Oral history interview with Wesley Memeger, November 12, 2012

Memeger, Wesley
Painter and chemist

Size: Transcript: 15 pages.

Format of recording: Originally recorded as digital wav file. Duration is 78 min.

Collection Summary: An interview of Wesley Memeger conducted November 12, 2012 by Margaret Winslow for the Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives of the Delaware Art Museum.

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

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

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MARGARET: Here we go. So this is Margaret Winslow, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Arts at the Delaware Art Museum, interviewing Wesley Memeger at his home on Monday, November 12th, 2012. Okay so that was kind of the official, getting that out of the way and then it’s nice to just keep it an informal conversation.

So Wes, today we’re going to talk—start by talking about the contemporary art scene in Wilmington in the 1970 and ‘80s. And I thought it might be best to start by asking you when you actually arrived in Delaware.

WESLEY: It was November 1965 and came here from Yonkers, New York. I had been in graduate school at Adelphi University in Long Island for five years in chemistry. And I finished and started working on a PhD and had located a job here in Wilmington in 1964. And I finished up work in 1965 and then we came here.

MARGARET: Okay. Okay and so obviously five years before that time period that we’ll be focusing on for the exhibition but describe what the art scene was like in Wilmington when you arrived and then we’ll talk specifically about how things changed in the 1970s.

WESLEY: When we came here we didn’t get the impression that there was much going on. There was quite a bit on the music scene. There was jazz, there were jazz clubs. But with respect to art there was the University of Delaware and then there was the Delaware Art Museum. And
shortly after we came there were some [inaudible] by various people such as Susan Isaacs to contemporary art. And she had a gallery downtown, I forget the name of it but she has some level of success but it was tough going. That’s just an opinion.

And I think that [inaudible]. And I think that occurred somewhere in the ‘70s. I think she was involved in the exploration for the DCCA officially opened in 1979 [inaudible]. But I didn’t think there was much of an art scene here in Delaware. We came down from New York and [inaudible].

MARGARET: Right, and so what did you—so if you were here in ‘65—I’m just kind of thinking. So Grace McFarren opened her gallery space in the early 1970s.

WESLEY: That’s correct.

MARGARET: Correct. And so did it seem like there was some sort of shift in the beginning of the 1970s? Do you have any thoughts on what may have kind of sparked a new commitment to contemporary art with the establishment of some of those first galleries, such as her gallery or Fifth Street or Susan Isaac’s gallery as well?

WESLEY: Well I think it was some sort of move towards abstraction. And it is not clear how that came about but there were people such as [inaudible] and others who had begun to make abstract work for paintings and sculptures. And a lot of it just plain irritated the local people. We had a critic here. His name was Bill [Frank] his last name is slipping my mind but he used to write about artists in the early ‘70s.

And as far as he was concerned, a lot of what was being done was not art at all. I think he was basing his comments on what he had been seeing at places like the Delaware Art Museum, work that he could relate to better; work that was representational. And so then you had these people coming and making what was considered to be strange shapes; strange forms; use of color that he was simply not used to. And he simply didn’t understand it.

And then as Grace McFarren got started on what was [inaudible] art gallery. And that was actually right before the Delaware Art Museum became involved in the same kind of activity. Grace would reach out to the artists who were sort of making abstract [inaudible] bunch of things. Her first consideration was about whether the artist had something to say in terms of composition, presentation, or abstraction. It didn’t really matter if she was interested in whether or not war had an impact on people who were renting—potential customers.

At about that time there was also some—University of Delaware had several of their artists who were actually making art. And they would have openings down at the University and some of the work, frankly I think, was beginning to push the envelope. It was breaking [inaudible] the scene if you will. I am thinking specifically people like Joe Moss.

[End of Audio]
[Audio resumes]
MARGARET: Continue, I apologize. So we were—

WESLEY: We were just talking about Victor Spinski. There was also an artist at the university, Norm Sasowsky. He was an amazing painter who never really found his way into the circle of the Wilmington arts scene, but nevertheless was, and is, considered to be a very fine painter.

MARGARET: How long was he at the university? Do you remember?

WESLEY: He spent at least 25–30 years. He was there for a long time. He came in from New York.

MARGARET: Before—no, after Julio?

WESLEY: They overlapped.

MARGARET: Okay, it’s interesting because I know his work somewhat. In starting this research project, his name is not mentioned very often and maybe because he wasn’t as actively involved in Wilmington.

WESLEY: He’s a very private artist. He’s was mainly known for his work on Marsh. He was kind of the keeper of Marsh’s estate. He was very, very involved in this settlement of Marsh’s estate, and working with Marsh’s [inaudible]. He has probably one of the best websites I’ve seen that deals with following one’s career as an artist. He has his career laid out in decades and I think the site is current. At least the last couple years there was some [inaudible].

MARGARET: Is he still in the area?

WESLEY: He still lives in Newark.

WESLEY: Oh, interesting. Does he come out to openings?

MARGARET: Probably [inaudible].

WESLEY: So I should maybe plan to visit him, or find a way to visit him.

MARGARET: Yeah, I would say. I think you’ll find he’s a fascinating individual. He’s retiring somewhat, but has a lot to say about art. His art making covers a wide range of techniques: paints, makes prints, [inaudible] print, all kinds of things. Works with oils, work with watercolor, works with acrylics; a very wide range. He and Joe Moss were at the university at the same time. The crowd at the university was really quite close at one period. There was Joe Moss, Norm Sasowsky, Dan Teis. They used to get together for building one another up. They’d have parties to kind of boost one another. I think they were searching for appreciation, really.

I think the art scene here in Wilmington was never—this is just an opinion—[inaudible] groups and the university crowd never really meshed with the Wilmington group of artists, if you will. Even with the founding of DCCA, I don’t believe that the university crowd came all that closely involved with the DCCA, although there were individual artists who would show at the DCCA
such as Moss and Dan Teis and Sasowsky every now and then. And [inaudible]. They would come in and they would show their work every now and then.

But I never got the impression that there was a true integration of artists in this general area. I think that some of it probably had to do with the sense that the university people were being academic, I’m not sure.

MARGARET: What about artists who were outside of the Wilmington scene but also outside of the university of Delaware crowd? I’m thinking of artists like Mitch Lyons, Margo Allman. I guess many of them—Pennsylvania, West Grove areas. It’s interesting in that it seems like in some cases they have kind of engaged with the University of Delaware crowd, in some cases with Wilmington; kind of this in-between crowd.

And I’m always curious, not that I am attempting to categorize them—but in thinking about how they were engaging and what communities they were engaging with in the ‘70s and in the ‘80s. I know that Mitch has told me of some of his activities in downtown Wilmington creating huge coil pots and I know of course that Margo exhibited with the art museum. But it’s interesting that there is this group of artists that are kind of outside these two more specifically defined crowds.

WESLEY: Well I think some of it had to do with people going their own way. Mitch, for example, he was first a potter, I think. At some point he made this discovery that you could transfer pigments to surfaces via canvas or on paper. I think the first observation was that he was fiddling around with pots and he found that some of his pigments were transferred to newspaper, or maybe it was print, just loose print. That observation then changed his whole direction about art making. He became very much interested in making prints based on the transfer of pigments from clay over to surfaces and he eventually found a surface that was particularly useful to him, I think it was called a satara, a polyester nonwoven material that accepts pigments readily from clay transfer.

And so he’s Been interested in that process for years now. As a matter of fact, when you talk to Mitch about his art making, he doesn’t appear to be all that much interested in the subject of his art making as much as he is the process. I also found that curious because I think some of his images, some of his compositions, are quite excellent. But I don’t think that he has paid, in the past, much attention to that. I think just recently he’s begun to pay a little bit more attention to the fact that the images that he makes—are saying something about him, about his life and about—we have one work by Mitch called The Balloon Ride.

He and Bea, apparently were out in the countryside one day and I think Mitch had promised Bea a balloon ride, [inaudible] the Greenville area. So when Bea was off and flying in this balloon, he was inspired to make a print. You could see the joy in the thing, there was red balloon and it had a tail on it, and it was whipping and stirring and it was—in a sense, it represented what to him was a glorious day. But in general, his work was more abstract, more transfer of anything that he found in his presence, in his working space, to just make different shapes on canvas. It was kind of a spontaneous making of art.
He did not, I don’t think, pay much attention to the composition of work that resulted. He was just playing. Many artists make work just by playing around. But I think in his case he was more divorced from the subject matter of his art making. He was interested in just how well things would be transferred, how well the process had been. As opposed to someone like say Dan Teis, who paid a lot of attention to design of his images. For some reason, I think of those two artists in the same breath. It’s not clear to me why. I guess the thing that I see, which is a common element, is the richness of surface. Sometimes Dan’s work tended to go right up to the edge in terms of chaos, whereas Mitch would just let it fly and didn’t care because he was interested in, in my opinion, in the process. Now you’ve got such a range of people who are working in this area who you can’t really pin them down, and they move rapidly from one area to the next.

Margo Allman was one of them, who was basically—I think her first work was certainly aimed at painting, having studied with Hans Hofmann. But shortly thereafter I think she became very much interested in sculpture. It’s not clear how that happened. I think her sculptures amount for a kind of transfer of some of her emotions in a way that paint did not. I think mainly it had to do that her sculpture was kind of ahead of her painting at one point, and so she focused in on sculpting. Also I think she had kind of a muscularity in her work and I think the sculpture allowed for what she felt at the time was a better use of her talent. And if you look at some of her work, it’s extremely expressive; beautiful forms and shapes and volumes and cavities and so forth and so on. Wood-ends and marble and fabric, a whole range of things.

MARGARET: Well I want to go back to Grace McFarren. Tell me a little bit about her, I know you studied with her. Tell me a little bit more about that relationship, a little bit more about her gallery. I know it was in the old Wanamaker building on Augustine Cut-off. Do you know how she had access to the space, how long she was there?

WESLEY: Well she approached him. I think it was about 1970. She approached Wanamaker’s—she had come from Cleveland with her husband. She had been at The Cleveland Institute, that’s where she studied. At that point she had a passion for abstraction. She came to Wilmington and discovered that she was not in the area where people particularly appreciated abstraction. So she said, well, I’ll just move toward realism, and she did.

MARGARET: In her own work?

WESLEY: In her own work. She’s a very good realist painter. A wide range of oil and water colors, so forth so on. I think she had a need to build community and so she had this idea that one way to do it was represent other artists somehow. So she approached Wanamaker for a rental space with the idea of bringing in artists who were working in Delaware Valley. I use Delaware Valley in a loose sense: people from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia. She would bring in their works to be rented, and then subsequently bought or rented on a longer-term basis and then purchased or just returned.

What she found was that Wanamaker was very, very supportive and instead of renting her the space, they simply provided the space at no charge. This occurred over the period of a little over 20 years. So on a monthly basis she provided a space for artists to either bring in their work or she would go out and collect work from artists. As far down as Torpedo Factory outside of—
MARGARET: Oh, outside of—and those were monthly exhibitions?

WESLEY: Basically she would bring the work and she would arrange it in a way where you could have a good view of the work. It was almost laid out in a gallery since but there was a lot more than you could generally accommodate in a regular gallery. I think that was somewhere around 1970s, but the first time I met her was in 1972. What happened was that there was a research supervisor of mine who had gone over and rented a painting. The painting was called Charlotte Amalie, it’s an island down in the Caribbean. This painting was the painting of a market scene, and it was called Charlotte Amalie.

I liked it. So Alex, the administrator, had this work in his office, and I said tell me about that work. He said, “Well I rented this from Grace McFarren at the [inaudible] art gallery in Wilmington.” I said “Really?” He said, “Well it’s open every month and you can go there and look around. So next month I’m going to—” That’s where I rented my first painting. It happened to be the one that had seen in his office. And eventually I bought it. The painting was by Harriet Ermentrout. I was interested in that painting because it reminded me of a woman who was a friend of my mother’s. She was a very large woman. The image showed her from the back and she had this tremendous straw hat on, and it just seemed like something right out of my childhood. That started my attending her gallery on a monthly basis for the next 20—

MARGARET: Now were these—were they crowded openings? Was there a sense of a community?

WESLEY: She would open the gallery at about 11:00 a.m. in the morning and people would drift in and out until about 8:00 p.m. in the evening.

MARGARET: So it was one day each month?

WESLEY: 2 days.

MARGARET: 2 days each month. Okay. And open all day.

WESLEY: And these were weekdays. I think Thursday/Friday or something.

MARGARET: Oh that’s interesting. And then the rest of them month the space was closed?

WESLEY: Yeah. So they had what was called Gallery Day. People would come. I think that’s where, I’m not sure of this, but I think that’s where Alice Hupfel had gotten the notion of doing the same kind at the Delaware Museum. I’m not sure, but I think that’s how it happened. I think it could be that Alice got the idea independently, I don’t really know, but she had actually knew of the existence of that arrangement at the Wanamaker with Grace McFarren.

MARGARET: Now—I could easily find this as well—but do you remember, did those galleries end with the closing of Wanamaker or did they end prior to the store’s closing?

WESLEY: What happened was that Grace found—she was told that the store would be closing, and that perhaps she should start thinking about making another arrangement. So she was told
that there was a store up in Concord Mall right at the north end of the mall—what’s the name of that store?

MARGARET: The north end of the Concord Mall, that would be a Boscov’s?

WESLEY: It was the store prior to Boscov’s—it was some other store—Harriet probably knows the name of it. But in that space, on the third floor. They were there for a couple years and then it was discovered that the Wanamaker environment created—something about that space people felt comfortable with, so the one at Concord Mall was never as successful. Though people would come. It just lost the energy.

MARGARET: Wow. But she continued for several years in that space?

WESLEY: She continued. Then she brought in another person—Ellen. I can give you the name of this person, the last name. It was her assistant. And she carried on a little longer. By that time Grace had moved back.

MARGARET: That’s interesting. So really, in 1970, one of the few people if only person showing contemporary art in Wilmington. Because Fifth Street, Rob Jones and Fifth Street—that didn’t start until really the middle of the 1970s into the later 1970s. Did you ever go to Fifth Street?

WESLEY: No.

MARGARET: Interesting. Were you not aware of it?

WESLEY: Not aware. I think that there’s a void in what happens in the arts in a place like Wilmington due to the lack of interest on the part of the press in talking about what goes on in the arts. So if the individual galleries don’t purchase space to be advertised, you can’t say—well, art galleries such as Station Gallery or the gallery at Greenville—those came out a little later—and there’s a gallery out on Route 52 near [inaudible]—galleries like that I think they were somehow able to create their own clientele. But for smaller galleries trying to get things going, there was simply no help being provided by the press. That’s my sense.

MARGARET: You’re right. And actually I found little in the established press on these actual gallery spaces. It seems as though the gallery and maybe the underground artist community in general found other ways of spreading that information through ‘zines. Dream Streets was one of them and I know that Rob Jones was involved with that publication. But these were coming out of Arden, they were artist produced ‘zines passed out wherever. That information wasn’t being circulated widely.

WESLEY: Yeah, that’s right. There was a little gallery in Arden run by—after a while one starts to forget about a number of these things, I’ll think of this name too in a moment. There was a small gallery over in Arden which was attached to the theater space. And the woman who ran that gallery would have openings every now and then, and she showed some contemporary kinds of things. She had kind of a minimal impact on the arts scene, but nevertheless she did try to
show contemporary work. Sometimes photography, sometimes graphics, prints, those sorts of things.

I think what was true then is still true in Wilmington. And that is, the major press here doesn’t put all that much effort into the gallery scene. Having said that, what has been encouraging in the last few years is the fact that they do cover openings to a higher level than they did say 15–20 years ago. By the way, I haven’t seen—maybe I’ve missed it—but I haven’t seen coverage of the Juried Exhibition. It’s unforgiveable. I haven’t missed anything have I?

MARGARET: No, you have not. Betsy Price still has not been into see the exhibition. We’re hoping that Roberta and Libby will come down. I know that’s Philadelphia, but it’s the art blog and of course have of the show includes Philadelphia artists. Nothing from the Philly inquirer either.

WESLEY: See, that’s unbelievable. It’s just unforgiveable. It’s just stunning.

MARGARET: I’ve been disappointed with the lack of coverage for the exhibition.

WESLEY: It warrants good coverage. I mean, compared to the exhibition a year and a half ago, there’s a show I can’t recall the name of it.

MARGARET: At the Museum? *Perception Deception*?

WESLEY: Yes.

MARGARET: We had great coverage for that show. Wonderful review from Ed Sozanski.

WESLEY: And then there was a show previous to that were there was good coverage too.

MARGARET: For the Vogel exhibition?

WESLEY: Oh it was the Vogel?

MARGARET: We had good coverage for the Vogel show.

WESLEY: Yeah, and then there was the—

MARGARET: Oh, the Leonard Baskin?

WESLEY: Yes. I guess what I’m concluding is that in contrast to the absolute lack of coverage to the small galleries around town, at least the Delaware Art museum and the DCCA are getting coverage at a number of their shows. That’s why I’m rather disappointed; I would’ve thought Price would have come. There was a small gallery that Steve was associated with—17th street?

MARGARET: Yes, Project Space.
WESLEY: Project Space. I called Price one day, it was shortly after the space was up and running, I said, “You know, you ought to go over there and take a look around, I think you'll find some interesting stuff there, [inaudible].” I’m not sure she ever got there. But I had to think they could’ve used publicity at the time. I haven’t gotten there as much as I would like to, but I have been there two or three times, and it’s an interesting endeavor.

MARGARET: It is. It’s a nice little space. I think that they’ve programmed it well so far. Now you know that Delaney Barclay will be moving out the space and Jane Chesson is moving in.

WESLEY: Is that so?

MARGARET: Yes. I’m not sure how involved she’ll be with the exhibition schedule, but I know she’s looking forward to having a studio space outside of her home. So I’m eager to see her studio once she’s set up and I imagine she’ll keep it open for first Fridays.

WESLEY: A very interesting young woman.

MARGARET: Yes. I have two specific questions in terms of your thoughts on the impact of—and these are two big questions—the impact of the foundation of the DCCA. Which I know is a huge question. And the impact of the formation of the art loop in Wilmington. In terms of chronology I guess we should start with the DCCA.

WESLEY: Okay, I’m going to run to the restroom for a moment, but I have a few things to say about it.

MARGARET: Okay I’m going to pause this.

WESLEY: Sure.

MARGARET: Perfect, okay.

WESLEY: Well I think the inauguration of the DCCA had profound impact on the arts in Delaware, and in the region actually. I remember being on a panel down at the Delaware State Arts Council building when the first director, Steven O’Leary, came down to try and gather support for the DCCA. The initial impulse of people who were reviewing proposals for funding thought that he was mad, and that he—people just could not grasp what it was that this new organization was trying to do.

But he stood there and convinced this group of people who would make a decision on whether or not to pass initial funding. He convinced them—or us, I was a small part of the group because I was a new member of the [inaudible]—and I think that people who were on that panel were very glad that they made a positive decision. I think they were doing things which were—they were making—things felt ephemeral, you couldn’t put your hand on what it was that they were trying to accomplish with this new organization. It wasn’t academic, really, but it was above the thinking of most people. So people just didn’t know quite what to feel about this new thing.
But slowly it evolved and they began to have exhibitions, go down to shows, to openings. And even to this day it just felt as though they were trying to do something new but it wasn’t clear what it was. I remember one night we went down there and there was this aroma in the air; this big grass sculpture, in one of the galleries, it was all over the place. The grass was beginning to ferment, and it was giving off this strange aroma and they say, “Well, you know, that’s the DCCA.”

There’s just one more, another point: one thing you worked quite hard on was to make sure that people who came in as artists were doing shows. [Inaudible]. They worked hard on providing spaces for people to feel comfortable and live in. So we hosted several people. Gina Bosworth hosted. There were people that would host artists as they came in.

MARGARET: So really engaging visiting artists with the community.

WESLEY: Yes. I remember there was a guy who---[inaudible] later on here, because this is the grassy piece that I was referring to. This was in the early ‘90s.

MARGARET: That was in the water works?

WESLEY: Yes. What I was getting to was that after a day’s work at the gallery, the person would come back here and be up until later at night just having cocktails, drinks, and talking about what went on during the day. I think that kind of thing’s Been lost. I’m sure that I don’t know about anybody who’s involved in hosting artists at a high level. Are you?

MARGARET: No. Really, aside from the artist in residence program, at the DCCA, that does not happen. And that’s a very different kind of—I mean, that’s usually focused on a distinct smaller community within the city. So it’s engaging with community but in a very different way, and with a very specific group. But no, that doesn’t really happen, at least as far as I’m aware.

WESLEY: I think [inaudible] can be pointed out, which I think is missing and which is highly desirable. Look at this one—it turns out that this person, Dolores Pyle Josey, is married to Alder Josey, who used to be a scientist at the experimental station. We were in some research advancement social group at the experimental station. Dolores Pyle Josey is of course a dancer, and she’s a part of a group called ArtSquad. She was at the time a very elegant vigorous person in dance.

When this came out, I mentioned to Alder, I said, “Do you remember when Dolores was associated with the DCCA? There’s a picture of her in the catalogue.” He was thrilled to know that and I’m sure he must have bought a catalogue for her. I didn’t know about the DCCA until after it was formed. It was kind of interesting—Rick, who was a founder along with several other people, Gina Bosworth and others—they quietly went along until they got to be really going. It was so long ago. This is Gina. A completely different person.

MARGARET: Right, that’s incredible. Oh, yeah, on the right as well. So it sounds like it really strengthened community. Did it feel like it supported a community in addition to the art museum
or—I mean, I’m sure there weren’t any sort of confrontational relationships with the art museum—but, did it feel like—?

WESLEY: I think what happened here is that it filled a void. There were people who came over from the Delaware Art Museum—they were interested in supporting new art. But at the same time those people such as Phyllis Aronson and her husband Buddy Aronson and others, they were totally engaged with the Museum, but they saw that there was a need for a new kind of place for making new art. So they supported the place with their money and with their effort and time whenever they could. So I don’t think—there was never a conflict.

But I think in general people at the Museum saw this as something simply new, not threatening, but something new and it was—and good. If you think about it, many of the Delaware Art Museum crowd, if you will, are not to be found—more now, in the last couple years, than before—are simply not to be found in the DCCA. It’s almost like you’ve got a split. Whereas the people at DCCA will show up every now and then at openings at the Museum, and so they seem a bit more accepting of a lot of range of things. Who knows? That’s my impression.

MARGARET: And I guess that need was not being met simply by the annual Juried Exhibitions. There was a bigger need than could be met by that.

WESLEY: A bigger need, much bigger need. There was once—you may remember this, no I don’t think you were here then—there was an exhibition at the DCCA of art from [inaudible].

MARGARET: Oh right, I’ve seen that in the exhibition schedule.

WESLEY: It was an exceptional exhibition. But when you went into the room, and looked at the work, you knew that it was not a DCCA exhibition. It was a bit more, I wouldn’t say necessarily conservative, but it was not a DCCA exhibition. But what I think it allowed was for good collaboration between the two organizations and unfortunately that exhibition was not built on. I still see it, and I think there’s still some lessons to be taught from that exhibition. It was quite good. But it was not a DCCA exhibition.

And I think that what it took was—there was a measure of the impact of the DCCA that was, I don’t think it was an accident that the DCCA is looked upon in a fairly good part of the country as being something which is significant. It’s a good sound organization where really interesting things are shown. And people seek the place out. There’s this notion of cutting edge and all of that. I think still there’s a holding back here in many cases where the work might be a little softer. But some of the things that are shown at the DCCA are indeed new. There was a show a couple years ago where there was a platform involving Corian. And there was vessels, ships, on the platform, it was kind of a light structure show—he’s moved to New York and ended up in Asia.


WESLEY: *Light Showers*. That show was a combination of art and craft and technology and it was really quite exquisite. I think by anybody’s measure it was a cutting edge show. It got—it
started from a collocation between DuPont, artists DCCA brought together and it worked nicely. And there are other examples of shows that were right up there. There was a show dealing with the filming of Central Park, photographers of Central Park over 24 hours. I don’t remember details, but it was another show that was right up there. Shows I don’t think at this point you would necessarily find at the Museum, but I think there’s this interesting movement out there beginning to happen. I think the Museum is pushing the DCCA—I’m not sure how much the DCCA is pushing the Museum—but I think what I’m seeing is that—there was this Deception—

MARGARET: Perception Deception?

WESLEY: That show I think was pushing the boundaries and I think anybody who was from the DCCA looked at that work and said, “You know, this kind of thing could easily be at the DCCA and could be effective.” That’s what I meant by the Museum pushing the DCCA.

MARGARET: Right. You bring up a really interesting point. I find myself in talking casually about exhibition either at the Museum or the DCCA, I find myself saying “Oh that’s a DCCA type show,” “That’s a Delaware Art Museum type show” when talking about contemporary art. And I don’t think I’ve really considered what I mean by that, and what I mean when I say that. But I imagine that other people think about that distinction similarly, but I feel like it’s never really Been explored what that means.

WESLEY: Yeah, I think you’re correct. There may be—there’s a distinction, but I think the line can be a very thin one. There’s a piece in the show at the Museum right now, it’s a sculpture in relief and there’s a girl inside—it’s called Letter.

MARGARET: Oh yeah, Paul Hamanaka: Letter.

WESLEY: Yeah. That piece is a hard one to read. It has a little age on it, if you will. It doesn’t feel like, to me, like a cutting edge piece, but it’s almost there. In other words, there’s a very subtle line. I’m not sure what it is. Do you know what it is? Do you understand what I’m saying?

MARGARET: No. But I know exactly what you mean. You can’t pinpoint it; it’s too subtle for that.

WESLEY: If you had that piece at the DCCA, I think people would immediately accept it. They wouldn’t quite know how to read it. I think it feels, it certainly feels advanced at the Museum. It may not necessarily feel advanced at the DCCA but it would not be rejected either. That’s what I mean.

MARGARET: Right. But that’s really interesting to think about in thinking about the contemporary art program, which is what I do. And thinking about those subtleties and distinctions, and what is causing them. is it, you know I would hate to think that its—and I don’t think it is—but is it thinking about kind of the size of the institution, is it thinking about the budget of each institution? Kind of thinking about some of those other things, are these things that are informing these kinds of distinctions between the two programs. I’ll have to think more about that.
WESLEY: I think one distinction is that so far the Museum requires, there’s this, how do you say it—the Museum requires a little bit more polish on its pieces. The work cannot be too shaggy, for lack of a better term. It has to be well perceived and well executed. There’s one piece in the show which I think is on that border—that piece that has the plastic hanging off. As you go into the gallery space, off to the left, almost diagonally straight ahead, diagonally.

MARGARET: Two chairs, and then the plastic in front? Gregory Gorrell.

WESLEY: That piece is a little shaggy.

MARGARET: Unpolished?

WESLEY: Yeah. If you saw that at the DCCA, you wouldn’t bother, you wouldn’t question it. But at the Museum it feels a little not complete thrown out [inaudible]. It’s this where I think you’ve got to see the small differences. The Museum I think requires—I think the Museum has a higher bar than the DCCA does. The DCCA allows for over experimentation. Which is great. It’s a wonderful element, more experimentation.’

MARGARET: And it supports emerging artists who are developing through experimentation as well. This is something I want to unpack a little bit more. Like I said I found myself not dismissively but offhandedly categorizing shows in this way. I think there’s actually much more there. It’s more interesting to think about because it is in fact one of—I would imagine—the motivations behind the founding of the DCCA.

WESLEY: The DCCA certainly allows for more reaching. And wants to make you reach, and present the work and it reaches a certain level and then you can then transfer these ideas and things over to museum environments such as the Delaware Art Museum but it may not be at that point yet. That’s the way I would view it. Let me give you another example where I feel that there’s a difference. You have a piece by Moe Brooker. It’s a beautiful thing. Right next to his you have a piece which was made by—

MARGARET: To the left? Michael Kalmbach: *Political Climates.*

WESLEY: That piece, although it’s quite nice, it doesn’t [inaudible] Brooker’s piece and I think it has something to do with, not necessarily unfinished, it just is right there at the edge where you question just what is it? It’s not clear to me. These judgments are really hard to make because you’re dealing with something that you can’t define very well, but to me those two pieces are really distinguished from one another. One being to me high art the other one being something approaching it.

MARGARET: What’s also interesting then, in thinking about the motivations behind the founding of the New Wilmington Art Association, and the perceived need that the DCCA wasn’t filling.
WESLEY: Well I think—sometimes the curators have their different views of things, and in some cases they can confuse artists. As an example, I said to Susan Bandes one time, I said, “Susan Bandes, you know, you need to have a major exhibitor on Dan Teis’s work.” That’s when Dan was still living. She says, “Oh I don’t know, that stuff is not all that contemporary.” I said, “What are talking about?” She said—she never explained it. But that was her sense. And I said, “Well okay, well she’s seen a lot more work than I have, so I’ll give her that.”

And then I approached it again about two years later. I said, “Susan,” I said, “You know, it’s a shame that you didn’t get around to showing Dan’s work.” She said, “Yeah, he’s dead now.” Which was a fact. Well he certainly was no longer contemporary. But then when you look at Teis’s work—he was doing some things that were new then, and done in such an exquisite fashion that they still appear to be worthwhile to show. But you don’t quite know where to show them. I think they’re probably not a DCCA type material, but could be museum type material, who knows. I don’t know how you all deal with—those are big problems—

MARGARET: It is, and it’s a challenge I think that faces some artists living in this community. I know DCCA uses the term emerging. What does that mean? I have my own ideas of what that means, but if you look at an artist like Margo Allman for example. Emerging in terms of national recognition, emerging in terms of—I mean she’s incredibly prolific, and has continued to push her material, subject matter, those interests in form. And I think that there are artists who fall into this kind of in-between space,

WESLEY: Yeah, you know, it’s a—you’ve seen that marble sculpture of hers. It’s an amazing piece, as good as anything I’ve ever seen in terms of a biomorphic handling of Carrara marble. It’s amazing. There are artists, Margo is now 70, she’s 80—I guess she’s 81 maybe? I think she’s a major artist who never got found by the right person to push. She has a show at the Blue Street downtown. Have you seen it?

MARGARET: I did. I went with her and bill on Friday.

WESLEY: There’s a piece, as you go into the gallery, all the way to the end. There’s this piece as you go into the gallery, there’s a red piece. There’s two pieces down there, there’s a piece that has a—

MARGARET: With the wood grain underneath? New levels of depth I have never seen in her work.

WESLEY: Yeah, it’s astounding. I think her stuff deserves a major show. Anyway, so I guess I feel that there are a few artists around Delaware Valley who—I think that the Museum needs to—the Delaware Art Museum has a number of missions, sub-missions, and one of those should be to push at least two or three of its artists who it deems worthy to national prominence. And I guess I always felt—and I’ve been in art for a good long time but now I am drawing certain conclusions—whenever I go to the MOMA and to the metropolitan or to New York and you say, “Oh, this is the new York scene.”
Well, it’s not. What it is is they’re people who come from these little small towns and places in the Midwest and Pennsylvania and Delaware and the south and Texas—this is going to sound funny, but not much of Florida—but all over the place, and it happens that sometimes they get involved in groups there in New York and they start to influence one another. But a lot of the stuff is made elsewhere and is up there. So why can’t we as a community down here push whatever we view the very best out here as you know, you ought to push this stuff, you ought to show this stuff.

I think these museums such as Delaware Art Museum and smaller museums in this general area could much more effective in helping their artists escape the lower rung of history somehow. There was—do you know anything on Warren?

MARGARET: Warren Rohrer, yes.

WESLEY: He’s an amazing painter. He finally got—the Delaware Art Museum finally did something right before he died, maybe it was right after, but amazing work. His work, in my opinion, it should be highly ranked stuff. And it’s not. And it’s not because it never really got pushed. I think the Philadelphia Art Museum could’ve made him. That’s just the way I feel.

I think just these events don’t have to always pay off. You say, well, we tried, we tried to push that person, and people just didn’t buy it. I think that there should be some of that too. I think that’s another mission that the Museum could pay a little bit more attention to. The DCCA could have impact there also, but I don’t think it still doesn’t have the clout that the Delaware Art Museum has in terms of pushing—if it were, if it decided to push. Did I get to answer at least some of the question there?

MARGARET: You did, I think I’m going to stop this for today.

End of Audio
Duration: 78 minutes
Oral history interview with Wesley Memeger, December 14, 2012

Memeger, Wesley
Painter and chemist

Size: Transcript: 38 pages.

Format of recording: Originally recorded as digital wav file. Duration is 150 min.

Collection Summary: An interview of Wesley Memeger conducted December 14, 2012 by Margaret Winslow for the Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives of the Delaware Art Museum. This interview was conducted for Dream Streets: Art in Wilmington 1970–1990, an exhibition held at the Delaware Art Museum June 27–September 27, 2015 on the contemporary art scene in Wilmington in the 1970s and 1980s.

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

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MARGARET: Recording, this is Margaret Winslow, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum interviewing Wes Memeger at his home on December 14, 2012. Okay we’re ready.

WESLEY: Well the things that I’m going to talk to you about today are abstract works. I’d like to tell you a little bit about how I got there. As I have mentioned before Grace McFarren was a mentor. She died last year at 98. And I used to go to her, when I went to her openings on a monthly basis she would always tell me after whenever we had discussions, you know you always talk painting. I said well Grace I have been every now and then most of those things at that point were realistic in nature and rather primitive but nevertheless they were realistic. But after she kept bugging me I said well maybe I’ll just do it and so I took my first course at the University of Delaware in drawing and I have a thing with the instructor recorded someplace.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: A good drawing instructor really and I think I may be able to find it here. Yes Charles Rowe.

MARGARET: Charles Rowe?

WESLEY: Yeah.
MARGARET: Okay. And that was in 1990?

WESLEY: In 1990. You know there are super realists out there and artists. And I didn’t really like his things but nevertheless he was a good instructor and it was all of the basic elements of drawing and painting, mostly drawn perspective and the rest of it. And I was interested in flatness for the most part but I did work hard to understand the physical factors that went into doing good perspective drawings. And it got to the point where my drawings were really okay. But I soon became more; well I guess the kinds of things that we collected kind of bordered on abstraction in the first place. They were, had realistic components but they bordered on abstraction and those were the elements that attracted me.

So I said to myself you know you ought to try and learn to do abstract work. And one day I was in the living room of the house and I looked at a gold lined bowl and it had fresh fruits on it, a mini gallery. I could show it to you.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: See over here. So you know when I compare, this room happens to be gray, the walls are gray but even in a white room if you look at that bowl opposite the wall what you’ll find is that the brightest thing in the room will be that gold vessel. And so I said I wonder what would happen if you began, if I began to paint on the gold surface, what would be the effect and would I hit, would I get something bright, brighter than say painting on the white surface or what? And so I started and I could’ve guessed what I was going to get but I didn’t know. What I got was basically something dull but it set me off in a direction which I would have never gotten too had I not painted on that gold surface. And I’ll show you what I did.

MARGARET: Wes, do you have the first?

WESLEY: I have the second.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: I was interested in a square and I have been for a long time. And I’m not sure, it may have started when I was in graduate school dealing with some square molecule, almost square molecule, four carbon atoms and four hydrogen atoms in a ring and they were at the corners of a square. So I gave myself a problem to solve and that was how do you get across a surface which is square and more or less empty. And for some reason I thought of stripes so I went to translate myself, one side of that square to the other in a kind of a subtle way but then I thought I’d take the opportunity to use gold for the first time in painting.

I had mentioned a few minutes ago that I painted on a gold surface and I got something that was really quite dull and here’s this strip which is painted with white gold. And so there’s nothing special about it but what I thought was that in painting that gold strip opposite next to, adjacent to a strip that was not covered with gold next to one which was slightly different in intensity in terms of the colors are flat. And so I knew you that with this square where one translates from one side at a subtle, with the subtle fashion with stripes to the other. And this drawing is called
a—it was done in 1998. And it’s the second of the series and it’s called, I think it’s called *Towards an Eccentric Square* or something like that.

And this square is about in the middle of the frame of this work except it’s offset by maybe three quarters of an inch so it’s not quite in the square, quite in the center but it more or less feels like it’s in the center. Now these are, this is the offset here and these, this is, I think it’s gray and matte black for the most part and paints gray which has been just modified just a little bit with white. And I like this kind of thing. It’s simple and it’s not clear to me why I like it but I do. And the only place where, there are two places where I can use gold. I use gold here which is not painted over, it’s just glued onto the surface. Here’s another strip of gold which is glued to the surface but then there’s a little bit of paint, white paint over this strip.

And all the way to the right here there is a strip that has kind of, I use a tool, a dentist’s tool to make lines, like kind of incise the surface. So there’s all kind of vertical mark making as you go from one place to the other in this drawing. So that was actually the second example of using gold leaf in this kind of work. And I made a third and a fourth and I have the third which I’ll show you in a moment. The fourth I think I sold to Jay, to Maxine Rosenthal.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: And they had to take a look at both the third and the fourth. They preferred the fourth. Or I think it was, no there was a time that it was better but I’m not sure after all this time. So let’s go in this room over here.

MARGARET: Can I ask you one quick question now?

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: Did you, in the making in the structuring of the composition, did you move from the left to the right?

WESLEY: I think what I did was to lay down the other current way, lay down the gold strip. I glued the gold strip to the surface and then I proceeded from left to right.

MARGARET: Okay, okay.

WESLEY: But then I think there was some back and forth as I developed the work, to try and get balanced as I moved from left to right.

MARGARET: And was that first work that you did, the painting on gold, similar in composition?

WESLEY: It was simpler.

MARGARET: Okay.
WESLEY: Let me run down and get it because I think it’ll demonstrate to you how simple it was. Hold on a second.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Here it is.

MARGARET: Oh.

WESLEY: Let’s put it in the line here. So again there are vertical, distinct vertical strips but it’s very subtle, especially more than two thirds, about two thirds of the right half of it.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: So there is a strip in here but you can barely see it.

MARGARET: Okay. But not the entire, not all of the gold strips are painted, or are they, okay.

WESLEY: No. No only one.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: That one. Yeah these are, these are unpainted.

MARGARET: Okay how interesting. But a similar composition with the black and paints gray?

WESLEY: That’s right, yeah.

MARGARET: Outside of that as well.

WESLEY: Yeah, yeah. Except the paint’s gray in this case, there’s a box sitting here. There is no, there’s no intersection like in this one there’s kind of this strip right here.

MARGARET: Right.

WESLEY: Yeah. If you now just a little bit there is an intersection here and in this one there’s not. It’s just the paints gray from here or to the edge.

MARGARET: It’s interesting how those read as three-dimensional in a way.

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: So my first question, well one of my questions was going to be whether or not it’s kind of a cut-out piece of paper but this intersection here kind of gives that illusion.

WESLEY: Right. And it’s tougher because I used masking tape, masked it all and just painted and, but no, it just butts right up to the next here.
MARGARET: Mm hmm.

WESLEY: There was a, the next one, there were three, is this work and this we’ll take a look at it and we’ll work and see a little better.

MARGARET: Okay. Oh, these weren’t here before I don’t think the last time I, weren’t there, there were Ruth, oh what is her name, I’m forgetting the artist.

WESLEY: Egri?

MARGARET: Yes.

WESLEY: Yes, yes. Well this painting kind of gets to the interesting, the view about Strauss and I have a copy with you and he goes on and on and to me exaggerates a bit but nonetheless he had a few things to say and he liked this work very much. And I’ve had it now, I made this in ‘98 and it’s grown on me, I like it. Initially, this work is related to, well I’d say the next one of this series, this one is called Towards an Eccentric Square and the one following this one is called An Eccentric Square which I gave, which I sold to Jay and Maxine Rosenthal. So it would really be number four I guess.

MARGARET: It has a [inaudible].

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: Do you have an image of that?

WESLEY: Yeah, well yes I do.

MARGARET: I’m just interested to see the difference between the two, differences between—

WESLEY: Yeah we can. Here’s number four. It’s more painterly if you well. It’s this one here. It has a lot more areas of agitated roll.

MARGARET: So you can really see the brushwork.

WESLEY: Well what you see is not quite brushwork. What you see is, I began to experiment with the gold leaf stuck to the paper. These are done on watercolor paper and so I had the gold leaf and in class one night, I made these paintings while I was in Eo Omwake’s class.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: And one evening I was fooling around with masking tape and I made a mistake and I put the masking tape over gold leaf which had been glued to the surface of the paper and I pulled the tape away and I said, “For goodness sakes I’ve made a mess.” And Eo Omwake said, “Look, don’t touch it.” So out of that came this effect.

MARGARET: Okay.
WESLEY: So this is gold leaf which has been pulled away with masking tape and there are sections that I painted. After I, I go back and forth between pulling the gold leaf off and then putting some paint on and it just goes back and forth until I get what I desire. So that’s that.

MARGARET: Okay, okay. But here we see a few things already in the development which are the addition, I mean kind of going into one of the blues in here and then the lines are stopping, ending.

WESLEY: Yeah well I’m glad you picked that out. What’s going on here is that I was thinking of a, this is translating from one place to the next in a work. So you go up and take a look at this line here and you say, “Well where did it go?” Well you start looking and it goes over here and up again. So it’s a way to ask a question. What happens to this line as you move in the work and so that’s the idea behind that.

MARGARET: That’s interesting. It certainly disrupts that more kind of uniform transition from left. It’s interesting that when I’m looking at the piece I go from left to right. I don’t go from right to left.

WESLEY: I find it interesting that you said that because I had never thought of it but I do also. I’m not sure why but you do. And I think maybe it has to do with the intensity over here in moving toward the light, I don’t know. I like these transitions here. And this is flat black and this is gloss black.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: A little different screen, this and that, the nature of the black I’m using and that seems to work here.

MARGARET: It’s in search of a slight, slight diagonal.

WESLEY: This one?

MARGARET: Yeah.

WESLEY: Yeah. Well, let me tell you, you know one always learns from other people and in some respects this particular square started with Franz Kline and I’d like to show that to you.

MARGARET: Should I follow you?

WESLEY: No.

MARGARET: Okay, okay.

WESLEY: I’ll be right back.

MARGARET: Okay.
WESLEY: One of my favorite paintings in all the world is one by Franz Kline and this painting is quite large. It’s 55 inches high by 79 inches wide and it’s basically a square with a tail. And what I did was to take his square and square it up, squared it up and as tail I decided to take a loop.

MARGARET: Yeah. What is this, do you mind if I look at the—?

WESLEY: Yeah that’s, yeah go ahead.

MARGARET: So I can write this down real quick.

WESLEY: And in a subsequent one, again this is more exact. It’s a sort of square up a square with a more exaggerated tail. See I didn’t want to copy him directly. I thought I’d just use his idea and in the real work in this big white area of Kline’s it’s much more, there are some subtle transitions of grays and whites and it’s really quite beautiful. And what I learned from that, or what I wanted to do after I took a good look at his work, I said well since I’ve been making these textured structures based on gold leaf and peeling away gold leaf and repainting and so forth, let me try an extreme thing where I create textures within a square and also outside and that’s what this is. By that time I was up to square number seven.

MARGARET: Okay. Okay so wait, so three, we’ve done a lot between just three and five though.

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: But where, do you have four? Oh four, right, we know four. Four is An Eccentric Square. So then that’s a huge shift though from four to five.

WESLEY: That’s right. So I’m back, at this point what I’m doing, let me make sure I got the order right now, okay this is four. The next one, the next painting is not numbered in the same way. The next painting is called Square Dance.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Okay. So let’s, before we look at this one, let’s go out and look at Square Dance.

MARGARET: Right.

WESLEY: So we are up to number four, to here.

MARGARET: Okay, yeah.

WESLEY: Number three and number four and let’s go to Square Dance. It’s a square.

MARGARET: Right, okay.

WESLEY: And in 1999—
MARGARET: Now before we look at this one, were you doing, do you do studies, preparatory drawings, sketches? And I ask because there are I think kind of big transitions between just four works.

WESLEY: No. What I simply do is I had questions in my mind about how the viewer might look at these works. So I would, number three, yes number three, I should have had an exhibition at the Delaware Art Museum. It was one of those year-end classes, class sessions, class exhibitions.

MARGARET: So you were taking classes with Eo at the Art Museum?

WESLEY: That’s right.

MARGARET: Got it okay.

WESLEY: And so I was at the, in the gallery one day and there were two women who were looking at this work and they said, “Boy that guy can sure paint wallpaper.” And I said, “That’s interesting.” I didn’t take it as an insult, I said well that’s what they’re seeing, that’s what they’re seeing. And so basically, you know you see those wonderful blue painting that has those verticals?

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

WESLEY: And so they were seeing striped wallpaper and it brought home something to me because we had, at our house before we moved here, we had, the kitchen was green and white and orange stripes and it was really quite nice and vibrant and all that. And so I said, I said to Sigmund, “So that’s what they saw, wallpaper?”

MARGARET: Right.

WESLEY: But I don’t know whether that was a thing, that is to say well maybe you should put some structures in those works which are not vertical and more interest from some viewers. You may want to try to experiment. So I began to put things off of the vertical. And I should really bring up the, the thing that really got me going here. Let me get it. It will only take a minute.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: You were asking about whether or not I did preparatory drawings, I guess the answer is yes but not in a planned way but I did every now and then. Here’s one. Here’s one that says thoughts on eccentricity. So I just had a piece of gold leaf backing and I just made this little drawing, *Jack on a Line*, 1999. And this painting was done in 1999 and 2000. And so this painting was, had its origin here, so basically what I did was to take this square, this large square and rotate it and it went a little further from the drawing when I translated it so I twisted it and translated it down here so it doesn’t, and then when it’s completed to one of the squares, because the second one goes out of the plane. This one stays in the plane and so I put squares on the
square and that’s the name, that’s the origin of the name *Square Dances*. These little squares are kind of moving around this square.

MARGARET: Right.

Wesley Memeger: And—

MARGARET: Well that’s still keeping all right angles because you’ve introduced an arc.

WESLEY: Yeah that’s right, yeah. I wanted to increase the interest on the part of, I admit myself, but also maybe the viewer. And one guy who came to the exhibition of this work, this was at an exhibition at Ellen Bartholomaus’, this painting and the previous ones up to seven I guess. And one guy, a chemist, came to the exhibition and this is what he wrote me, and I think you’ll find this fascinating. Want me to read it to you?

MARGARET: Yeah that would be good.

WESLEY: Yeah. It says—this is dated 12-5-2000, it says “Wes, in your thinking about squares have you considered their curious role in nature? On the atomic scale nature certainly seems to favor right angles. Cubic, orthorhombic, monoclinic spaced groups probably account for a large fraction of all crystal structures. But squares and rectangles are remarkably rare among naturally occurring macroscopic objects. Relatively few crystals grow with squares, square or rectangular faces. And I can’t think of any biological objects—cells, viruses, honeycombs etc. which exhibit the shapes—that is square shapes. Yet humans seem to accept them as among the most natural shapes for both utilitarian and aesthetic purposes. We compulsively use right angles to construct everything from microchips to buildings and they also play a central role in our concepts of perspective and proportion.

In some of your paintings you’ve exploded the dramatic emotional effect of tilting right angles. In virtually all cultures and historical periods humans have surrounded themselves with objects and enclosures constructed of right angles of their own making. It’s difficult to find examples which are not man-made. If we’d simply been exploiting the mathematical properties of these structures why hasn’t nature done the same thing? Why aren’t there any square tree trunks, square pods and clamshells?”

So I thought about this article, this note that he wrote to me and I went looking for squares in nature. And Margo Allman gave to me this little book, *Discovery of the Square* by Bruno Munari. And she said, she says, “To Wes, may his book deepen your love of the square. Fondly Margo.” This is 2000. Well I went looking through here and I found something which is reminiscent of the square. It’s a fossil sponge and this fossil sponge organic has more or less square faces. So it was just one example but it’s complicated by the fact that the corners are kind of strange.

MARGARET: Right.
WESLEY: But nevertheless it forms a square. So I wrote, I went on the Internet and I found a discussion of the fossil sponge and there was a professor working at a museum in Switzerland. So I wrote him a note and I didn’t expect to hear from him. A week later I got a letter. And he says you know it’s going to be tough finding any square structures and the one that you see in the Munari’s book, he said he took some liberties. It’s a little bit more complicated than that. He showed me the structure that looks like what it was. Again the faces were square but the corners were more exaggerated, less perfect if you will. But again the squares were, the faces were square. Long story short I found, there’s been only one other example of a square kind of face for these prehistoric things. And one is shown in this book.

MARGARET: If this was, sorry just to interrupt, and I’m betraying my—

WESLEY: Go ahead.

MARGARET:—complete lack of scientific knowledge but the square that, so this is an image that I remember though which isn’t exactly a square I guess but what is it, the golden?

WESLEY: The Golden Square.

MARGARET: Right.

WESLEY: Or, yes, yes.

MARGARET: Which has a basis I guess.

WESLEY: Golden section.

MARGARET: Right, okay. So I guess it’s more that you can impose a rectangle within this Golden spiral?

WESLEY: You can.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Yes. There is a cell someplace in here that’s kind of squarish. What I was going to say a little earlier, I should’ve completed what I was going to say, was that this professor from Switzerland wrote to me a very nice letter and talked a bit in detail about all kinds of fossil structures. But again nothing beyond what was found here in terms of the square yeah. So I think Steve makes a good point, made a good point that in nature you don’t find a lot of right angles. You find ovals and circles and more or less.

MARGARET: Right but when we started talking—

WESLEY: We are.

MARGARET: Okay.
WESLEY: Here is a microscopic algae which is almost square, not quite.

MARGARET: Interesting.

WESLEY: Yeah. So it’s kind of a stretched square if you will but—

MARGARET: And then these are almost, these are like honeycomb—

WESLEY: Yes.

MARGARET: Shapes within.

WESLEY: Within yeah. But the, so that’s microscopic.

MARGARET: Right okay.

WESLEY: Microscopic structures more or less in kind of a stretch square if you will.

MARGARET: Right. Well it’s interesting though because when we started our conversation, and that’s actually when you were talking about perhaps being drawn to molecules that were—so I guess they’re not exactly, they are square? Like before when you were talking about four carbon atoms?

WESLEY: Yeah well I watched a research proposal on how I might go about making what is called cyclobutadiene. Let me write it C-Y-C-L-O-B-U-T-A-D-I-E-N-E, cyclobutadiene. It’s a square, it’s almost square. It’s kind of, it’s a little off.

MARGARET: Is this a compound?

WESLEY: Yes it’s a compound, yeah.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: It’s very unstable. People have tried to make it. People were finally successful in making it but not as a pure material. It was always coupled with something else. So it’s a very unstable material. But you can think of, in your mind you can think of those things in isolation as being just a square molecule with four carbon atoms and four hydrogen atoms.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: The interesting thing about working as a an artist and before as a scientist is that sometimes you can be just so wrong but it can lead you, these wrong assumptions or wrong information can lead you to interesting things. Like when I—this notion of painting the surface of gold to see what I would get and I’d say well, “Since the gold is so bright you’re bound to get something which is brighter than a white wall.” Well it’s just not so. You just get something which is pretty dull. Well but at least you found a route of exploring how materials behave.
MARGARET: Right.

WESLEY: Now what, they’re some interesting things in this work physically speaking. You know gold leaf is made by taking gold pellets if you will and putting the material, I think, between leather pads and you beat it. And then at some point you can take the material and fold it over on itself and bring in another layer and so forth and so on until you build up the structure you need. Well what I found in fooling around with painting a surface that I began to pull off or peel the surface using masking tape what it then did was to expose some of the layering. And here are some examples.

I made a square, had glued a square piece of, a square piece of—cube of beef to a surface and then I began to peel it with masking tape. And what I discovered, you see these sections here?

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

WESLEY: Yeah. You can imagine that these are just strips of a square. And I began to peel off the outer layers of the gold leaf and so as you move along here you tend to expose the inner workings, inner surfaces of the gold leaf that you wouldn’t ordinarily see.

MARGARET: Right.

WESLEY: So that’s what these are, yeah. They’re more or less a uniform, ordinarily would be uniform gold leaf but here it’s peeled away. So it was just a way of adding texture to this work.

MARGARET: And you’ve not added any additional paint over that?

WESLEY: No.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: No. I just peeled it.

Margaret Winslow: Okay.

WESLEY: Over here this is, I just took sandpaper and different scouring tools and just worked the surface to make it more interesting, especially over here. And when I looked at this work, especially in here, what I discovered was that this particular piece section right here, if you turn it on, turn it 90 degrees it makes it kind of an interesting conversation so I actually once made of 6 x 3 painting and sold it to somebody just of that.

MARGARET: Of that section of the painting?

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: Interesting.

WESLEY: Yeah that occurred about five years after I had made this.
MARGARET: Now I want to get back to the introduction of the arc because this is the first time in your work that we are seeing it, correct?

WESLEY: Mm hmm.

MARGARET: Which is interesting because that’s what you, I mean you’ve done that with the tilting.

WESLEY: Mm hmm.

MARGARET: Are you tracing that movement?

WESLEY: Yeah. It’s not an automatic arc. It’s purposefully done with a tool.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: I think I might have used a protractor or I used a pencil at the end of a string to make the curve.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Yeah. And I think up here I probably used a protractor. So they were made in different ways but they were all, they were never made just by, just with the arm. It was made with the help of a mechanical device.

MARGARET: Okay. So the level of movement, I mean there is movement in the other works. I think that movement, that transition from left to right, but the level of movement in this work is very different.

WESLEY: Yes.

MARGARET: And I’m also drawn to these maybe tails?

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: I don’t know if tails are the right word.

WESLEY: That’s all right.

MARGARET: That is coming off of these other squares as well.

WESLEY: Well that was to create, the purpose of that was to create interest for me and for the viewer too. You just kind of have kind of like a plug square just sitting there and you say well that may not be all that interesting so you change it a little bit by hanging a tail or I could have done some other things. I could have rounded the square or I could have put texture in the square. But I decided to just add some tails and also those tails also have a way of kind of mobilizing the squares.
MARGARET: Mm hmm. Now in the construction of this composition, because you know starting out with what you said before you’re kind of setting up kind of a problem or a system for yourself when you were moving from left to right. How did you structure this composition in terms of the development of the composition?

WESLEY: Well the thing which I did was to use this notion of eccentricity. You know when you think about it an eccentric square is kind of an absurd idea. Eccentric circle yes because as you move around the circumference you can go in and out and it becomes kind of wobbly and so forth. But in a square if you put a pin point in the center of say the initial square then you rotate it, it’s hard to think about eccentricity per se but for the purposes of thinking about art making sure you can do that. And so in this case what I did was to start from the outside of a large square and rotated it. And so this square, one looks for the corner of this square, the path up here someplace comes across here but it goes outside of, okay and then comes back in here okay so that one just represents the rotation. And that’s the case here also. If you rotate it again and you get this, that’s one side and that’s one side.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: But then when you start to translate the thing then it goes off surface and you can’t find, you can only find one side of it.

MARGARET: Right.

WESLEY: So you’ve done more than just rotate it, the square. So in terms of doing this, making this structure, I did this one first and then this one and then this one and then this one.

MARGARET: Okay. But you had created this under the kind of background of that larger structure for.

WESLEY: I had created, oh okay; I’ll show you what I did.

MARGARET: Should I follow you?

WESLEY: Yes.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: I took a photograph of that painting while it was in progress and I had, it was just these verticals. And since I had the photograph, one day I looked at it and I said, “You know this might be a nice little painting to make.” And so then I began to add some gold leaf to it and I took some colored pencil and I scratched over the, I changed the surfaces on the stripes to get these kind of subtle changes here you see?

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

WESLEY: So this was the case where I had just the vertical lines and then I decided to make those changes like rotation and translation. It was before this. Once I made that structure I then
took this photograph with the verticals and just changed it in a way that would kind of mimic this one so I kind of learned from what I was doing here.

MARGARET: Right, right. Oh can I just make one other, one little comment just in our conversation about the square and the circle. Looking at, oh what was I thinking? You said you don’t really have an eccentric square but if you completed this entire rotation wouldn’t that give you a circle?

WESLEY: Well let’s put it this way if you use this—

MARGARET: That outside point?

WESLEY:—as a point, yes, yes.

MARGARET: Oh okay. That’s just my own circle, square kind of thinking about.

WESLEY: Yeah. You see if you rotate it this then goes this way—

MARGARET: If you put it in motion?

WESLEY: Right, right.

MARGARET: That outside point would then—

WESLEY: That’s right, yeah.

MARGARET:—mark a circle.

WESLEY: Right.

MARGARET: So it’s interesting thinking about you know not having many squares found in nature and then how these different shapes are—

WESLEY: That’s right, yeah. I know what you mean.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: There’s something on the other side of that painting but I shouldn’t show you until we look at the ones downstairs.

MARGARET: Okay. I’ll wait.

WESLEY: So that’s basically what we’ve got up here. Now this painting was the one that moved one individual to ask me to make a large painting for him. He was sitting over here one day for lunch, Dudley Spencer. And he said, “You know that painting reminds me of a suspension bridge.” I said, “Oh really?” And I had never thought about it in those terms before. I said well that’s kind of a distorted half of a suspension bridge with this being the, possibly being the egg point and forget about this. I said yeah. He said, “I kind of like it but the colors I’m not thrilled
with—” He said, “Would you consider making a work for me?” I said, “I don’t know Dudley. I have to think about it.” So he said, “Well why don’t you come over to the house?”

And so I went over and I saw the space. I said, “I can’t do that. It’s too big.” And I said, “What you should do for this space is we get a painting by somebody like Dorothea Rockburne.” He said, “You think so?” I said yeah. So I wrote to New York and I wrote a letter to Lawrence and some other, in this gallery and I told her what the work was possibly for and I think they got excited because it was Frank Lloyd Wright design house and they sold one of the catalog. I showed it to Dudley and he took it and he looked at the work and he kind of liked what he saw.

Several weeks later I was over there and he says, “I have something for you.” And he gave me the catalog back. And then he said, “You’re sure you’re not willing to give this a try?” I said, “Well I don’t know. I just have to think about it.” So I thought about it for several months and I said, “It’s too much.” He never gave up. So he said, “Why don’t you make some sketches.” So I made a little sketch which was about 18 inches long of the proportions of the space that he desired. The space that he desired was 8 feet by, or 8 inches, 8 x 4 which for me was a big painting because this one is 4 feet.

So I made into a drawing and he said, “Well I kind of like it. It’s in the spirit of some of the things you’ve done. So why don’t you make it larger for me.” So I said, “Well I’ll try.” So I made a, I think a quarter scale work and worked on it quite a bit and see I’m liking it more and so he said, “So why don’t you make a full scale?” I said, “Well I don’t know about that.” I’m concerned about several things. One, the color he wanted was red. I had never made a red painting, matter of fact I didn’t like red in my work. I didn’t like using red in my work. I like red by other people, I have this red painting right here called Red Sky which I like very much but for me it wasn’t the thing.

But he kept going and he eventually convinced me that maybe I should give it a try so I did. And over a period of several months developed a work which eventually satisfied his needs and we installed it in his house. And he had it there for 11 years before he died a few months ago, couple months ago. And it brought a lot of satisfaction which I feel quite all right about because we had a lot of conversations about that work. And I don’t normally write stories about works outside of chemistry. But I wrote a story about how that painting came about starting from sitting at the table here and going to New York to see if I could find somebody who was satisfactory to him, satisfy his needs and so forth and so on, down to the installation and several years after looking at the painting on the wall of the house and saying you know the painting seems to work for him and people who came to the place seem to like it.

MARGARET: Were you satisfied?

WESLEY: Not completely but it worked in the house in an uncanny way. It got to the point where you couldn’t, couldn’t separate the room from that painting, it just worked to me.

MARGARET: Huh, that’s interesting.

WESLEY: But it was red and I’m still not in love with red paint.
MARGARET: You must have shown me a picture of this before.

WESLEY: Yeah I think you’ve probably seen it.

MARGARET: I think I’ve seen it.

WESLEY: I’ll show you again.

MARGARET: Remind me again. Now do we need, because we came in to look at this before we looked at Square Number Seven?

WESLEY: Square Number?

MARGARET: No, Square Number Five, right.

WESLEY: Basically the difference between this one and Square Dance is color. There’s something about the blues and the lavenders like this had turned kind of purple, light turquoise, I like very much. It’s a soothing kind of thing. It was just one way of adding color to the work and to make it somewhat richer. I felt that I accomplished a softening of the composition here which is not present in the other work, for example in this area here where I was kind of sort of liked this subtle character that goes on there here.

MARGARET: Right. So I’m struck by the amount of texture in this work. And tell me how are you creating this texture? So these bands of color that has kind of a similar texture as the gold leaf, you fixed those?

WESLEY: Yeah that was done again by using masking tape and using colored pencil. So there’s acrylic paint and color pencil in this work. It was kind of multimedia.

MARGARET: Had you used color pencil before?

WESLEY: No. People had used it in Eo’s class and I said to him, “It looks like it’s interesting.” “Why don’t you just try some?” So that’s how that came about.

MARGARET: Hmm, but that look, I think, I just, I really like the replication of that texture, the gold leaf texture using the color pencil.

WESLEY: Mm hmm.

MARGARET: And this is again incising or no?

WESLEY: Here?

MARGARET: Yeah.

WESLEY: This?

MARGARET: The square.
WESLEY: Yeah that’s incising, yeah. That was just taking a dentist tool and just, or a knife and just cutting into the surface.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: For me all of this is interesting learning because you know you can do, what it says to me is that you can do anything you want to do in making it work and you can use, for somebody who is traditionally trained in school, you know we were told that paint issues, brushes and so and so but you can use anything you want, sticks, whatever and so that, I found these dentist tools which I found them very useful for making these kinds of things.

MARGARET: And I guess that is not often the case in science.

WESLEY: Right.

MARGARET: Right. I mean you don’t have that level of freedom do you?

WESLEY: Well you can do it.

MARGARET: I guess maybe if you’re a better scientist.

WESLEY: Well you can make, you can make all kinds of—you can do all kinds of tricks in science. But there is an elegance associated with a lot of them. I mean that’s not quite the proper word but yeah there is, you can’t kind of explain what it is about the technique that you’re using that makes sense. For example you’re trying to create crystals from a solution and you’re trying, in some cases you need to form some small crystals or a seed so the crystals will grow. So one thing that people did was just scratch on the surface of the container in which you are trying to make crystals and you can induce crystal formation by the agitation on the flask. Well in a sense it’s kind of related to this kind of thing here but not quite. It’s more kind of mysterious and eventually you might be able to explain it.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Anyway so basically the idea here was to introduce color.

MARGARET: Color okay.

WESLEY: To move away from say beige. And I’ve, for almost ten years now I’ve been trying to move away from beiges but I always end up back to the beiges amid whites and grays.

MARGARET: Do you think in simplifying your palette you can focus more on the square?

WESLEY: Yeah I think so. I think so and it’s not, yeah I have a few things I was scared, that I’m still working on, on simplifying things and it’s not clear why I continue to do these things but I still find them interesting. They are simple but I still find them interesting, I do.
MARGARET: So maybe if we could look a little more at how this series has progressed? Because this is *Square Number Five* and then you said you showed up to *Square Number Seven* at—

WESLEY: This is number seven.

MARGARET:—at Blue Streak. Was this the first time that you showed this series?

WESLEY: Yes.

MARGARET: Was this the first time you showed your work outside of the Art Museum for example?

WESLEY: This was the, this was 2000. Yes it’s called *Alter Ego*, first time. And basically there were three of us who showed work. It was I, Noman Thomasas and there’s one other guy who, we were, had, Norman Thomasas was involved in advertising and the other guy was kind of an engineer at DuPont. Harriet?

HARRIET: Yeah.

WESLEY: Who was the third guy who was showed with me and Norm Thomasas?

HARRIET: Was it Norm?

WESLEY: No not Norm.

HARRIET: Was it Moische?

WESLEY: Yes. M-O-I-S-C-H-E, that’s right Harriett, thanks. Moische Mark M-O-I-S-C-H-E and I have a postcard downstairs.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Yeah. Anyway so number six is a mystery.

MARGARET: As to where it is?

WESLEY: Yes or if it was done. I’m sure it was done. I don’t normally skip—

MARGARET: You don’t have an image?

WESLEY: I don’t normally skip, it’ll be—I think the purple when you go downstairs.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Is it clear what I’m—?

MARGARET: Yeah.
WESLEY: All right.

MARGARET: Your presentation was interesting for the earlier squares, the matting, leaving the edge of the paper exposed.

WESLEY: Yeah thank you. Carolynn Roberts, you know that name?

MARGARET: I don’t.

WESLEY: She had a frame shop right down here at the corner of Route 202 [inaudible] and Miller Road and she was a good framer. And she framed this work. She made a decision about how to mount it all. And came to the show and afterward she said, “You know I don’t like the way that work is, fits within the surface of the frame. I want to do it over.” So she took it and did it over, no charge, nothing. She just, it didn’t meet her needs.

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

WESLEY: Anyway but she was the one who decided, I like the way it’s done. It’s given me a lot less problems than this work here.

MARGARET: With the paper, yeah buckling, mm hmm, yeah.

WESLEY: Yeah I wish I had done the same thing there. Okay. Why don’t you go down there and take a look. Let me turn some lights off. I’ll be down in a few minutes.

MARGARET: Okay. Wes, that is a very large canvas. Does it just, gosh it intimidates me. It’s like it stares at you.

WESLEY: Well it’s large isn’t it?

MARGARET: Do you feel that when you look at the surface sometimes before you start? Stephen has talked about that before, kind of the intimidation of a blank canvas?

WESLEY: No this thing—

MARGARET: It’s arresting almost.

WESLEY: Let me put it this way, until I put it on that easel it was more intimidating because I had it over here. When you put it on an easel it’s just [inaudible] so it’s a, so it’s not too bad. I feel as if it’s mine and—

MARGARET: Yes you can manage it.

WESLEY: But yes I understand it’s a big surface and the question is why would I do it and I want to try to explain to you after a bit.

MARGARET: Okay.
WESLEY: Let me see here, okay we have over here; I was telling you I wrote a story about that work up behind you. This is in the house and these, Frank Lloyd Wright used a lot of squares and all types of things in his architecture and along here in this painting there’s these squares right at the bottom.

MARGARET: Now help me understand this room. So this is a—?

WESLEY: This is the living room. It’s about 20 x 30 or something like that. It’s red.

MARGARET: So it’s very red.

WESLEY: Yeah. And when you go out of the living room right here onto the patio—

MARGARET: Oh wow it’s so beautiful in the fall and that wonderful curve.

WESLEY: Yeah. The place is solar, it was solar heated or it is solar heated so the sun house, the earth moves past the sun so this curve follows the sun and so heat comes out here and gets absorbed and translated into the living space.

MARGARET: Wow that’s incredible.

WESLEY: He was very tight about exposing his house. Eventually it got out and now it’s being talked more about and showing up. But he did not want anything posted or displayed about his place and so I respected that. I think he said, “Well you know you ought to use the fact that you’ve done this for me, you ought to take advantage of it.” I said, “In what way Dudley?” He said, “Why don’t you just say well you’ve done work which is displayed in Laurel.” Laurel being the name of the house, the name the Frank Lloyd Wright gave the house. I said, “Well okay.” And I said, “Well, what would you want me to do?” He said, “Well, you can take a photograph of it and you could post it at one of your exhibitions.” I said, “Well, maybe.”

So I did, I took some and put them in a nice photograph. And then one day he said, you know he says, “I think I made a mistake.” I said, “What was that?” He said, “Well, I said I was not going to expose this house and this is exactly what I’m doing so let’s discontinue it.” I said, “That’s fine with me.” So it was kind of back and forth and he had just this habit of just upsetting apple carts.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Difficult man in many respects but we understood one another and I liked him very much and I think it was returned. Then one day he came to me and he says, “You know I think I’ve been wrong in not letting you put this on your website. You have this work here and maybe you should put pictures of the house and the rest of it on your website.” And I said, “No, I don’t think I want to do that.” I said, “I don’t need it Dudley.” And so that’s the way, well it turns out he died several weeks ago, month and a half ago and he was 92. I don’t know what’s written in his will, I don’t know what’s written down. I do know what the work apparently meant to him, beats me why it does but some of the letters that I’ve got are in a sense they’re kind of
intimidating letters for a person who makes works. I think the work is, it’s a good work for that place. I’m kind of satisfied with it because he’s so satisfied with it but I never really loved it and art’s a funny thing.

MARGARET: It’s powerful.

WESLEY: Apparently.

MARGARET: Do you know what is going to happen to the work?

WESLEY: That’s the question.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Because I told him, I said, “Look if you ever—“, and there’s going to have to be some decision made about the house of course and the work and all that. And as far as he was concerned, I’m absolutely sure of this because he considers these things to be one. I should, these are letters between us, let’s see—

MARGARET: And the home is in northern Wilmington?

WESLEY: Yes it’s down here on Shipley Road.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: And he was a very interesting smooth talk—this is an award they gave him for his work in blood.

MARGARET: Oh he’s a doctor? Frank Lloyd was his—

WESLEY: He was a scientist.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Now I have not shown this to anybody else. Can you read his writing?

MARGARET: I can.

WESLEY: Read this part in here. You see he liked it obviously—

MARGARET: He liked it a lot, well and it—

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: And just from the tone of the letter it seems like it’s something that affected his outlook.
WESLEY: Well I think that’s right and, because he spent a lot of time alone in his life and studying this painting provided a lot of comfort. So he’s visited me here and he had a way of looking at paintings that I had not seen anybody else do, look at paintings from a point of view, from his point of view which was most unusual. He was kind of a mystic in some ways. Here is a, from this letter that I wrote about making work, he was a pain in the neck. I had worked on the painting from the spring into summer and then Harriet and I went off to New Mexico and he’d gone off to Canada. So that’s the setting.

Upon returning from New Mexico on June 30 in what I feel was a better frame of mind I returned to the painting and on July 13 I had Dudley come over to take a look at the work. He was not pleased with what he saw. He felt that the painting had lost its essential openness, was too flat, to red and too in-your-face. So essentially I had made a sketch and then I had, he wanted red so I had put more red in. And I didn’t like red as I mentioned to you a number of times and I think because I didn’t like red I had made it really red so—

MARGARET: So it was more red?

WESLEY: It was more red than he wanted. So he did not particularly like, he did not particularly like, I’m sorry. As I said he felt that the painting had lost its essential openness, was too flat, to red and too in-your-face. I asked what he thought about the gold leaf squares along two of the arcs. He did not particularly like them and for that I was delighted for I felt that they were too decorative. Normally when someone gives commission every now and then they’ll make comments but he wanted control. As far as his bigger concerns and mine I told him that I might be able to bring the work into a better balance and mood by a subtractive process but as I worked it was clear that some of the areas had to be chiseled over, that is completely redone. This deconstruction was a tough thing to do but the work needed it in order for it to have the emotional impact that I felt it had to convey. At the same time I realized that Dudley’s request for certain colors was not strongly felt. That is he didn’t, he thought he wanted a red painting but he really wanted one which was closer to the sketch that I had made.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: And that what he really wanted was a work which felt right, that is not well articulated like the small sketch. After about 10 days of hard work I felt the painting was starting to connect so I called Dudley to come over and take a look. He felt that the work captured the spirit he desired and asked whether or not I was about through. I told him perhaps but I felt I needed to live with the work for a while and make further refinements to make it fully complete.

Today August 11 I feel the work is essentially complete and have not made substantial changes in the past week. A couple of days ago I brought it from my studio up to our living space next to Square Dance and conclude that it works and that it has much the same spirit as some of my other paintings in the square series. In a few days I will call Dudley to see what he thinks and feels.
Today, Sunday afternoon I received a surprise call from Dudley who had just returned from the Northwest Canadian family vacation. He appeared to have had a great time and was inspired by his trip and further said it was about as close to heaven as I will ever get. In any case he said that while on vacation he had been thinking about the painting and wondering if I could possibly introduce a more mysterious sense of light into the work. This request was based on the apparent allusion of shafts of light which are present in the painting. Further he asked whether or not I had considered a title for the work, something having to do with moving into the light.

I indicated to him that I had done some additional work and had brought the painting up to our living space and that he had better come over and take a look. Well he asked, “Well what about this afternoon?” Since he would be very busy the following week with work matters, having just returned from vacation. He came over at about 3:30 and after looking briefly explained, “I think it’s a finished work. I don’t think you should touch it.” And he reached for a handshake. Anyway that’s the story and this thing, it has, there are some other elements which I won’t go into but it was too much.

MARGARET: Now tell me what is the full time frame on this? That initial conversation at the dinner table to the completion?


MARGARET: That’s quite a commission.

WESLEY: Yeah, yeah. That was quite a bit of fooling around with Dudley Spencer for sure. Anyway even after all this time I go back and I read this letter, it’s a very interesting relationship that developed.

MARGARET: I can, knowing that history though definitely sheds light on how he might feel so connected to the work as well.

WESLEY: Yeah. Well it’s, it is complicated, his, well his way of dealing with artworks and with his art works and with his surroundings and his architecture have complicated his life. His wife died maybe 12 years ago and there was some things in that note that you were reading that had to do with her. He just was so involved in the house and in his workings and in his work as a scientist and he sort of paid attention to her but I think that she might have been neglected to some extent. His daughter is, remains ticked off with the house. I mean she can’t stand it. She lives right next door. They used to live in the house which was right next door to the one that was built.

MARGARET: He had the house; did he have the house built?

WESLEY: Yes.

MARGARET: Okay.
WESLEY: He had taken, he was taking a course at NYU and Frank Lloyd Wright came in every now and then and was instructing the course in architecture and Dudley somehow found his way there. And that’s where they first met and he was a brash young guy with nerve and he approached Frank Lloyd Wright and asked him to design his place. And the basis was, “You don’t have a single house in the state of Delaware and Delaware is the first state you know that. So I think you should consider it.”

MARGARET: I wonder what that relationship was like, that working relationship.

WESLEY: It was not great. There were several exchanges which were not great but eventually Frank Lloyd Wright decided that he would do it because he liked the way the land arranged itself and so it worked.

MARGARET: Wow.

WESLEY: So one thing that I’m still working on, kind of stripes although they are in a different way than what I had done previously.

MARGARET: So, and before we start, help me with a quick chronology. So, you know because for some reason I didn’t write down dates. *Square Dance* is 2000 right?

WESLEY: 2000, it was 1999 to 2000.


WESLEY: Right.

MARGARET: Okay. And so down here, we’re looking past 2000 correct?

WESLEY: That’s right.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: That’s right. Like this work here for example was done in 1996, sorry 2006 and it’s called *Hold My Hand*. This work arose from looking at works by Richard Serra and was the initial thought in taking direction. Okay, this is a, it’s one of those sections right and so when you look at it, it looks, this looks convex and this looks concave. And when I looked at these things I said what would happen if you were able to superimpose a concave structure with a convex one and so I attempted to do that. It didn’t work very well initially. And I backed away from it. Essentially I’d have a kind of a concave thing that looks like this and something like that. I wanted to work with; the challenge for me was to do a square. And so—

MARGARET: That’s interesting given your interest in flatness.

WESLEY: Yeah. And so, so this would work. It has these vertical bands. I was, as many people, were, I was affected by 9/11. It was an awful thing and so this work deals with that Wesley Memeger but in a way which is far different from what I had been doing before. Initially I had
done some work that were almost black and deep red and deep blue and all of that and I decided I’d bring it up to white.

MARGARET: Those, those initial, still dealing with 2011?

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: Or 9/11?

WESLEY: Yeah 9/11, yeah.

Margaret Winslow: Okay.

WESLEY: So when I saw Richard Serra’s sections I decided I’d tried to listen and here is, see that?

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

WESLEY: But I didn’t feel that I could then put this concave one and that would be the convex one here. So this was the start of that. And so you get your shearing action here and these two vertical columns, it’s kind of a direct relation to what happened there. And this work over here, this is kind of back and forth now. I think this was done actually a little earlier. This was done in 2003. All the little squares here, a couple of little columns in there, sheering action and some things were really dark and I said you know I don’t think I should be fooling around with that Wesley Memeger so I moved away. And the next one was blue and the next one was kind of white and as I said then I saw these works of Serra. So I went from here basically to that white one there and then to this work over here.

MARGARET: To this one.

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: But very red.

WESLEY: Yes, yes.

MARGARET: And so much about, this seems so much more about mark making.

WESLEY: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MARGARET: How many works like this did you make?

WESLEY: There were just three or four, just three or four. There was one which was deeply colored.

MARGARET: Wow.
WESLEY: I sold this to an artist friend, Anna Frances. She made that exhibition called “Return to Beauty” at the BCC. They worked on it and it became an exhibition she liked. But this one, this deep blue thing, this shot of light; I don’t know what these mean. So this is 2004. It was about 2003-2004. And the white one over there was later.

MARGARET: Okay. Wow. So this is just so different. Did you show any of these?

WESLEY: Yeah. This one was shown at Carolynn Roberts. Oh Carolynn Roberts had this gallery house out in [inaudible]. And she liked showing [inaudible] works. And Stan Smokler and other people who showed there, and they were really on to her because she really pushed. And so that was sold.

MARGARET: I just, I love the composition. Its kinds of shots, like, you said shots of light coming out.

WESLEY: Yeah. [Inaudible] but this one’s small. It’s about 18 x 18 inches. Here’s a little drawing which I made, which I sold to somebody and again it’s that notion of concavity and convex character. There is some works that you get rid of and you wish, you always wish you had kept them and this is one of them. There’s something very airy about it and almost gossamer about it, with the structure looks kind of on the page. So I went from here to this and several years later of course and it was following this, so from here to here, to this.

MARGARET: Sorry just a quick question. Are these images from the show at Carolynn Roberts?


MARGARET: Okay. So this is, wow these are just so interesting.

WESLEY: This one I gave to the DCCA for their auction and they sold that to somebody up in [inaudible], Homage to Colin Breenbe, CG. He’s a friend who liked to use these tension bars in his work.

MARGARET: Just a completely different illusion of depth and perspective.

WESLEY: Yeah. You know what that is? That’s, there is a building downtown, the I. M. Pei building.

MARGARET: Yeah.

WESLEY: This, he wants to do, he calls this kind of simulated architecture. He was interested in making large scale sculptures but found that he could never afford them so he started to put these bars in his work. And so this—

MARGARET: How interesting. Is he local?

WESLEY: He’s in New York.
MARGARET: Okay.


MARGARET: The work is interesting.

WESLEY: Yeah, yeah.

MARGARET: Oh, so if you’re, yeah.

WESLEY: So if you go outside and look up the, look up on the walls, these are floors and so, I took this picture in 1979 when I was taking a composition course in photography. And I call it Lebayan Paved Boulevard. Some people think that they are at a train station or——

MARGARET: Yeah, I see yeah. Oh these are so, so do you have any others from this group?

WESLEY: I only took, I took several photographs and when I lock on something I like I just, that’s it and I discard it.

MARGARET: Oh no, I’m sorry. I mean from the group of painting?

WESLEY: The group of paintings?

MARGARET: Because I feel like I haven’t seen any of these and they are so different. I mean it’s just kind of an interesting series within this you know kind of the continuum from the earlier work into this more recent work that I’m familiar with. And there’s just kind of this interesting different moment. Oh and so this is later though? This is from 1997?

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: So this was before.

WESLEY: Yeah this was before these.

MARGARET: The square series.

WESLEY: Yeah this was when I learned how to do perspective.

MARGARET: So this was this what you were doing, this wasn’t what you were doing with Charles Murray was it?

WESLEY: I think I learned how to make these kinds of things as a result of taking his course. I had taken those photographs and I looked at one of the photographs one day, this one in particular. I said you know what I should do is just see if I can make some interesting paintings based on that and so that’s what happened here. There was one painting which I think you would have like accept I messed it up several weeks back.

MARGARET: Recently?
WESLEY: Yeah I had gone back after 15 years and was fooling around with it and made a mess. But sometimes you mess up paintings and that’s what happened.

MARGARET: Do you often do that? Go back and, your work?

WESLEY: No I don’t generally because I think it’s a mistake. Here it is.

MARGARET: Yes, I love that. Still trying to, okay so that was that one. Gosh these are so interesting. I would just love to see more in person.

WESLEY: Ordinarily I would bring the painting out but I’ve destroyed it. I do not know where you’d see it.

MARGARET: Okay. Are these your sketchbooks Wes?

WESLEY: Well this was some—

MARGARET: I’m just peeking.

WESLEY:—stuff that had to do with perspective. And it was a rigorous sketching class.

MARGARET: So from when you were doing those, taking those classes in the ‘90s?

WESLEY: Yes.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Yeah. And okay so from the mid-2000s I went back to these verticals. But then I wanted to, because things were feeling chaotic I wanted to move away from this kind of quiet thing. And so I had used an X on this cross before in a dark painting that you had seen but when I put it in this one I said you know it’s not working so I just, I should back up. Before I put the X in by the cross I was working on just the verticals in those orbs. And at one point I just again made that X because I said you know I think it’s not going to work. I’m just not going to do it. But when I put the X in I said you know this looks kind of interesting and so I just finished it in that way. And again it was the verticality and strangely enough most people haven’t, they told me kind of associated this with anything but what it is. But I know what it’s related to. My granddaughter, Lily, she loves this painting. So it’s called it Hold My Hand and it’s based on her standing next to me looking at the—

MARGARET: Oh wow.

WESLEY: Yeah. She was eight at the time.

MARGARET: Well it’s incredibly dynamic. And it’s interesting to see the amount of mark making and gesture that I feel like I’m saying in these more gestural painting from the earlier 2000s but that I hadn’t seen in those initial square paintings.
WESLEY: That’s right, that’s right. And it was also intentional. I had to keep down the dynamics if you will or in my way of thinking the noise. And I tend to like quiet paintings and so I moved, ever since I’ve been moving back to really quiet paintings, especially after this one. I had never, Carolynn Roberts came here one day and she says, “What is this?” I said, “Well you see it.” And she says, “Why don’t you show it?” I said, ”I’m not going to show this.” She says, “Why not?” I said,” Well that painting doesn’t feel like me at all so I’m not going to show it.” So eventually I showed it in 2009 and I had some comments to make about it.

MARGARET: Was this show at 919?

WESLEY: Yes. Right. While I’m looking you might just take a look at this. I think you might like it, even black and white I painted it.

MARGARET: Oh yes, I can see. So Carolynn Roberts Gallery was on Yorklyn Road, okay. Who was RB Strauss who reviewed the—

WESLEY: He was a writer who had a way of looking at abstract works like nobody else that I knew around Delaware Valley. And he died maybe three or four years ago but there were a lot, he reviewed a lot of work for a lot of people around here.

MARGARET: It’s interesting, his relation of your work to natural phenomena.

WESLEY: Yeah. See I think in some ways he got kind of carried away but nevertheless he saw what he thought he saw I guess. He was very encouraging.

MARGARET: Oh, I’d love to have a copy of this at some point.

WESLEY: All right. It has to do with this one.

MARGARET: With this one? Okay so this was your artist statement from 2009. I’d love a copy of this.

WESLEY: Okay. So you can see it’s something I just would not have shown, that’s why I mentioned Carolynn. I kind of miss her. She got out of the gallery business because she couldn’t make a go of it.

MARGARET: Is she still in the area?

WESLEY: No. She moved to Florida. Her mom lives there. She was trained at U of D as an artist but she never made art. She just felt she wanted to sell it and frame work. I think she was good at both. I sold several paintings through her.

MARGARET: With her?

WESLEY: Yeah.
MARGARET: So do you think this canvas is really a transition between that work that you were making in the early mid 2000s and then into these later pieces?

WESLEY: Yeah. Basically what I feel is that I said you know this is outrageous. And so I said, but I’m finally accomplishing this thing, what I was trying to do. That is you see the convex, I’m sorry concave this one.

MARGARET: Then the convex.

WESLEY: Yeah. It just feels right in this particular, in this chaos.

MARGARET: But there is a third kind of dimension I feel in the piece as well.

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: So then you send this and, well no maybe that is the same kind of—

WESLEY: Well if you want to see something interesting, look at it from this angle. That’s what my granddaughter, my granddaughter is, not as, not as tall as you, she’s about this height and she was not seeing the same painting I was seeing.

MARGARET: Right.

WESLEY: It was funny.

MARGARET: Yeah because the level of depth in the piece.

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: It’s incredible. But then still that, I mean is that right in the center of the canvas, that gold thing, that gold shift.

WESLEY: Yeah. It’s put on and then I scraped it off and put it back. It’s just where we worked again and again and that’s on paper by the way, so paper glued to canvas.

MARGARET: Oh really?

WESLEY: Yeah. So once I finished that then I went to more quiet things again. And so I kind of moved first to simple canvas without the strip. And I should show it to you on the end of that because I sold it to a woman who lives out in Silver Springs, Ellen, Ellen Bartholomus sold it from a group show.

MARGARET: That was at Blue Streak?

WESLEY: Yes. Now when Echelmeyer tried to take pictures of this we had one hard time but the painting itself is gossamer like. It almost floated and so it, it’s a little, has a little bit more substance than this surface but not a lot and I really liked it and made the mistake of selling it.
And then I made another one and we were having some critique sessions and I thought about ways of changing the asymmetry in the thing and so I put a line down through there. Kind of not sure that was the correct thing to do but nevertheless I did it and that’s that painting on the left except that is a different kind of feel. And initially I was trying for this kind of feel but because of the dry conditions in the studio and because the temperature, lots of things, the paint set up in a completely different way and it was not as gossamer, airy like.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: And I missed that. Anyway this, this painting had a way of having these squares just disappear on you from different angles. And it’s called Homage to the Venetians.

MARGARET: Okay. It’s certainly an interesting way you know how that line, that diagonal grounds the piece in a very different way.

WESLEY: Yeah. That was the objective, was to somehow stabilize it. But for me this one, it kind of feels better to me but yeah that has its purpose. Now what’s going on over there is diptych formation. I’m still in the process of making that work and so I’m bringing, trying to bring those two things into phase with one another. You see the right side of the second panel?

MARGARET: Yeah.

WESLEY: You see the right side is kind of slightly tilted.

MARGARET: Yeah.

WESLEY: It’s taking on the color of the other, yeah. So I’m trying to fit those two things together.

MARGARET: So you’re reworking the one on, are you reworking the one on the left?

WESLEY: No. The one on the right is being worked on to bring it up to the point where it fits with that. So I’m trying for diptychity.

MARGARET: Okay. Have you, yeah, no, have you done any other diptychs?

WESLEY: Yes.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Yes.

MARGARET: Diptychity that’s a good word. You should be an art historian.

WESLEY: This is not quite a diptych but this is a painting of Tonia. It came directly from that one upstairs where I just took it and cut out that small section and blew it up to 6 x 6 and
somebody bought this work here in Wilmington. It really works in the house. It’s not quite as red. It has a, it is more like, more kind of gold like.

MARGARET: So you were working on these more minimal calmer similar compositions during the same time that you were creating these dynamic canvases as well?

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: So you weren’t working exclusively on those more kind of dynamic gestural darker canvases?

WESLEY: Right, right.

MARGARET: That’s good to know. Okay.

WESLEY: Yeah I was not, yeah. Now there’s one, I mentioned it at the lineup that you saw dealing with Hold My Hand. It’s this one and it’s called A Quiet Day in the Studio. This painting kind of resulted from just being in this space really, in this quiet and it’s got a lot of verticals. It makes it happen and so it, and you notice there is a return to this?

MARGARET: Yeah. This feels the most like the first series of works on paper than any of the other canvasses that I’ve seen.

WESLEY: Yeah, yeah, right.

MARGARET: I like this a lot.

WESLEY: Now you try to photograph this. You can’t really. It’s just impossible.

MARGARET: Well I think the subtleties of your palette and your brushwork, it’s incredibly difficult to capture I imagine. Have you had Carson’s photograph your work?

WESLEY: No I have, do you know Rick—

MARGARET: Echelmeyer?

WESLEY: Echelmeyer.

MARGARET: Mm hmm. He works at the Museum as well.

WESLEY: He’s really good. He does work at APA in Philadelphia. Carson photographed for me early on and he was frustrated with it. And I just never returned. Rick is less frustrated but his results aren’t all that better.

MARGARET: That’s very—you know, I think you captured that perfectly. Mm hmm, maybe the difference between the two.
WESLEY: Yeah. You know the way I work sometimes it’s kind of based on some sort of logic or it feels as though I’m still fooling around in the lab when in fact I’m not. But I can think about things in a way that has some pseudoscientific thought behind it. I will know when I’m making a scientific error and yet it leads me in the right directions. This is one. You see this is the case where you have a square and there is kind of a beam of light coming down and bisecting the square in the middle there, white going up. And at a certain point they just kind of up end. Well that’s just the opposite of what happens generally with light going into a structure. The light beam will bend and here I’m having the square bend.

MARGARET: Right.

WESLEY: So it’s wrong, its wrongheaded thinking but it leads to an interesting result.

MARGARET: Right. You know it’s interesting just thinking about some other artists and their working processes. Were you at Dennis Beech’s gallery talk?

WESLEY: No I missed that.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: I missed it.

MARGARET: It’s interesting listening to artists kind of set up these rules or, no I guess rules are probably the right word for it. But just kind of structured method of working, these kinds of internal rules or constraints that artists will sometimes give themselves. And I do wonder, and I’d included that actually is one of my questions for you, if your background as a scientist had influenced that method of working because I think that you can, you have a sense of that structure when looking at your work.

WESLEY: Well I think it does. For example I was restrained in making this work because of certain scientific principles. But it’s a strange kind of restraint because I know that the restraint that I have is not necessarily correct but it is a way of guiding yourself in a way, you can fool yourself into thinking that you’re doing something which is profound when in fact you’ve been led, and kind of led by kind of some wrongheaded thinking. But that’s all right.

MARGARET: I like that pseudoscientific that you said, yeah.

WESLEY: Yeah. So there are a couple of, I’ll tell you where I am now after I tell you about—okay so I’ll tell you about what I’m trying to do here, I’m trying to bring these into alignment. This painting here, when I had it at the 919 it was really fun because depending upon what time of day you went into the gallery you would see different things. Every now and then some of these squares would drop out, you wouldn’t be able to see them, you know there’s one there, particularly the one down there and I think there was one in here someplace. You go in there you’d say, “Where is it?” And then you could see it come into focus. But with this painting it’s kind of a square in a square and I do believe that art history is important and people have a lot to
teach. And in this case Agnes Martin and Kazimir Malevich. I didn’t think about this when I was working but you see the alternating paint stripes?

MARGARET: And the shift to the horizontal.

WESLEY: Right, right. There’s—

HARRIET: Excuse me.

MARGARET: Yeah?

HARRIET: Would you like some water or something to drink?

MARGARET: Oh no I’m fine, thank you though.

WESLEY: And then there’s the square here and then there’s this one. This square with this arrangement is a direct translation of one of the images. The white square, white on white square. The difference is that it’s pink and the pink is the one that’s iridescent. So this didn’t go in until everything else was more or less done.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: I have these tails here and I said, “You know this center, it needs something.” It wasn’t quite completed so I just put this in and it kind of feels a lot better. So that is going to— because the next painting will be, this other related to this one but it will be bigger.

MARGARET: Is that the largest canvas you’ve done since the commission?

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: It’s intimidating in the sense that I know how much work it is because I believe every square inch of the surface needs to be painted as opposed to people who pour paint or drip paint. They will leave say unpainted canvas which is fine but people were so further ahead and maybe will copy this maybe but I kind of feel that every inch needs to be painted.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: I’m going to get started on that. Then finally this one, let me show you what, this was a little different. This one is Eccentric Square.

MARGARET: Wow.

WESLEY: It’s that old notion of who’s afraid of red, blue and yellow.

MARGARET: Yeah. And that’s on paper?
WESLEY: That’s on paper.

MARGARET: And when did you do this?

WESLEY: Three weeks ago.

MARGARET: Oh very recently.

WESLEY: Yeah, it’s the last, last thing. It’s not complete yet but it’s getting there. It almost feels like a collage.

MARGARET: I was just going to ask about this element. That’s not a collage?

WESLEY: No it’s a painting.

MARGARET: Well this is very different.

WESLEY: You know it’s, the whole thing is activated in a way that the others are not. And for me it almost screams, maybe because of the colors. I don’t know. What I would like it to do, and it’s probably not going to do it, is to go flatter but you know that’s the, that may be the challenge.

MARGARET: I have to say I’m really drawn to, as you say, the eccentricity of the square, this tilting of the form. And interesting how it’s been flattened or grounded by that central square. That isn’t, it is, or I can’t tell if it’s square to—

WESLEY: Actually the, if you take this square here and this one they’re almost in phase but slightly out.

MARGARET: Okay.

WESLEY: Slightly out. This one is tilted slightly. It was intentional. I didn’t want it quite in phase. And it’s visual, I can pick up, I can pick up this difference easily.

MARGARET: Uh huh yeah. It feels very unbalanced.

WESLEY: Yeah, yeah.

MARGARET: Does that feel comfortable?

WESLEY: Well it’s a, no and I think it has to do, an unbalanced nature has to do with this pinkish red. I’m not sure, I’m not sure of that. I’m not sure of that.

MARGARET: Well I think the tilting and the primary colors and the pinkish red.

WESLEY: Yeah.

MARGARET: There’s a lot happening.
WESLEY: Yeah. I think what you did with a painting like this was to just let it set for a while and see what happens. When I first made it it was really way out there and it felt uncomfortable but not so much now. And eventually you also start to see some interesting things like this one.

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

WESLEY: All kinds of stuff. And that’s the way my eye goes when I look at something like this.

MARGARET: I feel like there is a whole different, different levels of depth in this that I don’t necessarily see in the other work.

WESLEY: That’s right. It’s no longer a flat painting.

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

WESLEY: Yeah nothing like over here which is a real flat painting.

MARGARET: No.

WESLEY: And then this too.

MARGARET: Yeah the lighting, it almost feels, well I don’t know maybe in ways similar to the one in the back left corner, that kind of, that type of depth in a way.

WESLEY: Yeah. I don’t know whether you noticed this painting or not. This painting here has a duality. See the top now, the top, it comes right here. See the top, there’s a triangle at the top which is reddish. That thing will disappear—

MARGARET: Mm hmm. When you get—

WESLEY:—about right here.

MARGARET: Yes.

WESLEY: See that?

MARGARET: And that’s really because of the types of paints you’re using?

WESLEY: It’s because the types of paint but interesting enough it all depends upon this angle.

MARGARET: Right okay.

WESLEY: Yeah. And what I’m going to do I think is make a very thin painting just like, something like the one there. I kind of made those great end slabs [inaudible].

MARGARET: Barnett Newman?

MARGARET: Yeah okay.
MARGARET: So you mean a shaped canvas?
WESLEY: Yeah. Just taking a, like a, just like a—
MARGARET: Just a shaped curve, yeah. Oh that would be interesting to see.
WESLEY: Yeah.
MARGARET: Huh, no longer a square.
WESLEY: Right, right, just something to try.
MARGARET: Oh that would be very interesting to see.

WESLEY: Anyway so this is kind of what I’m up to now. To me it’s very interesting because I’ve been retired now since 1997 and I’m still involved in kind of a range of things and painting is one of them. And I still feel kind of strangely comfortable with trying to advocate for one thing or another. It’s a peculiar business. But what it does is take me away from having enough time to dig deep into some of these things.

MARGARET: Right. So, Wes I’m going to stop our recording.

[End of Audio]
Duration: 150 minutes