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Artist George Condo Maps His Return to Health in a New Show

Of his new show at Skarstedt Gallery this month: “As an artist you’re able to take negatives and turn them into positives.”



By Lane Florsheim | Nov. 26 2019

In late July, the artist George Condo went to the hospital with terrible chest pains. He was told he needed heart surgery immediately. “They said, ‘If you didn’t come in today, you would have been dead tonight,’” he says. After his surgery, Condo’s surgeon showed him black-and-white images of what his artery looked like before and after. “I said, ‘Oh wow, it was really bad,’” he remembers. “He said, ‘Yeah, you would have had a heart attack.’” Condo took the scans home. For his recovery in August, he went to the Hamptons, where he watched TV, played Scrabble with his two daughters and worked on a series of drawings. His larger-scale paintings, which require a ladder, were out of the question. “Then, eventually, I kind of felt perfectly fine,” he says.

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The drawings he completed during that period of rest are on view in a new exhibit of his work this month in Manhattan. Though the show is titled simply *George Condo: Paintings & Works on Paper*, it tells the story of a complex year for the artist. Condo, 61, made all of the 25 works in the new show while also working on a 13-foot tall sculpture covered in 24-karat gold leaf, currently on view at Lincoln Center Plaza.

When he got back to New York City in September, Condo didn't have enough new work to fill a show. "Something was haunting me about those horrible black-and-white [medical] pictures," he says. "All of a sudden I realized that all this was building up inside of me. The only things I want to paint are these sort of terrible black and white paintings."

He made one after another, mixing black paint with different colors like green, brown and ultramarine to create a deeper field. Each painting contains a figure on one side, the rest filled with black space broken into sections by constellation-like lines he scraped into its surface. Now, five of them—entitled *The Black Paintings*—line the walls of one of the gallery's rooms.



'Pushed to the Edge' is part of Condo's 'The Black Paintings' series. Oil and pigment stick on linen, 68 x 74 inches. PHOTO: © GEORGE CONDO / ARS (ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY), NEW YORK. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SKARSTEDT, NEW YORK.

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“It’s almost like in my mind, looking up at the sky at night and seeing these constellations and connecting the dots between the stars and trying to make sense of the universe...they’re very difficult, but at the same time I find them really satisfying,” he says, of the dark sections created by his scratched lines.

It’s not the first time Condo’s work has explored his relationship with his health; paintings made during his recovery from cancer of the vocal cords comprised a 2016 show at Sprüth Magers Gallery in L.A.

This year, Condo shared part of his studio space with the violinist Leila Josefowicz. As he painted in one room, her music would drift over from another. The first of his **Black Paintings** came before his surgery, in part as a result of listening to her violin. He says he found himself creating something completely different from his signature, self-described “Psychological Cubism” style. Many of Condo’s paintings are brightly colored, geometric portraits that often draw comparisons to Picasso. For months, the painting influenced by Josefowicz remained the only one of its kind.

Displayed across the way from **The Black Paintings** are three 11-foot-tall, brightly colored portraits in more typical Condo style, including one called **Fashion Model**. It depicts a curious creature, thin and tall with one bulging blue eye and a blonde ponytail, set against a gauzy blue and pink background. During the show opening, visitors stood in front of her, posing for photos against the Instagram-friendly work. “When I did these incredibly great big paintings that you see in front room during the earlier part of the summer, I had no idea what was coming my way,” he says.

Condo was born in Concord, New Hampshire in 1957. Having painted and drawn since he was a toddler, Condo enrolled in his first “real” art class in Boston when he was 19. The teacher asked students to take any object they wanted to be the subject of a drawing or painting; Condo chose a crushed Pepsi can that had been driven over by a truck. “It was the first time I’d ever had a group session, and [the teacher] looked at every single thing and he said, ‘Everything in this room looks like the thing that you guys chose to paint except for one,’” he remembers. “He came over to mine and I was like, ‘Oh no,’ and he said, ‘This is the only one that looks like art.’ That was the most defining moment for me as an artist.”

Instead of going on to art school as he’d planned, Condo moved to New York and became a printer for Andy Warhol. He then spent a couple of years in and out of L.A. developing his own style, which was heavily influenced by the Old Masters. Alongside peers like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, Condo gained acclaim in New York in the 1980s. In 2010, he collaborated with Kanye West, creating the cover art for the musician’s *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* album, and the year after, the New Museum held a retrospective of his work. Condo is known for the characters he creates, like **Fashion Model**, which he says come from the world around him. “Most of mine are like the school teacher or the bus driver or the garbage man or the janitor,” he says. “I think of them in a Shakespearean way, they all come from people of life.”

Right now, he’s still working on **The Black Paintings**, and seeing his paintings and drawings assembled for the show this month was an emotional experience. “It was thrilling to see that I’d taken an extremely negative experience for myself and my health and turn it into a positive,” he says. “As an artist you’re able to take negatives and turn them into positives. You would think that, honestly, politicians could learn a lot more from art. Unfortunately none of us artists would make good politicians.”