

GALLERY- GOING

By TALYA HALKIN

The San Francisco artist Bruce Connor is best known for his experimental film pieces and assemblages, which are often composed of tangles of nylon, plastic and old photographs.

"The Dennis Hopper One Man Show, Volume II" — a series of 26 etchings at the Susan Inglett gallery — reveals a slightly more obscure, but equally compelling aspect of Mr. Connor's work. Around 1959, he began composing a series of paper collages out of his collection of 19th-century engravings. Like Max Ernst before him, he detected the strange poetic quality lying dormant in the obsolete imagery of botanical and mineral specimens, mechanical apparatuses, and bourgeois interiors.

Working in secrecy, Mr. Connors decided to take advantage both of the public's ignorance of his new work and of its obvious connection to Max Ernst's collages. At one point, he considered attributing his own collages to an imaginary persona whose career would predate that of Ernst.

Later on, in a decidedly conceptualist move, he decided instead to attribute the collages to the actor and photographer Dennis Hopper. Resolved not to reveal his own identity as the artist, Mr. Connor intended for Dennis Hopper to show up at the opening as a guest, only to discover it was "his" work that was being exhibited. Not surprisingly, no dealer was willing to exhibit the works under these conditions.

It was only in the late 1960s that the collages were publicly seen for the first time. Mr. Connor transformed them into etchings and published them collectively in three volumes as "The Dennis Hopper One Man Show." Volume II evokes a world of fantasy and dreams that very much stems from the Surrealist manipulation of ordinary objects in order to explode the surfaces of reality.

The etchings show an infatuation with the minute process of compiling and composing complex images. In one of them, carefully drawn shells, corals, leaves and flowers grow and intertwine, forming a chaotic jumble that rises up against a stormy sky. In another, a proliferating pile of objects completely takes over an antiquated domestic interior. A giant crustacean watches over this strange fusion of mechanical, natural, and ornamental forms, while an Egyptian wall obscures one corner of the composition.

In some of the etchings, the protagonists are scientific or mechanical apparatuses that take up the entire composition but defy any rational, productive function. In two remarkable images, figures whose bodies are partially composed of artificial appendages dance around a bonfire crowned by a gigantic penguin and engage in a gun battle in a carefully furnished living room.

On one level, the etchings have a pastiche quality to them. At the same time Mr. Connor's aesthetic sensibility was very much part of his own beat-generation desire to revolutionize everyday life. These works also form an interesting parallel to his use of collage techniques in his filmmaking practice. The result is a series of incredibly rich, detailed works that demand close scrutiny and exude a hypnotic, even hallucinatory quality.