

BIRDS

# PHOTOS: Painter Turns Studio Into Stunning Habitat for the Birds-Turned-Muses He Rescues

Hunt Slonem first fell in love with birds as a child and has dedicated his studio space to keeping them happy

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1 of 11

Hunt Slonem works in a paradise, a colorful jungle he has created in the heart of Brooklyn, New York.

The artist and animal lover has combined his passions, creating a 30,000 square foot art studio that also doubles as a home for exotic birds.

The avian "models" are often muses for Slonem who has released a new book of his work called *BIRDS*, which is filled with, you guessed it, stunning reproductions of his delightful winged paintings.

In celebration of this new release, Slonem talked to PEOPLE about his passions and shared photos of his studio and shots from *BIRDS*.

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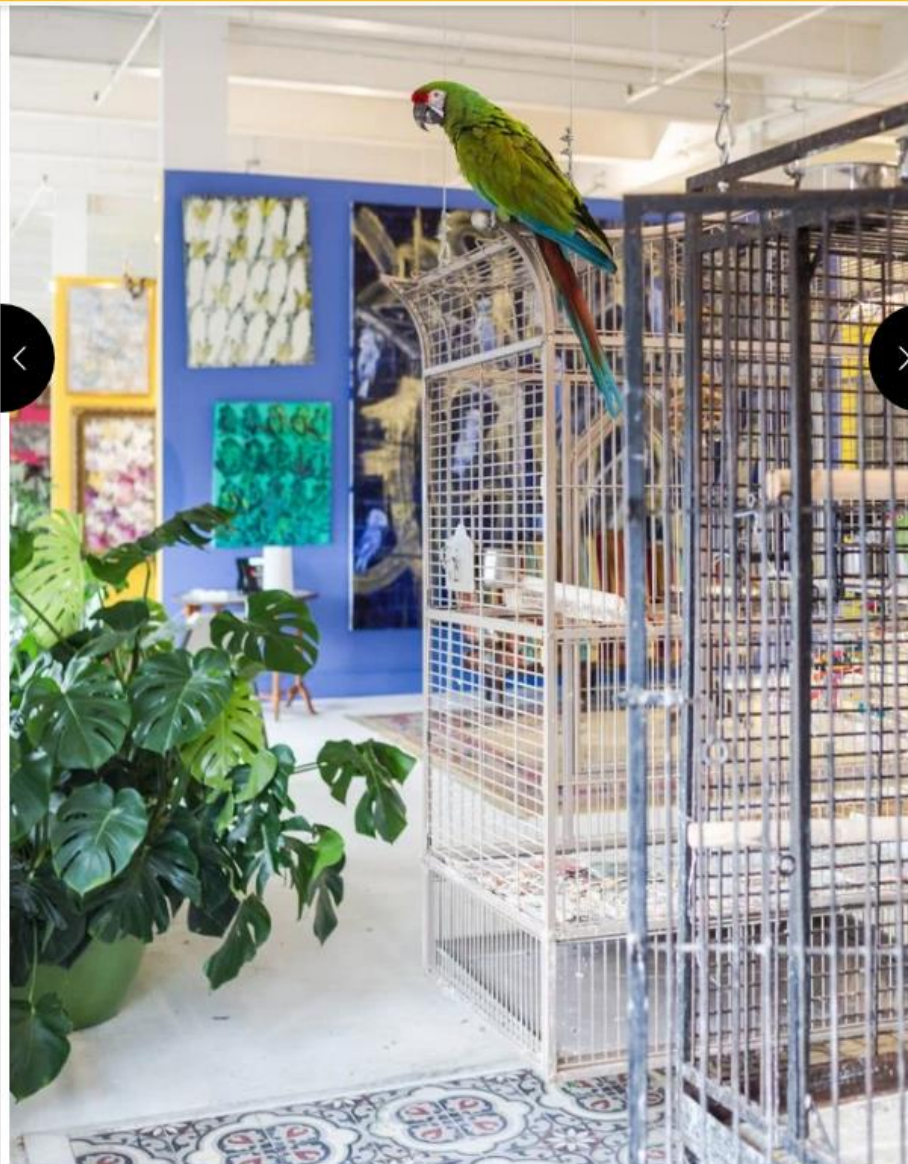
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2 of 11

## What first inspired your passion for birds?

My passion for birds started when I was a kid in Hawaii – I just fell in love with them. Some people like dogs, but I'm a bird person – birds and orchids. I would sit on the porch with my parakeets as an elementary school kid.

I'm drawn to the colors, the forms, the influence on fashion; how they affect the areas of the world that they're in, in terms of dress, art, religious practices; the use of their plumage in ceremonies and to determine rank and status. Toucans and hornbills are among my most favorite bird species. They are amazing forms with amazing colors. The shades are almost extraterrestrial – they are just beyond belief. Truly remarkable.

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3 of 11

## How did you begin rescuing birds?

Birds live a very long time and are very complex to care for. It's a long-term commitment. People often get them at certain points in their life and then their lives change and it's no longer possible to keep them. The rescuing of birds stems from people knowing that I am passionate about them. They would call me up and ask me to take them.

Although I help with other animal organizations, I'm not an organization – I'm just an individual. And I am close to capacity!

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4 of 11

## How did you set up a sanctuary in your studio?

It's not a sanctuary; it's my personal bird habitat. These are my family. The aviary is not open to the public because the birds get stressed out and I'm not set up for that.

As my collection of birds grew, I needed more and more space. I've had birds since I was a kid, but really got deeply into acquiring more birds when I moved to New York and began painting them. I've been painting birds since the '70s and have had an aviary for 30 years. I had a 40 foot cage (with divisions) in my first loft in New York. In my current studio, I now have large individual cages.

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## What reactions do you get when people see your studio for the first time?

Well my studio is vast, so it has many different areas. The birds are in the back so they're not bombarded with disturbance. It's otherworldly, like the Garden of Eden. There is an enormous garden area of tropical plants. I'm fascinated with the Victorian conservatory and I tried to recreate that. It's a unique environment and people are pretty blown away by that.

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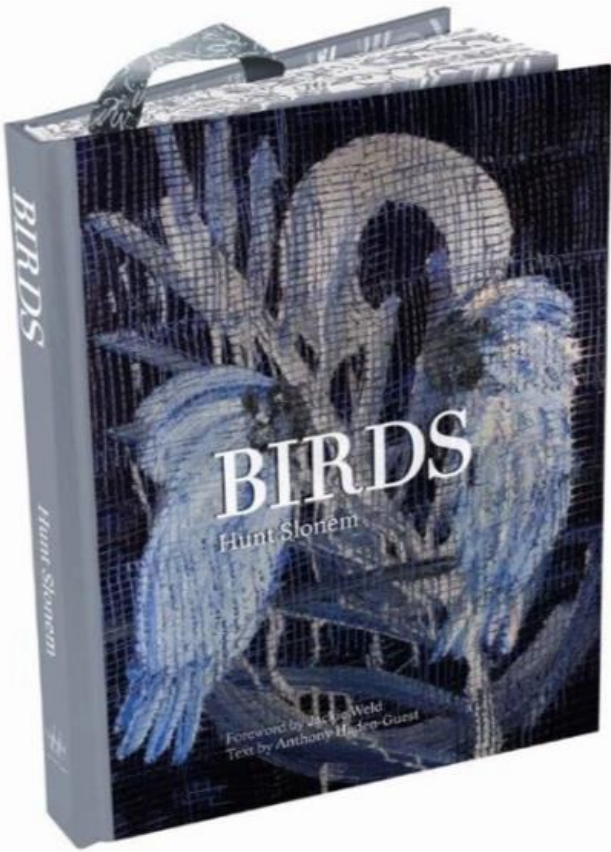
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## How do your birds help you with your art?

I find birds to be great companions. They're at my side all through the day when I'm working. They are funny, smart and have very strong personalities. They are also very interactive; a lot of them talk, so for somebody who's just working all day it's a great form of companionship and inspiration. I always ask them what they think of what I'm painting at that moment and I get varied reactions.

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## How did your birds inspire your upcoming book *BIRDS*?

The book features my paintings of birds spanning over a 45 year period. It is a record of my observations of bird keeping and of the varieties that I've had and lived with during that time period.

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## What can people expect to find in the book *BIRDS*?

A huge expanse of my work and it is comprehensive of every phase of my painting of birds for the past 45 years. I am quite pleased by it. There's an essay by the world famous art critic Anthony Haden-Guest, and the foreword is by Jackie Weld who wrote the book on Peggy Guggenheim and Rara Avis, which my painting was on the cover of.

Birds are one of the major themes in my work. And this long-awaited book is the only one that covers this major subject of my work, of my serious years of painting in New York.

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## How is this project important to you?

Everything that I do is important to me. This is the first monograph on my bird paintings, which have been a predominant factor in my paintings for years. It's just my daily ritual and it's documented in all of the hundreds of shows that I've had all over the world. The book provides a glimpse of my whole life as a painter. My paintings are not scientific studies. They are my observations and the expressions of the bird population that surrounds me.

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## How many birds are you currently caring for? Do you have a favorite?

I currently have around 45 birds and I love them all equally. My bird keeping has switched from soft billed birds, which only live about 20 years to parrots, which can live up to 100 years. At this point in my life, I mostly have varieties of parrots including amazons, cockatoos, ring neck parakeets, canards and macaws.

I have a bird named Perky who I'm very fond of, but all birds are highly intelligent. People don't realize how intelligent birds are. They are much smarter than dogs and cats. They are very clear in their wants and they have the intelligence of a 3-year-old human.



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## What advice do you have for a first-time bird owner?

Bird keeping is a serious commitment. It's not just a lovely little thing in a cage. They are very intelligent creatures and need a huge range of diet. They need as much space as possible.

Think of the creature, its needs, the level of commitment and make sure that you can do it. You need to think about it carefully, as it's quite a job. People often fall madly in love with their birds, so there's a great upside to bird keeping if that happens, but they are not toys.

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