



THE HUNT FOR BUNNIES

Down the Rabbit Hole with Painter HUNT SLONEM

By Tyler Malone

Photography and Paintings Courtesy of Glitterati Incorporated

Design by Mina Darius

Spring 2014

“Be vewy vewy quiet, I’m hunting wabbits,” says Elmer Fudd, in just about every cartoon he appears in with the world’s most famous rabbit, Bugs Bunny. Though he’s not hunting for rabbits (or wabbits) like Elmer Fudd, painter Hunt Slonem does a better job at capturing them. While Elmer Fudd constantly messes up in his attempt to turn Bugs into bunny stew, Hunt Slonem wakes up every morning and captures bunnies on canvas. These warm-ups are, as John Berendt calls them, “the artistic equivalent of calisthenics in which he flexes his painting apparatus to establish control over the colors, shapes, and textures that flow from his mind’s eye through his arm, hand, and brush on the painted surface.”

Hunt Slonem paints countless other subjects, but the bunnies always begin his day. Like the White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, they lead him down the rabbit hole to the Wonderland that

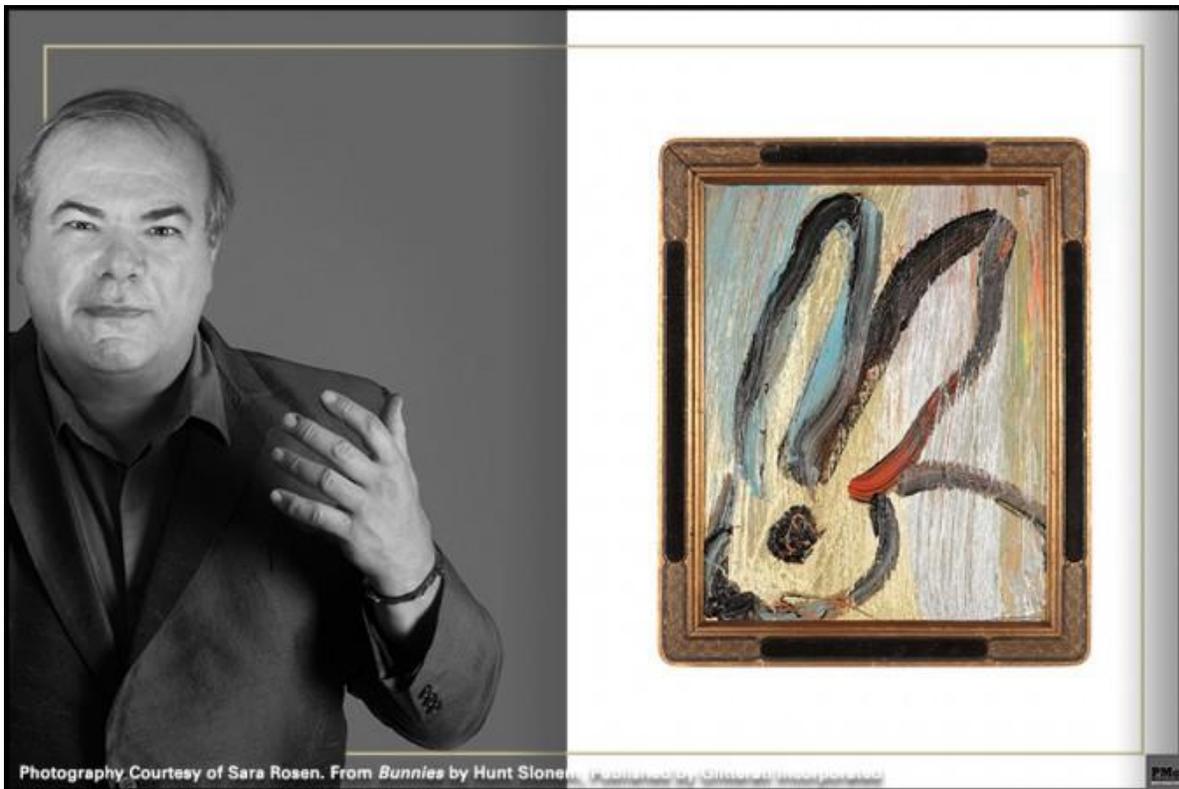
is the rest of his paintings. I spoke with him about his new book, *Bunnies*, which collects a number of his bunny warm-ups.

Tyler Malone: When and why did you start doing these warm-ups which John Berendt called your “artistic equivalent of calisthenics”?

Hunt Slonem: I started a long time ago. About thirty years ago, I had a show in Richmond, and I didn’t have money for contemporary frames. I was going to the flea market a lot so I started buying 19th century photo frames. There was a standard size 8×10. I started working in that size. The frames sort of changed the way I worked. I started buying gallons of white paint, and painting wet into wet. So it was a huge breakthrough for me: I started doing these little studies to fit the frames in wet on wet.

TM: So why did you pick bunnies as your subject?

HS: I didn’t know at the time why I picked them. I liked them, and I’ve had them as pets off and on my whole life. I was using them in groups at the feet of saints. I don’t know: something about luck and multiplicity. I also just liked the shape, and they’re cuddly. Then one night I was having Chinese food and I looked down and realized I am the sign of the rabbit. So maybe they’re sort of all self-portraits?



TM: Monet had his waterlilies. Dali has his soft watches. Warhol had his Campbell soup cans. You have your bunnies. Why do you think it is that so many artists, yourself included, have a particular image or icon or concept that they keep gravitating back to?

HS: I like the idea of repetition. To me, it’s like divinity. Why is grass green? And why does so many different unique blades of grass make up the whole? Why are leaves covered with trees where no two are exactly the same? Why do you say the rosary and repeat certain things? I’ve followed a lot of Hindu practices throughout

my life, and we repeat mantras. So repetition and divinity for me go hand in hand. I have repeated everything I've done in life a million times. It's almost hard for me to abandon painting anything. I am constantly repeating. I also think that every time you do it, you do a little better.

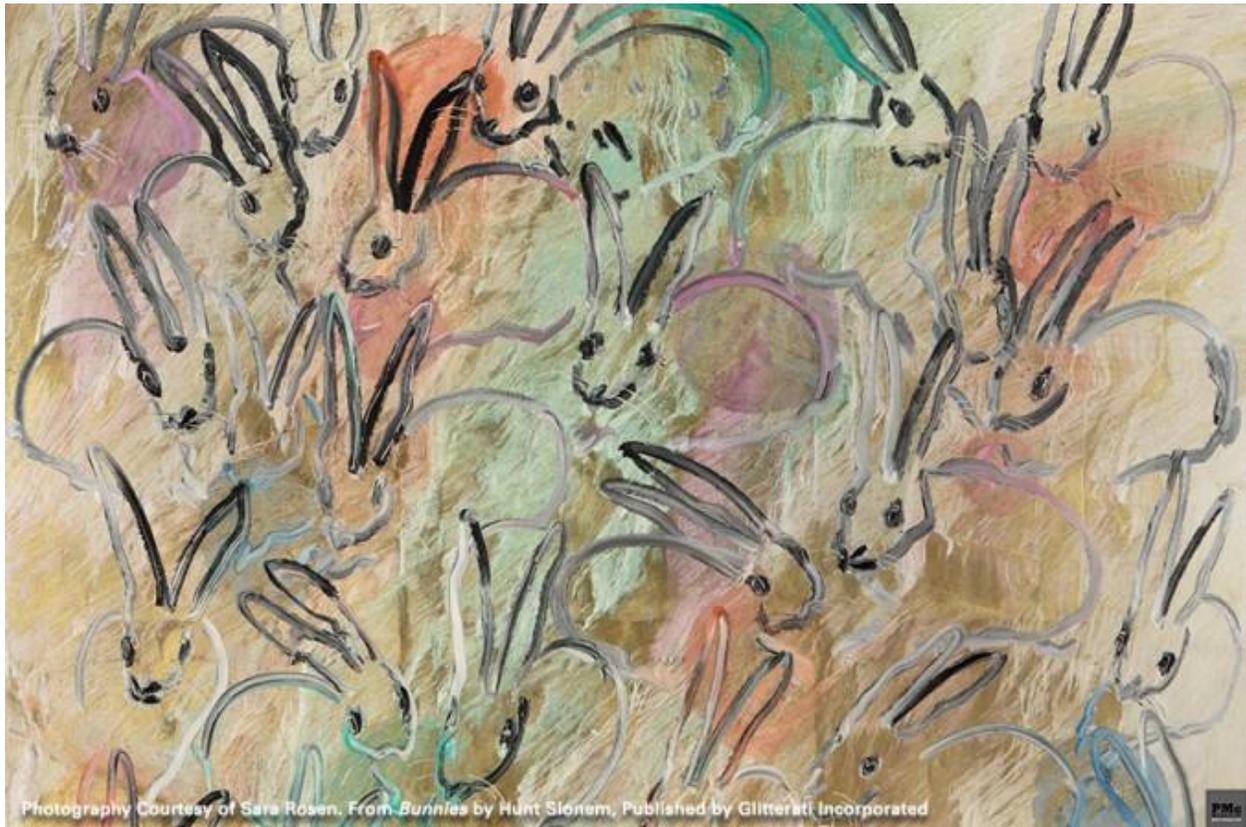
TM: Who are some of your artistic heroes?

HS: I'd have to say my number one is Picasso. But I like different people for different reasons. Warhol is a big inspiration for many different reasons, not necessarily painterly. I like Cindy Sherman's work a lot. I like Richard Sexton's work. He's a New Orleans photographer. I also love Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. There's millions of inspirations. I love American painting of the Victorian era.

TM: You've mentioned the White Rabbit from Lewis Carrol's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when discussing this series in the past. When you speak of *Alice Adventure's in Wonderland*, there's the idea of altered states and alternate realities that comes up, and of course related to that there's also the concept of madness which is such a part of that book. "We're all mad here." How do you feel your bunny series fits in with those thematic concerns?

HS: It's a wonderful reference. It's a magical reference. It's a reference that has inspired all of our childhoods. As you say, the whole idea of alternative realities, and alternatives to authority, a bit of rebellion. There's the big and little, and high and low. I love the whole tea party scene. I keep in my homes full place sets of old Paris porcelain dinnerware at all times on the table. People come and eat on paper plates on top of it, and move from seat to seat. The whole idea of the continual event.





Photography Courtesy of Sara Rosen. From *Bunnies* by Hunt Slonem, Published by Glitterati Incorporated

TM: What other rabbit paintings are in your mind as you paint?

HS: The most famous rabbit painting in the world is probably Dürer's *Hare*, which my generation grew up on. There's that movie *Harvey*. There's Bugs Bunny. There's a whole book on rabbits and art, and it's pretty amazing. We've just always been fascinated by painting rabbits, all the way back to Medieval times. We don't paint rats as often, even though they're both rodents. There's just something about rabbits that we love. There's something charming. People carried rabbits feet for lucky charms when I was a kid. They're a symbol of fertility and multiplying.

TM: Though we've discussed the idea of you continually coming back to bunnies, obviously bunnies aren't the only thing you paint. What was the thought behind doing the book specifically on bunnies, which is only just a small selection of what you paint?

HS: Well, it's becoming an increasingly larger part of my work. It's just something I've always wanted to do. Marta [Hallett] gave me the opportunity to do it. She was very open to the idea. She did a gorgeous job with the book. And it's out just before Easter, which is great.

TM: A lot of the idea being of creating art in any of its forms has to do the concept of creating something beautiful to live on after you, a sort of surrogate immortality. What do you want people to say about you and your artwork long after you are gone?

HS: I'd like them to say anything they want. I paint. I have paint in my veins. It might seem like a silly thing today to want to paint when there are so many other forms of expression. But I grew up around art, and I just love to paint, and have since I was child. I paint whether anyone likes it or not. I guess I hope I'm remembered for reminding people to look at nature more. It's vanishing at such a rapid rate, I hope we still have wild rabbits running around in the near future. I hope my work lasts. That's the hope. But that's not why I do it. I do it because I have to.