

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

eyeLEVEL
CONDO ELEVATES NEW MUSEUM
BY PETER PLAGENS



View of "George Condo: Mental States," 2011, at the New Museum, New York. Photo Benoit Pailley.

LIKE A LOT OF VISITORS to elevator-intense museums, I like to gravity-feed. That is, I ride the lift to the topmost gallery floor, then perambulate my way through the shows I want to see back down to the lobby level using the stairs. At "George Condo: Mental States" at the New Museum in New York [on view through May 8], a stunner awaited me as I exited the elevator on the fourth floor: one of the best-installed walls of contemporary painting I've ever seen. Condo's mostly fictional oil portraits—done in a variety of styles, but primarily in his trademark collapsing-jack-o'-lantern manner with rows of tiny white teeth sprouting anywhere and everywhere—were hung practically floor to ceiling, as if in the annual salon of some Academia del Bizarro. The paintings, their subjects, the gray wall color, the spacing and the scope all fit together like the parts of a Swiss watch (which, I suspect, is one of the last things to which Condo's witty and well-painted pictures are usually compared). Of course, my mind was also visited by some smart-aleck thoughts, such as that the artist whose portraits were displayed on this floor might be named "Francis Guston" and that the earlier, more abstract all-over compositions that greeted me on the third floor could have been painted by "Arshile Scharf."

All in all, though, "Mental States" is a fine painting exhibition. Condo's smart, he takes risks and he has a very deft hand. The 53-year-old painter landed in New York from Massachusetts in his early 20s and quickly started showing his work alongside that of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat in the East Village. Condo had consumed, however, a

lot of undergraduate art history and, instead of going straight for the cartoon jugular, eventually opted for what he called "fake old masters" by, well, painting like they teach you to paint in painting class: making volumetric portrait heads with well regulated brushstrokes, doing a little Cézanne dance with the light-dark relation of the subject to the background, keeping color clean and reasonable, etc.

What Condo—once he hit his faux-academic stride in the mid-1990s—brought to the painting table is a morphological sense of humor that's simultaneously wickedly blatant and wryly understated. Wham! The goofy head (occasionally from a real person, usually invented) hits you like a Basil Wolverton cover for an old *Mad* comic book. But then, wait a minute: the painting is actually sort of reverential, like portraits of doctors in hospital lobbies. Back and forth your perception goes until Condo's affectionately dystopian take on modern life settles in as sideways profundity. The wonder is that Condo's freshness hasn't pooped out over the years. His style may be formulaic, but it's a damned good formula.

THE NEW MUSEUM'S architecture didn't fare nearly as well on this trip, when it finally dawned on me—after many previous visits where I had subconsciously rationalized away a slight but nagging unpleasantness—that the building just isn't a very good place to look at art. Between the critical honeymoon a

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new building often enjoys (especially when it's a new museum in a major city, designed by rising-star architects) and a point in the future when, oddly, it changes into an almost "natural" part of the municipal landscape, lies an uncertain territory of use, reevaluation, reuse, and re-reevaluation. The 175-foot-tall tower, an asymmetrical stack of boxes clad in a screen of anodized aluminum, was designed by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, principals in the Japanese architectural firm of SANAA, and winners of the 2010 Pritzker Prize in architecture. The building was praised to the skies by some critic



Condo: *Dreams and Nightmares of the Queen*, 2006, oil on canvas, 20 by 16 inches. Private collection.

when it opened in late 2007, but it was as if none of them had ever gone inside the place when there was art on offer. One even remarked that the building steps aside and lets the art speak for itself, once a person enters the building.

In the first place, there's no art readily visible from just inside the front entrance. The museum's lobby is a visual cacophony: a big ticket counter on the left, an irritating curvy screen semi-sequestering the museum store on the right, and—hardly rare in New York—a view straight ahead of people sitting at café tables drinking coffee. To see actual art, one needs to get on an elevator. The drill is this: after you buy a ticket, you're immediately confronted (albeit in a friendly way) by a guard with a laser-reader for the ticket's bar code. Then you wait. And wait. The feeling is what you got at an old Army induction center—sign on the dotted line, get handed a uniform, and queue up for the showers. The elevators come in two sizes: small, and not-big-enough, especially on

a weekend when there's a popular show. There are stairways, but the main one is in back of the elevators, claustrophobically narrow, and mitigated by only a small-gauge railing. In the long descent, you wonder whether you're in an art museum or a parking garage. Another staircase has a decidedly fire-escape vibe to it. The galleries themselves are fairly serviceable "white cubes," to employ Brian O'Doherty's felicitous phrase. The tall ones on the third and fourth floor did Condo justice in spite of the sizable crowd, and the top-most gallery, its lower ceiling feeling unavoidably oppressive after the capacious spaces below, was barely tolerable.

THE WORD THAT KEEPS popping into my head on each visit to the museum is "cheesy." Of course, the architects were laboring under monetary constraints (\$50 million for a new museum in 21st-century Manhattan is pretty cheap), and their announced design philosophy is to let the homeliness of function show. The ethos of the New Museum itself—which, when the late Marcia Tucker founded it in 1977, paid all personnel the same salary and listed them, in directories and catalogues, in alphabetical rather than titular order—has always been "Hey, gang, let's put on a show." But bad fit and finish (that rattling glass on the stairway overlook) and proportions (the stairway to Hell and that skinny plain pipe railing) are neither populist nor prudent.

Still, the particular Parkinson's Law noting that the decline of any organization begins right after it's moved into a new building doesn't apply to everyone all the time. The New Museum is healthy and vibrant. Its exhibitions, however slanted toward *bricoleurisme*, have been generally toothy and newsworthy. Iza Genzken's big rose sculpture on the museum's facade is an enormous improvement over the earlier cloying "Hell, yes!" sign in puffy rainbow letters by Ugo Rondinone.

A pervasive negative critique of the New Museum has been sociopolitical. That the museum seems to me to be for the most part a privileged playground for the well-off, pitilessly inserted onto a street where the clang and bang of restaurant supply shops and the cheerless hopefulness of rescue missions heretofore resided authentically side by side, is one of those unavoidable facts of life in a living, breathing metropolis. Things change. Indian encampments become whaling villages, which become warehouse districts, which become small manufacturing centers, which attract shops and homes, which become residential neighborhoods, which go upscale, and so on. That much of the art that the New Museum has shown in such exhibitions as "Unmonumental" and "Younger Than Jesus" looks cobbled together from Bowery detritus shouldn't insult anyone, either. Art, like love and the Lord, works in mysterious ways its wonders to achieve.

Purpose-built museums of modern and contemporary art are festivals of unintended consequences. Who knew in 1966 that the Whitney would eventually seem so gloomy? Who foresaw that the rebuilt MoMA would reemerge as the great hand-sanitizer of modern art, as if an artistic arm of Big Pharma confined the bohemian social flu to a secure square block in midtown? Or, on the other end of the spectrum, who foresaw that the Guggenheim's spiral ramps would become so normalized? (Abuse of viewers is bearable if it comes from a genius.) So there is hope for the New Museum's building. But it'll take an awful lot of work on the *inside*, and many more shows like the excellent Condo retrospective, before the structure can dispel the snipes, like this one from a commenter on Yelp: "All of this museum's charms can be experienced from the curb." ○