



### Why snobbery is bad for you

By: Jessica Kiang

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In a Berlin art gallery, a battle rages. The carelessly beautiful line of a melancholy harlequin's dangling leg does war with the impudent scratchiness of a goggle-eyed naked couple caught – and the word is chosen deliberately – humping. Beside that, the fine-featured translucence of a delicate portrait from the most famous Blue Period of them all, bravely faces a grotesque, grey-faced preacher with hair in the style of Charles II or Brian May. In another room, a small, kitschy image of Queen Elizabeth II in pastel hat and pearls is forced to look on in blandly smiling approbation at a massive Cubist nude, all breasts and pudenda and underarm hair like starfishes.

The more you look between the two, the more strained Her Majesty's smile begins to seem.

This is Confrontation, an exhibition at Berlin's Museum Berggruen, in which the paintings of contemporary US artist George Condo hang alongside the museum's own hugely impressive collection of works by modernist pioneers Matisse, Klee, Braque, Cezanne and, most numerous, Picasso.



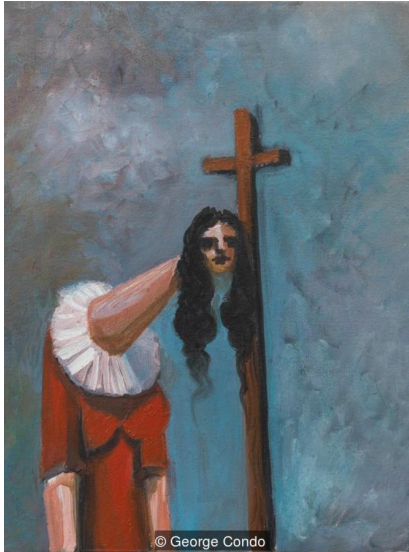
Condo regularly assails the boundaries of good taste, drawing upon pop culture such as in *Telepoché Cut-Out* with its imagery from *Wheel of Fortune*.  
(Credit: George Condo)

And the effect of walking through these immaculate rooms with their carefully curated pairings is little short of revelatory, especially for those of us who would hesitate to call ourselves fine-arts aficionados. In fact there is a very real sense that the exhibition might



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have been designed precisely to annoy, or in the parlance of the catalogue, at least "irritate" the more elitist element within the already rarefied art world. Partly that's because Confrontation can be enjoyed with a bare minimum of outside knowledge – take it from me. And partly because it's so damn funny.



Condo also frequently subverts sacred symbols or images of authority, as in *Woman with Cross* (Credit: George Condo)

"It's very rare, in that it's so playful, so full of humour," the exhibition's curator, and the director of Berlin's National Gallery, Udo Kittelmann tells me. "There's this wonderful Picasso portrait of a woman, and next to it you have this very small picture by Condo titled *The Sex Addict* – and, my goodness!" Like many of the Condo paintings on display, *The Sex Addict* seems not just to be an homage to the work it hangs beside, but naughtily mimicking it, sticking its tongue out and pulling faces. But the raspberry it's blowing is not at the painting itself, for which Condo's admiration somehow shines through. It feels aimed instead at those who would regard the Picasso as unassailable, as beyond the pale of pastiche or interrogation, locked forever in the sterile cabinet marked 'masterpiece'.

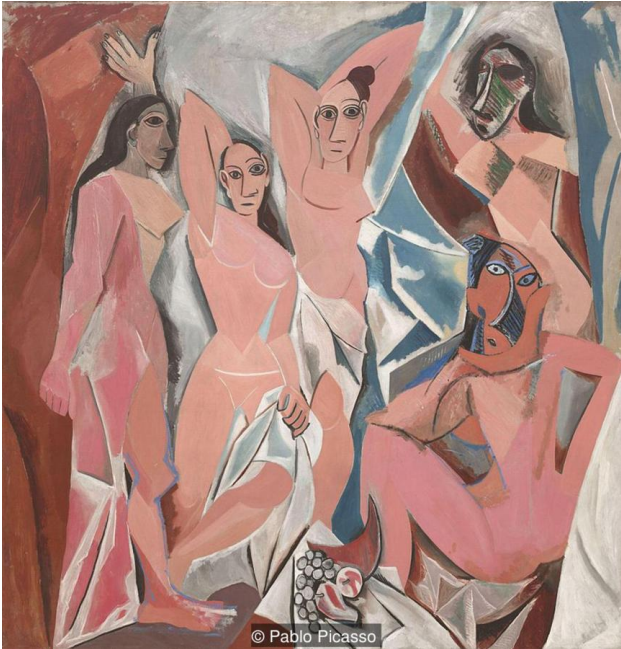
"The only reason Condo could create this body of work," explains Kittelmann, "is that he was never afraid to deal with these 'superheroes' of art. Today most people are afraid." As you move through the exhibition, admiration for Condo's lack of fear gives way to amusement at his insolence, and a deliciously subversive sense that he, and we, are getting away with it. Kittelmann agrees: "You start with a smile, and finally you laugh."

## High meets low

The confrontations are not just funny, they are also rejuvenating. You wander the rooms without experiencing the gallery fatigue associated with more traditional shows, which philistines like me often only remember as a blur of paint on canvas and an urgent curiosity about the bill of fare in the adjoining cafe. Here, the mischievous aesthetic conflicts keep you constantly off-balance, constantly recalibrating your expectations, constantly engaged, and your attention never wanders to tea and cake.

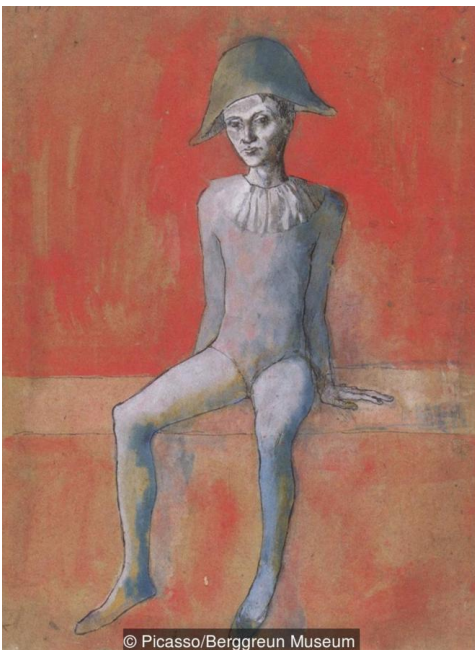


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Picasso also made confrontation his theme – his African mask-wearing prostitutes staring directly at the viewer seem to demand a response (Credit: Pablo Picasso)

Kittelmann explains, "What George [Condo] and I had in mind was, through these paintings, to make people remember how it would have been in 1910, 1912, 1913, when they first saw Picasso's Cubist paintings – it was a shock." Now, of course, those images are among the most famous in the fine art world, but their status as canonised masterworks can impair the casual viewer's ability to see them for the striking, profound images they are. "Today," says Kittelmann, "[a lot of] people who go to exhibitions see a Picasso and they say: 'look, another painting! Probably worth a million!' This does not happen at all here. It's always about the power of the art itself, the power of the image."



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Berlin's Berggruen Museum pairs Condo's paintings with works from Braque, Matisse and Picasso, such as his Harlequin With a Red Background (Credit: Picasso/Berggruen Museum)

Hanging the delightfully rude paintings of Condo next to the Matisses, Braques and Picassos that, along with an intervening century's worth of pop culture, inspired him, was calculated to elevate the estimation of Condo's talents. Any artist who shares wall space with these "superheroes" surely gets an upward nudge – even if their work seems wanting in comparison, or even if the "invasion" of the museum's pristine collection causes "irritation". But, "what really happens, and this we could not be sure of [in advance]," says Kittelmann, "Condo's paintings refresh the 'superhero' paintings and not just the other way around. You see both works totally differently. The paintings do not change, but our way of seeing them does."

Condo's work gives Picasso's art back to the viewer, as much as Picasso dignifies Condo by association, and this to-and-fro relationship happens in a way that tears into the discrete, categorical separations that foster an exclusionary, alienating approach to art. And that is an approach that dogs not just the highbrow 'elite' but their nominal opposites: the populists who would also reject whole classes of art and culture, sight unseen, believing them to be outside their realm of interest. Reverse snobbery is just another form of snobbery, after all – it's a peril at any brow-level – and corrosive tides of partisanship along left wing/right wing, liberal/conservative, populist/elitist divides are rising not just in global political discourse, but in the cultural discussion too. As a film critic, I've felt it pollute the air in my own small corner of society.

## **Shattering hierarchies**

Which is why the giddy blast of Confrontation, an exhibition that demands not passive consumption but active participation, that challenges traditional divisions between high and low art and that has such a good time doing it, has such a salutary, oxygenating effect. Perhaps it's a factor of being outside my own cultural comfort zone – itself a lesson about getting out of one's silo – but the Confrontation approach feels exponentially bigger than the exhibition itself. "But yes!" exclaims Kittelmann when I ask him if the thinking behind Confrontation could have a similarly energising effect across the broader cultural landscape. "You can do this with every kind of art – paintings, sculpture, film, music..."



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The parallels between Condo and Picasso are particularly obvious in Condo's *The Cracked Cardinal* with its Cubism and anti-clericism (Credit: Condo/Berggreun Museum)

In the context of an increasingly unstable world, it can be easy to fall prey to paralysis regarding art; it can all seem so futile, so much pretty fiddling while Rome burns. But the exothermic, oppositional approach of *Confrontation* has, among all its other pleasures, the effect of reminding us how vital art is, how personal and yet how much an expression of participation in our collective humanity it is. Udo Kittelmann's grand, but not unjustified hope for the exhibition is that it could "get back to the real roots of why art is with us – why art was invented."

In an airy room, a pair of strangers come at the same time to Picasso's graceful *Seated Harlequin with Red Background* (1905) then look over at the grinning goblins of Condo's *Seated Couple* (2005). They glance at each other and laugh. It's the final lovely irony of an exhibition laden with irony that outside its doors the world is more divided than ever yet its conflicts and confrontations evince, of all things, solidarity.

