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Oral history interview with Robert Ryman,  
1972 October 13-November 7

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Ryman on October 13, 1972. The interview was conducted in the artist's studio in New York, NY by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

## Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It is the thirteenth of October, 1972 – Paul Cummings talking to Robert Ryman in his studio, house. You live up here too, right?

ROBERT RYMAN: No.

MR. CUMMINGS: No, just studio - on Greenwich Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are you living then, in Bowery, or [inaudible]?

ROBERT RYMAN: [Inaudible.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, let's just do the background. You were born in Nashville, right, 1930? Did you grow up there?

ROBERT RYMAN: Yeah, I went to school there. I was in – well, I began college there, until 1950. Then it was the Korean War. Then that interrupted the college. Then there was the army for two years, until '52. Then I came directly to New York.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, let's talk about Nashville for a little bit. Do you have brothers and sisters there, or family?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah [laughs]. I have a brother. He's a terrific person. I like him [laughs]. He has three kids and, you know, a car and a house. Somewhat different from my situation. His name is John. He has a few early paintings of mine actually, some of which were kind of student paintings but a couple that he has are very good paintings.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you didn't start painting until, what, '54 or '55? Did you paint or draw before that?

MR. RYMAN: No. I was a jazz musician. I originally came to New York for that reason. Because I played music in the army. And so, I came to New York because this was where the music was. Then, when I arrived here, for the first time I saw museums and galleries and saw paintings; and I became interested in it. It excited me and I decided around '54 that that was really what I wanted to do.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what got you going to galleries and museums? Was that a person or just one of the things you did in New York?

MR. RYMAN: No, no person. It was just, I knew they were here. Oh, I went everywhere. I mean, I went on top of the Empire State Building, I went to –

MR. CUMMINGS: Everywhere [they laugh].

MR. RYMAN: – the Staten Island Ferry, I mean, everything that was available.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. RYMAN: – Times Square. I spent a lot of time just looking and kind of feeling the city. You see, I had never seen anything with the energy that the city had. And it excited me. I went to museums. As I say, just everywhere and taking in everything that was here.

MR. CUMMINGS: And it changed your interest from the music – or was there competition for a while there?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah no, I was – Well, competition? There wasn't really any competition there. At first, when I decided to make this change, there was a little emotional – [laughs] how should you put it – Well, yeah, the emotional upset I guess, because I had put so much time into the music. You know, I had been studying it, and I

had been playing it. And I was very involved with the music world. Not only jazz but, you know, I would go to the concerts at Juilliard and other places. So there was a little emotional thing about just giving it all up for painting.

MR. CUMMINGS: When had you started to study? When did you begin to study music? Was that around -

MR. RYMAN: Oh, that began in Tennessee. Yeah, you know, I was 18 and 19, and I didn't know what I wanted to do or what I - Well, you know, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to get into. I think a lot of people don't at that age. Then, I just felt the music, the jazz. That's what I wanted to do. It was kind of a crazy thing. I mean, I was put down for it by my parents and all that, because [laughs] "what is a - what are you going to do?"

MR. CUMMINGS: "What kind of lifestyle -"

MR. RYMAN: Yeah exactly, "What kind of life are you going to have with a - playing jazz?"

MR. CUMMINGS: What did you play?

MR. RYMAN: Tenor sax. But I felt it, and I liked it. And that's why I got into it.

MR. CUMMINGS: Was there any interest in music at home? Was your brother interested or your family?

MR. RYMAN: It was a tough life kind of thing, too - Oh, no, no. My brother is six years younger, you know, so he didn't really have anything to do about that. Yeah, well my mother used to be a pianist. I mean, not a professional one -

MR. CUMMINGS: She played piano.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah - but not bad. I think she almost went into the profession, but she didn't. I don't know if that had anything to do with it at all. It was just that I liked to listen to music and so I got into that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what were the schools like? You went to George Peabody College right?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, that was a school for teachers. I only went there - that was my second year in college - because it was a better music school than where I had been before.

MR. CUMMINGS: What, the Tennessee -

MR. RYMAN: - Polytechnic Institute, which was more of an engineering school. I went there originally. Well, [laughs] one big thing was to get away from home. I mean - [laughs] I don't know how to say that. I mean to live away from home for the first time in my life, you know. But it turned out when I decided to really go into the music that Peabody was a better music school, so that was a better place to go.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were you interested in engineering and technical things?

MR. RYMAN: No [laughs].

MR. CUMMINGS: It was just a place to go.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, and they had a pretty good music department, but it wasn't - When I first went I didn't really know if I was going into music or what. And as I say, it was a big thing just to live away from home at that time.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were there any teachers that you remember from those schools?

MR. RYMAN: None.

MR. CUMMINGS: [They laugh.] Any students or any memorable events or influences or attitudes?

MR. RYMAN: No. Well, there were friends. I had a lot of friends but no one that really -

MR. CUMMINGS: Were there any jazz clubs around there in those days?

MR. RYMAN: Very few. There were some but it was all kind of an underground thing.

MR. CUMMINGS: Country music was it?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Nashville was geared to country music with the Grand Ole Opry, and that's all you could get on the radio. I would spend time, hours in fact, fishing around on the dial of the radio trying to get a station with jazz - some station, way off. Of course, there were records. At that time, well I can remember

[laughs] it was the 78 [rpm] discs you were getting. That was a big thing, you know, going to the record store and trying to find out what they could get or what they had.

MR. CUMMINGS: I get the feeling that Nashville is so dominated by the country music.

MR. RYMAN: Well, it was, sure; it still is. No it's definitely not a place that has too much jazz. But as I say, there were places, but very few. And very kind of underground. You see with the black community at that time, it was a whole different situation. Everything was segregated and, of course, some of the best musicians were black. But they couldn't come to your school, or you couldn't go - I mean, you could but it was difficult. That's one thing with musicians; there was never any racial problem. Everyone understood each other. It was just what they played and how they played. But [laughs] in order to get together, it was kind of a tragic complication. You know there were the black clubs that had some pretty good jazz blowing, and then there were the night clubs and other things going. Big bands would come in or first-rate jazz groups, on occasion. But it was hard.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were there any friends that were interested in jazz in college?

MR. RYMAN: Oh yeah, sure. There were two or three good friends that I had. I think one is a composer, Alfred Bartles. And another good friend was a trumpet player who ended up in the music school. He's the head of the music school now at Peabody. Actually, I haven't seen him in years. I don't really know what he's doing.

MR. CUMMINGS: Who is he?

MR. RYMAN: His name is Del Sawyer. In fact, his brother is a painter. I can't remember his first name now. Well, that's not important.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, did you get into the musician's union?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah [laughs].

MR. CUMMINGS: Or any group?

MR. RYMAN: The whole number - [Laughs.] The musician's union was really incredible [laughs]. When I took - this is 802 I'm talking about [Local 802 American Federation of Musicians] -

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MR. RYMAN: -in New York. You know you have to go through an audition. But the audition, at that time at least - and I'm talking, you know, what?

MR. CUMMINGS: 1950's.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, I'm talking about years ago, twenty years ago. Anyway, the audition was pretty ridiculous [laughs].

MR. CUMMINGS: In what way?

MR. RYMAN: Well, they had you play a tune. And then you had to read some notes, I mean a simple thing like Chopsticks.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right [they laugh].

MR. RYMAN: And you had to play a few scales or something like that, or exercises. And if you could do this, and as long as you paid your dues -

MR. CUMMINGS: Ah, right. The other vital part [they laugh].

MR. RYMAN: So that was really a joke. But, of course, you had to be in the union to work.

MR. CUMMINGS: To do anything, right exactly.

MR. RYMAN: Well, you didn't have to - I mean, you could work, but it wasn't so good. You had to be in the union, unless you really wanted to hassle around.

MR. CUMMINGS: It wasn't worth the trouble.

MR. RYMAN: But I never really worked - I worked practically none, nothing at all as a professional jazz musician, because I was mostly studying, and playing in jam sessions and little clubs here and there that no one has every heard of.

MR. CUMMINGS: What kind of places?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, bars around the Village. I think it's still there, the Champagne Gallery, a place on MacDougal Street. And another place off of Sheridan Square, Arthur's it was called. I hadn't thought of this for a long time. [They laugh.] Then some places on Third Avenue uptown. But as I say, I did very little of that. Oh, and then there was - some jazz clubs around - I can't even remember the street, but in the center of the Village that had major groups come in. And sometimes on a Saturday night - not a Saturday, that was a big night - but on Monday nights, when the place was half empty. Then they would have other groups that played. You didn't get paid for it, you know.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right [inaudible].

MR. RYMAN: But as I say I did very little of that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you study with anybody in New York? Because I have you tied up with [inaudible] -

MR. RYMAN: Lennie Tristano, the pianist. Yeah, I studied with him for, I guess, three years.

MR. CUMMINGS: From when to when about?

MR. RYMAN: Well, when I arrived. From '52 to '54, when I quit; when I began painting. Actually, I was fooling around with painting - you know, doodling with paints - around '53. But I really wasn't into it. It was '54 or '55 when I really completely dropped the music and said, "Well, okay this is it; it's painting. I like it."

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what about the army. Were you in Korea?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, no. I didn't go to Korea. I was in an army band. I was stationed in southern Alabama. At that time it was Camp Rucker, but now I think it's a fort. [Laughs.] That's where we were stationed, but we traveled around from there and we played for everything. Anything that the army wanted music for, we played - within a certain radius - from marches, parades, service clubs, officers' clubs, dances.

MR. CUMMINGS: Anything and everything. [Laughs.]

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, carnivals that happened to come around. [They laugh.] We had some moonlighting on the side.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right. [Laughs.]

MR. RYMAN: We could play in the towns around -

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, really? [Laughs.]

MR. RYMAN: -you know, for little clubs. But that was it. It was just whatever they wanted music for -

MR. CUMMINGS: "Hey, come over here -"

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, that's what we did. We also did some - I mean, we went through all the groveling and the dirt, with rifles too - we went through the training.

MR. CUMMINGS: The basic training, right.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, but primarily what we did was anything they wanted music for. [They laugh.]

MR. CUMMINGS: New York was obviously the place to come to pretty early in life then?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, yeah, and in fact I was coming to New York before the army. The army interrupted that; took a couple of years out. But I don't regret that, because I learned a lot in the army. I was doing what - I was in the music.

MR. CUMMINGS: So kept it on.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, right. So I learned a lot. But it was nice to get out, and it was nice to arrive in New York.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what did you do when you came here? You obviously weren't making a living from the music. Did you get a job?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, I could talk about - [inaudible] I mean, is anyone interested in that? [Laughs.]

MR. CUMMINGS: It all adds up in an odd way.

MR. RYMAN: I came directly after I got out. Well, I spent a week at home, and then I took a bus. I had very little money. I had \$200 that I got from the army when - What do you call it?

MR. CUMMINGS: Muster you out?

MR. RYMAN: Muster me out. Right. I had \$200, maybe \$240 or so. I came here and I didn't know anyone in the city, although I came with a friend from the army. We got a place in a rooming house on 60th Street across from Bloomingdale's, which was run by a Russian cellist. He played cello and it was a very strange scene. [They laugh.] I don't even know how to begin to describe it. But we had this room and it was very inexpensive, \$8 a week or something like that. We had piano. And no gas, very little heat. You know, it was the usual. I immediately got in touch with Lennie Tristano to begin lessons, and well, that \$200 lasted for a long time. It lasted for about three or four months. I ate hamburgers at Riker's and canned beans and that kind of thing. The main thing was paying for the lessons, which was at that time \$5 a lesson.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you pick him?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, a friend of mine had studied with him and recommended him, and said that's the person you should see. So, I knew about him. And I knew that he taught, and I knew that he had a group of students and a studio. So, it was a logical place for me to start.

Of course, I was very naïve at that time. I didn't know the city, I didn't know anyone, and I spent all my time just practicing. I was pretty much a recluse. Of course, I had no money to really go anywhere. It was a matter of paying the rent and eating and paying for the lessons. And that was all there was, you know. Well, of course, my \$200 ran out after a while, after three months. Well, I had to get a job. [They laugh.] I didn't have anything else.

My first job was as a messenger. I didn't want any kind of job with any real responsibility, because that would have been the end of everything. So it was just a matter of flunky job after flunky job. First as a messenger for an insurance company and then a mail room attendant and then I don't know. I went from one to another. I don't remember all of them. Once I was a traffic manager at a chinaware importing place. I mean assistant traffic manager. I was learning. But once they found out I wasn't really interested in it -

MR. CUMMINGS: That was the end.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. So it was on and on from one job to another, just a matter of making sixty or seventy bucks a week or something to pay for everything. Then I finally got a job at the Modern Museum [Museum of Modern Art] as a guard.

MR. CUMMINGS: How'd that happen?

MR. RYMAN: That was very good. In fact, that was the beginning of an education, a very good education.

MR. CUMMINGS: What year was that?

MR. RYMAN: I think it was '54 or around that time.

MR. CUMMINGS: How'd you ever come to go there for a job in the first place?

MR. RYMAN: Well, through a friend, I met this woman - let's see, what's her name? She's still at the Modern - a very good person. [Inaudible.] Betsy Jones. She was a friend of a singing group called The Heathertones [1946-1953], which now don't exist anymore, and I think they didn't last too long. But they were a popular singing group, The Heathertones, and she was good friends with them. And I met her there. I don't know how it came about. I just said, "Well, I needed a job." She worked at the Modern at that time. I don't know what her duties were there, certainly not what she is involved with now. I think she's a curator now [Associate Curator, Department of Paintings and Sculpture], right? But she said she would inquire about it. And then I inquired about it. So I went and anyway I got the job as a guard. I don't know how it happened.

MR. CUMMINGS: How'd you like that?

MR. RYMAN: That was really the best job I'd had. It didn't pay too badly. I think I got around \$80 a week instead of \$60.

MR. CUMMINGS: A lot of difference. [They laugh.]

MR. RYMAN: Well, it was a lot of aggravation, of course, and a lot of boredom. But what I got from it - In the first place, I could be pretty much left alone. I could see all the paintings, everything that came in and out of the Modern. Show after show. I got to see all the movies - not just once, but six times - because I used to also take

tickets at the movies. So I got to experience a lot that I never would have otherwise, you know, from the collections and, as I say, the paintings and sculpture and everything that came in and out of the museum. I was there for, I guess, four or five years. Also, it was an advantage because the hours were pretty good, because the museum didn't open until eleven. That meant I could sleep late in the morning, and I could paint at night, you see. It was eleven to five, something like that. So that was a very good advantage. I learned a great deal from that, from being there and seeing the people; seeing the organization, how it worked; and, as I say, the art and movies and everything.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what about the actual activity of being a guard there? Some shows draw enormous numbers of people and others don't. I suppose it depends where you are. You know what -

MR. RYMAN: What do you mean?

MR. CUMMINGS: What your association with the public is?

MR. RYMAN: Well, as I said, it was a little boring and sometimes a little hectic. Sometimes, when they'd have openings at night, you'd have to work overtime, which I hated because I didn't want to spend that much time. But I got along well with everyone. It was just - You'd give directions to people and someone would say "Well, where is the Van Gogh?" "Second floor, first gallery -"

MR. CUMMINGS: You got to know where everything was.

MR. RYMAN: Oh, I knew where everything was.

MR. CUMMINGS: How'd you like the experience of being able to see the same pictures over and over and over? Weeks and months on end -

MR. RYMAN: Well, I never got tired of that. I would concentrate on different paintings each week or so, you know. Sometimes I would be into the Cezannes. Other times I would concentrate on the Matisses or the Picassos or other things.

Well, the big thing was not necessarily - once I learned their permanent collection pretty well. It was the one-man shows, those special shows that came in, that were really fantastic. That was always a new experience, a Monet show or - I can't even remember all of them. The Pollock show at that time. I remember people's reactions to many of these shows. They were angry sometimes. Or, you know, a lot of people liked it.

And, of course, I had the benefit of lectures that went on and all of the activities.

MR. CUMMINGS: There were some good, little side-effects.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, as I say, it was the best thing that I could have done.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, this was also your first introduction to art history, wasn't it?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, right. I mean, although I'd been through the museums and galleries, not so many galleries actually, mostly museums - the Met and all - before this. But this was a very educational job.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well they've often had artists working as guards there. Were there any when you were there?

MR. RYMAN: That's right. At that time they seemed to encourage artists, or at least student artists. I wasn't really an artist then. Dan Flavin was there. Let's see, I can't remember - there were quite a few painters, Bill Sharp. I haven't seen him in a long time. Sol LeWitt was there. In fact, that's where we first met. Only he wasn't a guard. He was selling tickets, I think; or he was working with the books and magazines.

MR. CUMMINGS: The bookstore.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, right. Sol was there and they were - they would work for awhile, and then they'd leave. I stayed there the longest practically of anyone. Dan, after he left the Modern, went to the Museum of Natural History as a guard.

MR. CUMMINGS: Really?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah [laughs]. That was his second job. I don't know what he did after that [laughs]. He, well, he didn't get along too well at the Modern. I don't know. He was very -

MR. CUMMINGS: Was it difficult to work there, or was it fairly easy?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, no. It was very easy. There were hectic times, and there were some hassles, and sometimes it would be very tiring and, as I said, boring on occasion.

MR. CUMMINGS: What caused the boredom? Was it lack of anything to do?

MR. RYMAN: Well, yeah, the walking around so much and too much of the same thing five days a week. You'd get a little buggy sometimes. But for the most part, it was very good for me.

MR. CUMMINGS: What kind of painting were you doing then?

MR. RYMAN: Well, I was just beginning to paint and I was -

MR. CUMMINGS: You never studied painting with anybody though, did you?

MR. RYMAN: No, no. I went through everything that any student goes through. Well, I did take one course in drawing, figure drawing.

MR. CUMMINGS: Where at?

MR. RYMAN: At the American Art School [American Artist's School]. It was a terrible course. I quit after six weeks. Drawing from the model, the plaster-casts, and they had all this worked out - you know, number one shading, number two shading, three, four.

MR. CUMMINGS: The whole system.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, it was really a mechanical kind of thing, and I wasn't interested in doing that anyway. I just wanted to have some experience with it, and it was awful. I quit that. Oh no, I forgot. I took - Yes, the museum school had a course called Experimental Painting, and I took that. It was for adults.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, that was -

MR. RYMAN: What's his name? Who was the head of that then [Director of Education]?

MR. CUMMINGS: The man who was there for all those years?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. He was a short man, very energetic.

MR. CUMMINGS: D'Amico.

MR. RYMAN: D'Amico. Yes, right. What's his first name?

MR. CUMMINGS: Victor.

MR. RYMAN: Victor D'Amico, right. He was the head of -

MR. CUMMINGS: What kind of class was that? I've heard about those-

MR. RYMAN: Well, it was good for me, but it was strictly a beginning kind of class. It was a little of everything actually - drawing from models; sketching; working with paint and color; some instruction about color.

MR. CUMMINGS: Who taught those though? Do you remember?

MR. RYMAN: I don't remember his name, no. It was just someone, I have no idea who it was. But it only lasted a short time. It was three or four months a course, like once or twice a week, I don't remember, for two or three hours. And mostly you would go in and work. But it was a nice thing for me. It gave me a little insight into some of the techniques. You know, pastels and -

MR. CUMMINGS: Water color and -

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, right. And even though I didn't really do -

MR. CUMMINGS: - all the materials. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, right. Paper and canvas; that was the valuable thing.

MR. CUMMINGS: Going back again to the early first paintings, what kind of things were they? Were they figurative things or abstract things?



MR. RYMAN: Well, as I say, they were things like all students do. I didn't know what I was doing. I was just painting. I was just doing things with paint. No, I never did any realistic paintings except for these drawings, as I said. No, they were always abstract. Oh, I worked -

MR. CUMMINGS: Why was that? Weren't you interested in representational art?

MR. RYMAN: No, never. No, because I decided right away that - I knew that I could do it. I mean, I could paint the figure if I wanted to, or I could paint a landscape. I knew I could do that, because it was just a matter of learning the technique. But I knew that really wasn't - if I could do it, anyone could do it.

MR. CUMMINGS: And it wasn't enough of a challenge.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, that's right. If I was going to do something with the paint, and make something happen with it from me, then that would be much more important, and much more of a challenge. That's what it was. And so it was always abstract.

MR. CUMMINGS: What painters were you interested in, in those days?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, many, you know.

MR. CUMMINGS: Everybody and everything?

MR. RYMAN: Sure. You know, Matisse at one time. As I said, I was moved by many things. But I tried to always see what they were doing with the paint, how they worked with it, more than the - I was never interested too much in symbolism or story telling.

MR. CUMMINGS: Or what kind of image they used?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. I could understand that, but that wasn't what it was all about really. It was how they put the painting together. I was interested in composition and color and paint handling. How one person would do something in a different way than another artist but still come out with the same strength, with a sureness I guess was what it was in the end. Authority, like Picasso or Van Gogh. When they painted something, it was as if it were just put right down, just no fooling around with it. It was right there.

MR. CUMMINGS: Bang. There it was [laughs].

MR. RYMAN: And, I mean, it always seemed like the easiest thing. Some of the best paintings always seem just like anyone could do it. They're so easy looking -

MR. CUMMINGS: It's part of the illusion.

MR. RYMAN: But that isn't so easy to get. It's always the paintings that aren't so good that have this struggled look, fussed with, or painted out and over.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, were you reading books at this time? Did you read art history and other things?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, yeah. I used the library at the Modern. Of course, that was another advantage. I had access to that. I didn't read so many books; mostly there I read magazines and articles and clippings and whatever catalogues, more than I read books. I would go through books. I would not really read them so much as just pick out certain things that interested me.

When I got into books was after I quit the Modern. I got another job at the public library, the art division. And that was excellent also as far as education goes. I was there for a year, and there again it was sort of a flunky job, you know.

MR. CUMMINGS: Running books or something?

MR. RYMAN: Page supervisor. But there I had access to tremendous amounts of material. In fact, that place really amazes me - what they have there. I worked on the scrapbooks and the folder files, and I knew the system. I learned the system backwards and forwards. I knew where to find anything - and all the huge picture books they had and the print collection -

MR. CUMMINGS: And Karl Kup, he was there.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. That's right. He was the head of the Print Collection. So that was very valuable for me. For a year I did that after I left the Modern.

MR. CUMMINGS: So, that gets us into 1960.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. That was about 1960 when I left the library. And that was the last job like that that I had.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you had shown during the late fifties and early sixties in some of the Tenth Street galleries like the March [Gallery] and Brata [Gallery]?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, in '58 and '57, I think. They were group shows at the March and Brata and -

MR. CUMMINGS: [inaudible]?

MR. RYMAN: I don't know, maybe a couple of other ones. Funny I can't remember those. But I was never a part of those galleries. I was never a member of the galleries. Usually I'd be invited, you know, for a Christmas show or something like that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, right, when everybody brought their friends in.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, right. It was when everyone -

MR. CUMMINGS: Filled up the walls. Yeah, I remember those shows. How did you like that? That was kind of the heyday of Tenth Street.

MR. RYMAN: Well, it was kind of an exciting time actually. It was very energetic there. A lot of action and people and artists were around, and some of the shows were very good actually. It was an interesting couple of years there with Tenth Street. I think that was an important time.

MR. CUMMINGS: You didn't have any interest in being in a gallery then or showing with anybody particularly?

MR. RYMAN: No. I could have. I could have joined one of the galleries, but I didn't like the idea of a cooperative. I mean, the way everything was run - kind of sloppily; and there was a lot of, oh, confusion. No, no. I thought the only thing is to have someone show my work - Well, I wanted to paint and not be involved in all of the politics and things. So, I never wanted to be in a cooperative gallery. That's changed a little now, of course. Cooperative galleries are a little - well, some of them anyway - are a little better.

MR. CUMMINGS: But, they're always full of politics I think.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, there's always, you know -

MR. CUMMINGS: Somebody starting one for some reason or another.

MR. RYMAN: Right. And, you know, when you get so many artists together all trying to run something, it's really chaos. You know, it's just difficult. I mean, it was particularly then, but that might have changed a little.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, when did you - when, for example, the pictures on the wall here, the photographs, when do they start? The earliest?

MR. RYMAN: The earliest one here is '57. I have a few from '56 but they're, you know, more student things. But around '57 and particularly '58 that's when things began to - well, I began to know a little more of what I wanted and what I was doing, you know.

MR. CUMMINGS: When did you start the, you know, the raw canvas things that are -how can you describe - you know, off the stretchers, or something?

MR. RYMAN: Oh yeah. Well, those - huh - I don't know exactly. There were a few in '58, some in '59. But I was doing paintings on stretchers also, you know. But mostly around '64 - '63 I guess, I did quite a large group of paintings, you know not on stretchers. But it wasn't anything special. It was just that I wanted the nakedness, you know, just the surface and the paint. And really I didn't know what to do with them, so I put them under glass, you know in a glass frame.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, right. So the whole kind of thread is of work that goes on, you know like the metal ones, the support itself is not there almost, and some of the things on paper and cardboard it's-

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. Well I - For a long time, and always and still, I like this very - I wanted it to be as simple, I mean as direct, without any interference. For instance, years ago in '59 I think, '58 - no it was a lot earlier than that. Well anyway, when I first saw Rothko, I didn't know what to make of it. There was this very naked canvas with no frame on it and not even a strip, not even tape, you know, just the canvas. I was very impressed by that, by Rothko's sensibility. As I say, when I first saw that, I didn't know what to make of it; but then I

understood it later. And I guess I wanted that, too. I wanted just -

MR. CUMMINGS: That straight confrontation-

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, and no frames. Although since that time, I have used frames, you know, taped frames and paper frames. I've used - but they're always kept very to the point. Nothing is there that doesn't need to be there. If I use a frame, a paper frame or a tape frame, it's because that's part of the painting. It's not because it's some kind of decoration. It's there for a reason, to pull the painting out onto the wall and not to confine. My frames never confine paintings.

MR. CUMMINGS: Just to hold it up so you can see it.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, but also to point, I mean visually point, you know with some tape strips or something, to expand the visual vision of the painting. And with the paper frames, they were always translucent so you saw the wall and you saw it was just kind of a, there again, an expansion of the painting itself. And a contrast; of course, it served as that, too. But never a thing that was boxed or confined, whereas the usual frames do that.

MR. CUMMINGS: So it's very open-ended. But it doesn't still blend off into the wall or anything. They all stand out very much.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: [Inaudible].

MR. RYMAN: Oh yeah, well yeah they are. They're objects, there's no question.

MR. CUMMINGS: You know the early ones that I'm sitting and looking at, all these are early pictures, there's that grid-system-structure underneath. And As I remember, you had painted bright colors and then kind of gone over them with white or something. I don't remember exactly.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. I used a lot of color. And at the beginning when I first began the - well, the white paintings if you want to call them - I would begin by putting down a lot of color and then it was always a matter of taking out, painting out the color; painting out the painting to where I ended up with very little color left. And it was painted over, but maybe a little red here or a blue shape slightly on the edge. The edges were very important. But it was always subtracting, you know, putting a lot of color and then subtracting with the white.

MR. CUMMINGS: Why'd you use white though? What was the -

MR. RYMAN: Well, I don't know. It didn't get in the way, you know. It was very neutral, I guess; I don't know. I mean, you don't usually paint out with a color. You paint out with a white, and that's how it began really. It just kind of evolved. And then at one point, I just decided: Well, I'm putting this color down, and I'm really not that interested in the color that I'm putting down. I'm only doing it because somehow being a painter I should use color. But here I am painting it out, so why not get this down a little stronger and not put the color on in the first place? And then, begin with the white and make something happen with that, rather than when I'm painting out the color.

MR. CUMMINGS: What started the grid systems and the use of the squares? Because that's a fairly consistent quality.

MR. RYMAN: Of course, a grid is a very classical - Probably every artist, every painter that ever worked, has used a grid in some way or another because it's simply - I mean, you see the old master drawings. Well, of course now, they did it for different reasons. Everyone did it for different reasons. You know, you'll see a grid where they either scaled up a drawing, or did a drawing for a painting. You know, they could scale it up with the grid. But, of course, the grid is always one of the most direct visual things, because you have the horizontal and the vertical [laughs]. You know, and they cross. And that's really very perfect. It's a very perfect, nice thing. Simple and right, this grid. I never used it myself to scale anything. I only used it as a visual guide, anchor, if you want to call it that. If you have the horizontal and vertical lines, and then if you have other things, other movement no matter what, with paint or drawing, then it's a very direct visual approach, a very right thing. I don't always use that, but -

MR. CUMMINGS: No, but it appears here and there. You sense it kind of underneath, even some of the more recent things.

MR. RYMAN: Well, of course with the circle, the drawing that I did on the circle - paper, which there were five of - that worked very well, I mean visually, because you had the horizontal and vertical straight lines and they were broken by the circle space, I mean the space of the circle, which contrasted with that and contradicted it. And also none of the lines were the same length, because of the circular space, so that it worked very well in

that sense. I mean, in the visual rightness of it.

MR. CUMMINGS: What led you into the circle? Because there's that and what, some prints of the circle, aren't they?

MR. RYMAN: Well, I don't know exactly. But the circle was a very – I'd worked, you know, on the square space and that I liked very much right from the beginning. In fact, almost from the beginning I worked on a square. I don't know why. I mean, except that I liked the equal sides. You know, it wasn't two sides longer than two sides, it was –

MR. CUMMINGS: The same all the way around.

MR. RYMAN: It was – the square, which seemed to me the perfect space to paint on, I mean as far as what I wanted to do with the paint. And then the circle, of course, that is a very perfect shape to work on too because there are no corners. There are no, I mean, they're almost – there are no sides. It just –

MR. CUMMINGS: Goes on.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah [laughs]. It's just a circle. So the challenge was interesting because there were no corners. And the circle is very similar to the square, I mean in being very –

MR. CUMMINGS: Proportioned.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, equal. Everything is equal. And I guess that's how it came about. I wanted to try it and see what I could do on the circle space. I've never done a circular painting. I've only done the one circle drawing which was five parts, and the recent lithograph which was a circle. I've never done a circular painting. I don't know why. Somehow the painting doesn't [laughs] – I don't know, maybe I will do a circle painting. It just never lent itself into that the same way that drawings did or the lithograph did.

Actually, the lithograph [*Circle Lithograph*, 1971] came about – I had done the *Two Stones* [1971] lithograph in Halifax; and they said, well, if you'd like to do another one, let us know. And I had no plans to do another one; I had nothing. And then it just occurred to me, I wonder if they can print on a circle space? Because I had never seen it, lithograph on a circle space. I don't mean a circle image, you know, but the actual space being circular. I called them and I said, "Can you print on a circle?" And they said, "Well, I don't know, maybe we can." [Laughs]

So they made an aluminum template, you know, to tear the paper. And so I came and then I worked out the print. The dimensions were decided, and the type of paper, and the ink and the size, and all of that. And it turned out that they could. There again, it was just another challenge, you know, to do a lithograph on a circular space because I'd never seen one. I don't know that there are any. Maybe there are.

MR. CUMMINGS: So you were pleased with the solution then?

MR. RYMAN: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: I mean, it did work for it?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. It took much longer than the first lithograph to do, because there were many trials. I didn't know the – Well, you know, first we tried different papers, and we tried – I got the size pretty much down. Oh, well, I won't go into that. It's a long story. Many decisions were made on that lithograph. But it finally ended up, I think, to be very good. I mean I got rid of all the unnecessary [laughs] things, and the paper was right, and the writing on it was where I wanted it.

MR. CUMMINGS: It worked.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, right.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

MR. CUMMINGS: It's the seventh of November, 1972 and this is side two. On the other side, you'd just finished talking about making the round print. You've made other prints, right, besides that circular one?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. There was the first one which was the *Two Stones*. Two of the limestones that were clamped together and the actual stones were printed.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did it come about to make those prints? I mean, were you asked? Did you want to do –

MR. RYMAN: Oh, yeah. I was asked by the people at Nova Scotia [College of Art and Design] if I'd like to make a print, a lithograph. I was thinking about etching at the moment, and I said yes I would. I'd had this idea with the stone and, well, first it was to print one stone. I'd had that earlier with a printer here in New York in '65 to print one stone, and we did one trial proof of it but with a very small stone, just to see how it would look.

MR. CUMMINGS: Who was that?

MR. RYMAN: Irwin Hollander [master printer]. But at that time he was moving, and there was some financial problems and so we never did the print. I just forgot about it. Nothing was ever done about it until I was asked to do this lithograph. So I thought I'd continue with that. At first it started out to be one stone, and we went through all kinds of problems with the stones. They at first said what we can do is a photographic image of the stone. You know, we can just make it look like a stone or we can draw the stone and print it. But I said no, it has to be the actual stone itself printed, because I don't want the image on the stone printed. I just want the stone.

MR. CUMMINGS: The whole shape with the rough edges and everything.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, and, well, with ink of course. So before it came to the actual trials, I decided to print two stones instead of one because with two they were locked together in a wooden frame so that they wouldn't bounce when the press went across it. I thought then I would have the edges be smooth where the press - I mean it'd be a hard edge where the press moved across and soft edges where it wouldn't, where the press would have to stop before it went off the edge of the stone so that it wouldn't flip the stones or break the stones. So I decided on two stones, and we were fortunate in finding two stones that were pretty similar. I mean, I wanted them pretty much alike. They were both rectangular, and they were ground down so that they were even, so that when the press rolled over them, so they would both print. Then there were a lot of problems with the paper and the ink; and the size of the print; the chop; the pressure of the press, how much we wanted to emboss it. Those things we went through. But that was it really. And as I say, it was just fortunate that we got two stones that were very equal.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, were you happy with the results?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, very much so. And it was very intense. There were a lot of decisions. It was similar to the circle lithograph. Most of the decisions were worked out as to the stones and locking them together and everything were worked out over the phone. Then when I went to Halifax, it was a twenty-four-hour day. I decided on the paper and the size and the torn edges, and as I say, the pressure - It went very quickly, you know, everything was decided on and the edition number and -

MR. CUMMINGS: That's not a large edition is it?

MR. RYMAN: No. It was fifty. Plus, I think, there were five artist's proofs.

MR. CUMMINGS: Have you liked this activity of making prints? Do you find it congenial or is it difficult?

MR. RYMAN: Well, I'd never thought about making prints until recently. You know, I had never really had the opportunity. I just began it because I thought it would be a challenge and an interesting process to try to work in, and so it began with the two stones and then the circle lithograph. That came about - I guess maybe I talked about this before.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, right.

MR. RYMAN: Well, they asked me if I wanted to do another one, and I didn't have any idea. Anyway then came the etchings, and I did those because there again I'd never done etchings before. It's a whole different process, and I thought why not try it and see what I can do with it. It was very interesting, the etching process I mean, very different than the lithography.

MR. CUMMINGS: Which do you prefer? Or do they do different things for you?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, and then I did one silkscreen also. I don't know. I don't have any plans to do any more right now. They're both interesting. I guess the etching is a little - the etching process is certainly more complex in a way, I mean more in an almost archaic -

MR. CUMMINGS: [Laughs] all the technical -

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. All this stuff you have to go through to get the print, with acid and rosin and all that; and the biting; and the press itself; and the wetting of the paper. Whereas, you don't have all of that so much in lithography. Of course, the results are - with the etching - very good. It's different.

MR. CUMMINGS: You find it's a stronger image?

MR. RYMAN: Well, no, not necessarily. But you can build up ink with the etching, of course, which you can't with the lithograph. Well, you can there too. You see, they can do just about anything with any of these. [They laugh.] But they can fake an etching. They can emboss and they can do things with silkscreen and lithography. I mean, it takes someone with an eye for prints to really see the difference. I mean, the average person couldn't tell probably one from another, but there is a difference. I don't know that one is any better than the other. It's just -

MR. CUMMINGS: Different.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, let's go back to our chronology here for a bit. You had an exhibition where? Where was the first one-man show at?

MR. RYMAN: Well, that was at Paul Bianchini [Gallery, New York].

MR. CUMMINGS: That was Bianchini.

MR. RYMAN: And that was 1967, in April.

MR. CUMMINGS: But you had shown there in all sorts of group shows and things you had been in?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, the group shows -

MR. CUMMINGS: Since March Gallery and Brata and those things.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. Well, the first kind of group show where I showed more than one painting was at Alan Auslander [Gallery], in '64 I think it was. I'm not sure - around that time. But the first one-man show was at Paul Bianchini.

MR. CUMMINGS: How long did he represent you?

MR. RYMAN: Let's see, about three months I think. [They laugh]. Right after my show the gallery folded. That was in April and the gallery closed in June. So you can figure three months, I guess [laughs].

MR. CUMMINGS: He didn't handle you when he went private did he?

MR. RYMAN: No. Well, he had two early drawings of mine. But not so much -

MR. CUMMINGS: No paintings or anything.

MR. RYMAN: No, he had no paintings at all. No, he really didn't have anything.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you had an exhibition once with something called The Lannis Museum.

MR. RYMAN: Oh, yeah [laughs].

MR. CUMMINGS: Who was that again?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, that was Joseph Kosuth. As far as I know, I may be mistaken, it only lasted for a month. I mean, space was rented; and it was a gallery-type space. They had this one show. They may have had more, I'm not really sure. But the one show that I know about was just quite a large group show of documents. I can't remember now the title, the name of the show, but it had to do with books and documents [*Normal Art*, 1966]. Anyway, that was the Lannis Museum. I think it was called that because someone by the name of Lannis had put up the money for the space. But it only lasted a month or so.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that was it.

MR. RYMAN: But it was the Lannis Museum, no question about that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well what about Dwan [Gallery] -

MR. RYMAN: I think the full title was Lannis Museum of Normal Art.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, right, right, Normal Art.

What about Dwan? Because you got involved with her soon after that.

MR. RYMAN: Well, that was later. That wasn't until '70.

MR. CUMMINGS: Really? I thought that was before.

MR. CUMMINGS: No. Then the Fischbach [Gallery], after Paul Bianchini. I didn't show in New York until '69. I showed in Europe in '68 [Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich and Konrad Fischer, Dusseldorf]; but I had no gallery in New York until '69, with Marilyn Fischbach. I had a show there in '69 and '70 [*Robert Ryman: Delta Paintings, 1966*].

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, who represented you between Bianchini and Fischbach, yourself?

MR. RYMAN: Well, really no one except Konrad Fischer in Dusseldorf and Heiner Friedrich in Munich. I had shows in both of those places.

Then a little later, in '69, [Galerie] Françoise Lambert in Milan and Yvon [Galerie Yvon Lambert] in Paris. Then also [Galleria] Sperone in Turin. Those people had a lot of my work. I guess probably Heiner Friedrich and Konrad Fischer had most of it, the work of those two years.

MR. CUMMINGS: What was it like showing in Europe and not showing here so much? .

MR. RYMAN: Well, I'd never been to Europe. That was my first time to Europe, in '68. And it was very good for me, very interesting, I mean, you know, the experience.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were you there just for your exhibition or did you travel around a bit?

MR. RYMAN: I traveled but it was all business. I mean, it was all for shows. I did very little sightseeing except for the town or city that I was in at the time. It wasn't any kind of vacation. In fact, it was very much work the whole time.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what kind of reception did you have in the German galleries?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, very good. They were at that time, and still I think, are - maybe not so much now but at that time - very enthusiastic about American art. They were very prosperous. A lot of people were buying work of American artists, I mean, not just me but all of the pop art and -

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you get associated with them in the first place?

MR. RYMAN: Well, first Heiner Friedrich had come by to my studio sometime ago, I guess '68, '67. And he wanted to have a show of my work. He liked it very much. Then shortly after that Konrad Fischer visited the studio, and he also wanted to do something immediately. And I said, "Okay."

MR. CUMMINGS: It all happened.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, so I went over and did the shows there.

MR. CUMMINGS: So, you really had more shows in Europe than here, by the time you started showing.

MR. RYMAN: Oh, many more. Well, '69 was the biggest trip and also probably the worst on me physically [laughs], because I had a show at Friedrich's [*Robert Ryman Drawings*], Konrad's, Yvon's [*Robert Ryman*], Françoise's in Milan and in Basel at the museum there. The Kunst Museum. And also I was to have one in Turin at Sperone's. I had all these shows within a month's time, and I was going from one place to another. I had the paintings done for all of them except for one that I was going to do there. And well, that's quite a story.

But I broke down at the end and I caught a very bad cold. I was pretty ill and things went wrong; and things got lost in the shipping; and so I never did have the show at Sperone's because I just couldn't do it.

MR. CUMMINGS: But you had all the other ones?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. So it ended up having the five shows.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's an awful lot of work, isn't it though? You know, enough paintings for five galleries at the same time.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, it was. Yeah, and they were all different. I mean, they were not the same paintings by any means.

MR. RYMAN: Different years?

MR. CUMMINGS: No. They were all recent work. Let's see, the paper paintings were shown at Konrad's. Oh, you're right. The group that were shown at Heiner's were 1968, and those were on the linen. And some paintings that I'd done on mylar were at Yvon's and also a different group at Françoise's.

MR. CUMMINGS: What was at Basel?

MR. RYMAN: Well, that was [laughs] - there was a snow storm, and the paintings were sent from Heiner's [in Munich] to be shown there [in Basel]. They were on linen also, but were not shown in that show [in Munich], they were to be shown there [in Basel]. One had gotten water damage from this snow storm. I don't know. They'd left the paintings out on the ramp in the snow or something. One was all right; that was shown. And then I did a new painting there [in Basel] that I had planned to do at Yvon's [in Paris] but I did it there instead.

And from there, I was going to Paris and so I had to reschedule my work for Paris [laughs] because I'd done what I was going to do in Paris at Basel. So there were two paintings, one very large one and one of five panels on mylar. They were fairly large panels, each a little over three feet each square.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you only started doing really large paintings recently didn't you? You know the ones in the Guggenheim show [*Robert Ryman, 1972*]; there were a couple of immense canvases there.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. Those are the largest paintings on a single surface that I've done. I've done larger with panels before that, one that was at the Whitney Museum in that process thing [*Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials, 1969*].

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, the process show.

But I'm just curious about this whole European business for another minute. What was your reception like with the artists and collectors and museum people? You had a whole view of it within a month visiting so many cities.

MR. RYMAN: As I say, it was very good. Of course, I couldn't speak the language. I don't speak German or French or Italian, so I couldn't communicate with everyone that I came in contact with. Of course, most of them spoke English, so it was really no problem. Still many of the artists and others didn't. So it was a little strained in that respect. But the reception was - Well, I felt good about my work. I felt that was good and it went really well.

MR. CUMMINGS: Have you continued to show there in the last few years?

MR. RYMAN: Well, I haven't in the last year. Well, I have yes, but I haven't been there. Yes, there were two shows at Heiner Friedrich's. He has since moved to Cologne, too. He has a gallery in Cologne and his print gallery is now in Munich. So there was a show both in Cologne [...] and in Munich [...] this last year. There was a show of the circle lithographs and the trial proofs of it in Munich. So I didn't actually go there. I haven't been to Europe in two years, but I am going now. There will be a show [1972-73] in London where I've never been.

MR. CUMMINGS: Where's that going to be?

MR. RYMAN: In December, the first of December at Lisson Gallery. Nicholas Logsdail is the person [founder]. And then I'll go to Dusseldorf and do a show at Konrad Fischer's. But I don't want to go any place else.

MR. CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] That's enough there. No more five shows in -

MR. RYMAN: In fact, I had a breakdown after the '69 trip [laughs].

MR. CUMMINGS: That's very exhausting.

Well, who has your work? Fischbach still represents you now?

MR. RYMAN: No. No, they don't.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's right. It's Weber [John Weber Gallery, New York].

MR. RYMAN: Marilyn Fischbach has some paintings of mine, mostly that she has in her own collection. I really don't know if they are for sale or not, but she does have oh, I guess five, six, seven paintings that she owns. But I'm not actually represented there.

MR. CUMMINGS: Then you were with Dwan, right? Then Weber became Dwan.



MR. RYMAN: Yeah. Well, at Dwan the situation came about because I thought it would be interesting to have a show in the Dwan space and also the Fischbach space at the same time. Since they were both in the same building and only three floors apart, it would be ideal. And so we worked that out and that was in '70 [1971], I guess.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MR. RYMAN: And so there was the double show with Dwan and Fischbach. My thinking at the time was that I wasn't represented by Fischbach exclusively or Dwan exclusively; but I was represented by many people, Dwan, Fischbach, and the European galleries. As long as I kept the shows different in each place, there shouldn't be too much friction as to prices; because no one would have the same thing that everyone else had.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did it get complicated?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. [They laugh.] It got out of hand, and it was too complicated.

MR. CUMMINGS: Too much.

MR. RYMAN: I mean businesswise. Ideally, I guess it should have worked out right. I didn't like the idea of being owned by any one person, or being the exclusive property of any one gallery, you know.

MR. CUMMINGS: They could each have their piece of the pie.

MR. RYMAN: I wanted to be able to show wherever, whoever had a good space and was willing to work at it. But anyway, the Dwan folded right after that, and then I pretty much went with John Weber and his space because, as I said, it was getting complicated and it was a better situation.

MR. CUMMINGS: What about the Guggenheim show [*Robert Ryman, 1972*]? How did that come about?

MR. RYMAN: Well, very surprisingly for me, Diane Waldman [Curator] asked me if I wanted to have a show of my work at the Guggenheim. At first it was to be a show with Bob [Robert] Mangold and myself together. But then the plans were changed by Diane. She didn't really say what reason she changed her mind, but I assume because it would be maybe a little confusing with the two of us in one show because of certain similarities of the work; and possibly also because there wasn't enough space at the time for both of us. So it was decided that there would be two separate shows. That's really the way it came about, and she just asked if I wanted to do it and I said yes, fine. I didn't know what would be in the show. Actually, I planned to have all new work in the show but that didn't come about because -

MR. CUMMINGS: How was the work selected? Did you do it with her?

MR. RYMAN: We both did it. I decided I didn't want any work before 1965 in the show. I mean, there was never any intention for it to be a retrospective in any way, because that would have taken up the whole museum, and then some, if we had really done that kind of thing. But it isn't time for that kind of thing, I don't think, so I wanted it to be a very concise group.

MR. CUMMINGS: Kind of recent paintings -

MR. RYMAN: Recent work, a very good showing of examples of certain series and certain recent work. That was really the main thing. It was to be whatever we could get hold of actually. It turned out to be from '65 to the present and then, of course, not only what we could get hold of, but what would fit in the space, you know. There was just so much space.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you like the installation and everything? Did it work for you as an exhibition?

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, I was pleased with it.

MR. CUMMINGS: The space worked all right with those bays? [They laugh].

MR. RYMAN: Well, the Guggenheim - Well, I don't have to explain that; it's the strangest museum in the world, you know. There isn't anything like it. You just have to do the best you can with the curved walls and those bays.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that was it?

Well, what was the reaction that you got? It's been eight or nine months now. It was January, wasn't it or early in the year? What kind of reaction have you gotten from people - artists, dealers, collectors?

MR. RYMAN: Lots of people liked it, I think. Some didn't like it.

MR. CUMMINGS: But was it useful from your point of view as far as people becoming interested in your work is concerned?

MR. RYMAN: Oh, sure, because a lot of people got to see the work. Much of it, even though it was older work, had never really been seen here in New York. A few of them had, but very few. Some were from private collections in Europe, and I would say only maybe three or four [telephone rings] paintings of the whole group had been seen here in New York.

[Audio break]

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, do you think – just the one more thing on the Guggenheim – that it has affected your market in any way?

MR. RYMAN: It could be, indirectly.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's hard to tell.

MR. RYMAN: I don't know exactly, but I would think so. It is a prestige kind of thing to have a show at a major museum in New York, and many people saw it who had not seen the work before. So I think it did have some kind of prestige value.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what was your reaction to seeing it, because you haven't seen these all together either?

MR. RYMAN: That's right. It was interesting for me [laughs], and it was very good to see them together like that.

MR. CUMMINGS: In what way?

MR. RYMAN: Well, I could see, you know, the different years. The paintings have gone from one year to another year. Of course, many were left out and some really major ones were left out. But I could tell – I got the feeling of what I'd been doing, you know, because you could see them all there. But the main thing was putting the show together and then after it was up and I saw them all there and everything seemed right, then I forgot all about it. In fact, I only went to the show one time while it was up. I mean, I had seen it of course putting it up, [laughs] so I knew the show and I knew the paintings. But I really only went to the museum once, because it was done; it was finished and there wasn't any need to see it really because I had seen it.

MR. CUMMINGS: You know it's interesting, do your paintings look different to you in different circumstances? I mean the same painting in different galleries or different –

MR. RYMAN: Well, sometimes if the lighting isn't too good or if the space is cramped or the walls are maybe brick or something else, it might change things. But they –

MR. CUMMINGS: Stand up pretty well.

MR. RYMAN: Sure, they are always there.

MR. CUMMINGS: There's one thing I noticed, at least among the titles of the paintings. It seems as if they are done in series. Do you work in series or are they just titles in series sometimes? Like *General* or *Veils* or *Standing* or various things like that.

MR. RYMAN: Oh, yes –

MR. RYMAN: Is that a theme or is it just a handy title?

MR. RYMAN: No. Some are not titled, but I try to title them if I can because I think it's better for information just for –

MR. CUMMINGS: Discussion or records.

MR. RYMAN: That's right because you know what you're talking about.

MR. CUMMINGS: [Laughs].

MR. RYMAN: You know if you say number one or two it's kind of vague. But I try to pick titles that don't interfere with the work. The *General* title I meant just as general. I mean, general anything, not as anything specific.

MR. CUMMINGS: I see. But are the paintings conceived of in series?

MR. RYMAN: Well, those were – the *Generals*. I intended to do I think fourteen of them, and in that case yes, each was a half inch difference in size than the other. I intended each one to be pretty much the same but different because of the size. And because as the size changed, also the paint area changed. And the application changed because the frame became larger each time. That was definitely decided to be fourteen, or actually I think there were fifteen and one was damaged, so I think I ended up with fourteen.

But, yeah I usually work in groups. Well, with the *Surface Veil* paintings, there were four of those big ones. There were some smaller ones that were not really studies but a similar procedure on a much smaller scale than the big ones. I'd planned to do two actually in the beginning of the large paintings; and then after I finished the second one, there were some problems. I could see that I was getting into something that I hadn't really completed yet. I was getting into different problems, and I really needed to do two more.

MR. CUMMINGS: What kind of problems?

MR. RYMAN: Well, with the way I had been handling the paint. The first two were oil on linen, and I was using a small brush and they were very large – 12 feet. And after I finished the second one, I could see there was much more to do with this, that this wasn't finished at all. I mean the painting was finished, but I mean this –

MR. CUMMINGS: The idea and everything.

MR. RYMAN: The process. There were many things I wanted to get into, and so the second two I used cotton. I kept the same size brush, but I approached it in a different way although it was very similar and still keeping with the same paint. So with the other two, I felt I had really got it down or got this out of my system, working on that scale with the paint.

MR. CUMMINGS: One thing that interested me and thinking about what you said and looking at all the photographs here which are very convenient [laughs] – are your paintings thought out very much ahead as far as planning the sizes and the way the paint is going to be put on or not?

MR. RYMAN: To a certain extent, yes, they are. With the *Surface Veil* paintings, I wanted them to be twelve feet, and that was planned right from the beginning. And I knew what size that was. I decided on the brush and I decided on the paint. And, as I said, I had done some smaller ones before in somewhat the same way, so I knew pretty much the way the paint was going to work. But when it actually came to working on those paintings, then it – Well, it evolves itself –

MR. CUMMINGS: Once you put the pieces together.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, the image, what the paint does when it's on, that I don't have that planned. I know a little about what it's going to be, but I don't see it until close to the end of the painting.

MR. CUMMINGS: I often wondered about that because one gets the feeling that you do set up sizes and brushes and kinds of paint –

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: – and whether it's going to be a very controlled stroke or a freer one.

MR. RYMAN: Yes, that's to begin with, but then the painting –

MR. CUMMINGS: Do the subsequent paintings work the same way, or is it in the first one where all the technical decisions take place and the other paintings sort of grow out of that?

MR. RYMAN: Well, the first one you see sometimes fails. I mean, I can plan the scale and the brush and the paint and all that; but if it does not work the way I think or if I'm not pleased with the result, then I have to make some adjustments because I know it isn't going to be right. So then I have to go back and maybe change the scale or change the brush or change the paint so that I get the feeling that I want at that time. Then it works pretty smoothly after that up to a point until it's finished.

MR. CUMMINGS: So there's still actually a lot of activity happening once you've started the picture. There's a certain amount of chance involved in it.

MR. RYMAN: Well, it's not chance. I mean, I'm very aware of what the paint is going to do. I know how the paint is going to react on the surface because I know it; I've tried it; I've done it. It's more the feeling that's the chance of it. That's difficult to explain. It has to be a very direct feeling and a very sure approach to it. There can't be any doodling. I mean –

MR. CUMMINGS: It has to happen.

MR. RYMAN: - it has got to come out right away; and if it doesn't, you can always tell when it's been fussed with.

MR. CUMMINGS: But there's not much overpainting is there?

MR. RYMAN: No, never.

MR. CUMMINGS: When a stroke goes down, that's it.

MR. RYMAN: That's what I mean. If I miss, then there isn't any overpainting. It just has to be right the first time.

It's actually very much like playing jazz [they laugh] now that I think about it. It's that kind of thing. It's when you're playing an instrument and you're composing and as you play, there isn't any second chance. Once you play, that's it for that time.

MR. CUMMINGS: You can't go back and say, "Well, I want to change that."

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, it's very similar to that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, because even in a jazz number, you're following a certain kind of idea and a pattern.

MR. RYMAN: There's a certain, sure, structure set up before.

MR. CUMMINGS: One of the other things that I find interesting is that your surface varies from what is almost very flat, shiny enamel to a rather heavily textured one to some paper ones where there's hardly any - I mean, it's almost not there; it's on thin paper and the paint seems to be very thin.

MR. RYMAN: Yes. Right. Sometimes the paint will be very heavy; sometimes very thin.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do those alternate? When you work on a series of paintings, is it just one theory that you work on or do you alternate?

MR. RYMAN: No. It's one at a time.

MR. CUMMINGS: So that the thin paintings would be six or eight or ten, and then there might be a change to something else.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah -

MR. CUMMINGS: A contrast [inaudible] -

MR. RYMAN: Yeah, but it's not exactly in that way though. I mean, I usually work on one group of paintings at the same time with a certain type of paint that I'm working with, but sometimes there won't be very many of the same. They're not always in a series. Sometimes there will only be maybe two or three in the same manner, shall I say, and then something will evolve from those and then that will change.

MR. CUMMINGS: So really there's almost a direct line of evolution in a way.

MR. RYMAN: Yeah. Usually one comes out of what came before that; because always when working on paintings, you make discoveries while you are working and that leads on. That demands that you do certain other paintings with what you found out, what you felt with the ones before.

MR. CUMMINGS: You mentioned before that you had done some teaching at the School of Visual Arts [New York]. Is that your first teaching activity?

MR. RYMAN: No. I taught before, just briefly, at New York Institute of Technology - this was for a year, I believe it was, two days a week, before Visual Arts. That was my first time teaching.

MR. CUMMINGS: How do you like teaching?

MR. RYMAN: Well, [laughs] I enjoy it sometimes. I mean, it's interesting to talk with students and to find out what they are thinking and what they are involved in and to be able to work out problems with them.

MR. CUMMINGS: What kind of students do you have there?

MR. RYMAN: Well, they are fourth year students. Most of them are involved with painting, but some are

involved in other things, you know, film and construction or sculpture, whatever. They are very interesting [laughs] -

MR. CUMMINGS: Keep you moving, right?

MR. RYMAN: As I say, they're involved with all kinds of ideas. And some of them work very hard, and they are excited about it and trying, learning about materials and technical problems. But it's kind of demanding, very draining. One day a week is all I can really take; although, as I say, I enjoy it sometimes. Other times, it can be really very hectic because you become so involved in their problems and what they are doing, it's hard to get back into your own work. But that has become much easier to do though as I've taught more.

MR. CUMMINGS: How long have you taught there?

MR. RYMAN: I guess this is the third year. The first year I taught a foundation course in painting, and that was in a way more challenging than the fourth year students because they were right out of high school and it was their first year. You have to tell them everything about brushes, canvas, right from the beginning, you know, paints and composition and color. And, of course, you don't have to go into all that with the other students, with the fourth year. Although, [laughs] you'd be surprised. Sometimes you do. [They laugh.] Sometimes you find that they don't know which brush is which or whatever.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, how do you like being at that school? Because it's full of all the zippy people, teaching the -

MR. RYMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CUMMINGS: - some of the people have told me that their students are about one jump ahead of them half the time.

MR. RYMAN: No. You know, they are young. Sometimes they can come up with some interesting ideas, you know, but that's not really what they can only later - and that's experience and that just takes time. They might do one or two pretty good paintings, pretty competent paintings. But can they do a dozen?

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, right.

MR. RYMAN: That just takes time and experience. And certainly, then they have to stick it out. Actually what it amounts to is they really have to be dedicated. That has to be their life and maybe not even five out of a hundred will do that. They'll probably end up doing something else.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you think there is any way to tell when there are students like that who really are going to go on and work and paint, or is it very difficult to judge?

MR. RYMAN: Sometimes I have a feeling about some of them that they probably will, but you can never know really - Some you have a feeling about, that they will probably do something. It's usually the person who isn't the best in the class that will end up going into it.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's tenacity sometimes.

MR. RYMAN: There are a lot that are very, very intelligent, and they do a lot of reading and are up on the latest art [laughs]. There are some who are very skillful technically. They really are - what's the word?

MR. CUMMINGS: Proficient.

MR. RYMAN: They can handle materials well, put things together well. But they're usually the ones that are so - I can't think of the word - not skillful but kind of slick, I guess, in the sense of being overly knowledgeable and skillful, you know -

MR. CUMMINGS: They pick up a style.

MR. RYMAN: - so that they usually don't end up doing too much, I mean, later on. But I can't really put my finger on why I feel some will do well.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay. One thing we haven't talked about. You were married to Lucy Lippard [critic, curator], right?

MR. RYMAN: Yes, for six, let's see, six years.

MR. CUMMINGS: You met her at the Museum [of Modern Art] when you both worked there?

MR. RYMAN: Well, that's where we first met. But where we really met each other was at the [New York] Public Library in the art section there.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh really?

MR. RYMAN: Lucy was doing research there for a paper she was writing at the time. She was getting her art history degree. That's where we really got together, at the library. At the Museum, I'd see her around, you know, but I never really got to know her.

MR. CUMMINGS: I'm curious about the business of being married to such an active critic [laughs]. Was it chaotic from your point of view?

MR. RYMAN: Well, of course, when we were first married, she was not a critic. That came later. As I say, she was getting her degree in art history, and she wanted to write. She was always a very good writer in the sense that she knew how to put words together. She had the ability for writing, and she was very quick. She had a very sharp sense of what was happening and how to put the words together, and she worked very hard, you know. She was a compulsive worker from morning until night, and so she was really fantastic. She was an excellent writer, and I helped out a little bit with the seeing part. I would give my opinions on what I saw and what I felt about things, and she could always put it into words where I couldn't - I mean in writing. So I like to think I helped her a little bit [laughs].

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you discuss your work with her very much? You know, occasionally -

MR. RYMAN: No. We didn't talk too much about my work. It was around all the time. I would talk about it on occasion and she always liked the work that I did. Of course, being married, it wasn't ethical for her to write about my work, you know. Then, of course, at that time I had no dealer and I had never shown. I never had a show of my own. [Inaudible].

Well, she's very good, I think.

MR. CUMMINGS: Was there a lot of career conflict at a later point between the demands of your activity and her work?

MR. RYMAN: No. Of course, it would have been worse if she had been a painter, too. [They laugh.] That would have been very bad. But her being a writer didn't really conflict with my work, and later on she became interested not so much in criticism but in writing. She wanted to do more serious writing. She wanted to get into other fields of writing. So there wasn't really too much of a conflict.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did she bring many people to see your work?

MR. RYMAN: No, no. Now there were a lot of people who would come to see her because of articles that she was involved in or books that she was writing. And, of course, she knew a lot of other critics and scholars. So many times I would meet them when they would come to see her, and sometimes they would be interested in my work. But there wasn't so much of that. Mostly it was her work and it was my work.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that went along easily.

MR. RYMAN: Yes.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

[END INTERVIEW]

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