

A Canvas of 100 Rooms

By CLAUDIA STEINBERG

AFTER a long search through high-priced downtown real estate, the artist Hunt Slonem found new quarters to rent that were worthy of his ambition to live large and paint a lot: 50,000 square feet, including a terrace, on far West 10th Street.

In New York, a city where people count their space in inches, Mr. Slonem counts in rooms — some 100 of them. Instead of being starved for space, he had the opposite problem — cleaning, painting, furnishing and finding new purposes for an almost limitless number of once-stultifying cubicles. This

An artist turns offices into an endless parlor.

year, he moved in 50 truckloads of furniture, some of it borrowed and some his own, including an extra-large sofa from Andy Warhol's Factory, a long English refectory table and some imposing chairs; his potted forest of orchids, citrus and palm trees; more than two dozen birds; and 30 years' worth of his art.

A Denver-based company called Corporate Express had occupied the space, near the Richard Meier towers, but left behind 300 cubicles, coffee-stained wall-to-wall carpeting and countless swivel chairs. "It was a total mess," Mr. Slonem said.

Worse than the mess was the aura of hundreds of office workers that lingered behind and, he said, oppressed him. So a friend from Houston helped him decorate the place. They hung vintage brocade fabrics on the walls, and within weeks, Mr. Slonem had covered endless linoleum hallways, hundreds of walls and even the carpeted floors with layers of intensely colored

Continued on Page 7



Photographs by Bärbel Miebach for The New York Times

LORD OF THE CUBICLES Hunt Slonem turned a space worthy of Dilbert into art.

A Canvas of 100 Rooms



sometimes become artwork. In 1996, he covered the walls of a room at Art in General, a downtown gallery, with thousands of their feathers.

His formal reception area glows absinthe green, and it houses bird sculptures in a glass-enclosed room that formerly housed computers. A

long corridor from the reception area leads past a large gym, a bishop's chair, a bathroom, a water cooler and the cacophony of his birds imitating the sounds of a busy office — phones ringing, voices saying "Hello? Hello?"

"I need to be surrounded by living

things," he said. "Otherwise, I can't work." (He has one cat, an Abyssinian named Kitu, and has also granted asylum to four turtles.)

After painting and hanging fabric, Mr. Slonem asked Michael Butler, one of the clairvoyants he consults almost daily, for a psychic reading of

the space. "This place was designated for Hunt by his karma," Mr. Butler said. "It's not always possible to find that in one's lifetime, but he is a very spiritual person."

Mr. Butler determined that the dead center of the space, which he named the Apex Room, was the most



Fifty truckloads of furnishings for a labyrinth of rooms.

Photographs by Bärbel Miebach for The New York Times

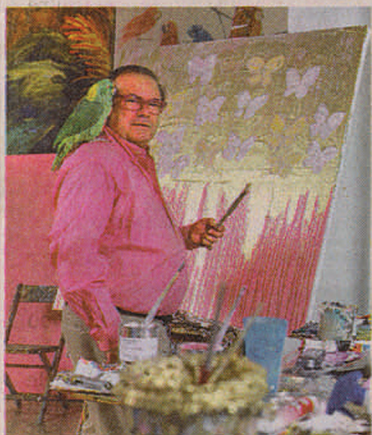
PAINTBOX The artist Hunt Slonem defined rooms by color groups. Clockwise from top left: The Red Room has ebony chairs on loan from an antiques dealer; the Blue Room holds his butterfly paintings; a sitting part of his large collection of Blenko glass; Kitu the cat in the Nap Room; some of his collection of neo-Gothic chairs; in the Yellow Room, his sculpture of ocelots in acrylic and wood.

Continued From Page 1, This Section

paint. Perhaps only an artist would dare to use his color combinations.

One salon was inspired by the color of a Sweet'N Low packet, a lively pink Mr. Slonem describes as a very social color. He complemented the saccharine walls with rosy furniture from different periods and places, including an Edwardian banquet set and 1950's Palm Beach chairs. "I have been ridiculed for this, but I realized that if you have a mass of pink objects, they really work together," he said.

He has other theories. Blue, he thinks, should be reserved for big things — the ocean, the sky or the meditating mind. Yellow, he believes, aids inspiration, so one of his boxy rooms glows like potent lemon custard. Still, neither his tropical plants nor his radical palette nor his neo-Gothic chairs (which cast a somber shadow onto the scene) could completely exorcise the ambience of a dull workplace or overcome the low ceilings and neon lights. And so



ENDLESS QUARTERS Hunt Slonem, above, with his painting "Ascension" and Perky the parrot; above right, his studio with neo-Gothic chairs and, in the background, a carousel elephant turned birdcage; below far right, a former office hallway; below near right, a room inspired by a packet of Sweet'N Low.

he has embraced the jarring discrepancy between the 9-to-5 world and his own Victorian exoticism.

Mr. Slonem has always shared his studios with large flocks of birds, who serve as his muses and models. Parrots, finches, cockatoos and toucans dominate his large canvases. Since he is proud that his birds were not captured in the wild, but bred in captivity, he often portrays them as caged behind a grid of lines directly scraped into the wet paint.

But the birds also enjoy hours of freedom while he paints — and the African grays compete with green aras for the coveted spot on his shoulder. (Frequent bird bites are the risk of this arrangement.)

Not to distract from the exuberant plumage, Mr. Slonem keeps his studio space pristine white. The birds

sometimes become artwork. In 1996, he covered the walls of a room at Art in General, a downtown gallery, with thousands of their feathers.

His formal reception area glows absinthe green, and it houses bird sculptures in a glass-enclosed room that formerly housed computers. A

long corridor from the reception area leads past a large gym, a bishop's chair, a bathroom, a water cooler and the cacophony of his birds imitating the sounds of a busy office — phones ringing, voices saying "Hello? Hello?"

"I need to be surrounded by living things," he said. "Otherwise, I can't work." (He has one cat, an Abyssinian named Kitu, and has also granted asylum to four turtles.)

After painting and hanging fabric, Mr. Slonem asked Michael Butler, one of the clairvoyants he consults almost daily, for a psychic reading of the space. "This place was designated for Hunt by his karma," Mr. Butler said. "It's not always possible to find that in one's lifetime, but he is a very spiritual person."

Mr. Butler determined that the dead center of the space, which he named the Apex Room, was the most

ONLINE Claudia Steinberg narrates a tour of Hunt Slonem's place: nytimes.com/home.

important of many sanctuaries that Mr. Slonem uses for meditation. The lavender-colored chamber is devoted to saints of nationalities and religions honored by Mr. Slonem, including St. Francis of Assisi.

Mr. Slonem, who sells his paintings for up to \$50,000 each and whose work has been collected by the Whitney Museum and the Metropolitan Museum, will not disclose his rent, saying only that it is a "great deal." (Alan Victor, the executive vice president of the Lansco Corporation, a commercial brokerage firm in Manhattan, estimated that space that large would normally rent for \$480,000 to \$720,000 a year.)

One might accuse Mr. Slonem of excess — O.K., go ahead, accuse him of excess. The other day he said he discovered yet another room, but there are advantages to having so many. He has finally had a chance to display his paintings thematically and chronologically — butterfly paintings in one room, hypnotic mon-

Where workers typed, cubicles give way to color.

key eyes (he calls them his guardians) in another, rabbits (his sign in the Chinese zodiac) in a third.

And if his friends, his masseur, his personal trainer or guests lose track of him in the building, they can always call him on his cellphone.

He still gets lost sometimes. But he said, "I finally feel very organized, because there is a room for every activity — one for drying paintings, one for writing thank-you notes, a room for getting dressed for the day and another for black-tie gatherings."

There are also two kitchens, which could be described as one for cocktails and one for cockatoos (where elaborate, protein-rich meals for the birds are prepared). Mr. Slonem eats take-out food or at restaurants.

Certainly furnishing the place was no problem. He is familiar with the flea markets and auction houses of the world. Some pieces he bought on eBay. Others are only temporarily parked at his place, as storage for his friends. Sandra Long, the antiques dealer, has left an ebony table, chairs and sofas in his Red Room, and they will surely be missed when they move out again.

On the other hand, the space is filling quickly, which has led Mr. Slonem to think even bigger. "A hundred thousand square feet would entertain me for the rest of my life," he said. And although he also owns a 30-room house in Kingston, N.Y., some part of him wants to own a plantation in Louisiana (he studied art at Tulane University there).

If all else fails, he is ready to buy a castle in Germany.