

**Rafael Vargas-Suarez conversation 10/4/13,  
in his home/studio, Brooklyn, NY**

AM:

Hi Rafael, How are you?

RVS:

Good thank you. Good morning.

AM:

Good morning. Would you please introduce yourself.

RVS:

My name is Rafael Vargas Suarez, I am a contemporary artist, I live here in Brooklyn and I am happy to have you here this morning.

AM:

Thank you for having me.  
So how did we meet Rafael.

RVS:

If I remember correctly at a place called Bar Jamón around Gramercy and you were with a friend that I ran into and I was with a whole other group of friends and then of a sudden we all kind of joined tables. Remember that?

AM:

I do remember. I remember but I thought it was after that, it was definitely at Bar Jamon, ok.  
laugh  
Where re we right now?

RVS:

We are in my studio here in Brooklyn and basically it's a live work space, I built it out about 10 years ago and I'm here and then when I'm not here I work other places.

AM:

What does your space mean to you?

RVS:

Well it has several different functions it's because I also live here, I have to be able to separate working time from living time and so I have a very kind of rigid schedule. And so I've managed to be able to live and work in a space that is not just about a living and working arrangement but it's also about the way I use the space time-wise. So I feel like it's a place that has to be very clean and very organized for me to be able to think about my work. And then once I'm done with work it's a place that I can also enjoy just as a living space. So, because it has two functions and because I am here a lot I really try to maintain a very

organized space and when I say space, I mean architecturally, like literally living and working space but also mentally. I try to keep this place very positive and very organized and very happy.

AM:

Very good. And when you talk about your schedule, so what is your schedule here? Because it is a live work space how do you divide up your time?

RVS:

Well, I'm at the mercy of several things. Mainly I am at the mercy of the schedule of three different space programs, so your - I'm talking about NASA, Roscosmos, which is the Russian Federal Space Agency and the European Space Agency, ESA. So, their operations that are broadcast live and I get all this through the internet - there are press conference, there are what are called mission status briefings there are launches there are landings there are live events there are space walks there are a number of live events. And what happens is that when you are dealing with their time zones, meaning Moscow time, European time, or Greenwich Mean time or Central Standard time or Eastern Standard time my schedule really shifts into their schedule, so again I have to maintain this place so that at any given hour of the day or any given day of the week I'm ready to just on board that live event and be able to work with it. So in a sense I keep irregular hours, but they are mostly very regulated morning and daytime hours.

AM:

I see so living really far from your studio would be impossible.

RVS:

Not necessarily it would just mean that I would have to adjust somehow. I've always lived with the studio and sometimes I think that it would be good if I didn't but then it has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the disadvantages is that I tend to be a workaholic. One of the advantages is that I feel like I get a lot more done, so just like anything else it has it's pros and cons.

AM:

Nice, and are you in this space alone?

RVS:

Mostly, I do have an assistant part time but then there's always people coming by for meetings or visits or you coming by now to talk and so a lot of the times I am here alone but I - there's always people coming in and out so, it's usually of course work related and when my assistant is here I try to have him here as much as possible. So we work pretty much 8-10 hour days when he is here.

AM:

And what does he do for you?

RVS:

Everything except administrative things which I tend to be good at unfortunately. We, he and I have a system I, we have been working together for years, so basically he does a lot of filling in of painting, he does all the packing, unpacking, shipping, he knows he can use all the tools, he's a big guy he can lift things, move things, hang things. So he's really kind of an all around assistant but there are times when it's just him and I, each one in our chairs sitting or standing painting for days and days and days so that time, that's his favorite part of the job, but other times there's regular kind of handy work to do.

AM:

And stretching canvases and packing and whatever else is - it has to happen too, but does he do those things?

RVS:

Yeah, and if it's really large pieces we have to do it together. Otherwise it's, it would be a disaster.

AM:

And how big do your paintings get?

RVS:

Well, they can get up to 9x12 feet but if we are working with lots of panels, multi panel paintings the largest ones we've done here which were done in sections because they wouldn't actually fit in here put together have been 11x47 feet.

AM:

WOW

RVS:

And then some drawings on paper can be 12x17 feet or 17x15 feet, so pretty large pieces.

AM:

And that's what happens in the studio, but you recently did a mural - you recently did two murals but how big was the mural in Spain?

RVS:

The mural, it's titled El Dorado, in the Canary Islands at the Atlantic Center for Modern Art, that mural ended up being 35 feet tall by 68 1/2 feet wide. And that was done over the course of a week with a lift, scissor lift, and three assistants. So, Yeah I mean things in the studio can be manageable and things outside of the studio are pretty large scale in general.

AM:

The mural you did, I mean that took how long? It took three weeks to do you said?

RVS:

One week.

AM:

Oh it took one week to do. So that becomes your external studio for a little while?

RVS:

Yeah, you know working on site, you know you get invited to do these big projects and literally these places become your studio. I don't do residencies, I know a lot of artists that do and that they benefit from it, but I don't actually, I don't think they're for me so I consider these pretty large installations to be the form, a kind of residency where I get to go somewhere and work and work on site and whether it's indoor or outdoor these places end up being your temporary home. Your temporary studio. So, that's always a nice way to break up the monotony of day in day out at your regular studio. Those become like what I call micro residencies.

AM:

That makes sense and also residencies, usually people use them to meet other people and if your going somewhere else you're meeting a whole new slew of people anyway, right?

RVS:

Yeah, especially in a large scale exhibition, unless you're socially awkward. You're going to meet so many different people. I think one of the things that I've noticed in working in a project in a big museum group show or solo show working on site is people tend to leave you alone. They let you work because they have work to do too. Whereas in a residency program there is a bit of socializing and I don't know how much work exactly people get done from what I hear.

AM:

I am not quite sure either.

Where is the best place for you to think clearly? Is it your home and studio?

RVS:

I think for the most part, yes. And while I'm traveling I get to have a lot of....first of all when I'm traveling unless I'm, I have to engage with other people in the work sense, I kind of keep to myself. For example in airports or going from point A to point B, where ever it may be, I just out of my own habits I guess or my own the way I am, I really keep to myself, I don't start talking to strangers - that might sound funny but, I really keep to myself and so that, during those times I am actually doing a lot of thinking and it, sometimes I call it I am painting in my head. Like if I am headed somewhere to do a big project I'm actually thinking a lot about it and then by the time I get there I know what I am going to do, I have a very clear picture in my head. And then after, again the same thing, when I am coming back, I do a lot of post production thinking like what did I do, what does it mean, what does it mean for the next thing that I am going to do. And then when I come back here again I start reflecting a lot on

what I did and it helps me figure out the next steps. I'm constantly thinking and rethinking and evaluating really my work, it's not out of any kind of stress or paranoia or anything. It's really just a matter of reflecting and thinking about your own actions and because at the end of the day I'm the guy who's going to take all the blame and the heat for any of this, so I the best place for me to think really - I don't think there is a best place, but I would say that while I am traveling and while I am here it's pretty much non-stop thinking.

AM:

And how often do you travel?

RVS:

I would say, at this point, I'm probably out of town anywhere from 3-5 months of the year. Since around 2000/2002 it's been like that.

AM:

That's really great.

RVS:

It's a lot. It does get to the point where I just want to come home.

AM:

And where were a few of the last....the last trips you've taken where have those been to?

RVS:

Well the last few, well I was just in Slovenia participating in the Ljubljana Biennial. I was only there a couple of weeks, I really enjoyed it. Before that I was in Massachusetts doing a small installation out in Cape Cod which was very nice. And before that I was in Russia doing research and then the first part of the trip was research at the Russian Space Center and then the rest of it was an actual, an actual vacation. And then in the Spring I was in the Canary Islands doing the mural that we were just referring to.

AM:

Fantastic, can you tell us what you were researching in Russia exactly? In terms of NASA and the technology there.

RVS:

Well, before I tell you what I was researching I will tell you why I was researching what I was doing. Half of my subject matter is in Russian. I work with informations, data and visualizations of space program operations. In around 2005/6 I realized that half of my possible sources are Russian so in 2007 I went to Russia and participated in a Moscow Biennial and after the opening and after I did my project I stayed and I was able to visit the Roscosmos, which is the Russian Space Agency and then I realized that I would have to come back and really try to gain an understanding of what they are doing so I have been there a few times and this past summer I went back to Roscosmos, I went to the, it's called the (Yuri) Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in a town called "Star City (Kokolef?)" which is a suburb

of Moscow and I went to see how they train and then I went to a place called Energia, which means energy in Russian, and they invented rockets. They are the oldest corporation of company of rockets. It used to be a state owned, Soviet State owned company. And today they are partially publically owned state owned and part of it is that they actually have stock holders, private company. So, I was able to go to their facility and see how they invented and developed and produced rockets. So those are things that are just so for my work is just so much information. I was able to get way more information than I even know what to do with so those trips when I go to Florida or Houston I can go see space centers and space center operations, it's a bit more accessible, but in Russia it took quite a lot of letters and permits and a special VISA to be able to step on Federal property. And with a camera and talk to people pretty openly.

AM:

Wow, that sounds fascinating. You told me a lot about this trip, but I didn't know the specifics.

Would you, describe your work?

And I am coming closer.

RVS:

OK

So basically I am very interested in visualization methods of science and in particular in what's called Earth Science obseRVSation or space flight programs, manned and unmanned space flight programs. And one of the reasons I got into the visualization aspect of it was just the sheer amount of data that you have to look at and I like the fact that a lot of it is changing and it is in real time. So it's kind of like when people are watching the stock market, but this is different you are watching human presence and unmanned presence in space. The other aspect of it is that there's a lot of engineering and architecture and I am a big fan of architecture since I was very young. So, through my interest in architecture I started getting interested in actual materials used in space and then you learn about how those materials are developed for space programs and space operations, but then you also learn about how those materials and those technologies affect our lives here. I think most people are quite unaware of how many things in our daily lives were first developed by the space programs. And I think most people take all of this for granted they just use these technologies and these products and these things as just - they don't even know where it came from - it's just this consumer sort of cultural phenomenon that they don't even understand the origin of it. I actually like seeing and understanding these things way before they become a consumer product or a consumer seRVSice. That is one aspect of kind of like how I arrive at why I am interested in space program operations, but in the end I just think it's visually a very rich sort of well or fountain of imagery and visual imagery. I think that also when you look at Earth from space or you're looking at other planetary places you get this thing that's called Remote Sensing, which is that we are here - we are down here, but through our technology we are able to see other places remotely. I am very interested in that aspect also. Just, again, even just from a purely visual manner, Remote Sensing is just, it's a to me it's a 21st Century form of impressionism or cubism. It's just gaining new perspectives through technology.

AM:

Can you actually describe what you make and your process?

RVS:

I could basically say that I draw a lot! I draw and I draw and I draw and I draw. And then, basically drawing for me is like I'm able to think. It's kind of like very meditative. And then at some point I am looking at images and looking at different types of information and then I say OH! I can take a material like that and make some art with it. Laugh.

I think that it is more about a reaction to, it's like I am absorbing all this information and it has to come back out in one way or another. I feel like it's, it's a filtered channeling of information of some sort and then I usually don't have a plan or a sketch of what I am doing it just sort of flows out. So things flow in and things flow out. I always feel like I am just a filter.

AM:

How many drawings have you made Rafael?

RVS:

I have no idea. laugh.

AM:

I mean, uncountable amounts.

RVS:

I am sure at some point they can be counted, but I have no idea.

Really.

I have books and notebooks and just full of page after page and I have no idea, really. I have been drawing my whole life so if you want to get down to it. I have been drawing pretty much every day of my life since I was 6 years old. So I have no idea. And I have pretty much all the drawings. Pretty much.

AM :

You do?

RVS:

Yeah. I don't really sell drawings, it is very rare. My work that leaves my hands is mostly paintings. Here and there some kind of, maybe a work on paper. But I pretty much have all my drawings.

AM:

And where do you keep these drawings?

RVS:

Here and I have a storage place that's just full of things but I also send a lot of work to Texas just to - with my family so they have a lot of stuff that just goes straight from the studio to

Texas. That is never shown, it's never exhibited it's just to keep. But as far as the number of drawings I have no idea. laugh  
Good question though. I have no idea.

AM:

laugh

We can start to the math perhaps.

So you were talking about materials earlier, can you describe some of the materials that you do use. Behind us, ...

We can just describe the space because people can't see it. They can only hear about it.

So can you describe the space as you walk in from the staircase?

RVS:

Yeah well right now I have a little bit of a bunch of recently finished works. I am currently working on a material called polypropylene canvas and it looks, one side is very canvas-like and one side is rubbery. And I am actually working on both sides as you can see. There's like two different pieces here, they are the same material but I am working on either side and this is a material that is used to wrap electrical cables with for spacecraft and then over this material they use thermal insulation which looks like silver or gold foil and there is a painting over here that's that material. I am trying to implement more and more materials that are actually used for spacecraft and for space operations for my work. And then the paints I am using are actually all industrial enamels, they are paints used to paint ships and planes and boats and spacecraft. In a sense the works that I am doing, most of the works that I am doing these days are quite sturdy and weatherproof you could say. Most recently I'm using solar cells used to make solar panels to add to these paintings to add to the geometry and the layering and I like the design of solar panels a lot. So to me just visually they reference things like minimalism and geometric abstraction, but they have a real purpose and a real function as well. They are not art, but we can put them in the art. Right now I am sort of in this period where I am trying out a lot of newer materials within my work and in about another week there are going to be a lot of really large panels arriving because I'm going to start to work on very large scale pieces.

AM:

And what are those panels made out of?

RVS:

Aluminum or wood.

AM:

So your materials range, I mean there's a painting here painted on wood panels and there is I think 3 wooden panels attached together. And then you have like you said all the space materials, or the materials they use in space.



RVS:

Yeah, you know sound is one of these realities that it just it's a way, it's part of the work and it sort of I could say that it is really a medium not only that I understand, but I really like the visualization of sounds, Synesthesia. But also for example when I'm working with things, when I'm listening to information from the space program, I'm not just looking at it, I'm listening. So there's a lot of everything from the sound of a rocket taking off to astronauts and cosmonauts communicating with Earth from space. You're talking about the sound of equipment the sound of even like waves on a shore and seagulls right near a rocket before launch. So, I always feel like there is so much sound involved with my subject matter and in the last several years I thought more and more about the actual physics of the sound so - one of the things that I am trying to do more recently is also implement sound as part of the paintings. That the paintings actually produce sound. So one of the ways to do that is instead of hooking them up to speakers or anything is to actually have them become a speaker through these things called tactile transducers, which you can feed a programmed sound into them and then they are attached to the surface of whatever object you're attaching them to and that object becomes a speaker, so we tested it earlier in the year and it worked really well and we're going to be working more on those things because actually we want the paintings to vibrate. Vibration is such a fundamental behavior of everything from the most sub-atomic to the most large scale thing in the universe. I really want the paintings to sort of start having their own sort of metabolism.

AM:

You say we, who's we when you work on sound?

RVS:

laugh.

I am starting, I have been collaborating with a man named Stephen Barber ([www.stephenbarber.com](http://www.stephenbarber.com)), composer, producer, arranger and Stephen is a person who when we met he explained his interest in visual art to me from a from the point of view of a person in music, highly highly accomplished in music. But I also realized very early on in our conversations that he really understands visual art, probably even more than most artists. Because the way he sees things is he thinks about them as energy and as a frequency and he is always talking about algorithms and frequencies. And I realized very early on in our friendship that we shared a lot of similar feelings and ideas about visualization. So last year we said so you know enough about this talk let's do something about it, so we did a piece that was shown earlier this year at VOLTA Art Fair. And it was basically a landscape of sorts, a 30 minute composition that had sounds going from the subsonic to the supersonic. And the subsonic sounds had to do with frequencies, they were based on frequencies, used by animals and plants in nature to communicate. So things like whales and otters and seals and elephants, they communicate subsonically. These frequencies can travel hundreds of miles, we can't hear them, but they can. And then it went from those frequencies, very very low frequencies, in mHz, all the way up to supersonic frequencies which we sampled from rocket liftoffs. Once you break the sound barrier it's considered supersonic, so a lot of these rockets that are lifted off, there's a point where they break the sound barrier because they are going so fast. We gathered a lot of material and it went from , again very low frequencies to very high frequencies and then the mid-frequencies we worked with a guy named, well the producer, was Dre, Andre, they call him Dre, his name is Andres, I never call him Dre.

So we worked with Andres Levine, Dre as they call him. And we worked with him, who really has so much expertise in mixing - such a broad range of materials, because he's worked with movies and so many sound tracks and things. So Stephen and I considered a sound track and then along the way he asked Bob Malik who is one of the premier saxophonists and he's

worked for years, with Barbara Streisand and Stevie Wonder and all these big stars. So Bob came on board our project and we did something really funny. We gave Bob a couple of small paintings of mine and put them on the music stand and we told Bob, why don't you thin about the composition of these small paintings and you develop a system of high and low and mid-tones that you can read. And so here's Bob, when of the best saxophonists on planet Earth reading one of my paintings and playing to it. And we did this with several small pieces so we recorded that and then mixed it with him and played around with it and so it was a real privilege to work with these guys, not only because of how much they know and how much they've done, but also because, they were for them, they said it was a real, something very different to do. That normally they are under these strict deadlines and they have to do things a certain way and this was a very open way to work for everybody so that was, so far that was the first project that Stephen and I have done and we're planning on doing a few more things fairly soon.

AM:

Good, because I did go to VOLTA and I heard your piece. I heard your collaboration, it was fantastic and I would love to have it on the show behind this if that's possible.

RVS:

Oh, yeah yeah - I'll give you a - yeah we can do that for sure!

The problem at VOLTA was that it is an art fair and it's not the most optimal place to hear something like that. We really recorded it and mixed it so that it will get re-mixed again, we keep calling it versions. So that was Version 1.9, we did 8 previous mixes till we got it right and then version 1.10 will basically be, or 2.0 will be if it'f for an exhibition and we will mix it so that it will be according the space that it will be in. So, that is one of the things working with these guys is that they are not thinking oh, Let's record something and make some sound. They are also thinking about how it is going to sound like in the room and Steven has, he always talks about the architecture of the room for the architecture of the sound. So that is something that I would have never really thought about a whole lot, but fortunately, Steven has that capacity and that experience so that when you hear something you are not only hearing it because of the way it just sounds, you are also hearing it because of the room you are in and how it sounds in that room.

AM:

Where wold you show your paintings if you had your ideal space?

RVS: On Mars.

No, I'm kidding.

AM:

No, I don't think you are. laugh

RVS:

Well, my ideal place is in zero gravity.

AM:

Good.

telephone RING

Good, that was perfect.

RVS: That is my mom.

AM:

Hi mom.

AM:

Can you describe that importance of the association of material to subject matter.

RVS:

I am glad you ask, that is actually a constant concern of mine. One of the things that, especially with the site specific work and the big murals is that I prefer to work with a local material that has a rich historical context to it and, for example, I will give you a good example. I did a series of murals last year that I did in Puerto Rico and I was very lucky enough to have been given what I consider the best and most beautiful space on the entire island, which is the chapel of the old Spanish Navy arsenal in the old city and it's this 500 year old chapel, it's got this beautiful dome with the niches and the little side chapels. I had been there twice before and I always remember thinking this would be such an amazing place to do something in. Low and behold, years later I am asked to be in the triennial, last year in 2012. And the curator of the exhibition said, "I don't know where I am going to put you, but I am thinking about your work for the chapel space." So I was immediately like, yes....

I want the chapel. So she gives me the chapel space and at that time I was doing a lot of thinking about martian landscape imagery and photography that is provided by the mars rovers and I was thinking about panoramic landscape paintings and murals and imagery and then I went on a site visit to the chapel and it's this 360 degree round room and I thought well , wow, this would be a great space it is a circle, it's circular. And then the first thing I thought is well, I want to use a local material to paint mars with so being in Puerto Rico, they have great coffee, I thought I could use coffee. Which I had already used mud in a previous piece, local mud from El Paso from el Rio Grande, from the border. And so I thought, you know this is another opportunity to use a local material so I ended up going to a coffee plantation and actually making my own coffee, literally from the beans to the roasting to the everything. We made the coffee so that the color of it was like this sepia, dark sepia tone, so by the time you're painting it on the wall it looks very antique. It looks like this Renaissance type of sepia tone, aquatints and watercolors. So, there is always for me there is this idea that local materials add up a layer of context and I get to learn a lot about something local. A lot of my subject matter is so, literally away from this world that by working with local materials I am able to kinda bring those things back here at a more down to earth context as well. So I do like that dichotomy between the subject matter being extra-planetary or extra-atmospheric and then working with a local material, it's kind of like a far away but so close. So I work with a lot of this idea of with materials of a duality, and then like in the studio here, the paintings, the

materials used for space craft - you know - it's like these things that could go to space, that could go out there but they are here. So again, I am always thinking about materials in this sense of place - the duality of place. Here, there, near, far.

AM:

I remember having a conversation in my studio, at one point, and you said this is where you should keep going because of the materiality and the association of the material to the subject. matter.

How many years have you been in NYC?

RVS:

Wow. That's funny this question keep coming up recently. I have been here since 1997 so 16 years was September 9th was 16 years.

AM:

Congratulations. I have been here for 15 years.

RSV:

OK.

AM:

Does it feel the same way to you as it does to me that time flies here in NYC?

RSV:

I, well, sometimes. I sometimes feel like it's, it depends if I am really really focused and as they say, in the zone, in the studio it is like time kind of doesn't exist and then all of a sudden when there are a bunch of deadlines stacked up against me time is just flying but I feel like a I have a pretty decent relationship to time in general, but it just depends on. I think there are certain times of the year where it just flies by. Like fall and spring. And I think winter in NY can be very long, laugh, and I think summers are just right.

AM:

You are from Texas. You were born in Mexico City, right and then you were raised in Texas, but why did you chose to move to NYC?

RVS:

I always wanted to live here. Since I was a little kid. You know when you were in school and they would say "what do you want to be when you grow up" I used to say I want to be a New Yorker. And the teachers were pretty freaked out, they would call my parents, my parents were like yeah of course, why wouldn't you. Why are you calling me? We live in NY when we were younger. My parents, not so much my dad, but my mom spent a lot of time here as a little girl so she knew and I knew when I was a child her story so I am a city person by nature, an urban dweller I guess you can say, it's just in my blood to be in a city.

AM:

And what is this city, what does this city mean to you?

RVS:

It means a lot of things, and I am going to sound very idealistic and naive but I think that as long as I have been here and, I know people have been here many many more years than myself, I still think that you still have a lot of the most open minded, and the smartest and the most ambitious people on earth here, working and thinking and doing and promoting and diffusing and... There is just so much going on here that I think it's not for everybody, but I think that if you are able to catch a wave here that it's just quite a - again - I am going to sound naive and after all these years, idealistic. I still think that there's the possibilities here are really open for pretty much almost anybody doing anything. I think it's up to each one of us to figure that part out, but I think that almost any artist is able to find a community here that not only tolerates what they do but that supports what they do.

AM:

I think this is a good time now to ask you this: to ask you to repeat the story you once told me about the act of being a criminal in the art world. Can you retell that please.

RSV:

Yeah, so basically I think you know his work, Ron Gorchov - he is a friend of mine, artist painter. Ron is like, literally like a living old master to me. And I remember having having coffee one time with Ron and Ron is somebody who gave me a lot of advice that said, don't take all of my advice, but I am just going to give you some. And he's a funny guy, but anyways, he, I remember him telling me I was about to go give a lecture in an art school - I think it was in Puerto Rico or Pennsylvania - anyways - he said well do you know what you're going to talk about? I said "yeah, I am going to talk about my work and then I am supposed to look at some of the MFA students' works and critique them." And he said "Oh yeah, they need criticism, they really need it, and he said - you know - one thing I always tell them is "they are going to ask you - inevitably they are going to ask you - how did you get into the art world - how did you get a break, how did you get a show? And he said I tell them the same thing and I love what Ron said, he said "I tell them that being an artist is like being a criminal." And what he meant by that was that criminals, no matter what are going to commit their crimes, right? They are going to get away with it, as many times as they can get away with it, but sooner or later they get arrested. So, I think what Ron meant by that is that artists just have to be up to something, they have to be doing something and then people come by their studio and then they go and they leave the studio and they start telling them or they go and see a show and they are like "you have to go see this, this guy is up to something. You got to go see this person, they are doing something and then those people that are told that you are up to something go see what you are up to and all of a sudden you get arrested. And I think what he meant by getting arrested is that finally you got caught, and you get a show or you - people find out what you are doing. Eventually you get a rap sheet. I always thought it was a funny analogy that. But I think in a way he's right, it's like artists have to be up to something and the more original and the more unique and the more innovative of a language that it is, it's people eventually somehow, especially in NYC, they find out.

AM:

And getting found out and getting arrested are good things in the art world!

RSV: Exactly

AM:

You were just talking about language and clearly your work has your own language that you have created. But you also speak Spanish fluently, clearly. How does that help your career?

RSV:

Well, I just see it as , you have twice the potential to communicate verbally, I mean literally the work, of course has it's a visual language and it has no, it shouldn't have any cultural bearing, barriers or borders, but. For me it's really about being able to, when I need to verbalize things it's such a huge advantage to be able to do it in more than one language.

Talking about my work in English, to me, is completely different than speaking about it in Spanish. Because you have to switch contexts a lot. Specifically cultural contexts. So, I've had the chance to travel through parts of the Caribbean. 46: 14 and South America and of course Spain and each place you're, you have to talk about your work and in a specific context that is more locally understood. With English it is very different, English is a universal language in which English is pretty much the same almost anywhere, but Spanish has a lot of local flavor to it so I for example in Spain I have to talk about things like cubism and certain specific artists in relationship to how I am working - how I am thinking and how I am composing visually. In South America it is more about the Brazilian and Venezuelan geometric abstract context and in Mexico it is about muralism. And here in the United States, you know of course, Spanish being such an important language here as well, it's sort of all of them put together. Having Spanish as an option has, it just opens up more doors. Really.

AM:

You've mentioned a lot of people have been your mentors and you're sort of one of mine, because I love having conversations with you Rafael.

RSV:

Thank you.

AM:

I just want to ask you, who would you thank or who do you want to thank for helping you get to the place that you're at now?

RSV:

Well, that is a pretty long list. laugh

Well I think it's there would be several categories. I think my immediate family first because I grew up in a house where I wasn't discouraged to make art or be creative or be do anything like that, even though they are really there is I don't come from a cultural family or a cultural background really. So, growing up I realized early on that I didn't I wasn't told that I couldn't that I shouldn't try to do anything creative. So that really has a lot to do with my parents, they

were always sort of like well whatever it is you want to do just try to be the best or try to be really good at it. When I got to NY I very quickly met some curators who again this wasn't even planned this was just like my work just happened to be around and some people told other people that I was up to something, going back to the criminal thing. And the first curator that saw my work and that put me in a show was Yasmin Ramirez. Who is an art historian and she is an expert on Caribbean culture but she saw my work as just very different and I am still friendly with her and her and her husband and they are very sweet people and I see them quite a bit still and she was really the first person that started telling other people look you have to see his work. And it took me a long time to realize what she liked about it, but now I realize that for her it was more about this sort of drawing, automatic drawing, and making all these shapes and connecting them to science and having it be some sort of diagram of reality and then she basically put me in some shows and to me it is almost like a family tree where one show leads to another and then around the year 2000 I met Rene Ricardo around 1998 or 1999 actually and Rene is a really great curator who discovered a lot of artists that became very well known like Vic Muniz, Rachel Harrison, Fabian Marccacio and I mean she is very very respected and known for her eye. So I was very lucky that she saw this wall drawing of mine and she put me in a show right away and she showed my work to people in Europe, people here, a lot of curators museums. And so I feel like in the beginning these two ladies, I was lucky enough that they saw my work and saw something within it, enough to want to show it.

And since then I have had a lot of I guess other curators who have also been very supportive here and in Europe and then artists have been....I have had several mentors basically. My first real mentor is a guy named David Midaya whose Filipino and based in London since the early 60s, a pioneer of earth art and performance and conceptual art and David is such a he is one of the most inspirational, creative people you could ever meet. He was a child prodigy, he was the youngest artist ever at Documenta and hung out with Walt Disney and Duchamp and the guy is like a walking 20th-Century art history book and David was really the first person who said, "you need to move to NY." and I was 20 or 21 at the time and then I moved to NY, of course as I had already thought about, but he really, he really was trying to drive it home, "You really got to get there, like ASAP." And then I had to, I was here about two weeks and I met Mark Lombardi who is now deceased, about the year 200, but Mark really was not just my friend, Mark was a real mentor, a teacher. Mark was a lot older than me and we kind of moved here at the same time, we actually had a day job together. And so I only knew Mark for about 3 years because then he died. And then I met Ray Smith, and then Ray became really kind of a patron, I mean he really he helped me out with a studio and introduced me to a lot of people and then basically after Ray I sort of became, I got to the point where I didn't necessarily sort of stumble upon a mentor anymore. So I feel like those guys were my graduate school, those guys are my PhD, those guys are like you know I can, with the exception of Mark, I can still talk to them. To David and Ray and still be able to learn. And really their life experience and artistic experience, I mean is just so rich. I was lucky that I was able to ever meet them and know them and be encouraged by them.

And the, also now it's like certain patrons and certain collectors it's that when things are getting scary they bail you out, but those are a different type of people you want to thank so. That's a whole different issue, that's more about just logistics, but it's such an important part of

when you are trying to, when you are making a living from your art those really at the end of the day are the people that are going to keep you going on a different level than creatively or emotionally. It's just, they become more and more important.

AM:

And now you do live off of your art now, but you just mentioned, you shared a job with Mark. What job was that job and what jobs have you had?

RVS:

I have been making work full time since pretty much around Sept. 11th. September 11th happened and the next day, literally the next day, I decided that I would never want to go back to a job and after Sept 12 on I think that was it. I said no more jobs, life is short, I want to make art. Before that I worked in galleries, I worked in museums, I worked in art handling companies, I did installations, I did so many things, just I had a lot of experience in Texas as a student, working in the University Art Museum and some private galleries and hanging shows doing lighting, working with curators and everything all across the board of art operations. That really gave me a lot of practical experience I brought with me to NY and I was able to find work very quickly and I had so much work offered to me all the time. Mark and I worked for a company in SOHO, an art shipper in SOHO and we both hated it and after work we would just hang out and talk and there was so much talking with Mark about so many subjects. So, subjects of my work, subjects of his work and both of us being from Houston we both really, I knew where he was coming from and he knew where I was coming from so we always had that Texas connection.

He worked mostly as a driver, driving trucks, and I worked mostly in the office, doing business math and accounting and clerking and everything. Everything that had to make the company function but I gained a lot of knowledge about the city, about the galleries about the collectors. I mean it was just endless, looking back on it I learned a lot, at the time I hated it. We had a guy as a boss who was a decent man, a good man, but as a boss he could be really horrible, but looking back on it I actually appreciate all I learned from him so. Like most jobs, your first job when you move to NY, it always has that story.

AM: So Rafael, we are almost done and I'll let you get back to work. I have to ask you, what are you reading right now?

RVS:

I'm reading several things, I just bought a book on Thomas Hirschhorn's writings, I've always been a big fan of his work. I recently saw him organize a talk with John Aherne about John Aherne's Bronx bronzes, that controversial piece from 1992. I'd always been into his work, Thomas Hirschhorn's work, and after seeing his Grand Ski project??? in the Bronx and after going to his lecture I realized, ok this is a guy, I like the way he thinks. So I bought a book that was just published of his writings.

And then I am reading Notes on a Conditional Art by Robert Irwin whose one of my all time favorite artists and it's really about, it's all his writings, interviews, notes, lectures, letters, complaints, rants, everything. And I've always been big fan of his work but his writing is very



different than his work, it's a little bit professorial, but at the same time very clear in thought and very rational, which I really appreciate and then I'm reading a book, I'm trying to learn Russian. I can't speak it very well, but I don't know why I can actually read it pretty good right now, not a lot. So I'm reading a book on ??? Nabokov, who was an architect, a 20th-Century Architect in Russia during Soviet times and I went on this last trip I want to a bunch of building that are still in Moscow that he designed and some of them are now, they are used for completely different purposes - just factories or warehouses, some of them are now cultural centers, one of them is gallery, one of them is a museum, they're....I'm really into architecture so, this was an architect that I knew a little bit about before but on this last trip to Russia I did a little bit of my own research about him and was able to find out about this pretty cool comprehensive book. I am re-reading Terry Duvets' book from Kamf to Duchamp??? It is a very difficult book to read and I like it because it is from the perspective of a - he wrote it as a sort of, I don't know if you know the book, it's a book that's built around this idea of if a person or being from another civilization, alien civilization, came to Earth, and the first thing they stumbled upon is Duchamp's urinal fountain, right. Duchamp's Fountain. And this being, one of the first things they notice is that human beings consider it so important, how do you explain the importance of this thing to an alien being? It's a really brilliant book and it has a lot with the philosophy of Kant and it goes all the way to Warhol's oxidation paintings. So, it's pretty heavy stuff but I like the way he writes and the way he explains what if you don't know something, what if you are so oblivious but the one thing you do know is how you notice other people's feelings about something. And then how you form your opinion based on your observation of other people's thoughts and feelings about something. Like why is that so important. So I feel like it's a book that's also a bit of an analogy on how most people in society are not interested in art and the ones that are, of course who get into it and understand it, when you see people in a museum or in an art gallery who poke fun at something and go "oh a four year old can do that." They don't understand the context of why the urinal, why this fountain - what's the importance, what's the relevance. And I just like the way he writes.

AM:

I should read that because I have had to describe this to people many a time, why some things are so important or why this is in a museum and why they in fact can't make that painting on the wall that they think a four year old made. Anyway.

What do you listen to in the studio?

RVS: I pretty much, during the morning up till about 5:00 I just have music. And it just depends on if I am working not under a lot of pressure I can have some clam music. If I am under a strict deadline, I crank it up and it's fast and heavy. Hard and heavy. So it just depends. Today I will probably listen to country music all day. And right around October / November I start needing a southern fix because I haven't been back in the south in so long since last spring. So I start getting a little I need some country music today. And I like the old stuff, most of the new stuff I don't like. So I'll listen to some Don Walser today probably. He was called the Pavoroti of the Plains because he was a yodeler.

AYM:

Can you share some more people that you listen to?

RVS:

Like country?

AYM:

Yeah.

RVS:

I like Don Walser. I like Buck Owens. I like of course Willie Nelson is a key figure. I also listen to a lot of like Casian zydeco - Luisiana music, so there is also this - when you grow up in Luisiana or New Orleans there's a lot of this blending and mixing of Caijen and French and Zydeco and Country and Western. It's kind of like this idea of the Gulf Coast. When you go from Houston to New Orleans there is so much music, so I tend to try and listen to that region as much as possible. Some of it is called Swamp Boogie. So it's just kind of like Rock n' roll, Zydeco and then one of my favorite characters, he's now dead, but great is Gatemouth Brown who was quite a prodigy, he played I don't know how many instruments, but his two main instruments were the fiddle and guitar. He could make the fiddle sound like a guitar and the guitar sound like a fiddle and that's like from a sound perspective that's pretty mind boggling.

AYM:

I'll let you get back to work Rafael, thank you so much for having me.

RVS:

Thank you, Allison, it was fun.