need a little prodding, a little fire under their ego to get them out of the house and

into a theatre. Since El Paso is always lacking for audiences for theatrical productions, we thought we did fairly well for our first effort. We did manage to get some money left over from expenses to get the lady a very handsome honorarium for her efforts.

M: For Miss de Anda?

A: Yes.

M: Is she a famous actress?

A: Yes. She lives in Juárez and has a dancing academy. She teaches poetry and dancing, and she's an actress, too.

M: Your play is about the Empress Carlota.

A: /It's/ a famous three-act monologue and it deals with her later days just at the verge of going crazy over all this. It's really a love story. It deals with her love life with Maximilliano, and it tells the history as it happened then, and then going crazy over this thing. Quite interesting, very dramatic.

M: That's the only play you've had?

A: Yes, as such. Of course, all the parties we have had here eventually turn out to be outrageous comedies at times, unrehearsed. (Chuckles)

M: Have you had some musical performances?

A: All the time. You have missed my solos here on the piano, the violin, or the organ. I guess you're lucky! (Chuckles)

M: One thing I have wanted you to talk about is putting on the passion play. I already have seen there's a director.

A: I thought I started all the rumors myself. Where did you hear this?
(Laughs)

M: It gets around.

A: Our two efforts at Anapra were very successful because they were mostly done out of sheer...sheer...what do you call it? It's for a sense of expression or at least bending our frustrations in presenting something like that, because all of us need to express ourselves. In a production like that everyone has a chance to express themselves in many ways without any sense of getting paid for it or being obligated to do it. There's a difference when you volunteer to do something, when you get paid to do it. So we didn't make a nickel out of it. We got a lot of blessings and hot beer from the priest at Anapra, but that was it, materially speaking. But esthetically speaking, we still talk about this great thing, laugh about it, and all the people that were involved still remain friends.

M: What are the different places that you did it?

A: First it was in the church proper.

M: San Martín de Porras.

A: San Martín de Porras in Anapra. The church, being so small and all, was kind of ideal because everything happened right in there. The people seemed to be involved and so it had almost a religious feeling about it, when it was over and done with. The next year the church managed to build a hall, a big cinder block building, so we did the same passion play, only we had, you know, about 50 per cent more people involved and more space. So it took on a different aspect. Still, it was successful.

M: Where did you get the words you used?

A: Oh, we just took it from the Gospel by St. Mark.

M: Just followed it?

A: Yeah. We had a reader. What's it called in other churches? The...

M: Narrator.

A: And all he did was just read it as it is.

M: Because the people in the play, they didn't say anything.

A: No, no. It was actually a moving play, but the scenes were done /in/ just paintings, you see, instead of action, and all through following the voice of the narrator--with beautiful music in the background and effects and all.

M: As the director you told them what to do, though.

A: Yes. Actually it was a series of paintings in my mind. That's how I conceived of doing it, that's the pleasure I got out of it--to have each scene a painting.

M: Have you ever heard of the thing they put on at Laguna Beach, California?

A: I have heard of it.

M: They have an outside theatre there and the people pose as different famous paintings.

A: Yes, I heard about that.

M: Well, how did you get your actors for this thing?

A: Just let out the word that we were putting on the play. And, "Who wants to join in?" Someone said, "I will," and I'd say, "Invite five more."

M: Who did you get to play some of the main parts?

A: It was just a matter of who was there at the first few meetings that we could select--you know, whoever was more or less ideal for that part.

M: That looked the part.

A: Actually, all they had to do was be cooperative to the point of not being self-conscious, because if they were, it would ruin the whole thing. So we matched the ones that could move around and bat an eye now and then. We'd say, "Well, you're lively, so you do the moving parts." And then those who just warmed benches without any expression, we said, "Well, you'll

be one of the bench warmers." (Chuckles)

M: Well, those would be the apostles in the Last Supper.

A: But we had so much fun. It was really a comedy in itself. That's funny, because in the front of the stage was this tremendous tragic thing going on, and backstage the greatest comedy of the century was going on. Like the apostles, they were all teenagers. Most of them were part of the baseball team. I invited one and he invited the whole team, so that almost took care of all the apostles, with the exception of a few of the grown-ups. Lo and behold, when they passed the bread and the wine on the table, everyone managed to get a little piece of this bread and a little...I guess it was Coca-Cola, you know, the wine. But it got to this one guy, El Indio. We have a portrait of him. It got to him and he took the whole piece of bread (laughs) and ate it and he poured all the Coca-Cola, so that left the other apostles without bread to break. That was one of the scenes.

Then El Cristo managed to steal a pint of whiskey that I had secreted to give to Dr. Gardea just before the performance, to calm our nerves. He was doing the sound and all of this. I said, "Doctor, I have a little whiskey and I'm going to hide it. Now, when the play begins, you and I will just have a drink and calm our nerves while the play is going on." Came the time when just before the play began and I said, "Let's have the drink." He said, "All right." I looked for the pint of whiskey high and low. I said, "There's only one person who would ever search around here for liquor." So guess who it was? It was El Cristo. (Laughs)

M: Who took that part?

A: Well, Carlos Astorga was the Christ. He was a good one. He really was a good one.

M: You had to watch him to keep his sober.

A: Well, yes. Because /when/ I was berating him about taking the pint of whiskey, I said, "I don't care if you drink it. But if you get out there on that cross and you're hung and you get the hiccups, I'll really crucify you!" (Laughs) So many things like that happened that made it all worthwhile.

The reason we did not present it again /was/ because of lack of enthusiasm on the part of the parishoners and the priest over there. They didn't bother to ask whether we would present it again, could they help us present it--nothing! They just thought maybe we would do it all just /on/ our own volition. So I told everyone, "After all, we're not doing it for our own health. We're trying to help them." So I lost interest because of that. You can't force these things down people's throats. If they want it, they can ask for it. Of course, I had to build the studio, which also contributed to that lack of getting involved. I'm still leery of getting involved in /other/ things because I lost so much time.

M: But it was a great experience that you'll never forget.

A: That's why I say, you get involved and the only reward you get is some table conversation.

M: I think it was Joan Quarm that saw it and gave you quite a write-up when it was shown there in Anapra--how professional the actors seemed and how emotional everybody got.

Some other things I wanted to ask... I don't know whether you want to discuss this or not, but I know you have supported some political candidates rather actively around here. But do they win, though?

A: I have many zeroes so far. (Laughs)

M: You supported Raymond Telles for Congress, and who else have you supported?

- A: Hector Bencomo and his ticket. That's about it. But personally, getting involved with political rallies or political beer busts or whatever, in that respect that's how I got involved--lending my studio for meetings or a big fiesta or a baile, whatever. 'Cause politics are not politics if you don't have beer busts and drinks galore, and music and all. It comes with the bandwagon. But so far, as I say, I'm batting zero.
- M: Well, you tried.
- A: O good try. (Chuckles)
- M: It seems to me I've probably asked you about teaching art or having any students. But you have had some in past years. Didn't Jimmy Drake study with you for a while?
- A: Not a sense of studying. When he finally decided he wanted to be an artist, he was in my studio for days at a time.
- M: How old was he then?
- A: I guess his early teens. He was just beginning college. There was no sense of class. He was just there while I was painting and I would comment and all. But never in any sense of lessons.
- M: He didn't paint in your studio then, did he?
- A: No.
- M: He just watched you?
- A: Yes. That's the only way I invite people when they're interested. [I] say, "Well, come and watch, and we'll talk." It's immediate; it's important right then. I don't have the patience for the other thing. I did one time get a fellow for a whole summer from Yselta--Jesús Gutierres, I believe. [He] got a scholarship and so Mrs. Anne Carroll, who does the column in the paper, invited me to use this scholarship with Jesús. [She said], "Will

you take him on this summer?" I think it was only two months. Once a week he would come to the studio for mostly drawing. I insisted that he spend all the time drawing.

M: So you got paid?

A: Yes. I got the money that he won with the scholarship, and he was there for all that summer.

M: You never followed his career?

A: Now and then I see him and I talk with him.

M: What's he doing?

A: Well, he's in high school or he's about to be out of high school. But his interests vary from one thing to another. He makes a painting, and they praise it, and he calls me. But he still hasn't really found himself or his...

M: I think I've met him. He was here once and he had some of his pictures.

A: I think so. A small fellow with green eyes, very brown skin.

M: But, now, Jimmy Drake has gone much farther, though.

A: Well, eventually he went to the Art Center school in Los Angeles.

M: And graduated.

A: And graduated. He can teach here and there. He has had several studios around town. He hasn't quite found the one that I guess he's most comfortable in.

M: Had you known his mother?

A: Yes. I knew her quite a few years before I met James.

M: She has some kind of a business here, doesn't she?

A: She does saddle blankets and weaves sarapes and all that.

M: Does she design them herself?

A: I think she and her sister do it. They have the work done in Juárez, the weavers are in Juárez. So they take their own material from here over there, and they do the weaving, and they bring it back. They have a mail order business.

M: But it's quite successful.

A: Yes.

M: She would qualify as an artist herself.

A: Yes. I think she's now taking lessons with Alemán.

M: She is? Well, then there was Father Rahm's sister.

A: Leona Berry.

M: Leona Berry. She took lessons quite a lot with López-Alemán, and she seems kind of to depend on you as her art critic.

A: We have an agreement. Since she's always been a very beautiful violinist, one day she insisted that I learn to play the violin. Someone gave me a violin--it's a prop for my paintings. And she said, "Oh, it's a beautiful violin. Why don't you learn to play? I'll teach you." So, I thought it over like two days. Well, why not? The violin was here. Then she said, "Why don't we exchange? I'll teach you to play the violin, and you teach me to paint." This went on for three, four, five years. But eventually began to make friends with the paintings, you see, and I began to lose mine with my violin playing. So it didn't work out. (Laughs)

M: Leona since moved to San Antonio.

A: Yes.

M: Did you actually give lessons to her?

A: Oh, yes. She'll never forget me because I always kept sending her to Ascarate Lake. She loves to paint water and effect the water like

seascape. She would not have the right effect of water in her paintings and I would say, "This is the way it should be." I criticized her, very honestly, of course. She said, "But, there's no water around. That's the reason; I'm not near the ocean." I said, "Leona, go to Ascarate Lake." (Chuckles) So for years later, any time things were wrong, she'd say, "I know, Manny. I have to go to Ascarate Lake."

M: There's one thing I've been intending, Manny, to ask you in all these interviews, and I musn't let this one slip by.

A: It must be the beer.

M: About Urbici Soler. We never really talked about him and what you know of him since he was a famous local artist for years, though he didn't originate here. He was born in Spain, wasn't he?

A: /Yes./

M: Catalán, from that part of Spain. He taught over here in the Art Department when it was I guess the College of Mines to begin with. Then he designed the Cristo Rey monument. Did you know him in those days?

A: No. I met him after the whole monument project had been finished.

M: He was very friendly, too, with Father Lourdes Costa, who was also Catalán.

A: Yes.

M: Was it Father Costa who conceived of the monument?

A: I have never read the story or heard the story of how the monument came about.

M: I think they already had a wooden cross up there that they had for years before they put their monument up. But tell us about how you first knew Urbi.

A: Well, after the war I got my G.I. Bill of Rights benefits, so I enrolled

at the College of Mines. I think it had become Texas Western then. I only wanted to take art courses. There were only two or three instructors then: Vera Wise and Harrison and Urbici. So that's when I met him. I took sculpture with him.

M: You haven't followed through as much with the sculpturing as with the painting.

A: No. But essentially it was a very good thing because Urbici not only taught sculpture, but he taught a sense of life being art itself.

M: He was a philosopher.

A: Exactly. /It was/ the first inkling I had that art was more important than being successful in business, that art was every day, that you could be an artist in just the way you live your life day by day, that anything you did you could enhance and make important and entertaining. To this day I admire him because he was the first person that I met that had a spirit of being universal, cosmopolitan, sophisticated, educated. Of course, since I was eager to learn--I was all ears--I would listen. So that was a great thing to have met him.

M: You must have known him outside the classroom, too, to talk to besides just in the class.

A: Well, it was always in class. But when he first started to build his house out by Anapra...I don't know where he lived before, I think he lived in a big warehouse or someplace. He was great friends with Mrs. Wilmarth. Remember her? Mrs. Louise Wilmarth.

M: No.

A: One of the librarians, or one of the great workers for the library. He was a great personal friend /and used to/ spend a lot of time in their home.

I never knew where he lived until he started building that house that still exists in Anapra. He would say, "Come and help me this weekend." I would help him plaster here and mix cement with the help of other students. That's how I began to know him better.

Then, of course, he was instrumental in getting me to meet Peter Hurd, because one day he mentioned to me that I was to meet a great artist, and this artist was interested in meeting me because he needed an assistant for a mural project. That's how it came about. He arranged this meeting in his office and he said, "I have shown some of your work to Mr. Hurd and he's interested and wants to meet you." So one day he said, "He's in my office. Go in." I went in, greeted Mr. Hurd. We spoke in Spanish immediately. Then the interview was very brief. He said, "I just want to ask you a few things. Do you like to speak Spanish?" "Yes." "Do you speak it well?" "As well as I know how at the moment." "Do you play the guitar?" "No." "Do you like to sing?" "Yes." "Do you know Mexican songs?" "Quite a few." And he said, "Well, I guess that's all I wanted to know. You're hired." (Laughs)

M: Well, then did you see more of Mr. Soler?

A: Immediately after that we were guests at the Hurd Ranch for two or three times, like a Saturday and a Sunday. The first time was so I would get to know Peter before we went off to the mural commission in Houston. Then another time it was just a social that Pete invited Soler and Soler said, "Since I'm going over there, why don't you come with me?" The second time there I met Mrs. Hurd, who at the time was very cold and aloof. So Mr. Soler said, "Oh, ¿quién sabe? We might not ever make it with her because she's so difficult and distant." But as it turned out, eventually it worked

out fine. At first she gives the impression of being aloof and all that; eventually, as she gets to know a person, all these fences begin to be tied in back and rolled and tied with a beautiful ribbon. (Laughs)

Then, of course, after I completed the mural commission with Pete, in the meantime, we became good friends. I think it was soon after that that /Soler/ died.

M: I wanted to get on tape your story of the circumstances of his death. I think you've told me that two or three times, but now we're to put it on tape. Could you tell us about that?

A: It was one afternoon as I was leaving the building, one of the classes /in the/ Cotton /Memorial building/. And as I was going out he was getting into his old, beat-up car. It was about lunch time, I guess. He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going home, it's time to /go/. I don't have a class this afternoon, so I'm going home." "Why don't you come with me? I have to go pour a plaster thing for a lady, a friend of mine. Why don't you come with me and help me? Then she'll give us lunch." I thought a minute and said, "Well, fine. Okay." So, we went to this lady's house; I forget her name now. She had done a clay figure of somebody, a bust. Out in the yard he did the plaster and all, and did the mold. I just watched him. Then the lady said, "Come and have lunch." We sat and had lunch. Then Soler got sick. He said he felt like /it was/ something he ate. So the lady said, "Go in the bedroom and lie down a bit." He did and he didn't seem to be getting better. He said he felt like he wanted to vomit or whatever. She said, "Let me call your doctor." And I guess his doctor lived in Juárez, and she couldn't get him at the time. So she called her doctor, and he said, "Well, do this or that," or whatever. Then,

finally Urbi wasn't feeling any better, called his doctor, and finally got in contact with him. So over the phone this doctor said, "Stop at the Rio Grande Pharmacy," in South El Paso somewhere. "Stop by and get this medicine."

So we left the house and he said, "Why don't you drive, because I don't feel very well." So I drove his old truck-car. Then he said, "Stop over the drugstore and pick up the prescription." I said, "I better stop at my house and tell them where I am." I stopped at my house and told them I was going with him because he was feeling sick and all, and I was going to at least see him home. This was sort of a late afternoon then. And I said to him, "Don't you feel like you want to go to the hospital?" "Oh, no. I don't want to go to the hospital." "Should I tell someone, like Father /Costa/?" "No, don't tell anyone." Then I said, "How about Bob Laya?"--another student who was a football player and a very good friend of his. "How about him?" He had helped him build that house. He was an art student with him and really good friends /with him/. "Why don't we tell him, too, to come down and be with you?" "No, I don't feel like that. I just want to go to the house."

So we picked up the medicine and drove down. He said, "I will go in the bedroom and lie down and take the medicine," and all. In the meantime from a phone I called the Athletic Department to let Bob Laya know, but I couldn't get him. I just wanted to let him know anyway. I said, "Come down later because I'm going to stay with him and see how he feels." I couldn't get him. Finally we got to the house and he went and got into bed.

There was no telephone in his house. He wasn't getting any better

but he said, "This happened before," and all he had to do was sort of sleep a little while. While he went to sleep, his kitchen was a big mess. He hadn't done the dishes or pots and pans so it was all...that was all there was to it, you see, because the windows were boarded up with cardboard because he hadn't finished the house. There wasn't much to do, and so I started cleaning the kitchen. And I would go look in and see how he was doing. His neighbors, I would see them out in the backyard. I would think, as soon as I came /out/ I would call Father Costa.

It got dark and he was sleeping away. So I /said/, "I guess everything is all right." I had finished doing all the cleaning up. So I put a blanket and some cardboards right in the kitchen. The living room was full of cement sacks and bricks and tile. But I couldn't go to sleep. I'd get up and go look in and see. Then one time I heard all this snoring and gasping and all. So I went in and looked at him and he lay very still. I thought, "Well, I don't think he's any better, I'd better call Father Costa or somebody." Before I did, I took his pulse 'cause I wasn't sure. I had never been in a case like that. I didn't know what to do. I said, "I'll take his pulse," and I did and I didn't feel anything. Then I put my hand on his forehead and he felt kind of...just cold. So I thought, the best thing is to go next door and call the doctor, call Father Costa. I went next door, and I called these people from out the fence because they had dogs. I told them, screaming out loud, "Come to the door. I want to tell you something important. Mr. Soler is very sick. As a matter of fact, I think he's dead. Please, answer the door, or call, /or/ let me use the telephone. You call them." I don't know if they didn't hear me or maybe they thought I was crazy. They didn't even turn the lights

or open the door or even hear me. I don't know.

M: Was this very late at night.

A: Yes. It was like 11:00 or midnight. So then I got back to the house and got the keys to Mr. Soler's car from his pants. I thought, "I just better go /get/ Father Costa." I knew where he lived--right in Smelter, on a little hill across from, I guess, the community there. Do you remember where he lived?

M: Across from the church?

A: Yeah, up in the slag heap. That's where he lived. So I drove like hell right up to the thing and walked up, and I banged on that door and I called Father Costa till I gave up. I think he was either afraid to answer the door or...he didn't answer either, and I knew he was there. To this day I don't know why he didn't. But I banged--I even got a rock and I banged on the door. /I said/, "You better come quickly because I think Urbici is dead. He's very sick," or whatever.

So I went across and there was a filling station open, just across the street, somewhere along there. I walked in and I didn't have a dime. I looked at the man there and I said, "Could I get a dime from you? I have to make a call because I have to call the doctor. This man, I think he's dead." I think by then I was beginning to feel the impact of the whole thing, being so mad at all those people who wouldn't answer the door. I thought to call the lady, then I couldn't think of her name and I couldn't get her address. So I called the operator. I said, "What /should/ I do? I want to call somebody. I think this person is very sick. I think this person is dead." So the operator wasn't any help. She said, "Call a doctor."

Finally I looked in the directory and I found this lady's name. I called her and said, "I think Mr. Soler has had a heart attack and I think he's dead now. What shall I do?" "Oh!" she said, "I will call my doctor and we'll get him out there immediately. Who's down there?" I said, "No one. No one answers. No one bothers nobody cares." So I went back to the house. I told the man, "I'll bring your dime back." I went back to the house and I stayed outside. Finally, there comes a car. It was the lady and the doctor. Of course he came in, "Oh, this man is dead." I said, "What else is /there/ to do?" "No, that's all right. Nothing you can do. I'll do the rest. I'll call the undertaker, I'll call this and all that." He said, "Nothing you can do." "Well, do we all go home?"

Oh, in the meantime the sheriff arrived. See, this was New Mexico. He arrived and he began to ask questions: who was here, where, what, who. He had to examine the body for signs of foul play and all of this. Then the lady said, "/Can/ we leave?" He said, "No, you can't. You have to wait here till we are satisfied that..." So the law took over. So it was like 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning, clear day, when I finally got home. And that was the end of Soler. But he didn't want anyone to know, didn't want to go to the hospital. That was how it came about. To this day I don't know. I saw Father Costa. I think he's dead now. But it never occurred to me to say, "Why the hell didn't you ever answer that door when your friend needed you?"

M: Father Costa probably presided over the funeral.

A: I forget all the details. I only remember that Ellen Coogler was there. She's a good friend. She and the Acosta girls, Esperanza /and Dolores, went, and/ some of the students. Bob Laya was there. It was in Evergreen Cemetery.

M: He received a Christian burial?

A: Yeah.

M: Though probably he wasn't a practical Catholic.

A: I think he and Costa had a lifelong argument. (Laughs) Every time they got together it was either talking about Spanish food and wines or religious matters.

M: I think we ought to stop there. The only other thing I had in mind was to ask you about individual paintings that I know of.

A: Well, now is a good time. Why don't we take a little break and then go on?

/PAUSE/

(Recording continues in Spanish, a conversation with "El Borrego" about Boxing. Not transcribed. Interview continues below.)

M: Vamos a hablar del papel.

A: Craft paper, paper bag number twelve.

M: Y tiene que cambiarlo.

A: I change it every time the flies begin to mess around because it catches all the perspiration. It keeps all my dirty thoughts in there. Hangovers and... So it's really sort of a walk-in confessional.

M: Walk-in confessional.

A: Yeah.

M: It looks like fly paper to me.

A: Exactly. (Laughs) Oh, speaking of fly paper, you know when my mother discovered that I was talented? She said that /when I was/ two years old I could really draw flies. (Laughter)

M: Que atrae las moscas.

A: It's hard to translate just anything.

M: Vamos a hablar de su famoso retrato de Doña Josefa.

A: Sí.

M: En inglés.

A: ¿Quién dice que es famoso?

M: I do because I own it. (Laughter) It's been shown in the museum and everybody says it's one of your best, and how lucky I am to have it. Can you tell us about this person? What was her name?

A: Josefa...she's related to my sister's in-laws. She died recently.

M: She was from Ojinaga.

A: Yes. She had a one-room house in Ojinaga made of adobe and it was falling down. But to hear the story about her, she reared like ten, twelve kids. She adopted them and raised them as her own. They're all scattered around.

M: Huérfanos.

A: I don't know if they were huérfanos or not. But that was one of the gifts that she left, that she reared these kids. And yet she had this beautiful face. That was it; when I saw her, I decided she was the one to be painted.

M: She would come here and visit with her friends in El Paso.

A: Her relatives. You see, my sister's /husband/ is related to all the kinfolk of this Josefa.

M: But she was a friend of Doña Concha, su mamá.

A: Oh, yes. She got to know her when she came to pose. She spent her life in El Paso and Carlsbad, New Mexico, with other relatives, and then she would go to Ojinaga.

M: Was she ever married?

A: Oh, yes. Her husband was a musician.

M: She had children of her own?

A: Yes.

M: But she reared all these other children that weren't hers?

A: Yes.

M: And everybody admired her very much as a person of fine character.

A: But she was very simple in her ways; she didn't like to dress up for anyone, she didn't wear any jewelry, she didn't want fancy dresses. When I painted her, her greatest contribution to the painting was to wear that white blouse that she's painted in.

M: Oh, yes.

A: It was a gift from somebody for Mother's Day. It's a nylon blouse. That's as far as she would go. But no other decorations. So the decorations I put in that painting was a bouquet of paper flowers.

M: I'm remembering her head, too. Does she have earrings?

A: Yes. Earrings are practically put on when they're born. You see, their ears are pierced when they're very young. A year old kid, a little girl sometimes wears fine earrings. And then in your braids you have a red ribbon or a red string. But that's about all. They always wore dark brown skirts.

M: You used to say that when you started painting, like so many portrait painters, you concentrated on the face and so you weren't so good at the hands. And you'd usually leave them out of the picture. But in that one you have both of her hands with a very fine representation of hands of a very aged person.

A: Well, it was a matter of deciding that I couldn't go forever sitting people on their hands, that I had to face up to it. So I decided that if I could paint the character of her face, I could certainly paint hands.

M: Hands have character, too.

A: Certainly. They're the question mark, the exclamation point to the person.

M: Doña Josefa's hands must have represented a lot of hard work.

A: Yes, she worked very hard. It was nothing for her to plant corn and raise it. It wasn't anything to her. She was used to hard work.

M: And you know how it used to be the custom among the Catholic people to kiss the hands of a priest. But I've often thought, when you think of it, those are the hands that touched the host, the body of Christ.

A: Actually, it wasn't so much the hand but usually there's a ring, a symbolic ring, like a bishop. When one sees a bishop one kisses the ring. It's not the hand, it's the ring with is a symbol.

M: I've seen that done just to a parish priest.

A: Oh, yes. Basically it comes from the same ceremonies.

M: But there is the idea that those hands are sacred.

A: Sure.

M: You're not kissing the hand of the man, but because those are the hands that touched the body of Christ.

You seem to have a particular affinity to paint...you have done very successful paintings of older ladies, like your mother, and then that one of Doña María Caldera that's in the museum here.

A: Yes.

M: Can you comment on her?

A: Yes. Mrs. Caldera passed away last year, but she was a neighbor for all the time that I lived on Hammett Street. She lived next door. She was renting the house from her sister who owned the property. The Calderas were in the neighborhood for more than fifty years. Since I began painting

portraits of people I would admire her face, her tremendous age. She wasn't that old but she had led such a hard life, such a tremendous life of just merely existing. Her husband gave her a tremendous bad time. Her family grew up and dispersed, got married. Some didn't, some just sort of took up with someone. Her life was not all just a happy thing.

I approached her one time and told her that I wanted to paint her. She was a constant visitor in my mother's kitchen. They were always sitting over coffee and gossiping and laughing and telling risqué jokes. (Chuckles) And I would tell her, "María Caldera, ¿cuándo te pinto?" And she would say, "No, a mí no me pintes. Ve pinta a las muchachas bonitas." "María Caldera, ¿cuándo te pinto?" "No me esté fregando la alma. Ud. no me pinta a mí." This went on for more than five years. It got so that when she would go by on her way to church, I would just say, "¿Cuándo?" And then she would get up and say, "Nunca." So it was just funny. /I'd/ just make a sign and say, "Well, do I paint you?" And she used to say, "No." I just gave it up, because I would say, "Why don't you want me to /paint you/?" "You don't want to paint an old, wrinkled-up lady like me." So I just gave up.

One fine day her son José came to me and said, "You better get ready. My mother said to tell you that she's coming over." (Laughs) I said, "What? She's coming?" "Yes. She's talking about /you/ painting her. She's coming over." "But when?" "Right now. Get ready!" (Laughs) So I couldn't believe my /ears/. And surely enough in half an hour she appeared. Here she was, all dressed up in a dark blue sort of silk dress, and a great big chain hanging from her neck with a big religious medal, and two or three rings on her fingers. /She had/ glasses which I took off for the portrait. She stood there and said, "Here I am. Get with it." (Laughs) No ceremony,

no nothing. So I had to quickly invent, you see. I said, "Well, let us get the angle." I sat her on the modeling stand. Then I put some music-- some records, Mexican records. Finally, I got ready, began the portrait sketch. Then the second day she appeared again. By then I took two or three rings off her fingers, and I said, "We don't need them, we don't want them. And why don't you wear a happy-type dress?" "Oh, no. This is a fancy dress, this is the dress for going out, the Sunday dress."

So that's how it came about. It took me like a week to do the painting. But in it, of course, since I had known her for all these years, I put on all the hardship and all the struggle just to exist. When she died she was seventy-six years old, but she looked all of eighty-four, eighty-five.

M: The "Doña Josefa," you took longer on that.

A: Oh, yes, because that was a bigger painting and all those flowers.

M: A couple of weeks?

A: Sure. Then "María Caldera" came to the museum through Mrs. Richard Miller, the White House Department Store people. Mrs. Miller bought the painting and said, "I want to donate it to the museum in memory of my own mother," who died at that time.

M: I see.

A: So that's how we got "María Caldera." Later I would tell her, "María, your painting is in the museum. How about that?" It didn't impress her one bit. (Laughs)

M: Then the UTEP Alumni published a portfolio that had a reproduction of your painting of your mother, Doña Concepción. Were you somewhat influenced then by the publications of pictures by Andrew Wyeth?

A: No. From him I have always admired his tremendous concentration on the one

object or subject. Of course, I admired tremendously his craftsmanship. But outside of that I admired more, or /was/ more influenced by the work of Mrs. Peter Hurd, Andrew Wyeth's sister.

M: Henriette.

A: And yet again it is her own tremendous involvement with the person that she paints that inspires me.

M: I know you've painted your mother any number of times. But this one that was in the alumni portfolio, you finally sold that?

A: Yes. There is a lady in Roswell, New Mexico, who bought it. She had been after that for I think all of two years. I wouldn't sell it, and she would say, "Oh, but do, please. One of these days you're going to need some money, and then you're going to /want to sell it/." I said, "No. It might not ever happen." And sure enough...

M: What is her name?

A: Gue.

M: I wish I would get you to comment, too, on your big commission to do a portrait for Time magazine on César Chávez.

A: That came about quite unexpectedly, and I think maybe it had something to do with the visit of the Time people. Several people came to El Paso the time that they had the Time exhibit.

M: In the museum?

A: Yes. They had a travelling show of some of their cover portraits. And all these people came to El Paso and I remember meeting some of them. And as usual, they all found themselves at a party in my studio. I just happened to be having a big party. When they knew they were coming, someone called me and said could they come see a painting. I said, not only that, but

they're invited to the party. So they were there at the party. The Hurds were there and a great number of people. I met Rosemary Frank, who's in charge of hiring the artists.

M: For Time magazine?

A: Yeah. This party was a big success. The exhibition was a big success. Later I got this call from Rosemary Frank and /she/ said, "I have a commission for you. We're working on this story and we want you to do our cover." That's how it got started. So evidently it was only contacts and maybe the museum people here recommended me, maybe Peter Hurd recommended me; or whatever. I never knew, I never found out. But sometimes /that's/ how things work out. The fact that César Chávez being a Mexican American probably had something to do with the decision, because honestly I knew very little about César Chávez when they asked me /to do/ the portrait. I said, "I'll read a book or two about César Chávez, see what he's up to." The only thing I regret about that is that I didn't get to meet him personally, Mr. Chávez. He did not agree to pose for the portrait.

M: They asked him?

A: Oh, yes, surely. That was all set up. I was to go to California and meet him and paint him. And when I got to New York they said, "We have bad news for you. Mr. Chávez refuses to pose for you, for Time, or for anybody." So I had to do it from photographs. That's the reason I did the portrait that you now have, where he's very young. So when I took it to New York, the big shot that looked at it said, "Oh, he's too young. Oh, no, no. We want something older, more mature." That's the time I had to do an over-night portrait.

M: The first portrait that you did, the one that I have, you did here in El Paso

in your studio.

A: Yes. I had all that time to do it because the story was about a month or two away.

M: Then they called you to come to New York to bring it?

A: I said, "Can I send it?" "Oh, no. You bring it?" So I said, "Well, what can I do? You can't use it." "No, he's too young. But we want it. But what do you suggest?" So I said, "When do you want it?" "How about tomorrow?" (Laughs) So I said, "It's not impossible. Right now you get me some photographs." So they had some guy in Los Angeles do some telephoto /shots/ of Chávez. They actually had the man photograph him in Los Angeles with telescope things because Chávez didn't want to pose for anyone. He was hiding from Time personnel. They sent quickly a series of these slides of him, and they said, "Now, chose from these. This is what we want." So they gave me two or three and I selected from those. Then I got in my room and got a six-pack of beer.

M: In your hotel?

A: Yeah, in the hotel room at 1 Fifth Avenue. It's a very famous address. Right by Washington Square. I just got all the materials and started. The next day at four o'clock I delivered the portrait at the Time-Life Building.

M: Had you taken brushes and paint with you?

A: I bought everything over there--just a few brushes. I can do it with two or three things.

M: But the first version you'd spent much more time on.

A: Oh, yes, surely.

M: And tried much harder. But the one you did in the hotel room was the one they finally used.

A: Yeah. Then I took it up and all the big shots got together and they didn't have a fit. They just said, "That's it, that's it. Okay. Thank you. Pay the man. Goodbye." (Laughs) You know, they do this every week, so it's nothing.

M: But since then you have gotten to meet Chávez.

A: Several times.

M: Was that when he would come here to El Paso?

A: Yes. He's a good friend of Father Muñoz and all the groups that are on strike against Farah. Several times he had lunch there at the church rectory.

M: Of Father Jesse?

A: [Yes.] So I've been invited to go to lunch and sit next to Chávez. And we belch together. (Chuckles)

M: And how does he feel now?

A: Now he says, "Oh, I am so sorry, I didn't know you. If I had known you, then it would have been easier." He said, "Well, one of these days when you come to Delano, California, you look me up and be my guest." I said, "Well, can I possibly paint you again?" "Whenever you want, I will do it," and all this. (Laughs) That's how things work out.

M: I have some other portraits here that you've done that seem outstanding. I remember one summer going to your studio there on Hammett and you had just finished a large picture that you called "The Penny Catcher," that showed a boy with just shorts on and holding one of those things that penny catchers do. You were very excited and you felt that in portraying the tones of the flesh and all that, that you were reaching higher plateaus than you had ever reached before. Can you comment on that picture?

A: Yes. A doctor in Juárez owns that painting. I think that I had done some water color versions of that before, 'cause I crossed to Juárez many times and I would see these kids. Then, of course, the announcement came that the old bridge would be demolished for the erection of the new bridge. And I thought, "This is the last time we'll see a penny catcher." Because the bridge was flat, it was ground level. Remember?

M: Yes.

A: So the kids were actually six feet under the bridge. You could toss nickels and they had these curious cardboard cones tied to sticks, and they would catch the money in those. Whatever they didn't catch, they could dive into the water and retrieve.

So when they built the new bridges which are arched over the river channel, it is so high up that you can't see the kids. They shout their lungs out and you can't hear them. If you toss a coin, it hits them on the head, conks them out for two weeks. So it was a losing business. And so when I painted this I did it with the idea in mind that it was the last of that, which is true. They just don't exist around the bridges. But the idea was to paint the atmosphere right there by the bridge--the water and the greenery that grows along the bridge and the gnats and the mosquitoes and the dirty river water, because we never have clear water. It's always muddy and sandy. And that feeling; I think I got that in the portrait.

M: You used a neighborhood boy as the model for that.

A: Oh, yeah, sure.

M: Do you remember the person who bought this picture?

A: Dr. Villarreal in Juárez.

M: One that I have, that very large one that you called "Huichol Indian," that

was posed for by that same boy.

A: The one that ate all the bread at the disciples' table.

M: What is his real name?

A: Francisco Hernández.

M: Well, now, the costume, though, that you used there, is it typical of the Huichol?

A: It is a native costume and I bought it at the Artesanal Museum in Juárez. It is called the Museo de Artesanías. I bought it there because they do bring in the real, the authentic costume. I still have the costume.

M: And you put your model in it?

A: Yeah. He looked about as Indian as... As a matter of fact, I tell him the joke about the Mexican who got on the Greyhound bus going to Indio, California. His luck was not very good that day, so he sat next to a Spaniard on the bus. They talked a little bit but the Spaniard wouldn't talk to this one, this dark Mexican who looked like an Indian. As they were getting near California the Mexican asked the Spaniard, "Venga, señor. Dígame. ¿Qué me falta para llegar pa' Indio?" So the Spaniard looked at him haughtily, and he said, "Hombre, inomás las plumas!" (Laughs) So that's the way with this indio, all he needed was the feathers.

M: But your model really was a person who had grown up around here.

A: Yes.

M: Another picture I have you called "El árbol de la vida." Can you comment on that and just what the tree of life is?

A: The idea started at the Christmas party. I had decorated the studio. At one end of the studio is a huge candelabra. In México, in Metepac, they do these trees of life. They're ceramic candelabras, and in them they put figures

and flowers and birds, and they're beautifully colored in oranges and purples and greens and blues. It tells a story--a symbolic story or whatever. And so for the studio decoration I /used/ the same idea--only /they/ were huge, almost lifesize, on the studio wall. When the party was over and I was tearing down all this, there was one little corner where all this beautiful orange paper was, with those figures and paper flowers. I left it up there and I painted it. That's how it came about.

M: You also have some dolls.

A: Yeah, they're part of the decorations.

M: Oh, of the tree of life. Where is this place, you say, in México?

A: Metepec, south of México City. All their ceramic is peculiar because of their color combinations: oranges and purples and lilacs and greens and blues.

M: Why do they call it the Tree of Life?

A: Because in a sense the candelabra itself /is/ in the shape of a tree, then on these branches they have bird cages and flowers and little human figures. They also tell a story about life. /This is why they call it/ the Tree of Life.

M: Are they made for a certain season?

A: No, no. It is just part of their particular product. /They're made of/ clay and then painted over.

M: Another one of your well-known pictures that I want you to comment on is the one that's in Our Lady of the Light Church. Can you tell us about that? Did the parish priest there make some kind of a contract with you to make that, but then he left?

A: No. This was when the old church was still used, on Dolan Street.

M: Dolan?

A: Dolan Street, yes. That's where Vikki Carr was born.

M: That church was torn down.

A: No. It's still there but it's not used as the main church. It's used for catechism classes and all. But when that church was there and about to be used for other purposes, because the new church was being built, this group of people, some whom I had known when we lived there, came to me and said, "As a remembrance of the old church, we want to pay you so much money to do us a painting of the Lady of the Light." /So I agreed for a certain sum./ No, in the meantime, as I worked on the painting, they had a change of priests. Before they had a Mexican priest, Spanish or whatever. In the meantime they changed priests and they had an Anglo. So these people wanted the painting to go into the new church.

M: The one here on Delta?

A: Yeah, on Delta. And this Anglo priest told them, "No, señor. No poder poner retratos, pinturas en mi iglesia. Iglesia es modernista." /Spoken with an English accent./ (Laughs) So, no painting, no candles, nothing. He was just going to have a modernistic box. These poor people, their feelings were hurt so badly because here was their great sacrifice. So nothing was said about the painting. These people politely said, "We can't use the painting. They won't let us put it up."

M: Had you already made the painting?

A: Yeah, sure.

M: And received the pay for it?

A: Yes. Part of it--a payment or whatever. They said they were so hurt because this priest just said, "No, no thank you. I don't want any such stuff

around my church. It's modernistic and that's the way it's going to stay." So I said, "All right. Then that's it. I'll just keep the painting and I'll build a church and put it in there. It's big enough." It was there for some time. Then they changed the priests again and out went the Anglo. Came a very active, good-looking priest with wonderful manners; a fine musician who understood the people there.

M: Do you remember his name?

A: And I found out that he was from Juárez and had a great education for the priesthood. His music studies were in Europe, in the Vatican. So I found out that this young priest was interested in getting the painting back. I kept saying, "Well, if I find any good reason for them to have it, I'll let them have it. If not, that's it." This priest was very friendly with my nephew whom he had met in Maryland when my nephew was studying for the priesthood. They had met there, and they became good friends. So every now and then in my house, not in my studio, I would hear this guitar playing and the singing and all. The next morning I said, "Who was that?" "Oh, it was the priest. He came over and he played the guitar and sang." So I said, "Who is this priest that comes out and plays the guitar?" "His name is Father Jesse Muñoz. He wants to meet you one of these days." I said, "Is he coming after the painting?" "I don't know." "Ah, ha! He's coming after the painting." I was so mad that I didn't want anyone to have it. I said, "He's going to have a hard time getting it."

Eventually I got to meet him...and played the guitar. Good voice and musician. Then he took over the church. My nephews who go to the church said to me, "Do you know that this is the first time we enjoy going to church, going to meetings? This priest really talks our language. We

thought we were pretty smart. But, you know, this priest, he knows more than we do." And all of a sudden I saw this church full of kids every Sunday, just overflowing with young ones. And I said, "Who's doing this?" "It's Father Muñoz. He talks the language." They were all so pleased with him, and he had done so much good. So one day I called my brother Francisco and I said, "I want you to come over and pick up the painting, and I want your family to deliver it to Father Muñoz." Nothing was said about money, about anything. He just took it down there and I said to Father Muñoz, "I want you to have it for the church because I appreciate what you are doing, because of your efforts for the kids, for the young ones, and /for/ your understanding of what is needed here." So there it is. To this day it's hanging there and blessing us all.

M: It's quite large.

A: Yeah.

M: Yet the church is so large.

A: Well, it looks small in there because it needs other decorations. But they haven't had the money to do that. Muñoz wants maybe sometime to have a mural to bring it all together and set it off. I told him that it's too big a space for a painting. It looks so small. That's how that painting came about, and the struggles to get it finally hung.

M: Have you done other murals besides those you did with Peter Hurd?

A: Yeah. There was a wild one up at Casa Blanca in Logan, New Mexico. It's on the outside wall of a restaurant. It's a history of New Mexico. It's done in reverse. You start reading it from right to left. (Laughs)

M: I remember seeing once--I think it was in the YWCA, some drawings.

A: Cartoons.

M: On large paper. Was that for that scene?

A: No, that was the study for the Las Cruces mural.

M: Which one is that?

A: The one at the First National Bank.

M: And what is the subject of that?

A: The history of the Southwest done in fresco technique.

M: You were allowed complete freedom on these.

A: Sure. Except the one in Logan, which is hilarious, because the owner, Mr. Hadinger, a German who is about seven foot tall and weighs 300 pounds, called the Chicago Art Institute one fine summer and asked them if they could recommend a mural painter in the Southwest.

M: He called Chicago?

A: Chicago Art Institute. That's the letter he sent me. They recommended me. He said, "Come to my restaurant in Logan, New Mexico, and I will show you what I want."

M: Where is this Logan?

A: It's north of Tucumcari, about two beers away. I said, "Where do you want the mural?" "I want it outside." "Outside? But the weather..." "I want it outside." "That wall is terrible." "We'll take the plaster down." "How about sanding, cement and all?" "We'll get some." "From where?" "Well..." So I said, "I will need..." He said, "Here are the terms: I'll give you \$500. I will give you a bedroom here; all the space you want every time, and I will pay a helper for you." So that was the contract. I took a helper with me and went up there. We had to even clean the sand, wash the sand because being out in the sticks, you see, there was nothing. So we had to do the sand bit: dry the sand, plaster the wall. So I used

up about two helpers. One of them quit on me after all the hard work. Well, the thing is I paid him. We came back for a rest between plastering, and I made the error of paying the rascal. He went to Juárez and had a parranda for three days. When I had to go back, I couldn't find him. So I had to grab the next one that was available. We took off and finished the project.

M: Was this several years ago?

A: Oh, yeah. It was when I was charging \$500 and all the steaks I could eat. (Laughter) But he insisted. He said, "And I want the figures to read from right to left." I said, "How come? It's so crazy." "I don't give a damn. See, when my customers come to the cafe they eat steaks here and call me when they want to go to the toilet. They come out there and they have to see the mural going from my restaurant to the toilet." (Laughs) So here we have the beginning of time as they go to the toilet. The history gets down to the first of the /Space/ program. Then I said, "How about when people come out of the toilet?" He said, "When they come out of the toilet they shouldn't feel like looking at my mural." (Laughs)

M: Then the one at Las Cruces came later?

A: Yes, that was later. Second effort. I think it's one of my best.

M: I wish I could get you to comment on the portrait you did of Tony Córdova here, and what you had in mind there.

A: That started because I did a poor painting of that before, /with/ the same idea. It's now in the bank in Lubbock, the Citizen's Bank in Lubbock.

M: What was the idea?

M: The farmer by the cornfield, irrigating. It's there at this bank. Several people had always asked about the painting. "We were interested but you sold it. Do another one." So I got enthused about doing it again. It's

hard to do the same idea twice, so it was a long time before I got enthused about doing it. Then I decided. Well, I was growing the corn outside. As you remember, I had some corn out there. So, here it is. That's how that came about.

M: One person you've used numerous times as a model is Gonzalo. What is his last name.

A: Gómez.

M: Gonzalo Gómez, over quite a number of years' time. Haven't you depicted him, too, as a campesino?

A: Oh, yes. A bullfighter, a Chicano. I think the best one of him is this Chicano. He was in that one of the farmer. He was in the one, "Canciones de la Revolución."

M: The one as a Chicano was published in the book of poems.

A: Yes. It came out very handsomely on the book. They cut it down and just had the face. So that made him very prominent.

M: Then one here lately you've done that you seem to feel you have done very well by was a self-portrait showing you wearing your paper hat.

A: What happened, I was doing this guy Luis. I started a painting of him and he didn't show up for that day. And so when I get all excited about painting, I don't want to waste the day. So he didn't show up and I figured, since I was all ready to work that day, I looked around and there wasn't anything interesting inside that I could do. So I said, "Why not do another self-portrait?" So I started. I think I did it in three days. When the model showed up, I said, "Go screw yourself, I'm busy." (Laughs) I was so mad at him, but at the same time the results were...I think it's one of my best self-portraits.

- M: You have used your nieces and nephews a lot.
- A: Yes, since they were very young. One of my nieces I have been painting since she was eight months old.
- M: Is that right?
- A: She's now fifteen.
- M: What is her name?
- A: Nina María.
- M: Nina María. Then this one you did, it must be one of your nephews as a Roman soldier that was in the passion play.
- A: Yeah. All of them, including my sister and brother-in-law. I've painted all of them, the whole family, since they were kids. And my sister has quite a few portraits of her kids. She has one of herself, one of her husband, one of my mother, two of my father, two of my brother. She's got quite a few paintings.
- M: There's one I've seen, too, of a sailor.
- A: That's my nephew, Francisco.
- M: Francisco Acosta.
- A: He's now married, studying to be a doctor. So at least he's an artist, because he says even to applying enemas you have to use some sort of finesse about it. (Laughs)
- M: We were looking at a new one you've done here of a boy.
- A: No, that was an old one that I cleaned, cut down. It used to be quite large and I cut it down. I erased out all the background and I'm doing it over again. It was a very dark painting and I didn't like it. So I stripped it down and just left the figure. I'm doing the background, and changed the whole thing. It's coming along fine. See, I thought I could only

wreck it, ruin it. So I cut off like about twenty pounds of masonite.

M: One I remember seeing there in the Student Union Building when you had a show there was... Well, isn't this couple named López that have long been such good friends of yours?

A: My compadres, that portrait of them.

M: His wife and their boy.

A: Yes. It's a charming portrait.

M: What is their name?

A: Jesús López, Lucy López.

M: Did they assist you in the passion play?

A: Yes. I knew López in high school, and Lucy lived across the alley from us on Hammett Street for twenty-five years or more. So, really /they're/ all old friends. And then when they were married I was best man at their wedding, and when their boy Antonio was born I was godfather.

M: You've been godfather quite frequently.

A: Yeah. I have been asked to be godfather again.

M: You have? How many times?

A: (Laughs) Last year Gonzalo's mother had a little boy, fourteen years after the last one. So I was asked to be godfather.

M: You painted him in various little scenes.

A: Five people in one /portrait/. That was last year. /Do/ you know Salvador Valdez of the Nosotros magazine?

M: Yes.

A: His wife had a baby last year, so he said, "I want to ask for your hand, (laughs) to be our compadre." So sometime this year we'll have the baptismal.

M: You painted some pregnant women, too, haven't you?

A: Well, every time I look around there's some here and there. The latest one happens to be a relative of my sister. She recently delivered the baby-- a very lovely little girl. Three days after I finished her portrait, the baby was born. (Laughs)

M: Pretty quick. Do you feel that it's more important to paint older persons than young persons?

A: It doesn't matter. It's how I feel.

M: Young persons, life hasn't done anything much to them yet, so their faces are unmarked, as it were.

A: The thing is is that it is one's own either recollection of adventuresome spirit. Like if I paint an eighty year old person, I'm not eighty years old but my own sense of adventure dares me to paint a person who knows so much or who has gone through so much, or bears the result of having existed on this planet. And if they're young, then I say, "I'll call forth my powers of recollection." Actually, I am being this person or persons. I'm reliving that experience.

M: Some of the very famous painters like Goya would often put the character of the person so it would be offensive to the sitter. He did several portraits of the Duke of Wellington and he would paint him like an aristocratic Englishman who really hates Spaniards, who doesn't want to work with them but has to so they can defeat Napoleon. It just shows that in the portrait.

A: It is the artist's privilege to do that. A person shows many facets and one can pick, but only as related to one's own experiences and knowledge and open-mindedness and the whole thing. One is not a copy, one does not copy a person. One sits through a day or days of sharing a moment with people. Who are you? Who am I? What are we doing? What do you think?

That's what goes into the portrait.

M: When you do a portrait are you particularly trying to probe the character or personality of the subject?

A: No, not really. I think what I am enjoying is the effect of sunlight, what it does to whatever the person has; form, shape. Basically it goes back to the rudiments of life: line, shape, form color, sense of life in them, particularly a sense of life in the person, (chuckles) a glow from within. It's up to the artist to get his and the model furnishes the inspiration or the notes or the relevant particulars that an artist can magnify. It just takes one blink in the eye to create a feeling of mystery. It takes one little brush stroke to create a thousand hairs.

M: You are apparently trying to give a kind of philosophic content to it than just the...

A: Just the painting for painting's sake, so what? It must be an experience, an unforgettable one at least for the model and the artist, because I make it important for the person, too. They'll never forget it. And they know they were important for that one moment because it was part of the creation.

M: One of the pictures that I won that I'm very pleased with is the one that you did of my daughter Alma. I guess she was only about eighteen years old, but it's certainly more than just a photographic reproduction of the person. It almost has a sad element to it.

A: And it was partly Alma, and part me, 'cause she was not the outgoing _____.

M: When I first proposed it to her she wasn't interested. But when we got her in the studio and you began playing music and records for her, finally she got where she was very enthusiastic about it.

A: That's what I say, you see--it was important for her. It became of importance. This is the difference. Sometimes if I say I want to hire a person

to pose for this, when I hire them it means I want to borrow a hand to look at or for them to wear a dress, for them to wear a blouse or a cap so I can paint the clothes, not the person. That's when I sort of hire someone, say "Will you sit there three hours and I'll pay you so much?" It's just for doing these things that they don't have to participate in, participate in mentally. But when I'm painting a person I will say, "Will you pose for me?" Then it's that I have already been inspired. And so, whether money exchanges hands or not, is of very little consequence.

M: Some of these like Doña Josefa and María Caldera, did you pay them to pose?

A: No, I didn't pay them, but I made a gift to them that I thought was appropriate. I never mentioned money. I just knew what was needed, what would please them tremendously. So I gave them a gift.

M: Can I ask what?

A: For Doña María, I believe it was a dress. And for Doña Josefa it was a gift that I didn't see because my sister got it for her. She knew what she really wanted. I said, "Go ahead and get it." And I said, "Wrap it up in a beautiful box, ribbons and all. Because you see," I said, "whatever I give them in money, it will be gone today." But something that they wanted, that they couldn't classify as money, it was a gift and they would appreciate it more. It would help them, really. It would be a great help. So that's the way I handle such things. Sometimes now for young kids and all, I know that nothing would please them more than just some hard cash. So I say, "Here. I'm not paying you for this. I'm giving you a gift." Unless I say, "I need somebody to hold a..." like "The Penny Catcher." "Just hold that cone there until I finish painting." And I say, "Then I will pay you. I didn't need the model for communication, I just wanted him to hold

something. It was very impersonal. "Okay, I will pay you." But for others I just ask, "Will you pose for me? I can pay you or we will agree on something." Most of the time they say, "Don't pay me. I'm so happy and so honored to pose for you." In those cases I always make sure that I give them a gift of something--a bottle of scotch or a case of beer.

M: Like with your relatives.

A: With my relatives, they usually get something that I know they will need.

M: One of your best pictures I remember in the old studio was one that you did of a black boy that lived there in the neighborhood.

A: Yes.

M: You don't remember his name?

A: Sure, Wayne Jones.

M: Wayne Jones. Did he go to Zavala School with your nephews?

A: No. He was a friend to the baseball players. Remember the team of baseball players I sponsored? They were all going to Jefferson High School. And so one day they stopped by and said, "This is Wayne Jones. He wants to see one of your pictures." So I showed him. As I was looking at him, I said, "Would you like sometime to pose for one?" "Yeah, you bet." So eventually I sent word to him that I wanted to paint. So I did this one of him. When it was finished I said, "Wayne, why don't you invite your parents or your friends to come look at it?" He said, "Yeah. I will." Then he came one evening and he said, "They don't want to come, they don't want to look. My sister, my mother, they don't give a f--- about my painting. They don't want to see my painting. But I brought my friend here." So he introduced me to his friend, another black person. I brought out the painting and they were both looking at it, laughing at it. Wayne says to

him, "There you are, man. What do you think about it? Crazy. What do you say?" His friend looked at it and looked at Wayne and he said, "Man, it sure look like you. Man, you's purple black!" (Laughs) It was a great compliment. But his folks never saw it because they weren't interested. Eventually, one of the musicians in the Kingston Trio bought it. It's now hanging in Georgia somewhere.

M: You had some difficulty collecting?

A: Yes. One of those long, drawn out /stories/. Finally, it got all paid off.

M: Really? How nice.

A: Last month. (Laughs) /After/ five years.

M: Well, I expect that's the way it'll be with me, too.

A: But at least I don't have to chase you and send you telegrams. (Laughs)

M: You had to keep reminding him.

A: Good Lord, yes. But anyway, it's a great compliment. One time I mentioned, "Why don't you return the painting since you can't pay for it?" He said, "Oh, no. We're going to keep this one." (Laughter)

M: And that was the Kingston Trio. Well, they're nationally famous.

A: /They/ made a lot of money. But something went wrong and the bottom fell out, because when they bought it they had bought other paintings, and they paid cash for all the other things.

M: From you?

A: Yeah. They said, "We want to think about this one." So they left. Then later they called and said, "We want it."

M: Did just one of them buy it, or the group?

A: No, no, just one. Bob Shane.

M: Bob Shane.

A: Shane, that's his name. He and his wife called me later and said, "We want the portrait. We'll send you the money." But things didn't work out in the meantime, so that began a long, hard struggle. They sent \$500 and then nothing for months. Well, those are just stories. (Chuckles)

M: If you live long enough you'll get all your money.

A: They are stories that every artist has, I'm sure.

M: Sure. If you're honored that they have your portrait, though, and they wanted so to keep it.

A: Yes. The best compliment of all, regardless of the money.

M: Sure.