

George Condo

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YOU WANT TO DIE. Me too. It's something we share from the old days, a time sunk in the manic-depressive dependence that prefigures memory. George Condo paints his leering faces and tangled lines over the body of this long-submerged past, picking up its fragments of trailing, rotted flesh as they float to the surface and pasting them into the ongoing pastiche his survey has defined as "Mental States." This past is also a destination, one that tortures, even humiliates, but will ultimately seduce us with its certainty. Invoking a death drive on autopilot traveling toward the nirvana of stasis, the exhibition—organized by Laura Hoptman and Ralph Rugoff—shows us that Freud's most enduring legacy is Condo's as well. The artist's diverse projects are routed into a salon of disjointed visions, alternately lush with paint and sodden with the weight of mastery and decay.

Mimicry and fragmentation define the sites of Condo's aesthetic theft. Since the artist's first shows at Pat Hearn's East Village space in the early 1980s, his lugubrious homage to European masters has channeled not the distanced criticality of appropriation, but the boundaryless bond of

projective identification. *Memories of Picasso*, 1989, reanimates painterly history with necrophiliac passion yet carefully avoids the literalness of the copy. Condo entombs the earlier artist's sensibility within his own, expelling a blenderful of what Melanie Klein might call part objects—pink breasts, eyes, ochre and gray underpainting, grinning jaws, a green hat (maybe)—into the frame of a preestablished patriarchal form. Other subjects of his distorting mimesis are Bacon, Tiepolo, Goya, Rembrandt, Velázquez, et al. Condo's interest in art that is "official," that looks like art," touching on a language of simulation and parody that had a more complicated valence in the late 1980s, can now be read as a kind of populism, arguably making him a godfather to a younger generation of artists, among them John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, and Sean Landers. This rehashing of traditional forms deflects anxiety, providing a much-appreciated balm for the social and psychological uncertainties that underpin modern living.

In his abject portraits of chaste couples such as *The Stockbroker*, 2002, and *Homeless Harlequins*, 2004, Condo remains haunted by instability, allowing the characters depicted to level an overly intimate gaze of confrontation and reproach. At odds with the confidence to which his painterly ability and formal imitation aspire, these sad-sack figures with their pinheads, childlike props, and clichéd costumes betray a vulnerability and an embarrassment, which combine pathos with ludicrousness. This sadness is, in turn, mocked by its own excessive sincerity. Klein's notion that the incorporation of "an unassimilated idealized object" leads to a "feeling that the ego has no life and no value of its own" suggests why even the impressive scale and painterly bravura of these works only underscore their subjects' inadequacy.

As with news photographs of accident victims, our response to these portraits is split by ambivalence. At once demanding identification and defying empathy, the works revel in the masochistic promise of mastered trauma faci-

tated by endless viewings of the disaster. Canvases where couples are getting it on—*Couple on Blue Striped Chair*, 2005, or *The Return of Client No. 9*, 2008—are the flip side of the emo portraits, replacing the earlier couples' pleading countenances with the rapacious excitement of hungry beasts turning to notice a new meal. The viewer, positioned as prey by this delightfully sadistic gaze, is reminded of the potential for reciprocity implied by the misfortunes of others.

Adjacent galleries in Condo's survey group his work under the themes "Manic Society" and "Melancholia." Although the term *society* generally refers to a large group, the subjects of the portraits in those rooms often appear to be going it alone. The society in question seems to be within. Shaped from the inside out by unseen forces, these faces give a literal (or even forensic) dimension to Condo's stylistic "pluralism." Teeth push through cheeks, heads stretch into phallic breasts or shrink into collars. A queeny eye pops out of its socket, Uncle Joe's malevolent grin cele-

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brates multiple erections, and Jesus sports two round pink cheeks just below his cock-shaped nose. Condo's combination of mayhem, despair, and European art history is notoriously crowd-pleasing, resulting in many forms of success, one being the inclusion of his work on vast numbers of websites. These Tumblrs, blogs, and social diaries place Condo's fragmented representations side by side with their audience. The reflections are uncanny. You want to die. Me too. □

"George Condo: Mental States" is on view at the New Museum, New York, through May 8; travels to Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, June 25–Sept. 25; Hayward Gallery, London, Oct. 18, 2011–Jan. 15, 2012; Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Feb. 23–May 28, 2012.

DAVID RIMANELLI IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.



From left: George Condo, *Memories of Picasso*, 1989, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 63". All works by George Condo © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. George Condo, *Uncle Joe*, 2005, oil on canvas, 53 x 46". George Condo, *The Stockbroker*, 2002, oil on canvas, 96 x 80".

