



Art

Review: “George Condo: Mental States”

The master of '80s remix style returns. *Howard Halle*



Over the years, I've learned not to expect too much from exhibitions at the New Museum, as they tend toward visual and intellectual incoherence. So imagine my surprise at “Mental States,” a three-decade survey of New York painter George Condo: It looks fantastic. This is all the more remarkable when you consider that close to 90 works have been crammed into the building's third- and fourth-floor galleries. I'm guessing the artist himself oversaw the hanging; it certainly feels that way. But whatever the case, the show is a delight, and that comes from someone who never really counted himself as a Condo fan.

Indeed, the patented Condo formula—a mash-up of cartoony figuration, Old Master technique and High Modernist tropes—is an acquired taste, which may account for the peculiar trajectory of his career: hugely successful with certain collectors yet somehow remaining in the background—until recently, that is, since he did an album cover for Kanye West. Even so, he never achieved the iconic status of contemporaries Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat—artists who, like him, effectively pandered to popular taste at a time when the idea was far more of a no-no than it is today. Still, his work has served as the template for such artists as John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage.

When he arrived in New York from his native New England in 1981, though, the postmodern wave was about to

break. Appropriation art was still in the air, and Neo-Expressionism was all the rage, but he didn't fit into either category. Pop culture references seemed to rattle around in his work, though not explicitly; he certainly didn't go on about the death of the author or any other such issues attached to appropriationist aesthetics. And though he was there for the start of the '80s painting revival, his work never took itself as seriously as, say, that of Julian Schnabel. (But then, whose work did?) Until now, I'd pretty much dismissed Condo as typifying the cultural emptiness of the Reagan era, but this retrospective reveals something else: an artist who uses humor and formidable art-historical erudition to plumb the human condition.

Beginning on the fourth floor, on the wall opposite the elevators, you're immediately greeted by a showstopper: an artful, salon-style grouping of about 45 portrait paintings of varying scale. As a whole, this gesture could be easily construed as an attempt to stuff the exhibit with more pieces than it could otherwise accommodate. But it works because of its rhythmic massing of various sized compositions, various styled frames and differentiated palettes. It takes you out of the particular and into the general and then back again. And the whole is craftily anchored by a particular canvas at the bottom center: *Spanish Head Composition*, from 1988, which appears to recapitulate the larger arrangement within itself. It portrays a kind of Picassoid Don Quixote figure surrounded by multiple cartoonlike studies of heads that echo the disposition of images on the wall before you.

The fourth floor, then, serves as an introduction to Condo, evincing his commitment to Old Master principles of art while undermining them. But it also provides a primer on his figurative approach, which progresses from the ridiculous to the sublime. For his characteristic handling of features such as the eyes, nose and mouth, however, he's indebted to one artist especially: *Mad* magazine's Don Martin. Like Martin and R. Crumb, Condo's sharp observations of humanity's foibles spring directly from his imagination, which in his case, is as chock-full of art-historical touchstones as it is pop-cultural junk.

The third floor, for example, is divided into thematic rooms, including one titled "Manic Society" that features *The Return of Client No. 9*, from 2008. Aside from the titular allusion to the prostitution scandal involving former Governor Eliot Spitzer, the canvas, which depicts a couple furiously copulating doggy-style, is a takeoff on one of Francis Bacon's sexual cri de coeurs, complete with bright orange background and schematic structure caging the figures in their fierce heat. The joke here is that the painting is a rumination on heterosexual, not homosexual, lust.

My favorite part of the show is the final room, which displays Condo's turns toward abstraction—well, not exactly abstraction, but an allover form of composition in which his cartoon characters dissolve into homages to Roberto Matta, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, achieving a loopy, restorative lyricism. For me, this is what ultimately makes Condo's art worth a second look: In his own goofy manner, he found a way to reknit the past and the present over the revolutionary breach of modernism.

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