Oral history interview with Tom Watkins, November 8, 2013

Watkins, Tom
Artist

Size: Transcript: 30 pages.

Format of recording: Originally recorded as digital wav file. Duration is 95 min.

Collection Summary: An interview of Tom Watkins conducted November 8, 2013 by Margaret Winslow for the Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives of the Delaware Art Museum.

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

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

The transcript of this interview is in the public domain and may be used without permission. Quotes and excerpts must be cited as follows: Oral history interview with Tom Watkins, November 8, 2013, Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives, Delaware Art Museum.

TOM: I'll give you some samples on this stuff. That’s the thing. I figured it makes more sense that I can show it to you.

MARGARET: Yes, this is Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum interviewing Tom Watkins on November 8th, 2013 at the Delaware Art Museum. Okay, so Tom, I’d like to start out by asking where you were born and raised.

TOM: I was born in about a mile from here and I was raised pretty much here. I was born at the Delaware Hospital at Washington Street and I lived very briefly in Newport, Delaware. I was very young. I was probably about one year old then my family moved to a small house in Richardson Park and then to a second small house so I live from age two and a half to fifteen at the corner of Norway and Eureka Ave. which is an old parsonage building or a church.

The church had been made into an apartment building behind me. We were at the first floor of this brick parsonage building. I was opposite, originally it was the volunteer fire company, Five Points Fire Company so for three or four years, I had a fire siren outside of my front door and then it became the Painters’ Union Hall. I don’t know what it is now but it’s still there at that corner.

MARGARET: Okay.
TOM: We moved to downtown Wilmington January of 1967. My mother—my father died when I was 11. My mother was working at the Delaware Hospital evening shift, children’s division and the bus company, Delaware Coach Company had gone on strike. So my mother was catching rides in with people that worked on her shift or taking a cab. The cab cost about $1.00 at Richardson Park to the hospital in 1966. My mother was getting paid $0.87 an hour. That was minimum wage. She was a nurse’s aide. She had a week where nobody was coming her way; she could spend literally half her take home on cab fare.

MARGARET: On transportation—

TOM: So we moved downtown to Tenth and Jefferson which was about four or five blocks from the hospital and—

MARGARET: That was in January 1967.

TOM: Yeah. I walked my mother out to—went to high school to enroll, that was about a three or four mile walk I guess. The buses—we walked in. There was a race riot going on. There were police running around the hallway and people were screaming and yelling on the intercom, said that more police were coming. My mother said I don’t think I want to go to school here, Bob. We walked home and I enrolled in Brown Technical High School which is now under the front lawn of Hercules. I took the [inaudible] there for half of the tenth year. I came in the middle of it and the whole of eleventh to twelfth grade.

MARGARET: Okay.

TOM: That was when, [inaudible] we were on; we were on the same building as the print shop so people were studying to be printers. They were still doing hot lead type so they were doing handset type and monotype, and monotype with the typesetting machine. If you wanted to print an illustration, you had to have an acid etched metal plate made and that was locked into a lock-up and then print it.

I learned what was then 19th century technology while the real world was pretty much going the offset at that point but my foundation was in that 19th century technology which over the next five to ten years was pretty much abandoned commercially and it became the province of artists and print makers because you could get a full 8 1/2 X 11 sheet of type for about $15.00 that was photo typeset. It would’ve been about the same price probably with the old hot lead stuff but you could make corrections on the photo typesetting. Hot lead, you had to recast the whole thing.

I picked that up on the fly just by reading and talking to printers so that gives you the idea of the background but people don’t have a grasp of how different it was then. If I wanted to have a caption for a magazine article, I would type it up and write notes on it, what size type, what the lettering would be for spacing it if there’s more than one line and it would take usually three days to get that back. If there’s a mistake, there wasn’t something like an E or an F is supposed to be that I can chop off of a piece of an X-Acto. I had to send it back and get it re-done so you could have a week just to get a single caption done.
MARGARET: Right.

TOM: It was still fairly common to get stuff done hot type and make a print proof of that and then manipulate the print proof rather than have it recast. You would wait out and correct the printed proof copy.

MARGARET: Okay.

TOM: So that’s where I was sort of dropped into. There were a lot of commercial printers in Wilmington when I was a kid. The News Journal was here and there were a good, there were three or four typesetting houses so you could find this stuff, you could see it done. You could walk into a small print shop and it was all in the front room so you could walk up to the guy who was doing the actual printing and you could watch him do lock-up on your stuff. That was fascinating.

MARGARET: That’s interesting so did you apprentice anywhere outside of the high school?

TOM: Closest I did to an apprenticeship I guess would’ve been working at Hardcastle’s. School had a co-op program for the twelfth grade students and the way it worked was there was another student named Wayne Phillips and I. I would work two weeks at Hardcastle’s which was an art supply and frame shop and I go back to school two weeks then he would replace me. We did that for the whole last school year. On Saturdays, we both came in and you know, the business was done by Bayard T. Berndt who was a very good painter and they were, Hardcastle’s, was the big store in Delaware.

Audio Visual Arts had a lot more of the graphic art material but traditional fine arts supplies that was Harcastle’s. I was shocked to discover that the big jars of the [inaudible] powdered tempera that we were mixing up in school as a kid making finger paint out of it, commercial art make tempera because we were doing a lot of signs. That was the same stuff that Andrew Wyeth was buying. There’s a difference between my second grade finger painting, my tenth grade sign and Andrew Wyeth’s Christina’s World was an egg and some talent but the same raw materials were being used for different projects which really fascinated me.

That’s sort of thinking about the idea that people make the mistake of denigrating a material is not having any value of a serious use. Here’s Andrew Wyeth using the same stuff that kids finger paint with.

MARGARET: Right, how that’s interesting that material kind of specificity. So after high school, you went to the University of Delaware.

TOM: Briefly.

MARGARET: Briefly, okay and tell me about your time there.
TOM: Well, it was a weird situation. I wanted to enroll in the printmaking class. Another friend of mine and I both wanted to enroll. We got there and we had our money refunded to us. I said what’s going on? First of all since you’re going to a technical high school, you didn’t have a foreign language so we’re not going to force you to take up foreign language but you have to have a college level English course for one year along with your art course for us to enroll you as a student. I said okay, I’ll do that but, well, hold up, Mr. Watkins. What’s the hold up? Well, only six people enrolled for the printmaking course and we needed I think it was 12. So the instructor’s on sabbatical this year. Come back next year. I couldn’t get in then.

MARGARET: So you couldn’t take—yeah.

TOM: I ended up at the University of Delaware. I was in longshoreman for several years and was injured and part of the Workman’s Comp program was that they would provide financing for training that would take you to a different job [inaudible] injury. My back was badly injured by falling case of bananas; hit me on the lower spine. So I enrolled in Joe Moss’ University of Delaware sculpture class and I had a semester paid for by the Workman’s Comp program.

I told what I really want to do is make a big monster costume. They said you want to what? Well, and I go to these comic book conventions and I’m interested in cartooning. Yeah, my son says you’re a cartoonist. Well, there’s a big monster character from Marvel Comics called Man Thing and I’m building a costume and I’m using techniques I read about from a guy named Paul Blaisdell who did stuff around here, International Pictures in the ‘50s, stuff like Invasion of the Saucer Men and I read that he made this big full-body monster suit for it to tear up to be on space.

They built it on the actor’s underwear, long underwear. I said what are you doing? Well, I had an overall, a one piece of jumpsuit. I’m building a body on it with shoe repair cement and foam rubber. I’m going to end up in an 8 foot tall monster that has me in the middle of it. He says well, where does the sculpting come in? I’m casting skin and I’m doing cast resin eyes and he looks at my notes and says yeah, that’s sculpting, go ahead. So Joe let me build my big monster suit in this class and—

MARGARET: What year was that?

TOM: ‘73.

MARGARET: That was 1973, okay.

TOM: In ‘74, I wasn’t living in Newark then. Yeah, I was coming out from Wilmington. There’s a bus trip in there but you were given money for textbooks which I could send to the University of Delaware bookstore and the U of D bookstore did have some art supplies. They had polyester resins I used for the character’s eyes but they could do vouchers to another store so I would have them voucher gallons of latex rubber that was used for craft molds for candy leather and I get these gallons of rubber and mix up the monster suit stuff. I did a three-by-four pan of stuff called CelluClay, papier mâché product.
I made detailed bubbly nasty looking lumpy skin with it then I mix up rubber with acrylic medium and acrylic paint to varied colors. I pour it into the mold and let it sit for a couple of days and peel it out and have sections of skin. I’d cut it apart with manicure scissors and work it onto the rough foam rubber body and then the character’s a big shambling mass of vegetation so I had pieces of rope look like roots covering up the seams and I use dyed grass that was used for basket weaving so it took about a year to build this whole thing.

MARGARET: That’s incredible. You don’t still have it, do you?

TOM: No, it was sold as part of a packaged deal.

MARGARET: Oh, okay.

TOM: It ended up at the Elkton JC’s for the Halloween Haunted House. They rented it several years in a row. They ended up getting it.

MARGARET: They bought it eventually as well?

TOM: Oh, yeah. I ship it around the country to comic book stores for openings. I wore it in a parade in Rutland, Vermont. Rutland, Vermont, there’s a fellow named Tom Fagan who was a comic historian, especially interested in Batman and he created a Batman costume for their Halloween Parade in the early ‘60s. By late ‘60s, cartoonist and comics fan [inaudible] up in Vermont on Halloween; they build floats around comic book characters. It’s been on for about ten years and they built a float around the Man Thing character. I was on the float. I was on the float three or four times. I was Dr. Doom from Marvel Comics one year there then yeah, another point on the [inaudible] in Rutland, Vermont because that’s where all the people that became really famous cartoonists and writers and comics and the—there it is.

MARGARET: I was wondering so is this it?

TOM: That’s it.

MARGARET: This is it?

TOM: Yeah.

MARGARET: Do you have any other photographs of it?

TOM: Somewhere. I’ve been trying to find it. I have stuff in storage I have to get out.

MARGARET: Okay or I can go back to the News Journal.

TOM: It was the cover of Delaware Today. It’s a colored photo of it on the cover of Delaware Today, December of ’76.

MARGARET: December ‘76, Delaware Today cover.
TOM: These interior photos of me getting the costume so you get an idea of how big it is. The head was solid on top of the chest and the chest was a big, it was sort of like a hood for a sweatshirt. I flipped the chest back with the head mounted on top of it. I peep out the holes in the chest. There were pieces of dyed grass hanging over the holes.

MARGARET: Oh, wow.

TOM: It was how they do it in Hollywood, believe it or not.

MARGARET: Yeah, oh, that’s incredible. So, what was—do you remember Joe Moss’ response?

TOM: He thinks it was funny.

MARGARET: He thought it was funny.

TOM: Yeah, he was, well, Joe had a piece of, I didn’t come in the front door so I know that for years there was one of his big pieces sitting on the front door here.

MARGARET: Yes.

TOM: It was great and we sort of had something in common. He had some fingers missing from an accident. He’d heard, I have a half-brother who lost his arm in an industrial accident when he was a kid. He got caught in a meat grinder at a meat packing plant. He knew I knew about that kind of accident so it was, I was the one guy he didn’t have to lecture about safety. He lectured about safety holding his hands, show people his hand missing one or two fingers and I still lecture young guys about safety. I see somebody on a film set or shop changing the blade when the saw is plugged in, that gives me the shivers.

MARGARET: Oh, yes.

TOM: But—so that’s sort of a side bar but that was what I did at the university. I build a monster suit.

MARGARET: Did you meet Rob at the university?

TOM: No. I was working, *Emergency Illustrated* was created by a guy named Richard Bronson from Baltimore and he’d been working on video projects with a guy named Hank Goldstein and Hank in turn had connected with Ed Wozlowski they called Stretch. They decided to put out a magazine which was mainly, the main intent was for a—they intended to focus on video and cable access. They were lobbying for cable access for Rollins and Rollins was [inaudible] for any kind of access and they created this project *Emergency Illustrated*.

I got drafted to this and some work. They saw my old unpublished cartoon work. I’d been doing it. They printed it and I started, they needed some, basically they needed to fill some space for the second issue and I read an article about comic book conventions in New York and I’d never
written before but I think it was a little over the top but they liked it. I said I liked writing so I started writing for them.

MARGARET: So that was the comic art convention that you reviewed, the July 1973, that was the first review that you did for *Emergency Illustrated*.

TOM: Yeah and it was interesting because I did the cover for the second issue and it gone from two colors in the first issue to full color in the second issue because there was a printmaker at the university, an instructor named Richard Miller and he’d done this very complex large print and it was done by, it was printed with silkscreen or maybe in [inaudible].

I think it was a metal-based plate system of some sort. It was copper, copper plate I think. It was done as a full color piece so he agreed to allow them to use his hand separations for that and print it as a center-spread of the magazine which I thought was great because here you have a piece of fine art from the handmade plates in a mass circulation magazine. I think it was like 3,000 copies. That’s how massive it was.

They say well, we got a color for the cover, too, Tom. You want to do cover? I did the Nixon cover. I did it with what we call Zapotin which is one of the brand names. It was graduated bar, percentage graded thought patterns on— Zapotin was a, it was a, it was like, anyway, example, it’s the same material as the magic tape is. It’s a thin acetate with a dull flat adhesive on it and they would patterns on it and so if you looked at the daily comic strips, the Phantom was always done as gray in the daily comics and that was a 50 percent gray pattern. The percentages were based on 100 percent being black and 10 percent being almost invisible gray and they were, they were in series, key to the touch reduction.

Commercial art was done usually twice the size of printing or occasionally half the size of printing so if you wanted to have a gray value and a piece of advertising or an illustration, you would get the appropriate percentage to the appropriate reduction size and cut it out by hand with a mat knife, put it on the [inaudible], rub it down with a burnisher and that reproduced as a black line shot. If you used gray ink as a wash like you would if you were doing a commercial illustration, it had to be photocopy—it had to be halftone end of a halftone of it and the halftone is a printing of photograph.

Instead of having an area of gray or black and white, you had black dots that became the gray and the black became not a true black but a softer color of a dark gray. So the argument against using wash was that you didn’t have true blacks. I figured there’s a way around that but technically what you do is you do black and white artwork. You keep that aside and then you do your wash on top of the artwork or a copy of it. You make a halftone of the wash because of the grays then you make a line that gets ahead of the original artwork, bond the two negatives together and print that then you have a true black trapping the graduated colors.

It’s very technical but what you had to deal with, this is way before computers, when I printed full color, I didn’t know how I was going to print so it came out because I had three overlays. One was yellow. One was cyan. One was magenta and I put down red film represent black so I
could see through it with 100 percent colors but all the tints, if you want to make a Caucasian flesh tone, it’s usually 25 percent magenta, 10 percent yellow and you have to angle the screen so they don’t moray. It’s a whole complicated process and that’s what I was doing.

It got easier. I realized it’s just a little more expensive to do all your, instead of doing all these dots and stuff, you would take an overlay and do graduated gray pencils or wash or any other kind of medium and work up your gray values for magenta, yellow, and cyan again and sometimes the black as well. Usually I had a black trap line down so you would do all these grays then tell the engraving shop it’s a 4-color job. They would put angled screens on it so they wouldn’t moray again then you’d have a negative that showed a gray pattern that reprinted with the right color ink and then you’d have 4-color.

But again, unless you wanted to pay $100.00 for a proof, they would make a transparency of the colors with a dye and you could look at it, you were flying blind.

MARGARET: You wouldn’t know.

TOM: You didn’t know they had 10,000 copies of it sitting there.

MARGARET: Right.

TOM: That’s how you did it.

MARGARET: So they were aware that you were doing this kind of work.

TOM: Oh, yeah.

MARGARET: And asked you to become involved with *Emergency Illustrated*.

TOM: Yeah.

MARGARET: But that was, so that was ‘73.

TOM: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay.

TOM: This is rounds us back to [inaudible] by Rob. So we worked out of the building on Cleveland, whatever the street that was, I can’t remember the name of it now but Stretch’s wife and another woman had a small clothing store and we used the backroom for our production facility. That became impractical and it ended up becoming the second home to Newark Food Color so we moved to Wilmington, figured that was the big city. We found space on second floor buildings for sale and rent. The building I moved into at [inaudible] hadn’t been occupied in the upper floor except for a hand engraver for 15 to 20 years so our office was an old beauty salon that had closed in ‘59.
MARGARET: Oh, my gosh.

TOM: Had all these art deco furnishings which I saved some of them and I ended up paying $25.00 a month for a corner room that had been a dental lab. That was my apartment for nine years and I spent about $10,000.00 fixing it up but divide $10,000.00 into $25.00 a month for nine years, it was a good deal because I had to put plumbing in and that for it to work and all that stuff but so across the street from us was Rob Jones and he’d been there for about six months and we were sort of like dogs sniffing each other. It’s like—we became friends fairly fast. It was you know, he had a great sense of humor and saw what we were doing.

He was in advertisement with a magazine and it was fun. It was nice that two groups of people doing things that were considered unconventional were in the same neighborhood. It was Fifth Street Gallery, Emergency Illustrated offices and we called the company itself Extra Media because they, we were doing video projects for people that was record your kid’s birthday party stuff and industrial stuff, recording board meetings, doing presentations.

It was us and then there was a greasy spoon restaurant underneath of us called The Savoy and Savoy Restaurant, best food in town, what are you going to—and at the back of us was Hardcastle’s and Salvation Army.

MARGARET: Hardcastle’s behind you.

TOM: Yeah, I can look out my back window and see Hardcastle’s and I was friends with everybody there. Yeah, you could have an afternoon where Rob Jones and Tom Watkins and Andrew Wyeth can be walking down the same block together.

MARGARET: Altogether.

TOM: At Fifth’s and Shipley.

MARGARET: Fifth’s and Shipley, and then of course realizing that right around that time as well, the Grand Opera House is being renovated.

TOM: Right which I had mixed feelings about because the Grand was called the last wave of studio system movie houses. In the late ‘40s, the Justice Department made the big studies divest all their theaters. Their argument was it would enable theaters to have more diverse showings because if you were Warner Theater, you had to show a Warner and little Allied Artist couldn’t necessarily get a booking. Well, that meant that Warner always had a place to sell their movies so they always had a profit.

Warner—the Grand was the Stanley Warner Grand. Down the street was the Stanley Warner Town and then there was the Stanley Warner on 10th Street. They were not officially connected with Warner Bros. anymore but they still had I think Warner’s owned at least the real estate so they had long term leases for these theaters.
The Grand in the ‘60s was a double-feature house. If an A film played at the Lowes or the Warner in January, in June, it would be back at the Grand with a second feature and then where double features were being released regularly, science fiction, horror, the Hammer films from England were double features usually. American International had the [inaudible] stuff with Vincent Price. You had Mr. Price stays live there ten years later which is interesting.

I got to see all the, what’s now considered classic stuff. I saw the Ray Harryhausen film, *Jason and the Argonauts* there on double bill. I don’t know if you know who Harryhausen was. He was an animator. He was the assistant animator on *Mighty Joe Young* and he animated *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms, The 7th Voyage of Sinbad, Jason and the Argonauts* and he did an exhibit here in the ‘80s, early ‘90s of bronzes cast from his animation models. This man had a 35-year career of moving 80 units tall animation mannequins.

I was talking about it with my roommate this morning about the skeleton in *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*. You have a two-minute long sword battle with a skeleton. That’s 24 frames a second so for a minute all that sword waving around, a minute times, 60 times 24, one man moving that in a dark room with light on it bit by bit by bit, hand clicking a 35 mm camera then integrating that with live action footage. So I was seeing his stuff. I saw Vincent Price’s post series films. I saw the Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing Hammer films and it was the tail end of the independent horror adventure stuff from the late ‘50s, stuff like *The Flesh Eaters* was still in there, horrible film but quite effective.

Before they closed, they were catching the beginning wave of the ‘70s independent stuff like *Night of the Living Dead* and they closed out as a exploitation house showing corrupt black gangster movies and kung fu films. That’s how they closed out before it became the Grand Opera House. But it was fun, you know, in 1967, go down the Grand on Sunday and for fifty cents I could see *Jason and the Argonauts* and another movie. That’s pretty good because TV was, NBC was the only network doing full color broadcasting in the mid-’60s.

TV sets were expensive if they were color and they weren’t that good. You could see widescreen full color for very little money at a theater.

MARGARET: So affordable entertainment in downtown Wilmington for the people who were living there.

TOM: Yeah and it’s just a shame you know, I didn’t dislike what the Grand was becoming. I disliked what was lost because there were no movie theaters left then. It was the last one.

MARGARET: So, the other Warners and Lowes had closed prior to—

TOM: The Rialto—

MARGARET: And the Rialto—
TOM: The Rialto was the last segregated theater in Delaware. They hung on to the mid-‘60s with the segregation.

MARGARET: Okay. Now some of these spaces were repurposed later and I think the Rialto specifically they had kind of parties—

TOM: The fire, mysterious origin.

MARGARET: I’ve heard that but prior to that, they were having parties and they were showing pornographic films.

TOM: For a very brief time, George Stewart and—I can’t remember his last name, Barry [Solan] who run the state, had leased it. I think they had a two or three months run in there. It was very tough [inaudible]. They were, because that was concurrent with the Rondo Society—Rondo Center and they did their initial—George Stuart was involved with that of course and our mailing list was used for the invitations for the opening of it. That’s when they sort of had a chance then I thought, a movie theater—a movie theater I didn’t have to pay for a while.

MARGARET: Yeah. So getting back, I do want to talk a little bit more about Fifth Street.

TOM: Sure.

MARGARET: Being right across the street, I imagine you becoming good friends with Rob. I imagine that you must have attended many of the openings, all the openings in the gallery so the way it’s been described, the few exhibition, insulation images that I’ve seen, I mean this was really seen as a contemporary New York style loft gallery in downtown Wilmington and it seemed like from this exhibition programming and you’ve mentioned this, you’ve really diversified the types of artists you were showing so I know you showed some professors from the University of Delaware.

TOM: Yeah, Julio daCunha.

MARGARET: Like Julio daCunha.

TOM: Joe Moss had some work there.

MARGARET: I think Joe did as well but then he was showing very different kinds. There was a nice range.

TOM: You know who Wayne Hulk was?

MARGARET: No.

TOM: Wayne Hulk was, well; he was somebody I could’ve invented for a story. He was a quiet, he’s sort of a John Waters character. He was sort of quiet, nervous, young guy, who was very twitchy and they did these fiberglass pieces that had big blobs all over them. They looked
like glowing hunks of semen splattered on the wall. It’s just very, very Freudian. His mother followed him around everywhere taking sort of—“Are you okay, Wayne?” “I’m okay, mom.” It was just like Rob would look at me and roll his eyes and he’d say “You wouldn’t believe how interesting this gets, Tom.” I will believe it. He was a kid wearing his neurosis right on his sleeve and Rob let him exhibit it publicly.

It’s very strange stuff. He did an exhibition of billboard art because he pointed out that the gag was Rob, and I thought, most of us were aware that when you go past the billboard on the interstate, you see a 7Up can and you go to a gallery in New York and buy a [inaudible] you see a bunch of dots. You go to look at a billboard, a foot away in the gallery; you see a bunch of dots. The whole pop art thing was using the iconography and the physical process of commercial printing commenting on it but if you took the trouble to look at the stuff, you really—it was there, you could see an interesting aspect of it that was beyond what it was supposed to be. Yeah, it’s a can of soda but it’s also a bunch of dots.

It’s just like—I asked somebody, “You ever seen the Mona Lisa?” “Yeah, I have, you saw a bunch of dots.” “What do you mean? Mona Lisa’s in a gallery in Paris. It’s a painting.” “I’ve never seen it. I’ve seen hundreds of post cards and magazine pictures; it’s a bunch of dots.” So I’m not sure why if I look at these dots, he would tell me that’s art. I put dots on paper every year. It’s not art. There’s only one Mona Lisa. Everything else is a bunch of dots and Rob and I were both aware of that and he appreciated what I was doing with sort of disassembling the processes and commenting on them because people—yeah, Rob was not somebody who believed in arbitrary fine art, commercial art, or a low art, and high art. He was very egalitarian.

We both thought it was [inaudible] you know and we were also—well, it was kind of sad you know that in the classic period of comic art and comic strips would be the turn of the century to the mid-’30s, most of the artwork was destroyed. The artist didn’t regard it as having any value. Comic book’s the same thing. Publishers destroy the artwork because they were afraid somebody would get it and ship it to Uruguay and do Spanish language editions of Batman and they wouldn’t pay any money on it.

It all fell apart in the ’70s when somebody pointed out that well, commercial art ethics, the artwork belongs to the artist. Well, we bought it. Somebody’s pointed out in California “Well; you bought my artwork for 20 years?” “Yeah.” “Did you pay any sales tax?” “What are you talking about?” That’s what did it. It was the California sales tax. All these companies for years had been taking people’s artwork and destroying it or shipping it overseas for their own purposes were later on selling it when it became valuable, had never paid the artist sales tax.

So if you didn’t pay sales tax, you don’t own it or you’re going to pay the sales tax on 35 years’ worth of artwork which you’ve paid several million dollars for. So that’s one of the things we were dealing with. So artwork had just, people had started to collect the stuff and study it and like photography, we threw our contact sheets away. We made a print of a picture for a newspaper, [inaudible], fortunately for some people like Capera and Luigi saved their originals. They lived to see themselves regarded as artists.
It’s just, it’s just crazy but Rob was aware of that. We’d go to—I had a full color cover from *Emergency Illustrated*, all hand separated work thrown away by a printer that they shot the magazine—you want your artwork back? Yeah. They just threw it away. It was something. It was about 80 hours’ worth of work at that point. They just throw it away because they’re used to doing Joe’s Produce Market—Tomatoes On Sale This Week.

MARGARET: I think it’s interesting that the two of you are thinking about process, commercial processes, commercial materials, industrial materials and it’s interesting that the two of you were thinking about those things when you were both studying with Joe Moss. Not at the same time—

TOM: Oh, yeah.

MARGARET: But somewhat you—certainly contemporaries at the University of Delaware, so who’s using, you know, the polyurethane foams and things like that.

TOM: Everybody that knew Rob was pretty much convinced that he was killed by the materials. I worry about it because I did costume work for years. I used shoe repair cement which has toluene in it and acetone. In the middle ‘80s, Joseph Kallinger used as inhaling, shoe repair cement fumes in a small shop for years as an insanity plea. So I guess fiberglass a lot, too, the stuff’s lethal. I’ve walked into places where they’re casting stuff. People walk around with no filters on. I walk in; I get a headache in two minutes. Rob worked with that stuff. It produces cyanide. It’s just terrible stuff.

MARGARET: So interesting that the two of you are thinking about both of those things. Let’s talk a bit about the CETA program and you’re involvement with that. I think another interesting thing and I think maybe if you can speak to this, I do think that the CETA program and the Delaware Art Museum’s outreach program that they developed with that funding helped along with what you and Rob were doing downtown, helped really support and solidify the artist community that would lead to the founding of the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts.

It’s bringing all of these people into one place giving them specific activities and then they go on to fund their own things so I would love to hear about your involvement with that and then specifically about the mural project, City Sights/City Sounds.

TOM: Oh, yeah, well, a lot of the artists, I was starving, everybody else was and the chance to do some artwork where I didn’t have to pay for all the support—I tried to do magazine artwork because you could do something and have it printed and multiple people would see the final result. If you do a painting, unless it’s something that’s tremendously popular and exhibited somewhere or reproduced, nobody sees it so okay, I’m gearing my stuff for better for worse, whatever I have to say, it’s going to be seen by people in a magazine.

Murals, that’s pretty good, too. You can see it and it seemed like a very—it’s innately democratic and I remember it was a really eerie moment. I took commercial art [inaudible] and we had the meeting for the mural project. They were using the then empty Greyhound Terminal building before it was torn down. Delcastle Technical High School was the successor. I walk in.
The only place available was the same desk I sat in for three years. I sat down there. It was just the creepiest feeling. This was seven or eight years after I graduated from high school, sitting back at the same desk. That's weird.

I remember they were building the Market Street mall. It seemed to be a big [inaudible]. I knew it was going to disrupt the business downtown and it helped kill a lot of small businesses because the corruption of traffic and it just didn’t seem to make sense to me so I, one of the things I decided to do, I guess you could say a parody, a science fiction projection of what this mall was going to be like in X number years, I did a post-apocalyptic version of the mall. I did several studies. I showed the planners if you didn’t realize what they were—it’s the dumb planners they had, instead of having the nice little cherry trees they planted, I showed big sumac plants [inaudible].

I call them Delaware palms, iridescent red sumac trees that had giant dragonflies, five foot dragonflies flying around and it was just—one of the things I did was a sketch showing a wall with a bicentennial poster on it and it was all faded, there’s all these weird animals walking in front of it and Cynthia Burke who was one of the administrators of the project got horrified. “I’m one of the administrators of the Bicentennial Committee. You can’t use that!” I was like Jesus Christ, the idea being you know, we had a bicentennial and I ended up doing the, the first mural I did was what was then the Wilmington Greyhound Station. A guy name Nick Battaglia found it.

It gets complicated in a web in there because Nick Battaglia was the brother of Basil Battaglia. Basil Battaglia had run for mayor and was a major Republican politician, head of the Republican Committee in Delaware I believe. He was trimmed by commissioner for a long while. We used to have a mailbox next to each other. “What do you do, Commissioner Basil?” “Oh, I get a limo, ride around, once in a while look at it, go up to my office, click my check—don’t print that out.” But it’s okay but he was a big supporter of history gallery. He was at all the openings. He bought work.

MARGARET: Interesting, Basil was.

TOM: Yeah, Basil was. His brother Nicky, a brown bag packet store for the inner city black leather trade on Fourth Street or Second Street around Second and Adams or Fourth and Adams, it was one of those little places with Plexiglas dividers in the front that has a gun on it. That was one brother. The other, the sister owned a dive bar next to Hardcastle’s on Shipley Street and so you had Republican Chairperson, inner city slumlord and liquor store owner and proprietor of a sleaze bar and Nicky owned the property that the Greyhound Terminal was in. I told them I wanted to do a mural and I said, “Are you going to pay for all the stuff?” He goes, “yeah. Okay, sure. What I want you to do though, I want you to paint the whole wall white, even the area”—so he got an extra ten feet of painting for free and I guess the mural stood for about four, five years. Well, you know it’s going to be torn down. Yeah but you know, how many millions of looks it’s going to get before it’s torn down?

MARGARET: So you installed the mural, painted the mural, knowing, they already knew that building would be erased.
TOM: I knew it would come down, you know, a fairly short time but it was a very nice spot and people saw it. I had a couple of nice assistants on it.

MARGARET: Do you remember a Karl Schlater?

TOM: Karl Schlater worked on the second mural I worked on.

MARGARET: That was the second mural.

TOM: Yeah, on Orange Street. That was the one that was a heartbreaker because again, I said it’s all [inaudible]. That mural was on the outside of a building that had a typesetting foundry in it and I got typesetting for x-ray and some other commercial projects in there occasionally. They commissioned me to do the mural and the building changed hands and the new owner cut a doorway into my mural then they painted over it. I’ve been told that was going to be there for at least ten years.

MARGARET: Okay, that was the Bell Supply Company?

TOM: Yeah.

MARGARET: Between, was that on, it was between—

TOM: On Orange between Fourth and Third.

MARGARET: On Orange between Fourth and Third.

TOM: Yeah and the typesetting was on the upper floor.

MARGARET: Okay. So that mural project though developed specifically out of your involvement with CETA?

TOM: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay.

TOM: I thought it was really positive because you know, I was aware that Orson Welles had been part of the WPA project. Orson Welles was and still is one of the main influences in my life. I thought yeah, I was aware when I was doing all this stuff that Orson Welles was sitting around a highway getting fatter by the year and not able to make movies. He couldn’t do anything. It was just around that time I heard that Steven Spielberg had met with him. He’s hoping he was going to get some money for a project. The only thing he wanted to do was to tell him he spent $100,000.00 on a Rosebud prop. Welles is trying to get enough money to finish a movie and Steven Spielberg just buys little props for enough money to make a movie. I have funny Orson Welles stories. I’ll tell you some time.
MARGARET: I realize I’m a little bit out of my chronology here because the murals went up in ’75, ’76. The Art Museum had a show in July of 1975 at the downtown gallery and that show included sketches.

TOM: I think it had preliminary sketches, yeah.

MARGARET: Preliminary sketches for the murals.

TOM: You have the name Ray Kopchow anywhere? He was the official photographer for that project.

MARGARET: Ray, how do you spell the last name?

TOM: I think it’s K O P C H O W.

MARGARET: Was he also with CETA?

TOM: He was the official photographic documentarian. He shot thousands of slides. He shot everything at 35 mm color slide. He did black and white shots for the program books, the gallery books so yeah if he’s still alive or his heirs are still around, they should have thousands of those slides.

MARGARET: Okay, I have interviewed Carson Zullinger and he has promised to get my some materials as well.

TOM: Carson and I were longshoremen together in the early ‘70s.

MARGARET: Okay. I don’t think I knew that.

TOM: Yeah.

MARGARET: That’s incredible. So you knew him even earlier.

TOM: Oh, yeah.

MARGARET: So—but I want to get back because Apocalyptic Productions was founded in 1974 with, you founded that with Craig Dawson and Joyce Brabner and did the Wilmington Costume Company come shortly after or was it simultaneous?

TOM: Well, Wilmington Costume, Apocalyptic was basically me and anybody who wanted to do something goofy having it. It was an excuse to have some letterhead and cards because I wanted to get some silicon rubber to make some molds for some costume projects. DuPont couldn’t give me a retail address for it and they wouldn’t sell directly. They would send me, it would send legitimate companies five pound samples of the stuff for free and I couldn’t go out and buy 55 gallon drums of the stuff because it was like $450.00 a drum and you don’t know if
it’s going to work. If I had a company, I could call there. This is Mr. Watkins from Apocalyptic. Can you give me some samples of that by next Tuesday? I got blah, blah, blah.

They’ll mail you all the stuff, UPS, too. It was crazy but you couldn’t—DuPont was never very good at selling their stuff. They could only tell you, we started this company and they only deal with basically if you want to buy $100,000.00 worth of silicon rubber, they’ll talk to you but if you want to buy yeah—

MARGARET: Smaller batches, yeah.

TOM: So, I was doing, I was making costume stuff to order. That big monster suit was a portfolio piece that showed what I could do and Tom Sabini is the make-up guy that did all the Romero movies from *Dawn of the Dead* on. He did *Creep Show*, a lot of [inaudible]. He’s an actor as well. In the mid-’70s, there was a comic book convention in New York and the costume judges were me, Denny O’Neil who’s still editor at *DC Comics* and George Romero, and Tom Sabini. We’re judging the costume event.

At this point you know, I’m doing stuff professionally. I’ve won all these awards in New York and I didn’t think it was fair for—I mean 10 years older; I was a kid making the monster suit in a garage. Now, I’m a guy with a shop making costumes commercially. I didn’t think it was fair for some kid in a garage to compete against somebody to do it. Tom Sabini, I’ll tell you, what do you when you’re not doing a head exploding? He looked around, “Chicken suits.” “What you did, Tom?” “Chicken suits. Chicken suits for the University of Delaware [inaudible], chicken suits for the Shriners, for the Order of the Blue Hen, the Order of the Crow, the Order of the Duck, a lot of chicken suits.”

MARGARET: A lot of chicken suits.

TOM: So when I got to that, at that point, I was still making stuff to order and somebody came in, wanted to, they wanted to rent a clown costume. I said we don’t do—I was just, I’ll make a clown costume overnight. He came back with a clown costume. The person wearing the clown suit was [inaudible] in it was Aidus Gimbutas who was the owner of Main Light, the lighting company.

MARGARET: Yes.

TOM: Well, he was one of my assistants.

MARGARET: Okay.

TOM: We ran into Aidus in a clown suit. He was Bootsy the Clown. Bootsy was his nickname from Gimbutas. So Bootsy the Clown. So we said to him, “You know, this clown suit is a good idea.” So I listed under costumes but I was getting more close for rentals than I was for construction for the kind of stuff I did so we started doing a little bit of costumes. Eventually, somebody had been involved with Upper Delaware had a costume shop called the Nutshell.
Basically their old production costumes were rented out and sold and they were doing that. One of the people involved with it had an argument. A portion of the costumes is settlement for money owed and they came to us and said I’ll give you these on a consignment basis and we’ll split the money. We did that and eventually bought them out because it was becoming harder and harder to sort it out but this is where it gets kind of messy. After Rob closed down the gallery, the Nutshell people were so impressed with the business Rob was doing that they—I changed the name to [inaudible] for that, they moved a costume shop in, in the former history gallery space right across the street from me.

MARGARET: Really?

TOM: I was resentful that—Joyce was real resentful because you know—yeah but one day Joyce just says, “you realize what they’ve done?” I said, “What because I’m going to make a couple of phone calls.” This is when—now Joyce could really, if Joyce is mad at you, you’d know. She pointed out to the arts council that they’d be giving money to the arts council and all the state funding, operations has been giving money to the Opera Society for years. They were spending it on costumes. Now they had a commercial business with all the inventory paid for by tax money, calls them a tax paying commercial business that had basically created the market in that city and they were told if you want any more money from us, sell your costumes.

You can’t take money from public sector into private sector and compete with private sector with public money. So I bought them out and a lot of ill feelings there but you know, it was legitimate. It isn’t fair. I was fighting a daily battle with winos and it’s just awful stuff down there. They just came in when I had the cream. They had volunteers from Arts Society working for them. I’m paying people.

MARGARET: Right.

TOM: That was one of the nastier things that happened but—

MARGARET: But Apocalyptic Productions was prior to Xanadu, correct?

TOM: Yeah and Xanadu, Rob Jones was responsible for Xanadu.

MARGARET: How so?

TOM: Well, I cook. Rob was a star waiter. He was making $200.00 a night in tips at the Canal House in the mid-’70s. He said that restaurant’s—only if he’s available—why don’t we open a restaurant? So I took a lease out on it. Rob got busy. I was paying rent for six months on a building that had—it was going to rename the restaurant. I was going to be the chef and did the design work for the menu and stuff. [inaudible] “I’m too busy, Tom.”

So Xanadu was created because I’d signed the lease for a property at my building that’d be paying rent on for months and it was already a restaurant so took the restaurant stuff out, put it in the basement and put a comic book shop there.
MARGARET: You made it into a comic book shop.

TOM: Right because Craig and I each had comic book collections.

MARGARET: Okay.

TOM: That was the origin of that so that was okay, what can we do here?

MARGARET: Okay and how long, when did—Xanadu transitioned into Gallery X?

TOM: Yeah. I don’t know if you realize how business-y the politics in that town has become by the mid-’70s. You had, basically you had a huge amount of properties; they were absentee landlords in New York. They were successors to places like, it’s like Woolworth’s, international or national chains bought lots of properties in the ‘50s and now they have all these white elephants so you had blocks full of property. There was a speculator named Ron Mazik who made money off of a race horse that won the Kentucky Derby. He bought a bunch of buildings up, slapped paint on them and moved tenants in and screwed them because he didn’t fix the buildings up very well.

So all these buildings were being shuffled around and in the middle of all this was the Ogden Howard Furniture Company. They were in a former Woolworth’s set on Market Street between Fifth and Sixth. They were my landlord. They owned the building. I was in two buildings that were linked together. These buildings had been the Every Evening newspaper offices. I was—my bedroom that had been—my property had been a dental lab. Before that, it had been the editor’s office of the Every Evening.

MARGARET: Okay and because you’re on Fifth between Market and Shipley—

TOM: Running from Shipley to Market was another building that was the press house. That’s where the presses were for the newspapers and—

MARGARET: Okay. You’re on the Fifth Street side? Are you on the Fifth Street Gallery side?

TOM: It was an L with the L, the bottom of the L being Shipley Street and the long part of the L running from Market to Shipley.

MARGARET: Market to Shipley, okay.

TOM: The middle of the L was McCready’s Florist. It was two buildings wrapping around on the little building. The second floor and the fourth floor connected. The first floor and third floor didn’t.

MARGARET: Okay. Can I pause?

TOM: Will Eisner, the creator of The Spirit newspaper strip, walked in with Denis Kichen one day. Kichen was a cartoonist and publisher. He was at that point reprinting the life work of Al
Cap, especially his *Li’l Abner* strips and he was quite a good publisher. Eisner had done *The Spirit* for 12 years from the early ‘40s to early ‘50s and it was made into a bad movie by Frank Miller a couple of years ago but Eisner created *The Spirit*, wrote and illustrated most of them.

His main assistant in the late ‘40s to late ‘50s was Jules Pfeiffer. Pfeiffer was the 17-year-old kid sweeping up the shop and coloring *The Spirit* for the boss before he went on to win Pulitzers and Tony’s. So he wandered in one day to say hi and the funny story about that is when we started the comic shop, I went down to [inaudible] to see if I can get comics from them rather than, well, became the alternative system and there was a cover. *The Spirit* was a Sunday insert in newspapers. It was a seven or eight page comic book that either came as part of comic section. You had arrows that fold here, cut here or was pre-printed like an advertising supplement.

He had about 30 papers around the country and *The Spirit* was in the Sunday papers. The newspapers’ syndicates got nervous and they’re only [inaudible] comic books so they decided to publish around a comic book so Eisner created *The Spirit* and he did—several companies had periodic reprints of the Sunday comic strips in comic book format. I walked into Dumb Marvin News and the old type comic book was twice up. There’s a cover this big of a woman looking up at you pulling a dagger out of the top of her nylon. It was the cover for *The Spirit* comic book.

Next to it was the cover of a comic book character *Blackhawk* which is a World War II aviation strip and one of those famous covers there was a device called the war wheel. It was a three story tall rotating wheel, basically a giant tank with spikes on it and what would be the hub for machine guns and it rolled through the countryside on this tank thread and it’s by a guy named Reed Crandall, a very good artist. These covers are hanging there with frames, no glass on the cover of [inaudible]. I mentioned that to Will. He goes, “I’ve been for that cover for five years, Tom. I forgot who I gave it to. I have to go down and get it from. I won’t reprint that.”

A couple of months later, Denis Kichen has it on the cover of his reprint magazine of *The Spirit*. So, it’s kind of incestuous. Walking down Market Street Mall one day, here’s [inaudible] behind me, excuse me, can you direct me to Wilmington Square? Vincent Price is standing behind me. Right over here, Mr. Price. It was like 8:00 Saturday morning, you know. It’s okay, Vincent Price, sure, okay.

MARGARET: What was he doing in Wilmington?

TOM: He was doing a one-man post show. I met him at the Hotel DuPont in ‘65. He was representing Sears. He picked the artwork for a touring collection of fine art by Sears and for five years, he would do hotel shows all over the country and he would print a program and he would lecture.

MARGARET: Really?

TOM: He had *carte blanche*. He got paid a huge amount of money for it but he gave a lot of young artists their start. He brought a lot of pre-Columbian stuff in the country, too.
MARGARET: Interesting.

TOM: So yeah, me and the arts and Vincent Price, who woulda thunk it? Years later I saw him in *Diversions and Delights* on stage. That was the one-man Oscar Wilde show and a couple years later, I’m working at the theater backstage at the playhouse so one advantage of being a small town is sooner or later you meet everybody for better or for worse, even Vincent Price.

MARGARET: Right. That’s incredible. We skipped the Rondo Center and I do, well, okay, we also skipped, let’s go back to the World Sleaze Convention. Let’s do that. So World Sleaze Convention, 1976; tell me about the key players who were involved in organizing that and the event itself.

TOM: The reason for it was at that point, comic book conventions had become a big business. They were, in the late ‘60s, a fellow named Phil Sewing was the main promoter. He did an annual convention of *Life Force* in New York. It was a good event. Young guys started doing a convention circuit and they became more or less commercial ventures, whatever’s hot on TV last season, we got the guy that played Ensign Cody on *Star Trek* to sign your autographs and it was sort of the forerunner to the mentality of the baseball card show. I didn’t like it. I said you know, things are getting sleazier and sleazier. I said hey, we got to do a World Sleaze Convention.

Thinking about it, I was thinking about the Ed Wood movies and I was involved with underground comics. My friends in the underground comics are saying, why don’t we? It was a parody of all the mainstream events to that and Wilmington was caught up in this bicentennial fever.

MARGARET: Of course.

TOM: I had reservations about that because I’m 62. I grew up in the lowest part of Delaware was segregated. I’m aware of the history of what’s going on. I knew about Lemont being lobotomized in the ‘30s. I knew about that the crazy censorship that had been done over the years.

MARGARET: You were in the city in 1968 for the riots?

TOM: Yeah and all this stuff that’s going on and people were just sort of pretending it wasn’t there so I thought I’d do a parody of it and had mentioned it to Rob Jones and he thought it was great so we used a portion of the studio space I had for the films and we had the exhibit displays at Rob’s. It was stuff like okay; George Stewart and I were both interested in the *Mars Attacks* cards. I had a display of the *Mars Attacks* cards. I had a whole lot of [inaudible] tracks. I had public service announcements stuff.

The Supermarket of Sleaze which was like spray cheese, you know, all these things, we had videotaped loops of the horrible UHF commercials that were going then you know. Pocket Fisherman—so it was George and Joyce, a guy name Dennis Gallagher, he has videotapes of the whole thing.
MARGARET: Oh, really?

TOM: Yeah and Rob Jones, Craig Dawson to a degree and I made friends with John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil who had published *Punk* magazine in New York. They came down for the convention. They brought down Debbie Harry and Chris Stein from Blondie and I’m known as the guy who wouldn’t let Blondie perform for free. So, didn’t have time and we had Edith Massey as a guest from John Waters Films.

MARGARET: Was John Waters there?

TOM: No. He came up for some other events later on. John was, he’s a great guy. We had Edith Massey. A guy named Ed Green built a lot of the physical display stuff. He was the frame maker at Hardcastle’s. He knew a guy down the street who had a porno shop and he, when he looked at the porno shop or whatever, and over two days built Rob’s office in a duplication of a porno shop and he borrowed a couple thousand dollars from the pornography and we had a little porno shop off to the side with a booth. That’s what they had. We borrowed the films from the porno place. They loaned me the films and we had the film program.

It was Rondo Hatton that the actor, [inaudible] who became the mascot of the Rondo Society had Pink Flamingos and a lot of ‘50s B science fiction films. How’s this for a choice, *Little Shop of Horrors, Plan 9 from Outer Space*, I mean this is what we’re—Rondo Hatton in *House of Horrors*, this is 1976 so we were ahead of the curve as we were and I said we had the people from Blondie and the guys from *Punk* magazine.

MARGARET: What was the attendance like?

TOM: It was like middle hundreds like 300 or 400 people.

MARGARET: Okay.

TOM: But amazing was from all over the world, there was a little piece that appeared in *Playboy* about it after the fact. *We* magazine was published by Heffner for a while. It was like a four or five page thing. It was illustrated by John Holmes. That was [inaudible] on it. PBS, actually NPR at that point as it would be and NBC to Channel 3. They were 3 then, not 10. They picked up on it. When apparently went out of a network it was in UPI and they paid them. I was getting all these postcards and letters from all over the world. I said this is getting real big and real crazy, you know. It scared me quite frankly because I knew how media magnifies and manipulates things but all of a sudden, this is almost for the rest of my life answering questions about Ed Wood or I just sort of cut it because I just didn’t want to do just that.

MARGARET: Right and that’s getting a little dangerously close to the things that you’re parodying which non-surprisingly that’s exactly what the media does. As soon as it comes out, they’ll quickly digest—
TOM: I got a call from John Waters. I met him several times before. He says, “You know, Tom, can you come down to Baltimore for projects?” “What’s up?” He said, “I needed a statue made of Edith Massey for the film *Desperate Living*.” I said okay so I made a statue of Edith Massey dressed as Queen Carlotta. It was a character named Flipper who was a go-go dancer and part of the plot is one of the characters has a female to male transsexual operation that’s botched and because her lover doesn’t like it, she removes the male member with a pair of scissors on camera. I did that for John Waters and John called me up. He said, “Guess what? The critic from *Variety* walked out on it and I’d seen Tom—Tom, that’s like getting the Academy award.”

So I was kind of spoiled for movie stuff like that you know and it was like I ended up getting $600.00 for the whole deal but I’m doing this stuff with John Waters. I’m sleeping over at his house. I’m on the couch in his library which is about twice the size of this room and it’s floor to ceiling with every book ever written on abnormal psychology and movies. It’s like—he’s shown me photo albums of him and Sam Quentin visiting Tex Watson, the Manson murderer. I don’t look like a serial killer but he does. So that was funny.

I did that and sort of got lost there but that was the thing. I was interested in doing stuff, not just—and John said the price line was I come to Baltimore to talk with him about this stuff. I’m on the set. This guy comes up and says, “Hey, you’re at Wilmington; you go to the World Sleaze Convention.” John Waters goes, “He produced it, you asshole.” That was the funniest line. John Waters, you know and he’s like rolling his eyes. That’s John Waters. I got to fulfill one of my ambitions. He says, “All the extras are drunk, Tom. We got to burn down Mortville. Can I trust you to run to the village with a torch?” I go, “Yeah, a Universal mob?” He goes, “Yeah.”

So I got to be a Universal torch bearing mob guy in a John Waters movie. Sure, I’ll do that. So you know, that was the fun stuff but—

MARGARET: But the World Sleaze Convention, one time and one time only.

TOM: Yeah, it was just like I could’ve made a lot of money and just like yeah, it’s—making a lot of money is a great idea but you know, it’s [inaudible]. Ever since, making a lot of money isn’t that hard if all you ever want to do is make a lot of money. It’s just, I work the theater and get a good check, I spend it on a magazine. Just do stuff. It’s all change what you can do now. It’s what; I’m looking at that now. It’s just like getting the machine in the gear again because the advantage of the internet is that anything get out there but it’s so diffused now, before, you had maybe five or six things like knocking on your subconscious mind for attention. Now you got a million things.

I was injured a couple years ago on a job. I fell off a dock because somebody was really stupid. He pushed me. I’m wedged into something. My back, my feet are here, my hands are here, my back’s at the bottom of the—I’m wedged in and the guy knocked me over. I saw him coming to me. The first thing I said was if you put this in YouTube I’m going to kill you. That’s all I could think of because he’s—

MARGARET: Mass distribution.
TOM: I didn’t look at—that’s all.

MARGARET: It was just yeah, even more massive than you know, that distribution that you were speaking of earlier, the limiting it to 3,000, a specific audience.

TOM: So now, I’ll explain it to you later on but I’m looking at ways at doing stuff again. I’ve got to do, all right, as I call art, involves both the physical craft, the motivation, and the mechanics. I’ve had the motivation for a while. I’ve got my craft up. I sit down with four by six index cards and bottle of ink and a pen and I’ll show you I guess, I feel I do scenes for movies. I’m real good at doing Universal Frankenstein movie scenes. I do landscape stuff. I do caricatures. Just fill a card cold, no preliminary penciling, I filled it out cold and work through things to get to speed the mechanical aspect of it because if you get to think about how do, where does the thumb go? You just do it. It has to be like auto suggestion. It has to be your subconscious. It has to be pushing the pen around to make it [inaudible] I think.

Once you get the craft level up, it’s just focusing on the subject matter and deciding how you want to distribute it so that’s my ideas now, not finally but it just, but you know, it was, that was a large part of it though, it was doing something. Even the comic shop, you know, it was lemonade and lemons but we were a comic shop but we would order extra copies of things we thought were good and give them to people like Will Eisner.

Will Eisner, The Spirit, from ‘40 to ‘52 with fill-ins by people—he was in the army and we would buy extra copies and give it to people, guys we thought were smart and buy the X-Men from Marvel. This was done 30 years ago and it’s really good, you should have this and give it to them.

MARGARET: Yeah, so it’s an educational endeavor as well.

TOM: It was all intended to be that way and it was just, we would just get frustrated because it’s just yeah, the quote from H.L. Mencken; you’ll never lose money underestimating the taste of the American public. It bothered me because comics, when we opened the store, someone who I knew say hi to was Art Spiegelman. By the time that store closed, he’d already published the first volume of Maus and he was on his way to getting a Pulitzer.

He treats comics as a bastard medium as no value, I was just, I didn’t agree with that. Unfortunately for people to see something like Maus or realize their spirit, he had to shovel a lot of X-Men and Superman because that was the entry point for people just like movies. Orson Welles, fantastic guy, but for every Orson Welles, you got to have a dozen bad films to get people to go to the movies, you know. No eight-year-old wants to go see Citizen Kane but they want to go see Jean Altree, you know and eventually they’ll get the habit of going to the movies and you get the art along the way.

MARGARET: Those hooks—
TOM: Yeah, it’s very problematic. I was lucky enough working at the play house to catch the last hurrah of the people that did live TV and early serious film TV in the ‘50s. I worked with Larry Stuart, a comic; he was an F Troop, very good physical comic. He had a variety show in the ‘50s and he was in his early 80’s doing—I talked with E.G. Marshall and it was before Richard Flescher, the director, that published his memoirs. I was asking about, I’m working with Welles in Compulsion and I knew five years before the memoirs came out how well the intricate scene—

Basically the scene where Welles was playing, it’s based on the Leopold and Loeb murder and Welles plays a character who’s basically Clarence Darrow. At the end of the film, he does a summation to his jury because his two clients had just to prove they’re smart, had murdered a 12-year-old boy just to prove that smart guys could do anything and he does a nine and a half minute summation for one take and I asked how it was done and he explained to me that Welles rehearsed at once. He had three cameras come in. He had teleprompters at all three of them and he never looked at teleprompters. He had the whole scene cold.

It was me, two other actors, and the director, and the director of photography and the sound man and it was a closed set. It was neat knowing that like five years before the book came out by the director was saying that so that was the thing I could get when I worked with Mercedes McCambridge who everybody knew as the voice of the demon in The Exorcist and knew she had won an Academy award or you know, she’d won an Oscar for All the King’s Men and then she’d been in Johnny Guitar and had a cat fight with Joan Crawford but she plays a butch-Mexican Lesbian JD in Touch of Evil for Orson Welles.

Her big line is these guys have pinned down Janet Lea in a hotel room, she’s wearing her lingerie. This guy’s standing there pumping a syringe looking at her and Mercedes McCambridge comes in wearing a leather jacket standing there in the dark going I want to watch. That’s what I know her from. It’s just like—I want to watch—what the hell. So I sort of, I was collecting Orson Welles stories. I work with Norman Lloyd who had just come off a big run of St. Elsewhere and he played in, he played Cassius the poet in Julius Caesar on Broadway with Orson Welles in the ‘30s. He’s this guy that falls off the torch of the Statue of Liberty in the Hitchcock film Saboteur.

MARGARET: Okay, haven’t seen them.

TOM: He was a producer and main director for about half the Hitchcock TV shows and he was telling Orson Welles stories. He’s in his early 70’s. He and his wife and I are at a table having dinner in the middle of Dead Poet’s Society. He’s telling me this great Orson Welles story. That’s the kind of stuff I enjoy. Working with these people, yeah, it’s just, it’s amazing what’s out there. I enjoyed, I mean it was tough and it was crazy, it wasn’t a lot of money but you had exposure to interesting people and it’s just a lot of them are gone now. It’s just, oh, well, left wandering but—

MARGARET: Yeah, this is all wonderful.
TOM: If you threaten to put this in a book—

MARGARET: Yeah, I see this, yes, the amount of—yes, the history and interactions that you’ve had are both worthy.

TOM: A lot of it—by the way, what you think happened didn’t really happen. Now the \[inaudible\] brothers didn’t produce the national interest in Ed Wood. I did but they rode on my coattails whether they were aware of it or not because they’re \[inaudible\] and primed. Joyce Brabner didn’t just find Harvey Pekar. He asked me something interesting one day. I gave her \textit{American Splendor}. A couple of months later she calls me, she’s going to marry him. I said yeah, okay. I work for a guy in New York for a long while. One day we were talking about stuff like this. This came up. He says geez, Tom, like the Forrest Gump of the underground.

I said yeah, maybe. But yeah I used to have a great deal of satisfaction knowing that some good would come out of it all.

MARGARET: Yeah, well just something about, I mean you’re the connector for this entire, for these two decades. Really and thinking about Wilmington in the 1970’s and ‘80s, this is the connector.

TOM: I got involved in some Wilmington stuff. A friend of mine, who I collected comics with when I was a kid—there you go, maybe Reese Robinson was working for the city and he asked me to help with the city project and I said, “Why’d you get me involved in this?” “Well, we went to the \textit{News Journal} and you know, you’ve had the biggest file on somebody who’s not a politician or a member of organized crime in the state, Tom.” I said, “Really?” He goes, “Yeah.” Okay. I know that’s crazy, not a politician or connected with organized crime.

MARGARET: Yeah, that’s a compliment, right?

TOM: Yeah.

MARGARET: So let’s talk, let’s think about the, let’s talk about the late 1970’s.

TOM: Sure.

MARGARET: So like the early and mid, an incredibly active time in the contemporary art scene in Wilmington. So, we talked about the founding of Xanadu. I know you’re involved with Joyce Brabner for the arts program in the Delaware Women’s Correctional Institute and I did speak with E. Jean Lanyon about her involvement in that program as well.

TOM: Well, yeah, it gets more complicated. E. Jean Lanyon was a major staff person in Hardcastle’s. That’s where I first met her. She just quit her job there.

MARGARET: So you all have met there.

TOM: Yeah.
MARGARET: Okay, interesting and what was the program that you were doing in the Women’s prison?

TOM: Well, Joyce had a volunteer program that was basically a self-help through arts projects, produced a book of poetry and it was, made written poetry and illustrated poetry. Jean was doing art classes. I did a class on puppet making and the last time I was there though, she had hosted a Halloween show. We had Boris Karloff in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. In the middle, I came dressed as a zombie and we had a big Halloween cake, orange icing with black bats on it. In the middle of it all, one of the inmates stabbed another person because Neecee had a bigger piece of icing in her cake so we had to shut it down and go home. I got to see a prison knife fight over icing on a cake.

Joyce brought in Frank Miller, the cartoonist to go up there and at the [inaudible] correctional institute and apparently Frank has an inflated bet over the year to an interesting story about his time in the tough prisons of Delaware. I knew Frank from Vermont. He’s one of the guys in the Halloween parade floats so it’s just, he does exaggerate but basically a good story.

MARGARET: So in the late 1970’s, we also had the foundation of the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts.

TOM: Right.

MARGARET: The foundation of the Delaware Theatre Company as well. There has been a fair amount of work certainly on the history regarding the DCCA and I’ll be speaking with Cleveland Morris.

TOM: Please.

MARGARET: Right before the beginning of Thanksgiving. I will speak with him later in the month. We had a brief interaction. He has a show up at Carspecken-Scott right now so I was able to meet him, speak briefly and then we setup a time for a longer conversation so I’m excited to hear more from him.

[Crosstalk]

TOM: I helped build some of the props and I ran props on K2 and I worked [inaudible] on *The Tooth of Crime* with Sam Shepherd show and I remember I got a phone call one day from the Museum, the Rockwood Museum and it’s a DuPont estate—

MARGARET: Rockwood, yes.

TOM: Said, “Tom, we were sent to you by Cleveland Morris. We need your help for Halloween.” What do you mean? “Well, we’re doing a—we want to have a Halloween program for kids and we want to have somebody reading spooky stories and Cleveland said anybody could scare children better than Tom Watkins.” Okay.
MARGARET: Different kind of compliment.

TOM: But yeah, his idea of being funny. He said yeah, I read H.P. Lovecraft to the kids.

MARGARET: Yeah.

TOM: So that was fun.

MARGARET: And so were you involved with or do you remember any of the early activities with the DCCA?

TOM: Well, it was sort of more like skirmishes. I knew Rick Rothrock and I knew him through Fifth Street Gallery. He had done some work. If not a solo show, he’s a co-exhibiter and remember he, he placed, he called my attention because he put pieces of saw on top of the—Baltimore towards the mall. The mall had these [inaudible] bulletin boards that had a circle on top of them and he put a saw on top of them. I thought it was hysterically funny. Nobody got it. I thought it was great.

MARGARET: He was doing some interesting public sites. He used to work in downtown Wilmington.

TOM: He had the same impetus to [inaudible] I did. It was like, what are we doing? At one—we intersected one time on a job when a guy named Ray Dobb had been the decorator for Bronstein’s department store, mainly a woman’s clothing store and right after Star Wars came out, the decorator wanted to have a Star Wars themed window and he had me build these low budget monster costumes and a robot for the window and the follow-up of that was he created a company, called It Figures which was especially mannequins for department stores, and animatronics.

He did an animatronic one-half scale I guess it was, a Christmas Carol for Robertson Clothiers. It was housed in the old Lit Brothers building in Philadelphia. I think it’s still being used and he was doing custom mannequins for upscale department stores. These things are with theme design and was doing event things like this and I was, he was hand-carving wooden plaster hands. They were becoming too time intensive so he had me make molds of silicon rubber that I had to argue with Dupont for to cast to make the hands.

Then he wanted the cobblestones made and I asked Rick Rothrock for a method, for a material supply source to make these cobblestone molds and his wife or then girlfriend, I don’t care what she was got real cage-y and she was like Rick wasn’t allowed to tell me where he got the material because that was a secret. So it’s like okay. I didn’t tell Rick. I had my own secrets so I found another way of doing it. I used the same basic process that I did for the monster costume that I did for the other thing. I made a big mold and cast it and gave it to Ray, here, pour your plaster in this, this is it.
I’d also poured in plaster again the blue and gold rim at the University of Delaware has a decorative [inaudible] around the top of it and the guys that did the remolding job pulled all the plaster off of it and that contractor realized that he had to restore stuff that had been put up in the ‘20s and ‘30s, all these delicate deco plaster so I made molds and recast the stuff in plaster for them to do and then they came back and they said blah, blah, blah. You can’t take a dry wall drill and put a two inch dry wall screw through 8 inch plaster even if I do back it with burlap. What you got to do is you got to pre-drill them this wide, I got to get a 60-minute drill and do a counter sink and if you want to do it in fiberglass, you can use your big drills on it.

I made some money on that but that was the kind of, Rick and I were sort of competing for that kind of job because you know, putting grass on top of bulletin boards is maybe art but it doesn’t get any money but doing commercial casting and fixing decorative borders, that pays the bills so I could do my stuff. Rick and I knew each other from that and we had other mutual friends, Carson Zullinger for one. One of the main administrators of DCCA didn’t like it, get his name down but—

MARGARET: So an artist?

TOM: Yeah, he was one of the real academic guys.

MARGARET: Graham Dougherty?

TOM: Oh, yes, Graham Dougherty, everybody’s favorite person probably and the intersection of all this is that when it was still the L.B. Jones Gallery, I’d done one or two shows at Crumb’s Restaurant and [inaudible] I proposed to L.B. Jones and Rick the idea of doing coordinated openings. We did coordinated openings on Sunday and that was the basis of Art in Town. That’s where it started out as, on a Sunday. That was the first time that anybody had done that.

MARGARET: Coordinated openings in the setting.

TOM: That was it and I thought it was a good deal because DCCA was dealing with both; I had a friend named Joe Clark who was involved with them. It was dealing both with fairly traditional academic art and conceptual stuff and stuff that’s in between. Jones Gallery was mainly paintings but contemporary and Crumb’s was whatever I could think of. It was my stuff. We did an incredible variety of stuff. I had a commercial illustrator show with people to, that were doing stuff for national magazine. It’s like Crack, the humor magazine and illustrators for Fine Times and Delaware Day. We had photo shows. We had—we couldn’t do sculpture very practically because of the physical limitations and we couldn’t do anything that were pretty [inaudible] for lunch but otherwise it was pretty open. I thought that was a good combination of events tying these things together.

MARGARET: Right, combining these efforts. So let’s move into—I try to limit interviews at least to two hours but let’s—

[Crosstalk]
Really? Let’s move on into the 1980’s.

TOM: I want to say well, what do you do when you’re not moving? Lie around, watch TV, eat, watch TV, eat.

MARGARET: Okay so let’s move on to the 1980’s. So at this point, it’s interesting. I read an, now I can’t remember the citation but I read in an interview that you had been doing xerography since 1983.

TOM: Well, yeah, that’s a qualified answer because—

MARGARET: Yeah, let me—

TOM: We were calling it copying before that, you know. It was like you know, when movies became films.

MARGARET: Okay.

TOM: I came into xerography as an adjunct doing commercial work.

MARGARET: Right.

TOM: I saw the whole development of photocopiers into what they’re becoming and they all evolved. The photocopier became the laser printer with the computer but it was still on analog device, black and white. Color xerography was becoming viable by the ’70s but it was very expensive and very—it was unstable. Let’s put it that way. It wasn’t very accurate.

MARGARET: Okay.

TOM: There were pressures people don’t realize now. Up until the ’80s, it was illegal to photograph US money at scale. You could not reproduce a photograph of a dollar bill that was not at least 2 percent larger or smaller than a real bill. If you, photocopiers, well it was 2 percent smaller than the original so that bonds and negotiable and people paper money couldn’t be photocopied. In the mid-’80s, there was a big electronics show in New York and Xerox was going to premiere their super deluxe new color copier.

Three things happened. They brought their machine in, Canon brought their machine in. Xerox guys saw what Canon did. They went back. They sent their machine out to close down their space and the treasury department came in, made some tests with the machine that Canon had, came back and put a chain and padlock around it and said you can’t bring this to another country and it went on for several years.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 95 Minutes