

Hunt Slonem at Marlborough Chelsea

Quiet, luminous fields of painted gold underlie the regimented visual cacophony of the world according to Hunt Slonem. For the most part dated 2004, these new paintings, characteristically, are densely figured with representations of the much-publicized tropical birds that populate his labyrinthine studios. They are also obsessively complicated with butterflies, flowers and the emblematic faces of saints that resemble their models more in spirit than in fact. Both decorative and devotional by intent, these prominent figurative elements are ranked by color, size and kind against the golden ground; the surface is then inscribed with a furiously cross-hatched mesh of lines drawn with brush handles, cutting through the rich oil to give an impression of layers of wire

caging. For all the works' implied spatial depth, there is no reckoning of perspective, and while the overall effect is abstract, painterly and tactile, the figurative elements seem flat against the picture plane. The paintings recall those of the Pattern and Decoration movement, which challenged the taboo against decorative art.

Slonem divides the 7-by-9-foot expanse of *Ascension* vertically into three figured bands that visually dominate the underlying gold grid, which is layered with grassy patterning and incised cross-hatching. The painting's center section is active with an almost exhilarating pattern drawn from the common Clouded Sulfur and Checkered White or Cabbage butterflies found in open fields and meadows, part of Slonem's vocabulary since the 1990s. Ascending in columns on either side are the imperturbable heads he conceives as representations of saints, emblems introduced to his work in the 1970s. He invariably tilts them to one side, freeing them from the regularity of the grid by slightly altering their insistent repetition. In one example, he exuberantly adds a tube's worth of cadmium orange as he draws the simple outline, caught up in the enjoyment of painting. Over the years, the birds have evolved from the saints, which they also represent.

Another relatively large painting, *Charm*, is divided into four horizontal bands, each figured with rabbits, a relatively recent motif that is an Asian symbol of luck. The similarly conceived *Migration* offers further horizontal

multiplication of small finches, hundreds ranked side by side, wings folded in rest, their breasts composed of strokes of bright color. The three ethereal tiers of confectionary delphiniums, lilies and irises that constitute *Reflection* add sweetening to the generally reserved palette of this exhibition. Still, Slonem holds a special place for his cockatoos, which appear in the wide and rather somber expanse of *Still*, a meditative review of elegant tropical birds perched within their cages. They are nearly lost in the near abstract, 8-by-11-foot expanse of *Hurricane*, where they seem to have dematerialized altogether.

—Edward Leffingwell

Hunt Slonem: *Ascension*, 2004, oil on canvas, 88 by 108 inches; at Marlborough Chelsea.

