

PROYECTO MISSION MURALS
Oral History Audio Transcripts

ESTRIA MIYASHIRO ORAL HISTORY
Honolulu, Hawaii, July 13, 2021

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This is an oral history of artist and activist Estria Miyashiro for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on July 13, 2021, simultaneously in Honolulu, Hawaii, at 8 a.m., and in my apartment in Oakland, California, at 11 a.m.

The voices you'll hear will be Estria's and my own. You can also hear Estria doodling throughout the oral history while he recounts his memories, prolific visual arts career, and life. When we talked, he was wearing a green button-up short-sleeved shirt with a yellow leaf print.

This oral history delves into Estria's personal life and his work as an artist. He shares his experience of moving from Hawaii to San Francisco after high school, learning to tag and write in the eighties in the Bay Area, and developing his work with artists like Crayone. We talk about his initial interest in mural making, what he learned from artists like Susan Cervantes, the Precita Eyes Muralists, and artist/activist Nancy "Pili" Hernández while working on the Water Writes project. Estria also discusses his work in Hawaii and the Mele Murals project. In our time together, he takes us on a journey through the expanse of public art and activism he generated throughout the years, his role in preserving and amplifying his own Hawaiian heritage, and how he carved out his own legacy through the arts.

Here is the oral history.

Esta es una historia oral de la artista y activista Estria Miyashiro para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. La entrevista fue grabada el 13 de julio de 2021, simultáneamente en Honolulu (Hawai), a las ocho de la mañana, y en mi apartamento de Oakland, California, a la una de la madrugada.

Las voces que escucharás serán las de Estria y la mías. También podrás oír a Estria haciendo garabatos a lo largo de la historia oral mientras relata sus recuerdos, su prolífica carrera en las artes visuales y su vida. Cuando hablamos, llevaba una camisa verde de manga corta abotonada con un estampado de hojas amarillas.

Esta historia oral se adentra en la vida personal de Estria y en su trabajo como artista. Estria comparte su experiencia de mudarse de Hawai a San Francisco después del instituto, de aprender a hacer tags y a escribir en los años ochenta en el Área de la Bahía y de desarrollar su trabajo con artistas como Crayone. Hablamos de su interés inicial por la creación de murales, de lo que aprendió de artistas como Susan Cervantes, de las Precita Eyes Muralists y de la artista/activista Nancy «Pili» Hernández mientras trabajaba en el proyecto Water Writes. Estria también habla de su trabajo en Hawai y del proyecto Mele Murals. Durante el tiempo que pasamos con él, nos llevó de viaje por toda la extensión del

arte público y el activismo que ha generado a lo largo de los años, su papel en la preservación y amplificación de su propia herencia hawaiana y cómo forjó su propio legado a través de las artes.

Aquí está la historia oral.

CAMILO GARZÓN: Today is July 13, and I'm here with Estria Miyashiro. And I'm talking to him on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project*. If you can say your name and also where were you born, exactly?

EM: Aloha. My name is Estria Miyashiro. I'm born in Honolulu, Hawaii.

CG: Perfect. And when you think of your upbringing in Honolulu and all of the beauty that surrounded you, as well as just the very specific situation in the islands when you were born, what are some of the memories that come to mind?

EM: Well, Hawaii's paradise, you know. It's beautiful. The energy of the land and waters are strong. So you feel this specialness of the place. You feel the place is alive. And you might not even realize that when you're a young person, but it affects you.

So when I moved to San Francisco and started building an art career, you still longed for Hawaii. You still feel like that's your home. So even though you're a couple thousand miles away, you still feel like you're right there. It never leaves you in your heart. So that shapes who you are and what you're doing.

And then, in Hawaii, it's all about connection in Hawaii—like connection to each other, connection to the land, connection in our stories. And so that you're always painting, thinking who are you accountable to? Who are you painting? Who's going to see this? You know, I've painted some kind of crazy or irresponsible things when I was younger, but you're always thinking about, oh, what if my grandmother sees this? [*laughs*] What is she going to feel?

So I think that helps shape you to become a community artist. I don't know. Maybe it just shaped me because there's not that many community artists from Hawaii.

CG: I think that's part of it, though. As you're saying, it's nice to hear that this was part of just your context and also just the nature around you but also your family. There's one thing that I remember is that when you were in school—I think you said before that math, algebra, there's some subjects that people are more interested in, and some subjects that some other people are not as interested in, as happens with life. But you used to do something

very peculiar, very specific, with algebra in your paper. Do you remember what I'm referencing?

EM: I think so. Algebra, for me, was something I couldn't comprehend. So the textbook became my sketchbook, you know. I was zoning out in the class. I started doodling. And I think because I couldn't get it, that I couldn't even handle, like, football physics, which is like the science class for the football team, I gravitated towards art.

So in a way, it helped me know that, OK, math, science, that's not my career path. And art was something I really loved—or was coming to love at that point.

CG: Yeah, and then one of the things is you were using those parts of the algebra book as the sketchbook. What were some of the images, when you were a kid or a teenager, that you were starting to doodle? Were there things specifically, like mountains or the ocean or even food? What were some of those images you first started to use?

EM: When I started doodling in the math book, it was just like, I don't know, doing little graffiti pieces of this girl's name. [*laughs*] And then, one day, a classmate walked by, and he looks at it, and he goes, "Oh, you're a graffiti artist" And I go, "Yeah." And then, he walks away, and I'm thinking, What's a graffiti artist? You know?

Then, probably a couple weeks later, my break-dancer friends, they were always looking for anything with break dancing because it just wasn't much available back then. We didn't have Internet. There weren't a lot of magazines.

So whatever they'd find on break dancing, we'd see graffiti stuff in the backgrounds or on their denim jackets. And we were always curious what that was about. So then, one day, we just got an airbrush kit and hopped the fence and went in a canal and painted. And then I fell in love with that.

CG: That sounds fun—and not only fun but also just another way of using those same kinds of images you were already making but in a way that also was sharing with friends, it seems. And also, you saw something in you that someone else saw first, right? You were like, Oh, a graffiti artist. I don't know what it is, but now, I'm interested. What is this, right?

That word—graffiti—and that's something we were just talking about a few minutes ago, there's many connotations, right? And the original connotation, supposedly, is that it's scratch, or scratches, on the walls, especially, like, in Italy, when it came out.

In the United States, it has been used in many ways that are, in a sense, analyzing this kind of public art. And in your early years and then throughout your life, how have you seen that word? What does that word mean to Estria?

EM: Yeah, I agree. The original definition of the word graffiti was to scratch or to scribe into a surface. And then, when you look at dictionaries that are made in modern times, they've changed the definition of it to include the American media version of what graffiti is.

So in style writing, which is what I come from, they call it the G word. You know—it's the bad word that you don't use because it's the media trying to label us as something. Just like vandals, right? That's the people from Europe. [*laughs*] That's not destroying signs and stuff. And it's a way to kind of quickly summarize who we are or what we do and give it a negative connotation, as opposed to—they could have called us storytellers or communicators, and it would have had a positive connotation, right, like trying to communicate something, trying to share something that's as common as humans through all time.

CG: Yeah, there's that, that I mentioned. And I feel like you have consistently pushed for that recognition of what you do as not only storytelling—or as you have called it, also writing—but also just as a tool, right, as an education tool and as a way of also knowing who we are or who people are in the communities that you've been a part of, especially these days that it has been consistently tied, your graffiti work, your storytelling work, with your education work and activism. All of those are connected. They're not separate. I think that it is very clear that all of them are connected.

I think that one of the important things is you did go from a place [where] you were born and raised, which is in Hawaii, and then you ended up on the West Coast of the United States, specifically in the San Francisco Bay Area. And those kinds of things are big, especially when you're young. Do you remember how you felt when you had just moved to San Francisco?

EM: Oh, yeah, I'll never forget how I felt when I moved to San Francisco. So it was fall of '86. I came for college, actually, at University of San Francisco [USF]. And they had a partnership with the Academy of Art College. So you could get a degree from USF but get taught the art from the Academy, which was a little bit more credible than a degree from the Academy at the time.

So for me, you know, I couldn't wait to get out of my parents' house. I didn't realize how much of a free spirit I was—[*laughs*] try[ing] to run away and stuff. And so to come to San Francisco was the way out of my parents' house. It was the way to start my life and be free, more so than, Oh, I'm going to get an education, you know?

And then when I got here, it was, I think, two weeks before school started, so I had a little time to explore. And a classmate of mine—he ended up becoming my best friend, and we still work together to this day—he also went to the same school. And he was a legendary king already in Hawaii for graffiti. And I was nobody in Hawaii.

And then, when we came to San Francisco with those two weeks—hey, let's hop the bus and go around and see what's available, I mean, what kind of pieces there are. So we'd just take the buses to the ends of the lines and back. And we saw amazing parks, like Crocker[-Amazon], Silver Terrace, these other sites that were like more like South San Francisco, Daly City side—that area of San Francisco is just full of these vibrant pieces with styles and color schemes that we've never used in Hawaii.

So back then, like I said, there wasn't Internet. If you wanted to see pieces from another city, you either had to go there or you had to meet someone and then physically mail each other photos. So going to see that was hugely inspirational for us. There was a guy named Dug One from TMF, and he had amazing characters. There was a guy named Ges. They were friends. Ges had amazing pieces. So that stuff got us excited. So before college even started, we're already painting the project rooftops, you know, just going for it.

And I think that kind of set the tone of what my college experience was going to be like, because I wasn't at school as I should have been. [*laughs*] I was out painting. And going to art college was an interesting thing where you're trying to learn skills to make money off of it, but then I had to get jobs to pay for school in the meantime, art jobs.

And then, coming from a graffiti background is very different than those artists [I went to school with]. A lot of those kids, they're well-off kids. I don't know. They don't know what to do, so they become an artist or something. They don't all necessarily have that drive, that determination, like, "Oh, I gotta be this artist" thing. Whereas the folks that were struggling, or even the folks that had a career and realized that wasn't the career for them and going back, they were motivated to make something of themselves.

And coming from writing, we have this mentality of I'm going to battle you; I'm going to smoke you; I'm going to compete with you all the time. So I was always comparing myself against my peers and classmates and trying to outdo them. So those [well-off] kids, they take winter break, summer break. They go home. They don't do art. They just, I don't know, hang out with family.

But for me, I had to live off of it already, so I'm hustling, lining up gigs. I'm doing whatever I can. So when [those other art students] come back from break, it's like they've kind of

regressed a few weeks in their skills, whereas my skills moved forward a little bit because I was continually working on stuff. So eventually, I kind of pushed to the front of the class.

But later you grow up, and you realize that you can't use other people as your motivation. You gotta just look inwards to improve yourself. So there was a very striking difference in the perspective of art, both in aesthetics and in the competitiveness, from folks on the street versus those in school. And I think those in school were just looking to make money.

But coming from the streets was more of how does this connect with people? Why do we paint the streets instead of trying to go into galleries like those other art students? And realizing early on, man, millions of people pass my piece in a month. And you're never going to get that number of people in a gallery or a museum. So yeah, it was all about painting streets or trains or trucks or whatever you could get your hands on.

CG: Anything that was around. And it also is the same kind of thing that it is not only about the art, right? It's also about the connecting with others or making sure that others see what is out there, that they are able to still have art. Because as you were saying, galleries, museums—[they were and are], still to this day, somewhat exclusive.

But instead, you always gravitated to the art that was going to be, as you were saying, on the street. [People are] going to see it, and I can always go to different places and just not only continue getting better—because you had that right? But also just get to know more of the city and of yourself through it, right? It was always like a feedback loop.

And as you said, even before you started in USF, you already had worked outside on the street. You were getting to know what was going on, and you already were making art. It wasn't that you went to school to make art. You already were making art and then also went to school.

When you think of those times in school but also after school, how did your conception of art while you were living in San Francisco change. Or, as you were saying, when you were just tagging or writing, there were different ways of working. How did those kinds of things change? Did you start doing different kinds of street art, as well, that you hadn't tried before? Or did you stay in one realm? What was the combination of things?

EM: Oh, that's a good question, Camilo. When I came into San Francisco, the first group of writers that I connected with, they became a crew called Together with Style. And they were known on the West Coast for innovative styles—not following the styles that were coming out of New York and Chicago, you know, but trying to break the rules and realizing that New

York had trains. So your pieces either had to fit below the windows of a train or on the whole car.

But we had walls, so we could do different compositions, different colors. You could do more elaborate stuff because you could go back multiple times. Whereas with a train, it's gone the next morning, right? You don't know if you're going to see that train again. *[laughs]* So they were very innovative, and that was a huge inspiration for me to explore the styles, explore the flows of letters, techniques.

I think the other main crew at the time that got me excited was Dug One's TMF, The Mellow Fellows. And they were known for that sort of classic window-down or whole-car kind of graffiti styles. They believed that style had to stay connected to its New York roots. And I often wonder, what if I had met those guys first? Then I might have got sucked into that way of thinking.

But for whatever reason, I met up with Crayone and his crew, and that just allowed me to explore things. So I felt comfortable trying different things. But I mean, I would look at, you know, most writers would look at other writers. Or they would look at Vaughn Bodē's underground comic book, something simple that would translate well on a train—you know, flat color, stylish outline.

But we would look at fashion illustration or illustrations on magazine covers—anything. So we would experiment with techniques, with colors, with applications. And then we also weren't afraid to do a non-hip-hop look. You know, everybody was doing B-boys or DJs, you know, straight graffiti characters. And we were just doing totally weird stuff. A lot of it sucked, you know, but we were free to explore things.

And my background was, as a teenager, I spent my years at the YMCA in my neighborhood. So it was always about helping kids, giving back to [the] community, and also dreaming of how to change the world or make it a better place and then methodically going about doing that. So those are the kinds of things that I learned as a young person.

So then, with the first Iraq war, I was really motivated by that. So I went around the city writing stuff about it, made a little magazine with Twist and some other guys about the BS that was happening with that, how the US manipulated things to start that war. And I would even go on the streets and say that I was doing a report for school and interviewed complete strangers on the streets. And then, if the quotes moved me, I would go tag those quotes at night on playgrounds and schoolyards and stuff. *[laughs]*

So I think that's why the city had it in for me, because I was writing political stuff. But that connection with those writers, I feel, gave me the OK to go do things like political graffiti that had nothing to do with style writing.

CG: There's just so much wealth of community and also media that you are also learning from that also got into, as you were saying, your work, including, as you were saying, that you were just talking to just passersby or just like someone and asking them something, and if it moved you enough, just writing it and making sure that it was present for others to see. And that kind of conversation, that the city is speaking back to the people, you were also making that happen. And you did have some media attention, which we will get into in a second.

And if you think of in that time, just in the eighties especially, when you were just not only learning, at that point you were also just able to, as you were saying, explore and also get into more specific things that you were getting interested in—like these kinds of what we would call political stuff, which, at the end of the day, is also just very much a human conversation with the city. A lot of these things become political just because others didn't want to listen to the things that you were saying.

But they were just things that you just—someone on the street [said]—and they were just part of the conversation. They became public because you made them public. But these were things that were going on—the ideologies, the narratives, all of these things. So what happened when you did get that kind of media attention?

I talked to Nancy “Pili” Hernández about this, and it was just so interesting, her perspective on it, which—she loves you as a friend and colleague, and we can talk about *Water Writes* in a second. But what happened, in your own words, and why is it that they were talking about you in the way that they were?

EM: Anybody born after 1984 in a major city in the United States does not know what a city full of bare walls looks like, right? So my generation is like the last that remembers. Like, I remember there was no such thing as murals, you know. There was just bare walls.

So for our generation, because of style writing, to realize like, Oh, what would that wall over there look like with this color, or this big bang? You turn the corner and—boom!—this thing just captures you. So we wanted to put that everywhere. And I think that's why it was a golden age in style writing at that time. Because everybody felt that excitement, you know? And also there just weren't enough cops to catch all of us, I think. [*laughs*]

But that excitement of transforming spaces from blank stuff to colored things—making something out of nothing, being a creator in that way—was super exciting. And I don't think future generations have that level of excitement. So with that, we were painting a lot of stuff. And to rise to the top in a city like San Francisco, you've got to paint a lot, and then you have to get good at it.

And I was horrible at it in the beginning. I didn't even know I was horrible, right, until I started noticing that, oh, people don't take pictures of my stuff. They don't waste film—it was film back then—on my pieces. So to get good, I figured that if I drew more, or painted more hours than everybody else, I would slowly catch up or even pass them. And that's what I did.

So in our Together with Style crew, we would have contests like who could do the most pieces in a month, who could do the most hours sketching in a month or whatever. And we'd bet for like a hundred cans each, which is a lot. So we'd have to go steal all that. *[laughs]* But anyway, that's a whole other story.

So we were going out all the time, painting. And then, somehow—how did it happen? Somehow, I was painting a truck. And it was interesting. It was these two guys. They were famous for driving around the country and then stopping in different places and then making videos and blogging about their experiences there. I think they were two gay guys, so it was a different perspective at the time. There wasn't a lot of gay voice in media. So they were just boldly sharing their views of things. And they were smart and intelligent and perceptive, so it was enjoyable to watch and read what they were doing, you know.

So one day, I saw their Monkmobile~~[was]~~ coming down to San Francisco. And I was like, Oh, my God, I gotta paint that because everybody's going to see it. So I pulled to the side and talked to them, and they're like, "Yeah, come paint it. We're going to do this book fair."

So I'm painting in front of this book fair, and this teacher walks out, and she goes, "Will you come teach my class? I have no money." "Oh, all right." So we went and taught this class. And then, stupid me invites the head of [the San Francisco] Department of Public Works [DPW], which does the anti-graffiti [work], right?

Because I'm thinking if we can shift their perspective somehow, then we can work with them, not realizing that he's like the devil incarnate and just has it in for me. He just thinks I'm like the kingpin of graffiti, or a kingpin, and if he takes me down, he'll take down a bunch of people. So when he saw our class, he was pissed.

So then, I'm doing my thing one night, tagging, and again, writing political stuff in the neighborhood. And then they got lucky. An off-duty cop caught me. So I didn't think he was a

cop. Otherwise, I would have ran earlier. [*laughs*] I would have ducked into the trees in the park and hid out. So he got lucky. He caught me. And then, somehow, the DPW heard about it. So he talked to the judge and was like, “You can’t release this person.” So they raised my bail to, like, \$50,000. You know, you’re [a] graffiti kid—bail bond is, like, five grand. So I have to get people to get my credit cards to float that.

But yeah, so I got busted. And this is about—maybe 1994 or something. And in the historical context, an American young man had gone to Singapore, I think it was. And I don’t know, he was smashing signs with another youth from that country—like actually destroying things, public property things. And so they caught him and the other kid. And out there, the penalty is they cane you. They give you lashings. And so it was a big deal in US media because people were starting to get frustrated with graffiti. They didn’t understand it. It was becoming so prevalent that the people were saying we should cane them here. We should lash them here.

So the US tried to intervene on that kid’s behalf and say you shouldn’t lash him. And they’re like, “This is our country, and these are our rules, so we’ll be nice, and we’ll just give him eleven lashings instead of—we were going to give him, like, thirty.”

So that just happens. Then I get busted right after San Francisco raised it from a misdemeanor. You would just get a ticket, you know. Like if a cop saw you, he’d write you a ticket and send you on your way. They raised it from a misdemeanor to a felony. And felonies have different classes based on dollar values. So I think I was the first big bust right after they passed that new law. So they wanted to make it the highest class. So they blamed me for everything in the neighborhood. And I was like, I can’t carry that many colors. [*laughs*] I don’t have that many styles and that much time. Well, whatever.

So I was top of the news for two days, front page of the papers. All the press is calling my house. So I had to get out, get a lawyer. And then the thing that bumped me off the news was OJ going down the highway in his white Bronco. That’s what got me off the front page. So, I guess, thanks for that.

But because of that exposure, weird opportunities came my way. Susan Cervantes from Precita Eyes called me and said, “Hey, come teach. We got this brand new urban youth arts class. Come run the class.” “Like, all right. Yes.” “And we’ll pay you.” I was like, “Oh, that’s way better than the free one I was doing.”

And then my buddy hooked me up with doing skateboard graphics at REAL and Stereo Skateboards, which is still based in San Francisco, I think. So just mural commissions started pouring in. Even the City of San Francisco gave me commissions, which is hilarious. Because

on one day, I'm doing community service for getting busted. And on another day, I'm getting paid from the city to paint it.

But yeah, it was a crazy time. It was super inspiring, super exciting. And I had to do a lot of community service for that, but I ended up not paying anything. And they were like, "Well, you owe so much money, you might as well start paying." And my lawyer said, "But you don't buy a car when you don't know how much it costs. So let us know how much it is." Well, they never figured it out, so we never paid anything. And eventually, that got expunged. So I guess I'm still a clean person now. [*laughs*]

But you know, people were mad, so they wanted me to get the stiffest penalties. You know, I met a lot of those conservative anti-graffiti people. I had to work with them as part of my community service for some of it. It's opening your eyes to things. And then, the community service—you have to show up in the morning, and then different departments in San Francisco assign you. You might go with the fire [department]. You might go with the police. You might go [with] DPW, whatever. And it's usually just cleaning things or rearranging things. And so you start to see all the corruption in the different departments, how workers don't work for four hours out of the day. They just turn off their walkie-talkies and go take a nap in the park. Like, wow.

I think that DPW head wanted to discourage me from doing any more art, but it fueled me. Because I was like, I need to speak about these injustices that are happening, this theft of our public monies.

So Precita Eyes sort of was like, and you look back, and you just think, well, Kūpuna must have—my elders must have—been lining me up for these things. Because here was this super-progressive woman, fearless, big-picture, not afraid to tackle heavy politics, [who] believed that all murals should be about political issues, about people's rights.

And I think it was the next piece that I needed in my own personal development, where so much of style writing is about me, me, me, right, doing my name a thousand times everywhere. And then [Susan Cervantes's] perspective of "No, it's for the people, it's by the people, it's in the community." She would give me commissions that were outside of the Mission. She wasn't even interested in painting outside the Mission, like, didn't care.

So realizing, instead of being pushed away from the community with penalties, it was about bringing me in. And I don't think she realized how much of an impact she was making to kind of politicize me or make me feel more of a connection to the community.

CG: It is really incredible to know that you have had all of these—there were many moments that are very complicated at the same time that you were able to still do the best out of it and it put a lot of other people in your way, like Susan Cervantes.

And when you think of the Mission, or the Mission District in San Francisco, what are some of those memories of even projects or murals that you did with Susan or even this class that you were starting to teach? Because that's an essential thing that continued until this day. That's still something important. What are some of those memories that you have of your life in the Mission, in those moments when you were actually working with Susan?

EM: Well, to back up a little bit, in the context, I arrived in San Francisco in fall of '86. And style writing was bumping. It was going crazy.

CG: The golden age of graffiti.

EM: Golden age, yeah. But prior to that, you're looking at the seventies. You have this rich history. I mean, San Francisco, at the time, was the mural capital of the United States. You had these political murals, a lot of Latino artists, Chicano artists, just holding it down, doing amazing stuff.

I mean, you drive around the Mission and what are now just memories or postcards or in books, that was your living history—these huge, vibrant murals, you know, people dancing salsa and stuff like that or like Balmy Alley talking about all the struggles of peoples in [the] Third World, how much of that is actually caused by the US. Things like that were powerful.

So coming in at '86, style writing was like, What are we doing? Look at what they're doing. I think, for a lot of us, we didn't get into it, or we didn't know what it was, because we were younger. But for me to see that stuff every day—I mean, Susan's stuff was amazing. She was organizing huge projects at the time. She's such a fearless, like, "I'm just going to make the craziest stuff happen" kind of person.

And then, Juana Alicia, her murals—I mean, they're still amazing to me. But the ones at the time, like the kid holding up a flower with guns pointing at the kid, stuff like that, just in the middle of the road in the Mission—just whoa, such powerful stuff that I hadn't seen in art, coming from Hawaii. Hawaii's all about sunsets and Diamond Head and waves—stuff that tourists will like. But to see those kinds of things, it seeps in.

And then, getting to work under—I didn't realize that I would be getting a free mentorship from Susan and all the artists that came through her center, and her family. Her family, too,

is just amazing, like very loving. They're tight. They have struggled through decades of stuff together to make her career happen. And I think that's phenomenal.

But all of that being the melting pot, and then the style writing coming in and changing things and seeing people like Regal come in and do these crazy murals that are just like one giant stop sign. Oh, you know, it redefined what mural art was. Not just him, but there was more people like that—or then graffiti artists going and doing huge walls with their name—two stories—Amaze, Twist, whatever. People weren't used to that. So everything was changing, not necessarily in a better way that it was about politics or community, but just that so much more stuff was being painted. A lot of styles and different voices were being expressed and experimented on.

And then I'm just jumping into that at an early age and trying to figure out, Am I just a writer? Because this stuff is pretty powerful. And then she would have us come paint with them and learn stuff. Like, she got a commission from a friend who had bought the McDonald's on 24th and Mission. And he said, "I don't think the business does as well, so could you paint some murals? I think that would draw the community in."

So she kind of hemmed and hawed because she was so anti-corporations. But she knew this person, and it's in the community. And he said, "I have this much money for you, and you can just do whatever you want." So she lined up her team, and she gave us young folks the whole back wall. And all they said was, "We're going to talk about the four elements." Like, I don't even know what that is. *[laughs]*

And I painted some dumb stuff, I think, some pretty, naked burning woman with wings or something like that. And you know, it's not the kind of stuff I would paint now. But the owner came by one day, and he said, "Thank you. You know, your mural has increased my business 11 percent overnight. That's huge." So there's that side.

And then, the more important side was how one day, a gangster comes in his big gold-and-red Starter jacket. And he says, "Yo, man, thank you for painting and making our neighborhood look pretty. Like, I lived here my whole life. I've stood on this corner my whole life, and no one ever gave us nothing. And this is the first time somebody came and gave us something, so thank you for that." I was like, wow. That shifted me, what that guy said. Like, I want to do that some more. *[laughs]* And so with the urban youth arts class, we grew it. We started to get more walls.

So the kids would come paint, come sketch in the class like twice a week. And then we would go paint on the weekends, at least one weekend a month, if not the whole month. And Susan would just line up walls for us, and we would just go paint stuff. So it was slowly about

coming to know what their identity is in that community, you know, and then painting about that.

I think it started off with just the simple—we're graffiti people, just put our name on it—to trying to make it more relevant for community. But it was a start. And then she got a big project. I think the school is called Cesar Chavez. I don't remember. But there was a mural with Martin Luther King on it. And so she painted this huge Cesar Chavez. I want to say it's three stories tall or something.

And she gave us young people, the urban arts class, this side wall. And it had old graffiti, like Transformers robots that were fading. But the Martin Luther King kind of survived. So we touched it up. And then we wrote across the top of the wall, above the windows, "With love, magic, and art, we shall overcome." And it's kind of taking a play on a quote out of one of his speeches and then adding that beauty.

And I didn't realize the power of that until years later, when this person that I admired—he was a union organizer. So his job was to get hired at hotels and then organize the workers to become a union. Kind of a bizarre job to have. Because the workers—I think they're mostly Chicano or Filipino—they're afraid of losing their jobs, even though they're getting treated badly.

So to me, he's like a local hero, doing the work. He's young but making this commitment to community. This guy was studying like war strategies in order to uplift his community. Like, who does that? So this is a guy that I admire. And he comes up to me one day, and he goes, "Hey, you remember you painted this school?" "No." "No, you remember. It said this." "Oh, a little bit." Then he finally, he's like, "Let me find a picture." And he shows me a picture. I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I remember painting that."

And he goes, "You don't understand. You want to talk about having a personal relationship with art? I was a young cholo when you guys painted that. And me and my crew would hang out in that schoolyard after hours and drink and sell drugs and fight and we would jump people in, and we would fight other gangs. And we would sit on those jungle gyms and wonder, like, why are they painting this mural that says, 'With love, magic, and art, we shall overcome?' And that mural made us start to realize that what we were doing wasn't appropriate for a schoolyard. So we stopped drinking there. And then we stopped hanging out, and we stopped fighting there." And eventually, he left the gang and became this union organizer.

He's like, "So your art is one of the big things that helped me see what I had to do in life and got me out of the gangs." And I was like, "Wow." No one ever told me anything like that. If my

art can do that for one more person in my life, it's a win. So those little moments, they change you, you know?

CG: Those are all beautiful moments. And I think that when I think of the street art that I've been able to observe in the Mission, it's really nice to see that there's also that influence that you had, not only with the actual art but also educating others, children, youth, to also be able to know how to do that and what to depict, too, and even your choice of images, how it continued changing. Do you remember there was—I think it was in Haight Street in San Francisco—I think there was a mural that you got, I think, commissioned? Yeah, it was on Haight Street. [Estria *laughs*] You have too many. You have too many.

I think it's just the same thing that you're saying, just like, depending on the mural, depending on the art, you still were having some feedback from the community, right? And people were still reaching out to you. Like, this is not only art. You are giving these as a gift to us. Thank you for giving us something when there was so much that was taken from these communities and has been continued to be taken.

When you think of your time in not only doing these kinds of murals—and also with Susan that you just explained such a beautiful mentorship and relationship—you think also of, for example, Nancy “Pili” Hernández, which I mentioned earlier. And there's this beautiful project that you created—several murals in different parts of the world—that is the Water Writes murals. What was the drive or the idea? Where did it come from, and why did you decide to collaborate with other artists doing this, including Nancy?

EM: I had one of my best friends in Hawaii. His name was Corey. He wanted to do projects together. We were good friends in high school. He was this Hawaiian guy. We would lay on this basketball court at night and dream of, like, what can we do to make our world better?

And it would just be he and I, and we would see this one lone white *pueo*, this Hawaiian owl, [in] our valley. It was probably the last Hawaiian pueo in our valley. And it would just come to us at night. And I didn't know back then how significant that was or what it meant for us. But this guy, Corey, reaches out to me, and then he wants to do some projects.

So he goes, “You gotta see this series.” The Internet was still just kind of getting going to the point of past newsgroups to actually having sites and video and stuff. So there was this series. It was called something like *Toxic Monster Island*. It was about the big trash in the Pacific. And he showed me that, and I was just so shocked at how much trash was out there.

You know, when we were young, the beaches were pristine. You would go out in the morning, and there'd be shells or glass balls from the fishermen's nets. But you could get

these things. You could get shells and make puka shell necklaces. And now you can't go to the beach and get enough to even make a bracelet. And there's so much microplastics in our beaches that we can't even filter it out. It's so small, you just see billions of little colors.

But it wasn't like that when we were young. And to see that video where they're fishing up pieces of houses and whole refrigerators and just whatever floats there and everything growing on it, I thought, Oh, we need to do more about this. We gotta stop this trash in the ocean. So one mural's not going to be enough. So we're going to have to do a series of murals.

And then, as an artist, I was applying for grants. Artist grants are usually like, oh, we have 1 percent of the budget. We're building this new building. We've got to put it towards some art. So I don't know, let's make a mural about this lawyer. Lawyer? Like, who's this lawyer, you know what I mean? Like, who even knows this person? So a lot of those commission opportunities were just not something I could resonate with. And I had all these ideas of what I'd like to do as projects.

So then, one day, one of my good friends, he ended up becoming a founder of Twitter. And he goes, "Dude, you're not going to believe this. This project I'm working on, it's, like, gangbusters. So I gotta pay this money. Either it's going to go to the US for taxes—and fuck that because they're going to make bombs, so let's do these projects we always been talking about."

All right. So we started this nonprofit. And we probably should have did some research before we did it. Because maybe a nonprofit wasn't the smartest way to go. But we didn't know better. But so we did it, and we started Water Writes.

And I thought if we can do ten murals in ten cities at the same time and all of this is streaming live on the Internet, that it would be a big hoopla around that. It didn't dawn on me how much work it takes to plan each mural when you're trying to do it with other countries and other artists and other environmental groups. So I think, in a year, we did eight or nine. And it took another six months or so to do several more.

But everywhere we went, people didn't want to talk about trash in the ocean. They wanted to talk about access to clean drinking water and who controlled the water. And it was the same story everywhere—privatization, rampant pollution, destroying our most valuable resource on the planet. It just makes no sense. So that's how Water Writes formed sort of organically.

I had hired my friend, Nancy Pili, to coordinate it because she was good at stuff. We had that trust already. We already saw each other as comrades in a people's movement, and we were getting more into environmental stuff. So she made it happen with that money. Yeah.

Some significant things that happened in that series of murals was, like Palestine, sending a team out—one guy from LA, one guy from San Francisco, from the Mission, José Rojas. And you got to, like, fly into Israel, and then you gotta kind of sneak your way into Palestine and say that “oh, I'm here for a conference,” or whatever the heck you're going to say, right?

And we did it in partnership with this group that always goes there, and they set up desalinization units so the kids can have water. And they're building these things in schools because Israel's bombed all the wells, all the drinking sites, all the sewage treatment plants. So they're slowly just trying to kill them off by just removing any resources and making it as toxic for them as possible. So they build these desalinization units in the schools so their kids can drink the water.

So we go with them. People are building those units, installing those units. We're painting murals. I think they did like nine or ten schools—ten schools in nine days or something like that. And all of them are gone now because, in the last couple raids, Israel blew up all of those schools. So that was a powerful thing.

South Africa—we went out there and partnered with people there. And let's say we spend \$25,000, \$35,000 to make a mural happen. And you realize, wait, how much does it cost if we just dug a well for them and taught them how to maintain the well? You know, we were creating a mural and marketing towards English-speaking people, primarily in the US, when we could have really been about the people there and dug the wells and set up education systems and ways that they could monetize so that they could maintain those systems. So [it was] just a wake-up call for us—what are we really doing to help people? Are we pandering to our own ego? Are we actually trying to make it better for them?

So Water Writes was like this learning ground for us to figure things like that out. Nancy Pili organized one in Richmond, California, where I think Shell or Chevron have their oil refineries. And every few years, one of those parts of that facility catches on fire and is this huge thing burning oil for days on end. And everybody gets sick. And those companies cover it up. So she really wanted to put it on blast, like, this is not acceptable. You know, all the poor people have the land where all those chemicals go. And all the wealthy people have the spot out of the wind, where they don't get those chemicals.

I think that was maybe the last mural in that series we did, but it really made us realize how much we could do to connect the art to the stories of the place. So it was hard to get that

funded because funders couldn't see the impact of you going into a place for a couple of weeks and creating a piece of art and then leaving. They want to see a year-after-year program in one community, serving the same kids, the same demographic.

So that was kind of hard to get funded. But then it led to us developing a series of murals in Hawaii called Mele Murals. And learning from Water Writes, I spent an entire year just taking three to five meetings a week with different community members—everybody from politicians to nonprofits to artists to youth groups—and telling them, “Here’s what we think we’re going to do. Here’s this project. What do you think?” And they would give us feedback.

So taking that feedback and adding everything, it made it so much more than what we were going to ever build. I think I was still pandering to my own ego, like, I’m going to do this swan song of twenty murals about Hawaiian songs and then, peace, I’m out. Instead, we’re like sixty-five murals in and still about teaching young people how to be those visual storytellers, grounded in place, connected to their land, connected to their ancestors, to their stories, to their culture. So much more than anything I could have built myself. So going back to what you said, yeah, Kūpuna watching over you.

I think when you set yourself on a righteous path, a *pono* path, that people and resources will come into your path to empower you. And when you’re trying to go down the wrong path, it’s just obstacle after obstacle. Because they’re trying to tell you, “Look—open your eyes. This is not the direction for you.” [*laughs*]

And Mele Murals was that. Like, everything came. Money came. Partnerships came. Walls came. I’m at the point now where I realize the site calls us. The space, the land, calls us. So people go, “How do you choose the walls?” We don’t. People find us. And it’s always like, “OK, what is up with this place? Why is this place calling us? What kind of healing does this place need?”

And we’ve since learned things like land holds the memory of things that happened there, whether they’re traumatic or they’re positive. So if it’s traumatic, then a lot of bad things will continue happening there. It’s just a low-vibration place, right? But you can help cleanse it. You can bring people in to lift out that negative energy, to clear out spirits that are stuck there, to clear out dark energy, and then make it this portal, or make it this kipuka, this sprouting place of new life or new beginnings or creativity.

And when you do that at a school, it’s hugely transformative. So taking what I learned back in style writing: boom, bright colors really catch you. Dynamic things really capture people. It might not be what people want to hang in their living room—or, I should say, what wealthy

people want to hang in their living room—but it’s definitely what is going to capture people’s eyes, and it captivates kids.

And then looking at color theory, how colors resonate and stuff like that, more normal kind of art things. How do you incorporate those things to make the energy of that place feel different, to raise the vibration for those kids and that community? I don’t know. I went on a lot of tangents, so I don’t know where we are now. [*laughs*]

CG: No, what I was telling you, when you think of normal interviews, which this is not that, right—this is not even an interview. It’s an oral history. You’re really connecting a lot of dots that are just very important. And even one thing that I just noticed is how much of an influence San Francisco [had] on you and on you creating these Mele Murals, but also in you creating these opportunities for youth and for telling your own stories—actually reflecting of the place, which you were also doing, that kind of a public engagement with art before—but that kind of site-specific [art] with the stories of the people and reflecting of the community.

But it’s very nice that you were able to combine all of the things you learned as a kid and as a teenager in Hawaii with the things that you [later] learned in the eighties in San Francisco and beyond. And it all seems to be very well connected and very well grounded. You are telling the stories and letting people, kids, tell the stories with these murals and with this work.

And I think that one of the nice things about the murals that you’ve been describing, that you were trying to do a swan song, is that it became bigger than even what you thought. And it might have been like, as you were saying, there’s some part of you—that you were like, I’m doing this for myself a little bit. [But] it became way larger than that.

And it’s so important that it always ends up like that with those murals. It is very much collaboration. It is very much about the place. And one of the nice things is you’ve been able to do this, thanks also to your nonprofit, which is the Estria Foundation. And Mele Murals also became a documentary, which I was very happy to be able to watch to know exactly the impact you’ve been having over there in Honolulu but also just beyond.

And when you think of your current work, right, I would say the legacy that you are leaving behind in Honolulu, I think it’s very important. I would like to ask you, what do you think that legacy is, in your own words? Because I know what I’m seeing. I know what others see in you. But what do you see in you when you think of your own legacy?

EM: Wasn’t sure I had a legacy yet. [*laughs*] I mean, I hope that I’m creating opportunities. I credit Susan Cervantes with letting me lead that class at her center. And then, from there, it

was East Bay Asian Youth Center and Urban Arts Academy in Oakland and then, finally, going to EastSide Arts Alliance and launching an urban arts class there.

But where Susan's class, it was just—maybe because of me at the time—was more graffiti-centric. And then going to EastSide Arts Alliance, it started to become—it's a graffiti-ish class, but it's definitely about politicizing young people so they understand why they're oppressed, why their community is the way they are, and then how to be a voice for the people and communicate these things on the walls.

And so all of that led to the Mele Murals, where we teach the young people to be this voice for the community. So I keep hoping that the Mele Murals and all the programs that have been built off of it since then would develop the young people to be these visual storytellers. And I don't know how many of them are going to take that route.

But I do know that the meditation piece is probably even bigger than the mural piece. The mural's this landmark that lasts for how many years, right? And people see it. Millions of people will see the walls. But the meditation is the thing that you can use to work on yourself. And that's real change. When you change yourself, when you change the head of the dragon, then the whole body of the dragon changes. And so it's a ripple effect, right, into your family, into your household, your community, and farther out.

And the meditation also helps them ground and connect to the land and try to feel what the land feels and know that it's a living thing that we have to take care of, and connect to your ancestors for inspiration and guidance. Like, you can ask them any question, like "Should I go to this event? Should I hire this person? Should I do this project?" They're always there for you.

And I think a lot of people in the United States feel a disconnect. They don't know who they are or where they come from. And Indigenous people are all about, like, you gotta know where you came from to know where you gotta go.

So I hope that our projects help to connect the kids to their—and not just the kids because we work with teachers and adults too—but connect the participants to their genealogy, to their place, and then connect them to their future. So I don't know if I'll be famous in the end. I don't really think that matters. But if the work has an impact, that's what it's all about.

CG: I think that when you think of that impact you have, that is that legacy. Because it is not about necessarily creating the next generation of street artists or muralists. It's about by them learning these kinds of skills—but also these kinds of thinking, or as you were saying, meditation—they change themselves. And if they change themselves or the ways of thinking

about the world and themselves, then they can also effect more sustaining change and accept that—as you were saying—the land, the water, what surrounds them is as important as it is.

And you've also taught them another thing, I think, which is the value of community and the value of conversation, constant conversation. It's also that kind of very incredible thing you've been doing with Nancy "Pili" Hernandez, José Rojas, which you just mentioned, with Susan Cervantes, and even, since your early days in San Francisco in the eighties, just understanding your place in a place and occupying that. In a way, that also gives back to a community, Estria.

And I think that anyone that cares to hear your words today will be able to witness that you are a person that has understood that kind of space and has led other people to that, especially younger people. And I think that that's just such an essential thing.

I think I have only a couple of more questions. One of them is just—one thing that I think I ask often in these kinds of oral histories—which is what is something that you need to tell me, or for someone that listens to this, so that they can better understand you as a person?

EM: What can I tell you so they better understand me? I hope that they get that I have tried to grow and improve myself and be closer to my truer self, you know? Yeah, I guess that's it.

CG: The other one that I wanted to ask you is just, when you think of all of these interviews you've had during the years, all this media attention to you, even opportunities of documenting your work, these are different kinds of conversation in which you're able to say and express yourself in whichever way you want to tell your story.

One thing that I think we don't get asked enough is this kind of—what is it that you haven't been able to say before or that you would like to expand that you have not been able to say? So when you think of that, is there anything that comes to mind? Of something you would like to say that you haven't been able to before, or you didn't want to?

EM: I probably want to say sorry to all the people I've hurt along the way. And thank you to so many people that have helped me become what I am, to empower me to do the work that I do. Actually, this interview, this talk-story session, has helped me kind of reflect on how each of those things had key, pivotal moments in my life. So thank you for that.

CG: I would say just thank you. It's been a true honor to be able to know that in this very weird year that we have had that I'm able to talk to you—you're in Honolulu, I'm here in Oakland—and that we're able to just reminisce on the person you are and all the steps and all

these things that happened along the way. And I'm glad that you were able to just tell us some of these stories.

And thank you so much for not only your time but also all of these beautiful things that you are still doing and that you have done so far and all of those other things that you were saying, also—like even, I would like to say sorry. They did take you places, and you still did have a lot of impact. So thank you so much for everything you're still doing.

EM: Thank you. I appreciate this opportunity.

CG: I hope that after listening to this oral history, you also understand what Estria realized during our recording of it. It is his belief that Kūpuna, his elders and ancestors, paved the road of his life and growth.

Working on his art and practicing and creating in great volumes were necessary ingredients for Estria to develop his own style and work. The tags and writings of his name in street art were some of the first and significant steps in that direction. After time spent working on public art in partnership with muralists, he realized the collective and collaborative worth found in working on murals and grew to become more aware of the power of his art and work.

Pulling from his time spent learning and creating with Bay Area muralists, Estria continues to honor his heritage and traditions while living in Hawaii through the Estria Foundation and the Mele Murals project, which is described on its website as a foundation that “promotes youth development, arts education, cultural preservation, and community-building through the creation of large-scale outdoor murals.”

This oral history of Estria Miyashiro 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.

JUSTIN AH CHONG: Justin Ah Chong

CG: Who provided us with recording assistance in Honolulu, Hawaii.

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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