

**PROYECTO MISSION MURALS**  
Oral History Audio Transcripts

**RAY PATLÁN ORAL HISTORY**  
Oakland, California, April 13, 2021

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This is an oral history of Chicana artist, cofounder of PLACA, and educator Ray Patlán for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on April 13, 2021, in Ray Patlán's home in Oakland, California.

Before we began, he heard me say something like "Because this is going to be long, you could sit on a comfortable chair, if you want to." That "if you want to" was actually in Spanish—"Si quieres." He laughed and said, "¿Siqueiros?" I asked him to repeat what he said. He repeated: "¡Siqueiros!" He explained that an old joke among Spanish-speaking muralists comes in the form of one of the last names of the Tres Grandes, [David Alfaro] Siqueiros, and that it's what they say anytime instead of "Si quieres." That's Ray for you—funny, full of stories, and with a laugh that fills up the room.

The voices you'll hear will be those of Ray and me. You might also hear his ten-year-old dachshund, Carmelita, in the background.

This oral history delves into the facets of Ray's early life in Chicago that led to his career as an artist, including his trips to México since he was a kid and detailing his foray into visual art, his educational projects, as well as his teaching life. The personal and political reasons for his focus on muralism are illuminated as Ray takes us on a journey through the expanse of public art he has generated throughout the years.

Here is the oral history.

*Esta es una historia oral del artista chicano, cofundador de PLACA y educador Ray Patlán para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 13 de abril de 2021, en la casa de Ray Patlán en Oakland (California).*

*Antes de que comenzáramos, él escuchó que dije algo así como: «Ya que esto va a ser largo, podrías sentarte en una silla cómoda, si quieres». Todo fue en inglés menos lo de «si quieres», que fue en español. Se rió y dijo: «¿Siqueiros?» Le pedí que repitiera lo que había dicho. Él repitió: «¡Siqueiros!» Explicó que hay un viejo chiste entre los muralistas hispanohablantes que tiene que ver con el apellido de uno de los Tres Grandes, [David Alfaro] Siqueiros, y que por eso dicen así en vez de «si quieres». Así, tal cual, es Ray: chistoso, dicharachero y con una risa que copa cualquier espacio.*

*Las voces que oirás serán las de Ray y la mía. Quizás también oigas en el fondo a su perra salchicha de diez años, Carmelita.*

*Esta historia oral ahonda en las facetas de las primeras etapas de la vida de Ray en Chicago que lo condujeron a su profesión como artista, incluyendo sus viajes a México desde niño; además, puntualiza su incursión al arte visual, sus proyectos educativos, así como su vida docente. Ray expone las razones personales y políticas para enfocarse en el muralismo al llevarnos de viaje por toda la extensión del arte público que ha generado a través de los años.*

*Aquí está la historia oral.*

**CAMILO GARZÓN:** All right. So, I think we are recording now. It looks like a funny setup, and that laugh is perfectly captured, so.

**RAY PATLÁN:** *Perfecto.*

**CG:** So, today is April 13, and I am here with Ray Patlán in the studio that he's working at currently. What are you currently working on?

**RP:** I'm working on a mural for the lobby of the brand-new homeless senior housing in the Mission District. I'm doing it on portable panels, and then I'm going to install it when it's complete.

**CG:** So you're currently preparing it before you end up installing it?

**RP:** Yeah, this is a very tiny section of it that's in this room right now. There's three large sections. It's about fifty feet by ten feet.

**CG:** That's going to be a mural installed in the Mission District. When do you think that it's going to be finished over there?

**RP:** Uh, well it's been a big delay, because of the pandemic and my slowness. I'm used to working in collaboration with people, and I've been working this alone—again, because of the pandemic. So, I would say, it's nine-tenths complete right now, probably by the summer it will be done.

**CG:** That makes sense. So, I look forward to seeing that when it's finished. Let's start with the basics: what's your name, and where were you born?

**RP:** Raymond Michael Patlán. I was born in the South Side of Chicago, Mother Cabrini Hospital, in 1946.

**CG:** Great. With your family background, when you think of growing up there, how was it growing up there? How was your relationship with your family?

**RP:** It was actually a very good childhood for the period. Neighbors were very friendly and open. Our parents didn't have to have a big paranoia about us playing out on the street, being out there alone. We had lots of kids in the neighborhood, and it was a good childhood in that neighborhood. Eventually it changed—but all neighborhoods do, I guess, in different parts of the country.

**CG:** What changed in yours?

**RP:** Well, crime became more apparent after a while. I saw the first person shot when I was probably about ten, maybe younger—I can't remember exactly. And it was when gangs began to form in the community and the...

Yeah, the kids were not used to this kind of violence, so we all were quickly made aware of it, and we became accustomed to ducking for cover when we heard gunshots or when we saw people running down the street. Yeah, it was a quick change—but that happens, I'm sure, in every overcrowded community, which is what Pilsen became after a while. It was full of people, which is great, but of course the good comes with the bad as well.

**CG:** Yeah, and speaking of Pilsen, that is a name that to this day is associated with you geographically, right, that location, but also as a movement.

**RP:** Yeah, I think most people in my neighborhood would say *la dieciocho* (the eighteenth), 18th Street, or Pilsen, yeah.

**CG:** And, you are associated with the Pilsen movement, or the Pilsen Muralismo (muralism) movement, also in Chicago. And when you think of those early years making art—or not only art, because it was art as well as art socially conscious of what was going on with these changes that you were mentioning—how do you describe those early years?

**RP:** Well, I mean, I don't know how early you want to go back, but I was—I've been drawing since I was very young, since I was a kid. And in fact I remember being a little capitalist. I would trade my drawings with other kids for candy, or toys, or whatever, you know.

But I guess my first real approach to public art was when I began working at Powell House, which was later known as Casa Aztlan. And I began working as an assistant to María Almonte, a woman who was doing ceramics with children in the basement. She had a whole setup, with kilns and everything. And I would assist her, and that was my introduction, more or less, to teaching and working with other people.

But I was always drawing, and my recollection of public art was from my annual trips with my parents to Mexico. That was the greatest influence—the Mexican murals and the Mexican muralists. And my parents' very generous introduction to Mexican art for me. It was not just the art; it was the whole idea of Mexico at that time in the fifties, my uncle's ranches, the cities of Mexico. Mexico City was clean when I first arrived with my parents. The cars there were minim[al], the streets were clean, the people were polite—doesn't sound like Mexico City, does it? [*laughs*]

**CG:** Doesn't sound like a lot of the Latin-American capitals that we think of these days.

**RP:** But, yeah, it was—me and my cousins would roam around free, buy *semillas* (seeds) and dulces (sweets) and pastries in the street. And we just—we had free run of pretty much anywhere we wanted to go in the city. It changed substantially over the years, of course, like every city, and it became overcrowded. And yeah, I don't think I would want to live there at this time, but at that time it was a great place.

**CG:** Yeah, and then you're mentioning all of these beautiful memories with, you know, food, pastries, these kinds of things that you would be like, wow, so many colors, so many textures and flavors. One thing that I wanted to ask you about those times is you're mentioning the

influence of seeing Mexican murals, or just Mexican art, in Mexico. Which ones were the ones that you like remembering in your mind vividly?

**RP:** Oh man, so many! It wasn't just the big three: [Diego] Rivera, [José Clemente] Orozco, and Siqueiros. It was José Chávez Morado. Lots of other younger artists who were just doing art all over the place—and everywhere I went I saw murals in Mexico. So I mean, if it was Guanajuato, if it was San Miguel [de] Allende, if it was Mexico City or Saltillo, there were murals everywhere. And it was a big influence on my thinking about art and how it could be, how it should be, maybe.

I had read a little bit, very little at that time, in this country about the movement. But I knew that it had made a significant contribution to the people and the history of Mexico. And I figured, well, we had murals here too, but not quite the same kind of approach, or significance, as the Mexican movement. So I began to look further into it, and when I went to school here later for art, I was told that I should not put my eggs in that basket, because it was like billboards. They were like commercial, you know—why do you want to do that?

Well, nobody could have convinced me then or now that that was the truth. I saw with my eyes and I felt how these murals affected the people in Mexico, and I knew the same could happen here with a new movement—a movement that would come from art communities. So I began to initiate some projects at an early age in my community.

**CG:** Yeah, you did see the truth behind what you were witnessing in Mexico, rather than just like what was being told to you here.

**RP:** Yeah, and eventually I just decided that the Art Institute was not the place to get what I needed to continue this work. I had, I think, maybe one semester left, or twelve units, something like that, and I left. I figured I could get more off of my community out on the street than I could in the school. And I had had plenty of training in Mexico, and in the US in terms of art. So I decided—let's start putting it to use, you know, and giving back to the community that I grew up in.

**CG:** Absolutely, and you did mention Casa Aztlan, and in 1970 was when it was founded. And it really became a focal point for the community as you were establishing, and you created a mural cycle in '70 to '73 over there. You were already a teacher here.

**RP:** Well, I'd been working there, like I said, since I was very young, with Mrs. Almonte, and I more or less grew up there. It was like a second home.

**CG:** And it was a nice way of, as you're saying, going back to your second home and paying respects to the place, or what were you trying to do with these very famous, you know?

**RP:** Well, I'd been there for a long time, as you have noticed. And I noticed all these names on the wall—Lithuanian and Polish names of people who had contributed to Howell House. And that's fine. I thought that was great. But the community had changed. It was now mostly

Mexicanos. And so I decided—well, why can't we have our names on there as contributors? Why don't more of our people contribute to this place that is serving our community?

And I asked for permission to do murals on the walls inside of the auditorium, where a lot of activities took place. And at first the director said, "Well, no." He didn't trust me. I was a student, you know, "[*inaudible*] permission to paint on your walls?" But finally, I showed some work and I talked more and more about it. And finally he decided—"OK, but you have to buy your own paint." In other words, it was economics as well. I said, "OK, I'll do it."

And I think I spent—on the first *Salón de la Raza*—I spent seventy-five dollars on paints. And most of that was from my own salary at working there. And I think it took me about a year to complete, in 1971, the *Salón de la Raza*. And what I tried to do is give a semblance of the contributions that our people had made to the world—not just, you know, to Pilsen. And I started with the founding of Tenochtitlan, the native cultures, and through the revolution—very short. Of course, there was not a lot of room in the *Salón* to do what might have been done. But—and then I ended it at the doorway, because that's where the history continued out, in the community. And I ended it with what was going on then—the current history—which was Corky Gonzales, César Chávez, Dolores Huerta—people who were making a difference in our communities at that time across the country and the world.

And, well, nobody really thought a lot of it, except local community at that time. It became a bigger issue later as the Chicano movement grew, and self-awareness was—became a super-important part of our culture.

**CG:** Yeah, that makes sense because, as you're saying, you're presenting what the community is, but it can also be—and the opportunities, as you're saying, very specifically ending it by the door, so that, this is where it goes. It's to the external, like, this is where the work continues.

**RP:** Mm-hmm. And it became a really rooted part of the community—even the gang members were expressing their concern about it, how it impressed them.

One of the young members, I remember, Lester—we used to call him Crazy Lester—wanted his portrait next to Zapata. He didn't even know who Zapata was—he just liked the image. And so I put his portrait with the big sombrero and the *bandoleros*—you know, big bandoliers across him, as part of—and people recognized him. And they thought it was funny, but at the same time they got the idea.

**CG:** That Emiliano Zapata and this other person that you're mentioning, Lester, both of them are still related. They are still culturally within the same realm.

**RP:** Significant, yeah.

**CG:** *Exacto* (exactly). And the significance, I think, that that is a nice part of your work, that you do create art that really—not only is for the sake of art, but also represents the

community, and these historical figures, these legends, are on the same level as Lester. As this person that you know. Flesh and bone.

**RP:** Yeah, there were a number of different portraits included in the Casa Aztlán murals. Women who were wives of friends of mine, and like I said, the different gangs even got included in the last panels. The local gangs who—I wasn't glorifying them—but I was showing that they represent the community too, whether you like what they were doing or not, you know. Yeah, I tried to reflect the community as I saw it, as it was.

**CG:** And it's special especially because, as you're saying, it didn't matter that you didn't agree or not with what these gang members, as you're saying, were doing or not. They are still people. They are still—

**RP:** They're part of the community, that's for sure.

**CG:** They are us too. That makes sense. One thing I wanted to follow up on is you mentioned Corky Gonzáles, and how do you remember him? How do you think we should remember him as a person?

**RP:** You mean Corky Gonzales?

**CG:** *Sí*, Corky.

**RP:** Well, Corky was a super-important part of the Chicano movement. And his youth organization in Denver contributed immensely to all of our consciousness. Because the conferences that he did drew from all over the country. And even today I hear people talking about that—those conferences—and how it impressed them, how it brought them back to their communities to contribute more, and new, ideas.

Yeah, Corky was really an important part of the Chicano movement. Even today people still repeat the poem “Yo soy Joaquín.”

**CG:** How do you remember him as a friend?

**RP:** Well, I knew him only briefly. I really didn't—those conferences were so packed with people, it was almost impossible to get to him. I knew César better than I knew Corky, which is kind of a miracle. But, from what I saw, he was doing great stuff, and he was very open to whatever people wanted to know from him and whatever he could contribute to the movement that was going on.

**CG:** That makes sense. Let me just introduce another guest that we have here. Do you mind introducing who this beautiful being is for you?

**RP:** [*laughs*] This is Carmelita, my pet dachshund. And she's sniffing the microphone right now. She's been with me for ten years, and she's just a great little companion. Everybody loves Carmelita, I like to say. [*laughs*]

**CG:** I would say, in the few hours that I've known Carmelita, she's very sweet. She's very, very sweet.

OK, let me get into another topic, which is your identity. I think one interesting thing is that, as the decades have passed, and as the Chicano movement as well as the Muralismo movement happened, there's been changes in how people identify themselves, and that to me is fascinating. Have you seen the way that you identified yourself also changing? Or do you think it has remained relatively constant?

**RP:** Well, no, everybody changes. Change is super important. That's what our movement is about. But yeah, I remember when I first started using—we first started using—the word Chicano. It was very negative for some people. In fact, the older folks really disliked it. They thought it was an insult to the culture.

**CG:** Why did they think that?

**RP:** Slowly, as we began to identify what it was, what we meant by it—the younger folks—I think people began to accept it and eventually the older folks actually picked up on it. And I remember a number of seniors in Pilsen being strong advocates of the word and of the movement, the Chicano movement. Which was great, because that brought more people to support the things we were trying to do like, well, the different community centers, for example. Casa Aztlán, Gads Hill, a number of other community centers in the area were actually using the word to promote events, which was impressive.

And it took a long time, but we eventually began to merge positively with the community, the whole idea of Chicano, and the movement. And there are still people today who don't like the word or feel it's not a legitimate term. It's unfortunate because it's definitely here to stay—it's not going anywhere.

**CG:** I think that you have also proven that, not only with your art, but also just as a testament of who you've been in the communities that you've been a part of.

One thing I wanted to ask you is about PLACA. This is a word that Spanish speakers might be familiar with because it is a word that it is very easy to understand if you speak Spanish. It is a very specific word to name something. So, why did you come up with that word specifically, and why did you decide to create PLACA?

**RP:** Well, *placa* can mean many, many things, as you well know that you're identifying in Spanish, right? And the *bandillas*, the gangs in the neighborhood, used it to identify themselves. So it became a very flexible word, like many words in Spanish. And it became, eventually, like an emblem of pride, a symbol of pride, rather than maybe what it had initially identified itself as.

You know the Balmy Alley Project, which is very well known in the Mission—maybe farther than the Mission, out all the way to art history. Yeah, PLACA became part of the iconography,

or the vocabulary, of that kind of public art. That we are doing it without having to get a license, or without having to get a degree, or without having to have any kind of legalization, if that's what you want to call it.

But we were actually going out with people, many of whom had no art training at all, and expressing ourselves on the walls. And that didn't mean just graffiti. It meant actual mural work and artwork that was being done in the communities to express immediate concerns of those communities.

**CG:** What were some of those immediate concerns?

**RP:** Everything from gentrification to racism to equal pay—just everything that concerned people in poor, or rather lower-income, communities that needed to be rectified. And so we tried to talk about our concerns on walls, like I said, without necessarily an academic background to pump it up, more with the straight-up *placazo*. Kind of similar to the graffiti that goes up, with spontaneity and not with a lot of—how shall I say it?—sophisticated education necessarily. And many times it did get expressed with academic sophistication, but not always. And it wasn't—well, I guess what I'm trying to say is, it wasn't always necessary to have a great academic background to express the concerns of a community in public art. And so we continued on that path, I think.

To be very honest, people all over the world took notice—and graffiti isn't a new thing, *placazo* isn't a new thing. It's been happening for centuries. But the recognition that the community mural movement gained was international. You know, Siqueiros expressed his delight in seeing our movement grow. And in fact, that's one of the reasons I think he allowed me to have access to some of the work he was doing and to sit and talk with him at various times in my visits with his studio, in his studio.

There was a great Renaissance, if you will, of community art in this country—all over the world, actually. But a lot of really strong movements in the US, and eventually in other countries—Mexico, and Europe, and Asia. And I've done murals in all those countries, and it wasn't me spreading it. It was the whole idea, the whole concept of this movement, that spread throughout the world. And it started a long time ago. I mean, it isn't like any one person started it.

I guess the big spark that happened in the community mural movement was Bill Walker back in the 1960s on the South Side of Chicago with the *Wall of Respect*. But that wasn't the beginning of community murals. It was definitely a significant step. Bill was a great artist, and he was a good organizer. But murals began to pop up all over the place. I mean, I remember reading stories about murals in African villages talking about situations, not just decorative murals, and Mexican ranchos and Chinese villages.

There was like just a whole movement that all of a sudden began to sprout all over the world. And it was that idea of *placazo*. Being able to talk about your needs, your life on walls, and letting other people know what your needs were, what your wants were, what your situation was. That was what I think became the world community mural renaissance.

**CG:** I think that's essential, as you're saying. You also mentioned Siqueiros, and one of the things that I find striking is—even you that are I think very well known for your artistic work—you still mention the contributions of others as important, or even the people that came after you, as important to just muralism, or *muralismo*, as an art form, as something collaborative, as something that you do together, and to represent the community. And that strikes me as something that moves you, it seems.

**RP:** Well, the individual creativity has always been really important, because individuals are important. But if you really think about art as a collaboration, it's been going on since cave painting. And the first murals were done as collaboratives, not just—I mean, there was not maestros, or we would have seen or heard about them. They were done by groups of people. The Egyptian murals were done by groups—the Mayan murals, the Aztecs, the Greeks, the Romans, the Chinese. These are significant contributions to art that were done by collaboratives. And I'm kind of in that period right now myself, where I would prefer to work in collaboratives than I would individually.

And right now I am working on this mural for the senior center individually, but it's because of the pandemic primarily. I would much rather do it as a collaboration. That's what I've been doing for the last few years of my career—collaborations—and they work very well. In fact, the renovation of Casa Aztlan was one of the best collaboratives I've worked on in a long time.

And I did one also recently, in Blue Island, Illinois. That was a great success. The collaboration was not just with the artist, but the community, the police, the mayor—everybody contributed, which is just amazing to me.

But it's how this movement has grown, that has really drawn in physically the community, and they all have a participatory place in creativity.

**CG:** And you're mentioning this new mural that I'm seeing you working on here before it becomes the mural, right? And I think the first time I found out about it was through Susan Cervantes, who is also reinstalling *The Four Stages of Corn* right around the corner from, I think, where this mural that the city commissioned is going to be.

How are you feeling about it—Especially in this really weird, unprecedented time of COVID-19—how are you feeling about this one, compared to other ones?

**RP:** Well, like I said, this is the first individual mural I've done in a long time, and it's going very slow. First of all because I'm aged [*laughs*—hopefully like wine. But I'm older, and it's harder to do some of the things I could do a lot quicker and a lot more efficiently when I was younger. True, I've gained a lot of experience over the years, but climbing ladders, lifting things—it gets a little harder as you get older. I've missed the collaboration for a number of reasons. And also, when you work with other people, you learn so much. I learn so much.

It's like, when you say maestro, you're not just talking about the maestro teaching, you're also talking about the maestro learning from everybody. I mean, the contributions people give to you, whether they have artistic experience or not is irrelevant. They contribute lots of new ideas, sometimes unconsciously—and that's part of art. It's a beautiful part of art. Discovery.

I remember a student asking me once in a class, “Well, Mr. Patlán, when do I know that I've achieved artistic stature and I become an artist?” And I turned to him and I said, “You know, probably when you decide to become a plumber.” And he was shocked—he didn't know what I meant.

And what I was referring to, or inferring, was that once you stop discovering and you think you've made it, so to speak, or you become an “artist,” whatever that means, and you have no more to do in that creative field—go and do something else that you can be more creative in. Why should you stop? If you have discovered everything you can, there's no more to do in that field. Go do something else. I think art is about discovery. The challenges that we find in community work and community art are discoveries. And that's one of the other reasons for my being so adamant about collaboratives, because you learn so much from each other working as a group. Much more than you do sitting at an easel painting a painting. You learn a lot from every creative thing you do, but you learn a lot more when you work with other people.

**CG:** Yeah, and I think that you just spoke about another aspect of, I think, also your creative life, which is educating, being educated, sure, because as you're saying, you're still learning while you're collaborating with people. But then there's the other part, which is you've also been able to pass down some of that knowledge as that anecdote that you just told me.

What do you think about your life as a teacher, as an educator? How do you see it collaborate also with your art, and then your art informing your teaching?

**RP:** Well, a lot of my work as a teacher has been doing mural collaborations. I find it's a good way to teach for a number of reasons, not just about drawing and painting, but also about working together, and about community, about being a community for whatever short period a mural takes to do with a group of people. Because as I said earlier, and I really truly believe, we learn from each other. And working together in a group—there is not one person that gives more than anyone else. Everybody contributes. And it's beautiful, because you learn to work with other people that's an *enseñanza* (teaching), a learning in itself, being able to work with others.

I think not enough of it is done, and the world would be a better place if more people were able to work with others—rather than thinking that individual work is more important, or that I'm a genius [*laughs*], or I'm the leader of this group. It's good to be a leader, but the leader has to understand that the people he or she is working with are not following. They're actually participating in the creation of a larger work, and mindset, and way of thinking.

I think that's the important part of working on murals too—it's the whole idea of creating an environment in which people learn from each other. That is what happens in mural art, especially with the collaborative aspect.

**CG:** And some of these people that I think you've been able to work with—or collaborate [with] or both—one that comes to mind, or a couple, are Mario Castillo and Marcos Raya. How was it to work with them, compared to, for example, in Balmy Alley, or just in San Francisco?

**RP:** Well, Mario is a very special person—and case. Mario and I worked together as very young artists. We would sit together in his mother's house at the kitchen table and paint, and draw, and talk. And that was a great experience for me, 'cause Mario is a fantastic artist. So I learned a lot from Mario, not just about art, but also about life in general. We talked extensively about our families, about our lives, about what we wanted, what we needed, what we did. Yeah, Mario was always a great influence on me, probably one of the bigger influences in my life, in terms of artwork. He was doing tremendous art as a young person. And stuff I mean, most people couldn't believe it was coming from him, 'cause he was so young.

My first art exhibit he convinced me to exhibit. I didn't want to. I didn't feel my work was good enough. And Marcos—[*laughs*]. It was nice to watch Marcos's work go up and become part of the whole movement. We had kind of a strange relationship. We were not very close, but the work he was doing was a great contribution to the community, as well as Mario's and a number of other artists during that period.

Pilsen was just beginning to recognize the public art contribution. And Mario's was the first that not only was a beautiful piece of art, but also a great collaboration with young people in the community, out of one of the community centers. As well as being an influence on the work I was going to do later, and I did then.

Yeah, the early days of the movement were very, very minimal in terms of the number of artists that were participating. But it grew, and it exploded. I mean, in the past ten years it's become an incredible movement—and not just in Pilsen, all across the country, and into Europe, in Mexico, in Tepito, and even in China and in Europe, there are placazos going up.

So it wasn't just our influence, I would say. It was something that's been with us forever [that] just needed to be uncorked. You look, like I said, back to the days of the cave paintings, and you don't need to think any more about where it came from. I mean, it's an innate kind of sprout—just kind of boom! It's there. There's no one person that has initiated it. It's something that comes from inside humanity. You need to express yourself. And it comes in a lot of different ways. I mean, there's dance, there's paint, there's music, there's all kinds of contributions to public art. Ours is just one of the many.

**CG:** Yeah, I agree. And one other thing that I wanted to ask you, this is a question that I think I was really happy to ask you, because of a conversation you and I had on the phone a few weeks back. And I remember that you told me to ask you specifically about a time in which

Roberto Vargas and his son, it seems like they sent you a photograph, and I think it might have been [for] the *Y tú yo y César*, or maybe—

**RP:** *Y tú yo y qué*. Yeah, that was a mural I was working on, and I asked for a photograph of Roberto, which was him wearing a beret and a jacket with Nicaragua across it.

And when I, I was doing a series of photographs on a wall of different people in the Mission community. Everybody, from businesspeople to a waitress who used to wear a bathing cap to serve people in the restaurant—everybody knew her in the neighborhood—to local people who lived right across the street, a family, two sisters, and on and on. A guy who lived in the hills, who said he remembers when it was goat farms in Bernal Heights. So I put these portraits up to show that the Mission consisted of a lot of different people, and some were still around, some were not.

But a reporter photographed the mural and zeroed in on Roberto Vargas's portrait—with the beret and the Nicaragua jacket—and made a reference to it being a portrait of Saddam Hussein. And you remember the reputation Saddam had during that period when this mural was being done—it was not exactly a positive image. So one of Roberto's relatives, it might have been his wife, I can't remember, came at me and the reporter for publishing this. And I said, "Well, I didn't have anything to do with the publication. The guy took the image; it's public art. There's not much I could do about it. I'm sorry if you [were] misrepresented. We all know Roberto's not Saddam Hussein." And this guy didn't even [know] what it was about; he just kind of wrote what [he] felt he wanted to.

Anyway, it was all settled eventually, but it was kind of a scandal for a short period of time in the Mission, because this guy wrote this article about me putting up a portrait of Saddam Hussein, and then replicating the image of Roberto with Saddam.

So that's the story I wanted to tell you. In a way, it was kind of funny—but it was not. It was very serious too.

**CG:** Yeah, like as you are saying, there's the difference between oh, OK, it's funny because this is my friend, I depicted him this way. But then the not funny way, and you told me what you think of what I'm gathering, is the assumption of the journalist, of the reporter. Because [he] should have asked.

**RP:** Well, also I think that he was referring to the whole idea of murals as well, which was very offensive. The whole idea of murals being left, left-wing, or being radical, or being a protest of some sort. I'm sure that's where he was going with it. And he got straightened out real quick. They went to talk to him and said, "You're facing a lawsuit, buddy." [*laughs*] But it was straightened out in good time. Unfortunately, it created a little, minor friction during that period.

**CG:** No, that makes sense. I'm sorry that that happened, especially because there was a very specific intention with you depicting Roberto like this.

**RP:** Well, Roberto became a community hero. Well, not just community—he was international in terms of his contribution to the movement in Central America.

**CG:** Yeah, and also just his words. Like he's just—that's one of the interesting things, as you were saying, that you've also not only collaborated with muralists, but also there's like so many different people—poets, lawyers, historians, people that were just around you with this purpose. Pushing forward, just representation, just art, and being able to see yourself depicted in a way that is not an assumption, like this journalist did do.

**RP:** Yeah, the reason I brought it up to you on the phone the other day was because his son had sent me a picture of that incident, more or less, over the Internet, and I thought it was pretty funny. He saw it as being humorous. [*laughs*]

**CG:** Yeah, no, as you're saying, like it's funny, and it also, as you were saying, it also is very sad at the same time.

**RP:** When you're painting, when you're doing images in public art, you're going to get all kinds of different responses.

**CG:** That's one question that I want to ask you, because as you're saying, it's public art, it's out there, and it's there for people to, sure, consume, in quotation marks. But it's also there being interpreted, reinterpreted. How do you deal with something that you put out there, and then it just becomes something else?

**RP:** Even more importantly, something I'm sure you have not thought of because you're not a muralist, I don't think. When people come up to you and start talking to you as a muralist, most of the time you don't stop to talk to them. You're talking to them facing the wall. So in essence they're facing your back. You have your back to them. You don't know what is going to happen.

I've had people come up and start screaming at me for what's going up on the wall—or because we're painting on a wall, period. I've had people curse me out, because—you know, “Why are you destroying that mural?” Or funny incidents, like people coming up to me and saying, “Oh, man, that's a beautiful image! You're a good artist!” And then the next day coming by and saying, “Oh, man, you really messed that up! It was nice yesterday.” [*laughs*]

So you're getting feedback from the community, and it's not always positive. But you have to kind of swish it around in your head and decide what this contribution is, and how you're going to deal with it. And like I said, most of the time you're not even facing your accusers or your admirers. You're with your back to them. So it's an unusual kind of relationship with the public.

**CG:** Yeah, absolutely. Especially the kind of art that it is, as you just described, and this unique relationship.

One other thing that I wanted to ask you regarding your muralism work is [about] *Y tú y yo y qué*. And you did depict César Chávez, which is a person that you've been in contact with, you've met, and it's been a part of just—not only the Chicano social movement—but also just social rights and equality in the United States. These are images that you depicted, you decided to put on a mural. Why did you decide to feature César but also all these other figures, or just normal people that were living in the Mission?

**RP:** Well, I didn't put César on that initial mural. Later Kookie, Carlos Gonzalez, who assisted me on that mural, changed the mural and put César up, which is good. I love César Chávez. I think he's a great hero of our movement.

But yeah, I think that our images intentionally try to provoke positive or negative responses from the public, and they do. Anytime you put something up in public it's going to initiate some kind of response. That's why you do it, basically. And hopefully it'll be, it'll have a positive outcome, but you never know.

And César is one of the more positive images I think that has been represented by all of us.

I met with César several times. I worked with the [United] Farm Workers for a couple of years in Chicago—helped win the Great Strike. But yeah, César's very seldom, as far as I have known, elicited any kind of negative response from the community. It's always been pretty positive, because that's the kind of person he was. Very positive.

**CG:** I remember Mission Local interviewed you last year, and there were some mementos or keepsakes that you were giving people when some of that mural, you had to let go. What were some of those mementos, and why did you choose to give them to people?

**RP:** I don't quite remember what you're speaking of; could you remind me?

**CG:** Yeah, so Mission Local made an article last year in which they were asking you—as well as why did that mural depict César—but also then you were giving some mementos away. It seems like that mural you had to—

**RP:** Oh, you're talking about Carlos, not me. Yeah, people getting mixed up with Carlos and me, because Carlos redid that mural.

**CG:** Right.

**RP:** And the mementos you're talking about were pieces of the mural—actual pieces of the mural that Carlos had given to certain organizations and private individuals. I believe one of them was a portrait of César.

**CG:** That make sense.

**RP:** Yeah, that's Carlos "Kookie" Gonzalez, who assisted me on the first mural. And what happened was he later asked my permission to redo it in his own style, what he wanted.

**CG:** And that's when he introduced César.

**RP:** Right, that's how we got associated with, yeah [*laughs*].

**CG:** That makes total sense.

**RP:** It'll be the same. It could be confusing.

**CG:** Yeah, I think I might have—I did see your name in that article, probably was just because you are the original muralist.

**RP:** Because he retitled it as well, with almost the same title. Like you said, *Y tú y yo y César*.

**CG:** *Sí—Y tú y yo*. Yours was *Y tú y yo y qué*.

**RP:** Right.

**CG:** That makes sense. That's good. And then, now that you mention Kookie, right? How is it, or how has it been to work with him, or to know him as well? How was that relationship?

**RP:** Kookie's become one of the more important artists in the Mission, maybe in the country, and he's done murals in San Francisco State University, around the Mission. And he's become a great artist in his own right. He—I don't know how much collaboration he's done—but the work he's done on his own has become very strong and really important in the whole movement. Yeah, and I was really proud to have him mentioned that he had worked with me.

Our first time together was working in Folsom Park with a group of gang members on a mural—a low-lying wall there in Folsom Park. And he was just a teenager then. And that's how long I've known Kookie. You know he was a probation officer at juvie—juvenile hall—and he's retired now. And he's just become a muralist, which is great. So the influences of our murals are many [*laughs*].

**CG:** And also just the way to interact with the community as well.

**RP:** Yeah, mm-hmm.

**CG:** That too. A couple of other things that I wanted to ask you before I let you go, Ray, is you also have worked—and I don't think you've been asked this enough, about your position as the executive director of Creativity Explored.

And I have two questions on that. The first is: how did this specific work impact your art practice? But also, how was it working in that position with other people, like Chuy Campusano?

**RP:** Well, I'm going to answer your questions in reverse.

**CG:** Please do.

**RP:** First of all, it was kind of a struggle, a nightmare to be working as an administrator after having been an artist, and wanting to continue with my public art. But I learned so much from working there. The community I worked with was very free and open. The artists in that center were uninhibited creators. They created from their hearts and their minds and didn't have to go to school, didn't [*laughs*], didn't need instruction.

And they taught all of us who would work there, I think, all the artists who worked there, a real lesson about freedom—about the freedom to create. And that creativity is not just something you learn in school, and it's not something that is taught, but something that comes from inside, something that kind of is born of your, all your sensibilities. And that's something that's really important for artists to get ahold of. It's hard to express in an academic setting, I think—my thought only.

But yeah, these students, and I call them students, 'cause we were their students, really. But they had a sense of creativity that is not teachable. It's something that just comes from within. It's something that maybe the first paintings in the caves had. They had this creativity that just was undefinable—it was just there. It came out like a geyser that just exploded. And that's what many of the folks we worked with in this center had.

And I was lucky enough to work with a number of local artists—who were able to bring that out further and further and actually make it digestible for the rest of the population—so that they could exhibit in local venues like some of the big-time galleries in the city and stuff. It was very impressive work; it still is! Still goes on today.

**CG:** That makes sense, and as you were saying, it's just—there's such a through line of just, even the most ancient humans, of creating this same kind of art and this same kind of expression that comes from within, as you're describing.

How do you remember Chuy Campusano?

**RP:** Chuy was a good friend—not very close, but a good friend. He worked on his art with certain principals, certain direction, that he had developed over the years. He was very much interested in public art as well, and in Mexican art in general. We had a relatively good relationship, friendship, and as he worked with Creativity Explored, but also as a local Mission artist.

Chuy was probably one of the stable staples of the art population in the Mission. So, part of his contribution to me was just kind of being a person who introduced me to other folks, but also some of the ins and outs, some of the do's and don'ts, and like that. We had a good relationship, but very distant, but good. We learned from each other, I think.

**CG:** Thank you for sharing that. One question that I think is very open, and just take it as you want to take it, but I think is very important is: what do you think you need to tell me, or what do I need to know, so I can understand you as a human being? Such an open question.

**RP:** *[laughs]* Well, I think that, hopefully, that I've grown over the years in my art and my life, that I am more open to change now than I have ever been—and that both refers to my life and my art. I'm a lot more calm, more of a peaceful person, than I have been in the past. I'm interested in working with others more than I am in isolating myself in the studio with an easel in front of me. And I have almost always been that way, but for a while I was an easel painter in my studio, and it taught me a lot. I just, when I discovered, I guess, that working with other people was going to teach me a lot more, I decided to take that route—and I've been there forever, I guess, now. I really miss working with others during this pandemic thing.

And it's too bad, because I was starting, I think, to get a momentum in terms of the projects I was taking on and getting referred to—a lot of renovation-type stuff, going back and redoing old murals maybe forty, forty-some years old that were deteriorating or had been wiped out by whatever causes, and being asked to go back and redo them, and then forming a small group of people to work with me on them. And out of those developed some great artists, some really good artists. They didn't develop with me. I mean, they already were good artists, but they developed even further in terms of their approach and their ability to do public art.

And that's, that was, that is important to me. It's the way I hope to continue to develop, to more or less create a venue, or venues, for more artists to do public art.

**CG:** One thing you just mentioned is the fortunate work that you had been getting of restoring, or at least renovating, some of these murals, and that's an important discussion to have, right? Is it about conservation? Is it restoration? What kind of care can be given to these pieces that [are], as you're saying, forty years old? What do you think you or other muralists need so that work can be done as you think it should be done?

**RP:** Well, there is no permanent medium unless you do a sculpture on a rock or something. And that may not even be permanent—earthquakes, etc., weathering.

I guess the best you can do is prepare your art so that it will last as long as possible. Nothing is forever, and it shouldn't be. Why do you want an artwork to last forever? Even the old great artworks of the Renaissance, etc., are deteriorating. And it's just natural. I mean, everything dies. Everything goes away. Nothing lasts forever, as the old adage goes.

But the best thing I think artists can do to have their work continued is—or to last—is preparation. Make sure that your preparation is well done. And that's the thing that makes artists really kind of set [apart]. Oh, I just want to do the art. And many of the artists just go up on a wall and do it. Which is good. There's nothing wrong with that spontaneity. It creates—there's a lot of creativity involved in that.

But if you want it to last, you do have to think ahead and prepare the wall so that it does last. And in many of the instances where I've been asked to renovate or restore something, or redo it, it's because the preparation wasn't done well enough. Not always, but sometimes.

And that's—a lot of it is impatience. You want to get—you want to do it; you want to make it happen. And that's good. That's a spontaneous part of it. But at the same time, do you want to come back and have to redo it again? In these instances I'm talking about the renovation and the redoing of murals. It wasn't always that case, though. In many cases it's because the building changes hands or the community decides they got to renovate a building for whatever reason. Those are the kinds of things that will happen. And there's no—you don't have control over that. You have control over preparation and making sure you're doing the wall as durable as you can. But if somebody buys the building and decides to put a sign up, there's not much you can do about it, right?

**CG:** Yeah.

**RP:** That's been the case on occasion.

**CG:** That makes sense too. I think those are very good recommendations of just like, as you're saying, there's a difference between the spontaneity, which can bring creativity. But if you want it to last it also demands good preparation.

I think I have just one last question, which I think is to me very important, which is: what would you like to tell me? What is something that you wanted to maybe say about your life or your work that you haven't said yet?

**RP:** I don't know; I think I'm wanting to let other public artists know that we're responsible for what we put up, what we paint, what we talk about with our art. And much of what's going on in our society today leaves us a lot to talk about. And we should be talking about it. It's our responsibility to say what we think and what we feel, and especially with the injustices that are occurring all over the world today. I don't think we need to be a book, but sometimes a simple image can say so much. And the thought you put into what you're doing really matters, especially doing public art.

So, that's really about all I would say, is that you really need to, we really need to, think about the imagery we're putting up. And it doesn't have to be raging radicalism or peaceful solace. But it needs to effect change somehow or another in our society, and preferably for the good and not for the evil.

Yeah, that's really about all. I think we're at a time when we're able and more than willing to make good images, statements about our lives, about how the world is, how it is changing. Not necessarily determine what it should be, but more like where it's going and maybe how we can make it better.

**CG:** I think that's a perfect way to end this. Ray, thank you so much for your time. I think we need to acknowledge that the other guests might have something to say, so I will now go to the other guest, one second.

Carmelita, do you have anything to say?

**RP:** [*laughs*] Sniff, sniff, sniff.

**CG:** That was Carmelita. Thank you, Ray.

After the oral history recording finished, Ray asked if I wanted to have lunch with him. In a year in which the COVID-19 pandemic had decimated meaningful face-to-face personal interactions, and as we both were vaccinated, I accepted instantly. While driving to a Mexican restaurant in Alameda, California, Ray told me a story about one of the times that he met Siqueiros in Mexico. When Ray asked Siqueiros about what makes murals unique, he told him that the difference between murals and, say, art on canvas is that you can put the canvas anywhere inside or outside—on top of the chimney, on the entrance wall, in the bathroom. You could even flip it and cover it. But murals, Siqueiros said, “*Son ambiente.*” They are part of the ambience, of the environment and fabric of what’s publicly accessible—and it’s there.

This oral history of Ray Patlán 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.

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Thanks for listening.