

**PROYECTO MISSION MURALS**  
Oral History Audio Transcripts

**ESTER HERNÁNDEZ ORAL HISTORY**  
San Francisco, June 25, 2021

**SF MO  
MA**

This is an oral history of visual artist Ester Hernández for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on June 25th, 2021, in Ester's home in San Francisco, California. The voices you'll hear will be Ester's and my own.

Before we began, she offered me a Sanpellegrino Limonata and showed me around her place, including some Japanese prints, one of the Neko-bus from the beloved Hayao Miyazaki film *My Neighbor Totoro*. She also had a small Totoro keycap on her laptop's keyboard. In front of her, on the table where we sat to talk, she had written some notes to refer to before and during the recording of the oral history. While she had them there, available, she didn't need them. Her memories and stories came out naturally.

This oral history delves into the facets of Ester's personal life, her Mexican and Yaqui roots, her rural upbringing, and her work as a muralist, visual artist, and educator. We also talk about the guidance she received from her teacher Fran Valesco, the influence of Japan in her work, her time with the Mujeres Muralistas, the Sun Mad piece, and her depiction of the Virgen de Guadalupe.

Here is the oral history.

*Esta es una historia oral de la artista visual Ester Hernández para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 25 de junio de 2021, en la casa de Ester en San Francisco (California). Las voces que oirás serán las de Ester y la mía.*

*Antes de que comenzáramos, ella me ofreció una Sanpellegrino Limonata y me mostró su casa, incluyendo algunas láminas japonesas, incluida una del Neko-bus de la admirada película de Hayao Miyazaki Mi vecino Totoro. También tenía una tecla pequeña de Totoro en el teclado de su ordenador portátil. Frente a ella, en la mesa donde nos sentamos para charlar, ella había hecho algunos apuntes para consultarlos antes y durante la grabación de la historia oral. Aunque los tenía allí, disponibles, no los necesitó. Sus recuerdos e historias surgieron naturalmente.*

*Esta historia oral ahonda en las facetas de la vida personal de Ester, sus raíces mexicanas y yaquis, su crianza rural y su labor como muralista, artista visual y educadora. También hablamos de la formación que recibió de su maestra Fran Valesco, la influencia de Japón en sus obras, su experiencia con Mujeres Muralistas, la obra Sun Mad y su representación de la Virgen de Guadalupe.*

*Aquí está la historia oral.*

**CAMILO GARZÓN:** Today is June 25, [2021], and I'm here with Ester Hernández. I'm talking to her on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project* in her home in the Mission District, San Francisco. If you can just say your full name and where were you born.

**ESTER HERNÁNDEZ:** My name is Ester Hernández. I was born in 1944 in Dinuba, California, a small, little farming town in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley here in California, to a Mexican and Yaqui Native American family of farmworkers.

**CG:** What do you remember of growing up in that specific part of California?

**EH:** Well, I would say I was very—well, aside from having a big family, a very rich, cultural family—I mean, we were poor economically, but there was still a lot of the arts and culture that was brought from Mexico. So we were still surrounded by song, music, dance, appreciation of the arts, and self-expression. So that was very much a part of my life.

But, of course, being a farmworker family, as a child, I spent most of my summers and most of my life in the fields. And I have to say that the beauty of the organic materials was very touching and inspiring to me. And coming from a small, little farming town, those were, like, the only raw materials around, so those were my—the grape fields, in particular—were my first explorations of the world around me, manipulating the sands, drawing in the sands, making objects out of clay that I would find here and there, making little stencils out of the grape leaves.

So where I'm from is at the western base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. So there's this huge, incredible mountain range that my family and all of us—the community, the schools—we spent a lot of time up there—in particular, Sequoia [National] Park. So all the lakes and the boulders of granite and what have you were all very much inspiring. And it was kind of the backdrop to my life. So it was magnificent because it was always changing, whether [because of] the weather or the time of the day.

So in general, it was a very beautiful setting, although there was—it is still one of the poorest places in the world economically. But it's very culturally rich, even now, to this day, with the Indigenous people who are now the farmworkers from Oaxaca. They come with all of their traditions.

**CG:** So that, specifically, is something that to me is not surprising because I've read so much and have known so much about you. But it's the cultural and geographic and also historical wealth that being from that area—your family and also having different identities—has come to mean to you not only as an artist but also as a human.

And all of these things that you were expressing—the dance, even just seeing the Sierra Nevada Mountains—this kind of geography influences who we are and also the kinds of things we get interested in. Doesn't predispose us, but it still gives us some points.

When you think of the arts that you were mentioning, including dance, what were some of those traditions—Yaqui or otherwise—that you were really, I don't know, [that you] had some kind of affinity for or you thought of, like, OK, I see some meaning here. I want to lean deeper into my own identity or culture. What were some of those?

**EH:** Well, I have to say that everything we did culturally, I mean, whether it was baptismal, whether it was a wedding, whether it was a graduation, whether it was a funeral, we were always celebrating life and death through the arts. And so I grew up with a real respect for the arts.

And so, of course, I had to find my own way in terms of how I needed to express myself. And it was through the visual arts that I sort of ventured in that way, rather than song or dance or poetry or what have you. That was what really moved me the most.

And also, another interesting thing about my growing up in the small, little farming town out there, I was born and raised in Chinatown. It was founded by Chinese around the turn of the century. And it was, of course, considered the worst side of town to live on because it was pretty much undeveloped.

So when my families migrated from Mexico and from Texas, that was the only place that they could live. And it was really interesting because there were Chinese, there were Korean, Filipino—it was mostly farmworkers—of all backgrounds, as well as some Okies, the poor whites. And then, also, one of the communities that really most affected me was the Japanese after World War II, after they were let out of the internment camps, that was the only place they could live—in the barrio.

So I grew up with a very, very multicultural community. And one of my closest friends, who lived there in the barrio with me, was Japanese American. And as a child, we started sort of sharing artifacts from our culture and learning each other's language and sharing food and things along that line.

So as a child, I really was exposed, like, to calligraphy and things like that and being very, very touched by that and learning about calligraphy. So a lot of those elements stayed with me, even to this day—a real fascination [with] other cultures that kind of enriched my own. So in general, that's kind of the background.

But I would say one of the major turning points is—OK, I could back it up. My parents were also very much involved in farmworker unionization. My mother had been in a cotton strike in the 1930s, and my father was one of the first people to join the farm workers union, the United Farm Workers union.

And that was a real turning point in our lives, to say the least. And the farmworkers, when they were marching to Sacramento—the big march—they went through our little farming town, through my little town. And I had never seen art being used for social change. That was the first time I'd seen anything like that.

In the schools and all of that, in a grammar school and high school and all of that, they would show us the usual Western art but nothing even for Mexico. We knew nothing except what our families would show and share or know about.

But the farmworkers, when they came—El Teatro Campesino—they had banners, they had songs, they had dance, they had portable murals. It was just this whole different world that I witnessed. And I didn't exactly run off with them, but it stayed with me. That was a real turning point in terms of how I saw art being used as a tool for change. So yeah.

**CG:** I think all of the things that you're saying right now have had an influence, direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious. Because you see the work that you did over the years, and you incorporated even some of these kinds of East Asian art [techniques] that really originated there, like ukiyo-e or even these kinds of more interesting techniques that were developed thousands of years [ago] there.

But with iconography, that also reflects some of who you are, which is something that you've done throughout your career, not only in these kind of visual arts with prints and other kinds of things, even with pastel and those kinds of techniques, also in murals, which we'll get into. I feel like your art really has tried to express different kinds of things about who you are but not in a millenary sense, not like what some other artists were thinking, like, we're going to do Native Americans or who we were two thousand years ago, six hundred years ago before Columbus and all that.

**EH:** Yes, correct.

**CG:** We're depicting who we are here and now on a daily basis. Why did you decide to do that back then?

**EH:** OK. I've always had an interest, and so had my family. My father could speak Japanese because he worked with a Japanese farmer before he was taken away—before the farmer was taken away—to the internment camps. So my family always had an interest in other cultures, in particular Japanese because they were there with us in our barrio.

My sister and I were the ones who had a really deep fascination with Japanese culture. And I passed that on to my son, who eventually landed up, maybe thirty years ago, moving to Japan, marrying a *japonesa*. I have a granddaughter who's half Japanese. And I have had a chance to travel to Japan twenty-five times. So I have had a chance to see papermaking [and] pottery studios with kilns that run up the side of a mountain.

But the one thing that always really sort of fascinated me is I always found a relationship, especially—not to say that I'm really knowledgeable about it—but [with] Shinto and its kind of honoring all living things in nature. And I always found that resonated with the Native American and the ancient Native traditions, also, of honoring nature and seeing that they're gods and all of that.

So those types of things always sort of connected up with me, probably since I was a child and then, again, having a chance to go to Japan and to go to Mexico, to travel to very rural areas, to meet modern artists and all of that. And just kind of see that there are certain—certainly, there are connections, but the world is also changing. I mean, it always has been. But to me, I find that really fascinating when I meet somebody who's Chinese Mexican, somebody who's Iranian Guatemalteco.

Because my family is now very mixed in that way too. And to me, that's the richness, and that's a strength of our lives. And it doesn't get acknowledged often enough, you know. I have Jewish. I have Armenian. I have Black. I have Puerto Rican.

I mean, I have everything now in my family, and I think it just made us stronger and, I think, a lot more tolerant, getting to know about other cultures. It makes you think about your own culture. So yes, I've tried to do that. I've tried to somehow incorporate that into my art on some level.

**CG:** I think you have at various levels, which is even what you're doing right now, which is explicitly saying there's Shintoism, or Shinto, from Japan. There's some Buddhist art that also—especially Zen Buddhism—influenced some of those kinds of things.

And what I'm saying right now, I'm saying it because it is present, and you have decided to add it. But on top of that, you've also decided to add your own identities and reflect on, as you said, if Shinto makes me remember this about my background that is Yaqui, my background that is Mexican, these kinds of things, then it has not only the value of being more tolerant maybe, but of being in a sense, of seeing other things that you hadn't seen with the same eyes before. And I feel like you have. You do it in your art.

And when you think of when you went to study to a very specific university in the Bay Area—and you’ve talked about it in interviews before—there was an influence there too, [and] it seems like it also came through not only in your art but, at the same time, it came through in your life and your activism, as we call it these days—activism—just in who you are. Do you want to tell me a little bit of after you were growing up and ended up in college? How was that experience?

**EH:** OK. Well, coming from a small, little farming town, there aren’t very many opportunities, being an artist, especially. You have to, like, leave to go to the bigger cities. But at that point in my life, I was involved with the [United] Farm Workers, and I met somebody who had left the city to go to get involved, also, with the union. But for a few years, I went off to be a hippie, OK? And I learned a lot at that time too.

But then I got tired of that, and I came back into the Bay Area to go back to school to reconnect with community. Because I was even up in southern Humboldt County. And that’s when I went back to school. And I landed up in the East Bay.

And I met up with some women who were mostly *caribeñas* (Caribbean)—Trinidad, Belize, Puerto Rico, Cuba. Anyway, so they reconnected me with what we’re calling a third-world community. And, in particular, I ended up sort gravitating just to sort of reconnect with the Latino. But it was a bigger picture. It was a new reality. There were people from all over South America. There were people from everywhere.

So my consciousness about what Latina meant just got blown out of the water, coming from the countryside where everybody was pretty much Mexican—Mexican American or whatever. So anyway, that was really a mind-blowing event and I was studying art again.

And when I was over there at Grove Street College, they were starting to create murals. And a lot of those people—Mike Ríos, René Yañez, Patricia [Rodriguez]—a bunch of us were already over there and then everybody ended up coming to San Francisco.

But then I got recruited to go to UC Berkeley. And that was like—ha!—amazing. I mean, it was really like being thrown over the Niagara Falls in terms of the attitude of the teachers that were there. And mostly—they were, for the most part, elderly, tenured white men. And it was probably the first wave of women, people of color, and even teachers. That’s where I met Fran Valesco, and she was part of that new wave.

So they were very confused—a bit threatened. But they, I guess, said the doors were open, and things were changing. But, you know, they were still crying about the Renaissance. And

they knew absolutely nothing about what was going on in the community. They were kind of still living in this ivory tower and this whole other reality.

And Fran, fortunately, was one of my teachers there. And she was much more worldly and sophisticated and knew what was going on. Because she probably herself had been an activist for who knows [how long] because there were so many movements at that time—student movements, what have you. So she was very supportive. And there were a few other teachers.

But in general, it was a very difficult time. But nevertheless, I accepted the challenge because I love to learn. And UC Berkeley really—because it's so huge, I could take classes in geography. I could take classes in Japanese art history and African art history, in Western art history. I mean, it opened up this whole world. Because I've always loved libraries and learning.

[*door opens*]

So if I wasn't an artist, I think I would have been a librarian. Hello. [*laughs*]

So even though it was really challenging because, in general, being women of color—strong women of color—we were somewhat intimidating. And so there were barriers put up. But we didn't let that stop us. And I joined up with a community of other Latino, third-world, gay, progressive community. We came together. And so we were able to sort of work our way around it.

And I was still on the dean's list. Even then, they probably were scared to death of me, some of my teachers—initially, initially. But once they got to know me, they kind of relaxed a bit, and they realized that I was there to learn. I wasn't there to slit their throat, although sometimes I would have liked to.

Because they would call us names like Rosarita or Chiquita, like the banana, you know what I mean? They didn't know how to deal with women—women of color. Even white women—they didn't know how to deal with them either. It was like we were all this, whatever, this new population and wanting space, wanting voice—not wanting, demanding.

**CG:** There's two things there that I'm going to follow up on. One is I talked to Fran Valesco. That's one other person that I talked to.

**EH:** Yes, yes, Fran.

**CG:** And when I talked to her, she mentioned you. And it was very special because I knew I was going to talk to you. And this is the beauty of the project for me, knowing that there's these interconnections of people that have taught you, but you've also taught a lot of people too at this point. You also became an educator.

It's been a very important part of how—you've even been able to justify art, as you've said in other interviews and in other moments. It's teaching that has also helped you focus and not compromise in any point in time in your art. And that's very nice to know that you also had someone like Fran to converse with. Because it's not only to look up to.

This is where my second part, or follow-up, is, which is you have always had an attitude against authority, even during UC Berkeley times—or you talked about it. And that's not necessarily any judgment of value. It's an interesting approach.

Because I feel like if you needed to occupy a space that you were already occupying, but others weren't necessarily validating it and, on top of that, they were calling you those kinds of names, you definitely have to question the authority of those people calling you those names. So I think that that is fundamental, especially because after UC Berkeley, you did end up in San Francisco, working as an artist.

And I want to ask you about a couple of things, which is there's a very specific anecdote that I've read about, but I would love to hear it from you, about the Galería de la Raza. You met some very specific people.

**EH:** Yes.

**CG:** And thanks to that chance occurrence, that chance encounter, you've been able to be associated with a specific group of *especialmente mujeres* (especially women), right?

**EH:** Yes.

**CG:** Do you mind telling me a little bit of that story, like how did you meet? Or why were you in Galería de la Raza that day?

**EH:** OK. Because, I would say, because—being part of Galería and being part of a community outside of the UC system was like survival. It was like my sense of community. It was a sense of feeling whole and connected.

And again, coming from the farmworker background and all of that, where we were being told to serve the community was probably one of the highest honors that we could have, to

make things better for the people that are coming after us. So that was in the back of my mind all my life. And it still is.

But the school was set up to—sort of individualism, like individualism, and creating work basically for—what should I say—for sale, or commercial [purposes]. And we, at that point—because I became part of this bigger movement—[were making] art for the people, making art that resonated with our community, that reflected our community, that gave a sense of hope of who we are and our hopes, our fears, our aspirations. That gave light to that.

But during that time was also, sort of, this third-world feminist consciousness that came into being where we sort of had to negotiate the racism that was within the general feminism and yet, being aware of that, still trying to navigate ourselves within our community, our bigger community. And so that was about the time where all these ideas—it was just a fascinating time. Every movement was going on.

But anyway, my connection with Galería. I was studying in Oakland, and I was invited—I think it was Irene [Pérez] and a couple of other women [who] came there looking for women artists. And so they invited me to participate in what was the first all-women exhibit [at the] Galería.

And so that was my connection right there. I met them. They're artists, again, of different backgrounds. And that was just really marvelous. Because up until that point, I had met a few artists. But these women were already also in art school, kind of like they were sort of on the same path that I was, in terms of really thinking about making a career as an artist.

So it was just really a wonderful time for me. And then one thing led to another. They started doing murals. Things were going on in the community. And it just kind of went on from there.

But I was still a student. But Galería was like home. It was *familia*. It was community. And it really sort of kept me from going nuts, to be honest with you. It just gave me another sense of another reality that was more healthy, in some ways.

**CG:** I think that part of finding communities, even if you already are a part of our communities, speaks to a sense of belonging. And the way that you're talking about it—and correct me if I'm understanding it wrong—is that you were taking an active role in creating those kinds of belongings in places like Galería or with the Mujeres Muralistas.

Because the places that you were supposedly belonging to, like we learned to believe the colleges that we attend—to the schools that we go to—that we belong to those places. But

that's not entirely true sometimes. There's a sense of identity that gets crushed or doesn't get expressed, unless there's people in the room—

**EH:** Respected.

**CG:** —that respect you. And that word, respect, it's something that I think has been fundamental in your career, not only with the art you've done but also in the way that you have incorporated the themes, the ideas, but also the specific people that you depict sometimes. And you have always wanted to incorporate everyone's voices in a very respectful way. That's something that I think you can see in the way that you're even talking about these times in your life but also in the art currently surrounding us.

That is very important. Because, currently, I am able to talk to you, and this is your voice, and I want to be respectful to your voice. What are some of the things that maybe you haven't been able to speak about as much about that time?

I was speaking yesterday to Mia [Galaviz de Gonzalez] and to Ana Montano, and they were saying sometimes it felt like Galería was very male-dominated. And places like 24th Street—like Mia was managing; Ana and then others were helping. It felt like a little bit more welcoming to not only women but other folks.

And that, I feel like, is important for me to ask you, just even with this community, sometimes there might have been some issues or some things that have happened. What was your experience in those years of negotiation or just trying to feel a part of another community but also seeing that, OK, there's some shortcomings. What are some of those things?

**EH:** Well, I have to say that that was one of the reasons why I think the Mujeres Muralistas was so strong. Because it was all women and because most of, I think, the things that women had to say were either ignored or pushed to the background.

Because let's get real. I mean, you could name any movement, whether it's a Chicano art movement or Chicano civil rights movement, the farmworkers' movement—although that was a little bit more—what should I say?—more open to women because of Dolores Huerta. But all of the different movements—the Black movement, the Native movement, the student movement, even the hippie movement—they were still very patriarchal in a lot of ways. So the men kind of pretty much determined what was going to happen and what was not going to happen.

What was that saying? The men are the jawbone; the women are the backbone. But anyway, I never let any of that stop me. Because I came from a strong family of mujeres—they were

*chingonas*, OK. They were very strong women. So I was always taught to—if something is in the way, you find a way to get around it. You set your goal, and you find a way to get [to] it. And certainly, being educated was part of that.

So again, coming from a big family—I had a lot of sisters, and I have brothers and uncles. I mean, [it was] a whole *chingo* (a shitload) of family—so we were always having to negotiate something. So for me, coming out into the community and running into people who were directors of galleries or whatever, they were usually men.

And there were some men—I'm not going to necessarily say names—who were very negative, OK? But fortunately, there were men who were very sure of themselves, and they were confident, and they were very open and supportive, like Malaquias Montoya, even José Montoya. Who else? Rupert García. I mean, they were just a group of men who sort of opened the doors and allowed us to—allowed us to participate, gave us voice.

And sometimes, there were some people that we had to sort of keep after, to confront them, to question them [about] why they were doing things and all of that. And some people came around after a while. But some people just sort of stayed in their head.

But I don't like to dwell on [the] negative. And that's out there, that's for sure. And sometimes we have to confront it and go around it or move in another direction, away from it—whatever. But I don't know. Like I said, I just kept moving forward in the direction as best I could, being positive, with the women-center[ed], women-focus[ed attitude], though, and finding people who are our allies, whether [or not] they're men.

Because it wasn't just men who were closed and narrow-minded. There were plenty of women out there who, even to this day, are very narrow-minded in terms of the role of the arts and the role of women and interacting with other cultures or respecting other cultures or respecting gay people. I mean, there still are a lot of people—there's still a lot of work that has to be done. Let's put it that way.

But we all have different ways of approaching that, whether it's through song, dance, poetry, artwork, visual arts, or whatever. And we all sort of—I would like to think, especially the people that I love and respect of the art community—I think we all kind of come together on that level to try to sort of heal our community, in some ways.

So I don't know. Like I said, they're out there. That negative energy's out there. But I don't let that stop me. I don't let that dwell in my head. Because I think that's why a lot of people get into drugs or kill themselves or just get unhappy and all of that.

Because there's so much out there that really, from day one, wants to crush us, you know what I mean? Being people of color, being working class—I could go on, right? Whatever—all those isms and all of that. But I just try to stay the course and surround myself [with] positive people.

**CG:** I think you've managed to do that throughout your life with all of those challenges that, some of them, you mentioned explicitly; some of them, I don't need to ask you about. Because I respect you and how you chose to approach this. Because it is really the impressive thing to someone like me to see you associate yourself and have allies to your art and to you as a person, as a human.

One of the things that we've already been mentioning are the Mujeres Muralistas. They are the Mujeres Muralistas. And you've collaborated with them. You have even—I remember reading about the Paco's Tacos mural. And that's such an essential part of what happened since the seventies and beyond.

What are some of the anecdotes that you have in your mind of working? How was it? Was it thrilling? What kind of associations bring to mind the mention of things like the Paco's Tacos mural or the Mujeres Muralistas? What are some of the things that you remember?

**EH:** In terms of working together and the struggles?

**CG:** Working together, struggles, and also just hanging out, being around each other.

**EH:** Well, it was beautiful. For me, again, coming from a rural background, I had never really been around other people of other cultures—of other Latino cultures even. So to me, I really loved that. It was like learning about *música huayno* from Peru, *cumbia* from Colombia, *plena* from Puerto Rico, music from the Caribbean. I mean, it was just this whole other world and all that. So it was wonderful and fabulous. It opened up my world in ways I never would have imagined. It was a real time of sharing.

Working as a group was, well, it's like working with any group. In particular, I would say, with the Mujeres Muralistas, we'd come from different backgrounds, different classes, different sexual identities, urban, rural, different parts of the country—the whole bit. So coming together, especially when we worked on *Latinoamérica*, because I think that was really the main sort of time of the real coming together [of] the Mujeres Muralistas.

After that, it kind of went in a lot of directions—it was always morphing. But working with the group—again, trying to come together, like with the rhomboidal parallelogram mural—all of that was like—trying to respect each other, give each other space, trying to get feedback

from the community, and then try[ing] to come up with a design, a theme—was really, really challenging, I have to say.

Because, again, there was everything from the voice of art for the people, and it has to be super political. And then there was another voice that said, I want to do whatever I want. I want to do whatever I want. I don't want to be told what to do, or I don't want to listen to anybody. I'll contribute what I can. And so, there was everything and everything in between there.

So it was really, really—it was like taking a class that probably will never exist again in Chicana and Latina feminism in the arts—art feminism—well, just part of the art community. Arts in the arts. It was just really amazing to hear these different voices of why they were making art, what was important to them, what was their relationship with the community, and how we would bring our skills. Because the skills varied too. Some people were like amazing artists already but highly developed. And others, like myself—I felt like I was still finding my way. And other people, maybe their art was not the strongest, but they realized the importance of talking to the community about the PR part of it.

So it was just all over the place. So it was really just, I have to say, probably a little bit of cheap tequila and a little bit of smoking mota maybe, sorta not everybody—just kind of smoothed it out a little bit. Or maybe it just blew the hell out of everything to the fact where we just had to get away from each other for a little while, get over ourself, and come back and realize that, ultimately, we wanted to communicate to the community whatever it was that we had inside of us, and we were going to do it together.

So I think, basically, that's kind of why the Mujeres Muralistas—it was not like everybody merged their drawings together. It was like everybody had this section, this section, and this section. Express yourself. And I think that's kind of what allowed the group to sort of go on and work together off and on with different projects and to bring other people on with different ways of seeing things, with different ways of painting or drawing or whatever, and different ideas.

It just allowed—that kind of concept of being open, I think, really allowed it to go on and as a model for other women, and even men, to work together as a collective, understanding that we had to respect our differences. But we had to come back together if we wanted to share our bigger story with a very complex community like we are.

**CG:** I think that's essential. If I were to ask you about this kind of master class that you're talking about—

**EH:** Yeah. Oh, yes.

**CG:** Because it does sound like a master class—

**EH:** Yeah, it was.

**CG:** —that would be beneficial.

[*siren blaring*]

**CG:** From your own perspective and you also being an educator—let's let that siren go.

**EH:** Right.

**CG:** But if you think of the master class that this was and that you participated in and also have taught, what are the bullet points of like, these are the lessons that we could teach you—Mujeres Muralistas and myself—through our work and through our life? What are some of those lessons that future generations listening to this could listen to it and say, Oh, this is exactly the kinds of things that we learned from Ester and Mujeres Muralistas? What are some of those things? And it doesn't have to be bullet points, but just what comes to mind as the lessons?

**EH:** Well, I think, initially, recognizing the strength and working as a group and then respecting each other's differences, again. And sort of allowing everybody to contribute whatever skills and knowledge and ideas that they have, giving them voice to express that. No real leader as such. And, of course, that makes it very difficult.

But it was a time also that—again, because people had different skills and knowledge. I mean, some people were very well-read on Cuba and Africa and all of the different struggles that were going [on] all over. And other people were extremely talented in mixing colors. Other people were extremely talented in how to lay out designs. And other people had skills in how to make them bigger, like onto a wall.

So there were all kinds of technical skills and, again, people who were good at talking with the public, who were good at talking with the press. And so it's, I think, recognizing the skills that bring you together as a group and allowing people to share those and somehow or another giving fruit to the group's vision. [This] ultimately—it depends who your audience is, I think, having that communication with whoever that audience might be—whatever you're trying to talk about, whatever you're trying to create a dialogue visually with, that has to

always be there. And then I think everything else can sort of fall into place—as long as there’s that basic understanding and respect for the other person.

**CG:** I think that’s essentially a master class, just what you just said. And that, I think, I see a lot in—as I was telling you earlier—in your art but also in the way you have carried yourself throughout life, in the different ways in which you have gone about creating what we call a career. But [it’s] more than a career. It’s a matter of all the things you have approached with respect and curiosity, work-wise and also just in life.

I want to get into two things. One thing that I would love to get into is, while you were saying that some of the Mujeres Muralistas were better at certain techniques than others, you yourself are a person that is very familiar with multiple techniques. And each one of them not only needs, or necessitates, a certain skill set and knowledge, it also is a matter of approach.

So when you think of your own approach artistically—doing prints or doing something with pastel or a mural or other kinds of art—how do you approach each one? Or when do you choose to use each one of those methods or techniques? What is your approach to those kinds of things?

**EH:** That’s a good question. I guess it just depends on what I’m trying to depict. And if it’s something that I think—for example, my primary love is a line. And that comes from childhood. That comes from seeing Japanese calligraphy. It’s a line.

So that’s my number one passion. When I got involved in the Chicano civil rights movement, the art branch of it, we realized quickly, though, that we didn’t have control of the media—TV, newspapers, what have you. We had none. And the two ways that we could communicate would be murals and screenprinting. So that’s where I decided to learn about screenprinting, which is very bold and graphic. It’s very different than drawing. So I kind of have always gone back and forth. I mean, with drawing, for me, it’s very natural and just very direct. And I love it. I love it.

With screenprinting, it’s just a very different way of working. You’re working in reverse a lot of time, or you’re cutting stencils. And it’s very intricate, and there’s all this layering. It’s just a whole other way of thinking. But [my] approach—I guess my drawings are more personal. They’re usually narrative. They’re of people. So my work is mostly about people, and it’s narrative in nature.

But my screenprints usually—I felt that those would resonate with a bigger community, and they were maybe artworks or something that I wanted to go out there to create some kind of a dialogue. So that's when I turn to screenprinting.

So I kind of have always gone back and forth. But now that I'm a bit older—to say the least, I'm seventy-six—it's harder for me to do screenprinting, just because it's really tight work. And you're leaning down, and you're cutting stencils. And I'm worthless with a computer. I'm still old-school in that regard.

So for me, fortunately, I can still draw easily, even though I had to get some physical therapy to sort of train me to set up the level of drawing where I could draw—and exercises to do in between. So I've always sort of navigated between drawing and printing. Those are my two loves, although I have done other things, too—a lot of other things. But those are my two passions.

**CG:** And when I think of not only the two passions but the iconography and the narrative—because I do see stories in them—one of the ones that I wanted to ask you about is when I talked to Yolanda López, who also has depicted la Virgen de Guadalupe—she approached it in a very specific way. This is just for context.

What I'm interested in is you yourself also decided to depict la Virgen de Guadalupe in a very specific way. And it tells, in my own opinion, such an important, beautiful, respectful story of the person you're depicting or who you were depicting. Can you tell me the story behind that decision of depicting la Virgen de Guadalupe in that way?

**EH:** Yes. Historically, there have been a lot of scholars who, even to this day, ask me about when I depicted it versus whoever else in history. And apparently, my Virgen de Guadalupe is the first. Other people were able to see it and interpret it and take it to a whole other level. Even to this day, that's still going on.

Mine, I did the original drawing probably in '72. And then, I was taking a class with Fran Valesco. She was my etching teacher—a wonderful teacher, I have to say. I learned a lot from her in more ways than one. I am a Guadalupana, but [I have] my own concept, not from the church. I grew up in a small, little farming town, and we didn't have a church until I was already maybe eight or ten.

So the services that we had in terms of any religious services was held by the elders in the barrio, in somebody's backyard in the open air. And it was devoted to la Virgen de Guadalupe. So la Virgen de Guadalupe is, and continues to be, part of my life. But I see her in this other

way, sort of a few steps away from the church. And they would not like what I have to say, but that doesn't matter.

But I still honor her as the mother, the mother energy, the Earth mother—though not seen. I'm aware of all of that. I'm also aware of the Black Madonnas and the fact that, when Españolas came, they came with a banner of la Virgen de—what was her name—Extremadura, the Black Madonna. OK. So anyway, I'm aware of all of that.

The reason that I did that image, in particular, though, transformed her. I was not so much aware of all of the historical background, though, to be honest with you. My grandmother had died a few years before. And my grandmother was a very dynamic and strong person. But when she died, they always make these little memorial cards. And it was a traditional Virgen de Guadalupe.

And I just remember telling my brothers and my sisters and saying that was not my grandma. She was full of energy and full of life. She was pure *indígena* from the mountains of Guanajuato. But she was just so full of life. She loved to sing and dance, and she had been a farmworker. She had a lot of children, but she was very, very strong, [and] very much inspired me, even to this day.

But I thought, you know what? I kept thinking, I need to honor that spirit, that energy. So that stayed with me, that stayed with me, that stayed with me. So I developed some drawings, sort of transforming her. And it was during a time also, a little bit before I went to UC Berkeley, when I had been taking some karate classes. And it was part of the whole feminist inner strength and what have you and all of that. I loved the outfits, but I was worthless with karate, OK? After a few times being slapped around, I was done with it. But I love the outfits. But that stayed with me, that kind of fighting spirit.

And it was a time too when we—the Chicana feminist movement was kind of flowering, and we were all trying to find our inner strength and find our voices and find our place in community. And it was a call. I saw it as a call to activism, to become active, to break out of the mold, to break out of the shell and get out and do whatever you're meant to do in this world.

That's where it stems from. That is the root of that image for me, of the one of kicking—with the karate kick. It also [caused] a lot of problems for me too. I mean, Yolanda can attest to what happened to her. But I had that happen way before she came around.

**CG:** What was your experience with what the reaction to it was—which is also always what happens with art, right?

**EH:** Oh, yes, of course.

**CG:** You put it out there. But on top of that, the title of that specific Guadalupe, I think that's something I want to ask you about. It's the title but also the reaction to everything about it. Why did you title the print in that specific way?

**EH:** *La Virgen de Guadalupe defendiendo los derechos de los xicanos* (The Virgin of Guadalupe Defending the Rights of the Xicano People)? Yeah, I changed that around [with the] X. And now, it's always—

**CG:** I know.

**EH:** That title was always changing [*inaudible*].

**CG:** It's always the interesting thing about—

**EH:** It did not have a name for a long time.

**CG:** When did you title it? Because that's something I couldn't find.

**EH:** Yeah. I don't know. I can't remember. I can't remember. Because I kept thinking about it. Because when I first did it, it was a school project. I had no idea. But before it had dried, it had already been published by some women who were putting together a book on a bibliography of Chicana writings—which is really way back, amazing that they were doing that. So they used that on the cover.

And then, my *Libertad* came out in another publication, recarving the Statue of Liberty. But the minute that that little booklet, the little pamphlet, went out—boom!—I started getting all kinds of feedback, again, mostly from men. “Oh, you hate men,” or “You hate the church, or “You hate virginity.” I mean, there was this whole litany of stupid things. I'm like, “What? I do?” I was like, “What are you talking about?”

But some women were offended too. But mostly, it was the men, to say nothing about the Guadalupanos—the people who are real hardcore, like Guadalupanos. Oh, my God, like, what am I doing? This was sacrilegious. I have no respect. I don't understand. I said, “Of course I understand. I am a Guadalupana.”

OK, anyway, they have their interpretation of the role of women within the church, of Mother Mary and all of that. I'm losing my chain of thought. What were we talking about?

**CG:** The reaction, which you started talking about.

**EH:** Oh, the reaction. And then, later on—I mean, it got around. People started publishing it. A lot of different people, a lot of artists, started reinterpreting it in their own way. Yolanda really, because she's so scholarly, she really wrote about it in another way, started opening doors to it being seen in another way—that transformation, which I had not necessarily thought out, but I had done the first one.

Later on, it was used on a folio without my permission. This Jewish guy who was working for an alternative radio station up in Santa Rosa. He used the Virgen de Guadalupe for the December cover of their little folio, and all hell broke loose. The Guadalupanos went nuts, out that way, [in] the country. Guadalupanos went nuts. And they went to all of the places where the pamphlets had been put out for the public to take. They gathered them, and they burned them. [*laughs*]

Anyway—and so it created such an uproar, people calling the station to complain, that they decided to call a town hall meeting. They called a town hall meeting. I think fifty people showed up, including two nuns. And the nuns were supportive of it. Because they said that the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe was pretty radical already.

Because basically—I mean, it's a story that's not only happened in Mexico—but she was an indigena. She's a woman of color. She spoke in the Indian language. I mean, on and on and on. So that in itself was pretty radical. And they were, I think, nuns who were into liberation theology. So they were much more open.

But in general, it was pretty wild. They didn't want me to go because they said they couldn't protect me. Anyway, so I think Maria Hinojosa was working there. Now she works for Futuro Media.

**CG:** She has her own company.

**EH:** But she was out that way. She was a part of that, that dialogue that went down. But anyway, things like that happened to me. Within my own family, some were just scandalized. They probably didn't want to even have anything to do with me ever again because they were very, very Guadalupanos.

But in general, my mother and some of my *tías* and all of that—they loved it. They got it. Because especially when I made the connection with my grandmother and it's calling women

into action and all [*snaps fingers*] because, like I say, I come from a bunch of *gallas*. They were chingonas. So they got it. They understood that once I explained it a little bit.

**CG:** That is just fascinating, in terms of even the reaction, or how it got used and you approached it. I just really particularly like the kinds of decisions that you make by depicting the kinds of things that you have chosen to depict.

Let me get to another aspect of your life, which is not only the art in itself and the work, what you produce, but the education aspect. There's some kind of didactic aspect, it seems, to most things you do. Not only are you telling a story, you're trying to maybe educate in some respects. You've also been, quite literally, an educator. How do you see that as part of your life, being an educator, or having been a teacher? What are the fondest memories you have of educating?

**EH:** Well, let's put it this way, I come from a long line of educators. My grandfather, *tíos*, my siblings, and I have, in the San Joaquin Valley, a lot of my family—we come from a family of educators. So that's kind of embedded, even though we had to be farmworkers for a little while, but we all went to school. That was important, to get educated.

In terms of my work, though, I'm much better at communicating my ideas visually than I am through words, speaking, and all of that. I mean, just to do this, I've been a nervous wreck and had to write a million things down just to sort of get it in my head. That's not my strength.

So I've used my art to—I don't know if I would necessarily say it's to educate people, but it's to process my own feelings, what I'm sensing and what I'm feeling that's going on around in the community, in the bigger world, or within myself. But I have found, just from the feedback, that it resonates with people on some level. But I don't really consciously make anything to like teach anybody.

*Sun Mad* might be the closest to that. But the rest of my work is just ideas that come through me that I have to give form just to process them. Because I'm sure, if you talked to a lot of people—I made a lot of artwork that will never be seen, and nobody could care less if they see it. Or sometimes, I just tear them up because I processed it. I processed it, whatever I was thinking or feeling. I processed it because that's how I work visually. But nobody had to see it. Nobody has to see it. I don't care. We have to please ourselves first. I think if you just sort of depend on the product rather than the process, you're going to have a hard time in the art community. Because it's brutal.

So I start with pleasing myself in whatever I want to say. If somebody can get something out of it, I'm grateful. That's a blessing. But it's not necessarily my goal when I create—very rarely, very rarely. But I have found that people are always telling me that they learn so much, or they felt so much, or [they're] proud to see me depicting something of their culture or their life or their way of being or the issues that we're dealing with.

And I've done work on Guatemala, about the war in Guatemala, because I had a chance to be over there. I normally have to experience things. I can't just draw out of the air. I'm not in a cave. I'm influenced by everything that's going on around me. And I really like to move around and experience things firsthand as much as I can. Because that feeds me in terms of how I can give visual life to it.

But, like I said, I don't necessarily make something with an intent of anything. If it has a life over and beyond me, that's a blessing. But that's not my goal. Maybe it is, in some levels, on some levels.

**CG:** Yeah, but I like the fact that you're saying you start with yourself first.

**EH:** Has to be that way.

**CG:** And not only is it about expressing something that needs to be expressed in that moment—there's like a compulsion. There's like a need.

**EH:** Yes, yes.

**CG:** But also, even if you finish something, it still doesn't have to be seen by anyone else but you sometimes.

**EH:** Yes, yes.

**CG:** That, I think, is an important thing. Because, as you're saying, the educational aspect, the seeing each other represented, if someone gets to see it, that's a secondary thing. The first thing is still you being able to feel like you were able to express something at that point in time about who you are or what you were thinking or anything that you were trying to express. I think that's very important.

One other thing I wanted to say—and this is just a comment, more than a question—in this project, I feel like I've been able to talk to a lot of artists that you've known. And you're saying one thing, which is that you feel like you're nervous by speaking or talking or using words rather than the visual arts. I feel like you have been one of the clearest people I've talked to.

**EH:** Oh, thank you.

**CG:** And I'm saying that because I feel like sometimes we believe that we struggle saying certain things or communicating it in a certain way, but it's also important to hear it from someone else that maybe we don't struggle in that way. I feel like you've been incredibly clear in so many ways, and this is going to be so helpful for anyone that wants to know about your life but also the kinds of things that you've been doing throughout your life. So that's just a comment.

**EH:** Thank you.

**CG:** I would say that I have a couple of more questions. One of the questions—*no, está bien* (No, it's ok.)

**EH:** OK. *Ya mero* (Almost done).

**CG:** And the questions are more general, more open. They're not very specific. And it's because I want you to just take it in any way you want to take it. And one of the ones that I have been asking recently is when you think of your life and your work, but also you as a person, what is it that you need to tell me or anyone listening here so that we can better understand you?

**EH:** What would I say? I would say it's—since being a child and listening to my family and the elders and my connection with nature and with my art is a sense—it's kind of always been there since I was a kid—a sense that time is passing, an awareness of the passing of time and maybe this ridiculous notion of capturing time through my art.

But also embedded in that is maybe through my art. And maybe, again, that's just my legacy is trying to make it a little bit better world out there, trying to open up the communication, a visual communication amongst ourselves, amongst other people, amongst the world.

So again, and I'm not trying to be preachy, but I just like meeting new audiences. I like my world and my art to be in other places so they can learn about who we are as a people, as a woman, a woman of color and Native, Mexican woman, what we're thinking, what we're feeling. I think that that's important. I think that, ultimately, has been my role to do that, visually.

And it has not been easy. But that has been my life, and I feel blessed that I have been able to do that since I was a child up to now. And I'm seventy-six years old, and I'm still at it. Who

knows how long, but yeah. That was my fate. This has been my fate. And I feel blessed to have sort of lived my life.

Like I said, it's not always been easy. But yeah, it's an amazing life that it's been. It's been a gift, a gift from the gods, like Lydia Mendoza would tell me—a gift of gods meant to be shared. The gods—I'll make that plural. So yeah. *Punto* (period).

**CG:** I think that we could leave it there, just because—thank you for sharing about your life, about who you are. All of these people that we come from and also all of your background and identities. I feel like you've been a vivid example for anyone caring to listen of how to carry yourself and express who we are or who we can be too. So thank you so much for having me here today.

**EH:** I thank you, too, Camilo. You've been wonderful, and I thank you so much for sort of coming prepared and for your kindness and your warmth and your gentleness. I appreciate that very much.

**CG:** Thank you.

After the oral history recording finished, I reflected on what Ester said, about the triumph of putting something on the page, on a print, and not having to do anything else with it. Not having to show it, but being satisfied by what we created, and not necessarily published. Especially when pleasing one's own process, that is to honor oneself by also creating for oneself.

And to always be celebrating life and death through the arts. Like in the Sun Mad print Ester gave me before I left her house while hearing the birds chirping.

This oral history of Ester Hernández was a collaborative effort, like murals also are. The team behind it was:

**ERICA GANGSEI:** Erica Gangsei

**MYISA PLANCQ-GRAHAM:** Myisa Plancq-Graham

**CG:** Who served as executive producers.

**JAVIER BRIONES:** 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.

The *Mission Murals Project* was organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services.

Thanks for listening.