



ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / **Vol. 01** Jan.- Mar. 2023

Lifetime of Devotion: The Art of Fred Martin

MING REN, Former Assistant of President, San Francisco Art Institute; Director of International MFA Program, China Academy of Art.

Notes About the Role of China and Chinese Art in My Work

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Sponsor: Chinese Arts Association of San Francisco

Organizer: California Academy of Arts

Publisher: Frontier Press

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Lifetime of Devotion: The Art of Fred Martin

Ming Ren

Fred Martin was an outstanding painting professor and scholar who worked at the San Francisco Art Institute for over 50 years, during which he served as the President of the San Francisco Art Institute for over 20 years. He was a renowned painter, art critic, and art educator in the United States, and was also one of the important figures in American modernist abstract painting.

Early in his career, he studied painting with renowned artists such as David Park, Mark Rothko, and Clifford Still at the San Francisco Art Institute. His works seem to embody the philosophy of color in geometric abstraction and the rhythmic form of musical notes, as well as the romantic abstraction that expresses naivety and fun. The inner spirit of the works materializes into shapes and lines with the use of lines and colors to convey the harmony of forms and their relationships, which is enough to touch and shock the viewer. In a strict sense, this is not just the result of superb painting skills, Martin's painting is based on the principle of being able to touch the human soul, mainly by returning to the "original" innocence and finding the true

expression through his works. Viewers can also see the "traces" of the cross-influence of these early works by his mentors, but that is just a "trace". His works have a unique imagination that is both "familiar" and "new". The free-form lines, shapes, and colors are harmonious in the multi-dimensional space of the picture, making the energy they release extraordinary. His compositions are full of passionate biological energy, with unique and individual watercolor blending, and you can still find more colorful new aesthetics features in these decades-old "original" works.

Professor Martin's works have been exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art since 1949, and over the past 60 years, his works have been displayed at major museums across the United States, including the famous Whitney Museum in New York. During this time, he has won many prestigious awards, such as the 183rd Annual National Academy Prize in New York, the gold award at the annual oil painting and sculpture exhibition of the Oakland Art Museum, and so on. In fact, Martin's fame comes not only from his works, but also from his art criticism, writing on art history, and



Figure 1, 2. Artist and educator Fred Martin (1927-2022) was among a group of students at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou Zhejiang province in 1988. Photo provided from Ming Ren.

speeches. He is widely recognized as a well-known art critic, and has published many art works to date, including: “2008, 2009, and 2010 Painting and Working Records” “Classical Soil” “Holy Land”, and more. He has also written a large number of art reviews and essays for many American art magazines and special issues.

Professor Fred Martin is also an old friend of China. During his tenure as president of the San Francisco Art Institute, he made outstanding contributions not only to the exchange of Chinese and American art and culture, but also to the training of art talent in China and to the research and development of contemporary art in China. He started leading the team of teachers and students from the San Francisco Art Institute to the China Academy of Art and other art colleges in China for academic exchange as early as 1986. To this day, nearly 30 years have passed. Many famous Chinese artists have

gone to the only pure art institute in the United States for further studies in the 80s and 90s. The San Francisco Art Institute thus became the earliest art institute for exchange between China and the United States.

The exhibition features works by Martin, who had a strong interest in Confucian culture of China from a young age and showed elements of Chinese culture in his works. The works showcase Martin’s artistic development and style in different periods and serve as a tribute to his artistic contributions and legacy. Martin’s art has left a valuable spiritual wealth for the world.

Feb. 5, 2023

MING REN, Former Assistant of President, San Francisco Art Institute; Director of International MFA Program, China Academy of Art.

Notes About the Role of China and Chinese Art in My Work

Fred Martin

An astrologer told me once, fate is what happens to you; destiny is what you make of it.

We are each one of us a separate tree of life in the great forest of life that is the Earth itself. And for that different tree that each one of us is, it is where the seed was planted—the soil, the water, the air and light and season—that is the first thing that happened to us, that is our own first stroke of fate.



Figure 3. Fred Martin. *Sketch*. Watercolor paper, 1958.

And it is for each of us who our parents were and their strokes of fate and the destinies that they made of them that now surrounds us as our own second stroke of fate.

And so it is that from this place and from these people in it, it is from these fates—from this environment of lives—that we each begin to make our own unique destinies, our own individual trees of life within the vast nearly infinite forest that is the whole earth.

My seed was planted in San Francisco in 1927. My father was an electrical engineer working for the Pacific Telephone Company. He designed switchboards for offices... He was from a little town on the banks of the St. Lawrence River in upstate New York. When a very young man he had run the electrical generator for the town (a lonely job all night) and to pass the time he taught himself to play the violin and the flute. Fate is what happens—a long job running a generator on the dam all night—destiny is what we make of it—learn music and get a degree in electrical engineering. And so in later years he taught his son to understand science and classical music: Mozart and Rossini and Opera. Always stubborn, when I grew up I went for Wagner and Mahler, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius.

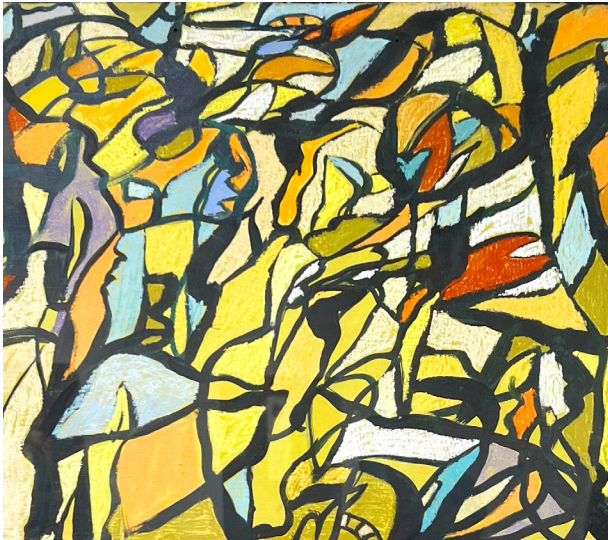


Figure 4. Fred Martin. *Continuity*. Board, 1960.

My mother was born in a little town in California on the Pacific coast. I always heard her father was a “drunken lumberjack” where just in from the coast were all the forests of the California Redwoods from which the houses of early 20th century California were being built. My mother graduated from high school in her town, moved north to San Francisco,

and became a secretary in the office where my father worked. They married, and a year later I was born in June—as my astrologer friend said, a Gemini.

Fate is what happens, destiny is what you do with it. When I was 5 years old, I was bedridden with rheumatic fever for 3 months or more (that was indeed my fate). But it was from that fatal event began what later became my destiny—an artist—because as a five-year-old who did not know how to read, I spent my days drawing ships inspired by a *Book of Old Ships* illustrated by Gordon Grant that my parents had given me. My parents praised my drawings, and my mother collected them in a scrap book which she kept until she died and I threw it away (I wish I hadn’t). By the way, “inspired” means to be filled with spirit. To be inspired does not mean to be derivative, it means to be lifted to a realm higher and wider than where you were before.

After that at least 3 months of bed rest I drew only seldom. I remember, however, when I was back in school a time in second (or third?) grade when I was drawing a sailing ship and the guns were firing and I was making the sounds of the cannons low in my throat and mouth and the teacher—actually a very kind woman—said I should stop. I did stop, but I still hear today as I did then the sounds and names and stories (if you could

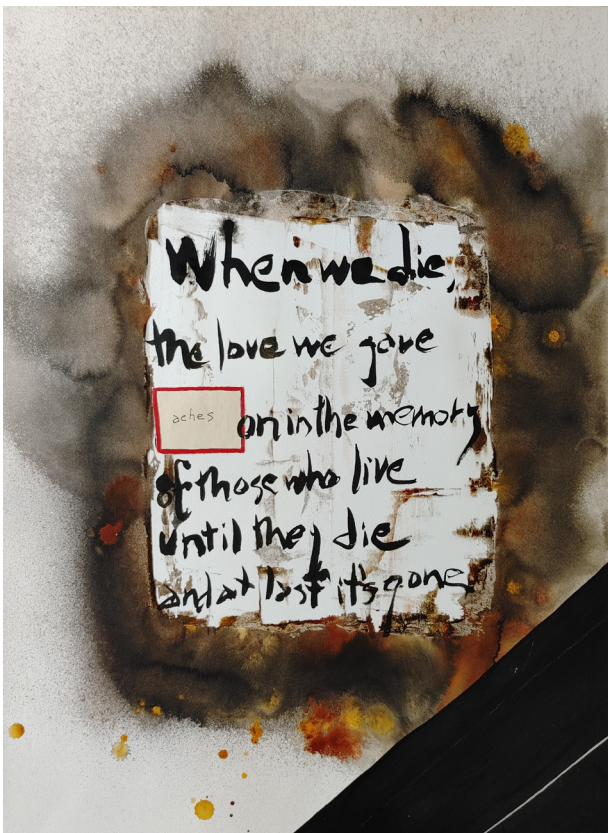


Figure 5. Fred Martin. *Aches*. Watercolor paper, 1980.

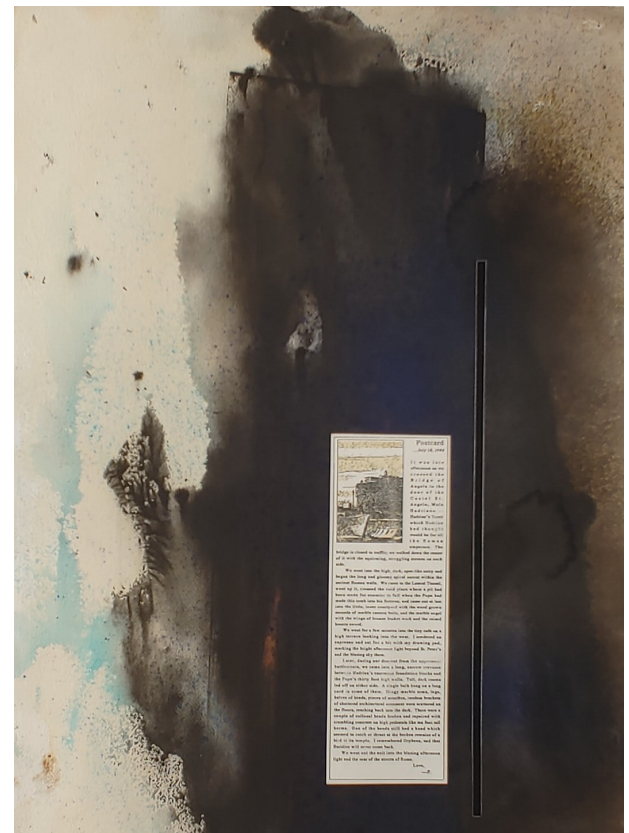


Figure 6. Fred Martin. *The Ink in Memory*. 1980.



Figure 7. Fred Martin. *Sketch and Manuscripts*. Watercolor paper, 1984.

call them that) of what I make—and the touch and color and weight and substance and light of it too. That is because for me at least, what I make is not so much pictures of things but things themselves in all their physical actuality.

I was in my senior year of high school when one of the teachers took me under his wing to learn high culture including Laozi (we spelled it Lao Tze then and I still do). I found a 1910 “transliteration” of the Tao Teh Ching, made my own more readable rendition of the chapters that mattered to me and used it for my term paper in aesthetics when I was in graduate school.

My high school teacher also gave me a book of ten or so Chinese paintings in color where I noticed but did not think about all of the inscriptions of poems and owners’ seals on the paintings; and he gave me a copy of *Chinese Art* (published 1935 in London), where I found a colored illustration of a Tang “Apple Blossom” vase. Somehow there came to me then the phrase “that this light which once so fell on it should ever so fall, even to the final dust”. That vase and phrase—and that one might write poems on the surface of a painting and that I should remember what Lao Tze said about the void—have been among the foundation stones for my art ever since.

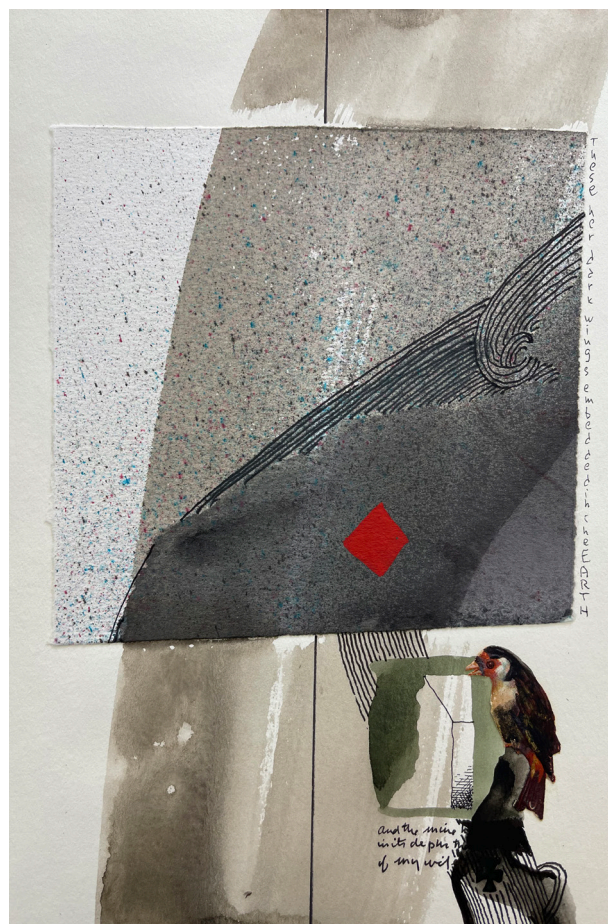


Figure 8. Fred Martin. *Sketch and Manuscripts*. Watercolor paper, 1984.

I enrolled as a Freshman at UC Berkeley in the fall of 1945. Our second semester introductory art course involved using a Chinese brush, ink stick and stone to make what our teacher thought was Matisse, since I had seen some Chinese calligraphy in the 1935 *Chinese Art*, I thought was maybe calligraphy—anyway, wiggly lines. A year later while in a highly charged emotional state, one afternoon I made wiggly lines until they made of their own accord the image of what was then my psychic crisis. In 1947 I had wandered by way of illegible calligraphy into the realm of Abstract Expressionism before the style and the term had been invented.

Other Chinese sources from my undergraduate years at Berkeley were a course in Chinese poetry where I learned of Tao Yuanming and his *Peach Blossom Spring* and a poem I think called *Return*, and of Tu Fu and his poems of exile, nostalgia and regret. I also took that year a course in Chinese philosophy from Han to Sui taught by a professor visiting from the University of Peking, and a course in Buddhism from an old German professor who had known Sir Aurel Stein and showed dingy hand colored slides of Dun Huang.

In the year after I graduated from Berkeley, I took a course from David Park who suggested when I was

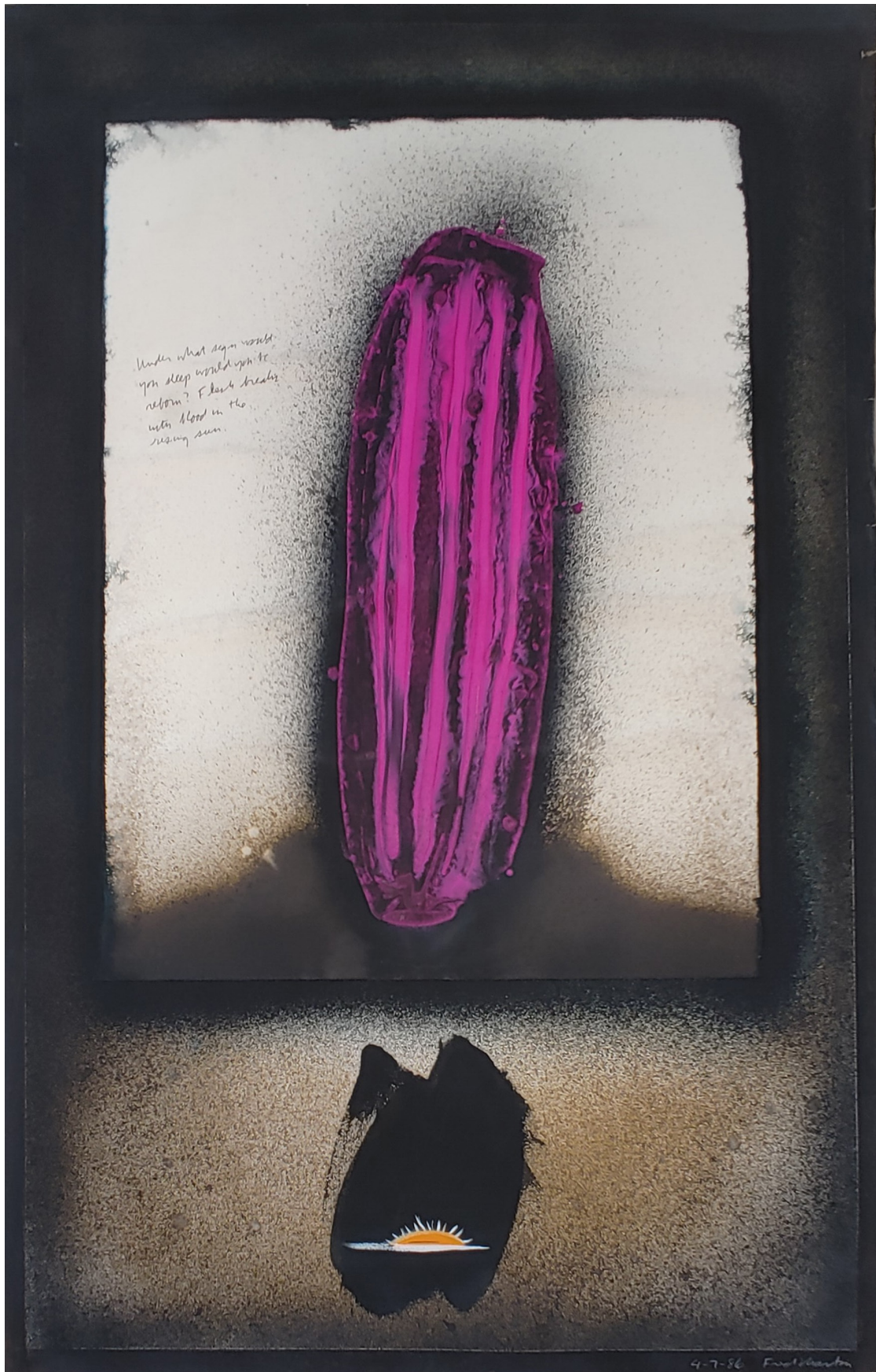


Figure 9. Fred Martin. *The Bitterness*. Board, April 7, 1986.

stuck in a painting and did not know what to do, “pick the part you like and paint everything else out.” I did that and found large blank spaces which soon enough I characterized as Lao Tze’s “void”. When later I saw Ma Yuan’s work, I knew I was right.

Many years passed. I climbed the ladder of career both as an artist with many exhibitions, and as a teacher, ultimately becoming Vice President for Academic Affairs at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), where unknown to all but me, the readings I had made so long before in Lao Tze and Confucius were of help in my service to a community of artists and students just as they had been a guide for centuries to the people of China.

Then, in 1986, came the opportunity to bring a group of students to study at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art) in Hangzhou, and for me to travel to Dun Huang where I had been dreaming of going ever since my undergraduate days in Berkeley almost forty years before. I joined the students

in their wonderful studies of Chinese painting, calligraphy and culture at the Academy, and in the following years had the opportunity to go to Putuo Shan, Tibet, Huang Shan, the Li River, the Yun Gang caves and so many other places of Taoist, Buddhist and Chinese painting lore, mystery and power in the Western mind.

As for the roles of Chinese art and philosophy, literature and landscape in my work and life now since that first touch in high school seventy years ago, all the things and experiences in the past come together as a continual shifting of West and East and past and present as in this text (in pen, not a brush) on a painting from twelve years ago.

“He remembered how sometimes the Chinese scholar—a mandarin like himself of so much learning, authority and isolation—in the silence of his studio and surrounded by the tools not only of his first studies but also of his subsequent social ascent...the brush and ink, the paper and inkstone, and by curious things and bits of stone his friends of past times had given him, a water dropper shaped like one of the Taoist peaches of mortality, a fragment of jade with the lines of the mountains of the Western Paradise. Thus as for the Chinese scholar to whom sometimes the marks in a rock showed the path of life, so sometimes for him a stain, a bleed or blob of paint became his prayer and truth, his words and touch and shining dust.”

So, in old age as in youth, experience comes together to form personality—but in old age, we have accumulated so much more experience. My experience has been broad and now long thought about—a tapestry of East and West, of past and now and tomorrow. And all of it comes always together in each work of art complex or simple, for it is in the touch of the hand and its place in the image that all the artist’s life comes together to make the work that is a gift to the future.

We are each one of us an individual tree of life, and like every tree we sprout from seed, we grow, mature and give fruit to feed people now and give seeds for the people of the future. We then grow old and die, our trunk and branches lying in the earth slowly transforming to become soil for the trees of lives to come.

November 2017

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Editor: Gao Pengfei

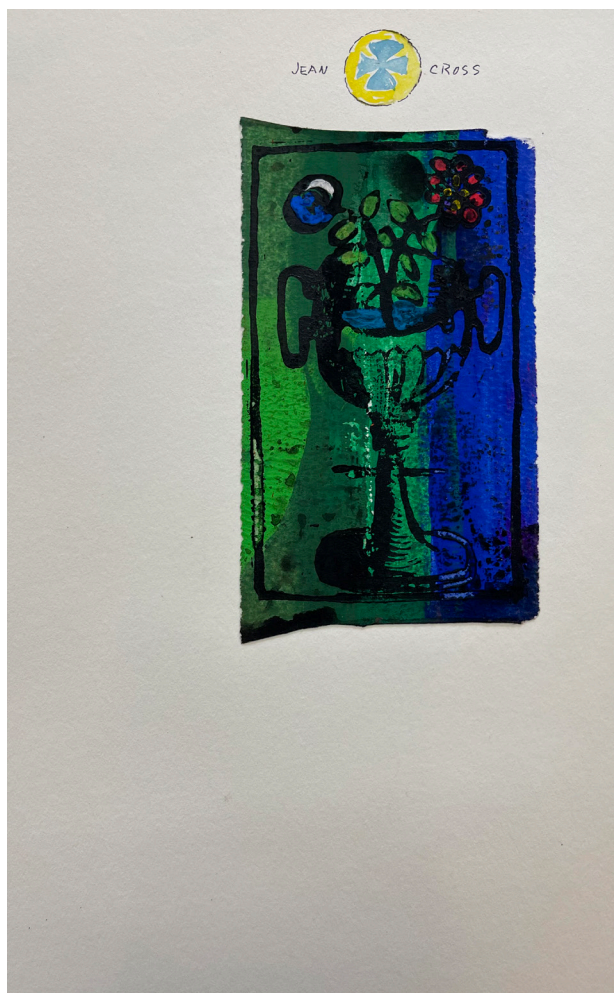


Figure 10. Fred Martin. *Sketch and Manuscripts*. Watercolor paper, 1984.