

Features /



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Time's Fool

Jennifer Higgin reflects on the 30-year career of George Condo.



'Why should I play the Roman fool, and die
On mine own sword?'
Macbeth, Act V, Scene viii

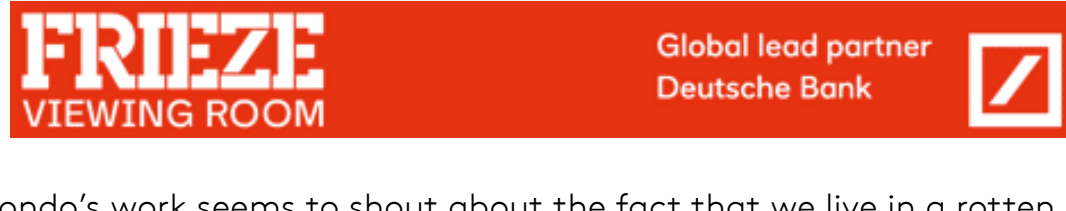
George Condo's paintings describe a ribald world of crazed, comic engagement, theatrical illogic and a furious indifference to conventional niceties. Lush, delicate swaths of paint delineate bodies penetrated by other bodies, pierced by objects ranging from harpoons and daggers to carrots, or plagued by mental disquiet; insanity is the order of the day, served with a side helping of sly cruelty. Mouths (of which there are often more than one to be found in a single head) gnash tombstone teeth while jaws drop like broken elevators; cheeks wobble and bloat like testicles, and plump limbs thrust forward with vampirish delight. Coat-hanger shoulders, broken necks and wrenched muscles rise up at ghostly angles that, weirdly, only reiterate how at home these creatures are with dislocation and deformation. Look at a lot of Condo's paintings in a short space of time and it's hard to know which scenario is preferable – lonely lunacy, crazed copulation or group insanity.

It was Pablo Picasso (one of Condo's heroes) who famously declared that 'art is a lie that makes us realize the truth' – a paradox that Condo, who never uses photographic sources, echoed when, in an interview with Ralph Rugoff, he spoke of his interest in 'the realistic representation of that which is artificial', an approach he has termed 'artificial realism'.¹ Condo is a masterly portraitist of imaginary people (and, very occasionally, of actual ones – for example, Queen Elizabeth II, whom he painted in 2006); he returns again and again to these figures, whom he describes as 'fractions of humanity battling extinction'.² His cast of characters includes a fictitious Frenchman (Jean Louis) with a chameleon face and a bow-tie, the Frenchman's imaginary extended family and servants, Cubist maids, rock-wielding cavewomen, haridan wives, demonic girlfriends, drunken uncles and malformed architects, all of whom gaze out from their worlds with varying degrees of delirious joy or impotent fury. (After all, nothing in their lives will ever change now – as Condo noted: 'They are actors and we are their glass wall'.³) Asked about the origins of Jean Louis, whom Condo has painted countless times and in various incarnations (for example, one painting is a portrait of his mind, another of his soul), the artist replied: 'What is Jean Louis? Is he a waiter, a chef, a driver? Is he a real person? Or is he a Chuck Close painting gone wrong? ... When Jean Louis appeared, he took on the same framing used in Chuck's self-portraits from the seventies. He has no other origin really.'⁴ No other origin, of course, apart from the interaction of Condo's imagination with the world he both inhabits and studies.

References to time, anecdote and fiction recur and blur repeatedly in Condo's work: he believes that 'painting needs to transform in order for it to become interesting for each and every generation, but I think more in terms of being liberated by history. Liberated by what has come before.'⁵ Thus, time in a Condo painting is determinedly non-linear – I've never before wondered what might happen if a cavewoman was dumped in a 1920s' bar and thrown some lipstick and fishnets. Traditional subjects such as reclining nudes and drunken men fuse with invented characters from prehistoric, Classical and Pop culture, including slapstick Roman soldiers, snarling superheroes with beer bellies, deformed saints wearing opulent robes and irate cave dwellers; within this painterly theatre often lurk references to current corporate scandals or politics (from Enron to US and British politics and the monarchy). But whatever the subject, every brushstroke seems to acknowledge the impact hundreds of painters – from Frans Hals and Edouard Manet to Otto Dix, Francis Bacon, Willem de Kooning and Phillip Guston (all painters to whom the physicality, the possibilities of paint, were as important as subject matter) – have had on Condo's technique, his exploration of space and his mind's eye. 'The way I paint', he has said, 'in technical terms is very traditional: I start with a ground on the canvas; then I make drawings. I make sketches and sometimes I'm involving a number of images from different paintings, with slight variations at times. I think of them as themes and variations, composites of various psychological states painted in different ways.'⁶

Condo is not, to put it mildly, averse to a little exaggeration. Eyes, for example, are a part of the body the artist rates highly, as, obviously, have many painters before him – but in his cosmos they're transformed from windows to the soul into little holes of horror or inflated glutinous orbs, jelly rocks that occasionally roll from their sockets to balance lightly, say, on the end of a perky-haired girl's nose. To add to the confusion, one eye will often contradict the other – ferocious on the left and tender on the right, say – which creates an unsettling sense of simultaneous attraction and repulsion. (As Rugoff wonderfully observed, Condo paints faces that suggest an 'anatomical orgy'.⁷) Similarly, women aren't just nude, they're voraciously and violently naked, seemingly spawned of monsters: hags who grimace from their painterly prisons with lascivious desperation, or glance up from their sexual shenanigans with a look that would instil nameless fears in the coldest of hearts. If it weren't for the sneaking suspicion that these characters seem actually to be having strange, if somewhat hysterical, fun, you might feel sorry for them. But (and there's something about these images that makes you state the obvious in the same moment you notice the nuances) they're not people who could ever exist – they're paintings. As such, they beg the question: who, exactly, is laughing at whom here? And what's so funny? Humanity?

That's the thing about artists who use comedy to describe impossible or tragic situations – they fiddle with your sense of judgement, usually while side-stepping any kind of conclusion about what exactly it is they're poking fun at (which leaves, of course, the viewer with the terrible responsibility for their own laughter). There is clearly something unacceptable about laughing at someone else's deformity, yet Condo ardently encourages mirth in his viewers, however vulnerable the scenario. (In this he is certainly an equal opportunity employer: the women he depicts are easily as warped as the men – who Condo describes as 'oppressed bozos resisting dehumanization' – who frequently seem to cower away from the female energy directed so violently towards them.⁸) Take his creepy, comic paintings of perverted superheroes and pin-ups: Batman looks like a demented rodent, the Playboy bunny has a foxy figure and a ravaged, horribly rearranged face, while a flabby Superman smokes two cigarettes with his ears and seems oblivious to the carrot on his head – all possible pomposity is quelled by equal measures of pain, paint and parody – and funnily enough, the more you look, the more vulnerable and human they become. ('I think the pedestals these heroes once occupied in the American psyche have degenerated', Condo has stated. 'They are burned-out superheroes, they're ghosts of themselves.'⁹) Equally, religious superheroes such as priests and saints are also given short shrift: Condo was brought up a Catholic, a religion he believes incapable of reconciling public and private values; and in revenge he has variously imprisoned priests in shopping carts, turned them into clowns and squashed their faces into unrecognition. As André Breton observed, humour can, paradoxically, be a way of coping with the most tragic of circumstances: 'There is nothing', he wrote, 'that intelligent humour cannot resolve in gales of laughter, not even the void.'¹⁰



At first glance Condo's work seems to shout about the fact that we live in a rotten, riotous, culture fuelled by bunkum, and our pleasures aren't pleasurable to some mix of mockery, violence and exploitation – all of which, in conversation, might get a touch tedious, but which, as art, is redeemed by the artist's complex technical and imaginative skills, which are considerable. In one fell swoop Condo drags his subjects from the gutter and bathes them in a kind of enraged and complicated glory – complicated in the sense that, despite his almost Beckettian fascination with failure, he invests each of his paintings with something monumental, be it a giant woman, an enormous jaw or a reassembled face. He has even lent smoke a sinuous, sculptural quality. (Many of his troubled, hilarious individuals smoke so hard it would seem to be their only nourishment, yet the way Condo paints it, it's more sensual than skin.)

In Condo's pictures sex is a currency so devalued and an act so ubiquitous as to be almost worthless – yet the artist returns again and again to the subject of couples, alone or in groups, united by booze and lust, not only to mine the subject's potent psychological potential but also to explore its compositional one: he obsesses over variations of sexual positions with the same kind of fervour that Donald Judd saved for exploring variations in reflective metal. If it weren't for the elements of demented pride that are alluded to in the midst of these scenarios – the ferocious toss of the head, the startled anger (as if you, by looking, are now somehow complicit in their fury, having interrupted a very private, if manic, coupling), the bared teeth, the energetic, shameless nudity and kind of appalled joy – these pictures could be pathetic. As it is, they are, in their (very own) way celebratory, even grandiose, a reaction Condo ascribes 'to the façade of morality that hides the fanatical undercurrent that we are faced with today'.¹¹

Although he makes sculptures less regularly than paintings (which may partially account for the lavish materials he uses, including gold, bronze and titanium – he is looking into marble at the moment), these too explore collisions between the monumental and mundane. The subjects of these works include the aforementioned trapped priest, a walrus, altar boys, opera singers and Madame Voltaire. Never have hard metals looked so malleable. The tension, or gulf, in these objects between material and subject – something very valuable used to describe faces that reveal, in each indentation, their vulnerability – blows predictable hierarchies of meaning and value (both material and conceptual) to the wind.

Restlessly returning again and again to the same subjects without, somehow, repeating, if not his central players, then the marks he employs, Condo's explorations of how to apply paint, draw a face or sculpt a figure have remained relentlessly fresh for almost 30 years (he turns 50 only this year – his precocious talent was recognized at a young age). In this, he side-steps the dilemma facing artists who grapple to reconcile both the ideals of art and the reality of the world: he is too in love with his materials and too absorbed and curious about his subject matter (humans, and what they feel for each other, how we repeat our mistakes, what faces reveal, where hands and bodies might travel to, if only allowed) to become complacent. Or, as he puts it: 'It's about dismantling one reality and constructing another from the same parts, and that various concrete objects are not attached to their parts alone.'¹²

Whatever the ostensible subject of Condo's paintings, drawings or sculptures, sexual energy fuels the machine that drives the body, stimulating an act without which we could not live as a species. In Condo's universe, however, sex is imagined less as a victory over abstinence than as a confirmation of the necessity of connection with other people, however crude. This is emphasized in the delicacy with which he paints, not only bodies (and this is something, given the bluntness of the subject matter, that is easy to overlook) but also the walls, mattresses and surrounding landscapes, which writhe – as if in agreement – like excited flesh; everything, on some level, appears to be blooming, leaking or rotting – is, in other words, alive. In his drawings the subject is treated with even greater subtlety: the crusts of unions is portrayed in swift, tender lines and fine shading. This is what the world is, Condo seems to be saying: a place as sophisticated or rudimentary, as alienated or as alienating as we choose to make it. That there can be dignity in the object is not a new idea, but it's one that Condo has dragged into the 21st century by giving it, quite literally, a fresh coat of paint.

- 1 Ralph Rugoff, interview with George Condo, 'The Enigma of Jean Louis', in George Condo, *Existential Portraits*, Holzwarth Publications, Berlin, 2006, p.8
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 13
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 9
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 11
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 7
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 8
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 10
- 8 Phone conversation with the author, March 2007
- 9 Op. Cit, Rugoff, p. 11
- 10 André Breton, 'Lightning Rod', *Anthology of Black Humour*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1997, p. xiv
- 11 Op. Cit, Rugoff, p. 10
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 8

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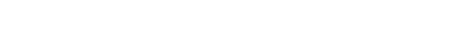
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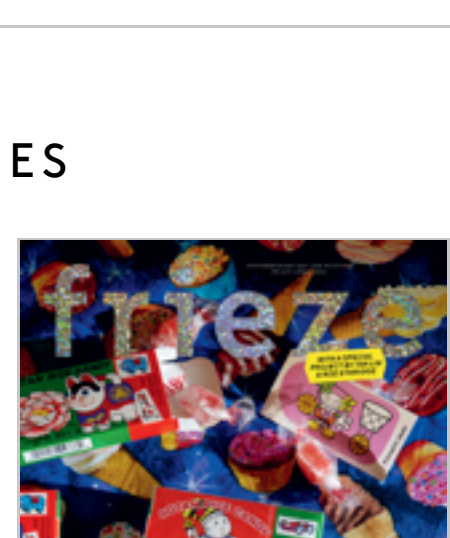


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