

by Bruce Helander

Years ago, Hunt Slonem was determined to close out Manhattan's downtown concrete jungle by insulating himself behind the thick brick walls of a Houston Street tenement, whose interior was somewhat reminiscent of the Bronx Zoo aviary. Like so many artists before him, Slonem enriched his life and his inspiration by surrounding himself with personal objects of his desire. Working and living in the same environment is an absolute necessity for most artists. The practicality of rising with the sun where you paint when you awake to the multiple chants of exotic birds—lots of them—becomes a built-in daily motivational alarm clock for exploration.

George Bellows loved the inspiration he derived from the Hudson River, even in the dead of winter he was compelled to sit alongside a natural aquatic border to soak up the movement of barges as they floated by in the cold hazy mist of a Manhattan morning. Sitting on a wooden stool, wearing leather gloves that clutched a paint brush nearly frozen in time, the artist liked to surround himself with the true life elements of a fascination that kept him occupied for years. Larry Poons, who took over Willem de Kooning's studio on Broadway, lived inside his canvas as every wall and floor was covered with years of residuals that had strayed off course during his wild throwing sessions, which launched paint into the air and onto a waiting canvas. The requisite of living knee deep in his work—you literally bounced as you walked on the spongy acrylic surface—was the same constant physical stimulation that artists seek out when they have found a direction they must follow.

For Hunt Slonem, entering his own cage that he shared with dozens of winged companions not only isolated him from the demanding distractions and stimuli of the city, but solidified a bond with his subjects that is indeed rare in the history of art. The recent exhibition of large-scale paintings at Marlborough Chelsea in Manhattan shows off the intensity of the artist's commitment to co-existing with his models. There is a remarkable intimacy and understanding of his living still life "props." These airborne creatures seem to come alive again as they nest on a flat canvas protected from a dangerous outside world by a thick idiosyncratic cross-hatched mesh that covers every picture like a mosquito net. For years, the artist painted his feathered friends frolicking among the decorated branches with their large colorful beaks proudly held high as they looked back to their provider who lovingly recreated their astonishing beauty on a daily basis. The show in Chelsea goes well beyond his most notable silhouettes, with portraits of human heads and ornate objects that retain the same kind of magic the artist has

perfected over the past thirty years.

In his remarkable maturity as an artist, Hunt Slonem has developed an eccentric style of cross hatching his surfaces with thousands of scored lines wandering in all directions. Once his paintings have been completed with visual stories and compositional balancing acts, the traveling circus he formed is then completely blanketed by the fine latticework that adds an integrated spirit to his canvases. Sometimes nearly hidden by conflicting parallel rows that enclose his subjects, the pictures often promote a mysterious spirituality that seeps through to confront the viewer.

In one of the exhibition's master works, "Haitian Rope Morpho" (1997), the artist offers a hybrid of organic shapes that pay a distant homage to Terry Winters, whose seed pods and attraction to nature dovetail into Slonem's own primitive instincts. In this bright orange composition,

long-tailed yellow cockatoo-like birds synchronize with the vertical seed pod shapes, fiddle ferns and pomegranates that nourish this beautiful species. In this delightful display, black lines on vivid surfaces interconnect as the artist moves wet pigment back and forth until the entire design is protectively and systematically sealed. We are looking in while the birds are looking out, and somewhere in the middle a simple melodic harmony pulled from a prehistoric past comforts our intuitive desire to commemorate nature. "Red Butterfly" (1998, oil on canvas, 108" X 144") presents a large slice of the earth's atmosphere, where butterflies dance in a pattern of gently flapping wings that seem to endlessly circulate.

While an exchange student in Nicaragua, the artist would play hooky to hunt for exotic butterflies that captured his imagination and permanently branded in his memory a love of

creatures in their home environment. A long-standing symbol of the soul in Western mythology, the butterfly was frequently the attribute of Psyche in neoclassical painting and sculpture. Continuing with this tradition, the artist here has crafted a fusion of neoclassical sensibilities reminiscent of great still lifes, often set in similarly crafted gilt frames with a contemporary application that energizes a canvas, with the old supporting the new.

Hunt, a rare adorable bird in his own eccentric right, portrays his great love for winged specimens and nature with a charming mix of abstract expressionism, color field attitudes and classic sculpted gardens redolent of Claude Monet. The playful images of Paul Klee and to a certain extent Alexander Calder relate to many of Slonem's witty and fanciful arrangements. Experiencing a Hunt Slonem show becomes a celebrated and exciting event, complete with a caged three-ring circus where creatures silently sing as they jump to a permanent perch of position and respect. ♦

Bruce Helander is an artist who writes on art.



"Haitian Rope Morpho" 1997, oil on canvas, 70 x 60 in.



"Red Butterfly" 1998, oil on canvas, 108 x 144 in.

