

Interviewee: ELAINE SCHMITT URBAIN
 Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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The interviews with Elaine Schmitt Urbain, Pete and Betty Schmitt Jennerjahn, and Ruth Asawa were conducted by telephone. At the time I was trying to determine whether Ray Johnson was at Black Mountain College for the 1946 spring term or whether he was away. The interview with Elaine Urbain is on Side 1 of the audiocassette. The interview with Pete and Betty Jennerjahn continues on Side 1 and overlaps onto Side 2. The interview with Ruth Asawa is on Side 2.

I mistakenly locate the Ox-Bow School in Saginaw, when it was in Saugatuck, Michigan. It was the summer school of the Art Institute of Chicago. Elaine Schmitt Urbain, Betty Schmitt Jennerjahn, Pete Jennerjahn and Ruth Asawa were all students at Milwaukee State Teachers College in Milwaukee. Ray Johnson lived in Detroit and attended Cass Technical High School.

Mary Emma Harris

MEH: Okay. Where did you first meet Ray, Elaine?

ESU: At the summer Saugatuck school.

MEH: Is that S-A-U-G-A-T-U-C-K? Was that a church—?

ESU: It was the summer art institute

MEH: Ok. Who sponsored it?

ESU: I think it was the Chicago Art Museum. [MEH: The school was the Ox-Bow School of Art sponsored by the Art Institute of Chicago.] You know, I'm not too sure. But, you know, I've got that all written down some place. I'm sorry— I'm not sure if this is correct even. But I have— that's the one I have the pictures of that Ellen Lanyan— she was there. Have you heard of her name?

MEH: I'm not sure.

ESU: Well, she lives in the city, and when I went to the memorial for Ray, she was there. And we were all giving our reminiscences of Ray. And she then sent me this photograph of Ray and me on a bike, you know, for two. A bicycle built for two. And so I have those pictures— So, yes, we were working on lithographs. And it was a wonderful school. It was just after high school.

MEH: Okay.

ESU: We were there together. And I know there's a show I got at the Feigen Gallery of Ray's work. I guess you know about that.

MEH: Yes.

ESU: Anyway, it was in the 50s And I thought, gee whiz, I've got stuff from the 40s. And why wasn't that in it?

MEH: Right. You have stuff from the 40s.

ESU: Yeah, right. Sure.

MEH: One thing I want to do is— this exhibition that Mary Holden is doing is later work. But I want to do an exhibition of Ray's work from the forties, early Black Mountain stuff.

ESU: Yeah.

MEH: I have a question. The first summer you were at Black Mountain— that the summer of '45 when Feininger was there,

ESU: Right.

MEH: Okay. Did Ray hear about Black Mountain through you or through Betty? Do you remember?

ESU: I think he heard about it— my sister was the one, you know, who was the one

organizing this and saying what a wonderful school this was. She really was the one that got Ruth to go,

MEH: Did she [Betty] go the Saugatuck school?

ESU: No, No. She didn't go to the Saugatuck School.

MEH: Where would she have met Ray?

ESU: You know, I'll have to call her tonight.

MEH: I'm going to call her after I call you.

ESU: But she's really got that straight. But I just know it was her influence that got Ray and Ruth to go to Black Mountain.

MEH: What do you remember about Ray at the Saugatuck school?

ESU: Unfortunately, I didn't know that he was always just very funny. He was just always funny. We just always had good times. He just loved doing his art. I mean, he was very good at what he did. Then when I left, he sent me these wonderful letters and postcards. These were the early drawings when he says he's pining for me and sitting under the moon. And these wonderful little drawings he made. In fact, one of them was in the show. A few of them. Yeah, they were in the show that Ray had in North Carolina, and mine was really the earliest work. And it was one of these wonderful postcards that he sent me, and they are very important, these postcards of Ray's. So, that is what I have of his. I know that man came to see me. What was his name? Andrew. Because he was doing a whole film on Ray. He was here, you know, wanting to see all this stuff. And then he interviewed me. And then he was going to come back with his, film guy, but I haven't heard from him. I don't know what happened to that.

But he wanted this early stuff too.

MEH: According to my records Ray was there in the summer of 1945, the summer Feininger was there. And then he was there for the fall. According to my records he left and didn't come back until the next summer. Do you remember anything about that?

ESU: No.

MEH: That might be a mistake. I'm not sure.

ESU: Well, I've got—you know, the dates, I think, on his postcards, so, it should be on the dates that I have of all his stuff and then on the artwork that he sent me. I'm not sure when Ray left.

MEH: I know he stayed through the summer of '48, But according to my records,.. I'm not sure— I'm going to have to double check it — he stayed for the fall quarter but then left, and then came back the following summer. I don't know whether he might have gone back to Detroit or whether I have made a mistake or what.

ESU: That I'm sorry I don't know. My sister— but she doesn't have much recollection at all of Ray. But I mean, she could really fill in some of these things that, you know, I don't remember. But I just know that in my own letters which were '45 and '46, there in these letters I talk so much about Ray. The stuff that I wrote.

MEH: I'll check your letters for dates. That might be helpful . have copies of your letters somewhere here.

ESU: But which ones. I've got so many letters.

MEH: Right. Let me see which ones have to see if I can date from that.

MEH: Okay, I was just trying to put this together.

ESU: So what is this going to be now?

MEH: They're doing an exhibition— a Ray Johnson exhibition, and I am doing a preface. And they really want me to document basically when Ray was at Black Mountain and what he did there. So, I'm trying to be sure. I'm not sure about this date. I'm concerned— I have to double check and find out where I got that information. The other thing I would be curious about is where he was. If he left Black Mountain, like for the winter and spring, where he went during that time. Whether he went back to Detroit or where he might have been. I know he didn't go to New York [MEH: Actually he did go to New York] until '48 when he left the college. I don't think he went there before. So, anyway. Okay, At some point I want to interview people particularly about their recollections of Ray at Black Mountain.

ESU: Do you have many from his first year there?

MEH: Probably not that much. You didn't come down together did you?

ESU: No.

MEH: To Black Mountain.

ESU: No, we didn't come down together.

MEH: Your background— your religious background was Catholic. Do you remember what his background was? Did his family belong to a particular denomination.?

ESU: You know, isn't that interesting. I think we didn't — Even though everyone else was trying to convert me off of Catholicism, you, know, to be a nonbeliever. But I don't remember. He never was pressuring me. So, you know, I'm not really sure.

MEH: Not really sure.

ESU: But when I walked to church, I don't think Ray ever walked with me to go to church. Or Howard Rondthaler. He'd walk with me.

MEH: That's interesting.

ESU: Yeah. He was We were very close, very close. Those were wonderful times with Howard.

MEH: What was Ray like at Black Mountain?

ESU: Well, he wasn't the big shot. He was a very— like a country boy, you know. I mean, you never would have thought he would become what he is. He was just always—I hate to use the word “goofy”, but he was on the goofy side, because he was always joking with us and fooling around, you know, and coming into my studio. I then would say, “Ray, you can come in now,” you know. Then he'd visit me when I was up. He'd come barging into my— where I slept, and I'd say “Ray, only the girls can be up here” He was just always sweet though. He was so sweet. Well, you know, he really liked me. That's why he wrote— did all these drawings. You know, “When are you going to go for a walk with me?” I always said “No” because I really liked Howard better. It was very— It was very cute. No, I loved him. I loved him. We were very— He was always in my studio. He'd tell me everything that was going on with him. Well, like the night he got drunk and made me—

MEH: Was that the Karl With party?

ESU: Yeah. Right. And then he made me stay up. So, he told me everything. He said, “If you don't, I'll do something.” And I never found that letter where he said what

he was going to do if I do if I didn't listen to him. So, I listened to him for hours and hours while he told me how sinful he was. So, the way he talked about sin, it sounds as if he was—

MEH: Right.

ESU: —very religious. And when his parents visited, I don't really think there was any religion that came through. They were just very good people, you know, who didn't want to spend the money to go to a hotel, so they wanted to sleep in their car. Those were really principled people. If I had all my letters before me, I would be able to recall more stuff. And there are some I haven't even gotten through. There are many, many letters, probably more that would have Ray Johnson talking to me when he came in and all the things he said when he visited me. But I know he was always so interested in the Bodoni, in the printing that Albers did.

MEH: How did he relate to— He was interested in the Bodoni type,

ESU: Yeah, Right. Very interested. In fact, that's one of the pieces I have a letter he sent. He talks about this type in the letter. So, I've got those wonderful pages. There again, I'm not sure what year that was, but I know that I've got a lot it seems to be from those early years.

MEH: What was I going to ask you about? I was going to ask you about something else. How did Ray relate to Albers?

ESU: Isn't that a shame. I don't really have much. You know, when I talk about the— Well, he certainly was in the drawing class. I mean, I've got a drawing of Ray. Well, that's the one that I drew the portrait of, from that drawing. Those were all

done in the drawing class. So, he definitely was there in the drawing. I don't really— I just know I liked to draw him. But I don't think he liked my drawings because they were emphasizing features that I don't think he wanted to be emphasized. [LAUGHTER] You know, his hair sticking straight up. But I will have to go into a dream world and back to those wonderful days at Black Mountain with Ray.

MEH: I'm going to call Betty now. Then I'll talk to you more. Maybe we can look at your letters at some point and see what they trigger, you know, what memories they trigger for you.

ESU: Yeah, the letters. I have them all in a big box. I've been going through these letters. I know I was doing that with Andrew but then I never— When he didn't come back, I kind of left it. I was getting through all these letters. But then in my letters, well, yes. In my letters, of course, is where all that is. So, when is that show of his going to be?

MEH: It opens sometime in the spring.

ESU: Oh. Uh-huh.

MEH: Like, maybe in April.

ESU: Oh, I see.

MEH: So, anyway I'm getting all the phone and go ahead and call Betty, It is good to hear your voice sounding as good and strong as it is.

ESU: Well, good.

MEH: How is your little granddaughter doing?

ESU: Oh, she's just so wonderful. She's talking and just so cute. The other day she

was here, and Michael was laughing so much. I had a little party. And all of a sudden we went in, and she had dumped all my papers, all on the floor. And then she comes out and says, "I made a mess. I made a mess." She was killing everyone. She's just so incredible. So fun. But listen, I know you probably don't know, but she said — Mary [Holden Thompson]— that I was going have a show but I still don't know when she plans that show.

MEH: I have no idea. I think she's just trying to keep things together small bit by small bit so it's— I don't know.

ESU: I was wanting to go to Majorca in maybe next September or something. I've got so much art work there. I'd like to go. Anyway— but I guess there's not going to be anything this year.

MEH: That's really her- that's—

ESU: Right. Of course.

MEH: —Mary's— I think she's just trying to hold things together.

ESU: Yeah. I know she wrote me and said that just to get funding for the shows. That's what's so difficult.

MEH: Right. And for the publications, but she's trying. She's trying to lay some groundwork.

ESU: Yeah, so I know she is. So, listen Mary. It is wonderful to hear you. Were you with your family.

MEH: Yes, I was. I was gone for two weeks which was nice, and here I am back in New York, a free spirit.

ESU: A free spirit.

MEH: A free spirit, yes.

ESU: And your health is good?

MEH: Yes. Except I have always have to fight the Battle of the Bulge now.

ESU: You looked very thin when you were at Black Mountain.

MEH: Yeah, I was— my weight was okay then but—.Yeah, I'm in very good health.

ESU: But are you taking a lot of herbal and vitamins?

MEH: I really am now actually. What do you recommend?

ESU: Well, of course, I think Echinacea to prevent all these terrible colds that people are getting.

MEH: I just take that if I feel like I'm coming down with something. I don't take it all the time.

ESU: And Golden Seal. You can get Echinacea with Golden Seal, and that's very good. And a lot of C. Are you taking a lot of vitamin C?

MEH: I just take my regular multivitamin. Should I take more Cs?

ESU: Yes, oh, my god, yes. What's in there? You're probably getting 500 or son.

MEH: Probably.

ESU: No, you really—you know, Linus Pauling, my hero, he used to take 18,000 milligrams a day. You can take a lots more and that just builds your immune system. It's just important with all the pesticides assaulting us and everything that's in the atmosphere is so bad. And this helps to prevent all that bad stuff happening to you. So, to me that's very important, And Gingko biloba. That's the plant that Ruth drew on her card when she was putting all this stuff together. Did you remember that? It was the leaf of the gingko. And that is the

oldest tree in the world. It withstood Hiroshima, and it sprouted back. So, that is so wonderful for your mental and circulation and just general good health. I really spend the time and money in taking all these supplements.

MEH: I should really do the ginkgo.

ESU: Yes, the ginkgo. I was just to the health food store today. You should get the one that isn't— Some say 400 milligrams, but that isn't as high as a real extract which is more 60 milligrams, and if you go higher, it means you are getting the leaf and you need the plant. Anyway, I was just discussing that today. But I think it is just vital. And you do so much and you are so important you need to keep your health good. People who say they don't believe in vitamins— it's really, you know, it's really just not true. You need it. My advice to you, dear Mary.

MEH: Thank you, Elaine. I will take your advice. I'm going to call your sister. Are they in Arizona now?

ESU: Yes.

ELIZABETH SCHMITT JENNERJAHN

MEH: This is Betty Schmitt Jennerjahn. How do you recall Ray's coming to Black Mountain?

ESJ: Well, as time goes on I recall less and less. Pete remembers more than I.

MEH: I'll talk to him after I talk to you.

ESJ: But my impression is that when I was at Black Mountain, I wrote to Elaine. She was at, I guess, Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck], and that is where Ray and Ruth Asawa and Elaine were, [MEH: Ray and Elaine were at Saugatuck. Ruth was not.] and I wrote this enthusiastic business on Black Mountain. And so, I think that they all came then. Now it could be that someone else would remember that there was another reason for Ray coming but I know— I know that when we were in San Francisco at the other Black Mountain reunion, and we were at Ruth's house. At one point she said to Albert, she said, "Without the Schmitts, we would never be here." And so she remembers it. From that I take that's because of my letter that she came to Black Mountain.

WPJ: Hello, Mary.

MEH: Hi. How are you Pete?

WPJ: Oh, I'm doing okay.

MEH: Good. But I'm glad you all are past your surgeries now.

WPJ: Right.

ESJ: Anyway and I— I have the impression that Ray came along with that. And someone else could come up with a different memory.

MEH: I think that's correct because you were never at Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck]

with them

WPJ: No

ESJ: No, no, not at all.

MEH: Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck]. Was that an Art Institute of Chicago program?
Who sponsored Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck]? Do you know?

WPJ: I wondered if that came out of Cranbrook.

ESJ: I think he came out of Cranbrook.

MEH: I can check that. I was just curious. Okay. [MEH: The Ox-Bow School in
Saugatuck was the summer school of the Art Institute of Chicago.]

ESJ: Because Cranbrook was this art center that this sculptor whose name I can't
remember. This, you know, American modernistic kind of sculptor at Cranbrook.
There were all of his modernistic kind of large forms around, and I think it was
an outgrowth of that that was at Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck]. But, again, I
wasn't even there. I don't know.

MEH: Okay.

ESJ: Elaine could have some memory of that.

MEH: Okay.

ESJ: Or Ruth.

MEH: I'll check with both of them. I talked with Elaine and she wasn't sure. In fact, she
was calling it Saugatuck. [MEH: The laugh is on me. She was correct.] But it
was sacked and now. [Laughter]

ESJ: That's Elaine

MEH: That's Elaine. Right.

MEH: But she actually sounded very good. She sounded good. Her voice was very strong, and she sounded better than she sounded for a while to me.

ESJ: Has she told you what she's doing?

MEH: She's doing this television thing. I know about that.

ESJ: Well, she has a television show, a cable television show once a month. And she begins to zero in on it, it seems to me, about three days before it and finally decides what the topic is going to be on, and she rounds up all this research, probably by phone, in these few days, gathers some person who's a real expert in all kinds of fields.

MEH: Isn't she amazing?

ESJ: It's unbelievable. It's truly unbelievable. So, last night she did this interview with the Episcopal priest of the White Plains Episcopal Church, Trinity Church, talking on how terrible Giuliani is for what he's doing with, you know, welfare people. And she was totally outraged on the whole thing. She has so much energy.

MEH: She really is amazing.

ESJ: I mean, it's totally fantastic. So—It's true that she doesn't comprehend sort of basic facts of my life, Pete's life.

MEH: Anybody's.

ESJ: Things like that, but when she gets on a topic, is fantastic.

MEH: She's incredible.

ESJ: Right.

MEH: Okay, now. So I think that was— I'm going to call Ruth and confirm this, too.

Okay. Do you remember— Another thing I need to clear up is, according to my notes— I'm not sure just where I got this from— Ray came for that summer of '45, which was the summer Feininger was there, and then he stayed for the fall quarter, but he left for the winter and spring and came back the next summer. Do you have any recollection of that?

WPJ: Why I can— I can give you one milestone and that is, we arrived the summer of '48.

MEH: Right.

WPJ: Ray was there.

MEH: He was there then. Right.

WPJ: And that was my first face-to-face acquaintance with Ray Johnson, and I can remember exactly how it occurred.

MEH: How was that?

WPJ: Well, we arrived during the day just around noon. And it was the time when the practice was that people sort of had lunches, and they took them out and ate outdoors. And—

ESJ: So, that was a Sunday.

WPJ: Yeah.

MEH: Right.

ESJ: That was a Sunday and there was— Ray was— They had a blanket spread out and there was Ray and some other person or two who had already collected when we appeared. And that was when I was introduced to Ray.

MEH: What was your first impression of him?

WPJ: Well, he seemed congenial and friendly.

MEH: You knew that he was Elaine's friend? You had heard about him from Elaine.

WPJ: Yeah. Right. I mean— so he was already a known factor with Elizabeth — Betty — and Elaine so this is someone I'd heard about already. So, this was my first real contact with him.

MEH: What was he like it black Mountain?

WPJ: I don't remember too much particularly of anything especially where he stood out. He was not involved in the dance. And he did not and our Light, Sound, Movement Workshop.

MEH: That would have come a bit later. Do you remember his being in Albers' class at all?

WPJ: I don't. I mean, there are other people that I do remember, but I don't remember Ray.

ESJ: And I don't either. Basically, I had the impression that Ray was sort of a part of the furniture. I mean, I was around Ray. He was a friend and all, but I didn't have— it must be that close contact with Ray, you know, the way Elaine did. And then for me in the years after, I remember Ray saying things, you know, joking about my particular personality and character, that I would do these seven different things while driving— riding on the train from Asheville to New York, you know, weaving and doing, who knows what else I was doing, and he thought that was very funny and, you know. Confirmed it all and enjoyed it all but—So, he was really just part of the general furniture. And as years went on and he got into this Correspondence School, you know, and I'd get a card,

“Dear Betty, today I brought an umbrella. Love, Ray.” And, well, you know, I threw all that stuff out, you know. And we kept getting all this stuff. Caroline Kennedy’s swimming suit. And all that stuff. As time went on it just looked trashier and trashier to me. And so, we just threw everything out. We just didn’t want it around. But then when we were getting ready to move we— I don’t know if we had a show in Long Island or what, we called Ray and invited him over, and he was so lovely. He was so charming. And he was so responsive and appreciative of our artwork. And that was so surprising after getting all of the stuff in the mail. You know, we wondered where in the world was he. And he was so respectful of our work. And when we would put it— You know, we’d show him something and then put it back in the racks, and he was always rushing there to be sure we didn’t harm anything. And that again was so surprising. And then another thing, when we were here, and we had a show— It must be the show at the Sedona Museum which was just three years ago, I think. And we sent him an announcement, and he called and was just marvelous in response to that. He was supportive and interested and just what a wonderful thing that an artist friend would do. And that, of course, meant a lot because all of this was canceling out these other things.

[END OF INTERVIEW. END OF TRANSCRIPT.]