

Heather Gwen Martin  
**Biography and Technique**

**Born:** 1977 – Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada  
**Styles:** Abstract Expressionism



**Childhood & Early Training**

Martin was born in 1977 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. She remembers: "As a young kid -- starting maybe around 2 -- my mom would give me a big wooden-handled brush and a bucket of water when she worked in the garden and I would paint the sidewalk with water for hours on end. Not sure I figured it as drawing per se, but there was a definite engagement there."

At 17 years old, early acceptance to UC San Diego provided Martin with access to top art professors, such as Kim MacConnel, Ernie Silva, and Eleanor Antin. MacConnel (known for infusing high abstraction with kitsch decoration) immediately recognized a sophistication in Martin's early paintings he considered above the work of graduate students. A decade later, MacConnel continues to respect Martin's sensibility demonstrated by his 2010 San Diego emerging artist prize nomination for Martin. Applauding her ability to break the rules, he notes that Martin's "canvas space, while flat, opens up almost three dimensionally and in ways that skew balance, proportionality, and composition." In turn, Martin appreciates MacConnel's support for "work that was tongue in cheek and funny to me." Martin Received Bachelor of Arts (with Honors), University of California, San Diego in 1999.

She then studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, completing her degree in 2001.

## **Early Career**

Martin's early developed ability to experiment with color, line, and shape result partly from her background in computer illustration for comic book companies. Although a full time college student, she worked full time applying color for DC Comics. The clean, controlled brush work and highly saturated color found in Martin's paintings are directly associated with this experience. Martin acknowledges, "technology has affected the way that my hand, eye, and brain work because I spent a lot of time at a computer with my hand making shapes and color. You have to be precise with your hand. It's not real color--it's the color on the computer, instant and artificial with clean lines precise down to the pixel." She observes we often "conform to technology as opposed to technology conforming to us."

Despite this background, Martin consciously pursued painting in the face of an art environment dominated by new media. "I wanted to be making a painting, because it slows things down and brings back the human element in the making and in the looking. I wanted to be able to one day make a painting that's interesting and engaging and will compete against whatever is the flashiest loudest thing." Martin is equally effusive when discussing the physical and perceptual experience of painting. She describes staring at her work from an inch away, "the way the colors interact and are bouncing off each other. That's all you are taking in for so long and then you look away and everything else...is different and skewed." Yet, when pressed to discuss specifics behind the scenarios she draws from she balks arguing that it would "kill the experience." Since Martin first took advantage of UCSD's renowned cognitive studies program a decade ago, she continues to be interested in "how we respond to stimulus and different interfaces in the world"--painting reminds us that the brain is a physical organ and that our bodies are systems with reactions that cannot always be controlled.

## **Technique and Approach**

Martin delves deeply into the world of color theory and abstraction. The forms she creates teeter between complete abstraction and a loose suggestion of referential objects and forms. Her two-dimensional works boldly evoke a sense of space through color relationships. Experimental color combinations and lyrical compositions invite viewers to explore the visual depths within her paintings.

Since the early 1990s a particular aesthetic has been associated with abstract painting in the western United States, an aesthetic of over-the-top visual lushness that knowingly and aggressively updates ideas of "beauty," acknowledging our habituation to, among other things, synthetic materials and colors, and even the digital representation of mundane reality. Los Angeles, Houston, and, in particular, Las Vegas serve as the loci for this no-longer new-but-still-pervasive aesthetic, but it should come as no surprise that one of its most persuasive practitioners should now emerge from San Diego, specifically from the University of California campus - where a similar affront

to the art world's dominant "ugly-is-serious" trope had coalesced two decades earlier in the Pattern & Decoration movement.

Heather Gwen Martin began her studies at UCSD at the height of the "beautiful abstraction" tendency; according to her mentor, Kim MacConnel, even her earliest works "stood out in their commitment and sophistication." Recognizing a kindred spirit, Pattern & Decoration veteran MacConnel cultivated Martin's innate abilities and leanings, and the result is a body of work that still stands out in its commitment and sophistication - this time in the world, not just in the classroom. The tendrillous lines Martin employs, and the bulbous but brittle shapes she describes with them, appear in other contemporary painting and (especially) drawing, as does her palette, especially its almost painfully vivid chromatic levels. But nobody --- nobody --- else employing these now commonplace formalisms makes them work this way, or even achieves quite this level of power, allure, and eloquence.

Martin clearly derives her intricate, tensile line from both nature and computer; but at heart it comes from her own hand, and its dogged quiriness harks back to no less than Arshile Gorky. (The recent retrospective at MOCA provided ready comparison.) In a sense, Martin is an nth-generation abstract expressionist, devolving Gorky's branching gestures much as James Brooks and Conrad Marca-Relli and William Baziotis (and, yes, John Altoon and Jay de Feo) had. At the same time, her intense colors - and, especially, her raucous color combinations, sliding close hues and values almost painfully upon one another - owe a debt to the '60s-era hard-edge painting of such as Ellsworth Kelly, Leon Polk Smith, Jack Youngerman, Nicholas Krushenick and Deborah Remington. I have no idea whose work Martin knew previously (although, knowing MacConnel, he turned her on to at least some of these predecessors), but in this case we're not talking influences, we're talking shoulders of giants. This is the panoply of American painters in which we can already place Martin.

Of course, the 33-year-old Canadian-born artist --- who did grad work at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago --- is a child of her time as well. In both her palette and her line, and especially in her tumultuous composition, with its eddies, zigzags, abrupt abutments and explosions - all rendered with the poised, crackling hairlines of digital rendering - you see her inherit not just from the aforementioned postwar masters but from more recently prominent painters such as Inka Essenhigh in New York and Los Angeles' Monique Prieto. The level of excitement doubles, then, looking at Martin's paintings: you experience an exhilarating eyeful, gorgeous, smart, risky and vertiginous, and at the same time you witness an American tradition coming to a head in its latest iteration.

When asked, *What do you listen to while you work?*, Martin responded: "Music combined with sounds outside my window - trucks, birds, humming machines,

sometimes L.A. Louver, Venice, CA also mixed with background tv noise --- creates a sort of quiet in the end.”

### **Today**

Martin lives and works in Los Angeles. Her work has been included in museum exhibitions at the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; the Frist Art Museum, Nashville; the Rice University Art Gallery, Houston; the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; the Claremont Museum of Art, California; the Torrance Art Museum, Torrance, California; the El Segundo Museum of Art, California; and the Pizzuti Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio. Martin lives and works in Los Angeles, California.



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<sup>i</sup> *Biography of Heather Gwen Martin*, composed from various sources:  
[https://lalouver.com/artist.cfm?tArtist\\_id=426](https://lalouver.com/artist.cfm?tArtist_id=426); <http://www.artnet.com/artists/heather-gwen-martin/biography>; <https://www.muralsoflajolla.com/heather-gwen-martin>;  
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