

BRUCE CONNER

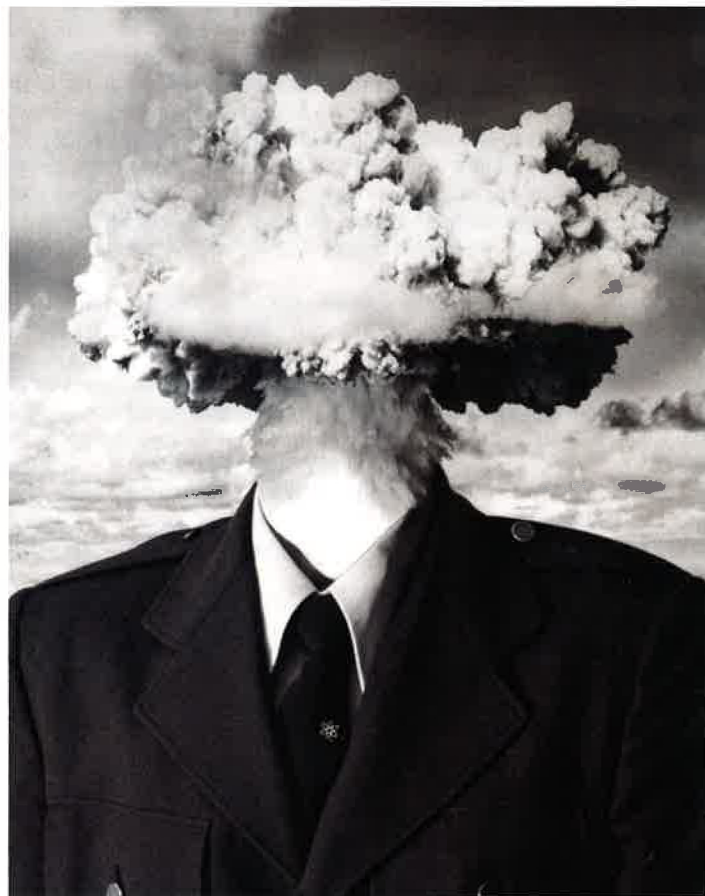
A new survey exhibition of Conner's prints provides a compelling cross-section of the famed Bay Area artist's idiosyncratic output and vision that spans his career.

The poet Michael McClure, a friend of Bruce Conner, recalled postwar San Francisco as "a place where one could live in a lovely apartment with a view and low rent that an artist might be able to afford."

Today's \$3000 rents and go-go work ethic, both related to the tech culture, might make us nostalgic for a bygone era that most of us never knew. "Bruce Conner: Somebody Else's Prints" at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art (February 7- May 6, 2015) offers a provocative glimpse into the Beat era of the 1950s and the hippie era of the late '60s and early '70s. Organized by Jodi Throckmorton, former curator at the Ulrich Museum of Art at one of Conner's alma maters, Wichita State, the show features work from private collections and from the Conner Family Trust, offering Connerphiles a trove of rarely seen works from that exemplary inner-driven artist. Cathy Kimball, Executive Director at SJICA: "... an icon of the Beat Generation in San Francisco and beyond, [Conner] was part prankster and perfectionist, innovator and rule maker, cynic and optimist. Perhaps all those characteristics are best seen through his works on paper—the only medium that spans his entire career. It was a personal honor to meet him a few times over the years and experience his acerbic wit and steadfast commitment to his craft."

Conner (1933-2008), having moved from Kansas to California in 1957, was a major player in Bay Area social/artistic movements (despite extended stays in Mexico and Massachusetts). His powerful, creepy, nylon-stocking-ed assemblages of the 1950s combined found (or rather, "lost," to use his term) objects—broken dolls, fur, feathers, fringe, lace, costume jewelry, and girlie- magazine photos—into 'aged' and seemingly spider-webbed tableaux invoking love, longing and morality, analogous to the made-in-LA installations of Edward Kienholz. Both California artists enlisted surrealist juxtaposition to expose the dark side of consumerist American culture. But just as disturbing assemblages like *CHILD* (1959-60), a scorched, mutilated wax tot in a baby's high chair were getting favorable attention in New York (despite Donald Judd's critique, "strange and perverse and not too much else"), Conner, who resisted being pigeonholed, gradually abandoned assemblage, to take up film-making—with similar methods and themes.

His mordant, funny short films are assemblages of found footage—shaped through leader countdowns, blackouts, whiteouts, and repetitions—that comment on history and memory, sex and war: *A MOVIE* (1958), with its famous Freudian torpedo; *COSMIC RAY* (1961) with "What'd I Say" by Ray Charles as soundtrack, inaugurating the use of pop music in art film (and thus, by extension, music videos, which Conner disclaimed: "Not my fault."); *REPORT* (1964) with its harrowing examination of the JFK assassination and its coverage by the media; and *Marilyn Times Five* (1968-73), employing footage from a 1940s film loop erroneously thought to be a young Monroe, with the actress herself supplying the soundtrack, "I'm Through with Love," from Billy Wilder's gender-bender comedy, "Some Like It Hot," among others. Contrasting with these deconstructions of film veracity is *THE WHITE ROSE* (1967), Conner's elegiac documentation of the removal of Jay DeFeo's mammoth painting, *The Rose* (1959-66), from her upstairs Fillmore Street studio/apartment. Conner, a close friend of the painter, considered the 2300-lb. painting "a living and breathing physical being."



"BOMBHEAD," 2002

PIGMENTED INKJET PRINT ON PAPER, 32" X 25"

PHOTO: COURTESY SAN JOSE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, MAGNOLIA EDITIONS, OAKLAND, CA. © 2014 CONNER FAMILY TRUST, SAN FRANCISCO / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Even film, however, could not contain Conner's restless creative drive. As he later said in an interview, "I couldn't see myself spending months editing a five-minute movie that would end up being shown in a place where everybody had to sit still and look at a little rectangle." He gradually returned to drawing—which, for him, entailed spending sometimes months adding intricate patterning to little rectangles of paper, an aesthetic insurrection in the era of high-concept, big-execution art of Minimalism, Land Art and Conceptualism. If Conner's geometric compositions of rectangles and circles superficially resemble hard-edged formalist painting of the time, in brightly colored acrylic paint, the small, personal scale of the drawings and their dense weave of ramifying marks and hatchings, occasionally dark-on-dark (and thus to the casual glance indecipherable), are more properly compared to the lyrical, meditative mysticism of Morris Graves, Ad Reinhardt or Agnes Martin—and maybe even some early Jasper Johns, with primary forms "that the mind already knows" swathed in painterly nuance.

Conner, who created light shows for the Avalon Ballroom, among other projects, shared the San Francisco counterculture's immersion in mysticism, altered consciousness and esoteric lore, as well as its anarchic, playful spirit. Both qualities are in evidence in "Somebody Else's Prints"—which presumably takes its title from Conner's distrust of the art world—and in his use of pseudonyms (e.g., Anonymous, Diogenes Lucero, BOMBHEAD) after a supposed 1999 retirement from making art, an idea that probably derived from Duchamp. In 1964, Conner wrote to McClure, "I think that I am fed up with Art encroaching on every side of me. I have a feeling of death from the 'recognition' I have been receiving". (One can almost hear him reciting John Cusack's improvised lines from the 1989 comedy "Say Anything": "I don't want to sell anything, buy anything, or process anything as a career... You know, as a career, I don't want to do that.") Printmaking seemed to offer a way to disseminate his work to a broader market while minimizing his involvement with the financial realities of "the art business."

This exhibition shows the artist experimenting with fine-art printing at Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Albuquerque and Collectors Press in San Francisco; with commercial offset printing with an Oakland firm, Kaiser Graphics; and finally high-tech media at Magnolia Editions in Oakland, where he digitally reworked themes from earlier in his career. Over 70 prints are featured, ranging from the Tamarind works of 1965 to his Magnolia prints of 2001-2008. Many of the prints feature Conner's familiar abstract imagery, suggestive of mandalas, prayer rugs and cosmological charts. Peruse them carefully, and his astonishing graphic facility in creating hypnotic yet varied pattern becomes evident; some of them almost resemble miniature versions of Keith Haring paintings. There are, of course, pranksterish jokes exhibited along with the aids to mystical meditation. At Tamarind, frustrated by the technical restrictions of lithography and the concern about original, signed prints, Conner made a print duplicating the reserved-parking sign in the parking lot for Tamarind founder June Wayne, and made prints mocking the idea of authenticity: he signed one print with his thumbprint; another print is empty but for a small thumbprint at upper

left, which is similarly signed art in the traditional location at the lower right. With digital technology, Conner found he could further explore themes from the past: a delicately magical inkblot drawing from 1999 receives a second life in the hieroglyphic *Memorial Inscription* (2002/1999), and a 1976 *Angel Wall* self-portrait photogram made with photographer Edwin Shea is recontextualized in *Canyon De Chelly* (2003), with the phantom figures superimposed onto a color photograph of a Arizona cliff wall, as if the Navajos had had alien overlords. In a more serious vein, Conner made an elegiac series of prints of falling leaves, commemorating the World Trade Center deaths of 9/11, and a several prints including atomic bomb blast imagery originally used in his 36-minute film, *CROSSROADS* (1976).

Also on view are various items of Conner memorabilia, including a poster from the artist's 1967 run for San Francisco Supervisor, with an image of the artist as a toddler, and another with the photo of an elephant that Conner had covered with painted hatch marks and the word LOVE. There's a conceptual piece as well, *Prints* (1974), with photos of the artist being fingerprinted by Palo Alto PD for a teaching job and a letter to San Jose State's art department head, requesting the eventual return of the ten fingerprints, valued at \$2000, a minimum value estimate number that Conner verifies based on previous print sales.

Conner's wide-ranging involvement with the cultural life of the Bay Area over five decades may suggest that artistic creativity flourishes best under certain conditions, some of which are now in question, namely, a manageable cost of living and a supportive, engaged creative community. Whether these prerequisite conditions can continue and whether artistic achievement does depend in fact on a certain aesthetic critical mass remain to be seen.

—DEWITT CHENG

"TRACERY IN THE SKY," 2002

ARCHIVAL PIGMENTED INKJET, GRAPHITE ON SOMERSET PAPER, 14 3/8" X 21 1/2"

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