





GEORGE CONDO

Artificial Realism



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George Condo

GEORGE

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Chapter 1

03

George Condo is a contemporary American artist known for his unique figurative paintings and prints. Featuring fractured portraits and aggressive imagery, Condo often recontextualizes paintings from the Old Masters with allusions to contemporary American culture, blending their imagery and techniques with aesthetics that echo Pablo Picasso and Willem de Kooning. Born in 1957, in Concord, NH, he studied art history and music theory at the University of Massachusetts in Lowell. A member of the band The Girls during the late 1970s, Condo met Jean-Michel Basquiat in New York at a show, it was Basquiat that suggested he move down to New York to pursue a career in art. Condo's first public exhibitions were held in East Village galleries. between 1981 and 1983.

Welcome to New York!

When he emerged in the East Village art scene in the early 1980s, Condo coined the term Artificial Realism, "the realistic representation of that which is artificial", to describe his hybridization of traditional European Old Master painting with a sensibility informed by American pop. Along with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, Condo was instrumental in the international revival of painting from the 1980s onward. Condo's work has been influential to many successful artists of his generation and the generation that followed him, including Nigel Cooke, Sean Landers, John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage.



The first public exhibitions of his work took place in New York City at various East Village galleries from 1981 to 1983. During this period he worked in Andy Warhol's factory, primarily in the silkscreen production studio applying diamond dust to Warhol's Myths series. He moved briefly to Los Angeles and had his first solo exhibition there in 1983 at Ulrike Kantor Gallery. After returning to New York later that year he made his first trip to Europe. Condo moved to Cologne, Germany, where he met and worked with several artists from the Mulheimer Freiheit group, including Walter Dahn and Jiri Georg Dokoupil. His first solo exhibition in Europe was in 1984 at the iconic Monika Sprüth Gallery.

While still in Europe Condo met and began working with American art dealer Barbara Gladstone, and in 1984 he had a simultaneous two-gallery exhibition in New York at Pat Hearn and Barbara Gladstone Galleries. Already close friends with the world know fine arts artist Basquiat by this time, Condo met Keith Haring on returning to New York, and the two remained lifelong friends until Haring's death from AIDS in 1990. Several of Condo's most significant works from this period, such as *Dancing to Miles* (1985), which was included in the 1987 Whitney Biennial and is now in the collection of the Broad Foundation in Los Angeles, were painted in Haring's East Village studio.



Between 1985 and 1995 Condo lived and worked mostly in hotels and rented studios between Paris and New York, while continuing to exhibit extensively in the United States and Europe. In Paris, Condo was introduced by Haring to the American writer and artist Brion Gysin, who later introduced him to William S. Burroughs. Condo and Burroughs collaborated on numerous paintings and sculptures between 1988 and 1996. Selected works from their collaborations were exhibited in 1997 at Pat Hearn Gallery, New York. Condo and Burroughs also worked together on a collection of writings and etchings titled *Ghost of Chance*, which was published by the Whitney Museum in 1991.

Warhol visiting Condo's studio in the 1980's

George Condo in the 1990's with some models in his studio

05

06

While in Paris, Condo also met and befriended philosopher and semiotician Félix Guattari, best known for his collaborations with Gilles Deleuze, when Condo was working in a studio in the apartment building where Guattari resided. Guattari wrote extensively on Condo's work, including an introductory text and interview in the exhibition catalogue for Condo's 1990 solo exhibition at Galerie Daniel Templon.



07

08

George Condo
"Collusion"





George Condo, photographed at his studio in Spring Street, New York

09

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“Picasso was always painting Dora Maar or whoever; Bacon's portraits could always be traced to some existing person. But not my portraits. They were all imaginary.” — George Condo

At once visually arresting and amusingly alarming, *Nude Homeless Drinker* from 1999 is a striking example of George Condo's manifest interest in picturing psychological disturbance, painted in his unique pictorial language that forces viewers to ponder the surreal state of our own humanity.

In the mid-1990s, Condo began to develop a new facial vocabulary in his portraits with bulbous cheeks, bulging eyes and disk-like ears, all discernible in this work from our *New Now* sale on 28 February. These particular features convey a compelling psychological presence, often immediately recognizable as somehow manic or depressive. Condo refers to these paintings as “antipodal portraits”—renderings of figures on the outskirts of society or in everyday roles, hovering between reality and fantasy. These figures are regularly accompanied by recurring referential symbols, such as bubbles, wine bottles or glasses, cigarettes and carrots. The idyllic blue sky background, whimsical bubble and wine bottle of the present work are also evident in some of Condo's other depictions of determined drinkers, such as *The Drinker* (1997) and *Uncle Joe* (2005), a scene of the ultimate hedonist in a peaceful green beyond the reaches of society, aggressive in his inebriation.

The present work was included in Condo's first major survey exhibition, *George Condo: Mental States* (2011–2012), which traveled to important institutions including the New Museum, New York and the Hayward Gallery, London. Arranged thematically rather than chronologically, the show displayed the breadth and diversity of the artist's impressive oeuvre with works spanning his entire career. *Nude Homeless Drinker* is a captivating and humorous example of the theme “Manic Society,” a grouping of paintings from the late 1990s and 2000s depicting drunken exhibitionism and figures in the throes of manic delight and unhinged desperation or rage. The teeth-bearing grins or screams of many of these figures recall Willem de Kooning's ferociously smiling, abstracted women, such as *Woman I* (1950–1952), who parallel Condo's own female forms, transformed into relevant, contemporary images. As scholar Simon Baker described in *George Condo: Painting Reconfigured* from 2015, “*Nude Homeless Drinker* usher[ed] in a range of variously outraged and outrageous female forms. While in other work, stock poses from the life room are turned on their heads: the sense of the female form prey to the vicissitudes and arbitrary geometry of posing in a constant theme of Condo's unedited female disasters.”

Nude Homeless Drinker is one of if not the first instances in Condo's painting in which he explicitly depicts multiple states of physical and mental being. The five arms swinging in frenzied motion imbue the figure with an ambiguity that is completely unlike any of Condo's contemporaneous, carefully posed portraits. Foreshadowing by over a decade the development of some of his more recent series such as the *Drawing Paintings* or *Double Heads*, the present work already exhibits Condo's mastery of critic Harold Rosenberg's coined term “action painting,” which is here coupled with the artist's incredible painterly treatment of form and character grounded in his understanding and appreciation of the likes of Picasso and Rembrandt. As Condo described, as quoted in *The Guardian* in February 2014, “It's what I call artificial realism. That's what I do. I try to depict a character's train of thoughts simultaneously — hysteria, joy, sadness, desperation. If you could see these things at once, that would be like what I'm trying to make you see in my art.” *Nude Homeless Drinker* perfectly embodies this multivalent nature of Condo's oeuvre at its finest. A pivotal work that bridges his many thematic and technical achievements, *Nude Homeless Drinker* is a testament to the undying nature of the primacy of painting and the master of the medium, George Condo.



Introduction

George Condo — Artificial Realism

George Condo
Droopy Dog Abstraction,
2017



George Condo
Marc Jacobs,
2007



George Condo
Droopy Dog Abstraction,
2017



George Condo
Father O'Malley
(The Priest)
2004

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A little bit of this & a little bit of that.

The artist recalls his youthful ambition of wanting 'to make an incredibly important statement right away' and deciding 'I like Old Master paintings, so I'm just going to paint them.'

He has paid homage to Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Goya — as well as certain Modern masters, such as Picasso. *The Black Insect* (1986), for example, takes its inspiration from the insects and free-floating forms in many of the paintings of Joan Miró. Condo's fascination with the greats of art history has persisted throughout his career, with Picasso remaining a key touchstone and influence. 'I describe what I do,' said the artist in 2014, 'as psychological cubism. Picasso painted a violin from four different perspectives at one moment. I do the same with psychological states.'

The bodies in *Figures in Motion* (2013), shown above, share a distinct sense of the caricatural and grotesque with Willem de Kooning's *Woman* series, while the dynamism of the work recalls the gestural abstraction of Jackson Pollock. In the words of the Hayward Gallery director, Ralph Rugoff, Condo's paintings reveal a 'remarkable breadth of artistic exploration'.

He is perhaps best-known, though, for his depictions of an eccentric array of invented characters, all seemingly in competition with each other as to which has the most startling physiognomy. These include *The Insane Psychiatrist* and *The Secretary*, both from 2002. 'George Condo is an artist who can reference French 18th-century portraiture and a comic strip in one and the same painting,' says Francey. 'He mixes high art and low art with aplomb — something that has helped him achieve a wide audience internationally. He's sought after by buyers in America, Europe and increasingly Asia.'

A standout example of Condo's mix of high and low art is *Frankenstorm*. The subject is inspired by Picasso's *Head of a Woman* from 1960, yet its ears are clearly modelled on those of Mickey Mouse. Condo, who likes to live life on the edge, painted *Frankenstorm* in 2012 during the height of Hurricane Sandy, without access to electricity and the outside world.



1
George Condo
Smiling Girl
2007

2
George Condo
Double Heads on Red
2014

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Introduction

George Condo — Artificial Realism

1



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2



1

George Condo
Ahmed the Tailor
2013

2

George Condo
Compression IV
2011

Introduction

George Condo — Artificial Realism

