

PROYECTO MISSION MURALS
Oral History Audio Transcripts

CONSUELO MÉNDEZ ORAL HISTORY
Caracas, Venezuela, June 19, 2021

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This is an oral history of muralist, artist, and educator Consuelo Méndez for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. The voices you will hear will be those of Consuelo, filmmaker Javier Briones, and me, all in Spanish [and later translated into English]. It was recorded on a rainy morning in Consuelo's home in Caracas, Venezuela, on June 19, 2021, and simultaneously in Javier's apartment in San Francisco, California, and in my apartment in Oakland, California.

One of the things that I think are very important to note about Consuelo's home is that, on top of her artwork, are the many books and notebooks that Consuelo has. She references in the oral history the importance of her diaries, of how important taking notes has been for her since growing up.

Research, you'll come to learn in this oral history, has always been an essential part of Consuelo's work. For past year and a half, she has been researching a very specific topic of inquiry: herself, finding more and more about her own past, her memories and recollections, and her own legacy.

This oral history delves into the facets of Consuelo's early life in Venezuela, her upbringing in the United States and her relationship with her parents, her work in forming and creating art as a founding member of the legendary mural collective *Mujeres Muralistas*. We also talked about her return to Venezuela, her thoughts on film and the visual arts, her views on education and being an educator, and about her role in preserving and amplifying Latinx heritage in San Francisco's Mission District, Venezuela, and beyond.

Here is the oral history.

CAMILO GARZÓN: Today is June 19, and from a screen in Oakland, California, we—on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project*—are talking with Consuelo Méndez, who is in her home in Caracas, Venezuela. Consuelo, can you please tell us your full name and place of birth?

CONSUELO MÉNDEZ: My name is Consuelo Méndez, and I was born here in Caracas on April 26, 1952.

CG: What was it like for you growing up in Caracas? Could you describe your relationship with art back then?

CM: Well, from the time I was small I showed an interest in painting and art. My father was a pediatric neurologist but also a painter. He would go to the countryside to paint and of all the children—there were four of us—I was the one who would go along. From the time I was

small, then, I was surrounded by art. I always liked it. I was the one who would make the posters at school, stuff like that. I liked painting.

As a child, I took art classes at the Museum of Fine Arts with Mercedes Pardo, one of the country's greatest painters thanks to, among other things, her beautiful and expressive use of color. She was married to Alejandro Otero, another Venezuelan artist. From the time I was little, I was immersed in art. My dad would take me to the classes and encourage me.

CG: Your dad also painted, so there was someone in your immediate family, someone close to you, with a great many talents, plus your relationship with your mother. How do you think those relationships and others influenced the decisions you made, as a young person in particular, that would eventually lead to you becoming an artist? How did you experience those decisions?

CM: Well, from the time I was little, though I had been encouraged to be an artist—well, at least to have some relationship with painting, which was my first form of expression. When, as an adolescent, the time came for me to decide what career to pursue, I was in the United States. My family immigrated there in 1964. My father went to study neuropediatrics, and my mom saw the chance to move the whole family to the United States. We went to Houston, Texas.

And in junior high and high school, from the time I got there, I took art classes. But when I had to decide what I wanted to do for a living, they never let me imagine I could make a living as an artist. I was like the black sheep in the family, the crazy one: “What are you doing messing around with art? Artists can't make a living.” Even today people say things like that to members of their family who are a little different.

So I was not allowed to study art. I was in Houston. I graduated from high school and went to Rice University. I got a full scholarship for all four years, but not to study art. I think that, deep down, my family wanted me to study medicine, to follow in my father's footsteps, right? But at that point I finally rebelled. I am a product of the sixties—of '68, really. That was my life. Those were the years of the hippies and liberation—and I took all of that in along with the music. Besides, I knew exactly where my interest lay: in art and, mostly, in poetry.

I read a lot of poetry—I always have. And to go further with that—one of my professors at Rice said to me, “Look, Consuelo, if you want to get somewhere in art, Texas is not the place right now. You have to go to New York or California.” He saw that I was really interested. Even though I was studying psychology, that was my major, I—when I got into Rice, the university was creating the [Rice] Media Center, and there was a lot going on. They had set up graphics workshops. So, when I started out at Rice, I visited the art studios and soon started making graphic arts as well as painting and photography and seeing a lot of film. And

that professor—Joe Tate was his name—told me, “I think it would be best for you to get out of here.” And, of course, I started looking into options and decided what I really wanted to do.

And, at the same time, I decided I had to leave home if I wanted to really make a go of it. So, one fine morning, a letter came to the door for me, and my mother opened it. And that very day I left home. In the past few days, reading my diaries to look for information about that historic moment, I discovered that the day I left home was April 7, 1971. I took my bike and my backpack, and I ran away for two weeks; I went to college. I was crying as I left because I had never left home before. Truth to tell, the one I had trouble with throughout my life was my mother. We had very different ways of seeing things.

When I was in Houston—I was a teen when I arrived—I wasn’t allowed to go out. I never had dates. I couldn’t go to the movies. The only freedom I had was—because I was Latina, right? So my mom would say, “You can’t go out like that; the gringos are the ones who go out, and they’re pretty batty.” They let my brother, but not me, because he was a boy. So what I did was look inward. I started to write and draw. I set up a studio in my house—my parent’s house—and started planning my escape. I am a Taurus—very methodical, very organized. But one fine day I got a letter and my mom opened it. And at like four in the morning—[I was up studying because] I had a chemistry exam the next day at college—my mom tells me to stay put, not to go out. “I am waiting for your father to call to see what to do with you,” she said. Well, she had opened a letter where a friend of mine asked me how my plans to run away were going. I made up my mind that that was the day I would leave. I grabbed my backpack and ran away.

About two weeks after I left, my father, who lived here in Venezuela, had gone to Texas. I called home and he said, “We want to talk to you.” And by the time I went back home, my mind was a bit more made up; I knew better what I wanted. I told them that studying art in Texas was impossible and that I wanted to go to San Francisco. The professor I mentioned before had helped me put together my portfolio, and I had been accepted to the San Francisco Art Institute. I had applied for a loan to pay for the first year. I was all set to go, and I told them so. And so, as a family, they decided to support me.

When he heard me voice what I wanted, my father supported me. He brought my mother around, and I went home. And in the fall—September of that year—I went to San Francisco for the first time. I have been trying to remember, and I think it was ’70 or ’71. That’s right. I left home in April ’71, and in September of that year I started at the San Francisco Art Institute.

CG: Your account of not only your childhood, but also of when you moved to the United States and then your moves within the United States—it is interesting because I think the

context is similar for everyone here: we were Latin Americans first; the United States came second.

That's interesting, when you get to thinking about how you identify, as a native of Caracas or as a Venezuelan, say, and then you come to the United States and there is a whole different framework, a different way of seeing identities. How has that changed over the years for you? How did you see yourself when you were a child, a teen, and an adult, and during periods that have witnessed a lot of changes that affected how we understand ourselves and others?

CM: Well, first off, that conflict with my mom about gender differences, about what girls were allowed to do versus what boys were allowed to do—that did not sit well with me at all, and I became even more rebellious, of course. When I moved to California, I changed. California was all about freedom and identity. I would even say I had an identity crisis when I arrived, because the first time I felt some sort of racism was in California. I had not felt it in Texas. (I was much younger when I lived there; by the time I went to California, I was twenty.)

I felt for the first time I had to have an identity. I had to speak English differently to be able to feel or be identified as Latin American—and that was a powerful experience for me. I had never thought about that before. When I arrived in California, I spoke my Texan English fluently. I didn't have the slightest Latino accent. I was twelve when I arrived, and I had no trouble speaking English. Of course, I had the two languages. At home, they made us speak Spanish—that was one of our languages—so I was bilingual. But my mind worked in English.

So when I got to California, I was faced with a major conflict. They treated me like I was white, I felt, but I wanted to be Latina. I even changed the way I spoke English. I started faking an accent so that they would ask me where I was from—because I was white. I didn't fit in with Chicanas because I was Venezuelan, with Blacks because I was white, or with whites because I was white but also not white. Those were rough years for me in terms of identity until I found a niche in my work. I started investigating art, and I began to understand and identify with art processes in Latin America as well as in other parts of the world. I think the fact that I attended a place like the San Francisco Art Institute where the strong suits at that time were minimalism and performance art—I veered to Latino and graphic arts, to a different political identity.

So that was an odd mix, and I think partly why I started making murals. My major at the Art Institute was painting. I started taking painting classes and I had conflicts with one of my professors. I didn't like his way of teaching, his pedagogy; I didn't like how he approached us. At a crit of my work, he told me that I used a cartoon-like formula to paint, that my method was like caricature. I don't know what got hold of me, but I lost it. "You know what?" I said to him, "You are the one who uses a formula to teach and express yourself. I have seen it. You

stand behind the students for a while, study the situation a bit, then tell the student three or four things, and that's it." He was a really shy guy, you know? He was like a cowboy or something—I don't remember exactly where he was from.

At that point I decided that painting should not be my major. By that time, I was reading political critiques of easel painting, and there was the whole question of the need to deindividualize art. So I turned to graphic arts and changed my major to printmaking. And that was when I started to be happy. The idea of multiple impressions, of the edition—a lot of people could have the images. An image, or many images, could be distributed widely, depending on the size of the edition.

And the political component too, right? The ability to articulate more directly, more powerfully, which is not how it works in painting. In painting, you delve in and then receive a lot of feedback. I needed to be in an environment, to work with a medium, that brought me into contact with the outside world. I worked and studied with Patricia Rodriguez in printmaking at the Art Institute, and with Irene Pérez. We got together and started to talk about forming a group of women muralists. From graphic arts and working with women, I met Chuy Campusano, who was making murals in the Mission. He was working at the Jamestown [Community] Center—I think that was what it was called—and we started making murals at there. I also made a mural at a clinic on my own. I came to Venezuela for a semester in '73. When I went back, a friend who worked at the Mission [Coalition] Organization, which is where the wall with that *Latinoamérica* mural is, told me that funding had been approved for a mural. He asked me if I wanted to make it. The thing was the wall was huge. I couldn't do it alone. And that is how Mujeres Muralistas was created. We started meeting as an organization in like '71 or '72.

It eventually became necessary to form a group—a collective—and by that time we were becoming friends. Each of us was pursuing her own projects, her own graphic art. Irene was making her murals (I think they had been making the murals on Balmy Alley). Each of us had a different background: Irene was from California, and Patricia, like me, happened to be from Texas and moved to California. We decided we wanted to be a group of women because we were competing—quote, unquote—with male muralists from the Mission who were pretty heavy hitters.

We decided we wanted to form a group of women who would do everything ourselves, including the work from on top of the walls. We would figure it out. If we had to put up scaffolding or get paint, we would do it ourselves. The way we learned how to work with walls was very, very experimental and personal, and we were very respectful of one another. We decided to work in Patricia's studio—that was our headquarters. I am not sure whether Patricia shared her studio with Irene or with Graciela, but it was large and they lived upstairs. And that was where the four of us would get together to talk and figure out how we would

place the image on such a large wall. We started out talking, making sketches, talking about the concept, figuring out what a mural is, how it differs from painting.

We had started studying. I am, generally speaking, hardworking and inclined to research and study. I like reading, discovering things. And, of course, I eventually came into contact with the ideal of the four great Mexican muralists. The ones that spoke to me most were [David Alfaro] Siqueiros and [José Clemente] Orozco; I liked their stance, which was very creative and open. The meetings we would have were like battles of ideas. Each of us would bring what she had worked on, and we would put everything on the table and see how we could use it for the mural. I had just turned twenty-two—I turned twenty-two on April 26, 1974—and we were going to start *Latinoamérica* in May, I think.

And we would have one month to paint. We only managed to get them to give us—I don't remember exactly but—like \$5,000 or \$10,000, which we had to divide up and use to pay for materials. But that helped us come together as a group. Our dynamic took shape gradually. There was always a lot of mutual respect. Each of us contributed her ideas, and not only intellectual or philosophical ideas, not only the ideas in our heads about art, but also ideas put down on paper, which is, in the end, the hardest part.

It was a very organic process, a lovely process. We grew a lot and were always open to experimentation—we had to be, because we didn't even know what paint to buy (it had to be durable). But we also wanted to have some income, a salary for a month or a month and a half, right? By chance, we are meeting again, fifty years later, because we are thinking about making a book about our experience.

The book is less interested in recording what we were and what we did, because that has already been established—we know we form part of history—than in helping other young women artists who are struggling the way we did, the way all women artists have. Because we are not included in history equally. But that does not mean we have not been working. I mean, in retrospect, I think that my work, my approach to my work, is the same, but of course with much greater clarity now, thanks to age and experience. But the essence of the work and the need to speak through art, through colors, is the same.

CG: Consuelo, of everything you have been telling us, I think one of the most important parts is the obvious fact of the name you chose—*Mujeres Muralistas*. That matters, I think, as much as how you started creating and cocreating with that collective. How you and other women worked collectively to create this type of art, murals—that is so important. What does it mean to you to have worked mostly with other women?

CM: God, I think at least one reason we started getting together was to protect ourselves, and because, in my view, women work well together. Over the course of my life, I have

realized how important my women friends are, the structure they provide, the mutual respect, the fact that we women are very intuitive and just naturally work from the heart, right? None of us was very intellectual in a traditional sense; we were a heterogeneous group.

I now realize, through this conversation, that Graciela, Patricia, Irene, and I actually had similar backgrounds, but our visions of life were different. One thing we all believed, though, was that art is larger than any one person. I mean, the artist is really a medium through which what one has inside can get out—one verifies that it can be expressed and let out. We agreed that it was important to get the work out there, to express it, and for us to connect with the world. Creating for others mattered, but mostly the pedagogical part of all that mattered. We cared a great deal that people understand the value of art and artists. And with murals, where the work is done outside, made in front of people, so they see firsthand that it is not a cakewalk, but hard work—you have to be up there at seven in the morning to make the most of the sunlight and then work all day long. You really work sunup to sundown.

So I think we had those ideals in common. We had a lot in common, really, and the experience of struggling in a milieu that was, at that time, very masculine and very competitive. If you sell your work, you're an artist; if you don't, you're not—that sort of thinking. What mattered to us was a search for alternative ways of living and an interest that exceeds the individual, right? And I think that is what we had in common. And how we worked. We would make the sketches, buy materials, put together a model, and then take it to the wall. We didn't really have the training; it was all hands-on experience. You would buy the paint and see if it worked all right.

Taking the image to the wall scale took a lot of research. We hadn't studied in a muralism school—I think we were starting one ourselves, because a lot of people joined in and helped us out from time to time. So little by little we honed the methodology, the type of materials we needed and so on, and I think that was our education. We came together like a force to work and then head out and engage in dialogue, mostly with the people who lived near the murals. I mean, we were not really sure what it was going to be, but we discovered it as we went along.

For me, one of the most beautiful things was that, once you start working on a mural, you get involved in a community, you begin to have a presence there, and the people around [it] begin to feel like that wall belongs to them. And you are also one of them, part of that community—people bring you food and chat. When people would see us painting five stories up on scaffolding, they would say, “Hey, it's women up there!” That was unheard of back then—all women on scaffolding, not a single man. We would go get the posts and boards and everything.

I remember once I climbed up—since San Francisco is a windy city, when we finally managed to get up to the top of the scaffolding to paint *Latinoamérica*. My God, I think I must have been up there for like three hours too afraid to move. I had no idea what that was going to be like. Imagine: you are way up there. You start drawing. You lean back to take a look at what you are doing, but all you see is that part, so you have to climb back down to see the whole thing. That was your job. You would do it, make a mistake, climb back up, try something else, wreck the paintbrushes. Do you know how many layers of paint we had to put on? We learned all of that as we went along.

All of that was fundamental for me. Thinking about it over the past few days, it ended up changing my life. Later, in 1976, I came back to Venezuela, and by the time I started making the mural, I knew, thanks to something I read today, that I wanted to come back. That experience making murals changed my life, and I am so grateful for that. But I didn't realize how important that work was for me until at least ten or fifteen years later. I think it is so interesting that you are doing this research, the way you are salvaging people lost in history. Imagine: I am here in Caracas, and you are in San Francisco. There is a team of people working on documentation here in Venezuela, so different expressive needs are coming together to study a moment in history that needs to be articulated; it has never been articulated in this way before. I am not sure if that answers your question.

CG: Yes, it does, and many other questions as well because that is the gist of what we are doing, this project's reason for being. Javier and I are very interested not only in helping to tell your stories and the stories of the Mujeres Muralistas, as well as the number of artists and activists who, as you were saying, were sprouting up in and around San Francisco in the seventies, but who also had an influence on so many others who are still making murals and art of this sort around the world.

The Mujeres Muralistas' impact was felt around the world, but it has not been recognized, which is why we are doing this project. And one thing that, I think, Javier and I are particularly interested in is asking you about—I think you mentioned it in responding to these questions—that change in identity and trying to understand yourself there in Caracas and here in the United States, and how others saw you and how you see yourself. You just said that over the course of these past ten or fifteen years you realized how important your art has been. With art that is so public and accessible, art that anyone can see and interact with on the street, my question for you is, I think, how the choice of certain images and your work with the Mujeres Muralistas and that larger context enabled you to understand parts of yourself you were not familiar with before.

CM: Well, I think that for me starting to make murals, wanting to make them, was about changing—or wanting to change—people's conception of what art is. Our Western culture has passed down to us a lot of misguided beliefs.

We grow up receiving so much information we think is our own when, actually, it is not our own, but we realize that as we have more experiences. I am the product of a specific change in paradigm in the history of humanity because I was alive and at my prime, at the height of my creativity and rebelliousness, in '68, '69, '70, '71, when the whole world, the history of humanity, was changing. They say that that was the beginning of the Age of Aquarius in philosophy and religion, in spirituality. I am a product of all that. I was not a hippie, but I was into—I had a different view of life.

Feminism was beginning to be talked about. I was alive when the world was undergoing changes, but I didn't know that that was happening. I sensed it, breathed it, experienced it, wanted it, partook of it. In the work I made in San Francisco, for example, feeling Latina was really important to me. In California, I experienced an identity crisis. I came from Texas, and of course my mother thought, "You are Latina; you can't go out." But I am talking about something else. When I started making my art, I became interested in studying the Indigenous question, Mexican and Andean images, images of nature in our region. My first works as an artist were botanical images. My first experience, the first sign that I was going to be an artist, was scientific illustrations.

And I gradually started to realize that I had—well, not a special talent or anything, but that that was my life, the place I had to delve into. And with the murals, I understood where I was, that I had the need to express myself, but I also realized that the art I wanted to make had a social function. I needed that because—well, there were all kinds of revolutionary ideas in the air, that whole vision of the United States as a monster gobbling up Latin America. I took that all in—all the ideas of the Cuban Revolution. All that, and protest music, was my background, my education.

So there was an eagerness to critique and come up with alternatives. I think the alternative we offered was working together collectively. I am a firm believer that the only hope for humanity is working with others, working together, and being humble and empathetic. All of that is much clearer today. The impulse and energy were strong, as was the need to talk and try to come up with changes for humankind—I think that was somewhere there in everything we were doing. Those were our ideals.

CG: What you are saying about your identity crisis, about reconnecting and, in a sense, changing your identity, understanding other things—all of that is crucial, and I think you can see it in your art, in the art you made with the Mujeres Muralistas, but also in your own production and how that changed over time.

One of the things we are most interested in asking you about today—we have heard Juana Alicia and many other women artists talk about it as well—is the creation of the Mujeres Muralistas manifesto. That living and organic document—and that is exactly what it is—

contains your values and, in a sense, your essence and principles as a collective. It is an extremely important document for art history and the history of recognition of Latinos and Latinas in the United States in particular. So, the question is how you came to write that manifesto. What was its reason for being? What led you to decide you had to create it?

CM: Well, that document has a history, of course. When we went to the presentation of the mural—we had one month to complete *Latinoamérica* and we did it, we completed it in one month, a month of hard work—that day we were going to celebrate, the same way the completion of any mural is celebrated, with a ritual, a presentation where people bring food. Well, we hadn't had time to write anything. And I think we were able to write it so fast because we were—because painting in front of people and painting together gave us plenty of time to talk. We conversed a lot, we studied a lot, and we argued a lot.

So we got together on the day of the opening; we felt the need to have something to read to the people, and we came up with the idea of a manifesto that would sum up the ideas you are pointing out here as central to our practice, our way of working. Experience is what brought us there, and the desire to keep at it. But certain things got in the way, personal things, and I had to leave the group, but not the friendships. When, about a year before coming to Venezuela, I left the group, it was because of a personal problem. But the ties of friendship and the work together continued. Later, the women continued with *Paco's Tacos* before each one began to work on her own. And I came back to Venezuela.

But I said to myself I could not come back to Venezuela without a master's degree, so I got one in printmaking, from San Francisco State. Graphic arts paved the way for the murals, and they had the same ideals: non-individualized art, art for others, art to say things. In graphic arts, at least, you say something and then you do something else (painting is different), but the—quote, unquote—political, ideological, philosophical conception was already pretty firmly established. What we had to do was carry on with the practice and see where it would take us.

I came back to Venezuela and never once stopped working—I still work with a real sense of discipline. Working makes me see that art is bigger than me—that's clear. I am just like a little horse trying to keep up with art. Patricia, Irene, and I have been talking over the past few days, and one thing is for sure: we haven't really changed. Each one has her own interests and curiosity on an individual level, but the ideal of art for others, of art as a solution for humankind, is still with all of us. I think that the cornerstone of that belief was the work on the murals and the ideology we came into contact with at that moment in history.

CG: Absolutely, and what you are saying—not only how each of you has continued since then, the way you still work, each one with her own concerns. It's nice to hear, and it makes sense: each is her own artist and human being. Something else that has not been discussed much—

and, of course, only tell us what you feel comfortable telling us—is the positive and the negative things, the gray areas, the nuances of working with other people whom you end up loving. Loving them a lot, even if there are always clashes.

So, what was your experience like? What were the positive and the negative parts of working with that collective? And how did you reach the decision to leave it—formally, that is—though you would still get together?

CM: Well, we had made the *Latinoamérica* and *Paco's Tacos* murals and done a lot of other things that I don't remember, but the time came when I was interested in investigating beyond the structure of the mural and its possibilities. And I started studying, and I was really struck by Siqueiros—he was the craziest of all those guys. He spoke of the need to break up architecture with murals. Just imagine! I didn't understand that idea, but I was drawn to it.

So, I felt the murals we were making—of course, we were pleased with them, and we were getting a lot of attention from the media, lots of interviews, documentaries, advertisements. But I felt that there was a need for much greater research, to bring about a deeper break. The images we were making were pretty, but I found them too decorative. I felt the need to take things further, but not everyone in the group felt that way. Each one of us had her own need—that was where I felt the difference.

Irene, who is from an Indigenous family, had grown up in California. Patricia's background was totally different. She is from Marfa, Texas; she had lived with her grandmother on the Texas-Mexico border, which is a whole experience. I can't remember exactly where Graciela is from, but she had another vision of life too. And I was the only Latin American—quote, unquote—the only Venezuelan in the group. They had gotten spankings when they were little for speaking Spanish, but no one ever told me not to speak Spanish. So, there were things that set us apart. And I was more interested in studying and research—it's not that I was better or anything; I just felt the need for that.

And my husband at that time and I clashed a lot. After the presentation of the *Paco's Tacos* mural, he went so far as to tell me he was fed up with being considered Consuelo Méndez's husband, for example. Because at that time we were pretty famous in a way, right? Everyone wanted to be connected with the Mujeres Muralistas at that time. And we were happy about that, but I was not so interested in that part. What mattered to me was doing the work, but I had a real *machista* (male chauvinist) at home, and he had me in a bind. So at that time I decided to stop working to save my home life, such as it was. I decided I cared more about my home and making sense of that excuse of a marriage I was in. I wasn't yet a mother—my daughter had not been born, and that was very important for me. So I turned inward from one day to the next and stopped making murals with the other women.

We were hired to do a mural, a larger project for an art fair downtown, in the plaza near the museum. And we made a large rhomboid mural; each of us made a panel. And that was the last project I did with them. But of the group, Patricia was the one who really kept us together. Communication was really important to her, and she became a sort of spokeswoman and guardian of our history. She kept all the information about the murals for all these years. If someone wanted to know about the Mujeres Muralistas, Patricia would call them. And we have always had a special friendship, even though I live here in Venezuela. We have always been in touch.

And that's what's so wonderful, right? Even though I stopped working with her, even though we stopped making murals together, the human tie, the emotional bond, remained intact. And we have been going over it, talking a little about everything you are asking me about. And it's all fresh in my mind because for the past year almost I have been investigating myself, reading my diaries—I am an artist who keeps diaries. I have all that information written down. I might not remember exactly, but if I read it—of course, when you read your own memories, everything comes right back and falls into place, right?

And all of this, this conversation with you, really stirs up my inner world and where I come from—and that's important. It makes me think about how I got where I have been and where I am now. I am surprised by the murals being made in the world today, by the technology—those cabins that go up and down—by the paint. I mean, those guys who make murals with spray paint! I think that if I had stayed in the United States, I would have kept making murals because of the dimensions they have now. But I came back to my country, and my work took another direction. But I did keep making graphic art and, in the nineties, while teaching, my work veered in another direction, toward the body. Not many years later, I started working in performance.

And in essence they are the same. The artist is in a specific space for a time, and what happens when they see you, when you are there in that space—it's the same as with the murals. I mean, when I was doing a master's—my second master's—in contemporary art, something clicked when I realized that what we were doing in 1973 with the murals was contemporary art. It was public art, art in direct contact with people—and that is one of the premises of new art. I mean, you have to consider the one looking at you. The artistic experience is something that happens between the one looking and what they see. The strange space that is created there—that was the mural experience for me. So, at a certain point I said to myself, Come again? It seems what I was doing in the streets back then was contemporary art.

But I didn't realize it at the time, I mean, I didn't understand how important that was. In fact, I hid it, because there was a lot of prejudice in Venezuela, at least at the time I came back. I had to promise the director of a center where I was accepted to study graphic arts that I

would not go around saying I had gotten an MFA in the United States. There was a lot of prejudice against US art, you know? But when I started to study public art, contemporary art, all of that, I said, “But I did all of that.” So, it’s funny that you ask me these questions now. You don’t realize what you are doing when you are doing it; you realize it through reflection and looking back.

Anyway, I taught for many years. And at a certain point, I thought I was giving classes because I was a rebel, because I didn’t want to sell my work, because I didn’t want to have anything to do with galleries, because I was a different kind of artist—which meant I never learned how to sell my works, never ever. My art is sitting at the bottom of a drawer. So, I decided I would make a living as a teacher, from giving classes—but that didn’t really work out either, because now I am a retired university professor who makes five dollars a month here in Venezuela. That’s the situation I find myself in.

But I have kept working on the basis of the belief that art is what gives you an alternative, a way to live better. Because my work veered to the body with performances. And, at the same time, I worked in art therapy for thirty-plus years. And what is that really? It’s about working with others. And what are the murals? They are about getting involved in people, in their lives, so that they feel that something belongs to them—and, in fact, it does. So, I have been coherent over the years, even if I hadn’t realized it. Now that I am thinking about it, and now that I am older, in a calmer, slower, more reflexive phase of life, I can say that I haven’t been too incoherent. And I still have work to do.

I mean, if God gives me another twenty or thirty years to live, another phase will set in in relation to the work I have done and getting it out there. Because my work is tucked away, tucked away like my diaries, but that does not trouble me. It’s part of my process.

CG: Consuelo, everything you have been saying about how this history has been documented, in a way, by you and by Patricia—and the personal relationship between the two of you. You have also been a documentarian, in many respects—you know what I mean? You have documented many things, if only for yourself, in, for instance, the diaries you mention. It would be very interesting to hear how today’s Consuelo sees the Consuelo of many years ago. How did the women in the *Mujeres Muralistas* meet? Do you by chance have your diary with you? Could you read that part?

CM: Yes, but I’ll just tell you how we met. The one who remembers most clearly—who knows when and how we met—is Patricia. Patricia remembers meeting me at a gathering of students at the San Francisco Art Institute. (I don’t remember it.) We were both sitting there. She is very outgoing, and she came over to me and asked me my name and where I was from. There was a group of students from the Third World at the San Francisco Art Institute

and scholarship students—that brought us together. So that was where we met, at the Art Institute, each of us working on her art and in her classes.

She was more active in the community because her work engaged it directly. I had to work my way in gradually. But the one who has kept us together all these years is Patricia. For me, friendship is very important. And what I find is that with friends, even if you don't see each other for years, when you get together again, it's as if you had never stopped seeing each other. That is the magic of friendship, and friendship is the only relationship where that is true. It is also a relationship with no judgment, no criticism. You don't meddle in your friend's life; each person does what they must.

And, in that sense, for me the Mujeres Muralistas experience was fundamental. And that tie between women—the circle of women, the study of mythology and feminine archetypes—was also, for me, fundamental. When, for example, in analyzing my diaries I realize—or when I was working on that master's in contemporary art, and I was going to specialize in studio art, meaning that my master's thesis would be my work. One fine day the professor came over to me and said, “OK, but what is it you want to do exactly? Do you want to work in painting? Papermaking? Bookbinding? Graphic arts? Do you want to make murals? Performance? What do you want to do?” Just picture it, the professor—how old would she have been? She must have been my daughter's age now, so she was about forty and I was fifty-something—an artist fifty-something years old with experience giving classes under my belt.

And she just blew my mind! Magdalena Fernández is one of the most interesting contemporary artists here in Venezuela. And that day I came home with my head hanging down, and I realized that I had to delve into my notebooks and diaries to see what is in them. And I started to look through them, and what do you think emerged? The goddess, the mother, woman, all the feminine archetypes—that's what. And the message was that that was me. So I asked myself, Consuelo, what are you going to do? And I also got frustrated because when the time came to draw, when I started drawing, the first thing that came out was the female body. And it kept coming out, again and again.

And so, when analyzing my diaries and images, which are what tell me where I come from and who I am, I realized—damn it!—I have been working on the topic of woman, the goddess. And I said to myself, Consuelito, there is something important there. And something that I decided at that point—I think it was in 1995 or '96, around there—was that one of the things I wanted to explore and had not explored yet was performance. For like three or four years, I had been working with the body, the body and art, in my classes, as well as with sensory perception and art therapy. But I had never allowed myself to do it in my work. So, I decided I wanted to work in performance.

I decided I was going to investigate the feminine in my work. And the first character that came to the surface to take to the space of performance was Artemisa. Artemisa, la de Caño Amarillo, which is where our school here in Caracas was located. And I started to study performance just as I had studied murals years before, to study how it engages people, the importance in performance of physical presence at a specific time, of a space and a work made to be remembered by the one who does it and the one who sees it. So, in essence, the vision was, from the perspective of my life, the same as with the murals. Something really clicked for me

So I started doing performances, including one project on femininity called *The Work of the Wait*. And I started to make works that had to do with that, works that take place at a certain time. But some of my performances are open in time in the sense that I can pick them up at any point and do them in other places.

And another thread that runs through my life is my diaries, which I mention a lot, because I think it is one of the most important things—one of the most important works I have made and that I make, one of the most important things I have. One time I went to Canada to do research on doctoral studies. I was lucky enough to spend like three months at York University, where I was a guest professor. And while there I had an experience with a drawing professor—a very tall man and a Vietnam vet. He would lock us into a few rooms—there were like twenty of us—and we would have a drawing class for like four hours where we would not draw, but talk. I mean, you would work on your own, right? So, when I went in and showed him the project I wanted to work on while I was there, I had my diaries with me. It was all in my diary.

And he said, “What is that you have there? Why don’t you show it to us?” “Well, because it’s my diary,” I said. I didn’t think it was important, you see. “Show it to us. Show it to us,” he insisted. So, he really wanted me to show them to everyone, and in them were all kinds of stuff—my writings, things I had stuck on, all of the things you do in your diaries. And he said to me, “You will remember me forever because of what I am going to say to you: your art is in those notebooks. You’ll eventually decide what to do with it. You can paint me a mural, but you will make that mural at a certain moment in time, and you leave it there and it will get damaged. But your expressive life as a continuous whole is in those diaries.” And that was very important because he gave me the green light to keep at this, which was the most personal thing I had, something I considered so intimate.

Then, in 2014, a Venezuelan-Greek-American curator who was working on a very interesting project invited me to show my diaries. And I told her I didn’t think I could. “They are too personal; I am leaving them for my daughter’s eyes only.” But she said, “Listen, you are not going to show just one, but all of them.” And at that point I opened up and realized the value

of that work. And that is where things stand now for my work. There are so many things I want to do, to study, and to produce.

And I think all of that, in my case at least, has to do with how I grew up, when I decided to make art, and the life decision that art is not mine alone, not just for me, but for others as well. And you really have to grapple with that idea. In the case of you, filmmakers, what could be more complicated and collective than making a film? So, you really have to be humble, and get over yourself. Those processes are collective, that's where their strength lies. It might be [auteurist], but there are always so many people involved in making it. I think all works of art are actually like that, contemporary art included, art that is necessarily made in the streets, public art—the other always has to be taken into consideration. If not, it's just a cry in the dark. I am not sure if I have answered your question.

CG: Absolutely. I think what you just said about filmmaking really resonates with Javier and me. I want to play for you something you said in 1975 at the Frente Conference. Let me know if you can hear it all right. [*plays recording*]

What you said was, “Murals, for me, are like films: image after image.” You said that in 1975. And I think that is really very important not only for the two of us, but also for your diaries. It resonates a great deal there as well. Why, at that time, did you make such a specific comparison between murals and film?

CM: Well, I think the connection—what's at stake is the body. And I think that something changed for me, that my understanding of art and expression, all of their forms and instances, changed when I realized that the body is the groundwork for everything. The body is the fundamental tool of expression—after all, the body is what moves.

When you look at a mural, when you make a mural, you have to keep in mind a lot of things; a mural is not a painting. That was one of the first things we grasped—I grasped, but I think we all grasped, all muralists grasped—that a mural is not a painting on a wall. A mural has to take into consideration so many things. It takes into consideration the context, the space, how and from where it will be looked at—from above, from below, from all angles. A mural is not only a decoration on a wall but also an intervention in people's space.

And I think film is an intervention in a person's inner space. Because film is image in movement. It affects you emotionally. It affects you physically. It affects you psychologically. All art does, of course, but some art is more complex. And of all art forms, film is the most complex, in my view, because of everything it implies. Besides, film is only film if it is seen. If it's not seen, I'm not sure it's film. I mean, of course it is, but if it is not seen, if it does not shake you up—but everything has changed so vertiginously.

Sixteen years ago, I didn't have the slightest idea what a computer was. But now I am not so illiterate, even though I live in the country with the slowest Internet in the world. Without these machines and these experiences, we would not be where we are today. And, in my view, art has much more to do with who is looking at it and how they look at it and how others look at it than with what it is in and of itself. But it is pretty complex, right? So many layers of thought and other things to be considered. Like human beings, who are not as simple as we may seem—isn't that right?

JAVIER BRIONES: Yes, and that's amazing. And it affects the meaning of the work, right? People are looking at the mural, walking by the mural, waiting for the bus next to the mural, interacting with the mural. First some paint over it and then others. It's a living thing.

CM: Yes.

JB: And that really interests me a great deal, especially in relation to your work with the Mujeres Muralistas. Just think that, as far as we know, only two of the murals you made have survived. But I think the legacy you have left is much larger than those murals. Can you tell us a little [about] what you consider the legacy that, as an artist, you left in San Francisco? And the legacy left by the Mujeres Muralistas? What does it mean today, in retrospect, when you can better assess it? What was it that you did? Thinking back to '76, what legacy did you leave this city?

CM: Well, I think the fact that it happened when it happened was fundamental. I mean, that rebellious stance we took when we, women one and all, went out there to show the world there were women artists—that was crucial to our personal development. But it was not until the past few years that I have reflected and looked back, looked at and read the books [on the Mujeres Muralistas]—I have almost all of them, because I am always sent a book when it comes out or invited to the book launch. So, I see it in print and in films—or if you look on the Internet.

The most important legacy, I think, is the effect it had on our personal lives. Our lives were not private but always connected to many, many people. I was an art professor for twenty-seven years; I taught all those generations of young Venezuelan artists—all the guys who are now on the international art scene. And I was always very honest, very experimental and restless. I always knew I was not one of those teachers who had the answers to everything, who had the power. I was more like, "Listen, if I don't know, let's investigate it together." And the students were also restless. I would take into account each student's background and think about what you can do with that, how you can change the way a person looks, and experiment in a free and creative methodology. They let me, thank God, work in the least structured department, which was drawing. At the same time, it was hard because drawing had always been taught as something rigid. But it's really not rigid at all.

If you understand your own nature, if you understand how you look at the world, that's how you will work. But you have to be free and inquisitive to experience all that—and art is the place to do that. You close your eyes and you look inward. You open them and you look outward. You bring the two together. And that's it! And since I was in the drawing department—for me, to draw is to make a graphic representation of your thoughts, of the way you look; it means understanding how you look at things. And at our school, which was a wonderful experience for professors and students alike, drawing meant being in contact with—in the drawing department, I was in contact with everyone at the school. I had to give drawing classes to the sculptors, to the painters, to photographers, to the crazy students who, like you, wanted to work in audiovisual and mixed media and in photography—they never found a place for themselves at the school. I was able to create the mixed media and photography department. I wasn't able to establish a film department, but there was video. And thanks to the experience of working with different people, the way I gave classes changed—it became much more open. It meant that I came up with a methodology where first you get in touch with your body, you understand how you look at things, and then you try to see what it is you want to say. And in taking a look at what you want to say, you start to see how you want to say it.

A painter's human nature is, in essence, so different from a sculptor's, so different from a filmmaker's, a video artist's, or a photographer's. So those human beings who were so frustrated with drawing would come to me. They were frustrated because they couldn't fit into that scheme of things. And, through play and using the body, I was able to help them connect with their true nature, and from there they were able to say what they wanted to say. And then that came back to me, and I allowed myself to create in other ways. I got a degree in graphic arts from the Art Institute, but first I was a painter and, really, a muralist. But later I realized that really and truly what I am is a draftswoman. Because I see things through lines. I make lines. I embody—everything I do is drawing. And that is why I make diaries. That was the conclusion I reached and how I got into teaching.

And thanks to that I eventually gave myself permission to work in performance. And today I can make performances. I can paint. I can draw. I can take photos—because it matters less how you say what you say than what the hell you are saying. And you can say something or not say anything. Or say it little by little, in separate drawings, say, or with a more global register of things, like in film. But some things come more naturally to you, and that's where we explore. And I think that all of that came from the work we did with the murals—I am almost sure of it, in fact.

I am so curious what would have happened to me, what my life would have been like had I stayed in the United States instead of coming back to Venezuela. But it's a strange question because I wanted to come back to Venezuela; I wanted to live in Venezuela. The twelve years I

spent in the United States weighed me down. Life in the United States makes me feel so sad, so lonely—I don't like it one bit. I can go there for a while; I can work there or spend some time with my siblings, all of whom live in Texas. But the way of life in the United States does not appeal to me. And now in Venezuela we all want to get the hell out.

But at my age, I don't want to leave; I don't want to have to leave. And life here is very hard, but I don't want to leave. I want to be able to come and go. Why? I don't know, because this is my home. My roots are here. This is my air and my wind. And if I can share that with others in other places—like the opportunity you have given me to say what I think—we keep working, with all the media available today and this pandemic on the Earth that has changed our lives. But we are still working. Just think about it! A person in Venezuela talking about life with a person in California—we are here making something, creating together. And that is magic, right? It's magic. And we have to keep at it. I mean, there is no way not to work. That is what binds us—that and telling stories.

I think life stories and telling them is fundamental. When you tell your story and someone else tells their story, there are always commonalities. It's like group therapy. For me, group therapy is the most efficient, the hardest, and the most painful therapy of all. You are in a circle; someone else in the circle tells their story while you sit there quiet, listening; and that story resonates in you. And you say, "Goddamn, I thought I had a problem." But it turns out that your problem is never, or rarely, as big as another person's.

And I think that's at play in art too—that is art. Art is when you see something you like, or you don't like, that says something to you, that resonates in you, that stays with you. And if you create—ideally, everyone would realize that we are creative beings, that we are cocreators. But not everyone has the ability or the open-mindedness to realize that. When lockdown came, for example, some people close to me went mad. And I would say, "Why are they going mad when there is so much to do?" Reign in your world. But who am I to tell anyone what to do? But the human being is a creative being. The thing is we don't recognize it. We don't know it. We are not aware of it. And that is where our work as artists lies—we have to communicate that. We are individuals, but we are part of a collective. We shouldn't feel bad because we are not political—because we are political because we are social beings. And stick to what you believe and trust that you will find others who resonate with you, because they are out there. And keep at it; keep doing what there is to be done.

JB: Speaking of connections, of the importance of being an artist and finding others, and speaking of the question of the collective: what legacy was left, in your mind, of having created the Mujeres Muralistas, that is, its legacy over the subsequent decades and into the present? What is the most important legacy?

CM: Well, I think that that legacy is what continues. I see a legacy as a thread that begins somewhere and moves on and keeps growing. And I think the legacy we may have left was seeing women doing things that, generally speaking, they had not been seen doing before. Even though it was not our express cause, we did want to work together—and without men. We didn't want men on the core team. We had very dear and beloved male friends who taught us things.

Chuy Campusano, for example, was one of the people I have most loved in my life, and one of the people who taught me most. He was very giving and generous—and that was not, in my view, the case with many other muralists, who would keep their secrets. Just like the teachers you might have had—there were generous ones and others who didn't say anything, didn't pass anything on, because they were self-centered. And I think that if you are out in the street, if you are working with another person, you can't be selfish or arrogant, you can't be proud. So it was like a hands-on life lesson.

We learned how to enlarge the drawings, to prime the walls. Of course, there were mistakes, but we worked with them. I think the legacy is presence. The legacy is example. I realize from our conversations that one of the things that most troubles Patricia and Irene, for example—it doesn't really trouble me, because I live in Venezuela and things here are different—is that, from what they tell me, young women even today don't believe they can do certain things because women supposedly don't do them. That is still embedded in our culture. And abuse, abuse of women on so many levels—that is still around. The deconstruction of the family, the fact that women bring up the kids, see to it that they get ahead without a supporting masculine figure—our social structures are broken. Being able to say something about that and being an example—that is the legacy.

The truth is I have not thought much about that part, that concern, because I live in a different reality. I came back to Venezuela. I wanted to come back to Venezuela, and when I—I am in contact with the United States and follow the news there, everything that happened this year, the whole issue of racism. On TV, you always see white people until, suddenly, a Black person or a Chinese person appears, but there are no Latinos. And that gets me thinking.

I see a group exhibition, for example, where artists are invited to show their work, and the first thing I do is count how many women are included. And even—today, for example, an exhibition is opening here in Venezuela at one of the most active galleries there is, and you see the list of artists, maybe ten artists—and just three women! Why? I mean, I know it can't be fifty-fifty—but why not? Or why not more women than men? I am one of those people who is always observing that, and I think that is a legacy of my work with women. I can't help it. I can't help but see that. I go to an exhibition, and I don't see women. And only now is this coming to the surface. So, [the world] has changed, but not enough.

And we have to stick with it; we have to be stubborn, to be persistent. We have to study and open up the floodgates. Because the world has moved on, and young women artists are going to be there alongside young male artists. There might be more opportunities now, sure, but I don't think this whole situation with the pandemic was in vain. The pandemic and lockdown—even though things are beginning to open up in some places, less so here in Venezuela—has forced us to look inward and ask ourselves questions like Where am I? Who am I? What do I want? Where am I headed? And I think that those are still key questions to ask oneself. I think they have to do with that question you are asking me, Javier.

What is the legacy? Well, we were there; we made our presence felt, even though—unfortunately—it is still not recognized. But you are working on that. And that helps me understand just how important that moment was. What would have happened if I had stayed? What would happen if I took that work back up now? Because imagine: a muralist always dreams of making another mural. I dream of making a mural for a church, for example. I have the drawing and everything, a sketch for a church. Things on hold. I wonder whether I will ever make it. I don't know—maybe in another life. And since I believe in other lives, I say to myself, I'll come back and make it then. You know what I mean?

And I think that part of our work, of what we did, is still unresolved, in a sense. And I think the fact that we are getting together again, which is very healthy for us, is going to provide a more logical and intuitive response to that question than my individual response could ever be. Because at our get-togethers we are starting to tell each other our life stories. We are now listening to Patricia's—and it's surprising. Even though I have worked with her and know her, there is so much about her life that I did not know because we didn't talk about certain things. But if you talk about those things, if you write them down and think about them, you realize there is still so much left to get out of that experience we had, and you are opening the floodgates back up, right? Just for the record.

JB: Well, first off, I loved your answer. I think we talked about that a bit yesterday, and that is what I really wanted to chat with you about—that legacy you have been thinking about—because I know you have all been talking. And I think the entire group that has been working on this project sees your legacy as indisputable. It has had so much influence on so many people. And I know that, because of the pandemic and all, you have not been able to travel to San Francisco or Oakland. But there is an explosion of amazing murals here. And a lot of that is thanks to the work you did, to the work Yolanda López did.

CM: Yes.

JB: We are revisiting, in a way, women artists who paved their own way. Since certain doors were closed and others might have been open, but you did not want to go through them, you found your own ways. And I am so pleased you mentioned that. It is important, I think, that

people know about not only the material conditions in which you worked, but also the situation today—the things that have not changed.

CM: Right.

JB: And we hope that the work we are doing makes a tiny contribution—

CM: Sure.

JB: —in response to the need to diversify in terms of gender, race, and so many other things.

CM: Yes, right.

JB: My final question—Camilo has others—is if you have any specific memories of painting, of your work in education, of anything else you have done. The last surviving large mural by the Mujeres Muralistas is in the [24th Street] minipark.

CM: I didn't work on that one.

JB: Do you have any specific memories of having painted that park? What was the story?

CM: No, I didn't work on Precita. I didn't work on that mural. I had already come back to Venezuela or I was working on my master's, but I didn't work with them. What I remember off the bat is *Paco's Tacos*, that long mural I made with Graciela, and then Susan Cervantes joined the team. And memories of *Latinoamérica*, that giant mural.

JB: Let's talk a little about the *Paco's Tacos* mural then; we have a tape here that we found.

CM: Well, *Paco's Tacos* was a mural against McDonald's. There was a taquería there called Paco's Tacos that had an enormous wall in the parking lot. It was at the corner of [South Van Ness] and 24th, and they were going to open the McDonald's at the corner where the subway is. The subway station—[for the new BART system]—hadn't opened yet, and there was a plan to open a McDonald's there, I think. So the idea was to fight against the McDonald's and make a mural representative of us, of Latin American and Chicana culture, of the Mexican community. That was how it started.

I remember that that mural showed me how important relationships with the people who live near the murals are, with the community that lives there—right?—because, as soon as you start working, people come over. The tie with the ordinary people who live nearby becomes paramount and very close when you are there making the mural. People start to take care of it; I mean, there is a sense of belonging. I remember that near where I was painting there was a tiny little Black boy—I called him Jimmy Timmy (his name was Timmy). And he fell in love

with me; he called me his wife and everything. So, he would come over and sit down next to me to paint, to look at me, to talk to me. He was really little. And I have never forgotten that boy, for example. Jimmy Timmy was so important to me. I have always liked kids, and I have worked on murals with kids. I have never forgotten about him.

With the *Latinoamérica* mural, I was surprised at how much admiration there was for us as women up on scaffolding. I saw it as just part of the work, not as anything special. But it was special for other people. And the people who worked there—the relationships formed over the time it takes to make the mural—are unique. Because you finish the mural and you leave, and you might wonder whether or not there is a connection, but there is: people take care of the mural. In the everyday work, we would go early and someone would come over and bring you a taco or a drink—and I think that human connection is what lives on. That is the part I liked.

Even though I am talking a lot now, I have always been a reserved and shy person. I would rather paint than do other things. Of course, as you get older, you change; you work on yourself. But with something as private as painting, doing it outside, before the eyes of so many people—it was a learning experience. Because it is not easy to have someone watch you paint. And that was an added benefit of the experience of painting murals. And I enjoyed that; I enjoyed growing in that way, growing along with the other members of the Mujeres Muralistas and with friends who would come by and say, “Let me paint for a little while.” So, you would let them. “OK, fill in that part there, and then I’ll finish it up.” And I think that is what work on the murals leaves behind, and that might be part of the legacy: people come over and paint, and they take that story away with them.

CG: Consuelo, what you are telling us goes beyond the space and the legacy of your murals and the murals you have worked on, which have an abiding influence, but there is something else no less important and that is—for example, it is raining in Caracas right now, and that is by no means unusual in the Andes. And if you think about it, every place has its specific characteristics. The place I want to ask you about is the Mission, la Misión, in San Francisco. What does the Mission mean to you?

CM: Just imagine: for me the Mission was like my place in San Francisco. I felt like a fish in water there. I loved the accents, for example—one language spoken in so many different accents, and so many different foods, but there are still points in common. That was what I liked about the Mission. I understood that I was Venezuelan, but also Latin American. And our different cultures would interact because each of our countries is different. We have different ways of singing, different ways of making rice—that was so eye-opening and beautiful to me, which is why the images were—the images in *Latinoamérica*, for example, deliberately encompassed all of Latin America. Each [artist] decided what to paint.

And together we decided what the mural's structure would be. And, as you know, it begins with the maguey. In one of her books, María Ochoa analyzes it beautifully; she even sees it as a sort of altar. I read that reflection on *Latinoamérica*, the mural, its structure, as an altar—I had never seen that before. Yet I have my own personal altar. I pray a lot at this stage of the game, right? And I said to myself, What a beautiful analysis she does of the abstract structure of *Latinoamérica*. At the same time, it makes sense that it would be like that—that is how we think, that is what we are like.

The composition took shape on its own as a structure that could bring together different ways of saying things. Because each of us had a very different style. It was not a collage because it did not take shape randomly or by chance; it was carefully coordinated, even though we weren't fully aware of what we were doing. I think we became aware of the work in making it. Awareness came through action—learning, action—which is how it is with education, with teaching and learning. Later in my life, I came into contact with qualitative research, project-based research—an entire methodology that we came to without guidance.

For example, my daughter has been living in Europe for sixteen years. She got a master's in public art at the Bauhaus. She is a contemporary artist who lives in Austria. She does installation, and her specialization is public art. And in the past few days I've been reading a proposal of hers for a large project she is working on, and she reached a series of conclusions that I—after I looked it over (she always asks me to read what she writes). After I read all her ideas about what public art is in relation to communities, I told her, “Wow! Naya, we got to that same place without realizing it. I mean, if back then I had had the framework you are developing or the explanation you are giving, the murals would have been amazing—something else entirely.” But it happened the way it did. We reached the same conclusions, I reached the same conclusions that she reaches today through her research and everything she is studying. It's exactly the same.

I mean, I never ever imagined my daughter would be making public art. How could I have imagined that? Impossible. But it turns out that she—a forty-four-year-old woman living her life as a contemporary artist in Europe—is connecting things I experienced and I studied and I investigated, things that I still believe in. So, I guess her interest in this is because I put it in her head. I asked her, “Is this just a coincidence? Is it in our DNA?” I don't know, but it is striking. When I read what she writes, when I see art today, its advances on intellectual, practical, and technological levels, because the murals they are making these days—I have no idea how to use those materials, but I can learn fast.

And I am really impressed by the visual effects that some of those guys are able to produce—graffiti artists, the murals they make, for example. I mean, I take off my hat to some of these new art forms. Even here in Venezuela there is a whole mural movement in Los Palos Grandes, another city. I haven't left the city at all because I have a—for personal reasons I

have taken lockdown really seriously. But in Los Palos Grandes they are making murals everywhere you look. I have seen some photos. I may think that they are very decorative or abstract, that they work or don't work, that they are not taking the setting into account. And if they gave me a studio to work with the guys making those murals, I would take them in another direction thanks to the ideas I have today. Still, it is happening, the murals are being made.

What that is is history, development, and evolution. But I think things happen for a reason. The murals continued, right? Juana Alicia is older now, but there are younger people, women and men, making murals. Murals are still painted because it is stronger than we are; it is in our blood. There were murals in caves; the Indians made murals; the Aztecs made manifestos. We all come from the same thing is what I mean. Africans—what about those towns where African women paint the houses? The entire community painted.

I just saw a Mexican architect—I can't remember his name right now—who built a Quetzalcóatl as his home on a plot of land. The house was inside the snake, and you might say, "My God! Where did that come from?" Well, from the collective unconscious, am I right? All of that is right there, and it is all very human. The Gupta culture in the East, those carved caves—that is inside us as well. I think the mural is a human art form, a social art form, an art that takes the artist, who is holed up somewhere, out into the street to have other experiences. And so, you have the chance, the choice, to head out onto the street or to retreat into your house. But if what is going on on a creative or artistic level is true, it will get out there. And the person who sees it will feel it.

I am not sure if that answers your question exactly, but I think it is related. Everything is related. The human being is not separate from anything; we are part of everything. We may believe we are separate, but that is a lie—and all spiritual and scientific research knows that, and it is even connecting to the East. The yogis said it before. So, humanity is in tumult; we are all in tumult. Why? Because we are truly heading into another age. But the problem is patriarchy. The problem is patriarchy. The problem women have is patriarchy. Abuse is patriarchy. Our culture is patriarchy. And patriarchy is not going anywhere without a fight, without a war. And that is what we are experiencing. I believe that the pandemic, lockdown, everything we are experiencing is part of that. And this is the time, the chance to take a look at ourselves, to do different things, to formulate different structures, to try to relate to one another differently. Because this is a problem of relationships.

CG: Look, Consuelo, I want to tell you that you not only answer our questions—

CM: [*laughs*]

CG: —because you do answer them—but also bring something greater than knowledge, and that is wisdom, the ability to understand you, your person, in so many different contexts. And what interests Javier and me most, I think, is being able to let you convey that wisdom, present it, in a way that will be—what we are producing here is a historical document. And, as a historical document, it is finally letting you talk about the things that—well, you have been talking about them, but what you have said has not been duly recognized or taken in.

And that is what we are after. That's why we are thrilled that you are not only answering the questions but also telling us so much more. I think the last question—really and truly the final question—I have to ask you, because as I said not only [inaudible]. Basically, what thing or things would you like to say that have not been spoken of until now? I ask that knowing that this is an opportunity to discuss those things. What is the thing or things you want to say but have not been able to say before, or that you have said but has not been heard? Things to convey to someone listening to this historical document and this account of not only your life and your work, but also of who you are, all the thoughts and even cultures that have influenced your life?

CM: Jeez, you put me in a tight spot! One of the conclusions I have reached in life—and I think that my life at this time is much calmer, much quieter. I mean, I am sixty-nine years old, and I think that is life's process. They say that as you get older you turn into a sort of sorceress, that life sorts itself out, and you start talking differently, right? I think that one thing I understand about art more clearly than ever is that art is greater than I am. Art saved me, I think—and by art I mean everything one does. The human being is—we are essentially creators and creative.

If you are aware of the process, if you really look at and observe yourself, if you take on the personal work of understanding yourself, of making connections and getting rid of what you don't need and stop complaining—well, if you do all that personal work, I believe that the only out for humanity is through art and the creative process. There is no alternative. If someone who is suffering starts doing something that engages an expressive language, whatever it may be—not necessarily the visual arts because every language has its own set of elements—that person will heal or, at least, carry on in a different way. And I think that is what I would like to leave behind.

I have been involved in art therapy for many years, but in what sense? The word therapy and the word art have the same root, which is making soul. And to make soul is to make contact with your essence. To see it and, from there, express whatever you want to. And you express through languages. There is the language of sound, the language of movement, the language of drama and theater, the language of the word, and there is visual language. Each language has its own reason for being, and each of us has our own tendencies. I, for instance, cannot help but see the world visually, in terms of touch and movement. So, the

task for each one of us is to find our way of being. If you find your own nature, you stop being so critical, and you get down to the work you have to do. And I believe that is the only alternative.

I mean, we have all heard so many things during the pandemic and lockdown—so many people depressed. You have to look inward and observe and listen to yourself. You have to slow down, look at life differently, and realize what it is you like. Yesterday I was listening to a documentary by Deepak Chopra. He is very much part of the modern way of seeing spirituality. And one of the people they spoke about was Joseph Campbell. And Joseph Campbell says, “Find your bliss.” What is that? Find what makes you happy, what excites you, what makes you be who you are. Because if you are happy, you are not going to be mean to the guy on the corner. You are not going to be mean to the guy who sells you your coffee. And I think that that is one of humanity’s problems. We always think we are the center of the universe, but we are all in the same boat, the same mess. And if you learn that and have a language to express it, you have an impact. You have an impact, and people listen to you. But it is really a question of keeping at it. And of having patience, right?

And the project you are making about me at this stage of my life—it really surprises me, and I am truly grateful. Not so much because the voice of Consuelo Méndez will finally be heard. That doesn’t matter to me much. I mean, it’s nice; it’s a nice massage for the ego, right? But I knew that would happen at some point. When an artist keeps their work, it comes to light after they die. How many times has that happened, right? Van Gogh himself. How is it possible that at an auction a Van Gogh goes for millions and millions? But Van Gogh is important for other reasons. Van Gogh is important because of the letters he wrote to his brother—they were the foundation of *my* creative process. The first books that I read, that I was given to help me find my way as an artist, were *Letters to Theo* and Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*. That is my foundation.

After that, many other things came to me as well. But what matters, then, is keeping at it and realizing that we are human beings, and that that is the essence. And we are not separate entities. The Earth is human; the Earth is home. And if we don’t take care of it—well, everything is connected, all of those things are connected. And I think that is what I want to say. And it might not be very different from what many others are saying, but it is the voice of this Consuelo who is here in Caracas, who decided she wants to stay here; she wants to come and go, and she wants to keep working. Because I have no intention of stopping—and no one will stop me. Why? Because it is bigger than I am. And perhaps my legacy is to keep giving, right? I am still working with others. Not on the same scale as before, formally speaking at least, but I work in other ways.

CG: Thank you for letting us tell your story with you, because you are the narrator of your story. Javier and I are just here to help you tell it, but all the stories of individuation, all the

currents and discourses, and religious and philosophical schools, and about your own conception of art, of life—that is this project’s purpose and reason for being. We know that you have so much to give and that you have given us much more than we deserve, in the best sense, because all of this is yours. And you have always given and given some more, and we want to recognize that, recognize everything you have given us, and that you are still giving us with this conversation, this offering of your life and the stories you tell us.

That’s all. I am so grateful, and we are so pleased that you have given us this space on a rainy Caracas afternoon.

CM: [*laughs*] The sun has come out. The rain never lasts long.

CG: That’s right; after the rain, the sun always comes out.

CM: That’s right—and the heat.

JB: Yes, the heat. Thank you. I second everything Camilo said, and I would like to thank you for telling us so much. These are the types of conversations I like to have because they are organic. And, as Camilo said, you answered so many of the questions we had. And, as I said, we have read a lot about your work, about the work of the Mujeres Muralistas, but it is really wonderful to be able to talk to you about it.

These days Consuelo keeps a very active Instagram and social media presence where she features her work, her thoughts, and snapshots of her life in Venezuela. After the oral history , Consuelo sent us a very nice email that I think best can conclude the story of that rainy morning that ended up with sunshine or “post nubila, Phoebus.” Here’s the email :

“[I had a] nice feeling after the interview. I still think the whole experience was an act of psychomagic!! Hope everything came out crisp and clear as it felt. Unbelievable.... Warm abrazos, Consuelo.”

This oral history of Consuelo Méndez 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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