

Interview with Gus Madrigal, 19 June 1986.

Allen: It's August, right?

Gus: August, buit everyone calls me Gus.

Allen; I know the feeling. And you have just retired becoming Professor Emeritus and are about ready to move to California.

Gus: On the third of July. On the tenth of July more or less.

Allen: Now, when did you first come to the University?

Gus: The first time I came was in, I believe it was in August of 1959, for an interview for a job, and Jim Jackson interviewed me in Milford Hall. The department was there at the time, the offices were, and there were studios on different parts of the campus. Dana Hall was under construction at the time in the fall and my classes were in the basement over in Carlson Library. I had two classes there and then I had a, not a student class, but an (?) class in a building that is was where this building is.

Allen: Stamford Hall.

Gus: I don't remember, but it was a large building. And let's see, there were classes in Milford Hall and the basement of the library and in Stamford Hall, as you say.

Allen: You said when you came the first time.

Gus: For the interview. Then I began teaching in September of '59.

Allen: And you've been here since then.

Gus: Yes.

Allen: Why did you stay so long?

Gus: Why did I stay so long? Because I loved it. I loved being near New York City and I like Fairfield County and also, because of a very, very important reason, because of the people who were formally with the department who had completed or were completing their master's degrees at Yale. And were studying, or had studied with Albers, and I had never met people in the arts who had studied with a master, and these people, Sybil Wilson, Jeanette Lam, John Day and then Bob Morris, Bob Julio, and on a part time basis there were Peter Knowlton and Julio (?), these were all Yale people, and they brought a quality of profes-

sionalism that I had never seen, that I had not sensed, and of course I had not taught at a university anyway, but even just as a student, I had never met people who were as professionally committed as these people, so it was very, very exciting for me to be here. I know when I took the job here, I thought I'd be here for two or three years and then go back to California where I came from, and that, but when I saw that this was a really learning situation, and a dynamic situation, and the department that was growing and developing, I just kept putting it off and then gradually I didn't think about it, I just assumed that this was where I was going to stay because things were happening, and, as I said it was the proximity to New York.

It also had the advantage because I wanted to develop as an artist, as a painter, go to the galleries and to the museums and to be abreast of everything that was going on, was very, very important, so really, after being here three or four years, I mean. I knew there was no mistake, that I wanted to stay here.

Allen: The, Jim mentions in his work, and you just mentioned Albers at Yale. What was his interest?

Gus: Great input, great influence in this department. As I said Our freshman students, to this day, continue taking a foundation program with drawing classes, and, but the most important classes, in my opinion that are still taught, are the interaction of color classes that Albers taught at Yale to all of these people. All the masters now, as well as undergraduate level, still teach that class at the University.

Allen: Inter-action of colors, you say.

Gus: Inter-action of colors. This is a course that Joseph Albers devised, because it has many series of colors and many books written, and I would say his great contribution to education was the simplification of the study of color. It was his approach to the study of color which was perceptual, not intellectual. It had systemitized color. There's a famous color system called a Munsell color system

Allen: How do you spell tht?

Gus: Munsell, and with that system, you organized color according to darkness and lightness, into brightness and dullness, and in Alber's course, you had certain problems that are designed to have you see what happens. If you put this color next to this color, there's no interact and then the student has to perceive this interaction, and the, after, well, let me just (?). There are a series of problems, approximately 15, and each problem is geared to have a student perceive something particular about the color, and then they're not involved with a right answer, because there's no right answer, it's just happening more or happening

less, quite a bit of perception, and this is a very important part of their basic education, because they go into graphic design or painting or any of the art forms, basically their decisions as a working are based on what they perceive happening on the canvas or on their design, so they begin, already in the Freshman year, thinking or understanding that they investigate, they perceive, and they investigate and they come to a certain decisions about what colors are going to do. Visual organization, sometimes called basic design, also has a series of problems are given where a student has to make decisions, organization decisions, based on what he perceived. So there's no right or wrong. There is more dynamic or less dynamic or more this or more that.

Allen: Would this be why I am completely ignorant of the techniques of painting and coloring and so forth, like a picture or do not like a picture?

Gus: No not necessarily. I think that when we like paintings, that is a very personal thing, but I think that we like paintings the way we like music. I think it's easier to respond to music because we've heard music since we were children, and where paintings are not that accessible. You have to go to museum or a gallery or books. Books are not the same as actually seeing a work of art, and it takes time to educate the eye, because all my life I've known highly educated and very cultivated people in, let's say music, literature and other art forms and, in fact, who are visually inexperienced. It has nothing to do with a lack of sensitivity or lack of intelligence, it simply has to do with a lack of visual experience. And also, interpreting a painting especially when there is no subject matter becomes a rather difficult to respond to because we are conditioned from a very early age to have paintings that tell stories. (?) but in music we don't need stories because we are accustomed to listening to music without words. It would never occur to you to say, I don't like that piece of music because it doesn't have words, I don't understand it. You respond to the organization of sounds and respond esthetically to that, and in paintings, it is the same thing, you remove the story or the words when you respond to the organization of shades of dark and light. But it's more than that, there is the sensitivity and special vision of the artist has to be in that work of art, otherwise, it is just a design. So for a person who doesn't have very much experience, it takes time to distinguish between the work that has poetic quality from the work of art.

Allen: Now you mention the words form and design. This brings to mind the old struggle on graphic design and industrial design. What's the story on that? There is a big argument politically and so forth and (?)

Gus: Esthetically.

Allen: Yes

Gus: You mean in this university?

Allen: Yes.

Gus: Yes, there always has been a, two different points of view.

Allen: What are they?

Gus: I would say that the point of view of the graphic designer, a graphic designer's preparation is based on the fine arts approach, as I just explained, foundations courses, and the graphic designer communicates an idea, a visual symbol, and he also puts together pamphlets and posters and things that give messages and designs, choosing typography. The typography is very important because the typography may relate to the content of the book so our students as graphic designers are taught relationships are very, very important, and, now, I'm less qualified to say that how the industrial design teaches but I can only say from my observation, they used to take the color class and the visual and organization class when I came to the University of Bridgeport, but then after a few years, they taught their own. I think that possibly, they may approach design or form, externally, for a look that maybe current, as opposed to coming to a solution because of esthetically, because of what comes from within the designer. It is real interesting. I think you would find it very interesting that if you go to the Museum of Modern Art and look at a design of furniture and the things that are used in industrial design, that the majority of those objects were designed by artists and not by industrial designers. Industrial designers are more commercial because we know what their forms of art are, things have to sell, and also these designs that are designed by artists tend to be very expensive so again, I think that the mass market almost demands that industrial design take a less care.

Allen: Has this anything to do with the fact that industrial design was under the control of engineering people?

Gus: No, I don't think so. I think that it had, when I first came to the university, you have one, you didn't have a college of Fine Arts, or anything like that, and our programs, like graphic design was under the College of Business Administration, Art Education, obviously the College of Education, and Industrial Design would have a home within Engineering rather than Business Administration.

Allen: Why did we split art up like this?

Gus: Well, at the very beginning, the art department, when I

came here, was administered by the Jr. College of Conn. And so when we offered the four year degrees, the Jr. College obviously couldn't do that, so we had to find colleges that would give four year degrees.

Allen: Why wouldn't it be in Arts and Sciences?

Gus: Sometimes, what was it in Arts and Sciences? Painting was under Arts and Sciences. But, as a matter of fact, Graphic Design eventually was, if I remember correctly, I think Jim's report could probably tell you better. I think that they were, no, because I remember that Dean Ropp and Eaton Read were the Deans of College of Business Administration and Arts and Sciences but I remember that Eaton Read, Sybil Wilson (?) until finally towards the goal of the department was to have a College of Fine Arts because then we would all be together and Industrial Design did not.

Allen: I'm trying to figure out why.

Gus: Because philosophically, they differed from us. They felt probably, that our program was not rigorous enough for their students, but we were more involved with having our students become professional and see relationships, and also they worked, graphic design students worked, in my opinion, just as hard as industrial design students, except that the industrial design department was very successful in creating a mystique about how hard it was to be an industrial design major, and yet undergraduates from our department have been in graphic design, this is where they devote, most of their areas are. Now, (?) the art director for Bloomingdales, is a graphic. We had very successful designers who are in Fairfield County, wonderful accounts, very, very successful, and also not dealing with K Mart, Caldor Accounts, but with very prestigious type of accounts. There's the difference, between a fine arts education and a commercial art.

Allen: I'm still fussing with this graphic design and industrial design bit. Would there be a question of personality involved in this argument?

Gus: Possibly, with Professor Redmann who is, as you know, a strong personality, and he has ideas about what industrial design should be and you can expect that program to be strongly guided by a strong personality. Personally, Bob Redmann has always been a pleasant person to deal with, but I never had to deal with him on a philosophical level. It has always been a casual area.

Allen: Would there probably be also the fact that they, industrial designers, are constantly in the top three or four industrial departments in the country?

Gus: You mean in the sense of rivalry because of that?

Allen: Being listed as the top three or four, gives them additional clout in any argument.

Gus: Well possibly, but, believe it or not, we never thought very much about that. I don't know why, but really because we were so secure about what we were doing, and I guess the clout that we had, was the success of our designers. In quality towards organization.

Allen: The reason I'm asking these questions and probing at it is that I have observed, as a faculty member, this rivalry and then when I became Dr. Miles's assistant, I saw it even more when he attempted to bring the two departments together unsuccessfully and I wanted to get your reactions to it.

Gus: You know, this year, one of our teachers taught drawing in industrial design, Peter Shier, so there's, I guess because of necessity, there's going to be some inter-action and also, Bob Redmann is not the chairman. He was a strong force behind it and I suppose that when a chairman has worked very hard to build a department, he is unusual. You know, being, I wasn't aware that he was, tht ID was one of the top three. They deal more, in the world of selling products, so it is very different from one of selling ideas, and when you tap into a Sears Roebuck, you're going to design all over the place, but Sears Roebuck is not Bloomingdale's.

Allen: I think you've made the point.

Gus: This is fine. I don't mean that industrial design as being successful with their students but the whole idea, for our university to urge students to do well.

Allen: In working on the history, i've run across some of the points of view that I have mentioned so far.

Gus: When you interview Jim Jackson, he will be able to work it out in detail, he knows much more about that. You know he founded the Industrial Design.

Allen: Oh, really.

Gus: Oh yes.

Allen: I didn't realize that, it didn't come through on this.

Gus: Oh yes, he founded it, he and Gordon Florian, a part time person, founded the Industrial Design Dept. So when you speak to Jim, get that information on how Bob Redmann came into the picture. It will be very interesting. In fact, I would like to

know a little more about it. We never seemed to have time to discuss it at length.

Allen: What other activities have you taken part in in the university?

Gus: In the university itself?

Allen: Yes.

Gus: Well, I've been on committees and I've concentrated on my painting, and when I first came to the university, I came to teach. I came from Teacher's College at Columbia. I came to teach art education classes which were just developing and I began to supervise, I think there was only one student and when I was working for a doctorate of education degree at Teacher's College, I'd been there three years, but when I came and I met the people from Yale, I realized, well, I knew all along, that what I wanted was to be a painter. And, I guess it was the third year that I was here, I don't remember, I was to have a reduced load so that I could write the project, and the project was to set up the art exhibit. And then, I realized, after two years of meeting these people who were very, very successful that they were doing what I wanted to do. And with their approval, I made the decision to stop getting the degree. And I wrote a letter to Jim Jackson, telling him that I was not going, that I was stopping the degree program, because I would be locked in to teacher preparation, which is fine, except it wasn't for me. It was not really my interest. And I wrote him a letter resigning from my position as the coordinator of art education. And I would like to go the fine arts area. If there were not a position, a full time position in the fine arts area, then I would be willing to go on part time until there was a full time position open. And Peter Schier had come in at that time, and so, I forget exactly, I think that I was going to concentrate on one part of, that Jim Jackson could clarify this better, because he has a very, very sure memory for this sort of thing. Whether I was going to be in elementary and he was going to be in secondary, visa versa, I don't know. But anyway, when I made that decision, well then Peter, became the art education specialist. And then Jack O'Hara came in. Then I moved into the fine arts. So I didn't have to go part time. I was ready to go on a part time basis. But I knew what I was doing, because I knew I was taking a path, because I knew I did not want to do art education. I wish I could find the letter. Jim and I were talking about this the other day. And I told him that I was making my bed and I was ready to sleep in it.

Allen: Have you, other than committees, been active in other parts of the University?

Gus: No.

Allen: Any reason why?

Gus: Well, I have been very busy with my own work, but also, working, I have shown quite a bit, especially in the late 50s and 70s, when I organized a show in Madrid, I was having considerable success. That took a lot of time and energy. It was a very interesting period for me, was that I could work to 1 to 3 o'clock in the morning and come to class at 9 o'clock, that I would be, I was a better teacher, and in those days, I was teaching 4 days a week, staying up to 1 or 2 in the morning, and on Saturdays of course, But I can't do it now. But it was wonderful.

Allen: How did your painting change over the years?

Gus: Well, basically it has not changed in that I work in geometrics, maybe architectural would be better, Somewhat Architectural, And then within these architectural forms, I formerly, when I worked exclusively with water colors, I had spontaneous free forms, within circles or ovals, and created a feeling of movement within sectors. So that you might say, It was dealing with optics, It was something that was cerebral. It was something that was more (?). And then when I started to work with oils, I continued to do that, until I went to, no maybe it was before, No, it was on my sabbatical when I was in California in 1981, The first sabbatical I was in Madrid. That was when the water color paintings were really going strong. And then the second sabbatical, I stayed in California, and then the last stage, substituted the organic forms that were clearly non representational, and instead of using the free forms, I used (?). But still I am basically working with optics, but they are less cerebral, and more organic.

Allen: (?) outside of the art Dept?

GUS: Of course I spent so much time in my studio, I didn't really get to know, I always have liked, the Du Ponts. Very intelligent and she is also has a personal quality that I admire. Lets see who else?

Allen: Any administrators?

Gus: Well, (?) Dr. Littlefield, as you know, I always liked him. He was very friendly to me, always. I may have told you about the very first time that I met him? In that August when I came from New York, I had never heard of this place. And after meeting Jackson, Dr. Littlefield was the vice president, so I went to see him in Cortright Hall. He Opened the door with a big smile, that he always had. He asked me to come in and sit down. Now Madrigal, doesn't that mean something? He looked it up in the dictionary, it was a musical form in the 15th century, etc. I

never forgot that. It was a wonderful thing for him to do. It put me at ease. And then when I gave the address for the, when I got the award, Henry W. Littlefield Professorship, From the Dana Foundation, I spoke about this. But other than that, no I didn't know many.

Allen: I usually conclude with a couple of thought questions which don't always work out. What was your greatest success at the University?

GUS: My greatest success? I would think communicating with students. Now that I am leaving, I feel very good about that. And helping them to open the doors.

Allen: Any failures?

Gus: Do I have to tell you? I don't know. I really, really don't.

Allen: perfectly alright.

Gus: Someone else can tell you better than I can.

Allen: Unless there is something else, that you wish to add, this had been very interesting and you have helped in describing some of the programs that we have had. I deeply appreciate your help, especially the Albers role.

Gus: You know that he was a visiting Dorne Professor?

Allen: Yes. OK we will conclude this interview.

End of tape.

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