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Bruce Conner: It's All True, Museum of Modern Art, New York — review

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Bruce Conner's 'Bombhead' (1989)

Bruce Conner didn't want to be famous. Public success appalled and disoriented him, and he fled what he called the "feeling of death from recognition". Having earned his place in a major museum, he felt as if he had climbed into a coffin.

So it's hard to know what this proudly obscure painter/ sculptor/ draughtsman/ filmmaker who died in 2008 would have made of this smashing retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Would he have seen it as a posthumous indignity or — as I do — a magnanimous way of sharing his gifts with new generations? Conner operated under a number of aliases, and even unleashed his work on the world anonymously. He enjoyed international recognition early on but gravitated towards the margins while some of his fellow San Franciscans, such as Jay DeFeo and the one-named Jess, ascended to a West Coast pantheon.

He was a difficult person. His art is contradictory and obsessive, and his yearning for freedom overcame a competing desire for validation. Now that he isn't around to argue, MoMA has done Conner a great service by enshrining him as a lone-wolf genius of the 20th century.

His daring masterpiece "A Movie" dominates the entrance with a 12-minute mash-up of violence and kitsch, set to Respighi's ponderous "Pines of Rome". In a montage that looks rough and random but isn't, Conner spliced together footage of — and this is only a partial list — the dismemberment of an elephant, surfers riding waves, Mussolini strung up by his ankles, crashing warplanes, soft-core beauties in alluring poses, an exploding H-bomb, motorcycle races, diseased African children, and the Hindenburg's fiery finale.

Conner had an eye for the individual image, but by linking together scraps from B-pictures, industrial shorts and newsreels, he created an unconscious narrative that's based in the visual but reaches deeper to sow connections between sex and death. The mesmerisingly powerful film assaults viewers on their way into the exhibition, pummelling them with motifs that keep rattling through the show.

The apocalyptic sublime resurfaces in "Crossroads" (1976), an atomic-age montage set to the incantatory music of Patrick Gleeson and Terry Riley. Conner uses as raw material footage from the test of a nuclear bomb detonated 90 feet underwater in the Bikini Atoll on July 25, 1946 — a calamitous spectacle captured by 700 cameras. The US government deployed the images to promote atomic testing, and also to advertise its global power. Conner refocuses on the beauty of destruction. He shows us the eruption 15 times, divulging a new level of majesty with each repetition. We teeter between wonder and nausea.

It was the federal government that linked the ravishing explosion to a woman's lethal allure. Two plutonium bombs were detonated that summer, and both celebrated less radioactive bombshells. One weapon, "Gilda", was named after a recent movie and had its nose adorned with a painting of the film's star, Rita Hayworth. The second, called "Helen of Bikini", sparked the craze for the skimpy bathing suit. That associative twining of violence, the female body and nuclear holocaust led like Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth of Conner's career.

Bruce Conner's 'Looking Glass' (1964)

He had already explored it inventively in his 1959 assemblages "Spider Lady House", "Spider Lady Nest" and "Arachne", all of which secrete skin-like stuff beneath webby nylon stockings. You can't tell what's behind the stretched and brindled membrane, but it's tantalisingly creepy. Most of these installations fold in junk harvested from San Francisco's decaying Queen Anne mansions, lending them an air of Halloween grotesque.

In the late 19th century, men channelled their terror of the women's movement into the nightmarish femme fatale, a sexually avaricious predator who leaves a trail of male victims. Conner embraced that myth again in the 1960s, suggesting that the period's feminist upwelling left him deeply unsettled. He admitted that a vengeful sex goddess was a hackneyed theme, but claimed he couldn't resist exploiting it. MoMA tries to frame that weakness as a critique of perverse eroticism, but I'm not buying it.

At the same time that Conner was assembling his arachnoid erections, he was also building the grislier "black wax" sculptures, which he described as "a series of works that represent protest, horror, disgust, anger, revulsion". He marshalled these dark passions in "Child" (1959), a mutilated boy propped in a high chair. You can just make out the remnants of a face beneath the gauzy shroud, and teeth bared in a perpetual scream.

Conner created this electrocuted zombie kid as a ghastly response to the case of Caryl Chessman, a death-row inmate who had been convicted of rape, robbery and kidnapping (but not murder). Conner considered his execution more outrageous than his crimes and the man himself the spawn of a bankrupt society.

The artist achieved his dream of generating revulsion. The San Francisco Examiner called the work "a prime example of pessimism . . . like something a ghoul would steal from a graveyard". It also propelled Conner into the celebrity he abhorred. Philip Johnson purchased the piece. MoMA included Conner in the historic 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*. Soon after, he walked away from the medium.

More than half a century later, MoMA takes in the full range of Conner's erratic career, which careened from Surrealist collages in the tradition of Max Ernst to obsessive abstract drawings done with a felt-tip pen, to laboriously symbolic inkblot creations, conceptual art, performance, light shows and photographs of punks. He spent decades as a polymath in search of a mission. Fortunately, he kept returning to film, which is why the show takes time and patience to appreciate. Watch the videos in full and you'll find the essence of this complicated and ornery genius.

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