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## "Bruce Conner in the 1970s" at Michael Kohn Gallery

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It's hard to decide what's coolest about the Bruce Conner of the 1970s. Is it how such a clear and unique sensibility always showed through in his work while he constantly changed things up, so much so that his midcareer work feels as fresh and different as the work he was producing in the San Francisco Beat scene of the late '50s and early '60s? Is it the way he moved effortlessly and freely between photography, photograms, film, drawing, collage and assemblage, making distinct and compelling work in each with a kind of artistic Midas touch? Or is it because in his mid-40s, Conner was hanging out at the Mabuhay Gardens nightclub — San Francisco's equivalent of CBGB or Madame Wong's — photographing the new-wave and punk acts playing there?

As this exhibition makes clear, there are many reasons to be a fan of Conner, who died last year, and many points of entry for an audience of varied interests and enthusiasms. Offerings here range from a sculpture comprising a brick wrapped in an Ace bandage — an elegant, blunt-force distillation of both the material affinity and discontent that defined his earlier assemblages — to a drop-dead beautiful collection of Conner's inkblot drawings, to one of his full-body "angel" photograms, to

what are essentially "screenshots" of motel-room TVs tuned to late-night movies (lovingly taking in a bit of the surrounding décor), to frank and oddly tender images of the likes of the Dead Kennedys and Negative Trend doing what they did best.

While this exhibition does a fine job of demonstrating just how vital Conner was at midcareer, the focus on the '70s specifically as a decade raises an even more important issue. It was a decade of major shifts and developments in the field of contemporary art, and what the Kohn show suggests is how Conner charted an independent course, but nonetheless wasn't out of touch with change in art or the broader society. This goes directly to the problem of how Conner's entire oeuvre has been contextualized. While he has been well situated within the genres/movements of Funk art, Beat culture and the West Coast assemblage scene, and in some ways got his due in stature and consideration within an international contemporary art pantheon via a 2000 traveling retrospective, what remains to be done is an examination of how his work fits in, piece by piece, phase by phase, with developments in art as varied as pop art, Arte Povera, Nouveau Réalisme, minimalism, late-modernist abstraction, conceptual art, the "pictures" generation, and photographic work by the likes of Nan Goldin and Robert Mapplethorpe. Conner didn't hang with any of these crowds, but he also didn't work in isolation from the influences that shaped them, and his independence and quirkiness shouldn't be a distraction from the project of more fully considering his engagement.

Michael Kohn Gallery, 8071 Beverly Blvd., L.A.; Tues.-Fri., 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sat., 11 a.m.-6 p.m.; through Dec. 19. (323) 658-8088, [kohngallery.com](http://kohngallery.com).