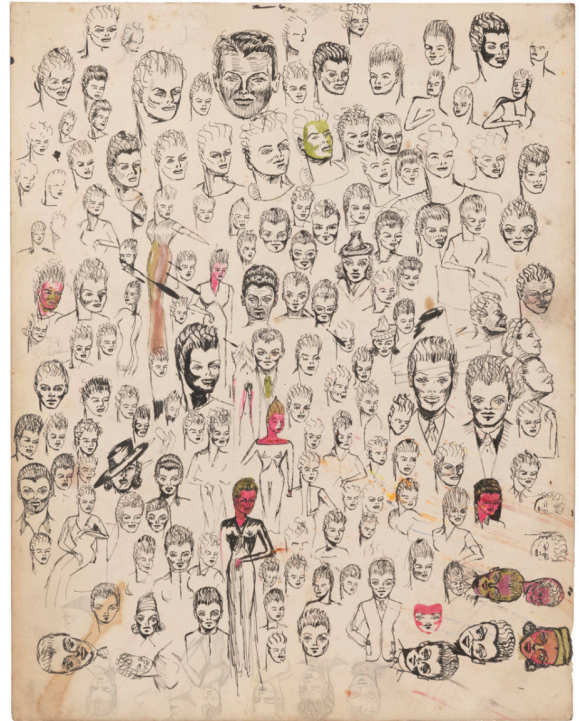


Eddie Owens Martin's Transformation into an Outsider Saint

John Yau

I first heard about Eddie Owens Martin (1908–1986) from the poet and publisher Jonathan Williams, who sent me a copy of *St. Eom in the Land of Pasaquan: The Life and Times and Art of Eddie Owens Martin* (1987), shortly after his press, Jargon Books, published it. In the monograph, Martin tells the writer Tom Patterson the sordid details of his life story and how he came to be St. EOM. It is one of those stories that stays with you long after you have read it.

Born in Buena Vista, Georgia, the son of sharecroppers, Martin ran away from home and his abusive father at the age of 14, eventually arriving in New York, where he survived as a street hustler, as well as a transvestite known as the Tattooed Countess, a waiter, a dope dealer, a gambler, a small-time thief, and eventually a fortune teller and artist. During a nervous breakdown in the 1930s, he heard a voice tell him to shed his old identity and become a “Pasaquoyan” named Saint EOM. In 1957, after his mother died and left him the family farm, he returned to Georgia and began transforming his home into an alternate universe, a project that consumed him until he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound nearly three decades later.



Eddie Owens Martin, “Untitled” (n.d.), watercolor and pen on paper, 14 x 11.25 inches (all images courtesy Institute 193 (1B))

Based on what Martin told him, Patterson surmises that being the sole Pasaquoyan enabled St. EOM to enjoy the pleasures of “ceremonial drag,” tying the ends of his beard on top of his head and wearing costumes. As he related to Patterson, he never cut his hair because he believed: “Your hair is your antenna to the spirit world [...]” Patterson describes “Pasaquan” — Martin’s inherited house and surrounding land — as a “pre-Colombian, psychedelic wonderland.” In 2008, Pasaquan was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Many consider it among the most important art environments in the United States, comparable to Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers.

One reason for providing the reader with some details of Martin’s history is because it will help contextualize the work you see in the exhibition, *Eddie Owens Martin, Pasaquoyan in the City: Fashioning a Southern Saint*, at Institute 193 (1B), curated by Annie Moye and Michael McFalls.

Although Martin lived in New York for more than 30 years, where he spent an increasing amount of time in his room making art, he gained attention only briefly, and not because of what he made, but because of how he was dressed. A writer for the newly started publication *Village Voice* characterized him, in the May 1, 1957 issue, as “one of the most colorful registrants” to be showing work at an outdoor art show in Washington Square. Describing him as “a turbaned, bearded figure,” the short, frontpage article cited

this statement by Martin: “I exhibit under the name of St. EOM [...]. I’m showing jewelry this year, as a change from paintings, but I’m really a fortune teller.” Appreciating Martin’s sense of identity as constantly shifting is central to understanding his art.

The exhibition consists of 11 undated drawings done in watercolor and pen on inexpensive paper, dating from 1935 to 1957. The largest sheet measures 22 by 10 ½ inches; the smallest, 10 by 12 ½ inches. According to the gallery’s press release, they were “selected from a collection of 1200 drawings found in steamer trunks in an attic at Pasaquan. These drawings have never been exhibited and were probably never removed from their trunks after Eddie moved back to Georgia from NYC.”

It would seem from this selection that Martin was interested in fashion design and the gender fluidity of his appearance. In some drawings of a figure wearing a dress, the figure’s wavy hairdo is cut short and worn tight to the head, resembles a quiff or “faux hawk” long before Miley Cyrus and Ruby Rose popularized this style. Whether the figure wears a dress or a suit, the length of hair stays basically the same. In every drawing — a number of which are full of heads — Martin focuses on the hair, eyes and mouth, making only slight variations. It might go straight back, or straight up, or be somewhere in between. Everything about the face is stylized — turning it into a kind of mask. He seems to be obsessively drawing different idealized versions of himself. What comes through is gender ambiguity.

In one drawing, dominated by a figure in a one-piece green bathing suit, the hairdo resembles a pompadour. Placed more or less in the middle of the paper and stretching from nearly the bottom to the top, the figure is surrounded by ink sketches of more figures and heads and, inexplicably, a row of three pyramids at an angle, near the lower right edge. Was Martin interested in pharaonic attire as he might have seen it in movies, sideshows and museums?

In another drawing, the dresses and costumes worn by the four female figures seem to be inspired by an imaginative combination of science fiction movies and high society evening gowns. Martin seemed to understand that everything one wears is a costume, a gesture toward identity. He also recognized that there was no place for him in this world and that he needed to create an alternate one, as others have gone on to do before and since. Done before he returned to his home in Buena Vista, Georgia, where he began building a world he felt safe in, the early drawings are the start of his visual exploration



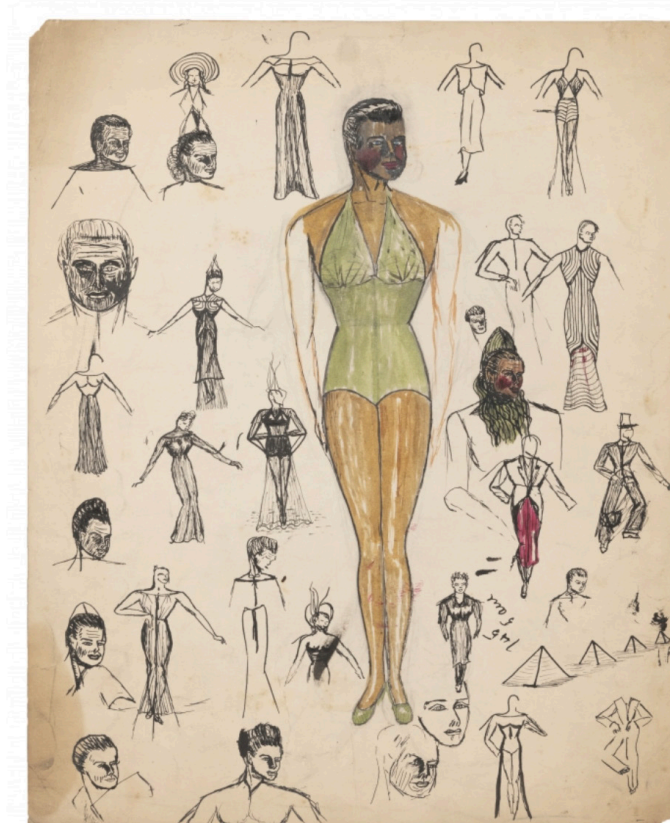
Eddie Owens Martin, “Untitled” (n.d.), watercolor and graphite on paper, 10 x 12.5 inches



Eddie Owen Martin, costume (n.d.)

of identity. Exhibited along with one of his costumes, they offer a glimpse into the daydreams of an intriguing, idiosyncratic visionary.

Eddie Owens Martin, *Pasaquoyan in the City: Fashioning a Southern Saint*, curated by Annie Moye and Michael McFalls, continues at Institute 193 (1B) (292 East 3rd Street, Manhattan) through November 3.



Eddie Owens Martin, "Untitled" (n.d.), watercolor and pen on paper, 17.25 x 14 inches