

Oral History interview with Ramses Noriega

Noriega, Ramses, born 1944

Painter

Los Angeles, California

Part 1 of 2

Sound Cassette Duration – 24:12

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

DENISE LUGO: [...] Ramses, when were you born?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I was born in Caborca, Sonora, Mexico in 1944.

DENISE LUGO: When did you come to the United States?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well I came in 1956. So I spent [...] 12 years approximately.

DENISE LUGO: Your first language was Spanish then?

RAMSES NORIEGA: My first language is Spanish. English is my second adoptive language.

DENISE LUGO: When you came, where did you go? Where did you settle?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I consider myself a spirit of movement and my first movement was from Caborca to Mexicali. From Mexicali I developed my world perspective of humanity and I developed my philosophy and it was there that began to do my artwork. My first art works that I could remember were in two forms. They were what we used to call *monitos de barro* (clay/mud dolls) and they were graphics, drawing with pencil and with sticks or we would scratch the ground a lot and draw. And with the pencils we also used to do a lot of drawing on books, on wood, on anything that would be on flat that would take a pencil. I recall images from those days. The types of images we used to do in those days there was “El Santo” which was a *luchador* (Mexican wrestler) and we liked that. And there was another one, “Superman”. Which is called “Superman” in English and we used these characters. We used to do *los saltones negros*, the black hawks; which was kind of like GI Joe type thing. Seven black hawks during the Second World War that used to travel throughout the world for justice and peace. Then we used to do Mexican people like Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, Benito Juarez and those types of characters. We used to copy a lot of things from funny books [because] we did not have any art books. [...] Are you interested in other influences in that period?

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, yeah. [How about] your family [...]?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well, I lived with my grandfather and were lived it was called “Arrimados”. Which my grandfather and my grandmother they had their own children.

DENISE LUGO: Extended family.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Extended family. We were not really like their- My parents—
(Sound of tape recorder turning off) *Ay-ya-yai*.

DENISE LUGO: Ok, you can talk.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Ok we're checking to see if it's recording.

DENISE LUGO: Ok.

RAMSES NORIEGA: [...] *¿Haber en dónde estamos?* (Where were we?)

DENISE LUGO: We're talking about your extended family and when you lived with you grandparents in Mexico.

RAMSES NORIEGA: When I lived with my grandparents in Mexico in 1956, that's when my parents decided to bring me to the United States. It was very difficult for me to come into the United States. I went through a very harsh period of feelings of isolation and being neglected. My experiences in Mexicali were such that [it was] difficult to relate. For example, the kids of my age have never worked for a living. At 12 I had started working in the street selling and knowing what mathematics was in terms of money since I was 6 years old, 7 years old I was. I used to walk about 7 miles all day selling different kinds of things. I was working as a shoeshine boy. That's [why] Manuel Cruz's work became so relevant to me when he was working his sculptures because he did things that related back to the history of our people. He did the shoeshine boy; he did several sculptures that related to that to my life. But here in the United States the kids were involved in things like football. I've never seen football in Mexico. We played soccer, but nobody played soccer here. They threw this funny looking thing that looked like a *virote*. A *pan virote* (Mexican bread that is oval shaped) is like French bread. They used to throw it and I could never understand why anybody would like throwing this French bread around. The only thing I could relate was baseball, so I did play baseball. I threw two shout outs when I was a kid, but I had problems because I didn't understand English so I couldn't work with teams and this kind of thing because of the racism that was involved. It was hard for me to relate to other kids that had this kind of background. The kinds of things that they saw on television did not mean that much to me. I was used to going to the theater and the Mexican theater and these kids hated the Mexican theater. They could not identify with Mexican theater. I was used to going to go see “Resortes” (famous Mexican actor) and “Cantiflas” (famous Mexican comedic actor) and Pedro Infantes (famous Mexican actor and singer), “El Charro Avitia” (famous Mexican singer); all of them people. These guys, they were completely ignorant about

the world of “El Charro Abvitia” and “El Loco Valdez” (famous Mexican comedic actor) and all those new guys from the 1950s, comedians, you know? And like Maria Victoria (famous Mexican actress and singer) and these guys all they could talk about was people like Fats Domino, a real fat guy that would play on a piano and everybody liked that sort of thing. To me, I mean it was stupid, you know? They liked this thing about the low rider cars and I thought that these people were living at Disneyland. Anybody that could do those kinds of things they didn’t know were life is at because life for me was at survival. I was taught and trained to survive. I was like perhaps those soldiers that come from Vietnam from the front of survival. Where there was a guy that lived in my neighborhood he used to pick little pieces of rags so he could sew them a make himself a coat. Those are the kinds of stories that I can tell you. I could tell you about the dogs that all of us kids would take to another neighborhoods and then there would be a dogfight. And how we made our own tools to fight against each other. We called them *resolteras*, slingshots, and then we used to fight across the river because there was a river there. Their group would be on one side of the river and our group would be on the other side of the river. We used to try and recreate old Indian battles, and I don’t mean cowboys and Indians from Hollywood; I mean Indian battles of the Mayas and Aztecs. Those were the things that were going through my mind. And our dogs weren’t named like Puff and what are those other names that they name their dogs? Like Spot and Black and all that. You know, our dogs had different names like *Oso* (Bear) and *Dientes* (Teeth) and *Solo Vino* (he came alone) and things like that, you know? And it was a totally different world that I came into. If somebody were to move a child over to Russia and leave them there alone, that’s my experience in the United States. In the United States there were fences everywhere. Everything is fenced around here and everything’s got concrete. I used to live in the dirt and everything was an open country; there’re no fences, people didn’t have any money to fence things unless they were walled up with adobe or things like that.

DENISE LUGO: Talk about when you came here? Your education?

RAMSES NORIEGA: They put me in the wrong grades when I came here. Even the classes that I took in college were barely beginning to touch what I took in Mexico in math when I was in 3rd grade. So it was extremely boring. And in terms of reading I knew how to read in the second grade and they put me here. In the 8th grade people in high school people still didn’t know how to read. So it was a waste of time to go through education. In high school there was a teacher I had in junior year she says, “You are so brilliant and so intelligent; how could you stand being around all these kids?” She realized something because she asked me some questions and the way I answered the questions she realized that I was—

DENISE LUGO: Your art.

RAMSES NORIEGA: That I was light-years ahead of people’s method of thinking.

DENISE LUGO: In high school?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I could relate to Shakespeare. I could relate to things like writers from the Greek philosophers. When I was 12-13 years old I was reading things of the French philosophers. Those things meant something to me because life meant something to me. I wasn't a kid; I was never a kid. I was never a kid. I don't think I went through a childhood.

DENISE LUGO: In your high school, you said that you had a teacher named Bob Pierce; he was very instrumental and artistic.

RAMSES NORIEGA: I did my art on my own. See what happened is that the teacher started to notice I was doing art. I used to like to go out every Saturday and Sunday [...] in the desert or to the neighborhood and I used to like to do a lot of landscape and [...] buildings. Through the buildings I could tell the story about life [and] through landscape about life living in that landscape. Also, I like doing a lot of still life. What the teacher started to do was give me books on art and the book that they chose to give me was French impressionism. Through French impressionism it had a lot of the things I had in my paintings so I started learning from those books. There was an artist named Ted Koskie that had a big influence on me because the way he used watercolor and I did not like the way he used watercolor eventually because it was transparent and I liked old paint.

DENISE LUGO: Pigments?

RAMSES NORIEGA: When I was a senior in high school Bob Pierce organized in Coachella in the women's-. What did they call that? The Women's Club Hall. Organized an ... civic for me so we put some table and put some art pieces there. It was a great miracle out of 50 pieces we put out for sale, I think about 42-43 sold out. So we made over a thousand dollars in one day in a Saturday. It was such a big miracle that it hit the front pages. The reason why I say its a miracle is that I been praying for a year or maybe a little bit less then a year. I've been praying every day that God would guide me and so forth. So that's why I believe that there is a God because, see nobody planned this. I prayed for it and it happened. [...] I had the money there but I never applied to UCLA, that's where I went to school.

DENISE LUGO: That's in 1963 right?

RAMSES NORIEGA: That's in 1963. This had happened. The reporter that used to write for the Riverside Enterprise Newspaper had just moved from New York, gotten a job, had retired kind of thing [and] had gotten a job in San Diego with the Riverside Enterprise Newspaper. He saw my work and he felt that my work was excellent so [...] he ordered some papers from UCLA application papers so that I could apply to be a student there. He filled them out for me and sent them and I just put my signature. Then they told me I had to take an exam. So I took English [and math] exams so they could place me. [...] I did go through English and math and I got very good grades. I think I finished with a 3.75 average at UCLA among the graduates or something like that. This is how I got into UCLA. When I went to UCLA I though, the dorms are there

for students to get a dorm. I didn't know they rented them. So I went there and I told them I wanted a room. I remember there was a whole bunch of people and my English was pretty bad. I could write it and I could read it, but I couldn't talk very well. They explained to me and I didn't know what to do and there was this guy that said, "Hey my roommate is gone for two weeks so why don't you stay in my room?" So this is how I spent my first two weeks at UCLA. [...] I began to meet people and make friends until the big explosion of the late sixties you know around 1967, 1968, 1969; where there was a student revolution, intellectual revolution that revolutionized the whole campus there.

DENISE LUGO: Talk a little bit about that. How [...] was it at UCLA at that time?

RAMSES NORIEGA: What happened is one if the students named Montezuma Esparza who now owns "Galavisión" (Mexican television station) here in Los Angeles. He had been talking about how he had gone to a meeting and how some Chicanos had been talking about starting a organization. So we went ahead and got together and started an organization at that time and that was called UMAS, United Mexican American students. This was UMAS because the blacks used to call themselves I think United African American Students or something like that. Then afterwards they changed their name. We changed our name to M.E.Ch.A. (Stands for *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlan* - Chicana/o Student Movement of Aztlan)... No, no, no, no, no.

DENISE LUGO: M.E.Ch.A?

RAMSES NORIEGA: They changed their name to M.E.Ch.A and in those days I had been involved also prior to the movement here in UCLA. I had been involved in starting several organizations in the Coachella Valley. I was beginning to work with educational awareness and art awareness. [...] We had a strong group. A generation that has produced strong doctors, lawyers, business men from that group and writers and professors some great men have came out of that generation at UCLA. What I like to call the 1968-generation. We had people in films and what have you [...] from there.

DENISE LUGO: Who are the professors? Do you remember the professors there in the arts?

RAMSES NORIEGA: None of us. None of the Chicanos were professors. We were students.

DENISE LUGO: No, no, no. I'm talking about the—

RAMSES NORIEGA: Now of course we are all professors.

DENISE LUGO: The art professors.

RAMSES NORIEGA: But in those days the professors that were there never cared. I was there for 4 years and they never cared for what I was doing. There was people like Sam Amaro. Ray Brown was the only one who cared because at that time he was married to a

Mexican Chicana from Texas and he could identify how I felt because he could see how I felt.

DENISE LUGO: Who were the other artists?

RAMSES NORIEGA: He was the one that was supporting. I was the only Chicano artist at UCLA. When I came there, there was another Chicano artist that had just graduated; his name was Eduardo Carrillo. Ed Carrillo and also another one had graduated with the name of Roberto Chavez. When the Chicano movement [and] the art movement started [...] around 1970, 1969, 1970, that's when I knew Roberto Chavez and Ed Carrillo. [We] became very good friends. It was I who introduced him to the Chicano art movement and the Chicano movement in general. He had a very kind of rough introduction. He didn't believe me what was going on in our community. So he decided to go and find out and he went to the police station in East LA and he asked them if it was true the things that these things were happening and they told him.

DENISE LUGO: Where was he at?

RAMSES NORIEGA: At this time [he] was living in Venice, California. He had just come into the United States from La Paz on a fellowship that he got from some people up in New York, one of those famous fellowships people. Anyways he came back to the United States and he was living in Venice. Like most people he thought I was just exaggerating. He went to the police station in East LA and they told him none of this stuff was happening and that they were good policemen and everything was American and everything was on the level and apple pie and baseball and so forth and that was that. When he left the police station going to his car about half a block from the police stations; two policemen came by and beat him up and roughed him up so bad. That was his sad introduction into the Chicano.

DENISE LUGO: Movement.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Into the Chicano Movement. Ever since then, he became a leader in several areas. He organized the second Chicano statewide exhibition in the history of California, its called "Califas" (nickname for the state of California used by the Hispanic community, especially southern California). [He] organized [this in] 1980. In 1975, I organized the first exhibition, statewide exhibition in California of Chicano art, which was called "Califas", which was "Califas" One. So there was only two "Califas" that has ever been in the history. Anyway, that was a far as what was happening. Many of the guys that were in our generation in 1968 were involved in many things. We were involved in the whole political movement of the people that were running in East LA at that time. We were involved in the educational walkouts in East LA. We were involved in the high potential programming in UCLA. We were involved in a lot of programs that brought Chicanos to UCLA. We were involved in a lot of meetings with a lot of Chicanos from northern California. I remember we used to travel to San Jose and we traveled throughout the southwest organizing Chicano students. It was a time of awareness of our people. It was a time of establishing roots of no root, but establishing a system.

DENISE LUGO: Talk about your mural?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well, when I was leaving UCLA, after I had got my MA they invited me from the Chicanos studies department the cultural studies departments to paint a mural. Then from that mural I chose three artists to help me out.

DENISE LUGO: Who were the artists?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well there was Eduardo Carrillo, [...] Sergio Hernandez and Saul Solache. We decided to divide the mural.

DENISE LUGO: Mexicanos?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Yes. We decided to divide the mural in four parts Eduardo Carrillo with his style would be very adequate if he would do the part that dealt with the—

DENISE LUGO: What was the theme?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Pre-European period.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, let's talk about that.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Four periods of Latinos in this continent.

DENISE LUGO: What is it called?

RAMSES NORIEGA: The History of *La Raza* (Chicanos).

DENISE LUGO: Where in what Building?

RAMSES NORIEGA: It is um—

DENISE LUGO: It still exists, right?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Yes. [...] This is the best-kept secret at UCLA. It is over at the cultural studies department on the 3rd floor of the— I can't remember the name of the building its so long ago.

DENISE LUGO: Campbell Hall?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Yes, Campbell Hall. It deals with three phases. It deals with the period before the Europeans came to this continent. Which is kind of ideal.

DENISE LUGO: Historical—

RAMSES NORIEGA: Historical mural. Then the other part that's on the extreme left [and] on the extreme right it deals with the Spanish period or how the Spanish period castrated the colonization. Castrated the spirit of the *indios* (Indians/natives). So there appears Saul Solache's central image, a man who has the head of a skull, in other words death and then has his genitals torn out completely castrated to show that not Latinos are castrated. That the spirit of our people have been had been castrated, [...] had been ripped out the soul of our people [...] by the Spanish; they went after our spirit. Then there was [...] the colonization [period] until the revolution by Sergio Hernandez. That one covered two gigantic farm workers with weapons and guns and knives and also with their fields where they do the farm working areas and there's a dead Zapata on the ground. The last part was the Chicano movement [...]. I was extremely active in the Chicano movement. I had been working with Cesar Chavez.

DENISE LUGO: Ok.

RAMSES NORIEGA: I had been working with Cesar Chavez. [...]

DENISE LUGO: How; in what sense? Did you produce any artwork?

RAMSES NORIEGA: No, my position on artwork was that the kind of art that I was doing I was doing the art the soul of the people. I wasn't doing the politics. I wasn't doing the big boss and the little farm worker. How do you call it? Orozco. I felt that was too illustrative. It was too illustrative; it was too dedicative to low level. So what I went is more on an abstract principle of man kind battlement.

[End of Interview]

Part 2 of 2

Sound Cassette Duration – 24 minutes

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

DENISE LUGO: Second attempt on having this thing work. Ok let's start, Ramses. Where are we going to go from here?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Ok, well let's start at the beginning. You were asking some questions regarding the high school.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, let's talk about your high school and then your influences in college.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Ok, just to be very brief and just to cover the main points. I went through the Coachella Valley High School in Thermal, California. I went there 4 years from 1959-1963. My art teacher was Robert Pierce there. He's an elderly man right now. He's approximately, I don't know, close to 70 years old. Most of my studies that were

really done were by myself. It wasn't until my fourth year that Robert Pierce and I really began to work together. Perhaps in those years the artist that influenced me the most was a European water colorist that had published a book. His name was Ted Koskie. I used to go outdoors all the time in Coachella Valley. I would go to the mountains. I would go to the desert. They would let me out of class. I was the only student that they would let out of class. I would walk out of art class and I would go wherever I wanted and set up my easel, whatever I was doing to do my artwork. Most of my techniques in those days were watercolor. I did pencil sketches and then I filled them in with watercolor. I tried to select something very special about nature. For example, I would see a house or I would paint a flower or a tree or a landscape, this sort of thing, and I would try to pick something that was very unique about that particular view. I would put it down on my artwork and that was my work. It was observation of life working from nature. I used to look at a lot of books of the particular the impressionist period. In those days my concepts were of somebody of 18 years old still young green type of person. So my work was mostly a study of form, color, line, texture and doing at the type of content where nothing is required in terms of your beliefs, who you are, what you are and so forth. So during those periods the Mexican artists did not influence me. I felt pretty negative. Not very negative, but I did not like their work very much, like Siqueiros, Orozco, Rivera; seemed to me very heavy in term of esthetics. They seem to weigh a lot in terms of what was happening with their concept of revolutions, their concepts of society, their concepts in general. They were what I would call "adult concepts" and even though I was 18 I still had the mind of a kid. Those things didn't really meant that very much to me. So what meant a lot to me was nature. Working from nature. So my work reflected that. In those days I worked for my senior year in high school for about 6 months to put a show together that we had in the women's club at Coachella. I sold about \$1,250, which was what paid my first year at UCLA. During my four years in high school I got many awards [...]. Anyway, they had a county fair there in high school contest that kind of a thing and again I was not interested that much in content. I did not like to do Indians because they were boring to me. Everyone around me, I did not know any Indians that dressed up like Indians. Like I see some *indios* (Indians). The only Indians that I knew were the one that came in the *calendarios* (calendars) of the ancient Aztecs or Mayans and so forth. Surely enough there weren't any of them running around in the *barrios* (Chicano neighborhoods), you know? Then I didn't do low riders or *pachucos* (Mexican decent gang in L.A.) or any of that sort of thing because I wasn't into that kind of thing. I was into my studies. I used to be a—

DENISE LUGO: Diligent student.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Yes, [...]. I really liked studying. I thought that the mind was a tool that had to be [...] developed and I really worked very hard. I was very aware of trying to get out of a very oppressive environment I have lived in; what you call the squalor type of poverty in Mexicali. Then I moved to the Coachella Valley and lived with my parents. My father was always ill; he finally died of his illness. He would go in and out of mental hospitals and my mother used to work all the time at the *empaques*, packing food places. And we were kind of left alone to grow up and that was the kind of background that I had. I pretty much knew that that wasn't the kind of thing that was for me. I also

started to teach my brothers and my sisters that were younger from me, I would take them out and show them the farm workers how tired they were and how poor they were and I told them if that's what they wanted to do to be when they grow up and they said "no". I told them they have to study in school. So myself in those days started telling people they have to study in school to order to get out of that. The odds were very much against us coming from that sort of poverty. Education was the only hope that there was for us. This is how I ended up at UCLA.

DENISE LUGO: Who was motivating you in high school towards going to college?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Nobody was motivating me in high school towards going to college. As a matter of fact, one teacher came up to me and said, "You will never make it in college. If you go to college within 3 months I predict that you'll be back here." I did go back 6 months later; I had gotten five "A's" and one "B" at UCLA my first semester. I told him never to tell anybody that again. Some of the other teachers felt very strongly that I was intelligent and so forth but they did not encourage me [and] did not help me fill out papers. I did not know anything; [...] counselors did not help me. As a matter of fact, I got advised that I would be a farm worker for the rest of my life. [...] Everyone in the Coachella Valley was told that they didn't need education in high school; that they would eventually [...] be farm workers and it was part of the process and that's how life was. But for me, I was one of the very first persons. I went back to the Coachella Valley after my fourth year at UCLA and I organized the high school students in a walkout there. I also worked there.

DENISE LUGO: Why?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Because of the oppression that was going on in the high school. We wanted education to be relevant and we wanted Chicanos to go to college and they weren't making this available. So we put pressure on people. I confronted the board of education. I was in jail. I remember [...] many times I was in jail because I was very outspoken. In the Coachella Valley [...] one day I just came out of my house [and] they arrested me there. [...] For example, one day when Senator Tunning was speaking there, I started a clap-down where we made so much noise that he couldn't speak and I was thrown into jail for that. They called it "disturbing the peace". Anyway eventually I was not guilty and they let me go free. I was involved in many other things. For example, there was a store there, ultra right wing store, that was putting out information that Cesar Chavez and all the people that were with him were communists. In those days Cesar Chavez was- If you were a *chavista* (people who support Cesar Chavez ideals) people hated you. In those days there was no such thing as—

DENISE LUGO: What year was this?

RAMSES NORIEGA: This was in 1968. [...] At one point I got one of the books from the bookstore and started to burn it out in public in the street; well sure enough the police was there pretty fast and the people were there seeing. A lot of those people the *campesinos* (Hispanic field laborers) didn't have the mental will or the- They were gutsy

people, they had more guts than I did, but they could not see through the system- the political system. I could, so I started burning the thing and everybody was very happy about it; and that gave them the strength to go out there and go and strike and organize and so forth. [I was also] involved in an organization called Mexican American Scholarships around 1967.

DENISE LUGO: Where?

RAMSES NORIEGA: In the Coachella Valley in the city of Indio. Right now that organization has as many as 2,000 people there that meet once a year and they raise 10 of thousands of dollars for scholarships. I remember when there was four or five of us who were the members of the organization; that's all the members that there were. I remember the days that we were persecuted and I was involved at one time. [...] I was in charge of the Kennedy for President campaign in the Coachella valley. I had the headquarters in Coachella. I had many people working under me [doing] what they call "manning the phones"; making phone calls, leaflets, and so forth. [...] That was after I been to UCLA for about four-five years there. Then here UCLA I went through my school but I also started, with another fellow, we started what was called the Chicano Moratorium Movement. It was an anti-war movement exposing the over killing of Chicanos in Vietnam.

DENISE LUGO: What year is that?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I think that was 1969. We held our first moratorium rally here in East LA in 1969.

DENISE LUGO: Let's go back to UCLA.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Okay.

DENISE LUGO: The beginning of UCLA.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Okay.

DENISE LUGO: You went to UCLA in what year?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I went from 1963 to 1970.

DENISE LUGO: When you went there, how many, there was a lot of Chicanos there?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well there were very, very few. Somebody says that there were around 30 Chicanos in 1963 when I went there.

DENISE LUGO: Okay.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Because of the Spanish surnames out of 30,000-student population in those days.

DENISE LUGO: When you went there- let's talk about your artwork. [...] Your teachers there and the influences there; let's talk about that.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well when I went into to university one of the things that the teachers did right now is destroy everything that I have learned. They couldn't care less about what I knew. They told me to forget everything that I had learned that I was really going to learn art there. So I was used to going out there working for nature and I was getting very interested in books. I always, I always really love to just look at books of art paintings. I would go for four-five hours until my head was blowing. [...] I was going mad looking at books of art through photographs and learning from them. That was perhaps my greatest source and my greatest need was met by the UCLA art library; not through the instructors. When I went into the class, the classes were pretty dull and dead. They used to put up still lives. They were pretty ugly; it was very unhealthy, everybody was using oil paints there. [...] It was a very depressing attitude. Everybody was dressed very filthy and dirty and the teachers were never took care of themselves physically; they were unshaven [and] looked very depressing. When they talked, they talked like they were mad. They talked like they were angry; there were sarcastic. [...] Many times it was hard for me to understand what they were saying. There were a lot of students there that were overly well dressed. It was very difficult- Forget about the art; for me to cope socially was a nightmare to be UCLA. [...] The first person that that took a liking to me was [...] Jone Diangelo. [...] The first year that I was there she saw some of my drawings.

DENISE LUGO: Who was she?

RAMSES NORIEGA: She was a sculptor.

DENISE LUGO: Teacher, right?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Sculptor, yes she was a TA. She says, "You know what Ramses? All of these teachers are afraid of you because they see that you have real life and they see that they're art is dead. And they see that your art is so powerful and unique. [...] That your make them ashamed. That's how come they don't want to deal with you." And she says, "but your art is better than anything that anybody is producing and your art is powerful." I was doing some large [...] 3-by-4 charcoal painting of self-portraits that were so powerful, they scared people. They were surreal and impressive. Just like the stuff I'm doing right now, but it even more powerful back then. With good instructors, I think I could have been in some of the top world galleries in 1964, [...] but because of bad instruction and all the games and politics that are played at universities those things happen. So I've always said you know it's was a very sad experience what happened to me at UCLA.

DENISE LUGO: Who were your teachers that you could recall? Did you have Hassel Smith?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I had some good teachers like Hassel Smith. He was a redhead man in his late 50s or mid 50s [...] when I had him in 1964 [...] or 1963. He let me do my work very much. He never made any comments. One day it was a very special thing that happened to me he. I did not know this, but he sat in the back of the room and he watched me for hour and a half paint straight. He told me this afterwards. He came up to me after I did the painting and he says, "You made every right move on that canvas," and he said it was a pleasure seeing me and he never seen anything like that and he said it was a great thing. That was Hassel Smith. I have always had this kind of complements. I also had a run-in with William Brice but he had to do with temperament than art because [...] he's a very quiet reserved man. He's very brilliant intelligent but, you know. Him being the son of Fanny Brice and having that kind of background and people kind of looking up to him [compared to] myself coming from the kind of poverty the farm worker position; meeting with him trying to treat me like I was a normal student it just didn't fit me. So what happen was that I had to raise my voice and we had a very strong disagreement there. That was right out the bat 1963, I think. I never had anything to do with him or took his classes. But now that I have a few years that I've lived myself, you know, I know that the man was a good man. He was a questioning man and it was just temperament and the kind of backgrounds; were we were too different. We're too different so that we could understand each other. He's a great man. [...] Another teacher that I had was Ray Brown. Ray Brown really helped me a lot. He was married to a *mexicana* (Mexican) from Texas, I believe. It was easy for him to see where I was coming from and relate. So he started helping me. He became the chairman of my committee that gave me my master's degree UCLA. He started [...] taking my side explaining so forth. So he was extremely influential in assisting me. The teachers hardly taught anything; they just told the students, they give them problems, they let them work and whatever work there was. Once and a while, they come and say very little, almost nothing.

DENISE LUGO: How about Garabedian? You also ran into him?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Garabedian. I had a run in with him. I had him as a teacher and he's my friend. [...] I saw him about 2 years ago or so. Right now I understand he's in New York. I saw him here in—

DENISE LUGO: He's living in New Mexico.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Pico Boulevard. He's in New Mexico now? Okay well, Garibidian I had him in the class. He had these boring still lives. They always brought these women and they told the women to take off their clothes there and then we started doing artwork. That was very shocking to me because I came from a provincial town and here they are you go into one classroom and [...] this lady starts undressing. [...] For most students it was more natural than for me. So finally what I started doing is that I started satirizing the whole situation of [...] naked women in a room. [...] They treated them like

they were furniture. They said, "Well you put your leg up here, just stretch over here. Will you do this and do that?" I started looking at the students and everybody and I started satirizing the whole hypocrisy [...] of the thing. To me I still have some drawings of that. They're very funny; strong satire of that. Anyways, we were doing a critique one time, Garidian was looking at my painting and he was saying wow that this and that the other you know kind didn't appreciate it too much and I says, "You are not really looking at my painting. From what you're saying, I can see that you haven't seen my painting. I don't know what you have in your mind," and I came up very strong. He says, "What do you mean?" I says, "First of all you're like 15-20 feet from the painting and that painting was painted from one and half foot. So the visual perspective that your getting is not what is there," So he says, "What do you mean?" I says, "Well go out there and look at it closer so that you can see the painting what's it about." And he did go up there and looked at it closely and [...] he says, "By God, you're right!" And he got the whole class there and they looked at the painting. He saw that the painting was actually very exquisite painting. It was done in a very low tonality. From far away did not work that well but from close up it was truly very painting. And after that he pretty much left to myself to work. I had another instructor that I rather not mention. He had very strong conflict in his own art and who he was as a person. So one day I had invited him to go the restroom and have it out with me. We nearly had it "fistkly" in the room. It was that kind of a thing. The other instructors, they were too much into themselves. I would rather not mention names. They were not teachers really. It was a very weird situation at UCLA. I wanted to do just get out of there.

DENISE LUGO: Did you go to all of their art exhibitions? Did you go to ... gallery there at the time?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Yes, I went to all the exhibitions; the major exhibitions. One of the most important exhibitions that influenced me was one around 1967 or 1968. Around those years; that was by King Cole.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, Edward King Cole.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Edward King Cole. Another exhibition that influenced me very much was around maybe 1964-1965. [It] was the pre-Colombian exhibition. They had an extremely large pre-Colombian exhibition that the museum of art there in San Diego county. [...] I went to Las Cienega (refers to one of the galleries or museums located on La Cienega Blvd, Los Angeles) once in a while looked at the gallery. I felt the environment was very cold.

DENISE LUGO: Why?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I felt the galleries were very separated from life and art so forth. Well they were involving sales, you know. I felt that there was no romanticism in the gallery. The sales people, there was no life, they were dead; then in those days it was even worse, the life was just- it was so dead. La Cienega you could read the newspapers and you could read the art magazines and they said incredible art is being done from the

1960s and I saw that the new art work being done by all these guys from the 1960s and I says, "What a bunch of junk!" This thing is so flat and so dead; it was just this white canvas with two stripes or this long canvas with two or three stripes with a little faded color. I would see these textures on very flat canvases and [...] this is an insult to my understanding of life and experiences and so forth. These guys were doing intellectual high quality design in art. Of course in those days they would go into fantastic explanations of what they were doing. I still hold that Warhol (Andy Warhol, American painter) doesn't know how to paint; none of these guys know how to paint. They're part of the height of the media. They're the new academia of art times. I predict that they are going to be very dead and boring. They're very dead and boring. They have always been. They have nothing to offer. About the only ones that had anything to offer were the New York action painters. I felt that they did put some guts into their work but this other guys; they were intellectuals confused that wanted to make it into the art world. They were all like the rest of contemporary Americans society, they wanted to be part of the whole---

DENISE LUGO: [...]

RAMSES NORIEGA: To do some without paying the dues.

DENISE LUGO: A lot of people would say that much of the work is being done by Chicano culture, I think in a sense dealing with is that a lot of the Latino art has a lot of content [...] It's interesting in a formal aspect of it, but very much involved in content. [...] A lot of the work that you are describing is very "connectic" art [...] and at the same time it is surface art. Very much geared formalistic perspective.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Yeah, there was a lot of "gringo loco" (crazy white man) art. It was still "gringo loco" art that's coming out of New York and Europe. You know a lot of this stuff is trying to cite themselves up to find new forms. This is inherited from the Greek concept. They are always trying to find the new thing. That's not as important as finding the true understanding of one's understanding of the world.

DENISE LUGO: And you think that art has to have [...] a social perspective [and] content instead of just worried about formalistic?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I couldn't make a comment for anybody else. [...] Even those comments that I am saying is my opinion; I know that half of the world probably is against it, but I have to make my own decisions of what I do and what I think.

DENISE LUGO: Mm-huh.

RAMSES NORIEGA: So, um, let me see. I lost your question.

DENISE LUGO: No, what I'm just saying is it seems like, I would say anyway 98% of all Chicano art that was produced during the last 20 years, have been dealing with basically with social matters, social-economic problems that are going on in the barrio; which are

either home life and are projected onto a canvas or wall. [Compared to] the Anglo counterparts here in LA, [that have a] whole different perspective on life and also dealing with formalistic analysis of the work. In other words, the formal elements were more important than the actual context.

RAMSES NORIEGA: I couldn't add anything to it. I agree with you 100%.

DENISE LUGO: Okay going on to UCLA [...] let's talk about your mural. You [...] did a mural in UCLA. How did that come about?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well that came about through a period where the Chicano movement was very high.

DENISE LUGO: What year?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I think it was 1969 or 1970, around there. And [...] the Chicano studies department there invited me to paint a mural and so I invited three artists at that time; Ed Carrillo, Saul Solache and Sergio Hernandez. We did the studies for the mural. The way that we did it; Saul Solache had an idea of dividing the mural into four panels that were all conversion in the center.

DENISE LUGO: Wait a second, where is the mural located at?

RAMSES NORIEGA: It's at Campbell Hall of the third floor. It is what it used to be the Chicano library. [...] I think it's a conference room now. And this mural was to depict four eras of the *raza* (the Hispanic people) history in the United States. Ed Carrillo on the left was wanted to do before the Europeans came into America.

DENISE LUGO: Mm-huh.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Then Solache, on the right panel, was going to do Spanish colonial period; and then Sergio Hernandez was going to do the Mexican revolutionary period; and then they let me do the Chicano period.

DENISE LUGO: Uh-huh.

RAMSES NORIEGA: During the Chicano period what I did is that I presented injustices at different institutional levels. For example, I exposed the police, the whole immigration; the police and this type of institution. And then, I exposed also the Catholic Church. I expose the Vietnam War by putting a lot of dead Chicanos there. I expose [...] the system of the United States where this blind justice [...] was giving a dollar to a *viejita* (old woman) that her son had died in Vietnam, this was the payment. [...] I put in the background a whole bunch of Chicanos demonstrating with a sign that say "*juntos venceremos, viva la raza, viva la causa*" (united we will overcome, long live the people, long live the cause) this sort of thing. And I put a huge fort as symbol [...] and on top of the fort I put the Chicano flag. This fort was a symbol of the strength of

our people when [...] we have unity. [...] There was one Chicano there, he's wearing a suit, he has no shoes, and he painted his hair blonde. He's seating a little girl, he has torn off her arm and part of the arm he's eating it. The girl is dying, this sort of thing. I think it's probably the most powerful painting in California. Some of my friends like Salvador Torres from LA says, "It's the most powerful mural from that period." From San Diego says that that's the most powerful painting mural from that series. That's before any of the murals [...] East LA took place. You got to think about the timing too; before Chicano art took place in San Diego and this mural was done in a period where [...] many of the Chicano artists today were calling themselves Mexican-American artists and they refused to use—

DENISE LUGO: Talk about a little bit about that.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well there was this guy named Leonard Castellanos was an organizing artist and he did not particularly like me.

DENISE LUGO: Late 1960s?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I think I was late 1960s, around 1970', 1969, 1970.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah because they had Mechicano in 1969', okay.

RAMSES NORIEGA: He was trying to organize with a group that was called TELACU (The East Los Angeles Community Union) with Esteban Torres. They didn't look very "favorly" to me and they didn't like to use the word Chicano because they felt it was very derogatory. And they said that unless we identify ourselves with Mexican-American artists and maybe that has something to do with my good friend Esteban at that period, that was the kind of move.

DENISE LUGO: Okay.

RAMSES NORIEGA: And the so the artist were having—

SECTION CUTS OFF

RAMSES NORIEGA: I think the father of Chicano art in—

DENISE LUGO: Okay explain.

RAMSES NORIEGA: In Los Angeles. He was way before me and he was way before anybody else. Manuel Cruz has been doing Chicano art since the 1940s. He's an old *pachuco* (Mexican gang member) and he's still has the *trajes* (formal suits or clothing) from the 1940s and the 1950s. He did some writing but Manuel Cruz is one of those guys that going to die and he's going to be recognized 15-20 years from now type of personality. But Manuel Cruz to me [has] created something that never existed. As an old *pachuco*, he kept all of those traditions alive and he made a lot of *rolas*, what he calls

them songs. He made a lot of *rolas* about the *barrio* and about our people. so in his music he was already talking about the imagery that even Chicano artists today haven't done it in 1986. They're just beginning to tap of what Manuel Cruz used to talk about in the 1950s, never mind in the 1960s. [...] There's another guy that goes back to that period; his name is Jose Montoya.

DENISE LUGO: Sacramento?

RAMSES NORIEGA: From Sacramento. The kind of imagery that he [...] deals with is the kind of imagery that that [...] Manuel Cruz has always dealt with.

DENISE LUGO: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Manuel Cruz is the one that told me the story about the 1930s about the *tirili* (Hispanic gang) was before the *pachuco*. He's the one who told me the whole story about the *pachuco* in the 1940s, the *vato loco* (Hispanic gang) in the 1950s then the Chicano in the 1960s and now in the 1980s and 1970s we've seen the *cholo* (Hispanic gang) a new group of people coming in. Now what I am telling you is very complex.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah.

RAMSES NORIEGA: I'm just skimming through the very top because we can talk any one of those issues. So in seeing these things I intellectualized more of this of what he told me and I started dividing Chicano art in many areas.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah.

RAMSES NORIEGA: For example, I divide Chicano art into *cholo* art, "pinto" art; "pinto" art *de adrentro* (from within) [and] "pinto" art *de afuera* (from outside). I divide Chicano art into Chicano graffiti; Chicano graffiti of the streets and Chicano art of the restrooms, which is very different. They have two different messages. I divide Chicano art into another area that deals with tattooing because tattooing is a form of art in its self. And then, there's Chicano art that is what I call *tijuanero* and that is kind of the Indians. *Tijuanero* is the sister or brother of Hollywood. See Hollywood and Tijuana are married; they been married all the time. The art of *tijuanero* they always to this *indio* (indian), this *cholo*, this *pachuco*—

DENISE LUGO: The glorification of—

RAMSES NORIEGA: The glorification of all this kind of thing that sells. They want to make money, you know. That's the thing about them. And they have all these low riders and they're selling all this stuff.

DENISE LUGO: What do you think of the “Lowrider” magazine? What kind of art would you see there?

RAMSES NORIEGA: I think a lot of that stuff deals with pornography. I think it lacks intellectual depth.

DENISE LUGO: We're talking about the formal.

RAMSES NORIEGA: I think it keeps some of the traditions of [...] some of the lesser important traditions in [...] our communities.

DENISE LUGO: Mmm-huh.

RAMSES NORIEGA: So I feel that it is something [that] gives identity to the young people, but I don't think it gives them hope or direction. The Chicano movement did give them hope and direction. I think that it is the fall of the Chicano movement; it was one of the first things that I noticed that commercialization of Chicano movement and the exploitation of our people.

DENISE LUGO: Mmm-huh.

RAMSES NORIEGA: It's just another form of exploitation.

DENISE LUGO: How do you see the art from the, let's say, the early 1960s to the late 1960s, how did it differ?

RAMSES NORIEGA: From the early 1960s to late 1960s?

DENISE LUGO: Yeah were talking about work.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Okay in the early 1960s there was no Chicano art per say. There were a lot of artists that were working on the traditions. They were doing—

DENISE LUGO: Very Mexican.

RAMSES NORIEGA: --personal art, forgive me, they were doing very personal arts. Some of them were influenced by many areas. For example, the Montoyas especially Jose Montoya and Manuel Cruz and other Chicano artists [...] from the Imperial Valley, myself and there was Palomino; we were doing personal art influenced from different parts of the world.

DENISE LUGO: Mmm-huh.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Okay. But we were not giving up our personalities. [...] It was still our vision. I think that this art matured more, everybody's art matured more in the late 1960s. I don't think Chicano art has comes to its height yet. I think the Chicano art [is] just stating stage right now. And I know that through all these that people are trying to make moneys and careers out of Chicano art; they want to make sure like its already

passed [and] that it reaches with the movement. The Chicano movement produced certain forms of art that were political: number one, they were social in nature; number two, they were historical in nature; number three, it presented different artistic perspectives. I don't think that's a combination of Chicano art. Chicano were beginning to see the development of freedom, and forget about identity, a personal freedom of expression of a people that have been oppressed for over 400 years by Europeans; that's what Chicano art. Chicano art keeps the traditions of this continental traditions of America and it also [...] uses outward form as Octavio Paz and some of the other ones, says the inner form is *indio* (indian) and the outer form is European. The Chicano art is beginning to have that. Mexico began to do that in the 1920s, in the beginning of the century, but it aborted. Mexico gave birth to abortion and Mexico cannot continue its route of copying New York and copying Europe; it cannot continue and be able to survive because its tradition is so rich in this continent. This is the great conflict in Mexico City right now, in the whole country of Mexico in the arts. Its again they have [...] taken on another mask, as Octavio Paz says. Even Octavio Paz was taking a mask. I don't think he's true to himself.

DENISE LUGO: I think Mexico most people don't realize it, there a lot of differences between Mexican art and Chicano art. It's too dually different things and people don't seem to realize that [...]—

RAMSES NORIEGA: They don't realize it [and] they don't want to realize it because Chicano art is more Mexican than Mexican art itself.

DENISE LUGO: Yes, very much so [...].

RAMSES NORIEGA: And they are afraid of Chicano art because they are playing the main trend. You see they are wearing the mask of the Europeans and the Americans right now. Chicano art takes off the mask and its very threatening. They want to put Chicano art [...] as backwards or something from the past, [...] but by doing that they put themselves out. [...] They really have a unique problem. God bless them [and] I hope they get out of it. I mean its a nightmare.

DENISE LUGO: [...] Most people would consider you an activist. You pioneer on civil rights movement in the 1960's. You were very pivotal in forming- for instance some of your alliances are with different political people. Talk about a couple of those programs you were involved in.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well, I been involved in starting over 18 [...] grass root organizations the United States. About a half, or more than half of them, are still standing. I was involved in the beginning of UMAS, United Mexican American Students, that later changed its name to MeCha, *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlan* (Chicano Student Movement of Atzlan).

DENISE LUGO: Which most of the universities have a chapter?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Yeah. I was also involved in working with MAPA (Mexican American Political Association), in many areas where we begun that group. I was also involved with working with like I mentioned MAS, Mexican American Scholarships, and many organizations here in East LA; in many little organizations that appeared and disappeared. Congress of Mexican American Unity. I was one of the leaders in the farm workers struggle in the Coachella Valley. I was considered a very pivotal person there in the Coachella Valley. I was also [was a] organizer for Caesar Chavez for a while.

DENISE LUGO: I want to talk about the art. How was the art used, besides posters, for Caesar Chavez. Many of the artists like Carlos Almaraz did posters and streamers and stuff was that—

RAMSES NORIEGA: They did this work when it was all over.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah.

RAMSES NORIEGA: All these artists were doing [...] this thing when it was so over. It was, how do you say, it was popular to do it. When the heat was there, they throw you in jail for making a statement. When you did a mural, they'll kill you in those days when I was working. You talk for Caesar Chavez, [...] they branded you all kinds of things. [...] East LA murals and Chicano painters came after— like Manuel Cruz and I used to say after it becomes popular and that the *gabacho* (white man) wants, then everybody is going to jump in and everybody is going to say they are Chicanos and its exactly what they did [...]. [...] I do not hold the communist political perspective of Chicano art. I think that there's many Chicano artists that hold the communist political perspective. I don't think that's Chicano art. I think that it is communist political art with the window dressing of Chicano art. I think its very dull and it lacks the *espíritu del pueblo* Chicano (spirit of the Chicano people).

DENISE LUGO: What is the diff—

RAMSES NORIEGA: Let me tell you something about Chicano art. Chicano art fundamentally is a religious art and is done from a religious perspective because our people for thousands of years have been religious people. Never mind what kind of different kinds of religions and what they believe, but our people are people who believe in God. They are not atheist people and the communist perspective is an atheist perspective. It goes totally against our culture and our people. Therefore, I feel that this art is not Chicano in spirit but it is a foreign European art. And you can see it in their imagery, which is pretty bad.

DENISE LUGO: For instance?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Well I'm not going to name names.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah but—

RAMSES NORIEGA: So a lot of these guys are my friends.

DENISE LUGO: Okay. Now the reason I am asking you is because gets a little tough to— When you're looking right in the middle of the early 1970s you look at much of the imagery that was being painted at the time. Chicano was very socialist but at the same time, where do you cross the difference between socialist and communism, because they thought it was Chicano art was a way to get a message into way to get context. Ramses, so how do you distinguish the difference?

RAMSES NORIEGA: How do you distinguish the difference? I think the difference, the way that I distinguish is that the artist themselves come out and make the statements about the future of the *raza* (Hispanic people), of communism and so forth. Then once you start looking at their artwork you can see that that's their perspective. That is something that bothers me about Mexican art too you know. A lot of Siqueiros and—

DENISE LUGO: Diego Rivera.

RAMSES NORIEGA: Diego Rivera [paintings] are very boring, is very monotonous and they paint people like robots, which is the perspective of the communists. They have no individualization.

DENISE LUGO: Especially creative aspect that's unusually—

RAMSES NORIEGA: Yeah, creativity is dead. I don't even want to argue that part, I don't even want to get into it. I have no respect what so ever for art that puts forward a political perspective. I don't think that it is art; I think that it is politics. In Chicano art, the way to distinguish it when it deals with politics is that in social perspective is that it is real. [...] The whole perspective is felt. That it isn't just a political perspective. When Chicanos expose the police, it isn't because they have a world system of politics, it's because the police [has] killed somebody or has done some harm here or there. They are exposing it, so it goes beyond politics. That art is primarily art and then its secondarily politics. I'm against art that has politics first and art second. I am for art and then politics. In politics, when [...] you paint a rose that's politics. Anything is politics.

DENISE LUGO: Why is it then Ramses that, let's say someone from mainstream [or] lets say even now, talking contemporary say well if that is so then why don't Chicanos try to understand more of the art aspect, formal qualities that an Anglo does for instance of the trend that is happening now? Why is he so "separatist"?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Okay because Chicano art is not separatist. Main trend is separatist. Chicano art is holistic art. Chicano art, not only includes form, it includes culture, it includes dreams, it includes philosophy, it includes religion, it includes politics and that's how politics enters in. Chicano art isn't politics and main trend. That's how main trends are because they think in terms of black and white. They have a very limited intellectual understanding of life and art to begin with. Okay [...] they ask these questions and they put these positions because they're ignorant. They're ignorant

sometimes of their own making, sometimes because they're racist, because they're intellectually lazy to deal with the problems and they're intellectual cowards in dealing with real problems. Chicano art is a holistic thing. Let's not get caught up with the *política* (politics) okay? Chicano art deals with folk art. I give you like 5 areas, or 6 or 7 areas that Chicano art deals with: [...] *cholo* art, pinto art and then the fine arts is something that came in the 60's when Chicano started going to the universities. For the first time [they] begin to understand the role of art and begin to get very serious and committed themselves to much more serious art. The other people that are Latino artists, which are not trying to pass as Chicano artists, were never Chicano and still are not Chicano artists. [...] What they are: they have taken up the roles of the main trend artists; that's what they have done and you find these guys way back in the 1800s, in the 1700's, in the 1900's, [...] prior to 1950's [and] forget about 1900's. There have been *mexicanos* (Mexicans) who change their name and you see them in the museums. You say, "Well this is a European artist," and you don't find this perspective. I think Chicano art in the future is going to bring some of these individuals. Contemporarily you have a lot of them still working in the European or New York school or—

DENISE LUGO: Are you talking about someone like Manuel Leery?

RAMSES NORIEGA: Yeah.

DENISE LUGO: Who does things [in a] very different scope. Robert Greyham, people even consider him Chicano right now and I—

RAMSES NORIEGA: They are a bunch of phonies. The artists are phonies and the people that are putting them are phonies. [...] It's that they are confused and they like money and they like power and they are going after their own careers. [...] I thank God that I can see it so clear.

[End of Interview]