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Oral history interview with V. V. Rankine,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with V.V. Rankine on March 2-22, 1990. The interview was conducted at the artists's home in Washington, D.C. by Liza Kirwin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

MS. KIRWIN: This is an interview with V.V. Rankine for the Archives of American Art. It's March 2, 1990 and we're in her home in Northwest Washington, DC.

First, I guess we could start with the beginning, if you could give us your birthday, where you were born, and where you grew up.

MS. RANKINE: Well, my father was a New Yorker. My mother was a Bostonian. So I was brought up in New York on Long Island. I was born in 1920 in Boston.

MS. KIRWIN: Then another question. Once you first decided to become an artist or how did you first become interested in art? Were your parents artists?

MS. RANKINE: Not at all. There was no artist in my family that I know of. My mother was a writer and she wrote some books but never pushed that too hard. I thought they were very good books. But she was the kind of person that wanted to sell you the world, rather than sit down and work very hard in a library.

MS. KIRWIN: What was her name?

MS. RANKINE: Heather Hemingway Leshar. Leshar was my father who is Swiss descendant. Otherwise, I'm very Boston. The reason I had trouble in school, because I was this really dyslexic child, and I never really knew how bad it was until I remember going to see an old housekeeper of ours when we were little children. My sister, who lived in France for many years, she said, "let's go and see--". And so I had to drive to upper state New York.

But the interesting thing was she showed me some letters that I wrote. I couldn't believe it. They were upside down, inside out. Of course I couldn't keep up in school. My mother didn't know what was wrong, but she just took me out of school. But that isn't the perfect solution because you still know there's something wrong.

MS. KIRWIN: What age were you when you were taken out of school?

MS. RANKINE: Around seven or eight. One of the first schools to know about the subject a little was in the Beaver Country Day School near Boston. I went to live with my grandmother and went there for six or seven years, the last six or seven years of school. There I'll never forget the first interview with the headmaster. He asked me what my age was, which was 14 or 13 at the time, and then he said, "Oh." I was dropped down in classes with kids three years younger or four years younger. He said, "We'll just put you in the right class."

You can imagine what that did to me psychologically. Anyway, that made a great difference in my life. Dyslexia doesn't leave off - my sons had it to a degree too. But now more is known and you're not dropped from one class to another. I can remember in this school, being the country day school which I went to, two teachers gave me oral exams, which I always thought was very generous. Because you're just so busy at exam time, you just sit down and have one kid talk it all to you. And that made a tremendous lift in my life because I knew it all. I just couldn't write it.

But at this school, the head of the art department was a Mrs. van Ness, Mary van Ness. And believe it or not, she's had a few rather important shows lately. She was an artist.

MS. KIRWIN: Is that van Ness like -

MS. RANKINE: v-a-n and then N-e-s-s.

MS. KIRWIN: Okay.

MS. RANKINE: And she lived in Boston and always had a gallery there. Her name isn't known but she recently

went to some museums. She died recently at quite an old age. But anyway, she influenced me I think with my first idea of becoming an artist. So then I got out of school in 1939. And then my mother said, "What are you going to do now?" I thought well I might go to college; I want to study art. And she said, "It's the war. Everyone's going to be doing something for the war. You ought to work. Otherwise, you'll be out of things."

I remember I came down and got a job in Washington. I was just a kid. It was a boring job with a British purchasing agency. And so then I told my mother how boring it was. This is a long story. It doesn't have that much to do with art. Nonetheless, you asked the question and I'm answering it.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: Tell me if there's a time limit.

Then I said to my mother, "This is just boring. All I'm doing is filing." I wasn't very good at filing and then she sent me this ad that said, "Emergency committee to save the Jewish people of Europe." She said, "This sounds interesting."

MS. KIRWIN: You were talking about the emergency--

MS. RANKINE: A committee to save the Jewish people of Europe and what was beginning to be known then about the concentration camps and the murder of the Jews. I went to--a couple of guys from Israel who came to start trying to do something in this country. And indeed they did, not that America did much. But they passed some legislation and tried to inform. No one could believe it, even though we had some people giving testimony who had escaped Auschwitz.

Anyway, I did that for about three years almost. And then I can remember writing this rather funny note to my boss saying, "Well, now the war is almost over. The situation was moving a bit and I am going to become an artist." It did seem rather pompous. I went to New York and studied there.

MS. KIRWIN: Was your sister already in New York at this time? You had said you were living with your brother-in-law and sister.

MS. RANKINE: Yes. Now what happened in the meantime, I had a very young marriage to John Magruder. And it's Agnes Magruder, she was my sister-in-law.

MS. KIRWIN: Oh, I see.

MS. RANKINE: Yes, it was at that time my family was still living on Long Island.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: And they hadn't come back into New York to live. So it was the perfect arrangement to stay with them for room and board. They were also going to Connecticut, coming and going. But still it was a wonderful experience in that they were there quite a lot at the beginning years. Then they moved to Connecticut entirely.

MS. KIRWIN: When were you married the first time, your first marriage?

MS. RANKINE: In 1944.

MS. KIRWIN: Was that when you were in Washington? Or did you get married when you went to New York?

MS. RANKINE: I met John Magruder in Washington. He was in the Marine Corps and it was kind of a very quick young marriage kind of thing. Then he had to go back overseas. So there I was in New York--It was a wonderful entry to the art world.

Gorky was just extraordinary, as many people who have come in contact with him.

Did I read you the letter? I found a copy. I don't have the actual one, but it's in this catalog from the Museum of Modern Art. And I think it's the most touching letter that one artist has ever written about another. It's from Bill de Kooning who was his great friend. I'll read it because it's so like Bill. I remember Bill being this way and speaking this way.

Now this is Arshile Gorky in this show. It's called "Fourteen Americans and the New American Painting". I'll just read as part of the Gorky write up in a piece on the Arshile Gorky memorial show. This is a letter that Bill de Kooning wrote to *Art News* when *Art News* had said that Gorky was very influenced by de Kooning and de Kooning wanted to set the record straight.

He said, "In a piece on Arshile Gorky's memorial show, and it was a very little piece indeed, it was mentioned that I was one of his influences. Now that is plain silly. When about 15 years ago, I walked into Arshile's studio for the first time, the atmosphere was so beautiful that I got a little dizzy. And when I came to, I was bright enough to take the hit immediately.

If the bookkeepers think it necessary continuously to make sure of where things and people come from, well then I come from 36 Union Square. It is incredible to me that other people live there now. I'm glad that it is about impossible to get away from his powerful influence. As long as I keep it with myself, I'll be doing alright. Sweet Arshile, bless your dear heart." And of course that's after Gorky had died. That's very Bill de Kooning, the way I remember him.

MS. KIRWIN: Do you remember the studio? If you could describe it at that time.

MS. RANKINE: Oh, yes. When he first lived there, it was on 36 Union Square. The entrance was on 16th Street and Clarins Department Store was across the street, if you remember that part of Union Square. You went up some quite big stairway and it was sort of like an early loft building, but not really a loft. It was a studio. It had an entrance hall and a little room that he used as a store room. And then you entered into the big studio, which had a skylight, not in the roof but on corner of the roof. It was a wonderful studio, marvelous light.

Then when I was there, Maro had been born, the youngest daughter. Once you have a baby in the main room, it can't be your studio anymore. Gorky was a good carpenter so he built the kitchen. He had built a couple of more bedrooms. So it was a family room and not the studio. We went across the street and rented a studio on top of Clarins Department Store. I would come back every day across the street and I would walk to the Ozenfant School, which was on 20th Street, just the other side of the 3rd Avenue El.

MS. KIRWIN: How did you decide to go there and say not the Art Students League at the time?

MS. RANKINE: Well, my father had a great friend who was a collector. In fact if you know the museum in Richmond, his name was Catesby Jones. You can see the wonderful paintings of his that are now in the Richmond Museum. I remember he used to tell me about Picasso, Leger--all of those. He said never paid more than \$1,000 for a painting.

And so my father said, "Let's ask him." And he said he knew of Ozenfant. And he said he thinks he would be the most interesting school. That was a smaller school. But it was the GI Bill of Rights time. The other students from the GI Bill were Bob Rauschenberg, who didn't like Ozenfant, Jack Youngerman, who did, Manush Yeti who is shown in New York and is known. He was the cousin of the Shah of Iran, interestingly enough. I still see him in Long Island. He was with Betty Parsons at one point. So was Jack Youngerman in the early days.

Ibram Lassaw. Ibram was older than us. At that point, you could live on \$90 a month in New York. And he wanted the GI Bill of Rights money. He'd been in the war. He already had his studio on 6th Avenue. So he wanted to go to a school that would accept him to come only for criticism, not to work there with the students because he had already been shown. He went to the Art Students League and they rejected him. And interesting enough, even though Ozenfant, you can see his photo here, Ozenfant was supposed to be the stickler of the age, nonetheless saw immediately who Ibram was and accepted that he could come for criticism between 12 and 1 every day. He would sign him up for the GI Bill. So that's how Ibram was there.

I remember Bob Rauschenberg used to always be out at the local bar, particularly during the criticism period. He just didn't want Ozenfant to be scolding him or talking to him. And after a month or so, he left and studied with Hans Hofmann, which was another great school I could have gone to at that time.

But I stayed with Ozenfant, who was a rigid teacher. You had to do four coats of paint on every painting. You had to start with a drawing, then you had to transpose it onto a canvas three times the size, two times or three times. You could decide how large you wanted it to be. But it had to be transposed mechanically, so you learn mechanical drawing. You can imagine what--the four coats of paint on a canvas, what it would look like.

I remember once when I got home I had this awful painting finally finished and carried back. And Gorky came in as usual from the studio across the street, and he said, "What did you do today V.V.?" as he very often did. I showed him this thing with hesitation. Instead of saying why did you whip this thing to death, he said, and it's so brilliant, "I appreciate the fact that you had the interest in this work to keep going into it. But next time V.V., try and have a little more wonder in it." It's a phrase I remembered all my life. How could you forget it? Now who else can remember a phrase that a teacher said to you that many years ago. That one just rang. I very often think it's the most important phrase. Does a work of art have poetry in it or doesn't it? It's really to me an answer. That's one of my Gorky stories.

Then I want to talk about Ozenfant.

MS. KIRWIN: Yes.

MS. RANKINE: In spite of his rigidity, he was interested in his students and you knew that he was someone. He gave of his personality. He was rather dramatic. He'd come in from his studio to where the students were at about five steps down. And a quick criticism time. Then he had an assistant teacher who posed as the model. He'd do a drawing or he'd do other kinds of work. He'd come to criticism. At the door, he would say very often, "Egypt was the great civilization bar none." He did that very often. I still see Jack Youngerman and I still see Manush. I still see even Lassaw. And we always say, "Egypt was a great civilization bar none."

His teaching of line was more interesting, more vital. I never got over having to put the four coats of paint on somehow. Also the mechanical drawing of transferring mechanically I felt didn't have much poetry in it. But that was just a question of technique.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you continue with those techniques into your own painting years after?

MS. RANKINE: No. I dropped oil paint as soon as acrylics came. They weren't around then. But when they came, I went into acrylics, and I've painted with acrylics ever since. I'm called a sculptor, but a lot of my work is on the wall. On occasion, it comes off the wall. When I work in Plexiglas, it's carpentry, in the sense that you cut it out and piece it together. But I still work on wood. Then the wood comes off the wall by about three inches. And then I paint on it. I'm doing some of these again. In fact, recently my gallery had sold a few. One went to New Guinea. When I was in India, I was glad to hear that.

MS. KIRWIN: And where is this?

MS. RANKINE: My gallery in Easthampton. So you never can tell in life. So I'm doing some more. All of that is acrylic paint. I find that the method of acrylic paint, if you put on enough coats, you sand between each coat and make absolutely sure that it's dry before you go on with another coat, that it's held very substantially as well as oils. The color and the resonance seem to me to hold very well with acrylic. So I have no problem in terms of durability.

MS. KIRWIN: What of Ozenfant's teachings do you think have made the greatest impression on you and that has been carried through in your work through your paintings and to your sculpture today? Do you think there are aspects of his teaching--

MS. RANKINE: I'm focused drawing his mind and his purism affected me very much. In fact, I'm still purist. Did you see the drawing right near the door of Ozenfant? His purist drawing is--exactly what I mean, his feel for line. He was called a purist. In fact, I think he coined the word.

Even in the introduction to my first show, it's Jack Tarkhoff--had written the introduction. He said, "Mrs. Rankine has painted these images for nearly as long as I have known them", which is since the summer of 1948. "The idiom is entirely original. She was a student of Ozenfant's. And it is to him that she properly owes something of the purist attitude of her work." So there it is, by Jack Tarkhoff in the introduction to my first show in New York. So I think there was an influence certainly. Then after studying two years with Ozenfant, I heard about Black Mountain College.

MS. KIRWIN: How did you hear about it?

MR. RANKINE: Of course from Gorky. Bill de Kooning was asked to teach that summer. He was married to Elaine then, and we all went together sitting up all night in the train to Black Mountain, which was about 20 minutes drive outside of Asheville, North Carolina. Bill was teaching. Elaine was just there as his wife.

She became interested in, and a lot of extraordinary people were there. At the time, she was particularly interested in Buckminster Fuller. I can remember Elaine de Kooning running around helping Bucky pull up the old Dymaxion dome. Then she played with him in one of the plays in this Black Mountain book. It's a photograph of Bucky Fuller and Elaine de Kooning in this play, which Arthur Penn, one of the students directed. And Art was just my age, a student. I can remember his yelling at them from the back of the room. Well, he did produce some interesting films. He was the younger brother of Irving Penn, the photographer. There were many extraordinary people at Black Mountain College.

But I thought having first lived with the Gorkys and had this, in a way, wonderful association with Ozenfant and Gorky, and then going to Black Mountain and studying with Albers and de Kooning--and other teachers that were there, Richard Leopold, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller. Ted Dryer, the director, his brother was married to my cousin. So that was another connection to Black Mountain. So I heard about it from various sides.

My particular friends were Ken Noland, Ray Johnson, Art Penn, Kenneth Snelson, the sculptor, and others. But

those are the ones I particularly remember as friends at Black Mountain. I studied with Albers color class. I studied with Bill and I'll always remember Bill's first remarks. He stood up in front. He was saying what he felt about art and how he got going, and how important it was to feel very emotional about it, and saying this sort of thing. Then he came out and put his face really near the students and he said, "You may not think know what I'm talking about, but I do. I do." That's another--of how many years later can you remember what one teacher says. But that beginning--and then sticking his face right up amongst his students and saying that, that's very much Bill de Kooning.

In that letter that I just read about Gorky says something about Bill de Kooning certainly. It's kind of wonderful. He was so different from Albers, who again was a little rigid in the Ozenfant sense. And the color classes, you learned something new. You noted Albers' books so it can all be read now. But he hadn't written them yet. He was just devising this system.

MS. KIRWIN: What were you doing in his class? I'm just curious.

MS. RANKINE: We were just doing his little things with color. Then you'd start with this color, and then you would make it darker, darker, darker, lighter, lighter, lighter. Then you'd mix it with one other color. It was purely a lesson in water color mostly.

I remember one of the things was there was the square he had used. But he wanted you to put a color around a color that would project the inside color out. I remember that was one of the lessons. And you tried and tried and tried to get the best one you could so you could show it to the class. That was interesting. I can remember when he came to you, it's very rigid in the same sense as Ozenfant, you had to do it this size, this way. You mix this color and that color and no other color together. You know, that sort of rigidity.

But when he came to your studio and everybody had a small--I think it was called a study. It was about the size of a small single bedroom--but still, it was year around. It had a desk. It had an island easel or a wall and a place to hang your coat--a chair. That was about it. That was your study. And he would come. If you asked him to come to your study, he would come to give you a critique. Then it was quite different from in the past. You then saw that he was another person. Albers was very touching in that way, but so was Ozenfant. And that's what a true artist I feel maybe is.

MS. KIRWIN: Now how did he differ with these more one on one critiques in the studio?

MS. RANKINE: Well, he'd try and find out how you felt, what you felt you were trying to do. I remember he said to me once, and I think it's very true of life, he said, and he sure practiced what he preached, he said, "V.V., you have a tendency to roam too much." Now I was just a student. But still he said, "It's much better remembering your future career to stick to one aspect of things." Albers did that. I didn't. And yet it's interesting, I often think of that remark.

But now, Black Mountain--of course, John Cage was wonderful. I didn't study with him. I started to study with John Cage, but then I didn't know how to do music. So after about two lessons, I couldn't do a scale on a piece of paper. So I dropped out of John Cage's. I just went to all of the little concerts and so forth that he did.

MS. KIRWIN: Do you think a lot of the students there were experimenting with things, felt that they could for instance, if you knew nothing about music, take a class with Cage?

MS. RANKINE: They could have. But when I got there, I saw that the others at least could read music. And I'd never done anything in music in my life, so I realized that that was not for me. I remember I think I did some sculpture with Peter Grippe, who was there.

Richard Leopold was also there, but I couldn't study with him. But I remember he came. He had two young children. And he drove up from New York in a hearse. He had bought this old hearse. And it was fine because he said it was big enough that he could keep the children in there and it could be their playroom and all these things. He was always driving around the campus in his hearse. It wasn't a big campus. It was just the lake and this one single road around the lake to the studies building.

I think the only employees besides teachers, I think there was a cook and one kitchen helper. There were never more than 90 students at any given time. You had your week when you were serving and picking up and washing the dishes. Then I think you had two weeks, and then the next two weeks there'd be another group who would do it. You made your own beds. The people who lived in dormitories kept the dormitory up. And many many interesting artists poured through Black Mountain.

MS. KIRWIN: What were de Kooning's classes like?

MS. RANKINE: Well, I think I told you at the beginning that he bamboozled everybody that way. "They don't

think I know what I'm talking about, but I do." And he wanted people to paint actively – just start out and don't plan it or anything, just bombard the canvas.

MS. KIRWIN: That must have been quite a shift for you coming from Ozenfant.

MS. RANKINE: Well, Albers saying mix only these two colors and the square has to be exactly this size. So it was a complete opposite, which I liked. And there was the chance of having some poetry in it, which came out of Gorky.

Certainly that letter says a lot. I know when I've been to see de Kooning over the years, and I did see him, nobody's allowed in now. We live in Long Island in the summer, right on Fireplace Road, right near where a lot of those artists live, but right near de Kooning. I used to go and see him. Elaine would write on the board, "V.V. Rankine coming to see you" because he was beginning to forget names inevitably. You'd come in and you saw he didn't have a clue who you were. I'd always bring a photograph of Gorky and then he'd look at it. He'd kind of look at it and look at it. And then he'd say, "I know him V.V."

Now no one's allowed to see him. I know last summer, that Lassaw was here with his old friends--I think even took the thing to court saying, "It can't be good to keep him there a total prisoner, even if he has Alzheimer's and he can't remember anybody." It still might mean something for an old friend to drop in. The thing now is that he's completely closed off. It's sad.

MS. KIRWIN: I wanted to go back to Gorky's studio for a moment. And could you talk about the other artists who were in his circle then? Were there artists also living in that building on Union Square?

MS. RANKINE: I didn't know. I don't think so. I think he had the only studio, although I might be wrong. I don't think he had friends in the building itself. But his dear friends were right nearby of course. We said de Kooning. David Hare was around a lot, Frederick Kiesler.

And curiously enough, near neighbors along 14th Street were Raphael Soyer and Moses Soyer. You'd think that their painting was so different that they wouldn't be constant friends, which they were. That was kind of a wonderful thing about Gorky. You didn't have to paint the way he did. I know he was a very close friend of Raphael Soyer. And Jean Renault was a life friend. In fact, he and Agnes had gotten married in California and Jean Renault was one of the witnesses. He was a life friend of his.

MS. KIRWIN: Was your sister-in-law an artist too?

MS. RANKINE: No. She never was, not in the least. At first she was very helpful to him. He had many tragedies in his life and difficult times. Just as he was becoming known, there was a big fire in the house and studio in Connecticut. And lots of canvases, work of two or three years, were burned just like that. That was a terrible thing, just at the point when he was beginning to be with Julian Levy, to have shows, when a few museums had asked for works. He had lots of them.

Then he had this cancer bout and was in the hospital in New York. That's when they came back in. I was living in the studio then with Agnes' sister, Esther, Esther Magruder who was a ballet dancer. And we paid rent to them. But then they would come and stay. I can remember I had a little bed, which was in the storeroom that just had a screen when they were there. They needed the big room. So I had this little bed in the storeroom where a lot of work was. But thank goodness, that was never burned. But the fire in Connecticut was devastating.

I would say the Gorkys stayed all through the summer at the Magruder farm in Hamilton, Virginia. I used to go there too. It was there that Gorky painted from nature – in the 30s in New York, very poor. He taught at the Grand Central Arts School, but still very poverty stricken, not selling; just trying to gather enough money to get art supplies to do his work. Then he had some breaks and some success.

I think he was visiting Jean Renault, and they were married I think it was across the border, not California, not Utah. I've forgotten, one of the Western states. They were married at the Bucket of Blood Inn. I wasn't there. I didn't know them then, but I knew them shortly after that.

James Johnson Sweeney was always a supporter of Gorky, and used to come to see the studio and talk to him and so forth. So those are the ones I remember. Of course, I'm sure there were many others. But I remember de Kooning, Kiesler, David Hare, Raphael Soyer, and Moses too, and James Johnson Sweeney. You know, I was just a kid. There were others certainly, but I just didn't know who they were. But these were the ones that I knew afterwards, and Jean Renault.

MS. KIRWIN: Let's talk for a minute about your first run and one person show at the David Herbert Gallery in New York. That was 1962.

MS. RANKINE: Right.

MS. KIRWIN: And Jack Tarkhoff wrote the introduction. Can you talk a little bit about how the show came about and your relationship with Tarkhoff?

MS. RANKINE: I've never studied with him, but I met him when he was teaching here at American U. Various friends of mine were studying with him. People talked about him and I felt the spirit of his presence. I remember he lectured a couple of times and I went to the lectures at American U. He's just a wonderful man.

As a matter of fact, several summers when I was then married to Paul Scott Rankine, and that's why--my name is Rankine--We were living next door. I rented a little place next door to the Tarkhoffs in Provincetown. That's where he lived. He also had a studio in New York. And Provincetown is an interesting town. Who did I mention? Hans--

MS. KIRWIN: Hofmann.

MS. RANKINE: Hofmann lived there, a couple of houses down. I met a lot of artists through the Tarkhoffs.

MS. KIRWIN: When did you first go to Provincetown?

MS. RANKINE: This was in the 60s. And then I even wanted to buy a house. We wanted to buy a house for the summer. And then I thought well, it's so much farther to communicate from Washington. And so I started looking around the Hamptons. And my father kept saying, "You've now inherited some money. Buy some land. Buy it on the water." And so, I bought this kind of lovely land near de Kooning's house on Fireplace Road. Springs is the unfashionable side of East Hampton. It's where most of the artists live. Jim Brooks is nearby, a wonderful man. And I've always loved it there--

[END OF CASSETTE 1, SIDE A.]

MS. RANKINE: I greatly admired--a neighbor at one point and a life friend. He comes to see me every year, and we talk about my work. Now I don't know of no other artist really, I mean if I ask someone to come. But that kind of communication of those days, which I remember even at Gorky's studio, of Gorky going to see another artist like John Graham and they both talking about their work.

This is one of the things that I think is rare in the art world today. And in New York particularly, everyone sort of to go to someone's artist studio, which are hidden because they're so afraid you're going to copy it or something. The spirit has completely changed and it has much less of the feel that there was in those days, which I just remember.

MS. KIRWIN: Do you remember Graham ever coming over to Gorky's studio?

MS. RANKINE: Yes, um-hm, um-hm, right.

MS. KIRWIN: What was your impression of him? He seemed to have been a larger than life personality from his papers. We have his papers at the archives.

MS. RANKINE: Yes. He also worked hard. But I remember just the spirit of his presence as being singular and a little bit offish, something like that.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: That's about all I can remember. I can remember shaking Mondrian's hand, and I'll never forget that. Mondrian called Gorky on one of those early visits to New York and asked if he could come and see him, and Gorky was thrilled! And he told all of us that we could be there. He would introduce us to Mondrian, but then we'd have to get the hell out and not come back for an hour. I think that was it.

But I remember looking into that face, interesting white face of Mondrian. He always wore a business suit. No other artist around wore anything but blue jeans. But Mondrian always wore this blue suit--and glasses. But I remember distinctly looking into his face and getting a feel of it. Gorky was thrilled that he had called him. Well that's again you see the communication between artists, more than there is now--

I knew Rothko in later years, and he was wonderful. He was always glad to communicate. Or of course Tarkhoff knew all these people, and I met a lot of people. Then there were the Five Spot and the bars. First it was the Five Spot. And then the next place was on Irving Street. I forgot the name of it. What's wrong with me? The other place--

MS. KIRWIN: The Cedar Bar.

MS. RANKINE: The Cedar Bar. We used to go there with Tarkhoff. I can remember once coming in and Philip Guston sort of getting up and going towards Jack and saying to Jack, "We wanted to go down and see the museums in Washington. Do you know anyone in Washington?" And Jack just turned around and said, "V.V." So I said, "Yes, you can come and stay with us. This is our telephone number and address. You can see the museums. There's a trolley car." We lived in Cabin John then. The Cabin John Trolley used to go right in near the museums.

I thought that meant in a couple of weeks I'd hear from him saying, "Can I come next week?" The next day, I luckily was back in Washington. The telephone rang and it was Philip Guston; he was in Union Station. So I told him I put a place on the dinner table, but I was cooking dinner so I couldn't come for him. He'd have to take a taxi. So he took the taxi to Cabin John to have dinner.

Then the next day he said he wanted to meet Duncan Phillips. And I called Duncan Phillips. He was wonderful. I knew Duncan Phillips in those days in the 60s, early 60s. I don't know where I met him. And of course, Paul Scott Rankine was then private advisor to the British Ambassador--Chief Correspondent--there was some party where I met Duncan Phillips. We immediately talked about art. Then I noticed I was asked to the house. I was always sitting on his left--an ambassador's wife would be on his right.

So you could talk about art. And that meant very much to me. I have spoken to Eliza--about my memories and what he used to say about his feelings. In fact, he used to say to me, "Who do you think I should buy now?" How about that? He even took some of my suggestions.

MS. KIRWIN: What did you suggest that he buy?

MS. RANKINE: I think the Rothkos. Oh then, he came to the house to see the Tarkhoffs. I think there's only one small, not very good Tarkhoff in the collection. And he looked at this one around the corner, which was in the house at that point. He then said, "I'm going to buy a Tarkhoff. Then he died three weeks later so he never bought that.

And then of course I said Gorky. It's funny, but as much as we agreed about painting and everything, I remember that I think Phillip said, "Well, I haven't felt him yet," which is an interesting remark, a beautiful remark about art. I haven't felt him yet, interesting. Well, he doesn't have a Gorky in the Phillip's collection, and should have.

MS. KIRWIN: Well, I was talking about the first show.

MS. RANKINE: Oh, yes.

MS. KIRWIN: How did it come about at this gallery in New York?

MS. RANKINE: I was called E.R. -

MS. KIRWIN: I wanted to ask you what V.V. stands for and when you changed your professional name from E.R. to V.V.

MS. RANKINE: Right. I think it was two years later. This was my first show. My first show at Betty Parsons was - and then Jefferson Place Gallery. I was living in Washington. Here I am E.R. Rankine. Jefferson Place Gallery, big mistake. The year isn't on it. You should always put the year on an announcement.

MS. KIRWIN: I have a list of your exhibitions somewhere. And it was somewhere between--in the 60s.

MS. RANKINE: Right. Well, my first show at the Jefferson Place was 1963 and that was E.R. Rankine. So I think it was '65 at the Jefferson Place. My first show at Betty Parsons was '69. By then, it was certainly V.V. Rankine. And how did I change? Oh, I didn't want to be called Elvine because everybody calls it Elvine. I think it's an awful name anyway. So my nickname was always V.V., so I switched to V.V.

There was also another tale about that. When I was 13 years old, I was a figure skater then. I was runner up to the novice champion of the United States, which isn't much in those days. So much has happened in skating since. But anyway, I was on the ice rink in New York. I was going to school in Boston at the time. It was vacation time and I skated the Boston Skating Club, which most of the champions came in the early days starting in Boston. The whole America entry seriously into international figure skating--started in Boston.

So there I was on the rink in New York. The clubs you could exchange. Katharine Hepburn was there. Then it was a little above Icelands, the old Icelands rink was the New York Skating Club, and above was a restaurant. I was talking with my couple of friends, and Katharine Hepburn was at the next table. She came up to me and said - and I got up like a school child. She said was I from Boston. I got up like a school child and said, "Yes. How did you know?" She said, "I can tell by your accent."

Then she looked at me. I was 15 or 14, pretty young. She said to me, "Are you interested in the theater?" Well, I knew if I said no that nothing would happen. And if I said yes, what would happen? So I said yes. She looked at me and said, "Will you come and read a part at the Theater Guild with me right now?" And I said yes. So we went down, changed our clothes, went down the stairs of Icelands. There was the old Daimler chauffeur waiting for her.

I even knew what the Theater Guild was because I had a cousin who was always saying she was interested in being in the theater. She was saying, "I read at the theater guild today." So I knew what the Theater Guild was.

Well, they gave me this part to read. And I said, "I haven't got a clue who I am." They said, "Oh, we'll give you 20 minutes to study." After 20 minutes, I still didn't have a clue who I was. I think it's rather interesting that I behaved this intelligently, since I was really considered this stupid dyslexic child, number one.

Then, after 20 minutes we went into the Green Bays table. And there was Theresa Helburn, the head of the Theater Guild for many years. And the director of the play, Katharine Hepburn, and a few others at the table, they asked me to stop on page six. I read two sentences, and just read them. I got up out of my chair and said, "That was bloody bad and I'm leaving", in spite of all these important people. And I walked out the door. It was probably a brilliant thing to do.

Katharine Hepburn chased after me and said, "Give me your telephone number and I'll arrange to have the--". It was before the days of Xerox. "I will arrange to have the script typed for you." I thought I'd never hear from her again. But I went home and then regaled my mother the story. She supported me. She said, "You can never tell in life when something comes at you."

That evening at a quarter 'til seven, Katharine Hepburn was on the telephone saying, "I have the script copied. I'm going to be out tonight, but my butler will have the script. And you can study it for three days and then come read again." Wow. So mother and I jumped into a taxi and went down to the old house in--I think she still owns on 33rd Street.

Then my mother said, "You go to bed. I'll find someone to help you with this part." She knew quite a few people. In the morning, she said, "You've got an appointment at 10:30 with Augustine Duncan", who was the blind brother of Isadora Duncan. And he was a great Shakespearean actor. But since he was blind, he didn't get that many parts that he could play. But he was a very great actor. I must say it was just extraordinary how he gave me this part. I now know that in the theater--they can make you understand the part.

He'd say, "You don't know who you are" when I first read it. And I said, "No, that was the trouble." And he said, "Do you know *Little Women*?" I said, "Yes". He said, "You're Amy", so that I knew who I was supposed to be. Well anyway, it was a wonderful experience. That's what the part was.

I went and read, and I read it really well with this wonderful training. He said, "Ask this question. Count to two, then say that." It was very professional at the end of the third day. I read it very well. I remember it was good. But he'd given it to me. I wouldn't have been able to do it by myself. It was the part of the youngest sister in the *Philadelphia Story*.

Then it was my great aunt, the only money bags in the family, her full name was Elvine Richard, which was my name too. I was named after her. She called my parents and said, "If you will allow Elvine to go into the theater on the stage before she's finished school, I will disinherit her." At that point, my mother who was helping me, she's a very stuffy woman and she means it. So she started to talk me out of it. I never went into the theater.

MS. KIRWIN: Were you offered the part?

MS. RANKINE: Yes.

MS. KIRWIN: Oh, goodness.

MS. RANKINE: So that's why I don't call myself Elvine. And that was a long story.

MS. KIRWIN: Now I know why.

MS. RANKINE: And at that point, you can see I started going from E.R. Rankine to V.V.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: My first show in New York at Betty Parsons was '69. At that point, it's V.V.

MS. KIRWIN: How did you get from Black Mountain College back to Washington? What happened in those intervening years? And how did you end up in Washington, D.C. again?

MS. RANKINE: Okay. Well, I was in Washington for the war. My father was a dollar a year man during the war. As a matter of fact, he was Chairman on the Admissions Board. During the war, they were what they called dollar a year men.

MS. KIRWIN: I'm not familiar with that.

MS. RANKINE: People who volunteered. In World War II, he was an important businessman in the war, a banker. He came and just volunteered his time. So he became Chairman of the Admissions Board during the war.

I was here working on this other thing, so when that finished, then I went to the Ozenfant School. In the meantime, I'd married--John Magruder--so that's how that happened. That was a very young marriage. He went overseas. But anyway, we finally split apart and we're divorced.

Then in 1949, I married Paul Scott Rankine, back to Washington again because he was Reuters Chief Correspondent, a newspaper man.

MS. KIRWIN: Where did you meet him? Was that when you were here?

MS. RANKINE: Yes. I met him when I was here. I met him through the newspaper world here.

MS. KIRWIN: In Washington.

MS. RANKINE: Um-hm--because I'd been here during the war. He would come down and visit. He was in New York in the early days. I didn't know him. I think I met him actually in New York. But then he moved to Washington. He was with the British Information Services in New York. Anyway, we were married in '49 in Paris. Where I was just being a tourist and he was covering the Conference of Foreign Ministers. We were married in Paris--the home of an artist whom I'd met in New York. He was here during the war and then he moved back to Paris.

MS. KIRWIN: So then you both were living in Washington.

MS. RANKINE: Um-hm.

MS. KIRWIN: And this is the 50s now.

MS. RANKINE: Right. And I had my first show at the Jefferson Place Gallery.

MS. KIRWIN: What was that gallery like?

MS. RANKINE: Oh, on P Street. I think that's my first show. And it was in '64 or '65. Well, it was as you know a gallery that began a lot of people. Tom Downing had the show before me. Gene Davis, all those people were just starting out. And Alice Denney, bless her heart, did found the Jefferson Place Gallery. At first it was on Connecticut Avenue and then it moved to P Street right near 22nd. There was a good deal of friendship and warm feelings amongst the artists at the Jefferson Place Gallery.

MS. KIRWIN: So you did feel a kind of a sense of community with the artists who showed there.

MS. RANKINE: Oh, yes. I had the studio on the floor above. So I was always passing through the gallery. At that point, Nesta Dorrance had taken over the gallery, and she handled it wonderfully. I think she did very well for people she selected. Now Osuna was across the street. That was the other gallery.

MS. KIRWIN: This was on P Street?

MS. RANKINE: Yes. And then Henri started down the street. So the P Street was the gallery street at one point. I'm sorry that the Jefferson Place didn't continue. After about--in the 70s some time it started. Well, they lost their space in the building. Then they got more expensive space near DuPont Circle. I don't know if you were here then. That was the late 70s. But that and then it was too expensive for them to keep up. Somehow it failed. But it was a wonderful gallery. And it started out with a great feeling of friendship. Kevin Merrill and the Circle of Washington Color School--that sort of thing. I remember Sam Gilliam walking in for the first time.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you often invite people up from downstairs if they were at the gallery?

MS. RANKINE: I don't think so, but people knew I was there. That isn't where I lived, but it was good studio space. You could get things inexpensive in those days. It was \$70 a month. That seemed like a lot of money then and it's good space.

MS. KIRWIN: We just did an interview with Sam Gilliam. And I think of everything that was said in that interview, the thing that hit me the most was his reverence for Tom Downing. It's something that I hadn't really come across in looking at the Washington art scene. Do you have the same impression of Downing from those years?

MS. RANKINE: I liked Downing. I remember he was certainly a staunch friend and we were showing together. He used to come into the studio--and yes, I liked him. I liked the feel of the work. No one was still around in those early days. He showed at Jefferson Place in the early days. Before we moved, he's one of the ones that moved off to New York.

And I met Morris Louis through Ken Noland. Morris Louis was extraordinary. I used to sit there on the house on Legation Street. He worked in the living room in that small house, living room furniture pushed this way. He'd be doing the furls. And it was so small, with one of his paintings, one side that would be rolled up--I remember sitting there and watching him do that.

MS. KIRWIN: He let you watch him?--

MS. RANKINE: Yes. And he was a friend. It meant a lot to me. And I remember his first show at André Emmerich's in New York. It was when Emmerich had that white house. I think it was on 64th Street near Madison Avenue, between 5th and Madison. I remember he was so nervous for the opening. His nice wife, she was greeting people and doing other things for him. He said to me, "I'm just so nervous. I've got to go back in the office." And he said, "Come with me." I went back to the office with him. And he said, "Feel my hand. I'm shaking." That's Morris Louis. I think of what came out of that first show.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you ever go to the Washington workshop where Louis and Noland--

MS. RANKINE: I knew of it but I didn't go to it.

MS. KIRWIN: How about the Institute of Contemporary Arts? I know you showed there.

MS. RANKINE: Oh, sure.

MS. KIRWIN: But do you remember Robert Richmond?

MS. RANKINE: Oh, yes. He was a friend. I think what Robert did was quite wonderful. I'd go to all the poetry readings. And I remember Dylan Thomas reading. There were some very important people. I remember they used the Corcoran Gallery. What's it called? It's like a stage in the Corcoran Gallery right as you enter the school entrance. It's right to the left. I should remember the name of it. But it's still there. That's where a lot of these--Stephen Spender--I think Robert Richmond did a lot.

MS. KIRWIN: Quite a lot of people here. It's astounding when you look at the programs.

MS. RANKINE: That's right. Robert Richmond did wonderfully. Now once another thing I did with Robert Richmond, I think I was writing it down. I remember it was Kay Halle. He knew Jack Kennedy. Actually, Kit Kennedy was a friend of mine. So I had a connection. I never knew Jack particularly, but Kit was a dear friend.

Kay Halle thought up the idea for the Kennedy inauguration of asking poets, writers, artists. I don't know if there were architects or not, maybe just artists. And she called me and Robert Richmond to come around and said that Jack Kennedy had accepted this idea. The inauguration was to be in two weeks, so there wasn't a great deal of time to arrange this. She said, "Who do you think we ought to have?" I remember Bob Richmond and I, we chose the first people. I said Rothko and Klein. And Robert Richmond wanted Naum Gabo.

MS. KIRWIN: That was a good friend of his.

MS. RANKINE: Yes, that's right. That's right. And then somebody else who was another friend of Kay's wanted Zadkine. Well, I didn't coo with that because I could have thought of someone better. I was even thinking of de Kooning, although it was early for de Kooning in the 60s, which is interesting. Anyway, so this was accepted. And those were the first four of the four artists.

I remember there was a big snow at the Kennedy inauguration. I went down to the station to meet them. I called them up. I knew Rothko and Klein at that point. And Robert Richmond called Zadkine and he called Gabo. Gabo was too ill to come, but he was so touched. He knew that he had been invited to the inauguration of the new president. He did die I think a month later or something. Robert was very pleased that he knew because he'd been not well accepted in this country, considering his reputation in Europe at the Bauhaus before coming here during the war. So that was interesting.

But I remember driving down to the station, Union Station, and they weren't on the train. And I thought well they probably missed the train. So I waited for an hour for the next train to come in. And sure enough, off the

train Rothko and Mell, and Klein and Betsy. So I'm glad I waited because there was this fierce storm that day. And we started driving slowly.

I've always prided myself that I know every back lane in Washington, because remember the traffic was stuck on Pennsylvania Avenue. But I was trying to get out of town and I was doing all these little back alleys. And we were supposed to get to Walter Lippmann's house for a party right up here near the cathedral. And all the authors and I--I don't remember who the authors were and I don't remember who the poets were that were asked. But we arrived at this party, then I just couldn't move the car. At one point, I remember the car just stopped. I had been turning the wheels so much. But anyway, we arrived at this party.

Then we walked from that house to Alice Denney's house for dinner. And I can remember Rothko in front of me with a suitcase on his head walking through the snow. That's a certain walk. We had to walk around the sidewalk and the school there. But still it was possible to walk there. Then Ken Noland was there. And I was saying, "How are we going to get home?" The Rothkos were staying with us. The Klein's were staying with Nancy, not Nancy but Alice Denney, and I didn't have a car.

So Ken Noland said, "Well, I'm going out of town this weekend and here are the keys to the car." So we had Ken Noland's car to drive, to drive out to Bethesda and the next day, to get in for the inauguration; another memory. They were in a very jolly mood. I can remember Rothko and Klein saying, "Oh, think of it! Here we go in Washington, D.C. going to the inauguration of the President of the United States"--much laughter.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you all go to the ball that night?

MS. RANKINE: That's right. We were invited to the ball. That's right. And luckily I had Ken Noland's car. The next day, I think that was the next night, the snow had stopped. The inauguration itself, I think it was that way as I remember, was that afternoon. I remember we were sitting right near the Willard Hotel on one of the benches. After Kennedy went by, Rothko said, "I've never seen my paintings at the Phillips." And so I had to get down--came out and got him to the Phillips Collection--But at that point, the gallery I think didn't have openings. And Rothko had never seen it. So all that happened in one day.

MS. KIRWIN: Do you remember the de Kooning show that was here in 1963? It was the Washington Workshop Center for the Arts. I guess I read about it through Leon and Ida Berkowitz's papers. They mentioned a de Kooning show that was very well attended in Washington. It was 1963.

MS. RANKINE: You'd think I'd remember everything.

MS. KIRWIN: It was supposed to be the first one-man show in Washington at that time.

MS. RANKINE: Well, it doesn't stick in my memory. But I remember that de Kooning was on the next. Also, Johnson did the same thing, had the writers, the poets, and the artists--four of each and de Kooning was one. I was trying to think who the others were. So that gives that he had the show here in '63, and actually wasn't that known yet. And for Johnson's inauguration, he came to that one. I remember that. I didn't have much to do that one, just the first one.

MS. KIRWIN: How about teaching in this area? You've taught in a number of institutions around town.

MS. RANKINE: I started at the Madeira School actually. They were just enlarging the art department. I initiated quite a few things. In the first place, I told them what the art school should look like. And then I said well if it's room in the basement, I was thinking of the studies building at Black Mountain, put a few of the best artists or the best students, the most promising students, they can have a studio of their own, even though it's really small like the studies building at Black Mountain. Barbara Keyser went along with that.

Then the other thing I wanted to initiate was the teachers. Instead of teaching like teaching five days a week, they get good artists and have it only two days a week, one artist two days a week, another artist two days a week. And that should be considered full time. Then you can get someone of much more reputation. I remember I brought in Anne Truitt. I brought in Sam Gilliam to teach at the school.

MS. KIRWIN: Two days a week.

MS. RANKINE: Two days a week. And Barbara Keyser went along with that. I remember the other thing I initiated was to have a night class that they'd never had before. I've always been greatly--in Nicolaidis. You know that book. I always taught Nicolaidis. You can transmit through Nicolaidis a lot of what drawing is all about. The feeling of weight, which is very important in art. In all those paintings in which the clouds look like they're rocks and the mountains look like they're pillows. And Nicolaidis goes into that. So I established this Nicolaidis class. I can remember Barbara Keyser said at first, "The moon is marvelous." And then she looked as though she wasn't going to accept it. Then she said, "Well okay, but females only."

Then I went to University of Maryland--and kept on with my Nicolaides. I also taught painting at the night class. And I left it there. I stopped in 1992 and I miss it. They're asking me to come back, and it's great temptation.

MS. KIRWIN: Oh.

MS. RANKINE: But then time, time, time. And yet I sometimes wonder you do what you have to do. Is having anymore - that much more time when you do that much less work. It's a question. But I haven't gone back. But I certainly loved it there. I've been a visiting artist at the Corcoran--10 day periods of visiting artists, and around the various universities. I noticed one there months ago at a show at the Institute of Man and Science, Munsterville, New York.

I'd completely forgotten this. It was in 1968 and it came about from Betty Parsons. I was the artist in residence. A selection of recent works by representatives of the Betty Parsons Gallery would be on view, and rather good people. Karl Bartels, do you remember him? Alexander Lieberman, Robert Murray, Kenzo Okada, Richard Prucedá, Ruth Forman, Jack Youngerman, Calvert Carveshaw. I brought the show up quickly. I had completely forgotten that fact, came across that.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you start at Franz Bader after Jefferson Place Gallery?

MS. RANKINE: Oh, a long time. In fact, interesting enough I found this one. And then I had a one-man show at Barbara Fiedler with Betty Parsons. She was always doing this work. I think that work constructions are interesting. And that was a show at Barbara Fiedler's. I was on the second floor. Betty Parsons was on the first floor. Then I had another show a couple of years later with Barbara Fiedler.

MS. KIRWIN: That was on 21st Street.

MS. RANKINE: Yes. She had a very nice building. It was before R Street galleries had started. She was near the Phillips, but she was sort of alone in a sense. P Street was still going on. I assume it was still on P Street.

MS. KIRWIN: What do you think about the Washington art scene today and as it was when--

MS. RANKINE: It was so much smaller, but it was a wonderful feeling. I don't know what Sam Gilliam said but I remember his being around.

MS. KIRWIN: I think the R Street galleries, it's good to have that consolidation. It just wasn't working on 7th Street.

MS. RANKINE: Yes. I'm sorry about that--I think moving back to DuPont Circle--evidently people just didn't want to go to 7th Street.

MS. KIRWIN: Right.

MS. RANKINE: The art world is so much larger now, but to me it's still got a nicer feel than New York. It's just gotten big and impersonal and filled with hype. If you don't have an agent to do all of the publicity for you, all of that kind of thing--it's so different from those early days.

MS. KIRWIN: Have you ever thought about moving to New York for your career or have you always been satisfied here?

MS. RANKINE: I did. When I divorced Paul Scott Rankine, I moved to New York right away. That was in 1969. And then I stayed for four years. I had property there then, was showing at Betty's. Then I married Rufus King, back to Washington.

I met with Franz Bader Gallery only through Wretha Hanson. That doesn't mean I didn't like Franz Bader. When it was a bookstore, he could show much smaller works. It was much less space. And I'm very fond of Wretha Hanson.

MS. KIRWIN: It's a nice gallery. It's a nice space.

MS. RANKINE: Um-hm, yes. They're going to have to move.

MS. KIRWIN: They are?

MS. RANKINE: Yeah. She's found another place, also downtown. Good luck. 15th and K it's going to be. I'm very fond of many of the galleries--

MS. KIRWIN: Do you continue to show in New York now? Do you have a gallery there?

MS. RANKINE: No. For a while, I just gave up on New York. And now I'm talking to a few people--I'd better not say which one. I show in the Hamptons at both the Benson and the Benton Gallery. One is in Bridgehampton, one is Southampton. They have very good shows--that's a nice art world and a very nice feeling amongst the artists up there. I love it. It's amazing how many of the artists of the day are around there.

[END OF CASSETTE 1, SIDE B.]

MS. KIRWIN: You were going to tell a little bit more about Gorky.

MS. RANKINE: Yes. I had a note written here and then I just rambled on and forgot to look at them. But he did mean so much to us. Betty Parsons was very influenced by Gorky, and she studied with him at one point. In the 30s, he had a small class. And Ethel Schwabacher and Betty Parsons were in that class, and they often talked about him, what a wonderful teacher he was. Now I never studied with him but I had this contact by living there.

I remember trips to the Metropolitan. He'd page me he'd say if you want to go the museum V.V. One of his favorite artists was Ingres [Jean-Auguste-Dominique]. But I remember the portrait in the National Gallery of the woman. I should know the name of it, with the hair parted in the middle and all the vulgar jewelry on her hands. But he adored that painting for its abstract qualities. He'd stand in front of it and he'd say, "V.V., can you see why I admire this painting for its abstract qualities? Not for its realism, certainly not." He said, "The first place, took the arms off, turned them around, put them back on again. Next time you go by, look at it, both arms and their abstractness," and the way he centered the whole painting on the parting of the hair. He talked that way about paintings.

I remember him standing in front of the *View of Toledo* [1596-1600] in New York at the Met. *View of Toledo* is El Greco of course. Then he'd say, "Wonderful abstraction in this work--I don't see it as realism at all. I see it as wonderfully fabricated abstract painting." That's the way he used to talk with me. And it was wonderful to go with him to museums--He said, "All right, think of it as an abstract painting--painted so differently from the drapes on the windows. Think of that as abstract form. Anything can be divided up in five parts--and yet they paint it differently. Yet, all together in one painting they stick together." And that's the kind of way he would talk in a museum. Your eye saw things for the first time. So I wanted to say something about that.

Also, one of the things that Gorky used to do is he said the floor of the main studio, he would scrub it in the years when he worked there. He didn't work there when I was there. But it had this unbelievable scrubbed look. He'd say, "Before I started to work every day, I would scrub the floor." In the first place, I loved the purity of just the wood, scrubbed wood. It had been a very beautiful wood floor from whatever the building was before it became broken up into these parts or studios. And he said, "I get tired enough scrubbing the floor so that I feel more relaxed and I can let ideas flow through my mind in an easier fashion. That's a more attuned portrait. Well, that's a Gorky statement.

MS. KIRWIN: That's great. Thank you.

MS. RANKINE: Well, I start out with my painting and then it started. I was just saying that since I didn't become an actress and my aunt wouldn't let me take the part of the younger sister in *The Philadelphia Story* with Katharine Hepburn, I never went into the theater again. I never thought of it. I went back to school and became interested in the art department.

A very nice woman called Mary van Ness, who's not living anymore, but she was up to say five years ago. I used to go back and see her when I visited the family in Boston. She's now at the Childs Gallery, which is in the Fuller Building interestingly enough in New York. She had a large show there. And yet, she was working so hard every single day as a teacher. No art department lets you do that anymore. Back in the old days, you had to work five days a week like anybody else. I think she had very little time to work for many years. But she was the real thing somehow. And I think I became an artist because of Mary van Ness.

I remembered I told her about the Ozenfant School, and she came for one term. That always interested me. That's when I was living with the Gorkys. Ozenfant was very rigid, but still very much of a real artist and personage himself. His work is pretty purist and rigid. In fact, I think my tendency towards purism tends to become more and more so. My latest things that I'm working on now are very purist. The Plexiglas pieces that hang on the wall that you look into, that's my last work. Perhaps this is through an Ozenfant influence.

MS. KIRWIN: Were you only painting at the Ozenfant School?

MS. RANKINE: A lot--I think I said this last time. We had to do three coats of oils, so you can imagine every painting, but terrible if you didn't know how to manage oil. What would you do with three to four coats? A lot of work. And that was a certain rigidity. Also, Albers was rigid. But when he spoke to you, he'd come to your study. In Black Mountain, I had a studio. And Ozenfant was the same. Then, he got away from the rigidity if you

got to do it this way, you've got to do it this way. It was you suddenly got more out of it, out of his talk.

So I went to Black Mountain, the Ozenfant School. I kept on looking. At one point, I came to Washington to live when my father was working here--and then during the war, I went to the Phillips School, which had Laura Watkins was wonderful and Bob Gates. That was a Washington background.

Then my first show in New York was with the David Herbert Gallery. At that point, I was doing what I called the rounds, some drawing, some painting. And I think it was an interesting show. It got very good reviews from kind of top people, which was interesting. My first show in 1962, and that's before I'd shown at the Jefferson Place here in Washington.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: Let me check. What was that year? It is the Jefferson Place Gallery, 1963. So I guess first in New York, David Herbert Gallery, then Jefferson Place.

MS. KIRWIN: So this one you've shown me is reproduced in black and white. But were these color--

MS. RANKINE: That was a drawing. That one I put up there is a very early painting. The interesting thing about that painting is that it was in one of the Corcoran annuals. I wish they still had it. But it's perfectly clear what it is now, but nobody knew what the globe of the world was going to look like from out of space at that time. That's why that's interesting.

I remember Andrew Wyeth was the judge and it was the first time I've ever called the work into any competition in anything. Andrew Wyeth kept returning to it. And I think I was told later that the Corcoran people kept saying, "Oh, don't pick her, we don't even know who she is. She's just a young student." And Wyeth would say, "Nonetheless, this painting interests me." He gave it a prize. And it was the first time I was in any kind of museum shows.

MS. KIRWIN: Do you remember the title of this work, just so that people listening to the interview might be able to find it again?

MS. RANKINE: I'd have to see if it's on it.

MS. KIRWIN: Well it's three worlds in different shapes.

MS. RANKINE: The thing of it is that it really is, what interests me now, it was bought by Oscar Cox from this show--for \$50. And you know years later after Oscar Cox died, he lived in Georgetown, I asked if I could buy it back. Because of the relationship to outer space, it's still very much the texture and color of the moon, and very much the way it really looks like from outer space. And it was long before the first moon shot.

We had a friend who was involved with the first moon shot. I showed it to him and he said there were many things that were interesting in it. He doesn't know what the first globe was. But he said with the way that tied with this sort of light does have a meaning amongst nuclear physicists. And wow! Now this was very much like the work of my first show. This was earlier because my first show in New York was '62. This was I think like '56 or '57.

But I was doing these kind of globes. I used to call them rounds I think, some in charcoal and many in color. I still have some of them and I occasionally pull them out of the attic or the storage and look at them. It didn't nearly relate to my later work, which became much more purist. But that was my first show in New York at the David Herbert Gallery.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: And David Herbert had really very good eyes and started quite a few people. At my first show Louise Nevelson was in the front room. She had shown before. But Andy Warhol was in the back room and it was his first show as well, which is interesting. I was always asked to The Factory. If I said downstairs it's V.V. Rankine, they'd say come up. He was rather such a clever man. Anyway, that was my first show.

And then I turned more purist and worked on wood, painted on wood. I think the reason is that I wanted the work to come towards me. Where did I get that idea? Believe it or not it was at the - Uffizi museum in France. And I was looking at some of the - Giotto or Duccio, great thick frames and wonderful painting here and wonderful painting in the center. It was sort of in the shape of a course. There was a period in the early Italian painting like that.

I looked at this and looked at it. I can remember thinking to myself that's what I want to do. I want it to come at me. And I didn't necessarily think I'm now going to become a sculptor because in a way that's what happened.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: And that idea I think did come from some of the other early Italian works in the Uffizi. Because the frames were at least four inches thick, or even sometimes five. They came at you. That's what my first woodworks were. My next show -

MS. KIRWIN: Can you describe those woodworks?

MS. RANKINE: Yes. I decided to paint on wood, not with oils but with acrylics because they wanted them to be flat and pure. You know that upstairs there are some. My first show at Betty Parsons, I don't think there were any wood pieces in it. They were canvas, but they were thick. It was still coming at me. And then I realized that it would have to be edgier and therefore then I bought the wood, had a carpenter make them for me. Those are my first wood pieces. But it came out of my first show at Betty, I think it was on canvas, and some of the canvases were shaped like a "v" this way.

MS. KIRWIN: The middle of the canvas came out.

MS. RANKINE: No, the center went backward and the edges came forward and it was framed. But still there was this little level on the back end so that you looked into it.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: And that was my first show at Betty Parsons, 1964. Betty Parsons was wonderful. She had a lot of famous people you know, particularly in the beginning years, but she didn't believe in, or maybe she said she wasn't good at it, but she didn't believe in doing a lot of publicity. A lot of push and a lot of publicity, that wasn't in her nature. A lot of people left her. Pollock started out with her and then left her. I think Rothko was with her and then left. Ellsworth Kelly was with her and he left. Ed Reinhardt never left, Bonnie Newman never left, and Kenzo Okada I think were the people that stuck with her. I never left.

But she had this terrific eye. She always said, "Well art lives on my walls. And I'm not going to do anything other than--I'm not going to go into publicity machines and so forth." Well, I liked Betty and I thought she was wonderful. She had this tremendous eye, really did.

Well, that was my second show. Then it was all still on canvas until I realized canvas wouldn't work because you fold the edges. Even though you could frame it, which I did, I wanted the edge to be more important and to come at you. So then, I started working in wood. I had a carpenter friend who would make these pieces. I would design them and he would make them.

I had a very hard time at first finding stable wood. Then I realized how hard it was to find wood that wouldn't warp or whatever. I finally found one that--and some of these pieces that go back, since was 1964, they're still perfectly unwarped, was when I found marine plywood. It seemed such a simple answer, but it took time to come to that.

And I'm going back into wood pieces now. Sometimes I worry about the conflict if somebody says, "She works in Plexiglas," and then you see one painted and you think she doesn't know what she's doing. She's doing too many things. She's painting on wood and the rest of the work is kind of like architectural see through sculptures. Most of my work is wall work, very often they jump off the wall, either on a stand--so I've done both.

Still the original thing that I saw that day is when these great thick framed picture - just came at me like that. I realized that I wanted it. And that was sculpture, although it was called a painting. But now people say I'm a sculpture with certain of these wall pieces because they stick out three and a half inches, seven inches, six inches.

MS. KIRWIN: You'd said you had a carpenter help with cutting the pieces?

MS. RANKINE: Yes, making the pieces to my design and then I'd paint on them. First I designed them, decided what shape it was going to be. And then I'd do all the measurements very carefully and he would make them.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: Then we came to the marine plywood conclusion. That was the best. And these pieces believe it or not for years didn't sell. Recently, I've had some pretty big sales in the big pieces. Of course I've made them right along with Plexi. Recently, I hadn't shown the wood ones because then everyone wants to show the Plexiglas. The reason I bought Plexiglas first was because of the trouble with wood warping and I'd heard of Plexiglas, which was fairly new then.

MS. KIRWIN: When was this?

MS. RANKINE: Way back. This was in early 60s, very early 60s. That's about when Plexiglas came out. Rohm and Haas used to make the Plexiglas. There are other types, but I always used Plexiglas. All this was before Reed Plastics was formed in Rockville.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: But I think I ordered my first Plexiglas from Reed Plastic. Or maybe I ordered it directly from Rohm and Haas. I can't remember. That was just a company name. I thought that I was going to paint on them and that would be the solution to warping.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: I think I went to a store or place and looked at Plexiglas. I don't think it was Reed Plastic yet. And I just selected some just sheets of Plexiglas in various thicknesses, quarter inch, half inch. You can still get them in most sizes. I had them leaning against the wall at the studio. As I sort of looked at it, before I begun to work on it, I saw the see-through possibility. I never painted on Plexiglas. I was using it for what it was, see-through.

Then sometimes I invented--in that work. I think I invented sanding Plexiglas in a way that it looks like slate or stone, and that's with a regular sander. It's exactly the same. It's just ordinary shiny black. I realized that you could do, with a sander you could make Plexiglas work quite differently.

Then a lot of them were architectural in nature. I think I always looked at buildings. I think that I'm influenced by architecture. I found myself if I'm driving along, I'm looking for an interesting building, an interesting shape. And that's why when I had my show at the American Institute of Architects (AIA) people responded to it and sort of said well did you ever want to be an architect? That had never occurred to me. I think I told you last time about the artist, the architect that stood in front of a work of mine. I think I've already said this.

MS. KIRWIN: No, say it again.

MS. RANKINE: Or I might not have. I realized at an opening that this architect was muttering something. And I stuck my head in to see what he was muttering. He was saying, "No wiring; no plumbing." I didn't have to cope with that, which I liked because it showed that he felt the work was architectural in nature.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: I think that has been a great influence in it. So I've worked with color on wood and they always come off the wall slightly. I've never made wood sculpture that jumps off the wall. All my wood pieces have been attached or hung on the wall but projecting into the room into space by at least three and a half, four inches.

MS. KIRWIN: How are these Plexi pieces joined?

MS. RANKINE: Oh, they're laminated. At first, there was a guy who now lives in Maine and I lost him. He worked just in the basement of his own house when I found him--the first guy that would help me laminate the pieces. Again, I would design them as I did the wood pieces, and go over there. I learned a lot from him because he, to save me money, he would put this lamination on. It's thick. There is liquid laminating, that's what causes bubbles. If you see bubbles in cheap Plexiglas furniture or something, that's because they've used the quick stuff that dries in five minutes. The PS70 is like Vaseline. You stick it on and you glue it all over the place. And then when it's dry, and it takes ten hours to dry so it's the next day, you then scrape it down and then you buff it. Then you get the perfectly clean edge. He would let me do the scraping and buffing, which would save hours and my having to pay him to do it.

MS. KIRWIN: What's his name?

MS. RANKINE: You know I've forgotten. Now I deal with Walt Sheridan, who was an assistant of his. And he's still in Rockville and he's wonderful. Walt Sheridan has this marvelous understanding. He makes mostly Plexiglas frames, is his regular business. He's always helped me and I go out there and we talk about how Plexi should be done technically. And now he has a lot of assistants and so forth. Now I'm not allowed to stay there and finish my own work because there isn't the space. But we have an old relationship.

And I remember in the Russo book [*Profiles on Women Artists*, University Publications of America, Frederick, MD: 1985], which he did one of the chapters on me, Alexander Russo, I said then were it not for Walt Sheridan I could not possibly proceed in my endeavors with Plexiglas. I'd shown it and Walt still has it in his office. It's still there. He said, "A lot of people wouldn't have said that," because a lot of artists have gone to him and touched Plexiglas in their lives. Certainly for framing everybody uses it.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: Well that's part of how I hit Plexiglas.

MS. KIRWIN: Now some of the Plexiglas pieces are right outside?

MS. RANKINE: Yes. In fact, I've had one, which was out in front of the Benson Gallery in Bridgehampton, certainly all summer. She has an indoor gallery, but still this was an outdoor piece on the lawn. But people driving by could see it. If a heavy limb fell on it, it could be broken, something like that.

So really maybe the only material that would do well in public places where kids might jump on them or someone might throw something against it or that sort of thing is steel or aluminum. Plexiglas is breakable if you really whack it. But it will stay out. I have a piece that some people bought, quite a well-known collector in Easthampton. He keeps it out in summer when they go down there and then put it in the barn in winter. Because you don't know what will happen when you're not there.

[END OF CASSETTE 2, SIDE A.]

MS. RANKINE: My last show was at the American Institute of Architects. And I've said that about the architectural influence. These were all see-throughs because it was--against glass, looking out on the back of the octagon house, the garden, the terrace, and then the octagon house. I was along the glass.

The first time I've shown, I usually think of something being a white wall. But I was interested in the fact that you could stand on the terrace and look through the plate glass in this contemporary building, which is the American Institute of Architects. That show had no color in it other than the Plexiglas colors. Plexiglas doesn't come in very interesting colors I'm afraid.

I did go to England once and I had one new show in London at the Axon Gallery. And at that time, I looked at Perspex, which is what it's called in England, exactly the same material. It was called Perspex. Perspex had better color, truer, purer colors. And I thought oh this is wonderful because I can order them and they'll have to be shipped. But the expense was so great, I really had to drop that.

So I've never really much gone into color other than what's called the bronzes and the grays. And they've got some pretty good reds. I'm doing a red blue one, bronze gray one right now. I'm working on it.

I'm definitely going to paint again on wood. And recently I've gotten into some pretty good private collections. People seem to want painted woods more than the Plexiglas ones.

MS. KIRWIN: What sorts of architectural forms are you attracted to when you develop these Plexiglas pieces? A lot of them seem to be, well not an ordinary residential kind of structure, but maybe something that's more like a skyscraper or monument.

MS. RANKINE: Yes, that's right. I did some that were influenced by the Washington Monument. I was always very influenced by the Middle Ages.

MS. KIRWIN: This just seemed to be kind of inhospitable maybe to the human figure, dwarfing the human figure -

MS. RANKINE: Yes--in a way, strange faces. But they're I think Medieval in nature too. And I've always love to go to Europe and occasionally see the few remaining Medieval walls and castles--

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: But yes, I do miss color so I'm moving back into color. But I thought that time that I bought the Plexiglas thinking I was going to paint on it and then it changed me because I sort of went and looked through it. So I'll never paint on Plexiglas. But I think I will do more wood pieces. Recently the head of the Ford Foundation bought a large work of mine. It was about 20 years old. But it's on a 20 foot wall. It looks marvelous in his house.

MS. KIRWIN: Who are your principal collectors?

MS. RANKINE: I should have this all written down, shouldn't I? Gilbert Kinney bought one recently, one of the color ones on wood. I've forgotten this guy's name over at the Ford Foundation. I think his name is Dave. There's one in Chicago, Plexiglas piece by Saul Sherman. I haven't made that many sales in my life. Some are in museums.

I had a large piece in Indiana, New Harmony, Indiana. It was called the Roofless Church which was designed by Phillip Johnson. When it says roofless church, the church were trees. In a sense, trees are rather gothic. And then he did the design. He did an altar and the design. The shape of the church was like a stone wall, but didn't

go up very high, not more than about three or four foot. But I was very interested in the roofless church. And they had one building - indoors where the priests could keep their equipment and so forth. They bought the piece of mine, wood piece, and it was on the altar in the indoor church.

I love that association with Phillip Johnson. It meant very much. Roofless church, New Harmony, Indiana. There was a memorial to a man called Owen. It was one of the old communities. It was called New Harmony. It's still New Harmony, Indiana. And it was the granddaughter, she was married to her husband which is the grandson or great grandson of the original Robert Owen. It was one of the share-the-wealth communities. Then Jay Noland who lives in Houston, but also in New Harmony, wanted to make a memorial to him, which he asked Phillip Johnson. That's the Roofless Church. I have about two or three pieces from that, the Roofless Church, and then there's one in the restaurant.

People visit this community. I admire them for rebuilding the whole theory if there was a share-the-wealth community. In other words, there was an old fashioned factory run by water-- and it didn't matter what job you had. It didn't matter whether you were the boss or the poorest member of the community. Everybody shared the wealth. And you just went to the grocery store, which was everybody gave what they made, which was a sort of tax. Then you just went to the grocery store and bought what you wanted for nothing. It was very interesting and I'm glad to be in that.

MS. KIRWIN: Were those pieces specifically commissioned for that building?

MS. RANKINE: I think she came and looked at some of the work and said, "I want it like this." And then she gave me the size of what the altar was going to be, and that this would go on top of that. Yes. Then I went out to see it installed and met Phillip Johnson. That was quite a few years ago in the 60s, late 60s. But it gave me great joy to do that. I think that was probably one of my pieces sold, was from 1955--

MS. KIRWIN: So now you're moving more into the wood pieces again?

MS. RANKINE: Well, I have some in the studio. Maybe we should go up. I have one of the older ones. Somebody came to see it recently, that I pulled out of storage and put it up. As it's been there in the studio for about a couple of months, I'm drawn to it.

There's one piece always in the Franz Bader Gallery--that's on a narrow wall. But a lot of the wood pieces are long and narrow in a very narrow place. She always has one. No matter who else is showing, there is that one piece up of the narrow wood ones. And they have very often sold, so why not make more.

I do wonder between, I remember when Albers said, "Stick to one aspect of things." He said he practiced what he preached. But this artist who works in Plexiglas and then paints on wood, is that illogical? Is that having too many aspects? I worry about that a little, but I'm going to do it anyway. And whether you can show them in the same room or would you have had two rooms at the gallery, one for Plexiglas pieces, one for the wood pieces? I was contemplating this at the moment.

MS. KIRWIN: You also did quite a lot with the figure in Plexiglas.

MS. RANKINE: Very abstract.

MS. KIRWIN: Right. Do you want to talk a little bit about this shape that's recurrent in your work?

MS. RANKINE: Right. Well the Day piece and also the piece that was up there which is gone, that was up there the last time you were here, yes I think of them as it's my shape of man, a man and woman, very very abstract. I've done a lot with that shape. It seems to mean something to me. I feel it's my form.

MS. KIRWIN: The one that was there was two people joined, right?

MS. RANKINE: Right. And so was the large wood piece that went to I think Robert Day, the 20 foot wall. There were two of them, the painting red and gray. Again, that's exactly that image. Always that one on the narrow wall--

MS. KIRWIN: How long an association have you had with Franz Bader?

MS. RANKINE: It isn't Franz Bader anymore. It's owned by Wretha Hanson. I think when Franz Bader had the bookstore, the space was too small. I didn't consider going to him. Even now, I give him credit for being one of the first galleries in Washington and so forth. But I think always in terms of the book shop and the smaller space, I never associate myself with it, until Wretha Hanson came along and got these huge walls. And so I liked her and went with her.

I was with Barbara Fiedler for a while before she retired and the Jefferson Place Gallery before that. I have had

work shown for Phillips Collection, but many years ago. I think maybe they should give me another one. There isn't the Corcoran Annual anymore. I wish there was. I thought many interesting things happened through that, having a jury from out of town.

MS. KIRWIN: Because the last one they did was the Washington show and I guess a couple of years ago that met with a lot of criticism.

MS. RANKINE: Yes. I had the three, the *Women Before the Gate*, large, black Plexiglas figures, very abstract but definitely women. And the *Women Before the Gate* is a story. I came across it when I was traveling through Greece and there was one small mountain town outside of Athens. This is a true tale. The soldiers of Sparta were marching towards Athens to knock it down to take it. A runner came up to this small village, mountain village, and he said so he could spy to turn the way that they were coming.

This woman said, "We can't fight. All of the men have gone for the defense of Athens." And she said, "What can we do?" She pulled all the women together and said, "We think if we just do nothing, the soldiers will come. We will all be raped, murdered. We can try and do something. Everyone go home, dress in black, cover your head, everything. We will stand motionless and without fear in front of the city gate. It was an old walled city. We will stand motionless without fear."

The soldiers from Sparta came up the road and suddenly stopped. What is this, these black figures, no faces? They had decided this isn't Athens. I think they decided to turn around and go towards Athens. In other words, she saved the village. And that piece at the Corcoran, the waiting for the gatekeeper, that tale.

What more?

MS. KIRWIN: I'm thinking. Do you still show in New York?

MS. RANKINE: Well, you know after Betty died, and I've been in some group shows, I just didn't show. In fact, New York hit a kind of crazy period, which I didn't like. I saw so much that I call crap. That didn't mean that I don't think there's some good galleries and certainly wonderful artists. Of course there are.

But I'm now talking with Jack Shainman about possibly having a show there. But this is years later. So I did hit that period when I just didn't show in New York. My last show in New York was I think 1980, ten years ago. Maybe it was '82. So that's quite a while. But I didn't feel that at that point that I was going to go around with slides and get kicked out.

Abe Sachs asked me - he died about four years ago. That's right. He asked me what I was doing now that Betty had died and so that was an invitation. I would have been glad to be in Abe Sachs Gallery, but then he became ill almost immediately after that and died. So that was the only person--I thought I'm going to wait until someone asks me. Only Abe Sachs did. But now Jack Shainman is. He's on 560 Broadway. And I liked him. I miss not having the gallery on 18th Street here.

MS. KIRWIN: Yeah, I miss his gallery too.

MS. RANKINE: Betty Parsons was wonderful to be there, and the people that I admired. She was always mad at some people. She said there was a way of leaving when they spoke to her, said they're going to another gallery but they appreciated what she had done and so forth. That was all right. Somebody like Ellsworth Kelly backstabbing. She never would look at Ellsworth Kelly again.

MS. KIRWIN: Do you think that your work, you have gained any inspiration from some of those other artists like Ellsworth Kelly and some of your shaped--

MS. RANKINE: The purist ones could well be, could well be. And as a matter of fact, I remember stopping at his farm, which was in New York State just below Massachusetts. But this was years ago. I don't know whether he's still there or not. He had a place in town and a place in the country. Yes, and Ellsworth was a friend. I haven't seen him recently. I haven't called him. But I admire his work--I think Albers certainly was.

Brancusi was a tremendous influence. I did meet him before he died and it meant a lot to me--that was the year he died. He died the year later or maybe a few months later. So I did see him. To go into his studio--he cared so much about the natural light. The Impasse Ronsin used to be a hen farm. Did you know this story about Brancusi?

MS. KIRWIN: No.

MS. RANKINE: At one point, a big road was to go right through it and he had to get out. And at that point, Brancusi said I can't leave this place. Think of all the work I've done on the roof with making openings so that each piece could be perfectly lit by daylight. Monroe was then a high official.

MS. KIRWIN: Cultural Minister or something.

MS. RANKINE: Is that it? Cultural Minister I believe. And Monroe did intercede and had the road stopped. Can you imagine that happening in America? Let's stop at Fifth Avenue. But the moment he died, a man called Istrati, who was also Romanian and had been his assistant for years, became sole executor of the will, and had to get the work out very quickly because that road was going through.

Anyway, I had this wonderful experience. I'm sure a lot of me comes out in Brancusi. I was so glad the other night when I was talking to a group of artists. Steve Pace came down--we were talking about influences or father figures. And Steve Pace said, "I bet yours is Brancusi." And I was thrilled that someone had thought of that because we really work so different. To me he was the great originator of his period; he was brilliant.

And then I go back to maybe the Renaissance, people like Giotto - things certainly came at me - what made me go really want to do more work came from that. I've also very much admired the American Indian. I have a piece upstairs. Again, some of them are three-dimensional but they're not huge outdoor sculptures and yet, they are outdoors. But they come at you off a wall.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: So again, I certainly caught culture pieces and some of the American Indians. I'm trying to think of other inferences. Egypt, certainly Egypt. In fact, Ozenfant used to say at least once a week for the two years I studied there, he'd come in and announce as he's coming in to do the criticism, "Egypt was the great civilization bar none." He said that over and over. And when I got to Egypt, I realized the sense of scale was extraordinary. I'm sure Egyptian works--has been an influence.

Not Greece. Greece is too civilized. And I remember as wonderful as the Acropolis is, that's not me. Even though I've taught life drawing for years and I'm interested and I'd draw the figure, I figure that's all abstract. That kind of classicism doesn't move me.

It's more primitive. Well, who could call Egypt primitive? When I saw the great temples come in bold in Dara--even more thrilling than the photographs that I've seen of them, somehow the scale even more exciting than I expected it to be.

I was very moved by and perhaps influenced by the great caves of Lascaux. Since radiocarbon dating has come in, they painted with charcoal and blood so it can be radiocarbon dated.

MS. KIRWIN: Um-hm.

MS. RANKINE: It's gone back, this is man 300, no 30,000 years ago. 30,000 B.C. is a date that nobody really can contemplate. But because of radiocarbon dating they're now moving these--I saw them years ago when they were open to the public. I never went to the Spanish one, which is now closed. About a couple of years ago, I had a chance of going to Lascaux. I'd always asked a friend at the Natural History Museum to be sure and let me know if they were ever going to have a trip, and they had one. And I ran. I had very little notice. I just ran to see it again. It was for me tremendously moving.

They're mostly paintings, some structure. They're very textured. And some of it can be called structure in the cave, although mostly it's called the paintings. But they're really not because they used the rock, the shapes of the rock, in a very inventive way. Some of it is like wall sculptures. Also as you first enter Lascaux, it's like the animals are racing. There's this unbelievable sensation of animals plunging down this long cave, which I thought was thrilling. I thought it even more the second time I went years later.

Then I found out when I got there that I was terribly lucky, this was only two years ago, to have gotten in. When we got there, we were a group of ten on this special trip formed by the Museum of Natural History. My father had been on the Board of Directors, so that's why maybe I had a better chance to get in this group.

Five people are allowed in three days a week and it has to be as the sun is setting. So the light you see is terribly dead. That's very few people if you consider the world. Five people and there are a group of ten. We stayed nearby in a hotel. Five went the first day, and then the next five went the following day.

MS. KIRWIN: That's great experience.

MS. RANKINE: Yes. And then I wanted to go to visit Altamira, I think the Spanish one, which is now closed, open for quite a few years. It's now closed to the public. I'm still trying to find out whether I can get into that because I'm sure they do the same thing. They let a few people in a day at sunset. But you have to really know somebody to get on that list. Elaine de Kooning went to both the caves and we used to talk about it. I went to her a memorial--it was last week. And it was very moving.

[END OF CASSETTE 2, SIDE B.]

MS. RANKINE: I've always admired William King, the sculptor. He lives in Easthampton and has been a friend. The wonderful thing is that every summer he comes once and tours. He comes for tea. But he really does, he comes to see me and talk about my work, which is wonderful. And it means so much to me. I think this doesn't happen that much in the world anymore. And I ask him what he thinks of this piece. His thoughts are very revealing to me and I cherish that. I don't think artists talk this way as much as they used to in the early days.

I did once say that about Bill King, that he's given me suggestions that I think are very profound. And I can't wait. When we drive up, I always take a few new pieces with me. I can't wait for Bill King to come over and tell me what he thinks about them.

MS. KIRWIN: So you see him every summer in the Hamptons?

MS. RANKINE: Right, right.

MS. KIRWIN: Who are the other artists up there that you--

MS. RANKINE: Jim Brooks I greatly admire. He's getting pretty old now. But Jim is wonderful and lives nearby. I used to see de Kooning, but now he's just a virtual prisoner. I think we did talk about this last time I saw you. I studied with Bill de Kooning. But now with the Alzheimer's, it's gotten so a hold of him, I think he's kept a prisoner and I disapprove of that. I think that the friend should be allowed to see him even if he doesn't know who you are, rather than not have any friends.

Well, we were in the Hamptons. There were some good galleries. The Benton and the Benson, and I've shown at both of them from time to time. They're all kinds of other ones, but I think those are the best ones.

MS. KIRWIN: Do you do a lot of work up there? Do you have a studio in your house?

MS. RANKINE: Yes, a small one. We haven't been able to be there for too long. Now Rufus is somewhat retired, so maybe we can spend the whole summer this summer. He's going to be writing a book. If he doesn't have to be too close to the source of material, then we can spend more there. I love that place, but we can't stay there very long. But still, it's fun to go and see dear friends. It's a great feeling of warmth.

Larry Rivers, still an old friend. Roy Lichtenstein. Certainly Ibram Lassaw who was at the Ozenfant School, is wonderful. Jack Youngerman has a house down there and he was with Betty Parsons years ago. I admire Jack Youngerman. Robert Richtenburg was just up the street. He was a student at Ozenfant School when I was. And perhaps his name isn't as well known, but he's quite an artist and a dear friend.

MS. KIRWIN: How long have you had the house up there?

MS. RANKINE: When it was being built, I stayed with Lee Krasner. And people always said, "How did you put up with the likes of her?" She could be very difficult, but she was a staunch friend. I would get out of the house all day. I stayed there for about the last month as the house was being finished because I thought I had to be there. And that was in 1968, I believe.

And it was only because my father had told me to buy some land and kept insisting. I thought buy land. I think I told you the story last time. I had no idea how to buy land. He said, "It must have a water view."

MS. KIRWIN: A good water view if you bought land in the Hamptons.

MS. RANKINE: Yes, it was a beautiful water view. So Springs is the unfashionable side of Easthampton but it's by far the most beautiful. And it's where all the artists lived, most of them. Then some lived in Southampton. There's quite a tradition of artists there. I know that Pollock went down in 1945 and they bought a house. A lovely artist called John Little who was a dear friend, who also died a few years ago, was a close friend. We would talk about work too together. There were many more that would pop into my mind.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you buy there because other artists had settled there?

MS. RANKINE: Yes. In fact in that book I say I came down because of artist friends. My father had gone to the Hamptons as a child and he returned in the summers. Easthampton was just a village and people rode horses to the beach. There were no places to park near the beach, so it was when he went back again in his old age, we'd love to spend summers there. It was then that he said, "You've got to buy some land." It meant a lot to me, quite a wonderful place, and it's a warm feeling between artists.

MS. KIRWIN: Why do you think that there isn't a similar community in Washington?

MS. RANKINE: Well, I think there's more so than there is in New York. I think there's more feeling. I remember the original artists of the Jefferson Place Gallery still have a meaning. Gene Davis, Tom Downing, Sam Gilliam showed at Jefferson Place.

MS. KIRWIN: So you think that gallery just fostered that kind of a relationship among artists?

MS. RANKINE: Yes. A lot of the artists started there. Then Osuna came along. Then a lot of people started with Osuna. It was just across the street on P Street in those days. But those were the two galleries and most of Washington art came out of those two galleries. I'd say Franz Bader, although in the old days he could only show much smaller works. And of course it was the bookstore, the art bookstore.

Other art communities, certainly the Hamptons is one of them. And it still has this sort of feel. And I'm interested in what the Pollock-Krasner Study Center is going to do. They opened for the first time last summer and they had a few talks for people who had written books about Pollock. They sent out sort of weekly meetings, and the subject is going to be Lee Krasner's early work this time. She had a wonderful old dining room table, huge table that was always there in the early days and the speakers sit around it, the audience. Then they talked across this table to each other. And they asked any questions from the audience. I have hopes that this is going to grow into quite an interest.

MS. KIRWIN: Do you remember Pollock?

MS. RANKINE: Hardly. He was young when he died. It was many years ago. He was 45 years old, I believe--44 maybe. I remember seeing him roaring down 10th Street quite inebriated, but he wasn't a friend. I became a friend really after the death and Lee being a neighbor.

I didn't move out there--after my mother died--she didn't want to go to the Hamptons. She felt it'd be too social. She was a very serious woman. Then after she died, my father said, "I want to go again." And I said, "Okay. I'll go and rent a house. I'd love to spend the night there." So he started going out. My mother died in '62 and I think slowly went the years, '64, '65, '66. I just rented the house for a month. That's when he said I should buy the land then build a house. He lived for many more years, going there in the summers and married again and lived to 92 years old and died a few years ago. My father, he was a wonderful man.

From the very beginning, it really was the artists and the artists friends that I loved. I think this Elaine de Kooning memorial, which was just last week in New York, because she lived out there, and even though she was separated, I don't know if she ever officially divorced from Willem de Kooning. She did help run the house. As this Alzheimer's came on, she took very good care of him and saw that the arrangements would be right for him and so forth. And I admire her for that. I think Elaine de Kooning is a caring woman. She lived separately but saw to everything, to all the arrangements.

I think Bill did go heavily into liquor various times in his life, and then this Alzheimer's coming on. The last time I saw him was two years ago. I think I spoke about this the last time in the last recording. But it was moving. And of course he was tremendously influenced by Gorky. I think I read the letter and all that means a lot. It's an extraordinary art community and I can't wait to get there again.

MS. KIRWIN: When will you go up this year?

MS. RANKINE: Well, I rent the house. You certainly can't get in until the end of June. But if we can stay two months, sometimes it's just a month. It used to be just a month. Rufus would have to come back to his office. And sometimes I'd be teaching too. I remember one summer I was teaching at the University of Maryland, and so I couldn't go until August. Then having to come back and commute by about the end of August because already the winter term was beginning.

Although I haven't spent much time there, and then the house is always rented in the winter. Someone made it there to take care of it. Many of the artists live out there and work out there, and then maybe come into New York just for occasions or openings and so forth.

MS. KIRWIN: Well, I think we can end this. So I want to thank you for your time and attention to this interview. We appreciate it.

MS. RANKINE: Well, it's been rather rambly I guess. It's almost better to ramble because maybe you feel it more than if you had written something and you were reading what you written.

[END CASSETTE 3, SIDE A.]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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