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Oral history interview with Michael A.
Cummings, 2012 October 25-26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Michael A. Cummings on October 25 and 26, 2012. The interview took place in New York City, New York, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Michael A. Cummings has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Michael Cummings in the artist's home and studio in New York City on October 25, 2012, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, disc card No. 1.

Well, it's a pleasure to be here. And we started our conversation with a tour of this magnificent collection of your work and your art collection, which has been wonderfully illuminating. Thank you for that.

MICHAEL CUMMINGS: Well, you're very welcome. I'm very happy to participate in the archival oral history collection.

MS. RIEDEL: Great. Well, we're delighted that you were willing to participate. Let's start with some early biographical material —

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: — and go through that, and then we can get more directly into the work. You were born in Los Angeles in 1945?

MR. CUMMINGS: Correct, November 28th, my mother's birthday.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, really?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Interesting. November 28th. And what was your father's name?

MR. CUMMINGS: My father's name was Arthur Cummings. And that was supposed to be my first name as well, a junior, but my mother didn't want me to be a junior so she put his name in the middle and made me Michael.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So she wanted you to have a name and a life of your own.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, because she said she had grown up with a lot of "Juniors" around her from her family and she didn't like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And what was her name — what is her name?

MR. CUMMINGS: Her name is Dorothy — first name is Dorothy. Her last name is Goodson now because she remarried. And my stepfather died 25 years ago, so she's been on her own, primarily retired, lives in a house in L.A. She worked for Lockheed Aircraft and she did the interiors — the curtains, the chairs, and all that sort of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: And she went to work doing — what is it? I want to say Rita the riveter? What was that famous —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right, right, Rosie the Riveter, I think.

MR. CUMMINGS: Rosie the Riveter.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: She went to work at that era when the men were at war and they were hiring women to work in factories and stuff. So she went to Lockheed and worked, and just stayed on and kind of moved up the ladder and eventually retired. So she's very detail-oriented when it comes to things around the house because of the work that she had over the years.

And she's still very active. She's 89. She drives. She works in the yard. She says she's 10 pounds overweight. [Laughs.] And she had a minor stroke about a year ago but she came out of it, but she does say that she can see how that affected her overall balance a little bit. And the doctors warned her about food and then cholesterol and all that sort of stuff. She's doing Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Did she sew or work with her hands?

MR. CUMMINGS: No. No one in my family — well, she says she did, but I don't remember her doing that, and I was the oldest of three. And she had an old Singer sewing machine in the house I remember when I was younger, but I never saw her on it. But she said she did work on it a little bit. But none of my grandmothers sewed, as far as I knew, and no one had a quilt in the house. And so I didn't know anything about quilts until I came to New York.

And I didn't have any creative people in my family even though there were several great cooks in the family. And one of my grandmothers, my father's mother, she cooked from scratch, and all mental. And she was an amazing cook, but no one outside of that category of food was creative in any sort of way that I could remember.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: There was no role model to look at, at all — no musician, no anybody.

MS. RIEDEL: That is interesting.

You say you had two siblings?

MR. CUMMINGS: Two sisters. I was the oldest, and the next one after me was five years younger, and then the other one was, like, I think — well, after Phyllis was Monica, and she was a year behind Phyllis, I think.

Phyllis, the middle child, she died four years ago, so it's just myself and Monica. And they had aspirations of being somewhat creative, but their, sort of, hopes and dreams kind of got diverted into marriage and/or just sort of other I guess basic sort of human needs and requirements, whereas I kind of went down the road alone. And kind of looking at the history of art, is a lot of them were single and not married.

I chose to embrace my art career as my partner and I kind of sacrificed a lot of stuff to be an artist. And I could see whereby I did have some relationships with women earlier on, and there was one I proposed to and stuff, and some proposed to me, but I kept saying no, no, no. But I see whereas if I had gone down that road, I would have, like, lost my dream.

And I always considered art as something I wanted to do since I was about 5 years old. I wanted to be an artist. I didn't know how to define it. When I was small, I guess around that time, in kindergarten, my mother says the teacher raved to her about my watercolors and how great they were, and how I had talent and everything. And my mother, you know, it was sort of like, "Huh? What?" She didn't understand what the teacher was trying to express, but the teacher was totally excited. I don't know what I did to get her in that state of mind, but she was just raving about my artwork.

But that door closed because I didn't really pursue it in any sort of overt sort of way. What happened was, as an asthmatic child I stayed home a lot from school, and in doing that I was in sort of a solitary sort of, like, state of mind. And I start to just kind of look around at what to do, and I started, like, making copies of the wallpaper — [laughs] — in my grandmother's houses when they had floral and different sort of patterns. And I would just kind of make copies of that.

And then I did bubblegum wrappers because they were cartoons sort of things. And then I kind of expanded to floral and plant life around me. And people were kind of, "Oh, look at you. You can draw something like that." But all it was is that I was just focusing in on and developing a skill because I had the time to do it. It was my own sort of private self-taught way of kind of drawing. And I did that.

But there was no one around, but because of the asthmatic condition, that led me into exploring the world around me as a child, like I think no one else — well, I think if you're a normal child you're kind of with a group and you're playing and all that, but as a solitary child and not really looking at a lot of TV, I had to find ways to entertain myself, and to entertain myself was in a creative sort of way, and I was very happy with that. It was a

silent sort of communication with the world around me, and I just followed that.

And so that kind of stayed with me as I grew into an adolescent, and it kind of, I guess, grew stronger a little bit. And one of my school trips to a museum or something — it had to be a school-related experience — I came upon the van Gogh painting *Sunflowers*, and that just kind of nailed me to the cross in terms of — I said, "That's what I want to do." And that was sort of like a guiding light.

And from that point on, that was my wish, sort of more of a secret wish rather than expressing it to my parents or anything like that. And it wasn't until I got into — well, I'll stop here. You might have another question.

MS. RIEDEL: That was fantastic. It was very insightful. So from very early on it seems you were really developing a sense of observation and an interest in pattern. I mean, many kids might not have cared at all —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — and didn't pay attention to wallpaper. So that was with you from the beginning.

MR. CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmation.]

MS. RIEDEL: And were you kept home from school —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — or just after school you —

MR. CUMMINGS: I was kept home from school because of the illness, because at that time — and I don't even know if they've developed better medicines, but children that were asthmatic at that time, in the '50s, we had to take adult medicines. So they were very strong, narcotic almost. And so it was always worried that that might be too much for me.

And I was really a chronic asthmatic, and I had eczema. And my mother took me to the doctor one time to get an allergy test, and she got, like, a two-page list of things I couldn't eat and what I shouldn't do. And she kind of jokes about how she hollered at the doctor, "What can I feed him," you know, because I couldn't eat wheat or with butter. I couldn't drink regular milk. I couldn't wear wool. There were just all these sort of crazy things.

But I did stay home, but in order to make up for my education that I would miss, my mother put me in summer school every year. So every year I went off to summer school. So it became a regular pattern. And then at one point they skipped me because they said I was more advanced because I had gone to summer school. [Laughs.] So I graduated from high school. Or was it junior college? But I think — well, junior high school to high school, I was sort of like a year ahead of myself but I went on.

But again, the school experience for art wasn't anything special. Emphasis on art was sort of like just a class of recreation, keeping the kids together. There was no great insightful instruction from any of the teachers at all about artists or anything like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Just so we're clear, when were you home and when were you actually in school?

MR. CUMMINGS: During the elementary period —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: — from about — I guess kindergarten to sixth grade is when I had the most chronic sort of experiences with asthmatic attacks. And after that it started to decrease. And eventually — I almost have outgrown it. I mean, I could have an asthma attack triggered by some dust or something unknown, exhaustion maybe, but I rarely have those. But I do have an atomizer and everything necessary to address the issue if it comes up.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: But I've kind of outgrown it. And the eczema has gone away as well.

I did kind of reflect on that time period a little bit, and some of it was related to emotions, and the emotional part came through the domestic sort of disagreements my mother and father were having until eventually my mother divorced my father when I was about 12 years old, or 10 to 12 years old. So things kind of calmed down a little bit and I didn't feel the agitation or emotional stress that was taking place. Since I was the oldest, I was seeing and hearing and kind of understood more. So that was during that time period.

Then through junior college — I mean junior high school and high school, there was nothing really unusual taking place in school related to art. Outside, I — well, and some of the things in school, in California, you're exposed to Native American art. You're exposed to Japan art. You're exposed to South American art. And you get a really intense sort of introduction to that because it's so near and there's exhibits going on and there's sculpture around you.

So I really got into pattern and design —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — a great deal. It really was fascinating, because I wasn't really interested in portraits and the whole sort of Europe canvas painting at all. I was more — I felt more emotionally connected to these patterns and these other cultures. And so I really love the patterns and I would go see the shows. And sometimes it would be reflected in what I was doing then, but I wasn't really doing a lot of art. I had wishful thoughts. I was sort of like — well, I had wishful thoughts.

What I attempted to do was oil paint, because at the time acrylic paint wasn't really that much in vogue or introduced so much. Oil paint was the standard way you went if you wanted to be an artist. And my mother put me out in the garage when I wanted to do that because of the smell of the turpentine and everything. And I was just doing basically still lifes, and I was experimenting with thickness of paint on the canvas with a palette knife as opposed to a brush.

And again, having van Gogh be my role model, the thickness of paint on the canvas, the bright color and the flowers and stuff like that, I did that for a time. But at the same — in the real world my parents had pushed me into going to college to go into business administration.

MS. RIEDEL: But before we get there —

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — let's go back to high school a little bit more. Were there any art classes? Were you taking regular field trips to museums?

MR. CUMMINGS: We had a couple of —

MS. RIEDEL: And what was the name of the high school?

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, I went to John. C. Fremont High School.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, what neighborhood is that?

MR. CUMMINGS: That was in, I guess, Central Los Angeles.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: That was one of the black schools that was overcrowded, and I didn't know it until afterwards. [Laughs.] And it was also a school where it was discovered after everybody graduated and some people went on to UCLA, that we were being graded on a lower level. And so the kids that went to UCLA as "A" students, they discovered they weren't really "A" students. And there was sort of like a whole mental sort of shock to them.

But we did have some teachers that were really, well, sincere and eager to help us academically in things that we needed to have to go on to college, especially the English teachers and the literary teachers in terms of the novels and different sort of classics that we read, really gave us a better foundation to be prepared for going on. So it helped me in my English class when I went to junior college because I could understand and break down and summarize a novel very easily. [... -MAC]

But so I went to John C. Fremont High School. I was in a winter class. They stopped winter classes. I graduated in February, and I was about 16 1/2, think, or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: When you graduated?

MR. CUMMINGS: I think so, because of the summer schools and stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And we weren't given a lot of options. I mean, "college" was a word and was a concept, but they tried to push me and a lot of other — the males into what they call — these schools doing mechanical sort

of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Like vocational?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, vocational schools. And my mother put her foot down to that. She said, "No, way." And so she wanted me to do something better than what she had been doing. You know, that whole generational thing to be better.

And then she wanted me to go into business, because she said, "With your asthma, you can't do, you know, hard labor. You better get an easy desk job." So that was her joke all the time. [They laugh.] "Get an easy desk job."

So I went into business, but in the back of mind, you know, the artist's voice was just kind of like whispering in my ear all the time, you know, that's your real calling, not to go into business. So for two years I took business classes, and on the side —

MS. RIEDEL: This was at L.A. City College?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, L.A. City College.

MS. RIEDEL: Sixty-three you started there? Is that right?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. And I was living at home at the time, and I was doing my little painting in the garage. And then at the end of the two years —

MS. RIEDEL: Before we get there, just one quick question.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: You're doing this painting in the garage, and I'm still — I'd like to hear a little bit more about where you learned, where you got these ideas. Were you reading books? Did you have any instruction inside of school, outside of school?

MR. CUMMINGS: No, I was kind of self-taught.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: I guess — again, I use the word "visualization" to how I create, but I was, I guess, bringing that experience as an asthmatic child and being by myself and looking at the world around me and studying the wallpaper and everything.

I went to museums and everything on my own and just looked at the exhibits, and primarily, again, the ancient civilizations from South America to the Japanese art, and to whatever else might be presented. And I also got into the Chinese thing a well. But I would go there and just walk around and absorb what I was looking at.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were going to LACMA, you were going to the Getty. Where were you —

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, well, I was going primarily — what was that museum called at the time? There was one on Wilshire Boulevard. I think that one. There was just one or two at the time I was growing up.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: The Getty could have existed in the '60s but I'm not — I guess it did, but I never went there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: But there were a couple of major museums in I guess the downtown area of L.A. but more to the west side.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And where La Brea Tar Pits is located —

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. CUMMINGS: — wherever that museum is. I went to that one. And so I went on my own a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Just by yourself.

MR. CUMMINGS: Just by myself, yeah. I had no problem because it was like going into — well, the experience alone was just so — I don't know; it embraced me and I embraced it. It was just like a union that was supposed to be, and I just felt at home.

So I would come back — and I didn't really buy art books or anything like that at the time. It was just something that I remembered and I wanted to try. And I got the tools to work it, and I went in the garage and just played around with it in terms of experimenting and developing an image through paint with a brush. I did some charcoal stuff.

I tried to look around in my community to see what was going on. There was an artist group in Watts by Watts Towers. And, again, I was able to be mobile in the city, because in L.A. you're given a license and car keys at a very early age, and in the high school you're given drivers' ed, or used to be given drivers' ed, so even prior to the class I was driving up and down my driveway. [Laughs.] So was able to move around the city by borrowing my parents' car when they weren't using it to go to these places sometimes.

And I went to the Watts art center, and I walked in and I was, like, the youngest one, you know. I was, like, all of 18, 19, and you had all these adult black artists talking about their art and stuff like that, and I'm just with my mouth open, not knowing what to say. And then one of the artists there I re-met 20 years later here. His name is Dan Conchula [ph]. And he was a painter that became a director of some organization here in New York City. But Dan Conchula [ph], a black artist.

And then there was another organization nearer — no, I can't say nearer to where I lived, but I guess maybe nearer to where I lived — called the Brockman Gallery. And it was two brothers, [Dale and Alonzo] and I think their last name was Davis, but it was the Brockman Gallery in Leimert Park. And they existed for a long time.

They were like a beacon for young artists, and just to exhibit black art, because the only place you could really go to see art was La Cienega Boulevard. And that was really a closed sort of like little group of galleries that had their own sort of stable of artists, and you didn't really see any black artists.

There was one gallery — I don't know the name of it — that showed the very famous California artist named Charles White. And he was sort of the only known black artist that you heard his name repeated over and over again.

So they also had an organization at the Brockman Gallery, and so I kind of joined that too. Again, I was the baby in the group and I just sort of like listened. There was another artist, a printer in that group at Brockman Gallery. Her name was Ruth Waddy, and she was an artist that never made it in terms of financially, but kind of made it as a black woman as a printer. And you could find her in some books.

And so at one point I was a member of these groups, and then I kind of fell back because at the time that I declared myself wanting to be an artist to my family, they told me that, okay, if — well, my stepfather set me down at the kitchen table. I remember it vividly. He said, "Oh, so you don't want to go to business school anymore, go into business?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "I want to be an artist."

Now, again, as I said earlier, I didn't know how to define that. I knew it was something creative. And if I really was pushed against the wall I would say it would be a painter, because I really didn't know about the other arts too much. So he said, "Okay, you want to be a starving artist." I said, "Yes." He said, "Do you want to live in an apartment with no utilities or electricity or anything like that?" I said, "Yes." "You don't want to have any food in the house?" "Yes." [They laugh.] And he said, "Okay, if that's what you want to do, do it, but we're not going to support you." I said, "Okay."

So what I did was change my sort of classes at the end of the semester. I took all art classes. And I got myself a part-time job. Was it part time or full time? I was a full-time job and I went to school at night. And then during that transition point when I'm going more into declaring myself an artist, I start to feel like I wanted to live on my own.

And I guess I was about 21 or something, and I thought that was a rite of passage. I thought everybody did that. And so I had some friends that had done that and some that were living at home. But for over a year I kept telling my mother, "I'm going to move." And so at one point she got tired of me telling her, so she said, "Either move or shut up. [They laugh.]

So anyway, I was kind of timid about moving because it was great idea, but then I kind of reflected on what I was giving up. And it was a whole lot. And so I was working full time for the County of Los Angeles. It was very easy to get government or county jobs at that time in the '60s because the test seemed so simple. You know, it was yes and no questions. And it wasn't the quality; it was the quantity. So the more you got right — and I moved into that position at an early age and I got a job at a county office. I think at one point I was in the mailroom.

And then I got — my mother found a car for me from some little old lady that hardly had ever driven it. And then at another point — oh, before getting the car, a very interesting story is that I bought myself a motorcycle because my mother wouldn't buy me a convertible red mustang. [They laugh.] And I just knew I had to have that. But I couldn't get it, so I had a little bit amount of money so I said, "Okay, I'm going to fix her. If I can't get the car, I'm going to get myself a motorcycle."

So I went to a Honda motorcycle dealer in Los Angeles. I had been on a motorcycle maybe twice, on the back, of a friend that had one. And so I knew it was a way to move around. It didn't have a top or windows or anything but still I could get around the city.

So I went to this motorcycle dealer and I bought a used Honda motorcycle. It wasn't a giant — it wasn't like a Harley or anything. It went up only to 60 miles an hour or a little bit more than that. And I never got on the freeway with it because I didn't think it was strong enough to really go through traffic like that.

So when I purchased it I gave them the money and they said, "Well, let's kind of, like, get you started in the back alley of the store to show you — see if you can balance it. Don't push the gears at the same time because you'll fall forward. Don't do this or that."

So I turned the motor on. And they were holding the bike and I was ready to be pushed off, just like a little child on, like, a two-wheeler. And then before I got pushed off I said, "How do you put it in reverse?" And then they looked at me and laughed. They said, "It doesn't go in reverse." [They laugh.] Because I was thinking of a car.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: So they pushed me off. And then I went through red lights because I was afraid to stop on the brakes, on the front brakes, because of the way they had put the paranoia in me. So finally my eyes were tearing, my mouth was all dry, and I'm going through traffic, and I said, "I've got to stop and get a Coke or something to drink." I said, "I can't go any further." I'm kind of, like, dehydrating.

So I made a turn into a drive-in sort of like restaurant with — sort of like a McDonald's sort of thing where the cars parked. So I went straight to the back wall and hit the wall really soft to stop because, again, I was afraid to stop.

And then I finally got home and my mother says, "What's this?" "This is my motorcycle." So I had the motorcycle for a year, and it was a lot of fun. I rode up and down Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood at night with other people that had motorcycles. And I had only a few accidents.

One time I had a flat tire. I was going about — I was in regular traffic and the thing started wobbling. It was in the back. And said, "Uh-oh, what am I going to do?" I always had a helmet and gloves on, but I didn't know what to do. And I could have slowed down or something but I felt I had to jump off.

So I ejected myself off the bike. I slid for about 20 or 30 feet, and the cement ate up the gloves but didn't get to my hands. My leg was bruised. I had the helmet on. And the bike just turned over and the motor was still going. And I landed sort of on the side of where a golf course was, and some of the men kind of looked at me and said — they made some sarcastic remark and kept playing golf.

So I got up and I went and picked up my bike. And I knew that it would be a problem getting the flat tire fixed because it was in the back and this was a motorcycle. So I wasn't far from home so I kind of, like, limped home with my motorcycle, and eventually got it fixed. But I guess that was the most serious accident I had. I had one or two others but they were minor.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a lot of accidents in one year. [They laugh.] I can see why your mother decided on the car.

MR. CUMMINGS: But the interesting story about that motorcycle thing, I eventually — when I gave up the motorcycle, I sold it to a school friend. When I say a school friend, we went to elementary, junior high and high school, and even junior college together. And he became a famous independent filmmaker, Charles Burnett. He made *Killer of Sheep*.

And he lived in the same area where I live, and he was commuting to UCLA and it took over two hours or more by bus, so his first piece of transportation was this motorcycle. And he had that until I think it broke down. Maybe, I don't know, eight to maybe 10 years later — within a 10-year period he got a MacArthur award. So he's still out in L.A. We still communicate. He has grown children now and stuff. But that was a little link there.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: When you made that switch in L.A. City College from business to art —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — what were you studying? And were there any teachers that were influential?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, no, there weren't any teachers that were influential. What I was doing was I didn't know where I wanted to go in art because I opened the door — when I said I wanted to be an artist, my parents let me be free, but I didn't know which way to go. I thought painting was it. But I said, "Well, let me try ceramics."

So I took a ceramics class, but it was too slow of a process. I couldn't do the cylinder too right. And when I talked to the instructor about bright colors and everything, he talked about how the brighter colors cost more money, the glazes and stuff like that, and then you had to kind of, you know, step by step. So I took one class of that and gave that up.

I don't know if I took a painting class or not. From there I thought, well, maybe I'll do interior design, because I don't know, color and fabric and design, stuff like that. So I took myself to Woodbury College — that was in Los Angeles — that gave four-year degrees in interior design and decorating.

So I took a class there, and all the teachers were very encouraging to me because they could see some talent there. And I was sort of encouraged that that's what I might want to do, but I was still not totally — it wasn't allowing me to just do color like I wanted and to be creative, because you were very limited because you were dealing with certain sort of items or structures or decorative forms and stuff, and you worked within that sort of vocabulary.

But I guess towards the end of the first year I met this graduating senior. And we crossed paths because he was about the only black person there besides myself. And he was pining about how he didn't feel he was going to be able to find any employment after being there for four years. And I said, "Well, why not?" And he said, "Well," he said, "Most of the popular decorating houses want you to come in with a list of clientele or possible clients that have money. And so if you can't bring that with you, you can't get in." And so I said, "Oh." I said, "Well, I can't create a list." So that kind of threw me off a little bit about pursuing that.

So I think I dropped out of that. And then I think for about —

MS. RIEDEL: That was '68, '69.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, that was in that time frame. And then towards the end of '69, some of the friends that I had known had graduated from UCLA and were going to go to New York. And so they went — two or three went to New York and they were there for about six months. And then one of them invited me to come to New York and experience it.

And he said, "Once you get here, you'll see how L.A. is just a country town." And that statement just blew my mind because I could not understand L.A. being a country town, with Hollywood, Sunset Boulevard, Malibu, the mountains, the beach and all this. A country town? I said, "No, Nevada might be a country town but not California."

But when I got here, it was sort of like Disneyland to me because it never slept. I mean, L.A., you didn't have an automobile you couldn't get to different places late at night because public transportation stopped. And the streets were always desolate late at night, whereas New York, people were on the street 24 hours. And so that was amazing.

And it was also amazing because of the fact that I didn't know anyone in New York except these people. I had no relatives or anything. So it was being in a new world by myself. And so that's how that came about, me traveling to New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Where did you first come in the city, and when exactly was it and for how long did you stay?

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, well, prior to leaving New York I had risen up into the bureaucratic system.

MS. RIEDEL: In Los Angeles.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: I was a caseworker taking food stamp applications.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And I was really sympathetic to the people that came in applying, whereas some were really insensitive to the individuals, and I guess because they were doing the job too long or they just didn't want to connect. And so I connected with a lot of people.

And so there was one woman that came in with three little boys and she was desperate for food stamps. And I was sitting next to the person taking her application when I was working with somebody else. And I heard how cold and indifferent he was to her. So I complained to the supervisor and I took her application, and she was eligible.

And at that time too I felt I wanted to be a Big Brother, so I saw her outside the office and I started taking the kids to parks and a play. I took them over to my mother's house so that she could meet them. And she fed them and stuff like that, because the mother was having a hard time. And so before I left L.A., I took the three little boys to Disneyland. And it was, like, practically a hundred degrees.

And I had one suitcase, and I was supposed to go with one of the guys that was already living in New York, but he had to come out to L.A. to do business for family business and he couldn't leave the same time that he originally thought. But I was so wound up to take this trip to New York that the night before, I couldn't sleep. And I think it was that night he told me he couldn't go. I said, "Well, I'm going anyway. I cannot sit here. I'm too anxious and stressed out thinking about this trip so I've got to get on this plane."

So I got on the plane and I fell asleep, okay? I had California clothes because I was a California native. I got off the plane, it was snowing. It was close to 100 in L.A. I got off the plane, it's snowing. I had this cute little suede coat on. [Laughs.] And I must say too, you know, coming from L.A. I went through the "flower power," the love generation thing. I was sort of embedded with folk music. Bob Dylan, Judy Collins and all of that was in me, plus a little Motown sound too, but I was more the free spirit.

So I got off the plane with this suede coat. I think I had bellbottoms on. I had my Beatles moustache. And so since I wasn't coming with anybody that lived there, I was given instructions to get in a taxi, go down to Greenwich Village, go to this address; there would be someone there to meet me. So I said, "Okay."

So I got my luggage, one suitcase, got into the taxi, and the first thing the taxi cab asked me was, "Oh, did you just come from Jamaica?" And I'm just saying, "Huh? Jamaica what?" [They laugh.] And then I said, "No, I just came from L.A." He said, "Oh." And little did I know, after reflecting on it years later, that I saw what he saw, what — this brown-skinned kind of burnt-looking person in a suede coat, not prepared for the weather at all, that he must be coming from somewhere else, and it must be the islands.

So he took me to where I was supposed to go, down in the Village. I got out of the cab, and there was this little Italian guy waiting for me. And he had to be about — no, I was about 25 so he had to be about 22 or 23. And so the first thing he said, "Oh, are you hungry? Do you want to go to the Pink Teacup" — which was a soul food restaurant. [Laughs.] And I said, "Well, what is the Pink Teacup?" He said, "They have soul food." And I said, "Well, I don't know. I guess so. Is there any other choices?" So we went there and it was pretty good food.

And then I went to where I was going to be staying, and it was on Leroy Street, right off of 7th Avenue. And it was in an apartment building. There was a little old Italian lady who was the super. And she always peeked out her door every time the front door opened. And she was always going up and down the hall with a mop or a broom. And then I was in this apartment with two other guys and an Afghan dog, which was very much in vogue at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. CUMMINGS: And we were sleeping on the floor. It was a studio apartment. [Laughs.] And, you know, we were all trying to survive. And they were — one was trying to write musicals and stuff, and one wanted to be a filmmaker, and I was just there for the ride. I said I wanted to be an artist but I really put no effort into becoming an artist at that time. And in order to survive I had to get a job, so —

MS. RIEDEL: You're not coming to visit; you're moving there.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I put everything in storage. I quit my job.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. CUMMINGS: And it was supposed to be temporary, but I didn't know what "temporary" was, but I did leave everything behind.

MS. RIEDEL: That was brave and adventurous.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well —

MS. RIEDEL: It's someplace you'd never been, to just pack up — well, it was the spirit of the times.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, it was that spirit —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — at the time, because one side story to that, to talk about spirit and what I thought I could do, I even auditioned to be in the chorus for *Hello, Dolly* with Pearl Bailey. And I had no experience. And I got up there and I felt such like a fool when they said, okay, do this, do that, and I was in a chorus of other guys. And I said, "Michael, what are you doing?"

But at that time there was a song that Nina Simone was singing that was very popular in the black community, "Young, Gifted and Black," and that was sort of carried over on from the '60s into the '70s. And I thought I was young, gifted and — I could do anything. So to tell that story about auditioning for Pearl Bailey, it's just so hilarious. [Laughs.] I had no dance skills at all. [They laugh.] But I went — because, again, the guy that wanted to write music, he was getting Variety, and I saw these jobs, sort of, calls and stuff. I didn't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: So I just did it one time. I never tried it again. But what saved me was, bless my parents, I had business skills because I had two years of college taking all sorts of things related to business — typing, filing, whatever else. And so I was able to get a lot of part-time or temp jobs in New York City with my office or business skills.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that really saved me. And I also developed more art, sort of like cultivated and enhanced what I had, to move on to work in a lot of nonprofit arts organizations over the years with my business skills.

And then outside of that, then I did my own thing in terms of developing my art skills. And I think I got serious about 1973 or something. It was right at the — well, I met Romare Bearden's work through going to the Museum of Modern Art. In the early 1970s they had a one-man show of his work. And they kind of showed how he took these small collages that he created and they blew them up. And they really became a large narrative, very intense, about the whole sort of community or culture of, you know, the black community.

And so that really struck me as something that I could relate to, even though — and I could see Picasso's cubism in it. And Braque and Picasso, I liked both of their works, paintings and collage. And I saw that in Romare Bearden's work. And I said, "Oh, this is something that I could do," because I wasn't really feeling it any longer as painting.

And then, I had tried to paint but I found several things: Financially it was expensive, and then you needed storage for the canvases so they wouldn't be damaged. And then if you weren't selling, then the fact that you were accumulating these canvas frames and stretchers and stuff like that, it was a little bit too much. So when I discovered collage, that was something small that I could still be creative at and still venture into exploring, taking on the challenges of cubism artwork. And I said, "Why not?" So I started doing that for, I guess, a good year or more.

And then at one time when I was working for the Department of Cultural Affairs here in New York City, I was working with a woman named Karen Bacon, whose brother is Kevin Bacon. But she was an events planner for the Department of Cultural Affairs, and she gave a lot of big events in Central Park.

And I was her technical person. I worked with her in hiring people to work in the parks. I went to supervise them. I was the liaison with the park maintenance people and the people that we hired to do events. And I was given a little orange pickup truck that I rode around the park, and I could even drive it to my apartment in the Village. So I had my own orange truck. And I had that for a year.

And during that time frame we have one event at the American Craft Museum, which is now the Museum of Art and Design, that was on 53rd Street across the street from the Museum of Modern Art. Well, our event was called "Make a Banner, Fly a Banner." And we had an artist from Canada named [Norman] Laliberté, and he made tapestries with Renaissance themes. They said he was really from Brooklyn, but he said "Laliberté." [Laughs.] That's his name, Laliberté.

But anyway, he was live there, instructing workshops. And there was a film about him creating his work, and there was an assignment given to all the staff to make a banner, because at the end of a week we were going to have a parade around 53rd Street and 5th Avenue with a little band. And there was a family event, so families

were invited to bring their children to come in and make this banner and then come back at the end of the week.

So the staff was told to make a banner to participate. So it was the first time that I put my hands on fabric to create something with. And I just approached it like I was making a collage, but with fabric. But I didn't want to use glue. I was very resistant to glue. I didn't want that on my fabric. So I demanded of myself to use needle and thread.

MS. RIEDEL: Why was that? Do you remember?

MR. CUMMINGS: I don't know. I was just anti-glue. [Laughs.] I was just anti-glue.

MS. RIEDEL: You had used it on your collages. You had used it —

MR. CUMMINGS: I had used it on the collages and I had used it —

MS. RIEDEL: — in shadowboxes?

MR. CUMMINGS: — also in a two-year artist-in-residence program in a public school. Agnes Gund, who now is the executive director of the Museum of Modern Art, she was a younger woman then and she had money. And she came into New York City, and because they had taken artists out of school, she wanted to put artists back in school.

So I was in a pilot program whereby I was given a large budget in a school up in Harlem, right next to City College. And for two years I had, like — I had a teacher's aid, and I had three classes a day. And I had artists come in and talk to the students and everything. But for three classes, the different age groups for four days a week, I gave them experiences in creating art through all sorts of media.

And I would have music going on. I painted the room myself because they said that the custodian never had time to paint the room. I put colored tape on the floor, making designs. I had posters all over the place. I had mobiles coming down. Alexander Calder was talked about, and stuff like that. I think we went on field trips.

And then I plugged in to all the resources that were available. The Smithsonian had traveling art shows, so I had those come to the school. The Museum of Natural History had sort of things going on, and I had that brought in. So it was just kind of blossoming with all sorts of art sort of forms and media going on with these children. And we were using glue and we're using all sorts of other things.

But when it came to making this banner at this point in time, I was anti-glue. And so I guess I wanted to be a purist or something at the time, working with fabric. I couldn't see glue with fabric. And so I walked around. I kind of — well, what do they call it — shopped around for a place to do it, to sew it for me. So I went to a tailor. And this is scrap material and I didn't think it was that valuable. He wanted \$100 to sew it. And he said, "Oh, wow, I've never seen anything like this. This is real exciting. Oh, \$100." I said, "No."

And then I went to a woman that made clothes in SoHo, and she said, "Oh, Michael, you could do it yourself. I'll teach you how to use a sewing machine." And she talked about the bobbin and the tension, the needle and the threading, and stuff like that. I said, "Oh, no, I can't do that." [Laughs.] It was such a frightening experience. It was like learning how to type on — work on a computer. That's the way I looked at it at the time, the sewing machine. It wasn't simple. So I said, "No, I can't do that."

So I kind of had run out of other options, so I said, "Okay, Michael, you're just going to have to sew it yourself." So I got a book on embroidery stitching and I did a simple running stitch —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — up and down, up and down. And I did that. And after it was all over with, people said, "Oh, that was real exciting. It sort of looked like Romare Bearden a little bit. And it looked like a giant collage, and it was quite interesting." But for me —

MS. RIEDEL: Was it a narrative piece? Was it abstract?

MR. CUMMINGS: It was a narrative piece. It was a profile. It was almost like in that box there, the shadowbox. It was a profile of a woman's face, and then she was sort of like in the midst of tall, green sort of stalks with flowers on top, with leaves. And I had sewn sort of ceramic little buttons and beads on it. And it was really simple.

And then I had sewn sort of some triangles on the side to kind of make it look like it was a border a little bit. And that was — and it wasn't little. It was about maybe 3 by 4 feet or something. And so I did that, and after it was all over with, I started talking to myself, not as a senile person, but I just sort of critiqued and evaluated what I had created. And I saw there were more possibilities there than I had initially thought about, because I just

thought of this as a one-time project, and it was over and I would go back to my collage or whatever I was doing.

But this said, no, this is the way you're going. And I saw this as a way to accomplish doing my large paintings but, as I told people early on when I was starting, I could roll up the fabric, fold it up, put it in a drawer or a box, and I didn't have to worry about a lot of storage space. And I said it was soft also. And then I said, "The palette" — I said, "I have an endless palette of fabric colors and prints and designs."

So I said, "Oh yeah, all this is coming together." But then it was a matter of the construction of bringing it together and keeping it on a foundation. And I say "foundation" and keeping it together; I decided early on that that first banner technically was considered an appliqué construction. I didn't know it at the time but I found out that's what it was. And so I stuck with that from then to now. I do appliqué. I get a foundation fabric and I put pieces on top. It's like creating a puzzle with pieces and bringing it together into a composition.

So that's what I did then. And so I did that for a year, and for a year I only made what would be — what you would call a top. It wasn't quilted. And for a year I was, like, learning or picking up or developing my skills. And in developing my skills I was getting some mentoring. And the mentoring primarily came from the executive director at the craft museum at the time, Paul Smith.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: And Paul Smith was a very kind guy. And because we had the exhibit there, we had connection by way of me being a staff member at the Cultural Affairs Department.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And I was in and out of the museum a lot during that event, so I got to meet him and see him, and we got to talking. So when it was all over with, I must have expressed to him that I wanted to go more into this fabric designing, so he pointed the direction of how they had a resource library and how I should go into the resource library and look at the books and different things that they had.

So I did that, and I think from there I might have bought some books on embroidery and learning about fabric and sewing — primarily sewing it, because I hadn't thought about quilts at the time. That didn't come into the conversation.

So over that period of time I would bring my — whatever I made to him and he would critique it in a very gentle sort of way, you know. And it was an amazing — looking at it or thinking about it now, it was an amazing experience that I had that access.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so, I did that many a time over the year. And again, I guess even leaving him I could tell he was trying to be really gentle and kind and not say, you're making a mess, but — [they laugh] — or what is this?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: But, you know, there was an undertone of encouragement and keep going at it, because he could see, I guess, that I really wanted to keep at it. So at the end of the year I made the largest piece, which was 4 feet by 6 feet, and it was — I was using at that time — I hadn't really explored the fabric market in the city.

And so I was using materials that I used with the children when I was teaching, and primarily that was bright-colored pieces of felt. But I wanted to move away from felt after I started reading about how, for storage purposes — you know, moths and insects and stuff were attracted to felt, which was part of wool, and I wanted to move into linen and cottons and stuff.

But at that time this was nothing but little triangles and circles made out of — cut out of bright-colored felt with beads and buttons. And there was a sort of abstract pattern to it. I kind of saw it as the city traffic in terms of bridges and roads —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and movement that way.

And after that was over with I think what happened after that, I went — because all of those things are basically, I think, more abstract than any sort of narrative going on. But there was a leap from that into making narrative quilts. And I think the first series I did could have been *Springtime in Memphis*. Even though I did a small collage series, I did four quilts called *Springtime in Memphis*.

And there could have been something before that, but I remember that was when the quilt came together, and that's when a person that collected quilts that lived in Baltimore, Maryland named Roland Freeman —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — who had created a lot of quilts — exhibitions and books — and he was a photographer for the Smithsonian at one point in the late '60s or something, and that's how we came and discovered the quilt world in the South, because he was photographing the fading South. And he said he came upon all these women that had these quilts on fences and stuff and he got them for hardly anything. But he amassed this quilt collection.

But anyway, at the time that we came together he had heard of me working with fabric and how I was doing quilts. And he came through New York one time. He came to my apartment down in the Village and set down with me and kind of talked about his history a little bit. And I told him about my lack of history with quilts, and then I showed him what I was doing.

And at the time I was doing *Springtime in Memphis*. And one of the *Springtime in Memphis* — to kind of take a side trip a little bit — is in the Schomburg Library Collection [Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library] on 135th Street. They have one of the — Schomburg, they have one of the quilts. And another quilt is in — well, it's not in the Getty Museum, but the Getty Museum made an educational packet, and I gave a quilt to the African American Museum at Exhibition Park in L.A.

And the Getty Museum put together an educational packet. What they did was make a poster of the quilt with about four or five other artists, and they laminated the poster. On the back they gave the history of the artist and the name of the artwork and how it was developed. And this was a packet that they sold to schools — the Getty Museum sold to schools.

And so that particular quilt got called into being in an exhibit at the Studio Museum in Harlem at one time. And at one time Oprah Winfrey came to that exhibit for that — for that exhibit. She came to that show because Faith Ringgold was in the show also, and that was one of her favorite friends. And so she came to acknowledge the show and Faith Ringgold, but I was the only male in the show.

And so as the director was walking Oprah around the museum, she said, "Oh, and this is the quilt called *Springtime in Memphis* by Michael Cummings. And this is the only man in the show." And Oprah said, "Oh, my goodness, a man in the quilt show," sort of like that.

And then the director went into telling her about the story. "And Michael has this, called *Springtime in Memphis*, and what he is showing is how — he has an Egyptian theme because he's relating not only Memphis to Memphis, Tennessee, but Memphis, Egypt, and how there's this spaceship of Egyptians flying across the sky. And then you have — on the ground you have — it's a night scene." I used black velvet and stuff like that. It was really kind of interesting.

So that was one of the quilts that I made in that series. So Roland, at the time he visited me, I had just finished I think one of the last quilts in that series. And for the finishing touches for the border — generally all four borders kind of match up, I thought, but in this particular quilt I had four black corners and one green corner. And I struggled with that for a long time before I sewed it down and made it permanent.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's just three black and one green?

MR. CUMMINGS: One green, I think. Or it could be the opposite, three green and one black, but there's one color opposite the other three. And again, mentally I struggled with it. It was sort of like an internal force that I didn't have any control over that said it has to be this way. And because I'm — you know, looking at, you know, art books and you think about symmetry and all this sort of stuff — you know, Asian art maybe, but this was not Asian art.

So I did that. And so when he came to visit me this quilt was out, and he started to quiz me as to why I put this one different color there. And I said, "I don't know." I said, "I don't have any explanation. It was just something that I felt I had to do. The quilt was saying that's what it needed."

And so he quizzed me a little bit longer, and then he said, "Well, the reason I'm asking all of this is because," he said, "In Southern tradition" — and there's a superstition that, you know, you don't make all four corners the same. But he said, "This is something you learn, you know, by way of other quilters in the South and something. Here you are isolated and you never heard of it, but you did it." So that was a little scary. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. It's interesting, though, that you had grown up looking at so many other different kinds of art. You've mentioned Asian art —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — and Native American in particular, and South American.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So your sensibility maybe was differently informed as well.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And these quilts, the *Springtime in Memphis* series that you're talking about, was this in the early '80s?

MR. CUMMINGS: No, '70s, the late '70s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, the late '70s. All right.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, the late '70s. And so he looked at that and he told me that story, and I can't say that I ever did that again. I can't think of a quilt that I did that again. And that entry into making quilts, some spiritual force — [laughs] — had me do that, and it had me provide that information through Roland Freeman, to tell me about that history that I was connecting with.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I see. I see.

Also, going back just to before you had been quilting, you had been painting —

MR. CUMMINGS: I was painting.

MS. RIEDEL: — and making shadowboxes. So you were developing a sense of composition and color.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, the shadow boxes didn't come about until the '90s, I believe.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, really?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. They could have been the late '80s but —

[Cross talk.]

MR. CUMMINGS: — I think maybe the '90s, I think.

[End of disc.]

MR. CUMMINGS: [In progress] — because there was one I think in the '80s — I don't know; I can't put a finger on a lot of the art objects. I guess I was doing more collage, kind of doing the shadowboxes. I have to look back in my records to see dates on that.

MS. REIDEL: But certainly collages and paint.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, definitely.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, definitely.

MS. REIDEL: And when did the collages come about? Did they come about after you saw the Romare Bearden show?

MR. CUMMINGS: They came about — yeah, because I knew nothing about collage in L.A. I didn't know anything about the whole set of African-American cultural history until I came to New York and started to hear about the Harlem Renaissance, started to go to the Schomburg Library, started to pick up books and read about the various artists, the various movements and stuff going on in New York.

And it just took my breath away because I did realize what my friend had said — [laughs] — country town — really did apply to L.A., because California and L.A. history is so limited as opposed to the richness of the East and all the various immigration groups that came through New York as opposed to the West, and what they brought with them and what was developed.

So I was just in culture shock, you know, at all that was around me and all the sort of, like, paths, sort of like

icons that had lived in New York and had created in New York, from performers to visual artists, you know, all that.

So I was absorbing that, and then I came across a Bearden show in the early '70s. And that was a transition for me because I put down the brush and I started picking up the scissors and paper and glue. And I kind of went forward with that, falling back just a little bit on painting but mainly just going forward with that.

And then, like I said, through the Department of Cultural Affairs and that office and the events that we had, I was able to meet him by way of a person that lived — not lived there but worked in the office, Suzanne Randolph. She eventually developed her own art consultant company and did installations around the city.

But she knew everybody and so she introduced me to him. And everybody called him Romy, but I never called him Romy. I always called him Romare Bearden or Mr. Bearden. But through her I met him. And then he was a very gracious, open, warm individual. I mean, he had no sort of formality in terms of his aura. He was just a friendly, warm individual, embraced you instantly.

So in speaking to him he said, "Oh, yeah, come by. You know, let me see your work." He was very encouraging and open. So I walked five flights of steps to go visit him at his studio in SoHo right on the corner of Canal and Wooster. And he was there with his cat and his wife, and he had lots of books. And that's where he worked. That was one of his studios.

He did have a studio on Lenox, because there's a large collage canvas that he did that the Metropolitan Museum has that's about maybe 15 to 20 feet long and it's supposed to be — it's called *Lenox Avenue*. And he captures two or three blocks where he worked.

And so I took my work there and he looked it over. And again, like Paul Smith, he was very gentle about encouragement and said a few little things. And that was enough to keep my ego, you know, sky high. And I said, "Okay, I'm doing something. I'm saying something. I'm communicating."

So I did that for a time. And then I think —

MS. REIDEL: Would you go periodically to show him your work?

[Cross talk.]

MR. CUMMINGS: I would go periodically, yes. I must have made a good dozen trips, yeah.

MS. REIDEL: Over the course of —

MR. CUMMINGS: Over the course of a time of I guess maybe a two-year period. And then I would see him at his openings. I went to every opening he had and we would say hello. And then, again, I knew his wife by way of her getting grants from the New York State Council of the Arts, where I worked for 30 years. And we would talk and stuff like that.

So I had two Bearden connections, the husband and wife. And so that was — and then through the state arts council, at one point the governor awards gave awards to exceptional artists in all art fields. They did that for about four or five years when I was at the state arts council. So Louise Nevelson is a person that I met, Robert Rauschenberg, Miles Davis. And there were some architects and other people that I met through those events.

And so I really had an exceptional sort of like view and access to the art world. And then, living in the West Village like I did in the '70s, it was sort of like the "wild creative West" because you had people migrating from SoHo to the West Village. But SoHo was just a lot of raggedy buildings with dirty streets, but you had artists' lofts. And that was going on.

And then you had, what is it, AIR [artist in residence, zoning requirement], artists — resident artists something — resident — the city gave loft spaces to artists, the city buildings that they owned in SoHo. So artists could apply and get these lofts, and that's how they got into a lot of the lofts in the early '70s and the late '60s.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: They had this city program. And so you would just kind of go through there, but then you started to see the documentation and the photographs of Rauschenberg collecting trash and putting it together, and in ending up in the Museum of Modern Art, and his prints. And, again texts and images and photographs and everything, and his prints, was always fascinating.

And then with the cubism there was, like, some texts going on in there too, but I didn't do anything with it at that time. It wasn't until much later, like in the year 2000 maybe that I started, in that decade, to start to apply

text information.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: But towards the very end of the '80s I thought I was missing out on something in terms of a family, so I thought I wanted to adopt. And I went to some places but it was like, "No, no," as a single male. And then also, I was gay. And then I knew some people that worked in some agency. They said, "Well, no, Michael, that's not going to work either."

So I said, "Well, okay, I want to try something." So I said, "I'll be a foster care parent." So I had a friend that was the head of an agency, but he — well, he didn't — well, he had an agency that had a lot of problems. The people that were foster care were really taking advantage of the system. They were warehousing the kids. The more kids, the more money they got. They didn't really do anything for the kids but they collected all this money, and they bought themselves vans and travels and all sorts of stuff.

So he gave me two kids that had a lot of problems. One was a 9-year-old who was in the fourth grade but he was reading on a sixth-grade level. However, he didn't have everything connected in terms of, I guess, behavior. He had fits. But all this was acted out because he wanted to be with his other siblings, and his other siblings were with his grandparents, because her daughters had dumped all the kids on the mother.

And so all the social workers didn't want him to be there because they thought it was a bad influence. And so I, with my full-time job, said, "Okay, I'll put down my art dreams to try to invest in trying to help these two people." So he was 9 and the other kid was 16 — no, he was 16 ½ — he might have been 17. He was almost in high school.

So I ran around instantly becoming a parent with after-school programs, getting them in school, getting school papers transferred, school clothes, homework, lunch, going to parent meetings. And all this —

MS. REIDEL: What year was this?

MR. CUMMINGS: This was '89 —

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: — '89. And what happened was that the little boy, every time he didn't want to do something, he would have a temper tantrum, and that would be anywhere. And he would holler and scream. He would drool at the mouth. And I would tell people about that at the office and they didn't believe me, because it was extreme. And yet he was kind and gentle and all that when he was on his regular sort of self.

But he had got put out of another foster home where he was with a family — the husband was a policeman and the woman was a teacher, and they had one little child. And they came home one day, they said — and the babysitter was there or something — but he was trying to choke their little kid, and they put him out.

And so when that process was going on, they said he left their home in the Bronx, 9 years old, by himself, went from the Bronx down to city hall office to say that he wanted to go back to his grandmother's. And they said, "How did you get here?" And he said, "I just came on the train."

So I got him, but eventually the temper tantrums did not work out for me. And he wanted to go back — that was the whole reason he was doing all of that. So eventually we had a meeting where — there was periodically — you had to bring the kids and you — and all the parents to the meeting down at the office. So one day he had a temper tantrum there, and then that's when everybody saw what I was talking about.

So they said, "Well, Michael, you know, he's so young we can't put him in a group home. So the only thing we can do is send him back to his grandmother." So I said, "Well, I can't take him back." And so he went back, and on his way out the door he said, "Oh, okay, I'm going to go back to my grandmother's and I'm going to be an uncle." And then his oldest brother was like 15 or something. I said, "Who — you're an uncle? Who's going to have the baby?" "Oh, my brother's girlfriend is going to have a baby." I said, "Okay."

So he left and then he — I think I got one or two little notes from him telling me what he wanted for Christmas, along with — and then the other guy, he couldn't — he had gotten pushed along in the school system, so he was about ready to graduate but he was on a fourth-grade reading level, and he was that high. And they said he came to school neat and clean all the time, so nobody could see what was going on.

He was gay, and I tried to tell him — I said, "You know, if you want to go to school, whatever you want to do, you know, I'm there to help you. But, you know, you've got to go to school." And I found out he had gotten a boyfriend who was — now, he wasn't 18 yet and the boyfriend was, like, 20-something. And then I found out he wasn't going to school. He was having the boyfriend come over here and they were spending the day together

until the boyfriend had to go to work.

I said, "No, this is not going to work out." And so I tried to talk to him about that. And then he said to me, he said, "Well, you know, I'm just going to check out of the program and, you know, you won't have to see me anymore." And he said, "I'm going to join the Army," because I kept saying, "Well, what do you think you can do? You can't hardly read."

And he didn't want me to help him with his homework. [... -MAC] And then when I went to the family meetings they said, "Oh, you're the first person that ever came to see about what he was doing in school." So I said, "Well, you can't join the Army because," I said, "You can't even read or write, so they don't want you."

So in the foster care system, what they do is give the kids, at 18 — if they want to get out quickly, they'll sign a piece of paper and they give them \$500 and they push them out the door and they don't ask any questions. So I don't know if that's still the policy or not, but that was the policy then. So he got his \$500 and he kind of got swallowed up into the world.

At one point when I was here, I tried to reconnect him with his family in the South. I sent him down there to meet his father and those cousins and things down there, hoping that that might do something. So he came back. The first week he was all aglow about — happy about the experience and all that. And then the second week: "I don't want to go back down to that little country place. It's too backward for me." He wanted to stay in the big city. So I said, "Okay." So eventually I don't know what happened to him because I never heard from him again.

So after that experience in 1989, I said, "Okay, Michael, you tried that. It didn't work out." A lot of people said, "Well, you weren't given the best samples of kids to deal with anyway." I said, "I'll just invest my time and energy into my art, because that was a diversion for '89."

MS. REIDEL: Absolutely.

MR. CUMMINGS: So '89 I found that poster that had the African jazz performers on it —

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and over that winter — I guess November, December —

MS. REIDEL: Who was the photographer of that poster? Do you know?

MR. CUMMINGS: I'll have to get back to you. I have a postcard with his name on it.

MS. REIDEL: Right. That would be nice to have.

MR. CUMMINGS: But I don't know it offhand.

MS. REIDEL: Right. Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: I'll get back to you about that.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: But that I guess — what would be the word — germinated in my mind —

MS. REIDEL: Sure

MR. CUMMINGS: — that image.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so at the stroke of the New Year, I plunged into working on that series. And I say "series," and I didn't do series until about, I think, the late '70s or — it had to be the mid-'70s.

And another mentor I had was named Willie Birch. And Willie Birch was an artist who was about maybe five or six years older than I was, a Southern guy, black, from New Orleans, and had graduated from college as an artist and stuff like that. And he taught a little bit. And we crossed paths at the Studio Museum because he was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum, along with David Hammons. And David Hammons is like a very well known conceptual artist.

And David Hammons is actually also from L.A. And we went to the same framer in L.A., and I didn't even know him at the time but the framer kept saying — and the framer — this is all in Beverly Hills or Hollywood, and he

said, "Michael, you should meet this artist, and here's some of his work." And he had the body prints, the famous body prints of David — and I said, "Ew." Well, I wish I would have bought one at the time. [Laughs.]

But he said, "You should meet him." So one time I came in there and David Hammons was in there. And this was in the late '60s. And so he was a kid and I was a kid. And we said, "Hi," you know, kind of shy at the time. And I said, "Oh, hi," and then that was it. And then later on he appeared in New York. He was the artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum and we met there.

And we didn't have a lot to talk about. Willie Birch is the one that took me under his wing and kind of told me — and tried to — yeah, to show me different methods and techniques that I should use. And one of them was — he said, "Well, Michael, don't just do one composition, or take a theme and just do one design or collage." He said, "Take it as far as you can take it. Try other variations on that same theme or image and see where you can go with it. Try different colors and forms and stuff." And I said, "Oh, really?"

And so I did that and it created a whole new sort of view on how to experience what I was making, because it made me look at it at different angles by way of different colors and shapes and forms. And so —

MS. REIDEL: And when was this meeting with Willie Birch?

MR. CUMMINGS: That was about sort of like '73, '74 —

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: — because it was that time one of the first series — early series was *Memphis in Springtime* —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — a quilt series.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And then the collage series. And all that was about '77. So it was about '75 or so I started doing as series format.

MS. REIDEL: Series.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so in 1990, when I started on this trip with *African Jazz* quilts, the idea was to do maybe three to four or five, but they came so fluidly out of me, and easily that friends around me said — they kept encouraging me and kind of pushing me to do more. They said, "Oh, Michael, just don't do six. Do eight. You can do it. You can do it."

So I got kind of like encouraged to take on the challenge. It was sort of like a dare. And so I did. And then once I got to eight they said, "Oh, to 10. You could do 10. Go on and do 10." So I pushed myself, said, "Okay." "Do an even 12. Just do a dozen. Just go on and do that." So I did that. But in moving through that series and looking at the size and what I did each month, I clocked myself. I did one per month in 1990. Every 30 days I started a new *African Jazz* quilt, and each one was approximately 6 feet by 9 feet.

And people would say, "Well, how did you do it when you're doing your 9-to-5?" And I said, "Well, what I would do is that I would come home from work, jump into my work clothes, for artists. I would eat something that wasn't complicated to prepare. I could get down to a sandwich. And then I gave myself three to four hours work time after I had eaten."

And I said, "What I did, I retitled my timer as my 'personal trainer.'" And I'd say, "I put on my timer 60 minutes and I'd charge into my artwork." I said, "When that bell goes off, it brings you back into reality, and I reflect upon and I review on what I had accomplished. And if I'm not satisfied and I know I'm going for another two to three hours, I turn the 60-minute timer on again and I push myself to work faster."

And they said, "Well, where did you get that idea about the timer?" I said, "Well, I read that somewhere. Some other artist, a writer or somebody, had a timer. And I thought it was a great idea, and I embraced it and I went out and brought from, I think — I don't know what kind of store, but where they had a 60-minute timer. I guess it had to be a store where they had pots and pans and things for cooking. And I bought it and I put it on my mantle.

And I put my music on and everything, but once that bell goes off, I come back from wherever I am mentally in my creative world and I wake up to see what I've done from my creative flow. And so I've used that timer for over 25 years. And everybody that comes over on tours or whatever, I tell about that timer and a lot of them say, "Ah, that's just what I need. I never thought about that." I said, "It's great." And I said, "It's my personal

trainer." [They laugh.]

MS. REIDEL: Amazing.

MR. CUMMINGS: So every month in 1990, at the end of the month I was finished with a top. I'm not talking about the full quilting process. And everything was appliquéd and everything was based upon that poster. And each one had the same three musicians and the same general position, but I used different fabrics. And as I progressed through the year, I reached out to more variety of fabric types and textures and patterns, and I also expanded more into being a little bit more abstract with the faces, even though you can't be much more abstract than what I gave you.

But one of the things that ties into that development, I was also going, at the time, to the Caribbean Cultural Center here in New York City that deals with the diaspora and the whole sort of like flow of culture from Africa to the Caribbean to South America. And they have classes, and I was taking a class on Yoruba culture at the time, and it was given by a Yoruba priest. And I think we were talking about masks at the time, and he was showing images. So I think that was one way that I embraced and translated the mask images.

But another way was the masks that I had already collected in my studio and home. And then another way that I went down this road of being in an outdoor environment, which I call a jungle, was that coming from L.A. and being so near Hollywood, I grew up with a lot of Hollywood movies that dealt with African stories. You had Tarzan and everything like that. So I had a very stereotype image about what African was all about and what Africans were.

And so when I saw this poster and they were playing jazz — and I grew up with jazz by Duke Ellington and Count Basie, my mother and father playing those records, and I saw these Africans and I said, I've got Africa with Tarzan, jazz with Duke Ellington, but I saw these Africans in the club playing jazz and it just — it was a collision of different cultures coming together that I had not allowed myself to open up and think about. I had stereotyped everything. And so that just blew my mind.

So I created Africans and African masks playing jazz in an outdoor environment. And that's how that kind of came about. And as I progressed I kind of incorporated sort of more cubistic sort of ideas into it, but based upon originally stepping into it with a Yoruba sort of background, taking those classes, masks surrounding me, thinking of Hollywood, and looking at this poster all along.

So at one point, *African Jazz #10*, you could see that it's black and white and gray, and there's a little brown in there too and there might be another color. But when I reached that point, I was sort of like telling friends, "I OD'd on color." I created nine quilts bursting with color, 9 feet tall. And I couldn't think of any more color combinations. So I said, "Okay, I'm just going to calm down and just use black and white."

So in doing that, I'd felt that I needed to add some gray and stuff, which I did. And then it was more challenging because to get different effects in the masks and the feeling of the musicians, it was really complicated and a challenge to kind of achieve that balancing act with just those limited colors. And at one point also, this is where I wanted to — well, this is one of several quilts that I wanted to play with doing something other than just leaving a plain back of the head of the piano player.

So this is when I brought in the Janus mask idea of a two-faced individual playing the piano. And so one is the reality of the real person. The other one is sort of like his consciousness having a facial expression on the other side. And I acquired that idea by looking in the room where I was working and saw this Janus mask that I had. And I said, "Ah, that's just what I need to do is just add another face to that head." Simple as that. Doesn't everybody think of that? [They laugh.]

MS. REIDEL: Was that the first time that you can remember so clearly the work that you collect appearing somehow in your own work?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, that was very clear, because I was looking around for some solution —

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and I didn't know what to do. I was sort of almost at a loss. And then I looked up and saw this sculpture staring at me practically, with two faces. [Laughs.] And I said, "This is what I need to do." And it was also during this year, 1990, that I really reinforced exercising visualization within myself, and especially when I was going to sleep, because my time was always limited.

People said, "Well, how" — one of the common questions is, "Well, how long does it take you to make a quilt?" And I said, "Well, maybe two months at the most." And they said, "Wow, so fast?" And I said, "Oh, is that fast?" I said, "Well, I don't know because I'm in a time constraint. I have to budget my time." So I said, "I have a 9-to-5."

And people say, "You work? You have a 9-to5?" I said, "Yes, and then I come home and then I do my quilts so," I said, "I have to work really fast because I want the idea to stay fresh and I have to work with that."

And on the weekends it was a full-time job. It would be eight to 10 hours I would give it on the weekends. And I would be wearing out my "personal trainer," but I would be working and working and working and —

MS. REIDEL: Saturday and Sunday both you worked all day?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, especially [... -MAC] once I finished the halfway mark, the momentum of me wanting to work faster to see it come together and be completed takes over.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: The beginning up to the first half is very slow because I'm kind of a little uncertain of translating the vision into the reality and getting the pieces together, and it's kind of laborious to kind of start sewing. But once I get into the rhythm of it, I'm part of the machine. But until I get into that rhythm it's, oh, I don't want to do this. But I tell myself, well, this is your artist, Michael. This is what you wanted to do.

So year after year I look out these windows — I've been in the house over 30 years and I can see the seasons changing, and it seems like the most intense work comes in the summer. [Laughs.]

MS. REIDEL: Really?

MR. CUMMINGS: And I'm looking out the window telling myself — like a little kid, I want to go out and play, and then the other voice says, no, you can't because you have to work on this artwork. This is what you want to do in life, so enjoy it. And then I calm down because I realize, yes, that's what it is all about. It's making art.

And you have to — I tell people it's sacrifice and discipline, and that's what it's all about, so to create that space to do your artwork. Because I've come across a lot of friends that — we are friends but they call up, "Oh, let's go do this, let's go do that," because they have an apartment, not a house. They have other hobbies and other creative things, but not something that they have to stay home and make all the time. I know architects and stuff like that, but they have an office they work in and stuff like that.

So I said, "I can't go. I've got to do this." And they've grown to understand. They can see that I'm really serious about what I'm doing, but initially it was, "Oh, why can't you come out and play?" [Laughs.] And I kick myself and say, "Well, Michael, why can't you?" And I say, "You want to make art, and you've got to make art by staying at home and being in your studio."

So I try to make my studio as comfortable as possible. I put my incense on. I put on my music. And basically it's jazz music, but it could skip all around the world from traditional Chinese music to — I love Brazilian music. So it could be anything — to opera. It just depends on the mood, but the music does help carry me through the creative process.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: And music has played a big part in — and this is my development, going back to L.A., like I mentioned, growing up in the '60s the "flower power" and listening to folk music. Folk music to me was very, very instrumental in me being an artist that does narratives, because I was always interested in the story that the song told you.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And Bob Dylan, his stories took you on all sorts of rocky trips and roads. And I loved his music. I embraced his music like, I guess, about — at the first year in junior college I met people that were into him. And I think he came through L.A., but in '63, '64, I discovered Bob Dylan. I bought his — [... -MAC] albums at the time, and I was playing them in my house and my mother said, "What is that racket?" [They laugh.] Because of the whiny voice —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — the harmonica and stuff like that. But I loved it, the "Tambourine Man" and stuff. And I went out and bought the tambourine man's glasses, the rose-colored glasses. I lost them the first week. [Laughs.] And I went out and got a harmonica, and I never could get past the first note. But I loved his music and I loved the storytelling.

And then Judy Collins and her songs, and then Joan Baez, and then, you know, other people — well, I guess Big Mama Thornton, but that was another type of music. But I was really into the folk music because of the stories

they were telling. And that stuck with me. And being, again, an L.A. kid and seeing all the Hollywood old movies — reruns on television, I was always into stories.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: You know, the dramas and stuff like that. I didn't like horror movies. I liked sci-fi and drama but not horror. Comedy was Okay. But I think all of that helped to create this sort of — this development of me wanting to tell stories, because I had heard so many stories. And then there was a voice inside saying, "Well, you have stories to tell," or, "You could take information and make it into a story." So that took place.

So the evolution started way back then in terms of me being introduced to the protest songs of the time. And I was a child of that time so I really embraced it. I was in marches and stuff, went to Joan Baez's retreat up in Big Sur a couple of times. I think I marched in the "flower power" parade in San Francisco.

MS. REIDEL: What was the retreat? I'm not familiar with that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, she gave some sort of retreat. I don't remember the context of what it was about, but she had all these acres of land up there, and periodically she opened up the land. And there was a stage. And there was a purpose for coming. And the roads were all clogged up with people parking alongside the wall. And you walked in — and we were sitting on the ground primarily.

And I don't know if it was related to politics. It could have been the Vietnam War protest sort of conversation. I don't remember what the conversations were. I just knew it was a big collection of people in their early 20s all there, listening to her, and I guess on the side smoking or doing whatever else. I wasn't into that at the time. And it was a day's event. You know, I don't know if it went — I just kind of remember going up with a friend and we spent the day there and that was it. But it was at her retreat. And that was just part of being a California person —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — Southern California person, and being in that age group, because I was drafted to go into the war at the time and I told myself that I was not going to go, and if I did get drafted I would go to Canada.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's what I told myself. And so there were a lot of people enlisting just to get it out of the way. And I had a cousin who wasn't even 18 but he wanted to get it out of the way before he went to college. And he was in that last group of 18-year-olds that got killed in Vietnam. And my aunt — because he was my first cousin — it took her over five years or more to get over that because he had them sign him in to get it over with.

And then I had a lot of friends from high school in my community signed up, because again, at that time too if you didn't have any sort of other plans, you could go into the Army and get credit for college or whatever, learn skills and stuff like that.

MS. REIDEL: GI Bill.

MR. CUMMINGS: But this Vietnam War, it wasn't a war like any other war, so they went into jungles and they just all got killed. So all through that time frame, on a monthly basis two or three people you would hear had been killed. So the whole community was always saddened by hearing about the latest news of who got killed. And I guess I could think of about maybe four or five people in my graduating high school class that got killed, and they were no more than 19 or 20.

So I got called about three times, and I kept saying —

MS. REIDEL: With your asthma —

[Cross talk.]

MR. CUMMINGS: This was the thing. I was going on my asthma with a doctor's sort of statement, but at that time they just wanted bodies. They didn't care. So on the third go-round they — after I went through the process I got a letter saying, okay, I didn't have to go. Another friend of mine, he did something that a lot of people were doing. He took a lot of drugs before he went for the interview so he'd get schizophrenic, or whatever. But they were still taking them. [Laughs.]

And then one guy, he was the only child of the couple, and he was one of my best friends. And they tried to get him out based on that, because I thought — I thought there was a rule that, okay, if he's the only child, the only son, you don't have to go. But for some reason — he didn't go but they gave him — they labeled him a

conscientious objector and he had to serve doing social sort of things for two years or so. And he had graduated from UCLA and he was one of the ones that came here that wanted to be a filmmaker. So he worked in Bellevue Hospital for two years to satisfy that requirement.

But that was kind of going on. So I guess that could have been part of the conversation at the retreat for Joan Baez, but I don't remember the context at that time. I just remember traveling and her being there. And I eventually got into "Kumbayah," I think, with all of the events. [They laugh.]

MS. REIDEL: I have a question about the collection that we are looking at.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: And when did you begin collecting, and what's the criteria for the work, because it just —

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, I guess I started collecting in Los Angeles —

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: — in the late '60s when I had my first apartment, and I started going to thrift stores. I don't know what led me into thrift stores because I had no relatives that went to thrift stores. My mother never talked about thrift stores. But for some reason I walked into a thrift store and I was hooked. And I started going to thrift stores all over the city of Los Angeles in my car, and I would pick out things periodically.

The criteria, I guess, had to be — it had to be artistically interesting to me, some sort of aesthetic that appealed to me in the design, shape, color or something, but more like the design and shape.

MS. REIDEL: Two-D, 3-D? Anything?

MR. CUMMINGS: Anything.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: Anything that I could afford and sacrifice. So I think I went to some of the smaller thrift stores in the community areas that were blah, blah, so not really good anything, just junk. And then I kind of drifted over to yard sales and thrift stores in Beverly Hills, and "decorator row," [... -MAC] or Rodeo Road at the time. And they would have periodic sales.

And then I discovered some discount warehouse places where they sell sort of so-called antique things, so I started shopping in there a little bit. I bought an antique desk that I don't have any more that was carved wood, oak, from Portugal, and that cost all of about 3 [hundred dollars] or \$400, a big massive thing. And I got that, and there was a chair to go with it with a velvet or velveteen cover and everything. I thought I was living in a castle or something. [They laugh.]

And then I bought some — the candelabras I have in there, they're art nouveau. I bought those in Beverly Hills at a thing. And then they're made out of soft metal, I was told by somebody. They're not really brass or anything. So they have a few cracks in them, but I've had them for over 40 years now. And they have a marble base. And that was something I got from L.A.

And then there's a bust of the man there. Did you see that Arabian guy?

MS. REIDEL: I don't think so.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, come look at this — oh, okay, the Arabian guy; you can see him. And he has a turban on. And I got that in L.A. And in the last couple of years they had an exhibit here in New York at a gallery of some — it wasn't one artist but it was that period where those Arabian heads, or busts, really, were made out of marble or ceramic, were very much in vogue. And they had some really pristine, beautiful ones there. And mine was quite similar to what they had. I don't know the artist.

And I bought this earlier on. I came across this guy. He was, like, in the black community, but he was a holdover — he had been there since the '30s or the '20s in this house, and he had collected different things. And the two outstanding things that I wanted was bust of the Arabian guy, plus he had, like, an Arabian woman that was miniature that was beautifully made.

And those were his children. He didn't want to give them up, or if he was going to give them up, he had to give them up to somebody he knew would love and take care of them just as much as he did. So after many trips of nurturing a relationship with him, he gave them up and I bought them.

And at the time I guess — yeah, I had my own apartment at the time. I took him to my place, and everybody that came over to look at him were just struck by the realism of his facial expression. And they would sit — people would sit down and talk to him. And eventually when I moved, I gave it to my mother to keep for me while I was in New York, because I was supposed to come back at some point. I never did, but she kept it for, I don't know over 10 years or so.

And then during that time period, which she didn't really tell me, both of my sisters adopted him at different times and put them in their apartment. And so they told me stories of how people would come over and get high with drinking or something else and sit down and talk to him. And they would have serious conversations with him. I don't know if he spoke back to them or not. [They laugh.] But I heard all these stories.

And so eventually they got tired of him and he ended up back at my mother's. And so I think I brought him back to New York about — only in the last 10 years. I eventually decided, well, what am I waiting for? I was always afraid that it would cost, like, a large amount of money to have him packaged and sent, but I found a place in Hollywood — I think it was through — I don't know if the Yellow Pages or if I Googled it. At this point I don't know which one it was, but if found a shipping place that handled artwork.

So a friend of mine and I wrapped him up in a blanket and took him to this place, and they said, "Oh, sure, we could box him up and it would be all of about \$150." And I said, "Wow, I've waited all this time and it's that cheap." So I finally got him back in my environment after an absence of about 30 years or so.

But that was one of the earliest pieces that I bought artwork. And then the table and chair. And then there were some stores that had cheap imported items that I would buy from Mexico or Asia or something, nothing that I have currently. It was kind of cheap but colorful and interesting in design. So that also kind of encouraged me to go further.

When I came to New York, I didn't really get into collecting that much because I brought — eventually I got things out of storage in L.A. and I brought them here, like the candelabras and the desk and stuff. And I have a brass bed that I purchased from L.A. that I have with me. But those were in storage. But I left the man — the bust with my mother.

But when I came here I didn't start buying anything until I guess I got more of a substantial job and income, because the first five, six, seven — well, I guess five years at least, or seven years, it was rather rough in terms of part-time, temporary work. And I don't think I was looking for a full-time job. I was just sort of enjoying life in New York. I was 25 when I came here, and it was 1970. Discos were just starting. You know, why work so hard? [They laugh.]

And I was living with this guy. We were lovers. We didn't use that word, but we were lovers and we were living in the village. And he had a full-time job and I had a part-time job. So we were kind of working like that together, and we had a — he found a basement apartment on West 11th Street, right across the street from St. Vincent's Hospital. And that was a great block. The block over east, between 6th and 5th you had the New School —

MS. REIDEL: Oh, yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: — that was there. And then a block over from that — I don't know if it was in the New School block or not, but you had a famous event that had just taken place before I got there in April where one of the brownstones had blown up. It was next to Dustin Hoffman's house. And it was bomb-makers that were anti-American or something. It was a big thing. And the whole house just blew up because they were working on this bomb. And it was right next to Dustin Hoffman's house. And so that was history on the block.

So we were in this basement apartment, which was really — it was storage rooms, but the super allowed my friend to sign up for an apartment. So it was like one, two, three — one, two, three rooms, and there was supposed to have been storage. There was no bathroom. There was a bathroom out in the hallway and next to the laundry room.

And then we established a shower unit in the place, and we — he didn't cook. My father cooked and I had uncles that cooked, so I was cooking since I was — I could see the burners on the stove. And I enjoy cooking, so I cooked. But what I had to learn how to cook on was a hotplate and a toaster oven.

So we did that for, I guess, almost a year. And we were using — we were eating pot pies a lot, and I was fixing brown rice, because we couldn't afford a lot of meat, so at that point that's when I became a vegetarian, because we couldn't afford beef and pork that much.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so we ate a lot of vegetables and rice and brown rice and stuff like that. And so at one

point when I tried to go back to eating meat, my taste buds refused it. And I grew up with lamb chops, loved lamb chops, and I went back to lamb chops I couldn't even chew it. So I said, okay, that's enough.

But we lived — I lived in there on 11th Street down in this basement apartment. And we joked about if we ever lived together in the future, we would have to have separate houses or separate parts of the house, because he was a perfectionist in terms of how he arranged everything, and I was sloppy. And I had my little art stuff up, but it was minor. And so we just joked about that. We're good friends now. He's back in L.A.

And so we separated and that was that. And he didn't become a filmmaker, but he went into printmaking and now he has his own printing business. And I, at that point, took off more into investigating, investing in, putting more time in becoming an artist.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And I went to the Art Students League and I got a scholarship there, on 57th Street, for a year. Rudolf Baranik was a painter and an instructor there. And I had him, and he was very, very encouraging. I think he was from Russia. And he lived down in the Village with his wife, and we would see each other periodically because I lived down there too. And he was known to dress in black. This was before black became fashionable in New York. He was always in black.

And he was a painter and he really encouraged me. He liked what I was doing. But I didn't — painting started to lose its appeal, and I guess it's because I was moving more towards collage at the time. So I was there only at the Art Students League for a year and gave it up, but —

MS. REIDEL: Is this before or after you went to school for your degree in art history?

MR. CUMMINGS: This was before.

MS. REIDEL: So this would be mid-'70s.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right. And around — let's see, after — let's see, after — I worked for the Department of Cultural Affairs in I think '73, '74. I think around '75 or something I started working for the Children's Art Carnival —

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: — in Harlem. And a famous black female artist named Betty Blayton Taylor —

MS. REIDEL: Seventy-six maybe.

MR. CUMMINGS: — was the director there. And she had open arms to any artist that needed a job. And she worked with the Board of Ed, so she had school busses of kids that came in there for art experiences. And this is when they did kind of eliminate artists. So she was very popular with the Board of Ed. And throughout the day there were a variety of classes. So she took me in, and I primarily was an artist instructor with the children and worked with classes that came in, and had an assistant. Sometimes I had another artist working with me.

And I did that for about three years, and at one point there was an artist that was in charge of working on mural projects with the high school students in the summertime in the parks, because the parks had allowed her to paint murals on park buildings. Mainly they were restroom buildings, brick. And so I worked with this artist, and she was the main artist and I assisted her. And at one point she left the program and found another job. So I was put in charge of directing the mural project with the teenagers.

And I did this for either two or three summers, and in doing that, that's where I acquired my comfortableness of working with large-scale artwork, which translated into my large quilts. Because people say, "Well, where are you coming from with these large quilts," because people think a quilt is no more than whatever the size of a bed is. And I see them, a larger scale, more like a tapestry.

And I get that from with murals, because I had to free-hand the mural design onto the wall by way of a ladder and then I had to help the kids paint in the colors and stuff, but it was the idea of the freehand and visually kind of working with the scale or the size of the forms, transferring that from the paper, or my mind, onto the side of the wall.

And in doing that, that also stayed with me throughout the years after leaving there, and that made it so much more easier for me to work in a large scale, because it was something from my past that I had had to do and

became comfortable with, and there you go, with the large quilts.

Another thing with the large quilts is that I got reinforced at comparing them to tapestries two ways: one, seeing French and Italian tapestries at the various museums, but also at one art conference that I went to in D.C. — it was an international art conference, and there was a group of people from Senegal, and they had created these beautiful tapestries that were funded by some company or somewhere from France that operated this tapestry — or manufactured these tapestries using African artists' designs. And they were on display at this particular meeting.

This was, like, in the '70s. And they talked about what they did but the tapestries spoke for themselves. And they were tapestries; they weren't quilts, because they were woven and they were giant size. And among them was one woman about of about maybe eight men, and she was up there sitting, and they were all talking about their work and stuff like that. And then the question presented to her in French, and she responded, it was like, "How did you get among all these men with our artwork, participating in this project?" And she said, "I had to fight to be here." [Laughs.] Like that.

So between her statement and —

[End of disc.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Michael Cummings at the artist's home and studio in New York City on October 25, 2012 for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is card No. 2. And we were talking about the Senegal artists.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, the Senegal artists and this particular woman that was in the group and expressing how she had to fight to be in the group. But what stood out more than just her statement was just the scale of the tapestries and the interesting colors and designs. They had animals and abstract forms all kind of coming together. And at that point an inner voice said, "That's what you want to do." And so —

MS. REIDEL: What in particular? The scale?

MR. CUMMINGS: The scale — the scale — primarily the scale, you know.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And the scale then kind of connected with the color and the forms. But it had to be that size. And that's what I left with and remained forever, is that that's what I wanted to do. I had not — I had seen tapestries but I hadn't really connected these African Senegalese tapestries with European tapestries. But since that time there's been tapestry shows here, one big one at the Metropolitan Museum where they had French tapestries.

And I went there, and even though the subject matter wasn't the same, the scale I just fell in love with, and even bigger than mine. And I said, yes. This kind of just reinforced that, yes, you know, it can be done, it has been done and should be done. But the problem with me and my work is that when people see it in galleries or museums they say, "Michael, you know, I love your work, but you just make it so big it won't fit into my apartment. Why don't you make something small?" [Laughs.] So I get that response a lot.

So it kind of slows me down a little bit because then I think, well, you know, maybe I am making something that's just kind of out of the reach for regular people. And then I said, "Well, what am I doing? Am I making — who am I making artwork for?" It comes into conversation. Then it's for not one group or one person; it's for the world at large, for whoever wants to look at and see it. It doesn't have to be necessarily owned by an individual just as long as it's shown and people can communicate with it and walk away with something. That's the more important factor.

So I've kind of resigned myself to that because I'm forging ahead with making large pieces. I have this, what, slave quilt, *Henrietta Marie* on exhibit now at Lincoln, Nebraska at the museum there. And that's, I think, about 13 feet by 10 feet. And then I finished, two years ago — it's never been shown — the *Sister Gertrude Morgan* quilt.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And she's about 15 feet tall and about 13 feet wide. And I have her folded up. And I really got into that to the point where I had to start talking to her spirit and say, "I can't put any more on this quilt. It's too much." [Laughs.] Because, I don't know, about the mid — where, in the 2000s, where — I don't know what year in the year 2000 that I started using text, but on her I maxed on text —

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — because she was a missionary in New Orleans that preached the Bible, and her Bible section was the book of Revelation. And they had a large exhibit of her work —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — at the Folk Art Museum here in New York years ago. She also performed and recorded gospel songs. She played instruments. And her folk art came about by way of her creating images to reflect her teachings from the Book of Revelations.

And she was promoted at the jazz festival down there in New Orleans in the '60s and '70s until, they say, at one point she came into the office and told the director that God told her to stop making this stuff because she was, like, losing her mission in life to preach the Bible, so she stopped. But for I guess maybe a good five years or more she created a mass of work, and it's in a lot of private hands and it's also in a lot of museums.

And so I first discovered her in the — 1984, I think it was, at the Brooklyn Museum. It was just starting in the '80s for black folk art to be introduced on a large scale in museums. And this was a show of black folk artists at the Brooklyn Museum. And that show went on to the Smithsonian Institution, but in the Brooklyn Museum they recreated her living environment in primarily one room, because she had the whole house. At one point she decided she was going to be the bride of God —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — so everything was painted white in her house and she wore white. So they recreated her kitchen and they put the shades that she had painted on the lesson plans and all this sort of stuff.

So when I saw that and when I read about her, all the rest of the show was primarily black folk artists, men. And they did a lot of found objects and they were considered visionaries in terms of how and what they created, but it was sort of more three-dimensional sort of stuff that they put together out of the yard and tools and utilitarian things that they put together.

Hers was all this translation of the Bible, and she was going to become the bride of God. And between her lifestyle that she created and these visions that she had, I couldn't get them out of my mind. I always kept her in the back of my mind in terms of who she was and what she was and what she represented. And when they had the show in the Smithsonian, I went to D.C. to see it.

And then they had another show of something with her here but it was really watered down. It was really minimal. But when they had the show at the folk art museum they didn't recreate her room. They had photographs — blown-up photographs of her house and everything, but they had three floors of objects that she had created. And it was at that point — and then they had several lectures about her there by scholars and I went to several of those.

And it was at that point that I decided — because I always wanted to do something for her but I didn't know what. At that point I committed myself to making a quilt for her. And I don't know if I was clear about it, but at this point I want to say it was always going to be her and her vision to be the bride of God.

And even at one of the lectures I told some of the scholar people — and even the woman that works there in the foundation, Lee Kogan — Lee Kogan, she's still there at the foundation for the folk art museum. And she helped create some of the lectures and shows at the time. I told her I was going to do something, and it took three or four years later to get started on it. And —

MS. REIDEL: Is that normal, that something germinates for that long for you?

MR. CUMMINGS: No.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: No.

MS. REIDEL: So this was unique.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, it was very unique. It was just, I guess, trying to see how I was going to position the composition, what parts it was going to have, how I was going to state it.

And I started with a wedding dress. So I went — there was one of thrift stores I go to, they were selling wedding dresses. So I said, ah, Okay — I don't know, 30 [dollars], \$40 or something. So I bought the wedding dress. So that was the beginning. And then I said, "Okay, I have the wedding dress. She's going to be the bride of God." And then I think also things came together because was more comfortable with writing text —

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — to tell her story, because just having her look like a bride did not say anything to the viewer.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so I had to tell her story, and telling her story required text. And so leading up to that I already had made, I think, one of the Obama quilts. I had done some more things that had text on it. And so I didn't have a problem with telling her story now with words and images together.

And so I bought the wedding dress. And I didn't want to modify the wedding dress in any way. I wanted it to be a full-size wedding dress. So in order to have a full-size wedding dress, I had to have a large foundation to sew it on. And then after I sewed it, I had to have a border. And I wanted it very floral. I wanted it to be a happy feeling to the whole thing.

And in telling her story I combined statements that she said from the book that I had. And then I also wanted to combine passages from the Book of Revelations that she preached. So I combined those two thoughts or statements on the surface of the quilt.

And this was all hand-lettering, because earlier on I thought I had to have stencils or something to make the lettering. I was kind of — oh, I think the *Jazz Satin Doll* was one of — I won't say early quilts, but was one of them more elaborate quilts that I went all out with lettering or text on the quilt surface. And so that was all hand-done.

And then someone asked me at the Visions Museum out in San Diego this past May when they saw my *President Obama* quilt and all the lettering on [the surface –MAC]. They said, "Do you outline first or use a pencil or anything?" I said, "No, I just kind of go right for it." And they said, "Whoa, you do that? What about a mistake?" And I said, "Well, I don't [make –MAC] mistakes." [They laugh.]

So that's the way I go about lettering. I don't do an outline or anything. I just go right on the surface of the fabric.

MS. REIDEL: And that Gertrude Morgan piece seems to be unique for multiple reasons — the long germination phase, the scale —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: — which certainly you've done large before but that is one of the larger pieces.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: And then as you said earlier, just the absolute omnipresent text.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, and it's not a series — it's not part of a series.

MS. REIDEL: Right. Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: *Satin Doll* was not part of a series either. She is unique, even though there's Josephine Baker — there's two in that series.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that's because I used both sides of Josephine Baker's dress. I tried to conserve and recycle in the *Satin Doll* case because of the fact that —

MS. REIDEL: Is it actually — sorry to just — is it actually Josephine Baker's dress?

MR. CUMMINGS: No.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: No. I call it Josephine Baker's because that's the name of the — *Josephine Baker* quilt.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: But, no, the dress I got at the flea market again.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: But I used both sides in *Josephine Baker* quilts.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: But for the *Satin Doll* quilt I didn't use the back because the back was a zipper and there was a lot of things going on. And because it's sequins sewn on, the form of the back didn't allow itself very much to be recycled into another dress form. So I had it but I haven't used it as a dress form. I just have it folded up.

MS. REIDEL: How is it that certain ideas become a single piece and others lead to a series? How is it — because you've alternated throughout 30 years between series and singles.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I guess a word comes to mind. I guess the difficulty of the subject matter.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And once I feel it, like the *African Jazz* series, the variations and movement and introducing different colors and texture became easy. With some quilts, when there's just two — like in the *Josephine Baker* quilt, I didn't feel — I thought I captured the essence of her in the two — or I captured what essence I wanted to represent her with in those two quilts, and I didn't feel I wanted to go any further with any other expression of her personality.

And I guess in the *African Jazz* quilts, the musicians have individual personalities through facial expressions, but they're not an identifiable individual.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And the *Satin Doll*, the form is supposed to personify many jazz singers —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — not just one singer.

MS. REIDEL: Sure.

MR. CUMMINGS: And I've thought about doing individual singers like Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan or someone like that, but I've never moved into doing that exactly. I do have a couple of quilts that I started after the *Satin Doll* to do other singers, but they were going to be more generic than an individual singer.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: So I guess that's — it's kind of based on, I guess, me connecting emotionally with the subject and how far I want to go in emotionally with the subject.

MS. REIDEL: So I'm thinking specifically also of *The Children of Egungun* —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: — and also the *Butterflies* series —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: — two very different series.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: One seems to be more a formal exploration, the *Butterflies* perhaps?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, the formal exploration of *Butterflies*, there was an easy connection for me because, first of all, the first *Butterfly* I made was for a commission for New York City Department of Foster Care Services. And the building was going to be renovated next to Bellevue Hospital on 2nd Avenue and I had to work with architects.

Well, I went through the whole process of being selected first, and I met with architects and artists and stuff to be selected. Four artists got selected. And then there was a whole year's process of meeting with the architects periodically to see where they were in the development and in the color samples and all this sort of stuff, and then to work with the exact size of the space where you were supposed to have your artwork, and then meeting other certain standards — going to community board meetings and having them see the work and see if they have anything, then finally going to the art commission and having them review the work for approval.

And it was at that point one of the art commissioners, she stood up and said, "You know, well, I really like your

work." And her background was a child psychologist. And she said, "I really like your work but, you know, your composition with the cat and the flowers," she said, "You have a black background. Why do you have a black background?" I said, "Well, because the black really projects out the colors of the flowers and the cat." She said, "Well, I think that might be a little scary for children. Could you soften that up a little bit?" So what I did, I said, "Sure. You know, no problem." So I chose sort of soft, dark blue to do that. So that worked and that was acceptable.

I went on to win an award from the arts commission for the four quilts that I created, but one of the quilts was a butterfly and it was a monarch butterfly. And after I did that butterfly and after I did the whole four quilts for the commission and hired an interior designer to install them because I couldn't install them. They wanted a legal person to do it, and they wanted special framing because this was supposed to be durable in the hallways of a public building, and it was going to be with children and everything.

One — and I don't know if it was the art commissioner or — I don't know if it was a building staff — a staff person from the Children's Services or something, but among all the artists and the architects and a person for — art committee that selected artists, there was a person that raised their hand and said, "Shouldn't you have maybe bulletproof glass on your work?" [Laughs.] And everybody looked at that person and said, "Bulletproof glass?"

And then everybody calmed down and said, "Well, first of all, it would be too heavy to go on the wall with the artwork. And so we're not going to have that. We're going to have just heavy-duty Plexiglas and that's all. And that would be safer because if it falls off the wall it won't hurt the children, whereas the bulletproof glass would hurt the children.

So that was one of the things that came up. But after that experience was all over with, I said, "Creating this butterfly was really a lot of fun." And then I really saw the butterfly pattern as an abstract pattern or design. And then that innocently took me to the thoughts of another favorite artist of mine, Georgia O'Keeffe. And I said, "Well, if she could do flowers, I could do butterflies." [They laugh.]

So I purchased a book by the Audubon Society, of North American butterflies. I don't know why I chose North American butterflies, but I think that was the first book I saw on the shelf at the store. I should have chosen something else because I realize now that they have a lot of dark-winged butterflies, and I did do two or three quilts that had black wings but had orange and yellow in them.

But anyway, so I bought this book and I had Georgia O'Keeffe as a role model. And I said, I'm going to do large-scale butterfly wings but I'm still going to keep the butterfly form so people could step back and appreciate the butterfly, and the butterfly will be on a bed of flowers. And so I collected a lot of floral fabrics to represent the garden of flowers, and then I chose a variety — well, six different butterflies out of this book. And then I simply just blew up, from the actual photograph of the real butterfly, into a fabric translation.

And at first I didn't — I didn't think it was going to be a problem but then I started looking at the butterfly wing patterns. I said, "Well, Michael, how are you going to recreate these patterns and then have them identical on each wing?" And I said, "Hmm, I didn't think about that one." [Laughs.] But then the simple matter was just to double the fabric, cut out the design and open it up, and you have two forms that are identical, for the left and right.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: So I did that for each one. And I surprised myself at how easy it was once I just thought to fold over the fabric and cut out the form. So I did that with each one of the six.

And I think one of them became a little bit more abstract because I used sort of an iridescent fabric on one of them, and that kind of took it out of the realism sort of image and made it a little bit more abstract. And I had them in different exhibits and I had — I was in a group show but it was like a weekend show, or something at the American Folk Art Museum, and I had them on display.

And a lot of people liked the abstract butterfly as opposed to the more standard-looking butterfly, and I was surprised, but I really got into the abstract one because I was thinking more of the way a Japanese artist might approach it, so I was adding colors and different things in different places that I normally wouldn't, and I didn't create as much of a garden effect, a realistic garden, as the other ones had. But it was a lot of fun.

And they were about six feet square, I think, and four of them — let me see — two, four — at least four got purchased by the Art for Embassy program.

MS. REIDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And two went to Mali, and a couple are in Rhodesia. What is it, Rhodesia? Yes, [Rwanda], in the

embassy there, and they liked them so they have them. And then I have a few remaining in my possession.

But that's how I moved into that. I just felt that the butterfly pattern was very abstract and relating to Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers and her artwork and what she did. And I always loved her artwork. And I loved her artwork so much I went out, and in one of my thrift stores I found a skull of — whatever you call it — a steer. And I have the horns and thing.

And when I first saw her painting of that, I said, ooh, because I don't like horror movies and that sort of, like, projected the skull and something horrible. And then I started to embrace it as sculpture and saw how beautiful it was that I had to have one, so I went out and bought one. I said, well, this is something years ago I would have never thought that I would end up buying, but I bought it and I hung it up and I really started to appreciate it. But since then I've kind of delegated it — or relegated it to the back room, because a lot of people see it and they don't understand.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: I think I have to be in a more Western environment —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — or creative —

MS. REIDEL: That will fit right in in L.A., yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: — a ranch-like atmosphere.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: But anyway, I bought it because it was through her. I just fell in love with the sculpture elements of the skull, and I could see what she saw. But that was also how much I was into her work and appreciating her work, and understanding that she had been in New York at one time —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and some of her panes related to window views and stuff like that. So I felt we were connected a little bit there. And so with the butterflies I thought I was just kind of continuing something that she had started but I was taking it from flowers into another sort of subject matter —

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: — blowing up that image like that.

MS. REIDEL: Quick question: You were talking about the book that you got of Georgia O'Keeffe's, and I —

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I have that.

MS. REIDEL: Well, you've got a huge library.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, oh —

MS. REIDEL: And you've talked about books being significant sort of throughout your development, from learning how to quilt to looking at different artists. Are there particular books that really have stood out as significant over time, or are they just an ongoing resource that you constantly refer to?

MR. CUMMINGS: It's just an ongoing resource. I mean, your question is sort of like the question I got at a private school once when I was the artist-in-residence for about three days. It was Sewickley School in Sewickley, Pennsylvania. I think it's called Sewickley, Pennsylvania. It's outside of Pittsburgh.

And the friend that invited me, he said, "Michael, there's a lot of trust babies here," because it was the iron baby — iron barons and the families that lived in this town. And so I was there for about a week. And they put me in this hotel that was in town, and once or twice a month the kids would dress up formally and come in and learn how to eat formally, and be waited on and everything in formal attire. And I said, whoa, okay.

And so at point I was in the auditorium with about 200 kids. And I had shown them slides of my work and stuff like that. And it was question and answer. And one kid raised his hand and said, "Mr. Cummings, what is your favorite artwork that you've created, or what is your favorite piece of art?"

And I had never really been — well, if I had been asked that question, I don't know what I answered, but it wasn't

as significant at any other time that at that point because I realized, with 200 pairs of eyes looking at me and being young and impressionable and I was like an insect under a microscope, that I had to say something profound. And it had to be quick because the question had to be asked and everybody was with their mouth open and their eyes big, waiting for me to answer.

So I said, Michael, what are you going to say? Say something. And I thought and I went through the whole process of where I was going to go with the answer. And then I just kind of relaxed and I released it and I said, "The favorite artwork is the one I'm currently working on because," I said, "That's where all my energy is" —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — "That's where all my focus is."

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: I said, "Once I finish the work, I'm released from it. I'm not emotionally connected. It's independent. It's on its own and I move on to the next one. So whatever I'm working on presently, that's the most important one to me at that time." So I just — like that.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: So in terms of the books, the books are the same way. When I buy a book, it's new and fresh and it's offering some sort of insight or something to an artist or historian, and I'm reading and looking at it. And when I finish it, I put it aside and move on.

And looking — I was looking at — last night I was taking notes a little bit and I'm looking at the books. I said, oh, I must have about 200 or something books here, or something. And then I have some more books downstairs. And I said, well, what am I going to do with the books eventually, because at my age a lot of artists and other people that have collected are talking about downsizing and what are we going to do with our collections?

And so I know this one couple in SoHo, they're donating everything to Emory University, but they had to do research and find someone that would appreciate and take on their collection, because with their funding the way it is now in society and stuff, a lot of universities can't afford to take on things.

So I'm going through the process of trying to create options in my mind as to what to do with various things — donate them to schools or whatever — but the books I have are basically all art-related — different cultures, different artists — and I don't really refer to them too much anymore.

And I guess I'm kind of like — have reached a point where I'm on automatic in terms of when I go to approach a subject and — well, in constructing a quilt I just have this kaleidoscope of ideas, of techniques and what I could do to kind of bring it together. There aren't a lot of references of having to go back to a book or read something anymore.

And another ingredient — I say ingredient — in how I work and how I approach things is that when I was teaching that two-year class that was funded by — what's her — Gund — her first name?

MS. REIDEL: Agnes?

MR. CUMMINGS: Agnes Gund in New York City, those two years, with three classes a day, showed me how much talent children had without any sort of formal instruction, but their creativeness was so free and — what's the word — no inhibitions to create — or approach creating anything, and no hesitation.

They just had a free spirit of taking the material, whatever it was, bringing it together to express their idea. And I would step back and see Picasso, Matisse — we did a wood structure thing and I had to introduce them to Louise Nevelson and stuff like that. They were doing all of that.

And I said, "Look at this." You know, and it was at that time that I started hearing about problems that graduating fine arts students were having with trying to not only make their art but sell their art. First of all, they didn't have any business skills —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — coming out of school. That wasn't a requirement — a portfolio, putting anything together, a résumé or anything that way, how to create a budget, how to do a proposal. That wasn't in their mind at all.

And I actually gave classes on that at one point for two years at the Bronx Museum. And I think it still goes on. It's a six-week class where you apply — artists apply and they select so many, and you have to commit to

coming to the class I think once a week or whatever. And you have an experienced artist or someone walk you through the steps of their personal experiences and what they found necessary.

Now, my particular niche that they gave me to do was to talk to the artists about a portfolio, because back in the day, in the late '60s — well, I wasn't doing slides in the '60s, but in the '70s you had to — you didn't have the Internet, so you had to write letters, you had to make slide duplicates, you had to do résumé, and all that had to be in print on paper and mailed out.

And then when you went to meet somebody, you had to have your portfolio with your slides, maybe a slide viewer, a slide tray, something, a light box. And then you had to have other things in a portfolio case. And all that had to be ready to go, and you had to kind of look like, you know, you were serious about what you were doing and you were serious about talking to them, and that you were going to continue with this, you were committed for life, all this sort of stuff. So I kind of walked them through all of this.

And just a side note: I was told — at the end of the semester they took a survey and I always came out, you know, the best class. People liked the way I introduced them to what they needed at the time. But getting back to — where were we? I forgot where we were. I don't know how I side-tripped into this.

MS. REIDEL: Right, I lost the detour. Let's think a minute.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. We were talking about the question about the — oh, the books.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: The books.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: But, yeah, so the books, and down-sizing — we were there, and then —

MS. REIDEL: We moved on to something else, I think.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, it had to do — you had something about the school or something? I had to do something —

MS. REIDEL: Well, my last one was the books, and then I was going to go on to collections, so I was letting you follow that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, and then talked about résumés.

MS. REIDEL: Teaching in the Bronx.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, that was that class.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: But what led me to say about teaching the class? I forgot what it was.

MS. REIDEL: Yes, that I don't know.

MR. CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Okay.

MS. REIDEL: I was letting you follow that thought.

MR. CUMMINGS: I'm having a senior moment.

MS. REIDEL: Sorry. [They laugh.]

MR. CUMMINGS: You can blame it on the senior moment.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. REIDEL: We'll come back to that. I mean, it seems like there was an interesting dovetailing between your business background and your art experience, and then giving — oh, you were talking about your MFA students finding a job when they got out and looked for work. Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, right. Yes, that's what led into that.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And then the children —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and how free they were —

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and how expressive they were, and how artistic without having that formal training.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: And how that in the '70s there was a lot of criticism, some critiquing about what students were lacking. Besides the business component, they were lacking a way to express themselves outside of the academic environment that they were in. They were kind of saddled with — it had to be by the book. And I learned through the children it didn't have to be by the book at all, and you could still come up with exciting compositions.

So that helped me release sort of a certain reserveness that I had in my creativity —

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: — because up until that time, working with canvas and also collage — there was a certain balance and tension. The colors had to work out just right and had to kind of balance overall, but the kids were doing that almost, like, blindfolded. [Laughs.]

MS. REIDEL: And this was during the three years you were teaching?

MR. CUMMINGS: The two years.

MS. REIDEL: The two years.

MR. CUMMINGS: The two years at the school when I was —

MS. REIDEL: Is that PS 129, that one?

MR. CUMMINGS: I think it was, yeah.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: That was it.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: I was there for two years. But I walked away from that experience saying I was taught more by the children than I taught them.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: And from that —

MS. REIDEL: That was your artist-in-residence?

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: From that two-year period I've carried over that sense of freedom. I call it spontaneity or improvisation, but it's the core — it comes from — or the root comes from that experience.

MS. REIDEL: I'm so glad you mentioned that too because the timing of that seems especially fortuitous because you were learning to quilt in '73 and this teaching experience was from '77 to '79.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: So really in that developmental phase of still getting on — really taking that quilting medium forward —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: — this happened.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, and also — another little side note; I won't get lost this time — in that doing that two-year sprint [sic] at the school as the artist-in-residence, I would come home each day exhausted because three classes a day, each class had at least 30 children in it. I had a student — well, teacher's aide, but they just followed my instructions. But I tried to personalize the experience for each student.

So I went around and looked them each in the face and talked to them and went around and see what they were doing, and gave them encouragement and all that. And at the end of the day, I felt like a wet rag. [Laughs.] And I went home, and think each time I would just collapse and take a nap. I said, "If I was a drinker" — [they laugh] — I said, "I would become an alcoholic because," I said, "I don't know how they do it."

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that was a trip that I went through for two years. It was just — but I think towards the second year and the latter part of the last year I think I had gotten more into it. But it was sort of an exhausting sort of thing.

And then I also challenged myself with a lesson plan, because teachers are supposed to have all the classes — the teachers and the academic thing, they have a lesson plan. And the principal, she was very lenient with me because she trusted me and so she didn't ask for a lesson plan. But when I went in each day, I had to have something new for the kids and for the teacher's aide to prepare for the students.

So I would go to bed and sort of visualize. I'd wake up and I would have something new by the time I walked into the door of the classroom. But leaving the classroom the prior day, I would be blank as — so that sort of like was really a demand on the creative process mentally — [laughs] —

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — to create something within 24 hours rather than to think something out in advance to work on, to have something planned out for the whole week.

MS. REIDEL: And I'm glad you brought this up again, because you mentioned visualizing earlier before you went to bed, and I definitely want to touch on that because that seems like that's been an ongoing part of your creative process no matter what you're doing. But would you describe that and talk about how you structure that and what you do, or how it works?

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, visualization was introduced to me by a guy that lived here in the house, and he was going to Columbia University. He was taking two majors at a time. It was museum education and something else. It was a double major. But he was a vegetarian, and also he believed in this visualization.

And so he talked about it, and that's where I first started hearing it, and then he talked about how he exercised it. And it was mainly through sleep. So I said, okay. So I start to try to do it and —

MS. REIDEL: What is "it"? What do you do? Do you visualize —

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, your subconscious is aware that you're asleep —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and it's taking, from your consciousness, ideas or thoughts that you had —

MS. REIDEL: Sure.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and it's having a conversation with you —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — but not necessary words but visually, images. I guess maybe I should kind of restrict that. As a visual artist I guess I think in images rather than words, and so my subconscious was giving me images of things that I had thought about, was looking at in terms of my art creation, or whatever project I was working on at the time. And when I'm asleep, it goes to work —

MS. REIDEL: Sure.

MR. CUMMINGS: — in selecting colors, rearranging shapes and forms. And my conscious is — I'm supposed to be asleep but I'm aware that it's taking place. And I'm not participating but it is going through a series of options —

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — of shapes and colors and moving around, because sometimes I would go to bed — especially when I was working with this *African Jazz* series I was saying, "Well, what am I going to do here? How am I going to work that out," especially — not especially, but one of the problems would have been the *African Jazz #01*, the black and white, and how to move things around on that.

So I would go to bed with those thoughts. And there might be a certain amount of consciousness or an awakening in your sleep of what's going on because besides the visualization. He also said that you could control your dreams and participate in the dreams. And he said, "You know, if you want to fly, you could tell yourself to fly, and you can be aware that you're flying but you could be aware also that it's a dream."

And I must admit, on two or three occasions when he was living in the house and we talked about that, I actually had that experience in my dream. I knew I was dreaming and I was flying. And I knew I was flying, just in my body. I wasn't in any vehicle or anything like that, and I was enjoying it. And I could feel the speed. I could feel the air. I could see the objects below, and it was wonderful. And I did that a couple of times. And so that really sort of like confirmed to me that, you know, there was this whole mind — engine in the mind that you could sort of like control to some degree.

And so that to me kind of connected the visualization sort of experience to some degree, not that every time I went to bed I could say, I don't like that color or this shape or something, but I knew — and I had confidence that I could go to bed with a problem in developing some art idea that I had, and go to bed with those concerns on my mind and it would transfer over to my subconscious, and it would go to work. And when I would wake up, the problem would be solved and I would realize the solution. I could see the solution in my mind. And that happened time after time after time.

So that is what I — and how I exercise it, I tell myself, "Okay, this is a problem." And I don't even use the word "maybe," you know, that it might get solved. I just know it will get solved. I depend on that process.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so it's served me well for many a year.

MS. REIDEL: It's fascinating because I've heard many people describe this many different ways, and so it's just interesting to hear your particular process. And will you consciously go to sleep with something then in mind —

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. I consciously go to bed saying, "I have this problem." I'm talking to the universe.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: "I have this problem. I want to solve it. I'm going to go to sleep. I'm going to close my eyes and then I want the process to start." And it does.

MS. REIDEL: And you've been doing that consistently for —

MR. CUMMINGS: I've been doing that since the '80s.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, since the '80s.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting. So it's a regular part of your process.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, it's a regular thing.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's one of the tools that I have in creating my artwork and part of the creative process.

MS. REIDEL: Let's talk a little bit about that working process since we've just touched on —

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. REIDEL: — it seems like, a core part of it. You've talked about when you form your ideas, sometimes there will be a small amount of drawing, advance drawing, but the difference of when you're working on —

MR. CUMMINGS: Commissions.

MS. REIDEL: — commissions —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: — versus your own work, which you might just start cutting into fabric.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, up until I started doing commissions — I think like in the '80s, sometime in the '80s — prior to that, all my artwork was created just through, again visualization, just thinking of the idea, whatever the subject matter was.

If the source was a current event or it was music or it was a photograph or something I had seen that I wanted to translate into, like, a quilt image or a collate image, I would just think it. I wouldn't bring up a sketchpad and try to work it out through forms and positioning it and stuff. All that was done mentally.

And "mentally" also meant in a sort of a color way also. I can't say, you know, there were specific colors, but it wasn't black and white either, in the image. But I could see the form in my mind and it was just a matter of picking up a piece of chalk and drawing that form on a piece of fabric.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And the form could take any size shape that I wanted it to. And that was sometimes dictated by the foundation fabric that I chose to appliqué everything on top of. Or it could be I just wanted something very large and therefore the scale of whatever I drew out from my visualization would be large. And that had to connect to another part that had to be large, because proportionately it all had to kind of come together. And so one piece led to another.

And I'm working on the floor. I'm not working on a table or anything. I work on the floor. I worked on the floor ever since I started quilting — creating quilt tops. And I'm on the floor. I have the music going. I'm on my knees. I have the chalk in my hand. And I learned the chalk process — I don't know if I learned it from a tailor or another quilter, but that was more easy to eliminate than trying to hide a marker line or a pencil line or something.

So I had my chalk. I'm doing a line. And then I get my scissors and I cut it out and then I place it on the larger foundation fabric. There's no other lines of forms on this fabric. It's just blank, except for that one cut-out that I made. So have to visualize more how that's going to be matched up with another piece I'm going to cut, from my mind, out of the fabric.

So it slowly comes together. I always kind of associated it with making a puzzle, but backwards, you know, because you buy puzzles in a box; you put the pieces together. Here I'm creating the pieces to make the puzzle.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: So recently — this is a little side note — I'm working on the floor. A few years ago a friend was visiting me and said, "Michael, I'm going to buy you something that you need because you're working on the floor with these quilts." And I said, "What?" He said, "I'm not going to tell you. Let's go to the Home Depot."

So we went to the Home Depot. I said, "What are you going to buy me?" And he picked up a pair of things and gave them to me. He said, "Here, this is what you need." I said, "What are these?" "Kneepads." [They laugh.] I said, "Kneepads?" He said, "Yes." And then I tried them and I said, "Oh, these are great," because I was wondering how much longer I was going to be working on the floor. And so I use those now periodically when I'm ongoing with a big quilt.

So I'm on the floor and I'm visualizing and cutting out shapes. And then I use straight pins. I pin things down. I don't cut out the entire composition necessarily the first go round or the second go-round, but I pin things down, and then what I might do is sew it to the surface of the foundation fabric. And I always use a zigzag stitch primarily to sew around the edges. I don't do the traditional tucking over the edges like traditional quilters do, a quarter of an inch or something. I don't do that.

And what I did — I picked up this habit of zigzagging the edges through the Make a Banner, Fly a Banner experience at the museum of — well, at the craft museum by this artist, Norman Laliberte, because that's the

way he constructed his tapestries. He did a zigzag stitch. And what he did — his zigzag stitches — I think also he had complementary threat colors.

MS. REIDEL: Okay, between the bobbin and the needle.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so that's what I do also. I use thread like paint. And so I sometimes have threat colors that match the fabric I'm working with or to complement it some way, but I don't — so I'm not using one thread color throughout the quilt at all.

And so I'll sew down whatever I've cut down with my sewing machine, that I've had over 25 years. I bought this sewing machine at Macy's. It's just a little domestic model. And a little old lady — I didn't even know how to operate the sewing machine. I told you when I did the first little banner, a woman wanted to show me and I ran away from her. And so but this time I had to embrace the idea that if I wanted to go further, after the first year of making hand quilts, or tops, or wall hangings, that I had to learn how to do a machine.

So I went there and she showed — she gave me a couple of free lessons. She said, "Come back if you have any problems." I went back a few times because the bobbin was too tight or the thread didn't work right. And she said, "See, just do this and do that." I said, "Oh, okay." So the rest is history.

And so people look at the sewing machine. They see the little arched arm over — that the domestic sewing machine has. And they said, "How have you made all these large quilts with this little sewing machine? And just like I set my timers, my "personal trainer," I call my sewing machine my "dance partner." I said, "We just learned each other's moves, and I just swing the fabric through and it lets it go through, and we just move around like that." And I said, "That's how it goes."

I've always wanted to buy a second sewing machine because I knew I needed a backup in case I was working on something that had a deadline or something, but I never got around to it. I did go to Sears one time years ago and they had all these new sewing machines that had 50 different stitches and all sorts of other stuff going on, and I got just sort of, again, overcome with the complexity, because my sewing machine only does two stitches: a straight stitch and a zigzag stitch.

MS. REIDEL: Zigzag.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's all I need.

And so I've just kind of gone along, tried to maintain — keep the machine oiled and up to date and clean, and I've created all my quilts with that one sewing machine.

So once I sew everything down, I go and cut out the next piece. But then people have told me — and I unconsciously never thought about it — I do layers. I might do one layer of fabric all over the surface, and then I go back and I might do another layer in different areas of the quilt composition until I'm satisfied with the whole quilt. And how I know when I'm satisfied with the whole quilt, I tell people it's when it tells me it's finished.

And then I learned that comment by reading an article once in a magazine. They were speaking — they were interviewing some quilter, a little old lady somewhere, and they asked her the same question. And she said, "When it tells me it's finished, that's when I know it's finished." And so that's — I listen for that sort of feeling from the quilt that, okay, you can't go any further. It doesn't need any more anything. Just leave it alone. So I listen for that feeling.

MS. REIDEL: Has that also been true for quite some time?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

MS. REIDEL: Decades now?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. And when I did the quilt — I'll tell you, one part that was really kind of eerie, when I did *I'll Fly Away*, the quilt that's at the Museum of Art and Design now, in their collection, that quilt I made, and it was supposed to be a cotton picker. It was supposed to be a slave in a cotton-picking field. So what I had done for research, I had purchased a reproduction of a photograph of a woman in a field being a slave, and she was

all dressed up, and he had a cotton bag and she was doing cotton.

So I reproduced her hat and her long sleeves and all that. And I learned they did all the long sleeves and apron and all that because the cotton plant had thorns and they didn't want to get, you know, cut or scratched or anything like that. And it must have been a cold time because she was really kind of — she had a vest on and a scarf and hat and everything, so I recreated all that.

And then I did my imagery around her, and I called it *I'll Fly Away* because that's actually a title not only of a TV show that was on television, but it's also a title of a gospel song: "I'll fly away, come some early morning, from my pain and misery." And so around her I put a lot of African fabric images of little figures. They weren't realistic but, like, little animals or different things. And this was all supposed to be sort of an aura or energy field that would help her "fly away, come some early morning."

And so I had made the entire quilt but I didn't have a face. I put the hat and everything but no face. I said, "Well, where am I going to get a face for this quilt," because I didn't feel like the space allowed me to really create a face that I wanted to, and I didn't feel like making the face and sewing it in there, which I would have to do because it was too big and too heavy now to take through the sewing machine.

So I had a canvas that had a face that I had painted years and years ago, and I never wanted to throw away the canvas because I thought it was sacrilegious or something, because if I threw away the canvas I'd get struck by lightning because the face was saying, you aren't going to throw me away.

So when I came to this, sort of, crisis moment in finishing this quilt, in my mind the visualization took over and it connected this old face and this canvas with this blank spot in the quilt for a face. And I said, "Oh, this is where they could come together."

Now, the canvas had to be at least 15 years old. I didn't throw it away. So I went and I started cutting out the face. And I was waiting for something to happen. [Laughs.] Nothing happened, but the quilt was lying on the floor in my studio, all finished, waiting for a face. I took the cutout face. It was an oval, and I didn't have to do anymore cutting to fit exactly under the hat.

When I put it underneath the hat in the space where the face was required, and the whole quilt came together with the face, I felt that there was a vibration in the room. I left the room and closed the door. I was afraid because I felt like something was alive in the room other than me — [laughs] — and it was the quilt.

So I closed the door, and I don't know how long it took me to come back in, maybe 15, 20 minutes or something. Then I came in to see if everything was still in the same place. And it was, and so I calmed down.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: But for that moment that I put that face underneath that hat, I felt sure there was something supernatural going on here that I didn't understand, and I left the room.

MS. REIDEL: That's fascinating. Had that happened before or since?

MR. CUMMINGS: No, no, no.

MS. REIDEL: That was the one time.

MR. CUMMINGS: That was the one time.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. So that took place with *I'll Fly Away*.

So that's the process. It's just visualization. Although in terms of commissions, though, the commissions in the '80s, when I started getting them, I found out rather quickly — and it was a requirement to get the commission — that I had to present to them some sort of idea on paper. And they just said "On paper." I was the one that started to create collages using fabric and paint and stuff to give them almost like a finished look of what the quilt was going to look like, not to scale but at least a miniature, and also using the exact fabrics that I was going to use in the larger quilt.

I just felt that that's what they should have, to know what they're going to get —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — so there wouldn't be any surprises. Since the commissions generally really restricted you as

an artist, you couldn't really improvise or do variations. Once you had the theme of what they wanted and once you presented what they saw you were going to do, you had to stick to that. And within the contract it talked about, you know, if you didn't, then they didn't have to pay you.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: It was simple as that.

So I started doing little miniature designs of what the quilt would look like, a pattern for the commission. And I only did that for commissions. I never really took that over to what I was doing until maybe the late '90s or — yeah, the very late '90s or something, when one friend of mine who was an architect was saying, "Michael, you know, you're doing this for the commissions. You should do that for your own artwork too, and you should, like, frame them or at least keep them."

So I started to do that, but I still don't really do that for my own work, like the large quilt I was talking about, *Sister Gertrude Morgan*, there's no sketches for her. I just visualized her as the bride of God. The bride dress was the key. And then all around her was her story. And that brought it all together.

MS. REIDEL: You've done quite a few commissions. How do you select which ones you're interested in?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I don't. I just kind of reach out and I hope they select me, because as an — well, I'd say as an — I'm known in the quilt world as sort of like maybe the leading male black quilter, and Faith Ringgold is the leading black female quilter.

And then Michael James is a white quilter, but he's not quilting as much anymore. He's gone more into the academia world, and he's at Lincoln, Nebraska. And he had a lot of books out, and he was quilting, I guess, like, maybe in the late '70s all through the '80s and maybe in the early '90s, and then kind of transitioned over into teaching.

But we know each other, and he has — he wrote a very positive article about my *Young Obama* quilt last year in Fiber Arts magazine. I think that's the title of it. It's international, and he raved about that quilt. And that quilt happens to be at Lincoln, Nebraska, where he is right now, at the museum that's separate from the university but it's on the campus. And so that is in there, along with the *Slave Ship [Henrietta Marie]*, along with another quilt from the *Slave Ship* series.

But getting back to the commissions and being selected, it's always — I either have been invited to be a part of the process to create a commission and/or I've just found commissions on the Internet or in art publications and applied to them. What I had to do — and you are selected —

[End of disc.]

MR. CUMMINGS: [In progress] — in that you're included or excluded because a lot of the public art commissions are either outdoor or they want sculpture or they want mosaic. They might want a mural, but when you get into textiles, that's a whole other thing.

And the last commission I had was canceled because it was right at the beginning of the financial crisis nationally, and I knew it was coming even though it was a year before I had gotten selected. And there was — it was a courthouse in North Carolina, and the city was putting up the money. And I was going to make two quilts, and they were going to be six by eight. And they were going to go under Plexiglas in this courthouse, and the courthouse is going to be transferred into social service offices. And I had chosen a theme — it was Mecklenburg County — and we were going along, but after that first year and then the crisis took over, I got a call from the director of the art project saying, "Michael, I have some bad news for you." But I had anticipated it, because working with the State Art Council, we had heard all over the country how things were just collapsing and that the funding was drying up and stuff, and so I was anticipating the call. And so, you know, I wasn't hurt or anything about it, because I said, "Well, I'm going to go forward and at least finish one quilt," which I did. And they gave the first payment of the quilt, and that was okay with me.

And so — but one thing took place in a conversation prior to the termination of the project was that I kind of introduced a project director to what I was doing, and I showed her — because they didn't ask for what I was doing in this particular one. I just kind of researched what the history of North Carolina was. It was cotton, was a big sort of money maker in the early years, and it was very rural. And I applied to that primarily because that's where Romare Bearden is from, and I wanted to honor him by making something that would be in the county where he was from, and the kind of exhibit within the design, certain elements that he promoted, which was the train and just the rural landscape of everything.

So — and so that's what I tried to bring together in my composition, but they hadn't seen the composition. So

they start — she started to see it, and I could hear in her voice she kind of felt that maybe it was too stereotype related to the population that would be coming into the social services. And it was nothing directly said, but it was indirectly stated. So I don't know how well the quilt would have been received after it was over with, with the subject matter at this point, because of how she responded with that conversation. But that was something that surprised me to a certain degree. You know, since we were in the year — the 21st century — [laughs] — and stuff like that and this was a public sort of thing and this was history, it wasn't something that was hidden or anything. But anyway, that was — that was that experience there. And so I had applied for that. So half of the — I guess half of the commissions I applied for and half I was invited to participated in — with. So the ones I chose were ones that were willing to accept the textile at media as an art form, because a lot of them don't.

And then one, well, the MTA, I applied for a commission twice with them, and they were willing — and that was to go in the subway somewhere, but the last one was to go on the outside of a building. And they were willing to take on my designs and have a mosaic company somewhere translate it into a larger design. So I was in that competition, but I didn't get it. But it was — and it was an interesting experience because it allowed me — they gave us a list of manufacturers that deal with mosaic designs and had worked with the MTA, and two were in Germany, and we emailed back and forth, and one was here in Brooklyn. And it was a list of six, but I narrowed it down to three. And we talked back and forth, so I had to get a budget and how much it would cost and everything like that.

So — but again, I didn't get that, but I applied for it because I had known Mother Hale. It was to honor Mother Hale who took in foster care kids and drug babies, and I actually volunteered for her organization, and I worked with the babies and stuff for, I guess, a half a year. After work, I would go by, and you would work with the instructors there and walk them to the playground to play. You would read them stories and just do little things like that to help out. And so I did that for a time. And so I knew her, and I wanted to, you know, at least try to be one of the people trying to honor her in an art form. But again, they didn't select what I created.

MS. RIEDEL: How did the commission works differ from your own work?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, they differ a lot because, like I said before, they kind of limit or restrict your creativeness because you presented them with a design, and they're anticipating and seeing that design just blown up — no sort of variations or differences that they didn't see in the first one. And when I was first starting commissions, an artist friend of mine who's a printer, her name is Robin Holder, and she lives in Brooklyn, she told me, she said, "Michael, beware, when you start doing commissions, it's going to change the way you think about art or where you're able to create art." And she might have gone into a little bit more, but it did sort of cripple me initially in terms of the freedom I talked about earlier with the children and all of that. When you're doing a commission, again, you're locked in. And if you see something that you think you might want to change, [... - MAC] you can't do it. And so that restriction mentally or psychologically, when I move back over to wanting to do my own work, it's sort of like I'm in a brace or something. And I have to break out of that to be able to do my own work. It sounds a little strange because you do that commission and you walk away and you go back to your own work. But something happens psychologically where you can't just go back and do what you were doing before easily. There's certain sort of, I don't know, blockades or something that's not really allowing you to let the energy flow like it should. And so I had to get used to that transition back and forth, and it slowed me down a little bit then, in different times.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've been doing commissions consistently throughout your career, so it must be a real back-and-forth.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, I mention here that I've been doing commissions but I don't see it that way. I guess it adds up that way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, you said from the '80s — [inaudible] — '93 through the current year?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, from the '80s, yeah, yeah. So, sometimes you don't really think in that sort of history what you just think at the moment, and you don't add it up. "Add it up, Michael. Add it up." Okay. But yeah, it's been a back-and-forth with that, and it has caused, you know, like — again, like I said, a slowing down of the process of creating something on my own of that going back and forth. But it is — I did enjoy — I have enjoyed doing the commissions because a lot of the commissions have taken me in different directions that I would not have normally traveled creatively, and I like that process of opening up new doors.

MS. RIEDEL: Do any commissions in particular come to mind when you say that?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, one was an abstract. It was at Tennessee. It was in Knoxville, Tennessee, springtime in Memphis — well, springtime in Knoxville or something.

MS. RIEDEL: *Dogwoods in Springtime?*

MR. CUMMINGS: *Dogwoods in Springtime*. That commission was done at a convention center that was being built, and they selected me — I don't — I don't know if I — I think they contacted me through word of mouth or something. But they hired many artists to fill up the convention center and public spaces, but they have decided on me to do a work that was in an area that was only four feet high and 10 feet long. And so that for me was a very odd size and a challenge. I said, "Well, what in the world am I going to do?" But then doing some research about Knoxville, Tennessee, and I drifted into being in a rural area and having done that series early on in the '70s I knew it was — it was a rural area, so I wanted to embrace something to do with the land. And then I learned that Knoxville — I think the dogwood is either the local city landmark tree or is the national tree — is the state tree or something, but dogwoods.

And dogwoods were the first tree that I was introduced to in a New England springtime when I came to the East to live, because I didn't know about springtime flowers, you know? [Laughs.] We had flowers year-round in L.A. And of course the fruit trees would come out with their flowers in the spring, but so what?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: But later I said, "Oh, the dogwoods, the dogwoods." And so they embrace the dogwoods down there. So I said, "Okay, I'll take on the dogwoods." But it wasn't going to be realistic, and for some — I gave them three different designs.

One design I gave them that was semi sort of — or is that — Okay, springtime — well, the dogwoods. The *Dogwood* design ended up being very abstract. It was sort of like a patchwork quilt, but there were certain elements in the fabric designs that allowed you to kind of consider a landscape, and that was that one fabric had a zigzag motion in it, which could be the river. And then dogwoods are pink and white, and so I put a pink-and-white polka dot fabric into the design. And then I put some other sort of light designs in as sort of light pastel colors, and then a little bit of green oval shapes to kind of give you a sense of springtime and leaves coming out on the plants and stuff like that.

So that one was for — well, they wanted that 4-by-10, so I gave them a little design using the actual fabrics that I would use. And then I gave them two other designs which they said that there was going to be a little moat and a little bridge that people crossed over to go into the convention center. So I created something like a little bridge with arches, and I had something with a fish going underneath it. And they said they were going to have banners with different colors and stuff on the bridge, kind of designating this is the way to the new center and all that.

So I gave them that to consider as well, but they chose this abstract patchwork design of mine, and that just really surprised me. But then I thought, well, maybe whoever was on the committee grew up with patchwork design quilts and could kind of see the richness in this design that I saw as sort of more just an abstract. They saw it as sort of like really relating to the surrounding community and the history of quilt-making.

So they accepted that design, so I created that design. So that was one that was challenging and kind of off the beaten path because it was the most abstract patchwork design that I have done up until the recent *House Tops [Gees Bend]* quilt that kind of borrows the variation on the — [inaudible[13:14]] — quilt makers.

After that the quilts commission —

MS. RIEDEL: Think about that 1996 *Dreams Deferred* quilt.

[Cross talk.]

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah, that was another one, *Dreams Deferred*.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That was to commemorate the Oklahoma —

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, the children that got bombed and killed in the Oklahoma bombing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: That one was a commission by a foundation out in California. They commissioned I think about 12 quilts at least. Faith Ringgold was one of the quilters in there. I don't know the other names of the quilters.

MS. RIEDEL: Helias Foundation, I think.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. And given that theme to commemorate the children, I had to sit and think about that for a time. But having worked around children —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and having somewhat of a childish mind in certain categories, and then also embracing the whole idea of a dream. And like I mentioned earlier before, "Young, Gifted and Black" that music, you could do anything if you have the vision and the dream. And then embracing the dream that I felt that I always nurtured and carried on to develop where I became as an artist, I had to have this dream that I kept alive.

So then I thought about the dreams that these children might have had that was turned off by the bombing. And then I thought of the Langston Hughes poem that I always embraced with dreams — and I didn't discover until I came to New York his writing, but what becomes of a dream deferred?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so I thought of that. And then I went back to thinking of the children, and I thought about all the different types of dreams that they could have. I said, "Well, that's it." You know, I'll call it — the quilt may be called *Dreams Deferred*, and it will be dreams that they don't have or can't have because of the bombing.

And so what I did to create the composition, I started visualizing what would I do to put on the surface? And then I said, "Well, it has to be things related to possibilities — future images of being a doctor, a nurse, a scholar, having a graduation robe on; having toys to play with, a beach ball that you — and a little shovel that you use to pull up or dig in sand, and a shirt that had a baseball player on it, a cowboys and Indians that you would play, or a little doctor."

So I went to a variety of places. I went to thrift stores and found little children's clothes that had different sort of prints on them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And then I went to a cake bakery store where they had little forms, little miniature forms for doctors and nurses and stuff, and I got that. And then I bought some toys, like a Cinderella something. And then I had like — William T. Johnson is a painter, a black painter from the '30s and '40s, and he had, like, some dancers, some Bebop dancers on a t-shirt that they had at the Smithsonian. I cut that and put that in there. It was all objects of what children could imagine that they could grow up to be, or what they could play with in their lifetime.

And so I put these on the quilt surface. I put not a lot of things on the surface because I sent it off to a quilter to sew the three layers together. And once that comes back, then I hand-sew other objects, because I know they can't work with objects going through their machine, or whatever they have, the equipment.

So I got the quilt back and I finished it. And it went on for a two-year span of touring. And I think it was a year or two later the quilter that did the initial part of the quilt forming sent me a letter and admitted for the first time that initially she did not understand where I was coming from with my concept for the children. She said she just could not connect with it. But she said over time she thought about it and she said she understood now where I was coming from —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and what I was trying to say with *Dreams Deferred*. And I was just so surprised —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — because we had been a team for over 10 years, and I still send her things periodically. But she never said anything except in that letter.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: So that's how that particular quilt came together. I thought of *Dreams Deferred* and what children had lost.

MS. RIEDEL: Any other commissions that stand out in your mind as particularly memorable?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, one was memorable only because I had 30 days to do it. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that is memorable.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that was the *Absolute Vodka* quilt.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I was going to ask you about that one. So that's interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, I don't know if they still do it or not, but they used to, on an annual basis, select a group of artists to make new quilts with their, you know, image. And so that particular time — and also it was the whole black-and-white thing too because this is only black artists that they were selecting, and someone the year before had been selected and they talked to the person that was hired to curate and collect artists to make the new year's work.

So this woman told this woman about me, and then she contacted me and she said, "Okay, do you think you want to do it?" And I said, "Yes." And then she said, "Okay, you have to submit some ideas." And so I said, "Okay." But first of all I had to wrestle with it because I didn't know a lot about it. I guess I was starting to see them because they were starting to appear in magazines a lot in the '80s. It was becoming very pop art sort of to look at and see and then to kind of imagine how the artist was connecting with the label and where the label was and stuff.

So at the — at one point, in the beginning of the — of trying to visualize it, do I put the label on it? Do I put vodka? Do I put — what do — what do I do? And I put Absolut and I said — you know, I was wrestling with that. And then I kind of realized by looking at other ads in the past, that some artists were just putting the bottle form. They were not putting any texts or labels or lettering or anything. So I said, "Okay, I could do that."

But then, they said that you only had 30 days to do it. And they had a contract that was about 40 pages — [laughs] — your generation, the future generations, all rights and all this stuff — and if you don't finish it in 30 days, we'll take everything from you and take it to somebody else to finish it. And you won't get paid anything. But you have 30 days to do it.

And so I said, "Oh, my goodness" —

MS. RIEDEL: What was the — what was the rush?

MR. CUMMINGS: I don't know. I don't know. But yet, they have — it was 30 days. And so I said, "Okay, I can do this."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. [Laughs.]

MR. CUMMINGS: I got my personal trainer with me, we could do this. And so — anyway, I kind of figured out a size, it was going to be about 4-by-5. And I said, "Well, what can I transfer or what can I put into the composition that I see would work?" And I have 30 days, so I said, "Well, I can't really try to imagine something new that quickly that I'll be comfortable with." And then I looked around and I said, "The jazz series." I said, "Well, what I could do is take the jazz series, leave in the bass player and the horn player, but take out the piano player and put in the bottle form." And then I said, "I'll make a night scene, so I'll make — I guess, like a moonlight night — a moonlit night." And then I put that in the background. And I could bring that together. Because I said, "I could easily kind of create the musicians, because I did 12 of them already." So I did that. And then the bottle form was kind of easy.

And to kind of give the Afro-centric sort of like feeling to it, I used African mud cloth as the fabric to cut out the bottle with, so people could see this pattern going on. And if you don't really look at it as a bottle form, you just see it as a pattern related with these exotic sort of like musicians playing around in this environment. So I created that.

And it went on to be in one magazine. And then I contacted I think one of the offices or something then asked, "You know, how do the images get selected for magazines?" And they said, "Well, it's the publications that select the images. They don't really promote the images, the — whoever the publication is, they have looked through their selection and picked out what they want." I said, "Oh, okay." And then they came out with a book — I think there's only one book; I don't think there's a second book. There's one book that has — and it stops, I think, in the '80s — of all the Absolut vodka ads. And it — one little side note in the story is that a friend of mine had a daughter in a private school on the Upper East Side, and he wanted me to go talk to her class as a — as a — what do we call it — favor. So I said, "Okay."

So I went there and I got my little portfolio and had my little stash of little fabric pieces and stuff. And I was talking about it. And it was all over with and the kids were kind of like milling around. They're kind of somewhere packing their books and getting ready to go — private school, now. And then I was talking to the teacher. And then I kind of in a low voice said, "You know, I'm doing a vodka ad right now." And a little girl heard me next — standing next to me. She said, "Oh, the vodka — Absolut vodka — oh, my father and I, we collect those. We have a lot of those." [They laugh.] I said, "Okay."

So when the book came out, again it stopped around the '80-something. And then I guess the next book, I might be in it if they come out with the next book.

MS. RIEDEL: Yours was '97, yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, and so they told me I had the unique honor that they had two Cummings in the Absolut vodka. And the other one was e.e. Cummings. And I said, "Whoa, okay, that was special." [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible] — absolutely.

A quick question, we just mentioned fabric and you've talked about finding dresses and things at thrift shops and at yard sales. Where else does the fabric come from? Are there certain places that you go back to time and again?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, in Manhattan, it's been a — sort of a revolving sort of situation — a process of elimination of stores, because with real estate in New York, a lot of the fabric stores that were around in the '70s and the '80s have disappeared, and so I had to go to new places, but in the '70s and the '80s, there were a lot of shops along 57th Street — from 6th Avenue over to 8th Avenue, there were a lot of dress fabric places, and they had some beautiful imported fabric stuff. And I would do that.

But there was another wonderful place in the Bowery section — Beckenstein's. And it was an old fabric store that the family started years ago, and it had prospered. And I think the third generation was operating it, and they had a fabric store for men's suit fabric, they had a decorative fabric for everything for the house and then they had a dress fabric store — all this was on Delancey Street. And I went down there all through the '70s — going down to Delancey Street to Beckenstein's. Now, they're on 21st Street — the children that have grown up — and I — they sold the buildings down on Delancey Street, and they have one store now on 21st between 6th and 5th Avenue, and I've been in there the same — a few times, but it's not the same anymore. They do have the basement with the remnants and stuff, but it's just not the same. So now I go to around below SoHo — I guess it's NoHo on Broadway, below Canal Street, there's still a few dinosaur fabric stores that have been there forever that you have to climb over fabric to get to other fabric. And it even has — well, I won't say a smell to it, but it's old and ancient, some of it, and some of it more recent arrivals in the front.

And so I go down there now primarily. I've never really shopped around the garment district. In the '30s and the early '40s, only because it was just too overwhelming, and each store has a different sort of, like, feel to it, and the salespeople are kind of aggressive with you. "Well, what do you want," you know, and stuff. And eventually, I guess when you become a regular, they kind of let you go, but they don't want you touch anything and all of this sort of stuff, but down in these old stores, you're just kind of free to just move around and touch and feel and pull out or whatever, and they don't mind it. And the prices are much better also. So I go down — for the last, I guess, five to eight years, I've found myself going down NoHo on Broadway and shop down there, and then on the side streets.

And a lot of the fabric I buy is upholstery fabric; it's not necessarily dress fabric. Any my little sewing machine of 25 years or more can still handle it. [Laughs.] And sometimes I have to kind of go slow, because the needle doesn't go through the fabric as easy as with dress fabric, but it still manages to do my three layers or four layers on that. But I do — I get a lot of upholstery fabric. A lot of that might end up as a border, or it could also end up into the main design, and, I lean towards linen and silk and cotton and cotton blends, only because of the lasting quality as opposed to wool. I'm always afraid of insects and moths [with] wool, so I don't really deal with wool at all.

And I know these other fabrics have a more of a last — longevity to them, so I choose only those kind. And I refer to borders — early on when I was making a lot of quilts, I made the patchwork border with the triangles creating the squares going around, and that does get more attention and it is more in tradition to a lot of the quilts, but I find myself now making the border more like a frame and getting solid color fabric and/or fabric that has some sort of pattern in it that creates a frame around the work.

And then, back in the '80s, I discovered a quilting term in terms of a border fabric design is that you put a binding on the outer end of the fabric border. So I've been requiring that a lot now, where it could be a black or red strip — whatever color might compliment the quilt itself, I request that because I like that additional, finished look that it gives the quilt. So — but in terms of fabric places, they're very — they're getting more and more limited in Manhattan.

MS. RIEDEL: I would think.

MR. CUMMINGS: And I primarily shop in Manhattan. I don't really go — I'm sort of a Manhattan-ite. I don't really leave the island for a lot because I'm afraid of the outside world. [They laugh.] So I stay on the island. I don't cross the bridge very often. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, but you said you're preparing for a trip to Japan?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I went to Japan in November of last year, and it was all-expenses paid. I had gotten invited by the editor of the quilt magazine in Japan, translates into "Patchwork," and it's been ongoing for over 10 years. And she first — she and I first discovered each other, I guess, through some show of mine that might have been traveling. And it had to do with the *Jazz quilts* too, because she's a jazz lover.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so she featured me on the cover of the magazine back, I guess — well, it had to be after the *Jazz quilts*, so it had to be, like, early '90 — '93, '94 maybe? I don't know if it went in that far. And so I was on the cover and I was featured in the magazine. And then we kind of kept in touch.

And she comes periodically to the United States, to see quilt exhibits and stuff like that because her magazine is also in charge of this quilt — this giant international quilt festival that takes place in November every year in the convention center. I happen to be part of it this year, but it goes on annually and her publication sponsors it. And they have over 3,000 quilts and a lot of visitors.

And she featured me, I guess, about three or four years ago — not featured, but had me in an article. And then at that point she said, "Well, would you like to come to Japan and show your quilts one year?" I said, "Sure." She said, "Well, I'll work on it." So she worked on it, I guess, for two years. And so early — I guess — well, it was late prior year, 2011 — 2010, I guess, the end of the 2010, she said, "Okay, it's a go for 2011."

So when that started — that process started it led me into whole new areas. I talk about business skills and everything — a whole other area, how to ship internationally, because I have had some quilts go international, but they were through organizations and I had nothing to do but the transportation of the quilts. It was all in the hands of the organization.

But this time — and I thought it was going to be the same thing with them. However, they said, "Oh, would you please do it? We don't have a representative here." So it was — it was like 13 quilts. I had to get first an appraiser — which everybody should have. And I hadn't really dealt with an appraiser before. Well, one time I dealt with an appraiser, when I did a commission for City College up here in Harlem for the engineering building.

There was a commission and I had to — it was to make a quilt to honor the engineer that designed the Williamsburg Bridge. And so I did sort of an abstract bridge image and then with the flow of the coils that are on the bridge that create that loop or circle, the U shape going across, I kind of repeated that as a pattern. And then I kind of put a lot of smaller block parts of colors and stuff like traffic.

And then I did a — what was it — a globe — I think it was a globe — sort of, like, reflecting the universe or something. But it ended up 15 feet square and it was going to cost them about \$12,000. And the guy — the head of the department couldn't believe that a quilt was going to cost \$12,000 and he couldn't believe that I was worth it.

So he demanded that I get an appraiser of my work so he would have proof. And so an appraiser came over. And she evaluated what I had done up to that point and stuff and said, yes, you know, it's — he's worth it. So I got the commission and it ended up 15 feet square. And they put it in the auditorium at City College up here. So that's where that is now.

But getting back to where I was — and I kind of lost my direction —

MS. RIEDEL: Japan.

MR. CUMMINGS: Japan? Oh, Japan. So what they wanted me to do was get everything appraised for insurance purposes and then they wanted me to contact a shipping company. And then it had to go through customs and tariffs, and then that was a whole special document that I needed to get from a particular company that issues those things. And that cost about \$1,200, that they paid, but the \$1,200 covered insurance and also customs and tariffs.

And it was a document that allowed you — and it was what everybody uses for conventions and short-term shows in other countries — that allows you to go in and out the country — and it says you're going to go in and out the country all within one year or less. And so, I had to get this document. And that — going back and forth, emails and filling out forms, and it was a nightmare.

And so once it all got together, DHL was the company that did the shipping. So I had these — I had to order heavy-duty boxes. And then I got injected with fear by one woman I know, Carolyn Mazloomi, that does a lot of quilt exhibitions that I've been in. She ships a lot and she ships with a shipping company, but they ship

everything in crates.

So she said, "Oh, Michael, you need a crate. Oh, you need a crate." And then I talked to the company in Japan. I said, "Well — you know, I told them I need crates." They said, "Oh, we can't afford crates. Crates are too heavy and they weigh too much and it's — too much trouble." So I said, "Oh, really, do I want to ship my quilts in cardboard boxes?"

So anyway, I ordered heavy-duty cardboard boxes off the Internet and I — it was like three boxes — big boxes. And they came and picked them up and took them there. And they got there within a week, to Japan. They went to — where's the company? The company's in Tokyo but the show was in Yokohama, which is outside of Tokyo by about an hour. So they ended up there.

And then I got my ticket and I was given a hotel to live in — well, to stay in while I was there. I got a free breakfast and a free lunch. And I had to — well, I was one of two invited artists. A couple, a husband and wife from England, came there. The wife, she did these very giant — talking about Georgia O'Keeffe and giant forms — she did giant seabirds and sort of like driftwood and other things.

They were very realistic. They looked like photo projections, they were so realistic looking — but very large scale, maybe about six to eight feet square. She said she did the quilting and the drawing and her husband did the painting. And he was a scientist, but he had time to do the painting. They used pastel colors. And so they were one exhibit and then — so you had that. And then next to them, on the other side of the wall, was my exhibit of my quilt style. And the thing was, we were surrounded by traditional quilts — [laughs] — that the Japanese quilters made.

There were — there were a few that they tried to call art quilts, but they were very conservative in their sort of designs. They did venture off into abstract, but just so much — not anything bold and really hit you in the face. And then they had a lot of floral patterns and they did a lot of patchwork, stuff like that. And then they had a lot of vendors who were inside this convention hall as well.

So we had to give tours. And so I had an interpreter that walked alongside me. And I would talk about — we rehearsed what I would say — I would say. So I talked about each of the 13 quilts — I think it was 13 quilts —

MS. RIEDEL: Did you select? Did they select?

MR. CUMMINGS: She — primary interest was the *Jazz* quilts.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: So they had about — at least six *Jazz* quilts. And then the other quilts it didn't matter. They wanted me to send 20 to 30 quilts, but I was totally uncertain of the care, of what would happen to them. I just thought that was too much to invest in something too unknown. Even though she was a really nice person, they were going to pay for everything, I didn't know the physical process that the quilts would go through, coming or going.

So I said no to 20 or 30. So I gave her, I guess, 13, I guess it is. And to me, that was enough. And there were some bigger quilts too. Besides the *Jazz* quilts, I gave them *Kitty and the Fireflies in the Bush*. I gave them one of the *Josephine Baker* quilts. I gave them *Dreams Deferred*. And I gave them a few other quilts, some of my *Haitian Boat People* series quilts were in the show as well.

So they had a nice sort of grouping. And I felt that was enough. And for the space that they provided and stuff — I guess they would have expanded the space — but they — it was an enclosed space with panels — giant panels that were about 10 feet — well, maybe eight feet tall. And there were two — well, let me see — one, two, three, four — there were four entrances and exits to go in and out.

It was — they gave me a red carpet. You know, they had some plants in there. I had some securities — little old ladies with vests on that said security. And no pictures allowed. My name over the arch of the main entrance, where it was in gold leaf in Japanese. And then they had photographs on both sides with me working at a — at a quilt — on a quilt. And then it was in English and in Japanese, the text there.

And so that was — that took place. And that was all of about maybe six days from the beginning to end. And that's sort of, like, normal for these sort of international-type shows because the one I'm going to be in in Houston, Texas this November is going to be less than a week and they're going to have the *Josephine Baker* quilt in that show.

And so after that was over with, that quilt show in Japan, in Yokohama, a friend of mine who said he had a sister that lived in Japan, but she no longer lived there, he said he had traveled there many a time. So he wanted to

take me on a tour. So he's a teacher in Taiwan, but he said he had the time and he had a lot of flight credits or points so he could get a ticket. So he flew over.

And so, he said, "I'm not going to take you to downtown Japan and all that — Tokyo — because that's just like New York. He said, "I'm going to take you to the country so you can really see the real heartland of Japan." So we went to the interior. And we went to mountain resorts where they have the hot springs. And he said, "You know, this is Japan." And he said, "This is historically sort of a rite of passage. Everybody goes to the hot springs. And this is part of being Japanese."

So the first night there was fog outside, it was damp. And he's leading me outside to these hot springs, where other people were out there. And the steam's kind of coming out of the water. I said, "I'm going to die of pneumonia!" [Laughs.] So we get in the water and I said, "Oh, this is nice. This is nice." I don't want to get out now. [Laughs.]

So I get out and then we go to, I think, another one — another hotel and all their hot spring pools were done up with themes. It was a coffee theme — you could smell the coffee, it looked like coffee. And people were splashing around, kids and everybody. And there was a wine one with a big bottle — with the hot spring water coming out the bottle of wine. [Laughs.] And there was a green tea one.

So all of this, and then I went in to have this experience where these little tiny fish, like the size of sardines, nibble at your dead skin on your feet. And I talked to my mother about that, and a few people they said they've heard about that and they even — I don't know if Oprah talked about it or something. But it had been sort of talked about nationally. Some people knew about it that I spoke to.

But I hadn't heard about it. And it was — it was another little side treat that we had. I think it was — cost \$10 to \$12 and you clean your feet and you go into this, like, little pool and then the fish are already there and they take in about 15 people at a time. And you stick your feet in the water and the fish rush over and start nibbling at your feet.

And it feels like little electric shocks. And they nibbled the dead skin off, supposedly. [Laughs.] So I didn't notice any difference, but you don't stay very long either. You stay maybe all of 15 minutes. They don't allow you stay much longer than that. The fish don't give up, but they tell you to leave. And so I had that experience.

But other than that, I had a lot of Japanese food that I really love because I'm semi-vegetarian anyway, so — I only do fish and poultry. So I didn't venture off from that. And I — once — the end of the quilt exhibit I did kind of look forward to McDonalds, but I didn't go. I did see it, but I didn't go. I stuck with the Japanese food.

But I had — the first breakfast I had — I had to get used to vegetables, you know? Even though this was a hotel where they got, I guess, international and American people, so they had coffee. I'm not a coffee drinker, but they had yogurt and they had some cereal things and they somebody making omelets and stuff, but I don't eat eggs, I guess I'm allergic. But they had that going. So they had some American stuff. But I stuck with the vegetables. I said, "Nothing wrong with that." I said, "I like the seaweed and all that, I'm used to it." But it was early in the morning. But I got used to it. So that was every day in the morning.

And then the lunch, they gave you a really compact box. And I think the box cost 15 [dollars] to \$20 because I was trying to translate the sign where people were buying it. I was getting it free, but I was trying to translate it. And to me, it looked like it was 15 [dollars], \$20 for this box that had like a little — some rice in it, that had a little salmon in it and it had like some sort of drink in it and I think it had a little something sweet in it. And it was a little box, and that was lunch. And I looked around and all the men were skinny-looking. And I said, "Wow," I said. "This is their diet, you know?" But all the men were skinny.

But I was in a very — where the hotel was, Yokohama, is a port city and is a very sort of thriving — lots of hotels, it's outside of Tokyo, so a lot of business going on. So I was, I would think, in the midst of a lot of middle-class people, because the hotel was connected to the mall; everybody was always dressed up. Even the families coming to look in the stores and stuff, they were really well-dressed and everything.

And the women, like all the men I saw, basically had suits on, little skinny suits. And all the women were highly fashion-dressed. They really kept up with the looks, the boots, chains, the vests and everything like that, and lots of makeup and all this. And I said, "Whoa, okay." On the subway — I was on the subway and I think I rode on the bullet train too — the teenagers, it was like anything goes — [laughs] — and very androgynous in terms of the boys. And then I heard — I saw some guys with makeup, and I heard that that was sort of a thing there too. They wear makeup.

And once I was leaving Japan to go to the airport — we went to many museums in the interior place, went to some of the gardens; it was autumn, so the landscapes were just beautiful with colors and the way they were like laid out in and the different plants and the trees and everything like that. And people — there were these

hordes of people; everybody had new Nikons and everything taking pictures. They would — and everybody had a digital; I don't know. I took a ton of pictures and I was — I'm looking at them now — I say, "Huh, it's all a garden; what's the big deal?" [Laughs.] You know, but at the time, it was like a magic land because of the colors, like somebody painted it all. So we went through all of that.

And towards the end, we stayed at a really authentic lodge and you had like a kimono in the closet that you had to put on — well, you didn't have to put on, but it was, you know, you could put on to come to dinner. And you in advance said what you wanted off their menu. And you had all the little dishes and everything, you sit down on the floor and very traditional. So we did that for like three days. And then we came back to the city to go to the airport.

He did all the translation and the money and the itinerary. He had planned it in advance, and he knew where all the places to go and all that. I would just follow and paying the bill. And so it was really an exciting, unbelievable trip.

And then when we were leaving the outskirts of the city, Tokyo, going to the airport, that's when we saw where the more common people live in what they call the — I don't know if they call it projects or — but I think they call them projects. And they just had a lot of crime, graffiti, the things that we have here all going on.

But I didn't really see that in my travels, because again, I was in downtown Yokohama in a hotel connected to this big mall. They — it was — and they had Christmas decorations. And I asked about that; I said, "I see all these Christmas decorations around; I don't see a Santa Claus, though. And I don't see the Virgin Mary or anything like that." And they — and then my friend said, "Well, they embrace part of Christmas in terms of I guess the materialistic part" — [laughs] — "and the decoration part. But they don't embrace the religious part." So I said, "Oh, okay." Because in the mall — it was an enclosed mall — they had this giant Christmas tree that must have been at least 20 feet tall. And they had it all lit up.

And little did I know, because once the day was over during these exhibit days, I would just go back to my hotel kind of exhausted, because I was on the floor all day long — but one night, I think I went out to the mall or something, and I saw this Christmas tree all lit up. And it was like I was back in the disco or something. It was like all sorts of things with lights. And I said, "What is going on with this tree?" And somebody said, "Well, they have a — it's computerized and it does all sorts of things." It goes through about maybe 20 or more patterns of lights. And it was just amazing. [Laughs.] So Japan was — that was my experience.

So I was in Japan a total of about maybe nine to 10 days.

MS. RIEDEL: Have your travels over time affected your work in any way?

MR. CUMMINGS: I tried to reflect on that. I saw that that was one of my questions. And I tried to look on that. And I kind of came to a conclusion that they didn't have a lot of impact. Because I think looking back to my childhood and even as a young adult into becoming, you know where I am now as an artist, I always looked at books. And I always looked at foreign films. And I always looked at art exhibits that brought art from other lands.

So going to these lands — I went to Egypt. And I had already done an Egypt-themed sort of series and stuff like that. And so I didn't pull anything out of that except that when — I would look for textiles. And I bought two textiles or at least one from Egypt that was an applique of a camel and a rider or stuff like that. And I said, "Oh, I can relate to that." And I went to the museum and I saw the gold mask and everything in Cairo. But I had already experienced that mentally and physically by working on my art.

So — and then going to China, I went to China with my mother. And we were there for — I don't know, almost like nine, 10 days. And we went to all the major cities and museums and stuff like that. But I discovered, the museums didn't really offer much to see, because of the Cultural Revolution, everything was kind of thrown out and bought by other countries and in other museums and other places. So I went in there trying to look for things and there was nothing to be seen, because I had fallen in love, not only with Japanese art, but Chinese art, by way of *The Last Emperor*, the movie. I think I have the music, I'm — I don't think I bought the DVD, but I have the music. And so I love that movie and the designs and textiles and the color and fabric and all that.

But it wasn't there. And when I went to China and Beijing and Shanghai and some of the smaller places, you had all these modern buildings that looked like Main Street with the glass front...

[End of disc.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Michael Cummings in the artist's home and studio in New York on October 26, 2012, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, card No. 3.

Good morning.

MR. CUMMINGS: Good morning.

MS. REIDEL: I thought we'd start off this morning with any — your final thoughts on the travel question that we were discussing yesterday —

MR. CUMMINGS: All right.

MS. REIDEL: — and then just any thoughts that might have come to you this morning that seemed somehow pertinent to the conversation yesterday, and then we can proceed from there.

MR. CUMMINGS: All right. Related to the travel part, as I was reflecting yesterday on how that even though I did travel, and I have traveled to many different countries — Egypt, Brazil, to China, and now recently to Japan — I never came away with any sort of resource of ideas that I thought I wanted to translate into quilts.

And then at that question, instantly another level of my consciousness was thinking about, well, how, when I was younger — I guess kind of looking at the classic case of a little kid, their curiosity — just went into books. And I had the time to explore and develop that personal relationship to looking at the world around me through books and different cultures because my illness of being an asthmatic kept me out of the mainstream of activities with other children of my age, because I was constantly in the bed.

So I think that, in one positive way looking at the illness, allowed me to just kind of explore the world around me through books. And then it also, I think, created sort of a — sort of communication that I developed one-on-one with art and creativeness that I didn't really share with anyone because there wasn't anyone to share with. So as I grew older, it was sort of a private relationship that I had with art, and it took me to museums, it led me to look into books and stuff. And so I did my traveling visually.

And when I became of age and I did start to travel, it was like I embraced the feeling that I was in a historical location. However, for art purposes, I had already digested what was done in that particular country to a certain degree. So I didn't come away with ideas to create anything new because once I had looked at books and stuff.

I had already created both collage and quilt images of Egypt prior to even going to Egypt. And I got so intense in the study and looking at the images and stuff, I started to have dreams that I was in Egypt at the time of Tutankhamen and all of that. And I saw myself going down the street in a chariot and things, and it was just — at one point I would wake up sweating because it was so realistic that I had immersed myself into the culture and the history and the images that I became part of it, and that was really weird.

So that was one thing. And then I guess, jumping over to —

MS. REIDEL: Quick question: Did you have this very active imagination and this active dream life as a child too, or did you get more so as you got older?

MR. CUMMINGS: You know, it's an interesting question, because I can't really remember dreams but I do remember having a very sort of microscopic view of the world around me. I would look at little ants kind of crawl around and go in and out of their little ant holes and stuff, and I remember looking closely at tree barks, and everything around me was sort of like magnified. And I just saw — I felt I was seeing the spirit of nature and just not nature forms. And I was feeling it. And it was — I felt I was connected to something, a larger force. It was just really strange.

MS. REIDEL: And you felt that growing up in Los Angeles?

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, I felt it. [Laughs.]

MS. REIDEL: That's extraordinary.

MR. CUMMINGS: I really felt that.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: And, again, I go back to how I guess I was so isolated as a younger child, being sick all the time, that my imagination, my awareness of the world around me, all of that got sort of magnified into a larger sort of like — well, it took my curiosity into an area where I wanted to know more about what was going on around me, and I wanted to — and then when I saw art through these ancient cultures and through school and the Native American and all this, I got fascinated because it took me out of my consciousness and my reality and it led me somewhere else where there was this art going on.

I didn't call it art at the time. It was just the whole culture going on. And that was something that was not in my immediate environment, and so that fascination kept drawing me back for more, and then it led me to other

cultures. But all along that was also feeding a little voice that said, "You wanted to be an artist too," because the more I looked at that, the stronger that voice and that urge to want to duplicate what you're looking at, to be creative yourself.

So it all kind of tied in, but that's — and I didn't have — I can't remember dreams but I can remember that my curiosity and the way I looked at the world was not just one-dimensional, and I felt — I was kind of like relating to the objects around me, the plants and animals, and I really took an intense participation in working with plants. And I took — my grandmothers both had gardens, so I was fascinated at how plants grew. And they would do their spring planting in the summer, and in the fall they would harvest certain things.

This was in L.A., but they had — these were both — I call them country girls because they were both born and raised on a farm in Georgia. They moved to California in the early 1900s and they had their families. And they still carried on certain traditions of a little plant life. It wasn't major, but they would grow vegetables and they would have the plants. Being one of the first grandchildren, I assisted, and I enjoyed assisting them. You know, it was something that I enjoyed because it was this whole fascination with life and how things grew.

And also it provided me with shape and form and color because I could see these flowers and the green leaves and the way they were shaped, and I started to, as — I guess in early adolescence, started to draw. I mentioned I did the wallpaper that had floral. And then I would go outside and do the flowers and things that were in the garden.

And so that all sort of like fit into this urge to try to express myself as an artist, and also to sort of try to duplicate, in a very minimal sort of way, what I was looking at in terms of these other cultures and the designs and everything on ceramics, on walls and the murals. And so all that sort of came together.

But dreams, I don't remember dreams, but I remember how active I was and how visual I was at that time. I was very visual, even though I don't think anybody was aware of that, but my relatives and friends, when they would see what I would produce, they would be amazed and say, "Wow, look at that," you know. And then they would say, "Oh, you have talent." [Laughs.] And didn't know what talent was. It was just something that I —

MS. REIDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. CUMMINGS: You know, at this point I could call it doodling or something.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: But it was just something that had to be expressed. It was like singing or dancing or something. For me it was something that was in my fingers that had to kind of create.

MS. REIDEL: It's interesting because it sounds as if you were very immersed in nature and in the art of other cultures as a young child because that was where you were spending your time. You weren't in school. You weren't out playing with other kids. You had a real immersion —

[Cross talk.]

MS. REIDEL: — growing up.

MR. CUMMINGS: And I wasn't looking at television a lot, even though television did play a big part in everybody's life out in California, and living in L.A., I guess, especially. You had tons of reruns of Hollywood movies and stuff like that, so I did get into, like I said, a lot of the drama and the storytelling. I'm one of those persons that was crying at the end of the movie when somebody got killed or something.

But I really got kind of pulled into those types of stories and the visuals. And talking about dreams, I have very active dreams now and things could really affect me where I could take that to bed with me and it creates a whole story. I could hear dialogue and stories and all that, and I'm in the story and stuff. It's very strange. I'd wake and say, "Well, do other people have dreams like me?"

And then, I avoid looking at horror movies. I don't look at horror movies because that really kind of rocks my brain and I just can't sleep and it's really negative. So I don't look at the horror movies. But dreams are just continuing all the time. And sometimes I wake up and I try to remember because, you know, this is really important, stuff like that, but it eventually fades away.

But sometimes I try to call people if they're people in the dream that I know. Like recently I had a couple of dreams with one of my cousins, and I called her up. She's in Denver. And I said, "Oh, I had a dream and you were in it." And I had never had a dream with her in it before, but I think something that evoked the dream was that I've been trying to speak to her over the last six months off and on, just minimally, because she has cancer and it's terminal. And they've given her a couple of years and she's in her second year now.

So she has a husband that's there, and the husband and her mother don't get along so the mother can't come visit because they get into arguments, and the doctor says she's experiencing too much stress as it is. So I've kind of reached out to her. We were never really, really close, but she's my first cousin, my mother's sister's daughter.

So I've been talking — but I called her up and I said, "Olivia," I said, "You were in a dream." And I said, "You were little. It was around Easter time and you had a yellow dress on, and I remember that dress very vividly. And I just wanted to share this with you." And she called me back — or I think we were emailing — and she said, "You know, that's a very interesting dream because," she said, "I really don't remember that dress like you mentioned, but that color is my mother's favorite color." And she said, "I could imagine that I probably did have a yellow dress at some point when I was little, for Easter." I said, "Oh, okay." But that just kind of came together in a dream. I pushed it out and shared it with her.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. REIDEL: Another question from yesterday, it seems that you've consistently been involved in education in one form or another pretty much for your whole life, and certainly for the first half of it. You did a lot of your own research on learning how to quilt through books and magazines. You were in school, in a number of different schools —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: — studying a number of different things. For what reason did you decide to go back to school and formally study art history and actually get a degree in it?

MR. CUMMINGS: I have to laugh because the whole purpose of going back and formally taking classes and getting a degree was to satisfy my mother. [They laugh.]

MS. REIDEL: Well, I'm glad I asked.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, well, I should kind of have a postscript to that too. It was also because of the need that I felt that, looking for jobs, they wanted a person to have a BA.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: So it was those two things that kind of balanced out. And going back, I went to part of the New York State university system. It's a branch called Empire State College. And what they do is work with adults that have a lot of work experience.

MS. REIDEL: I see.

MR. CUMMINGS: And you could get credit for some of your work experience. And I already had two years of school behind me, so they took that two years of transcript and then I wrote a summary of my experience in saying how that applied to what I was going towards.

And then the shortest way — I think I had a year-and-a-half or something to do, so — and I wanted to stay in art, and so I chose American art history as my degree major. So I went through that time period. And it was like I was working full time —

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and I was doing this in the evening. And then I had interviews with the various instructors with what I had read, and then I wrote papers as well. And then I finally came out with a BA. And I sent the degree paper to my mother. [Laughs.]

MS. REIDEL: Yes. Moving on to the work, I wanted to look at some of these general questions —

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. REIDEL: — to consider the work as a whole from a number of different perspectives. And I've been reflecting on the work in the various different — the various different quilts that you've made, focusing on personal narrative, historical stories, series, commissions, abstract and landscapes, portraits and, as you mentioned yesterday, the influence of the African diaspora.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: It seems that that is really the perfect frame to examine your entire body of work —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: — because it covers important historical events. It covers the mythological pieces, which we really haven't talked about at all that I'd like to talk about now, the personal narratives of your own experience, the diverse backgrounds from the *Jazz* series taking place in this tropical jungle, to the Brazilian pieces, the Haitian pieces, your *Grandmother's Porch* [... — MAC].

MR. CUMMINGS: *Clara's Garden*.

MS. REIDEL: I think that's right.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. REIDEL: Does that feel accurate to you, and is that something that you've thought about consciously?

MR. CUMMINGS: It has been something I've thought about. And initially in the very beginning, like I keep referring to my beginning introduction to art, it was more the European art and still lifes and Matisse, Picasso really stand out, and the landscapes, Cézanne [... -MAC]. And then I tried to duplicate them in my very early beginnings. [... -MAC] Working in the garage outside of my mother's house doing sunflowers [... -MAC].

But as I grew older — and I guess not until I came to New York and made a declaration to myself, but it could have been prior to that — somewhere along the line I didn't see myself in any of the paintings. I didn't see anything that I could identify with. So there was a silent voice in me that said, when I grow up, I'm going to make art that I could communicate with or I could identify with that I could see myself in. So it was sort of like a declaration that that's something I was going to do, and I really didn't think about it in terms of how I was going to activate that sort of, like, proclamation or something.

But eventually, when I came to New York — and, like, I mentioned how I was introduced, and it was like culture shock, into the African-American presence on the east coast from slavery to the migration period into the big cities, into the renaissance period, into all the individual people like Zora Neal Hurston, the Langston Hughes, the Jacob Lawrence that were doing things, and then the Broadway scene and all of that. It just kind of like shook my mind as to wow, you know, all these role models.

And then at one point early on when I was in New York I said, "Well, if I had only had a family member that was in some art field, I could have been persuaded very easily at a very impressionable age to, like, try to connect with that and become something in some art field." But I had no role model in California. So when I came here, I was already committed to being a visual artist, so at that one point I came across Romare Bearden in the early '70s at the Museum of Modern Art, and I said, "Wow, his vocabulary, his imagery is talking to me, and I want to do that."

I really kind of beamed in on that, because prior to that I was still doing more abstract, trying to paint, not so much fabric but I guess introducing fabric pieces into my collage paper stuff. But he really was sort of a beacon to kind of show me a way on this journey that I had started as an artist, and this journey coming to New York.

And a friend of mine has always said, "Michael, it's not the destination in the journey; it's the journey itself that you have to enjoy." And so that really stayed with me because it has been all the experiences on this journey in my life, and I'd forgotten about the destination. It's never been about success. It's never been about a lot of money. It's just trying to nurture and fulfill the dream of being an artist.

And like I mentioned yesterday, the artist lifestyle does come with sacrifices, disappointments and a lot of discipline. And I'm not perfect and so I'm not — I give myself some high bars to try to reach. I don't always reach them. But coming to New York opened up my mind to this world of the African-American art and artists. And it was through that experience that my commitment to making more of that and following a tradition got embedded.

And at that point I started to but didn't — again, not consciously. It was just that I had all this material around me and I was absorbing it, and I wanted to kind of express it in my way of what I was reading and what I was seeing. So I started with collage with Bearden. And then I had this one moment on the job of having to make a banner. And that opened another door, and that took me into the first year of what I was calling wall hangings.

And then somebody said "quilts," and then I said, "Well, what is a quilt?" And then I started saying, "Okay, I'm going to take the wall hanging and make it into a quilt because all I have to do is put two layers behind it." But then the imageries on the quilt start to reflect also experiences, and my experiences as a black man in Harlem, a black man in New York, you know, moving around.

And so I start, I guess, recording — I guess you could say they're sort of like recordings as opposed to a written diary, a visual diary of different experiences that I've had. But it did become more and more conscious, or I just became more and more locked into it and then having second thoughts of moving any further out, even though I came across other artists.

Like, at one point I discovered Joseph Cornell and his shadowboxes. And he told these magnificent, complicated stories in these boxes, so I went out and bought this book on him. I think it's called *Utopia [Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell]*. He lived on Utopia Boulevard in Queens, and I think that's the title. And I bought the book, and it was fascinating to see that he was born in the late 1800s and he became a scavenger and he collected all these things, and he lived with his mother, and he put these things together, and famous people became — well, discovered him and they got showing him.

But it was the idea of what he brought together and what he tried to create in this boxlike form that fascinated me, because to me it sort of related to a quilt but it was three-dimensional with all those objects and everything, and I was so fascinated that I said, "Well, I want to try this also." It was sort of like something new to experiment with, a new art form.

And so I made about five. And again, the subject matter of them kind of translated into my personal experiences. I did one on Steve Biko in South Africa because I read his story and I guess at the point when I too was in the news, and I was aware of that, so I did a shadowbox on him. And then I did one related to my sister out in L.A. She was on drugs at the time in the '70s.

So I came back, and I guess from all the choices I had to use media-wise to create something, I chose a shadowbox and I put together this — a little black doll, and I inserted that in there. I put little angels, a spiritual sort of connection that I thought I wanted to have them to try to help her. And I also put sort of a fantasy California scene around her, lots of sun and bizarre sort of things, because a lot of people referred to L.A. as la-la land, and I wanted to kind of create that feeling within this environment that I was creating.

So shadowboxes were another form, but again, it continues the storyline. I was continuing the diaspora with the African-American experience, and my experiences all kind of came together. So, yes, that's been a continual thread that's only kind of turned into rope. It went from a little thread to a big rope in terms of the power and the strength and the imagery of what I've created has grown and grown and grown, where in recent times I've created a *Slave Ship* series.

And that was something that I was very slow to approach, because not only in the white world but the black world too, it's something that you don't grow up talking about. So I slowly came around to embracing that and wanting to express myself through my art form related to that period. And so I created this *Slave Ship* series, and that was only recently. And then I moved on to a personality of Sister Gertrude Morgan.

MS. REIDEL: Let's talk about *The Slave Ship*, though, if you don't mind, for a minute —

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. REIDEL: — because we talked about Gertrude Morgan yesterday.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. REIDEL: And I'd like to talk about *The Slave Ship* because we haven't talked about that at all.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. REIDEL: It's a smaller series, right?

MR. CUMMINGS: Correct, three.

MS. REIDEL: Yes, three pieces. I'd like to talk about the evolution of that series —

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. REIDEL: — how it came about, and in general, how you just choose from all the ideas and all the different narratives, all the different stories you could choose from, which was actually going to become a quilt. We were looking at a couple of collages of Muddy Waters yesterday —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: — you said he just couldn't become a quilt.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: So how did *The Slave Ship* evolve, and how in general did the ideas take form in quilts?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, there was a small thought that I had way back when, when I first came across this famous print that you see in a lot of American history books about a diagram of how the slave ships were laid out and how they placed the bodies to maximize space. They laid them out on the surface in different layers within the ship, in chains and all that.

And looking at that, that — I guess with anybody looking at it almost, it made a very big impression on me emotionally, and it stayed with me. And then periodically over the years I would see that in a publication or something. And then I guess in the last three years or so I started to get this idea that I wanted to reproduce that graphic into a quilt. And I said I wanted to do that because, I've never seen anyone try to do that before.

MS. REIDEL: That particular pattern?

MR. CUMMINGS: That particular pattern.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: I've seen some paintings about that. I might have seen some drawings or something, but not in a fabric translation into a quilt, or even a wall hanging. So I took that on as a challenge, and I said, "That's what I want to do. At some point I'm going to do that." But prior to that I had reached out to the slavery theme in two other quilts, I think. One was *I'll Fly Away*.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And I think that was my first quilt that I attempted to look back at that history, and I created this quilt that's about — I guess she's about six feet tall at least. I forgot her measurements. But I researched and I found, again, a photograph of a woman in a cotton field, and it was in the 1800s, prior to the Civil War. And she was all dressed for her work. And I said, "Okay, this is the image that I will use."

But then it wasn't just to put her in a field picking cotton. It was also to go into her mind and spiritually think of where or what she might be thinking about at the time of picking cotton, and also maybe to reach in and lift her out of that in some sort of way. So I call it *I'll Fly Away*, and I attach that title that comes from a gospel that is some early morning she's going to fly away from a misery.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And this flying away I found out was ancient African folklore sort of myth that people could fly around. And it's also picked up in the novel called *Beloved*.

MS. REIDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And she — and I can't think of the writer's —

MS. REIDEL: Toni Morrison.

MR. CUMMINGS: Toni Morrison, she mentions how people fly. And I connected with that because when I read that novel — and that novel I read in a day and a half. I stayed up one night and read it until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning until I was finished with it. But the flying part — and then hearing this gospel song, some early morning I'm going to fly away, I connected those and said, "Wow."

And so I said, "Okay, she's going to fly away some early morning." And so around her I put African images that in my mind were like little spirits that could help her on her journey, and also be there to protect her as well, what she was doing. So that all got into the composition. And it was the first reaching out that I did.

And I chose that one — I could have chose others. I looked at others and they were, like, wagons with children and adults on it. There were different — there were people sitting on porches, a group — and I have a postcard now of little children sitting on a fence, and I've always said I was going to go back and try to reproduce that in a quilt, and I haven't, and I've had that postcard for years on a bulletin board. But for some reason I chose that one.

And I must admit too that it looks like — and I kind of looked over the images that I've created. I'm much more comfortable and it comes out more naturally when I'm doing women in my artwork.

MS. REIDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: And at first I tried to say, well, it's because women, they wear more colorful clothes, they do different things with their hair, and stuff like that, but there's — I don't know; there's a comfortable feeling creating images with women.

And I don't know what it is, but I tried to consciously balance it out. I said, "Okay, am I going to do a male or a female," because, I said, "I've got too many females, okay?" [Laughs.] So I kind of think about that sometimes. It's not something that's in the forefront and I'm kind of like really arguing with myself, but I am aware how I kind of lean towards one rather than the other.

But that was the first effort in terms of slavery. And then I guess recently, after — I'm trying to think of the *Mecklenburg County* quilt that I did, *Cotton Picking Time*. That was done in 2008. I don't remember the date on *The Slave Ship* at this point.

MS. REIDEL: The very first one I think was 2006, *Escaping the Slave Ship*.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, all right.

MS. REIDEL: And *The Slave Ship* was 2007 and *Waiting* was 2008.

MS. REIDEL: Okay, so then the *Mecklenburg County* quilt came after that. But that also went into the story visually of slaves. But then didn't — but then I kind of translated it. I wanted to take that slave concept out of the composition, so I called them sharecroppers at one point because I put them after the Civil War, and sort of like in the late '20s or 1930s when the migration was taking place from the South.

And also I was making this quilt to honor and commemorate Romare Bearden, since that was the land that he grew up in. And I added some elements in the composition that he uses, and one was a train, and the train is going east, coming out of the South. And in the windows of the train I had found fabric that had fitted images of New York landscape — cityscape on it, the buildings and everything. So I made those the windows of the train. And so if you look closely at the train you'll see images of New York and skyline going on there.

So that's going there. And then you have the people in the cotton fields, and you have a family — that one has, like, mother, father, or two adults, and a little girl, and then a person in the distance working in the fields. And so that one created and reproduced sort of like that Southern experience after the Civil War, but still they were still in the cotton field, still working at hard labor and not making very much money. And then the hope and dreams of a lot of people were on that train going out of that rural area into the big city to pursue their hopes and dreams.

But that was another point when I chose to do a group of people as opposed to one person or something else, and I just kind of like that landscape. I did put in a fence, a little fence. I didn't put a house but I put a fence to kind of add that close by there could have been a building or something. But that's the way that came in.

So that was my sort of like how — my experience with, like, trying to make a statement about the slavery period.

MS. REIDEL: It's interesting because they evolved. The first one was *Escaping the Slave Ship*, and then there's the actual *Slave Ship Henrietta Marie*, and there's *Waiting for the Slave Ship*.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. Now, the *Waiting for the Slave Ship*, that's very unique, and another — after reading how the African — the captured Africans that turned into slaves were kept in pens or waiting areas until the ships were prepared and until they were prepared to get on the ships.

And one of the readings I found — you know, they kept all the women in one area and the men in the other, and they shaved their heads for the long journey, to prevent any sort of bugs or infection. And then they also branded everybody. And the branding would be the initials of the new owner that had bought them, and they were taking them to them. So in this *Waiting for the Slave Ship*, I introduce women, because I said, "Okay, I have nothing but men on the ship, men sort of escaping the ship. I want to represent the women and what they had to go through and their participation in this whole system."

So in that quilt I have a group of women. There must be about six or seven. And they're just kind of sitting around. They all have their heads shaved off. I've written on each one of their shoulders, or something, an initial in red. And then I have one that you see a partial face, and her body language is sort of like in anguish and suffering, the way I position her body. And other women just seem to be sort of in shock about their condition and position, where they are. And they're just kind of like still and statuesque and kind of waiting for the unknown. And so I presented that.

And that quilt is about — hmm, I guess it's at least — might be 8 feet by 6 feet? I can show you that quilt at that point. But, yeah, so that was the third in line of the three in that *Henrietta Marie* series, where I wanted to

present a female view of what they were going through.

MS. REIDEL: The other quilt that clearly springs to mind among this group is the one that you did of Harriet Tubman.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

[Cross talk.]

MS. REIDEL: And that was a commission.

MR. CUMMINGS: That was a commission for the new Underground Railroad in Cincinnati, Ohio.

MS. REIDEL: A museum, was it?

MR. CUMMINGS: It was a museum.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: And it was opening up and they commissioned several quilters. I don't think they had other media artists, but I know I was one of the quilters selected. And there was another woman. I can't think of her name. She was an Ohioan that was well-known there for making quilts. So she was commissioned.

And the commission was to create something related to the Underground Railroad that would be installed in their museum to help tell that story to viewers and the public coming in there. So I decided to do Harriet Tubman because she was one of the superstars in the Underground Railroad in saving many people, or helping people escape. I think the number is 5[00] to 600. She helped lead them over to Canada, or at least out of the South.

And so I chose that, and in doing that I created a family: mother, father, little boy, little girl. And she's in the front of the quilt, or to the right. And it's like 6' by 8', so it's 8 feet long. She's on the right and she's kind of standing statuesque with a rifle and — with a rifle, and above her head is the North Star because she followed the North Star to get to the North. And the family — the husband has a box on his shoulder. Everybody has some sort of bag, and they're traveling at night. And I created that for the museum.

And I had read about her in the — previous to creating that, and so it was easy to embrace her as a heroine to put in the quilt to go to that museum. And it didn't take — I guess it took about three or four months to make, or something like that. I have collages that I created to present to them that I had framed that I have to show the development of the images. But from the collage to the quilt it basically stayed the same. It just kind of blew up to be 6' by 8 feet.

MS. REIDEL: How significant is it to you that these pieces are quilts?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well —

MS. REIDEL: There's a lot of metaphorical —

[Cross talk.]

MR. CUMMINGS: I'm kind of amazed that I have chosen that art form to express myself in terms of as an artist. And sometimes I stop and wonder, how did I get here, because — I said, you know, people choose paint, clay, wood, collage, you know, or glass or mosaic or something, but how did I end up at this sewing machine and then doing these large quilts? And I'm so comfortable doing it. It's not like it's labor-intense at all. I mean, for me it's therapy. I mean, when I get on the sewing machine, I'm in another world and I'm very comfortable.

And so I don't know how to explain it. It's just something that has evolved from that first moment when I bought the sewing machine from Macy's and I started to learn how to operate it and became very sort of comfortable with using thread and fabric to construct an image. And I've been doing that for now over 25 years, I guess maybe almost 30, and it's just natural now.

MS. REIDEL: I just think about this in particular because yesterday you mentioned the transition from making wall hangings —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: — to quilts. It was an intentional choice to go that extra distance.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. REIDEL: There certainly is fantastic history that's associated with quilts. I'm wondering if you wanted to be part of that. There's an intimacy and there's a tenderness. There's a very physicality of functionality to the history of quilts. Does any of that play into your thinking?

MR. CUMMINGS: Not really. I say that kind of quickly and I have to step back and see. I am — let's see — I could say excited to be a part of a continuation of a quilt tradition that I could — you know, takes you back to slavery times when they did make quilts, and the whole transition from the basic utilitarian to the more decorative to the transition in the '70s when artists picked up that and called it studio quilts or art quilts.

But, yeah, and I am excited to be a part of that and I try to honor that tradition by keeping my quilts in a functional sort of construction form in that they have three layers. So I tell everyone, you can still put it on the bed if you want to, but a lot of people hang it up. But I try to maintain that three-layer construction for traditional purposes. The subject matter is not traditional but the construction of the three layers remains that way and I do that to honor them.

But after that, I don't see myself as being special. [Laughs.] I'm just trying to express myself as an artist, and I've gravitated over to fabric. And I just see myself kind of making giant collages, because I tell people sometimes, the word "collage" and "appliqué" are both French words and they both are kind of basically the same. Collage is more like paper. Appliqué is more like with fabric, but still it comes together with some sort of composition or image. And it could be abstract or narrative and I've chosen narrative.

But I kind of see them as giant collages, but they argue about the name of "quilts" and they just go out, but I kind of related to collage because collage is what got me started by way of Romare Bearden. And I just see that I just took another step away from the paper collage that he was doing into a fabric collage. And other people could do it. There's not a lot of people doing it.

A lot of the artists that are doing quilts are using paint on the surface to create a lot of images, and using maybe a quilting construction of three layers and calling it a quilt but they're not really doing appliqué. And I use paint, textile paint, minimally to create different sort of shading or something like that, but basically all my quilts are all pieces of fabric sewn down by sewing machine.

MS. REIDEL: Do you think about any of the work in terms of political or social commentary?

MR. CUMMINGS: I do sometimes. And I had to pause because recently I've done Obama quilts, so that was very political. But I looked at it is just making historical sort of comment on what was happening in my time.

And I did one quilt called *Young Obama*. This was when he was first campaigning in 2008. And I went around and collected those little election buttons that are — they have faces on the metal buttons there. And then I read about him and then I combined some of my thoughts that I had collected from reading Dr. [Robert] Farris Thompson books about symbolism and sort of objects around burial grounds in New Orleans, and superstition and stuff like that.

So when I created the Obama quilt, I put safety pins all around him, gold safety pins, or brass safety pins. And I did that using the word "safety." They were supposed to protect him. And then I put keys on his arms, and that was supposed to be keys to unlock the doors of knowledge for him.

And then I put numbers on him. I put — 44 was he's the 44th president. And then I put another number — I think it's 15 — or it's 14 or 16 for Abraham Lincoln, since he really identifies with Abraham Lincoln. And then I put the year he was born and then I put the year that he got married on his jacket there. And then I put some other words around him.

So I created his face and I chose sort of like black and white colors to kind of show the mix of his mother and father. But one of the more unique things, I thought of Frida Kahlo, because I really liked her work over the years, and her coloring and stuff — of course, you know, California and Mexico. And I like the way she talked about her inner self when she went through all her surgery and her accident.

And so in the center of Obama I have a crocheted heart that's maybe at least about 8 inches long, and within there I have a photograph — not a — well, it's a printed face of a little black boy. I put that in the center of the heart. And then underneath the heart I put two wooden African sculpture figures, one being his mother and one being his father. And since they were African sculpture forms, I painted one white, representing the mother, because it was a female form, and then I put little aloha — what do they call — that lei flower thing they do in Hawaii?

MS. REIDEL: Oh, like a little lei?

MR. CUMMINGS: A lei —

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — around her neck that they do in Hawaii. I did that. And then they were underneath the heart. All this is on the jacket. And so they were — the parents had produced this little boy that produced this young man that was running for president.

And so that — and then the second Obama quilt I chose after he was president. And again I chose just black and white, but this one I got more political in that I wrote a lot of famous statements by famous black men that were primarily political in their lifetime. Thurgood Marshall, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes are three people that come to mind. And then I also put in there Abraham Lincoln, again because Obama likes Abraham Lincoln. So I did a quote from Abraham Lincoln as well.

So earlier, prior to those quilts, I guess in subtle ways talking about the culture, society of — there might be subtle images and forms that I put into my compositions, but one strong one was the Haitian boat people. When that was going on in 1987, I guess like a lot of people looking at the news in the evening and looking at these rafts come ashore in Florida, and the bodies, and then how the people that were still alive were getting arrested and corralled into these outdoor bins or pens, or whatever you want to call them, I just felt I had to make a statement.

And so I did a series of three quilts called *Haitian Boat People*, and one quilt was showing them leaving the island on a raft, and then the second one was in the middle of the ocean, sometimes related to the Middle Passage. And they're surrounded by sea serpents and all sorts of strange-looking fish. And there's, like, danger in the air. And then the last one I show, where the raft is turned over and they all drown.

And I use a lot of Haitian symbolism because there's a whole Europa culture that came to Haiti, and so on each quilt there's a mermaid, and this mermaid is sort of like a spiritual mother and she's trying to help guide them. So she's pushing the raft into the water in the first quilt, *Leaving the Island*. And then she's underneath the rafts with her arms wide open, helping to guide the raft.

And then in all three quilts as well is I have little human forms, like gingerbread forms, in white kind of floating around. In reading Haitian mythology, these are invisible spirits, how they portray them in their visual art form. And so I put those around their spirits, and I put some little angels floating around too. But then the raft turns over, and so I put tears coming down the face of Yemajá — what's the name of the mermaid — because she's helpless at trying to save her children.

And also another element that I put into the quilt, on the faces of all the people that are in all three quilts I didn't put any mouths on them. They have eyes; they have their hands kind of reaching up, but no mouth. And I decided to do that deliberately because I always said that when you looked at the news and you heard the reporters, you saw the people, no one ever allowed them to talk. You could never — you never heard them say anything.

And so I deliberately made that statement, well, you know, they don't have a voice so my images will not have a voice. So I did that deliberately. So that was something that I created in '87 related to that.

And then I guess going back behind '87, I did —

MS. REIDEL: That's an interesting one too, because those quilts are such an interesting mixture of history and tragedy and mythology.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right. Right.

MS. REIDEL: Yes. That doesn't happen all that often in the work, right?

MR. CUMMINGS: No, no, no.

MS. REIDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: Although, going back behind '87 into the, I guess, late 1970s I did the Steve Biko shadowbox.

MS. REIDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that was after reading about his life and time. And I guess I read that after he was killed and aware of that. So I wanted to make a statement about that. So I created that shadowbox with him, and in that one I have a plaster bandage mask that was a throwaway working with children. That was a very popular item to make with children. We put the Vaseline and put layers of plastic bandages, the same as you do a cast,

and once it's dry — you do it in the summer in a warm room. And you pull it off and you have his outline or mold of a face.

And then the idea for the children was to paint it and then to decorate it. And you could either hang it up, play with it, or wear it or something. But a lot of kids, once they pulled it off and looked at it or something, they didn't like it and they couldn't kind of see beyond the immediate sort of form of how they could decorate it and paint it. But it was paint and sequins and you can do all sorts of things with it. So I collected several rejects — [laughs] — and I took them home and put them in my little resource box.

And so for Steve Biko I had one of these plaster bandages masks. So I put that into the box. I think I tacked it onto the back of the box — the box is wood — and then I created a sort of outdoor environment. And then I got a rubber glove and I painted it white, representing South Africa. And then in the glove there's a chain, an old rusty chain that I found, and the chain goes from the hand to around the neck of the mask. And then that was my statement. And I put his name in there, and I think a date or something of when he got killed. And I had done that. But between Steve Biko and the boat people, I can't immediately think of other strong political statements that I might have made.

MS. REIDEL: It seems that there is a sense of religion and spirituality in the work. Does it feel that way to you?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, and I credit that to how I was brought up. My father's mother was a missionary in her own way. I think she went to a Pentecostal church. And she would come and pick me up with my sisters every Sunday morning and take us to church when we were little. We would cry, kicking and screaming going out the door — [they laugh] — because we knew it was an all-day drama.

And so we would go there. I think we had breakfast before we left, I think, but we'd have lunch and dinner at the church and we'd come home after 3:00 or 4:00. And going to visit her, my grandmother, I was her favorite grandson. And she was the one that was the very good cook. So she would make me this delicious lemon butter pound cake from scratch. And she said nobody else could have it. "It's for Michael." And so I would go home with this pound cake every time.

But when we would go over to her house, she would make us get on our knees and pray. Like before, after, some part of the visit we would have to pray. And she was a woman that had, I think, about six children, and she was a very strong-willed individual. But my mother gives her credit for being very progressive because she tried to — even though my mother said she didn't have a lot of education, she tried to have, like, a little food stand. She was a missionary. She enforced sort of rules of the house, you know, no smoking and drinking. And all the daughters grew up to be really great women. And the sons were wayward. My father was blah-blah.

But she was a very religious individual, and I feel, since I was sort of the first grandson and I spent a lot of time with her growing up — and then when she was in a nursing home and I was in New York, every time I would go out there I would sit with her so many hours per day when I was there. And I felt it was so special to be with her. We didn't really talk a lot. We would just kind of be there. And she was in her right mind. She never lost it. She died when she was 97.

So I always felt, through her, that I — and then I always liked going to church to listen to the music, the singing. It wasn't the message so much; it was just the singing. So I've always been attached to the church, but as I grew and kind of started to see the world around me, I started to see that it wasn't so much I was attached to a religion as opposed I was more just spiritually connected to the world around me.

But the church has always been sort of a rock, I would call it, in my life. And I've always felt too that, you know, there's been sort of her spirit sort of like looking over me and kind of protecting me in a way. I've kind of felt that — because I've kind of said, you know, there were some times that, you know, things weren't going good or I kind of had an accident or something, I said, "Hmm, you know, this could have been worse than that." But then I kind of thought, well, you know, maybe there's someone kind of looking out for me in that sort of a way.

So anyway, the spiritualness has been a continual sort of thread in my life. And I look around me and every day I'd say — I'd count my blessings. And so I'm always thankful for what I have. And I try to go to church. I am a member of a church and stuff, but the spiritualness of everything, I try to put that in what I do in terms of reaching out to people, being friends with people, sharing love with people in a variety of different ways. I'm always kind of conscious of trying to be that good person, and that's what she was all about, my grandmother.

My mother said that she would always have a big pot of something on the stove and she would pull people in off the street that she felt she wanted to help them in some sort of way. And so I kind of remember her a lot as sort of like a role model, and that spiritual and giving and just being, you know, that type of person.

MS. REIDEL: That leads, I think, nicely into another question about community. And do you feel like there has been a community that's been important to your development as an artist, either a church community or an arts

community?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, there's several. There's been — well, my extended family here in New York of various friends that I have, a lot of them are professional people that are from other parts of the country that settled in here, and I've known them for, like, 30, 40 years. And they're very supportive. We're supportive of each other.

And then there is an art community. And I kind of hesitate because the definition of "art community" — I know a large number of quilters, of course, over a number of years. I know visual artists as well. So they all come together, a variety of different artists that I've known for a long time. We don't necessarily see each other a lot anymore but, you know, if I wanted to reach out, you know, I could speak to them.

And then New York City has been a learning environment for me, and a community of museums, of libraries, and over different time periods I knew staff people in different museums and libraries connected with my job that way, or participating in programs as an artist I grew to know different people that were in charge of various departments in different places, so I could reach out and communicate or send the information to what I was doing, and that sometimes would create sort of involvement in another project, or something like that.

So there are many different communities that I belong to that have been very supportive and helpful in just my development, and also my stability as a person living in the big city, because there's so much stress and push and pull that I — you know, everybody has their apartment or their house somewhere that they kind of have refuge in, and I've kind of created my own sort of like world in my house, but outside I've learned to navigate through the city and come upon different personalities and just kind of remain calm and sane and don't let the insane person make me the same as they are.

So it's been a learning process and I think I have all the tools — or I have most of the tools — not all the tools but most of the tools to kind of continue on.

MS. REIDEL: You were with the New York State Council on the Arts for 30 years as an arts analyst. Is that right?

MR. CUMMINGS: Correct. Right, right.

MS. REIDEL: Did that in any way affect your work or your career?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, it did. It did very much, and in a positive sort of way, even though it was a 9-to-5 job, it allowed me all the benefits that one desires as an employee in terms of health insurance, an income. However, it wasn't a corporate or a profit-making environment. It was a state agency. They gave grant money to arts organizations, all types of arts organizations all over the state.

And so it was a demanding job because what I did was work with the contracts that were sent out to organizations after they —

[End of disc.]

MR. CUMMINGS: [In progress] — they received approval for a grant. And at one point we would have three different council meetings that awarded grants. And in each grant period, there would be on average of about maybe 6[00] to 800 contracts that had to be mailed out. And so I would have a clerical staff, about two or three people. They had other jobs to do, so it was when I could get them, they would come and help me.

And this was during the paper era, so we would send out three or four copies of a contract. They had an invoice. They had instructions. They had a statement paper that told them their rights, if they wanted to disagree with whatever amount of money they were getting. And they had an envelope. And all this had to be signed and notarized and sent back to me. And then when I got it, I had people to help open it up. But I did data entry. I would record that it came in.

And then after that I would prepare the voucher to be sent to be sent up to [Albany] to make up the check, so it would be sent to the organization. And then the organization could continually be calling me as to "where's my money, where's my check? I didn't get my check." And then I would also be the liaison with Albany with this — my agency. If there were money problems related to the grants, I would call up to the accounting department, the treasury department, the comptroller's office — all these different people and these — I would be calling them and asking them about the process of different things.

And then over the years, different processes changes, the code changes and all that, and I had to keep up with that. And it was sort of one could say mind-boggling and also very over the top in terms of labor-intense because sometimes it just felt that the agency didn't care about the person, me, putting out all this paper. And they wouldn't — they knew that I would do the job, you know, so they had confidence in that. And I think that thought in their mind of knowing that, "well, Michael is going to do it regardless" made them less worried about

deadlines being passed or people being troubled or anything like that. So that went on for about 30 years. [They laugh.] So — but you get into a groove or rhythm with the job. And there were highs and lows in terms of demand of energy and what you had to put out.

But all said and done, leaving there each day coming home, I sort of, like, took off that burden and that mental sort of weight that I had and transferred myself into thinking about my artwork. I became another person. And that other person focused only on the creative imagery that I wanted to put out onto a quilt surface. And that I turned off the day, turned on the evening, turned on the music and went to working on my quilts.

Now that I've been retired for two years and I've been very active in promoting what I've created and putting my inventory quilts out into the world, and currently, there's, like, six shows that I'm in, and I was in a seventh one earlier in the year, I look —

MS. RIEDEL: All around the world, we might mention too. There's one in Japan, can't remember — [inaudible] —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, there was one in Japan [... -MAC]. I look around and say, "How did I do all this?" Because, I said, "I had this job, and I'm looking at all these quilts," and now, I say, "I'm not that active anymore." [... -MAC] It's just amazing that the job did allow me and it inspired me and, I guess, stimulated me in a way to want to do more. I did meet a lot of artists, and there were a lot of art-related shows and activities that we were — had access to. And being in that art environment, it was encouraging. And I guess it allowed me to nurture my inner spirit in terms of an artist, even though there was a lot of demand — clerical and data entry and the telephones. I mean, at certain times throughout the year — well, not throughout the year; the 30 years — I would come home, and I wouldn't even want to go near a telephone because there were so many telephone calls coming and going during the day and inquiries and stuff like that that I didn't feel like picking up a telephone.

So — but it was a plus, I give that job credit, because without that particular job, I don't know if I would have had the time or the interest as much, because again, I was surrounded by — we gave — we had 14 different art departments, from architecture to dance to literature to visual arts to film. We had all these — we — you had all these different people that specialize in these areas, in music. And so I was interacting with them at lunchtime or just sort of like colleagues and stuff. So I think those conversations talking about art also instilled in me a desire to create my own, whereas if I was in another environment that wasn't about art, then that would've been like a cold steel wall there, and I would not have anything to kind of bounce off ideas or talk about things or to get any stimulation from anyone that was interested in art. So that allowed me to do all of that and to come out after 30 years with not only a history with them but a very large history being active as a quilter around the world.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Because a — you were fortunate, it seems, fairly early on to have your work be part of the art — part Art in Embassies program, is that right? [Inaudible] —

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, yes, it's Art Embassy — well, I don't know — again, I don't know when that started. I guess it was — I don't know if it was in the '90s.

MS. RIEDEL: Can't remember the first one, yes, something — and you've had pieces here in New York, but in Mali, and I can't remember —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right. [Rwanda -MAC].

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: Rhodesia and Mali, and then there's one now in Susan Rice's private residence at the Waldorf-Astoria here in New York. She has *African Jazz #5* that — they called me up late last year and said that she was furnishing her apartment with art from their collection, but they wanted to know if I wanted to loan one of my quilts for her environment, and she was interested in one of my quilts. And so I said, "Sure." So she chose or they chose *African Jazz #5*. So that's there.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting to me too that you've been able to get the work out as much as you have with a full-time job and with no long-term regular dealer — art dealer, gallerist whatsoever.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. That's another amazing sort of aspect of my life. And I could — I guess I could use the work they use in New York on the street, a hustler. [They laugh.] I was just really — I picked up that rhythm that, you know, well, you know, if they're not going to knock on your door with the new mousetrap you made, you got to go knock on their door. So I was very aggressive as a young artist here in New York City in the '70s. After I thought I was on that road, I tried to maintain little business cards, portfolio. I got my slides together.

And some of the early shows I participated in were outside, around NYU, the Washington Square Park — they

used to have an art exhibit every summer. And I did that for at least two years, but then I realized that I was not an outdoor exhibiter because most of those people are very professional, they have all sorts of equipment, their vans and stuff, and here I was, lugging things along, and I had little paintings and stuff like that. So I put that behind me.

But I did knock on a lot of doors, and every opportunity I had, I would pass out my card, and every person that I would meet, I would collect cards. I had, like, a lot of business cards. I had a Rolodex one time. [Laughs.] So I had that going on. And then I would keep people up to date with what I was doing. And some that solicited sort of, like, communication and invitations to be a part of shows and stuff. So a lot of people would comment, how, I'm always getting things from Michael and stuff like that.

So I knocked on a lot of doors and then let any grass grow under my feet. And I didn't really try early on to have an agent, but I just kind of really knocked on all the doors. And eventually, I guess it was a slow process, I started having one show, led to another show. And then I — and then I start touring more and developing my artwork in the subject matter than what I was doing, and people took more note of that.

And then at one point, like I mentioned, I did reach out for Jacob Lawrence's agent out in Seattle, and we worked together for one year.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that Francine Seders?

MR. CUMMINGS: Correct. But because she was way on the West Coast, northeast — northwest, and I was in the east, after a year's time I decided that that wasn't going to work out and that I would just go back to being on my own again because there was no gallery here in New York that I — well, I had kind of reached out to a few galleries and kind of suggesting that I was looking for someone, and — I didn't really actually say, "would you take me in," but there were some galleries I reached out. But I never got any sort of replies and any conversation related to becoming part of the gallery. And as you had said earlier on, it could be also the art form that I was working in — a quilt, textile — because all these places dealt with paintings, sculpture and maybe some conceptual art and maybe some installations, but not textile art and not a quilt. [Laughs.]

So I did get frustrated over it. I always sort of, like, admired people that did have a gallery. But I said, "Well, you know, this is not the end of the world because I'm going to make the art, so it's just a matter of getting it out." And so I've been just very aggressive — I don't know if you would use the word marketing, but I've been putting it out. And now, at this point in my life, because I've shown so much and so many people know of my work, I'm getting calls frequently of being asked or invited to participate in shows.

So — now I must say I don't sell a lot. But that was another thing that my nine-to-five job allowed me to move on from that state of mind of having to be worried about and stressed out about selling something that would have paid the rent or something. I always heard my stepfather's voice in the background: "You want to live in an apartment with no money and no heat and no food?" And I'd say, "Yes, yes, yes," so — [they laugh] —

MS. RIEDEL: But maybe not.

MR. CUMMINGS: Maybe not.

So I always said — and then I met artists in the '70s when I was here that were living in the East Village when it was really bombed out and drug-infested and stuff like that, and they were living the life as an artist, but I didn't want that kind of life because, you know, they — it was just horrible. So I wanted to be — have a comfort zone. And then I always thought too, I said, "Well, how can you be in such a crisis mode, stressed out, no money, not knowing where the next dollar is going to come from and be able to sit down and create art, and let alone buy the supplies to make it?" So I always said I wasn't going to live that way. So I — money was not an issue in terms of selling the art to make money.

And some people have thought, well, that's the way I was living. I said, "No." It's because some people knew me only as an artist. There was one — there is one famous artist quilter named Nancy Crow, and she called me up one year and asked me to do a summer workshop that — she does an annual quilt workshop on a farm or somewhere, and she wanted me to be one of the instructors. And I said, "Well, Nancy, I can't come because I have to work." And I — and then there was a pause on the phone, and then she came back in sort of, like, a surprised voice: "You work?" [They laugh.] And I said "Yes" — because I never really combined my office experience with my art experience on one resume, so — I always kept that divided, so people only knew my art resume or they knew my business resume. So she only knew me as a quilter. And so she shocked. She said, "oh, I didn't know." [Laughs.] I said "Yes." And she said, "And how do you do all this?" I said, "I don't know." But anyway, so yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it —

MR. CUMMINGS: I just made quilts. I just made quilts. And, you know, I said, "If they sell, they sell. If they don't." I might make one sale per year. Two years ago, after the financial crisis, I guess in 2009 I made no sales at all, and that was the first time that that had happened. And I said, "Whoa, okay." But last year I sold a quilt at Swann Gallery in their auction, somebody had bought it. And I never had found out who, they wouldn't tell me, but they said it was someone that knew I think Bill Cosby, someone that had seen my jazz quilts some place, and they — the auction, it was like a silent auction on the phone. Somebody bought it. I was sitting in the audience, but I didn't know who bought it. But that was sort of, like, special. And that was — that was, like, a year ago.

But this year —

MS. RIEDEL: And how did that come about? Was that a benefit for something or that was just —

MR. CUMMINGS: No, no, they do an annual auction.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. CUMMINGS: And it was another aggressive movement on my part of getting to know curator of that auction.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: And he annually — I think it's two — I think he might have two auctions per year, and he specializes in selling African-American art —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: — but again, paper, canvas, sculpture — no textiles.

So I met with him several times, not in an official meeting. I just went to the gallery. He was walking around, and I would ask for him. I said, "Oh, I'm Michael Cummings. Here's my card. I do this and this and this, you know. I'm interested — and if you'd be — would take on one of my works to put in your auction.

"Oh, I don't know, nah, nah, nah."

So it wasn't until I used somebody else's name on the third or fourth conversation that he knew that he had sold some of her work, not her personal work, but out of her collection in the auction. I said, "Oh, I'm friend of Camille." And then he would say — then he said, "Oh!" And his eyes lit up, I got a smile for the first time —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and all of that.

So then he admitted that he had never put a textile in the auction before, and these auctions have been going on for years. And so he said that she would do it the following year in the auction.

And so that year I spoke to him, he put in a small Faith Ringgold textile work. But I don't know when she did or if — it must have been from somebody else or something, but the only that made it special was her name was on it. The composition — the size of it was maybe 24 by 36 or something. It was nondescript in terms of the composition. There was not a narrative. And everybody looked at it and said, "Huh?" You know, and it didn't sell.

And so mine was the next one coming up the next year, and you have to give it to them months in advance so they can photograph it, put it in their catalog, put it on the — in and all that.

And so he — they had it — had it hanging up in the stairwell because it was one of the jazz quilts, and it was 9 feet long. And so when it went on auction, there were no bids in the audience, but on the telephone — and I think — and there could have been — the second somebody, but I think it went up — it ended up selling for \$13,000.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that was the first — well, the textile that he introduced into the collection.

This — the following year, this past year, or this year — they had one earlier this month, in October. I wanted another jazz quilt to go in there, but — I was going to give him *Jazz #10* —

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, the black one.

MR. CUMMINGS: — but that's such a — yeah, I had that appraised, and that went to Japan, and the appraiser

said, "Well, Michael, this is really an icon in terms of — among your jazz quilts, because it's been really publicized so much, been in a lot of exhibits, you know, if you set a certain level of pricing for this."

So I went in and told them about all the history and everything like that, but he refused to go any higher than what the previous quilt went for. He was afraid that it wasn't going to sell, and he didn't want to change that attitude of his, and I didn't want to put it in on the basis of what the other one went for or anything. So we, in a friendly sort of way, disagreed, and it — no quilt went into the exhibit or into the auction.

So I haven't spoken to him since. He did try to give me options: "Here's what we could — we could take something else and put it on the side. It doesn't have to be in the auction. We could promote it to our collectors and stuff like that."

So I still might — you know, I still want to keep a relationship with him.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. CUMMINGS: But at this point I've just moved on. Other things have come up and all these exhibits and things like that. So I haven't got back to him. And I know it's just a once-a-year thing, so I might start up another conversation.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, when I look at your CV, that there — you have, without a regular gallery, managed to have quite a number of solo exhibitions —

MR. CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: — at the Akron Art Museum in '93, at Bates College in '98, at — is it Nobis Gallery in 2007 in [Mablewood, NJ]? Nobis? With this —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right. Well, I don't know how you say it — [laughs] —

MS. RIEDEL: And then the — and then the international quilt festival last year in Japan.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. Yes. Now all those came about from years of cultivating relationships with different people. At Bates College, I know two professors there. And we have known each other — I knew one before he even became a professor. He was the artist and resident at the Schomburg, and years ago I used to have extra rooms, and so I'd put on my — my name on a list over there that if you have an artist and resident that they gave a six-month residency for someone that wanted to research in literature, you know, from their library — and so one guy, Charles Nero, won the award that year to study Langston Hughes. And they called me up and said, "Do you have space? There's someone that's going to be studying here for six months." And I said, "Sure."

So he came over, and I generally interview people, and I — we got along okay. So he rented the top floor, and through that time we became friends. And he's from New Orleans originally, and he's a really outgoing, friendly individual, and he's a great chef — [laughs] — I call it chef, not a cook — growing up in New Orleans. And he's — he goes by the book, and he has all his tools and equipment, and he would create these big feasts. The kitchen would be a mess, but the food would be delicious.

And so he eventually got a job. He transferred from Florida's university to Bates College, and he became the head of the English literature department and the gay and lesbian department, and he bought a house there.

And then they — I don't know if it was a new museum or it was a relatively new museum, a gallery space, on canvas — on campus. And so he said, "Well, Michael, you know, you should have a show here. You know, they should show your quilts."

And so he talked to the administration. It was about a two-year dialogue that he was having with the administration because the director of the gallery was not very receptive of the idea or anybody telling her what she should do with her gallery space. So she was very indifferent, impersonal, cold about the whole thing, and eventually she didn't produce a catalog, she didn't produce a poster.

But I got in about maybe — I — at least — it had to be over 12 — 14 quilts were in the show. It was a magnificent show. And I did get a video out of it. And it was the most popular exhibit they ever had. And then even the student body, through the website there, said that they all liked it.

And so she had to eat, as they say, crow or something — [laughs] — but she — you know, even at the Q-and-A meeting that I had at the opening or some point while I was there — it was packed — she didn't even have refreshments or anything for anybody. She was just really terrible.

But again, it was the most popular show they ever had, and I went up there for that purpose. I was there for, I

guess, about a week, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Are there any other potential exhibitions on the — on the horizon?

MR. CUMMINGS: At this point, no, but there's a possibility of a sale or two, because at Lincoln, Nebraska, at the textile/quilt museum that's on campus there, they are in talks with me wanting to buy a group of my quilts because they said that the current gallery — well, the current museum, which has galleries in it — they're going to double the size of it in the next few years, and they're going to have a special wing or gallery that will show studio/art quilts. And they want a body of my work to be there, and the body would be representative over a time period of what I've been doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Fantastic.

MR. CUMMINGS: So I had an interview — well, I had a power breakfast meeting — [they laugh] — with Robert James, who's a philanthropist and a quilt collector and also the funder behind the museum. And him and his wife, who died — she died last year — they gave money to build the museum, and also they gave their collection. And it's about 4,000 quilts now. And he says he's still going around the world buying quilts from India and other places. And he said the reason why he was meeting with me — I had met him and his wife 20 years ago, and they had heard about the jazz quilts. And so that pulled — that was like a magnet. They went to me, and I went to them, and then he took me up to their house in Chappaqua and showed me the additional room that they had built that was climatized that had their 6[00] or 700 quilts in it at that time.

And then everybody said, "Oh, Michael, they're going to buy a quilt from you." And the only quilt they had from a person of color was Faith Ringgold. And so I walked away waiting for the telephone to ring, and it never did. [Laughs.]

So 20 years or more later, he gives me a call recently, says, "Michael, how are you?" [Laughs.] And I said, "I'm okay."

"Been a long time."

I said, "Yes."

And then he said, "Well, I want to have a meeting with you." He said, "The people at the museum, you know, are interested in getting your work." And I said, "Well, since I'm in the city and he's in the city, I'll just sit down and to him."

So at 7:30 in the morning we had breakfast at the Harvard Club. I said, "7:30?" "Well, I get in the city at 7:00." And he's 89. And so we met at the Harvard Club.

Again, getting my professional self all together, I had my tablet. I had put on a memory stick about 12 images that they could consider to buy. I had made a price list. I gave him my edited résumé and updated résumé. But — I know they already know all about me and everything like that, but I just wanted — presented a package.

And then I made a CD for him to take with him. He said, "Okay, you know, I'll get all of this and move it — and just pass it on to the staff people and they'll decide."

But he said, "It's my money." And I said, "Okay [... -MAC]."

And so I walked him through the images, and I gave him a price list, and I was waiting for him to cry, "Poor," and I said to my friends jokingly — I said, "Well, if he cries 'poor,' I'll just give him some Kleenex, you know" — [laughs] — like that.

So as I was going down, he was looking at the price list, but there was no facial expression at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so he said, "Well, you know, they just have \$50,000, and so we'll just see. You know, we'll just see what happens."

And I said, "Oh, yeah, we'll just see what happens."

So that was about three weeks ago now, and I've put on the bottom of my price list — I said, "Prices expire November 28th," because I had seen that somewhere on other sort of bill of sales or something, because I didn't want them to get me in a trap with saying, "Well, you have this on paper," and coming back to me like a year or two later —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and saying, "We want this at this price." So I said, "No, I'm not going to do that."

So I gave that. So I'm waiting to see if they're going to get some. He said they wanted four or five quilts. So —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that actually ties in, I think, perfectly to a series of questions that I'd like to talk about in terms of the art market. Clearly you're business-savvy and education has paid off, but have you seen any sort of change in the market for quilts in that 30 years that you've been working?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, there has been a change, because the 30 years that I've been working, I started off when quilts were more considered, in the — on the state of mind and visually, as your grandma's quilts are to traditional patchwork quilts.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: They could be the star of Texas or the log cabin or whatever design you wanted, but that all fit into just traditional sort of vein of how a quilt was considered.

And then also the construction of the quilt 30 years ago, entering into competitions, there were two categories. One was hand-sewn and one machine-sewn.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] And they couldn't cross. [Laughs.] And so that has changed.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: But it's changed for the better in that one aspect of the growth in the market of quilts is that there's big business for vendors in quilting — the fabric, the sewing machines, the embroidery sort of items and the people that make display equipment. In the convention halls that invite those type of shows to come in, when you go to a quilt exhibit, you — one or several sections are filled with vendors, and then you also — I'm skipping over publications, quilt books, magazines, and then there's even shows on cable, quilt shows.

So all that has blossomed and flourished due to the interest of quilts. And the interest means that people have continued making quilts. There is a large population that are really — embrace the traditional patterns, and they have fun making those. And there are quilt groups and organizations. And then there's the art quilts, that I think have opened — well, they did open the door to that art form to be considered and taken into galleries and museums, where it wasn't before, although the Whitney did introduce the Amish quilts and they had a show at the Whitney of quilts back in the '70s, I think the late '70s or early '80s. And that was — that broke the chain, so to speak, on the museum door and allowed that to come in. And since that point, you've had a lot of artists that dabbled into using the quilt format to express themselves.

Robert Rauschenberg did a quilt. However, his quilt — [laughs] — is a quilt that was already made, he threw paint on it and it's framed in a Plexiglas box at the Museum of Modern Art. [Laughs.] That's his quilt. However, artists are making quilts, and they're being shown in a lot of different venues now. And so the popularity is alive and well.

And you have two schools of thought. You have your traditional people, sort of in the middle America on the East and West Coast, and then you have some artists that are using that as their art form to express themselves, like myself, and Faith Ringgold comes to mind. There's a woman named Susan Shie that does a lot of narrative sort of work on the surface of her quilts. And we're out there doing that. Michael James once created quilts, but he did a very sort of architectural sort of structures with strips and stripes of color, but he's moved on now to become more a professor, works at Lincoln, Nebraska, museum, is connected to that and also the textile department, but he has a lot of books out.

So all that has moved everything forward, and still in the public's mind more so, maybe, now than maybe 30 years ago because it's amazing how, if you think of all the technology and all the other diversions people could take, with computer games and television and maybe travel, that they have time to even think about or create a quilt. There are still people that are still holding on to that tradition and passing it on to their children or creating quilts to give on to other generations and stuff like that.

And then all the people that come out when there are quilt shows. I mean, it's amazing, 30 years then to now, when I show my quilts, I always tell people, be prepared because there are going to be a lot of people that come. And it's always the case. You get old and new coming out to look at quilts. And that's what happened at Bates College. It was amazing. People came from New Hampshire. They came from Vermont. They'd heard about this quilt show. And I don't know when the last quilt show they had in that vicinity, but people came from all over to

look at quilts. And they weren't your — and I assume they knew they weren't your ordinary quilt, but the word itself pulled them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. You've traveled quite a bit. Do you see quilting elsewhere?

MR. CUMMINGS: You know, when I go to places, I go to the museums. I don't see — like I said, when I went to Egypt, I went to some stores. They had applique textiles kind of representative of or symbolizing camels or different sort of Egyptian symbols and stuff like that. I didn't see any great fabric in China, Brazil. I was in Bahia and I went to all — the few museums that they had there. They mostly had decorative arts that were made by the slaves. And then I went into the churches, and everything was made by the slaves. They had all these giant, life-sized wooden sculptures of the saints, and so I was looking — I thought I was in the house of horrors or something. They were very scary looking.

But no, no quilts, and not a lot of textile, either. And I'm thinking because of the vulnerability or how textiles could fade and how they dry rot if people don't take care of them, and these countries, except if you were an aristocrat or something like that, they weren't preserved or taken care of. And certain weather conditions like in Brazil, they wouldn't be lasting unless somebody with money really took a great care to protect them. So I haven't seen a lot of quilts.

I went to Paris, but at that point I didn't really go looking — I went to the museums, the Louvre, like everybody goes, and I went to Versailles and stuff, but I wasn't looking for quilts. And I guess I saw tapestries, but quilts I didn't think — I don't — no. But I know historically, when the Pilgrims came from England, there were quilts in England, and there were quilts, I guess, in Europe at that time. But I haven't been, really, to England.

And I've seen quilts at the Newark Museum. The Newark Museum and the Brooklyn Museum have a very large collection of quilts from the 1800s. And they came about — after reading and talking to people, is that there was a large middle class, the upper class population that lived around New Jersey or in New Jersey, and these were passed down from families and eventually they ended up — they donate them to the museum. And they talked about the types of fabrics they used. They used satins and velvets and all this, and this sort of told you the class of people that worked with them and made them. And so they have those type of classic-type quilts in their collection.

MS. RIEDEL: We were looking at some books earlier. Are there particular writers that you feel or books that are particularly significant about quilting in America, ones that you would refer to?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, there's three people that spearheaded and brought to the forefront in the last 20 years the whole sort of contribution of African-American quilters, historically and also focusing on newer quilters, and those three people — one is Carolyn Mazloomi.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: She's not only created traveling shows over the last 10 to 15 years, she's also written catalogues related to those shows. And then there's a young woman now that's in Virginia, named Kyra Hicks.

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

MR. CUMMINGS: And she's written many books and done a lot of research on particular quilters from the 1800s and 1900s. And then there was a woman that came before them, that she mentored these two women I just mentioned, and her name was Cuesta Benberry.

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

MR. CUMMINGS: And she died in St. Louis, Missouri, maybe six, seven years ago. But her story was that she was a librarian, and over a time period, she started to see there was no information about African-American quilters. She retired, but she had that librarian sensibility whereby she collected bits and pieces of information and she put together a book. And then she also knew other quilt historians and she kind of exchanged information with them.

And eventually it blossomed into a show in Paducah, Kentucky, that I was in, and I had the *African Jazz No. 10* quilt. And I don't know if it ended up on the cover or not, but anyway, that was the first show that she curated bringing together all her research and everything, and it introduced both the art quilter and also the traditional quilter in the show in Paducah, Kentucky.

And then from there, Carolyn Mazloomi, she created an organization called Women of Color — no, Women of Color Quilting Network. And that organization she still maintains on a smaller scale. And when she heard of me — I think it might have been in Paducah, Kentucky — we were talking and everything and I was interested in

joining, but because of the name of the organization, it didn't have men in it. [Laughs.] So I think she talked to other members or whatever, but I got adopted. [They laugh.] But I was sort of in the back. But putting me in the back didn't make any difference, because every time I was in a show, my work always stood out because I had sort of an artist sensibility that other people didn't have. So I always felt that, you know, sometimes she deliberately tried to play down, you know, me, because my quilts would get all the attention. And in a magazine or sort of an article, they would focus on my quilt.

But anyway, she has been a great venue for me to channel my quilts through because a lot of times she had themes for different shows that she wanted to have tour, and that presented a challenge to me to kind of look at a particular theme and then to pull out of my thoughts what — and through research and stuff that I knew about — what type of composition I would create for that particular show.

And through her too — and because most of these shows travel for two years, they go to a lot of different parts of the country and they go to a lot of museums, so that's been another way that my work has been promoted and people have become aware of my work, through these traveling shows. Initially, 30 years ago, a traveling show might be — six months, a year, was stretching it. And then over time the average length of a traveling show that you had to give up your work has been two years.

And a lot of my non-art friends, every time you say your art's been on a show traveling or it's in a gallery or something, "Are you getting paid for that?" [Laughs.] And I say, "No." And they say, "Wait a minute. You're lending your work for six months in their show or their gallery, and you're not making any money?" I say, "No, that's not the way it goes." And so they said, "Oh." And then when I have a show someplace, "Oh, are you going to go?" I say, "No, they just want my art work, they don't want the artist." [Laughs.] And so I have to educate them about how the art world works, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: And then a few kind of joke about how, "Oh, you know, your work's going to go up in price when you die." [They laugh.] I said, "Yes, I know." [Laughs.] So anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: We mentioned books. Are there any particular magazines, periodicals that were significant to your development or have been important to you over time?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I have two bookshelves of publications that I've been in over the 30 years. And then right at this table here there's about six books that are more current. Anything in particular?

MS. RIEDEL: Or that have helped feed your way of working or your process or your thinking about working, too. So not necessarily —

MR. CUMMINGS: No. That's all kind of been external, you know, and there's been after-the-fact. I mean, what they photographed and everything was work that I've previously done, so again like I mentioned, I emotionally am not really attached to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: But the publications did reach a far range of people that may have not seen my work in a gallery or museum setting, people that subscribe to certain art or craft magazines in different parts of the country, and some of them internationally. But I can't say I've gotten feedback, but I don't know how they network with each other in talking about different artists, because I have gotten calls from curators in different organizations — not organizations — galleries or museums whereby they became aware of my website by someone telling them about me.

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

MR. CUMMINGS: And recently I got a call from — what's the college — Duke University. A librarian in some — one of the libraries they have on campus, she heard about me and went to my website, and then she communicated with me because she said, "Oh, I'm going to pass this information on to some scholars or somebody here that might be interested in what you're doing." And then I told her about the show in South Carolina about the mermaid, and so she said she might go see that. So that's a connection that just kind of came from — I don't know what her source was, but you never know where these magazines and who talks about what to who.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: And then another person, who teaches at a religious college outside of Philadelphia, I don't know how he came across me, but we've been communicating for, like, three years now. His wife's had a baby

since that time. And he produced a book on religion and he wanted to use one of my quilts as the cover.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so we negotiated that and I said, "Yes, not a problem." Then he's been talking about wanting me to come talk about the spirituality of my quilts to his class. And so we haven't got that together, but there is — the publication, I can't think of one in particular. I'm always happy to talk about the one that came out of Japan because the editor there for this quilt — Japanese magazine, she put me on the cover. And there was — it was for me so odd that I would end up on the cover that there's no one in Japan that isn't more worthy than me, but she wanted me on the cover and featured me in the magazine, and so that was very special.

And recently, there's a book called — what's it called here — *Masters Art Quilts Volume 1*, and that book is very special because it's like a mini gallery exhibition of about maybe 40 artists, art quilters, and it gives the viewer a range of images, about six to eight per quilter, and so that's very special because in most books you get one or two photographs, and they move onto whatever subject the book is focused on or other artists. But this allows anyone to sit down, to see a range of subject matter that this artist has created. And it's beautifully illustrated. And it's nice sizes, too. They're more than — I think they're at least five by seven, if not larger, in the book. So it's a good size for people to get a good idea. And the color is very good as well.

MS. RIEDEL: We have talked about Dr. Farris Thompson at Yale. Are there any other writers or art critics that have been important or influential to your quilting?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you know, I must say that, again, almost being like an outsider in terms of textile art, that I haven't had a lot of serious art critics write about my work.

MS. RIEDEL: But I'm not even thinking about writing about your work.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm thinking about influencing your thinking.

MR. CUMMINGS: No, I — except for Farris Thompson and — but he's more of an instructor, and he talked about the diaspora and the connecting parts from Africa to the Caribbean to South America to North America. He made an early impression on me in the '70s. And I also knew different people that were going to his classes to get a degree from Yale, and so that how I got to know of him.

But other than that, at this moment I can't think of anyone that stands out there. Yes. I know I mentioned Rudolf Baranik of the Art Students League as a teacher that was very nurturing and encouraging me in painting, but I didn't really pursue that. But at the time, I mean, if he had been discouraging, I don't know what direction I would have gone in. But he was very nurturing and encouraging, and that gave me — sort of inspired me.

MS. RIEDEL: He was at the Art Students League?

MR. CUMMINGS: Art Students League.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was — and you were there in the early '70s or mid-'70s?

MR. CUMMINGS: It might have been — somewhere early to mid-'70s. It might have been six months or so, yeah. But other individual — there — another person that was a mentor — but I already mentioned his name, Willie Birch — he was an individual that was very encouraging and talked me into doing a series, and he would give little critiques of my work a little bit. And we had an ongoing — I knew him for many, many years, him and his wife.

MS. RIEDEL: Was he an artist or a collector?

MR. CUMMINGS: An artist, an artist. And he's now in New Orleans. He was originally from there, and that's where he lives now. And he does a very narrative sort of work, paintings. And — but I haven't heard of him in some time, but he's down in New Orleans.

But no, I — sometimes I feel, you know, artists are isolated and they kind of work on their own. And even though we're reaching out to show our work and everything, we don't really — well, I know I don't — it sounds like I might do a lot of networking, but I don't think I do a lot of networking in terms of, you know, to really make social connections is like going out to the parties and doing a lot of nonart-related things, but it's networking. And I don't really — I hadn't had the time to do that with nine to five and coming home. So I tried to do that through correspondence and introducing myself to people, but I didn't really try — I didn't invest a lot of time in pursuing that and sitting down with lunch or going to parties and stuff like that. So I — that's one way that politically you connect to present your art and make connections and to kind of just make yourself known. But I

didn't — I've been sort of in the shadows just creating and working for two years. And you know, and even — not doing really many workshops — I don't really like doing workshops, but not doing workshops or talking about my work or not having the time to do any of that.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you done many, and where have they been?

MR. CUMMINGS: I did — most of the workshops I participated in were in the '70s when I was sort of like in between jobs or was doing part-time work. I started to do a few at community centers. I did that. But —

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing at Penland or Haystack or —

MR. CUMMINGS: No, one, I read over that, and I know people who have been to those places, and when I was working my nine-to-five at the States Arts Council, of course we had a visual arts section and people would talk about that and they would know when there were openings and when they were, like, recruiting, stuff like that. But I could never participate in it because of my nine-to-five job. And I — you know, it wasn't like the agency was going to close down if I took off two weeks or something, but they made you feel that way. [They laugh.] So I could never get a block of time for residency or to think about those sorts of things, and so I just looked at them, the opportunities, but I never could take advantage.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll pause right there so we can switch the disc.

[End of disc.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Michael Cummings in the artist's home and studio in New York on October 26, 2012, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is card number four.

We've touched on a number of your different influences — historical narratives, personal narratives, Romare Bearden, music. Is there anything else in particular that you would like to cite as an influence over time?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I don't — I've talked about folk art, but folk art has played a big influence since the '80s when I first started seeing it in galleries and museums. And again, that was another awakening for me to kind of see that — again, talking about academia and formal training, how that wasn't necessarily required in order to present a beautiful, powerful piece of art. And these folk artists were doing it and with all media, from textiles to metal, found objects and everything — and wood. So they were a great influence to allow me to be more free with the way I created and constructed my work, and with what I would embellish on the surface of quilts, I didn't — I went from the traditional button and beads to wood, metal and plastic on the surface because of what I was seeing through folk art.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. You mentioned a spiritual sensibility; is there any music in particular or any textiles in particular that you care to mention —

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, music has always been in the background, sort of like an energizer for me in making my artwork, and the primary music that I generally play has been jazz, and that has been a historical sort of sound in my life since I was small, because my parents grew up in the bebop era. So therefore, they had 78s and 33-and-a-third records of big band sounds and singers, and they were playing that when I was little until I grew up to be a teenager and I was playing Motown and pushing that out the room. But I grew up with that as a background, and I grew to enjoy it. And my uncles played that when I went to visit them as well.

So it was a continuation outside of the house and I became very accustomed to hearing it. It was also a relaxing sort of sound, and it was a familiar sort of sound, and then I transitioned over from just instrumental into song, because again, the storytelling and listening to the words of song — even when I was younger, people said, why are you so interested in the song? I said, it's the words; it's what story, because a lot of people didn't pay attention to what the singer was saying it was, like, the rhythm and the beat and all of that. And the voice was just an instrument, but I really focused in on the words and the storytelling.

So — and to this day, I have many, many sort of CDs and recordings of vocalists singing jazz, and I always get upset when I'm looking in the New York Times or under concerts being presented or jazz series and things coming up, they always have musicians, but they don't have the singers. And so I always kind of missed that. So jazz — you can sell — as I develop in the '80s and the '90s and even to this day, I put on jazz music, but I have expanded that to going to Brazil, and even prior to Brazil, I had embraced the Brazilian music, and even though I don't understand Portuguese, I did have one favorite artist — singer from Brazil — Milton Nascimento — I think that's -- Nascimento is the last name; the first name I'm not certain of, but he writes his own music. It's basically, poetry, and he has a very haunting, emotional sounding voice, and it's — kind of drift along like slow fog over the land, and I just kind of — my mind just opens up, and you can imagine anything you want with this sound.

So I was playing this music way before I went to Brazil. But they also have a lot of upbeat Brazilian music, which I

listened to also. Bossa Nova came from Brazil, and I listened to that in the background sometimes. And then I go into — sometimes I'm in — really in a mood for traditional music. I might put on — no, not Japanese, more Chinese music or I might put on Spanish music. I just have a potpourri of sort of, like, sounds and recordings that I have that I've put on. So music has played a big part.

Earlier on, like I mentioned before, folk music, because of growing up in that era in the '60s — even though Motown was very strong, it was stronger — I guess it was — might have been — the epicenter might have been in Detroit in the East; it did filter out to the West, but I embraced, through my sort of — I can't say my group of friends, because they didn't embrace it, but I embraced Dylan and all the folk music. And so I got into the storytelling that they were telling.

It was a lot of protest songs and stuff like that, but that was a big part of my early years of just kind of hearing those sounds and getting into the songs very much — and the meaning and the motion part of that; I just drifted along with that for a great deal, but music has played a big part, and the weather — the weather in New York — the weather in the East Coast played a big part in — well, not a big part, but it was influential in how I worked in the early years, because I didn't like the cold weather the first three, four, five years. It took some time to acclimate myself to this weather, so I — in the early years, I was more productive in the winter, because even though I worked, I didn't want to go out in the cold.

So on the weekends and stuff, I would be very happy to stay in, and staying in meant that I had time to work on my art. So I did that. Now, after more than 35 years or more — I can't say I don't like the cold, but so what happens, though — I've noticed that I do — well, I have deadlines in the summertime, generally, for some reason. And I don't have them as much in the wintertime, or I'm making something that is going to be shown in the fall or winter, and I'm sort of in the middle or almost finished with it in the middle of the summer.

So many a summer, I've been in my studio area slightly sweating, even though I have fans, and working on a quilt and say, why am I working on a quilt in the summertime, because even though it's not finished, if you could imagine heavy amounts of layers of fabric on your legs not moving, and there's already heat and humidity in the room, and you're starting to feel the heat from the quilt top that — and you have the fan blowing — it is sort of slightly uncomfortable, but the weather earlier on, just like, kind of related to having asthma and staying in the house when I was little — the weather kept me in my apartment in New York for many a year, and then, while I was in the house, I got more active creating art.

MS. RIEDEL: And I think it's interesting that you mentioned music and emotion. And I think that we've been looking at some quilts this morning. It seems like that's a very important ingredient to your working process, that there has to be a certain level or degree of emotion for you to move forward on a project. Is that accurate?

MR. CUMMINGS: That — yes, 100 percent. And I haven't really put it in words, but it is sort of like I have to have my emotions turned on and connected to the theme or whatever the images I'm working with, and with that emotional sort of engine on and the creativity going, then that dictates sort of the way the image is going to come out in terms of the development through fabric. And I have to feel it — I really have to feel it. And the music is sort of an ingredient in that sort of, like, mixture there that keeps the level of emotion a certain way, and so this feeds into the creative process, the music. And all that has to come together in order for me to be creative.

I don't think about it, but I know there's a combination of elements that have to come into the studio with me — the music, the mood, the emotion all has to be there regardless of what materials I might have laid out and that the sewing machine is ready. It all has to be an emotional push into the room that gets me going.

And then, even at that point, it's not that strong, because, having done this so long, I realize that the first — well, so many of the first cities to start the development of the quilt are just kind of, like laborious, because it — I can't see it on the floor yet. I can see it in my mind, but I know I have to go through many steps to get to a point where I could start to see it on there.

And I fight with that sort of early development, because I'm not totally connected. It's not until I visually see something that I could identify with and say, oh, yeah, there it is that that propels me to kind of, like, go faster and more motivation takes over, and I'm really connected at that point. But when the first cuttings and the pinning, the sewing — it's just all labor. I don't — I don't feel the connection; I don't feel the rhythm taking over, and I don't feel the mood. It's just sort of — I'm outside of the process.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there any difference between the narrative pieces and the abstract pieces?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, the narratives absorb more of the emotion from me, whereas the abstract — I look at it as just fun creation for me, and when I discover the quilters years ago, through the Whitney Museum, I came home and, one year, or within a couple of years, I said, well, I could just put my scraps of material together and make some interesting color combinations and make some easy quilts — I call them easy quilts because I didn't think

there was anything to it, whereas, with narrative quilts, there's a whole emotional visualization process that goes on, and it's always sort of in transition, because it doesn't necessarily just flow out perfectly, and so I'm going to bed with thoughts and trying to adjust positions and forms and colors.

And then it's going back and forth to the quilt itself and finding fabric that matches up with the mood and all that, but with the abstract pieces, it's just sort of like the harmonizing of color and what shape the color's going to be, and this is going to be square, rectangle, or how is it going to fit to balance out? It's sort of an abstract painting, but — easier than that to me, but there is a lighter sort of energy mood that goes into working with the abstract

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: — than with the narrative quilts. They're very much lighter, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you see any similarities or any differences between the very early work and the recent work?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, the recent work has taken on a more emotional feeling to it, and they're more layered and more imagery going on in them. And also, recently, last few years, there's more text on the surface. I've presented more words on the surface, where — and the early works had none of that at all. And the earlier works weren't as complex, I think, although that's in the eyes of the beholder. But there has been a transition, and I — and the early works kind of went in different directions in terms of subject matter a little bit, whereas I'm kind of like more focusing in on more history sort of themes now than I was in the past, and there's more variety of embellishments on the surface now — much more variety, and even more daring for me.

I'm like sewing African masks in the slave quilt — slave quilt called *Henrietta Marie*, I have the Mermaid Yemaya in the quilt, and for her face, I sewed a wooden mask — African mask for her face on the quilt. So I've taken some very bold steps with what I think I could, with the artist's license, get away with. And so I'd become less conservative with how I approach what I put on the surface.

And going back to the Obama — *Young Obama* quilt, where I used the Frida Kahlo sort of, like, method to create the inner person with the heart and the parents below that, that quilt was created for an Obama exhibition of quilts that Carolyn Mazloomi was going to put together. And it came together, but when I sent her a photograph of the finished product, there was some silence and a long delay on response. And then finally, I got a call from her, and she said that she couldn't put it in the show. And she said she had showed different members, and they felt it was an insult to the president, and so with her getting this feedback from the members, she said that she couldn't put it in the show. So I was very —

MS. RIEDEL: What was insulting?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I could only think that they looked at the two wooden figures. They were just — they were about maybe 6 to 8 inches, and they were nude. And so I guess that's —

MS. RIEDEL: You didn't ask?

MR. CUMMINGS: I didn't ask? No, I didn't ask. I was in shock. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: I just said, "Well, you know, you win some and you lose some." That's sarcastic and just left it alone because I knew — I knew that I liked the piece and I knew it was — I knew it was a strong piece for me, and I knew it covered a lot of territory in terms of vocabulary and what it was talking about. And I — so I just left it alone and knew that there would be other places for it to go. I wasn't stuck on the fact that it wasn't getting into that one show which it was made for. And I guess that's the way I look at life. You know, if it's — if one door closes, there's other doors that you could try to open, you know, like, what are your options.

So about six months later the same quilt was chosen by Michael James to be in the *Fiberarts* magazine. He featured it in this national — no, international magazine. And from there it now is at the Lincoln, Nebraska, textile museum. And they love it, and they want to buy it. So, you know — [laughs] — I — what can I say? You know, it's just in the eyes of the beholder. She, with the backers of the — some of the members didn't want it, but other people do want it. So it's sort of like show business, you know. [They laugh.] Everybody's not going to like what you do. So she kind of stepped up and said she couldn't use it.

MS. RIEDEL: Are you working on anything in particular right now? Do you have a new piece or a new series in mind?

MR. CUMMINGS: Right now I just finished, and I sent it off to Carolyn Mazloomi, another — she said this is her final exhibition she's going to do. But she says that every year, so — [they laugh] — but this show is going to

open up in Wilberforce. And Wilberforce, Ohio, has a big history for the Underground Railroad and some other things going on there. And they have a museum there. And so this show is going to open up there. And her theme to the members was — and she passed out a list, two-page list — that the quilts had to represent famous African-American personalities. And so the time I got around to getting information about it and the list by way of email, everybody was taken on the list. So I didn't know what I was going to do.

So I was having a conversation with my 89-year-old mother and telling her about this situation. She's in L.A. And she says, "Well, why don't you do a quilt on the first female black astronaut? Nobody ever talks about her. You don't — you don't hear anything about her." And I said, "Oh, really?" And then I looked up, and her name is Mae C. — her first name is Mae, M-A-E, middle initial C, Jemison, J-E-M-I-S-O-N. And she is still alive. She has a foundation. She has three or four degrees. She graduated from Stanford — one of her degrees is from Stanford. She — her foundation does international research for diseases around the world. And she was an astronaut on — one of the spaceships in 1997. That could be '97, '96.

So what I did was Google her, and I found a photograph of her in her spacesuit holding her helmet with a big smile towards the camera. So I took that image and translated it into a quilt, which is about maybe a good 6 — no, I say 5 feet square, 5 ½ feet square, and — to create — she had an orange suit on, so I got some orange fabric to create the suit. And to create some of the metal equipment on her spacesuit, I went to Home Depot and — [laughs] — and bought some plumbing equipment — [laughs] —

MS. RIEDEL: Great.

MR. CUMMINGS: — and put it around her neck. And then I bought some drain caps that you see in your sink to put on — so that would be for oxygen on her suit there. And then I bought some black patent leather material to put as the shield on her hat. So you had that dark sort of sheen look on her. And then I put that around her collar. And then I put a USB plug in one of her sleeves because she had something like that in her photograph with a plugged-in thing, so I put that there. And then I found some little metal, hmm, you know, buttons or something, but they had wings on it, sort of like flight wings or something. And then I found another little something I put there. And then I sowed on an American flag on one side.

And then — oh, for the interior around her, I went to the planetarium at the Museum of Natural History and bought a little space kit that had little astronauts in there, and I sowed those in like they're out in space. And then they had some rockets and spaceships. So I sowed all that in. And then some time ago, I had bought some little glass buttons. They were, like, slightly rectangle. And they look like crystals, almost, because they were almost an inch, about three-quarters of an inch long and about maybe, hmm, less than a half-inch wide. But I sold those all over the background. And I used a dark blue denim fabric as the foundation for the quilt. So then I sowed these crystal sort of buttons on their, like, stars, and then I had the rockets and little spaceman. [Laughs.] So that's going on all around. And then I found a card, a postcard they were selling at the planetarium that had the Earth, but it was sort of like a 3-D card, so if you moved it, the Earth moved around. So I sowed that into the quilt as well. So you could see that she wasn't on Earth because Earth was, like, on the side in this postcard. So — and then I put at the base when she was born and her full name.

And then around — for the border, I chose a fabric that I had bought at one of the only quilt fabric stores in the city called City Quilters, and — there around Chelsea. And they had — they had very unique fabric. So this fabric I had bought some time ago. It was the subway map, but it was black background, and the subway lines and everything were in bright colors. So from a distance, you just saw lines. You didn't see it as a map until you get close, you could see it was a subway map. So I was getting a little humorous with that because she doesn't need a subway map; she needs a space map. But I put that all the way around and then just bordered in red.

So I just sent that off, like, last week. And I had it photographed and everything. So that was the last quilt I made. And that was dedicated to astronaut Mea C. Jemison. I plan to eventually email or send her a photograph of the quilt — or to her foundation, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And no — nothing is on the next — nothing — [inaudible] —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right now I'm thinking about going back to making some more Obama quilts, but this time not just him; I want to kind of relate to the debate series that went on, so I want to put Mitt Romney in the picture as well. So I'm thinking of that, and then I'm thinking about also maybe doing an Obama family quilt with him and his wife and his daughters. And so in the last three or four weeks, I've been starting — well, since I woke up to that idea, I've been now looking for images to cut and save. So I've been going through magazines and newspapers. So I'm — I have about six or eight images now that I collected. So I'm on the road to kind of going in that direction with creating some more Obama quilts but with other people in them, primarily a couple with maybe Mitt Romney and then also with his family.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm.

How have your sources of inspiration changed over time, or have they?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, they have changed because I've opened up myself to being aware of more resources through books and looking at different things differently. Like, when I first came to New York, I really didn't even think about African art, really. And so that's been a gradual sort of, like, transition over to really embrace it and being surrounded by it and then being more aware of the variety of fabrics that I have access to in this city and not limiting myself to that. And sizewise, I've kind of grown more to be comfortable with larger than smaller in creation of — [inaudible].

And I must admit, and a lot of artists would kind of say the same thing, a lot of times what you create is sort of dictated by your workspace. And my workspace, even though I can crowd it with lots of chairs and other stuff, they are portable and I can move them out; it is about 15 feet square. And so that has allowed me to kind of think large in terms of when I work on the floor and having a large foundation — except for the last several quilts, *Sister Gertrude Morgan*, the *Slave Ship Henrietta Marie*, and — oh, also this housetop quilt; those I had to extend out of my studio room into the next room a little bit — and/or I had to work in sections, and I sowed it together because they were so large, and I never did see the full work hanging or fully displayed until I took it to the photographer, and he has a giant loft space down in SoHo, but I would see it and then be able to really look at it fully; all I was able to do was stand over it, stand on a chair and look down at it or look at it at a distance and different angles but never really see it officially or formally hung on the wall. So with those big pieces, that's a slight problem, but it doesn't prevent me from approaching that and making them because it's — long as I could feel that it's — emotionally, that it's coming together the way I want to, I feel it's okay. So —

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting. That's really interesting that you feel it's coming to you and you feel it's working —

MR. CUMMINGS: Right. Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — but you can't really see it.

MR. CUMMINGS: No. I just feel it. I just kind of feel it.

And so over time the larger quilts have become more into being the sides that I work with — 7 by 7 feet is sort of like my average size that I work with. Earlier on I lived in a smaller apartment and I made smaller quilts. [Laughs.] That was it. And then I didn't take on — I didn't take on as many — I want to say people in the imagery in my quilts. I've taken on more I think, but not life size, just more human forms in my work in the last 10 to 15 years than I had in the beginning. That's been something. And although I was making collages and I was using only photographs of people, I didn't really take that into the quilts as much as I am now. And I think I was afraid of working with the face through fabric in the beginning because I knew it would be a challenge with a sewing machine; maybe it could be easier by hand, but with a sewing machine, trying to put various sections of a face together and trying to sow it underneath the needle, the arm of the sewing machine.

And the first successful face that I did was with *Take my Brother Home*. And that really allowed me to see that it was possible, and I did have the skills, but I did have to be very patient. And that word, "patient," everybody that looks at my quilts think, "oh, you must have a lot of patience." And I never think about patience because, like I said, you get in a certain headset mood with the music, and then you're in another world, and you're just in the creative flow of things; you're not thinking about patience because it's therapy to me. I calm down, and it's all about that. My mother says, "oh, you're lucky you're not married and you have kids," you know. [Laughs.]

So — but patience, I don't know. Sometimes I wonder about that. And a friend of mine tell me — out in L.A.; he's 68 now — he says, "Michael, you know, there's one thing about old people, they have less tolerance about things." And I said, "Really?" And then ever since he told me that about two years ago, I kind of catch myself — tolerance — [laughs] — you know, because you go into stores and you're dealing with younger people and stuff like that, and they don't understand or they don't give you the right response or something like that, or you're standing in a grocery line or something like that. You know, patience. So I just have to laugh when some people tell me I have patience, because I don't see that I have patience. But then I just look around, and what I've created, I tell people it's discipline that really keeps me in that chair at the sewing machine. I don't know about patience. It's discipline and a desire to be creative.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

Do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition, part of a specifically American tradition? What sort of a —

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, it's a little of both in terms of how I feel connected, because having read about the history of quilting and how textiles are created in various parts of the world, men have participated in creating textiles more so than women in most of the country. Women have participated in dyeing, maybe, and I could say maybe

decorating, but the men have been the weavers of fabric in Africa and in Asia. And so when people talk about quilting history in America and they only relate it to women, I kind of point out that in the larger universe, globally, it's sort of a society thing in terms of how genders have been separated and dictated to do one thing and not the other thing. There have been some documented quilters, but not that many in America, but again, I see myself as part of the larger part of the world where men to participate with textiles.

And now that's not even a consideration, necessarily, in the art community. It's still talked about and the questions come up, how do you feel about being a quilter, because people still have a very, sort of, like very narrow definition of who's a quilter because they still kind of grab hold onto their grandmother as being the only type of person that can make a quilt, or their mother. So I feel connected nationally that way, through — men have always participated with textiles and being creative with them.

And United States-wise, I feel part of an African-American tradition of quilts coming out of the South and being made in the South and then kind of traveling wherever they went, and quilt traditions kind of blossomed. And then there's two levels to that, two tiers. There's the African-American tradition and then there's kind of going into the mainstream of the larger quilt-maker society of the white quilt makers. And that's all kind of come together now because they're all making the same patterns, they're using the same material and they're participating in the same shows now. So that's kind of come together.

So I see myself on those different levels of participating and continuing on a tradition of textiles and constructing quilts. But I've kind of moved it to another level in terms of what they call the art quilt or the studio quilt because I started off — again, using the word *discipline* — and I was still — I was starting off making these art quilts, but I stepped back and I told myself, well, I want to see what these traditional quilts are all about.

So I chose several patterns and I made several traditional quilts earlier on. I've never really shown them in exhibit-wise, but I made them because I wanted to see what it was about to have to use an exact ruler and measurements and everything to make the blocks, to bring them together. And so the last quilt I made, which was back in — I guess in the late '70s, might have been the early '80s, it was called — what was it — it had a really cute name. It was the Widow Fan or the Widow's Fan, I think it was called. Each block had about 14 to 16 pieces in it. And why I chose it, I liked the way it looked — initially I didn't know what I was getting into, and I had to make about 20 blocks, I think, eventually, had to make 20 blocks in the border. But — and, you know, I tucked under the edges and all that. So I took myself through that process as a discipline just to see what real quilters, in terms of traditional methods, were all about. And then I never went back.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there anything surprising or interesting that came out of that process for you?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, they do a lot more work than I do, I think — [they laugh] — in terms of constructing it, because that tucking under, and then I heard some people they actually iron the little tuck-under part, and then there are the exact measurements and all that. See, all in my quilts, I don't use any sort of measurements, except when it comes to maybe the foundation, to see if that's squared, and that's not really perfectly square, and then when I measure off the border fabric to go around it. But the interior of the quilt, all those individual pieces that I visualize first, and then just take my hand with a piece of chalk and draw out the form, there's no measurement to that. There's just a sense of what the proportions should be, but there's no exact measurement of how it's going to line up with the size, so that I just kind of know what I'm cutting out and the way I build upon each piece that is going to fill up that space or that foundation fabric.

MS. RIEDEL: A couple questions about universities. You've studied in universities. You have a degree in art history from the university, but your studio practice is mostly self-taught.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: So do you see any difference between an artist that's university trained and one that's learned their craft or their practice outside of formal training?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, the difference is that, I guess, the studio artist — or the artist in the university comes out with a more formal approach to how they create their artwork, and they do lean more on the historical background coming out of Europe as to what or how art is defined. However, once they get into more modern art, like Pollack and all the other people that were in his period, that sort of breaks down to some degree. But still I think they still retain a lot of definitions and sort of psychological restrictions on what they can do and can't do. Whereas the non-university individual that creates artwork, they have no inhibitions. They have no definitions to follow. They have no restrictions. They have their visions and their dreams and what they believe is the right way to go with constructing or doing what they're doing, and they could come out with equally something just as beautiful and powerful as someone out of the university. And a lot of times it's much more unique and much more thought-provoking.

In the past, they haven't had access to having it shown, and they didn't — they were looked at as being kind of

insane — [laughs] — as opposed to creative. But now, since the '80s, that's changed remarkably, and dealers have really combed the land and started to re-evaluate and found artwork or folk art and put high prices on it. So it's become very valuable. And what used to be an outside has become inside art.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: So. You know.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you had any involvement at all with national organizations other than quilters? Have you had any — American Craft Council or anything like that?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I used to belong — I used to belong to an organization called the NCA, the National Conference of Artists, and it was made up of African-American artists [also Empire Quilters, American Craft Council, and Studio Art Quilts Associates -MAC]. And practically all the artists were teachers or professors. And so again, talking about income and how artists live and stuff like that, they got their degree, they were teaching on college campuses, but they were still active as artists in making art. And so I joined that national organization. They would have branches in different cities. And I was part of it for I guess a good four or five years actively.

And every year they would have an annual meeting in a different city. And so this was sort of a first for me, and I guess I was working somewhere full time, and I would take off to go to these meetings because it provided an opportunity for me to see another part of the country. And so they had one in Memphis, Tennessee, and through that trip I did the Memphis series of *Springtime in Memphis*, both quilts and collages. So that was a trip that did affect me in a very visual sort of way.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: Then they had one in D.C. and I met the Senegal artist that did the tapestries. And I heard the woman speak [; she had to be a fighter among all the male artists to get recognition -MAC]. And I said that's what I wanted to do. And then they had another one in Atlanta, Georgia, and I got to kind of explore the city of Atlanta and walk around canvases — campuses that they were there at the time. And so I was with them for a time, but then I kind of faded out and kind of got into my own thing, so to speak, with doing my artwork and new job and stuff like that, and I kind of lost the motivation to kind of pursue going to the meetings and stuff like that.

But there was one artist I met — her name was Honeywood, Varnette Honeywood. Varnette Honeywood. She became very famous because on *The Cosby Show*, the Huxtables, she used her artwork all over the apartment. So I don't know if you remember it, but it was, like, very narrative, a lot of comical sort of situations, black light, but they didn't really have faces. But she was very detailed with the clothing and the interior of the compositions, stuff like that.

And she was a young woman when I met her at the D.C. She was just graduating from Spellman in Atlanta, and she went on. And so we kind of kept in touch because she lived near my mother and I saw her a few times and stuff. And she died, like, about maybe four or five years ago, and she was younger than I am. And I don't know if she had cancer or what, but she died, and that was very sad to hear. But I had met her, one of the artists that I met through that.

And then I did belong and I did try to keep contact with various craft arts organizations and membership and stuff. Right now I'm an active member in SAQA, Studio Art Quilt Organization, or Studio Art Quilt Association, SAQA. And the woman that put together this master book on art quilts, she was the executive director of the organization. She still participates in it. And I've been a member of that group for about at least four to five years. And through them, I've participated in several exhibits by way of their bulletin board and/or exhibitions that were open to apply to.

And it was through this organization and their list of exhibitions that I applied to and got accepted for the Lincoln, Nebraska, show. And it was a very sort of elite sort of selection process because out of all the members, they were going to select four people only and they were going to give them a show each. And they were going to have — originally I think it was more than three quilts, but it ended up only three quilts. But out of everyone that applied, I was one of the four that got accepted. And that was almost about nine months before the show started, and then there was a process of paperwork and then sending other images so they could select what they wanted. And they selected the *Slave Ship*, Obama, *Young Obama*, and also they selected *Escaping the Slave Ship*. And they did those three. So it was through that organization.

And I — what is it, Fiber Arts? I was also a member of that for a time. I don't think I am anymore. I don't think I get their magazine. But I got sort of inspired to join that by way of Paul Smith, who used to be the executive director of the Arts and Crafts Museum. He was a member. And then again, like I said, he was an early mentor

and stuff. And he's still very active. I see — every so often I see his name pop up somewhere in an article. And so he had told me to join Fiber Arts years ago, and I did. I was active for a while but then I kind of lost interest in the magazine, so I didn't pursue that anymore.

And then other things have taken over in terms of my focus, in terms of trying to maintain an old house, and then the last few years at my job, and then at one point I had a back accident, three years ago, just prior to retiring. I lifted up something and it kind of sprained my spinal column. I kind of pulled it out of joint, and I had a really sharp pain. I could hardly walk. I had a cane. And then I had to get silicone shots in the spine, and then I tried to lift something up while it was healing, and then — [laughs] — I had to get them all over again.

And so — but different people at work that I knew, they said, "Michael, this is a sign that [... -MAC] you're supposed to be at home, you know, because I was out for almost two months." And they said, "This was just preparing you to get ready for retirement."

And then when retirement came along, our governor, Paterson, was leaving office. And generally when a governor comes in or leaves, he always has some sort of special package that he offers to employees so they could weed out some of the people that they don't want anymore or whatever. So he offered a package. And someone called me up from my job — "Michael, are you going to take the package?" I said "What package?" "The governor's offering a special package for people that retire." I mean, you had to be a certain age and have so many years already on the books. And I said, "I didn't know; I'll have to think about it." And then I knew I wanted to leave in about a year or two, but this was like, you had to leave — you had to leave by September the 30th, and this was about four months before September 30th. [Laughs.] So you had to make up your mind, submit your papers, and then your executive director had to decide whether or not that she wanted to release you.

So I kind of hesitated for a time, and then one of my co-workers who's an auditor there at the agency said, "Michael, what is your problem?" He said, "You know, let's add it up. You know, you make about the same as you are now if you retire, so what's the problem?" And I said, "Oh, I don't know." And then I was afraid to leave. [Laughs.] I was afraid to go outside, you know? And so when I was filling out the papers and writing my signature to say, this is what I wanted to do, I was practically shaking because I was saying, oh, my goodness, look at this; this is all I dreamed about, and here I am at this point hesitating. It was so unbelievable.

So after I did that, the executive director of the agency — she approved eight people. Eight people wanted to take the package because we had all started about the same time. We had all reached about the same age, and they were ready to walk. So the people that remained took a deep breath and were surprised because, wow, you know, so many people are leaving with so many — so much experience with them, and there was no one to fill that spot. And then there was also a freeze on hiring. So they couldn't even replace those people. People just had to kind of step up that were already there. So it was really unbelievable.

But I can't say I miss the place, and I've kind of blossomed more into thinking as an artist, and I've been able to really look for and participate in a lot of exhibits and to get my artwork out there more frequently now. And that's been a good thing, and I'm excited about that.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Two or three summary questions, and then any final thoughts you might have. When you look on your career, do you see it in terms of episodes, periods that are distinct, or do you see a thread of continuity that goes through the work? Maybe in your case, it's almost a cyclical — have you thought about it?

MR. CUMMINGS: I've — I guess I might have thought about it, but not really consciously. I've thought about where I started in L.A. and where I am now and how I got from L.A. to New York, and those were episodes, I would imagine, because the whole L.A. experience, I would have never thought that I was going to leave L.A. because at the time I did leave L.A., you know — that was leaving my job, selling my motorcycle, selling my car — I thought I was on top of the world. I was living on a dead-end street. There were palm trees out my window. I was on the top floor of a two-story sort of apartment building, and I had, like, the roof garden sort of thing. I had French doors. And it was a quiet street. And I was able — and you know, I was, like, all of 24, 25. So I was able to go out at night and party and still had the energy to get up, go to work in the daytime. [Laughs.] And I had this — I was living the life. And I was — I was — at that point I was a weekend artist. You know, I talked [ph] more than I did, and I did just a little bit.

So that was one episode. But then I got pulled to New York, and I got pulled to New York by these other friends that I knew. And so that episode went into a whole other lifestyle. It was a culture shock, and it was sort of like coming to a new world from where I was. And the stimulation for the first couple of years was tremendous because it was just so much to absorb, and at the same time, I hated the weather. [Laughs.] I didn't — I didn't know how to dress. I had my — only my California clothes. It was horrible.

But again, referring to all the resources that were available, all the history that I started to discover, that was a great transition from the limited to hardly any sort of history or historical, cultural sort of development that I had

from L.A., about African-Americans especially, and so I kind of focused on that. And then I started to cultivate and develop an extended family, and they were a lot of creative people, in not only just the arts but in other professional areas. And we all had the same type of energy and the same type of values, and so we kind of supported and helped each other. And that was a good thing, and that still exists now.

And then moving into the whole 30-year sort of segue of being with the state arts council, that provided, like I mentioned earlier, a foundation or stability in my life whereby I was able to do my artwork and also to do some promotion of it, because again, not having an agent, I had to be aggressive in that area. And I've always had business cards — [laughs] — even though I had nobody to give them to. And I also established myself as a little business. I had my — a business account and stuff like that. I was really trying to formalize and be as positive and businesslike as possible on that side, and then on one side being the artist, and then a third side being the 9-to-5er. So that 30-year period, I think, brought together a lot of elements and made me stronger, and I think that also comes with age to a certain degree. But I guess it's also your mental thoughts of how — what you want to do that causes the maturity. It's not just because of age. And so I was — really start to discipline and focus myself.

And so there are stages. And from the — that 30-year period, it — I produced a lot of quilts, and I was in a lot of shows —

MS. RIEDEL: How would the work itself — the two I'm thinking of — is just that — the transition of the work over 30 years —

MR. CUMMINGS: The transition of the work — it did —

MS. RIEDEL: — from the very — you know — [inaudible] — garden to —

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, yeah, the transition was, again, coming to New York, I still had the idea I wanted to be a painter, but then in the early '70s it was Bearden, and so it was the collage sort of construction, and then there was a little introduction to Joseph Cornell, and then I saw Louise Nevelson, just the building blocks and stuff like that. And then it was kind of interesting to see Alexander Calder's sort of mobiles floating around, and he had little found objects going around. And those kind of people — and then Picasso, his large paintings, and Matisse always kind of pulled me in with his color and all of that. So those things were kind of swirling around me. And then Robert Rauschenberg's found objects on the street — that was — [laughs] — sort of a big joke, but then — and then Andy Warhol was kind of zipping around the place. So all those things were kind of whirling — and then this guy Jean-Michel Basquiat —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right, right, right. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, now, his work was just really out the box. And people really psychologically talked — broke that down. You know, did he hate himself? Did he — well, what was going on? Was it drug-related?

But I must say we crossed paths one time in my life, when I was at the Children's Art Carnival in the '70s. He was a high school intern for a minute. I say a minute because he came for maybe no more than three or four weeks, and then he disappeared. Little did anybody know reading his history, he was probably slightly homeless at that time even. So that's why he didn't really come frequently or really stay there, and he was always sort of unkempt-looking. But it's just remarkable years later he turned into this international superstar.

And so — and then I guess looking at his work at the Whitney when they had that one-man show and it was all up in your face because of the large scale that it was — and I think it was on two floors, even — I think that made an impression that at this point as I'm talking, I think it made more of an impression than I thought because he did tons of writing on the surfaces of his paintings. And I was struck by that at the time, but I think that was another moment that was retained in my subconscious that allowed me the freedom to take that step, having seen it in a museum setting with someone that was famous. And not only did he have that, he had everything on the surface. He had paper collage with painting, the words. There might have been other things glued, stuck on there.

So now that I'm talking about it, I'm realizing that it had more of an impact on me than I really knew at the time. And I never really thought about it until now, even though I have his book and stuff like that. I look at it and I show people — did you know him, blah, blah, blah, but I never really connected where he was influencing me.

MS. RIEDEL: I love when that happens. [They laugh.] That's great.

MR. CUMMINGS: I never knew that. So that's an awakening moment. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, good. I could not be more pleased.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, different sections from L.A. to New York, and in the last 30 years, and the imagery has changed — larger, like I said, more figurative and more historical-related than I had worked in the past.

MS. RIEDEL: How has your work been received over time? Is it fairly consistent? Does it ebb and flow?

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, initially I had to — like that woman said in Senegal — not in Senegal, from Senegal, at the D.C. meeting, I had to fight to get into shows. And it wasn't really that sort of intense sort of a fight; I just had to apply, and people had to wake up that there was a male doing quilts, but it was quilts that they weren't accustomed to. And it was a slow progress — process in terms of moving along, but the recognition was continuous because I tried always to have a certain level of creativeness in terms of quality of work. I didn't ever try to present sloppy work, and if it was something I wasn't happy with, I didn't want to show.

But somebody said, well, do you ever make work that you don't like? [Laughs.] And I say, well, I have, and I didn't — I haven't finished them. You know, I have a couple of tops that I didn't go forward with because I didn't like the way they were going and I didn't like the proportions or I didn't like the fabric or something. But I could say that's only been three or four. But most of the times I go all the way through and I'm satisfied with the quilt that I do. And I move them out and gradually — and one of the venues — like I mentioned too, Carolyn Mazloomi's been a great venue because of all the different shows she's created that it allowed me to push in new work and have it go around the country. But also, there's been other outlets with the various group shows I've been in, some of the one-person shows I've been in and also several of the international shows.

But all along it's been a progression of increased interest, and that increased interest has brought about the interest — has produced more shows. And so it's all been on an increased sort of thing. I can't say — and then also more publications as well. I've been invited to participate in more publications, even though there's a lot of publications behind me that I've been in, and I have maybe about close to maybe 80 books that I'm in, maybe, and I have two shelves on my bookcase that are just exclusively magazines and books and publications that I'm in. And so a lot of — like I mentioned, there's money in the quilt world, and the vendors make a lot of money, as opposed the quilters making a lot of money. There's a lot of publishers that do quilt — art quilt books, and I've been in many of those. And so those are coffee table type things, if anybody has a coffee table. And then there's smaller ones that I've been invited to participate in. So the interest has been ongoing. And like I said, now there's this museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, that wants to buy a body of my work to put in their collection.

So I just feel at this point, this year especially, with the way things have been sent out to all these shows, that I have to get busy and start making some new artwork, because just like any other artist, it's like — the question is, like Janet Jackson says in one of her songs, what have you done for me lately? [They laugh.] And so what have I done lately for a new quilt? I mentioned I made this quilt about the astronaut, but that was small in comparison to other things. And as I was working on that and I was around that process, I was sending out quilts to Houston, Texas, to Utah, to outside of Seattle and different places. So I said, "Michael, you got to really make some new stuff because, you know, it was always known, and it is always known, that you can't keep showing the same stuff over and over again, and people want to see your latest stuff." So I have to make some new quilts. [Laughs.] I have to make some new quilts.

MS. RIEDEL: I just have one final question, a sort of a summary question. When you look back on these 30 years and all these quilts, what is the essence of them that appeals to you? What about — what about making the work really matters to you?

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay, now, repeat that again?

MS. RIEDEL: What is the essence of the quilt in particular that matters to you, and what is...

[End of disc.]

MS. RIEDEL: What is it that keeps you continuing to work? What is about — what is it about the work that's really important to you?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, the essence of the work — and I guess I'll go back to when I was little and I said I wanted to make art —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: — that I could identify with, and I wanted to make work — artwork for other people in my community that they could look at, from children to adults, and kind of identify with. So that has been somewhat my mission in terms of what I wanted to do, even though it — that came about only after — I guess I really got rooted in New York, and I saw the history and the culture, and I wanted to be a part of that, and I wanted to be not only a part but a continuation. So that was the focus on what I — what imagery I was doing.

Now why I was doing it — I ask that a lot of times when I'm on the sewing machine — [laughs] — and I've been on the sewing machine for hours with my personal trainer, ticking off the time, and I say, "Well, Michael, what" — sometimes I even think I'm crazy for doing it, because — I said, "How many people are sitting down doing a giant type quilt like this? You know, how many" — and then — and I can't think of anybody else — "and why are you doing it?"

And then I have to just relax and say it's a part of me. I wanted to be an artist; this is what it is translated into for me in my life. And if I don't do it, I'm not really totally alive, because creating and being an artist was part of my — or is my dream, and so I'm living a dream. And if I don't nurture and participate in the dream, it dies.

And then it's that "Dream Deferred" poem. What happens if a dream dies? Does it explode? Does it dry up like a raisin?

And so there have been some dry spells when I've heard — have writer's cramps or whatever — different people that can't — and I've gone through a little bit where it's been like six months or so I might have not done anything. And I get kind of shaky, and then I get kind of nervous, and then I feel like maybe I've lost something to something.

But then something triggers the whole flow of the creativity, and then I get some sort of visions of what I might want to do. There's some sort of inspiration or something that I look at that might trigger a thought to make a quilt, and then I move on.

I don't keep a sketchbook of a series of images I want to do, like some people do. It's all of this emotion. I'm full of emotion. So it's always an emotional connection that I move on to the next quilt with.

And so why do I do it? It's — I have to do it, and I have to do it regardless of what's around me, what I have or what I don't have in terms of in my environment. It's just part of me. It's like — it's like eating, you know. It's — I have to do my art.

So — some people like baseball — [laughs] — and other things, and some people like baseball, and they still make art, but — [laughs] — I kind of focus on my art and that's my life.

And so I do look at other people's work and I do — you know, we talked about publications, and I'm in books and stuff like that. But I don't really try to do a lot of shopping around to see what other people are doing, and I feel sometimes that might be a disadvantage. But at the same time I feel it may be positive as well because I'm not being influenced by looking at other people's work, even though my work does relate to or reflect influences by other artists. So — but I have to do it because it's just part of me and it's part of my dream, and without keeping the dream live, I'm not alive.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you very much.

MR. CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] You're welcome very much.

[End of disc.]