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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Leta Ramos, 2000
June 23

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Leta Ramos on June 23, 2000. The interview was conducted at Leta Ramos' home in Oakland, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funded by Bente and Gerald E. Buck, The Buck Collection.

Interview

LR: LETA RAMOS
PK: PAUL KARLSTROM

[TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Leta Ramos. Lolita.

LR: Unfortunately, my father liked the name Lolita.

PK: And, in fact, you're not the only one in the family with that name. Is that right?

LR: No, my grandfather had to leave the country during the first World War because he was of German descent and went into Mexico and raised coffee and tobacco with a very well-known family. It was like the Vanderbilts but they're not the Vanderbilts. They were a similar family. Went with my dad and Mali -- my grandfather was there -- he just saw a little girl running around and her name was Lolita so he named his daughter Lolita and then my cousin's name is Lolita, my name is Lolita and I changed it to Leta. Lolita's too heavy of a name for me. Plus I'm not even Spanish or Mexican. I'm French-German.

PK: Well there you go.

LR: Irish. I'm sorry, Irish and German and French.

PK: We ought to -- that's good. I really wanted to get that down on this tape because that's a . . . so it's Leta, L-E-T-A.

LR: My spelling.

PK: Your spelling. Leta Ramos -- the interview is being conducted on June 23rd, the year 2000. Hard to believe. And at the subject's home in Oakland, California and the subject is artists and models. This is one of a series of interviews that are being conducted for the Archives on the topic, artists and models. The interviewer is, once again, Paul Karlstrom. And what I would like to do . . . well, first of all, thank you for agreeing to this little interview. I should give a tiny bit of background. I don't wanna talk too much myself about this but you happen to be married -- you're an artist, you happen to be married to another artist, Mel Ramos and as it turned out over a course of time and a long relationship, a long marriage, is that you were really one of his main models. And so this gives you this rather interesting over quite a period of time -- personal experience playing that role. Operating in that role. That's, of course, what we want to talk with you about today. And I suppose a good way to start out is for you just to recount how this began. Your own experience as a model -- when you first posed, presumably for Mel but, I mean, I don't know that. But how did this happen and how did it sort of all evolve over time?

LR: Well, he just asked me if I would pose for him. He needed a model, obviously, and I was the most available. And I felt rather strange about it at first and I don't know why I was so shy about my body, I mean, I would be now as an older w- . . . I'd feel like, Birdie. Who's mother-in-law was Birdie? I never wanna look like Birdie.

PK: Larry Rivers?

LR: Larry Rivers' mother-in-law. And I looked at that and I thought, "Oh God, I don't want anyone ever draw me if I -- when and if I ever look like that." But, you know, I thought . . .

PK: Great painting, though.

LR: Oh, it's people. I mean I love to look at people.

PK: Right.

LR: And I think it's life, you know. And Mel was very interested in just the way the body looked and so forth. And

it wasn't always nude.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: I mean, there were times when he would do drawings . . . walking down the street. We have other pictures of us, you know, in Europe walking down the street and so forth. But at first I felt a little self-conscious. But I realized that, "Well, this is documentation. I am his wife, why not? Why not do it while I'm young?" And, actually, I guess I was a little flattered, too. And he did one of me when I was pregnant. I don't think you ever saw that because it was -- in fact, it's probably destroyed. It wasn't completely nude but it was definitely when I was pregnant and it was when he was doing those kinda green-gray, kind of very muted tones. Weren't real fleshy and everything.

PK: What year would have that have been, then? That's easy to figure out.

LR: 1959.

PK: Why destroy it?

LR: Well, I think he just didn't like it.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: And there were a lot of paintings that -- when we moved he just kinda -- he took to the dump. Can you believe that? He took several paintings to the dump and then someone picked them up. I don't know -- we found out later that someone picked them up. But he threw a lot of paintings away. Yeah.

PK: Well, David Park supposedly made a big bonfire and burned his abstract paintings. Maybe that's just part of the myth of the bay area figurative school, I don't know. Let's see, how old were you then? When did you meet Mel?

LR: Well, Mel and I went to the same high school.

PK: That's what I thought.

LR: And he's a year younger than I am. And I graduated in '52 and he graduated in '53. Married in '55. We were still -- I was 21 and he was 20. And, of course, I got razzed about that. I was engaged to marry someone else that would have been a real disaster. He was a big football player, four-star letterman and all that and I don't know -- I met -- like -- I met Mel and it just, just seemed to be the right thing.

PK: So you dumped the jock for the artist.

LR: Dumped the jock for the artist. Well, we were having other kind of problems, too, but, yeah, I almost married the wrong person and I just really . . . I knew Mel in high school. I remembered seeing him and he remembered seeing me. I was the cheerleader -- yell leader, you know, and Dave was a big football star so he [Mel] knew who I was. And I remember seeing him. Found him cute and all that.

PK: Was Mel then an art student in a high school already? Or do you know if they had art classes or . . .

LR: I -- you know, he designed a little logo for the C.K. McClatchy lion.

PK: Really?

LR: And I didn't know that 'til later after we got married. But I always liked the logo. I was the yell leader, you know, and I wore the . . .

PK: What high school was this?

LR: McClatchy. McClatchy. C.K. McClatchy high school in Sacramento. And I wore the big cheerleader sweater with the big "M" on it and the little lion and they always did a lot of publicity and graphics and the little graphics of the lion was what Mel had designed and drew. Just quite a coincidence. And in Sacramento the big vacation spot is Lake Tahoe.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: And we'd always go to Lake Tahoe. And I met Mel up at Lake Tahoe. I had seen him in high school -- not really knowing who he was or anything. We were up at Lake Tahoe . . .

PK: Is this after you graduated or . . .

LR: Graduated from high school.

PK: So you graduated and then you met him.

LR: Graduated in '52.

PK: Yeah.

LR: So it was 1952. Went up to Lake Tahoe. I was laying on the beach in my little -- no bikinis then -- in my white . . .

PK: One-piece.

LR: . . . swimsuit. Just one piece -- laying out and I looked up and here's this guy looking at me and it was Mel looking down at me and he was saying -- a little short time afterwards, "Yeah, I was just gazing at you." I go, "Yeah, I remember you." And he came by with somebody I had known. One of his best friends. Jack Ogden. Who is also a wonderful artist. And he says, "Yeah, I was just gazing at you," and he said, "Somebody was gonna ask you out to the dance." You know, at Belle there, they have those dances and he says, "No you're not gonna ask her out. I'm gonna ask her out." So he came over and he says, "I wanna have a date with you tonight. I'll meet you at the Belle." And Mel was a wonderful dancer, you know. So we were dancing and that was it. Then I told him, I says, "You know, I am not gonna stay in Sacramento. I'm going back to San Jose State. And I think you should also leave Sacramento. Get serious about yourself. I'm gonna be a teacher. I'm going to San Jose State." And he says, "Well, then I think I'm gonna follow you there." And he did. And I was staying in a wonderful place, Bel Manor. My step-father paid for my education. Mel had to work hard and put himself through school and so he followed me and he was able to find an apartment with two other guys -- share the rent. And we both went to San Jose State that one year and then if we were to get married, we had to come back to Sacramento. We couldn't afford to be away and I wouldn't expect my step-father to pay for my schooling down there but when I did come back and we got married, my father did -- my step-dad did continue paying for my education. And then Mel went to Sacramento State with me and we both graduated. Got our teaching credentials.

PK: Hmm. Did he get his teaching credential for the teaching of art?

LR: Yes, for teaching art. And he did a remarkable thing. We were both working and he had to put himself through school, more or less, and I was very fortunate -- my step-father paid for me. And we both worked that summer and he managed to get his Master's Degree. That particular summer. Right -- we bo- . . . I graduated from college and we got married, started teaching and then I was teaching and then he got his Master's Degree so I put him through school that last year. Happy to do it. And that's how it all happened. We really did well, I think. And then my step-dad helped us buy a house. And we didn't have children 'til five years later. And my ex-boyfriend said, "I know why she got married. She was probably pregnant." And I really fooled them all. Put my . . .

PK: You waited until '59?

LR: Yeah. I don't know if I waited. I was lucky, I guess.

PK: So, somewhere along the way -- while he was an art student, I suppose, you were married -- he asked you to pose. Was he beginning, I mean, can you remember was he working to that end?

LR: Well, he kept peering at me all the time. As I would disrobe, you know. Or get in the bathtub or walk around and I said, "Mel, what are you looking at?" I was always a little self-conscious. I don't know why I was but, I said, "What are you looking at?" You know, he says, "I think I'd like to draw you." And I said, "Oh, no." He says, "Yeah. Will you pose?" So I said, "Well, sure, you need a model." And that's how it all began.

PK: So he started out doing life drawing exercises...

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . shall we say? What point did he begin, then, to work with nudity?

LR: From photographs?

PK: Well, or work into paintings, the figure. Then his early work actually isn't about that so much, although he has these superhero women.

LR: Wonder Woman.

PK: Yeah. Exactly.

LR: Yeah. Um-hmm.

PK: But his figurative work was more of the super heroes, among other things. At that time -- or at least those are the earliest works I know about. And that wouldn't figure into -- I don't know that you would be . . .

LR: Well I . . .

PK: . . .useful for those.

LR: He did . . .

PK: There were a lot . . .

LR: Oh, he used me in -- well, there are a couple of super heroines where you can see it's my face and there's like a phantom lady or one of them. *Cave Girl*. I hated that one.

PK: Were you in a cave?

LR: I was *Cave Girl*. My face -- and I loved the one with gorilla, though. That was one of my favorites that he did. But with the comic heroes, yes, it was *Cave Girl*. And I thought I looked so mean but if you had to live in a cave, I guess you'd be mean, too. I don't know. But *Cave Girl* was patterned after me.

PK: These were works of the early '60's and this all seems to fit.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: That he was -- that was the point which he was really growing as a professional artist, I mean, he was finding his own distinctive style.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: And I gather, then, that you were part of that, in terms -- you were along for the ride. You were a participant -- a model . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . for some of those works. I've talked with Mel about this before because it is interesting. From very early on, I guess, he started really working from photographs and sometimes combining different elements -- bringing them together to create a fiction, basically, that then was the [true] model for his paintings. Do you remember that and the -- because I know that you were sort of "abused" in that respect over the years, you know. Part of you would be included, then it'd be somebody else. Do you remember when that came about? How that came about? From your perspective?

LR: Well, it was the fact that in some cases they weren't available. Like if you want a particular figure, you want a particular stance and the head doesn't work or the face isn't what you want for the body to do.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: Then you have to interchange them. And he did one that was a commission. Fred Weisman -- very prominent collector -- who had the distribution of Toyota.

PK: Yeah.

LR: And he wanted a model on the Toyota and so Mel thought she should be Japanese so he photographed this Japanese girl but used my body. And she wanted to see it and she was so excited about seeing it and she looked at the body and said, "Oh, I look wond-, oh, don't I look . . ." And he had used my body and I don't know if he even photographed her nude but he didn't like the way it [her body] looked.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: So he used my body and put her head on my body.

PK: Do you think that was one of the early examples of the way he said, well . . .

LR: Interchanging.

PK: What year about was that? Was it mid-60's, perhaps?

LR: I would say so, yeah. I always liked the bathtub one. Of all the ones, I thought that was very sophisticated because I love Bonnard. He's one of my favorite artists.

PK: You mean this one? [Points to illustration in *Mel Ramos: Watercolors*, 1979, p. 27]

LR: Yeah. At first I was a little angry with him. I said, "I can't even take a bath in my own privacy."

PK: You look really young in this picture.

LR: Well I was very young.

PK: Let's actually -- it's nice to -- especially to turn to something that you really like because . . .

LR: Yeah, see, 'cause there for a while I sort of resented it and I was -- Oh, I was kinda hiding here and there. I didn't like him looking at me and I thought, "Oh, I must look peculiar at this angle. I don't want him to draw me at this angle." Or something or other and I was just very peaceful in the bathtub and never thought a thing about it. I was unaware of what he was doing with the bathtub painting, to tell you the truth.

PK: So was he -- did he just sort of catch you there? I mean just appear and take the picture?

LR: Yeah, I was unaware. And, of course, you can tell when it's not my body.

PK: Yeah, that was 1979.

LR: Yeah.

PK: *Bonnard's Bath*, right?

LR: Yeah. And you can tell when he's taken liberties and put . . . and then there were some cases where I just hated the body that he . . .

PK: Chose.

LR: . . . showed. And I think there was one, like the -- oh, Walrus or -- yeah, *The Walrus*. I hated that body. And then, of course, he used my body and somebody else's head, too. And in some cases I didn't like that and then in some cases I was very flattered but . . .

PK: Well, in *Bonnard's Bath*, is that all you?

LR: That's me. In my bathtub. Unaware what he was doing.

PK: But you like that. You just said you really like that one.

LR: Yeah, I like that one because it's a good time for me just to meditate, and I love Bonnard's work. I'm sure you're very, very familiar with Bonnard's work and his life and what he turned out to be a wonderful man and . . .

PK: You know, this is interesting. Let's talk about this a little bit because, of course, he was, to a degree, obsessed with his wife, and she [appeared] over and over again -- especially in the bath. And, in fact, there's been quite a bit written about this and about the energy that seemed to come -- it wasn't a detached observing of his wife, it was much, much more of a connection.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: And apparently an obsession with this. I'm not trying to say that there's necessarily a parallel here, but what struck me as interesting is your remark that for a time you felt like you were being sort of followed around . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . being observed, like, well I don't know. I shouldn't say as if I know like what. But that it was something that made you a little bit uncomfortable.

LR: Yeah, it did and, of course, in high school I guess I had a nice figure.

PK: I'm sure.

LR: Well, anyway. I didn't go unnoticed, let's put it that way. And I was self -- very, very self-conscious. Why? I don't know why. I just was.

PK: But with a bit of -- it sounds to me with a bit of vanity in there about yourself. You were aware that you had a good body.

LR: Well, no, I always felt a little self-conscious. I really did.

PK: You can have both, you know.

LR: Yeah, okay. Okay. But, no, like I said, I -- first time I really noticed him I was on my back, laying on the beach in a white bathing suit and I had taken the straps off so that I'd tan on the top there.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: And he came over and I about lost my, actually, that's what did happen.

PK: What?

LR: I don't know if I should tell you that one.

PK: Why not?

LR: Well, I had taken the straps down and, you know, they had these little bone things . . .

PK: Right. Right.

LR: . . . and he startled me so and I was still kind of embarrassed. I ran over to the water and my top was practically falling off and I ran to the water to hide.

PK: To escape.

LR: To escape from him. But I felt like I was losing my top and I got so embarrassed and I just ran to the water and hid in the water.

PK: And it's cold.

LR: And Lake Tahoe is very, very cold. But I was so embarrassed because I think my top -- you know they had those little stays and it did kinda pop open and I'm afraid it did kinda pop o-, and I was so embarrassed.

PK: I'm sure that somebody on the beach appreciated that.

LR: Well, I don't -- my girlfriend told me something about it. Yeah. She said, "You about lost your top. You ran to the w- . . ."

PK: I wonder if Mel saw that. Maybe that helped make the connection.

LR: Maybe. I don't know but . . .

PK: [Your] posing for him . . . it's not unusual, actually. In the history of art there are plenty of cases where -- usually husbands -- male artists use their wives as models. In some cases, as a matter of fact, the wives insisted. So there not be other models.

LR: Oh, I've heard of that, too. I've never been that way.

PK: And then you . . .

LR: I hated reading about that. I thought that was really depriving your husband or your artist or boyfriend or whatever of experimenting and seeing other ways of working. I mean, I would never have done that. I mean, there was a time, of course, when I'd get a little, "Ooh, I wonder if he really likes her better than me." Or, "Ooh, she's got a great . . . ooh." You know. Sure. That comes into to your mind, too but I would never deprive him of really experimenting and exploring. I would never have liked to have been that kind of person.

PK: Did you feel that his using you so much, so regularly, was because there was something special about you . . .

LR: Or that I was just convenient.

PK: Right.

LR: I mean, I was there and I was convenient but I mean, I'm happy that I was one that he chose. Convenience

isn't always your first choice. No, I was happy to do that. In the beginning, though, I felt a little self-conscious because I had never posed in the nude for anybody before.

PK: Did you always feel that this was simply work that you were doing? You were like a collaborator. Or did you feel that you were a collaborator in his image making?

LR: I think in a way . . .

PK: You know, a contributor.

LR: I think in a way I felt that he's my husband, he's an artist, he needs a model, and if he chooses me I really should be flattered. I felt that I really sh- . . . well, in the beginning I felt I was used, like, "Why can't he get a model?" And then when I saw what he was doing and what beautiful work he did, I felt honored. I really did. I felt honored that he would select me.

PK: You know as the public -- there's so many questions -- so many interesting angles to this. A situation which is in a way, complicated, because of the rest of your relationship. I mean, you're life partners. This isn't just an artist and a model situation. I guess one of my questions would be, when you're in the studio and functioning as -- performing -- playing this role, did the rest of it go away? I mean, did you really feel that you were getting down to -- that this was just an activity and it was for this moment and you were a model, he was artist and then so the rest of your life issues and whatever else was going on . . .?

LR: Well, Mel was always with business.

PK: Focused.

LR: Focused. Very focused. "I need a model. Now, you've gotta do it this way or we're not gonna do it at all. You've gotta put your leg this way, you gotta sit this way. Now you gotta look this way." No. Very, very focused on his work.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: No hanky panky.

PK: No, no, no. Wasn't -- there were no sidebars on this, right?

LR: No.

PK: It was just . . .

LR: Really wanted to get his work [done] and very nervous until he saw that the results were as he wanted them. "Now we might have to retake this one. Now you moved your leg. I don't think the light was right on your leg. Now look -- you were looking down when I told you to look up," or something. Very, very strict. So . . . oh, dear.

PK: Oh, dear. All business. Did you . . .

LR: But he prepared me very well, too.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: You know, he would always say, "Now, I want a certain light on you." Or, "I want you to look a certain way." Or, "You should be at a certain angle," or -- he'd give me a clue to what he was doing.

PK: So he included you in the concept so that you could . . .

LR: Get in the mood or have a certain look about you.

PK: Yeah. Participate. How did you feel about -- as the work became more and more sexy? Which it is. I mean, Mel is known for pretty sexy imagery.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: At one point, and I wouldn't [necessarily] characterize it this way, but some people very much relate it to a sort of Playboy idea of voluptuous young woman.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: And obviously these pictures are, as you've said and as he said, "constructed" from different parts. Which is

quite interesting [because] actually there's artificiality to that in terms of the source. These are not individuals. These are not people who are whole persons . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . but rather, matching some kind of an idea that Mel had and fitting an image. How did you feel about that? Did that ever bother you at all in any way? Did you sort of understand what -- appreciate what he was trying to do or did you see it, perhaps, as, well, I don't know. I should ask you.

LR: Kind of a sexist thing?

PK: Well, I wouldn't say that exactly.

LR: No, okay.

PK: You know, the -- well, I mean, that is a whole issue. The glamour side of it but I was thinking just . . .

LR: And I loved his glamour series. Are you familiar with that? With the wonderful fashions that he did. He even made cut-out dresses out of plywood and . . .

PK: Really?

LR: . . . I don't know if there's any in there [the book]. *Polka Dotty* -- he took a lot of . . .

PK: I've seen some of those. Yeah.

LR: Yes. Fashions from *Vogue* magazine. He did one of me with the Pope.

PK: Here's a real . . .

LR: Yeah. I love that one.

PK: So for the sake of this tape . . .

LR: Hysterical.

PK: . . . this is -- it's called *Blue Coat*.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: 1966. Painting.

LR: I'm glad I didn't have to cut the holes out of my coat, though.

PK: And here you are -- or at least your head -- or is that all of you?

LR: It's almost my coat. I had a coat very similar to that.

PK: But he didn't cut out . . .

LR: No, he did not.

PK: What did he do? Did he pose you in the coat and then in the painting?

LR: He made his own wooden constructions. He knew how to make the . . .

PK: So this coat was made out of . . .

LR: No, but not -- I don't know if that one was. Several of them are. One of my favorite paintings is the one in the bedroom with the black dress. He cut the wood out and flocked it. He did very few flocked pieces. You know the flocking is that fuzzy . . .

PK: Right. Right. Sure.

LR: And he made one of those cut-outs . . .

[TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PK: Continuing the interview with Leta Ramos. This is, well, tape 1 still, side B. We were talking about this very

interesting painting, *Blue Coat* . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . of 1966.

LR: Ruined it. Just absolutely ruined that coat.

PK: But he didn't cut out the . . .

LR: No, only in the construction.

PK: But we have to describe this. It's really quite wonderful. There's this big, beautiful coat with -- how would you describe it? It's flared . . .

LR: It's like a trapezoid.

PK: Yeah. And what -- in the painting . . .

LR: Triangle.

PK: . . . the bosom area -- the bodice is . . .

LR: Hi honey. There's my little grandson. [Mel Ramos appears with grandson]

PK: . . . this painting. The -- there are two holes in the front in the bodice with your breasts showing through but -- I guess this -- I don't expect you to necessarily talk about what he was after, in this particular series. In these kinds of works, I think that there's, in part, an awareness of the times [and fashion designs] of Rudi Gernreich.

LR: Absolutely. Yeah.

PK: And so it must've been -- maybe it was -- let me ask you, was it kind of fun for you and Mel to do some of these things? Did you feel it was fun?

LR: Well, in some cases. Yeah, well, with that, I mean, he just -- I don't know. I -- it was something I wasn't expecting, let's put it that way. He just says, "Put your coat on, let me see how it looks," and I still have the coat. And I'm relieved he didn't have to cut it up but, no, he created a lot of these situations without having the actual object.

PK: Right.

LR: Yeah.

PK: I mean, we don't have to over analyze that painting but I guess it points in a direction. There's a focus. Or there seems to be a focus in Mel's work. Which, you know, perhaps has been -- I think has been -- misunderstood in some respects but you were along for this ride . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . and I'm just curious to know if this was something that you were, sort of, watching, paying attention to? After all, we're talking about the '60's and then into the '70's when there was a lot of sexual liberation and imagery through Playboy and many other things.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: Movies became more that way. It was more open about nudity and . . .

LR: I think his work reflects all that because Rudi Gernreich and all of fashions and things that he did -- Mel was just illuminating all of that because Rudi Gernreich -- I think he did do some clothes where the dresses were . . .

PK: Yeah.

LR: . . . cut open and things like that. And he's done -- and Rudi Gernreich also had one where the navel was shown and all of that. And Mel was just, more or less, reverberating all the things that are around him, you know. All these fashions for women. Men didn't have all those wonderful, fun fashions, you know.

PK: No, no.

LR: Maybe a tie that glowed in the dark or something but the women were the ones that had all the fun fashions.

PK: But from your standpoint -- your husband's work was very much addressing these kinds of social changes -- cultural changes . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . I guess. And a lot of 'em had to do with sexual liberation -- these -- the images of.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: And so you found yourself going along through this process. You were sort of an agent of this.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: In Mel's work. Even though it [female subject] wasn't always all of you.

LR: Right. All of me.

PK: Might have been one part or the other.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: And I'm just curious to know what you thought about that, at the time? If anything? Or if it just seemed . . .

LR: Well, sometimes he would put a different head on my body.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: And that was okay, too. I'm glad I could help when I could and always would joke about that. "I'm glad I can help when I can." But then there was one painting he did and the breasts were -- well, probably, the girl -- really, to me, almost deformed and I said, "Mel, those are the ugliest breasts I have ever seen." And I said, "Oh." Well, I had to be really careful. I mean, I didn't want to take away from his creativity. That would've been cruel of me. If he wants to put those big, dangly, ugly boobs and use my head, oh, so what, you know? I have to have a sense of humor about it. But there was one time when I thought, "Oh my God, I hope no one thinks those are my breasts because those are really ugly." And even my mother said, "Oh, Leta, those aren't yours." [laughs] My mother had beautiful breasts. Even at a late age and she knew what my body looked like and she said, "Those are terrible." She said, "Those are terrible looking boobies." And I says, "Well, that's Mel's work. I'll just have to live with it, I guess." So . . .

PK: You know -- well, here's another issue. The . . . I mentioned vanity before . . .

LR: That's vanity. Right.

PK: In one way or another. There's also another term that comes into play and that is exhibitionism or, as my wife says -- who has posed nude, as well -- she calls it "display". Which is . . .

LR: That's a nice word. Display.

PK: . . . which is sort of a nicer way to say it.

LR: Yeah.

PK: And was that ever part of your motivation? It sounds to me as if you were proud of your body and this was a way . . . you certainly weren't happy when you were associated with a body that you thought wasn't as nice as yours.

LR: Well, it took me a . . .

PK: So is this a self-image thing?

LR: Well, I -- well, I never was -- I didn't think an exhibitionist. I mean, I loved to dance and all that but I always had my clothes on.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: And when I started posing nude for Mel, I was a little embarrassed there for a while.

PK: That's what you said. Yeah.

LR: And to have other people look at me, I was a little embarrassed but then after -- if he would select someone else, then, of course, you'd think, "Well, he's selecting me because he likes the way I look and after a while I felt very flattered. And then I realized he has to have a variety, too. And any woman would feel, "Well, I hope my husband isn't gonna get too enamored with some other woman," and all that and it takes a lot of courage as a woman . . . you know, Wayne Thiebaud, he has models, too, and other men have their models and . . .

PK: Um-hmm. Right.

LR: . . . and who was I thinking of? Oh, Vargas. Now he would have been a interesting one to talk to. And I always accepted it as this is Mel's life's work. And . . .

PK: And it happens to be sexy and glamorous women.

LR: . . . he's entitled. Yeah. So you laugh. I cannot -- what's the word? Curtail . . .

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: . . . any of his creativity.

PK: What an ideal wife model.

LR: Well, not that I didn't have some fears here and there.

PK: Well, did you ever get jealous? I mean, I sense a certain competitive element there.

LR: Oh, well, of course I would think of things once in a while. Certainly. Certainly. Or you would think I didn't love him very much if I didn't have some form of jealousy, . . .

PK: On the other hand you've described a situation where when you get in the studio -- you start working -- it's focused.

LR: Mel was really business.

PK: Focused. Really focused.

LR: Very focused. Yeah.

PK: I mean, that seems pretty clear. The whole issue of Mel's imagery is, to me, very interesting because I happen to look at it in, I think, a pretty sympathetic way. I see -- I personally -- and I've talked with him about it. See beyond the obvious. Part of the appeal is on the level of the obvious so you have these very sexy, glamorized, almost idealized -- certainly voluptuous . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . young women. And put in sometimes rather bizarre conjunctions with animals . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . and with food and the symbolism is all pretty loaded in many cases of -- and then his take on all this. We're not really talking about him, we're talking about you here but it -- there's a certain resistance, especially over time. A kind of critique of this imagery [as sexist] that you mentioned earlier, and that certainly -- with the rise of feminism -- which is pretty much concurrent with Mel's career.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: That this had an effect on the way his imagery was viewed. Did you think about that at all? I mean, here you were, again, an agent or a participant in the creation . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . of the images. Did you -- as feminism became more active and a presence, how did you feel about his work, his imagery? And then maybe your own involvement?

LR: Well I would always come forth and just say, you know, "He's celebrating the beauty of women."

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: I mean, how can anyone get any negativism out of that? I mean, look at the advertisements and often times the woman selling the oranges, the apples or whatever and in the fashions, I mean, you have to have some kind of beauty and grace about it, but I never thought he was exploiting women. I never looked at it that way. And at the State Fair it was marvelous because he had an opportunity to see Miss California. As a matter of fact, I went to modeling school with one of the young women who was selected to be Miss California -- and I went to modeling school with 'em and everything. We were out at the State Fair and I did model at the State Fair, too. And then they would have the contestants, Miss California, Miss Sacramento and everything. And that's where Mel saw where the girl -- and, of course, she was in her bathing suit . . .

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: . . . dump a pile of oranges on her or whatever. And I was always around there 'cause I was one of the models for the State Fair -- no I wasn't Miss California or anything like that but I was modeling with Miss California. In fact, she went to modeling school with me.

PK: It was a [unintelligible]?

LR: Yeah. Yeah. Right. Um-hmm. And, actually, it was a beautiful theme. This girl said -- but she was, of course, in her bathing suit and they dumped all these oranges on her, you know. And I'm sure that's how that image developed. It was an actual activity. But so many of those particular figurative pieces, they're out of magazines.

PK: Right.

LR: And then he . . . because he just felt he couldn't afford to hire models and then later he did, actually, be able to have live models.

PK: You know what's interesting to me is the sort of distance from individuals, from human beings, actually, in Mel's work. I just thought about this as we talk, and then in looking at these images, that they are -- somehow they stand in for a particular human experience rather than being an individual living a life. They stand in for commodities, they stand in for -- which is like a critique.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: But even the combining, as I said earlier, seems to me to be a, in a way, denial of individuality. What do you think about that?

LR: Well, our society was always using beautiful women to sell products.

PK: Right.

LR: I mean, way back -- I saw some early 1920's or so forth. I don't know, I've always -- before Mel brought them to my attention I was aware of them. We had a nice collection, in fact, my uncle [McKeehan] was mayor of Port Hueneme and he transported apples and all --- oranges and all that in those cartons, you know, where they had their beautiful oranges and all that. Often times they had -- they didn't have nude women but they [each one] had a beautiful face, and my uncle had a wonderful -- it was -- I don't if it their own logo or it was the orange company -- had a beautiful girl and the oranges around, and everything. Mel just kind of glorified it. Just made it a little bit more interesting and visible.

PK: Well, it seems to be, in that respect, very much related, of course, to pop art and to comments on the society and how we use images just to sell things or as symbols or as metaphors . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . for something else. I guess what I'm saying, it strikes me as interesting he was using you -- somebody he had a very close relationship to . . .

LR: Well, I was convenient.

PK: Right. Right.

LR: I was real -- and I didn't charge.

PK: That -- none of that relationship seems to, as far as, you know, in the reading of the pictures, come into the images. I mean, it's real matter-of-fact of, "Here are the parts of Leta . . ."

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: “. . . that I love.” In other words, I guess what I’m asking or suggesting is that he was -- Mel was able, professionally, then to detach from the emotional connection . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . that you would represent. Because what you would represent are not so much these things that seem to be symbolized in these paintings but something, obviously, much more complicated or richer and deeper than . . .

LR: No, he was more concerned about, “Am I going to have the arm in the right angle? Are the feet, the lighting . . .” No, very, very business-like and I did assist him in a couple of situations and he was very business-like. Very matter-of-fact. Very precise in everything he did. And, actually, he’s pretty tough to work with. I was always afraid I was gonna bat my eye when I wasn’t supposed to or something. And he usually knows exactly what he wants. Well, he’s open to change if things worked that way but . . .

PK: What about the -- let me see. I hope I can find it in here. Maybe it’s in the other one. It’s you -- in fact, you were the subject for several of these paintings. *You Get More Salami with Modigliani*.

LR: Well, there -- and you’re probably thinking of *Leta and the Swan* or . . .

PK: Yeah. That, but . . .

LR: . . . that -- and that wasn’t always me. It was a take-off on Leda and the Swan but he changed it to Leta.

PK: I think this is the one -- number four. Do you remember this, by any chance? But the point is that it’s based -- the model for it is a collage. I think it’s this one.

LR: Yeah.

PK: I think that is the one that you guys brought into my office. In other words, the collage was . . .

LR: That belonged to somebody. Who did that . . .

PK: But the collage for this, you know, the model -- which showed how the different parts were combined . . .

LR: Well this one is totally me.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: For one back here isn’t.

PK: Okay. Maybe I’m mixed up.

LR: Yeah. This one is totally me, but this one over here -- there’s one over here that isn’t. But those two are -- but there was one that -- this one here I think is more of a collage. Yeah.

PK: ‘Cause the one that -- and see, this is the first I knew . . .

LR: Did DeWain Valentine have one?

PK: I don’t know. Maybe.

LR: I think he does.

PK: So we have that model -- artists and models. This is the model for his work.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: It’s a collage in the Archives of American Art. {Mel Ramos Papers} And I remember that I was struck by the fact -- I said, “This is really interesting because it seems to have been manipulated and . . .”

LR: It can still be the same person and manipulated.

PK: That’s what I was gonna ask you about.

LR: Yeah. Because you take so many poses, so many different angles and sometimes it’s not the right angle when you take the total photograph so you dissect it a little bit and re-compose it. And I know he’s done that in the past, too. And we have our own dark room so -- he doesn’t do it so much now but we used to develop all out

own photographs.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: And he could manipulate them a lot that way.

PK: So it is truly a photographic process. Well, I mean, it's certainly a collage process because you go to magazines and so forth. There are a lot of movie stars or actresses and all in there.

LR: Arlene Dahl was very flattered by Mel's painting and she said, "I love that painting." And I -- she said something like, "I never looked that good."

PK: What did he do, though? Did he . . .

LR: Well, that painting . . .

PK: . . . did go ahead and do it and . . .

LR: . . . for the San Francisco . . .

PK: Yeah.

LR: . . . Museum.

PK: Now that's . . .

LR: Was grateful.

PK: . . . oh, that's fabulous. Yeah. That's a great museum.

LR: Yeah. And she loved that painting. She says, you know, "I never looked that good." And I know the breasts aren't her because Arlene Dahl cannot be found in the nude.

PK: But he took her from a photo. He just -- from a magazine.

LR: He took from a movie magazine, her face and then the body from Playboy. Playboy was very handy. And she was so flattered. He was always afraid he was gonna get sued by a few . . . but she just said, "I never looked that good and I am just so thrilled with that painting." Oh, I'm sure she looks close enough to that. She looked like she had a wonderful figure.

PK: See, that's a absolutely terrific painting. So funny. What about *Spicy*? That's you.

LR: Uh-huh.

PK: Do you remember *Spicy*?

LR: Yes.

PK: 1964. So there you are.

LR: Yeah.

PK: *Spicy*.

LR: Yeah, I didn't know how Mel had come up with those titles. *Spicy*. Why did he think I was spicy?

PK: It must've been fun.

LR: Yeah.

PK: For both of you. It seems, frankly, pretty straight forward. And your experience was, I guess, as it should be.

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: Did you pose for other people or just Mel?

LR: No . . . I did do, you know Glenn Fishbach? Always fashion stuff. I wanna say -- I can't remember what happened with my Glenn Fishbach [photograph]. He was quite a well known photographer in Sacramento and then his son, Kurt Fishbach, became well known for photographing artists.

PK: What was his name?

LR: Well Glenn Fishbach . . .

PK: Was the father, yeah.

LR: . . . was the father and Kurt Fishbach -- actually he had a show recently of his portraits.

PK: When did you stop posing?

LR: I used to store model, you know. Bathing suits . . .

PK: Yeah.

LR: . . . and things like that.

PK: But I mean for Mel.

LR: Oh, for Mel? I don't know. Everyone once in a while he'd say, "I need a foot. I need a hand. I need an arm."

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: So I'd come down, "Here's an arm," or something. Sometimes when the model didn't do what he wanted to or the photograph wasn't -- didn't have adequate information.

PK: Right.

LR: For hands. Hands were always difficult.

PK: They're hard to get.

LR: Very hard to do and hard to see . . . You have to see them in order to draw them. And -- well, I hope he'll do the grandchildren.

PK: Well I guess he finally did your daughter. I heard that story. How at first she wouldn't, the story goes. And then . . .

LR: She would not. No.

PK: . . . her friend.

LR: She was too embarrassed to show her body. She was afraid that she wasn't big enough and all of this and then when Mel says, "Well, I wonder if Laura will pose for me." As soon . . .

PK: Was her friend, right?

LR: Her girlfriend who had a fabulous figure at one time. Unfortunately she's tragically changed and . . .

PK: It happens.

LR: Yes. I know. As I sit here with my grandmotherly body, and it was just wonderful that Laura could pose because it did so much for Laura. At the time, she was so proud and she didn't really have a father in her family. The father kinda . . .

PK: Yeah.

LR: . . . left the family core there and Mel was a good friend with her and the paintings turned out beautiful. But I'm so glad that Mel finally did some portraits of my daughter -- of our daughter, pardon me. And Wayne Thiebaud also did portraits of his sons.

PK: Yeah, I know.

LR: And they were quite embarrassed by the whole thing.

PK: Well, you know, these parents do take their liberties. What about -- you said a couple of things earlier that interested me before we were taping. And one is that you've done some yourself. You're an artist. You did several male nudes. And I forget exactly what you said but I got the impression that it wasn't entirely all that interesting or as satisfactory . . .

LR: Well, I always liked to draw but I never considered myself an artist and I had an aunt who was quite an accomplished artist who died very young and so I never thought I could be an artist. Well, I went back to school, after I taught grade school for so many years. Went back, took art classes and then I realized I love drawing the figure but, you know, they rarely have male nudes.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: And I was quite curious to, "Well why don't they have more male nudes? And what is it like to draw the male figure?" You don't see many. Now, was it Balzac who did a few male nudes? And they were very harsh. Remember . . .

PK: You mean, Rodin?

LR: Rodin did Balzac, right?

PK: Right. Right. Yeah.

LR: And so I thought I'd try it. Jo Whaley [phon. sp.], my girlfriend who's a wonderful photographer -- you probably have heard of Jo Whaley.

PK: I think so. Yeah.

LR: Yeah. I told Jo Whaley, I said, "You know, I'd like to try drawing the male nude sometime." She says, "Well, I have a brother." I said, "Yeah, I remember . . ."

PK: Bring him on.

LR: I remember . . . I can't think of his name now. And I said, you know, "I certainly wouldn't expect him to model for nothing. I'll pay him so much per hour. So Doug came over. That's his name. Doug. And he was thrilled that I was gonna do some paintings of him and I did some very discreet [ones], I think.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: I've got one up on the wall in there and he was a very nice person. And I wanted to see if I could do it. I think the male body is much more difficult to draw than the female.

PK: Not as flowing roundness, I guess.

LR: Right. And yet as . . .

PK: Which do you think is more beautiful? Let me ask you about . . .

LR: It depends. Depends upon the individual.

PK: Yeah. But, I mean, in general. Do you -- some people do . . .

LR: Well, women seem to really flow a little bit nicer. But -- no, you go through art history and the female body is always much more visible.

PK: Well, not true. Not entirely, because in the Greek and Roman times, the athletes and so forth. And into the Renaissance, actually, there's this -- they're both [present]. But certainly in our modern times or recent times . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: But that has, partly, to do with -- and I really didn't wanna get into it now but . . . ideas about sex . . .

LR: Um-hmm.

PK: . . . and desire. And, you know, we haven't touched on all that. In all of this conversation, it's been very, sort of, businesslike and matter-of-fact. But there is a whole other component, which has to do with desire and with objects of desire and picturing that and trying to distill it. And Mel's work, actually, is interpreted that way quite a bit, and what's so interesting is the experience of the process of coming to these images. As you describe it has really nothing to do with that. It doesn't even seem to be a goal. And this is interesting because the effect, in many cases for many people, is, you know, these are sort of emblems of desire.

LR: Um-hmm. Well, he's had a few commissions, you know. And, in fact, there's -- the one that we're going to put in the show that I designed called Generations -- it's a commission. I think the wife was the one who said she

wanted a painting done by Mel Ramos to give to her husband and they're one of the wealthiest families -- I don't know -- I guess they're Swiss. Own shipping -- a fleet of ships. That's what it is.

PK: Um-hmm.

LR: And she had all kinds of ideas for herself. She had -- she was very familiar with Mel's work and she says, "I want you to paint me as the corn queen. I want you paint me like this and that." And so Mel took photographs and I was there, too. And she commissioned him. I mean, if you have enough money, why not?

PK: So then he . . .

LR: There's the one up there. I'll show it to you.

PK: Okay. Good. I can see it now.

LR: You know -- you will know the name when I tell you but I can't think of it. He's one of the wealthiest families -- I believe in Switzerland.

PK: Okay.

LR: And she might've been an American that married a Swiss . . . [Tape runs out; session satisfactorily concluded]

END OF INTERVIEW

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