

George Condo

SKARSTEDT GALLERY

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This exhibition of George Condo's work consisted of only three paintings—all masterly, all large, all 2010. Part of a series titled "Drawing Paintings," 2009–, they depict standing figures—some "interlocking," some "spatial," as the titles of two of the pieces tell us, and some in Washington Square Park, per the title of the third. The canvases are noteworthy not only for their mix of acrylic, charcoal, and oil pastel, almost indistinguishably integrated, but for their fusion of styles, resulting in what might be called an expressionistic surrealism or, perhaps more pointedly, an expressionistically grotesque surrealism. In comparison with the solo portraits for which Condo first became known, they suggest his painting has outgrown goofy comic-strip caricature, however sardonic it remains. Condo here faces the problem of the decadence of modernism, and comes up with a

viable dialectical solution: Instead of pushing one style to an extreme, he revitalizes different styles by using each to inform the others—even as he readdresses the old modernist problem of the relationship of painting and drawing, modes that Matisse thought were inseparable if not entirely one and the same. Expressionism and Surrealism had already converged in Abstract Expressionism, particularly Willem de Kooning's, but Condo's integration of them produces even more absurdly (and comically) monstrous and menacing figures than

de Kooning's women. The snarling white teeth of Condo's human grotesques seem to allude to those de Kooning's sometimes also possess, but Condo's seem more biting, and there are more of them.

Condo's figures tend to be quick sketches, even schematic outlines, with bits and pieces of colorful planes giving them body, however hallucinatory and flat they remain, and however contorted and skewed the expressions of the faces are. In *Washington Square Park* human shapes emerge from a blue background like mirages; in *Interlocking Figures* and *Spatial Figures* they seem about to dissolve into a white background, creating a somewhat more flashily atmospheric effect. I couldn't avoid associating the figures in Condo's paintings with the ghosts that spontaneously materialize in Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* (1980): Condo's figures, in the process of materializing (or is it dematerializing?) have the same uncanny glamour, and toy with our sense of what is invisible and visible—or, more exactly, with the sudden emergence into consciousness of what we were previously unconscious of.

Condo is preoccupied with sounding the depths of the unconscious, not only because Expressionism and Surrealism have been understood to express it in their different ways, but because, as he has said, he wants to explore the unconscious of his morbid, nightmarish figures. I don't know if he succeeds—is he showing us the way his figures see themselves in their unconscious?—but his figures are convincing as representations of disturbed (and generally hostile) mental states, even though all these works also contain less absurd aspects, such as the traditionally sexy nude who stares out at us in *Spatial Figures*. Such elements suggest that Condo's sensibility, however quirky, is not entirely morbid.

—Donald Kuspit

George Condo,
Interlocking Figures,
2010, acrylic,
charcoal, and oil
pastel on linen,
76 x 78".

