Smithsonian
*Archives of American Art*

# Oral history interview with William Cumming, 1965 April 3

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## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with William Cumming on April 3, 1965. The interview took place at Cumming's home in Seattle, Washington, and was conducted by Dorothy K. Bestor for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

### Interview

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mr. Cumming, why don't you tell us first about how you got to be on the Art Project in the beginning? Were you appointed or did you apply for the position or were there tests you had to pass or competitions or what?

WILLIAM CUMMING: The main test was being poor, and everybody was, so it was not too difficult to get on.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I heard there were some requirements that you had to show that you couldn't do anything else but be an artist, which would be a little hard to prove, wouldn't it?

WILLIAM CUMMING: [Laughs.] I don't remember that.

DOROTHY BESTOR: That's what Fay Chong said.

WILLIAM CUMMING: It's very possible. I remember you had to get on—qualify for relief. And they, of course, went through a charade of trying to find employment for—you know, which was just a big laugh because there was no employment for anybody. And I had to work on a regular labor project for several months.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What was that?

WILLIAM CUMMING: I was just working on pick and shovel work out at Civic Field. I gotten out of high school in 1934. And I worked on the National Youth Administration photographic project in town. We were sent over to the Federal Art Project probably in 1937, I would say, early fall of '37, to take some publicity photos. And when we went over there, I met Graves, who I recognized since his photograph had been in the papers and I'd known his painting from about 1934. And I had been writing free, gratis, for nothing art reviews for a magazine called *The Town Crier* which was—I suppose you might call it a premature *Seattle* magazine. But as I recall it, it was a much better magazine than the *Seattle* magazine, which is—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, in what way?

WILLIAM CUMMING: It was well written. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: That sums it up.

WILLIAM CUMMING: *Seattle* is extremely badly written magazine. But I had written a review of the [Northwest –Ed.] Annual. That's what confuses the time because my review of the Annual would have been in October. So, I guess there wasn't so early in the fall as I thought, because I'd have written on the Annual for the October issue probably, and I—unless it was some other show that I covered. But anyway, I wrote a review—[clears throat] pardon me—standing up for Graves and Callahan who had been recently attacked as avant-garde and modernistic and terms like that, which were bandied about in those days. And so, Graves already knew of me when I met him, but he didn't know that I was just a kid still wet behind the ears. And particularly, since I wrote rather positively, as if I had no doubt that everything, I said was not only true but wise. [They laugh.] And so, Morris invited me to dinner, and I went up and had dinner.

[00:05:11]

Are you taking off? I still don't know what you said. Did you say you would be back? Okay.

Well, I had dinner with Morris and met the Callahans, who suggested I should get on the Art Project or the Writers' Project; there was some question. I applied on both, but the Writers' Project felt I was best [laughs] fit for the Art Project. So, I applied, and I got on and I had to go through and get on relief. In order to do that I have to leave home and come to town, and I got on. I would say I must have been on the WPA labor project by—in the early 1938. And I think my transfer to the Art Project came through about August of '38. That would be my guess. All I had to do is take some stuff over and show it to Inverarity, the director, who made disparaging remarks, but [laughs] I found out this was his usual course with everybody.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Incidentally, was he the first director of the Project, or had there been someone before him?

WILLIAM CUMMING: As far as I know, there was no one before him.

DOROTHY BESTOR: That's what I thought.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I believe—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Someone asked me—

WILLIAM CUMMING: My understanding—Denise Farwell told me that she knew Joe Danysh who had been appointed the regional director.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, he was down in San Francisco.

WILLIAM CUMMING: That's right. He was—Holger Cahill was the national director. He appointed Danysh. Danysh came to Seattle and evidently, he had been in touch with Denise who now lives on Bainbridge Island. And she told Bruce that Danysh was coming to town. And her story was that Bruce met Danysh before anybody else had a chance to talk to him. He took him out to dinner and later told her that they went out and sat on the end of a dock looking at the water and talked about art, and at the end of the night or whenever they got through talking—I think he said they talked all night, and as the dawn came up, Danysh turned to Bruce. And I suppose his voice quivering with the emotion, [they laugh] said, You are the man for us. Which was good because Bruce was, according to Denise was—had been working and teaching puppetry, probably as a TA or something like that, in the school of drama for Glenn Hughes but to according to Denise, Hughes was about to fire Bruce. I don't know if that's true or not.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM CUMMING: That was—in any case, the appointment to be the director of the Project came at an opportune time for him and an extremely inopportune time for everybody else concerned. But—so, I don't think there could have been a previous director but there may have been somebody in the area with some administrative job during the old PWA days, because there was some kind of a program under PWA which predated the WPA Federal Art Project.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I think that was a looser thing, where they just sort of went around and commissioned individual artists to do things, but I can't say for sure.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I can't find any record of that as operating in Seattle. It may have. I know it operated nationally, but there's no file about it.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Did you ask Fay at all about that?

[00:10:02]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, he didn't remember anything before the phase that he was employed on. Well, you got on it then, and it would be interesting to hear exactly—or pretty much what you did and for how long, what kind of painting and drawing and such they had

you doing.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, the project here did very little of the type of thing that is familiar in other projects. As far as I'm concerned, and I'm sure as far as most of the painters I was associated with were concerned, the Project did nothing here because of Inverarity who was a prize jackass. And whatever the reasons, just failed to get much work for us to do. We—Morris worked in the field most of the time and he just painted easel paintings as he would do even if he hadn't been on the Project. All the project did was give him pittance to live on and appropriated the paintings he did. Lubin Petric, who was Morris' brother-in-law, was on the Project at the same time. And as I recall, Lubin—I don't know if Lubin was in the field or not. He was living in Seattle. In the field meant that you could stay home and paint in your own studio—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: —at your own time. As I recall most of the time, I was kept in the studio, and I'd have to check with Lubin whether either of us ever had any time in the field or not. But in any case, all we did was just paint pictures, whatever we would have done in any case and we received an even smaller pittance than Morris. Nothing was done with the paintings and drawings except to stack them away.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Now, some of them were the watercolor sketches that you lent the Archives to be photographed, weren't they?

WILLIAM CUMMING: They may have been done on the Project, I doubt it. I think most of those were done on my own. They were the same period.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yeah.

WILLIAM CUMMING: They're—those were mostly sketchbook things.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yeah.

WILLIAM CUMMING: And the chances are that some of them were worked up as paintings—temperas during the day at the Project from the sketchbooks I kept the rest of the time. The reason I say I doubt it is that most everything we did for the Project, we—as I recall, we weren't allowed to hold on to it. It was government property. And Bruce was very—a very, very much a martinet on things like that. This came up in a little later incident when he had a bunch of stuff destroyed. But at the time, as I recall, I just—I remember I was doing very elegiac paintings of washed drawings looking sort of like Chinese Sung [ph] period drawings with horses, and rather anemic nudes looking sad, usually with same reference to the Spanish Civil War.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLLIAM CUMMING: I don't know what the reference was, but everybody was thinking about Spain in those days.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

[00:15:00]

WILLIAM CUMMING: And in any case, we just went ahead and painted. Some people—there was a little woman whose name I can't remember, must be long dead who would go out every day and do watercolors, pictorial stuff, and come back in at night. There's a sculptress named Irene McHugh.

DOROTHY BESTOR: There's a group picture with some of the workers.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Oh, you got this from Fay.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Including you. Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: My glasses.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I think some of those people you've been talking about are there.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Let's—[laughs] I wouldn't recognized myself if my name weren't on it.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I don't suppose anybody would.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, standing next to me is Dick Correll. Dick was a commercial artist.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Is he still alive? I can't—

WILLIAM CUMMING: As far as I know, he is.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Where?

WILLIAM CUMMING: The last time I knew, he was in the Bay Area. He worked in New York designing book jackets for many years. But the—about 15 years ago, the book jackets began to be—the dust jackets were set up in mechanical process and the hand-lettered and designed jacket began to disappear. Then standing next to him is Salvador Gonzalez, who is still around as I recall.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What does he do now?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, he's an odd little fellow. He's rather deaf. And you could find out about Salvador by calling Bernard Flageolle who was the medical photographer at the tumor institute of Swedish Hospital.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, how do you spell Flageolle?

WILLIAM CUMMING: F-L-A-G-E-O-L-L-E. I hear Gonzalez once in a while. He paints a rather primitivistic type of thing. The next guy, that's George R. Glenn, I think may have worked on the Index of American Design. And Dave Stapp [ph], next to him, definitely worked on the Index. And Paul Cunningham, who I understand is dead, was a big bluff, woodsy type of a guy [laughs], who carved animals in wood and who was sort of a patsy for Inverarity. And Ransom Patrick, the next one, was a commercial artist who was just fighting his way off the bottle at that time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I hear he has since graduated from college and subsequently gotten a PhD and become the head of the fine art department at Duke University, did you know that?

WILLIAM CUMMING: No, I knew that—I didn't know where it was. I thought it was at Cornell. Yeah, Ran was a typical hard-nosed commercial artist. He was a display letterman. He used—at one time worked for Frederick's, he'd takes the cards and lay them out without any guidelines and just write the cards out. And he—after I went in [inaudible], I don't know whether he was in service, and GI-ed, or what but he did take a degree and he became an aesthetician. And Wellington Groves, who is not in this photograph but who is— was on the Project, told me that Ran was back in town not too long ago, or a few years ago and they were—he was at an evening where Ran was present. He said he couldn't understand a word Ran said.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

[00:20:01]

WILLIAM CUMMING: He had become so super-aestheticized. Bernie Sheridan [ph], I don't recall. Fay Chong, of course. Esther Olson [ph] was Inverarity's secretary. And I don't know who Bill Van Wyck [ph] was.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Do you know if Esther Olson [ph] is still around?

WILLIAM CUMMING: No. [Inaudible.] Van Wyck [ph], I don't know. I don't know who this is, S-K-L-A—Oh, St. Clair [ph] somebody—I don't know what her first name is. I don't know what she did she. She may have been—there were a number of people on, clerks and the like. And there's the pride of the Czar's bodyguard, Jacob Elshin [laughs].

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yeah [laughs].

WILLIAM CUMMING: And Jacob used to sit in bars and drink wine and tell me how the Bolsheviks blew up his brother.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Which is very possible, but not being terribly sympathetic to the White Guards, [laughs] it didn't impress me a great deal. Jake wasn't too bad of a guy. He was not part of our group. We didn't—our group was Graves, Anderson, Callahan, who wasn't on the Project, Petric, and Tobey, and myself. Marsh—Leon Marsh had been a CCC administrator or head of a camp, and was a reserve officer. And I guess even reserve officers were unemployed in those days because he was on the Project and he made color. He ground it and was pretty good oil, according to Lubin. I've just heard that he's a brigadier general or something now but where I haven't any idea. And Alf—what the heck was his last name? I think he had a fingertip missing, he's on the far right here.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Is that Bruseth? B-R-U—

WILLIAM CUMMING: Bruseth, Alf Bruseth, that's it.

DOROTY BESTOR: —S-E-T-H?

WILLIAM CUMMING: He was on Index of American Design.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Is he around by any chance.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I have no idea. This guy, Henry something or other, I believe was the carpenter. And then this is Lubin Petric, who is still around, Lubin was my closest friend, and he was Graves' brother-in-law at the time. The woman next to him is Helen something or other. I really [laughs] don't know what she did. And then this is Agatha Kirsch. That's the little woman who painted watercolors and who one day came flying back from Alki Point frightened to death because some man had been watching her from the window of the men's dressing room. And I don't get this woman next to her. Can't even read the name. I don't remember her at all. I remember Mrs.—it was Ms. Kirsch, I'm sure. And then comes the —our Ute Indian painter, Julius Twohy. I don't remember too much about Julius' work except it was sort of a takeoff on Indian painting, at the time. And he lived up on Rainier in an old house, and had a rather large brood of children. But I never was able to figure out who are the numerous girls I met around there with his wife.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, according to one tale that I heard just this morning, he was madly enamored of some young Indian girl and it affected his work so much that he would get to carving—wood carvings and go right through to the back and [William Cumming laughs] was, for a while, never able to finish one figure. But that may be exaggeration.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I don't know. I don't remember—

DOROTHY BESTORY: [Inaudible.]

WILLIAM CUMMING: —[inaudible] carving. Who did that came from?

DOROTHY BESTOR: Harry Bonath.

[00:25:02]

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, Harry's got a good memory. I don't know what happened to Julius finally.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mr. Bonath—maybe it's pronounced Bonath—thought that he had died within the last few years.

WILLIAM CUMMING: It's possible. Now, these—I think Barnes was a carpenter and this guy was a carpenter. That makes three carpenters, though, which seems an inordinately large number. One of them must have been a timekeeper. I think Barnes—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Probably.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Barnes was the Project timekeeper, I believe.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM CUMMING: Old W.O. Fletcher [ph], I think he again was Index of American Design.

Those guys, of course, did fantastic work.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Fantastic in what sense?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, he—you know, they did these meticulous watercolor renderings of cast iron banks and other artifacts of Americana.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Do you think it was worth it?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Oh, certainly. Now, you're trapping me into saying [laughs] I think the Project was worth it [laughs].

DOROTHY BESTOR: [They laugh.] No, I'm just talking about the Index now. There is the view of some that it took them two weeks—it would take one painter two weeks to do a perfectly exact rendering of a key, let's say, and that that was rather self-defeating.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, they didn't have anything else to do and nobody else was recording these things. And I personally think they are better recorded in that type of rendering than they are by a camera.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM CUMMING: But like everything else, much of the work was made work. And that was all the Federal Art Project or WPA was allowed to do, since if you did anything that competed, you were interfering with free enterprise.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: And since I was on the other end of the stick at that time—I suppose today I wouldn't care to have the government sponsor other artists to compete with me but nobody—there was no—no artists who were going to do—I mean, there was no foundation, or anything interested in those days in keeping these artifacts alive. And if they hadn't been recorded then, there would have been just that much a smaller pool of them to be recorded later.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Right.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Now, next to old W.O. [ph], who I'm sure is dead because as you can see, he was quite ancient then, is Irene McHugh, the—who was the sculptor on the Project. Irene had done work like—oh, she designed kewpie dolls and things for fairs, for novelty houses.

DOROTHY BESTORY: Oh.

WILLIAM CUMMING: In addition to the sculpture on the Project. As I recall, she did a bas relief or two for public buildings, minor things. And then this was the boy-wonder Hanns Bok, who—he was a rather large, anemic-looking boy, the youngest person on the Project. He did weird figures, and he whistled all the time which annoyed Mark dreadfully, because he wouldn't just whistle "Home on the Range", he'd go all the way through "Afternoon of a Faun" from beginning to end. [Laughs.] And Mark would go right out of his wig. [Dorothy Bestor laughs.] And Hanns later went to New York, and he became the cover artist for—oh, a magazine, Fantastic Stories or something, anyways, like fantasy fiction stories, not science fiction so much as fantasy fiction and he'd do these weird type of figures which are used nowadays to represent Martians.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM CUMMING: And his stuff, I understand, became sort of collectors' items. And you probably got the story from Fay, how he—Fay used to write to Hanns about once a year and he'd get a letter back. And last year when he wrote, he got no reply, and months later, the envelope came back and marked "Deceased."

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh?

[00:30:01]

WILLIAM CUMMING: But he never knew how Hanns was deceased. My—

DOROTHY BESTOR: No, he didn't mention that.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Oh, he didn't? Well, that's an interesting story. Fay could perhaps tell you more about Hanns, since he was corresponding with him. Hanns, as I recall him— in memory, he seems like the kind of kid who might very well have had rheumatic fever as a child, because, while he was large, he was very pasty, and not at all a physical person. Then besides these people who are in the Project—these are the people working at the Project down in the maritime building—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: —later at the Bailey-Gatzert School. But this photograph was taken down on the top floor of the maritime building. I believe it was the top floor, where we were on. Guy Anderson and Morris both worked in the field. They were both living out of town most of the time, up in La Conner and Edmonds. Guy later was transferred to Spokane and taught on the—in the center over there. And then Jim and Margaret Fitzgerald were purely in Spokane. They were here when I met them, and I didn't even remember, when I wrote the article for *Puget Soundings*, that they had been connected with the Project, but they were put on the Project teaching over there, in Spokane.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

WILLIAM CUMMING: And in Spokane, at the center over there, there was John Davis teaching, who is now, I believe, head of the art department at Idaho State College in Pocatello. And is an old close friend of mine, but I haven't had any contact with him for almost 10 years. Malcolm Roberts, who was supposed to be Seattle's first surrealist, did rather decorative type of surrealism. Sailboat rigging in the middle of a desert blowing in the wind. Malcolm was—had left the Project by the time I came along. He was—he's an interior designer now in town, here.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I want to talk to him soon.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Yeah, he's an excellent person to talk to, because he would have a lot of knowledge of before I got on. And he has a very good memory, much better than mine. And he's extremely charming person. So, I think that's about all the people connected with it. Oh, there was a watercolorist, Vanessa Helder, I think she taught in Spokane, and she's now, I believe, in the Los Angeles area.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Vanessa was a rather flamboyant gal. I'd say was probably in her early 30s in those days. Many of them who are still alive are, of course, older now. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Odd. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM CUMMING: Including myself. As far as I know, this is about the only photograph of me in existence from that period. And I don't know of any of—Lubin and I once had a little photograph taken on the street up on Stewart—the corner of 18th and Stewart across from the bus terminal by a street photographer who had one of those old box cameras with a tin cup and developing fluid on the tripod, and make little, tiny photograph about the size of this matchbox. And we looked like, sort of—oh, you might have taken us for Modigliani and Kisling. [Dorothy Bestor laughs.] We really looked that part. Unfortunately, we couldn't paint the part those days but—and that photograph disappeared.

[00:35:07]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Would you like a copy of this one? The library is making a couple of extras.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I'd be glad to have one.

DOROTHY BESTOR: All right.

WILLIAM CUMMING: It's just too bad that—well, of course, Tobey is the one I've forgotten. Tobey came in '39. Now this must have been taken—it doesn't say whether this is early or late'39. I would say this was probably early '39 before Tobey came on. Tobey came back from Dartington Hall in England, and there was a lot of optimism. He was to head up the

studio work itself. And also, there was a mural to be done. I don't know where. It was hoped that Bruce would finally keep his damn nose out of the studio and let the artists work under Mark. Also, like, you know, we all thought that we'd get a chance to—the younger painters would work as assistants to Mark on the mural and it would be a very valuable experience and all. And Mark did cartoons for it, which were subsequently disappeared. But he—I couldn't say how long Mark was on the Project but I doubt if it was as much as a year.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Did he get a chance to supervise it at all, or was he just working?

WILLIAM CUMMING: He just came down and rattled around. There was—now I don't know whether Mark, you know, was an administrative type but we never found out because Bruce interfered and gave him no chance. You'd have to talk to Mark to get the details on all that, but I know he quit the Project because he was so fed up with Bruce's interference.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What form did Mr. Inverarity's interference take? Did he dictate the subject matter or the number of paintings you had to do or the time you had to spend or—

WILLIAM CUMMING: No. I—as I recall, he didn't pay a great deal of attention except to find fault but mainly, he did all kinds of little things to put the artists down like putting the artists on the salary scale for the nonprofessional help and putting the nonprofessionals on the skilled artist level. Of course, it was quite a bit—the arrangement—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Very surprising.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I was—I never got more than $66 a month.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I thought the artists are supposed to get $94?

WILLIAM CUMMING: That's right. But as I recall, the carpenter got $94. That might—you know that—it's a long time ago but I know we—this was a big gripe among people like Lubin and myself. I think Morris got [$]94. But he'd do things like—I don't recall this, it evidently happened before I was there but when Guy was in the studio, there was a time when you had to check out and check in when you went to the can.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, really!

WILLIAM CUMMING: [Laughs.] And Bruce would do things like reminding you that if you—I remember doing a painting in which I had rather raw reds and yellows and blues, which sounds rather amazing.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Uncharacteristic [William Cumming laughs] of you.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Very uncharacteristic. I was just stumbling around in those days. But Bruce called the colored crude as I recall. He was probably correct as far as that goes but I justified it by pointing to painters like Van Gogh and Kokoschka. He reminded me that I was neither Van Gogh nor Kokoschka. [Dorothy Bestor laughs.] It was in an extremely sneering fashion, which made me want to smash him in the fact.

[00:40:00]

It was just his manner, he could these things very neat and continually did things to humiliate the artist. Morris eventually left purely because Bruce decided to force him to come in and work in the studio. And later, he put me to work on a—designing a model of Northern Canadian Indian village for Dr. Gunther [ph] at the university. Things like that which continually derogated us and—plus, added to which was the fact that he never knew used us to do anything around in the community. [Inaudible.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: He didn't give you a chance to work your sketches up into murals, then, that were actually painted [at home (ph)]?

WILLIAM CUMMING: No, no, he never got any mural commissions for the Project. People who remember better than I could probably re—I know there were some discussions about different possible projects. But my understanding is that they all came to naught because either Bruce annoyed the people he had to talk to, or he fouled up. Now our feeling—and this was the feeling of all the—well, all what I would call the serious artists on the Project, was that Bruce's pathological jealousy, or what we considered a pathological jealousy of artist who were capable of doing what he was not capable of doing, was so great that it interfered

with any intentions he may have had of legitimately trying to do the things that the Project did, for instance, in San Francisco, where they did a great deal of work including the Coit Tower.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: And I think that in retrospect, I don't see any reason to change the opinion I had in those days, and I've talked with Morris and Guy and Lubin. They've all said the same thing. Denise Farwell reminded me even more of the—some of these things that Bruce pulled on other people, not on myself.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Like what?

WILLIAM CUMMING: No, I really can't. I mean, it's just the kind of stuff you listen to and say—click your tongue but it's—it doesn't really mean much to me anymore. I can't even remember all my own gripes except that I—we all felt that Bruce was just sort of a nightmare that we lived with every day. And—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, there were some attempts to change the directorship?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Yeah. We made attempts. There were evidently two parallel cabals going at one time. One was the Artists' Union. We had—we formed a local—I think we called ourselves the Washington Artists' Union, I'm not sure. We were affiliated with the left-wing commonwealth federation but we had no operative ties with them. They probably looked on us as a bunch of nuts, and we probably looked on them as a bunch of boors.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM CUMMING: I really can't remember. The people of the—just how much of a tie there was, I don't know. It wasn't enough to make much of an impression on me. But we did make an attempt to use the union itself to organize a movement within the Project to bring our gripes to the attention of Harry Bonath and Dr. Fuller and people like that, and a meeting was called up at the art museum. We were supposed to go—Lubin, myself, and Leon Marsh, the president of the local, were the spokesmen. And we were to lay before these people, the accomplishments of projects elsewhere, the talent available on this Project, and the failure of Bruce to make use of the talent properly.

[00:45:21]

But just before the meeting, we got word, either Carl Morris flew over, or Hilda Deutsch—they're now Carl and Hilda Morris of Portland—they were in the Spokane group—anyway, they came over and announced—or sent word over that if we went ahead to dump Bruce, they would back him up.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, why was that do you suppose?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, you'd have to ask Carl and Hilda. They later said that their position was that Hilda at least had been on the New York Project, and she said that there, they got rid of an unpopular administrator. And in his place, they got Brigadier General Somervell.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Who launched a big witch hunt and decided that the artists were propagandizing for a revolution or some darn thing. I have no idea what the details were, but it caused a big mass firings and all kinds of trouble on the Project back there. And anyway, that was her position was that if we got rid of Bruce, we might get somebody worse. While we were working to get Margaret Callahan, the job at least, some of us were. I remember my impression was that if Bruce was dumped, Margaret would get the job. I don't know whether that's true or not. But Margaret, being a New Deal Democrat would have had a good chance at it, from the political standpoint. And from the artists standpoint, I think she probably would have got the support of most of the artists.

DOROTHY BESTOR: She would have been very good, wouldn't she?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Margaret would have been a wonderful administrator. And in the meantime, I talked to Morris and he remembers a meeting held at his place where the Pattersons were present among others. And I think Ken and Margaret and some other

people, and they were working also to—in the same way. But anyway, at the meeting of the art museum, Marsh came to us. Marsh was a very sort of a timid soul type, and Marsh came to Lubin and I and said, We've got to lay off Bruce because the Spokane people won't go along with us. So, instead of making our pitch, we told the—we simply told this group of people—we were sitting in the boardroom at the art museum, and we told them how—what the Project was doing other places, what it was capable of doing, what talent was available, and we stopped there. We didn't add [laughs] the role of this scoundrel Bruce who was sabotaging the Project here, and I remember Harry Bonath saying to somebody, What the hell's going on? I thought we were supposed to hear some gripes or something. I could have spent my evening better than coming up and listening to this talk about what the Project's doing in San Francisco and Dubuque. And [laughs] I don't know if Harry to this day knows what the hell [laughs] happened, but we got submarined.

And the funny thing was the main reason the Spokane people wouldn't back us up was that they didn't have so much trouble with Bruce. Bruce came over once a month maybe, and took Carl and Hilda and Joe Solomon, who was over, to dinner. Ken Downer was another one over there.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Most of the correspondence is with Ken Downer, and apparently there was a great deal of very strict supervision, from here, of his activities. Such as making him rewrite his letters, and send over here every time he wanted a couple of dozen drawing pencils for the project.

WILLIAM CUMMING: That's very likely. Ken probably was the director there.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, he was.

[00:50:00]

WILLIAM CUMMING: Carl and Hilda were the—well, Hilda was the more—most talented person. I don't know whatever happened to Downer. I heard something once. Somewhere I got the impression he married money, [laughs] but I don't know. I don't know where I got—

DOROTHY BESTOR: I had heard that he has something to do with a museum.

WILLIAM CUMMING: [Inaudible.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: I'm about to find out.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I don't think it was much of a working artist, as I recall. I may be wrong there again, but that's my impression. Joe Solomon, I never knew, but I've heard of him and he—you see his name in *Art News* and such-like scandal sheets. He's probably in New York. I'm pretty sure he was a New Yorker. And I don't know what the basis of this colonizing by eastern artists was. It was evidently a subtle policy of the national organization to send New York artists out to the hinterlands.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Maybe it was a part of the regionalism movement.

WILLIAM CUMMING: It might have been. I don't know. They didn't do much to us. We sort of did a few things to them, but it's pretty hard for a New Yorker to become a Westerner. And I don't know if any of those who came out here have succeeded in really becoming a part of this scene. But of course, another thing was that our regionalism wasn't a regionalism at all. It was just—it was an idiom that was rooted in the physical terrain, and the atmosphere, things like that, but it wasn't—we never had a regional school—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: —in the order of the vulgar regionalism of Benton and that gang.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You were saying when we talked before that northwest art was a function of the quality of the light as much as anything else?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Yah, I think that the gray light defines form in a particularly plastic manner that is different than the light in other places that I've been, like Southern California, the light hits form and bounces off. Here the light envelops form more like water—a gentle stream of water flowing over a form. I guess the tape should note that I am gesturing [they laugh], wiggling my fingers in a downward movement.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Too bad we don't have a camera here.

WILLIAM CUMMING: [Laughs.] Perish forbid. [They laugh.] Well, anyway, the Project again—there's one thing I didn't want to miss, although it's on the other tape—is the fact—the crime of crimes was when we—I believe it happened when we moved from the Maritime Building up into Bailey-Gatzert School. And Inverarity—we had, of course, a tremendous amount of paintings, drawings, sculpture, and stuff that had been accumulated, and Inverarity want through a bunch of stuff and there was a whole table of just junk, in his eyes, which he wanted destroyed. Now, as Morris remembers it, nobody would obey him. He asked probably these guys—working stiff guys in the Project to destroy, and included, definitely according to Morris, included Mark's ceramic figures that he had done. Guy was of the opinion that it also included the cartoons and the material for Mark's projected mural that never came—

DOROTHY BESTOR: That one that was to be in the chemistry building at the university?

WILLIAM CUMMING: I believe that was where it was to be. And then Guy—as Guy remembers it, the cartoon and the drawings were in this group of stuff which Bruce ordered destroyed and when nobody would do it, he said, Well, I will show you how to do it, and he just swept the whole mass off the table into bins and the stuff was carted off and junked.

[00:55:09]

Morris remembers him also taking a hammer. And, as Morris says, went down the line of Mark's sculptures, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, just breaking them into bits. And this story has come up time and again, I don't think there's any question—there may be some question as to the exact details, but I don't think there's any question that Inverarity deliberately and maliciously destroyed a tremendous amount of work. Some of the sculpture may have been mine because I used to model little—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, did you?

WILLIAM CUMMING: —figures down there.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, I would have thought that Mr. Inverarity would want as much work as possible to be shown, to have been accomplished under the Project he was directing, just for his own credit if nothing else.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, our analysis, of course [laughs], was that Bruce was so pathologically jealous of artists that he couldn't help destroying our work one way or another. He had been raised, as I understand it—this again [inaudible] authority is Denise Farwell—who would be a good person to talk to about Inverarity. [Cross talk.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: I will definitely try to see her.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Since she [inaudible]. I had her number but I wrote it on an envelope and put it in my pocket and—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, I'd be delighted to get that if you find that.

WILLIAM CUMMING: She's on Bainbridge.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes. How is she listed? Mrs.—

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, her husband there is around, so they're still probably Hollis Farwell, H-O-L-L-I-S. He is retired—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Fine.

WILLIAM CUMMING: He used to be—used to work for Matson steamship line. And they're real fine people. If you would like some time with good weather coming on, why—I know that Denise and Holly [ph]—I saw them at the preview of the Annual last year and they wanted us to come over sometime. If you'd like, we could get in touch with them and if everybody's time can work out together, go over some Sunday.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, I'd love to.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Because I'd like to see them myself, and—

DOROTHY BESTOR: That would be wonderful.

WILLIAM CUMMING: —Denise, I'm sure, can just remember acres of stuff about Bruce. But she told me that Bruce had been—his father—they had—there were two sons. The brother was the father's son and Bruce was the mother's son. And the mother was a disappointed artist, or a lover of culture and anyway—in case—languishing in this dustbin of [laughs] culture, provincialism, and she raised Bruce to be a genius. And his only genius was for being a 15 kinds of a damn fool bureaucrat. I have seen one or two things which he purported to be paintings, and other people have seen his prints, and he really stank the place up terribly.

But he, one year, was juried out of the Northwest Printmakers and his babbitt brother, in the meantime, was a businessman who worked with his father, had taken up printmaking as a hobby. And as Denise told it, [laughs] his brother not only got into the printmakers' show, which Bruce was juried out of, but won an award [laughs]. Which must have really galled the poor dears—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Must have been pretty frustrating.

WILLIAM CUMMING: —sensitive soul, terribly.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Incidentally, what, if any, was Denise Farwell's official position in regard to the art or the Project or—

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, Denny [ph] was just—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Is she a painter?

WILLIAM CUMMING: No, she and I used to play Ravel's *Mother Goose* suite, four hands on one piano [laughs], down on at her house, that was out on—she had a house down below about 36th, over in the Madrona area. You went down a long path. Here was the little house. I remember Jewish refugee family moved into the area, and these two little girls came down the path one day and discovered this little house on the side of the hill. Asked Denny [ph] if this was a Heidi house. [Dorothy Bestor laughs.] Very much [like that (ph)].

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:00:17]

WILLIAM CUMMING: No, she was just a—I suppose one might call her a dilettante, but I never thought of her as a dilettante. She—Denny [ph] was—she's just a person who liked arts and music and books and was very—a lot of fun to be around and talk with. And she certainly did a lot to—[Clears throat.] pardon—keep me from disappearing and malnutrition. And she had a sister who was married to—at that time, to a painter on the Project in San Francisco. I can't remember her name. Now, she's married now to a Unitarian minister somewhere. Her name is Patsy [ph] but I don't remember the name of the artist she was married to. I remember a story that Denny's [ph] brother-in-law was working, probably on the Coit Tower murals, and he was mixing and grinding tempera or color for the frescoes with a knife, spatula, and shallow dish, and Bruce was visiting the fresco project, and walked over in his tweed suit and made some patronizing comment about, Oh, mixing color, I see. And I can't remember this guy's name. But anyway, Denny's [ph]'s brother-in-law said yes, and increased the tempo of his spatula in such a way, squeezed down at the right moment so that the color just splurted all over Bruce. [They laugh.] And you can see how he was liked.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I can. A picture begins to emerge.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I don't know what—did Kenneth have any stories of Bruce?

DOROTHY BESTOR: Not as graphic as yours. I think it came—I know he came to the same general conclusions, but without bolstering anecdotes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Yeah, I know that he—I just—he may have known more about Bruce than I do. I know that the stories I've told are just a beginning and there's other people—Denise, Lubin, Morris, Guy—Malcolm probably knows a tremendous amount about him. But the fact is that none of it matters a great deal. All it does is it becomes pretty much personal

gossip.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yeah.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Which buttresses the picture of a rather fantastically bungling bureaucrat.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, Mr. Callahan's general conclusions seemed to be that sort of wry [ph] one that the Project was terribly badly managed here and yet was a very good thing for those particular times, and those particular people. That could not be recreated reintroduced into the American scene any other time.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, it kept us alive, and I guess that's pretty important. And certainly there was—there was valuable work done in other places, and the Index, I think, was a valuable thing anywhere. I guess that was eventually published, wasn't it? Or are those—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I'm pretty sure it was, though, not as many volumes as were originally projected. I'm going to check up on that.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, I always found the work of those guys fantastic, because, you know, they work with big reading glasses between themselves and the [inaudible] job. And they do—something really beautiful about that type of a rendering that can't be sneezed at. although people generally don't consider it really art. [Inaudible.] [Cross talk.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: I know. I'm surprised that you should approve of it this much.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, it's craftsmanship and good craftsmanship is important. There's too damn little of it today. And they always impressed me [laughs] very much. That's the biggest impression I get from the thing.

[01:05:10]

DOROTHY BESTOR: One other thing about the Project, was there much of a feeling of solidarity with the other federal projects such as the Writers' Project? Was there much contact between this and the Writers' Project or this and the Theater Project?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Not that I remember. We all were just earning our pittance, and I don't even—the only person I knew on the Writers' Project was Paul Ashford, who's dead now. And I don't even know who else was on it, for that matter, in this area.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Byron Fish was.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Oh, he was?

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM CUMMING: [Laughs.] I never knew that. I wonder—maybe John—no, John Reddon [ph], I think he was—in the old days, I think he wrote for *the Star*. Margaret Callahan had written for *the Star*. I quit the Project up in Bailey-Gatzert School because I just sick of it. I didn't have any desire to spend my life designing displays for the University of Washington museum.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Of course, there's another view of those displays. The anthropology people think that they were quite something.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, all I did was design a double-sided case that was [laughs] so difficult to carry out that the carpenters were all out for my scalp. [Dorothy Bestor laughs.] It called for a double—a bevel going two different directions at once in order to lay the glass flat. And I always have—I never found out if they carried it out or not. It was [laughs] a very interesting thing and not being able to follow through with the craftsmanship after designing it, I wasn't able to be much of a help to them. It was at that time, I told Bruce I was quitting. Morris quit about the same time because he would not come in and work under Bruce's thumb.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Sometime along then wasn't there that water fight or mud throwing thing?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, I may have it wrong. The funny thing is Jim Fitzgerald remembers it because he was up there that day, he says there was quite a hullabaloo. And I suppose I should remember it, but my memory is so vague.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, in the correspondence Mr. Inverarity admonishes someone about a water fight which, if it were repeated or news that it got to the authorities, the Project would be out of the Bailey-Gatzert School instantly. He didn't mention—

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, who would he be writing to, because—

DOROTHY BESTOR: —[inaudible] involved. That's what I want to know. I was leafing through great quantities of the correspondence, the carbons in the library. I fell upon that. I don't have the details in mind.

WILLIAM CUMMING: There was a period where we were—I think we were all off the Project, and it may have been when the shift was made. But there was a period there where everybody had to lay off for a couple of months.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, you were 403'd out, apparently.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Hadn't heard that [they laugh] for a long time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: And that was in 1939 according to the files.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, I went on the—I think you could either just do nothing or you could be transferred to another project in the meantime. Well—because the shift was—it wasn't just a move, it was a shift from a federal project to—

DOROTHY BESTOR: State-wide.

WILLIAM CUMMING: —being under the state WPA, and that was part of the reactionary trend of trying to liquidate the projects by taking them first out of their—they were autonomous national organizations within WPA and you were put under an art—the Art Project was just part of the Washington state WPA setup, which put you directly under the political machine.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:10:00]

WILLIAM CUMMING: And—instead of being under Cahill, who was evidently a fairly good guy, like Hallie Flanagan in the theater. So, I went on a real property survey out in the Ballard area, I remember, which was a ghastly experience, for a couple of months. Then we went back on and then we were on a new setup, although it didn't mean a great deal of difference at the time, to us. And then when I quit, I had nothing, but I got on the National Youth Administration. Betty Bard was at the head of the NYA Division of Information, which was sort of an NYA writing and art project.

DOROTHY BESTOR: She was Betty MacDonald, wasn't she?

WILLIAM CUMMING: No, she was Betty Bard at that time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

WILLIAM CUMMING: And she—oh, all the stories that came out in *The Egg and I*, I remember her telling in person, which was much more—a thousand times funnier than in print because Betty was so full of life.

And I went over to the NYA and an attempt was made to put—get me a special supervisory or teaching position. Finally, it was worked out that I would be related training advisor. I would be paid by the State Department of Education, because I remember Pearl Wanamaker signed my credentials. And I worked on the project, but I—in the meantime, I had to work for several months, or more than a year, I think, doing—acting in a supervisory capacity but paid only as a youth worker. And in that time, I did a mural for Burlington High School, which was part of a whole job they did up there. They built a shop, or some kind of a building for, I think, farm experiments for the Burlington school. And I remember a big dedication ceremony where my mural was dedicated at the same time, and Pearl Wanamaker was there and spoke. And Betty was there. And then Betty became Betty MacDonald.

The war came in about the same time, just about the time they began to take all our *nisei* kids away from us to put them in the camps. I—instead of getting into the service, I landed in [Firland Sanatorium –Ed.]. And Betty and her husband and my wife drove me out, to Firland. Of course, had Betty just got out of there—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yeah.

WILLIAM CUMMING: —a couple years before.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM CUMMING: And that was sort of the end of that part of my life.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, do you think it made some contribution towards you're going on as a painter?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Oh, certainly. You can't underestimate the importance of being able to be alive. I would have painted, of course, if I'd been working on—when I was working on the ditch-digging project, I was painting.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What if you'd been chosen to be on the Writers' Project instead of the Art Project when you applied for both? What do you think might have happened?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, it's hard to say because, in any case, I would have busted down with TB, and that would have—I really don't—I don't think I'd have ever gone into writing because I don't like to write. People have, at times, been kind enough to say that I'm a good writer but I hate—I hate writing literally. I hate—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Most of the best writers do really.

WILLIAM CUMMING: [Laughs.] Outflanked. But I would hate to think that I would have had to earn of my living writing. It's just drudgery. It's so much—I have so much more confidence in visual imagery. I think that words are more or less a trap. Anyway, I spent most of my time writing love letters in those days [laughs], to various gals who I hope have burned them long ago. [They laugh.]

[01:15:28]

DOROTHY BESTOR: I wonder.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I would hate to have them rise to—like Banquo's ghost. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: You'd hate to have them all lined up in the Archives of American Art [laughs].

WILLIAM CUMMING: [Laughs.] I certainly would.

DOROTHY BESTOR: As peripheral material.

WILLIAM CUMMING: One doesn't want to look foolish. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, this has been interesting. Thank you. Is there anything else you think we ought to get down such as—well, have you got any more general reflections on whether there should be any project like this as a continuing thing? We're talking before the tape went on about the suggestions for federal aid to the performing arts and suggestions for federal aid as part—federal aid to artists as part of the Johnson Appalachia project and other parts of the war on poverty. Does it make any—would it make any sense now, something at all comparable to this?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, it's hard to say. No matter how you slice it, there's going to be pork barreling.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: And I noticed Louis Guzzo opposed the federal proposal, the other day. And preferred a local level. But I don't see where you get away from the pork barrel on the local level.

DOROTHY BESTOR: No.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I would sort of be glad to be able to say, to hell with the whole thing, let the artist compete for his market. But this reflects my own position at the moment, the fact that I'm doing well on a competitive market.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Don't you think artists in general, if they're any good, are doing well now?

WILLIAM CUMMING: I'd say they are generally, the tremendous postwar prosperity has left a great surplus and national income to go into all kinds of luxuries. And if this should be pinched back, why, we might start to scream for help. [Laughs.] I hate to think—I shudder to think of ever going through another depression. But I don't even try to think of that at the moment. My market has stayed remarkably good in Seattle. I haven't even had to exhibit elsewhere. I have no desire to exhibit in the East.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You have exhibited in the East some, haven't you?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Not that I know of.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh. I thought I read that you had.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, it's very [inaudible]—there again, I don't know what all has been written about me so—and I don't check up because it's too ghastly [laughs] usually. I think Betty Willis [ph] took some things back about 20 years ago when she was working at the Willard Gallery. And Betty Willis [ph] is another person who knows a lot about that period.

DOROTHY BESTOR: She's not the one in the English department [inaudible] university, is she?

WILLIAM CUMMING: No, Betty—Betty lives over on Bainbridge also. She is very close—an extremely close friend of Tobey's. And I think she's collected a lot of material for a book on that period of the late '30s and early '40s. I know she was trying to pump me for my memories. Unfortunately, I just don't remember much.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, you remember quite a lot. How would I get in touch with her? Do you have her address on Bainbridge? Or does Denise Farwell know her?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, she knows her, but I don't know if they're—you know, if's they're—at least, I would imagine she must know Betty. I don't know if they're close friends or—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Or the reverse.

WILLIAM CUMMING: —in touch each other. Betty might even be in India at the moment. She bounces all over. India is a big deal with her. And the museum might know how to reach her. Dorothy Malone [ph], I'm sure, would know how to reach both Betty and the Farwells.

[01:20:15]

Dorothy probably knows a lot of stuff that nobody else knows, or rather has a view of thing—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: —because she's been there since before I came to town.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

WILLIAM CUMMING: She's been Dr. Fuller's [ph] secretary.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes. Well, I'm going to see her soon, so I'll ask her.

WILLIAM CUMMING: And—Earl Fields up at the museum might remember things back beyond —

DOROTHY BESTOR: Who Fields?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Earl. He does the record photography up there. He used to be a painter. He quit painting. But he and Callahan were part of a big sort of a—oh, what do you call it, a

collective up on Madison in the mid '30s and they were all hungry—might have been early '30s even.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Was that the group of 12?

WILLIAM CUMMING: No, the group of 12 was—you know, that was just a group, they were—I can't even remember who all was in it. There was the Camferrmans, Callahan, Graves, Ambrose and Viola [Patterson], that's six. Probably Isaacs. I always felt Isaacs was a dreadful painter but.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, really?

WILLIAM CUMMING: There's such an attempt now to make him out to be sort of a patron saint.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM CUMMING: I don't know. He may have been a good painter, but he reputedly was—blocked Tobey from teaching at the university.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, I hadn't heard that.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Yeah, I don't know who would be able to fill in on that, whether it's true or not.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, the group of 12, you were saying, included the Camffermans, the and the Pattersons, and Callahan, and Issacs—

WILLIAM CUMMING: And Graves.

DOROTHY BESTOR: —and Graves?

WILLIAM CUMMING: I think probably Issacs. And there used to be—there was a little brochure put out on the group at one time, and I'm sure it's in the library stacks somewhere. It may have been put out by some gallery showing them or something, but it was biographical material. And I don't know who else might have been in it. I doubt if old Forkner [ph] would have been in it. I don't know what the group was held together by. They— except I think they were they were sort of thought of is somewhat avant-garde. I don't think Tobey was a member. I think he was away. And I don't think the group really functioned as a group of [inaudible]—

DOROTHY BESTOR: No. That's what Mr. Callahan, he mentioned it in passing and said it wasn't really a group, it was just 12 people who got together, really, a very few times.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Yeah, you could have the same thing—the gallery that Fitzgeralds and Okada and a bunch had a [inaudible] Ivey [ph] up on Broadway for a while. And in retrospect, somebody thinks back, and they see it as a group. Even the group around Callaghan, Graves, Tobey, Anderson, Petric, myself, and Margaret, and then there were people who were sort of peripheral to it, mostly amateurs or art lovers like George Matter [ph] and Betty Willis [ph]. This group was no group really, and the painters in it had no common program. The idea of the Mystic Four was a journalistic device, because they all have different approaches. They're not held together. And Petric and I, of course, were not even mystics. We didn't qualify—

DOROTHY BESTOR: I see, the Mystic Four was supposed to be you—

WILLIAM CUMMING: No, the main Mystic Four was—you know, the publicized four, were in the state department show that went around the world were Graves, Tobey, Anderson, and Callahan.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

[01:25:02]

WILLIAM CUMMING: And in those days, Callahan's painting was purely straightforward—it wasn't exactly pictorialism but verges [ph] on that line; people working, loggers, mountains, things like that. It was only later that he began to paint this—on this idea of the philosophical

unity of man and nature. And Tobey was painting—I think he was beginning to move away from his figurative painting into his—I guess you could call them Baha'i paintings. Graves was doing things like the portrait of Anderson at this time, that was a little bit—the period I'm speaking of is a little bit before Mark began—or Morris began to paint in the small temperas, the little birds and all. Anderson was painting—Anderson and Graves were the closest, of the group, to each other. And Petric and, I while we rattled around together a lot, we didn't paint very similarly.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Is he still painting?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Yes, he paints, the little still life of the lemons [on that board (ph)] was his Christmas card. And he just—you know, just a trifle. I don't know exactly what the body of Lubin's work would look like now. I've been trying to get him to get enough together for a show. A two-man show with me, in the early fall, because I thought it'd be an excellent time to—for him to sort of come out of obscurity.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I hope you do.

WILLIAM CUMMING: And he and I would make a good double show. There's certain similarities and certain ties. And, of course, I was never much of a mystic. I was just painting people, who were not very mystical. And—so, there was not—there was no real close ties but there was—there were certain similarities. We all tend to be a draftsman. Even Anderson is primarily a draftsman. He's a bad draftsman if you go by classical standards. Like, if you were to approach figure drawing from the way I draw the figure, you'd say that Guy can't draw the figure very well. But if you try to—if you look at one of his paintings and try to substitute one of my figures, you would see that my way of drawing, which is nearer to the classical approach to drawing the figure, would be completely out of place in the ensemble of an Anderson painting.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM CUMMING: Guy's paintings have—more and more over the years have taken on almost the odor and texture of the La Conner tide flats, they really have—are dug into that terrain, and his people have the same quality of being rooted in, you know, marshy, wet soil. And—so that his drawing is appropriate to what he's doing. But he's a draftsman in that the drawn image is the important thing, not the paint texture, or other things. All these other things are secondary to the drawing of the image. And this is true of every damn one of us, as well as a few of the younger painters who are directed toward the northwest idiom, like Meitzler and Gilkey, who are closer to us than any of the other young people. Plus which we all had in common a point of view—not that we had the same point of view, but we all had a philosophical stance toward reality, which is not true of, say, the painters over at the university, for the most part, who are a part of the international—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh. What would you say your philosophical stance or reality was then?

[01:30:14]

WILLIAM CUMMING: I've been called an existentialist [laughs]. In the recent years, I've been called a Catholic atheist, which is quite a transmogrification.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Tom Robbins [of the Seattle *Times* –Ed.] called you that, didn't he?

WILLIAM CUMMING: He called me a geriatric Tom Sawyer. [They laugh.] Tom's going to be visiting us in June.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

WILLIAM CUMMING: I never quite—I got back, I said that he was a middle-aged Holden Caulfield.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Very good, but is he middle-aged, I thought he was young?

WILLIAM CUMMING: No. [They laugh.] He's only about—he's a baby, he's in his 30s. [Laughs.] But I had to have some kind of a riposte. I don't know what I would say, you know, I don't know what it is. I feel—philosophically I guess I'm a fatalist. I don't believe there's much purpose or meaning to human existence. Having been a radical in my youth, I'm tired

now, and like so many tired radicals, I've more or less come to the conclusion that the concept of man's capacity for progress and changing the world is an illusion and is useless. I don't know what I'd say besides that. I think just that people define themselves in the prism of their lives. And they either define themselves as having stood up to it or having gone under. Which, I don't know what that makes me. I guess it makes me an existentialist. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: I guess it does, but it sounds coherent.

WILLIAM CUMMING: [Laughs.] Graves believes, of course, that in the—Graves, Anderson, Tobey, and Callahan—well, actually, Tobey not so much, but Callahan, Graves, and Anderson all have varying approaches on man's relationship to nature. In the case of Tobey, I think it's more of man's relationship to a universe, rather than nature as we know it.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: In Anderson's case, it's very definitely this, the nature here, this concrete nature that surrounds us in our area. And Callahan, more or less—I don't, you know—I haven't seen Callahan. We sort of had bad blood, like most all the rest. And—

DOROTHY BESTOR: You've all diverged a bit?

WILLIAM CUMMING: Very much. Probably we had to sort of quarrel with each other in order to break away from each other. But Kenneth's painting always—his earlier painting was a big influence on me, in breaking me loose from a sort of anemic imitation of the School of Paris type of thing, Modigliani and even Marie Laurncin, for God's sake. And—[laughs]

DOROTHY BESTOR: She seems most unlike you.

WILLIAM CUMMING: [Laughs.] Yes. Oh, I used to do those little shoe-button eyes, but I was quite young, too. But Kenneth's—I don't know what his paintings so much today are like, but I'd say his philosophical approach is man in relation to a— pretty much a concrete natural world that bears a strong similarity to the natural world around us here, in the Northwest. Graves is a little—Morris regardless of his—how he might verbalize that he feels most kinship creatures.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING: And all of these creatures sometimes include things like—well, artifacts, compotes, and little chalices. It's very obvious that these have a strong religious significance, if by religious significance we mean something rather nonsectarian and broad.

[01:35:07]

They all are more close to oriental thought. Morris, of course, is very close to oriental thought. I was raised in Greek thought. And I—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, I didn't know that.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Always, as a kid I—that was my biggest influence, was the Homeric legends and the myths and the Greek art, early archaic Greek art. And it still is to this day.

DOROTHY BESTOR: That's, maybe indirectly, why your figures have a certain monumental quality.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Probably so. I never really thought of that, but probably it goes back to those very sculptural approach—even—

DOROTHY BESTOR: You were talking before about the monolithic character of your figures, but maybe it's monumental.

WILLIAM CUMMING: Well, that may be true. It's—I feel a kinship for those—even the Homeric figures are sculptural, even though they're verbal. And at the same time, I also have always had antipathy toward oriental thought with its idea of submerging the individual in a great wash. I always preferred the Greek idea. You—fate destroys you but you—it is incumbent to battle fate and even at the last minute when you go down to defeat, you should thumb your nose or cuss 'em out.

DOROTHY BESTOR:  Quite so.

WILLIAM CUMMING:  That's [laughs]—I'm just purely Western man. [Laughs.] I probably am passe along with the rest of us. But I suspect that maybe the Orientals are also passe. Maybe a man as a whole is, and I don't know that it'll—that the universe would be any the worse off for it.

DOROTHY BESTOR:  Well, we won't know will we.

WILLIAM CUMMING:  No [laughs]—

DOROTHY BESTOR:  Till we disappear. [They laugh.]

WILLIAM CUMMING:  We won’t know. But it—there's, you know, great divergences among these people who, I would say, this was the most coherent group in the history of northwest painting. It's the only group that was close together over any period of time that had stylistic variance but also had formal qualities, like this tendency towards draftsmanship rather than painterliness. And even other figures who were peripheral, just like the Fitzgeralds, have this same quality. And also, the fact that it was a group of painters who painted in order, not to create beautiful surfaces, autonomous things in themselves, but to say something, to communicate something, to people outside themselves. The newer painters, for the most part, belong to a school of thought that sees the painting or the sculpture as a thing in itself without anything to communicate, up until some of the recent developments like the Pop artists and the figurative school around the Bay Area.

DOROTHY BESTOR:  You surely don't think that the Pop art communicates anything to— do you

WILLIAM CUMMING:  Well, they're trying to communicate something. I—personally, I think it's rather flippant and shallow, but it may be that I'm just getting too old— belong to another generation. The f—the San Francisco figurative painters—of course, we have Gerald Bilaine [ph] and Jim Johnson [ph], and Bill Allen [ph], up here now, who are close to that approach—while they use Pop art elements in their work at times, are fundamentally painters, and again, they have something to say as against, say, Hixson [ph] and Mosley [ph] out of the university who are classical Abstractionists, more or less. Who don't consider that their art has any statement to make beyond its statement as a work of art.

[01:40:16]

And I don't—you know, I don't presume to judge between these two approaches. It's just that I never cared for art except as a way of expressing my opinion. Only, expressing it in a special way.

DOROTHY BESTOR:  Yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING:  A much more happy way than using words.

DOROTHY BESTOR:  Yes. Well, thank you. Most interesting.

WILLIAM CUMMING:  It is—now, the first tape is there was enough to it. It will be useable—

DOROTHY BESTOR:  I think so, yes.

WILLIAM CUMMING:  —the material between the two tapes—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]