

## BRUCE CONNER. IT'S ALL TRUE



BRUCE CONNER  
CHILD (HILJO), 1959  
Cera, nailon, tela, metal, bramante y trona de madera  
88 x 43,2 x 41,9 cm  
The Museum of Modern Art, Nueva York. Donación de Philip Johnson  
© Conner Family Trust, San Francisco / Bruce Conner, VEGAP, Madrid, 2017  
Fotografía: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

- Dates:** February 22 - May 22, 2017
- Place:** Museo Reina Sofía, Edificio Sabatini, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor
- Organization:** San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, in collaboration with the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid
- Curatorship:** Rudolf Frieeling Curator of Media Arts, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gary Garrels Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Stuart Comer, Chief Curator Media and Performance Art, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Laura Hoptman, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; with Rachel Federman, Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
- Coordination:** Beatriz Jordana
- Tour:** The Museum of Modern Art, Nueva York (3-7-16 / 2-10-16)  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (29-10-16 / 22-1-17)  
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (21-2-17 / 22-5-17)
- Related activities:** Rudolf Frieeling and Gary Garrels. *Exhibiting Bruce Conner*. 22 February, 2017 - 19:00 h / Nouvel Building, Auditorium 200

**Bruce Conner** (1933, McPherson, Kansas - 2008, San Francisco) is one of the most pre-eminent American artists from the second half of the twentieth century. This exhibition, the first to present his work in Spain, brings together more than **250 works** which span his fifty-year career.

Conner's work emerged from the California art scene and addressed wide-ranging questions concerning American society in the post-war era: from the burgeoning consumer culture to the dread of nuclear apocalypse. In his work he cultivated alternate mediums - now the hallmarks of 21st-century art - adopting different techniques and often creating hybrid pieces midway between painting and sculpture, film and performance, drawing and printing.

Early on in his career, he stood out as one of the first artists to make installations with found materials, while his relief and free-standing sculptures, for instance *CHILD* (1959) and *LOOKING GLASS* (1964), received critical acclaim at the time for their masterful compositions and markedly sombre nature. Furthermore, he was one of the pioneers of avant-garde filmmaking, redefining the notion of film by including footage from highly diverse sources – from the countdown leaders of early films in the medium, to movie trailers and training films and newsreels – to which he added his own 16 mm footage. He also developed a quick-cut editing method which distinguished his work, along with his pop soundtracks, for example in the pieces *COSMIC RAY* (1961) and *BREAKAWAY* (1966), regarded as forerunners of the music video.

Much like his installations, Conner's films deal with unsettling themes that still ring true today. He frequently adopted an incisive political stance and addressed problems such as violence in American culture, the objectification of the female body and the nuclear holocaust. By virtue of his structural innovations and daring subject matter, films such as *A MOVIE* (1958), *REPORT* (1963-1967) and *CROSSROADS* (1976) have become landmarks of experimental American cinema.

## **FILMS**

Organized loosely both chronologically and thematically, the exhibition emphasizes Conner's polymorphic abilities as it considers his unceasing creative output over five decades.

Some of his most significant films are positioned within the central axis of the exhibition, reflecting the belief that his work must be considered as a whole, not as the distinct and separate products of a visual artist and an avant-garde filmmaker.

In his films, Conner incorporated found footage from a wide variety of sources—from trailers and training films to newsreels—and added his own footage. He developed a quick-cut method of editing and focused on disturbing, current subjects. Often politically pointed, his films touch on issues of violence in American culture, the objectification of the female body, and nuclear



BRUCE CONNER  
Fotograma A MOVIE [UNA PELÍCULA] 1958  
16mm/ 8yN, sonido, 12  
Colección del San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Adquisición realizada gracias al Accessions Committee Fund) y del  
Museum of Modern Art, Nueva York, con el generoso apoyo del New Art Trust  
© Conner Family Trust, San Francisco

holocaust. Because of their structural innovation and daring subject matter, works like *A MOVIE* (1958), *REPORT* (1963–67), and *CROSSROADS* (1976) have become landmarks of American avant-garde film and are here presented as central markers of a lifelong obsession with the medium.

The exhibition also explores an entire grammar of displaying moving images, from analog celluloid to digital projections and multi-channel installations—a path the artist himself chose toward the end of his life, when he expanded the scope of his films by creating the large-scale installation *THREE SCREEN RAY* (2006) and digitally projected his last work in moving images, *EASTER MORNING* (2008).

### **ASSEMBLAGES, 1958-1964**

One year after arriving in San Francisco, Conner embarked on a body of distinctive collages and assemblages—evocative combinations of ordinary materials scavenged from the city's

streets and thrift stores. Most of these works hang on the wall or from the ceiling; some, like *RATBASTARD* and *RAT PURSE*, dangled from the artist's hands or shoulders as portable art. Conner initially sourced much of his material—furniture, window frames, lampshades, and decorative wallpaper—from the Western Addition, a neighborhood being razed in the name of urban renewal. Nylon stockings became a recurring element, serving as suggestive, weblike scrimms or containers for other objects. Together with the pinups and costume jewelry that appear in many of the assemblages, they point to Conner's sustained interest in the construction of identity, particularly that of the "feminine," as seen in works such as *HOMAGE TO JEAN HARLOW*.



BRUCE CONNER  
HOMAGE TO JEAN HARLOW [HOMENAJE A JEAN HARLOW], 1963  
Diversos materiales sobre masonita  
156,9 x 45,7 x 7,6 cm  
Cortesía Michael Black  
© Conner Family Trust, San Francisco / Bruce Conner, VEGAP, Madrid, 2017

Included in such high-profile exhibitions as *The Art of Assemblage* (1961) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, these works garnered international recognition and notoriety. Never willing to be constrained to a single style, in 1964 Conner declared he was done "gluing big chunks of the world in place," concluding his assemblages with the extravagant *LOOKING GLASS*. Over time some works changed irreversibly in appearance and material constitution, whether by chance or by choice. Conner delighted in this mutability, which he believed kept these works "alive."

### **Dark sculptures, 1959-1963**

In 1959 Conner inaugurated a group of assemblages that he later referred to as "dark sculptures." Unified by a common material—black wax—and a macabre sensibility, they reflect his feelings of revulsion and fear over the

violence, both real and threatened, that suffused American culture during the early decades of the Cold War. With their ambiguous, seemingly molten surfaces, HEART / WORM / MIRROR and MEDUSA bring to mind the nightmarish aftermath of a nuclear event. Works such as CRUCIFIXION and HOMAGE TO CHESSMAN address Conner's concerns through themes of sacrifice and mortality, while CHILD is a gripping protest against the death sentence.

Later in his career Conner envisioned an exhibition of these sculptures, many of which are now being shown together for the first time. Presented here alongside related assemblages, drawings, and paintings, the dark sculptures demonstrate Conner's capacity to channel personal anxieties into intense, even ferocious, works of art that draw upon universal themes of suffering and redemption.

### **Made in Mexico, 1961-1962**

Disillusioned by the culture of conformity and sanctioned violence in the United States and fearful of the threat of nuclear warfare, in late 1961 Conner devised a plan to leave the country. With assistance from the poet Philip Lamantia, Conner and his wife, Jean, found a place to live in the Juarez neighborhood of Mexico City.

Although he encountered challenges while living in Mexico—discarded material was more difficult to come by, and sales of his work dwindled—Conner produced some of the most exuberant collages and assemblages of his career there. Inspired by the infusion of spirituality into daily life and compelled to find material wherever he could, he converted everyday items from his home into artworks, including a room partition, a pillow, and even his shoes.

In works in other media, such as the film LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS and the drawing HOLY MUSHROOMS, the dreaded atomic cloud was transformed into images evoking the sacred and psychedelic psilocybin mushroom. Despite Conner's productivity, life in Mexico proved ill-suited to his family's needs, and in October 1962, shortly after the birth of their son, Robert, the Conners returned to the United States.



**BRUCE CONNER**  
23 KENWOOD AVENUE [AVENIDA KENWOOD, 23], 1963  
66 x 50,8 cm  
The Museum of Modern Art, Nueva York. Adquisición y donación parcial de Achim Moeller en memoria de Paul Cummings  
© Conner Family Trust, San Francisco / Bruce Conner, VEGAP, Madrid, 2017

### **DRAWING: "A FORM OF MAGIC"**

Conner had always produced works on paper along his paintings, sculptures, and films, but his commitment to drawing intensified upon his return to the United States from Mexico in 1962 and even more so after he stopped making assemblages two years later. 23 KENWOOD AVENUE is a landmark in the evolution of his style, introducing the interplay of densely applied lines and negative space that would predominate in the years that followed. The effect, which he called "a form of magic," is a dynamic surface that appears to vibrate.

Conner's exploration of the limits of drawing was advanced by the introduction in 1963 of Pentel felt-tip pens, which allowed him to draw continuously without lifting his hand from the paper. The mandala shape, common in the visual traditions of Buddhism and

Hinduism, began to appear frequently in his drawings that same year. “It relates to centering yourself or focusing your attention, your consciousness,” he told an interviewer, citing the windows of Chartres Cathedral and the writing of Carl Jung as additional precedents. In the mid-1970s Conner pushed the boundaries of the medium once again, creating a group of almost impossibly dense ink drawings in which only small pinpoints of paper, or “particles of light,” remain visible. His efforts culminated in the late 1970s with *LAST DRAWING*. “I was trying to keep from creating a composition,” Conner said. “It was impossible.”

### **INKBLOT DRAWINGS**

In the mid-1970s Conner began to experiment with a new style of drawing using inkblots. Reminiscent of the Rorschach tests used by psychologists, these works also hark back to his childhood experience of creating symmetrical patterns while blotting up spilled ink. “The paper is folded and a miracle occurs,” Conner said. His earliest inkblot drawings, dating from 1975, demonstrate the versatility of this technique, with compositions that vary widely in terms of density and symmetry. Conner took up inkblots in earnest in the 1990s, when a congenital liver disorder severely curtailed his activists and productive hours. In the ensuing years he created hundreds of inkblot drawings composed of thousands of unique forms.

Soon after Conner announced his “retirement” as an artist, in 1999, his “associates,” as he referred to them—Anonymous, Anonymouse, and Emily Feather, among others—began to produce and exhibit inkblot drawings. Conner’s relationship to these personae was left an open question, extending his efforts to undermine the idea of a fixed artistic identity. He considered the audience’s relationship to the inkblots to be no less fluid, saying, “The goal is to create objects that continually renew themselves, to always change.”

### **ANGELS**

In the photographic realm, Conner created two important series. In the mid-1970s, collaborating with the photographer Edmund Shea, he made a group of life-size black-and white photograms called *ANGELS* by pressing his own body against photosensitized paper as Shea directed light from a projector toward him to expose the image. Where the light was blocked, glowing forms emerged.

### **PUNK PHOTOS AND COLLAGES**

Conner threw himself into San Francisco’s exploding punk scene in the late 1970s. Asked to contribute to *V. Vale*’s now-legendary punk fanzine *Search & Destroy*, he dove headlong, camera in hand, into frenzied performances by Devo, the Dead Kennedys, Crime, the Mutants, and others. He likened himself to a combat photographer, “equipped with kneepads, work-boots, and an instinct for self-preservation during slam-dancing and mass movements on the floor”—although he was injured at least once. Even after his photo assignment ended, he continued to visit the Mabuhay Gardens and other punk clubs in the city, reveling in the abandon and vitality of the turbulent scene.



BRUCE CONNER & EDMUND SHEA  
STARFINGER ANGEL (ÁNGEL DE DEDOS ESTRELLA), 1975  
Impresión engelatina de plata  
215,9 x 99,1 cm  
Musée national d'art moderne(Centre de création  
industrielle, Centre Pompidou, Paris.  
© Conner Family Trust, San Francisco / Bruce Conner,  
VEGAP, Madrid, 2017

Some twenty years later Conner revisited this period in a group of collages using photocopies of his photographs, many memorializing punks who had died from the 1996 death of Frankie Fix, cofounder of Crime. Fix's preoccupation with crafting his persona—on stage and off—must have resonated with Conner, for whom identity and its construction had always been a central concern. **FRANKIE FIX DEAD PUNK: 8/1/96; MARK D'AGOSTINO and RICKY WILLIAMS DEAD PUNK: NOVEMBER 21, 1992** represented a return to assemblage for Conner, who had abandoned the form in 1964. The latter work incorporates a hospital bracelet and medical tubing, perhaps an autobiographical gesture reflecting Conner's ongoing struggles with liver disease.

## **ENGRAVING COLLAGES**

Conner began creating intricate collages in 1959, primarily from nineteenth-century steel engraved newspaper illustrations, later combined with archival photocopies of the same. He referred to this body of work, with which he was engaged most intensely during the 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s, as "engraving collages." Some of these compositions, especially the earliest, are reminiscent of the work of the surrealist artist Max Ernst, while others recall Manly P. Hall's *The Secret Teaching of All Ages* (1928), an illustrated volume on hermetic religions that held particular fascination for Conner as a young boy.

Conner adapted this technique to a wide range of subjects: interiors, landscapes, portraits, religious allegories, and enigmatic compositions that defy categorization. "An engraving collage selected from thousands of little images and different backgrounds could be a constant entertainment for me as I moved them around and transformed them into one thing or another," he said in 1997. Like his works in other media, the engraving collages attest to Conner's ability to transform the most ordinary of materials into objects of contemplation and wonder.

## **DENNIS HOPPER ONE MAN SHOW**

By 1967 Conner had been creating engraving collages for almost a decade. Observing that they "appeared to be by another artist," he conceived the idea of exhibition them under someone else's name. After seeing artworks produced by his friend the actor Dennis Hopper, Conner decided that "Dennis should be cast in the role of being the artist and the first exhibition would be 'The Dennis Hopper One-Man Show.'" He brought the idea to the Los Angeles dealer Nicholas Wilder, proposing that the concept would be complete when Hopper "walked into the gallery door and confronted this mystery that had his name on it." Wilder rejected the proposal, and from 1971 to 1973 were shown at San Francisco's James Willis Gallery. All but two of the original photoetchings have been brought together for the first time here, suggesting what Conner's thwarted 1967 presentation might have looked like.



Bruce Conner con Dennis Hopper en la James Willis Gallery, San Francisco, 1973  
Fotografía de Edmund Shea  
Colección James Johnson y Barbara Odevseff  
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