



William Cumming  
**Three Kids**  
1968



PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

William Cumming (American, 1917–2010)

**Three Kids, 1968**

Oil on Masonite

23 1/2 x 35 5/8 inches

Gift of Sandra Stone Peters

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American artist William Cumming is known for his bright, kinetic paintings of scenes from everyday life. His paintings are at once familiar and strange, portraying figures—often children—engaged in ordinary activities, but rendered abstract through flat planes of color and obscured faces. He had a long, successful career as an artist, despite periods when he struggled with tuberculosis and was ostracized for his political beliefs.

Cumming was born in Montana in 1917 and moved with his family to Portland, Oregon, when he was just a toddler. When he was seven, his family again relocated to Tukwila, Washington, a suburb of Seattle, where he would spend much of his life. Cumming initially taught himself to draw and paint through a correspondence course and weekly visits to the art history section of the Seattle Public Library. During the Great Depression, he found work photographing artists employed by the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, a New Deal program that hired artists to create works for public buildings, such as post offices and schools. Through this job, he met the painter Morris Graves, who became a close friend and introduced Cumming to other artists associated with the Northwest School of modern art. Until the 1940s, traditional works by Native American artists were the only nationally recognized art associated with the Pacific Northwest. The Northwest School artists—Graves, Mark Tobey, Kenneth

Callahan, and others—took inspiration from European Modernism as well as Asian and Native American art to create works that responded to the cultures and natural environments of the Pacific Northwest. These artists provided Cumming with the art community and training he needed to fully develop as a painter. His work quickly found recognition: the Seattle Art Museum hosted Cumming's first solo exhibition in 1941 when he was only 24 years old.

The following year, Cumming became debilitated by tuberculosis, a highly contagious, frequently fatal disease that plagued Seattle and many U.S. cities during the early decades of the twentieth century. He would spend the next decade struggling with the illness and often unable to work. During this same period, Cumming experienced a political awakening. Like many American artists in the 1930s and '40s, he was drawn to the Communist Party and supported the Soviet Union. During the Red Scare of the late 1940s and '50s, Senator Joseph McCarthy and the Congressional House Un-American Activities Committee persecuted people for real or alleged association with the Communist Party. Cumming was among the many artists, writers, and actors who were blacklisted and not allowed to work. He lived in fear of being charged with violation of the Smith Act, which outlawed membership in the Communist Party.

In 1957, on his 40th birthday, Cumming experienced another dramatic awakening. He renounced Communism, “decided” (in his words) to overcome his illness, and devoted himself fully to painting. In the decades that followed, he enjoyed good health and great professional success as a painter and an art teacher.

Cumming's understanding of space, light, and color was central to the development of his painting. He believed that “The space between alleged objects is the space which defines or creates the objects. Miscalled negative space, it is the space of relationship, whether in a painting or in people's lives. That is where living shows up, and that is the decisive space in my paintings.” His work privileges color and shape over realist representation. He often portrays figures in motion whose faces are obscured by shadow or whose backs are turned to the viewer. Cumming “was passionately aware of the ambiance of Northwest color, how the moist air creates a field of grayed color in which pure colors are allowed to shine out brilliantly.” While many of Cumming's paintings offer scenes with rich, bright colors, he employs a softer, more muted palette in *Three Kids* that evokes the Northwest mist.

William Cumming was married seven times and had five children. He died in Seattle in 2010 at the age of 93.



### Discussion and Activities

1. Look closely at Cumming's painting *Three Kids*. Draw a line down a sheet of paper to create two columns. On the left side, create a list of everything you see that refers to people and objects that exist in the world. On the right side, create a list of everything that seems abstract, obscure, or missing from the image. Why do you think Cumming chose to bring together abstract and realist elements in this way? What is the effect of his style?
2. Tableau activity: Ask three students to pose as the figures in Cumming's painting. Other students can provide feedback and help with positioning. What more do you notice about the painting when you pose as a figure? Imagine the moment just before the one portrayed here, then imagine the moment that follows. Ask students to act out the movements.
3. Write a story about this picture. Who are the figures in the painting? What are they carrying? Where are they going? What happens next?

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