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Bruce Conner's Darkness That Defies Authority

By ROBERTA SMITH JUNE 30, 2016

Bruce Conner was one of the great outliers of American art, a polymathic nonconformist whose secret mantra might have been "Only resist." In multiple media, over more than five decades, this restless denizen of the San Francisco cultural scene resisted categorization, art world expectations and almost any kind of authority.

His opposition took the form of dark assemblages made from the detritus of modern life that include some of the most forceful evocations of American violence in 20th-century art, and often ecstatic black-and-white films that protest the world's destructive powers. He was a master of Conceptual Art pranks that questioned his own authorship, and an ardently unreconstructed admirer of nude female beauty. Yet he also liberated his art from time and place with ink drawings whose eddying patterns and shadowy mandalas — created by minute dots — could be the work of Tibetan Buddhists forsaking sand painting for paper.

This is partly why the first New York retrospective of Conner's work, while years late, also feels right on time. A massive tribute, with some 250 works in nearly 10 media, "Bruce Conner: It's All True" opens on Sunday at the Museum of Modern Art before traveling to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, its chief organizer. It was assembled by a team of curators from both museums and has an exceptional catalog.

Conner, who was born in Kansas in 1933 and died in San Francisco in 2008, belongs to American art's genius-heavy postwar generation, born mostly between 1925 and 1937: Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, Eva Hesse, Andy Warhol and Edward Kienholz. Like many of those artists, Conner was shaped by the clash between the intense emotionality of Abstract Expressionism and the sardonic worldliness of Dada. Conner gathered his knowledge of these tendencies from the art magazines he pored over in high school in Wichita, Kan., and the visits made to New York during his student years at the University of Nebraska. Graduating in 1955, he won a six-month scholarship to study painting at the Brooklyn Museum's art school. His first solo gallery show took place in New York in 1956.

But Conner, politically minded from the start, set his sights on San Francisco, where he rightly decided that the art world's machinations would be less oppressive. He moved west in 1957, just after he and Jean Sandstedt, an artist he'd met in college, married; they were preceded by one of his closest high school friends, the poet Michael McClure. There Conner joined the counterculture, and fearlessly evolved into one of America's first thoroughly multidisciplinary artists.

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This show is a Conner extravaganza: a blessedly orderly one for an artist who habitually worked on several fronts at once. His different mediums are isolated in separate areas, with the films sprinkled throughout. The show opens nervily with a moving-image masterpiece: Conner's influential experimental film, the 12-minute "A Movie" (1958), made from 180 bits of existing footage spliced together to the sounds of Respighi's "Pines of Rome."

This pulsating enumeration of 20th-century catastrophe — war, colonialism, the bomb — interspersed with carefree surfers and scantily clad starlets — initiates us into Conner's sensibility, his preference for appropriation, accumulation and assemblage of small pieces into unexpected wholes. The closing shots include a gruesome battlefield, sick children and the Hindenburg crashing — and finally a frogman swimming calmly into an immense underwater shipwreck, perhaps a metaphor for the artist's exploration of destruction.

None of this is subtle, but it is fast-moving and riveting. Conner would set a more rapid pace in the brilliantly edited "Breakaway" (1966), an amphetamine-fueled music-video precursor that focuses on the dancing and singing of Toni Basil. At the other extreme is the majestic "Crossroads,"a 37-minute film from 1976, set to musical compositions by Patrick Gleeson and Terry Riley. It consists mainly of declassified government footage of the 1946 Bikini Atoll nuclear test (a lavishly documented event that involved 700 cameras and 500 camera operators). Conner's hypnotic rendition suspends the viewer between pleasure and horror.

The show splits into starkly different halves: assemblage and after assemblage. The first begins with Conner's early abstract paintings, whose colors darken and textures turn to heavy-duty collage as early as 1954. By 1958, he was an early adopter of assemblage, making obsessive found-object amalgams fashioned from broken furniture, mirrors, doll heads, feathers, slinky fabric and all manner of paper ephemera — the whole work usually swathed in his signature old nylon stockings for a dusty, spider-web effect.

Rife with half-seen images of pinups and starlets, gaudy yet bleak, these works are, for the most part, spooky memento mori to decaying glamour and beauty. They don't celebrate popular culture so much as point to its hollowness and tawdriness.

There are some bright moments, mainly a group of assemblages and altered objects, like the red "Pillow," which Conner began in 1961, a year he spent in Mexico. But most of these works are, in some sense, protest assemblages, most explicitly the macabre "Child" (1959-60), a tortured human figure tied to a child's highchair and inspired by Conner's opposition to the impending execution of the convicted sex criminal Caryl Chessman; it earned him national notoriety when it was shown in 1960 in San Francisco. (The Modern acquired the piece in 1970, and displays it in New York for the first time, after resolving decades of trial and error in conserving it.)

Even more disturbing is "Couch" (1964), a screaming, deformed mass of black wax sinking into a chaise longue. "Couch" was made as the Civil Rights movement gained momentum, and its implied horrors include racial violence. It was one of Conner's last assemblage sculptures. He had been included in the Modern's 1961 "The Art of Assemblage," but three years later he abandoned the medium: It had become a fad.

With a few outstanding exceptions, like "Tick-Tock Jelly Clock Cosmotron," which features a colorful game board and its own scratching, wheezing audio accompaniment, the assemblages

tend to look dated, like exuberantly nihilistic juvenilia, although I suppose they are credible antecedents of goth. Once past them, the show assumes a quieter, more meditative mood and becomes more personal and eccentric.

The mood is furthered by seamless collages, made from old engravings, inspired by Max Ernst, and the semiabstract "Angel" photograms: life-size silhouettes of Connor made with the photographer Edmund Shea. Lining a gallery and accompanied by the sound of chirping crickets, they have an Egyptian sleekness while evoking a summer night filled with swanning ghosts. There are a few outbursts, like the films "Report" (1963-67), a wrenching portrayal of President Kennedy's assassination, and "Three Screen Ray," Conner's last foray into his singular and visceral brand of structuralism, as well as some pedestrian photographs of San Francisco's punk-rock scene.

Partly by its very organization, "Bruce Conner: It's All True" implies that the films are his greatest work. They feel alive and of our time in a way that only a few of the assemblages do. And the ink drawings convince by their strange timelessness. After he tired of dotting with ink, Conner devised his labor-intensive inkblot technique, whose development enlivens a large gallery toward the show's end. Conner created the works' rows and fields of tiny Rorschachian emblems by drawing a single motif and then doubling it by folding the paper. The delicate little symmetries dance and gyrate, connect and disengage, suggesting insect specimens, jewels, orchids, masks, altars, ogres and ornate temples. They dizzy the mind with their expansive imagination and exquisitely controlled evidence of the collective unconscious.