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SFMOMA's Retrospective Exhibition of Bruce Conner, close and far

By Leah Garchik
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In an onstage conversation Wednesday, Oct. 26, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where Directors' Circle donors were previewing "Bruce Conner: It's All True," it was emphasized that Conner, "the quintessential artist's artist" by museum director Neal Benezra's description, was a man of paradox.

"He was part of the beatniks, the hippie movement, very active in the punk movement," said co-curator Rudolf Frieling, SFMOMA media arts curator, "but he kept his distance."

"He was at the heart of all those movements," said co-curator Gary Garrels, SFMOMA senior curator of paintings and sculpture, and he managed "to traverse them." As reviewed by critic Charles Desmarais on Saturday, Conner worked on paper, he built assemblages, and he made films, dizzying and hypnotic at once. Images are projected so fast that they're unsettling; you can't look away.

Walking through the exhibition, art collector Norah Stone mentioned that years ago, she'd been seated next to Conner at a dinner at his dealer Paule Anglim's house. He was "grumpy and funny," she said, elaborating a bit the next day.

"He was a curmudgeon in some ways, but he softened up after a while. He just didn't want to start any long conversations. ... I could have talked to him about North Beach and the history of San Francisco, but I wasn't one of his buddies. ... He didn't have any interest in impressing me with what he was saying."

At the time, the Stones didn't have any Conner work. But a piece owned by them — which includes a photograph of himself — is on loan for the exhibition.

As to the second quality, “funny,” Conner’s campaign speech — delivered at the Haight-Ashbury’s Straight theater — for a 1967 run for the Board of Supervisors is presented in the form of a list that begins: “Apple pie, cherry, chocolate, rhubarb, pumpkin, mince meat ... banana cream!” (He received 5,228 votes.)

A large assemblage called “Wednesday” was simply “Untitled” when Conner made it in 1960. Descriptive material says Conner gave the work to Peter Selz, who was then a curator at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. After Selz awarded Conner first prize in an art competition sponsored by the National Council of Churches, the artist retitled the work after Selz’s cat. Wednesday had given birth in the base of the sculpture.

P.S.: Natasha Boas, who wrote the introduction to “Bruce Conner: The Afternoon Interviews,” a newly published (by RE/Search) series of conversations with V. Vale recorded in the '70s, handed me a copy of the book at the exhibition preview.

In a 1979 conversation about punk, he addresses unlikely juxtapositions of punk (and himself): “You always think of things as being classically a balance scale, no matter what you do. It’s going to include elements of the other side of the balance. And once the balance goes all the way down, that’s the end of the balance, but it still represents that there’s an opposition, which is the split in allegiance. ... And what I’m interested in is how they deal with it, how they make their choices.”