

Simple gifts



Walter Lewellyn

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BETA PICTORIS GALLERY TO SHOW THE WORKS OF PROLIFIC LOUISIANA ARTIST EUGENE MARTIN.

On Friday, Sept. 5, [beta pictoris gallery](#) will have an opening

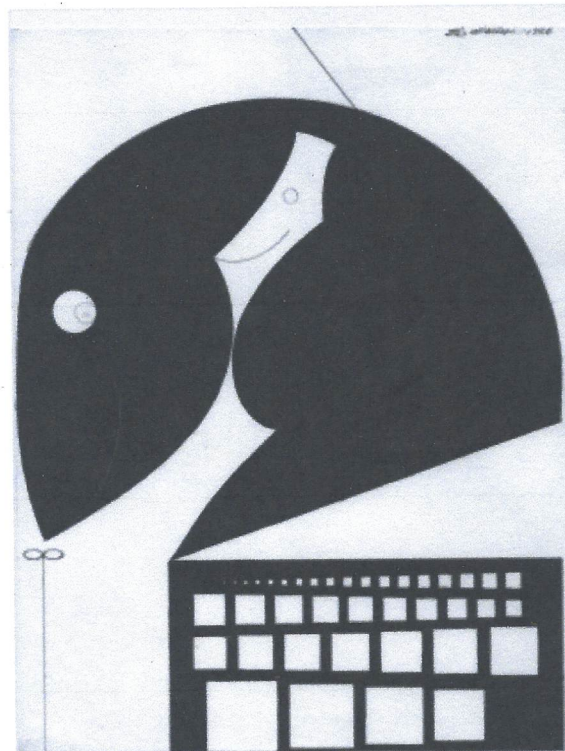


IMAGE COURTESY OF BETA PICTORIS GALLERY.

reception for *Favorite Blues*, an exhibition of the works on paper – along with four paintings – of

the late abstract artist [Eugene James Martin](#). The reception will take place from 6-8 p.m. at the downtown gallery.

Martin studied at the Corcoran in Washington, DC in the '60s, and while the experience gave him a thorough grounding in contemporary art, it definitely didn't translate to immediate success. Until the '80s, when he finally settled in Lafayette, Louisiana, much of Martin's work was composed in museums and public parks – he called benches his “offices” – and made with cheap pencils and inks on cheap (or found) paper.

Martin's poverty during this time is reflected in the works in *Favorite Blues*, which covers 20 resilient years of the artist's career from the mid-'60s to the mid-'80s. But far from detracting from the quality of the exhibition, the cheapness of Martin's tools only emphasizes the wonderfully handmade nature of his work, which is utterly without pretense.

It's a tired cliché to compare the works of a black artist to jazz, but for Martin – who actually gave being a jazz musician a shot before becoming a visual artist – it just feels right. His works on paper have a flowing, improvisational quality that's immensely endearing, muted and accessible compared to the louder colors and patterns of his paintings. Even as Martin's style evolves over the timeline of the exhibition, the musicality in his work – moving from minimalist riffs to swelling dynamics as the years progress –

never recedes.



IMAGE COURTESY OF BETA PICTORIS GALLERY.

While Martin described some of his works as “satirical abstracts,” it's hard to tell exactly what he's satirizing, since the specificity that's so key to satire is at odds with abstract art. The most obvious strand is a persistent racial commentary perhaps poking fun at notions of minstrelsy and Pollyanna views of racial progress with black smiling figures. Even when the intentions are opaque, a strand of humor runs through most the works on paper, a playfulness that makes Martin's work welcoming in a way that abstract art rarely is.

Upon first walking into the gallery, it feels like a solitary, avuncular friend has left something behind for you specifically – simple gifts, made with humble tools – that grow rich with complex melodies once you take a closer look.

beta pictoris gallery is located at 2411 2nd Ave N. For more information, call (205) 413-2999