

# ASSEMBLING A LIFE

## Bruce Conner has been reinventing himself and his art since the '50s

By Kenneth Baker  
CHRONICLE ART CRITIC

**B**rue Conner's modest house in San Francisco is so tidy and seemingly conventional inside that a visitor at once suspects the artist of using it as camouflage.

Conner, 66, is known for dodges and ruses that keep people guessing what, if anything, can be known of him from his art.

So diverse is the work in "2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II," which just opened at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, that it could almost be taken for the output of a movement rather than an individual.

It includes sculpture, assemblages, films, collages, prints, photographs and drawings.

Extensive though it is, the show is not a retrospective, Conner insists, because it omits paintings. Yet it seems to have left him feeling a little exposed.

"I decided a year ago to be an anonymous artist, and not arbitrarily," Conner said, after showing his guest into the tight front parlor that he uses as a studio.

"This is nothing new. We were all anonymous artists here in the '50s," Conner said, meaning himself, Jay DeFeo, Wallace Berman and others who made what is now known as Beat culture or the San Francisco Renaissance, before the current art-market star system got rolling.

"It's one way to retire," Conner said of his new anonymity. "It sufficiently negates having to deal with my work in galleries—cataloging it, selling it, talking about it.

"On the 12-step program of Artists Anonymous, the first is never acknowledging any of your work, after never signing it. But that does not necessarily mean that I'm not doing any work or that it isn't being shown."

In fact, Conner has had two gallery shows in New York this spring and will have another at Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco (opening June 7). Decades before Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine began their fashionable play with originality and selfhood, Conner was toying with authenticity and artistic disguise.

At a moment of uncomfortable career prominence in the 1960s, Conner sent a national art magazine a notice of his death.

To the dismay of dealers and collectors, he has periodically refused to sign his work. "Anybody who has a drawing of mine from before 1960 without a signature has an authentic work," Conner said.

### BRUCE CONNER

"2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II" runs through July 30 at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, 75 Tea Garden Drive, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Hours: 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, 9:30 a.m.-8:45 p.m. first Wednesday of the month. Admission: \$4-\$7. Call (415) 750-3600 or visit [www.thinker.org](http://www.thinker.org).

"One myth still being promoted is that the artist's work expresses his innermost self," Conner complained. People prefer to believe in a "one-to-one correspondence" between what an artist thinks and what is in his work, "rather than think of the artist on the model of a writer, a playwright or an actor, someone who works with narrative, irony, changing voices."

Conner gave an example of the complexity of thinking that lies behind his work.

Every critic has noticed the resemblance of his collages made from old wood engravings and those of surrealist Max Ernst (1891-1976). Conner acknowledged. But they have missed its point.

He took up the wood engraving collages "with the aim of creating another artist," Conner said. "I had three possible agendas for a biography: one was a contemporary of Ernst, another was an artist from around 1900 who preceded Ernst, the third would be someone contemporary with me who did not break away from Ernst's style."

His plan took a turn when in 1965 his friend, actor Dennis Hopper, showed Conner some objects he had made. "It was clear that he had been influenced by me," Conner said, "so I decided that if Dennis can perform me in his work, as maybe I tried to perform Ernst in my work, I would take advantage of his being an actor and cast him in the role of the artist who made these wood-engraving collages."

The result was "The Dennis Hopper One Man Show" of 1971-73, an array of 26 collages initially presented as Hopper's work.

Dealers had anxieties about ownership of the pieces, how to divide income from sales, the use of Hopper's name without his permission.

Finally the works were shown and then published as a suite of etchings by San Francisco's Crown Point Press, then based in Oakland.

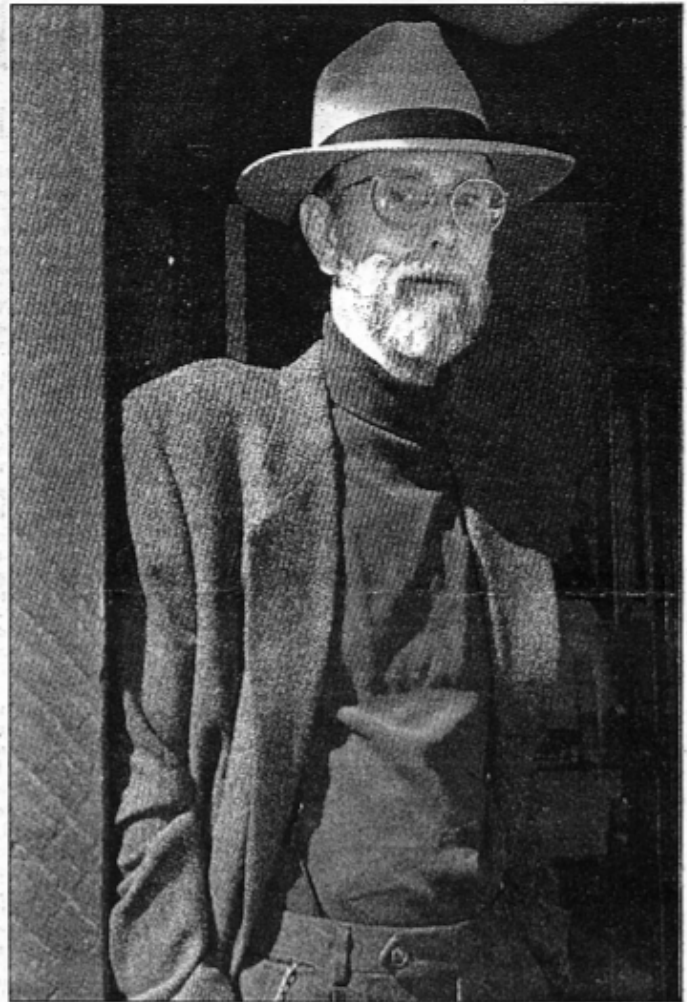
"When I'm asked a question, I tend to answer with a story," Conner said. "That's one reason why the show is called 'The Bruce Conner Story.'" The question that elicited the Ernst/Hopper story had been about influences on his work.

Conner continued his answer by recalling that critic John Yau had once asked him to mention some influences in a magazine interview conducted by fax.

"I typed out about 250 names and told John that the magazine should add ellipses and say that limited space prevents us from printing the remaining 50,003 names on Mr. Conner's list of influences," Conner said. "To single out anyone in particular seems to me disproportionate. Nobody's original so far as I can see."

Constantly changing media and his own internal distance from what he makes has caused its own problems, Conner admitted.

"In the '60s and '70s I had to work on myself to avoid producing too much. I worked in sculpture, film, assemblage, photography, painting and what today might be called conceptual art," he said. "Every one of these pursuits developed into a complex, functioning and very individual personality. I thought I could consciously be aware of and accommodate all these different activities and view-



Artist Bruce Conner: "Whenever I have an inspiration... I wait until it goes away."

points, but something like warfare developed between them."

He still sees this inner nimbleness as socially and psychologically necessary. "The problem I see is that people put blinders on themselves purposely," he said. "The social imposition of having one value at a time has so altered the way they deal with the outside world, that they deny what they're experiencing."

Conner has many unfinished projects and new ideas.

But now, "whenever I have an inspiration to do a particular kind of work, I wait until it goes away," he said. "This is a practical matter. In the last 15 years, because of poor health, I haven't had the energy or attention span to work on large projects. I've had to make work that I could do easily at home in a set amount of time, here at this table. It's like doing knitting or needlework in your old age."

The almost psychedelic detail of Conner's drawings of the '90s make people wonder whether he has lost the impulse to social critique that seemed to animate his early work.

As if to reassure them, he chose a photo collage called "Bombhead" to decorate the softcover edition of the museum exhibition catalog. It is a self-portrait in a surplus military

uniform in which the head has been replaced by the mushroom cloud of a hydrogen bomb detonated in the South Pacific.

"I haven't changed my view about the military and the bomb," Conner said. "My entire history as an artist coincides with the history of the bomb, and it's colored almost everything I've done. But I also don't see why you can't have a good time and be aware of your own mortality."

Changes in San Francisco since Conner arrived in the '50s make him pessimistic about artists having a good time here in the future.

Back when rent was cheap and celebrity merely a pipe dream, the Bay Area was a haven to people who saw art as a way of life. Conner said, "literally something to die for," not just a career option.

"My prediction of the next five years is that only artists who have an independent income or are extremely successful will be living here," he said. "The majority of art institutions will disappear, except for the giant, endowed nonprofits that own their own property. Most of the independently oriented arts organizations are being driven out because of the dominance of cyber-millionaires."

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