

Bruce Conner

SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY

In early 1962, Bruce Conner decamped to Mexico, intending, he recalled, to "live cheaply and hide in the mountains when the bomb dropped." His survivalist outing lasted less than a year. A nuclear attack never came, and the artist had trouble not only selling his work but making it: The junk from which he conjured his assemblages wasn't cast off as readily in Oaxaca it had been in San Francisco. Conner's sense of privation comes across in *DESIGN FOR A NEW ART MUSEUM*, 1962, one of eight early works that comprised a small recent exhibition. A morass of wispy pencil lines, some of which fall just short of describing natural forms, spill from a thinly sketched box. Complete representational ambiguity—no anchors or space or scale—this is a museum without a collection, one never to be built.

The significance of Conner's Mexican sabbatical has perhaps been overstated—it was one among many abrupt changes of tack that have marked his production (and, when asked what he did while south of the border, the diffident reply was "a lot of drugs and pyramids"). Here, though, the excursion functioned as the loose hinge of an exceptionally thoughtful show that telescoped a fecund period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s during which Conner evolved from Beat to psychedelic, produced (and then stopped producing) the assemblages that brought his first critical acclaim, and made the found-footage films (such as *A MOVIE*, 1958, and *REPORT*, 1963) that assured him a place in the history of experimental filmmaking.

In *UNTITLED*, 1954–56, some sections of a small sheet of filigreed Masonite have been covered in oil paint and others gouged, scratched, or trimmed with gold leaf. The earliest work in the exhibition, it distills two important strands of Conner's aesthetic—a talent for infusing even the most tatterdemalion salvage with delicacy, and an oddball feel for structure whereby an assortment of apparently random elements somehow appear to function as a deliberate system. *THE EGG*, 1959, likely a result of scavenging San Francisco's thrift shops and crumbling Victorian houses, piles colorful scraps of fabric, brocade, buttons, zippers, and Conner's signature nylon mesh, along with a contorted plastic baby doll, under the surface of a convex glass oval surrounded by an ornate brass frame.

Perhaps the show's stand-out work was an assemblage made in Mexico, *GUADALUPE*, 1962. A few strings of rosary beads, a shroudlike drape of fabric, and two small religious icons make this work seem like a shrine to the country's best-loved cultural figure, an apparition of the Virgin Mary, but Conner injects a characteristic note of profanity by affixing a newspaper photo of two scantily clad women, their nether regions scraped away. Material scarcity occasioned compositions that were sparer but no less symbolically dense; a contemporaneous drawing is equally airy, while the clotted graphic rhythms of a slightly later work, *TEMPTATION OF ST. ANTHONY*, 1963, look ahead to a subsequent series of allover mandala drawings.

The show's very concision was the key to its effectiveness, as a limited number of works encouraged specific focus on their thematic ties and formal sympathies. And Conner's medium-jumping restlessness, to say nothing of his partiality to consumer dreck, has its own legion of contemporary adherents. But recognizing his relevance now was an incidental benefit. Much of this work seems resistant to retrospect, thwarting efforts to comprehend its jumble of references and temporalities—and for an exhibition to have succeeded at such a task in a subtle, smart way made for art history in the best sense.

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—Lisa Turvey



Bruce Conner,
Untitled, 1960,
mixed media, pearls,
nylon, mesh, wire,
20 x 24½ x 2½".