

'Train' of Thought

Acclaimed veteran painter Eugene Martin debuts his first exhibit in Lafayette.

By Erin Zaunbrecher

Most artists take themselves too seriously, and that's not me," says painter Eugene Martin. But his humorous side and constant twinkle in his eye belie the hard times Martin has faced in his life.

He spent his childhood running away from foster homes and was forced to attend reform school. A stroke two years ago paralyzed one side of his body, and Martin doesn't speak as clearly as he used to, but it hasn't stopped him from painting daily.

Martin's life experiences, both good and bad, are funneled into his work — brightly colored abstract paintings bursting with humor and pain and covered with lines, dots, geometric shapes, and blocks of color. (Since the stroke, those lines and shapes have become looser and less precise.) "I call it satirical obstruction, because I use images," he says. "It's not pure nonfigurative. To me, it's figures, a lot about the absurdities of the human condition."

The Washington, D.C. native's education at the Corcoran School of Arts shaped his linear style, but his subject matter is more introspective. "We don't think enough," says Martin, commenting on society. "We copy too much, repeat what we hear." He started out painting realistic portraits, but didn't find it challenging enough. An instructor encouraged him to go further with different techniques. "I did more and more. It had the kind of challenge I liked. Abstract soothed me more than realism," he says.

Martin's work on a farm in Maryland around the age of 11 taught him the value of hard work. "I liked to work," he says. "I don't know where that came from. I never played with the kids much." He found comfort in building things like chicken houses, tool sheds, and tractors around the farm. "I found all of that to be a form of release, so it was easy for me to be a painter, an artist," he says. "I had no problem fighting off distractions. I did have a problem deciding if I wanted to be a musician or painter."

His love of jazz, blues, and rock 'n' roll and proficiency on trombone, upright bass, and bass guitar tempted him toward a musical career. After doing some thinking, he realized his personality was more suited for painting's solitude. "My talent was one of creating, alone," he says.

His upcoming Galerie Lafayette exhibit (debuting at this week's ArtWalk on Sept. 11) in Jefferson Street Market will be Martin's first in Lafayette; his work will also be a part of the new Acadiana Center



Above: The work of Eugene Martin by Terri Fensel



Galerie Lafayette will be the site for abstract painter Eugene Martin's extensive works in oil.

for the Arts' inaugural exhibit, *Spirit of Place: Art from Acadiana*, opening during the center's grand opening Gala Oct. 16. After moving to Lafayette in the mid-90s, his works were shown at the Zigler Museum in Jennings and Opelousas Museum of Art in 2000, and he's exhibited in Washington, D.C. and North Carolina several times. Martin's paintings have also been shown in Belgium, the native country of his wife, Suzanne Fredericq.

The 66-year-old Martin calls exhibits "the conflict of being an artist. You have to have a show," he says. Fredericq handpicked the 180 paintings and drawings Galerie Lafayette had to choose from to fill both the large and small gallery spaces in the market. "It's going to be a mix," Martin says. "Most of the show will be about in the middle of my creative life [the 1970s and '80s]."

More than 1,000 of Martin's paintings and drawings either hang or are propped up against almost

every space of wall in he and his wife's St. Mary Street home. Around 300 works from 2003-04 stand in rows against a brick wall in his studio. His still-prolific output and extensive work raised his only concern about exhibiting locally, even in Galerie Lafayette's sizable space. "The trouble is, is it big enough for me?" Martin asks. "I need about two buildings the size of the Guggenheim."

Martin's title for the exhibit, *The Gravy Train People and their Pets*, is right in line with his whimsical side. Most of his paintings have absurd or funny names, like *Cartoonist Eating Pork Chops* or *Louisiana Penguins*. The *Gravy Train* title is intentionally open to interpretation. "If it were a bunch of people who were fun-loving, laid back and original, didn't conform, and they were on a train, that's what the train would be called," says Martin. "Everybody wonders who's the gravy train people. Am I one of them? Maybe so, maybe not." ■