

George Condo: ‘I want my paintings as loud and amped up as Hendrix’

The artist on clubbing with Basquiat, getting Keith Haring hooked on Concorde — and his advice for collectors

[Lucy Davies](#) | Published OCT 17 2025



When George Condo lived in Paris in the late 1980s, the Bains Douches was about the hippest spot in town, frequented by a transatlantic set that included Madonna, the couturier Azzedine Alaïa and the artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring — Condo’s friends and fellow young guns of American painting. The trio were at the club one evening when Basquiat cracked a stink bomb on the floor. “‘We gotta get out of here,’ I told him, ‘they’ll know it was us,’” says Condo, “but he insisted we stay to see the expressions on people’s faces. He was always up to those kinds of things.” The 67-year-old artist has no shortage of adventures from that heady time, when signs of his starry repute and commercial punch included his use of Paris’s grandest hotels — the Crillon, Le Bristol — as studios and a regular Concorde habit: “It was

three and a half hours to New York; a quick nap and you’d be ther. I got Keith hooked on it — ‘Man, come on,’ I’d say. ‘It’s only a thousand bucks more than first class’.”

Condo has returned to Paris this month for a sizeable retrospective at the Musée d’Art Moderne. Conceived as the final chapter in a New York trilogy that spotlighted Basquiat in 2010 and Haring in 2013, the exhibition will be “the most significant of his career”, says museum director Fabrice Hergott.

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'The Cloud Maker' (1984) by George Condo © Courtesy Studio Condo © ADAGP 2025

When we meet at Condo's cedar-shingled home in the Hamptons, I find him painting in his studio, a former guest house in the grounds. Fog hovers over the garden. It's still and silent, bar the wild turkeys gliding about the lawn. The facts of Condo's life — precocious child, alumnus of Andy Warhol's Factory, hellraiser of Paris (see above) and London (we'll get to that) — perhaps suggest a Jack the Lad, but in person, you get something much sunnier and more enchanting. He is a short, compact fellow, wearing rumpled chinos, navy cashmere and tennis shoes, with a heavy, Beethoven-like brow. Conversation spills out of him in an easy, wide-ranging stream: the philosophy of Aldous Huxley; his devotion to Jimi Hendrix; what is the soul and why do we have an imagination? A step-by-step recipe for steak au poivre.



'Big Red' (1997), a recurring character in George Condo's work © Courtesy Studio Condo © ADAGP.



George Condo in John McNaughton's 2000 documentary film 'Condo Painting', © October Films/Everett Collection/Alamy

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Cooking is a new-ish jag. Away from the easel he also likes to watch sport and hang out with his Persian cat Fluffy. Her predecessor was Maria Callas, named for her singsong miaow, and when Condo moved into Manhattan's Carlyle hotel during his divorce in 2016 (from actress Anna Achdian; they have two children, Eleonore, 35, and Raphaele, 30), Maria came too. Though the city is his HQ — a townhouse between Fifth and Madison — he falls in and out of love with it. "I actually somewhat dislike it at the moment," he says, "but New York is still an electrical, magnetic type of place." He acquired the house in East Hampton 15 years ago. The paintings, drawings and sculptures in the Paris exhibition range over about 50 years, accentuating not just Condo's sustained virtuosity, but his diverse forms of expression, techniques, recurring invented characters and art historical allusions, most famously his "psychological cubism", where he paints different emotions or impressions of a person in one face.



'Double Heads on Red' (2014) © Courtesy Studio Condo © ADAGP 2025. Photo: Adam Reich

Cubism felt especially relatable, he says, "having a father who was a mathematician" — Pasquale Condo taught physics and calculus at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and schooled his son in the rules of perspective at the kitchen table — "but Picasso was into deconstructing, whereas I like the idea of reconstructing, or reconfiguring. I take all the parts

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and pieces and colours of a painting and reassemble them into something different. As much as they bring ideas of other paintings into the picture, they don't actually look like them." He took art history and music theory at Lowell, evening classes at Massachusetts College of Art — "but I didn't learn anything I couldn't read in a book or see in a museum" — then became the bassist in a band. That led him to Basquiat (also in a band) and in 1979 to New York's buzzing East Village art scene. Condo made ends meet by stuffing envelopes, selling pens and other odd jobs until a press release he had written for a gallery caught Andy Warhol's attention and he ended up on the payroll at The Factory. Warhol and Condo later became quite close. "He and I lived uptown, so after dinners at the Odeon, way down in Tribeca, we'd share a cab and talk."



George Condo with Andy Warhol in the early 1980s, in front of Kenny Scharf's painting 'Felix on a Pedestal'

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Condo's breakthrough came quickly, with his Fake Old Masters series (1982): improvisations on historic painting styles or motifs. "Like how Picasso took his favourite things from Cézanne's 'The Bathers', and came up with 'Demoiselles d'Avignon'," he explains. "I've never seen an artist whose work didn't incorporate art they loved, hated or learnt from." Growing up in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, his bedroom was covered in Cézanne and Picasso posters, his bedside table with the works of Baudelaire, Zola and Proust. "I was looking for that world when I went to Paris, and I found it," he says. "There was this feeling of freedom. I lured [Haring and Basquiat] over by saying, 'You can do anything you want here'." Condo took advantage of Paris's proximity to London to make a pilgrimage to the Colony Room — "I had to go to Bacon's bar. That was cool" — and ended up hanging out with Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin at the Groucho Club, or "smoking a bunch of cigarettes at Sarah's studio. They were a lot wilder, a lot more outrageous than me, but it was kind of comic relief after what happened [Warhol died in 1987, Basquiat in 1988, Haring in 1990]."



Photograph from the 1980s of George Condo (far left) and friends, including Jean-Michel Basquiat (second right, being carried).

When a grieving Condo felt ready to return to New York in 1995, he found its dealers largely indifferent. "Outta sight, outta mind,' one of them said — I really had to forge a new existence. Luckily, a whole younger generation, Cecily Brown and John Currin and those guys, were like, 'we love what you do, we've been ripping you off in college', and that reinvigorated interest in my kind of painting."

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George Condo's cover artwork for the Travis Scott single 'Franchise' (2020).



Detail from Condo's cover art for the 2010 Kanye West album 'My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy'

In the studio, we're a glass of Burgundy down — “easy wine, doesn't get you hammered” — and Condo is riffling through records. He was into music as much as art as a boy, and retains a rabid interest for its every form. At one time or other he has learned the accordion, the clarinet, the guitar, the viola da gamba and the lute, and made album art for the likes of Travis Scott and Kanye West. Hip hop artists interest him particularly, he says, because “they have replaced the idea of the Hendrix solo with words”. Condo wants his paintings to sound like Hendrix. At least, I think that's what he says — he's put Electric Ladyland on the record player and turned the volume so high my veins are vibrating. “I want them as loud and as amped up as this. I like extremities. I like to catch something in its most hysterical moment.”



'The Actress' (2018) by George Condo © Adam Reich

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We take a walk. He's telling me about the time he was giving a lecture at The Frick and someone asked what he thought was most important for a piece of art. "I said, 'most important is not that you can live with it, but you can die with it', because maybe you wanna live with a great Francis Bacon, but do you really want George Dyer on the toilet to be the last thing you see before you go?" Ever since, Condo continues, he's thought about his own work from that same perspective. "There's so much strife and struggle in the world, you can't help but absorb it, but as I age, I wanna make more work that would bring someone some kind of serenity." In the garden, a dose of sunlight has made the grass and greenhouses glitter. "Something like a lily pad painting," he says. "Some heavenly place on earth."