Though they have distinctly different ways of expressing their creative impulses, artists Dennis Williams and Edward Whiteman share a common link — Louisiana. Williams, who has lived most of his life in St. Martinville, works with mixed media and finds inspiration in symbols of spirituality. Whiteman, originally from New York but a longtime Louisiana resident, prefers to use paper and canvas, and it has been said that his art represents the union of nature and architecture.

Both, however, are considered to be major figures in contemporary Louisiana art. And both are currently the focus of separate exhibitions at USL. Williams' exhibit, "A Metaphor for the Spirit," contains mixed media drawings on paper produced in 1993 and 1994. Whiteman's "Paper and Canvas Constructions 1970-1993" includes works that previously have been featured in major solo and group shows throughout the country.

Williams' expressions of creativity are not limited to canvas; he also serves as a collaborator and guitarist for brother Nathan and his band, The Zydeco Cha Chas.

Williams' climb up the ladder of success has not been an easy one. His background is littered with obstacles which easily could have derailed others, including losing his father at a young age, dealing with a congenital heart problem, and struggling through an educational system that couldn't quite find a place for him.

"I just think he can serve as a role model for all of us in terms of his extreme persistence," said Herman Mhire, director of the University Art Museum. "He will not give up. In spite of all these challenges, economic and otherwise, he has this incredible ability to stick with it."

Williams' multimedia works are inspired by spiritual objects and symbols experienced on a universal level. He also often represents the human figure in some fashion in his art.

Williams, at the age of 35, already has "achieved a level of sophistication and a mastery that is remarkable," said Mhire. "I think this work (being shown in the current exhibition) is on a par with the kind of work one might expect to see in major galleries in major metropolitan areas. It's just extraordinary that he's come so far, considering that in a way he's working in the isolation of St. Martinville."

Williams previously exhibited his work at USL as part of a group show in 1984. The present exhibit is his first one-person show in the university museum, although he has shown his work regularly in this area as well as in Los Angeles, Atlanta, and other parts of the country.

Whiteman, who was born in Buffalo, N.Y., received part of his art training at the Albright Art School of the University of Buffalo and later at USL's Department of Fine Arts. The current showing of his work at the university marks Whiteman's return to Lafayette after approximately 30 years. In that time, he's lived in England, New York, New Orleans, and presently, in Covington.

Whiteman's work "is all about the tactile nature of the environment around you. And so it's about color, it's about line, it's about texture, it's about the interaction of nature and the built environment," Mhire said.

After abandoning the more traditional paint-on-canvas approach to art, Whiteman turned to materi-