TRANSCRIPTION RE:

CSUMB Founding Faculty
Oral History Project 1995-98
Rina Benmayor, Project Director

Interview with Amalia Mesa Bains, Professor Emerita
School of Visual and Public Art
College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Interviewer, Rina Benmayor, Professor Emerita
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Benmayor: Today is October 28, 2019. I'm Rina Benmayor and I'm here with Amalia Mesa Mesa Bains to record an interview for the CSUMB Founding Faculty Oral History Project. Amalia, do we have your permission to record?

Mesa Bains: Yes, you do.

Benmayor: Okay, thank you. Could we start by asking you to state your name and a little bit about yourself? Just brief biographical background?

Mesa Bains: My name is Amalia Mesa Mesa Bains. I'm an artist and an educator. I came to CSUMB really as a spectator because my husband, Richard Mesa Bains, was hired as faculty. I had just received a MacArthur Fellowship so I was not really required to work. And my Ph.D. is in the field of Psychology and it's the study of Chicana Artists. But in general I think I came there more than anything to be supportive of what I thought was an innovative new University.

Benmayor: And what year did you arrive?

Mesa Bains: We arrived there in 1995. I was a Visiting Artist for the program around '96 but it had still not received its degree granting confirmation. So once I got hired as the Chair my first job was to write the proposal for the degree granting program for California Post Secondary [Commission]. That was when the concept of Visual and Public Art was born. We didn't want an art department like other art departments. Judith Baca and Suzanne Lacy had left what I would call a "white paper." But for me it wasn't quite sufficient. So I wanted to introduce other issues like History and Ethics into the program and it not just be a studio program. So that occurred between '96 and '97 that I wrote it.

Benmayor: So in '95 you were here physically but you weren't part of the faculty.

Mesa Bains: No, I was not.

Benmayor: So did you have any relationship with Visual and Public Art during that year?

Mesa Bains: Oh, totally, yes. Johanna Poethig and Stephanie Johnson were the faculty. Judy Baca would come in and out, Suzanne Lacy very little. Johanna and I had worked together for many years in the city [San Francisco] so I kind of watched over things even though I didn't have a formal role other than a Visiting Artist role.

Benmayor: Because Judy Baca left when? Sometime in '95, I think, or was it before?

Mesa Bains: Yes. She never really completely took the role. She started out sort of going back and forth. In those early years I knew about the University - this part is interesting – long before 1995, because every time she came for the planning stages after it was over she'd come to see us in San Francisco because it wasn't that far away. She would talk my ear off about this vanguard idea that she really loved. So I was sort of primed for wanting to be part of it because she talked about it for almost two years before it actually started in '95. So I had some sense of what it was and what it was she was trying to do within Visual and Public Art. But it was left to me to do it when she finally decided that she would not stay.

[3:34] Benmayor: And in that first year I think after that first year Suzanne Lacy left?

Mesa Bains: Yes. She came back again maybe, I don't know, '98 or something like that? '97, '98. But she just stayed for a semester.

Benmayor: Right, right. So prior to coming to CSUMB with Richard what were you doing?

Mesa Bains: Well, I had been working at a place called Far West Laboratory. Despite the fact that my Ph.D. was in Psychology I've always been in the field of Education. I'd been in the school district in San Francisco Unified for about twenty-something years or longer than that. I was the Staff Development Specialist for the court ordered desegregation. So I worked with lots of teachers that were recalcitrant, which is the nicest way to say it. They didn't want to teach students of color and my job was to prepare them. In doing that, I met people from people from Far West Lab because some of the teachers from my

district were involved in a project on Diversity in the Classroom. The person at Far West Lab who was in charge of that had had a number of problems with teachers in my district, in L.A. and one other place. So they recruited me to go to work for them to help run this program and produce two books. The actual casebooks, so they were using the case-based approach to teaching that had been used like by Harvard Law and had been used in business. But this would be the first time it would be used in a classroom. So my background in teaching was very strong before I ever came to CSUMB and then I was sort of mortified when I saw how people taught because I had that whole different experience of teaching. So I finally took the job at Far West. I was there for two years. Produced the two books. And then I got the MacArthur ["Genius" award]. I also wasn't particularly well, so Richard thought it would be good for me to retire and just come with him as he made his way into this new job. Then Judy Baca tricked me. She had me over to her house on the Venice canals and one night she said, "I have someone I want you tot talk to." And it was Steve Arvizu. [Chuckles] My response to him was almost like very Catholic. I felt like I was talking to a **[6:12]** priest, a *sacerdote*. I told him, "Yes, yes." [Chuckles] So he explained to me that Judy would not be able to take the job and that they, meaning all of them, really needed me to do this or we might lose the program. Because Judy had run into many obstacles with President Smith and his wife. So I agreed to take the position. I remember that Josina Makau -- who I had become friends with through Judy Baca and who was kind of my advisor along with Joe Larkin in the development of the degree granting program for the California Post Secondary [Commission] --, Josina introduced me to a short course on Ethics so that I could build Ethics into the development of the program. Josina said to me, "Now, Amalia, you're going to apply for this job and when you interview you just tell them that you can't take the job if you don't get tenure, and Full Professor." I said, "Is that okay to do?" She goes, "Yes, it'll be all right." Baca told me the same thing. So I interviewed. I was supposed to negotiate and then I said that I couldn't take the job since I was leaving the MacArthur -- I mean I would not enjoy the fruits of it because I would have to work again --, unless they gave me tenure and full professor, which they did agree to. Then I discovered that it made me

really unpopular at the school. [Laughs] Betty McEady in particular found it very offensive. Because I'd never been in Higher Education before. So I had not, according to her, paid my dues. But it all worked out because I worked hard and I got along with the people so it was fine. But yeah, Judy got me to do it.

Benmayor: Well, in those days the contracts were a little bit [chuckles] unusual.

Mesa Bains: I used to call it the Wild West. You know, Judy's driving along in a jeep and she sees the six motor pool buildings and she says, "I want those." We got four out of the six eventually. So that's pretty good.

Benmayor: So you were working in the school district and working with teachers and very steeped in pedagogy and that sort of thing, but you were also an artist. So how did you bring that into the framework?

Mesa Bains: Well, since I was beginning to run our program then that gave me a chance to bring the notion of art-making within the context of what we were describing as community engagement. And Johanna, Stephanie, myself, Judy and even Suzanne, we all agreed that we had never been prepared for the work we eventually took on. And that we had had to learn on the ground. So when we devised the Major Learning Outcomes they were really the result of a set of practices that we had acquired through hard work and just learning. We wanted to give them those [outcomes] to begin with. So the whole idea of research as a sort of basis for art making. The idea that working with community was of value in art making. That collaborative skills would be necessary to work in community. And that you would need, of course, production skills or what you call studio skills. But if you are working in a community then they need to have some process to give you feedback and that was sort of the evaluative aspect of it. And

[10:01] then finally, we all agreed that what we had never never learned was distribution. How do you get your artwork where you think it should be? That's everything from grant writing, raising funds, to organizing in community. They were all things that we had learned but not been prepared for. So the program developed basically out of four or five of us and our life skills that we had acquired from working,

We thought we should have had them from the beginning but we didn't. I came out of San Jose State in the era of new media and plastics, and Uvex and polyurethane and all these types of -

Benmayor: Plastics and what?

Mesa Bains: Polyurethanes and metal flake sprays. They weren't even painting. They were almost like automotive in a sense. [Chuckles] That was in the 60's. So God forbid I should have ever learned to talk to anybody or plan with anybody. The model that most of us grew up with is really a 19th century model of the white male hero artist who suffers and maybe gets discovered after they're dead. They don't need anyone else and it's solely a sort of individual practice. That's not what our program is about, even though you have to have a set of skills to make things.

Benmayor: So you were a MacArthur fellow based on your artwork, is that correct?

Mesa Bains: A combination. They gave me the MacArthur, and this was a period of time in the MacArthurs where your set of skills had to be evidenced in a contribution to the larger society. I don't think that matters now but at that time. . . . So you had scientists and writers and there were people who had contributed. Some of them were Nobel Peace Prize winners. With the artists, they all tended to be people . . . but I was the only Chicana artist at that time. I don't know if there were any others. There were writers, Sandra Cisneros. There were other Latinos: Pepón Osorio, [Guillermo] Gómez Peña in performance art. But no other Chicana women artists. So it was partly my artmaking but also my revival of the tradition of the altar making and my writing. So through the years, I was never trained as an art historian or a critic but most of my friends asked me to write catalogs for them because they had been in my dissertation and they felt I understood them and knew about their work. And it's true that as another artist you actually know what a person goes through to make that. Since we were all in the same endeavor within the Chicano movement, of actually lifting up cultural practices and revealing lost histories, we actually were all in the same sort of business, as it were. So it wasn't difficult to write about. And so I wrote about Judy [Baca] and

Esther Hernández and Patssy Valdez and Santa Barraza, and Yreina Cervantes. I've written about all of them, mostly in small catalogs, occasionally in books. So I think that that was also part of why I got the **[13:14]** MacArthur. In the past, artists were usually quite self-serving.

Benmayor: Art what?

Mesa Bains: Artists are quite self serving. In the past that is a value. But in my generation, particularly in the Chicana movement, your greatest value was what you contributed to the group, to the whole. So I think that's why I got the MacArthur. It's very different now. They're all art stars. I was not an art star.

Benmayor: What was your dissertation on?

Mesa Bains: Let's see if I can remember the title. It was a study of the Influence of Culture on the Identity of Ten Chicana Artists. I used identity not in the popular sense, this was a psychological understanding of it and it was under Human Subjects laws. So they were all numbered. They were not individually known, although I think people could have figured it out. So I looked at identity construction in early adulthood. And I looked at issues like the influence of family, gender, sex roles and I looked at the idea of what we might call work or labor, like what it was that they did. So it was, it had like three categories and nine subcategories. They were based on interviews and a study of their work. Image analysis. Yeah, it was very comprehensive. But I had trouble with some scholars that felt that they could take the work and know who the artists were. This was sort of, not pre feminist but before people were "out." So there were people in the study whose interviews with me revealed aspects of their sexual life as children and as adults. And I could not have that go out. So I locked down all the biographic chapters, in effect I locked down the dissertation. Some people track it down every once in a while. And they use the summary chapter.

Benmayor: I was just curious because you made reference to your dissertation in relation to art. Okay, so when you came to the University in 1996 and you joined the faculty as a full professor, tenured [Laughs]

Mesa Bains: Something like that, yes. I think it was '97 by the time it was all complete.

Benmayor: '97. Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the environment that you found, pedagogically, in terms of the way the structures were organized? We were Centers and Institutes.

Mesa Bains: Yeah. One loves that. That was my favorite. That's why I threw myself so headstrong into it, is that I thought it made sense. So instead of Colleges we had Centers. We were using interdisciplinary models. So our department, for example, didn't have an Art History Department. Didn't have an Arts Education Department. And didn't have a Studio Department. It was all one thing. And then there were even broader interdisciplinary projects which I really liked. At that time they were also using outcome-based education which I knew from the public education sector because that was very popular at that time. So it made sense to me. Because part of what I felt we were really on the cusp of was the idea that the society had changed so completely that people no longer got a job and stayed in that job until they retired. The data was telling us that people might – and that was a long time ago – that they might change jobs seven to eight times. Now it's probably up to 20. They would need cross cutting skills. So to me that's why the MLO's [Major Learning Outcomes] made sense, because they weren't buried in one discipline, you know, like Chemistry, Science. They were like sets of, almost like cross current skills that were moveable. That once you got them you could go to any of these areas and use these skills. Almost like an extension of the early work on higher order thinking skills. You know, we knew in public education that in order for children to learn they had to have these building blocks. Not all children learn by rote memorization. Not all children have sight vocabulary. Not all children can use phonetics. So we already **[18:14]** knew in public education about structures of learning. And so when I saw this at CSUMB I thought that that was very workable and that it would result in something that would be very revolutionary and very

preparatory for anybody leaving that to go out into the real world. Because they would have a set of skills of either inquiry or analysis that they could apply to a variety of positions they might hold in their lifetime. So I found the whole pedagogical model of the University Learning Requirements and the Major Learning Outcomes and the Centers and the interdisciplinary and outcome-based education, they all made sense to me. But I also recognized they hadn't been tested. And I think in reflection, of all the things that we could have done a better job with . . . but we didn't have control over it. Because Clinton wasn't going into the second term, he needed it to open. The base closings were political poison, so he had to show, you know, swords into plowshares. So we opened the doors prematurely. So we had not tested out how the ULR's were really going to work. And that came back to cost us many years later, in the return to a basic GE [General Education model] which is really not relevant to life today. But I remember thinking later we should have waited, tested them out, there were literally too many of them. We would have pared them down. I thought for us, the MLO's really made sense. They worked perfectly. I saw other departments using MLO's just as though they were like disciplines within the department. So they weren't cross cutting.

Benmayor: So MLO's means Major Learning Outcomes.

Mesa Bains: Major Learning Outcomes.

Benmayor: So you're comparing the General Education University Learning Requirements to the Major Learning Requirements that when students declare a major they have to complete.

Mesa Bains: Then they would have that to go to. And in some cases I think people worked really hard on trying to fit together Major Learning Outcomes that could give those cross cutting skills and in other departments I don't think they did that at all. And in some departments, schools, colleges, however they were called later, they actually reversed themselves and went back to narrow discipline-based work.

Benmayor: So for somebody taking a major in Visual and Public Art, how did you present this panorama to them because presumably being an artist was central, right?

Mesa Bains: Yes. It was a little disturbing to them at the beginning. They didn't understand what's research got to do with it? Because we know this but we forgot, that many young people go into the Visual Arts because they're not good or comfortable in other forms of learning. So they might not be able to read or write well so they went toward the visual. And here we were throwing them back into research and analysis which they didn't even understand what that meant. So, you know, that's where I think **[21:34]** the Pro Seminar was really useful because that's how we introduced it. So the Pro Seminar was a semester long. Or was it two? I think at the beginning it was two semesters and then we cut it to one. And it helped them to sort of orient themselves to how these skills would be used. It was, you know, not an easy sell at the beginning but we were lucky because at the beginning what we got were students who had been in junior or community colleges *for years* and never gotten out. They came to us with such extraordinary visual skills that they ate up all the rest of it because they already knew how to do all those things. It was later when we got students who never had a background in the Visual Arts that we had to beef up the studio courses. Because the first two cohorts were amazing. They were so skilled. They really loved the idea of learning about planning community and learning about designing their own shows and things like that because they already knew how to make art. Later that became more difficult. And one of the things we learned was that our program wasn't deep enough in some areas. But it was an undergraduate program so they weren't supposed to learn everything before they went off. I think the whole evolution of the pedagogical model is, I really feel, really worth some research. Somebody needs to look at what worked? What didn't work? When did it change? Why did it change? Was it just about resources or was it about people caving to external pressure from junior colleges who didn't understand the names of our programs? They kept saying, "Visual and Public Art, what does that mean?" And we said, "It means that it's for people who want to make art that's engaged in the community." That's not to say they can't exhibit but this is one of their goals. And it really goes back to the whole, well both Chicano and Feminist and Black notions of service. And social justice, which for many art programs this actually has no place at all. Yeah.

Benmayor: So you became the Chair of the Institute, the Director of the Institute?

Mesa Bains: Yes, I was the Director.

Benmayor: Right. In some ways you were lucky because you have a skill base that's unified, art. Making art, whereas some others like Sciences and Humanities and Social Sciences, it was very difficult to. . . .

Mesa Bains: I never thought about that.

Benmayor: Yeah. It was like where's the there there? [Laughter]

Mesa Bains: No. We know what we're supposed to do. We make that. That's what we do.

[24:35] Benmayor: So I am curious to know, just briefly, the experience of your students once they graduated. Have you tracked them?

Mesa Bains: Oh, yeah. We've had really good experience with our students. They will sometimes write after years saying, "I get it now." They went out in the world and they just wanted to be arty-arty. And then eventually they got jobs in museums or in community centers or teaching. Then they got it, "Oh, this is why you wanted me to learn this." So I think we've been pretty successful in placement. Many of our students have gone on to graduate degrees in places like Yale, Goldsmiths in London. . . . Yeah, we've had a really good cross section. Many in Museum Studies. And quite a few muralists and community artists that still work. It's not an easy job and I think about it. You know, Joe Larkin's passing has made me think a lot about when he helped me to develop the California Post Secondary [accreditation document] and at one point he took me to task and he said, "Amalia, you know, I think you think all artists just are born to suffer and they don't ever have full employment." He said, "I think you want to make a program that changes that. You want a program where people feel that they can *have* a job. And that they can understand how that would work." So it made me think very differently about some of the skill sets, the placements that we would have them in. By then we had already started to build out our community partnerships. And what was our saving grace at Visual and Public Art was that we were able to raise money for external projects

that could bring our students in company of very renowned artists. So our first one was the Reciprocal University Arts Project. We had I think eight community partners. I used to work in television and they call it "ascertainment," which is when you try to find out what is going on in the field and what do people want and need. So we had something like 40 community organizations come in for a day long set of practices of communication. It turned out almost all of them wanted to contest the negative stereotype of Latinos that existed in the region. They felt very much that they were seen as mostly criminals and not much else. **[27:17]** Maybe laborers. That gave us a sort of map of where we could go with these community partnerships. That lasted for about four years and brought in about $600,000 over four years. Which meant we could pay for all of these artists that normally would never be able to come to a state school. Then our second set of funding went on for eight years. That was through the Nathan Cummings Foundation. It was [through] a friend that I had known for many years, who has passed now, Claudine Brown. She really believed that long term funding was the only way to effect change in education so she guaranteed us at least eight years, and she did.

Benmayor: Wow.

Mesa Bains: And we had like $150,000 a year. The last two years it was down to $100,000. But that made it possible for us to publish. It made it possible for us to form consortiums with other schools that were doing similar work around the country. It allowed our students to do internships here and in other parts of the country. We were very lucky in the fact that we knew from the beginning we could not count on money from a state school to do what we needed to do. Even after the first two years or three years our budget started getting cut. So then we thought well, we have to raise money, then. We had had the experience of raising money through community arts for many, many years before we came to CSUMB. I say "we" because Richard Bains ran the Music Performing Arts [MPA]. It allowed us to do interdisciplinary programs, because we could both raise the money. So I think that in some ways VPA and MPA in the early years had a different experience of living out the Vision of CSUMB because we had the

resources to do it. And we didn't need to ask anybody, "*Can* we do this?" We just did it. Then, you know, when we ran out of money and then we had to ask.

Benmayor: [Chuckles] That's a good segue because you mentioned the Vision and I wanted to get to that. I assume that when you first were talking with Judy Baca and Richard applying for the Music position here on campus that you had already seen the Vision.

Mesa Bains: Yes.

Benmayor: And how did that influence your predisposition, if you will, to come and work here?

Mesa Bains: Well, it was sort of like my own dream realized. I went, "What? Somebody wrote this down?" Particularly because for many of us working in community settings, and I had been a Commissioner of Art before and Richard had been at the Symphony so we had worked in major institutions for years, and the whole drive to bring diversity in had always been such an enormous obstacle. So coming there and seeing that it was built into the Vision and for me particularly because of collaborative teaching models that I had been involved in in the school district for many years, that really resonated. This whole notion of collaboration. Because I always believed that our Vision was extremely well suited to communities of color because people who don't have a lot of resources and larger families learn very, very early on cooperative learning models, collaborative models because that's the nature of life for us. I saw it in the classes, I saw it in the classes. Latino and Black students would immediately go right into the cooperative learning model. They liked it, they were comfortable with it. Many of the students who resisted it were majority students who had always been competitive and didn't like the idea of sharing not the work but the credit with anyone else. So I felt from the very beginning that the Vision really came out of knowing who you would serve and that that University had been designed to serve the Tri-County area, to serve *underserved* communities. That's why it was designed in the way it was. I really feel that the reason it changed is because the student recruitment changed over time and then we started responding to those kinds of students who didn't need the "Vision model" in the same way we thought they would. And

that was the beginning of the transformation, I think, away from a cooperative and diverse…. I remember hiring processes that were really centered on bringing in diverse applicants. I don't think that happens at all now. I don't think it's on the front burner or even the back burner. It's just not there.

[32:16] Benmayor: But ironically the population of students of color has increased!

Mesa Bains: Increased!

Benmayor: Because you go on campus now and you see much more diversity than you did before.

Mesa Bains: That's great. I just wish we had the same model we had before. [Chuckles]

Benmayor: So how did you see yourself enacting the Vision?

Mesa Bains: Well, this is terrible to say, my move toward acting toward the Vision or taking action really was when I encountered resistance to the Vision. That was when I stood up and thought, "Okay. Now we're going to have to do something about this." That had to do with the President and the Provost and their way of defining students and this move away from the Tri-County and notions of diversity. I always remember when the Provost Dell Felder got up and she used that sort of diminishing language. She talked about non-white students. Not students of color, but non-white students. Non-English speaking students. So already we were in a dilemma because she had reversed the understanding of who we served. She had already begun to define what would be successful, she called them quality students, the successful students. That didn't include the students that we most wanted to have there. So I sensed that that was happening. Then we formed the Chicano Latino Faculty and Staff Association [CLFSA] because we felt like we needed to have a more collective voice. A lot of us came from backgrounds of activism and social justice so it wasn't unknown to us to organize in that way. That was sort of the beginning, I think, of really pushing forward resistance to dismantling the Vision, which we already sensed by maybe the third or fourth year. I think the last fallout with President Smith was around '99, 1999-2000. So for me that was like three or four years in already. I was kind of shocked because I thought the reason we went there was because this was supportive of the diverse Vision. Then I realized that whatever was at the beginning was

under attack by the next generation of leadership which did not find itself agreeable with that. So that was the beginning, I think, of the battleground that we entered into in those years. Some of it was successful, some of it was not. But I'm very proud of those years because I feel like we rallied to try to defend what we thought we might lose and eventually, some of it we did lose.

Benmayor: So what were the issues that triggered the formation of CLFSA?

[35:32] Mesa Bains: It was interesting because it was highly individualized. We had Octavio Villalpando and Cecilia Burciaga in Administration's offices. Octavio especially was young, Harvard educated and he was involved in I think data analysis. So he was supportive of our sort of student model. When Cecilia was moved out by Dell Felder. . .

Benmayor: [softly] Peter Smith, I think.

Mesa Bains: No, it was Dell Felder.

Benmayor: Ah!

Mesa Bains: She told Peter that he had to stop having Cecilia come to the meetings because she was a negative force. She didn't smile enough. That's not really what it was. Then Octavio Villalpando stepped in to defend her and then he was put on administrative leave. In the course of like two or three weeks, they were both shoved out. We watched it happen over and over and over again. If someone was critical of the administration, there were these steps that were taken: One, they'd be put on administrative leave. When they came back they'd be moved into an office that was as far from the campus center as possible. They would lose their budget, their admin, secretaries, sometimes even their phone. It was like a model of distancing people from wherever decision making was made. So that was one of the ones that tipped us. Also students. When we felt that the students were being undermined by the recruitment models and by this notion of what was "wrong" with them, we just took action. We organized not just on campus but in the community because we had some really great community activists in Seaside and Salinas and we had our partners that we had been cultivating for a number of years who were really interested to how the

school was going to produce students. I think we were lucky at the beginning to have a sort of solid base. It got harder over the years to sustain it. Then when some of us that were more key figures began to leave and retire, it just depleted. Sometimes these things come into being at a critical moment, because it's necessary. I've learned for myself that one of the keys to my pattern of activism is when something is under threat and I feel that it has to be defended. It's sort of a natural response that I have, to organize. To give language to it. To find leadership that wants to work in that way. So in many ways, CSUMB was a great learning lab for me. It had been years since I've had to do that. I was shocked because you know, in San Francisco, you don't have to do that sort of thing. It's a diverse city and maybe you don't get all the things you want but there's a place to be working. Little by little it felt as though we were just being squeezed. People were being left out in the cold until finally, out of their own self-preservation and dignity, they would resign. **[39:00]** That happened three sets of times. By that time, we started using legal means. We would pool our money and hire a lawyer. Yeah, it was a very prolonged period of resistance. I think it started in '99. Yeah, I'd say it went for four years or so.

Benmayor: So basically it was the conflicts that were squeezing the presence of students and faculty of color on the campus.

Mesa Bains: Yeah.

Benmayor: How about the recruitment part? Were you able to recruit in VPA? For faculty of color?

Mesa Bains: Yes. We did. And, what we found over the years is that the students find us. I would say we were more like 2/3 Latino and Black in this last graduating group. We have a lot. They come to us because they know it's the kind of program where their values are going to be connected. I was vigilant for years about faculty. I feel really happy that before I left, I hired both Angelica Muro and Dio Mendoza because they will keep that program running for years. You know, we went through some bumps for a while, with people who one would think would be supportive of the Vision because they'd been in it, but in

the end, it wasn't that they weren't supportive, they were just too busy taking care of themselves. And that's the kind of job where you give more than you get.

Benmayor: So how was the work climate for you in Visual and Public Art, in terms of the stresses?

Mesa Bains: This is so terrible! I loved it. [Chuckles] I felt stress with the outside University, but within VPA I was very happy. I could have gone on being Chair forever except my sister got sick and I had to stay home. My parents had died and there was just no way to take care of her unless I went home. No, you know, I used to liken it to having your own repertory company. So like everybody will say, "Well, what are we gonna do today?" Then they would just do it with you. So because I raised the money and because I had access to support mechanisms, I felt like I could give the faculty support for their own leadership so they could have their own projects. I think when you are a Chair, that's one of the most important things you can do, which is develop leadership in your faculty. They have to feel that they're getting something out of it for themselves. Otherwise it's pretty hard to keep up that level of work. You know? By the end I wasn't even teaching anymore. I really couldn't. I taught a course every semester but it was really just managing the programs, the money coming in, the visiting artists, dealing with faculty evaluations, dealing with the University, fending people off. I always had this joke, "When I leave put a blowup picture of me at the door and they'll go away. They won't want to deal with it."

Benmayor: [Chuckles] So it sounds like in VPA you had a really wonderful symbiosis and commitment to the Vision and that didn't change.

Mesa Bains: No.

[42:44] Benmayor: But how were you situated in terms of the larger University? Were you on committees?

Mesa Bains: Oh, way too many committees. I think it was partly because we were a group, you know, so we all took our turn doing work. I remember when they were going to rewrite the Mission

Statement. [Chuckles] Franny [Payne Adler] and Josina Makau and I, we would meet secretly at Sweet Elena's. We'd have a little coffee and pastry and hatch out our next plan about how we would get the language correctly. I remember after a while I was the last one left standing. Even Franny had to give it up. She said, "This is ridiculous." We got all the way through it and then at the very last minute they decided to post it online and open it up to suggestions and then that was the death nell. Yeah, I was always in the Senate. I sat on various committees. Sat on people's tenure track committees because I was one of the few tenured, only tenured in my department. So I liked all that stuff. I like the notion of University service. I loved our categories of creation and discovery for our scholarship. I felt like we really had created quite a really beautiful model. I don't know if it's still there anymore. Because I really felt like if I was starting again as a professor I would want that kind of model.

Benmayor: What do you think were your greatest accomplishments? I mean you created a program that is still working today. It hasn't been revised and changed.

Mesa Bains: No, it hasn't been revised. They added one MLO when I was gone once - one of these self-expression ones – and I go, "All right. All right."

Benmayor: [Chuckles]

Mesa Bains: I think the first one was building a financial base for community-based work. Understanding that we couldn't do that within the structure of classes and we couldn't do it without paying people to take those things on. Then the second was CLFSA. I feel like we stood up at the right time. We fended it off for a while but it came back around anyway. But I feel still very proud that we worked together and I liked working with staff because you know, the bulk of the Latinos on campus are in the staff departments. So, we had everybody working on it. And Petra [Valenzuela] and Suzy [Hernandez] and Rose [Pasibe] and all the guys from the different departments on [Buildings and] Grounds, and Joe [ ] **[45:55]** and all of them. I mean they were our backup. I remember when they were trying to paint over our mural across from VPA. Joe would call me and say, "Mija, I heard they're asking for white paint and

ladders." I go, "Okay, thank you." Then I'd call up the PR guy and I'd say, "This is Amalia. I hear you want to white wash our mural." "Well, no. No, no. We didn't say that!" I said, "Well, okay, this is what I want you to know. If you try to do that I am going to give you the worst photo op you've ever had in your life. I can have anywhere from 50 to 100 people there in a couple of hours and they'll be standing in front of the mural and you won't paint." And he said, "I never said that. I never said that!" And I said, "Yeah, you did. You just thought nobody knew." And so the guys always would tell me when something was going to happen. Because they know everything. They see all the orders come in.

Benmayor: [Laughs]. That's funny!

Mesa Bains: Yeah. I think CLFSA was successful because staff were an integral part of it. I remember when we had to go in and ask Peter Smith for his resignation it was Donaldo [Urioste], Ray [Gonzalez], Petra [Valenzuela] and me. And Petra was shaking like a leaf but she stood her ground and she told them why. We all had a reason why we thought he should resign. Mine was that he couldn't control his wife.

Benmayor: I thought it was also asking the Provost to resign.

Mesa Bains: Oh, we didn't even have to ask her. She saw those signs with her picture on it. No, we didn't have to ask her. She resigned on her own. After Ruben [Mendoza] circulated that study that she had done, that she had written about Mexican women being submissive. She wrote it when she was much younger and she was in Texas. That was it. She knew then that we're going to dig up stuff on you. And she was my next door neighbor. She stopped speaking to me pretty quickly after that.

Benmayor: [Laughs] My, my!

Mesa Bains: Yeah, no. Those were great days. I love a good fight. It just sort of energizes, you know?

Benmayor: And how about in terms of the students in CLFSA? It was a faculty and staff association but ….

Mesa Bains: But the students were fully supportive. They were something! Remember the ones at the beginning, Viana [Torres] and . . . We had some really strong, strong students those first years. Remember those graduation speeches? Ay, those kids were the best! I think it was a good learning lesson for them because they had not been involved in political action before. They were a little afraid. I mean faculty were afraid. I could go out there because I had tenure. But, I would have done it anyway because I didn't really care. But you know, I think the students learned a lot from organized action. Petitions. Marching. Demonstrating. Things that they needed to know how to do. I feel like that's sort of Chicano DNA. You know how to do that because you've had to do it so many times. Judy [Baca] and I used to **[49:05]** go all the time to the different students, like at UCLA and even at Irvine. When students were demonstrating we would go to visit them. They always went to fasting too soon. "So wait at the very end to do it or they'll wait you out and you'll get sick," and they'll be… "They won't change."

Benmayor: And also the students were learning about . . . All of their faculty, we were products of the Sixties.

Mesa Bains: Yes.

Benmayor: So in some ways they were learning about those time periods in their classes but didn't have the space to express that.

Mesa Bains: So when they could see that and actually understand what it meant to do that. . . . I think about it now. I mean, my God. Here they are demonstrating in Chile, Bolivia, Beirut, Hong Kong, Barcelona. And *we* are not out in the streets when we really should be. Although he [Trump] did get booed at the baseball game so that goes to show you.

Benmayor: [Chuckles]

Mesa Bains: I think that in some ways I feel it was the finest hour at CSUMB because it was the time in which the University embodied its own Vision. Which was to stand up for the rights of others. To pursue equity. To make sure that diversity was integral to the University. Those were all the things we were

trying to do. And sadly, that we *had* to do, because clearly the Vision was not being lived out within the administration. I remember when we did our first digital mural. We had a lot of farmworker students working on the team that designed the mural. We had been asked by, oh, I can't remember, it was an umbrella organization for Farm without Harm. The strawberry pickers and all that. So we did a mural on the strawberry picking. It was called "La Fruta del Diablo" [The Fruit of the Devil], because that's what the kids' families used to call it, because it's hard to pick. We got it all done, got it all printed and we were trying to be entrepreneurial so they paid us $1,000 for it. It was gonna go out, a portable mural, while people did organizing. And somehow it showed up in the paper. They interviewed Patricia Rodriguez, who was our Digital Mural teacher at the time, and she used the word poison instead of pesticide. And all hell broke loose. I had Peter Smith in my front room at nine o'clock at night, slightly buzzed, I could smell the alcohol. He was just irate. And afraid. Because Freschetta, the Congressman, had called his office. They had like, I don't know, four or five-hundred faxes from the Western Growers Association coming in all day long. And he said, "Well, you have to give the money back." And I said, "Well, why would we do that?" He said, "Because otherwise the growers say that they'll pay you and they're going to have you making a mural for the growers." I said, "No. We select who we work with and that does not match our goals of social justice." So anyway, finally I think we ended up giving the mural to them and not charging them. But that was my first realization, "Oh, my God, I'm in Kansas!" [Chuckles] You know! "Where am I?" Because in San Francisco that mural wouldn't have made a beep. No one would have paid any attention. But yeah, and that was when I realized that the administration really wasn't in tune with the Vision. Because that mural was perfectly in keeping what we had committed to. Environmentalism. Diversity. Labor issues. Community Outreach. It was everything and yet somehow to them it was just totally frightening and upsetting and they just wanted us to get rid of it.

[53:15] Benmayor: I don't remember this exactly. So who commissioned the mural?

Mesa Bains: I think it was called Regional Action Program.

Benmayor: And it was from Salinas?

Mesa Bains: Yeah. It was an umbrella organization. Their membership was made up of the heads of like Farm Without Harm, one of the UFW Strawberry Pickers. It was several different things. They would do education like at shopping malls and things. They liked the idea of a portable mural. We even designed these little stands for them to put it on.

Benmayor: So when you say it was a digital mural you didn't look at it online.

Mesa Bains: No. I'm sorry. It was on Tyvek.

Benmayor: It was on what?

Mesa Bains: Tyvek. It's a type of industrial canvas that is used in the building of houses. And it's perfect for digital murals. It's indestructible.

Benmayor: How do you spell that?

Mesa Bains: T Y V E K.

Benmayor: Oh, okay.

Mesa Bains: Johanna did all of her murals on Tyvek at the school. So it seemed reasonable to us, I mean we were doing service, we were being entrepreneurial, the school had asked us to be. So in the end we gave them the mural. We didn't take the money. Finally the administration backed off. But after that we were sort of under the lens particularly of growers. And you know, we kept having that same problem. We did a big

[54:45] mural for the historical society that ran all the adobes in Monterey, the Monterey Historical Society. They had the museum, the Maritime Museum. And they asked us to design a mural for them on the history of the adobes in the whole area. So we did a beautiful map of the area. We had Chinese junks and we had the Gold Rush and all the Californio period. But central to the mural, because we always have central figures, were the grandparents of one of our students, they were Mexican. We designed it to fit a wall out in their little patio area that was 15 feet high and 9 feet long. We had a day where it was anchored

up and all this to-to. Within two months we got a call, "Please come pick up the mural." Because people on the board felt that it did not embody the philosophy of the Monterey Historical Society. And I thought, "Oh, yeah, too many Mexicans probably."

Benmayor: [Chuckles]

Mesa Bains: Because you know, they love that Anglo and Californio period but it's sort of white washed. Yeah, we kept learning each time we do these projects. "Oh, I get it. We're not in San Francisco anymore."

Benmayor: [Chuckles] Right. So let me ask you what you think your greatest legacy has been at this University.

Mesa Bains: I think it's VPA itself. I really do. I think the things you do individually, people will forget over time. You go away and then they don't remember anymore. But when you build something and that something lasts and it embodies the values that you share with the University, I feel like as long as there's VPA there, there is some part of that Vision that will still be alive. You know, we still do our projects. We still bring in visiting artists. We're doing the whole project for the Jubilee Year called "25 at 25." So we picked 25 artists from our 25-year history and we're going to put up a show at the new Campus Gallery. A part of it will be in the community. We haven't figured out the space yet. And it's amazing. **[57:08]** Every artist I contact, "I'm in. I'm in." So they're going to send us work so we'll go and pick them up. We have shipping on a couple because they're back east but they have galleries in L.A. and Oakland so we'll be able to get them without too much cost. Yeah, I wanted us to show that over that 25 years these are the, you know, Carmen Lomas Garza, Esther Hernández, Pepón Osorio, Carrie May Weems, Daoud Bey, Mildred Howard, Hong Lu, Roger Shimamoto. We have had the best of the best over those years. And every one of those visits opened up some student, it might have been one or two, but every time. Once or twice we had tried doing artists that were not of color. The students complained. Or they bullied the artist. "Well, did you pay the farm workers when you painted them?" "Who took that picture?" "Why does

that woman not have a head?" [Chuckles] And I thought, "Oh, my God, we've trained them so I can't bring in just any old painter." No. They know what you're supposed to be doing. So it's really adorable.

Benmayor: Is VPA in danger?

Mesa Bains: No, I don't think so.

Benmayor: Because there was a time when there was talk about unifying all of the arts?

Mesa Bains: Yeah. No, I don't think so. I think Angelica played it right. She didn't take a space in the new [College] building, so she had negotiations to get the building 70. Because we didn't get in there. So she said, "Well, then give us this building." So we got Building 70. They're remodeling it now.

Benmayor: That's again one of the ["eyebrow" buildings].

Mesa Bains: Yes. So we have 70, 71, 72 and 73. We have four now. Yeah. Well, she's very shrewd. Angelica can handle the deed. She can stand on her own. She has tenure now so she's a little spitfire. She doesn't care anymore. She was very careful before. I told her, "You have to be careful, wait till you get your tenure." But yeah, and what they are bringing in now. I brought in people of my generation and maybe the generation after me who were kind of legends. I mean they were like the big guys. We don't have that kind of money anymore and who she's bringing now are the new legends. There's Mario Ybarra. There's collective groups from Mexico. From L.A. She's brought in some really great people. And the students, they are current. These are people using new digital techniques and organizing in different ways. Because it's a different era. And that's what I like about VPA. The Galería de la Raza [in San Francsisco] **[59:57]** is the same way. If an organization has deep enough roots it can keep transforming itself with every generation, every audience it makes itself more flexible. And I feel like with VPA we are now in the next stage of it.

Benmayor: But at the same time you haven't diverged from the original Vision.

Mesa Bains: No, no. The DNA is always there. It's just that in each generation you show it differently. But no, you cannot let that go. That's what makes you who you are. You know, I feel like VPA

is a living thing. And so that's why if I think of legacy that's it for me. In my broader life it's regeneration. You know. I did the ReGeneration Project after I got the MacArthur. I did it through the Galería. It lasted **[1:00:43**] as a project for about three years. So I put some money into it from my MacArthur money. And then The Galería absorbed it. Like this person in Phoenix who is helping my show, he is a ReGeneration. Dio [Mendoza] is a ReGeneration. I run into them everywhere.

Benmayor: And what was the ReGeneration Project?

Mesa Bains: ReGeneration was a project that I started at the Galeria de la Raza [in San Francisco Mission District] where we had been approached and by we I mean people like Carmen Lomas Garza, myself, Judy Baca – it's interesting, they came to the women. They always wanted to know what was it like during the Movement. Like what did you do? How did you ….? And so we realized this new generation, and this was in the 90's, were very different. There were a lot of queer trans feminists, really out feminists, and middle class. Not necessarily Spanish speaking at all. And mixed race. A lot of mixed race. So we organized them into groups. One group was taking on educational projects. One group was curating. One group was writing. And then those groups took on projects at the Galería for two years. Now they're chief curators in museums! They are running programs out of cultural centers. I mean they're all over the country. There were like 45 at the beginning, and I would say I know where about 25 of them are. I keep track of them. Then after I left that project, that's when I went to CSUMB. So I already had the sense that the investment in young adults would return itself. You know, I had spent all those years, many years, chastising old museum directors and trying to bully people into diversity and finally realizing after a decade of doing it that the last person capable of change is an old white man in his sixties. He built his career on certain cultural values which will never change. So if you want change you need to raise your own people. So after years of doing that, I went home and said, "Okay, then we're gonna do that." And everybody collaboratively worked together and the Galería was willing to sponsor it. But in the end, people were mad at me because some people had to leave the Galería because they felt too threatened by the new people.

They thought they could just stay there forever. But young people expect things, you know? They look at things differently. So VPA was a natural next step and I feel as much about the young people as about the faculty that it was a success. It's had its bumps. And who knows with that University what could happen. But I'm still hopeful.

Benmayor: Well, with that, Amalia I want to thank you for this wonderful interview. I've learned a lot.

Mesa Bains: Oh, thank you.

Benmayor: So thank you very much.

Mesa Bains: You're welcome.

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