

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Organizes First Comprehensive Retrospective of Major American Artist Bruce Conner



***Bruce Conner: It's All True*
October 29, 2016—January 22, 2017**

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (July 19, 2016)—The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) announces its presentation of *Bruce Conner: It's All True*, the first comprehensive retrospective of the seminal American artist and influential Bay Area figure, on view from October 29, 2016 through January 22, 2017. Organized by SFMOMA, the exhibition brings together more than 250 objects in mediums including film and video, painting, assemblage, drawing, prints, photography, photograms and performance, representing Conner's intensely productive and polymathic career.

"The often radical shifts in direction of Conner's artistic practice, the parallel interest in experimental films and material objects, the playful and often irreverent approach to conventions of institutions and collectors—all of this is a sign of a great artist who made a point of not being categorized as a sculptor or a filmmaker and actively embraced change throughout his life," said Rudolf Frieling, curator of media arts at SFMOMA. "It then seemed appropriate to make the integration of all these components of his practice the guiding principle for our retrospective."

"Conner, from the beginning of his career in the late 1950s until the time of his death in 2008, was one of the leading artistic figures in the Bay Area, admired by other artists for his artistic integrity and

invention,” said Gary Garrels, Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture at SFMOMA. “His influence has grown enormously in recent decades, impacting younger artists nationally and internationally including major figures such as Dara Birnbaum and Christian Marclay and emerging artists such as Kevin Beasley and Carol Bove.”

Conner moved to San Francisco from the Midwest in 1957 and, after brief stays in Mexico and other cities throughout the U.S. in the early 1960s, called this city home for the rest of his life. During the course of his extensive career, Conner engaged in close dialogue with SFMOMA curators, conservators and educators, has been featured in numerous group and solo exhibitions and his work remains an important part of the museum’s permanent collection. An early practitioner of found-object assemblage and a pioneer of found-footage film, he achieved international standing early in his career and was a key member of the underground film community and the flourishing San Francisco art world—from the Beat generation, the 1960s liberation era and the punk generation of the 1970s and 1980s, though defined by none.

Exemplifying the fluidity that is now a hallmark of contemporary art, Conner worked sequentially or often simultaneously in a wide range of mediums. *Bruce Conner: It’s All True* presents a lifetime of work by Conner, whose transformative practice defies straightforward categorization. In a midcentury cultural landscape marked by extremes of devastation and abundance, Conner emerged as a figure adept at repurposing and recombining the detritus of a consumer-driven and media-dominated culture. The exhibition is loosely organized, both chronologically and thematically, emphasizing Conner’s polymorphic abilities by integrating works across mediums and creating atmospheric shifts and densely-installed presentations.

The initial presentation of *Bruce Conner: It’s All True* is at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (through October 2, 2016). After SFMOMA, the exhibition will travel to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid (February 21–May 22, 2017).

EARLY WORK

The exhibition begins with a group of early paintings, TICK-TOCK JELLYCLOCK COSMOTRON, a rarely seen assemblage with sound, and A MOVIE, Conner’s first film and a major cornerstone of American experimental cinema. This film exemplifies what would become a signature strategy for Conner—creating new forms by reordering shards and fragments of the 20th century. Defining a dynamic mode of filmmaking through the montage of found footage set to music through precise, rapid-fire editing, A MOVIE has had an enduring influence on generations of artists who have produced new films and videos by appropriating, manipulating and remixing the remnants of mass-media culture.

A second major section is dedicated to Conner’s assemblages from the 1950s and early 1960s. Among many highlights is the artist’s first assemblage, RATBASTARD, completed in 1958, the same year that he created the jokingly titled Rat Bastard Protective Association, a social group of like-minded artist and poet friends with a shared interest in the debris of everyday life. Over the next six years, Conner developed a range of assemblage formats including reliefs, along with hanging and freestanding sculptures. Using discarded objects and building materials found in San Francisco thrift shops and neighborhoods undergoing urban renewal, Conner’s assemblages incorporated elements like clothing, toys, costume jewelry, feathers, photos, newspaper clippings, cigarette butts, nails, tacks and razor blades. With few exceptions these works were wrapped or stuffed with torn nylon stockings, giving his assemblages an untimely, foreboding aura.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Themes of violent death—by execution, murder or nuclear annihilation—are common in Conner’s early work and reflect the artist’s engagement with contemporary issues of social justice, such as the nuclear arms race, the war in Vietnam and capital punishment. These concerns are particularly evident in his black wax sculptures, such as the recently restored CHILD, first presented in San Francisco in 1960 and last seen briefly in New York in 1995—a famously disturbing wax work created in response to the high-profile capital punishment of Caryl Chessman. The darkly beautiful, BLACK DAHLIA, an assemblage portrait of an infamous sex murder victim, similarly expresses Conner’s acute and intense engagement with issues of social alienation.

INFLUENCE OF MEXICO

Deeply concerned about the Cold War, in 1961 Conner and his wife Jean moved to Mexico City. There he produced a body of assemblages and drawings distinctly different from his earlier work. The assemblages became lighter, with richer color, and incorporated a deeper spiritual association. The ink-on-paper drawings Conner produced reflect the artist’s experimentation with psilocybin mushrooms, as well as his friendship with Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary. The mushroom form appears frequently in these works, and in some it is equated with the mushroom-shaped cloud of a nuclear explosion. Work such as the film LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS consists of footage shot directly by Conner while living in Mexico, and some earlier shots from San Francisco. Building on the rapid rhythms of his earlier film work and introducing multiple-exposure sequences, it is a psychedelic, meditative travelogue, consisting mostly of rural Mexico, featuring sumptuously colored images of the natural world, local villages and religious iconography. In 1967 Conner added a soundtrack, the song, “Tomorrow Never Knows” by the Beatles, publicly presented in this exhibition for the first time. In 1996 he edited a longer version which he set to music by experimental composer Terry Riley.

WORKS ON PAPER, PHOTOGRAMS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Conner’s work shifted again in the 1970s, with the creation of numerous drawings. Those with a circular composition he called “Mandalas.” He also developed offset lithographs based on his ink and felt-tip pen drawings, using the same motifs for magazine and book covers, posters, endpapers, cards and other multiples. In 1974, Conner began a series of densely monochromatic pen and ink drawings. In some works black ink covers the entire sheet; in others, the black surface is dappled by tiny points of white—reminiscent of stars dappling a night sky. Just as Conner’s Mandala drawings were created using a tightly organized system of lines clustered around central geometric forms, these STAR and INK drawings are made by filling in around increasingly smaller areas that remain un-inked. Dated by the month and year of their creation, they reflect the detail-oriented aspect of Conner’s personality.

The series of 29 large scale photograms, a selection of which are on view, that Conner called ANGELS, were created in collaboration with the San Francisco photographer Edmund Shea (1942–2004) and illustrate Conner’s fascination with darkness and illumination. Conner himself posed for these ghostly prints, though his body and features have been dematerialized into luminous forms that convey the mystical and spiritual overtones that would continue to permeate his work.

Exploring yet another medium, Conner began employing photography in 1977, after seeing a performance by the band Devo at the Mabuhay Gardens in San Francisco. Conner became a regular at

this important Bay Area punk venue, and after being invited to contribute to V. Vale's celebrated punk zine *Search & Destroy* (1977–79), he embarked on a yearlong photographic project to document bands and audience members at the club. In the 1990s, Conner revisited his Mabuhay photographs, producing from them a series of collages that are both nostalgic for, and critical of, the wildness and violence of the punk generation.

In the later part of his career, Conner also made many small intricate collages from engravings, influenced by Surrealism, that express complex psychological and spiritual themes. Entire galleries are devoted to each of these extensive bodies of work. Conner additionally began experimenting with a technique incorporating inkblots in 1975, continuing it until the end of his life; during his final years, it became his primary technique for working on paper. In 1999, Conner announced his retirement from the art world, though the same year, Conner-like inkblot drawings began appearing under the names Emily Feather, Anonymous and Anonymouse. Claiming that he had trained and paid artists to create and exhibit artwork, Conner praised these anonymous artists' decision to create art under pseudonyms, as it resonated with his career-long interest in playing with issues of artistic authorship and identity.

FILM

Additional filmic works featured in the exhibition are *REPORT*, *CROSSROADS* and *THREE SCREEN RAY*. Containing footage from recorded live broadcasts and the famous Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination, *REPORT* is one of Conner's most intense filmic constructions expressing shock and physical aggression, and offers a scathing critique of consumerist spectacles. *CROSSROADS* epitomizes Conner's horrified fascination with the nuclear bomb, as well as with the capacity of art and cinema to create a powerful record of death and destruction on an unimaginable scale. To make the film, Conner sourced footage of Operation Crossroads, a nuclear bomb test the American government carried out in 1946 at Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific. *THREE SCREEN RAY* (2006) is Conner's foray into digital editing and projection, structured around Ray Charles's hit "What'd I Say" (1959). It followed the film *COSMIC RAY* (1961) and the multiple-projector film installation *EVE-RAY-FOREVER* (1965/2006). In *THREE SCREEN RAY*, three video channels create dynamic juxtapositions between elements including a countdown leader, footage of tribal dancing, military imagery, television commercials and Mickey Mouse, allowing Conner's trademark themes of vice and violence to reach fever pitch.

At the end of the exhibition is the film *EASTER MORNING* (2008), a hypnotic meditation on rebirth and renewal, propelled by Terry Riley's iconic Minimalist composition "In C" (1964). This piece manifests the spirituality that appeared throughout Conner's career, from his earliest Christian-themed paintings to his trance-inducing works on paper. An elegiac, mournful work, this was the last film he completed before his death at the age of 75.

ORGANIZATION

Bruce Conner: It's All True is organized by SFMOMA and co-curated by Rudolf Frieling, curator of media arts, SFMOMA; Gary Garrels, Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture, SFMOMA; Stuart Comer, chief curator, media and performance art, MoMA; and Laura Hoptman, curator, department of painting and sculpture, MoMA; with Rachel Federman, former assistant curator, painting and sculpture, SFMOMA. Additional curatorial assistance has been provided by Nancy Lim, assistant curator of painting and sculpture, SFMOMA.

Special thanks to Jean Conner, Robert Conway, Michelle Silva and the Conner Family Trust for their cooperation and support with the exhibition.

PUBLICATION

Bruce Conner: It's All True is accompanied by a catalogue published by SFMOMA in association with University of California Press, and edited by Frieling and Garrels. Illustrated in full color throughout, this comprehensive volume provides access to a range of material, emphasizing aspects of his work that have never been published, including early paintings from the 1950s and works from the last decade of Conner's life, along with a trove of ephemeral materials. The publication features original scholarship by a field of authors writing from a variety of art historical perspectives, including essays by Frieling, Garrels, Comer, Hoptman, Diedrich Diederichsen and Rachel Federman, as well as contributions from Michelle Barger, Kevin Beasley, Dara Birnbaum, Carol Bove, Stan Brakhage, David Byrne, Johanna Gosse, Roger Griffith, Kellie Jones, Christian Marclay, Greil Marcus, Michael McClure, Megan Randall, Henry S. Rosenthal, Dean Smith, Kristine Stiles and the art collective Will Brown.

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SFMOMA Hours and Admission

SFMOMA is open to the public seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. through Labor Day. Free public spaces open at 9 a.m. daily. The museum offers extended hours on Thursdays until 9 p.m.

Annual membership begins at \$100, and members enjoy unlimited free admission (with advance reservation). Adult admission to SFMOMA is \$25 and admission for seniors 65 years and older is \$22. Admission for visitors ages 19 through 24 is \$19. SFMOMA provides free admission to all visitors 18 and younger, furthering its goal of building the next generation of art lovers.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

151 Third Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

Founded in 1935 as the first West Coast museum devoted to modern and contemporary art, a thoroughly transformed SFMOMA, with significantly enhanced gallery, education and public spaces, opened to the public on May 14, 2016. With six art-filled terraces, a new sculptural staircase and Roman steps where the public can gather, access to 45,000 square feet of free art-filled public space and free admission for visitors age 18 and younger, SFMOMA is more welcoming and more connected to San Francisco than ever before.

Visit sfmoma.org or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

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Image credit:
Bruce Conner, CROSSROADS, 1976; 35mm film, black and white, sound, 37 min.; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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