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Hunt Slonem, *After Buffalo*, 2002, oil on canvas, 93" x 133". Collection of the artist

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IN THE ART GALLERIES

Hunt Slonem (b. 1951) graduated from Tulane University in 1973. He has had more than 170 solo exhibitions since his first professional showing at New York's Fischbach Gallery in 1977 at the age of 24. Slonem's work is included in more than 50 museum collections, including those of the the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Institution, and the New Orleans Museum of Art. His gallery representation includes Marlborough Galleries in New York and Heriad-Cimino in New Orleans. The book *Hunt Slonem: An Art Rich and Strange*, with an introduction by Donald Kuspit (Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2002), is available in the LASM Gift Shop.



Hunt Slonem with his muse Cybil.
Photo by Bärbel Miebach.

**SEPTEMBER 25–
NOVEMBER 28**

Boldly colorful, Hunt Slonem's *After Buffalo* (see cover) depicts a delightful clique of abstractly rendered exotic birds—parrots, white and rose-breasted cockatoos, and toucans—gracefully posing amid a profusion of reds, golds, and oranges. Like higher forms of being, Slonem's regal birds float about companionably. Free yet separated from us by the bars of a grid scored across the painting's surface, they are gently held within their ethereal paradise. According to art critic Milton Avery, "From within the narrow confines of his grids, half cage and half perch, Slonem summons dazzling explosions of the variable life around us that need only to be looked at in order to spring into being."

Birds are the hallmark imagery in Hunt Slonem's luscious, colorful

paintings, many of which are on view in *Hunt Slonem: An Art Rich and Strange*, organized by LASM. Frequently referred to as "the birdman," the artist shares his spacious loft-studio in New York with dozens of exotic birds—toucans, macaws, cockatoos, touracos, lilac-breasted rollers, motmots, red-billed hornbills, lories, mystic jays, and even laughing kookaburras. A compulsive collector, Slonem has created a personal Xanadu that he calls "Huntopia"—an environment so full of neo-Gothic furniture, chandeliers, bird cages, and odd treasures that *Elle Décor* writer Brooks Adams calls it "an over-the-top *wunderkammer*, a curiosity cabinet on steroids."

Slonem's fascination with collecting—birds in particular—began in childhood. As a teenager he was drawn to the flora and fauna of Hawaii, where his family lived briefly. As a sixteen-year-old exchange student, he spent time in Nicaragua,

where he played hooky from school and went into the jungle to collect butterflies. He then lived in Mexico for a year prior to enrolling at Tulane University in New Orleans. According to Slonem, his imagery "comes from having lived with, cared for, and observed birds in an urban environment for the last thirty years." Birds have been the focus of much of his work since the late 1980s.

The bird paintings evolved from an earlier series in which the artist included birds within his representations of saints, particularly Saint Martin de Porres. Slonem's own spiritual views have been shaped by a youth spent in the Catholic environment of Latin America and by more recent encounters in India with Eastern religious beliefs. The spiritual imagery of the bird, variously represented in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism and dating back at least to the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, has been adapted by

Left: *Amazons*, 1994,
oil on canvas, 72" x 82"

Center: *The Ceiling*, 1989,
oil on canvas, 72" x 84"

Right: *The Fan*, 1996,
oil on canvas, 103" x 103"

Far right: *Citron Cockatoo*, 1998,
oil on canvas, 84" x 72"



Slonem to represent a soul or a guardian angel. Whether he is painting birds, butterflies, ocelots, or rabbits, all of Slonem's work is intensely spiritual.

Although birds have been prominent in Slonem's work for some time, they have emerged as one of the newest trends in subject matter for artists, according to the June 2004 issue of *ArtNews*. Several recent exhibitions have spotlighted this growing practice, such as *For the Birds* at Artspace in New Haven, Connecticut, and *It's for the Birds* at the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery in New York. Closer to home, the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans organized *Birdspace: A Post-Audubon Artists' Aviary*, an exhibition that included Slonem's work and that subsequently traveled to the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida.

For these artists, the bird generally represents a means through which to deliver a message, whether personal, political, or historical. Walton Ford, for instance, paints biting social commentaries through his depictions of birds that appear to be realistic but upon closer observation perform in a very unbirdlike manner. Jacqueline Bishop uses birds to help promote awareness of the need to preserve the declining rainforests of Brazil. And Peter Edlund's birds become pointed political references in works such as *Birds of the Slave States* (2001), a somewhat twisted homage to John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, originally published between 1827 and 1838.

The meanings and varieties of bird imagery embraced by the contemporary artists have supplanted the ornithologically accurate representation that earlier artists sought. Carel Fabritius (1622–1654), Rembrandt's most famous pupil,

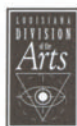
included bird portraits in his repertoire, and the American painter Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904) traveled to Brazil in 1863 with the specific intent to illustrate a complete series of South American hummingbirds. It was Alexander Wilson (1766–1813), however, who published the first attempt to describe all the birds of America in 1808 with *American Ornithology*. John James Audubon's 1810 meeting with Wilson may have inspired him to begin work on his own now-famous portfolio, a series of 435 life-size color engravings.

Audubon established a new approach to the painting of birds—one that strove for action as well as reality. He traveled extensively to observe birds and made notes on their complex individual needs, behavior, and habitats. His awareness that some species were already declining and in need of conservation was outweighed by his wish to achieve realism and detail. Audubon shot hundreds of specimens, wired them, and propped them with needles into lifelike positions.

Unlike Audubon, Slonem is devoted to his models and confesses to being their slave. His daily ritual begins with two hours of chopping vegetables and fruit to nourish the birds. Some even have special foods flown in from a biological supply house. For painting—Slonem's other vocation—his feathered friends conveniently serve as perpetual inspiration. Perhaps it is fitting that in one of the Baltic languages the word *slonem* means "the dreamer," for it is through Slonem that his magnificent birds can become beings that exist apart from the ugliness and banality of the everyday world.

—Elizabeth Weinstein

MUSEUM CURATOR



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