

# the conversation

## ‘I would love to do Prince Charles in full regalia holding a daisy’

**George Condo is the artist’s artist, a true original and bon viveur, who plays the viola da gamba and hangs out with Kanye West. He talks to **Tim Teeman** about the power of the grotesque and teaching Ringo Starr to paint**

It’s strange imagining rapper Kanye West in George Condo’s studio. It is not glamorous, just two soberly decorated parlour rooms in a townhouse on New York’s Upper East Side. One room contains works in progress, the other some of Condo’s finished canvases, portraits painted in an Old Master style but with weird bodily contortions and mutations: arms at odd angles, stitched-up mouths, heads sprouting from heads; cartoonishly bulbous cheeks, humans with animal hair, elongated necks, expressions of fury and surprise, distended torsos — bodies not behaving or looking as bodies should. Imagine a thousand nightmare permutations of Beaker from *The Muppet Show*, or as Condo puts it in his louche drawl: “Rembrandt meets Disney.”

His retrospective, *Mental States*, opens this month at the Hayward Gallery in London after showing at the New Museum, New York, earlier this year.

Condo, whose works sell for up to \$500,000, created the cover of West’s *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* album last year. Out of five versions, including one showing West’s decapitated head with a sword through it, the singer chose Condo’s image of him being straddled by a white, nipple-flashing female phoenix, which West claimed had been banned, although it turned out that Walmart, the store chain, had not banned it. Condo, 53, laughs that he and West wanted the album art to cause controversy, with West also in a “reflective period”, says Condo, over his 2009 stage invasion of Taylor Swift’s MTV Video Music Awards acceptance speech for Best Video. (West interrupted her to say that Beyoncé was a “worthier winner.” “His mother was also passing away,” Condo adds.

Besides West, other buyers of Condo’s work include Leonardo DiCaprio, Marc Jacobs and Cameron Diaz. His work has recently been selected to hang in the redecorated Arts Club, Dover Street, in London (interiors consultant, Gwyneth Paltrow; though Condo’s 14 works were selected by the curator Amelie von Wedel and one of the club’s owners). The New Museum show proved “the notch” to emphasise Condo’s significance, von Wedel says. “He has worked consistently and is an artist’s artist, an inspiration to younger painters such as John Currin. His ‘moment’ is long overdue.”

Just as there is a “Matisse or Picasso-type” face, Condo claims, he incorporates elements of what he calls “psychological Cubism”, so that one can see a figure’s “personality and train of thought simultaneously”. He likes these works of “artificial

realism” to shock, “but not negatively; these paintings put the pieces of a shattered life together, not shatter a life”. His portraits of the Queen — with a fragmented smile, green nose, even a carrot through her head — made Her Majesty look like a “Cabbage Patch doll”, according to one tabloid. “I have no interest in insulting the Queen,” Condo claims. “I knew those portraits would blow a lot of fuses. If she ever sat for me, I would ask her first: ‘How do you see yourself?’ The biggest honour for any sitter is to be painted in the artist’s style. I’d love to do Kate Middleton and Prince William, or Prince Charles in full regalia holding a daisy.”

The frothing around his grotesques delights Condo, who — no tea here; we’re straight into a bottle of Château Margaux at 11.30am — will hold forth on working for Warhol, then being bought by him, hanging out in 1980s New York with his good friends Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat and how gambling won and lost him over half a million francs at the roulette tables of Monte Carlo. The age of austerity hasn’t reached him, I say. “Not yet, not yet,” he smiles. He is far from a name-dropper (celebrities are simply part of his world), but it emerges that he taught Ringo to paint, the former Beatle following him stroke for stroke composing a painting and he learnt that Salman Rushdie had devoted a chapter in a book to his work when the two were playing ping-pong. Condo recalls a night at Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s home, watching a basketball game on TV while talking to Beyoncé about “why Jimi Hendrix led to John Coltrane”; their art collection was “impressive”, including “Basquiat and amazing Ofllis”.

The looks of surprise or shock on his subjects, Condo says, come from observing people’s faces in fleeting moments. “One minute they’re sitting there looking at some comics, then the phone rings and they hear their kid’s got run over by a truck. It’s not interesting to paint a female nude in a moment of complacency, but when she’s screaming at the maid. I like the anger.”

Condo adds that “existential despair” also haunts his work: the “difficulty of making life what you wish it would be, and also dramatic or tragic instances in one’s life come out in the paintings”.

Most piercingly he is referring to the death of his mother, Muriel, from cancer in February, just after *Mental States* opened in New York: “A wonderful moment professionally and a devastating one personally.” Muriel “came from one of those big Irish families”, had 12 sisters, he says, and was the youngest, “so my entire childhood was spent going to funerals, observing facial expressions: sadness but offset by remembering all the good things of a life, then breaking down crying. I have always been fascinated by contrasts: grotesque and

beautiful, high and low.” When his mother was put into a hospice, Condo felt “a heavy dark feeling: nobody leaves this place alive”. His father Pasquale’s death from Lou Gehrig’s disease was also tragic: a bright college professor ravaged by the loss of his faculties.

Condo grew up in a rural town outside Boston, visiting his first gallery at 19. He tried “sports and all that” at school, “but ended up with nerdy intellectual types” as friends. One day, reading a newspaper, his father “pointed out in a rage of disgust” a Picasso sold for a hefty price. “Why would something like this go for so much money?” Pasquale asked. Condo thinks that he replied: “I don’t really know, but it’s great, that’s why.” He bought a book by Gertrude Stein about Picasso and plastered his bedroom with posters of Cézanne and Monet paintings.

In 1978, having dropped out of college, Condo began working in a silkscreen-printing studio and became a bass player with a punk band, the Girls (today, for pleasure, he plays the viol, or viola da gamba, a Renaissance string instrument). John Cage, Miles Davis and Hendrix were his

**Condo loves gambling. ‘What can you do with money aged 80? Use it when you’re young’**

heroes: “I was thinking jazz, I wasn’t hip to the Ramones or the Sex Pistols”. Still, he threw himself into it. “I remember being on stage in Chicago and breaking a beer bottle over my head. It didn’t hurt. There was always sex, drugs and rock’n’roll: never one without the other, if you were lucky.”

He and Basquiat became friends after the band arrived in New York. “He was troubled, and I so wished I could have helped him. Keith Haring was more optimistic.” Of visiting William Burroughs at his country home, Condo recalls: “There were guns strapped into his hunting jacket. It could be 95 degrees and he’d be in his wool suit, ‘Let’s go shooting’, he’d say.” Condo indulged in “acid, pot, cocaine and wine. During the Eighties, everybody was rampantly on drugs all the time. It never became a problem for me, but it became a problem for my friends, who couldn’t function.” He, Haring and Basquiat treated clubs like the Roxy as their offices.

In 1981 Condo began working at Warhol’s Factory, screen-printing and diamond-dusting. Warhol was rarely there. “The phone would ring and it would be Warhol asking for a set of prints [to] suddenly be done in red. Everyone had female names, and so it would be, ‘Mrs

Warhol wants them all in red.” Although Condo had been encouraged by a drawing class in 1978, it was seeing paintings by Tiepolo and other Old Masters at the de Young museum, San Francisco, that proved his career-making foundation. “I didn’t want to copy them, but how I remembered them,” he says. He would scrape features from faces with a ruler to achieve his perverting effects and sold his first painting, *The Adoration of the Sacred Cow*, in 1982. After almost dying from food poisoning, Condo moved to Paris for ten years in 1985 and the deaths of Basquiat and Haring — “losing them made me feel so lonely” — roughly coincided with meeting his wife Anna. (They have two daughters, Eleanor, 21, and Raphaëlle, 16.)

The artist, whose art collection includes drawings by de Chirico and Picasso, claims not to be disciplined or rigorous, and cannot think “of anything better to do” than to paint. “If somebody asks me to go for a long lunch, I’m more than happy. Then I’ll have a long nap, do some work and start dreaming about dinner. I’m drinking more wine than usual right now.” He smiles. “I don’t like getting stuck in patterns. My uncle said, ‘Don’t get a job: you might like it’. If I do a good painting, I feel I’ve fulfilled my dream and ambition that day. Then I’ll have dinner and get smashed.” Turning 50 was a drag: people started telling him to be healthy: “A personal trainer spent two hours telling me how to stand. You’re going to die one way or another, so you may as well enjoy it while you’re here”.

Condo’s biggest pleasure is gambling. It began 14 years ago in Monte Carlo, when he won Fr365,000 in roulette. Then lost the lot. “I only had enough left to buy my wife a bar of soap,” he says. “But she thought it was a riot. Does he not worry about losing large sums? ‘One has to become responsible,’” he concedes. “You don’t want to be an old f\*\*\* without money. But when you get to 75-80 there’s nothing you can do with your money; it’s much better to use it when you’re young. I work” he adds. “I haven’t been hanging out in casinos, cancelling exhibitions.”

So yes, while he high-rolls and has fun, Condo is serious about his work and proud to have inspired many of Britain’s contemporary artists, name-checking Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas. “I’m hoping the puppeteer will live on in his paintings,” Condo says of his legacy. “I’m proud of working against the grain of what other artists were doing.” He takes a concluding glug of wine, an artist having an uncommonly good time in his garret.

**George Condo: *Mental States*, Hayward Gallery, London SE1 (0844 8750073), Oct 18 to Jan 8. His works at The Arts Club can be seen by appointment (theartsclub.co.uk, 020-7499 8581)**



George Condo: photographed for The Times in his New York studio



**CROWNING GLORY**  
George Condo's portrait of the Queen, 2006, and with Kanye West, below

