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A New Show That Puts George Condo Next to Picasso

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From left: George Condo’s “Telepoche Cut-Out,” 1989; Henri Matisse’s “Vegetable Elements,” 1947.

When Udo Kittelmann, the director of Berlin’s Nationalgalerie, initially floated the idea of an exhibition that would position George Condo’s work against pieces from Museum Berggruen’s 20th-century art collection, the American painter had some doubts. “Udo said, ‘You make so many modernist references,’ but I didn’t want to have a George Condo at random sitting next to a Picasso or a Matisse,” Condo remembers. “You’d see the absolute differences, as much as it appears to be referential.” Kittelmann spent two full days rummaging through the artist’s New York storage space, finally landing on a nontraditional approach, and convinced Condo to go along with it: The curator cleared out the museum’s 28 rooms, installed his pick of 118 Condo paintings, drawings, collages and sculptures — most never shown before — and then reinstalled parts of the Berggruen’s collection accordingly.

The resulting show, called “Confrontation,” opens tomorrow in Berlin and places, for instance, Paul Klee tableaus marked by the expressionist’s swooping signature near a mid-’80s, semi-surrealist Condo painting of his last name. Blue- and rose-period Picassos are complemented by similarly hued Condos; Georges Braque’s Cubist compositions echo a more recent oil painting of a man’s head split by a meat cleaver; and Matisse’s cutouts stand next to a few of Condo’s late-’80s and early-’90s collages.

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Condo points out that, in their time, the modernist masters challenged an established definition of art (“people then probably thought, ‘My kid can paint better than that,’” he says), but that the public became increasingly complacent and the pieces became blue-chip. “I want to bring back that original spirit, the feeling of first looking at those works,” he says, a sensation reignited by pairing them with his own often-provocative canvases.



However, as Condo remarks, the groupings aren’t meant to engage in a dialogue. “That would be an equal discussion of some sort and I could never be so pretentious as to think that I’m going to have a conversation with these artists,” he says, and mentions Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, with whom he’d sit in the studio and, in fact, talk about the differences between their work. “With a confrontation, an opposition is happening — and the beautiful thing that can happen in a confrontation is the resolution. It’s much more gratifying than the predictable agreement in a dialogue.”

A confrontation, though, doesn’t indicate a disconnect among Condo and his predecessors and current show-mates. “Any great artist is a sum total of the artists who came before him,” he says. “Picasso’s ‘Seated Bather’ comes straight out of Renoir and there’s references to David and ‘Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe’ by Manet. It’s an identity thing — everybody wants to feel like an individual, but we’re all part of a continuum, whether we like it or not.” Condo — who studied music theory, typically paints to a soundtrack and has dreamed up multiple album covers for Kanye West — offers a few metaphors from that milieu. “When I’m playing Picasso or Matisse or Cézanne in my paintings, sometimes they’re together in the same song, but it’s a jam session.” And, of course, “more contemporary things slip in,” he adds, laughing. “This show is going to be like Jimi Hendrix doing the national anthem at Woodstock.”

Above Photo: The late collector Heinz Berggruen and George Condo, photographed in April 2001. Credit: Olivier Berggruen