



in the frame

by Caroline Durio

An Artist at His Work

A stroke hasn't slowed prodigious artist Eugene Joseph Martin, who continues to do his job — creating art.

If Beethoven can continue to create without hearing, if Matisse can continue to paint without being able to hold a brush, then so can I," asserts Eugene James Martin, 65, a painter and a two-year stroke survivor.

The left side of Martin's face attests to the glancing blow with mortality: His eyelid is barely open beneath the black felt fedora perched atop his graying head, while one tip of his mouth points downward as if in a frown. The right side of Martin's face belies his handicap; this eye is widely alert and this side of his mouth is pertly amicable.

"When you decide to become an artist, you take on the consequences," says the abstractionist. "I have the madness to do that."

If madness is an obsession, then Martin is its master.

His home bursts with his creative activity and the audacious hues that grace the surface of every wall in every room — including the bathrooms. Rows, five feet deep, of oil-painted canvas after canvas lean against a wall in his studio. Rubbermaid stackable drawers adorn another wall, brimming with pen-on-paper black-and-white designs. It would

take days to shuffle around and study each work of art.

Vivid colors dance around each other in a merry waltz on Martin's canvases. His subjects are fabulously abstract and often painstakingly rendered in amazing detail.

"I like humor in art, you know, whimsical," says Martin. One of his favorite paintings hangs in his bathroom and is titled *Falling Psychiatrist With Dog* (1992). The painting depicts an abstract man and dog balanced precariously on an edge in the act of falling, like a still-frame shot of a skydiver taking the plunge.

Martin says one of his favorite artists, and a personal inspiration to his own work, was Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), a Russian expressionist, known for his 1913 *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)* painting, which was one of the first to depict forms in an abstract perspective.

Kandinsky, often called the father of abstract paintings, can be seen as an influence in Martin's creations even though abstract "wasn't trendy a few years ago."

Other artists he admires are Paul Cézanne, Joan Miró and Paul Klee — just to name a few.

Collectors of Martin's art range from private owners to museums. The Munich



THE SCENE

Eugene James Martin's art is not exhibited in local galleries, but he is represented by Kendall Banks of Lafayette, who can be reached at 988-3376, or via e-mail at verg@bellsouth.net. His works have been exhibited at the Opelousas Museum of Art and the Zigler Museum in Jennings.

More information on the artist can be found on his Web site, <http://morayeel.louisiana.edu/ejMARTIN/ejMARTIN-artist.html>. You can also read the artist's life philosophy, recorded in 1985 in an honor's thesis from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, at <http://morayeel.louisiana.edu/ejMARTIN/inter-view.html>.

Photos by Brad Kemp/bkemp@theadvertiser.com



Five feet of paintings are stacked against the walls in Eugene Joseph Martin's home studio.

Museum of Modern Art exhibits several of Martin's pieces. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan met Martin years ago and was fascinated by the man. He, too, owns some of Martin's work.

"I produce and stay focused — that's my job," says Martin. "We lose focus real easy."

How long has he been focusing on producing art?

Martin attended the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., from 1960 to 1963 and, after 42 years, painting is still his passion. Born in the nation's capital in 1938, Martin was orphaned at the age of 5 when his mother died. He had a fondness for running away from the foster homes he was placed in and, at the age of 7, he was sent to reform school, where he was surrounded by insufferable 18-year-old bullies.

Martin then spent time on a farm, where he learned to take apart and rebuild tractor engines. When he was 20, Martin joined the Navy but was discharged early because, according to him, he "had too much imagination." Apparently, Martin was too much of a free thinker. After being honorably discharged, he attended Corcoran during the mornings and mopped floors at night to pay his tuition.

After leaving school, Martin was unable to support himself as an artist. But, as luck

would have it, he met someone who would benevolently aid him in his journey.

"People will help you along the way," says Martin. "I've met some wonderful people in my life, so my life's been full of magic."

Martin met Suzanne Fredericq, a Belgian biologist, in 1982 and married her in 1988. In 1996, they moved to Lafayette so Fredericq could take the position of biology professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Ever one to show her pride in her husband, Fredericq has her husband's Web site on her Louisiana.edu homepage.

When they visited Belgium in 2002, Martin suffered his stroke.

"You got to be a man," says Martin of continuing with painting after his near-miss with death. "What you do with your life is important."

What's important to Martin is to keep on doing what he said he knows he was meant to do — create art.

"An artist is like that," muses Martin. "He brings you into a new world, and you'll have new experiences. An artist helps to broaden your world. They bring us along in this world — that's the artist's job." ■

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