JASON RUIZ: I want to make sure that we have your permission to record you and that we will use this for educational purposes, only non-profit.

MATEO ZAPATA: I forfeit all my intellectual profits. [Laughter]

JASON RUIZ: Thank you so much. We're interviewing today on April 24th, 2022 with Mateo Zapata, a working artist in Pilsen and we're going to start now. I'm going to get us started and Myldred and Isa will take over a little bit, but I'm going to ask, can you tell us about your upbringing, where you're from and just a little bit about you?

MATEO ZAPATA: Yeah, for sure. I was born in Colombia. My mother was from Chile. She exiled during the military dictatorship and then we moved here when I was really young to Chicago. First we lived on the north side, when we first came to the city, then we moved to Pilsen and I've been here for like over 20 years. I've been here ever since. Some of my first experiences with art media was at a local radio station, a youth art center called El Locale: Radio Arte on 18th Street.

That was literally one of the only places I could go to, to just kind of get away from what the sort of environment was like here, you know, 15 years ago, very different than what it is now. It got to the point where it was a space that really I think celebrated, right like, what I was doing even as a young person. Like it got to the point where I was able to host open mics, you know, as a 16 year old and have my own radio show, you know, on air as a 16 year old. So I think that that definitely built a lot of character and sort of just self-trust in my own ability to be creative, right. And to try to take that serious because, you know, you're in a public school system that could care less about you being creative, you know whether or not you're talented at this or that when it comes to art, right.

And yeah, after that, I did go to Lane Tech. I ended up getting kicked out and I went to Latino Youth in Little Village which is an alternative high school, used to be on Boulevard and 4th. Graduated from there, worked full-time a few years just to help my mom out because my parents were divorced at the time and then went back to UIC, graduated from there.

Since then, I worked in the non-profit space for a few years, worked for CPS as a counselor. And then I had this opportunity like eight years ago to go on the road with Molotov. I was starting to get back into the creative side, really hard, right? And in terms of photography, my design, my art, my video work and I got the chance to cover all their content for a national tour.

So I just quit, I quit my job and I was like, “I’m out” and —

JASON RUIZ: You had a day job at the time, like a nine to five?

MATEO ZAPATA: — Well, I was at CPS at the time. And I loved it. I worked at Hancock on 56th and Pulaski, amazing school, great students. There's just a lack of men of color in public education, so the ability to really impact and encourage, you know, these young people to do

something after high school, right, was very, you know, visible. Like they were super receptive to it. Which from what I, you know, saw at other schools was not normal but yeah, ever since I went on tour with Molotov, I basically have been freelancing.

JASON RUIZ: You mentioned several different media you were working in. You're doing sound, you're doing photography. You're doing visual stuff. Were you just sort of interested in the arts in general, sort of across media?

MATEO ZAPATA: I mean, you know, growing up, I was always surrounded by people that were involved in hip hop, right?

It was graffiti writers or there was MC's and you know growing up around that you just realized that versatility in what you can do when you're creative and how that defines your identity, right? You can assert that by being creative, but no, yeah, I think multimedia has always been interesting.

I mean, probably, since the first time I had to record and interview people on like a mini disk, right for value out there, like, they literally would give us the equipment and say go to 18th and talk to, you know, whoever you want. And so, I think that experience was just, you know, it was very nuanced and very unique, and the perspective of being able to capture stories.

JASON RUIZ: I remember mini discs unfortunately, horrible —

MATEO ZAPATA: Yeah, classic [Laughter]

JASON RUIZ: Great. So you go on tour with molotov, you're documenting the tour visually, right?And then that just gave you the guts to say, “I'm not going to go back to a day job. I'm going to devote myself to being a working artist”?

MATEO ZAPATA: More or less. I mean, I knew CPS isn't gonna take me back, you know, because obviously, I left, I’m like “yeah I gotta go”. And yeah, I think when I got back, it was just sort of, you know, rediscovering the possibility of really, being able to be creative and then challenging myself to accept that and to pursue that as far as I could and you know, I've made it this far so…

JASON RUIZ: Great. You're up.

ISABELLA VEGA: So you mentioned your upbringing, you were born in Colombia and one of your parents is from Chile —

MATEO ZAPATA: Correct.

ISABELLA VEGA: — So, how has being bicultural and having parents who are immigrants influenced your art and your drive to promote social change through art?

MATEO ZAPATA: That’s a great question. Um, I mean it was difficult at first understanding why I'm in a country that, you know, sponsored a military dictatorship in Chile, right?

And why I'm in a country that completely destabilized the economy and politics in Columbia, for decades, under the guise of a drug war, right? So that, I think in itself took me a while to sort of like, get over, right? Because I definitely was very, I think, resistant to wanting to even be bicultural, you know, I was like, “no, I'm good”. I'm Colombian and Chilean. Yo soy Colombiano y Latino, you know, like, I wasn't. I didn't even want to become a citizen until I was like, I think like 19 or 20. I was like a resident the whole time, you know, just because I didn't really feel like I wanted to because of, you know, that background and because you started thinking about why, why did your parents migrate here?

Like, why did I end up in Chicago, right? And it's just like, you know, obviously the situations there were not tolerable, right? Or safe enough to the, you know, degree where your parents were like “okay, he's going to have more opportunity over there.”

JASON RUIZ: Do you know why they picked Chicago?

MATEO ZAPATA: They had other family here. So that was the move for Chicago.

And yeah, I mean, I think I've always carried that sense of awareness with me, right? The sense of history, the sense of the impact of US foreign policy throughout Latin America, right? From Mexico, Puerto Rico all the way down to Chile. And being very cognizant of that and what that means for us, as a community here in the United States, and understanding how important it is for us to be cognizant of that and to not sort of perpetuate these stigmas of, you know, discrimination, oppression, and our classism to continue to occur in our communities here after they happen in the countries that we came from on a massive scale.

So yeah, no. It's definitely impacted, you know, everything I think I do creatively.

JASON RUIZ: How old were you when you came to the US?

MATEO ZAPATA: I was like one. Maybe, yeah.

JASON RUIZ: Sorry, one more follow up question Myldred, if you don't mind. What did you major in at UIC?

MATEO ZAPATA: Latino Studies

JASON RUIZ: Got it [Laughter]

MATEO ZAPATA: Yeah, I wanted to do a double but I needed to graduate and work. I had enough credits; I placed out of the Spanish. They used to do a test so you could take the test

and get credits, so I was like one class away from, I think, a minor in Spanish and then I was like, I think, two courses away from a double in poli sci. So that was kind of what I wanted to do, but I had to get out.

JASON RUIZ: We're big fans of the Latino Studies majors so…

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: So when you're looking at, like, all these Latinx issues, there are times that US foreign policy interactions are like Latin American things. But like in your work, you also look at like, U.S. social movements going on —

MATEO ZAPATA: Of course, yeah.

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: — You have a lot of recognition for your black lives matter movements and all of that stuff surrounding the pandemic – starting to paint essential workers, and all of that. So, when we were researching you, we saw a lot about your photography specifically. And so, how do you see, like, in what ways is your photography really good at capturing those moments? In what ways is your muralism really good at capturing those moments? And how do you see those working together?

MATEO ZAPATA: I think at the core is about telling our story. Even if you walk down 18th Street, see a lot of decorative art, right? Because of the gentrification, you will see a lot of commercial stuff; you'll see like, you know, a Hello Kitty with the Frida eyebrow or something, right?

Like that's not really telling the story, right? That's just super appealing, very decorative, looks cute. But you know, if you study the history of this neighborhood and the impact and meaning of muralism here, it's like a hold on. Like, you know, what are we doing here?

For me, it's about telling a story, telling our story through our lens; with our pen, with our paint brushes, with our spray paint cans, and you know, with our own voices. Because I think that even what has happened throughout Latin America is that you get a very white American lens that tries to figure out what happened in Chile, that tries to figure out or define, you know, the narcotics enterprise of Colombia and the impact it had on politics. And if you look at Mexico now, right, you could argue that it's a narcocracy to the fullest. But is an American lense going to use that word? Probably not.

So, I think it's definitely about just telling our story and being in control of our own narrative.

JASON RUIZ: You mentioned, you touched upon, one of the biggest issues in our research into the Pilsen neighborhood – just like the role of art in this neighborhood in this community. Decorative art versus political art. What's your take on that?

MATEO ZAPATA: Um, I mean I wouldn't necessarily put it on those two opposite sides of the spectrum. I'm sorry, I wouldn't put it on those two opposite sides of the spectrum because there is art that isn't necessarily political that can still be incredibly powerful, right?

You know Mauricio Ramirez just did an amazing piece across the street from Los Comales, of like, this super tall, strong aztec warrior. I mean that's not necessarily political but, you know, it's incredibly powerful for a young Mexican kid, who's walking down [the street] dealing with the, you know, barriers of breaking down what it means to be bicultural.

And then he sees his huge heroic figure that looks like him, right? That's incredibly powerful. I think, you know, art is always going to evolve and art is interpretive; art comes in various different forms, right? You can run across probably a few stencils on 18th Street that just have a phrase, right? That's a form of art as well.

You know, my thing is just the erasure of muralism, that was built with a purpose of telling a story and of capturing a certain moment in history. Whoever, you know, made that artwork, right, or whoever took that photograph, or whoever wrote that article, they did that because they felt like if they didn't do it, no one is going to know this happened, right?

Like, when I wrote an article, I wrote it because I felt like I had to. Because I was like, man, no one's going to write this like, you know, I can't not at least try right. I don't know if it's gonna get published. I don't know if people are going to read it, if people are going to understand what I'm trying to say; but let me at least try. And so, I think that there's a huge collective school era of artists and creatives that try in this neighborhood. It wasn't trendy, it wasn't safe, it wasn't cool to come around. There were no tours at the time. No one cared if these guys were painting; what they were doing.

I spoke with Aurelio Diaz when I arranged and helped out for the restoration of his mural on 18th and Racine, which was repainted and restored by Rufus. Uh, who is another amazing muralist with a crazy story in this neighborhood.

But, you know, no one cared that Aurelio was painting this. And if you look at that mural, it has so many like messages in it and so much power, right —

JASON RUIZ: Are you talking about A la Esperanza?

MATEO ZAPATA: — *No, no queda en la pared de Honky Tonk.* [No, no it is on Honky Tonk's wall] Yeah. Yeah. It's super powerful. And it talks about this whole — it's interesting because in my opinion, I think it's one of the only pieces in Chicago that I think sort of offers this pan-Latino kind of approach to identity. Where it's like, no, even though we are all Mexican here, it's not just about Mexicans, it's about Central Americans, South Americans…

And the moment that is getting captured is students painting protest signs. That's what that, you know, mural is. And so, you know, I just think it's super dangerous and really destructive to our community, to our identity if you start erasing those – those stories and erasing those moments.

JASON RUIZ: Since you've been working in Pilsen, what kind of erasures have you seen?

MATEO ZAPATA: Oh man. I mean the gentrification, you know, obviously brings erasure. You know, there's some people that, you know, think that gentrification is even a form or could be a form of trauma, right? For people that are in a community, they come back to where they grew up – their roots, their childhood memories that define their identity, but then stuff, isn't there anymore, right? Like what does that do to your psyche?

But to answer your question, you know, as far as erasure goes, I think one of the biggest moments of that here was Casa Aztlan. And I actually performed there when I was younger, you know, which is crazy. Um, I actually saw a photo of me performing there, like, recently. And I didn't even know that there was a photo. But no, Casa Aztlan was like the first, you know, fully resource cultural center in the neighborhood. Like, you could go to classes there, you could go and get a t-shirt with Zapata on it or whatever. You know, there were all these cultural celebrations, and music and art.

It was seen and was very much celebrated and supported there too and it was just a safe space in a neighborhood that needed one. And, you know, no one came and put it there, either – it was people from the neighborhood. They were like, nah we, we need something because this is, this isn't gonna, you know, you can't have these kids in an environment like this without having this incredibly powerful cultural center.

So I think, you know, to answer your question, that was definitely the first and more significant moment of erasure I have witnessed

JASON RUIZ: When they painted over Casa Aztlan, it was such a flash point in neighborhood discussions and, really bigger discussion, national discussions about gentrification and the battle over housing and space. Did you have any role, like were you already working in the neighborhood at that time? Like, did you? Were you part of the response to it?

MATEO ZAPATA: Um, I mean – como te podría decir… eso está difícil…

For me, it's like, look, a lot of people were angry after it got torn down. You know what I'm saying?

So for me, it's like, where were you before this happened? Why did this organization just need, I think it was like, 125K. That's all they had to pay the bank to get the building! And there was no effort to fundraise for that, there was no push. There was no, you know, one of these initiatives, right? Where they're like "hey we need to reach this [amount of money] so we don't lose this, you know, amazing historical landmark — this symbol in our community, this staple. And there was… none of that was done, you know, even the organization that had it just kind of threw in the towel and was like whatever.

And so I think therein lies the fault, right. In my opinion, I mean, I think it can be complicated if you're protesting and calling for change after the change has already happened and it was allowed to happen.

JASON RUIZ: Before we change the subject, just one more question about that.

What's, what's your opinion of what happened in the end, where they brought in, you know, old school artists to repaint over?

MATEO ZAPATA: Uh I don't know, I don't know. I, I think it was, I don't think the situation was handled well because the original artist just wasn't involved. The original guy that did that work, never got the opportunity to do it.

Like when I went when I wanted to restore Aurelio's piece which was falling apart, it was super damaged. I called him. And I was like, "hey, can you come to Chicago, like, what's good? Like we can maybe fundraise something. You've done so much here and you've been gone for so long, you know, are you down? What do you want to do?"

And he was straight up like, "nah man." He was like "I'm too old. I got some health issues, whatever, maybe next year," but he was like, "if Rufus wants to restore it, do it."

I think those kinds of conversations and that kind of communication is what is needed, you know, in a community like this when you have so many different eras of people that have done so much work.

JASON RUIZ: Thanks.

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: Speaking on that, I was looking through your Instagram and you had to touch on like, Oscar Romero accidentally painted over the Roswell tribute piece. And so I think it goes along with the things that you've been talking about. In fact, like you said, "trauma is real on all sides here, it's not going to heal itself" in the thread —

MATEO ZAPATA: Facts.

[Laughter]

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: — But just like thinking about, like, gentrification as a trauma I think it's like a really interesting way to put it. And also, looking at how you were talking about, like, erasure and that sense of like newer and older generations of Pilsen artists and like that shared respect for artwork. They were talking about, like, trying to talk with the artist before restoring their piece.

So, how do you see respect between artists, like, and grappling? And also like this new gentrification piece and how Pilsen is like, trying to heal from that.

MATEO ZAPATA: Hm.

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: Sorry that was a lot.

[Laughter]

MATEO ZAPATA: I mean, look, I'll be very honest with you. I don't think there's enough communication or dialogue. Not even between different generations, but just between creatives, period. You know, and I don't think it's just simply a symptom of Pilsen. I think it's a symptom of shame, you know? I think that because of the decades of segregation in this city, the decades of marginalization in this city, you know, people are just sometimes comfortable with being disconnected and I think it's difficult for them to challenge themselves to break through those barriers and to be open to that kind of dialogue, right?

There's amazing artists in this neighborhood that are around the same age who will not sit down next to each other at a table just, you know, because they never have, they never did and they don't want to anymore. And it shouldn't be that way, but like I said, I don't think it's just an issue in this neighborhood. I think it's an issue in Chicago because it's the same issue. Like you got cats on the north side in certain neighborhoods and like, you know, people in other parts of the neighborhood for reasons that shouldn't really, you know, build those barriers up that much.

JASON RUIZ: We're a neutral party. We don't want to stir up any drama in Pilsen but I think it is interesting and important for us to ask, you know, like where do you think those conflicts come from between artists?

MATEO ZAPATA: [Laughter]

Um, I think, you know, Chicago has and it's growing. Look, I grew up in Pilsen when it wasn't gentrified. I grew up in Chicago, going, you know, hanging out in Humboldt Park, you know. Hanging out in Logan Square before Logan Square was gentrified. You know, my best friend lived on Diversity right next to JJ Peppers in the projects of Diversity. You know, I would kick it in uptown back when uptown had projects too and it was, it was very different than what it is now. It wasn't gentrified. I was here in this neighborhood.

So I think as a city, Chicago's just very territorial, you know, and I don't know if it's a Mafia mentality, I don't know if it's a gang mentality. I don't know if it's, you know, just a sort of like “This is my neighborhood mentality”, but I think it's very territorial, you know? And it always has been. I mean, growing up, I grew up on Morgan to get to the train station and go to Lane, I had to walk through like six different, you know, gang territories.

You know what I mean? You know, it's crazy to think about young people having to go through that. And yeah, I mean even when I, just to get out of the Pilsen bubbl e for a second here,

even when I wrote an article about something happening in Little Village, there were people that thought that I shouldn't be writing about Little Village because I didn't grow up there.

So, I shouldn't write about anything happening there…and, you know, what does that mean then? Does that mean that I should be segregated to just write about what happens in the mile radius of where I grew up at? Are you going to tell a journalist that lives in Bucktown that he shouldn't write about Little Village too? Or are you just telling me that because I'm brown and I'm from the neighborhood that's next to yours, you know? So it's uh, yeah, I think that it is just a very territorial nature, you know, the scene here in Chicago.

JASON RUIZ: I'm gonna pass it on to Isa in a second but I want to ask one more follow up on gentrification. I think you're maybe like the 11th or 12th artist we've talked to. And one thing that has really surprised me on this project is the very, are the very, diverse opinions about gentrification. We've had some artists tell us that gentrification has changed a neighborhood for the better. —

[Laughter]

— You mentioned walking through 16 gang territories. Some artists say, there's fewer murders in Pilsen. Now there's fewer gangs in Pilsen. Now, It's safer. I'd love to hear you take on that.

MATEO ZAPATA: Well, there isn't fewer gangs. They're all still here. And I mean, I think that's part of the illusion and the appeal and the lie of gentrification, right? Is that if, you know, you gentrify the neighborhood, the gangs of it will disappear. They're still here, you know, and they're still killing people. You know, whether it's not as many as it was, you know, 15 years ago, if people are still getting killed, you know? As far as gentrification goes, yeah, I don't buy into the myth that it is going to solve problems in the community that still haven't been solved. You know, there's been a lot of young people over the past two years that have actually been killed in Pilsen. A lot of shootings still. And I don't think gentrification is going to change that because you know, there's just a lot of history here. A lot of those, you know, factions have been around for about a half a century. That's a long time.

I mean, you know, I think diversity is good. I will say that. I think it's good for, you know, Latino neighborhoods in Chicago, to confront their own anti-blackness and history of it. I think it's good for neighborhoods that were traditionally white, to confront their own anti-immigrant anti-latino, anti-black, you know, sentiments of the past. I think diversity is good, but, you know, gentrification brings about displacement, right? You know, you're forcibly continuing to move immigrant families that already moved. And you're just pushing everything further away, but it's still there, right? I think Back of the Yards in Brighton Park is one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in Chicago right now because of that.

Yeah, I mean, I'm not a fan of gentrification. I don't want to see you know, these businesses you know, shut down or close. That was one of the biggest issues during the pandemic. You know,

there's two corner stores that closed. This one, actually, and then one a little further west, called Kristen's. Willy's Tire Shop closed, you know?

And that's the danger, right? Is that you are continuing to remove, you know, and erase and devalue whatever was there and say, "No, that's not valuable. This is." And what tends to be seen as more valuable is the white-owned business. Yeah, I mean, I'm hoping that Pilsen doesn't turn into Logan Square, you know.

But time is going to tell. And obviously what you brought up before about how segmented and divided the neighborhood is, that if people were a little more united, you know, you can deal and confront these kinds of things, like gentrification but, I think the city still tabled that whole vote on rent control.

I don't think they really made a decision on that but, city-wide I think they're saying that that could possibly help slow down gentrification. But yeah, from my understanding Roy hasn't put that on the table yet.

JASON RUIZ: Thanks.

ISABELLA VEGA: Okay, we're gonna shift gears a little bit to talk about *Somos Pilsen*. In the mural, we read that it features 46 residents and we just wanted to know more about that. What, why did you think it was important to incorporate these everyday people and like, just maybe the logistics too, like how do the conversations begin when you ask someone to depict their portrait? That kind of stuff.

MATEO ZAPATA: Yeah, I had pitched Don Pedro's painting of a mural there before the pandemic. And in the pandemic, obviously everybody's trying to survive, do what they got to do, and then one of the sons of family members from Don Pedro's called me was like, "hey, I really want you to do this, you know, would you be down to work with Pablo (Serrano) and figure something out?" And I was like "yeah, it's cool, it is a huge wall." For sure.

[Laughter]

JASON RUIZ: Is that what drew you to that space in the first place? I mean, it's massive.

MATEO ZAPATA: I, you know, I feel that there is a lot of room, still, in this neighborhood to preserve stories and beautify. Like I produced and curated the Selena mural that was painted by Asend on Cermak and Wood, right? I got the wall, got him to do it, got the funding and you know that it took a life of its own.

And in my head, it was like why doesn't Chicago have a single sort of ode to this icon that represents this entire bicultural identity which is very much housed within this community. So no, yeah, I thought the wall for Don Pedro was an amazing space and they were super open to it.

To answer your question, I think that, you know, Pablo and I were realizing what the value was in the sort of journalism work I was doing: in capturing these stories, interviewing essential workers. And I think that initially, you know, there were a lot of different ideas, but I think at the core, we realized that the important part and the beauty behind that would be, can we do this visually right? Can we capture stories and people and try to make it a time capsule of whatever this moment in the neighborhood is? And that's why we went that route. And yeah there's a lot of interesting people with very powerful stories on that wall.

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: Could you talk a little bit about the Phoenix and it grabbing the snake?

MATEO ZAPATA: Yeah. If you look at the inside of the snake's mouth, there's a message there—

JASON RUIZ: All right. Now we have to walk back. [Laughter]

MATEO ZAPATA: — You know, we were at the cusp of the Trump administration being sort of exposed. And I think that we were also reeling, with not just, you know, the entire reckoning of racial injustice in this country, the impact of the pandemic on black and brown communities, but there was also this just sort of sensationalizing campaign of incarcerating children because they're immigrants. I think that we wanted to address that and how real that was. And so I think the Phoenix is supposed to empower, right? At least to me. I'm sure Pablo has his own interpretation of it. But you know, for me, I think it's symbolizes not letting your trauma and your struggle, sort of hold you down, and define your identity in a negative or toxic way but in utilizing that to rise up and into really sort of redefine yourself in a more powerful way because the Phoenix rises from the anxious. So, yeah for me that's what that means.

JASON RUIZ: We noticed that in that piece and in some of your photography, there's just real celebration of everyday people —

MATEO ZAPATA: Yeah.

JASON RUIZ: — What draws you to doing that in your work? Also, the other one, *Corazon de Chicago.*

MATEO ZAPATA: I'm just not into like commercial stuff, man. I don't really get much out of taking a portrait of someone with makeup on and filters and lights and reflectors and three flashes pointed in different directions so the hair shines in this way, because it is gonna look good after I photoshop it for an hour. That does nothing for me. It's not sort of the kind of photography that I think has power, in my opinion. I think there's people that are great at that and they should keep doing it and it's cool.

But for me, I think reality is what is important to me because I think that there's so much about the reality of young people growing up in Chicago, young people growing up in Pilsen, Little

Village, Brighton Park, Back in the Yards, Humboldt Park, in the city as a whole. There's a lot of that reality that isn't being seen. It isn't being documented and it isn't being acknowledged. And to me, I'm gonna try as much as I can and as hard as I can to sort of help document what that is before it gets erased.

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: How do you balance depicting these great people and what they're fighting for and like change while also documenting their struggle without making it seem like “Oh, you should pity these people” in that way?

MATEO ZAPATA: It's difficult. I mean, it's draining to continue to have to document death. I've definitely grappled with that on a personal level because it can be a little draining at times. I don't think that the goal, at least with what I write, has ever been to victimize, right?

And it's definitely easy to fall in that trap or to fall into the tendency of promoting a stereotype or an archetype that's just not healthy or powerful and just perpetuating, you know, negative stigmas. It's a challenge, I think that as an artist, as a writer, as a photojournalist, you have to document the reality but at the same time, even if that reality can seem difficult or grim you know you have to find the upside, right? Like with an essential worker, working full-time, exposing himself to COVID, maybe he has a sibling who contracted COVID, maybe has an uncle that passed away from COVID but he's not letting that defeat him. He's still showing up, he's still doing what he has to do and he's not letting his circumstances define him. And so I think that the balance in itself is whether or not you're telling the whole story instead of just a piece of it.

ISABELLA VEGA: Very cool. Do you think that the *Somos Pilsen* mural does work to battle these ideas of gentrification and displacement and was that like a goal that you guys had in featuring the residents?

MATEO ZAPATA: I think it helps, in its own way because it's gonna tell the story. It's completely different than any other mural in this neighborhood and I think it is gonna stand out.

I think Don Pedro’s is its own staple and also has its own history in this neighborhood. I think the story of the father and the family and the mother, those are incredibly powerful stories. I think it's gonna serve its purpose of just trying to inform, right, young people and anyone that walks by a little bit of the neighborhood on what it looks like, as opposed to what you find on Google or Forbes magazine.

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: How do you choose who goes on the mural?

MATEO ZAPATA: Um, [laughs] there were some moments there where there was some issues behind concerns of certain people being on it. And there was certain moments where, you know, we had, I had to assert my opinion as to why these people needed to be on there, despite whatever concerns may have come up but, it was a conversation. It was about balance, I think, at the end of the day too, making sure that there's people from all sides of the neighborhood,

that there's people that aren't just, you know, Mexican. You have black families on the wall and young people. You have documented people, undocumented people, and I think it was about balance and diversity. I think that was, you know, that was it.

JASON RUIZ: Can you tell us a little bit about this space that we're in? We're at 2200 Carpenter? What's it gonna become?

MATEO ZAPATA: We haven't announced it yet. I think we have one more thing we have to do tomorrow morning but the goal is to open by mid-June. I'm gonna have a soft opening that I'm organizing myself next month. So I'll definitely invite you guys, if you want to come.

This is gonna be called La Esquina: Community center. I came up with the name. We got an award from the city of Chicago. Pablo, he's basically identified this opportunity and he hit me up and he was like "Look man, like you know, you're a great writer. Can you try to do this? Do you want to work with me on this?" And we did, we worked on it together and we got the award from the city. You know, I'm gonna be teaching workshops out of here, classes out here for free. Pablo is gonna be doing the same thing. We're gonna have exhibits out of here and I think the goal with the space is definitely not to center it around myself or Pablo. I think the goal is to have the space serve the community. If anybody else wants to do a workshop, wants to host an event, then do it. You know, that's what this is here for.

We don't really have a community space in Pilsen right now. After Radio Arte: El Locale closed, there hasn't been anything else that sort of like has an open door and is just there to serve young people and creatives and that has that instructional capacity which I think is super important. So for me, it's quite a feeling because for me, it just comes full circle, like all the way because of my experience at Radio Arte. So for me, it's really powerful that I'm gonna be able to kind of reciprocate that a little bit, you know with what I can do creatively in trying to teach and help other people learn about how to do that.

JASON RUIZ: Can you tell us a little bit about the Selena mural and how that came to be? You alluded to it a little bit ago.

MATEO ZAPATA: Yeah, no, um... I had this whole campaign with Carniceria Maribel about "support your local corner store". Huge believer in supporting, you know, local businesses and Maribel has a really interesting history behind it and the story behind it and the grandmother who came from Mexico and opened the shop up. So I've always been super proud and a fan of that corner store and I just pitched the idea to the owner. I was like, "yo, like we need to do something with that wall. You have to". Then he loved the idea of doing a mural for Selena and, you know, Ascend is, I think, unparalleled when it comes to portraits. Incredibly talented. And I've known him for a minute. We never really worked that much together, but we would constantly run into each other and we had some mutual friends. He was down and he did it and we got the funding for it and yeah, it blew up for sure.

JASON RUIZ: One thing we've been exploring is how the murals come to be? Does someone commission them? You're a bit of an *empresario* (entrepreneur). You're kind of coming up with the idea and convincing different parties to get involved.—

MATEO ZAPATA: Yeah.

JASON RUIZ: —How do you think most murals in Pilsen come to be or murals that you've been working on? Where do they come from?

MATEO ZAPATA: I, to be honest with you, I don't know what other people do. I really don't. I think there's a lot of different ways people go about it. For me, the most important part is the building owner and the family. That's where I start the conversation. I introduce myself, “Hey, you know, my name is Mateo Zapata. I do XYZ, this is my bio. This is who I am. Do you want to work with me because I'm telling you who I am?” And you know 10 times out of 10, it's been like “yeah of course we do. What's your idea?” I usually take it from there.

And yeah I mean sometimes, you know, I'll do it myself, if the opportunity is there. Now that stuff is opening back up, you know, this summer I already have like two walls around here that I'm trying to do on a solo tip. But yeah, no, I am all about collaborating with people or if I see an opportunity and I know an artist whose style is gonna just really pop and excel, I hit them up, “ay you should really like get on this, asap” And it works the other way around too to be completely honest with you. Sometimes there's an artist that says, “ay, I want to do XYZ” and I'm like “nah g, it's not gonna…” [laughter] and it's just a creative difference, right? I think that has to be understood.

JASON RUIZ: How much say does an owner have in the finished product? You know, because is your task to respect the artistic vision of the artist, or to please the owner?

MATEO ZAPATA: Some of them are a little touchy about it, you know. Some of them are like hey, like, what, what are you, what are you gonna put on there? You know, what do you, what do you mean? Like, what is this? You know, I had a conversation with an owner during the pandemic and, you know, they wanted me to do some stuff but they were like, “oh you could do this, but you can't do that.”

And I was like, “whatever I'm good” and they ended up some super hallmark type art. [Laughter] Yeah. Insane. But no, I mean, I think the owners for the most part, they're pretty open as long as you're transparent with them about like, “hey, this is what I'm gonna do like, is that cool?” But I mean, you know, aside from that one instance, I don't think I ever had an issue with the building owner.

JASON RUIZ: Would you be willing to tell us some of the things that are exciting you about, like, some of the public are going up in Pilsen right now and some of the stuff that's annoying you one or both.

MATEO ZAPATA: Um, hmm, the controversy! [Laughter] I think it's good to see that there are younger people starting to throw down. And not just the OGs or the older folks, or the people that have already been in the game for 10 years or the people that are like, “oh, I am XYZ, whatever.”

You know, the divas and the egos aren't the only ones in the space. I think it's really good that you're starting to see a lot more young people that are like, no, I could do this too like, move, you know? And, and that's just the natural part of the course of, you know, any creative scene.

So that's really cool. I think you're also starting to see a lot more women that are painting and I don’t think you saw that before. And that's one of the biggest, you know, critics of the older schools. But I think the emergence of women doing public art – I think that is really, really cool because it's a whole other, it's a whole other vibe.

It's a whole other perspective, different energy, you know, and even just now, my guy is gonna open up a restaurant on the 18th. He wants me to help them with, you know, the launch and then whatever the marketing, *esto y el otro,* and he's like, who do I get to paint the front?

And I'm like, get a woman. He's like, who? And I'm like, “that's who.” You know, and I know she's gonna snap. And I called her and told her she's like “what?!” So yeah, I think that is also pretty interesting to see. Right?

JASON RUIZ: We've interviewed Sam Kirk. We've interviewed Sandra Antonio. Are there other women that you think we should keep our eyes on?

MATEO ZAPATA: Rocio Bano, she's from the neighborhood and actually grew up here. *Y también, um, de por aca*. You got to interview Delilah, Delilah Salgado. Yeah. She's been here for a minute, she's definitely put a foot down and she’s dope. She snaps. She doesn't do that much as she did before, but when she pops up, she pops up. She's really dope. Who else?

Um, there's this, there's this young woman, she goes by a kittysaurus I think, is what she goes by.

She's, she's doing a lot. She's popping up in a lot of places; she's young. She's doing the pop-ups, you know, like, oh, hey, and I do this and that *pero tambien pinta.* I know she's, she's doing anything. I think that those, especially, I think would be really good to talk to for sure.

JASON RUIZ: We'll follow up and look at them. Um, you mentioned younger artists coming in. This is something we've noticed. We've got the old guard, you've got the new guard. Let me run an idea by you. This is something we've been talking about in the class and that we talk about with some other artists.

There's a sense that the old guard were more communitarian The involved community in the painting —

MATEO ZAPATA: They did!

JASON RUIZ: They want to do stuff that empowers the community, you know. The new guard is more individualistic. It's more about expressing your own personal brand. It looks, it's sounds and looks like this is resonating with you. Is this something you've seen or noticed?

MATEO ZAPATA: Yeah, no, 100%. Yeah, no. It's very ego driven, man. And it's territorial and that's where the clashes come. Because you have people that aren't like that, and you have people that are like that. And then you have some people that just, you know, put their head down, cower in the corner and then there's some people that are like, “what's good?”

[Laughter] You know what I mean? Not everybody knows how to deal with that kind of energy, but you know, it's gonna happen. But Mauricio, he actually did a community day which I thought was really dope. So the wall across the street from Los Comales, that's what he did.

I think on his last day, he did a thing when he's like, “hey who wants to come out?” You know and yeah, not enough people do that you know. And that's sort of the goal. I mean that's what we're gonna try to do with this space. You know, it's to provide people with that opportunity to feel like, you know, let's collaboratively do something.

JASON RUIZ: Absolutely, um. Okay.

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: Can I ask a follow up about that?

JASON RUIZ: Yeah, please.

MYLDRED HERNANDEZ-GONZALEZ: How do you see that, like, as a reflection of like this new bicultural identity like, that’s like, rooted in the history of muralism’s sense of like community and also that's rooted in a lot of Latinx values and things.

So how do you feel, like, about that combined with like the new like his new generation of Latinx Americans.

MATEO ZAPATA: I mean every generation is going to define itself. I don't personally identify as Latinx, but I am never going to tell another person how to identify themselves. That's totally oppressive, right?

And that's, you know, every generation is going to figure it out. They have their own story, you see what I'm saying? So, I think that, you know, the experience of me growing up is gonna be way off the, you know, different side of the spectrum than a ten year old right now who's gonna grow up. You know, Chicago was a different place, society was different, you know?

I grew up watching Rodney King, watching Lenard Clark get beat up half dead in Bridgeport. You know what I mean? I grew up in the era of like, you know, people using payphones, you know what I mean? Like, it was just a different world. So, I think that every generation is gonna define itself and when they do it creatively, that's when you get to explore what that identity looks like.

JASON RUIZ: I don't want to create a false dichotomy; That there's the old school communitarians and the new school, ego ego ego, me me me; individualistic. But, you strike me as someone who's young but still on the more communitarian side.

MATEO ZAPATA: I mean, I mean, I grew up moving around a lot. I didn't just stay in Pilsen, I didn't just stay on my block. A lot of my friends did. You get caught in that territorial mindset? You get caught in that “no, this is me, you're over there.” You know, it is what it is.

I saw too much value in cross-cultural experiences and, you know, being cool with the Belizean kid from uptown, right? But then also being cool with the El Salvadorian, you know *un salvadoreno* that grew up on Culliton Loomis, you know what I mean? To me… that I, I saw too much power in that, growing up. And I think the more I've grown, the more I've learned, the more I continue to grow, you know, I think that those kinds of experiences and being that open to other communities, other people that don't look like you talk like you are from where you're from, can teach you a lot.

And, you know, maybe that was because I am Colombian and Chilean and I'm not gonna find that anywhere in Chicago. You see what I'm saying? So it's like why am I gonna try to stick to just one bubble or just one group or one side of this city if you know my identity itself doesn't even belong to any sort of specific box in this country.

But I just see a lot of power and community, you know? I mean even like the stuff that we saw happened the past two years with like you know, the protests that I helped organize for Miguel Vega, you know, there were hundreds of people marching down 18th Street.

That was literally me and one other person that were trying to raise awareness on that, right? And what happened is that you got solidarity! Right? And so the thing is that you you can also create solidarity through being creative and through art, not just to yell “fuck the police” at the top of your lungs in the middle of the street in protest shutting the street down.

You can build solidarity on different kinds of levels and to me, that's why I have that approach.

JASON RUIZ: We're nearing our hour. So, we're gonna get to some fun questions in a second. Just a couple. But you mentioned in response to Mildred that you don't identify as Latinx. Why not or can we ask how you identify?

MATEO ZAPATA: You know, I think that I never fit into any box in this country, ever. I didn't like the name Hispanic, you know, people still use that term, you know. And that's a term that this government just assigned to people.

Uh, and I think that the idea of identity is super complex in this country. If you look at the creation of the Chicano identity in California, right? Like they created their identity but they also demanded for this state to acknowledge that identity. So when you're filling out any sort of boxes on any paperwork for the state of Illinois, you can check a box that says, “I am Chicano”.

You know what I am saying? That's power. That's challenging the system and forcing it to acknowledge your identity. And you know, for me I don't like the anglicizing of the sound of the term Latinx. That is what kind of made me cringe a little bit when I first heard, you know, because my first language was Spanish. I was ESL.

My parents still don't know how I learned English, you know, because we never spoke at home. So, I identify as an afrolatino of indigenous descent within the realm of how this country views race. But, you know, identity is a powerful thing and it's also very sacred. Everybody has their own identity and should be able to define it as they see fit.

JASO RUIZ: We need a label for this project, you know, this question is partly selfish, and we've settled on Latinx art in Pilsen. Or Latinx muralism in Pilsen. You think that sounds right to you? Or…we don't want to say just muralism in Chicago.

MATEO ZAPATA: I know. I mean the thing is this in and this is where it gets interesting.
I can put you in touch with over 50 people that have grown up in this neighborhood and that do not identify as Latinx. And half of them are going to be like, what is that? You know what I'm saying? —

JASON RUIZ: I do.

MATEO ZAPATA: — So it's definitely a matter of perspective and lens you know because then when you impose identity on people that's like, you know, what are we doing? And yeah, identity is a fascinating thing.

JASON RUIZ: Couple of fun questions. If you indulge us in another three minutes —

MATEO ZAPATA: Oh you're good. I am in no rush, you're good, you're good. Don't worry.

JASON RUIZ: One of the audiences we have in mind for this is kids, because we're gonna put this stuff online. We hope that kids are gonna be accessing this as they explore Pilsen, if they're doing school papers or research, if a kid who's listening to this who's in Chicago or elsewhere wants to get into the arts, what advice do you have?

MATEO ZAPATA: Get a black book and just start sketching and start painting and start practicing and do what you want to do. Create what you want to create. Don't just sit there and draw a banana in a bowl because that's what the teacher said in art class.

I mean, do it! Do it because it's class and that you want to do your homework, get your A or whatever, but create what you want to create.

That's, that's what I would say. And, you know, don't ever let anyone try to tell you what to do, or what you should do. Trust yourself, trust your home creative drive, and just be honest. You know, Bruce Lee, had this whole thing about his style of fighting and called it “honest expression.”

He's like, if you're honestly expressing yourself, you're gonna be incredibly powerful. And I think that rings true with being creative.

ISABELLA VEGA: How would you like your artwork to be remembered?

MATEO ZAPATA: As real.

JASON RUIZ: What recommendations do you have for someone who's new to Pilsen? What do you want them to check out or see or experience? Uh, just go around, don't just stick to the east side of the neighborhood. You know, check out Camino's on a Friday night. You know, um walk to the murals that are on 18th and Western, not just the murals that are around 18th Hosted. The murals over there on 18th and Western are incredibly powerful.

You know, one of them has a sign that says like, you know, “stay out of Columbia,” you know. Yeah, I would just say, you know, just walk around. Don't just stick to 18th Street, you know, walk down 19th street, walk down 21st, walk down 17th Street, go to a corner store, go to Harrison Park and, you know, support the local street vendor. Uh, yeah.

JASON RUIZ: Is there anything else you want us to know, that you want us to know for this project, that you can enlighten us on regarding your work or the community as an artist?

MATEO ZAPATA: It's important for us to tell our stories. And I appreciate you all doing the work that you're doing. And, I think the more of us that work at telling our own stories, the stronger the impact it's going to have for that next group of young people that want to learn about the city that they're from and what happened in that city to get to where it's at.

JASON RUIZ: Do you think, um, what role do murals in particular play in this storytelling? You've mentioned telling stories a lot. You know, do you think murals are uniquely positioned to tell stories as opposed to other art forms?

MATEO ZAPATA: I think every art quantum can tell a story. I just think that, you know, the history of muralism and Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, Puerto Rico throughout, you know, Latin America has

always been to tell the story. Like that was its purpose, you know. But I think every art form can tell a story.

JASON RUIZ: Great. You guys have anything else? We've gone one minute over! [Laughter] Mateo Zapata we thank you so much for your time —

MATEO ZAPATA: No, thank you guys.

JASON RUIZ: — So enlightening.