

Bird's-eye View: Talking Art With Hunt Slonem

By Rosemary Feitelberg, Photos by Kyle Eriksen



One of the many seating areas in Slonem's massive work space.

Amidst Hunt Slonem's murals, hundreds of paintings and sculptures in his cavernous 30,000-square-foot work space, one thing is clear — the artist likes to go big.

Beyond the art, as far as the eye can see, 60-plus birds, some of which are 60 to 75 years old, were squawking away from an unseen section of his studio during a recent visit. The 62-year-old artist is widely recognized for his neo-Expressionist paintings of birds. But, like much of what he does, even his hobbies are rooted in his art.

An ardent antique collector with a New Orleans sensibility, Slonem has what he describes as the largest privately owned Gothic sofa collection, not to mention hundreds of top hats and framed iridescent blue morpho butterflies on display.





But back to the art. With 36 exhibitions of his works planned for this year alone, a new book release and a Lee Jofa-made rug collection set to make its debut this fall, Slonem says he is nearing the purchase of The Rexmere, a former 400-room hotel in Stamford, N.Y., that he plans to convert into a work studio and decorative art museum.

Tonight, Slonem will be holding court in the Paul Smith store in New York's SoHo signing copies of his sixth tome, "Bunnies" (Glitterati Inc.), which has a foreword by John Berendt. Every morning Slonem starts his work day with "daily warm-ups" (a term he borrowed from the abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann), spending 30 minutes painting rabbits on small rectangular panels made of wood and Masonite. Signings are also slated for April 9 at Lord & Taylor's flagship and April 23 at Dylan's Candy Bar.

The Kittery, Maine-born artist routinely paints until 7 or 8 p.m., or well into the night if he is not going out. But despite having had 350 shows since 1977, he barks, more than bristles, when asked why he is so prolific.

"Because I'm a working artist. I mean, Picasso was prolific, you know [Andy] Warhol left [behind...] I hate that question. Why shouldn't I be? Is Damien Hirst?" he says. "I paint my work and I enjoy painting. It is the glue and fiber of my existence. Nothing else satisfies me. I get my ideas by working daily. You know, it has taken me 62 years to arrive at what I do. I didn't just start scribbling overnight. And the simplicity of my work came from leaving things out."



A wall of the artist's bunny paintings.

Raised in what he called an Ozzie & Harriet-type world where calling cards were in order, Slonem and his siblings grew up in many places because their father was a Navy officer. As a high school exchange student in Nicaragua, he would skip school and hit the jungle with his butterfly net. Slonem says that magical experience has never left him, “My whole work was influenced by it. I remember all of it so vividly, the name of the parrot and the servants, and this wonderful woman named Rafaella who used to comb all of the girls’ hair. The grandfather was 95 and lived in this 300-year-old house with 40-foot ceilings, and little families of turtles would walk out into the jasmine-filled courtyard. It was just straight out of ‘100 Years of Solitude’ [Gabriel García Márquez’s classic novel].”

After graduating from Tulane, he studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, and then in 1973 followed the “don’t go to grad school, just go to New York” career advice. Meeting Roz Chast briefly at a Robert Mapplethorpe opening led him to his first apartment — a \$250 monthly rental in SoHo. Recalling that “edgier” time in the city, Slonem says, “I just remember being with René Ricard at some after-hours place on Avenue D and being frisked for guns walking in. Maybe my ideas were fresher, but every day was this adventure. I’m happier now that I’m more focused.”





A view of Hunt Slonem's massive work space.

One thing is clear: Slonem is savvy about real estate. Years after his arrival in Manhattan, he scored 30,000 square feet with a terrace in the Starrett Lehigh Building for \$5 a square foot, which he kept for a stretch. If that weren't enough elbow room to paint, the artist later landed an 85-room, 45,000-square-foot space on 10th Street.

Like The Albania and The Lakeside, the two plantations that he owns in Louisiana, The Rexmere is a National Historic Landmark. "I've always said that with 100,000 square feet I can be kept busy for the rest of my life," Slonem says. "I can fill up 20,000 to 30,000 [square feet] in a few years."

