

George Condo goes from Kanye West's dark fantasy to painting his own demons

A brush with cancer inspired the artist's latest show, in a career which has seen him work for 'slave wages' at Andy Warhol's Factory and paint West's album cover

Jordan Riefe in Los Angeles

Wednesday 20 April 2016 18.21 BST

It seems as though there have always been monsters lurking in George Condo's artwork, whether it be the psychological cubist portraits depicting various emotional states, or the white demon that graces the cover of Kanye West's 2010 album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. But in his latest show, *Entrance to the Void* at Spruth Magers in Los Angeles, the monsters are of a different kind. A bout with cancer of the vocal cords last year spawned a bigger, badder breed of demon to exorcise, which Condo confronted with the only weapon he knows - his paintbrush.

"I was starting to feel very scrambled up and thinking about my kids and how bad my situation was," he says in a voice still raspy from surgery. He seems energized as he nears the canvas, a self-portrait in monochrome quadrants, each with features rendered in expressionistic blurs. As is his custom, the new work combines elements of masters like Andy Warhol and Francis Bacon without ever stooping to gimmickry. When he was diagnosed, he says: "I was just freaking out doing these paintings. I was in five different places in my mind at the same time."

These, along with abstract portraits and compositions like *Landslide* and *Tumbling Forms*, mark a departure from Condo's previous work involving drawing, pastel and charcoal like those in his 2014 London shows at Skarstedt and Simon Lee galleries. Back then, he quickly realized he would have to take measures to ensure that his drawings didn't disappear, smeared on the shoulder of some oaf in an overcoat. He bristled at the idea of covering the works in glass, so instead decided to move away from pastel and charcoal. But to where?

It seemed time to add a new weapon to his arsenal - a palette knife. In works like *Reflections in My Mind* and *Zombie Modernism* the paint is applied liberally, sculpted up and off the canvas in a nod to late Van Gogh works like *Mulberry Tree*. His compositions tend toward verticality, a gap bordered by black or, as he puts it: "A curtain you can look through into this mental landscape." The tall space in the middle is populated with clamoring shapes and screaming faces, the monsters ever present, diminished in size though not in number. "It's the obliteration of the characters that keep haunting me. I'm getting them out of my system," he explains.

A series of three portraits inspired by Francisco de Goya's *The Countess of Carpio*, *Marquesa de la Solana*, feature the dark monochromatic background of the original, but

in Condo's version the face of the Countess is demolished. It is a theme that harkens to his earlier works – stylized takes on famous motifs like the screaming head at the center of Picasso's *Guernica*, or the Old Masters he nods to in 2001's *The Cracked Cardinal* among others. Rather than borrow from Goya's painting, Condo's portraits somehow seem to ennoble it, transcending time like dots scattered throughout art history, linked by patterns, concepts and motifs, which he likens to a constellation in the sky. "Something happens in Egypt and that connects to something that happened in Peru that's connected to pre-Columbian. And then it happens all of a sudden in 20th-century painting and then there it is again in some sort of totemic form. For me, it started to appear in Monet. Instead of looking down into the water and seeing lily pads, you're seeing a reflection of some sort of Aztec god."

Pretty trippy stuff, no doubt, but not unusual coming from a guy who dreamed up what he calls artificial realism, which turns on the notion that reality is beyond our grasp because it can only be accessed through a manmade filter we call our senses.

"He's an artist with broad cultural knowledge, and broad knowledge about European art history," says gallery co-owner Monika Spruth, who put on Condo's first solo show in 1984. "He manages, with his knowledge and intellect, to bring it into a new form. Like the Goya paintings, which artist would dare do a painting like that?" Other fans include John Baldessari, Jessica Chastain, Lady Gaga and Leonardo diCaprio, all of whom attended the opening party on Tuesday night.

Condo credits his father, a physics teacher, for putting crazy ideas in his head when he was growing up in Lowell, Massachusetts. Early efforts in a rock band called the Girls precipitated a move to New York City in 1979, where his first new friend was Jean-Michel Basquiat. He soon got a job working at Andy Warhol's Factory where he was a screen printer for what he describes as slave wages and conditions (14-hour shifts). Within a few years, Warhol was purchasing works by Condo and even took a photo of him, never realizing he used to be an employee.

Keith Haring also collected Condo's work, and soon the two became fast friends. "I was painting these Old Master-like paintings. Jean was painting these expressionistic paintings, and Keith was doing this linear work. None of us overlapped," Condo explained. "Keith said to me, how do you manage to do so many forms but there's no sexual act. I told him, 'No they're having sex. It's just that they're forms, not human.'"

Haring introduced him to artist Brion Gysin (inventor of Alice B Toklas brownies, among other things), for whom Condo wrote the introduction to a gallery show. It caught the eye of Gysin's friend, writer William Burroughs, who collaborated with Condo in a series of paintings, sculptures, etchings and writings throughout the 1990s.

Another collaborator outside his medium is Kanye West, for whom he painted a cartoonish image of a black man in repose, a green bottle in his hand, with a white demon with a woman's body, spotted tail and angel wings straddling him. It's crude but not particularly pornographic, and yet it inspired outrage among some and was eventually banned.

"I think it was the interracial situation that got it banned," says Condo emphatically. He remembers getting a call from West, in Hawaiian exile, as he describes it, working on the



📷 Entrance to the Void, 2015. Photograph: © George Condo / Artists Rights Society/Courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

new album. The next day, the rapper turned up in Condo's New York studio. "I was thinking, everything he's talking about and all the connections we're making, he's thinking of a constellation of sound and music and changing the landscape of the music business in a strange way. This new album [The Life of Pablo], it's never finished. Why does an album have to be finished? It's like when the Beatles had the White Album, why does an album have to have a cover? Asking a question that simple changes an industry."

As for West's many detractors, "They don't understand that he's into this evolution of music and not being labeled as simply a hip-hop artist or a rapper. He's bigger than that," explains Condo. "He's turning the world into a mental institution."

Next autumn, Condo returns to Europe and Berlin's Berggruen Museum, where curator Udo Kittelmann will contrast his paintings with works from the museum's renowned permanent collection of 20th-century masters like Giacometti, Picasso and Matisse in a show called Confrontations. And in 2017 he will enjoy a retrospective of works on paper at the Phillips Collection in Washington DC.

In light of his recent illness, it's little wonder the artist feels the pressure of time more than ever. A self-professed workaholic, he seems to never stop. "I like to paint," he mutters, a profound understatement. "It's all about the emotional capacity of an artist to express himself. He can be living on the top of Mt Olympus and screaming at the sun and not be able to make poetry. Or he can be in a slum in Harlem and be the greatest artist that ever lived. It's all about your ability to put together your thoughts and feelings."