Oral history interview with Stuart and Toni Young, September 25, 2013

Young, Stuart and Toni
Art patrons

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MARGARET: Okay. So this is Margaret Winslow, associate curator for contemporary art at the Delaware Art Museum, interviewing Stuart and Toni Young, on September 25, 2013. Okay, so my first question, and I should also tell you why I’m interviewing the two of you specifically is that when I’ve been interviewing other artists and patrons and supporters in the past, they have referenced both of you as being longtime supporters of the arts here in Wilmington. But my first question would be, if you were both originally from Wilmington, from the area. Are you Delaware natives?

STUART: Okay. I think that—I’m a Delaware native.

MARGARET: Good to know. Okay.

STUART: No question about that. But I’ll let Toni tell you about the story that she likes to tell about the Delaware Art Museum.

MARGARET: Well—do you have anything else to say about that question?

STUART: What else do you want—I know that my sister would go to art classes at the Delaware—at the—what was it called.
TONI: Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts.

STUART: Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts.

MARGARET: Okay. So you’re original Delaware natives. Did you go to school outside of Delaware?

STUART: Well, I went to college at Williams College, outside of Delaware. And then I went to UVA Law School and Columbia Business School. Otherwise, I was in Wilmington.

MARGARET: Okay, so then you settled back here in Wilmington after law school.

STUART: Yes.

MARGARET: Good to know, perfect.


MARGARET: Okay, and when—1960.

STUART: I guess ’61 is when I really settled down here.

MARGARET: Perfect.

TONI: That’s what I tell him, that you were here, always.

STUART: Sure.

TONI: So I was not. I was born in Rhode Island; I grew up in New York. I went to Goucher College, and all I knew about Wilmington, Delaware was that the train went through here, and what I saw from the train did not make me want to come to Wilmington, Delaware. And then I met Stuart, and moved from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Wilmington, Delaware, in 1969, and it was—I can’t say what a culture shock it was. It was a culture shock. Since we’re talking arts, I’ll say that in Cambridge, we had had our skirts halfway up our thighs; they were on their way back down.

Here, they had never even gone up yet. It was like this big gap in time. And I never realized that when I lived—I lived on Long Island, but I went to Broadway shows all the time, I went to the opera, I went to the music, I just took that for granted. And when I came here in 1969, there was an amateur Delaware Symphony, there was no Delaware Theatre Company, there was no Grand Opera House. The Art Museum was called the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, and I was kind of surprised. And I decided—Stuart was very busy as an attorney, and even though he was collecting all this art, he was not a member of the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, it just wasn’t an inviting kind of place. And so I signed up for art lessons, because I had been taking some classes here and there, and I took classes with someone named Rita Bernhart at the Art Museum, and loved it. And I was not good, but I loved doing it, and then I got involved—
I actually found the paper before in what was called the Membership Committee of the Wilmington Sub-society of the Fine Arts in 1973. I have the list, if you want to see it. And just like it was called society, everyone on there was Mrs. Stuart B. Young, Mrs. Edgar Coleman, the woman’s name in parentheses, but it was a very, very different time. And we were all women on the membership committee, I didn’t even remember that. I was looking for something else, which was as I was kind of on a committee in the early ’70s with Pam Richards and other people, and we were trying to interest people in collecting art, and more contemporary art. That listing became the collective circle, but Stuart will tell you about that, which he did under his term, when he was the president of the Art Museum. But that was an early version of that.

MARGARET: And in 1969, there were hardly any commercial galleries that were dealing in contemporary art. Did either of you frequent—excuse me?

STUART: The only art gallery was Hardcastle’s.

MARGARET: Hardcastle’s.

STUART: It wasn’t really a gallery, it was really just framing. Then they later got into showing some local artists.

MARGARET: And did either of you go to the Wilmington Gallery of Circulating Paintings, which was in the Wanamakers building, and operated by Grace McFarren? Does that—

TONI: No.

MARGARET: That doesn’t recall.

STUART: No. The Wanamakers was just down the hill from where I grew up.

MARGARET: Just down the hill—which is interesting. So she was—so this is in the Wanamakers building, but she had established that gallery in 1960, and she was showing her own work, so contemporary work. And showing the work of some University of Delaware faculty, like Dan Teis. She showed his work specifically. But aside from those two, there really weren’t any other contemporary, commercial art spaces in Wilmington.

TONI: I think that’s right.

STUART: That is correct.

Margaret: But Stuart, you had already started actively collecting at that point?

STUART: Oh yeah, I was actively collecting before that.

MARGARET: And can I ask if you had focused—

STUART: Started in 1960, I guess.
Margaret: And were you focusing on contemporary art?

STUART: At first, I was just collecting whatever prints—might have been a Chagall print, or a little two loop track, collecting maybe something when I was on a travel or something. But then later, I started concentrating on contemporary art, and Bill Homer told me when I was put on the accessions committee, and Bill Homer said to concentrate on American art. So I—you know, concentrate in an area, or at least I got that impression. But as a result, there are a lot of things which I didn’t collect which I maybe should have.

But today, everything is very global. When you talk about an artist from Germany or from other countries, they’re really American contemporary artists, because it’s so global today. But in those days, I decided to go in contemporary art and figurative art. So I was doing—I wanted to make a focus, and you just can’t collect everything, so if I saw something abstract, I would like it or something, but I wouldn’t buy it. It was, I think one of my first abstract paintings was when I got the brochure—

TONI: James Brooks.

STUART: Yeah, the brochure from the Martha Jackson Gallery. And I said, Toni, this looks like something you’d really like, and it was a James Brooks. So we did go up to that gallery.

TONI: Stuart was collecting all through the ’60s, and we got married in 1969. And by then, you were really into contemporary. You were really looking at a few years maybe you would like it. Because he was really into contemporary by the mid-’60s.

STUART: Yeah, because that was in like ’57. But when I went to law school, I met a classmate of mine, Larry Vigon, we went up to New York together. And we went to see his brother, who was an attorney. And when we went to his apartment, we saw all this art, it was just fantastic, I said, boy, he’s really doing well. And then I inquired about it, and he told me he was a member of—

TONI: IGAS.

STUART: I know. An organization called IGAS, the International Graphics Art Society, which was backed by Nelson Rockefeller, or Lawrence Rockefeller. I don’t know which. Probably Nelson. And they sold these prints for 25 dollars, and the frames were being done by Dave Schiff, which was one of the better framers, and they cost maybe 35, 40 dollars. So I started inquiring about that, and became a member.

And in fact, I was a little upset, because we would get these brochures on Friday, they would be sent out when the new show came up. And they would send it to everybody on the same time, and I would get mine late. So there were 210 prints. That’s the number. If you see a print 210, it’s probably IGAS. And it went out of business, I forget when. But I called the guy up, the fellow—I can’t remember his name, and I said, you know, it’s not fair, you’re sending this out, I get it two days later, but the people in New York get it right away. And when I call, there might
be a print that’s already been sold out. So he began to send out a couple days earlier for the people out of town.

MARGARET: Very considerate, yeah.

STUART: And then—for some reason, it just stopped. But by the time it stopped, there were a heck of a lot of galleries around, it was growing.

MARGARET: Right. But primarily though, when you would have been collecting, say in 1969 for example, the two of you are going out to New York. And in the early 1970s, so you’re going up to galleries like Martha Jackson. And not necessarily looking here in Wilmington.

STUART: Right.

TONI: Absolutely.

STUART: That was definitely—it was New York-based.

Margaret: Okay.

STUART: Though there were Philadelphia artists, Terry Goodman.

TONI: But they all came through New York anyways.

STUART: Right. Oh yeah, Terry did that gallery.

MARGARET: Oh, so that’s an interesting point. So even those Philadelphia artists whose work you may be interested in, you’re seeing their work on view primarily in New York.

STUART: Right. And I just find out from the gallery that they’re Philadelphia artists.

MARGARET: Later.

STUART: Right. I wasn’t going to Philadelphia galleries, and in fact there weren’t that many. And then—I forget the one that was—Michael—Mickell or Magel gallery in Philadelphia was handling the Averys and I was interested in looking at an Avery with Borgenicht Gallery. And then Marian Locks opened up a gallery, which is one of the better galleries. And it was very much New York-ish, because they were getting New York artists, like Bartlett, and others.

MARGARET: Lynda Benglis, right.

STUART: All those, yeah.


TONI: Right. And he was on our committee too, at the Art Museum.
MARGARET: Oh, interesting. He was on this—

TONI: [inaudible] and Graham Dougherty, I think.

MARGARET: And Graham Dougherty as well. Interesting.

TONI: I guess they were trying to get the “young people” together too.

MARGARET: Yeah. So—and this was—sorry, I just want to go back to this committee briefly. So this was a committee that was formed by supporters by the Delaware Art Museum, which was then the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts. And it was for individuals interested specifically in contemporary art?

TONI: Yeah. We were trying to get people to collect contemporary art, so Graham was a painter, it’s all women. The men were out doing their law and—

STUART: Mary Page [Evans]. Was she in—?

TONI: Was Mary Page part of it? Probably. I can’t say for sure. I’m not sure if Mary Page was on it, or—

STUART: And then you had a show where we were going to select, and I was invited to go with you. Spouses came. And we were to select some art with the money that they had for acquisitions. And Toni and I wanted to get this Nevelson, which they did get. The Nevelson sculpture. Nobody heard of Nevelson, and I don’t think they thought much of it, but they’ve also got Jack Beals. That was another one that they wanted at the time.

TONI: Are you sure—I’m not sure the Art Museum didn’t acquire that one. I’m not sure that the collectors’ group did.

STUART: I thought they did.

TONI: Well, I’m not sure of that.

MARGARET: That’s interesting though, so there was really kind of this early support for different art specifically.

TONI: I think it was a recognition that the Art Museum—look, if you had someone as knowledgeable as Stuart about art, and he had no connection with the art—there was some disconnect with the Art Museum and the younger, active, art community. I think, very correctly, the Art Museum had taken the role of preserving this wonderful heritage of paintings they had. And I don’t know if they had thought about it in terms of reaching out and continuing it.

MARGARET: Right. But that really seems to shift in the 1970s, which is really just incredible.

TONI: Oh, I guess so.
STUART: Because I got on the accessions committee.

TONI: When did Pete Warrick become the director? In the ‘70s, I know.

Margaret: It was in the ‘70s—’70—Oh, I shouldn’t say. I’m thinking it’s ‘73, but—

TONI: He was a change. And the person before, that was Bruce St. John?

MARGARET: Was Bruce St. John.


MARGARET: And Pete Wyrick included—there was a great article, interview with him that was published in the News Journal at the time of his appointment, and he said specifically about focus on contemporary art, engaging with the local community, all the same things that we’re talking about right now.

TONI: Exactly. So this is—and that’s part of it, I don’t know the exact dates, because—

STUART: We got to know him, but I never knew Bruce St. John. But I heard his name a lot.

TONI: So this atmosphere, to me that was the change. I don’t have that much frame of reference, but I had a few years in the early ‘70s, and then suddenly Pete came and the whole thing changed. That’s kind of the sense that I had.

MARGARET: And then in 1973, we have Rob Jones establishing his space, Fifth Street Gallery, in downtown Wilmington. So he’s coming from the university of Delaware, he is identifying that there are vacant spaces in downtown Wilmington, there’s still this—we still have it today. But there’s kind of this fear about going into downtown Wilmington, given the history following up from 1968 and the riots. So he’s taking advantage of vacant spaces and artists that are in the area. There’s certainly a lot more artists involved at the Delaware Art Museum with Art Reach and CETA programming, things that are happening there. So he’s really then taking the opportunity to show their work in downtown Wilmington.

TONI: Well, that’s absolutely right. That’s very well said. But I have to add the other piece, which is, I was only involved in the Art Museum for this short amount of time, because I had shifted my attention to the Opera House. And this is directly connected to what you’re talking about, because we, in 1971, decided—we had this gala on the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Opera House. And we decided that we were going to try to restore the Opera House and bring it back into the performing arts thing. So it’s up the street from where Rob opens his gallery. And we, in the summer of 1973, while the mall was being put in, we renovated the facade of the Opera House. In other words, before it was cast iron, but you didn’t know it. Because from the first level down, it had all been covered in modern storefronts.

STUART: Yeah, awnings and stuff like that.
TONI: And nobody knew it was a cast-iron building. So we stripped that down and displayed this fabulous, restored, fabulous cast-iron facade at the same time that the historical society moved all those houses that are Wilmington town square. So that was the whole concept, and Rob was right in the middle.

MARGARET: Right in the middle. That’s a wonderful point, that’s really great.

TONI: So it was all this whole moving of the arts. And those of us at the Opera House would always say that it had to work, because we had three main goals. One was to bring real performing arts to Delaware, or to Wilmington, because as I said, the symphony was still amateur. The playhouse was locked up in that building, there was no dance to speak of, there was no theater company. So we said number one was to bring performing arts events, the second was to restore an architectural jam, and the third was to be an anchor for the redevelopment of Wilmington. Those were our three big things. And—

STUART: At that time, just before that, I was telling Toni that the only thing that really was involved in the, other than the visual arts, was the Rialto movie theater, and the Towne. The Towne was taken down, and it wasn’t very active. I don’t think it was, there was anything in there. But the Towne was right where, you’re talking about the houses were moved for the Historical Society. Right next to the academy, the Kuumba Academy. The Towne was right next to that building.

MARGARET: The Towne—it was called the Towne?

STUART: T-O-W-N-E. I think it had an e. It was a movie theater.

MARGARET: And it was a movie theater.

STUART: Not a very popular one at all, and a smaller one.

MARGARET: Okay. Oh, that’s interesting though. This is the first time anyone’s mentioned that structure that I’ve heard about.

STUART: So there was the Lowes that wasn’t doing anything. Loews Aldine.

TONI: Loews Aldine, was the one that was two down from the Opera House.

STUART: Yeah, right next to the Opera House basically. And then Warner was no longer there, but that was there for a while. But about that time, everything went out to the suburbs and there were no movies. And the only theater was the Playhouse.

TONI: And that’s an interesting thing because I remember that over the years, one of the things that people said about the Art Museum is that they never should have moved out here onto Kentmere Parkway. Because they needed to be—the city was so exciting at that point, the people wondered if they were good out there. Of course, it was such a beautiful place—
STUART: Well, there was a time when I, in the ‘80s, when we were thinking of—when we did our expansion, I was chairman of the building committee, and we were considering the federal building, to go into town right into Rodney square.

MARGARET: On Rodney square.

STUART: And then that was not going to work. Then we thought about Mars Jewelers as a branch gallery, and that didn’t happen at all. What did happen was the Farmer’s Bank, right on the corner, of—I think you still have, maybe you don’t do it, the sub space—

MARGARET: We don’t do it. The Downtown Gallery.

STUART: Right, the Downtown Gallery.

MARGARET: Right. Which was in 919 Market Street, that building.

STUART: Right, that would be right, yeah. So they would show a few things there. But the effort was back some years before that to really bring a physical structure there of our own. But it just didn’t work.

TONI: Because, just what Margaret was saying, that it was a really happening scene in the ‘70s downtown. We were going to change the world.

STUART: Right, well, I think that was the effort.

MARGARET: Well, and that’s so interesting, and something—I’m so glad that you said that, the restoration of the Opera House, Wilmington town square on the other side, the construction of Market Street Mall, and then Fifth Street Gallery and Rob’s activities as well. So tell me, did either of you go to Fifth Street Gallery? Do you remember Rob, or any exhibitions, or—?

STUART: Oh sure, yeah, we remember him.

TONI: I remember that it was very exciting. It was the only thing that was like a New York gallery, we thought.

STUART: Yeah, and the space was very much like the lofts in SoHo. Before SoHo it was in cement areas. Also, it was—the University of Delaware, Teis was in a show that I think we saw there, and I’m thinking of another artist I can’t remember—

TONI: But he was very authentic. He was just like a New York gallery person, and he knew what he was talking about, and he was enthusiastic about it, and I think we all thought he was a terrific asset that we had there.

STUART: Right, right. When we lost him it was a real tragedy.
TONI: And we thought he was really brave to do this, because people were telling us at the Opera House that we were nuts, we could never raise this much money and restore the building, and I think some people told him the same thing. You can’t have a gallery, and yet, we were all doing it.

STUART: And across the street, it was either he had it or not, they had a little movie. It was kind of like a little get together place, with couches and stuff like that. We never got involved in it, but—

TONI: They had the brick underneath.

STUART: With what?

TONI: With the brick walls and all, underneath.

STUART: Oh no, that’s another—that was a restaurant.

MARGARET: So there were two. I’m wondering if you’re thinking of Xanadu comics, or the Rondo center.

TONI: Oh, I’ve been to Xanadu comics.

STUART: Probably. On Fifth? I think it was—

MARGARET: I think they were on Fifth.

STUART: Xanadu comics was on Fifth.

TONI: Xanadu comics, I took my son to all the time. That was the ‘80s though, because he was born in ‘71. Well, maybe it was the late ‘70s. He had all the comics. That was the best.

STUART: Didn’t that go into a restaurant, that location?

TONI: Then it became a restaurant, certainly.

STUART: That’s where La Fia is.

TONI: Just on the one side.

STUART: In the back.

MARGARET: Oh, I do.

STUART: That’s the location.

MARGARET: I didn’t realize that’s the location.
TONI: I didn’t realize that was the exact location.

STUART: Right behind it is where the comic books, and then it became a restaurant, La Fia also—

Margaret: Four West Fifth, right.

STUART: What’s that?

MARGARET: Four West Fifth.

STUART: Four West Fifth, exactly.

TONI: But didn’t the comic book place, Xanadu, go all the way to Shipley Street, and La Fia is off of Market Street. Well, okay, maybe it’s the very same building, but if that’s true—

STUART: And where La Fia was is where this place was where they had couches and stuff like that. It was just kind of a get together, casual kind of thing.

Margaret: And they would show films, things like that.

STUART: I think they did. I don’t know.

MARGARET: That must be the Rondo center as well.

TONI: You’re not thinking of the thing much later, just 20 years ago, that had the jazz?

STUART: No, that’s another one. Yeah, there was a jazz place, that was—I forget, we went there and had a drink and on. But that’s when Bromberg came, and Bromberg came much later. That’s much later. Because Bromberg didn’t come until after DCAD was established.

MARGARET: Right, okay.

STUART: That was one of the reasons he probably came was that he had some activity there and there was something going on. But one of the other things, I don’t mean to get off it, because we’ll get back and forth, but one thing I’d like to point out is that dance—Toni just brought that up, and there was a concerted effort by Peggy Amsterdam at that time, to bring dance to Wilmington. And we saw a lot of good dance—

MARGARET: Pilobolus.

STUART: Pilobolus.

TONI: No, wait a minute, that was the Opera House. Peggy did later on, when Peggy came. Peggy came in ‘79. But we had brought Pilobolus the very first season to the Opera House.

STUART: Oh, did you? Okay. But she expanded that, she really wanted more dance.
TONI: Peggy was chairman of the dance committee at the Opera House while I got there—I think she—

STUART: Well then, that’s why it is. I’m not saying it was the Delaware State’s Art Council, I’m saying it was—

TONI: I think. Peggy was somebody who was a good friend of ours, who came from Fairfax, Virginia—most immediately from Fairfax, Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia. But when her kids were born in the late ‘70s, she wasn’t working, so I got her to volunteer at the Opera House. And she was doing a lot of things, I can’t remember specifically it was dance, but many things. She later—Cecelia Fitzgibbon asked Peggy to work part-time and then it was full time, and then she took over as chairman of the Arts Council afterwards.

MARGARET: Of the Arts Council. Okay.

STUART: See, that’s the—

MARGARET: Keep going.

STUART: But we had Elliot Feld play a dance there. And he made an inquiry to have the grand opera house as his home base. But you weren’t interested in that, because it’d be taking over the place.

TONI: All the performers, yeah. All the performers who—many of the performers who were at the Opera House loved it, they loved the acoustics and they loved the intimacy of it.

STUART: Yeah, well Philadelphia Orchestra wanted to record there.

TONI: But we’re not talking about the Opera House.

MARGARET: Yeah. I think that this is—I’m really glad that you—

STUART: No, but that shows the interest of all that. The Opera House was in [inaudible].

MARGARET: And I’m glad that this point came up, because in surveying the visual arts, of course I can’t help but survey the performing arts as well, especially considering the amount of collaboration that was happening across disciplines at this time. Rick Rothrock was doing interesting collaborations with dancers and performance out in large, public spaces. He did performances in White Clay, things like that. But I have been particularly interested in dance, because it does seem like there was an effort to bring dancers to perform here in Wilmington, at the Opera House, at the Delaware Art Museum, I know they had dance performances there as well. But I don’t—I haven’t been able to find any record of modern companies based in Wilmington.

STUART: Right. There weren’t any.
MARGARET: It doesn’t seem that there were, and it’s—

STUART: No, we just had the—

TONI: Until Marsha Borin did the ballet. Marsha Borin.

MARGARET: Until First State Ballet, right. And it seems like that was the case in Newark as well. I have been able to track down dancers who were involved, dancers and choreographers who were involved with the university of Delaware, but most of their activities were taking place earlier in the 1970s. So it’s interesting, it seems like Wilmington hasn’t been able to support a modern dance company, the same way it has later been able to support some ballet companies.

TONI: I’m sure people have told you this, but Jamie Jamieson had the Academy of the Dance, and he was enormously well-respected. He had danced on Broadway, I believe.

STUART: Right, he was on 14th street, in Wilmington.

TONI: But he was a very, very dominant personality in the art scene. And when you thought of dance, you thought of Jamie Jamison, and it was ballet. And his Nutcracker at the Playhouse every year was sold out.

STUART: That was it, but really he never was able to perform a company—

TONI: But the person who can tell you a tremendous amount about dance is Marsha Borin, if you haven’t already spoken to her.

MARGARET: I have not.

TONI: Okay, Marsha Borin studied with Jamie Jamieson for years. Studied dance professionally, and then went to college instead of continuing dance, and didn’t become a dancer. But then she worked with him a lot, and then she as a volunteer, did a lot with dance. So she’ll be able to give you—she’s Dr. Howard Borin’s wife.

MARGARET: And the spelling of her last name?

TONI: B-O-R-I-N.


Margaret: Okay.

STUART: And also at this time, I was on the board of the Delaware Art Museum, but I was also on the Wilmington Arts Council. And Carol Balick—you spoke to Carol Balick?

Margaret: I have, yes.
STUART: Oh, so then she told you the story. Carol Balick came to the Wilmington Arts Council of—the Wilmington Arts Commission, it was called, Wilmington Arts Commission. And Cleveland Morris was with her, and she asked us to approve the city renting the Fire House for two dollars a year to Cleveland Morris, and his two good friends, the Phelans. Peter and—

TONI: Ceal.

STUART: Ceal. And we thought we were going to have a repertory company. That was the idea. And it started out that way, and the performances at the Fire House were really a lot of fun. Here was the fire house and a parking lot all the way around it, because they had torn down everything. So you would park right—it was like sitting in the center. It was on the street, but a u-shape of all the parking area, and it was really a lot of fun. Of course, if you walked in a little bit late, you got to walk across the stage.

TONI: No, you couldn’t, because—

STUART: Well, no, if the performance was—but you had to walk, maybe not across the stage, but very close to the stage in order to get to the other side, because everybody looked at each other. It was in a round—

TONI: This was the square. This is the stage, and people were here, and people were here. So you had to walk right across the—


STUART: It was amazing what they did with that space.

TONI: But they started in 1979, and I was really involved in the Opera House. So we were working on the Opera House from 1972 and then, in 1970—just at the time Stuart is talking about, I was invited to have breakfast with Peter and Ceal and Cleveland. And I got so excited about what they were doing, because we were already bogged down in some problems, he said, oh, I’d like to drop everything in our house and come work for you, because you’ll get to start over. And they had the same kind of energy, they came in just like we did with the Opera House, with all this energy, and did a wonderful job. They really did.

MARGARET: So at the same time, in 1979, we have the foundation of the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts.

TONI: Oh, is that when they were founded?

MARGARET: As well. That same year.

TONI: I didn’t realize it was that old.

STUART: And that was downtown, at the Waterworks.
MARGARET: Well, they had a building on Front Street first, but they were only on Front Street for a pretty limited amount of time. When did the Delaware Theatre Company vacate—?

TONI: They started in 1979.

MARGARET: And when did they vacate the Fire House?

STUART: Gee, I don’t know.

MARGARET: Because didn’t the city come in and do eminent domain pretty quickly after, for construction?

TONI: Not quickly, no. I could look that up for you, I think, but—how many years have been—I don’t think they were in the new house more than 20 years, were they? I bet they were there at least a decade.

MARGARET: They were. Okay. Because I know the DCCA moved fairly quickly from the location on Fifth Street down to the waterworks.

STUART: Oh, okay. See, I didn’t know much about them on Fifth Street, and then there was a lot of efforts by, I would say, Mary Page, and again, Carol Balick, she’s an artist. So she was involved in that. I can’t remember the other people, but then they had a lot of functions there. It was a nice space actually, I liked it. And of course they built a nice building.

MARGARET: Right. And so, you were focused primarily on things that were happening with the opera, and then with the theater company a bit as well. So neither of you were really involved in some of those early activities at the DCCA?

TONI: Not at all.

STUART: No, not really. I mean, we went to their functions. The only thing I remember about DCCA is the president was Richard Vague. And Richard Vague, I got a call from Mike Harkins, who was the Secretary of State. And he said, I’m going to put Richard Vague on your State Arts Council. I was the Chairman. I said, no you’re not, because Richard Vague was doing such a good job with DCCA, I didn’t want him to take away from DCCA. So I said, no, you can’t.

And the other reason was that when I—and that was the reason, because when someone comes on the board of the Arts Council, my position was they could not be president of an organization. Because when you’re president, no matter what, your priority is to that president of the organization. So he couldn’t be as objective. So I didn’t want him to resign as president. And I called Dick, because I was friendly with him, I said, Dick, I just prevented you from coming on the Arts Council. But I know darn well, you’ll get on some years later, don’t worry about it, but we need you there, because—I’m just relating it, because even though I wasn’t involved, I understood the importance of DCCA and I wanted someone like Dick Vague to carry it at the helm. And he did a great job.
MARGARET: Right. So skipping ahead a little bit in time, so into the 1980s. This is when we see the foundation of some other commercial spaces in Wilmington. So Somerville Manning, and then later, Susan Isaacs’ gallery.

STUART: I was going to mention, Susan Isaacs was there before Somerville.

MARGARET: I think she was—

STUART: She was on Tenth Street.

MARGARET: She was on Tenth Street. So Somerville Manning was in Greenville, and they were founded in—

STUART: I didn’t know that they were around that long.

MARGARET: They were, actually.

STUART: She’s on our boards, see.

MARGARET: They were founded in, give me one moment, so I get this correct in our audio. They were founded in ‘81.

STUART: ‘81?

MARGARET: In 1981. And Susan—

STUART: What about Susan?

MARGARET: Did not open until ‘85.

STUART: ‘85. But Summerville—

MARGARET: She was 1985.

STUART: Right, but Summerville was never in town.

MARGARET: They were never in downtown Wilmington, that’s correct.

STUART: That’s what I’m trying to say, is that Isaacs came right in town, not in Greenville or anywhere else.

MARGARET: Right, which is a great point, so really, Fifth Street and Susan Isaacs were the only two.

STUART: Was Fifth Street there with Isaacs at the same time. Was there an overlap?

MARGARET: No, there was not an overlap.
STUART: I didn’t think so.

TONI: When did Sewell Biggs open his gallery in the Opera House? Do you know that?

MARGARET: That I do not know.

TONI: Okay, Sewell Biggs is somebody—you know the Sewell Biggs collection, the Dover—

MARGARET: Yes.

TONI: He was a collector of many things. And Sewell opened one of our retail spaces at the Opera House. I maybe have that upstairs. He opened a gallery that was meant to be like a New York gallery. His first show was Robert Natkin.

STUART: That was a friend of ours—

TONI: That was a friend of ours, that’s why we remember it so well. And Sewell was in business for just a few years, because he couldn’t make it work.

MARGARET: That’s so interesting. Say, the artist’s name again?


MARGARET: Oh, Natkin, yes.

STUART: Natkin.

TONI: And Sewell Biggs, and—but that was an indication that we thought the world wasn’t ready for—

STUART: Yes. It was great to see the show and all, but then he couldn’t get any other artist.

TONI: And people couldn’t believe the prices. Because—

STUART: People—right, right. He couldn’t bring the New York scene down. He had the contacts, I’m sure. Just like Marian Locks, she really brings the people from New York to Philadelphia.

TONI: So that’s an important theme, which is that when we started the Opera House, one of the ideas for many of us was that any group that was travelling wanted to go to the Kennedy Center in Washington, wanted to go to Carnegie Hall in New York. Wilmington was a good place to come through. And that kind of idea was the same thing with the Delaware Theatre Company, would be really easy to get New York artists who weren’t working right at that time to come and perform in Wilmington. And the same thing with the art scene, it seemed logical to bring down, but the art scene didn’t catch on as easily as the performing arts and the theater. That just didn’t—
MARGARET: And I think there was a bit of disconnect between what’s happening in New York and then what might be happening in Washington, D. C., especially at that time. There isn’t that kind of—

TONI: In art, you mean.

MARGARET: In the visual arts, right. There isn’t kind of—this is wonderful that you said this, I did not know about Sewell Biggs’ gallery in the—

TONI: In the Opera House.

MARGARET: No one had talked to me about that before. And you said that was, it was short-lived.

STUART: Only a couple of years.

MARGARET: Only a couple of years, and you remember if it was in the—

TONI: I would say ‘80s, but I can—the easiest way to find it out probably, is to look in a phone book. In a directory, because it was the Opera House either way, so it was either 810 or 812 Market Street.

STUART: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay, this is—

TONI: I may have some papers upstairs but I doubt it. Wait, wait, wait, let me look in my own book and see if I knew it—oh no, that was published in ‘76, sorry. No, I don’t.

MARGARET: And a few people have also mentioned that Rob had some sort of disco space, something, in the Opera House, second floor of the Opera House?

TONI: Really?

STUART: Not Rob. There was that mirrored—you remember all the mirrors and that, right on the second floor, where they had functions and stuff. Not on the right, when you’re looking at the Opera House on the outside, on the right side, it was really very nice. And the left side—

TONI: Was the parlor.

STUART: What’s that? That, the parlor on the left side, not the right side. There was one on the right side and the left side. But that was all with mirrors and everything, remember, it was very—don’t remember. Okay.

TONI: No. I don’t remember his space.
STUART: Dick Chelvon had a lot to do with that, didn’t he?

TONI: Oh, that’s the grand tier. Dick Chelvon designed the grand tier.

STUART: Right, that was on the first floor.

TONI: And you’re trying to say that Rob used the floor above it as—

STUART: I don’t think Rob was involved in it, I was just countering.

TONI: I don’t know about that. Dick Chelvon designed—in the Opera House originally, there were all these rental areas. Dick Chelvon took over a restaurant that the Manis family ran. George Manis and his father. And it was a restaurant on two floors, it was gorgeous. They had it all married, with chandeliers. They made it look Victorian.

STUART: Okay. That was on two floors? Okay.

TONI: I think so. And then the other spaces were other rentals. One of the spaces—well, this is interesting too, because I remember the vote that we were going to allow a video store to come in, and some of us, including myself, thought, well, what is that? A video store? Is it pornography? We didn’t know what it was. And it was just the beginning of selling videos, and then they didn’t come—I think they didn’t come in, we didn’t want them to get it.

STUART: I don’t think there was—oh, wait—no, no.

TONI: Later on, Will Prosek, that was just much, much later.

STUART: Yeah, Will Prosek, beautiful. That was another thing that was different.

TONI: Now you’re in the ‘90s again.

STUART: In the ‘90s, was no problem.

TONI: Much later.

MARGARET: Okay, okay.

STUART: Okay. Can’t remember when—that’s right, the date.


STUART: That’s right, ‘85.

MARGARET: 1985. So you all must have attended some of her exhibition openings and activities and things. Do you remember her space, or her program?

STUART: No, not really.
MARGARET: No? Okay.

STUART: I knew it was there, I did go to a couple. But I don’t know if we went together, or I just stopped by it. Because it was downtown, so it was nearby.

MARGARET: Right. Okay. And that was relatively short lived as well. So then she closed in the early 1990s.

STUART: Two years?

MARGARET: No, she made it a bit longer. But I think she closed in ‘92, ‘93. And she was showing some really avant-garde work in downtown Wilmington. And prior to her gallery, she was involved with Linda Brennan-Jones, and the L.B. Jones Gallery as well.

TONI: I remember that name, why is it I remember that name?

MARGARET: So I can’t remember, I can’t say the exact space, but also in downtown Wilmington.

STUART: Really? L.B. Jones?

MARGARET: And then Susan went—L.B. Jones. And then Susan went out on her own. But then, in the early 1990s, and I think this is something that the two of you could probably speak to, you see Susan Isaacs’ gallery closing, there are no commercial endeavors that replace any of those activities in downtown Wilmington.

STUART: Except Carspecken.

MARGARET: Except—right. But in the 1990s. So Susan Isaacs closed, and then it’s really pretty vacant in regards to the visual arts in downtown Wilmington. And what’s interesting is I think it is indicative of some larger things that are happening in contemporary art at this time. Certainly the effects economically, that were happening in the late ‘80s into the early 1990s. And then what you’re seeing happening with the culture wars, and this discussion about government public support for the visual arts. I’m wondering if either of you have any other kinds of observations about what happens to contemporary art here in Wilmington at that time period. Because it seems pretty dry, for lack of a better word.

STUART: Well, I don’t think it was ever really much of anything for contemporary art.

TONI: I think we had a sense that the Wyeth and the Brandywine school are so popular, with so much of the population, that the people who are interested in art, tended to gravitate towards art.

STUART: The Brandywine. The Brandywine school was always popular. And then you had the Schoonrovers, and Loper, that was another element. That wasn’t Brandywine, but there was some influence in his subject matter. But quite different.
TONI: But it could be—

STUART: But there was more—people from—we bought that piece of sculpture, the acoustical one of Moss. Joe Moss. He was quite contemporary and then we found out that—I forget what this is called, another sculptor that lives right outside of Mass—just across the line. I can’t think of the name of the artist, but it’s—Murray.

MARGARET: Oh, Robert Murray.

STUART: Robert Murray is more or less a local guy. But nobody ever knew it. I knew him from New York, I didn’t know him from here.

MARGARET: And I think he—

STUART: Moss was never really New York, I don’t think he ever made it to New York.

MARGARET: And I think Robert Murray has kind of stayed outside of the local community purposely.

STUART: Yes, that’s exactly right. But he’s not Delaware, he is Pennsylvania, but he’s nearby.

MARGARET: But still part of—

STUART: Like West Chester, or something like that.

MARGARET: Right, and he’s part of that whole group of artists who are living in kind of the West Grove, Kennett area, like Joe Moss and Margo Allman, and Mitch Lyons, who will become—who have become part of the Wilmington art community, but he’s one artist who’s really stayed outside of that. Which is interesting.

STUART: Yeah.

TONI: The other question that you’re asking, I have a sense, and maybe I’m personalizing this too much to the Opera House, but I remember as president of the Opera House, going to the Arts Council in ‘82, ‘83 and ‘84. And the Opera House was the largest recipient of funds at that time. We’re getting like 150,000 dollars, something like that. And I said, it’s not enough. You’ve got to get us more, and the state has to give more money to the arts.

They would say, you can’t have more because then there won’t be—and I said, well, the answer is you have to give more support to all of the arts. So I think what happened by the ‘90s is the Opera House was struggling terribly, the theater company was struggling terribly, there was no money, and I don’t want to say everybody gave up, but it wasn’t a strong art scene. We had all been so energetic in the ‘70s, and so sure we were going to be able to turn everything around, and it didn’t happen.
STUART: Well, that was—when you talk about that, that’s when I started the Art Stabilization Fund, was in ‘92.

TONI: Yeah, okay. And that’s why you started the Art Stabilization Fund, because everybody needed it so bad.

STUART: Well, I knew that one person was going to the legislature, that was the Delaware Symphony, and the Delaware Theatre Company. The Delaware Theater Company had gotten pretty much a green light and then I got a call from Mike Harkins, I called Ceal, and said, what’s going on? They’re all coming individually, we give to you the Arts Council, because we want you to decide who should get what. And we’ve got to—

TONI: Work together.

STUART: Work together, and we’ve got to prevent this individual request. And that’s a whole other story, that’ll take us another interview. But then the arts—but that’s the ‘90s anyway.

MARGARET: But still, that’s responding to that need that we’re seeing in the late 1980s and early ‘90s.

STUART: Oh yeah. And I had to tell Mike, I said look, two people are coming to you, but every arts organization, and I was well aware of the Delaware Art Museum, because—no, I went back to be president, but I had been on almost every committee and chairman of many of them. I said, we all need a lot of money. They all need money. Not just these two that are coming to you. He says, well then, let’s get together. And that’s when we had a lunch.

TONI: In fact, here’s another interesting piece of that. I think it’s 1982, your dad died in 1982, correct? It’s either 1982 or 1983. There was a mission that Pete du Pont put together when he was the governor, to Luxembourg, because Luxembourg wanted to be a partner in a music festival with Delaware. And so a group of us went over to Luxembourg, and were wined and dined wonderfully, and saw the performances.

And when we came back and discussed it, the consensus was that we couldn’t do it because we were all so desperate for money, that we couldn’t have this new activity unless we were guaranteed a new pot of money. And maybe we should have sat back and thought, well, we’ll give ourselves this wonderful exposure, but that’s how desperate we all were for every piece of money. And I remember saying to the governor, we have to have more money for the existing arts. We can’t be starting something new, and it didn’t happen.

STUART: Glenn Kent was the—

TONI: Glenn Kent was the Secretary of States. And Judy Hoopes, and Cecelia, I think. Julie Hoops was the head of the Arts Council, I think—yeah, because Julie was on the trip.

STUART: Yeah. That was just before I started.
TONI: Yeah. Well, what happened is when I was finishing my term at the Opera House, Cecelia said to me one day, I’m really excited that I may get to work with your husband. I said, what are you talking about? She said, oh, don’t you know? Well, he’s going to become the chairman of the Arts Council. We should have turned off the tape for that. Sorry.

STUART: So I was actually—to follow up on that, Toni comes up to me and says, Stuart, I have to tell you something. I think the governor or representative of the governor is going to call you, and I want you to say yes. Because I had not been on the Arts Council, all I knew was it was giving money to the Delaware Art Museum. And I said, well, anyway—So I said, yes but it took up a lot of time. But I really enjoyed it, it was a great experience.

MARGARET: Now, can either of you speak to the varying levels of support that you saw coming from the mayor’s office during this time?

STUART: During—the mayor, Mayor McLaughlin, was very supportive of the arts. He was the one who kept the Wilmington Arts Commission. And he supported us getting the [Richard] Stankiewicz piece of sculpture. And [inaudible] was the head of the county, executive of the county. And she wanted some other artists, and we established a committee, and Rowland Elzea was on the committee fortunately, from the Delaware Art Museum, and I can rely upon him having good taste and knowing something about the arts, and we got the Stankiewicz. Right?

TONI: Yeah, but in the—

MARGARET: And under his term—

STUART: So he was supportive of that, wanted to pay for that. We got it very inexpensively. And he—there were other works of art that were placed—

TONI: What about Elbert?

STUART: That didn’t have anything to do with the mayor.

TONI: How did the mayor react then, or neutral?

STUART: Who was the mayor then? Was it McLaughlin?

MARGARET: To which work of art?

STUART: No, it was Jim. The Holocaust Memorial, by Elbert Weinberg.

TONI: The Holocaust Memorial. I just didn’t know if there was a mayor, so while you’re thinking about the mayor, I will say that—

STUART: It was Jim Baker—it was McLaughlin, because Jim Baker was the head of the city council. And I don’t think it was Tom Maloney—
TONI: No, I want to talk about Tom Maloney.

STUART: Yeah. But anyway, so there was obviously support from the city and the city council for the Holocaust Memorial. And the percentage for the arts. The commission did get the city to do one percent or a half percent on public projects, if you put in a sewer. One percent of the sewer cost was to go into the arts. You would say, well, you put a building up, you’re supposed to have a piece of art for a public place. But it didn’t matter whatever the public project was, as I say, even if it was a sewer line, a certain amount was put into it. So the one on Fourth Street [Ric Snead Proa], which they have not taken care of, is that piece of sculpture, and I can’t remember the name of the artist, but it’s like sails. It’s got three little curved areas, and the paint has deteriorated. It’s in a corner, it’s in a bad place. In fact, I think it was repainted, but a different color.

MARGARET: I know, it looks like they just put a primer on it. It’s kind of like—I know, it hasn’t been well taken care of.

STUART: Yeah. And I don’t remember the artist, but he’ll work in a public place, and I don’t know, people kind of hide behind these sails, and it wasn’t a good thing maybe, in that location, but they were trying to do works of art. And they went ahead, and the—right across from the station, they put in that work by, he’s a well-known artist, and I can’t remember his name, who did that work right across from the station.

TONI: That’s nice.

MARGARET: Yeah, the Ned Smyth. Bright.

STUART: Was a sailboat, and all that, to relate it to, I think, the Swedes and stuff. But the one at the public building for the city, county and police, was a real failure. Because the artist wanted to put, let’s say, three figures on this big T shape coming up, and then a nice long piece.

TONI: It’s the one on the southeast corner of Fourth street, if you’re coming up King Street.

MARGARET: The figurative work, with the firefighter and the little figures behind.

TONI: Yes, that’s the one he’s talking about, yes.

STUART: Little. Little.

MARGARET: Very small.

STUART: He wanted five times, four or five times that size for three. But the police said, hey, wait a minute, if you’re going to have the firemen, I want us there. They didn’t understand the symbolism of having just a few to show what this building was. They all wanted a little bit, and the artist folded on them. I don’t understand what happened. Then—this is not the city, but Manuel Neri, the building on—new building that was US—one of the banks or something, right up on Walnut Street, had in front an eagle. And then later, put in a Manuel Neri sculpture.
TONI: When was the Frank Stella put in?

STUART: And then—oh wait a minute, that’s another thing. And then, what happened is, I don’t know why they did that, but then they brought back an eagle or something in front of the building. You can see it on—

MARGARET: Right there on—

STUART: What’s the name of the street, there’s King, French, and—I don’t know.

TONI: I guess I don’t go very much further.

STUART: Anyway, they put the Manuel Neri in the back. It’s kind of lost, it’s nice in there, but there is a beautiful Manuel Neri sculpture in the back of that building.

MARGARET: I don’t know if I’ve ever seen that.

STUART: Well, that’s because it’s hidden. It’s right—you know where the bus station is? Is it still there, the bus station? And the park, and then there’s the station. So that street that goes beside the park and the station dead ends, and you make a left on Second Street. Well, right where—if you kept driving, if the street was there, you’d find the Manuel Neri is in that park.

MARGARET: I had no idea.

TONI: I don’t think—I don’t know.

MARGARET: That’s so interesting. Hm, okay.

STUART: And we met Manuel Neri in San Francisco when we were there, and we’ve got a couple of works by him.

TONI: What about the Frank Stella?

MARGARET: And you mentioned, yeah. You mentioned Frank Stella.

TONI: The Frank Stella, it’s in one of those buildings.

STUART: Frank Stella was in the Federal Building, and that’s when the—what they call there, whatever it is, the government agency that takes care of the buildings assigned the Stella to our courthouse. The Federal Building and the Federal Courthouse. And when you would come in, it’s a very poorly designed building, and it’s not very impressive. You come in, the ceiling is very low, and right in front of you is these elevators, the elevators on the side, and right in front of you is a blank wall, and they put this piece of sculpture there. But it was one of Frank Stella’s aluminum colored works, one of his earlier works. And he came, and when it was dedicated—he’s a small, little guy. And then someone got hurt running and hit themselves on it, because there were sharp edges. So they moved it, and I think we lost it. It went to another city.
MARGARET: It went to another city.

TONI: I think that was the day, I was asking that—

STUART: It’s not in the Courthouse anymore.

MARGARET: That’s so interesting.

STUART: Yeah, we lost it. And we never got anything back, I don’t think.

MARGARET: At one point, there was a Sheila Hicks in a corporate collection somewhere downtown. But I have no idea where it is now.

STUART: Well, you know, the banks—Hercules had a great collection. And Hercules, with the Delaware Art Museum, would rent works. Alice Hupfel is not well. So you’re not going to get much from her. She doesn’t even remember me.

MARGARET: I know. We conducted an interview.

STUART: That’s too bad.

MARGARET: We waited too long.

STUART: But anyway, she was the head of that department. And of course, the Hercules had their own personal collection that they’ve had over years. And I don’t know what happened to that collection, they had all the really local good people, the wives and—

TONI: And the library. As you know—

STUART: And the Delaware Trust had good—

MARGARET: The Delaware Trust, right.

STUART: The Delaware Trust had an ugly collection.

TONI: But again, the Brandywine school. All of that was the Brandywine school. But coming back to this question of the mayor, Tom Maloney was really a central part of the Opera House’s success. Tom Maloney and his wife, Linda, loved actors and performers, and he was very supportive of the Opera House. And when we restored the facade in the summer of 1973, I’m not saying ’73 so much, it might have been ’74, John Craig was our Chairman of the Board. And John Craig said if you want people to pay attention—

STUART: He’s at News Journal.

TONI: You have to create an event. So we all met on Rodney Square, and we had a parade, and we marched down to the Opera House. And Tom Maloney, as the mayor, climbed a fire truck
ladder to the Masonic eye and repainted—well, symbolically painted the eye. That’s how supportive he was.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s incredible.

TONI: And then he was always a part of the activities. So there was definitely a sense that the mayor’s office was working with the Opera House.

STUART: Yes, oh yeah. Definitely. And of course, the reason is Jim Baker’s been terrific for DCAD.

TONI: Oh, and the mayors after that.

STUART: Now this mayor is another question.

MARGARET: Right, right. Well, this is—you all have given me so much information. I’m going to stop this.

TONI: Okay.

[End of Audio]
Duration: 63 minutes