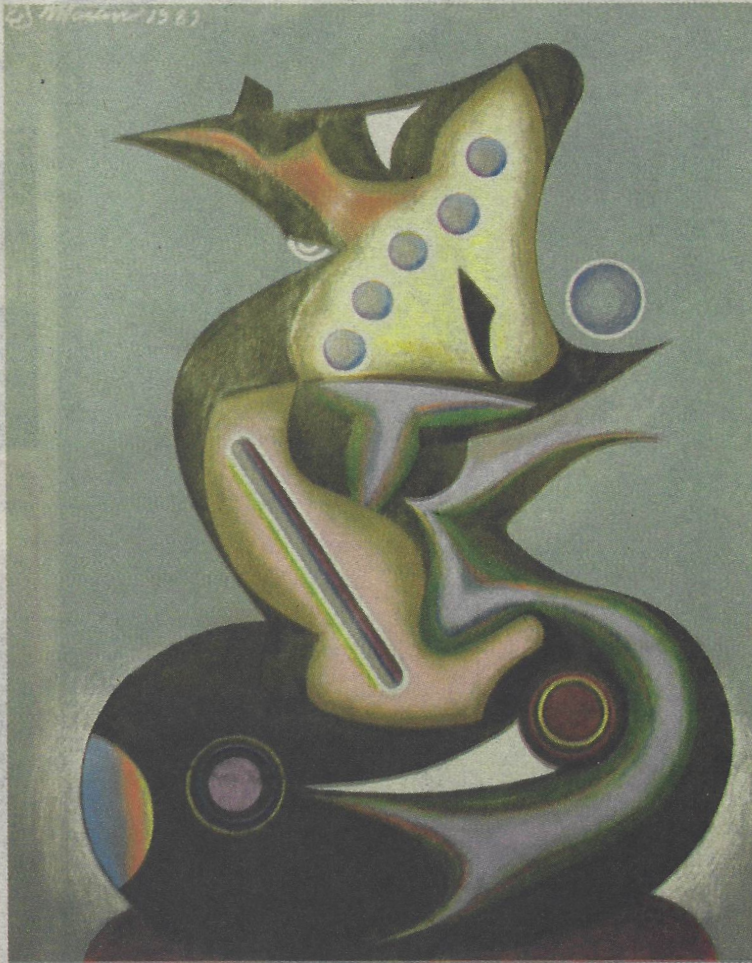




# At the Ohr-O'Keefe

## *Eugene Martin: A Great Concept/1E*

SUNDAY, JUNE 24, 2012



"A Great Concept" by Eugene Martin



Eugene Martin works at his desk.

## 'A Great Concept'

*Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art showing works by Eugene Martin*

By **Thomas B. Harrison**

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Architect Frank Gehry famously said he wanted the buildings of the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art to "dance with the trees."

Another kind of dance is taking place inside, where the artwork of Eugene Martin has transformed the Gallery of African-American Art into a "visual performance" space. As the title of the exhibit suggests, it is "A Great Concept." (See information box)

That is the assessment of the artist's widow, Suzanne Fredericq, Ph.D., who is impressed with the exhibit of her late husband's artwork — and with the Ohr-O'Keefe.

"I love it," she says by long distance. "It's so playful, so witty and full of humor and wonder. ... It's all about rhythm, and movement and change, and I think it's extraordinary. You go there and it's an enchantment."

"The Art of Eugene Martin: A Great Concept" consists of 38 works that are predominately acrylic on canvas. Other media represented are oil on canvas, graphite on paper, collage, mixed media, colored pencil on paper, pen and ink, and brown and blue ink on paper, applied with a bamboo reed stick pen.

Fredericq, who teaches biology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, says the gallery complements the artwork, and vice versa.

"I think it really brings out the architecture, and the architecture really brings out the best of the paintings," she says. "It's a real symbiosis, I think, when you go there — and very uplifting, very positive. Eugene was a very positive man."

She admits she has her favorites among her husband's artworks, but the list changes.

"For me, great art is different every time you look at it," she says. "That's what I see in Eugene's art. He was such a strong artist, and very much a loner. Nobody was going to influence him. I never even tried. He loved his art. He had to do it. It was like breathing. It kept him young, open and sweet in his way of thinking."





"Mean and Green" by Eugene Martin

## EUGENE MARTIN AT OOMA

**WHAT:** "The Art of Eugene Martin: A Great Concept"

**WHEN:** through Dec. 1

**WHERE:** Beau Rivage Resort & Casino Gallery/Gallery of African-American Art at Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, 386 Beach Blvd., Biloxi, Miss.

**RECEPTION:** 5:30-8 p.m. July 12; admission is free and open to the public.

**NOTE:** Martin (1938-2005) was born in Washington, D.C., but spent the last nine years of his life in Lafayette, La., painting in his studio.

**ALSO ON VIEW:** "Geoff Mitchell: Chaos at the Confessional," through Nov. 24 in the IP Casino Resort Spa Gallery; and "Trailer McQuilkin: An Uncommon Beauty," through Nov. 24 in the Mississippi Sound Welcome Center.

**HOURS:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

**ADMISSION:** \$10 adults; \$8 seniors 60 and older, AAA and military with I.D.; \$5 students ages 6-17; free for ages 5 and younger.

**INFO:** 228-374-5547 or [www.georgeohr.org](http://www.georgeohr.org)

"He was one of those artists who never knew what would come out of a painting when he started," Fredericq says. "He didn't plan anything. He would set his ego aside and somehow his imagination flowed. He was always surprised, too, with what he came out with because he was so open to it. He never had any creative blocks because he let himself loose and was open to whatever. Nothing externally influenced him; it came from within."

Denny Mecham, executive director of the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, says Martin's work has two distinct personas: "A purist's love of brilliant, saturated color and strong patterns which integrate the rhythms of jazz," she says, "and the dark, monochromatic tones of his edgier, more narrative drawings and washes which are alternately complex, playful, caustic and mysterious."

Barbara Ross, curator of collections for the museum, says Martin's artistic strength was "his ability to make playful objects from his imagination, often not giving them a title until he saw the finished product."

"Also, his use rich color is evident, as is his incorporation of human, animal and geometric shapes."

In more than 40 years devoted to art, Eugene James Martin (1938-2005) created an extensive body of work. He is best known for imaginative, complex, mixed media collages, humorous pencil, pen-and-ink drawings, and paintings on paper and canvas. His work often incorporates whimsical allusions to animal, machine and structural imagery among areas of pure, constructed, biomorphic or disciplined lyrical abstraction.

Martin referred to his works that straddled abstraction and representation "satirical abstracts."

His paintings feature bands of playful colors and uncomplicated shapes that form the base upon which he constructs more complex figures. Circles recur throughout his work, reminiscent of the faces and eyes of humans and animals. Images of "hats" and "bowties" are also recurring images, juxtaposed with areas of bold stripes.

Ross says Martin's work "is colorful, whimsical, geometric and above all, just plain fun."

"His paintings, collages and pen-and-ink works are enjoyed by visitors of all ages," she says. "Upon visiting the home in Lafayette, La., where Martin lived with his wife, Suzanne Fredericq, (OOMA director) Denny Mecham and I found ourselves in the midst of room after room full of delightful art that we felt must be shared."

Ross says her favorite pieces in the Eugene Martin exhibit are the large (60-by-84-inch) acrylic on canvas titled "The Fall of Icarus" because of its scale and the story behind the title.

"I also love the small, whimsical, untitled abstracts painted with brown ink on paper, using a bamboo reed stick pen, because they show his precision and mastery over the medium," she says.

Martin was born on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. His father was a traveling jazz musician, according to biographical material. After Martin's mother died in 1942, he and his brother entered the foster care system. Martin tried to run away several times and was placed in reform school at age 6.

He spent the remainder of his childhood with a foster family on a farm in Clarksburg, Md. While living on the farm he drew realistic portraits and nature scenes.





"Too Slippery" by Eugene Martin



"Wheeling Kate" by Eugene Martin



## Martin

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He also loved music and learned to play upright bass, thunder bass and slide trombone. He played in a local rhythm and blues group called the Nutones, Martin's bio states.

After high school, Martin was unsure about whether to become a full-time musician or a visual artist, but he opted for art because painting and drawing better suited his temperament as a loner. He attended day sessions at the Corcoran School of Art, 1960-63, and worked at night as a janitor for the Montgomery County School Board.

From 1963 until 1988, Martin lived in Washington in group houses, with friends, and was sometimes homeless. He continued to create art according to his circumstances: graphite and pen and ink drawings on paper in libraries; outside parks; in airports. He drew on napkins when he was too poor to afford materials.

Martin was invited to stay for long periods in the homes of friends Thomas Stark, Al Stern, Isabel Taylor

and Marco Leonardi. When he had access to studio space, he created increasingly elaborate mixed-media artworks on paper and oil paintings. Martin occasionally participated in group shows, and the Munich Museum of Modern Art acquired several of his works, the news release states.

Martin became a painter who considered artistic integrity his guide and he did not follow a particular school or movement. As an artist, he remained an individualist whose art defies categorization.

In 1982 he met Suzanne Fredericq, a native of Belgium, who came to the United States to study biology. They married in 1988 and moved to Chapel Hill, N.C., where they lived from 1990 until 1994. During those years Martin was invited to show his work in solo exhibitions at Duke University and the Horace Williams House, according to his biography.

Bonnie and David Hobbs invited him to participate in group exhibitions at Fridholm Fine Arts in Asheville, N.C. There was a solo exhibition of his work at the Mich-

el Rooryck Gallery in Ghent, Belgium.

Martin returned to Washington, D.C., for two years before moving in 1996 to Lafayette, La., where Fredericq is a member of the biology faculty at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. In December 2001, while visiting Belgium, the artist suffered a brain hemorrhage and a stroke. Upon returning to Lafayette, he underwent extensive physical therapy.

He resumed creating art in the studio in his home until his death Jan. 1, 2005. Fredericq says her husband maintained a positive outlook despite his declining health.

"Even when he was sick at the end, I never heard him complain," she says. "I think he was so free, he was the freest person. ... I never heard him much talk about the past. He was a person of now — and of eternity, I think. He was really wonderful, and I just loved my life with him."

*Information from the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art was used in this report.*