Oral history interview with Susan Isaacs, October 28, 2013

Isaacs, Susan
Curator, art historian, co-founder of LB Jones Gallery, and founder of Susan Isaacs Gallery

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MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, associate curator for contemporary art at the Delaware Art Museum interviewing Dr. Susan Isaacs on Monday October 28th 2013. Susan, I would like to start out by talking about the gallery's foundation initial focus and I should preface that question by saying that the gallery opened first as the LB Jones Gallery. What year was that?

SUSAN: It was 1988. Stands for Linda Brennan-Jones.

MARGARET: Tell me how you met Linda Brennan-Jones.

SUSAN: Actually we both worked together at the Rockford Center in Wilmington when it was in Wilmington. We were both aides at the Rockford Center. She's a lot of fun and we got along really well.

MARGARET: The Rockford Center was a psychiatric?

SUSAN: Psychiatric. It's now a psychiatric for adolescences and it's moved somewhere. But then it was an adult and it was in Wilmington and I worked there for two years.

MARGARET: Would that have been in the early 1980s? Do you remember?

SUSAN: When did I work there? I might have even been earlier. It might have been '78 to '80, something like that. I'm not sure. It could have been that.
MARGARET: So the two of you met there. And you were a working artist at that point.

SUSAN: I started graduate school at Delaware for art history in 1980. Linda and I kept up our friendship. In 1982 I lost a child and Linda was incredibly kind. Of all of my friends she was the most supportive. Anyway, Linda was incredibly supportive and we remained friends. She inherited some money I think, a small amount of money, and called me and said, “Do you want to start a gallery? I'd like to do that.” And she said, “But you would run it.” And I said, “Well, galleries are usually for the name of the people and since it's your idea and your funding it should have your name on it.”

The interesting thing was I knew she was more conservative in her taste than I was, but I was extremely naive at that point. I didn't know anything about those kinds of mall-esque shows where they have painted Santa Clauses and Christmas stockings, or sort of kitschy but not that good craft decorations and things. It's not quite good enough to be folk art. It's craft. And I didn't realize that that's what she meant she wanted to show. So we had a disconnect. We found a space, we showed up the very first day, and she showed up with painted Santa Clauses and Christmas stockings and very traditional quilts but not really great ones.

I was in shock because I was such a—you have to understand that I was raised with furniture designed and built by [inaudible] who designed the secretary at the UN. Even though I grew up in the suburbs and went to school with everybody else I had studied oil painting with Ed Loper when I was 15 years old. I was the only young person he ever took on and that was because Anne Crawford recommended me. So I lived in a bubble. I was surrounded by magnificent Scandinavian modern furniture. I went to New York, to Philadelphia to eat, to the MET when I was young. I went to Europe when I was 15 on my own. I went with a group but my parents didn't go.

MARGARET: You grew up in an artist community.

SUSAN: Well I didn't always live in Arden. I lived in Holiday Hills. They moved to Arden three weeks before Jim [Plummer] and I were married in 1975. But we belonged to the Arden pool and I always hung out in Arden.

MARGARET: So you were still within that community.

SUSAN: Oh yeah. And so it's my—you know what they say, “Don't assume or else it makes an ass out of you and me.” I actually was in a state of shock. I didn't know what to do or say. I showed up with my things and you know the kind of stuff that I supported. So we attempted—right away we both recognized that there was a disconnect. But Linda tried to be incredibly supportive of the modern artists that I had. I tried to survive—which was the only way I could think of it—the stuff that she brought in. Pretty soon thereafter we realized that it cost more money than the little bit that she had to start the gallery. So I suggested that we start framing—a framing business—to make ends meet.

But I had to learn how to frame. But of course I'm an artist and I always liked working with my hands, and I'm an obsessive-compulsive so I learn things to the nth degree. I flew out to
California—I learned everything I could from reading and doing and practicing—we didn't have the internet then. So I got to Core Magazine, I talked to conservators, I talked to framers, framing companies, and we got moldings. We didn't get a chopper at all originally. So moldings would come in length, but I learned how to join them and I learned how to cut mattes.

I didn't know how to do French mattes, but I knew a lot about archival because I had actually done matting and framing for Susan Ball who eventually became director of College Art Association. But she was a dealer for a while in fine arts and I was her assistant. So I had done a lot of matting and framing for her that was purely archival and not decorative.

MARGARET: You were her assistant in Wilmington?

SUSAN: Mhm. When she taught at the University of Delaware. I think it was one or two years. She would have these private soirées where she would have Renoirs and Picasso, some of them after-strikes, but she dealt largely with print. She actually taught me how to do archival matting and hinging. So I did actually know stuff, but I didn't know decorative stuff. I didn't know French matting, I didn't know about doing double triple mattes, multiple windows. I didn't know any of that. So the person that wrote the column in Decor magazine at that time who was the “Ask the Expert” was a guy named Paul Fredericks. He had been Ansel Adams' framer. He was about 5”. He was French.

This is not the same Paul Fredericks of Hollywood that did risqué clothing, this is a guy who was a famous framer, who wrote the “Ask the Expert”, and he was about 80 years old at that point. He ran a framing school and he had a particular—where he would train people to be picture framers. I called him and I said—maybe I wrote, I don't remember—I said, “I would like to come out and learn with you but I don't want to do a standard course, because I've already been framing for a while and I know how to do a lot of different things, but I would like to write a list of things I don't know how to do and have him teach them to me. So I'm asking for a private week of five days and I'll come every day from 9 to 5.” He said, “Okay. This is what it will cost.”

I paid for it. Jim and I flew out and we stayed at Half Moon Bay. I don't know what Jim did during the days, he did stuff. He would drop me off with Paul. At the time Paul was actually in the midst of taking an old Ansel Adams photography off of Masonite. Because apparently—he said, “We didn't know better then, and he didn’t have any money, and we would just mount it to Masonite and of course it turns brown.” And it was for a museum, he was the Ansel Adams expert, and he had framed them and he knew how to un-frame them. So that was interesting, that whole week he was working on this Ansel Adams. So I put down French matting, I might have put some different kinds of hinging techniques that maybe I didn't think I knew as well as I should've, I don't remember.

I obviously put down a lot of stuff that I wanted to learn, I mean it took up five days. It was just Paul and I. We would have lunch together. He was married; his wife would pack his lunch. He had to have been at least 80 if he was a day. He had magnificent hands to watch him work. Magnificent. He had studied with a very famous Russian framer. He told me the name; I don't remember what it was. That Russian framer said, “You should always have something just not
quite perfect”—in the matte or in the cut—”because that's the way you knew that it was hand-cut and that an artist had framed it.” And Paul said, “Of course we don't accept that today.”

This was before there was a computer generated program and an automated matte cutter where you can—if you buy that equipment you don't even have to know how to frame. But I learned all of that and I ended up having his clients—curators and conservators—and I also did a lot of really difficult—I loved problem framing. I liked working with contemporary artists on resolving issues in terms of how they wanted to present things, and then I—being an artist myself—I used to do a lot of really wildly decorative framing.

For instance, somebody bought Seurat posters at a big Seurat retrospective and I mounted them and cut mattes and then painted the mattes in the frames like Seurat used to paint the frames and extended the paintings from the posters out. I would do things like that that I really enjoyed doing.

MARGARET: So in developing that framing program for the gallery that in a way then would supplement the activities that you—

SUSAN: Yeah, I mean, it's Wilmington Delaware, he didn't have a wide portfolio. We didn't have very much money at all. I ended up ultimately re-financing this house five times, which is why I don't have the equity in it that I should which is why I can't retire. But I don't regret it; it was the PhD of art business, of the business of art for me. And also I learned—I did all my own marketing. So I not only did framing. And then I eventually hired framers, but I still designed a lot, but I hired people to carry it out. And I've done some occasional framing since, but we have a matte cutter and a joiner at school, and a table saw.

In case things—I've had some work come in damaged—the work wasn't damaged, but it was the people who shipped it to us didn't package it correctly. So I had to remove the plexi and it was in a frame with a spacer—I did the whole thing because we don't have a big budget at the school. It was a big piece and to get it transported to somebody, it would have been hundreds of dollars. I just bought a new piece of plexi, the frame was still good. I still do that where things will come in, I'll still cut a matte and do some hinging if necessary. But only occasionally.

So I learned. I would call Winterthur all the time and ask questions. So I had regular clients, business clients, but a lot of my clients were contemporary artists and conservators and curators. Because they wanted the kind of archival process that I knew about. So it was interesting in that way.

MARGARET: Right. Now I want to go back, one question I didn't ask you in regards to opening the gallery with Linda: what were your motivations in regards to opening the space? I'm asking that because in 1985, there are several other commercial spaces in Wilmington.

SUSAN: That I really wasn't aware of that much at the time I was in graduate school.

MARGARET: But they weren't really supporting the types of contemporary artists that you—
SUSAN: Hard Castle was in Wilmington then for many many years.

MARGARET: Hard Castle, Carspecken-Scott—

SUSAN: Carspecken-Scott had some modern art but pretty conservative.

MARGARET: Pretty conservative. Station Gallery.

SUSAN: Right. Who's always survived, but it's a small operation. I admire those women because they really had a good business plan, they know what they can do, and what they do, they show the art that they know they can sell. It's a very excellent business plan. I had no business plan. It was the school of hard knocks. It was the best of times and the worst of times. Well I don't know why I did it. Linda called, she was a friend, it seemed exciting. I had a bazillion part-time jobs, I was teaching. It seemed like something I could do. I've always taken on a lot. It seemed like something I could do part-time was really how I thought of it.

I guess I imagined we would have a space, we would have this contemporary art, I'm sure we talked about we would get the work from artists in the area but I just didn't realize we meant different artists. It really was a mistake on my part, not Linda's part. Because she wasn't naive about it, she knew what kind of art I liked. I was naive about what she thought. When she said more traditional I thought that meant more Brandywine school, I didn't think that meant the other thing. So it was my own mistake, I was very sheltered. I'd lived a very sheltered life in terms of that sort of stuff.

MARGARET: But I'm wondering: did you identify a hole or a gap in terms of other spaces? Because these other spaces are in downtown Wilmington, they're supporting some local living working artists, but they weren't supporting the type of contemporary program that you were—

SUSAN: I think I probably did in the sense that I had been very involved in the founding of the DCCA. Although I wasn't one of the so-called “founding members.” I'm not sure why, I must have just not have been there the day they signed the incorporation or whatever. Because I definitely was at those early meetings. My husband and I installed the first two exhibitions for the DCCA. I resented—and I remember it as resentment—I resented the fact that this area was dominated by the Brandywine tradition. Resented it. I still have difficulty showing anything from that tradition in any of my American art classes.

Because growing up here I had a hard time with art teachers and whatever who would look at my work which was very expressionist and say, “I don't understand why you can't paint like this.” pointing to a Wyeth or a Pyle or something like that. And so I did definitely—I mean part of my reasoning for helping to form the DCCA, along with many people off and on through the early years, was to find a voice for contemporary art. So it was a voice for my work as much as anything else. Not that I ever showed my work. No that's not true. One group show I put one of my pieces in and I ended up trading it for a set of encyclopedias which I finally tossed a few years ago because they're totally obsolete.
In my own gallery. Oh no, I did do a show—I did one show of my own work of painted portraits. So in all the years, in the six years that I had the gallery I only did one show of my own work. I didn't really initially think of it as a space for showing my own work. I really thought of it as a space—I really had the art historian in me, was more powerful than the artist at that point. Definitely. I think if you had caught me in 1975 to ’78 I would have been doing it as an artist, but I think by 1986 I was really doing it more as an art historian.

MARGARET: So then in 1988—it's great, I'm sure you remember this article that Delaware Today did. So in 1988 you were on your own as the Susan Isaacs gallery.

SUSAN: Yeah. Linda and I decided that we had different goals. And it was the money pit. She, not being in the arts really, never really wanted to be in the money pit. I at that point was so vested in the artists—so vested with them—that I decided to continue on and change the name of it.

MARGARET: So you changed the name. You were still at that point on Tatnall Street.

SUSAN: The same address, Tatnall Street.

MARGARET: And you had the three stories at that space?

SUSAN: Well we started with the first—I think we started with the first floor and then we added the second floor, and then we added the third floor. There was actually somebody up on the third floor when we moved in, she was a dress designer. The third floor was a tough one to get up to. I had my dry-mount press up there and I had storage and I never liked bringing people up because it was treacherous steps.

MARGARET: So you were exhibiting primarily on the first and second?

SUSAN: Yeah. I had good storage up there. I had racks built. I would carry things down to make a presentation usually. I was always worried about somebody falling on those steps. You know how attic steps are in a 1850—narrow steps, shallow steps, straight-up, no handrails. I just really worried about somebody falling, so I used it for working on the press. Can you imagine we got a huge dry-mount press up there?

MARGARET: How did you get that up there?

SUSAN: I don't know how anymore. I don't know half the things I did when I was young.

MARGARET: This brings me to my next question: at the time of this article you were running the gallery on your own, still doing mounting and framing I assume?

SUSAN: Mhm.

MARGARET: At the same time you were working on your PhD at the University of Delaware and at Rutgers.
SUSAN: Yeah. I was teaching at Rutgers, I taught at Rutgers for eight years. I was also doing the radio show for part of that time.

MARGARET: What was the radio show?

SUSAN: WYLM, *Delaware State of the Arts*. Which is still on. But I co-hosted that and then hosted it for eight years. I ended that in—it was about eight years—I ended that in '93 or '94. I still did it probably my first year that I was teaching at Towson, but I would have to run in, do the radio show, rush out, get on the road and get down to Towson in time to teach. It was just craziness. I did for about a year and then the radio station said, “We want you to engineer it also yourself, we're not going to give you an engineer anymore.” And I said, “You know, I can't do that, I'm sorry, but my life is so complicated.” That was old engineering where you had the tapes—you had to put the tapes on and make sure they didn’t pop off. I did it a couple times and I said, “I can't concentrate.” Because it was the old system. I think maybe I could do it today with the digital and all of that. But I said, “I can't concentrate on engineering this at the same time that I'm the host and conducting the interview.” And they said, “Well we're not going to support an engineer.” And I said, “Okay. I'm so busy now anyway and I have a full-time position.” And I wasn't paid for it. It was just interesting. But yes I did that for eight years. Co-host and then host.

MARGARET: So was that program—it must have already been going?

SUSAN: Oh it had been going for a long time before I started in.

MARGARET: I didn't realize that. I didn't realize the program had been in existence that long.

SUSAN: Oh yeah it’s been around for a long time.

MARGARET: Who were you co-hosting with? Do you remember?

SUSAN: Yeah. Steven—let me think—what was the guy's name who was the director of the theater at the time?

MARGARET: Cleveland Morris?

SUSAN: Cleveland Morris and Steven who was director of the Delaware Symphony—*Stephen Gunzenhauser*, something like that. They were the co-host for many years. Then Cleveland left and then I did it with Steven. And then he left and then I just did it. I used to be a regular guest, that's how I ended up doing it. Because I was a regular guest. Cleveland loved the gallery and so I was a regular guest before so then they asked me to co-host. And then Steven left and I just hosted. And then I left and recommended—I think, I don't remember—I maybe recommended the person who is still doing it who is the director of the Delaware Opera I think.

MARGARET: Who's doing it now? Paul Weagraff from Delaware Division of the Arts. And he co-hosts now with Guillermina Gonzalez.
SUSAN: Okay that's different.

MARGARET: But she's only recently been—she's been co-hosting with him since she started at the Delaware Art's Alliance? Right?

SUSAN: I don't even know that organization, I'm so not—

MARGARET: It's an organization of one, maybe two.

SUSAN: I'm just not familiar with it. My life is largely in Baltimore and Philadelphia and New York so I'm not as much in Wilmington as I was.

MARGARET: So let's see—let's move—I'd like to ask you about your stable of artists. In this same article it mentions 30 artists, 60 percent of whom were women. Some specific artists it mentions were Donna (Kyle) Ripp, Helena Dominick, and Jim Schneck.

SUSAN: Jim Schneck, he did his MFA at Delaware. And then he was I— I thought Steve knew him—because he worked for Winterthur for a lot of years handling art and stuff.

MARGARET: You know, he might. I just haven't mentioned his name in that context. Steven might know him.

SUSAN: Very nice guy.

MARGARET: Tell me any other artists you remember and tell me a little bit about—

SUSAN: How I'd select people?

MARGARET: Yes.

SUSAN: Well, in those years there were tons of artists who didn't have an opportunity to show much. Many of them came to me and I tried to give opportunities to lots of young artists. Some shows were better than others. I also gave opportunities to established artists who sometimes hadn't shown their work for a long time for various reasons or hadn't shown in Wilmington forever. I really had way more artists than I really could handle but I had a hard time saying no. I only occasionally made my decisions based on business.

Since I really didn’t exactly understand business—the business of selling—essentially I was an art historian and an artist who loved art. If I found patrons or clients who were real true collectors and loved art we got along fine and everything went well. But for the average person coming in who didn't know anything about art I was happy to teach but I—

MARGARET: Okay. So we're talking about specific artists whose work was shown, and just to confirm that you did not have a specific focus in regards to the work you were showing. So you weren't focused on abstraction, regional.
SUSAN: No. I didn't have a specific purpose. Sometimes quirky artists intrigued me, sometimes it was their personality, sometimes the work was interesting, sometimes it was just different from anything else I had, sometimes they talked me into it, sometimes—the one thing I knew was that for the most part I didn't show representational art. There were a few exceptions. I showed Marjorie Egee’s work. But what I did was I kind of talked her into—I showed work of a particular focus of hers.

So when I said, “You know, Marjorie, if you could do larger paintings of these flowers where you just—like this one that you have smaller where it's just a section so that it has a more contemporary feel and you frame it very simply”—I ordered the frames for her and showed her how to do it—I said, “I would represent you and show those. But the things that are more standard, kind of scene painting, I won't be interested in showing. So it's up to you if you want to develop that path that I see a hint of here, I'll be happy to schedule you a show in a year or two.”

So we did and we actually had a long relationship and I sold a lot of work for her over the years. It wasn’t that she didn't already have that work, but she had lots of other things going too, and I said, “This is the body of work that I would be interested in and I would be particularly interested if it were larger.” and I said—at that time she was framing with very complicated frames—and I said, “and I would want very plain mattes and very simple wood frames.” I don't know what she's doing today. I think she shows with Station Gallery but I’m not sure.

MARGARET: Actually I don't know either.

SUSAN: Maybe she doesn't. She's good at marketing herself too. But you know who I sold a lot of work to? I also did Satellite exhibition, for a number of years I—Ristorante Carrachi?

MARGARET: Oh yes.

SUSAN: I did all the shows there for a number of years. Marjorie's work happened to be up when they were filming to the Dead Poets Society and they used to eat there a lot, the crew. I sold a lot of her work from that show to people who were on the crew of the Dead Poets Society. A number of pieces. I worked on the Dead Poets Society.

MARGARET: Oh you did?

SUSAN: Yeah, I did—I worked with—well now they're divorced, but what was the director's name? Peter Weir. And Wendy Weir was his wife and she was in charge of the sets—set designer I guess she was. So everything that you look at in that show that is framed except one piece that Tom Watson framed for them on the spot, every single thing I framed. So they went to the University of Delaware archives and got archival images of school teams and that, and then they would bring them to me, and Weaver Brown did the calligraphy of the years and all that.

So Wendy would come in and we would pick what works. And then the scenes where there are family photographs on the tables or sets or whatever, I framed all of those. And then I ended up framing—I could have made money on this but I would never do that—the boys for Christmas wrote poems to Robin—what's his name, the star of that movie?
MARGARET: Robin Williams.

SUSAN: Robin Williams. And I had them calligraphed in mattes and frames. And then I had a client, an attorney, who was the attorney for—what's the rock singer, George something or other?

MARGARET: George Thorogood.

SUSAN: Thorogood. And I remember UPS coming in and picking up a package going out to George Thorogood of something that I had done. And the UPS guy said, “Is this the George Thorogood?” And I said, “No, no, it's just somebody with the same name.” I was very discreet. And I had all the original copies of the poems, I could have sold them to National Inquirer or something. Because one of them—at least the head guy—has become a—isn't he, he's a well-known actor now.

MARGARET: Yes. But I can't remember who he is now.

SUSAN: I don't remember either because I don't follow any of that. But, it was fun. They paid in $2 bills. I did thousands of dollars of work for them. One day I had my whole crew, we were framing until midnight, and then I would call and the truck pulled up to load up everything, it was 2am, and John—and I don't remember John's last name—but he had been the set decorator for the original Star Trek. He was the set decorator for this film.

And he said, “You know, Susan, if you were in LA you'd be famous. The way you get work done and get it out.” I said, “Well, I'm famous in my circle.” I had been to LA once and I didn't like it, so I wasn't going back. But it was a lot of fun. I never went to the set. I could've. I just was so busy. It was Christmastime, November, December. October, November, December.

MARGARET: Oh, right, when they were filming.

SUSAN: Interesting—my brother-in-law worked on it too. So did Tom Watkins. And my brother-in-law did the leaves and stuff, because he was a landscape designer at that time. Among his many things that he did. He's a creative person. He's a Leonis—the Leonis Family Restaurant.

MARGARET: Right. This is Ron Leonis.

SUSAN: Ron, yeah. He did the—he brought in bags of leaves that he had collected from places to make it look more—because the out of order of the scenes or whatever. So helped them make it look seasonally appropriate for the script. Everyone in Wilmington was working on that film in some way or another.

MARGARET: Yeah, it's interesting. A lot of people that I've talked to have mentioned that film as well. So, Susan, I don't know if I've asked you specifically: when did you move to Delaware Avenue?
SUSAN: I'm not sure. I think it was '90. I think I was there about 18 months. And then came back the great crash. Remember DuPont laid off 8,000 people in one week, or one day or something.

MARGARET: And that was in '92.

SUSAN: Yeah. And that literally closed my business. I did not have a person walk in that space for two weeks. Not a person that wasn't my staff. For two weeks after DuPont laid off 8,000 people. I think the number was 8,000.

MARGARET: And that was not far in the heels in the—there was a crash in '89 or was it '87? It may have been '89?

SUSAN: I thought it was '91 or something.

MARGARET: Maybe it was '91.

SUSAN: Bill Clinton is the one who took us out of the crash.

MARGARET: Yeah. So DuPont laid off—so we have that happening—

SUSAN: They changed their whole focus, they laid a zillion people off and that affected the whole city. And I literally did not have a client for two weeks. I mean, nobody even came in to look at the show. Which gave you some idea of how significant that company was at that time.


SUSAN: So everybody was probably nervous and not going out and certainly no one was spending money.

MARGARET: And so you closed the gallery—

SUSAN: In February of '92. Yeah, probably within a few months of that crash. Maybe that was the fall of '91 or something. Because I think it was the spring of '92 that I closed.

MARGARET: Backtracking a little bit: I know that Art on the Town was sponsored by the Wilmington Art Commission.

SUSAN: I helped co-found Art on the Town.

MARGARET: Right so that would have been—

SUSAN: John Gatti. John Gatti came to my gallery on Tatnall Street and he said—he used to come all the time—and John said, "I have this idea but I only want to do it—or, are you interested in doing it? Because if you don't want to do it then I'm not going to move forward. You have to be involved." And he explained his idea and I said, "Yeah absolutely I want to be involved and do it." And so he said, "Okay, we'll work on it together." So I was on the
Wilmington Arts Commission for a number of years. I have those dates upstairs in an old resume somewhere.

MARGARET: Okay, that's good to know.

SUSAN: I'd have to look it up. But I was on the Wilmington Arts Commission. And for two years, two times at least, I—you know the women's conference that used to take place—maybe it still does—at the University of Delaware, the National Women's Conference? It maybe doesn't exist anymore. I did the art exhibition twice for them for that conference.

So I served on their planning committee for the women's national conference. I did that. It was a huge exhibition up on North Campus there—whatever that events and planning is in Newark where they could have the conferences there. It's a huge lobby. And I mean it was a lot of work. I did it twice. All women artists from the region. There was no budget.

MARGARET: So you were curating? You curated that exhibition?

SUSAN: Organized and curated, everything. I did that twice for them. I don't remember the dates; maybe I could find it on an old resume.

MARGARET: So—sorry I know I'm jumping all over the place—so we have all of this momentum in 1988, Art on the Town, you're into the new space on Delaware Avenue, but then in 1992 huge recession, DuPont laid off 8,000 workers—

SUSAN: You'd have to look it up, that's the number that sticks in my head.

MARGARET: Right, but there's this huge serious financial impact. And at the same time, right around that time, we also have a change in the mayor as well in Wilmington.

SUSAN: I don't remember who the mayor was.

MARGARET: The next mayor who came in—and I'm asking the question and for some reason the mayor's name is completely escaping me at this moment. The first African-American mayor in Wilmington.

SUSAN: It wasn't Jim Baker.

MARGARET: No. The one before that. Starts with an “s.”

SUSAN: It was the one who was a professor at the University of Delaware.

MARGARET: He did. He came from Delaware. Sills. Mayor Sills.

SUSAN: Yes, right.
MARGARET: So all of this coming together in the early 1990s and really seeing the tremendous impact that it had on commercial spaces. But in regards to arts support within the city, I think is really just—I would say devastating certainly in some respects.

SUSAN: It was. You know, it was interesting because I had finished my PhD in '91. So it kind of—the timing of it worked okay for me in the sense that I'd finally finished my doctorate that I had been dragging on for years because of doing the gallery and having children. I had about a three year period where I really didn't work on my dissertation and then I pulled myself together and got it done. So the timing was pretty good. I was ready; I closed the gallery in the spring of '92.

And then CAA does their advertisements starting in August, September, really October is the big advertisements. So I really had the summer to update my resume and whatever, and I was working on an article that got published. So timing-wise it was not so terrible for me and the fact that I got out of it—I mean, I was poor. I got out of it not in good financial shape. But I closed the gallery in basically good financial shape. Having paid my creditors and the artists. So it was time to start over.

MARGARET: So you started at Towson in—

SUSAN: ‘93. I taught at Rutgers, University Camden for eight years while I had the gallery I guess I was doing that.

MARGARET: All of those things all at the same time?

SUSAN: Yeah.

MARGARET: That's incredible. So I'd like to get your recollections, memories, of some of the other avant-garde artists activities that were happening in Wilmington at the time. So I'm going to go back in time to Fifth Street gallery. But you would have been at the University of Delaware.

SUSAN: I really never went. I really knew of that gallery mostly after it was closed. Because I was basically—I spent my life between my house and University of Delaware. I started—I did a second degree in art history '78 to '80, and then I did the masters and PhD starting in '80 to '91. Got my masters in '84 and my doctorate in '91. So I was heavily, heavily ensconced in that. I started teaching at the university level in '82 before I even finished my master's degree. Summer of '82 was the first time I taught at the college level.

MARGARET: So you weren’t attending any of the activities at Fifth Street, but you did know Tom Watkins.

SUSAN: No I actually met Tom when I opened my gallery. He came loping in—if you've met him you know he's very tall—he came loping in and introduced himself. I liked him. I love characters; he was definitely a character, he was great. We formed a friendship. He came around a lot. And then certain other artists who were friends of his—Anne Eater—came to see me.
That's where I started showing the xerography work, which I hadn't been familiar with before. I'm a pretty classically trained artist. Boston University School of Fine Arts, two years, and three years at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. I ended up graduating from the academy and that's my first background as painting. In Wilmington I studied with Ed Loper when I was young. So that was a whole new world, xerography.

MARGARET: It's interesting because there is this other small artist community that is focused on xerography, the 'zine scene that was coming out of Wilmington.

SUSAN: Which I didn't really know much about until Tom introduced me to all of that.

MARGARET: Until later, okay. I'm trying to remember: at that point, I don't think Xanadu Comics would have still been open and running.

SUSAN: I'm not a comic book type person. Not a graphic novel type person. Not that I haven't shown that kind of work. The thing about me is that I am “catholic” in my tastes. I admire diversity of all sorts. I admire tenacity, I admire difference, I admire creativeness, I admire strangeness, I admire anything unusual, and I admire character. So if an artist came in that had any of those elements I was probably a sucker for it. Because that appeals to me. Even though I'm much older now I still try to be extremely in the artist's corner, to show the work the way they want it to be shown. I bend over backwards to get things done for the artists. I try to be very open-minded in my tastes. Yes occasionally I'm disappointed, the promise doesn't show through. But very rarely.

I think if you believe in people they live up to your expectations 99 percent of the time. At least that's what I've found. So I'm a half-cup full person. I've always loved working with artists and trying to make it possible for them to survive and to show and do their best however I can figure it out. I continue to do that at Towson too because I curate the two galleries there. Sometimes the third gallery. Keeps you young, if you’re always looking at new art, meeting with new artists. We have an MFA program. So I’m continuing the same—now through teaching—the same kinds of ways—I would remember I would have guest speakers come to the gallery, I had the director of the Delaware Art Museum at the time come give a talk to the artists.

I think I had a conservator come at one point. I guess I probably was always more of an educator than a business person, though I did learn a lot about business. Not always good things, but I learned a lot about business. I didn't really enjoy the business end of it at all. As a curator you do that though because you have to write grants and budgets. That's the business end of it. I'm still not thrilled about it, but I've got to do it all the time. I just put three grants to bed last week.

MARGARET: Oh really? Gosh. So I think this is a good stopping point.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 52 minutes