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Martin, Eugene James

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(24 July 1938 – 1 Jan. 2005),

visual artist, was born in Washington, D.C., the eldest of the two sons of Margaret Helen Dove and James Walter Martin, an itinerant jazz musician. Upon the death of his mother in 1942, he was placed in foster care in Washington, D.C. After running away several times, he was sent to reform school and, around 1945, was placed with foster parents Franie and Madessa Snowdon on a farm in Clarksburg, Maryland. During those years at the farm, Martin started drawing realistic portraits and landscapes, as well as playing upright bass, thunder bass, and slide trombone in the local rhythm-and-blues band The Nu-tones. After pondering whether to become a visual artist or a musician, he briefly enlisted in the Navy in 1958, hoping to receive an art education, but was honorably discharged after sixteen days.

In 1960 he left Maryland and moved to Washington, D.C., to attend the Corcoran School of Art and Design. For a period of three years he received art training during the day and worked as a janitor with the Montgomery County School Board at night. In 1963 he left the Corcoran School and decided to become a full-time artist. The years that followed were very difficult. After being evicted because he could not pay the rent, he lived in group houses or stayed with friends and was sometimes homeless. All his works executed during this period directly reflect his financial situation. Most of the time they were small pen-and-ink or pencil drawings that he created during the day in outside parks, libraries, the airport, or restaurants. When he was too poor to buy any supplies, he would draw on napkins, and when his financial circumstances became more favorable, he would experiment with oil painting and mixed media on paper.

The 1960s were decisive for the development of Martin's style: he abandoned realism and created a very personal kind of abstract art that he called "satirical abstract." His work was a combination of whimsical allusions to human, animal, and machine among areas of pure abstraction. This unique style, coupled with the fact that Martin did not belong to an artist group or artistic movement, effectively placed him outside of the mainstream. His artistic references were very different from most African American artists at the time. Martin never considered himself a black artist, and his influences—Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Max Ernst—were mostly European. Remaining very independent in his art as well as in his personal life, he never surrendered to any pressure to create a certain kind of art that would sell or be represented in galleries.

During the 1970s and 1980s, he continued his abstract work in such genres as black and white ink drawings, ink and bamboo stick drawings, and graphite drawings. He also experimented with collage, using pieces of previous works to create new ones. Between 1978 and 1988, he lived in the apartment of photographer and friend Marco Leonardi (1933–1990). The two artists worked together, with Martin greatly influencing Leonardi, guiding him toward greater discipline in his photographic practice. The two men shared a keen attention to structure and the same sense of humor, and created pieces accordingly.

Janus, by Eugene J. Martin, 1995, mixed media on paper, 27 cm. × 38 cm. Estate of the artist, private collection.

In 1988 Martin married the marine biologist Suzanne Fredericq. The greater comfort and financial stability that came from this marriage allowed him to have permanent studio space and work with acrylic and canvas. He was able to spread and work on different canvases at the same time and developed his collage technique by introducing photographs of his own work in new pieces. Toward the end of the 1990s, he worked exclusively with acrylic on canvas, with the result that the attention to structure always present in his previous work became more obvious, and closer to geometrical abstraction, in his paintings.

In December 2001 Martin simultaneously suffered a brain hemorrhage and stroke during a trip to Belgium. Even though the stroke left him partly paralyzed after undergoing physical therapy, he adapted and continued painting. Still working with acrylics on canvas, his work became more abstract, as the imagery almost disappeared. His paintings became more gestural, with large strokes of paint that highlighted the contrast between hard and soft edges.

Toward the end of 2004, Eugene Martin's health deteriorated quickly. After a one-month stay at the hospital, he came home to die, surrounded by his work. He left behind him a vast body of work of approximately five thousand pieces.

Further Reading

Veneciano, Jorge Daniel. *The Geometric Unconscious: A Century of Abstraction* (2012).

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