

Hunt Slonem on colour, living with 60 birds and never limiting your goals



Inspired by nature and his 60 pet birds, Hunt Slonem is renowned for his large-scale sculptures and restorations of forgotten historic homes. Bunnies, butterflies and tropical birds burst from his works in a bold and vibrant style that's unmistakable.

WRITTEN BY LAURA CONNELLY
8 MARCH 2018

Slonem's art can be found in the permanent collections of 250 museums around the world, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Whitney, the Miro Foundation and the New Orleans Museum of Art.

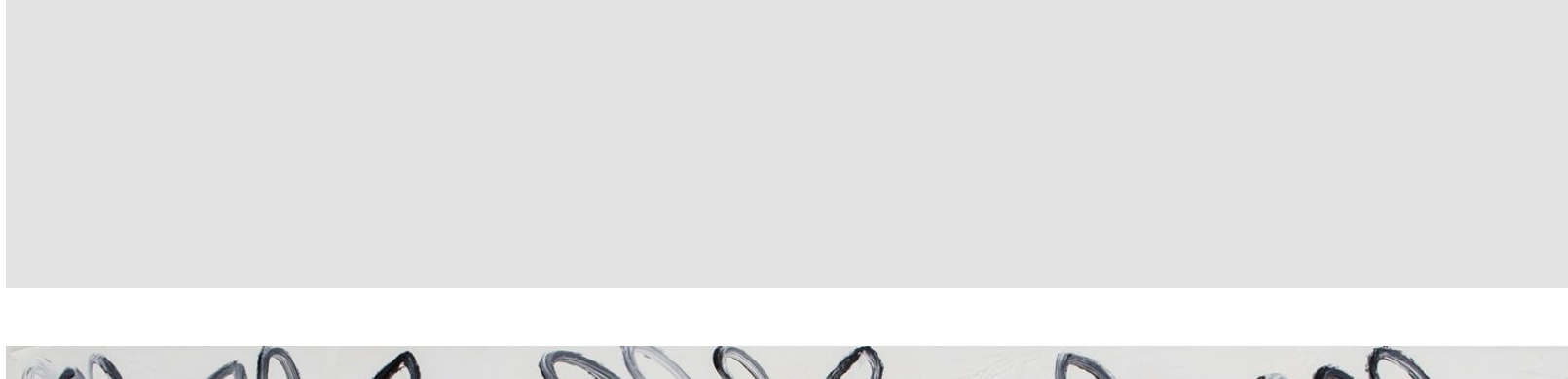
We recently met up with Hunt to talk art, architecture and, of course, birds.

You've been working as an artist since the 1970s. How did your first foray into the art world come about?

I went to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine in 1972. I met a lot of people from New York there and it was very eye-opening. I got a lot of encouragement. When I finished school, I decided to move to New York. I met Ruth Kligman, who was with Jackson Pollock in his fatal car crash and she introduced me to my first gallery, Fischbach Gallery. I had my first show there at the age of 24.

Your work is so distinctive – full of bright colours, animals and birds. Where does your inspiration come from?

It comes from meditation. It comes from passion. It comes from fashion and advertising. And it comes from growing up in Hawaii as a child and the jungles of Nicaragua, which I experienced when I was an exchange student at 16. In addition to my natural pantheism towards colour, I find it to be the elixir of life.



Has your source of inspiration changed throughout your career?

My sources of inspiration have never changed. It's always nature and spirit. I've lived with animals, with 60 birds, throughout my entire life in New York, which are also constant sources of inspiration.

You work across various artistic mediums. Do you favour one above the others?

I love painting on canvas but I do printmaking and sculpture as well. I'm using things other than paint in my work too, such as diamond dust and metallic powder paint. I also use the front and the back of the brush – I paint the paintings with the front and then I make marks into them in the back, which I refer to as cross-hatching.

It's been argued that the art world is elitist. Have you ever found it to be that way during your career?

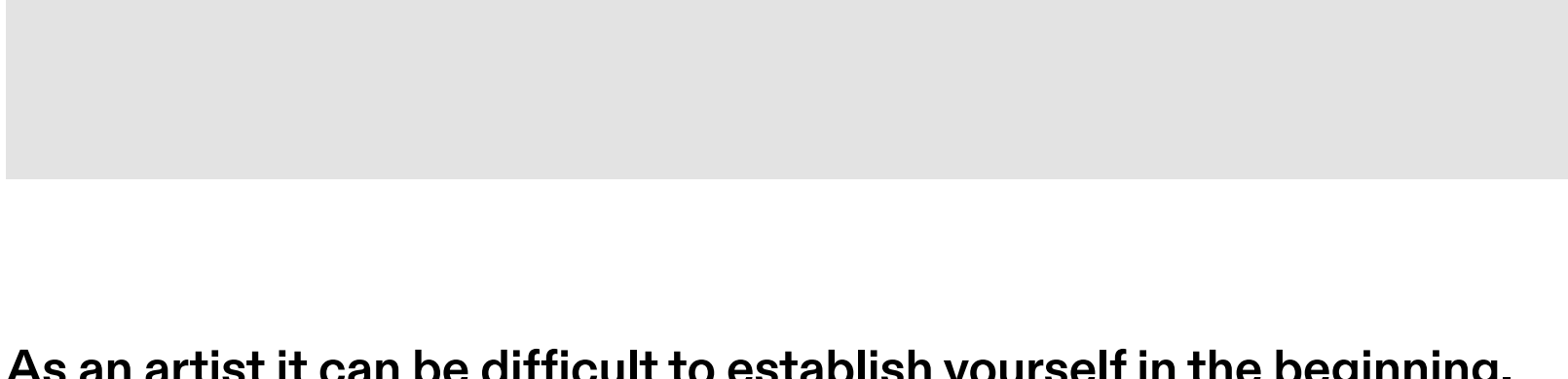
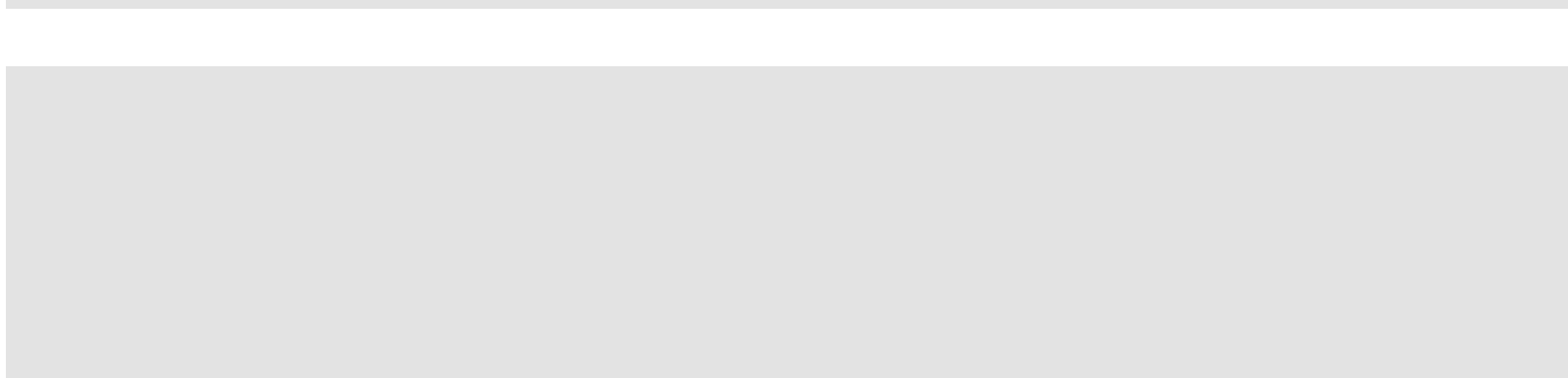
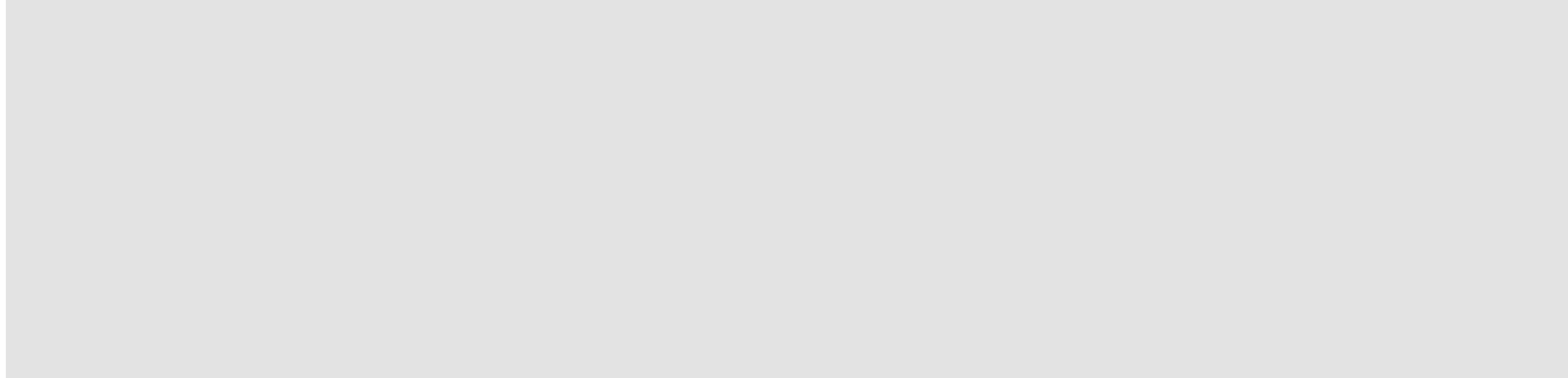
Completely.

What's changed in the industry over the last 30 years – for better? And for worse?

I am not the world's authority on changes in the art world but in my opinion, it's grown tremendously. There has been a development of all these art fairs, which have taken over. There are an incredible amount of artists now too. Recently, it's about who's new, what's new, and what pieces are selling for.

I think there used to be less emphasis on all of that. Although it certainly existed, it was on a much smaller scale. Things used to be more predictable, now it all depends and it's swung in various directions. I always admired artists who lived to 90 and had very long-term successful careers.

There is an emphasis on the 'young' artists of today, especially those in street art. There are many new forms, much more work seen internationally as well as a focus on highlighting the importance of being multicultural.



As an artist it can be difficult to establish yourself in the beginning. How did you do that? Any key tips for those starting out?

We're all still starting out. My goal has been and always surrounds the notion that we need a personal voice and to just beat our drum. It has been my life's goal to be immersed in my work on a daily basis and to be true to my vision regardless of what is going on in the world.

I think it is as hard to establish yourself as it is to sustain an interest in your work over a lifetime. I'm an example of someone who came to New York in 1970 and continued to work.

Today you just have to be doing that right thing, at the right time and the right place. There is no formula. I would say the best word to use when giving advice would be persistence. I've watched people who were nowhere get picked up later on. It's equally hard on both sides of the fence. It could also be destiny.

I've watched wildly talented people not get further in their careers. I've watched minimally talented people take over the world. Persistence and destiny, I don't think people realise how hard it all is.

You're dedicated to renovating 'America's forgotten historic buildings'. What sparked this project? And do you have a target for how many you're hoping to save?

My goal is limitless. It's not just buildings that are considered forgotten that I take interest in, they have to be of architectural interest to me.

I've only done one non-home, which is my Armory. I'm just a space glutton and I love it. It's part of my art form – to recapture lost splendor of other eras. I find it very sad that we have so little reverence for architectural wonder of the past. It's very new and not a very popular thing in America.

In Europe and other places, you just grow up and people are surrounded by antiques and they are wonderful with centuries behind them. We've had such treasure in the last 150 years in America and we are just the land of the new. I love rescuing what I can. I've done about seven projects now.

What are you currently working on?

A lot of commissions, a lot of shows. I'm having a show in Kazakhstan in a museum. I'm working on a monumental sculpture in Louisiana. I have 15 upcoming one man shows. I paint every day, I just paint, whether or not there is anything happening...but there always is, of course. I can't imagine a life without painting.

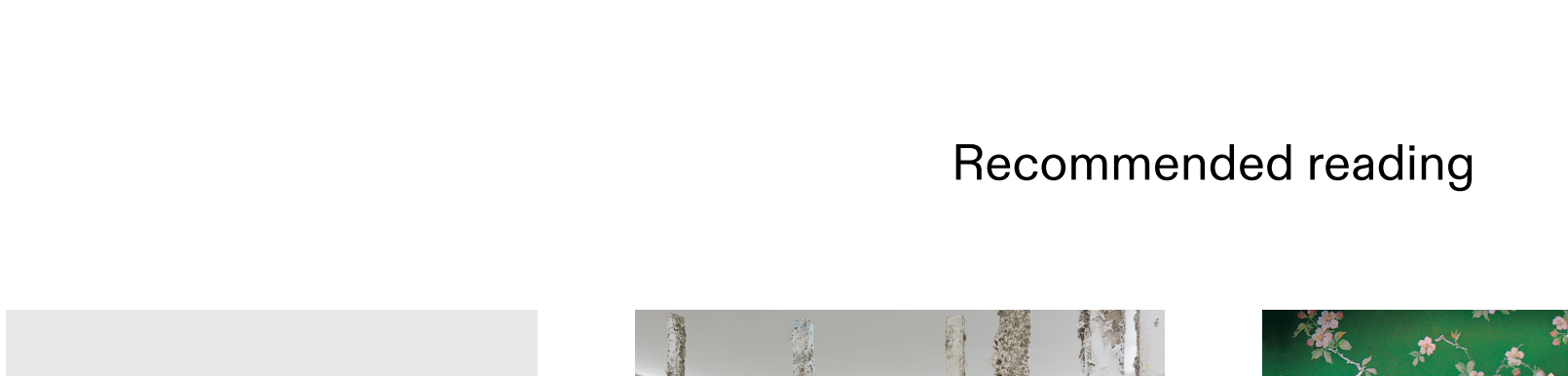
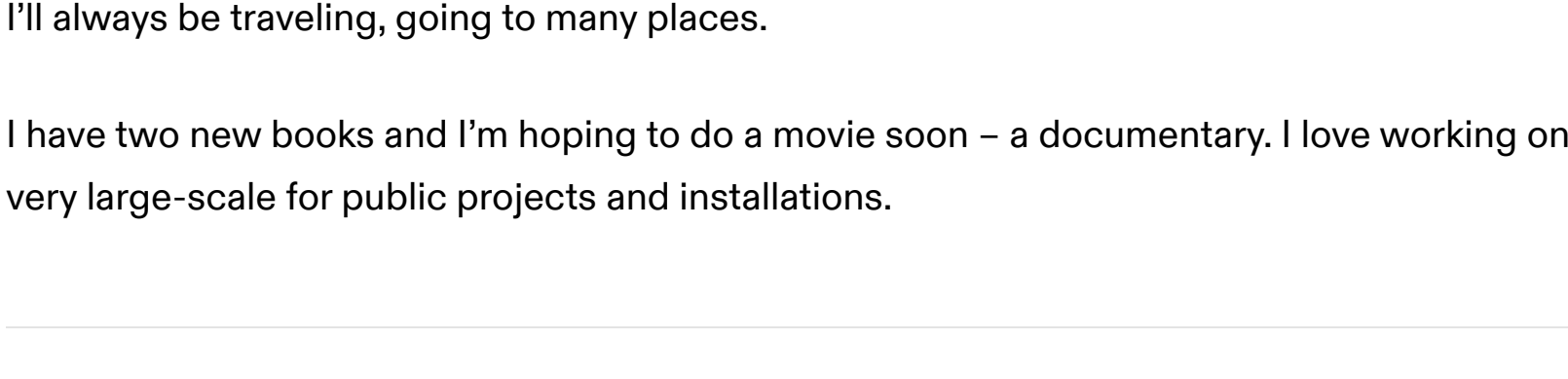
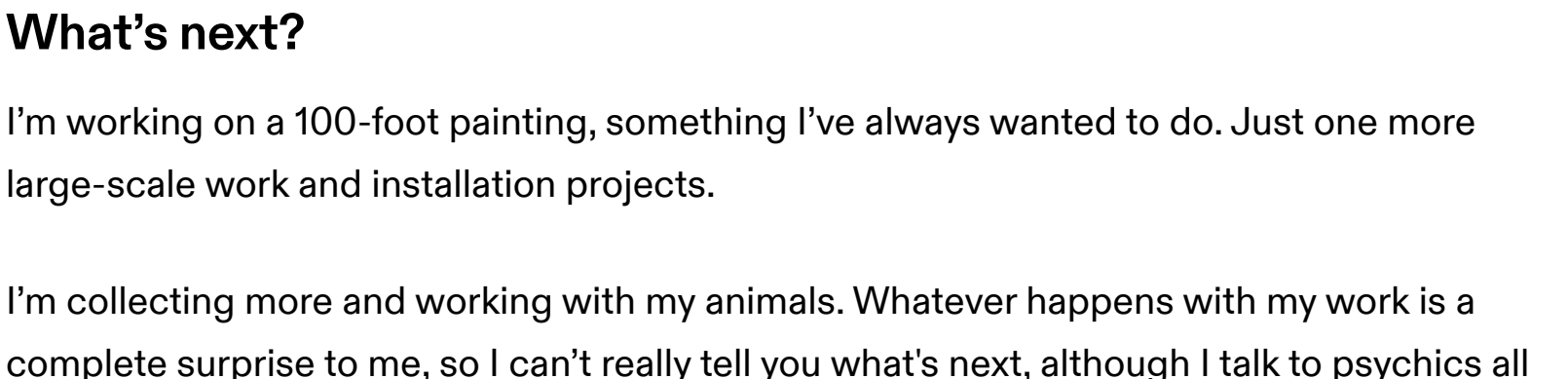
Your Brooklyn studio is renowned, and is often used as a destination for photo shoots. Can you briefly describe it for our readers?

It's a wonderland of jungles and living birds and antiques. It's very large and full of colour and a great showplace and studio for my work.

There are lots of great views on all three sides – you can see the Statue of Liberty and all of Manhattan and Staten Island. I'm always looking at water when I look up, it's my secret world.

And it's all about my collecting, amassing, and saving of old things. Making them relevant again, combining periods and fabrics and colours. I love other artists' studios as well, they are one of my thrills as an artist. I'm always looking at books of artists' studios over the century.

It's so interesting to see how many people I admire and how they put their places together, like their choices of objects and furniture. I was always inspired by Picasso's studios and Matisse's, Gustave Moreau's Paris studio is amazing as well.



How is the creative scene in Brooklyn?

A lot of artists are here. I mean, I'm pretty isolated, I live in Manhattan and come to Brooklyn and work. I do a lot here and it's been great for giving me more time. I come in the morning and leave as late as I can depending on what I have to do. So, I typically keep to my universe here. Other than go to the Brooklyn Museum, I have a few artist friends that I enjoy.

Is there one piece of advice you've been given during your career that's particularly stuck with you?

Yes, two things: Alex Katz said "You're never ready to show, you do it anyway, because you never feel ready." Philip Pearlstein said, when he was in school, that he had applied to a Fulbright for 16 years in a row and he got one finally... and that happened to me with the NEA grant. Again, persistence. Perseverance.

What's next?

I'm working on a 100-foot painting, something I've always wanted to do. Just one more large-scale work and installation projects.

I'm collecting more and working with my animals. Whatever happens with my work is a complete surprise to me, so I can't really tell you what's next, although I talk to psychics all the time. They say there will be a lot of foreign involvement with my work, constant activity, I'll always be traveling, going to many places.

I have two new books and I'm hoping to do a movie soon – a documentary. I love working on very large-scale projects for public projects and installations.

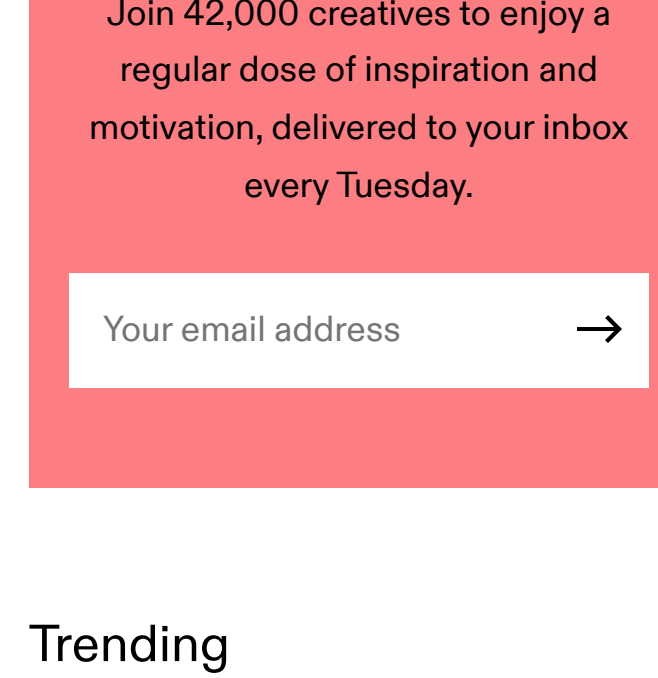
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