

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

George Condo's Illness Spurs a New Vision

The American sets two London shows: one of artwork created before an illness, one after.

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George Condo's pre-illness 'Standing Bather' ©George Condo/Skarstedt

Last May, after opening his show at the Sprüth Magers gallery in Berlin, artist George Condo returned to his Manhattan apartment and collapsed, waking up in the hospital one week later.

"I was smoking two packs of cigarettes a day and drinking three bottles of red wine a day and painting constantly," said the 56-year-old, who had contracted Legionnaires' disease, a specific form of bacterial pneumonia. Shortly after leaving the hospital, he slipped and broke three ribs.

Mr. Condo says the harrowing experiences and his subsequent recovery in the Hamptons led him to "reappreciate" painting and infuse his normally subdued canvases with punchy hues like cobalt blue and marigold.

Both sets of works—the bleak figures created before his collapse and the cheerful, harmless-looking monsters created afterward—are on display in concurrent shows opening in London on Tuesday at Skarstedt Gallery and Simon Lee Gallery, respectively.



George Condo's post-illness 'The Laughing Clown' © George Condo/Simon Lee Gallery, London

The decision to open two shows by one artist during London's week of contemporary art auctions—the city's busiest for buying and selling recent works—is one way of dealing with potential turf challenges as art dealers go global.

English dealer Simon Lee has managed Mr. Condo since 1999 and represented him in London. But in the U.S., Mr. Condo is represented by Per Skarstedt. In 2012, Mr. Skarstedt opened his own London branch, though he hasn't shown Mr. Condo's work until now. "It can be complicated territorially," Mr. Lee says.

Instead of engaging in territorial war, the galleries are jointly representing Mr. Condo and showing two wildly divergent series of works—thus avoiding flooding the market with similar pieces.

"There's always been a worry that when galleries expand to London there can be conflict with dealers who already represent the artist there. This is a new way to deal with that," says Bona Montagu, Skarstedt's London director.

Mr. Condo painted the nine works in the Skarstedt show, priced between \$150,000 and \$250,000, on thick French-produced paper hot-pressed from a blend of cotton. Mr. Condo says it creates "beautiful, Rothko-like textures" when he applies ink or paint. It's a new process for the artist, who normally paints on canvas.

Paper is usually a harder sell than canvas, and Mr. Condo upped the ante by choosing mostly dark, sepulchral colors that are typically unpopular with collectors. But the choice was vital, he says, to evoking a "visceral feeling" from the images of malformed humans, most of them women.

In "The Discarded Human," a woman wearing only knee-socks contorts her body to show both her breasts and buttocks, but grimaces in pain as long strands of hair represented by dripping black ink cascade over dilated eyes, giant ears and glistening teeth. Behind her is a bleak wash of grays and browns. "It doesn't represent anyone specific but instead the feeling of displacement and that cruel aspect of humanity, where people can be discarded and thrown out," Mr. Condo says.

For decades, Mr. Condo has been strongly influenced by Rembrandt's commanding portraits of strong figures, as well as Pablo Picasso's "displacement" of human features like noses and eyes, the New Hampshire-born artist says. Because he doesn't paint from models, only his imagination, he spends hours studying works at museums, particularly New York's Frick Collection.

While the Skarstedt works illuminate "what's wrong with the world," says Mr. Condo, the colorful semiabstract portraits in the Simon Lee show "grind down" that dismal mood into more cheerful tones, like the popping tangerine, yellow and purple of "The Laughing Clown."

The 16 paintings are selling for between \$300,000 and \$500,000, the same price as the nine that sold out at the Sprüth Magers show in Berlin, when factoring in their smaller size.

And does Mr. Condo still imbibe three bottles of wine a day?

"No, just one bottle now," he says.