
An artist's sumptuous book of bunnies, just in time for Easter

R. Stephanie Bruno April 20, 2014



Anyone old enough to remember the Easter bunnies at Scheinuk the Florist's on St. Charles Avenue every spring can recall the experience of standing outside the bunny enclosure, watching the rabbits as they slept or hopped or sat perfectly still. Grown-ups seemed always to tire of bunny gazing, but children could watch for hours (and create a scene when forced by an exasperated adult to get in the car and leave the bunnies behind).

New York artist Hunt Slonem seems as mesmerized by rabbits as the boys and girls of New Orleans back in the '50s and '60s. Slonem, a Tulane University graduate who visits the city monthly and has restored two Louisiana plantations, wakes every morning and warms up by painting rabbits.

Now, Glitterati Press has collected dozens of Slonem's rabbit images in "Bunnies," a sumptuous, large-scale book alive with gold pages and vivid color.

The book isn't what Slonem expected, but he says that's a good thing.

"I probably would have done something much more modest, images of bunnies in frames, one to a page, something like that," he said. "But the publisher had a different idea. They wanted it to be a coffee-table-sized book with gold pages and large-scale images. I'm thrilled they insisted on it, because what they produced surpassed anything I would have come up with."

The shimmering presentation and life-size images succeed in capturing the viewer's imagination in unpredictable ways. What is it about a big book filled with painted images of bunnies that induces a meditative state? Is it the repetition, like a mantra? Is it the seemingly endless variety of personalities that Slonem can tease out of a few skilled brush strokes? Or is it the rabbit image itself?

"I found out reading the table mat at a Chinese restaurant that I was born in the year of the Rabbit, but I had been painting rabbits long before that. Rabbits have an innocent appeal, almost vulnerable, but they have a mythological quality, too. There are just so many associations with rabbits in our culture," Slonem said. "There

are figures like the White Rabbit and the March Hare in ‘Alice and Wonderland,’ there’s Harvey the Pooka in the movie with Jimmy Stewart, there’s the white rabbit of Grace Slick and Jefferson Airplane. Rabbits represent good luck.”

Rabbits are also a symbol of “intimate activity,” as he phrased it, due to the fact that they reproduce at an astronomical rate.

And reproduce they have, at least in their newest studio (located in the building that Manhattan) is covered with rabbit paintings at flea markets and estate sales all over the



world then carefully fitted to the subject.

Some paintings are stark — spare but background — but others have colored

expressive black lines on a white background in luminous shades of green,

pink, blue or red. Some canvases have multicolored and metallic surfaces.

“My newest technique is mixing diamond dust into the paint to make the surfaces glisten,” he said. “I use it on black or dark blue paintings and outline the rabbits in white.”

Slonem said that his fascination with the creatures goes back to his childhood in Maine, where he would spot bunnies at twilight. “It took on a mythical feel, it being neither day nor night but in-between.”

In the book, all rabbits have names, something the publisher requested and Slonem worked furiously to accommodate.

“I came up with as many as I could think of,” Slonem said. “Almost everyone I have ever known is in there somewhere or another.”

Rabbits are also named obliquely for the two Louisiana plantations that Slonem has restored: Albania and Lakeside. The bunny named “Jeanerette” is for the Louisiana town near which Albania is located and “Bayou Teche” is the body of water that borders it. Another rabbit is named for the Morganza Spillway, located just down the road from Lakeside Plantation in Batchelor.

Slonem shows his paintings in galleries around the world and has been collected by major museums, including the Guggenheim and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans.

Locally, he exhibits at Martine Chaisson Gallery on Camp Street in the Warehouse District, which will host an exhibition of his new works in August for White Linen Night.

Although Slonem is known to keep birds in his studio space, along with the Gothic Revival furniture and marble busts he loves so well, his single foray into rabbit ownership was what he described as “a disaster.”

“I lost three assistants to that rabbit! It would chase people. I finally gave it to a friend who owned a farm,” Slonem said. “The rabbit fell in love with one of the farm horses and would follow it everywhere. Maybe it was really a horse in a rabbit’s body.”