

# THE BODY AS AN ARCHIVE

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VISUAL AIDS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript: José Luis Cortés + Eric Rhein

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**[00:00:23.850] - Eric**

José, I'm, I'm really delighted that you came from Puerto Rico to be here in my studio for this conversation, and particularly meaningful that we go back to 1995 and the First Ten exhibition of Visual AIDS. Actually, can you speak about the First Ten exhibition?

**[00:00:47.550] - José**

Well, thank you for welcoming here and for suggesting that I come to New York. The First Ten was the first show for the Archive Project, and it was the first ten artists that were documented by the Archive Project, which was done for--they started to found, David Hirsh and...

**[00:01:20.470] - Eric**

Frank Moore?

**[00:01:21.310] - José**

Frank Moore. They started to look at artwork that was being thrown out on the street as garbage art. And it was like, okay, artists that were dying. And that's when they come up with a concept for Visual AIDS for Archive Project. Visual AIDS was before.

**[00:01:38.400] - Eric**

When you and I first started talking about your coming here to New York for this conversation, I didn't realize that you actually were involved with Visual AIDS' conception of the archive. And we have a similar history with David Hirsh, who wrote about my work for the New York Native and your work as well.

**[00:02:00.710] - José**

Yeah, he was...the way I was, they had a press conference to launch The Archive Project at the Met on the steps. And Mauricio Lafitte told me, you need to be there because all the HIV art and it was going to be like community building. So I was there. I remember when...It was beautiful. And yeah, one point, all the artists stand and take press, started taking pictures, and then we got down. You were there, John Docto. And then I saw William showing off his tattoo with his HIV positive tattoo. And the press were crazy. They were like, all taking pictures. I was like, oh, wait, I got to meet him.

**[00:02:58.010] - Eric**

He was a very striking young man.

**[00:02:59.770] - José**

Yeah. With long hair. I said wait. So then after New York One interviewed me, it was good. And then...so I kind of approached William, and we ended up hooking up. So we had a hookup, and then he called David

Hirsh, and then I met David Hirsh, and then this happened. So I remember his beautiful work, the self-portrait. It was like, wow. I was really impressed.

**[00:03:42.790] - Eric**

William died, I forgot when, but not actually so many years ago now. And so that leaves you, me, and Rick Martinez as the only surviving artist from the First Ten. Rick Martinez is this guy right here.

**[00:04:01.120] - José**

Oh, wow.

**[00:04:02.080] - Eric**

He actually ended up being a therapist of mine through the Actors Fund.

**[00:04:06.670] - José**

Oh, my God.

**[00:04:17.330] - Eric**

I'm interested in knowing, before we continue through the path of our--long path, because I'm 60. How old are you?

**[00:04:24.380] - José**

60.

**[00:04:25.270] - Eric**

So I'm curious about, really what you were like as a little boy, this little photograph of you and your mother is really very precious.

**[00:04:31.510] - José**

Yeah. Just before we moved to Puerto Rico, because my mother and father, they met in New York, so they lived in a, it was a Polish neighborhood, and then I remember Puerto Ricans started moving in. So they met in a dance. They got married. My father had he worked in a furniture store and then he...so my mother was, she was an orphan. Yeah. At twelve. She had like seven brothers and sisters. She was the oldest, so her aunt sent for her and she went to New York and she learned English and she went to beauty school. She wanted to be a model, but they didn't let her. The uncle said, if you're here you can't. Under this roof, you can't.

**[00:05:37.850] - Eric**

Like, my mother and my relationship was extremely significant in not only the course of my childhood, but really helping me to survive. You shared that your mother's relationship to you has been really incredible.

**[00:05:51.850] - José**

Yeah.

**[00:05:55.810] - Eric**

Were you creative as a little boy?

**[00:05:57.970] - José**

Actually... So then they met, they got married and they had three kids. I was the middle one when I was three. It was around this time we moved to Puerto Rico. My father wanted to build his own furniture store. So my memories from Philly is watching on TV, Mary Poppins and The Sound Of Music. And I have a dream of looking something, I left something behind in Philly. So when I was in Puerto Rico, I had a recurrent nightmare. It was something that was stuck between the wall and the floor. And then in Puerto Rico, we lived in those row houses, like suburbia. And it was new, so the house, it was newer built and some of it was like...So we moved there. I was in Carolina, the store was in San Juan, and we went to private school. My mother was very protective. She would pick us up in lunchtime to come home, have lunch in an hour and take us back. Because--the first time I took a bus, she was riding the car behind the bus. I could see her, me and my friend, and she's like making sure we arrived to our destination.

**[00:07:24.590] - Eric**

So forwarding to your coming to New York, that must have been quite something for her.

**[00:07:33.570] - José**

She's like, eh...I don't know how to say it..."estar curada de espanto." That means nothing shocks her.

**[00:07:37.570] - Eric**

Okay.

**[00:07:38.530] - José**

I'm sure she...she says she needs my laugh. That's all she needs.

**[00:07:44.920] - Eric**

So things have evolved since you were a boy?

**[00:07:47.460] - José**

Yeah. So then...

**[00:07:51.190] - Eric**

Your coming to New York? When was that?

**[00:07:52.630] - José**

Yeah. I was 28 and I had a boyfriend, Ruben. He was Dominican and he was staying in Puerto Rico. He was studying. He had a doctorate degree on radio, type of x-rays and stuff. So we met and he was like bisexual and very macho.

**[00:08:22.810] - Eric**

He was American?

**[00:08:23.840] - José**

Dominican. He was like about my age. I was 28. So I met him and we had sex, unprotected sex. And then that kind of shocked him a little bit because he was a doctor. And this was like, I was 28. That's about the time. So he asked me to get my test. So I got tested. We never kissed again because he didn't want to. All I could do was oral sex with a condom and no kissing.

**[00:09:08.910] - Eric**

This is after you found out that you were positive.

**[00:09:10.450] - José**

This is the first thing, the first rule. My diagnosis like, oh, we can stay together, but this and this. And it was like, it worked. Like, I was sad. And we went to see Pretty Woman and you know, Julia Roberts, she don't kiss the clients, but she kissed...Tom Cruise?

**[00:09:32.900] - Eric**

Richard Gere.

**[00:09:33.510] - José**

Richard Gere. And I remember I couldn't kiss my man anymore. I started crying as he was sitting here. I remember crying through my left eye. So then a friend of mine, most of my friends had left to New York because they were that time that they wanted to live in the big city. And I had come to New York for

vacation a few times. And I loved it. It was a little bit...I'm glad I didn't stay that time, but well, I visited many times, but I was scared of living in New York because it was conducive, could be bad for me. Yeah. My friend, my first lover, when I was 16, he said that he had the network that I could move to New York, and he had everything I needed to do to get on the system. Because if I got ill, I needed a backup support from the government, from everybody. So if I waited to get sick to ask for help...so we kind of like, played the system a little bit because I was healthy. So there was like three symptoms that you couldn't prove. One was sweats, night sweats, diarrhea and exhaustion.

**[00:11:10.210] - José**

So we were instructed to tell these things to our worker. This is like a long time ago I think I'm not liable for this.

**[00:11:21.690] - Eric**

It's, I mean, it's survival.

**[00:11:22.610] - José**

Yeah, I never told this.

**[00:11:26.650] - Eric**

I think this is a safe place to tell it. It's also to me, it's a vital part of our history.

**[00:11:32.220] - José**

Yeah. So it was like we had the Puerto Rican Mafia. I walked in and my friend comes to say hello. I'm like, I need a chart. I know what I'm going to say. And then I got a check for...A back check and everything. I don't remember very well, but yeah, I had that. And then I got in the system and I stopped. My apartment in Harlem in front, the park, the Cloisters and all that, it was across St. Nicholas, was beautiful. And then that's where David Hirsh came. That was the first photo shoot. And that was when this happened.

**[00:12:19.970] - Eric**

For the shoot, to take pictures of your artwork.

**[00:12:22.370] - José**

And then El Museo del Barrio they went looking, they had the first biennale, which is called X Files. And they went to the archives to look up Puerto Rican artists. They wanted to be inclusive. And they selected me and Luis Carlos for this big show.

**[00:12:40.530] - Eric**

At the Museo del Barrio?

**[00:12:41.330] - José**

Yeah Museo del barrio. So then I had to write my first statement. And I remember I had this boyfriend. His name escapes. He was assistant of Louise Bourgeois. He was assistant of the assistant, told me stories. He helped me prepare for the Museo del Barrio.

**[00:13:07.870] - Eric**

Writing is so much a part of your work, actually, it's interesting for you to talk about.

**[00:13:12.880] - José**

Yeah. So I painted, I've been painting for 30 years on newspaper. At one point, I got hurt in my shoulder, so I don't know if you're going...When my right arm failed me, my left arm helped me to become a writer.

**[00:13:38.270] - Eric**

Oh, yeah.

**[00:13:39.350] - José**

Because I would type and the first personal piece of writing, it was for Visual AIDS. I remember Ted Terr?

**[00:13:50.970] - Constantine**

Kerr.

**[00:13:51.790] - José**

Kerr. What's his name?

**[00:13:55.000] - Constantine**

Ted Kerr

**[00:13:56.650] - Eric**

Oh Ted Kerr?

**[00:13:58.210] - José**

Is "Terr," no?

**[00:14:02.490] - Eric**

Ted Kerr. Theodore Kerr.

**[00:14:07.230] - José**

Yeah. He was the project manager. Maybe I'm using his name in instagram. And everybody has a different name. Instagram.

**[00:14:20.610] - Eric**

He was responsible for you doing the web gallery.

**[00:14:22.980] - José**

He was so helpful. He was so helpful because I was going through a deep depression. And that's when I moved to Puerto Rico because I had nervous breakdown in New York after like, 30 years. So I got in the hospital. I had a nervous breakdown. When I left, I had a plane ticket. I went to Puerto Rico, I got better. Then we came pick up my stuff and left.

**[00:14:46.940] - Eric**

Do you remember what year that was?

**[00:14:49.050] - José**

I'm very bad with years. This is like around ten years ago. Yeah. I lived 25 years in New York. So they had the web gallery. I asked Ted if I could curate what was the things you need to do to curate? And he said, yeah, it's doable. And just send me a short paragraph and a title. And I was, like, coming out my depression, which I was like, four years in Puerto Rico, very bad. So I was coming out and then I said I wanted to curate a show. This is the statement that goes, the show was called It Feels Like Drugs, but...It Feels like Love, But It's The Drugs. I was in Germany and I was kissing with this German beautiful man. He looked like a punk Robert De Niro. We were kissing and there were people around and he whispered in my ear and he said, "It feels like love, but it's the drugs." I was like, I got upset. I'm like, why you have to ruin it? I'm aware of this. We were on ecstasy. So I said, that's a good title. And I wanted always to do something with that phrase. That was the name of the show.

**[00:16:06.180] - José**

All the art had to do with like, it was almost like it was about me. The statement was about--Ted said, don't worry, there's no rules. You don't have to.



**[00:16:17.820] - Eric**

I printed it out, actually, too.

**[00:16:20.120] - José**

The article? The statement. Yeah. I'm just going to read the first sentence. "At 15, I realized what I like sexually. I met this very good looking Canadian who picked me up and took me to his hotel room. We began to have sex. He slapped me on the face, took me from behind while pulling my hair. When it was all over, I, knees shaking, felt exhilarated, fulfilled, happy. From then I developed a fixation with rough sex, being dominated and one-night stands. Hardly ever dated. I've been promiscuous ever since. I won't live in my life this way. Pain, pleasure, sex, beauty, drugs and love have always been intertwined within my essence."

**[00:17:01.910] - José**

So this is an object. Like my best friend, he committed suicide a few years ago. So in the pandemic, I tear most of my like half of my sketchbooks and I make pieces.

**[00:17:23.390] - Eric**

They're beautiful. Really beautiful objects, José.

**[00:17:24.760] - José**

Yeah. So this is his handwritten, he was helping me edit my article, this. So this is hand, right? This is what I have. I think it's like...

**[00:17:39.650] - Eric**

It's okay.

**[00:17:42.770] - José**

It's rough.

**[00:17:51.510] - Eric**

The way that you've mounted these on pieces of wood really goes along with the emotion that is involved with how you write and how you...Composition.

**[00:18:00.130] - José**

And then I use water and then I use dirty water paint to make it look like even older. It's a painting.

**[00:18:11.550] - Eric**

Some kind of secret scripts that have been in the mountain.

**[00:18:15.770] - José**

Yeah, that's what they got. It's like that book..Anyway, yeah. So I got like a year worth of worth of this type. And it's like, precious to me. Sometimes I have poems that I use and I lost them because they're like, glue and backwards.

**[00:18:37.350] - Eric**

Did you want to read something from that?

**[00:18:39.340] - José**

No, you don't need to. How much? No, this is this is what I just read. We were like 8 hours editing this.

**[00:18:49.620] - Eric**

So you're using this as it and then reinterpreting them with these objects that you've made.

**[00:18:55.000] - José**

This object is about him, about Nelson. So this is like, it's called Homage to Nelson. So I have these things here. I'm going to talk about it. So I want to show you. When I came to New York, I came for vacation for a show, OPR that Luis Carlet built with Reyes, Meléndez, and Mauricio, Lafinter and bunch of kids. So it was for Puerto Rican artists. And we had a show and I came. It was really good. I think it was my second show. I had self-portraits, the Blue Boy. And I met Juan. You met him?

**[00:19:50.590] - Eric**

No, I don't think so.

**[00:19:51.280] - José**

Do you know about him?

**[00:19:52.340] - Eric**

No.

**[00:19:52.910] - José**

He was Keith Haring's lover for like...His last lover. And he's beautiful. They met in Danceteria or no, in the Paris Garage. They met there. He was dancing and people said, he asked him to dance, and they said, you know, you know who you dancing with. He's not bothered. He played like he didn't care about shit. They ended up being lovers. So he knew what he was doing. He got AIDS. He got HIV. Keith died. I think they have been broke up. Keith foundation used to take care of him in a way.

**[00:20:46.960] - José**

Would give him \$500 a month.

**[00:20:52.270] - Eric**

You mentioning Paradise Garage reminds me of how much performance has been a vital part of your own expression of yourself and painting and cloths and using your own body.

**[00:21:03.640] - José**

Yeah, there's some pictures I brought. I'll show you later.

**[00:21:09.560] - Eric**

Great.

**[00:21:10.090] - José**

And it's Ivan Terrible.

**[00:21:14.630] - Eric**

That's your identity?

**[00:21:16.320] - José**

Yeah. I was a stripper in Eros theater. I was maybe like 30. And my name was Ivan, my stage name, because there was a kid in school that I was in love with throughout elementary and high school. He was blonde, he was son of an American. So I'm dancing and you have to get naked. You should have like a hard-on and stuff. And then you walk down this, Giuliani was on... he was the mayor. So everything was changing. And we couldn't do certain things that were done before. There was prostitution on the side and when I came there was more there. So I was dancing. He always will announce me now, Ivan, and the curtains will open, smoke and I will come and leather or I will play the Puerto Rican stereotype I had boxers or something like that. It worked. I stayed there like full on a year. So one day before I go on stage, "Now with you, Ivan the Terrible," and I'm like oh, I like that.

**[00:22:39.090] - Eric**

You like it.

**[00:22:39.920] - José**

I love it. So then I have notes that I wanted Ivan to be a performer. I have notes of that, old notes, like when I wasn't performing.

**[00:22:51.830] - Eric**

So was it like filling in a history of him? Your notes were about filling in a history of Ivan?

**[00:22:59.400] - José**

No, like, I remember as soon as he said Ivan Terrible, I came home that night and I wrote the name and I said that I want him to...Something about that Ivan was going to be the performer.

**[00:23:12.370] - Eric**

Your identity as a performer.

**[00:23:13.560] - José**

Yeah. So it's written before it happened.

**[00:23:15.620] - Eric**

I see.

**[00:23:21.820] - Eric**

So was Ivan the persona that you did at Pork as well?

**[00:23:27.040] - José**

Yeah, I didn't have the name yet. It was about time. At that time, I'm not very clear. I remember his name. He's a dancer. He passed away, his name escapes.

**[00:23:59.690] - Eric**

So you were saying that there was a dancer that was particularly significant in this part of your life.

**[00:24:06.460] - José**

Yeah, we started dating a little bit. I remember he wrote notebook of poems about me. And he had a loft. He lived on a building in Harlem that was a fire station. So the loft was awesome. High ceilings and the roof. So he'd do projects there. And then he invited me to have my art for the next party and do a performance. I'm like performance?

**[00:24:34.840] - Constantine**

Mauricio?

**[00:24:36.060] - José**

No, the dancer.

**[00:24:39.890] - Eric**

So before that, you hadn't...

**[00:24:42.550] - José**

Before Pork.

**[00:24:43.490] - Eric**

This is what encouraged you to.

**[00:24:45.110] - José**

Yeah.

**[00:24:46.010] - José**

Or maybe Pork was going on at the time, but I wasn't painting my face. This is the first time I painted my face.

**[00:24:50.890] - Eric**

At this party.

**[00:24:53.540] - José**

Yeah. Because I had to do a performance. So I said, what am I going to do? So I had the idea of painting myself like my work in black and white work. Like the catalog you printed?

**[00:25:07.730] - Eric**

Yes.

**[00:25:11.230] - José**

Like the tattoos. Yeah. You see, I used to work like this, so it's black and white. So I said, oh, well, I'm going to paint my face to look like my paintings. And eventually later, I'm going to show you I have some, actually, paintings of me painted.

**[00:25:30.370] - Eric**

You got it on your arms here.

**[00:25:31.730] - José**

Yeah.

**[00:25:32.120] - Eric**

I was curious about how that evolved.

**[00:25:38.630] - José**

I was invited to this performance.

**[00:25:41.610] - Eric**

Nice arm.

**[00:25:44.730] - José**

Skinny. So I said, oh, I'm going to paint my face. Actually, I'm going to do it. So I took some pictures. I took it to 1 hour, developed, came back. I had the backdrop of my art, so it was kind of merging with my art. So I said, oh, it works. It looks good. I can present this. So then I went there, and I hung a big painting, 10ft by 10ft square of the grid, living in the grid. It's newspaper. Newspaper only like, I paste newspaper together. And it became actually, Mauricio sent me that piece of newspaper on the mail. He sent it fold. And that was my first big work. Oh, I could glue it together. He kind of was very helpful, but he made me think bigger.

**[00:26:37.590] - Eric**

Do you remember what the newspaper was actually saying?

**[00:26:40.410] - José**

Actually, I don't remember, though I think maybe it was a little bit conscious. I don't know how he picked it. I know how I picked the newspaper. I have pictures, and then I put pictures here. A stack of pictures, stack of newspapers, color newspaper mostly. And then a picture and a newspaper will scream out like "us, us!" And then I start making the newspaper. And that works for that photograph. And that's the color. I don't use color. My color is in the newspaper.

**[00:27:21.350] - Eric**

The color that's in the ink of the newsprint bleeds through.

**[00:27:24.960] - José**

No, you don't bleed through. I paint around it.

**[00:27:27.130] - Eric**

I see.

**[00:27:27.610] - José**

Yeah. So he invites me. I put my work up, and then I bring the painting. And it's such a high ceiling, so I use fish wire. And the painting is flowing to the floor. It's just right in the, so it's like a curtain. So I sit on the floor with a broken glass, and I start painting my face in silence until here, on the floor, sitting down, the Polaroids are on there. And then I go up the chair, the floor. And I have a chair behind the painting. And I had a box cutter in my hand, in my pocket. So I get on the chair, and then I cut one of the faces on the big painting because it's paintings. So I cut the top square, and I stick my face painted. And I just stayed like that. Wow. It was like nothing ever like that. They were like, gasps. It never happened again. It was my first performance. I was shaking.

**[00:28:38.850] - Eric**

Incredible.

**[00:28:40.010] - José**

Yeah, because I could never do that performance again. Now I have the painting like glue. I could put it...I've done reenactments of it, but it's never the same. When I cut the piece, I was like, so yeah, that's when I got hooked with performance. I started doing it at Pork. So yeah, then...

**[00:29:10.650] - Eric**

I'm curious because a lot of how we live our lives and how we...We manifest our work in very different ways, but we have a very, we have a real kinship to our relationship, to how vital our artwork is to

ourselves and our identity, our being HIV-positive, how we process being in the world. So your describing that first performance and painting, to me, really strikes that chord that you are your art. Your art is you, and your way of expressing what you want to contribute to society is through that.

**[00:29:45.510] - José**

Yeah. It's almost like, I'm glad you mentioned that cause, I know you also the same way. Sometimes there's no, like, a clear line that divides the artist from me. It could be dangerous.

**[00:30:15.730] - Eric**

I've experienced some mental vulnerability myself, but also even as a child, and so I was very connected with art being an expression of myself. So there's an interconnectedness to creativity, mental vulnerability, sexuality, and all of these things can mesh together. So it's a bit of a bind kind of tightrope we walk sometimes to see. The best art can come out of those extremes, but of course if we tip over, it does become dangerous. It can become dangerous. We want to function in the world at the same time we want to enjoy these heights.

**[00:31:02.140] - José**

Like somebody said, I'm barely functioning. No, I'm doing good, I'm doing good.

**[00:31:09.650] - Eric**

Well, what is functioning?

**[00:31:11.570] - José**

Yeah.

**[00:31:17.510] - Eric**

The times that I've been the most vulnerable and potentially on an edge where somebody, a doctor or some scientific classification might use a terminology to say, you're bipolar, you're this, and in reality, I feel like I have gone into some heightened sense of reality that has contributed greatly to what I am.

**[00:31:42.110] - José**

What they call my "diagnosis" is...But I feel the same thing at 60 with a borderline personality disorder. But basically it's high intensity, intense feelings, intense, everything. I'm very happy, very sad, very angry, very depressed, very down, very...So all my life, if I wasn't like, that's why my work is intense, because I have intense, all the time intense feelings.



**[00:32:24.570] - Eric**

Can they switch quickly?

**[00:32:26.440] - José**

Like, I could cry and then I could laugh a second. I'm talking to you, I'm crying and then I start laughing.

**[00:32:36.270] - Eric**

Do you have any sense of yourself as being more this way in relationship to your being positive and your health history and your survivorship? I mean, it's hard to know whether or not I would have been this way if I had not been positive.

**[00:32:51.430] - José**

Yeah, it's like the mind is something they cannot do a test, so it's not like they can check your blood, tell you they figure out what you're telling. And sometimes I tell I'm saying I need a diagnosis because I've been trying to figure out my life and you're the professional. And then they, like, all agreed I was borderline, but I had to ask for the diagnosis. I got ill. I moved to Puerto Rico.

**[00:33:27.390] - Eric**

Roughly ten years ago.

**[00:33:28.780] - José**

Yeah, my mother, she went back to New York. My mother, we packed everything because she was very protective. And I just came out from the hospital. I was doing good, but I could like...

**[00:33:44.610] - Eric**

You needed support?

**[00:33:45.750] - José**

Yeah, I could have got lost again. So she came, we packed everything. I would be panicked that I was going to have to throw my art away. And I was like, in the hospital, I'm like, oh, my art, my art. And they call it psychotic, psychotic episode. I don't have psychotic episode.

**[00:34:06.250] - Eric**

But that's like a prime example of a doctor's diagnosis of artist is kind of like psychotic.

**[00:34:14.570] - José**

Really? My art, I'm freaking out, I'm going to lose it. Maybe I was sick. So my mother said, oh, you need some boxes and put it in boxes.

**[00:34:25.790] - Eric**

So your mother knew you more than the doctor?

**[00:34:28.330] - José**

Yeah, she was the one who diagnosed me first. She said I was like twelve. And she said, if you don't have a problem, you find one. And then that's one of the symptoms. And then I took the doctor, I said, Were you sure? Once they told me I wanted to make sure, he said your mother told you when you were twelve. I'm like, okay, so it's official. So I come to Puerto Rico. I was four years depressed, like horrible. I wasn't painting. The only time I stopped making art, I was like doing all the time, shaking like that. If I go out, I'm like in the office, my sister, my nieces will hold my feet because I was always shaking my feet. Horrible. So my mother, she said, why don't you paint? So I said okay. So I pull out a newspaper, I'm watching TV and it's not coming out. He said, turn the TV off. I'm like, no, I always paint with the TV on. I always did. That was part of what will get me there. I said, well, you could turn it off. You could paint with it off, it's not like necessary.

**[00:35:57.950] - José**

So I turned it off and it worked. And then I came out with a piece that I could post. It was my first post on Facebook. It wasn't like the best painting, but it got me out of the hole I was in. And then it was a museum in town in Carolina called Escuté, la Casa Escuté, it was big. And then she said, why don't you go we have been there just looking at art. And she said, why don't you go and ask for a show? And I'm like, so I get on the bus. She didn't take me there. She had me take the bus because she said, you need to make this yourself. You got to hustle this, I'm not gonna baby you so I got on the bus and I'm waiting in the Plaza, like freaking out, all nervous. So then I had a meeting with the guy that was going to say yes or no on the table. And I got it together for the meeting. I had a date. I had a show.

**[00:37:08.220] - Eric**

Actually I remember you sharing this with me when this was happening.

**[00:37:12.020] - José**

Yeah.

**[00:37:12.500] - Eric**

Sent me notes about it.

**[00:37:13.610] - José**

It was great. And it was called Concreto. Concrete, concrete, material, cement. It was all paintings of cityscape. Mostly in Berlin, in New York, Puerto Rico. So I divided the room, international room. I forgot the Puerto Rico. Yeah, it was divided by different...One was Ivan. One was...I did a sculpture because in Puerto Rico where the economy and stuff is...So they see a lot of houses that they tried to build a second story. So the first thing you need to do some pillars with iron. What do you call that? The iron? Steel? So then you see a lot of houses that they never built anything. And then all they have is the little column with the steel hanging up. And it stays like that years and years and years. They want to build the second story, but it's left like that. So I did a sculpture. My neighbor, actually, he kind of like did it because he knew cement. So he built the wood. And then I helped mix a little bit. Rocks and cement. And then we put it there and I put the four wires and they dry. And then we took the wood and it's an homage to the Puerto Rican...

**[00:39:00.810] - José**

The lack.

**[00:39:04.570] - Eric**

What do you mean the lack?

**[00:39:06.490] - José**

Necessity. And it's almost like, we're like the last colony. And sometimes I hate the US. Government because what they've done to my country, which they name a territory, they made into a territory that's pretty bad, so like we went on a really big debt, like bankrupt and that's due to corruption in Puerto Rico. The politics, it's not only the US. Government, it's the government in general, the Puerto Rican government too. So we went into this like billionaire billion billions worth of debt. And so when like...You remember like I don't know, you remember when Greece went bankrupt? So as a country they could get help from the international community. And they got through it. We couldn't because we are territory.

**[00:40:35.190] - Eric**

So your being a territory keeps you in this sort of weaker state of being.

**[00:40:42.970] - José**

Yeah, cause we don't vote for the president. I'm a U.S. Citizen. I was born in the States, but even though I was born in Puerto Rico, I'm a U.S. Citizen since 1950s. We got the citizenship. So it's kind of like a second class citizenship. Actually, it is second class citizenship because if you don't have voice in the Senate, we have a representative with no voice. She just can't be there. She got no vote. She can talk with no vote. It's a woman now. So there's the Jones Act. This is like a law. Anything that comes from Puerto Rico, like if we get tomatoes from Italy or it's Italian sauce for a restaurant, needs to come to New York. Can't go directly to Puerto Rico. Needs to come to New York. Then it needs to get off the ship into an American ship. And then the American ship bring it. So who pays for that? We do. Why can't the ship

go, we're on the way. Why are you greedy? So even in the hurricane, they will bypass that. And we were like messed up. And FEMA don't work for us because most of the people that lost houses, they don't have contracts.

**[00:42:12.650] - José**

They don't have paperwork. And then FEMA cannot help them because it don't fit into their template. So they live with like, blue tarps still, maybe, I don't think now, but for years. And a bunch of artists use their tarp, blue tarp, like in the rainforest, in the river, in the rocks, like made part of the rock there's how many blue tarps there was. That's what they gave them, blue tarps. I don't know. Finally somebody came. They hold the money for many years because of the corruption. So it's almost like...When the bankruptcy came, they established La Junta de Control Fiscal. I got the translation for that. Yeah. One moment, I have it just for this. I'm going to take a second to look at the translation. Yeah, it must be here. They established, Obama established, it's called La Junta de Control Fiscal. Fiscal. He named nine people for that. It's like a fiscal, like they're going to look over the financial.

**[00:44:11.660] - Eric**

Fiscal.

**[00:44:12.340] - José**

Yeah, fiscal. And they're looking over the Puerto Rican finances. So they got more power than the government. So even now it's worse. We don't elect who take charge. So instead of, you know what they did? They closed 400 schools and now they're selling everybody, it's like...

**[00:44:36.760] - José**

They have a law that, incentive for Americans or international, I'm not sure, 60, Law 60. So a lot of Americans are coming and it's almost like we feel very angry. I'm trying not to feel that because I was going through the ocean and I couldn't enjoy it. That's only affected in me. So I said, I'm going to be more proactive. Instead of hating, I'm going to proactively support the Puerto Rican businesses. That's the best thing I can do. That's what's going on in Puerto Rico. It's pretty bad. We kicked out one of the governors, Ricky Renuncia and Bad Bunny and Ricky Martin were like there. And it was so massive, I wrote, I did like a piece, I wrote "death penalty for those who rob the riches of a people" in Spanish. And then I was in the march like that. Bad Bunny said puñeta! Puñeta! Puñeta! That's like some curse word. And I said, wow, some discourse. But it worked. It got him out and he had to renounce. It was twelve days of protest. It was beautiful. So, yeah.

**[00:46:25.800] - Eric**

Hearing you speak about well, whenever you speak, there's a video that I really love of yours, The Floor. It's very expressive to me of an artist's life and everything we think about and our work, our paintings, our sculpture, the ephemera, the newspapers, things that we read. And in your case, all of these materials relating to your life are spread out on the floor in this little apartment. And then you're walking periodically

you see your feet, like gesturing and the sense of beauty and overwhelm at the same time is just really spoke to me.

**[00:47:09.070] - José**

Yeah. Yeah, it's the beginning of the lockdown. So everybody was doing things on the Internet, and that was the way you could feel something. So I wanted to do something good.

**[00:47:22.940] - José**

Because it was like...

**[00:47:25.580] - Eric**

I was curious. Did it just come to you or did it something that happened organically? Did you plan the installation?

**[00:47:30.300] - José**

No, I planned, I was going to do a live. So I brought all the paintings out, put them on the floor. You couldn't see the floor. It was like a carpet, newspaper carpet with memorabilia, bunch of stuff. It was kind of manic. So I covered the whole floor. And then I called some people so they were aware for the live.

**[00:47:59.480] - Eric**

So they were there when you filmed it?

**[00:48:01.550] - José**

They were watching. Yeah. So I started washing my feet because I was going to walk on the painting. So I thought everybody was like, oh, he's walking on the painting. So let me do a video of me washing the feet and make a reference of Jesus. So I'm washing my feet with one hand and recording with the other one. So then I dragged my feet and opened the door. And then I start walking, and I was naked. So it was that sense of danger that it was live, so I had to really be aware not to show. So that was cool. It was like 15 minutes. Yeah, I jumped over a chair at one part.

**[00:48:47.520] - Eric**

I love the sense of intimacy, not knowing that there were people there watching that when you're viewing it as a video piece, it's you the artist with your work in that sense. And the textures are very much like your paintings in of themselves.

**[00:49:05.570] - José**

Yeah, it was like I zoom out. Yeah. I knew what I was going to do. I knew I could improvise. And some guy called it a retrospective.

**[00:49:22.390] - Eric**

Yeah, that's what I felt.

**[00:49:25.780] - José**

He's a theater director. I said, oh, okay, I'll go with that.

**[00:49:30.820] - Eric**

I got retrospective when I was watching it, actually as well.

**[00:49:37.160] - José**

Yeah. I'm going to maybe mention some Ivan. So I met Royal Torres. He lives in San Francisco. He's a cisgender, very straight, like macho man, but he's very like he's like a voyeur and I'm like a pervert. So he gets off on my shit. And I bring the expression my experience. And he's the technocrat with the academia. So we work on an issue and Ivan is...He works with Ivan the terrible, but we work together. He worked with Ivan, but this is like a perfect example of what el ichu is, el ichu. El ichu wait, is like spanglish for a magazine? Like a magazine issue two s's. So it's in Spanish, issue. Because I always say issue. We don't say issue, we say ichu. You got issues in Spanish, you got ichu like, whatever. So it's a zine. And then this is our first publication. It's actually the second, but official is the first. It's a poem I wrote. It's called "A Perfect Man." And it's autobiography, so I might read some of it. This is a translation made by Enrique Olivares. He's doing a PhD on Hispanic Studies in LA.

**[00:51:24.630] - Eric**

Who is this?

**[00:51:25.750] - José**

This is me.

**[00:51:26.590] - Eric**

Oh, yeah.

**[00:51:26.940] - José**

Doing my first Communion.

**[00:51:30.620] - Eric**

Wow.

**[00:51:32.280] - José**

So this is an essay by Enrique about the poem. So I'm going to read a little bit about this and a little bit about this. Okay? The Perfect Man is Puerto Rican, masculine, heterosexual, young, mustache blonder than the rest of his hair, soft face, brown eyes, not sophisticated, kind of rude, and selfish, always late, kind of interested, kind of hustler, tender but domineering, jealous, possessive, has a car, has a girlfriend, that lives with his mom. A wheat dealer with an ankle bracelet, pink lips, almond eyes, white skin. An American son, so he's blonde. Good at improvising so he can rap for me while I record him. Lives close to home and loves being together. Doesn't fuck me. Calls me a dirty slut. Tells me when he fucks his girlfriend, comes buckets. He makes me watch anime and tells me about the plot with the air condition on. Brings his index finger to his mouth, begging me to shut up when his woman calls. Sell me the nickel bag for \$4. Only if we smoke it together. He controls my anxiety pills just as he does my breathing. I leave it there.

**[00:53:11.710] - Eric**

That's beautiful.

**[00:53:12.730] - José**

So I'm going to maybe share a little bit of these are ichu, some quotes from poets, some are in Spanish so I'm going to just read them in Spanish. The Present Is Not Enough by José Esteban Muñoz. I Want To Be Filthy and Anonymous by John Jordan. No es justa la desilusión sin sudor ni tanto besos de viento en su húmedo olor ni tanto leche en la boca sin sabor ni tanto cuerpo con cuerpo, sudor con sudor ni tanto bicho violento en la resurrección ni tanto vagabundo invisible en la pasión ni tanto, ni tanto, ni tanto Manuel Ramos Otero, he's from the 70's and 80's he died of AIDS.

**[00:54:04.690] - Eric**

Really?

**[00:54:05.260] - José**

And I've been compared to him because maybe we have similar life experience. The perfect man exists, writes Esteban. He's not a metaphor. He's not some fractured aspiration of an idea that lays just out of our reach. He's made of flesh and words. The same thing dreams are made of. He is an amalgamation of impulses, desires, and long for projections for the future. He's both horizon and custom made Tom of Finland Ken doll. Just because we can conjure him doesn't mean that he's enough. It means in many ways it signals to us that the word as we know it is not enough. Ni tanto. So I'll leave it like that. The book is available.

**[00:54:56.620] - Eric**

Thank you.

**[00:54:57.390] - José**

Yeah.

**[00:55:01.600] - José**

I just want to start by telling you how sorry I am that you lost your mother recently.

**[00:55:08.520] - Eric**

Yeah. And thank you.

**[00:55:10.480] - José**

I've seen the pictures. What a beautiful relationship you have.

**[00:55:15.220] - Eric**

Well, thank you. I appreciate that because I know how close you are with your mother and just hearing you say that she came with boxes to help pack up your work. We're sitting in a studio that I have very much because of my mother's activity and commitment to keeping her son alive. But also she died in January, so it's all very raw. And I'm realizing that it's up to me...well it's actually kind of happening automatically that she's still behind me and she's still the support. But she was an English teacher, high school English teacher and very gifted teacher. So she didn't have a tremendous amount of financial resources. But she made sure that I could live expansively as an artist despite of my HIV and at times needing to also live off of the social welfare system. So we're here in a setting that's very much because of her.

**[00:56:24.870] - José**

Yeah. A thought keeps coming to mind. She knew that this was what's keeping you alive.

**[00:56:32.470] - Eric**

Exactly. She was also ongoing contributor to Visual AIDS. I realized the joy and pleasure she got in participating with me to have this activist voice in nature within my work. Her brother, Lige Clark. Lige

**[00:56:56.730] - José**

Your uncle.



**[00:56:57.440] - Eric**

Yeah.

**[00:56:58.340] - Eric**

He was a very formative early gay rights activist in the 60's and 70's. When I was getting ready to...I was like 13 or 14 and going into puberty. I found books that he wrote with his partner, Jack Nichols, my mother's cedar chest, about their life and activism and philosophy.

**[00:57:18.950] - José**

You read.

**[00:57:21.360] - Eric**

Yeah. She said that she wasn't hiding them, but they actually were on top of these linens. One of them is called "I Have More Fun With You Than Anybody." Starting from when they met in 1962 in Washington, DC. My uncle was in the army, and he was working for the Chief of Staff at the Pentagon. So he had top level security clearance. And in the night, he and Jack would pass out gay rights pamphlets in Washington. And they helped start the first gay rights pick at the White House with the Medicine Society. And then the books go in and chronicle them coming to New York and their activities here. They started the first national gay newspaper called Gay in 1969, which I covered.

**[00:58:15.960] - José**

It was right after Stonewall.

**[00:58:17.860] - Eric**

It was actually right on the heels of Stonewall. Right after, yeah. Some say that was in response to Stonewall.

**[00:58:23.240] - José**

Yeah.

**[00:58:25.040] - Eric**

So another book is "Roommates Can't Always Be Lovers." And people would write to them for advice and they would write back, so this "Roommates Can't Always Be Lovers" as an anthology or it's kind of Dear Abby.

**[00:58:39.930] - José**

You know certain gay people would refer to their boyfriends as roommates.

**[00:58:45.050] - Eric**

As roommates, yeah.

**[00:58:45.770] - José**

I had a neighbor, he's straight, but he's very...In Puerto Rico I used to not openly be gay because I have...The culture, so I won't say I like girls, but I won't say, oh, look at that boy. And one of the neighbors said to me, so I was telling a story, and I had to the first time I said I had this girl, and three days later he go like, dude, you can be gay. It's okay. What's that girl? Come on, we want to make jokes to you, but never about that. And then I came out, and that uncle, he said, ah! your "roommate," like he was making fun. I said, yeah, my roommate.

**[00:59:35.540] - Eric**

With a wink.

**[00:59:36.420] - José**

Yeah.

**[00:59:39.400] - Eric**

These books were filled with their philosophies of life. Also, because my uncle could quote from Walt Whitman's poems, like, almost any poem you would choose, he could quote from it. And also, when he was killed in 1975, he was, he was, he was murdered traveling in Mexico under some...Bit mysterious circumstances. It's thought most recently that the man that he was traveling with was delivering money to the Sandinistas during the Nicaraguan conflict. As a young man reading these books, their philosophies were indoctrinated into my consciousness.

**[01:00:24.270] - José**

And this is your uncle who you love.

**[01:00:27.480] - Eric**

He also happened to be extremely beautiful.

**[01:00:29.800] - José**

Yeah. Is that you or is that him?

**[01:00:35.720] - Eric**

So my mom being close to him and them being so much part of my upbringing, you know there's a real tie between those.

**[01:00:46.700] - José**

Yeah. She was like, it was normal for her.

**[01:00:49.530] - Eric**

Yeah. I didn't really come out to my parents. I remember talking to my mother about this boy that I thought was really cute after I moved to New York, and she just pulled over the side of the car and said, tell me about him. Her only real advice was that, or concern, was that I try women as well, just to kind of so that I know eventually happens.

**[01:01:12.220] - José**

Cross that out. Try it. It's easier.

**[01:01:15.920] - Eric**

Exactly.

**[01:01:16.450] - José**

It's going to be easier.

**[01:01:17.370] - Eric**

Well, I thought that men were a bit easier after this.

**[01:01:19.560] - José**

But people, like parents, wish you were straight. Maybe not yours, but usually parents, because maybe not now, but back then. It's a harder life?

**[01:01:30.700] - Eric**

Yeah.

**[01:01:31.640] - José**

In their eyes. So they want you to be "normal," I guess.

**[01:01:34.670] - Eric**

To be honest, I never got that from my mother. She took joy and pleasure, me being, yeah.

**[01:01:39.290] - José**

My niece came out to me. She's 17, and she's beautiful, and she's very strict. She's like, she's strong. She sat next to me, and she said, Tío. And I thought she was going to discipline me or tell me about something that she found out. She said, Tío. I'm like, what, what. And she took a bath, and she said she was going to come out, and then I said, what, what. So she stopped for a few minutes, and then she said, I'm gay. I'm like, oh, wow, that's great. Welcome. So I'm sure for her, she felt like her gay uncle...

**[01:02:27.980] - Eric**

Well, I think I'm, like my uncle actually was more bisexual. The path that I took was just to live a life as a gay man was much more harmonious with my existence. My mom was actually with me when I tested HIV positive. Not when I tested, but when I got the news. It was her 50th birthday in the summer of 1987.

**[01:02:51.380] - José**

How old were you?

**[01:02:52.420] - Eric**

I was 27.

**[01:02:53.510] - José**

Wow. That's the same age. I got tested

**[01:02:56.090] - Eric**

Yeah. I actually remember reading that. And I had a boyfriend at the time, Mats Gustafson, who is a very accomplished fashion illustrator. Actually, at the time of this 1987, he was really, like, the fashion illustrator in the world. So he took my mother and I to Paris for her 50th birthday. And the whole time that we were there, we knew that my results for my HIV test would be waiting. My mom stayed on in New York, and I was in my studio at the time. It was on Avenue...it was on 14th street between A and B, and it kind of had this southwestern exposure. And so she was there when I called my doctor, Dr. Passer, at the time, and he confirmed I was positive. But immediately she set out to find resources to help her son survive the best I could. I think it was in part the rich humanist philosophies of my uncle that I read in his books that helped

me gravitate towards philosophies of mind, body, spirit, connection and set this path of this being like a spiritual quest that I was on and that my mother was on with me.

**[01:04:30.100] - José**

That's beautiful.

**[01:04:32.340] - Eric**

I never adopted the thought that I was going to die from it or didn't necessarily need to die, but that it was an adventure of growing and developing and learning and healing what I could to live the fullest life that I could.

**[01:04:50.300] - José**

Contrast with my experience. Because I had a death sentence, I had to be crazy and do all the sex I could and all the art. I didn't have accountability, I had like a time limit.

**[01:05:10.950] - Eric**

You felt like you had an expiration date.

**[01:05:13.230] - José**

Yeah, and I wanted to overlive without worrying about...I didn't even think I had a future.

**[01:05:21.780] - Eric**

Okay.

**[01:05:22.980] - José**

So I lived a crazy life. And then the protease came and oh, wait, I got to get it together.

**[01:05:28.500] - Eric**

The protease inhibitors being released in 1996 brought you back to that sense of responsibility.

**[01:05:34.200] - José**

Yeah. I'm going to possibly grow old.

**[01:05:38.730] - Eric**

Were you ever really ill from HIV?

**[01:05:41.360] - José**

No. Let me see. Well, I got, like, the shingles, I got on my face. I don't think that was related.

**[01:05:53.380] - Eric**

Not Kaposi sarcoma?

**[01:05:55.180] - José**

No, shingles. It's like a kind of herpes, but they take my whole face. It's not safe for you.

**[01:06:04.980] - Eric**

Shingles run the nerve pathways.

**[01:06:06.070] - José**

They have a vaccine.

**[01:06:07.360] - Eric**

Nerve pathways, right? I think shingles run the nerve pathways.

**[01:06:10.860] - José**

Yeah. So it was like they took the half the face, mouth...only thing I had to do, luckily, I was never sick.

**[01:06:20.210] - Eric**

Did you have low T cells?

**[01:06:22.770] - José**

Yeah, I had, like, 33 T cells. 33 when my first T cell came.

**[01:06:29.670] - Eric**

But still that didn't...

**[01:06:32.060] - José**

No, because that was when AZT came. And I started right on AZT, my virus. Did you...

**[01:06:44.220] - Eric**

I was really really ill, but at the same time, making artwork was really, like you, a constant in my life. And I think I know that there was an interrelationship with what I was sensing spiritually. And also I was very involved with getting acupuncture regularly. Massage, and...

**[01:07:07.700] - José**

Self care.

**[01:07:08.550] - Eric**

Self care. There was a group called the Healing Circle.

**[01:07:10.980] - José**

Yeah, I used to go to a yoga class in the Gay Center.

**[01:07:14.620] - Eric**

Okay.

**[01:07:15.640] - José**

I remember I went, yoga class for HIV.

**[01:07:20.600] - Eric**

I wonder if we were in the same class sometime.

**[01:07:22.520] - José**

It was really nice. They had quilts. It was really nice. And then I had a boyfriend. I had, like, a toxic relationship, and that was really cute. I walked across the street, and they had the Tom of Finland fair, and I went up and they were, like I ended up doing nude modeling there for the first time. And it was a good day that I had, like, community outside.

**[01:07:46.740] - Eric**

In your own way, you had a mind body relationship, and you identified another kind of a way than I did. The Healing Circle was a...Well, I went to an acupuncturist, and she had a man call me because he was very involved with the Healing Arts. This man named...

**[01:08:07.460] - José**

Healing Artists?

**[01:08:08.750] - Eric**

Healing Arts, like, healing arts are like acupuncture, yoga, these things.

**[01:08:16.220] - José**

Reiki?

**[01:08:17.510] - Eric**

Whatever one might think of as being the blanket term would be like, Healing Arts.

**[01:08:22.240] - José**

Oh, wow.

**[01:08:23.360] - Eric**

This man, Abelarda, called me, a young man that he had never known, and introduced himself as also being positive. And he encouraged me to come to The Healing Circle, which was a group that met on Tuesdays at a church on 17th street, a Catholic church in the gymnasium. And sometimes there could be anywhere from 150 to 300 people there, all doing this exercises on mind, body, spirit, kind of...Have you heard of Louise Hay? Louise Hay, she was a practitioner of mind, body, spirit connection. So then through The Healing Circle, I met people like Marianne Williamson, who was teaching a course in miracles.

**[01:09:15.450] - José**

It's funny. My mother is a healer.

**[01:09:17.510] - Eric**

Is she really? In what way?



**[01:09:19.360] - José**

Oh, she does reiki, she's in tune. She's been New Age since the 70s.

**[01:09:26.710] - Eric**

Okay, but she didn't direct your way.

**[01:09:32.500] - José**

She tried, but I was in New York. I wasn't receptive.

**[01:09:41.320] - Eric**

Okay. There are so many of my friends who were involved with The Healing Circle and Manhattan Center for Living with Marianne Williamson and the later organization Friends In Need, like, as we were experiencing one another and so many of these men and women died along their path of this philosophy, I quickly kind of learned and adapted an understanding that though it's understandable and normal to take this path because you want to survive, the survival being a goal was setting one up for failure.

**[01:10:25.320] - José**

Yeah. So it's just to make it easier, the path.

**[01:10:28.740] - Eric**

Yes.

**[01:10:29.580] - José**

I say happiness is a state. It's not a place. It's a state.

**[01:10:38.200] - Eric**

It's not a destination.

**[01:10:39.650] - José**

Yeah, it's a destination. No, it's a state because you can be happy. And the state you're in, you're happy. But if you want to be happy, you don't work to be happy. You need to be happy.

**[01:11:02.400] - Eric**

Our circumstances don't necessarily have to dictate how we are in the world or our happiness, or our perception in the world.

**[01:11:10.920] - José**

And I remember my mother, she did help me with the healing stuff to come out the depression. She did, because she took me to this New Age fair that they have booths and they had all these pagan books. Everybody, it was a big thing. And she took me to...I found this book there, and I started reading that book, and then that helped me a lot. So she directed me, actually she got me out of depression. She got me to a show, and then she had me meditating. I started doing yoga every Friday. So she did help.

**[01:11:53.440] - Eric**

So it's late later in your life.

**[01:11:54.790] - José**

When I was there, when she was close, she was able to help me.

**[01:11:59.380] - Eric**

This path that I went on very much automatically really did have an effect on my artwork. The piece that I showed in The First 10.

**[01:12:08.540] - José**

Yes.

**[01:12:08.910] - Eric**

Self portrait, that's this--

**[01:12:10.190] - José**

I remember clearly.

**[01:12:11.170] - Eric**

--like, cage-like, it's actually here. We can share it with you later. But at 27, 28, I was definitely conscious of how my sexual identity was being challenged and evolving. And this cage like structure self portrait that goes over like my fly's unzipped. Speaking of my phallus self portrait, it's focused around my erection in this cage like form with ring finial over the slip of the penis and then a casing of a brooch where the anus would be, and a little washer where the navel is. And it's like when I was building it, unconsciously, it was like, in retrospect, it was like going into my interior body and drawing out these energy centers and then them circling around the erection. And then the horror of the body and the religious iconography of the cage meets. And then from there, it went on to these other sculptural pieces, at times using suede and brocade fabric that I collected on a trip to Japan and to Paris.

**[01:13:42.750] - Eric**

Mats, being this quite established illustrator, I would travel with him, but then I would go off and collect things.

**[01:13:50.120] - José**

I was curious how you end up there.

**[01:13:52.680] - Eric**

And then I would bring these materials back to my studio. It was like a matrix where I would bring together all these forms and...

**[01:14:00.620] - José**

Then you find amazing things.

**[01:14:03.560] - Eric**

Very much so. Yeah. And these are cross cultural associations that would become married together on these cartouche-like forms.

**[01:14:12.720] - José**

Like these boxes.

**[01:14:15.840] - Eric**

Yeah, the boxes...

**[01:14:17.600] - José**

They change?

**[01:14:21.840] - Eric**

I always had a relationship with collecting things since I was a little boy. My aunt, Joyce Bacord is an antiquer, so I would go to visit her in Kentucky. My family's from Kentucky, for the most part.

**[01:14:36.660] - José**

The antique roadshow.

**[01:14:37.720] - Eric**

Yeah, exactly. So this sense of fascination, of how discarded materials or salvaged objects have a history.

**[01:14:46.680] - José**

Yeah. I don't like new things. You give me something? Don't be IKEA, please.

**[01:14:56.300] - Eric**

What is this little pin you have.

**[01:14:57.890] - José**

That you this is a gift from a fuck buddy. And he's, like, wealthy and he has this beautiful house and we had a great time because we don't have, like, intimacy issues. So he don't want any more boyfriend. So he brought this from Amsterdam.

**[01:15:18.650] - Eric**

And it's a little dog?

**[01:15:19.850] - José**

Yeah, it's like the fetish for dog play. It's a dog but it's a human. It's a human. It's not a dog. He just got the tail. You know, it's fetish...

**[01:15:32.920] - Eric**

Like a puppy.

**[01:15:33.940] - José**

A puppy. And then you see the gold. The black is like the knee pads. The mouth and...I don't know, it's fantasy, but it's a human because look at the legs.

**[01:15:51.700] - Eric**

I see, yeah.

**[01:15:54.480] - José**

He's pretending to be a dog. I had a fight with this guy real quick. He said my best friend's father is gay. I said, oh, what that dog? No, he's a human. He said no, he's not. He's a dog. I'm like, I mean, I'm the father. No, he's a human. He says, and we know. He said I'm gay too. It don't matter if you're gay. He's not a dog. He's a human. Yeah, I like it a lot.

**[01:16:21.580] - Eric**

It's sweet. We were wearing black shirts, kind of coincidentally. And then you have this little gold.

**[01:16:28.260] - José**

This is like my gala. So when I'm, like, going out, this is special day, so I put my pin on.

**[01:16:36.620] - Eric**

Even, like, the piece behind us with these objects, sort of like this is each one evokes some kind of memory or thought and how they work together, create a world unto its own.

**[01:16:50.560] - José**

I've seen them always like online. I never seen them...

**[01:16:53.830] - Eric**

In real life.

**[01:16:55.110] - José**

Yeah. I remember you when you changed. This is like a new path you took. You were doing more like sculptures and then you started doing...

**[01:17:02.210] - José**

Well, I think what happened...Well, I want to actually circle back because it's related. Before the protease inhibitors came out in 96. Like, unlike you, I actually was extremely fragile and ill. It actually relates to my use of salvaged materials and the connotation between seeing things that might be dismissed or thought of as ugly or undesirable, being represented as something that is beautiful.

**[01:17:45.670] - José**

You give it like a new life.

**[01:17:47.620] - Eric**

New life and meaning.

**[01:17:49.760] - José**

And it brings stuff, like those objects bring stuff with them.

**[01:17:55.460] - Eric**

They do. I always did artwork throughout my HIV history and can see that it is really something that kept me going. And then becoming involved with Visual AIDS like you did, layered on another sense of purpose and meaning to the artwork. That there was a strive to contribute a voice to this situation in our lives that automatically and understandably is perceived and experienced as being devastating. But within that there is also light.

**[01:18:41.670] - José**

Community. You felt like they got your back somehow.

**[01:18:47.460] - Eric**

Well, even just interpersonally just for my own being and my own self, I see that the things that I was given to think about and to experience physically opened up windows to a higher understanding or another kind of understanding of my human existence. And Visual AIDS, being an organization that supported that voice was really very vital and important because there was a time when it took me a while to feel comfortable coming...I don't say coming out or being open, just sounds like there's something to be hidden underneath it. But for me to be able to integrate my HIV status within how I spoke about my work provide a sense of wholeness in another kind of a way. And even with this philosophy or thought that HIV wasn't and being...Having AIDS wasn't going to be my demise immediately. Still, I had reached a point of having four T cells, and I was 127 pounds. And I had Candida systemically into my bone marrow. I had to give myself injections of Neupogen and Epigen every day to keep my red and white blood count high. And then still having a sense that I was going to...I don't remember actually what I was thinking at that point in time because things were becoming more and more surreal.

**[01:20:42.210] - Eric**

But I was treated for the Candida, which was causing all this plummeting of my blood work in the Christmas of 1995. And I would go to the doctor's office, Dr. Bellman, and get daily IV treatment for Amphotericin, which was called Shake n' Bake cause you would shake and get the chills. But it worked. And then I was put into a study for the protease inhibitors, like February. And then it came back really rapidly to more vital.

**[01:21:18.340] - José**

No, that's what a lot of people were like, oh God what I'm gonna do...

**[01:21:21.710] - Eric**

Right.

**[01:21:25.150] - José**

Do you have a series of drawings that you call them you residency?

**[01:21:29.570] - Eric**

Yeah. Going back to 1994 as I was starting...

**[01:21:33.360] - José**

The drawings in the New York Hospital residency.

**[01:21:38.850] - Eric**

I call them Hospital Drawings from my residency at St. Vincent's Hospital.

**[01:21:43.420] - José**

Okay, yeah. (laughs)

**[01:21:43.670] - Eric**

Yeah, actually, I'll just show one.

**[01:21:46.490] - José**

Yeah, I saw that piece and I'm glad you brought it up.

**[01:21:50.150] - Eric**

So this is back to my mother. It's called Mother's Tears. And what happened is...I went into like, a severe manic state in the summer of 1994 because it's thought that, not Candida, but it was thought that HIV had entered my brain.

**[01:22:16.330] - José**

You thought that? They told you that?

**[01:22:18.730] - Eric**

My doctor told me that. Yeah, that was probably the reason. After that, I've had other episodes, so I'm not quite sure if that was the reason.

**[01:22:31.910] - José**

Yeah.

**[01:22:32.540] - Eric**

But that's when AZT was introduced to me in 1994. And because AZT can cross the blood / brain barrier.

**[01:22:41.570] - José**

Oh right.

**[01:22:42.570] - Eric**

And then I actually did come down into a more grounded state, but it was an extremely highly creative period of time.

**[01:22:55.070] - José**

How long was that residency?

**[01:22:57.310] - Eric**

Well, the summer of 94, the somatic state kind of crept crept on. And I was doing a lot of very outlandish, though creatively exhilarated sculptural constructions by bringing objects from the street into the apartment and getting things from the flea market and putting things that got in the pet shop, bird seed and bird's feeders. So they were, in my mind, very constructed.

**[01:23:30.720] - José**

You don't have them?

**[01:23:31.830] - Eric**

Well, no, they were made of garbage, basically.



**[01:23:35.640] - José**

So they were ephemeral?

**[01:23:37.150] - Eric**

They were very ephemeral.

**[01:23:38.020] - José**

Okay. Do you have pictures?

**[01:23:39.680] - Eric**

And quite creative. No. My friend Mats might, because he was documenting them for insurance purposes, because I did them in his loft.

**[01:23:52.430] - José**

Why insurance? Because if something happened.

**[01:23:57.550] - Eric**

Again, these constructions were a kaleidoscope of my overwhelm of my own body becoming fragile, unknowingly fragile. The constant news coming in about HIV and the demonstrations that were going on and things that were happening in my personal life.

**[01:24:24.340] - Eric**

So I was overwhelmed. So I think that these...

**[01:24:28.480] - José**

And the pieces represent, show that.

**[01:24:30.650] - Eric**

Yeah, I actually come to mind, they had the same kind of feeling as your work. In its expression, though mine, in terms of how they were constructed, were not constructed very well, because...

**[01:24:44.450] - José**

Oh so the insurance is if something fell and broke...

**[01:24:47.050] - José**

Well, things were broken. I tore up some of his drawings, but not meaning to tear them up, but in my mind, I was getting them together for a show, but it was a show that wasn't going to happen. So my incapability of having the motor skills because I was so speedy weren't good for his drawings. My father taught art education when I was growing up, when I was little, from when I was little. So he did actually quite extraordinary vessels, ceramic vessels, and one of them had broken. There were probably other things broken. I was urinating in glasses because I was interested in the color. And so they I think that they were extraordinary pieces. I can remember...When one is in a manic state, or one can be in a manic state for some people, I don't know for everyone.

**[01:25:54.200] - Eric**

But for me, the qualities of my being accentuate. I'm a very altruistic person. I want good to happen to everybody. So I was planning to have a foundation for Friends In Deed, to have artist housing, artist residency in the country where I grew up, outside of New Paltz in the mountains. Things were based on real tangible ideas, but they were not realistic. I danced when I was growing up. I was in a ballet company in high school, and so I would have memories of dance, and I would go to a lot of dance. So I was spreading pennies over the floor and, you know, working out choreography.

**[01:26:50.150] - José**

Around the work?

**[01:26:51.750] - Eric**

Well, yeah, around the work, yeah.

**[01:26:53.450] - José**

And the drawing part, you were doing this at somebody's house?

**[01:27:00.410] - Eric**

Mats and I were together. Mats Gustafson is the name. We were together as boyfriends from like 1983 until 91.

**[01:27:09.470] - José**

And you use his drawings for your sculpture?

**[01:27:14.030] - Eric**

I use everything for my sculpture.

**[01:27:17.310] - José**

You will break some drawings also?

**[01:27:19.580] - Eric**

Mats and I were separated as boyfriends, but he was extremely supportive of me as his friend who wasn't having HIV. So even though I wasn't living with him anymore, I would go to his loft and stay there while he was in Europe working. So I was making this creation in his loft. And so just segueing how I got into the hospital is that his assistant came one night to the loft and saw me in this state, naked or with underwear, with all of this installation, brilliant yet intangible installation around me. And he called Mats. Mats called my mother in Kingston, New York and kept me on the phone while she came to get me to take me to the hospital. And she came to get me. She said, she told me, we're going to go to meet Dr. Bellman for dinner, but first we were going to go by the hospital to meet him, something like that. And then I was there for a month. And that's where these hospital drawings came about because I was in this state of wonderment. And for me, having experienced these states a couple of times, I see it as an enlightened--I was expressing it as an enlightened state, which I feel it was.

**[01:28:49.630] - José**

But it could be harmful.

**[01:28:50.660] - Eric**

It could be harmful, right. And I was fortunate to have a doctor in Dr. Bellman who believes in mind, body, spirit, and he would say, okay, Eric, you very may have been seeing angels, because I thought I was seeing angels on the subway before I went back to the loft in the evening, and there's nothing wrong with you being where you are, but we need to bring you down so that other people can communicate with you more easily. So between me arriving and me leaving, I did these series of hospital drawings. I must have done a hundred of them.

**[01:29:41.390] - José**

Less manic?

**[01:29:43.310] - Eric**

And I was splashing water. This is just full moon.

**[01:29:50.350] - José**

You draw on them, wet them?

**[01:29:53.890] - Eric**

Mats and my mother, when he came back to New York, brought me drawing materials and markers because Mats is a brilliant watercolorist. I was imitating what I sensed he do. So I would put the marker on the paper and I would push water on them.

**[01:30:13.910] - José**

It's limited, the resources.

**[01:30:16.240] - Eric**

Yeah, but I was so fast, I was going so speedy. And there were other things in the hospital which I don't want to spend all of our time on. But I didn't know that any of them survived until Mats sold his loft after the protease inhibitors came out. And I, or maybe 2000, when he sold his loft, and he gave me this box of hospital drawings because now I was in another kind of a state. So he protected them for me.

**[01:30:49.650] - José**

Wow, you should get the pictures.

**[01:30:51.990] - Eric**

Yeah, I have pictures of all of them. I should ask him.

**[01:30:58.630] - José**

Make a point. I'd love to see them.

**[01:30:59.740] - Eric**

Well, David Hirsh, who brought us both into the archive for Visual AIDS and involved with the Archive Project, he videotaped me that night, but he told me that it got destroyed. But anyway, the drawings have this, I call them rough and tender drawings, and because they are rough and tender, they have another kind of expression than my other work, which tends to be, because they're raw and touching immediately...and my work as a body of work tends to be highly refined. And I think a lot to do with my relationship to Mats and being introduced to high fashion. At the time, in the 80s, he was interested most in what he wore and what he presented me to wear. Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons, Jean Paul Gaultier and then other designers of interiors I can see influenced my aesthetic.

**[01:32:17.350] - José**

You did some wearable art?

**[01:32:19.250] - Eric**

I did, actually, yeah.

**[01:32:22.050] - José**

I was surprised to read that.

**[01:32:23.810] - Eric**

Thank you for bringing that up.

**[01:32:24.390] - José**

Well, I saw some pictures with some Japanese...I've seen some pictures back then with some wearable art. I don't know.

**[01:32:32.230] - Eric**

That's where Mats and I met at a gallery called Artware, which was on West Broadway that showed artists one of a kind and also limited edition works. And I was doing these very kind of outrageous and eccentric wearable things that were abstractions of butterflies.

**[01:32:50.590] - José**

Okay.

**[01:32:51.080] - Eric**

Yeah. Actually, when I was 18 and first moved to New York, I did an apprentice with a man called Kermit Love who designed Big Bird for Sesame Street. And we met in upstate New York, where I grew up, and he invited me to come to New York and work on projects with him.

**[01:33:10.560] - José**

And that's when the wearable art?

**[01:33:12.740] - Eric**

Well actually, one of my projects was to make butterfly puppets for George Balanchine for a production of L'Enfant et les Sortilèges. I think the...I don't speak French, but the translation is The Magical Child.

**[01:33:29.180] - José**

And they use them in costumes.

**[01:33:31.550] - Eric**

Well, they were actually butterflies, and I made the wings out of wire, and then I would stretch silk chiffon over them with hot glue guns, and then another man would rig them so they could animate. But that's actually how I started working with wire.

**[01:33:47.850] - José**

And they were part of the dance somehow.

**[01:33:50.070] - Eric**

Yeah, they were part of the spelling.

**[01:33:52.510] - José**

Before I forget.

**[01:33:58.430] - Eric**

The butterfly puppets have a direct correlation to my leaves project.

**[01:34:06.290] - José**

I can't wait to hear about that.

**[01:34:10.290] - Eric**

When I became more vital again, because of the protease inhibitors, I applied to the McDowell Colony, which is an artist colony in New Hampshire. And I was in a state of exhilaration and light as this sort of renewed state of being in the world because I automatically became engrossed in the atmosphere of McDowell because it was fall.

**[01:34:41.540] - José**

It's like childhood.

**[01:34:45.070] - Eric**

Yeah, and the leaves were changing and transforming as I had. And it felt like genuinely, this kind of energy field of people that I knew who had died around me, like they were supporting me to go out into

the world again. And I started picking up leaves and attributing them to different people that I was sensing. And then, because I had wire in my studio, I traced the leaves in ink, and then I sculpt them with wire in sort of three dimensional form.

**[01:35:15.240] - José**

Wow.

**[01:35:15.900] - Eric**

I'd hook them into paper, so they're like three dimensional drawings. Actually, the piece back here is some of the leaves.

**[01:35:31.390] - José**

The wire goes through the paper?

**[01:35:33.460] - Eric**

They're constructed so as I make the leaf bend the wire around the leaves, I'll include the little prongs in the construction so that the paper gets holes punctured where the prongs are, and then it fits on the paper and has a sort of three dimensional quality.

**[01:35:57.510] - José**

How many?

**[01:35:58.950] - Eric**

Well, when I started it, it was 80. And there's a photograph that I have called it's a self portrait, and I'm naked.

**[01:36:05.530] - José**

All of them?

**[01:36:06.810] - Eric**

Well, McDowell...this is at McDowell. They're, like 80 behind me. But I made a commitment to make a tribute to leaf tribute or leaf portrait, to anybody that I knew who died, even though it's become a bit unmanageable.

**[01:36:26.230] - José**

So have you done 300 that died recently?

**[01:36:29.350] - Eric**

Yeah, but then also I'll write down the names of people who've died. For instance, a friend, Craig Russell, died, maybe two years ago.

**[01:36:39.620] - José**

And some of them are acquaintance?

**[01:36:42.290] - Eric**

Well, some of them. First, The Leaves is the title of the piece for the leaf project. It's become more than 380 individuals represented, and as time has gone by, I've included...It started off with people that I knew.

**[01:37:04.380] - José**

Okay, that's it.

**[01:37:05.550] - Eric**

But then it started to build up from that from people that were influential in my life.

**[01:37:10.340] - José**

Okay.

**[01:37:12.030] - Eric**

Over the last three years, I've been working on leaves to represent specifically artists who die. Sometimes...the initial project, theoretically, if I were to have an intact representation, would be leaves sort of hung freely as a community, not formally framed, which would be like a very large installation.

**[01:37:37.790] - José**

All in paper.

**[01:37:38.660] - Eric**

All on paper. But then I have other versions where a leaf would be framed individually on its own, and then they could be like one could represent the whole project if it's in a show along with a statement about the leaves, or it could be all 380 of them. So as time has gone by, it's kind of continually evolved into other kinds of presentations. And there's been times when I've loaned work through the Art and Embassy program because they place artwork in the residencies of ambassadors throughout the United States. And I've worked with the embassy in Vienna. The embassy in Greece, Cameroon and Malta. So the piece



is both an aesthetic piece is also a way of continually emphasizing that HIV and AIDS is an issue for us, too.

**[01:38:44.440] - José**

Awesome.

**[01:38:45.690] - Eric**

It goes back to your and my common purpose of an activist nature within our work.

**[01:38:55.090] - José**

Yeah. I'm sorry?

**[01:38:58.350] - Eric**

An activist.

**[01:38:59.640] - José**

Yes.

**[01:39:00.080] - Eric**

An activist aspect to our work.

**[01:39:02.340] - José**

The leaves, yeah.

**[01:39:03.730] - Eric**

In the way that you've done it yourself.

**[01:39:06.640] - José**

Yeah. Sometimes I wonder. They say activists. I'm like, but it's like you said that just by making art and being identified as HIV artists, that's activism.

**[01:39:24.810] - Eric**

Exactly. For me, being...It probably circles back to my Uncle Lige, just the nature of being inclusive of the fact that HIV is in my life. I'm HIV positive, I'm an artist, and this is the voice that I can help.

**[01:39:42.540] - José**

Every time, like I'm in the taxi driver and I say, oh, I'm going for oral history about HIV artists and stuff, people are like, oh, wow. I'm helping by just being nonchalant about it. I'm helping the stigma, how you say.

**[01:40:02.280] - Eric**

Destigmatization.

**[01:40:05.170] - José**

Just by being casual about it. They're like, wait, this is no big deal for me. Why should be a big deal for me?

**[01:40:11.140] - Eric**

Right. I feel that being positive and having AIDS and survived gives us a window into the world that is unique. And every time I write something or even put something in social media about being positive, I'm conscious about spinning it in a way that is hopefully more expansive way of thinking about something.

**[01:40:42.160] - José**

Yeah. I share information about AIDS or if there's a group, I share openly information, and people just read that.

**[01:40:58.090] - Eric**

I see a correlation between my Uncle Lige's early years of what he and his partner Jack Nichols wanted to communicate about the expansive possibility of being gay, to correlating to our time period of being positive, to those of the young men and women that I know who are part of an ongoing evolution. I'd like to read just because, before we close, I have this book that came out about my work.

**[01:41:35.910] - José**

I love it.

**[01:41:36.470] - Eric**

Thank you. Thank you so much. I was very fortunate because the publisher, Institute 193, gave me free reign on the book. So the design and the editing and the choosing of who the writers were, I had the ability to really make it an artist book. And I think of it as a monograph memoir because it's very much a way of containing...

**[01:42:07.030] - Eric**

Tangible.

**[01:42:07.700] - Eric**

...our story, yeah. So there are three essays in it.

**[01:42:13.470] - José**

I love one part that says about the new kids are the spirit.

**[01:42:18.910] - Eric**

That's actually what I wanted to read. So this is actually on the back of the book. There's a photograph of the family cemetery in Heinman, Kentucky, and it's the day that my Uncle Lige was buried. So that's the only photograph in the book that I didn't take is his friend Steve Yates took it. So. "For me, perceiving the young as reincarnations of people who died during the 80s through the 1990s is visceral. This verse came to me through a conversation at a benefit for the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. Its mission to enable all people to be free to self-determine their gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race. There, intergenerational artists and I contributed work for auction. My friend Brian and I marveled at the vast presence of youth who were expansive in their fluidity of gender and sexual identities. Brian pointed out that according to Buddhist philosophies and beliefs, these 20 to 30 year olds would be the reincarnations of those who died during the height of the AIDS epidemic. As he spoke of this, the hair on my arms stood up affirming, confirming."

**[01:43:49.470] - José**

So beautiful, like most of my friends are those kids in Puerto Rico.

**[01:43:55.530] - Eric**

Yeah. Thank you. To me, that's the real meaning of our work.

**[01:44:05.380] - José**

Yeah.

**[01:44:06.930] - Eric**

To be part of something.

**[01:44:11.570] - José**

It's cool because I love those kids. I try to make art for them. I think this generation is like we caught their attention, then our work will be long-lived.

**[01:44:36.570] - Eric**

Thank you. I'm really glad you came.