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Christ almighty! George
Condo, 'Jesus', 2002



FRIEZE SPECIAL

“Gazing into their faces is a bit like finding yourself in the middle of an orgy”

The madness of king George

Snarling and bug-eyed his funny-faced inventions may be, but New Yorker George Condo is among the most influential painters of his generation



**Ralph
Rugoff**
Director
Hayward
Gallery

George Condo's 2002 painting of that name (pictured), resembles a refugee from a rehab clinic for steroid abusers. A thick mountainous neck rises without interruption to his downturned U of a mouth, while satellite-dish ears peep out from behind his straggly hair. Above the puckered topography of his bulbous nose and cheeks, a pair of vertical eyes conveys a look of cartoon alarm, as if he were not quite sure how he landed in this catastrophe of a face or what its short and long-term implications might be.

Yet despite his ludicrous appearance, Condo's 'Jesus' evinces an improbable, if precarious, dignity. Old Master highlights imbue this portrait with a

weird majesty that is augmented by the depthless background (which lightens to the right as if from the fallout of a fading halo). As a portrait it is at once endearing and monstrous. Yet for all its disorienting oddness, looking at this picture is like gazing into a mirror reflecting mental states and predicaments familiar to us all. Jesus – *mon semblable, mon frère!*

Over the past three decades, in canvases that articulate this kind of potent emotional charge, George Condo has explored the outer suburbs of acceptability while making pictures that, for all their outrageous humour, are deeply immersed in the traditions of painting. Reworking outmoded pictorial techniques and styles in oil and varnish, he has fashioned a polyphonic terrain of cross-reference that ranges from the renaissance to the baroque, from Tex Avery cartoons to cubism and surrealism, abstract expressionism and pop. Rather than being burdened by history, he seems liberated by it. Given this fearless approach to

subject matter, his work has often made the general range of contemporary picture-making seem narrow and constrained by comparison.

Over the years he has populated his canvases with an arresting parade of unsettling, tragi-comic beings including not just Jesus, but God and the Queen of England as well. These portraits commingle elements of the beautiful and the grotesque, provoking a kind of mental whiplash that unhinges the hold such categories have on our perception. Condo also makes the case that painting can be at once challenging and comedic. Take 'Jesus', for example. Is it a serious painting? Or perhaps it is better to ask: how absurd can a painting be and still be considered 'serious'?

Significant art must somehow address the world in which it is made and presented. On the surface, a portrait of Jesus hardly seems like a vehicle for engaging current concerns, yet in its convergence of gravitas and cartoonish-ness, Condo's painting sums up defining aspects of our relationship with contemporary culture. Simultaneously soliciting varied registers of response, it instills a general uncertainty as to how we might go about deciphering its mixed messages. This overall ambiguity is only enhanced by the fact that 'Jesus' doesn't look especially contemporary but instead exudes a puzzling timelessness.

Condo has been playing with that idea since 1982, when he began a series of 'fake Old Master' canvases mounted in faux-gilt frames. Gussied up in period costume, these paintings presented, as the artist himself explained, 'an artificial, simulated American view of what European painting looked like'.

Shortly after moving to Paris in 1985, Condo began a lengthy and intense exploration of the work of Pablo Picasso, a Spanish artist whose own voracious revisit-

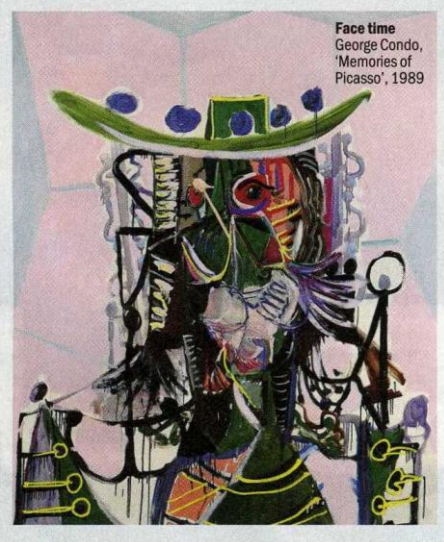
ing of art history was clearly a relevant precedent. Many of Condo's portraits from this period feature the fractured anatomies and double-eyed profiles of faces which look flayed open (pictured below). These ghouls call to mind Apollinaire's famous remark that Picasso's early cubist portraits were cruel jokes.

In 1996 Condo began to elaborate yet another facial vocabulary, variations of which he has continued to develop up to the present day. In pictures such as 'The Drinker' he introduced humanoids distinguished by ballooning cheeks, tumescent chins, oversized eyes and saucer-like ears, all deftly modelled and shaded to suggest volume-displacing forms. Resembling a motley assortment of mixed-up erogenous zones, their features are essentially corporealised: gazing into their faces is a bit like finding yourself in the middle of an orgy. No longer the emblem of a transcendent self, their countenances appear as composite entities: it is as if the body, long repressed by the face's cultural tyranny, has returned with a vengeance, erupting in swollen protest to recolonise its lost outpost.

Condo referred to his new pictorial species as 'antipodal beings', creatures linked to the antipodes of consciousness (his 'Red Antipodal Portrait', [1996] is one of this week's three special covers). Yet despite their freakish features, they appear strangely familiar. Apart from their heads, their bodies tend to be more or less conventionally shaped, garbed in ordinary clothing. But it is with their vivid emotional register that we feel most intimately acquainted: whether depressive or manic, their postures, gestures and expressions are immediately identifiable. Unlike in caricature, where features are distorted with satiric intent, the preposterous faces of these figures are in fact rendered with great sympathy and a compelling psychological presence.

In contrast to the sombre, deliberate tenor of most painting from the past 20 years, Condo has fashioned a mode of serious painting that is smart enough to resist taking itself too seriously. His art revels in irresolvable pictorial knots that wreak havoc on our usual assumptions about the relationship of form and content: a Condo painting of a crucifixion can be wildly funny because of how it is painted, while a portrait of a cartoon mutant with an uproarious mug is rendered with the pathos of a tragic icon. At its core, his art is fuelled by an unabashedly tragi-comic vision and a desire to describe, evoke and intensify the tensions between seemingly incompatible elements, including gravitas and humour, as a way of bringing us face to face with our own contradictory natures.

'George Condo: Mental States' is at the Hayward from **Tue Oct 18-Jan 8 2012**. This text is an extract from the catalogue, priced at £34.99, also available pre-exhibition at the special price of £24.99 from the Hayward Shop and online.



Face time
George Condo,
'Memories of
Picasso', 1989