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THE ONLY STAIR THAT DOESN'T CREAK: Eugene Martin

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"The Oxford American may be the liveliest literary magazine in America."
THE NEW YORK TIMES

Born on Bayou Lafourche in the small town of Cut Off, Louisiana, Reggie Michael Rodrigue is an artist, arts writer, and curator. Rodrigue connects Louisiana's Bayou Country and Southern culture to the global visual arts scene as an online art ...

Contemporary Art in the South:

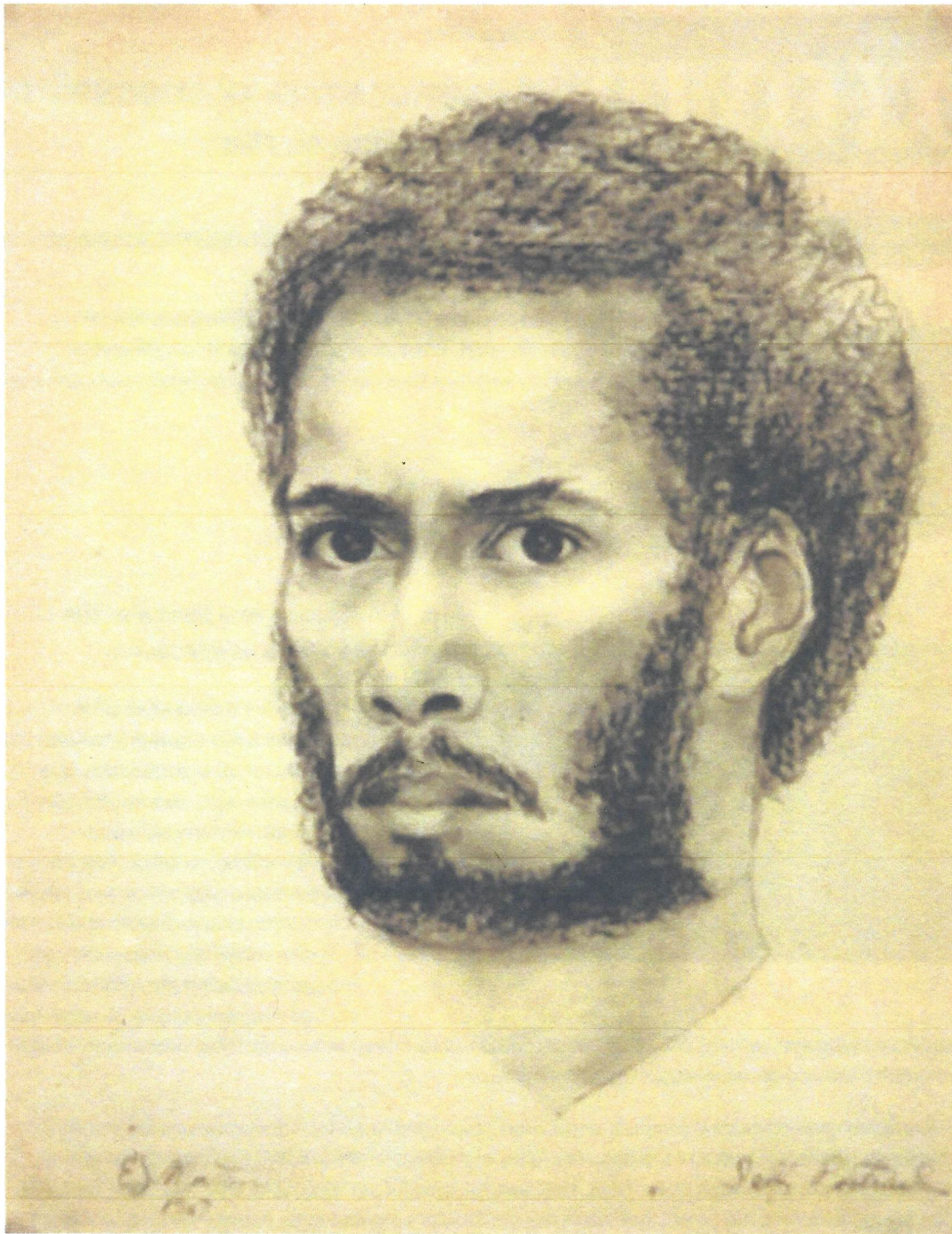
Eugene Martin at the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum

For the past couple of months, I have been drawn further into what I would call a parallel universe. This breach with my former reality didn't begin with the discovery of a wormhole or some other form of extraordinary space/time anomaly: began with an introduction to Ms. Suzanne Fredericq, a University of Louisiana at Lafayette professor of biology and widow of artist Eugene



Martin. An acquaintanceship blossomed into a friendship, and my wife and I were invited to Ms. Suzanne's home, which she shared with Martin until his death on January 1, 2005. We weren't prepared for what we would encounter there.

Practically all the walls of every room in the home were covered in Martin's work. In his studio and in some of the other rooms, stacks and stacks of paintings and drawings occupied a considerable amount of floor space. It seemed like very little of the home was given over to furniture, but in retrospect, all the necessities for creature comfort were there. They just became lost in this sea of work that was alive, tumbling like an acrobat off the walls and marching in unison across the floors. The tub in the guest bathroom had even been turned into a makeshift grotto for Martin's work. It's probably my favorite part of the Fredericq-Martin home. I felt transported to a place that felt familiar yet quite enigmatic and alien—a place located "through the looking glass," to borrow from Lewis Carroll.



"Self Portrait," (1967). Courtesy of the estate of Eugene James Martin.

The Fredericq-Martin home is iconoclastic, much like Eugene Martin. He was very much a self-made man. His life began in Washington, D.C., in 1938 with much hardship, including the death of his mother when he was four years old. Martin's father was an itinerant jazz musician. After his mother's death, Martin and his brother entered the foster-care system. After several attempts at running away, Martin was placed in a reform school at the age of six. He eventually made his way to a family of farmers in Clarksburg, Maryland, where his talents in visual art and music began to develop.

When he matured, Martin chose the path of visual arts because it better suited his temperament as a self-confessed "loner," and he attended the Corcoran School of Art. After leaving the school in 1963, Martin spent the next twenty-five years living in group houses, with friends, and was occasionally homeless. He never abandoned his art, though, and continued drawing in public places. When he couldn't afford paper he drew on napkins. Occasionally, when he was offered lodging and studio space with friends, he was able to create more complex mixed-media works and oil paintings. During this period, he exhibited his work in group shows and the Munich Museum of Modern Art acquired several of his pieces.