Interview with Frank E. Cummings III
Conducted by Jo Lauria
At the Artist's home in Long Beach, California
December 28, 2006, and January 5, 2007

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Frank E. Cummings III on December 28, 2006, and January 5, 2007. The interview took place at the artist's home in Long Beach, California, and was conducted by Jo Lauria 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.

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

Interview

JO LAURIA: December 28, 2006. Interview with Frank E. Cummings III, in Long Beach, California.

Frank, could you state your name for us?

FRANK E. CUMMINGS III: Frank E. Cummings III.

MS. LAURIA: And could you tell us when and where you were born and give us a little bit of your family history and background?

MR. CUMMINGS: I was born in Los Angeles, specifically in Watts, which is in the Compton/Willowbrook area. It is a predominantly African-American, or black, community. Shortly after that we moved to - more toward Central Los Angeles, where I went to public schools. Public school was difficult because at the age of two or three, I believe it was, I was diagnosed with asthma; I had a great deal of difficulty breathing. I couldn't get involved in physical activities, and I spent a lot of time at home just breathing. The result was that I missed a lot of school. So it took me longer to go through the elementary school system than it did with the normal students. By the time I graduated high school, I was probably two and a half, almost three years older than the rest of the students.

My father worked very hard in construction, and I watched him a lot. He loved fishing and hunting in his spare time, what little spare time he did have, but his hobby, his passion at that time was designing and building model airplanes. And I watched him a lot and actually got involved in building model airplanes myself. I think that was the beginning of where I am now, taking raw materials - sticks and glue and paper - and building them into something that actually functions.

My father was so good at it that in 1948 he became national champion [Academy of Model Aeronautics, a division of the National Aeronautic Association], and the first prize was a real airplane. He set numerous national records in many different categories. And following in his footsteps, in 1954 I was in a contest and established an endurance record in a junior category, which stands today.

MS. LAURIA: An endurance record for what?

MR. CUMMINGS: For a model airplane that I built that stayed up for a very long time, which is something like 24, 25 minutes. I don't remember the exact time. But along the same vein, I had the urge to fly. So I actually went through pilot training, and you know, did the solo and navigation - it directly connected with my father, because that's what he did. He didn't keep his airplane very long because it's very, very expensive and we simply couldn't afford it. So I believe he kept that airplane for, oh, three or four years.

MS. LAURIA: And how old were you, Frank, when you set the endurance record and when you learned to fly?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, I set the endurance record when I was about 14, and I learned to fly - oh, let's see, I was 30 - no, I was - I learned to fly around 1993. So I was 50-something or other. It was a long time. But the art aspects of what I do didn't come until much, much later than the endurance record.

MS. LAURIA: So you wouldn't say that you had a driving ambition, when you were a young boy, to be an artist, but that you had an inclination to work with your hands and to manipulate and to figure out complex constructions.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's right. But it came almost naturally. When I was very young, if I found an old clock in the trash can, I would take it apart and rebuild it, and made it do something different. I actually built a ham-operator transmitter from scratch, and it worked for a few months, and then I went on to something else. But the ability to pick up raw materials and decide to turn them into something else almost came naturally, but I never saw it as an art.

MS. LAURIA: Why did you then choose, later in your life, to specialize and become an artist who made very intriguing furniture forms and lathe-turned wooden vessels?

MR. CUMMINGS: I don't think I considered it a choice. I never sat down and said, I want to do this. It was more of a process of elimination, or a discovery. The way it actually started was that - well, in high school, which was a long, difficult process, there were 57 students in my graduating class, most of whom came from the Torrance/Palos Verdes area. And so when they graduated, they were all college bound, and I thought, well, I think that's what I want to do. It was like, everyone else is doing it, so therefore it must be the right thing to do. I didn't consciously say, I want to go to college, until after I saw what they were doing. But with the learning disabilities that I had, my grades were just the worst. And I got over my asthma in about junior high school and became involved in track and cross-country, and I ran everywhere. The air, it was wonderful.

MS. LAURIA: Just like Forrest Gump, the character in the movie played by Tom Hanks.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. When it came time for graduation, however, and I decided, well, I want to go to college, too, my track and cross-country coach said, well, here's some college applications. And I filled out several of them, and lo and behold, I was offered college scholarships to three different universities. The paperwork had to be approved by the high school counselors and administrators, and when the papers came back, they inadvertently came back to my house as opposed to going back to the school. And so I got a chance to not only see the results, but I got to see what the high school counselors had to say. My college opportunities kind of went down the drain because my high school counselor said that he felt I was not college material.

In retrospect, he was probably right, based on grades, but I was so hurt by that, because at that point I figured, if you're not college material, you should be allowed to go and then if you fail, you're done. So I was denied the opportunity to fail. But I really wanted to go, because that's where all the other students were going and my friends were all going. I decided that maybe the high school counselor was right, and so I'll go to community college where it's easier.

And I was there for three semesters, and it was very difficult. The thing to do at that time was to get involved in math and electronics. Now, my learning disability had to do more with reading. Numbers were not a real problem or difficult; sort of, complex ideas weren't difficult if I could first understand what we were talking about. So I majored in math and electronics the first semester, and I ran track. Track and field and cross-country was what kept my grades up, because the other grades were just really, really shaky.

Then we had a track meet with the big university, which was Long Beach State [California State University, Long Beach], and we promptly showed them what track and field was really all about. The university coach came and asked me if I would be interested in running track for Long Beach

State, and, of course, I was, because that was where all my friends went. So after three semesters I found myself at Long Beach State University, and that's when they really forced me into deciding, now, what are you going to do when you graduate? What is your major going to be? That, to me, was a difficult concept. How do you pick something like that and work through the process, and then four years later this is what you become?

And so, as a process of elimination, I already knew that math wasn't it. Electronics wasn't it. I wasn't that interested in any kind of future in track and field because it was very limited, and my track and field specialty was what I called an in-between race. I wasn't fast enough for the sprints, but I could do the long distances. But a mile was too far, and so it didn't work out. So going through the list of what I could and could not do, and walking around the campus, I walked through the art department, looked around, and thought, well, I can do that.

MS. LAURIA: Well, and you should explain, as you told me earlier, that you learned how to draw just by observation. So when you went to the art department and observed what they were doing there, you could immediately see that you had those skills.

MR. CUMMINGS: Those skills. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So when was it when you first realized you could draw well?

MR. CUMMINGS: Because of the asthma I spent so much time resting, and my parents, fortunately for me, could not afford coloring books and fancy art equipment. But they had lots of paper and pencils, and so I learned to draw by looking at other pictures. And I could emulate that, or I could look out the window and see things, and I could draw things - kind of look like what I was looking at. Drawing for me was more of entertainment and helped pass the time, because I spent a lot of time resting. And it was a skill that I had picked up but didn't really understand what I was going to do with it.

Walking through an art department, I could see people were drawing pictures. I said, I can do that, and I became an art major. That was on the list. This was a major. This is the one I understand; this is the one I can do, so I became an art major. Had no idea what I was going to do with it. My goal was simply to become a college graduate. That I understood. People that my parents knew, who were college graduates, had the nice things, the cars, the good jobs, the vacations. My parents, not having any of those, they really struggled. So if I get this college education, then I'll be able to do these things.

I have transcripts now of that entire period, which I later used as a counseling tool, and it shows on my transcripts that I started at Harbor City Community College, after three semesters went on to Long Beach State, and 10 years later, without missing a semester, it shows graduation.

MS. LAURIA: And why did it take 10 years to go through a four-year program?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I had to repeat a lot of courses, because Ds and Fs don't count and I had lots of those.

MS. LAURIA: In non-art-related courses?

MR. CUMMINGS: In non-art-related courses. In art-related courses, the only ones that I had difficulty with was art history. But the rest of them - and those were the kind of grades from the art courses - drawing, painting, design, color - all those other courses I was able to do really good. You know, fairly good grades; enough to offset the other grades.

MS. LAURIA: And that is, I guess, primarily because art is doing and creating with your hands, and it's conceptual, working from mind to hand coordination, and the other courses are reliant predominantly on reading skills -

MR. CUMMINGS: Reading skills.

MS. LAURIA: - which for you was a difficulty just to begin with.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's called dyslexia. And I've since then talked to a lot of people about that. And I describe it as more of a spherical kind of thinking process as opposed to a linear. The university is set up on a linear process. Mine is more spherical, so it is very difficult for me to do that. I can understand a concept almost immediately, because I could see the big picture. But then I have to work through all the ins and outs to get to how it's done, and there is never a straight line - some over this side, some over here; they're just all over the place. But after a while, I could pull them together very quickly.

It's very difficult to describe how one feels when one is trying to do that, but I developed skills on how to get through the courses. But it took me a long time to develop those skills. For example, I learned that when a professor asks you a question, the answer to the question implied in the question, and words in a book were shapes and certain lengths. The Ps were at the bottoms and the Ds were at the top, and I could spot those shapes very quickly. So when I was skimming for an answer to the question, I didn't read the book. I could go through the book very quickly and I'm looking for the right shapes. When I found those shapes, the answer was usually within that block. And I learned to do that very quickly, but it was a long time before I could do that. So I didn't have to read the whole book, just find the book that had the information that you need to get through the test, and eventually that's how I did that.

MS. LAURIA: Well, do you think the art education at Long Beach State College - then it was Long Beach State College, but now it is California State University, Long Beach -

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, California State University, Long Beach.

MS. LAURIA: Thank you. Do you think it was a quality education that inspired you to continue in the direction of being an artist?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, absolutely, but I didn't know it at the time. Little things happened, and most of the information, most of the knowledge, and most of the inspiration didn't happen in the classroom, but someplace around the classroom on the campus these little magical things happened. I remember talking to one of my teachers after class. In fact, this is a teacher who inspired me and became extremely important in my career.

His name was Raymond Hein. He taught basic design at Long Beach State. He taught basic design, but he was also a jeweler. And after the design class was over - he had turned a closet into his little studio, and he would go into this studio and work, and he would leave the door open. After class I would walk by that door and I would look in, and he would say, well, come on in, and I would ask him questions. He was the most interesting man. He got me excited about things. I loved the way he dressed. I loved the things he talked about and the way he would be up in front of class and he would talk about these things so effortlessly. I just admired him a lot.

MS. LAURIA: Would you say in retrospect that he was a mentor?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, absolutely. That was before the word was popularized. He was my mentor. He inspired me to hang in there, despite all of the difficulties. So after the 10 years, and I graduated, graduation was an extremely disappointing event.

MS. LAURIA: Anticlimatic?

MR. CUMMINGS: Anticlimatic, because I had been working every day, hour after hour for 10 years to reach a goal, and all of the sudden you reach the goal, but the drive to continue was still there. I didn't feel any smarter. I thought, as a college graduate, I would feel different.

I remember looking at the diploma, which is fairly small, and I can remember when I was in elementary school, I got a health certificate that had gold and green on it - it was bigger and more impressive than this piece of paper that took 10 years to get, and I really didn't - I didn't understand. Because I graduated on a Friday, and the following the Monday I was antsy; I was ready to go back to school, but it was over.

MS. LAURIA: During the phase of being in school and taking different courses within your curriculum, did they ever suggest to you to have a professional practices class or any kind of class that would teach you the skills of being a business person or an artist to give you some direction post-graduation?

MR. CUMMINGS: No, there were no such classes in that period. In fact, later on, I started developing those kind of courses and taught them, but they were at the graduate level. So there were no such courses, and by the time I had graduated, going back, I had been doing several different kinds of things to make a living, which was very important because I had a wife and two children. I was actually working as a social worker for Neighborhood Youth Association [NYA], which is an organization that is funded by United Way. And it came through what they used to call in those days the Poverty Program-that's another story.

But I got this job, and because I didn't have an M.F.A., which is master's degree in social work-not M.F.A., but -

MS. LAURIA: M.F.S.?

MR. CUMMINGS: - M.S.W., I wasn't allowed to take on the more difficult jobs working with teenagers. So I was assigned almost what I call a babysitting job, to babysit the younger siblings of these older kids, while the professionals were out working with the teenagers. Well, within a very short time, I was able to show that the younger siblings demonstrated the same problems as the older kids, getting in the same kind of trouble, but because they were younger, they would get a swat on the behind and be sent home as opposed to being sent to jail.

And I was able to bring about larger changes in their behavior and in their attitude and do it in a shorter period of time than the social workers were able to do with the older kids. The organization slowly changed from a correctional program to a prevention program. And once I got my degree from Long Beach, they suggested I go on to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] School of Social Work and get my M.S.W. degree, and the program directors and the people in the agency had all of the right connections - would make it very easy to get into the social work program.

The job at NYA paid very little. So at the same time, I was also working for Sears and Roebuck. And they had learned that I had got my degree; they wanted me to go into their management program.

MS. LAURIA: So you were working retail as a sales associate, and then they viewed you over a course of time and said, Frank, we want you to go into our management training.

MR. CUMMINGS: It started off that way. I got a sales position, part-time, and they have you take a test. After I got the job, I quickly found out the highest paying job at this store that I could get into would be security, and I watched security people, and eventually I was the security agent for Sears.

Then when I graduated, they asked me to come in and take the test again. So I took the test, and they said, never before have seen such a difference in the test. This one, in the first test, you're this kind of person: you're quiet, docile; but on this one, you're this other kind of person: outgoing, dynamic. And they couldn't understand what-how could this happen?

So I said, when I took the first test I needed that job really bad. Now, I have got my degree. I don't need or want this job. This is probably closer to who I am. And they wanted me to go on into the management training program, and I knew I didn't want to do that. I knew that I didn't want to be a social worker, because after about seven years of working with the troubled youth, the social worker needs a social worker. It's a very demanding kind of position, and a number of things happened that told me right off the bat that "you don't need to be doing this kind of a job."

It was then that I got the call from a Tom Ferreira, who at that time was the chairman of the art department at Long Beach State. I knew him. I had been underfoot for years.

MS. LAURIA: And he also was a ceramic artist, wasn't he?

MR. CUMMINGS: Ceramic artist, yes.

This was in 1968 or so. Socially, it was the time after the Watts Riots [1965] had taken place. Fires and riots were in most of the major cities, in Boston and Chicago, those sort of places. And the black community was up in arms. A lot of the campuses were experiencing all kinds of difficulty. So Long Beach State decided that what they wanted to do was to try to address some of those issues so that those sort of problems would not exist on their campus. So they came up with what they called the Black Faculty -

MS. LAURIA: Advisory?

MR. CUMMINGS: Teaching program. One of the demands was that the African-American students felt that there was no one on their campus that they could relate to - very few black faculty. So they hired that semester, I think it was about 13 black faculty, who were not necessarily qualified to teach but were "qualifiable," which meant you had to have your bachelor's degree, you had to be accepted into an M.A., M.F.A., Ph.D. program, and that would be half of your responsibility; the other half would be teaching, and for that you got the equivalent of the instructor's salary.

MS. LAURIA: In what years are we talking about?

MR. CUMMINGS: We are talking about 1968, '69, and '70.

MS. LAURIA: So you were approached -

MR. CUMMINGS: I was approached by Tom Ferreira from the art department chair. And it was a wonderful thing, because I thought, well, I have been involved in the university for 10 years, and I kind of knew what the art department was about.

MS. LAURIA: Meaning, going to college.

MR. CUMMINGS: Going to college, but going on to get a graduate degree, I thought, oh, my God, it took me 10 years to get a B.A. I'll never make it. It just simply isn't going to happen. But this was a wonderful opportunity. If I could get into graduate school, this could be the opening of a brand new door that I have never thought about. I never planned to do that. I never planned or thought of becoming a university professor; I never thought of becoming a professional artist. It was like these doors open, it was my door, and I just sort of walk through it.

MS. LAURIA: Did Tom Ferreira know you personally? Had he seen your work?

MR. CUMMINGS: I was underfoot for 10 years, so he knew me well. Now, as it turned out, I was the only African-American art student at the time.

MS. LAURIA: And did you excel in any one of those courses in competition, or did you have any student exhibitions with notoriety?

MR. CUMMINGS: No student exhibitions. I never felt my work was good enough. Plus, the work was in supervised situations with an instructor, therefore, it wouldn't qualify for the major exhibitions, but I just never even thought about it. My goal was to get a good grade and move on - get a good grade and move on. I never really thought much about what was happening to the work I was creating or where it was going to go. That just wasn't part of it. All I wanted to do was graduate. It never occurred to me what there was after getting the degree.

MS. LAURIA: So as these doors are opening for you back in the '70s, I think it's very telling that you yourself then go into academia to become a professor who then structures programs. I mean, having lived them -

MR. CUMMINGS: It is.

MS. LAURIA: - experientially.

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly. It was actually amazing how it all came about, because I couldn't have planned that, couldn't have planned that because by looking at transcripts and history as a student,

you would not think that I could be able to do those sorts of things. It just simply wasn't in the cards, so to speak. And by that time, the design instructor, Ray Hein, had moved on with several other faculty to Cal State Fullerton [California State University, Fullerton] to start a band-new program. So I thought, well, if I could get into the graduate program at Cal State Fullerton, which geographically was not too far in terms of driving, this would be a great thing.

Ray Hein was there, who knew me, and could maybe give me some pointers and some direction. So I called up Mr. Hein and told him about the program and what I needed to do, but he said, well, you need to submit a portfolio to the grad committee, and there is a whole process. I said, well, I don't even know what a portfolio is. He said, get some of your work and take some pictures and bring them in. I said, well, can I bring it in or have you take a look at it. He said, sure, no problem.

So I put together some photos, mostly Polaroid pictures, and I tried to mount them and get them in some kind of order. My goal was to take them to him, let him look at them, then he could tell me what I needed to do with this to make the portfolio.

Get to Fullerton. First time I had ever been on the campus, and it's portfolio review day. I was devastated, because I walked into the room expecting to meet with Mr. Hein. And this gorgeous stuff that was being presented by potential graduate students - and these were kids who probably began focusing on art as freshmen and sophomores and had concentrated, and so their portfolio - outstanding stuff, and here I've got this little folder with Polaroid photos.

So I gave it to Mr. Hein and we talked about it a little bit and he came to me later and said, well Frank, with this portfolio, we cannot let you into a graduate program, but we can let you into the program as an unclassified graduate, which -

MS. LAURIA: He couldn't let you into the art program.

MR. CUMMINGS: The art program was classified standing - but we can let you in as unclassified, which means you can take the next semester and build a portfolio, resubmit a year later, and we'll take a look at it. That was enough to satisfy the Long Beach State requirements. Even though I was unclassified, I'm still technically in a grad school, and so I found myself going to grad school for the first time and teaching a college class for the first time all in the same week.

MS. LAURIA: And were you teaching a class in the art department?

MR. CUMMINGS: I was teaching class. I had two classes in the art department. One was a beginning crafts class, and one was a basic design class. These are classes that I had taken earlier, much earlier, so I kind of had an idea of what they were about, but I was one day ahead of my students in terms of understanding what was going on.

My first courses in graduate school were independent studies, and what I wanted to do is - I had no examples for my students. I couldn't show them what I wanted them to do, so in my beginning crafts course I wanted to show them how, for example, to sharpen tools. So on that day I was sharpening tools as a demonstration, but I was actually sharpening them for myself, because I was going to use them that evening at Cal State Fullerton on my own work. And in basic carving, I would start a piece and then take it to Long Beach and show my students how you start a piece.

And after a few weeks, I was a day or two ahead, and so I would always have to start a piece and stop it, so I could take that demonstration into class and show them what I was going to do, and that's pretty much how I did it. One day ahead, and it was like skating on thin ice. Petrified.

MS. LAURIA: Besides carving, which I'm assuming you're talking about wood carvings -

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - what other kind of craft skills did you teach the college students?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, at the same time I also took a another independent studies course, but I decided I wanted to work more with nonferrous metals - brass, copper, silver, so forth - making sure

that the fabrication skills - get them up to speed and learning more about it, so that when I went to class and I was teaching the students how to do this, I had the order all right because I had just gone through it with my own work.

So the first of the semester was a woodworking - a course that primarily focused on hand tools. Although I was fairly skilled with machines, my students would not be allowed to use the machines, and so I didn't really bother with them. And then the nonferrous metals - I would teach them basic soldering, how to use the drill and saw, and all of the hand processes that one would use to make jewelry or small containers. And that's pretty much how it started.

I remember that I decided for myself, in my own coursework, I wanted to do six wooden objects. Each one would be focusing on a different aspect, so I started with container forms. The first one was an open dish sort of form. The second one was more of closed, bowllike form, and down the road, until one was completely closed and you had to get all the material out from a small hole. A happy accident occurred. I was working on this small container and I dropped it. I was sitting at the desk, I dropped it, and it hit the floor - it was at a time when I wanted the containers to be off of the surface because visually the surface the form was sitting on interfered with the visual aspects of the form itself.

MS. LAURIA: To be lifted, you mean?

MR. CUMMINGS: Could be lifted. The glass on this table is visually connected. So to create the separation, I wanted to lift it so that I could visually separate it and not have to go through the brain function to separate it. And it was that piece that I had dropped and it bounced. I caught it and it didn't break. In fact, I discovered how strong it was and I thought, I could put a lot of weight on this thing. And I thought, if I made this thing a little bit bigger, I could actually sit on it, and that became my first piece of furniture. So all of that happened in my first semester as a graduate student.

At the end of the semester, my portfolio had all six pieces that I had done in that independent study in wood plus one piece of furniture and 10 or 12 pieces in metal. I wanted things that were articulated, things that could move, combining other materials.

MS. LAURIA: All six pieces in wood? It was wood?

MR. CUMMINGS: All six pieces were in wood.

MS. LAURIA: In the container class that you were teaching?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: But in the metal fabrication class there were boxes and pieces of jewelry, all kinds of objects. When I presented the work at the end of that semester to be graded, Ray Hein looked at it and said, you're ready for the graduate program. In fact, we'll accept all of these pieces, and the course work, as your first semester as a classified graduate student. And with a swipe of a pen, I went from unclassified graduate to classified in one semester, and the courses and the units counted.

After that it went so fast I can't remember most of it. But the most interesting thing was my grades, including art history. Except for one B in art history class, I had a 4.0 grade point average. It didn't seem hard to me at all. Maybe it was because I was focused. I'm sure that was part of it. But the other part, I think, was there was a use for it. I was able to take this information and use it with my students. In the classes I was getting a different kind of feedback from my instructors.

Because I was in this special program, the six units of the program I was taking at Fullerton and the six units of the program for teaching the classes at Long Beach was the equivalent of 12 units - was a full load that I was responsible for. I didn't have to do things that other professors had to do because I wasn't there yet. I didn't have to serve on committees; I didn't have to do any research; and this publish or perish thing, don't have to do that either.

Now, by that time, I was wise enough to figure out "wait a minute." This can't last; this can't be. So from the very first day I began doing everything else that the other professors were doing. And I was kind of fortunate because I had an office partner who was hired at the same time I was, so we started at the same level. He was a rank higher than I was, and he came into through the traditional way. He had his graduate degree, the portfolio, and teaching experience.

MS. LAURIA: This at Cal State Fullerton.

MR. CUMMINGS: At Cal State - no, this is at - we're still at Cal State Long Beach.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, Long Beach, right. But your graduate program was at Cal State Fullerton.

MR. CUMMINGS: At Cal State Fullerton.

MS. LAURIA: But your teaching part was at Cal State Long Beach.

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly. I started doing all the things that everyone else was doing. Got on the committees, started trying to get the work out, tried to do all the other things that everyone else was doing. And sure enough, before the end of that semester, I was told that some changes had been made in the black faculty program and I had to be reviewed like all the other professors.

MS. LAURIA: That's your first year?

MR. CUMMINGS: First year.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, because you said by the end of the program. The first semester?

MR. CUMMINGS: By the end - well -

MS. LAURIA: By the end of first year.

MR. CUMMINGS: The year has two semesters.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. Before the end of that first semester.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, even before the end of the first semester.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

MS. LAURIA: So we were talking about five or six months?

MR. CUMMINGS: Easily. Maybe less. And so I pulled that portfolio together and I made a presentation, and it shocked them, because if I hadn't done all these other things, I would not have been prepared. So I had done the committee work, the research work. By that time, I had gotten in to my first shows. I didn't get into my first exhibitions until I was in graduate school, and the first one was a student exhibition at Cal State Fullerton. So I passed that review. Flying colors.

MS. LAURIA: And what did you submit for your exhibition material?

MR. CUMMINGS: By the time that - I think the first three of the wooden objects that I had created that semester, I immediately pushed them out into exhibitions, primarily to see -

MS. LAURIA: Do you still have those, Frank? Or are they published anywhere?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Yes. Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: They are published. Now, the publishing thing is interesting. I immediately figured out that the faculty that had to do the review work didn't understand the exhibitions that much. Well, if you put a wooden vessel in an exhibition and it was just sitting there, what does that mean? I realized that it doesn't mean anything unless it's published or it's in writing or it's been reviewed, because when that piece of paper went before that committee and they read it - oh, that's what that means.

MS. LAURIA: So, it's how to quantify it?

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly. So from the very beginning, every piece that I made was designed to get into an exhibition and/or a publication. It was designed to do that. Now I have been doing it for a long time. Well, for example, newspapers who print photographs of images have a format; a very specific format. If your piece does not fit into that format, you have no chance of getting it published. However, if it fits in their format and has the right cropping and the right kind of background, it increases your chance, not only of the piece getting into the show, but that it's going to get published.

MS. LAURIA: That's previous to computers and Photoshop?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, long before that. I'm from the old cut-and-paste, rubber cement period. So I would look at opportunities for exhibitions, and I would find one that is close to what I'm doing, and then I would find out other things. It helps to know who else is in the show. It helps to know who is jurying that show.

MS. LAURIA: So you had all of these strategies.

MR. CUMMINGS: Strategies. These are strategies that developed over a period of time, because my goal was to get a piece into this show so that that committee would approve it and I would keep my job. It was the most wonderful job in the world.

MS. LAURIA: And during this time, you're raising your two children.

MR. CUMMINGS: Raising the two children, which became a little easier once I started teaching. It was heaven.

MS. LAURIA: And did you work?

MR. CUMMINGS: It was very difficult because I was going to school at the same time. But -

MS. LAURIA: Did you work at Long Beach to do your own work or did you work at Fullerton to do your work?

MR. CUMMINGS: A little of both. I found that some of the work I could do at Fullerton during my class period, but with other works I could come to Long Beach University at night. I had the keys to the shop and I would come when students - well, not too many students were around, and I could get a lot of work done. So between the two, I got most of it done at Long Beach in the evenings.

MS. LAURIA: You didn't have a separate studio -

MR. CUMMINGS: No.

MS. LAURIA: - at that time?

MR. CUMMINGS: No studio. I did some work at home, but I didn't have a facility at home. The garage was cold and damp, and I didn't have a lot of tools. But we had a wonderful stockroom that had the tools, so I could always check out the tools that I needed. And as the teacher, I could set a certain tool aside that I had already sharpened, because I don't want anybody messing with those tools. But I had to leave them there and so it made it all a lot easier. But I immediately began to get pieces into exhibitions and get good photographs. I have some of those old copies of the magazines.

For example, getting a piece into the *Long Beach Press Telegram* was a good thing, but getting one into the *L.A. Times* Home Section was better. It could be the same pieces, the same show, but the response of the committee to an *L.A. Show Home* magazine was much greater than one at the *Long Beach Press Telegram*. So I began to look for the kinds of media that would have the greatest effect on the committee, so that I could make those hurdles.

As a result, I never missed a hurdle. Every time I came up for promotion or tenure, I made every one of those hurdles without - it was easy, because it was like part of what I needed to do; I didn't feel I was doing anything extra. But the other thing was, I felt I needed to that because I always felt

that the students - you know, am I doing the right thing for my students? Am I teaching them the right way, because there was no way of finding that out until after the fact. So if I could make a piece and get it into [an] exhibition, then there was a good chance that I could teach my students how to do it, too.

MS. LAURIA: And could you talk a little bit about your involvement with the California Design show at the time, which - I believe you were in California Design number 11 ["California Design XI." Pasadena Museum of Art. Pasadena, CA].

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. That was huge. My first exhibition was in a student show at Fullerton. The director of the gallery was Dexter Frankel. Dexter Frankel had an appointment with Eudorah Moore to discuss something. I don't know what it was. But when Eudorah got on campus, Dexter wasn't in her office, so Eudorah strolled around a little bit and walked in the gallery, and she saw my work.

MS. LAURIA: And Eudorah M. Moore, at that time, was the director of the California Design exhibitions, which were held at the -

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

- Pasadena Art Museum. The former -

MR. CUMMINGS: That's right.

MS. LAURIA: - Pasadena Art Museum, which is now the Norton Simon Museum -

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: - of Art. And Eudorah took over the California Design program in 1968.

MR. CUMMINGS: Sixty-eight. Now, I didn't know anything about those exhibitions, because I wasn't ready for those. I mean, this was my first student exhibition. I thought that was a big deal. But in order to be involved in that exhibition, you had to submit your work and it had to be juried in. Eudorah Moore walked in the gallery and she saw the chair - that chair right there - and some other pieces, and I was invited to "Design XI."

It was incredible. I was dumbfounded. I walked in there and I set the work up and I saw all the other pieces then. To be in such an exhibition with these wonderful, wonderful works and names of people who I'd begun to learn about were in there, and there my work was, too.

MS. LAURIA: Such as?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well -

MS. LAURIA: Sam Maloof.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, Sam Maloof - Kodak was represented, Samsonite was represented, Wendell Castle - these were names I had begun to learn about, and these were the biggies. Ray Hein was in the exhibition, along with Tom Ferreira, and I go, whoa. I'm in with these guys. The exhibition went to a catalogue and a small number of the piece - not every piece got into the catalogue, and a small number of those were in color. So the name of the game was if you could get into that catalogue, then you're, sort of, part of that registry, because that catalogue became a who's who of top designers in California for the next three years.

So if your name was in that catalogue, that was big. If, on top of that, it had a photograph of the work so people could actually see your work, that was even bigger. But if you got a color picture in there, that was huge. I end up with a color photograph of that chair in that very prestigious catalogue.

MS. LAURIA: Do you remember - recall - the title of the chair, Frank, and the year you made it? We could look it up.

MR. CUMMINGS: It was simply *Hand-Carved Chair, Oak*.

MS. LAURIA: In the *California Design* book [*California Design Eleven*. Pasadena, CA: Pasadena Art Museum, 1971].

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. I don't think I was - it didn't have a title. I remember that, but I can look up the year. That was the beginning, because as exhibitions go, you can enter an exhibition that is a juried show, and there may be 500 people entering that show, and they jury it, and if you're lucky, you get selected.

After that, there are invitational shows, and as the number of participants in that invitational show get smaller and smaller, the show becomes more prestigious, up to perhaps someday a one-person show. Well, almost immediately I started being invited to exhibitions. Boy, this was huge. They actually want - they called me. I don't have to submit the slides and all that sort of stuff.

MS. LAURIA: And were you categorized at that particular time and space as a furniture maker, or were -

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Somebody who works in wood?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. I guess the big category was wood, and so as long as there were wood objects in an exhibition, I was often invited. They didn't really see me as a furniture maker for quite some time, because there was only that one chair. But later on, I began having invitations to furniture exhibitions. But it was wonderful.

Now, about the same year, a book was being done, and a letter came to the university asking for submissions to this book.

MS. LAURIA: You were talking about 1974?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. We're talking 1974 or '75, and that was Dona Meilach's book [*Creating Modern Furniture: Trends, Techniques, Appreciation*. New York: Crown, 1975]. And I saw that, and I immediately put together images of my own work, but in addition to that, I went to my classes and said, okay kids, here's what we're going to do. Here's what they're looking for; here's the format. I want photographs. Get them in here now. And so we talked about how to get them photographed. Do you take them; do you send them out? So that was part of the learning process.

So when Eudorah Moore's book came out, my pieces were loaded, but also, my students' work was in that book. Now, this was the first book. When I took that book to that committee - here it is -

MS. LAURIA: Are we talking about *California Design*, or are we talking about Dona's book?

MR. CUMMINGS: We're talking about Dona's book.

MS. LAURIA: So when you said, when Eudorah Moore's book came out.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: When the *California Design* book came out.

MR. CUMMINGS: That was important. That worked.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: But it was, like, one small image in this huge library of work. With Dona Meilach, it was different, because many of the photographs she had that talked about tools and machine shops were taken in the studio. I submitted them. They were Long Beach State studio, Long Beach State shops. The hands of people demonstrating were people from Long Beach State. So Long Beach State was just strewn throughout there, and when it shows that not only is Professor Cummings in this book, but his students are also in the book, that gave huge credibility, not only to my own work, but to my students' work.

MS. LAURIA: That would be Dona's book called, *Creating Modern Furniture: Trends, Technique,*

Appreciation [New York: Crown Publishers, 1975] -

MR. CUMMINGS: That's it. So my credibility as an artist and an art teacher skyrocketed. And that was the goal, because at that time the name of the game was to do good as a teacher, as a professor, because that's what they hired me for. This is what I love to do. The work was almost a by - product of that process.

Tenure came in 1975, which was a five-year period instead of seven, so I did it much quicker. And by that time, I had been promoted to an associate professor, which was huge. The thing is, I didn't miss any of those steps.

Once you reach tenure, all of those things that you did to reach tenure, you don't have to do that any more. You don't have to publish anymore; you don't have to be in anymore shows; and for most university art professors, a great deal of that energy stops. There's no reason or pressure to do it anymore. But for me, it was like, well - well, wait a minute. I kept on doing it. I wanted to continue to get better in every respect.

MS. LAURIA: Did you have the same sensation that you had when you graduated from undergraduate, which was that Monday came and you wanted to continue on and you wanted -

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - to keep going?

MR. CUMMINGS: The idea of - well, just having a letter come in and they're asking you to be in a show was such a huge honor that I didn't want to disappoint myself or anyone else, so I wanted to continue that. And then, there were other exhibitions that I saw that that might be interesting, that perhaps other people were in, or other media. Well, let's try that, too, see what happens.

MS. LAURIA: So when someone would ask you, Frank, at this point in your life, 1975, just in casual conversation - what do you do for a living? Would you describe yourself to them or to colleagues or to friends as, I am first -

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - an educator, a professor, and secondly, an artist, or did you flip it? Were you first an artist?

MR. CUMMINGS: It depended on the group.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. And did you specify what kind of an artist-

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - specifically? Could you sort of go through that?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. If it were a group of the academics, then I'm a professor first. I'm a teacher first. And then what do you do? Well, I'm an artist. And the artist was a category that I selected. One of the things that I learned very quickly was that if you were a woodworker, then I looked at that show and what was in it and who was in it. Woodworkers was a very small category.

MS. LAURIA: Would you say that's true today as well?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. That hasn't changed. It's still very small.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: That hasn't changed. As a matter fact, it may even be smaller and tighter now than it was then.

MS. LAURIA: Only because a very specific type of work and type of object is expected from a woodworker.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. But then woodworkers have different categories. You can be a furniture

maker in that category. You could be a lathe turner, very specific. You could do - gosh, I could sit here and give you a whole list of them - marquetry, a very specific category within woodworking.

MS. LAURIA: Right. But it's all related to process.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's all related to process, exactly. And that was one of the reasons that I felt uncomfortable, because, for me, process was important. You have to learn how to manipulate the materials, make them do what you want them to do, so it's really important. But why you're doing it seems to be more important than how you do it. The how part is easy. That's what the books are all written about. You can go to a library and look up any subject, and there're just piles and piles of books and literature on how to do it - how to sharpen this tool; how to use this tool; when do you switch over to a different tool; what grits of paper? That, for me, was the easy part. And so I didn't want to get caught up in that process, because it didn't seem to be particularly difficult. So even today, I do not consider myself a lathe turner. It's another machine; I know how to use it, and I use it a lot.

But it's not the process that I'm interested in. Process is something I have to go through in order to get to the good stuff. And the good stuff is always about some kind of personal expression, so in those discussions when somebody asks me - it was very clear to me from the beginning that I was an artist. I am a visual communicator, and we've changed the jargon a little bit, but that's basically what I do. And I use the wood as the media, the tools as a process, to communicate a specific kind of information.

[Audio break.]

MS. LAURIA: We ended beginning a very interesting part of the conversation about why one creates art at all.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And for you, it's not about learning the processes or the techniques of creating an object; it's more about conceptualizing, visualizing, communicating, and problem solving. So can you tell us a little bit about the way in which you approach the idea of creation and creating an object?

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay. The processes have to be learned. When I say process, the technology - let's put it that way - the technology has to be learned as a result of the process. If I discover, for example, that I'm doing a piece that needs strength in a particular area, and with my experiences with wood, I know that wood will not do that, that it takes steel, then it is my responsibility to learn about the steel and how to bring into this piece so that the strength that I need is there.

Almost immediately, my work became more of a mixed media. At least people saw it as mixed media, because I don't remember ever doing a piece, in the beginning, that was just all wood. I became fascinated by how things feel, and so I was able to communicate. Communication came to me easier by touching and feeling things. Smooth versus rough; soft versus hard.

MS. LAURIA: So you want to communicate through tactile experiences.

MR. CUMMINGS: Tactile experiences, yes. In the crafts, the big picture, those utilitarian-type objects, and people were able to hold them and touch them. I became quite efficient in ceramics. But to be able to create a vessel that you can actually put your milk in the morning and pour it onto cereal in a bowl that you made was really, really wonderful.

To be able to comb your hair with a comb that you created, that was specifically designed to maybe raise your awareness about your hair, was just wonderful. So my materials came as a result of the need to communicate the essence of these different kinds of feelings.

MS. LAURIA: Did you see a separation, or a divide, as being an artist who makes their own work or a designer who designs and has someone else make the work, or do you feel there is a division between an artist and a designer of the unique piece -

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - and one which is designed for mass production?

MR. CUMMINGS: I can separate them and talk about them individually as a result of going through it and becoming the educator. But when I was going through it, it was all one sort of thing. You have - design. For me, the word "design" simply means to organize. Do I put it here, or do I put it over here? Do I turn it this way? That's what designing, to me, is, simply organizing the imagery or the materials so that it does a certain thing.

MS. LAURIA: So that it functions.

MR. CUMMINGS: So that it functions. Now, its function may be to sit on it. So if I'm going to make a chair - now it has a category - a chair has certain requirements. Depending on what kind of chair it is, it has to be [a] certain height with certain angles, with certain stresses in it. So I have to know what it is about making chairs; so am I a chair maker? I can make chairs. I have studied those angles. I have studied the technology of putting wood together in a certain way that it actually can take a lot of stress or a lot of weight.

I've learned to finish materials so that if you're sitting on it and you touch it, it feels right. So I know how to do those things. But it's the same for other kinds of functions. For a while, I did a large number of mirrors, hand mirrors and wall mirrors. One of the things that I discovered is that when - if you want to engage another person to take an interest in your work, if they see their own reflection in it, you got them. That quick. And so having reflective qualities so that a person can see their images and become involved in the work was part of the process.

MS. LAURIA: It's also about framing, because you're framing their environment.

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly. Yes, because a wall mirror is simply a frame, and everything in it is the environment that happens to walk through it. That was one of the reasons, after doing that awhile, I felt, well, I'm giving up most of the space here. And so I remember the first one I did was I started to draw on the glass. At first it was an extension of the frame, but the drawing became more and more involved. The next thing I knew, the reflection was gone. It was the image on the glass that became more important.

MS. LAURIA: And when you say "draw on the glass," were you using sandblasting or etching or -

MR. CUMMINGS: I was using [a] diamond stylus, which basically scratches the glass. And by using a drawing technique called crosshatching. But you can do the same technique on glass, except you have to do it in reverse. But the image that I wanted to engage you in a certain way - but there was a specific image that I wanted you to see in there, and so the next thing I know, I'm doing self-portraits and portraits of other people on the glass itself. But because there was that shiny quality, it drew them in, and then at a certain distance, they can then see other images. And I won't say it was a trick to draw them in, but it was just part of the process.

MS. LAURIA: So you were interested in seducing the viewer either through tactility or through this reflective character of the material, to get them to look at your work and then maybe see a deeper or perhaps another layer. So you're interested in communicating through layers?

MR. CUMMINGS: It's all about the viewer and causing the viewer to respond in a particular way. At first it was so that I could just get them to respond. That was wonderful, but no, what if they look at it and their response is, I don't like that? That's an inappropriate response, from my point of view. It has to be a positive response. So how and what do you do in order to get the viewer to respond in a positive way? Sometimes the viewer was one person. In fact, in many cases, my work, the piece, was intended to evoke a response from a particular individual. A lot of it was C.C.

MS. LAURIA: C.C. being your wife.

MR. CUMMINGS: C.C.'s my wife. Most of my work recently has been about her. I remember a time when I needed a specific response from Sam Maloof.

MS. LAURIA: Or from a juror.

MR. CUMMINGS: Or from a juror, or from a small group of people. And if it's from a small group of people, I pretty much know who that group is. I did a piece that was designed specifically for my colleagues and peers at Long Beach State. I needed to tell them something, but I needed to tell them through the work. The work had to communicate the essence of that message.

MS. LAURIA: And did the now-famous ivory clock become one of the pieces you used to communicate your master craftsman education and your technical adroitness?

MR. CUMMINGS: Everything that I was is in that piece.

MS. LAURIA: Everything that you were at a certain point.

MR. CUMMINGS: At that point.

MS. LAURIA: Almost like a guild system.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: You know, how you move in the Renaissance from guild to guild -

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: - you have to produce a work that shows you can master certain skills before you can become a member of a certain guild.

MR. CUMMINGS: That piece was designed to communicate to the faculty and my peers at that time who I was, what I could do.

MS. LAURIA: And could you describe how you've managed that?

MR. CUMMINGS: You want the whole story?

MS. LAURIA: I'd love the whole story.

MR. CUMMINGS: Okay.

MS. LAURIA: Since it is a piece that is now at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts [MA], correct?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And what is the title of the piece?

MR. CUMMINGS: *It's About Time* [1979-80] is the title. It actually has another name, which I never write down, but I don't mind telling about it. The things that came together that caused me to create the clock were that my work was getting out there now, was getting in some publications, and I didn't feel as though I was getting all the information out. It was unlike the motion picture industry, who have thousands and thousands of individual frames put together. You run them through the projector, and after a few minutes you get the whole story.

I get one frame, and I get a fraction of a second to communicate everything that I want you to know in that one frame, one image. So how does one do that? One of the problems that I face is if I could get the viewer to spend more time with the object - the more time they spend, the more opportunity I would have to communicate to the viewer the essence of whatever the subject was. So the word "time" kept popping up. I was at the university - now, let me back up a little bit.

The university was wonderful, but there were some difficult parts. One of the difficult parts was that -

MS. LAURIA: The university being Long Beach?

MR. CUMMINGS: The university would be Long Beach.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: To some extent Fullerton but primarily Long Beach. One day I graduated, being a very poor student, barely making the grade to graduate, which is 2.0. That's minimum and that's exactly what I got to graduate. And taking all those years to do it and then the next day becoming a colleague, that was a difficult transition for all of us, but especially for my former teachers, who were now my colleagues. It was an uphill battle.

After being there for a while, I was in the classroom and the door opened and the art department secretary came in and said, the chairman of the department would like to see you for a moment. That was kind of a frightening experience, because the department never does that. They never interrupt a class for a meeting. At the faculty meeting before classes began, they announced that the art department had to elect or appoint a new graduate coordinator.

By this time Tom Ferreira was no longer the chair. But we were very close at the time of the faculty meeting. I was sitting right next to Tom and I leaned over and asked, Tom, what does a graduate coordinator do anyway? I knew we had one. I knew my grad students were going to this person to get something done, but I just never really paid any attention to it. So Tom said, shh. You don't want to know. So I never questioned it. So I go to the chair's office and, as requested, there was Tom Ferreira, the grads coordinator who was stepping down, and the department chair, and they were all smiling.

I'm thinking, oh, my God, what's going here. I thought of Daniel walking into the lion's den. So I said, okay. What's going on here? Well, don't worry, Frank, everything's fine. But we hear that you're interested in being our new graduate coordinator. What? All I did was ask a question. He said, well that's more than anybody else - let's talk about this.

They gave me the opportunity to be the grad coordinator. And the reason I took it is because, as grads coordinator, I could write my own schedule. I would still be responsible for teaching one class. I normally would teach three, but then I got to choose who taught the other two.

MS. LAURIA: And this is all within the scope of the undergraduate art department classes.

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly. Undergraduate and graduate.

MS. LAURIA: And graduate.

MR. CUMMINGS: And so I jumped on it, because by working out my own schedule, I could actually put more time in the studio. And giving my best graduate students the opportunity to teach my classes meant that they graduated with fine portfolios, with real paid teaching experience at a university. That's something very few other graduates from other institutions had, which is why most of my graduates were grabbing up the teaching positions really fast.

MS. LAURIA: And how big was the program then, Frank?

MR. CUMMINGS: In the program there were about 23 or so faculty positions. These were tenured, and tenure track, and oh, maybe 15 or 20 part-time faculty. We had, at that time, the only B.F.A. and M.F.A. program in the California State university system. We wrote that program, and I became the coordinator of the first M.F.A. program; it was a trial program through the chancellor's office.

MS. LAURIA: What year were you talking about?

MR. CUMMINGS: This was 1971 - no, it's not. That would be 1976 or '77.

MS. LAURIA: And you're saying that Long Beach - Cal State - because then it was Cal State Long Beach - had the only art department?

MR. CUMMINGS: Had the only art department M.F.A. program.

MS. LAURIA: But you also said B.A.

MR. CUMMINGS: They had a B.A. We had the first B.F.A. We had an M.A. and we had the only M.F.A.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. So the M.F.A. was sort of a trial program -

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - with the Cal States.

MR. CUMMINGS: The B.F.A. and the M.F.A. was a trial program -

MS. LAURIA: Through the chancellor's office.

MR. CUMMINGS: - through the chancellor's office on the Long Beach State campus, and the idea was to see if it works and how much it was going to cost. And then if it worked, the programs on other campuses would be funded. It was 10 years before they decided to let it go. But I became the coordinator of the first M.A. and M.F.A. program in the Cal State university system.

MS. LAURIA: What do you mean they decided to let it go? They don't offer those degrees any more?

MR. CUMMINGS: No. Before they let it go to other campuses.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: It stayed on the Long Beach program for 10 years. Now the program exists on several of their campuses.

MS. LAURIA: That was very opportunistic.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, wow. What an opportunity. I didn't realize what an opportunity it was at the time because I was thinking very small. I was thinking in terms of being able to get more work done, being able to get my students the opportunity. I didn't think of the effect of being the first M.F.A. grad coordinator in the California State university system, what that meant. I didn't understand that until much later. But -

MS. LAURIA: And we're still talking about background of the clock, correct?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. Now, a short time - it couldn't have been more than, you know, a few days after I had agreed to become the grad coordinator. I was going across the studio, and there's a hallway out front, and I overheard my name. Well, Frank Cummings, and I didn't understand what they were saying. But I'll admit, I listened to the door, and they were two of my colleagues. One of them was a former instructor during those early years. They were discussing the fact that they had heard that Cummings had now accepted the graduate coordinator's position, and they said, that's probably okay because he's not a very good artist anyway.

That was devastating, the fact that they said it or even thought it wasn't a problem, but they said it out in the open, in the hallway, and students are walking back and forth. I was hurt more than angry. I got angry later, but I was hurt that they thought so little of my work, because it had been getting into the shows; it had been getting into publications, and my teaching evaluations were excellent. And so it was during that day as I walked across the studio, I said, I have to show them. They still don't know who I am or what I can do, and so I need to do something to convince them.

MS. LAURIA: Do you think it was a question of the discrimination of hierarchies, that they perhaps were teaching in other fields besides what we now call craft-based arts -

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, I think that was part of it.

MS. LAURIA: - and that it may not have even been - although you personalized it and, I mean, and you internalized it, it may have been just the fact that it was -

MR. CUMMINGS: It could have been a lot of reasons.

MS. LAURIA: - because you were dealing with crafts?

MR. CUMMINGS: One of them was from what they used to call the fine arts, drawing and painting. One was designer, which is a separate category in the arts. And the crafts - which was my

area - crafts is sort of the bottom of the totem pole in the art world. Fibers and crafts and clay, they're all sort of in there. And so there was that part of the discrimination. Part of it was because I didn't come through the system the way they did; I came in on a special program. By that time that special program had been disbanded. I had made all the hurdles, gotten rave reviews; I got a contract to continue teaching long after the program had disbanded - the program only lasted for about a year and a half.

MS. LAURIA: And you're talking about the instructor and coming in under the -

MR. CUMMINGS: It was called the Black Faculty Development program. Before the semester was over, it was then called Faculty Development program, because there were other minorities that felt they should have been included. So it went from black faculty to minority faculty to faculty development, and it was gone. So that was a year and half after they started it, the program was gone.

And those who got in on the beginning had sort of an open contract. As long as you were doing well in graduate school and maintaining your responsibilities as an instructor to campus, it would continue. And so two years later, when I got my graduate degree, by that time I was an associate professor; so a lot of it had to do with that. It could have been professional jealousy. I don't really know, because I knew I was doing well; I was getting headlines. My work was appearing in the newspapers and my student evaluations were high. The other thing I used to do is I keep the showcases on campus loaded with student work and accomplishments.

[Audio break.]

MS. LAURIA: Frank, we were talking about the clock, *It's About Time*, the title for which you have a different title, and I'd love to have you finish the story so we'll have a background on that wonderful clock, which is now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

MR. CUMMINGS: Earlier, with a discussion with other faculty, we always would gather around the drinking fountain or the coffee machine, and the subject of what is art would always pop up, which is kind of a trick question, which there has never been an answer, to my satisfaction, anyways. One my colleagues, he said that he doesn't know what it is, but he knows when he's around it, because one of the things that it does - it leaves you speechless. That stuck with me.

So I decided that with this piece, I needed to leave them speechless. In one respect it was to remove the dialogue that they had come up with, which was their rationale for my taking the grad coordinator position. I wanted to remove that. So I knew the piece -

MS. LAURIA: Their rationale being that they felt you would be better as an administrator/educator than as an artist?

MR. CUMMINGS: As an artist, right. I wanted to remove that whole idea and leave them without anything to say, or speechless, so the piece had to do that. So the question is, how do you do that? What does it take to go into a piece that will leave a person or people speechless? So the first thing I need to do is to attract them to it. They have to be able to get into the piece, and so I immediately picked out materials that attract attention.

Shiny things. Big things versus little things, or, in my case, high contrast. The highest contrast of all is black and white. So ivory and ebony, and if you throw some gold in there for shiny, people will look at it; people will come to at least examine it to see what it's about. So that determined right away what the materials had to be. To add to that, shininess, glass. People flock to pieces of glass in an exhibition versus pieces of paper or pieces of others, so I wanted glass to be included.

So that gave me my list of materials. I knew that I didn't have enough time to say everything I wanted to say. I only had that one frame, so time was part of the problem. How can I get people to spend more time? So that word time just kept popping up, and I said, well, a clock, that would really be great. Didn't have an image at that time and didn't know how to make a clock.

So I made a couple of phone calls. I discovered in a Smithsonian publication that one of the families that made clocks here in America was the Terry family, and they even had some examples or pictures of the Terry clocks. And I found out that there was a member of the Terry family still living way up in northern California.

So I got the number and I called him up to make an appointment to go up there and spend a few days or a few weeks - whatever it takes to learn all that I needed - and maybe I would be on my way. But over the phone he said, well, young man, you got the wrong idea. Because I thought a clock is really, really complicated. No, it's not complicated. So basically over the phone, he told me how to a make clock. In about 10 minutes, he told me basically what I needed to do in order to make a piece that functioned as a clock, and I basically just went to work. I did all the drawings I needed first, at least I thought I needed, and started working.

MS. LAURIA: But this is a particular type of clock. This is a grandfather clock, correct? It is a pendulum clock?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. Well, at that time I called it a freestanding clock. So depending on the size of it, it could be a grandmother or grandfather. I didn't determine which category it needed to be in, but based on what I wanted to do, because of the length that the pendulum had to drop and where everything was and proportioned from a creative point of view, I knew that it would take a certain distance, and I didn't compare that with those other clock terminology.

MS. LAURIA: And Mr. Terry told you how to make a pendulum clock over the telephone?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, not really. The pendulum came as a result of my earlier experiences with model airplanes. In the old days, before the electronics, model airplanes - especially if you're going to fly radio-control planes - was controlled by what they called an escapement, which was a rubber-band-driven system that allowed you to make the airplane go right, left, up, and down. And basically, the pendulum on a clock is an escapement system. It allows the energy of the clock to escape at a prescribed rate. It's exactly the same except it's different shaped. So that part I knew I wanted weight driven; I knew I wanted the pendulum, because I wanted the movement, which was another part of what I felt should be there in order to attract attention.

And so it began one wheel at a time. In fact, if you look at the clock, at the system, there's five wheels in the drive system. If you look at the first wheel and compare it with the second one, they're very, very different, because I didn't know exactly how the teeth should be angled or what should happen. Basically if I move it this way a little bit, that should work. And it worked okay. I said, well, if I move it back a little bit, it might work better. So the next wheel or gear takes into account what I learned with the first one and so on and so on. So it was a learning process, and the nice thing about it is that if you look at it carefully, you can see those steps and how they changed and how it all came together. As long as it worked, it was fine, but if I could make it work better, that can be seen in the next wheel or so forth.

So the clock went very smoothly, as a matter of fact, but it was one of those times when I was sitting there working and I had no clue as what I'm doing. But my hands were moving, my brain was working; I had to take a breath, and I watched it happen for a while. That's happened to me a number of times, and sometimes it's kind of scary, because you think, oh, what's going on? When the pieces come together before your eyes, almost in a dream state, it's a very strange kind of feeling.

But the clock came together, and after almost a year it was finished. It was designed for the faculty show, because the faculty show was about one year from the time that I started and so that was my deadline. This thing had to be finished for the faculty show because it was designed to show the faculty who and what I was. I say the name *It's About Time* because it was about time in many respects. The other name in small parenthesis for my colleagues is *Put Up or Shut Up*. I installed the clock. I was on the committee to install the faculty exhibition, and so I made sure my clock was in the place I wanted it to be, so that when you walked in that front door, it was the first thing you

would see. It was the only thing on the floor because all the three-dimensional works were in a separate part where you had to move through the gallery, past the clock, to see them. It was one of the best experiences I had ever had.

MS. LAURIA: Meaning that they were on pedestals?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, it was on a pedestal, and it was the only piece on the floor. Everything else in that section was two-dimensional on the wall.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, because it was in a different gallery than the three-dimensional objects.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. There were three connecting galleries, but in the first gallery where you come in the door, my clock was the only piece on the floor. Why? It's because I designed it that way. I designed the lighting, the color on the walls and trim, everything. And when the door opened and they came in, you could hear deep breath and "wow," and then silence. That's all you could actually hear, the silence, and then you could actually hear the clock ticking, and there were like 20 people in the room. It was like, without saying anything, the job was done. I had accomplished exactly what I wanted. I left them without words. They were speechless.

It also marked the end of my tenure at Long Beach State, because once I had reached that point, there was nothing else to do. It was time to walk away. I've learned over the years, you always walk away at a high point. Other opportunities come, and so it was shortly after that that I went to Cal State, Fullerton, which is a whole different story. But the work continued. The work was so successful from a personal point of view, in terms of causing the right kinds of responses, opening up another door.

The first rocking chair that I did rocked on wooden bearings. And I did - as an introduction to Sam Maloof - the biggies in the world of furniture were Sam Maloof and Wendell Castle. Those were guys that some day I'd like to be like, not that I wanted to do their work, but I enjoyed the kind of things that happened to them because of their work. The kind of invitations they get, the kind of response that people give them when they walk into a room was - I said, boy, that's great.

So I discovered after a little research that Sam Maloof and Wendell Castle's careers only crossed in one place that I could find and that was at Penland School of Crafts in [Penland,] North Carolina. So I thought, well, there must be something there I need to know, to learn about, so how do you get to Penland? It turns out that in the wood program, it was Sam Maloof who made the recommendations, which means I have to get to Sam to get to Penland. Sam was a juror of a show at Fullerton, along with Harry Bertoia, the sculptor - chair maker.

MS. LAURIA: From Cranbrook Academy of Art [Bloomfield Hills, MI].

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, from Cranbrook, and they were the jurors.

MS. LAURIA: And what year are we speaking of?

MR. CUMMINGS: This is 1974. The exhibition was called "Chairs in Motion." In order to enter the show, you had to make a chair, and it had to move. I had already gone to a presentation where Sam gave a show-and-tell, and it was wonderful. No one can make a rocking chair like Sam. I mean, you know that the minute you see one, you know instantly that no one can make a rocking chair better than Sam. Just don't even try.

So I decided that I want to enter the show, but I also learned from that presentation that Sam had an ego. Of course, we all do. The difference with Sam's was that he earned it and he deserved it. And so when he talked about a rocking chair - I also heard him criticize other rocking chairs and why they didn't work and that sort of thing, so I said, if you want to get into this show and you want Sam's approval, don't make a rocking chair. That won't do it. If anything, you'll get a criticism, and I wasn't after a criticism; I wanted a recommendation. I needed to enter the chair so that it would move but not rock.

And I came up with this idea for a chair that had bearings on each side and they would be composed

of different kinds of woods and some ivory. And I went through a whole process of getting it to balance, because this chair started to grow from the sketches. Before it was finished, it took on quite a few changes, and one of the changes pulled the chair off balance because I had pinned the balance perfectly in a cradle. But because I decided to make the back longer, more thronelike, it threw it off. And I had to go through several changes. I tried a spring, it didn't work. I pulled the spring out. So I finally counterbalanced it with lead. The day came, and Sam did something that I patterned my own career after, whenever he juried a show -

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

- he went around to critique it, which was the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen; it's very, very difficult to do, but Sam could do that. And I thought it was so wonderful for the people who entered the show, because if your work didn't get into the show, Sam told you why, so the next time your piece might get in.

And so I was sitting in there on the floor, and Sam came down and he was talking about the chair. He came to mine. He liked it a lot, and then he said something that just knocked my socks off. He said, it's too bad you didn't anticipate this chair would be off balance and you'd have to add 13 pounds of lead to counteract the weight.

MS. LAURIA: How did he know that?

MR. CUMMINGS: I was dumbfounded. How could he possibly know that, because you can't see it. There's no visible evidence that the lead is inside, and it's perfectly balanced. You can just as easily taken the weight off the topside and accomplished the same thing. I remember standing up and my voice cracking and said, thank you, Mr. Maloof. I really appreciate your comments, but how did you know there was lead? He knew exactly how much. And so he tipped the chair up to look at the bottom, and then he started squeezing it, and I'm thinking, he's looking for it. He doesn't know. He said, well, young man, you got me. Ray Hein told me about it.

Sam had spent that evening with Ray Hein, and apparently they had gone through the gallery and looked at chairs. I had shared that information and the problem with Ray as I was developing the chair. So I said, thank you, Mr. Maloof and then I sat down. About a month and a half later, we got a call from the parks and recreation department that Sam Maloof was giving a presentation at Yosemite [National Park, CA] and they wanted us to pick out some of our best graduate students and send them up there for that wonderful experience of helping with the presentation. And so my office buddy said, well who are going to send? I said, we're not sending anybody; that's my job. No, you don't want to go up there and be Sam's gofer. I said, oh, yes, yes, I do.

So I packed the family up and we went up to Yosemite, first time there. And it was a three-day seminar, and the first day I was Sam's gofer. He wanted to show slides in a meadow, so we had to pull extension cords up this hill so the projector would work. The second day, he asked me to demonstrate hand techniques, because he was doing the machines and he wanted somebody to do the gouge and chisel demonstrations, and so I did that. The third day, I was just demonstrating by myself. The following summer, I got the call. I thought I was going to go up to Penland to be a student and to learn. Sam Maloof recommended I come to Penland as a teacher.

So my first day at Penland School of Crafts was as an instructor.

MS. LAURIA: That's great. Now, you said Yosemite; what kind of a program was in Yosemite?

MR. CUMMINGS: It was at the - oh, I forgot the name of the lodge. There's a beautiful lodge up there.

MS. LAURIA: Half Moon? Something? It doesn't matter, but it was with the parks and recreation.

MR. CUMMINGS: With parks and recreation. And it took place in Yosemite Valley, so it was great. I did learn. And it wasn't anything about technology or physical kinds of things. But at Penland there's an energy there.

MS. LAURIA: Some people think or have said that places like Penland and Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME] are magical -

MR. CUMMINGS: They are.

MS. LAURIA: - in a sense that it's the convergence of all - it's a flashpoint in their life.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. So you have people from all over the country coming together for a very intense, short period of time, and then they're gone. And you can't reproduce it. It's never the same. And so, from that point, I was up at Penland teaching every summer for the next seven years or so.

MS. LAURIA: In the wood program?

MR. CUMMINGS: In the wood program. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And what kind of classes did you teach?

MR. CUMMINGS: I taught classes that were open to both novice and professionals. And by that time, my work had gotten out, so people kind of knew what I was doing. But the idea is that, you know, the instructions you will get are to be based on where you want to go and what you want to accomplish. Then I will help you with the technology and the materials to do that thing. But you're not coming here to be Frank Cummings, and that worked very, very well.

I have also been to Haystack three or four times. They're very different kinds of programs, and they're different in terms of the kinds of spirit and relationship. They're both wonderful but very, very different. My first experience with Haystack was the summer of '74 - or early summer '74, when Haystack had decided to do - they used to have these what they call international programs. The program was based on a particular country. And for the first time in maybe the history, they had decided to concentrate on the continent of Africa. So they brought in about seven people from different countries in Africa that had different skills. I remember the person who was the wood specialist came from Tanzania.

They had decided that this is a wonderful thing. But then somebody said, you know, we've invited all these wonderful people from Africa, but we've never had an African American here. So that summer, they called upon about seven or eight African-American artists whose name was out there, and my name was there. So they invited me to come up. It was wonderful, because the first week there were no students. So it was just me and the African from Tanzania, who just shared experiences and shared some time, and that was really wonderful.

MS. LAURIA: Did you know this person before?

MR. CUMMINGS: Not before. I knew nothing about him. We had a lot of things in common, but then a lot of things were very, very different. For example, I could look at many different kind of woods and I could tell you all about that wood and where it came from and what the qualities are, but he had never seen wood like that. He saw the tree. So he could look at the tree and tell you the same thing. I had never seen the tree, so it was those kinds of things that were just really, really wonderful, marvelous kinds of experiences.

But after that, I went back to Haystack several times, too. So I've had experiences with both of those schools, and they're just, like you say, they're magical. Anyone who has an opportunity to go and wants to be a good artist, a good craftsman, needs to go.

MS. LAURIA: And you brought up the subject of Africa, and I know that you spent some time in Africa, the West Coast of Africa, I believe, when you were invited or were able to do so through a grant. Can you talk about that experience?

MR. CUMMINGS: There were two different occasions that I spent time in Africa. The first time was as a result of the university. They evaluate you in so many different areas, and one of the areas was travel. They wanted you to travel and broaden your horizons.

MS. LAURIA: Was this pre-tenure or -

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh yes, this was pre-tenure, and the thing is that I would love to have gone, but as a young professor, you don't have the time nor the money to do those sort of things. I also decided if I ever got a chance to travel abroad and go someplace, you know, exotic, I would want to go to a place where I might discover something new. So if I went to Europe and looked at the old masters, you're not likely to find anything new. They have been studied up and down, sideways, and in fact, some of the best records of the old masters is now in books, because the originals are slowly disappearing.

So I thought if I could go to a place like Africa, I knew I could discover something new. So the time came when I decided I'd like to go, so I wrote a research proposal that was a local campus research proposal, and it won first award, which was $600. And that $600 was supposed to be seed money to write a larger grant that could then submit it to NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] or National Endowment for the Humanities. I wanted to go to Ghana, and I wanted to study the carvers.

In the books on African art, we had these wonderful pieces-the best examples are in the British Museum - but if you look at it, there will be the name of the country, the period of when they got it, and that's about it.

MS. LAURIA: You mean that the artist would be anonymous?

MR. CUMMINGS: The artist is normally anonymous, and I'm thinking, who is this person? Who did this and what was this person thinking when they did that? How did all that happen? That's the part I wanted to discover.

The other occasion was that in 1972, I entered an exhibition. There were five of us from California. We got together and put a show together, and it went to New York, to the Fairtree Gallery, and was reviewed by *Craft Horizons* - now the *American Crafts* magazine.

And to this day I have the original copy of that page from the magazine, and it was not really a good review of the five artists, but my section is interesting and a good review. It says, Cummings reflects primitive Indian and African influence with miniature circular covered boxes on pedestal bases. True fetishes adorned with precious feathers, fur, and ivory. His necklaces reflect the same magnificent fabrication. Wow.

The problem with that -

MS. LAURIA: And that's from the review that was in *Craft Horizons* in October 1972?

MR. CUMMINGS: October 1972. The problem with that - I had no connection with Africa except for the L.A. County Zoo and Tarzan.

MS. LAURIA: So you felt that they were extrapolating something in your art that wasn't there?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. Well -

MS. LAURIA: Or maybe it was there and you didn't know it was there.

MR. CUMMINGS: There it is. Maybe it was there and I didn't know it. I had to look up the word "fetish." Inanimate objects that are endowed with special powers. Whoa, what does this mean? How is it that they can see this in my work and I don't know about it? If I am doing this and if this is true, I need to find out. So I really want to go to Africa. I look up the word fetish or fertility, and I was focused on Ghana. I'd love to go there and find out how do they make those things, really? And do they really work? And what is that all about? And that's how I got directed.

The grant proposal -

MS. LAURIA: Directed to make those dolls -

MR. CUMMINGS: No.

MS. LAURIA: - the fertility dolls, or just directed to go?

MR. CUMMINGS: Directed to go to Africa to find out if there was a connection. Maybe I am doing it but I don't know it. Maybe it's coming from deep inside. But if I'm doing this and I don't know about it, what would happen if I find out about it and really start to work hard at it? Would they become better? Would they become stronger? So, to go to Africa, I might discover that, and it would also solve this problem of travel, and so the university kind of supported the idea.

They liked the idea, I rewrote it, and they sent it to the National Endowment of the Arts. My proposal was to go to Ghana and research the connections between the struggles of the African-American community and struggles for identity and everything else in the ghettos with the same things that were going on in Africa. Now, the arts and humanities thought that was a great idea. But because I wanted to study one section of it, the arts thought that was thin, so it got bounced back and forth between creative aspects and humanitarian aspects. And so I said, well, I'll wait until that comes through. Meanwhile, time is wasting, I got to get going. I ended up doing the whole trip on $600, and I was there for two months.

MS. LAURIA: That's quite a feat.

MR. CUMMINGS: Quite a feat. But it was like serendipity. It was like I was supposed to do that. I tried to get a flight from here, which I had to go from here to L.A. to New York, and from New York to Ghana. I got the last seat on a charter flight, and I think it cost like $200 to go from here to Africa and back again. The rest I spent on film and camera equipment. And I figured once I got there, I'd figure out how to live. It's a good thing that I didn't have the money to go to the nice hotels and live like normal people.

MS. LAURIA: Or a tourist.

MR. CUMMINGS: Or a tourist. I ended up going into the villages, and luckily I had met this - his name is John Yaw Barimah. He's from Kumisi, Ghana, and he's an Ashanti carver. Those are the people who actually carved the Ashanti stools. Now, the thing about the Ashanti stools is I related to those as a piece of furniture, and I'm now making furniture, so I need to go out and find out about this furniture. But it was so much more than a piece of furniture.

Anyway, it was an absolute incredible experience. And when I came back, I didn't bring anything back with me in terms of new ideas, textures, colors. I knew that from a spiritual point of view that what I was doing was a good thing and I just have to do it more - do more of it. So when I came back, the furniture didn't change and take on these so-called African qualities, except for two pieces, which I did as a tribute to John, the person who I lived with and loved like a brother while I was there. I did two pieces in tribute to him, and then everything else went right back to where it was before I went to Ghana but with more awareness of what I was doing and, more importantly, why.

The second time I went was in '81, but this time the State Department called me up and wanted to know if I would be interested in going to five different countries in Africa. And these were countries that had villages where people were making things and the village was totally dependent upon the objects that these people made. My goal there was to go and help to increase the productivity, so that there would be more income coming to the village. That was the whole idea. And at the same time, they wanted me to put on exhibitions at a couple universities, a couple of museums, but also there was a couple of community centers where I went to put on exhibitions and talk about what I was doing and that sort of thing. That was wonderful also, but it was very, very different than the first time in Africa in 1973.

MS. LAURIA: So the exhibitions that you were putting on were exhibitions of your work?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. Exhibitions of my work. I put a body of my work together that was shipped to these five different countries and set up in galleries, museum galleries, and community centers where they could actually see the work. So there was about - oh, 10 pieces, I think it was. But these are fairly small pieces that could be packed and traveled easily. Nothing as large as a piece of furniture or nothing as delicate as, say, the clock. I'd gotten to the point where people could

look at my work and say, "That's a Cummings."

And I would sit there looking at my own work and wonder, how do they know? You know, what is it about the work that's me? I still don't know the answer to the question, but they still kind of know - there's a mark on it that people know that it is my work, and that was a wonderful thing to discover.

But the African experience satisfied so many different areas. It just really shocked my colleagues at the university that I would go to such faraway places, and as they saw, dangerous places. And there was an element of danger to these places, but it just made the work come alive.

When I sat down in the studio and went to work, there was more realization about what I was going to do and how I was going to do it. I don't know how it came, and it's hard to describe what I'm doing when I'm doing it, but it sort of gelled by going to Africa these two times.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I've heard you speak about this experience, Frank, and the one thing that always sticks in my mind is that you came thinking that you could, and you were asked to increase the villagers' productivity in the objects they were making, and the question of teaching them to use motorized equipment came up. And at the end of your experience, you realized that that was the wrong direction for them to go -

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - that they should continue to use hand tools, because the hand tools gave their work a remarkable individuality, a uniqueness, and a roughness that translated into energy.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. That happened almost immediately.

MS. LAURIA: And don't you think that affected your thinking about your approach to work?

MR. CUMMINGS: That, too, but one of the other things is that there is a spiritual quality to the work that is done in many of these countries. That the worker, the artist, the artisan endows the materials with a spirit that other people can see or sense. If you sit there and watch the person working, you probably don't see it. But if you have the opportunity to talk to him about it while he's doing it, while the wheels are rolling, you sort of get a sense of what's going on.

MS. LAURIA: The wheels meaning the gears of the brain?

MR. CUMMINGS: The gears in the brain. For example, I was very interested in Akuaba doll because I had seen some in the fetish houses, where the fetish priest had given it to people, and they worked. They really worked. And so I was sitting in John's little workspace one day and he was working on an Akuaba doll, and somebody came in and they looked at me. Obviously I was a stranger, and so they got really quiet and talked in the corner. John went over to a box, opened the box, and took out an Akuaba doll and gave it to this person.

MS. LAURIA: And the Akuaba doll is meant to be a fertility -

MR. CUMMINGS: It is a fertility figure.

MS. LAURIA: - fetish. Okay.

MR. CUMMINGS: The interesting thing is that John did not charge them any money. Apparently the fetish priest told the woman to go to John to get it. There was no money exchanged. Whereas the other ones he was working on - if a tourist came by, whatever you could get for it, you know. Sometimes two or three bucks. So finally I said, okay, John, what's going on in that box over there. He smiled, said, the ones in the box, these are the real ones.

And so, he was working on a real one one time, and I said, what is the difference between the real one and the one that you sold in the store? And he just sort of smiled; he said, they're very different. He said, the spirit is with me when I do the real ones. I said, where does this spirit come from? The fetish priest told the spirit to come and the spirit came. And he endows this wood with that spirit,

and then he hands it to the woman. That to me was a powerful statement for him to make and for him to so clearly understand the difference, because if you look at the two, at first hand, you don't see that much difference.

But after a while I looked at them and thought, oh, I see it, but I could feel it. Also this one is different. There is something different about this one, and it's very difficult and go through and describe, this eye is this way; this nose is this way; this hair - because it is extremely subtle, but there is a difference. But the major difference is in the belief system that is set up with that change. Yes, the most wonderful things can happen if you believe it, and we have things like that in our own culture.

MS. LAURIA: And did you feel that your work now, or has been in the past, or may even be in the future, that one of the objectives is to achieve a spiritual play in your role in making the work?

MR. CUMMINGS: Spiritual in that I'm trying to establish and/or strengthen the connection between that person over there and me, and it's done through the object.

MS. LAURIA: So the object is a conduit?

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: Can you talk a little bit about what are the similarities and differences between your early work and your recent work and where you might be going in the future with your work?

MR. CUMMINGS: My early work was the result of learning a lot of things about the materials. Learning its limitations: what can it do and what it can't do. How far can I go with this material? And so those early pieces reflect that investigation into the material and processes - an attempt to find out how much texture can I create. And at the same time, I'm learning the difference between what happens when a person touches a textured surface versus a smooth surface.

There are what I call transitions - the beginning of what I call transitions in my work are apparent. Whereas I couldn't figure out a way of doing a smooth surface right next to a textured surface. There had to be a transition from smooth to textured, and those transitions were like portals, going from one surface to another, from one environment to the other. And so the fact that you have to cross over these barriers or portals became very important as my work developed; those portals became even more important.

My latest work - the new work that I'm doing now is the result of learning all those things and making it as sophisticated as possible. There has always been that urge - not so much an urge. I was always annoyed at one stage when people looked at the works from Africa, Native American art, and they start to talk about it as being primitive versus sophisticated. Another reason I went to Africa the first time was to find out the difference, and they looked sophisticated to me. I mean, these people are doing things with their hand tools that we can't reproduce with our so-called sophisticated machines, yet we call them primitive. So I needed to find a new definition for that.

I've always wanted to be sophisticated. I've always admired the great masters whose work was at the cutting edge of sophistication, but I loved the way the things felt. I loved the way they smelled. Each wood has a different aroma, and as long as I was concentrating on the way it felt or the way it smelled or the way it worked, I felt as though I wasn't quite communicating the sophistication of that process. My work now is much more sophisticated - I started to say purposeful. But purposeful is not a good word.

MS. LAURIA: Meaningful?

MR. CUMMINGS: Meaningful. That's a better word, meaningful. In that, there was an element of discovery in my early work, whereas I didn't quite know exactly what it was going to look like until I got there, and then I knew it. Now I know long before I even pick up the wood exactly what it's supposed to look like, and now I know how to do it. So I go directly to it. I don't have to sort of go around the corner to come at it. I just go right up to it, nail it, and move on.

So the work doesn't actually go faster; it actually goes slower, because there's so much more that I'm trying to do in that one second or that one little space. I'm trying to do so much more there than I was earlier.

MS. LAURIA: Now, it's interesting that you're one of the few artists who have an excellent command of the material. For example, in lathe turning wood, you additionally add in elements of very fine, set jewelry pieces, caste or gems. Can you talk a little bit about that? What was the inspiration? I know the whole conversation. You've been talking about seductiveness and obviously the richness of a wood surface, the refinement in the polish, and the grains, especially figural woods, are very seductive. And what could be more seductive than metals and gems, especially reflective gems, and you have a background because of Mr. Hein -

MR. CUMMINGS: Because of Mr. Hein I've got that background.

MS. LAURIA: - in working with metals. But now you've taken both of those elements and you're combining them in a very, what I would say, uncharacteristic way. Most people who turn on the lathe tend to go into either more grandiose, in the sense of scale, or in the complexities, in the sense of multiple turnings, ornamental turnings. And here, you're not doing that; you're using the lathe in a pretty straightforward way, but you are making the work very complex because of the addition of the jewelry elements. So would you speak about how that came about?

MR. CUMMINGS: My work in terms of the lathe, I don't think you can get anymore straightforward than what I do on a lathe. But the lathe is only a small part of the finished product. And a lathe happens to be one of the most efficient ways of getting to that one stage, because I might be on a lathe for one hour, hour and a half. But then I'm on the workbench for six months, working with what came off of the lathe.

We were talking earlier about the conduit of people. The vessels that I do contain the spirit that I'm trying to communicate. Often, it's something that I personally feel that I try to put into that. The chairs do it in a more physical kind of way, because I can sit on it, and it holds me. There I am; there's no doubt about it.

MS. LAURIA: It has contact.

MR. CUMMINGS: It has contact. Now, those transitions that I mentioned before originally were fairly simple, clean lines between a smooth surface and, say, the textured surface. But as I looked at that transition from one area, or one realm, to another, I realize that it's like going through a portal. And when you enter one side of it, and you come out the other side, you're not the same person you were. There is a change that takes place as you cross that line or go through the door. So what's happening now is the door itself becomes more important, so it tries to make sure that you are adjusted or prepared in an appropriate way to experience the other side.

Now, that just may be a line in the middle of a vessel where you start from the bottom and when you cross that line you're into something different - a whole new world. And so this line that has become much, much more elaborate, with inlays and gold and precious stone, is to not only prepare you for what is on the other side, but to tell you. Without touching it, without crossing it, it will tell you what's going to happen when you cross that line. It's almost instantaneously, but I expect you to be a different person.

In many of the vessels, it's like wood is such a powerful material itself. And so many woodworkers don't want to touch it, because it is wonderful by itself. Mother Nature does some of the most exquisite things. And so they are what I call the purists. I do the same thing sometimes out of necessity, because Mother Nature has done such a powerful thing to this that the only thing I can do is present it and shine it up. I can't do anything with it.

MS. LAURIA: You mean like the woodworker Rudy Osolnik, who had a theory that - or put into practice the theory, anyway-that a natural-occurring burl and irregularity in the wood - what we would consider a deformity of the wood was a beautiful thing, a beautiful defect, and could never

be replicated. Therefore, it should not be manipulated.

MR. CUMMINGS: But I don't really call it a defect, because nature did it.

MS. LAURIA: And nor did he.

MR. CUMMINGS: But yes, that's true. I have done pieces where that I feel like I'm chasing it all the time. It's the material telling me what I can do and what I can't do. And it's very difficult because I'm constantly adjusting. Other pieces I do, all those decisions are made before I start. It will do what I want it to do, or it won't do anything. And in some cases, both those elements are in the same piece. So I give Nature her space.

MS. LAURIA: When you say that, can you cite at least one example that we might, as the readers, go look at a piece? I know there was one in the [Irving and Mari] Lipton Collection that had a natural edge that you left that way, that also had very fine and beautifully spindled spires that you carved.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, there is one piece that is in the Philadelphia Woodturning Center's collection, which was one of the first ones that I did this. And it is a natural piece - natural in that the bark, the cambian layer, and all the other physical parts of the tree are there and visible. And the vessel sort of encompasses it all. The natural edge is still there. Now, the interesting thing is that that natural edge, which is the bark and all the wonderful characteristics, that you can't duplicate that. Mother Nature gives it to you or she doesn't. It's so very different from the piece of wood down to the heart of the wood, and so there are these transitions that take place.

So I have actually separated that natural effect from the part that I had the control over using these flutes. The piece that is called *Marriage* [1995]; the piece that is in the Smithsonian - *On the Edge Naturally* [1987] - is one of those pieces where the top part of it was this wonderful gift, and I had the privilege of seeing it for the first time and presenting it to the viewer. But from that part down, it's all me. So I have to find a way to balance those two. Who am I to even suggest that I could run that race with nature? I don't pretend to.

MS. LAURIA: As the Greek gods would say, don't rival Zeus.

MR. CUMMINGS: No, no, can't do it. So I give Mother Nature her section, and with the transitions that I talk about, it allows me to make my part, my contribution.

MS. LAURIA: Can you tell us if you - I know that you feel several people have mentored you in your life and in your career. Can you talk about how you feel about mentoring, or how you have served as a mentor to others, or if you've ever had direct apprenticeships or been someone who has given apprenticeships to students or to other artists?

MR. CUMMINGS: I've done hundreds of workshops. By workshop, they're usually very intense - anywhere from three days to three weeks. And in my classroom, each year when I was teaching, I would have a minimum of 25 students in up to three different classes. I looked at each student as an opportunity for me to do something special for that student. And so I've never singled out any one student. But over the years, a number of them have come back. Most of us who teach never hear about them. Once they graduate, they're just gone. But I was nominated for outstanding professor at Cal State Fullerton, which is akin to the clock. It was, again, an opportunity to demonstrate to my peers what I was all about. So by having them nominate me as outstanding professor was just a real, real honor.

But to involve myself in the process, I had to call students up and get letters, and other students call other students, and so I have the rare book. And in that book, I have letters from former students - some of which I don't remember their names, but when they make the statement, I remember that person - students who were in my classes at that time, and both former and present graduate students. And so I got a chance to sit down and read some of the things that those students thought about what I said or did or didn't say or didn't do at the time. And it's the most wonderful thing I've ever read, something that I will never, never take it apart; I will treasure it.

One of the most interesting things was a letter in there from a student - and I remember the student - who kept asking me a question and I kept avoiding giving the student the answer because I realized it wasn't the answer that the student needed; he needed the journey to find the answer. That was important. And so I didn't give him the answer. And so I got this letter from him, and it was a big thank you note that said, thank you for not giving us the answers. So yeah, that's happened.

And some of the students that I've had are in some of these books now. And some of them are in the museums and the galleries, and they're doing really quite well. But many of them, I should say, became teachers. In fact, there are more who became teachers. And even there, I get a card from one now and then who tells me, well, now I'm teaching this level and it's so great and I love it. So yeah, I've had a lot of students - and before we knew what mentoring was - I tried to treat those students like Ray Hein treated me. I've had many students who my job was not to teach them, but simply to open the door.

MS. LAURIA: So do you feel that universities and American universities in our type of system work really well for teaching artists, or do you feel there is another avenue for artists who are self-trained? Do you have an opinion on how you feel your career has been affected by both of those elements, those paths that you might have taken? Because a lot of what you've learned, you've learned on your own, just like observing your father building model airplanes. I mean, in the best possible world you could tell a student, yes, having university training is important, but also perhaps it's important to learn on one's own.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, it's difficult for me to nail that down. I do realize that there are probably more opportunities for students to become good artists and great teachers on the university campus than not, but it's not every time. It doesn't happen; it's not that clear. I know more people who have gone through credentialed programs who should never be there, and have never done a thing in art since then, than I do people who have become great teachers and great artists. That's a very small, small number.

MS. LAURIA: Well, one of the questions that is prepared and we ask - and I think it's an important one - what are the most powerful influences that have happened to you in your career - either people, art movements, technological developments? I know that you mentioned your two trips to Africa. Those seemed to be pivotal for you.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, the first one especially. The second one was more a verification of what happened the first time and a demonstration of what happened the first time. But the first one was pivotal.

My father, of course, a great influence. Ray Hein another strong influence and mentor. Another mentor of mine was Tom Ferreira - I should say is; I just saw him a few days ago. But in terms of individuals who have influenced me and sort of shaped who I am, it's those three people.

I can't say that there's any particular work or artist's process that has influenced me, because I see them, I think about them. Some things I think are good; some things not so good. But I am so impressed even to this day when I see even a reproduction of *The Pieta* [Michelangelo Buonarotti, 1498-1500]. I am just awestruck. So the great masters, I still look to for inspiration and setting the benchmark. That's really where I want to be. So there really has not been a contemporary of mine that I have ever felt that way. I know, Sam Maloof; we've become great friends; as well as Wendell Castle. But we're three different kinds of people trying to do basically three very different kinds of things.

MS. LAURIA: But I guess that you could say that it's - but it's this community of collegial encouragement, even brotherhood, in a way.

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly. I've seen it happen on a university campus in the corner of a classroom with three people. I've seen it in a classroom with a hundred people there. I remember going in a classroom and I was just awestruck by the instructor. I don't remember what he was saying, but I

thought, if I could ever talk like that - or it was like a light came on when he walked in the room. And everybody was silent and you listened to him. I've got to figure that one out. So I have seen it. I've seen it at workshops that were wood-turning symposiums. I've seen it happen.

MS. LAURIA: And do you think it's important for an artist - even if you are an artist who works mostly in a solitary manner and works at your own work in a studio at home, more or less isolated - but to be involved in a larger community, be it a craft community or craft organizations or part of a fellowship with other artists in such places as Haystack and Penland; I mean, do you think that's important to the development?

MR. CUMMINGS: It's important that the person -

MS. LAURIA: Or at least important to your development?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, to mine, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: You've already said it has been, but -

MR. CUMMINGS: It's important that you understand that your work is part of a much larger picture. Workshops and programs like Cal State Fullerton and Long Beach can have an opposite effect, and I've seen that happen, too, where they get so involved in one aspect of what they are doing that they disregard everything else. Workshops often will do that, because I've seen them where John X will be up there doing his magic and when the workshop is over, there's 25 little John Xs going out trying to outdo John.

And I've seen it where a person is sitting there just looking and not taking any notes, not demonstrating, and then they'll get up and walk away. And next thing you know, this person is doing something magical. It's hard to say what he saw, or what she saw, what happened there, and why those other 25 missed it and this one got it; we don't really know. But I have been in classes when the instant this person walks in the door, I go, there's one; that one's going to make it. And I instantly know what to do for that one person. And I look for that person. I really work hard to treat every student in my class or expose every student in my class to what I'm exposing to that one. I mean, I go overboard to do that.

MS. LAURIA: That is as a professor. And now you are retired in your professorial role, I should say. So in your life now, which is, we could say, perhaps richer in terms of time, do you find that your work has moved into a different direction, or you would like it to move into a different direction, or you just have more of it to produce more pieces?

MR. CUMMINGS: I have more of it to produce. And interestingly enough, I've gotten so much better from a technical point of view in doing it, you would think I could do them faster. It seems to be taking longer to do them, because there is so much more that I can do with the materials to get the point across that I couldn't do before.

MS. LAURIA: So the learning curve that you have is accelerated, but it's been about adding more layers of meaning to a piece?

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly, so the pieces actually become more complicated. They may be physically smaller, but they're much more complicated, and as a result, they take more time.

MS. LAURIA: Frank, if you could just comment on what kind of information sensibilities - sensations - you want to communicate in any one piece?

MR. CUMMINGS: Now, since the pressure to prove myself to my peers is gone, that's a wonderful thing. I don't need to do that anymore. I can now focus on the feelings and attitudes that I think are really, really important, even though the piece itself may not look as complicated, because I don't have to do all that fancy stuff anymore. But it comes out that way anyway. But the small things in life are what's most important.

I did a piece one day that-it was a piece about -

[END TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

- C.C. Most of the time it's about how I feel, trying to communicate the essence of how I feel about this woman. And interesting enough, she gets to see it for a second and then it's gone someplace. But it came home hard and fast one exhibition, the piece was there, and there were some people standing around talking about it. And those were the days where I could go to a gallery and nobody knew who I was. Sometimes, if I have a friend, we trade places. But this person said, I wish somebody felt as strong as that about me.

MS. LAURIA: And this was a piece that you had made for C.C., your wife.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, and I knew - I knew that it was working, because I can't ask C.C. if it's working, because she's my support. She'll say nice things, you know. She'll be critical when she wants to be, but she knows what it's about; she knows what it's for, so her response to it isn't the same as a response from somebody else. And I can grow more from that response out there that lets me know that I'm on the right track and this is working. So many of the pieces I have done - in fact, most of the pieces I have done in the last five, six years have all been about my relationship with C.C. in one way or another.

[Audio break.]

MS. LAURIA: January 5, 2007, continuation of interview with Frank E. Cummings III.

Frank, just to go back to some of the issues we touched on earlier, could you delve in a little further about a discussion about how you feel issues of race or ethnicity affect your work?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, to go back a little bit farther to sort of lead up to that, the first goal I ever set for myself, as I mentioned earlier, was to become a college graduate. I had no idea what would happen after that; I figured that was a big enough goal. Once I reached that, hopefully I would understand. Upon reaching that goal and being asked to teach at a university, things began to change very rapidly. The program that brought me into the university was a race-related program.

MS. LAURIA: And we did talk about that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, we did talk about that. In order to continue the process of getting my graduate degree, becoming a university teacher, the primary goal then was to do the very best job I could with the work. So the work initially became part of the process of keeping the job.

Once I began to finish work, and after I got it out, interesting things began to happen. If I presented the work myself and people saw me as an African American, they took that as the basis for understanding the work that I was doing, and they began to read things into the work that, from my point of view, wasn't there, had nothing to do with it. So I found the best way to discontinue this is to present the work, but stay out of the picture. The work was much more successful, successful in that it began to achieve the goals that I had set for the piece.

MS. LAURIA: So do you feel you were being typecast or that people were misreading it, based on preconceptions of what they felt a black American would put into their work?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, more of their conceptions of what an African American was in the '60s in California in the United States; that was the basis.

The work immediately began to get high reviews, good reviews. Good reviews in that it was accepted in an exhibition. When it came to review the work by a publication, it was one of the pieces selected. And the reviews were really quite good. They talked about design and texture and all the words that I was looking for.

The moment I came in the picture, then they took it from the standpoint of, oh, that work is trying to express his trials and tribulations in the ghetto. Or, he's going back to his roots in Africa, therefore this must mean that sort of thing. It was so bad that I just decided the best way to do it is let the work do the talking. It said what I wanted to say much more eloquently than I could describe,

because once I started describing, I had to overcome a lot of preconceived ideas about what I was doing. And that was hard work.

For example, there was a major exhibition put on in the LA County Museum [of Art, Los Angeles, CA] back in the '60s. And it was an attempt to relieve some of the pressure and problems of the African Americans, the blacks in the ghettos. And so they had an exhibition. It was called "Phenomenon in Black" [1972] at the LA County Museum of Art. I thought about that. I said, I don't really want to get involved in that. But LA County Museum was one of the buzzwords that the faculty, the Ph.D. types, would really understand. So of course, I got into the show.

The show was not a good exhibition. Never before had the *L.A. Times* taken three full page - with photographs - to rip a show. And deservedly so, now. This show was not a good exhibition. All kinds of problems with it; the continuity of the installation, the craftsmanship in many of the pieces was just not good. It was not a good show. However -

MS. LAURIA: What year are we speaking of, Frank?

MR. CUMMINGS: "Phenomenon" - I happen to be prepared for that. While I'm looking for the exact date, when I wrote the exhibition up in terms of the presentation for my colleagues at the universities, I called it "Phenomenon" - left off the black part. Because it was at the LA County Museum, it was a work that they felt was really important. Okay, that show - I had forgotten about all these. Oh, here it is - it was 1972. It was a juried show. To get into the show, you had to be black. That was it. I don't think anybody looked at the work. I think there were some fears or concerns about what if we reject this person. What is he or she going to say or do? So anybody who made stuff and was black pretty much got into the show.

I began to get invitations to exhibitions. And right away I began to think, there is one month out of the year that I will not show, and that is February, because I started getting requests - some of them were really good galleries and some of them were relatively good museums - but the only reason they were inviting me to the show is because this was black - I was African American and it was black history [month]. That is not a reason for me to show, and so I simply won't do it.

MS. LAURIA: Well, this is an issue that many women also face when it's women's history month or because they are included in shows that have to do with gender and identity and gender politics. And some women say that is what their work is about. I mean, certainly, Judy Chicago would bold-facedly say that she belongs in a show of that nature. But other women resent being categorized that way. They don't really feel their work is about their identity.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, my work is about my identity, and one facet of my identity is that I am an African-American male, but that's only one. And it is my experience and my relationships that are the primary focus of my work. And my identity as a black man cannot be denied - and I don't want to deny it - but it's not the primary facet. I don't want my work to be judged on the fact that I'm a black man. If I had entered the black shows, the African-American shows, it was like I was a huge fish in a very small pond. I didn't like that. I'd rather be a small fish in the bigger pond of the universe and struggle to get to the top of that pond than be isolated, because I know many colleagues who are - to this day - are still in that category.

MS. LAURIA: Well, do you feel - I think I might have mentioned previously that the leaning now in the museum world is to go with the idea of integration of artwork, meaning that they no longer - because we're in the 21st century and there is globalization - museum directors and curators don't feel that work necessarily divides neatly any longer along the lines of chronology or process or materials. And do you see the idea of integration, of having artists who have come up through the ranks of the craft discipline and are using craft materials, do you see it as a good thing to strive for, to hope that work be included in the broader art context along with other works by artists who did not necessarily come up in the craft world?

MR. CUMMINGS: In the case of my work, absolutely, that is what I would strive for. I remember

years ago someone asked me, which craftsman do you admire most? Who would you like to be like or emulate? And at that time, I knew people like Sam Maloof and Wendell Castle, and I knew most of the, quote, unquote, wood turners. None of them came to mind. Even though I admire some of them and I appreciate their work, I wanted to be known down the road among the great artists. So when somebody asked me who are the greats, well, Michelangelo, [Leonardo] da Vinci, [Pablo] Picasso.

The first time that I saw *The Pieta*, I was speechless. I was standing in front of a true work of art that needed no explanation. The entire room was quiet. You could hear a pin drop. So how does one create work that leaves them speechless? That was my goal. And I began to study the old masters and learn more about their lives and how did they get from here to there, hoping that I could be able to maybe chart a path that was similar to theirs.

So, for example, the first time I got an opportunity to do a piece that went into a religious setting, a church, I jumped at it, because most of the great masters worked for the church and their work was in the church. So to get a piece in a church seemed to me to be the most appropriate way to at least begin to address those issues. Even though I did it at hardly a cost to the church, but to do a piece. And that piece, as I worked on it -

MS. LAURIA: Can you tell us a little bit about the commission?

MR. CUMMINGS: The commission was from a -

MS. LAURIA: Because I know, just because you mentioned Sam Maloof, he has done commissions for churches as well, where he has done the altars and the crosses. But what were you asked to do?

MR. CUMMINGS: It was the Los Altos United Church of Christ [1977]. But they called the university and wanted to find someone who could do the altarpiece for their church, which was just a few blocks from the university. And I immediately said, I'm the one to do this. This is my project. The church didn't have a lot of money, so we talked about them paying the expense of the materials. I said, if you will front me the money for the materials, I will do the rest. The project took on a monumental quality. It ended up being a 10-foot-tall piece.

Years ago, someone had given me a piece of wood that was from an olivewood tree, and that this olivewood tree was a living tree during the period of Christ. It was just a little small piece of wood, maybe four inches tall or something. And I had that piece of wood for years and I treasured it, but I thought, here is the time to use it. So the top of the cross had a crown on it, and the crown had three other smaller crosses. And those three smaller crosses are capped with that olive wood from Israel. And the crown also has jewels that are woods from every continent.

MS. LAURIA: So you were asked to make a crucifix?

MR. CUMMINGS: It's like a crucifix, except it doesn't have the figure of Christ on it. And there is a large circular piece at the bottom that represents the Trinity. It's divided into three sections. The piece is magnificent. It was such a delight to do it. I was able to install it in such a way as though it looks like it's floating. It's just sitting out in space. And the church takes such good care of it. They actually love it. And it looks today as polished as it was the day I delivered it.

Sometime later the corporate office for the housing development for the elderly for that church tracked me down. They knew they wanted a piece like the cross in the church. They tracked me down and they asked me to do another one. But this was a little smaller, once again, because it's in a corporate office, and lots of traffic going through there - I did another one. And it was as much fun to do as the first one.

I had to pull back from what I really wanted to do, because even the corporate office couldn't afford that. Because I was thinking of the gold and the gems and it was spectacular. So they said, well, we're a nonprofit organization, so if people come in and see this wild, elaborate, fancy - with jewels and gold-it wouldn't look good. So I toned it down, but on the three crosses on the crown, I said, I'm going to do it here, and it's not going to cost you. But I just cannot let this go out without this touch

as to where I am now. So that piece is now in the corporate office.

The corporate office did not want to pay the price. In fact, my pride said, well, if you can't afford me, then that's just too bad. And I went home, and I was talking to my mother, who is in a nursing home up in Idaho, and she says, now, Frank, a little money is better than no money. Oh, God, Mom, why did you tell me that? So I called them back up and said, listen, I will redo the sketches and come up with something that is more affordable and that will represent what you are in this setting. And so I did it, and once again, I actually dedicated it to my mom during the presentation ceremony - to my mom and my dad. So those are the two - I would say - major - major commissions, not in terms of how much money I got, because we're not talking about money here, but major in terms of getting it into a setting where people look at the work and respond to it in the appropriate way.

MS. LAURIA: Very reverentially.

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: Now, one of the questions that always comes up, too, trying to evaluate an artist's career, is how do you feel that doing commissions has impacted your work or made you stretch aesthetically, possibly more than you would have had to if you were working on an individual piece that you had no particular parameters to work on?

And maybe you could also talk about how the commission came about for the film that you worked on, because that's a very interesting idea. Because most people think about films sets as being very ephemeral, and here you are an artist who - obviously you're working with a material that is long-lasting; your pieces are meant to be seen throughout time, and someone asked you to do something for a film. And what were the things that you considered, and what were the benefits and maybe some of the disadvantages of accepting a commission of that nature?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, generally speaking, I have not taken on commissions, because commissions are generally based on what the client wants and what you've already done. And they will see what you've already done, and they want something like that, or something in that area. Meanwhile, that piece may be 10 years old, 15 years old, who knows? I can't go back and do that over again. If I did, it would be simply for the money. And my work has never really been about that, so commissions have not been good for me.

With the 20th Century [Fox] piece, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* [1998] with Angela Bassett, Taye Diggs, and Whoopi Goldberg, the director of the film had this idea of what he wanted for Stella. Stella was an African-American woman who was a corporate success and a financial success, but in her heart she was a furniture maker. They were looking for an African-American female furniture maker. They looked and looked and looked. Now, there are some out there, but they didn't find them - maybe luckily for me. Someone said, well, if anyone knows where she is, Frank Cummings will know, because I was connected with the university, the world of furniture; my work was out there.

And so they called me up and posed the question, we're looking for an African-American, female furniture maker. I thought, if you were in the presence of the work of an African-American, female furniture maker, how would you know? How would you know she was even female? If she's a good furniture maker, would you know that it was a female? Would you know that she was African American? The answer is probably not, unless she made it an issue in her work. Otherwise, you wouldn't know.

So I invited them to come to my house to discuss it. And in the meanwhile, I emptied out the living room, made pedestals, borrowed a couple of my pieces that were out there, and I turned the living room into a gallery. And the clock was right by the window, so when you came in the front door, that was the first thing you saw. And so, when I opened the door and the 20th Century Fox people took a step into the hallway, they said, "Oh, my God, look at this. This is what we're looking for." So I didn't have to say anymore. There was something about the work that made a statement about

the maker that was obvious. They didn't want anything off the rack, so to speak.

So we sat there and they said, well - they told me about the story of Stella. And there is a couple shots where she's working on a computer; do you have a computer desk? No, I don't have a computer desk. Well, there is another scene in her kitchen where there is a discussion going on and they're sitting on bar stools that she made and there is work all around. I said, well, how much time do I have? I said, I can pull that together for you. What kind of time are we talking about?

So we set the parameters up; I took a leave of absence from the university and just buried myself in the studio and went to work. I first produced sketches, and they approved; they loved the sketches. I think there was just one correction on one of the pieces that they felt was a little bit too large; could I scale it down. And so that's how the commission came about.

Now, the interesting thing is that when it comes to talking about financial gains from a piece like that, they wanted to rent a large number of my vessels to put all over the house. So I was actually paid for the commission for the bar stools and the computer desk. Because of the time limit, I worked in materials that I could work very quickly. So what they got was an image of my work. But it didn't have the range of colors that I would probably have chosen, because I chose a wood that worked very quickly. I added some highlights using colorful hardwoods, but the shape and the form and the style was obviously a Cummings piece.

And not having an agent understanding how that industry works, I thought the best thing for me to do is - I'm not going to become wealthy by doing this, so I opted for credit for the pieces in the film. And that I got, because if you watch the film, you have to wait-it's right at the end, somewhere around, no animals were hurt during the making of this film. But there it is. It says something like "Stella's furniture and vessels by Frank E. Cummings III." I thought this might lead to something more down the road.

MS. LAURIA: Now, what happens to the actual pieces that you made for the set? Do they revert back to you, or are they owned by the production company?

MR. CUMMINGS: They're owned by the production company. Now, interestingly enough, the bar stools disappeared. We don't know where they went. This was done right at a time when I was going through some major medical problems, and I wasn't able to get the photographs that I wanted. So I went back to the studio after it was done, and they hunted down the computer desk, which I was able to get a good photograph of, but the bar stools disappeared. But on the bottom is written very clearly who and what and where in such a way that they're not going to be able to remove that. So no matter who has them - and I'm sure somebody out there has those pieces - they know that I did them. I even thought of doing a whole line of furniture-oriented pieces, and I was going to try to copyright the name "Furniture by Stella." At that time, I could have done it, because nobody jumped on it. I thought I could be pushing these things out the door really quickly, but do I really want to do that? And the answer was, no, I don't really want to make Stella furniture.

MS. LAURIA: So you weren't interested in designing for production?

MR. CUMMINGS: Not interested at all; never have been. I have tried it on a couple of occasions, where I have tried to do duplicate pieces or a limited production, and it's just not my cup of tea. It just doesn't work. The excitement and the joy of the process is in conceiving the work and methodically going through the first process to make sure it comes out the way you want. Once that's done, we have to move on. We just can't do that over and over and over again. It just doesn't work for me.

MS. LAURIA: Well, there are designers like Charles and Ray Eames and Mies van der Rohe who felt exactly differently, that their designs, they want to see them for the multitudes. And so you could be involved, if you wanted to, in the design phase, and let someone else handle the production aspects. But that does not appeal to you.

MR. CUMMINGS: One of the first opportunities to go into production work [was] when I finished

a one-of-a-kind chair and it was photographed in the *L.A. Sunday Times*, big half-page, beautiful photograph. That Monday, I got calls from furniture manufacturers who wanted me to head up their finishing department. I got calls from people who wanted five of these for a dinner party, all of which were interesting. But that was the first time the idea of reproducing came up. So I took the chair, at the risk of losing it, and made a fiberglass mold, and began to reproduce that chair. And I did two prototypes.

In those days, when I took it to a manufacturer, they looked at it; they were just jazzed about it; but they could not figure out how to make that chair. I was thinking that if we could make these things inexpensive - if somebody else could make them, and I could maybe supervise production or something like that, I'd be willing to do it. But to sit there and make them, that's not me.

MS. LAURIA: So you have not had the opportunity to actually see one of your designs go through a successful production phase, because what you've learned is that - because of your experience, you're not interested in actually doing them, so then it has to be farmed out or contracted out.

MR. CUMMINGS: Have to be farmed out, yeah. And it turns out that the work that I do is too complicated for normal production processes. It's just too hard to do. It doesn't mean it can't be done, but by the time they do it, the production costs are so high. In fact, they wanted more for those reproductions than I thought the original, one-of-a-kind chair was worth. And so it just never really worked.

But the idea has always been there; I would like my work to be accessible by the public, but it turns out that if it goes into a private collection, only the people that collector knows will ever see that. Unless I pull it out for an exhibition, it's not likely to be seen by others. So if others are going to see it, I find that the museum is the place where larger numbers of people get a chance to see the work. And so my work has been geared for museum collections and what I call high-end galleries. But it's because of that the work has gotten into so many publications. And it's these publications that satisfy the Ph.D.s and the literary types, so that going through the ranks and becoming a professor was very easy. It was like I didn't have to work at all; it just happened because of the names and the numbers of the publications.

Once I didn't need to do that anymore, there was no reason to stop. I was feeling very successful at it; I really enjoyed the responses from the work. And so I simply continued. So at the university, I was one of the few in the entire school of the arts who continued working at that level and at that pace.

MS. LAURIA: Of intensity?

MR. CUMMINGS: Of intensity, where there was a sense of - I was driven to get as much out as I can. My life is only going to be so long, and I've got so much work to do. I have to stay busy. And that's pretty much what's happened.

Now, going back a little bit to the prejudices, only on a few occasions has there been outright bigotry toward my work. Let me rephrase it - it wasn't toward the work; it was toward me. My work has been in publications for a long time, but not very many people knew that I was an African American. I was invited as the keynote speaker for a conference. And apparently no one knew that I was an African American until I got there. And that's when the trouble started. So on a couple of occasions, I was asked by the people attending the conference that - you really need to leave; you don't belong here - that blatant.

MS. LAURIA: Can you reference the region of the United States that this happened in?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, a couple of times it was in the South. But it has happened on several occasions on campuses that are religiously oriented. And I've been to almost all of them. But that's where it tends to happen.

Once in the South it happened. And it turned out to be a good thing, because the directors and because of how I handled that particular situation when an irate student was extremely upset - this

was when - looking for the word now - when minorities were given an advantage - affirmative action. It was during the affirmative action days when I was confronted by a white male who was very upset, and rightfully so, because he was not able to get the jobs and the opportunities because he was white. He felt that African Americans were taking all those opportunities. He thought that I was invited because I was African American, not because of the quality of the work. So he went way off in the woods to reflect this, and who should be at the head of the class? It was another African American. He went ballistic.

But because this happened in a public setting and how I handled the group, many more opportunities came to me. And I became highly respected by that institution, not only because of the work, but because of how I handled those difficult situations. It has happened on a number of occasions. But my background experience and accomplishments have always overcome whatever prejudices people have found. But it still tends to make them rethink of the work - oh, he's black; let me look at it again. That's happened quite a bit, too.

MS. LAURIA: What do you feel - I know that your work has been geared toward, as you said, to be in museums, because that is a place where the general public has access to see your work. And it is a place for visibility, and also the publications, but when we were talking about the clock - *It's About Time* is the title - we never finished the story about how did the clock come from the place where it was made, which was many years earlier, then the time frame of 10 years later, when it ends up being acquired by the museum.

MR. CUMMINGS: I'm sorry, it was 20 years later.

MS. LAURIA: Twenty years later. Yes, I thought so. Because the clock was made in the 1970s, wasn't it?

MR. CUMMINGS: It was over 20 years later.

MS. LAURIA: Give us an idea of the journey of how that happened.

MR. CUMMINGS: Once the clock was complete, once the work was complete - and in some senses, once it had done its job with the faculty and making the statement of who I am - I still felt that I needed to get it in publications. Most of the people who have seen my work have never seen the real piece; they've seen pictures in books and magazines. A clock magazine came by, and I don't remember how they heard about it, but came by and saw it, said, oh, my God, this is great. If we can get a great picture of this, we'll put it on the cover. So I think, cover of a clock magazine, that's a good place, because I was interested in what this piece meant in terms of another clock made in the United States, what it meant in terms of, historically, a timepiece. So I'm still thinking more historically. So it got onto the cover, and it had a nice centerfold. It was great.

But I realized that only the people who were interested in clock making would see that. So the photograph itself was pretty spectacular, and it got into a couple of different publications, nothing real major. A couple of them were - I thought-inappropriate, because there was a wood-turning magazine that had bowls and vessels, and then here is this clock. So from the standpoint of continuity of this article, it didn't work at all. This piece just should not have been in a wood-turning or wood-turners' magazine.

But eventually, I got a call from the Boston Museum [of Fine Arts], who was doing the furniture exhibition. And I was very interested because it was furniture 1940 to 1990, contemporary furniture ["The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940-1990." November 12, 2003 - February 8, 2004]. It placed my work historically, which to me was extremely important.

MS. LAURIA: And you're talking about the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

MR. CUMMINGS: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, an extremely high-end facility. So, yeah, I said yes. But I actually had to make some - what I call small changes - they actually ended up being major changes, because the clock had really never been exhibited for a number of years. It's just sitting there. And there were a number of changes that I thought, if I ever do another one, there's

some mechanical changes that I'd like to make. But if I could just aesthetically do this again, that would be great. So I decided to make the mechanical changes, which then increased the run of the clock from 54 hours; I was trying to make it run for a week. And to do that, a number of mechanical changes had to be made. So I actually dismantled the entire piece and redid some major, major things.

But the key was, the Boston Museum bought into the clock based on a photograph, which was 20 years old. So when I finished making the changes, it can't look any different than the photograph. That was the hard part, changing some gears and changing some things that would affect the physical aspects of it, but not the visual. And that was very difficult.

One of the things, I'd found that my skill level, my aesthetics, the things that I required of myself, was 20 years down the road. And so looking at these pieces that were 20 years old was like looking at Tinkertoys. And I couldn't go back and make Tinkertoys anymore. I worked at it and worked at it, but it was very difficult to do. So the conclusion was that most of the pieces that were replaced are visually far enough from the pieces that are like it that you don't make the connection unless the new pieces are right next to the original pieces, and it worked perfectly.

And I'm about 20 minutes short of a week; but the clock, *It's About Time*, actually became the hit of the show.

MS. LAURIA: It was asked to be in an exhibition at the time, but it was not being considered for acquisition or what?

MR. CUMMINGS: It was only considered for the exhibition. One of the nice things was that in order to be accepted into the exhibition, to make sure the clock was in good condition and represented the photograph, the Boston Museum called the [J. Paul] Getty Museum [Los Angeles, CA], and they had people from the Getty come down and look at the clock and photograph it to make sure that it was the genuine thing.

Crates were made, and the clock was shipped off with the condition that I would go with the clock and I would set it up. I didn't want anybody tinkering with it. I would set it up, make sure it was working, and then when the show closed, I would come back, take it down, crate it up, and everything would be fine.

But when the show opened the response was incredible. I walked into the room, the entire installation had already been set up. The only thing that was missing was the clock. So everything was ready for exhibition. I walked in, and here I am among the greats of contemporary furniture making. And I just couldn't believe that I was in the same room; my work was in the same room as all these people and this wonderful exhibition.

MS. LAURIA: Do you recall who the curator was? Was it Ned Cooke?

MR. CUMMINGS: Cooke.

MS. LAURIA: Edward Cooke?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, Edward Cooke from the Furniture Association was one curator, along with Gerald W.R. Ward and Kelly H. L'Ecuyer. The museum had not seen the clock. They had only seen photographs. So they called down to the storage area and brought the crates up in the elevator. Everybody came down; they wanted to see it. Even the assistants and people from other areas, who had heard about the clock, all came down to see it. The crates came open; all you could hear from the group was "Oh, my God." Some people thought it was going to be a lot smaller than the photograph and some thought it was going to be bigger. I took it out, set it up and got it balanced and everything, got it working. Stepped back from it, and it was like I'm looking at it for the first time myself, but in a whole new setting, in a whole new venue. I was awestruck by it, too, awestruck by the fact that it was there with all these wonderful historic pieces.

MS. LAURIA: Which brings up the point about context, how context changes the meaning of the

work.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. Up until that point, the only time it had been seen was by itself, but in small shows with other things. But now, it's in context, and it's got a date and a place in history now, so that's very different.

The opening was the next day and it was wonderful. The thing about the clock is the contemporary wood furniture from 1940 to 1990 are primarily wood tones, the rich browns and shift toward the reds and some of the lighter brown. My piece was the only piece in there that was high contrast, black and white. And so just by that, it attracted a lot of attention. It was among the few pieces that had glass, so it's reflecting light from around the room, and it was the only piece that moved. And we decided not to set the chime - because the clock chimes - so not only does it move, but it makes a great sound. So, I mean, people just flocked to it.

We decided not to allow it to chime, except on demonstration, because it would detract from the rest of the show. But the clock becomes highly animated during the time that it's chiming. You can actually see wheels are moving and things are happening. And so people would time their visits to the gallery on the hour. Okay, let's go back. We'll have lunch and we'll come back - but we have to be back by two o'clock. So on the hour, people were standing as close as they could, because the hand would go to 12 and a lever would drop and things start to move. It was great; it was wonderful.

So during the opening, I was ecstatic about the reception that the clock got. Someone came to me - I don't remember who it was - I do remember, though, it was a member of the board of directors, and he asked me a question that I didn't quite understand at first. The question was, "Does this clock have a home?" And my first response, well, yeah, my living room. And then I understood. I said, well, it doesn't have a permanent home at this time. Well, we'll have to see about that was the response. And before the show closed, I got calls from the director saying that they were going to do a fund-raiser, and they were going to raise the funds for the clock, and that the museum would be its permanent home. And it would be placed in the new wing that they were building, which would be completed in about three years.

MS. LAURIA: And we're talking very recently, the date that the show was? The director is Malcolm Rogers?

MR. CUMMINGS: That's right. Malcolm Rogers was the director, and the date of the exhibition was November 2003 through February 2004.

MS. LAURIA: So he said that they're going to raise the funds - have a fund-raiser to purchase the clock so it becomes part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and that it will be on display when they build a new wing dedicated to -

MR. CUMMINGS: Permanent display; that was important; permanent display.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B.]

Going back a little bit, one of the questions has to do with influences; being a student of the arts and studying the great masters and periods. The period that probably influenced me most - or maybe not influenced, but that I was most aware of - is the Bauhaus. And James Prestini, who I believe was either taught or was a student of the Bauhaus, came to Los Angeles for an exhibition and conference, and that's when I met him for the first time. I called him the "grand old man."

MS. LAURIA: In the 1960s, do you think that's when you met him?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, no. This had to be, well, this had to be maybe a few years before he passed away, 1989 or 1990. But he came to the exhibition conference site, and I just wanted to be around him and just listen to him talk. I really wasn't interested in the conference or the exhibition, even though my work was there. I was interested in this man who connected me with the Bauhaus. He may have been a little hard of hearing, because he talked loud.

And we were going through the exhibition at the same time the conference was going on down the hall a little way, and he was looking and looking. And some other people asked questions - he was bombarded with questions. And at that time, and even today, somehow artists-young artists - feel that they can be successful if their work is different. So everywhere you go - all I hear is, "I want my work to be just different." So they're looking at other works and trying to figure out, what can I do that's different?

James Prestini stopped, turned slowly, and said, "Don't worry about being different. Just be good."

MS. LAURIA: Good advice.

MR. CUMMINGS: It was like dropping a bombshell in this room. Those words just sort of echoed through the building. From my point of view, they just echoed through the room like the only thing worth hearing. And those who didn't hear it missed the gem of the conference.

And when I think of the old masters, they never really tried to copy anyone else. They just took the work that they were doing and tried to make it better and better, and more and more. And it just grew and grew and grew. And so that's been my philosophy, even before he said it. I just want my work to be good. If it's good, it'll hold up and stand on its own.

MS. LAURIA: Now, the clock, obviously, is a high point in your career by all standards. But you've also worked - I think very successfully - with turned forms. And I've noticed throughout the many iterations of your pieces that you keep coming back to the carousel horse. And you have a couple magnificent pieces, and one which we are borrowing for the "Craft in America" exhibition, a very large turned piece that has carousel horses.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right, there are three carousel vessels.

MS. LAURIA: Right, can you talk a little bit about those and about the inspiration behind the pieces -

MR. CUMMINGS: I think the carousels are really a good example of how I work and what I try to achieve. But going back just a little bit, there was one other incident that marked a high point in my career, and I guess I didn't realize it until it was over. But in 1997, I was awarded the outstanding professor award at the university. Now, this is the other part in my life that goes really hand-in-hand with the work I create. Because it was because of the work and its accomplishment and my accomplishments with my education and my students, primarily, is what got the nomination in the first place, but to get the award was just wonderful in that that outstanding professor award, generally speaking, never goes to the arts. It generally goes to the scientists, sociology, or economics.

MS. LAURIA: There's only one award every year?

MR. CUMMINGS: One award for the entire university, once a year. So for over 300, mostly Ph.D. professors, only one is given. And in 1997, I got it. It was a culmination of all that work - going back to undergraduate school, taking 10 years to getting the degree, flunking out, not really having good grades, only having the minimum requirement to get into a university to teach and having to struggle over those hurdles, and finally getting to be a professor-to be awarded the outstanding professor award.

And because I had previously been in the White House Collection, I got a letter from President Clinton congratulating me for that award. That was huge on the university scale. And it also marked the point where, you've reached the top now, what do you do now? Because, there is no more up from here; it's only down. And I said, well, you need to think about something else. So three years after that, I decided to retire. It was time to leave. So that was another high point.

Now, coming back to your question, the carousel - the first carousel. When I did this piece - I was thinking about my life. In fact, that's what I think about when I do most of my work, or parts and segments of my life, and what part am I going to talk about. I'm normally talking about the part that

is happening right now. I don't normally go back and think about what happened, because I can't change that. If I do a piece today about how I'm feeling now, hopefully it's going to open doors and allow me to have new experiences and better experiences.

But the carousel came to me - I thought about the first times that I saw a carousel. It was in the Griffith Park in Los Angeles, and it was this wonderful old carousel.

MS. LAURIA: Which is still there.

MR. CUMMINGS: I think it's still there. Yeah. But I remember going and seeing it for the first time. All I could do was sit in the park and watch it, because my parents, who took us on a picnic, could not afford the fare for the carousel. It was the most fascinating thing I'd ever seen, I think, by that time, because I was not very old. But once again, I remember how I felt when I saw it and the grandeur of this carousel at maybe six or seven. So I decided I wanted to revisit that moment. And I made the first carousel vessel.

Now, carving carousel figures was not part of my repertory then. I mean, I used the carving tools and I understand the nature of the material. So at first it didn't seem that difficult a job to do. But I remembered I wanted it to have that magic quality, and then again, the materials, to me, that have those magic qualities are the exotics - the ebony, the ivory, the gold, the gemstones - the sparkly things. And so I decided the easiest way to create the figures would be to carve them in wax and use the lost-wax process, because you have lots of opportunities to change and fix and change and fix, until you finally get it right.

So I finally got it - I forgot how many - I think there's like seven - eight; there are eight carousel figures. And they are on spiral poles and there are -

MS. LAURIA: Let's just, for the reader, define that you're working with jewelry-sized carousel figures, which you are carving, and they were about one-fourth of an inch.

MR. CUMMINGS: Maybe half to three-quarter of an inch. But the basic part of the carousel is wood; it's ebony. Again, I select that wood because ebony is a very hard wood. This particular piece of ebony has a lot of what they call marbling, so there's a lot of light areas. And so there's lots of movement in the wood itself. The top of the carousel would be - what is now characterized as my trademark-is the lacework top. So the work would be done in one piece, basically roughed out on the lathe. The top would be cut off. The carousel figures and the gems would be placed in, and then the top would be placed back on. So it's ebony; the carousel figures are 14-karat gold, and between them are pearls, nice-sized pearls; it was the largest pearls I could afford at the time, about seven or eight millimeters.

It was done in order to get this idea out, but it was also done as a means of understanding the work that I would have to do to make the carousel, because carving these carousel figures was a very different approach to my work. The setting of the onyx stones and the pearls was part of my repertory; it was something I'd used many times. Working with gold was not difficult, and I had done some lost wax. I prefer fabrication, but lost wax is not beyond what I can do. And it came out really quite nice.

The carousel was almost done as a commission piece, in that I told a collector about the idea and what I wanted to do - this was Dr. Irving Lipton. The Lipton Collection is still probably one of the largest and best wood-turned collections. But we became great friends, and he loved the idea. And he said he would provide the money for the materials-the gold, the pearls, whatever else I needed to do this piece-providing that when it was finished, the piece would belong to him. That didn't bother me at all, because this was a way of getting involved in this particular idea. So I did the piece; and when it was finished, he loved it. And I graciously gave it to him. It represented the carousel that I saw as a child sitting in the park, so it was simply called *Carousel in the Park*.

MS. LAURIA: And all of the horses are in a different aspect of riding up and down the pole, correct?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, up and down the pole. That's important. They're all riding up and down the pole.

MS. LAURIA: So it's very animated. If you were to turn the vessel, they would almost seem as if they were -

MR. CUMMINGS: Almost seem as though they were moving. It was such a wonderful experience. I went right back to work and said, I'm doing this one again, because there's another stage to the carousel story.

I remember the day that I had the money to ride the carousel. That's a different carousel than the one in the park. I went to work, and using basically the same approach as the first carousel, I went to work on the second one. And something very interesting and dramatic happened. The carousel figures became much more interesting and dramatic than the first one. The first one was a wonderful carousel, but these new figures were more beautiful.

And by that time, I'd started doing a lot of research on carousels. I started traveling to real carousels and looking at them, and I went to books on carousels. And I understood that there were different - there are what they call standers, and these were where the horses are on the platform. And then there are flyers. The flyers were what I was working with the first time. So I started creating these carousel figures that were genuinely flyers. These figures weren't just moving; they were flying. The first ones were carousel figures that weren't connected, because of the poles. These new horses had attitude; they had flair. They were much more graceful, because now I knew how to make them.

And the pearls between the carousel figures were black pearls. The first one had onyx stones all the way around it. And the onyx stones that I had cut specifically for the carousel were rectangular and flat. So as you move the carousel, you would get a glimpse of light on the surface of the flat stones as the light hit it. But that would only happen when it moved. So my question - how do I get that flare of light when the carousel doesn't move? And so I had another set of onyx stones cut that had a slight radiance on the surface which caused the light to bounce off the surface much better.

This carousel was so far in advance of the first one. In the past, I've got the best results from my work once they go into publication, because lots of people get a chance to see it. And sometimes it takes five to seven years to get it into a publication. But I got this one into a publication right away, and it was on the cover of a wood-turning journal [*Woodturning: Journal of the Guild of Master Craftsmen*. July/August 1992] to which I had written a series of articles.

Because being in a university, publishing, showing my work at exhibition was satisfactory for the art department and the school of the arts. But it just didn't quite work when I was talking with my colleagues from philosophy or the math or the sciences, who would say, "Oh, you haven't published yet, have you?" So I decided, well, I've got to get this publishing thing. So I wrote a series of articles, which were picked up by the magazine; they put the photograph of the second carousel on the cover. It was seen by a collector, Thorn Barnes Donnely, of Donnely Directory, the publisher from Chicago, who now lives in Florida - he saw it on the cover when he was in another country and called me up on the phone and purchased the carousel over the phone along with two other pieces that were in that article. That was special.

It was one of the first times I had what I called the separation anxiety, because even though I do the work to be out there, it's not that easy for me to just push it out there, because I miss it. I think about it and I want to see it again. But off it went, and by this time, I'm on this journey and I'm really fired up. And I need to continue to work. So even before that carousel went, I needed to do the next one.

But this one was, as I mentioned - the carousel that went into the Donnely Collection-from the standpoint of actually riding the carousel. It's called *Carousel: Age of Innocence*. Now, age of innocence, what that means is when you're on the carousel, you can get caught up in all the fantasy that comes with the carousel - the knight in shining armor, the cowboy rescuing the damsel, all that. As long as you're riding this horse and you're going up and down, looking straight ahead, the

fantasy is intact. But if you look off to the side, and you realize that you're going in this circle, the fantasy is broken. The next carousel was going to be about the fantasy that is broken.

But the new carousel immediately took on a whole new level, where no longer was the carved wax cast in gold figure enough. These figures had to be more individual - even though when you cast them, you make one and you can alter it and change it. These new figures, from the very beginning, would be different characters on the carousel. And so I started this process of carving the carousel figures in ebony, keeping in mind they're only about an inch or so high. So they're very, very small.

MS. LAURIA: So these were the first horses to be carved directly in the wood.

MR. CUMMINGS: In the wood, the very first ones.

MS. LAURIA: There's much more investment of time and labor and risk-taking, is there not?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, risk-taking, all that, because make one mistake and you start over. So I made my rounds to the county fairs and photographed horses, trying to understand how the horse is put together. I even looked at some books on the anatomy of animals. And interesting enough, it came to me. While at the fair, I'd just about had enough of taking the pictures of horses, and I looked over and there was this beautiful black stallion, and they were giving it a bath. So here is this beautiful black stallion, and he's dripping wet. And when he's wet, you can see all the muscles, all the contours. You can really see the horse, because you're getting this reflection off the surface that you can't see if the animal is dry.

I took a few pictures, but just seeing it was enough. I went to the studio, cut the first piece of ebony, and went to work. It was like - I'm going to do this; it's in my head; it's in my heart. It's not in my hands yet, but it will get there. And so the first horse I finished. I put it up there and I said, boy, that's a dog. I meant literally - it had four legs, the body, head, ears, but that's a dog; that's not a horse. There's something about the relationship of the figures that wasn't a horse. So it went on a - I put the dog aside.

Putting it aside - that little pile of cast-off carousel figures became really important later on - I started another one. This time, it was a horse. I was ecstatic. It was a horse, except this horse belonged behind a plow on a farm; he does not belong on a carousel. So he goes on the pile; tried it again. The third one and the fourth one were much better; it was like sneaking up to this figure that I'm looking for. I believe it was the fifth one I said, ah, this is it.

MS. LAURIA: Looked more like a thoroughbred?

MR. CUMMINGS: It's getting there; it's getting there. But now, I'm on a roll. I can do it better. And I started the next one, I said, wait a minute. Look at the pile. It gets better and better and better and better. When is it going to be good enough? At the rate I'm going, it's never going to be good enough. So you have to say, okay, pick one. Or we'll start with the - I think it was the fifth or sixth one - okay, you can be on the carousel. And they just got better and better and better.

On this carousel, the figures are not attached to the carousel with the spiral pole. They're not flyers; they are standers; they're standing on the carousel in a majestic pose. Some of them have one leg up, and some of them have all four legs down and about to lift one of the hooves. But they're very animated, even though their feet are attached. The thing is that all of their heads are slightly turned, and they're looking off, because I realized that the world on the carousel is a fantasy. The real world is off the carousel. You cannot stay on this carousel and stay in the real world. And when you lose innocence, you become aware. And this one was called *Carousel: Age of Awareness*. Awareness means that it's time to get off the carousel, or you're going to have to turn your head, look straight ahead, and stay in the fantasy. It was the largest vessel that I've done.

I had to order more stones and more pearls, and it just sort of took on a life of its own. Once it was finished, it was everything I wanted it to be. And as I moved the carousel around and I look at the different figures, I know who was the first one on the carousel.

MS. LAURIA: I was going to ask you, do you think that a viewer would be able to tell?

MR. CUMMINGS: They haven't been able to tell yet. But I also know which one was the last one. And I actually - on the carousel, the first one and the last one are right next to each other. And I had them all lined up at one time. I have a photograph of them all lined up before they were on the carousel, and I think I have two or three that I started, but I realized, no, you're not good enough to be on the carousel. This last one, it was it. And also I have a couple that I started, but I never finished. Because once I got going, they went faster and faster, and I had more control of them. And the ones that are discarded were not actually mistakes, or they weren't damaged in any way; they just weren't the right character for that particular piece.

Now, that piece has been photographed and put into several publications. But other than an installation I put in during the outstanding professor award - I put in a small installation with some of my pieces so that people would understand what I do - it has never been displayed. This exhibition here will be the first time it's been out of my possession. So, yes, I have separation anxiety already. I took it out and I looked at it, and it didn't need dusting because of the box, but I made sure that everything was polished up and everything was ready. And I actually delivered it this morning.

MS. LAURIA: So that is the "Craft in America-Expanding Traditions" [2007-2009] national tour that will be the first time that the *Carousel: Age of Awareness* goes on display and on tour for the two-year period. Well, that's wonderful that now it will have a large audience to see it in many different cities.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, that was my goal. The work does me no good sitting at home or in the studio or in that box. It's of no value to anyone, including myself. The work has got to go out, and sometimes it's hard.

MS. LAURIA: Do you find that, in general, it's difficult to be in international collections? Do you have work internationally in permanent collections?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Any of the public museums?

MR. CUMMINGS: I have, I think, three pieces in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art collection; I have one piece in the Mint Museum [of Craft and Design, Charlotte] in North Carolina, I think. I have three pieces in the Renwick [Gallery], Smithsonian [American Art Museum, Washington, DC], one piece in the White House Collection - although I don't know where that's going to go or if it's ever going to be seen.

MS. LAURIA: I believe the White House Collection now is in President Clinton's library in Little Rock, Arkansas.

MR. CUMMINGS: So there's one piece there. And the clock, *It's About Time*, is in the permanent collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

MS. LAURIA: And any museums abroad?

MR. CUMMINGS: I have one piece in the Museum of Malawi [Blantyre, Malawi], which is in Malawi, in Africa, the southern part of Africa. And the rest - I have some pieces in some very good private collections, but those are the museums where the pieces have been.

My work, many years ago, was published in a book that National Geographic published called *Craftsmen in America* [Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1975]. I was fortunate enough to get a piece in - actually two pieces in there.

And I didn't realize what that meant until I got a call from them and they said they're doing a publication, and two people show up at my house - this is before I even had a studio - and one of them - I believe his name was Bates Littlehales, who was known for his wildlife photography. And

he is sitting in my living room taking pictures. I was doing a series of hand mirrors at that time, so when Mr. Littlehales took the picture, my face appeared in the mirror that I was holding. I was also focusing more on what I used to call body adornment. I didn't like the word "jewelry," because my work wasn't based on the value of gold and diamonds at the time. It was more about aesthetics, so I didn't like the term "jewelry," because of what people expected.

And so I got in that section, and it's sitting right next to a piece by one of Albert Paley's early pieces; it's right on the same page. And Sam Maloof is in that book, and a number of other important American craftsmen are all in that book. That was a big deal. And my photograph and statements about my work is at the beginning of the chapter they call "The Scene Today." In fact, National Geographic wasn't going to do that until they started seeing my work and other people's work-they added the last chapter, which was called "The Scene Today." And that was - just to use the words "National Geographic" at the university, whoa. Hardly anybody has had a chance to do that; that was big. Very, very big.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I know that one of the - we could say - litmus tests for artists is the amount of notoriety, the amount of recognition, publication. And it sounds to me, Frank, and correct me if I'm wrong, that publications writers have all been very positive in the development of your career. Is there any one particular writer, critic, or something that someone has said to you in the past that you've always felt was core to the essential meaning of your work that you'd like to share with us, or any particular incident in an exhibition other than what you've already mentioned? Obviously, having the clock exhibited during the exhibition at the Boston MFA [Museum of Fine Arts] was a high point. But in terms of any particular art critics - I mean, one of the things I guess we could talk about is why is it that if you are an artist coming from a craft discipline, who uses craft materials, that your work is only reviewed by publications that have generally to do with the crafts, and that publications such as *Art in America* or *ARTnews* tend not to cover exhibitions or work by artists that come out of craft disciplines?

MR. CUMMINGS: I think, generally speaking, the separation of the craftsman and the artist, which goes way, way back even beyond the Renaissance, continues, that the person who actually picks up the material and works with it is not viewed on the same level as the person who comes up with the idea. And most of the great masters had apprentices and fine craftsmen working for them. So that is part of it.

But in terms of reviews, I actually stopped allowing my work to go into exhibitions if it had the word "crafts," "wood," or "turning." If it had those words in its title, I really wasn't very interested, unless there was some compelling reason beyond that. As a result of that, I began to get reviews. The problem with reviews from the craft side of the picture is that most of the people who do the reviewing are other craftsmen. Literary people, people who are aware of the history of what we're doing, don't tend to write articles in craft magazines. So my goal was to get it outside of that; to be reviewed by an art historian, for example, would be important. So most of the reviews that I've gotten have come from people who are not in the crafts.

The craft critics have always found something critical - but that's what they're supposed to do-but it was always something where - really picky kinds of things. Things like - well, this piece doesn't have as many gems in it as this piece from back then, and they seem like they were looking for something to be critical about. Whereas the people from the literary world often were surprised by the work; the fact that it was even there was a surprise. And because it was a surprise, many of them, I don't know if they knew quite how to review it. So their comments seemed to be - at least from my point of view - much more relevant in terms of the exhibition. There was a time when, for example, I remember when, at the university, the big thing for any faculty in the art department was to be reviewed in the *Times*.

MS. LAURIA: The *Los Angeles Times*.

MR. CUMMINGS: The *L.A. Times*. If the *L.A. Times* picks up your work, then it's okay. So my goal

became to get a review in the *L.A. Times*. And I accomplished this because an art historian saw the piece - who was writing articles - and he reviewed the piece. And it got picked up by the *Times*. I believe even today, the reason they picked it up was because it was reviewed by an art historian. If it had been reviewed by another craftsperson or a gallery person from the crafts field, I don't think the *Times* would have picked it up, and there was also a photograph of the piece in the paper. So that was huge.

So having the work reviewed is very, very important, but I think it's essential that it be reviewed in context. And context, for me, is not which is the shiniest piece of wood, which is the biggest vessel, whose rocking chair rocks the best. I want it reviewed from an aesthetic point of view and based on content. And so that has begun to happen.

I have a couple of names that I can give you. Okay, Eudorah Moore has written some things, which I thought was very important, because Eudorah Moore was one of the few people at the time who had what I call the overview of what was going on in California, specifically, but crafts in general. So if Eudorah Moore said something about your work, that, to me, that was important.

MS. LAURIA: And Eudorah Moore, during this time frame of which you were speaking, was the director of the California Design exhibitions that were associated with the Pasadena Art Museum.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's true. And she also served on boards for the arts in Washington.

MS. LAURIA: The National Endowment for the Arts.

MR. CUMMINGS: National Endowment for the Arts; she served on those boards. So she is a person who had a chance to see it all. So if she happens to zero in on your work, what she has to say is relevant, extremely important. What you have to say is extremely important. And the art historian whose review in the newspaper was important.

I have not - I've had my work reviewed by a lot of turners, but I don't even think about them. In fact, I have been annoyed at many of them, because of the kinds of things that they pick on. Well, he doesn't use the right tool; he uses this technique or that process. I'm looking at the piece - how would you even know what tool is being used? It's because they saw a demonstration, which I don't do anymore. I will not demonstrate at a lathe-turning event. The first time I tried, I was told by the audience that's not the right tool you're supposed to use for that.

MS. LAURIA: Well, there has been criticism by artists who work in craft materials in the last decade, and I think it's a valid criticism, that there is too much writing that goes on about process, technique, and not enough about meaning, context, influences, inspirations. And I think that is - I think we have made progress. I think that our journals that are published in the fields now, they are seeking out writers who have a broader context. So I think we will see an improvement in that area.

MR. CUMMINGS: I've seen an improvement over my years. I look at it from the standpoint of how people respond to the work. And there are three responses I look for. If I go to an exhibition and listen to what people are saying, and they'll ask, what kind of wood is that - they're looking at what I call gifts from nature; Mother Nature does some absolutely incredible things with wood and other materials. And in many cases, all you have to do is present it and you're going to be a hit. Another response is, oh, my God, how did he or she do that? Now, they're looking at technology, technical prowess, which is extremely important. Without the techniques or abilities to manipulate material, you don't go anywhere. So every artist in the world has to have a level of technique and understanding of materials before it's time to go to work.

But once you understand your materials, once you understand its limitations, and you understand your tools and what you're capable of doing, then it's time to go to work. Up until that time, I don't want to be bothered with it. I don't want to look at other pieces of pretty wood. It just makes me envious. I'm not interested in learning techniques that are not pertinent to where I want to go. When somebody is in a room when it all comes together, all you hear is - [gasp] - and silence. Then, you know that what you're looking at is important.

So I mentioned Dona Meilach and Eudorah Moore. Well, I didn't mention Dona Meilach - she's written several books. Eudorah Moore, yourself, and another young man who was a curator for the Oakland Museum, Tran Turner. I don't know what Tran is doing now, but he did a story. He decided he wanted to do an article, and he wrote a story on my work. And it was wonderful; I absolutely loved it. It was like he was saying the things that I didn't have the words for in such an eloquent way. So I think, God, if I could just talk that way, that would be wonderful. If I could just organize my thoughts that way - my thoughts come in like little clouds that keep floating around, and they pass through one another, and I have to grab at them and pull them together, and eventually I get them in an order that I can work with. But if I have to talk about it, they're constantly moving, and I can't get my hands on them. And there simply aren't enough words - or I'm not aware of enough words in the dictionary - to come up with the kinds of words that I would like to say about the work.

I have found in the classroom, I had to work very, very hard at it to be able to get in front of a classroom and talk about what I had done, what I have accomplished, because I'm teaching basic design. I know basic design upside down and backwards; I know what works. I've tried it out; I've practiced it. My students have worked with it. I know it works. So I can get up in front of a classroom and talk about design. And design to me is simply organization. How big should it be; how small should it be? There needs to be a rationale for every decision you make about the work. Because when I'm in the studio, I look at it, I sketch, and I say, well, no that's not quite big enough. It needs to be that big, and the reason it has to be that big is because of all the things that are around it.

MS. LAURIA: So you're operating from the same formal issues that the fine art sculptors - the same formal issues as volume, lines, scale, mass.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, all of it. Those are my words. Those are my words. And interestingly enough, if you look at the design elements and design principles, design elements are things. They're tangible. They're all nouns. Design principles are things, you know, movement; they're all verbs. And so I'm using a visual language just like a person writes a book. And it's almost the same format in many cases.

So if anything, I am a visual communicator. I've got something to tell you that I think is important, and I want you to take a second - actually, I want you to take a fraction of a second to take a look at this.

MS. LAURIA: And that brings up two significant questions that require a bit of thought. One would be, what do you hope the viewer will take away from your work when one is in its presence? And secondly, when you are gone, what would you hope you have left behind for the next generation? How have you enriched the field? What was the significance of Frank E. Cummings III having been here as an artist?

If you wouldn't mind just thinking about those and addressing - I know you've touched upon a little bit about what you want the viewer to take away, but if you have a piece - you know, any piece - the clock is obvious because - it's an awesome piece. It's almost unfair, because it's like Wendell Castle's *Ghost Clock* [1985], which is a trompe l'oeil, and everybody stands in front of it, and you are wowed. It's the wow piece.

But let's talk about maybe a quieter visual piece. If I'm to stand in a room in the presence of your work, what would be the emotions you would like to evoke? What would be the sensibilities, the concepts that you'd like me to walk away with as I leave your room, your inner sanctum of artwork that you've placed there for me?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you are right in terms of the clock. It is like a blockbuster. No matter who sees that clock, it's just going to knock them off their feet. It's dramatic; it's big. But I have always felt since I was very small that there was a reason for me to be here. This cannot be an accident. My problem is that I don't know exactly what the reason is. But it's important that I know that there is a

reason. And that's enough for me. So when it comes to the work, when I think of the big picture - because I look at it from the standpoint of a big picture, and then there's a more - smaller one that is more specific - but from the big picture, I hope my work tells the viewer that I care and am or was here.

MS. LAURIA: That you care about what?

MR. CUMMINGS: I care about life. I care about people. I care about this earth, the sky, the rain, the trees. It's all so very important and very special, and I care. I care about us as human beings and how we get along, how we relate to one another. And I hope my work shows that. I can't imagine an artist working with those kinds of images or objects and not care.

When I pick up a piece of wood, I know that - and I have picked up wood that was ancient. When I look at a tree and I see all of those annual rings, I don't just see numbers. I see all the things that have happened to human beings during that time. It's all recorded right there. And when the tree is felled, people say it's dead. Well, it's not dead.

[END TAPE 3 SIDE A.]

However, I know have a huge, huge responsibility to care for and present this piece in a way that, if nothing else, represents what it was before it fell, and then hopefully what I've added to it. So every piece of wood to me is really important. It talks to me. It tells me - I remember looking at the annual rings on a piece of wood, and I thought, right here, with the creation of this ring, is where Lincoln was assassinated - oh, my God, look at that. And interesting that the tree's annual rings often shows what is happening to us - if there is a drought, it's recorded there. If there is disease, it's recorded there. If there was a war taking place near a tree, you can actually see it. So that's really important.

MS. LAURIA: Those are the things that you're getting out of your natural materials that you are trying to then manipulate, but do you -

MR. CUMMINGS: If nothing else, tell that story. Manipulate it in such a way as that the viewer who comes up and sees it can see that history, that story, that strength, those weaknesses. All the things that have happened to us, hopefully, is there.

MS. LAURIA: The whole story encapsulated into a vessel?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes. I realize that it's like my work has been one frame out of a million frames, which is motion like a roll of film. And somehow, I have to tell the whole story in one frame.

MS. LAURIA: But aren't you also telling a story, Frank, about whether or not overtly or subvertly [sic] about perfection, or the striving of perfection, and how maybe the attainment of perfection is not possible, but one should struggle towards that ultimate goal? Because in your work, I definitely see - and I don't want to talk about technique or technology - but I definitely see that you are taking things, pushing them to the outer limit of possibility. So If I'm looking at your work, I have to then consider this. When you might call it, in more humanistic terms, caring, I call it more about challenging.

MR. CUMMINGS: There is that element. The point is to communicate as effectual as possible. I'm always pushing the edge. How far will this go? How far can I take this idea? And so my work has been noted for pushing the edge, thus *On the Edge Naturally*, which is in the Smithsonian. That was all about being out there on the edge, but that's where I'm supposed to be. That was a statement to all of my colleagues.

But then there's the smaller story. This is the one where it's not enough for me to kind of get my hands on it. The other one is elusive, and it changes all the time. But there is generally a particular feeling or statement that I want to make at that time with this piece that is unmistakable, that is so blatant and so clear.

MS. LAURIA: So it's very direct. Before you sit down to take a natural material, you already know what that material has to say in its finished state?

MR. CUMMINGS: Exactly. One of the ways that I differ from many other craftsmen is that I don't grab the material and then start looking for the answer in the material. I already have the answer, and I look at the material and say, is it capable? Is it possible to get it within that material? If it's not, I move to another one. And so I find the material or materials that are capable of making the statement that I want to make.

So if there were one piece that I would want you to look at, that would hopefully tell you everything that I want to tell you, other than the clock, would be the last piece that I finished, which is called *C.C. in Diamonds*. Now, that piece came about because there was a clarity that I had about my relationship and my feelings about one person. The older I got, the harder I worked at it, the clearer it becomes. This is something that I don't believe can happen overnight. This happens over a period of years, years of trials and tribulations and all that sort of stuff.

The materials I had used in the past didn't have the qualities or the ability to make the statement that I wanted. One of the reasons for switching to 18-karat gold - because 14 doesn't reflect the right color. The reflection of light that I wanted, I cannot get in what I call the lesser stones or soft stones, like the garnets. I saw that light in a ruby. I saw that light in a diamond. The reflective qualities of those stones are much higher. On a scale of zero to 10 in hardness and refractive quality, they're 10, whereas all the other stones are sevens, and eights, and sixes, which are fine, but I needed more. I came across a piece of wood that had all of the qualities that I could ever want in a piece of wood, and I had to set it aside for several years because I didn't have the other materials.

Eventually, because of the clock, I was able to afford diamond. Now, I didn't want perfect diamonds, because the reflections from a CZ [cubic zirconia] is as good as one from a diamond if you don't know the difference. And even people who know the difference have to look through magnifying glasses to tell the difference. I wanted materials that would evoke a sense of, "Is that a diamond?" So there has to be something in the stone that evokes that response. If it's clear, it won't. But there has to be something in there. So there has to be enough of what the diamond industry calls imperfections that make you think, well, that can't be a CZ, that must be a diamond. And so I ordered stones that had those qualities. I went through a batch of stones looking for the right ones, and you have to be able to see them with the naked eye, because only a jeweler is going to put a loop up there to find out.

The other stones were opals. I've had these opals for a number of years. I've had the opals cut specifically for my work. I wanted opals that were basically white, but when you look at it, this color just pops right off them. I've seen beautiful dark blues and blacks that were much more valuable. I didn't want that. This had to be more of a white stone, because it had to be in contrast to the dark wood. But at the same time, there is a whole rainbow of color in each and every stone. So these all come together.

If you look at my vessels with the lacework over a period of years, you can see a number of changes as the work developed. In the beginning, I wanted the largest vessel possible out of a piece of wood. So if the piece was the size of a coffee can, if the lacework was very small, the vessel was actually larger. But in this case, the lace had to be much larger, which means I'm losing a lot more material, which has always been hard, because the material is so precious to me, so to lose a lot of it was difficult.

But I played with what I call angles and waves, and what I call revolutions, that evoke certain kinds of responses. I call them cycles. If it's a low cycle with small numbers of waves or low frequency, it produces a more quiet, subtle kind of response. If there are more waves with higher frequency, then the response is more animated. And on top of that, I can angle the wave. I can actually angle it down, keep it flat, or tip it up. So I've been looking for the right angles that evoke the kinds of responses I'm looking for, and I found it some time ago.

And in this piece, *C.C. with Diamonds*, it's perfect. It is perfect. It is wider than most. It has a lot more flair to it. How I divided those waves into segments that almost come off like leaf shapes is

very specific. There are specific numbers that work around that piece. The number of diamonds in it is specific in relationship to the number of opals. The height of the piece is perfect in terms of the width.

MS. LAURIA: So you're really talking about proportion?

MR. CUMMINGS: Proportion - hard-nosed proportion, going back, even as far back to the golden rule.

MS. LAURIA: The golden mean?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, the golden mean. And there's some variations on that. But I'm very aware of those proportions and how they work, and how they've worked through history. So it's there. And it's the best piece I've ever done, in terms of achieving the ultimate of my work.

MS. LAURIA: And that piece was just completed, Frank?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, just completed. It has not been exhibited yet. It's been in a few minor publications. But it's not out there yet. It will be awhile.

MS. LAURIA: So do you see your future working in your studio, again, as a sole practitioner and continuing forth using primarily the same materials? Do you see any major shifts that might occur now that you have more time to devote, since retiring from teaching, to your work?

MR. CUMMINGS: No, I don't see any major changes or shifts. I've done the crosses in the church; I want to do others. I've done the linear pieces, which we haven't had a chance to talk about much, that Irv Lipton affectionately named them magic wands. And they are based on a kind of magic. I would do more of those and more vessels. I have ambitions of doing another clock, because that clock that is in the Boston Museum was the first one. And the one that's in here is better than the first one.

MS. LAURIA: In your mind.

MR. CUMMINGS: In my mind. It's mind boggling to think about. I hope to do one of those. But interesting enough, you would think that over the years, your skills get better. You get more awareness of what you're doing and what you want to do; you would think that the pieces, it would go faster and be easier to do. But it's harder, and I go slower.

MS. LAURIA: Maybe your standards are higher?

MR. CUMMINGS: That's exactly it. The standards are higher; I'm requiring more of myself and more of the materials, and as a result, each piece takes even longer to do. So yeah, I will continue to work. And I have materials in my studio that are sort of sitting, waiting to go. But it's not quite right yet.

Timing is important. All the pieces come together, and I'll wake up at three in the morning, and it's time to go to work; all the materials have to be there. I can't just say, okay, now I have to go out and get this. They all have to be there. So I have materials in the studio that are just sitting, waiting to go. But it's not quite ready yet.

MS. LAURIA: Well, do you sometimes use an invitation to an exhibition to propel you or motivate you to do a piece that maybe you have been thinking about for a while but there's been no set reason why you had to do it at this moment, but suddenly you get an invitation such as, "We're looking for the forefront of what's possible in furniture now, and we're going to invite you to participate in that exhibition." Does that stimulate your working process at all?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, it does if the invitation is open enough. I have had a couple of exhibitions that were more specific than I wanted - it wasn't exactly what they expected it to be. So I have entered a few exhibitions, and the pieces that came out I thought were really wonderful, but it was not what they were thinking. My interpretation of the requirements or the limitations was different, and as a result, the piece did not get the reviews that I was hoping for.

On a couple of occasions, I got a letter from a colleague that said, don't worry, Frank, as usual, you're just too far ahead of them. Wait - and sure enough, if I wait four or five years, all of a sudden they see it, and it's brand new, and it's exciting. But that's the way the commissions are: "I saw this piece and I would like something like that in my collection," but the piece they are talking about is six years old, seven years old. And I try to get the client excited about what I'm doing now. I said, that piece was on the cutting edge back then. This is the cutting edge now. But that doesn't happen very often, because the collector has to take a risk to buy into a new piece, and not too many of them are willing to do that.

MS. LAURIA: Well, another question that I should ask is, are you involved or what involvement have you had in the national craft organizations? And do you feel they've provided you with any kind of community? Obviously, you've had your community at the university - your students, your colleagues, your administration. But do you belong to the American Craft Council, or are there any -

MR. CUMMINGS: I have been a member of national organizations for very brief periods, primarily because I was expected to be part of a professional community. They want to know, do you belong to any, so I want to say yes. So I was a member of these associations. But I personally didn't find anything in them that helped me go forward in my own work. I don't know. I looked for it, but it's hard. It's hard to talk to a colleague; for example, if I were to talk to Bill Hunter, who I consider a very fine artist and colleague, Bill and I would talk about everything in the world except wood, lathe, vessels, sculpture.

MS. LAURIA: I bet you talk about fishing.

MR. CUMMINGS: Fishing comes up. Yes, fishing comes up. But I have found that with other colleagues. When we get together, the best times are when we don't talk about that stuff. Because you're an expert at what you do, I consider myself extremely knowledgeable about what I do, and I don't need to know more about what others do to make my work better. And I hope they don't need mine.

And so for professional organizations, that's kind of what they talk about. The feedback that I got from the work that I was doing was not much help because they were mostly craft-oriented kinds of organizations. I know people who are buying different machines because this one does this and this one doesn't do that. I talked to a colleague; he's buying a brand new lathe because he can move the switch from one side to the other.

MS. LAURIA: Well, there are people who feel that part of their reason for being, which may not be your reason, is a sharing of information, a networking. I mean, people do join organizations like the Furniture Society, American Craft Council, you know, more specifically to SNAG - the [Society of] North American Goldsmiths - because there are times to convene where you get to see colleagues from all over the United States. But you may be a person who likes to work more individualistic, and more on your own. And these sort of organizations, although they may provide you with a lot of social outlets, you don't find professionally that they work so much for you.

MR. CUMMINGS: I wish I had said it that way.

MS. LAURIA: It's just two ways of looking at it.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, that is true. And I respect them; I respect what they do. But the goals that I have set for myself were not addressed so much in those organizations.

MS. LAURIA: So that brings us to our last question, which I know you're not evading, and then you can add anything else that maybe I have forgotten. But what is it that you want to be remembered for, as Frank Cummings, the artist? As your wife, C.C., had asked you. [Cummings laughs.] Why don't you repeat that little story, when we did our first day of interviewing? When we left, C.C. was there, of course, and at the end of the night - I should say at the end of the day, she thought about, well, what probably - what do you still need to address in this interview process? And what was her

question, Frank; why don't you think about -

MR. CUMMINGS: When I am gone, what do I want people to know? It's hard to describe that in terms of the work that comes out of the studio, because there is so much more; there's more to me even than that. I try to put as much of me as I can into the work. But it's not possible to do it all.

I want to be remembered as a teacher who gave the students everything I had.

MS. LAURIA: No holds barred.

MR. CUMMINGS: No holds barred; there was no question that the student could ask me that I would not find an answer to or a response to. I wanted to be known as a really good teacher because I had a good teacher. And out of respect for him - and we talked about Ray Hein - I had to be good for him.

MS. LAURIA: So "good" in your terms would be defined as committed, compassionate?

MR. CUMMINGS: Committed, compassionate.

MS. LAURIA: Knowledgeable?

MR. CUMMINGS: You have to know it. How can you teach it if you don't know it? How can you teach someone to do it if you can't do it? That has always been my philosophy.

MS. LAURIA: Passionate?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, absolutely. There is no greater passion than what a good teacher can experience when he is in the classroom and the students are there and the light comes on. They are open to it. They understand it. There is nothing more exciting to me in a classroom than that particular moment. And I remember when this young lady came into my classroom and I discovered this was Ray Hein's daughter. And Ray told her, when you go to school, you take Frank Cummings's class. What a responsibility that was.

Another time, a young man came into my studio and he said, I work with Sam Maloof; I'm one of his protégés. And Sam says before I come back to work for him, I have to take a design class from you. What am I supposed to tell this student? Sam Maloof sent his student to me to learn about design. What a huge responsibility and what a great honor. So yeah, that's really important to me. And I hope that dedication, that passion, can be found in my work.

My father was a great inspiration to me, after the fact - when he's down the road and very, very old, all of a sudden I realize what that man did. He was a great man. But his light was not allowed to shine. The timing was way off; society wasn't ready. So I have a responsibility to him, too, because if it were not for him, I would not be here doing the kind of things that I do.

So all of those people - Ray Hein, Tom Ferreira, Sam Maloof, James Prestini - I owe them big time. And so I want the world to know that for a few moments, I lived in their shadow, and that I am greater because of it. I want them to know that there are other people out there who have hopefully lived in my shadow, my students. I have some really great students out there. Not all of them are artists making things. They're wonderful teachers out there and they're good people.

I hope my work tells that part of it. And if nothing else, I have had, over the past 43 years, a relationship with one person, with C.C., that has been an incredible journey with the highs and the lows. But coming through it and having such a huge respect for her and what she means to me, hopefully, that's coming through the work, too.

MS. LAURIA: So she would, then, be considered your muse?

MR. CUMMINGS: I have actually used that term in several presentations. She is indeed my muse, no question about it. She doesn't quite see it that way, but yes, she has been and continues to be my muse. She was responsible for helping me get through school when I was so dog tired I couldn't read the book; my eyes wouldn't stay open. She has sat there with the textbooks to help me get

ready for exams. She was there when I'm organizing paperwork for presentations, because she's much more literal than I am, so she can see things on a piece of paper that I miss. She's been my proofreader. She's been there every step of the way.

MS. LAURIA: Well, she's also the life partner, a facilitator, and a muse. Nice relationship to have, if you can have it.

MR. CUMMINGS: If you can have it; it's extremely rare. I have been fortunate to have found it.

MS. LAURIA: Then maybe if we do have five, 10 more minutes left on this disc, two of the questions we haven't really thought about, maybe because they're not so relevant to you. But one of them is describe your relationship with viewers. Is it important that your work be shown consistently in galleries, that you sell, or has that not been such a huge goal for you?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, it was a goal at one time, but as it began to happen, I discovered it wasn't nearly as important or successful as I thought it would be, because dealers, gallery owners, have a completely different agenda than your work. And they will try to steer you into areas that benefit them more than you. The other thing is that I understand they have to make a living and they've got expenses, light bills, and so forth, but I could never see that they deserved half of what I did, half of my life. Nor could I see doubling what I thought the piece was worth, because now you're talking about my client, the person who is really interested in my work. So I don't see they should pay twice what the piece is worth in order for them to enjoy the work. So that has not been a successful venture for me, although I have really tried. I wanted to be in name galleries and have the big reception, which is always fun and exciting when your work is out there and people are looking at it. So I've always wanted that, but it has not happened with galleries or dealers.

I even tried one time to get an agent. But they were used to dealing with the performance end of the arts or painters or sculptors. But when I put my work up, what is that, they would say. Well, what do you do with that? And so, how to market my work became a huge issue. And there are very few people out there who understand the marketing of my work. And the marketing wasn't exactly the word I wanted to use. I wanted to get out there and get responses, but marketing takes a particular strategy, which I found very, very difficult to deal with. Having to talk about the price of my work is about the worst thing you could do to me.

MS. LAURIA: That's why artists oftentimes use gallerists, gallerists and dealers to do that for them, because the artist doesn't want to be put in that position.

MR. CUMMINGS: No, I don't want to be put in that position. It would be actually easier for me to just give it away than to sell it. It's very, very difficult. So no, I've not had a good working relationship with dealers or galleries.

We haven't talked too much about technology either. But technology hasn't had what I would call a great impact on my work, because the technology I use is ancient, time-tested. I don't use computers. I don't have any what I call fancy tools. I have had to make a few tools to do a very specific job in my work, and I use them a lot. But I think what I have done with my work, once it gets out there, the technology that it presents has had some effect on the field, because some people have said, "Oh, I didn't know you could do that with wood." Or, "That's wood? I had no idea that was wood. It looks like another material." They had no idea that the material had those kind of possibilities. So my work has had an effect on the field in opening up more possibilities. They have said, I didn't know you could use your work to make a statement. And so there are more people out there. I'm not taking credit for all that, but the work has been out there changing attitudes about me and my work.

And as a result, I've had people call me up and say, well, that lace thing you do, how does that work? And so whenever I did a workshop, I would never talk about my own work. It was what got me there. My job there was to teach you how to do your thing and get it out there. I want to teach you how to do a Martha or how to do a James. I don't want to teach you how to do a Cummings. I

mean, I've already done that. That is one of the things that has made my teaching successful; I've focused on the individual. Even when I've got 25 people in the room, I deal with one at a time.

MS. LAURIA: About the technology aspect, do you see yourself at this time in your life as spending as much time to investigate a whole other arena, a whole other kind of material, to go into a combination of materials, or to continue to still investigate what is hopefully a limitless -

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, I have narrowed my work down to a very small section that has limitless possibilities. I do not see myself buying a new tool, investigating any new materials or new processes. I don't need to try out new glues or adhesives or finishes, new sandpapers, no. I won't be doing any of that. I will be focusing my time on perfecting what I already have and what I already know. There is still a long way to go and that is my job. Hopefully, I'll have enough time left in this life to do it.

Wow, I think we've covered it.

MS. LAURIA: I think so. Maybe just do you foresee, Frank, that another opportunity like the two that you had to go to Africa might present itself? I mean, is there another place in the world that you're yearning to go? India, or another investigation about how other cultures use vessels, use ritualistic objects, anything like that?

MR. CUMMINGS: No.

MS. LAURIA: You don't have that wanderlust?

MR. CUMMINGS: No, I don't have wanderlust. I love my life. I love my studio. I love where I live. I don't have any ambitions of - well, I would love to see as many of the great masters as I possibly can in my lifetime. And so if I have to travel to see them in Spain or Paris or Madrid or wherever, if the opportunity presents itself, I would love to do it. But I'm not going out of my way to do that.

MS. LAURIA: It was only a question because I know there are several artists who get almost their total inspiration from their travels. And obviously, you're not one just looking towards your journeys. Your journey is an inner journey.

MR. CUMMINGS: Inner journeys, yeah. Those external journeys are tough on the body. They're hard. And I dearly love the ones that I've had, and they've been very, very important to me, wouldn't give them up. But I'm not interested in doing it again. I'm not. I don't feel the need to go to another country to be inspired. I'm so inspired by stuff around me that I can't imagine having enough time to get all that done.

But I'm very picky with it now. I know that things are changing. My eyesight is changing; the joints in my fingers are changing. And I don't lift heavy pieces of wood anymore because it hurts. And so based on all those things, things are coming in gradually to a point, to a tighter focus. So there will fewer pieces. I don't see myself doing very large pieces anymore, although the largest piece hopefully will be another clock, which is like five and a half feet tall. But no, I don't want to do a bigger vessel. I don't need to make them shinier. All the things I have to do are already here; I just need the time to do it.

Things like this exhibition that is coming up here is one of those pushes, because I'm in really good company with the exhibition that is coming up. I'm in really great company at the Boston Museum and the White House Collection. So being seen in the company of the greats - what I'd like to do is continue to work, and there are a few pieces that I will still do that sometimes no one will see except C.C. And there are a few pieces out that she has that no one has ever seen and probably will remain that way, because it was designed for her. It was designed for the look on her face when she saw it. Once that was accomplished, my job was done and it was time to move on.

MS. LAURIA: So how many pieces does C.C. have in her private collection?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, unfortunately, not as many as she'd like. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: I imagine they had snuck out of the house somewhere.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, there's a few that she's so upset about, because she said, oh, that's my piece. Well, more pieces have snuck out of the house and gone into collections and publications. And she understands that, but yes, she has a few pieces. She has maybe five pieces that are hers.

MS. LAURIA: And very personal.

MR. CUMMINGS: Very personal to her, yeah. Maybe five or more. There's a few pieces, yeah. But she gets the chance to see. Although she knows *C.C. with Diamonds* is hers, she can't own it.

MS. LAURIA: Because you would like to place it in an institution?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, and I want other people to know about *C.C. with Diamonds*. So having that piece in her personal collection, not a good place for it to be.

MS. LAURIA: Well, as a muse, I guess that is part of her responsibility.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, she has to give up some things.

MS. LAURIA: All right, well, thank you very much, Frank. That's the end of our interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]