

SEVEN AMERICAN ARTISTS

by

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Table of Contents: p.1
Preface: p. 5
Introduction: p. 8
Jewett Campbell: p. 38
Judy Glantzman: p. 53
Eugene Martin: p. 54
Judith Bernstein: p. 67
William Wegman: p. 82
Peter Plagens: p. 98
Greer Lankton: p. 121
Acknowledgments: p. 131
Bibliography: p. 134

If you ever want to talk to Eugene Martin al you have to do is call or visit him at his "office" between 5 and 7 p.m. His office is a booth at Food for Thought, a restaurant in Washington, D.C.' Dupont Circle.

Martin has been holding office hours there for some fifteen years, listening to problems and just talking with friends and strangers alike. He considers himself somewhat of a mystic -- a common people's "shrink." In much the same way, Martin approaches his art with a sincere consistency; analyzing motivations and the workings of the mind are important to him. He views the act of creation as a mystic, almost sacred, experience.

Martin was born in Washington, D.C. in 1938. He worked nights from 1960 to 1963 so that he could attend the Corcoran School of Art during the day. Upon leaving the Corcoran, Martin turned all his efforts to his artwork, drawing and painting with whatever materials he could afford. Strength of conviction and repression of material desire allow Martin to continue drawing and painting after 22 years.

Though Martin's work has received little exposure, in 1981 he exhibited a painting at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and several pieces of his work are in the collection of the Munich Museum of Modern Art.

Could you just give us some background information? I was born in 1938 -- Washington, D.C. My mother deceased when I was about five, and I was put in foster homes. I ran away from the first one. And when I ran away, I ran to the Capitol. Sat on the steps. So that was unique I think. I was this little black kid and all these white steps, and I was just sitting there. I was very peaceful. Then the guards came

and took me into the office. I was sent back to the foster home. Then I ran away again. Finally they found another foster home, and I didn't like it. Then they had no choice but to put me in a reform school because they said they had no place to put me. In reform school I learned some pretty good lessons. I was about seven. The other kids there were 18. I had to stand up right there because they try to hurt you, push you into it. I learned right then that in regards to how much pain someone can inflict you, it doesn't have to hurt your spirit. So being an artist is easy from that point.

How do you think that affected your art development?

That me made tough, psychologically tough. You don't get respect, you get mostly rejection. And you get people trying to manipulate you and confuse you, and you get jealousy. So you have to be tough, sort of stubborn. That made me have an individual way at looking at things, my own way of thinking. I learned not to be controlled. An artist has to learn that, because other people are going to want to control him and influence his work. People love that, especially if they are well-to-do people. They want to be able to say, I influenced an artist... And then I went on a farm for maybe 15 years. That was good. While I was there, I was drawing a lot of chickens, cows, horses. And the farm was good, because I was able to use a lot of my creativity in building things, corn sheds -- whatever we needed on the farm I built, just short of the barn. I loved to do those things.

So you started working in a real way? Yes, crafts, carpentry, and mechanics. I took tractors apart and put

them together, right down to the crankshaft. So, I had a lot of talent in my hands, and I used my mind. Then I played music -- the upright bass, the thunder bass, and the slide trombone. But even before that, before my parents deceased, I had this urge to be creative. I literally worked in bed. It was frustrating, because I had no materials, and the grown-ups thought that was very unnatural -- I should be playing with the other kids.

Did you ever invent anything that ... Well, I started little projects and I had a fantasy of carrying these little projects out, but I never did because I didn't have the material to finish them with. So then I learned to observe people and behavior. I would just sit back and watch people. I learned at a very early age what motivates them. I learned that they are victims, because I was abused from the same people. I was really physically abused.

What did you learn that motivates people? Well, that they are victims. Some are willing victims which is different. Even the ones that are willing victims -- the neurosis is so strong that they are crippled. As an artist you have to be able to see into people somewhat. The work may come out abstractly, but you still have to have insight into behavior. So really good artists are original shrinks really. All through history it's known that governments had artists that they would use just to be counsellors. If we go back the Renaissance, you'll notice that from DaVinci on to Rubens, kings and queens would consult their artists for advice and counsel. Artists have to see not only outside, they have to see inside. And then they have to have foresight, not just

hindsight. Artists are the original shrinks, and in their work this comes out. It may be very abstracted -- people won't notice it -- but all the insight, all the predictions, and all the compassion and love should be in the work, if it's great work.

So your childhood gave you strength on one side and also made you sensitive on another side? Yes, insight too. Because if you really understand these things, you're not going to become bitter and you're not going to get creative blocks. Most artists have a block at some point in time. Too many have been destroyed by it because they lack enough understanding not to be thrown off by the disappointments. I learned to keep my problems straight. Then I turned to something unusual. I took it for granted that most people do. I learned to control my dreams. I could set the stage for my own dreams before I went to sleep.

How? Just before I'd fall asleep, I'd say what I wanted to dream about. And I don't understand it too much, but it happened. And while I was dreaming, I knew I was dreaming. So, I was really into controlling my dreams and being in charge of things. Making my own scenes before I dreamed, and just having fun while I was dreaming.

Can you still do that? Yes, I can still do it, but I don't care to now. Now, I'm able to put my ideas on paper. But when I was 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.

Do you still have some of the stuff you did when you were a kid? I lost so many things, because I was really on the move being shifted from foster homes. At the farm I stayed the longest. I don't have any of the stuff, because I just didn't keep things. Even now, I'm not into collecting things...

I'm interested in that dream idea again. What would you make yourself dream about? Anything. Say I wanted to dream as a kid that I had certain toys that I didn't have in real life. I would dream that I had these toys, and I would play with them. And I knew that I was dreaming. I would tell people in the dreams that we were dreaming, so it doesn't matter what we do.

Is this reflected in your art? I noticed there is a dreamlike quality in a lot of your art. Well, I guess the fact that I had full control. There was no problem of someone influencing the dream in that sense. So, in the art I still maintain a certain amount of freedom. I'm in charge of creating and outside influences don't get through to me. As an artist now I have no problem of people influencing me. I have a lot of people who get upset because they can't influence me; especially when it comes to being somewhat commercial, so I'll sell. I'm very stubborn about that. Because of the dreams and because of a lot of internal involvement, my philosophy is sort of like that of a mystic. The creative act is very important to me. So, whether the works sells or whether it hangs, is really not that important to me. The creative act -- what I mean by that is when you

create something by pure motive -- it generates a kind of energy that goes out through the universe.

Is this a religious kind of idea? No, just a mystic one. I believe that any act done with pure motive, pure love, affects people. Even a painting that is done with pure motive and pure love gives off energy that a painting done with commercial intentions doesn't. Just a little bit of commercial intention dilutes the energy. And while it may be pretty, it may be decorative, it may be liked by many people, there's not much integrity there.

How old were you when you left the farm? I was 20.

Where did you go then? I joined the Navy because I felt that I could get free art schooling. I wasn't there very long. They give tests, and the Navy apparently has a certain kind of mind they want. It has to be at a certain level -- it can't be too original, too creative. You have to be intelligent. It stands for reason they don't want you to be creative in the middle of a war. They want you to follow orders. They told me I had too much imagination, I'd be a problem there. "We don't think you can repress your imagination." I got an honorable discharge, and on the forms the reason is that I am an artist. So I got out of the Navy, and I came to D.C. to the Corcoran School of Art because I wanted more training. I was there for about three years. They couldn't believe I didn't have any training. They told me I was very good. They had mixed feelings, on the one hand I was very sincere and I worked the whole time I was there during the day. On the other hand, I didn't play with them. They want you to play with them sometimes. I didn't have time to play

with them. I was very poor; I had to work at night as a janitor. I went to school five days a week from 9 to 12 in the morning, and I worked from 2 to 11. I picked a job that took no mental effort. So I did that for about two to three years, then I decided to go full-time. That wasn't very easy. I learned that many people who make commitments and promises don't come through. Just as I stopped working and left the Corcoran, I had all of these promises that they were going to buy things, and I believed them.

So what happened then, where did you work? I just worked in my own studio. I worked and I thought I'd sell the things; I didn't. I couldn't pay the rent. I got evicted.

How did you eat? Again, it was sort of magic. As a mystic, I believe that if you put pure motive into what you are doing, and you're willing to go into art or any form of endeavor all the way -- do or die -- then you'll have help because there are people who believe in you. The sincere is very deep. They may not understand the work you are doing, but the sincere is so deep that it attracts them. And you'll have what you need somehow. They believe in you because they believe in your sincerity. If you can't keep up the courage to get that type of sincerity, you better keep your day job, you better be practical, find other ways of being an artist. I have the strength to realize that being practical is not the most important thing.

So how many years has it been that you've been an artist in that sense? A full-time artist -- about 23 years.

Have things gotten better? Things have gotten better in the sense that I realize if your sincerity is great, you may have what you need. The worries won't be a block. In a way it's gotten better -- I have years behind me, experience. And gallery owners and dealers see that you put so much time into it, they begin to think that maybe you've paid your dues.

But nobody gives you something for nothing? Well, in my case, I give insight and understanding. I'll give works of art without making a business deal out of it. Just a natural giving and taking.

Would you like to sell your art? Yes, but that's not my job. My job is to produce, and I'll take the consequences either good or bad. I have many friends who disagree with that. They think I should be out trying to sell my art, out hustling. I don't feel that's the case. I feel that I should be working full-time, and I get by.

Where have you had shows? Well, the galleries I've shown haven't been great established galleries. You wouldn't know them right away. So, I tend to forget them. Why mention galleries that are obscure? It's too much like you're trying to impress people. I've had a few shows in New York. I met the director of the Munich Museum of Modern Art and he took about four or five pieces back. The Germans like my work because of the structure.

It's reminiscent of some of the German artists. Do you think they are influential anywhere in your studying? Not to my knowledge. I've had many people say it looks

like it's African or Indian. No, I just work. I haven't been anywhere. I've been to museums a lot. I like many artists. I can't compare them, say this is better. And I just happen to like things' structures, rather than things that are all over patterns.

Maybe you are drawing from kind of a universal body and that's why it's reminiscent of other cultures and artists? That might be. I've had some galleries not be able to label the work.

What would you call it? I call it satirical abstracts.

Why? Because first they're humorous. They're imagery. The imagery is, I find, very warm, very positive, very amusing. They're humble and shy. They're not pompous.

What inspires you, something I your mind or something external? I started working from -- I will explore a piece of paper into areas, and the structure would just automatically begin to develop. Then the works tells me what to do. I must listen to the work. The work will tell you when it's finished and when it's not finished. When the work tells me to back off, I back off. I put it away, and I work on something else.

Do you work on many things at once? Yes, I can't work on more than one or two at the same time because I don't have the space. But I prefer to. This thing of ego will get into the way every time. You've got to push that aside.

What's the major concern in your work? Do you have a concern for shape and form or color? Shape and form

and color. Texture is not a big thing. Structural imagery. That turns people off. People probably think if it's violent, they want it to be non-objective. If it's imagery, it frightens people.

What kind of images do you find in your work? It's a combination of man, insect, animal and machines.

So, right now most of your works are probably sitting at home. Most of them.

And people don't get that much of a chance to look at them. That will come in the future, maybe it won't come. My job is to produce.

What size do you prefer to work in? Whatever I can afford. Scale doesn't matter that much. Too many artists work out of scale because the museums demand that size.

You are techologically very good. Would you paint a portrait? No, years ago I did. But I work because it comes from the heart... I haven't done realism in a long time. It doesn't please me.

Do you see a progression in your work from the time you became a full-time artist until now? What changes do you see? I see a little more surrealism creeping in, just a little bit and the structure is a little more obvious.

What do you mean by that? I mean, the areas are more defined.

Do you think that is good? I don't know, it's coming from the heart. It's what I feel. I like it. I hope it's good. I believe in it.

What do you see surrealistic that is creeping in? The distortion of the images. But I think the humor and the wit are still there.

I know your work is very independent, coming from the inside, but do you see any effect of the black experience in these at all? No, I have never thought consciously about black art and the black experience; I've always been criticized because of that. I felt a lot of pressure in the '60's. The art comes from the soul; it is me. I'm not concerned at all with what's black and what is not. And I'm very peaceful.

What other kinds of things do you like to do; do you read, do you look at other's people's art? I go to museums sometimes. Not a lot. Of all the activities I prefer just pure thinking.

Where do you do most of your thinking? Sometimes I do it right in the midst of many people. Such as in a restaurant, or bar or maybe out in the park. I like to make sense out of things; I like to put the pieces together in my mind. When I do this, I find a lot of original things come about. As you read other things you gain information, but not a lot of originality comes out.

Who are some of the artists whose work you like? Well, there are many. From DaVinci and Van Gogh, Cézanne,

Miro, Paul Klee, Picasso, Chagall. I can't have a favorite, I very much appreciate each one for what he is doing.

It seems that art has been a great release in your life that for many others might have turned to anger and resentment. Yes, that comes again from when I was about six or seven learning to analyze people, to understand the way the psyche works. The past may have been very rough for some people, but for me being an artist is easy. I never had a secure home with parents taking care of me, so being an artist is easy.

What makes you mad? Mad? I try to get mad less and less. I've been disappointed. Any psychologist will tell you, you know, you have to get angry. I disagree. You can grow to the point where you can learn how not to get mad. Once you accumulate negative feelings and fears then you have to let it out. I agree with that. But what do you do? Do you keep collecting and throwing away, or do you learn not to collect junk?

How do you deal with violence in the streets of Washington? Well, I believe -- and this is going to sound very sumptuous on my part -- if you learn to be at peace as much as you can, you're going to have better timing. If you carry stress around with you, it throws your timing off. You'll be at the wrong place at the wrong time. If you go somewhere with violence in you, you're going to attract violence. It depends on your psyche. So I've never had any problems with violence.