Oral history interview with Kevin McLaughlin, December 5, 2011

McLaughlin, Kevin, born 1954
Painter

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CAITLIN: Caitlin Davis interviewing Kevin McLaughlin on December 5, 2011. Are you originally from Delaware?

KEVIN: Yes I am. I was born in 1954 in Wilmington and I think it was the Delaware division. Well it had to be it was back then. I went to Christ Our King grade school. Salesianum and the University of Delaware. I did a little bit off time at Del State when I was a high school teacher in 1996.

CAITLIN: What inspired you to become an artist originally?

KEVIN: Natural talent. I was the kid that wasn’t doing the class work and drawling the pictures in the margins and everybody knew that I had this drawling talent. I was like known for it all the way through. You know grade school and high school.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: When I was a junior at Sallies they hired an art teacher for first time. We were 1971 or ‘70 and a fella by the name of Walt Stand. His daughter is Cynthia Stand you may uncover her name. He was particularly good for me because he was a graphic designer, which I didn’t know much about.
CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: He was in his sixties at the time he came to work for the school. He was slowing his career down I suppose. He was a painter. He was a very talented painter and he sort of was my mentor for a while. I was his best student he took me under his wing and sort of pointed me in the right direction. Showed me I could make a living with my natural talent.

CAITLIN: Um-hum. I think you mentioned earlier that you wanted to major in painting?

KEVIN: Correct.

CAITLIN: But then decided to do graphic design.

KEVIN: Well back then when you were going to go to college.

CAITLIN: Um-hum

KEVIN: Again this is demographics, people of my generation very rare that your parents went to college. If I knew somebody or I met somebody and their parents had a college degree that was unusual. That was a different type of family. So I came from a blue-collar, industrial, working class family. So what they would say is yeah you can go to college but you need a trade to fall back on.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: My mother didn’t want me to go to college at all she wanted to become an electrician or plumber, you know enter the union. Because after four years you would be making $50–60 thousand dollars a year. In 1978 that money would be like 8 or 100 now. Anyway, I wasn’t going to do that. So graphics was the thing to fall back on. So that’s basically what it was. You get to use your artistic ability. Plus my brother in law who was older, he worked in the printing business.

CAITLIN: Oh okay.

KEVIN: There was something that was industrial and blue collar but artistic at the same time. A lot of skill in that. In the whole variety of things. So I was familiar with that so that’s how I did graphic design. The graphics was the practical thing. Got a Bachelor of Science in that. Which was considered a little bit more of a valuable degree then the BA. There was no MFA or BFA back then or EMD.

Anyway that was the thing, I’d have that to fall back on and if that failed I was construction worker when I paid my through college. I did, frankly, what you call them macho jobs. I worked on building 495. I was the guy who put the dynamite in the hole then come back up where it goes under Philadelphia pike. I used to go in the tunnels and it was a rough job.
It’s sort of one of the things that upsets me about the direction the nation is going now is that wasn’t there for my son.

CAITLIN: Uh-hum.

KEVIN: You know a young man of his generation. My son is 23 or 24 and it’s tough when you’re young now because all these jobs that were there when I was young. They’re not there for the kids and there’s character building in that. So anyway that’s one of my gripes [Inaudible]. That’s what I did. So Walt Stands, my art teacher, he was a painter he was a graphic designer. This looked like it would work for me.

CAITLIN: Um-hum

KEVIN: I had high SAT’s and things like that but I’m not mathematical. I would have preferred to be an engineer and working the space program that’s what I really wanted to do. But I don’t have the IQ—mathematic IQ for that, but I had this natural talent.

CAITLIN: Um-hum

KEVIN: I was determined to make something out of that.

CAITLIN: So throughout this time were you continuing painting even though you were taking graphic design classes?

KEVIN: Absolutely. I mean I didn’t fit in either department. Graphics professor, he knew that my love was in the fine arts.

CAITLIN: Okay.

KEVIN: Without bragging, I was one the best graphic students too. But I didn’t bare the hell with that because everybody knew I wanted to be a painter. I was a known guy around the art department and everything.

CAITLIN: Um-hum

KEVIN: I just, I mean you have to lock onto something to be successful. I understood that instinctively at that age. So like I was telling you earlier the graphics program had tremendous amounts of electives in it.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: So I basically did painting I, II and III. I and II were still life. Drew and you got things down and III was figure. Then you had special problems. So I filled—they didn’t let you take painting as a freshman.

CAITLIN: Okay.
KEVIN: You aren’t allowed to handle color until you got a year under your belt. That was in the art department in general. But anyways, once I got to be a sophomore I took my painting one course. I was just locked in. Junior and senior year I took special problems, sometimes two a semester. They brought a fella in by the name of Nicholas Krushenick. Who was sort of a second-tier pop artist. Like from the for real scene

CAITLIN: Um-hum

KEVIN: You know that spawned Roy Lichtenstein and all that. He knew all these guys, but this was a guy that you’d go to the deer park with, you know? Sort of absorb the personality. It was instructive. I took most of my special problems with Charles Rowe—who I had great admiration for. Charles would take—I was his TA one year.

CAITLIN: Um-hum

KEVIN: We were pretty close. He was good at petticoating. He could take a student that couldn’t really draw and the 14-week semester get 500% improvement out of that student. Not a knock on the other professors but they couldn’t do that. Charles was older, he had petticoating, and he had technique for teaching and everything. He was pretty cool guy. He was also a tough guy. He made a lot of students cry.

It was interesting because the people that were drawn to him, that could deal with him was like somebody like me that went to catholic school, that went through [Inaudible] because it was an extremely top school back then. If you played, that was the substitute for the Marine Core and stuff.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: I played some sports there and everything. Not with any particularly success, but a lot of that stuff set the stage for having the discipline to succeed. Because art is a freelance thing. There’s no structure in it and you know I ended up teaching later on. I taught a DCAD [Delaware College of Art and Design] for a while—no fine arts, graphic design and things. I taught at Howard one year and Delcastle.

Especially at DCAD I’d tell the students if you’re really want to do this, this isn’t something to take lightly. It’s a tough life. It’s hard to make money. This isn’t like you go work in some big corporation and they assign you a number and they have a pay scale like you do in the union shop.

CAITLIN: Um-hum

KEVIN: Where government for instance, everything is on a matrix. If you’re an artist you’re going to live without that safety net. You’re going to walk a tight rope and you’re going to have to be cleaver and you’re going to have to be adaptable. You’re going to have to go without. You may have fat times. It’s not for everybody, one thing I resent, and this is part of what got us in
trouble as a nation. Look at this Wall Street protest thing and the segment of it that upset with the student loans.

We’ve over-sold the value of this college education and we’ve also changed it into a country club experience. So these people are upset because they borrowed fifty grand to party and that’s basically what it was. When I went to school it was a Spartan experience.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: You went in your dorm in Delaware. You had a cinder-block rooms, you had one telephone for forty people. You had three toilets for forty people, three showers, you lived on top of one another. You would have a TV this big with rabbit ears to watch *Star Trek* and a second program called *The Snow*. This was like very Spartan, you go to dining hall and you had the worst food in the world. They would slap it on the plate. I’m sorry I’m going off here.

I went to my thirty-fifth class reunion at Salesianum. They had a dining hall like a college. They have a vegan bar, they have a Asian bar. They had toast on—ketchup on toast with some cheese called a pizza back in my day. It’s amazing how things have developed but I don’t think it’s made us better as people.

It hasn’t given people the grit that they need. Interesting thing, Sallies-Adam you think of as a great academic school which it is, but before my era they had this horrible track record of college placement. People were flunking out right and left. So I benefited because the administration and school decided to turn it around. All they did. I don’t even remember anything academic I did there.

All they say everyday was college isn’t going to be easy, it’s Spartan, the food is going to be bad. You’re going to be away from your parents, you’re not going to have no discipline. You’re going to be in a class with 300 people and there’s no textbook. They told you what it was going to be like, so I was prepared for that. I’m getting off track here I’ll shut up.

CAITLIN: It’s okay, what did you do after graduation?

KEVIN: All right, there’s where it got tough.

CAITLIN: Because you graduated in ‘78?


CAITLIN: ‘77, and your first show was in ‘80 right?

KEVIN: Yeah.

CAITLIN: So what did you do those three years?
KEVIN: Well I got to go back to the falling back upon thing to tell that story. I worked construction for a while.

CAITLIN: Okay.

KEVIN: When I first got out of high school and then I went to work at Chrysler. I did two years at Chrysler. Made some real money there. So I was working there when I graduated.

CAITLIN: Did you continue painting?

KEVIN: Yeah, I was painting, but it was kind of hard because you’re in class you have the discipline and the structure of class. Then it was over.

CAITLIN: Yeah.

KEVIN: June ‘77 it was over. I went back to Chrysler, just like I said, you were making a lot of money. I set about to fill up my bank account. My plan was to stay there as long as I could take it.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: It was funny I did the two and a half months of summer. Which I did the previous year then I got a little nuts with it, got into September and everything. I hung in there as long as I could. Now we had a bad recession in those years and the advertising agency business was hit pretty hard. So again I was without my class structure with the painting.

Then I was a little bit lost and staggering for a year or so with that. That’s when I started, not really when I started. So when I bucked down with getting the illustration board and acrylics and going out and finding these spots. Like at the White Clay Creek Park or C&D canal. You can go up on those back routes there and get up in the air some.

I was working on my thing and then simultaneously I’d put my suit on, wing tips and I would make appointments with the ad agencies. You mentioned in your question, or maybe that’s better for another question about the advertising agency.

CAITLIN: Oh yeah that’s another question.

KEVIN: Okay, I’ll defer to that. I was knocking on doors getting interviews, selling my portfolio. Nobody was hiring. It was like the economy was similar to what it is right now.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: People were out of work there was a lot of despair. But what happened was the art directors would say we can’t hire you, we don’t have the volume of business to take somebody on. Have a brochure, can you take this home and do this? So I started taking home projects and
by then I quit Chrysler. I think I made it to October, like I said when the school year started and all that years of being in school and having that technical thing.

That kind of started working on my mind, so I think around October I quit and I started going to visiting these ad agencies. Then after about nine months I started pulling enough work in. I also would go into other ad agencies on site. To be an extra pair of hands and get things done, these people got busy. It started to turn into something. I had money saved up from working at Chrysler so I did like get through a period where I developed this.

So gradually got the graphic design thing slowly building up. Now my wife was a year ahead of me—my first wife was a year ahead of me at the University in the graphic design program. She got a job in an ad agency in the small shop. Then I got the note boss, I got to observe what they were doing. This was all simultaneous she maybe got this job in ‘77,’78. I could do this, I could run a business like this. As long as I didn’t want to have fifty people working for me and do all that kind of thing, but I could carve a living now. So it just developed into that.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: Now I wasn’t painting that much—not enough to make myself-happy or feel like I was making progress. Once I started making a little income from graphic design then I started buckling down on the painting. Then what happened was by1980 I landed a job with a ad agency. I was twenty-five years old. I became an art director. Which they didn’t hand that title out lightly back then. I was young to get it. Retrospective it was meaningless, but I was happy. I felt like I had arrived.

I hated the job but I didn’t last long in it. But, I got to thinking about painting again. Again it got my bank account filled up a little bit. I got so frustrated with the job I said screw this; I got to set about doing my life’s work. Which is becoming a painter. Now, on Main Street, the new art where grass roots is.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: That building was a loft that I found out about. Art students there—artists actually were up there. I got in on it. It was like really, really cool. You had to—that building was very raw and nasty back then. That’s before it was rehabbed and turned into condos. I rented that entire upper floor. It was something you would have if you were a New York Artist. Stipulation was you had to have four people on the lease. You might come across the name Steve Daiber he’s an acquaintance of mine from the university.

CAITLIN: D-a.—

KEVIN: D-a-i-b-e-r. He went to [Inaudible] Academy for graduate school for painting. You may find him in your research. He doesn’t live here anymore. He’s was very avant garde. He was up there with me. Another friend of mine Joe Morrow, who’s the president of the Miller Morrow Group Ad Agency. One of my graphic design buddies. He was up there with us. There
was a woman by the name of Jane Larue, she was from Virginia, and she was a painting student. Grad student at Delaware, she did some interesting work.

There were some other people I’m not remembering. Then I went up there, like I said, I got frustrated with the job. I found this place then I met Vernon Good. I showed him some of my things that I did out in the field and he signed me up for a show. Now I have this commitment for a show and got to come with twenty-twenty five pieces. So this really kicked me off.

Some of my common sense friends said you’re out of your mind. Quitting your job to do this thing, you don’t have any income. That wasn’t really true. I was still dong brochures and stuff. That became the model for what going to be the next fifteen to twenty years of my life due to graphic design. Then my wife also got ticked off at her job and she had enough and she came home to work with me on the business.

I have to give her props, she really supported me. Because would happen from there on, I’d get these shows and I was always working. At that point I was always working and developing things. Building up an inventory and everything. But then, when I would have a show, a point would come say maybe two and a half three months from the date of the show, where okay, I’m halfway done, but now I have to do this full time.

So that was like really, really cool.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: I could just, you know my wife would handle the design business and I would just retire to the studio and paint full time. It was like a dream come true. I’d fill up the roster for the show, have the show and everything. Sold a couple pieces out of Erin’s show. I sold one; I forget this ladies name. She just died recently. Was a big collector. Everything had to be blue. She loved cerulean blue I remember the artist would say that. That was my first significant sale. She collected everybody’s stuff by the Y.

So it [unintelligible] and had a good sale there. Then I was on it and I’d have a show. Kick back, relax, hopefully get a check from some Sallies and everything, set about the graphic design thing. Then for a while it was like entering jury shows which is what we did. You got your name built up and started showing at the Deluxe Luncheonette on Main Street.

CAITLIN: Yeah where was that? Someone mentioned that, I forget where was it located at?

KEVIN: That was…

CAITLIN: Was it next to the State Theatre?

KEVIN: Exactly, exactly. Horrible food. Barry Solan the guy who used to run the video store. His wife worked there when she was young.

CAITLIN: Yeah.
KEVIN: Barry was a funny guy, he said that the last Irish brothers that ran that restaurant they had to have an adversary relationship with food and cooking. But the art professors introduced me to it and they did have the best coffee. They got written up in the Washington Post, they started having all these shows. All us local artists and everything and some of the right people saw. Lo and behold my name’s being dropped in the weight pile.

CAITLIN: That’s cool.

KEVIN: So that was like neat. Things like little magic things like that happened back in the day. So anyway I started getting my name out there to these jury shows. Somewhere along the line I met Nancy Bercaw. It was a friend that hooked us up. When I had that show, the one that mentioned in the Mezzanine Gallery, all these people came out. Nancy showed up and she loved the stuff and we did a hand shake to do a show the next year in ‘86. One of your questions was what was your most memorial show? Well those two shows in a lot of ways were, because I had the big turn out. Complete surprise lot of praise and complements on the thing at the Mezzanine Gallery.

Then I signed up with her, signed a contract for her to represent me and everything. We agreed to have a show September–October of ‘86—and see at that point before I had the show at the Mezzanine Gallery. I had this really productive period started working on the urban scene and the industrial landscapes. Built those paintings up and that’s like I mentioned earlier that’s what made it popular.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: People loved that and the show at the Mezzanine Gallery was largely made after that work and it really put me over the top. In the studio—basically I’m saying is from the end of the Marilyn Good thing up until that Mezzanine show I really buckled down. I don’t want to sound too much like I’m about money. On the art part and personal development and knuckling down on the side and everything that was a very productive period. I broke a lot of new ground with my work. The one I showed you with the gut casting the fishing line.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: I was like stuck with my oil and paper technique and I had a wall I couldn’t get through and I just worked on myself. Got to do better, got to do better. Push yourself and like somehow I got my head in a certain place on this one session to sit down and do the work. I banged most of it out rather quickly and visually used the application of the paint the wall. All the stuff, the expression it all fell into place. I got something here and same with some of these industrial painting and everything.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: One of the things about them is I borrowed from the printing business and graphic design. I color separated those paintings in a manner of speaking. Back them my technique
would be I’m going to work on the sky. Almost like you would mask out a photograph and retouch one part of it. I wouldn’t be concerned with anything under the horizon I’d do the sky in one sitting. Then I’d say I’m going to work with blue and then I would apply all of the blue.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: I’d break them down into these mental exercises.

CAITLIN: Um-hum

KEVIN: How many different ways can you slice and dice this and isolate what the problem is on the aisle to work the thing. Back then I sort of used this graphic design slash printing color separation method to put the picture together. Later on when I go into the, when I started moving away from the industrial stuff and then to the more rural things. Didn’t have anything to do with the subject matter I was just tired of what I was doing. Then by then I had a body of work for four or five years, this is how I was doing it.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: I looked back and said I this is good but I need a change up. My thing has made it look a certain way now I want something else. I’m a colorist at heart. I put a lot of study into that. I studied Seurat extensively and there was a professor at the university who made his whole life work over Seurat. I even mimicked that as a student. I experimented with point oil and things. Then what I would do—you know it’s hard work oil painting. You got to set your palette up; you got to mix all these paints.

I didn’t just all I just need to do flash paint the person mix up from and subdued. I mean I would do that sometimes. I developed this technique; it was like a mental exercise. It’s like being a musician, knowing your instrument and knowing the scales, which I’m terrible at by the way. It’s like knowing how all that projects out. You take like a C-sharp minor, and people who are jazz musicians they know all that stuff.

When you’re playing with someone like that they don’t have to struggle and make a mistake to find the note the way I do. They just—because they have this whole thing ready to access in their head. Well I looked at painting like that too. It was a lot like that. It was also like exercise. You’re either in shape or you’re not in shape. When you’re in shape and you’re a athlete playing basketball, football, what have you. Things happen you know when your body is not fighting you. When you’re painting your mind fights you.

CAITLIN: Uh-hum.

KEVIN: So by that point when we got I started preparing for the ‘86 show at this Asian gallery. I was moving over into these rural scenes. I was doing better with my traveling and my photography and finding new source material. I tapped out the Delaware source material. Flat landscapes, nah tired of that. Electric towers, no I want to do something else so started going out
that way to the west, northwest, into Lancaster County and places like that. So anyway getting back to the palette. What happened was I switched to a totally different technique where I would like—would have my work session.

I would prepare the palette, which is about this big piece of Masonite that was soaked in oil and water. That’s the way Steve Tanis taught us to do. I would make every color in the rainbow. The goal became to push color against color. Color temperature against color temperature and sculpt the image out and have all of these axis on the color wheel active and ready to be accessed on the palate. This would take an hour, the mix up. To mix up these blotches.

CAITLIN: Um-hum

KEVIN: I’d put some white in there and let’s say I was going to work, which I would do. I understood the push pull. This is in your musical notes, scale structure notes. I’ve studied the color wheel and I studied contrast, lack of contrast and color temp and all these different things. I also used gray as a neutralizer and I was able to get the push pull going. This was a lot of work sometimes—this because, like I said it, would take sometimes an hour to set the palette up.

I’d make these splotches of these different colors. I would have like a gold color that would merge into orange. Then I would have a violet—those two things compliment. Then I’d have my light blue, then my darks, then fractured greens into this incredible spectrum of all the green you’d need to do. To landscape I would have of these pots of color let’s call them. I’d mix them all up—take half hour to forty-five minutes depending on what I want to do.

I’d pour a little medium, which was oil and garnish on it. Go get a drink, get a cup of coffee and that medium would mix with that paint and form a certain consistency. Then I would go back and I would start sculpting things out like using the variety of the temperature and the color and you pick the gold I would make against the highlight, you pick out against say, chrome green and all these kind of things. Does that make sense?

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: Then instead of working in this color separation, back to where we just do the side. I would just work with blue or I would with green. I had every color available and my mind was expanded and commanded enough, that I would like literally sculpt the painting out by having all these colors active. I don’t think that many people do this. Because it’s a lot of work and everything. Most people I would tend to think—I hung out with other painters. They would work for a particular spectrum. They’d keep everything to the green side for that work session let’s say.

But I didn’t do that and then that was very liberating. I could do all these different things. I applied most of that technique to the rural stuff that I merged into. So anyway the show in ‘86.

CAITLIN: That was mostly urban landscapes, correct?
KEVIN: It was a mixture.

CAITLIN: Okay.

KEVIN: That was a mixture. I was starting to introduce my Lancaster County stuff in. I started using this technique for color mixing and the composition of the thing. That was very successful. I sold probably twenty pieces out of that.

CAITLIN: Okay.

KEVIN: It was well-attended lots and lots of people came. I can’t remember if I got write ups on that. Media tended to cover shows that were more in a non-profit environment. Like the DCCA or the Mezzanine thing.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: But personally I felt I really hit my stride there. I had, you know, the big splash at the Mezzanine thing. This thing and other things out that. The public relations and just the aspect of having all those people out there was a big thing. Then the pay was the ’86 show at the Station Gallery. We weren’t rich, you know the graphic business, we did ok. My friends who went into business and went into other professions and other things. They had more.

CAITLIN: Um-hum.

KEVIN: Secure jobs, middle class existences and stuff. We were certainly lagging behind that but we were doing ok. My wife and I were happy, my first. My daughter was born in ‘84 my daughter was born in ‘88. Was able to work this with small children and everything. It was school you know, and then I think you’ve seen my resume. I have a bunch of shows in there but those were the two that were—this is from the station gallery one. Would you excuse me a sec?

CAITLIN: Yes.

[Break in Audio]

CAITLIN: Specifically about how you started painting the urban landscapes. Why did you—

KEVIN: Why did I do that?

CAITLIN: Yeah.

KEVIN: When I was a little kid we’d go for a ride and I was always looking out the window. When we would go through a place like Marcus Hook, up what you call the Industrial Highway 291, I was just totally fascinated by that, the oil refineries, the flares, the lights up in the air where they burn off the gases. Bridges, I’ve always loved bridges and industrial things. We’d go down to [inaudible] and you’d get near the refineries [inaudible] and just these things made this huge—I’ve always been a very visual person and these things just made a huge impression
on me. I found them more interesting than just looking at the farm or the hills and things. When I got serious about painting I was looking for something to do. I said well, let’s go with something that made a big impression on me, go with something that I visually love to look at. Other things reinforced it. I mentioned [Inaudible] and those, I forget what they called that school. Clyfford Still had a little bit to do with it. There were urban scenes and you got some great geometric shapes and abstract shapes out of all that, so I decided to, like I said, just go with my instinct?

CAITLIN: Where did you gather inspiration from, just driving around?

KEVIN: Yeah, I started recreating the drives of my childhood, this little kid looking out the window like this. No seatbelts back then, you just slither in [Inaudible] the car and stuff. Like I said, those things just made a huge impression on me. I have this sixth sense, this is really strange. My family didn’t travel much, and you didn’t back then. So my life consisted of driving around New Castle County when there was shopping to be done. I’ll give you an example—once a year—my mother didn’t drive, it was common for women of her generation never to learn how to [Inaudible] a car. My father worked at Chrysler and GM, he was a [Inaudible]. He worked incredible hours. He was never around. My mother’s parents always lived around the block. Every Friday night we would go to the Boothwyn Farmer’s Market, and Saturday we’d go to New Castle.

I hated it, I was imprisoned by this. All my friends were running around the neighborhood [Inaudible] get in the car and go down to the farmer’s market. There were other children that were trapped in the thing and I would play with these kids. I had farmer’s market friends. Once a year we would go to Downingtown, there’s a big farmer’s market up there back then. We would drive through the Brandywine Valley up that way. Like I said, I’d be looking out the window. To this day I can feel the curvature of the landscape. If I drive— inadvertently drive into a place that I’ve only been in once when I was five or six years old, I can feel the land and I get this *deja vu* thing happening. It’s like I have a strange instinctual relationship to this. I just went around looking for these places. I photographed them.

CAITLIN: Yeah, so would you describe the process? So you would visit the site, take a photograph then start painting. Would you visit the site again?

KEVIN: Generally not. What I would do would be I’d select a day. The day would select itself because of the atmosphere, because you had a particular type of clean air, a particular type of light. I later figured out these things occurred certain times of the year. I would sometimes take the day off. I would get the camera. I used an Olympus LM1, I used—I [Inaudible] in the using, I think it was Kodacolor Gold which was a print film. It had a nice warm vivid color. I would go and hunt these things down. Sometimes I’d do something specific. I’d go to Delaware City and I’d say I’m going to do the Oil [Inaudible], and I’d take a picture of that giant smokestack down there, which I’ve painted many times with a [Inaudible] Point Bridge. I would do specific trips just to do that.

Other times, mostly when I got into the rural things, which [Inaudible] away then it would be an all-day trip. Sometimes I would go and stay overnight for two or three days. I would go to the
Grand Canyon or Pennsylvania, I discovered that place in the early ‘90’s, that would be like an overnight—I would take six, seven roles of 36 [Inaudible] film, do all that. The industrial things, they were generally closer and more accessible. Do you know what the [Inaudible] is, in the evening when the sun [Inaudible] and everything turns violet and gold and everything?

I like to photograph under those conditions. The middle of the day is terrible for photography generally. I would go visit these sites and I would racket and take my exposures and everything. Then I would get the film developed and I’d look at the print. I would study it and sometimes I’d get an enlargement, then I’d get my head in the back and I’d say I would try to reconcile what I saw because the camera never tells the truth. I get this thing going on where I would look at this and like I said, I would sort of—I hate to use the hippy talk, I get my head into it, but that’s essentially what I would do, I would get into a zone and I would just start painting. Now I would cheat sometimes and I’d shoot slide film and on some paintings I would project that up on the canvas and then I would block that in and then I’d start filing in.

I did that a lot during that color separation phase too. I did that with a lot of the industrial landscapes. Then to do a change-up, I abandoned that. I decided to make the pictures too rigid, too photo-realistic, and then I just decided that the natural mistakes that I was going to make added something to the painting that it needed. So when you’re blocking it out you have some building over here, then you have the street, then you have the—you have all the angles. When you’re going to hold this in your hand and draw that, you’re going to make some mistakes. That’s on purpose. That’s what gives it its charm, punkiness and everything.

CAITLIN: Did you paint the paintings exactly as the photograph showed or did you put a spin on it? Did you add figures, change colors, or—?

KEVIN: Yeah, I—no, I didn’t make them exactly like the photograph. I—again I would look at it like getting in the zone mentally and then I would let that take me [Inaudible]. That’s another thing too. I always thought painting was like riding a wild horse. You don’t have—that’s another thing that people that are fans and amateurs don’t understand, you don’t have total control over this. You can, I suppose, but—I’m not the greatest painter in the world. I knew where my talent level was and what my ability to control things was, because I’m always comparing myself to other people. I’m a competitive person, not in a negative way, but even as a small child I was aware of the rate that people learned from the minute I set foot in school, and where my place in the world was with all of that.

Anyway, I was—I would rip out on these things. Again, using music terminology I would have the photograph and I would just let that take me on the path. Like I said, I wasn’t that rigid in my style, I just went in the direction that it took me. Like improvisational music—you go see jazz musicians and people who are truly gifted just make something out of thin air, they follow half where that takes. It’s not about classical music or exact replication of what was written.

CAITLIN: You mentioned that traditionalists said your work was vulgar and ugly. How did you feel when they said that? Were you happy that you were creating controversy?
KEVIN: Yeah, I mean there was a certain amount of satisfaction to that, shake things up a little bit. When I was young I thought I was smarter than everybody else. It confirmed their old-fashionedness and ignorance. I didn’t get too much into any of that, I just shook it off. You have to have thin skin if you’re going to do this. I mean you’re putting yourself out there, like any other person—politician, movie actor, writer, athlete, they’re all going to get criticized. Not that I ever got [Inaudible] at the top, it would just be every now and then. Some of this stuff was [Inaudible] and I had some relatives. I won’t name any names, but I had some people that weren’t particular fans of what I was doing. They were [Inaudible] parental type of thing. It’s unusual for me to get a phone call. Business doesn’t work on the telephone anymore. That was a little bit worse than some stranger saying this is [Inaudible] subject matter. I don’t know—you want your family and the people who have a vested interest in you being successful, you don’t want them to be criticizing you.

CAITLIN: How did you get involved in Art on the Town?

KEVIN: Remind me what that is.

CAITLIN: Various galleries throughout Wilmington on Fridays would have—

KEVIN: Do you mean as somebody that exhibited, or just as fan?

CAITLIN: As someone who exhibited. Or do you not really remember? It’s okay if you don’t remember.

KEVIN: That’s a long—that’s fuzzy—I mean I was in shows, and the openings were always [Inaudible]. It wasn’t like strategically I sat in my office and said I [Inaudible] or anything like that. I mean that was just the natural outcome of things. I went out on it when I wasn’t showing to see my various acquaintances, which unfortunately I can’t remember names of anyone.

CAITLIN: That’s okay. I know that you were selected to show at the Helio Gallery in New York City. Could you talk about that?

KEVIN: Sure. Memory’s a little vague there, and not exactly complimentary. That guy was running a vanity gallery in my opinion. I think I—I don’t even know if I should go here—I think I upset some of my colleagues because I was in a show there, I don’t remember much about it. I remember meeting the guy when he came down here, and I remember going up there to deliver my work. He was on St. Mark’s place on the east side; you could see the river down the street. That was a strange thing. Let me say this about that, I’m a business man more so than other artists because of my graphic design [Inaudible]. I don’t know what that guy—I can’t remember if he was running shows that weren’t vanity shows. You know what that means right, vanity publishing, vanity gallery. That’s when somebody’s basically charging you to do the work and not putting any money up and not taking any risk. I sort of saw through this, I think John Gatti was involved.

CAITLIN: He was.
KEVIN: He might not remember this this way, but I saw potential that we could all be exploited. I asked the guy certain questions when I met him. He was going to charge everybody this fee to be in the show and he was—Delaware got hot. See here’s what happened, Delaware sort of got hot, got this reputation and I think John had something to do with finding this guy which was a great thing for him to do and stuff. I don’t know how he found us or any of us found him, but he talked up a good game and he wanted to have a group show of some of the people that were hot or [Inaudible] around here. I remember there was Sally Cooper Marsh was involved, and John was involved, and there were some others that are slipping my memory, but I did the math. When I went up and met the guy I said, “What’s your rent here?” I slipped that in. I got the answer—it just happened to be what he was going to collect from all of us.

Do you know what that means? That guy wasn’t going to work that month. He had a show, he had filler, he had his rent paid. Now, what’s human nature? You’re not going to hustle. I just didn’t trust the guy. I took this business view of it and it upset people. I shouldn’t be saying any of this, but I will. One of the other artists, and this was a very, this was a strange thing to say to me. It was at once flattering, but they were frustrated with me. They said, “We need you to make this work. If you’re not on the team, you’re what holds this—” I don’t know why they said this [Inaudible] they really wanted me to be in on it. They said, we need you to make this work. One of the artists said, you’re turning down a big thing here. You’re going to be like Pete Best, the guy that had Ringo’s job before Ringo. Pete Best walked away from the Beatles, right? One of the other artists said, “You’re going to be the Pete Best of this thing.”

We all did our show there, and I don’t think anything came of it. I wouldn’t file it. Maybe John or one of the other artists had success with this guy, but I’ve been around the block a couple times, I was used to going in with clients and negotiating things. Again, I made some money in both my careers, but I didn’t make a lot of money. I was real aware. Well I can’t be sinking time and resources into something that I sense is going to be a dead end. When I would share with Nancy—at the station gallery and the other commercial galleries here, part of the deal, when you’re a real artist they are putting some of their money up to sell you. They are taking a risk on you. You take a risk, you help her pay that, but when you’re—there were some exploitative things going on in the art world I did not agree with.

For instance, charging people to be in [Inaudible] shows and everything. If you start looking at things from a business perspective, how do you know that such and such a group doing this [Inaudible] show—some of them were collecting a lot of money. There were some that I ran the numbers on. They were money-making exercises for these organizations to some extent. Then you would look at—there were some writings going around in the art world and the theater world, I guess it’s charging for an audition. If you moved this over to the music world or the theater or performing arts world, it’s charging people to audition as an end in itself, as an income stream for the organization doing it. Part of the old auto worker and union guy and having rules in the workplace and not only is it just union, I mean in the graphic design world I work in now, you have to protect your house.
You have to protect your income and the way that you make your income. You have to have logical thought processes. Even now running my graphic design business, I get people asking me, “How do you decide what to charge and what do you charge for this, that, and the other.” There has to be logic. You can’t tell a client, I’m just charging you something because I feel like it. You have to have a rationale that can stand up to examination and everything. I’m just sort of into that in a self-protective way in both graphic design and fine art. If there’s no money in it for anybody, it’s going to cease to exist, so you have to recognize economic realities. So the Helio thing was sort of strange in that regard. I sort of smelled something I wasn’t comfortable with and you have to understand that painting is a speculative business.

I would get asked to do a show, and like I [inaudible] to you earlier, that would be an awful lot of work. Some of these paintings have over 100 hours in them; some of them have two or three. As a median, I would say they all have 25 to 35. You can imagine how much time I’m putting in in the basement. Again, I have my personal ego gratification, I’m perfecting the art of doing this, and I was dead, dead serious about that, but I also had children and was a family man to a certain extent. I needed to have some kind of payoff on this. Like I said, it’s a speculative business and so if somebody’s going to ask me to have a show, and I provide them with [inaudible] paintings and hundreds of hours’ worth of work, they need to put some skin in the game for that too. I can’t just do that on blind faith.

CAITLIN: My next question, you had a panel discussion at the Delaware Museum, do you remember what that was about?

KEVIN: Not that much. I have vague memories of that. It was neat. Mary Putnam was on that. We didn’t socialize, but we became friends, buddies. I was [inaudible] in the [inaudible] Gallery in Philadelphia at one point. She was with them. There was also a gallery up in Philly called the Butcher-Moore Gallery. It was Noelle Butcher and this guy Charlie Moore. I got in with them briefly in the early ‘80’s and Mary was showing there. Mary was doing scenes of Canton Sussex County. She loved the lay of the land down there.

I used to joke with her, “We drive by one another,” because she’s a Pennsylvanian and stuff and I’d go into Pennsylvania for my source material, she’d come down here. She was a nice lady. She was on the panel, right? I think we got up and we talked about our various styles and things like that. I was happy to be asked, that was pretty cool to be taken seriously enough that the museum would ask me to do something like that. I felt stroked and complimented and stuff, it was really neat, but I can’t say much about it, [inaudible] we talked about. I think I spoke extemporaneously to a large extent.

CAITLIN: What prompted your transition from painting to photography? You said you don’t paint anymore, correct?

KEVIN: Well, economics basically.

CAITLIN: Your last show was what—I forget what year.
KEVIN: ‘04.

CAITLIN: ‘04.

KEVIN: Yeah. Interesting story about how that came about. I have to give a little personal history on this. I got divorced; things didn’t work anymore for the relationship or for business thing and stuff. I was still hitting it hard when I lived at home with my wife. I had the studio running, I had a basement room, it had this exhaust fan in it. I spent a lot of time down there over the years. These later paintings, I finished that one up, that big one with the Brandywine Park and all that I did towards the end. I was trying to produce bigger work. Anyway, like I said, the market dried up. I had a show in ‘91 or ‘92 at the station gallery. Sales-wise it flopped. I think I sold one painting. That didn’t cover the cost of the invitation and the cheese and crackers and stuff. Again, I’ve got small children. I’ve got responsibilities and stuff.

That hit me kind of hard. My star had gone down. I could sense it happening and stuff. Then in ‘96 my wife and I split up. I moved to this farm up on [Inaudible] and ran it. I lived there six years. I had all the best intentions of picking up the baton and competing in painting. For whatever reason I never got—and this was perfect for me, I had this retreat. You couldn’t see another house for—house was on the hill [Inaudible] we couldn’t see another home. We couldn’t see another human being. I was renting 250 acres. That’s what the landlord, that’s what we entered, this land and trust, this rural land. I lived in a building that was started in 1720 and the front end was built in 1850. It was the home of Bookings that started the Bookings institute, right up the road here.

It was rough though, let me tell you. The place was cold as hell. The windows were—the original windows were from 1850. I had a dirt basement, dirt floor that had a heater on it that sucked in all this filthy dirt up and I was sick all the time. It was a three bedroom colonial house, but the house is—[Inaudible] 80% of the walls were this thick. So you see this big house but it’s like a glass that’s so thick. It looks like a 12 ounce glass but then it only holds six ounces. It’s not that big in there. I never established a studio where I was comfortable. I never got my groove back. I did do some pieces. I would sit out there with my pastels and I did crank out some nice pieces.

So, I spent six years there, and then in ‘02 I bought a house in Newark. My kids were at Newark High, I needed to be closer. I got more serious about being a parent. It’s ironic, you split up with your wife, and then you double down and you’re a better parent. That’s necessity and everything. It’s the way it had to be. I got into coaching which was an ambition that I had from the time I was in high school and was a mediocre JV football player. I wanted to have a son and a daughter and teach my son to play football and teach my daughter to play basketball and be involved and all that. That came in and—also too, the year I split up with my wife I was working at Howard High School so I had this cushion, but the job only lasted a year. I had never intended to get back into the graphic design business, I had it with it.

There are elements of it that are pretty rough. I had sort of had it with it. When I got laid off from Howard I had to—here I’m living on my own, I’m divorced, I’ve got child support payments to make, I’ve got to buckle down on being a dad and everything. Like I said, the speculative nature
of the painting, that just undermined it all, it just didn’t fit anymore. I did do some work and put out some work that I was pretty happy with. Was this question about going from painting to photography?

CAITLIN: Photography.

KEVIN: So, interesting thing too, I was the photography teacher at Howard. For a year I had access to all the equipment. This was pre-digital, ‘96. I mean the digital camera took—it was like half a megapixel [Inaudible] a useless picture. Then the camera that I really knew was my wife’s, it stayed with her. Then my other cameras broke. Then I didn’t have access to the Howard camera. I didn’t have a camera for a long, long time. Then this just evolved where here I did this thing with this art that was 50 to 75% of my life, of my work life and my consciousness in all of this and things have changed and it wasn’t a viable thing to do because of all these reasons. I had to be a serious father; I had to be serious about graphic design.

Looking back, the painting thing kept me from being a serious art director and designer and business person as I should have been. It was unsustainable. You have this, but you’ve done all this. I tuned my entire life to this and here it’s just puff. So I met my present wife, Amy in ‘97 and we dated a long time. We decided to get married. My son was the youngest of our four children; he graduated from high school in ‘06. We got married. In ‘07 we went to Ireland for our honeymoon. We postponed it a year. My grandfather came from Donegal. So I said to Amy, she grew up traveling, but I didn’t. She had to convert me. I said, “I’m not going to Ireland unless I have a real camera.” I bought a Nikon D80, which is still what I use, and just started slowly learning the craft with that.

I’ve been using Mac’s since 1988. I’ve been using computers and technology and digital imaging since then, but getting into the photography end is completely different, dealing with images and photographs and stuff. Took—I actually had to read, which I resent. I had to buy books and [Inaudible] and stuff. It gets something in me. It’s the one way that I can preserve what I spent all those years doing. I had to make this rational, adult decision to leave this lifetime avocation behind and then I discovered—thank God she’s patient with me. It’s sort of a bargain when you have—she came from a travelling family, I didn’t, the photography’s a hook to get me out. I just started falling in love with it. Once I mastered the camera and the tool and discovered what can be done with this.

You’ve heard of raw photography? Raw is a file format. You shoot that instead of a jpeg. You can set good [Inaudible] with DSLR to either do a jpeg of various qualities, [Inaudible] you do a raw. The raw is—I don’t want to get too technical, but it’s either a 12 bit or 16 bit file. It’s not 8 bit. It has all this extra data in there. It gives you the ability to adjust the color and the contrast and the sharpness. It’s better than working with Photoshop. It’s hard to explain It’s part of Photoshop, but it’s a different technique that works with this particular file format. It’s wonderful. You can literally paint with your digital image.

The things that I was looking for when I would go out to do the photography that I wanted to paint, in addition to these things I’ve talked about, about using the color and manipulating the
process and all of that as a form of creativity, what you’re really doing, like when you go out there and you study the impressionists, you study any of the landscape artists, you study Akins, anybody—what are they doing? They’re painting light. They’re painting dark and light. [Inaudible] all those kinds of things, color saturation and all of that. Painting on the technical end and manipulating all those things was manipulating that. I want to catch that goal from the [Inaudible] light.

I want to catch that aquaness that’s off in the distance. With raw photography you can either enhance that or suppress it and bring it out and everything. Also, it’s funny I started photography in college and have been using cameras all my life, but I’ve resisted being a technical geek with it. I just basically did the same thing as a way to maintain some kind of purity. I used to think—which a lot of people do—to be a great photographer you go out in the field, you get your settings right, you capture the image, and bam that’s it. You print that puppy out, especially back in the days when it was filmed, you either got a good picture or you don’t. I only thought that because I didn’t know what I was talking about.

When I started studying this raw photography and I got this technical book about it, the author was a huge, huge fan of Ansel Adams. I never studied these people. The Ansel Adams would work for two months to make one print. All the things that Photoshop does for photography, basically Ansel Adams invented these techniques that he used in the dark room. They make a big deal about the zone system. He put that stuff on the backpack and went out in the mountains of California. That’s all great stuff, and he got good exposures obviously, but the real magic was the manipulation. I never knew that. I should have because I should have studied them when I was young. I’m not particularly ashamed to manipulate the photos, just don’t want to go too far.

I have a buddy, Scott Hewitt, he’s a commercial photographer. Every now and then we get together. We don’t get together, we talk on the phone and exchange some emails and stuff. I know him from the advertising business. He’s helping me quite a lot with this technical stuff. He says, “Don’t overcook the picture.” You can see when they’re overcooked. I really like it. I mean, we now have a methodology. My wife and I are—I’m 57, she’s a couple of years younger than me. Our children are established adults. All four of them have real jobs; they have health insurance, so our businesses are doing well so we’re trying to enjoy what’s left of life.

We’re going to do one expensive vacation that requires air travel per year, and then we have this condo that we picked up in the Shenandoah Mountains. Basically I just plan on doing travel/landscape photography, going out and capturing these things because I get off on it, I like experiencing different parts of the country or another country like Ireland. We go around, talk to people, get into the culture there and see what it’s all about. Then come back with sometimes a thousand pictures. I went to Montana; did you look at that stuff?

CAITLIN: Mm-hmm.

KEVIN: Yeah, that was a dream of a lifetime. I saw that road eight years ago in modern marvels. I looked at that on TV and it looked like the most intimidating thing I could possibly do. I’ve got to go there and drive on that road. It’s great. It opens your mind and like I said, visiting other
parts of the country and seeing how people live and chatting people up and then coming back with these pictures. I got back from Montana, I’ve got to set everything up with my business, I can’t run off when I’m busy. That meant that when I came back I didn’t have any work.

That was cool because I was going to have work in a month and I spent the whole first month processing those pictures. I would go in my room and put on one of my favorite albums and just look at those pictures and get in the zone and push-pull all that stuff. I just can’t believe I’ve been there and seen that. There was 115 here, we were hiking in the snow, 8,000 feet elevation, pretty cool. You go to somewhere—we were in Death Valley, people really were cowboys out there. You leave Las Vegas and you get out in the country, you go northwest and you go past Ellis Air Force Base which is practically 15, 20 percent of that [Inaudible] part of Nevada.

You go out there and man you see some towns and you see people live different. They live in trailers; they really are outdoors people, cowboys, and people that scratch their living out of the land like people did in the past. You see some of that. Montana’s quite a place. [Inaudible] the fourth biggest state and there aren’t even a million people there. Yeah, it’s very sparse. I just love all that. See my dad was a war vet and he was in some nasty stuff, and if you watch Band of Brothers or any of these movies, there’s a cliché in there where this [Inaudible] say, “If I live through this, I’m going back home and getting on my patch of land and not budging.”

My old man was in continuous combat from say July 17, 1944 until the day Hitler shot himself. Then he came back here and they were going to send him to invade Japan. [Inaudible] expected to sacrifice a million and a half people in the first month. In fact the Japan thing was so nasty; the United States had a policy, never use chemical weapons like nerve gas and things like that. They figured we had no choice if we had to land—set foot on [Inaudible] in Japan. If that had happened, I wouldn’t be here. My dad was down state in Sussex guarding German prisoners in May and June of ‘45. So I’m a fan of the atomic bomb. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for that and everything.

That’s a harsh thing to say, and that’s a controversial thing, but that’s because people don’t understand that if that didn’t come along, instead of 150,000 people dying, you’re going to have 15, 20, 25 million deaths—additional deaths on the war that had already cost 60 million lives. Japanese had a 2 million man army in China living off the land. They would have to be brought to heel. Just think of what that would have cost. Think of all the people that wouldn’t be here and stuff. I say that lightly when I say I’m a fan of the bomb and everything. Anyway, my whole point in going down that road was that when you’re a child of a guy that was [Inaudible], that’s like [Inaudible] wildwood for one week in the 60’s.

My wife grew up in a different environment. She’s a New Yorker; her father was a travel agent. It’s good to get out. I’ve been [Inaudible], I admit it. I’ve got a decent amount of education for a guy of my generation and period of time. I was lucky enough to do some things with the painting and it wasn’t a total waste of time. I didn’t starve my family; I didn’t flog a dead horse with it. It’s nice to—this phase now. I just wish there was some money it. The nice thing about the photography, it’s like music—practice your guitar, notes disappear in the air, it doesn’t pollute
anything, nothing is broke, you didn’t really waste any time, it’s not a commitment for—painting is just such a huge, huge commitment of time to do it right. I had my thing with it, and photography’s a nice substitute.

CAITLIN: Nice, I just had—oh, sorry.

KEVIN: I don’t know anything about the business, so it’s obvious from talking to me that I learned the art business, I learned the steps you had to take to get known, to make money, to do these things. I don’t know how you do that in photography. I never paid attention to it when I was doing the simultaneous thing in the art world. I scratch around on the internet but I don’t see anything real satisfactory. In fact one of my biggest fears is when somebody who’s a little bit younger than me has a kid in high school, “Oh you’re a professional artist.” For instance I was up—I went up to [Inaudible] Creek in northern Pennsylvania, stayed at this bed and breakfast and the lady who was the waitress, a little bit younger than me, she said, “What brings you up here?” I said, “I’m a photographer, I’m photographing the valley and the canyon and everything.” “Oh, my daughter’s a junior in high school and she wants to be a professional photographer. Can you talk to me about it?” I’m polite and everything, but in reality I’m just, “Oh my God let this not come to me.”

I don’t want to dash anybody’s dreams but there’s no money in that business anymore. Not that I can see. Maybe I shouldn’t say it, I don’t [Inaudible] I don’t know who any of the younger artists are. I don’t even know if there are any around here. I assume there has to be. We had conditions back in my day that allowed you to scratch out a little bit of money from it. The internet’s caused this great leveling of everything. It’s caused a leveling in the graphic design and what I call professional photographer business, like my friend Scott Hewitt. I’m from the advertising business. A photographer to me is a studio that has top-shelf equipment, lights, studio; you can bring a vehicle in, some large object. Guys that can complete—and women—that can complete an assignment.

That’s what I came up in in the advertising business. A widget would have to be photographed, or you’re selling, I don’t know, something environmental like a nursing home, or you’re selling your business and you hire a shooter that can come in and get in and out of there and come up with a professional photograph that you can print. It’s a beautiful thing. People like that—again it’s my prejudice. They’re photographers. Somebody that’s like me, that goes around a shoots pictures for pleasure, and self-publishes, again, back to the vanity publishing thing. Yeah, you’re a photographer, but that’s not real, that’s not shooting for National Geographic or any of the big media things. Do you know what I mean? There has to be something else to it besides self-fulfillment and stuff. I’m cautious about saying, “I’m a photographer,” but I enjoy it and my friends enjoy it and—I do it for them. It doesn’t really cost me anything.

CAITLIN: That’s good. I just have one more question. Do you think Wilmington has its own—or had I guess, its own art scene compared to Philadelphia and New York City back when you were showing?
KEVIN: Yeah, obviously small, but we were [Inaudible] unto ourselves, and there was economy there. There was art being bought and sold. It supported a lot of artists, some of which made some money, some of which didn’t, or maybe very little but they were diligent and everybody participated. It was nice. The art loops were a pretty big thing, the art on the [Inaudible]. We touched on the music thing that seemed to prosper. I think we had a nice thing going on. Again, obviously not like the big city, but it was pretty cool.

CAITLIN: Well thank you so much. You gave tons of information, it was great.

[End of Audio]
Duration: 45 minutes