Oral history interview with E. JEAN LANYON, October 2, 2013

LANYON, E. JEAN, born 1935
Artist, poet, and Delaware Poet Laureate Emerita

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MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum, interviewing E. JEAN LANYON on October 2, 2013, at the artist’s home at 8 Winston Avenue in Wilmington, Delaware.

Okay, so you were born in Wilmington?

E. JEAN: Yes, I was.

MARGARET: And you attended Goddard College?

E. JEAN: Mm-hmm.

MARGARET: And then, did you immediately go to Los Angeles? Tell me about that early education.

E. JEAN: I worked for a year after high school. Basically, I had no help, no financial background or backing, and the counselors and teachers at school were useless in guiding or helping me even though I begged for help. In those days if you were poor you didn’t get a scholarship. I got a letter from Scholastic Arts because I won first in state but, because I was poor, they wouldn’t give me a scholarship. I was too poor to be given a scholarship.

MARGARET: That’s odd thinking.
E. JEAN: No, that was the thinking in those days. That was the 50s, early 50s and prior to that. If you were poor you didn’t go to college.

MARGARET: Then you didn’t go to college at all?

E. JEAN: No, no.

MARGARET: Hmm, okay. Where did you go to high school?

E. JEAN: Wilmington High School on Delaware Avenue. Good old Wilmington High. That was a wonderful place.

MARGARET: Really?

E. JEAN: Mm-hmm.

MARGARET: On Delaware Avenue.

E. JEAN: Chase Manhattan Bank is there. It’s across from the cemetery. They tore down our old alma mater and put up that ugly building and got rid of us. The school out on DuPont Road is just not the same. It says Wilmington High on it, but they’ve gotten rid of Wilmington High completely.

MARGARET: Right. So you worked for a year after high school?

E. JEAN: I worked for DuPont Company in the executive department in the chart room and saved up my money and managed to get a scholarship to Goddard even though it was not an art school and I had no money or backing. They gave me a scholarship. I went there for two years. I supported myself in between.

After two years the one art teacher that was there was begging me to go to art school because she said, ‘You’re wasted here.’ Those days were days of extreme male chauvinism so the poetry I was writing was poo-pooed over what any male would do, of course. So I got no support in writing poetry there.

MARGARET: Were you doing the two of those simultaneously when you started?

E. JEAN: Always done them.

MARGARET: Always simultaneously?

E. JEAN: Yeah. Yeah, it’s one of those crazy things that—and Jeanette Slocum Edwards, when I was in junior high school—was it junior high or high? Maybe it was my first year of high? A schoolteacher wrote to Jeanette Slocum Edwards, because she was a poet and a painter, and said, “We have this child we don’t know what to do with. She writes poems and paints.” She probably said I was a mess [laughing].
But I sent some poems—I was invited to send poems. I sent a couple of poems. One of them was accepted for their anthology in 1951, something like that. Anyway, I was invited to a writer’s meeting and of course, being a young teen I thought these were the oldest people in the world. They really weren’t; they were adults, but they treated me like an intelligent human being. Jeanette and I hit it off the very moment we met and her entire life we were friends, but she was my mentor.

I took evening classes after school. Y-Ed it was called at the men’s Y on Washington Street and they were called Y-Ed classes and she taught creative writing and I took some of those classes and I had a wonderful introduction to many kinds of poetry through her. We had lots of fun exploring art together because when I came back from Chouinard she wanted to know everything I learned [laughing].

MARGARET: Ah, that’s wonderful.

E. JEAN: So, we shared very much.

MARGARET: After two years at Goddard, then did you immediately go to Chouinard?

E. JEAN: No, I came back here. I worked for a year at the Diamond State Telephone Company and became their first female engineer.

MARGARET: Oh.

E. JEAN: I had saved up my money and I got on a Greyhound bus with a weekend suitcase full of clothes, and my French folding easel and my poetry.

MARGARET: Right, and you went out to Los Angeles?

E. JEAN: Yep.

MARGARET: What year was that? Do you remember?


MARGARET: So, out to Chouinard—

E. JEAN: I can give you—let me get that one more book I can give you.

MARGARET: Okay, so this is beginning late 1940s scrapbook.

E. JEAN: Yeah, see my father gave me this scrapbook.

MARGARET: Oh, wow. This is the first volume.

E. JEAN: We had to draw ourselves in school and then this was when I was younger. I had to write a—this has pictures of me and I was in the newspaper in 1936.
MARGARET: Oh, that’s a wonderful picture.

E. JEAN: That’s my brother and me and that’s me later on [in my] winter outfit. This was the first poem I had published.

MARGARET: At 13?

E. JEAN: Mm-hmm. That’s Wilmington High School and this is junior—oh no, that’s Winter Junior High and then there should be one, that’s me. Nope, that looked like me. This was an interview in high school. What year was that? January 1952, and I was in high school attending over there. This is a transcript of what pupils think about art.

MARGARET: Who conducted this interview?

E. JEAN: Consultant Miss Helen Pankhurst, an educator who created the child’s radio program and author of *Exploring the Child’s World*.

MARGARET: Oh, interesting and this program that you were interviewed on was this for the *Child’s World*?

E. JEAN: I assume so, yeah. Joseph Corby was the art supervisor for the public schools. He was no help at all. I went to him for help about going to art school. That was me in my first job with the architect and I did a two year apprentice with him. Well, I was the first female in Delaware to take drafting because I fought with everybody so that I could take it. I stood up for myself. I was in the art club and the thespian society and I did stage sets. You’ll see my first name however, I keep it a secret. My first college roommate was very dramatic. She was an actress and she said, ‘Oh, everyone must have a mystery in their life.’ And so my mystery was my first name.

MARGARET: Interesting.

E. JEAN: Actually, because there were so many people around us with the same first name I wasn’t allowed to use mine. So I could only use Jean.

MARGARET: Was this in with your family?

E. JEAN: Uh-huh. Well, family and friends. So, you can see I had, even in those days, I got first prize in the Hallmark art talent contest way back then. We went to Huckleberry Mountain Workshop Camp.

What’s this? Oh, Betty DeChecco, now Maroni, did that cover, but I did the sets.

MARGARET: For this play.

E. JEAN: And this is graduation and I received awards. Even though I was a DO student, I received awards.

MARGARET: A DO student?
E. JEAN: Diversified Occupations.

MARGARET: Okay.

E. JEAN: In order to—okay, I’ll tell you this story. When I was going to be 16 my mother said, “Well, you’re 16 you have to pay room and board or get out. You don’t have to go to school. Quit school now. You’re only a girl.” Well, I was only a girl, but I wanted to go to art school and I said so. She said, “Well, that’s up to you. You still have to pay room and board.” I knew that if I got out I still had to pay room and board so I’d have to quit school and go to work.

MARGARET: Right.

E. JEAN: Oh, it’s very old; it’s falling apart. That’s Chouinard.

MARGARET: Oh, here we go! So this is Chouinard. This is August ’57.

E. JEAN: I went there in ’56. Here it is, Goddard. I went to Goddard ’54, ’55, almost ’56, then started ’56—I went at night to Chouinard; ever night and Saturday.

MARGARET: And you must have been working during the day?

E. JEAN: I worked during the day with an architect.

MARGARET: In Los Angeles?

E. JEAN: Yep. And then that job ended and when I was going to day school at Chouinard I worked in a bar. I was a cocktail waitress. I worked every night. It wasn’t easy.

MARGARET: What year did you finish at Chouinard?

E. JEAN: I left there after two years ‘cause I nearly starved to death. They had a terrible recession because the aircraft company who practically supported the whole city doing what the movie industry didn’t do—when they shut down to change over to missile program all of the little tiny companies that supported them went down, everything went down. It was a terrible recession. There were bread lines. I couldn’t get work after that except at a bar at night and tips were lousy if you had customers and I nearly starved.

So, friends scooped me up and away we went to Chicago. In Chicago I met and married my husband and he was killed by drunk drivers and I came back to Wilmington because I was pregnant. I thought well, I’ll have my baby with my family. I should have stayed away. I just didn’t have a very friendly family that’s all. I’ve been on my own and I’ve been—I think I’ve been on my own since I was born actually [laughing]. If you want to know the truth.

MARGARET: That must make for a very strong individual.

E. JEAN: [Laughing]
MARGARET: So what year was that that you came back to Wilmington?

E. JEAN: ’58 and Stephanie was born in ’59 and she is the light of my life.

MARGARET: Okay. So let’s skip ahead to—and actually it’s pretty perfect, to 1970. So, in 1970 is this your first publication in 1970? The Myrno Bird.

E. JEAN: The Myrno Bird. It’s a picture storybook and that should be in here.

MARGARET: Was this your first publication? I know you were published in newspapers, anthologies, etc. But was this your first book?

E. JEAN: Yeah. This is my—my mother worked for the bank. She didn’t mind taking credit for what I did but she didn’t help me with anything. Anyway, this is my mother with me and The Myrno Bird.

MARGARET: Who published The Myrno Bird?

E. JEAN: First State Writers did. I won a book prize and they sponsored it. You can tell what years they were.

MARGARET: Oh, yes. Those are fabulous pants.

E. JEAN: [Laughing] That’s Ruth Egri holding—and that’s my painting that I’m putting up on the wall there.

MARGARET: So, that same year, February 1970, you have a one-person show at the Warehouse Gallery in Arden. Were you showing work from The Myrno Bird?

E. JEAN: No, I was showing my paintings. Yeah, this show begins June 20th. This is it.

MARGARET: And that’s from the Warehouse?

E. JEAN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Oh wait, this looks like it’s at the Rehoboth Gallery.

E. JEAN: Oh, is that Rehoboth?

MARGARET: This is good. This is ’71.

E. JEAN: Okay, here’s The Myrno Bird. You have this.

MARGARET: And actually, this is perfect. If you hold on that page I’m going to add that citation to this clipping. So this was published—

E. JEAN: November 11, 1970.
MARGARET: And this was in the *Morning News*, okay.


MARGARET: Oh my, a year? Annually?

E. JEAN: Warehouse Gallery features myriad of work. This is the Warehouse Gallery and I did the drawings for—I have a lot of stuff. I didn’t realize how much I had archived until just recently.

MARGARET: This is wonderful.

E. JEAN: But, these are all 1970.

MARGARET: Okay, so this must be about *The Myrno Bird*?

E. JEAN: Yeah, book is charming. Do you want to see it?

MARGARET: Oh yes, I would love to see the book!

E. JEAN: It’s very small and very—

MARGARET: Oh, this is lovely!

E. JEAN: I can’t put my hand on the resume book, but I have—

MARGARET: This is lovely!

E. JEAN: Thank you.

MARGARET: I don’t think the museum has a copy.

E. JEAN: I don’t know.

MARGARET: I’ll have to get our librarian on this. Have her track down a copy. So, this was published in October 1970 by First State Writers. They were on Hillcrest Avenue.

E. JEAN: That’s Jeanette Slocum Edward’s address.

MARGARET: And it was a limited edition of 500 copies.

E. JEAN: Yep! This is early shows and artwork. Here’s Jeanette Edwards at Warehouse Gallery. These are like early photos of some of my work. Here’s stuff up on a wall. That’s me at the university. I did all these paintings of Hawaii. I was there for 10 days so I did five paintings. This was like the first really good watercolor I did and it sold. But that was in ’55, I think.

MARGARET: ’55?
E. JEAN: Yeah, I was working in a shirt factory during the day in the winter. We had winter work term at Goddard and sleeping on two boards between two straight chairs with blankets that had all these mouse holes in them at my father’s cabin. And I would fall asleep in my dinner, facing my dinner. I did a mural and I can’t find the other photos of it. I did a mural for Wright Construction Company. It was eight feet tall by 42 feet on a curved wall.

MARGARET: And that was for Wright Construction?

E. JEAN: W-r-i-g-h-t Construction Company out on Governor Prince Boulevard. This is a show at the Warehouse Gallery. I was young. I was very young there.

MARGARET: Now did you show quite a bit at the Warehouse Gallery?

E. JEAN: Yeah, I was very involved with Warehouse Gallery. See, here’s another copy of this article.

MARGARET: So the Warehouse Gallery, which is in Arden, and then you were exhibiting at the Workshop Gallery, which was at 5601 Concord Pike.

E. JEAN: They built the Target and other strip malls there. It was a big warehouse in front of the Brandywine Raceway where they had the trotters, the trotting races, and I was very involved with the people who had the gallery and DeeDee and I showed there quite frequently.

MARGARET: Now, the Workshop Gallery, were they doing framing as well? Or were they just exhibiting work?

E. JEAN: No, Buzz Ware had the Ware House Gallery. That’s how it got to be called W-a-r-e Ware House because that was his name. I was trying to see if there’s anything prior to—Okay, this was the announcement of The Myrno Bird that was sent out.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s wonderful.

E. JEAN: It wasn’t even expensive.

MARGARET: I love that description; “A whimsical children’s book for adults dealing with the eternal problem of communication.”

E. JEAN: That was—I did that when I was in junior high school. I always cartooned.

MARGARET: Oh, that looks familiar!

E. JEAN: You know what that is? That’s a copy—

MARGARET: Of Ford Maddox Brown’s Romeo and Juliet and the Delaware Art Museum’s collection.
E. JEAN: Yes, that’s right and I drew—I taught myself to draw. I wasn’t allowed to go out to play. That was my rule until I drew something every day and I drew his eyes so much that I went through the paper. Yeah, you know how all that is.

MARGARET: So E. Jean., were you showing at all with the Wilmington Circulating Gallery of Paintings, which was operated by Grace McFarren?

E. JEAN: Yes, at one point in time she had a few of my pieces and I don’t remember which ones they are. I might be able to look it up in my book of sales if I sold there. If I didn’t, that’s another story.

MARGARET: I think it’s interesting that she is operating a commercial contemporary art gallery prior to those activities and those commercial spaces that opened in 1970. So, prior to Hardcastle, prior to Carspecken-Scott; Grace McFarren was doing that work and showing Dan Tice’s work, showing her own work.

E. JEAN: I worked at Hardcastle’s on Shipley Street and Bayard [Berndt] wanting to start a gallery. He had taken over also the Delaware Avenue store and it had a big room in the back. He talked about a gallery because he always kept a few small pieces of local people on one wall there in the store on Shipley Street. I had pieces there and sold from that wall. And then I begged him to open a gallery there and I hung the first show that went in that gallery and that was the first show I ever hung. After that, we had regular shows in that gallery on Delaware Avenue and that was prior to Grace McFarren’s—I think that was prior to—

MARGARET: Prior to her space?

E. JEAN: Yeah, ‘cause it was the early ‘60s when I worked for Bayard.

MARGARET: Okay, prior or just contemporary with? I don’t have a firm date on when she started her activities. I know it’s in the 1960s, but I’m not sure how early. So that’s interesting to know that those two things perhaps happening somewhat simultaneously.

E. JEAN: Right. You have some of my newsletters. This is a collection of my newsletters from the very first one.

MARGARET: What is the date on the very first one?


MARGARET: And these were newsletters that you sent to everyone; friends, family, artists and literary community.

E. JEAN: Yes, yes. I did that for a while, then there was a hiatus of ten years when I didn’t send any letters and I started again at the end of 1990. I reviewed the year. So it was January ’91.

MARGARET: Okay, so it was primarily through the 1980s that you did not send the newsletter.
E. JEAN: During the 1980s.

MARGARET: Okay and was it an annual newsletter from the beginning?

E. JEAN: Yep!

MARGARET: Okay, always annual.

E. JEAN: Yep. Here they are. Lots of things going on.

MARGARET: So in—I want to sorry, go back to 1976, *People Garden* was published.

E. JEAN: That was published by Lenape Publishing Company and young Andy Wyeth, who I had taught how to draw and paint, illustrated it.

MARGARET: Okay, I did not know that he illustrated it.

E. JEAN: Mm-hmm.

MARGARET: I have to make sure that we have these publications in our library.

E. JEAN: I don’t know that you have any of them.

MARGARET: I’m going to—our librarian and I are going to work on this. So the next year, the year after, 1977, the first *Dream Streets* is published.

E. JEAN: Here we go. Let’s go past all of this stuff.

MARGARET: And maybe this would give us the opportunity to talk a bit about—

E. JEAN: That’s an ad for *People Garden*. That’s the cover.

MARGARET: Here’s the first publication of *Dream Streets*. So, tell me a bit about the foundation of *Dream Streets* and maybe this is an opportunity for you to talk a bit about your interactions with artists and writers like Steven Leech, I know Carson Zullinger was involved in this first publication of *Dream Streets* as well.

E. JEAN: Was Carson in here?

MARGARET: He is! One of his photographs. It’s the wonderful, radiating figure.

E. JEAN: A drawing of mine is in here, not a poem but a drawing.

MARGARET: A drawing, okay.

E. JEAN: See that’s my drawing. It’s the story—it illustrates the story of the Amazon River, the myth of the Amazon River. This poor thing. Did Carson do that photograph?
MARGARET: Not this one, but I’m very curious.

E. JEAN: Ed Wesolowski did that.

MARGARET: That is Carson’s.

E. JEAN: That’s Carson’s.

MARGARET: I don’t know if it actually—see it says Susan—

E. JEAN: Susan Smith, Newstar Photo.

MARGARET: I’m wondering if that’s of Carson?

E. JEAN: Oh, is that Carson’s?

MARGARET: Nope, no.

E. JEAN: Where’s the credits on that?

MARGARET: Lew Bennett and Jim Zingheim? I’m not sure who that is.

E. JEAN: I don’t know. One of those must—maybe this photograph of this female is him, is by him?

MARGARET: Either by him or it might be of him.

E. JEAN: Oh, it might be of him?

MARGARET: I know at that point Carson had a full head of hair and his glasses, so it might be of him as well. Now, tell me a bit about the history of the foundation of Dream Streets.

E. JEAN: A group of youngish, well I guess very young, writers got together and I was working at the University of Delaware in the architectural department and I was involved with other publications there. I’m wondering if any of that shows up here. Anyway, what’s the date on this?

MARGARET: That would be 1977.

E. JEAN: Copyright Dream Streets 1977. We were the Eschaton Writers.

MARGARET: But artists involved as well?

E. JEAN: Oh yeah, artists and they asked me to contribute. Now it was Phil Bannowsky, Steve Leech, what was the name of that guy who was so negative and fought with everybody? I’m trying to think of his name. I didn’t put in an editorial group here. But anyway—

MARGARET: Was he—this was a writer?
E. JEAN: Yeah, he didn’t stick around in this community. Steve knows all of this. Anyway, they fought all the time. I didn’t have time to fight with him. I was working full-time, raising a kid, teaching at night, writing, painting. I didn’t have time to screw around with that guy. I let them fight.

MARGARET: Did you contribute to subsequent Dreamstreets?

E. JEAN: Oh, yes! Many, many, many issues; I edited many issues, I illustrated, I did covers for issues, I did much, much poetry in them. I was involved with Tangent, which was a university paper. I was involved with a feminist newspaper that I got in a lot of trouble for.

MARGARET: Was that coming out of the University of Delaware, the feminist newspaper?

E. JEAN: It was, Viewpoint, yeah. I was involved with Viewpoint, Tangent, what were some of the others?

MARGARET: Where you involved with any of Tom Watkins publications that would have come out later? I think they were primarily Tom Watkins, though Steven Leech may have been involved as well. Like X-Ray or Emergency Illustrated?

E. JEAN: Somewhere around this house they’re probably copies of X-Ray but it would probably take me a month to find them. I’m not a neat-nic. This is amazingly neat for—now this is when I worked at the women’s prison.

MARGARET: Oh yeah, so tell me a bit more about this is the WCI Arts Workshop.

E. JEAN: Yeah, it’s Women’s Correctional Institute Arts Workshop Inc.

MARGARET: And this organization was founded by Joyce Brabner?

E. JEAN: Yep, and she got grants for it and hired me to teach.

MARGARET: Tell me a bit about that experience.

E. JEAN: It was a wonderful experience actually. The women were just very excited about having something to do ‘cause they had nothing to do.

MARGARET: Which correctional facilities were you going into?

E. JEAN: Up on Darley Road. The women that worked with me were just excited all the time about doing stuff. They asked me to teach them various things so whatever they asked me to I tried to teach them.

MARGARET: So you weren’t doing just drawing and/or poetry?

E. JEAN: No.
MARGARET: Were you teaching any kind of—I say practical life skills, but I’m thinking more of like kind of handwork, sewing, things like that?

E. JEAN: Yeah, I taught arts and crafts. We did puppets for—because Joyce had some little acting company come to teach them how to write a little play and put it on and I had my students make hand puppets. I had a whole book of the crafts I taught them.

But they asked me to teach them how to make things to send home to their children. So I had to get permission to bring in pins and needles. I had to count the pins and needles. Oh, was that fun, and scissors. There was no budget at all. I begged and borrowed and made do with the most amazing things and I had those women doing all kinds of stuff. I designed everything they made. I designed slippers for their children that were puffy and had like a rabbit’s head or a bear’s head on it and I designed dolls.

One woman came in there who was the most unlikely to have a child, which you never imagine in the world; a tough little number, and she saw me—I made some cookie cutter dolls with little cookie cutter kind of dresses. I mean I learned to sew when I was three, by hand, ‘cause my grandmother was a seamstress and she raised me. Anyway, she came to me and she said, “I wanna make one of those shirts for my baby.” I looked at her—it was the last thing in the world that I would imagine this woman having a baby.

I had to get material. I made all my own patterns. I still have some of them in a file folder. But yeah, we made little blouses to send home and lots of doll’s pillows, teddy bears with arms and legs that moved.

MARGARET: Oh, wow.

E. JEAN: Yeah, I thought how in the world did I figure that out? But, I did. I even taught carpentry. They had a carpentry thing. Joyce brought in a carpenter and he didn’t want to continue to teach so she gave it to me and I didn’t know the first thing about it, but I taught it. We made very interesting things [laughing]. And the women liked going out in the courtyard and using a hammer and saw and things.

MARGARET: Right. And so the program, you said, was about two to three years or less?

E. JEAN: Yeah, two to three years.

MARGARET: And there were other—so a carpenter, an acting company came in. There were other artists who came in as well right?

E. JEAN: I think she had—

MARGARET: I think Carson may have been involved.

E. JEAN: Carson may have been one of them.

MARGARET: And Flash Rosenberg, am I remembering, Susan Rosenberg as well?
E. JEAN: I don’t know. Oh, it could have been Susan Rosenberg, yeah. I don’t remember all the others. Mary Page Evans came and helped me. She came in as my assistant and basically I was holding the classes and she was being my assistant.

MARGARET: That’s wonderful. I didn’t know that.

E. JEAN: Yeah, she did that for maybe a year. But basically, I took my mother in to visit. I didn’t think anything of it. When my daughter was home for the summer I took her in with me as my assistant because I had a lot of women who were interested and you needed more than one person to get around to everybody. The women said to me, “You bring your daughter in here?” And I said, “Yeah, is there a problem with that?” “With us?” I said, “Well, what’s wrong with you?” And they’d look at me funny and I’d say, “Look, are you a human being?” “Uh-huh.” I said, “Well, I’m a human being, my daughter is a human being. I needed help and she’s a good helper.”

But I did sort of a mind control with the women, which is not me controlling their minds but learning to control themselves. So I would take them down to the alpha level and give them positive statements because you have reached this level you are a superior being, you are a very brilliant person and you can do anything you want to do, and just reinforced positive reinforcement. None of them ever heard that in their whole life. Nobody ever said nice things to them their whole life.

And so then, we’d do exercises in temper control, exercise in dream problem solving, sometimes we would go on an imaginary journey and have a picnic somewhere. Different things we’d do.

MARGARET: So that kind of guided meditation?

E. JEAN: Yeah, I would get them down to the level and then we would work on our projects. I got called into the office by the captain and she was a formidable woman. I was afraid of her [laughing]. I was very, very nice to her because I was afraid of her. She said, “I understand you’re doing this mind control with the women?” I said, “Well, yes I am. What it is, is teaching them to control their minds. I can’t control anybody’s mind. It’s just giving them some tools to keep themselves calm, to think through problems so that there’s not violence taking place. How not to have a confrontation. Just different things like that and sometimes we just talk about problems and what we might be able to do.”

I said dream control because you might think about something before you go to bed at night and just say I’m going to have the answer tomorrow and if not tomorrow, the next day. I said, “It’s just a tool for them and it’s positive statements.” So, I’m explaining this and I’m sweating blood [laughing]. I’m thinking this is it, I’m done. She says, “Well, I don’t know what you’re teaching or what this mind control is but we’ve had an 80% drop in personal violence so don’t stop.” I like to have fallen through the floor at that point in time [laughing].

MARGARET: [Laughing] That’s incredible. Did the program end when Joyce left?
E. JEAN: Joyce decided not to pay—she decided she was going to pay the women for coming to the classes.

MARGARET: The women who were incarcerated?

E. JEAN: The inmates. Instead of paying me, the artist, and I said, “Look, I can’t teach without a salary, Joyce. They have room and board, clothing, everything they need. They don’t need money. I need money! I have to pay my mortgage! I have to feed my child!” Well, we had a big falling out about this. So, I was no longer the instructor. I don’t know who instructed after me, if anyone, but she lost her—she had been doing very well on the grants. She was a good grant writer, but of course she was factoring in her own salary the whole time. Taking her nice chunk. Joyce was not an easy person to get along with. It’s amazing I got along with her as long as I did because I did, I got along with her very well. But she was hard to get along with.

MARGARET: Would you go down—did you frequent Xanadu Comics or any of the activities at the Rondo Center? I’m thinking of some of the other activities she was involved with.

E. JEAN: That’s been a long time ago. Xanadu Comics I know about. You know, I was working other places, teaching other places as well and doing a lot of things. I didn’t—I had to budget my time.

MARGARET: Right, of course.

E. JEAN: So, that’s—I was friends with George and Tom. I was good friends with Tom. I was always older than anybody else in the groups; older than Steve and all the boys that did Dreamstreets. After that we got a few females in and I was older than them by a few years. I’m 78.

MARGARET: You must be—did you know Margo—do you know Margo Allman?


MARGARET: It’s interesting and I want to kind of shift our conversation a little bit because you were at the University of Delaware—it’s interesting ‘cause were you always living—well, always—when you came back and reestablished yourself, were here with your daughter, were you living here in this house in Wilmington?

E. JEAN: No.

MARGARET: Were you in Newark?

E. JEAN: I lived on Union Street. I had a studio, a little storefront studio. And then I later moved to Newark and I lived on Cleveland Avenue and North College in a nice little house. We’ve moved around somewhat.
MARGARET: I like that you bridge some of these gaps between Newark and Wilmington, the incredible distance that is however many miles between the two.

E. JEAN: [Laughing]

MARGARET: So you’re involved with a lot of these activities in Wilmington, but you’re at the University of Delaware and then you have this other kind of contingency that’s kind of the West Grove, Pennsylvania—I’m thinking of Mitch Lyons, Margo Allman, those artists who are kind of a little farther outside of these two other communities.

E. JEAN: Right, Margo was in Newark.

MARGARET: But then also coming in to Newark. I’m interested to know if you exhibited at Gallery 20.

E. JEAN: Yes.

MARGARET: And were you involved with any of the spoon themed shows at the Deluxe Luncheonette?

E. JEAN: Oh, I remember those.

MARGARET: The Greasy Spoon, that’s what everyone—

E. JEAN: The Greasy Spoon, yeah. I remember the Deluxe, yeah. I used to eat there [laughing]. I think I was on the fringe of almost everything in those days.

MARGARET: Okay, but you showed at Gallery 20. Would that have been when Joy Schweizer was there running the space?

E. JEAN: It might have been. What years were—

MARGARET: Or was it Helen Mason? Because they both kind of—

E. JEAN: I don’t know. It would be probably in here.

MARGARET: Okay, so that would have been in the 1970s into the 80s.

E. JEAN: Every place I showed I think I have something of in these books.

MARGARET: Oh, that is good archival—you’re a good archivist.

E. JEAN: I don’t know whether I am or not.

MARGARET: What is this? The Art Collectors Lottery?

E. JEAN: Unfortunately, gave paintings to various things and never got money for them or anything; auctions and people stole the work, so to speak.
These are the poets and I read with all of these people. These were my buddies. The arts community and the literary community are like this, but they very seldom ever cross over. I’m the one that crosses over but nobody else does. As a matter of fact, at the Biggs so many of the literary community came. My poetry was on the wall between my paintings and then when it moved up to Gallery 919 I still have the plaques from the show. I have a whole book of that show if you want to see that.

MARGARET: Okay.

E. JEAN: But we were going all over the place reading and trying to get readings going, started. Did Steve work on *Viewpoint* or *Tangent*?

MARGARET: I think he worked on *Viewpoint*.

E. JEAN: Yeah, he followed me on *Viewpoint*. That’s how I met him.

MARGARET: It does seem like Tom Watkins, I wouldn’t say he was a whole generation—

E. JEAN: He was never involved in that.

MARGARET: He was focusing more on the kind of comic, xerography, that kind of scene.

E. JEAN: Yeah, this was a different level.

MARGARET: And a different aesthetic, certainly.

E. JEAN: Yeah, completely different aesthetic. I’m trying to see if there was anything. I know we had poetry and cartoons and we tried to get ads.

MARGARET: What about the performing arts? I think it’s interesting that there are some connections between some visual arts and dancers in Newark earlier in the 1970s.

E. JEAN: Delores Pyle Josey, we used to call her—Buzz Ware called her Apple Pie Josey ‘cause she was so pleasant but she used Pie, I guess her maiden name. Anyway, she was the entire dance department for the University of Delaware and in their male chauvinism they never gave her credit for what she did or the proper pay or anything else. They are notoriously rotten to women there. They still are. They were worse than—and that’s why it was such a strong feminist community. Well, we were fighting for our rights and you younger women all think you’ve got them. You’re kidding yourselves.

MARGARET: Yeah.

E. JEAN: And we were hoping that you all would carry on and no one has. The whole movement was started by a lot of rich, young women with not much to do, which was wonderful because they could afford to be radicals. They didn’t have to work and support themselves. They didn’t have to worry, daddy would bail them out. The rest of us who were the soldiers worked our
hearts out. I worked on so many levels in the women’s movement. But it’s just—that’s the way it goes. That’s not what this is about I’m sure.

Theater people tend to be very self-aggrandizing and primadonnas and they don’t consider anybody else important. Writers are not important. Fine artists certainly aren’t important to them. Nobody is important but them. Musicians are not important except as support for something they’re doing. So, theater separates itself by its own ego. Writers and artists tend to be loners, the good ones, and to find other writers of the same level, other artists of the same level, interact with them but go back to their own work.

Creative people are like cats. You can’t hurt them. So, when a group gets together and Dreamstreets was the real first working of what I call our literary communities today, I was very involved with them. I was very involved with every issue just about in those early days. I think I even did the cover for the last issue of it. But, we started the awareness in the whole state and in parts of Pennsylvania and Maryland and New Jersey. We started this whole poetry reading movement and eventually, we found a home in O’Freil’s Irish Pub up on the second floor. That’s gone too, they tore that down.

MARGARET: Where was that?

E. JEAN: That was next to the Wilmington High School.

MARGARET: Oh, no! So also in downtown Wilmington on Delaware Avenue.

E. JEAN: And then O’Freil took over that little triangular, pie shaped building that is now I think a beauty parlor or something.

MARGARET: Right, so right where it splits to kind of Tenth and Eleventh, okay.

E. JEAN: Yeah, right. Kevin moved in there and we still had the second floor there and then he and Beverly Andress had a falling out. She had taken over—I was the person who was the organizer, etc. in the very beginning of it and I burned out so who took over after me? Susan Michelle took over and then Craig Simon, I think, took over and then Beverly Laws/Andress, she went back to her maiden name. It’s Andress now.

When nobody else was there I would pop up and—30 years it’s been going on.

MARGARET: Okay, so these are—

E. JEAN: We still meet every second Saturday.

MARGARET: So, it’s every second Saturday. Has it always been every second Saturday?

E. JEAN: Yes! It was always the second Saturday poets.

MARGARET: And so over 30 years, when was the first reading? Do you remember what year?
E. JEAN: It was in the ‘70s. If it’s 30 years count backwards. This was the year, I think, that we started. This is ’81. We were going everywhere reading as a group, the Eschaton Group. We read in bars and bakeries, in cemeteries, in old folks homes, we read everywhere.

MARGARET: Did the Eschaton Group start the second Saturday?

E. JEAN: Mm-hmm.

MARGARET: Okay. So that is all kind of that same line, different activities.

E. JEAN: Yeah, yeah. We wanted to educate the public about poetry. We wanted to not just read to each other.

MARGARET: Where are you reading now?

E. JEAN: Jackson Inn.

MARGARET: Really? I didn’t know that. I live in Union Park Gardens. I know where the Jackson Inn is and that’s second Saturday still?

E. JEAN: Uh-huh.

MARGARET: What time?

E. JEAN: 5:00 to 7:00 pm every second Saturday.

MARGARET: I’ll make note.

E. JEAN: Okay, you’ll have to come.

MARGARET: I’ll have to come. So, I want to—let me ask about one other publication and then I’d like to end by asking you—I think the only space we haven’t talked about specifically well, two spaces I want to talk to you about Fifth Street Gallery and Station Gallery. But, prior to that can you tell me about Woman’s Scrapbook in 1979? Was this another publication?

E. JEAN: That was a feminist publication. It was a self-publication. I have copies of all of this if you’re interested in seeing them.

MARGARET: I would be. So you self-published that in 1979?

E. JEAN: Yeah, now let me tell you about publication. I spent a lot of money sending stuff out in the early days. If you get published you’re lucky if they give you a copy of the publication. I spent a lot of money entering shows. If you won a prize you get money. If you sell a painting you get money. I had to make a living. I stopped sending—I still send stuff out occasionally. I sent out book manuscripts. I got turned down left and right, rejected, rejected. I didn’t have the money to spend getting rejected.
E. JEAN: So, I was working full-time. I always taught. There was always a class in my studio, in my home or I was always teaching someplace else. I taught everywhere from old folks homes and community centers to universities and colleges. Anywhere they would have me, any subject they wanted, I’d teach [laughing]. It’s money coming in and it’s part of my heart. I can share that. It was really hard to continue. I had to balance somehow this whole keeping a roof over our heads, clothes on our backs and food in our bellies business. I didn’t enjoy starving when I did. I don’t think anybody does.

I became Poet Laureate because I applied just to get David Hudson, who was the scourge of Wilmington, out of the limelight. He hated my guts. He hated me. First, because I was a woman, second, because I became Poet Laureate over him. And of course, when I was appointed Poet Laureate.

MARGARET: And just for the record, I’m going to insert that you were appointed Poet Laureate in 1979.

E. JEAN: Here it is right here. Here’s the appointment and all the letters of recommendation that were sent. Everybody wanted David Hudson out. Nobody liked him. He was an embarrassment to the literary community. This is what was published when I got—not only that, I got this in the mail. The Governor didn’t even give it to me face to face. As a matter of fact, there were so many applicants that the Governor couldn’t handle it. He turned it over, for the first time, to the Arts Commission. The Arts Commission had to make the decision.

Fortunately, I had all these wonderful—and I don’t even have copies of a lot of the recommendations. I didn’t even know who some of these people who were recommending me were. I got copies of letters wherever I could but here it says that David Hudson called me a piddling versifier. I told Bill Frank when he called me, I said, “I wasn’t appointed to fight with David Hudson. I was appointed to do something good with poetry. I’m not going to fight with you about him or with him.”

Then, the Newark Post was kinder to me. And then I was running for State Writers or I was part of it and running it. These are all congratulations. I love this! This is a picture of David Hudson when he got the news that I was Poet Laureate.

MARGARET: [Laughing]

E. JEAN: Then, the First State Writers gave me a party and wrote me poems and a cake. Here I am cutting the cake and all of this stuff. Then, I answered—I sent a copy of this to the Governor and to the newspaper and it’s poetic in justice again. I wrote a poem saying how I felt about all of this. And that’s me on an elephant [laughing]. So anyway, there are various publications in here and I was commissioned to do things so there’s commissions.

This was when the Olympic runners came through Delaware when they did the 13 states. We had a big banquet for them and I wrote this poem.
MARGARET: That was in late ‘70s or early ‘80s?

E. JEAN: 1980. And here’s me with a couple of the runners and Delaware’s ice skater.

MARGARET: Let’s just—I want to go back or maybe you’re getting this but I’m worried we’re getting a little farther ahead in our chronology, back to—

E. JEAN: Did you want to borrow these?

MARGARET: Not yet. I’ll make note that you have all of these materials. But I don’t want to borrow them quite yet.

E. JEAN: I’m trying to see if I have any Dreamstreets stuff here. Oh, we did all kinds of things here; Reaganomics and the threat of war, oh my.

MARGARET: And these are readings?

E. JEAN: Yeah, these were us doing readings. I’m trying to find it—see if I have any—

MARGARET: At some point I would like to see copies of People Garden and Woman’s Scrapbook, but we don’t have to do that right—

E. JEAN: They’re right there in a drawer.

MARGARET: Oh, are they? Okay, here we go.

E. JEAN: Yep, I’ll just open the drawer and—I was just appointed to the Mezzopamine Women’s Timeline of Women Poets.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s lovely.

E. JEAN: I just need to get the lid back on this and get the drawer back in. I’m a little bit organized. Okay, here’s People Garden and that’s—

MARGARET: Oh, and here’s Woman’s Scrapbook.

E. JEAN: Yeah, and then following that were poems and snapshots. And then, because I draw all the time, my son-in-law put that together. I am the human facilitator for Possum Garage Press. I will say I think my poetry has grown over the years, thank goodness [laughing].

MARGARET: I have to make sure—we just have to get a copy of this.

E. JEAN: His drawings are just wonderful. That’s Laura, his wife.

MARGARET: Oh, really? I’m not going to take time looking at this.

E. JEAN: I did the illustrations in there.
MARGARET: In *Woman’s Scrapbook*?

E. JEAN: Basically; collage, drawing, photographs.

MARGARET: Oh, you did a second printing in 2005? Is this from the second printing or the first?

E. JEAN: Yeah, that’s the second printing. This is also second printing.

MARGARET: Okay, so both of these are available?

E. JEAN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay, good. Through you or online?

E. JEAN: Me.

MARGARET: Through you, perfect.

E. JEAN: You might get first printing from somebody else.

MARGARET: Do you think we should try to get a first printing for the library?

E. JEAN: Whatever.

MARGARET: Maybe I’ll see what Rachel can do, our librarian. She’s wonderful. If she could find a first printing it would be nice to have that for the library.

E. JEAN: How is your time? It’s 11:41.

MARGARET: I have about 10-ish minutes.

E. JEAN: We can get together when—you know.

MARGARET: And we might need to get together again, but just for the sake of this interview today I do want to just close by asking you about any recollections you have about Rob Jones and Fifth Street Gallery and then about your involvement with Station Gallery. And we can start with Fifth Street since I know your involvement with Station Gallery is still ongoing.

E. JEAN: I was never really that involved in the Fifth Street Gallery except through knowing Tom Watkins. I think my daughter was more involved with that group than I was.

MARGARET: Oh, really? Did you ever go to the gallery to see any exhibitions?

E. JEAN: I think I went way back when. But I’ve been to thousands of galleries and exhibits.

MARGARET: Right.
E. JEAN: I can’t count them [laughing].

MARGARET: Well, tell me how you became involved with Station Gallery because they continue to represent you today.

E. JEAN: Years and years ago I went to them and asked them to carry some of my work and sell it and they said, ‘Okay.’ And then, Susan Isaacs came along and took over a small gallery that she was partnering with someone.

MARGARET: With Linda Brennan Jones.

E. JEAN: Yeah, who had asked me to show some of my work. Well, Susan didn’t like my work so it didn’t get shown there. Then, Susan set up this whole New York thing where you had to be exclusive and no matter where you sold your work you had to pay the gallery a commission, even if you sold it from your own studio, etc. A lot of impossible things that robbed the artist.

So, I was with Station Gallery they weren’t moving my work at all and so they kind of said well, maybe we’ve got to do that and I said well, then I have to take my work back. So I don’t know if they did that with other people or not but I took my work away and then I went back to them several years later and said, “Look, I do want to show with you. I like you all very much. I think you’ve been wonderful for the art community so how about it?” So then we picked up again and I’ve had shows there and been in shows and I stop in there almost weekly on the way home from the artist breakfast on Thursday mornings.

If I miss they say, ‘Something’s wrong, it must not be Thursday.’

MARGARET: Do you remember when you first started showing at Station Gallery? Would that have been in the ‘80s?

E. JEAN: Probably, I think so.

MARGARET: And then do you remember when you—

E. JEAN: Oh, way early when they first opened, I think.

MARGARET: So that would have been in the ‘70s.

E. JEAN: I think Susan Isaacs was trying to bring Wilmington into the New York scene mentality and she met with a lot of resistance. She had a few really faithful people in her gallery, but she was very particular about what work she wanted to show and it wasn’t mine [laughing].

MARGARET: We did talk about a few of the other gallery spaces like Warehouse and Workshop. Did you show with any of the other commercial galleries in Wilmington or Centerville?

E. JEAN: Yeah.
MARGARET: And Hardcastle, you showed your work there.

E. JEAN: I’ve shown everywhere.

MARGARET: Okay, have you shown at Carspecken-Scott?

E. JEAN: He snubbed me. I went in to talk to him. He was too busy. I had to make an appointment, I made an appointment, I went in, he wasn’t there. I called, I requested—but for some reason I’m not on his agenda. You can’t be on everybody’s agenda.

MARGARET: Definitely not, no. But fairly consistently except for that gap, with the Station Gallery?

E. JEAN: Mm-hmm.

MARGARET: Wonderful. Perfect.

E. JEAN: There was a time when I kind of withdrew from everything just so I could paint and wasn’t showing a lot, just painting a lot. And you have to do that every once in a while.

MARGARET: Mm-hmm, yeah to focus on your own practice. Well, I’m going to stop this.

E. JEAN: Okay.

End of Audio
Duration: 89 minutes