PROYECTO MISSION MURALS
Oral History Audio Transcripts

MICHAEL RÍOS ORAL HISTORY

San Francisco, March 12, 2021

SFMOMA

This is an oral history of pivotal Chicanx artist Michael Ríos for the Mission Murals Project. I'm Camilo Garzón. [This interview] was recorded on March 12, 2021, in Michael's studio inside of the Noonan Building in San Francisco. The voices you'll hear will be those of filmmaker Javier Briones, [me], and Michael.

This oral history delves into the facets of Michael's life that led to his career as an artist, detailing his foray into visual art and music as a young man in 1960s San Francisco, Europe, Cuba, and onward. The personal and political reasons for his focus on muralism are clarified as Michael takes us, mural by mural, on a journey through the expanse of public art he has generated throughout the years. The oral history also shows how his role in preserving and amplifying Chicanx heritage in San Francisco's Mission District led to a close, collaborative friendship with Carlos Santana. The chronicle of his successes continues into modern-day times, along with a look at his current struggles. In addition to the oral history itself, we were fortunate enough to capture a studio tour that includes Michael freely playing guitar.

Here is the oral history.

Esta es una historia oral del fundamental artista chicanx Michael Ríos, para el Proyecto Mission Murals*. Mi nombre es Camilo Garzón. [La entrevista] fue grabada el 12 de marzo de 2021 en el estudio de Michael, ubicado en el Edificio Noonan en San Francisco. Las voces que oirás son las del cineasta Javier Briones, [la mía], y la de Michael.*

Esta historia oral indaga en las facetas de la vida de Michael que lo llevaron a emprender su carrera artística, revelando detalles sobre su incursión en las artes visuales y la música como joven artista incipiente en los años sesenta en San Francisco, Europa, Cuba y más allá. La entrevista esclarece las razones personales y políticas por las que Michael decidió centrar su obra en el muralismo mientras el propio artista nos guía, mural a mural, por una ruta a través de la amplia obra de arte público que ha generado a lo largo de los años. La historia oral también muestra cómo su papel en la preservación y la diseminación del legado chicano en el barrio de la Mission en San Francisco lo llevó a formar una estrecha y colaborativa amistad con Carlos Santana. La crónica de los éxitos de Ríos continúa con un vistazo a la época actual y a las luchas en las que se encuentra involucrado el artista a día de hoy. Además de la propia historia oral, tuvimos la suerte de poder plasmar una visita a su estudio en la que se oye a Michael tocando la guitarra libremente.

CAMILO GARZÓN: And I think we can just officially start. So, Michael Ríos, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. Let's start with some questions about just your early life. When do you think you started getting interested in the arts and how instrumental were your teachers and family in validating these artistic expressions and appreciating the talent?

MICHAEL RÍOS: Well, I must have been about fifteen or sixteen years old, when I was in the tenth grade, and I got a scholarship to go to the Academy of Art. So after that summer session, I went to the director of the art school and I said, "Hey, Mr. Stevens, I know what I wanna be for the rest of my life. I wanna be an artist. What can I do to come to the art school

while I'm still in high school, 'cause I still have the eleventh grade and the twelfth grade to go through. But what can I do to come here to take night classes, 'cause I'm just so inspired by being around, in company with, all the artists that come to school here."

He says, "Well." And I told him, I said, "My mother died when I was six years old." I said, "Me and my brothers and sisters, we lived with my grandparents in East Oakland." And he said, "Well, OK. You can pick up a broom and that'll pay for your nightly tuition. Just don't mess up too much in school. You can come here as much as you want as long as you can sweep."

So I was one of these kids, man. I worked my way through art school on a working scholarship. The benefit for me in having the experience and going to the Academy of Art and really learning how to draw and paint and do illustrations is that those are like my formative years, right, to learn how to draw and paint portraits and all that stuff. And I knew at some point in time that I wouldn't be handcuffed in doing just commercial art, and that I [could] actually free myself and be a little bit more of a fine artist.

So I got my training—as far as learning how to draw and paint and all that—out of the way while I was still in high school. So right after high school I was able to start my own business in North Beach doing commercial art with a couple of other artist friends of mine that went through the art school.
So our little business was called Weston, Ríos, and Brown Graphics Art and Design. And that's when we went about doing all kinds of commercial art stuff.
[*inaudible*]

CG: When you were growing up or even as you became an artist—there's a lot of iconographies that are Mayan or Aztec iconographies, as well as even some comic book or comic aesthetics that [we] see in your art. How do you engage with the Indigenous imagery of the Americas, as well as with this other art form, which is comic books or just comics?

MR: Well, OK, for me, like a lot of us going through school, that wasn't the education that we got [when] learning about our culture, learning about these great civilizations that our heritage and our people come from.

Not until you do your own investigation and your own research [do] you find out, right, oh yeah, man, somewhere in my blood, in my DNA, I'm connected to these people in the ancient past. And all that, you can say that all those things are in your DNA memory bank of your connection, your heritage, and to your grandfather three thousand years ago. And sometimes you can spiritually feel it—I feel the spirit of this Indian coming out of me, that I could have been in some lifetime in the skin of an Aztec warrior or an Aztec artist or pyramid builder.

Although it's hard for me, unless it's a dream, that that's part of my life and part of my makeup. But I think it's all there in your DNA. It's a long line of memory that goes way back. And artists sometimes have the gift to be able to, like, tap into that mysterious energy that was part of that culture way back, even back then.

So when I could, I started looking more into it, because a lot of times—and people would say this to me—they would tell you to kinda, like, turn you on and say hey, man. These look like Mexican colors. And I'm thinking, how do these people figure out that these are Mexican colors? Because they're so bright and so vibrant that only people of Indigenous origins have the ability to do these things. If you're a European, they're a little bit more subdued and low-key. But no, no. If you're a Cuban or you're a Puerto Rican or you're a Mexican, you let it all hang out. It's like a parrot, a parrot that has all the feathers and the colors. I mean, Latinos are good at that. You see Huichol art, art from the Huicholes. They don't pull any punches with their work and their colors.

It's like if you wanna have a psychedelic experience without even taking drugs, look at their art. And if you can read between the lines, you can see where they're coming from. And that's with anything. And people learn how to read between the lines, they get more of the real message. 'Cause it's not always the first thing you see. You have to kind of like really, really study something to see what its real message might be. But at the same time, not so abstract where people don't know where you're coming from.

I mean, there's a beautiful thing in being an artist that is totally inspired by wanting to do nonobjective art and impressionist art like I'm doing, like I do now. But at the same time, when I get a notion in my head about, oh man, something's really bugging me, so I'm gonna just get it off my chest and make a painting of it. And I can do it.If I wanted to draw, say for instance, like something that's gonna get people upset, I could do that. I could do dark art if I wanted to. And me, starting off my career as a commercial artist, there was a lot of times when I'd have to deal with art directors and ad agencies.

They would kinda like have me change particular things that I drew because it wasn't to their liking. He says, "Oh, this guy looks too Indian. Can you make him a little bit more this or that or can you shave his nose a little bit or give him a little bit more of a whiter complexion?" And I would have to go along with this because it was a commercial job. But it would really upset me, thinking, Why is this art director telling me how to do my work and my art? But I knew that that was just the nature of being in the world of commercial art, that you'd have to go along. You have to compromise. And at that time, being a little bit rebellious, it would bother me. I mean, I learned how to do it. I learned how to compromise, but not to the point where I lose my own principles. I still feel strong and right in my way of thinking about things, and something that's true and something's that's righteous and just—I want to keep that in my work.

CG: As you were saying earlier, you do have experience also in commercial art, and especially when you worked with Bruce Atkins, for example, these things informed you also when you were creating, then, these murals. [What] were some of these?

MR: Well, the work that I was doing with Bruce Atkins, that was like my first commercial job as a commercial artist. And I was sorta like an illustrator doing men's clothing for newspaper ads. And it was strictly learning how to work with ink and brush and to make ads for the newspaper. Because in them days, that's what they did.

So that was just a great learning experience, learning how to, like, really work with black and white, black-and-white medium, and copying something exactly the way it looks. If it was a shirt that had, say for instance, like that cowboy shirt, it had a lot of patterns, but it was in color. But you'd have to do it in black and white to get people—sort of like an education.

Or a paisley design shirt, like what you're wearing, if I had to do that shirt, it was gonna be an ad for a newspaper. I'd have the shirt on my desk, and I'd have to copy exactly what was there on your shirt.

So, that was a great experience, learning and training for me. And then after I left that, I did that for a year and a half maybe, I moved over to North Beach and got hired by these two graphic designers that were doing again, commercial art, but they were doing preliminary art for what the BART system was gonna be all about. I was doing illustrations way back in that time.

CG: Before BART was a thing.

MR: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And these guys were doing also, like say, annual reports for different corporations. And these annual reports would be, like, at the end of the year. They would have all kinds of graphics and all kinds of cool stuff, that I thought was cool. But it was very commercial, just all commercial-oriented stuff. It had nothing to do with fine art.

CG: I think that's essentially in your work that you did have all these commercial experiences which are, let's say good for technique or just skill set. But then you decided to use that to create this very public-facing art that also had these comments, social comments, on what was going on in the Mission then and there.

When did you see—or when did you start to shift your perspective on like oh, OK, I wanna start making this kinda fine art? Was it after Europe or when was it that you started being more like, I'm gonna create this art in this way? Like for example, when you went to Cuba, just like these kinds of other influences really [are] represented in your music. And this was like beginning of the seventies, right? I think that the article we read was from '72.

MR: At that time, I was doing this mural for the Mission Neighborhood Health Center on 16th and Shotwell. So I was on one wall, and this other woman muralist, Graciela Carrillo, was on the other wall. And so we both got to go to Cuba. And her, and this other friend of mine, Peter Gallegos, who at one time was the director of the Silkscreen Center here in the Mission. Anyway, all three of us from the Mission went there along with some people from New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle. So it was about sixteen or seventeen people who got to go there and visit their artists and musicians. And they had all these other—they took us to schools and just educated us, man, on what the Cuban Revolution was all about. Because I didn't really know that much about the revolution, although I saw, I was old enough to see how in 1959—

CG: Right, '59.

MR: When Castro, when it changed over from the dictator, Batista. And so I learned a lot. I learned a lot about their socialist way of thinking and their aspirations. But to me, I mean, I was more aligned with the arts and the music because that was what I love. But it was a great education to learn, right, that a lot of the artists that were there were also doing socialist-inspired art, right? But at the same time, they could do art that was totally not political. They could do art. Because we had a blockade on the country after that, after Castro announced that he was going to side with communists and the Soviet Union. But Cuba still had a lot of relations with all these other different countries, all these socialist countries, of course, but [also] Canada. And so the Cuban artists could still do their art that wasn't totally propaganda art and show in museums or galleries around the world. And so their art really inspired me too, because just like their music—it's the drum. It's the drums, you know, the drums and all that, that inspire their energy and that kind of thing.

CG: All these Caribbean rhythms.

MR: And it's totally what did it for me too. They got these drums here.

CG: Yeah, bongos, congas. I mean, another article from that same year, there was this statement by you that you were mostly into music. Like, sure, art and everything, but you were also just very into music. What changed? Or why did you gear yourself, your career, a little bit more into the visual arts and not pursue music further other than, as you said, as a side gig?

MR: Well, it hasn't been too long since I just have not totally dedicated myself to doing half and half. Because for a lot of years, I did that. I would do art in the daytime because I knew I [could] make money doing it. And even though there were times when I was not making money at it, I was still doing it. I knew, right, that it was just something I had to do. Because a lot of the murals—when I did murals in the Mission, I think at the beginning, it wasn't even for money. It was just for me to prove myself to the community that I had it in me to do this and put something beautiful up on a wall.

And because I had dedicated myself that way—and behind the scenes, where these guys like René Yañez and other people had put together these proposals to the federal government to start this program called the CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] program, CETA, where they hired artists to go [into] different parts of the community, like the WPA program, but it was CETA. So that's when I finally was able to get paid to go out there and do murals, see? Because my first mural, again, was just a trade, right, because this group—and the Mission called it MCO—we had just gathered this little gallery on 24th and Bryant called the Galería de la Raza. And it was myself and these other Latino artists. And so, because they were helping pay the rent there for us, they had asked if one of the artists [could] come there and help repaint one of their walls on there at 23rd and Folsom. So I volunteered. But I said, Wow, man, instead of doing just a straight paint job, I think I could see a big cartoon strip on this wall indicating all the different little activities that go on in the Mission and in city life. And because I have a sense of humor—I always thought that a certain, some kind of city life, it's like a rat race sometimes. It's a rat race. And people have to just scurry like little *ratones* to make ends meet and get through life.

So that's what I did. I did this big cartoon. And the reason I had done it as a cartoon thing is because there was a school, a little elementary school, across the way. And kids used to walk by. I said, I'm going to do this to entertain the kids. I wasn't really so much doing it to entertain people my age or adults. I wanted to really see what the reactions of the kids were going to be, right, after they see an artist up on a scaffold putting color up there and putting all these little crazy characters.

CG: How did they react?

MR: But it was serious—I had put some serious thought behind it because I said, OK, at that time, people were using the term *pigs* to describe the police, right? And so I had done a scene of a guy, a cop, leading four ratones into a paddy wagon, and then another scene where they were in jail, and then another scene where there was a guy in front of a judge with his lawyer, his arm around his shoulder.

CG: Yeah, and you're right. That's something that was part of 1980, as a *Chronicle* article. It's mentioning that your first mural in 1970 San Francisco was depicting, as you were saying, police officers with *caras. de cerdo*, pig faces, harassing citizens with the heads of rats. And this mural was mentioned by Cronkite, Walter Cronkite, in national news. And I think there's a quote of you saying, It's here that I realized the power of murals. Once you have all these experiences and also this Cronkite national news, just bringing some highlight.

MR: Yeah. Yeah. I was really surprised that it would capture that kind of attention on the national news. And he actually commented there was an artist in San Francisco doing this controversial painting on this wall. And see, the word *mural*, again, was not in our vocabulary, right? When I think of murals, I think of Diego Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, Michelangelo—people that did fresco art, right? That, to me, at that time still in my mind was what murals indicated, right?

CG: What was the change? Because *mural*—in español, *muro* is related to *mural*—which is just this art on the wall, *muro*, *pared*. So, as you were saying, this wasn't as part of the collective unconscious of everyone using this term.

MR: No, no, they weren't. No, it wasn't. But as time went by, it was a word that they would use to indicate somebody doing big art on a wall, whether it was on the street or in a building. So that's all good. But when I think of what a mural in its true sense of the word is, these great artists are [who] I think did real murals, see? But now you can use that word to indicate a wall, a painting on a wall, see, whether it's a small wall or a big wall. And again, the word is in the normal vocabulary of people's daily language.

CG: Yeah. No, as you were saying, right, it's part of the vernacular. People use it. And Michael, speaking of this Cronkite quote that he delivered in the national news, can you tell me more about the impact of your first mural and its controversial content? And what was the impact of this notoriety or just this national news mentioning a controversial work done by you in San Francisco? How do you think that this gave some highlighting to your work?

MR: Well, first of all, it was an honor, right, that they came to San Francisco and saw that what I was doing in the Mission of this big cartoon strip had any kind of relevance on whatever level it was.

But again, because there were some political people that saw political things in what I was doing, right, they made their own story out of it. But for me, again, I was doing things that I thought were little vignettes of city life—you know, a guy in a park sitting on a park bench kissing his girlfriend, three guys going to work, a guy sitting on a table in a clinic waiting for a doctor to see him, or people standing in line, either in an unemployment line or a food stamp line. All those things were—that's city life. That's city life. And so I think if I can express it in a cartoon kind of way, right, that's what I want to do. But when you do something, people have their own interpretation of what they're seeing and what the message is going to be. It might not be your message, but people have, again, their own way of interpreting things. And sometimes—and their way of interpreting things sometimes inspires you to think, Wow, I never really looked at it that way. That's another angle of looking at my art. So this is great. But it gave me, it inspired me to think, Wow, there are a lot of walls here in the community that can use art to beautify the neighborhood somewhat. If you do something really beautiful, people appreciate it, right? And if it's got some educational content behind it to educate and inspire people, even better, see?

CG: And you represent these kinds of people that are like you and I, like Hispanic or Latinos in everyday life, in your murals and in your work, like as you were saying earlier, lining up for food stamps. They were being hassled by police.And you've represented them sometimes as moles. And then you see the oppressors, like, for example, the police. The police—they're pigs. They're hound dogs.

What of this imagery speaks to what you were just speaking [about], which is, we're doing the work, the people that are Latino. They're the ones doing the work. And then these [oppressors] are benefiting from that work.

Why did you choose those images or these—let's call it animalistic depictions? Why did you think that OK, I'm gonna use these images?

MR: [*laughs*] Because again, there's always a way of looking at the comedy of life and the tragedy and the comedy of life, where people wear masks. And so for me, again, city life, and even now when you see how people, what they have to do to survive, I mean like it's still a rat race. It's still a rat race.

When you see all of the homeless out there that don't live any better than rats on the street. I mean it's kinda like, it's not a nice thing for me to have to draw a human body and then put a face of a rat on this person.

That's just me being comical, and I guess cynical in a way, [but] not so much, I don't think. But you get a little bit of a humor aspect, but it's a tragic humor. It's a tragic comedy and life is like that for a lot of people. Even though people are born into this world thinking that life is

gonna be beautiful. It's not always beautiful, and it's always a lot of dark stains that are gonna appear in your life as you go through life.

CG: Especially reading between the lines, you see some of [the] work in the Mission, like, for example, at the Galería de la Raza billboards, which seems to me, from what I could research, that it seems like in '74 you were the first artist to paint there.

MR: Yeah, that's right.

CG: And you not only painted there, you painted over corporate ads. So there's a lot of—not only between the lines—there was something there that was there before that you used as a backdrop and then created something that beautified the neighborhood but also spoke between the lines. Do you agree with that?

MR: Yeah, that's true, because that billboard that I had, you could say, liberated for the Galería, was again a billboard in front of this bus stop, this humongous billboard, advertising again, either cigarettes or whiskey, or something like that. So this one day, when I was in the minipark working and I was ready to go put my paints away, 'cause I used to store all my paints in the Galería so it would be walking distance to the minipark, I said, "Man, I'm tired of seeing this billboard that's right next to this gallery, our gallery, and it's not a billboard that can be an absence of art."

So I took it upon myself to go out there and whitewash this commercial billboard and put my own thing on there. And the first thing I did was a cartoon again, of a little palm tree walking down the street with his little dog on the side. And he's going to school. He's got a lunch pail and he's got his books. And I forgot what the subjects were on the books that I had put there. And then on the sidewalk, I had a little a trio, three little palm trees, one playing guitar, one maracas, and one congas. And then the houses were sorta like, you know, comic book buildings, this and that. And then I wrote on the sidewalk in these big block letters, "En La Mission con Salsa," 'cause I was into salsa music at the time too.

So it was colorful, again, 'cause it was something colorful for the neighborhood. I figured I always wanna do things out there to entertain the neighbors, folks that don't do art the way I do every day. But if you do something for them, they get a kick out of it. It's gonna make their day that they saw something colorful. And they'll remember it when they go home. They saw something colorful. And they saw the guy actually doing it, painting the colors on there. So, the billboard was up for about a month. And then here comes the billboard company again to slap another billboard on top of my billboard, on my art.

Luckily again, me and Graciela Carrillo were at the minipark, and we were getting ready to go home. I said, "Hey, Graciela. Look what they did. They plastered a billboard on top of my art. But the paste is still wet." The paste, the paste they used to put the paper on there. I said, "Man, I'm going there, man. I'm taking this shit off."

So we went there and we ripped the whole thing off after they left in their trucks, 'cause it was still wet. We took it all off and my mural was back up, see? But the paste, the glue kind of

ruined it, and the paint started cracking. So I said, "OK, well, I'm gonna do another mural on here." So I went and got my paints and I whitewashed it again and did another scene. But this time I did a humongous guitar player lying on his back playing his guitar. And then again, I wrote the words *salsa ahora* above that. So that's when they kinda started a little war with us. You know, they called the Galería. And 'cause René was sorta like the director of the Galería, they call him. And he says, "Hey, Michael. You know, we're having a problem here. The billboard company, man. They don't want us messing with their billboard."

And I said, "Well hey, man. We gotta have a meeting with these guys because, you know, we wanna claim this billboard as our own to do our own, you know, make it an art billboard. Since we're an art gallery here, this billboard should be for art. And I think it would serve the community, at least that little corner there, that you know, there's a little bit of culture here on this corner—besides the culture that we're trying to create in the minipark for the kids and educate them to Quetzalcoatl." You know, what's Quetzalcoatl? The kids will say, "What's this big, old feathered serpent?" What's its meaning? Well, you know, now we're gonna educate you to a little bit of Aztec history and Mexican history and this and that.

So after a while, the billboard company says, "OK, we give up. You guys can keep the billboard. But we're taking our frame off it. We're taking our frame off of it." In fact, they took the whole billboard away. So the wall looked even more terrible because there had been a fire there, and you could see all the smoke on the wall. So we said, "Well, hey, listen. You guys aren't being right with us by doing this." So they came back and put a billboard on there for us, but without a frame. Because in them days, they used to have these metal frames. They looked like a painting. But they just put up that—like I showed you that in that photograph—big wall, a big wood wall like that. So after that it was our billboard, the Galería's billboard. So, I don't know how many times I had the energy to go out there and do all these other murals that I did on that billboard, 'cause I know I did that one Frida Kahlo one that one time. And then I did another one that was showing Christopher Columbus for Columbus Day.

But I've done a few. I've done a few. And then after that, other artists would go out there and actually paint, spend a week, whatever, when a new show was coming up in the Galería. And as time went by, though, they stopped doing that. And then the new people that were running the Galería were just—because now and then we had computer art, computers, and people could print stuff up and go, like the billboard company, print it on paper and then just paste the stuff up there. So as far as I'm concerned, I mean, I don't wanna say anything bad about anybody, but it kinda went downhill, that experience when I was seeing really beautiful hand-painted murals on that one wall, on that billboard. Which is OK. You know, that's just the way it goes.

JAVIER BRIONES: Michael, I'm really curious, because I'm wondering, I know you talked a little bit about this. But I'm wondering if you can kinda talk about your motivation for wanting to paint that mural for kids in the minipark. Like what was it, what was the reason why you wanted to, why you saw that wall and you're like, all right, I'm gonna paint there?

MR: Because at that time, my first son, that was killed in 1982, must have been about six years old. And so a lot of my work that I would do, I would do to entertain him. So it just happened to be that one day, I was standing in the Galería de la Raza. And from that corner, you could see the minipark, a little bit of the minipark.

And I don't know—the idea came to me. You know, I'd like to go out there and do something for these children, right? Because I've always thought that if you can get the kids at a young age to get inspired to want to do art or play music, I think it's a great thing. Because we always need more children exploring their creativity and being able to feel that they have this magic in them and express it through art and music. And if it's not music, it's science or all that kind of good stuff.

Because then I think people will remember you more for that, for those kind of dedications, how you dedicated your life to do things to inspire people. We're all a particular universe unto ourselves, with a lifetime, an infinite past that we come from, and an infinite future that we're going into, even though we're at a crossroads right now here as a human being in this world right now on this earth.

CG: Do you remember any children or any young people stopping by—maybe the minipark or any other mural—and saying something about your work, even when you were still creating it?

MR: They probably did. They probably did. When I was actually out there doing it, the mothers and the kids, they'd say, "Oh, we love what you're doing. We love what you're doing. Your colors are beautiful. Keep it up."

CG: That's cool. Yeah. No, that makes sense.

MR: Yeah, yeah.

JB: Do you feel like it was a response to something? Because I remember you mentioning seeing all this *mierda* that was everywhere, right?

MR: Well, here's another reason that I thought it was important for me too—because, again, growing up originally doing commercial art and having to deal with art directors and ad agencies, I would notice in the Mission more than any other, you know, are they sort of like low-income communities? That there were a lot of billboards stuck on people's walls, billboards—either small, little billboards or bigger billboards—advertising all these erroneous products, cigarettes and liquor, and just, you know. And I thought, God, it would be nice if every once in a while you would see a billboard that was totally geared to some relevant educational message, telling the kids, don't forget to brush your teeth before you leave home, or did you do your homework, or things like that, right, totally opposed to selling a product. Because when you think about it, these spaces that these billboard companies choose to tag their commercial billboards on, right, do have an impact on people that walk the streets. Commercial advertising is very devious in a lot of ways, where they use subliminal messages to sell products. So I learned that. I knew, right, that there's, that you

know. And so anyway, to me, it was like very, a lot of eyesore to look at these billboards and not see anything artistic, cultural, or otherwise when these billboards, if people had a little bit more of a higher consciousness or [were] a little bit more enlightened in their mind, could see more beautiful messages in these frames as opposed to just selling products.

CG: I think that's very clear, especially in the Bank of America mural. Because it takes a lot of cojones. It takes a lot of guts to paint a critique of capitalism when the bank is commissioning you to paint there.

MR: Well, see, that's another thing. That's another thing. I can't believe that my partner, the main artist, Chuy Campusano—

CG: Chuy.

MR: Right. Did this for whatever reasons, right? We were convinced to do this. Then I read a quote from Diego Rivera, which is it doesn't matter where you do a mural, even if it's for a Bank of America or Wall Street or for, like in San Francisco—because Rivera did murals for, what do you call it? Stock brokers.

CG: Yeah, stock exchange.

MR: Right, right. Just because it's not really for those higher-up folks, right? It's for more the common man, the common folks. But the mural that we did for the Bank of America, there was some controversy in that mural, for sure.

CG: Yeah. Do you remember the public reception?

MR: We thought, Why is this mural going to be in a bank? Why can't we take this mural that we're doing, a big ninety-foot mural, you know? And we put a lot of content in it. I went there—I mean, the original sketch was already done by Chuy, right?

But they needed somebody to actually go teach them how to paint the thing. And since I had already been doing murals and I know how to illustrate and I know how to mix colors, I said, OK, man, this is how we're going to do it, you guys. We're going to go about it this way. And started making it look like a fresco with all these little strokes that we did to work on all the stuff in the mural. And at that time, I think the Brown Berets in Oakland were still kinda like alive and well, doing things. And we thought, man, why don't we just kidnap this mural and take it someplace to Oakland, where it can be seen by everybody, not just people that come to the bank? But we gave up on that idea because we said, No, that's going to create even more problems for us. Let's just go along, get it done, finish it, and see what happens.

CG: Was there any kind of censorship from the bank to your work, Chuy's or Luis's?

MR: OK, so there was a scene that we did where these doctors were in an operating room [and a] woman was giving birth, right? So in that scene, there was these little circles that we did, all these little diseases like cancer. And one of the cancers was the SLA [Symbionese

Liberation Army] symbol. One of the symbols that we did, we drew the SLA symbol, this seven-headed snake, right? And they said, "Hey, look," the bank says. "You know, you guys can't have that up on there. We won't finish paying you guys until you guys figure something else to do there. We don't want any kind of controversy, right, political or otherwise, that kind of street revolutionary stuff in your content here." So, again, we compromised and put something else on there, some other kind of disease. So like that—just throughout time, I mean, Rivera, same thing when he was doing Rockefeller murals. They actually destroyed his mural. He went back to Mexico and repainted it again, right? But it's a mural that's been there a lot of years. And it's in pristine condition because it's inside the bank. So it has its value, and it has its purpose, right? I mean, besides that, I've done other murals. Like, say for instance, I did a mural on 24th and Mission Street.

CG: Let's get into that one in the next question. Let me ask you a couple of follow-ups because you just mentioned that you did the mural. It's inside of the building. And this is a very different kind of mural because most of these other murals are on the outside. What are some of the challenges of painting a mural inside rather than outside?

CG: Well, I mean, there is a difference between being out in the air, in the elements, and being indoors, like in this studio. You're out of the rain and out of the wind. And it's just a little bit more pleasant if you're in a studio doing art. But at the same time, because we're out, if you're doing a mural out on the street, there's a lot of good things that happen because there are just folks that go up and down the street. And you're doing this to entertain them in a way, right? Or they get to see something actually from nothing, something is coming about—this big, beautiful painting. And so, I mean, both places where you're going to do art, whether it's indoors or outdoors, it's challenging. It's challenging. What you want to do in either environment is just keep your focus and know that you want to create something beautiful that people are going to appreciate and talk about, whether it's this way or that way.

Because, like I said, besides it being a mission that you want it to be your mission in life to do art and be an artist, right, and explore your inner world and bring it to the surface, make things—and you have the ability to create, make the invisible visible, which artists do. Because before you start, it's like this screen here. It's just a blank wall.

But you have the vision. You have a vision, a third eye, to see something up here, right? And that's how artists work. They have either a dream, or they come into a vision. Or the vision formulates as they go on about it.

To me, it's a special thing. It's a special thing to do. I'm grateful that I have the ability to sometimes do it and make sense of it. A lot of times, it might not make any sense. But you still do it. Because some people love what you're doing. Some people don't get it. And some people don't like it. So everybody's got their own opinion on how they see things.

CG: What do you remember of the public perception of this specific mural? Because you're saying everyone has their own opinion about it. And they see different things depending on who they are.

But there were events. For example, there was this Roberto Vargas poetry reading and these other things attached to a mural. How did this change the perception of the work or of the mural itself?

MR: Well, it's hard to say. I mean, because I have friends that are—like I said, Roberto Vargas is a great friend of mine. And Alejandro Murguía, same thing. And these guys—so they don't do murals. But they're great poets and writers and are sort of contemporaries of mine and have their own perspective on life and culture, growing up Latinos and Hispanics and whatever. And I think you're a poet. Because I'm inspired by great poetry. And I'm inspired by great music. So whatever art form you're doing your work [in], they should be able to inspire each other.

I mean, because to me, poetry—I mean beautiful poetry by some of the great poets in the world—it's like being in the company of a great painter or a great musician. It's just that they're using words to express a certain thing. It's just as beautiful as sitting in a concert hall and listening to a great symphony.

CG: What were some of the comments that people made about that mural, the Bank of America mural?

MR: To be honest, I mean, I can't really recall what some of the comments were. I think for the most part, folks appreciated it and were happy that another mural came into being in the community even though it was inside the bank. Not everybody goes to the Bank of America. But there was enough interest, I think, as time went by. Because I wasn't the only one doing murals after a while. It was the Mujeres Muralistas that came a little bit after me. Because I had started doing these murals in this children's minipark on 24th Street.

And originally, I wanted to do the entire park, all the walls that were in there, from the little-bitty buildings. But then the women came to me and said, "Hey, well, we think you're kind of hogging all the walls. We would like a wall." I said, "Yeah, be my guest. You guys do beautiful work. It'd be great to have us all here at the same time doing murals for the kids." See?

So I mean, there are a few murals that I've done in the Mission, not a whole lot. I mean, I could never catch up with Susan Cervantes and her team, right? Because she's just like the godmother of the mural movement here in the city and beyond.

And Juana Alicia too. These are all, to me, great artists, these women.

CG: Yeah, and as you were mentioning, for example, earlier, you mentioned Las Mujeres Muralistas. Do you consider yourself an ally of these kinds of environmental feminist causes that are associated with the Muralismo movement from the Mission?

MR: Oh, without a doubt. I totally honor these women—to do what they did and have the energy and the mind and creativity to go out there and express their own views and their own symbolism and imagery to enhance the community with their work and their art. So no, I hold these women artists in high esteem. Because there was a time, again, where we worked

together. It's like in the minipark in particular, when I was on one wall doing my work and they were on another wall doing their work. And we'd spend the whole day painting. It was a luxury to do that. And at the end of the day, we'd all meet at the Galería de la Raza. I said, "Oh, everybody did good work today. OK, see you tomorrow." So it was a fun time. It was a fun experience. And now they've kept it alive. That's their life work, of course. And so they've done a lot of beautiful things. And Susan Cervantes, up and above us all, with her Precita Eyes mural workshop, has got a lot, a lot of murals under her.

CG: And then just because you mentioned minipark and you have mentioned that before also, as you were saying, you and Susan and other people were turning this place into a park full of murals. And how do you think that your first mural in the minipark is, now that you have the hindsight of many years?

MR: Well, I'm amazed. I'm amazed, even though they totally need restoration. They're almost completely gone. I'm surprised they haven't got in there and whitewashed them and did something new, right? They're still giving me the benefit of the doubt that there's going to be funds at some point in time in the future to go out there and renovate these murals—in their original form somewhat—and hire me as the original artist to go there and kinda like see that come about.

But if not, I'm saying there's always, we could always completely whitewash what was there and put up a whole brand-new set of images. And then bring it into some other new, contemporary thing.

Those murals, they go back quite a few years now. When I think of the mural that I did for the Mission Neighborhood Health Center, that was in 1976 and maybe fifty years ago now.

CG: And you did that one with Graciela Carrillo, right?

MR: Yeah, she did one wall. I did the other wall. And then it was about maybe four, five, six years ago that we got funding from [TODCO] to go out there, from John Elberling, who's a complete champion in my eyes, to go out there and restore those murals. We met, and he says, "Hey, I've got some money that I can put toward this restoration project." But it was Susan Cervantes and her son that went out there and retouched Graciela's mural. I was able to go out there and do my own that I'd originally done. So I was happy for us to be able to do that.

CG: How was it, for example, that you remember the collaboration in these kinds of projects? As you were saying, Graciela had her wall. You had your wall. How do you remember working collaboratively in these projects with other artists?

MR: Well, I'm sure when we're out there together in near proximity, we inspire each other, right? Because I mean, I couldn't do what they were doing, what she was doing. I was totally doing what I do. But at the same time, it was just inspiring to see each other working and doing this—that we're actually there sitting on a scaffold and painting away. So then at the end of the day, she says, "Oh, wow, what a great addition of color that you came up with

today. Oh, my God." And so we would encourage each other. We would encourage each other, that we're doing beautiful work. And a lot of people are going to be happy for it. And the beautiful thing is that whatever our mission in life is, if we can go about inspiring people to raise their consciousness, again, to be more beautiful people and have a little more of a beautiful perspective and vision of life, then we're doing good. We're doing good in that way. And artists, I think, that's why I love being in company with all these beautiful folks that are my friends, that are artists or musicians because their mind's in the right place. Their aspirations are in the right place. What they want to share with people, man, are the more beautiful aspects of our life and our culture.

So that's how that went. And then I had seen this wall over on 24th and Mission, this long, rectangular wall. And at that time, the BART system was just coming into the community. They had built this BART station there. And so I thought, well, I want to do a mural that's showing the BART on the tracks. But then I want to make these cement beams that hold the BART up, make them look like the most geometrical figures—these cement pillars that hold the tracks up—and make them look like people, a man, a woman, then a man, a woman. And then in between them, the masses of people that are going to ride this train system, right? And to me, that wasn't a controversial or political statement, although when I think, OK, if you're going to show people shouldering tracks, then there's a weight on your shoulders, right?

On 24th Street and Mission Street, there's sort of a hard intersection of the community just because the BART station is there. And people either go into the BART from either corner, juxtaposed corners, to go downtown or go to Daly City, right? And so it's a busy, busy intersection, see? And so the time that my mural, when I first had done that mural, the colors were beautiful, bright. And again, that particular mural there, I was inspired by [José Clemente] Orozco. My original intention was to see that entire wall done [in] mosaic. But San Francisco said, the Art Commission, they told me, "Well, we don't have that kind of money for you to do a mosaic. But we'll help you with some funding just to do a painting on this stucco wall. And we'll help you with the scaffolding."And then, at the same time, I had gotten a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to help fund this mural project. I was able to hire two other assistant artist friends of mine to help me do it.

CG: Who were these artists, Machado and Montez?

MR: Uh-huh. Tony Machado and Richard Montez were my Oakland buddies, my Oakland friends. We kind of both came from Oakland to San Francisco to do what we did. So they were my team. They were my team because they were the ones that helped me actually do that first part, that first cartoon mural.

CG: And what was their role? And what was your role creating that mural on the BART station?

MR: I was the originator, right? I mean, they just kind of followed my lead because I could trust that they could copy what I was painting. Or if I said, "Hey, man, could you guys paint it this way?" Machado was good at that, copying my colors.

And they were actually the ones that helped me do the murals in the minipark, the San Francisco minipark over on 24th Street. Because I couldn't have done these murals by myself. Luckily, I had a team. These guys were my team. Plus we all played music together. We played guitar together. And we lived together. So that's how we would go out there, as a little team, a little trio. But after a while, they went about their own way, their own business. So it's the humble people. It's the humble people, the simple people, right, that carry the weight of this train system. It's people's taxpayer money that's going to pay for this system. For me, a more insightful metaphor was that it's poor people that always have to carry the burden of things in society.

CG: Right, like it's built on the backs of immigrants. And your mural on 24th Street at the BART station.

MR: Yeah, that's a good way of putting it. Because most folks, say in the early, early centuries, the train systems were built by the Chinese or the Mexicans. It's always the ethnic people, right, that are doing the hard labor and the hard work out there.

CG: Yeah. As you were saying, this was paid for by the taxpayers and the people that populated the Mission back then, which in the seventies was predominantly, like, it became predominantly Hispanic. It jumped from 20 percent in the last decade of the sixties to 40 percent the next decade.

JB: I agree with that. And I think also you were really responding to, you know, if we're looking at the BART mural that you made, you were also really responding to an issue of the day, right?

MR: Well, yeah, I couldn't help it. Yeah.

JB: What were you responding to?

MR: Well, initially, here comes this brand-new rail system that's going to come and now service the neighborhood, right? People could jump on the BART and get quicker to town or get quicker to Oakland, right? But at the same time, there's a price, again, that people are paying for this thing. I mean, developers and people out there are bringing new things into a city. There's a lot of motives behind it, right? And a lot of times, like gentrification, for instance. So for instance, this corporation that I'm part of right now, this [TODCO], and I'm their artist in residence. So when the South of Market was being gentrified and the Moscone Center and all those places around there, at one time, before all that started, there were hotels that housed all the old folks. A lot of the Filipino community was in the South of Market, right?

But because they were going to build these new buildings and all this, all those old hotels were going to come down. And these folks were all going to be displaced. The same thing with what's going on now with people not being able to afford to live in San Francisco anymore because the rents have just gotten so out of hand. People who have been here

forever now can't afford to be here. Because, again, it comes down to people being greedy for money. And it's not so much a human issue anymore. It's more a financial issue.

JB: But what were you hoping the people who are walking by this mural entering BART would think about when they saw your mural? What were you hoping that people would see? And you just talked about how you want to inspire something higher, something more beautiful, talk about something? What were you hoping people would walk by and feel and see when they saw that?

MR: Well, really, to be honest, I wasn't really hoping for people to think one way or the other about it. Because you never know what people are thinking unless you sit down and have a conversation with somebody and ask them, "Hey, what are you thinking?" I mean, maybe a few times, people say, "Hey, we love what you've done here because it's touched upon a certain kind of issue that we all think about but don't really know how to express it. And you expressed it, I think, with your graphics, right?" Yeah.

CG: Or even social justice, what you were saying, for example, or the question earlier, which was minipark, the BART station mural, these other ones. They always are expressing these ideas about—they're going to gentrify the Mission. They're going to be building this upon the backs of immigrants.

And nowadays, in that same place where the mural is—and as you said, the interpretation was about BART is built on the backs of immigrants—now that's where a lot of the testing for COVID-19 (we're in the middle of the pandemic) is being done.

Do you think that in your art you're reflecting the spirit of the times, as you were saying, that you're having a kind of conversation with people about these social justice issues or just these things that were affecting people?

MR: Well, when I was out there, just like when artists were out there in the public, so somebody there is there watching what you do. So you jump off the scaffold. And they want to ask you, say, "Why are you doing this? What are you doing this for? And we love what you're doing, but what's your motivation?"

And then that's when you get into a conversation with them. If it makes sense to them—great. Then they understand why you're doing this. And I'm sure I've had a lot of conversations or did have a conversation with a lot of folks that would take—I would take time to jump off the scaffold and try to explain to them that I'm doing something here to, first of all, beautify the neighborhood, to bring color into the neighborhood [so] that people have something really pleasant and beautiful to look at. But at the same time, there was some content of a message in it, right?

CG: What was the message?

MR: Well, again, they can consider it—depending on how you see things—political. It could be a political message, that humble people and poor people throughout time in history have

shouldered the weight of building things in society. See? It's like if you go back to the pyramids, when all the slaves were lifting all these boulders and rocks to build these pyramids. It's no different nowadays when you see all these big buildings going up, all these construction workers. And you got out. I see it in my particular neighborhood, most of the construction workers that I see out here—doing all the sidewalks and doing all the heavy laboring and all the welding and picking up these beams—are ethnic people, a lot of Latin people.

And that has not changed. They're the ones that do all the heavy lifting and all the heavy work as, usually, the more privileged—excuse my expression—white people are running the show. And they're not the ones who are out there moving rocks and breaking up the rocks and building sidewalks.

It's more poor folks, right? I mean, they have a job. It's a beautiful thing that they have work. But they're the ones that do the heavy work. See?

JB: Michael, I have a question for you about it, which is I think in our research about the Mission murals, we found that many of the muralists are responding to social and political movements of the day. It seems like your work is also in many ways doing that.

I wonder if you can just talk a little bit about how—I think you expanded on how people walk by murals, and it serves the people. And you have the people-first flag. I wonder if you can just talk about the importance of that level of public education or public pedagogy or response to social movements in your work.

MR: Well, if you're going to—again, a lot of artists will take on the issue of the day and try to make light of it in some kind of an artistic juxtaposition of things and objects in your painting, right, some dark and some light and some humorous and some tragic—all these things. And it's just another reminder for the folks out there in the public. Because your mural art is a public experience. You're doing it for the public to get your point across. And again, artists, just like everybody else, have feelings. We all have feelings. And we are all affected by the news of the day, right? And so a lot of times, you say, Man, you know what? I need to do something about this because it's really bugging me. And they'll do something really extreme and controversial.

But it's just like anything else that people are fed every day. You want them, at the end of the day, to think about where our society is going and where we are as a group of people that we're either stifling our consciousness, our education, or we're growing and inspiring each other to go a little bit higher and think a little bit more with compassion and loving our neighbors and being a little bit more forthright and treating people equally. You know, get up and above racial stereotyping. Get up and above seeing people as a color as opposed to just seeing into their spirit and soul. Because artists work with colors, an array, a palette of colors, all different colors. And so it's always disturbing to me when all we can [do is] refer to each other as white person or Black person or yellow person. And it's not very high minded. It's not very high minded if you're thinking that way and you look at each other [based] on just the color of your skin.

So I would like to think that, because I aspire also to be a spiritual person, whatever that means, whether it's a cliché, that when you're in company with your human brothers and sisters out there in the human race, you're looking at them from the more beautiful aspects of their life, their childlike spirit that you connect to when you see.

Because when I meet an old person, an eighty-year-old person or a ninety-year-old person, the first thing I like to imagine was that this person was a little child—a little child, right? And the child is still in there although their body is now a ninety-year-old body and a ninety-year-old mind. But behind that mind, there's layers. You go back. There's a spirit of a child there. This person loves connecting with this childlike spirit and what he did when he was a child, what inspired him. And so if I could look at people that way and have some kind of third eye to look into their heart and see that this person is really a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful person, and he's not all that he pretends to be with all the masks that people wear to go through life. Because that's what artists do. They're good at having an inner vision to seeing things.

It's like if you're a portrait artist, and you're sitting there doing a portrait—you don't want to just capture the superficial aspects of a person's image, right? You want to feel like, and even though it might be a little bit abstract, like Picasso might do, you're capturing the spirit of this person. And so that's where we're all on an equal-level playing field, that we're all spirits. We're all spiritual human beings, although we're all in different bodies of different colors and come from different parts of the world. But there's common spiritual energy that permeates all our lives, right?

CG: Let me ask you one question about your mural-making work because you've spoken before about Diego Rivera. And there's the Orozco as well as [David Alfaro] Siqueiros. But you yourself with, let's say, Chuy Campusano and Luis Cortázar, you were also a trio. And these previous ones that I was mentioning—Siqueiros, Rivera, Orozco—are known as Los Tres Grandes. How do you see yourself with those Tres Grandes and now you guys also being three greats that continued the legacy?

MR: Well, I mean, I guess there's some kind of connection there because it's always great when you have compadres and fellow artists that are kinda like—you're aspiring to do the same thing in your own way, you know, in your own particular creative way, original way. But you're also there to encourage each other. And once in a while, you might collaborate and work on a particular project all at the same time.

So I've learned how to collaborate with folks. I've learned how to do projects in collaboration with folks and not totally think that I'm so full of myself that I can just do it with just me and just me. It's not that. You need a team one way or the other to be great. There's always some background of support that you have that pushes you along. And although you might be the particular in the picture, there's always some other folks there that are part of your team to do it, even though they might not get the notoriety that you get. They deserve it too. But again, I'm happy that I was part of this movement and that there are other younger artists that are still keeping things alive. I mean, there's all kinds of places to do murals. But the

Mission happens to be just saturated with them, which is kind of a cool thing in a way, because I guess they accept that this is a neighborhood where people do art and want to do art. Even though we already have one across the street, here's another one across this street, the same street. So you got five or six murals all on one street or one block.

CG: Why do you think it happened in the Mission? Why specifically the Mission in San Francisco?

MR: Well, just because people probably realize that it's the most soulful neighborhood in San Francisco. It's not the Mission. We have the Carnaval, right? We got the Carnaval. No other neighborhood in San Francisco has a carnival like we do. And that's when the colors really come out, in the Carnaval.

So it's a vibrant neighborhood. The sun shines more here in the Mission than it does in other neighborhoods. It's a little bit warmer. I mean, it's sort of like the bottom of the skillet. Then you have all the hills around.

But the Mission is like that, right, where you get the most sun, the most pleasant weather. And again, people in the general community have gotten used to seeing art go up here and there sometimes. So younger artists, I guess they feel a little bit more secure. They come to the Mission and get permission from some wall owner or some building owner to put a mural up on their wall, right, because they'll be in company with other murals. It's not like they go to Nob Hill and places like that to do them. But I would just think that, again, wherever it is, artists always need support and corporate sponsorship to keep the arts alive, right?

See, San Francisco I guess, in particular, is like a mural capital of the world, one of the mural capitals of the world, although there could be others around in Europe and wherever. But we're well known for that. A lot of people come to the Mission not only to be in a funky Latino neighborhood with everybody speaking Spanish here and there, but to see all the beautiful art that all these folks are doing—kids and otherwise. So it's kind of a special place in San Francisco. It's unfortunate that all this gentrification and all this other stuff has—people had to leave, right, myself included. My only footprint in San Francisco now is here in this studio. Well, I have my murals out there. For whatever condition they are, they're out there still. And they haven't really disappeared just yet. That's how it goes. I mean, nothing lasts forever.

CG: Yeah. And when you realized your—you called it your mission on the Mission, it has, it seems to me, two aspects, it can have more. Which is to, yes, beautify the place, make sure that the Mission is beautiful to look at with all this incredible art that you're making as well as then transmit a message that also engages people spiritually and tells them that there are some things that are, as you said, tragic and comic at the same time. And I think that that is, in a sense, what you were doing all along with your art when you became an artist. Do you agree with that statement?

MR: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I do. I do. Because just like food—I mean, it's not all the time that you're going to get something sweet. Sometimes you're going to get the sour also. And that's what

balances things out. You don't want too much salt on your plate. Just enough, right? Or you don't want too much sugar, just enough, right, to sweeten things up a little bit. And life like that and all its intricacies are that same way. Again, you learn how to be in some kind of middle road to balance things out where you're not too extreme on one side or the other. You're not too high above anybody or below anybody. I think that you're in the middle and equal with everybody. And you give everybody the same benefit and that kind of thing.

JB: How would you describe your work. Like, you know, if you had to describe it, how would you describe your work? Sort of like the iconography that you pick, or where does that inspiration come from?

MR: Well, I guess you could see a little bit of Picasso influences in some of the stuff. But it goes beyond that. I mean, I not always just trying to copy Picasso. I think, [*inaudible*] here's a piece that I titled *Lunch with Picasso*.

JB: But you know, I see some religious iconography, some Mayan, Aztec iconography. You know, where does that kind of inspiration come from for you?

MR: Well, because it's all those things that you mentioned [that] are all around us. And I like to think, again, with my aspiration for being more prolific in my expressions of my work that I can encompass all those things in my art. I don't segregate too much of that stuff. I mean, I like to include it all because it's all part of our life. There's nothing new under the sun for me.

So, I think that all those things, even though they may be—if you think of a frame, they could all be in juxtaposition. One thing could be in this corner, and the other thing can be in this corner. But they're all part of life. They're all part of life and they're all part of our history and our particular cultures.

I mean, I embrace Buddhism. I embrace my Mexicanness. And I embrace my San Francisco-ness and my Oakland-ness.So all those things. You know, you like to think that, just kinda like it enhances your own makeup when you think you can connect to a lot of things and you don't limit yourself. And your vision is a little bit more stereoscopic, you know, 360 degrees kind of thing. So I would like to think that there's a lot, a lot of things that inspire me. Can I get up for a minute and just show you something and come back?

JB: Can we do it? Oh, you're going to grab something and bring it back?

MR: Mm-hmm.

JB: Oh, yeah. That's fine.

CG: That's fine.

MR: Let me just grab something.

CG: Absolutely.

MR: Now, here is a painting, let me show you. See this painting here? Now, this little shack here used to be across the way here next door to this building. This is where I used to do my work in this room here.

So last year or the year before, when Trump was talking about building a wall to keep all the Mexicans out, and it was constantly on the news hammering away at this wall, it was really upsetting me. Because he was attacking my people, attacking the Latino people and calling us this and that, right, good-for-nothings. So I said, OK, I'm going to paint this wall here that represents Trump's idea of a wall. But it's a wall that is not going to be a successful wall because there's going to be a rift in this wall. And the rift is when they were doing that Dakota Pipeline there. See? And at the same time, because the country was so divided in their alliances and allegiance with you're either in a blue state or a red state, or you're either a Republican or a Democrat and all this, to me, erroneous allegiance to political parties—which I'm not.

My allegiance is to the culture and the world of art and in company with artists. So I decided to paint this wall here to represent what Trump's wall was—sort of the yellow brick road kind of thing. But it wasn't well built. So there's a rift there, right? It's broken. So these little support things here are the letters T for Trump's wall. But because San Francisco is a sanctuary city, right, I felt that this little neighborhood here, this little area right here where my studio was and where I had my art in the shipping containers to keep my art there—and then one of my friends went to Standing Rock in the middle of winter. And they let him stay in one of these tepees there. See? And he took this flag there with him, the San Francisco flag, right? So I mean, I love San Francisco because, I mean, we're not aligned with the Republicans. Although I'm not either one or the other. So I figured, OK. But Mexicans—a wall is not going to keep Mexicans out of any place because we're—if it has to be, they know how to build tunnels. So this is an indication of a tunnel that they would build and say, "We hired El Chapo to build this tunnel." And here, they come out in middle America. They finally come here, and their flashlight, right?

So you've got the flag of San Francisco, and it represents the sanctuary. And so I'm saying my yard here with my studio is my sanctuary. But it's in San Francisco. But even up above the flag of San Francisco, there's a flag that says, "People first." See? And even up above there, you've got this little bird on the flagpole that says "Mother Nature" up above everything else. So to me, this is a little bit of a political statement that I had to get out of my head and put on there, right? So I had fun doing this painting.

When you think of a Goya, the artist Goya, and how he saw things in his world and what he would draw to come to some atonement with what life was about back then in Spain and into these revolutions and this and that, artists throughout time have always been spokesmen for social issues and causes but in their own artistic kind of way, right? And it's a little bit more, for me, a softer blow on how to enlighten people. Because the whole notion of us doing art is to enlighten each other, right? Even though there's a lot of messages in society and issues in society, that come along with all the education that we have to come to terms with. But at the end, you think, OK, through all this weeding out of good information

and bad information, whether it comes through books—or a lot of it will come to you in the form of art and culture. See?

I mean, Carlos, like when Santana goes out there and plays a show, just like any great musicians, he would like to think that, at the end of the night, folks were really inspired and it was a magical, spiritual experience, right? That he took them a little bit higher. Because in between some of the sets that he does, he'll get on the microphone and express certain kind of views that he has about life and how we should look at it and think that we're more than what we really, really think we are.

We're more, say for instance, just greater human beings, right, than we give ourselves credit for. And artists are good at making pictures of those kind of notions.

CG: Let me get into your friendship and work with, I think, one of your longest-standing collaborators and friends, which is Carlos Santana. And I read that you met in '86 finally. But it happened after a mural and a gig painting for a drum set. Is that true?

MR: So in 1986, with this other artist friend of mine, both of us together had done this mural on 22nd and South Van Ness. And this was probably the last mural that I'd ever done in the Mission.

And it was a big project because it was three big walls, three big walls that we did. The middle wall was going to be a wall that was going to feature Carlos Santana—mariachis behind him because his father came from a family of mariachis.

And then at the same time, to honor another great person in Latin music, Eddie Palmieri, and another great, [the] Cuban conga player Armando Peraza. We put him in there also. But our reason for wanting to honor Carlos is because he was, again, a product of the Mission, so to speak. He grew up in the Mission and started his career there as part of the Santana band there out of the Mission and was able to capture world attention with his music with the help of Bill Graham and going to Woodstock. And so I felt if I wanted to honor anybody, it was going to be somebody who was going to be contemporary, that people could relate to—a person that was doing something beautiful with his work, his music, and his art. And it was Carlos. See? And I wasn't doing it to impress him. I was doing it more for the benefit of the community again, right, for them to realize that, hey, you got somebody that's really beautiful that does beautiful music and is a hit out there in the world with his music, has come up with something really unique in the collaboration of his Latin and blues music and congas and all those—his own particular mixture of music.So he was grateful that we did that. He was happy. He was honored that I had done that for him. So it wasn't too long after that, after we had done the mural.

So the day of the opening, the day of the dedication of the mural, I had gotten Supervisor Jim Gonzalez, who was the supervisor of the Mission District at the time. And then his father, José Santana, used to come by every day to watch us paint the mural. So I would jump off the scaffold and run over there and say, "Hey, José, how are you doing, José?" He said, "Oh, yeah, I like what you're doing. I love what you're doing. That doesn't quite look like my son."

And so he said, “But I have some photographs I want to bring you tomorrow to show you what I think my son looks like.” So this is a funny story. So then that same night, I got a call from his management company saying, “Hey, Carlos, he’s kind of snuck out there on the sly and seen what you’re doing. He loves what you’re doing. But he just wants to know one thing—why you’re making him look like a cartoon.” [*laughs*] He says, “But it’s OK.” He says, “Come into the office tomorrow. And we’ve got a lot of photographs that we want you to look at to take with you to give you a better view of him, this and that and his poses.” So that’s what I did. I went and got a lot of photographs from them. And at the same time, his father the next day also brought me a folder, a manila folder with all his old photographs of Carlos. And I said, OK, now I know what to do, you know? Because I was sorta like working off of just one little photograph. But all these other photographs had shown me all these different perspectives of him and a little bit more of a 360-degree view of him playing guitar and looking up the way he does. So then I was able to get it right. So then his father came back and said, “Oh, yeah, he looks exactly like my son now.” He says, “Are you going to have a dedication?” I say, “Yeah, I’ll say we are.” He said, “I’d like to come out there and honor my son by bringing my mariachi band out there to play. But we’re going to double it up. We’re going to have, like, twenty-four mariachis plus a singer.” I said, “Oh, that’ll be great, man. I’m sure Carlos is going to love it.” So I called Carlos. I said, “Hey, man, make sure, man, you’re going to come out there that day of the dedication, because at the same time, I’m going to have a bunch of posters made of the mural that we did to give out to the community. And you and I can sign, right?” So this was the first time him and I got together to sign a poster to give to the people. So it was a great dedication. I mean, he honored us. He honored me. And he honored Kookie Gonzalez, the other artist and other helper.

It wasn’t long after that his guitarist—I mean, his drummer, his original drummer, Michael Shrieve, who played Woodstock, says, “Hey, man, Carlos is really in love with your colors, man. But it’s so funny. We’re going to get together for our twentieth anniversary at the Shoreline. And I have this drum set I would like you to paint for me. Can you do the whole drum set?” I said, “Sure, man.” So I did the drum set. After all that, he says, “Hey, man, I think Carlos is going to call you about a painted guitar. Are you into it?” I said, “Yeah, sure, sure.” So one of his guys says, “Hey, man, Carlos would like you to come to the studio tomorrow if you can in San Rafael and talk about painting a new guitar for him.” I said, “OK.” So I go over there. And he says, “Man, I love what you did with my drums. Can you paint me a guitar?” I said, “Sure, man.” He says, “Well, what do you want for payment?” I said, “Well, I don’t want any money, but I’d be happy, man, to own one of those guitars you’re playing over there right now.” And he says, “What kind you like?” I said, “Oh, I like that Paul Reed Smith, man.” He says, “Oh, OK, cool.” He says, “Well, come on by tomorrow. I’ll have a guitar for you.” OK, so good. So again, I went by the next day. And they’re in the middle of playing. They stop playing. And he goes behind his amplifier, pulls out the guitar case and opens it up, and looks up at me and says, “Hey, what do you think?” I said, “Oh, that’s a beautiful guitar, Carlos. Thank you, man. Thank you so much.” I said, “OK, I’ll get busy.” So I was doing sketches. But they were more like the designs I had done for the drummer. He says, “No, no.” He says, “I don’t want that kind of stuff.” He said, “I like your Mexican stuff more, your Mexican imagery.” I said, “OK, I got it.” So anyway, I’d done that. And it was a hit. It was a hit. So then his brother called me. He says, “Hey, man, Carlos wants to see some more of your new work.” I said, “Well, I’m doing shirts right now.” Just like these other guys that are doing shirts for him—Michael

Roman. So anyway, I said, “Here, take him this batch of shirts. See what he thinks.” So it was about maybe twenty shirts that I’d done, these T-shirts. So the next day, his brother called me. He says, “Hey, man, come by the office, man. Got some money for you.” So here’s a check for five thousand bucks. So I’m thinking, Hey, man, this is way more than what the shirts are worth. He says, “Oh, no, no, he wants to pay you handsomely for the shirts. At the same time, it’s money for some future projects. But he wants you to come by. He wants you to come by his house tonight or tomorrow night or whatever so you guys can talk about some future projects.”

And so my contract with this California Arts Council was ending because I think I had gotten [it] three years in a row. And you can only get funding for that [long], and then you have to take a break. So I said, “Well, what am I going to do for this next year?” And then I’ll see. So anyway, I started doing shirts, like these kind of shirts here. And then Carlos says, “Hey, man, I want to see some of your new work.” I said, “Well, I’m doing shirts, just like your buddy.” So I sent him a batch of shirts. And he was knocked out. He said, “Hey, man, can we do some more? Can we get together and do some more of this?” And just one thing led to another, right? So that’s kind of how we got started working with each other because he had all of these pictures of all his heroes—which were my heroes, of course—Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bob Marley, John Lee Hooker. He says, “Can you do a shirt of this? Can we do a shirt of this guy and Jimi Hendrix?” I said, “Sure, man.” I said, “As long as you pay for all the screen process and all that, we can do it.” He says, “Yeah, yeah, just go ahead and send an invoice to the office, right? We’ll get it all paid for.” So we started doing that. We started doing that.

And then he got me a contract with Sony Music, right? And that’s when I had become incorporated and started a business called Heaven Smiles Art Productions because they wouldn’t give me all this money unless I was incorporated, right? So I had to do that. And most of the work I was doing for Sony was geared for Carlos, right? I mean, I was doing stuff that was going to be geared for Michael Jackson or Tina Turner—whoever was on the roster. But it was mostly stuff for Santana. So he took up the slack and employed me. I mean, I was employed with Carlos for almost fourteen years straight just doing art. I didn’t have to do anything else. So it was a great collaboration all these years that I had been working with him because he’s so creative himself, right? I mean, he doesn’t really do graphic art. But he knows what he wants to see.

CG: But he has the ideas too.

MR: But he has ideas. He has ideas, you know? And because him and I are the same age, I mean, we could communicate with each other very easily and be on the same page. Because same thing with Carlos. I mean, Carlos’s inspirations are John Coltrane—his high inspirations—Miles Davis and all the jazz giants. And the same with me. I’m inspired by these musicians also myself because I’m an aspiring musician.Although I knew that I wasn’t going to make my complete living being a musician. It would be something I would do on the side. But I was able to do art, sort of make a living at it all these years.

CG: Let me just ask you very specifically about something you just said, which is about your music just as a musician. Because one thing that we researched and found out was that it seemed like you had a band called [*inaudible*].

MR: Well, that was way back when. Oh, my God.

CG: Yeah, way back. Yeah.

MR: You know, in fact, with that band, that was a band where we first started doing, it was John Calloway, myself, and maybe Pete Gallegos. And who else? I forgot who else. Mike Madrigal.

But that was our first, that was maybe my first little Latino band that wasn't playing [*inaudible*] or Santana-type stuff. We were playing more salsa kind of stuff. So that was our little claim to fame with our 45, that song that we made—"San Francisco"—became like the little anthem for the Mission District for a while. I guess it still is in a way.

[*"San Francisco" plays*]

CG: Salsa en el barrio.

MR: Alma del barrio. So that was the hit, that was the good song—"San Francisco." It made it to number one on the radio. For eight weeks we were number one on the radio that year, 1982.

So there was a flip side, I'm gonna play that also for you. So here was the flip side. This is a really great tune too.

[*music*]

JB: Did you ever go to Fantasy Records with Carlos?

MR: He called me one time. And he said, "Hey, man, I want you to come to Berkeley. I have some friends I want you to meet." So it was at Fantasy Studios. So he was doing a recording. He was doing a Jimi Hendrix song, "Castles in the Sand" or some shit like that, a Jimi Hendrix song. So it was Jimi Hendrix's original producer, Eddie Kramer, I think it was, and then Stanley Clarke, bass player, and Tony Williams. And these guys are jazz giants that have played with Miles Davis. And so I got to hang out with these guys because somehow, I don't know how Carlos got me into doing shirt art. I mean, I had just been doing it because I was working as a teacher and teaching art here on Potrero Hill, at the Potrero Hill Neighborhood House.

So somewhere in between all that, I had got invited by the Miles Davis estate in New York, to show my work with the art of Miles Davis and this photographer, Annie Leibovitz, right? So they said, "Yeah, man, we, love your work, man. We want you to show in the gallery here in New York with Miles and Annie." You'll have one wall. Annie will have another wall. And then

Miles will have two walls. I said, “OK, cool.” So that was another thing that I got to do. It was a great time. And Carlos has been there all the time forming that. He’s always giving me financial support to go to these things. So then besides the guitar stuff and the shirt stuff, he says, “Hey, man, can we do a mural for my stages?” And I say, “Yeah, man.” So we got a canvas twenty feet by forty feet long, one piece of canvas, and he says, “Can we do a mural?” So that was my first mural for Carlos in his stage shows, right? It has a red hand and a blue hand and all these kids in the middle. And it ended up being an album cover for *Live in South America*, his *Live in South America* album cover. So he would take these murals around the world with him to all these different shows that he’d do. And people loved it. Then he says, “Hey, man, can we do another mural?” I said, “Yeah.” So all in all, I had done four major stage backdrops for him. The last one was *Supernatural*. The last one was—

CG: 1999.

MR: Maybe, yeah. This is one of them here. I think this was the second one here—this one here. This one’s called *Embrace Your Absoluteness*, where he wanted to honor the African kids and the American Indian kids. And he wanted to use this image of Christ from Rio, on the hill. So this is what I did for him. So of course, the congas. So he was in love with this image here. And then after that, we did this one here because he called me on the phone and he says, “Can we do another mural?” I said, “Yeah, man.” And I said, “Well, what do you want to do it of this time?” He says, “Well, I got this song called ‘Mumbo Jumbo.’ So can we do something with that, those words?” I said, “Yeah.” And he says, “Can you hide the words *mumbo jumbo* in the art? And put these words in there too, the words *trans dance*, *state of grace*, and *the zone*.” What else? And like I said, that was it, yeah. State of grace. So this is the word *mumbo jumbo*, M-U-M-B-O. So that’s *mumbo*. And then the *jumbo* here. I kinda like jumbled it around. J-U-M-B-O. When he first saw it, he says, “Oh, man, this is just way up and above what I ever would envision.” I said, “Oh, great.” I said, “Well, I’m getting some posters made of it, Carlos.” He says, “Yeah, cool, cool.” So he was sending the posters to all the people that were going to be on that *Supernatural* album. And then he would call me. He says, “Hey, man, you are not going to believe this. Everybody’s writing lyrics to your art.” He says, that’s “Maria Maria,” and that’s “Turn Your Lights On.” And that’s whatever, you know, “Corazón espinado.” I said, “Oh, right on.” So OK, cool. So he calls me again. He says, “Hey, I got some of the new music. Want to hear it?” He used to come to my house all the time, right? Because we both have sons the same age. His son and my son are both the same age.

And so we’d get together at about two o’clock in the afternoon. He would come to my house, to my garage, and hang out with me while I was doing my work. And then by three o’clock, we’d take off to get our kids from school, our two boys. He says, “Well, I got the new music.” I said, “Yeah, well, bring it over, man. I’d like to check it out.” Because he was telling me before this. This is amazing how Carlos’s mind works.

We would sit around in my garage. He says, “You know, man, I’d like to really put some music together that’s going to be a little bit more radio friendly. Although I have a lot of success in doing concerts all the time and shows all over the world, I have not been on the radio for a long time.” He says, “But anyway, here, put this one on.” So it was him and Eric Clapton. He says, “What do you think?” I said, “Well, man, I think you guys got down, really.” So then he

put down, then he said, “Put this one on here, ‘Corazón espinado.’” I said, “Oh, man, Carlos, I think you’ve got some radio hits now. These are really fucking rocking. These are rocking tunes.” And then he put the one, “Smooth,” that song “Smooth.” I said, “Oh, Carlos, man, yeah, you’ve really got some hits here, brother. Get down.”

And sure enough, sure enough, man, it won nine Grammys, right? So that put my work even more on the map. So I was grateful for all this work that I’d done with Carlos. And even till now, people still—they love it. And then there was a time when M&M’s candy called me to do art, to put my art on their packages. And they flew me to New York to meet with the art director and the M&M’s people. I had my portfolio. They said, “Yeah, we really love what you’ve done with Santana. And it was a toss-up between you, Peter Max, or this other guy that worked with Andy Warhol, right? But we like you. We like where you’re coming from because the theme of our campaign is a groovy summer, sort of like the Summer of Love here in San Francisco. So we know that you’re one of those kids from the sixties, just like Carlos is. And we love your psychedelic colors and this and that.” So anyway, they hired me to do this art. And they said, “We’re going to put your signature on 350 million packs of candy. Have you got a problem with that?” I say, “I don’t think I would have a problem unless some kind of crazy guy would come out of the woodwork and try to track me down for whatever. But no, I don’t have a problem with that.”

And they said, “This is the first time we’re going to ever do this. We’ve never featured anybody’s art on our package even though our big, old M&M is going to be on there. We’re going to put your signature on all these packages.” I said, “Wow, that’s amazing. That’s amazing.” They said, “You’re going to be a household word for a little while.” I said, “OK, whatever.” So I flew back to San Francisco and did two big paintings, four-by-eight panels. And I sent them back to New York. So they used one of them. So the art director later on tells me, he says, “Hey, man, your art helped boost these sales 21 percent or 28 percent or something like that. And so they want you to fly out to New York to promote the campaign.” So they flew me back to New York, got me together with these two celebrities from Los Angeles who were the Mark and Cindy Brady of *The Brady Bunch*. Ever heard of that program? But I never watched them when I was growing up. I never watched it because by that time, I was into other things and not watching soap operas on TV.

But we got together in New York to have dinner with these two folks. They’re movie stars, I guess. And so the guy says, “Hey, man, I really love your work. I love your work.” And all this blah, blah, blah. And I said, “Oh, I’m honored to meet you.” “But I never really watched your program when I was growing up because I was already into jazz and playing music. And so I never watched TV too much. But I’m honored that we’re here doing this and you’re going to help us promote the campaign, right, and talk about me and Carlos, right?” So that was a great little experience there. And to me, it was off the wall, an off-the-wall gig all the way. So cool, you know, whatever. And then again, *Time* magazine called me one time. They said, “Hey, we love your artwork. We’re going to do a little story on Santana. And can you send us one of your shirts that we can photograph and use in our little article?” And so we did that. I did that. So again, I’m grateful for all this attention that I’ve gotten with my work and starting from way back when, when I was just doing things in the Mission for whatever I was doing them for. So now I’m just going about trying to keep my sensibilities alive with my work.

And I'm grateful that the board [of supervisors] of San Francisco, Aaron Peskin, a great friend of mine, the supervisor for North Beach, John Elberling. These are all great champions in my eyes.

It was a couple of years ago that they put together a resolution where they gave me the title of San Francisco artist emeritus, right?

CG: February 23, 2018.

MR: Mm-hmm. And I said, "Well, I don't deserve this because I'm not really, that's not my world." And they said, "Well, we think you do." I said, "OK." Because I told Aaron—I said, "Hey, Aaron, with all due respect, I had to look up that word in the dictionary." I said, "Because that's not a word that's in my vocabulary or I even knew existed, really." And he says, "Yeah, well, it's a high honor. It's a high title." But between them, between Aaron and, again, the board of San Francisco, they provided me this room to work in as opposed to where I was before, that little shack down here, this next yard.

CG: In this resolution, there is this quote that I'm going to read to you. And I think it really speaks to your work throughout more than fifty years, which is, "In particular, Michael Ríos's many Mission District murals are globally renowned for their inspiring manifestations of the neighborhood's vital Latino soul as well as the artist's own Chicano heritage."

MR: Well, I have to thank Aaron for being so articulate in putting it in that way, expressing it that way in a statement that way. Because I never would have said it that way. [*laughs*] I'm just grateful that I have the ability and the mind to do it. When I went to city hall to receive that resolution, whatever it was, so they asked me to speak. I said, "Well, I'm really grateful to the supervisors here, all of you, the board of supervisors in city hall and this and that, the mayor, for giving me this acknowledgment. But in all honesty, it's something that I feel all the artists in the city that are struggling to get their work noticed deserve."

Because I'm not doing my art for any rewards or titles or morals, none of that. Artists don't really start off in their world that way. And if rewards come one way or the other, we're grateful. Most artists, if they're really, really in tune with their selves, then they're doing it out of an inner necessity, right, to share their place in life. I mean, so I'm accepting this on behalf of all the artists that I'm in company with that want to go out there and do murals and educate and inspire folks with art, right? Because to me, the world of culture and art are way high and above the world of politics. The politics, to me, is a down and dirty business. It can get [to be a] down and dirty business. Although you need politicians to support the arts. We need big business to always see the value of art. And there should always be some part of their budget that they're going to use to enhance their projects.

CG: Let me ask you two more questions, one that is very important with regard to funding, for example, with what you were saying about artists need money. And rent is, in San Francisco, astronomical. And while COVID has made it easier to rent, it's because people are fleeing or not able to stay anymore here in San Francisco. And back then when you were

making these murals in the seventies, especially, there was CETA. And there were things like Galería de la Raza that were supporting your mural making. But now looking into the future, into the legacy of what you created and other parts of the Muralismo movement, what are some of those things that need to happen for artists, younger generations, to be able to continue that long tradition of making art in the Mission?

MR: Well, I guess there's a few things, you know, to keep things alive and not let them fade into the history books. I mean, again, because artists, they do their work out of love. Anything beautiful that you're going to create has got to come from your own love of your work and what you're gonna—how you're going to share this love with your audience. And if it's done with love, it's like food. If you go to a place and you want a burrito and the guy does it with love, it's going to feel a lot better eating it. Art is the same thing. So just as time goes by, young artists need to feel that there's encouragement—spiritual encouragement—for them to continue doing art and becoming artists, and at the same time, that there's enough of an enlightened consciousness in the world of business and corporates, that there's funding for particular projects that artists might want to do that's relevant and might enhance the community.

If it's going to be a mural in particular on a wall of a school or a wall of somebody's building and the artist feels like this will bring a beautiful flavor of color to this particular corner, right, and people have support to do it—beautiful. See? Like the mural I did over on 24th and Mission Street has been up there for a lot, a lot of years. And it's never really been out there, it's never really been retouched or reconditioned.

So that's one of my issues right now that I hope comes to some kind of head and comes to a—before I get too old to go out there with a team to put a brand-new face of color on that thing and bring it back to life like it was back when I originally had done it. Not only there. I have some unfinished business still here in San Francisco with my old murals, right, that I would love to see come back to life a little bit, like the murals in the minipark.

CG: What do you need for that to happen?

MR: Well, again, money. It takes money to feel like you have money to buy the paints, money to buy the scaffolding, and money to pay your help and a little bit of compensation for your own self to get you through it while you're doing it. All those ducks have to be in line like that.

But I haven't lost hope. I haven't lost hope. But if it doesn't happen in my lifetime, then I'm not going to worry about it because I won't be here to care one way or the other. But if people can pick up the slack and still carry the torch and say, "Oh, well, even though Michael Ríos is not here anymore, there's still the ghost of his mural here. Let's go out there and recondition it and bring it back to life." See, and if that happens, fine. And if I can see this from wherever in heaven I'm looking down at and say, Oh, good, they're doing it—beautiful. I mean, art, through thick or thin, through feast or famine, artists still are going to do art, right? If you're really passionate about your work, you're going to find ways to make ends meet and still do your art.

CG: Recently, and you were telling me this a little bit before we started the interview, you've had to endure and you have survived a lot of sickness and a lot of problems. And these are very difficult chapters of your life that have happened recently.

MR: Well, I look at it this way. I mean, things can always be better, or they could also be worse. So I always saw myself in the middle of one thing or the other. I mean, I'm grateful I've had the energy to work through my physical handicaps in a way where I'm not totally handicapped, you know, on crutches or blind or I've lost my sense of touch. But again, I accept myself getting up in age a little bit. I'm seventy-three years old. And I have friends that are younger than me that have gone, that are no longer here. And I'm still here. So for whatever reason, I want to make the most of it and continue doing my work and create some value out of it for not only myself, but the people that I want to share it with.

Because really, I do this myself, of course. But I also do it for my people, my people, you know—my family, extended family, friends, and folks that have sorta like you know, followed my career in a way to say, "Oh, what is he going to come up with next? What's he thinking these days?" Well, you know, it's not anything overly important. But just like everybody else, you live in a world. You're not in a vacuum. You live in company with other folks that are trying to figure it out also, just like you are.

CG: To conclude in other words, speaking about, in a sense, the work that you're doing still and the legacy that you're going to keep having and creating, what would be a lesson that you could give the present and future generations of artists that are inspired by your life and work about seizing opportunities and moments?

MR: Well, two words. I use these two words, right, to title the mural that we did up there with Santana. Aspire to inspire. It should be your aspiration to inspire people with your life and your work, right? And to inspire them to what? To a little bit higher consciousness. See? Because that's what it takes for the entire world to come a little bit closer to the notion of world peace and happiness. If it's your continuous aspiration, you constantly feel like you're—you're constantly an aspiring human being, an aspiring artist to want to inspire people with your work, then something good comes out of that.

And that's what I think would be my simple expression to folks. Continue to aspire to inspire with your work, if your work is going to have any kind of value. Also, another thing is the two words—value creation, right? Create value with your life and your work, right? Work that has [*claps*], you know, spiritual value, value that has meat and potatoes. Spiritual value.

But life is continuous and eternal, even though, you know, it's like an old pair of shoes. After a while, you got to take them off and put on a new pair of shoes. Our life and our body's like that. See? But your real life is something that will never, never die. Just like you can say to yourself, I've always been here. And I always will be. It might not be here on this particular earth, right? It might be someplace else in the universe or some other dimension of life. Because the more you learn, well, life is like in infinite multifaceted dimensions, there are multifaceted dimensions of life, right, on all kinds of different levels.

And so we might be living this one particular dimension of life right now. But there are other simultaneous dimensions of life intermixing right now with us that, because of our limited senses, sensibilities, we can't really be, are not in tune with them.

Maybe if you believe that you have a third eye—and sometimes in your dreams, you go to these other dimensions. Then that makes you realize that, yeah, there's more than just one dimension that we live in life, right? And sometimes that kind of vision, because your third eye is to see your inner universe.

The eyes that we're talking with to each other right now are this dimension. But there's all other dimensions, right? They're deep and mysterious too, that are out there, that are with us here and now.

As we go through life, man, the more sensitive you can become to feeling those kind of energies, the more you feel you're really, really in tune with the universe and the multi-universes that we may go in and out of. Because you think, there must have been another universe that this universe was born from. And when this universe has its lifetime, another universe is going to be born out of it. See? So it's that kind of thing, I guess. That's kind of talking on an ethereal level. It has nothing to do with here and now. But at the same time, for me, it does in a way because I like to think that although I have one foot on Earth, the other foot is out there in the universe.

Thank you, gentlemen. Because it's always a pleasure to sit and have an intelligent conversation, whether it's talking about me and my work or, next time, we can talk about your work and your work.

So to me, it's all people. We're all here in it together for some reason, doing what we do. And I guess the bottom line would be for education and inspiration.

CG: We appreciate you sharing a lot today. And as you say, aspire to inspire. I think, fortunately, this is what I—it's a record of your first-person account. But this is your life and your work. And I think you are still continuing to aspire to inspire. And we just are honored to be able to help tell your story.

MR: I'm honored that we're doing this together. I really am. It gives me encouragement that I'm not out there in the wilderness, like I might feel sometimes in this building with nobody else around us. And nobody can visit me, more or less, because we're so off the beaten track in a way. It won't always be like that.

CG: True.

With his freewheeling passion for art and a lifetime of dedication to serving the community through it, Michael Ríos stands as an exemplary Chicanx artist of our time. His long-standing murals continue to beautify the Mission District while elevating and educating public consciousness to include the rich intricacies of Chicanx history and culture. By making his art

explicitly accessible, he has inspired generations of artists and average people to seek meaning and enlightenment amongst the oppressively mundane.

MR: There was a time, see, before the COVID thing, they would have open studios in the city. And so this building—all the artists in the building would gear up for those two days and the weekends that we would do it, open our doors up and have people come through and see what everybody does. Hope we can get back to those days.

CG: Hopefully soon.

MR: But if we got our shots, we're getting close.

CG: This oral history of Michael Ríos was a collaborative effort, like murals also are. The team behind it was:

SOPHIA MARINA: Sophia Marina

CG: —who served as audio and content editor.

ERICA GANGSEI: Erica Gangsei

MYISA PLANCQ-GRAHAM: Myisa Plancq-Graham

CG: —who served as executive producers.

JB: Javier Briones

KEVIN CARR: Kevin Carr

CHAD COERVER: Chad Coerver

CARY CORDOVA: Cary Cordova

STEPHANIE GARCÉS: Stephanie Garcés

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Melissa San Miguel

CG: And it was produced and mixed by me, Camilo Garzón.

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Thanks for listening.
[*music*]