Oral history interview with Fred Carspecken, September 17, 2013

Carspecken, Fred
Gallerist and co-founder of Carspecken-Scott Gallery

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MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum interviewing Fred Carspecken of Carspecken-Scott Gallery, along with Don Stradley and Laurel Christie. This is September 17, 2013, and we are at the Carspecken-Scott Gallery at 1707 North Lincoln Street.

FRED: Well, I moved to Wilmington in 1970 from St. Louis.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: To start Schoonover Galleries. I don’t know if you’ve written about that or not, but John Schoonover, who is Frank Schoonover’s grandson, and I went to college together.

MARGARET: Right. And you were in the same fraternity?

FRED: Right, fraternity brothers, yes. Fraternity brothers meant a lot. And he was working at an insurance company, and I had run a gallery in Florida after the Navy. I was a pilot in the Navy in Pensacola, Florida. And I ran a gallery down there called the—I don’t know if it’s down there anymore or not—called the VZ Top Gallery. The owner was ill, so I sort of took over for about six months or so.

MARGARET: And that would have been after—
FRED: That would have been before 1970.


FRED: So I ran this gallery, and I really didn’t have much training. I had no training. But I was interested. I had bought a couple of things from the gallery, and I was getting out of the Navy, and he said, “I’m going to be going away. I don’t know how long I’m going to be gone. I wish there was somebody here to run the gallery.” I’d had a couple of glasses of champagne at an opening. I said in a small remark, “I’ll run the gallery. I’m getting out of the Navy in two weeks.” And he went—he was an older man—and he went, “Yes, Fred will run the gallery. Fred will run the gallery.” I mean, I liked Pensacola, so I ran this gallery and just loved doing it. I actually did a good job. Now, there’s a lot of stories connected to that that wouldn’t be relevant here, but I ran that gallery and then I went home to St. Louis and wasn’t doing anything. And I was having breakfast with my father who had retired, who told me that he and my mother loved me very much, and was I going to do anything? Was I going to work or anything? And I said, “Oh, I guess so.”

So Schoonover called and we decided to open Schoonover Galleries in Wilmington. I’d had some experience framing pictures, and he of course was very much into his grandfather’s [Frank Schoonover] work. We were at 16 and 16 North Rodney Street at Schoonover Galleries. You probably already know about those.

MARGARET: Yes.

FRED: So it was just something to do. I knew I wanted to be on the east coast; I didn’t particularly want to stay in St. Louis where I was from. My mother was an artist. My parents collected modestly. We spent a lot of time—we would go to church then go to the St. Louis Art Museum. It was just sort of something I sort of liked. And these were the sixties, and the byword was, “Do your own thing.” That was the motto.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: Usually expressed this way: “Like, do your own thing, man. You got to do your own thing.” Do you understand where I’m coming from?

MARGARET: I understand, yeah.

FRED: Oh, good. You’re so hip. So anyhow, we started doing it. I love Wilmington. I didn’t want to be in a big city. I didn’t want to be in New York, or Philadelphia, or Washington. I love Wilmington. I had a lot of friends from Wilmington from college, friends from Wilmington.

MARGARET: Okay.
FRED: So we started Schoonover Galleries, and we really—I enjoyed doing it, and John and I are still good friends, but I liked more contemporary art.

MARGARET: Because at that point, when you started Schoonover Galleries, you were focusing primarily on—it was a frame shop.

FRED: It was a frame shop that happened to be the Frank Schoonover Studios. I would try to sell some of his work.

MARGARET: Schoonover?

FRED: Yeah, they were—he and his father would sell paintings.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: We just did framing, basically. And then my personal favorite—I mean, all of those paintings were fabulous. They’re wonderful. There’s no doubt about it. But they weren’t held in very high esteem, if you remember.

MARGARET: Certainly not at that point.

FRED: Not at that point, no. People would say, “They’re just illustrators.” Oh, just illustrators. They were wonderful paintings, but I liked contemporary things. And so, in 1973, I think maybe March or so, we started Carspecken-Scott Gallery, and continued—of course, the framing was a large part of our business. I think our first show, I think—I’ll let you catch up. Our first art exhibition was for Mary Page Evans. It was a three-person show. Mary Page Evans, Tania Boucher, and Tom Bostelle. Certainly you know the Bostelle name.

MARGARET: I do.

FRED: And that—for lack of a better term—was a blockbuster show. I mean, really. People came in, and they were amazed. Here was something that was beautiful that wasn’t in the ducks and trucks tradition. A lot of the art being done here was ducks and trucks and rusty buckets with daisies. Well done. Well painted. But it just reacted in other ways. So Mary Page and Tania Boucher, and Tom Bostelle were more abstract. So that was a nice—I mean, it was a signal that maybe we were doing something right. That’s hard for me because I’m old and have a bad memory, but who else did we used to show? I know we used to show Julio daCunha.

MARGARET: Okay, so you got—

FRED: That name rings a bell?

MARGARET: Yes, and I have interviewed Julio already.

FRED: Julio would probably—yeah. And Kathleen Keane—sorry to go so fast.

MARGARET: Oh no, this is perfect.
FRED: Tua Hayes. Now, we had a show for Eugenia Rhoads. Eugenia was one of the founding members of the Delaware Museum.

MARGARET: Yes.

FRED: And the Delaware Society for the Fine Arts, it would have been at that point.

MARGARET: Yes.

FRED: And others.

MARGARET: Okay. Well, let me skip back.

FRED: I talked to Carol and she thought we didn’t really do anything until the ‘80s.

MARGARET: That would have been in the ‘80s. Her name is included in this article from the November 1988 Delaware Today. It does list, in addition to Carol, Carolyn Anderson and Marshall Burns.

FRED: Marshall Burns—that’s a name I have not heard.

FRED: Is he associated with us, or—

MARGARET: Associated with you all. Burns.

FRED: Burns. I mean, that’s a name I don’t recognize. He’s recognized the name.

FRED: This is interesting.

MARGARET: Yeah. Let me go back a bit.

FRED: Is that the guy that did the fabric collages?

FRED: Let’s not even remember him.

MARGARET: Okay. Let’s skip on now.

FRED: That wasn’t his name, then.

FRED: No.

MARGARET: Let’s go back—sorry—just to the foundation of the gallery in 1973. So it was opened as Carspecken-Scott. Tell me a bit about Howie Scott. I know she wasn’t with the gallery too long.

FRED: She had started working for me and Schoonover—Schoonover and I. No, she was working for John Schoonover and me. That’s right. And she was very, very good with her hands and she was very capable. She enjoyed doing that work, and she liked that day we started the
gallery together. But she had said early on, “You know, I really want to have children. I want to have goats, and chickens, and cows. I want to be—this is an interim thing to do.” She was here until 1976, I think, approximately.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: Then she went home and fulfilled her desires to be a wife and mother.

MARGARET: Okay. Okay. That’s good to know. Now, tell me about that first exhibition just a bit more. So these are three artists. Had they had prior representation in this area? Mary Page Evans, for example.

FRED: Mary Page Evans—she was being shown at the gallery and Centerville, and I had gone to a show. Before we represented her, I had gone to a gallery at Centerville.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: And she had a very big, very strong, really turbulent painting. It was beach umbrellas, but they looked—it was very abstract, it was very expressive—very emotional. I just loved it. As far as I’m concerned—I can’t remember the price—2000.00 dollars, maybe. It was far more money than I’d ever imagined. So I just bought the painting. I just paid it off over a year or something like that. It was the painting that really excited me. And apparently I think what happened was, she said, “Well, who bought this painting?” Of course, she knew everybody who bought these paintings except Carspecken. Who’s this guy? It turns out her husband had gone to the University of Virginia, and I’d gone to the University of Virginia—and this is going to make you throw up—we were fraternity brothers. Here we are again—he was far ahead of me, so “You were an Elmo [St. Elmo]? I was an Elmo.” There’s an immediate bond, embrace, quivering, you know. So this is a connection. And of course Mary Page whom you’ve met.

MARGARET: Yes.

FRED: I mean, she is wonderful. So we became good friends, and then she very nicely had a show here. And she of course had studied with Tom Bostelle. And Tom was of course aided and abetted by Tania Boucher. She was a groupie, I think is a fair way to say it. He was a guru. He was Mary Page’s guru also. And they would catch up on the brandy, wine, and making beautiful art. At that time, very hard to sell. They did what they wanted to do, and I always loved it.

MARGARET: As you said in this article, and I quote, you were in favor of “strong, modern representational painting.”

FRED: Yeah.

MARGARET: So there really wasn’t a venue—maybe a little bit at a gallery at Centerville, but otherwise not a strong scene for showing that kind of work in this region.

FRED: Yeah, Hardcastle’s, Gallery at Centerville, Your Home—I don’t know if you’ve even heard of that. It’s at 202. Your Home, Inc. It was a hardware store that also had a frame shop and
a little gallery. And they would have shows by nice people—nice little paintings, by mostly women, which is fine.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: But it was my opinion, I wanted to be the Guggenheim of Wilmington. We thought we were very avant garde. I should say, representation of it—that was not limited. I liked things that were not representational as well. These things I considered contemporary art. The word “modern,” I get what that means, I guess.

MARGARET: Well, by 1980, it probably meant something a little different than it does now.

FRED: Yeah, I mean, [Victor] Vasarely was modern, by that standard.

MARGARET: Yeah.

FRED: Stuff that was not as traditional as they had around here, and to our surprise and pleasure, it took off. People said, “Oh, this is very nice. This is very interesting.” It was a breath of fresh air. So that’s—we started doing more shows and continued doing the framing, and had—what other shows—what other people did we represent that you can remember beside the people that got ticked off? I don’t mean got angry, but they weren’t listed. Of course the Delaware Art Museum was changing substantially in these times, too.

MARGARET: Oh yeah.

FRED: Bill Radebaugh.

FRED: Bill Radebaugh.

MARGARET: Can you spell his last name?


MARGARET: Oh, interesting.

FRED: And they were—he was our version of Louise Nevelson. I mean, you know—we had Louise Nevelson. It was good.

FRED: Oh, Sculthorpe?

MARGARET: Yes, Peter Sculthorpe.

FRED: I wonder if that was the ‘70s or the ‘80s, but we did have Peter Sculthorpe, and we did very well with him, and then he got pricey—too pricey—he ended up going to some event.

MARGARET: Okay.
FRED: He got a little pricey for us. Of course we’d had—sometimes you would have shows for everybody once a year, and after a while you sort of saturate the market. Wilmington is a small market. It’s too small a market for opera. It’s too small a market for theatre; it’s too small a market for symphonies. You know, it’s a small market for anything—and as for the art museum, we wish we had a base of two million people, but we make due with what we can.

MARGARET: Right.

FRED: So that was always an issue.

MARGARET: So what was the approximate size of your stable of artists then, at that point?

FRED: Seven or eight?

MARGARET: So really that small? Okay.

FRED: We would have shows—there’s Marty Menahan—I don’t know if that’s right—he was the “painting postman” from Benmin, NJ. And he did—now, his things were very good. They were shown at BOYFS. But he was very good, and we sold him.

MARGARET: How interesting.

FRED: I don’t know what happened to him. We had several shows for him. He was a really nice man. We just took—our rule for showing is we look at it, do we like it, how much is it, can we sell it—and third and probably most importantly, can we get along with the artist? Wonderful painters who are doing—it’s so difficult, it’s not fun anymore.

MARGARET: Right. Have you always been in this location?

FRED: Yep, always. Always been here.

MARGARET: Okay. Included in this article lists, in addition to framing, restoration services.

FRED: Yes, but we don’t do those here. We have three different—we have three or four restorers. We network out.

MARGARET: Okay, and has that always been the case?

FRED: No. I’m not sure we did that until we had to find the sources. I would say not in the ‘70s.

MARGARET: Not in the 70s.

FRED: We would never presume to restore a painting.

MARGARET: Yourselves.

FRED: No.
MARGARET: That’s good to know. Okay. Now, in the 1980s—and several other artists have talked about corporate collecting.

FRED: It was bit in the ‘80s and ‘90s. Business was—the art business was like shooting fish in a barrel. The growth was incredible. And there was a lot of corporate sales, and we did—we sold a lot of graphics, which would be silkscreen, lithographs, and stuff like that for the graphs and things like that. Also, we sold a lot of watercolors in the ‘70s and ‘80s.

MARGARET: How interesting.

FRED: Now we sell very few watercolors. We sell mostly oils. Oil on canvas and oil on paper.

MARGARET: Right, and so—

FRED: I mean, Carol Anderson was a wonderful—we sold easels of Carol Anderson’s. I mean, I don’t know if you know anything about her, but she has beautiful watercolors. She’s a watercolorist. And of course Andy Wyeth was a watercolorist.

MARGARET: Right. Were you ever selling Andrew Wyeth?

FRED: No, we were—he was way out of our league.

MARGARET: Okay, but watercolors—Anderson. And the silkscreens and graphics work that you were selling particularly to corporate collections in the 1980s—was that work by the stable of artists that you had?

FRED: Publishers.


FRED: When Devon and—

FRED: Devon and the Graphics Society—though those were mostly prints.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: But we sold a lot of prints.

FRED: Delaware Trust.

FRED: Yeah, so we would do—a lot of that business was dying out. But people did—they had places in California, places in New York and New Jersey who would publish these portfolios of original signed prints. It was the era of the original signed print.

MARGARET: Right.
FRED: So you had—so, which, if it was a small silkscreen edition, that was one thing, but when you have an original signed print that is one of 7500, it becomes a “So what.” But people really said, “Oh my God. 23. Oh.”

MARGARET: Right.

FRED: You don’t have to quote me on that, but the point is, people were—that was a big turn of events, you know.

MARGARET: And that was something that the corporate community really responded to.

FRED: Well, they—the better corporate community responded to the original graphics.

MARGARET: Right. Okay. But they were originally—

FRED: But there were people also who just liked—and a lot of people who still want local subjects. So Caroline Ashton—she had I don’t know how many prints—15 or 20 prints.

FRED: 15 or 20, yeah.

MARGARET: So she was doing print work too?

FRED: If you didn’t want to sell—if you couldn’t buy a fifteen hundred dollar picture, you could certainly buy a thirty-five dollar signed print.

MARGARET: Okay. In the article—and again, I’m referencing the November 1988 Delaware Today article about the galleries in Wilmington—it lists no specific names of corporations. It just lists law offices, banks, and corporations among your customers. Are there any specific corporations that you feel comfortable mentioning that you remember?

FRED: I’m trying to remember.

FRED: Delaware Trust.

FRED: We did work for Delaware Trust. We did work for Patterson Schwartz.

MARGARET: Oh, okay.

FRED: Did we do work for Potter Anderson back then?

FRED: Mostly framing. They didn’t buy much. They had these older pieces.

FRED: And they were in the other building?

FRED: Yeah, the Delaware Trust building. Yeah, if my memory was better I’d tell you more.

MARGARET: Oh no, this is good.
FRED: But we would go in and they would show us their space, and art humanizes the workplace, as you know and have an understanding. They’re very employee friendly and wanted to provide an environment that was pretty and people wanted to look at things, and they brightened things up.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: The advantage of the prints or the reproductions—the graphics work—is it was relatively inexpensive.

MARGARET: Right.

FRED: Mannington Mills.

FRED: Mannington Mills. That’s right. Mannington Mills in Salem, NJ.

MARGARET: Oh. Mannington Mills—that’s in Salem, NJ.

FRED: That was good. Yeah, Manington Mills.

FRED: We framed a show for the Octagon.

FRED: Yeah.

FRED: They were—it was their own objects, though. We didn’t sell them any objects.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: We just did the framing for the show for the Octagon Museum.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: The people we had in association with in Washington—we did a lot of framing at Georgetown Galleries.

FRED: Georgetown Galleries, yeah.

FRED: Yeah.

FRED: So they were marketing rare—supposedly rare—what was the name of it?

FRED: I’m trying to remember.

FRED: Newspapers from the 18th century.

FRED: That was it. Newspapers.

MARGARET: Oh, like ephemera—things like that?
FRED: Yes, what a wonderful word—ephemera.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: And we’d frame them and they’d sell them. They sold them on the telephone.

MARGARET: Oh, interesting. Okay. Now that kind of corporate collecting market died down, I guess, in the 1990s? Mid—


MARGARET: Right.

FRED: Yeah. Oh, around the middle of September. I mean, 9/11, it just stopped cold. We should have stayed closed all of October and all of November if we could. I mean, it just—people were not thinking about anything so frivolous as buying art.

MARGARET: Right. Let’s go back earlier to—still on the same topic, but looking a little bit earlier at the end of the 1980s because I have seen—and really I’m looking at some of the gallery scenes in New York and looking at the—we had another recession at the end of the 1980s. That was ’87 or ’89.

FRED: That goes back too long for me to remember.

MARGARET: Sometime around there. We see decreased funding and we see the culture wars in the early 1990s, as well, and so—

FRED: What would they be? The culture wars.

MARGARET: So this is when—the best example is the Mapplethorpe controversy.

FRED: Oh yeah. Okay.

MARGARET: So all of the NEA funding going to these projects. Mapplethorpe gets the award from SECA and everyone’s up in arms.

FRED: Right. And the [inaudible] isn’t year-round. What was that?

MARGARET: Exactly. The Andres Serrano.

FRED: Right. People were all up in arms and going crazy.

MARGARET: Right. Exactly. So you see a lot of galleries that opened in the early 1980s in New York closing about 9 or 10 years later. Some galleries—of course there are fewer galleries closing in Wilmington because there are fewer galleries that are opening, but you see a gallery like Susan Isaacs that closes in the early 1990s.

FRED: Yeah, exactly.
MARGARET: I don’t know if you remember Grace McFarren.

FRED: Of course I do. She had a gallery with the Wanamakers.

MARGARET: Exactly. The gallery of circulating paintings.

FRED: Yeah.

MARGARET: Which, my goodness. She was operating in like the 1960s.

FRED: Oh, she was there a long, long time.

MARGARET: And showing Dan Teis, all this kind of work.

FRED: Yeah.

MARGARET: I mean, granted, Wanamaker’s closed and so she shifted up to 202. So you’re seeing some of these effects in Wilmington in the late ‘80s, early 1990s as well. Do you remember feeling any of this kind of decrease in marketing or similar effects here for your gallery?

FRED: Honestly, I don’t remember. I remember after 2001 and after 2008 for that matter. That was a terrible thing.

MARGARET: Right.

FRED: Not really. Can I just—I just have to tell him one thing before he leaves.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: I missed the question.

MARGARET: So basically I’m trying to get a sense of the scene in Wilmington at the end of the ‘80s and early 1990s because I’m seeing some shifts in the support of the arts here in the city, and I’m seeing some closures of other galleries here in the city. And these are trends that I’m also seeing in New York, that I’m seeing nationally, as well. So I’m trying to get a sense of what is this break in Wilmington that happens here in the early 1990s? And if you all felt those effects at the gallery, as well. Did you see a decrease in patron support and purchases, or is it not something that was significant enough to stand out in your memories?

LAUREL: You can verify that with Fred, but there was a point where people were not buying original artwork. They were buying posters.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: We sold a lot of posters. People were still in the “Isn’t this cool? Put this in our kitchen or our family room,” or whatever.
MARGARET: So feeling more comfortable buying something a little less expensive.

FRED: Right.

MARGARET: But still feeling like they were purchasing art.

DON: Yeah, yeah. Kind of.

LAUREL: They were decorating.

DON: Yeah, exactly.

MARGARET: That’s a good way to say it. Okay.

LAUREL: Because, you know, the mainstay of art business really has been framing, and the selling of the art work is just—

DON: It’s up and down. It’s—

LAUREL: Exactly. It’s unpredictable. So we had to have a source of income that was going to be—

DON: Keep us rolling.

MARGARET: Right. And it seems to me like that’s an incredibly successful model for a gallery in a community like Wilmington. So you have the framing means. You’re able to really let that support some of the other activities of the gallery.

LAUREL: Exactly.

MARGARET: And it seems like that has been—I’m just thinking of some of the other galleries who have had trouble sustaining themselves.

LAUREL: Yeah, yeah. Sorry, you might want to pause.

MARGARET: I’ll pause for a second. And actually, just so I can get this on the record, as well—Don, how long have you been here at the gallery?

DON: I believe I started here in 1978.

MARGARET: Oh, so just two years after the—no, not two years—five years after they opened.

DON: Five years after. Yeah.

MARGARET: 1978. And, Laurel, how long have you been here?

LAUREL: August the first, 1986—nine o’clock in the morning.
MARGARET: Oh, that’s wonderful.

DON: She kind of views this like a prison sentence.

MARGARET: When are you being released? I’m not asking—I’m not asking that question.

LAUREL: I’ve still got a ways to go on my—

MARGARET: Oh, this is wonderful. So all three of you have really been in Wilmington. Have you been—I know you started here in ‘86? Are you originally from Delaware?

LAUREL: I am. I’m from Newark. I grew up in Newark, Delaware.

MARGARET: Okay. So in the area in the ‘70s and early ‘80s, as well?

LAUREL: Yeah. I’ve pretty much always been here.

MARGARET: Okay. Wow, this is wonderful. Well—

LAUREL: Like I said, I couldn’t escape.

MARGARET: Delaware seems to have that effect on people.

FRED: How about you, Margaret? Are you from here?

MARGARET: I am not a native Delawarean. I am from central Pennsylvania. The area kind of between Shippensburg and Carlisle, out in the middle of nowhere.

FRED: But beautiful.

MARGARET: But beautiful. I went to Mary Washington for undergrad and then went to SUNY Purchase College for graduate school, but Delaware has held on to me.

FRED: Well, it’s a wonderful, easy place to live.

MARGARET: It’s incredible.

FRED: I’m not real competitive. I didn’t want to bang—butt my head against the wall in a big city, and in Wilmington, and within a year, you’ve pretty well met everybody that you need to know, but you’re close to Philadelphia and New York and all that. It’s really easy.

MARGARET: I love it. I absolutely love it. So we’ll come back because I do want to get back to some of the gallery specifics, but since we’re talking about the 1970s and ‘80s, and since you were all here at that point, let’s go into some recollections about Fifth Street Gallery and Rob Jones.

FRED: Robbie was kind of nuts. You’ve got to think of him as some kind of New York—he was just off the wall, as far as traditional Wilmington was concerned, but they loved him. They just
loved him, and he had a wild—from our perspective—a wild—I can’t remember some of them. I’m not sure if it was about the art or about the experience of his openings. I mean, he sold some stuff that was downright terrible—or had shows and stuff that were just sort of terrible, but the whole point was, it was new and fresh. It was fresh. It was good, too. I mean, you would probably know more about the exhibitions he had than I do because I don’t remember a lot of them. But I’d known—I knew him before—and I’d known he was the brave new world.

MARGARET: Right.

FRED: And he’d appealed to the obvious counter-culture appealing people, but then he appealed to all these Greenville matrons who thought it was awfully exciting, and he was very undecorated—indecorous. He was irreverent. He was very snappy, very rude, but nice rude, you know what I mean? And I think people like that.

MARGARET: Okay.

FRED: I was very, “Well, yes, sir.” And he was very, “Aw, well, girl.” Or something like that, and people would say, “Oh, that’s different.”

MARGARET: Yeah. Oh, that’s incredible. And he seemed like a pioneer of sorts in downtown Wilmington because—

FRED: Oh yeah. Very much.

MARGARET: And it’s a little tricky to find specific details about the gallery’s activities, but from what I’ve found, and what’s included in this 1988 article, the rough span of exhibitions is from 1973 to 1979.

FRED: That was Fifth Street?

MARGARET: Fifth Street.

FRED: He wasn’t that long.

MARGARET: I know. And that’s what most people have said, so I think he’s kind of extended—when he was being interviewed, he extended the years of the galleries, and I have found some exhibitions as early as 1974 and as late 1978, but I don’t think he was programming consistently during that period.

FRED: Yeah. I mean, he was a latecomer by my standards, and downtown—by that time, Hardcastle’s had moved out of downtown, we’re here when we left what I call the “fashionable midtown area” or the “West End.” London has a West End, we have a West End. But anyway, he
went downtown by the “hum hum” and brought this wonderful life to that space. The Grand was going by that time, but the building he was in—I can’t remember what was—

MARGARET: So he was in the Queen.

FRED: What is now the Queen.

MARGARET: What is now the Queen. Second floor—you only entered on Fifth Street, is that correct?

FRED: You walk in the door at Fifth Street, and you climb the stairs.

MARGARET: You climb the stairs to go up to the gallery on the second floor.

FRED: I think he may have even lived there for a while.

MARGARET: That’s what I was wondering. Do you know if he lived on the second floor or the third floor? How he occupied those spaces?

FRED: Talk. We’ll call Brad. Brad works for me, and Brad and Robbie were friends.

MARGARET: Yes.

LAUREL: Yeah, see, I do remember. I was at that gallery—this is slightly before my time, even though—I did go—I remember going to the Fifth Street Gallery. If it was ’74 or ’75, I was still a teenager, so—

DON: Maybe with your sister?

LAUREL: Yeah, exactly, because Maureen, my older sister, she kind of mingled with people of that ilk—the art scene. She had friends, you know—either artists or musicians and they would gravitate toward Gibby Perry. Although that might have been—

FRED: He was later

LAUREL: Yeah, he was later. He was—I’m thinking of Tom Downs.

DON: Okay.

LAUREL: I’m thinking of Tom Downs. He, I think, had some association with that gallery.

MARGARET: Tom Downs? I don’t recognize that name. Was he an artist?

LAUREL: He was an artist. He was an artist, but—

MARGARET: From Wilmington? Or local?
LAUREL: Yeah, local. He was actually—this is a piece of trivia. He was actually my art teacher in the sixth grade.

MARGARET: Oh. And where would that have been? Where was he?

FRED: At Brookside Elementary School.

MARGARET: At Brookside Elementary. That’s not a name that I recognize.

FRED: He is now downstate.

MARGARET: Oh, this is good to know.

LAUREL: I think possibly he and Robbie were friends. I don’t know that he was any—

DON: I’m not sure. I’m sure they would have been aware of each other, or at least—absolutely. But probably, I don’t know if he actually had an exhibition there at the gallery. I just remember—I think it’s possible. I remember Tom doing this series of insects. He did this whole very avant garde—they were drawings, I believe, or paintings—I’m not sure which—of insects in various—

DON: You said Tom Downs?

LAUREL: Tom, yes. Because he was doing—at that point he was producing art. I don’t think he was doing any artwork now.

MARGARET: He isn’t? Okay.

LAUREL: No, but he did it—when he was younger he did.

MARGARET: Interesting. Okay. And in addition to the exhibitions, it seems like there were a lot of these parties, celebrations. I’ve found reference to the Sleaze Convention. I don’t know if either of you attended the Sleaze Convention? They had Edie the Egg Lady come up from Baltimore.

DON: Oh my God.

DON: So there’s where JoHn Waters—

MARGARET: JoHn Waters connections between Wilmington and Baltimore.

LAUREL: Yes. Here’s another name that you might want to possibly talk to. Paul Woznicki.

MARGARET: Yes, we’ve talked. Woz—yes.

LAUREL: Yeah. Because he—

MARGARET: He was doing interesting work as well.
FRED: Absolutely.

MARGARET: With the robots and the sound—this kind of experimental sound that he was doing with George Stewart in Newark, as well. And I know they participated—they seem to be more involved with this kind of Sleaze Convention, Rondo Center, Xanadu Comics kind of scene that focused—it seems like, more around Tom Watkins, but of course Rob and Tom were friends, as well.

FRED: Right.

FRED: Remember Edie from Baltimore?

DON: Edie the Egg Lady, yeah.

MARGARET: Did you attend the Sleaze Convention, Fred?

FRED: No. That would not be a—no, it was fine. That wasn’t my scene at all.

MARGARET: Right. So there—I haven’t conducted an interview with Tom Watkins yet, so I’m eager to talk to him about this specifically, but it does seem like there was kind of Tom and Rob’s activities were parallel in a similar location, but it does seem there was a different group associated with Xanadu Comics, Tom Watkins.

FRED: A lot of these I just didn’t understand. I didn’t get. I didn’t dislike it because they were doing it, I just—I didn’t get it. It didn’t interest me, you know what I mean?

MARGARET: Okay. And it seems like those activities were what was more closely connected to what’s happening in the lower eastside in New York. So there’s that similar aesthetic.

FRED: Because Robby spent a lot of time in New York.

MARGARET: Right. So did you—I can’t remember if you said when we spoke last—did you go up and visit Rob at all when he was in New York?

FRED: I can remember one time I went up there, and he worked in the restaurant. It may have been Windows On the World or something. I just remember that it was about two o’clock—or between two o’clock and three in the morning—and he got off work and he was rearing to go, and I went, “Eh.” We went to some wild, crazy club. It just wasn’t me. He was gay, I’m gay. I should have loved this. It was just more than the little boy from St. Louis could handle.

MARGARET: Right. Do you remember seeing any of his exhibitions in New York?

FRED: No, none at all.

MARGARET: None at all. He didn’t—

FRED: I bought one of his sculptures and I put it in my garden.
MARGARET: Shrouds.

FRED: Yes, shrouds. It was on this pedestal and it had a plaster face inside.

MARGARET: Right. So how did you come to purchase that work? Did you purchase it in New York?

FRED: From him. I purchased it at his Fifth Street Gallery.

MARGARET: Okay. So he may have been doing those shrouds earlier because the first reference—this should look familiar. The first reference that I can find to the shrouds was for the—was from this September 1983 exhibition that he had at Pier 34. A lot of artists in the lower east side were utilizing Pier 34 to basically put on exhibitions—installations—in this large abandoned space. I can’t find anything about the shrouds prior to this point, but you—so you purchased the shroud from Fifth Street?

FRED: It was the shape of a pedestal, and it had—so it was plywood—and it had this oval hole, and there was this shroud face, this sort of white face, shrouded face inside.

MARGARET: So it wasn’t something like this?

FRED: It was inside of a box. A plywood box.

MARGARET: That’s really exciting.

FRED: It weighed a lot. It’s plaster, I guess.

MARGARET: So he was doing a lot of this similar kind of work. That would have been prior to his going to New York in 1980-ish.

FRED: He was going up to New York and checking out the scene. He had gone to the University of Delaware and all that stuff, and he was enormously hip, and so he was bringing back information and doing things like this that never would have crossed our minds.

MARGARET: Wow, this is so interesting. So the shroud was a kind of—you can see the kind of like a death mask.

FRED: It was a mask, yeah. Sort of a mask. A shrouded figure inside of a box. We’re all trapped in our own box, that sort of idea.

MARGARET: That’s so interesting. I’ve not seen reference to that work at all.

FRED: He’s got a few of those.

MARGARET: Okay.
FRED: I think it was the same show. He had shrouds all—the shrouds were several thousand bucks, maybe. This was less then, when I wanted it.

MARGARET: What’s interesting is I can’t find information about his exhibitions on Fifth Street, so the exhibitions he put on about his own work. I can’t find any details about those.

FRED: Really? Interesting. I did not go down to every show he had, but I was in and out of there. It was always interesting to see what he was going to come up with. Everything was very innovative.

MARGARET: Did you see his exhibition at the Museum with the black polyurethane kind of forms?

FRED: I don’t remember that. Did he show at the Museum?

MARGARET: He did. It was called Black Wilmington. Of course, conveniently the exhibition file in the archives is painfully thin. I think there’s one letter between Rob and Rowland. And that’s it. So we do have a few images.

FRED: Excuse me. Are you going to the warehouse? It may seem different because he was a real promoter. But he was a great promoter. I remember the series of things.

MARGARET: Do you—and this is just your opinion—do you have a sense of him being a good promoter of Rob Jones or a good promoter of the artist whose work he showed?

FRED: This is going to be colored—jaundiced—I think he was a good promoter of Rob Jones.

MARGARET: Of himself. Yeah. Because it doesn’t seem like—I mean, it was wonderful. He does—like you said, he was a pioneer in downtown Wilmington. He was bringing energy into the city. He was getting dance performances out on the Market Street Mall, so I do think he was doing a lot of good things. And I think that it helped support what we saw later in the late 1970s with the foundation of the Delaware Theatre Company, the DCCA. I think he was certainly kind of fuelling all that artistic energy, but I don’t get the sense that he was really trying to create a commercial success in the Fifth Street Gallery.

FRED: His [inaudible] were about promoting downtown and his own lifestyle and his own personality, and he needed a vehicle, and he tried to sell some art. I don’t know how he did as an art salesperson. I don’t know.

MARGARET: I don’t think he did incredibly well, and this is based on some of the artists that I—

FRED: This is not—this is not how he was all the time, but I remember someone saying, “Rob Jones, when is he there?” I said, “I don’t know when he’s there. He has hours, I presume.” “Well, I go down there twice during his hours, he doesn’t leave a note, and the place is all locked up.” Well, you can’t do that. If you think you want to be in business, you have to be accessible.
MARGARET: Right.

FRED: They were annoyed and mad. Going downtown was no day in the country. People were a little fretful about being downtown.

MARGARET: Well this is so—what, five, six years after 1968? So there’s still that society.

FRED: People were afraid to be downtown. It’s brave to be downtown. But of course he opened up in that location because it was financially a good deal.

MARGARET: And I think that’s what it was. He was taking advantage of a basically vacant spot. Inexpensive, and trying to create energy and really taking advantage of what that real estate had to offer. And—which is interesting because that’s exactly what he was doing when he was up in New York with the artists in the lower east side. And they were doing the same thing in the 1980s. You have all these vacant piers, these big structures, and they’re taking advantage of it and putting on exhibitions, installations, and utilizing that space.

FRED: Well, SoHo—people opened up in SoHo because it was dirt-cheap. Well, it ain’t cheap now.

MARGARET: Right.

FRED: It’s terribly expensive now. Artists are known to do that. They go to a place that’s dirt-cheap and turn it around, and that’s what he was—

MARGARET: Exactly

FRED: He got that from—he figured that out from—I don’t know where he figured it out, but he did that here in Wilmington. He was in New York most weekends, you know, living this wild and wonderful life if you didn’t have to sleep.

MARGARET: Right. This is great. I’m going to stop this because unless we want to go back to any other details about the galleries specifically. I think it’s great. You’ve already told me about the kind of—the stable of artists, what your main focus was in terms of supporting strong, contemporary representational and abstract work.

FRED: Yeah, you might want to say—because we weren’t just representational.

MARGARET: It wasn’t just representational. So showing abstract as well.

FRED: Some of it was representational, as well, because you have to be able to—as a commercial guy, you have to be able to sell it, and in those days, you really couldn’t flat out—

MARGARET: Right. So I think this is great. Would either of you like to add anything at this point?

FRED: I can’t think of anything.
MARGARET: Perfect.

End of audio
43 minutes