

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

FEATURE

THE COLLECTION

Artist George Condo's Instrument Collection

The "artificial realism" artist, who's enjoyed major exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the New Museum, finds a creative escape in his love of rare instruments

By MEGAN CONWAY

Jan. 23, 2014 1:31 p.m. ET



PLUCKY GUY | 'I don't want to simply collect instruments and not know how to play them,' says Condo, seen here strumming a custom-made lute in his New York studio. The case in the middle holds a viola da gamba and at right an antique guitar. *Photography by Jack Pierson for WSJ. Magazine*

IN THE FRONT ROOM OF his Upper East Side parlor-floor studio, the artist George Condo pulls an intricately carved lute from its case. A large canvas featuring three female nudes is tacked to the wall, cigarette smoke hangs in the air (Condo likes to roll his own) and everywhere are string instruments: a viola da gamba, several rare acoustic guitars and a cream-colored Fender among them.

The lute, made to his specifications by the Parisian luthier Wolfgang Früh, took over a year to finish, and it was the first in Condo's collection, which has grown to include 11 other carefully sourced instruments ranging in value from \$5,000 to \$50,000. He has made a point of learning them all. "I don't want to simply collect instruments and not know how to play them," says Condo, who studied music theory and art history at the University of Massachusetts in Lowell. "It's a great way to take my mind off the here and now—all the aspects of what goes on in the art world."

It's not surprising that the musical tastes of Condo, known mostly for technically brilliant paintings rendered in his self-coined "artificial realism" style—a kind of contorted neo-Cubism by way of Goya and Velazquez—run to Bach and Beethoven. For the artist, "composition in painting and composition in music are sometimes similar." He says Beethoven's practice of "foreshortening"—repeating progressively shorter phrases to intensify the music—isn't so different from his painterly manipulation of figures to afford them spatial and psychological dimension.

This month, Condo opens a show of his ink drawings in London, at the Skarstedt (from February 11 to April 5). He will also be showing at London's Simon Lee Gallery from February 11 to March 22. Now 57, he's also enjoyed major exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art and, in 2011, a critically acclaimed mid-career retrospective at the New Museum. In 2010, he famously created a quintet of album covers for Kanye West's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*.

Just as he deploys Old Master techniques to create cutting-edge work, Condo believes that 18th-century music "sounds more modern when it's played on older instruments": The works "completely open up," he says. "You feel these big skies opening overhead, and this golden light shining in." Currently, he is working on a piece by Sylvius Leopold Weiss, a lute player from the turn of the 18th century, transcribed from lute to guitar and studying viola da gamba with a teacher once a week. "I always say, 'You have to do something while the paint is drying.'"

Corrections & Amplifications

This month, artist George Condo opens a show of his ink drawings in London, at the Skarstedt (from Feb. 11 to April 5). He will also be showing at London's Simon Lee Gallery from Feb. 11 to March 22. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said his ink drawings would be showing at Skarstedt's New York location.