

# the ART ASSASSIN volume 2

interview portraits by qi peng

## ASSASSINATION: Suzanne Fredericq, Researcher of Red Algae Systematics, Biology Professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and Spouse of Eugene James Martin, Artist

[with one comment](#)

Suzanne Fredericq has been a most wonderful friend and supportive of this series of interview portraits. I would like to acknowledge this as our talk has a profound dimension that bridges time and distance. She is a stronger supporter of contemporary art as well as one of the foremost researchers into [red algae systematics](#) and a teaching position at the Department of Biology at the [University of Louisiana at Lafayette](#). She is the spouse of the former [Eugene James Martin](#), who was one of the most important [African-American abstract artists](#). Mr. Martin had many shows ranging from the awesome [Walter Anderson Museum](#) to the prestigious [Acadiana Center for the Arts](#).

Martin's artwork reflects a strongly [modernist](#) tradition in its hybrid combination of [figurative](#) and [abstract](#) elements. Adding a dash of private humor and a broad gamut of emotions ranging from [comedy](#) to [tragedy](#), the artist has been consumed by a sense of his passionate drive to create these ideas like a [ballet](#) dancer drawing out forms from the gradually shifting limbs. He was rather prolific and Ms. Fredericq has been very supportive of his work during the decades of his studio practice. I feel honored to be able to talk with Suzanne with her signature graceful humor on a wide range of subjects ranging from [algae](#) to biology to the nature of abstraction in art to Eugene Martin to [marriage](#). This will provide a solid view into the daily practice of painting and how contemporary art can be incorporated into our practical, everyday lives. Art is a daily bread of our existence.



Photograph of Suzanne Fredericq in Belize. Courtesy of Facebook and Chip Clark.



Photograph of Eugene James Martin working in his studio. Courtesy of website at <http://morayee.louisiana.edu/ejMARTIN/ejMARTIN-artist.html>.

If you have any questions about Fredericq's biological studies, [Cajun food](#) and [culture](#), or Martin's brilliant artwork ranging from paintings to works on paper, feel free to contact her at [sfredericq@yahoo.com](mailto:sfredericq@yahoo.com).

So here are THE ART ASSASSIN's relevatory details of the "assassination":

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Qi Peng 09

qi peng: To start off on a lighter note, what are some of your favorite artists, books, television shows, sports, art magazines, toys, movies, and other cultural artifacts that you wish to share with your fans of your work here? Do you have any recent galleries or exhibitions that you have seen and would recommend to us? What things in those shows inspired your artistic eye and tastes?

Suzanne Fredericq: If there are fans of my artworks out there, these works surely ought to be imaginary, and the fans as well, since I'm not an artist but a biologist. What's not imaginary though, but very real, is that I have so many favorite artists, spanning every imaginable period and medium. Too many to list here, but besides Eugene J. Martin, a top favorite would have to include this genius who was the first to pick up a stick, dip it into some pigments, apply it to a rock, and with a stroke of the hand start these prehistoric cave paintings in [Lascaux](#) — as a reminder of what's so primordial and universal about the human drive to create, to connect, to reach out. You'd also find in my Imaginary Museum [Piero della Francesca](#), for all his contained interiority; [Tintoretto](#) and [Rubens](#), for all their exuberance and dynamism; [Rogier van der Weyden](#) and [Hugo van der Goes](#), for all their humanity; [Bob Thompson](#), for all his boldness; [Bill Traylor](#), for all his wonder; [Giuseppe Arcimboldo](#), for all his whimsy; [Helen Frankenthaler](#) and [Nicolas de Staël](#), for all their longing; [Franz Kline](#), for all his lyricism, achieved with just a few black strokes.

Sculptors I'm especially drawn to are [Willie Cole](#), [Joel Shapiro](#), [Martin Puryear](#), [Martin Payton](#), [Jerry Harris](#) — all for their subtle wit and the way they make the heavy look so light. I'm also enthralled with the contrast, the juxtaposition of the rough and the polished, such as [Michelangelo's Medici Chapel](#) in [Florence](#). So powerful, so perfect. With photography, I'm partial to the great [Czech](#) school of avant-garde photography, especially [Frantisek Drtikol](#), and to the black and white surrealist photography of [Grete Stern](#) and of [Chema Madoz](#) today. I melt in front of photographs of [Robert Doisneau](#) and of [Marco Leonardj](#), an unknown artist. In new media, the work of [Christina McPhee](#) is truly astounding, the way she blends the fragility of the natural with the catastrophic through her fractured or overlapping photographic panels.

Right now, I'm rereading "[Belle du Seigneur](#)" ("Her Lover"), [Albert Cohen's](#) masterpiece. Books that have profoundly marked the way I think and see things include the works by [Suzanne Lilar](#), my grandmother, ranging from her essays, theater, philosophical criticism, everything.

I enjoy watching the political pundit shows Sunday mornings. Also [Reno 911!](#), [Jon Stewart](#), and [Stephen Colbert](#). I must admit that since I left the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) and while there was a dyed-in-the-wool [Tarheel](#), I haven't watched college basketball as much as I did in the past. Of the art magazines, I get and "leaf through" [ArtNews](#), [Art in America](#), [Artforum](#) and [Art+Auction](#), for a general idea of what's being talked about with regard to matters of contemporary and other art.

I haven't really played with toys in a long time, except for playing with a camera to make amateur video clips that I post on youtube. I maintain three sites, [one dedicated to Eugene James Martin](#), [one to seaweeds and natural history](#), and [one to Suzanne Lilar](#): [youtube.com/nemastoma](#), [youtube.com/nemastoma2](#), [youtube.com/nemastoma3](#).

I love classic cinema, [film noir](#), the great Italians — especially [Visconti](#), [De Sica](#), [Antonioni](#), the movies by [André Delvaux](#). Also the postwar British cinema that was so experimental but fell out of favor when the [French New Wave](#) displaced it. I'm thinking of [Losey's "The Servant"](#) or [Basil Dearden's "Victim,"](#) two films with [Dirk Bogarde](#) in the leading role. Also [Terence Rattigan's "The Browning Version."](#) All astonishing, dark, complex psychological dramas.

When I last visited [New York](#) for a weekend in February, I thoroughly enjoyed the [Bonnard exhibit at the Met](#). Never fail to visit the [Neue Galerie](#) and [Klimt's Adèle](#) — one of the most sensual, joyful paintings there is. Saw the [Calder exhibit at the Whitney](#) and especially liked his very early [mobiles](#), when they hadn't yet become as slick and predictable as those from later years. Was more impressed with the drawings of [Marlene Dumas](#) at [MoMA](#) than I thought I would be. Loved marching in and out of galleries in [Chelsea](#) with [John Haber](#). Both the [Manzoni retrospective at Gagosian](#) and the [Fred Sandback exhibit at Zwirner & Wirth](#) were an eye opener.

A local exhibit I recently attended was of [Troy Dugas's](#) stunning [assemblages](#) made of vintage product labels at the [Arthur Roger Gallery](#) in [New Orleans](#). I always enjoy seeing the latest paintings and installations by [Brian Guidry](#), mixed media works by [Stephanie Patton](#) and [Shawne Major](#), or drawings by [Ralph Bourque](#). All highly recommended. What I like so much about these artists is the renewed sense of surprise every time I look at their art. There are so many talented artists in and around [Lafayette](#).

qi peng: You are the wife of the artist Eugene Martin who was one of the most prominent African-American abstract artists. Could you describe him as well as his work for the readers who may not be familiar with his legacy? What was life like being the spouse of a prominent artist?

Suzanne Fredericq: Eugene was the most extra-ordinary man and artist. And also the funniest, the most profound, the most sincere, the wisest, the most courageous, the most loving, the gentlest, the strongest. There are not enough hyperboles in our vocabulary to come close to express what he meant to me. Life with Eugene, just being near Eugene, was pure bliss, day in, day out.

In art as in life, Eugene would approach everything from a fresh, very personal point of view. I never heard him utter a single platitude. Perhaps more than anything, he loved to think. Sit quietly in a chair and just think, and let his thoughts sort themselves out. And this freed his mind to view different angles, different alternatives to any given problem, artistic or otherwise, before dealing with it, consciously or unconsciously. He abhorred dogmas, being pigeonholed, categorizations of any kind. He was the freest of men. And this freedom, this openness, this trusting of life comes out in all aspects of his art. He would always push his creation to the limit, always try to go further and further, improve it until he couldn't add anything more to it. Then he would back off and, when satisfied, sign the work. He only titled his pieces – reluctantly – when they needed to be included in an exhibit. When he had the space and could spread out, he liked to work on different pieces at one time.

Eugene started out doing [realism](#). While in foster care on a farm in [Maryland](#), he would draw farm animals but also build sheds and barns or put together tractors. He was equally talented as a musician and played the [bass](#) and the [slide trombone](#) in a R&B band. At one point he felt he had to decide between becoming a full-time musician or a visual artist. He chose to be a painter, as it better suited his temperament of a loner. As a painter, he could make his own rules, break his own rules, and not have to depend on the other people in the band. He attended the [Corcoran School of the Arts](#) in [Washington D.C.](#), his hometown, in the early 1960's. Stayed there for about three years until he learned everything there was to learn from the visual arts curriculum. From the moment an art instructor challenged him to expand beyond realism and into abstraction, he never looked back, never made another realistic portrait or landscape again. The break was irreversible. He now had to look within himself for inspiration.

Eugene has always been a very proud man. Very stubborn as well in the sense that he wasn't going to kowtow to anyone. It took a lot of courage for him to do this as he missed out on exhibition opportunities like that. I admired him so much for it. In his youth, in both segregated D.C. and Maryland, he lived through some of the worst humiliation a human being can go through, was beaten, abused and anything under the sun you can imagine, so he wasn't going to take crap from anybody, and he never did. He was not confrontational at all, but if he was not pleased with something, he would just walk away. And thus he walked away from several potential career opportunities in his life. He always had my fullest support in absolutely anything he did, and that was all that mattered to him.

qi peng: What were Mr. Martin's tastes? Did you have similar hobbies and preferences in art between the both of you? What was a typical day for his work schedule? You are a professor of biology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. What is your work schedule there like and how did it mesh with Mr. Martin's studio time?

Suzanne Fredericq: It's funny, I'm the scientist and he the artist. But for relaxation, I would go out and buy ArtNews and keep up with what's going on in the artworld, and he would go out and buy [Popular Mechanics](#), [Popular Science](#), and magazines highlighting the latest technological gadgets. He especially was intrigued with current research in [astronomy](#), and loved to watch [documentaries](#) about [planets](#) and the origin of the [universe](#). We really cross-complemented one another in our interests and also in temperament. Whereas I tend to more impulsive and instinctive in my approach to life, he wouldn't rush into making decisions the way I might, and he always wanted to sleep over a problem or decision before acting upon it.

Eugene would paint and draw with the radio, CD player or the TV turned on in the background. His taste in music was very eclectic and he liked all types of music. He had a sentimental fondness for [Paganini](#) and the [waltzes](#) of [Johann Strauss](#). He loved the great energetic [bluesmen](#) like [Albert King](#), [Albert Collins](#), [Little Milton](#); [R&B](#); and the [soul music](#) of [Sam Cooke](#). He also got a kick from listening to some of the high-octane gospel preachers like the [Rev. F.C. Barnes](#) and [Luther Barnes](#). The [Modern Jazz Quartet](#) was one of his favorite [jazz](#) groups, along with the [McCoy Tyner](#) trio. The first gift he ever gave me when we met in 1982 was the [audiocassette](#) "Don't mess with my Tu Tu" -a [Zydeco](#) tune played by [Buckwheat Zydeco](#), a native of Lafayette. Little did we know at the time we would end up here fourteen years later, in the heart of Cajun and Zydeco country!

I so admired and loved how fully dedicated he was to his art, and he admired and loved how fully dedicated I was to my research in seaweed systematics. There was thus never any friction between us as is so common in couples in which one partner feels professionally frustrated or emotionally neglected, because both our emotional and professional needs were fulfilled.

Eugene was always quite flexible in his work habits; he said he was at his sharpest mentally in the morning, so that's when he

would do most of his creative work. But he would basically go in and out of his studio all day long, which, wherever we lived, was a room or area in our living quarters. He never had a huge, separate studio to really fully spread out. He would have loved it though, to be able to paint really large works, to see where this adventure would have led him. But he always adapted to the circumstances of the moment. During periods when the money was very tight, he would make graphite drawings, or pen and inks on paper. When he couldn't afford the paper, he would draw on napkins. As soon as financial circumstances would brighten up a bit again, he'd be able to afford paint tubes, linen, canvas, and so forth. When it was getting close to the end of the month and there was no spare change left, he just might round up a bunch of his earlier works on paper, cut them up, and reassemble the pieces into reinvented [mixed media collages](#). To him, the medium was not that important, the creative act was.

My work schedule at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where I've been on the faculty in the [Biology Department](#) since 1996, is not that different from that of any other full-time, tenured faculty member in a strong research-oriented department: conduct rigorous, state-of-the-art research, continuously apply for competitive [federal grants](#) to support one's research and one's Ph.D. students, submit research publications to peer-reviewed scientific journals, advise undergraduate and graduate students, plan national and international collecting trips, attend and present research data at scientific conferences, teach classes, collaborate with colleagues worldwide.

All Eugene expected me to do after my work at the university was to basically just show up; by then he would already have taken care of the domestic chores at home and have started to wind down for the evening. So, as soon as I got home, we were able to fully enjoy each other's company and have a lot of fun together. He made everything so easy for me, spoiled me so. I tried to do the same for him so that he wouldn't need to worry about anything, just concentrate on his art. He didn't really care much where we lived geographically as his creative inspirations all came from within himself. Wherever we lived, Eugene painted full-time. In Lafayette he was able to resume creating larger-format paintings because now we had more ample living space.

All was wonderful until December 2001, when Eugene nearly died from a [stroke](#) and simultaneous [brain hemorrhage](#) while we were visiting my mother in [Belgium](#). He survived the ordeal, but it was very difficult for him to go through the extreme rigors of [physical therapy](#). He eventually was able to walk again with the aid of a walker, and more importantly, he was able to resume painting. Most of the stacked paintings you see in the accompanying photo where he's seated in his studio were created after his stroke! He never complained. He had his priorities straight and said he had no regrets in life. He had always done exactly what he wanted to do with his life, which was to create and be a full-time artist, and he never had to compromise his artistic integrity. That was very important to him. I'd say you can't have a more successful and fulfilling life than that! He was so thankful that he still could paint and continue to be so creative after suffering his stroke. Even after all the debilitating medical effects, even after his health progressively started to deteriorate, he remained so wonderful to live with, so full of curiosity, so full of life. He was all about love until the very end.

qi peng: What is your research on red algae systematics like? Is there any relationship between your biological forays and the world of visual art? How do you find the beauty within living creatures?

Suzanne Fredericq: [Systematics](#) is the field of study concerned with detecting patterns of [evolutionary](#) relationships among particular groups of [organisms](#). The focus of my research lies in discovering and investigating patterns of evolution in the marine [red algae](#) and to correlate molecular and [morphological](#) data sets from species around the world with possible worldwide [biogeographic](#) hypotheses. I find the red algae to be the most fascinating of organisms, not only because they are characterized by bizarre life histories and have produced some of the most beautiful forms among all living organisms, but also because their complexity of form hides a most remarkable simplicity. They have evolved a suite of [cytological](#) and morphological modifications despite major developmental constraints, and what I find so fascinating is that they can do so much with so little, so to speak.

I see the same universal representation of patterns of Form converging upon nature and on the canvas through the mind of the artist as a direct reference to a same reality. The only non-scientific paper I have written deals precisely with what I regard as Beauty or Elegance in the biological world and the visual arts, but it would take too much space to elaborate on this subject here. The paper can be viewed as a pdf file listed on [Eugene Martin's website](#) at <http://morayeel.louisiana.edu/ejMARTIN/ejMARTIN-artist.html>, under the heading Publications/Reviews, 2001.

Eugene understood everything right away. For example, when I was a graduate student in [Chapel Hill](#) he came to visit me one day from Washington D.C. I showed him around the lab and he wanted to see what I was looking at. I told him I was looking at some sexual reproductive structures in a [species](#) of [Gracilaria](#). He took a quick glance through the microscope and said, "Oh, now I understand what you're doing all day long, you're watching Grace and Larry through a [peep show!](#)"  
Vintage Eugene.

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qi peng: Do you have any favorite cuisine or dishes that you enjoy? Considering that food is essential for the artistic soul, what things do you look for within a daily meal?

Suzanne Fredericq: I'm an [omnivore](#) really, and basically enjoy all types of food. All except [peanut butter](#) and [Brussels sprouts](#). Of course, here in Lafayette, it's culinary heaven. There are more restaurants per capita than anywhere else in the country – got this information from the [Lafayette Visitors Bureau](#). I don't know of anyone who has come to live in Lafayette and hasn't gained extra pounds galore. Cajun food is just too seductive, and the entire way of life is centered around [gastronomy](#).

Even when I teach about [seaweeds](#), I may get some [sushi](#) rolls and have the students make sections of the [nori](#) – the little seaweed wrapper, to look at its structure under the microscope before they can gobble them up. One year, a student picked for his final Marine Botany class project the topic "Seaweeds and their Uses." He had mentioned in passing that he was a Chef and gourmet cook. So when it was his turn to present his project in front of the class, he had a friend show up with an elaborate arsenal comprised of [kombu](#) soup, seaweed salads, sushi rolls, canned fish, canned [bowfin](#) eggs (Cajun "[caviar](#)"), [flans](#), [ice cream](#), everything under the sun — all foods containing algal ingredients. Our own version of "[Babette's Feast!](#)" He wanted to bring along [beer](#) as well since [alginates](#) stabilize the foam head – it made perfect sense, but unfortunately university regulations do not allow for such type of scientific fervor. It doesn't take much for any store-bought packaged foodstuff to not include some type of algal-derived extracts; just sharing some information with the students of what the enormous contribution of algae is to everyday life, makes my day every time. It's my Food for Thought.

qi peng: Are there any restaurants or hangouts such as bookstores around the Lafayette area or anywhere else that you wish to recommend us? What are the qualities that you enjoy best about the places that you have chosen?

Suzanne Fredericq: You won't have any trouble finding a restaurant to your liking where people hang out. That's basically what Lafayette is all about, food. The bookstores here are not unlike the usual mega-bookstores you find in any city, with the exception that down here the largest aisle section is invariably taken over by culinary books.

I'd recommend visiting Lafayette during the free music festivals, of which there are many taking place throughout the year. As with food, people here are music-crazy as well. It's not for nothing that Laissez-les bons temps rouler or Let the good times roll is the region's motto, a leitmotiv that is followed quite literally.

My favorite place has to be a [bald cypress swamp](#) not far from Lafayette, [Lake Martin](#), a birder's paradise. At this time of the year it is a major [rookery](#) for many species of wading birds, such as [herons](#), [egrets](#), [spoonbills](#), [ibises](#). It is also a delight to stroll by the little swamp in the middle of our campus and watch the [alligators](#) and busy wildlife that inhabit it.

qi peng: How do you feel that the current economic recession impacted the contemporary art market and way that it functions in the larger national economy? Do you feel that artists will be pursuing more personal and intimate projects than the overly commercial work, typically geared for the art fairs, during the upcoming years? How do you think that galleries and non-profits will be coping with the dramatic shifts within the political and corporate culture, particularly in America? Do you have any thoughts about the current state of the [stock market](#) and its concomitant corruption? Any thoughts on the [Obama](#) administration in relation to your viewpoint on history, social identity, and the arts scene?

Suzanne Fredericq: Once a link in a chain is broken, consequences will reverberate at every kink along that chain. When collectors need immediate cash, can't afford to purchase additional art, or dump existing works from their collection back on the market, everyone loses – the gallerist who can't sell inventory, needs to close the gallery and dismantle his/her stable of artists; the artist who loses gallery representation; the collector who backs off from donating previously promised works of art to a museum; the [underwriter](#) who pulls out from sponsoring elaborate exhibits that museums now have to cancel due to the high insurance costs; the frame or art supply shop that sees less foot traffic and orders less inventory; the graduated MFA artist who's thousands of dollars in the red with no prospects for acquisition of their art or a job; the casual collector who's holding off buying even a modestly priced artwork; the city who's cutting down on art program funding due to a dwindling tax revenue; the art auction houses who grossly miscalculated the market and now are stuck with overvalued, unsold inventory; the art instructor whose art class gets cut.

Perhaps this downturn in the market will predominantly affect the psyche of mainstream artists who already enjoyed a comfortable token of commercial success. They may have gotten used to having their works sold; perhaps they lived a bit too much beyond their means and now they can't afford the rent on the large studio or continue to pay their assistants any longer. They are the ones who will face tough competition in finding new gallery representation when their gallery closes down. Probably the big-name superstar artists will continue doing just fine, relatively speaking, notwithstanding a scaling down of their operations. The vast majority of artists, those who "have plenty of nothin" and never got a break before, will

probably find a way to keep on doing what they have been doing all along, if only they can hold on to their day job; if not, only the most dedicated and stubborn artists will look for and find creative ways to keep on making their art. Some have said that such a weeding out process at every step, brutal as it may be, may be the impetus for a future, more sensible, art renaissance. Perhaps, but in the meantime, the ripple effect of this downward spiraling at every level of the economy is just bewildering and tragic for most of the parties involved.

With in-your-face consumption and super-commercial megaworks now being frowned upon as being insensitive and in bad taste, it looks like the understated, the small, the intimate, the art that reflects a more cocooned life style is in again. It wouldn't surprise me if there will be more pressure put on an artist who wants to exhibit to be more conformist, whether the sponsor or funding agency is a for-profit organization, or a non-profit that has to conform to certain stipulations and restrictions before accepting funding, a bit like whether or not Alaska or Louisiana will accept the economic stimulus package. Perhaps the more strings attached, the less independence, the safer the art that gets exhibited, whether good or bad.

The one positive aspect I see in the current economic downturn is that artworks will perhaps be less avidly viewed as a financial investment or commodity to be traded like pork bellies on the global market. I may be very naïve here, but who knows, perhaps the old-fashioned idea of "Art for Art's Sake" may become the new trendiness.

As so much with regard to the stock market seems to be about perception, I can't think of any person in the world who could project greater confidence, poise, calm, stability, and optimism in the future – whether real or imagined, than does President Obama. He truly is one of these larger-than-life individuals belonging in the small, rarefied league that also includes Nelson Mandela. I read that there is a push from the Obama administration to increase the budget for NEA funding, but I haven't followed up on the details.

qi peng: What is your opinion of art world journalism? Do you read periodicals such as ArtForum or ARTnews to get an up to date understanding of what goes on within the art world? Do you have any favorite artistic blogs or websites that you enjoy looking at on a regular basis? Do you feel that smaller, regional art markets like Santa Fe or New Orleans will have a chance to expand their horizons into becoming essential and vibrant art hot spots just like Los Angeles or New York City? What do you think is the current state of contemporary art within the Lafayette area where you are located?

Suzanne Fredericq: What attracts me and what keeps my full attention when reading an art review or an essay by an art critic overlaps with what moves me when I look at an actual work of art; conversely, what puts me off or keeps me indifferent when reading an art review also will put me off or make me ignore a work of art. Jean Dubuffet perhaps said it best, "What one expects from art is that it disorients us, that it removes the doors from their hinges." Great art criticism will do that as well – it will disorient the reader, it will surprise the reader, in the sense that every time one thinks of art, every time one looks at art, one will gain some type of understanding one may not have had before the reading.

Using these criteria, my very favorite living art critics are John Haber, Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz. Each has a such a personal, original point of view on all things art; each has such a vast encyclopedic knowledge from which to pull convincing arguments, comparisons, and allusions; each has such a clear, distinctive, unpretentious writing style; each has such a lateral, reticulate way of thinking instead of one that is plainly vertical. Their readings may invariably disorient me, their opinions may surprise me, and each will have made me think about a concept, a relationship, a wink that I wasn't aware of before reading their review. Conversely, articles that I gloss over, that I ignore, typically will be full of platitudes, devoid of context, and characterized by muddled, vague, confused or pretentious prose. Such reviews will not disorient me, they will not surprise me – they will bore me.

As I mentioned above, I love to leaf through the monthly glossies, to look at the images, the photographs. When the writing gets too hermetic, too pretentious, too trendy, I skip, turn the page and forget about it all. No sweat.

I view typical blogs as very different from thoughtful art criticism, more as a flash in the pan, a snapshot, a celebration of the instant, a repository for great practical tips, a witty repartee. Art blogs I particularly enjoy include those of Edward Winkleman, Joanne Mattera, Tyler Green and CultureGrrl at ArtsJournal, Sharkforum, Pretty Lady, Dawoud Bey, Richard Lacayo, Jonathan Jones at The Guardian. I love Artnet. Will also regularly with a click of the finger hit the links to The Art Newspaper, Artdaily, Artinfo, Artforum. I enjoy perusing the main art auction catalogues online in the hope of catching a glimpse of some hidden masterpiece or forgotten treasure. I love youtube. Enjoy watching the James Kalm report. My favorite of all the youtube art sites is youtube.com/moonlightnoir. I learned so much about photography from watching the clips on this channel (unfortunately, several clips have since been removed by youtube). I especially appreciate youtube when obscure or long-forgotten audio or archival film footage is magically resurrected from oblivion. One discovers new gems every day. I did with the music of Scriabin, for example, and to listen to different interpretations of a same piece when played by different musicians has become one of my favorite pastimes online.

I don't know about the situation in Santa Fe, but the art world in New Orleans is quite vibrant and rapidly expanding. No city can or should compete with New York, a city I view as the center of the artworld. Even though Lafayette's focus on the arts is really music, we have a [monthly Artwalk downtown](#), and a spectacular Acadiana Center for the Arts and [University Art Museum](#) in which contemporary art exhibits are quite well represented.

qi peng: How would you describe the tenor and spiritual overtones of your husband's artworks? How did he manage to combine skillfully his interest in the figurative and abstract concerns that runs throughout his pieces?

Suzanne Fredericq: As an artist, Eugene never took anything for granted. While he never took himself seriously and would at all times laugh at himself, he always took his art very seriously. As I mentioned earlier, his whole being was about freedom, freedom of mind, freedom of action. He was so open to life and always put himself and his art into question again, time after time. He did so with every brush stroke, with every line of the pencil, with every cut-out. And this is why his art remains and feels so alive today. And this is why, when I look at his art and live surrounded by his art, I feel so alive as well.

He said the way he created was that he never had a preconceived idea or image in his mind prior to executing a particular drawing or painting. He would thus never know where the first brush stroke on a canvas or the first mark on a piece of paper would take him. So his art kept him full of surprises, always fresh. He thus was never bored.

He said he would put his ego aside and the imagery would just flow out of him and onto the paper or canvas, non-stop. In this sense, his execution very much reminds one of the [automatism](#) of the [Surrealists](#). What differs though from the Surrealists' mode of [automatic drawing](#) is that Eugene had complete control of his creative actions while he was drawing and painting. He knew when to start, where to go, and when to stop. Eugene may have had the wit of the Surrealists, but he certainly did not have their hang-ups or frustrations! Because he was so free mentally he never had any creative blocks.

In order to be able to remain so free mentally, to stay so unburdened, he purposefully kept distractions throughout his life to a minimum. That's the main reason he never joined artist associations, wasn't socially active, didn't feel the need to be entertained. He thus worked in isolation. He liked being in full control of his art, with no one trying to influence him, no one telling him what to do. He was one of those artists for whom creating art was for art's sake, along with the acceptance of any consequence – good or bad – that comes with such an uncompromising stance. For him, it was the only way he could live with himself. He was a Modernist at heart.

Eugene further elaborates on his approach to creating art and his philosophy of life in a 1985 interview he gave to [Dean King](#), a writer who at the time was one of my many roommates in a large, chaotic house we shared near the campus of UNC-Chapel Hill while we were students there. When Eugene came to visit me one day from Washington D.C., Dean interviewed him and this interview became part of his Honor's thesis submitted to the [UNC English Department](#). The [interview](#) can be viewed online at:

<http://morayeel.louisiana.edu/ejMARTIN/interview.html>.

Eugene called his works of art "satirical abstracts" and I will further clarify the meaning of this term when answering the next question.

qi peng: What trends do you see are forthcoming within the contemporary art world? How would place your husband's artwork within the overall context of art history particularly the [abstract expressionist](#) and [cubist](#) movements? What do you think is the overall attitude and philosophical drive which is shown within his artwork?

Suzanne Fredericq: Not being an artist and not privy to classified information, I'm really not at liberty to predict the next conceptual trends in contemporary art, one way or another.

When I think about [conceptual art](#) though, I often think of that little kid, that little black kid who, so poor growing up that he had no toys to play with nor materials to carry out little projects, had a drive to create that was so strong that he had to find an outlet without using things. Who learned to go into his mind or otherwise would have gone crazy. Who learned to observe people and behavior. Who learned to control his dreams, by setting the stage for his own dreams before he went to sleep and while dreaming knew that he was dreaming. Who, when growing up, would not let outside influences dictate or interfere with the creative process. Whose philosophy of life – because of all that internal involvement, was sort of that of a [mystic](#), in that he saw the creative act, when created with pure motive, when created with pure love, as generating a kind of positive energy that goes out through the universe.

Eugene's spatial abilities, his conceptualizing powers were just phenomenal. The way he would find an outlet for his creative drive, the way he was to choose his mode for expressing a concept, an idea, was through drawing and painting. But only

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because paper and canvas were cheaper than working tri-dimensionally or with elaborate installations. His could just as easily have been as fulfilled as a sculptor than as a painter and draftsman. He actually was thinking of making some sculptures and funky outdoors installations after we moved to Lafayette, but then his stroke put an end to such possibilities.

Eugene liked to call his works “satirical abstracts” because of the pervading humor of the imagery in his works that is so warm, so positive, so amusing, humble, shy and not pompous at all. Whenever I think of possible influences on his artworks, I unfailingly return for hints to the great modernists, especially European Modernism and the Russian avant-garde of the early 20th Century. But look for yourself. Over 600 images of Eugene’s artworks, dating from the 1960’s through 2004, are included in [Artnet’s Artist Works Catalogues](#), and 200 of his works are incorporated in a [separate Eugene James Martin collection in ARTstor](#), the digital art library geared towards research and educational purposes. You will be pleasantly surprised that [ARTstor’s](#) Martin collection is a perfect vehicle to illustrate and assess the major artistic tendencies and influences that have taken place in modern and contemporary visual art.

Looking at some of Eugene’s images, you’ll may recognize a wink to [Paul Klee](#); or a nod to [Kandinsky](#) and [Miró](#) in some color [acrylics](#) on paper; or you’ll think that [El Lissitzky’s Prouns](#) were reinvented in some oval drawings; you’ll be reminded of some disassociations that would have made [Picasso](#) proud; you’ll appreciate [Matisse](#) even more after seeing some of Eugene’s bold acrylics on paper; you’ll be perplexed that some of Eugene’s fantastic and surrealist graphite drawings will make you think of a sane [Alfred Kubin](#); looking at Eugene’s sculptural drawings, you’ll bet he was [David Smith’s](#) soulmate; you won’t believe Eugene never saw a [Jawlensky](#) figure; you’ll be happy to recognize what looks like the hand of [Marsden Hartley](#) in some densely painted acrylics, or of a young [Arshile Gorky](#) in some early pen drawings. You’ll be overwhelmed when you’ll realize that some of Eugene’s greatest explosions of joy and color were painted just a few months before he died.

On the other hand, I see less of an influence of the great [African American](#) masters in Eugene’s work. Once in a while, perhaps, some areas in an [expressionist](#) oil of [Charles Alston](#) may remind me of what Eugene briefly tried to accomplish. An [Art Deco](#)-type figure that could have been painted by [Aaron Douglas](#), a color impression as in a [Richard Mayhew](#) landscape, an angular structure as in an early [Romare Bearden](#) oil, a furtive pencil stroke as in a [Norman Lewis](#) drawing perhaps may all point to an African American experience, but it is not obvious.

No matter a particular stylistic expression, Eugene’s creations would always go beyond, always dig further, always burst out of its accepted boundaries. When viewing Eugene’s works in isolation, one may at first not understand the common thread that links his entire oeuvre. His output is just so enormous, so all-encompassing. But when one takes the time to look, to see, to understand, then the more one looks, the more one sees, the more one becomes convinced that Eugene’s creations have a language all of their own. That he was a true original, a genius. That as an artist he did things one is not supposed to do. That he mixed, that he juxtaposed soft-edged and free-flowing [organic](#) forms alongside hard-edged [geometric](#) structures, all the while making both states intrinsically relate to and complement one another. That Eugene’s art was thus all about [poetry](#). Poetry in the metaphysical sense, the one that captures the essence of [André Breton’s](#) great text, the one in which “Everything leads to the belief that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictions”. If I can sum up what Eugene’s art was all about, it is about such poetry, so brilliantly expressed in the [Second Manifesto of Surrealism](#).

You’re asking about the context of Eugene’s work in the overall context of art history, particularly the abstract expressionist and cubist movements. The leading protagonists in these particular art movements are often perceived as having been highly charged, [macho](#) and ego-driven, competitive, thriving individuals embroiled in artistic rivalry. Eugene was all but that, he who remained to the outside, he who worked typically alongside any art movement. Perhaps it’s precisely because he worked in isolation that he was able to remain so independent as an artist. He wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

qi peng: Do you have anything else which you would like to share with your readers and fans of Mr. Martin’s paintings, your research in red algae, and your other artistic or biological pursuits here?

Suzanne Fredericq: Thank you, qi, for your very welcoming “assassination.” As Eugene would say whenever he saw a commercial of the [National Rifle Association](#), while tapping on his [upper limbs](#), “the only [arms](#) I carry are these.” I likewise am glad I came out alive and well of this interview and that I didn’t assassinate anything or anybody. Now let’s enjoy looking at some art, and at some algae!

For more gossip or dishing me the art scoop: E-mail me at [qipengart@gmail.com](mailto:qipengart@gmail.com)