

GEORGE CONDO

SIMON LEE, LONDON
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A few years ago George Condo almost went linear on us. Paintings of psychotic priests and grotesque bacchanals entitled *The Last Days of Enron* (2004) suggested the artist was, for once, angling his funhouse mirrors away from art history and towards contemporary America's queasy mix of conservatism and avarice. If Condo's newest portraits speak of his homeland's psychoses, they do so more obliquely. The crassly vivacious female nude in *Metamorphosis* (2006) stands in classic 1950s cheesecake pose: dark curls streaming, legs pitched apart and chest out, crossed arms forming an 'M' behind her head. Condo has done various surreal violences to this lowbrow and vaguely antiquated ideal: one bare calf culminates in an elephant's hoof, the other in a piratical peg leg. Her face, meanwhile, speaks of multi-axial schizophrenia. One eye blandly sultry and one dementedly wide and glassy, a budlike nose and a catlike mouth which, in several further variations on this portrait, will be cubistically repeated and nightmarishly squared off; the mindless jaws of a machine.

This is Condo's development of Picasso and Braque's decisive fragmentations: images that don't cohere, are apprehensible only in fragments and signify with wild variation from zone to zone. His women are emblems of castration fear; gnashing *vagina dentata*; boldly empowered; obviously exploited; comedic and ridiculous. The psychotically diagonal eyebrow and wild eyeball of the Amazonian nude, and of the balding man in target-patterned T-shirt and furry pants who appears happily harpooned in *The Smiling Sea Captain* (2006), carry clear pop-cultural echoes: Bugs Bunny impersonating a manic conductor in *Long-Haired Hare* (1949), Jack Nicholson gone theatrically berserk in *The Shining* (1979). That this lunacy has no baseline in reality, while Condo performs the idea of someone compelled to keep echoing it, is the churning *mise en abyme* of his recent work.

One can extend this interpretation quite a long way – arguing, for instance, that Condo identifies in painting's inherent elasticity and multivalence a locus for the uncertainty that underpins our wilfully dumb cultural moment. (It's worth adding that, as such, he comes across as one of a tiny group of painters to have emerged out of postmodernism's first wave who still appear to have anything to say.) But one is also given the impression, beyond some loosely topical allusions to misadventures during hubristic voyages, that this is something of an accident. There is a suite of drawings downstairs, compounds of eroticism and quick brutality that see Matisse-like female nudes imprompted by figures seemingly begun by Chuck Jones and completed by H.R. Giger. Their cumulative inference is that Condo works out of his head, is deliberately out of his head when he works and is as dazed and amazed by the results as we often are. One misstep of self-conscious calendrical indifference clouds this simulacrum of bohemian immersion; while most of these sketches are dated by month or year, several are ostentatiously annotated 'December 25'. Well, nobody's perfect. *Martin Herbert*

The Actor, 2006
oil on canvas
127 x 107 cm.
Courtesy Simon Lee Gallery,
London, Luhring Augustine,
New York, and Galerie Andrea
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