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Press release

Eugene J. Martin. Paintings, drawings, collages

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This is the first exhibition in the country dedicated to the American artist Eugene J. Martin (1938–2005). Martin belongs to the generation of African-American artists that emerged after the Second World War, but he was distinguished by his lack of political engagement and his creative independence.

After a difficult childhood, Martin enrolled at the Corcoran School of Art and Design in Washington, D.C., in 1960. Becoming an artist was a clear vocation, regardless of his material hardships. He visited museums regularly and developed a passion for Cézanne, Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee and Miró, all of whom had a decisive influence on his work. His early figurative pieces evolved into what he called “satirical abstraction”: biomorphic and anthropomorphic creatures appeared within skilful compositions, always imbued with humour. He often drew on the street or in cafés, selling his works to passers-by or with the support of generous patrons.

In 1963, upon graduating, he definitively abandoned academic figuration. The following years were devoted to reflection and experimentation, developing a singular style influenced by modern art. His work is organised into clearly defined series: *Circle Drawings* (1969–1971) and *Oval Drawings* (1971–1974), where free forms are constrained within geometric structures, evoking Kandinsky and Picasso. These were followed by *Sculptural Drawings* (1974–1975) and *Mines Graphites* (1976–1978), populated with dreamlike creatures in geometric universes, and the *Bamboo Drawings* (1981–1983), which are poetic and humorous.

It is important to note that these works were created under precarious conditions, using small formats and inexpensive materials. From 1988 onwards, with his own studio, Martin worked in acrylic on canvas and larger formats, producing “heterochronic” collages and moving towards pure abstraction in the 1990s, where figures disappeared and were replaced by brightly coloured geometric elements. Despite suffering a stroke in 2001, he continued to work, with a more essential and liberated gesture.

His career was solitary, removed from schools and movements. Despite the dominance of Pop Art and Minimalism in the United States, Martin never abandoned his artistic vision nor considered his work to be political. His trajectory sits firmly within the context of 20th century African-American art, from the Harlem Renaissance to the civil rights movement, which he experienced firsthand, attending Martin Luther King’s speech in 1963. His work combines freedom, humour, and a sense of *joie de vivre*, regardless of material conditions or notions of success.

Cultural influences and dialogues are clear: the work of Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, as well as his fascination with Picasso, is evident in his exploration of collages, colour contrasts, and graphic compositions. Behind this stylistic diversity lies remarkable coherence, a constant spirit of inquiry, and technical mastery.

For the exhibition, the gallery has selected representative works from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s: oval drawings (1971–1973), graphite pencil drawings (1977–1978), bamboo pen ink drawings (1982), and “heterochronic” collages (1993–1997). The variety of techniques — ink, pencil, gouache, watercolour and collage — demonstrates the artist’s gestural freedom and his talent as a colourist.

Martin's work is held in prominent institutional collections across the United States, particularly in the South: Alexandria Museum of Art (Louisiana), Ogden Museum of Southern Art (New Orleans), Paul R. Jones Collection of African American Art (Newark, Delaware), Schomburg Center for Black Culture (New York), Stowitts Museum (California) and Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art (Georgia), as well as in private collections in America and Europe. It is time for Eugene J. Martin's work to be rediscovered by a wider audience, to appreciate the serene joy that each of his creations radiates.

BIOGRAPHY



Eugene James Martin was born on 24 July 1938 in Washington, D.C. His father, a travelling jazz musician, left the family home shortly after his birth. His mother died in 1942, soon after giving birth to his brother Jerry.

After moving between several foster families, Eugene was placed in a reform school at the age of six. There, surrounded by older adolescents, he endured violence, abuse and humiliation. In the late 1940s, he was adopted by a farming couple in Maryland. He helped on the farm, attended school, and was able to devote himself to his two passions: music and drawing. A brilliant musician (double bass and trombone), at the age of twenty Eugene considered pursuing a career in music, but he soon abandoned the idea, wishing to remain completely independent and not reliant on other members of a group.

Following a brief period in the Navy —from which he was honourably discharged due to his difficulty in following orders and his imaginative nature— he enrolled at the Corcoran School of Art and Design in Washington in 1960. There he received formal academic training and was praised by his instructors for his skill in portraiture and figure studies. During

this time he frequently visited the free museums of Washington, becoming particularly fascinated by Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee and Miró, whose work would have a decisive influence on his own artistic development.

He left the Corcoran School in 1963, determined to become an artist at any cost. This marked the beginning of over twenty years of precarious existence: Eugene worked on park benches or café terraces, quietly selling his drawings, sometimes with the support of generous patrons. When he had no accommodation, he stayed in building lobbies. Between 1978 and 1988 he lived with Marco Leonardi, a photographer friend. Their shared passions and complementary personalities created an atmosphere of joyful and fertile emulation.

In 1982, Eugene met Suzanne Frédéricq, a young Belgian student who had come to Washington to study biology. Their attraction was mutual. They married in 1988 and moved several times according to Suzanne's professional opportunities before settling permanently in Lafayette, Louisiana, in 1996. This marital happiness coincided with improved material circumstances, and the artist finally had his own studio.

They made several trips to Belgium, where Eugene was warmly welcomed by Suzanne's family. During their last visit in 2001, he suffered a stroke that left him with physical impairments. Nevertheless, he returned to work, though by December 2004 his health deteriorated rapidly, and he passed away on 1 January 2005.

Following his death, Suzanne Frédéricq, while developing a distinguished academic career, worked tirelessly to promote Eugene J. Martin's work among institutions and collectors.