

George Condo's Elite Pathology — Nigel Cooke

As a contemporary of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, collaborator and friend of William Burroughs and one-time employee of Warhol's 'factory', New York-based artist George Condo's influence has been wide and deep for over 20 years. In some ways it's hard to imagine the work of John Currin, Sean Landers or the Chapman Brothers without first thinking of Condo's bizarre, deranged and hilariously pathological antipodal portraits.

But how can we begin speaking of pathology (malfunction, disease), when what we're dealing with are easel-sized portraits painted in oils? Such a genteel format feels instinctively at odds with this kind of psychological extreme. Yet the 'pod people' of Condo's paintings – a slaving genealogy of toothy, mouse-eared maniacs - do indeed seem warped by a force beyond their control. The figures themselves seem capable of pathological behaviour, leering foolishly and sometimes aggressively from domestic interiors, anonymous landscapes and foggy, vague spaces. But it is not the people within the paintings that connect most significantly to an idea of pathology. It is the process of rendering their corporeality in paint that betrays a pathological distortion -the pathology of a mode of representation. Referring to them as "schizophrenic portraits", Condo's heads, as with Bacon, become a malleable clump of matter onto which the business of painting can be projected. This misanthropic mangling brings the image into an uneasy relationship with the word 'portrait'. With a complex and 'unflattering' admixture of European painterly styles, Condo sets about his pod people energetically; Cubism is wielded like a machete, carving up the face and torso of 'Imaginary Green Portrait' (1997) into shards of screaming colour. Like some painterly adaptation of 'A Picture of Dorian Grey', the pictured 'sitter' is subjected to violent stylistic experimentation rather than entropic decay. And the mutilation takes place as if under the strict authority of a historically omnipresent and psychotic Old Master.

When I managed to meet George Condo myself, I found that his knowledge and passion for painting, coupled with his delight in perversity, forced me to think about the idea of this Old Master painting persona in relation to the artist's personal history. I became interested in how much the pathology of the portraits was a matter of style or personal expression; in other words, where all the violence came from. It's clear, even with slight familiarity with his painting, that the exacting deformations played out in period styles are more personal than a detached critical art-world reference game. On the other hand, the perversity of the work relies exactly on this sort of sophisticated secondary referencing as much as it does on so-called authentic expression. In the end, it took a throwaway comment from Condo himself to help me begin to figure out a connection between the artist and the complex pathology of his depictions.

I was lucky to first meet the artist at my studio in London. On discussing a work of mine in progress, he insisted that a finished area was in fact far from it – it needed something extra. For Condo it would never really work without the addition of another object, and he returned to the subject now and then as the evening drew on, making suggestions one after another, hoping to offer me the right image. Later, as we parted company, he announced that he had exactly the right thing for me. My painting needed an owl in it – with an arrow piercing its eyeball.

Whilst the owl made it into the finished painting, the arrow didn't, and I began thinking about why I had cooled the thing down to this more sedate version. Initially, it seemed more surprising to me that I had taken his casual suggestion seriously in the first place. But there was clearly something about George's own working procedures that my painting couldn't process, something about the violence of the suggested expression that said something fundamental about George's conception of the standard painterly conventions – in his case portrait, in mine, landscape. And it became clear that the notion of conventions in general is strikingly key to Condo's style of pathology. If there is a destructive violence at work, then it relies on the staid institution of academic portraiture to be understood as such. The 'pod people' may be prey to sundry assaults, just as the poor owl with the arrow would have been; there's head shrinking and deformation, the facial insertion of carrots, viral proliferations of eyeballs, teeth and hair, etc. Yet despite the weirdness and profanity, these are still traditional portrait compositions. But here, expressionism -pictorial drama and wantonness -invades the scene. It is the convention that refuses to grow up, running amok in the costume department of painting's elite developmental stages (Cubism, Classicism), creating freaks that embarrass the institution of connoisseurship into joining a contemporary painting narrative, like a delinquent dragging his grandparents to the dance floor. The 'owl' comment showed me that things have to fall apart for Condo, to the point of dissolution and farce. And not in secret either: it all has to happen as the insolent eruption of expressionism in the face of painting's grand history of progressive elites.

Condo came to prominence in the 1980's, a time when expressionism in painting was enjoying a now well-known revival. Basquiat's painting was gathering universal acclaim, Julian Schnabel was producing enormous paintings with plates in them, and large expressionistic figurative paintings of all qualities were dominating the New York gallery scene. The old-school tortured painter-genius seemed to have returned, and heroic images of artistic struggle also began to reappear in popular culture. Abel Ferrara's seminal film 'Driller Killer' (1979), released at the start of this revival, chronicles the exploits of a clichéd New York artist so fixated with this idea of the life of a painter that his energies cannot be contained by it. If we are talking of expression as pathology, it's all here. Reno, the film's struggling painter protagonist, battling with his huge painting of a buffalo, becomes increasingly hypnotised by the animal's painted eye as his life quickly disintegrates around his practice. The painting becomes his master, alienating him from humanity, driving him to complete the project at all costs. Almost like a splatter-flick version of Paul McCarthy's film 'Painter' (1995) (its protagonist not unlike a Condo character), 'Driller Killer' casts the painter Reno as childishly disillusioned by his gallery, his lack of success, and the indifference of his girlfriend to his genius. This cocktail of neglect, his inability to finish the painting, as well as the buffalo's goading eyeball, prompt the artist to begin slaying drunks and tramps in the neighbouring streets with a portable drill. It's the kind of response to frustration that recalls the miseries of Van Gogh, who pottered out to paint the moon at night in a straw hat mounted with candles. The conclusion to the 'hat of flames' episode is obvious, but no less an act of painterly frustration for it. And whichever of the 'ear' stories you believe, the mutilation demonstrates, amongst other things, the inadequacy of painting to articulate the artist's deep-seated primary pathological urges. And then of course there's Richard Dadd. Is it so improbable that the discipline of the Victorian painter's uptight, graphic style may have acted as the repressor of his impulse to drag his Father into the serpentine lake to be drowned?

Ferrara's painter Reno Miller the Driller Killer dramatises this grand history of

pathological expressionism as artistic overflow. When painting fails to satiate Reno's need for direct existential transparency as it did with Van Gogh and Dadd, expressionism raucously splits its sides, spilling the delirious freedom of nocturnal mayhem. Snarling Reno is -at last -drenched in a glorious spray of blood, the Rothko-esque monochrome relief to his painterly constipation.

These stories show that things can really fall apart in painting. But can George Condo's painting be considered in these extreme terms of pathology? As far as I know, the artist has never hacked himself or anyone else to pieces. But what happens if painting does manage to contain primary pathological urges? When painting is not set aside but taken up as the arena of expressive mutilation? Condo's omnipotent old master manages to contain a pathology of elite (the 'select few') expressions – the expressions both prey to and signs of the pathology – within the terms of painting. High-end art historical styles like Cubism, Surrealism and Classicism are forces that invade the sitters but also model them – albeit as screw-ups from a disastrous visual melting pot. The result is a challenge to the idea of individuality and singularity in both personal style and historical pedigree. So the Van Gogh-dominated tradition of pathological expressionism (usually enacted by 'outsiders') is used to reevaluate the problematic conception of tidy linear art historical narratives. So the losers get to laugh at the winners.

The painting persona creating this has an ultimate mobility in time, generating figures that dwell zombie-like in the recreated multi-temporality of art history's best bits. This odd combination is how this assumed persona resists the bombastic authorship theatrics characteristic of other American painters who emerged around 1981. Condo's work does demonstrate American Art's need for Master Painters in the European manner as does the Van Gogh-inspired Reno of the film 'Driller Killer', or Schnabel's oft-quoted reference to Picasso and Van Gogh as "My peers". But this centralising of the author is the opposite of what happens in George Condo's painting. Instead of his ego erupting into actions and words in the outside world annexed to the painting, as it did with Reno et al, this force is driven deeper into painting, into multifarious voices, a personality disorder in place of the cult of personality. Condo's painting operates its violence in the same American tradition of European painting envy, but as an exaggerated logic of appropriation rather than as competitive ambition. The paintings speak more of the worshiping of such cultural elites as social sickness than of the possibility of contributing to them.

It's worth noting that Condo grew up in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, which is not far from Boston, the centre of American painting before the 1950's, and an area enthralled with the idea of old-master refinement. With little local history to draw upon, early American painting borrowed styles and techniques from classical European painting, often transcribing entire portrait poses and simply adding the face of their chosen subject. It's possible that the pervasiveness of this secondary status to the painting of the time influenced Condo's view of the relationship between authenticity and value in his own painterly process. In his portraits, there is clearly some status anxiety going on, though deployed as an attack on constructs of cultural authority, not least that of the artist's own reputation. The process of establishing sovereign painting movements is put up for ridicule, and the notions of responding with subservient homage or original expression get the same treatment. The bourgeois fantasy of portraiture capturing the God-given wealth of a New England family (the function of much early American portraiture), for instance, is hysterically lampooned in Condo's

'The Stockbroker' (1998). But it's also possible that the kind of head-swapping between American and European portraits, used to import European gravitas to early American painting, summed up the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the art that was revered in Condo's home town. This obsession with pictorial manners at the expense of all else certainly carries the trace of misanthropy detectable in Condo's later portraits. Why not consider Condo's elite pathology as driven by the sadistic reversal of this simple transference of heads? That this simple post-war technical solution, used innocently to achieve 'rightness', becomes in Condo's art the sign of portraiture's inability to do anything other than reveal the artificiality and self-satisfaction of the cult of painting's history? That by amplifying this transference to include not just heads but eyes, teeth, painting styles, carrots etc, Condo converted this technical process into a driving principle of manic expressionism. Reno's mania for greatness in the European style finally took his painting to a homicidal level of expression, but for Condo this is missing the point. The desire for 'rightness' of a painting's subject matter – a portrait, a landscape -is belittled by the pathological portrait of all painting culture that needs to be undertaken at the same time. Condo's portraits are, therefore, portraits of Painting – they just happen to be people too.

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