



Larry, 1998. Oil on canvas, 54 x 54 inches.



Rad Cick II, 2000. Oil on canvas, 78 x 68 inches.

THE TROPICAL WORLD OF

I am sitting at a table at Spencer's for lunch and the tables around me represent a virtual who's who list of the valley's top movers and shakers. Business suits are aplenty, deals are being made across the lobster cobbles and every time someone walks in someone from a table waves. In the midst of this all sits renowned New York artist Hunt Slonem in a sport coat and pants with a sunny striped shirt and a pair of eclectic purple glasses perched before his confident eyes. At age 55 he is imp-like, even in his broad physicality. He's not looking around to gauge the social scene of Palm Springs, a place he's never been, but is watching the ground as waiters fly by and watching the birds that stroll below the tables hoping for some scraps of someone's meal.

Everywhere he goes the birds remain his constant. It's birds that grace Hunt Slonem's paintings, hiding within miraculous, massive visages of colors like cobalt blue, fire red, canary yellow and tropical green painstakingly scraped while wet, to give the elusive but ever present feeling of looking into another world through a human's cage. It's birds and butterflies and bunnies that Hunt paints.

Communing with nature comes naturally to him. It began with his early travels in life to Hawaii and his experience in Nicaragua as an exchange student. He fell in love with the flora and fauna, alive with vivid colors, in places absent of other human interaction where silence reigned. His first paintings were dotted with the faces of saints—beings that dwell in those quiet places. The birds and other creatures evolved from here, fed with inspiration by the pioneers of bird imagery like Fabritius, Heade and Audobon.

There's a bit of Tennessee Williams in Hunt. Even though he was born in Maine, I feel the presence of an almost Southern charm while listening to him speak quietly and slowly, as he eats his crab cakes, and tells me about his painting practice.

"All I'm ever doing is painting," he says. "I don't know how to explain it except that I feel like I am just a vehicle. I know what I like, what I am interested in, and the rest just comes through me and appears on the canvas. This is just what I do."

He does it so much that he had to buy a 100-room building in New York's



Lutes, 2006. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches.



Primary Butterflies, 2005. Oil on canvas, 85 x 90 inches.

HUNT SLONEM

BY KIMBERLY NICHOLS

West Village for a studio. The rooms are brightly painted, floors and ceilings awash in the same colors that adorn his canvases that find homes in each of the rooms. A blues washed morning glory painting hangs on a periwinkle wall; the studio a vast sky where all kinds of creatures find home in the nooks and crannies. His life is far from ordinary and he does nothing simply.

Hunt lives and works in New York City in his legendary loft, with his seventy pet birds as his models. The birds, cared for by a full time assistant, are treated as members of the family. He spends the first part of his day caring for his birds, and the rest of the day becoming inspired by them. His second home is a mansion in Louisiana, a decadent place he's equally enthralled with, perhaps for its similar warm tempo of life that already inherently inhabits by his spirit with its tropical longings.

At this point in his career, Hunt can be called "prolific". Since 1977, he has had over 250 solo exhibitions at prestigious galleries. His work is exhibited globally, including in Madras, Quito, Venice, Gustavia, San Juan, Guatemala City, Paris, Amsterdam, Madrid, Stockholm, Oslo, Cologne, Tokyo, and Hong Kong. Over 70 museums internationally include his

work in their collections, among them The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art in NYC. He won the 1991 National Endowment for the Arts Grant in Painting, and MacDowell Fellowships in 1986, 1984 and 1983. Many celebrities collect Hunt's work. It doesn't take him long to finish a painting, detailed and meticulous as the final outcomes are, as he has been living his passion and is quite familiar with it, for most of his life.

As the power lunches around us end Hunt smiles with a twinkle in his eye and takes a piece of bread from his plate. He bends down towards the side of the table and feeds a bird pecking at the ground.

His eyes twinkle as he looks at me and says, "I guess I shouldn't really be doing this."

"You're the last person I would ever tell not to feed a bird," I say as we both laugh.

Hunt Slonem's exhibit runs through Sunday, April 9 at Exposure Gallery, 436 N. Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs

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