

*Stories Project. ACC 54.*  
*Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.*

Larry Bell (b. 1939) came to the fore of the international art scene in the 1960s, recognized for his perceptual exploration of the properties of light and reflections on manipulated glass surfaces in works ranging from painting to sculpture to furniture design. He met Robert Rauschenberg in Los Angeles when the two were young artists in the 1960s, likely through their mutual relations with the print studio Gemini G.E.L.

Transcription of a phone interview with Larry Bell conducted by David White, Senior Curator, and Thomas Roach, Director of Art Services, of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on March 14, 2023. Reviewed and edited by White on May 16, 2023; Bell on June 1, 2023; and Roach on June 2, 2023.

Larry Bell [LB]: Hello?

Thomas Roach [TR]: Hi Larry. This is Thomas Roach and David White from the Rauschenberg Foundation.

LB: Yeah, hi, how are you?

TR: We're well, thanks. How are you?

LB: Good. Yeah, very good.

LB: What's up?

David White [DW]: This is David speaking now. And we have some questions which we'd like to ask you. And do you mind if we record this so we just have a record of what we've spoken of?

LB: I guess so. I don't mind. No, I don't mind.

DW: Good.

TR: Thank you.

DW: And we've done a number of oral histories over the years when we had a connection with Columbia University, and that's finished, but we continue with this thing called Oral History Stories, where we speak to people that either worked with or were friendly with Bob, and try to get some information that increases our knowledge about Bob. But I wonder if you could just say a few words about yourself, just—on the record—your name, where you grew up, where you live now, and what kind of art school training you might have had, if any, or that kind of thing?

LB: Well, I was born in Chicago. My parents moved to Los Angeles when I was five, just about the time that the second war ended. And I grew up in the San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles. And after high school, I went to art school, because I didn't do very well in high school because of hearing loss that wasn't detected when I was a kid. They used to look at your ears. The nurse would come around and look at everybody's head and their ears for things that were alive. But no one ever tested your hearing. Anyways, I liked to draw cartoons in school and sometimes I illustrated my homework in a sort of comic book style.

DW: Oh, great. And what—from?

LB: I graduated at high school. I didn't have the credits to get into a university or anything. So the options were go to work somewhere, or go into the army, or something else for a teenager. And I decided I'd go to a professional school that taught you how to draw. And in those days there was a school called Chouinard Art Institute [in Los Angeles, now California Institute of the Arts] that was a training ground for Disney's people.

And my thoughts were I could maybe get work being an animator or something if I learned how to do that. But the animation training at the school was a very advanced kind of thing. And you had to take a whole bunch of classes prior to that before you could get into those kinds of trainings. And I found myself very much influenced by the fine arts people, the painters. And in particular a teacher called Robert Irwin who was . . . I believe his first semester teaching was my first semester as a student. And, so again, I ran into problems with the institution and I think it was pretty much based on just the problems I had with hearing. Anyways, I left after a little less than two years and went into the studio and started painting.

And then, it was at that point, that I started hanging around with the real professional artists, including Irwin, who had a studio around the corner from me in Venice Beach [Calif.], and Ken [Kenneth] Price and Billy Al Bengston were on the next street. They share a studio. And there was a kind of camaraderie that developed between us all, and wasn't much else happening down in that area. It was really dangerous. And so people hung together pretty much.

DW: And what year was that, do you recall?

LB: 1959—'58, '59.

LB: And somewhere along the way, I met [Robert] Rauschenberg. I'm not quite sure when. He got involved with the Gemini printing program [Gemini G.E.L. (Graphics Editions Limited)]. And so, I spent time in Los Angeles and I'm pretty sure that's where I met him.

DW: You mean at Gemini?

LB: Yeah. Something like that. Because they had nice openings and parties and stuff like that. And just about everybody showed up at their social events.

DW: Yeah, I've always heard about those [Elyse and Stanley] Grinstein parties.

LB: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, yeah. Those people were very influential in supporting the arts across the board and they were very successful at it. And so their business was quite successful. And I think it was Ken Tyler at the time was the director of the operations and the Grinsteins were partners with him. [Tyler co-founded Gemini G.E.L. with partners Sidney Felsen and Stanley Grinstein in 1966.]

DW: Right.

TR: And around when do you think that was that you would've met Rauschenberg? Or was it hard—

LB: I can't hear you very well.

TR: Around when do you think that was, that you might have met him for the first time?

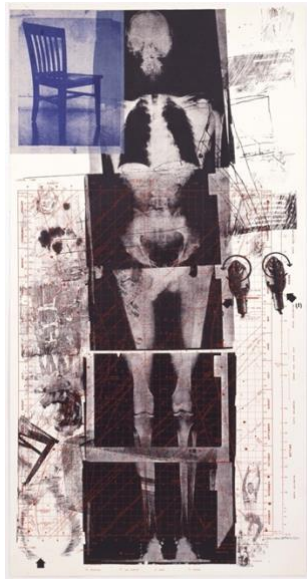
LB: In the early sixties.

TR: Early sixties. Okay.

DW: I forget when he did that, when his first project was at Gemini. That's easy enough for us to at least find out that it can't be before a certain year.

LB: Yeah. Yeah. Right, right. Yeah, I don't remember exactly when that was.

[Rauschenberg began his working relationship with Gemini G.E.L. in 1967, making *Booster* and its *7 Studies*. The project, which incorporates silkscreen and lithography, represents Gemini G.E.L.'s first project in combination printing and was at that time the largest art print ever made.]



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Booster*, 1967  
Lithograph and screenprint on paper  
72 x 35 1/2 inches (182.9 x 90.2 cm)  
From an edition of 38, published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles  
RRF 67.E012

DW: Now there's one thing in our records that was one of the reasons that was prompting this call. And I can just read you a quote. It says, "1973, first *Early Egyptian* piece made in Larry Bell's studio in Venice, California." So the first question, is that correct? Because I don't know who wrote that.



Robert Rauschenberg  
Untitled (*Early Egyptian*), 1973  
Sand and acrylic on cardboard  
107 1/8 x 138 1/8 x 28 1/2 inches: (272 x 350.7 x 72.5 cm: )  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation  
RRF 74.001

LB: Well, I don't know either. And I gave Bob my studio, because I had gone off to New Mexico to stay for a while and the building was just empty. And so he was in need of a place to work. And I think it was somebody, it might have been the Grinsteins that told me he needed a place to work and, through them, I invited him to stay at my place.

DW: So he was staying there as well as working there and sleeping there?

LB: Well, it was perfect for that. Yeah.

DW: And as far as you know, was there anyone else with him at the time when he was working?

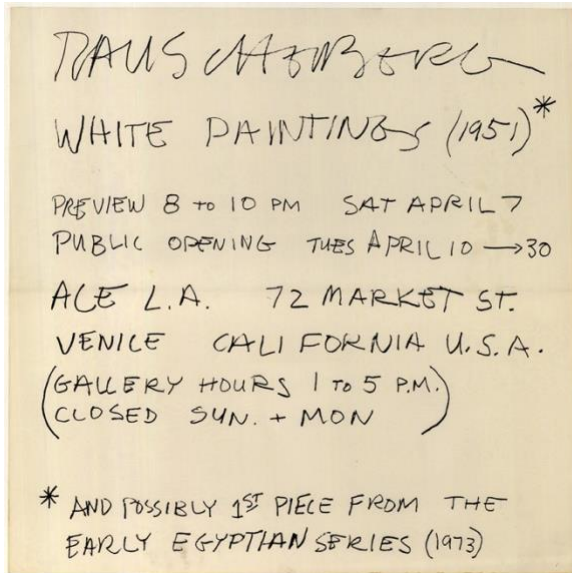
LB: As far as I know, no.

[Rauschenberg's son Christopher Rauschenberg and his partner Janet Stein recall visiting Bell's studio where the elder Rauschenberg briefly stayed in 1973 while he was preparing for an exhibition at Ace Gallery, Venice, Calif., *White Paintings, 1951*, April 10–May 15, 1973. They recount seeing works made by Rauschenberg at Bell's studio made of cardboard boxes encrusted with sand—elements from the beginning of the artist's *Early Egyptians*. They further recollect spending time with Bob Peterson, Hisachika "Sachika" Takahashi, and Debbie Taylor during this trip.]

DW: Oh, because basically, he was preparing for this exhibition at Castelli Gallery, or was that at Ace Venice? [While at Bell's studio, Rauschenberg was preparing for an exhibition at Ace Gallery, Venice, Calif., *White Paintings, 1951*, April 10–May 15, 1973.] Bob had made the *White Paintings* in 1951, I believe. And the original canvases had been used by Bob to make Combines and other things. So when he wanted to have an exhibition of the *White Paintings*, he arranged to have them remade to show at Castelli's in '68. And he called them *White Paintings, 1951*. [Evidence shows that the set was remade again in the later 1960s or early 1970s, possibly in preparation for its exhibition in the Ace Gallery show in 1973]. And then showing [in the same Ace Gallery exhibition was] this one *Early Egyptian* piece, which was made in your studio. So, I didn't know if you were aware at all of the *White Paintings*. Were they around in the studio at that time?



Installation view of the *White Painting [seven panel]* and *White Painting [four panel]* (both 1951) in the *White Paintings, 1951* exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery, 1968. Photo: Rudy Burckhardt. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Ace Gallery (Venice) Poster*, 1973  
17 x 17 inches (43.2 x 43.2 cm)  
RRF 73.E017

LB: Well, I wasn't around the studio. I was away.

DW: Right.

LB: I actually never visited with Bob when he was using my studio.

DW: Oh, interesting. That's good to know.

LB: But I wouldn't know.

TR: And do you know anyone else that was close with him socially around that time that maybe we could follow up with?

LB: No.

TR: No? Okay.

LB: No, I don't. I mean, I have never thought about it. If something comes to mind, I'll try to make a note of it. But—

TR: Thank you. Yeah.

LB: . . . I don't know if you spoke to Janet Webb. Her first husband was a printer at Gemini, Jim Webb, and I assume they were good friends, but I just don't know though.

TR: Yeah.

LB: You might speak with her about that.

TR: Okay.

DW: That's helpful.

TR: Yeah. And there was an exhibition of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* at Ace Gallery in '73. Is that a show that you would've seen?

LB: No.

TR: No? Okay. And—

LB: No, I—

TR: Go ahead.

LB: . . . stayed away from Ace Gallery.

DW: Ah, that's interesting.

TR: Quite smart based on what I've heard.

LB: I actually did a show with that guy [Doug Christmas], once.

DW: You say you did do a show with him?

LB: I did a show with him, yeah. Yeah. [Ace Gallery, Los Angeles, *Larry Bell*, November 1970]

DW: Did you get your work back or did he sell it?

LB: No. Aside from getting a bounced check, which I do remember, I don't—

DW: Oh, that sounds very familiar.

LB: . . . think I had any other troubles with him. He settled up on that.

DW: Oh, good, good.

TR: And I wonder if you remember seeing the *Carnal Clocks* [1969] at Ace Gallery in '69 [Ace Gallery, Los Angeles, *Robert Rauschenberg: Carnal Clocks*, April 24–May 30, 1969]? Or were you in New Mexico at that point?

LB: No, I didn't move [to New Mexico] till '73.

TR: '73, okay. Understood.

LB: '72. I mean, no, '73. It was '73.

TR: Okay.

DW: Well, this is really helpful just to start getting our info in order. And you're speaking of your difficulty in school because of your lack of hearing, makes me think of Bob's difficulty because of his dyslexia, which also was not recognized. They just thought he was a bad student and that it wasn't—

LB: Yeah. Well—

DW: . . . because—

LB: . . . I can only guess if that's the reason. It might just have been that I was really stupid and dumb student, that's all.

TR: I doubt it.

DW: Yeah. Yes. That's hard to imagine.

TR: And did you ever visit with Bob in New York or in Captiva [Florida]?

LB: No. Well, yeah, in New York I saw him a few times and I remember him getting very thankful that but this was in the seventies—of thanking me for letting him use my place. But I did—if I remember correctly, I did go to his place in Captiva, but he was not there when I went to it. And I can't remember what got me there, because Janet [Webb] wasn't with me at the time. Some things I just don't remember.

DW: Sure.

TR: Of course, yeah. And Larry, I just wanted to say, Reinhard Bek [conservator] is working with us, and thank you so much for spending some time on the phone with him to discuss mirroring and metal vacuum disposition and all of that. I think that's immensely helpful for him doing his research. [Bek & Frohnert, with assistance from Conservation Scientists at the Winterthur Museum, were researching and analyzing the mirrored Plexiglas components of Rauschenberg's *Carnal Clocks* (1969).

LB: Oh, good.



TR: Yep.

DW: Well, I think that's all the questions, specific things that I had in mind.

LB: Yeah.

DW: If something else comes up, might we call you?

LB: You can call me anytime you want.

DW: Okay.

LB: That's fine.

DW: Oh, that's a very, very nice offer.

TR: Yes, very kind. Thank you.

LB: Oh, no problem.

DW: Okay.

LB: Good luck to you.

TR: Thank you.

DW: Thanks so much. And if you're in—

LB: Have a great day.

DW: If you're in New York—

LB: Yes.

DW: . . . ever in New York, come by. The building on Lafayette Street is still here. It's where the [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation headquarters are and we are happy to welcome you.

TR: Yep.

LB: On Lafayette Street?

DW: Yeah, by Great Jones, in between Great Jones and East 4th.

LB: It's where? East 4th Street?

DW: Between East 4th and Great Jones Street. Yeah, it's about a block east—

LB: Oh, yeah.

DW: . . . of Broadway. That's where Bob was—

LB: Oh, yeah, yeah.

DW: . . . before he went to Captiva.

LB: Frank Stella had a house around there, somewhere, I think. On 4th, no, he was West 4th.

DW: He was on Jones Street, I think.

LB: Jones Street.

DW: Yeah.

LB: Right.

DW: So that's more the West Village.

LB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right, right. Okay, well thanks for the invite—

DW: Okay.

LB: And—

DW: Yeah.

LB: . . . good luck to you. And don't hesitate to call if something comes up that you think I might be able to help with, I'll be happy to share whatever I can remember.

DW: Well, many thanks for that offering, and for—

LB: And these are just memories, and the accuracy of them, I'm suspicious of. So I don't trust my memory.

DW: But that's happening to all of us over a certain age. So I understand completely.

LB: All right. All right. Well, okay. Good luck to you.

DW: Thanks.

TR: Thank you.

DW: Many thanks, Larry.

LB: You're very welcome. Bye-bye.

DW: Bye.

TR: Bye.