Oral history interview with Ken Mabrey, August 20, 2013

Mabrey, Ken, born 1954
Painter

Size: Transcript: 18 pages.

Format of recording: Originally recorded as digital wav file. Duration is 68 min.

Collection Summary: An interview of Ken Mabrey conducted August 20, 2013 by Margaret Winslow for the Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives of the Delaware Art Museum.

This interview was conducted for Dream Streets: Art in Wilmington 1970–1990, an exhibition held at the Delaware Art Museum June 27–September 27, 2015 on the contemporary art scene in Wilmington in the 1970s and 1980s.

Funding for the transcription of this interview was provided by a grant from the Delaware Humanities Forum.

The transcript of this interview is in the public domain and may be used without permission. Quotes and excerpts must be cited as follows: Oral history interview with Ken Mabrey, August 20, 2013, Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives, Delaware Art Museum.

MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum, interviewing Ken Mabrey in his studio at the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts on Tuesday, August 20, 2013.

Now, I’m just going to put this somewhere that’s close to us but we can just completely ignore it.

KEN: Okay. This was Mary Steiner’s mug. It’s a beautiful reindeer running through this beautiful foliage and she studied with Mitch Lyons and Victor Spinski down at the U of D [University of Delaware]. I just am overwhelmed with the texture and color. It’s just—the detail on it—she was doing painting and graphics, printmaking down there at U of D and—

MARGARET: That’s beautiful. I’m going to photograph it as well.

KEN: Okay, okay, that would be spectacular. She showed at the Queen Gallery—the gallery above the Queen Theater on Fifth Street back in—somewhere in the middle or early ‘70s, probably ’74-’75. I studied with Victor—oh, let’s get some light on.

MARGARET: Yeah, let’s get some light. There we go. Perfect.

KEN: I can move—

MARGARET: There we go, perfect!
KEN: Okay. She was doing these wonderful—they were kind of—they were derivative of Aboriginal drawings and so forth. It has the lines and you know, the American Indians scratch paintings on the walls and Australian things and she kind of combined that into printmaking and it got her into archeology and she went on to—now she’s Dr. Steiner and she’s travelling the world. She studies out there at Rice Canyon and those great houses out in New Mexico and Arizona and so forth.

MARGARET: That’s so interesting. Was she an undergrad at the University of—

KEN: She was a—I guess an undergrad at Victor Spinski’s ceramic studio. I was there in ’75 and this is a mug—this is one of the pieces I played in the mud with down there. I was trying to make a whistling cup but when I poured the glaze on it sealed everything tight. But it still is kind of my Indianhead mug.

MARGARET: Oh Ken, this is wonderful! I haven’t seen it. Ken, can I—let me just tell you for our purposes today, I would love to talk about your career and then, we can talk about your kind of recollections of Wilmington. We’ll have to go backwards cause we’ll go backwards to before you went to school in the early 70s but then into the 1980s as well.

KEN: Okay, okay.

MARGARET: So perhaps we could start—

KEN: Well, this is my yearbook. I designed the yearbook. This was the initial cover. It was for the Greenleaf yearbook and basically, they decided that would be too controversial so I put it on the collage literary magazine and came up with this kind of punk, acid trip type of, growing plants—I don’t know it’s—keep on growing.

MARGARET: Oh yes, and so you went to—

KEN: Mount Pleasant.

MARGARET: Mount Pleasant High School. So Ken, you are a Delaware native?

KEN: I was born to a Delawarean and a girl born in Iowa and Texas and I came back in ’57. So, I’m pretty close to being a Delawarean.

MARGARET: [Laughing]

KEN: My grandfather had a farm in Clayton, Delaware, north of Clayton, east of Eden, north of Clayton I don’t know.

MARGARET: Have you been—

KEN: These are the illustrations that I did. I did the illustrations in the way out for this yearbook. Well, this Mr. Shaw. This was the art teacher. He got me, he got Lisa Bartolozzi, he got—he was just one of these people, he let me come in there and play in the mud. He let me come in there
and do ceramics, do etching and painting. He just opened so many doors to me. This is him. You can take that if you want because he just was—it was—the school was really good. There were these wonderful art teachers and the theater teachers. He had me doing set design at Mount Pleasant. I did *The King and I* and various other things.

I have built a set for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. I did little flourishes here for—that was the Greenleaf was the name of the book.

MARGARET: Oh Ken, these are wonderful. Now, tell me—okay, so you graduated—

KEN: In ’72.

MARGARET: In ’72.

KEN: I was walking up to Mr. Shaw in ’69 when—junior high, ninth grade. And then he moved up to senior high and I got to play with him. He just was one of these guys—he would open the door and let you come through.

MARGARET: Oh, which is wonderful.

KEN: It got my ideas about drawing, playing with pen and ink and so forth. I know I basically traded up from crayons to pencils to pen and ink and then to oil paint. He gave me my first box of paint for being the class artist in ninth grade. He gave me a tackle box full of paint. It was [inaudible] paint or something like that, but it was still oil paint and it was great.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s wonderful. Okay, so you graduated in 1972 and then you—when did you go to Indiana?

KEN: I went to Indiana in ’76–’77 until ’79. I went to Delaware County Community College where I studied with Al Swinson and John Botkin. John Botkin was a printmaker from Indiana. He recommended that I go out there, maybe do some prints and I mean maybe—you have to go out there and be a painter and try their BFA program and maybe check out the printmaking department because Rudy Pozzatti was out there. If you look over here those are my lithographs from Indiana.

MARGARET: Oh wow, okay.

KEN: I have some—well, that big one—they had these incredible stones out there. They were like 400 lb stones. That was *Dancing at Bonnie’s Café* or something like that and it involved machines and things in the bar. I did that in ’78. This is another one called *Discolocated* or something playing on dance wars and things like that.

MARGARET: Oh, what great perspective!

KEN: That’s what people—yeah, yeah, I always try to find an aerial point of view or a different point of view and try to find a different way of seeing. This is from Yale and I was over there in ’79–’81. [Inaudible]. This is a lithograph from ’99 from a painting I did in 1980. So it’s *Express*
Checkout paintings and I put barcode readers zapping around there kind of leading your eye around with multiple point perspectives vanishing into the barcode readers and the big “L” shapes of the cashier counters up here.

MARGARET: Ken, tell me about your time at Yale. Who were you studying with then?

KEN: Okay—okay—Rackstraw Downes was up there as a visiting artist. Renard [inaudible] Shea was there. Retna Campbell, I think she has some sort of relationship down here. The former Dean, Andrew Forge, was the [inaudible] Dean when I was there. He would come in. he was one of the most marvelous critics. He married Ruth Miller, Roland Elzea’s former wife, yes.

MARGARET: So he was there when you were there?

KEN: Yes, Andrew was there and Lester Johnson. I also worked with—the people I worked with most were Charles O’Connor, who was brought up from Queens College and Denzel Hurley, he was printmaking and teaching—he taught—I was his teaching assistant when he was teaching printmaking up there. I was the lithography TA up there.

I went on from there to do their summer program. I got into the Dean, their assistant to the director at the Yale Norfolk summer program and that’s one of the t-shirt covers that I did, the designs that I did for the t-shirts there in 1984 or something. That was one of these funny things. It was—I got plugged into that and I would do this mundane, mechanical illustration the rest of the year. But, for those three months in the summer I was in heaven. It was like you had 30 students who really wanted to learn something and really wanted to move.

They had printmaking, they had painting, they had photography and drawing. One of my other—one of the instructors I had out at Indiana was Roger Tibbetts. He was in the undergraduate program. He was in charge of the BFA program there for two years I was out there and he eventually became one of the—he ran it the last year I was there in ’87.

MARGARET: In ’87.

KEN: Charles O’Connor was there, I think it was ’83–’86. Chuck O’Connor, he was a painter from Brooklyn, New York at Queens College, he was in on the founding of the studio school back in the 1960s. He was one of these people that just—he could simplify things. They were abstract painters. I was taught—I’m a figure painter, but I was taught by abstract painters so it got me to look at things differently. It opened different doors and got me out of the Brandywine tradition I guess.

But, I still come back to the Brandywine tradition because I was looking for Harold and the Purple Crayon at Wilmington Public Library down here in Rodney Square and I go in and I see NCY’s Footprints in the Sand, Robinson Crusoe paintings and it’s like—I was five or six-years-old and my face just dropped. It was amazing. It was a whole world in this one painting. Seeing those I know that that made me want to go to the museum and I went to the museum and saw the John Sloan paintings and I kind of fell in love with that figurative tradition from Sloan, Bellows and Isabelle Bishop and so forth.
MARGARET: What about the Pre-Raphaelite collection?

KEN: The Pre-Raphs, I love them too. I love the decorative aspect of them. I’ve even got some William Morris wallpaper over here. This is my only still life. The painting from it is out in the hall here if you want to take a look at it. It’s an old violin. It’s the last thing my father brought out of the farm before he sold it.

MARGARET: Okay.

KEN: Oh, well. It had my mother’s pitch pipe and various things on there but it’s—oh, well. It’s kind of my autobiographical—it’s my way of saving the farm but that was—I guess I’m getting off-track.

MARGARET: Oh no, that’s okay. There’s no off-track in our conversation.

KEN: Okay. These are woodcuts I did in ’75 from Delaware County Community College with John Bodkin.

MARGARET: John Bodkin.

KEN: He eventually got a lithopress in there but it wasn’t there when I—he had etching presses and—

MARGARET: Oh, wow.

KEN: Let me—they should be over here. Forgive me.

MARGARET: Oh no, this is—

KEN: That’s [inaudible] Cannery Row. It’s ’75.

MARGARET: Do you mind if I take a picture?

KEN: Go ahead, go ahead. I’m sorry I’m just—

MARGARET: Oh no, this is—

KEN: If this is what you want—

MARGARET: This is exactly what I want. This is wonderful and I’ll just interrupt you with questions occasionally.

KEN: Okay.

MARGARET: Let’s just make sure these look okay.

KEN: This is one of the best [inaudible] books around.
MARGARET: I can’t remember; *A Spectator of Life* was in ‘80 something?

KEN: Oh, I don’t have my glasses on.

MARGARET: Let’s see. ’88.

KEN: ’88, yeah. I’m indebted to him. His New York paintings just knocked the socks off me. The dust storm at the flat iron building and so forth, it’s just incredible. I don’t know—growing up in this town I used to go to bank at WSFS with—because they had the NCY at the [inaudible] of the family there. That thing’s 80 feet long or something, it’s like 20 feet by 80 feet. It was just huge.

MARGARET: Yeah, but you know it’s interesting, so many artists that I’ve talked to, especially focusing on contemporary art in the 1970s and 80s, they talk about this struggle against the Brandywine tradition.

KEN: Yes, yes, there is a struggle but—

MARGARET: But you’ve really embraced the—

KEN: If you embrace it, it leads you on and beyond it.

MARGARET: Right.

KEN: I was against a lot of the Brandywine close-mindedness but if you change the angle on things, you turn it a little bit, you find a different perspective; it will still dance, the thing will still come to life.

MARGARET: Right.

KEN: These are some etchings I did up at Norfolk when I was a student there.

MARGARET: They’re beautiful. Oh Ken, I just—I haven’t—

KEN: This is a woodcut from ’75. I don’t know if this—this here is another version of that one. It has the rainbow roll on it. Here’s my disco dancers from 1978. I was out in Indiana and they just—I don’t know I never really—

MARGARET: Oh Ken, I just—I haven’t seen all of these early etchings. The line—they’re just incredible.

KEN: This is what I did—I got the Yale Norfolk fellowship in ’78 and I went there and worked with Brian Kay and Andrew Forge was teaching drawing there. Louis Finkelstein was the director at the time. Chuck O’Connor was teaching painting there. Larry Fink was the photographer that year and it was—

MARGARET: Now you got the Yale Norfolk fellowship in ’78?
KEN: Yes.

MARGARET: But you didn’t start to Yale—

KEN: It was sort of like they were testing the water to see who was out there and Indiana wanted me to stay another semester for some reason or other, so I stayed through until summer of ’79 and went to Yale in the fall of ’79 until ’81.

MARGARET: Now tell me Ken, throughout—so you’re going to school at Yale but—and before that—okay, so Indiana ’75?

KEN: ’76 through ’79—I guess it must have been—my brother and I went out there—he went out there to see about comparative literature and I saw they had an incredible art department from what I could see from being there for two days. I saw their graduate school art department and then their undergraduate department held up their part. They came out while I was there and bought an elementary school and moved the BFA program into an elementary school.

So you went from having to paint a barn to having four people to a classroom. So there were 16 of us in the program. They put their money where their mouth was. They even came in and put in some color corrective lighting. You know they had fluorescent and incandescent bulbs so you could have cool or hot so that was pretty impressive back in 1977-78. I was working in Army barracks there at one time too. You got bumped around a little bit but eventually they wound up at the McCullough School there.

All in all it was a very good experience. They had the wall—teaching ceramics. I just missed Victor’s teacher, Carl Marks taught Victor Spinski at Indiana University. I missed him by a year. He retired the year before I got there so I missed out on Victor’s input but I went out there and played in the mud too. I made rocking figures and hand-built stuff. It was fun. It was one of these things—I would go and spend a couple weeks doing pots and then I’d spend a couple weeks doing printmaking and I was playing off of one another and burning the midnight oil painting.

MARGARET: So tell me about—I guess I wouldn’t say—it’s not necessarily a shift from printmaking into painting, but tell me a bit about that transitional moment.

KEN: The transition is the mark making. You can get an incredibly powerful mark when you print something. When you run it through a press it just pushes it into the paper and I’ve been trying to get that kind of a mark making into my painting. I carried it over a little bit in some of these India ink and gold ink and silver ink drawings here. It’s the power of the—in black and white things can work in two different places; they can read on the surface or they can read deep space and they can go back and forth.

I’ve been trying to get that kind of interaction with the color in my painting. I’ve been trying to have it—you know blue usually reads as cool and is supposed to recede, but if you pop it up front, nail it in place there it works as a frontal line. You can reverse—you can change the rules. You can change the rules of color and paint and it’s one of the things we’ve started to see—that they weren’t—all right, excuse me.
When I got to Yale I started seeing these different painters and Lester Johnson, you know he would push everything forward with his bright yellow background. Everything was golden and then he would be painting on top of that and would sneak a little bit of blue or some cool in there and it would just ice the thing. It would just be icing on the cake. It would just sing out like a jewel. If you had purple or violet with a little bit of cerulean in there it would just sing out.

It was a lesson and that’s part of the reason that corner is yellow and the background is yellow. I was working with Lester and he had a green shadow there and it pushes all that blue up. It just lifts it up and it’s great—when you’re painting it’s your job to defy gravity. It’s like sculpture, it’s like that—the statue of Balzac, it’s got to rise up and take flight. It’s got to be like Brancusi Bird or something. You’ve got to push things a little bit differently.

I’m trying to do something like that here with this current painting of that fountain. That is the Art Builds on Sand Fountain down in the Brandywine Park and so it’s kind of—we’re just kind of pushing it forward and having it come up. I don’t know if that’s appropriate or not but these are some of the paintings I did while I was out in Indiana if you wish. I went through my acrobatic period here. I have Acrobats to Coffee hanging in there. This is Checkouts. I don’t know, that might be better.

MARGARET: Do you mind if I take pictures of these as well?

KEN: Please, please, if you wish. That was the painting I did at Norfolk the summer I was up there. This a jazz painting—and the other great thing about Indiana University was that they have an incredible music program out there. They concentrated in the music—they have a musical arts center and almost every night of the week you could go out and hear a student recital. You could hear saxophone quintets which you don’t hear—I got exposed to hearing Lester Young. One of the fellows in the house I was living in was a wood bend major and he had this incredible collection. He has Lester Young and Sonny Rawlins and all these various jazz musicians and it was just amazing to hear.

I came back from Indiana loving early 1930s-40s jazz; Benny Goodman and Lionel Hampton. It’s great driving music. If you’re out there and road rage is out there just put Lionel out there and you get good vibes.

MARGARET: Yeah, yeah. Now Ken, where were you showing your work? Where are you showing it and where were you showing it, if so in this timeframe?

KEN: In this timeframe, in 1981, I had a show at the Dingy House. John Gatti was working with the [inaudible] Arts Council at the time and they had this—it’s called Willingtown Square. There’s two houses which are connected and you go in one side and go up and down. Rick Rothrock had one side of the house and I had the other side of the house. It was like the first two-man show I had in Delaware with Rick Rothrock in 1981.

Roland Elzea came down to my grandfather’s farm in ’82 or ’83 for one of the biennials and they selected one of the paintings from that. I believe I’ve got—let me see what I have. I don’t know if this is it or not. I showed there—is that ’83?
MARGARET: In ’83, yes. So this was the 67th Annual Delaware Exhibition?

KEN: Mm-hmm.

MARGARET: This was in ’83 and when you said that Roland came down to your grandfather’s farm were you maintaining a studio there?

KEN: I was living downstate there in ’82–’83.

MARGARET: So this was after your MFA—

KEN: After my MFA graduation exhibition at Yale. I showed at Yale. I had an exhibition there. I don’t have the—I did make a lithograph where the show card but it didn’t get down here. I went from there to various other venues. The Wilmington Arts Commission at the new city building, I exhibited there a couple of times during the ‘80s and Carucci’s Restaurant in ’89. They had opera singers trolling around and—let me see if I’ve got it here.

MARGARET: I’ve heard stories of the trolling opera singers.

KEN: Here, here, this was March.

MARGARET: Oh, and you designed this?

KEN: I designed that with the painting of my—the Checkout painting here. So that’s basically—I did that layout and they bought the Egg painting, which is at the Delaware Art Museum from that session.

Currently, I believe Susan Isaacs had opened the gallery on Tattnall Street?

MARGARET: Yes.

KEN: I never showed there, but she had one of my students from Norfolk show there. So Laura Bockneau was one of the students up there in Norfolk in like ’85 or ’86 or something like that. The next thing I know I wind up—there she is showing her work in Wilmington.

MARGARET: Yes!

KEN: This is from the Wilmington Arts Commission, I think, at the city building.

MARGARET: Okay, so this is October 4, 1989.

KEN: Okay, ’89.

MARGARET: This is the Greenville Community News.

KEN: Oh, okay, okay. Here’s a copy for you if you want.

MARGARET: Oh, perfect! Oh, that’s wonderful! Thank you.
So Ken, I want to—actually, before we go back in time. You have showed locally with? Remind me, have you shown with—

KEN: I’ve shown locally at the Blue Streak Gallery here. Ellen Bartholomaus’s Blue Streak Gallery since the 1980s I guess. I’ve shown at Hardcastle’s Gallery. I had a show at Toscana when they used to hang artwork at Toscana. That was probably in the late 80s, early 90s. It’s probably out of the scope of that but—

MARGARET: Okay.

KEN: I’ve shown at Hardcastle I’ve shown at—Hardcastle used to be the only art store in town. This was where you had to go if you wanted some Windsor Newton paint. They used to have two or three places they had down on, it was either Delaware or Tatnall. I think that one down there on Orange Street or they had the paint supplies and the frame shop and then they had one up here on Delaware Avenue. When I was growing up that was the only place in town you could buy paint in the 1960s and early 70s.

AVA was there up the street from Susie Isaac’s gallery on Tattnall and they used to handle paint. One of my high school compatriots from the art program, Stephanie Lombaro, used to work there. She lives in Arden now and is doing Hats for Cats or something like that. She’s making funny things out of—stocking caps and things like that with neomimi cat ears or something.

MARGARET: Did you show at Station Gallery or Somerville Manning?

KEN: I showed at Somerville Manning probably late 80s. Somerville Manning had me there and Hardcastle showed my work out when they moved out to Centerville. I’ve had group shows there. I’m also part of this sign group which has been travelling with sister cities of Wilmington and put together several exhibitions—but it must have gotten its start somewhere in the 1980s.

MARGARET: It did. When did you become involved with—

KEN: I became involved in the 1990s so I guess—I’ve got a catalog of their show in Germany if you wish to take that.

MARGARET: You all have a show coming up as well I heard?

KEN: Yeah, we should be having a show up in Westchester University in 2014, I believe. Let me see, there should be a black catalog here. Oh well, okay.

MARGARET: Oh, is that it? One down.

KEN: Yes, there you go. Here you go. This is Von der Heydt Museum in Wuppertal. This is a copy of Bernie Felch’s show from ’99, but he was one of these guys around town.

MARGARET: Oh yes, I’ve seen this picture! This is great!
KEN: This is Lisa Bartolozzi, there’s Mitch Lyons, there’s myself, Rick Rothrock, Debra Stelling, Helen Mason and Valetta.

MARGARET: Is this copy for me?

KEN: You can have that. You can take that.

MARGARET: Okay, wonderful. Thank you!

KEN: My paintings aren’t that black but for some reason or other they always print my work black. They don’t understand my color range. It’s like whenever I get anything printed they get their foot caught in the mud.

MARGARET: Yeah. So Ken, I’d like to—let’s see. So, I want to go back to the mid-1970s because you mentioned the Streak Gallery in the old Queen Theater on Market and Fifth. You would have been—you had graduated in ’75, so you would have been going—

KEN: I graduated in ’72 and I was working my way through Delaware County Community College. I was getting my—well, you know getting out the basic stuff out of the way so I could go to Indiana without having to go through all the math and science and so forth.

I worked with John Bodkin there and Al Swinsky and John was one of the Indiana printmakers who steered me towards Indiana and that was a pretty good call. That was a good call for me. That was a great call for me. The Candlelight Theater used to have a gallery in Arden. It was down below the Candlelight Theater. There used to be a gallery by the blue board and my art instructor had a show there. Mr. Shaw was a ceramicist so he had his various stacked figure-like chest piece-like forms there. I guess that must have been ’72 or ’73 or somewhere in there.

There was a mall just north of Naamans Road, it’s where the Target shopping center is now. That’s where I first ran into Mitch Lyons. He was in there throwing pots and buildings. He was hand-building stuff in there and it was like ’72, ’73, ’74, somewhere around there. He eventually moved up to the Barn Shops in Chadds Ford and so Mitch was working up there and then he moved to New London with his home studio where he’s been for the past 20–30 years or something. But that was my first meeting with Mitch.

I was poking around and coming to this place. It used to sell potting soil and garden equipment and here he is in the corner throwing pots. A friend of mine’s buddy was running a used bookstore there too so it kind of moved up to Chadds Ford Gallery space in—I guess up until the middle 80s or something like that.

MARGARET: Okay. Tell me a bit about your memories or tell me whatever memories you do have of Fifth Street Gallery and the exhibition programs there.

KEN: All I know is that Mary had this incredible show and it sold out. It was like November or December and it was incredible, it was beautiful, it was wonderful and she should have had a
good experience but apparently economically it didn’t pan out. The work sold but—I don’t know. I can’t—

MARGARET: I understand.

KEN: It was like a second floor or walk up and I really don’t remember anything more than she had these beautiful things. There were raccoons, chickens and hens and things like that, frogs and strange little critters and they were just spectacular and they were wonderful and delightful. I guess it must have been November ’74 or ’75 or something like that. I really don’t have that much interaction—I was on my way to going to Indiana and ready to go to Indiana. I came back and showed at the state building. I’ve had four or five shows at the Mezzanine Gallery at the Delaware State Arts Council.

I’ve had—oh, ’89–’90 I got this State Arts Council fellowship for established professional artist and that was sort of the end of that. ’88 I had a show there called “On Different Levels” where I had a band of paintings and I had these large drawings which were like 45 inches high by eight feet long and had wrapped the whole space—it was like an arena chapel. I just took over the entire space and nobody’s been able to hang above the hanging wire again, the hanging rail. I guess I’ve ruined it for them.

MARGARET: [Laughing] Ken, do you have instillation images from some of these previous exhibitions anywhere in your files?

KEN: I might have some from the State Building. I’ll have to go search. I did do some videos of them so there might be a video or two of them but I would –

MARGARET: That’s good to know. I’ll make note of that.

KEN: Okay, let me make a note—let me see. In ’81, ’82, ’83 Rosanna Capaldi got together and we had a drawing group. Bill Shea and Charles Burwell and so forth, we got together and drew in her studio. She was in one of the Schoonover studios there.

MARGARET: So this would have been right after—

KEN: After graduation.

MARGARET: Okay and right after the foundation of the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts?

KEN: Yes, yes, yes. DCCA, I was in one of their first shows down there. It was on N. French Street. It was in a second floor walkup in some industrial building kind of opposite—the Delaware Theater had a firehouse across the way. Let me see if I have it here. Okay, where is it? I have the painting I had in that show. This is the piece which was in the show. It was Bus Stop Sunset. These are sort of contemporarily 1981, I guess that was. This is the show.
Steve Tanis curated the show or judged the show. This is the one which was at the DCCA. Then, I went away to do graphic work to pay off my student loan down in Washington, D.C. Basically, I did mechanical drawing.

MARGARET: When was this?

KEN: ’82, ’83 until ’86, ’87.

MARGARET: So you were living in D.C.?

KEN: I was living there during the winter and was going up to the Norfolk summer program during the summer. I got more work done in the summer and I had more fun in the summer than I did while I was working in Rockville, Maryland. It’s one of those places—never going back to Rockville again, somebody wrote a song. I’ve driven past it but—

MARGARET: So you came back to Delaware in—

KEN: It was around ’86, ’87. My mother moved back into Arden and so we moved into the house that I had been living in from ’72 until ’75. So it was like coming back home. Arden was great that way. They gave me a show at the fair there. I think it was 1990 or something. They gave me a show in the Backroom Gallery there. I did covers for some of their playbills and so forth for their summer theater, the Open Air Theater they had there. I did Twelfth Night. I was a supernumerary; actually I just walked on the stage and held a spear and stuff like that in Twelfth Night or something like that. I guess that was the early 70s. Somewhere in there I was doing that.

MARGARET: Okay.

KEN: I was doing silk screens and things like that and trying to find my way and that and wound up painting a portrait of my girlfriend out in my kitchen window. That’s still probably one of the best paintings I ever did but I don’t have it here.

MARGARET: Do you know where it is though?

KEN: Yeah, yeah, she has it. It was in her dining room or living room or something like that. It was a view out a kitchen window, the petted green through the walnut trees. It was just one of these—Arden felt like home.

MARGARET: Ken, tell me, you have been involved with the DCCA for quite a long time. In speaking to Graham Dougherty I think the two of you have probably tied for the artist who’s maintained a studio longest at the DCCA. So tell me a bit about that in those different locations.

KEN: Okay, I moved in with Anne Oldach in the Waterworks Building in between French and King Street, it’s the old Waterworks Bank building. I was on the second floor there and it was a nice, viable space. It was about the size of this studio except for it wasn’t quite so crowded and it had three windows and it faced the pumping station and I got to paint the pumping station out the window there.
MARGARET: How many other studios were there—

KEN: Graham was upstairs and Linda Johnson and Colleen Zufelt were up on the top floor, the third floor. I was on the second floor along with the police lockup. Apparently that’s where they threw impounded stolen goods and bicycles and so forth. They threw them in this lockup upstairs but that doesn’t matter to anybody.

It was on the second floor mezzanine overlooking the main gallery there at the DCCA. I guess that was ’89 I moved in there and Graham and I basically volunteered and we hung and lit shows for the next ten years or more until they got the professional crew in there. They started hiring preparers and letting people do it professionally when we went from a volunteer organization to a professional organization. That was somewhere in the late 90s I guess it was.

MARGARET: Did you involve yourself with any of the programming at DCCA in terms of—

KEN: I was on the gallery committee so we went and we did that marathon slide show and reviewed things and voted thumbs up/thumbs down or whatever. Basically had a number system and depending on how high of a number it was people got a show or not—or something like that.

Debra Stelling was in there. Mark Taylor was in there. Valetta, sometimes Ellen Bartholomaus was involved with it. We had—all I know is Graham and I were up on top of this 16 foot ladder teetering and tottering trying to fix the lights and things like that. We were able to hang a show a month there. We did an all right job for a bunch of non-professionals so we had that gallery running and we would have nine to ten months worth of programming there and there was a studio for the members’ gallery, which you could—if you were a member of DCCA you could send in slides and get a show in there and so forth.

It was pretty impressive. We were able to keep up with hanging and doing some pretty incredible stuff there.

MARGARET: How often did you show your work at the DCCA, down at the Waterworks?

KEN: It would—when they had the members’ show I usually could get a piece in there and I had the side gallery and the members’ gallery once or twice while it was down there. That was in the 1990s, so it was kind of—I really wasn’t involved with it until they moved to the new building. I was off to school basically and working and trying to pay back my student loans in the 80s.

When I came back I had the—I got involved with the DCCA. Carson kind of introduced me to Anne and got me into the studio and basically, I’ve been with them ever since. Graham was there before Linda Johnson and Colleen Zufelt. Linda’s back here, upstairs, if you—

MARGARET: Yes, I should talk to her at some point as well.

KEN: Yeah, she might be somebody to talk to. Let me see—this is a little book I’d done at Delaware County Community College. It was my design project for then but I don’t know if—that was 1973 or ’74.
MARGARET: Well Ken, what this does make me realize is that I didn’t know your full first name.

KEN: It’s Kenan. I’m Kenan Mark Mabrey.

MARGARET: I didn’t know that.

KEN: I go by Ken because nobody can pronounce Kenan.

MARGARET: Kenan is a wonderful name.

KEN: It’s a wonderful name, but nobody can pronounce it. I’m always getting Keenan. Everybody thinks I’m Keenan or Kevin.

MARGARET: Is it a family name?

KEN: Yeah, my mother—I think she picked it out—it was some writer from—George Kenan or—I don’t know. There was some writer or philosopher or somebody she picked out on that but I don’t know—picked out on that and made me—after him I guess. I don’t know. There was a Kenan Eglis that my grandparents knew so I don’t know if—

MARGARET: It sounds English, Kenan does.

KEN: It’s just one of those things. I went as Mark until fourth grade and there were too many Marks in the room so I became Ken.

MARGARET: This was wonderful. So Ken, I’m going to stop this for our purposes today.

KEN: Okay. Things like that—that was ’78. Basically, I’ve been using the human form as my building block and that’s how I composed and my instructor out in Indiana, Roger Tibbetts, told me to take a look at Max Beckman and he had all these wonderful acrobat pictures and so forth and I sort of took a lesson from him and learned how to do parallel perpendiculars. It’s like you’ve got parallels going this way and then you turn it on the end and go back into space. It’s different ways of looking at things or going through the high angles or something like that.

MARGARET: You were really experimenting with these—with perspective very early though. Were you looking at other artists?

KEN: I was looking—if you—I grew up—I was stuck at a babysitter’s house and I got to watch all these great old movies and they’re called high crane shots. If you come in from above it projects down onto—your five appendaged form of the human figure becomes something else. It compresses in space and it falls in with Max Beckman’s paintings. He had these large head figures and then little legs and so forth kind of projecting downward and so forth and I kind of was playing around with that.

MARGARET: Okay.
KEN: That’s also some of the great paintings of John Sloan’s you look through and you look above. There’s an elevated train coming around—

MARGARET: All of the various perspectives within the city, within New York, looking up or looking into someone’s window or across the rooflines.

KEN: Yeah, there’s a flight of pigeons and somebody’s painting over there. There’s like these gold, flittering birds coming across the cityscape.

Them and I looked at Edward Hopper and then I go to Yale and I start seeing Bonard and Vuillard and kind of reversing color roles and so forth. You can still see—I guess this is my farm staircase here. That’s my father coming out of the attic with the last—that’s the old violin, which I kind of have that storyline but this—you’re looking down, you’re looking up, you’re looking through. You can go down the stairs and the girl in the hallway out in the hall there is coming up on that landing downstairs. It’s my grandfather’s bedroom with the red floor.

MARGARET: Okay.

KEN: There he is out there in the yard with his wheelbarrow and my father and his paratrooper getup coming out of the attic. Yeah, he was so proud of jumping into France. It kind of—it’s an arabesque, it’s a staircase continued at different levels I guess. It’s one of those fascinations I had with just shifting points of view and perspective and stairs seem to be able to do that for me. I don’t know. There’s the Express Checkout painting where you’re looking down at the people and that was one of the paintings I did up at Yale in 1980-81.

So I’ve become more conventional in my perspective but I’ve been trying different things.

MARGARET: But those recent paintings from the Eiffel Tower, those are recent aren’t they?

KEN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Oh, I love the perspective!

KEN: Oh.

MARGARET: And those looking out through the city and from that interesting kind of tighter balcony space. Ken, I remember seeing a painting when Stephen [Ruszkowski] and I were in here a while ago and it was kind of a landscape. There was kind of an out building, maybe a clothesline.

KEN: Let’s come out here. There are a couple of them out here too.

MARGARET: Okay.

KEN: There’s the top of the Eiffel Tower. This is my homage to flight. There’s the Eiffel Tower.

MARGARET: Is this recent or—
KEN: This is recent. This is this past fall or spring. I don’t know. It’s the Wright Flyer here. The French were all up on balloons and this is the Concorde. Here’s Jules Vern Earth to the Moon and there’s the moon getting shot in the eye.

This is one of my father’s paintings.

MARGARET: Oh, I didn’t know your father was a painter!

KEN: That’s how I knew my father from 1956 until ’61. He was in Texas and Korea. This is a painting he did somewhere around the year I was born. That’s been hanging around and I’ve just been kind of trying to figure out what to do with a vertical and I’m trying to do that here.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s lovely.

KEN: That’s one of the woodcuts from ’75. Here’s the Best Taxicab in Tokyo. That was at the art museum and this is another version from the west looking east and the Men’s Auxiliary Service Pilots flying planes over to the war. We are stardust, we are golden. It was the golden generation and it’s punctuated with little ensigns of the various allies. There’s red stars for the Russians and the French and the Americans.

When I was living down there at the farm I used to get buzzed by these A-10s from Jersey. They’d come in at tree level, tree top and it was pretty funny walking out there. That’s the old violin. That’s what came out of the attic.

MARGARET: Ken, when did you finish this painting?

KEN: 1999, it went to Germany. This is the girl coming up the staircase. That’s the attic staircase where my father was coming down this way. That’s the landing and that was my Canadian girlfriend just kind of breezing in from the south. I kind of got a little Santa Lucia, Swedish Christmas thing going on there.

Down here, this is another flight of swallows. You just follow the birds. The birds just kind of lead you around, swirl around and it says, “Save our farms.” There’s my grandfather out there in the garden hoeing and there’s my grandmother with a blue star for my father who was parachuting into France with the 517th Parachute Brigade. This is the girl on the top of the Eiffel Tower just before the war and the lady in the canyon.

MARGARET: Yes, I know this one.

KEN: Right, I painted that in August ’97. I went out in July, saw the Grand Canyon, came back and painted that.

MARGARET: The museum included this one in the show at the Downtown Gallery, didn’t we?

KEN: Probably.

MARGARET: I think so.
KEN: It was probably in that group.

MARGARET: Okay.

KEN: I’ll have to say. I might have the catalog here. There’s the credit check there. The problem is people like to buy these foreign paintings for some reason or another. It’s like the one thing that’s been selling. The foreign paintings have been selling.

MARGARET: Oh, this is wonderful.

End of Audio
Duration: 68 minutes