

Sandra Alvarado, Eric Morales, and Drisel Perez Gutierrez (editors)

"They breathe color!"

Chicana Artist Margaret Garcia (b. 1951) and Her Activism in Los Angeles

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California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).

The Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History.

Project: Women, Politics, and Activism since Suffrage.

O.H. 5992.1.

Oral Interview with Margaret Garcia, conducted by Helen Yoshida,

October 13, 2017, Los Angeles California.

Introduction

The oral history interview transcribed below belongs to a collection held in CSUF's Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), titled "Women, Politics, and Activism since Suffrage." The interview with Margaret Garcia was conducted by Helen Yoshida on October 13, 2017, in Los Angeles, California. The interview lasted 50 minutes and 55 seconds, and it is archived as a digital recording/audio file at COPH (see "Copyright Advisory" below). The verbatim transcript edited here was prepared in 2021 by Sandra Alvarado, Eric Morales, and Drisel Perez Gutierrez.

Margaret Garcia, born September 20, 1951, in Los Angeles, California, is a Chicana artist and activist. In the interview edited here, Garcia reflects on her teenage years growing up in Los Angeles, prior to pursuing a career as an artist. Before completing high school in 1969, Garcia had experienced conflict at home, eventually ran away, and was taken in by two teachers. One of these educators had at some point housed individuals who had marched with Martin Luther King Jr., and they sparked Garcia's interest in politics, Civil Rights, and her Chicana identity. Garcia discusses her role in the 1968 Los Angeles High school walkouts, when she spoke in front of the Board of Education, and details her unconventional approach to gaining acceptance into the University of Southern California (USC).

Garcia discusses her evolving aesthetics, her passion for the use of high-key colors, and why she is so intrigued by these colors. She comments on her feelings about contemporary visual artists who have influenced or inspired her through their friendship and their craft, including Yreina Cervantez, Carlos Almaraz, Frank Romero, CiCi Segura, Sonya Fe, Linda Vallejo, Patssi Valdez, and Graciela Iturbide. Garcia shares her philosophy on teaching art and mentoring new artists through the various workshops she holds, which, she believes, are not just helpful to students, but to herself as well as she continues to grow in her experience through teaching and mentoring. She shares her sentiments about incorporating political messages into her art, reflecting issues that matter to her, such as the protection of landmarks like the Atchafalaya Basin in Louisiana and Glacier

National Park in Montana, rather than merely creating work that endorses or rejects a political candidate during election seasons.

Margaret Garcia's recollections of her teenage years provide insights into events that have affected the Chicana and Chicano community in Los Angeles, California, such as the educational inequity that resulted in the 1968 East Los Angeles high school walkouts. The changes in her aesthetics illustrate the evolution of her art and activism. Her story also touches on the beginning of artistic traditions, such as the Day-of-the-Dead celebrations, and their global influence. Her interview should be of interest to anyone interested in the community history, social history, and cultural history of southern California.

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The primary-source edition published below originated in the "History and Editing" course offered by CSUF's History Department.

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Verbatim Transcript (O.H. 5992.1)

LAWRENCE DE GRAAF CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: Margaret Garcia [MG]

INTERVIEWER: Helen Yoshida [HY]

DATE: October 13, 2017

LOCATION: Los Angeles, California

PROJECT: Women, Politics, and Activism since Suffrage

TRANSCRIBERS: Sandra Alvarado, Eric Morales, and Drisel Perez Gutierrez

HY: Um, so, um, um — where — so, kind of going off of —

MG: Where – off – of what I asked about Chicano¹ art?

HY: Yeah.

MG: What are you going to ask?

HY: Um – (laughs) – well, how did the Chicano movement affect or inform your work?

MG: Um, in 1969, I'd just graduated from high school. I had been living with an English teacher and a history teacher. I had had, um, because inasmuch as I didn't get along with my mother, I also didn't get along with my father at the time. We hadn't come to terms with our relationship. Part of that was a lot of the poison my mother had put in the water in – in terms of the way I felt about my dad.

HY: Mm-hm.

MG: So, we got into an altercation. I had a – a girlfriend. You know, at the time I was like sixteen, and I was not sexual. (laughs) I was just a normal sixteen-year-old kid, and my girlfriend kind of – her name was – we called her Evie. She was one of the girls that we hung out with. She looked and felt like a dyke² to anybody who would look at her. Now, you know – I – for me, I didn't have a word for it. (dog sneezes repeatedly) I didn't have an understanding of it and, so, she was going out with boys and, to be honest, it wasn't on my, like, radar. It wasn't something I thought about. Um, but my dad came home one day, and she was – she and my cousin, Cookie, and I were doing our hair and dancing and stuff, and my father had a hissy fit, and we got into a fist fight, and he, you know, he knocked my head on the floor, and I had like bruises around my neck where he was trying to choke me. I had a stepmother at the time who was a beautiful woman, very nice lady – got him to stop. The next day, I ran away from home, and I was taken in by an English teacher and history teacher. And the history teacher had housed some of the people that had been marching with Martin Luther King.³ I know – I'm getting – it takes me long to get back to what I was saying. Veralynn Marshall who was a history teacher at Roosevelt,⁴ and um, this politicized me to some degree – there was sort of – it indoctrinated me into modern poli – we talked about Civil Rights and Chicano rights, and things like that. So, by the time I got to CSUN,⁵ I was really thirsty, really hungry for, um, that indoctrination. And, I came into the term "Chicano" because before that I didn't know anything "Chicano." "Chicano" was – for me, a perfect word because it helped me to define myself. To say, you know,

¹ Identifier for Mexican Americans and those of Mexican descent living in the United States; in popular use since the 1960s.

² Slang term (often offensive) for a lesbian.

³ Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968); American Baptist minister and Civil Rights activist.

⁴ Theodore Roosevelt High School, Los Angeles, California; established 1922.

⁵ California State University, Northridge; established 1958.

I'm not Mexican, I'm not American. I'm both—I'm—I'm something else, you know. And I wasn't hyphenated. It was one word, and I liked—I liked that. And, so, I embraced that term because it allowed me to take pride in the things that I enjoyed about my culture. And it allowed me to discard the things that I no longer had use for. Including this sort of male-dominated world that *Mexicanos*⁶ are so strongly in favor of and something that my grandmother taught me to reject. So, it fit me. It felt right. It—it—it felt whole. So, I embraced the terminology. I became aware of the farmworker struggle,⁷ and I joined the picket line and started picketing—um, in favor of the farmworkers. Back in '69, I went up to Delano,⁸ I slept in Filipino Hall,⁹ and I stopped eating grapes, you know. What else could I do? Um, and then, uh—but I wasn't an artist at the time. I did not give myself permission to call myself an artist probably until 1983. At one point, I st—I was studying art. I learned to draw and when I turned twenty-one, I took up painting. But the reason I didn't give myself permission to call myself an artist is because my beliefs were that you had to have a certain skill to achieve that. It wasn't just you deciding, "Okay, I'm an artist today." Like, you know, you had to have some skill. And I had to practice and become skilled to get to the point where I could call myself an artist. And it wasn't until someone else called me an artist that I believed it, and I think the first time I remember someone calling me an artist, because I would say I was a painter—I—I paint, I didn't say I was an artist because I didn't feel I had the—the—the right to say I was an artist until I had achieved as—a level of skill, and I felt like I was still learning. You know, I—I, you know, it's like, you know, someone calling you *maestro*,¹⁰ and you're like, "Oh," you know, "I'm still learning how to play a note or two." And I—and that's the way I felt—I felt like a beginner. I had an artistic vision, I had an aesthetic, I had things that I love, and that any artist would be proud to be able to say, "I can express that." But it, um, I had—I didn't feel like I had achieved that. That's why I—I didn't feel I gave myself that permission until '83, I think. And Glenna Avila¹¹ was the first person to call me an artist, and I thought, "Okay, I am. I'm an artist. That's right." Because I was *doing* it. I was in the midst of doing the work. It wasn't just a fantasy in my head. I was putting myself out. That's when I felt I could give myself that permission.

HY: Um, (pauses) were you a part of the (pauses) 1968 walkouts?

⁶ Spanish for "Mexicans."

⁷ Reference to the activism of César E. Chávez (1927-1993) and others for farmworkers' rights.

⁸ City in Kern County, California; known for the 1965-1970 Grape Strike.

⁹ Community center in Delano, California.

¹⁰ Italian and Spanish for "master;" also used for a distinguished artist.

¹¹ (Born 1953); artist and art administrator in Los Angeles, California.

MG: The walkouts?

HY: Yeah.

MG: Uh, I—I hesitated walking out. I was at the gate, and I was there. I did not walk out, but I went to— afterwards, there was a town hall meeting where all the students who walked out went to speak before the Board of Education.¹² I went to that, and I spoke in terms of what I—you know, I said, “There’s— there’s something wrong here,” you know. “My sister has graduated from here, and she can’t even read. It seems to me that’s wrong.” That the level of education at Roosevelt was not as high as it was at Fairfax High¹³ or some other place. So, yeah, there was huge discrepancies. So, I spoke out in favor of the walkout before the Board of Education. I went there to speak, but I didn’t walk out. (long pause)

HY: And—

MG: I think it served its purpose. I thought it was a good thing. (long pause)

HY: Um (pauses), I’m just going back to— um, school— school again. After we talked about CSUN (traffic sounds), um, and then— did you— you attended USC¹⁴ for graduate work.

MG: Mm-hm.

HY: So, what drew you to their program?

MG: Um, I called them up and said, “You know, I would really like to go into your school, but I don’t have a B.A.”¹⁵ (pauses) So, I went, and I met with them, and I interviewed everybody on the faculty, and they voted unanimously to let me into their program. (pauses) But I didn’t have a B.A.

[00:10:00]

MG: They let me into their program. They s— (pauses)— my understanding— I wasn’t there in the meeting, but they— they said, (rattling dishware) “Well, this is a— this a person worth— you know, she’s basically trying the competition that we have in the open market, and she has achieved that level of success. So, we ought to recognize it and just let her move forward from here on in.” That’s why I was accepted. (pauses) Does— (laughs) does that sound crazy? (rattling) It set precedent. They had never done that before.

HY: (laughs) No, that sounds cool.

MG: Yeah, you know, it was nice. They were good to me. (rattling) I thought the faculty was good to me.

HY: Mm-hm.

MG: Um, the student body not so much.

¹² Governing body of the Los Angeles Unified School District; established 1961.

¹³ Fairfax High School, Los Angeles, California; established 1924.

¹⁴ University of Southern California; private institution, established 1880.

¹⁵ Abbreviation for “Bachelor of Arts;” academic degree.

HY: Mm.

MG: Kids were—I was like the only Chicana there and, (rattling) I don't know, some of those students had problems (pauses) with me. But, you know, what do you do? It was a good experience.

HY: Uh-huh.

MG: I realized how much I knew.

HY: Already, going in?

MG: Yeah.

HG: Yeah.

MG: And, you know, I was an adult. I was not a young student and, you know, a lot of these programs, it's sort of like, you're told not to have an opinion. (laughs) You know. And if you're—if you're—if you hit forty and you don't have an opinion about something, you're really in trouble—(rattling) it seems to me.

HY: (laughs) Uh, in graduate school, um, uh, when—when you began working in the field, were there—there many, uh, women artists already in the field—in your field?

MG: Uh, you—you mean, uh, what do you mean? Uh—

HY: Uh, (rattling) uh, women who are, um, s—your contemporaries?

MG: Well, Yreina Cervantez¹⁶ (rattling begins) was one of my contemporaries. You know, and there have been a few women that have been very, you know, great colleagues. And we had conversations and exchanges and things like that. Uh, my—my, uh, work, you know—Linda Vallejo¹⁷ said to me that my work was, uh, that I was a formalist. That's what she called me. It was a bit formal. It wasn't like folk-crafty kind of—I—I didn't do a lot of (pauses) folk and crafts kind of imaging. But, in truth, I did a lot of restoration work when I was living in Chicago, when I was doing—and I—I had this very strong appreciation for (door creaks) high-key color and that fact that it kind of—it comes from a folk-art tradition. Um, I didn't paint, at the time, you know, I wasn't painting *calaveras*¹⁸ and Day-of-the-Dead imagery, and the *Virgin of Guadalupe*.¹⁹ Uh, I didn't really learn about Day of the Dead until '83, I think. Kind of late. Um, I learned about those things through different ways, because I was doing restoration work in Chicago and we did a lot of, uh, European china, and things like Lladrós²⁰ and—and

¹⁶ (Born 1952); artist and Chicana activist in southern California.

¹⁷ (Born 1951); artist and advocate for Indigenous art and rituals in southern California.

¹⁸ Spanish for “skulls.”

¹⁹ Title of Mary, the mother of Jesus, based on 1531 Marian apparitions in Mexico.

²⁰ Lladrós; Spanish manufacturer of decorative accessories; established 1953.

Hummels²¹, and Wedgwoods²², and Royal (creaks) Doultons²³, and all this kind of, we called it “poodleship,” and occasionally, we’d get something from China, 500 B.C. China, Mexico, and Africa, and it was hand-crafted, and it had high-key color, and it was strong, and I loved it. You know, um, and what I – what I learned is that art – around the equator, art from places with hot climate and tropical places with big, beautiful butterflies and big colorful flowers, that color is the *norm*. If you live in Iceland or Holland, and it’s snowing, and it’s off-season, and you get to stay home and paint – you’re painting snow and slush and gray and umbers, and – and earth tones and just – sad, gray things, you know. And, uh, the – the color palette for those of us who live in areas that have that hot tropical sensibility, it’s a norm. Whereas, you know, like, I – I mean, I know that, on occasion, it rains a lot, and you might look up on a hillside and see ice plant that’s blooming in – to full fuchsia, and it is so electric that it almost looks artificial. Well, that’s the norm, and to European sensibilities, you know, that high-key color was almost bombastic and offensive. And then, you know, they’ll say, “Oh yeah, Gauguin²⁴ did it.” People will tell you that. They’ll say, “Oh, Gauguin did thi” – Gauguin was Latino! He grew up in Peru. His mother was Peruvian,²⁵ and he grew up as part of the Americas. So, his contribution in terms of that sense of color comes from here. It comes from us. That’s our heritage. It makes sense to me. I get it. I love it. You know, eh – eh, *Mexicanos*, the Indigenous people, they – they just about – they eat color, they breathe color, they see color. It’s – it’s part of the environment. It makes total sense. And, I – what I did was, I kind of combined my knowledge of more traditional European – with that sense of color and acceptance of works by people who do fauve²⁶-ish work, like Jawlensky,²⁷ who’s German, and, uh, you know, some of these – these other painters. I love the – the fauvists,²⁸ as they call them, wild animals or whatever. But, it doesn’t – it’s not wild – I think, you know, I turn on the TV, and I – I – we don’t watch TV here, but I – I had a TV set, I’d put the – the, you know, person looks orange with bright-colored hair, and people would say, “Your TV’s off.” I go, “No, it’s not off. It looks great. I like it that way.” You know,

²¹ Porcelain figurines based on art by Sister Maria Innocentia Hummel (1909-1946); made 1935-2008 by German manufacturer W. Goebel and since 2009 by successor companies.

²² Wedgwood; English manufacturer of decorative accessories; established 1759.

²³ Royal Doulton; English manufacturer of decorative accessories; established 1815.

²⁴ Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin (1848-1903); French Post-Impressionist painter.

²⁵ Gauguin’s grandmother, Flora Tristan (1803-1844) was French-Peruvian.

²⁶ Fauvism (from the French “les Fauves,” meaning “the wild beasts”); early twentieth-century artistic movement known for intense colors.

²⁷ Alexej von Jawlensky (1864-1941); Russian expressionist painter, worked in Germany.

²⁸ See note 26.

- I—I—I—I react, and I have that sense of—of, uh, appreciation. (to NN)²⁹
Thank you, babe.
- NN: You're welcome. Enjoy.
- MG: Aw. That's sweet of you. So, um—
- HY: Thank you. (rattling ends)
- MG: —it's normal to me, you know, I think. Um, so, I don't feel so traditional as she may think I am. Um, but, you know, hey. (pauses). Thank you. He's— he knows I'm hungry.
- HY: (laughs)
- MG: Bless his heart. I'm going to just take a (inaudible) here. So, does that answer your question, or did I answer it? Did I—
- HY: No, I think you did.
- MG: Okay.
- HY: (laughs) Um—
- MG: This goat cheese tastes great with that honey, by the way.
- HY: Oh, it does?
- MG: Mm. Mm-hm. (whistle blows) Anyway—
- HY: (laughs) Um, (whistle blows) so, throughout the years, uh (rattling), what themes have emerged or reappeared—continued to play a role in your work?
- MG: In my art?
- HY: Mm-hm.
- MG: You know, there's people whose work—people, you know, I—you know, I—I—I do like, you know, the same people I liked before, except now there's a whole bunch of people that I like even more. You know, that—I'm going to put this right here. That—like David Fleury,³⁰ who is a young man that was my apprentice. (rattling begins) I got to a point where I was looking at his work, and I was saying to myself, "You know, I'd rather have a David Fleury than a Picasso."³¹

[00:20:00]

- MG: Then, I realized because it says more about who I am and where I come from, and I really love the aesthetic. I love, you know, and I—and I—of course, I love John Valadez³² and Yreina Cervantez, (rattling ends) and I love—I love things that I know. Things that (pauses) they—they—they make sense to me 'cause I see them in the context of my life now. They reverberate, um, my sensibility now in terms of what's going on (distant

²⁹ Unidentified individual present during the interview.

³⁰ Artist in Los Angeles, California.

³¹ Pablo Picasso (1881-1973); Spanish artist.

³² (Born 1951); realist painter and muralist focusing on Mexican American visibility.

chatter) and what I see. Um, of course I love Frida Kahlo.³³ She's lovely, you know, and wonderful. But, uh, there's a lot of women artists right now that I love even more. You know, um, uh, some of them are people that paint with me, that I—that I like to paint with. And it isn't because they're famous. You know, it isn't because they're well-known. It's because they speak to me (distant chatter), you know. Uh, and that includes people who aren't Chicano as well as people (whistle blows) who are Chicano. You know, uh, I feel like we're just right now scratching the surface in terms of women that are getting out there and producing. Um, (pauses) (rattling) but, um, (distant chatter begins) I guess Yreina would probably be at the top of that list (rattling). Carlos Almaraz,³⁴ for sure. You know, he's life-changing. Uh, Frank Romero,³⁵ who has been a dear and good friend to me, who has opened up his studio and been an influence and given me access to other artists and other things that he's done, and I see the relationship between him and—and Carlos and how they developed, and—and why that was really significant and really important (distant chatter). Um, but I love the work of Ester Petschar³⁶—she's a Chicana. And, uh, I like Crystal Galindo's³⁷ work a lot. Sonya Fe³⁸ is—is really amazing. She's lovely. Her work is—is really well done. CiCi Segura,³⁹ she does some gorgeous things. She's also in the Cheech Collection.⁴⁰ Um, I like, um, the altars and the installations of Ofelia Esparza.⁴¹ She was there at the beginning when all that, uh—the Day-of-the-Dead stuff, it was—she started educating everybody on how to put a—an altar together and how to make those—those, uh, presentations. And, uh, Rosanna Ahrens.⁴² Um, that's—that's kind of, the—the people that I'm close to right now, that I feel most connected to in terms of having a dialogue and being able to—to have an exchange when it comes to art. They'd probably be the first ones. There are other people who are more famous that also deserve, uh, you know, some—some recognition, that—that have worked really hard, um, Linda Vallejo (whistle blows). You know, um, and—and even, you know, Patssi Valdez.⁴³ You know, Patssi is in there. Um, but, if I was gonna do a show, right now,

³³ (1907-1954); Mexican painter.

³⁴ Carlos D. Almaraz (1941-1989); Mexican American painter.

³⁵ Frank Edward Romero (born 1941); American artist.

³⁶ Artist and activist in Los Angeles, California.

³⁷ (Born 1983); Yacqui Xicana artist in San Francisco, California.

³⁸ (Born 1952); American painter.

³⁹ CiCi Segura Gonzalez; abstract painter in Los Angeles, California.

⁴⁰ The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture, Riverside, California (to open 2022).

⁴¹ Altar-maker (*altarista*) in Los Angeles, California.

⁴² Rosanna Esparza Ahrens; daughter of Ofelia Esparza, artist in Los Angeles, California.

⁴³ (Born 1951); Chicana artist in Los Angeles, California.

right here and now, and I was going to try and pull people together to do that show and it was – if it – if it had to be a Chicano show, then I would probably – Son – Sonya Fe and CiCi Segura would be there at the top. Um, if it was a bigger, wider circle of people that I wanted to say in terms of women and women’s art, um, I would add, uh, Margaret Lazzari⁴⁴ and uh, Ruth Weisberg,⁴⁵ Ann Page,⁴⁶ um, who do amazing work. (children audible in the background) Um, and you can say Beatriz Ochoa⁴⁷ all the way up in (inaudible), Graciela – Graciela, um, Barraza-Vega⁴⁸ in Corpus Christi. But one of the photographers, one of the women photographers who I *absolutely* adore is Graciela Iturbide,⁴⁹ who’s a friend of mine. I hooked her up when she came up here. She had a solo show at the Getty⁵⁰ and uh, she did, I think, uh, “48 Hours in the Day of America”⁵¹ or something like that. And I took her and set her up with my niece who lived in Boyle Heights,⁵² and she did a series on the – the gangs of East L.A.⁵³ What time is it?

HY: Uh, two-ten.

MG: Oh, we’re good then. Okay. I can eat this.

HY: (laughs)

MG: Um, Graciela Iturbide is a Mexican photographer, not a Chicana. But she’s definitely on top of any list I could put together. I went to Oaxaca,⁵⁴ and I met, um, Justina Fuentes⁵⁵ from Oaxaca, and, um, she’s magnificent. Laura Hernández,⁵⁶ also from Oaxaca, she’s wonderful.

HY: Um.

MG: Mm-hm. (pauses) I haven’t been staying on a list of everything. I think that now that I don’t curate as much, that I’m not doing the Day of the Dead like I was, um, because I’m trying to stay in the studio, so to do my art. You know, Bonnie Lambert,⁵⁷ who’s my – who’s been my student, who’s now kind of on her own, doing her own thing, she’s somebody to watch. Definitely somebody to watch. Um, and my aesthetics has changed a little

⁴⁴ (Born 1953); artist and professor emerita (USC).

⁴⁵ (Born 1942); artist and professor (USC).

⁴⁶ Ann Takayoshi Page (born 1940); artist and professor emerita (USC).

⁴⁷ Unidentified artist.

⁴⁸ Also known as Grace Barraza-Vega; artist in Corpus Christi, Texas.

⁴⁹ (Born 1942); Mexican photographer.

⁵⁰ The J. Paul Getty Center/Museum, Los Angeles, California; established 1997.

⁵¹ *A Day in the Life of America* (1987); art project.

⁵² Neighborhood (also known as *Paredón Blanco*) in Los Angeles, California.

⁵³ Abbreviation for “Los Angeles.”

⁵⁴ Oaxaca de Juárez, city and state capital of Oaxaca, Mexico.

⁵⁵ (Born 1954); Mexican painter.

⁵⁶ (Born 1960); Mexican painter.

⁵⁷ Stage actress and painter in southern California.

bit. There's certain things I didn't care for, I didn't like, and now I have an appreciation for it. Things that are a little more – raw. Things that are a little more – I wanna say, uh, (pauses) I don't think "primitive"⁵⁸ is the correct word. I think just things that are a little more – not so "academic."⁵⁹ Not so well proportioned. You know, I don't – I don't mind – I don't mind a certain amount of – I – I almost want to say "disfigurement" in the work, you know, where the work is not necessarily so – so practiced, so – so anatomically correct, but there's a little bit of distortion because we all see with a little bit of distortion, and that distortion sometimes kinda makes you uneasy. And sometimes it makes more of a point than something that's correct. I think if everything had to be anatomically correct, we'd have anatomy charts in the museum, and we've gotten to a point where we – we just about have done that, you know. I'm – I'm not a big proponent of conceptual art,⁶⁰ and it isn't that there aren't conceptual pieces that I don't like, it's just that, if you look in the dictionary, and you look up the word "concept, conceptual," it means "born in the mind." My work is not born in the mind. It's born in the heart. It's nurtured by the mind. And it's okay for something to be intelligent and tho – thought out, but the problem that I have with some things that are "born in the mind," when it comes to art, is that they get to the point where sometimes they're just *contrived* – for me. And even though there's always something that breaks the rule, and occasionally there's a conceptual piece that really hits home, and it's like, "Oh wow, that really says it," the majority of the work for me falls on kinda, like, deaf ears. Or, like, really? You know, I – I kinda get bored with the sort-of post-modern paste of, you know, charcoal houses and gray houses and beige houses, and you know, it's like, I want some color,

[00:30:00]

MG: you know. (dog barks) Sort of tired of that that post-modern era. I d – I – that – hipsters don't bother me, it's their aesthetic (laughs) in Echo Park⁶¹ that bothers me. (dog barks) I don't care for all those black buildings, you know. (dog barks) (pauses) I know, that's a quirk of mine, I guess. That's why my house is green.

HY: Um, you mentioned earlier that, um, you do teach – teach art to other women, um, but what – what motivates you to do that? And, how long have you been doing that?

MG: Oh – (dogs barks) I love – I love having my workshops. And, um, (dog barks) (laughs) (to dog) BooBoo, stop it! Um, students – a good student goes

⁵⁸ Adjective; referring (derogatorily) to non-European art and non-western societies.

⁵⁹ Adjective; referring to the realistic painting styles of the European academies of art.

⁶⁰ Artform that privileges a concept or idea over traditional aesthetics and forms.

⁶¹ Neighborhood in Los Angeles, California.

(inaudible) for you. You—you find that, in teaching someone, what you know, you have to find a way to articulate it in a way that is comprehensive enough to pass on. And you can't just do everything out of a book. You have to give an example. You have to show them how. You have to lead the way. *And* you have to, I think, you really have to get yourself to the point where (pauses) you—you train them to have an opinion. There's a lot of people who walk in and say, "I don't want you to teach me anything. I know what I'm doing and I—I did it that way because that's the way I wanted it." But, it—a—a person who is truly reaching to prove themselves is not like that at all. They're kinda like, "Well, what do you think?" you know, and, uh, it's the teacher's position (dog barks) to get them, to guide them to a place where they begin to understand the process that they're going through, so they can embrace it—so they can embrace their own capacity—to embrace where you are in this minute—wherever you are, whether it be good or bad. This is where you are, this is where you're starting. Embrace that, and then step up from there because until you embrace where you are, you can't take the next step to get where you are, because you're always faltering. So, you—you have to develop a foundation for yourself so that you can get where you wanna go. Whether it be skill or aesthetic, wherever you're going. And, um, I learn it—I learn a lot by teaching people who don't have the skill I do. And I learn to see things differently. Skill is one part of it. Talent is an overrated concept. It's just totally overrated. Somebody may have talent. So what, if they're not working? They may have talent (dog barks), but they don't practice it. So what, if they have talent? (dog barks) If you really wanna be an artist, and you have no talent, and you have to develop it—you have to develop the way to understand composition, how to create values of light and dark, how to balance color, how to move quickly perhaps across the page. That's an accomplishment. To go from—perhaps not understanding—"I can't even draw a stick figure." Who cares? Who wants stick figures anyways? You know, it takes the determination and the desire. Do you wanna be an artist? Then develop your skill. If you want it bad enough, you can have it. There isn't anything to keep you from trying to do that. And, you know, hey, I have a—a guy, he's like, in his, like, late seventies—he comes to my workshops. It's kind of late in life for him, you know. But he gets better, and he gets better, and occasionally he really, really surprises us. And sometimes, he does a lot of stuff that you're going like, "What were you thinking?" You know, there's a lot of that. But I think because—I think—I—you know, I believe in reincarnation. Whatever skill you're practicing in this lifetime, whatever it is you're teaching yourself to do, there's always going to be a payoff. It may not even be in this lifetime, it may be in the next one. But the process of learning it, the process of going through it, the process of being creative and giving yourself the opportunity to be creative

- and learn a skill – I don't believe is ever wasted at – regardless of what place and state you're at and if you have a lot of talent and you practice it – oh my God – you flourish. But if you have all this talent, and you don't practice it, who cares what talent you have? (rattling)
- HY: It's essential to practice – to practice.
- MG: You know, start playing, you know. Go out there and play. Just go out and do what you're supposed to do. Make time for yourself. Indulge yourself with the time to be creative, to sit there and be able to enjoy it, and do it.
- HY: Being present.
- MG: Yeah, you have to be present. You know. (pauses)
- HY: When you come to the canvas, um, and you're painting or you just finished a piece, uh, what do you hope viewers will, um, come away from with – by – viewing your work – experiencing your work? (traffic sounds)
- MG: You know, it, um – of course, it depends on what I'm painting. If I'm painting a portrait, you know, probably what I want more than anything is that you get a sense of that person; that you see that humanity; that you – you have some kind of understanding of it. You know, I – uh, when I did the *Nuevo Mestizaje*⁶² series, you know, the majority of the people were people of color. Not everybody was Mexican, because that's the – the point of it, they were all kind of blending. Some people were Asian, some people were African, or White – whatever. But I wanted to put us all within the context of being human, you know, of, uh, seeing our humanity, you know. Not just the sleepy Mexican with the *sombrero*⁶³ pulled over their head, where it's just a stereotype in an eye color that we are. You look at the television and, you know, we're portrayed as, um, lazy, sleepy Mexicans, drug addicts, prostitutes, uh, but, in – in what I'm painting, people around me, and I'm painting the portrait of a person I know, and they're a teacher or a filmmaker, a singer, an author, or an artist, you know, I put those things oftentimes on the painting. I write something about what they say to me. You know, Elias Nahmias,⁶⁴ who is part Lebanese and part Israeli, and he knew, um, um, Gabriel García Márquez,⁶⁵ he knew him, and he knew his son, and when he met him – Ga – Má – Márquez said, "The seeds of destruction are within you," because he had two opposing – the Lebanese, the – the Arab – and the – the Israeli – and he was part of the same thing. And I thought, "Oh, that is so beautiful." So, I took that, and I scratched it into his portrait, and it says, "The seeds of destruction are within you." I loved it. Uh, and that's true about his portrait (whistle blows), about who

⁶² Spanish for "New Miscegenation;" Margaret Garcia's contribution to the exhibit, "Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge" (2001), organized by Cheech Marin.

⁶³ Spanish for "shadower;" a wide-brimmed Mexican hat.

⁶⁴ Mexican-born independent filmmaker.

⁶⁵ (1927-2014); Colombian author.

he is. And he's a Mexican filmmaker, but he's also, uh, you know, Israeli, Arab, you know, he's—he's a—a lot of things. So, I—I think, uh, I want people to walk away with the complexity of what we are, and that we have our contradictions, and that we're more than one thing, you know. We're not, you know, "Oh you're Mexican," and it's like,

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MG: when it comes to your mind, what is that? You know, you know, you, like, I'm—I'm kind of confused about that. You know, the whole thing with races is a construct, it really is. We're not different races, we're not like different species or something like that. We're all human beings. And, uh, we—we need to see each other as human beings to be able to—to—uh, value the differences that we have instead of trying to make everybody *beige*. We're not all beige. We're a lot of different things. And it's the differences that make us so beautiful. When somebody has long legs, when somebody is short and small and cute, and somebody is tall and handsome, and, you know, somebody else is fair, and somebody is black as night, and—oh my God—the colors that—that vibrate, radiate—radiate off of their skin. How boring would it be if everybody looked the same? How boring would it be if everybody liked the same thing? I mean, to me, it's just boredom, you know. I would want—I want my color. I want, you know, a spicy, tasty, you know, in-your-face perspective, you know. That's what I want. That's what I want. (pauses) Did I answer your question?

HY: Mm-hm.

MG: Did I? Oh.

HY: Um, do you consider yourself a political artist and an activist?

MG: Good question. (laughs) (rattles) Mm, you know, this last election season, I pissed off a lot of people. People attacked me because I was not supporting Hillary.⁶⁶ Um, and I don't like Trump⁶⁷ any more than anybody else. I tried to paint Trump and do something very political, but it's not my nature. It's just not my nature. The same way that someone who does cartoons—but, I'll say this, I was painting—I just did a painting a few days ago, about the Atchafalaya Basin.⁶⁸ The Atchafalaya Basin is in Louisiana, and it's where the end of the DAPL⁶⁹ pipeline flows. My work is political because I am political, because I care about those things. And, in—ina—ina—inasmuch as my existence is political, my work is political. And I care that we're screwing up the Atchafalaya Basin by laying a pipeline when you have all

⁶⁶ Hillary R. Clinton (born 1947); American politician, 2016 presidential candidate.

⁶⁷ Donald J. Trump (born 1946); 45th President of the United States.

⁶⁸ Wetland/swamp in south central Louisiana.

⁶⁹ Abbreviation for "Dakota Access Pipeline;" an oil pipeline that extends from northwest North Dakota, through South Dakota, to a terminal in central Illinois.

this crawfish and you have food, and you have wetlands, and birds, and things that are going to be at risk for being eliminated. And every Cypress tree that comes down in the Atchafalaya Basin is never replaced. We can't replant it. Those wetlands are lost. They're gone. We are destroying this paradise. So I painted it. Is that political? When I'm telling people, "This is what we're losing." Some people would say, "No, that's not political," because there are no slogans, there's no — there's nobody telling you who to vote for — there's none of that. But it — I'm asking people to be conscious of it. The act of painting it — is what I'm trying to do is, I'm trying to make people aware with the beauty of that place. And at least put it in somebody's mind because nobody is talking about the Atchafalaya Basin. So, does that answer your question?

HY: Mm-hm.

MG: Okay. (pauses) Do you wanna see that painting?

HY: Yeah. That'd be great.

MG: I posted it on Facebook.⁷⁰ I also posted Glacier Park⁷¹ — which has burnt down. (rustling) (long pause)

NN: (sneezes)

MG: This is the Atchafalaya Basin. (pauses)

HY: It's so vibrant.

MG: Isn't it beautiful?

HY: Yeah.

MG: That's the Atchafalaya Basin. I was there — earlier this year.

HY: Mm.

MG: And then, uh, I went to Standing Rock.⁷²

HY: Mm.

MG: So. Mm. Standing Rock is near and dear to my heart. (pauses) Do you want to put a little honey in your — (taps) @@@

HY: Oh, yeah.

MG: Yeah, try that. — Let me show you Glacier Park. Just did that one too. I'm going to get sticky honey all over me.

HY: It's two-thirty.

MG: Yeah, I'm gonna have to go.

HY: Yeah.

MG: Here. I don't know if you wanna — this is Glacier Park.

HY: Wow.

MG: So, in some ways, no, it's not political, but, yes, it is. I don't sit down and try to do political art. I just try to be aware, to be mindful. Being mindful can be political. Does that — does that kind of answer that?

⁷⁰ Social media platform (also known as "Meta"); established 2004.

⁷¹ Glacier National Park (Rocky Mountains), Montana.

⁷² Standing Rock Indian Reservation, on the border between North and South Dakota.

HY: (laughs) Yeah, it does.
MG: Isn't it?
HY: Yeah.
MG: You know. (pauses) So they're coming in the studio to shoot those paintings for the show.
HY: Oh, okay.
MG: And, so, the other paintings I'm trying to do are about the water. I like painting water. (pauses)
HY: Okay. (rattling sound)
MG: Goat cheese and honey is one of my favorite things.
HY: (laughs)
MG: Mm. He doesn't like honey. I'm the only one who likes honey (inaudible) licking my fingers. Mm. Terrible. (inaudible) Bad manners.
HY: (laughs)
MG: So, that's kind of where I'm at right now. So, I can't paint Trump. I can't stand his face – can't stand to look at him.
HY: Mm.
MG: I don't have the capacity to do that kind of thing and then let it go. I – I – I – if I – if I do something like that – I – it's like I – it comes into my body, into my being, and I'm like living too much hate. I can't deal with it, you know. And – and I've worked really hard to get to where I'm at to let go of all the things that have hurt me in the past, and that hate brings everything up. So, it's better, you know, they – yeah, it's better to push it away from me. And, uh – and not allow him to be successful and turning me into what they are. You know, um, there – there is the idea that instead of spending my energy trying to, you know, be against something, even to resist something, to – it is better – more, uh, productive to be in favor of something. I'm in favor of Glacier Park. I'm in favor of the Atchafalaya Basin. I'm in favor of certain things. You know, it's like – instead of being against the war, I am in favor of peace. And – and, to that, I – I kinda embrace that philosophy –

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MG: – you're more effective by – by, uh, by being in favor of positive action than being against something. Being against drugs and saying "no" doesn't do anything, but being in favor of sobriety and embracing what *that* means is different. And – and I think more effective and fruitful – better use of energy. (rustling) (pauses) I hope that makes sense to you.

HY: It does.

MG: Yeah. My hands are such – (inaudible) Ouch. (inaudible). Um, (inaudible).

[00:50:55]

END OF INTERVIEW