

DIGITALLY-RECORDED INTERVIEW

WITH MEL RAMOS

AT THE MEZZANINE AT MEL RAMOS' STUDIO

DECEMBER 17, 2007

INTERVIEWER: PAUL KARLSTROM

ASHES TO LIFE PROJECT

Donated Gift from Paul Karlstrom

LIST OF NAMES MENTIONED

Nathan Oliveira  
John Mattos  
João de Brito  
Leta Ramos  
Mario da Silva  
Gabriel Navar  
Rupert Garcia  
Tom Wesselman  
Gagosian Gallery  
Richard Hamilton  
Picasso  
Matisse  
Richard McLean  
[Roy] Lichtenstein  
[Jasper] Johns  
[Andy] Warhol  
Benjamin Lanford McKean  
Ed Ruscha  
Robert Williams  
Frederick Weisman  
Fletcher Benton  
Dwaine Valentine  
Gulbenkian Museum  
Sandra Bocalá  
Daniel Spoeri  
Bruno Bischofberger  
Michael Dunev  
Sam [Hernandez]  
Antonio Gaudi

INTERVIEW OF MEL RAMOS

PK: Paul Karlstrom

MR: Mel Ramos

LR: Leta Ramos

[First Audio File]

MR: I said something like, you know, "You've got to be pretty stupid to be painting women for 30 years and not loving it." So apparently ...

PK: I make collages of them.

MR: Of them?

LR: Of his work? Of Mel's?

PK: No. Well, I might use Mel. I might actually use a Mel image. But I like to do collages and some are my photographs.

MR: Cut and paste?

PK: Yeah.

MR: Yeah. I do that on the computer.

PK: Yeah. I don't do it any other, I don't do it on the computer. I do it the old fashioned way like old collage where you cut it out. And I actually have done a number of collages. Some of them are kind of sexy. They're sort of erotic.

LR: Maybe you need an art exhibition or something.

MR: Did you see that ...?

PK: Yeah, exhibition is the right word.

MR: ... Cornell show?

PK: Yeah. Did you like that?

MR: Oh, boy.

PK: Wasn't it great? I saw it three times. Once with Anne and once with other.

MR: Yeah. Those collages were so ...

PK: I just think any collage is great. It has a lot of respect now. Oops, I'm taping all of this. Watch. Ready?

[Second Audio File]

PK: Okay.

MR: Question number one.

PK: I don't go that way. First I have to introduce what this is.

MR: Oh, okay.

PK: This is an interview in a series leading up to an exhibition catalog for a show, at least in a preliminary way it's called *Ashes to Life*. This is Mel Ramos, who's one of four artists in there. Tell me all the four artists.

MR: The artists besides myself are Nathan Oliveira, sometimes referred to as Nathan Riviera, as he was in my book, John Mattos, a graphic designer from San Francisco and João de Brito, a Portuguese-American who's actually from the Azores who lives in Capitola and who is responsible for organizing this exhibition.

PK: And there was a preview opening just last Wednesday, wasn't it? Or Thursday?

MR: That's right. This past week there was an exhibition at The Stone Gallery in Oakland, a preview of the show that will come eventually in some museum in Lisbon. It was attended by a lot of dignitaries from Portugal, the Consul General of Portugal, the mayor of an Azorean city. The name of the city escapes me at the moment, but the mayor was there.

PK: Is that the sister city to San Leandro?

MR: Yeah.

PK: Because the mayor of San Leandro was ...

MR: That's right. It's the city which is the sister city of San Leandro.

PK: Okay. Well, to finish my identification of this for the sake of the record and the transcriber, this is Paul Karlstrom conducting these interviews, the *Ashes to Life* interviews. And we're, as I said, with Mel Ramos, and sitting in is his wife Leta, also an artist, who is taking photographs of us. And if they're good enough, who knows? They might go in the catalog.

MR: Hmm, that's right.

PK: The date is December 17, 2007, and we're in the office between Leta's studio and then if you go down the stairs it's Mel's studio. Is that right?

MR: That's right. This is the mezzanine.

PK: Okay. So we really have this well placed.

MR: Yeah.

PK: And I think this is fun. As I said earlier, I've kind of dropped a couple of other projects, but one of them is really big. It's based on interviews, a biography with Peter Selz. But that's not due until November, which is pretty soon. So I could take a little time out from that to do this. And from my perspective, and what I hope we get into a bit, to think and talk around the idea, it's really as I understand it, this show is about identity. I can't see any way in which it's about shared stylistic concerns or even artistic concerns necessarily, unless there's something that kind of emerges from the Portuguese connection. But why don't you tell me, Mel, exactly how you came to be involved?

MR: I got a call from João de Brito a year or so ago. He wanted me to come to meet the Consul General of Portugal when he found out that my ancestry was Portuguese and that my family and all my paternal and maternal grandparents all came from the same island in the Azores. My parents were first generation Californians and I'm second-generation California.

PK: What is the island?

MR: Pico.

PK: Pico?

MR: Ribeirinha, Pico, one of

seven or eight islands. I can't remember quite how many there are. But it's up here somewhere. Anyway. [close paragraph] And he originally explained to me, as I understood it, that he wanted to engage Portuguese-American artists, artists who have Portuguese heritage, to do an exhibition in Lisbon. As I understood it now, to promote Portugal, to promote the international, kind of the international art scene that has Portuguese artists. You know, when you look at art history, the only significant Portuguese artists that I know of is da Silva, Mario da Silva. Beyond that I don't know of anybody else who distinguished themselves. Other than that Portugal has distinguished itself in the Olympics. They won a few years ago, won the marathon, some guy from Portugal won the marathon. And I had a kind of a little glow came over me as I was watching the television, and I was watching him do a lap with the Portuguese flag wrapped over his shoulder. This long, skinny guy, like all marathon people, they're all long and skinny.

And so, you know, the idea I thought was to use American artists of Portuguese heritage who have somehow distinguished themselves in their field, to do this show in Portugal to promote Portugal. It was a PR thing as I understood it.

PK: And all four are Bay Area artists.

MR: Right.

PK: So you felt a glow when you were watching the Olympics and Portugal won the marathon.

MR: Yeah.

PK: That's interesting. That was before you were contacted about this exhibition. This was ...

MR: This was 15 years ago.

PK: Yeah, a long time ago. And so it isn't as if this is a brand new idea to you. In other words, feeling some connection to national origins, to Portugal. Can you talk about that a little bit, other than the glow that you felt?

MR: See, you know, my connection to my national origin, to my heritage it's not a very strong feeling that I have. You know,

I'm second generation. I think of myself as a West Coast guy. A Californian. And like everybody in this country, not everybody, but a lot of people in this country, they're immigrants. They came from somewhere. And that's what America is. And California is notorious for having a huge Portuguese community in the Central Valley, and Merced, for example. All those little farm towns, they came over here to be farmers. And my grandparents, both my grandfathers came over to work on the railroad. So the Southern Pacific and the Union Pacific.

PK: Like Chinese.

MR: Pardon?

PK: Sort of like Chinese, to work on the railroad, right?

MR: The Chinese came to build the railroad.

PK: Right.

MR: My grandparents came to work on the trains.

PK: Okay.

MR: Conductors and, you know, brakemen and that kind of thing.

PK: Better job, right?

MR: Yeah, better job. And they probably weren't treated like coolies either, I mean, like the Chinese were.

PK: Oh, that was a gratuitous comment on my part.

MR: What was the question?

PK: Well, we were talking a little bit about your feelings about, sense of identity is what we're getting to.

MR: Yeah.

PK: And you were just saying immediately prior that you basically didn't feel a close connection. You had a connection but you were basically, as I understood it, felt like an American, Californian.

MR: Like everybody else here who's from somewhere else. I mean, they all feel the same way, I think, except for the illegal

Mexicans that are coming in. Their purpose, too, is probably still tied very closely to Mexico. But being second generation, you know, and speaking English without a Portuguese accent, like my grandparents had, you kind of distance yourself a little bit from that.

But an interesting thing happened to me in 1992 or '93, I can't remember when it was. It was during the Gulf War. I was invited to be the official artist for *Carnaval* in the Canary Islands in Spain. And so I did this painting, what they used for their posters among other things, jewelry and knickknacks, which they sold at the *Carnaval*, which was being held in the island of, on the town of Santa Cruz on the island of Tenerife. And when I was there, I got to talking to the director of the *Carnaval*, and she asked me where I was from and all that. And I told her - where my parents came from, my grandparents came from. And she looked at me and she said, "Are you Guanche?" And I said, "Guanche? What is Guanche?" She said, "Guanche were tall island people." Tenerife is a series of islands off the coast of Mauritania. Another 1,000 miles west are the Azores out in the middle of the ocean. And she said there were tall island people that inhabited these islands at one time, indigenous people. Unlike most Spaniards who are short in stature, these people were tall in stature. And that's why she assumed that since I came from the Azores, my parents came from the Azores, that somehow back in my heritage I was Guanche. And I have no idea whether I was or not.

PK: So you were not just macho, but Guanche.

MR: Guanche. G-U-A-N-C-H-E.

PK: Yeah, I got it right. So this is a true group of people.

MR: Oh, yeah.

PK: And its distinguishing feature of being tall at least. And they were in the Azores as well as the Spanish, the Canaries.

MR: They were in the islands in the Atlantic Ocean.

PK: I see. So they were seafaring to some degree.

MR: That's right. Fishermen.

PK: Yeah. Now that must have interested you.



MR: It did.

PK: Then giving you further insight into where you came from.

MR: I thought about it for awhile, whether I was or not. You know, whether that was going to remove me from being Portuguese or not. But I didn't think about it very long because I don't think, I just don't dwell on the fact that I'm Portuguese. I mean, I'm not ashamed of it. I'm absolutely, you know, I mean, I'm just as proud as anybody else to be who you are.

PK: Yeah, so the whole issue of identity, let's talk about that. Because that's a big question. Anybody who's studying America, but it's not just art, and it's something that I had the privilege and pleasure doing with Chicano artists, African-American, Asian-American. I've written about all these areas. I'm not a big expert on it. But it's just unavoidable. And with these groups the, well, race and national origin really is a factor. It's difficult - let's put it this way - they're gathered together in exhibitions, especially, well, any group. This idea of using groups, race and national origin to say build exhibitions is not new.

MR: And it's also very common among Latino artists.

PK: Yes.

MR: Most of the Latino artists I know, their work is about their heritage. And a lot of black artists also.

PK: Yes. And Asian-Americans, especially the younger ones.

MR: Ah, Asian-Americans, I don't know, but the Chinese are sending over art now to the ...

PK: Big time.

MR: Cartoons, these funky cartoons. And I mean, it's unbelievable how this has caught on. And it's sweeping the country.

PK: Well, that's another topic, and it's an interesting one. It's more like the art markets hunger for the new and then to peddle it. I mean, simply put it seems - with due respect to the Chinese contemporary artists, but all of a sudden they appeared on the scene. But I gathered from when we were talking earlier that you haven't, you didn't before and maybe this has changed, but before you certainly didn't think of yourself as being a

Portuguese-American artist, or Portuguese-American anything. It was just a fact. But it didn't influence your way of looking at the world or doing your art, right?

MR: You know, this whole idea about the Portuguese-American art didn't occur to me until I got a phone call from João de Brito.

PK: So it's a new idea.

MR: It's a new idea to me, yeah. He reminded me that I'm Portuguese. Oh, yeah, that's right.

PK: So how do you feel about it though? I mean, does it seem a little odd to you or ...?

MR: It did. You know, my feeling was that I've been very, very, very fortunate in my life to have become who I am, and getting a lot of approval and attention and press, and far beyond my wildest dreams of ever obtaining this kind of notoriety. But my notoriety has nothing at all to do with my national heritage, nothing. Not one scintilla of anything, you know. I've always thought of myself as a West Coast painter, who is affected by the light here, the expanse, the space, all this kind of stuff that they don't have in New York. And I thought of myself as that kind of an artist. And when I think of myself as being one kind of an artist or another kind of an artist, I think about it usually in terms of location. You know, like being a New York artist, for example. I wanted to be a New York artist at one time in my life.

PK: You tried, didn't you?

MR: Well, I couldn't stand it for more than six weeks. I was six weeks ...

PK: So that's all it took?

MR: Huh?

PK: That's all it took for you to make ...

MR: That's all it took, yeah.

PK: Okay.

MR: You know, you can't walk out your front door without spending \$50.00 bucks, you know, for a cab or for this or that.

PK: So what you just said, and I'd like to confirm it, is that for you, you as an artist, and others in general, I suppose, are defined more by where they are, where they work, involving a choice of being there, rather than where they are from?

MR: Right. And that's what I said. And my work grew out of interests in things - comic books as a child, advertising in America, American advertising in magazines and media. My work grew out of that. My work didn't grow out of some deep seated need to express myself ethnically, like my assistant does, Gabriel Navar. He's Mexican. And his work is all about Latino stuff.

PK: Or somebody like Rupert Garcia maybe? Where there's a political dimension. What about that? Identity, of course, leads to identity politics. And you're absolutely right that certain groups more than others, especially the young people, might view themselves as having an obligation to perhaps just tell their own story or the story of their group. And if there are all these Portuguese people, Portuguese-Americans, this big migration to California Central Valley and the Bay Area, I guess, as well, to a lesser extent. So if that is a reality of life for some, for many Portuguese, it's conceivable that their story, there could have been a desire to express that story. And I'm thinking about this show that you're in with these four artists, and I have to go back and look at it more carefully, but I didn't discern anything except in maybe in João, in his work, but other than that what do you think?

MR: You know, João de Brito, when he brought this to me, this notion that he wanted to use my work for his theme show, this last, this year for example, I mean, I've been in like five or six theme shows. One of them is the National Portrait Gallery in London called *Pop Art Portraits*. The show was full of pop artists, but I didn't see many portraits. They just used it to get all these people together. There was one at the Gagosian Gallery in London where I had a piece. Again, a pop art show called *Pop Art Is*. And the title of the show is this 12 words that Richard Hamilton used to describe pop art way back in 1959 or whenever it was. You know, expensive, indignant, all these words that he used. And then there's a big show in Rome at the moment at the Scuderie del Quirinali. Do you know that place?

PK: No.

MR: Ah. It's a big exhibition hall in Rome.

PK: Maybe I do, but does it go back way in time? I haven't been to Rome in a long time.

MR: It's just a big, huge pop art show. Pop art from 19- whenever, to now. And when he called me and asked me about this theme show, another theme show, I said to myself, "Gee, *Ashes to Life*. Maybe he doesn't know my work very well. You know, I'm a so-called 'pin-up artist,' as people like to call me. Which I really resent.

PK: Well, I will be sure not to call you that.

MR: No, I mean, and Picasso and Matisse do a figure, a naked figure, a naked woman, they call it a nude. When I do it they call it a pin-up. The same with Tom Wesselmann. He doesn't like it either.

PK: No.

MR: So I thought real hard, and I finally came to him and I said, "You know, my work has nothing to do with your theme. I can't imagine what ... My work is a celebration of life - got nothing to do with from ashes, nothing to do with ashes. It's a celebration. I celebrate, the images in my paintings are celebrations. Either you get it or you don't. That's usually my comment.

PK: And what did he say? I mean, how did he persuade you to then associate with this?

MR: He's just a charming guy. He's really a charming guy.

PK: Yeah, he is a charming guy.

MR: I have a hard time resisting charming people.

PK: Even men, huh?

MR: And then I started thinking about it. And I then I realized, Jesus Christ, I've got a painting called *Phoenix*. It was a mythical bird that rose from the ashes.

PK: That's right.

MR: And then I had this series of paintings called, when I was doing these landscapes, when I built the studio, and I looked out that

window and I saw some palm trees across the street. It inspired me to do these landscape paintings. And I did three landscape paintings, which were half circles, palm trees that went like this. One was a black one. That was at the show. One was all white. One was red, called *Tree-o*, spelled T-R-E-E dash O.

PK: Right. I got it.

MR: One was called *Life, Death, Reincarnation*. The one that he has is *Death*. And then I realized also that this series I'm doing of Galatea, the Pygmalion series of the statues that come to life, it's about transfiguration. I mean, there's this model statue, half white model statue and one half real-life person. Those all fit the themes, as far as I could tell.

PK: Yeah. And so that made it, provided then more of a reason for you to be involved beyond your Portuguese ancestry?

MR: Exactly. I told him originally, I said, "You know, I don't have anything that you want. I mean, even if I have something, I mean, even if I did have something that you'll want, I don't have it here, because I don't have anything of my own here." Everything is gone. So he just kept insisting and insisting and insisting that I give him something, some paintings.

PK: Did he spend time - let me back up. Did you already know about the famous eruption in the Azores? Is this something that you knew about? It's something that you probably didn't think about very much. That its anniversary was coming up, what is it '07 or '08? The anniversary is '08?

MR: I'm not sure.

PK: The 50<sup>th</sup>.

MR: 50 years ago.

PK: Yeah. Okay. But anyway, that is the reason, that's the first thing I was told about when he, João, spoke to me.

MR: Yeah. No, I clearly remember watching the television 50 years ago and watching this eruption. It was on the news.

PK: It was more interesting to you because of where it was?

MR: Yeah, of course. And that's where my relatives come from.

PK: Do you still have relatives there?

MR: No.

PK: They all came over here?

MR: Yeah.

PK: Along with many others.

MR: The ones that did come over here, they were my grandparents. So anybody else that was related to them, cousins and stuff, I'm sure they're all gone too. My grandparents died 30, 40 years ago.

And I just remember seeing it on the news. And so when he mentioned it to me, I knew about it. You know, and they're having the celebration of the anniversary of that eruption. So, okay. So ...

PK: Well, it seems to me - Well, what do you think about this in terms of intention? It seems pretty strategic in terms of promoting Portugal, as a matter of fact. And I'm not sure where ... I guess João came up with the idea for the art show, but there must be other things going on where the Portuguese, maybe the Consul General here, for instance, is trying to - it's a dramatic event. It has an anniversary. The result of it, as I understand it, was although people weren't devastated in terms of big death, this was not like Herculaneum or Pompeii and Vesuvius, or anything like that. But nonetheless, it somehow, maybe you can explain it to me, served as the occasion for many Azores people - I don't know about other Portuguese - to make this, to leave. To go, a lot of them, to the U.S., I guess. Is that right?

MR: Yeah.

PK: Why?

MR: Well, why? I mean, why did anybody leave? That was just, when that volcano happened they just gave them it an excuse. They probably wanted to leave all their life. Portugal, the Azores are really poor, you know, it's a really poor place. I mean, there's ...

PK: I didn't know that since I've never been there.

- MR: Not much happens there. I mean, they're volcanic islands and the island that my parents came from, my grandparents came from is just this flat ass island. It doesn't seem like there's anything on it. Maybe there's one or two towns on this place.
- PK: Do they have any palm trees or anything?
- MR: I don't think so. The photographs that I've ever seen of it in books, it's just ...
- PK: It's not like tropical islands?
- MR: No, not at all. It's just barren.
- PK: It's not a resort destination.
- MR: Not Pico, my island. But San Miguel is.
- PK: That's a nice one, huh?
- MR: Yeah. That's a big one, and it's a capital and all that.
- PK: And your grandparents specifically came, well, they were part of a migration group. But do you know what they were doing on Pico? You know, what their livelihoods were? What the ... In other words, what did they leave behind? You described a situation where maybe not too much. There weren't lots of opportunities. It was the usual story of people in ...?
- MR: You know, I really don't know what they left behind. I never really thought about much, thought much about it. I never bothered to ever ask them what they left behind.
- PK: And your parents didn't talk about it?
- MR: No. My parents were born here in California, Sacramento.
- PK: That was it.
- MR: And, that's right. And every year we would go to the Holy Ghost picnics. Do you know those?
- PK: No.
- MR: Ah.
- PK: Tell me about the Holy Ghost [picnics].

MR: Ah, it's a Portuguese thing. They have them at the - it starts out in the church every spring. They have communities, all around California they have these Holy Ghost celebrations. It starts out at mass in the church. And then there's a parade. And they carry flags and they march. I used to carry the flag. I used to carry the Portuguese flag. I remember I used to love to put that little leather thing on with the little pouch, and you stick the flag in there and march when I was a kid. And you march to the fairgrounds or wherever it was. And there they served beer and beer beans. You know? Lupino beans. Do you know those? Lupino beans?

PK: I don't know. I don't think so.

MR: Oh, they're little yellow beans that are marinated in brine. And eat those and drink beer.

PK: You're getting sentimental here, nostalgic.

MR: And then at midday they would serve *sopas*. *Sopas*, which are boiled beef, mint, a lot of mint, and French bread, slices of French bread. And it's soaked, the French bread is soaked up in this meat juice. And they served everybody free. It's called *sopas*.

PK: *Sopas*.

MR: Ask Nate about it. He knows about *sopas*.

PK: *Sopas*.

MR: Everybody knows about *sopas*. As a matter of fact, when de Brito told me that there was going to be a dinner that night at the Stone Gallery, I was talking to Richard McLean about it and he said, "What are they going to feed everybody?" And I said, "They're probably going to feed them *sopas*. There are a lot of people coming."

PK: *Sopas*?

MR: *Sopas*.

PK: Is it S-O-P-U-S-H?

MR: I have no idea how you spell it. I have no - I have never ever seen it written. I just know how to pronounce it.



PK: *Sopas*. There's a lot of ish, "sopush," in Portuguese, a lot of ish.

MR: Yeah. "Sopush." Yeah, the word for goodbye is *adeus*.

PK: That sounds cool.

MR: The word for hello is *olá*.

PK: So what was this event called every year?

MR: The Holy, they were called the Holy Ghost picnics. The Holy Ghost picnics. There was a queen. They elected a queen. You know, all of these Latin countries have these things.

PK: Yeah. And where was it held?

MR: They were held all over the place. There were three or four venues in Sacramento. They have them in Fresno. They got them, the last time I went was with my father when he was in Santa Rosa, when he was living in Santa Rosa. There are all these Portuguese communities that do it. And they have a parade ground, they have a fairground where there's a hall.

PK: Yeah?

MR: A hall with a stage. You know, I basically remember that. All the women were sitting along the edges of the hall on a bench. There was a stage and somebody was, you know, they had the same kind of instruments, the viola and banjos and stuff, playing music, the *chamarrita*, the typical Portuguese dancers called the *chamarrita*. And they were all doing the *chamarrita*. And I was just a little kid, you know, watching all this stuff.

PK: You liked it?

MR: I was a little kid. I liked, sure. Yeah.

PK: But that suggests, look at how you remember it. It suggests some, that was a connection with Portugal.

MR: Oh, no question about that. Like I said before ...

PK: You were Portuguese. You were qualified to go there as ...

MR: Absolutely. No, I'm, you know, when anybody asks me what I am I tell them I'm a Portugee. You know. I have no problem with that at all. It's just that I don't dwell on it. I don't dwell on it. Leta does. She dwells on her ancestors. She talks about her ancestors all the time.

PK: Leta, what's your ancestry?

LR: Well, as far as I know, I'm German. However, when this particular part of Germany where my grandfather was born was always being turned over to either French or German, French or German. And then my mother's side was Irish. Benjamin Lanford McKean with red hair. And my brother married a German war bride and he ended up with all the red hair. Both of his children have bright red hair.

MR: Her ancestors come from Alsacia.

PK: Yeah, Alsacia, that's what I thought.

MR: Alsacia.

PK: So, well, I mean, one of the reasons I ask this is that I suppose we all have a sense - well, we're Americans. I certainly am, second generation, but Swedish ancestry. And what you - it sounds like you participated more in events that were, well, the Holy Ghost picnics, at least that, where the identity was reinforced, at least on an annual basis. And Swedes, especially in the Midwest and so forth, would have these kinds of events, but I mean, we had some family traditions, but they weren't communal in the same way that you're describing. And I would think that that would provide a different kind of link to that.

MR: Yeah. Portuguese things were very communal, that's for sure. They get to be 300 or 400 people at these events every time they had one.

PK: So I'm going to be talking with the other artists. I've already talked with de Brito. And tomorrow I talk with John Mattos. And then Friday Nathan Oliveira. And it's going to be interesting to see what, well, with de Brito, I mean, it's a big deal because it's his idea.

MR: But he's from there.

PK: He's actually from there. And so it's quite interesting to me - Do you get the sense that in a way he's seeking to reinforce or to construct a connection that he feels is latent in the other three of you, something, this awareness of being Portuguese in origin? Or, in other words, a sense of identity, Portuguese identity? Or do you feel - and I'm not asking you to sort of critique his motives or anything like that - or do you feel that as an artist he is interested in pulling together a show, Portuguese is the reason or the excuse, but to be with you guys?

MR: That thought has crossed my mind.

LR: Well, all four look so different. I mean, in some nationalities ...

PK: Well, the work certainly doesn't seem to - there's no connection as far as I can see.

MR: No. What you just asked has crossed my mind. But it just only crossed my mind. I haven't really -

[Phone rings.]

MR: Excuse me.

[Third Audio File]

PK: Okay. This is file five. Okay. Anyway, sorry about that. Well, why should I apologize? It's not my fault.

MR: You know, I mean, and as for the question, I mean, I'm very often flattered when curators include my work in exhibitions with the likes of, you know, [Roy] Lichtenstein, and [Jasper] Johns, and [Andy] Warhol, and all these people. And I'm flattered by that. And I think that's a pretty common sentiment among artists who are - they like to have their work shown along with heavyweights.

PK: Yeah. Well, I did a show last year with a little gallery down in Pasadena for drawings of Ed Ruscha and Robert Williams, who's the famous hot rod artist, you know, sort of a low brow. He's famous, like the father of low brow.

MR: Yeah.

PK: Ed and Robert it turns out are good friends. And Ed introduced me to Robert, the first time I met him. And he's LA-based and

so forth. And his imagery is, he's a realist painter, but very much into popular culture and so forth, which of course would be appealing to Ed when you think about it. But it seemed, let's face it, the Robert Williams had considerable importance within a certain group. But it was smaller, more limited. He's not certainly as well-known as Ruscha. And I know for a fact that Robert was thrilled to show with his friend, Ed, which is a perfectly okay type thing. I mean, and Ed I think really wanted, part of the reason he did it, he didn't have to do that kind of a thing, even though we know one another, he's not going to do it just for me. Certainly not the gallery. It turned out well. I did a little booklet. I'll send you a copy if you'd like.

MR: Yeah.

PK: A small booklet. A nice little show and all that. But it was clearly a case where Robert benefited the most from the show.

MR: Sure.

PK: And I just, I mean, it just occurred to me really in your case or with this show, pretty much just now, I hadn't thought about it. So I guess what I'm suggesting or asking you about, do you see that there really are multiple motivations in this particular show? I mean, it's not simple and straightforward perhaps. It's not just one thing, but it may be three or four.

MR: I really couldn't say for sure if that's the case. I don't really know that. But my sense tells me what I told you before. That it's a chance for him to show his work in a venue that's going to attract some attention.

PK: And also serve the interest, I mean, to put the best - there's no reason to do otherwise. His enthusiasm is genuine, and his sense of being Portuguese. And probably the pleasure in identifying some other Portuguese ...

MR: I'm sure. I'm sure.

PK: So all these things. And then he's also doing a service for Portugal for the Consul General.

MR: That's right.

PK: Well, we ...

MR: Now when I agreed to do this I really, you know, I felt a sense of duty.

PK: Really?

MR: Yeah. I mean, if it was anything else, for example, that had nothing to do with my ancestry, and somebody wanted to put a show together based on, you know, some German mythology or something, and I didn't have the time to do it, I would just flat out say, "Sorry. I'm busy." But when it was about my Portuguese heritage I felt a sense of duty to pay some, give some, you know, pay some respect to that.

PK: To your origins.

MR: Yep.

PK: To your grandparents at least, if not ...

MR: Yeah. And it had to do with just recognizing and being respectful of it. And, you know ...

PK: Well, you know, in a sense this whole identity theme, basically you're acknowledging, not that perhaps you put enormous importance upon it, but acknowledging an aspect of who you are.

MR: Sure.

PK: And I think that's - Well, what about this volcano, the whole volcano business? Let me phrase this in a way that makes sense if I can. The volcano seems to loom so large in this story, and it created an island you tell me. It was a pretty benign eruption because according to João, nobody died. You know, there was no human casualty and I don't know if some towns were, a little town was wiped out, I have no idea.

MR: Got buried under ash. Only half way though.

PK: Only half way? Oh.

MR: That big tower, that got buried half way up.

PK: Wow.

MR: But they dug it out.

PK: Yeah. And re-established. But nonetheless, for the Azorean people that was like a big - I was going to say watershed. That's not exactly the right word. But it marks a change in terms of the history of the Portuguese people of the Azores.

MR: It was a big deal there.

PK: It was a big deal. And so it would make sense and seem appropriate for you to be involved. I'll learn - well, as I said, I'm going to be talking with John [Mattos] and then Nate [Oliveira], I'm going to learn what they feel about that. But does that seem for you the overriding interest and reason for you to be participating? This piece of Portuguese history that has to do with the creation of Portuguese-Americans in a large number? *Ashes to Life*, the American life, I guess the new life?

MR: Probably, but life went on before that, the eruption. I mean, Azoreans have been coming here long before the eruption.

PK: But not in the same number, right?

MR: That I don't know. I couldn't speak to that.

PK: I get the impression from João that ...

MR: Is that the case?

PK: Yeah, that there's kind of a ... I don't know if there's mass.

MR: I mean, my parents came over, I mean, my grandparents came over long before that eruption. But you can ask him. He'd probably know more about that than I would.

PK: Well, it's an interesting concept. Let's just talk, and, you know, I think there's probably not much more to say in terms of your own relationship to the show and to Portugal and so forth, unless there's some things that you find you still like, that you particularly like about Portugal or Portuguese culture. Is there anything that you, you know, in your adult life that is interesting?

MR: I've been to Portugal twice. I went to Lisbon three times. I've been to Lisbon twice and to Porto once. I had a show in Porto up north. That's a really beautiful city, gorgeous place. And they have incredible shellfish.

PK: Good food?

MR: Oh, and sherry. That's where they make *porto*, port wine. Sandeman, I got to see all those wineries that were there on the Rio Douro. Rio Douro goes through Porto and enters into the Atlantic Ocean. And of course the Douro Valley wine region in Spain is one of the greatest in the world. And I got to go to some Portuguese homes, you know, of rich people who collect art. The dealer took us around. And, you know, it's a typical European city. I didn't notice that there was a lot of poverty, but apparently there is. Not poverty, but low standard of living. Lisbon is an entirely different matter altogether. It's a big huge metropolitan place. I went there with Freddy Weisman and Fletcher Benton and Dwaine Valentine. And Freddy took us around to the Gulbenkian Museum.

PK: When was that? About what year?

MR: Oh, boy.

PK: Eighties?

MR: Ten or twelve years ago. Maybe early nineties. And Dwaine and I, we used to--they all took off and Dwaine and I stayed for three or four extra days in Lisbon, because Freddy was paying for the hotel.

PK: Nice. [laughs]

MR: I mean, you know, they have great museums. But I still think of Portugal as still somewhat of a semi third world country. That's the way I think, from what I've observed.

PK: Well, so interestingly, you have a house in Spain.

MR: It's on the other side of Spain.

PK: Yeah?

MR: Not the Atlantic side, on the Mediterranean side.

PK: And now with your new identification with Portugal, thanks to Mr. de Brito, well, I mean, there's nothing ironic or paradoxical about it. You know, we find ourselves in different places for different reasons. What is your town? Is it Horta?

MR: Yeah. Horta.

PK: Horta, yes. Horta.

MR: That's it.

PK: And there you are. Somehow you found yourself being attracted, liking it and then over, how many years?

MR: 35.

PK: Oh, God, I didn't realize that.

MR: I bought it in 1972.

PK: Yeah.

MR: But I went there for a different reason. I went there because I wanted to find out where Picasso made his first year he was painting.

PK: Really?

MR: I was in Zurich with Sandra Bocalá and Daniel Spoeri. And they were all sitting around talking about the sunbelt of Europe, and how they wanted to get out of the northern European shit. You know, dreary, dreary, crappy. It's cold every ... And they wanted to go down somewhere in Italy or Spain and get a summer place. And I had nothing else to do. I had a show with Bruno Bischofberger in 1972. And I had, I don't know, \$20,000 down my cowboy boots.

PK: Nice.

MR: And I was just waiting for my plane to take me back to California. And I had a few days to go. And then all my friends were leaving to go to Spain and see this town where Picasso did his paintings at.

PK: Oh.

MR: And they invited me to come along. So we flew down. Rented a car and drove through this town. And my friend Sandra was walking around looking at these houses. And I said, "How much is that one?" And he told me. And I said, "Shit. I got enough money in one cowboy boot for that." So I bought it.

PK: How much was it?



MR: \$1500.

PK: No! Oh, my God.

MR: This house here.

PK: Yeah?

MR: That's our other house.

PK: You have two houses?

MR: This is the house we live in. I have three. I bought another one.

PK: Oh, pretty soon you'll own the town.

MR: But the price structure is a little bit different now. My friend, Reynaldo just bought his house and he paid \$267,000 Euros for it.

PK: Oh. So Sam and ... do Sam [Hernandez] and Jo [Farb Hernandez] live in your town?

MR: No. [close quote paragraph]

They stayed in this house for six months. Fell in love with Spain and bought a house up north. And Michael Dunev. Remember him?

PK: I think so, maybe.

MR: Had a gallery in San Francisco. [connect quote paragraph]

And Michael lives there. And now he has a house and a gallery up there. And Sam and he are good friends. Sam, he showed Sam around. Sam bought a huge house up there, up north, up by Figueres.

PK: That's Dalí country, isn't it?

MR: Exactly.

PK: Okay. So I get the point that you certainly didn't buy that place in Spain due to any atavistic draw to that part of the

world, other than liking it, and then the art history, I mean, initially.

MR: It was opportunistic. It was an opportunistic event in my life. I mean, my friends were looking at these houses and here I have a chance to buy a house in Europe that I can renovate. I mean, it was nothing but, I mean, there was dirt floor. It stunk of horse piss. Probably 500 years of horses pissing on the floor. It had, upstairs it had the room that they lived on, a funky little, skinny little walls. And then a floor above that was where they kept their rabbits in cages.

PK: Right. Usual.

MR: Potatoes and shit for the winter.

PK: A usual site.

MR: Yeah.

PK: All right.

MR: So we'd come and rip - we tore off the roof and made a terrace, which you just saw there. And I put about 12,000 bucks into fixing it up 35 years ago. And then the next house I bought was a lot more. And the last house I bought was like the one next to this one, which is a ruin. It was just abandoned. It's in a ruin and we had to tear it all down.

LR: It's a garage.

MR: But I paid 40 grand for that.

LR: A garage at 40 ...

MR: And I'm going to spend another maybe 80 or 90 renovating it.

PK: As I say, you guys are going to have half the town.

MR: But a lot of people do that. I mean, this used to be - there was a roof. This is the old roofline. It came down like this. And we just tore off the roof and made a terrace up on top.

LR: Yeah, I got so inspired by Antonio Gaudi.

PK: Yeah, got into your tiles and stuff.

- LR: Well, those are old tiles. Those are from the twenties and the thirties that the tile factory was throwing away. So we knew good work, you know.
- PK: Well, I'm certainly, don't worry, I'm not going to make any connection between the Azores and Horta. I just, I don't see it. But it is interesting. They're not exactly in the same neighborhood, but you do, in any event, find yourself in that part of the world now.
- LR: And the Spanish love to listen to Portuguese. They find it lyrical.
- MR: We drove there once. We drove to my show in Porto. And it's a good drive across Spain. It's a big country.
- PK: Yeah.
- MR: So we spent one night on the road somewhere and finished up going into Portugal the next day.
- PK: That sounds great. Now that I've seen these pictures I'm thinking, God, why don't Anne and I find a way to go there. Now we have of course this grandson who's going to be running our limited travel. Anne is going to retire.
- LR: Hey, they have babies too. They have their babies running in the streets.
- PK: You mean ...
- LR: I'm talking about in Horta here. They have babies and they seem to manage.
- PK: No, I ... it's not that.
- LR: And I'm absolutely amazed that they don't get hurt, you know, on the rocks.
- PK: It's not that. Well, you know, Brooklyn, the kids running in the street in Brooklyn, they might get hurt. But what I'm saying is that our travel destinations are probably going to be limited to mainly New York. But it looks great. Well, listen, I'm going to ... I think we've covered ...
- MR: Yeah, I don't know what else I can say that would throw any light on the topic.

PK: No, I think that enough light has been turned upon it.

MR: Okay. Here's a slide show.

PK: Okay. I'm going to turn this off now. Thank you.

[End of Interview]