Oral history interview with Joe Moss, April 8, 2011

Moss, Joe
Sculptor

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MARGARET: And... recording. So, just for archival purposes I am going to say that I am interviewing artist Joe Moss on April 8th, 2011, in the artist’s home. And my name is Margaret Winslow. I’m the assistant curator for the Delaware Art Museum. Okay, so I was hoping we could start—maybe if you could just talk a little bit about your art education starting at the beginning.

JOE: Well I didn’t really have any formal art education until I hit college because the schools I went to in West Virginia, of course didn’t have art classes. I just enjoyed drawing from the time I was a little kid. I remember crawling around on the floor in the church, underneath everybody’s feet and my mother, to make me behave, gave me her [inaudible] fountain pen, blank check—the back of a blank check, so I drew a picture of the church but from the outside while I was inside.

And so she thought somebody else drew it and I didn’t. Finally she was convinced. But anyway—I’m sure my thinking at the time was, “I must be able to do something that somebody else can’t do.” And it encouraged me I guess. And after that I just drew a lot like drawing cartoons. In school I liked drawing [inaudible]. I liked drawing a funny caricature, passing it around the room, everybody laughing [inaudible] wondering what was going on.

And then I drew everybody in the graduating class when I was a senior. I went home for the 50th anniversary of our class a few years ago and one of the people I drew a picture of—I kind of
predicted everybody’s future on a big drawing I did around stage. I showed them all because there wasn’t that many kids in the class.

MARGARET: Small.

JOE: So she told me—I drew—she liked to play the guitar and sing country songs and I said—my fortune for her I wrote was that she would travel the world playing her guitar and singing her songs. And she said, “I have a bone to pick with you” and I said, “What’s that?” And she said, “You know I never got to go around the world playing my guitar.” She said, “I barely got away from Deuce Creek” which is where she lived, married a guy, and raised a family.

So anyway I entertain myself but I realized I didn’t want to stay on a farm. So I got to get out of school. So I start at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh [inaudible], but Pittsburgh was so awful in those days. The sky was so polluted and I was there on a Sunday looking for a room and it was just unbearable. You couldn’t see—it was a sunny day but you couldn’t see the sun because of the smoke.

MARGARET: Wow. So would that have been in the early ‘50s?

JOE: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOE: And I said, “I don’t really want to live here.” So my brother-in-law was with me and he said, “Well you could get an art degree in West Virginia. Why don’t you come back to West Virginia?” And so I thought that was kind of a downer. It was an art school but—in West Virginia. But I thought I had to do something to have some kind of success at this because I didn’t want to work on the farm. I didn’t want to go to the coal mine. I didn’t want to cut timber. These are the things that some of my other friends are doing because hardly anybody went to college where I went to school. Later on I think a couple people got degrees but just not very many.

Anyway that’s—so I [inaudible] West Virginia’s small art department had an art historian who was the chair of the department, a studio person, and an art education person. That was it, three.

MARGARET: Wow.

JOE: Three for the faculty but they noticed I had [inaudible] because I was in the studio drawing and I started oil painting in the first year when really it didn’t start until the second year. But I got to sit in with the class. At the time I was a junior and I won first prize and—

[Break in Audio]

MARGARET: Okay, here we go. So we are looking at—what was the name of this painting?

JOE: West Virginia Boom.
MARGARET: *West Virginia Boom* from 1966. So tell me about this.

JOE: Well, the governor, because I attracted a lot of attention, I think from my *West Virginia Moon* painting, and at one point I was better known than the governor’s estate because of that. A friend of mine married the governor’s daughter. So my friend was waiting for the governor and the governor asked if I could do something to get attention for his daughter’s skirt-mining business. My friend called me and asked if I could do something with him.” And I said, “Well give me a couple of weeks and give me a call. I don’t have anything off the top of my head, but in a couple of weeks maybe I’ll think of something.”

So he called me back in a couple of weeks. He said, “You have an idea?” And I told him my idea and then it got quiet on the other end of the phone. I said, “Paul, are you there?” And he said, “Oh, yea. Joe,” he said, “that’s kind of extreme, isn’t it?” And I said, “Do you want to get attention, or do you not?”

MARGARET: Right.

JOE: He said, “Well. Let me run in by the governor.” So here I am by the governor and the governor said, “Just leave him out of there and don’t mention his name.” But, he wanted me to go ahead and do it. So I had the governor’s order, but I didn’t tell anybody that. So they had this special night of award giving and recognition. Hyman Leroth—was an outdoor presentation they did. It was the history of how West Virginia became a state.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOE: So they had the poet laureate. He had a new poem he had written about West Virginia. He gave all these prizes for conservation and so forth to people, and I was sitting there with all these governors and their wives. There was an amphitheater. It was a beautiful evening, too. There was an old [inaudible] field with an old cowbell, and the lights. The night was coming on and lights were coming up, and it was just beautiful. But, I was sitting there and thinking, oh my God, I might have gone a little too far here. I was a little worried, because this was a big thing. I mean, it was eight feet across.

MARGARET: Eight feet across.

JOE: And six feet high.

MARGARET: And where was it set up for the ceremony?

JOE: It was on the stage, and it was sitting there not blowing up. I had two guys behind it with torches. There were 13 fuses sticking out of the back of them [inaudible] force, so it could stand the blast [inaudible]. I had the wick sticking out the back—M-80s, which was the size of half a stick of dynamite.

MARGARET: And on the front side, you had painted this landscape painting, right?
JOE: I covered it all up. But, if you look after it blows up, see all those miners? The water is all filthy, full of little creepy crawlers.

MARGARET: And you have words as well, “dads,” “dirt,” “spoil,” “ruin.”

JOE: And these are little toy soldiers, but they have no heads. They were made into miners. They’re little toy bulldozers and things that had wings on them like they were rocks.

MARGARET: So these were three-dimensional objects inside the painting?

JOE: Oh, yea.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOE: These pockets. Everything had covered up and then the blast went off. Anyway, I had two guys back there, and there were 13 charges, and they had propane torches. [inaudible] first, second, third, and so forth. [inaudible]. They took the cover off of it, and the photographers were all around the stage. They’ve been told there was something special. They were taking pictures. It was pretty boring, so they had started back to their seats and a first charge went off. And I had also packed dirt in there.

MARGARET: Into the painting?

JOE: Yea, in these pockets. I had never went and tested the dirt in there before, and that dust exploded, too. It was really blowing things. Photographers were trying to run back and get pictures, ladies were ducking under their purses and things. I thought, somebody’s going to lose eyes. This is going to really hurt somebody. Oh my God, I was afraid to watch. I scared myself. Anyway, the 13 charges finished, and this huge cloud of smoke raised everywhere. And you heard it. Just a few claps, and everybody sat there stunned. And then they came out, all [inaudible].

MARGARET: So tell me about the response to this.

JOE: Well, the governor’s wife wanted to make it back to talk to me back at the [inaudible]. When I went back there, she said, “Joe, you know nobody has responded to the poem at all. You totally stole the show.” Anyway, then all of this stuff came out in the newspapers.

MARGARET: “Moss Painting Real Blast.”

JOE: They had it back at the concession stand where people could examine it up close. Yea, did you read where—well this what is said in The Pittsburgh Press.

MARGARET: Now, what happened to the work?

JOE: I don’t know. Oh wait, it went to the Rotunda of the Capitol.
MARGARET: Oh, okay here we go. So it was placed in the Capitol Rotunda, so it was on view there.

JOE: They had—I don’t know, some of the Senators were fighting. I think one guy punched another one maybe, if you read all of this stuff. One of them said that it was an awful thing because it was giving tourists a bad idea, giving them a bad impression of West Virginia. Another point of view was, well that’s exactly what we’re doing, isn’t it?

MARGARET: Do you feel like it really increased awareness on what was happening in terms of mountaintop removal coal mining?

JOE: Yea, I don’t know what difference it might have made.

MARGARET: Yea, it’s still happening now.

JOE: I have all the letters from *West Virginia Boom* [inaudible], and *West Virginia Moon* was primarily—it was two-thirds to three-quarts favorable. This wasn’t. One of them had said he’s like to paint a painting of me where he’s have to use a broom and a bucket of shit to do it.

MARGARET: Wow. That’s a strong response.

JOE: I got phone calls that you wouldn’t believe. Like, somebody would call and say, “You don’t know who I am, but [inaudible]. I had my best friend for life here and we were having dinner and we got into an argument about your painting. I was defending it and he was giving me hell, and I threw him out of here. I wouldn’t let him stay and sent him home!”

MARGARET: So it did caused discussion about this issue. But, you don’t know what happened to the work after it was on viewing in the Rotunda?

JOE: I don’t know. I’ve got a little box someplace with a few shreds of it.

MARGARET: I wonder if it’s in storage somewhere.

JOE: I bet they threw it away.

MARGARET: That may be the case, or maybe it’s kept somewhere. So I also want to talk about another exhibition. In February 1981, one of your sculptures—we talked about this little bit this last time—was removed from display at the Carvel State Building.

JOE: The installation, yea.

MARGARET: The installation. It’s interesting. In your vertical file, we have the official letter that they sent out, and their official reason given, and I quote was that, “some of the materials used in the installation were determined by the building manager and the city fire marshal to constitute a fire hazard.” But, it seems like a lot of the reaction that I read was really in response to the work, the kinds of materials you were using in this, maybe less-than-traditional sculpture
materials that people were responding to. So can you talk a little bit about that? But first, tell me, because I found the work referenced two different ways, as *Compromise*, and as *No Compromise*. Did the title change in the middle?

JOE: [inaudible].

MARGARET: It was.

JOE: I think I sent out invitations with it saying *Compromise or No Compromise*, I can’t remember.

MARGARET: I think it was—

JOE: I have the slide right here.

MARGARET: Here is the letter, the official letter.

JOE: I can’t remember.

MARGARET: They sent that to the museum.

JOE: Hm.

MARGARET: And then we have this one. This is February 11th, 1981. The work is titled—oh, no maybe it is titled *No Compromise*. No, so we have *Compromise* here, and then *No Compromise* here. Regardless, tell me about that piece.

JOE: Okay, well, I think. No, that’s the exploding thing. The slide is right here.

MARGARET: Okay. All right. I think we’re still okay. Yup, there we go. So it looks like the piece was made out of wood and insulation foam as well.

JOE: Polyurethane foam, soft.

MARGARET: Soft. And this was for a DDOA grant show, correct?

JOE: Yea, I did have a grant that year. I had an ADA grant, and I had a Delaware grant the same year.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOE: It was during the time of the Iranian hostages, which was all about oil, the same thing we have going on now. Anyway, I used as many plastics as I could. Delaware’s known for its production of plastics.
MARGARET: And now, the tar element was not able to be realized in the installation, correct? I guess you and some of your graduate students tried to install it and then a visitor decided to interact with it?

JOE: Yea, and then we removed it.

MARGARET: And then you removed it.

JOE: At twelve we went to lunch after we installed the piece, and then we came back and somebody, who was not supposed to even be in the building at the time, had been in a hurry [inaudible] in the room and must have seen the tar and [inaudible].

MARGARET: It looks like there are other elements here. It looks like there’s wood.

JOE: Copper.

MARGARET: Copper as well.

JOE: Acrylic. You know there’s one of Horace’s downstairs.

MARGARET: I did not know that.

JOE: [inaudible] between two big [inaudible].

MARGARET: Yes, that was in the show. I’m looking at that image right now.

JOE: That was the altar piece.

MARGARET: Now, explain what you mean by that.

JOE: Well, it was kind of to give it a little religious conscience. You wouldn’t usually see a knight on an altar. What’s that biblical thing that—which biblical character was it who was supposed to kill his son?

MARGARET: Isaac?

JOE: His son’s named Cain or something like that?

MARGARET: But I know who you’re referring to.

JOE: I know it’s a far-fetched connection, but artists do make far-fetched associations. If they don’t, they’re not very interesting.

MARGARET: So you actually have images here of the mess that was made after someone walked through the tar pen.

JOE: There are pictures of people before it happened, too.
MARGARET: I was curious. When I was looking back at these newspaper images, they really only show the image of the foam piece. They don’t show images of the other sculptures as well. Those certainly didn’t constitute fire hazard, not at all. So tell me, were you surprised by that response to the work?

JOE: Not really. I don’t think so. I think art ought to cause you to react and respond to it. I actually was responding in a sense, because I was asked to do a show and I asked if I could do a piece outside, and at first they said yes, and then I was told no for insurance reasons and so forth. I couldn’t put anything out there. Of course since, they’ve done that quite a lot. That kind of hurt me. But, I must say I sold the piece for a good deal of money later. Anyway, [inaudible]. It was really quite pretty before it got messed up.

MARGARET: The images are absolutely beautiful. Like I said—and let me just show you again. For example, in this image, it’s really rather difficult to see the other work that’s included in the exhibition.

JOE: That tall window, you can’t see it because the altarpiece was behind that. And this foam business—I grew up on a farm over in the Berkshires and so forth, and you’d spear an animal apart with a big stake in order to gut them and skin them and all that stuff. Some of this stuff comes from butchering scenes, and all kinds of imagery from the past.

MARGARET: The understanding of contemporary art in 1981 in downtown Wilmington, this was difficult material.

JOE: Yea. Did you know that piece [inaudible].

MARGARET: I thought I saw that.

JOE: I won a national prize for that thing for another show later on.

MARGARET: So you incorporated this sculpture in another piece.

JOE: I sliced it and made pages. That’s the book. If you look at the book, it was in I.M. Pei’s Plaza in Wilmington for First Night. And it was there—it’s got pages and a marker, and people wrote things they remembered about previous year, the year they just lived. And then I had two big reflectors that won a spread across the court, and they had platforms that came up. You could walk up into the focus of those big sound reflectors, and you could talk to this reflector and tell somebody on the other end of the plaza talking on the other end of the reflector. You could tell them about the year you had, good things and bad things and so forth.

And the people in the cone couldn’t hear. It was focused. Anyway, you wrote something about the past year in the book.

MARGARET: What year was this?

JOE: I don’t know. They had some kind of comedian or international leading actor.
MARGARET: So First Night, maybe in the ’80s?

JOE: Vic won a prize—the organization that put the show on, they hadn’t done anything. It was my piece. I’ll see if he would know what year that was. I’ll bet you she would. Do you remember what year we did the [inaudible]?

DAPHNE:[inaudible]. Did you check the outside of the books? The outside of the books usually have the year on them.

JOE: You’re sure it’s on the outside of the books?

DAPHNE:[inaudible].

JOE: It’s on the resume?

DAPHNE:[inaudible] on the outside of it?

JOE: The big rubber one?

DAPHNE: Yea. It was the very first First Night they had.

JOE: [inaudible].

DAPHNE: I’m pretty sure that’s what it was. One of these books has [inaudible].

MARGARET: You think perhaps it was Wilmington—the first time they did a First Night celebration?

JOE: That’s what she said.

MARGARET: So I can look into that and see what I can find.

JOE: You know Paul Earl [inaudible] disco?

MARGARET: Right.

JOE: His wife was the instigator of that. She started that, I think in Boston.

MARGARET: Oh, First Night in Boston?

JOE: Yes, and then it went international.

MARGARET: Right. I know someone else who I think was involved with that as well, up in Reading and she might remember that as well. Okay, so I’ll ask her about that as well. How neat. Okay, well I think I’ve been asking you questions for close to two hours now.

JOE: Really?
MARGARET: Yea, so I think I'm going to stop for today. Sound good?

JOE: Okay.

[End of Audio]
Duration: 29 minutes