

**TRANSCRIPTION RE:**

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

**Interview with Judith Baca, Founding Professor  
School of Visual and Public Art  
College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Interviewer, Amalia Mesa Bains, Professor Emerita  
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**Narrator: Judith Baca**

**Interviewer: Amalia Mesa Bains**

1           **Mesa Bains:** Okay, we're recording an interview with Judith Baca on September 9, 2019. This is  
2 part of the Founding Faculty Oral History Project. So, I'm going to start off with a question, Judy. This is  
3 the section that has to do with the motivation for coming to CSUMB and stories of arrival. We all have a  
4 story that stands out in our minds about coming to CSUMB. Can you talk about the moment when you first  
5 heard about the University, when you first arrived on campus and what your feelings were when you  
6 landed?

7           **Baca:** I first heard about the University in a meeting that was called by Steve Arvizu. He asked to  
8 meet with me and I believe that he invited me up to Monterey and there was a hotel on the beach where  
9 everybody was meeting. We weren't actually meeting on the campus at that point.

10          **Mesa Bains:** Right.

11          **Baca:** And he explained to me the Vision of this University. In the Salinas Valley in this location,  
12 there was a possibility of us beginning to be able to teach a very selective set of students, students from that  
13 region who were children of migrant workers, of the people who populated that region. He asked if I  
14 wouldn't be interested in leading the efforts around the Arts. They were putting together a select group of  
15 professors that would be part of the Planning Committee. And I really liked Steve and I thought that he was  
16 a sort of joyful, powerful spirit. I immediately became engaged with him in the possibility of this dream.  
17 And I thought, "Wow, this could be really wonderful." So that was the first meeting. Then I think we  
18 started to meet at this hotel. The first time I went to the campus that was another thing. We went on a tour  
19 of the campus because at that point it was still filled with military. We weren't really allowed on the  
20 campus. We weren't allowed on the campus for some time. They were transforming it. The military was

21 leaving and the campus was not at all prepared for non military personnel. Then of course, I do remember  
22 very specifically that first day driving around all these barracks that were boarded up. It looked like a ghost  
23 town. And it was massive, just massive! And then there were all these things about weapons and armories  
24 and bullets and I don't know, bombs and things in the ground. It was like we were warned in all these areas  
25 not to step here or there because they were still filled with military paraphernalia. But it had a very  
26 **[3:38]** ominous presence. I remember thinking about the land and that space and how every war had been  
27 staged from Fort Ord. All of the American engagement had begun with training of soldiers from that  
28 facility. And there were cavalry barracks, I mean where the horses were kept, it went all the way back to  
29 that time. And the other part of it was because it was a military base it had preserved a great deal of the  
30 environment. It wasn't all built up. So I could see through the military facilities what was original land and  
31 how exquisitely beautiful it was. So it was a mixed feeling of what was imposed over the top of a gorgeous  
32 and beautiful natural site, and the memory of that early land. And then on top of that, the layering of all of  
33 these military acts and the training of young men. I could feel what they had been through there. It was  
34 kind of overwhelming.

35 **Mesa Bains:** Okay. They're asking you if you would talk about what they're calling the early days.  
36 What your first assignment was. What did you envision that you could contribute in your role? Can you  
37 remember a particular story of taking a role on the campus?

38 **[5:28] Baca:** There were so many different events that were kind of notable. It was a long time, probably  
39 a year before we were really on the campus. We were having these meetings in various places. The team  
40 was assembled. At that point I think Steve Arvizu asked me who would I want to work with in the Arts and  
41 who could else would I invite. Two people really came to mind immediately. One was the fact that Luis  
42 Valdez was just within reach of the campus.

43 **Mesa Bains:** Yes, yes.

44           **Baca:** He was in La Paz, I mean in San Juan Bautista. Steve said, “Well, let’s go see him.” I said,  
45 “Well, it would be incredible if you could get him to be engaged with the theatrical aspects of the  
46 university.” That was a profound meeting and he said, “Let’s go.” So I came up [from Los Angeles] and  
47 we drove out to San Juan Bautista and we went to this little Mexican restaurant, I can’t remember which  
48 one it was -

49           **Mesa Bains:** Probably Doña Esther’s or Jardines [de San Juan]. It’s the only two we have.

50           **Baca:** One of those, right. We sat down, and Luis had always had some eye on those grounds [Fort  
51 Ord]. I guess at some point he was talking to George Lucas about acquiring parts of that facility. And he  
52 wanted space like that.

53           **Mesa Bains:** Wow.

54           **Baca:** You know, having been in the Teatro Campesino, in his small space, the idea of having sort  
55 of an expansive space to work in. So I talked to him about thinking about the planning as we were starting  
56 the planning, looking at him to kind of fill out a vision that would address the people that he’d worked with  
57 for primarily all of his life in the teatro. So he began to join us and we started to fill out the ideas of the  
58 Arts. Although he wasn’t part of that original planning committee. The planning committee actually was  
59 very interesting because it was sort of science heavy.

60           **Mesa Bains:** Right.

61 **[7:56] Baca:** Yeah. It was fascinating for me because I’d never been in a group like that. I remember  
62 coming in one day, which is what actually set off this whole thing for me in terms of the visual imaging,  
63 seeing— I can’t remember the professor’s name --, he was working with Native American material and he  
64 had a laptop and he’d changed his keyboard to writing Navajo. I was looking at the keyboard. I said, “What  
65 is that?” He said, “I am writing in native language.” And then I saw the images which were these little  
66 robotic things running across the top. At the time in the early computing there were no images on  
67 computers that in any way would represent people of color, represent, you know, the kind of ideas that he

68 had about being able to communicate in the language of the First Peoples and to be able to represent those  
69 ideas within the planning and the curriculum. And I just said, “Oh, my God, this is so cool!” Then what we  
70 need is the imagery that goes with this. And it’s possible for us to really think about transforming this  
71 system of technology into relating to the people that we are trying to serve in this University. That’s how  
72 the digital mural idea began.

73 **Mesa Bains:** Wow. I wonder if it was George [Baldwin]. It was either George or Jim [May]. Might  
74 have been Jim.

75 **Baca:** I can’t remember people’s names anymore but he was a very sweet man and a very kind of  
76 thoughtful person who was really very focused on -

77 **Mesa Bains:** That would be Jim. That was Jim.

78 **[9:53] Baca:** That was his focus in research. Then being around the scientists – it was a real sort of  
79 integration across academic cultures. You know, in the University of California we never meet. I mean  
80 we’re across campus. We’re miles apart in terms of the campus. The North Campus, the South Campus,  
81 you don’t even see each other. Here we were in the same room, literally months and months. I would listen  
82 to them talk about what they thought was important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Again, we were talking all the time,  
83 “the 21<sup>st</sup> campus for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

84 **Mesa Bains:** Right.

85 **Baca:** And then of course Luis was inspirational. Whenever he really got himself on, he would just  
86 move the room. He could just like enchant the entire space with these ideas. That was his strength. His  
87 strength was vision, really.

88 **Mesa Bains:** Yes.

89 **Baca:** Okay, and then I invited Suzanne Lacy.

90 **Mesa Bains:** Okay. Was that the second person?

91           **Baca:** Yes. Because what I was thinking about is what we really needed was that solid curriculum  
92 writer. You know, the person who could sit there and hammer out the language that would describe. . . .  
93 What I was trying to do was to take apart one project that I had done. One community participatory project,  
94 which now I guess is called public practice, in which an artist worked in community deeply. Didn't study  
95 about the people but in fact created an image that was in relationship to a place and to the people. So we  
96 started to take apart that. And that was a very exciting and interesting process for me, to take apart one  
97 artwork and look at the beginnings. What's the first thing that you do? And then of course at that point I  
98 thought Suzanne Lacy because Suzanne was so good at that kind of thing.

99           **Mesa Bains:** Yes, she was.

100           **Baca:** Scripting. She could script that kind of thought. And she would just interrogate me. She said,  
101 "What is the first thing?" I said, "Well, the first thing is you get pissed off.." She said, "Well, that's good.  
102 Let's start with being pissed off." I said, "Well, look, for example you start with a river and you say, 'They  
103 concreted the river, this is not right.' I watched it in my childhood. You can't concrete a river. You destroy  
104 the arteries of the land." So the very first thing we wrote in terms of the process that an artist would go  
105 **[12:35]** through in our curriculum is finding the place in which you were upset or moved by the experience  
106 in life and in the world. One that you wanted to work on correcting or edifying or transforming. And so it  
107 was each step. Going through the second was like dreaming of another way to deal with this. The river is  
108 concreted. Well, I could blow up the concrete and then I could go to prison for the rest of my life.  
109 [Chuckles]

110           **Mesa Bains:** Exactly.

111           **Baca:** So I could be a terrorist. Okay, well that won't work. So we would like create these ideas.  
112 Then we created a step by step -- blowing up the river was not the thing I could do. But I could paint the  
113 river and I could create a tattoo on the river, on the scar where the river once ran. So in other words I was  
114 working in these metaphors and then we were transforming these metaphors into language that was

115 academic. And creating a kind of step-by-step view of how you would create an art work. Then you would  
116 create all these alternatives. So we went step by step by step, until we created a participatory reciprocal  
117 educational curriculum for the Arts.

118 **Mesa Bains:** And did that extend beyond the Visual Arts into, say, Music or Theater?

119 **Baca:** I thought that where it really went was. . . it had to do with the relationships that we had  
120 together. Like Josina [Makau] was the person I could really work with because she was working in Ethics. I  
121 felt that the affinity that we had with her thought and her work as a professor was very allied with these  
122 ideas. So I learned so much from her in terms of how you deal with communicating and human interaction  
123 and how ethics are built into the planning. More than I did with theater. I mean Luis was very much  
124 focused on the Mayan and I think also he was very enchanted at that point with Hollywood. He wanted to  
125 figure out some way to create a platform that would make it possible for movies to be made from this place,  
126 where theater could be a growing ground and then it could be amplified into a larger scale.

127 **Mesa Bains:** Do you think that's why he named it Teledramatic Arts and Technology?

128 **Baca:** Yes. I think that's why he went immediately to Teledramatics because he was very  
129 interested at that point in TV and movies. I think it was that time that he was trying to get that Freedom  
130 movie made.

131 **Mesa Bains:** Yes.

132 **[15:45] Baca:** He wasn't able to pull that off. But then, of course, as time went on, there was also the  
133 question of who was going to get what building. I remember the day driving around with a then Dean, he  
134 became Dean but he was actually a military guy and he was in charge of the facilities. You probably met  
135 him when you came.

136 **Mesa Bains:** Yes.

137 **Baca:** And there was a big grab of the buildings, right? I found it really oppressive to live on that  
138 base and to be on that base. I couldn't take it for suspended periods of time. I mean I didn't have the

139 support system around me to make it okay. Right. But I saw immediately those tank buildings. When I  
140 went into the tank buildings I knew that they were not desirable to most other members of the faculty.

141 **Mesa Bains:** Yes, but perfect. Absolutely perfect.

142 **Baca:** I tried to get three buildings but I got two.

143 **Mesa Bains:** We now, we have three and we're getting a fourth.

144 **Baca:** Really? That's what I wanted. I wanted the three because I thought one of them would be  
145 graduate studios.

146 **Mesa Bains:** Oh.

147 **Baca:** Yeah. And then I said and I wanted the eyebrows on them. The Frida Kahlo eyebrows.

148 **Mesa Bains:** Well, we did get that. We have, you know, that arched connecting space. So you had  
149 outdoor spaces and then the actual buildings themselves. But the connecting arch created like a protective  
150 canopy for the outdoor space.

151 **Baca:** Right. The tanks could drive in and then there was an indentation. When I was in the Taller  
152 Siqueiros in Cuernavaca they had these floors that had grids over them, steel grids. And you could pull  
153 them back and panels could be dropped into those vacuums, those spaces. So therefore people would not  
154 have to climb. So when they were painting a panel. So that was one of my enchantments with the tank  
155 space. Although we never did pull that off. We never did use those deeper spaces.

156 **[18:09] Mesa Bains:** Well, as it turned out there was a plume of toxic material right up underneath that so  
157 it's just as well you didn't.

158 **Baca:** [Chuckles] Yes, I knew there was some toxic material everywhere on that campus so it was  
159 like they kept discovering it. And then of course there were the cougars. [Chuckles] There were like  
160 mountain lions or something that came out at night. So it was filled with all kinds of crazy stuff.

161 **Mesa Bains:** When did you and Suzanne begin designing – did she work on the windows or was it  
162 you and Johanna?



163           **Baca:** On the what?

164           **Mesa Bains:** On the window project?

165           **Baca:** No, Suzanne didn't work on the windows at all. That was Johanna [Poethig] and I. I mean I  
166 started it and then, I think she wasn't teaching there yet. Maybe she was, I can't remember. You know, I  
167 can't quite remember who was teaching or whether we were open then . . . because we had students and  
168 Johanna must have been teaching.

169           **Mesa Bains:** She was, I think.

170           **Baca:** Yeah. So she brought students. And I thought, when I saw those boarded up windows I  
171 thought, "How do we do this transformation," because it was so oppressive, it costing any money? We  
172 didn't have any money. We didn't have the capacity. But to look at those buildings and see Tyvek, the  
173 notion of using a Tyvek paper which people used to wrap a building and then to concrete it into plaster and  
174 so forth if they were transforming it. But Tyvek is a really durable material, very cheap and in giant rolls.  
175 So we got big, giant roles of Tyvek and the paints that we had for our classes and we took all these images  
176 and rosters of people who had been soldiers who had been there in training, and we allowed the students to  
177 select different soldiers that they read about and where they were from, and then to create an image of that  
178 particular soldier who left that military barracks to go to war. It was really profound. We were painting  
179 giant portraits about seven foot high, five feet across portraits and then just simply stapling them onto the  
180 wood. They were able to stay for quite some time. It was amazing how long they lasted. And the kind of  
181 transformation of our students as they began to touch the history of CSUMB and what preceded it. Also,  
182 **[21:06]** at one point, I think it was Johanna Poethig who basically said we also have to do the animals, the  
183 things that were here before the military. I thought that was a wonderful idea. Then they went further. I  
184 thought we could just keep painting those barracks forever. You know, transforming them all. But it was  
185 really profound because it was fast, it was direct, and it created a visual change on the campus immediately  
186 before there was any building going on.

187           **Mesa Bains:** I always thought it sort of brought the buildings to life as those people looking out a  
188 window and you could see all of them. And you had a sense of what this place had been before we got  
189 there.

190           **Baca:** Um hmm. That was the idea, to immediately do a transformation that we could see and feel.  
191 We needed to do it. You have to understand that the military barracks, the military presence was so  
192 profound even when they were gone, that it was overwhelming. I mean how could that become a place to  
193 learn? How could that become a place that was something different than what its purpose had been before?

194           **Mesa Bains:** Yeah. When you started you mentioned the Vision and I wanted to know if you could  
195 talk more about what in the Vision attracted you and what it meant to you and how did it guide the work  
196 that you did there.

197 **[24:12] Mesa Bains:** Well, I believed in Steve Arvizu and I believe that he should have been President of  
198 the University. Of course the shock was that when the time came for him to be appointed he was not  
199 appointed. That was really I think the turn, that was a very bad turn for CSUMB. A mistake. A mistake  
200 that really could never really be made up, made to be corrected and never could be really entirely corrected.  
201 But what I was enchanted by and what I thought was like “what a great dream” was to actually create a  
202 university perhaps that actually dealt with California as it really is. What if the professorships reflected the  
203 population? What if we had the majority of our professors of color? What if we were able to balance men  
204 and women? What if we were able to focus our curriculum on those who would receive it? You know,  
205 what if it was not so estranged from the very nature of the Salinas Valley and the migrant workers and their  
206 agricultural fields that surrounded us? What if it took the history of Monterey and what if it took the history  
207 of all those men who came marching through that land as they were training to be in the Army, and  
208 reflected it. So I was very excited about writing a curriculum that would make activists, that would make  
209 young people in charge of their own lives and become the transformers of the experiences that their  
210 families were continuing to have being pesticided, being underpaid, being deported and the increasingly

211 anti-immigrant sentiment. What if this place stood in a moral and ethical way. . . the opposite vision? I  
212 thought that was worth working on.

213 **Mesa Bains:** When you first started to see it enacted, and this is a whole section on campus culture,  
214 how did you feel it was going at the beginning?

215 **[26:20] Baca:** Oh, it was marvelous! I mean we were getting hundreds and hundreds of applications of  
216 professors. It was like Christmas! We were reading these things and going, “Look at this person! Look at  
217 this one!” It was almost like they were attracted, they were drawn, people were drawn to this site and to  
218 this place and to the Vision that we put out. We were getting the right people. It was a little overwhelming  
219 to try and interview all those people and then to do these selections. I was like getting pretty fatigued with  
220 that. [Chuckles] I didn’t want to be doing all those interviews, I was going crazy! But I was still at the  
221 same time trying to build a lab. I was still trying to do the conversions. It was . . . you know.

222 **Mesa Bains:** Yes.

223 **Baca:** And then I was going back and forth to L.A. because I still had SPARC [Social and Public  
224 Art Resource Center] happening. My plan, honestly, was to bring SPARC there [to Monterey]. I thought  
225 the next place for the new program that would be about public art and public murals, and I was working on  
226 that, too. I had all these partners already in the community who wanted to work with me on bringing  
227 SPARC there. So it was going to be Monterey SPARC and I planned not to be going back to L.A. I  
228 planned to stay.

229 **Mesa Bains:** What changed?

230 **[26:48] Baca:** The Vision. As we began to hire people and we began to put in place the people who would  
231 build the University, they took Steve Arvizu out and they brought in Peter Smith. When they brought Peter  
232 Smith in, there was a very funny moment. This is a great story. [Chuckles] Luis and I were sitting in my  
233 office and I wonder if you’ll remember this. The computers were being delivered so we were sitting amidst  
234 the boxes, and the phone rang. My phone. I couldn’t get to the phone from the boxes right in front of me so

235 Luis picked it up. He said, “Judy Baca’s office.” [Laugh] We thought it was a great joke, Luis Valdez was  
236 answering my phone. It was the President’s Office. It was his secretary or something and she said, “The  
237 President would like to see Judy Baca.” Like as if I would drop everything and run over there right then.  
238 Right? Like I was being summoned. “Can I ask what this is regarding?” And then she said, “Well, the  
239 President wants Judy to paint a portrait of her [him] for an auction.” And Luis’s eyes widened, like he was  
240 gonna tell her off. And he put his hand over the phone, “Should I tell him to go. . . .”

241 **Mesa Bains:** Blank themselves?

242 **Baca:** Yeah. [Chuckles] I was looking around and I said, “No.” Because we all knew that Steve [  
243 means Peter] had been in a few of these planning meetings and it was kind of scary listening to him. He  
244 was clearly a disruptive force. I mean we struggled between our disciplines. I mean that was not easy trying  
245 to work between these disciplines. To be truly interdisciplinary is really hard, right?

246 **Mesa Bains:** Oh, yeah!

247 **Baca:** Because we are so trained in our own disciplines. You know, we really don’t have an idea  
248 how other people train and learn their own disciplines or actually pass it on. So Steve [Peter] was a big  
249 disruption. So I said to Luis, “Tell him I’ll do it.” And so he hung up. He said, “What!? You’re gonna go  
250 paint that guy’s portrait?” I said, “Yeah. Look it, I’ll go and sit with him for at least an hour and I will get a  
251 clear view of who he is.”

252 **Mesa Bains:** Frightening. [Chuckles]

253 **Baca:** Yeah. Face to face.

254 **Mesa Bains:** So what happened at the meeting?

255 **Baca:** Oh, so I went to the meeting and I did a drawing of him. I listened to him and I kind of  
256 interviewed him.

257 **Mesa Bains:** Wow.

258           **Baca:** I interviewed him. I can't remember everything that he said but I got a clear vision that he  
259 had his own vision.

260           **Mesa Bains:** Oh, yeah.

261           **Baca:** That had nothing to do with what we had already done. And that he was not in any way  
262 buying in. First of all, he had no idea where he was. [Chuckles]

263           **Mesa Bains:** They thought they were in the Caribbean or something. I don't know what they  
264 thought.

265           **Baca:** They had no relationship to Monterey or to California. His wife was just beginning to decide  
266 to redesign things. That was a clincher for me because she was going to paint the buildings different colors.  
267 I'd invested so much time and energy in the tank buildings and she could just come right over the top of me  
268 with no position, no assignment, just simply the wife. She was the First Lady of the President. And that's  
269 how she operated. I saw this kind of crazy Republican right-wing notion of education and at best the  
270 unwashed people of color would be ... yeah, it was like the Caribbean, like they were going in to deal with  
271 the slaves.

272           **Mesa Bains:** Like a missionary worker. Something. I don't even know...it wasn't even that good.

273 **[31:30] Baca:** It was like missionary work. Though it wasn't even that benevolent. It wasn't even that  
274 benevolent.

275           **Mesa Bains:** No, it wasn't.

276           **Baca:** About the building of his own vision and his own idea on top of what we had done. "Thank  
277 you very much, now get out of our way." Right? I mean, he was a smooth talker but everything was  
278 revealed in the way he spoke about it. And I thought, "I can't be here." It was that moment that I made my  
279 decision to leave.

280           **Mesa Bains:** Well, it's interesting because that was my next question. It was about the struggles  
281 and evolution as the campus took shape and what were the key moments of change or struggle that stand  
282 out in your memory. Yeah, was it that? Was it more than that?

283           **Baca:** It was the undoing of the people that we selected.

284           **Mesa Bains:** Yes.

285           **Baca:** I started to see the faculty change. The decisions were no longer kind of democratically  
286 done. The faculty no longer had the agency. There was a cadre of, a smaller number of people surrounding  
287 the President. Actually, it's really interesting -

288           **Mesa Bains:** Like Steve Reed?

289           **Baca:** It's the Trump model.

290           **Mesa Bains:** Yes. Dell Felder.

291           **Baca:** Yeah. I didn't know these people because there was no contact with them. Right. These men  
292 came in and surrounded Peter along with the First Lady and they began to change things. Suddenly there  
293 were dictates from above. And the people that we were hiring, you know, the choices about hiring, the  
294 distribution of resources, all those things suddenly got transformed. And I saw for me the vision of being  
295 able to bring spark to the Salinas Valley, to combine my lives, both work in community and work in the  
296 University, I thought I'm going to be in struggle to even see this Vision through. And I'm not protected  
297 enough. I felt that you and Richard were much more suited because you could work together both in music  
298 and the arts and create a strong vision for the arts together. I mean we didn't even have departments. We  
299 were working in clusters.

300           **Mesa Bains:** Right. Centers.

301           **Baca:** Yeah, the Centers. So it was interdisciplinary even in the Center. And so each of these  
302 Centers, we all were small enough we could still come together. The Centers could come together. So you  
303 could see what every other Center was doing. And the resources were sort of distributed among us.

304 [Interruption in the recording]

305 **Mesa Bains:** We're back now.

306 **Baca:** Okay, so we were talking about what happened with the -

307 **Mesa Bains:** And it's funny because you've gone right into the section that's called Departure.  
308 You know, are you still on campus now? Why not? You started to tell me about that. What made you  
309 decide to leave?

310 **Baca:** It was a number of things. One was, the culture was not transforming fast enough from the  
311 military. The military had been given positions of deanships.

312 **Mesa Bains:** Remember, what was his name? Matt? Something like that. Mack.

313 **Baca:** Mack?

314 **Mesa Bains:** Mack. He was the guy who had been the last Commander in Chief at the base and he  
315 became one of Peter's Vice Presidents, I think.

316 **Baca:** That's right. So in other words, that transition in which military people were the opposite of  
317 what we were trying to build, right?

318 **Mesa Bains:** Right.

319 **Baca:** And I saw that. I didn't see them as congruent. I didn't see militarism as having a space as  
320 we were trying to turn that whole paradigm upside down. It wasn't about, you know, getting people to  
321 follow orders. It was about giving them their own agency. Our teaching was about the reverse of that. Not  
322 to be subservient. Not to follow in a goose step. But to begin to transform the experiences you and your  
323 family had so that we would improve the conditions in California fields and in California life, particularly  
324 for Latino and African American and all of the other – Cambodians, all those other people who basically. . .

325 **Mesa Bains:** Filipinos. And Filipinos.

326 **Baca:** . . . Filipinos, who made California wealthy. The people who made the wealth. This was the  
327 colonized population that we were trying to transform. So when military people were put in positions of

328 power in the University, it was a clear sign that it was not the right direction. I was talked to as if I was a  
329 little girl. As if I was just a woman. It was the military sexism, the military bias carried over into the  
330 University. While at first you could say, “We’re transforming as we’re working on this,” it started to  
331 become set, as people were brought in around Peter, people were brought in to basically carry out the  
332 dictates, and they could change from one week to the next. And so it was like, “What happened this time?”  
333 You know. I’d come back to L.A. and then come back the next week and it’s like – and I was flying back  
334 and forth to Monterey, right?

335 **Mesa Bains:** Yeah.

336 **[2:59] Baca:** I’d come back and then I would see all these things had changed. Literally, I had computers  
337 delivered to my program and then the next week I came back and they were gone.

338 **Mesa Bains:** Yes. Well, you know, given that I think you left after, what, the first or second year? I  
339 don't remember. I do remember being at your house when you told me that you weren't going to go on with  
340 it. But [you said] that I should talk to Steve, and you had Steve on the phone to tell me my marching  
341 orders. I remember thinking, “Oh, no. Don't make me talk to him!” Because he was kind of like a priest. So  
342 that was the day I signed on. You passed the baton to me. And I've been ever grateful all these years.

343 **Baca:** I only thought that you were the only person who could do it. And again, it's partially  
344 because you had Richard's support and the two of you together could go back to back. The other is that I  
345 thought that you had the grace. I didn't. I was ready to go toe to toe with Peter in about a hot second!

346 **Mesa Bains:** [Laughs]

347 **Baca:** I would have insulted him at the first meeting.

348 **Mesa Bains:** Oh, it took me two years and then I really insulted him when I asked him for his  
349 resignation!

350 **Baca:** [Laughs] Well, you probably did it better than I. Oh, my God. It's interesting, as I've aged  
351 and I've grown I realize that sometimes the confrontation of what is really profoundly wrong and so



352 egregious, confronting it only entrenches it. Do you know what I mean? It doesn't work. Maybe it makes  
353 me feel better for thirty seconds – [Laughs] – but it doesn't really work.

354 **Mesa Bains:** Then you pay for it for years after. [Laughter]

355 **[4:55] Baca:** Pay for it years and years and years. I've seen it so many times, particularly within  
356 academia. To come back to the hunger strike and to what was happening at UCLA, which had so much  
357 promise in terms of being able to develop the resources I needed to work in community and to continue to  
358 work at SPARC. I didn't have to move the whole organization there. It made more sense. It turned out to  
359 have its own difficulties in terms of. . .

360 **Mesa Bains:** Yes.

361 **Baca:** . . . working in a totally. . . . It was an interdisciplinary program that was not  
362 interdisciplinary.

363 **Mesa Bains:** Exactly.

364 **Baca:** And I really got it because I had been in a real one. You know? I had worked with real  
365 interdisciplinary thinkers. So when I saw this not doing it at all, I was completely shocked that they were  
366 calling it interdisciplinary, right? I don't know, I just thought, "Well, I'll just work through it." The thing  
367 that kept me able to stay there 23 years at UCLA was that I had all the community's capacity. To work in  
368 neighborhoods. To develop monies that would actually support my students doing real work, like let's say,  
369 at the Miguel Contreras Learning Center which was named after Maria Elena Durazo's husband who began  
370 Justice for Janitors. So we did a giant work and tribute to him. Also to advance the technology in such a  
371 way that it really enhanced the way that I work as a muralist. We created murals for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a  
372 21<sup>st</sup> century manner. And all of it began at Monterey. It began there.

373 **Mesa Bains:** Well, in that sense what do you see your legacy to the University being? What do you  
374 think you built there?

375 **[6:53] Baca:** I don't know. I'm not sure if I could really call it a legacy so much as that I can say that I  
376 hope, to the degree that these ideas are left, or they got carried by you -- and I know you respected those  
377 ideas and supported the continuance of them--, I would hope that the legacy I left is a notion of a reciprocal  
378 artist. An artist working in a relational way with a sense of ethics, with a sense that what we make can be  
379 transformative in the world. And that we have a civic responsibility to be part of our world. I think we  
380 transferred that in these ideas, in the way we taught our courses. We did that by taking apart and examining  
381 in a kind of introspective way, How do you make your art? And how were your projects successful? What  
382 made, for example, the Great Wall what it was or what it is and continues to be? How did that work, that  
383 you could create a giant work that is the history of immigrant American and acknowledges at a time when  
384 immigrants are again suspect, are called illegal aliens. How can you make something that transformed the  
385 people who made it and tells the real story that is the real American story. I hope that that's the legacy, a  
386 piece of that is left.

387 **Mesa Bains:** I think a piece of that is left. I think that in VPA [Visual and Public Art] if no other  
388 place – and its undergraduate program. Because we were never able to do the graduate program, there  
389 were never the resources for it. But I look at it and I still see students working in communities, students  
390 developing ideas about themselves and others in a way that you started. So I think you should be happy.

391 **Baca:** Well, I think there were some great people who followed me. I mean you couldn't ask for a  
392 better muralist than Johanna Poethig.

393 **Mesa Bains:** Oh, my God. The best.

394 **Baca:** She's the best. And her heart is the best. And of course, you! I mean what a great legacy for  
395 those young people to have you there. And to have Richard there. Also, those military buildings got  
396 transformed. And they've become spaces which will be occupied by new generations and will be put to a  
397 different use. I'm really happy about that, that I contributed to transforming a military zone into a site of

398 learning and put the energy and heart into it when it needed to be placed there. And I'm happy to have  
399 worked with who I worked with.

400 **Mesa Bains:** Okay. I think we did a good job.

401 **Baca:** [Laughs]

402 (END OF RECORDING)

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