



**Jane Martin:
The Ties that Bind**

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Diana Nemiroff
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Foreword

Sandra Dyck, Director

Thirteen red roses were delivered to me at CUAG yesterday. The gorgeous bouquet sits on my desk, its deep, velvety reds not only a stunning foil to my monochromatic office environment but also a link to the brilliantly coloured roses that crowd Jane Martin's paintings, featured in an extraordinary solo exhibition in the gallery, just outside my office door.

The Ties that Bind is Jane Martin's first career retrospective, curated by Diana Nemiroff. It is appropriate that the exhibition takes place at CUAG: Jane received her MA from Carleton University in 1966 and taught English literature here. She also met her husband, the musician Ewen McCuaig, on campus; they married in 1967, moved to Toronto in 1986 and were profoundly devoted to each other until his death in 2001.

It is no surprise that images of Ewen figure prominently in *The Ties that Bind*. In the exhibition's intense, formidable and dense chronological unfolding, Diana focuses our attention on Jane's lifelong subject: human relationships, whether within the family, among friends, or the give and take of the couple. As Diana has written, the exhibition takes its title from the ties — often literal in Jane's work — that express both the fulfillments and frustrations of these intimate human connections.

Like all exhibitions, this one coalesces and embodies a unique community, one formed through connections to Jane Martin. I thank Barry Spackman, Daintry Topshee and Jean Bridge, whose personal and professional support for Jane have made this exhibition possible and joyful. Jane's friends Daintry, Bill Brown and John McKinven, and Glenda Patrick (through the A.T. Tolley Art Collection) generously loaned works to the exhibition, as did the National Gallery of Canada, Canada Council Art Bank and Ottawa Art Gallery.

Diana, too, has long been a supporter of Jane's work, purchasing it while curator of contemporary art at the National Gallery of Canada and then again, while CUAG's director. I am indebted to Diana for her empathic and incisive approach to this curatorial and writing project. It was a pleasure to observe her working out the impressive installation on site, in close collaboration with preparators Patrick Lacasse and Gabe Thomson.

I am most grateful to Jane Martin, whom I've known and admired for nearly thirty years, as an artist, an advocate for the rights of women in the cultural sphere and a philanthropist. It is because of her extraordinary support for and generosity to CUAG that we will one day be able to establish a new staff position, The Jane Martin and Ewen McCuaig Curator of Art by Women. It is a fitting tribute to her life's work, and one that connects her primary passions.



Dickson Suite #1, 1981



Clematis Ramona, 1983

Jane Martin: The Ties that Bind

Diana Nemiroff, Curator

Jane Martin's art addresses the feelings of connection that people have for one another, the metaphorical ties that bind us to one another. Sometimes, these ties are experienced as friendship, or as a deep emotional bond between two persons. However, they can also be experienced as constraints that prevent us from giving full expression to ourselves, or the selves we could be. This is the psychological terrain that her art explores. Her work is provocative. Whether on a large scale, with multiple elements and strong colour, or at its most intimate — a pencilled record of the details of a single body, closely observed — it is difficult to remain indifferent to the works she has made over the past fifty years.

In spite of the changing means and stylistic approaches that Martin has adopted over time, there are several constants, as this retrospective reveals. The first is the persistence throughout her work of a female subject. There are exceptions, of course: male figures appear in the couples and family groups in the early works that make up the first section of this exhibition, and the subject of much of the late work is her husband, Ewen McCuaig, who died of brain cancer in 2001. The sex of her subjects is less explicit in the central section of the show, in which fragmented torsos are strung up, bound and stuffed into elaborate frames. But even in these psychologically and sexually charged works, the confusion of flesh and fabric, the obsessively painted wallpaper backgrounds, the ribbons and stitching, combine to suggest, directly and indirectly, a female subject.

Another constant is the domestic scale of the work. Almost all Martin's paintings are well under a metre in height and width. Only one work in this exhibition, a panel from *Ewen's Christmas Cabinet Polyptych* from 1996, is larger. These intimate dimensions are consistent with Martin's chosen themes — the family portrait, the couple, sexual intimacy and the roses from her garden, arranged on

plates or piled in cupboards. Even smaller are the drawings, scaled only slightly larger than the Polaroids on which they are based. They invite the viewer to look closely, thereby miming the artist's own connection to her subject.

The deliberately naïve, decorative quality of Martin's work is a third constant. It is evident throughout in the flattened space in which she positions her subjects. It greets the eye via intricately patterned tablecloths and wallpapers that serve as backgrounds to both portraits of roses on a plate and portraits of couples in a room, but it's apparent also in the elaborate folding and stitching that secure an empty skin torso to its beribboned hanger. At their most intense, her pictures — chock-full of decorative detail — can be stifling in their intimacy. Whatever pleasures or pains they portray take place out of sight, in the bedrooms and closets the artist evokes, rather than in the impersonal streets of everyday life. The private enclosure of the house and garden is the stage set for the human dramas she depicts.

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The Ties that Bind is divided into three thematic sections and periods. The first, in which Martin's focus was on couples and family portraits, begins with paintings from the mid-1970s, the point when her signature style and subject matter emerge clearly. Preferring to leave interpretation to the viewer, Martin was reserved in speaking about her work at this time, except to say that she began individual paintings without preliminary sketches or a particular model in mind. "I merely start with a blank white board. [...] I may go on for hours until something emerges—an eye, a face, or an expression which I rework ... until maybe a month later a very definite painting has evolved."¹ In spite of this reliance on the unconscious creative process, which led her to speak, in the same interview, of her lasting emotional investment with

her subjects, she did, in fact, have an early model to guide her overall approach. Inspiration came from old family albums full of formally posed studio photographs, in which people donned their Sunday best and presented themselves as they wanted to be seen and remembered, unflustered by the pressures of everyday life. "When I paint," Martin told a journalist, "I feel as though I am the photographer, and they are with me in the studio while I take their picture. I get very caught up with my own emotions and preoccupations about the family."²

The paintings that emerged from Martin's imagination in the decade between 1973 and 1983 gradually evolved from stories peopled by stiff, two-dimensional figures resembling the cut-out paper dolls that little girls of her generation played with, to grown-up dramas of sex, babies and feelings of entrapment. Tying the knot is represented in the painting *Wedding Ribbons* (1974) by coils of ribbons which pass through the shoulders of the dazed-looking couple's clothing, literally suspending them in this moment of (one supposes) marital bliss. A few years later, in *Black Half Slip* (1983) a half-naked woman, her torso bound with ribbons, pulls away from her importunate lover, leaving the viewer with unanswered questions.

Although her frontal compositions, flat pictorial space and use of decorative detail are suggestive of pop art and popular art in general, Martin's art conveys a variety of very human emotions, from tenderness and sexual contentment to loneliness and frustration. Viewers struck by the wooden, puppet-like style of her figures assumed her intent was satirical. When Kay Kritzweiser, a seasoned Toronto art critic, wrote, "Jane Martin's paintings are marvellously wicked caricatures of the human race—you think at first. But more accurately, Jane's people, though grotesqueries, are real people and that's the test," she was one of the first to understand Martin's true



Wedding Ribbons, 1974

aim.³ Martin confirmed her observation several years later, stating: “What I am interested in, to the exclusion of all other subjects, is people. I try to paint with an emotional and sensual accuracy.”⁴

Beyond exhibiting her artworks in Ottawa and Toronto, Martin was also actively engaged with the close-knit artistic community in Ottawa. Along with the artist Jerry Grey, she headed the production team of CAROT, the local organ of the national artists’ lobby group CARFAC, and was elected CAR’s Ottawa representative, hailed for her “unbreakable integrity” in CAROT’s November 1976 newsletter. She was particularly concerned with the representation and economic situation of women artists and the systemic constraints they faced. Through CARFAC, she published a report in 1978 on the under-representation of women artists on Canada Council juries tasked with awarding grants, later updated and published jointly by CARFAC and Status of Women Canada in 1981.

Martin’s activism on behalf of Canadian artists continued after she moved with her husband to Toronto in 1986. There, she worked on the fundamental issue that had drawn her to CARFAC, that of artists’ copyrights, and in 1988 co-founded the artists’ copyright collective CARCC. From 1989 to 1991, she served as national president of CARFAC. Martin continued to defend and advocate publicly for artists’ economic, professional and moral rights for the next decade. Her work in this area is an extension in a different register of the human-centred vision of her paintings.

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In 1986, around the time that she and Ewen McCuaig moved to Rose Avenue in Toronto’s Cabbagetown neighbourhood, Martin’s art took an abrupt turn. The precipitating event, documented in a series of

Polaroids and drawings in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, appears to have been the surgical incision and subsequent scarring of her abdomen from a hysterectomy operation. Scars on the body, regardless of biological sex, accumulate with age. But for a woman, this scar is a mark of profound consequence. It represents the loss of her reproductive life, the end of her ability to have a child. Medically necessary hysterectomies may be a source of liberation from suffering for some, but they can also be experienced as — and can precipitate — a premature coming of (old) age and attendant emotional turmoil. However this may be for the individual, a scar is the memory of a wound, an act by which the barrier of the skin is penetrated, and the flesh laid bare.

Leaving behind the documentary precision of her post-hysterectomy drawings, Martin went on to produce a series of remarkable paintings of the human torso, pierced with stitches, bound with ropes of ribbon, wrenched into twisted shapes and hanging like empty bags from satin-clad clotheslines. These are among her most disturbing and, at the same time, compelling works. Fuelled by rage, anguish and occasional black humour, they both rivet our attention and force us to turn away. Like her earlier works, they are part of the feminist project that questions societal norms which put women in their place in socially sanctioned institutions like marriage and the family. More profoundly, they exhibit the wounding effect of societal assumptions about ageing, which are most cruelly directed toward women. Speaking in 1989 about the body as medium and metaphor in her work, Martin concluded with these words:

Throughout my work the human figure has been used symbolically. The weddings are not personal documents so much as images of cultural phenomena. The genital images are not pornographic, but potent metaphors of power and

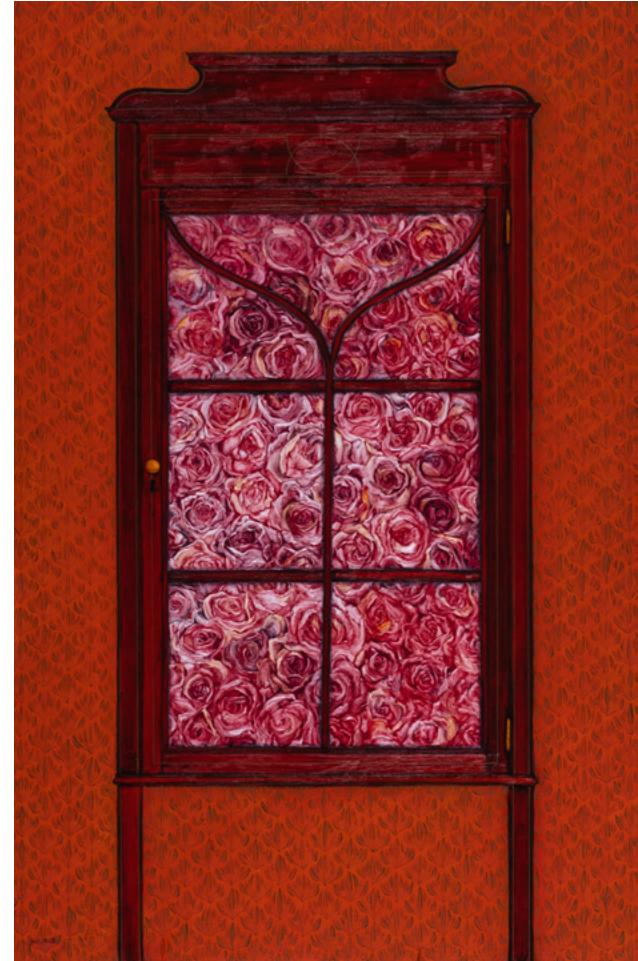


Hanging Cupboard, 1998

powerlessness; [...] repression and rapture. [The body] is also metaphorically the site of oppression and the shrine of pleasure.⁵

Gradually, the torsos Martin painted — initially so visceral — emptied out, and the skin that enclosed them increasingly resembled fabric. When she decided to pay homage to Vancouver artist Gathie Falk's pioneering ceramic works, Martin borrowed a motif — the display cupboard Falk used in her *Eight Red Boots* (1973) — for her own purposes. In a statement prepared later, she wrote: "It resonated with my own compulsion for representing the body through processes of fragmentation, containment, repetition and abstraction."⁶ Stuffed into painted display cabinets like old rags, Martin's distressed skins lose some of their gut-wrenching directness. Midway between flesh and fabric, they nonetheless surprise, their seams suddenly parting to reveal an unhealed wound or a vulva-like opening. Although metaphorically secure in their cabinets, these fabric-skins are forceful reminders of the pain of ageing and the persistence of desire.

By 1993, the gothic atmosphere suffusing her paintings, darkly expressionist in their distortions of the physical body, yet oddly domestic in their settings and references to the sewing room, had come to an end. The twin themes of horror and sensuality that pervaded these works proved too hard on her personal equilibrium. "I felt I would come to harm if I kept on," Martin wrote in a note on an announcement for her new paintings of roses.⁷ She kept the cabinets, but filled them with roses from her garden. She also devised a new, equally domestic means of displaying her roses, placing them in bowls set on patterned tablecloths, which lent itself to smaller, more intimately scaled paintings.



Ewen's Christmas Cabinet (Orange Background), 1995



Fabulosity: Today is Wednesday. What will we do tomorrow?, 2009

Martin's new subject matter grew out of a passion that had been developing since the move to Toronto: she had become a collector of roses, and a decade later, the garden behind her house housed some 37 varieties, both old and modern, of the storied flower. Flowers in art have a long history, from sensual celebration to *memento mori* — reminders of death. Martin's paintings, featuring roses she had cut and dried, are both. They speak of sensuality contained and of worldly transience. They also bear the imprint of the domestic world that she and Ewen had created in their Edwardian house, its intensely coloured walls and ceilings hand-painted by the couple and decorated with period furniture and her own paintings. Together with the garden, the house became their *Gesamtkunstwerk* — a total work of art — in which art, music (for Ewen, a church organist), architecture and design combined to make an expressive whole.

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The rose paintings were a metaphorical response to a medical event in the couple's life: Ewen's open-heart surgery in 1995, which necessitated the rerouting of four arteries leading to his heart. Only later did Martin exhibit the drawings she made documenting the event. Playing on the double meaning of 'heart', she titled the resulting series *Dear Heart*. Like the drawings that had followed her own surgery, they were intimate in scale and carefully observed. In an emotionally revealing statement published for an exhibition of the drawings in 2004, she wrote, "Ewen's interest in the wires and the removal procedures was quite matter of fact. My interest in the markings on his leg and torso was visual and particular. Maybe interest in detail is a way of coping with the immediate aftermath of what was really not so cut and dried, but a maelstrom eventually calmed by a medical wonder."⁸ This slow and considered process — photographs, followed by drawings, followed by paintings — separated by several

years, would become Martin's way of working over the next decade and a half, as the calamities of age and fate, culminating with Ewen's death from brain cancer in 2001, piled one upon the other.

Roses remain inextricably part of the process, as Martin's work moved, in this third and most autobiographical period, toward unflinching realism. Their lifespan, measured by a single season, from closed buds to sensual blooms to faded and withered petals, is here the poetic equivalent of the late stage of human life. Ewen's illness interrupted the rose paintings, but it also gave rise to an unexpected dimension of poetic language, as he struggled to put into words what was happening to him. Martin borrowed the word "fabulosity" from his observation that the roses in full bloom in their garden were "just moving into fabulosity" to title an exhibition of paintings she made several years later of her husband after his surgery, some of which are included in this exhibition.⁹ The word contrasts oddly with the external evidence of physical devastation seen in the paintings, but it opens a window onto the wonderment that seemed to fill everything he saw and felt at the time.

In 2002, Martin had her own brush with fate in a collision with a transport truck while driving back to Toronto from Ottawa, where she had been discussing arrangements for an exhibition of her drawings. It took a long time before she could use the photographs that she had taken of herself after the accident. In a statement for an exhibition of her rose paintings two years later at Juniper, an Ottawa restaurant run by her friend, the chef and artist Richard Nigro, she wrote: "Roses. Funny. When our bodies were bashed, I couldn't paint them, even though body imagery had been my metaphor for thirty years. I needed a metaphor for the metaphor."¹⁰ A decade later, she started work on two series of self-portraits titled *Staying On*, documenting her injuries with the unsentimental realism that she had always



Staying On: Crash #4, 2014

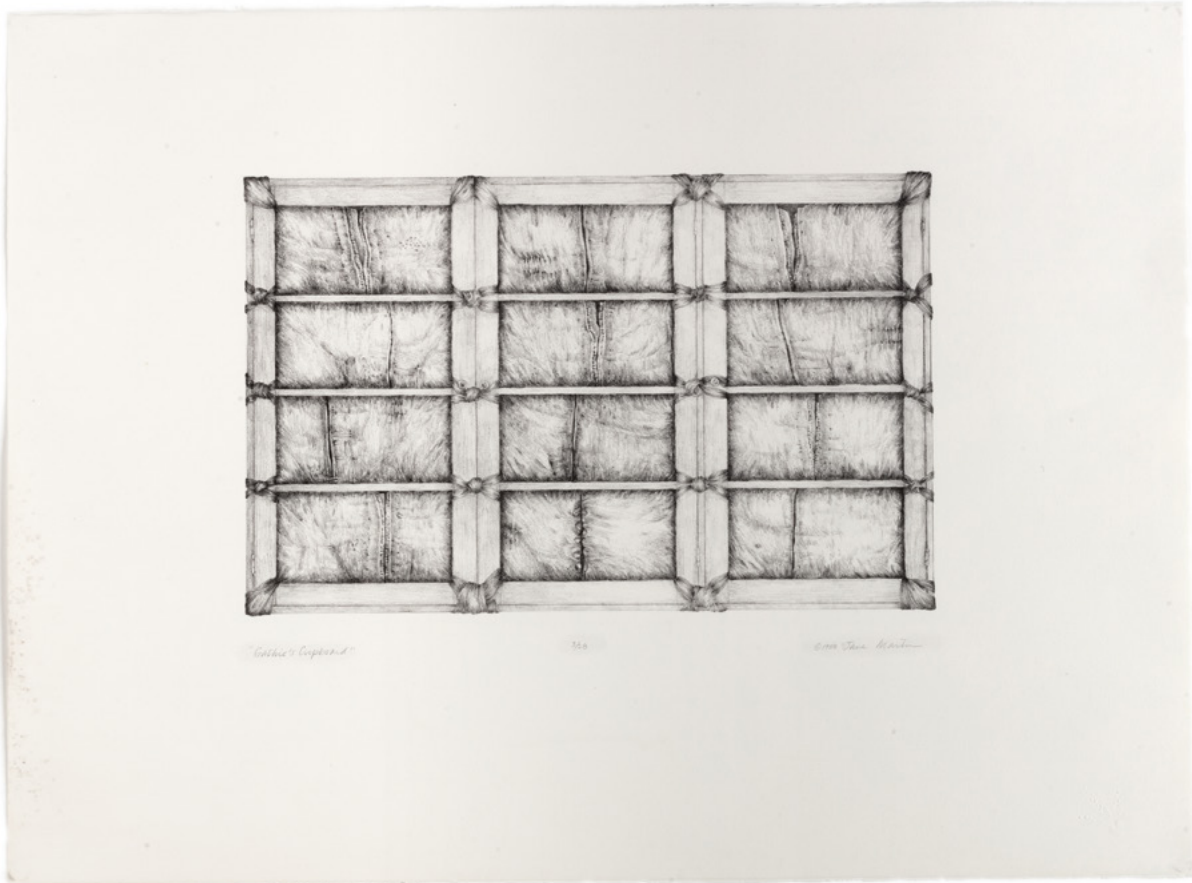
brought to her depictions of people and their hopes, their foibles, and their disappointments. Here, she is the one who remains, after her husband's departure, waiting for whatever life brings next.

Martin studied literature, not art, in graduate school; she completed an MA in Canadian Studies at Carleton University in 1966. Largely self-taught as an artist, she found her way gradually, slowly developing her vocabulary. But what she wanted to communicate was clear to her from the beginning: "The single subject of my work is people; its single aim, understanding; its single motive, love. Many consider my images distorted, ugly, and hateful. I consider them realistic, beautiful, and compassionate."¹¹ Given her background and training, it is not hard to imagine Martin as a modern-day Jane Austen or, perhaps, Charlotte Brontë, depicting the social challenges and personal struggles of her female protagonists as they try to find love — and gain wisdom. In the last works in the exhibition, the *WE* drawings, there is suffering but there is also love. The ties that bind herself and Ewen McCuaig are the final chapter of Martin's storytelling, and a fitting expression of her feminism-inflected, humanist vision.

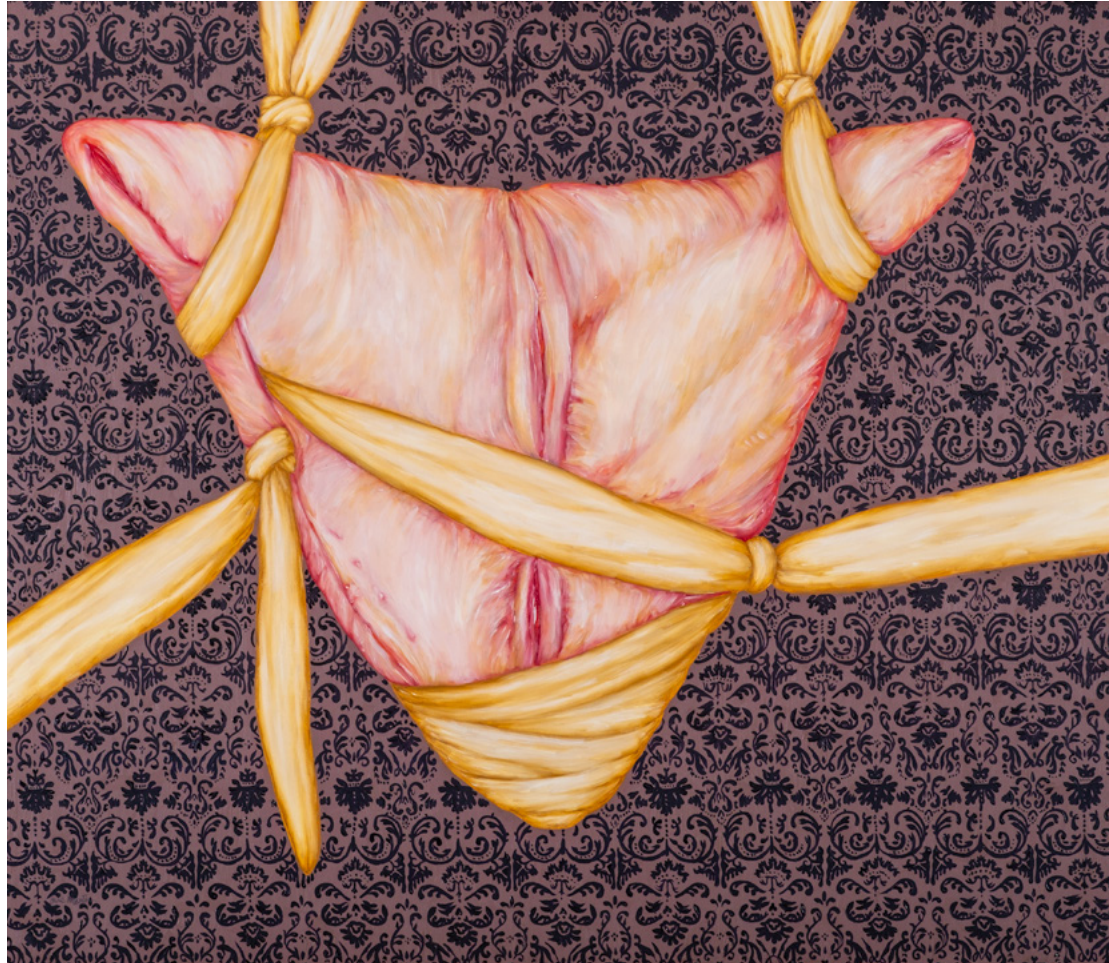
- 1 Valerie Knowles, "World hers alone," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 25 August 1973.
- 2 Kathleen Walker, *The Ottawa Citizen*, 27 September 1975.
- 3 Kay Kritzwiser, "Doreen, Jane, Agnes," *The Globe and Mail*, 9 October 1971.
- 4 Jane Martin, in anonymous review, "Paintings, sculptures at Upper Level Gallery," *The North Bay Nugget*, 24 August 1979.
- 5 Jane Martin, "The Body; Medium and Metaphor," notes for slide talk at Rodman Hall Art Centre, St. Catharines, on the opening of the exhibition *Crossties* at Niagara Artists Centre, 5 October 1989.
- 6 Jane Martin, acquisition proposal, curatorial files, National Gallery of Canada, 2017.
- 7 Handwritten note to the author (dated 3 June 1993) on the announcement of the *Rose Show*, which took place at her Toronto home from 19 June to 9 July 1993.
- 8 Jane Martin, "Artist's Narrative," announcement for the exhibition *Dear Heart: Drawings by Jane Martin*, *new* gallery, Toronto, 24 March to 11 April 2004, and The Ottawa Art Gallery, 25 June to 26 September 2004.
- 9 The *Fabulosity* paintings were based on the photographs which Martin took of her husband, documenting his surgical scars and the radiation and chemotherapy that followed his surgery. In 2007 Martin created a series of 40 coloured pencil drawings titled *Something Happened* based on her photos and exhibited them at Red Head Gallery in Toronto the following year. Some 35 drawings from the series were purchased by the Art Gallery of Ontario.
- 10 Jane Martin, exhibition announcement for *Juniper Roses*, 4 November 2003 to 15 February 2004, Ottawa.
- 11 Jane Martin, "Artist's Statement," *Artfemme 1: An Exhibition by Artists from the National Capital Region*, sponsored by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 20 September to 29 October 1982.



Blue Flowered Wallpaper, 1979



Gathie's Cupboard, 1988



Wrapture #1, 1989



Emblem #4, 1990



Brocade Background Roses, 1993



Ewen's Christmas Cabinet Polyptych (panel 3), 1996



Brown Plate on Lawn, 2003



Fabulosity: Your whole body is in devastation, 2009



WE: *White*, 2010

Works in the exhibition



Wedding Ribbons, 1974, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Green Leaf Room, 1976, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Lace Curtains, 1976, Oil on Masonite, Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank

Blue Flowered Wallpaper, 1979, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Daintry Topshee

Green Curtain, 1979, Oil on Masonite, Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank

Dickson Suite #1, 1981, Oil on Masonite, Carleton University Art Gallery: Gift of Bill Brown and John McKinven, 2004

Dickson Suite #3, 1982, Oil on Masonite, Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank

Black Half Slip, 1983, Oil on Masonite, Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank

Clematis Ramona, 1983, Oil on Masonite, Carleton University Art Gallery: Gift of Bill Brown and John McKinven, 2004

Gathie's Cupboard, 1988, lithograph on paper, edition 3 / 28, Carleton University Art Gallery: Gift of Victoria Henry, 1995

Pink Ribbons, 1988, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Bill Brown and John McKinven

Emblems: Diptych, 1989, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Daintry Topshee

Wrapture #1, 1989, Oil on Masonite, Carleton University Art Gallery: Gift of Bill Brown and John McKinven, 2006

Wrapture #2, 1989, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Emblem #4, 1990, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Emblem #5, 1990, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Transfiguration No. 18, 1991, Coloured pencil on matboard, National Gallery of Canada: Purchased 1991

Wrapture #3, 1991, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Brocade Background Roses, 1993, Oil on Masonite, Carleton University Art Gallery: Gift of Bill Brown and John McKinven, 2000

Rembrandt's Roses, 1993, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Daintry Topshee

Window Seat, 1993, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Ewen's Christmas Cabinet (Orange Background), 1995, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Gathie's Cupboard (Green Background), 1995, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Ewen's Christmas Cabinet Polyptych (panel 3), 1996, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Gathie's Cupboard (Orange Background), 1996, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Dear Heart #8, 1998, Coloured pencil on ragboard, Collection of Jane Martin

Dear Heart #17, 1998, Coloured pencil on ragboard, Collection of the Ottawa Art Gallery: Purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program and OAG's Acquisition Endowment Fund, 2004

Hanging Cupboard, 1998, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Pressed Glass Dish on Lawn, 2002, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Pressed Glass Dish on Mahogany Table, 2002, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Brown Plate on Lawn, 2003, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Pressed Glass Dish on Indian Tablecloth, 2003, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Fabulosity: Mask #1, 2009, Oil on aluminium, Collection of Jane Martin

Fabulosity: Sometimes I seem to know things and then I don't, 2009, Oil on aluminium, Collection of Jane Martin

Fabulosity: That thing coming over my heart in waves, 2009, Oil on aluminium, Collection of Jane Martin

Fabulosity: This opening is so critically numerous, 2009, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Fabulosity: Today is Wednesday. What will we do tomorrow?, 2009, Oil on aluminium, Collection of Jane Martin

Fabulosity: What grew in there by false, 2009, Oil on Masonite, Collection of Jane Martin

Fabulosity: Your whole body is in devastation, 2009, Oil on Masonite, The Arnold Trevor Tolley Art Collection

WE: Silver Lace #1, 2010, Coloured pencil on matboard, Collection of Jane Martin

WE: White, 2010, Coloured pencil and graphite on matboard, Carleton University Art Gallery: Purchase, 2012

WE: never quite touching the river, 2011, Coloured pencil, graphite and watercolour on matboard, Collection of Jane Martin

WE: Tether, 2011, Coloured pencil on matboard, Collection of Jane Martin

Staying On: Crash #3, 2014, Oil on aluminium, Collection of Jane Martin

Staying On: Crash #4, 2014, Oil on aluminium, Collection of Jane Martin

Staying On: Crash Triptych, 2014, Oil on aluminium, Collection of Jane Martin





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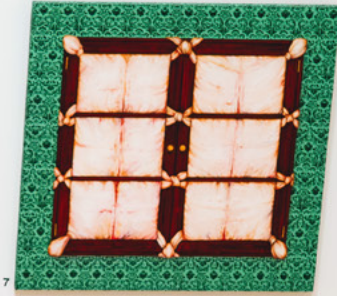
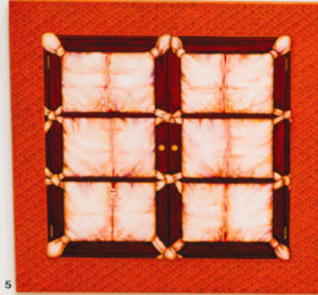


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Back cover: *Fabulosity: Your whole body is in devastation*, 2009 (detail)

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