



**EUGENE JAMES MARTIN**  
**HETEROCHRONIC COLLAGES**



ACADIANA CENTER FOR THE ARTS | FEB 12 2022 – MAY 14 2022

# EUGENE JAMES MARTIN

## HETEROCHRONIC COLLAGES

**Heterochronic Collages is an exhibition of paintings by the African American visual artist Eugene J. Martin (1938-2005)**

*presented by*

Derrick Batiste  
Katie Bernhardt & RJ Fonseca, Jr



Acadiana Center  
for the Arts



## EUGENE JAMES MARTIN HETEROCHRONIC COLLAGES

The œuvre of Eugene J. Martin (1938-2001) is composed of multiple pictorial and graphic expressions accomplished using different techniques with which he experiments to derive the means that best expresses his art, his sensibility and even his sense of humor. Among his vast artistic production, collages occupy an important place to which little attention has been paid so far.

Martin briefly experimented with collages in the mid 1960s but immediately left the technique aside to concentrate on abstract oil paintings on canvas and various media drawings. In 1980-1981 Martin returned to collages, in the form of small, geometric colored pencil works with subtly incorporated drawing fragments created during the same time period. One will not find in these collages random pieces of ephemeral paper and photographs from found, discarded media arranged and stuck down onto a paper surface to create a new whole. Martin's approach to these early collages is structured, balanced, harmonious, and never just about cut-and-paste, cut-and-glue.

The early 1980-81 collages belong to the period immediately following Martin's 1965-80 stand-alone abstract drawings and satirical abstractions created with felt tip marker, ball point pen, pen & ink, graphite and colored pencil, gouache, watercolor, acrylic paint, and mixed media, but prior to his 1981-82 bamboo reed pen drawings, his 1983-86 pen & ink and graphite pencil drawings, his 1987-1993 acrylic paintings on rag paper, and his 1994-2004 acrylic paintings on canvas.

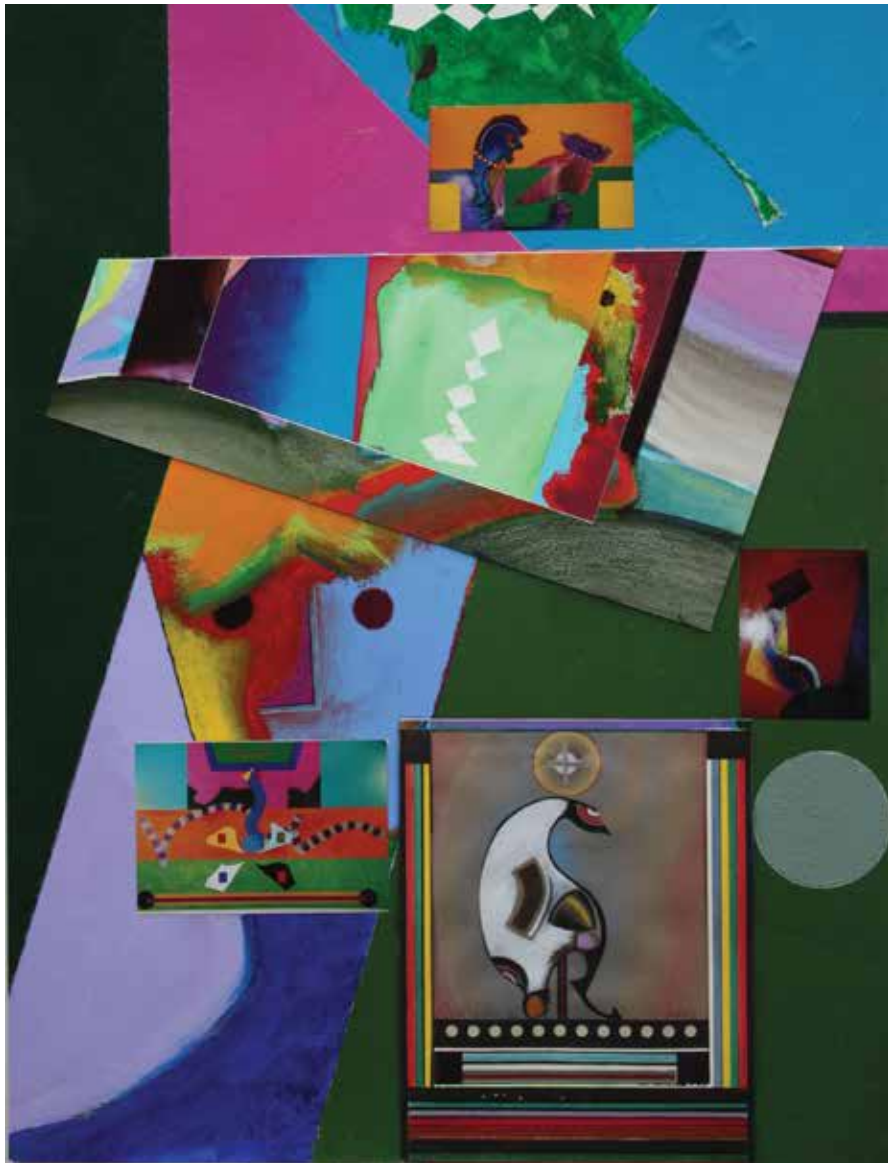
Whereas Martin's collages from 1980-81 were created contemporaneously, those from the 1990s are best viewed through the lens of Time, hence heterochronic -- literally of different times. Time here is not viewed as linear but well as cyclical. Each final collage was not conceived as a collage at first but instead represents a series of evolving metamorphoses



*Untitled*, assembled c.1997, 1993 acrylic paintings on rag painting, and erasure/cut-out crescent, 25x231 (21x27) inch.

and reorientations until it achieves unity by merging apparent contraries. As was the case in Martin's earlier collages, all his 1990s works are comprised solely of his own artworks. The difference between the 1990s and the early 1980s approaches is that the later collages were created from stand-alone works years or decades ago and that subsequently became integrated into more recent works on paper. Mixed media drawings from the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s typically became incorporated into larger works on rag paper from the early 1990s. A painting on paper created in 1991 might incorporate a pen and ink drawing from 1982, a mixed media drawing from 1969, and a photograph of one of his acrylic paintings on canvas created in 1993. How are we then to date a heterochronic collage? To date such complex and puzzling collages which represent a unique aesthetic is perplexing since Martin often dated the final collage with the year it was assembled. Many of the 1990s collages are dated 1995 to 2000, but most frequently 1997. Most often than not he didn't include the date when the individual pieces contributing to a later collage were created. The question seems further moot as it allows for apparent temporal reversals, such as when a photograph of a 1995 painting becomes part of a "1992 collage" when he apparently forgot to date the final collage. Eugene's art is thus the opposite of stasis; it is transformative at all levels of time and space. It is about freedom, improvisation, bridging, embracing, and uniting the past with the present.

The term "heterochronic collages" is a visual arts concept invented by Eugene J. Martin. In every instance, the additive process alters the original concept of each stand-alone piece and its relation to the collage as a whole. Each individual work in the collage becomes transformative vis-à-vis one another when incorporated in a new context. Multimedia collages, in essence, are chimeric creations: each becomes a single entity of multiple works that originated as distinct separate sources at separate times, with the dynamics of each part and the whole bestowed equal importance. The multiple (the individual works contributing to the collage) has become



*Aunts and Uncles*, assembled 1997, mixed media on rag paper (1990 acrylic painting, 3 photos of acrylic canvases, fragments of older acrylic paintings, 1980s drawing), 31.3x25.3 (29x22) inch.

one (the entire collage), and conversely, the one wouldn't exist without its multiple components. To approach Martin's collages is thus to discard any preconceived notion of what a collage typically and traditionally represents. The imagery of his collages is uniquely original and inventive.

By concentrating on any one part of a collage one can "travel" in and out of Time such as when a painting of 1991 incorporates a photo of a painting of 1999, which reminds us of H.G. Wells Time Machine traveling seamlessly from the Past to the Present to the Future, and back. In his collages Martin bridges Time but also genres, styles and media.

Martin's heterochronic, multi-sourced collages represent a singular aesthetic, a link with the concept of Time. As such, they are more rooted in the modernist literature of Marcel Proust than in the visual arts. Proust viewed that the power of Art is to resist the forces of Time, in which the past and the present, time and space become closer. This is also the power we experience when viewing Martin's heterochronic collages.

Just as Proust views Art in his masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time* (*A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, published in 1913-1927) as an organic whole, so are the heterochronic collages of Eugene J. Martin. Older artworks are reborn in their incorporation into a collage and are thus not ephemeral - they stand on their own and are just as relevant as the more recently collaged works. The experiences of both Proust and Martin are never fragmented but are to be viewed as a continuum. With Proust, most of the volumes are not divided in chapters, with Martin, most of the collaged works are not divided by time frame or medium.

Proust realized that the past is buried within him and that the only way to recapture this Lost Time is through Art. By experiencing, through involuntary memory, the possibility of sensations that are identical to the ones he experienced in the past, he realized that he had the ability to penetrate beneath the world of appearances and create a truly great work of art. Martin may have felt in the creation of his heterochronic



*Untitled*, 1997, mixed media on rag paper (acrylic painting, photo of 1994 acrylic on canvas, photo on 1990s acrylic on canvas), 25.3x31.3 (21.3x27.3) inch.

collages the same sensations that became a source of pure joy when it allowed him to rediscover in the present a sensation of the past. But this is not a voyage in the past, it is a voyage into the present. It is not a memory of the past, but a memory of the present.

To the same extent that Proust did not write *La Recherche* with a pre-established plan, neither were the creation of Martin's collages. Proust proceeded with endless additions to his ever-increasing volumes of *La Recherche* by temporarily 'collaging' his famous 'paperolles' in his hand-written texts and proofs so that his monumental novel kept getting fatter and fatter from within. Martin also wanted to push his stand-alone creations as far as he could by incorporating singular works/-fragments into a uniting collage to result in the formation of a more expansive coherent wholeness in which the relationships between the works are constantly changing and unpredictable. Proust's novel never stopped being constantly re-invented, restructured, enhanced during the writing process, and neither did Martin's heterochronic collages.

Through his heterochronic collages, Martin was able to attain a vision of Time Regained (*Le Temps Retrouvé*) and to defy Time. He did so by following a continuously evolving approach to his art and by conceiving powerful visual imagery combinations that opened up hidden worlds to us all. In this sense Eugene J. Martin is very Proustian.

The art of Eugene Martin, an African-American visual artist, is strongly rooted in the early 20th century European modernist tradition. It remains important to study in depth the connections between the visual art of Martin and that of European Modernism.

The AcA exhibit will highlight Eugene Martin's heterochronic collages from the 1990s. Those paper collages that incorporate a photograph of a painting or drawing will be hung next to the pertinent stand-alone works.

*Suzanne Fredericq  
Lafayette, Louisiana*



*Untitled*, assembled 2000, mixed media on rag paper (acrylic painting, 2 photos of 1995 acrylics on canvas), 20.5x 16 (14x12) inch.

## BLACKNESS AND COMMUNITY

### EUGENE J. MARTIN: HETEROCHRONIC COLLAGES

Eugene J. Martin's Heterochronic Collages are a great way to catch up with a significant and too often overlooked African American artist. How could they not be, when Martin incorporated several years of his art—in paint, in sketches, in photographs, and in catalog reproductions? Nearly two hundred collages make clear his range, with selected juxtapositions of his source materials. They provide a fresh context for earlier exhibitions of his paintings as well. Equally important, they allow one to catch up with a vital, vibrant urban community.

Characters slip in and out of Martin's abstractions like old friends. Just to stop in at Louisiana's Acadiana Center for the Arts is like entering that community oneself. All, it may seem, are welcome, male and female, black and white. And did I spot a figure with cat whiskers? They seem wide open, too, to one another, like the two children of different races in woefully mismatched school uniforms as *Sweetie Pies*. As the title of a source painting has it, *Let's Dance*.

### SATIRICAL OR OTHERWISE

Only do not accept the invitation too quickly. Martin shows people at home with one another, but not necessarily with themselves. They are gauging their position and taking their time. Two black men in a source painting confront one another up close, face to face, the Mohawk on one echoed in the protruding jaw line of the other. A cat, for that matter, sounds like the worst of the Internet, but it is also an emblem of slyness and cunning. A degree of confrontation and calculation is no more than the ordinary cost of art, blackness, and community. Yet it reflects all too clearly the plight of a painter, any painter, in the 1990s unwilling to let go of the richness of late modern art.

One can feel the mix of laughter and unease in the small mouths and huge eyes set anything but straight in their faces. Martin sometimes called his art "satirical abstraction," but it is never



*Changing Underwear*, 1994, acrylic painting on canvas, 49x31 inch

condescending or complacent—not when it turns on openness and sympathy. Not, too, when identity itself is so fluid. That white child is not alone in his bright yellow face in place of flesh tones and blond hair. Blackness is a rich mix of blacks, browns, and grays. Others stand apart from art’s traditional glorification of pink flesh with every color under the sun.

The collages show Martin at his furthest from abstraction, satirical or otherwise, but not altogether removed. That should make him newly relevant for today’s art, where body imagery and fantasy flow seamlessly into the inheritance of Modernism. If it makes you think of outsider art or kid stuff, all the more contemporary and all the better. Just bear in mind that he is best known for abstract art with good reason, and his subject matter is as slippery as its approach to race or narrative. In revisiting his past art, he was also affirming his commitment to painting. He was offering a pocket history of painting at that.

He displays a striking range of genres and technique, from portraiture to still life and from dotted accents to blended streaks of color. They keep everything in motion, even when the actors themselves do their best to sit still. Pretty much anything finds an unsettled place, from a vase on a table to cryptic hieroglyphics, even when they stand apart in black and white. Here and there at top are hints of landscape and sky. As always for Martin, Cubism is the font for an art of radical juxtaposition. Most settings are interiors, but one never can quite pin down when figures in their separate color fields occupy the same space and time.

This is everyday life, but not an everyday occasion. People appear in their Sunday best, for a more than ordinary Sunday. A woman fingers her pearls, but in living color. One man’s suit flares out into what might be a woman’s outlines. Does his white shirt front bear a slightly sheepish rat? Go ahead and smell a rat.

The Heterochronic Collages embrace Martin’s larger body of work physically, while departing from it in subject and media. As Suzanne Fredericq points out in her introduction to the exhibition, he had adopted collage before, in the early 1980s, at





*Untitled*, assembled 2000, mixed media on rag paper (acrylic painting, 2 photos of 1995 acrylics on canvas), 20.5x 16 (14x12) inch.

a crucial moment in his evolution. Only now, though, did he reuse past work. At nearly sixty, he might have been giving himself the much overdue retrospective that he never received in life. If it doubles back over the course of a career, "heterochronic" speaks literally of other times. In the process, it looks hard at the place of time in the Modernism he so loved.

### **PAINTING AS COLLAGE**

Modern art demanded to "make it new." That could mean an art for today, but also an art cut off from the past. And Martin's earlier collages had their own eternal present, with tight, shimmering parallels that recall the architecture of an art deco city. So did his prolific practice, from the kind of artist who just turns up in his studio every day. Do your work, he seems to say, and past and present will take care of themselves. Now, though, he is explicitly looking back, even while dropping right into the flow of time in the community.

The ambivalence of memory is itself at stake, and surely the need to remember was personal. The series falls roughly at the time of his move to Louisiana from Washington, the nation's capital and a black urban center. He must have asked himself where he was going and what he was leaving behind. That could be, too, why race appears more obviously, from a man who refused to labor under any label other than artist. Still, the work is about not just African American culture, like the jazz he knew and played himself, but Modernism and diversity. At his death in 2005, he left behind a white, European-born scientist in Frederica, his widow, who brings a singular expertise to his work.

He was not alone in his ambivalence. Museums in recent years have highlighted black abstraction, while leaving it to the viewer to understand its blackness. When Melvin Edwards shapes rusted iron into shackles, he is confronting a dark history, while also claiming the inheritance of David Smith as a welder. A show on the theme of black power had half a floor for abstraction, like that of another painter from Washington, Sam Gilliam. His unstretched canvas bursting with paint seemed completely out of place in all but one thing. Draped like curtains, it divided and claimed space.



*Untitled*, n.d. (1990s), mixed media on rag paper (1990s acrylic painting, 1970 felt tip drawing), 41x29 (21.5x28) inch.

Martin can boast a similar dual heritage. Collage itself takes him back to the techniques and silhouettes of Romare Bearden, much like the characteristic clash of bright colors and warmer browns. Still, it should not bring one to forget his place as a painter. In fact, collage also sheds light on his origins, quite apart from that brief detour in the early 1980s. One might see his geometric abstraction as itself a kind of collage. It should help rescue him, too, from lingering neglect.

Was painting itself out of the mainstream back then? It also had its share of dogma. It had to be “rigorous” and never “anecdotal,” and his geometric or biomorphic shapes could easily seem fussy or arbitrary—and that was apart from his black, white, and wildly colored actors. One can see him instead, though, as ranging over the vocabulary of art for his time and a vocabulary of feeling. He could cut it apart and reassemble it, much like in collage. Not everything works, but it has its own community as well.

To get to know Martin, then, AcA makes a great place to begin and then some. The Heterochronic Collages challenge one to pin him down as a painter, as what a younger artist, Karla Knight, has called (in describing herself) an “educated outsider.” They are exuberant, crowded, sly, and often sexy—and do not forget that “hetero” also denotes a certain sexuality. They show an artist at work, and a recurrent right-angled motif could easily be a drafting tool. They mix laughter and despair even as they reach for a wry disdain. They create a community.

### **PASSING THROUGH ABSTRACTION**

Black artists may have been marginalized, but one can no longer dismiss them as outsiders. They have been as central to Abstract Expressionism as Charles Alston or Norman Lewis, whom the Jewish Museum has paired with Lee Krasner. They have been as central to shaped canvas of the 1960s as Al Loving or Gilliam. They have been as central to the space between abstraction and representation as Hale Woodruff, Beauford Delaney, and Edwards. They have been as central to the full recognition of women artists as Barbara Chase-Riboud, Howardena Pindell, or Alma Thomas, and they are central to art today. They have become stars in their own right, like Nick Cave.



*Untitled*, n.d. (1990s), mixed media on rag paper (1990s acrylic painting, 1970 felt tip drawing), 41x29 (21.5x28) inch.

The distinction takes on special urgency for a black Southern artist only now gaining his due. Martin almost fits the fashion for outsider art, and if that will help others discover him or Stanley Whitney, terrific. Yet nothing is half as naive as it may seem. When Martin sometimes described his art as “satirical abstraction,” he knew full well that it is not at anyone’s expense. Still, the label does get at the seriousness, the comedy, and the eclecticism. It gets at his enigmatic figures and the defiantly abstract space in which they live.

Born in 1938, Martin studied at the Corcoran in Washington, D.C., and his work makes plain his knowledge of Cubism, including its spatial density and collage technique. Yet he also knew the bolder colors and outlines of a postwar American art that begins and ends in abstraction. His drawings, in overlapping curves of graphite or pen and ink, treat black and sepia as the rich colors they are for him as well. Black Southern art can hardly avoid questions of identity, and Martin’s color contrasts also resemble those of Jacob Lawrence as well as Bearden. He started out playing jazz (while Romare Bearden tried his hand at songwriting), and one could call that a key influence, too, as with the artists in the Whitney’s “Blues for Smoke.” He worked quickly in both acrylic and collage, like a born improviser bouncing off others in a band.

For him, art cannot leave personal experience behind. That may be why a figure keeps making an appearance in Martin’s work, even at its most abstract. Truth be known, he does not look much like the artist, but then Martin had more than his share of personalities within a single work, and they get along just fine. He is the frog peeping out from the side way back in 1969, the black silhouette lording it over an oval in 1972, and the man in a bow tie caught up in clashing geometry from 2000. To judge by early titles like *Detective Jones* or *Food and Drugs*, he could be on either side of the law. He could be wielding what looks like a hammer, in another work from 2000, before deciding whether abstraction can survive the blows.

Now that abstraction is back, big time, but often touched by representation, Martin's questioning is newly relevant. One could imagine his canvases as Martin Puryear in two dimensions. Or one could draw a direct line to geometric abstraction by such black artists as Odili Donald Odita. Like many younger artists, black and white, he might have leaped straight from the clarity of an earlier Modernism to American Pop Art and the graphic novel. (Well, some of those floating fields of color do have a parallel in Hans Hofmann.) One can see him putting abstraction through its paces, but with plenty of interruptions along the way.

Paintings from the 1990s, just before and after Martin moved to Louisiana, have a newfound energy, but also a greater simplicity. Their ground now looks like a grid, although a line of one color might leap across a rectangle, over a brushier green, to land on the other side. In his last years, his art becomes sparer, purer, and also less regular. Its subject might be a single descending brushstroke, 'but then Martin's real subject was painting all along. Does that just add to the ongoing riddle of whether one can distinguish an African American abstraction—and how? One might look for answers starting here.

*John Haber  
in New York City*

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#### ADDITIONAL IMAGES

Front Cover:

*Between Affixed and Attitude*, 1996, acrylic painting on canvas, 49x31 inch.

Inside Front Cover:

(detail) *Untitled*, assembled 2000, mixed media on rag paper (acrylic painting, 2 photos of 1995 acrylics on canvas), 20.5x 16 (14x12) inch.

Page 1:

Eugene Martin in his studio (2000)

Page 2:

Eugene J Martin BW Portrait

Inside Back Cover:

(detail) *Between Affixed and Attitude*, 1996, acrylic painting on canvas, 49x31 inch.



# EUGENE JAMES MARTIN

## HETEROCHRONIC COLLAGES

### PRESENTED BY

Derrick Batiste  
Katie Bernhardt & RJ Fonseca, Jr.

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