

# PORTRAITS OF IMAGINARY PEOPLE

*How George Condo reclaimed Old Master painting.*

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

The art of painting supposedly gave up the ghost around 1970, done in by minimalism, conceptual art, video, performance art, photography, body art, language art, earth art, and a host of other designated successors. Before the seventies were out, though, painting had bounced back, bristling with new energies and reengaging with recognizable imagery, illusory space, and other obsolete heresies. Considering that the painted image has been with us for thirty thousand years or so, its rebirth was no big surprise, but some of the ground rules have changed. To be widely recognized in today's art world, a painter needs, to begin with, a technique or a material or a concept that nobody else has claimed: Julian Schnabel's broken-plate paintings, say, or Jean-Michel Basquiat's graffiti-inspired primitivism. George Condo, whose mid-career survey exhibition opens at the New Museum on January 26th, came up with something even more radical: he rediscovered Old Master painting.

This happened in 1982, when he was twenty-four. As he described it to me last summer, he had recently quit his job in New York, working as a printer for Andy Warhol, and had gone to join his actress girlfriend in Los Angeles. One day, he said, "I suddenly had this feeling that all the things I was put in this world to do I had to do now. There was a new wave of figurative art going on in New York then, with Basquiat, and Schnabel, and Keith Haring and a few others, but I didn't want to be part of that. I felt I had to come back to New York with a statement that would stand up against Andy Warhol's soup cans. And the irony was that it turned out to be Old Master painting. What's so bizarre is that I didn't need anybody to show me how to do it, and there was no trial and error. The first thing I did was a painting called 'The Madonna.'"

Although he referred to his breakthrough painting at that time as "a fake Tiepolo," he hadn't based it on the work of any particular artist. He'd made it up, from his memories of all the Madonnas he had seen in museums and art books and catalogues. The painting, which is twenty inches high by sixteen wide, shows a woman in a billowing cloak, her eyes cast down, her angular features silhouetted against turbulent white clouds. Condo built up the surface with alternating layers of oil paint, transparent or semi-transparent oil glazes, and varnish, techniques he had read about in a college art-history course. Deciding at one point that his paint was too thick, he took a ruler and scraped some of it off. "That made it sort of blurred, like a Francis Bacon," he said. When the picture was finished, he put it in an antique carved wood frame he had found in a thrift shop. "It really did look like an Old Master painting," he said, "but with a modern edge."

There are more than eighty paintings and sculptures in Condo's New Museum show ("The Madonna," which has never been shown before, is one of them), and visitors are more likely to notice their modern edge than the techniques he used to produce them. Although Condo has worked mainly within the European tradition of portraits, landscapes, and figure studies, with occasional forays into abstraction and sculpture, the vast majority of his so-called "portraits" are not portraits at all but images of imaginary people. Now and then, somebody vaguely recognizable pops up—Queen Elizabeth II, Jesus, Batman—but, generally speaking, Condo's subjects come straight from his imagination, where the sleep of reason produces not only monsters (grotesque faces with three or four rows of ferocious-looking teeth, copulating couples who look straight at the viewer and scream angry imprecations) but also vo-

luptuously realistic nude bodies and beautiful, faceless mannequins in period costumes. Condo's subject matter, which can be simultaneously hilarious and scarifying, puts a lot of people off, but many contemporary artists are in awe of his virtuoso paint handling. They also respect his material success. "I've never had any trouble selling work," he said recently. Nor does he have a problem spending the proceeds on a highly agreeable life style. As early as 1985, an entry in Andy Warhol's diaries refers to the twenty-seven-year-old Condo as "this 'poor artist' [who] has a room . . . at the Ritz Carlton."

Condo and his wife, Anna, a filmmaker, and their daughters, Eleonore, twenty, and Raphaëlle, sixteen, live in a rented, slightly run down, but still elegant town house on the Upper East Side. In a shopping spree last fall, they replaced most of what Condo called the "fake French furniture" in their living and dining rooms with the real thing: a Louis XVI dining table and six Regency chairs, a Georges Jacob settee, and several exquisite marquetry pieces signed and stamped by the eighteenth-century masters Roger Van der Cruse and Pierre Migeon, including a commode made originally (by Migeon) for Madame de Pompadour's bedroom. "We hadn't bought any new furniture for twenty-two years," Condo explained, "and all the stuff in here was destroyed by the cats." (They have four.) "We didn't have a place to sit down."

No such grandeur exists at another rented town house, seven blocks south, which Condo uses as his studio. In the high-ceilinged, second-floor drawing room where he paints, the only furniture is a cheap schoolboy desk and chair and a brace of rickety tables, one piled high with partly squeezed tubes of Sennelier and Mus-



*"like the idea that there's something beyond the painting," Condo says. "Beyond what you can see." Photograph by Tina Barney.*

sini oil colors, the other with acrylics, pastels, and drawing materials. On the first of my visits to the studio, last fall, two blank canvases, each about six feet by five and a half feet, stood against the wall on the left. Benjamin Provo, the studio manager, had applied Condo's preferred ground coat of pale, bluish-gray acrylic paint to both of them the night before. What Condo had in mind today, he said, was a painting with several interacting figures.

His fifty-third birthday was coming up in a few weeks, but Condo, whose painting clothes are the same as his street clothes—dark slacks and a Charvet sweater over an untucked white shirt—could still pass as a rumpled, party-ready undergraduate. On most days, he appears to be on excellent terms with himself, and his non-stop, wide-ranging conversational style is punctuated by bursts of laughter. Having agreed to let me watch him work, he picked up a piece of white chalk and began drawing, left-handed, on one of the two stretched canvases. After a few quick, sure strokes, I recognized the bald head, upward-thrusting chin, and large bow tie of Rodrigo, one of the recurrent characters who have populated his pictures over the past few years. Rodrigo is “a kind of lowlife,” Condo confided, “the one who parks your car.” Also, as he once put it, he’s “the piano player at a wedding, doing the worst song you’ve ever heard.” Without a pause, he started another figure to the left of Rodrigo, a slender nude girl facing forward, her right hand casually shielding her pudenda in the classic pose of the Cnidian Aphrodite. The chalk made a whispering sound as it touched the canvas in large, sweeping arcs, precipitating a delicate rain of white dust. “White chalk is nicer than charcoal,” Condo said, “because you can go right over it with oil paint. Charcoal gets into the paint, makes it muddy.” He sketched in a third figure, to the girl’s left, an older woman, wearing a long dress with a scalloped neckline. Pausing to pick up a carpenter’s spirit level, he used it to see whether the vertical lines on the canvas were true. (They were.) “What happens now,” he said, “is I sit down.”

Sprawled behind the little maple desk, whose top was covered with cig-

arette burns, loose cigarettes (Camels, no filter), crumpled dollar bills, pencil stubs, and other debris, he studied the work in progress. “I’ll have to redraw the girl,” he mused, scribbling a few lines on a pad. “I want to bring her forward a little. She’s sort of being sent off into the world, I think.” The three figures were already developing characteristics that he could identify. The older woman was the girl’s mother. Rodrigo was “the disapproving butler.” He went back to his paint table, chose a new, medium-sized bristle brush, squeezed some burnt sienna on a paper plate, and began going over the chalk lines with it. The reddish-brown pigment gave solidity to the figures. He revised as he went along, rubbing out lines with a paper towel and redrawing them. The girl became more robust and less classical, with large eyes and a full mouth. He enlarged her nipples. Adding a squeeze of burnt umber to the paper plate, he mixed it with the sienna to make darker tones—shadows—on one side of her breasts, giving them volume and roundness. A series of undulating strokes generated billowing hair down to her shoulders. Part of the magic of oil painting is that, to a non-artist, it can seem easy to do. “She’s becoming more Italian,” he observed. The mother’s head was too high, higher than the girl’s. As he worked to correct this, her face more or less disappeared in a tangle of lines and erasures, and then reemerged as that of a grotesque harridan, with no lower jaw and one eye twice as big as the other. Her expression was savage, demonic, and somewhat demented. Condo likes to practice what he calls “psychological Cubism”; instead of showing different facets of an object simultaneously, as Picasso and Braque did, he paints different and often conflicting emotions in the same face. To me, the mother’s rage seemed focussed on her nubile daughter. “They’re going to determine what’s going on here, as much as I am,” Condo said cheerfully.

An hour or so later, when the three figures were fully drawn, he took a cigarette break and then laid out a new palette on a fresh plate: titanium white, raw sienna, burnt sienna, sap green, emerald green, ultramarine, vermilion, Naples yellow. With a larger brush, he began

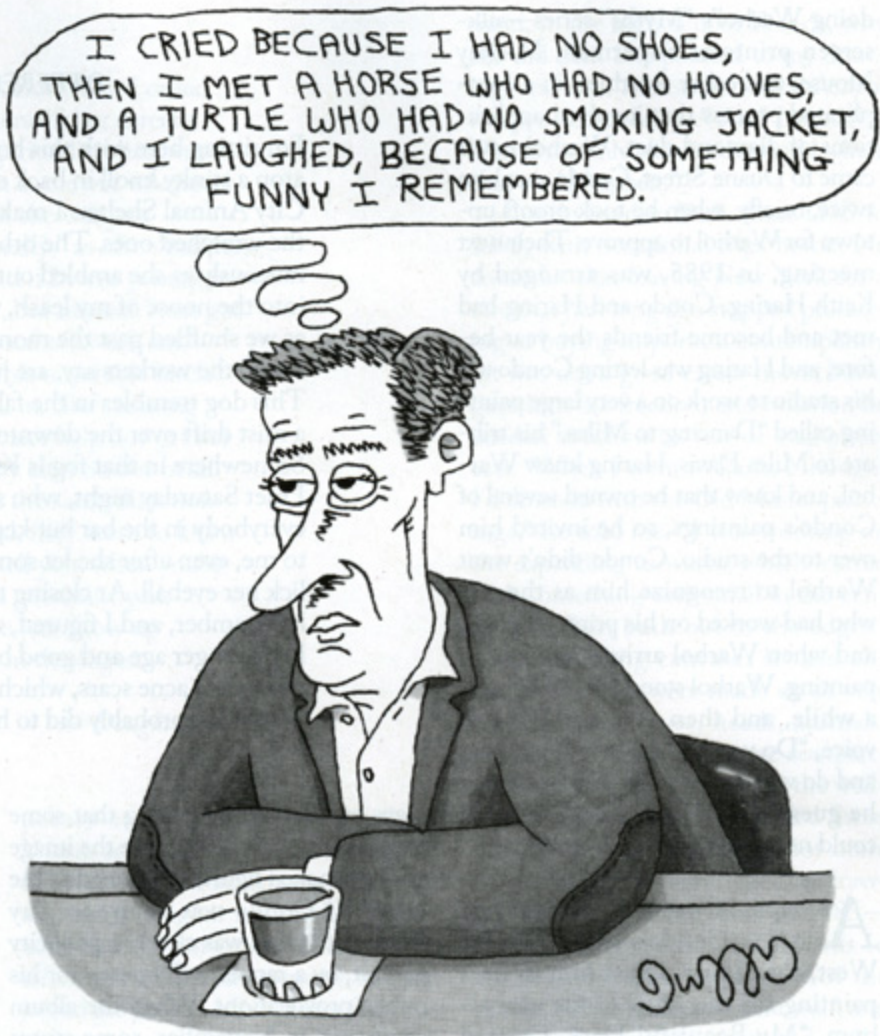
putting in the flesh tones. “I like the gray primer, because it gives a burnished look to the flesh,” he said. “They used this in Dutch painting—the Spanish and the Italians used a sort of rusty brown. Here, I’m putting brown over brown, and green over that.” I never understand why this combination of colors ends up looking like warm flesh, but it does. He made the girl’s hair auburn. He painted in the eyes—blue for the girl, green for her mother, black for the butler, about fifteen seconds on each eye, and a quick, unerring fleck of white for the highlight. I asked him if he ever worked from live models. He said he had done that. “You look at them, and you don’t want to paint, but you have to. And you can’t keep them from moving. I never liked it.”

Two hours passed. The mother was looking even angrier. Her dress had turned dark green. Although her lower jaw was missing, she had a dangerous-looking shelf of feral teeth, and a weird, rectangular protrusion on the left side of her face. I asked him what it was. “That,” he said, “is an exaggerated slath of cheek,” and we both laughed. The butler wore a white dress shirt, a black morning coat with black satin lapels, and a carmine cummerbund. A large mirror hung on the wall behind him, reflecting the fringe of hair on the back of his head. One of his white-gloved hands clasped the girl’s left shoulder protectively. Another hand rested on her right thigh; Condo wasn’t sure whose hand it was, and the uncertainty amused him. “I like the idea that there’s something beyond the painting,” he said, “beyond what you can see. The girl has an expression that suggests she knows what’s ahead for her. The butler doesn’t know, and the mother just knows it’s not going to be good.” He was starting to lay in the blue-green background when I had to leave. He stepped back, and said, “Whoever looks at this painting is going to put the story together in his own mind. I’ve decided to call it ‘The Uninvited Guest.’”

Artists abandoned storytelling in the nineteenth century, but Condo has always been notably out of step with his contemporaries. As the second oldest of five children (three boys, two girls) growing up in a Catholic family in bu-

colic Chelmsford, Massachusetts, he was the only one who showed any serious interest in music and art. On visits to their paternal grandparents' house, in Haverhill, twenty minutes away, George spent hours looking at photographs of the large, neoclassical sculptures that Salvatore Albano, his great-grandfather's brother, had carved during an illustrious career in Italy. Some of them, George learned, were in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Pasquale Condo, George's father, taught physics and calculus at the University of Lowell, in the town next to Chelmsford. His mother, Muriel, who came from a large Irish-American family, worked as a registered nurse. She took note of George's unusual drawing skills and arranged for him to have art and music lessons outside school. From the age of fourteen, he spent a lot of time in his room, practicing Bach and Scarlatti on the guitar, reading Aldous Huxley's "The Doors of Perception" and other books, listening to Debussy and Miles Davis on the record-player. His walls were plastered with art posters—Cézanne, Monet, Picasso, Kandinsky. "I was in my own world," he remembers. "I was the sort of kid who carried John Cage's 'Silence' around like a Bible."

Condo and his siblings all went to Lowell, where the tuition for faculty children was a dollar a year. Because Lowell offered no studio-art courses, he majored in music theory, and took as many art-history courses as he could fit in. Although music (classical, jazz, and beyond) was and still is an important part of his life, he had known since childhood that he wanted to be an artist, and in 1978, after his second year at college, he moved to Boston, to attend the Massachusetts College of Art. The teacher of a night-school painting class at the college that he signed up for that summer singled out Condo's painting of a crushed Pepsi can as the only student work in the room that "looked like art," and this was so encouraging that Condo decided he'd rather keep on painting and not go to art school. He got a job silk-screening images on T-shirts, and he joined a Boston punk-rock band called the Girls, which had been started by three male art students. A lot of



young artists played in rock bands in those days. "It was easier to get a message across in music than it was in painting," Condo remembers. "This was the height of the punk-rock thing, with the Ramones and the Sex Pistols and Patti Smith. I thought it was really great, a cross between John Cage and performance art."

He played bass guitar in the band and doubled on the electric viola, which he'd learned to play at Lowell. The Girls became one of the most popular groups in Boston. In 1979, they hit the big time, with a show at a downtown New York rock club called Tier 3. They wore cardboard boxes and played at killer volume, and the drummer destroyed his drum set onstage. Jean-Michel Basquiat was in another band playing that night, which was called Gray. After the gig, everybody went over to the Mudd Club, where Condo and Basquiat got together

and talked. "He was shy but sophisticated," Condo recalls, "and he talked like a Harvard kid. Neither of us had done anything yet—he was just putting his 'Samo' tag on walls, with spray paint. A couple of years later, I ran into him again in L.A., and we became good friends."

Condo and Mark Dagley, who played guitar for the Girls, decided they had to move to New York. They quit the band, and returned in December of 1979. After a brief stay at a midtown hotel, where the rooms were thirty-seven dollars a week, they found cheaper lodgings downtown, and they discovered an employment agency called Kelly Girl, which offered temporary jobs of all kinds. Condo had "about thirty" jobs, he said, the last and longest of which was with a master printer named Rupert Smith, on Duane Street. Smith printed for Andy Warhol. At the time, he was

doing Warhol's "Myths" series—silk-screen prints of Superman, Mickey Mouse, and other worthies, in a complicated process that involved applications of diamond dust. Warhol never came to Duane Street. Condo met him twice, briefly, when he took proofs up-town for Warhol to approve. Their next meeting, in 1985, was arranged by Keith Haring. Condo and Haring had met and become friends the year before, and Haring was letting Condo use his studio to work on a very large painting called "Dancing to Miles," his tribute to Miles Davis. Haring knew Warhol, and knew that he owned several of Condo's paintings, so he invited him over to the studio. Condo didn't want Warhol to recognize him as the guy who had worked on his prints, though, and when Warhol arrived he kept on painting. Warhol stood behind him for a while, and then asked, in his soft voice, "Do you just go up to a painting and do whatever you like?" Condo said he guessed so. Warhol said, "Gee, I could never do that."

A couple of weeks before my first visit to Condo's studio, Kanye West, the rapper, asked him to do a painting for the cover of his new album, "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy." West said that he had seen paintings by Condo, and wanted to collaborate with him. According to Condo, he also said that he was looking for "something that will be banned." West came to Condo's studio, where for several hours they listened to tapes of his music, and over the next few days Condo made eight or nine paintings. Two of them were portraits of West, one in extreme closeup, with mismatched eyes and four sets of teeth. Another showed his head, crowned and decapitated, placed sideways on a white slab, impaled by a sword. There was also a painting of a dyspeptic ballerina in a black tutu, a painting of the crown and the sword by themselves in a grassy landscape, and a lurid scene of a naked black man on a bed, straddled by a naked white female creature with fearsome features, wings, no arms, and a long, spotted tail. West chose that one.

In mid-October, shortly before his album was released, the *Times* and other papers took note of several Twitter mes-

## DIFFERENT DOGS

I'm sitting here with this bony little Doberman atop a stinky knoll in back of the Oklahoma City Animal Shelter. I make sure to walk the wretched ones. The others barked raucously as she ambled out of her cage into the noose of my leash, which hung slack as we shuffled past the monsters in the segregated pen—some, the workers say, are just born bad. This dog trembles in the fall chill as we watch a mist drift over the downtown skyline. Somewhere in that fog is Krystal, the woman I met Saturday night, who seemed to know everybody in the bar but kept circling back to me, even after she let some crazy asshole lick her eyeball. At closing time she gave me her number, and I figured, doing the math, her younger age and good breasts plus nice face minus the acne scars, which didn't matter to me, but probably did to her, equalled

sages by West, complaining that some retailers wouldn't let him use the image with the naked figures. ("Banned in the USA!!!") Condo was happy to play along with what was clearly a publicity gambit, by a rapper well known for his public provocations. When the album came out, in November, some stores had the naked "phoenix" on the cover, and others had the ballerina. The album sold nearly five hundred thousand copies in its first week, and went straight to the top of the charts.

Condo didn't like Los Angeles. He stayed there for less than a year, returning to New York in early 1983. He broke up with his actress girlfriend and found cheap lodgings in the East Village, and made a lot more Old Master-type paintings, experimenting further with underpainting and with Renaissance ideas of geometrical structure. Later that year, he was invited to be in an exhibition in Amsterdam. "I didn't have the money to go," he said, "but out of the blue a guy came to my studio and paid me twelve hundred bucks for one painting." It was his first big sale, and it financed his first trip to Europe. He stopped in London to see the Old Masters at the National Gallery, then went to Amsterdam, and from there to Cologne, where Jiri

Georg Dokoupil, Walter Dahn, Martin Kippinberger, and other European artists were developing punk-oriented styles of what was being called "wild painting." Dokoupil, whom Condo had met in New York, invited him to use the studio he had just vacated, and Condo embarked on a series of very odd clown paintings—the ultimate kitsch subject, "painted like Rembrandts." Dokoupil also gave him an airplane ticket to Santa Cruz de Tenerife, in the Canary Islands, where the Cologne art crowd went to relax—in part because cocaine and other drugs were more easily available there. Condo fell in love with a twenty-one-year-old local girl named Maria Martell, and ended up staying with her for several months, and making the paintings that launched his reputation.

The techniques he had been teaching himself over the past year came into full play in five "name paintings," where the letters "C-O-N-D-O" were spelled out large in surreal, exquisitely rendered settings. Graffiti artists spray-painted their names on walls and subway trains; Condo emblazoned his in Old Master landscapes. The five letters, studded with jewels and issuing plumes of smoke, marched across one of the paintings, "The Cloudmaker," in a gorgeous caravan, catching the first rays of a sun-

my first Oklahoma girl. But when I called she talked only about herself, her careers, her degrees, her deep spirituality, her power to literally make the sun come out whenever she felt like it. I thought she was just misusing the word "literally," as often happens, but no, she meant it, and if I were younger I'd have challenged her, but instead I just got depressed, more depressed after the sex. Better to be here with this miserable bitch watching the clouds roll in. She's leaning against me now, and I can't help but pat her grubby shoulder, rest my chin on her head. When dogs gaze out in the same direction as you, sniffing the wind, they seem to know the future. They don't tell you, when you're a volunteer, which ones got destroyed, which got adopted. You just show up and find different dogs in the cages.

—Douglas Goetsch

rise over distant mountains. A young Cologne dealer named Monika Sprüth showed some of Condo's other new paintings in February, 1984; nearly all of them were sold, for fifteen hundred dollars apiece, and Sprüth has been his main European dealer, confidante, and adviser ever since. "Monika told me I should keep at least one of the paintings, and focus on being a 'serious' artist," Condo told me. He kept "The Cloudmaker," which hangs in the living room of his New York town house, along with paintings or drawings by Picasso, Giorgio de Chirico, George Romney, Sir Thomas Lawrence, and Andy Warhol. Sprüth introduced him to the New York dealer Barbara Gladstone, who was visiting Cologne, and she immediately offered to show him in New York.

Condo had already promised to show with Pat Hearn, at her recently opened gallery in the East Village. Full of newly acquired self-confidence, he persuaded Hearn and Gladstone to collaborate on a double show of the Canary Island paintings, as Leo Castelli and Mary Boone had recently done with Julian Schnabel. When the two Condo shows opened simultaneously, in December, 1984, the reviews were positive. ("A breathtaking concoction," Gary Indiana wrote, in *Art in America*.) Everything was sold. The boom in contem-

porary art was under way by then. Young artists like Schnabel and David Salle and Eric Fischl were selling at auction for higher and higher prices, and Condo, a hot artist with an original talent and unlimited prospects, had just joined the parade. More than a few people were incredulous when he decided, a few months later, to move to Paris.

I asked him several times what had prompted him to do that, and he gave several answers. "People in New York were dying of AIDS," he said. "And, besides, in the Canary Islands I'd really liked the feeling of being away from the crowd." Another time, he said that it was because Martell was in Paris, working to get her graduate degree in biology. Condo had fallen hard for Paris when he went there in 1983, by himself, taking the train from Cologne. "I stayed for a month at the Hotel Lotti," he remembers, "and every day, when I came back to the room after lunch, the curtains would be drawn. I finally asked the

maid, in my high-school French, why she did that. She pointed to my drawings and said, '*Monsieur, le soleil n'est pas bon pour vos tableaux!*' And I thought, This is the only place in the world where that could happen."

Condo lived in Paris from 1985 to 1995, with occasional trips home. He concedes that leaving New York for a city that had long ago stopped producing or buying important contemporary art was not a good career move, but it gave him the freedom and isolation he needed to follow his out-of-step interests. "When I went to Paris, I thought I'd finished with the Old Master paintings," he told me. "I was working on the expanding canvases, which started with something very small in the center and then built out to the edges." The expanding canvases looked abstract, but they were made up of very small images—eyes, heads, animals, surrealist forms—in discrete compartments. Bruno Bischofberger, the well-connected and highly cultivated Swiss dealer, showed them, and a lot more of Condo's new paintings and drawings, at his Zurich gallery in 1985—more than three hundred works in all. Bischofberger sold most of the paintings, bought the rest himself, and put Condo on a ten-thousand-dollar monthly stipend, deductible from future sales. He also introduced him to Philip Niarchos, Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza, Claude and Sydney Picasso, Prince Ernst August of Hanover (who was married to Grace Kelly's daughter Caroline), and other wealthy clients.

Condo never did sink very deeply into French life. His grasp of the language was casual, and his relationship with Martell was spasmodic; she was too absorbed in her graduate studies to give him much attention. Condo was an odd mixture of neediness and rebellion. He had great confidence in his talent, but he worried about losing contact with his generation of artists in New York. His friends were mainly American artists who were passing through. He was very close to Basquiat and Haring, whose early deaths hit him hard. (Basquiat died in 1988, of a drug overdose; Haring died of complications from AIDS in 1990.) "Jean-Michel was like a wounded animal," Condo re-





members, “but his painting was so tough. He hit the canvas with a lot of force, like a boxer.” Condo’s own work was closer in spirit to Basquiat’s than to Haring’s, but his bond with both men was personal, not aesthetic; they don’t seem to have influenced each other at all. Later, in the nineteen-nineties, Condo established a strong connection with Allen Ginsberg. Growing up in the town next to Lowell, where Jack Kerouac came from, he felt a sense of kinship with the Beat Generation writers; he and Ginsberg met in New York, and had many long conversations there and in Paris. Condo also met William Burroughs, with whom he collaborated on a book project (prose by Burroughs, images by Condo), sponsored by the Whitney Museum—it was called “Ghost of Chance.”

In Paris, he lived mainly in hotels, because he couldn’t stand being alone in an apartment, and he worked in rented studios; at one time, he had three of them. Condo spent a lot of his earnings on art—Picasso etchings at first, then paintings and drawings by Picasso, Warhol, de Chirico, and others. He took the Concorde on trips to and from New York, and, guided by Bischofberger, acquired a taste for very expensive wines. He also indulged his passion for early-Renaissance and Baroque music, played on the instruments for

which it was written. (In his studio last fall, Condo wanted me to hear the difference between a Glenn Gould recording of one of the Goldberg Variations, and the same variation played on the harpsichord by Gustav Leonhardt. “When I first heard the Leonhardt,” he said, “it was like a Tiepolo ceiling opening up over my head.”) Listening to a concert of seventeenth-century lute music by John Dowland at the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris, Condo was so overcome by its beauty that he had trouble breathing, and was forced to leave; it was the first instance of the claustrophobia that, ever since, has made him avoid concert halls, theatres, and other enclosed spaces whenever possible. He had an eleven-string lute made to order in Paris, and learned to play it; when the strenuous fingering began to affect the muscles of his painting hand, he switched to the viola da gamba. None of these things seemed to interfere with his art, which kept pouring out and changing in unexpected ways.

For nearly two years, he was painting “into Picasso,” as he once described it—trying to understand Picasso’s language from within, so he could apply it to his own purposes. To some degree, he did the same thing with all the artists he admired—Tiepolo, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Goya, Cézanne,

de Kooning. “I did fake Caravaggio studies and Cézanne studies,” he said, “and these were not respectful studies. If the art was good enough, I tried to destroy it. You have to be severe with art, because you don’t want to be a slave to it. Why would Picasso take David’s painting of the Sabine Women and tear it apart? Because that’s what you do. If you don’t love it enough, you walk away.”

Condo had three paintings in the Whitney Museum Biennial in 1987, including “Dancing to Miles.” (The painting had been bought by the California collector Eli Broad.) A few days after the opening, Arnold Glimcher, the owner of the Pace Gallery, on Fifty-seventh Street, called and offered to represent him. Condo liked and admired Barbara Gladstone, whose gallery had represented him since his 1984 shows with her and Pat Hearn; he felt that she had a deep understanding of his work. On the other hand, Pace was the blue-chip gallery then, with a roster of major artists and ample funds to support them. He was told that the gallery would get his work into major museums. Julian Schnabel, who had recently left the Mary Boone Gallery and moved to Pace, urged him to come aboard. Condo now feels that his decision to go there was a mistake. It effectively took him out of the developing downtown art scene, at a moment when new ideas and new directions were being debated and tested. What he lost, in effect, was his natural audience.

His life was changing in other ways. Maria Martell had ended their on-again, off-again relationship in 1987. Not long afterward, in a café in the Marais, Condo struck up a conversation with an arrestingly pretty young woman at another table. He saw her again two months later, at a night club, and they talked at length, in his bad French and her slightly better English. Her name was Anna Achdian. She had been born in Yerevan, Armenia, and her family had moved to Paris when she was two; at the time they met, she was an actress, working in film and television. “All of a sudden, in the middle of a sentence, he bent over and kissed me,” Anna remembers.

"I said, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'I love you,' and I began laughing." Later that night, they went to his room at the Hotel Bristol. "George was smart and funny," she said, "and he had such joie de vivre. I loved his paintings. It just seemed so comfortable, and I'm not the cautious type." They got married in 1989, in Antibes, with Claude and Sydney Picasso as their witnesses, and had Eleonore a year later.

New work issued from Condo's various studios in a profusion of styles and forms—figurative and abstract paintings and collages, drawings, and, from 1989 on, sculptures whose antecedents ranged from Picasso's witty combinations of found objects to de Kooning's roughly kneaded human hulks. Dealers told him he was undermining his market by producing so much work, and he regularly proved them wrong—like Picasso, Rauschenberg, and other compulsive workers, he had no alternative. In 1992, he decided to go back and re-examine the Old Master techniques he had put aside earlier. He painted surrealist images in crystalline landscapes, and a very large, quasi-religious tableau called "Visions of St. Lucy." Condo persuaded a registered copyist, whom he had seen working in the Louvre, to come to his studio; the man looked at "Visions of St. Lucy" and said he had nothing to teach him, but they copied a Raphael together (from a reproduction), and Condo says he learned a lot about color, and modelling, and using pyramidal or diagonal lines to structure the composition. To call attention to the new work, he invented a term to describe it: "Artificial Realism," defined as "the realistic representation of that which is artificial."

Condo showed regularly with Monika Sprüth, Bruno Bischofberger, and several other European dealers, who could usually find buyers for whatever he did, and with Pace, which had problems with his work. "My shows there would get pretty good reviews," he said, "but I felt like things were going dead for me in New York. Pace just wasn't selling my work. Arne came to my studio, looked around at the weird, screaming Bugs Bunny heads on Renaissance bodies that I was doing then, and said, 'I don't know one person I could sell these to.'" Glimcher

was often enthusiastic about his other work, and the gallery paid him a generous monthly stipend, but the lack of sales meant that his debt kept building up. Eventually, he had to sell important paintings from his collection to pay it off—a Basquiat, a Warhol, a Picasso painting of Dora Maar. "It really hurt me to do that," he said. "The Dora Maar painting was bought by Gianni Versace. When I finished paying back the gallery, I still had more money left over than I've ever had in my hands at one time—and Anna and I spent the entire amount in two months! I don't know how. We were just traveling, and staying in hotels, and buying stuff."

Condo's work has always been harder to sell here than in Europe. He feels that things would have been different if he had stayed with Barbara

Gladstone, where his paintings could have been seen and understood in the context of original and difficult work by Matthew Barney and Richard Prince. But Condo has never had much in common with his contemporaries. Postmodernism opened up the history of art and much else for contemporary use, and this led to the craze for "appropriating" specific images—from art, photography, commercial design, and other fields—but appropriation was never Condo's game. Instead of borrowing images or styles, he used the language of his predecessors, their methods and techniques, and applied them to subjects they would never have painted. "Mr. Condo makes things that look like paintings, that have the presence, completeness, and frontal tautness of paintings, yet in some essential way they are not so much paintings as



"They're not identical twins—they're surgical twins."



artifacts, signs of another time and place," the *Times* critic Roberta Smith wrote in 1988. Since the time and the place are located, as often as not, in the history of European painting, Europeans may have found them easier to like.

This, however, is a hypothesis that the upcoming Condo exhibition at the New Museum is designed to disprove. The show is not a retrospective. Entitled "George Condo: Mental States," its main focus is on the portraits, and on works that deal with the manic-depressive melodramas of Condoland. "I've always felt you could do a selective survey of George's work that would change the way people thought about it," Ralph Rugoff, the main organizer of the New Museum show, told me the other day. (Rugoff is the director of the Hayward Gallery, in London, where the show will go after it leaves the New Museum.) "George's paintings have a life that's very different from what you get in other artists," Rugoff said. "There's real heat on the surface, and things are changing all the time."

The Condos moved back to New York in 1995, soon after Raphaele was born, and settled into the Upper East Side town house they occupy today. The enormous body of work that Condo has made since then is as diverse and contradictory as ever, and a good deal more disturbing. His

homecoming coincided with the discovery or rediscovery of his work by John Currin, Cecily Brown, Lisa Yuskavage, Glenn Brown, and other rising stars of a new generation of artists. "I wanted to rip him off," John Currin told me recently. "When I was starting out, I made Condo paintings—without the wit and energy. I thought his were the best new paintings I'd ever seen." Currin, who is five years younger than Condo, has channelled Lucas Cranach and other Old Masters in his own work, and he, too, has become amazingly skillful in the use of their techniques. Pictures by Currin and other painters of his generation sometimes sell for a lot more than Condo's do, and this is annoying to Condo. Now and then, he feels that others get credit for things he did first, but he also knows that having his work admired by younger artists has made critics and collectors look at it with renewed interest.

Most of the paintings Condo has done since his return are populated by beings culled from his febrile imagination. In 1996, he introduced his "antipodular" creatures, freakish humanoid figures with jug ears, clown noses, and flowing hair; they are based on the peripheral beings described in Aldous Huxley's book "Heaven and Hell," who live "at the antipodes of everyday consciousness." Next came "Rodrigo,"

"Jean-Louis," and other players in Condo's extended commedia dell'arte, where the comic and the tragic Muses often face off in a single image. There have been a few references to real-life characters and events—the orgiastic revelers in a 2004 painting called "The Last Days of Enron," for example, or the naked fornicator with a knife in his back and a spear through his chest in "The Return of Client No. 9"—but more often Condo operates in a parallel world of his own. Nudity, fornication, rage, insanity, glee, violence, loneliness, and alienation are the norm here, and this does not sit well with critics who think serious art shouldn't make you laugh out loud. Condo's mother, who still lives in the family house in Chelmsford (his father died in 1998), occasionally has similar doubts. Why, his mother asks him, does he paint such things? Reading about the controversy over the album cover he did for Kanye West, she said, a trifle sadly, "You could have done it for Susan Boyle." When Condo visits his mother, he usually stops off, in his chauffeur-driven Mercedes (Condo let his driver's license lapse in 1978 and never renewed it), to play the high-stakes slot machines at the Foxwoods Resort Casino, in Connecticut. Gambling is his preferred recreation. He has won and lost substantial amounts of money at Foxwoods, and at Aspinalls in London, the casinos in Monte Carlo, and (closer to home) the Empire City casino, at Yonkers Raceway. Losing never bothers him, he told me, because "I only count what I win."

Condo left Pace in 2001, and went to Lühring Augustine, in Chelsea, a smaller but well-established gallery with an international roster of innovative artists that included Albert Oehlen, Paul McCarthy, and Christopher Wool. The work he showed there has been hard to ignore. In his 2008 show, he took on the Crucifixion, with four large paintings that were individual portraits of Jesus, the two thieves Dismas and Gestas, and, for good measure, God. Condo, a lapsed Catholic who grew up attending Mass and going to confession, told me that he greatly values "the opportunity as an artist to destroy authority by depicting it in your own terms," but his Crucifixion paintings are strangely respectful. Jesus, on the Cross, seems to be



*"Here are the office supplies—it's also where people weep or sexually harass each other."*

dissolving in a pointillist aura of colored light. "I thought of it as a way of depicting his spirit emanating outward," he explained, and then added, in case that sounded too serious, "In my opinion, it's like a grand homecoming parade." Like his "portrait" of Queen Elizabeth II, whose resemblance to a Cabbage Patch doll scandalized the London tabloids when it was shown at the Tate Modern, in 2006, the Crucifixion paintings are examples of what one New York critic called "Condo's seduction/repulsion game." Seduction seems to have won out on both occasions. All four paintings from the Crucifixion show were sold, and the British collector Edward Spencer-Churchill bought nine versions of his Queen Elizabeth portrait. The original is owned by Maurizio Cattelan, the Italian-born conceptual artist and provocateur, who persuaded Condo to do it in the first place. "George had this fantastic idea of painting her naked," Cattelan told me at the time. "With a beautiful young body," Condo added, "so there would be lines around the block. But then we heard"—erroneously, it turned out—"that you're not allowed to show members of the Royal Family nude in a public institution."

Cattelan's support helped to accelerate the current upswing in Condo's reputation, both here and abroad. Two years ago, the Gary Tatintian gallery, in Moscow, gave him a strenuously publicized exhibition, and newly rich oligarchs bought everything on view. The going price for a large Condo painting these days is four hundred and fifty thousand dollars. From a career standpoint, his first solo show at a New York museum could hardly be better timed. Laura Hoptman, who joined the curatorial staff of the Museum of Modern Art while she was co-curating the New Museum show here, hopes that it will illuminate Condo's influence on contemporary painting. "George opened the door for artists to use the history of painting in a way that was not appropriation," Hoptman said. "He's fighting with his fathers and grandfathers, but he's not dissing them."

In 2009, Condo left Lühring Augustine and joined forces with Per Skarstedt, who recently took over the palatial space once occupied by the Paul Rosenberg Gallery, on East Seventy-ninth



*"But the P.R. guy says he's going to be O.K."*

Street. Since then, Condo has produced a group of paintings that suggest, to me and to others, a major shift in his work. Condo calls them "drawing paintings," because the primary materials are charcoal, pencil, pastel, and acrylic (water-based) paint, but they are on canvas, and they combine figurative and abstract elements in complex interactions. "The new paintings may be getting certain things out of my system," Condo said the other day. We were in his studio, looking at three new canvases he had done that week. "I mean, all those pods and peripheral beings and weird characters I've been working on over the last decade. I'm starting to bring back more naturalistic faces and bodies, as you saw in that painting 'The Uninvited Guest.' Maybe Rodrigo and those weird types will gradually migrate off the canvas and leave me alone. I did a drawing painting called 'Rush Hour,' with a lot of figures coming toward you, like a stampede of people out of a subway—one person talking on the phone, another one grimacing wildly. That's exciting to me."

Skarstedt has just sold "The Uninvited Guest" to a major European-

based collector. Steven Cohen, the hedge-fund manager and one of the most active American buyers of contemporary art, commissioned four large paintings of the seasons from Condo, and MOMA, which had more or less shunned Condo and his immediate contemporaries until now—the museum doesn't own a single painting by Basquiat or Schnabel—has acquired a Condo drawing painting called "The Fallen Butler," which it is lending to the New Museum show. Condo once told me that what he cared about most was for his work to hold up in the company of the artists he admires—Velázquez, Manet, Picasso, Duchamp, Warhol, and all the others. "If my work were hanging in a museum, and it didn't look like it belonged with theirs, I'd be heartbroken," he said. "I'm not saying it's as good as theirs. It's not about competition. It's about coexistence with the artists you respect. That's my main goal." ♦

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