THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Changing Face of Portraits

Collectors are paying top dollar to be painted by famous artists—even if it means looking silly or grotesque. How an unflattering image became an art-world status symbol.

By Ellen Gamerman
August 5, 2011

Greek businessman Dakis Joannou was posing for a portrait by artist George Condo when he noticed a tuft of hair sprouting from the side of his head on the canvas. He interrupted the painter.

"I'm not worried about the teeth sticking out of my cheek, but I am worried about the hair sticking out of my face," Mr. Joannou told him.

With a few brush strokes, the artist, who is known for painting surreal faces with screwball features, limited the hair to traditional spots just over the ears of the 71-year-old collector. The work by Mr. Condo, whose canvases typically command $450,000, now hangs in a privileged spot by a fireplace in the living room of Mr. Joannou's Athens home. It's one of three portraits Mr. Condo painted of the collector, who appears alternately with lime-green ears, a bulbous blue clown nose and an endless chin. Mr. Joannou owns them all.

The portrait has long been a symbol of the relationship between an artist and a patron. Throughout most of art history, commissioned portraits ennobled their subjects—showing them surrounded by symbols of wealth and virtue, perched regally on a steed or even transported into a New Testament scene. The artist, who depended on the patron for money and support, was typically happy to oblige any demands.

Today, portraits may be deliberately ugly, filled with palpable angst or defiantly abstract. The works are more about scouring the psychological depths or playing with the concept of portraiture than about illustrating a patron's smooth likeness.

These portraits reflect a shift in the power dynamic between collectors and artists. Contemporary art stars are wealthy and famous in their own right. Many of them view commissions as favors, not a necessary part of business. And collectors are willing to play by portraitists' rules for a canvas they think will reveal something profound about them—or demonstrate their special relationship with a sought-after artist.

Private art adviser Kim Heirston says collectors who saw Julian Schnabel's signature images of distorted faces made from broken dishes at his current exhibition in Venice immediately wanted to see themselves in fragments, too. "I had about four clients I walked through that show say, 'Do you think Julian would do a portrait of me?'" she says.

Fashion model Christina Kruse recently asked New York-based Israeli artist Nir Hod to paint her 5-year-old son, August. Mr. Hod, whose works typically sell for $30,000, rendered the blond child with a sneer, cocked eyebrows and a lit cigarette. Ms. Kruse loves the work. "He did manage to get August spot on," she says, adding that her son sometimes sits with the bearing of a 50-year-old man. August is less fond of the painting, which hangs in his bedroom at his father's house in New York, but his mother says that's because the boy prefers bright colors.

Patrons aren't always pleased with an artist's singular vision. "You have to understand that at least 50% of the people who have portraits done of themselves don't like the portrait," says Peter M. Brant, the newsprint mogul and art collector who has bought or commissioned several portraits of himself and his family.

The resale market for commissions, which often cost more than an artist's other works, can be limited in the short term. Buyers may not be interested in owning a piece so plainly tied to another collector. With time, however, a portrait can gain significantly in value if demand for the artist grows. "The people who realize that tremendous gain are the grandchildren or great grandchildren," Mr. Brant says.

The market for works by Cuban-born American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres has thrived in the years since his 1996 death. Last year, Mr. Gonzalez-Torres's 1992 piece "Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient) sold for $4.6 million, a record for the artist at auction. The conceptual representation of French collector Marcel Brient is a pile of candy in blue wrapping printed with the word "Passion."

Mr. Brant and his family have had mixed experiences with portraiture. Artist Maurizio Cattelan visited Mr. Brant's house several years ago and proposed making a bust of Mr. Brant's wife, fashion model Stephanie Seymour. The result: a work depicting her nude torso thrusting forward like a figurehead on a ship. Mr. Brant, who recalls paying $600,000 for the 2003 piece, says his wife was less than thrilled with the image. "It's like any woman that's 50, or a woman that's 70, doesn't like a portrait of herself because she remembers herself when she was in her 30s," he says. Mr. Brant says he liked it: "As a work of art, it was an 'A.' " The bust, which Mr. Cattelan says was inspired by the idea of a wall-mounted trophy, was part of a limited edition. One sold at auction last year for $2.4 million.

When Mr. Brant's mother, Lily Brant, posed for a portrait by Mr. Schnabel, she put on jewelry, got her hair done and trekked out to Long Island to sit for the piece, which was commissioned for about $150,000, Mr. Brant recalls. Mrs. Brant disliked the end result, saying the 1998 painting made her look too stern.

Mr. Schnabel was initially hesitant to tinker with the work. "I didn't want to change it because it was perfect," the artist says. He soon reconsidered: "It's somebody's mother. I said, 'Oh, I can fix that.'" A couple of days later, he added a large block of white paint that obscured the top half of Mrs. Brant's face, a flourish he has used in similar ways in other works. Though Mr. Brant calls the painting "masterful," his mother covered it with

a sheet and left it in her garage in Greenwich, Conn. The piece, which Mr. Schnabel is displaying in his Venice show, is now starting to grow on her. When the work returns from Venice, Mr. Brant says his 91-year-old mother will hang it in her house.

Mr. Brant got a surprise when he commissioned the Swiss contemporary artist Urs Fischer for a show at The Brant Foundation Art Study Center in Greenwich. Mr. Fischer created two candle replicas of Mr. Brant with wicks atop the heads. The wax sculptures, for which Mr. Brant recalls paying about $400,000 each, burned during the show last year, brains first. "I think it's an incredible work," Mr. Brant says, adding that a candle-maker in Switzerland has since remade the works for him for several thousand dollars each.

When a buyer is unhappy with a commission, the relationship between collector and artist can become complicated. Contemporary art collector Michael Hort so dislikes a portrait of himself and his wife Susan—he thinks it makes her face look stiff—that he's banished it to a bathroom in their home in Monmouth Beach, N.J. He has tried to temper his disappointment around the artist, whom he declines to name. "One of the problems is for the artist, it's part of their life, their soul," he says. "I don't like to criticize something like that."

Artists who accept commissions often set ground rules so that their creative freedom—and relationships with collectors—won't be compromised. Painter Alex Katz, known for large-scale faces in cropped close-ups, will paint a commission for about $700,000, twice his regular price, and only for buyers who already own two of his big paintings. "I do it almost as a favor," he says.

Jacob Collins, who paints contemplative classical images, insists that a sitter pose for 60 hours over several visits, and he won't agree to work off a photograph. The artist charges roughly $75,000 to $100,000 for a commissioned work, more than twice the price of a non-commission.

Chuck Close, whose massive photo-based portraits sell for millions, says he is constantly approached by collectors who want him to paint them, but he always turns them down. If he agreed to one commission, he'd have to agree to dozens, he says, adding that friend and former super agent Michael Ovitz asks for a portrait every year to no avail. "I keep teasing him, 'Well, maybe next year,' " Mr. Close says. Mr. Ovitz says his quest started on his 40th birthday, when as a joke Mr. Close sent a photo of himself at his easel with a picture of Mr. Ovitz on the canvas. "I've always wanted one," the 64-year-old collector says.

For many collectors, one of the perks of sitting for a portrait is a feeling of connection with a favorite artist. Filmmaker Angela Ismailos bid at a 2008 benefit gala for a chance to pose for David Salle, who painted her with her head lying decapitated by her side and a flower on her neck. The 38-year-old collector, who spent more than $150,000 for the work, says she doesn't try to control her image in portraits. She considers the piece as a kind of collaboration. "I wouldn't use the word 'commission' anymore," she says. "I love

them to do what they feel like doing." She says several artists have painted her because they consider her a friend; some sold her the works, others gave her the portraits as gifts. New York collector Dianne Wallace appears as a human locked inside a house cat in a work by the German painter Martin Eder. "In the cat's face, you can more or less make me out," Ms. Wallace says. She believes such portraits help knit her into an artist's oeuvre: "I feel as if I'm playing a part in art history." Ms. Wallace, who also appears in a painting by John Currin with a lobster and dead fish near her face, as well as a broken-plate portrait by Mr. Schnabel, declined to say whether the works were commissions or gifts.

Demand for portraits is high, says Will Cotton, whose works often feature women in candy-coated headgear and range from $65,000 to $250,000. He says he now receives six to eight portrait requests a year, compared to none five years ago. Amy Phelan, a 40-year-old collector, tucked herself into a dress like a silver cupcake foil to pose for him in New York last year. Delighted with the result, she has placed the work in her husband's office at their home in Aspen, Colo.

Some artists are pushing portraiture in new directions. Spanish artist Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle has created colorful works based on a sitter's DNA chart. Fred Tomaselli's "chemical celestial portraits" are based on the subject's astrological sign and lifetime drug history.

In 2009, Mr. Tomaselli donated a commission for a benefit auction, where it sold for $17,000. It went to Gerrit Lansing, a Greenwich, Conn., collector who was battling liver cancer. The resulting work is dotted with names of medications from Mr. Lansing's treatment regimen, such as Interferon and Codeine. Mr. Lansing died before the work was completed; the picture was given to Mr. Lansing's widow, Sydie, who prizes it. "It will be with me forever," she says.

Mr. Joannou enjoys living with his twisted George Condo pieces, whose prices he refuses to disclose. People always recognize him when they see the portraits, which feature him next to Mr. Cattelan, the artist. He says he prefers them to a traditional, stately depiction. "I wouldn't have a portrait like that," he says. "I'm not the king of England."