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George Condo interview

By Julie Belcove - April 21, 2013 4:43 pm

George Condo is something of a Renaissance man. He is an internationally lauded artist, acclaimed for his warped, if humorous, take on portraiture. But he is also an accomplished musician, a skilled home chef, an amusing raconteur and, as he recounts in one story, an enthusiastic gambler. Perched on a rickety chair in his New York studio, cigarette in hand, he tells how he travelled to Monaco 15 years ago to design costumes and sets for Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo but, faced with nine days of downtime, eventually wandered over to the casino.

"I didn't know how to play, so we watched the old ladies putting coins into the slot machines," he recalls. After lunch and the lubrication of a nice bottle of wine, he proceeded to a giant slot machine and on his second spin won. Big time. His 365,000 francs in winnings were ceremoniously delivered on a silver tray and required two security boxes at the Hotel de Paris. "Now we're real players," he told his brother-in-law over another bottle of wine. "Now we're in the game."

Within a few days the windfall was gravely depleted. He returned to the same slot machine, this time leaving with 170,000 francs. "From then on, gambling was my favourite thing on the planet," he says with a raspy laugh. "All the ballet people had to come and drag me away from the table." By the end of his stay, instead of a beautiful bauble, he brought his wife a bar of soap. It was Savon de Marseille, but still . . .

His taste for betting may surprise some, but not his longtime dealer Monika Sprüth, co-owner of Sprüth Magers gallery. When it comes to art-making, she says, "He's always had the ability to take a risk."

To be sure, when he was starting out more than 30 years ago, figurative painting was a hard sell in the contemporary world. Many American critics and collectors didn't know what to make of his canvases, which looked like a cross between Old Masters and Looney Tunes – Rembrandt on crack. Think teeth where they shouldn't be, animalistic features on humans, ears the size of pancakes, expressions of wild-eyed mania, but all painted with a meticulous hand. Condo's maverick style helped revive the moribund medium and pave the way for the figurative work of John Currin, Nigel Cooke and others. Today, two years after a riveting retrospective at the New Museum, his reputation is at a high point, and he has an exhibition of new sculpture and his "Drawing Paintings", which seek to blur the line between the two mediums, opening this week at Sprüth Magers Berlin, promising to be a highlight of the city's Gallery Weekend.

It's a lovely spring day, and Condo, 55, should be in his weekly music lesson. Music and art have always been intertwined for Condo – well before he created a self-consciously risqué album cover for Kanye West. Growing up in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, a self-described nerd, he studied classical guitar, then switched to the lute because he wanted to play the Renaissance music he loved on the instrument for which it was intended. Eventually the lute's "gruelling fingering" interfered with his painting muscles, so he took up the viola da gamba.

At the Boston museums he looked at "everything". Monet's "Water Lilies" would make him think of Debussy; a Pollock or de Kooning would bring to mind Miles Davis or Charlie Parker. Later, during art school in Boston, he joined an art-punk band called The Girls, and the night of their first New York gig he befriended another artist/musician: Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose band, Gray, was the opening act. After the show, Basquiat brought Condo to the Mudd Club. That night convinced him he was done with Boston, and he moved to New York. A few years later, the buddies carried out such sophomoric high jinks as releasing a smoke bomb in Paris's Les Bains Douches, then standing on the sidewalk watching the horrified customers flee.

In New York Condo took a series of temp jobs, one at a gallery. When Andy Warhol saw a press release he'd written there, he asked that its author come to document the minutiae of life at the Factory. Warhol's minions soon discovered that Condo was an artist – he touched up a speck on a Diana Ross portrait with a dab of ink – and hired him to help print the "Myths" series. During his eight-month stint, Condo was in Warhol's presence only once, when he carried the proofs for the artist's approval. "He made some funny comment like, 'How come I always have to sign them?'"

A few years later, Warhol bought several paintings from one of Condo's first shows. "I didn't care if I had critical acceptance," Condo says. "I was more excited about being accepted by artists." When Warhol asked mutual friend Keith Haring to introduce them, Condo consented but was inexplicably petrified that Warhol would recognise him from the Factory. Even after becoming friends, "I never told him, I was just so embarrassed."

By then Condo had hit upon his signature style and moved to Paris, where he lived from 1985 to 1995. He continued to show in New York but, as his work was heavily indebted to the European canon, found wider acceptance abroad. "My painting is all about this interchangeability of languages in art, where one second you might feel the background has the shading and tonalities you would see in a Rembrandt portrait, but the subject is completely different and painted like some low-culture, transgressive mutation of a comic strip," he says, arguing that initially, "I think it was too far over people's heads to get it. It just didn't make sense."

Condo coined the term "artificial realism" to describe his direction. He points to a seminal painting leaning against a studio wall: a bucolic landscape with the name Condo outrageously scrawled across it. "When I did that I thought about something that might have been around a couple hundred years," he says.

His characters, who spring not from dreams or drug-induced hallucinations but rather his take on the absurdities of everyday life, caused the greatest stir. "They're not the kind of people you want to spend a lot of time staring at – they're not on the covers of magazines," he says. "When you see a crowd of people coming out of a subway and one crabby old lady is elbowing some guy to get out of her way and some strange bickering starts to take place, those kinds of expressions are far more interesting to me."

He has skewered priests from his Catholic childhood, stockbrokers and even Queen Elizabeth, but there is also pathos in his art. "I tend to think I can make a hero out of a bum," he says. He compares himself to a playwright creating multi-dimensional characters. "What's possible with painting that's not in real life is you can see two or three sides of a personality at the same time, and you can capture what I call a psychological cubism." One eye might be joyfully staring at a delicious dinner, while the other has just witnessed a car crash. "I like that because the human being has so much of that inside of him."

His Drawing Paintings are crowded with half-drawn figures and splotches of vibrant colour. "I love to draw and I love to paint and I thought, why should there be any distinction or hierarchy between those two mediums? Why not put them together as a single thing, the same way I was talking about languages," he says. "The figures are dissolving until they finally sort of just become paint again. I think that's a function of me wanting to say goodbye to some of the characters that have been playing in the last few episodes of my work."

Condo and his wife, Anna, a film-maker, moved back to the Upper East Side in 1995, when their first daughter was ready to start school and their second was a baby. His studio is a floor-through of a slightly run-down townhouse. Hanging in the front room today is a series of large ink drawings on paper. They're mostly nudes, reclining women rendered in dark tones, one with a garish red dot on her cheek to match her nipples. He began them about three weeks ago. "It's been great," he says. "They're spontaneous. Whatever you do you can see – the drips are all there. I like art that shows its footsteps." Always prolific, he can paint one in a couple of days. "It doesn't take long to draw a line. You can't slowwwwwly draw a line."

He doesn't like being idle. Most mornings he's in by 7.30, typically beginning with a familiar theme before initiating a series of "irrational moves". "I can't stand a white canvas," he explains. "If someone wanted to drive me insane, they could put one in front of me and not give me any art materials to work on it. That would be the perfect torture."

'Paintings and Sculpture', Sprüth Magers Berlin, April 27-June 22, spruethmagers.com