

## Carlos Almaraz

*An excerpt of an oral interview of the artist, conducted 1986 Feb. 6-1987 Jan. 29, by Margarita Nieto, for the Archives of American Art.*

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-carlos-almaraz-5409> (find the full transcript of the interview here)

**ALMARAZ:** [My father] is totally bilingual. If you put him in Mexico City and you put him in a dining room, he'll have a wonderful time, and if you put him in New York City on Times Square at a local hot dog stand, he'll have a very fine time. And there's no division in his feelings for both cultures. And from that, I've learned the same kind of appreciation for the American culture, within me, in the American culture I mean, the Mexican culture within me. They're two extremes that, you know, can and do live in the same person. So he evidently traveled to Mexico and to Chicago a great deal throughout his life. [...]

**NIETO:** And going back to that early childhood, do you have any memories. . .

**ALMARAZ:** Yes, very vivid memories, in one respect. And one of the first memories that I've had of seeing art, or looking at paintings, was in the old Zocalo Church, the big Guadalupe Church there, because it's an old haunting church. It's like something out of Paris. It's like Notre Dame. It's an old, old. . . [...] late Baroque building cathedral, with many facets within it. I remember praying there, being on my knees, and looking up at what must have been a portrait of John the Baptist. [...] for me, my first impression of art was both horrifying and absolutely magical, because I really believed that was a gorilla, and it scared me. I, otherwise, I've never had any fear toward going to church; it was for me an experience to share with parents and especially with my mother. But that to me was the first painting because it was a painting; I've gone back to see it and, yes, it's a painting of John the Baptist that confirmed my sense that art can be something almost alive. And that happened very young, you know, at a very young age. Later on, my exposures were different. [...]

**NIETO:** Duchamp.

**ALMARAZ:** Yeah. Then that led me into the pain of the period, which then finally kind of cleared up where our modern art started, and then I could add on to that the knowledge that I gained from seeing the art exhibits in New York City and seeing where the American influence became a part of the history with the advent of Abstract Expressionism, and even some of the other moves before that that were popular and they were sort of American-European movements. And then that plus seeing all the art in the museums and understanding that finally started to give me a clear indication as to what modern art was about and what came after modern art. I was in New York when Pop Art was on the decline and Conceptual Art and the very, very severe hard-edge school of painting was on the rise. For a painter that was the worst time to be in New York. Because no more did you see drippy paintings; now you saw crisp hard edges, a lot of writing, a lot of intellectual investigation, less of the atmosphere of Kline and Pollock and some of the other artists who were the characters of that turning point for American art, and

more of the literary structure of what art was about. It was to read and not a time to paint, as I saw it.

**NIETO:** And today would you still view that as the very sterile period?

**ALMARAZ:** I'd have to say yes. I'm not against any school of painting, but I'm not in support of art that depends so much on literary content. [...] So I'm sure there was. . . There was a lot of guilt there. Because what I did afterwards was to in a sense to punish myself in a positive way, which sounds real Catholic, but by giving up my involvement with the art world and the art galleries and making myself a living off of art, I decided to become involved with social issues and using the vehicle of the mural as the means by which I could. . .

I could try to redeem my brother's life and try to reconstruct my reality through my work in murals.

**NIETO:** Fascinating.

**ALMARAZ:** It finally led to my involvement with young kids to help me on the murals. And to create a sense of collectivity. It was from there that I started to get involved with the children of Plaza de la Raza, and help Margo Albert in establishing some of that at the beginning when we were still working on benches in the park. And to be aware of the world around me, rather than just me in the world.

**NIETO:** So in a sense it was from that self-isolation toward a, out of growth, toward a world, toward a social order. But through this whole introspective search. [...]

**ALMARAZ:** Oh, I see. Well, after my brother's death, in about '71, I felt very bitter and confused about being a Mexican American, or Chicano, here at this time and place, questioning my. . . In a sense questioning my allegiance to the United States and the principles of capitalism and asking questions about that. When the Chicano movement came around to me it came in the form of Gilbert Lujan. He came to my mother's home and I was working in the garage on the series of what I call my "Mad" series. These were drawings that I did on, first series I did in pastels, oh, say, the second series that I did in pastels. And at that time I was drinking a great deal, I was basically home to Los Angeles for, because I had not succeeded in New York. I was feeling pretty bad and then my brother's death made things worse. I was looking for a reason to get involved with something besides myself. I was then doing these drawings that I just mentioned, which were very crazy, very subconscious, a lot of Jungian kind of psychological symbolism. And I was doing a bunch of them, many of them. Strangely enough, now I only have about six left of that whole series and I must have had maybe fifty. I later sold them out of my portfolio to make, you know, ends meet.

Well, one of the tenets of Chicano muralism has always been the correlation between the muralist movement in Mexico, supposedly, and the muralist movement in California or the Southwest.

**ALMARAZ:** Um hmm.

**NIETO:** And other people have challenged that. They say that that doesn't really exist, that that's a supposition that art historians and art critics have created.

**ALMARAZ:** Um hmm.

**NIETO:** But in talking to you it seems obvious that that was a premise.

**ALMARAZ:** Oh, right. Remember I was born in Mexico, so to me, you talk about muralism, you have to go back to the big three. And I literally went back to Mexico City to look at all of their work. I looked through scads of books, looking at details of their work. I read much research on their life, their lifestyle, and their politics and their philosophy and their ideas. So, no, I very consciously went back to pick up ideas from them, and ways of conveying complicated ideas to a in [this sense] a non-literal group of people, being farmworkers, and trying to get the ideas across. [...]

**NIETO:** Well, in a sense and this is departing a bit from what we were going to talk about, but I think it's important when you start the Echo series you have this influence to me it's separately clear of Monet and the Impressionist school, an aspect that few people realized until I think that show in 1984, the big Impressionist show, the Olympic here, at the same time that you had the solo show in Barnsdall.

**ALMARAZ:** Um hmm.

**NIETO:** And the relationship of Impressionism to the city, to the urban landscape as well as to the rural, which is what we usually associate with Impressionism. And right now, you were just looking at this photograph of a painting by Monet, and it brought to mind that influence, which I think is very strong in you, isn't it?

**ALMARAZ:** Well, I think that dealing with the urban environment, we have to certainly. . . Maybe it started with Impressionism. Because at that time, you had artists looking at cityscapes, at factories, at drawbridges, at scenes that were no longer rural, bucolic. They were not romantic in the old sense of going back to Greek landscapes. They were not pretty much can be said in the sense that up to that time, Paris started to become an industrial city and London an industrial city, and the artist of this period again conveyed that very well, with a certain softness, because it was not what it is today. I kind of see that here in Los Angeles. We have a metropolis, but it's not, hasn't been developed to the extreme that New York has, or Chicago. It still has elements of nature creeping through it, giving us a landscape sometimes very reminiscent of French Impressionism, of those lovely cityscapes or streetscapes of Paris with the horse-drawn carriages. I sound, I'm probably very romantic in my thought of this, but I still think Los Angeles presently is a romantic environment. It may not be in 50 years.

**NIETO:** And that's what you wanted to catch?

**ALMARAZ:** I think so. And leave that behind so people can look at. . . I did one painting of Looking South on North Broadway, it was called.

**NIETO:** I didn't know that.

**ALMARAZ:** From the top of the Elysian Park. And already that scene has changed. They've added more buildings, and Chinatown has taken a distinct different look. In the painting I did there's a, you know, Chinatown as it was five years ago. So already time has stood still, in that painting, and I think that's one thing painting does. It makes time stand still. . .

**NIETO:** Catches the instant.

**ALMARAZ:** . . .or blurs time in a way that say Francis Bacon blurs time, to make you aware of motion. But then there's that other very wonderful aspect of painting, is it absolutely renders something still, so you can study it for all it's worth. [...]

**NIETO:** It's funny, I always assumed that your sense of color came from the school of Mexico, for some reason.

**ALMARAZ:** Well, I think people do believe that, but actually it's not true. The sense of the color initially came from Mexico, but it's re, recognized, re-recognized in paintings. In other words, I probably reacted as a child to a serape before I ever saw a painting. But then when I saw the fauvists and I saw their paint, I said, "Oh, this reminds me of something familiar." On until maybe some of the modern artists also having that kind of, conveying that kind of feeling to me. The influences are many. The fauvists are one, in the purity of color that they have. That piece was color that was almost out of the can, although it never really was. People assume that to be literal. No. I'm saying that I rendered the color, I changed it very little. I try to keep up with the brilliancy of the color and actually work with that brilliancy the way a Indian might make a beautiful blanket out of brilliant-colored yarn. It's the combination of colors that give him a sense of tonality, not so much that he's mixing his own colors. And this is what I was trying to do in the early color paintings that I was working with. Later on, especially now, they're altered. There may be a little more gray, there may be a little bit more sophistication in my application of color. I recently did a painting that was done in [thalo] green and burnt orange, which are very, very distant from my early paintings with hot pinks and blacks. I'm getting now into a more sophisticated color idea.