

**INSIDE: Acadiana's most
complete list of things to do.**

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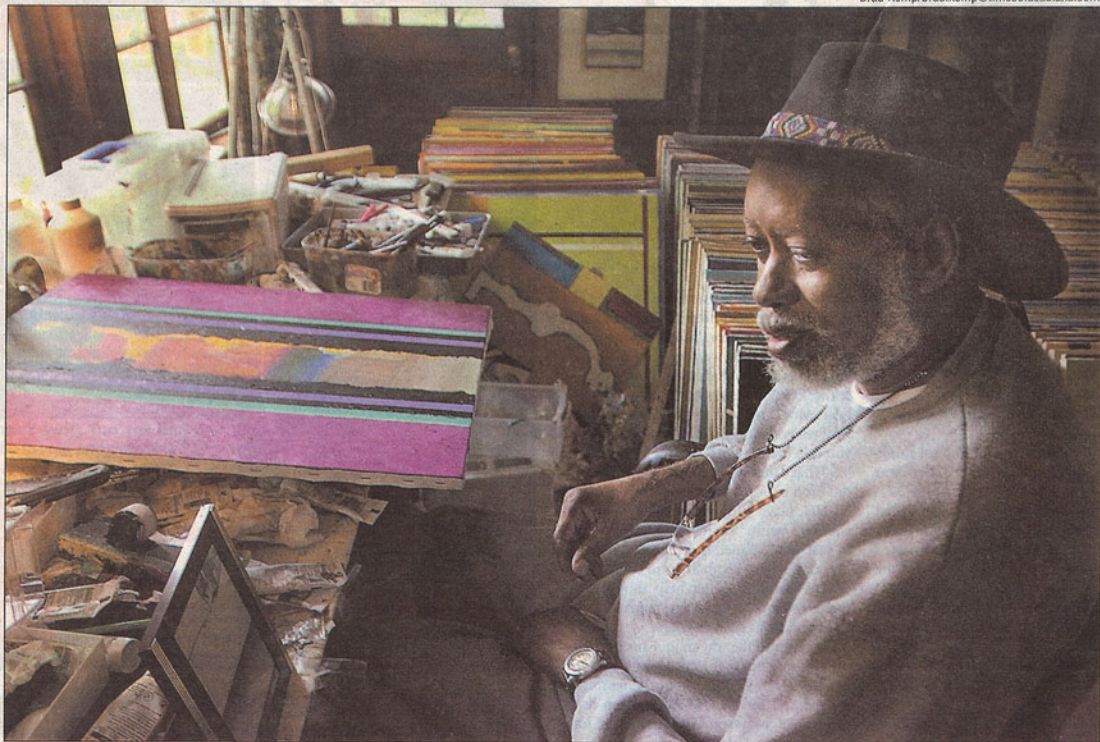
THE TIMES

O F A C A D I A N A

Requiem in Abstract

**Fame was never a priority
for Eugene Martin.**





Eugene Martin took a brief pause from his work for this May 2004 photograph.



'Hot Rod Shirley' by Eugene Martin

Fame

was never a priority
for Eugene Martin

By Don Allen

The first thing that strikes you is the color. Vibrant reds, piercing yellows, almost every imaginable shade in a brightly imaginative and obviously man-made rainbow. It's as if someone asked the question, "Why can't a rainbow look like this?" — and then decided it could.

Requiem in Abstract

The paintings are everywhere.

They are on every wall in every room, and there are a lot of rooms. They're stacked on the floor, hundreds of them. Within the walls of the house on West St. Mary Boulevard in Lafayette is the work of a lifetime, the creations of an artist who spent virtually every minute of a career that spanned almost half a century either painting or thinking about painting.

For Eugene Martin, there was nothing else.

Only the canvass.

Only his art.

Eugene Martin died at his home on New Year's Day. He had suffered a stroke two years ago, and his wife believes his body just wore out. The Washington, D.C., native was 68-years old when he died, and he leaves behind a curious legacy. Few people in the local art community are familiar with his work. Martin spent most of his life in the Northeast. He moved to Lafayette less than nine years ago when his wife of more than 17 years, Suzanne Fredericq, was hired as an assistant professor in the biology department at the University of Louisiana.

A native of Belgium and 20 years younger than her husband, Fredericq has traveled around the world to study, of all things, seaweed. But for the artist and the biologist, it was love at first sight and living proof that opposites attract.

"He didn't much care where we lived because he could paint anywhere," she says. "He just made up his mind at the age of 20 that even if he starved, he was going to be an artist."

For a while, it looked like he would accomplish both. In 1982, Fredericq met Martin in Washington, D.C., at a time when Eugene was considered to be an "artist in residence." In his case, the expression was to be taken literally. Fredericq says Martin would stay with friends because he didn't have a residence of his own. Apparently, he couldn't be bothered with actually selling some of his work to earn the money to rent an apartment.

"He always thought that if you're starving, then

you're starving. He wasn't trying to do that, but he wouldn't do anything to compromise his art. He was always a loner, and he never liked to join. And because of that, he never got his big break.

"Eugene had no interest in marketing himself because he didn't have time for anything except painting," claims Fredericq. "He didn't concern himself if people saw his work or not. Eugene figured they would see it eventually, and besides, that was their problem, not his," says Fredericq. "And the 60s were difficult because he was expected to produce 'black art,' and he wasn't into that. He wanted to be an artist, not a black artist. And so he was considered politically incorrect and never moved in the right circles to become famous."

Almost famous? His paintings hang in the collections of the Munich Museum of Modern Art and Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Martin's abstracts have been displayed in countless major cities around the world, but it took the hiring of an agent to get a showing locally.

"I met him at Bella Luna during an art show for my wife, Vergie," says Kendall Banks, who took Martin on as a client last year. "They approached us because they saw the way Vergie's career had grown and invited us to their home

to look at his work. We fell in love with it because it was colorful and full of life. It was opposite of Vergie's work because it was abstract, although much on the same level because they both shared the same color and movement."

Banks helped Martin set up his first show at Jefferson Street Market in downtown Lafayette, where Brian Guidry has been curator for more than two years.

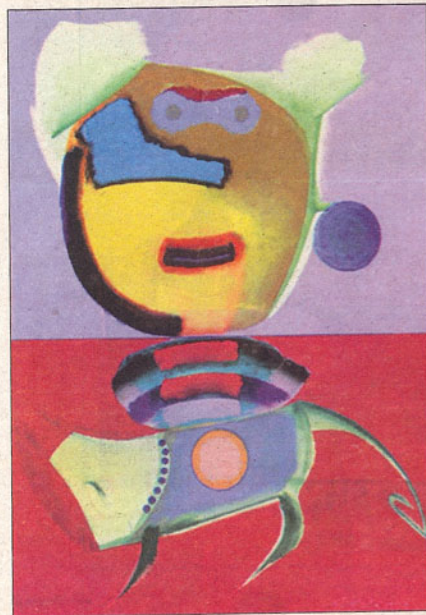
"I visited him at his home and studio about a year ago and was impressed particularly with the quantity of work," remembers Guidry. "I think his work comes from the heart, and there's something very essential about it and very true to who he was. When we exhibited him (Oct.-Nov.), most everyone loved it. A couple of people were uncertain about some of the work,



Martin moved to Lafayette in 1995 with his wife Suzanne Fredericq (left).



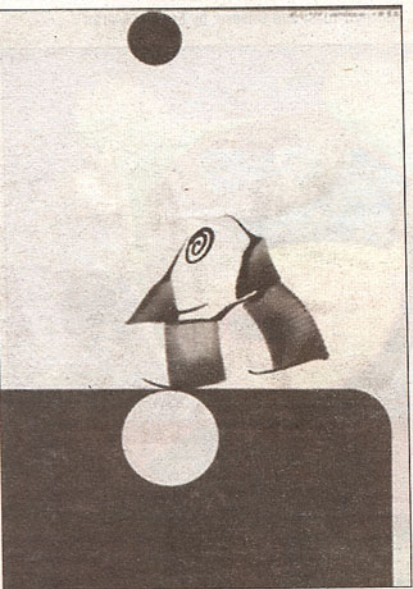
'Burned Toast and Cheese' by Eugene Martin



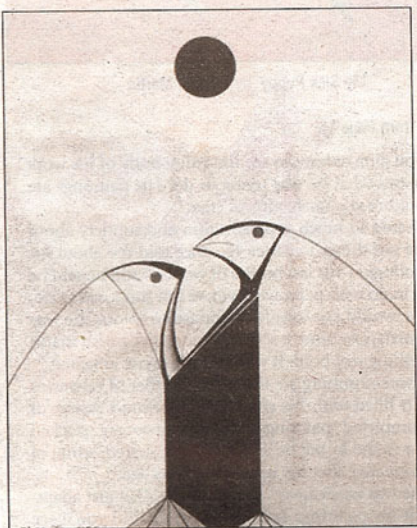
'My Sick Puppy' by Eugene Martin



Martin's home is filled with the vast body of his work.



'Logman' by Eugene Martin



'Teobirds' by Eugene Martin

because you almost have to see the entire body of his work to understand what he was trying to do. His paintings are very, I wouldn't say harsh, almost crass.

"But there's so much sophistication and subtlety about the way he put things together. He once told me about his newer paintings — his last bodies of work — and he said he was trying to do with paint what you're not supposed to do. The way he would put together contrasting colors, the way he would juxtapose almost scratchy, indecisive brush marks with something real bold. It was actually pretty amazing."

Even more numbing are the sheer number of canvasses that Martin filled with his colorful and abstract vision of reality. Completed paintings and drawings are stacked everywhere in the home he and Fredericq shared, some of them even created after his stroke two years ago.

"Eugene was so creative," says Suzanne. "He just adapted. Look at his paintings (after the stroke), and you'll see that they're a little looser, freer."


Martin spent a lot of time adapting. In and out of foster homes after his mother died in 1943, Martin was placed in a reform school at the age of 5. He spent 15 years on a farm and eventually worked as a janitor while he attended the Corcoran School of Art and Design in Washington. His work has been exhibited nationally in Washington, North Carolina and New York, and his international exhibitions include Belgium and France. Today, his agent says Martin's originals sell from \$450 to \$125,000.

Meanwhile 83 of Martin's paintings have been hung at Clementine's in New Iberia in preparation for a retrospective showing beginning February 4. More of his work will be displayed at the Acadiana Center for the Arts beginning Feb. 12, and exhibitions are being discussed for the Louisiana State Museum and Louisiana State University.

"Time just ran out on Eugene," says Banks. "But we have a lot of stuff still in the making that was going to make him known in this area. He's already known throughout other parts of the world, just at a different level than most other

people and artists because of the circles that he and his wife moved in. Compared to other states, we're in another world here in Louisiana. But if an artist doesn't know how to get his art into the right people's hands, nobody will know. Unfortunately, just when I started to market Eugene, he had health problems."

The dynamic is nothing new. History books are filled with the names of accomplished artisans who didn't become famous until after they were gone.

"That's life," says Suzanne. "That's the way it's always been. But he knew that, and he couldn't be bothered by that. But when we had that show at Jefferson Street Market and the young people had a chance to see his work and were making a fuss over his art, he saw that. And I think that gave him a lot of pleasure." 

Don Allen is a staff writer with *The Times*. E-mail him at ddallen@gannett.com. Want to share with a friend? E-mail it from our Web site, www.timesofacadiana.com.