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ARTISTS TRAINING AND CAREER PROJECT

CASSETTE

SIDE A

INTERVIEW WITH DAN RAMIREZ

October 20, 1990--Madison, Wisconsin

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Dan, what were your initial experiences with art?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, they were pretty much--as a young child, with my family, I suppose not unlike a lot of individuals--

[SOUND CUT]

I can recall many--many occasions when I was very young to see a lot of my uncles and aunts on my father's side of the family who could always draw cartoon characters, or draw something from a comic book that always looked very real, and so I--I think I was always kind of possessed by a certain magical thing I saw about the ability to make something look real, even though they were taking something from something that wasn't real

to begin with, anyway. In retrospect.

But I was encouraged a lot by--by my mother, who was also a singer, and sang a little bit on the radio in Chicago when she was a young person. And my father, who could also draw, again, and make things very real--look real to me, anyway.

And so those things were always in the household in one fashion or another. There was always drawing pencils, big drawing tablets that were always kind of strange and wonderful to have. And I had an aunt who lived with us from my mother's side of the family. I should tell you that I'm half Mexican and half Yugoslavian. And my father was born in San Francisco del Rincón in the county of Guanajuato, Mexico, and my--my mother, although she was born in the United States, her mother was born in [Hotecvar (ph)], off the coast in Yugoslavia.

And so, anyway, she was involved in Music from--from her particular area, which was really

singing, and my father could draw. And his--my father's sister and brother, they were always drawing, as I mentioned.

And so I think that kind of got me kind of interested also. And I remember when I was in grammar school, I think I was in about third--we called it grammar school, I guess it's elementary school now, or something like that, but I think, I believe it was about third grade, and there was a drawing contest, and I asked my father for this tablet, and he brought--came home, and brought me this really big tablet, must have been, as I think back, probably around thirty by forty. It was really one of those big, large drawing tablets.

I remember drawing this--taking my pencils and drawing these octopuses [sic] under water, characters, this scene that I was going to enter into the contest. And we had living with us--we lived in an apartment building, and there were--there were--it was half Mexican and half

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Yugoslavian. My grandmother had all the money, she came over from Yugoslavia, and she brought some money with us. The rest of my family were factory workers, and pretty much like most people at, you know, the time. Struggling to get along.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

How did they meet? I mean, they met there in Chicago?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

My father--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

[INAUDIBLE] Your father made his way to Chicago-

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah, my father came over with my--with his parents. And his parents lived, when they came over they lived in a boxcar at the Santa Fe Railroad on Clark--Clark Street, just off of Archer in Chicago. And they lived in a boxcar for a while while his father, my grandfather, who's now dead, cleaned cars, the inside of cars, the upholstery and that. And--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

And did they come for work?

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DAN RAMIREZ (A):

They came for work I think primarily, sure. And a better standard of living I guess than what they had in Mexico at the time. And he came--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

A [cold?] place to go after Mexico.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Oh, yeah. Yeah. But, anyway, they--he came down here with them, and he--he lived in the china--what's called the Chinatown area of Chicago, 24th and Wentworth, in that area there. And it was primarily I think at that time not so many--Mexican people living in the area as there were Italian and some Chinese, of course, being in the Chinatown area.

And he was a baseball player. And my mother, again, she lived not too far away from there, and I guess she saw him, met him one time playing baseball, and one thing led to another, and their lives got together, and.... After that it was myself and my brother and sister! [LAUGH]

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

I was going to say, how many siblings do you have?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I have--I have a younger sister--see, I am--I'll be fifty this year, so, and I'm fifteen years older than my sister, so I guess she'll be thirty-five. And I have a brother who I believe is forty--he must be forty-four now, I think. So there's just the three of us.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Are they involved in the art world at all?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

No, not really. My sister, I believe, she's teaching--I'm--I may get this wrong, but I think it's psych--management psychology for business majors, something like that. Okay? At least I know that's what she had her degree in. I think she's teaching in that area. And my brother works for the government--I'm not sure what his position is at this time. He was a procurement agent at one time, but he's been there a long time, he's had a lot of advancements and position

changes, so I don't know exactly what he's doing right now.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Do either of them do any drawing, do any singing?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

My brother liked to draw a lot. I don't recall whether my sister did or not.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Of course, fifteen years, that's a lot older.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah, yeah. But my brother did some. [? ?] he did--back to this thing about the drawing and the tablet, I drew this scene and took it into school to have it evaluated. And I began to mention that in this apartment building where all of us were living together, I had an uncle from my mother's side of the family, who was Yugoslavian, and he weighed about four hundred and sixty-five pounds, and he had these wonderful features in terms of wrinkles and saggy skin and things like that, plus he was also a very jovial kind of guy.

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I mention that because when I presented this drawing of mine for this contest, later in the day it was announced--I think we had--it was a PA system we had at that time--it was announced that I had won this contest. And so everyone was to come to the different rooms--and I guess there were three or four different winners, from different classes or whatever, different subject matter I think it may have been. I'm not sure.

But, so, anyway, it was announced that I had won. So everybody--the classes--we then filed into this room where these drawings were set up, and there was mine. And I looked, and it was this wonderful picture of my uncle. And it was really done. I says, well, I knew immediately who did it. My father had done this drawing when I had laid this tablet down, somewhere during the night he went in there and sketched my uncle, and so of course I had to fess up that this wasn't my drawing. And it wasn't one of the greatest experiences of my life, it was pretty--I was kind of deflated--

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

Unglued.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah, and unglued a little bit.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

What happened to your drawing?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, it really wasn't considered to be a very interesting drawing, especially not in the context of that tablet, which had my father's rendering of my uncle, which was much better.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

So both of those drawings were put in under your name?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, what happened was--no, what happened was I put in the tablet, not realizing the other drawing was even in there. And they just kind of looked through it, figured, oh, he's entering all these drawings, and they chose the drawing of my uncle! [LAUGH] Which made sense, it was a nice drawing. So that was [?] experiences I had with art.

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

And you had lots of relatives living around you? You had an aunt living with you--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

We had--let's see--I believe there were six apartments, and there were uncles and aunts from both sides of the family. Actually, I think for the most part they were from my mother's side of the family. One other of which was also married to a Mexican man. I have an aunt, my mother's sister, who lived directly across from us, who sent me to the Art Institute as a young person. She knew how much I liked to draw, and she was very much an influence as a young child. Very supportive, as well as my family was. And she was married to a young Mexican man.

And so this Mexican man--his name was Emilio--and my father were very good friends, for reasons I'm sure other than just the fact they were both Mexican, but nevertheless, they got along quite well as brother-in-laws [sic]. And he was an interesting man, because he was a pitcher in the

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White Sox farm system at one time, so, he also played baseball with my father, so I suppose he had that in common.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

So the members of your family seem to have been fairly positive about the talent you exhibited as an artist.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

I--I have gotten but--nothing but the most positive feedback and support from my family. In anything I did, it wasn't--didn't matter whether it was art or anything else. I was pretty much--my wings, so to speak, were cut at a very, very young age. I--we lived in Chicago, and I rode on streetcars when I was, you know, seven or eight years old, and just got all around. And they just had a way of making me feel very, you know, liberated and free to do whatever I wanted to do.

My father has always told me I'd amount basically to being nothing but a good time Charlie, because I just liked to have a lot of fun, and he's right, I am still that way. I just enjoy having

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a lot of fun. So he's kind of int--but yes, they were very supportive, to answer your question more directly. Extremely--extremely so.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Were there any other educational experiences that--that gave you validation or resistance to your art work?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

To the art work?

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Um-hmm.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I can think of some--some things that happened at the high school level. I remember--I wasn't much of a student. I mean, when I went to school, I didn't enjoy being in school, and I'd find ways to get myself in trouble enough where I'd be suspended for a week. I'm not sure if it was intentional or not, as I look back on it. I'm beginning to think maybe it was a way of getting out of school.

But in any case, I had a class once in high

school, and it was an art class. It was probably called art appreciation. It seemed like everything was called art appreciation when I was in school back in the fifties, in high school and elementary school.

And I remember having a confrontation with one of my teachers about what complementary--what complementary colors were. And she really kind of was thrashing me around, you know, kind of through the head, basically, about, about what I didn't understand about art. And so I got kind of confused and infuriated about it, and kind of felt, well, maybe I didn't know as much as I thought I knew.

And I think for a little while after that, I turned to other kinds of things. Because I remember after--well, I never graduated from high school. I was in a Catholic high school in my first year, and got into some trouble there and was asked to leave, and went to a public high school, where I wanted to play football more than

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anything else, which was basically almost all I did, other than this one--couple of art classes I was just talking about.

And--ended up going into the Marine Corps at a very young age. Oh, one of the experiences I had in the Marine Corps was I was asked to--if--there were--our drill instructor asked if anyone could draw. So I kind of raised my hand, said I could. So I had to draw this big platoon flag of this big globe with the wings and "Semper Fi" and all this kind of stuff that Marines kind of thrive on as mottos, which are kind of wonderful, I suppose.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

I'm glad to know the Marines do a little art work as well as practice maneuvers and--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

--are warlike.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah. Well, anyway, that was an ex--I guess, if

you want to call it an art experience, it was certainly an experience about things that I felt were art, you know, art might have been. So I did that. But I didn't last long in the Marine Corps either. I ended up having kind of problems there. And--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Were any--going back just one second, were the classes that you had, did you have many art classes other than kind of hands-on in grade school or high school?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

The only art classes that I--I can really feel comfortable saying that were art classes would have been the ones that my aunt paid for at the Art Institute, which were life drawing classes. And then I had some--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

And those were when you were ten and eleven?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

I was probably twelve, thirteen, something like that. And at the American Academy of Fine Arts in Chicago, where they teach these very classic

approaches to tone and composition and things like that. And for my part, I mean, that's really was art was about. You know, I knew--knew nothing, art history was not in my life at all at that time.

So, I remember liking the smell of it. I mean, I remember walking in, you could smell oil paints, I mean, everything was just that aura of--making art was just magic for me. If there's a ritual to it, I mean, it's one of those things of being able to walk in and putting on coffee and standing in front of your work and listening to sounds and smells that are....

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Aren't the smells sort of very important? They are to me.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I think so. Well, they are to me, and it's really kind of funny. I don't work in oils, I did when I was younger, so I remember the, recall the smell. But--[? ?] in a way, but I really deal with acrylics, when I work now, so,

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there's not that much of a smell, really. Or the--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

But you've got smell for the wood, some smell for the earth.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, the wood and the earth, yeah, with the newer works, you know, that's for sure. So, yeah, so through school and my education, I didn't have that much. So there really wasn't that much formal training. Because right after the Marine Corps thing, when I came back to Chicago, most, I need--I wanted a job. And--most of my family, especially from my father's side of the family, were truck drivers. And truck drivers back in the sixties made pretty good money. And I think it was 1959 when I got my first truck driving job, and I drove a truck until I was--I was a steel hauler until I was I think twenty-seven years old, so that was nine or ten years of hauling steel, either long distance or locally or something like that.

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So I really--I mean, I was--I was making money, spending it as fast as I was making it, having a good time. But I was making the ki--you know, a lot more money than most kids my age. And then one thing, of course, you know, life goes on, and I ended up getting married, and drove a truck while I was getting married.

Then finally I just--it was getting rather hard. I mean, I was working twelve hours, fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. And as you get older you start to kind of think, look back, well, like, is this the way it's going to be the rest of your life, you know, and this kind of thing. You want better things. So I--there was kind of like a glamour I had still I think about art.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

When you think back, were there any particular art forms that interested you as a child? The drawing you talked about. Anything else?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

I think--I think really more than anything else

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it was simply to be able to take a pencil and draw something that looked real. Again, I don't have any other--other way to really put that. Because I used to do comic strip cartoons, you know. But, no no, cartoons, I mean, in retrospect, I understand them now as not being real, but to me at that time that's what reality was. I mean, it depicted something that conformed in a sense to reality. You talked like this, you moved like this, you did things like this. So it made sense to me.

SO in terms of a form, no, not at all. It was just one of these things that seemed like it was- again, in retrospect I guess it was just kind of like ego thing here. I mean, I could do these things, and I would get applause for it of some kind. Because all the kids that I grew up with, I was always the guy asked or the person asked to draw on their arms.

Remember the old--the pencil with one side red, one side blue? Of course, tatoos are red and

blue. I have a tatoo here, a [?] Mexican girl with a sombrero on my arm. So I would be the one asked to draw these tatoos on my arm. I'd draw these wonderful things, and they'd look just like these things should look.

And so, again, you know, I can only look back on that and say it was one of those reinforcement things that happened in my life that made me feel special in ways I didn't feel otherwise.

And I think--I--I have a--[?] a lot about this, it's an interesting question, actually. That you're asking. Because I've--when I have--now that I think back, one of the things that really frustrated me more than anything else was the neighborhood I grew up in was primarily Irish Polish Catholic. I was the only Mexican. Half Mexican, actually. In the neighborhood that I grew up in as a young adult. And most of the kids that I went to sc--that I knew, finished high school. They went on, finished college. They're lawyers, they're doctors, they just

really performed quite marvelously. And I never did. I was always the truck driver. I was the kid who had the money first. See? But in the end I didn't really have it.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

It wasn't going to go that much further.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah, it wasn't going to go much for me. So I've always had I think a certain kind of embarrassment about a lack of education. And as I got older, then, as I--just talking, mentioning as I, after I got married and was feeling the frustrations of kind of like a dead end thing, I said, well, you know, there is one thing I can do, that is I can draw and render things kind of realistically. That maybe being a commercial artist might be a kind of an interesting thing to do.

And again, I saw a certain kind of glamour in coming and sitting in an office and drawing, and I assumed you got paid a lot for that. I think at age twenty-seven, it's still probably, now,

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with a lot of naivete, in your--in one's psyche. But in any case, I--so I decided, well, I would go to school part time.

And so what I did was I went to a city college in Chicago called Olive Harvey. And--I went there and took the academic courses. I could see the way the program was set up that you had to take 'em, and I hated it, I dreaded it. [? ? ?] this is not what I want to go back to school for! I want to go--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Was it required? This was before the days of GED's?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, the GED--I, well, I should backtrack just a bit. I had to take the GED in order to get into the city college. So I took the GED and passed the GED. So that--gave me the credentials then to enter into the city college. And so then I went into the city college and took the academic courses. And lo and behold, when you go to school when you're twenty-nine years old, you

have a lot more to say than when you're in school when you were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen and eighteen. And so things went quite well.

I mean, I enjoyed the classes I had, the classes in psychology, classes in social sciences, philosophy, I loved philosophy. So I was able to draw on some experiences of my own that allowed me to see life in ways I never saw it before. That had an incredible effect on me.

So, I figured, well, you know, [?], to go on into the curriculum, and through the curriculum I would then get into the art courses that I needed. But I didn't take them in the city college. My--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Were you going full time at this point? I mean, were you still--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

It was part time. See, what my thoughts was, I guess through a lot--through a long period of my life, of growing up, I was always trying to find

ways of getting around things, so I wouldn't have to do it the hard way! [LAUGH] I think my father recognized this, and that's why he said I was going to be nothing but a good-time Charlie!

But what--I figured, well, I'd go to city college, I wouldn't go to a large university, because then you'd have to take all those courses that are so hard, and I'm not going to--I'm going to fail and I don't want to fail, I want to feel good, I don't want to feel bad!

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Yeah!

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

So I figured City College, which is--you know--which is--and I don't mean to infer that a city college has a less demanding program, but in my eyes, given my naivete, that's kind of like the way I was looking at it.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Well, sometimes it is less demanding.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, perhaps--I certainly thought it was.

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Anyway, so I went there, and--for the two years, and like I said, things went really well. I got like almost straight A's, and everything was wonderful. So I figured, okay, then I'll take these courses, transfer them now into the university, the academic courses, and then I'll take the art courses that I need. And I didn't need as many academics, I would take just those that I needed.

So I went to the University of Illinois at Chicago, and this is where everything really changed for me. Because I went to the school with the idea of doing commercial art. Well, I didn't do a very good job of screening their program to see just what it was they taught, but it's not commercial art. Primarily it was--it has--it had a reputation at that time, it's changed since them, to a large degree--but at that time of being an extension of Bauhausian kind of ideas. So there was the strong, rigid foundation program that one took in space, you know. Positive [?], space.

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

Wasn't it like the "draw me" ads that I used to copy in the Sunday newspaper.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah. And so I--so when I went there, and I said, okay, I'll take the foundation program, I'll take the first class, and my teacher was a man by the name of Bob Nichol. That's his picture right there. And I keep that around because he had probably the greatest influence than anybody in my life, in my life.

Now, I don't recall exactly whether he was actually personal friends with Piet Mondrian or whether he just knew him through another intermediary or not, but he would tell us a lot of stories about times when Piet Mondrian would work, and how he would do these things with the lines, and it would take forever moving them back and forth. And he would ask questions of people who were sitting around, where it would finally end up back where he wanted it, which was only an eighth of an inch away from where it began to

begin with.

Anyway, this man, Bob Nichol, was not only a teacher in the foundation program, he was a collagist. He was an artist who did collage work of found things in the streets. And he was also, I guess, one might refer to him as a transcendentalist, a spiritualist of some kind. But he had an incredible effect on me, because he would look at the things that I would draw--I would draw things, bowling balls, that would look real, all the things that I could do. And he would just kind of shake his head, you know, like, you know, you're never going to make it, but that's okay, this is what you want to do, you know.

And I just--I started listening to him, and to make a long--you know, make this a little shorter, he finally convinced me that--or not convinced me, but kind of showed me that there was something about abstraction, which was what he was dealing with, even though he was using

found materials, which aren't very abstract, but I guess the composition factors were, that through this process of abstraction you could touch things inside of you in ways that weren't dictated differently through working representationally. Not that you can't do it representationally, [? ? ?] different now, but at that time.

And that really intrigued me. And so I started working--what I did first was I took an art history course, turned in--they have a sequence in our school I think where you have to take--at that school at the time, where you started with the ancient and moved through [? ?] different periods. And somehow I ended up taking the contemporary one first, the modern one. I took them out of sequence. I think it was okay to do that.

And one of the first people introduced to me was Barnett Newman [sp?].

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

Ah.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

And he really intrigued me with the way he thought, you know, with the way he thought about the way you make a painting and what they meant. I wasn't sure I saw that in the work, but it interested me.

But then there was the other revelation--and this was a real, real factor in why I think, why I work the way I work, which is primarily with linear elements and light and--it's kind of abstract architectural components. I could draw realistically just fine. I can't do it with paint. I can teach you how to do it with paint. I could do that. I know all the recipes, I know the techniques, I could show you how to render realistically with paint. I can't do it for myself, really, and get the job done. I just can't do it.

But what I could do was--I found out was I can

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make the most incredible masked taped straight lines with paint, and I can build these kind of light surfaces. I just--there was just--so I figured, well, I've got that. That kind of looks like Barnett Newman. And when I think about Barnett Newman, what he feels, and I find that it's really so compatible to the way I feel about what art should--how art should function, and how a visual thing could function, to really reach in and talk about things and feel things, I said, well, this is--this was what I wanted to pursue.

And so, I was in the right place! Because it wasn't just a question about Bob Nichol, but a number of the faculty that I could go on to mention a number of names, I won't, but I'm sure I'll forget somebody. But all who were incredibly supportive of me, and really helped me, and things just really came together.

And I have, again, the really good fortune of meeting people--I mentioned to you Dennis Adrien earlier, who over the years has--I've become

very, very close to. Who just visited our campus here in Madison. But as a young student, as good fortune would have it, one of my instructors mentioned to Dennis Adrien that he might want to look at my work. Dennis was an art critic, a curator, putting shows together at the time. And Dennis looked at the work and said, well, you know, there's a show at a restaurant, Black Hawk Restaurant, in Chicago, you can put up all the work you want, pretty much.

And so I put up--I probably put up sixty pieces of things all over the place. But it was my first kind of like venture into being public somehow with something I believed in. And in this particular instance there wasn't any feedback, there wasn't a review or anything like that. But it was one more of those really positive things that happened in my life that--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Was this during your first year or your second year there?

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DAN RAMIREZ (A):

This was--this was, I believe, my--this was 1973, I believe, and I graduated in 1974. So it was right about my third year.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Yeah.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

About my third year. Well, Dennis had done this for a number of artists, not only in Chicago, in other places, but especially in Chicago, where if he sees a young person that he's--he's--that he likes, he'll support. And so that--that's just one of many good things that happened to me.

I won't dwell on the--I really can't dwell on bad things that have happened to me, because after a certain period in my life, things, in terms of my artwork, things just kind of moved rather nicely, and when I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago, as I moved through the rest of the programs, I found--again, I found the right school to be in. I was the kind of person who liked to think a lot. Sometimes I would be--

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I would be criticized that you can't make art thinking, that you really have to come from inside. I was always confused by that. I've never seen the difference. I don't know how anyone can really make those things, those distinctions. You can talk about them that way, but I just think they function too closely together to make a distinction like that. In any case--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Wait, let me ask you one question here. When did you become an artist, and how did you know?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

I don't know that I ever thought about becoming an artist right away, because I think I thought in terms of being a painter, being a sculptor. Maybe that's part of--of--of the education that I had in that I sensed in going through some of the classes that I took that there was painting and sculpture, and the classes were set up that way.

That it wasn't till later that I came to realize that what we're really talking about is making

art. I think you really find that out when people like Rauschenberg and a lot of other people began to do multimedia things, incorporate all aspects of life into something in a very specific way. That happened before then, but when I became cognizant of it, that then I began to realize we're really talking about making art, and it doesn't matter whether you paint, whether you sculpt, whether you mix the things, or whatever.

And that happened to me probably as I came into graduate school. But being an artist was still kind of a strange idea. And I'm still, even to this day when I talk to my students, I try to get--to get across I can't teach art, I can't teach them to be artists, all I can do is educate them, which simply means to expose them to different kinds of experiences, different kinds of options, ways of looking at the world, through either my eyes, their eyes, or other people's eyes. Making art is something they either will do or they won't do, and I just don't know if there's a period at which one can really start to

really say it's that. At least from my perspective.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Was there a point in your own view of yourself where you felt, or realized afterwards, that in your own sights you had crossed over from looking at art or at painting or at sculpture as a potential career to being an artist?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

I think probably the first time that happened may have been the very first time that someone like Dennis Adrien, who had the reputation as a wonderful critic and thinker of art and writer of art, that all of a sudden someone basically, you know, says to you, there's something there. Maybe, maybe that was the first time that I thought to myself I could be an artist, and maybe even that I am an artist.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

"Am" instead of "could be."

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Maybe--yeah, yeah. May--maybe that has--I don't mean to be wishywashy, because--

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

No, I understand.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

--I'm not sure I can point out exactly when that is. And I have to be very honest with you. As the years have gone by, I've seen how much bad art I can make. Or bad things I can make. As well as good--as things that might--maybe I'd find more significant. So I'm not sure, maybe you're an artist sometimes and maybe you're not an artist sometimes. You know what I mean? Maybe it's just not always that. I think we--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Or maybe, as you said earlier, you're an--you are an artist, but you make things that are art and some things that you don't consider art.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Um-hmm, I suppose that's true. I guess maybe--maybe looking at the word "artist" as some kind of concrete thing that happens is maybe even the wrong way of coming to terms with it. As a process, I think I could--I'm more comfortable with saying I'm an artist in terms of--the things

artists generally do to make art. That I was aware of for a long time.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Currently, do you consider your work more paintings, more sculptures, both?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

The current things?

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Yeah.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

The current things I consider--I guess--you know, just in like a hybrid of painting and sculpture. And I think that's pretty obvious. I use painted elements, and then I use these kind of projected things. But my work--I guess the philosophical kind of questions that--that interested me I found most prevalent in the minimalist movement back in the sixties. Which was their--they had many kinds of ideas I guess one could isolate, but one predominant one is the notion of this art object that stands in for itself as a thing in the world, unto its own being so to speak, in an ontological sense.

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That interested me because I understood that argument as meaning almost that you could not infuse any other kind of spiritual thing into it, or any of these things that one might have--if one looked at a Barnett Newman or a--better example--one looked at a David Caspar Friedrich [sp?], and read the things mentioned about a certain kind of numinosity, sublimeness, perhaps spirituality, that resided in the work. A minimalist would not allow for that to enter into that particular piece because it was another sense of what reality was about.

Well, that interested me, because on the one hand I believe that things in the world are exactly that, they're things in the world. On the other hand, how do you deny the fact that you have these other kinds of feelings?

And so I guess all my life I've tried to incorporate both of those two things together somehow, and to make some sense of all that for myself, in terms of reality. I'm--I've pursued

notions of spirituality for a long time, and I think one of the reasons is because it's always mentioned so much about my work. Sometimes that's confused me a lot, because on the one hand I like the way it sounds because it sounds--the sounding makes me comfortable because I believe that, but I don't like the way it sounds because I think there's a pretension about what spirituality is as if one really knows what it is, and that I'm not sure of at all.

And more often than not, I'm dedicated to the--to the--not dedicated--but I'm more inclined to accept spirituality as a very real concrete kind of thing that exists in the world, at least from the point of view that that's what you can talk about, that's how you can function in the world, and if art has a salving or healing process to it, or function to it, as one of its functions, and I think it does, then being able to operate in the world concretely towards others is what counts.

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That can be, that can make the world a better place, due to the function of art. This idealizing and posturing about this whole business of the--of this other, that's fine, but that's a leap one makes. And not everyone is willing to make that leap.

But things here in the world, where you're physically encountering things in ways that--that press meaning in your life and help you define why you want to be here, if you want to be here, and things like that, that's more concrete.

So that side of the minimalist agenda interested me, because I think they were right. But there's something missing there. That was just too narrow. And so that's why--that's what I've been pressing on.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

So you've kind of switched and moved into both. Would you say that your work has progressed more--but it's been primarily in painting, with sculptural elements--

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DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Sculpture is newer.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

--ever since you started? I mean, once you got rid of the commercial art idea, it's come.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Uh-hunh.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Describe the importance of peers to you in the time after high school, or your truck driving days, or then--in truck driving days and then at art school.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Okay. I'm going to give you--kind of two sides of it. Both sides, which are really positive, although one side will kind of seem negative. Let me see if I can explain that.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

You can say negative things if you like.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, but, if there were, I would, but there really aren't, but I just want to explain that. In terms of peers, one of the things I've had to

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confront is being half Mexican and half Yugoslavian. And having--as an artist especially. Because oftentimes with the last name that I have, there are certain expectations on the part of certain people that my art looks a particular way. There's kind of a stereotype about what Mexican art looks like.

In terms of my peers, a lot of the Mexican artists I know--and I think I'm probably more paranoid about this than anything else--I really don't think that it's what they're thinking as much as what I'm thinking. But it's as if I don't fit, but I should because I'm Mexican.

I remember a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art called--it was "New Roots, New Visions," or something like that. I forget exactly what the title was. But I remember how different my work looked than the rest of the Latin artists, Latino artists that were in the show. And of course, I liked that, because first of all, I like being different.

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But what I had to have understood was that being Latin American was all I had in common with everyone who was there by blood, okay, by heritage. But that in fact as a person who lived in the world I was an American who really was influenced by minimalist art. That's why my work looked so different.

Now, I also--I understand the Spanish language fairly well, enough to get by. I don't speak it very well at all. I'm greatly inhibited in my relationship to other Mexican people because of that. It's like I want to speak Spanish, but I don't, I always end up speaking English.

So, it affected my art experience in the sense that I embrace being Mexican so much, I mean, I cook Mexican food, my Mexican grandmother raised me along with my Yugoslavian grandmother, because my parents were working most of the time. So I'm very close to both. Very, very close. I'm very romantic, which I think comes from both sides of the line there.

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So, anyway, this is--and I'm--there's a very uncomfortable position I have found myself in quite often. You know, and tagged along with that I suppose is the fact I'm here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on what's called the Madison Plan, which is a mechanism or a structure that's been put together by the university to recruit minority faculty members into the program. That's been a very difficult thing for me to deal with. Because when I come into a situation like this, I don't want to be thought of as a minority, obviously. I don't think any of us who are considered minority really want that.

So, I suppose we tend to--I don't like to say this, because it sounds pretentious, and maybe it's a cliche--tend to work harder, to prove yourself. Because I think everyone tries to work hard. But there is, nevertheless, at least that thought in your mind about how you're perceived.

So, luckily, at least in my case, because of all

the good things that have happened to me, I have enough of a background and accomplishments that I think at least I'm on a par. At least, with those who might--might try to judge me.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Yeah, I'd say so.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

And I think I--as I--again, as I listen to myself talk, I sense a certain kind of paranoia, in a way that I probably never would have admitted years ago. As I'm growing older, I'm beginning to think more about that. And so I guess what I meant was there's that negative kind of ambience about my relationship with my Mexican peers, but on the other hand, there isn't, because I'm so much--I know I'm so much like them, and I love what they do, and, you know, we talk when we get the opportunity, but I am always fearful of having shows like that, that are Latin American or American minority, Mexican--there's always these things--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

The accent--

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DAN RAMIREZ (A):

I un--yeah. I understand the need for them on the parts--on the part of some people at times. But they really make me uncomfortable.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

We've talked a little bit about your role models and mentors. Would you like to add anything about them? And I'll continue that, because we need to move on a bit, what qualities do you feel you needed most during this period of time when you were first in art school and going through art school?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I think what I needed--and I guess this is really what I got, and I mentioned Bob Nichol, who's one person, and I again, I really don't want to mention--keep getting into--I'm going to forget somebody and I don't want to do that. But I needed to have someone put into perspective for me what it meant to draw, which is what I was doing, and to draw and to use that facility, if you will, in a way that was going to make me happy, to use that term for the moment. As the

years have gone by, now I understand what "happy" means. To a certain extent, I think.

And my peers, and my peers and my teachers were able to do that for me by allowing me to understand, as I mentioned earlier, how abstract art worked. And again, I don't want to push to the side representational art at all, because I understand that.

But they opened up, again, things for me in such a way, in a very short period of time, that it allowed me to just all of a sudden become a person. And it happened quickly. I think part of that, there's no question was the fact that I had already spent a number of years and had some experience as a person trying to survive in a world through working and things like--

I mean, golly, you know, the first time I got a teaching job and found you--all you do is you go to the university two days a week for about four hours a day, and then I would--hear, actually

hear some of my colleagues complain about having to come to a meeting on Friday, I said, wow, [LAUGH] this is--this is really an enlightenment for me.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

It's a very different kind of world.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

It really is. It really, really is. And it's one that one must learn to really appreciate and to really take care of and give something back to, because--other kinds of jobs are quite different.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

I know, and--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Not as interesting and [? ?].

MARY GREELEY (Q):

--much harder in ways that artists, when they're complaining about their work, don't realize how hard it is.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

That's right. Physically it's incredibly demanding to have to work seventy-five, eighty

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hours a week at a job you don't like. Seventy hours a week at a job you do like--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Is very different.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Incredibly different!

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Yeah, yeah, it's very different. Do you think your training during this art school period adequately prepared you for a career as an artist?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

You know, that's interesting. Yeah. Yeah. I really think so. I want--for a moment there I was going to say, well, no, probably more as a teacher. But no, I don't. I think in both cases. I think it has. It doesn't stop, of course. Because I still see a lot of these people, and they're struggling just like, you know, all of us are kind of in this together. And we have questions that we put forth to one another in terms of not only our art but our teaching also. So it's kind of--still goes on. I'm talking

about the people that I worked with at the university, and people I've come to be friends with in the interim.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

When--after you finished art school, did you give yourself certain benchmarks for achievement?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

[LAUGH] Yeah, I think I did. I think--I think like a lot of my peers, who I was--you know, who I was working with and having little shows here, you know, exhibitions, that I worked with, I think one of the things all of us wanted was something like some review in a major magazine. That was like a benchmark of a kind! You know--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Certainly is.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

--to be real candid with you. So, I can think--the first time--when--that ever happened for me, that also was again one of those reinforcing factors that said, well, maybe there's something here that--that's good.

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

Did you lay out any kind of plan for achieving it? Did you set other benchmarks as well?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

No. No, I don't think so. I was--when I went--decided to go back to--to--to undergrad school, I was married, and my wife was working in a--for a--advertising agency at the time. This is my first wife, I've been married once--twice, this is my second marriage now. But when I went back to school, my life changed dramatically.

But it is--it was--the word "benchmark" is interesting, cause one of the--there was a benchmark other than art. There was also a benchmark in terms of a level at which my life with my former wife and our marriage was going to be fulfilled to the extent that we could live a little more harmoniously than we were because of my working as much as I was. And we didn't have children, and things like that.

So that was one of the things I was striving for.

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So that was like kind of a goal. And I did give myself like a couple of years for something good to happen, so that would happen.

As things turned out, my life changed so much, and I became I think such a different kind of person, where my wife, who was so supportive of my doing what I was going to do was not growing while I was growing in ways that very strange things happened. Which led, ultimately, to my getting a divorce.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

That may have been more change than the--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Um-hmmm. I've never--I've never--there was a time when I would have said it was really more my fault than someone else's. I think those things are just impossible to determine. Impossible as to who or what. But....

MARY GREELEY (Q):

We have a couple more minutes on this tape, so we'll do one more question on this side. What were the first organizations you joined as an

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artist?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Organizations. I try very hard to stay away from organizations! [LAUGH] I have this incredible, again, pretention about being unique, by myself! [LAUGH] So I--I try to stay away from organizations. There were one or two that [weren't?] organizations, but that we had like what was called a Wednesday evening group of artists, that we would get together and we would talk. I liked that.

And then we had a show together one time, and I kind of liked it because it did give me a form from which to show from. I was getting uncomfortable with it, because it start--people started asking, well, what--what is like your philop--what--you ought to have a philosophy. You ought to have--

Then there was also a few that said let's write a manifesto. I started really getting frightened then. And then, it got down to a case where one

art dealer decided to put together a series of drawings by all of us. Into a box, and sell them. And that's when I said that's it for me! [LAUGH]

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Do you belong to any organizations now? Any artist organizations? Other than the galleries where you show?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

No, I don't. I don't--[PAUSE] No, I've--I've worked with a place called--what was it?--Metropolitan structures, which was an organization in Chicago that had an art advisory board that I would sit on and talk about they wanted to put shows together, and I, along with a few other artist, would recommend different kinds of shows they could do. That I suppose was an organization, of a kind.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Have you ever gotten benefits from an artists' organization?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Oh, well....

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

Or insurance, or studio insurance?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

No. No. I tend--I tend to--I don't apply for like a lot of grants and things like that. I just--I've always been able to support myself with my art, and I just find it real cumbersome going through the process. But by the same token, I am real aware of the necessity for those things to exist, because there's just--there's a great need for a lot of artists to have that--that accessible to them.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

How do you feel about unionization for artists?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I was a union man for a long time. Local 705 and 710 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and I wouldn't give you a nickel for a union. But I will say this, there was a time when they were necessary, when they first came in. There's no question about it. But there's just too many things that have taken place over the years that have led me to believe that there

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are powers to be involved in unions that really I don't think have the welfare of their constituency at hand. That's just kind of like my feeling. Not all, but some.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

I think we should turn it over now.

[SOUND CUT]

* **END CASSETTE SIDE 1**

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PART 2, RAMIREZ INTERVIEW

Madison, Wisconsin--October 20, 1990

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Describe the period in which you first achieved professional recognition as an artist.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I guess that would have been while I was--in undergrad school, I had mentioned that I was asked to do a show in this restaurant, this Black Hawk Restaurant. And to me that was certainly a professional kind of experience. As I said, I also had certain ambitions about wanting to be reviewed in more--in major journals and things of that nature. And of course, as that began to take place, that also kind of, for me, made me feel more like I was a--a professional of a kind.

But I--if you mean the first time I sold something, then that--that would probably have been about 1976, when I had my first one person show and sold--I'm sorry, it would have been my second one person show, because the Black Hawk Restaurant would have been the other one, but the

things weren't for sale there. But then I had one at a place called Chicago Gallery, in Chicago. And had the exhibition there and sold some work. So that would, I guess would have been, you know, from that point of view, my first professional--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Recognition.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Recognition, yeah.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

And did critical review follow?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yes, it did. Um-hmm. The critical review actually--there were two of them, one by a--a Chicago--both by Chicago art critics, one named Alan Artner, and the other Dennis Adrien, the person I mentioned to you earlier. And both reviews were very positive, and--and actually the review by Artner was the one that was the first kind of mention of--suggestion of spirituality and things of that kind were--they were beginning

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to surface--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Being picked up.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

--into the work, yeah.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

How would you describe the group you rely now--rely on now as your peers? Who are your peers?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

My peers now--well, I--I suppose in some instances, they haven't changed an awful lot, in that I still--see and talk to about conditions of life that are part of making art, with many of the--the people, the faculty at the University of Illinois who have since become my friends and colleagues and coworkers, if you will. So I still see them.

I have an additional group of newer peers, who are my colleagues here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and there are, again, a few people here who I confide in and talk to about....

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

Have--are most of them artists?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, some are artists, some are visual artists, some are writers, whom I consider, I guess, now that I understand the word "art," "artist" a little bit better, I also consider artists. Some are curators. Gallery dealers. [? ?]

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Are there many from outside the art world?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I guess--well, again, music is still part of the art world. Outside the art world. You know, I'm sure there are, but there wouldn't be many. Outside the art world. Well, actually, yeah, I mean, with the exception of my parents, my present in-laws are in some ways in influence, yeah. They have a way of looking at the world, both of them, that kind of intrigues me, and that in a lot of ways has actually influenced my own thinking in some respects about how I approach the things I do as an artist.

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

Interesting. Because the next question relating into it is how have your peers influenced your career?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I guess that again would be--one of the ways--well, they've influenced it by I guess--at times when I've had--I may--have had transitions in my work where I'm moving through a stage where I'm rather tentative and unclear--not that I think art has to be clear--at least unclear to myself, which it can be, that they're supportive, they kind of help me get through those things by, you know, recognizing certain things about what I'm trying to accomplish that even though--they tend to use a nice word that I like a lot.

The old word used to be "Your work is interesting." Which usually meant it's not too good. Now, it's "I like the fact that you're taking risks." [LAUGH] That has a little stronger connotation, a little more positive connotation for me. And so there are a couple of

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my peers who I think have been able to look at my work at periods where I'm really, really being tentative and kind of not sure. And....

I listen to reviews, when I get a review. I mean, I read them, I listen to them, I try to understand them, whether they're good, whether they're bad or otherwise, I want to try to come to terms with those things. So in a sense that kind of, you know, fits into that peer idea, because a lot of people who write about me are people that I do know. I know them on a social level as well as on a professional level. And then of course there are a number I don't know who write about my work.

So there is a lot of levels at which all of that kind of takes place. I don't know if I've really answered your question there.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Yeah, I think sufficiently, and I think it's been referred to before as well. How would you describe your occupation? Is this different from

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your career?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, let's see, my occupation I guess is really as a teacher. I don't consider painting and doing these other things that I do as really an occupation so much as something that I couldn't--I just--at this time in my life I've come to realize I couldn't live without doing it. I wouldn't--wouldn't want to live without doing it.

Teaching is something I love very, very much, and of course, what I do--in my own work as an artist comes very much into play with what I teach and how I teach and how I perceive the things that I teach. [?] go back to what I said earlier, I don't believe it's possible to teach anyone how to make art, but you can educate one. So I try and draw on my experiences to do that. Could you ask me that question one more time?

MARY GREELEY (Q):

How would you describe your occupation, and is this different from your career?

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DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Okay. I don't see either one as a career. It just isn't. There's too many things involved. Maybe I don't see it as a career because it's so different--or as an occupation--because it's so different than what I remember when I was a truck driver, which was like an occupation. And wanting to be a commercial artist seemed like a career. Neither of these things seem like either of those things. And for words, I don't think I'm going to be able to really articulate, but I just--they don't feel like they're that way.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Does either the word "career" or "occupation" carry with it a certain onus?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I think it can. Current--well--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Do you think that's the difference?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

This--you know, I mean, I'm certainly not--unaware that--that a lot of the connotations that I bring to these words are of my own making, from

my own experiences, and maybe they're not warranted. But for example, the word "career" does have a connotation to me that equates with, or synonymous with, the idea of success. And it's as if there's a certain level of success that one must kind of meet almost, or attain, to have had a good career. And I just don't see that kind of thinking as having any place in being a teacher or in being an artist.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

How long have you been teaching?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Ah, let's see, I've been teaching, oh, I guess--twelve years? Ten, twelve years, something like that.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

So did you come here after your truck driving and then school and then painting, did you stay in Chicago? When, at what point--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Okay. What happened, after I graduated from the University of Chicago, I did my graduate work there, which is, by the way, where I met my

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present day wife, who is also an artist. Graduated from there, and I took a teaching posi--well, actually I went--first I went back to driving a truck for about six months, because I needed some money to support myself, and to rent this loft in Chicago. And then I went to work for about a year at the University of Chicago in the admissions department.

And while I was there, I would sit in my office when I wasn't doing interviews, and reading. I read philosophy a lot, it interests me a great deal. And got this idea into my head that maybe it might be interesting if I could apply to the graduate program to work towards a doctorate in some field that would be directly related to what I was doing in my art work, feeling also that I'd accomplish a couple of things, well, a number of things: getting the research done that would interest me, also I would be making my art, which I would also be selling to support me, and then I would then get a higher degree which might enable me to get a teaching job with better credentials,

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let's say.

And so, anyway, I applied, I was accepted, I was given a--CIC fellowship, a really nice fellowship, and I started working on this thing. And all of a sudden what turned--what--began as kind of like an adventure into thinking about art turned into a very structured academic idea about writing about art. And just didn't--it wasn't feeling right at all. And so I gave the fellowship back and took a teaching job at the University of Illinois in Chicago that came up on an adjunct basis, which meant that I would just be teaching part time. Which eventually led into my teaching full time, going on a tenure track. Then I received tenure while I was there.

Then while I was there, this position here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison opened up on the Madison Plan, and I was asked to come down and interview for this job.

And the conditions were appealing, because the

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main considerations that I had were time. If I could get more time to do my work, because teaching does tend to be very demanding on you in terms of time away from your studio. And so we worked something out here where it was very good. Salary fantastic. It's just an incredible salary.

That, coupled with the fact that our children, our two boys, who were in school in Chicago were having a tough time. One especially, the older boy. Both of them are very bright. And the older boy was being put into a class situation where the--his peers were much older than he. And things just weren't--socially they weren't working out very well for him, but we couldn't get either of the boys held back. Both of them were kind of involved in this, but the older one a little bit more than the other. We couldn't get them held back, because they only way in the Chicago system they could hold them back was to flunk them, and they couldn't do that because of their academic abilities.

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So, when we came down here, my wife and I talked to one of the school psychologists here, and we told her what our kind of dilemma was, and she interviewed both boys, and she said, she said, "I think it's a good idea if we held them back." And she said, "We could do that here because of their birthdays." So everything seemed to fall real--quite, quite well there.

Then there was also, again, this is--there was an opportunity here at Madison where things, as they were explained to me, were in--at such a crossroads, where it looked like things could really start to blossom, and the program, there were certain aspects of the program that I think I could--I could make some contribution to. And there are a number of faculty here I find very, very proficient at what they do. And, you know, overall it's a good faculty and a good working condition. Like any faculty, especially a large one, there are problems.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Of course.

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DAN RAMIREZ (A):

And, you know, we all deal with that. But, anyway, the conditions were such where it seemed like I could do it. I could do that. And so we moved up here about three years ago. And--things, for the most part I think are working out quite well. I never realized how much I would miss Chicago. I lived there for forty-seven years. I was born there, so I--I left when I was forty-seven. Just about forty-seven.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

It's a very different atmosphere.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, it's a totally different atmosphere. And--I--I'm having a lot of trouble with it. I'm having a lot of trouble with it. I am a concrete and steel person, I have been all of my life. This is incredibly beautiful here. It can kind of almost lull you to sleep. And I'm not used to seeing mallard ducks walk across my lawn. As beautiful as it is, it kind of jars me all the time.

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I do remember kind of worrying whether or not I could still make art up here. I don't think that's a problem. In fact, I think the newest body of work that I've done is maybe the best work I've ever done. So--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

It'll be interesting to see how that evolves over time. Do you see any pattern or progression in your career, or the work that you have been doing?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Pattern or progression--well, the pattern I think is that I'm still dealing with those concerns of minimalism. They never seem to alter themselves any. I teach a number of seminars in post-modern theory. And I really enjoy the young ideas. I don't agree with hardly any of them. I don't know if I'm too conservative or--or what, or too much a traditionalist. But I find them actually very thought provoking. I don't the work real provoking, but I find the ideas quite provoking. And it's really, you know, it's helped me a lot.

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Anyway, but yeah, there is a kind of pattern in that I have maintained this kind of focus on what I want to do. The other thing, pattern--and what else did you say?

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Progression.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

The progression is that in coming here and having the opportunity to teach seminars, which is one of the things I asked for when I came up here, that in terms of progression I am able to I think really improve on my teaching capabilities and things that I have to offer as information, because I am delving--more into these kinds of ideas. And so that--it works hand in hand of course with my art work. So there is some, you know, feedback, change back and forth there. So yeah, I'd say so.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Describe the gate keepers at various stages in your career.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

The gate keepers. I'm going to ask you to--

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

Those who let you in or those who kept you out.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Those who kept me in, those who kept me out. Oh, that's an interesting question. I had a talk about something like that with my wife not too long ago. We were talking a little earlier in our conversation here, you and I, about the peer pressure thing. And I mentioned about the--being half Mexican and being half Yugoslavian. And just recently I've, you know, I've always told my wife, my present day wife, when--and I've been married to her for I think twelve years--that I was never prejudiced against, when I was a kid.

I was in an Irish Polish Catholic neighborhood, and everything just was, you know, it was just perfect. I'm looking back and finding out that I don't think it was all that perfect. I think there in fact were some times when the--the good old Mexican kid on the block, which is really what I was thought of, which bothered me quite a bit, not so much then, but now, that I was always

considered as Mexican and not Mexican-Yugoslavian, but Mexican.

But, maybe I was just kind of a--mascot or something. You know, or a--but not in the positive sense. I'm not saying that's true of everyone that I associated with, because I have some very dear friends from my young childhood days, very, very dear friends. And I'm not so sure that I was prejudiced against in an intentional way either. But I think they were--it certainly was there. I was too naive to understand it.

Today, sadly to say, yeah. I think there are certainly--there certainly for me have been moments in my recent--some of my recent experiences teaching, that there have been--there has been some prejudice. Against the fact for example that I could come into a situation as a minority and be given a reward of a kind that a lot of other people who aren't considered minorities are somewhat envious of. And it's

something that I understand. I have great sympathy for that.

On the other hand, see, I can't apologize for the fact that I live in the times that I live in, and I have made--I have accomplished the things that I have accomplished kind of parallel with those times. And I'll never do that. I'll never apologize for those things. But it's an uncomfortable one, and I do recognize.... And I don't think I'm mistaking--totally the idea of just being envy or jealous from being prejudiced, because I have experienced some things that I consider to be prejudices, and I'm not so sure that the people who do them realize that those prejudices are there. But they are.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Often they're subtle and very deep in our subconscious. I mean, we don't--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

That's right. That's right. And I know--and I know darn well that I'm also part of that. I mean, I'm sure there are many things that I'm

prejudiced over that I may think I'm not being prejudiced over, and certainly, you know, operate in the same way. But you asked me a question and I'm just responding....

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Yeah. No. That's good. What have been the discrepancies between your career aspirations and your actual career opportunities?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Career aspirations and my career opportunities. Every time--every time--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

[?] because with the hesitation about career, let's just talk about aspirations--

[BOTH SPEAK AT ONCE]

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah. Yeah, I was going to say--I was going to say--yeah, I was going to say--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

--and opportunities.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

--I'm going to--obviously, given our conversation, deal with the word "career"

differently, but okay. Aspirations and opportunities. Well, I think--with the aspirations I had at the beginning, I think most of those have been met. I don't have those same kinds of aspirations anymore.

There--I guess they've changed somewhat. Let me see if I can use this as one example. I think probably I aspire to go back to Chicago, okay, and to be home again. All right? Is that open to me? Not--not as much as I'd like it to be. I've cut certain ties by leaving, and taken on certain responsibilities, and the responsibilities I've left have now been filled by others. And rightfully so, as they should be.

And so now, the opportunities aren't there in the really objective sense, no. If you mean opportunities in the sense of would--would they like to have me there, I think there are a number of people who--I've certainly talked to people who say, "Gee, it would be great if you'd come back to Chicago." But, you know, again, there's

nothing there. So I think the opportunities will be there, somewhere down the line.

I don't want to put--I don't want to frame that question in totally such a negative manner though in terms of where I'm at right now. Because there--again, I want to emphasize that where I'm at right now, there's a lot of good things here, a lot of positive things that happened. But again, in the course of this interview, I'm going to be real candid with you and as honest as I possibly can be. And I really do aspire to go back to Chi--I miss it something terrible.

I think the other inhibiting factor, though, that would prevent me, is that I don't think my boys would stand for it. I think that they're at a point right now where they're so happy they'll simply dictate to me whether I can do that or not. And at this point in time, I would say probably I couldn't. So that would be an inhibiting factor.

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But professionally, if I use that term, I really don't think there's any real inhibiting factors that are--what's the word I'm looking for?--that are being put up there for me, to make--to hold, hold me from doing that, in some intentional way. They're just [? ?] [goals?], that's life!

MARY GREELEY (Q):

That's right! [LAUGH] What have been the major turning points in your career? Can you--are there three or four major--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Major turning points? A major turning point. Well, certainly when I was given the--I was given a one person show, exhibition, of a suite of prints at the--in the Prints and Drawing section of the University of Chi--I'm sorry--at the Art Institute of Chicago. From what I understand, I was the first Chicagoan ever to be given the one person exhibition in this particular department.

I think that had a lot to do with a certain kind of--of significance accorded to my work, which [in line?] makes, I suppose, reflects on my as

being maybe a significant kind of artist, at least at a particular time. Okay? Because first of all, you're basically being legitimized, if you will, by a major institution.

So, because of a number of wonderful people who were willing to stick their necks out for me, who also believed in what I did, gave me this exhibition. So I think that's one of the major turning points for me, because, again, it solidified not only those things in the art community, or the art mainstream, if you will, but it made me--again, it was one more of those very positive things in my life that made me feel as if I do things that are worthwhile looking at or thinking about. And so that--that would have been certainly one of the major things.

People I've met, you know, particular people that I've met, again, I won't get into a lot of names, because there are a lot of people, but in crucial ways I could not not mention someone like Dennis Adrien, I could not [not] mention someone like a

man named Robin Glauber, who has since died, who was a curator and a writer. And Bob Nichol, the person that I mentioned. Those would be certainly three people that I'd have to--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

With major--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

--consider as people who have, in different periods have either done something, contributed something towards what I am as an artist that have made a major, major shift or major distinction on what I do.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

What--this is shifting quite a lot--what has been your relationship to money throughout your career?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, again, very good as far as the sales of works are concerned. People collect my work, and again, I've had this good fortune--I think I've had eighteen--one person shows in Chicago and I would say probably fourteen or fifteen of them were, you know, sold out when I had the

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exhibition--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

That's wonderful.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

--and they would be sold out later when the exhibition was over. But the point is that people have been very supportive. And not just in Chicago. I mean, people on the west coast have collected my work, and different parts of--museums in different parts of, you know, of the country and things like that. So that's worked out.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

How have--how have the costs of supporting your art changed over time?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, the costs have never been really prohibitive, because when you're selling work you can put the money back into the--into the art work. My most recent show, I didn't sell anything. Nothing at all. And, you know, what does one attribute that to? Well, I've been told my dealer that things are really hard, money is

tough, and all of that. But, you know, dealers are going to be nice to you too! [LAUGH] So, I don't know, some people have said, well, the work is really risky, and it's tough, it's big, it's heavy. Well, who knows? The point is--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Have your expenses gotten a lot more?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, yes. This is a show that I put a lot of money into, that at this point I haven't retrieved yet, which isn't really what you put it in there for anyway, so that doesn't really matter.

But, getting back to the situation I'm in here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, one of-- again, one of the other attractive things about this university, which is an incredible university as a research institution, is that we have research grants here, and faculty can apply-

MARY GREELEY (Q):

For the artists?

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DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yes, faculty apply for the research grants, and they're quite, they're quite generous with the amount of money they'll give you to support you as an artist. And that is--that's one of the, again, one of the very positive things about being here.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

That's great.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

They have supported me quite well.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Have grants, awards, or competitions, or emergency funds affected your career?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, as I said earlier, I don't apply for many grants. I've never felt a need to, because I've always had the money, and it just takes so much time to put all that stuff together, I just--since the money's there I don't do it. I also--I still think they're worthwhile having. I'm always a little bit uncomfortable with the idea of the government having anything to do with

funding artists. That's probably another issue.

I haven't had any real--real ramifications from, for example, not getting money, because the money was there. The only thing I think that maybe does affect someone like myself who doesn't apply for grants very often--I think I've applied for one or two in my life--is that you're not asked then to sit in on other kinds of panels for people who do--usually you're not asked. And I was asked a couple of times, and both times I wasn't able to do it.

And I--as the years have gone by, I think I would have--I kind of regret that now. I would like to have had more of an input into how some of that money is distributed and to what kind of artists, you know. I think that would have been helpful.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Was there a particular time when such money would have been most helpful?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Are you talking about for me, in terms of my own

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work?

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Yeah, um-hmm.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Not really. Not, again, not in my particular case. I suppose it's always helpful. I mean, you can apply for these things, and you can get it, and you can use it, but there--I didn't have to.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

So that it was less relevant.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

What has been the importance of physical location and work space at different stages of your career?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Ah, physical location and work space: very, very important. If for no other reason than convenience. I had a loft in Chicago back in 1978 that was about fifty-two hundred square feet. It was quite large. And then I moved to a

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home on the far South Side of Chicago and worked out of a garage, which I turned into a studio, which was about four hundred square feet. And still doing--I do very large scale work, and I still continued to do large scale work, but fortunately I work primarily in panels, so I'm able to--but I could never see the whole thing up at one time.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

That would be frustrating.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

I'd have to project that. Then of course coming here, I have this studio, as you can see, which is about fourteen hundred square feet, which accommodates my needs. It still is not as large as I'd like it, but it certainly--it's certainly very good. So, it hasn't affected my work in terms of aesthetics because I still manage to make the large scale work even in a small environment.

A question I was asked by a number of people in Chicago at this most recent exhibition, because

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it was--there was dirt in it, was how much was being in Wisconsin, you know, affecting what you were doing? Well, my response to that was not at all, but I really don't know that. I don't think it is, but I don't, I really don't know. I'm always--I'm always open to the possibility that there's some subcon--at some subconscious level those things take place, so.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

That that is--yeah. What kind of control do you exert over your own destiny as an artist?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

In terms of some notion of success, really none at all. In terms of enjoying what I do, I have total control over that. There are times when I hate being in here. I mean, I just don't like it, it's no fun, it's not interesting. Maybe it's because I don't have any ideas, or it might because I'd rather go play golf, which I love to do. Or I'd rather do something with my family. But that's--the way it is! [LAUGH]

MARY GREELEY (Q):

How have you interacted with the public

throughout your career?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I've always tried to make myself available to people who wanted to speak with me, about my art for example. If I'm asked to lecture on my art, I can only think in very, very rare instances where I have refused to do that. So I think you're kind of obligated to really, it's almost a responsibility, especially with the good fortune that I've had, where people have been so supportive. I think you kind of have to give things back. As difficult as it is to try to articulate verbally what your work's about, I think it's still something that you should do.

So I think I've interacted with the public in a responsible way. I'd like to think I have.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

What are your own criteria for success as an artist?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

I guess my own criteria is that--as I mentioned earlier--I have focused on this issue of reality

in the way that I've experienced it through minimalism--minimalist ideas and other kinds of art ideas, if you will. That there's an element of the notion of truth that I--one comes to find out we're talking about so many different shades of truth and aspects of it. I'm not talking now about an absolute truth, because I think that's one of those leaps one makes.

But I have been in pursuit of a kind of truth for me, and it's still coming into play for me. It's still there, I'm still seeking it. And that is the one thing that I don't deviate from, and if I'm successful at all, it's not in finding it, but it's in being as honest as I think I possibly can in the--through the--through this process, in that pursuit.

Now, that's--it's very pretentious, I think, to think--you don't deviate from that. I'm sure one does. I mean, there are certain other things that we start to fit in. But I guess ideally, ideally, if there's a success factor, it's that

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somewhere along the line there have been one, two, three, four, five, whatever the number may be, I don't know what it is, hopeful there's at least one, thing that I have made, and I really mean this, "made," not thought about. Because I make things. That there's something that's been made that somehow will reflect that pursuit of the kind of truth that I've been focusing on for some time.

And then I guess the other element of that would be that--that understanding or that expression of--communicated would have some value. That it could actually make something in the world better.

You know, and I'm not going to say--because I think it's a cliche--even if it means just for one person. Because I really don't really, really mean that. I really would like to have a larger impact than that. I really, I mean, that's important to me.

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So, in terms of success, you know--and I have a feeling, I'm almost sure of it, I'll never know that. See. But that, ideally, that would be it.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Do you hold these same criteria for other artists as well as for yourself?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

No, I don't. One of the great, great things about this idea of art is that it's so free that, no, you cannot just--that whatever you think it should be, I think that's what you should pursue, absolutely, no question about it.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Are there particular periods of work that you feel more satisfied with than others?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Oh, definitely. Definitely. There are--there have certainly been times when I've worked on a series and have felt, well, this is--this is just wonderful, it's great, and I'll stop and I'll look back on it, and say, gee, you know what? It just isn't so great. And so usually I can find one or two things in different periods of my work

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that I think are the strongest that line up with this element of truth that I was talking about earlier, this thing that I pursue as an artist, that are--that are there. But I think ultimately one leaves that to others. I think you really have to.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Do you have--you've mentioned a couple of themes--a number of central ideas that you keep working on? Other than what you've said already? Seems to me--

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I'm--maybe this has more to do with developing a process that's really an analogy about this idea of truth that I deal with. And that is music. I studied music for a number of years, I played music, I studied--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

What kind of music?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, I played jazz, I played rock, and a little bit of classical music, but I studied classical music. I--I--I took some lessons from a man

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named Harold Carnes, who was the first bassist for the Chicago Symphony, a number of years ago. And then I took some formal music courses, and kind of played jazz. I was a bassist, is what I was.

And I love music a lot. And a lot of the work that I do is influenced by music, because I'm influenced by thinking. And this, again, I've already stated, I don't find that there's a separation between feeling and thinking. So, anyway. Music, of course, is one of these kind of systems that involves a certain kind of formal language that--allows one to--to--to move--within the constraints of the system, or to take out all these other pretensions of magical things that are outside of it. Not unlike I guess a lot of art.

So, in line with the music, there are a couple of people, one of whom I mentioned, Olivier Messain [sp?], who had a great influence on me. Now, Messain had a great influence on me not only

because of what his music sounded like, but from some of the things he said. I read a book, a man named Samuel I believe is the--Claude Samuel I think is the author's name who wrote it, a book, which was an interview with Messain. And to listen to Messain talk about music, about notes, and colors, and how each note gives you a special color, and about birds and sound, all this stuff--I should also mention he's Roman Catholic, which I am, a divorced Catholic, but at least there's an affinity there in terms of an upbringing. Whether or not we still embrace the religion is really a different question.

But, he sounds like Kandinski sounds when Kandinski talks about the sound of colors. You know what I mean, and things like that. Is that there's kind of a--just this--for me, this kind of romantic thing that harnessed by this incredible kind of intellectual thing that he has with music that really I embrace. Okay.

I've mentioned Barnett Newman before as another

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influence-- But this music thing is very big with me. I'm very--I empathize with it quite strongly. And so I've done a lot of things, like the Celestial City series, which is a part of his musical [rule?], the Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus, the [? ? ?]. I did a--that was the suite of prints that was shown at the Art Institute.

I'm--the works I just finished right now are called Contemplations, and they're really titled that way because I'm still affected in some way simply by the titles that he would use. And I am--well, they also refer to other things.

But that's one of the threads that runs through my work very strongly. Now, they're not about music. There have been reviewers who, because of the titles have tried to somehow make the parallel to music. And I've even gone so far as to actually use musical staves, which maybe was a mistake, but they really weren't about music when I work with them that way. But I'll, you

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know, that comes with the territory. You take what you get for that.

But they're not about--they're not music or about music, they're influenced by music.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

What are your feelings about critical review of your work?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

My feelings about it--well, is that you want as much as you can get from--especially from those who spend a lot of time investigating the nature of art, so to speak. Because I think it's helpful and gives you feedback in terms of how you're progressing in the field, so to speak, that you--you make yourself exposed to, this art idea, and this whole mainstream. I think it's good to have that.

The downside of that, I suppose, could be how much one is affected by the kind of criticism one gets. Does one begin to work for critics or oneself, or are you totally jarred out of

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whatever ideals you've set for yourself that you can't work anymore, because you've been told you're not doing....

So, I guess there's always that kind of--of possibilities, but I think criticism is absolutely essentially for all--you know--all kinds of reasons. But....

MARY GREELEY (Q):

How satisfied are you with your career as an artist?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

You know, I really--it's so easy for me to say I'm really satisfied because I've had limited successes of one kind or another--again, using those words, we talked about them before.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Right.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

I don't know. I am still--I am--like I said, there's times, I don't want to come in here. I just don't. I'd just much prefer to play golf or read a novel or something. Because there's

nothing for me to say. I don't feel there's anything for me to do.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

And do you make yourself stay here when you're feeling that way, or do you--?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

No, I--no, I get out. I don't--I'm not a big believer in, you know, one has to--at least certainly from my own experiences, you don't have to suffer to make art. Maybe you--maybe some do, maybe some--I don't know, I don't. I don't--I'm not going to! I don't--[LAUGH]

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Good. What have been your major frustrations?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Major--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Major professional frustrations.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Oh, gee, you know, that's an easy one. Really. When--when one makes art and talks about some kind of relationship of art to life, it becomes real--you're really hit in the head when you are

married to another artist. Which I am. And I am married to a woman who I love deeply. And who is an absolutely tremendous, tremendous person, individual, who I have learned so much from, who is so bright, so intelligent, and I think also a wonderful artist.

But the confrontation of trying to deal with time, who watches the kids, who doesn't watch the kids, especially in an era of time with women's liberation, which I strongly embrace, teach in my classes--and sometimes I say, why do you teach these things? You're making it more difficult for yourself! [LAUGH] But I can't--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Goes back to some of our hidden--not snobberies, what we were talking about, prejudices.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, that's right, that's right. And that--that is an incredible frustration, because I want for her everything I want for myself, and it can't be done! She has to steal, like I have to steal. And that is a reality, at least in my experience,

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you know. For me, that's a real, real frustration in having to deal with.

We both want the same for each other, and again, the idea if you believe art and life are combined, you know. You can take an opposing view to that. So maybe we make our own, you know, bed and we sleep in it. But that would be the major thing. Everything else kind of comes with, you know, being an artist, I guess.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

How would you describe the greatest satisfaction in your career? What's the greatest satisfaction?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

The greatest satisfaction. You mean what would I project as being a greatest satisfaction, or one that has already taken place?

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Oh, one that's already--well, either.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Okay.

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MARY GREELEY (Q):

And we'll begin to keep our answers--or keep your answers shorter, because we're going to run out of time in about five minutes.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Sure. All right. Greatest satisfaction. Well, I can't help still feeling that the show I had at the Art Institute, the exhibition I had there, was incredibly satisfying because I think the work was solid. I think the work was good, in terms of what I've been trying to accomplish over the years. I think that the pieces that I've just finished are really strong, real strong. The drawing, for example, in particular, and the work, the dirt pieces--and I hate to single out works like that, because usually someone will come along and say "You're wrong, it's the other ones." [LAUGH] But nevertheless, I really--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

We're talking about your point of view.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Yeah. I really do feel that these earthworks, so to speak, that I've just finished, are good. I

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think--I'm very satisfied with that. I'm also very satisfied with some things that are happening in my teaching right now. In some of the seminars I--there are some young individuals to whom which good things are happening, and they tell me that in some respects some of the things that we were able to discuss in the seminars we've had have made their life genuine for them in ways--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

That weren't before.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

--that weren't before. That--

MARY GREELEY (Q):

That's exciting.

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

--is really--that's really exciting.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

A quick answer on this one. What has been the effect of the marketplace on your work?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, as I said a moment ago, I didn't sell any work from this show, although I understand

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there's a bunch of things on hold. And my dealer said that the economy is such that, you know, no one will spend over four thousand dollars, and over the years my work has gotten to a price where I couldn't buy my own. So, I guess it's having an effect! A definite one! [LAUGH]

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Do you feel as though it's had a strong effect, negative or positive, throughout the period, throughout your period of showing in galleries?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, it's been positive in the sense that it makes things accessible to me that wouldn't have been otherwise, because the money was there, things that we could own, a home that we could buy, and things of that nature. So it's been quite good. I've never had really what I would call a negative factor, even not selling anything yet in this show, and perhaps not selling anything at all. I have a good job, I have a good salary, I can't complain.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

Well, that's good. How has your relationship to

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your materials changed from early training to now?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Well, in the sense that, for example, I mentioned earlier, I thought of things as painting, sculpture, so--in a very kind of purist sense, which came out of an initial education that I had, not that that's what they were telling me, that was the way I was interpreting it. Now, to bring dirt into my work is not a problem at all. Now it's whatever it takes gets done. So that's pretty much it there.

MARY GREELEY (Q):

What one major point do you make to your students, or would you make to a young painter about pursuing a career in the arts?

DAN RAMIREZ (A):

Oh, God. I guess--God. You know, really going into your studio and loving it when you're there is an indication that there--in some way there's a sense of self that is going to be embraced through this activity. If that means something to you, then do it forever. Just keep

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challenging yourself, permit yourself to be good to yourself, to go do it. It's too easy to look at--at--at making art as being some kind of situation that you need to struggle, to bring every bad thing or good thing into a work. You never know what it is. It usually tells you who you are if you let it. And you have to play. That's the biggest, biggest factor, is play. Be willing to play when you're making your art, or thinking about it.

I know when I was a young person, like a lot of young people, all I did, I would make games, you'd make up games, you'd make up golf courses in the back yard, you'd make up football games on boards, but you had a spirit about--

[SOUND CUT]

* **END TAPE SIDE 2**