

Sandra Antongiorigi Interview Transcript

[1:05]

Jason Ruiz: Hello?

Sandra Antongiorigi: You okay? So who? I'm Sandra.

JR: I am Jason. I am a professor here at Notre Dame and one of the leaders of the Pilsen Muralism project that we're working on, So really nice to meet you, too.

SA: Nice to meet you, Jason.

JR: Likewise.

Isaac Heller: I'm Isaac. I'm the person who's been emailing you so much, and I'm an intern on the, so

SA: Are you, Isaac. Nice to finally meet you.

IH: Yes. For sure.

JR: We are so thrilled to speak with you and grateful for making the time. And that is a great frame for the picture. I want to ask if we can record this interview.

SA: Yeah, Of Course. Um. Oh, yeah, yeah, sure. Go ahead. Um, let me move so you can see a nice little thing. There you go.

JR: It's perfect. It looks like an artist studio, so.

SA: This isn't actually my studio. It's like the this is where I do my conference calls and all that in this section.

JR: Wonderful. So we hope to talk with you for about an hour if you if you have the time to spare. And we've talked with several Pilsen artists already, a couple of whom have told us we should talk with you. You know, I don't want to put the label Pilsen artist on you. We'll talk about that. But, you know, artists whose work is significant, you know, to this project, which is really focused on engaging the public with public art on the streets of Pilsen, We're totally non-profit entity. We work, we're working somewhat with the museum, but we're just really we're educators looking to get information about the murals into the hands of teachers, students, the general public. And talking with artists is a big part of that. So that's kind of our goals for the next hour.

SA: Okay, Love it. I mean, I don't know how much I can help you, but I will do my very best to contribute in whatever we can.

JR: What we want to know about is you. So you are the expert.

SA: Oh, there you go. That's I kind of know that. It's just, you know, just, you know, disclaimer that there are some parts that are foggy in my head from, you know, younger years. So I'll do whatever I can.

JR: Yeah, we're trying to capture as much as we can and we will bounce around a little bit. There's no like, you know, there's no right answers, of course, but we've talked with old timers like Marcos Raya, you know, and we've talked with younger artists like Sam Kirk, who I know you've collaborated with. So, yeah, we've been all over the place. So, I mean, maybe you could just start if you're willing. First of all, can you tell us how to say your full name.

SA: So well, my full name is Sandra Iveliz Antongiorgi. So the last name is Antongiorgi, and that's kind of where people get stuck. TheAntongiorgi part

JR: Can you start by telling us a little bit about your background, where you grew up, how you grew up, you know, anything you want to tell us about your upbringing just to get us started?

SA: Sure. Well, I was born in Puerto Rico, in a little town in the center of the island, sort of the center called Utuado. So Utuado, Puerto Rico and my family came to the States in. I'm not even sure what year, but I must have been maybe three years old. I have no idea. It's so bad. Like the record is so bad that I don't even know what time I was born in Puerto Rico. But, um. But yeah, I came and we landed in Pilsen, I guess. And so we lived in Pilsen for. Maybe six years or something. 5 or 6 years. And from there we move to Humboldt Park. And from Humboldt Park, we my family ended up buying a house in Little Village. And that's where we ended up. My family's still there in Little Village today.

JR: All right. Can you tell us about sort of your early inspirations as an artist or you could go to your training as an artist? Kind of. How does one become Sandra, the working artist? What parts of your early lives life informs that?

SA: You want me to go into detail?

JR: If you're willing. Sure. Can I ask can I ask you to just move that soda can just for the recording? If we.

SA: Oh of course.

JR: Thank you. I'm sorry. I want this to look great in our app.

[05:31]

SA: All right. Um. I mean, so. When, When I lived in Pilsen, when we lived in Pilsen, my mom used to walk us to a school called "Jerko", which is now, I think, Pilsen Academy, if I'm not mistaken. And so we would have to take, Blue Island down to maybe what was that, 17th or 18th something, something around there. And so there was there was a time that I noticed that they were starting to paint murals on 16th Street. And so this was in the 70s, the early 70s or mid 70s. And and I remember walking, holding my mom's hand and my sister's hand and my little brother holding on to my sister's hand on the other side. And we would walk past and make a left, but I would be staring at the walls on 16th. And I think at the

time it was Aurelio Diaz maybe, and Ray Patlan maybe and I can't remember the other artist, but they were painting. Um. "Galeria del Barrio". And which is a piece that Sam Kirk just recently restored. And so I was I was watching them paint this and and was impressed because it was my first time seeing art at that scale. And when we would drive past it, it was it had just it was freshly painted, we would drive past it and I would stare at the faces. And I think why that was so significant is not only was I learning for the first time about large scale work or art that can be so large and impactful on a wall, you know, but also about the expression of it, like the the, how it evokes emotions. Because if you've seen that piece in details, it's different expressions from maybe angry to smiling and just this whole, you know, and. I thought that was pretty cool. I mean, that's stayed with me for a while. And living in that neighborhood, I started to see murals popping up. I started to see art and we moved to Humboldt Park. Now, at the same time, I was also learning guitar. So at around five years old, I was learning music. I learned that through my father, my father being a musician, my mom being a vocalist. And so my family is just all about music. Anywhere you go in Puerto Rico, in our town, it's we're known for the music. So I was learning that kind of expression at the same time. So I think I had this desire to always express in some way or another. So come Humboldt Park, it was, you know, all about music and celebration of culture. And we moved back to Little Village, where I think that might have been the 80s now. And there were murals, murals already popping up.

JR: Each of the neighborhoods you've mentioned is a distinctly Latino neighborhood Pilsen, Humboldt Park, you know, sort of heart and soul of Puerto Rican Chicago, a Little Village, you know. Do you think it was important for your parents to live in a Latino neighborhood?

SA: Yes, absolutely. Because they were coming from Puerto Rico, first time outside of that and coming to a place that was unfamiliar to them. And so they were seeking community. And and for them, community was just overall Latino, you know, And when they were when we were in Humboldt Park, I did want to say this was another part that influenced my art today. In Humboldt Park, as we would either go visit because we were always in Humboldt Park, even though we lived in Pilsen and Little Village, Humboldt Park was our place. We were always driving there. I don't know how many times a week our family was there, friends, and it was all about music, food, you know, all that kind of stuff. So I was always there. And in it, I think it might have been in the 70s. I saw protest for the very first time, and and the Puerto Rican people were protesting against police violence. And my father took us through Humboldt Park, the actual drive through the park. So we can see this because my father was in support. He was always my family has always been in support of I don't want to say well, in support of, justice, I guess, for Puerto Rican people and the Puerto Rican people lift being lifted. You know, so he took us by there and he was explaining everything. And I saw. These vans being turned upside down and being jumped on. And I saw things on fire and. What will my father was explaining was what they were trying to explain to us was that this wasn't that we were being violent and just it wasn't for no reason at all. It was because we needed to be heard and it was because an injustice had occurred and they had been hurting our people for for so long in Chicago. And so I saw this. It's recorded in my brain. And as I started doing my work in my early teens, um, I shifted to this kind of an expression. Using it, And I know I'm going forward now, but using it in a way that is speaking, um, sort of capturing history, but speaking for those who don't have that voice, speaking about injustices and, and sort of even, even the public art would become more of a, of a documentation, of documenting community, documenting changes and um, yeah, any marginalized people, you know, that that's what I was and I am focused on now.

JR: It's interesting to talk, you know, when we asked you to reflect on your early influences, you went to art and you went to protest.

SA: Yeah, that's. Right.

JR: You know. Can you looking back like it seems like, do you consider your work protest art? Is is that an okay description for..?

[12:10]

SA: Um. You know, one of the things that, that I struggle with in my work musically and in the visual arts is finding a genre or sitting in a genre or sitting in a in a in a style or a specific form of art. And and it's not because I don't want to. It has nothing to do with that. It's more because I can't. It's more because, um, the work. When I first started doing my painting, it was more of a matter of survival. I started painting because I needed to escape and I needed to. I mean, it basically saved me. I was. Seeing a lot of things in the neighborhood, I was experiencing trauma, seeing trauma. It was it was just it was too much for me. I was overwhelmed. And, you know, there was a point that I was like, either, you know, disappear off the planet Earth or find a way to survive, you know, And and I started to find that as, as I would take this poster paper, paper that I would just find, and I started dropping paint on it and doing things. I didn't know what I was doing, but I was just doing all sorts of stuff. It started to feel like or look like the way I was feeling. And it was a mess, it was a jumbled mess on this paper. Just paint splattered. Literally take gallons and do this. But it looked like something that I was feeling. And the same thing with music. I would make a mess. I would just be playing and screaming. But that was that was a form of expression. And it wasn't until I was able to contain it and take it and mold all that, I was able to take it and just kind of concentrate in a way into a really, complete expression. Like I was able to take it and make it into something that looked the way I felt, but beautiful that I was proud of that I was proud of that expression. And and it made sense to me. And and I could share it with other people. I was sharing and people were reacting. I was in high school and I had so many contests and all sorts of things that we would do in school at Curie High School and, the people enjoyed what I was doing. You know, it just it just became that. This was like during I think we were protesting some some war at the time, too, and you know, something and and playing music there. That was something for me. So I started to do my visual art, but then I started to work in wood and work in all sorts of whatever it is that I would find, and that became, you know, another form of expression. And uh musically I was writing in Spanish, I was writing in English, I was writing whatever came out. If it was like a country sounding song, that's what I would do, you know? And and if it was a Rumba, that's where I was, you know. And so. As I grew older, I started and I do a little bit of everything. So, I'm sorry. I kind of lost this, one point that I wanted to make was when I was doing the work to save myself. Like I said, it was about reflecting on who I was and where I was emotionally because it was really difficult for me to see and feel, feel where I was. I was so detached. So I started doing self portraits. And to the self portraits I was able to see like the angst, be able to see the confusion, able to look really, I would stare at it, stare at myself and really see, oh, you know, that's, that's I didn't know I was feeling that. And then I would be in touch with it. And suddenly I was. I was finally like looking at myself and finally feeling. And with that, I was able to always kind of like, do a little a little list or a little check mark. Like, okay, I'm feeling better today. Oh, that's okay. See, you know. All right. And, um, so my work in the beginning was all about reflection, self expression. And later on, I'm

sorry it, became this thing where I was able to really go back and everything that I had seen growing up, I was able to now start using this, this, this method, this this way of expression to be able to talk about other people and other things that I was seeing around me. And I started a whole like the way I work is in series, everything is a series that I do because there are so many different things that I work on, so many different important issues and that that's how I work, you know, that's that's what I do now. Everything's in a series and it's all different from printmaking to wood pieces to renderings to topics of protest, topics of domestic abuse, you know, child trafficking, sexual violence. I have a whole list up here on my studio of things that that I'm going to do next. And so I don't follow. That's my whole point is I don't I have a hard time falling into anything.

JR: You are you know, you are bringing up something that is very important to our project because, on the one hand, we're interested in the ways that murals, um, challenges people to think about social issues, as you called it, you know, a matter of survival, you know, in Pilsen, on the other hand, the murals are very beautiful. I mean, they're aesthetically pleasing. So can you talk about the role of aesthetics in that? You said that you would get out all this angst and then you'd look and it you you had made something beautiful, you know, I guess.

JR: Go ahead.

SA: Oh, please. You first.

JR: You know, so I guess the question then for me becomes, um. Do you strive to make? Should socially conscious art that you're just like the like you're describing like, should it also be aesthetically pleasing? Does that matter and does that matter to, like, Pilsen art?

[18:45]

SA: Um. The thing with it is..... I mean, I don't know. Okay. It's like this.... People will stop. And look at something that. Grabs their attention and. Whether it's so, so if you have something beautiful, I think people naturally kind of look at something that looks beautiful and they're like, wow, you know? And then they'll take the time to to stay there and study it or they'll remember it and they'll come back to it. And then they start to learn about the piece, either through something that's been written or something that the artist will post, you know, next to it. So and and just through years of coming by that same piece of work, you start to notice things that you hadn't noticed before. And so there is something nice about having a beautiful work. The other thing about having something that's aesthetically pleasing is the community takes this pride in that work, especially if it's a representational piece of its representing culture and the diversity or the richness of that culture or the history of that culture. So there's a there's a pride and there is ownership that happens. I always say different strokes for different folks because there are going to be people who are going to look at that same piece and say, that's just that's a piece of shit, or I don't like it. Or, you know, I've heard everything.

JR: Yeah.

SA: But so then there's that kind of work that that will say the same point or be a powerful piece. And maybe that artist either purposely doesn't render it to look a certain, you know, to look pleasing or maybe

that artist is just about like not able to. But they have this expression, right? And this is the way it comes out. So. It's like if you if. You want to. The subject is out there. The topic is out there, the emotion, whatever it is that they're trying to say is there. And if you want to have community respond to it, Sometimes I think you want to find a way to grab their attention and keep it. And I mean, personally, I'll say go ahead and do it however it is. If you feel it for myself, it's I do it a certain way. I do the different way. If you think about museums, you have stuff in museums that people are walking away from because they're like, Don't even get it. I don't get why it's like that. That's not a great piece. Why is that a masterpiece? You know? So it's kind of the same thing going into the neighborhoods. Some people can't see it and people can and others can't. So yeah, that's I'm kind of in the gray in the middle on that.

JR: That's so interesting because we've talked with artists who are on both extremes. Some artists who say, I'm a provocateur, don't I don't want to I'm not trying to please you, you know, and we talked with I'll just give an example, Miguel Del Real, who said who's like changing his picture in real time of the of the Virgin Mary, of Virgin of Guadalupe as people are walking by criticizing it, [laughs] you know, like he was, eager to please you know, the the crowd on the street versus others.

SA: Yeah.

JR: There's, it's fascinating and informative for us to put you in the gray area as you put it.

[22:22]

SA: Yeah, I kind of sit in that because I see the value of both because it's it's and. It's I know it's public work, but you think, about, why the artist is the artist. Why is the artist The artist? And. And what's that contribution? What are they? What are they bringing to the public? They're bringing a part of themselves. They are either going to be this detailed artist who love beauty and things like, well, I'm doing this for the public, you know, or I'm doing this because I just need to do this. It's pissing me off. I'm so tired of this. And you know, this is how it's going to be. That's that's that artist. So we can't take that away from them to say that a piece needs to look beautiful. Who says what beauty is, you know? And it's so we have to think about how people are benefiting from a mural, all the different parts of the people. So you have the artist who's benefiting the students or whoever The Apprentice was and the audience, you know, for the public or the community. So it can't just be one or the other, can't just be let me just make this work for community only because it's just impossible. You're bringing a part of yourself there. And and that's that's an important element.

JR: I'm going to hand it over to Isaac in a second, but I want to ask one more follow up, if you'll indulge me. You mentioned museum. You know, and I think you were starting to get at the difference between a piece of art that's in a museum versus a piece of art that's on the street that's available to everyone. It's public art...

SA: I have my thoughts on that. Yeah.

JR: ...Accessible to the community. So can you talk a little bit about like the responsibility of a muralist versus an artist who's working? You've done both. You've done murals, you've done you've had gallery

shows and museum shows. How, let me phrase it this way What kind of choices are you making that are different when you're making public art?

[24:25]

SA: Um. Well, that's interesting. I like that phrasing because. So as in my studio work, I am I really hit super personal topics or things that are really bothering me that I can't digest. You know, so I'm reading something and I'm like, This is horrible. And there I am. I'm like, I have to do something that is going to communicate this or that, that's going to make a person feel uncomfortable, you know? And but I want to do this in a in I want the composition or the color or whatever it is that I choose to be so striking that a person has to come in to look at this and then feel completely uncomfortable with it. And you have to sit in this thing that just attracted you. But it's so uncomfortable because you start realizing the subject matter. And I do that because so many of us turn our backs, You know, it's so easy to just like, oh, it doesn't feel, oh, I don't see that, you know. So easy to just stay in your room or in your house and watch the TV and or look at the news and just turn away. I just read that. That's too bad. Oh, well. But when you're creating a piece that's drawing the person in and the viewer starts to love it. And he realized that there loving something having to do in like domestic violence. And this woman is actually hanging somehow. But you didn't know that, you know, so so it creates this kind of like, you know, and what's your role in it as the viewer? How are you feeling and what are you doing? You know, that kind of stuff, right? In murals. I don't. That's not my my goal. You know, my murals are not about bringing you in to show you that something's horrific. My murals are about. First I document, I'm documenting something. I'm documenting a moment. It's either something that's happening within the community or something that's happening just overall in society or like I said right now, my my main thing is marginalized people and just representation. That's a huge thing for me. So if it's so anyway, so let me just go back. So. When I do this, I'm thinking of community and I'm thinking of how can I make you feel... Good? How can I make you feel good about where you are and who you are and who your family is and where you are in this city. Especially with the city that's becoming this whole city of divided into haves and have nots and... How can I add to you feeling pride about where you live. And how can I remind you of where you came from and of of the beauty and the culture around you? You know, it's like a celebration. It's always a celebration for you. How can I celebrate you and people who look like you? People who act like you and sound like you. How can I do that? Overall, how can I do that? And that's that's a big responsibility for me because I don't want somebody to just walk past the wall and miss the message, you know, or walk past a wall and think that it's just an everyday painting. And, oh, another mural came up. Oh, that's that's not it. Because I've been giving this some thought. The question of the museum. And I and I've given us some thought because think about how who are the stakeholders within the community? You know, who who owns the mural? Once the mural is painted, whose is it? And so I, I like to compare museums, the collection and the museum to the collection within a community or larger Chicago. And when we're in the museum, there's you know, we're paying a bill fee to see this collection that someone that deemed the masters, you know, or scholars or whoever it is deemed deemed the masters. And the only reason I say that is because I feel that there are so many artists out there of color, female artists who are not even anywhere near a museum if you think about the percentage of female artists that are in a museum. It's like 1% or no. And that's just not true. That's just not true. The there are female masters out there outside of Frida Kahlo and stuff, so. Anyway you're going to a museum and you're looking at all this beautiful work and you feeling something from it because you're able to sit there in silence with this piece and let it speak to you or one that you think is just not important and you go to the next piece. Should anyone get near the walls or near

the paintings or should anyone steal the painting? That's like. And one of those crazy, you know, it's like you can't touch that. God, you can't touch that. No, you can't do this. And if you steal a piece of stolen, then everyone, you know, mourns. You mourn like, I wish I could see that Van Gogh. I wish I could see that. You know a few of these. When the neighborhood, there are people who should be, protecting these these works and who should be, you know, keeping some kind of list or some kind of, you know, we should know what the entire city has and how and each piece should be protected in some way, you know? and and think about how when these pieces are whitewashed or deleted or erased, think about how many people really do go through some kind of warning for that and whose responsibility is to protect the work. Because the work did move numbers and moved community and moved them emotionally. It did something color, even if you just study color by itself and what it does to the human psyche, it does something. So the fact that we don't have the, I mean, now we have some kind of system in place, but the fact that we aren't looking at the work, the mural, the public art like or as, um, important as works that are in galleries, you know, some of the exhibits in museums. I think that that's why we don't, you know, there's not as much value. And sometimes when they disappear, the city can easily say, Oops, you know, I made a mistake and they don't right that wrong. So I know I'm going off on a tangent, but I have been thinking about that lately.

JR: We have been thinking about it, too, as part of this project. So trust me, it's well received. Isaac. I've been asking a lot of questions. I want to give you the floor.

IH: Well, kind of out of what you kind of were just talking about, about preservation of murals and things like that. Sort of how do you view your relationship to a mural once you put it out in the community? And kind of how do you think about restoration of murals and things like that and the way that other artists might engage with your work in that space? Does that make sense? So sort of once you've created this mural and it's in a public space like that, how do you view its life after you've created it? And what's your relationship to the murals and how does that change over time?

[32:04]

SA: Um. Well. The thing about murals is that they're not permanent. They. They're kind of subject to all sorts of weather conditions. All sorts of. Whatever happens on in a street, right? They just go through it. So you know that it may chip, you know, that it may be gone, you know that it may need to be restored or that it may be, um, you know, graffitied over or whitewashed whatever. Right? So you just kind of know that it's not a permanent thing. Um, but, when I'm when I'm creating a work, I feel like the moment that I sign it and we put the little plaque on it, you know, or whatever, that it's sort of like this is for you, you know, and this is for you. And, and I give it to to the community. It's theirs to take care of. Now, in my eyes, it's theirs to take care of. I hope I did the best job I possibly could to to, you know, celebrate you and, um, and then I pull away. And at that point, if they need like one of the pieces that that I did with Marcus Akinlana and Ralph Mueller, it's called uh "Es Tiempo de Recordar", and that's in Humboldt Park. And and in most of um, it sits right in the border. And you know that piece, when it needed to be restored, there was no one to restore it. It was it's 200ft ginormous, you know, So I restored it. The other artist was out doesn't live in Chicago. And the other one, I don't know where Ralph disappeared to. And so I restored it. And I had very little help, if any. If I had 1 or 2 people that would help, part of the time, maybe, you know. But you do it because you know that this was important or this is important. It's cultural representation. There's something about it that the community thought, was they thought was

worthy of being restored, you know? So I just went and did it. And and I do it again for for other pieces if they need the work. You know, we can work something out. I feel it's important to even if it's not my work and it's an important piece, you know, I feel it's important for us to constantly take care of our work in our collection in Chicago. And I say collection because I really do look at it the way you would in a gallery or a museum. It's to me it's the same kind of thing. And it's so diverse when you think about the street art and the graffiti into the traditional works, the protest murals, the iconic murals, it's so diverse, what we have. And outside of murals, we have our sculptures and also beautiful work in the city. We have to be really careful because, one, we don't want to get to where we consider some pieces from the outside, from outside artists, that becomes our priority. You know, or artists from other cities, you know, we put all our money into them when we have such richness here and we have such amazing artists in the city. That's what we should also be looking at and. And supporting them. So when a community decides it's um it's time to get rid of the piece or that they want something else. As long as it's the community that makes that decision or as long as they are informed because stakeholders have to be informed. The other men, you know, someone has to know about this and they have to be part of that decision making. And if they're part of that decision making, because that mural is is for the public and it is for them, then I say if they if they've decided that they want to replace it with something else. That's okay. You know, that's okay. However, there is a fine line because we do have gentrification. And gentrification is when you're when you're changing a neighborhood and you're sending the people who live there, you're kind of sending them off and you're pricing them out. You know, they can't afford anything anymore. Or you want to because you think it's a really good looking neighborhood, close, really close to downtown. Easy access. I like this because I like this because this is so the diagonal, you know, it's all sorts of things that you're like, I want this neighborhood now. And that's where it's like that's where I draw the line. I mean, I think that. You have to be careful because the first thing that that you do is erase that culture and anything that kind of looks like that culture or the people that were living there. And that's when we start either whitewashing like on the down low or um, and saying, you know, oops you like that kind of stuff or we start. Sending another artist that whose work is not as political or whose whose work could be more decorative. Let's say you send in these other artists saying, Oh, I'm super into murals, but they're completely whitewashed or covering up other pieces of work that have been like long standing. So I think I think we have to be careful with that.

JR: I want to ask a couple questions about gentrification. One thing, if you will, one thing we've grappled with in the project is like people asking us, can murals also be agents of gentrification? Like are are the murals making Pilsen more attractive to real estate developers, to yuppies, to young urban professionals who have no roots in Pilsen, you know?

SA: Yeah, I've heard of that before. I've heard that kind of stuff. Because it just so happens that where you have these Pilsen being like this artist colony suddenly became attractive to to young people who wanted to live there and be a part of that because there's something exciting about being in a place that I feel is being authentic and completely expressing itself authentically. You want to be in that, you know? But I think that that's uh I think that that's kind of like shifting the blame because. Just because something is beautiful and you want to be there does not mean, that it's responsible for the uprooting of people and sending them, you know, out. I remember when I lived in I've lived in several neighborhoods that have gone through gentrification. And and it's it's interesting because we consider certain neighborhoods impoverished neighborhoods in Chicago. You know, certain neighborhoods we call them violent. And I've

never lived in more violence in a neighborhood that is being gentrified. That violence was insane. And because I knew the guys who were in the streets, you know, the street gangs, I knew how they were being paid off and by whom. And that was shocking. And that by itself, it was just so violent and. There was a paletero walking one day in the hood and we love the paleteros and we love like, you know, and this dude comes out. Or a white guy comes out with no shirt yelling, will you shut the fuck up? And we were like, What? And it was like, shocking for everyone. And that was it. And everything started to change. It was like such a disrespect for the culture that was in that neighborhood. And I saw that time and time again. You can't blame the neighborhood. You can't. You know, people can come into that neighborhood and still enjoy it and contribute to it and be a part of it and say, you know, I don't want this to go away, so I'm going to be a part of this and I'm going to help out. I want to have a nice restaurant in this place, but I don't want to change too much. You know, I don't want to get them out of the neighborhood. So there's there's. A responsibility that comes with the person that's moving in. I would never say that. That it's the art. It just it's it's sure it's attractive and it's an attraction. But. Shit that doesn't mean that you have to act irresponsibly or it's this. I don't know. It's a violent thing.

JR: That's that's super helpful for us to think through, you know, like responsibility for gentrification. Like, not not the artist. It sounded like you were hinting at there is a distinction or maybe should be a distinction between like, socially engaged, community driven art and like the commercial stuff that we're starting to see. I mean, I've been working on this project a few years and I've seen just such an influx of like art that looks like a mural at the first glance, but then when you look, it's really like just the sign for a new restaurant or it's an advertisement or something. Can you help? I'm asking you for advice. Can you give us some advice about whether there's a distinction there, whether there's a line to be drawn?

SA: Well, before I do that. So let me ask the art that you're talking about. Are they community artists or are they artists who you know of or who are Chicagoans? You know, are they like an artist that has a brand and then now they're using it for a restaurant? Is that what you mean? Or are you saying that the restaurant is hiring people to do something that looks like street art or are the actual street artists?

JR: I'll give you a sec.. I'll give you an example. And, you know, don't I don't actually don't know who's behind this, but the the big Frida that's underneath the El that's the sign for taqueria or a new restaurant that's like I think it might be called Frida or something, you know, like it it, it looks to us as researchers like it's not exactly an organic, community driven project when it's it's really advertising a restaurant.

SA: I see, I've seen that before.

JR: Frida trope, you know, that's like, yeah, kind of well-trod.

SA: Well, I mean, the way I can answer that is, um, like I've seen. I know what you're talking about. I've seen that kind of stuff. And advertisers have been doing that kind of stuff forever. You know, they, they'll they'll put something up that looks familiar to people and that looks like it's going to draw, it's going to attract you because it's part of what you see every day. And it's part of like, we are you, we're down with you. We're down with this, you know? So you see that all the time. The other thing that that that's happening right now in terms of the walls that were let's just call them protest murals or murals on social justice, etcetera. So you have that more traditional kind of murals, you know. Think about the

history of mural painting. Even when it came here to Chicago, the kinds of things that that artists were painting about. And and then you have where we are right now, which is, you know, you're seeing a lot more of this kind of branding. The murals are more about branding and you'll see.

[44:05]

JR: Better word for what. I was trying to describe.

SA: So you'll see more. I mean. That's that's what it's about, like branding a certain image that you have or something that you've developed in a cartoon, that you've developed something and you brand that, and you just put that everywhere and people know that it's you and that's, that's that's happening right now. And then there's also, um, the... Anyway, I'll go into the other, so. What? What I feel is. I like that kind, I like that kind of work. I do like it's it's refreshing for me. It's a nice it's a nice expression. I like to see those colors. I love the fact... [phone rings] I'm sorry.

I thought I turned this thing off. I like the fact that, that is that it kind of like. Shakes up the scene. And it's like, yeah, that's, you know, it can be more than just these types of murals.

JR: Do you mean, you're talking about like the kind of graffiti influenced branded are like.

SA: Yeah, like there's graffiti, which I love. And then there's street art, which is, you know, it could be more like branding. It is like that, you know, And, and then you have your studio artist who is like, I'm a muralist, you know, and then they're like coming out and they're like doing these things. You know, and. They're bringing their studio work. I say like, there's room for all of it. And I know there are some I'm hearing things and I know that there are some some artists who've been in it forever and they're salty about it or they feel like, you know, you're taking away the seriousness of what we do. And not everyone's a muralist. And I get it because Mural. What a mural is. The role of a mural is, is, is one thing and it's kind of like changing right now or the way people are or the definition of a mural is right. But I say that there's there's room for all of it. But I do I the, I challenge a lot of the newer artists to really think about this this, thing because what's happening now is, I'm great with that word coming up, but I am seeing that it's being being used to to replace existing works in communities or when. For example, when you're whitewashing these walls and you're trying to and I and I say I mean I realize what whitewash sounds like and that's exactly how you mean it you're washing this neighborhood, you know, And and so what you're bringing in this fresh type of work, which is beautiful, the branded work, you know, it's cool. It's hip. And that's great because you're having you that artist is having their day you know, they're having their opportunity now. But I think that we have to think about the entire collection that we have in the city and maintaining that and preserving it and adding to it rather than replacing. And so I think that, I would love to see more of that kind of thought. You know, that kind of thought put into into that, new, mural painting style or whatever, Like just like, can... I feel like we all need to be reunited as artists and really like protect what we have and act to, to that. [Yeah, that makes sense yeah], that's, that's how I feel about it. There's room for it all. I just think we have to be, we have to remember what its role is, or how they're using it, not them as in the artist. The artist is doing what they do. But I'm saying the people who are who are hiring the artists and, you know, what's the intent? What are what are we trying to do with that work

JR: Um, part, we have a team of "techies" who are helping us build an app, and that app will hopefully lead people to murals, specific murals. So we want to ask you about a specific mural. Maybe I'll hand it over to Isaac. I know Isaac knows where I'm going with this. We want to ask about "Weaving Cultures." Isaac, do you want to go or should I?

[48:33]

IH: I can go and start us off, but I'm sure you'll have more questions. So I guess one thing about "Weaving Cultures" is if you could kind of talk about the process behind that mural for you, how you conceptualize what you wanted to represent? Also, I noticed that you mentioned self portraits earlier and "Weaving Cultures", of course, uses portraits very prominently. So I was wondering what it means to you and your work to be representing the faces of other people. And so I guess that's a starting point if we want to go from there.

SA: Um. Yes. So "Weaving Cultures", as I mentioned before, Sam Kirk had restored "Galeria del Barrio", and I believe this was through Chicago Public Art. And so they asked Sam to do "Weaving Cultures" or not that but to do another kind of a bookend, you know, another another piece that was that was about women highlighting women. And so Sam asked me because I do, I mean, I paint and everything, but I happen to do a lot of portraiture, like I said to you and and figurative stuff. I love that, I, you know, that's part of what I do. So when she asked me, we decided to do a mural that was celebrating women from diverse cultures and celebrating and highlighting, like their stories, you know, who they were. Their their culture, their story, their voice. So we just wanted, to make sure that, whoever was that was walking or driving through that community that they could look up and see, oh, my God, that's me, you know, or kind of it was just like, I can kind of see myself and resembles something about me. And so a lot of it was representation. So I would just look at women and look online and do some renderings. And because of the turnaround, we were trying to work quickly with this. We had the weather against us, it it was it was craziest project because I was so dehydrated. So the sun hits it almost the entire time and then it would rain. It was crazy. So we were trying to get this thing done. It was a low budget, at least for me. It was super low budget and but it was an important piece. So at the end we were like, let's, let's do somebody that we know, you know, let's and, and normally, that's how we would do the work. You do somebody that you know and you just go ahead and paint someone from community but this one was such a quick turnaround that we were just taking pieces of people, you know. But this one, we're just like, let's just do this one person that we know entirely. So we did Janice Bond, who's like this cultural curator in Chicago, was in Chicago. I think she moved. And and then we also agreed that, we thought it was important to put a transgendered person in the piece. And especially with all the all of this, the hate and crime against transgender people. So because one of the most important things is to me in my work is visibility, we were like, let's do this and let's do it quickly. I think Hillary Clinton was running at the time and we had Trump who was bullying and all of that whole anti-woman thing, you know. So we we did this piece and, I mean, we only had one person who yelled out the window like, where are the white people, you know? And, you know, I wish that they. Would have stopped because my response to that would have been, you know, everything that you, see, it's like magazines, media and everything that you see is is mostly white. So here's our opportunity to for us to be seen, seen in a community that is, you know, so diverse, you know. And so, Yeah, that was, that was that. And from there, um. We did another piece, oh um. I think it was Kian[?]. Yeah, we did another piece on Kian [?] Who is gender neutral, I think, Or gender Non-Conformative. And yeah we did a piece on Kian [?] and Andy Bellomo and I decided to keep this

whole queer series. Um, and so we did another piece recently in Hyde Park. And so that's what I'm on right now. The other thing, we're doing this, this, this, series, highlighting queer people, and, um, they are mostly transgender people. And then I'm developing now in the studio a series on disabled people, and the person that we did in Hyde Park is disabled and queer, so but, I have two brothers or had two brothers that were disabled, so that's an important issue for me to for them to be seen as, as loving beings, you know, not some bad. You know, person.

JR: Can I talk about, that before I want to make just a warning. I know Isaac has class in, like seven minutes, so if Isaac disappears, it's not something you said. He's got to get to class. [laughs] But I wanted to ask about sort of your aptitude for painting marginalized people in the context of the history of muralism, which has this reputation and really this history of being like a macho art form. There's this idea of sort of the very machista to male artists, you know, representing the community, his own vision of the community. Does that impact how you want to paint and include marginalized people?

SA: Yes. Yes. I mean, stemming back from figure painting, when I started learning figure drawing and figure painting, I think I was like 16 years old. And my mom had to sign something that said I could participate in that class because I was going to be looking at naked people, right? Nude painting. So and when I went into the class, it was. Always mostly a nude woman all the time. Right. And which was great because I'm studying the human body. It was wonderful. Wonderful for me. And then as I started, studying, going, you know, going to through, through taking these classes, I could go to the school or to the Art Institute Museum for free anytime I wanted because I was also working there as, um, In one of their programs. But anyway, so I would go almost every day after high school. So I would come from Curie High School and take the bus to the School of the Art Institute or to the Art Institute and just spend all my time there. It was all about, like if you wanted. If you wanted to show strength. I learned that it was a male hand in a fist, you know, and that was strength. You know, I learned all about how to show men as strong and women as fertile and and, you know, pretty and, you know, the nipples and this, you know, so it was just. This whole different way of of looking at myself. I was looking. At myself in this other form. Right? And so when in, growing up as the only woman really in doing mural painting that I knew at the time, I mean, I had female mentors, but it was more for my studio work which, which there still today in my life. And they're just there's these powerful women and I also had male mentors. But just, in just being in that community, in that field, there was. You're very aware that you are a woman and you're very aware that as a woman you are being looked at, like these paintings, these little nymphs. You know, this you're you're just you're just that, you know, we're this romanticized way of looking at, this you know, it's just very different. That's the wrong word. It was fucked up. It was just it was fucked up. And so I struggled against that for years. And that to be, to be looked at as a as a, female artist, a strong female artist, a capable, a relevant, you know, that shit that was difficult. When all the work was going too men because a woman couldn't build a scaffold and must have been that, you know, a woman, something that large. Honey, where's the guy who's painting the wall? I'm like. Okay. I mean, I still go through this all the time. Like, that's really cool. Where's, where's the where's the guy painting it? This is just a couple of years ago. I hear this, you know, So it's always a struggle and, and so then when I'm creating a work I mean, just as a painter myself, I have to be aware of of that kind of tape that's in my head, when I'm trying to represent strength in my piece or what a woman means. You know, even colors, pinks and all this kind of stuff that's. I don't want to do that. I don't want to be a part of that. And so when we're painting women and we're doing these these murals and we have nothing but female artists painting like our team, we try

to always just bring in female artists, even beginners, you know. And then we are talking about marginalized people. The three people that we've done so far are so amazing because we get to interview them. Even the guys that I'm like, you look back there. I get to these, this is a series on mass incarceration, and it's people who served and are out now, and they're doing these amazing things with their lives, whereas. Everyone usually gives up on them, you know, as someone who served time. But this guy is tremendous. And so why not highlight that? And I get to interview. Everyone and talk to them at length and learn their stories. And then my job is, is to bring that forward. Like, how am I painting the eyes? How am I painting to flesh? How are you connecting to this person? And and then it's a you know, I'm drawing a transgender woman. That's so powerful. That's so powerful to me. And, and I'm breaking these, these, these moodels don't know what you would call them, just like the way you would think that you're supposed to paint a mural about this, this and that, using, I don't know. I'm just kind of don't want to say too much because I've gotten so much backlash for some of the things that I say. So. But yeah, I mean, to answer your question, I am trying to do, something, something different and I'm trying to break this, this limited way of thinking of, of Europeans or even just thinking of a woman's role as a mural painter. I'm done with it. I'm done with that. You know, it's so sad because even like sex, sex, there's sexism and there's ageism. You know, it's just you don't see these you don't see age playing a part in a man's career in in the arts as a musician or as a painter. You just don't. He gets older and he's a maestro, you know, And for a woman, it's so different. It's so different. And so I feel like I've had to fight extra hard and feel like I've had., um, it's I'm hoping that I'm making it easier or I've made it easier for other female artists who've come up because it was a bitch. And so.

[01:01:14]

JR: I want to just ask some basic facts to get get this on paper so that we can, when we talk about you and our project, we can know that we're talking correctly. After Curie High School, how do you get training? Where where do you get trained?

Well, so I was at well, everything started at. Corkery. My seventh grade when my teacher said, you should study, you should just study art because my whole desk was always covered in my test papers everything was a doodle. And so he encouraged me to look at Curie High School, which at the time was a performing arts school. So I go there and I started to like, I remember my goal being like the highest thing that you can get was the Michelangelo Award, and I was a freshman and I remember being in the in the audience and, you know, they do this auditorium thing, everyone does whatever. And I remember saying, I'm going to win that award, right? So that became my focus so by the time I was like a sophomore, I started competing in what was the Academic Olympics. And in that I met Francisco Mendoza. And FranciscoMendoza is, is or the late Francisco Mendoza, Maestro. He was a painter who I still meet his students today. All the time. Every time I meet an artist or a young artist or in their 30s, Francisco Mendoza. He was uh, He was my teacher. So he asked if he could mentor me. He asked my mom, so I started working with Francisco. I would leave school and go to him, to his studio, to his school, at Orozco . I think at the time it might have been Cooper. So he introduces me to Jenny Kiessling [?] and Viviana Suarez, who are both working at the School of the Art Institute. Jenny Kiessling was all about community and Viviana Suarez was an artist from Puerto Rico who had come down and was a professor at SAIC.

JR: You're still in high school and you're meeting...

SA: I'm still in high school and I'm meeting these people with Francisco Mendoza. So a sophomore. I started taking classes at the School of the Art Institute in their continuing studies program, and Jenny Kiessling was running that program. She had started it and she was running it. And so the thing was, if you take a class it's 300 and something dollars. But if you become a monitor of whatever they call that, I can't remember right now, but you would sit in on another class and be the person who passes off the supplies, cleans up for everyone, then you get that class free. I was like, I don't have any money. My family is poor, you know. So so I started at 16 going there on weekends and I would go Saturdays and Sundays. So I would take I would go and work and then I'd go to the class. And so I started by helping out on Viviana Suarez. And she would, after I pass out the supplies, she would go sit down and I would say what she goes draw so I would take, I, would be part of the class. And she just took me under her wing. And this woman, my God, does she develop the way I looked at art philosophy? She was Incredible. And then Jenny Kiessling takes me under her wing. And so here I am, 17 years old, 18 years old, you know, and I'm doing nothing but art. I had the same art teacher for four years in my commercial art, and I would see her two periods. And then my third period, I would whenever I got a break, I was always painting and drawing in the art. Then I would leave there and go to the school, the art institute, and be with these women. Then I would do stuff with Francisco, like the mosaics at Cooper, that we had started, that whole thing. And and the through that I met Duarte and I met all these other artists from from the neighborhood and I started working with Duarte and he started teaching me whole different way of looking at mural painting. It was not about like, Let's just do this, this design and his was about like, how do you do perspective and how d you really get the audience? And what was the spiritual part like? There's a spiritual aspect of mural painting, you know, and meditation. And so that was through Duarte. And then I just went off and started doing my own thing by the time I graduated high school, I started attending the School of the Art Institute. I already had credits, so , you know, I got a scholarship. A 30%. And but then it just it was difficult for me because I was in, you know, living in the streets at 17 years old. I'm a runaway. You know, I left the house and just was homeless for a few years. And um and I had a hard time finishing SAIC, I tried and just too much. It was I was too overwhelmed with, you know, getting my apartment and working full time. It was too much. So I just went into doing my own thing, teaching and painting murals and doing music. That's what I do today.

[01:06:45]

JR: One of our our ulterior motives here is to is to engage kids with the murals of Pilsen a little bit. So I bet one of the things kids would want to hear from you is like, what advice do you have if if we could get this in front of a kid who wants to be an artist, him or herself? What advice would you give a kid? Or do you give kids who are interested in art?

SA: Yeah, I love kids. I Live for kids. You know, I will say that. Art saved me and so I can fairly say. Confidently say that art gives life, right. And I struggled, in growing up, I went through a lot. And I can't say, I don't know where I'd be without it, so.. Life can be really overwhelming, especially now. You know, it can be so overwhelming. Fitting in can be overwhelming. Politics, what's happening politically can be over. Adults can be overwhelming. They can and we have so many, acting out is a form of expression. It is an expression you're acting out. So why not take that and find a different way of doing it that you feel heard? There's something about doing your work that you actually feel understood. By just the paper itself, by just that. What you're looking at and you're like, Oh. Wow. You understand yourself. But then you're seeing a part of yourself on there and you feel like there was something that just happened between

you and whatever it was you were doing. You know, there there's, there's a way to disappear and healthily. You know, there's a healthy way to disappear. And I would say, do through your work or do it through art. Art is not easy. It's about commitment. It's not about like doing it here and there. You commit to it and it's you want to be good at something and anything that you do, you have to commit and you have to practice. And part of that practice is not always drawing. Part of it is just, here in your head, you know, you create in your head. Create paint. Draw. Sing. Write. Do it in your head. You know, if you have time. And I say that because there was a time where I stopped drawing for one entire year as an exercise and I said, I'm not drawing anymore, but I want to be better. When I come back, I want to be better. So every day I actually did an exercise in painting and drawing. So I look at something like, if I'm looking at you, for example, I could look at you and I could start drawing you in my head every detail, the light, the way the light hits shadow, you know. The darkness here. I did that for, I was performing at the time I was in Vegas and I was performing, writing music and all this stuff. So but I had stopped doing like the actual writing and I was just writing in my head and I would practice in my head and I would feel my hands twitching. That was part of the exercise. And one year later, I came back as a better artist. I don't even know what happened. I drew a person and they looked so realistic. I have no idea. And everything, everything turned. I suddenly was like, Oh my God, I'm like, legit. I'm like a really good artist like. How did I do that? There's so much power in this mind, in this exercise. And the best way to think about it is, you know, when you're dreaming and you feel like you're falling and when you wake up or when you're dreaming and someone grabs you or something happens to you and you swear, you wake up and you feel it and you're sweating. And it was so real. The mind doesn't know the difference. It doesn't know that you were dreaming. It's just it's this emotion it's doing something, you know, that's the same thing with your art and sports or everything else. You practice it in your head, your mind thinks it's happening, and that's how you're developing, you know? So there's just little cheap things, but as as a person of, I'm sorry, the lighting is kind of shifting here. As a person. I mean, I'll say it to young people, Black and Brown, young artists who are trying to do their thing. It's you have a lot to share. You have an experience that a lot of people don't have and so you have to think about, all these things that made you everything, that that surrounded you in your life growing up. How can you use that to create art and for people to see a part of you that no one's ever seen? It's like you. You're uniquely yourself and authentic and truthful. You're going to stand out. There is nobody like you. But if you are, not aware of your authentic self, if you're not aware of the truth of who you are and you're busy trying to be somebody else. Well, then you're creating something that somebody else is or somebody else has seen, so.

[01:12:06]

JR: That's so great. If I could ask another quickie, like just kind of for the kids, you know, if we have a kid standing in front of "Weaving Cultures", what's one thing you would ask them to look for in that particular work?

SA: I would probably... I would probably say the look, Look at the eyes. And, and what is that person saying? What's the story behind that person? When I was painting, "Weaving Cultures", every time I get to the eyes, it was it was as if I was having a whole conversation with these people, with the person I was painting. And that's what would help me paint the eyes the way they would come. They would come out because I was, I was creating like a storyline for them. Like I was just like, well, this is like the transgender, you know, it's a tough it's it's tough, you know, like the woman. The elderly woman, like on the left side, it was thinking about her hands, thinking about her skin, what she's seen. Um. You know

how she cooked, how she mothered her kids and and grandkids. The deaths, the people that have passed away in her life like stuff like that and it's all in the eyes. So everyone in every eingle one that painted there, there's a story that I'm trying to let you see. I want you to capture an expression or a feeling from it and you'll see whether they're, anxious, whether they're happy.

JR: We're guessing that some of the users of the information that we give will be new to Pilsen people who are first timers in Pilsen. And I guess two questions on that and I'll wrap it up after this, I promise. But, you know, the first question would be what do you want them to know about how Pilsen has changed in your experience? You have a longer history in Pilsen than some of the artists that we've talked to. So what do you want newcomers to know about the changes in Pilsen and what do you want them to know about Pilsen today?

SA: Well, I want you to know that, I mean, I'd say. When Pilsen started off on how Pilsen got on the map, you know, as, as this artist colony was, because there were so many artists, who were they, they were just, they found a way of bringing their story out. Like they just really wanted to talk about art in a way that we hadn't seen in that neighborhood. And they wanted to, paint murals because this is where they were a lot of the artists came from. It was all full of art. I mean, what you're seeing is, is just a glimpse, a little window of, of, you know, Mexico, or a little window of like Puerto Rico or I mean, you're seeing a little window of of an art form that they grew up in. I'm trying to get away from this light.

JR: Yeah. [laughs]

[01:15:10]

SA: So. Right, you can read my lips.

JR: Good for you. Bad for the video.

SA: Yeah. There you go. How's that? Is that?

JR: A lot better.

SA: Okay, so, you know, it's there. It's, it's a window into the into their life or into their culture and their history. So that's what we were seeing. We're not seeing something that, um, it's. It's not like by chance that Pilsen is so rich and colorful. It's like sort of like how we grew up we grew up seeing art, like the fact that, that I saw all these artists doing their work, I became one of those artists later on because I was so inspired by the richness that I was seeing around me and I know a lot of those artists started teaching young people what you're seeing is like this generational thing is you're seeing what a group of artists, some of them have studied at SAIC and some of them that came from different countries like what these artists their vision at that moment, what it created is what we see now. This is from the 70s. Like what? What they did with art, what Pilsen is now is because of a group of artists who wanted to d o what they do. They were passionate, and they wanted to honor their culture, you know, And that's the Mexican street. Well, what's now the National Museum of Mexican Art. That, I mean, those were some artists that that had had an idea and they were like you know, we need to. We have we have this thing going on. There's some beautiful art in our culture and let's let's do museum. You know, we're we're not, I mean,

we're it's considered like high art, you know, But they were like, this is how everything we do is, is is powerful art. So when you walk through Pilsen and you look at these murals, you're looking at a history of mural painting that that's not too far away, it's like from the 70s, look at what we did. And then the younger artists that you're seeing that are doing their work in Pilsen were inspired by artists before them. The idea of street art, that's, that's gorgeous. Pilsen is, it's gorgeous, but if you are coming into Pilsen and it's like your first time you have to be part of the preservation. You have to be part of preserving the history of Pilsen, preserving this work and because I think that what tends to happen, is we look at it and we like it, and then we're like, okay, you know, this is this is my new neighborhood now, and, and you expect somebody else to take care of the work, but you have to preserve the work.

JR: Final, final question. Who else do you recommend we talk to? Who would you recommend as some of the key artists in Pilsen? 2 or 3 would be great. You know that you think we should talk to next.

[01:18:13]

SA: I'm probably thinking you have spoken to a lot of them, but did you speak to. Let me think of a word you've already spoken. Who have you spoken to so far?

JR: So far we've spoken to Sam, Hector Duarte, of course, Marcos Raya and Miguel De Real, and you.

SA: Let's get rid of this light!

JR: That's okay.

SA: Sam, Marcos Raya, Hector Duarte

JR: I have to talk to Miguel.

SA: Miguel... Wow. Can I send you a list? Have you.

JR: Love that

SA: Have you spoken to Diana Solis?

JR: No.

SA: So Diana Solis was, was a woman that I looked up to when I was coming up, and she's, he's been in, this in Pilsen forever. She still lives in Pilsen. She's done some murals. She does a lot of studio art. Um. I can put you let me just write her name down.

JR: That would be. Incredible if we could. I mean, I can email you to and ask for follow up here if you'd maybe introduce us or.

[01:19:24]

SA: Yeah, I can do that. There's, you know, let me let me go down my my list , because there are there are several artists that I think should, you should be looking at.

JR: I'm going to stop recording, but we can keep talking just for a second.
[01:19:39] END