Oral history interview with Stephen Tanis, October 24, 2013

Tanis, Stephen
Painter and former University of Delaware professor

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MARGARET: I do, actually. Give me one moment. This is Margaret Winslow, Associate Director for Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum, interviewing Stephen Tanis, on October 24, 2013, at the artist’s studio at 1816 Miller’s Road, at Wilmington. Stephen and I live in Union Park Gardens, which is off of Union Street.

STEPHEN: That’s a cool little community.

MARGARET: It’s a wonderful, quiet little neighborhood. In some way, it seems like the only neighborhood in the city of Wilmington. It’s a discreet neighborhood that surrounds it. It’s very nice. We love it.

STEPHEN: I was talking to Richard Parker. I don’t know if you’ve ever run into him, but he lives there.

MARGARET: Oh, no. Richard Parker? That’s the name of the tiger in the Life of Pi, the book and the movie. I was like, “Wait, that name sounds so familiar.” That’s what that is.

STEPHEN: I didn’t know that. I saw the movie, but I didn’t read it. Anyway, Parker, he does restoration of antiques and boxes, and things like that.

MARGARET: Interesting. And he still lives in UPG?
STEPHEN: I don’t know. This was some time ago. That was my—I think that was the last time I’ve been in that area. It’s really nice there.

MARGARET: We love it. Our home was built in 1919, I believe. Solid construction, and perfect size, too. Perfect size for a three-person family, which is all we’ll be doing. Anyway, so, I would like to start by talking first about your arrival in Delaware. You’re from northern New Jersey originally, right?

STEPHEN: Right.

MARGARET: Then you went out to the University of Cincinnati, BFA. When did you finish your BFA?

STEPHEN: In 1970. I spent three years in the service, in the Marine Corps, actually. I went out to Cincinnati, and from there, I went to Cranbrook [Academy of Art].

MARGARET: And you went immediately from Cincinnati to Cranbrook?

STEPHEN: Right.

MARGARET: Who did you study with, when you were at Cranbrook?

STEPHEN: George Orton. He’s a really wonderful guy, and a painter. Just about a year and a half ago, we were up in New York for a retrospective of George’s. We were at some gallery. It was at—I can’t remember the name of the gallery, but it was great. It was wonderful to see him. He’s 87 years old, and he’s got a new girlfriend. It was a lot of fun.

MARGARET: So, you would have finished your MFA in 1972, and you came immediately to Delaware, right after?

STEPHEN: I was about to go into partnership with a former employer of mine, who was a builder. We were going to build houses in Princeton, New Jersey. Right in August, I got a call from Orton, that they were searching for a person to teach drawing at the University of Delaware. They called Orton.

One of the people, George Rowe, heard George speak. They loved the way he talked about drawing, realist drawings. He’s a geometric abstractionist. He does construction pieces. He recommended me, so I dashed down for the interview and got the job. It was really late in the game. It was an enormous pile of applications. There were 650, or something like that.

MARGARET: Oh, my goodness.

STEPHEN: And they offered me the job. I thought, “Man, I’ve always wanted to teach.” I knew I couldn’t do any art if I was going to be building houses.

MARGARET: Right.
STEPHEN: So I took the job.

MARGARET: When you joined the faculty, you were the second person from Cranbrook Academy?

STEPHEN: Julio [daCunha].

MARGARET: Julio was the first.

STEPHEN: His degree, I think he got his degree in the late 50s. There was some spread of time. Larry and Bob followed. The Cranbrook Mafia, as people used to call it.

Larry Holmes followed in 1973, and Bob, not until early ‘80s. 80 or 81. He was at Connecticut College. I knew both of those guys at Cranbrook, but they didn’t know each other at Cranbrook. I was the—Bob graduated the year before me, and Larry graduated the year after me. They didn’t really know each other.

MARGARET: So, you were the connection between the two.

STEPHEN: It’s funny, because I thought Larry was perfect for this job. Absolutely ideal for this job. Larry and I knew each other at Cranbrook. We weren’t close personal friends, but I just thought his work—and he’s got a great presence, and his leadership abilities, and stuff. I thought he’d be ideal. Now, I think there’s a couple more Cranbrook people there now.

MARGARET: There are. Is Ashley Pigford from Cranbrook?

STEPHEN: I know Ashley was a UD graduate. I did a portrait of his grandfather, who was in the engineering department.

MARGARET: Oh, I didn’t know his grandfather was—that’s interesting. Is Lance Winn from Cranbrook?

STEPHEN: He’s from Cranbrook. There’s another woman—

MARGARET: And Troy Richards? I heard he’s from Cranbrook.

STEPHEN: Mm-hmm. I met Troy. There’s a woman, a ceramicist. Amy?

MARGARET: Abby Donovan.

STEPHEN: She might be from Cranbrook.

MARGARET: It’s a very strong program.

STEPHEN: It’s a great school. The connection—Anyway, I guess I was—Julio and I were probably responsible.
MARGARET: The first two. But you were hired by Charles Rowe.

STEPHEN: Charles Rowe was at the head of the search committee, and Julio was also in the community. They were really the two faculty that were responsible for hiring me.

MARGARET: Can you talk—this is getting admittedly a little bit off-topic, but can you talk about the type of work that you were making at that time?

STEPHEN: I was sort of a little skittish about my work. I was just fresh out of graduate school, and I had come into Cranbrook doing representational work, influenced by Bay Area figurative painting. I was a pushy painter a lot, doing the figures. When I got there, my work started becoming more experimental, in terms of the painting process.

I started making abstractions. I was doing abstract painting, and a lot of realist drawing. George is big on drawing. I taught a class on realist painting and drawing at the Museum at Cranbrook, just to pay the rent.

That was fun, but it was weird. I didn’t know. I was doing this kind of work that was—I don’t know what they used to call it. There was a term for it, that I never could quite understand. Post-painterly abstraction. I think it was a term coined by Clement Greenberg.

MARGARET: Oh, okay.

STEPHEN: It was big, at the time. Like most graduate students, I was looking around the contemporary art scene, and trying to emulate the moves that a lot of painters were making. We were talking about the studios. I was doing that work, but I was hired because of drawing. I was hired to teach drawing. I had a whole tray of slides of figurative drawing. I don’t think anybody was interested in those paintings. They were huge. I don’t think I have a single one left.

MARGARET: I was curious, because I don’t think I saw a single one of that work illustrated in your catalog. I don’t remember any of it.

STEPHEN: I felt that it was so student and derivative, that I just didn’t feel comfortable about it. A picture I did as an undergraduate, when I just got into Cranbrook—that was in that show.

MARGARET: The portrait from 1960-something—

STEPHEN: 1967, the year of Ted. I had a real crisis about that work. I felt, “How invested am I in this?” I was just not interested in doing it anymore. It just felt like it wasn’t my own work. I was looking too much at other artists. There was nothing about—I was more interested in observation, and trying to come up with a way of working that was going to sustain me and my interests, and really engage me for a long time. I wasn’t thinking of the rest of my potential life, but something I could explore for a really long time. I was interested in what I was reading about, and seeing in galleries.
I used to go to New York every weekend. I was really into it. Anyway, that’s what I said. Throughout all of that stuff, then I went back to something very basic. I started doing pastels and still life. It was a tricky time, because I was trying to get tenure. I had to achieve something. I had to show, and do all that stuff. Those activities are going to lead to tenure. I was entering competitive shows as much as I could. I had a lot of luck with that.

MARGARET: Tell me a little bit more about that. I know that in the mid-1970s, it looks like you had become pretty involved at the juried exhibitions at the Delaware Art Museum. That was about 1976, 62nd Annual. From that, you were in a show at the Downtown Gallery with several other artists.

STEPHEN: Right. I think they had prizes. The awards were the show. It was a group show, from the Vienna Alley. That was good fun.

MARGARET: You were also showing—1977, you showed again, in the 63rd Juried Exhibition.

STEPHEN: Right.

MARGARET: There was another prizewinner in 1978. You were showing a lot at the Delaware Art Museum. Where else were you showing at that time?

STEPHEN: A lot of national print drawing shows. I haven’t lost touch completely with those things, but that’s something that people were doing a lot. You send your slide out with the exhibition fee. If you got in, you’re in a national show. It was a good little credit on your resume. I started doing that in graduate school, and then continued that. I was in a few of those. What else did I do? Oh, the Pastel Society of America show. I did pretty well with that, around the same time period. Entering, and getting some prizes.

MARGARET: Were you showing anywhere in Newark?

STEPHEN: No.

MARGARET: Aside from university spaces?

STEPHEN: No. I don’t know if you could show in Newark.

MARGARET: It’s interesting. The few places where—

STEPHEN: You’d probably know more than me.

MARGARET: Well, yes, because I’ve done this research. I won’t say amateur space is more pop-up kind of shows, so several people just showing fun things at the Deluxe Luncheonette, The “Greasy Spoon,” as people refer to it.

STEPHEN: We were so snobby. We were faculty. We weren’t going to mess with that.
MARGARET: Yeah. People showing, like, spoon-themed art. Other space, though, that does start to develop—though it is in collaboration with the university—is Gallery 20, which is run through the University Ministries.

STEPHEN: You know, I remember that, now that you mentioned that. I didn’t have anything to do with that.

MARGARET: Okay. I’ve been trying to reconstruct their exhibition histories. In some cases, I know they were involved with the university in developing these kinds of artist in residence programs. I don’t have a firm understanding of how that worked. I know that in some cases, the artist would show at galleries. I know Clayton Pond came down from New York City. He would do some workshops with students at the university. It’s kind of this interesting cross-institution.

STEPHEN: I don’t know why I feel so remote from that, but I do.

MARGARET: Okay.

STEPHEN: I’m thinking that maybe it wasn’t that big of a deal. But it doesn’t necessarily mean that. It means that I didn’t have anything to do with that.

MARGARET: Okay. Actually, that’s just as useful, in terms of information.

STEPHEN: Okay. I don’t really want to say that it was nothing, because it might have been quite a serious thing. It just eluded me.

MARGARET: You know, it does seem like it may have catered more to students in the program, as opposed to faculty. Sometimes, these artists in residence coming through—Joy Schweizer was involved with it, and Helen Mason. These were the two coordinators.

That’s good to know. Really, at that time, there weren’t too many other places to show. You could speak to this—it seems that there weren’t good spaces to show work on campus.

STEPHEN: No. It was awful, really. We used to show at Clayton Hall. We would always get in trouble. We would do something wrong, or put a nail in the wall, or whatever. They would hate that. They had a hanging system. Perkins Student Center was a place to show. I remember that I was having the exhibition committee, a university exhibition committee. We basically rent canned shows from the Smithsonian, and hang them up there.

MARGARET: Oh, really?

STEPHEN: They would come in crates, and there would be photographs.

MARGARET: Were they usually reproductions?
STEPHEN: If they were photographs, they would be original. It would be part of an edition of photographs. They had all kinds of shows that you could rent, from posters to original paintings. In terms of our budget, we ended up showing a lot of photography.

MARGARET: I didn’t realize this.

STEPHEN: It wasn’t that important, in terms of the teaching that we were doing. They were interesting shows. I think I did a couple more original shows, trying to get people to remember what I did. It wasn’t that great of an effort.

MARGARET: It does seem like you all had a fairly strong visiting artist, artist in residence, program.

STEPHEN: We did.

MARGARET: Do you recall any artists of note, during the 1970s?

STEPHEN: That’s a failing of mine, my memory. Yeah, we had people coming in all the time. I wish you had asked that question—I probably can’t dig up that information. We were trying to bring people in from New York and Philadelphia. Our showings were pretty current. Not the top—Rauchenberg, or anything like that, but younger people who would come down for $500.00 to $1000.00. You picked them up at the train station, brought them, and then sent them back. That was a pretty productive time.

MARGARET: I should try to do more work, to see if I can come across that information in the department files. I think that would be incredibly useful for this project, for me, knowing who was coming through.

STEPHEN: We did have a good group of people coming through.

MARGARET: I did find mention—and I don’t know if this is connected, but I did find mention of James Turrell visiting, and doing a lecture at Gallery 20. I figured that must have been a connection—

STEPHEN: Turrell came in, through a guy named Maurice Cope. He was in the faculty of Art History. He had an interest in contemporary art, and he knew Turrell. We had very little to do with that, in our department. It was Cope, in art history. When he came down—excuse me. I’m going to pause that for a second. Maurice loved young women. This was his third wife, or something. I think they had a child together, those two.

MARGARET: So, he arranged that visit, through the Art History department?

STEPHEN: Exclusively. Don’t let anybody else take credit for that, because that was Maurice Cope’s doing. He did get a lot—a lot of students got involved in the construction of that, a lot of art students.
MARGARET: Good. So he did involve the department in that.

STEPHEN: They were very involved in that. That was a really successful show. He just turned that whole place—which has always been unsatisfactory. You know, that old college museum space. Janis has really improved it, but prior to that, it was awful. It had coating, and it was impossible to show work. If you hung a painting, it was really high. The walls were beige, or some awful color. But the whole gallery became transformed, for the Turrell showing. That was really something.

MARGARET: I would love to have photographs of that work.

STEPHEN: Maybe Penelope could come up with some of that.

MARGARET: I’ll have to look for that.

STEPHEN: It should be in Art History, somewhere. Maurice would have made sure that happened. Turrell’s work needs to be photographed. This is a great one. That piece is really interesting. Disorienting. As soon as you go into the gallery, you’re like “What the…?” You don’t sense boundaries at all.

MARGARET: He alters, or complicates, your perception.

STEPHEN: That was the experience I had with Turrell. I had heard about him, but to see a piece—I was skeptical, but I saw it, and I was like, “Wow, this is great. This is really great.”

MARGARET: Wow, that’s incredible. Let’s skip ahead—and I’ll admit, I’m probably going to bounce around a bit, while we’re talking.

STEPHEN: Sure.

MARGARET: Since we’re talking—well, let’s get back on topic, with your exhibition activities. I want to skip ahead to your show at the Grand Gallery in 1978. This is—the Grand Gallery is another, one of two, spaces showing contemporary art in downtown Wilmington on Main Street, in the late ‘70s.

Stephen: The other one was Fifth Street.

MARGARET: The other one was Fifth Street Gallery. Rob Jones’s exhibition records in history are a little vague, at the biggest end—which, when he’s talking about the gallery after its close, he’s talking about the most extreme ends, which he says are 1970-1979. He wasn’t actively programming that entire time.

STEPHEN: I don’t even have any recollection of 1973. I think he may have been a student.

MARGARET: It’s a little—those are certainly not incredibly accurate dates.
STEPHEN: Julio might know a little more about it than I, because they were pretty tight.

MARGARET: It seemed like that. How did you get involved with Sewell Biggs? Tell me a little bit about the work you showed at the Grand Gallery in 1978.

STEPHEN: Sewell—I don’t remember how I met Sewell. He may have contacted me via the Museum shows, that he was referred to, and invited me to show there. I liked that space. It was a really nice space. It was on the first floor. It was a real clean machine. White walls, and very handsome. You know that the Grand Gallery architecture is very nice. You go in there, and there’s a very contemporary gallery.

MARGARET: Sorry to interrupt you, but that would have been just five years after they completed the renovation? I hadn’t thought of that. That’s a nice clean, fresh space. There’s energy, and it’s on Market Street.

STEPHEN: Yeah. The show—I got a couple of reviews. There was this guy named Otto Dekom. He was a reviewer, and he was sort of curmudgeon-y, in particular. He always had something good to say, and something bad to say, no matter who it was. That’s the way he wrote his reviews. What did he say about me? He liked my still lifes better than my figures. His thing was that there was more life in the still lifes than there were in the figures. I don’t remember that one. The only piece I sold was the woman who sat in the gallery. She bought a drawing. What was her name? Gina Bosworth, I think. At one point in time, she was part of the Delaware City Arts council.

MARGARET: Yes.

STEPHEN: Maybe in terms of sales—

MARGARET: Gina Bosworth bought that?

STEPHEN: I think so. I’m not exactly sure, but I think it was her. And then Swell brought some work from me, in 1990. I don’t know if you have that catalogue. It wasn’t a catalogue. It was a little folder.

MARGARET: I do.

STEPHEN: I showed it to the sculptor guy, Bob. He does twisted metal abstract pieces. He’s a great guy, and a good artist. You have a piece out front of his work, at the Museum.

MARGARET: Oh, you showed with—not with David Stromeyer?

STEPHEN: No, no.

MARGARET: With Robert Murray?

STEPHEN: Murray.
MARGARET: Of course. You all had that show at the same time. Of course.

STEPHEN: Did you know, at that opening, there were 750 people? It was just staggering. I’ve never had an experience like that in my life.

MARGARET: That’s incredible.

STEPHEN: It was a great opening. It was a lot of fun. I’ve never had an opening with that many people. 750 people.

MARGARET: That’s amazing. Do you recall going to any other shows at the Grand Gallery? I’m trying to get a sense of that space.

STEPHEN: No, I don’t have much of a recollection. It wasn’t that long-lived. It didn’t generate much, in the way of sales. But Sewell was determined to get something happening in Wilmington. Sewell is a funny guy. He can get literally ticked off about Wilmington. “Why aren’t people coming in here? Why aren’t they buying work?” He would get insulted, and I think that’s why he closed up the gallery. Because he was insulted.

MARGARET: That there wasn’t that support.

STEPHEN: Anyway, I don’t know how many shows he had there. I think after my show, I was probably guilty of the same thing. I wasn’t supporting it. Anyway, I can’t really help you on that score.

MARGARET: Okay. I should probably check in with the Bigg’s archives, and see. They do have a great—there’s a great photograph of him in the gallery on their website, and the work on the walls is fairly abstract. It’s a black-and-white image, so it’s fairly difficult to discern what is going on there. I should check in with those archives as well.

Tell me, Stephen, have you always lived in Arden? Were you living—

STEPHEN: Yeah. We’ve always lived in—I was married at the time, to a different gal. We started out in Elkton, Maryland. We rented a farmhouse. My first residence was a motel in Newark. We were waiting a month for this farmhouse to loosen up. We lived there for a few years, and then we bought a shell on Wilmington, on Shallcross Avenue.

I renovated that house. That was a lot of work. We sold that, and we bought a house on 18th Street. I did some more work on that place. That was the late ‘70s.

MARGARET: In the late ‘70s. So that’s around the park, 18th?

STEPHEN: No. 18th is between River View and Woodlawn.

MARGARET: Oh, okay.
STEPHEN: It was a nice little neighborhood kind of feeling. Not unlike Union Park Gardens. The houses had more variety in the architecture. My wife and I bought a big place on Shallcross, again, right near the Art Museum. Right along Baynard Boulevard, there. Or is it Bancroft?

MARGARET: That might be Bancroft.

STEPHEN: Shallcross is one block up from Kentmere Parkway. I can throw a baseball and hit the Art Museum from our place. It was a great address. We bought it for $90,000.00. It had been on the market for a long time, and it came down. We offered them a really low price, and they took it.

But it was too much house for us. It was hard to maintain. We couldn’t afford to do anything, but it was a big, beautiful place. Then we got divorced, and it was dreadful, that whole experience. Don’t get divorced. That was a rough time. We had a big custody battle, and I won.

My poor wife—She was having some really hard times. She died last year. Too bad. Anyway, I had custody. She got the house, and I got some other properties we had gotten. Anyway, I lived in an apartment on Delaware Avenue for a while. I bought this house—once I started seeing Alina, we decided to buy this place together up here.

MARGARET: Okay. You didn’t move up here to Arden until—

STEPHEN: Until ‘83.

MARGARET: Okay. You were in Wilmington, at the height of all of these activities, in the 1970s. Let’s talk a little bit about your memories of some of these commercial and non-profit spaces. I’ll kind of just give you the overview in terms of chronology, which you probably already know. In the ’70s, Carspecken-Scott opened, not in downtown, but in Wilmington.

STEPHEN: Sure.

MARGARET: And then, skip ahead. There’s Fifth Street, right in downtown Wilmington. Grand Gallery, right in downtown as well. Blue Streak, happening at that time.

STEPHEN: Blue Streak was not until later, at that time. Wasn’t that the ‘80s?

MARGARET: It may have been the early ‘80s. It was roughly contemporary with the founding of Somerville Manning, and then Susan Isaacs really is kind of the last commercial space.

STEPHEN: I don’t think she visited for more than two or three years.

MARGARET: It was very short-lived.

STEPHEN: She—Susan is so generous. She always wanted to treat artists well. She was putting too much of her own money into this, and her own time and effort. She, too, was experiencing what Sewell did, not as much community support. I think the galleries that came up with the
right formula were Fred Carspecken. They had an active business. He also had some artists that connected better, with the clientele in Wilmington.

Who was the other one? Blue Streak. They have a store, basically. It was a lot of fun. People liked to go in there. She’s great, Jodi.

MARGARET: Ellen Bartholomaus.

STEPHEN: Ellen, Jesus. She’s a good friend of mine.

MARGARET: She would have known Avery Draper, as well, when she was really focused on craft.

STEPHEN: Right. I didn’t know her until I started to get to know Ellen well. I’ve known her. She’s good. She’s important. And then, of course, Sadie Somerville and Victoria Manning have really succeeded as a gallery. I think their gallery, probably more than any other, is a gallery that’s achieved real national prominence, because of a certain niche market that they’ve created. They’re branding my valley painting. In fact, I just hooked up with them a couple of years ago. All these years, I hadn’t. And I don’t know why, really.

Well, that’s not exactly true. I used to show with Sherry French, until she closed. Sherry would sometimes get work out, to some other galleries. She was so impossible to deal with, that a lot of galleries didn’t want to work with her. Evidently Sadie and Victoria found it acceptable, going with her.

MARGARET: Okay. When did you first start showing with Somerville Manning? I know it was recently, but just so it’s on the record.

STEPHEN: Recently. I’ve had work there in the past, that it always surprised me when I saw it. I remember going in once. I was going to buy Al something for Christmas, a piece of jewelry. I saw one of my pictures, and I said, “Wow, when did this come in?” Sherry sent it down.

MARGARET: So that’s really because of that connection, that Sherry was sending it down to Somerville Manning.

STEPHEN: Right. The most recent thing is that I contacted Sadie, and asked her to come by. Sherry went out of business in 2009. She became very ill. In fact, I’m not sure she’s still alive. She was really, really ill. She had lupus. I’ve never seen anything like it. She went from this vibrant, healthy younger woman, to a cripple. It was just a devastating disease.

MARGARET: That’s terrible.

STEPHEN: Oh, I’ve never seen anything like it. It was so devastating, in such a short period of time. She had two little boys, twins that she gave birth to via some sort of in-vitro deal. Anyway, I like dealing with Sadie and Victoria. I like the work in the gallery.
MARGARET: What’s interesting is—I interviewed them, and something that they had pointed out, that I had not thought of before, was that what they really did—and of course, this is as they’re describing it, but I can see where they’re explaining this. They brought—they provided a strong commercial gallery, in which all of those Brandywine artists who had made their reputations outside of the area, could come back and show their work.

STEPHEN: Right.

MARGARET: It’s just this a-ha moment for me. So many contemporary local artists talk about the Brandywine tradition. In some ways, they had that reputation, but they didn’t have a way to show their work. That’s what Somerville Manning did.

STEPHEN: That’s where you go. There was a Brandywine art museum, but commercially, that’s the only place.

MARGARET: Yes. That was the only thing to think about. Just supporting a different part of the artist community—a very strong part, with a big reputation.

STEPHEN: It’s a tough. The clientele that they have is tough to get access to. It’s tough to get access to them. There’s a show by this guy named Jon Redmond. I really like his work. He’s from the East Coast. He came for his master’s degree the year I retired. I would have loved to have worked with him.

Anyway, he’s done pretty well at Somerville Manning. He’s become—I think it’s taken him a while to develop a good reputation among the people who work at that gallery. But now he’s a real darling at that whole scene. There’s a few other contemporary artists there that I like. Actually, a lot of them. I don’t know how well they’re doing.

They’re probably doing okay. A lot of those guys show. The kind of artists that have ten galleries, all over the country. I miss so much having a New York gallery, where you don’t have to deal with it. You just get your work out, and they do everything.

MARGARET: Right.

STEPHEN: That’s one thing about teaching. It makes you so lazy, I guess. A successful contemporary artist has to be a real businessperson, ambitious, and network, all that kind of stuff. Everything about that is—if you have a dealer who does that for you, especially in New York, all you have to do is paint. I don’t want to get off-track with my rants. You have to stop me.

MARGARET: Oh, no. This is all good, all wonderful conversation. Let me ask, since we were talking briefly, off-record, I am particularly interested in the energy that Rob Jones created in downtown Wilmington. I think, in some ways, I see his activities and what was happening at the Museum with the CETA Program, getting all of those artists in one spot, and supporting them. Those two things as kind of some precedents for the foundation of the DCCA, in 1979, and the foundation of the Delaware Theatre Company.
Basically, it’s bringing all of the artists together, and the energy, and that leads to the establishment of more established organizations that we see today.

STEPHEN: Right.

MARGARET: So, I know that Rob went to the University of Delaware. As you said, it does seem that Julio was a bit of a mentor to him, in a way.

STEPHEN: Somewhat. I think that they were sort of on the same page, with all that stuff. But Rob was a force onto himself. He didn’t need anybody, really. He knew what he wanted to do.

MARGARET: Do you recall his—I don’t know if it was a thesis exhibition that he had at the University of Delaware, but he had a rather expensive installation throughout the spaces. There was some really interesting PR about it. One of the works was basically destroyed from vandalism. Another one was stolen, and later returned. Even at the university, he was doing some pretty interesting work himself, these poured polyurethane kind of things.

STEPHEN: Right, I remember this. Lynda Benglis, around the same time—

MARGARET: Right around the same time, yes. It was practically contemporary. Maybe he was going up to New York and seeing that work, but he had to have been two months apart, which is interesting.

Looking at some of the work, and where she was showing it, and then the work that he was doing in Delaware. It’s very close.

STEPHEN: Just the way things are, in art. Just as an aside—I don’t want to bring it back to myself all the time. It’s the kind of thing that just used to drive me crazy. How can you be—Just a question, how can you maintain a certain amount of original integrity and still be a contemporary artist? To separate yourself from all of this trendy—things borrow from one another. Just get out of that, and try to find your own vision, and your own statement. It’s very hard. That’s the whole thing, isn’t it?

MARGARET: Yeah. And living in the same contemporary moment, and responding to the same contemporary issues in history.

STEPHEN: As a contemporary artist, yet, do you have to toe the line? I remember seeing—at the DCCA, I just saw a show by Steve Baris. And I like Steve Baris. I like his paintings. Yet, he had the obligatory video, and the obligatory installation. I thought, “What the hell? He’s a painter. Why is he doing this?”

MARGARET: He has a little bit of everything.

STEPHEN: Most artists laugh constantly about what kind of video could you make? We joke around about making a still life that jumps around, and making a video about it. It seems absolutely unnecessary. As silly as it is, unless you’re really into video work. But if you’re not,
why do it? You do it because you’ll get a show. It’s kind of disappointing to see Steve Baris’ video, but I liked his paintings.

MARGARET: I think the large painting is, in my opinion, the strongest.

STEPHEN: Yeah. And he’s got some canvases that I really liked. The new shapes are great, and it’s a great step forward for him. The other stuff—

MARGARET: There’s a lot happening in that gallery.

STEPHEN: There is.

MARGARET: There’s a lot going on.

STEPHEN: Anyway—

MARGARET: I felt similarly.

STEPHEN: Rob’s gallery became so much about Rob. I think a lot of people—I don’t know what happened to it. It sort of evaporated. Rob was making a move to New York, and he was setting himself up for that move.

I don’t know how he lived. I kind of lost touch with him. He was waiting tables in New York, so he was like every other artist. He was struggling, and then he got ill. I wonder what would have happened, if he had not gotten sick. I’m sure he would have been a big factor.

MARGARET: Certainly. Did you attend many of the shows he had at Fifth Street?

STEPHEN: A few. After a while, it just really wasn’t my scene, in terms of the kind of things he was up to.

MARGARET: And he had some interesting connections. There’s this other kind of scene happening in Wilmington, with Tom Watkins, Joyce Brabner, George Stewart, this whole bookazine kind of scene. It was pretty small. It was kind of on the outskirts. It does seem like Rob started to get a little bit more heavily involved with that kind of scene, and kind of pulled away a little bit from the others.

STEPHEN: You have to understand the level of elitism that we all seemed to have, especially if you were on the faculty at Cranbrook, and read Art Forum, and stuff. Comic books. It seems like we were stuck in a weird little academic world. I still have problems with a lot of that kind of work, but I’m much more open to it now than I ever have been. The art world today is so wide open.

MARGARET: Do you have a sense of what the general consensus was, in regards to the establishment of the DCCA?
STEPHEN: I do. I used to go to all those meetings, initially. Who was part of it? It was Pam. Susan Saunders, and Susan Ball. She was on the Art History faculty. She was interested in contemporary work, and at the time, the Art History department had nothing to do with contemporary art. This was in the late ‘70s, early ‘80s. But mostly the late ‘70s.

Susan was this young gal. I think she had gone to Yale, and was having a hell of a time there, in that department. She ultimately left. I’m trying to get to this endpoint, where she went to Columbia, and took a course of study that was designed to re-train academics, or people who have gotten advanced degrees in art history or the arts, and re-train them in business.

She did that, and she went from that, to becoming the curator of some big corporate art collection. It might have been Chase Manhattan Bank or something. From that, she became the head of the College Art Association. She stayed there for like 10 years.

MARGARET: Interesting.

STEPHEN: I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s still connected to that, but she’s probably my age now. She’s probably done with that.

MARGARET: Oh, interesting. That transition into corporate collecting is interesting.

STEPHEN: That is an interesting one. I really admire her for doing that.

MARGARET: We saw the amount of support from corporations in Wilmington in the 1980s and 1990s.

STEPHEN: It still does. It’s the model. I was so sad to see her leave. There’s another woman, Pat something or another. Not Layton. I’m drawing a blank. Great artist. She probably went to the University of Chicago, I think. This other gal. They drove out all these great women. Just gone. Now it’s different. There are women and men. At the time, it was tough. It was a real funny place for women. They had to be more than exceptional, and they had to be teaching what those guys wanted them to teach. Wayne Craven and Bill Homer. I liked those guys, but—

MARGARET: That department was not supporting contemporary artists at that time?

STEPHEN: No. They were a big department, and they had a great reputation, but they didn’t want anything to do with contemporary work. Susan did, and anyway, she landed on her feet. She was a big deal for a while: Director of the College Art Association.

I remember meeting her for a drink at one of those meetings, and I said, “Wow, how the hell did you pull this off?” I used to have a crush on Susan too. We used to carpool, too. She lived up the street from me, on 18th Street.

MARGARET: So, you were involved with the early meetings on DCCA. Did any other faculty—?
STEPHEN: Not faculty. Rick Rothrock was part of it. I always get a kick out of Rick. He started the DCCA. He was at those meetings. He was much more engaged than I was.

MARGARET: He was Joe Moss’s student?

STEPHEN: They never were all that close, Joe and Rick. I wonder if Joe was involved in some of those meetings. I can’t remember.

MARGARET: I have interviewed Joe. He didn’t speak to it, as far as I recall. I did interview him about two years ago, so my memory might be failing me on that one.

STEPHEN: Joe probably suffered from some of the same issues that we all did.

MARGARET: That’s interesting. I asked about the consensus regarding the Foundation. There has been—I think you’re speaking to it as well—this kind of disconnection between Newark and Wilmington, the great expanse between the two.

STEPHEN: Well, the university became increasingly isolated from all of this stuff. I was ashamed, in a way. I remember this guy named John Gatti. Did you ever hear of him?

MARGARET: Yes.

STEPHEN: He was involved with the DCCA. He was a student at Delaware. He got a graduate degree in Ceramics.

MARGARET: I don’t think I knew that.

STEPHEN: He’s still in Philadelphia. Where does he work?

MARGARET: He’s at the Barnes.

STEPHEN: I like John. He got involved with that. He was sort of a liaison, if there was one at all, between DCCA and the University. When Larry Holmes was the chair, we used to have our graduate shows at the DCCA. Then the DCCA decided to dump that whole connection, which was too bad, really. I thought it was stupid. You get those students that joined the DCCA, and they did, to get access to show there. It was like a membership drive. A little bit underhanded, but what the hell.

MARGARET: Yeah. Maybe we’ll see a shift back to that, now that the space has closed at Graham.

STEPHEN: The point of—there was all these independent organizations that didn’t want to coordinate with one another. There was the UG, the Art Museum, DCCA, all vying for the same monies. It was just crazy. We all used to think that the Art Museum and the DCCA should hook up. Even at the initial meetings, that was discussed. It was just a no-no. No one wanted to really do it.
MARGARET: Because the artists felt that the Museum really wasn’t adequately meeting their needs?

STEPHEN: Absolutely. But the Museum argued that it wasn’t their right. They’re not serving the needs of contemporary artists in the community. They’re a museum.

MARGARET: That’s interesting. I would love to finish our interview by discussing—not that I don’t want to do you any disservice, but I would love to talk a little bit more about your work. We did talk a little bit about the work that you were making, transitioning, and into the early work, the work that you were making when you first came to the University of Delaware.

I would love to kind of talk through the development of your work, into the early 2000s. I’ve seen the retrospective, looking through the images—I think it’s really interesting to see some of these transitions, certainly in regards to subject matter. I love what I’ve read, about you talking about the commitment and interest in the process of painting.

Maybe if we could start by talking about—moving past, I know you said you went back to pastels there, in the ’70s. If we could kind move ahead, looking into what looks to be a focus on the studio, in some ways, in regards to your subject matter.

STEPHEN: Yeah. Putting it that way, it’s interesting. I guess what I was trying to do—I was telling you earlier that I wanted to come up with a way of working that was going to endure for me. I could evolve on a very personal level, without getting too much external influence, other than the history of art, and come up with my own work. I think that the way I was working, in this studio—it was so important to me. It is, and it remains important to me. I’ve never been an [inaudible] painter. Maybe I should have. I often regret that, not going outside and painting. But not really. Only when I’m at a good gallery, and they say, “Do you have any landscapes?” “Darn. We like your work, but we can really only sell landscapes.” You can’t sell everything. But I like still life. I’ve always felt that the ultimate expression should be the figure. I’ve worked hard towards that, but not as hard as I’ve really been working with still life. Getting back to that observation of the studio, still life is part of that studio environment. You have control over it. You pick everything, and you illuminate it a certain way.

It’s always there, waiting for you. I’ve grown to love still life. Within that, more than the figure, I’ve felt—it’s become much more personal to me. The choices I make feel much more authentic and original than what I do with the figure. I’ve had moments, with the figure, that I thought I was really on the right track. I do these big quasi-narrative pieces, like this one on the wall. I bought this one out. See the design here? These big multiple-figure pieces that feel like they’re part of a story, or a lesser part of a story. We refer to it as the umbrella narrative.

They became a little out of control for me. I still have a lot of ideas in that regard. I think I would still be doing them, if I had support for them. If I had a gallery that was showing them and selling them. Otherwise, it’s just not even—it just becomes impossible. They’re hard to make. The amount of models and studies that you have to do—a painting like that can take six months.
It’s not just economics. I don’t want to sound like I’m mercenary about the whole thing. But I can do so many more still lives, and I’m much more directly involved with it. It’s more pure aesthetics, and the imagery is the kind of imagery that I’m really interested in.

MARGARET: Mm-hmm. Talk to me a little bit about the work you were doing with the model, particularly the nude, in the—let’s see, that would have been the 1990s. The Self-Portrait with Model. I think it’s interesting. Yeah, in 1994. The Self-Portrait with Model

STEPHEN: That painting is a hard painting for me.

MARGARET: I love that one.

STEPHEN: I like that painting too. I like it, but at the time, I was very unsure about it. I remember showing it to—I showed that for the very first time at Blue Streak. It was a show of self-portraits that [inaudible] put together. I thought, “I did this thing, I’ll show it and see what kind of response I get.”

I remember Linda Schmidt—do you know Linda Schmidt?

MARGARET: I do.

STEPHEN: She literally broke out laughing. I was thinking, “Oh, shit. This is terrible. People are laughing at this painting.” It’s funny. Here I am—it reminds be a little bit about—what is that painting by Thomas Hart Benton? Persephone, or something like that.

MARGARET: Oh, yes.

STEPHEN: It reminds me of that, a little. The leering. There’s a leering quality to that. To me, it was much more about teaching. I taught figure drawing. Literally, every semester, for years and years. That scene is what I did. That’s my work. I thought it was a legitimate thing to paint.

MARGARET: Well, yeah. It certainly seems in line, in the same vein—I’m going back a little farther, because I want to get back to the work you were doing in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. It seems focused on the studio practice.

STEPHEN: It is a studio picture. There are so many paintings that aren’t in that catalog. I didn’t want to call it a retrospective, because it had no budget for a retrospective. The late ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s were great years for me. It was great for the whole art market. Everything I did, I sold. Everything. Other than a few weird paintings that I could never sell in a million years.

MARGARET: All those paintings are in private or corporate collections?

STEPHEN: Yeah. I hung it up on the wall myself. Even paintings I had no business letting out of the studio, I could sell them. It’s just the greatest thing, and then it just collapsed. Mid 2000s, I guess. It was just done.
MARGARET: Not a full retrospective. There’s a lot missing, in terms of subject and form.

STEPHEN: It’s like a survey. That studio thing—I was doing other paintings in paintings. I did so many of those things. I did a lot of paintings over the years. That’s a Sewell Biggs thing. I put that in my museum show.

MARGARET: Okay. Oh, in 90. Okay. So, I wonder, how many pieces do you have at the Biggs Museum?

STEPHEN: Just that. It’s funny, I have that piece there. I have a little drawing, and a big painting, that was a companion for that. They should have bought it, because it was a companion for the drawing. Cheap bastards. But I was happy to—

MARGARET: Actually, it was purchased by someone else and then gifted. That was part of—you had those four pieces. This, the study—not Blue Marble.

STEPHEN: That was the ’76 show.

MARGARET: Yeah. That was the show you had with Donna Usher and Eric Guthrie? I don’t know his work.

STEPHEN: Safe time.

MARGARET: Yeah, that’s right. Interesting. The large narrative groupings, really not happening until the early 2000s. This was after you retired.

STEPHEN: Yeah, pretty much.

MARGARET: Okay.

STEPHEN: I started doing it when I was teaching. That picture—where was it? I think it’s a page earlier. It’s called Daniel Ma. I might have done that while I was still teaching. Most of those people were students. Not all of them.

MARGARET: Okay. And you’re included.

STEPHEN: Yes. That’s Bob Strade.

MARGARET: And other students?

STEPHEN: And my son there, the tall kid. These guys fighting. It was fun. I had all these people around.

MARGARET: Yeah.
STEPHEN: Those paintings—I’ll tell you, those paintings require a pretty big-time New York gallery to sell. Otherwise, you don’t.

MARGARET: Because they’re labor-intensive, in terms of models.

STEPHEN: They’re labor-intensive, they’re expensive, and the time that goes into them—I only sold about two or three, over the years. Sherry sold them all. I couldn’t. I’m hoping the university is going to buy this one. Janis is looking into that. Wouldn’t that be nice?

MARGARET: That would be appropriate. I’m going to stop this for today.

STEPHEN: Well, it was fun to take that trip down memory lane.

[End of Audio]
[Duration: 72 minutes]