

Birds of paradise in a self-created world

One of the things I like to do, when given the opportunity, is to make my way down the paths found in aviaries — those environments housing birds, the exotics, the natives and the migratory kind. *Hunt Slonem: A Colorful Nature*, on view at the Opelousas Museum of Art through Dec. 22, imparts a similar enjoyment for me, through abstracted images of birds and heavily applied oil paint.

Hunt Slonem, originally from Maine, attended and received his degree in painting and art history from Tulane University in 1973. Along the way, he lived in Mexico, Hawaii and Nicaragua, among other places, and also managed a summer at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Shortly after leaving Tulane, he moved to New York and began his painting career.

Slonem's neo-expressionist take on wildlife — and birds, in particular — embellishes an environment full of vivid color and form.

Opelousas Museum of Art curator Keith Guidry says of Slonem's work, "He creates art to live in it. Some artists create to capture their environment, but Hunt Slonem creates his environment to live in it, to walk through it."

And live with it he does, as most of the toucans and Brazilian cardinals and other fine exotics come from his own personal collection, an aviary inside a painter's studio. Painting from his observation of dozens of live birds, Slonem is able to capture the



In View Bryan Lafaye

essence of feathered friends through dashes of color and rapidly applied painterly techniques.

One of the interesting aspects of the work is the grid-like scoring found on the surface of nearly every painting in the exhibit. Slonem's scoring of the surface — his mark-making executed while the paint is still wet — relates a sense of viewing these birds through the cages in which they live. Yet there is apparently another aspect to this cross-hatching technique, according to Guidry.

"The scoring, or cross-hatching, is referred to as 'canceling' by Slonem," Guidry says, "more of a spiritual or mystic approach to his work, where Slonem cancels out, to a degree, the painted image — more like an offering to a higher power."

Birds are not the only subject captured by Slonem. In this exhibition are portraits of revered saints, Abraham Lincoln and paintings of butterflies and rabbits. One of the

two portraits of Abraham Lincoln stares across the gallery space as though attempting to communicate some bit of muted knowledge lost in time. The rabbits are intriguing as well, with a series of them covering an entire wall in one of the downstairs galleries at the OMA.

All black and white imagery with shades of gray, all quickly brushed into place, and creating another sense of environment, of nature, of Slonem's own signature.

Some of these rabbits stare back at the viewer, others have turned their backs on the viewer, while still others appear to go about their business without any concern for the viewer. These multiple paintings act as one, providing for an energetic installation.

As mentioned, there are butterflies depicted in glaring color, appearing to float away from the surface of the painting. One such painting, *Viceroy's*, 1999, is bright and bold in color and brushwork, but relatively small in scale to the other works placed around the room. As Slonem's larger works guarantee a presence, so do the smaller paintings. He continually creates an environment of mystery with these paintings.

From georgebillis.com, Slonem says, "My lifelong obsession, manifested in the daily ritual of painting, captures images from personal spirituality and environment. I exist surrounded by this self-created world, a triumph of nature, with its myriad of exotic form, color



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and mystical essence, simultaneously tangible and coming from higher realms."

This exhibit is one which demonstrates interesting color, painterly application of material and a sense of the artist's need to capture the true essence of what he is observing through his daily contact with his subjects, and more quiet than a walk through an aviary. ☺

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