

Joyous explosion

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Unlike the relatively privileged life of Ocean Springs artist-naturalist Walter Anderson (1903-1965), black artist Eugene Martin (1938-2005) learned as a child to make art with his dreams because he had no tools to do so in reality.

He was able to study at the Corcoran School of Art (1960-1963) in Washington, D.C., by working nights as a janitor and, ultimately, became a professional fine arts painter.



COURTESY WALTER ANDERSON MUSEUM OF ART/

The late Eugene James Martin's modernist paintings and drawings will be on exhibit at Walter Anderson Museum of Art in Ocean Springs Saturday through Sept. 30.

[Eugene Martin art \(June 19\)](#)

Thirty-three of his paintings and drawings are featured in the new exhibition, "Eugene James Martin: Man of Color," that runs Saturday-Sept. 30 at the Walter Anderson Museum of Art in Ocean Springs. His widow and staunch supporter, Dr. Suzanne Fredericq, a Belgium native and professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, is expected to be a guest at the opening reception on Friday.

By age seven, Martin lived in a reform school with 18-year-olds because he had repeatedly run away from foster homes.

"His father was a jazz musician," said WAMA executive director Gayle Petty-Johnson, "and at the time his mother died when he was very, very young, his father was off doing a concert. When he returned, welfare had taken the children. Martin and his brother were separated for many years."

Martin talked about learning to control his dreams in a 1985 interview with Dean Howard King in "Seven American Artists," an honors essay at the University of North Carolina.

"Just before I'd fall asleep, I'd say what I wanted to dream about," he told King. "As a kid, I had a drive to create that was so great I had to find an outlet without using things. I had no things, so I had to use my mind. Otherwise, I might have been bananas. Then as I got older, I had paper. I'd paint and draw."

"His work is so joyous," Petty-Johnson said. "It just explodes with color and enthusiasm. He obviously doesn't have bitterness."

Parallels between Anderson and Martin focus on strength of shape and form

and color. While both often reduce figures to an economical one or two lines, Martin's style is modernist with touches of humor and Anderson's is expressionism that looks abstract at times and realistic at others.

Martin's art "... is very different for us," said Petty-Johnson. "It is a modernist show. We don't do that often."

Martin is best known for his complex mixed-media collages on paper, his often gently humorous pencil, pen and ink drawings and his paintings on paper and canvas that may incorporate whimsical allusions to animal, machine and structural imagery.

His work has been exhibited widely in Europe and is in permanent collections of museums around the world, from Munich, Germany, to New Orleans, California and New York.