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Oral history interview with Susan Cummins,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Susan Cummins on 2009 Oct. 22. The interview took place at Cummins' home in Mill Valley, CA, and was conducted by Jo Lauria for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Mija riedel was also present at the interview. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Widgeon Point Charitable Foundation.

Susan Cummins and Jo Lauria have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JO LAURIA: This is October 22 [2009], interview with Susan Cummins at her house in Mill Valley [CA], for the Archives of America Art, interviewed by Jo Lauria.

Susan, we're going to start with the biographical information because we assume people reading these transcripts are starting from ground zero. So if you wouldn't mind taking a us back to the year of your birth and give us a little bit about your childhood and family background.

SUSAN CUMMINS: Well, I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, December 27, 1946. My father, at the time, was working for IBM. We then proceeded to move many times after that, which was sort of the tradition of the time. We moved to Long Island [NY]; then we moved to Atherton [CA]; then we moved to Portland [OR].

By that time, I was ready to go to college. So then I went to Southern California, where I went to school at Scripps College. I lived in Seattle [WA] after that.

So I moved around quite a lot, from the Midwest to the East. But mostly I'm a West Coast person. My early childhood was a very typical 1950s family. I have two sisters and a brother. Mostly I grew up in Atherton. So I was a very California kid.

My mother was very interested in the aesthetics of our house, and so got interior design people to help with picking the furniture and all kinds of fabrics and things. She also was very interested in the garden. I remember we had a Japanese gardener, from early on, who helped to define an aesthetic there. And in fact, we had Japanese screens in the house. I think it's a very strong influence, especially in the whole West Coast, but I think especially in San Francisco you see a lot of houses and gardens that are influenced by Asian design. I think people from other parts of this country don't realize the strong aesthetic influence in the West Coast of that. And I think it for sure influenced my eyes and my tastes to some degree or another.

So that really was the major influence on my early years of artistic things. We didn't go much to museums, certainly never went to galleries. We spent time outdoors.

[END CD 1 TR1.]

MS. CUMMINS: The first real exposure that I had to art - I remember taking an art class or two in high school, but basically the first time I really paid much attention was, when I graduated from high school, my parents had decided that as a graduation gift they would give me a trip to Europe. I went with a group called the American Field Service. There were like 18 teenagers just out of high school, mostly from the Oregon area, a lot from Portland. I didn't know any of them. They were from all other schools and so forth.

We went to Europe and spent about two months traveling. And one of those months we spent in Paris. So of course, what we did there was go to many, many art museums. So that was my first real time to become interested in art. And in fact, it was on that trip that I decided to study art when I got to college. So it was an extremely fortuitous moment in my life.

I remember in particular sitting in a church. They have these Italian guides that would come and tell you about the artwork in the church or wherever we were. And I remember one of the guides looking at me and saying, "You're really paying attention to what I'm saying. You are really interested in what I'm saying. I can tell that there is something special about your interest." And I got really embarrassed, I remember, because I thought, isn't everybody paying this close of attention? [Laughs.] Isn't everybody loving this as much as I am? So I got very self-conscious at the time.

But it really was fabulous. There was a couple that was sort of in charge of the group. And the husband of the couple was extremely knowledgeable about art. So he would have us do exercises like: look at this painting and

really study it. And then look away, and tell me everything that was in the painting. Just things like that, that were really helpful to teach you how to look.

MS. LAURIA: So that your proclivity towards art history, you think, maybe was jump-started on this trip.

MS. CUMMINS: Absolutely. And I don't know why. It wasn't really something that I had spent any time up to that moment in time thinking about. But there it was.

MS. LAURIA: So this is the awakening.

MS. CUMMINS: That was the awakening moment, yes. And then I went to Scripps College in Claremont, California—it was a humanities college. Its main core classes were studying religion, art, literature, and history. So it was a perfect school for me. I got a teacher there named Arthur Stevens, who I think pretty much started my sophomore year, teaching art history there. He was very funny. He loved puns. He was very knowledgeable about contemporary art, and specifically the period of time between the two World Wars.

So I think I probably inherited a lot of my love of contemporary art, and also early 20th-century to mid-20th-century art history, from him. He was student of Albert Elsen's—who teaches now at Stanford - who was a Rodin scholar. And so my senior thesis was on Rodin, but I didn't know that I had inherited that from Art Stevens. So it was a kind of a funny choice.

But I had gone back to Europe several times during my college years because I'd had such a great time there. And one of the places I truly loved was the Rodin Museum in Paris. Rodin did a lot of drawings, especially of dancers. So my thesis was on Rodin's relationship to dance, which then introduced me to dance, which also became a real joy of mine.

MS. LAURIA: And were you interested, while you were at Scripps, at all in the studio arts? Did you participate in any of the fine art courses, or was it more geared towards the academic side and art history?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, I did take some studio classes. I learned that being a painter was way too hard for me. I learned that being a sculptor or doing something object-oriented was a little more something that I could do. But mostly learned that I didn't want to be a hands-on artist, that I didn't have the patience for it. I had actually played the violin when I was younger, and I had a lot more patience for practicing the violin than I did for doing any kind of art form. I really was interested in thinking about art and looking at art and understanding art and appreciating it for its effect on me, I guess, and effect on my thinking, more than I was in making it, for sure.

MS. LAURIA: And as part of the college art history curriculum with Professor Stevenson—

MS. CUMMINS: Stevens.

MS. LAURIA: Stevens. Did you go regularly to museum shows and to galleries? And were you given assignments to evaluate or assess some of the works that you had seen during your visits?

MS. CUMMINS: We did not, that I ever remember, go to any museums. You know Claremont; there aren't any museums there. And in those days, which was the '60s, I didn't have a car. Neither did anybody else I knew. I took classes also at Pomona [College, Claremont, CA] because there was a cross-campus kind of curriculum. And there was a gallery there. There were a couple of little galleries in Claremont, but we didn't go there as part of our studies at all. And in fact, the one or two times I can remember going into Los Angeles to see an exhibition, it wasn't necessarily anything to do with a class, that I recall. So, no.

MS. LAURIA: So your analytic abilities that you have developed, since your interest was piqued, were mostly on your own then.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: You had to be self-developed in that area.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: So other than the art history classes, I know you have a tremendous interest and knowledge of literature. Could you describe how that might have keyed into what you've done later in your life as a dealer? Because I know that a lot of your shows are sort of based on—not a lot, but several that I'm aware of—that when you became a dealer, had some link or connection to literature.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, I think I'm just plain old interested in narrative. I just like stories. I'm not very good at telling them myself - [laughs] - but I love hearing other people's stories.

I think a lot of information is transmitted through storytelling in a much more effective way than talking abstractly about things. So a lot of the shows that I had in the gallery subsequently were based on personal narratives with psychological undertones. I think probably more than anything, what I like about literature and art is understanding the impetus for it or the ways in which things are communicated from one person to another through an object or an image or through a story.

I find it totally fascinating that art can do that. And that you always know that an object—if it's a good object of art - has something to say. That somebody made it so that it could say something to you. That is an amazing ability of art, to do that. And part of what that does to the viewer, which I consider myself to be, somewhat of a professional viewer, is it educates me to a new world. So I can get into the thinking of another person through that object. I can also understand the times in which it was made. So that's the hook for me, or the fascination.

MS. LAURIA: The context.

MS. CUMMINS: The context of it, yes. Or whether it has really an expression of the times when it was created. However, the context is not quite as important to me as the personal—what that person's life was like and what their psychology was like. I tend link many, many things to people's spirits—who they are, how they think, what they feel. Artists are notoriously often complex beings, and I love that complexity.

MS. LAURIA: Your parents must have been aware by this time, obviously, that your deep interests were to be found in this area of art, art history. Were they supportive?

MS. CUMMINS: Yes, they were. They didn't seem to discourage me in any way. I think that in those days, at least my memory of those days, people didn't have as strong an emphasis on, what are you going to do when you get out of school? My parents sort of just assumed that I'd figure out what to do with myself. They actually weren't going to have too much to do with it. So they just thought, well, if this is something that you really are interested in—my father was a very big reader and very much loved history, and I think thought it was a very respectable thing to study history. Art history was fine. Any kind of history was fine. [Laughs.] So just becoming a literate, articulate person was an important element.

I don't think they worried too much about was I going to earn a living. I think they probably assumed I was just going to get married and have a family and it really didn't matter so much. We're at the edge of a time frame here [in] which they were still thinking that things were going to be traditional. And I, of course, took a very untraditional route. But they didn't know that at the time I was studying art history. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: So you made your career choice at what point, Susan? We're now up to the point where you're graduating from Scripps.

MS. CUMMINS: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And you are confronted, as all graduating seniors are, with, what do I do with the rest of my life? Do I take a career path solely for the interest of making a living, or do I go pursue maybe something that may not be as immediately profitable? We all have those choices. How did you make your choice? Could you sort of guide us on your pathway to becoming a dealer?

MS. CUMMINS: When I got out of college, a lot of my friends were moving to Washington, D.C. And that was like 1969. There's lots going on in Washington, D.C., in 1969. So I'd never lived on the East Coast, and I decided I was either going to live in New York or Washington, because I wanted an East Coast experience.

Since so many people I knew were going to Washington, I decided that would be the more rational thing to do. So I went there. I went around trying to get a job with my art history degree. And I remember one place, a museum, was very happy to hear from me and gave me an interview, only to discover that there was another Susan Cummins that was going around interviewing at the same time, who had a master's degree from some very prestigious school. And when they figured out that I wasn't that Susan Cummins [laughs], that was the end of that big interview. And that was [the] closest I got to getting a job.

So I volunteered to be a secretary for somebody at the National Museum [of American Art], I believe it was, where I didn't last very long because I was a terrible secretary. But "Objects USA" opened there while I was volunteering. I vaguely remember that show. Given now my trajectory and my life, it's very synchronistic or strange to me that that show actually happened then. But there it was. So I left DC and came back to the Bay Area to recover from my year-and-a-half-, two-year trek out into the world on my own.

Meanwhile - [laughs] - when I was at Scripps, I used to work in a chemistry lab, so of course, I got a job in Washington, D.C., working at a lab that did drug testing for the government. At the very end of that period of time, I started working for some place called [the] Black Man's Development Center, which was a quasi-military, Muslim group that took people out of jail and put them on a methadone program and housed them and fed them

and tried to get them off drugs. So that was a pretty wild thing to do. My parents were a bit worried about that part of my adventure in DC. But it was a great experience, really a very interesting one.

So I came back to the West Coast, and I ended up in Mill Valley with Beth Changstrom. She had just started a little shop called The Fireworks, which was a production—ceramics—mostly hers. And a little bit of glass. It was like a 200-square-foot space on a little alley in Mill Valley called the El Paseo. And she just out and out asked me, after we'd been together for just a month or two, would I run The Fireworks? So I said, "Sure." And so that was the beginning of my being in business as a small business owner.

So we had that space for 10 years. In the meantime, she was making production ceramics, and I would help her in the studio a certain number of days a week. And then I'd work in The Fireworks a certain number of days a week.

We also did the street fairs in San Francisco: Grant Street, Polk Street, Union Street, a whole variety of street fairs. We also did Rhinebeck, the American Crafts Council Fair in Rhinebeck [NY] and in Northampton [MA], Baltimore [MD]. A lot of those early ACC shows. We would do wholesale, and we would do retail. And then I would take care of all the packing and shipping and ordering and billing of the wholesale orders. We gradually had a few other artists' work in The Fireworks because we met all these people then doing all of these fairs. It was easy to connect to them.

So that went on from like 1973 to '83 or so, when we got the space called Horizon Gallery, which was 32 Miller Avenue in Mill Valley. It was this long, narrow space that had been a gallery for a few years, and the person decided to get out of the business. So we got the space from them, and it became Susan Cummins Gallery. So it was Beth Changstrom Ceramics and Susan Cummins Gallery.

MS. LAURIA: And had you met Beth at college, at Scripps?

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. Mm-hmm.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. CUMMINS: She was three or four years ahead of me. But she'd gone back to graduate school, and she'd studied with Paul Soldner there. So I definitely had met her.

MS. LAURIA: So through Beth you learned all about the making of ceramics.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And then with bringing in the other artists at Fireworks, were [they] all people who made ceramics? Or did you take work by people who were making things out of different materials?

MS. CUMMINS: The only other material, really, at The Fireworks was glass. So it was two things made with fire. We'd have place settings and goblets. Steve Maslach, for example, was one of the goblet-makers or glass-makers there. So it was things like that. Mostly it was ceramics, and mostly it was Beth's work. So we were able to make a living doing that. Not a really wildly extravagant living. But we just worked our little butts off, and we managed to do okay.

MS. LAURIA: And did you find that you had an affinity towards the business end of running Fireworks?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, I found that I was very entrepreneurial. I found that I really liked being my own boss. I had done a little bit of working for other people in some other places before that, and I really actually found myself not liking that particularly. So I liked being my own boss. I felt that I could figure things out pretty well to keep things moving along and going. But I never had a business class in my life.

If somebody had asked for business plan, I would not have been able to give it to them. The whole process of becoming a business person was just, again, my own—as many artisans and certainly craftspeople are wont to do—is just my own learning by experience. Luckily, if you are so inclined, you don't make so many mistakes that you put yourself out of business. So I was lucky enough to manage to make good enough decisions. And Beth was very hardworking, and so was I. So I think that helped tremendously.

MS. LAURIA: When you had Horizons, did you begin to develop an idea that you wanted to position Horizons in a certain place in people's minds, that that was going to be the go-to place to look at interesting work or vanguard work? Or did you feel like you wanted to be more responsive to the community? I guess what I'm saying is, did you at that time feel like you wanted to bring Mill Valley, which is a small community and probably not so much on the cutting edge at the time, did you feel that it was your responsibility—responsibility might be a harsh word—but desire to introduce the community to artists that you felt maybe were a little more transcendent than making, you know, pleasant and comfortable work?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, first of all, we changed the name from Horizons to Susan Cummins Gallery as soon as we got it. So it was no longer Horizons Gallery.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. So you didn't continue that at all.

MS. CUMMINS: No. Mm-mm. I guess what I would say about that is, I didn't have a very sophisticated knowledge of how to run a gallery or what to do about it. So mostly what I did from the beginning was to invite people that I knew were excellent makers to be part of the gallery.

It started off, really, with all craft-oriented objects. So it was pretty easy to say, okay, I love Bennett Bean's work; I'm going to ask Bennett if he'll send me some things. I love a variety of different potters and others. And you'll see, if you look through the early invitations at the gallery, you'll see that I tried showing glass. I found the glass artists to be extremely uncooperative and really hard to get work from. At the time there were a couple of major glass galleries in the country—Habitat and Heller—that took almost all the work from every good glass artist. And I wasn't willing to show people that were mediocre in my mind. So those really high-falutin' guys didn't really want to show in a little gallery in Mill Valley. It wasn't very prestigious. So I stopped showing glass after a couple of exhibitions.

But then I had a fiber show, a basket show. I had a wood show. I tried out a lot of different media. But the thing I knew the most about was ceramics. And at some point or another, I remember thinking, alright, all these other fields have galleries that are very well respected and are taking all this good work. What is not being shown very much and doesn't have a good gallery showing it? So I ended up showing jewelry for that reason. Not because I particularly was interested in jewelry - I never wore jewelry, and I still don't ever wear jewelry - but because I felt that it was an area that I could excel in.

Helen Drutt was around, but she was showing largely Europeans. So being on the West Coast, I figured that it would be better for me to show only American jewelers, and that I was going to distinguish myself as showing and defining what was contemporary American jewelry. That was my strategy for jewelry.

I still had quite a few shows of various other types of objects as I was finding my way along.

In the second year I was there, I started having shows of two-dimensional work as well. I had a show with an artist named Gail Chase-Bien, who was a local painter here. The paintings were so big that the space was really too small to hold them. And I realized that I had to move to a bigger space.

So up the street, at 12 Miller Avenue, a pharmacy left their space. They'd been there for 50 years or something. So I decided to rent that space, and then I divided it because I couldn't afford the whole rent. At 32 Miller I had about 1200 square feet, and at 12 Miller I had about 2400 square feet. So I had a much bigger space, and I could show both paintings, in the front, bigger area of the space, and jewelry or smaller objects in a section in the back or in another little cubicle—a sort of divided-up area. And then I had a storage room and a little office area and so forth. So it was a much better space for showing.

MS. LAURIA: What year are we talking about, Susan?

MS. CUMMINS: When did I move? I think I probably moved in the early '90s.

MS. LAURIA: So you'd already been in business as Susan Cummins Gallery for about—

MS. CUMMINS: About tenish--10 years.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. And while you were progressing, did you notice that there were other galleries on the West Coast, or across the United States, that were starting to integrate showing jewelry with fine arts media as well? Or did you feel that you were more or less unique in that quality?

MS. CUMMINS: I felt very unique in that quality. And it was actually hard for me to get painters to show with me at first, when they would find out that I was showing jewelry. After a while that sort of—because I showed so many good painters and did so well with their work, that that sort of died away.

But you also asked me whether I was aiming my tastes at the local community. I never could run the gallery figuring out what somebody wanted me to show. I could only figure out what it was that I wanted to show, what I thought was good or interesting to me. And so I never could take this community into too much consideration. My taste was never so cutting edge that I went beyond the possible tastes of the area. So it worked out pretty well in that regard.

Most places that were showing the kind of jewelry that I was showing were either showing some other craft along with it, like Helen showed ceramics and some other things, too - but most of the other galleries were just showing jewelry. So it was a unique situation. And I guess I, in my unconscious but rational mind, decided that it

would be better to be in two markets than in one. And that it was a little schizophrenic to do that. But the two markets were very distinctive and very different. So we played both sides of the art world.

At that time, when the Internet wasn't as active as it is now, it was important to use as many resources as you could to keep yourself in business. So you would get known in one world. And then people, say, would come looking for a painting. Then they'd see the jewelry there. Then they might get interested in that. And vice versa. So it would be pulling from two marketplaces to get people to come to the gallery.

MS. LAURIA: And did you find that by doing this that there was a wonderful cross-pollination between the visitors to the gallery and also the artists, that they might become exposed to different sides? I'm sure you had painters and ceramicists who knew nothing about contemporary art jewelry, who then wanted to learn more, and then vice versa. Did you feel that you became sort of a place for education, without becoming a school?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, I think it's important to remember that in San Francisco there were other dealers like Ruth Braunstein or Rena Bransten who were showing what we would consider to be craft artists along with fine artists. And that it was an accepted thing to do. Louise Aldrich was showing fiber along with other things. It wasn't such a big deal. The West Coast is a little bit more accepting of a mix of things. Although jewelry was the hardest sell in that kind of arena, it was more natural for clientele, I think, in this area than maybe in other areas to become pretty easily used to seeing jewelry along with a painting. They would either just come and like one or the other and pay attention to both or not. We never tried to make somebody look at a painting or at the jewelry. But you couldn't help but notice that those two things existed in the same space.

MS. LAURIA: But when you did programming, it was available to anybody in the community. So that if somebody was interested in one or the other, you became the go-to place to learn about it in Mill Valley, wouldn't you say?

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. And I did fairs in different parts of the country. The fair I did most often was the New Art Forms fair or SOFA [Sculptural Objects & Functional Art], which was more object-oriented. But I also did a fair in Seattle that displayed both paintings and jewelry, the only place that I could show both. San Francisco had a fair for many years that was mostly fine art. I tried to do some installations of jewelry there, and that had some success. I don't know if I'm still answering your question. [Laughs.]

But anyway, by bringing people in from the rest of the country, because of what I showed at those fairs in New York and Miami, where SOFA was for a while, and Chicago and whatever, I exposed those people to the painters who were more regional. And most of the jewelry artists that I had were national. So it worked to introduce jewelry collectors to paintings and painting collectors to jewelry.

MS. LAURIA: If you had to, or would you, cite a mentor at this time, somebody that guided you one way or the other into the success of running your gallery or choosing the artists or even someone who was a great sounding board for you. There are certain difficult decisions along the way that you have to make. Was there anybody at this point in your career that you felt was a really good mentor?

MS. CUMMINS: There was nobody that I talked to on a regular basis like that. The people that I talked to the most were artists. I could see at a distance people like Ruth Braunstein, for example, as somebody that I admired who is several years older than I was. And Paule Anglim, who's also a San Francisco dealer. Who I thought were pretty fabulous. And they were all—I don't know, maybe they were in their 60s or 70s by this time, and now they're in their 80s or early 90s. [Laughs.] I don't know. I always thought that I, like them, would just kind of be working in the gallery till I dropped. And that was my model: that I would just manage to survive the whole endeavor. But nobody really was a mentor.

Probably the person that I talked to more about developing various aspects of things than anyone else was Bruce Metcalf. Not that Bruce knows anything about business, but he would always encourage me—or sort of push me—to go to the next level of something. Dominic Di Mare sort of did that, too. Bob Ebendorf did that really early on.

MS. LAURIA: And these were artists that you were representing at the time.

MS. CUMMINS: These were artists that I was representing at the time. They would always challenge me to go to the next step. And in their naïveté about business, and with my naïveté to try it, I sort of stumbled upon the next phase of the gallery. But I never talked to other dealers. I mean, I was part of the San Francisco Art Dealers Association for many years, and I talked to other dealers, but I didn't really talk to them as a mentor or somebody that they would be mentoring.

MS. LAURIA: Do you feel that the writers who write about art in general and maybe regional writers and inclusive of national writers - what was their response to your gallery? Do you feel that you were covered in a lot of the press, and that you became known for the artists that you showed?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, early on there were a lot of articles in the local papers; the *Mill Valley Record*, the *Independent Journal*, those kind of places wrote a lot about the gallery and did reviews and so forth. The *Pacific Sun* actually had a reviewer named Rebecca Solnit, who has become quite a famous writer now, and she did some early reviews of the gallery which were really good. The local reviewer from the *San Francisco Chronicle* was Kenneth Baker, and he eventually started reviewing people that I was showing. Never jewelers. I often challenged him to do that. But he would review people like Frances McCormack, who was a painter; Chester Arnold, who was a painter; and people that he respected already but happened to be showing with me. So he would come fairly often. And people like Maria Porges, who was reviewing for *Artforum* and those kinds of things, would come and review the paintings. In the jewelry field, really, there were very few places you could get reviews. There was only *American Craft* magazine or *Metalsmith*.

MS. LAURIA: Was *Ornament* magazine a—

MS. CUMMINS: *Ornament* was, yes, it was around, too. But they didn't ever really do much in the way of critical reviews. And in fact, *American Craft* didn't do much in the way of critical reviews. So I would get articles about some of the artists I was showing, but those magazines wouldn't list the gallery necessarily.

Ornament had an editorial policy of not listing the gallery unless you took an ad out. I once wrote a letter to the editor complaining about that because I thought there should be a wall between editorial and advertising. They printed the letter, and I got a lot of flack from artists for having said that. Which I thought was strange. A gallery always wants every single bit of publicity you can get—for free, of course - and I got my share.

MS. LAURIA: I interviewed Braunstein a month ago, and she was giving me the evolution of her gallery, having started out in Tiburon.

MS. CUMMINS: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And then moved to San Francisco. Was that ever a consideration for you?

MS. CUMMINS: When I first started in Mill Valley, people said, you're never going to have a good gallery in Mill Valley. Several people had tried to have galleries in Marin, like Ruth. And let's see, there's another woman—Anderson, what is her name? Paula Anderson, I believe, is her name. She had one in Corte Madera. There were a bunch of galleries in Sausalito that were all kind of tourist-oriented.

But people said, you're never going to have a good serious gallery in Mill Valley. Well, in my cantankerous way, I took that basically as a challenge and just said, Well, I'm going to try anyway. And because I had had The Fireworks for 10 years already, I had this little collecting base that had already started here. And I didn't really want to go into the city.

When it was time for me to move, that period of time when I said the paintings got too big for the space, I did look in San Francisco. And my heart was not in that. I didn't like the idea of going into the city. I'm only ambitious to a degree, not so ambitious that I wanted to sacrifice some aspect of intimacy of place for my career.

So there was something about staying in Mill Valley that just seemed right, especially when the space opened up right down the street. It was meant to be, as they say, or synchronistic. Something that just was the right thing at the right time. And I thought, why would I hassle going into the city when I can just move down the street? There was a go-with-the-flow moment. So I ended up staying here. As time went on and it became easier to do business at a distance, you could be anywhere and do what you're doing. I had very good local support, and then I could have relationships with collectors everywhere else in the country.

MS. LAURIA: What percentage of your business, do you think, came from doing art fairs? Do you think that was important to bring your name visibility to a wider audience, and then you would reap the sales maybe not during that three- or four-day period, but later on? Or did you think that making use of the Internet, when that became more of a viable tool, was a greater desire to go after that kind of business?

MS. CUMMINS: I closed the gallery in 2002. I did not have a website. It was the time in which, in 2001, people started having websites. And so I was trying to decide, should or shouldn't I? What shall I do? And I realized at the time I closed the gallery, I was going to have to reinvent myself and become redefined in some way. And I for sure had to get a website. I'd been working towards that for a long time by having a photographer do digital photographs of things that I could put in my computer and use with my art management system, which was called Art Stacks.

It was still the early days of doing e-mails and attaching images to e-mails and nobody could open them. Now we're so used to the Internet and so used to all of that, that you can hardly remember when that wasn't the case. But it was only seven years ago.. It wasn't that long ago. And I still did much of my business by printing off

images and putting them in an envelope with a letter and sending them to somebody.

MS. LAURIA: I guess I'm trying to figure out—you need to diversify your gallery business. So for you, it was more doing both markets.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: The fine art market and the so-called crafts market.

MS. CUMMINS: Right, right.

MS. LAURIA: And you would get people interested. At least get your name out there by doing the shows. And they would know you as the Susan Cummins Gallery that shows both of this kind of work.

MS. CUMMINS: Right. And I worked very hard on keeping in touch with all the people that have bought things from me.

MS. LAURIA: So you established a collector base right from the beginning.

MS. CUMMINS: I established a collector base. All of the technology that I did employ was to facilitate communication from the gallery to collectors. We had lists of people that were interested in something but hadn't purchased it yet. Bought something by somebody that needed to know when we had more new work of that person. We worked really diligently at keeping in touch with collectors. And as I said, it was much harder then. Clearly, if you want to stay in business, you have to know your audience and know what your audience is interested in. And the only way you can do that is to keep going back to them and saying, are you still interested in this work? Or what else might you be interested in? And so forth. So, yes, we paid a lot of attention.

Realistically, I probably spent a lot more time talking to artists than I did to collectors, which was probably a bit of a mistake on my part in some ways. But I was always fascinated to listen to the artists' explanation of what they were doing and why they did it the way they did it. So then I would be able to give a credible explanation to a collector about the work. But I probably could have spent even lots more time talking to collectors and getting to know them.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that's an interesting point about talking to the artists because I have heard from many artists with whom I speak to as well that there are so few gallerists left anymore who are interested in developing an artist's career.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: The idea that you work with an artist over time, and that you are a feedback system for them as well as a motivating factor. That so much of what goes on in galleries now is the quick sell. You either sink or swim. And the dealers just don't feel like they have the time to let a career evolve. How do you feel about that? Do you find that that was something that you feel very proud about doing, working with an artist over time?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, it's not like I worked with every artist that I ever showed over time. In looking back through some of the invitations and so forth, there are some artists I've completely forgotten about. I didn't work with them over time.

It was only a certain few that really were both smart enough and talented enough and persistent enough and ambitious enough, and that our sensibilities, our ambitions, our whatever went along with each other for some period of time in synch. So I feel very blessed to have met those people and to have our lives have coincided when they did. But there were other artists that I would show, and I'd sell some of their work—or I wouldn't sell some of their work—but they didn't keep pursuing a path that I could follow, or they didn't pursue a path at all at a certain point.

So I did the gallery the way I had to do it. Whether somebody else can pick an artist that they think will sell, sell the work, and then hop onto another artist, maybe that's the way they can do it. Everybody does what they need to do in order to survive. I don't have any judgment about somebody else doing it a different way. It's just what works.

MS. LAURIA: End of tape one.

[END CD 1 TR 2.]

MS. LAURIA: This is disc number two, interview with Susan Cummins for the Archives of American Art, October 22, 2009, at Susan's home in Mill Valley [CA], interviewed by Jo Lauria.

Susan, let's pick up with the idea of describing the concept for the space of your gallery. Were there other people involved at this time, your staff, who might have helped with the display of objects in the way in which they were shown to visitors?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, the last space that I had, which was at 12 Miller Avenue, I did build out and essentially designed myself—I didn't build it out myself, but I designed how it would be built out. It was very unsophisticated. We just bought off-the-shelf cabinetry and shelving to put in as display spaces in the offices and in the back near the reception. The rest of it was just essentially a big space, except for the jewelry cases, which I had built based on the flaws and successes of the original jewelry cases that I had had at 32 Miller Avenue.

So I tried to make it an extremely flexible space. There was very little built in. We had a lot of different types and shapes of pedestals, and shelving that could hang on the walls, and other things that would help us exhibit objects. Painting, obviously—that's kind of a no-brainer. You just hang them on the wall. So we had a lot of different systems. Then as time went along, we got more things built, or cases and so forth would come along, depending on the show that was coming up. And then we'd have them as part of our repertoire. So there was nothing planned out from the beginning necessarily and nothing that was extremely sophisticated.

I think at the moment that I closed the gallery in 2002, it was also a moment where the rug was beginning to look a little worn. And the cabinetry was—it wasn't really worn, because it was sort of bulletproof. But it was time to think about having somebody professionally design the place, because it was really clear that it was a pretty amateurish job. It was clean, and it worked, but I needed to rethink the whole thing. Part of the end of the gallery for me was thinking I had to rethink everything, including the displays of the gallery.

MS. LAURIA: And did you have any of your staff members who participated in doing the displays along with you? I mean there is an art to it.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. Certainly when we changed exhibitions; oftentimes Mija Riedel or Julie Gustafson would help set up the jewelry exhibitions. Or they would do it all themselves. We had certain cases that we could use. So they were limited to some degree or another on how the shows would look, but they were free to do the arrangement however they saw best. Usually I would do the show in the front, which was often the painting or object-oriented show. And I would designate how I wanted the objects to be arranged in that space. And then Andrew Korniej, who was the installer that I had towards the end of the gallery, or Beth Changstrom, who was doing most of the installation before that, would hang the pieces as I had indicated. Or arrange them in the way I had indicated.

It wasn't very complicated. It was more about getting a sense of what story I wanted the objects to tell, how I wanted them to relate to each other, how they looked best, in my view, at the moment on the day we were setting them up. There was very little preliminary planning. We used to take down and set up a show in one day. Usually we'd take it down, like, Saturday night, set it up on Sunday, and open on Tuesday night. Monday we'd take off. So we were a speedy group. I didn't like to dilly-dally around, essentially.

MS. LAURIA: Now let's concentrate on your last space.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: Which is the former pharmacy, which was the bigger space.

MS. CUMMINS: Right.

MS. LAURIA: When you started there, for the time until you closed, could you kind of give us a pattern of how things did work: How many employees did you have? What was your roster of artists like? If you had to divide it up, how many were in the fine arts and how many were in the crafts? And then how did you organize your exhibitions: Were they monthly? Were they one every quarter? If you could sort of lead us through the day-to-day running of your business.

[END CD 2 TR 1.]

MS. CUMMINS: So the day-to-day operations of the gallery: from the time that I opened Susan Cummins Gallery in 1983 until I closed it in 2002, I had part-time people working for me all the time. At one point we were open seven days a week. And then after a while, of course, it got to be more than I could bear. Because we were on the street, I thought I should be open like everybody else was, which was seven days a week. But then I began closing on Sundays and Mondays like most rational dealers do. I had usually at least three people and often four people or more working part-time. So everybody—there were three major people that I employed for a long, long time: Mija Riedel, Julie Gustafson, and Julie Allen. They would all work three days a week. They had other jobs that they did or wanted to do. So they'd work part-time because they wanted to do something else.

So they would overlap their days in a such way that there would always be two people, and then I would be there, too. So there were almost always three people in the gallery. And we had a very elaborate communications system: a thing we called the Black Book. We wrote down messages to each other, so that the first thing you did when you got in in the morning was look at the Black Book so you would know that so-and-so was going to come in today to pick up something. So that there wasn't a disconnect in the communications. It became easy enough for us to feel that they were there all the time, even though they weren't. I would often have an extra person who worked one day a week, like Andrew Korneij or Claire Hagen, who often worked on a Saturday. And so that sort of made up the number of days that we needed to have two people working. And what else was part of that question?

MS. LAURIA: How did you decide on your exhibition schedule?

MS. CUMMINS: From the very beginning we had monthly exhibitions. Mill Valley started doing the first Tuesday openings. There were some other little galleries or cooperatives in town, and we all agreed that we'd do first Tuesdays. So every first Tuesday of a month, I would have a new show. That was how the schedule got established. I would always have two exhibitions at the same time. One would be jewelry-oriented, and one would be painting or object-oriented. So they were mostly always solo exhibitions.

Once a year, in the holiday season, I would have a group show of jewelry and a group show of objects or paintings. Often that would be a call for a particular theme for all the artists that showed in the gallery, and anybody who wanted to do a piece for that show would get in the exhibition.

So those kinds of shows would be called things like "Winter Light." Or there was one that was called "Perched on the Soul," which was a quote from Emily Dickinson, that was about the use of bird imagery. One I had was called "Animal Imagery." Some were small-works kind of shows. You know the sort of typical range of types of theme shows. But I really liked doing solo exhibitions most of the time otherwise because I thought that was the most effective way to allow the audience to see a really good swath of work by an artist. Doing group shows really didn't allow that. So although I did an occasional show that was not holiday-oriented that had a theme, that was something I stayed away from.

MS. LAURIA: And during this time, at the height of your gallery's business, how many artists were you representing, and what was the division between the fine artists and the craft and jewelers, what percentage?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, there was a point at which I was showing probably 120 jewelers altogether, which was way too many jewelers. So I cut back in the later years in the gallery to somewhere around, probably, 50. Now, I would have liked to have shown maybe more like 25, and really concentrated on developing the career of those artists. But as I say in the *Metalsmith* article with an interview with Bruce Metcalf, jewelry artists of this kind and the people that I was showing did not make enough work for me to have enough of a body of work to have shown 25 artists, so every other year they would have a show.

I would sometimes have shows with artists—and I won't name names, but they know who they are—who would give me like seven pieces. And that would be two or three years' worth of their work. Well, (a) because they have to teach in order to survive; and (b) because it takes so long to make things, that's all they would make. That was sort of an extreme case. But a lot of jewelers, they just plain didn't make enough work. There wasn't a critical mass, so to speak. So I had to have more jewelers around in order to have enough merchandise, so to speak, to continue to survive.

In the painting and drawing and fine arts, I probably had more like 25 artists, because they, in fact, managed to produce enough for me to get enough of a critical mass of their work. And have things always in the back storage room that I could show people, that I would be able to literally continue to represent them on an ongoing basis. Rather than have the show either sell all the work or not have enough work to still have some left over to show.

MS. LAURIA: And were you showing Beth Changstrom's work all along at this time?

MS. CUMMINS: Beth stopped doing work for the gallery, I'm going to say, in the mid-'90s. So when the gallery closed, we hadn't been showing her work for a while.

MS. LAURIA: And what are some of the aesthetic criteria that you used to choose your artists?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, I can say that I tried to use similar criteria for the jewelry as well as the paintings and other objects that I had. As I said, I really am intrigued with narrative, so many of them had narrative as their basis. Or psychological, in some way psychologically based imagery.

A show that really, really influenced me from the '80s was called "Magicians of the Earth." It was started by the Pompidou Center [Paris] and was in Los Angeles, though never got to actually see the show. But I read a lot

about it, and I got the catalogue, which I have here today. It was a fantastic show of artists from all over the world that became this combination of the primitive and the conceptual and very sophisticated. And somewhere in there is my aesthetic, which has to do with across the board of objects and art-oriented things, a very strong sense of human-made, human spirit, powerful imagery that moves me emotionally.

I also noticed I began showing people that came from a Catholic background. And I thought this was very interesting. I began thinking about the fact that when you're raised as a Catholic, you see a lot of imagery. Catholics are famous for all the ritualistic objects and imagery that they employ to teach the practitioners about the stories from the Bible and so forth. So I began to realize that when you are taught that way, you begin to believe in some kind of strong spiritual nature of the object and of imagery to transmit something to the viewer. So they had this background that allowed them to believe in the object and the image. So somewhere in there is where I also come down. Which doesn't describe an aesthetic very much, I guess. It describes a feeling more than it does really what the thing exactly looks like.

MS. LAURIA: I'm sure, though, that quality of execution was an important criterion.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. It was, to a large degree. But I also thought that when people were messy, it would be often revealing of their process. And if that was the case, then I would like that, too. I like things that have a worn nature to them, that have a history. So when somebody would build up layers of things and stand back and show you the way they got to where they ended up, I would love that.

And in fact, when I was trying to reinvent myself before I decided to close, I was trying to decide if I should do something like—there was a show in the early 2000s called "Artempo." I think it was at a Venice Biennale. And it's called "Artempo: Where Time Becomes Art."

MS. LAURIA: And that was at Kansas City [MO], too, I think the Nelson-Atkins [Museum of Art].

MS. CUMMINS: Was it? I know it was in Venice, and it was in this particular building there. But it was a combination of objects and imagery that was from, again, all different cultures, all different ages. And I thought that would be the kind of gallery I actually would have liked to have done.

MS. LAURIA: So you didn't feel that you had to stay with one particular time period. Let's just fantasize: if you had continued on, you would have liked to have integrated work from different cultures, even, some would say, ethnographically oriented, along with different time periods, to show the connection?

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: Or at least to transmit that spiritual or ritualistic side.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. Right.

MS. LAURIA: That you felt was important. So why don't you tell us, if you had made this gallery, what would be some of the work that you would like to have in there?

MS. CUMMINS: I don't know. I would say that De Vera, which was in San Francisco, now is in SoHo in New York, is kind of along the same lines. It's very different than what I did. I didn't have the knowledge or the connections to have ethnic work in there or to be able to even find any of those things, but that's what I loved. So if I was trying to follow what I would have done had I kept following the path of what I loved, I would have tried to do that. Now, how that would have looked, you know, it would have been a very different—it would have been more like a shop than a gallery in a certain sort of way. And I actually didn't want to leave the gallery model.

But I spent quite awhile trying to figure out how could I do both without—you have galleries that show primitive work or ethnographic work. You have galleries that show crafts. You have galleries that show art. You have galleries that show all these things. So why can't you show all these things in a space as a gallery? I really mulled that over for a while and tried to figure it out. And never came to fruition or a conclusion about it. And maybe it's an impossibility and that's why. I don't know. But I just think that objects and images that have a certain type of power and ritualistic quality belong together. It doesn't matter what time frame they're in.

MS. LAURIA: During the course of the many years you were in business, can you cite a couple of real defining points or great successes that you had with either artists or shows that you feel really defined who Susan Cummins was and what the gallery was about?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, there are certain shows. There was one painting show that I had that I thought was really fantastic. I did it in conjunction with Bill Berkson, who is a critic and wrote a lot for *Art in America* and reviewed some shows that I had. He taught at San Francisco Art Institute and I really liked him. He's a poet. He grew up in New York in the '50s in the Cedar Bar with the Ab-Ex guys and was just very knowledgeable about painting.

And so he and I got into a discussion about what kind of painting is the kind that he thought was the best painting and that I thought was the best painting. And the longer we talked, the more I realized that I couldn't understand what his view of painting was. So I suggested to him that he put together an exhibition for the gallery of the work of artists that he thought were good painters.

So that resulted in a two-part show called "Why Painting?" And it was fascinating to banter about between the two of us what painting was about. Why painting worked the way it did. And what he particularly loved about it. I learned a lot from that. And I also think it was a very stimulating show for the area and stimulating for the artists that were in it. I also sold some pieces from the show which was great, as I recall. But it wasn't a huge commercial success; it was more of an enterprise to educate myself and other people.

Another show that a lot of people talked about for a long time that I thought was also kind of fascinating for me to put together was called "Jewelry As an Object of Installation." I decided that I would ask artists—jewelry artists—to give me a piece that was within a context. So it would be something that you could wear, but that you would take it out of an environment of some sort. So then I took those environments and that object, and put them in relationship to other objects that I pulled out of the back room of the gallery, basically to make a vignette.

At the time, there was a lot of conversation in the jewelry world about how could you be a collector of jewelry and have your jewelry out in your collection where people could see it? Because most jewelry collectors had it all stuffed in some drawer in their dressing room or in their bathroom or someplace where no one could see it, and it often would get abused as well.

So when people were making more and more sophisticated work, the idea was that they would present it in some way. And sometimes that presentation would add to the information about the wearable part. But then I also wanted to show it like it was in a house, that there was a painting next to it and some other object and some other things.

MS. LAURIA: That you have done here.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: If you want to describe—since the reader, the listener, can't see it - Susan has a beautiful wood table in front of her windows, and she has a display on it. So, Susan, why don't you tell us what's on it? Because it sort of describes this idea.

MS. CUMMINS: Right. Well, what's on it right now is not what I put on it, but what Tina Rath put on it. But it is the kind of thing that I had out there. I took my things away so she could put hers out.

But there's a book. It's a little bit like a cabinet of curiosities in a way. It's some things that are from nature, like a vertebrae with some bones sticking out either side. A twig. Something from the ocean that looks like a shell of some sort or coral maybe—more like coral. And then there's some objects that Tina has made of wood and fur and metal. And then there's a little plant, and there's a rose in a vase, and a necklace made by Ted Noten that's got a little fly caught in it displayed on top of some leaves. A little Ruudt Peters brooch. And then a kind of star-shaped thing that, I don't know, looks like a tool, an instrument of some sort. But it's a combination of things. And most people I know, that's the kind of house they have. They have things on the wall, and they also have objects sitting around. And so how do you integrate the two?

So this show was really my imagination of how that could happen with what I had at hand. And it was surprising how well that worked out. I guess when you've got an idea or a vision of what you like, then when you put things together, of course, they look good together because they're kind of all within a similar vision.

MS. LAURIA: Around this time, too—and I'm just addressing jewelry because it's an example that I know of—jewelers begin to display their pieces in stands so that they could, of themselves, become sculptural pieces that one might not even know when taken off the stand was a jewelry wearable. And [inaudible] Wendy Ramshaw began to do this, with her rings particularly. I know Bruce Metcalf started to make little stands where his figural brooches would be housed, so to speak.

Do you think that this became something very desirable on the jeweler's part, not only for practical reasons because obviously it has a placement in your house, but also for the idea of it making the leap between what is considered to be a wearable and what is considered to be sculpture? I'm challenging those categories.

MS. CUMMINS: I think all of that. When I finally did this exhibition, and certainly people were talking about it a lot then, but I did a little bit of research back. People had been doing that for quite a while. It's just that I didn't know about it. And so, as usual, many things are done before you find out about them. [Laughs.]

Having said that, I think things have gotten more elaborate, and I think things are getting more elaborate. I do think that there are limitations to jewelry that have to do with scale and weight and all kinds of things that can be frustrating to an ambitious maker. And I think the way around that, if you still want to do wearable jewelry or semi-wearable jewelry, is to do this presentation.

Right now Tina Rath is working on a very large installation that covers more than, I think, 30 feet of wall space that creates a whole environment that's very stylized, a forest/lichen-covered environment, that her jewelry will show up in. But it will be unrecognizable as jewelry except for the person that owns the piece. So that you'll know where to pluck the lichen off the wall and put it on your coat. [Laughs.] So the scale of ambition is getting greater as time goes on.

MS. LAURIA: And do you perceive that there will be maybe a breaking down more, in the future, of these divisions between what are fine arts, what are crafts, what's jewelry?

I think you allude to this in the interview with Bruce Metcalf—that was *Metalsmith* of 2003—that there is a great difference in the marketplace for these pieces. One of the defining points for these divisions is obviously the amount of money, the value that something costs, which tends to make its own barriers. If you're interested in contemporary painting, it may be of a different price category. But in your perception of the time that you were in the gallery business, and you do have a unique viewpoint because you were showing works that cut across all of these disciplines, do you feel that these divisions are no longer going to be so important, or they're going to become more calcified?

MS. CUMMINS: I think it's pretty clear that they're not going to become calcified. There certainly is more fluidity, and the art world is much more accepting of a lot of materiality that they were not originally accepting of. Now pretty much you can do anything and it's acceptable.

But I do think that we can't confuse that with the idea that an artist enters a marketplace. And whatever marketplace they choose to enter is the marketplace that they are probably going to remain within. So if an artist wants to make jewelry but they want to deal in the art world, they're going to have to enter the art world as a jeweler making some kind of relationship to what they do to what the art market demands. Now if that's not possible, if they can't do that—

MS. LAURIA: Well, could you expound on that? Would you say that's the description of what Tina is doing now?

MS. CUMMINS: I don't think so.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. CUMMINS: She's not going to show that work with an art gallery. She's going to show that work in an art museum, to start out with. But then she's going to show it with Sienna Gallery, which is not identified as an art gallery but more identified as a jewelry gallery.

I don't know any jeweler that has made that kind of leap into the art world, but there are a number of artists in the art world that have made some jewelry. Or made pieces that, for whatever reason, they wanted to express an idea through making jewelry. I don't know if the marketplaces are ever going to break down. I think there are marketplaces for design. There's marketplaces for art. And there's marketplaces for craft.

The least developed of those marketplaces is the craft marketplace. I think because craft spent so many decades trying to become art, instead of developing its own particular brand of business and marketing for itself, that it's the weakest of the markets. Well, it's the weakest of the markets, but it's the weakest of the markets if you think of it as an artist gives their work to somebody else to show: a shopkeeper, a gallerist, or whatever. But really the craft model for business is the fair, the craft fair. And now it's DIY on the Internet and basically selling directly from the maker to the purchaser without an intermediary. That is the craft model. Now that craft model has been very strongly—

MS. LAURIA: Rooted?

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. It's the strong tradition, shall we say. So people that come out of school identifying as a craft-maker, even if they went to an art school where they also were given a lot of exposure to other kinds of artmaking and art-thinking and concepts and so forth, they still have this tradition of showing—potentially showing—at a craft fair.

So one of the big differences, in terms of my sense of dealing with artists doing the time at the gallery, is if they were educated as a jeweler, they basically did craft fairs before they came to the gallery. And sometimes they continued doing craft fairs while they were at the gallery. But that had a sense that they were their own businessperson. Whereas a painter would come out of school and not have any idea about being their own

businessperson whatsoever. Not that they had any less education about it. The craftsperson didn't have any business education; they just thought that's what they were going to do. But the artist, the painter, would come out thinking they were going to give their work to somebody else to sell. And they didn't have any idea they would go to a fair to sell it. You can see painters, certainly, at fairs, but I guess I'm talking about people that regarded their work as more professional, that they would show in a gallery.

So it was really different. The two marketplaces are different. And I don't see the marketplaces breaking down particularly. I see a lot of exchange and collaboration and cross-fertilization amongst artists. But once they choose where they're going to sell their work, I think they pretty much have to stay in that market. It's hard to leap from one to the next unless you're leaping from the art market to the, say, design market. So you do objects that can be sold in museum shops, for example. Craft artists are in that in-between world where they can show in museum shops, too. But they can't necessarily show in art galleries.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you always have those iconic examples of how it flows from the higher marketplaces to the other, lower ones that works very well for someone like Alexander Calder. Throughout his career he made jewelry, but he was never considered a jewelry artist.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: And I think his jewelry commands fairly high prices. Harry Bertoia, same thing. Jewelry was not such a large part of his production, but it definitely was an important part. When he started his career after leaving Cranbrook [Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI], it was a real signifier if you had a Bertoia piece of jewelry. But he went on to do large sculptural pieces as well. And I don't think they have the trouble being identified or being changed in any way by making jewelry. But a jewelry artist, I think, has a harder time being seen as somebody—

MS. CUMMINS: As a sculptor.

MS. LAURIA: Right, who could be a sculptor. And some of it, as you say, could be just related to scale.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes, I think it is. There's always odd things. And certainly Calder is an example of an odd thing. Well, he got to be known, for example, for his circuses, his small-scale, miniature worlds, so to speak. Whereas most of the jewelry he made, as far as my understanding is, he made for other people. And it was a very rare time when a gallery would take the jewelry and sell it. That was more unusual than him just making a piece for so-and-so and so-and-so and so-and-so. He made a lot of work for people he knew that maybe have come onto the market later as pieces to sell. But he wasn't really so known for that, as he was known for his circuses or his miniature work, besides, obviously, his larger-scale [work]. And I see that as very unusual. Because I think one of the problems is the scale. Jewelry is a very intimate, small object. And it's very hard for people to slow down or be attentive enough to actually look at it.

MS. LAURIA: And during the course of this time, what were some of the changes that you saw in the materials that jewelers began to use? There wasn't always the traditional, precious materials like gold or silver or gems.

MS. CUMMINS: Well, I started showing people that were mainly working in gold and silver and stones. I started showing Pat Flynn and Barbara Heinrich and Sandra Enterline, people that were really using very traditional materials. And as time went on, I started showing people that were using more untraditional. But I have to say that, for the most part, there was a strong strain of continuing to use at least some kind of metal. Not necessarily precious stones per se, but some kind of stone oftentimes. And sometimes mixing in of found objects - like Kiff Slemmons did a show using old photographs. Then Tina Rath came along. She'd gone to school in Europe, in Amsterdam. And she came back from that experience using fur in her jewelry. That was one of the first times I had some really very different, no metal in it at all, jewelry.

Because I continued to show American jewelers and not Europeans, who were much more interested in experimenting with materiality, I didn't really get too much into that. Bruce Metcalf would carve wood as part of his work, but then the rest of it was metal. Lisa Gralnick used gold or silver and some little tiny bits of found objects, like flower petals or hair or something. People like Roberta Williams would use shell or old ledgers or butterflies or things like that. And so would Jennifer Trask. But still they were using the metal and just holding these little pieces as in a bezel or in a container in some way. So there wasn't this wholesale leaving of the traditional behind. American jewelers are still, even now, very much more traditional in their making than Europeans.

MS. LAURIA: Did you see change in the other artists? For instance, painters have gone from using a traditional canvas to other things—sometimes it's just the pigment that is scraped off of something, and that becomes the object. Did you see the same sort of progression or, I guess, experimentation during the time that you had the gallery?

MS. CUMMINS: In painting?

MS. LAURIA: In painting or in other crafts.

MS. CUMMINS: I guess I was a bit more of a traditionalist. I really like painting, and I like the way paint is applied to the canvas as marks, by how a particular artist applies paint to a canvas. I really like drawing a lot. So I had a number of artists that really drew well, and a lot of it was based on knowing how to draw in almost a traditional sense, but not doing a traditional drawing. Or doing a cartooning type of drawing, that appealed to me a lot, too. But I never was interested in somebody, say, for example, taking photographic images and reproducing them on a canvas and calling it a painting. Or reproducing brushstrokes or something and saying that this is a painting. Or playing around with that. I just like it to be sort of used straight up in a certain sort of way.

MS. LAURIA: Alright. This is the end of disc two.

MS. CUMMINS: And we should have some lunch.

[END CD 2 TR 2.]

MS. LAURIA: Continuing interview, disc number three, with Susan Cummins at her home in Mill Valley [CA], October 22, 2009. Interviewed by Jo Lauria. Let's continue on.

We were still at the gallery. And could you say, were there any members of your staff that influenced you in the way in which you ran the gallery? Or did you build any of their careers? Did you feel you might have become a mentor to anybody?

MS. CUMMINS: I worked very, very closely with the staff and very much let them have their own clientele, people that they related to and I didn't have anything to do with. Have their own relationship with the artists that we showed. I gave them a lot of independence and encouraged that. But I did reserve the choosing of the artists and the choosing of the shows for the most part, in the end, for my final decision. But they always could say to me, I think we should invite so-and-so to be in this show. So it was a very collaborative process.

Mija was more interested and just worked harder at being that kind of a collaborative partner in the gallery. So she often would deal with the jewelry artists and think about jewelry exhibitions. She and I spent time figuring out things together for the jewelry, for the most part.

MS. LAURIA: Did you see your role as a gallerist as also having to be an advocate or an educator? If you were invited to lecture, did you feel it was something that you - either because of marketing or because of a responsibility to fill - think that you should participate? Did you ever teach a class? If you were asked to jury, did you take on that assignment?

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. I didn't do a lot of lecturing, but I did do a certain amount of jurying, and I certainly thought that was important. I also had educational presentations in the gallery. Mija wrote a lot of the press releases for shows of the gallery. She would do interviews with artists and then write the press releases. We sent out press releases everywhere to let people know what was happening at the gallery. And I tried to get artists to come to their openings and do a little talk before the big opening started to whatever audience of people wanted to come and listen to them.

You asked the question earlier, did things that we did in the gallery lead to someone else's career? Well, Mija, of course, went on to do interviews like this one for the Smithsonian Archives project. And she began being more and more serious about writing. She now writes for a variety of publications. So it wasn't a direct translation, but sort of a moving into the field from the gallery and staying in that.

And then Julie Gustafson, who also worked for me, opened a gallery in Montana. So [she] has a little, sort of Susan Cummins Gallery version of some representational artists that we used to show there in her gallery in Montana. And Julie Allen still works in a gallery. But Julie Allen had worked in Ruth Braunstein's gallery before she worked for me. So she's an example of—once you're in the gallery world and the art world, you're sort of always in it. You very rarely get out of it. But I don't think there was any mentoring that took place, so to speak.

MS. LAURIA: And did you teach any classes or—

MS. CUMMINS: I never taught anything. I feel that I was a good dealer and a curious dealer and a dealer who was interested in the education of myself and my staff and the people that came to the gallery. But I also recognized the big divide between being an academic and/or a scholar and/or a curator in a sort of museum capacity and a dealer. I didn't think that I had the writing capabilities or the sort of research capabilities that somebody who's in a more scholarly role has. So I never took that on. And I still have really a hard time thinking about taking that on.

People have asked me to curate shows since I closed the gallery. And certainly I know more about a lot of things

than probably most any curator around could know. But I still—I can't write that well. And I'm not interested as much in doing the minutia of research that somebody who's more scholarly might be. I'm much more suited to the pace of a gallery, the go by your intuition and get the show in and get the show out than I would be by the slow, much more laborious pace of a museum, for example.

MS. LAURIA: And when you were overseeing the Susan Cummins Gallery, did you invite guest curators? I know that you did a collaboration that you mentioned earlier on, "Why Painting?"

MS. CUMMINS: Right.

MS. LAURIA: Do you want to talk about any other collaborations that you might have had with people, or guest curators, that you thought were fruitful, not only to you and your gallery, but to a different perspective for the wider public to enjoy?

MS. CUMMINS: Besides that one, I can't remember any other ones. Maybe Mija will remember when she gets here. Oh, I had one other guest curator that I can remember, and that was Townsend Wolfe, who is from the Arkansas Art Center [Little Rock, AR].

They had a very large collection of drawings. I knew somebody who knew them and had encouraged me to read their catalogues and so forth. So I got interested in the collection that they were putting together, and I asked Townsend Wolfe to come and curate a show on drawings for me from Bay Area artists. So he came. And for about two or three days, we ran around to a zillion studios, and he chose pieces for a drawing show. And subsequently purchased a couple for the Arkansas Art Center. But that was an interesting process, too. Those are the only two people I can think of. I don't remember anybody ever doing anything with the jewelry part of the gallery.

MS. LAURIA: Some galleries take it as part of their business strategy to produce books as well as do a journal. Do conferences and then compile the conference papers into journals. And that's a way that they get their artists out into the marketplace. Did you ever produce catalogues under your Susan Cummins banner?

MS. CUMMINS: I produced a couple of catalogues. They were mostly for painters, as I recall. But I produced some brochures for jewelers. And I did curate one show for the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum called "Beyond the Obvious: Rethinking Jewelry." So with that institution I did make a catalogue about jewelry.

MS. LAURIA: And what year was that, Susan?

MS. CUMMINS: I think that was 2000. Yes, around 1999, 2000. I was very interested in the developing of the computer and the technology that you could use with computers. I kept working on the idea that I would be able to pretty soon produce catalogues myself. That I would be able to get a printer, and I would be able to set up a catalogue and basically do it myself. Sienna Patti from Sienna Gallery is now doing exactly what I thought I wanted to do. But the technology never advanced enough for me to do that while I had the gallery. So I never actually could fulfill that dream. And I didn't make enough in the gallery to be able to pay for a catalogue, so—

MS. LAURIA: To support the cost of the print material.

And what about traveling any of your shows? I thought it was interesting when I interviewed Ruth Braunstein that she told me that she's traveling a show of Robert Hudson and Richard Shaw. Is this a sort of standard operating procedure, or is it an infrequent thing that gallerists or dealers do, or am I just not in the know and it happens all the time?

MS. CUMMINS: I don't think it happens all the time, at least not on the level of gallery that I had, for sure, and even that Ruth has. It may happen a lot more with the really upper echelon of the art world galleries. But it is an arduous task. Often what happens is a museum will decide to put a show together of something or someone that you're showing. But they don't have the resources or the time or the personnel to do all the tracking down of other places where that show would go. They do throw it back in your lap. So if you want to spend the time and the energy tracking down other institutions and finding out if they'll do it, then more power to you and good luck for the artist.

I did that with a Chester Arnold show, and I had some success finding some places for it. But it was a slog! And not something that one wants to ever do much of. It doesn't really somehow or another pay, so to speak. Because museums are extremely uncomfortable making commitments to things. They're always trying to hedge their bets.

First of all, they might not be the one that gets to decide. They have to bring it to a committee. It goes through this long process. And then when you finally find out that they could do it, they could only do it in this time slot—well, somebody else already took that time slot. It's just a very messy process. So unless you're a dealer that

has a huge commitment and feels like the career of the artist will be benefited in a gigantic way by showing in more locations, it's really a waste of time, frankly.

MS. LAURIA: This is an interesting, all-encompassing question: What do you consider, or have you defined, success in the art world? And was your gallery successful by this definition?

MS. CUMMINS: I would say that success would be moving your reputation, and the artists' reputations that you're showing, along to an ever-expanding audience. And so by that definition, I guess I would say I was successful. And staying in business is also a measure of being successful.

MS. LAURIA: You decided at some point, you said, that you thought you would just basically work until the day you die—at your desk at Susan Cummins Gallery. But that didn't happen. Do you want to give us a background about how you decided on your exit strategy?

You alluded to two of the factors: one is that you felt that the whole gallery needed an uplift, a facelift, and the other one was that you weren't in the real computer age at the time. You'd have to reinvent yourself that way. But why don't you talk about some of the other factors that might have led you to, at that point in your gallery history, decide it was time to close?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, the number one factor is probably because I was in a relationship with somebody who could afford to support me. I did not have to continue earning a living, so to speak. And I had been in that relationship for about eight years by the time I closed. So I had continued on despite the fact that I didn't have to.

I really loved having the gallery. But then my brother died in 2000. I think that I got lost a little bit in the grief process and began to doubt my own ability to choose new artists and to have shows with artists that I really believed in. And I got confused about what I was doing. Which is partly why I kept thinking I needed to reinvent myself, because I was a little bit lost in what I was doing. So I tried to sell the gallery and spent maybe six months or so putting it out there that it was for sale.

MS. LAURIA: Can you explain that: what does that mean when you try to sell a gallery? You're not selling the real estate.

MS. CUMMINS: No. What someone would have gotten when I offered to sell the gallery was the location, the lease, the reputation of that being a place where a gallery existed, the mailing list, the artists who would want to stay or not. Basically, you would just hand them the whole package and say, okay, now, you sort through whichever parts of this are useful to you. They would not keep the name, because it was my name. I couldn't let them keep that name. So they'd have to rename it. But it was a destination place that people would come to, not knowing that it wasn't owned by me anymore. And also a mailing list of people that have been interested in those artists. So however that would match up, it would definitely give somebody a big leg up if they were wanting to show artwork similar to this.

I wasn't really asking very much money for it. I just wanted someone to take the lease off my hands, practically. So anyway, I never did find anybody. And I decided I had to close anyway. So for a couple of months I had to pay the rent on the gallery without having gotten somebody to re-rent it from me. But then I finally did find somebody. So then it was just a matter of continuing to pay the rent, having them to supply me with the rental money. So I'm just as happy that I didn't find somebody, frankly, because [laughs] that could have been a real nightmare had I actually found somebody to buy it.

MS. LAURIA: And during the time when the gallery was open, how many people do you think would come in on a daily basis? Or was it seasonal? Obviously, Mill Valley is a beautiful location. I'm not sure that you get more visitors during certain times of the year. What was the character of the gallery during the different time periods and the visitors? What would you say you serviced, people coming in on a daily basis?

MS. CUMMINS: I don't know. I think it varied a lot by season, as you say. The holidays, obviously, a lot more people came in. And January, it was a lot fewer people, for sure. But because we were on the street, we had a lot of just wandering-in foot traffic. We probably had more people coming into that gallery than we would have had we been on the second floor of a gallery in San Francisco, where really you have to know that you're going there to get there.

So I have no idea how many people that is. It could be anywhere from 10 people in a day to 50 people in a day. There were some periods of time for an hour or so in the day when nobody would be in the gallery. But there were often people just wandering around, wandering in and out.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I know it's a difficult question, too. You don't track, really.

MS. CUMMINS: No.

MS. LAURIA: Like museums do with a little clicker.

MS. CUMMINS: I didn't have the clicker, no. [Ms. Lauria laughs.] I did not have the clicker.

MS. LAURIA: And also you could be doing a lot of business without people actually walking in through your doors.

MS. CUMMINS: Oh, absolutely. One time we decided to close—and this was when I was in my first space—we decided to close for August. Everybody took two weeks off. And I basically just was at that gallery cleaning up stuff, figuring out, reorganizing things, and whatever. And for some reason a lot of people came by that were really good clients during that period of time. So they'd come to the door. They wouldn't know we were closed because they'd never read anything. So I'd let them in. And then we would proceed to have this great time, really just one-on-one, looking at things. And it was one of the better months I'd had in a long time, even though we were closed.

So it was interesting. You can do a gallery business without having much in the way of foot traffic, for sure. You just need to be in touch with the people that are interested in the kind of things you're showing. And sometimes it's a detriment to have to spend time talking to people that really aren't that interested, but they're sort of curious. And then you never know whether they might get curious enough to keep coming back and eventually buy something. You do perform a great educational service for the community by being on the street as a gallerist.

MS. LAURIA: When you decided to close, what arrangement had you had with the artists? And how did you inform them? Did you try to look for another dealer who might have been interested in showing their work? Did you give them almost like a—not a severance, but a time period where you'd said, okay, I'm closing, and you need to find a better place to show the work? These are very personal relationships. There's no dealer in the world that doesn't have a personal relationship with their artists. So how did you go through that process?

MS. CUMMINS: I did try to find other dealers. For a lot of the painters and two-dimensional makers I did find other galleries—and some very good ones, actually - that were more ambitious than I was, and have taken those people on to much higher prices and much more prestigious art fairs, et cetera.

The jewelers were a lot harder to place. Some of them are still not placed anywhere. Some of the best jewelers in this country don't have an ongoing gallerist representing them. And I feel badly about that.

But when I did close the gallery, I did have a closing party. I invited all the artists—and all the collectors, too, that had so been the source of my joy and success and everything, all those many years, to come to a closing party. And I asked the people, everyone who was coming, to bring an object that represented something about the relationship between them and myself and the gallery.

MS. LAURIA: So I think I'd like [you], Susan, if you would, to read the copy from that invitation, because I think it's very telling of what the whole event was about. Since I had the privilege of listening to it earlier for the purposes of this transcript, I think people would like to know about it.

[END CD 3 TR 1.]

MS. LAURIA: So you're going to read what is on this invitation that you sent out to your collectors and your artists and others connected with the gallery.

MS. CUMMINS: Right. This was an invitation that was sent out for a party that was on Sunday, June 23, 2002. And it says: "Please bring a small object to the party that has a significance to you in relationship to the gallery, or something that represents a beginning and an ending or a waxing and a waning. During the course of the evening, you will have an opportunity to be photographed with the object and to speak about it if you want to. All the objects will be assembled into a large arrangement for the duration of the party. And when you leave, you will take it back with you. This project will represent what we have built together."

So people came and brought really amazing stuff and had amazing things to say, which I did video at the time. So there's a document of that party. I also had a professional photographer come and take really great pictures of everybody with their object. But it seemed to me that the object was the intermediary between me and all of these people. And the people and the people. It was just the perfect thing to do. It was a great moment and a great way to end a wonderful experience.

MS. LAURIA: And the videotape is with the Archives?

MS. CUMMINS: No.

MS. LAURIA: No. But maybe at some point it will be, so people can view what people had to say about their objects.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. Mm-hmm.

MS. LAURIA: The other show that you were telling me about, when we were not recording, which I thought was a really wonderful concept, was the idea that you had the paint-by-number—if you want to expound on that.

MS. CUMMINS: Okay. Yes. One of the last shows I did, I thought it might be interesting for collectors to go through the same experience that artists go through, because there's no explaining to a collector what it takes to be an artist. So I asked all the non-artist people that I dealt with, which were mainly collectors, to order a paint-by-number that was based on a photograph that they would send to a company. That company would then turn the photograph, either a landscape or a portrait or whatever they chose, into a paint-by-number. And they would send you back the little drawings with the numbers on it and the paint to go with it.

So a lot of people took me up on this challenge. And we had this great show that everybody came to. Of course, when you have a piece in the show, you want to come, and then you invite all your friends, and it was this big deal. I made them all promise that not only would they make the painting, but they would also set a price on it, and they would allow it to be sold, and they would get it there on time, and they'd have it framed and ready to put on the wall, all the things that an artist has to do in order to get ready for a show.

The amount of conversations I had with people getting ready for the show and the anxiety about it. And the not knowing what price to put on it; the price ranged all over the place, depending on people. I didn't want to tell them anything about what to do with that. So it was a fabulous show, and I think the people participating learned a great deal about the process of being an artist. And we did sell quite a few pieces [laughs] out of the show, which was pretty funny.

MS. LAURIA: And your parents participated.

MS. CUMMINS: My parents participated, painted two really just fantastic paintings and didn't want to sell them. I can't remember if I just made them put a really high price on it so nobody would buy it or whatever. But now those two hang very proudly in their house in Portland [OR]. I see them whenever I go there. And I think, wow, those are good paintings. Talented parents.

MS. LAURIA: Now did you start collecting while you were a gallerist? I know that you have a love for many of the works by many of the artists that you represented. And I see a few here in your home. But you also mentioned two curious things, which was that you never wore jewelry and still don't today, but you're known in the community as one of the eminent—you were one of the eminent jewelry dealers. And also that you never collected while you were a dealer.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, I do have things in my house that were by artists that I represented. But when I had the gallery, first of all, I couldn't afford to buy anything that I was actually selling. I wasn't making enough money to do that. [Laughs.] And secondly, I didn't have the collector bug. Some gallerists do and some don't, and I did not. I was much more interested in matching the pieces up with a collector who had the passion. I have regretted a number of things that I did sell that I wish I had bought. Not a huge number, but definitely some. And I did get some pieces along the way that I could afford or that an artist would give me, because they're just generous beyond belief. But many things you see in the house I did not buy.

Since I closed the gallery, I have started collecting, and I have started collecting jewelry. And it's been a fascinating process. And now I actually am quite interested in building this collection.

The thing that's most fascinating to me is, now that I don't have a particular clientele that I know is interested in certain things, I feel freer to roam throughout a variety of things and kind of change my mind about the direction things would go in. But I also am trying to make sense of why I choose certain things that I choose. So this jewelry collection, I think to some degree or another, resembles the collection that I had in the gallery, but a lot less narrative and a lot more related to nature and some kind of ritualized, object-oriented feeling.

One of the people that I've collected in depth is Dorothy Pruhl, who is an East German jeweler who does very powerful, almost I would say—although probably her dealer would kill me if I said—primitive pieces. They have a power that primitive work often has. She's an older woman, I think in her mid- to late 70s now, who grew up sort of in the Bauhaus tradition. Her images are taken from a very naïve and nature-oriented point of view. So I have quite a lot of her work. I also have a number of Ruudt Peters's pieces. So I've really become very interested in European work. Ruudt Peters I think thinks of himself as an alchemist, somebody who makes gemstones, say, out of—

MS. LAURIA: Bubblegum?

MS. CUMMINS: Not bubblegum, but other materials like chalk or plastic or whatever, very much like he's fusing things together, that become his own magic.

MS. LAURIA: I only said gum because I saw a piece that he did with gum.

MS. CUMMINS: Oh, no, that was Ted Noten.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, okay. Was that a collaborative piece, someone which you found?

MS. CUMMINS: Yes, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Alright.

MS. CUMMINS: That Ted Noten made "Chew Your Own Brooch." [Ms. Lauria laughs.]

Anyway, so I've gotten quite intrigued with a lot of European jewelers. I also still do collect people like Bruce Metcalf and Lisa Gralnick and Tina Rath and Kiff Slemmons and people that I showed in the gallery whom I always thought were really brilliant, and so forth. So I'm finding that I'm just loving doing that. And that I'm trying to define why I pick a piece that's somebody's and not another one. And why I pick certain artists and not other ones. It's quite fascinating to understand your own self through art.

MS. LAURIA: Your collection.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. Mm-hmm.

MS. LAURIA: But when you were a gallerist, is one of the reasons that you did not wear jewelry because you didn't want to show a preference for one artist over another?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, that's always what I said. But really the truth is that I never liked to wear jewelry very much.

MS. LAURIA: I can't relate to that.

MS. CUMMINS: I know. I know hardly anybody can relate. I don't even know if I can tell you why. But I just never liked being adorned. It sort of interfered with how I felt. So I really look at jewelry as an intimate object, and one that can carry ideas and beauty in a very small world.

I love netsukes, for example. I do love small intimate things. And I don't think jewelry has to be worn to be appreciated for the realms in which it's made. The scale and the other qualities that make it wearable, I still like those limitations being applied to an object. And I sometimes put things on, and I realize, oh, yes, they look very different when they're on than when they're off. I like the idea of the power that wearing something in the public can have. But I will only wear things when I'm going to a very special occasion. I just won't wear it on a daily basis.

MS. LAURIA: During the course of the gallery, establishing relationships with collectors, you must have—if you feel comfortable mentioning them—some very personal relationships that you had where you felt like you developed not only a personal relationship with the collector, but you developed their collection, because they asked for your advice. They wanted you to participate in that. Do you want to talk about maybe one or two of those relationships that happened during the course of the Susan Cummins Gallery?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, I should talk about Susan Beech, for one, for sure, and maybe Sharon Campbell for the other. Because they're still two of my best friends now. But I also need to talk about them in relationship to Art Jewelry Forum.

Art Jewelry Forum was started in 1997 as an organization that was intended to be a group of collectors who would, by traveling and a variety of other ways, educate themselves more about jewelry. I can remember that the Metal Arts Guild in San Francisco asked—I think it was during the time of the show that was at the Craft and Folk Art Museum [Los Angeles, CA]—if we could have a collector of jewelry panel. I wasn't on the panel, but Susan Beech was on it, Sharon Campbell, and Donna Briscan, among others. And there was somebody asking questions. It could have been Harriet Estelle Berman or somebody like that. And it was just at the time when those collectors were starting to understand there is a difference between small and wearable work and more conceptual and more adventuresome work.

So I watched those three collectors learn, through this traveling and going to SOFA and seeing other jewelry and talking to other dealers and talking to artists and looking at other collections and doing all the things that we had done with Art Jewelry Forum and just the general getting out and about and looking at student work and all of that. They went from that very traditional work to much more adventuresome, much more advanced, and became quite knowledgeable about the field. In fact, each in their turn—Susan Beech was never the chair of AJF, but Sharon Campbell was the chair; Donna Briskin was the chair for a while. And they really worked on that organization to keep it going and to keep it developing.

Now, as just a sidebar, now I am the chair. I never was the chair because that would have been too much of a conflict of interest. Although I did get the thing started, I couldn't ever really be the chair.

MS. LAURIA: While you were the dealer.

MS. CUMMINS: While I was the dealer.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. CUMMINS: But now I am the chair. And it is a great way to get people to educationally develop. Susan Beech really has an incredible jewelry collection, and she's in touch with dealers all over the world. She's got an eye that's developed and—

[END CD 3 TR 2.]

MS. CUMMINS: So then Sharon Campbell—

MS. LAURIA: Well, you were mentioning about Susan Beech's collection.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes, Susan Beech has put together a really substantial collection of jewelry that's probably one of the very best in the country, if not the world, at this point in time. So that was a pretty great way to start out educating a collector from the very beginning, and then have her go off and do this great thing. And then Sharon Campbell, she put together a house that— [phone rings]. That's my father.

[END CD 4 TR 1.]

MS. CUMMINS: Okay. So Sharon Campbell designed and built a house, and within the house she made places for all of her art objects, including jewelry. She decided in order to, as we discussed, display it in a house—she took the hardware that she had in the kitchen and various other places in the house on the cabinetry and made them into holders for various brooches. So she tried to integrate her jewelry into her house. And she had other places where she showed things, too. So she took it slightly a different way. But also kept on developing ideas for collecting jewelry.

And so did Donna Briskin, in fact. She just also redesigned a loft space and had a jeweler named April Higashi design and use an old cart of some sort to display her jewelry as part of the other objects that she has in her house. So they all kept on going and succeeded, after the gallery closed, in finding their own path.

MS. LAURIA: Even though two of them are very interested in the display option, do all three of these collectors continue to wear their jewelry?

MS. CUMMINS: Oh, yes. They're all interested in wearing. Donna Briskin was probably the most conservative of the three of them to start out with. And she's got some outrageous work that she wears now very easily. So it was an overcoming of certain types of inhibitions. But Susan Beech has always been good at putting herself together, and now she's just even better at it. So she wears a lot of jewelry. She wears everything that she buys.

MS. LAURIA: Not all at once. [Laughs.]

MS. CUMMINS: Not all at once. But often many things at the same time.

MS. LAURIA: At this point I'd like to introduce Mija Riedel, who is also an interviewer for the Archives of American Art, but happened to work with Susan Cummins for many years. How many, Mija?

MIJA RIEDEL: Sixteen.

MS. LAURIA: Sixteen years. Susan felt it would be a wonderful addition to the interview because Mija has the history of the gallery as well, and we can get two perspectives. So we'll continue to address some of the questions, and both Susan and Mija can respond.

What do you think the reactions of your customers were to the various artists that you represented at the gallery?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, I think that they must have liked them because [laughs] a lot of people bought them. I felt that the gallery showed things that were a little edgy, especially for Mill Valley, but not so edgy that they couldn't relate to them.

Mija, wouldn't you say that it was an avant-garde gallery, per se, but people sometimes would come in and go, What the heck are you showing here?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. CUMMINS: And it would be just that there would be some oddball things, like Kathleen Jesse's paintings, which would have, you know, two little girls all dressed up for church with their little bonnets and their frilly little dresses holding guns pointed at you. Just little weird things like that. And people were put off a little bit by that, or they loved it. It was one or the other. And Susan Beech is an example of somebody who loved that kind of thing. So we developed a clientele that loved what we showed.

MS. RIEDEL: There was also an astoundingly diverse range of work, I think. But I do remember people coming in and asking me exactly that question: What the heck do you show here? And at one point you came up with this term, which I thought was so perfect and so helpful, which was the term "psychological narrative." Remember?

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And that just really helped pull in everything from Chester Arnold to Kathleen Jesse to Kiff Slemmons to Keith Lewis, Bruce Metcalf. It gave us a wide enough umbrella to incorporate this very broad range of artists working in a real range of media.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: And, Mija, since you are here now, Susan alluded to the fact that you did curate some of the shows. Did you have certain favorite themes or artists that you wanted to put forth? Or how did that come about?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, the main one I remember working on was "Issues and Intent." Is that what you were thinking of?

MS. CUMMINS: I was also thinking of "Jewelry Woman."

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, "Jewelry Woman"! That was in 1992, right?

MS. CUMMINS: "Jewelry Woman" and then also we collaborated on a lot of those bigger theme shows, especially around the jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. There was "Adornment for Performance," and there was "The Weight of Gold." And what was the other?

MS. CUMMINS: "The Opera Show?"

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, exactly.

MS. CUMMINS: And then we had a lot of holiday shows that were like "Winter Light" and—

MS. RIEDEL: "Melting Point."

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. Not really deep themes, necessarily. Some of them were much more interesting. "Issues and Intent" was certainly an interesting one.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And I might just comment that these [are in the] Archives of American Art, the actual archives, because, Mija, you got Susan to contribute them. So if someone's interested in actually looking through every file, or what you had when the gallery closed, [they] can go to the Archives and look through the exhibitions files.

MS. CUMMINS: Right. I actually have a box that's got on it "Artists' Correspondence Before 1997" that I brought with me. It's down in the car. I don't know if it was stuff that you went through and decided not to give to the Archives, or if it's something that we want to look at before you go away and I can send down, I can send there, or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: I can't think why not.

MS. CUMMINS: Well, we'll look at it after.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So when you were collaborating together and coming to terms with being a gallerist and curating, what were some of the things that were the most inspiring for you?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I'll start off with "Issues and Intent," which was, I think, the most significant and certainly the largest-scope show that we did together; we curated that together, to be sure of it. I think it was in '96. We were really trying to get a sense of—jewelry and metal is such a dynamic field during this time. Some of the most interesting work we saw was coming from artists working in that field. I'm sure by that time we'd been showing Kiff Slemmons and Bruce Metcalf, Keith Lewis, Lisa Gralnick, Sondra Sherman.

MS. CUMMINS: Jamie Bennett.

MS. RIEDEL: Probably Kathleen Brown. Right. Exactly. We were showing a lot of people from RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI] or had a RISD sort of background, and New Paltz [State University of New York] and the Northwest.

I think the idea was to get a bigger idea of what was actually going on out in the field. And so we invited just about everybody we knew who was doing work that we thought was interesting. People who were professors and we thought might have access or might be able to recommend students, graduate students, recent graduates, who were doing interesting work.

And that was pretty fascinating because we really got as much as we could from the information that came in, and a lot of information came in. I was looking at the press release. I think we looked at slides, which we were looking at back then, from probably a hundred, over a hundred - I remember hundreds of different applicants -

MS. CUMMINS: That's right, I remember we did. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: - to try and get a sense of what some of the most interesting work was at the time. And as I remember, there was a lot having to do with scientific inquiry or pseudo—

MS. CUMMINS: That's right, systems.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So this was a show that would also incorporate people that you did not represent.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: So the sum of the numbers of the people was greater than the artists that you represented.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I'm just looking now, I can see here the press release. There were certainly some significant people whose names we all know: Gary Griffin, Mary Lee Hu, Myra Mimplitsch-Gray. But then there were people that we weren't so familiar with at the time. I don't know if that's how we found Miele Harvey—no, it was probably before, before we started to curate her work. Maybe we found David Clifford that way.

MS. LAURIA: So it was a conduit for you to familiarize yourself with what was going on in the field, getting out of your area here of showing the stable of artists.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: And also to investigate for our own education and curiosity what actually was going on. We certainly had ideas about what we thought was going on, but we had to figure out how accurate they were.

MS. CUMMINS: Right, right. Yes. Just to find if there were examples. We really were trying to define what American metalsmithing was about in the gallery by showing the people that we thought were the most intelligent and the best makers that we could find. So the idea that jewelry could speak and had something to say was the idea behind this show and also the show that I did at the Craft and Folk Art Museum.

MS. RIEDEL: "Beyond the Obvious"?

MS. CUMMINS: "Beyond the Obvious," Mija helped me a lot, write the essay for and edit that. And also spent a lot of time editing what the jewelers had to say, because this show was really trying to take a piece of jewelry and ask the artist to tell me exactly what's going on in this piece of jewelry.

Now, some artists really could do that very, very specifically and very well. And some just couldn't do it about that piece. They had done a series, or they had done something, and they would be all over the board trying to talk about that piece. And we said, no, no. We want you to tell us about that particular piece. What's in it? Why is it shaped that way? What are those colors about? What is that pattern about? What is it about?

So I think both of these kinds of shows were really about trying to give people examples of jewelry that had a concept within it that made it different than fashion jewelry or any other kind of jewelry, that was more related to an art type of production than it was anything else.

MS. RIEDEL: Really content driven. And so much of what we did, I think, was interesting and gratifying, [and] in the long run was educational. It had so much to do in the early days of education that this was jewelry that was not traditional fine jewelry.

MS. CUMMINS: Decorative.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Exactly.

MS. CUMMINS: Only.

MS. RIEDEL: People thought about it.

MS. LAURIA: Did you attempt to anticipate the public reaction by representing a certain artist, or did you rely solely on your own sense of the work?

MS. CUMMINS: I could never tell - [they laugh] - what the audience was going to react to. I would choose things that I thought were great. And then I would often call some different collectors and then say, "What do you think of this? Do you think it's any good?" And I would take the pieces from the artist saying, "Well, let me live with it a little bit, and let me have some people come in and look at it."

And, boy, those collectors were really pretty good. They would say yeah or nay. Or maybe, I'm not quite ready for that yet, but I like it. Or whatever they would say. And then I would make my decision after that, based on whether or not I thought there was any possibility that eventually, or right then, we would be selling it.

I had one artist who switched from doing paintings that were very narratively based with figurative work, and that were about ritual and portraiture and that sort of thing, switch entirely to abstract. Very, very, very fine lines. Very Agnes Martin-like. And I knew that I had no audience for that work. Just none. I'd never shown anything minimal like that. But I was showing that artist, and I just said, alright, we may not sell a thing, but I'll be willing to do that. So that was a situation where the audience went, you know, where's Susan Marie Dopp's work? [Laughs.] This is not what we're used to. But I knew that the audience I had wasn't going to buy that. So I did know some things about audience.

MS. LAURIA: But it wasn't your motivating factor.

MS. CUMMINS: No.

MS. LAURIA: Describe your relationship with artists. Are there any particularly salient anecdotes about particular artists, studios, processes, or the like that made an indelible mark in your memory?

MS. RIEDEL: If I can just jump in, actually I have a thought about that last question. Because I think that there was some really clear, interesting thinking, too, that went on in setting up the gallery calendar, which had to do with exhibitions that were edgier, that you thought would push things a little bit. And that might get good attention, might get bad attention, might make no sales.

There seemed to be a balance between artists that were pushing the envelope but might get critical acclaim, and then artists that just did absolutely beautiful work that was of the highest quality and caliber and intent that would also sell really well. And on the rare occasion there was both. I'm thinking of Jim Barsness, in particular, and Chester Arnold, Gail Chase-Bien, people like that. I was looking back over the roster of shows over the last 10 years, and that seemed to be something that was done really successfully.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: And so just when people would get comfortable, you'd give them something like Fred Stonehouse or Patti Loper.

MS. CUMMINS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Beautifully done work but a little edgier. And then you'd have Jeffrey Beauchamp or [inaudible] or things like that. And I think that was something that people also really responded to and liked about the gallery: you were never quite sure exactly what was going to be in there.

MS. CUMMINS: But we also had enough collectors that liked the edgier stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

MS. CUMMINS: So we were always a little bit sure that it wasn't going to be entirely rejected, and it wasn't so out there—that it was beautifully made, usually, at least.

MS. RIEDEL: And that might have been the work that got the critical reviews, too. It would bring in Kenneth Baker or David Bonetti [ph] or someone like that. Well orchestrated, though.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. Thank you.

MS. LAURIA: Well, it's good gallery strategy. [They laugh.]

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So were there any artist relationships in particular that, over the course of time, developed for you that you still remain very good friends with, that you still, maybe on a friendship basis, advise them on their career? Or have you—I can't imagine this—but have you stopped talking to artists in general?

MS. CUMMINS: Oh, no. [Laughs.] No. I still talk to many of the people that I showed. And most of the people that I still talk to are jewelers. I still know most of the painters in some fashion or another, but the ones that I actually really have an ongoing basis of conversation with - and it's probably because now I'm the chair of AJF and am involved in American Crafts Council, and I'm involved in the California College of the Arts, and I have really a connection to those jewelers, that I still am very good friends with them.

Story-wise - I told you I'm not a great storyteller, so it's hard for me to tell a good story about somebody that I had a relationship with - but there were some funny stories with, for example, Bruce Metcalf being a completely unconscious, dopey artist.

He would just stick his foot in his mouth on a regular basis when he'd meet collectors. [Laughs.] Or he'd make snide remarks about another jeweler or something. Not really meaning to, actually. But making a point or a comparison or something that people would take great offense at. And then I would have to busily patch up the offenses while he was kind of lah-dee-dah-ing his way down the aisle. I was constantly shocked.

And then Lisa Gralnick was another one who was just a - wow—a piece of work and somebody who was so hard to wrangle into any kind of a position, because she was ready to just fire off a missile at the smallest infraction. What she thought of as an infraction.

Dominic Di Mare was somebody who didn't ever want to show again. He showed with Ruth Braunstein and then quit showing with her, I guess, at the beginning of the '90s or end of the '80s. And then he didn't want to show again. He waited for 10 years, watching me develop the gallery, until he conceded that maybe I could show his work. He was condescending about his acceptance, to a degree. But he also was one of the biggest supporters of the gallery.

He used to come in every Tuesday morning and bring everybody lattes and treats. [Laughs.] It was a big thing to look forward to. You had to come to work on Tuesday morning. So if you came, at least you'd know that Dominic was going to be there with his treats. So he became a great friend of the gallery. But he was a hard one to please. So I don't know. Can you think of any other great stories?

MS. LAURIA: Did any of the artists ever approach you to do a sort of a residency or a patronage situation where they felt—some dealers do this: they set their artists up, or they give them money in advance for a certain series of work that may come. Was that something that you did, never did, wouldn't do?

MS. CUMMINS: I never had enough money to do it, so I don't remember ever doing that. I always paid people on time, but that is as far as I could take it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. CUMMINS: We made really a religious attempt to do that. Sometimes people—

MS. LAURIA: Very Catholic of you.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. [They laugh.] People would put things away and pay for them over time, and I always said they could do that for 90 days. And if they needed more than 90 days, then I would call the artist and say, Is it okay to do it more than 90 days? And so the artist would know that something was sold, and they'd get paid for it when it was paid in full in 90 days.

Because I had had situations where people would start putting money down. And if you split that money with the

artist and then they change their minds, there would be this whole huge rigmarole about that. So I always made an arrangement with the artist as to exactly how long it was going to be on consignment, what was going to happen. And we sent out monthly bills to people saying, pay your next payment. We were very, very systematic about how we approached the business.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't remember, as you say, any residencies or anything like that, to be sure. But something we were really very systematic about was working very hard to get press for the artists. That was something we were really focused on. It wasn't just a sort of shotgun approach to sending out press releases and then hoping that something might happen. It was very targeted about who was interested in what. And not only in terms of periodicals, newspapers, and magazines, local, regional, national, but also museums and trying to get museum exhibitions for the artists. If that was the case, try to help with catalogues. So there was a lot of work that went on behind the scenes. Julie Allen did a lot of that work with museums.

MS. CUMMINS: Everybody that worked for me had a certain area of expertise, and it was Mija's area of expertise to work with the press releases and the PR for the gallery. Julie Allen, because she'd worked for Ruth Braunstein and had worked before that for another gallery in San Francisco, had a very long history of knowing curators and so forth.

MS. RIEDEL: And the artists—it was hugely significant for their careers. They really appreciated that effort. Sometimes we were able to piggyback. Pat Flynn's show at the National Ornamental Metals Museum [Memphis, TN], we did an exhibition with them at the same time. Other things we were actually able to help set up, like Chester Arnold in San Jose. David Best in San Jose early on in 1992.

MS. LAURIA: San Jose Art Museum?

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. So those were things that we really focused on because we were always flying - [laughs]—we were always operating on a shoestring, but that was one thing we could do, was really work to develop the artist's career through press and through exhibitions. That was something that was very focused.

We had annual retreats, and we'd figure out where we'd been successful and where we could—I remember I was looking back: 1997, how did we do it? [They laugh.] It must have been a great year! But we would just tally what had worked and what hadn't and who was interested in what. And then brainstorm for what we could do the next year.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that's good because that segues right into one of the questions: what do you think were the least successful adventures—or ventures—that your gallery did?

MS. CUMMINS: SOFA Miami. Where everybody wanted to know how many ounces of gold was in everything. And therefore what was the value of it? That was pretty unsuccessful. That was Mark Lyman running SOFA, trying to find a new marketplace, and that was a total disaster. We did it for three years; we were faithful to the SOFA regime. But we didn't really make any progress in that marketplace whatsoever. So that was, I'd say, probably our biggest failure that I can think of, off the top of my head.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, there's nothing that—

MS. CUMMINS: Besides the Susan Marie Dopp show we didn't sell anything out of, that was totally minimalist. That was another bust. There probably were some other shows that were total busts.

MS. RIEDEL: You hated the purple [inaudible].

MS. CUMMINS: Oh, we did this show, "The Opera." Jewelry for the opera.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. CUMMINS: And so when we had it in the gallery, we had purple opera velvet for the background of the cases, which—oh, here's a good story—which we decided to bring with us to SOFA and do it in the same way. But somehow this context was all wrong for it. And I remember very specifically watching Kiff Slemmons, who'd never been to SOFA before, approach the booth and look at that purple like, oh, my God! She was horrified that we were using this purple velvet as the background for the work. Oh, it was a real cringe moment. But anyway. It wasn't a failure, though.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MS. CUMMINS: The show was actually a good show.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. CUMMINS: And we did sell a lot of out of it. But it was a moment of display trauma.

MS. RIEDEL: That's the worst that I can remember. Absolutely, Susan.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes, it was.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't think anything ever was that traumatic.

MS. CUMMINS: It wasn't as bad in Mill Valley.

MS. RIEDEL: It wasn't that bad.

MS. CUMMINS: But in Chicago or whatever—

MS. RIEDEL: These beautiful blond cases with this thing, yes, it was bad.

MS. LAURIA: Well, Chicago's a very open space, too. And that kind of a show probably needs the enclosure.

MS. CUMMINS: I can't remember when we stopped doing this, but the cases that we had in the gallery were also portable, some of them. And we used to drive to the New Art Forms shows. Beth Changstrom would load up the van and basically drive it to the fair in Chicago. And then we started driving trucks with other galleries that were coming from this area. We literally would drive the cases there. It wasn't until we redesigned all the cases and made them more portable and then built crates for them that we then would actually just ship them or store them someplace and then have them shipped back and forth. But, yes, we were still doing the old drive-it-across-the-country kind of thing for a long time.

MS. LAURIA: When you did a SOFA show, which is Sculptural Objects [&] Functional Art, did you also include some of the other artists that you showed that worked in other materials or other disciplines outside of jewelry?

MS. CUMMINS: We did. We almost always had some part of the space - like I showed Dominic Di Mare, a whole exhibition of his work, and Bennett Bean, a whole exhibition of his work. Joyce Scott once I showed—a whole little area of the booth was devoted to her three-dimensional sculptural work.

MS. RIEDEL: June Schwarcz, too.

MS. CUMMINS: June Schwarcz, Marilyn da Silva. We did bring other people like Deborah Barrett, who did mixed-media drawing portraiture.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Collaging.

MS. CUMMINS: Collaging.

MS. RIEDEL: Did we take Joe Brubaker one year?

MS. CUMMINS: We took Joe Brubaker one year, who did wood-carved figurative large pieces. We might have taken Rhonda Nevenschwander at some point in time. So we took other media. We never took any paintings.

MS. LAURIA: Because it was sculptural.

MS. CUMMINS: Because it was the wrong market for that.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. CUMMINS: But I feel like we tried to represent the other three-dimensional makers in the group of artists we represented that were not jewelry-makers.

MS. LAURIA: Because you said previously that the only place that you could show jewelry and the fine arts was at the Seattle—

MS. CUMMINS: Yes, the only place we got to mix both worlds was at Art Seattle—or what was that called? I can't even remember.

MS. RIEDEL: Something like that. I can't remember.

MS. CUMMINS: I think that was in the '90s, midish-'90s, late '90s. They allowed us to show the jewelry. They knew that we had a reputation for showing jewelry. So that show went on for about two to three years. We showed jewelry and paintings and sculpture all together.

MS. LAURIA: So when you say they allowed you—just to clarify this for the reader or the listener—these are generally juried in. You have to be selected.

MS. CUMMINS: Correct.

MS. LAURIA: Not everybody who applies, not every gallerist who applies to go to an art fair or SOFA is actually granted permission, is that true?

MS. CUMMINS: Correct. And so these were the market for craft, and the market for art was very different. So if you were going to be in an art fair, you would be showing art there. But we in the San Francisco Art Fair that went on for many years that Tom Blackman put together, we did show some installations like Sandra Enterlein did.

MS. RIEDEL: That's right.

MS. CUMMINS: So necklaces that had glass vials on the end that she filled with different things. And she'd hang them like an installation. We showed that. I don't remember if we showed any other things. But when we could, we'd try and get away with mixing in some of the jewelry if we could show it without it being in a case, for example.

MS. LAURIA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

Now, and this is a big global question, how has the market for American art changed in your lifetime, within the U.S., regionally, or internationally? Can you sort of frame it for us: some of the changes that you might have noticed during your years as a gallerist. Where was art then? Where is it now, in your opinion?

MS. CUMMINS: [Laughs.] Well, let me talk about jewelry first because it's a smaller world and one I know better. The main thing that's happened, certainly since the beginning of when I started showing jewelry and now, is that there's a lot more ambitious work done. There's a lot more interconnection between artists internationally. They see each other's work, and they know what each other's doing. There's a lot more jewelers, makers of jewelry, going through art schools. And therefore their ideas of what they're doing are getting very developed by learning about concept and so forth. There's probably not many more dealers than there were then, at least that are still in business now. There's a few more.

But I think the biggest change is probably that major collections of jewelry have gone into museums. Helen Drutt's collection going to the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, and Daphne Ferrago's collection going into the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and Donna Schneider's collection going into the Metropolitan and Racine—and I can't remember what else. But essentially the fact that jewelry, contemporary jewelry, was not included in collections up until these collections went into the museums. All kinds of other jewelry was in these fine arts institutions from earlier eras, but no contemporary jewelry was.

Now it's been going on long enough, and people have made big enough collections and have given them to these museums or sold them, whichever they've done, that now that validation and that spreading of that audience out to people that would maybe never come into a gallery has, I think, changed tremendously the potential for the marketplace and for exposure.

MS. LAURIA: Also the publications.

MS. CUMMINS: And the catalogues. The books that are coming out of Europe, in particular, are just phenomenal. One thing I've been noticing lately is that there's tons of books on New Zealand jewelry and Australian jewelry and Dutch jewelry and Italian jewelry and German jewelry, and every kind of jewelry. English jewelry. But there's no book on American jewelry since 1993, when Susan Lewin produced *One of a Kind: Contemporary American Jewelry*. And that was kind of limited. So, Mija. [They laugh.] In case you've been missing some project to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. CUMMINS: Here's one I can open up the door for - [laughs] - because that's kind of interesting that there's—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. It is interesting.

MS. LAURIA: Well, there are catalogues that have American jewelers in them.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes, but even there, the Europeans seem much more interested in documenting the hell out of everything. Whereas Americans don't have the money or don't have the backing. Helen's collection has an incredible catalogue. Daphne's is just getting put together and will be released, I think, in 2010 sometime. Donna Schneider's working on a catalogue, I believe, with the collection at the Metropolitan at least, if not at the Racine Museum. I think all of these collections now are putting together major catalogues. But you don't get too

many catalogues coming out of temporary shows. Bruce Metcalf's show, we definitely did a catalogue for that. And that traveled to four or five venues. So when you get a show that travels like that, that's great.

And just to mention here a little aside is that I'm also working with Rotasa Foundation which is once a year granting a \$50,000-a-year award to help publish catalogues. It is something that I feel has been lacking. And trying to do it with just American institutions and often just American jewelers. Although somehow or another those Europeans or somebody else sneaks in there every once in a while. [Laughs.] But Mija's working with the Oakland Museum and the MAD Museum [Museum of Art and Design, New York, NY] curators to put together a show on Margaret De Patta, which will open a couple of years from now.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

MS. LAURIA: 2012?

MS. RIEDEL: I think 2011 or maybe late 2010, yes.

MS. CUMMINS: I feel that that's a very important thing to do. But none of those collections are just purely American jewelry, for example.

MS. LAURIA: So do you see that the art market has changed significantly for the other types of art, fine arts or the other disciplines?

MS. CUMMINS: Oh, yes. I feel like the whole art world has just gotten blown wide open since the beginning of when I started doing the gallery. The art world has always been pretty adventuresome. But now I think it's just gone pretty much into—you can use any type of material. You can use any type of medium. You can cross over mediums. You're usually an artist that not only does one thing, like paint, but also does photography and film and some kind of objects. I think artists are encouraged these days to be creative about using anything they need to use to express themselves.

So that's why I mentioned earlier that some artists occasionally will do jewelry. Because that is something that they, for one reason or another, are interested in expressing themselves. And so they'll make a necklace from hair, like Mona Hatoum did. Or they'll make some reference to jewelry, like a bunch of jewelry stands that Charles LeDray used in an exhibition. There are things about jewelry that talk about value and status and social standing that some artists deal with in their work. And so moving into the jewelry realm would be a natural move for them.

MS. LAURIA: But in terms of the business of being a dealer, have you seen a big transformation for the last 20 years?

MS. CUMMINS: Sure. Yes. The Internet, of course, is the biggest one, which is an obvious one. But I also think there's a lot of dealers now that are so influential in the marketplace that they can pick and choose who gets to buy the work of certain artists, as well as what museums get to have the work, to have an exhibition. I think it used to be the other way around, at least as my understanding. And now it feels to me like there's a lot of dealers that are so powerful that they're almost like the banks that are too big to fail. They are the ones that are driving the market, not the other way around.

MS. LAURIA: And a good example of that would probably be the Saatchi Brothers.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And Gagosian.

MS. LAURIA: And Case Wildenstein. Do you think, though, if you reflect on this—and I know this question isn't in here, but humor me—that the gallery system as we know it is a paradigm that is no longer going to work in the future?

MS. CUMMINS: I wouldn't say that. I think people love to buy art. And I think that there's going to be always the upper echelon of the elite and the kind of status-oriented, sophisticated, extremely expensive market. And then there's going to be everything that filters down into the DIY: I'm an amateur and I'm going to make a cozy for your iPhone market that's going to be done on the Internet or little street fairs or whatever. And there's going to be everything in between.

People are always making things, and there's always going to be some way for them to sell it to somebody else. So maybe things will shift more to the Internet, use of the Internet, which it already has. But I don't see the spaces entirely disappearing. I think there still is a need for people to get together. A space is often inspiring to an artist to do something with or in.

MS. LAURIA: By the way, this is a question they keep asking publishers and journalists for newspapers -

MS. CUMMINS: Sure.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. LAURIA: Is the future paperless? Or are the galleries wall-less? So the same sort of idea that people are going to stop reading a book or stop reading newspapers or stop going to galleries. Nobody can really predict the future, but you're making a good point that people like to—it's like movies. When the DVDs came out, they thought, oh, movie theaters are going to disappear. Well, they haven't disappeared.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-mm. [Negative.]

MS. LAURIA: Because it's sometimes that experience of going to the gallery space.

MS. CUMMINS: Well, the music industry certainly has been heavily affected by the proliferation of the Internet and downloading and not getting any royalties for that and so forth. So it becomes harder. It seems to me that artists just manage to figure out the next other way that they can make a living happen.

There's nothing that ever satisfies a fan of someone's work quite like seeing the person in real life if they're performing, or if the work is an object being made and that person comes to talk about it. There is a magic about being in the presence of somebody that you respect and love. And I think that's a human-nature thing. So it might transform in some way.

Maybe books are more on electronic forms, but people always want to hear the author speak, see the author, or appreciate them for what they've done in real life. Who's to say what will happen? Who could have imagined that there would be such thing as an Internet a couple of decades ago?

MS. RIEDEL: And there's also—people would come for an opening, which you really can't replicate on the Internet, or people would come for an artist's talk. Sometimes there were panel discussions or [inaudible] painting. You could really conjure a whole spirit of inquiry or a buzz or an excitement. One of the exhibitions that we had in conjunction—it was jewelry: it was at the Oakland Museum, and it was at the gallery and at the Folk and Craft Art Museum - something about jewelry, way back in the early '90s, I can look. But I think there was—there is a community that comes together around a physical space; that was one aspect of it. And also the ability to browse and discover something that you weren't coming in looking for. There's something about going through those jewelry drawers that people just—

MS. CUMMINS: Loved.

MS. RIEDEL: —loved just discovering.

MS. CUMMINS: But it could be that we're just old-timers. [They laugh.] And that we really will not understand that, for example, communities are being created on the Internet.

MS. RIEDEL: Alright.

MS. CUMMINS: I still think people like to see each other. I think you form communities around similar likes and interests. And so if you like an artist's work, how do you get to be part of the community of people that see it or experience it in real life? You have to go somewhere.

MS. LAURIA: Well, actually, the Internet, too, is a way of expanding the market.

MS. CUMMINS: That's right.

MS. LAURIA: There are social networking tools now. I don't even want to mention them because tomorrow they won't be there. But Facebook or Twittering and all of that that the galleries can now utilize to even get more of the press and the word out there to build a community.

MS. CUMMINS: Sure. Right. I think the hardest thing is that there's so much out there that, how do you filter through? I think one of the things of the future, and is already to some degree happening, is like, who do you trust to filter through all of the information that you're getting? There may already be a website that does this, but I think it would be wonderful to have a website that just presented me with the news that I might be interested in, like Pandora, the Internet radio station. Do you know Pandora?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-mm. [Negative.]

MS. CUMMINS: Oh, my God, Mija, you have to look up pandora.com. It's a genome music project that takes music and sort of analyzes it for certain qualities. And then you type in, you know, I like Vivaldi. And then it will play all the music that sounds like Vivaldi or is related to Vivaldi by different composers, or you put in the Beatles and

which song of the Beatles? And then you'll get all the music that sounds like that. And so what they've done then is introduce you to music by people you've never heard of before.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. CUMMINS: And you can do a thumbs up or a thumbs down if they make a bad choice. You just say, I don't like that one, and it goes onto the next one. And it keeps a record of which things you've liked. So it keeps getting closer and closer and closer to the things that you like.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. CUMMINS: And you can create a number of different stations, so, hmm, today I feel like listening to classical. So you go to your Vivaldi station. Hmm, today I feel like listening to World Music, so you go to your Bahrain station.

MS. LAURIA: But they don't have that for art, is what you're saying.

MS. CUMMINS: They don't have that for art, or they don't have that for news. And I don't know if you could do it very well for either one of those things.

MS. RIEDEL: It's a great idea.

MS. CUMMINS: But I'd love to just get the news presented to me for the sort of things I'm interested in reading about.

MS. LAURIA: But doesn't that happen when you pull up your Yahoo map? [They laugh.]

MS. CUMMINS: Anyway, a diversion. But I think there'll always be people wanting to get together. And I think the Internet will just enhance that in some way or another that we don't know yet. But it will.

MS. RIEDEL: And there's something, too, about the fact that these are objects. And in the same way you want to see a picture of something. There is something about seeing the actual thing that just always draws people.

MS. CUMMINS: And one of the great things about craft is that it doesn't apologize for its tactility. In fact, it encourages people to respond tactilely. That means you have to see it in person. And one of the things I think that is happening in the DIY, and that Etsy has done in relationship to their community-building, is have people actually meet each other. They actually have situations where the makers can exchange information and look at objects of each other's and talk about how they're doing business-wise, et cetera. So they begin forming these friendships and relationships and sharing situations that other parts of the art market, I think, are not as willing to develop, shall we say. So I think there's, in the craft field anyway, a real interest in continuing to be hands-on.

MS. LAURIA: I know you've spoken a little bit about this, but how would you define the relationship that exists between a museum and a gallery? And if you could change it or would want to change it, how would you think that it would be beneficial to the artists to make a change?

MS. CUMMINS: Well, as I've said, I think now galleries are pretty in charge of museums to some degree or another. I think that in most museum situations, as far as I know at this point in time, curators are expected to know everything from the 1750s in decorative arts to the modern. They're expected to know so much information that they can't possibly know things in depth. So when they meet a collector or a gallerist that specializes in a smaller field, they're dependent on that gallerist to supply them with information. Sometimes that dealer knows a lot about what they're talking about; sometimes they don't, because nobody's vetting them or finding what their credentials are. But they have to depend on them, the artists and the dealer.

And so it's a very symbiotic type of relationship. The dealer needs the curator to have shows of the work they're showing because it validates it—and do scholarship on it so that it again validates it—in order to be able to sell things, because people like things that have some validity behind them.

It was interesting. I was just at a fair that was in San Francisco, a little small fair, of mid-century, mostly mid-century dealers. They were doing a panel, and they were talking about the work they were showing as craft. And about people like Sam Maloof and [Peter] Voulkos and different mid-century makers. They were talking about craft and handmade and one of a kind and all this stuff. So finally I said at the end, when there was question and answer, I said, "Why don't you show any living artists?" One of them was showing Wendell Castle, for example. Art Twentieth Century was showing Wendell Castle. And a couple of them were showing people that were alive. But they were basically long into their careers. And they said, "Because there's no validation. These people have been completely accepted, written about, had exhibitions, museum shows. No one can question their importance."

MS. LAURIA: Or their value.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CUMMINS: So I realized that I was just a stupid dealer for dealing with things of people that were not established. And that what I was doing was producing all the material that these guys were going to later use to build a market for—

MS. LAURIA: That's called the secondary market. [They laugh.] That's what they specialize in.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And they look for the people who have been validated, because they have a higher monetary value.

MS. CUMMINS: Right. Somebody that I talked to about this a fair amount after the panel was over, who shows J. B. Blount's work -

MS. LAURIA: Right. Gerard O'Brien.

MS. CUMMINS: Right.

MS. LAURIA: Reform Gallery.

MS. CUMMINS: Right.

MS. LAURIA: But people go to them because they're the pickers of what was important 20 years or sometimes 50 years [ago].

MS. CUMMINS: Fifty years ago, yes.

MS. LAURIA: It's supposed to be 50, but a lot of it is 25 years, too.

We have a good 15 more minutes on this disc, so we can approach these two last questions, which are kind of loaded in the sense that, in your opinion, who have been the most significant writers on American art, and why is their writing meaningful to you? Is criticism written by artists more valuable to you? Describe your relationship with critics. Now this would have been when you were still in business.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: But you, obviously, have had to have relationships with writers who would be doing, possibly, essays on your artists. You've mentioned Ken Baker before, Maria Porges. There must be people that you thought had approached your gallery, did their due diligence, and wrote something meaningful. Do you want to talk about any of those people?

MS. CUMMINS: I would just say that the people that are writing today whose work I really respect more than anything else are the people like Holland Carter and Peter Schjeldahl and Michael Kimmelman, people like that, who write for the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* and all those kinds of things. I love the way they write because they write in an understandable way, and they bring great insights while they're doing it.

I'm very interested in the scholarship around contemporary jewelry in particular now. So I am looking for people who are wanting to do that. And there are not that many. *Metalsmith* has a lot of things that are written by artists instead of by curators or scholars. I think Namita Wiggers is really pretty smart. Lena Vigna is really smart. I just met a New Zealand writer who I think you're going to see a lot of in the future years named Damien Skinner. I met him through Velvet da Vinci Gallery through Mike Holmes. There are a number of people like Glenn Adamson, who's written a book and is very much encouraging people to think about craft in different ways than they have. I'm developing quite a good relationship with a lot of curators who write. And through *Art Jewelry Forum* and through doing this foundation grant—

MS. LAURIA: But during the time of your gallery, did you find that there were writers that you had a long-term relationship with?

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. Sure, I did. We've already mentioned who they are. There were not a lot, for sure. Cheryl White was one that wrote.

MS. RIEDEL: And Rebecca Solnit way back when, who was wonderful.

MS. CUMMINS: I know, I mentioned her. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And Bill Berkson, too, would write occasionally. He was really good.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes, Bill Berkson. I remember Roberta Floden. Most of the people that wrote were just local, not super high qualities. And they mostly wrote for newspapers. So they were not going to get into anything very esoteric. Remember Phyllis Bragdon? [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MS. CUMMINS: And so these are all people that wrote for the local press. Probably Maria and Bill Berkson and Kenneth Baker were the most major writers that wrote for the bigger national magazines as well as the local press.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That sounds right. There weren't a lot, though. We were constantly looking for new ones that were to come by.

MS. CUMMINS: Right. And then there were some people in the area that would write for like *Metalsmith* or *American Craft* magazine that would be makers. I don't feel that I'm a very good scholar or curator for a museum-quality show; I don't think artists are very good, for the most part, at doing criticisms. And I think it's been a real downfall of the craft field to have so many artists do so many reviews of so many artists that are friends of theirs. I just don't think you can be impartial. It hasn't added much to the field. Now I think there's a resurgence of interest on the part of younger people to study this field and to become real scholars in it. For example, Bard is churning out lots of little mini-curators.

MS. LAURIA: Bard graduate school in New York City [Bard Graduate Center].

MS. CUMMINS: Yes, exactly. And so I think that's fabulous. I think that's just what the field needs.

MS. RIEDEL: Arthur Danto, I remember, once in a while, we read something, too. I don't know if you mentioned him. He was pretty interesting. And then Chiori Santiago.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: She wrote a couple of things, too.

MS. CUMMINS: *Art Week* was a publication on the West Coast that did try to encourage critical art writing for a long time. I remember *Art Week* was around when I was in high school. Is that right? No. Just out of college. But like a long, long time.

MS. RIEDEL: A long time.

MS. CUMMINS: I think it's still around.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know.

MS. CUMMINS: I haven't seen it for a long time, but I don't know.

MS. LAURIA: So, to sum up, I can't ask you how you view your gallery in the future because we won't be—

MS. RIEDEL: Virtually.

MS. LAURIA: Yes, virtually.

MS. CUMMINS: Virtually.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that's a fun place also at the Archives. But this is a valid question: what do you think your contributions have been to American art through being a gallerist? Not just being a super human being.

MS. CUMMINS: [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: The idea of, what legacy has the Susan Cummins Gallery left or had an impact on the American art scene?

MS. CUMMINS: I don't think I've had any impact on the American art scene. But maybe the American craft scene, I might have had an impact. But the art scene is too vast a world. And being in Mill Valley, there was no chance. I had a nice impact on the regional art world maybe. But the craft world I had a much bigger impact nationally. I think just for showing the high-quality work that I showed and trying to move it along into collections that have

eventually gone into museums, and promoting that work the way I did.

MS. RIEDEL: I think there was also—it was one of the first galleries that really showed craft and art together.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know if you mentioned that before.

MS. CUMMINS: I did.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Yes.

MS. CUMMINS: And I talked about how in the Bay Area that sort of was a no-brainer. Ruth Braunstein was doing it; Rena Branston was doing it. Paula Anglim even was to some degree or another—

MS. RIEDEL: To some degree, right.

MS. CUMMINS: —doing it. But it was something that was really not a big deal. Although, as I said, jewelry was a bit more of a hard sell than art was.

MS. RIEDEL: It was, definitely. And I think [we] put jewelry in that broader context, which I don't know that anybody had done before.

MS. CUMMINS: No. I don't know—I don't think anybody is still doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Just that range from painting through jewelry was one of the things that was most extraordinary.

MS. CUMMINS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: There was Cervini Haas;, I mean you know that they're closing in Arizona. She was showing painters, sculptors, and metalsmiths, jewelers.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: But I just heard that they are going to close, and she's going to do private consultation.

MS. CUMMINS: And Leslie Ferrin started showing painting now along with the ceramics that she's shown.

MS. LAURIA: I don't think she shows jewelry, though, does she?

MS. CUMMINS: No, she doesn't. Sienna's showing more, bigger, things that are related to jewelry or objects. I don't think she's started showing paintings yet. But she's trying to move into a slightly different realm, too.

MS. LAURIA: Well, there's going to be a great impetus in the museum world on the buzz word of "integration," to integrate all their collections so that you can see pieces—an object sculptor next to a sculpture—[phone rings].

[END CD 4 TR 2.]

MS. LAURIA: Well, in any case, the idea of integrating the collections, I think this started happening about maybe 10 years ago, when Malcolm Rogers took over as director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He wanted to eliminate the territory approach: we're not going to talk about just decorative arts or contemporary art. We're going to talk about art of the Americas, and we're going to integrate all the collections. And I think that galleries try to do that as well. You certainly did.

But I think it's a little bit more difficult, because a gallery has to depend on an income, revenue, from selling. And if you haven't developed a marketplace where people are expecting you to have integrated collections, then it's going to be a harder climb. But I do think that the people who are visiting galleries today wouldn't really think twice about having collections that are combined. I think they would just take it in stride.

MS. CUMMINS: Well, I think they would to a degree. As I said, I was fantasizing about, if I had kept going with the gallery, I had to reinvent it, and so what would I reinvent it to be? And I was sort of talking about the "Magicians of the Earth," or the show called "Artempo" that was in Venice during the Biennale a couple of years ago, where there is a combination of primitive work, and every era, with contemporary objects.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's interesting.

MS. CUMMINS: Painting and objects and all kinds of stuff all mixed together would have been what I really love and what I would really love to have done. But I didn't know enough about the other areas. Or I didn't have a

clientele.

So I don't know how you would have actually mixed those things together. I think there's still prohibitive mixtures of audiences or things that people would feel uncomfortable about buying from you as a dealer if you weren't grounded enough in a specialty. Especially if it was very high-priced work. So I think it's sometimes depending on how serious you are about it.

MS. LAURIA: And there are different issues involved, too: of provenance and all of those other things where sometimes the collector base doesn't integrate.

MS. CUMMINS: Right.

MS. LAURIA: You give a very narrow—narrow in terms of focus. [If you] want to collect pre-Columbian or something, you don't necessarily want to go to a gallery that doesn't have a hundred examples.

MS. CUMMINS: Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: But only has five because they've got other collections.

MS. CUMMINS: Right.

MS. LAURIA: There are restrictions. But have you thought about, or is it a fantasy, Susan, to revive a commercial business in the future?

MS. CUMMINS: There was a little moment there when I thought it would be fun to do a museum of contemporary jewelry, which I started poking around for a space to do. I love the idea of a space and having a space to put something in. I still love that. But the idea of doing another gallery, I think even if I sometimes fantasize about it, it's really just a total fantasy, and I don't have any real intention of ever doing that again.

MS. LAURIA: If there's anything else you want to talk about, I think we've covered—

MS. CUMMINS: A lot.

MS. LAURIA: - just about every question.

MS. CUMMINS: But Mija might want to say more somehow about her experience of being at the gallery or some of the questions maybe that we talked about earlier before you got here.

MS. RIEDEL: This is the one downfall of coming later, because I don't know what you've already covered. So it seems like you've been quite thorough.

MS. LAURIA: But you could talk about your experience of, how did you deal with the artists, how did you deal with the customers who came in? How did you feel about the kind of research that you had to do to write the press release? And what part of that did you feel was in service to educate the public?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: And did you think that was important?

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. That was what kept it really interesting and really made it gratifying on so many levels—intellectually compelling and stimulating. And there's just all sort of service to people who came in and had no idea what they were looking at, or were interested but just didn't quite understand. They'd start off with something that was a little bit more traditional and slowly move to something that was perhaps a little bit more content-driven.

But there was a wonderful range of artists doing a wonderful range of things. Even the more traditional gold work. Now with jewelers, Barbara Heinrich, Mary Lee Hu, Kent Raible, all doing something really slightly unusual. Taking it to a different degree.

And you could go from that range to then, you know, Kiff Slemmons. The first time I saw some of her *Hands of the Heroes*, I just thought that it was some of the most extraordinary work I'd ever seen. It really opened a whole world of jewelry to me and what its possibilities were. And then you think of Keith Lewis, the *Thirty-Six Dead Souls*. There were just some extraordinary pieces. It opened a world of what art could be in terms of—and we talked about this—in terms of taking it out into the world. It could become a public forum for ideas. It wasn't locked up in someone's home or on a pedestal. But it was out and in the world.

MS. LAURIA: It wasn't on a pedestal; it was just moving.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [They laugh.]

MS. CUMMINS: Well, and Mija had come from a gallery in Sausalito that was very commercially oriented. And that was totally about sell, sell, sell.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. CUMMINS: You had to make your commission. And so she came like a shot into my gallery at high-rev speed because—which is how she is anyway. [They laugh.] But besides that, was so turned off by that aspect of it that this whole idea of being able to educate herself and other people in the process was a totally different realm that was related to art still but very different.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: During your working together on any of the shows, did you suggest artists to Susan? Did you ever have a conflict, or you really loved somebody but Susan just didn't see it?

MS. RIEDEL: One of the great things, I thought, about the gallery is Susan was so open to that. We'd have sort of quarterly reviews of the new artwork. And you would often do the primary preliminary review. And then people that you found interesting, she'd bring in slides and say, what do you think? So there was a real—

MS. LAURIA: There was an openness to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. LAURIA: To discussion, and dialogue about what artists you both thought would be appropriate for the gallery.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes. And I don't think Mija ever had the feeling that she was going to ram somebody down my throat or anything like that. She never took it to that degree. She wasn't going to make a point of that thing, thank God, because then that would have been hard if I hadn't agreed with her. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: In all honesty, there wasn't so much that we could disagree on. It was still fairly early in the game, and what we came across was usually sort of miraculous discoveries.

MS. CUMMINS: Right. Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: And you traveled with Susan, as the other staff did, when you went to the fairs?

MS. CUMMINS: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MS. CUMMINS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: You not only had to deal with your local clientele, you had to basically learn how to deal with people who may not have known the Susan Cummins Gallery or who you showed. And so that was a whole other learning curve.

MS. CUMMINS: Right. And unlike other dealers, I actually was interested in their developing their own relationships with collectors. Some dealers, they just want to keep all the collectors to themselves and not have other staff interact with them. And I really had a very different idea about that. I thought that if Mija could work with somebody better than I could, that she should do that. And there were lots of people Mija could work with better than I could. [They laugh.] There were some people that - she just knew how to work with them, and I just didn't.

MS. RIEDEL: It was just long-term—

MS. CUMMINS: And vice versa.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. It was just long-term relationships. We did those SOFA fairs for so long. We did them before they were SOFA, Chicago International New Art Forms Expo.

MS. CUMMINS: Right. Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So that was wonderful for the gallery. That did bring a whole new group of clients in and for the artists.

MS. CUMMINS: And then it establishes our national reputation. We couldn't have established it in Mill Valley.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-mm. [Negative.]

MS. CUMMINS: No matter how hard we tried.

MS. LAURIA: Did you do any international fairs?

MS. CUMMINS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: We kept trying. [Laughs.]

MS. CUMMINS: We would have done. Had COLLECT been in existence, which is the British Crafts Council Fair in London, we would have done that. But, no. We didn't.

MS. LAURIA: And I'm dying to ask this question; it's probably more for my own edification. But when somebody would come into the gallery and see a piece of jewelry, how did they react to seeing it in a case and then when they put it on? Did you find there were challenges to that? That people would then say, you have no idea that this would be so kinetic when I put it on. Or be so heavy when I put it on. Did you have to learn a whole new skill set to sell jewelry? Because even though it has a higher plane of the content and the actual sculptural aspect of it, ultimately most people are buying it to wear.

MS. CUMMINS: Right, to wear. Well, it was different. I remember there was a Garth Clark interview, that I think *Metalsmith* did, about why he closed the jewelry part of his gallery that he had for a very short time. He just couldn't stand people putting on the jewelry. It was clear that he just had no interest in that.

But it was different. I mean different than selling them a painting or an object that they can put in their living room. It was really much more personal, much more about, how did they look with the thing on? And then could they imagine themselves wearing it in public? And what kind of response would they get to it?

There were a lot of people - like little short people who thought that wearing big jewelry, it wouldn't work for them. But then there were the little people who thought big jewelry was right. Everybody has these funny preconceived notions about what was okay or not okay jewelry-wise for them to wear. So Mija was always really very, very good at getting people to wear stuff or pointing out other things that they could wear. That became your *specialité*, I think. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: It was interesting, too, because jewelry, really you found that it wasn't all lumped together. There were some objects or some pieces that functioned well, like little miniatures. And they would be a ring or a bracelet, something that you could see, would be a very different experience for somebody thinking about buying it. Because it was more about their experience of the piece and what it meant for them and how it looked to them, as opposed to how they looked in a necklace or a pair of earrings. It was very different in terms of experience and what they were looking for and what became significant, how challenging they were willing to get. That was an interesting aspect of it.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

MS. CUMMINS: *C'est la vie*. Right.

MS. LAURIA: End of disc four and of interview with Susan Cummins and Mija Riedel. And close the book on this one.

[END CD 4.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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