

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Michael A. Cummings

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Cummings, Michael, 1945-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Michael A. Cummings,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 9, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:00:06).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Visual artist Michael A. Cummings (1945 - ) served as an arts program analyst for the New York State Council on the Arts, starting in 1980. His quilt work is in collections at the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Art and Design, the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, among others. Cummings was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 9, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_109
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Visual artist Michael A. Cummings was born on November 28, 1945 in Los Angeles, California to Arthur Cummings and Dorothy Dent. Cummings graduated from John C. Fremont Senior High School in Los Angeles in 1963. While Cummings attended Los Angeles City College for business administration from 1963 to 1966, and Woodbury College for design from 1968 to 1969, he earned his B.A. degree in art history from SUNY-Empire State College in 1979. Before graduating, Cummings enrolled in the New School for Social Research in 1973, completing the Workshop in African Arts and Crafts program at The American Museum of Natural History in 1976.

Cummings began his career in 1972 as a technical director for the New York Department of Cultural Affairs. In his spare time, he worked as a collage artist and painter. He discovered his passion for quilting after creating a cloth banner for an exhibition in 1973. He taught himself to quilt by studying the works of local quilters and how-to quilt books. In 1974, Cummings became the purchasing manager assistant for The American Museum of Natural History. He served as an arts administration assistant for The Children's Art Carnival in 1976; and that same year, held his first solo exhibition at the Studio Museum of Harlem. Cummings was the artist-in-residence for the New York Foundation for the Arts from 1977 to 1979, and joined the New York State Council on the Arts as an arts program analyst in 1980, working in contract administration. Cummings' solo exhibitions showed at the Francine Seders Gallery (1992), the Akron Art Museum (1993), Bates College (1998), Nobis Gallery (2007), the International Quilt Festival in Japan (2011), and the Artquilt Gallery (2014).

Cummings quilt work, which adheres to the narrative, story-telling tradition, has been commissioned by the American Embassy Art program, the City of Knoxville, Tennessee, the New York Department of Cultural Affairs, Home Box Office (HBO), The White House, and the House of Seagram, among others. His work was also included in the public collections at the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Art and Design, the California African

American Museum, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., and in the private collections of stars like George C. Wolfe, Whoopi Goldberg, and Alonzo and Tracy Mourning.

Cummings received the 2001 Louis Comfort Tiffany Biennial Award, the 2001 Excellence in Design Award from the City of New York City Art Commission, and the 2001 Children's Book of Distinction award from the Riverbank Review. He was interviewed for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in 2012, and by the ART CART: SAVING THE LEGACY project at The Research Center for Arts and Culture, an affiliate of The Actor's Fund, in 2013.

Michael A. Cummings was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 9, 2016.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Michael A. Cummings was conducted by Harriette Cole on November 9, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Visual artist Michael A. Cummings (1945 - ) served as an arts program analyst for the New York State Council on the Arts, starting in 1980. His quilt work is in collections at the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Art and Design, the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, among others.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Cummings, Michael, 1945-

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Cummings, Michael, 1945---Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Quilter

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Michael A. Cummings, November 9, 2016. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Michael A. Cummings, Section A2016\_109\_001\_001, TRT: 1:30:07 ?

Michael A. Cummings was born on November 28, 1945 in Los Angeles, California to Dorothy Dent Goodson and Arthur Cummings. His maternal grandparents, Alben Avery Dent and Hugh Dent, were from Columbia County, Georgia. During the 1920s, they moved to South Central Los Angeles, where Cummings' mother was born and raised. As a young adult, she frequented the jazz clubs on Central Avenue. Cummings' paternal grandparents, Belle Washington Cummings and Arthur Cummings, also migrated from the South to Los Angeles, where his father was born. Cummings' parents met in Los Angeles, and married in 1943. His father worked at the post office, and his mother joined the Lockheed Aircraft Company during World War II. Cummings' parents separated when he was a child, and he and his siblings lived with their mother and stepfather, Alonzo Goodson. Cummings suffered from several childhood illnesses, including asthma. Rather than socializing with his peers, he often spent time drawing and gardening with his grandmothers.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael A. Cummings, Section A2016\_109\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:13 ?

Michael A. Cummings grew up in Los Angeles, California, where he developed an interest in art at a young age. He enjoyed listening to music and drawing natural subjects like flowers and plants, and was inspired by the work of Vincent Van Gogh. However, his family did not support his aspiration to become an artist, and encouraged him to choose another career. As a result, Cummings majored in business administration at Los Angeles City College. After graduating from the two-year program, he started working for the City of Los Angeles, while continuing to make art in his free time. His work during this period mostly consisted of still life paintings in acrylic. As an adult, Cummings also became more social. He enjoyed listening to folk music at local coffeehouses, visited venues like the Brockman Gallery and took classes at a black art center. At this point, Cummings remembers the Watts riots of 1965, after which community centers began opening in predominantly African American neighborhoods of Los Angeles.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael A. Cummings, Section A2016\_109\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:27 ?

Michael A. Cummings moved to New York City in 1973, and found an apartment in the Meatpacking District of Manhattan. He initially held a few temporary jobs, and eventually secured a position with the Children's Art Carnival in Harlem through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. Cummings took a hiatus from creating art until 1975, when he started to work with textiles. While assisting with an event at the American Craft Museum, Cummings made a large collage from scrap fabric and other materials to be used as a banner. Later, Cummings met the noted collagist Romare Bearden through his colleague, Suzanne Randolph. Bearden critiqued Cummings' work, and gave him a signed print of one of his collages, 'Quilting Time.' Inspired by Bearden's encouragement, Cummings purchased his first and only sewing machine and taught himself to sew. He went on to create the series 'Springtime in Memphis,' which incorporated traditional quilt design elements from African American culture in the South.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael A. Cummings, Section A2016\_109\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:51 ?

Michael A. Cummings was influenced by African American history and culture as he developed his artistic style in the mid-1970s. He admired the artwork of Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, and studied at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Cummings was particularly inspired by the black folk artist Sister Gertrude Morgan, whose missionary work and visionary art attracted critical acclaim in the 1970s. Cummings had the opportunity to showcase his artwork at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1976. He was subsequently offered a residency at the museum, but declined and accepted an offer from the Cinque Gallery instead. There, Cummings' quilts were featured alongside the works of Romare Bearden, Ernest Crichlow and Norman Lewis. Cummings continued to rent apartments in New York City until 1980, when he purchased a dilapidated brownstone apartment building. For the next few years, he took a hiatus from art and focused on renovating the house, which he shared with fellow artists like Sana Musasama.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael A. Cummings, Section A2016\_109\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:02 ?

Michael A. Cummings was influenced by African American folk artists like Sister Gertrude Morgan and Nellie Mae Rowe. In the early 1980s, he began incorporating African imagery into his quilts. He studied Yoruba mythology, and took a mask making class at the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute in New York City. In the 1990s, Cummings' 'African Jazz' series was featured on Hallmark cards, and later displayed at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. He also joined the Women of Color Quilters Network, which was founded by Carolyn Mazloomi. Later, Cummings' work was showcased at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery in Seattle, Washington, and his 'President Obama' quilt was purchased by the Brooklyn Museum. At this point, Cummings describes the history of quilting, and the traditional quilt designs of Gee's Bend, Alabama. He concludes the interview by talking about his decision to represent his own artwork, and the importance of business skills for fine artists.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael A. Cummings, Section A2016\_109\_001\_006, TRT: 6:32:26 ?