

# SKARSTEDT

## The New York Times

### A Sun God? A Cyborg? No, It's a George Condo Creation

The artist's new sculpture at Lincoln Center Plaza has eye-popping dazzle. And it makes faces.

By Hilarie M. Sheets | October 29, 2019



George Condo's new sculpture, "Constellation of Voices," on the terrace of the Metropolitan Opera's facade. Credit: George Condo/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Antonio Santos for The New York Times

Visitors to Lincoln Center Plaza may be dazzled or disoriented by the light bouncing from the 24-karat-gold-leaf surface of George Condo's new sculptural spectacle, rising more than 13 feet on the terrace of the Metropolitan Opera's facade.

"Trying to find what it is that you're actually looking at will be part of the visual excitement of the piece," the artist said of his first major public sculpture, "Constellation of Voices," which was unveiled on Tuesday.

Mr. Condo, 61, is best known for his bold figurative paintings that blend old master techniques and cartoonish characters, capturing a range of emotions from many perspectives in a method he calls "psychological Cubism." "In the early days of Cubism, you would see a violin from four different angles simultaneously," he said. "I like to create a chaotic imbalance that then needs to be reassembled back into something aesthetically pleasing." At the Met, he has translated his manic approach massively into three dimensions, creating a head at once classical, futuristic and abstract.

# SKARSTEDT

“George paints and sculpts big emotion — what is better than that for the opera?” said Dodie Kazanjian, the founding director and curator of Gallery Met, the nonprofit that installs contemporary art throughout the Met. She invited Mr. Condo to choose a site for a yearlong display, as she did last year with the painter Cecily Brown.



Responding to the challenge of the prominent spot, dead center on the terrace overlooking the plaza, Mr. Condo first envisioned a kind of sun god. “I thought about the idea of a beacon of light and Apollo being the god of music,” said Mr. Condo, who made a tabletop model in clay, with Grecian-looking features and rectangular beams, resembling rays or horns, emanating from a tumult of handworked material evoking hair.

Transposing the clay to wax and carving into it with a kitchen knife, Mr. Condo softened the features on half of the face to make its gender ambiguous and made the other side more robotic — with an eyeball popping out like the Terminator’s. He added profiles jutting from different vantage points, creating a multitude of faces.

“I took it out of the realm of gods and wanted it to echo the feeling of our time, with this idea of a constellation of voices — when so many people have taken to the streets and want to be heard,” he said of the piece, which was scaled up to huge dimensions at the Walla Walla Foundry in Washington State and cast in aluminum, then leafed in gold. “You’ll see profiles or just imagine profiles that aren’t really there,” he said.

Art and music have always been intertwined for the artist. He drew an impressive crucifixion at age 4 — included in his 2017 exhibition of works on paper at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., — and painted obsessively through adolescence while studying classical guitar and lute.

# SKARSTEDT

After two years of music theory and art history in college, Mr. Condo joined a band in Boston as a bassist. On their first gig in New York, in 1979, he hit it off with Jean-Michel Basquiat, at the time a clarinetist in the opening band and a rising art star. Basquiat convinced him to move to New York to pursue his art seriously, and his paintings were collected early on by Andy Warhol and Keith Haring.

Mr. Condo paints from memory. He compared this process of pulling characters from his brain — people with crazy expressions screaming into their cellphones or walking sadly down the street — to that of a composer working at a piano. “I can transcribe whatever it is that I’m seeing or hearing in my head,” he said.



“Constellation of Voices,” all wrapped up before its installation. Antonio Santos for The New York Times

He tested himself on this front several times last year by completing a 14-foot-long painting onstage, improvisationally, during 55-minute performances of Anthony Roth Costanzo’s opera featuring the music of Handel and Philip Glass at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia and at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York.

“George is one of the great draftsman of American art,” said Laura Hoptman, the executive director of the Drawing Center and a curator for his 2011 retrospective, “Mental States,” at the New Museum. “That kind of graphic knowledge is as apparent in three dimensions as it is in two.”

Ms. Hoptman, who saw the sculpture for the Met, described it as “a monument for this temple of excess and expression” — at a time when who should be monumentalized in our public spaces is being hotly debated nationwide. “He’s created one of his George beings and gilded it in gold, which would not be appropriate for a lot of places but is, in fact, very appropriate for the Met.”

Mr. Condo is excited to watch the changing play of light on the head’s highly reflective surface. He views the abstraction of the wildly pockmarked head, which looks as though it might have been hit by a meteor shower, as alluding to sounds — the string section, the brass.

# SKARSTEDT



Mr. Condo watching the installation of his sculpture, which was cast at the Walla Walla Foundry in Washington State.



Detail of the hair, which looks like it could have been created by a meteor shower.



# SKARSTEDT

“It’s an orchestral piece,” he said. “Good music always has an aspect of dissonance, as far as I’m concerned.”

While choosing bombast and extroversion for the public plaza, Mr. Condo has taken a more introverted turn in paintings for his exhibition opening Nov. 11 at Skarstedt, the New York gallery that helped the artist fund the Met sculpture. The show includes a series of black canvases, with stark geometric lines and only the suggestion of figures relegated to the corner. These were painted after Mr. Condo was hospitalized in July with severe chest pains and had two stents inserted in his heart.

The artist later realized that those paintings resembled the black-and-white photographs taken with a camera threaded through his arm in the operating room. “They are a little autobiographical,” Mr. Condo said. While he did not, in fact, have a heart attack, he experienced the feeling of having one “in my mind.”

“I need to change my lifestyle and some of those changes could also be artistic,” he continued, thinking about how he is using time and space differently in these new highly abstracted paintings, which he called “internal constellations.”

“I wanted to obliterate the recognizability of most of what I’ve been doing in terms of portraiture,” he said. “These are really about destroying the old me and coming into a new one.”