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Oral history interview with Mel Ramos, 1981 May 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Mel Ramos on May 15, 1981. The interview was conducted at Mel Ramos' home in Oakland, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Mel, a few minutes ago we were talking about your writing; I guess it was the watercolor book, was that right?

MEL RAMOS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you were saying how you ran into a few problems with the editorial help in terms of changing your form of expression. You mentioned an example. You were writing about your views about the figure, which of course is why we're sitting down here talking into the tape recorder right now, and you said something that interested me: that you feel the figure has been castrated, I gather through the history of art, or perhaps in modern times. What do you mean by that "castration" of the figure?

MEL RAMOS: I use that term very specifically for what it means, and what it means is that you get your balls cut off. And it seems to me that when you cut the balls off someone, in this case you castrate some idiom in art. You know, it's like you make it into an esthetic eunuch. It's sort of neuter. It's become impotent, in other words. And considering the very first known object ever fashioned by man was the Venus of Willendorf, which was a little nude figure. So when you start with a little nude figure and then you ass four million years of – or is it two million years – when you ass millions of years of that history you would tend to think that the figure really doesn't offer much for an artist to deal with. I mean, the bottom of the barrel was scraped, it's sort of gone, but for some strange reason, that's not true, that's not true. Every once in a while there seems to be some artist who comes along and does these incredible paintings. It's been that way throughout the history of art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how does this castration – what form does it take specifically? Do you mean a stylization that somehow turns the figure into a formal arty object and perhaps gets away from the vitality, the flesh and blood, the connotations, maybe even the eroticism, these human qualities, does that have something to do with it?

MEL RAMOS: Well, sort of yes and no to that question. I see the figure as – I'm not sure how I can put this without sounding, you know, callous and personal, but that's actually the way it is with me. I always saw the figure not from a spiritual point of view. A lot of artists want to do figure painting from some spiritual or mystical or emotional kind of position because of all the things implied, you know, with the human being. But I don't see it that way, and I've only used the figure in my work as iconography, that is to say, as depictions of contemporary iconography. If you look around at the media, the figure is used in a myriad of ways for various purposes, advertising, in the form of billboards or on TV, magazines, you know, all around the American landscape. My interest in the figure grows out of that kind of situation, that is to say, an external situation that interests me visually. And therefore I interpret that not so much from an emotional standpoint but from a sort of detached, impersonal, kind of cool, you know, outside-looking-in situation, rather than being closely emotionally --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I gather from what you said that your relationship to the figure is really less of a personal one than almost a general one, whereby, through the use of the figure you're responding to, perhaps, the modern culture, to broader issues. This is really what interests you.

MEL RAMOS: That's right. I'm only interested in the figure as symbolism.

PAUL KARLSTROM: --of modern life.

MEL RAMOS: Exactly. Yes, that's the way I represent the figure in my work, in so-called contemporary society, not to say that historically, that it hasn't occurred, it hasn't appeared in an historical context. That also interests me, because I find the situations are very similar from one epoch to the next. In art history certain themes keep reappearing, they've been reoccurring for thousands of years and artists just keep doing them, like, for example, Leda and the Swan. Since the Greek that wrote that story did it, they've been using it – since Hellenistic Greek times.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you view the figure, then, as providing – I don't want to read in too much here, but do you view it as providing a continuity, a theme that then connects the modern world, or connects you and all of us to our forebears, if you will, to our own history as it extends way back? There are these common themes that are

explored over and over again, and it provides continuity here within the visual arts.

MEL RAMOS: Well, certainly in my case, my work for the last ten years has been strongly associated with the history of art. I started doing some paintings in the sixties which involved the history of art. In that case, it was popular art, comic book literature – the myths and the icons and the personalities that came out of the comic books, which have very strong implications in people's lives. For example, that movie, Superman, that just came out – I mean this affected a lot of people in one way or another. It sure affected me. From that to the late sixties I did some things with animals, again, which is a theme which comes from the tradition of, as I mentioned earlier, Leda and the Swan, King Kong and so forth, and the animal influence, bestiality, that appears in the history of art. Some of the very earliest paintings on cave walls are of animals, and I'm just sort of interested in the kind of things which seem to have strong interest in various epochs that seem to reoccur. Why do they reoccur? What is the tie between one period and the next that attracts artists to these subjects? And so my work is about those reasons that artists find to perpetuate these myths. I'm interested in why that goes on, and does it go on in the contemporary society? Well, it certainly does, and it manifests itself in a different kind of visual image, and that's the kind of visual image I'm interested in doing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you feel that in a sense you're updating the themes in modern clothes while acknowledging and maintaining the basic themes themselves?

MEL RAMOS: I'm not sure that "updating" is a word I would like to use. I don't think updating is very precise, actually, because the way it occurs now and, let's say, the way it occurred in 1860 Paris is not quite the same. I mean the artist – I suppose it's wrong of me to presume what the artist was thinking, but in the case of Manet's *Olympia*, from what I read, he had a strong relationship with the model, and in the case of my *Olympia*, it didn't have anything to do with that at all, the model was just a combination of things, a face from one source, you know, the flowers were being held by the maid from another source. In some cases I made my own props, but it came from a series of various sources to make this painting, not because I had any particular relationship with that model. It was because of the image again, an image which occurred before Manet in the case of Georgione's *Sleeping Venus*, and also in Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. So from that point of view, I had an entirely different concept of what I was doing about that painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the theme itself, as iconography, as an image, is very directly related to or lifted from these earlier sources, and so the theme itself is maintained, although perhaps the impulses behind it are different. You can't get away from the art historical recognition or connections right there.

MEL RAMOS: I think "impulse" is the correct term. The art historical part of it is for me – I like to think of my work as being humorous, something which a lot of people look down their nose at, but you know, I figure that --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where would we be without humor?

MEL RAMOS: I'm 46 years old; I can't be uptight now. I have to continue with the idea of humor. Everything else is so depressing. Life is so depressing. Everybody's being shot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, the other day the Pope.

MEL RAMOS: The Pope got shot, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: John Lennon, Reagan. And so maybe in a way --

MEL RAMOS: But it reinforces my notion, only on the opposite end of the spectrum. I'm interested in celebrity, and I do paintings of celebrities. Most of the things I do are very high-profile, well-known objects and nothing esoteric about it. And my approach to a figure is the same way, I mean I have no emotional involvement with – I'm not trying to uplift the spirit. But I do like to make "up" paintings, I mean, paintings which are up experiences, they're not depressing. I went to the German Expressionist show and I was depressed. I knew I was going to be depressed, because German Expressionism generally depresses me. You know, in a strong painting, you feel the agony involved. But I was depressed in this case because most of the paintings were bad paintings. I just didn't like them very much. There was one little Nolde watercolor, a little figure with a lot of yellow and red in it, I remember, and it was just gorgeous and I thought it was the star of the show. But the point is that I'm interested in celebrating celebrity, and what seems to be happening around the world is that all the celebrities seem to be getting knocked off by some other person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in a way you're honoring the position of high-profile individuals in your work, or at least acknowledging their visibility.

MEL RAMOS: "Acknowledging" is the correct word; I'm not honoring anything. I'm very apolitical about art. I get a lot of flack from very few, but nevertheless very vociferous, feminists about my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because of the so-called *Playboy* imagery, I suppose.

MEL RAMOS: It has to do with the nudity and the way in which I do it. They think of it as exploitive. My standard comment in a reply to that is that I'm apolitical about it. I'm not embracing it, supporting it, championing that, rejecting that, I'm just observing that it's there and that's the way it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And like it or not, it's an important part --

MEL RAMOS: It's part of the visual landscape and I'm interested in pointing out that aspect of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said something interesting in connection with the German Expressionist show which was at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, a large exhibition. Of course the German Expressionist artists, especially the Bridge group, have very direct involvement with the model. There are a lot of figure works, a lot of nudes, and of course historically this was a part of their program. They would go off into nature and paint their girlfriends, wives, whatever, cavorting in a landscape, but the nude figure in any even appears frequently and it means a great deal, at least on one level, in a personal sense. How do you feel your use of the figure relates to the German Expressionist approach? I gather from what you said that there are huge differences, but do you want to expound?

MEL RAMOS: Yes, I'm sure it probably relates, and there are differences and I think the differences are probably much stronger than the relationships. The differences come from context, I guess; it's a contextual difference. It's a very kind of emotional approach that they used, and mine is just the opposite, it's very clinical.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A good word.

MEL RAMOS: The criticism that I get from feminists is that I make these figures very brassy and shiny and flawless; curios words that they use: "flawless," because I tend to get--

PAUL KARLSTROM: Inhuman, I guess.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, right. I tend to get the most flack from women who have flaws, who as I see it have visual flaws. Women who have, as I said, no flaws seem to enjoy my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They identify.

MEL RAMOS: It's an ego thing, it's just an ego thing, and everybody's ego is involved when it comes to situations like this, particularly when the issues are hot and political, like nudity in public places. That seems to be – there seems to be a lot of it around.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean objections to it.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, exploiting women. Well, I mean the history of Western art, Western thought – you know, women have always been held as the peacocks in society. It's only in the lower animals that the male of the species are the peacocks. It's always been the tradition, they've always done that in Western society where --

PAUL KARLSTROM: At least modern Western society. If you go back to the Greeks and the Romans, especially in the early Greek work, you would find very few female images, especially nude, but the male athletes seem to embody the ideal, and it seems that we've, through the years moved away from that and shifted the emphasis almost entirely.

MEL RAMOS: They were probably more equal-rights conscious, the Greeks were, because there seems to be an equal amount of Dianas and Venus de Milos around along with Apollos and Achilles. But the only people that I can think of in recent history, with the exception being Rodin – I can't think of any artists who make, for example sculpture – if they do men, for example, portraits of men – I'm not talking about people who make sculpture for parks and heroes, I'm talking about people who make sculpture for parks and heroes, I'm talking about just using the subject. Rodin was the only one who dealt with the male explicitly. But quite to the contrary, when you think of sculpture, the sculpting of women, why my gosh, there's just all kinds of very representational sculpture of the nude woman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, most of the artists of note in modern history, anyway, that have come down to us, have been men. I wonder to what extent you feel that the male nude has been avoided perhaps because of homosexual connotations in our society, or perhaps it may be much more simple than that, that men for the most part are basically more interested in women, at least we could say this for heterosexual men, and the homosexual artists have a much more difficult time, perhaps, dealing without revealing preferences in a public way through their art. Do you think that's an issue, or explanation, for the dominance of female nudes in our Western art?

MEL RAMOS: I'm not sure about that. The homosexual thing is curious, kind of interesting because there are a lot of artists who are homosexual, and from what I understand – I'm personally not gay, but I really can understand from a genuine sincere point of view, honest, coming from myself, what that means. But I hear that homosexual men have a lot of sexual energy and a lot of the energy can be channeled into art, because I know a lot of homosexual artists, terrific artists. But the ones that I know don't deal with sexuality at all, they just don't deal with it in their work. I don't see it in there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I can think of, at least in terms of using the male nude, the male figure, I can think of a few exceptions locally to that. Paul Wonner, for instance. Not that that determines his work, but he's done some very important paintings where there is --

MEL RAMOS: That's right. David Hockney.

PAUL KARLSTROM: David Hockney's a great example, and here's a case where the man makes a lifestyle, part of his image that he's projected is his homosexuality. He came out of the closet to an incredible extent. The result from an art standpoint is the marvelous portraits and studies of lovers, men, and this sort of thing.

MEL RAMOS: Etchings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fantastic. So it seems to me, at least in those cases, that the male nude is handled in a special way that is unprecedented in recent times, and also reflects sexual preferences and energy, and I suppose what I'm trying to get at is, do you feel that the predominance of the female nude, mainly produced by male artists, quite naturally expresses this erotic and sexual interest in an externalization and manifestation?

MEL RAMOS: I'm sure it probably does. I know in my case, in the few instances when I've painted a male nude – I'm not talking about the way Manuel Neri would do a male nude, or Giacometti would do a male nude, I'm talking about --

PAUL KARLSTROM: More literal.

MEL RAMOS: --yes, something like Maillol, or Rodin, and while I didn't find the experience repugnant, I didn't find it particularly rewarding and more that it was if I painted a tree, you know. But the way I work, I work so close to the painting, that is, I wear magnifying glasses.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really, literally?

MEL RAMOS: I wear jeweler's glasses when I work. I work at a distance of six inches on a six- or eight-foot painting. My world in making the painting has nothing to do with sitting back and jerking off. It has to do with dealing with a little four-inch section of color that I'm sort of splashing around. So as I deal with the image I don't have – it's not any more rewarding to me to paint the female figure than it is to paint anything. But I must say that if I had to make a hard choice, it probably is a little bit more rewarding from a sexuality standpoint. That is to say, it's more fun to paint a breast, for example, than --

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- a hairy chest. It's more of a challenge, don't you think, to paint a hairy chest, all those hairs.

MEL RAMOS: Sure; it's just more fun, and I suppose that has to do with my sexual preference. But basically, to me, painting is just painting, it doesn't matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But obviously you made a choice, that your work and your imagery is well known for involving the female figure. I think that if you asked anybody, "Do you know Mel Ramos's works?" they would have some very clear pictures in mind, and invariably it would involve the female nude, perhaps treated in a pinup way, and maybe in conjunction with what at one time was called "Pop" sensibility or imagery; and I don't want to get into the whole idea of Pop art right at the moment. But obviously you made a choice. You said that you did a few male nudes. Was this early on in your career? Because I've never seen them.

MEL RAMOS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I have? Besides your self portrait?

MEL RAMOS: It's in that book there, in that catalogue.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, that's the --

MEL RAMOS: No, they were self-portraits. I was confronted with doing --

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is David's *Duo of 1973*.

MEL RAMOS: Right. There was this painting that I was interested in of [Jacques Louis] David and one also of [Francois] Gerard and one of Francois Picot, Cupid and Psyche paintings which I wanted to deal with as subject, and I did three of them, I did three Cupid and Psyches, all of which had the male figure in them. I just used the image of myself as a male figure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So all of the males that you've done really are self-portraits. Well, so far, Mel, we've moved quite quickly and I think, effectively into some of the basic issues in a specific way in terms of you and your own work and your relationship to the figure, what it means to you. What I'd like to do now is move back to some more general questions that have to do with the whole phenomenon of the figurative tradition, specifically in California art. For some reason here in the Bay Area certainly, and elsewhere I'm sure as well, even at a time or at periods when the figure has, shall we say, fallen out of fashion in terms of fine art activity, what with Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting, Minimal, Post-Painterly Abstraction, Conceptual, shall we say, directions in recent art, nonetheless, the figure has persisted and this ancient theme continues. I think to a certain extent you've answered the question why that is so, but looking right here at the Bay Area, keeping in mind of course an important phenomenon, I suppose, of the late fifties and early sixties Bay Area Figurative school – seemed to have a very strong hold in this area. And I would imagine you would associate yourself, you have been associated with the Bay Area Figurative, with some of the individuals, Nathan Oliveira being one of them. Briefly, how do you view that phenomenon and your own relationship to it as you developed your art?

MEL RAMOS: I'd say that whole thing that was going on with those people that worked here in the late fifties, Oliveira and David Park, Elmer Bischoff and Foland Petersen, Paul Wonner, William Brown, Joan Brown, had a terrific impact on me because I was in college at the time, I was a student.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you study with any of those?

MEL RAMOS: Never studied with any of them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No direct formal --

MEL RAMOS: No, I only saw their work, that's all. But that's all one needs is to see the work, see the real magoo. And once you see that, I was sufficiently moved by it to reorganize my whole thinking about being an artist. At that time I was sort of starting out at school and was thinking that I wanted to be an artist, that I had something to say, but I was bumping around and not knowing which kind of idiom to say in it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did you study, if I may interrupt?

MEL RAMOS: Sacramento State, for most of my college days. I went away one year to San Jose State but I didn't take any art courses there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you didn't?

MEL RAMOS: No, I was chasing my wife around, my girlfriend at the time. I was courting her, and I just didn't study much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That sounds familiar.

MEL RAMOS: So I was on probation and I had to make up a lot of courses. So I did all these kind of academic courses at San Jose. But I had one course in lettering from some old sign painter who came, and that was very important to me because a lot of my work has lettering, has the use of lettering in it. He taught me a lot of things about finishing of a serif, how you make them look sharp. That was really important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That reminds me of *Phantom Lady* of 1963, just as an example of the use of the lettering as a part of the total image. It even has serifs.

MEL RAMOS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that's where you got them.

MEL RAMOS: That's a painting in which I was using very heavy paint. To lay on this kind of heavy paint with a large brush, but you'll still keep those letters crisp. It's a trick that I learned from this guy. It's very easy to make them look soggy unless you paint them really hard with sharp edges. So that was a great experience with him. But I took most of my art courses at Sacramento State College.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And who were some of your instructors?

MEL RAMOS: A guy named Robert Else, a guy named Raymond Witt, a guy names Paul Beckman, and a guy named Ernest Vollbrecht. These were the teachers that were there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, now, was Wayne Thiebaud at that early date teaching at Davis?

MEL RAMOS: No, Wayne was teaching at Sacramento City College, where I went my first year of school, and where I took a painting course when I was a freshman – I was 18 years old – and an art history course. I took an art history course from Wayne and he didn't know how to pronounce Ingres's name correctly; he used to call him "Ang." And so I did a painting once of that painting, and remembering my lessons of art history, I called it *Ode to Ang*.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you spell it?

MEL RAMOS: A-n-g, just the way I heard it from him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some of your early figurative work – I'm looking here at a painting of 1960 called *Tourist* – does seem to owe something to Wayne Thiebaud.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, that's a portrait of Wayne Thiebaud.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's what I thought. It owes a great deal to Thiebaud.

MEL RAMOS: I owe a lot to him for that one, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you feel that Wayne was one of the, among these figurative artists, he's not generally considered part of the core of the Bay Area Figurative school, I suppose, but do you feel that Wayne was really one of the important influences in pointing a direction for you at this age?

MEL RAMOS: Yes, he was probably the second most influential person on me as an artist, the first one being Salvador Dali. When I was 15 years old, 16 years old, the first time I ever saw a reproduction of a Salvador Dali painting, I decided that I wanted to be an artist. It was a painting called *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans*.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think I know that one.

MEL RAMOS: And I decided that I wanted to be an artist then. So I made my way through high school painting posters for the basketball games and whatnot, put up in the hallway. And I took an art class and didn't have to do any projects, art projects. I would paint posters.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That sounds like exploitation.

MEL RAMOS: I got my grade that way. It turned out, when I went to college, I also got through this silly audio-visual aids course that one must take as a teacher if I painted posters for the guy who taught it. So I kind of greased my way through school painting posters. When I went to Sacramento State and met Wayne – I actually first saw him when he came to my high school on Career Day. He spoke about art careers. I went and listened to that lecture and he convinced me to go to Sacramento City College. So I went there and I met him and he was great. He taught me a lot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mentioned Dali. What was it about Dali that so appealed to you, and do you feel that your work, at least at one stage or another, owes anything to Dali's work itself?

MEL RAMOS: My work is rooted in Surrealism, definitely. You mentioned the word "conjunction" a while back. That's exactly what it is. Every series of paintings that I've done seems to have as a central pervading kind of theme this notion of conjunctions, that is, once symbol with another symbol.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like maybe the California bear, the state symbol --

MEL RAMOS: In this case, the girl with the animal, or in the case of a girl and the food, the grapefruit thing, the banana thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The grapefruit painting, of course – isn't that Arlene Dahl's head on that figure, buried in grapefruits and called Sunkist, 1964? It's in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

MEL RAMOS: Yes. And so in the sense that the Surrealists, and particularly Dali, used these kind of absurd conjunctions, I don't know why that's always interested me, it just has. And you see it just everywhere, in advertising particularly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you really think, with Sunkist that the conjunctions here are really all that absurd? Because from a strictly formal standpoint, the model of the figure here is shown buried about to the waist in these grapefruits, and then all these round forms clearly, and I think it must be intentional, echo the form of the breast.

MEL RAMOS: Well, I'm not saying that my conjunctions are absurd. I'm saying that the Surrealists used absurd conjunctions, that is, a guy walking in the middle of the desert with a tuxedo on, that's an absurd conjunction. And that was a common theme of the Surrealists. I'm not saying I'm doing it. I'm just using conjunctions, that is, combining elements which are not necessarily compatible, right? As one would think of them. The grapefruit painting came out of a very real life experience, as most of my paintings do. The grapefruit painting came out of a very real life experience, as most of my paintings do. The grapefruit painting came out of an experience I had one summer at the California State Fair, where I was working during summer school while I was going to college. I was working with Wayne Thiebaud. He was the designer of the California State Fair art exhibit for about five years, and he sort of put up the show and accepted the work and prepared it for judging, hired the judges, and did all the mechanics of running an exhibition.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year?

MEL RAMOS: This was '55, '56, '57. And one day for lunch, I was sitting in back of the art building, which was the converted poultry building; it used to be the poultry building. It was the nicest building on the old state fairgrounds. It was a brick building, and the rest of them were sort of wood and cement, painted institutional green. So all the PR people from the various counties used to come to the art building as a backdrop to promote the fair. It was the only decent-looking building. And in doing this, they came here once with the maid who had just recently won the beauty contest, the Maid of Orange County or Ventura County, or somewhere down south where they grow a lot of oranges, and they came, and this girl – I'm sitting there eating my bologna sandwich – and all of a sudden these guys come up in this truck, a dump truck, and they dump this load of oranges in the grass. And then out comes this girl in this white bathing suit with a little satin banner that said "Ventura County" on it, and they kind of bury her halfway into this stuff and they take all these photographs to send back home for the papers to promote the fair. And I'm sitting there watching this, so five years later I did a painting of it. I did a series of paintings of it, actually. I did one of grapefruit, one of oranges, one with honeydew melons, one with lemons. So, as I say, it came from a real life experience. But as I was sitting there, I said to myself, that's really surreal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Dali would have loved that.

MEL RAMOS: You know; what's going on here?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, is this unusual in your work, the fact that there's an experience, a very specific experience, that sets off --

MEL RAMOS: It's always an experience which motivates me to work, and it's my particular fondness for art history which motivates most of my work. An experience just sort of triggers off a thought about something which may eventually lead to something else. I've always felt that the figure was very, very important to my work. It's always been present, ever since I was a kid. I was always interested in figure painting. But one series of paintings leads to the next. You get an idea, or you develop a thought while you're working on something and it leads to another painting. I got into doing these de Kooning paintings, de Kooning being a very important influence in my life also. I can show you some paintings which are not in that catalogue, which --

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean the one in the Oakland catalogue?

MEL RAMOS: The book, the big book --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

MEL RAMOS: --which came before those early paintings, which looked just like de Kooning women. I mean, I was just really troubled by him at one time. So it was quite a challenge for me actually to try to attempt to do that painting just sort of outright, blatant, straightforward – here's *Woman No. 1* – and still make it, you know, a Ramos painting. And I think it was successful in that regard. It's probably to this point, the best painting that I made.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

MEL RAMOS: Yes, I feel very strongly about that painting. But it was the kind of things that I was doing with that painting, that is, the involvement with the paint itself, the painting of brushstrokes, that is, the reconstituting of those brushstrokes, painting them visually the way they appear in magazines, as opposed to the way they actually appear on the paint, on the surface, which has nothing to do at all with the way they appear in magazines. You're conscious of just so much energy and inhuman speed and transitory thoughts when you look at that work. You're so overwhelmed by the immediacy of it that when you see it in a book, it's not at all the same thing. So my painting is actually a painting of a reproduction of it, although it's been slightly altered. I added breasts. I made a nude out of it. I painted it all flesh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You not only added breasts, you combine the – you created a figure here with hooves, like a little satyr or centaur or something like that, which I don't remember from de Kooning.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, it's there. Everything is there, everything is exactly the same except that there – this was white. That was white and there was a red, she had on a red, something red down here, but I tried to make it, I tried to keep dark and lights consistent, but I made it all flesh color, the whole thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So actually, see, my memory doesn't serve me well, but the hooves were in the de Kooning? We should actually identify this, because I think it's important.

MEL RAMOS: The painting is --

PAUL KARLSTROM: *I Still Get a Thrill When I See Bill, No. 1*, 1976.

MEL RAMOS: It's a painting of de Kooning's first woman painting, the one that's owned by the Museum of Modern Art, which I saw in 1956 on my first trip to New York and was set on my heels, just set back. That's what happens to me usually, I see somebody else's painting and I get knocked out by it and I eventually get around to doing something about it. In the case of the de Kooning, I saw in 1956, and later in 1956 I was home making little de Koonings, I mean, just the way they looked. I was a student, I was 21 years old. Then I started making Oliveiras. All my work started looking like Nathan Oliveira. But that's a normal process, just a normal process, except that eventually an artist gets to a point where he starts doing something different. I just never really changed, I've always been doing that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're still a student.

MEL RAMOS: Still doing it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's move on. I think you have indicated to a certain extent what you feel your relationship to the Bay Area Figurative School was, and to recap, that I suppose these individuals and their work reinforced your basic, very early attraction to the figure. Then what about stylistically? I mean, the theme is there, it was there in your area where you grew up and studied and all that, in this Bay Area. What about the stylistic elements within the within the Bay Area Figurative Movements, the early connections, say, with Abstract Expressionist gesture, paint, and this kind of thing? Do you trace your own interest in that to the Bay Area Figurative school, Diebenkorn or --

MEL RAMOS: Yes, absolutely. You know, another curious painter around the Bay Area, and a very good friend of mine, is George Miyasaki. I was working at the state fair one year, and a painting by George Miyasaki came in, and it was a classical Bay Area Expressionist painting, you know, in the style of Diebenkorn and Nathan Oliveira and George Miyasaki. But George, being Japanese, was using all these very mystical colors, and I was really impressed by this painting by George Miyasaki, and my work definitely took a turn after that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the painting? Do you remember? Was it a specific --

MEL RAMOS: Some sort of abstract landscape.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not a figurative --

MEL RAMOS: No, it wasn't a figurative painting. But we were talking about style. And that painting had a lot to do with clarifying my thoughts about style. It was the way George used color. That was just very subtle kind of stuff. He's still doing the same thing only in an entirely different way, it translates into a different way. He has a show coming up at Stephen Wirtz very soon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'll see his work and I can say, "Ah, now I know where Ramos got it."

MEL RAMOS: Well, no, not at all, actually. This painting that I saw in 1957 by George had nothing at all to do with what he does now. It was a painting – we used to play this game at the State Fair, called "Hybrid" – I call it "Hybrid." I'm not sure who invented it; it may have been Wayne, but then again, it may have been me. I can't remember. But the game goes, if George Miyasaki is the offspring and Nicolas de Stael is the mother, who is the father?

PAUL KARLSTROM: You tell me.

MEL RAMOS: Right. And it had to do with – you know what that's about – it has to do with influences, sources, and what affects what. And it got to the point where Wayne and I and Jack Ogden, who was also working there, we could play this game. We used to play it because, you know, setting up an art exhibit is kind of boring work, so we'd play this game while we were working along, and it got to a point where invariably we could almost guess the answer immediately. Like de Kooning, for example. De Kooning was the mother, and Milton Resnick

was the offspring. Who was the father?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, my God. Well, that's a little deep for me this early in the morning.

MEL RAMOS: Right, it would make a great game.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You ought to patent it.

MEL RAMOS: Well, the answers could be – there's a lot of latitude there on those answers by anybody that's – but you know, style – I don't know, I really think that of all things about art that one could deal with, one of the strongest things is an emotional thing, an emotional kind of inclination of your approach to art, because people tend to use that work a lot, they tend to look at art and talk about the spiritual feelings that it imparts. And I'm very rarely – I'm usually bored with that kind of art, I have no patience with that kind of art. And so, being a very emotional person, I suppose that the most emotional part of my painting is color. It has to do with how that's applied. It's a felt kind of thing. If I'm struggling with notions about color and I see something in color that will affect me somehow, I tend to use that as a solution for my future problems.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think so.

MEL RAMOS: It has to do with fooling around and trying to learn how to draw, you know, a certain kind of space, and you look at Rembrandt, *The Man with the Gold Helmet*, and there it is, that's how you do it, just like that. That black behind his hat just kind of keeps getting denser and denser and denser as it goes back, rather than have the space just kind of go phhhhhw, dropping flat on the surface. Rembrandt solved that problem for me, so I'll just use the same solution for the same problem. And that's been the kind of way I've been doing things. In the process, one spends a lot of hours fiddling around, moving, you know, with a brush or pencil, moving paint around, and you get a lot of practice and you develop a certain kind of skill at it like you would with anything if you practiced it ten hours a day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what I would like to do now is get quite specific in talking about the figurative tradition, the artists and the model, and I wonder what role the individual model plays in your work, and I mean, again, specific individuals, other than, if it's the case at all, other than providing the forms for whatever the composition may be.

MEL RAMOS: Well, I married Leta when I was very young, and she's been with me all my life, and she's been my principal model; she appears in my work from the very beginning, since 1957 when I started doings paintings. The first painting I did of her was pregnant with my son inside; she was sitting there all blown up. And then I did some big portraits of her when I was still going to school, and then throughout the years, she's been the model in each series that I've done of different things. She was in a lot of the animal paintings. She was in the first three animal paintings, one called *The Walrus*, one called *Rhino*, one called *Gorilla*, which are not in there, they're not in that book.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm familiar with the works.

MEL RAMOS: They were the first animal paintings. That's her on the cover of the book, the art history painting there, on the watercolor book. So she's my principal model.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your basic source, and that of course raises some interesting questions. Am I right in assuming, then, that in these series, where we encounter many different, sometimes well known portrait heads, that in fact, these – it's like a pastiche, the heads are applied on the body of the woman.

MEL RAMOS: I hate that word, "pastiche."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, but fundamentally that is the case.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, that's generally the case, right. I, for a long time, just used the – my work is about media, you know. For a long time I just used photographs available from the media.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's what I always assumed.

MEL RAMOS: But there came a point – that was okay when I was doing those kinds of paintings that had to do with those food things, you know, cheeses and catsup bottles and so forth. That kind of stuff was very readily available in the media, I mean, Del Monte catsup always had such beautiful color adds in Life magazine and great source stuff for photorealists if you're so inclined. And other magazines had all the figures you needed. Well, when I started doing the art history series, I really needed a specific pose and a specific looking kind of person, particularly in the series I did called *You Get More Salami with Modigliani*. I did twenty paintings of Modigliani's nudes, and they're all kind of very peculiar looking – each painting has a specific personality. Like one figure might have these enormous hips and a very thin waist. So I had to find a figure that looked like that.

[Break In Tape]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mel, we were cut off when the tape ended and you were in mid-idea. We were talking about your relationship to the models, and your use of specific models, and I gather that for a certain number of years you relied, if not exclusively, largely upon your wife, Leta, as a model, and that in fact she appears in many of the paintings and I'm sure continues to, really as the primary source for the bodies, when, in fact, in many cases, the heads are taken from a number of different sources. Indeed, they're portraits, and often of famous people, probably taken, I suppose, from pictures in magazines.

MEL RAMOS: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And one would expect, I suppose, if you went back and looked at these paintings, that one would then recognize the figure popping up with different heads. But then you said that you came to a certain point where you were looking for something else, where you needed very different types of bodies with different physical characteristics, and obviously, you had to find different sources, and I believe you were going to expand upon that, how you went about that, when that happens.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, well, you know, I'm a great subscriber to all of the great clichés of the world, I just love them. I'm really quite taken with how they become clichés and how they are able to maintain that kind of intensity, one of them being "necessity is the mother of invention," and that's quite true in my case. When I needed a figure, an anonymous figure, to go with some particular object in a painting, I would use Leta.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you could only take so many liberties with her configuration.

MEL RAMOS: Well, if I just needed a general figure, a general body, I would use Leta because she was available. We could work in the evening, we could do it whenever. But when I needed a specific kind of figure, then I couldn't always use Leta. If I needed a specific kind of figure for somebody who had a small waist and large hips, to do a particular Modigliani painting, then I would have to look for someone who had that build. I had this notion of doing this whole series of painting, twenty paintings, and I just needed some various general models. I teach at Cal State Hayward, and over the years, in one way or another, either hiring models through the agencies and having them come, posing in the class because I taught Figure drawing, and, you know, for example, in the early sixties in Hayward, there was one by the name of Leslie Loop. She was a marvelous model, beautiful girl, very animated, really a terrific model, and I used her for several paintings. I didn't always use her face because I didn't want to use the same face over and over. But I used her body and I photographed her – I usually photograph models, I don't work from life. I've got bad eyes, for one thing, and I can't go for more than a half hour focusing from distance to shortness, which is the reason why I work with binoculars and have everything from the same surface source, and I can go for fifteen hours a day without getting tired. And that's just work habit, it's the way I found for myself to work. When I draw, I usually draw from photographs, because they are also conjunctions of things. I do a lot of drawings, but the only time I do drawings from life is when I'm teaching a class, and I sit down and so it with the kids. I'll sit down and demonstrate or I'll sit down and draw.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does that apply also to the – does that go back to the beginning, that even in the early works, or the series where Leta was a model, that these were done basically from photographs, not from sitting down and going through the exercise of life drawing, the traditions?

MEL RAMOS: In the early days, when I was much younger, you know, I was going to school and I was made very self conscious about the idea of sitting down and drawing from life. I used to practice it regularly. I don't do it so much any more. I don't do it, for example, like that group that goes every Friday and hires a model. I think that's more like a social club.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, I think they would agree.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, it's a social club. It's a good way for people to sit down and exchange ideas. But I would just hire – I had access to the models from the agencies, but also students who looked like they would fit the bill, or people you meet, or in the case of one model, she was a lawyer. She came to my house with her boyfriend. He wanted to buy a print, and I was showing him my prints and I was talking to him about using a model once, Virna Lisi, which I got from the cover of *Look* magazine. I used her in a painting and I was sued for it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

MEL RAMOS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you lose?

MEL RAMOS: No, I'm sorry, she threatened lawsuit. She got her lawyers after me, and it was settled by the lawyers in court.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't think they would have too much of a case.

MEL RAMOS: Charlie Cole's father owned *Look*, and they owned the rights to that photograph. They said if it came down to anything they would give you written permission to use it, because she signed a release. But anyway, I was telling her this story, and being a lawyer, she was very intrigued by it and she said, "Well, I think it would be fun to do that," and I said, "Terrific," and we made a date. She came and modeled for a couple of hours; I paid her an hourly rate, and I took enough photographs to do five paintings of her because she looked like these five Modigliani paintings that are all in this book.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She's the model for *You Get More Salami*?

MEL RAMOS: That's her there, that's her there, --

PAUL KARLSTROM: And all these, then, are really done from the photos.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, I worked from photographs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But did you – you said she was posing – was the session, then, a photo session?

MEL RAMOS: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You didn't do any pose --

MEL RAMOS: Oh, sure, yes. I have a regular photo studio, with the paper backdrop, and strobes and bounce flashes so I don't get any shadows. It's all softly lit and they're all posed. In front of the camera (in front of her) I put up this little reproduction of Modigliani that I'm looking at, and I'll just kind of work her around until she fits that exact position and I'll take photographs of her.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did she match, in terms of the configuration of her body, what you were looking for, what you recognized as Modigliani?

MEL RAMOS: I photographed her for these specific for these specific five paintings. I had nineteen of these reproductions of Modigliani.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you had the concept already established.

MEL RAMOS: Oh, yes, I had the whole series all planned. I wanted to do this whole series of watercolors.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And fortuitously, you found the model that matched.

MEL RAMOS: That's right, she just happened to come in one day. I was looking around for a model; I wasn't making an issue out of it, but if I found one, fine. Because I usually have enough photographs in advance to work with. The previous model, for example. I took a lot of photographs of her in order to do some of the paintings. When I saw her, I substituted her and the other one never got used. But when I hire a model, I photograph her in specific positions for these specific paintings. Now, as I said, necessity being the mother of invention, I did some of Leta, like this particular one, where I needed enormous hips, and I did --

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is part of the Modigliani series, *No. 14*.

MEL RAMOS: Right. I needed these terrifically exaggerated hips with a figure that went from that corner to that corner, diagonally. I just recently bought a twenty-millimeter lens, and by coming in tight on the figure, it makes a marvelous distortion, it makes this Modigliani distortion, which makes me wonder whether or not he was using a camera.

PAUL KARLSTROM: On the other hand, they didn't have such marvelous wide-angled lenses.

MEL RAMOS: Anyway, those are all the kinds of devices that I use. In this case, I used Leta for the last of these Modigliani series, the last three.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And these are done from photographs with a special wide-angle lens?

MEL RAMOS: Only in this case; the rest are straight. But quite frankly, a friend of mine and dealer in Los Angeles, David Stuart, once told me, "Jesus Christ, when are you going to start doing some paintings of somebody other than Leta?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I mean, my God, that's such a cheap model.

MEL RAMOS: I used her a lot, and he was showing the work, and he's sitting in the gallery all day long looking at

all these paintings of Leta. I can understand it from his point of view. But it sort of intimidated me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Self-conscious about it, maybe.

MEL RAMOS: And I probably would use a lot more of her, but as it turned out, I didn't. But I'm not doing the figure any more.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, well, that's a whole other topic. We'll have to do another interview. We're not allowed to talk about anything but the figure. All kinds of questions come to mind; one of them, I think, very important, which I'd like to get to in a moment, has to do with the use of photographs as an intermediate step from the model to the painted image. But there is one question I have that I think you'd be particularly well equipped from your experience to comment on. Do you feel that your personal relationship to a model, one that you're used quite frequently, your wife, in any way affects the work in a way that perhaps wouldn't happen, say, using professional models? In other words, there's a relationship there to that particular individual. Does that matter or not to you?

MEL RAMOS: Yes, I suppose it has to matter somehow. In one instance, for example, a painting of Recamier, where I used that model. And the original painting is by Gerard – is it Gerard?

PAUL KARLSTROM: *Madame Recamier*.

MEL RAMOS: In his painting there was this golden stand which had this neoclassical trapping hanging on it. And I didn't particularly want those neoclassical trappings in the picture, so I had to put something else on the stand. I had no idea what to put on the stand. But this model is also an artist, she was a student in my class. I remember when she was in my class she was painting sea shells, so I put a sea shell there instead. And in that sense, knowing something about her influence the outcome of the painting eventually. In that sense my relationship, or what I know about them or whatever, affects the work. That's about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, then, there's an additional element in a case like that, or portraiture, where you're bringing in attributes, something that's specifically connected with the interest or activity of an individual that, in a symbolic or rather subtle way, individualizes. Obviously the model is always an individual, but in this case, you've added an element that has portrait quality, symbolically.

MEL RAMOS: Probably, yes, in the classical tradition of portraits. I suppose if I were going to do portraits, and I do portraits, as a matter of fact, I suppose I think of them in the traditional kind of portraiture tradition, that is to say, involving somehow the personality of the figure, the person or whatever, somehow getting that into the picture. This is a painting here, for example, which was a specific portrait. It's from the series of de Kooning.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which one is this?

MEL RAMOS: *It's I Still Get a Thrill When I See Bill, No. 14*, and it's a portrait of Joan Quinn, who is a sparkling personality. She lives in Beverly Hills and she collects art, and she's bright and up and a charming and beautiful lady. She's a good friend of the English fashion designer, I forget her name already. But she has this crazy purple hair one week and green the next.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's not purple, nor green there.

MEL RAMOS: It's purple there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yes, it is.

MEL RAMOS: It's purple and pink.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It looks like Eleanor Dickinson.

MEL RAMOS: She dyes her pigtails purple and pink.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She's punk. New Wave.

MEL RAMOS: It's affected the choice of de Kooning images that I picked to use, because I wanted one with a lot of energy in it. Some of them are quite placid, but this one had to have a lot of energy in it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So despite what you said earlier, and I gathered, the way I interpreted what you said, that there was a certain objectivity or neutrality in your position vis-à-vis the model, but in fact, you are interested in many cases in portrait qualities. What I want to ask you now is, how so you see the body itself, the features of the body, accidents of nature or whatever, expressing personality? Do you view it as possible to use, not just the face and the features that we associate with portraiture, the physiognomy of the head, but body characteristics

as well, body language, if you will, pose, whatever, as conveying information about the personality of the character?

MEL RAMOS: In my own case, none of those things do matter, because everything is staged. You know, it has to be staged to fit either an existing image, as in the case of the Modigliani series, and we have these reproductions of this painting and the thing was staged, I was the director. It had to hit exactly like that, pose yourself exactly like that. And I would take maybe thirty pictures of that, slides, and I would look through all the slides and in one of them, I found one that was exactly like the reproduction, and there was no translation. And that's the one that I used. Invariably, you'll get a model who in one of thirty pictures is smiling or frowning or blinking her eyes or whatever. That will alter what you think is necessary. So in that sense, none of the personality of the individual comes through, unless I intend for it to do that is when I'm doing a portrait, that is to say, somebody says, "Oh, gee, I'd love to have one of those paintings." I say, "Oh, I'll make a portrait of you then." And then I do it with her in mind, or him in mind, as in the case of one of the Cupid and Psyche paintings that I did. The male in the picture was a portrait of the guy who owns it rather than myself. So in that sense – I mean, it's a question of intent, and intent, as I see it, is the thing which makes art art. It's because you intend for it to be that way. It's the old driftwood analogy. Why's a piece of driftwood lying in the sand and a piece of art? As long as it lays there, it's not art. But the minute somebody comes by and makes a choice that it's art, and intends for it to be art, takes it and puts it on the wall, then it is art. But it has to do with intent. It's just like the same analogy as when Isadora Duncan makes a leap that shocks the world. Why is it not – why do they call it art? Why is that exact same motion that [Fred] Biletnikoff did in Super Bowl 12 when he caught that ball, why is that not art? It's just as beautiful. The reason is that it wasn't intended to be. It's a question of intent. So my portraits are usually about somebody specific, and I usually try to make them heroic portraits because I'm interested in that. I'm interested in Romney, for example. I love Romney. I think he made just great, wonderful heroic portraits of people, and all the portraits I did in the sixties of Hawkman and Captain Midnight and people like that were very heroic and dramatic kinds of things. I used every device I could think of to make them heroic, that is, putting circles around them, or stars.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In your portraiture, I gather that you, in trying to capture personality or your conception of an individual, you feel perfectly free to combine elements that you feel eliminate the individual, even if, let's say for example, the body pr parts of the body come from some other source. In other words, you can mix them up.

MEL RAMOS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you're really imposing; it's not a literal response to the actual configuration, at least of the body, the individual being portrayed, but your perception. And if you feel that somebody else's body, or parts of their body, does better illustrate these portrait qualities, you feel free to do that.

MEL RAMOS: Oh, yes. Some of the photographs that I used are composites. I have my own darkroom, and I had to make one image which required a certain kind of upper part and a certain kind of Modigliani images, and this was before I had my twenty-millimeter lens, and so I didn't know what to do. I finally wound up going into my darkroom and making two photographs of two people at different angles and blowing them up in an enlarger so that they were just about a perfect match. And then I pasted them up together and used it. It's amazing how much it came out like the image in Modigliani, but it was an impossible distortion that a single individual couldn't possibly do with their body. But again, it was my perception of it. Sure, it's always your perception of it, it can't be any other way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think this leads us to something that is very interesting in your work, or in your methodology, and finally has a lot to do with your use of the model and of resources, and that is the importance of photography, the fact that almost without exception you work from photographs, from individuals, models, or perhaps reproduced photographs, magazine illustrations or whatever. You bring these together in, I think, a very imaginative way which reflects what you're after, your view of --

MEL RAMOS: It's conjunctions, [and the fact that it has to do with Surrealist conjunctions, not Surrealist conjunctions, but conjunctions] and it has to do with humor. I'm just interested in that, I like that. I mean, it's the way I see myself. I see myself as a kind of humorous person. I don't see myself as stodgy, uptight, serious – I don't mean to use all those adjectives in conjunction with one another, I mean, they don't necessarily relate, you can be one without being the other, but I see myself as kind of a, you know, non-serious person, and I think my work kind of comes off that way, at least I hope it does.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you feel that your reliance on photographs separates you and your work somewhat, then, from the figure drawing tradition? In other words, your models are, in fact, photographs. They're a step removed from the actual living figure, standing before you. Do you perceive it that way?

MEL RAMOS: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are your models people, or are they in fact photographs?

MEL RAMOS: Oh, they're photographs. Models are people, of course they're people, sure they are.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is there a difference, though?

MEL RAMOS: You know, once the photo session is over, I put it out of my mind. I just take the receipts and write it off on my income tax for what I pay them and then get on with the project. And the project, from that point on, is a very complicated one and I'm spending a lot of time at my slide table looking for the right image that I'm going to use for this painting. It's a very, very, very serious choice for me, because once I make that decision, in the case of my new work, for example, once I make that decision, I now have a four month commitment of time into this painting. And if it's no good, you know, I made the wrong choice, because paintings the same way. But the model, for me, is – I use the word "model" only because I'm doing these figure paintings. But it's still a question of making drawings. I make drawings. Before I commit myself to four months of making a painting I'll do these drawings, using the available source material, photographs or whatever. It may be a combination of photographs, it usually is. And form this combination of photographs I make a drawing, and if the image is going to work for me, then I'll go ahead and do a painting of it. But I do a lot of drawings. I don't draw so much from life unless I can do it quickly and I need some information, then I'll call Leta. "Leta, come here, I need your foot! Give me a foot, give me a foot!" or whatever, in a particular position so that I can make it work in a painting. But in that sense, I just use photographs as a source of making my work. I quite like something I read once by Gregory Battcock, God rest his soul, when he wrote a little book called Why Art? – something about my work in which he said, "When you think of it, Ramos was probably the first photo-realist."

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's very interesting. You know what my next question was going to be, exactly right on there. Do you feel that you perhaps indeed could be associated with Photo-Realism, specifically in your reliance on photographs? Let's mention somebody like Bob Bechtle, who makes a very strong point, in fact, as an essential ingredient of Photo-realist methodology, that your models are slides or photographs. When he does a car, a portrait of a car, he doesn't go out and like in life drawing, have a car get on the model stand and draw this thing; he photographs it and then the photograph gives him the information. He feels that this then makes it removed, that it's a slightly different activity.

MEL RAMOS: I also subscribe to that position, that the model I work directly from is the photograph. That is the model.

[Break In Tape]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mel, you were expanding on what you feel may be your relationship in some ways to Photo-Realism. Do you want to say something more about that?

MEL RAMOS: Yes. I suppose that I'm involved in the same kind of work methodology as the Photo-Realists in the sense that I use photographs as the source for the images in my work. But there's a distinct difference between the way I use the photographs and the way most of the Photo-Realists use the photograph, in that the photograph for me is not sacred, and in the case of, specifically, Ralph Goings, and I suppose Richard McLean, and others, Ron Kleemann, for example, the idea is preferably – it's a conceptual one – is not to deviate from the photograph. They do not make any emotional judgments, just paint what's there; it's like a machine. I don't use the photograph in that way. You know, once the subject is chosen and the picture is made, that's the way the Photo-Realists will do it. I will pick specific instances where I have to have one kind of photograph for one section of the painting, and another kind of photograph for another section of the painting. An example is the painting called *David's Duo*, a painting which involved two figures, a very elaborate bed, and a view through the window. I didn't particularly want to change the figure of the male, because it was such a complicated section that I would have to make too many changes around the edges to make it all fit if I used the figure, so I simply used the figure that was in the David and put my head on it, and I had my wife photograph me for this particular painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you copied the body from the --

MEL RAMOS: --actual David, right. And then I put my head on it. The model is a girl that I was using for several paintings at that time, the girlfriend of a local painter. Well, this was one of the ones that I posed her specifically for, and I used her entire body with the exception of this arm, which I couldn't get a good photograph of. I couldn't get it to fit in that space the way it was supposed to fit, so I used the original arm and stylized it more in the style of the person that I was using. And then I used another photograph for the view through the window, a photograph of Lake Tahoe. Originally, there was some mythical Greek landscape with some marsupial satyrs chasing nymphs through the woods. But in this case, there were like four or five photographs that were used, four or five sources. I made a drawing of it originally to see how well it would work, and it worked pretty good, so as I painted I had these five photographs tacked up and I was just going around at different times.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you took very few liberties with the basic – with the bed, with the drapes, with the configuration of the room, is that right?

MEL RAMOS: The liberties that I took were, I have a certain kind of way of working in which, as a painter, I'm very preoccupied with certain kinds of things, formal things that are going on in the painting, things having to do with texture and that kind of stuff. And my painting is, I suppose, a little looser than most Photo-Realists' in that theirs is all brushed out and brush marks are usually invisible. In mine, you're very much aware of those, and you're very much aware of the painted surface; the virtuosity in the paint is important to me. So I have to take liberties with it. I mean, I can't just use them straightforward. Most of those photographs I used of the figure in this painting of *David's Duo* are black and white photographs. And I usually like to work from black and white photographs, using information only in a tonal sense, and inventing the color. My color is not Photo-Realistic at all, it's very waxy, it's kind of heightened, exaggerated. I really tend to exaggerate values. I tend to run the whole spectrum of values. If a Photo-Realist had a painting which was very gray, its darkest value was forty or fifty percent, he wouldn't exaggerate it, he would make it fifty percent. So my notions about painting itself really tend to – because the strongest part of my work is the painting of it. I like to think the ideas are the most important, and they are for me, but sometimes aren't for other people. Other people see my work differently than the way I do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you're really an artist firmly and strongly within the painterly tradition.

MEL RAMOS: I'm very academic, old-fashioned, unreconstructed Western European-type painter, and my favorite artists are the Spaniards, for some reason. Somebody asked me this a few years ago, and I never really thought of what cultural group would be your favorite, but it turns out that all of the strongest painters I think of, and I've always sort of thought of them as individuals when I talk about how influenced I was by their work... Velasquez was one of them. Joaquin Sorolla was another one, a guy whose work influenced me probably more than Wayne's, but a lot of people think that that was Wayne's influence, when in actuality I think Sorolla influenced us both. If you know Sorolla's work from Valencia and you see those paintings, you can understand why. It's a very kind of loosely, sort of beautifully, loosely-tightly painted figure with these kind of electric blue lines running up the sides, just gorgeous sunlit things. And he had a big impact on me, Sorolla. And another one is Murillo for scale; scale is also an important thing, mainly because all of the paintings I've ever made are done to scale. The figures are all life size, with very few exceptions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about Goya? I noticed in your hallway here you have some Goya etchings.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, Goya is one of my favorites. The first time I went to the Prado, I went to look at the Goyas. I was 25 years old and wanted to go see Goya. Well, I went to the Prado, but I discovered Velasquez, and Goya looks kind of weak now, compared to Velasquez.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what you're looking for is a kinship with what appears in Velasquez and some of those characters that are so well known as painters, within the painterly tradition, but also interest in light, I suppose, I gather from what you say.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, interested in all the same kinds of things that painters have always been interested in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That takes care of it.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, and in the case of Velasquez, you know, for me, the painting is a – maybe a terribly overrated painting, but I think it's a great painting nevertheless, *Las Meninas*. You know, it's just an incredible painting. I'm in awe before it every time I see it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you're certainly not alone in your appreciation of that work. It's a very influential painting.

MEL RAMOS: That's it, I guess. I'm sort of influenced by all those guys, and it has nothing to do with anything other than making art. It has to do with just sort of – I used the word before, "clinical," but it's a kind of clinical attitude about making art. You know, I have this watercolor book. There's a thing in the last part of it that sums it up, sums up my idea about it, the last sentence in this introduction, and it says, "It is the spirit of this tradition that still makes me stand in awe before *Las Meninas* by Velasquez or *Il Tempietto* by Bramante, because I know that somewhere in these works is an idea that I can use." That pretty much sums up my idea about it all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let me ask you one more question, then, on the same book. I assume you chose the illustrations and so forth, and let me ask you for what reason. Obviously, the cover illustration is always chosen with particular care, and would you like to comment on the cover of your work?

MEL RAMOS: Well, in this case I chose – when they came to me with the idea of doing this book, I said I would like to do a book on watercolors because that was what I was interested in at the moment, and I provided them with thirty transparencies of my strongest watercolors and let them pick the twenty-five that they wanted. They were going to eliminate six. And the cover of the book was the choice by their cover guy. It just happened to be folded in the proper place. That was their choice, and I had nothing to do with it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's very effective.

MEL RAMOS: Yes, it came out okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, listen, unless you have something to add to this theme, I think we've pretty well covered it.

MEL RAMOS: No, I haven't much to ass except that my work is about art. My ideas come from other artists, and my enthusiasm tends to be constantly rejuvenated when I come across a great work of art, a new piece.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So really, you feel that you're responding largely to art.

MEL RAMOS: Of course, you know, art grows out of art. Every important painter, without exception, every important artist that I know, his work has that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you're not responding to the mass media as so many --

MEL RAMOS: Oh sure, sure, but --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you are, but that's not the overriding --

MEL RAMOS: The overriding issue with me is trying to put all the elements, all of the formal elements of art together to make a beautiful painting. That's my first and foremost concern. However, the Vehicle, or the image that you choose, whatever it is that you choose to get to that point, obviously you have to make some choices about that, because it's going to be a very important part of the process. So another overriding characteristic that I find with the great artists is that most of them dealt with the kinds of pressing issues of their day. You know, I mean they weren't out on some cloud somewhere, they were taking a look around them and responding to it visually. That's what I'm doing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think that pretty well sums it up. Thanks, Mel, good interview.

Addendum to Mel Ramos Interview:

PAUL KARLSTROM: Although it's unusual to add information after the interview, in this case it seems worth doing. Towards the very end of the interview, Mel was discussing his watercolor book and I asked him about the cover photograph, the illustration that was chosen, which was a painting called *Bonnard's Bath*, of 1979, and shows a nude figure reclining in a bathtub. The painting itself, on the cover, wraps around the book with the book's spine intersecting exactly the pubic area, and that was what Mel pointed out as a fortuitous arrangement. At any rate, the figure in the tub is that of Mel's wife, Leta, an artist in her own right. In fact, the body of many of the Ramos nudes is that of Leta Ramos. During a subsequent conversation over lunch at a nearby restaurant, Mel mentioned a very human aspect of his relationship to the model, and one reason for his predominant use of his wife. He told how very early on, when he began working from the figure, Leta apparently objected to his asking other women to pose for him, the obvious alternative being that she became his primary model, as in fact was discussed during the body of the interview itself. Obviously, this restriction was later relaxed. According to Mel, Leta came to a point where she allowed and recognized that this was his work. She really didn't want to interfere. But Mel acknowledges that as a result, he may be less comfortable with live models other than Leta, which certainly then has a certain effect on his work. My editorial remark was that this quite understandable situation recalls Edward Hopper's exclusive use of his wife as a nude model, simply because she forbad him to paint other women in a similar state.

END OF INTERVIEW

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