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Last Chance for The Late Bruce Conner

By Peggy Roalf Thursday, March 4, 2010

Bay Area artist **Bruce Conner**, who died in 2008 at age 74, was an artist and filmmaker who explored themes of mortality and decay, often from the trickster's perspective. When repeatedly asked by *Who's Who in American Art* to update his biography, Conner returned the correspondence marked "deceased." The publication revised his bio accordingly.

Associated with the Beats, including **Lawrence Ferlinghetti**, and Funk artists **Wallace Berman** and **Jay DeFeo**, he was less well known, remaining somewhat in the background until his first retrospective in 2000 at the Walker Art Center. Now, on the fiftieth anniversary of an exhibition titled *The Late Bruce Conner*, which was presented in 1959 at San Francisco's **Spatsa Gallery**, a collection of his intricate and commanding wood engraving collages is on view at **Susan Inglett Gallery**.



Three by Bruce Conner, left to right: *Untitled (Comet)*, ca. 2005; *Untitled (Oval Mountains With Circle and Cross Hatch)*, ca. 2005; *Untitled*, 2008. Courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery.

Three by Bruce Conner, left to right: *Untitled (Comet)*, ca. 2005; *Untitled (Oval Mountains With Circle and Cross Hatch)*, ca. 2005; *Untitled*, 2008. Courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery.

The fourteen small works bring to mind collages done by the German surrealist artist **Max Ernst**. Created using wood engravings as their starting point (many said to have been taken from *Harper's Weekly*), Conner's pieces are a study in themes and

techniques he worked with over a period of nearly two decades. The collages were a regular part of his output in later years; prior to that, the artist shifted from medium to medium, often abandoning a practice if it got too much attention from art critics, who he routinely scorned.

For the most part, Conner's additions to the engravings can be seen in the cut marks and different shades of paper combined. In *Untitled (Oval Mountains With Circle and Cross Hatch)*, a circle suspended above a craggy coastline becomes spherical with the added line work. It also signals one of the themes that runs through the artist's work, in his films as well as in the collages on view.

Circles set at an angle become elliptical, as in *Untitled (Oval Night Trees + Animal Head)*. In *Magic Show*, a flower power circle becomes a backdrop for a pinned butterfly floating above a Pucci-like jardiniere. In *Saving the Big Lollypop*, two workers clearing debris from a bombing site struggle to raise a long wooden shaft that now ends in a hugely out of scale circle overlaid with a net of concentric lines. The humor of the reconstructed activity is at odds with the devastation all around, but jibes with Conner's remarks in a 2000 interview with Kenneth Baker of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "My entire history as an artist coincides with the history of the bomb," he said, "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."

One of the most enchanting pieces is *Untitled (Comet)*, which depicts a window in a library. A comet streaks across the night sky; a book rests on the sill; a distant landscape is rendered in finite detail. But the collage action is utterly impossible to detect. The picture wouldn't leave me alone; I kept going back to try again to find a cut mark or a trace of white gouache that might give it away. Could this be a Conner's spoof? Each time I looked at it I also looked again at the other work - and came away with a deep appreciation for the artistic sleight of hand and humor that plays out amid images of decay which are often artfully combined with images of deluxe objects.

The Late Bruce Conner, the first genuinely posthumous exhibition of Conner's work, concludes on March 13th at [Susan Inglett Gallery](#). 522 West 24th Street, New York, NY. 212.647.9111. The exhibition is accompanied by what was intended to be his last finished masterwork in film, *Easter Morning*, with a sound track by **Terry Riley** played on antique instruments by the **Shanghai Film Orchestra**.