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By James Sullivan
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When Kanye West was in the studio making his latest album, “My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy,” he hung images of George Condo’s vivid, twisted portraits on the walls. Play the way this painting looks, he told his musicians. Condo, who grew up in Chelmsford, has made a name for himself with his arch, cartoonish variations on Old Master portraiture. After moving to New York in the early 1980s, he established himself as a player in the downtown art scene, selling to Andy Warhol and Ringo Starr and creating dozens of paintings with William Burroughs.

Now, with 30 years of recognition behind him, Condo is having a defining moment. “Mental States,” the painter’s show at the New Museum in Manhattan through May 8, is drawing both raves and rants.

And at the height of success, the 53-year-old Condo, who lives with his family in a lavishly appointed town house on the Upper East Side, is taking time to reconnect with old friends and family in Massachusetts.

In recent years he has spent time in Chelmsford, helping his mother, who died recently at age 79.

“I know a lot more about my youth now,” he said.

Colleagues from his younger years say that, even back then, he defied easy description. “With George, you really couldn’t pigeonhole him,” recalled Carole Julian, a fellow graduate of Chelmsford High’s class of 1976. “He was smart, but he was a cool kid. He was popular, and funny. He was introspective but easygoing. And there was definitely something very shy about him, yet he was comfortable in his own skin.”

Condo was the second of five children — three boys, two girls — who spent long stretches in summer staying with their aunts and cousins in Salisbury cottages on the ocean.

“As kids we’d roam the arcades on Hampton Beach,” said the artist. “It was an interesting atmosphere in terms of clutter and graphics.”

His father, Pasquale, taught math at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, where Condo studied for two years, focusing on music and art history. Dr. Liana Cheney, an art history professor who chairs UMass Lowell’s cultural studies department, remembers Condo as an excellent student who wanted “to understand not just the technique but also the meaning behind the works of art.” It was her advice that led Condo to New York.

From his childhood, Condo’s family recognized his ability. Among Pasquale’s family back in Italy were a few exceptional sculptors, and Condo’s own prodigious output includes a series of patinated gold busts, many of them on display at the New Museum.

The Boston Globe

But as a teenager he was more interested in music and the writings of Lowell native Jack Kerouac than in the visual arts. In 2006, Condo wrote the introduction to Kerouac's "Book of Sketches." The author inspired him to develop his own "pure uncontrollable mastery of chaos," he wrote.

Asked whether he mines his dreams for his work as Kerouac did, Condo answers with an emphatic no. His art, he says, is "about reality, transcribed almost into a dream state. It's kind of an invented dream."

Condo describes his formative years as "very jazzy." He had an epiphany when he found a copy of Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue" in the record collection of a friend's father: "It had this essay by Bill Evans, where he said that Miles was capturing forms like a Chinese calligrapher with his trumpet — very economically, the same way that a calligrapher could capture a running deer with six brushstrokes. That totally turned me on to jazz."

Already training on classical guitar, Condo went in another direction entirely when he moved to Boston to attend Massachusetts College of Art. While working in a silk-screen factory making T-shirts, he met members of a local band called the Girls. The band was "almost like a transformation of electronic music into this punk-dada performance thing," he said.

Condo played bass, electric viola, and occasional trumpet for the Girls, and later, upon arriving in New York, helped start a band called the Hi Sheriffs of Blue, which recorded several singles.

But as much as he loved music, what Condo really wanted was to be a painter. By 1984, he had earned a two-gallery exhibition of his work in the city.

Today his work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney, and his paintings sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. He's a big target: Art critic Jerry Saltz recently dismissed Condo as "a zombie — a very limited, ironic, art-about-art artist whose work sounds the same visually derivative, technically generic notes over and over again."

But Condo seems oblivious to such detractors. His original cover art for West's album, which featured a fiendish-looking Kanye-esque character and an armless angel in flagrante, was rejected by Universal, the rapper's wary record company. That, unsurprisingly, earned both artists plenty of notoriety before the album even came out.

In repeat visits to Condo's studio, West played the artist rough mixes of the album through a Marshall amp. Cranking the song "Power," which is built around a sample of King Crimson's "21st Century Schizoid Man," West told Condo, "See, man, that's why I wanted you to do it," the painter recalled. "That's what the paintings are all about."

"I knew I was going to have to push the Kanye thing to the max," Condo said with a laugh.

His paintings have always toyed with transgression. The faces of his subjects are often warped, disfigured, or caved in on themselves. His grotesques "are almost like musical variations on the portrait format," Condo said.

"At a certain point the variations become the thing I'm interested in," he said. "They're more representative of the mental state of the character."

"His mind is sort of psychedelic, in a way," said Girls guitarist Mark Dagley, a respected artist in his own right. Yet his friend has always had the outward bearing of "normalcy," Dagley said.

And although Condo loved New England, Dagley said, "there was another element of how they lagged behind that really disturbed him."

And Condo has made a career of disturbance ever since.