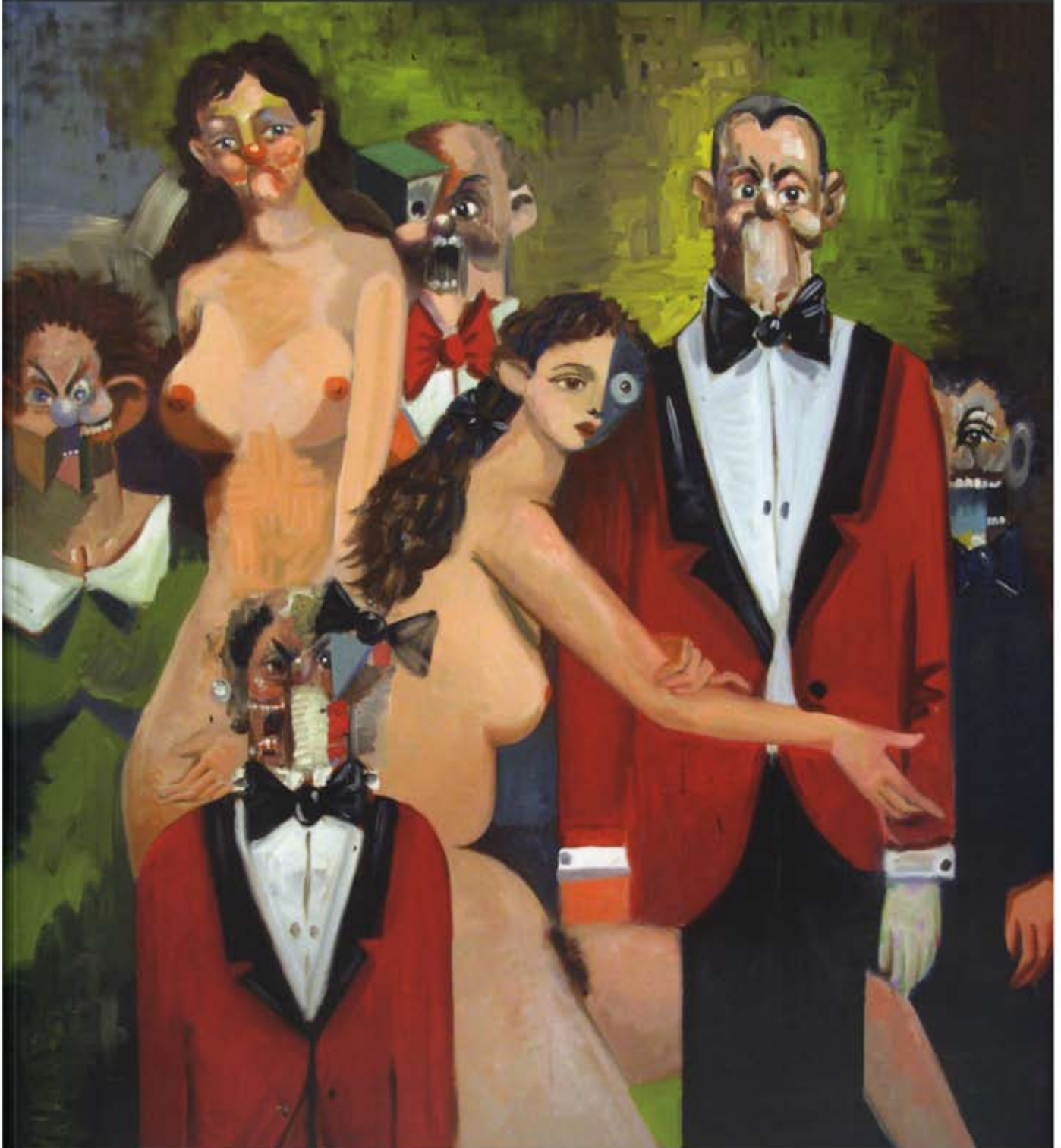


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FEATURE: GEORGE CONDO

I See What You're Saying: George Condo

It was a very different time. There were three thousand of us and everyone knew each other. Such was 'Downtown Society' from 1977-1987 – from the blackout until the death of Andy Warhol.

by **PATRICK FOX**

Rents were inexpensive and opportunity was everywhere. It was an environment of hope, and camaraderie, where artists and musicians, dealers and managers, writers and actors, fashion models and photographers all collided; all worked together towards a greater enlightenment and defined glamour anew on our own terms. Our young friends were still alive. It was a very different time.

George Condo and I were introduced in July 1983 through the artist Donald Baechler. I was visiting studios putting together the inaugural exhibition for my first venture, The Anderson Theater Gallery. Baechler said, "you should go downstairs and meet George Condo, he's seriously great." I'd heard it before, from other friends. It made me skeptical. I knew there were Neo-Surrealists out there, I could feel it, it was in the air. There had just been a major exhibition of Max Ernst. I was hoping to put a school of artists together, some identifiable stable of artists, but even a cohesive group exhibition was beyond my expectations at that time, so nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to experi-

ence. Instantly I was drawn in. I knew I was looking at paintings that were going to be around for a very long time. They had "famous painting" written all over them, as if they existed before, but I'd never seen anything like them—Salvador Disney, meets Walt Dali. We selected a group of eight small paintings on artist board. I flew down Second Avenue barely able to breathe. It was a different time.

I was fortunate, having worked for Tony Shafrazi, when he opened on Mercer Street. I knew and worked with his crew, including Keith Haring whose first shows I'd installed. I'd known Keith from his first exhibitions at Club 57 and the shows he curated at The Mudd Club.

My first sale from that show was to Jack Boulton of Chase Manhattan. (back then banks were the good guys – man, it was a different time). My second sale occurred a few days afterward when Keith Haring brought Andy Warhol to my gallery to see what was happening. They were excited by and purchased several of George's paintings straight off. That night I ran into poet/critic Rene Ricard to expose him to my gallery

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The Clown Maker, 1984, Oil on canvas, 74 x 48 inches, Image courtesy of Skarstedt Gallery, © George Condo 2012

“I think in a vacuum. I think time exists in a vacuum, and that what has come before us actually came after us. In other words we don't even know about the renaissance until after we're born, so how could it have come before us?”

and introduced him to George's paintings, (about the experience in American Vogue, a few years later, he recalled how he'd been shown George Condo's paintings by candlelight by an East Village gallerist - I still hear his excitement in the dark as he exclaimed "these paintings don't need light, they give light!"). Such a different time.

I visited George twice in Paris in 1985 and again in '86. During the second visit I picked up some flowers for the studio on Rue Condé. In a Left Bank flower shop, an unremarkable, but pretty blonde woman seemed to be making a display of affection for my benefit, rubbing noses with her young daughter but keeping her eye on me. They didn't look particularly similar but their familial relationship was clear. The mother's features arrived in my cornea separately, individually presented for examination. The perfection of each feature was breathtaking, but I was confused: why didn't they meld? What kept them discordant? Was it because she was rubbing noses with the girl but focused on me? Was it that 'display' of affection? Suddenly her features merged. I was confined in a small claustrophobic-inducing Parisian florist with Catherine Deneuve and her daughter, Chiara. God she was beautiful! I arrived at George's studio exhilarated, and boom! His paintings broke it down and put it together for me simultaneously, his painting defined what I just experienced. Condo's compartmentalization of features into separate labile emotions instantaneously converged to become a complex being. He exposed a character's contrasting emotions and motives, which explained my Deneuve experience. Effect Deneuve! I still see similar themes and content in the duality of his work - the sexuality, the comedy, the violence and pathos. Picasso gave us the ability to view a subject from different perspectives, Condo sees through and depicts what a person wants to project while simultaneously painting who that person is at their core, occasionally through a series of paintings of a single subject, each illustrating incongruous or inconsistent character traits, as he did with his series of commissioned portraits of Queen Elizabeth 2nd, for the Tate Modern, London.

People relate to Condo's use of re-occurring and evolving characters and his sophisticated use of symbols. His followers have watched

the growth of his characters and the development of his painting. His Mid-Career Retrospective at the New Museum was a major event on many levels. He is now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and in the permanent collection of The Museum of Modern Art.

Patrick Fox: I want to pick up on a conversation we began in 1985 at the Hotel Place Vendome, Paris when you eloquently broke down the mathematical similarities between Claude Debussy and Philip Glass. Flying home to New York City the next day I continued thinking of how information was transmitted between artists of different times, different historical settings, to the future and back again. But it seems everyone knows that successful artists can only thrive as is, like their work, they're also products of an age. I remember wondering if Hoagie Carmichael had whispered to Lou Reed. How could Braque influence El Greco? I began to see your influence on a wide range of painters, from la Tour to van Dyke, and to Bruegles, and deKooning even a photographer like Ryan McGinley. Did some art deity want to see if other artists along the time continuum of linear art history would reflect upon that fractured information? Could a Renaissance artist see through a cubist's filter? Do you see yourself influencing art of the Renaissance?

George Condo: I think in a vacuum. I think time exists in a vacuum, and that what has come before us actually came after us. In other words we don't even know about the renaissance until after we're born, so how could it have come before us? Ideas are like that as well, they come and find you wherever you are... there's this laser beam or something like it that projects them into your mind, and then if you have the technical skills to materialize those ideas and they fit within your concept of "self" they can be used.

Patrick Fox: It was great to talk to you on the phone again George, to hear your voice. I'm struck by the familiarity of your intelligence, the

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Diaries of Milan, 1984, Oil on canvas, 74 x 80 inches, Collection of Museum of Modern Art, Image courtesy of Skarstedt Gallery, © George Condo 2012

same I heard on 2nd Avenue in 1983 when I first encountered your painting voice. I'm thinking about how long we've both been around, discussions of discovery in the Tin Room of my gallery on Bleecker Street which was an artists salon. We were confronting our future, confronting paintings, confronting our auto-aversions. The lessons I learned from you were important for me, they were quite specific. One involved likes and dislikes, how to embrace that which made me uncomfortable. I remember telling you I didn't care for the color palette of a Sam Francis I had at the gallery (Imagine!) You disappeared into the office and in a few minutes you emerged with a small painting of an old woman in the exact

colors we were discussing. It was an important lesson for me. I refer to her frequently. I cherish that little old woman and the daily lesson of wisdom she still imparts, every time I see her.

George Condo: Back in the east village I remember hanging out with artists like David Bowes and Dan Asher, quite different characters but each one had something inspiring to offer. Dan... the idea of survival, how to live on two dollars per day. Whether it was borrowed from a friend or made by simply bumming it off the street. Bowes taught another lesson with his refined intelligence and superior taste that life and



Rush Hour, 2010, Acrylic, charcoal & pastel on linen, 80 x 70 inches, Collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art, Image courtesy of Skarstedt Gallery, © George Condo 2012

existence were as fragile as venetian glass... transparent and dreamy... but all along must be handled with great care to preserve its beauty. So I think between those two concepts of life my struggle was one of how do I borrow time... survival time. How do I smash everything in sight and rebuild it, how do I take all that means the most to me in the world and all that I cherish and set it on fire? How do I live with myself when I know that I'm playing such a dangerous game... like a race car driver, hit a bump and you explode into flames... but without the team to pull you out of the front window... but either way it was the only way for me to live, to be excited every day to want to wake up and risk it all.

Patrick Fox: I was visiting Rene Ricard at his East Village apartment directly across the hall from Allen Ginsberg's, when I first saw your painting, *The Cloud Maker*. Now my observations seem obvious to me. I remember saying you were painting from a god perspective, pulling the curtain back on god, exposing that he's no different than the Great Oz, and that he has to go to work every day too, that you were actually exposing how the clouds were made. Rene waxed on about your painting's significance as a breakthrough for you as a painter of time allegory. He matter of factly schooled me, breaking down the hows' and whys' this painting reaffirmed your importance as an

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Compression IV, 2011, Acrylic, charcoal, pastel on linen, 72 x 74 inches, Image courtesy of Skarstedt Gallery, © George Condo 2012

artist. He championed the freshness of your paint and the paintings surface. Clearly, that painting mapped you as a touchstone artist of your generation, because of your unique approach into the pantheon of art history, your presence in the arena with your contemporaries like Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring is unassailable. Does this make sense to you now, so many years later? Do you think it's possible for a single painting to do that, or are we talking about an inevitability? We knew those artists whose importance was inevitable. Was this knowledge the result of our close-knit, emotionally invested involvement; was friendly discourse participation in the

development of varied painting styles of a generation, during those earliest years? The passion of those times now seems desperate, like art itself could end at any moment and, because of this, we witnessed our friends' careers blow up fast. It was as if last year or even yesterday was already too late.

George Condo: I befriended Jean Michel in 1980 when I first arrived in the city and met Keith in 1983 after he bought a few pieces in your gallery. All three of us lived on that same edge... every single day something had to burn, something had to be made even at the expense



We Are Who You Think We Are, 2010, Oil on canvas, 70 x 60 inches, Image courtesy of Skarstedt Gallery, © George Condo 2012

of our own lives. Life was just an excuse for making art. They're gone now, but the art lives on... so, I guess it's true.

I've known George Condo for nearly three decades, his work still moves me and holds me captive. His assured ability to take on the art greats consistently reminds me I'm in the presence of a Master. George Condo is one of the great artists of my generation. Considered by many to be the greatest living artist of my generation. Whether Condo disappears into a luxury hotel in a world culture capital, a New York City townhouse, or behind a privet hedge in the British countryside, you know that he

doesn't stop working. He's always busy creating monumental art no matter what scale he chooses. George's art is a painted record of the times; he records our culture and interprets society as it truly exists. In Condo's universe we're seen as flawed protectors, and contributors, whores and vultures all worthy to be painted for prosperity by the Goya of our age (warts of the soul and all). George takes on the task and delivers. The annals of late 20th and early 21st century art must contend with George Condo because he's grabbed the brush of art history and uses it as a baton; he's handily taken on the responsibility of standard bearer and the interpreter of current history. Time is on his side. □