Ask the Artsperts
by Kristine Meek and Juliana Meek
Harmon-Meek Gallery, Naples, FL

Texture in Art

Dear Artsperts:
I was looking at a Hunt Slonem painting and was just curious: does he use some type of screen to scratch the paint? How do artists create texture in a painting?
Signed,
Scratching my head

Dear Scratching,

You might be surprised to learn that Hunt Slonem creates that effect by hand one stroke at a time. He has mastered this technique after decades.

Slonem is best known for his paintings of tropical birds, a category he describes as "exotica." He began this technique for his paintings of birds and butterflies. His fascination with nature goes back to his experiences living in Hawaii and Nicaragua in his youth as a son of a Navy officer. For as long as we have known him (since the 1990s) he has kept birds – often rescued or no longer wanted birds – in his studio aviary. Many of the birds are more than 60 years old and have been with him for decades. While you walk through his studio you will often hear a "hello" coming from a bird or two in an elegant and giant antique birdcage.

Slonem has been painting since the 70s. Slonem perfected a technique of painting wet onto wet. He then makes sweeping crosshatches with a paint brush handle that he has sharpened to a point. His crosshatching on the painted canvas is used to mimic, he says, the effect of a cage. While at first, one would assume the viewer is seeing birds in a cage, Slonem explains, it is actually us in the cage looking out to the birds. Knowing this will add a different dimension of thought when viewing his work.

The artist, Tobi Kahn, also creates rich texture to convey his spiritual, metaphorical and abstract depictions of subjects that can range from aerial landscapes to biological or molecular. Kahn uses a time consuming and laborious process of layering acrylic paint over gesso. Kahn says there about 40 layers of paint on each work. He is so meticulous that if he adds too many layers he will remove layers and begin again. He is very concerned with conveying meaning through texture, as well as through imagery and color.

Another artist known for using rich texture is Bob Kane. He used thick oil paint heavily slathered onto his treated, linen canvas. You almost feel the urge to touch his work. Children can touch his technique at the Loos Art Gallery at the Golisano Children's Museum of Naples where a large Kane painting of a horse is on display behind Opium Acrylic and next to a small sample of his technique, which he created especially for the museum to use as an example that kids could touch.

It is tempting to want to touch works of art to feel the texture, but it is important to refrain from touching since the oils on fingers will react with the paint. It can take years for the reaction to occur but fingerprints will eventually show.
Sincerely,
The Artsperts

"Morphos and Doves"
by Hunt Slonem
oil on canvas, 60"x70", 2015

"AKH-ITMIM II"
by Tobi Kahn
acrylic on canvas over wood
50" x 38"x 2", 2013

"Cappuccino" by Bob Kane (1937-2013)
oil on canvas, 12" dia. 2001

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