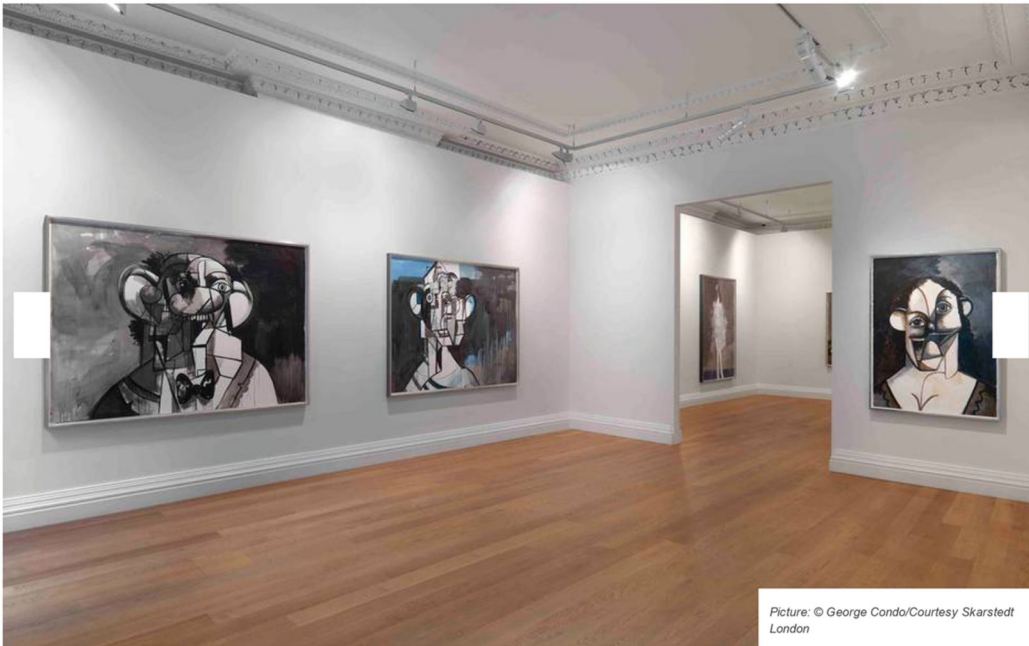


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LUXURY



Picture: © George Condo/Courtesy Skarstedt London

ART

George Condo's dark headspace

A near-fatal brush with Legionnaires' disease and the memory of his hospitalised hallucinations provide dark inspiration for two simultaneous George Condo shows



BY LOUISA BUCK

“Psychological Cubism” is how George Condo describes his fractured and frequently shrieking portraits and figures, paintings in front of which you sometimes don’t know whether to laugh or scream.

He’s the artist who a few years back caused an outcry for exhibiting a portrait of the Queen that was widely derided as looking like a cabbage patch doll (in fact she looked rather more like Popeye) and more recently was Kanye West’s go-to artist when he wanted some appropriately transgressive artwork for his *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* album, with the resulting lurid scene of a naked black man being straddled by a voluptuous white winged creature having the desired effect of being banned by a number of American retailers.

(This Christmas Kanye’s gift to Kim was a giant Hermès Birkin bag, emblazoned by Condo with three voluptuous nudes and a green monster, which unleashed howls of



George Condo, Headspace installation view at Simon Lee Gallery

[Enlarge](#)

outrage from the Kardashian fanbase.)

There's more drama on offer in the two George Condo exhibitions that have just simultaneously opened in London and which stand as a particularly personal *memento mori* from the famously hard-living artist.

The dark and deeply disquieting large ink drawings on show at [Skarstedt](#) in Bond Street were apparently created during a

particularly excessive period leading up to Condo's near-fatal brush with Legionnaires' disease last year; while the vividly-coloured gurning fractured portrait heads a few streets away at [Simon Lee Gallery](#) in Berkeley Street, emerged from its aftermath, and apparently owe their air of delirium to the memory of his hospitalised hallucinations.

However personal anecdotes only go so far to explain the extraordinary and unsettling paintings that Condo has been making for more than four decades to express what he describes as "the strangeness that is around me."

Condo may have been a friend and contemporary of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat – he even worked in Warhol's Factory for a short spell in the



George Condo, Birdman, 2013

[Enlarge](#)

early 80s – but there has always been as much of the museum as the street in his paintings. At the height of the New York art boom in 1985 he left the scene that had made his reputation, packed up his studio and moved to an unfashionable district in Paris where he then spent nearly a decade immersing himself in the painterly techniques and traditions of the past – creating what he describes as "a vocabulary that's been created in a sort of dictionary of art."

Condo has been based back in New York for many years, but this this tireless exploration, assimilation – and some say appropriation – of other artists ranging from Rembrandt,

Goya, Velázquez, Picasso and Matisse, along with American artists such as Hopper and Warhol, all spliced with an abiding love of cartoons, continues to feed into his art, topped up by regular visits to the Met and the Frick Collection. It has also had a profound influence on a generation of younger painters including John Currin, Sean Landers, Glenn Brown and Lisa Yuskavage.

As Condo says, "the only way for me to feel the difference between every other artist and me is to use every artist to become me" but while the ghosts of Rothko, Goya, Picasso, Frans Hals and a dash of Francis Bacon – to name but a few – certainly hover over both his current London exhibitions, the voice that comes through is always disquietingly and unmistakably his own.

George Condo: Ink Drawings – Skarstedt, 23 Old Bond St, London W1, until 5 April

George Condo: Headspace – Simon Lee, 12 Berkeley St, London W1 until 22 March