

Creating creature comfort

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Art can often seem a like pretentious endeavor for people who exist outside the insular world of theory and galleries, but renowned existentialist Hunt Slonem brings it softly down to earth for the uninitiated and connoisseurs alike.

Frogs, birds, rabbits, botanicals — all creatures great and small, but mostly small — find dignity under Mr. Slonem's brush, but the inescapable whimsy and accessibility to his tiny subjects has kept the art world in thrall for almost 40 years. Neapolitans, several of whom are avid collectors of his work, can view and purchase one of their own little beasties at Harmon-Meek Gallery's upcoming solo exhibition of Mr. Slonem's recent work Jan. 29 through Feb. 8 in Naples.

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Educated at Tulane University but inspired by his travels as a Navy kid in Hawaii and as a young adult in Central America, Mr. Slonem is one of the few artists in history to have exhibited in solo exhibitions on every habitable continent during his lifetime and is represented by 40 prominent galleries. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Museum of Modern Art all boast works in their permanent collections that depict the little bitty creatures that roam the earth or fill the sky, and sometimes they capture the landscapes where they live.



"Each little flower that Each little bird that sings, He made their glowing colors, He made their tiny wings." — "All Things Bright and Beautiful," Anglican hymn

The artist doesn't know why he's so inspired by the beauty of animals or objects that get lost in the landscapes that surround him. He lives his life surrounded by over 60 exotic — and geriatric — birds who need care, renovating abandoned plantations and mansions, and painting the sweet little animals that humans have steeped in symbolism and lore since we all started talking about such things. Why does he like them? And why are they so popular?



Top: "New Frog's Mystic Transformation" Above: Studio

"Who knows? God. Lightning struck," he said. "I never know why anything happens. It's not a calculated decision and that's what's so different about my work. When the stopper's removed they're just sitting there waiting. They're all things I've loved since I was a child raising orchids in Hawaii. I've had one of my macaws for 45 years. He's in his 70s."



"Bayou Teche"

Mostly, it seems Mr. Slonem is a creature of comfort and it is easily expressed in his work. Collecting enormous mansions in New York and Louisiana, filling them with antiques and spending an eye-popping amount of cash on maintaining dozens of exotic birds in their dotage ("not a light pastime") all speak to a person who finds beauty and value in God's creatures and their surroundings.

"I'm an impassioned collector," he said. "I just get more and more stuff that I hope to leave as a foundation."



"Black Diamond"

Each day begins as it has for decades, with a study in bunnies, the subject that has gained Mr. Slonem the most mainstream popularity. For many collectors, bunnies as a subject are positively Slonemian and his wet-on-wet paintings grace the walls of fine galleries and even a Kardashian house. But his wildly popular bunny series started about 40 years ago when he found 19th century portrait frames and decided to arbitrarily paint rabbits for them. Ever since, he's devoted time each day to watching how they change or whether to improve upon them.

"I don't know why things catch on or why they happen," he said. "When I repeat a theme, very interesting changes occur because I'm not stressed over the subject matter."



"Gold and Emeralds"

In Harmon-Meek's exhibition, guests can purchase several bunnies executed with "diamond dust," a crushed silica additive, which was suggested to him by his dealer in Bulgaria.

"It's sharp," he said. "It's like painting on sandpaper, a very different thing ... People want to see something new and this is actually very sparkly and it has a pizzazz that brings it more into people's attention. This catches the eye of the colors ... Kris Kardashian bought one and it's on the show all the time. Now her daughters are getting one. They've been very popular."

Another subject on display is a frog his partner, Gary, found loose in the truck while they were transporting plants to their Louisiana plantation, situated outside New Orleans on Bayou Teche.



"Sunflowers Sunset Park"

"He said 'there's something wet and gooey on my steering wheel' and it was a frog," Mr. Slonem said. "He's kept the frog alive for about three years now and it triggered a series of frog paintings."

Local collector Dan Johnson has several Slonem paintings depicting a wide array of his staple subjects, from butterflies to birds to bayous and of course, bunnies.

"The colors, I think, are what sort of attracts me to his paintings," he said. "I started collecting them about seven years ago and have been picking it up piece by piece."



"Tiger Swallowtail"

The Slonem works lead his collection, which also contains works by artists like Robert Vickrey, Paul Arsenault and Dorothy Gillespie.

"We have a really small apartment with lots of stuff in it, but every one of the Slonems we've picked out, we've picked out that particular one," Mr. Johnson said. "We're looking for things that are a little more colorful and interesting, not your normal things. He kind of leads our collection."

Harmon-Meek Gallery started exhibiting Mr. Slonem's work in 1996; about 12 have been solo shows. In that time, Mr. Slonem's reputation and popularity has grown into the gallery's early estimation of his work.

"He's really become a household name in certain circles and you'll see Hunt's work in the background of magazines like Architectural Digest or in the background of movies and television," said gallery director Kristine Meek. Once you see his works, it's so distinctive you'll start to see it everywhere."

The fact that Mr. Slonem's paintings have been incorporated into the permanent collections of so many prestigious museums, universities and cultural institutions highlights the fact that a work of Mr. Slonem's has a lasting value to the gallery's clients.

“There’s art that sells and has commercial value, but when a museum acquires a work, it’s a long process,” Ms. Meek said. “You can’t even donate very easily, so you know there’s going to be some permanence. The artists might be remembered and enjoyed for generations.”

And his paintings are just a joy to look at, she continued. She personally owns two Slonem paintings, a pair of lovebirds she selected in high school and a bunny in her son’s nursery.

“To be honest, I just think his work is beautiful, and I think art should be beautiful,” she said. “It should be something you want to surround yourself with and I love seeing his work every day. I like sharing it with other people and you can tell from his work that he’s a great person who enjoys his life.” Their clients seem to agree, said her father and gallery owner William Meek. When Mr. Slonem’s works are displayed with other artists, they seem to magnetically draw in viewers.

“It’s just interesting how people who have never seen his work in a group exhibition at our gallery just pick it out as their favorite without prompting,” he said. “They just love it and it’s an interesting test. It’s just an observation that people gravitate to it and it puts a smile on their face.”

Harmon-Meek Gallery displays a solo exhibition of Hunt Slonem’s work Jan. 29-Feb. 8 at its main gallery, at 599 Ninth St. N., Naples. A reception is scheduled for 5:30-7 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 4. For more information, call 261-2637 or visit www.harmonmeek.com. |

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