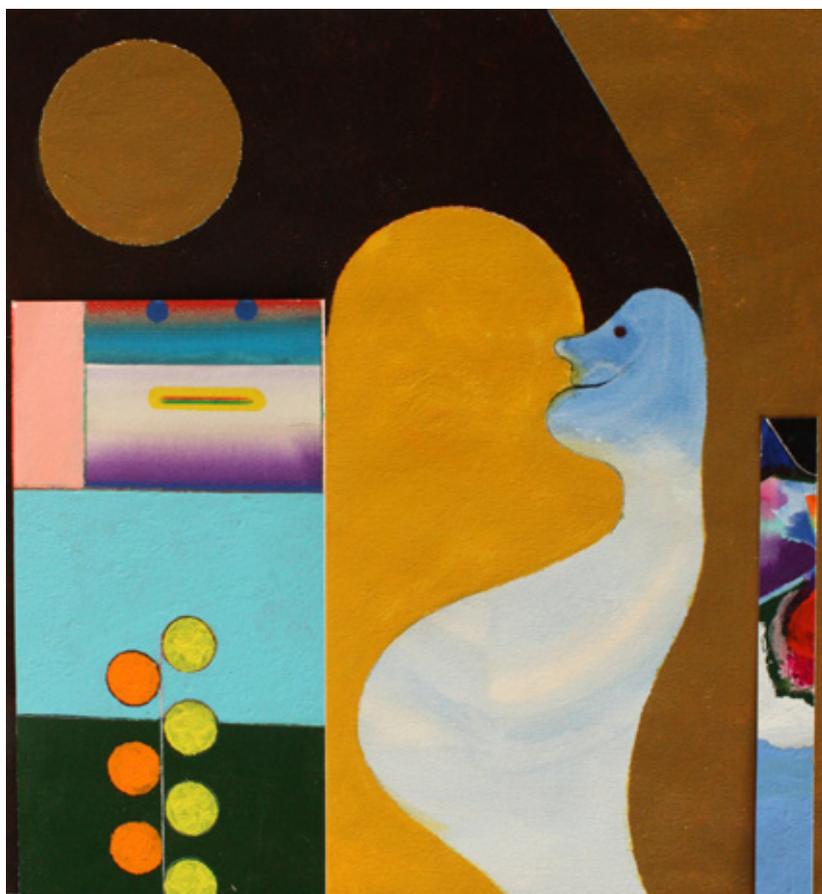


EUGENE JAMES MARTIN

11 January - 16 March 2024



Haut-Brion 1929, 1997

Two acrylic 1990s paintings, signed 1997 and strips on rag paper

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is pleased to present the first solo exhibition by American artist Eugene James Martin (1938-2005) at its Brussels gallery.

This exhibition assembles a diverse range of artworks that defy easy classification. The juxtaposition of different mediums and the combinations of signifiers that point to—rather than represent—still lifes, flow like various forms of expression within the perfect unity of the completed works.¹ Abstract forms, born from the artist's imagination, seem to be the only common denominator in this ensemble of artworks, which spans from 1972 to 2003. Abstract art was Eugene James Martin's best ally: it was a style that imposed 'no restrictions and no rules' on him; a style that allowed him to be completely free. This selection offers a glimpse into forty-two years of uninterrupted artistic endeavour, during which the artist remained guided solely by the principle of freedom until his passing in 2005. Beyond the vivid colours and the playful nature of the abstract forms, Eugene James Martin offers us, through these unique combinations, a distinctly personal perspective on the world.

If freedom lies at the core of his artistic endeavours, it also serves as the defining principle of his life. Born in 1938 in the Capitol Hill district of Washington, D.C., Eugene James Martin displayed a compelling creative urge from an early age. For a short time, he even considered becoming a musician. His need for independence led him to the visual arts: as a performer in a band, he would never be free; as a painter, he would 'only have to deal with himself and no one else'. In 1963, after studying art at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington, D.C., he decided to become a full-time painter.

¹ Dagen Philippe, *Eugene J. Martin l'insaisissable*, Collection Galerie Zlotowski, Les Éditions Martin de Halleux, 2023

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUXELLES

When we examine the pieces in this exhibition, it comes as a surprise to discover that Eugene James Martin's early work is marked by figurative imagery. His academic training initially led him to emulate Renaissance masters like Michelangelo. During the 1960s, influences from European modernists such as Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee and Joan Miró found their way into his paintings. From 1967 onwards, he abandoned figurative painting altogether, deeming it 'too restrictive'.

Works presented in this exhibition, spanning the period from 1972 to 2003, allow us to clearly appreciate the various shifts in techniques that have punctuated Eugene James Martin's career. Two paper works from the *Oval Drawings* series open the exhibition: combinations of colourful shapes accumulate, appearing unstable, within an oval space, detaching themselves from the white background of the sheet. These early compositions heralded a completely new artistic approach at a time when Minimalism and Conceptual Art prevailed. Between 1976 and 1978, the artist subsequently began working on a series of small graphite pencil drawings: the contrast between full and empty forms and the humorously manipulated visual puns are reminiscent of the creations of surrealists such as Salvador Dalí. In the early 1980s, his explorations continued with a series produced entirely using bamboo reed pens and ink, featuring characters that are as funny as they are intriguing. Finally, at the beginning of the 1990s, the artist reintroduced vivid colour into his work. His focus was particularly directed towards a category that comprised one-third of his entire artistic output: collages. He juxtaposed older works with more recent ones, and, driven by his unwavering commitment to maintain complete independence and creative freedom, relied exclusively on his own images in all of his collages.

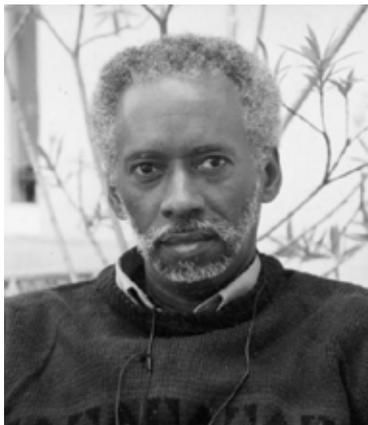
Although the various series exhibited present great variations, the style and spontaneity with which Eugene James Martin created his works remained unchanged.² Ever independent and critical of the established artistic trends in the visual arts, his body of work—amounting to nearly five thousand works of art—bears an extremely personal and singular label. At a time when being an African-American artist in the U.S. implied confronting racist stereotypes and a predominantly white art world, Eugene James Martin claimed he never concerned himself with it, because 'art came from the soul. It was him.'

In this way, he valued freedom above all else: throughout his life, the artist refused to compromise. It is in this unwavering approach that he found—along with his audience—the greatest liberation. The extreme skill and childlike purity of his compositions imbue his works with a limitless potential for interpretation, offering viewers endless possibilities for imagination.

²Vinouze Marie, *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, Improvisations in Time, Eugene J. Martin and the Masur Museum of Art*, Masur Museum of Art Press, 2012

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUXELLES



Born in 1938 in Washington, USA. Eugene James Martin died in 2005 in Lafayette, Louisiana, USA.

The art of Eugene James Martin resists all forms of categorization. The abstract imagery that runs through all his works emanates from the artist's pure imagination. The intricate collages, graphite pencil drawings, ink and acrylic works depict abstract characters, hovering between fantasy and mystery. Eugene James Martin described his works as 'satirical abstractions'.

After attending the Corcoran School of Art in Washington D.C. from 1960 to 1963, Eugene James Martin focused exclusively on painting. Throughout his life as an artist, freedom remained his only guiding principle: he never adhered to any particular school or artistic movement, remaining a non-conformist until his death in 2005. Eugene James Martin's work is resolutely audacious and singular, at a time when the Minimalist movement was dominant in the United States.

Eugene James Martin has had several solo exhibitions, including *Eugene Martin: A Retrospective* at Galerie Michel Rooryck (1990, Ghent, Belgium), *Art by Eugene Martin* at Horace Williams House (1992, Chapel Hill, USA), *Eugene J. Martin, États-Unis. Drawings and paintings* at the Cultural Center Oudenaarde (1996, Oudenaarde, Belgium).

Eugene James Martin's work has been the subject of numerous solo and group exhibitions, including: *Eugene Martin: Retrospective* at the Alexandria Museum of Art (2007, Alexandria, USA), *Improvisations in Time: Eugene J. Martin and the Masur Museum of Art* at the Masur Museum of Art (2012, Monroe, USA), *The Art of Eugene Martin: A Great Concept* at the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art (2012, Biloxi, USA), *La Mascarade du Chemin du Mauvais Pas Sous la Rose* at Cabane Georgina (2019, Marseille, France), *Eugene J. Martin* at Galerie Zlotowski (2020, Paris, France), *Eugene Martin: The Creative Act* at the Louisiana State University Museum of Art (2022, Baton Rouge, USA), *Eugene James Martin: Heterochronic collages* at the Acadia Center for the Arts (2022, Lafayette, USA), and *Eugene J. Martin Drawings* at Galerie Zlotowski (2022, Paris, France).

Works by Eugene James Martin can be found in various public and private collections in the United States, including those of the Alexandria Museum of Art (Alexandria, USA), the High Museum of Art (Atlanta, USA), the Louisiana State University Museum of Art, Shaw Center for the Arts (Baton Rouge, USA), the Masur Museum of Art (Monroe, USA), the Ogden Museum of Southern Art (New Orleans, USA), the Paul R. Jones Collection of African American Art (Newark, USA), the Schomburg Center for Black Culture (New York, USA), the Sheldon Museum of Art (Lincoln, USA), the Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art (Savannah, USA); and in Europe, notably the Munich Museum of Modern Art (Munich, Germany).

For further information, please contact Valérie Wille
valerie@nathalieobadia.com / + 32 (0)2 648 14 05

Galerie Nathalie Obadia
Brussels

Charles Decoster

Eugene James Martin

11 January - 16 March 2024

Romana Londi

April - May 2024

Galerie Nathalie Obadia

Paris

Cloître Saint-Merri I et II

Nú Barreto

Silhouettes Parfaites

18 November - 13 January 2024

Sophie Kuijken

20 January - 16 March 2024

Galerie Nathalie Obadia

Paris

Saint-Honoré

Fiona Rae

Messages

12 January - 9 March 2024

Carole Benzaken

16 March - 18 May 2024