

Jeff Zimmerman Interview

[1:02]

Jeff Zimmerman: Hello

Jason Ruiz: Hi, is this Jeff Zimmerman?

JZ: It is.

JR: Hi it's Jason Ruiz from the University of Notre Dame, how are you doing?

JZ: Good

JR: Good I want to thank you for taking my call [um]

JZ: Yeah sorry about that. Well, I've been all over the place trying to get some work done so that's my excuse for being an airhead and not responding to you way earlier, sorry about that.

JR: No, no, no, I totally get it, we're the ones stalking you, so um, but thank you for making the time. If you don't mind I'd love to ask you some questions, as you know we are researching the murals of Pilsen and we're trying to get kind of some information out onto the world for students or scholars who are interested in researching the neighborhood, looking at public art in the neighborhood, and of course you are high on our list of people we want to talk to. So, I have some questions prepared. I don't know what kind of time you have, so can you just give me a time limit and I'll keep to that?

JZ: 20 minutes

JR: Alright...

JZ: [Is that enough?]

JR: Ugh, hopefully, yes, i'll

JZ: I have to get my kids from school, ugh...

[2:08]

JR: Understood, and if you don't mind I'll be super quick and I'll ask, can you tell us a little bit about how you started working in Pilsen?

JZ: um, ok, I uhh, after college I was volunteering in South America, and I learned Spanish, and I was three years in Peru and then I came back to Chicago and a friend of mine was volunteering in Pilsen, and they needed an art teacher. And I was kind of artsy because I had studied graphic design, and so I wanted to continue to work with kids and volunteer and stuff so I became the art teacher there through the art institute actually. They had a place called the Castle Juan Diego, which is still there, over on Dew Island, and just one day the pastor at the time, whose name is

Chuck Dom, I think plus, everyone seems to know him, he just stopped me and he said “come with me” and he pointed to the virgin of Guadalupe mural there now, that building and he said, can’t find anyone to paint the mural, we want to do a mural, we want it to be the virgin of Guadalupe, and I said sure thing, and you know just because it sounded fun. And so I went and took a painting class at Columbia College that winter and someone also showed me a flyer that the Chicago Public Art Group had left somewhere. So I took the painting class in the winter and then that spring I called up the Chicago Public Art Group and I said how the hell do you paint a mural? And they were really nice about it and told me to call gilchrist scaffolding, you want to get acrylic paints and I had never painted before, until Columbia College. So to start the public art group really showed me how to, you know I didn’t know how to use [f] primer, you know you’ve got to get primer and this and that, and scaffolding, so we built up scaffolding on the roof of the, um, laundromat there, which is like the Lowes and I haven’t done that since. That was a giant construction, it was cool but nowadays I use a swing stage or some sort of motorized lift. But yeah, then I showed up and I had the meetings with Father Chuck and just a bunch of locals that I don’t know how we recruited them, and they came up with these ideas of what they’re about, we wanted to talk about immigration and the immigrant experience. Then I said alright, can you guys pose for me? Because, I need some references to work with and just kind of figured it out. My method is the same whenever I do a mural now, I just look around for people that are standing there and I ask them to pose for me and then I use their likeness in the mural. That was the first one there, that was the virgin of Guadalupe and that was 1996.

JR: Yeah.

JZ: And then the next mural I did down in Pilsen, when I started doing murals of my own after that summer. It took us almost three months to do just that one section, I just didn’t know what I was doing. Then the other two sections going west, the middle panel and the panel by the ally, we did in two thousand and one. And that was the same thing, we wanted to make the middle section to be about people who recently arrived, so brand new, off the bus, Mexican immigrants, and then the third panel was, you know, what do we look like after we have established ourselves in Chicago.

[6:20]

JR: You mentioned the massive scale of this work, can you tell me about sort of like why it is so huge? How you got there? How you landed on something so monumental?

JZ: That was the canvas, Father Chuck said, I want to paint that building. What do you mean? I don't know what you mean.

JR: It's so big, I just want to know how it got that way.

JZ: Oh well, just you know, you walk out of the front door of the church and you look to the right and it was just calling for, you know all of the building guys like Marcos Raya, you know there's other guys that were doing murals in the neighborhood, and it was a very Mexican thing, so they wanted it. It was calling them, let's get a mural over there so we can come out of the church everyday and instead of looking at that crappy wall, let's give ourselves something to look at. I mean that was the first offer that I had. It wasn't let's start small, it was, there's that wall and figure it out, and the second two panels are better than the first, you'll notice because I learned how to paint between 1996 and 2001. Even the funny thing you should include in there was the gone look, the second two panels that I did later are peeling and the bricks are popping off and stuff, but the Virgin of Guadalupe looks pretty much exactly the same. So the nuns would say, huh look at that see -

JR: Something miraculous going on.

JZ: They loved saying that, that you'll notice that the Virgin of Guadalupe panel is perfect, they love it, and I love sharing that, that's why I told that story to you, it is interesting.

JR: We will pass that along.

JZ: Pass it along son

[8:17]

JR: So after that piece, you start branching out into the neighborhood. I mean you are kind of in several places in Pilsen, so you are, it looks like, working with the church in some pieces, and without the church in others? Is that right?

JZ: Yeah, I did um a lot of the neighborhoods in Little Village and I ended up painting, there's an Elmi LA Girl right by, uh, 26th and like Albi over there.

JR: Yeah, I love that piece.

JZ: But that was a connection. Those, they, they went to St. Pius. So they found me through St. Pius and the same it's, I mean, I don't even have any of that. Those are, so then, there's the one we just talked about. There was one across the street, the parking lot. That was about the family. And we did that in probably 2002, but that's gone now because they put windows on that building. There's the one for the school, which is right around the corner on, uh, Cullerton, about teachers and kids, and there's this, you know, water coming down and this cleansing, a new life idea. And then there's some real crappy ones in the parking lot. One is of, uh, father Chuck holding up a baby, and then some kids. I mean, I don't even show people those, those was, but you just, so there was, nothing worked. The pictures didn't work, the weather didn't cooperate, the scaffolding was donated, so it was super scary and wobbly and those, those things didn't even turn out. But you know, the mural in the parking lot's gone and then, El Milagro is still there, but the only other mural I had in Pilsen that I'm trying to remember if I have anymore is on the,

JR: On the tortilla factory you had, I think it's called Freedom.

JZ: Yeah. Freedom, Religion and Commerce. That's gone. We painted over that.

[9:58]

JR: One question that we're facing and working on this project is, is how do we cope with stuff that is beautiful and important? You know, I'd have to say the one that about immigrant detention is, was one of my favorite pieces in Pilsen, you know, sort of as, from an artistic, from an artist's point of view. Can you tell, talk us through like, um, what does it mean to lose some murals?

JZ: I mean, you know, I kind of, I've always been used to. like, uh, I mean, I had a mural over on North Avenue in Monterey and the locals tried to put up a stink. I'm not assuming it was flattering. They tried to like, get it saved. Yeah. But you know, somebody bought the property and they just raised the building, you know? And my estimation, I mean, that was nice, but I never in a million years thought that what we were gonna do was stop the sale or building. And so, I mean, that happened to me real quick. I started losing my murals, like some were only up for a year, the whole building was gone, you know, the, the, the whole city started changing and gentrifying. Um, so I've always been used to that. And then if you know, something gets painted over, like there was a mural that they tried to save on blue island across the street from, uh, the Casa Diego. I forget who it was by, but it was one of the oldest ones. And, um, who the heck did it? I can't remember who did it, but it was, it was barely there. And there was this whole, like argument amongst the old timers and the new timers and this person and that person about restoring it. You know, my opinion's always been, just bring, do something new. Um, even if it's almost gone, it's almost gone and that's too bad, but it's made out of paint. Not out of bronze that lasts 30,000 years before it melts. Um, it's stinks and it's gonna fade or peel. You know, the whole buildings, you know, I had a mural in Puerto Rico when the buildings gone from the hurricane.

JR: Yikes.

JZ: Um, so I'm just kind of used to it. So it's, I, you know, if there's some that are old and that can stay like, uh, Marcos Raya's one about war over there on, uh, the train tracks. I mean, that one has been there since, you know, I was in high school. And, um, I just want it to stay, cuz it's kind of always been there and it's just reminds me of the seventies. Um, So, I mean, there's, you know, and any, honestly, it's a mixed bag. Some murals just totally suck. It's, it's not worth saving, you know, it's just, you know, it's not that good, but if it's like one of the first ones, like Marcos' is from the olden days and it's still there, heck let's try and make that stay forever. Cause it's so old. Or if it's really good or really meant something or it did something, you know. Okay. But if it's just sort of okay, or sort of good. You know, I would just say, just paint something new right on top of it and just make sure that it's better than what was there before. That's like the old, the graffiti rule too, you know, you could paint over my bubble letters, but your bubble letters have to be better. And you know, that was the rule. And if they weren't, you just kind of did some crap

and you got a beat down. So the rule of the street was, you know, you can go over me, but you know, when we all stand back, we must all agree that what you did was better. Um, you know, so I don't, you know, I'm about to go paint over one of my murals downtown tomorrow. Um, and it's my mural. Um, and I just repainted my mural at Oak street beach in September, and I just did something new. So some people get super caught up and worried and, but I'm completely the opposite. I just see, I just expect that the building's gonna be sold or knocked down. You know? I don't know whatever. I mean, I, I hope all my murals stay forever, but when they're gone, I, you know, I don't really sweat it that much, as long as I've got some good, good, uh, pictures, you know?

JR: This has surprised us. I'll be totally honest. You know, talking with, with a lot of Pilsen artists already, you know, like. That many of your colleagues agree with you on that one? Uh, but

JZ: [Laughs] Good..

JR: Cause I, you know, I'm a, I'm a historian. I'm like let's preserve everything for all time and never let anything go. And uh, , it's, it's really changed my relationship yeah, to the murals to tell you the truth. Um, can you talk a little bit about how Pilsen

[14:10]

JZ: It's also, it's also, cause I've had to endure like people, like making a big stink about saving my mural and I, I'm a nice guy, but I wanna be like, do you know, it's not very good. It was never very good. I'll be, I'll be happy to see someone paint, paint, something better there . But I, I bite my tongue, but I really don't know who does that I'm if something happened to me a few times where people really gotten, uh, like, you know, the one that should have been saved is that frigging, uh, um, William Walker over by [Unintelligible Street Name]

JR: Yeah.

JZ: There was, if you know what I'm talking about...

JR: I do, yeah.

JZ: I mean, that was a total shame. I mean, that talked about the time and that was that, you know, had a place and a moment and referred to the moment and referred to what it was about in the neighborhood and the change neighborhood and all that stuff. And that guy's, you know, passed on and, that pissed me off. So there's, there's one right there that really pissed me off. So. yeah, well, I'm not actually happy here that more people sort of agree with what I'm saying.

[15:09]

JR: I mean, that's kind of been the consensus and, you know, like I say, you know, it surprises us, uh, we're also interested in, uh, kind of how Pilsen has changed, is changing right now. You know? I know you're a Chicago native. I don't think you grew up in Pilsen that I know of, but, um, maybe you can tell me a little bit about changes you've observed and kind of your take on that.

JZ: Um, I went to St. Ignatius high school, but I grew up in suburbs, but I spent my high school years in the eighties in, uh, you know, the city. And I had a friend who lived in Pilsen who used to have parties. His mom was cool. Let him have kegs. So I spent a little bit of time in, you know, the mid eighties in Pilsen. So I knew about it and I saw the murals there. I was, not an artist back then, but I used to do good caricatures with the teachers and stuff, but I had an appreciation for the murals that I saw. So I, you know, thought there was, you know, I plus I grew up with all the graffiti guys, but I never did that. But you know, visually I was aware of the mural and Pilsen, but, you know, that was like a scary Mexican neighborhood. Um, that we kind of didn't stray very far from the car when we went to this kid's house and we kind of drove in and out. But it was right next to school. So it was right there. Um, but when I arrived kind of in 96 and did my mural, um, you know, it was very more Mexican feeling back then. It was, uh, a really good neighborhood. It was all like a lot of working people, but it wasn't scary. I never had any run in with, gang gang members or anything like that ever. Um, and, uh, I mean, I learned a good lesson. I was gonna put, uh, this one kid whose ma I now forget, uh, in the mural, the one that we're, that's still up there with the, uh, with the Virgin of Guadalupe. And I learned to sort of vet people, um, cuz he was gonna be up there kind of celebrate. Oh no, he was gonna be the one across the street. That's gone now the ideal family, he was gonna be representing one of the kids and someone kind. He told me maybe not. And he murdered someone the next year and he's doing life, and, you know, I kind of learned that. Not, you know, as long as literally I love when

people aren't famous and mural, the more of just regular person you are. That's what it's all about. But like, I don't want an axe murderer to be , [laughs] you know, when a bummer that would be, everyone walking on the street, like, oh, the ideal family. Oh, except for that guy. Yeah. so, so and so, and now he's doing life, um, But, uh, I was, you know, everyone was real, I speak fluent in Spanish, so I was able to hang out, but like felt real. Like I became a part of the, at least local part of, of Pilsen right there when I was working that first summer and then continued to do my art classes down there and spent like the late nineties, early two thousands. I spent kind of a lot of time in Pilsen and, uh, but it was really Mexican. A lot of, not a lot, but the artists all lived over by Halsted St. Um, they kind of weren't spread out like they are now, and it wasn't really an artsy neighborhood at all. It was kind of a Mexican working neighborhood and, but people all appreciated artwork for sure. Uh, everyone stopped and looked at a mural and talked about it, but he kind of walked by and I kinda always liked that people were opinionated and they wouldn't be afraid to tell you that's wrong or dumb, or who are you? Or, you know, I liked the fact that they tried um, most people were pretty complimentary, but some people didn't like that. I was a white guy, honestly. Um, but stopping and talking about the content and stuff, you know, I really liked that, but it wasn't an artsy neighborhood and Carlos, whatever his name is from the museum would probably try and tell you different. But I don't think so. And I think the museum actually opened right back then

JR: It did. Yeah. Um, I think early two thousands. Yeah.

JZ: And I, I mean, I never dealt with them at all, but, um, but so then, you know, I don't know. So then I had, I got an assistant probably in 2003 from a friend of a friend who was at the art Institute and he was living in Pilsen. So he was, you know, 21 years old from Canada and living in Pilsen. So around then the students started getting involved there and then you started seeing more, we pasty things going up and you know, that's when street art, you know, became capitalist, capitalist street art, you know, when I started, it was murals and vandalism, you know, it was graffiti and murals period. You know that when street art wasn't even understood really, but in the two thousands that started happening and you'd start seeing different people at the Jumping Bean Cafe and, um, you know, and then I kind of fell, fell out. I mean, I kind of didn't do, less and less work there. So it kind of fell out. But I mean, I don't know, has it changed that

much? Really? Even. I mean, I don't even know. I mean, I think there's a lot more like kids living there. Visually it seems the same and they've even bitching about gentrification down there since high school so, you know, I don't know if it's really happening. I mean that whole UIC thing that came right up to the, to the train track. Wow. But. I don't know. I was just down there. What, two weeks ago, it just took a drive through there. It felt kind of, feels kind of the same to me.

JR: Interesting.

JZ: But I, but I do know there's a lot of kids, kids down there and you know, I'll go to, I was with my girlfriend and we went to some secondhand store and like her friend from DePaul, from Lake Forest is managing the used clothing store on 18th street. So, you know, , it's gentrified and there's little more things to do and stuff. And I definitely see some like kids and white people, but it kind of feels the same to me.

[21:02]

JR: You mentioned being a white guy, artist, you know, Frankly, one of the few represented, you know, significantly on the walls in, in Pilsen. Like, can you tell me more about that? Or, I mean, I know you have to go soon, just so I'll make that my last question, but you know, like it, it, was it ever a problem for you being like either an insider or an outsider there?

JZ: The, uh, like real, like the Mexican Mexicans, the very focus issue, like junior arrivals to P were. , you know, it was, that wasn't ever a thing they never noticed. Um, but the sort of Chicano, uh, more American Mexicans from Pilsen, you know, and that's another thing my, my, my uncle lived in Pilsen my, you know, they used to be a Czech, Czech neighborhood back in the forties.

JR: How it got its name.

JZ: I've always wanted. Yeah. I mean, it's changed to be with, you know, my grandpa when they came and visit me when I was standing in Maryland, I was like, oh, this is a black neighborhood here. And then this is Italian actually. And then the Irish would go here. Me and your uncle were over there. And then Czechs, that neighborhood changed a zillion times in, you know, the past hundred years. But, um, the sort of Chicanos from the neighborhood , uh, there was, I'm not

gonna mention any names, but art leaders kind of didn't like me and just kind of badmouthed me. And I think it was cuz I was the white guy painting the biggest mural on Ashland avenue in the neighborhood. And I blatantly from the what the, the water cooler. I heard that, you know, so and so, and that guy were kind of anti-me and, uh, one time on this funny story, I was painting a mural and my friend Eddie Alvarado was helping me, you know, he wasn't the best painter, but he could fill in a big shape with color and stuff. And some dude, you know, total Pilsen older than me artist Chicano came walking and was like, bro, bro. Calling to Eddie. And he is like, what's up with the fucking white boy and he is like, what? He's like, what's up with the fucking white boy. And then he looks at me, he goes, no disrespect. And he's like, you shouldn't, you know, this guy shouldn't be up here. This is for us and da, da, da. And he just kind of let him go. And I wanna be like, this is my mural. I'm not working for him. He's working for me. Yeah. So, but yeah, so there was a few incidents and a few, uh, influential people, literally didn't like, they never said it to my face, but, uh, that the, uh, white boy was painting Mexican people, man, that suck empathy. You know, I don't know. I mean, I, I, you know, can, can I include a woman in my mural? I mean, I don't show up and paint what I believe. I sit people down in Pilsen and they tell me what they're thinking. And I regurgitate that visually and paint that on. yeah. You know, I'm not, I'm not trying to tell anybody what they're about. They're telling me and I'm just making it visual. So the fact, you know, and then those are the actual people who told me about it that are up there on the wall. um, but so, no, I mean, but I would say that if there was any animosity, it was from Chicanos and there was zero from like real Mexican Mexican newcomer type shoes. Seriously. Like they'd never noticed. But it wasn't a lot. It was, I mean, I'm, I was like right there was digging to give you something to, to make some anecdote it for you. It wasn't much, it wasn't much.

[24:33]

JR: I hear you. If we were looking for like archival sources, I know this is a long shot, but would we be able to find archival sources related to any of your work in Pilsen?

JZ: What does an archival, what does that mean? Archival for,

JR: Uh, sketches proposals. Contracts, you know, anything that would say, you know, that would help us sort of dig anything we could digitize, frankly, you know, to we've gotten a ton of

archival stuff from the Chicago public art group, for example, you know, including like old slides, old sketches, old pictures, snapshots, you know, of works and progress.

JZ: Um, yeah, I've got all that stuff. I've got the, I mean, back when I, it was actually on my, on my website, my original website, I think you can still go see an art beach, Chicago. Mm-hmm. which was a TV show on, uh, oh yeah. Chicago tonight. Yeah. And they did a story about me painting that mural with the Virgin of Guadalupe for that section. So there's a video documentary walkthrough of me actually creating that mural, but yeah, I've got all the photography and stuff and all my transparencies. I've got all this stuff if you want it.

JR: Yeah. I mean, if you'd, if you'd allow us to scan the stuff, you know, we're totally only for educational purposes, you know, we, we'd love to show people kind of, you know, this is what it looks like in progress. This is what the wall looked like before. This is what it looked like when it was brand new. Um, you know, could we reach out to you and maybe come with a big scanner and come find you and your stuff?

JZ: No, it's come. You can come take it away. It's literally the manila envelope or, or four the 1996 and then the 2001 revisit of it. But that'll have probably some sketches in it. Pencil sketches, like old fashioned like that with Sharpie pen.

JR: Yeah. I mean, that's like...

JZ: photographs. Like I took back then I would take it, your picture 24 times and then take it to the photo mat and then go then get the pictures back and look at 'em all and say, okay, thank God. This one is lit correctly and he's got a good expression. This is the one I'm gonna use, you know, whereas now I just do it on my phone and I look and I'm like, no, that wasn't good. Let's do another one. Boom.

JR: I mean, that stuff would be gold to us. And it would be so valuable, you know, from a research perspective. So, you know, if you don't mind me, you know, hitting you up for, you know, Hey, when can I come pick up those envelopes?

JZ: Um, yeah. Why don't you, I mean, are you, I hope you're not in a hurry, cause I'm gonna tell you to come in like December, because tomorrow I'm starting, um, like I'm leaving right now, but tomorrow I'm starting mural, redoing my mural at Michigan avenue. Mm-hmm that's gonna take till Thanksgiving.

[27:08]

JR: Oh, awesome.

JZ: And then I'm going out of town, but then, and then I'm going out of town again.

JR: Okay.

JZ: Well, I'm not, I'm just gonna be from eight till dark gone every single day, Saturdays and Sundays until Thanksgiving.

JR: All right. Well, if you, if you'll let me come,

JZ: If it rains. I mean, if it's pouring rain and you're around here. Okay. Give me a heads up and maybe I can just went up and dig you my files and. I mean, it's just that easy and I know where it is. It's just buried.

JR: Where are you based now? Where's your studio?

JZ: Um, I'm in Humboldt Park.

JR: Humboldt Park. Okay.

JZ: So right up by California and Augusta.

JR: Awesome.

JZ: Are you in South Bend?

JR: I'm in South Bend, but, um, you know, being coming to Pilsen as much as I can. Um, and in the spring, I'll be sort of staying there for a more extended period of time to kind of, um, try to get this project.

JZ: If you're not in a hurry, it's just that easy. I'll just, between now. And whenever next time I'm digging through stuff up there. I'll just dig until I find, I mean, do you care about El Popo and all that stuff? I mean, El Popo is.

JR: Yeah, I mean...

JZ: does that matter?

[28:13]

JR: We, we want it all, you know, like it costs us nothing to scan it. Cause we've got the equipment and you know, I'm, I'm a humanities professor, but I have a tech team that I'm working with and, you know, they'll figure out the best way to scan stuff the best way to get it back to you, the best way to, you know, make stuff kind of digitally available to people, uh, for us to look at and think about.

JZ: Yeah, well I've got a real good one too. The, uh, there, the [unintelligible] did story about, um, the second two parts of that version of the Guadalupe mural.

JR: Oh, okay.

JZ: With a newspaper article. And I, I actually just found it the other day. And the cover of the newspapers is the twin towers being attacked.

JR: Oh my God.

JZ: The cover of the exhibit is the twin tower, is exploding. And then he opened up the exhibit, to, was an old newspaper. Remember, and he opened, then he opened up. Fold out middle and it's, uh, all these pictures of my mural and a story about the creation of the mural.

JR: Oh, awesome.

JZ: So you can have a, you can have a newspaper.

JR: That would be, that would be so amazing. I mean, really cool.

JZ: So, um, I'll get back in touch with you in about December. Again, if you don't mind me stalking you a little bit to say, no problem, let me get my hands on this stuff. And you know, we'll, we'll scan

JR: No problem at all.

JZ: You do that and I'll bust it out. If you wanna talk some more in December, we can talk some more, but I gotta kind of get, look at my, my, my little boy.

JZ: I hear you. I want to thank you for again, for your time, uh, and welcome your generosity and everything. And, and I do wanna talk to you more in December, so I will, I'll try.

JR: Yeah, no reach out to me and I think it's cool what you're doing. So just don't be afraid if I don't, I'm just, just the space. Get, just call me back.

JZ: Awesome. Sounds great. I don't get back to you.

JR: Thanks a lot.

JZ: Bye man. All right, thanks.

JR: Awesome. Thank you soon. Thanks so much.

JZ: Bye.

JR: Thanks.

[29:53]