Oral history interview with Helen Mason, December 14, 2011

Mason, Helen, born 1926
Sculptor

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MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow with the Delaware Art Museum interviewing Helen Mason in the artist's studio in her home on December 14th, 2011. And now we can just ignore that. Okay, Helen so I am going to begin by asking you when and where you were born first.

HELEN: Well, as far as I remember, I always wanted to be—tell me if I'm talking too fast, too slow, too whatever.

MARGARET: Oh, it's perfect. And actually the audio picks up fairly quiet sounds as well, and we're right here beside it so we'll be good.

HELEN: Okay. I was born in 1922, believe it or not. I was born in Boston, and I studied at Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design. We moved to Delaware in 1967.

MARGARET: And what brought you here to Delaware?

HELEN: My husband was transferred. My husband worked for Hercules. We both came here in '67 with three children.

MARGARET: With three children, okay. And when did you receive your undergraduate degree?

HELEN: I received my undergraduate degree in 1948.
MARGARET: In 1948, okay. And after you received the degree, were you already working—what were your styles like at that period of time?

HELEN: After we got settled I had a small studio in our house and I was painting. My early work in painting reflected a keen interest in abstract art. I was always—I think from the beginning I always wanted to be an artist and I always wanted to do something different than anyone else possible. I went to New York often because my husband travelled to New York maybe two or three times a month.

I didn't go always. But I was headed to the museums to see all the abstract expressionism sculpture, whatever. So I kind of got acquainted with the artists. I liked the young artists emerging at the time. That would be Morris Lewis, Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and Frank Stella. In sculpture I was attracted to the work of Brancusi, Ronald Bladen, and Anthony Caro. This direction must have followed me all throughout my entire career.

MARGARET: Okay. Because you would have been going to New York in the 1950's. Which was the perfect time to be in New York?

HELEN: Well actually it was a little later—well, I went before, but being so close I went often in the '60s.

MARGARET: Okay, in the '60s as well. Were you going down to New York when you were at Brown?

HELEN: At RISD? It wasn't easy to go to New York often because we studied and were busy with our studies. I didn't go to New York very much in those days. But there were exhibits there and at the college, they always had something going on that I often went to—always went to if possible.

MARGARET: Do you remember who you studied with at Brown or at RISD?

HELEN: I can't remember the name, I'd have to look that up and tell you another time.

MARGARET: Were they working in abstraction as well?

HELEN: Yes, some of the painters were, yes. But not to excess. Most of them were doing realistic work. And I wasn't happy with that but I sometimes came up with something that they liked, and that encouraged me to continue working.

MARGARET: Okay. So when you were going to New York in the '50s and the '60s, were you going primarily to museum exhibitions, were you going to gallery shows, was it really a mix, kind of anywhere you could see?

HELEN: Yes. I went mainly to the major museums, but I found the galleries more interesting because sometimes artists—they weren’t the famous artists, they were the young emerging
ones—and they were doing the most interesting work. It turned me on; I really got excited when I got back to my studio.

MARGARET: But you were still primarily painting still at that point?

HELEN: I was still painting. Yes, I was primarily painting.

MARGARET: Any kind of avenues into sculpture?

HELEN: I decided, after being here many years, that I would like to—I wanted to develop my interest in 3 dimensional art. I called Charles Parks, a well-known sculptor here, and asked him if I could—”Do you need an apprentice?” I was interested in learning, seeing what he was doing, and maybe learning new techniques. I even told him I would sweep his floor if that was the case, I was so anxious to do it.

He said he couldn't, he was going to Italy for many months, but he had an apprentice at the Y in Newark who was teaching stone sculpture. I went the next day and I just couldn't wait to get my tools. He said I couldn't come 'til the end of the month or whatever, which I did, got new tools, and worked in stone sculpture for about two years, maybe a little less. It had become quite tedious, and it took me so long to finish a piece that I decided that I would enroll in a class at the University of Delaware. So I then went to work in clay with Victor Spinski and in metals with Anne Graham.

MARGARET: Was this before or after your graduate degree at the University of Delaware?

HELEN: This was the beginning of my graduate degree. I decided this would be a really good thing and I would learn a lot, and they both were wonderful inspirations to me.

MARGARET: And this would have been in the mid-1980s?

HELEN: Yes, it was in the mid-1980s. But at this point, I was offered a job. I had no intention of teaching, and had already started my master's degree, when Tatnall School called me to substitute. And I never left for 15 years. This was quite an exciting time for me. It was difficult. My husband traveled, my children—one of them was still home, but the others were at college. I had the time to work at night. I worked at Tatnall at night, there was a studio there for me to work in and I had watchmen to take me to my car. That was a great experience teaching there.

MARGARET: What kind of classes were you teaching?

HELEN: I was teaching sculpture, and actually was teaching stone sculpture. I liked it, but I thought students would really like it to, and they only had to do one piece. It took them the whole semester to do it. They did the most fabulous work. I remember going to Conowingo Dam and picking out the soap stones and bringing them back in my car. We got all new tools for them, and they loved it. We had this huge exhibition at Tatnall, and everybody was so impressed with their work. So that was great. I also taught painting and I taught ceramics.
At that time the headmaster asked me would I like to teach, would I like to be chairman of the whole art department of the school. I said I would like to do that, which I did. I also taught art history. Every student was required to take this class before they graduated. Because, particularly the boys, never probably would have the opportunity to do that. The women, girls, would probably go into art, some of them would, some of them won’t, and some of them did, become curators.

So that was a very interesting time for me. I also took them all over the world. I don't know how that happened, but we went to Portugal, Italy, China, and Russia. These kids were fabulous. They griped about taking art history, but when we went into these museums in these countries, particularly Russia, and they saw contemporary art—and there was a lot of contemporary art going on in Russia at that time. Some of the famous artists were filling their work, and when they recognized them, they said: “You know, we understand why artistry is so important.” So that was really great.

MARGARET: Were those trips organized over the summer during the school year?

HELEN: Well we actually had a very interesting curriculum. We have 22 days of concentrated learning. So we went for three weeks. Which was a fantastic opportunity for me and for them. They never gave me any problems, they loved the trip. Some of them later on took Chinese. I think these trips changed their lives in a sense. Even the girls fell in love with ballet, we went to Moscow and—so they saw the real wonderful Russian ballet. We went to concerts. Everything was arranged ahead of time, and we had a wonderful guide. It changed my life too.

MARGARET: That’s incredible. Remind me, what were the grades you were teaching?

HELEN: I was teaching in upper school. So I had all of them for four years. Not all of them, but off and on I had them.

MARGARET: How many other colleagues did you have in the art department? Was it a large art department at this time?

HELEN: It was small, very small. I was the only one in the upper school. I had a very busy schedule.

MARGARET: Oh, goodness, I would imagine.

HELEN: We had one exhibit particularly was great: they had just added a new art department and a theater, and I decided that—what could we do that would be really exciting to put in this new corridor. I think we all talked about it, and it was decided that we would do—it was called the Chelsea Bar. Now the Chelsea Hotel was where the poets and sculptors and painters lived. We got a piano from someone and they made—we used wire and papier mâché, and we made these over life-size pieces. So we set up this bar with tables and chairs and the figures were what the students worked with.
We had a very talented young man who knew about lighting and lit up the whole place, the Chelsea Bar. These sculptures were fantastic, a big article was written in the newspaper. We had the poor men and women who didn't have homes, the homeless, they were sleeping outside this studio, they were sitting on the sidewalk, and the sky was outside and it was probably the most exciting project that we ever did.

MARGARET: That's an incredible, that's an installation piece.

HELEN: It was an installation piece. We had music and we had piano player, we had a violinist, we had poets, we had—they all were recognizable in some way. They worked weekends, they worked every weekend, I didn't force them to come, and they all loved it. We had a ball. It was great.

MARGARET: That's incredible. Did you take trips up to New York as well?

HELEN: Yes, we took trips to the museum once or twice during the year. We also went to the theater. Some of them had never been to the theater; some of them had never been to New York. We saw two fabulous—sculpture in the round with the mad barber—I can't think of the name. They were overwhelmed with the whole thing, and liked it.

MARGARET: Wow, that's incredible. So you were at Tatnall for about 15 years. So from '83 to whatever that math would be '93, '98; something like that. What made you decide to leave?

HELEN: What made me decide to leave? Well, I was going to school, trying to get my master’s degree; I was doing that, and teaching. My husband was going to retire in the '90s. In fact I went to the headmaster and I told him I was retiring. He said “Are you sure you want to do that?” I said “Yes.” I came back and he said “You think it over.” So I stayed one more year after that. Because my husband and I wanted to travel, and we did a lot even on school vacations we'd always go somewhere very interesting.

But it was time for me to quit, and I was overwhelmed with work. I was also showing my work in galleries then too. So it was a mixed bag of overwork. I decided I had to make a choice. I think my husband needed me—he didn't want to be home alone. He did consulting afterward, and we traveled. As I look back I'm sorry, I should have stayed a little longer.

MARGARET: But it probably opened up the opportunity for you to concentrate on your work.

HELEN: Yeah, and I needed to do that. And that opened a lot of doors for me. I had many shows, particularly in Japan. But I did receive a National Individual Artist Grant in '85, '86. I think it was '86. I traveled to Japan for 4 months to study the art and culture of Japan.

MARGARET: So yes, I want to talk a little bit more about that specifically. So that was in 1986. And that was—

HELEN: It was probably in '85 actually. Because I had these exhibitions afterwards in '86.
MARGARET: Okay, so from '85, and you received a grant—now had you applied specifically to travel to Japan for that grant, or you kind of decided to do that travel after you had received?

HELEN: Well I also received an enrichment grant from Tatnall, they were supporting me too. So I had a little bit of money to do that. A colleague of my husband found me a place, the most fabulous place, in the embassy section of Japan, where I had a house and I had to take care of his little dog. So that was fantastic.

One phone call from a PhD student at Tokyo University—he was a student of architecture, made a phone call—because introductions are very important in Japan. I had to have an introduction to open the doors for me because I didn't know what I was going to do. I couldn't really take any classes because Japanese feel those 4 months is not very good, it's not enough time, and you almost have to spend a lifetime to perfect your interests and your talents and whatever. So that phone call opened the doors at Tokyo University, the head of the metals department and sculpture, took me to exhibitions were I would never be able to go by myself. Had to get together with me and with other students.

Many of the young students studying there didn't speak English but two did. One was born here in this country and went back with her family. So she was my guide in a sense. And then I made two other wonderful friends who later arranged shows for me many years after I left. It was a fantastic experience.

MARGARET: Talk about the work that you were seeing there. This was contemporary art?

HELEN: Not too much contemporary art. It was the screens—but there were a few artists working doing print-making. Their work was exquisite. That was very inspirational. Just the country it itself was beautiful. We travelled—I travelled all around but I learned how to get around by myself. Went to exhibitions that were arranged. I went sometimes with students, sometimes by myself.

I never was fearful of anything; it was a very safe place to be. But I learned so much about the Japanese. One particular was simplifying everything. It was perfect for the way I felt about minimalism. That changed my life and my work followed that whole philosophy even now in a sense.

MARGARET: So tell me a bit about the works that resulted from this trip. Because then in 1980 you had the exhibition *Form and Spirit* at the Delaware Art Museum. So talk a bit about that work.

HELEN: Well, when I came home I was just fascinated with the Japanese work and culture. I came back with all kinds of samples. Bamboo, silk. All kinds of string, all kinds of fabrics, dye fabrics. And I started to play with them. I couldn't come up with anything that I liked. It was looking just like their work. I had to make a decision about what can I do? This exhibition was coming up in one year, I had one year to finish. It was going to be in the Delaware Art Museum, with the invitation of Helen Sloan to have it in her gallery.
And I frankly didn't know what it was going to be. So I went to the library and I studied Japanese culture again, and I finally came up with the Japanese forms of unity, which gave me a hook. I needed that hook to start thinking about what I could do. There were so many influences that served to deepen and develop my awareness to the intertwining of life and art that was so ever-present in Japan.

MARGARET: We're going to pause for a moment.

HELEN: These forms of unity which served as a hook for my pieces consisted of a series of sculptural forms with specific references to Japanese history and culture. The underlining theme and my inspiration were the esoteric unity in modern Japan. Enclosure wrapping, arrangement pairing, union tying, layering, and a collection of bundling. These were all of the things that I remember. This gave me a beginning to my work, *Form and Spirit*. I tried to present this interpretation in symbolic form using modern and industrial materials instead of the usual Japanese materials. I used clay, aluminum, and rubber.

When the exhibition was over, and having worked so long in big pieces, I started to think there was a need for me to work in smaller pieces. With these big pieces I needed help and I used many of my students from the university, who had gone to the university from Tatnall. And that was terrific because that helped me finish the work in time. So thinking in terms of smaller work, jewelry was where I could have complete control again. This was—my minor was in jewelry and my major was in sculpture. Anne Graham served as a great inspiration to me.

It also offered a different kind of backdrop for a display of the finished work. The human scale once achieved through sculpture could also be accomplished when the jewelry is worn and become functional. The human body not only acts as a pedestal but a mobile armature. So I use rubber to make many things that could be worn. Knotted rubber necklaces, bracelets. I used modern industrial materials again using Teflon. I dyed the Teflon black. Black was a color that follows me throughout my whole career and I even wear black most of the time.

MARGARET: Can you tell me about this interest in non-traditional materials. Because I think that's so interesting how you used these modern industrial materials to reference these forms of unity. Tell me about that kind of transition, or that interest.

HELEN: I had to find something that no one had ever seen before. I was using clay in my graduate work. I was using metals, learning how to anodize aluminum. All these kind of fit together like a big puzzle. I loved working with rubber. Rubber is material that's actually trash sometimes. It’s where you can find all kinds of interesting things that can be used in sculpture. And of course, the color was the—it symbolized mystery.

MARGARET: Now obtaining rubber, though, could be a bit more difficult. Attaining a lot of these industrially produced materials could be a bit more difficult than going to Utrecht or something like that. So is that process of collecting these materials important to you as well?
HELEN: Yes, finding a place to find them. And when I explored rubber, I learned a lot about this material. When it comes off the machine—and I particularly needed, for instance, getting back to the symbolic possibilities that would tell the public that I had been to Japan. When one came to see this exhibit, could they recognize the fact that I had been to Japan, would it symbolize something to them as well?

MARGARET: I know you've talked before—just going back quickly, to gathering rubber—that you'll go to junkyards?

HELEN: Yes, trash yards. That was my favorite place, is to find somewhere where I could use—but for *Form and Spirit*, it was a more formal act of finding rubber that was new. That was the beginning, finding new rubber, and combining it with aluminum and clay.

MARGARET: Was those materials, right. So I should—because, these kind of found rubber pieces that we're looking at now is really more recent work. So I'm going to back, I'm going to wait on that one a little bit. I wanted to look at one other thing, specifically keeping in line with talking about these nontraditional materials and because you referenced minimalism as well.

That was certainly a mood of working within minimalism as well with this interest in industrial materials. Did you have a strong interest in minimalism and those artists that were working in that vein? I know we talked about the simplification of forms, industrially produced materials.

HELEN: Simplification was the important factor for me and every time I began a piece, I would think what can I eliminate to make it simple. Somehow, rather, these materials lent themselves to simple designs. I thought so. But every piece that I did for *Form and Spirit* had a meaning to it, it had a symbolic meaning. For instance, in my bundles, Japan, they always wrapped things up in little bundles. That fascinated me. I decided I would do different kinds of bundles. Horizontal, vertical, diagonal bundles. The biggest one was the diagonal bundle which symbolized the rubber tubes—the rubber tubes were about 5” tall—they symbolized the cases for the scrolls.

The aluminum which I anodized, fit inside these rubber tubes. I used industrial banding to put this piece together because it became very, very heavy and I had to find someone who could show me how to use this special tool. So once I got the piece together and stood it up, I thought it was going to be straight, but somehow rather it found its own way and became diagonal. I wrapped it with gum rubber and that symbolized the sumo-belt. Then I used the—it’s a plastic string or wrap—that I wrapped and wrapped and wrapped below the belt. And that symbolized something they used every single day, it symbolized silk. Which was very important in the culture of Japan.

The other bundles were the horizontal ones, were layered. And that was another one of the forms of unity. I layered the rubber, the aluminum, and the clay and wrapped it again, because everything was wrapped; that was one of the special things. We can see the screen.

MARGARET: These are great installation images from the exhibition.
HELEN: Wow they are good.

MARGARET: Aren't they wonderful?

HELEN: So we had horizontal, vertical, and I made three or four of the double once symbolizing the gifts. I did boxes—many, many, one followed the other. It was so easy, once I knew where I was going with this; I could have made 50 at that point. I remember wondering what the Japanese would think about all of this. I happened to be in the gallery one day when a group of Japanese women came and in and they loved the pieces because they knew what they meant but they were much different than what the Japanese do. So I was very, very pleased.

MARGARET: That's wonderful. Tell me, because there is some color in these works. Any sort of symbolic importance in terms of the color within these or not necessarily?

HELEN: I think that they needed something, they needed texture, and they needed color. How was I going to do that? I knew that they had to be wrapped, they had to be enclosed, and screens had to be made. When it was all over I couldn't believe that I had done this, it was sort of like a miracle that happened because it took me months to come up with an idea that was going to work. Art and sculpture sometimes becomes very difficult.

MARGARET: Wait, now remind me. Was this your MFA?

HELEN: No it was after.

MARGARET: This was after the MFA show. Okay, I'm going to just skip around a little bit. You started to talk a little bit about your jewelry. I wanted to go back to that. So you began working on a smaller scale. I love your point that the person who's wearing the piece becomes the pedestal, especially in thinking about modernist and contemporary sculpture, that erasure of the pedestal entirely. I love that. Tell me a little bit more about where this work was exhibited.

HELEN: I think I first exhibited here at the Blue Streak. I didn't sell a lot of work. It was hard because I found that the population in Delaware wasn't really going with the times. Some of my work, particularly the knotted neck pieces, didn't sell as easily as some of the more traditional pieces using gold, silver. I also used materials that were precious. But I combined them with the non-precious.

People weren't doing that very much. I loved doing that because it was something that very few jewelers were using at that time. In Japan, jewelry wasn't part of their culture. They only used the hairpin and in the obe. Those were the two places where some kind of ornament was used. As I look back now, things have changed in Japan. There are many jewelers doing exquisite work with metals, but not so much nontraditional, but just jewelry itself. Making beautiful jewelry.

MARGARET: What time were you exhibiting at Blue Streak?
HELEN: It must have been in the early '90s maybe. But I was also invited to show my work in Japan. I remember going back for that opening and it was revealing to me because it was on a Sunday and everybody came very dressed up and bringing food. It was beautifully arranged food. The gallery owner told me when I came that I had to be there every day to show them how to wear these pieces, and I sold many, many—I sold out almost everything I made. So that was my first success with jewelry, I would say.

MARGARET: So the work was very well received in Japan.

HELEN: Because the black against the black hair, and black on black—they liked that. I wore black with black broaches, with some color, sometimes I would have ivory or pearls or gold. They received it very well. I didn't know quite how I was going to exhibit it, it was a small gallery. But I blew up the ones that I felt would be good. I blew them up beyond maybe 4” high, I went to a photographer and he did that for me, and I rolled those up and I carried them with me to the gallery the day that we set it up. Everybody helped me do it. The reception was really great.

After that I had several shows in Japan and in Korea. Korea was the next place that my work was. I never went to the openings; it was just too hard to do. But the reception there was really good. There were gallery owners who saw my work—I had some work that I entered a competition—one of the gallery owners called me and asked me if I could keep it for a while because they were going to have a travelling show of metal smiths that went around the whole United States, it was a huge catalogue. That also gave me a big boost because he recognized something he hadn't seen before.

MARGARET: Right. And then you also exhibited the jewelry in New York. And the southwest? Midwest?

HELEN: In Arizona.

MARGARET: Remind me, where in New York?

HELEN: It was the American Craft Museum in New York now called MAD: Museum of Art and Design.

MARGARET: How did that exhibition come about?

HELEN: This was part of the traveling show from Wayne State University. It was called American Metal Smiths Working. Then I had a show at—it wasn't a solo show, it was a group show, at Aaron Faber. I just entered a contest of some sort and they accepted my work.

MARGARET: And where was it shown out in Arizona?

HELEN: At the most beautiful gallery ever. There was a woman who was on the board of the American Craft Museum who happened to be a friend of a friend with whom I was staying. She
bought 5 pieces, I remember. She just loved my work. In fact I'm sending her some this week that I'm beginning to—she told me what she wanted. That was another gallery which is not in existence anymore—I'm trying to remember the name of it.

MARGARET: Oh, in Scottsdale Arizona, Gallery Materia. So you had shown out there as well.

I'm looking through your CV—you've continued to show in Korea and Japan, somewhat recently as well, in the 2000s.

HELEN: Yes, and I may be showing again in the spring. There's going to be another big show in Korea. Now the Koreans are also doing exquisite—their techniques are fabulous. Their work is different but I don't like it as well as the Japanese work for some reason. I don't think they've gone far enough yet with it.

MARGARET: So tell me a little bit about what you're working on right now. Tell me a bit about your recent work.

HELEN: Right now I'm working on—don't ask me how I even came to this. I must have seen something in a show, maybe it was Avianio at The Whitney, because you're always seeing work that looks unbelievably interesting and you don't know how, which inspires you. There must have been a piece that almost took the whole gallery that was all made out of rubber.

Rubber parts, rubber tires, rubber gaskets, whatever. I think that sort of set me off on this road of recycled rubber. So what's happened is, I've converted recycled tires and rubber into fluent materials and have woven their textures, which is so interesting, and treads. The scars, the burns. All into my own compositions.

MARGARET: I love that point: the scars and burns.

HELEN: Which really deals with emotional and physical scarring that people go through as they live. In class, race, and labor, which are universal problems. So this material—I did one piece last year called *High Speed*, where I used all of the parts from accidents that sort of inspired me to do this. I think it, with the title which I found easily, it was an easy title somehow. In fact, my husband and I were talking about it together and we came up with this, because it does signify the accidents that people have and I did something special with it.

The thing about rubber is, it is trash sometimes that I use, but I try to make it beautiful because I wash it, I dry it, and I use something to polish it, and this trashy material becomes something elegant and beautiful. The first time I tried to do this, I made 6 pieces and I called them black magic because something magical happened when I washed them and polished them and it became beautiful. So that was another step in my growth period, working with this material. And I will continue to do this.

MARGARET: *High Speed* is a large work, a very large work.
HELEN: Yes, I don't have it with me; I'm going to get it this week. You may want to come again and see it.

MARGARET: I would love to see it in person. And that's the wall-mounted piece.

HELEN: Yes, and that was the first time I had done wall-mounted pieces and I'm going to continue doing this as well because sometimes—and maybe make some of them smaller so more people can have them at their homes. I only have 3 in homes at the moment, but I'm hoping with the big ones, some museum will decide they need something like this and they'll be gone. Because if you make them too big they're really hard to store. That's every artist's worry, I think, when they do something big, where is it going to go?

MARGARET: And difficult to work with as well. Just thinking about that transition from the larger pieces to jewelry, for you to be able to work smaller, and then you're going back to working on much larger pieces as well. But also working on smaller pieces to be viewed in the round as well. Just looking at the ones here in your studio are just incredible.

HELEN: Well you can look around and see the small ones are easily transported. The other thing that I did, I didn't mention it last time, but when I was at the university we did electroforming. And what you do is, you have a sculpture of some sort, you can use a found material, I found this, it was a letter opener—again, black ebony, ebony is another material that's wonderful to work with—and I found a sculpture who works in making boxes, and I saw him at a craft show in Philadelphia and I asked him what he did with the scraps.

And he said he just burns them or gives them away, whatever, and I said “Can you send them to me?” and I said “I want to pay you for them.” And he said “No, but pay the shipping.” So he sent me many, many pieces of—so this, what it is, you put a wax on the piece and you put it in a tank and it grows copper or silver or whatever, and I put jewels in it as well. This little piece is kind of neat. There's no end to all of things you can learn. I'm always learning. I always want to learn something new that I can use with what I've done before. That's the fun of being a sculptor.

MARGARET: Yes, and continuing to explore materials.

HELEN: And nontraditional ones.

MARGARET: And nontraditional materials. This continued interest in nontraditional industrially produced materials I think is really quite interesting. Now tell me, where has the most recent work been shown? Because I know you're involved with Fun and I want to—actually this might be an appropriate time—how did you become involved with Fun?

HELEN: The woman who really was the one who began, it was Deborah Stelling; we had worked together at the university. She and several other people, I think five or six or seven other people, decided to have a group that decided to work together all in different mediums, media. Got support—they also looked together—SYNE means working together—decided to do shows and even teach people about what they were doing. Learning, teaching, giving, and exhibiting
group. With help of sister cities of Wilmington, decided that it would be good to have shows at other sister cities all over the world. And this is what happened; they showed in England and Germany and Italy, and in Sweden.

There were seven of them. One of them developed cancer. When she died, Deborah came to me and asked me would I like to be part of this group. Everybody had to decide on this, it wasn't just one person, if one person didn't want you, you weren't going to be part of the group. So Deborah took me to lunch and she said “I think it’s okay”—and I knew many of the artists—“could you be part of this group?”

And that's what happened. The first show I was in was in Fulda Germany. Some of the artists did go, and it was at the Vonderau Museum in Fulda Germany and then they traveled, they traveled to two or three other countries. And then, we had another show, I would say five years ago, and we all showed our work then and it was a tremendous expensive. Well, at sister cites we didn't have to pay any of the shipping. Which was fabulous.

MARGARET: Oh that's wonderful.

HELEN: Some went, some paid their own way and went. I didn’t go, I wasn't able to go for some reason. But it was very successful. So I showed my work there. What was the question again?

MARGARET: And then where you're showing your most recent work, you also showed I guess maybe for the first time High Speed was shown at Gallery 919.

HELEN: Yes, at Citizens Bank downtown. That was a great show of all the fine artists, it was beautiful. Absolutely wonderful. The gallery owner—I had eyed one spot for my work—and he said, I can't promise anybody a spot; you may want this one or that one. But he gave me my spot and it was perfect for the work. Absolutely fabulous for the work. So here I am thinking about what the next piece is going to be. And I think it's going to be a wall piece. Probably a different shape of some sort. It's going to be long and narrow, or tall and skinny, I'm not sure. But I'm going to be playing with drawings first.

Sometimes if it's possible, I always make drawings first. So the drawing abilities that I developed are always being used, even with my jewelry I'll make a sketch and develop it after I do it. Or a model, sometimes a small model. With these pieces here, these steel pieces, that was something new that I'd never done before. But I wanted to make them, and I really couldn't weld. But I found someone who did the welding. I made the marqueses, the form, and the shapes, and the measurements, everything. I had the metal cut to size. Actually it was one of the professors at the university who said “I'll do this for you.”

Once it was done I had to take it to a place where they got all the junk off it, then another place that did model cars. So I was running around like a chicken with its head cut off, trying to figure out who was going to do it, and it was a very expensive job at the end. I made them huge. We
had a show, SYNE had a show at Tower Hill and we had one at the theater company and it was great.

MARGARET: These are so—obviously there's still that interest in industrial materials, nontraditional, and in the simplification of form. But they're different. But what I see here is that influence of an artist like Robert Murray or David Smith.

HELEN: Or Anthony Caro.

MARGARET: Or Anthony Caro, exactly.

HELEN: I just loved the work, and I said I've got to give it a show. I did. And you won't believe this, but what I'm going to do now with the jewelry—because sometimes I need that rest or I need to show something of jewelry and the skills that I've learned—is I might even be using wood and painting, doing this kind of form that fit on the body.

And 3 dimensional, so you'll see some from the front and some from the back maybe, it would go around your neck and it would do something. Because wood is a really neat material. And I can also forge, which I did, copper wire—I'd make necklaces that would kind of sit here. And then maybe some of it would go all the way down here—something very extreme. And those are sculptures.

MARGARET: Yes, and again, that's the human body as pedestal. I love that.

HELEN: So these—that's something that's sitting in the back of my head, that I can do myself. They're going to be maybe this big that fits on the body somehow. And red—maybe just ten red ones that people can wear. But it would have to be worn probably without coats, but that's their problem. And also hang on the wall.

MARGARET: So it's really both.

HELEN: Right. So, I'm not picky about the next thing. But sticking with this and maybe adding some color or some metal, somewhere in a subtle way. All these things are going to be dipped in dye. I have too much to do and not enough time to do it. But at least I'm not a sitting duck.

MARGARET: That's often a challenge for artists. I've heard artists talk about the number of projects that are in their heads that you will never be able to realize. Sometimes you've moved past them already so they're not physically realized and other times there's too much to process. Which is a wonderful predicament to be in, but a bit of a challenge.

HELEN: I'm often worried about this. I'm getting up there in age, but I don't feel like I'm growing old, and I still have all those things that I want to do. I wonder, because grants are available, whether I'll ever be accepted because of my age. I don't feel that that's the way it is because you see all the scientists who are old now, and have made huge accomplishments in their field, and they should be recognized, and they are recognized. So we all think about that,
and we'll see what happens on that score. But the work will never be stopped and hopefully I'll get better and better. I know you're going to ask me something about the Delaware Arts Council soon. Will you do that now?

MARGARET: Yes, actually, I wanted to close talking a bit about your involvement in the Wilmington arts scene in the 1970s and '80s, and specifically also about your involvement with the Delaware Arts Council.

HELEN: I've been really lucky. First I became very active in the DCCA, before it really became big. There were several of us, maybe ten of us, who would go to meetings and think what can we do to make ourselves known, we need a place show our work. There were a couple of places. We had a board. I was on the board for years. In fact, they asked me whether I would take a higher position, but I was getting my master's degree and I was teaching and trying to do work. So I never could. But I still was very active, particularly first in the DCCA. That took a lot of time. We worked together, and something has happened, and they now have a building which is showing fantastic work. So, then that would have been—that was really in the late '70s early '80s.

HELEN: Yes and I got a call one day from someone from the Delaware Arts Council, and told me that the Governor had recommended me with their help to be on the board. I was absolutely so happy because for the first time—I'd been on the other side of the fence, trying to help the artists and the artists' organizations and we'd meet every month and decide how we were going to distribute monies, how could we help artists. And I remember towards the end of my career there, I thought: “You know, there are individual artist’s grants, and that’s great, but what happens to an artist after he grows, after 10 years, can he apply again for that master's grant?” I really pushed that for months and months and months and they finally agreed to do it. And that's what happened. So I think there's only been a few so far, I think Rick Rothrock received one this year.

MARGARET: Yes, he did.

HELEN: Unfortunately it's only once every 4 years.

MARGARET: Oh is that what the timeframe is? But it's good that it acknowledges the different points artists are at within their careers as well, and that the “established artists”—whatever those terms mean—need the same kind of support as emerging artists need as well.

HELEN: Exactly. So you first have to receive an individual grant. And then after ten years, you can apply for the master’s grant. I know some wonderful people have received that. It's always an inspiration for all artists to get the emerging, and get the individual one, and then this. I think Wilmington is a place for so many artists to grow and opportunities to show their work now. We only had a few in those days. There weren't many places to show your work here. And then now every month we see new ones popping up and new work and I think it's fantastic.
MARGARET: Now I know when you were talking about your jewelry you were talking about the difficult time that the community had receiving the work. Did you feel like that was the same with contemporary art in the 1970s and ‘80s?

HELEN: Yes. I think that if I were very wealthy after first getting married, I went—every time that I went to New York I wanted to buy one of those pieces. And they were really reasonable but if you thought in terms of having a family then you weren't thinking of buying that. But we always bought something. We developed a collection. Now some of the artists are famous, some are not, but I loved their work.

I think, I must've—it's very interesting because no one in our family had anything contemporary. Furniture, art, it was all—maybe some art my family had—but it wasn’t contemporary. I just—something inside of me, when we were furnishing our home, I only liked contemporary furniture. No one had it. No one even has it here hardly. I collected stuff that in the museum of modern art. Every piece in there. Our house is there. I don't know how I even knew—I didn't even know about—but my husband, Bob, had a brand in the furniture business.

Contemporary furniture was just coming out and he said “Why don’t you go look?” I said “ I didn’t like any of that other stuff, I don’t really want any of that, I’ll have somebody make me a piece, get a piece to order,” or something. I went to all the furniture places and we got some wonderful buys on contemporary furniture, but it’s amazing that I was always contemporary in everything I did. Don’t ask me where it came from, I haven’t the vaguest idea.

MARGARET: That's wonderful. Well I think that is a perfect stopping point for today. Thank you.

HELEN: Thank you.

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Duration: 64 minutes