

ART HIVE MAGAZINE

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE:

LANDING WITH A RARE BIRD'S EYE VIEW FROM HUNT SLONEM'S BROOKLYN STUDIO WONDERLAND

By Bruce Helander

It's one thing to contemplate an artist's work on the walls of a gallery or in a good museum, or perhaps read a great article in a leading art magazine, but the perspective one receives is obviously limited and never totally complete until you have the opportunity to converse directly with the artist while in their studio. This dilemma is even more complicated, as most artists are private people, and as they gain fame their time to host studio appointments becomes severely limited. Unless you are a good friend, a family relative, an art critic or curator, or a well-known active collector with unlimited financial resources, your chances of meeting with an eminent artist on his home turf are unlikely. The next best thing may be the occasion to view an informative documentary or interview, where you get the essence of the artist and the "creative nest" with which the artist has surrounded himself.

I am grateful that I have had extraordinary opportunities over the past several decades to observe exceptional artists where they work, which came my way as a dealer in contemporary art on West Broadway in Manhattan and Worth Avenue in Palm Beach, and later as a curator for numerous museum shows and as a critic and editor-in-chief of *The Art Economist*. These experiences were particularly valuable and memorable as they led to connecting with some of the most famous artists living in America, including Robert Rauschenberg and James Rosenquist, which offered me insightful perspectives and professional work habits.

When I first met Hunt Slonem over thirty years ago, he lived and worked in a modest walk-up studio on Houston street in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan. As I approached his studio door with a knock and a shout, I unintentionally initiated what seemed to be a buzzing primitive call to the wild with a harmonic chorus of exotic birds squawking to announce an impending guest. Inside, near the entrance, a veritable jungle of giant cages housed dozens of exotic birds, a long-time passion and preoccupation for Hunt, whose inhabitants all seem to squawk in harmonic unison as you pass by. I soon discovered that the artist lived and worked with the subjects of his paintings, fair-weather feathered friends that were the models for his expansive artistic investigations into winged creatures of the earth. Hunt has moved his studio several times in the last few decades, but still holds on to his original digs on Houston Street, where he routinely returns each night after a challenging day in his studio.

Slonem's current studio is a bona fide museum of curiosities, supported by a massive 30,000 sq. ft. space filled to the brim with marvelous paintings accented by thousands of delightful objects from the turn of the century and positioned next to vintage furniture, often reupholstered with one of the artist's designed favorite fabric repeat prints or perhaps a dazzling pattern of flying butterflies in an aerodynamic formation custom printed on wallpaper. This amazing studio is simply packed to the ceiling with a visual unending energy that is simply unforgettable. A quote from renowned collector Beth DeWoody published in the artist's latest book is insightful and accurate: "Hunt Slonem is the kind of artist whose life becomes his art. Walking into his studio is like entering a magical world of a Victorian-era mansion in the middle of a rainforest." As you wander down a long, wide corridor that must be nearly the length of a football field, you might stop to examine a fine table overflowing with 18th century formal top hats and their original cases (think Abraham Lincoln!), and when the light shines past a stately view of the Statue of Liberty, ricochets off the adjacent East River and hits a factory shelf chock-full of wondrous vividly-hued glass containers, it adds a constant colorful sparkle to the floors, which are covered with classic rugs that sometimes feature a Slonem original design. It's easy to get lost here, if not physically then certainly emotionally sidetracked by yet another surprising presentation of handsome, unusual items, all hand-collected by the maestro. There is a large table displaying new hardcover books all about Hunt Slonem and his adventuresome quest of acquiring properties that he then decorates to the nines. Another section is filled with his new series of laser-cut, painted sculptures of birds, bunnies and monkeys.

Opposite page: Hunt Slonem, *Untitled*, 2015, Ed. 1/10, Acrylic on aluminum, 19 x 6 x 6.5 in. Courtesy Hunt Slonem Studio

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