Oral history interview with John Schoonover, August 22, 2013

Schoonover, John
Gallerist, grandson of Frank E. Schoonover and founder of Schoonover Galleries Frame shop

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MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, associate curator for contemporary art interviewing John Schoonover on Thursday, August 22, 2013 at the Schoonover Studios at 1616 North Rodney Street.

JOHN: My voice is terrible so—

MARGARET: That, they won’t hear that in the, they won’t be able to read that in the transcriptions. This is perfect.

JOHN: Where’s the video?

MARGARET: Oh no video. Well, unless you want video.

JOHN: I’m in a documentary video. That’s plenty on the Schoonover.

MARGARET: That’s true. I think mostly for this project I’ve just been doing audio. Though I did do a taped interview with Joe Moss and I have him on video as well, and he’s there talking about some of his work and such.

JOHN: Remind me again without wasting too much of your tape, the scope of the whole project.
MARGARET: The whole scope of the project—

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Well it’s incredibly ambitious if I haven’t mentioned that. I am attempting to survey the contemporary art scene in Wilmington in the 1970s and 80s. And as you know this is when the city saw the establishment of commercial galleries.

JOHN: Right.

MARGARET: The majority of the commercial galleries that are still in existence today as well as several important arts organizations. This is where the time frame that they were founded as well. So the DCCA, the Delaware Theatre Company, and arts organizations outside the city as well. So [inaudible] the Center for Creative Arts. So and all of this kind of incredible energy in downtown Wilmington. So looking at these two decades to really document this time period.

JOHN: [Inaudible] the Fifth Street Gallery.

MARGARET: [Inaudible] Fifth Street Gallery.

JOHN: [Inaudible] you know and a lot of this I’m sure I was just thinking came with the vitality and exuberance of downtown in the 80s. At Oscar’s and a lot of—

MARGARET: Right the connections—

JOHN: [Inaudible] rock and roll and—

MARGARET: Yeah—

JOHN:—the nightlife.

MARGARET: Yeah so I’m doing all of the research for that project in addition as you read. I’m doing kind of this oral history project. I’m talking with artists, gallerists, art patrons to really get—record all of their memories, contributions, activities during these two decades. It seems like this is a timely project. DCCA recently celebrated their anniversary and there have been kind of renewed artistic activities in downtown Wilmington. At the same time all of those things are happening I want to make sure that we document this history so it isn’t lost. Already as the Queen was renovated—

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET:—and you lost that great stairway out to Fifth Street Gallery where you saw all the gallery signage, all of that history is gone. So I think it’s really important and timely right now to document all of this.

JOHN: And then you’re going to have an exhibit at some point?
MARGARET: Yes so then in summer 2015—Oh sure. Bless you.

JOHN: [Inaudible] I don’t have a cold but I just have, something, whatever. Okay.

MARGARET: So summer 2015 exhibition. In addition to the exhibition we’ll probably address a lot of the live arts with exhibition programming. So addressing—

JOHN: Exhibition of current artists?

MARGARET: So it’ll be all work from the 1970s and 80s. The programming will address some of the collaborations between artists and dancers. So I would love to recreate some of the dance performances having bands and musicians who were popular during this time. As you probably know—

JOHN: Like the Melton Brothers?

MARGARET: The Melton Brothers. Yep. Yep. I worked with a fabulous intern on this project maybe about a year ago. I guess she was at the museum for about ten months, maybe even eleven months. And the amount of research that she did on this project was just incredible. And she really looked at the music scene a lot, both in Wilmington and then in Newark as well with the Stone Balloon and all of that history. And we’ll have an exhibition catalogue to accompany the show. So as I said, rather ambitious.

It’s a very ambitious project but I just think it’s the perfect time to be doing it. It’s interesting when I was working with the, I’m involved with the New Wilmington Art Association as well and we’re down there in downtown Wilmington using vacant spaces, this is like 2009, 2010, and just really feeling like pioneers in downtown Wilmington.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: And then I got the opportunity to go into the Queen before it was renovated and I entered on the Fifth Street side and saw this great gallery signage, like wait what was happening in Wilmington 30, 35 years ago? And so it’s really just reminding people of this history.

JOHN: I guess he’s not alive, what’s his name who ran that?

MARGARET: Rob Jones.

JOHN: Rob Jones.

MARGARET: So he went to, moved to New York in the early 1980s. He passed away from AIDS in 1989.

JOHN: Yeah.
MARGARET: Fortunately I’ve been able to connect with a photographer and the gallerist, who both knew Rob, knew the work and I’m actually talking to the gallerist this afternoon. He has one of Rob’s Plexiglas shrouds and some works on paper. So it’s just been an incredibly fun project to work on.

JOHN: I remember one night we left there and went down to the Terminal Hotel across from the train station.

MARGARET: Yes.

JOHN: It had a bar to—an oval bar to die for. We just marched down there like a bunch of, I guess you would say lemmings, but I’m sure Rob was leading the way. And knowing that that bar, that hotel, the Terminal Hotel was doomed and this was their celebration and that, you could probably research that, that was probably ‘82 or 3—

MARGARET: I think even earlier. That was in the late 1970s and we actually have a postcard of the Terminal Hotel—

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: We have a postcard from the hotel.

JOHN: That was sort of the great swan song, the great goodbye.

MARGARET: Right.

JOHN: Yeah. The epilogue to the terminal, everybody’s going—what. It’s sort of this, all this consciousness of the qualities of downtown Wilmington then [inaudible] kind of nostalgic, but apparent. And part of that, the revival of the arts and the performance scene in terms of music.

MARGARET: Right.

JOHN: Back then was sort of the, you’d say the genesis of that and he was certainly a pioneer.

MARGARET: Right. So let’s actually—No this is perfect. Just for kind of the scope of our interview today, I would love to talk about your—I know you’re a Delaware native.

JOHN: Well I was born in Florida but moved to Delaware when I was two.

MARGARET: Very young.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: So we won’t—

JOHN: That counts.
MARGARET: Yes, so that counts. Let’s talk about your return to the area after undergraduate at University of Virginia.

JOHN: Right.

MARGARET: That would have been, let’s see you came back in the late 1960s.

JOHN: June of ’67.

MARGARET: June of ’67. And let’s talk about the launching of the Schoonover studios with Fred Carspecken in ‘69. And then we’ll go into kind of your recollections of those activities downtown in the 1970s. So let’s start with your return in ’67 and what you were doing then.

JOHN: Basically I came back from Virginia in June with no job. So, and very little appreciation for my heritage or my grandfather’s accomplishments as, and much beyond a carver of turkey at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

And they never mentioned him in the art history course I took, so I was very naïve about this whole heritage. Thus I proceeded to get a job in life insurance in Wilmington Continental American Life Insurance on Rodney Square then, but began visiting with my father who was working with my grandfather in sort of an informal way because he was [inaudible] as late 80s then right. Yeah you could count it up. And visiting the studios mostly on Wednesday evenings when they would be kind of open for visitors, almost every Wednesday. And my grandfather would sort of hold the court so to speak in his, and he was still in fairly good health, telling stories and enjoying his, the memories of a wonderful, long career while people came in and bought painting that were then for sale.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: And the studio was full of paintings.

MARGARET: So he wasn’t teaching at this point?

JOHN: No.

MARGARET: Really just sharing memories and the work was available for people to view and possibly purchase?

JOHN: Right.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: And most of that was sort of promoted by my father.

MARGARET: Okay.
JOHN: As a means to generate some monies and again help pay the rent, the rent check because the studios were then being rented from the Wilmington Society of Fine Arts. So [inaudible] evenings we called them Wednesday soirees because people of all sorts would come in, some just to talk to my grandfather, get autographs of books, and then some to kind of check out the paintings for sale. Some of them were unstretched on the card table. There were hundreds of paintings in there because my grandfather had insisted on the return of his work from the publisher, interestingly.

MARGARET: Yes.

JOHN: And he rarely promoted the sale of his own work. As he said, “I’d already been paid for it so why would I want to sell it?”

MARGARET: That’s an interesting take.

JOHN: Yeah he had sold paintings in the past and people would commission landscapes which was sort of the later part of his career.

MARGARET: And certainly exhibiting locally.

JOHN: Exhibiting locally, a lot of requests to exhibit locally. I mean his illustrations were around through the early ‘40s.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: So he was not doing much sketching until early after the late ‘50s mostly [inaudible] teaching.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: Just enjoying, the golden years of an extraordinary career.

MARGARET: Right.

JOHN: So.

MARGARET: So [inaudible] a little, before we get to 1969 and the launching of Schoonover Studios, you were here when the riots took place downtown in 1968. Can you share any of your memories, recollections about that time, how it may have impacted you, or if you had a sense of what was happening.

JOHN: Well I think we had a sense in terms of all being terribly concerned. And of course we were all, much younger back then and maybe a little more resilient. Ironically I wound up down in Washington at that time.

MARGARET: Oh.
JOHN: So I was a little bit, and of course I lived in Middletown.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: So I was at somewhat, sort of at arm’s length so to speak.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: I don’t remember [inaudible] American Life Insurance being closed. And that was ‘68 wasn’t it?

MARGARET: Yes.

JOHN: Yeah I had left [inaudible] American in June ‘68 and gone to Europe for a summer abroad.

MARGARET: Oh.

JOHN: So again I was a little bit—

MARGARET: A little removed.

JOHN: Removed and out of pocket as they say.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: I commuted from Middletown even after the summer of ‘68.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: I came back in August at which point I began to restore paintings thanks to the advice of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Rich who lived in [inaudible] and were friends of Andy and Betsy Wyeth who dabbled in art restoration themselves. And they actually inspired me to become more involved in the studios beyond just the Wednesday evening soirees. And my grandfather was then in his late 80s, I think went into a nursing home.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: So the studios all of a sudden were even less occupied and my father, I think he had moved to [inaudible] Square. So I was sort of on my own as far as getting involved in the studios.

MARGARET: Right.

JOHN: It was sort of trial by error because I knew nothing about the art business. I mean I had to learn everything from the get go. So I was doing my little restoration in Middletown. I would drive up here and spend some more time at the studios. They were still chock full of everything.
They were still in their original condition. And that’s when I got the inspiration to call Fred because I’d talked to Andy Wyeth kind of about framing in general. And I think I remember him saying, “Oh you know another frame shop would be wonderful to have.” And then a light clicked on and I thought Fred Carspecken doggone you, he was involved in framing down in Virginia, and I remember him taking the prints down from the living room at the fraternity just before the party weekend started, so they would still be there after the parties were over.

MARGARET: So he was, you were both in the same fraternity?

JOHN: In the same fraternity but he was I think one or two years behind me.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: I’d have to verify that. I was class of ‘67.

MARGARET: But he’s, was he originally from Virginia?

JOHN: He was from St. Louis.

MARGARET: St. Louis.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Interesting. So was it your invitation that really brought him here to Wilmington?

JOHN: Well I’d like to think I made the initial call because I remember him saying, “Well I think I’m going to Europe.” And I said well if you do that what would happen, what am I going to do? And if I’m not mistaken he scrubbed those plans to go to Europe and decided to drive up here I think in June of 1969. He literally drove up in his Pontiac Lemans car, and I’m sure for him it was a leap of faith—

MARGARET: Right.

JOHN:—in terms of oh, hey, what’s Schoonover really up to? I don’t think he’d ever seen the studio.

MARGARET: And he would have just finished undergrad?

JOHN: He would have been either just finished or a year out.

MARGARET: Or a year out. Okay.

JOHN: But you can ask him which. He either worked for Victoria’s—there was a gallery called Victoria’s. There was also a famous frame maker named Ivy, Ivy Moulding, Ivy [inaudible]. And for some reason it just clicked that he was very familiar with something that I wasn’t.
MARGARET: Right.

JOHN: But I thought here I got this studio, it’s empty. I don’t even have a job. I think I’m going to be in the art business for a lot longer. My grandfather’s in a nursing home. My father was [inaudible] directly involved although he had written, he was about to write two books on my grandfather in the 70s. But he got ALS. He probably had it in the late ‘60s, but it wasn’t diagnosed until ‘72.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: So anyhow, so Fed rolled in. We put him up in my grandfather’s house which was also unoccupied on [inaudible].

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: So he had a bunk. And we were able to occupy two of the studios owned by my grandfather and to make a long story short, as I mentioned the Society of the Fine Arts. I don’t think it was called the Delaware Art Museum until—there was definitely a change in the name—

MARGARET: I think it was still the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts at that point.

JOHN: Yeah. I wonder, that’s a good question.

MARGARET: I think so.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: But I can check on that.

JOHN: [Inaudible] incorporated, until they sold their half interest in the property to my grandfather. And so when he died in ‘72 the property was entirely owned by my grandfather.

MARGARET: The entire property.

JOHN: In the meantime Fred and I [inaudible] expanded our little framing business into all four studios and we were going full tilt until my grandfather died, and then we kind of saw the handwriting on the wall. Oh my gosh what’s going to happen? And Fred said geez I think I’ll go out on my own, found a place on Lincoln and started that. But what’s fun is the people that worked for us. Howie Scott. Did you know that?

MARGARET: No.

JOHN: Yeah. She started here. I think gal that runs the station down there, what’s her name?

MARGARET: Nancy [inaudible].
JOHN: Nancy or somebody—

MARGARET: Or Alice Crayton maybe?

JOHN: Yeah. I may be wrong but ask Nancy.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: She might have worked here or started working with Fred. So there was this, we were kind of the, how do you say that, the midwife, whatever, for people that got, continued to stay involved in the arts. Obviously Howie did. She went with Fred. And then she and Fred split. So you had this expansion of involvements in the arts.

MARGARET: And certainly the commercial gallery scene. Because the two of you, prior to that the only, not the only one ‘cause I’m sure there were smaller ones, but the only other gallery that I’ve been able to identify who’s really dealing in contemporary work was the Wilmington Gallery of Circulating Paintings that was operated by Grace McFarren out of the Wanamaker building.

JOHN: Oh wow yeah, exactly.

MARGARET: Yeah but she was operating within that large department store.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: As opposed to existing on your own as a commercial space. But it’s really, yeah it’s like ‘69, ‘70 when the two of you were really starting. But then you see the other commercial galleries coming in later.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: So were you and Fred focusing solely on framing or at that point were you still selling your grandfather’s work as well?

JOHN: A little of all three. The framing. I was doing restoration.

MARGARET: Right. Okay.

JOHN: And I was involved in brokering my grandfather’s art also.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: And we had our big accounts then with the Brandywine River Museum which was just getting under way. So we did a lot of framing for them. We were framing for Andy and Betsy which was obviously one of our very special relationships, working with them. [Inaudible] Four
Gallery. Now meanwhile of course [inaudible], they were the old traditional gallery. And they were downtown at Fifth Street.

MARGARET: Were you showing any other local artist’s work here?

JOHN: No.

MARGARET: Not at all. Okay.

JOHN: [inaudible] functioning as an art gallery per se.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: Now Fred may feel we hung some things on the wall—

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: But I don’t remember us representing, interestingly and it’s sort of a corollary George Scarlett was starting his gallery out in Kennett Square and we heard about that. And that was a pretty significant addition to the art scene. That’s where Peter Sculthorpe, Andre Harvey started out. I don’t know whether you’re going to incorporate him, but you don’t want to overlook him in terms of his contribution. A very lovely, formal gallery out in the country.

MARGARET: And it seems like they’re probably—

JOHN: [inaudible] and who’s a, excuse me contemporary artist now. Who did a lot of Tom—

MARGARET: Tom Bostelle.

JOHN: Bostelle.

MARGARET: Well yeah because you have that whole group of artists who are out in the Kennett Square, [inaudible]—

JOHN: Yeah

MARGARET: [inaudible] all of those artist who are kind of gathering out in that area as well. Okay.

JOHN: And of course Brandywine Arts Festival which I was co-director which started in ‘61 I think. So it was very—obviously one weekend, but very active in its contribution to the arts. What else did you have? These things will pop in my mind.

MARGARET: Yeah and this is still, because Station Gallery, well no earlier, Somerville Manning not until ‘81.

JOHN: No.
MARGARET: Blue Streak Gallery earlier but focusing on fine craft at that point. But this might be a good time to switch to Fifth Street and your recollections of some of those, possibly of some of those other commercial spaces both businesses and restaurants that were in downtown Wilmington.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Because restaurants were really showing a lot of contemporary work. But let’s start with your recollections of Fifth Street Gallery. From what I’ve been able to tell, I don’t think there was continuous programming but it seems like the rough years for the gallery were 1973 through 1979. I don’t think he was doing monthly exhibitions for that long of a stretch, but there were shows throughout. So what were your memories?

JOHN: Well I’m going to precede this with another biographical insert. I got married in ‘71.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: So in ‘72 after my grandfather died and the studios were acquired by Dick Chalfant, and then subsequently reacquired by four of us. I think that’s in your—

MARGARET: In the materials.

JOHN: I rented my studio and I lived down in Chadds Ford and so I was really out of the art scene working primarily with George Scarlett—

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: —in the ‘70s. So from ‘72 to ‘77 Eric Parks was here interestingly in this studio doing his thing. Created Elvis. I think Elvis was created here. And I returned in ‘77, that’s when I sort of caught up. So I’ve got another void there.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: And that’s when I caught up and started reimmersing myself in the local arts scene and reestablished myself as a conservator. And purveyor of American illustration and of Frank Schoonover’s work. So—

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: So again I was not involved—

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: —directly in the contemporary scene other than sort of—with my peers and the arts, art scene, and friends. And being single, heading back downtown. So I only went to that, I remember that one specific—
MARGARET: Okay. So you were all at Fifth Street and then heading down to the Terminal Hotel?

JOHN: Yeah marching down to the Terminal Hotel. I remember it was at night and it was just a wonderful celebration. I don’t know if you could ever round up the suspects. I don’t know whether Fred went to that or not.

MARGARET: And I’ll be interviewing him in a few weeks.

JOHN: Oh you will. How about Graham?

MARGARET: Graham Dougherty did not mention anything about parties at Fifth Street or Terminal. I don’t think he did. I’d have to revisit the interview.

JOHN: I don’t remember it being a very large space coming up the walkway. And, but I didn’t know Rob particularly well.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: And my agenda didn’t change much from then through the ‘80s other than to stay very much a part of the burst of, the banks that came into town. When MBNA made its presence known.

MARGARET: That would have been mid to later ‘80s.

JOHN: Mid to later ‘80s. I don’t know for instance when Mrs. Craven, I’m thinking about were sort of the patrons of the arts back then. That was an important thing.

MARGARET: Well it’s interesting when I spoke to Sadie [Somerville] and Vickie [Manning] yesterday—

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET:—and then speaking with Nancy Bercaw earlier in the week, they both mentioned Mrs. Craven. And that really she was, it seemed like, the art patron in Wilmington in the 1970s and ‘80s.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Did you have similar interactions, experiences with her? Or recollections of her?

JOHN: Actually no, only one. She did acquire a couple of my grandfather’s paintings but this was more in the ‘90s.

MARGARET: Okay.
JOHN: But no, her focus was on the contemporary art scene, Hardcastle’s primarily.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: But she did visit the other galleries. But I was kind of a one-man band pretty much through the ‘80s.

MARGARET: Well yes there is a great, I love it, and this, and I’m referencing the May 1981 interview with you—

JOHN: Bill Montgomery.

MARGARET: By Bill Montgomery in *Fine Times*, lists you as archivist, promoter, PR agent, salesperson and curator of Schoonover Studios and wearing all of those hats at the same time.

JOHN: Yeah I guess I did. You know, man about town. But it was also like—and I did not frame, was I doing any framing back then? No. I did restoration through the sort of the late ‘90s when we started it and that’s a little past your time frame. Starting the catalog raising in ‘99.

MARGARET: Right.

JOHN: So as far as the ‘80s, I was sort of unique only in that you know I was sort of carrying the torch for Frank Schoonover and the old illustrators and I’m kind of in my grandfather shadow. And people would come to me and say, “Well what do you really do?” And I go, “Oh I’m the curator.” Oh, but what do you do, you know? But I was also into developing in sort of a marketing way the interest in my grandfather’s work. And he has basically placed on the totem pole of American illustrators so I was essentially through brokering his work, continuing on researching his work, trying to elevate his reputation as a great American illustrator.

MARGARET: Right. And forgive some of my ignorance in this particular field but probably advancing American illustration at this time as well because this is, I won’t say American illustration is rediscovered, what’s a good way to say this, that American illustration maybe at this time was not as heavily researched or exhibited?

JOHN: No. No it was sort of on the back burner. It suffered from sort of the stigma of illustration, especially in the New York academia.

MARGARET: Right.

JOHN: And even, it even took about 15 years after Norman Rockwell died for him to finally be elevated you know to the upper echelons of American illustration and art.

MARGARET: Right.
JOHN: No. There was a very moderate interest. Judy Goffman was you know doing her thing. She started in the mid-70s and she seems to have become the major influence in American illustration. You always had the Society of Illustrators you know puttering along.

MARGARET: Right.

JOHN: But no, I was able to maintain sort of a stronghold among you know a unique historical at the center of American illustration where you know certainly the four horsemen, or actually there were six, Stanley Arthurs may be one, Ed Braunside as well, had left out Stanley Arthurs.

MARGARET: Oh no really?

JOHN: Yeah. I don’t know if that’s corrected or not.

MARGARET: Okay I’ll look there.

JOHN: So I sort of kept that as my priority in promoting, you know, Frank Schoonover. I was dabbling in photography but I wouldn’t consider it a career.

MARGARET: Okay. Something, you have a great quote in this *Fine Times* article.

JOHN: Yeah [inaudible], of course I’ve got it hanging up there.

MARGARET: Yes I saw that as well. What’s great, the intern and I pored over *Fine Times* in the University of Delaware library and it’s wonderful that they have all of those in their collection.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Primarily thanks to Steven Leech who was doing a lot of the writing *Fine Times* and *Dream Streets*, all of those literary magazines, sell published literary magazines. But I’ll quote, John feels that “Wilmington”, well wait, let me go back, “While readily admitting his personal preference for mid-19th century and 20th century American illustration, John feels that ‘Wilmington needs a broader based reception for the modern or contemporary arts. I think we’re lacking in that and I’m sure it’s a manifestation of the conservative nature of the area.’” But it’s wonderful. You go on to say you know that this is something that the community should really support.

JOHN: Oh yeah. I would say that all over again despite my seeming to wear you know one hat as a, essentially a born into the field of illustration.

MARGARET: Right, right, yeah.

JOHN: I’m trying to think what else, and my sort of preference for the American, you know realist, realism in art. But all that energy that came in in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s was just another sort of natural platform for the arts to be brought into that.
MARGARET: Right. Do you remember attending any of the early DCCA activities in downtown Wilmington, exhibitions or some of the programs that took place actually out in the street or in Willingtown Square? Rick Rothrock had that great ice sculpture, Mitch Lyons was creating like the world’s largest coil pot or something, we had all of these festivals.

JOHN: Oh, I know Mitch. No they were down—

MARGARET: They were down on Front Street.

JOHN: On Front Street?

MARGARET: Mm hmm at that time.

JOHN: Yeah. No, what I remember about Front Street is I became the photographer for the Delaware Theatre Company.

MARGARET: Oh you did?

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: And so their founding right around this time as well?

JOHN: Yeah. I was sort of on board at the beginnings and I became the staff photographer. I went to many of the productions there and then I subsequently became the staff photographer the minute they moved out. They had to move out to Absalom Jones.

MARGARET: Right. Eminent Domain, city renovation when the banks came in.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: So they moved out to Ab Jones. The DCCA moved to the Waterworks building.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: And I was speaking with Joy and Ed Schweizer.

JOHN: Oh sure, I was just emailing them.

MARGARET: Oh really, yeah.

JOHN: They are in the Rowing Club.

MARGARET: Oh really?

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Of course it’s Delaware. Everyone knows everyone.
JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: And they were recollecting about the building that they owned that was right in that area.

JOHN: I’ll be damned.

MARGARET: And same thing, city, eminent domain and was demolished. I think they were involved with kind of the early foundations of the Delaware Theatre Company as well. But that’s so interesting, I did not know you were the staff photographer for the Delaware Theater.

JOHN: Yeah actually Dick Carter was the other one. Of course Dick, I don’t know whether you’re going to interview him, Dick Carter was the other staff photographer for the Delaware Theater Company and he owned one of the studios here until the early ‘90s.

MARGARET: Is he still in the area?

JOHN: Yeah, Pam was working at Kenneth square. Pam was, his wife was working for Longwood.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: Yeah Dick was one of the original owners of the studio. But they were downtown people so he and I, I joined him. He did black and white and I did the color photography.

MARGARET: Do you still have—

JOHN: I did it for like 25-27 years.

MARGARET: Oh really? So would those images be in the Delaware Theatre Company archives?

JOHN: Yeah the archives.

MARGARET: You don’t have any of those yourself?

JOHN: I have very few of the early ones that were on slides.

MARGARET: Okay so they would have all of those.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: I wonder if I saved, I just went through about 15,000 of my slides.

MARGARET: Oh my!
JOHN: And I’m sure I saved a few of those. It was some tough shooting.

MARGARET: I would imagine. So you’re shooting productions. Were you shooting rehearsals? Would you shoot the space at all?

JOHN: They call them photo shoots. Every production, one night the audience left and the cast stayed for the photo shoot.

MARGARET: For photo shoots, okay.

JOHN: And then it became all digital. That’s probably my biggest body of work is photography. Again that sort of starts right where you’re sort of ending your, mid, late ‘80s I guess.

MARGARET: You started at Delaware Theatre Company?

JOHN: The first year, the year they moved to Absalom Jones.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: I don’t think I did any shots out there in Front Street. I think Dick Carter did.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: I haven’t been in touch with Dick for years.

MARGARET: And that’s not a name that’s come up yet. This is the ever really expanding project.

JOHN: Yeah. Let me see if I can find out.

MARGARET: Okay let me pause this for a second. Back on topic, okay.

JOHN: This is more, well 1974, this is about that, the owners of the studio. And of course there were artists in here, Mrs. Lubitsch and Mrs. Kenner and Mrs. Kinley who was very supportive of the studio. Dick Chalfant was here.

MARGARET: Oh. This was in the—

JOHN: I’ll make a copy of that.

MARGARET: Oh that would be wonderful.

JOHN: But that just gives you something more to nibble on as well.

MARGARET: Right, no this is great.
JOHN: This rather, again this unique historical—Cy Lubitch. Did anybody talk to you about Cy Lubitch, the sculptor who did the Pele out in my front yard?

MARGARET: No.

JOHN: Cy was a very active sculptor here in Wilmington and sadly died about 15 years ago and they auctioned off all his stuff. His wife works for Delaware Trust. But Cy was a fascinating fellow.

MARGARET: I don’t think we, I don’t—

JOHN: Photographer sculptor.

MARGARET: Photographer and sculptor, I don’t recognize his name is being in the permanent collection, in the Museum’s permanent collection but I’ll look at that.

JOHN: Darn shame. He was a—interesting, I know that, again sort of an auxiliary little piece of information but I don’t want to overlook—you know kind of the ‘70s was, into the ‘80s we were all striving in the ‘80s to restore the building. And who—well that list of the history of the studio. And of course you know they were, the studios were threatened for demolition. That was really what this was all about, and 1-6, I mean in 1973.

MARGARET: Threatened for demolition?

JOHN: Yeah. And ‘73 when Dick Chalfant wanted to build a condominium’s here.

MARGARET: Oh.

JOHN: They were able to talk him into preserving the building by this joint ownership.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: Mr. Lubitsch, myself, Dick Chalfant and of course Dick still alive too.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: So you know I know there’s a lot of sort of extra history here. I’m trying to think of, well that’s sort of a corner of the studio back then. And of course the Iran—he was here. I jumped on board, that was the show, in case you’re, you know again you’re not writing the history of the studio.

MARGARET: Oh this is at the Delaware History Museum, okay. Okay, does the Delaware History Museum, well does the Delaware—do they have materials in the archives?

JOHN: I’m sure they do. They were given a copy of this. There’s the purchase, there is the Fine Arts Society. That’s really a pretty unique letter.
MARGARET: Okay. Is this a copy I can have?

JOHN: I’m going to make a copy for you.

MARGARET: You will make a copy, okay perfect.

JOHN: And none of this is privy. More information that’s out there the better.

MARGARET: Okay, good. Okay, oh right, okay, Bruce St. John would have been director at that point.

JOHN: Residents prefer studio—today kind arise.

MARGARET: Condominium, yes.

JOHN: Oh here studio, I can Xerox a couple of these things.

MARGARET: Oh yeah, this would be great.

JOHN: Good friends, good neighbor ravaged by bulldozer. And you know that’s something you’re not going to dwell on. You’re just going to say here was—

MARGARET: That moment, mm hmm.

JOHN:—that moment but yeah. The joy is that in preserving the studio you know it’s sort of—It has one of the unique focal points and definitely the birthplace. Schoonover galleries, Carspeken, Howie Scott. Mrs. Strange worked here, this is Adeline Strange, but she didn’t start, from the Strange family. She’s not alive either but Cookie Strange we called her. Does that ring a bell?

MARGARET: No. No one’s mentioned her.

JOHN: He helped us out. She was a bit of the patron of the arts but Fred would remember her very well. You’ll get a hold of him.

MARGARET: Okay. I’ll get some from him. One other thing, just skipping back to some other commercial spaces in downtown Wilmington, and again I’m asking most people just to see if they have recollections, did you know Tom Watkins or Xanadu comics which he would have opened with Joyce Brabner, later married Harvey Pekar who did American Splendor? There was this all kind of comic book scene.

JOHN: Sort of a subculture.

MARGARET: Subculture in downtown Wilmington and it was the comic book in this kind of ‘zine scene, xerographic art. Tom Watkins, Anne Eder all doing this kind of work in downtown.
JOHN: I remember Tom Watkins. I don’t remember if it was through the Arts Festival or not but I do have the rack in, but I can add much to that.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: Any other names that have popped up?

MARGARET: No. Those are the three who were really primarily—and George Stewart, will—George Stewart was Joyce Brabner’s first husband and he was involved with the Rondo Center. They had the Sleaze, and there were some connections with Rob Jones. They had the Sleaze Convention. Though the Sleaze Convention downtown, oh no I can’t remember if it’s ‘76 or ‘77, so it may have been when you were around in Chadds Ford. John Waters came up from Baltimore.

JOHN: Oh wow.

MARGARET: Edie the Egg Lady, there is this whole kind of underground community kind of pulse downtown as well.

JOHN: And I’ll tell you one thing that coincided with that was the renaissance of this area, Rodney Street, because in the early ‘70s, while the studios are pretty run down. There was definitely a decline in sort of the appreciation for the neighborhood, the architecture and the preservation. You had Chalfant moving in here with [inaudible] threatening the studios. And then that Easleys, E-A-S-L-E-Y-S, who bought 14, no, the corner of Broom and Delaware. They became the promoters of the preservation of this general area.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: And through the mid-‘70s and early ‘80s the Easleys—I can’t remember his—Maureen and Linda Easley I think. Freddie will remember their name.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: And that’s probably understated in terms of them beginning a movement to preserve and restore, certainly the three or four block area here.

MARGARET: Surrounding this area.

JOHN: How that translates into DCAA, Delaware Community Avenue Association I’m not sure.

MARGARET: Okay. And this would have coincided roughly with the restoration of the opera house as well.

JOHN: It might well have.
MARGARET: Which is interesting because you have the 1968 riots, the fear of downtown Wilmington vacant spaces.

JOHN: Right exactly.

MARGARET: But then you get renovations, it sounds like renovations in this area. Is this, this isn’t, what is this area called? Does this have—

JOHN: It’s just called DACA, Delaware Avenue Community Association, as opposed to Highlands.

MARGARET: So it’s not Highlands and it’s not—

JOHN: It’s not 40 acres. That is a boundary.

MARGARET: Okay. It’s not 40 acres.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: And it’s not Happy Valley.

JOHN: No that’s down—

MARGARET: That’s down farther.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Delaware, sorry say that again, Delaware Avenue—?

JOHN: Community Association.

MARGARET: Community Association, okay.

JOHN: I don’t know when they formalized there—

MARGARET: So then you have, and it seems like really there is that kind of renovation and push to get people back in, to feel comfortable coming back into the city.

JOHN: Oh definitely, definitely yeah. They were pioneers here, there and everywhere. And they—say don’t overlook sort of the architectural preservation quality of life.

MARGARET: Right that’s huge, yeah. And then it’s—

JOHN: And their building…it’s a great building. It is very distinctive because they were the first ones at the corner of Broom and Delaware Avenue.

MARGARET: Okay.
JOHN: I’d like to say 1400, maybe 1400 Broom.

MARGARET: Of course there is—interesting because just a little bit later the city takes eminent domain and demolishes so then you can make way for the banks to come in, to move into downtown.

JOHN: Yeah that was only economic and social search, although somewhat to the dismay of the young people that came in from New York. They felt somewhat out of place.

MARGARET: Right.

JOHN: It was a very indigenous movement. It wasn’t like these kids from New York came down and started a spearhead or picked up on it. It was mostly indigenous and then they got out of here when the banks, that whole thing in the early ‘90s, mid-‘90s and just faded out.

MARGARET: Just faded out, mm hmm.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Yeah. It’s really, it’s really right there. I mean I know okay so you have the stock market crash in ‘89.

JOHN: Yeah and you had that savings-and-loan thing which was—

MARGARET: And so that’s happening and then you have the culture wars starting in the early 1990s as well, but that’s when you start seeing some of the other galleries closing. Susan Isaacs closed her gallery in downtown in ‘92.

JOHN: When had she started it?

MARGARET: She started in ‘87, end of ‘87–early ‘88, right there. And so that was, you know pretty sure, but I think it was all of those changes in the early to mid-1990s that really impacted all of that, or affected really all of that artistic energy that we had in the city two decades prior, yeah.

JOHN: It was pretty significant for sure. There were these surges in areas. It’s hard to kind of you know, see how they all sort of formulated and generated interest in the arts on a much broader basis like you said before me.

MARGARET: Right. All the collaborations were just incredible. And the things Rick Rothrock was doing with dancers at the University of Delaware and then ArtSquad coming in prior to the DCCA foundation and you know having site-specific performances in the Brandywine State Park. Rick was telling me about an exhibition they had at the Brandywine Zoo and they put like artists in zoo cages. I mean it was just—

JOHN: Amazing.
MARGARET: Yeah right. That was like—

JOHN: When they do that.

Margaret: That would have been—

JOHN: I guess I wasn’t avant-garde enough to appreciate that.

MARGARET: You would have been in Chadds Ford at that time. So that’s like—

JOHN: Kennett Square you mean.

MARGARET: Wait we—you in Chadds Ford or Kennett Square?

JOHN: I’m sorry, Kennett Square.

MARGARET: Kennett Square okay.

JOHN: Yeah Kennett Square.

MARGARET: You would have been in Kennett Square at that time because that’s all the energy coming together right before the foundation of DCCA, all of those people’s activities coming together.

JOHN: Where else was that? And of course as I say—Parks was here doing his thing. I don’t know where you can find, and he did some pretty significant sculptures. I don’t know what’s happened to him.

MARGARET: He’s not still in the area?

JOHN: I don’t know. He was a bit of a strange cat. You know part of the great Parks—well in that case, while the trilogy of sons that were all sculptures under Charles.

MARGARET: And so Charles Park’s son—one of Charles Park’s sons.

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay.

JOHN: I don’t know whether I have any photographs of, We’ll have to go over that Elvis pressing. I was down in Memphis, the big sculpture.

MARGARET: The big sculpture, the sculpture, okay.

JOHN: And I think he, well he might not have done that here, he might’ve done a famous football player. He did—
MARGARET: Mostly figurative work?

JOHN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay. All figurative, yeah, okay.

JOHN: I’m going to make a note of that because I was so out of the loop. Actually I read in the studio for a brief time to a businessman that had some [inaudible].

MARGARET: Of this is wonderful. Well I’m going to stop this, John, unless you have any other notes you’d like to add.

JOHN: No but I’m sure my mind will review this and I’ll chat some email.

MARGARET: Yeah emails, more information, any of that would be perfect.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 56 minutes