

In Conversation with artists Ester Hernandez and Dolissa Medina
Transcripts from an August 27th Interview @ Galería de la Raza
Part of the Regeneration Program Artist Series

Part I

Dolissa: When Carolina invited me to do this several months ago I was really honored because in lots of ways I consider the beginning of my artistic awakening to have happened here in these walls of the Galería years ago - when it lived in the current Studio24 store for those of you who remember the Galería when it was next door. I find it very interesting how though through the times the building has changed, new businesses have come, a lot of the places have stayed the same, careers have been lost, and it's this really beautiful cycle. Then to see a new person come in the door, who's new to the city and we start talking, and it turns out that her mom's cousins with my dad back in Texas. It's like wow, we really are like family and I think you're a *madrina* somewhere down the line...

Ester: I am a *madrina* indeed...

Dolissa: So you're *familia*...

Ester: So it's all *familia*

Dolissa: Everybody's family here and I kinda dig that. During the 90's when I was part of the Regeneration program. Having said that, maybe we could start and backtrack and talk about your artistic awakening. I remember, and some of you may have heard this story I've heard somewhere, or read somewhere, or think you told me that one of your earliest memories as a child was playing in the mud, drawing in the mud. I was wondering if you could start about your early memories and at what point you started to realize you were an artist and what it's meant in the context of how you were raised. You know the community that you were raised in...

Ester: Ok, I think I was about two years old and I remember one of my brothers was being baptized and this was in the San Joachim Valley in a tiny little house; three rooms, and we were already six of us, seven actually. Anyway, we had a little band, and as a result everybody was dancing inside, all the kids were running around outside because it was hot and what have you, and I had a real fancy little dress on, like a little princess. And I fell in the mud and remember it was like just hitting the mud and being immersed in the plasticity of it, swimming in it and letting it absorb me. Of course I knew when I pulled away from it and had to deal with my family, all hell was gonna break loose and that was another story. What was amazing to me was when I went back the next day and there was still a sense of myself, and my experience that had been captured there in the mud. I just remember being totally affected by that. I also remember as a child working in the fields with my family, I was small and I couldn't really do a lot of the physical work that was required of a farm worker, but I was in charge of the food; keeping the food in certain places and bringing water. It gave me a lot free time again to draw and play with all the organic materials that were out in the fields. I didn't know they were totally contaminated but that's a whole other story. Nevertheless, I really had a chance to explore a lot of different materials. I went into school and I don't know things just sort of kept going on in terms of expressing myself with different materials,

and I had my first exhibit in kindergarten, in the regular class room. It was a little juried show, and that was my first exhibit in kindergarten and that changed my life.

Dolissa: So, even in elementary school you were saying there was a lot of artistic expression.

Ester: There was, but it was still the 50's, not like now, there was still appreciation for the arts and the importance that art plays in learning about yourself and everything around you, so I really felt fortunate. What about you? How did that happen, what was your experience?

Dolissa: You know it was actually a lot different in terms of my upbringing. My family was middle class for the most part, in lots of ways I was really privileged in terms of being given access to the arts, even though I'm from South Texas and so I consider that an area that didn't have a lot of culture - you know what we would consider culture, like museums and galleries. I mean come on Juan Junto was born there. It's sort of when you leave you understand culturally which area it is you're growing up in - you have this idea of what art is; it's these paintings on the wall, or classical music. And we really didn't have any of that in Roundsville. You're right on the border and it's funny, I mean I remember always writing, I remember my teachers telling me I was a really good writer and I was just so creative. And my mom was a teacher and so she gave me a lot of support in that sense. I had painting lessons, I had music, I went through every instrument and I failed miserably. And so it was kind of this whole thing where I was definitely exposed to the arts. But it's funny, I've never really given it much thought in terms of how it relates to who I am today because I didn't think of myself as an artist. Even when I started with Regeneration in the mid 90's, I kinda just stumbled into it by nature of David, you know someone that I already knew, who was saying we need someone to write some stuff, and you're a good writer so why don't you just come in and write and I'm like ok. What's this thing called the Galería? I've never been to the mission before, and again you really are just getting exposed to a whole other world and that's where I met you and a bunch of other people. I think that's point when I slowly became more involved in the arts community, but didn't identify as an artist. I think it's only been in the past two or three years where I've really claimed that, and kind of understood what it means. I also figured out even though I write, I think I'm more of a filmmaker and I really didn't come in to that until my thirties...

Ester: I would say that for me, it's like coming from a farm-worker family in the San Joachim and being part of this big *barrio* of Mexicanos, we didn't have money honey, but we had a lot going on culturally and spiritually. There was a band and there was music and dances. My mother she did embroidery, there was just a whole rich culture, my father was an amateur photographer. There was one thing after another going on even when we were working in the fields. Someone would break out in to a song or somebody would tell a story so I just always felt like that was valued. Whatever form of expression was always valued. However living in a farm-worker community, once you grow up, when I was graduating from school and I told the school counselor I wanted to be an artist, she bust out laughing. There's no work for artist in a farm-working community. I mean, I did the stuff for my friends and family, and all of that portraiture. But she told me that the only work I could find was working for the police and doing composites of faces of the *Mexicanos* and the

Indios that the police were always looking for. So I thought in a small town like this, forget it baby, I'm outta here. Anyway, eventually I ended up moving to the Bay Area.

Dolissa: And at point you went to Berkley? Is that where you studied?

Ester: I did, but actually there's a little gap there. I got into the hippie movement with a lot of Chicanas and I was married and lived in the mountains and still kept one part of my life connected with the farm-workers movement because that's what you did in that era. My family was totally involved with this movement and there was like a lot of energy and things going on, so I kinda kept one foot there and foot in the hippie movement which was kind of interesting.

Dolissa: What was that like?

Ester: It was fun...

Dolissa: This is what I also thought was so cool about like meeting you and having your stories about being a hippie. You know, a brown hippie...

Ester: They were out there; I wasn't the only one...

Dolissa: Yea, I'm sure it was just part of that thing. I mean one of the reasons I came to San Francisco ironically enough was because of the whole summer of love. I had all these idealized visions of San Francisco as this groovy place back from when I was 17 and came up on a pilgrimage to the Haight Ashbury and bought every peace sign in sight. But I think there are always these different identities that you have and it's kinda of hard to sort them, to bring them all together. That was my experience at my other school because all of my activist friends were white and I was kind of like the one queer hippie and my queer friends were like all of my different identities that didn't necessarily jive. And so it was really interesting in meeting you. Here was a woman who was in a relationship with a woman who was an artist, who was an activist and like everything came together. And I was like wow this is really kind of cool and the story you were telling me of San Francisco and not just like in the 60's, but also just the whole gay parades and stuff of the seventies and how you were a big part of an oral history in a way that I would never be able to receive from just watching a documentary or something. It was like you were there, you were there in this completely different context. I wanted to ask you about what that was like coming from a rural environment to the city, to San Francisco during that period. What it was like coming as a hippie when all these political movements were happening. I was wondering if maybe you could talk a little about that and at what point the whole birth of Galería kind of intersects.

Ester: Well coming from a small little town there aren't very many opportunities to just really grow and have a lot of different experiences, so all of the hippie thing and then moving to San Francisco was totally mind blowing. I was meeting people from all over, from different backgrounds, even from different parts of California living in an urban situation...

Dolissa: Was this the first time you had lived in an urban situation?

Ester: Yes

Dolissa: Ah coming to San Francisco

Ester: Yes

Dolissa: What was that contrast like - from rural to the city...?

Ester: Oh, it was very frightening to me. I had never been on a bus. I had come from a really small little farming town that was about population 5,000, and that's including like a lot of territory. It was extremely conservative and I was pretty much at the bottom. It was very segregated and very rich. When I think back actually, I just went to a reunion in June and it was called the Dayuba China Town Barrio Reunion and it turns out that the barrio where I was raised was founded by Chinese. I guess after the building of the transcontinental railway they went all over the place and sort of had their neighborhoods on the other side of the tracks and founded a little barrio there. We had Chinese and Filipinos, Blacks, and Mexicans. It was a huge community. We also had the Japanese after World War II who were forced in with us in the barrio, so even to this day we have a Buddhist church. It was a really an interesting community, and even then I was exposed to different cultures. But for once when I came over here, I saw the possibilities of becoming an artist, or whatever that meant. I was in school and taking more classes and I ended up meeting a couple of women who were sort of going out together. They were like affiliated with Galería de la Raza and that was in 1973. I was at school in Rosecreek College in Oakland studying art, so they invited me. They called themselves *Mujeres de Aztlan*, and I was so happy to meet these women and to meet other artists. I mean Yolanda, Francisco; I could go on and on. There were lots of people around; it was really exciting for me. Certainly the political thing was one thing and the family and the barrio. It was like finding all of that and more here in the urban setting. I was like totally excited and everybody was a hippie at that point. Here too, that's what was going on you know. Rene, I mean, I'm not giving any extra details, but nevertheless there was still a lot of different ways of thinking. It was very exciting.

Dolissa: Right, right. I've heard some of those stories and like I said, as just someone who - you know I'm 34 - it's just San Francisco just really had that whole you know (inaudible), that history. I mean living in San Francisco, it kind of breaks my heart though because I think to myself when I was younger and I wanted to live in San Francisco. I wanted to be protesting, I was thinking just back then that there was so much going on, and the irony is be careful what you ask for because here I am in San Francisco, there's a war going on, it's the same you know - people are doing every day things. It's kind of in that sense of what's changed and what hasn't changed, what you know, what are the discussions that we had in the early days in Regeneration? What issues are different for you? And how do we come into political consciousness, political awakening? The Chicano Civil Rights movement was in a different space, it was a bit more complex. I mean people were more in terms of feminism and it was queer stuff, so it was kind of a different environment. I wanted to know if you could talk a little bit about those political movements that were happening when you were involved with the Galería and the role that the Galería played in a way that art was a function of your political resistance. Maybe you could compare that to what you see happening today or what issues are going on today? I mean, it's a big question, you know and it's covering a lot of ground and we could kind of get into the now later on but I'm still really curious that there's so much in the world. There's so much going in the early 70's Vietnam, the feminism movement, the Chicano Civil Rights movement happening, the hippie stuff,

free love like all these things are happening. What was it like to be young and to be in that environment? How were you impacted? How did that impact your art and the themes of your art, your formative years? What was that scene like? How did you dig the scene man?

Ester: (laughter) Well Dolissa that was a lot. It's not like I'm thinking about this all the time. It's been like thirty years or whatever, but the interesting thing for me is the reality that things have not changed a lot. I think that's kind of what surprises me. There are still the same issues that were happening then in terms of dropouts, people dropping out of school, anti-immigrant stuff - which sort of comes and goes, but it never seems to leave. The racism, those things are still very much alive. We're seeing it here with the billboard, you know people attacking in different ways. I think to me the importance the Galería has played was that it has been a place we could all come together and exchange ideas, information, and resources and try to make sense of the madness that was around us. For my part, I'm not good at organizing or giving speeches, or doing all of this, or even lecturing necessarily. It's impossible to really deal with everything. You almost have to find something that really affects you and stays with you, and focus on that - give it a visual form. That has always been my challenge. I think that as an individual without a group to talk about these things, to make sense of them, I don't think it would happen. I think that places like the Galería and the Mission Cultural Center and all the arts is really because of that collective energy that comes together. It really is a lot stronger and very helpful in terms of helping us sort of digest all of it and work with it. In some ways, I cannot imagine what would have happened to me at that point because it was overwhelming in terms of what was going on. You know you could look at it from a distance but when you're living in the era and all of it, it's just like today. It's like you're still struggling with the everyday thing. On top of all this, other politics and things are coming at you and affecting you in different ways. I have to say that the Galería saved my life as well as giving me an audience. It gave me a collective voice, the feeling that I had a place that I could go to. A place that was safe, a place that was family and that I did not have in this environment.

Dolissa: So you've pretty much consistently lived in the Mission since the seventies?

Ester: No, I've lived in the East Bay, but since '73, when I first connected, I have stayed consistently involved with the Galería. I've been through lots of events here, been the wild girl, done it all here and had a good time. It's been sad times too...

Dolissa: Of course, what are your observations of the way the neighborhood has changed over the past 30-35 years?

Ester: In terms of how it's changed?

Dolissa: Yes.

Ester: Well, it's really changing in terms of gentrification, not only like the Anglos, but also the Chinese and Arab people. I mean there are a lot of changes, and I'm not necessarily putting that down. I know people are moving out, but there's lots of that are going on. I think for me there's a tension there because of these changes. For example, for me the billboard is like the real public face of art in terms of the power and the energy of the work that's being put out there in terms of the community and how they're affected by it and how they're responding to it. There's sort of a tension in the air I didn't

feel before. It was a lot narrower and more homogenous. Right now any time there are changes, it feels like a tension.

Dolissa: This is a hard question but over the years, what do you think was the greatest loss that we have suffered in the community.

Ester: Umm, the gravest loss...

Dolissa: Or the greatest gain...

Ester: The greatest gain; probably having the younger people involved and seeing that continued with Amalia Mesa-Bains, and all of the other energy that people put into the Galería. The Regeneration Program, to me, has been our biggest gain because at that point (when it was founded) a lot of us were sort of getting a little older and a lot of people were giving up their work and doing other things so that they could raise families. The arts are probably the worst occupation in terms of economically surviving. For me the greatest gain is seeing the young faces here and kind of knowing the ball is still rolling in terms of keeping the vision of the community alive and keeping the public face out there...

Dolissa: What were your thoughts when Regeneration first started, what were your observations about the art that was coming out of our generation and how it related to the work that your generation was doing?

Ester: Well, even now it's really interesting because I think people, especially this younger generation, has a lot more freedom and they're dealing with a lot of newer mediums that weren't necessarily around. I think the most cutting edge work that's coming out right now is performing arts stuff. Really, to me that's like really fresh and exciting but you know I think there's a lot more freedom. I mean the work that you are doing - congratulations on receiving this commission. (To the audience) She just received this big commission from the San Francisco Arts Program.

Ester: I see that before we were totally involved in sort of creating something and working really hard for the community and all that. I think it's still going on, but I think the younger generation (maybe I'm generalizing), but they seem to have a lot more freedom. Like your piece, the work that you are doing now would be interesting because it's not necessarily connected with the type of work that we were doing back in the seventies and all that real heavy political stuff...I would like it if you talked a little about the film because it's like totally out there...

Dolissa: Yeah well, it has a lot to do with my interest in San Francisco and the mythology. But it's basically about a bunch of dead white people. I feel as an artist I should have every right and freedom to do something about that...I mean I'm definitely interested in how people of color were impacted, but for those who haven't heard about it, it's looking at the 1906 San Francisco earthquake fire and I'm specifically interested that there was three days of fire and how it progressed through San Francisco and the way the fire department and the citizens fought the fire. I'm trying to dig up these human stories; like the Irish business that was on the corner of South Van Ness or, retell these stories. It's an experimental documentary so it's a lot of impressionistic imagery and just archival footage - a lot working with a lot of archival footage. There's a performative aspect, not where I'm

performing, but the exhibition of the film. We are going to project it onto a building that the fire department uses for the 100th anniversary for the San Francisco earthquake and fire. And, yea it's kind of weird I'll go to these history meetings and I'm usually like one of the youngest people there, or I'm one of the few brown faces there and people ask why are you interested in this? I kind of feel nice that I don't have the expectations; saying you should be making this or that kind of work, these are your identities, you need to make this kind of work. I feel that there's a lot more freedom and that prior to this a lot of my work had been more personal. And well, this really isn't like a personal piece. I'm actually trying to move away from that voice because although it's good to make personal pieces, there really is this other side to things that I'm interested in and it's looking at San Francisco history which kind of keeps in line with a lot of my earlier interests and stuff. But, you were really surprised, you were like this is totally different, but I also kind of feel like when I came into my own as realizing the history of the Chicano Civil Rights movement. This was something I really hadn't learned or gotten much about. I had taken some classes but it wasn't my experience in the sense that I'm of first generation middle class. We didn't grow up in the fields, that wasn't our experience and to say well, what does it mean to be Chicana identified? Or then you read Gloria Anzaldua and you're like wow, here's someone from south Texas, she's clear, she's had these experiences and again it's the way you come into the history of the movement. It was almost like user-friendly in terms of learning the history through the lens of women, or gay women. It was much more accessible to me versus this aspect of what other sides of the Chicano Civil Rights movement might have been from the male perspective. It was kind of cool to come into it in this way. I also lost my train of thought with what I was talking about.

Anyone who knows me knows that I'm kind of about that but in terms of the freedoms. That was a big discussion in Regeneration, was it post feminism, post queer civil rights, queer movement - you know what's going on with Chicano stuff right now is different than the *movimiento*. It's totally different today and how do I as this middle class (pretty much assimilated American kid) relate to this struggle. Because it's part of my struggle on a political level, but on a personal level, that's not my direct experience. But how can I be an ally of it, how can I be influenced, and how can my work honor that. I don't know but it seems like there's a lot more of a push for this notion of hybridity in terms of my generation.

Ester: I think on the other hand looking at the brochure announcing the different events that Galería is hosting one way or another, I think this is kind of a struggle that we all have as artists trying to find where we fit in and if we should always be doing heavy duty political stuff. Doing all of that versus doing things that are a little lighter and more open. But I say and I think you are like a really wonderful example, you're doing this work that's kind of more San Francisco but on the other hand, I see that you're doing this Mission Woman project. It's kind of a real balancing act, and I think that's really healthy. You are not all going to feel that you always have to hear from the younger generation kids the same thing that you're talking about. This feeling that they have to do this or that. I think if we all did a little bit if we all do a little something then it makes it better what ever that might be

Dolissa: Well the way that I figure to it's like no one's going to tell that story the way that it's told from my eyes. I'm curious to see how communities of color - which is almost impossible to find, there's almost no photographs of African Americans from the 1906 earthquake. So you're kind of looking for that because you are conscious of that. I

feel that you bring your own sensibility to whatever it is that you do and so in that sense that story is going to be told in a different way. It'll be told differently...

Ester: I think that I can remember a long time ago when Dolores Huerta came to an exhibit here at the Galería way back. She just said that she was emotional and touched by the work which covered all kinds of topics and all that. But she said that it was really important that we were out there doing this work because that for the most part, up until the Chicano Art Movement, that we were really invisible. And so again, it is up to us really to do what ever type of work and leave something behind. Leave some sort of trace because that's where we learn. We learn by what happened. You're looking for images. If there would have been a Chicano photographer or an African American photographer and maybe there were, but I think it's really important that we do all kinds of work. The reunion that I'm talking about that I went to, well I hadn't talked to some of my friends from the *barrio* in almost thirty-forty years. When I was there, well it was like totally segregated. I mean it was horrible except for the *barrio* crowd. Even then we kept our distance to some degree but I started talking to some of the women and men my age and I was telling them that they know they were telling me they were part of the historical society. I remember there were these old women who were the daughters of the pioneers crap, and I'm like what are you doing there?

And they said all those people died and we're like now in the 90s, the *Chicanos* and the Mexicanos are like 90% there. They took it over and I guess what they're putting in there now well they were really surprised that I asked them that because when I was there I would never have even considered, or even just gotten near the pioneer women. You know, dancing across the prairie and all that kinda of stuff. Their daughter's - that's a different story but nevertheless times have changed and I think again, especially in the rural areas, the Mexican and Latino community is growing by leaps and bounds. The future is really different. It's really going to be difficult. It's good, I think it's really an exciting time, and again I'm really happy to see you - a lot of people are out enjoying the sun and all that but nevertheless.

Dolissa: And you continue to be a critical part of that too. The nature of your history, the work that you did as a pioneer and as a pioneer *la otra* pioneer. But I actually wanted to ask you if just straight up, if people refer to you this way? But being honest, do you consider yourself a role model? If so what does that mean? What responsibilities come with that?

Ester: Well that's kind of the interesting thing I remember the first time I was called *señora* or the first time you get a gray hair. Things kind of like grow on you. It's like I think I've always been a teacher. I come from a long line of teachers, so I've always been open to that. I'm also a mother and a grandmother. I'm going to Japan to see my baby. Anyway what was I talking about?

Dolissa: Well if you would consider yourself a role model cause people use that word for you...?