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Oral history interview with Robert
Beauchamp, 1975 January 16

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Beauchamp on January 16, 1975. The interview took place on Sixth Avenue, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is Paul Cummings talking to Robert Beauchamp on January 16, 1975 in his studio on Sixth Avenue. What does the initial J stand for in your name?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: John. I've never used John.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were born in Colorado? Did you grow up there?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I grew up there until I was 19 then went to art school in Colorado Springs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to primary school, high school?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Right. In high school I had too many study halls and decided to take art. Everybody told me I could draw, so I took this class and became interested. There was a teacher I liked very much. R. Idris Thomas. He's long since dead. He was a Welshman who was very enthusiastic and had been to Paris and kindled my interest in painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you make drawings at home as a child?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: As I child, yes, but say from six to seven o'clock, say, from six to sixteen, I didn't do much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have other interests?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: As a 12-year-old I was interested in chemistry and geology, as a lot of kids are. Sports, of course. In high school it's basketball and football.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see those dumbbells there. Do you use them anymore?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: They're decorative. I bought those in a moment of wishful thinking.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The large one is heavy, isn't it?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: About 80 pounds.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have brothers or sisters?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I have three brothers and three sisters, a mother and a father that deserted us when I was three. Very poor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Big family. Were you right in the city of Denver?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you remember, because you grew up through the Depression?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Vivid memories. It was like growing up in a tenement. We never called it a tenement in Colorado, but it was the equivalent of a tenement in New York. It seemed everybody in this building was in the same predicament that we were. The fathers had deserted, had left, so this whole building, which was huge, had widows and children. It was a big apartment house. We played together and everybody knew each other very well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were the schools like that you attended?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: They weren't particularly demanding academically.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are you brothers and sisters older or younger?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I have one younger, the rest are older.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you are almost the bottom. I am curious about this one teacher who got you going in drawing and painting. Was that in the school, a regular class you could take?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Right, well, what he did, the way he taught, in Denver there was a Carter Memorial Prize, and he would devote his time to those students he thought were talented, so they would win the Carter Memorial Prize and he would neglect all the rest of the students. So I would be in the art room about four hours a day and his class would be over there and he would be spending his time with me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What is that prize?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: It was a scholarship to Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center in Denver.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things did the others do?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: We did art, painting, woodcarving--he was a great carver, knew a lot about it. And drawing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then you went off to Colorado Springs, which Boardman Robinson started. Did you study with him?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Yes, I knew about him before I ever got there and I was always planning to go there. A friend of mine, a year older, had gone to Colorado Springs before and told me all about it. I'd go down there and visit him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you'd been there and seen the place?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Right, and Boardman Robinson was an exotic figure to me. He'd been to Russia, New York, a New York cartoonist, and a very imposing man. I really admired and respected him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was big physically, wasn't he?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Not that big, but his presence was enough to dominate a whole gathering. Especially when you're a kid.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was your friend, did he become a painter?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Well, he's a commercial artist. There are two of them. One is a commercial artist named Roy Watson and he's in Denver. Another was Bob Romsen [unsure of spelling], who was really a brilliant artist, you know, for a kid. He got sick. Rheumatism, I don't know exactly. He moved to California. Those two were my friends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there a museum in Denver?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: There's a half-ass museum on top of a municipal building. Every Monday I used to go to the library and the museum, look at art books, at French painting, which my teacher told me to look up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So he was very influential in terms of sending you out and making you look at things?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I used to spend Saturday mornings at his studio at his home. Very influential.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did your brothers and sisters think of it?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: None of them were interested in art, but it was a democratic family. If he wants to do it, let him do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: They didn't kid me or make fun of me. My brother did kid me one time. He said, "I quit football because I want to spend time painting." I said, "You quit football because you're afraid of your hands." There was a little pressure like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was Colorado Springs like? What did you do there, what were the classes and the people like?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: We drew from life, painted from life, still life. We'd go out into the mountains and paint the landscapes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you given special problems? Or did you all go out and paint landscapes.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: It was a problem enough just to learn how to use the paint. I don't think it was a particularly brilliant school, but it was a very good experience. I always thought Robinson could draw well and I still think so. I used to spend a lot of time drawing. Live class and landscape.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were there twice, right?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I came back after the war.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there a difference then? Did the military experience affect your attitude?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I don't think it changed much. My friend named Gilbert Artes [?], he was an artist and we both went to Colorado Springs together, both joined the Navy together and both came on leave together and both went to Colorado Springs together. We kept in touch with people so we knew what was happening. Not a great deal of change. Robinson was still there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there other instructors you remember?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: George Vander Sluis and Edgar Britton. They were the two others, primarily.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you come to go to Cranbrook?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I decided, I got very conservative, I wanted to make money. I wanted to go to Cranbrook, take up pottery, and get my degree, because I was in love with a girl.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Pottery?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I'm not going to tell you the girl's name. It's not important. It didn't turn out right, but that was the idea behind it, to get a degree.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was she the one that got you interested in pottery? Or was that the school?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I don't know what the idea was. It was a stupid idea. But the idea behind it was you could make more money selling pots than you could selling paintings. You probably can, but it's not a very good way to make a living anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find Cranbrook after Colorado Springs?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Frankly, it was intimidating, claustrophobic, and Shangri-La-like, out-of-this-world and so manicured. Difficult to become adjusted to it. It felt false. I later got to like it very much. But the first impression was like living in a hothouse.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were your instructors at Cranbrook?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Wally Mitchell, he's still there. And Maija Grotell was the pottery instructor. I only took pottery for a couple of months, then I switched to sculpture. William McVey was the teacher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You never pursued sculpture.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I'm thinking strongly of doing it again!

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was your sculpture like?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: They were carvings from stone and wood. I loved it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why'd you stop? Was there too much conflict between the two?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I wanted to see what painting was like. I enjoyed doing it, but I didn't know what I would do with it. And I wanted to see what painting was about. So I switched to painting and haven't done any sculpture since.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see, so the change really came at Cranbrook?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were there '47-'48?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Then I skipped a year to go back to Denver for academic subjects. Then I went back another year, and left in 1950, I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you think of the Navy?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: As you get older you think it was a marvelous experience. But when you're there, it's not so marvelous. We went around the world. I was in the Armed Guard. You know what that is? In the Navy, it's a gun crew on Merchant Marine ships. We were at sea, the longest a month, then every week we'd hit a new spot. I was in the Navy three years and I was at sea about a year and a half. The other year and a half I spent in San Francisco.

PAUL CUMMINGS: As I remember, your earlier paintings seemed like complicated, in those days. Simpler, then they seemed in time to get complex, more inches, certainly got larger. Were you interested in animals, for example?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: My wife who is a dog lover says I'm not interested in animals at all. [Laughter] I like they way they look, as an image.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about Tenth Street? You were around Tenth Street in the wild days of the Tanager, March, and the Hansa and all of those things were going on. Does that have any meaning for you? Is it useful? Interesting? Provide anything?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: It was all interesting. They were nitty-gritty days where everybody was out trying to establish him or herself. It was very close. I think all of those people on Tenth Street liked each other. They were all united in some kind of an esthetic stance. It was exciting in that way for a few years, then it fell apart. When the Tanager first started there was a great deal of comradeship and adventure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were an early member, weren't you one of the founders?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I wasn't really a member, I was just one of the early ones to show there, because they asked me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The thing that interested me was that Tenth Street provided an alternative for people who were more adventuresome than the people who went to the Art Students League, for example, or the National Academy. There weren't really many places to show. There was [Sam] Kootz uptown, Betty Parsons, and a few other galleries.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: That means that the second generation Abstract Expressionists really had an outlet when many of these people [artists showing in the uptown galleries] were beginning to make it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, but many of them weren't really abstract painters.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: No, they weren't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Tanager had Wesselman, Alex Katz.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Actually, I wasn't abstract when I showed there, either, so I take that back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that was a conscious reaction against abstraction or did just half of the people, of that age group, somehow were interested in figurative painting? They all had some association with abstract painting.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I can't speak for others. I felt life was passing me by. I was being too esoteric, going through life with blinders on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Abstraction didn't appeal to you?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: No. Still doesn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about Provincetown? You had exhibitions up there at the Sun Gallery, various places. Were they useful?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Anytime you had an exhibition, it was good. You are exposed. I sold a few things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One didn't get all that many reviews by having a show at Tanager?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: No, but you got more than most people. If it weren't for the Tanager, and meeting, say,

Dick Bellamy, I would never have gotten in the Green Gallery. All those things work together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about Great Jones? You had a couple of shows there. Janet Cason?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: She had a nice little gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did Bellamy come into all of this?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Bellamy was a personal friend whom I met through Miles Forst, and whom Miles and Jan and other people talked into being the director of this gallery, what's the name of the gallery?

PAUL CUMMINGS: The Hansa.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: The Hansa. [Laughter] That's where I met him. But I'd know him before he became the director because he was around. He was one of the group.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had a couple shows with him at the Green, right?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find that? The Green was such a curious gallery that all of those almost totally unrelated people. That was really the first uptown gallery you were associated with. Was he able to do anything for you as a dealer?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Yes, I think he was responsible for both the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art buying paintings. He sold a lot, a lot for me, in those days. As the gallery developed I was out of character, because it became a Pop art gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you feel about the gallery's shift?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Actually, I was kind of glad it came along. Because Abstract Expressionism had become, to me, dull and in such a stalemate. This was like a fresh wind. At least you could see something you could react to. Those people--Claes Oldenburg, others--were just brilliant.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You got a Fulbright about '59, '60. You went off to Italy. How did you pick Italy?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I always thought Italy would be a nice place to go and it turned out it was. We ended up in a little town about 12 miles from Florence that's called La Romola, a little farming town in the mountains. We traveled to Rome and to different cities in that vicinity, but not much further. I worked constantly. It was the only thing I did. I didn't speak Italian very well and I didn't want to talk about the weather, so there wasn't much I could do except work. I worked very hard, got a lot of work done. It was isolated.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did your work change because of the Italian influence?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: No. I say that that abruptly. You can have subtle changes of which you are not very conscious. I was painting the same things that I did in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Later you got a grant from Walter Gutman, whom I guess was a great patron saint to everybody in those days.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Yes. He's still making movies, still around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You stayed in his house in Provincetown?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: For a whole year. I really enjoyed it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is the winter different up there?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Walter Gutman's house had only one heated room and that was the bedroom. There would be snow in the corners of parts of the house. I had to dress warm to paint. But he was very nice to let me have it. I didn't pay any rent. That was an eventful year, too, because I met my present wife, Nadine. Nadine Valenti is her maiden name. Now we've been married about seven years. [married in 1967]

PAUL CUMMINGS: To go back to Tenth Street, with artists living on Broadway, Tenth Street, Second Street down on the Lower East Side, did you see many people?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: A hell of a lot of people. Do you remember those days? Were you around?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh sure.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Remember those loft parties they used to have? Everybody was a friend.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Friday night on Tenth Street!

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Yeah, the Club. Did you go to the Club?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Once in a while.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I used to go to it until it was boring and political and dull. But at one point, when people you respected used to stand up and give speeches--Motherwell, de Kooning, Kline, and others. But then it became kind of bickering and small time. Hundreds of people knew each other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Going to the Club and listening to somebody say something, was it an interesting experience in terms of what that person had to say or a cultural experience or an intellectual one?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Hopefully all of those things. In those days, Abstract Expressionism was vital. People had ideas, would talk about them, and everybody was very tremendously interested.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Through the '60s you had exhibitions in Chicago, California, here and there at the Graham Gallery. Did they sell things for you? Produce activity?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Most shows you have out of town, in colleges, I've found, don't make any money. They expose you. Perhaps you may get a teaching job in the sticks, but as far as money is concerned it's worthless. But they all add up. I hadn't had that much exposure, so it's good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Recently, in '72, you had a show at the Stern Gallery in New Orleans, a gallery I don't know that much about but has a fairly zippy reputation.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: If not the best, it's one of best in New Orleans. I was down teaching at the University of Louisiana and I met her. I had a show at the college and she saw it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It does go one from another, doesn't it?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you come to get Robert Frank's gallery, French and Company? Did they find you or did you find them?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I found them. This is a tape recording and I don't want to talk about that experience. It was a disaster. I sold work, but in the long run it was a disaster.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think about what goes on in a picture in terms of how the images develop and open up, move, how a particular image changes, has its own kind of attitude. You do a lot of drawing. Do the drawings serve as beginnings of paintings or are they separate?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Most of my drawings have been a kind of painterly approach to drawing. It's just one way of working. Kind of a spontaneous image finding way of working.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you develop images in the drawings that then turn out larger, grander, in a large painting?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I think everything works together. I may develop images in a painting that I may put in a drawing. It goes back and forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about color? If I remember you had so paintings very very impastoed, very thick at one point. Was that build-up a result of changing or just working on the painting until it comes out?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: The best of them are very spontaneous, poured from a can, gallons of paint. Then you have to wait until it dries and then you have to push the paint around to get it moving. Some people think it's sculptural.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have ideas of what it's going to look like?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I've got two different kinds of ways of working. One is you know damn well what you are going to do, the other is to find it. After awhile you feel you are finding the same thing all the time! A bad thing, but I'm sure if you planned it all the time you'd find you were planning the same thing. You have to push it both ways.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get to the point of making such large drawings? Some are 70 inches long. One does not see others making drawing of that size.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: It's liberating. It's fun. You can put your whole body into it. Start out on the floor and think slow and you can work into them. I didn't do it for any other reason other than it just seemed like a nice thing to do. You can't sell them. Not many people want them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you work on the floor or on the wall?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: The drawings are started on the floor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The large drawings. The smaller one your work on on the table.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the paintings?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: The paintings are up and down, on the floor and on the wall. I'm splattering, I'm pushing the paint around. You can see better on the floor. You sponge. You push the paint around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you ever thought about where all the creatures go in terms of how things work together over the years. Is there a continuity of ideas? Those birds that go zoom. There seems to be so much activity all the time. There seems to be a cast of characters, always doing something.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: A cast of characters? Well, they are all Beauchamps, for better or worse. It doesn't particularly mean anything that they are Beauchamps. Every time I paint something, I try to make it as significant as possible. That's the only thing I can say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think of them as symbols?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: No. Sometimes I do. If I put a camel dancing behind an apple with a burning match in front of the apple, that's very symbolic to me. But I don't necessarily want to tell people about it. I would rather have them have their own ideas, which could be better than mine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the female figure, the dancer, which is usually a female dancer. Does that come from a person?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: When I was with Jackie Ferrara, it used to be very much like her profile. But I don't think so anymore. I usually try to make a sensuous female form.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about your terms of scale, say a drawing 16 inches long will have a tiny still life that's three inches sitting someplace. Or there will be some animal form or a figure a foot and a half long that seems very ambiguous, spatially, in relation to all the different pieces. Do they work together or are they fragments?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Generally, hopefully, everything is inevitably placed. A big donkey, 60 inches long, and a little tiny match, that thing is placed there just because it had to be placed there for subconscious, probably unconscious reasons.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Somebody had written that you are interested in parody and spooky things. Is that true?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: At the time, I probably did, but it's not generally my stance. I don't paint a horse--what's the word, anthropomorphic. I don't necessarily think I'm doing that. But on the other hand, I don't paint a horse that I think is realistic. So when you distort a horse, you make it like the cave men made those paintings. They were not horses, they were just beautiful drawings and therefore they were anthropomorphic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do make up your animals? Some don't look like a particular brand of animals.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I make them up. My imagination is not, that is, I don't set out to make an animal weird. I don't combine, say, a line with wings to make it a griffin. I think that's kind of futile. But I do, say, make an animal similar to a horse, but more horsey than a horse looks. I try to emphasize its own character.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I come back to the speed. I don't remember ever seeing drawings that are frozen. There always seems to be some kind of activity.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I guess that is conscious. I want to make things as dynamic as possible. I used to think that you couldn't make a dynamic still life, like my friend Leonard Anderson, who I think is a very fine painter. It makes it more interesting, more animated, more real.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you developed any theories of why they do this or that?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: I don't like the idea of philosophizing about paintings. I don't like the idea of talking about them in an esthetic sense. I do have ideas about how a painting should look. The subject matter should look--I mean if I have to do a self-portrait, you want it to look a certain way, to reveal your emotions or capture what you think your character is. You have to have a certain look. And I have ideas about space, the organization of a painting, how a well-painted picture should look.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you mean, "a well-painted picture"?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: It's very complicated. The first thing is that it has to have personality, to be worth looking at. I'm not, say, like Lichtenstein. His paintings are always a delight to look at. They're strong, not anemic. They have that plus to begin with. In speaking of my own work, it has to have a sense of my perception of reality. If you've painted as long as I have, you have ideas about what is plastic. A lot of these ideas come from Hofmann. A lot of times, you throw that out. You sacrifice plasticity for effect, at times. Together with what you are trying to paint, subject-wise, and the way it's painted is an intricate relationship. There's a lot of hope, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you edit your work a great deal? In terms of lining things up and saying those three are fine and those two are terrible.

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: As I go along.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your paintings of the last year seem to have a higher keyed color. Is that true?

ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: Yeah that's true. I have ideas about color the way I have ideas about a lot of things. I'm trying to make color work psychologically, plastically.

END OF INTERVIEW

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