

## HONG KONG TATLER

### Get To Know George Condo, The Artist Behind Kanye West's Risque Album Art

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George Condo has been a pivotal figure of American contemporary art, was best buds with Basquiat and Keith Haring, worked for Warhol and did Kanye West's album cover. With his debut Hong Kong exhibition scheduled for the end of this month, we spoke to the artist about what's to come.

George Condo wishes he could return to 1988, when the American artist wrote *Notes on Artificial Realism*, a treatise describing his artistic direction. In it, he emphasised the artificiality of his drawings—"an object that was real is made artificial in order to bring it back to reality"—and coined the term "fake paintings" to define his oeuvre.

Today, in Trump's America, that haunts him. "The phenomenon of fake news is precisely defined in the treatise," he says from his studio in New York. "Had I known those concepts would blur over into the real world in today's politics, I never would have written about them."

That wouldn't have changed much of his practice, however. For the past three decades, Condo has been creating abstract and figurative canvases, sculptures and drawings of a very distinctive style. A crossover between "old masters and Looney Tunes," as they've been described, his works walk the thin line between distorted appropriation and make-believe.



# SKARSTEDT

They riff on the painters he loves—Picasso, Rembrandt, Degas—while presenting the artist’s own grotesque, sometimes delirious, always wildly imaginative take on the absurdities of everyday life. “Fake paintings” is the perfect description for them—unfortunate and accidental fake-news association aside.

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The current sociopolitical situation might even be proving fertile material for the artist. Last April, a large portion of his New York solo exhibition at the Skarstedt Gallery touched on it, with a series of politically charged oil paintings influenced by “trolls, bots, and political figures.” The show he’s bringing to the Maritime Museum this month—his Hong Kong debut—is similarly inspired.

Organised by Skarstedt and Berlin-based Sprüth Magers, it’s titled *George Condo: Expanded Portrait Compositions*, and presents a new body of site-specific paintings and works on paper that “tell the story of our states of mind in this ever-anxiety-ridden moment,” Condo says. “But it ultimately also expresses that aggression and dividedness in the world cannot destroy the human spirit—that art speaks louder than words sometimes.”

And can push, I suggest, a “rebellion” of sorts. “Having a mutant for president has created such a hostile environment that it only makes you stronger and more determined to show the world what you think about it,” he concedes.



Double Heads on Red, 2014. (Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Skarstedt, New York)



# SKARSTEDT

## FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

Condo's work has had a disruptive nature since he began producing art in the early 1980s. Critics and curators didn't initially know what to make of his surrealist-style figure paintings, but soon enough he became, in the words of curator Klaus Ottmann, "instrumental in the revival of figuration in American art, along with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring."

Condo mentions both as pivotal figures in his career, but also as close friends.

It was Basquiat who convinced him to move from Boston—where the New Hampshire-born 61-year-old was studying art—to New York after they met. "We basically hung out as artists all the time and would meet up in different parts of the world and get smashed and go out and pull pranks on everyone," Condo recalls.

Once in New York, Condo landed an eight-month stint at Andy Warhol's Factory as an assistant. "I was the diamond duster on the production line and never even met him more than once or twice, but working that job at Warhol's was amazing. It was 1981, I was 23 years old and it was the perfect way to begin my full-time life as an artist."

A few years later, the pop art genius bought a few of Condo's pieces from one of his first shows in the East Village. "It was a true seal of approval," Condo says. "I've always thought that being an artist's artist first and foremost, before any commercial success, is what really matters."



Brainscape, 2018, 2017 (Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Skarstedt, New York and Sprüth Magers, Berlin, London, Los Angeles)



# SKARSTEDT

## MIND PALACE

Condo moved to Europe for a decade, returning to New York in 1995. In this time, his work remained unsettling, boisterous, often clownish, depicting imaginary characters whose exaggerated features channelled deeper, complex emotions. “Humour is the antidote to horror, and comedy and tragedy will always be linked,” he says, “like the Apollonian and the Dionysian extremes of art.

“I describe what I do as psychological cubism. I do imaginary portraits of the external and internal self. What you are seeing are the multiple dimensions of a person’s psychological experiences all happening simultaneously... hysteria, grief, joy and sadness. They may take place in different moments chronologically [in real life], but in my paintings I capture them all at once.”

Condo compares himself to a playwright crafting multidimensional subjects: “I create scenes in which my characters can act out their emotional conditions, often mirroring our own.”

## FROM RECORD TO CANVAS

Slowly, the art world became enthralled by Condo. In 2005, Austria’s Museum der Moderne Salzburg and Germany’s Kunsthalle Bielefeld organised the exhibition *George Condo: One Hundred Women*. In Paris in 2009, Musée Maillol held *George Condo: The Lost Civilization*. In 2011, the artist opened his first institutional career survey at the New Museum in New York to rave reviews.

The early 2000s brought change to his artistic direction, as Condo started doing portraits of real-life people (such as a brilliantly comical Queen Elizabeth II as a crown-wearing doll), and working on decidedly pop commissions. His most famous is the 2010 album cover for Kanye West’s *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, for which he created five risqué images that were censored in some countries.



Portrait of Kanye West, 2010 (Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Skarstedt, New York)

But it’s not rap or hip hop that moves him. “I’m into jazz from the early and late ’60s. Musicians like Eric Dolphy and Miles Davis. Music is part of my painting. I often think I’m transcribing music into a visual form and creating a picture of what I’m listening to.”

Is music his biggest inspiration? “I don’t rely on inspiration to create. I try to get up every morning and start my days making art. Most times I’m up at 6 or 7am and go into the kitchen, make a coffee and start drawing on the breakfast table. It’s the art that has to be inspirational, not the artist. I still paint like I’m 15 years old. It’s always a battle and it always will be.”

*George Condo: Expanded Portrait Compositions will be on show at the Maritime Museum in Hong Kong from March 27 through April 6, 2018.*

