Oral History interview with Luis Cruz Azaceta

Azaceta, Luis Cruz

New York City, New York

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DENISE LUGO: ...June the 30th, 1989. Interview with Azaceta, New York City. Luis, I wanted to ask about the school. Let's go over your school and your early influences.

LUIS AZACETA: I went to School of Visual Arts (SVA) here in New York City from 1966 to 1969.

DENISE LUGO: Who were your teachers there?

LUIS AZACETA: Well my teachers were Leon Dalop(?) was one of them.

DENISE LUGO: Oh Leon!

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah, but the thing is when I took Leon as my teacher, I was doing geometric abstraction at that time, so I guess I could have learned a great deal with him in terms of a figure and political interests and all that, but I was doing geometric abstraction. Anyway, Frank Groff(?) I think he was a great influence on my work. Robert Mangle was another teacher.

DENISE LUGO: Robert Mangle?

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah. Michael Lowe, one of the pioneers of ...(?) abstraction. Then our history was Mel Baghner(?), that was very young at the time and that was teaching art history. Andoriashi(?) was also the—The School of [Visual] Arts have all these, you know, really...

DENISE LUGO: Wealth.

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah. That's why it's called one of the best schools—Anyway those were the teachers and a few others, but I forget the names.

DENISE LUGO: So you had Robert Mangle and you're talking about geometric abstraction; what's the difference that and total ... work that you saw?

LUIS AZACETA: Well, I was influenced by what was going on in the galleries, in New York at that time; especially Frank Estella and [David] Nolan—geometric abstraction, formalist type of work. So I think I can do that, so what I had to learn was actually how to use the

paint. So when I finished, I became the master of the paint, you know, up to a certain degree. Now prior to going to School of Visual Arts, I was painting on my own for about three years.

DENISE LUGO: What was your work like there?

LUIS AZACETA: Before I went to school?

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

LUIS AZACETA: I was painting with things from memory in a figurative way; like Cuban political prisoners, things based on Cuba.

DENISE LUGO: You take a childhood—

LUIS AZACETA: No childhood. I remember political issues from Cuba. Also I was doing still life and things like that because that was my beginning. Starting doing still life; like apples and pears and things like that. Working and growing along the way. I began to paint in the Adult Center in Queens.

DENISE LUGO: Okay, before you did that.

LUIS AZACETA: Before of what I did, you are talking about?

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, before the Adult Center. The very early beginning. What were your influences at the time beside Cuba and the political situation in Cuba? Were you seeing other artists? Did you know anyone?

LUIS AZACETA: I didn't know any artists. I was in SOS when I didn't know anything about art. I didn't know anything; absolutely nothing about art.

DENISE LUGO: You were self-taught at the time?

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah, absolutely. I think I have always been self-taught.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, obviously. But did you do to any galleries at the time?

LUIS AZACETA: No, I didn't really. What I saw was commercial galleries ... They began to go through museums and all that out on my own.

DENISE LUGO: You started seeing that when you went to school?

LUIS AZACETA: That's before I went to school on my own. In other words, I began to explore different things. I didn't have no friends, so nobody in my family that will—You know what I mean? ...that will help you to a certain degree or make an orientation for you.

DENISE LUGO: What made you keep going at the time even though—?

LUIS AZACETA: I think it was the manner of being in such a big city and the different culture. A lot of identity to a certain degree. I wanted to do something and I didn't know

what. So I began to draw and paint out of that certain need to express myself because I didn't know the language. You see what I mean? ... school ... making drawings and all that. But I never really wanted to be an artist. All oppressive things, economic things were more important. You know like to get a job.

DENISE LUGO: How did you support yourself? You were going to work at the time too.

LUIS AZACETA: I was working full time.

DENISE LUGO: What were your first mediums? The very beginning before you went to school, what were you using to paint?

LUIS AZACETA: I was using oil pastels on paper.

DENISE LUGO: Were they large works?

LUIS AZACETA: You know twenty-two by thirty, eighteen by twenty inches. Like I said, primarily still lives. Then I bought a set of oil paints and the first painting I made was a self-portrait.

DENISE LUGO: Your first drawing!

LUIS AZACETA: Then I began to paint my family members, you know, my grandmother especially.

DENISE LUGO: She was warm and happy, like the work that you were painting?

LUIS AZACETA: She was a great model because she didn't move much. So for me that was very easy to draw her. If I draw my sister or somebody else they always get impatient. ...(?)

DENISE LUGO: Were you striving for likeness at the time?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh sure because I wanted to depict the portrait of somebody and I feel language was important.

DENISE LUGO: Realism?

LUIS AZACETA: Realism, right; that was my main concern. I figured art was realism. So then I went to ...(?) to take drawing from the nude twice a week.

DENISE LUGO: Nude modeling?

LUIS AZACETA: Nude modeling, exactly. Mostly my peers were old people and a few young people, but primarily old folks. So there I met a teacher who told me, "Luis, you have a lot of talent. ... You should go to school," and I said, "What school do you recommend?" He recommended the School of Visual Arts or Pratt [Institute]. So he said, "Look, I will write the letter of recommendation and all that of you need it," which he did. So I went to the School of Visual Arts to start taking portrait [class] at night; that was in 1966.

DENISE LUGO: Oh that was really great!

LUIS AZACETA: But then the following year, I quit the full time work that I was doing and got into full time [student] at the School of Visual Arts.

DENISE LUGO: At the Adult Center what kind of work were you doing there?

LUIS AZACETA: I was just doing action poses and trying to copy the model to the best of my ability.

DENISE LUGO: Anatomy studies?

LUIS AZACETA: Not doing anatomy studies, they didn't teach that. Most primarily they put a model there and the teacher would say, "Okay, every five minutes you will change." They didn't teach much really. But for me it was great because I had somebody that I could make drawings from, instead of my family for that matter. So it was more impersonal and mostly nude.

DENISE LUGO: How long were you there?

LUIS AZACETA: For about three years.

DENISE LUGO: So what years were [those]?

LUIS AZACETA: That was 1965, 1966; about a year and a half.

DENISE LUGO: And that was?

LUIS AZACETA: In Queens.

DENISE LUGO: It looks like you were going back into your early foundations of your work. I am talking about influences [like] your teachers.

LUIS AZACETA: Well Frank Roph was the one that influenced me most. He was a real abstract painter.

DENISE LUGO: How do you spell his name?

LUIS AZACETA: R-o-p-h, Frank Roph.

DENISE LUGO: You think he is surrealist?

LUIS AZACETA: He was surreal-abstract to me. What I learned with him was how use big brushes, how to mix colors without being afraid of the color, and the way of applying paint on a canvass.

DENISE LUGO: Application?

LUIS AZACETA: Application, yes. As a matter in fact, we used to work ...homework and I didn't mind that, in the contrary I loved that because to me it was a way of seeing how another artist with experience who manipulates paint. So that was great, it was he was showing me how to do things. Which many other students didn't allow that. Others didn't

like that and the teacher would come ...(?) to me I wanted to learn. I knew that was one way of learning quicker. I actually learned a great deal with him. I think he used to influence me to go into geometric abstraction.

DENISE LUGO: Really?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah. Then of course of what I was seeing in galleries [like] Larry Socks, Frank Estella, Nolan, the few artists from Washington, you know. All these kind of American artists were influencing my work. When I graduated in 1969, I got a certificate that would get ...(?) for a BA ...(?) The formal BA began in 1970 but I didn't feel like going back to school. I got married and a trip to Europe, gave me time and a way of seeing other cultures and museums, like the Louvre, the Prado. In Poland, I forgot the name of the museum. The ____(?) in London. I didn't find any geometric abstraction in any of those counties. So it made me think that what kind of a painter I wanted to be. I was very emotionally influenced by glorious grand paintings at the Prado and those generally were done by Bosch. His narrative I find—it was the life of his paintings. Velazquez of course, the way he manipulated paints. So I realized that geometric abstraction was personal and it was something that everybody was doing in New York. At that time I wanted to say many different things. Like experiences from my life and things that were affecting me, directly and indirectly around me; my environment in other words. So I realized I wanted to be an artists that will talk about these social conditions. Not talk about paint but about social conditions. So I began to paint automobile accidents. I heard in the news that more people in this country were dying in automobile accidents than the Vietnam War and that said something to me. I said in order work against the stripes and ...(?) I got to go opposite; maybe pastel to a certain degree. So I began to paint ... impressionistic.

DENISE LUGO: So you reversed the coloring?

LUIS AZACETA: No, the coloring was always very bright; kind of loud. Like what I was doing with the geometric abstraction, using the spectrum primarily. Like using primary colors with secondary colors and then heavy black outline around figures and shapes. So I did about twenty paintings based on the automobile accidents.

DENISE LUGO: Let's start the beginning of your list. The Cuban prisoner thing, when does that start?

LUIS AZACETA: I started painting on my own around the late 1963. In 1964, I began to use oils and then that's when I began to paint political prisoners; things that dealt with Cuba. Very nostalgic, I believe. And they figured some kind of isolation setting.

DENISE LUGO: You have mention of some thing that you saw that made a real impression on you when you were in Cuba. I want to write this because I think it is real important. You said that there was an accident in front of you?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me about that.

LUIS AZACETA: I was eight years old or something like that, I can't remember exactly, but I know I was very young. A garbage truck ran over this messenger kid that ride bicycles. So the whole truck went over his head. So when I was taken there with a few other kids ... that happened like a block away from where we live. What I saw was a pool of blood, with pieces of white substance, to me it was part of the brain—

DENISE LUGO: Oh the actually matter.

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah, exactly. It really made an impression on me. I mean to be so young and to see that, it was really something. Then of course I didn't see the body, you know, that was removed. I saw the pool blood and a white type of matter. I would say it was part of the brains or something.

DENISE LUGO: But it was a head that was actually—?

LUIS AZACETA: Yes. Totally crushed. Especially the garbage truck, can you imagine that? It's something so heavy!

DENISE LUGO: You were there by yourself?

LUIS AZACETA: I was with a little group with all the kids and I think it was my home for a while.

DENISE LUGO: You were on a field trip?

LUIS AZACETA: We all ran there because we heard that's what happened.

DENISE LUGO: You also said some thing about a young girl. You told me about a truck hitting—

LUIS AZACETA: Oh that was something else too. That was when I was sixteen, I would say.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, that's when you were older. Tell me.

LUIS AZACETA: The ____ Stadium was about seven blocks from home, where they play baseball and all that. They were having some kind of, how do you call that? *Equitación*, when they jump on horses and that kind of stuff?

DENISE LUGO: Horse racing?

LUIS AZACETA: No racing. *Equitación*, when they do demonstration with horses. Like jumping fences—

DENISE LUGO: "Equestering"?

LUIS AZACETA: "Equestering", right. Okay, they were having that. So I am with a friend of mine, who had finished watching that and we were walking home and all of a sudden like a few blocks away we hear a big van—boom! We turn out heads and we see a car flying in the air. Another truck hit the car sideways, at probably at tremendous speed, So we started running because it look like the car was falling on top of us. So we ran. This young woman

started running behind us. The car hit the street and it started going in swirls; hitting garbage cans, bushes of flowers on the sidewalk. The woman raced my friend and ripped his shirt totally open. He was totally in a state of shock. So all of a sudden we hear a noise, the car banged against the wall, we turn our head and we are like two feet, we see the woman under the car. We never got to see the diver of the car. We were totally numb, you had to slap out faces.

DENISE LUGO: Shock?

LUIS AZACETA: Totally shocked. I tell you we ran almost a whole block; almost another block. This car went bam!; from one side of the sidewalk to the other. I mean like sweeping garbage cans and like I said, I don't know who the driver was. I know that the ambulance came and all that kind of stuff, but we were still in shock. The police came and asked questions and all that. We didn't know. I told what I am telling you now, exactly the same.

DENISE LUGO: That was a real impression.

LUIS AZACETA: It was totally surreal; to see a flying car!

DENISE LUGO: What kind of car was it?

LUIS AZACETA: It was an old car of the 1950's.

DENISE LUGO: Heavy.

LUIS AZACETA: And heavy. It wasn't a little truck and probably it was going really fast and bang! To me that was a very surreal type of thing and really scary. We were teenagers, we run. I was a good runner. I am telling you, that car was—like that I was out the door in a way. Anyway, the woman never dies. She was in the hospital, I think, for six weeks. Her ribs were broken and one arm was broken so something. I remember she was eating an ice cream. Unbelievable, I still remember that. Those are impressions that you never forget. No matter what kind of film you will see and it will never claim that impression.

DENISE LUGO: You see everything here, but when you think about that—?

LUIS AZACETA: I know the experience that I had was when I was sixteen-seventeen ... I was really dying to see him run, in *El Malecón* in Havana. We went, not to the actual races, but when they run to see, they classify for the actual races. So there they built what they call *Pasadela*, which is a bridge. It's a big ___ log *El Malecón* in Havana, right? So in order to go from one side to the other, they built a *Pasadela*, which is like a wooden bridge for people can go from one side of the street to the other. What happen when ___ started, we were going to stop. I remember it was a red car Maserati number two. _____ and everybody was on top of the *Pasadela* and stood there instead of using it to pass by. There were students there and about two hundred people. And probably I was really ___ to support that kind of amount of people. I was in the last step on the sidewalk with this man that was friend of the family that took me to see the races. There we were still on the sidewalk on the first step to fall and the whole thing collapsed. Like this. All right in the middle of that and people falling down like this. I tell you, this kind of experiences that my work comes from all that kind of

stuff. More than a hundred people were hurt. I saw a guy with a piece of wood stuck in here and screamed and another [person] trying to get off. I know a girl that was totally half dead or something. I mean that was unbelievable. I remember [seeing] rifles because in races and all that, they control the crowds and you have police and soldiers all over. He was like totally opened mouth. He didn't move. Standing holding the rifle and he just couldn't believe it. Everybody screaming and running—Oh God!

DENISE LUGO: It reminds me of some of the stadiums that have [fallen] in England.

LUIS AZACETA: Right, exactly.

DENISE LUGO: The South American soccer games.

LUIS AZACETA: That was in Peru.

DENISE LUGO: Wasn't it?

LUIS AZACETA: They calculated about two hundred people atop of the *Pasadela* and nobody died. The one that we heard that almost died was a girl like eight years old. I don't think she died. I didn't hear later on what really happened to her.

DENISE LUGO: That was just before you came to the states?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah. That was in 1958, I think it was. I think I was sixteen years old.

DENISE LUGO: So let's use this analogy—I been dying to ask this question. You go through this, almost surreal because it's so strange, so weird—

LUIS AZACETA: But I saw reality!

DENISE LUGO: It's like one in a million chances it's going to happen.

LUIS AZACETA: And there I was!

DENISE LUGO: Then you come to New York. Everyone gets lost here: you lose your identity and you lose everything. You become just anonymous and you feel as though you have no control on the environment.

LUIS AZACETA: Right. I don't know the language, so there was no way to communicate with people from this country.

DENISE LUGO: So in your own mind, you try to rationalize by using art.

LUIS AZACETA: It was to be something in such a big city.

DENISE LUGO: Not only that, [...] when you first get here [you see the] immigrant experience, it doesn't matter where you come from, you use the only thing you had to face and that's what your parent have given you in another country. So you try to use those foundations to try to understand something bigger and so consequently you are at odds. So you say okay, "The only way to do it is to simulate and try to give something to society."

LUIS AZACETA: Exactly, absolutely. For me, the strongest reality was the childhood realities that I encountered.

DENISE LUGO: ... the experience that you went through in Cuba and then you actually saw the inhumane aspects of life in New York—What's interesting when I try to teach the students the background. Just strip away everything and try to understand how they felt at that time. With you, you're [an] unusual [case] ... immunity, but what I find is even in LA to try to work a review work, I can do it. But back here in New York again and going through it, every day life—work is a hundred times more because it's so New York! And on top of your own personal experience as a child that you went through.

LUIS AZACETA: I saw a woman in all aspects; psychologically and physically. Here you have such a big building that you feel like a little ant. And of course so many people in the city. You feel like you don't have an identity. You feel like a number up to a certain degree. Then I started working in a factory and there they give you a number. I was not used to that; to have a number.

DENISE LUGO: I think what's really interesting that most people don't understand: Let's say a critique from South America come and take a look at your work in a very poetic sense, very romantic, but really what they do is more like music. They talk about your work in a very romantic sense. You bring someone else to look at your work and it's like a dissection from one piece to another, looking at it, putting it together in a very empirical fashion, almost surgical fashion. So says two different ways. When you're Latino, you have these two things in a sense. You're working on two different levels. So you have to give half view of romanticism as an individual and then of course the other aspect that you have which is logical. Almost like two parts of your brain.

LUIS AZACETA: Well this is a very pragmatic technological society so every thing is perceived and analyzed that way. Which is very different from our culture—

DENISE LUGO: Not only that, as you come in and you do the work, you tend to say, "Oh, I am American." It's true, I read when you did that German catalogue you said, "I'm more here." You're right! The more you get to see your work, but it seems you're still Latino.

LUIS AZACETA: Oh absolutely! I mean my roots are Cuban, but when I said that I am a New York painter, it's because I study art in New York. The colleges that I visit were all Americans. In other words in Cuba, I never went to museums, I didn't know any Cuban artists, so in terms of that my influence is more American and my teachers are American artists. Now of course I was born in Cuba, my family are Cubans, so think I have both cultures. In terms of art, the formal aspects is more American and there's no question about that.

DENISE LUGO: That's what is taking me so long. Is that I've been going around and doing a lot of study of Cuban artists and it's difficult. I still have to do that even though I knew better. I had to see it more and more. But you're right, your work seems from the technique, fashion, the way you talk—it's like using English to talk about your soul.

LUIS AZACETA: It's less nostalgic. I think my work is more ... a lot of Cuban artists their work is more refined, more European.

DENISE LUGO: Academia?

LUIS AZACETA: It's more academia, more refined. Except of course L___(?) and maybe Amelia Peláez. Their work is kind of always up to a certain degree ... and I don't want my work to be like that. I like to address the issues in a very confrontational way, but without being sentimental, you know what I mean? Because sentimental means that you cannot do nothing about it. Let it happen and let's cry about it. I present the work that is confrontational, with the hope that we can do something about those conditions.

DENISE LUGO: This piece that you have behind you, what would you say? To me really, I see different issues.

LUIS AZACETA: Everybody of course will perceive a work of art you perceive it according to your feelings and where you come from, etcetera, etcetera. There's no question about that. But I always address the work with a motivation in mind. Not to make a painting that is he's bathing and you don't know what it means. To me it always means something in a very specific way.

DENISE LUGO: In other words, you don't believe in art for art sake?

LUIS AZACETA: No, I don't. To me art is a vehicle to convey something about the human condition. Art for art sake, I see it entertaining. I think art is more profound. Art should be philosophical.

DENISE LUGO: How did you feel when you have Robert Mangle, of all things, these minimalist people that were strictly formalistic? How did you feel when you had so much to say and their restraining you?

LUIS AZACETA: They didn't explain anything. Mangle was a teacher that never said a word. He used to class and read the paper. He was my teacher for six months, or whatever, one semester but no he never did. Even though I was doing stripes and formalist work, that was in a way similar to his, but he was a teacher that never said much. The most articulate teachers were Frank Rowe, Michael Lowe and Leo Dalop. They were really articulate. They would really talk to you.

DENISE LUGO: What kind of art did you do with him?

LUIS AZACETA: Before anything is that he was doing geometric abstraction. Leo ... I relate to his work to a certain degree now. ... And however, what did he say? I mean ... geometric abstraction, that was fashionable at the time. He's a teacher that doesn't believe in that, so what can he tell you? He's not going to tell you, "Don't do that."

DENISE LUGO: What was he doing at the time?

LUIS AZACETA: He was doing heroes and ... type of figures at that time.

DENISE LUGO: Really?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah, I visited him at his studio and all that. You know the ... that he gave ... monumental figures ...

DENISE LUGO: The work that you were doing at the time is still dealing with geometric abstraction and so on, and he was working doing figurative work at the time, right?

LUIS AZACETA: He always did the figure. Leon Dalop? Always.

DENISE LUGO: Here in New York, it was that intense and that's the only thing that they were really accepting at the time beside pop?

LUIS AZACETA: As a student, you always get influenced most of the time by fashion, by that I mean, what is really hot at the moment.

DENISE LUGO: Yes, I understand.

LUIS AZACETA: It's like ... and him around in the 1980's; he came and he's gone. Well if you go ... school in the mid 1980's, everybody was doing the figure and painting with ... . When I went to SVA, everybody was painting with acrylics and painting formalist paintings. That means, that you are influenced by what is going on. Actually at the end teachers don't really influence you that much. Then of course I painted the figure because I was taught figure drawings and others painted the figure.

DENISE LUGO: Do you have any early samples or anything?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh I do.

DENISE LUGO: A slide or something?

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah. ... As a matter in fact, Susana interviewed me all these weeks for an article and when I mentioned that she want to go to the slides because she never seen those works.

DENISE LUGO: Susana what?

LUIS AZACETA: Susana Cabrera. She was ... for about two years or so. She's doing now freelance and reviews. So she's writing an article art in Colombia. It's going to be a big article. They already asked for two years and finally we're going to do it.

DENISE LUGO: If you have any slides.

LUIS AZACETA: As a matter in fact, they were thinking of doing that. To show you what I was doing in school. That's the way when I give a slide demonstration or lecture that I pull out like five-six times a year. I always start with a performance painting in my presentation. People look at it and say, "Man, I didn't know Luis Azaceta could paint like that." So that's the way I start my presentation. To show what I was doing in the school and how I moved into expressionism. And then what I call my own; that kind of urban scenarios that I began to sport in the mid 1970's or early 1970's of apocalyptic top.

DENISE LUGO: Let's start again with your number one thing with political prisoners.

LUIS AZACETA: That was in—you know? Like I said, that was before I went to school.

DENISE LUGO: You have anything of that at all?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah! Absolutely!

DENISE LUGO: A slide or two?

LUIS AZACETA: I might. I think I do.

DENISE LUGO: Then what I'll do is duplicate them right away. Okay, the Vietnam War, what time was that?

LUIS AZACETA: The Vietnam War that was a theme I started exploring with the automobile crash. Even at that time the Vietnam War, my God, you hear so much of what's going on at full blast.

DENISE LUGO: Hunger in Africa, these were approximately at the same time?

LUIS AZACETA: Hunger in Africa and all that began to interest me and did paintings based on things like that.

DENISE LUGO: Was about the same time?

LUIS AZACETA: More or less the same time. I am talking about 1970's; 1969, 1970, 1971. I painted these cries up to the middle of 1969. When I came, it totally changed.

DENISE LUGO: Now let's talk about that. Do you remember the first work that you did when you came back from Europe?

LUIS AZACETA: That's what I mentioned, the automobile crash.

DENISE LUGO: That's the first thing you did?

LUIS AZACETA: That's the first theories of work that I did. That's what I remember. I am not sure if it was the very first one, but I am pretty sure it was one of the first ones.

DENISE LUGO: That's one of the first figurative that you did?

LUIS AZACETA: Right. In terms of not using a model.

DENISE LUGO: What I mean is this kind of "dressmenship" versus non-objectivity?

LUIS AZACETA: Right.

DENISE LUGO: Now, you did "Automobile Accidents" and then "Vietnam" right afterwards?

LUIS AZACETA: Well I did some paintings [of] crucifixions at that time. All this is at the same time. In a period of two-three months, I did all those paintings.

DENISE LUGO: Really?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah.

DENISE LUGO: You were happy?

LUIS AZACETA: Well I was happy and very unhappy because I was still looking for a theme or style that will represent my work.

DENISE LUGO: ... just that phase?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah. And that's why I say that my style was primarily expressionistic. I went back to what I was doing before I went to school, see what I mean? School was for me drawing in terms of learning about art history, what's going on with colors, you know what I mean? In terms of learning simple things, nobody can teach you that, you have to find out for yourself. You know it was a habit all along, when I have to go in circles in order—

DENISE LUGO: You know? It will be interesting to see a work that you did, the early still lives and things of your grandmother, and then see them about this time which the middle of 1969. Do you have anything of your grandmother?

LUIS AZACETA: Slides of my grandmother I don't think I have, but I can show you photos or something.

DENISE LUGO: Anything. I think someone is going to do that anyway. So I might as well do that.

LUIS AZACETA: I meet a lot of those.

DENISE LUGO: Really? And when you were doing this, it was a way for you to communicate, to talk, to say things and at the same time learning your style.

LUIS AZACETA: Saying things that were important to me. [It] was a personal involvement. A formalist painting, up to a certain degree, is personal. I don't know how to explain it. Because you invest in certain issues. ... Medley's got a mo... approach. [Robert] Medley does more of a post modern if you want to call it.

DENISE LUGO: And your paints. There were a lot of—

LUIS AZACETA: A lot of color. A lot of gestures. A splash of paint. And using one figure in the middle of all the wreckage.

DENISE LUGO: A central figure?

LUIS AZACETA: In the middle of all the wreckage. Then I also made a painting were there is a woman laying down in bed and the other woman crashed at the other end of the canvas. That reminds me of the accident, that experience.

DENISE LUGO: Have you seen [Carlos] Almaraz's work Impressions? He did a whole series of them.

LUIS AZACETA: Well he has one with a Hispanic show at night ...

DENISE LUGO: He did many, many. He's known for his impressions.

LUIS AZACETA: Really? What year was that?

DENISE LUGO: Oh, no! Way after you. But what he did is that he lived in downtown LA in his studio and he could see the freeways. So he continued to see them.

LUIS AZACETA: Oh I see! He had far away views. Mine are always close up.

DENISE LUGO: Yours are like documentary.

LUIS AZACETA: No.

DENISE LUGO: Not like documentary?

LUIS AZACETA: I don't think it's documentary. Actually you got it from far away because of the documentary Panoramic ..., landscape—I wasn't there with that. With the actual wreckage—

DENISE LUGO: That's what I am saying.

LUIS AZACETA: But it's not a documentary. A documentary would be if I paint it in a realistic manner to document that. What I was doing was inventing a lot of shapes to create more attention. In other words, wide angles I gave some kind of shape. So in other words I was inventing a lot of the wreckage also that was based on photographs.

DENISE LUGO: What's based on photographs?

LUIS AZACETA: But I don't see that as a documentation.

DENISE LUGO: Okay that's a wrong word.

LUIS AZACETA: Actually it was very inventive type of wreckage.

DENISE LUGO: What I meant is: You know how you see a picture and you see it cropped? And you see the main theme there? Where his is was long range and more of a landscape. That's what I meant.

LUIS AZACETA: The idea for this was also: the first five paintings I used the figure. After that, the figures disappear and they became abstract paintings. The idea was like you get closer and closer to the wreckage, like a camera getting closer and closer.

DENISE LUGO: But the same scene?

LUIS AZACETA: Not different scene. When you get really close to an object, it becomes totally abstract.

DENISE LUGO: Oh that's right!

LUIS AZACETA: That's what I did. I made like twenty paintings or so based on that.

DENISE LUGO: You still have slides on that?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah.

DENISE LUGO: Good. I am so glad you came to the documentation. It's worth it in the long run. The Vietnam thing.

LUIS AZACETA: I made paintings based on Vietnam, especially victims. Like mothers their dead babies, you know, massacres of people.

DENISE LUGO: Based on what you saw on TV?

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah, TV. Sure I saw a few things and then you read the paper. That affected me. Through the media, yes.

DENISE LUGO: What's the other theme that was Africa?

LUIS AZACETA: Yes, all the famine in Africa and all that. I made a few paintings based on that, but not in a documentary way. These works also take a chunk of me. All those "acusetals".

DENISE LUGO: Oh that's what I wanted to ask you. What do you mean by that?

LUIS AZACETA: It has to show a crucifix in what I did more or less.

DENISE LUGO: You did that only when you ... a theme?

LUIS AZACETA: I did a lot of crucifixes and I didn't have to do ... For this particular painting based on the abstract. Has a shade similar to a cross.

DENISE LUGO: You only did one?

LUIS AZACETA: I did a few.

DENISE LUGO: You have good memory.

LUIS AZACETA: I know exactly most of the work and I've done a lot of works. Three quarters of my work is totally from [memory(?)]

DENISE LUGO: ...(?)

LUIS AZACETA: I wanted to go back to certain—I did a series with a certain idea like the automobile crash and all that or crucifixions. Later on I totally changed the following year. I did that consciously. So I wanted to go back to my Cuban roots. So I began to work with the family theme, but in a freely kind of way. The forms were round, with the head was totally round, usually the mouth was open. I guess I had certain influence by Tamayo. I was a combination of the two I would say. Usually family was surrounded by either inside their body or outside by kids with toys and animals.

DENISE LUGO: Almost a colonial type of thing.

LUIS AZACETA: But very kind of primitive, like very voluptuous type of thing. In the ... was pregnant with maybe eight little babies, things like that. The word primitive to me—

DENISE LUGO: What was the driving force behind this?

LUIS AZACETA: I guess being married, I don't know.

DENISE LUGO: Was your wife pregnant at the time?

LUIS AZACETA: No, she was not. I don't know. It's just I wanted to paint homage and tribute to so many Cuban singers, like the Lupe, Olga Guillot and Celia Cruz. It was just a female's round figure—

[Audio Cuts off]

DENISE LUGO: You know what it reminds me of? Waldorf, it's like the very basic, primitive, beginnings, came to reality the basis, roots.

LUIS AZACETA: Primordial. That's what I was aiming at. Some kind of primordial archetype type of female figure. Usually there is a man and a woman inside the same shape, with two head for example to represent the man and woman.

DENISE LUGO: Like M... have always dealt with that kind of concept.

LUIS AZACETA: Exactly.

DENISE LUGO: With the fertility and I can understand that.

LUIS AZACETA: I did a whole series in 1972.

DENISE LUGO: How many?

LUIS AZACETA: I made, I would say, like fifty or sixty paintings. Or many be more.

DENISE LUGO: How did they differ in pallet?

LUIS AZACETA: The colors I have been ... the paint with oil paintings and was applied with pallet knives. They were kind of washy paints and then with the pallet knives I build that up [to create] textures. Even the under paint of the washes of the colors run the lines.

DENISE LUGO: It was basically the same colors that you were using?

LUIS AZACETA: No, different colors. The colors were very motion ... a lot of cienas and browns and for cool colors: green—I used a lot of green. Like I said right after that, I did another series [with] a totally different approach. I started doing heads and another students ... that were like ... I think I read Kafka's Metamorphosis and it was something to me that I began to do. [So] I reduced the pallet to only red, black and white.

DENISE LUGO: So they were boxes?

LUIS AZACETA: No, they were oil paintings on canvas. The work primarily was kind of childish, I thought. ...The figures were like the big ... and the arms were like sticks. The legs were like one line, and the arms were one line and a big box—

DENISE LUGO: Oh! Almost like cave painting.

LUIS AZACETA: Something like that.

DENISE LUGO: They are called pictographs.

LUIS AZACETA: Pictographs, something like that, but very expressionistic though. The main theme of my painting was expressionistic. And the primary color was red and black. Then also with the plague which I've done a dozen paintings.

DENISE LUGO: What do you mean by plague?

LUIS AZACETA: Plague was like a box was eating away people.

DENISE LUGO: Like epidemics or something?

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah, but with boxes. It was like metamorphosis up to a certain degree.

DENISE LUGO: Bugs, insects?

LUIS AZACETA: Devouring everything around. I did like a dozen paintings like that.

DENISE LUGO: What did they signify?

LUIS AZACETA: The actual metamorphosis of humanity becoming the box.

DENISE LUGO: They were made of canvas?

LUIS AZACETA: Painting on canvas.

DENISE LUGO: What was the application?

LUIS AZACETA: I applied the oil on the brushes. This is a painting, it's not a mixed media.

DENISE LUGO: How many do you think ... (?)

LUIS AZACETA: I never ... and followed by piles of heads.

DENISE LUGO: Then pile of heads?

LUIS AZACETA: Piles of heads.

DENISE LUGO: The head were decapitated heads?

LUIS AZACETA: Decapitated heads; only heads, piles and piles of heads. The title, for example was ...swear, ... and these things were done from 1972-1973.

DENISE LUGO: Okay, what was the influence on these heads?

LUIS AZACETA: I have no idea. I can't remember. I can't think of anything. The colors, like I said, were mostly hues and primarily reds, black and white. Grayish and pinkish colors.

DENISE LUGO: Most of yours were self-portraits, no?

LUIS AZACETA: No.

DENISE LUGO: None are self-portraits?

LUIS AZACETA: No self-portraits. Self-portraits came much later. Maybe after the heads, I did piles of skulls, mountains of skulls, which relate to the heads. With that one, I began to use charcoal sticks on paint and ... silver enamel to enforce the background. I also created pyramids and rectangular shapes, with the skulls.

DENISE LUGO: What did that signify?

LUIS AZACETA: I don't know what it signified at that time. I was still in repent. I went through a period that I was thinking a lot about my mortality and it's funny because later on I was talking to men that at a certain age says that we go through that period even though we don't talk about it. As a matter in fact, we started talking and said that when I was twenty-eight or thirty I was really thinking about death. Things like my mortality and things of that sort. So to me I said, "My God ..." So it seems, I don't think it's a coincidence, that it happens to a lot of men when there's a day and age, from twenty-eight to, I would say, twenty-five that mortality hits you. Maybe I am wrong.

DENISE LUGO: ...(?)

LUIS AZACETA: Really? That would be really interesting. I have never followed up to find out more about it. When I find out about it with this guy, I was no longer alone and we started talking. We went though the same experience. It was really weird, really weird. After that, that's it. Now I don't think about it.

DENISE LUGO: Maybe women do that later.

LUIS AZACETA: Maybe women do that later.

DENISE LUGO: Maybe thirties and forties.

LUIS AZACETA: That's real interesting. It's a cycle that very weird, really strange. Then I did the cut outs, they were cut outs from canvas. It was to create forms, like cars, trucks, boxes, piles of bodies, mountains of bodies, body parts—the idea was to hang it from twelve lines.

DENISE LUGO: *Tendederos* [Clothing lines]?

LUIS AZACETA: *Tendederos* [Clothing lines], exactly. The application of paint was enamel paint from the cans like graffiti style. Enamel spray, then with a black color ... the brush, I would create the outlines of all the shapes. Also of what I was doing, for example, a truck full of heads, or arms or legs; all piled up in a panel cartoon up to a certain degree and it gives a graffiti feeling to it.

DENISE LUGO: When you put those on the *tendederos* [clothing lines], did you have different layers of *tendederos* [clothing lines]?

LUIS AZACETA: No. For example, I would hang it from one end to the other and hanging different pieces. I mean you can create a whole environment, which I never got to do it because all those works I only had like two of them show in the Hispanic Exhibition here in New York. That was the end of that and I moved into another series. All that, I threw them away. All those, I rolled up and nobody had seen those works, except that school that had a big show. I have slides.

DENISE LUGO: Oh let's see them. So you hung them up and glazed a white wall?

LUIS AZACETA: I glaze any kind of wall. Primarily white would be ideal because then you see the contrast.

DENISE LUGO: How big were they?

LUIS AZACETA: They were big; eight-footers by six feet. You know large paintings. I remember the idea was a crucifix. I used Christ on the ground, the crown would hit the ground and then the other two figures, the others dying on the cross—

DENISE LUGO: You have a slide?

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah. The Christ figure, the head went all the way to the ground.

DENISE LUGO: I want to see that.

LUIS AZACETA: That's a nice piece, but I don't have it here. Make note for me of the slides that you want. I'll send you all that.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me you drew these.

LUIS AZACETA: I did a lot. I don't remember the exact amount, but I did a big body work.

DENISE LUGO: How long did you work on that?

LUIS AZACETA: For about a year; from 1973 to 1974. Those two was what lead me into the subway series.

DENISE LUGO: This was a transition?

LUIS AZACETA: Was not a transition. My work is never a transition, it's always a [compilation] that I would stop a long time and start something new. But did it similar things. I don't like the word "transition"; to me it's never transition, it's a continuum.

DENISE LUGO: Okay, you've done the subway series, tell me.

LUIS AZACETA: Right, when I started the subway series I started using subway assets—some kind of sketch representing people ...(?) ... it's some kind of fantasy where we have crocodiles under subterranean Manhattan. How do you say *alcantarillas* [sewers]?

[Audio cuts off]

DENISE LUGO: You got to go see Batman, that's a good movie!

LUIS AZACETA: This week I am going to see it.

DENISE LUGO: It reminds me of your work, huh Heather? You're going to like it. She didn't want to go see it—

HEATHER: She didn't want to wait in the lines.

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah, I am like that too, but I really want to see it.

DENISE LUGO: Oh he's going to like it.

LUIS AZACETA: It was that good?

HEATHER: It sold over a million— ...(?) films.

DENISE LUGO: You got to see it.

LUIS AZACETA: This week I am going to see it. We wanted to go when it first opened and I don't want to be in line.

HEATHER: We weren't in line. It's just down the street. It was a few minutes before it started and everyone was inside already and we just sat.

DENISE LUGO: ... people go wild.

LUIS AZACETA: Unbelievable.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, you're going to like it. You can see the city and you can see that's in night—

LUIS AZACETA: Oh it takes place in New York?

DENISE LUGO: It takes place in New York.

HEATHER: What's-his-name, he's good at acting the Joker.

DENISE LUGO: Oh the Joker!

LUIS AZACETA: Oh, he got like six million dollars for that part, six million dollars!

HEATHER: He deserved it, I mean he was [brilliant]!

LUIS AZACETA: We are going to see it because of that. A lot of people are disenchanted with the installation of Batman. Michael? What's his name? They were expecting a more masculine young guy.

HEATHER: He looks masculine when he's in Batman; his abs make him look masculine.

LUIS AZACETA: Someone from New York would say, "He's too whimpy."

DENISE LUGO & HEATHER: (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: We were talking about the subway series? Talk about these cut outs.

LUIZ AZACETA: From the "Cross", I went into the subway. So I began to use all these kind of ... in these paintings. You know, like crocodiles devouring people and things of that sort. Creating also right angles, like opened and closed doors of the subway, interior and exterior type of thing. To show, in other words, graffiti on the doors and the door many be half opened where I show what is going on inside the train. So, my concern was the doors and also because I wanted to create right angles with organic shapes. I create a pictorial tension which was very important to me at that time. Well actually, it always is. That combinations of things. Then I began to use collages in terms of the subway map I would do it into the actual canvas. Also doing attachments. For example, cutting out an arm or a woman's purse and attaching that with staples. The canvas paint, when it falls, it creates like a three dimensional thing. So I had a flat, two dimensional canvass with three dimensional attachments that I created. [They were] additional attachments. The woman giving birth, the baby is attached—it's another canvas, attached to the woman through the umbilical cord and the baby's feet and all that is the canvas falls like so. And it create a three dimensional look. So I did a three dimensionality to it. But I was developing that first when I decide, by then I was thirty-three years old, at that point I have never looked for a commercial gallery here in New York—I decided to look for a gallery. I think I was maturely enough and I had a lot of works done and the subway painting to me were the key paintings that I felt that I was doing something original and totally mine. So it was time for me to look for a gallery. I made a list of ten galleries that I thought that they might look at my work. I started with T...(?). So I went to him, I brought the actual paintings, they were rolled up. One of the c...(?) series and the other of the subway series. I showed it to him and she loved them. He liked it, he came a month later to my studio and by then I had more subway paintings done. He liked them and said, "I'm going to give you a show." This was in 1974—the end of 1974. So the following year in May, 1975, I had my first show in a commercial gallery. I shared the exhibition with a sculpture who I knew.

DENISE LUGO: Who was it?

LUIS AZACETA: Michael Isen.

DENISE LUGO: So you have any writes up of the critique?

LUIS AZACETA: We had a review in the *Arts* magazine. In terms of sales, Michael sold most of his show. I think I sold only one painting. In terms of sales, nothing happened. Then of course I was respected up to a certain degree. Not many people were dealing with figurations in the mid 1970's or early 1970's, except the pop artists. All the other artists in New York, primarily were dealing with conceptual ideas and installations or minimal art.

DENISE LUGO: How many did you do of the subway series?

LUIS AZACETA: I don't know, maybe forty-five or thirty.

DENISE LUGO: And you said that they are very large, right?

LUIS AZACETA: They are primarily, I would say, like six feet high by four and a half feet wide. More or less, the scale of a man. They are primarily doors; opened and closed doors.

DENISE LUGO: They open too?

LUIZ AZACETA: The doors are sometimes opened and sometimes they close.

DENISE LUGO: The door is framed, almost—

LUIS AZACETA: It's like painting just a door on the side way. Sometimes they are open and by that I mean leaving space between the doors that you see what was going on inside. Outside of the doors was graffiti were I was using graffiti also. When the doors are closed, through the windows I have the people doing some kind of violence.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, I saw it. You know what it reminds me? Of Frida Kahlo's "The Bus"? Where people are sitting down? Remember that? They are all in like a subway and they are sitting like this.

LUIS AZACETA: I haven't seen that one.

DENISE LUGO: It's called "The Bus". It's Mexico, 1930.

LUIS AZACETA: I have to check her work. I don't recall that. That's another artist that I relate a great deal to. Frida Kahlo.

DENISE LUGO: You have her biography?

LUIS AZACETA: What I have is a small catalogue of her work that I purchased in Mexico.

DENISE LUGO: I will send you a book. It's a biography of hers. I can make you copies.

LUIS AZACETA: Oh you don't have to.

DENISE LUGO: No, I'll copy them and send them to you.

HEATHER: The tape is running.

DENISE LUGO: The tape in running? Okay, go ahead.

LUIS AZACETA: It's on?

HEATHER: Yes.

LUIZ AZACETA: Okay so anyway, the other works were already feeling ... until I found a commercial gallery and a good gallery with artists that I really respected. Like Peter Scholl and ... and a few others. Then I kept on painting. The war became more and more graphic. I think what I was doing in a very unconscious way was combining, up to certain degree, pop and expressionism. Which I think the critics rates [were] cruel of the *New York Times*, titled

it, when referring to my work at that time like "apocalyptic pop" or "apocalypso pop" or to something of that effect.

DENISE LUGO: Or like bosh pop?

LUIS AZACETA: Right. It could be something like that, which is kind of apocalyptic. So it was a combination of the two.

DENISE LUGO: Have you seen the apocalyptic view of the Spanish manuscript?

LUIS AZACETA: [Does not respond]

DENISE LUGO: Okay, I'll see if I can get you some of that—very good. The Spanish medieval from the fifth manuscript.

LUIS AZACETA: When I went to Spain in 1985, I went to Barcelona and the last day that we stayed, we went to the museum of—in the medieval—the Catalan—How to they call that? I forgot the name now. The Romanesque Museum. I saw images there that—

DENISE LUGO: Were the Spanish—?

LUIS AZACETA: Spanish Romanesque.

DENISE LUGO: When were you there?

LUIS AZACETA: This could be the best museum in the world- Spanish Romanesque.

DENISE LUGO: When did you see this?

LUIS AZACETA: In 1985 in Barcelona. It was really exciting. I tell you, I went crazy, I brought all the post cards that they had in the museum. There were like two hundred and fifty post cards and I brought all of them.

DENISE LUGO: (Laughs)

LUIS AZACETA: Because what happened was we could only be there two hours. We didn't know about this museum or else we would have been there the first day. It was the best museum there. I stayed there.

DENISE LUGO: It was a church that they used there because it's a northern part state, right?

LUIZ AZACETA: Right. That was called San Juan Apost—? San Juan, all that is from the north, from Asturias to Galicia.

That's the only area untouched by the Moors.

LUIZ AZACETA: That's what they had, that's what they had in the museum; all those murals. What do you call them? Frescos!

DENISE LUGO: Frescos?

LUIS AZACETA: Which most of the art is destroyed.

DENISE LUGO: Did you see gargoyles and dead people?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh all the culture is a big blood and it was really bloody stuff. That's why I can related to a certain degree to all that kind of stuff. That's why when people look at my work and ask, "Where does all this come from?" and we've done that in all the periods. You show me this with the Aztecs and the Mayas, they did the same thing.

DENISE LUGO: It's man.

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah. It's not that I am some sort of maniac.

DENISE LUGO: Of course not. I am so glad you do this and you do your own thing instead of going with the trend. The last work that you did—

LUIS AZACETA: When I'll be done not that many people would do that kind of works. It became trendy in the 1980's. You see? What I was doing in the 1970's. I was ahead of time.

DENISE LUGO: What was the subject matter again? We talked about, I am going to call it bosh pop, now what was the theme?

LUIS AZACETA: Well—

DENISE LUGO: It was spiritual.

LUIS AZACETA: It was spiritual.

DENISE LUGO: So tell me what's the theme here? It's apocalyptic?

LUIS AZACETA: The things were urban scenarios. A lot of body parts, victims, big knives, guns, the impoverish state pierced by a knife to show that it is a very violet city.

DENISE LUGO: I have to ask this before you go any further.

LUIS AZACETA: Go ahead.

DENISE LUGO: When you were growing up as a child, I already had some psychologists look at your work—

LUIS AZACETA: (Laughs)

DENISE LUGO: Were your parents quiet? Tell me about your parents. I am sorry.

LUIS AZACETA: Well my father is kind of quiet. My mother is extrovert and my father introvert. I was not a quiet kid. I was very normal, very playful and always playing.

DENISE LUGO: What I am saying, violence and stuff, were you spanked?

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah! I was spanked sure! A lot of times and my father when he used to get mad. He was in the Air Force and he used to wear those army uniforms and buckle. He would take it and hit me with it.

DENISE LUGO: Do you mind if I put that in? I am going to have to talk about that.

LUIS AZACETA: Not every father did that in Cuba. Not in Cuba, but in all Latin America.

DENISE LUGO: Here you can't—

LUIS AZACETA: That probably happens ...(?)

DENISE LUGO: Look how you deal with your childhood and the way you were raised. The way I was raised is the way I deal with my childhood.

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah. There was no fooling around.

DENISE LUGO: We tried to logically speak to the child—

LUIS AZACETA: I do that sometimes and sometime he doesn't and I have to hit him sometimes. I do the same thing. I get the same thing. I have a buckle too and I hit him with that and he respect that. Like the way I respected that. If he couldn't find the buckle, he would get a branch of a tree, cut it and hit me with that. That was when he was complaining to my mother about me. Then he go through work and was tired, you don't want to hear so he would just go get the buckle—(Chuckles) You know what I mean? Just grab a buckle or a branch of a tree and hit you with it.

DENISE LUGO: I got the same thing.

LUIS AZACETA: Because we had a big front yard with a lot of trees. But I think I was a good kid. I was a normal kid, playing, getting hit, falling and always playing. No traumas, no problems in respect to my family; my father is not an alcoholic. You know what I mean? They are still married.

DENISE LUGO: Really? How old are your parents?

LUIZ AZACETA: He's like eighty-two, I think. My mother must be like seventy or sixty-nine.

DENISE LUGO: Really? They're young. Wonderful.

LUIZ AZACETA: Sure. My sister, very normal. No, you know what I mean, like split marriage all that. For example, my ...(?) is a split marriage. I mean, you know. So he went through another experience, very different from mine. So anyway...

DENISE LUGO: So we were talking about graphic stuff—

LUIZ AZACETA: Well the word "D—(?)" I began to use subway doors with combination of other things. One example, the anatomy of the beef according to McDonalds. Then I began to free falling title for my painting. This was 1975-1976. The colors were really bright, the forms and shapes outlined with a heavy black line, but very bright.

DENISE LUGO: Almost pop.

LUIS AZACETA: Very pop-up.

DENISE LUGO: Is it okay if I use the word "pop"?

LUIS AZACETA: Very pop, but again very different from American pop.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, I understand. Did you feel it a lot though, the aspect of the pop that influenced?

LUIS AZACETA: I never liked the pop.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, but you saw it everywhere, right?

LUIS AZACETA: I saw it everywhere sure. You couldn't ignore that.

DENISE LUGO: It was kind of an influence.

LUIS AZACETA: So I knew what was going on all the time. Anyway I began using very comical title. For example, this is a cow that is being dissected by the butcher were you describe the shoulders, the—

DENISE LUGO: Yeah.

LUIS AZACETA: And in front of that, I have like a blonde American girl eating an ice-cream. You know what I mean? And a subway door at the other end of the composition, figures upside down, heads coming out of the edge of the painting—a total chaotic type of composition.

DENISE LUGO: To create an anxiety and tension?

LUIS AZACETA: To create all that kind of stuff to which you feel you're in the city.

DENISE LUGO: Oh, that's very good!

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah. I wouldn't be able to paint those paintings if I lived in Kansas or Iowa.

DENISE LUGO: About his time is when you left to? What year was it?

LUIS AZACETA: That was in 1980.

DENISE LUGO: Eight.

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah, later on. This is still really early. We are talking about mid 1970's still. Anyway, I did stages or scenarios of urban violence and urban stuff up to the 1980's. But then in 1980, I was hired to teach at UC Davis in California.

DENISE LUGO: They told me that the reason you looked the way you did, because you were driving all across the country.

LUIS AZACETA: Oh yeah, I remember. I was at the ...(?) museum. They had an interview with the radio there. That was later on. I was actually going to Berkeley, so I made a painting that has half animal and half human.

DENISE LUGO: That's after.

LUIS AZACETA: But that was after, yeah. At Davis, is when I started self-portrait series of paintings because prior to that in 1977 I began to do self-portraits in an analytical way looking at myself in the mirror. In 1978, I began to put on phony hats and make funny faces and working with inks and watercolors and color pencils. But in 1981 I went to Davis, I just started painting self-portraits. The first painting that I made there was called "Door King for Five Minutes". Where there is a door on some kind of stage and then I painted myself in the door with a funny hat and I looked like a clown or some kind of actor. On the back of the door is all graffiti, even recommendations to offer that I admire. Writing that I admire and also artists that admire. That's 1980.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, you started doing portraits. You used the back of a door?

LUIS AZACETA: No, it's a painted door on some kind of stage.

DENISE LUGO: Oh, okay!

LUIS AZACETA: But then on the door I painted myself. So in other words, what I am presenting here is multiplicity of illusions. I am presenting a door to the viewer, but inside the door is a self-portrait. But also it is a stage. So every painting is about illusions. I think it is an important painting.

DENISE LUGO: Do you have a slide on that?

LUIS AZACETA: I have slides on that. Like I said, on the back of just the door, on the background of the figure which is still the door, I write with graffiti the names of the artists and writers that I like. When I was in Davis I made like fifty paintings.

DENISE LUGO: That was Berkeley, no?

LUIS AZACETA: No, no Davis from 1980 to 1981. By that, I mean two quarters. The end of 1980 and the beginning of 1981, then I came back to New York. Here is were I began to paint "City Painter of Hearts", it's on of my most important paintings of 1981.

DENISE LUGO: So what was the name of it?

LUIS AZACETA: "City Painter of Hearts", "Apocalypse Now or Later" and "Talk Around the City"(?) these are—

DENISE LUGO: I remember that.

LUIS AZACETA: All of these are self-portraits where the action occurs inside my body, inside my head as a dream or as ...(?) or on top of my head. Or in many cases using the self-portrait in miniscule, a tiny little figure, in the middle of some apocalyptic urban

catastrophe, like the "City Painter of Hearts" for example. Where I paint myself in there, lower corner of the composition, painting on an easel a little heart. Where I am surrounded by a whole city in flames, a dog chasing a cat, and a cat chasing a mouse, and then body parts—

DENISE LUGO: It's surreal of the whole thing going on.

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah, and this creating a dynamic of the composition; the dog and the cat and the mouse, creates a dynamic. The city is in flames and then cigarette butts on the streets, body parts on the streets—In other words, what I am creating here is an apocalyptic vision of an urban place. While the artist, I am painting my little heart and in a way ignoring all that is happening around me. So that's how I was using the self-portrait to convey different environments inside my body, outside my body, on top of my head and also around me. And now I explore that in 1981 I was very political and I created a lot of paintings.

DENISE LUGO: That's the one we were talking about. We're talking about immortality or that was earlier?

LUIS AZACETA: That was in the 1970's.

DENISE LUGO: How many did you do?

LUIS AZACETA: I don't know the exact number, but I made a lot.

DENISE LUGO: They were large? Did you do oil on canvas?

LUIS AZACETA: No, acrylic on canvas. As a matter in fact I forgot to explain also that in 1977 I got separated and I made a painting, living with that separation, which I called "Verbal Wounds". Where I depict a head of a man, which is not a self-portrait that would represent me, and a head of a woman, in profile in front of each other. The background is a house, representing the house that I owned in Stanton Island. On the house is a little window, with a little kid of two years old, representing my kid when I left the house. The woman is surely nice and ... scissors to the man. The man is shooting bullets and guns, which I title "Verbal Wounds". And that's the end of my first marriage. So that painting symbolizes that breakage, which I also have dealt in my work and live with that kind of aspect of divorce, separation and split. In 1979 I made that painting. The separation was in 1977. We got divorced in 1980.

DENISE LUGO: It was a long process.

LUIS AZACETA: Yes. That's before I came to Davis. So I came back to New York and did all these paintings. Then I was hired by Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. So I went there as a visiting artist for four months escaping the winter in New York. So then I met my wife of now.

DENISE LUGO: Sharon?

LUIS AZACETA: Sharon, that's right and we got married there at the end of the semester.

DENISE LUGO: How nice! You needed that.

LUIS AZACETA: Yeah, I agree with you.

DENISE LUGO: You went through hell.

LUIS AZACETA: I needed that. Anyway I was ready to—it's very logical to have family. In Baton Rouge, I got a really nice studio with air condition because it's kind of hot there and I managed to do a lot of painting there, about a dozen paintings. The most of the paintings from there are rotting now. "Spring in Baton Rouge" is a painting representing Sharon, dominating the entire canvas, where all these kind of erotic fantasies ...(?). From graffiti legs and many other paintings doing with that kind of—Couples in a state of love. So I came back to New York already married and I was hired the following year in 1983 to UC Berkeley to also teach for one semester, four months. In 1981 and 1982 I began to combine flat areas of color application with heavy pastel. Heavy pastel, I mean "personistic" kind of gestures. Using the cube of paint—

DENISE LUGO: Yes, I understand.

LUIS AZACETA: I think it is important to—

DENISE LUGO: So you did pastel? You used the space?

LUIS AZACETA: Right.

DENISE LUGO: Then it started changing?

LUIS AZACETA: Then 1983 I changed completely. Everything was primarily hue. ...(?) There, I made the painting called "The Traveler" and you referred to before; [where it has] a half man, half beast.

DENISE LUGO: Okay, that's interesting. Now you start putting together man and animal.

LUIS AZACETA: Right, metamorphosis waiting to happen. Also, a mechanized man and all that kind of stuff. There I also made the painting "Homo fractural". It was a torso and the head is on the other end of the torso and it's standing on it's face with some kind of aura around it. That painting is in Austin. I think I did like sixty-seventy paintings; I did a lot of paintings. Also another thing that I made there was "The Dance of Latin America" that was purchased by Metropolitan Museum. That painting is a figure of a man screaming and is decapitated and is doing some kind of dance. The legs and arms are dismembered and he's doing a dance. The background is using stripes, that from one stripe to another and the space in between is like barbed wire to create that kind of military control in Latin America or oppression, what ever you want to called it and using that kind of art in colors, the camouflage colors, different kind of greens, you know. Then there I did "Humble Peace". You know, almost any piece that went with heavy paints. I think those are the ones that you saw.

DENISE LUGO: I love those. What I like is that you used greens and reds—real raw color. It was just astounding.

LUIS AZACETA: Also the aura that I painted around it. It was kind of icons in a way.

DENISE LUGO: That's what I remember. You used a lot of the greens and reds and to some degree yellow.

LUIS AZACETA: I think the other paintings that you saw in that show were "Home ...(?)".

DENISE LUGO: I saw the whole body ...(?).

LUIS AZACETA: So those were the paintings there.

DENISE LUGO: How long were you there in Berkeley?

LUIS AZACETA: I was over there for five months.

DENISE LUGO: Who were you with? Was there any other artists?

LUIS AZACETA: No, the only artist that I knew that was teaching there was Jone Brown. From then we weren't sharing the same studio, even though he wasn't using it, was Robert Yaburg(?). He used to go there and see his students in my studio.

DENISE LUGO: The studio was—

LUIS AZACETA: Shared with Robert Yaburg(?), even though Bob didn't use it to do his paintings. I used it to do my paintings. He used it to see his students one a week there for an hour or so. Later on actually he did it the first two weeks and knew he was disturbing me because he saw that I was always painting, so he didn't want to disturb me.

DENISE LUGO: How about Jone Brown? She's a regular there?

LUIS AZACETA: She was ditching her classes.

DENISE LUGO: Did you get to know her?

LUIS AZACETA: Well, I knew her here in New York and in New York I visited her a few times—

[End of Interview]