



# Abstract Realism

A Pair of Studio Visits with Eddie Martinez

By: Jacoba Urist

*Eddie Martinez's studio. Photo by Pamela Vander Zwan. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.*

Over the last few years, Eddie Martinez has vaulted into that rarified level of the artworld that most painters can only dream of, finding critical, institutional, and market success that has landed him solidly on the radar of the world's top tier collectors. A fixture in the artworld since the mid-aughts, and long an insider favorite, reviewers have often tried to slot Martinez into specific categories and movements, labeling him a mixed-media or self-taught artist, classifying his painting practice as neo-expressionist or action based, and trying to designate his style as either representational or figurative. But with each show, the 45-year-old Martinez has consistently confounded expectations, refusing to conform to a particular style or mode of painting, and opting instead for a dramatic, densely packed approach that includes populating his compositions with spray paint, studio trash, gestural marks, cartoonish faces, and butterflies, alongside elements of abstraction and graffiti. All told, Martinez's painterly rigor compromises a brash, bodacious aesthetic that has left buyers and dealers of his work thirsting for much more.

In addition to the success he has found with collectors – between sold-out shows at his primary market galleries and the steady rise in price that his paintings have sold for at auction – Martinez has also managed to dazzle some of the most exciting contemporary art institutions in the U.S. Across the country, multiple museums have presented solo exhibitions showcasing the artist's oeuvre. In 2017, the Davis Museum at Wellesley College unveiled 'Eddie Martinez: Ants at a Picknic,' which included seven new large-scale works from the artist's 'Mandala' series – hyper-kaleidoscopic paintings that resemble massive, frenetic dinner plates – as well as numerous table-top bronze sculptures alongside a suite of drawings on paper. The following year, 'Eddie Martinez: White Out' came to The Bronx Museum, heralding an even greater level of recognition for the Brooklyn-based lifelong New Yorker in his hometown. In his 'White Out' series – a facet of his practice which now appears throughout his shows – Martinez strips his paintings of their usual bold palette, covering his work in various shades of richly textured whites, while allowing various shapes and color to seep through. Echoing Ad Reinhardt's purity of abstraction and Robert Rauschenberg's study in monochrome, Martinez's 'White Out' paintings, in particular, have become highly sought after by collectors not only here in the U.S., but also in Europe and Asia. Shortly after the 2019 show at the Bronx Museum, 'Eddie Martinez: Fast Eddie' opened to wide acclaim at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, spanning two gallery spaces with a bevy of new paintings.

But despite all of these accolades, Eddie Martinez has remained an inveterate risk taker, as eager as ever to push his practice to new heights and stretch beyond previous bounds. Over the course of two studio visits on the occasion of his recent solo show 'Pigeon Sweat' at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles, Martinez and I cover a lot of ground, discussing everything from the genesis of the butterfly motif that graces many of his new paintings, to what drives him to add detritus such as gum wrappers and baby wipes to his paintings. Along the way, Martinez shares the true inspiration behind the name of the recent exhibition at Blum & Poe, what it's like being one half of an artworld power duo (he's married to noted sculptor Sam Moyer), and how parenthood and the pandemic have changed him, both as an artist and as a human being.

*Interview begins ▼*



● **Jacoba Urist:** Your practice often combines signature figurative elements like butterflies and buggy-eyed, exaggerated human skulls, as well as gestural mark-making and bold, graphic brushstrokes. After all is said and done, do you consider yourself a figurative artist, or an abstract artist? Or would you say that your practice is impossible to pigeonhole into either box and really falls somewhere in between?

*Eddie Martinez:* That's not something I really ever think about unless someone brings it up or I see it written about my work. My painting is all coming through the same lens and from the same place of experience, which is me simply living my life. I just employ both ways of working and have zero interest in stifling myself.

**Jacoba Urist:** What about when the label of a "self-taught artist" is applied to you?

*Eddie Martinez:* I genuinely think calling an artist self-taught is a market factor. I am not self-taught or an outsider in the way most people are familiar with those terms. I had a little bit of schooling as an artist, but I just couldn't do it. I kept dropping out and eventually gave it up altogether. Rather than a "self-taught artist," I think a more appropriate label for me would be an "instinctual painter." I work on insight and intuition.



*Eddie Martinez's 'Bufly #4 (Big Body)' (2021). Oil, acrylic, enamel, spray paint, oil stick, baby wipe, and debris on canvas. 120 x 84 x 1 1/4 inches. © 2022 Eddie Martinez / c/o Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.*

**Jacoba Urist:** Let's talk about these paintings that you're currently working on. As we sit in the studio, it's filled with

butterfly compositions in various stages of completion, some of which are pretty large scale. In your own words, how would you describe these works?

*Eddie Martinez:* The inspiration for these butterfly paintings originally came from my son, Arthur. He got really into butterflies, so my wife, Sam, made him this amazing plaster butterfly thing—which I then painted—that he attached to a backpack and wore for Halloween. After that is when I first started making these butterfly paintings. Once I get into something like this, I just go. If I'm excited about something, I can see all the different possibilities at once, and it's crucial for me to just start working on them immediately and with all of my attention.

**Jacoba Urist:** You became a parent right before the pandemic, so you only had about five or six months of relative normalcy before the entire world got turned upside down—as opposed to just you and Sam's lives as new parents at the time. Your current LA show, *Pigeon Sweat*, features work made in 2021, a year in which the whole world was experiencing a lot of uncertainty. Talk to me about how these last couple of years have affected you.

*Eddie Martinez:* I think the global aspect of your question is hard for anyone to answer because the extent to which the pandemic has touched everyone in the world has been shocking. I think that will probably ebb and flow, seemingly never ending, especially with the variants and all that shit most likely continuing. But being a parent has done a lot for me. I've been trying to allow myself to grow over the last several years. I love being a father. I'm so connected with Arthur and Sam. I found parenting to be a precipice, a place where you might continue exclusively in your learned behaviors, giving in to your own recognition that you'll never change. You know, the "Well, I'm me; fuck it" attitude. The "I'm just going to do what I've always done and not make any changes" approach. Or, you could go the other way, and choose to look at it as an opportunity to be more open to changing your ways. When you become a parent, you really do have that choice between closing off or opening up. I've chosen to receive the gift of openness and I'm really embracing that. The pandemic was another huge pause button similar to how being a new parent can trigger a certain type of pause in your life that causes you to reassess. Sometimes you just have to put that New York pace in check.

“ I've chosen to receive the gift of openness and I'm really embracing that.”

**Jacoba Urist:** I bet Arthur's room is quite the collector's paradise. What artwork did you choose for him to live with for the first formative years of his life?

*Eddie Martinez:* He does have a sweet little collection in there. He has the first butterfly painting that I liked, which wound up, after the fact, being a study for the huge painting *Buffy #4 (Big Body)* (2021) which is included in the show at Blum & Poe. Then, he's got a beautiful Chris Johanson parrot, and a large, electric Brian Bellot collage. And Arthur is obsessed with basketball, so he's got two small Jonas Wood and Walter Price drawings, both of which are basketball themed.



*Eddie Martinez's 'LaLaLa Arthur's World' (2021). Oil, acrylic, enamel, spray paint, oil stick, and gesso on canvas in Artist's frame. 108 7/8 x 144 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches. © 2022 Eddie Martinez / c/o Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.*

**Jacoba Urist:** I'm curious about the title of the show. Where did you get the name of the exhibition, 'Pigeon Sweat,' from?

*Eddie Martinez:* It's from *Ted Lasso*, where he says the tea is so awful it tastes like pigeon sweat. I draw a lot when I watch TV.

**Jacoba Urist:** How did it feel working together as a couple—with your work so vastly different in material and aesthetics from Sam's—in conversation for the show "Sam Moyer and Eddie Martinez: Arthur" at Ratio 3 in San Francisco a few years ago?

*Eddie Martinez:* Since it was the summer of 2020, we didn't get to actually see the show up, so that was weird. We had an experience of it, but we didn't get to actually see it in person. We didn't make any of the work together, so the show wasn't collaborative in that sense. But we called it Arthur because he's our collaborative effort. There isn't much to expand on with that right now, except to say that there are some things coming this summer—two shows together—that are just Sam and Eddie individually. Maybe there will be some collaborative work. You never know what might pop up. But I think it's safe to say that people will certainly see our work juxtaposed with each other again.



*Eddie Martinez and Sam Moyer in front of 'Buffy #5 (Big Body)' (2021) at the opening of 'Pigeon Sweat' at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles. Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.*

**Jacoba Urist:** You've gained a lot of critical and market momentum over the last decade—especially these past few years—pushing your practice in new directions and turning you into a highly in-demand artist. How does that recognition and widespread attention affect your process and day-to-day experience of making art?

*Eddie Martinez:* It's much like parenting. I'm taking stock of what I've done until now, thinking more, and just generally slowing things down. There has been a progression to where I now have a very reliable, stable setup. Like I said earlier, my work is closely related to my daily existence and my experiences, which, at the moment, revolve very much around me just being stoked to be able to paint. I get to paint whatever I want and that's a living dream.

**Jacoba Urist:** Many artists construct a narrative around their paintings or frame a specific point of view for the viewer. But you don't do that for people. Why not?

*Eddie Martinez:* I definitely don't ever provide a storyline for the viewer. Any narrative that exists is generally coming from my own experience and my own life. I'm not telling you anything. I'm not trying to have something looked at with a certain perspective. I don't think it's my job to keep talking about the painting after it's already made. I can—but I don't.



**Jacoba Urist:** I'm wondering how you decide to incorporate other materials onto your canvases? After all, it's a technique you're pretty well known for, with works like *Buflly #4 (Big Body)* (2021) from this current show, for instance, featuring baby wipes and what you generally list as debris, as I've seen listed in other paintings. In the past, I also know you've used things like rolling papers, and Trident gum wrappers for your *Matador* series at the Journal Gallery.

**Eddie Martinez:** You mean, how do I decide to put trash in my artwork? Well, to start, there's just so many types of trash created when you make art in the first place. There's paper and plastic from when you open things, and baby wipes, bottle caps, and all kinds of other shit just lying around the studio. It's a constant irritant to me but I don't fully know how to handle it all. So, I end up just gluing things onto the canvas. It's an obvious thing I would do in life. I just pick up what's on the floor and put it on the wall and into my work. Of course, there are things that happen from a formal painterly perspective too. But I don't think people realize that a lot of it is a manifestation of my own compulsion.



*Eddie Martinez's studio. Photo by Pamela Vander Zwan. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.*

**Jacoba Urist:** I'm curious about how you manage the relationships with your galleries. While not necessarily unique, it is interesting that an artist – especially one as closely watched as you – would choose to maintain such strong continuing relationships with so many galleries of all different sizes and models: Blum & Poe, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Perrotin, Timothy Taylor. That's a fairly uncommon setup for someone of your stature in the artworld.

**Eddie Martinez:** I like to be able to steer the ship in the way that I want to go. And this seems to work well for me. I never really saw the appeal of being tied down to one dealer. It just doesn't make a lot of sense for me. Even though it's true that there are many little mini galleries that exist inside one of those huge galleries, and it's possible to find your own niche in one, I need to just keep things in check with where I am in my life and where I'm going. In fact, I've even gone back to some older relationships too, like Loyal Gallery in Stockholm, whom I

had worked with very early on. I had a show [New Paintings 2] there last spring, thirteen years after my first show with them. The process around the exhibition was really fun and we had a great time doing it. It felt good to rekindle that relationship.

“ I'm taking stock of what I've done until now, thinking more, and just generally slowing things down.”

**Jacoba Urist:** New York-based artists can often fantasize about LA as the road not taken. Did you ever flirt with the West Coast, or did you know from the start that New York was the place for you?

**Eddie Martinez:** New York is where I'm from. Both sides of my family are from Brooklyn, and I lived in Brooklyn until I was three then moved around and eventually came back. I mean, it's difficult living in New York sometimes. But once I realized I couldn't do anything else in my life other than pursue being an artist, there was no doubt that I had to do it in New York.

**Jacoba Urist:** During my first visit to your studio, we talked about your *White Out* paintings, the series in which you depart from your typical bold and colorful style and focus on a process of blotting out paintings with various shades of white. Your canvases take on a ghostly presence. I remember being mesmerized by them at your Bronx Museum exhibition in 2018 and feeling a strong connection to Robert Ryman, whom I consider the king of creating depth with white paint. Your current LA show has a *White Out* work, *Raid Painting #2 (Gotcha)*, 2021.

**Eddie Martinez:** And the last time we spoke you confessed to being a Wite-Out huffer...

**Jacoba Urist:** I had a visceral reaction when you mentioned that the smell of correction fluid might have, perhaps, helped influence your impulse to start the *White Out* series. My dad is a lawyer who had his office in our home. So yes, in the early- to mid-eighties, I enjoyed the smell of Wite-Out, now and again.

**Eddie Martinez:** I always had Wite-Out around because I was always drawing. To me, in that case, it's used to cover up one thing with something else. The goal with correction fluid is

to completely obliterate it. But here, in my paintings, I use the technique of white paint to see what happens when what you're putting down as a second layer becomes the skeleton. The skeleton brings a whole new idea, composition, or approach to making the painting. Instead of just whiting it out and letting it be removed, the whiting out gives it a rebirth and a potential whole new path.



Eddie Martinez's 'Raid Painting #2 (Gotcha)' (2021). Oil, acrylic, spray paint, and enamel on canvas. 60 x 72 x 1 1/8 inches. © 2022 Eddie Martinez / c/o Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

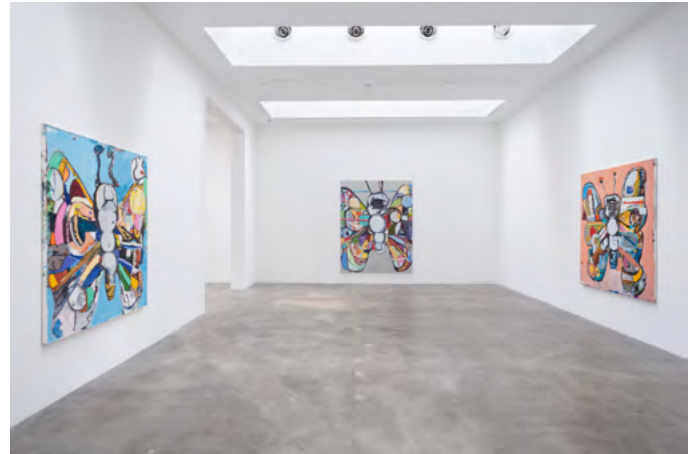
**Jacoba Urist:** Can you give me a sense for what your day-to-day life is like balancing painting and parenting? How do you unwind?

*Eddie Martinez:* Arthur is in what I would call mini school now, in a little environment with some friends and they're learning stuff. It's funny to call it school, though. It's basically for three hours a day. It's good after all the isolation everyone has been through. Kids need this. Sometimes we get there, and he wants to bounce, which I can understand. But overall, he enjoys it.

I play some version of tennis, taking lessons three or four times a week in the morning, afternoon, or at the end of the day. During that long stretch of Covid lockdowns, the city took down the public court nets, which was absolutely insane, at the time. You couldn't play anything anywhere. So, now, one way or another, tennis works itself into my day, and then I get to the studio and start painting.

**Jacoba Urist:** What about in the days and weeks immediately following a show's opening? Do you experience a sense of release after a show is finally up after working on it for so long and take some time for a breather? Or do you immediately start mentally preparing for the next one?

*Eddie Martinez:* If you came to my studio before this LA show, it was a total disaster. I was working towards that deadline on all different types of paintings simultaneously. But now that the work is up, I have a fresh perspective. I'm coming off of Pigeon Sweat and feeling pretty easy-breezy, so I decided to paint these butterflies, all at once, as you are seeing. I'm just going for it and having fun. ■



Installation views of Eddie Martinez's 'Pigeon Sweat' at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles in 2022. © 2022 Eddie Martinez / c/o Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo. Photo by Josh Schaedel.