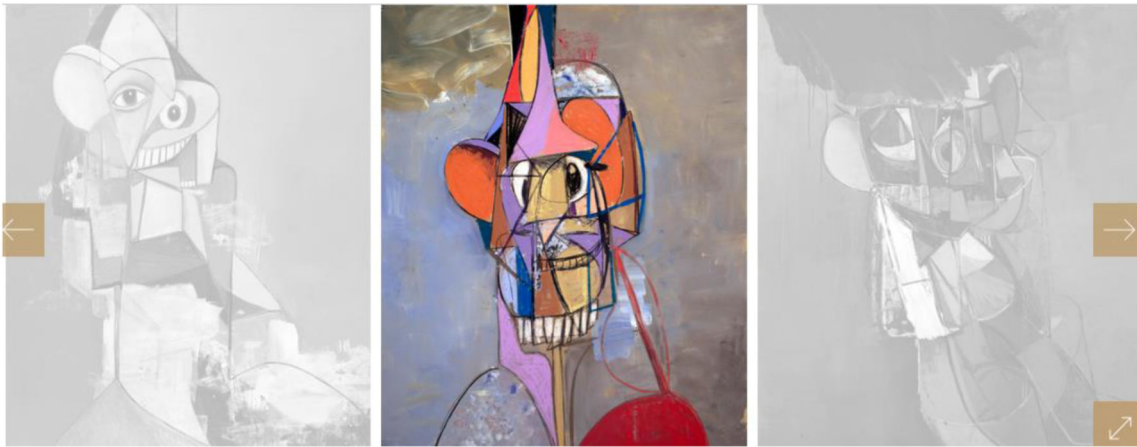


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George Condo's Altered States

The artist discusses where his head is at for two new London exhibitions

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Looking at the new works by [George Condo](#) now on view in two London shows, you might assume that they were painted years, not months, apart.

At the Skarstedt Gallery, you'll find a series of dark, sepulchral ink drawings that the artist made in a despairing state last spring. Monumental in size and painterly in their effects, they push the possibilities of ink on paper.

His subjects are human figures in extreme psychological states. In *Standing Bather*, an elongated ghostly female nude stands against a brooding background with her fingers gnarled. On the wall opposite, a prisoner behind bars looks on in open-mouthed horror, his head flayed open to reveal his brain. Having incorporated many of these figures into his works in various mediums, Condo decided that these ink drawings would be their send off. “I was really happy to finish with those kind of figures—those facial compositions and physiognomy,” he told me the day after his opening. “It was the end of their life cycle and they were pushing back just as much as I was pushing against them. They didn’t go easy! I was fending off as many negative spirits as I could and I think the work reflects that.”

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When he finished them, he flew to Berlin, where he contracted Legionaire’s disease—and then, triple pneumonia. He got himself home to New York, only to land in the intensive care unit in a state of delirium. He was hospitalized for weeks and nearly died. When he finally got back into his studio in the Hamptons in July (breaking three ribs during his recovery after a fall), he wanted to record the psychic states he’d experienced while they were still fresh in his memory. “The things you remember when you’re in intensive care are things that never happened, though they seem so vivid,” he said. “They happen in your mind, but didn’t happen in the real physical world. My doctors would constantly ask me, ‘Do you know your name? Do you know what day it is?’ and I would say, ‘I do, but the one thing I don’t know is whether the things I imagine actually happened.’”

Where he had long painted figures he knew to be imaginary, this time, he began painting those that had really “existed” in his mind, he said.

The new work was made over six weeks this past summer and reflect a newfound positive outlook on art and life. “They are a reverification of my work,” Condo said simply. “I’ve verified that they exist and now I’m reverifying it.”

We were standing in the Simon Lee Gallery, a five-minute walk from Skarstedt, where the spirited, brightly-colored canvases of “Headspace” now hung. The contrast from one show to the other was startling. Then and now; dark and light; figures and abstracted heads. “There’s a liberating feeling to these paintings,” acknowledged Condo. “I either draw them up from the bottom and I start them up from the top and they go off the canvas as if the canvas can’t contain them. They are not simply a portrait isolated in space; they are an abstract painting with some presence of a human being. It’s a different way to express the portrait. They’re about my thinking and the space that the head takes up on the canvas. My headspace—where my head’s at.”

At first he found it tough to paint. There was the post-illness exhaustion, of course, but also the matter of his process: he was used to working while smoking two packs a day and drinking three bottles of wine. He now smokes a few cigarettes a week and has the occasional glass of wine, he said. “Now if I smoke or drink, I can’t really work.”

As it happens, the best known of Condo’s recent paintings isn’t on view in either London gallery: it’s the painted Hermès Birkin bag that [Kanye West](#) gave to fiancé [Kim Kardashian](#) this past Christmas. Condo and West have collaborated on several projects, beginning with the album covers for West’s 2010 “My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy.” In December, Condo recalled, West called him and said, “I really want to give Kim something for Christmas. She has a huge collection of Birkin bags. Maybe you can paint one.” It took Condo about 15 minutes to paint three nude female figures and an angry green monster.

“Kanye and I both knew immediately that people who knew our collaboration would think it was fun but that Kim’s fan base would go berserk,” he said. “The whole point was to take an icon of consumerism and change it, which is like blasphemy. ‘You can’t do this!’ It short circuits people’s concept of what’s untouchable, which is why it was fun to do.” He concedes that its impact would have been negligible without the characters involved. “If I had just done it and put it in my closet, it wouldn’t mean a thing,” he said, laughing. “But when you stick that bag in the hands of Kim Kardashian, well, then you create a whole different atmosphere. It’s about context.”