

In Memoriam  
**Eugene James Martin**

July 24, 1938 (Washington D.C.) -January 1st, 2005 (Lafayette, Louisiana)



The artist Eugene Martin at work in his studio.

A native of Washington D.C., the late visual artist Eugene Martin became a resident of Lafayette, Louisiana, from 1996 until January 1st, 2005, when he peacefully died at the age of 66 from complications of a stroke and brain hemorrhage suffered in 2001. Even though the stroke left him partly paralyzed, he continued to paint until the very end.

Eugene's art was beyond category. He did not belong to any school or art movement, remaining an individualist and loner throughout his life. For him painting was a spiritual, introspective, primordial, and uncompromising creative act. After attending the Corcoran School of Arts from 1960-1963, he became a full-time artist, with artistic integrity his only guide. He briefly lived in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, from 1990-1994, returned to Washington DC, and in 1996 moved to Lafayette, Louisiana with his wife, a biologist, whom he married in 1988. His works of art can be found in numerous private art collections throughout the world, and are included in the permanent collection of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans and the Munich Museum of Modern Art.

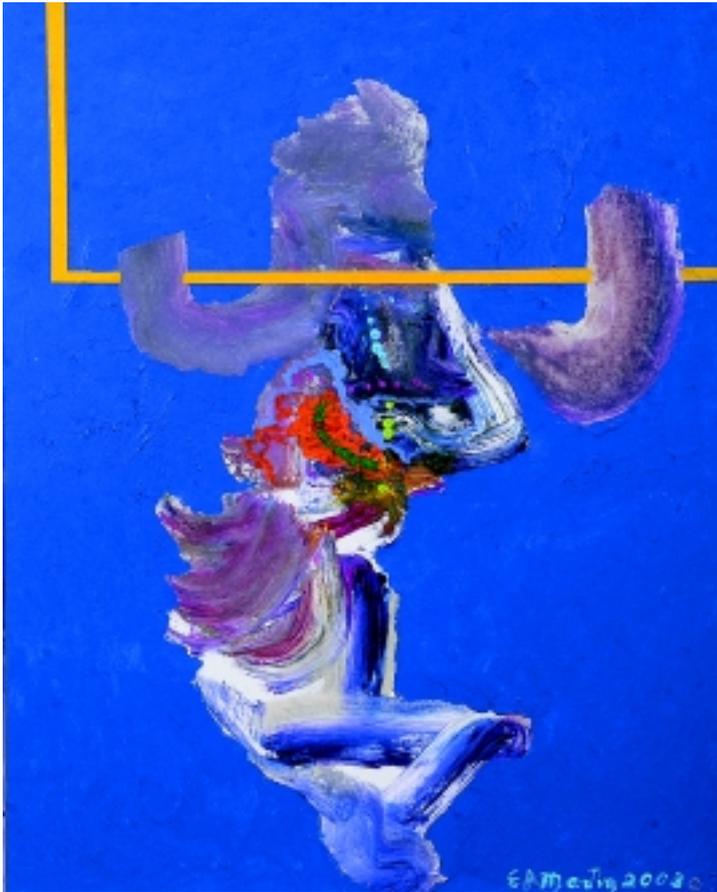
Of his art, Eugene Martin has said: "There are opposing forces in all living things. My work reflects this and stirs up a contrast of emotions in the viewer...

perception versus annoyance. There is the obvious and there is that which defies explanation. To the viewer who has reached that level of awareness, my work is no longer abstract, but very real". Martin's personal, often gently humorous works may incorporate whimsical allusions to animal and machine among areas of pure abstraction, but his art is difficult to classify.

The Belgian Art historian, Bruno Fornari, wrote in the catalogue of Martin's 1990 Ghent exhibit: "Approaching Eugene Martin's art objectively is not an easy undertaking. First, one has to dispose of a whole series of prejudices on art and color; only then can one, step by step and without too much thought, be seduced by the joyful and tender colors, the many abundant forms. The artist, who mainly taught himself, refuses to ponder on the reasons behind the creative impulse. To him, painting is truth to which he joyfully sacrifices every moment of the day. These drawings and canvasses are the creations of a refined artist who loves broad and full forms, contrasting colors as only seen in dreams. Confronted with this pleasant, sometimes on purpose ingenious art, one tends to forget the strength it takes the artist to blacken or fill the many blank planes with color, day after day, allowing nothing

to interfere with this incessant labor. His compositions are nourished with a suite of elements: to a strictly constructed background he adds strictly ornamental motifs, small, ironically simplified people, elements close to Miró or Jawlenski. For Eugene Martin, these are just a wink, a reference that surrealist painters themselves would not have forsaken. His tender irony, his acid colors mixed with delicately shaded pastel tints, are proof of his personality. His unending creative verve, never ruined by repetition, attests to his originality. To analyze his creations, however, would be treason. Watching Eugene Martin paint, one understands that this is all it takes to make him, and us, happy".

And Fornari again in a 1996 article: "Martin always had painting in his blood. The black and white ink drawings, that we discovered nearly ten years ago, formed the first landmarks of a tirelessly persevering quest. Already then was Eugene Martin situated outside the contemporary art movements, having retained only a constructed abstraction, broken by the apparition of a few small anecdotal and geometrical figures. An avant-garde specialist could better define this marginality, but also the borrowing of diverse contemporary expressions — testimony that an artist



Andy ate too much, 2002 Acrylic on canvas 30" x 24"



Untitled, 2002 Acrylic on canvas 30" x 24"

never remains indifferent to the world around him. Then, color little by little invaded the geometrical forms, gouache replaced ink and pencil, subtle harmonies of reserved tones became combined, all attesting to the alchemical dimension of an artist whose art, as new philosophical stone, isn't created to make gold, but to attain a state of equilibrium, of peace within one-self. Martin has remained fascinated by constructed abstraction - all his creation bears witness to it, but from now onwards his vast monochrome ranges become more and more gnawed at by multiple lyrical forms that insidiously take place at the heart of the canvas. A new freedom isn't solely found in the size of the more recent works but also in their color. Instead of restrained tones, there are now interplays of color that are more aggressively filled with light. The rupture between the tones is reinforced: an acid yellow now finds itself next to a mellow purple, like the voice of Billy Holliday; a winy red juxtaposes the turquoise of the southern seas. Matter followed a similar evolution - colored planes, formerly smooth as mirrors, now are thickened and separated by wide open spaces. Beads of colored points, and ribbons painted by a paintbrush barely laden with paint, play within the uniform background and serve as a transition to the lyrical forms consisting of mixed tones executed with a larger brush. Thus, in the midst of Eugene Martin's creations, geometrical structures and informal organisms are in a playful war, in a game in which the two protagonists remain in equilibrium, where

colors and forms form a harmonious set next to full or degraded tones. Maybe it is here, in a universe where everything has found its right place and in which the artist and his work coexist without clashes or complacencies, that best expresses the durability of Art.

More recently, in a 2005 pamphlet announcing the "Ornithology" exhibit, Brian Guidry, curator of Galérie Lafayette, muses: "Eugene told me of his most recent works that he was trying to do with paint what you are not supposed to do. I was sort of shocked! And it was true. These canvasses embody an awkward coexistence of palpitant cogency with incongruent conviction: vibrant fields of sticky colors, jelled against cool geometric shapes, which overlay calico brush strokes and brindled meanderings. Some of the works are very complex while others are pure autonomic marks similar to Chinese characters or hieroglyphs. They are truly brave paintings with incredible sophistication and shrewdness."

Likewise, Thomas Stork understood the essence of Eugene Martin's art: "As have the Chinese and English languages, Eugene has stripped his grammar to the naked bone, sinewed the simple frame, and created a rich vocabulary of meaning, sight and emotion. Yet, always there is discipline". And Eugene to respond: "If you seek just a little truth, you should not ignore abstract forms, the basis from which all short-lived experiences we call reality spring". What greater legacy can an artist leave behind?

For more information, Eugene Martin's website can be accessed at:  
<http://morayee.louisiana.edu/ejMARTIN/ejMARTIN-artist.html>

Untitled, 2002 Acrylic on canvas 30" x 24"

