

PROYECTO MISSION MURALS
Oral History Audio Transcripts

FRANCES VALESCO ORAL HISTORY
Alameda, California, June 7, 2021

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This is an oral history of artist and educator Fran Valesco for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on June 7, 2021, in Fran Valesco's home in Alameda, California. The voices you'll hear will be Fran's and my own.

When I first met with her on her house's front porch, I saw that she was wearing many different shades of red. When I asked her later about all that red, she said that it was her favorite color, a preference that we both happen to share. She was wearing a bright red vest, and she had round red glasses too. Her hair was also reddish. When asked about that, she said that she started putting red in her hair years ago, just for fun, and that when she looks in the mirror after she wakes up she says, "Oh, that's pretty festive!" It's a joyful way to start her morning.

This oral history delves into the facets of Fran's personal life and upbringing, her chameleonic nature, as she will describe, and also goes into her work as a muralist and educator, especially related to her past and present work on *The Disability Mural*. We also talked about her teaching life, her current doctorate, and her friendships with some of her students, like artists Xochitl Nevel-Guerrero and Ester Hernández, among others.

Here is the oral history.

Esta es una historia oral de la artista y educadora Fran Valesco para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 7 de junio de 2021, en la casa de Fran Valesco en Alameda (California). Las voces que oirás serán las de Fran y la mía.

Cuando me reuní con ella por primera vez en el porche al frente de su casa, vi que tenía puestos muchos tonos de rojo. Cuando le pregunté después acerca de todo ese rojo, ella me dijo que era su color favorito: una predilección que tenemos en común. Ella tenía puesto un chaleco rojo brillante y también unos lentes rojos redondos. Su pelo era también rojizo. Cuando le pregunté acerca de eso, ella dijo que hace años comenzó a ponerse rojo en el pelo, solo por diversión, y que cuando se mira en el espejo después de despertarse, dice: «¡Oh, eso es bastante festivo!» Es una manera alegre comenzar su mañana.

Esta historia oral ahonda en las facetas de la vida personal y la crianza de Fran, su naturaleza camaleónica, como ella lo describirá y también entra en materia sobre su trabajo como muralista y educadora, especialmente con relación a su trabajo pasado y presente en el Disability Mural. También charlamos sobre su vida docente, su doctorado actual y sus amistades con algunas de sus estudiantes, como las artistas Xochitl Nevel-Guerrero y Ester Hernández, entre otras.

Aquí está la historia oral.

CAMILO GARZÓN: Okay, we're recording now. Today is June 7, 2021, and I'm very pleased that Fran Valesco is here with me and welcomed me into her home and studio in Alameda, California. I'm talking to her on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project*. So, if you can just say your full name and where were you born.

FRAN VALESCO: Ah, my name is Frances Valesco, and I was born in Los Angeles, California—actually Hollywood.

CG: And then, with your family background—how was it growing up there?

FV: I was born there, and then we moved away when I was nine months old, to Washington, DC. My father had gotten some work there. And we moved back when I was six. So, it was a big shock to me to come back—and partially it was the landscape. Washington, DC—it's green in the summer, brown in the winter, and it was the complete reverse.

So, yeah it was a shock. I was also—I mean, I arrived in the middle of the school semester, so I really felt like an outsider. And so it was an interesting place to be, but it was definitely a company town. So, I always felt that when I was growing up—like, it's who do you know? And even when I was more of an adult, it was kind of like, oh, maybe you can do something for my career. So, you never feel—there was like a surface kind of quality to it.

CG: I think that's true of both D.C. and L.A. to an extent.

FV: Oh, I didn't think of that—yeah.

CG: Do you agree with that? And if not, that's fine too.

FV: Yeah, no, but you're right; it's all about politics and if you're in, who can do something for me politically. So yeah, you're right, that's a very—I didn't think of that. But anyway.

CG: And when you think of your parents, or your dad having to move to a new city with them, how was your relationship to them when you were a kid and beyond, and even to your family at large?

FV: I am very grateful my parents mov[ed] to L.A. My mother comes from a rather dysfunctional family [*laughs*], and my father was an immigrant. So for him it was a real oasis. Could you repeat the question again?

CG: Yeah, it's okay. What is your relationship to your family?

FV: Oh, my family. Yeah, so, we moved to this neighborhood with this house—that was really a beautiful house, because in LA there's so much fantasy architecture. And this—our neighborhood, which still had old houses in it. Old meaning [built in the] thirties, which is relative.

But yeah, one of the first things I have to say is, I experienced a kind of a shock. Our neighbors—right next door to us was a family that were, I don't know what evangelical religion they were. It might have been Baptist. It might have been Holy Roller—I'm not sure. It was some kind of thing like that. And the first thing that the little girl, who's a little older than me, came over to me, you know, "I'm the mayor of the neighborhood; let me tell you what all this is about."

And she said, "And the first thing is don't play with dirty Jews." And I went home to my mother and I said, "What's a dirty Jew?" I had never heard that. And we were Jewish. So, I got immediately enrolled in Hebrew school [*laughs*] for the next seven or eight years, finding out what a Jew was. But it was such a shock to me that I wasn't seen for who I am but who I represented.

And they were always doing things like hiding Bibles in our closet, because I thought that—they thought that was a really important thing to do, to save our souls. And it was also at a time that it was all of the anti-communist things. So we're talking, like, '41. I was six, so that's '47–1947. And they were always, this is all about the Russians, and the communists, and all that kind of thing.

And my father was Russian. So I remember one time, when he found the Bibles in our closet, he went over to them—he was, he was my hero in a lot of ways. But he went over there, and he just dressed them down. He said, "Who do you think you are? I escaped these horrible things, and you have the nerve to tell us that we are just unworthy people?"

And they looked so ashamed. It was really—they moved away about a year later, which I'm very grateful for, 'cause they were terrifying. They'd have these prayer meetings in their house, and I'd see adults going into tongues, and it was really frightening. We all used to hide in my mother's bedroom [*laughs*]. Anyway, but, we were—the neighborhood was 99 percent Jewish, so it was a very strange thing.

CG: So, you have these kinds of identities that you have had to understand and find out more throughout the years, right? You have Russian, you have Jewish. How would you consider yourself also?

FV: Well, that's an interesting thing. My father, the way he came to this country was through Cuba. And so we have a lot of family mythology, and part of that is that there was a branch of his mother's family that went to Havana, and he stayed with them.

But the name Valesco is kind of a stage name. So, I don't know if you want a little backstory.

My father was born in Crimea, on the Black Sea, and normally no Jews were allowed there. But they were musicians, and they played for the people who would come on vacation—music. And his mother's side, they were tailors, so they would make uniforms for the czar and things like that.

And during the Russian Revolution, they had to leave, and they went to Germany, and that's where he studied music. So he was in Berlin in the twenties. I wish I had been a fly on the wall there. And there were all these people; there was UFA [Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft], which was that film company. He knew Marlene Dietrich. He had a string quartet that he traveled around with. I can't remember the name of the violinist that he studied [with] at the conservatory. He was a concertmaster at the Berlin Symphony, I believe it was. And he knew her, so that's how he got into the movies in LA—that's how he escaped.

He actually came to this country in the 1920s on his brother's passport, went to New York. And he said, "This place is uncivilized." And he turned around and went home [*laughs*]. Big mistake.

So then it was a lot of trouble to get here. But yeah, so that was the other thing. I'm not following the thread exactly of your original question, but the other thing is that he was a musician. He played in the movies sometimes, but he had his own string quartet. He had a radio show. So—but he worked at night.

And so, we were different. We were different in a lot of ways. One was that I wanted my dad to be like everybody else's dad and [go] off to some corporate job during the day. And then, the other thing [that] was different [was] my mother had been in the Spanish influenza epidemic. And I see so many parallels now with socializing kids now. 'Cause my mother lost her hearing. She didn't lose it completely; she was hard of hearing.

But her kind of fear of people, paranoia—'cause I know other people who are deaf and hard of hearing, and that's the other community I grew up in as well. They don't have—they didn't have her kind of attitude about things. So I see a lot of parallels.

And I'm grateful, and again, for having lived long enough to see that come around. I mean, it's a painful time. But I see how I never felt more in history than I do now, based on my own family history.

Anyway, she came from Michigan, and [she] said she couldn't take the Michigan winters and so she ended up in LA. She loved music, and that's how they met, through music.

So, there were a lot of differences. I guess where I'm going is that my mother had a disability, and in those days they conflated it with mental issues. So if you couldn't hear, you must not be very smart too. And I have a lot of my attitude from that—it's like, she'd always say things like, "I can do that, don't tell me what to do. I can do that." And I have that same attitude [*laughs*]. "Oh yeah, let me plug it in and see if it works."

CG: And I want to get back to disabilities, or just the mixture, the hybrid space between disability and even art. Let me just follow up on just one specific thing which is, both of your parents—it seemed like they were instrumental maybe on helping you become an artist. How much of that was directly, and how much of that do you think was more your context and your decisions along the way?

FV: Oh, I think it was all of that, really. My father used to say, "Don't become a musician; it's a terrible, difficult life."

And you also asked me about the name Valesco. And so, that came from the Cuba part, so that's part of the family mythology. But there was a street in Havana, Cuba. He took another name—his name was Kaufman. Kauffmann, actually, which is a Russianization of Kaufmann.

So there were some German Jews that went to Russia. We've tried to trace our family history back, and we get to about 1850, and then it stops. But so, with a name like Valesco, it could be Italian, it could be Spanish, it could be Romanian. And now we find in our history—I have a sister who's kind of our family archivist—that there was a troupe of musicians.

There were fourteen people in this family, and some of them—they were all musicians. And some of them went off on these tours and went up to Tashkent; they went through Russia. And the name of the trio was—or whatever it was—was Valesku.

So I, again, the name, it's kind of made me into a chameleon. So in our neighborhood, we would always get calendars from the one Catholic Church in the neighborhood, because of our last name. And I've often been—so I feel kind of an affinity to the Latin community. My grandfather lived in Boyle Heights, which is now a very Latin community. It was a very Jewish community before that.

And so I feel like I can sort of, like, that's what the anthropologist in me is like. I can kind of skate through different kinds of environments. So I would say—and then I also thought, because my grandmother's maiden name was Melamedoff, which is an Arabic name for teacher. It was a Russianization of *melamed*, which is teacher in Arabic. And I thought, Well, maybe I'm one of those Spanish Jews that came from the Iberian Peninsula. Who knows? So, a lot of mysterious kinds of stuff.

And so about the arts—yeah, we grew up with [the] arts. My family, especially—my father was quite a bit older than my mother. He was twenty-two years older than my mother. So he had all this history before. We had these great parties in the house, and I remember growing up with clinking glasses and playing the piano, and lots of laughter and talking.

So, yeah. So, yes, it was definitely—we all had to learn a musical instrument. And my mother always encouraged me in the arts that I wanted to do. She was really my great savior against her family, who said, “Well, you ought to do something practical.” And of course, they were very upset with her marrying a musician, especially since she had a disability. How is he going to take care of you?

And in fact, on my birth certificate, it says what the—what do you call it—the occupation of your father was unemployed musician. So, a lot to grow up with. It's different.

CG: And I think that the criticism of practicality not being part of the arts—it's a praxis. It's a practice. Like, you're creating, you're producing something. So it's an interesting thing that, as you're expressing, has been a through line since then, before, and it still continues to this day.

One thing that I find fascinating is your relationship not only to the arts or the path you chose, but specifically your educational journey also. How would you describe that educational journey, even to this day? Just before we started this, you [were] telling me even that you're continuing your education in formal and informal ways. How would you describe that journey since you were a kid, until today?

FV: Oh, I think school was my—just saved me. I loved—in spite of all the other social things—I loved being at school. I love learning. Some areas were really a challenge, especially mathematics.

In the third grade I think we had three math teachers in one semester, and it was all downhill from there [*laughs*].

So, yeah. No, I love learning, and I think the—well, first of all, I remember trying, as I said on my website, that I remember trying to draw the fire, and it kept moving. And so it was like this process. Somebody wrote a book and one of the things they said about it is, “Why would you continue in this activity where you’re never really going to be perfect at it?” But it’s that journey of exploration that was really important.

Yeah, the educational part—as I said, my mother always encouraged me in what I wanted to do. And when I was in the sixth grade I think it was, they had some project of a big banner of some kind, and all the kids got a chance to do one part of it at the time. But for some reason the teacher saw something in me, and she let me work on the whole project. So that was really a big affirmation.

And then the other thing happened, when I was, I think, maybe I was fifteen or something, my mother had some friends who were—there was a lot of this sort of, in the fifties, in spite of McCarthy. I mean there were a lot of, still, people who believed in communism, and there were these red diaper babies, and I knew some of them. Anyway, she—some friends of hers started this art school, and she allowed me to take drawing lessons there after school, and that was really wonderful.

That was also my first introduction to life drawing, because I remember going to one class after school, and there was this woman who had this beautiful kimono on. She was sitting on a chair, or something like the one in front of me. And then she got up on the stool, and then she took the kimono off—and she was completely naked! And I looked around, and nobody seems—they’re busily doing their charcoal drawing away. Well, I guess this must be what it is, so. That was my—so there were shocks along the way with my education, I guess.

CG: And then, after your elementary, high school education, you pursued degrees, undergraduate, and now graduate degrees. Do you want to describe some of those?

FV: Yeah, I went to UCLA, and I actually wanted to go to the Art Center, because it was a very well-known art school at the time. But I would have had to have gotten a scholarship. We didn’t have much money. I mean, my mother’s family was right. We were culturally rich but economically really poor, and in those days it was really hard for my mother to get some kind of work, if she even—even if she had wanted to.

My father died when I was twelve. And so, she was kind of left on her own to help, to raise us on Social Security—which wasn’t—and his Musicians Union pension. So, it wasn’t much.

So, I’m very grateful for that time in California—the governor or the provost or the chancellor said, “Every citizen of California deserves a free higher education.” And my education was

free, to go to UCLA. It was a fifty-seven-dollar—what did they call [it]—student union fee. And I got scholarships on top of that, because of my grades; I had very good grades.

And so I got to go to UCLA, and I knew I wanted to be an artist, so I went to this amazing art department, had a great education there. But I also had a great education in humanities. And it was the kind of thing—freewheeling thing—well, let me audit a Sanskrit class and see what that's like. Or maybe I should take philosophy, or maybe even botany.

So I had a humanities minor. So it was—and it was a place where they had a world music concert once a week in one of the quads. So I heard Balinese music and Schoenberg. And also because of my background, with my father being a classical musician, I got to hear music and see plays, and things like that.

So I was educated not just in the arts, but also very well-rounded. And then, I ended up getting married, and when we split—and having a child. And after we split up, seven years later, I went back to graduate school in printmaking. I had discovered printmaking the very last semester, and that's what—as I said in my website, I had something that I could make and give away at the same time. And it was an armature for lots of different things.

CG: And the other aspect that you mentioned is the multiples aspect, that you can make multiples of these prints that you have. One thing that I'm interested in is, you not only are using your artwork in terms of just creating prints. That's an aspect, that's one of the—let's call it disciplines that you use. You have also muralism, which we're going to get into.

Regarding printmaking and other forms of art—like for example, muralists—how do you compare them, or how do you see each one of them?

FV: I see the muralism as more of a social practice. We didn't have that word then. That's a new word. If I can back up a little bit of how I got into that.

So, I always felt like I wanted to be in some kind of community of people. My mother had started the hard-of-hearing club in LA. When I was still married, I did take some courses in school. And printmaking is a very communal kind of activity because you have to share equipment generally—these presses that were expensive and all that.

So I got very interested in bookbinding. When I was—when my husband and I got married, we moved to a small town, and then we moved back to LA, where he got his graduate degree in ceramics. I helped put him through school. And I was at the student union one day, and there was this—and we could see the fires from Watts, the Watts Riots. Anyway, 'cause the show

was called *66 Signs of Neon*, and it was all this stuff from the Watts Riots that artists had come together—not just Black artists, but white artists and anybody who was interested.

And so that got me into community art. And we can elaborate on that part of the story later, but I was encouraged to start an art program in this little town, Santa Maria, which is now a bigger town. And so when I got to San Francisco finally, there was the CETA Arts Program that had started, and a friend of mine said, “Oh, they’re looking for artists in San Francisco.” So I applied, and there was something like three thousand artists that applied. It was during another recession, the big recession. And Ruth Asawa-Lanier was this amazing person who thought that the program should be for artists, ’cause we’re working people too—and not just learning how to do job skills, other kinds of job skills.

And so, there were 120 jobs, and I got one of the jobs. And part of it was because I had started this arts program in Santa Maria, and I had done this book project for. Joined for the Arts. And it was a—I was hired as a silkscreen person because I knew how to do that. And of course the first thing I did was do a mural—good government job, right? *[laughs]*

And that’s how I got involved with the Mujeres Muralistas, because Patricia [Rodriguez] was one of the first people I worked with. She’s a really good friend; she’s one of my best friends. And I started—I’ve always identified with the Latin community, but I’m not—I can’t say that I’m that. I can’t say that I feel Jewish, I can’t say that. I don’t know where I fit, except I know that I’m in the country of artists, so that’s my country.

CG: You were mentioning so many interesting points that I would like to follow up on, and the identities thread that we had started earlier. One other one that you just mentioned was how you got acquainted, not only with printmaking, but continued, and how you see murals both as a social practice, but also a communal thing that you want to collaborate [on] with other people—like Patricia Rodriguez, who you just mentioned.

Let me ask you about how has it been to work with other muralists, or with other artists, creating something? ’Cause you’re saying murals are like a social practice. It is something that is for society, for the public. But at the same time, it is done socially, which is different than other types of art. How do you see that relationship with Patricia and other muralists?

FV: You know, you’ve made a—you brought up a really interesting thread that I didn’t think of before, and that is it’s a kind of a natural progression for me to have been a printmaker and then go into muralism. You know, I didn’t think of that before.

But the way I see it is that, first of all, you have to share this equipment. So you’re in the shared space, but you create these little bubbles with yourself—like, I’m working on my thing

here. And there's a kind of understood, you know, don't bother somebody when they're working on their plates, or help somebody when they're running their things through the press, or that kind of thing.

So there's that. And then when you get to the mural, it's almost like you've added an element of theater to it because the public comes by. They talk to you. So there's this exchange. And what's so beautiful about working with her, is that she had some experience in the theater before. And so, that was kind of like another education for me.

I always tell the story of how we met. I actually—the first mural I did was at, I can't remember the name of the school in Noe Valley where Ruth had done her first mural. So it wasn't that I had to prove myself to the people there. It was like I had to measure myself against somebody who'd done this amazing thing.

And so, that was a whole different experience. But when I met Patricia, we were working on the—there were, it was called the Army Street Housing Projects. Now it's Cesar Chavez. And I came out there, I'm in my—it was a hot day, so I came out with my flip-flops and, you know, just a T-shirt and jeans. And she said—I introduced myself—and she said, “Do you know how to paint?” And immediately my back went up, like, “What do you mean? [*laughs*] Of course, I'm an artist—why am I here?” And then she said, “Okay, we're going to go up on the scaffolding.” And nobody had prepared me that you should wear better shoes.

So we go up to the third level, and then she said, “And now we're going to move planks, because we don't have enough.” So we're—you're up there, three stories high, moving these planks around, and I loved it. It was great.

And then she had this what they call a cartoon; it's like the little maquette that—you know. And she said, “Okay, just paint the square.” So, I realize, I understand that now because I can't step back and take a look and see what I've just done. I just have to trust that I've done something in this little area.

So, it was taking direction from somebody else, which was strange to me, but she did it in such a lovely way. And yeah, I learned a lot from her, and we became really good friends.

CG: That's such a beautiful anecdote. And it's such a funny thing, as you were saying, that you were on your flip-flops, and then—okay, I'm in it now. I have to just do this. And you did your part, and each one of those smaller parts became the whole, which is the mural.

And I love that idea of, like, murals, as you were saying, just becoming a bigger thing, but it's a bigger thing that—only because of the physical object, the physical representation—that

gets to be put on the wall or anywhere that it gets to be. It's also because of the smaller parts, the people doing it.

FV: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Also, I feel, like, a lot of my mother, like I can do this. I've never done this before, [but] just point me in the right direction and I'll do it.

And then, the other thing is that Patricia comes from a very similar background in some ways—in that she had to overcome a lot to go to school and to get where she did, when she did. And then overcoming all the racism, and all that kind of thing.

So, we were kind of kindred spirits in a lot of ways. And so I understood where she was coming from—you know, of course you can do this! She never questioned that—even though I was wearing the wrong shoes, or that I had never done this before—that we could do it together.

CG: And I think this speaks to something I read that you wrote, which says, “Murals are a way of building community and interacting with society. It's my small way to give back.” How do you think of murals today, and what are some of the ones that you've done? I know you've done more than—if I'm not mistaken—thirty public indoor and outdoor murals as well.

What are some that hold, like, a special place in your heart, or that you were like, okay, I can remember this one was very special for me?

FV: Yeah, well that first one. Actually, the very first one was really special, 'cause I was working with kids.

CG: Do you remember what it was called?

FV: Oh, it was called *The Alphabet Mural*. And we had kids—I think they were from first and second grade—to do it. I have very few pictures of it, unfortunately, because the Art Commission burned up. They think it was an arson fire. But all the negatives and all that burned up with it.

But, things were saying, A is for apple, B is for—well, G was for Gator. Why not? So that was the other why not? What are the rules here? So the same thing with Patricia, you know—why not?

So each one of them have a lesson in them. The one at Holly Courts Housing Project—I had never worked in a housing project before. Well, I had that with Patricia, but that was, I came in in the middle of that mural, 'cause Susan Cervantes was part of that. So, that wasn't my

project, but the Holly Courts one was really my first project, and that was working with people who had a great deal of community there. It didn't happen to be the community that the housing project approved of.

So for example, they had some graffiti on the walls that they came in and whitewashed over. Well, the kids were archaeologists—they knew every layer of graffiti underneath there. So, that was a really wonderful one.

The Desert Mural on South Van Ness was another really wonderful one. The way the CETA program worked—I don't know if it was a CETA mural or not. But the way it worked is that people would just put in requests—we want a mural here. And then they'd send out a muralist.

And we were getting minimum wage, I think it was five dollars an hour. But what that meant was, we could develop community as much as we needed before we even started the project. And that's what happened with Holly Courts. I met with all the people who lived there, because I knew once I left, it was their mural, not mine. And the more you involve people with the project, the more they'll take ownership of it—and hopefully custodianship of it too. So that's what we did. So that one—I loved them all, frankly [*laughs*], for lots of different reasons. But that one. Let me think, the North Beach mural. So, I know you want to talk mostly about Mission murals.

CG: And, if anything, that's kind of like a good segue, because while the project is called the *Mission Murals Project*, The Mission means different things to different people. And that's one of the essential questions that I want to ask you. It's a very open question, which is, when you think of the Mission or what the Mission is, what does the Mission mean to you?

FV: Well, now, the Mission has—that's the challenge of history, because it's so open-ended and amorphous and we start putting names on things. So now there's [something] called The Mission School of Artists. There was no Mission School. We were just artists working in the Mission. It was our neighborhood.

I mean, I lived in Noe Valley. I could walk down to 24th Street, and it was—it was a funky neighborhood. But it was lively, and I think that's partly the Latin thing, is that it was a lively neighborhood with lots of stuff going on in the streets and lots of places to eat and hang out, and all that. So I'd never, I think that's the uniqueness of that neighborhood, is that it's always felt like community.

CG: When you think of community—and thanks for telling me that about the Mission. One other way that you have engaged with community not only has been through art itself, but through the art of teaching. Teaching is in itself such an important part of what you've done.

And do you consider—this is like a twofold question. The first one would be, do you consider your art as also teaching? The other second question would be, does your art have some teaching elements, or educational elements, in it?

FV: Oh, both. Really. I mean, of the things I think about in North Beach, which is another community, a different kind—so here's the theater part of the mural. I was up on the scaffolding and some guy came by and he said, "I have a question to ask you. My daughter really loves the arts, but I think she should be an accountant because [*laughs*] it's more practical." I know this question, right? [*laughs*] And I said, "You should let her do what her heart follows."

So, that's the teaching part of it, that—so, if there's any teaching, I would say it's by example. That my life is an example of how to live a creative life and be important to community. A friend of mine has given me a nickname; she's called me a pollinator. And I can think of several things that—several occasions.

So, one of the first ones was when I was twenty-one and up in this small town. We had a babysitter come to our house. We were—I forget where we were going. And the way we had this house set up is my husband, my first husband, was an artist. He had the little bedroom for his watercolors, and I had this closed-in porch for my oil painting stuff. So you could smell the turpentine and stuff like that.

The babysitter walked in, and she saw all my canvases and stuff like that, and she said, "That's what I want to do." And she is now having a show coming up at Gagosian Gallery. So that's my first pollination.

One of the other pollinator things that I'm most proud of is Ester Hernández, who—she was a student at UC Berkeley when I was teaching in the art department. It was full of, frankly, white guys, older white guys. It was a boy's club. There was Joan Brown and maybe a handful—maybe three or four of us that were adjuncts—that were women.

And I said—she said to me, "I don't know what I should do." And I said, "Just paint what you know or just do what you know." And that's when she did the karate thing with the Virgen behind her.

And she said she credits me for getting her, you know, like, do what you need to do, and do it the way you know how to do.

So, there is another one of my pollinator things. So, [*laughs*] that's a pretty good one. Xochitl Nevel was another student of mine too.

CG: And I think that the important thing is, I'm going to talk to—it seems—both of them soon.

FV: Oh, good!

CG: Which—this just brings more depth into the relationships that I can see already, and the things that they learned from you. And you're saying it as a nickname, it is really like a practice—like the pollination of people, like the way that's a talent. And then that's an interesting thing that I would love to just ask you a more detailed question about, which is teaching. Right? Specifically the teaching itself.

You [*gave*] two very good examples, three, if anything. And when you think of your teaching experience, how do you remember it? Or how do you see it?

And what are some of the people, places, and things that you would like to mention or highlight? You mentioned Berkeley, but I know that you've also consulted and taught in other places, outside of California even. How do you remember all that teaching experience? It's a broad question, but however you want to take it.

FV: The first time that I taught was terrifying. So, when we moved to this small town, I was kind of removed. I didn't want to go to a small town, but my husband got the job, and it was—that was then. We didn't—women didn't—even have credit. When we left, when we split up, it was fairly amicable. I did not have my own credit, and it was under his name. So—and to get a divorce somebody had to have a fault—so we waited until the law changed. It was just like, we just split up.

But anyway, we went to some faculty thing, and this woman and I were talking. She was the wife of the English professor. And she said, "What do you do?" And I said, "Oh, I'm an artist." And she said, "Oh! Why don't you come to my third-grade class, and we'll teach—you could teach something." I thought, Me? Teach something? To these little kids? I don't know what I'm doing.

So yeah, that was my first experience. But fortunately, it's because I had known all these people at Joined for the Arts [Center] in Watts; Noah Purifoy, specifically, I think is really my mentor. And Judson Powell, who worked with him, was also an amazing person. They gave

me the courage to do that, to work from vernacular materials, to work from your heart, from what you know, and so that's kind of how I've always done my teaching.

I'm kind of like—like my mother said, “I can do this.” I have no background in anything. It's just seat-of-the-pants stuff. Want to do this? Well, I'll figure it out when I get in there. It's all about the technology too. Oh, I'm spacing out on her name. It'll bubble up.

Anyway, she said, “Oh you want to teach Photoshop? You can do that!” And I knew, like, five things in it. And it took me a year to figure out that it's not an obstacle; it's a puzzle to be solved when I come up against something. And teaching, I think, it's the best way for me to learn how to do things. Because those five things were things that I knew that I could do, and needed to do, but when a student backs themselves into a corner and can't figure it out—and with computers, as you know, it's either—it's binary. It either works or it doesn't.

So if somebody doesn't know how to do a drawing, well, they'll come out with a bad drawing. [*laughs*] But with computers, it doesn't work, right? So I figured it all out, how to do that. So, teaching for me is a learning experience; it's a real give-and-take kind of thing.

CG: And when you mention computers, when you mention these tools—because that's what they are—you do see of course what you're saying, which is computers have this binary system in which either things work or they don't. Zeros or ones.

But, I think that, if anything, with the way that you've described your teaching—and also with the relationships that you have had—there's just so many ways in which it works, even when it fails, because you're just using tools.

And it seems like that's your attitude too. It's just like, I can fail miserably in this thing for, like, six months straight, fine. I'll get eventually better because it's a puzzle. I'll solve it. I'll figure it out. And I feel like that's also your attitude toward not only teaching, but other kinds of things in life.

Do you see that also in your art itself when you started printmaking? When you did murals, do you see that attitude as something that is your approach?

FV: Yeah, totally, it's you have to—I think of Beckett, and he says, “Fail. Fail better.” It's where you learn, and it's—as uncomfortable as it is, if you can just live in that little space, where everything is not resolved, that's really interesting.

And so, the learning about things, that's why I don't think that's—as a pollinator, I have to keep moving [*laughs*] around and around. I mean, I used to—when we were in art school, the

mantra was, you know, get a good gallery in New York, get your retrospective at the Whitney before you're thirty, have big collectors—that kind of thing.

Well, a lot of art isn't in that category. And I think that's one of the things that I learned about being in the mural movement in the CETA program. We were considered pond scum. This is not—this isn't important art. This is some kind of expression of community, and who cares about community? What we care about is where you are in this hierarchy, this big pyramid, which has very few artists at the top. And we were in the bottom.

And so when things started happening, like I think with Tim Rollins and the projects. And all of a sudden, people started wanting to work with populations that were underserved or didn't have access—or they began to see the value of it. We were kind of like the start of that, in a way. And so, it's kind of indicating, in a way—and now they have degrees in social practice. We were just doing it. Same thing with the whole idea of the history of the Mission. We were just doing it. And we loved doing it.

It wasn't—I mean, we did have a little bit of our eye to big galleries, but that wasn't what we were about. And I know that a lot of the murals in the Mission were an expression of a certain culture, the Latin culture, but there was an expression of so much more than that. That was just—like the Balmy Alley project. It was such an expression of so many things. It was great.

CG: What are some of those things for you?

FV: Oh, agency. Culture. Expression. Building community. Having a variety of voices. All of that.

CG: One of the most interesting things about your career that has a special resonance, now that I understand you more with this conversation, is *The Disability Mural*. And it's been a—it wasn't just a project that you did for a year or six months. It's something that you've come back to and that has moved, even. It's something that has been like you, a pollinator. It has created opportunities of engagement, interactivity with communities—not only in the Bay Area, but beyond.

And back in 2013, there was a keynote address that you delivered at the Minneapolis City Center. And you're a founder of this project; you also coordinated the project. You did many—you wore many, many hats.

And you've shown and exhibited this in so many venues and places, but what do you remember of it, and what do you want to remember? What do you want people to remember of this project, in specific?

FV: Mmm. Wow, that's a long one, 'cause I'm still working on it. [*laughs*]

So we started in—all of my career has been, somebody asked me to do something; somebody trusted me that I could do this. [And] sometimes I'm like, What did they see in me? Somebody saw something in me that said you could do this.

So my friend Paul Karlstrom, who was a—he used to work at the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian. He said, “Oh, I have this friend who is doing this kind of project of having people with disabilities and [without] disabilities working together to form community.” And he said, “They want to do a mural project. Would you be interested in directing it?” And I said, “Of course! Let me figure out how to do it.” [*laughs*]

So, it was myself—and Osha Neumann was part of that too—because I don't have a visible disability, so it was important that we had somebody who had that. But also—but I'm very familiar with the disability community 'cause of my mother. And so we worked on it, and it was supposed to be a project around Ed Roberts, who founded the Center for Independent Living. And that's a whole other story in itself.

But just very briefly, part of it was that—first of all, he had polio and so he was in an iron lung, [he] and could get out of it every once in a while but was basically pretty disabled. And he matriculated—first of all, before he matriculated at UC Berkeley, in order to graduate high school, he had to have a driver's license. He had to take driver's training. It's like, are you kidding? [*laughs*]

But, somehow he finessed that, came to Berkeley. And they said, “We have no place for you to live, so you'll have to live in a hospital.” And he said, “Why don't you give me this hospital, and we'll turn it into a place for people with disabilities to live and work?” And so that's how the Center for Independent Living and the whole American Disability Act was kind of on a roll at that time.

So, the mural project is—we talked about having people with disabilities, but not restricting it to that, because then you start compartmentalizing. And that's, I think, one of the issues that's kind of fraught around Black art and Latin art and Asian art, and all that, is that you're put in a box. And sometimes the box usually means you're less than.

And so we didn't want that for this. So, it was people who were touched by it, people who were interested, who whatever. And so—and it also had to be in a format that anybody could have access to.

So that's why we chose these Masonite tiles. There were a thousand pieces, and that's one of the issues about being kind of an artifact of history. I know the story, backstory, of every single tile. Like, are you going to spend weeks on this so I can tell you the story—'cause nobody knows it. When I go, a lot of the stuff goes. And that's when history gets rewritten by people who hadn't been there or didn't know anybody there. It's unfortunate, but that's the way it is.

CG: Do you have any plans of maybe recording some of that? You were talking about even one of your siblings; she's very much like the archivist of your family. Would you like to maybe partner up with someone so that you can archive also some of these real stories behind all of this work?

FV: I would love that, yeah. In all my moving around and putting stuff in storage, I ended up giving boxes and boxes of stuff to the Bancroft Library. But they don't have the funds for someone to sit down with me and do that. And it is a labor of love, because all these boxes you see around here, they're all slides. And I have to go through those slides.

And that's one of the things—the public library, San Francisco Public Library, then there's more. Wait, there's more! Yeah, so the San Francisco Public Library—I've given a lot of slides to them. But what holds me up is documenting them, 'cause I'm the one that's writing down where it was, and the dates, and all that.

With the Bancroft Library, I didn't have time to do that. Here's the slides, here is the background material that we used, here is the—we had some recordings of stories. Sorry, that's all I can give you right now. I'm hoping, yeah, that would be great to do that.

CG: Yeah, there's such a wealth of stories. And multimedia, that's the other thing that I remember—watching a video. There was this Black man who has a disability. There's so many characters. There's so many people whose lives you touched with his project, and he just painted grass, because he remembered when he was a kid.

FV: Oh, you mean the YouTube video?

CG: For example, yeah.

FV: Yeah, that was such a lovely project. So we did get a grant for that. Yeah, that was lovely. Yeah, it was good.

So yeah, *The Disability Mural* is something that I would like to continue with. We'll see. What we're trying to do now is to get it—to get a website. It hasn't got a website. It doesn't have a Wikipedia article, because it's the first one.

And this thing that came about in Minneapolis and Duluth was because somebody took an interest in what we were doing here. So, I'd love to get it out there when—unfortunately, the person who was, here we go with history, he just passed away. The person who was running [the] Center for Independent—not Center for Independent Living, [*inaudible*] for something in technology, anyway. So, we're waiting a little bit. This just happened like a month ago, so to see if we can find the funds to get a website going. 'Cause otherwise you have to go to the Ed Roberts campus to experience the mural. And it would be so much nicer if people could see it online, 'cause that seems to be our process of seeing things these days. And also bring it out to the wider world.

I mean, the fact that I got stuff from Iceland happened to be that I was in Iceland, and I heard about this—the community called Sólheimar. It's—let me think of that, the Waldorf schools—what's the name of that guy? Anthroposophic medicine, all that kind of stuff. Anyway, there's a community that lives that way in Iceland, with disability and non-disability. I mean, they're actually living the life of that. And so I got some of their stuff in the mural too.

CG: I have just a few questions left. The good thing is that they're very open-ended. I can even maybe have a couple of follow-ups.

You mentioned your mom was—back in the day, she survived the previous biggest pandemic in the past couple of centuries, which was 1918, the influenza. We are just, it seems, getting past the current epidemic in the United States. Pandemic is still ongoing in the world.

What have you thought of your mom, or even just your current experience—as you described, you're currently in history. This is the biggest thing that probably has happened to most of us. How do you think of yourself as a person inside of this moment in history, but then now, now that we're finishing it? What are your hopes and dreams to do things now that it seems like things are opening up in California in a week?

FV: Wow, yeah, that is amazing! I never thought so much about that experience of that last pandemic until now. And it was actually secret for a long time. Nobody thought about it, really. So, I feel like I have something to learn from her experience, and the experience of those people. And also that it's such a liminal moment that anything could happen. And part of it is I feel like we're living in the Middle Ages, where reason is not at the top of the list—that we're in a time of fear. And when people are fearful, they do awful things to each other and close their ears, la la la, I'm not listening. The siloing of information—all those kinds of things.

But it's partially what got me into this graduate program now because I was basically curled up on the bed—I can't do art, I'm just adding to the chaos. My garden looked great; I was out there picking weeds every day. But that's—it sort of got me around like, oh well, I'm picking weeds and the garden makes me feel whole, and better, and putting my hands in the dirt, and now I'm meeting my neighbors. A lot of my neighbors I hadn't met before. I'm the lady who's out in the garden kind of thing.

And then I thought, I've always had a little bit of a complex about being asked to do stuff that I didn't know how to do—and wondering why they were asking me because [of] being the person who didn't have the credentials. And then I started to think about maybe I would be more effective if I had that credential that people think that I need.

But it's sort of like a capstone to my life, in a way. Being the wise elder, now that I'm of that age, that I could make a contribution in some way by being a voice, that I'm past wanting any of those things like a Whitney Museum biennial or even getting a tenure-track job. I'm way past that.

But I could make a difference. I could be a voice in the room where they're having the conversation. And in the years since I started that—'cause I started it with the, we closed down, what in March of that year, yeah, last year. I started in May. In that year, it has actually come to pass.

I'm not in an art department now. I'm in an education department. And now that I'm in a doctoral program, people are asking for me to work with them on this whole integrating arts thing. Let's do art and science together. Let's do art and math together.

And so, it's taken my self-esteem up a little notch—just like, oh yeah, what I say makes a difference. And in spite of Ester and Julia, and all these people where I pollinated their lives, to actually have that experience, it's like, yeah, from here I can see a bigger picture. And this seems like a good thing to do.

I will say it's really hard to learn. I have so much more sympathy for my students [*laughs*]. It's like my head's exploding sometimes.

CG: Getting back to learning in this way too, because it's a very intensive and intense way of learning as well. Also knowing the PhDs, just doctorates in general happened to be—you're looking at a dissertation. And a dissertation in and of itself is a project that compiles not only a lot of information and research, but also thinking, rethinking, and just spiraling those ideas.

FV: Yeah, it's a lot of self-reflection. I kind of joke that it's a good therapy, and I actually will have a piece of paper at the end [*laughs*]. Really, I've learned so much about myself as a learner—and yeah. And also writing. Writing is really hard—it's, yeah.

And then trying to figure out what they mean, what they want to say, or what I need to say. But I'm getting through that first year of the beginning coursework. And in terms of the dissertation, I'm not going for the PhD. I'm going for an EdD. So, the PhD is much more about the literature. And the EdD is about real, practical things, and I have to come up with a problem of practice. And that's so tricky. I mean, because then I have to have data that proves that there is in fact this problem. And finding a way to make that data relevant—it's going to be really a challenge.

CG: And it's so interesting because as you are saying, the EdD becomes a continuation of most of the things that you have done—not only teaching, but also like arts. And it's very rewarding to hear, and validating, that a lot of these other teachers and a lot of other researchers are looking for your expertise.

Like, they often—in the arts, it's not like artists call themselves experts in something. But they definitely are, and they use tools, and they have a practice and a body of work just as other doctors have, right? They have a body of work; they also have tools.

I have a couple more questions. One is this question that I feel really encapsulates why oral histories are different than other kinds of conversations. And it's when you think of your life and opportunities in which you were able to talk about who you are—what do you need to tell me? Or what do I need to know so that I can better understand you?

FV: Oh, that's such a huge question! [*laughs*] Wow. I was actually going to go off on another tangent before you asked that question, which is not only does this thing have to be an investigation, but it has to be a form of art practice for me. And I recently discovered—Melissa turned me on to these actually—is W. E. B. Du Bois, his data charts; they look like Kandinsky paintings. They're beautiful.

And Florence Nightingale, another one who did all this documentation—but it's so beautiful. And even the math professor that I'm working with, her math dissertation; it looks like a Sol LeWitt painting. I mean, it's so amazing. So, that's the part that's possible.

So, I think that getting back to what should you know about me, is that I have this aesthetic lens on the world. It has to be beautiful in some way even if it's difficult.

'Cause I'm thinking of the Balinese when I—there's another experience of mine, going to Bali—and somebody would say, "What do you do?" I'd say, "I'm an artist." And, oh! Not like, what's your day job or putting you in some hierarchy of something else. 'Cause everyone practices the arts there with their offerings and that kind of thing. But they also have these checkered kind of cloths they wrap around things—black and white—which means that good, neither good nor evil ever wins. It's a draw. Which is why they're all in balance all the time. And if it's a really ugly kind of situation, you make an ugly offering. When it's a beautiful something, you make a beautiful offering. But you make the offering nonetheless, in some way.

And so, I kind of have gotten more recently in a sort of spiritual way, that the aesthetics of things for me is really important as a spiritual manifestation. I don't know if that makes sense or not.

CG: It does. I studied religious studies, so this is just fascinating to me. When you say that, just the aesthetics having that kind of spirituality, or even just the ritual of creating, or offering, as you were describing it in Bali, in Indonesia.

In your own life, where have you seen that liminality between the aesthetics with the spirituality?

FV: Well, I see it when I actually practice my art, because I—time disappears—I'm totally focused on what I'm doing. And a lot of it has to do maybe because [I'm] kind of a finger drummer—I have to have a place to put that energy and find out how to do something, which is why certain kinds of printmaking [are] so fascinating to me.

'Cause especially the one that I've been working on lately is called pronto plate lithography. It's a kind of paper plate—or plastic plate—that they use in industry. And artists, being the little magpies that we are, we figure everything out and make an art thing of it.

There are so many steps that could go wrong along the way, so you have to be so focused. And if you misstep one way, you can make a corrective move if you're paying attention. If you're not paying attention, then it just rolls down the hill.

So that, I think, is also part of the spiritual practice of it—just keeping in some kind of activity, somehow ideally on a daily basis. I'm a terrible meditator, but to keep some kind of practice during the day where I am totally focused, and not thinking about anything else, and being present. And that way it's sort of like the universe provides—I get in this flow. And people talk about those flow states. Well, you have to make them happen. They'll come to you. I mean, the universe doesn't need my help; it's pretty big, so it doesn't need my help to organize

things so that I'll be in this flow. But for me to experience it as the flow, that's my responsibility.

CG: Kind of like, set yourself up for that flow to even happen. Like the flow will happen if you're there for it, but you need to be there.

FV: Exactly, yeah, if you're present for it. And there are ways to make yourself present. That's why people sit and experience the breath. Because that's one way of doing it.

So I'm looking at that. I keep looking at this crowded little studio. And when it was first—when I was waiting for the inspector, which was making me crazy 'cause they were done, and it took them two months to get here for a number of reasons. I used to just sit in this empty room, trying to visualize what would be here. And I'm hoping for it to be less empty of this stuff on that side of the room. Just, from the paper cabinet on, it's pretty good.

But yeah, so [to] just sit here and have this as a creative space is really important for me.

CG: I have two final questions. The wall behind me, you were talking to me about it just before we started this conversation. What does that wall represent to you?

FV: Possibility. If I keep it open and blank—and sometimes things appear in it, and then they get taken down and other things [go up]. But the wall there will always be the wall of possibility. And until that stuff is just not parked up against it [*laughs*]. That's what it is.

CG: One final question that I have is, is there anything else that you want to say, that you maybe haven't been able to say before? Something about you, or your life, or something else that maybe you would have liked to say but hadn't been given the opportunity to freely say it?

FV: That's so lovely! It's kind of like when people are asked on their deathbeds, "What do you regret?" [*laughs*]

I regret not being more my authentic self. So part of this chameleon thing is that I am able to pass through spaces and stuff like that. But there are very few people who really know me deeply, and I would say that is something that I'm working on at the moment. So there is that.

The other thing—if I can just say something about the murals. That was such an incredible experience of working with so many different people in the community, and seeing people value that, and watch them change their environment.

That was what's so great about the desert mural—I was working with this gang of kids. And behind the wall there were all their beer bottles and stuff like that. And I don't know if you know what a snap line is. It's a chalk line and you have—one person holds it, and then the other person on the other hand holds it, and it's got chalk dust on it. So you go snap! And then you make these lines on the wall, which are the larger version of your small kind of picture. And that's how you make these squares—to work. And I gave one end of the chalk line to one of these kids. And then it was their mural from then on. And then they started protecting it from the other gangs.

So, to have more of those experiences. I mean, I'm so grateful for those. I also feel like I really feel grateful for being, for having grown up when I did. I think it was a really special bubble in history in a way. I mean, I lived through the fifties. The sixties were amazing. That was really the generation I felt more at home with because we were changing everything. Organic food, community gardens, that kind of thing—murals in the seventies.

And when I said that I would feel like more part of history, my big concern is I always thought that the next generation would have it better—[and] my generation was supposed to have it better. And now I don't see that happening.

And it's kind of one of those, you know—I worry about my grandchildren, economically and health-wise. And the fact that—for the kids now that are coming through the pandemic, who haven't been schooled really for the year, and their phone is their safe place. I don't know; I worry about that.

But I figure, I've said this to other people too, that I can only be an example. And I'm like a little drop of water. But if there are enough drops of water, we make an ocean. And I'm hoping that the tide will turn despite examples. That's it.

CG: Fran, thank you so much for your time.

After the oral history recording finished, I went from the studio part of Fran's home into her actual living room and saw a varied collection of rubber duckies, a mandala painting from one of her students, and also a Bodhidharma print she bought [on] a trip to Korea years ago.

Before I left, she told me that what happens to murals nowadays is akin to what happened to frescoes in Europe. By that she means that all that's left in terms of frescoes is about 10 percent of what was once there. And that is what we know as the representative sample of frescoes.

“The same is the case with the Mission’s murals,” she said. “What is left then in that sample,” she added, “is impermanence.”

And I would add flux—like in her art and life.

This oral history of Fran Valesco 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.

NATALIA DE LA ROSA: Natalia de la Rosa

CG: Who served as a production assistant.

The rest of the team included:

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.

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Thanks for listening.